

CONFRONTING THE MODERN: RUSSIAN CULTURAL IDENTITY AND THE
URBAN IMAGINARY IN ANDREI BELY'S *PETERSBURG*

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To Seuss,
who would adore sitting on this thesis

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ABSTRACT

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According to legend, on May 16, 1703, Peter the Great marked a spot on the estuary of the Neva River on the island of Zayachy, laid down two sections of peat, and announced, "The city will be here!" He then picked up a shovel, began digging, and from there birthed the new Russian city: St. Petersburg. Although there is no historical record of Peter being on Zayachy that day, this origin myth denotes Petersburg's placement within the Russian consciousness as a particularly contrived city. The tsar's desire to move Western values eastward and into Russia has contributed to Petersburg's liminal ideological and cultural status between East and West in the Russian imagination ever since. In his symbolist masterpiece, *Petersburg* (1916), Andrei Bely uses the both the material and imaginary structures of the city to examine and attempt to reconfigure the Persistent question of Russian identity within a historical moment of crisis. In examining *Petersburg* as an artistic response to Russia's cultural and ideological tension, this thesis argues that Bely's writing of Petersburg allows the text to operate as dialectic for the symbolic relationship between the city's material spaces and its larger historical positioning within the Russian imagination. Moreover, in writing the city, Bely intentionally uses the constructs of space and time to argue for a broader, global understanding of modernity not only for Russia but also transnationally.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

According to legend, on May 16, 1703, Peter the Great marked a spot on the estuary of the Neva River on the island of Zayachy, laid down two sections of peat, and announced, “The city will be here!” He then picked up a shovel, began digging, and from there birthed the new Russian city: St. Petersburg. Although there is no historical record of Peter being on Zayachy that day, this origin myth denotes Petersburg’s placement within the Russian consciousness as a particularly contrived city—one that was, quite literally, willed into being from the marshes of the Neva. Moreover, Petersburg’s ideological demarcation from other Russian cities, like Moscow, delineates it as an “un-Russian” and “Western” city, one that cannot appropriately represent Russian identity (Bely 296). This symbolic and actual rivalry between the two cities extends back to Peter’s goal to construct a modern “New Rome” that would “wrest Russian society from the doldrums of backwardness and bring it in line with Western European development” (Pedersen 54). Despite Peter appointing St. Petersburg as Russia’s political nucleus, Moscow remained “Holy Moscow,” retaining its role as Russia’s religious and moral center (Bely 296). The post-Enlightenment effort of Peter the Great to move Western values eastward and thus into the Petersburg was caustically resisted by many citizens, as it risked sacrificing the deep-seated, uniquely Russian cultural identity, one aligned traditionally with Eastern values. The tsar’s embrace of West has contributed to the Petersburg’s liminal ideological and cultural status within the Russian historical and cultural imagination, facilitating the city’s presence as a unique center from which Russian culture can be examined.

In his 1916 masterpiece, *Petersburg*, Andrei Bely uses the city to examine, and ultimately attempt to reconfigure, the persistent question of identity within the Russian consciousness. Foreshadowing James Joyce's modernist ambitions in *Ulysses* by nearly six years, Bely writes the city of Petersburg, approaching it as both a material and imaginary construct. His awareness of the city's national significance allows him to work within the symbolic, drawing from various disciplines including mythology, philosophy, and mathematics. The events in the novel span from approximately September 30 to October 9, 1905—just days before the onset of the Russian Revolution, and during a year that, for Russia, typified the anxiety of a shifting political and cultural climate. Bely intentionally utilizes this historical framework to address Russia's impending political, social, and even psychological upheaval. His fundamental concern lies both in Russia's geographic positioning between Western and Eastern Europe as well as in the social and cultural consequences of engendering conflicting ideologies. As Robert A. Maguire and John E. Malmstad suggest in the novel's introduction, the city's geographic positioning between East and West contributes to its greater cultural uncertainty; it pits the Neo-Kantian reason, structure, and order of the "west" against the alleged irrational, impalpable, and intuitive nature of the "east" (Bely viii). In examining *Petersburg* as an artistic response to this cultural and ideological tension, this thesis argues that Bely's writing of Petersburg allows the novel to operate as dialectic for the symbolic relationship between the city's material spaces and its larger historical positioning within the Russian imagination. Moreover, in writing the city, Bely intentionally uses the constructs of space and time to argue for a broader, global understanding of modernity not only for Russia but also transnationally.

The pressing desire to identify the spatial and temporal “location” of modernism has been central to how it has been approached by scholars. In response to the question of when and where it begins and ends, the tendency has been to situate modernism within a particular time and space. Regarding modernism as a movement, Eluned Summers-Bremner argues that spatial and temporal disconnections have traditionally been characteristic of modernist texts. She positions the cultural response: “arising from ‘the shock of the new’ ... is repeated in the encryptionary workings of literary scholarship” (263). As related to cultural movements and ruptures, modernist studies require an understanding of its placement in historical and geographic contexts. In other words, how modernism is “mapped” both spatially and temporally contributes to the overarching understanding of how and why cultural ruptures occur. This categorization has, in part, allowed canonical modernism to emphasize particular geographic regions (largely Great Britain, France, and the United States), as these regions tend to be seen as emblematically Western and, ultimately, “modern.”

In order to bring the discussion of modernism and modernity into contemporary dialogue, the particular locations and moments in which cultural ruptures occur must be reconsidered. The recent scholarship of Susan Stanford Friedman, Laura Doyle, and Laura Winkiel reframes the classical approach to modernist studies, moving it away from specific spatial and temporal categorizations. In “Periodizing Modernism,” Susan Stanford Friedman reassesses modernism’s traditional placement, noting how placing it within the end of the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth centuries subverts its ability to give agency to “cultural producers in the emergent postcolonial world just as their new modernities are being formed” (426-7). A global framework for modernism, in

other words, allows for what Friedman refers to as a “polycentric” approach to the historical and cultural ruptures occurring in space and time (426). This approach reformats the face of canonical modernism. It decentralizes classical, Western modernities and considers alternative modernities as modernist cultures. This, as Friedman notes, “fosters a move from singularity to pluralities of space and time, from exclusivist formulations of modernity and modernism to ones based in global linkages, and from nominal modes of definition to relational ones” (426). Cross-cultural representations of the urban in modernist fiction give agency to forgotten spaces, acknowledging modernity’s break from tradition and movement towards newness in contexts within and beyond the West. This is seen in Bely’s own treatment of modernity in *Petersburg*, as he uses the liminal material and imaginary spaces within the novel to facilitate an understanding of Russia’s own troubled relationship with modernity.

In writing *Petersburg*, Bely draws from the material, built city as well as its presence in the modern Russian imagination to respond to and anatomize the historical role of Petersburg. In doing so, he brings the question of identity into conversation with the Russian consciousness during a particularly chaotic historical moment. In “Of Other Spaces” (1984), Michel Foucault examines the present cultural treatment of space, arguing that it is fundamentally responsible for “the anxiety of our era” (par. 6). He identifies two types of space: the utopia, which is unreal and the heterotopia, a space that is simultaneously real and unreal. To illustrate this idea, he uses the example of a mirror. The reflection of an object in a mirror is a utopia in that it is unreal, what Foucault refers to as a “placeless place” (par. 6). However, the mirror itself is a real object and is thus a heterotopia, juxtaposing real and unreal spaces. In appropriating contemporary notions of

space, and particularly in assessing the urban context in which Bely writes, the material city within *Petersburg* can be approached by way of a Foucauldian notion of heterotopia. This reading illuminates the novel's evocative cultural role, constructing via text the tension between built and invented space. The city exists simultaneously within a geographical construct, or "entity," as Bely refers to in the Prologue, "part of a certain planet" as well as an imaginary construct, one that is swarming from "the printed book" (Bely 2).

In "Literary Geography," Jeri Johnson addresses the textual city, noting how, "on the one hand, cities as found in literature are imaginative constructions; on the other, at least one literary city aims to reflect the material reality of its original" (60). In applying this notion to Foucault, the both real and imaginary representation of the city allows the novel to itself exist as a heterotopia: The city and the text are interchangeable, developmental centers from which the modern can be examined and (importantly for Russia) understood. Bely's calculated and mathematical re-creation of the material city allows it to operate as a heterotopic, public construct for the articulation of Russia's political and cultural anxiety at the dawn of a new century. This anxiety, for Bely, was symptomatic of a critical historical moment that called for Russia to reexamine itself and, moreover, reposition itself in a rapidly modernizing, globalizing world.

The city's historical background, importantly, provides a critical political and social framework in which Bely's *Petersburg* can be approached. Following Peter the Great's regime, the socio-political contexts in which Russian identity was formed began to take a dramatic shift. Revolutionary uprising shook this period, beginning in the 1860s and moving into the twentieth century. On May 14, 1862, a radical proclamation titled

“Young Russia,” invoked Russian citizens to assassinate tsar Alexander II, followed two days later by mass fires throughout the city. The city of Petersburg, then, began to veer into an era of nihilism (a term used by author and critic Ivan Turgenev), one that sought to restructure the role of the individual. Sergei Stepnyak-Kravchinsky describes this as “unencumbered individualism...the negation, in the name of personal freedom, of any restraints placed on man by society, family, or religion” (qtd. in Volkov 47). Much of this tension resulted from a crisis of faith, as the Russian intelligentsia began to regard faith as “beyond the limits of cognition,” steadily being replaced by Kant’s categorical imperative: a system in which reason can and ought to dictate morality (Pyman 2). Along with this new individualism entered new anxieties as well as a more industrialized, dirty, and modernized Petersburg. Consequently, the city’s artistic and philosophical movements began to reflect this. Dostoyevsky’s approach to Petersburg in both *Notes from Underground* (1864) and *Crime and Punishment* (1866) initiated the textual troubling of the relationship between the individual and the city seen in twentieth century Russian fiction. Notably, this occurs in *Crime and Punishment*, when the investigator comments to protagonist Raskolnikov, “there are few more grim, harsh, and strange influences on a man’s soul than in Petersburg” (qtd. in Volkov 47). By discussing Petersburg’s connection to the soul, Dostoyevsky moralizes the role of the city and, in doing so, demonstrates the shifting relationship between the city and the individual.

The onset of the twentieth century brought about a new level of revolutionary activity, primarily opposing the young tsar Nicholas II. Volkov notes that during this time, the Russian elite felt it needed “a small, victorious war” to counteract the impending social explosion within Russia, and Japan appeared to be a non-threat. The

commence of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904, however, did not go as planned, forcing Russia to sign a peace treaty with Japan in August, 1905 in Portsmouth, New Hampshire with Theodore Roosevelt acting as mediator (Volkov 144-5). In addition, this humiliating peace treaty followed Bloody Sunday, the police massacre of Petersburg workers demonstrating peacefully. On January 9, nearly 150,000 workers marched to the Winter Palace, imploring Nicholas to alleviate their oppression, poverty, and unmanageable working conditions. Nicholas was not at the Palace that day, and the military generals, fearing an attack, ordered that the crowd be stopped by force, and they fired at the workers. This act of violence from Russian leaders towards Petersburg's citizens set the tone for 1905 as a year of political and social uprising, as Avril Pyman notes, "throughout 1905, almost every day brought fresh news of assassinations, revolts, mutinies, and strikes" (245). This sense of impending catastrophe is strongly reflected in the artistic and cultural shifts taking place at the dawn of the twentieth century, and many began addressing this cultural anxiety and unrest by way of art.

Petersburg's cultural climate at the beginning of the twentieth century connoted a considerable ideological shift, involving a call for the reconfiguration of national values driven primarily by its transition towards a more secularized political (and thus urban) climate. Donald Fanger describes Petersburg as the "epicentre of the shocks that were transforming the cultural landscape of Russia" (469). This "shock" arose from the sense that the city itself was perpetually on the brink of revolution; likewise, Petersburg's cultural productions aptly reflected this anxiety. For the literary world, there was a desire to respond to Russia's realist writers like Tolstoy, Gogol, Turgenev, and Dostoyevsky, who provided a literary landscape that treated morality as a fixture within a familial and

spiritual construct. Sensing cultural crises, Russia's artistic elite looked to the West to the French decadents. From this decadent movement began Russia's second Golden Age, a Silver Age (beginning in the 1890s), which sought to reevaluate Russian culture and ideology within the context of rising political unrest and unease. This cultural reevaluation was taken up intensely by the symbolists, a group of poets (and later novelists) who sought to respond to the Enlightenment by way of art. Volkov notes that Russia's symbolist movement, which began at the close of the nineteenth century, was its "first fledgling modernist movement," seeking out a "new impressionability" learned from "Western masters" (127). Regarding modernism's role within various cultural sub-genres, Victor Elrich places specific movements within the scope of "modern 'isms' such as Symbolism, Expressionism, Futurism, Dadaism, or Surrealism" (2). By categorizing modernism within these and other subsections, it broadens the scope in which it can be approached and, ultimately, reconfigured. Likewise, the desire to separate themselves from the "old" was indeed a significant attribute of Russian futurism. Notably in the Russian *Futurist Manifesto*, "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste" (1909), authored by David Burliuk, Alexander Kruchenykh, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Victor Khlebnikov, the futurists called for an eradication of previous writers, philosophers, and poets. They claimed that, "The past is crowded. The Academy and Pushkin are more incomprehensible than hieroglyphics." The futurists demanded that nineteenth century writers like Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy be thrown "overboard from the Ship of Modernity" (qtd. in Markov 46). It was two years later in 1911 when Bely began working on *Petersburg*, a novel that attempted to reframe Russian cultural history in relation to past, present, and future.

Andrei Bely, the pen name of Boris Nikolaevich Bugaev, was born in Moscow on October 26, 1880 to mother, Aleksandra Dmitrievna, a notable musician, and father, Nikolay Vasilevich Bugaev, a prominent mathematician at a renowned Moscow university. Aleksandra believed that her son had the forehead of a mathematician, and because of this, she wanted to ensure that her son did not become like his father, but rather she encouraged him to pursue the arts. Bely's childhood was troubled by the tension between his parents' conflicting views of what he ought to pursue academically, and he describes this in both his memoirs as well as in his semi-autobiographical novel about his childhood, *Kotik Letaev*, published in 1917. Following his lyrical prose work in the four *Symphonies* (1904-1908), Bely's first major work, *The Silver Dove* (1909), established him as a novelist. It was also the first part of what was intended to be a trilogy entitled *East or West*, with *Petersburg* being the second installment in 1916. The publication of *Petersburg*, however, moved Bely to deviate from the trilogy. The novel began to take on a status of its own, and, according to Vladimir Nabokov, stands as one of the greatest novels of the twentieth century, following James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and preceding Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (qtd. in Matich 5).

Bely's work as a symbolist was, according to Steven Cassedy, focused on the act of creation (289). His attempt to position St. Petersburg as a symbolic center for Russian identity is evident in his artistic approach to the material city in *Petersburg*. His conscious and liberal use of geometric space is directly connected to his academic and philosophical upbringing. Although Bely followed his father's expectations and was trained as a chemist at university, according to his critics, he did not have the mind of a

chemist. He, rather, found his place in philosophical and occult societies; however, his connection with the then controversial symbolist movement was an embarrassment to his father, and it was for this reason that he took a pen name so to not humiliate Nikolay publically. Bely's prominent role in symbolist culture and his relationship with Moscow's Argonaut circle aligned him with a community of thinkers who initiated an attempt to break away from the "ideas, tastes, illusions, and beliefs" of the previous century (Lavrov 84). The Argonaut movement, however, was not strictly literary. It encased a wide-range of intellectual endeavors, all concerned with the act of creation and seeking to "mythicize daily life" (Lavrov 83-4). The fundamental goal of the Argonauts sought to utilize art as "life-creation," and they declared this to be their basic primary task. This notion of life-creation correlates with Bely's approach to Petersburg in the novel. Like the city, his writing of the city is itself an act of creation, allowing him to address Russia's cultural afflictions by way of St. Petersburg's re-creation, and thus its reconfiguration in the text. Lavrov describes the Argonaut's unifying themes as being threaded throughout their work, particularly in their conviction that "talent for writing" and "talent for living" ought to be weighted equally (83). This break from normativity and attempt to create "newness," as embraced by Russia's Argonauts, aligns Russia with international modernism. In placing these ideas within a literary context, Bely typifies this creative and self-conscious movement in *Petersburg*, not only for Russia but also on a global scale. What exists within the space of the novel is Petersburg's re-creation by way of the symbolic. Moreover, Bely's writing of the city allows for creativity, as by writing the city of Petersburg, Bely is giving it voice and agency, placing it within the broader, global context of modernism.

In his essay “Symbolism as a World View,” Bely describes the anxiety brought about by the new century, noting that “all the eternal values, which previously had revealed new perspectives, had become a thing of the past. Everything had lost its value” (73). For Bely, symbolism was a vehicle through which meaning could be reconsidered by way of art, and he places this within the context of a natural inclination for human beings to seek after what he refers to as “eternal values,” and poses the notion that art, rather than philosophy, can indeed operate as the “guiding beacon of mankind” (76). Bely develops this concept in “The Emblematics of Meaning,” in which he provides a definition of symbolism. As a movement, symbolism posited that a scientific worldview was insufficient, as it “refuses to entertain questions about the human meaning of phenomena. All it does is weigh the facts and establish connections between them.” For Bely, weighing factual knowledge, or what he calls “cognition” subverts the creative. He moreover, contends that, “science simply proceeds from one form of ignorance to another: it is nothing more than the taxonomy of every conceivable kind of ignorance” (118), rather than provide insight into transcendent notions of truth. Paramount to Bely’s theory of symbolism is the idea of creation having primacy over cognition, as he argues this “is the most fertile soil for the foundation of symbolism.” The “particles, forces, and ions” that are often discussed scientifically, when placed within the context of creativity, more deeply penetrate phenomena (131). In other words, science cannot provide meaning in the same way art can. Art, unlike science, facilitates a symbolic understanding of life.

Fundamental to Bely’s theory of symbolism is that notion that symbols are the result of the creator’s (artist’s) ability to fuse something from within him/herself with an object in the material world. Bely, like other students of theosophy during this time,

viewed creativity as reflective of the Divine, and in its symbolic manifestation he differentiates between various “symbols” and a Universal “Symbol” (Alexandrov 165). In this way, the human connection with the Divine is essentialized by his/her capacity to create, and because of this, Bely connects cerebral play to “occult forces,” which help the individual to understand (and re-create) the material world.

Many of the ideas Bely expresses in his writing were informed by his participation in movements like symbolism and theosophy. These ideas culminated in his writing of *Petersburg* (which began in 1911) in which he attributed to them a more unified term—cerebral play (*mozgovaya igra*). Cerebral play can be understood by examining Bely’s relationship with the creative and the symbolic, and likewise, his treatment of these ideas in the novel itself. Alexandrov suggests that the key to understanding this concept is provided by the depiction of Apollon in which the narrator describes cerebral play as “a mask” (164). He adds that, “beneath this mask is the invasion of the brain by forces unknown to us” (Bely 35). Alexandrov assesses this definition ontologically, as, for Bely, cognition and ontology exist indistinguishably. In other words, the mind operates as the vehicle for the existence of the material world, and this notion is evident in Bely’s approach to the novel. His heterotopic presentation of the city via text allows it to exist as a creative center in which the reader is able to cognitively move through the city and thus contribute to its creation. The reader’s imaginary movement, in other words, juxtaposes the material and the imaginary, facilitating a reconsideration of how the individual’s psychological understanding of the city plays into its material presence.

For Bely and other Russian symbolists during this period, the assessment of Russian culture became an artistic rather than philosophical endeavor, as Fanger suggests, “The Russian writer, whose moral responsibility to the people appeared central through most of the nineteenth century, became in the twentieth an artist: formerly sincere and direct, he was now artful and crafty” (468). This literary shift, then, reflects Russia’s (and the West’s) rising secularism, and as such, it furthers St. Petersburg’s placement as a new center from which Russian identity can be understood psychologically. A key component to the way in which Bely crafts this new identity is seen in the way he narrates *Petersburg*. Because the narrator is inconsistent, vague, and inarticulate, Bely provides the reader with the responsibility of navigating the novel and thereby navigating the city. The text itself becomes spatial, as the ability to operate within urban space depends on the reader. Motivating this was Bely’s belief in the superior nature creativity. The application of creativity can be seen through the novel’s incompleteness; the reader must complete it. Carol Anschuetz argues Bely’s interest in a psychological approach to ethics that sets *Petersburg* apart from nineteenth century Russian writers like Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and Gogol. The novel, she argues, is Bely’s attempt to reformulate the problem of theodicy that continually plagued the European conscience. At the beginning of the twentieth century, there was question regarding how Russian society ought to respond to the upheaval of Russian values and the inevitable embrace of the West. This shift in values, above all, Anschuetz notes, threatened to collapse the structure of the family, which was considered to be a cohesive moral center (126). In the writing of the nineteenth century, authors contextualized a system of values by way of family, and this can be seen particularly in Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* and

Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. In contrast, Bely decentralizes morality, looking to art and creativity as a new form of guidance ("Symbolism as a World View" 76).

Bely's concern about the misuse of categories positions him uniquely within the contexts of modernist movements, as Langen notes, he "spared no effort in reproaching his contemporaries for the lazy use of categories" (74). Modernism, for Bely, is not necessarily synchronous with symbolism, and consequently, as he notes in his essay "Symbolism and Contemporary Art" (1910) in which he mentions a number of writers including Nietzsche, Pushkin, Blok, and Dostoyevsky: "Symbolism is confused with modernism. Modernism implies a multitude of literary schools that have nothing in common...we call this whole discordant chorus of voices in literature either modernism or Symbolism" (qtd. in Langen 74). In Langen's assessment of this passage, he notes that Bely is not wholly opposed to categorization, but rather he is attempting to place and align himself with authors with he associates with his own writing. In connecting Bely's self-assessment to the broader placement of *Petersburg* within the modern, how he uses the material city (including both the geographic and the geometric) in his writing of the city allows the novel's representation of Petersburg (as a symbol of the city) to create and organize modernity for Russia.

The novel's plot is relatively simple, as the narration follows a young revolutionary, Nikolai Ableukhov, through the textual city of Petersburg. Bely uses the relationship between Nikolai and his father, Apollon, as interplay between West and East—Apollon the powerful senator, driven by symmetry, order, and reason; and his son Nikolai, an impulsive and naïve student at the University. Nikolai is characterized as

living with a sense of self-loathing, as his own conception was the result of his father's rape of his mother, Anna Petrovna, who moved to Spain to be with her lover (an allusion to Tolstoy's Anna in *Anna Karinina*). Nikolai's knowledge of this "most shameful physiological act" evokes resentment of his own being and of his father (Bely 71). This resentment culminates when, having been persuaded to join a radical leftist political group, Nikolai is given a time bomb and ordered to assassinate his father. The latter half of the novel, then, occurs within a twenty-four hour period, and one in which Nikolai agonizes over the decision of whether or not to assassinate his father. Important to the Ableukhov's relationship is Alexander Ivanovich Dudkin, Nikolai's friend and fellow party member. The statue of The Bronze Horseman, as a symbol of Peter the Great, haunts Nikolai and Dudkin as they work their way through the material city, and likewise, they symbolically interact with the historical Petersburg, redefining the city's cultural mythology. As the characters move through Petersburg, each is motivated by particular things: Apollon, symmetry; Nikolai, emotion; and Alexander Dudkin, the material world. As Maguire and Malmstad note, the relationship between these three can be characterized as "components of the dismembered triangle in the modern man;" Apollon representing disembodied thought, Nikolai the reliance on emotions and passions, and Dudkin being the embodiment of revolutionary action and will (112). Bely's orchestration of these individual components, as creative centers themselves, contributes to Petersburg's creative expansion. The characters, in other words, are creative, moving parts in the body of the modern city—as the people move, so moves the city.

For Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century, the notion of modernity evoked apprehension because of its association with Western ideology. The fear and anxiety accompanying this movement relates to its supposed infringement on Eastern values, and particularly values that sought to keep God as Russia's moral center. In Bely's attempt to turn to the West, particularly in his writing of *Petersburg*, he evoked his own crisis. His ideas were socially explosive, and his awareness of this encouraged his repeated symbolic use of a bomb, expressing his longing for "explosion." As Elrich notes, Bely's work demonstrates a yearning for explosion in a number of contexts, personally, politically, and socially (16). Reflecting on this desire for his own symbolic "explosion," Bely commented in his essay "The Crisis of Consciousness and Henrik Ibsen," "To explode along with one's age, in striving toward genuine reality, is the only way not to perish... The old forms of the old society will be blown up... I am dynamite. I know my fate." Several years later, he noted in his autobiographical *Notes of a Crank*, "my eternal explosions became worldwide.... I am a bomb trying to explode into pieces" (qtd. in Elrich 16). In *Petersburg*, the symbolic gesture of the bomb's explosion demonstrates culture's capacity to expand outward, affecting and altering its material and cultural surroundings. The image of the bomb places Bely within global modernity, as its metaphorical "explosion" in *Petersburg* extends beyond Russia and into the broader dialogue of modernism.

In *The Culture of Time and Space*, Stephen Kern's assertion that, "No age can sustain continual crisis" is significant for Russia, as continual confrontation with apocalyptic events throughout the twentieth century forced it to reexamine itself in light of catastrophes. Kern uses the human body as an example to illustrate these breakages, as

“The rebuilding of bone cells begins within minutes after a break, and reconstructive processes are at work in the mind of the most crazed psychotic even during moments of panic and disorientation” (207). The issue, with respect to modernity, lies in how the breakages are treated; for Bely, they act as opportunities for re-creation and even restoration. He, too, uses the metaphor of the human body, as in *Petersburg* it represents a symbolic unity of individual parts. Langen emphasizes Bely’s recurring interest in “the idea of unity itself” (68). The body, like a city, operates as an invisible center from which creativity moves and flows. Both are, in other words, wholes composed of individual parts. Kern further asserts that, “The crises of the generation at the turn of the century were also part of an essentially constructive process, as the most daring innovators put a crowbar to the ironwork of traditional forms to clear the way for the rebuilding ahead” (207). The notion of rebuilding is important here, as the text of *Petersburg* represents intentional attempts to dismantle how Russian identity was previously approached and treated. Dostoyevsky’s claim in *Notes from Underground* that St. Petersburg is, in fact, “the most abstract and intentional city on the entire globe” (qtd. in Langen 4) speaks to its historically unnatural and un-Russian identity. By writing *Petersburg*, Bely addresses the notion of intentionality by placing Petersburg as a creative center and force for Russia’s modern identity. For him, the city and the bodies within it are centers from which individual and cultural identity can be reexamined.

Kern identifies Russia as being quite literally “big with future.” The relationship between Russia’s material and imaginary structures is reflected throughout *Petersburg*, as Kern explains further that Russians “were acutely aware of the way the vast space shaped their character and historical destiny” (255). Bely, likewise, draws from the public’s

foundational understanding of the importance of cultural and geographical space in igniting its reassessment within the context of modernity. The novel's Prologue begins dealing with this issue of space by referring to the Russian Empire as "a geographical entity," establishing and connecting its political role with actual space (Bely 1). The reconfiguration of Russian culture and identity, in other words, must come from within. Bely's treatment of the urban in *Petersburg* essentializes the city's relationship with its material and imaginary constructs, and importantly, his use of heterotopic space gives rise to a greater understanding of what it means to be both Russian and modern. The novel's theoretical placement within modern literature is emblematic of Bely's reassessment of Russian identity.

In placing *Petersburg* within the larger context of global modernism, both the material and the imaginary ought be considered. Chapter two focuses on the material city in *Petersburg*, examining in particular how people and objects move and operate within the city's geographic and geometric structuring. Movement, for Bely, facilitates creation, and as the characters interact with the physical city, they contribute to its creative expansion. Moreover, movement through built space evokes dialogue with the historical Petersburg, constituting Petersburg's cultural and historical vitality as a center from which Russian identity can be reassessed. Building on this material approach, chapter three provides a discussion of *Petersburg* the imaginary city, and in particular, how the material city operates within Russia's mythological imagination. Critical to this is Bely's notion of cerebral play, asserting that the individual's ability to contemplate the material city is what allows it to exist. Bely's juxtaposition of the material and the imaginary within the novel posits it as a heterotopia, aligning the novel with contemporary

theoretical notions of space. In other words, *Petersburg* draws from the material to illuminate the imaginary and vice versa. Using images of creation and destruction, Bely emphasizes the grotesque to confront not only the assumptions surrounding the city, but also Petersburg's reality. It is through the city's mythological symbols that Bely connects the historical to the modern. By creating the heterotopic space of *Petersburg*, he brings the city into conversation with its cultural and historical past, thereby facilitating an understanding of the future. For Bely, this dialogue ultimately seeks to redefine and reassemble the historically problematic relationship between the material city of Petersburg and the Russian imagination.

CHAPTER II

PETERSBURG: THE MATERIAL CITY

The cultural role of *Petersburg* is set up to address particular problems associated with modernity, particularly the anxiety of assessing Russian culture at the dawn of what Bely refers to as “a crisis of thought” (“Symbolism as a World View” 76). In responding to this ideological crisis, Bely confronts Russian identity by re-creating the material city in *Petersburg*. Within the context of the city, Bely constructs Russia’s experience with a shifting cultural identity, symptomized by uncertainty, anxiety, revolution, and catastrophe. Regarding Bely’s use of Petersburg within a larger geographical context, Ada Steinberg argues, “If in Pushkin,¹ St. Petersburg is the second capital of *Russia*, the stage for a calamity with tragic consequences for *one* hero, in Bely, Petersburg is the centre of the *universe*, the spring-board for an inevitable cosmic catastrophe threatening to destroy the *whole human race*” (524). Steinberg’s notion of universal “cosmic catastrophe” speaks to the material city, reaffirming Petersburg’s existence (both in the city and novel) as a public and creative space for assessing cultural anxiety both geographically and textually. This chapter discusses Bely’s treatment of the material *Petersburg*, and specifically how its inhabitants’ movements within the city’s built environment create dialogue with the historical Petersburg. As the characters interact with Petersburg, they contribute to its enduring material presence. It is through the material that Bely puts present into dialogue with past, thereby allowing a modern Petersburg to respond to its own troubled history.

¹ Steinberg is referring to Aleksandr Pushkin’s 1833 poem “The Bronze Horseman,” which defined for Russia’s Golden Age Petersburg’s political significance.

The cultural role of *Petersburg* as a characteristically symbolist novel is evident in its narrative structure. Bely's use of confused and fragmented narration initiates an intentional sense of disorder, which facilitates the novel's function as a source of creation; the reader must create the city within his/her own mind. In its representation of Petersburg, language reflects the relationship between the city's material structuring and its presence within the cultural consciousness. The novel's dialogue with the historical appears in the first line of the Prologue, as the narrator's language mimics Imperial proclamations, which traditionally list the Emperor's official titles. Bely addresses a particularly Russian audience, invoking, "Your Excellencies, Your Worships, Your Honors, and Citizens!" He continues by establishing *Petersburg* as an investigation, asking, "What is this Russian Empire of ours?" (1). This question is the crux of the novel, and by posing it Bely initiates a reexamination of cultural identity, ironically using the historically un-Russian, contrived edifice of Petersburg. Important to this cultural reexamination is Bely's scrutiny of Russia's placement within the context of modernity. Additionally, the phrasing of this query considers public responsibility, allowing the novel to investigate what Petersburg is and how it ought to be understood. The narrator shifts to the geographic by answering his own question: "This Russian Empire of ours is a geographical entity, which means: part of a certain planet" (1). This response speaks not only to the geographic positioning of Russia on maps, but also allows Russia to become part of a global dialogue. Bely's choice to begin the Prologue by discussing Petersburg's location on maps is important to the role of *Petersburg* as an inquiry. The novel, in other words, not only questions Russian identity in relation Petersburg, but also Russian identity in relation to the world.

With respect to Bely's use of the material city in *Petersburg*, its manifestation within the novel is consistently tied to his desire to identify the "unified theory of the aesthetic object" (Cassedy 206). Essentially this is Bely's development of a theory of art criticism, with the "unified theory" relating to Bely's desire to create a scientific approach for studying aesthetics. For Russia's symbolists, many of the underlying principles of symbolism were derived from its artistic manifestation. Irina Paperno describes how the theological views of Vladimir Solov'ev inspired many of these aesthetic theories, particularly his assertion that the beauty of the natural world needs to be synthesized with the spiritual (13). Bely's desire to situate the spiritual world within the material is evident in his approach to symbolism, stemming from his belief that art, as opposed to philosophy or science, ought to serve as the "guiding beacon of mankind" ("The Magic of Words" 76). Similarly, in "The Emblematics of Meaning" he contends that science cannot appropriately provide a worldview because it "refuses to entertain questions about the human meaning of phenomena" (118). In applying these ideas to *Petersburg*, Bely closely followed symbolist aesthetics with his notion that art is the creation of life. His structuring of the city in *Petersburg* allows for this life-creation.

The novel itself is heterotopic, existing as both a representation and an anti-representation of the city. Bely affirms the city's material reality by way of its presence in both the characters' minds as well as the reader's. As Olga Matich notes in her introduction to *Petersburg*/*"Petersburg,"* the narrative is "hypertextual," as it simultaneously informs "narrative surveillance yet blurs all distinctions—between real and imaginary, physical and mental, body and space that the body occupies" (18). By blurring these distinctions, Bely uses the city to question Russian identity. In this way,

the novel operates as a fragmented map for the reader, who must navigate the material city both within the text as well as in his/her mind. Cerebral play exists both within the characters' minds as well as the readers. This is seen frequently in the narrator's use of unfinished sentences. One example of this can be seen when Apollon is in his office thinking about his work, and particularly the piles of papers on his writing table, as the narrator notes:

Apollon Apollonovich was warming his frozen hands by the fireplace, while his cerebral play went on constructing misty planes:

‘Nikolai Apollonovich...’

At this point Apollon Apollonovich...

‘?’

Apollon Apollonovich stopped at the door.

His innocent cerebral play again moved spontaneously into his brain, that is, into the pile of papers and petitions.

(Bely19)

This fragmented account of Apollon's behavior encourages the reader's role as navigator, as her participation in the senator's movement through his office facilitates readerly cerebral play. *Petersburg* exists, in other words, because its language is present in the reader's mind. The narrator, moreover, makes no distinction between the senator's brain and the pile of papers on the table; they become part of each other through Apollon's cerebral play, and his ability to contemplate the papers allows them to exist. This interplay between cerebral play in the novel and the reader's participation in cerebral play

further demonstrates the novel's heterotopic construction as being both real and unreal. The novel's reality lies in Petersburg's imaginary presence within the reader's mind, whereas the material reality of St. Petersburg in the text is the city's presence in the characters' minds.

Resulting from the symbolist's attempt to reevaluate national values, intense anxiety became part of the Russian symbolist movement, producing apocalyptic writings seeking to "establish a convincing consonance of historical events...as the necessary complement of past and present" (Hart 266) The historical comes into play in relation to looming catastrophe, as symbolism attempts to reconfigure and represent history symbolically as a way of building to apocalypse. However, regarding what form such catastrophe might take, Steinberg notes that catastrophe is present in the material structure of the city within its "climate, buildings, statues, streets" (524). The anxiety related to impending catastrophe is within both the geographic positioning of Petersburg and the city's material structures. The narrator mentions, "But if Petersburg is not the capital, then there is no Petersburg. It only appears to exist" (Bely 2), demonstrating the surreal relationship between the city as a physical structure and the city as a psychological center. Alexndrov suggests that the dialectic established in the Prologue acts as the narrator's exploration of whether and *how* Petersburg exists, to which he concludes "what defines it as existent is language" (127). Bely uses the novel to defend the notion that language has the capacity to penetrate phenomena, drawing upon the symbolic structure of language within the material and symbolic structure of the city, and initiates his own act of creation by way of the text.

The novel's fragmented narration is important to Bely's treatment of the material city. Due to the novel's intentionally disjointed structure, the narrational gaps provide room for the reader to interact with the text; Peter Barta points out the "narrational function lacks a unique perspective" (22). As Bely centralizes the city, the narrator becomes decentralized. Perspective is placed in the hands of the reader, who is a center and whose dialogue with Petersburg connects present to past and future. In creating a dialogue with the city, Bely's use of symbols, as Alexandrov suggests, works to express "the primacy of creation over cognition" (103). One must, in other words, create to understand the world. Regarding his own philosophical methodology, Bely argues that "one must create life" and his narration of the city works toward this sort of creation. This life-creation can be seen in the narrator's descriptions of the city, which tend to describe the colors of the surrounding space rather than the material, built structures of the city. Describing the Neva, the narrator notes,

A phosphorescent blot raced across the sky, misty and mad.
The far stretch of the Neva gradually misted over, and the
soundlessly flying surfaces began glimmering
green...Beyond the Neva rose the immense buildings of the
islands, darkening, and they cast shining eyes into the
mists—soundlessly, tormentingly. And they seemed to be
weeping. Higher up, raggedy arms madly stretched vague
outlines; swarm upon swarm, they rose above the Neva's
waves. (Bely 82)

As the symbolic structuring of the city comes into focus, the material loses focus. It is replaced by sounds, colors, and metaphors. The reader must construct its within her own mind. Bely's approach to the city emphasizes that all things, including "particles, forces and ions" are the products of a process that is first creative, and second cognitive (Alexandrov 103). Mathematically, these three forces exist within the city's structural and human components, which move and direct its outward expansion.

Vladimir E. Alexandrov suggests that Bely's imprecision, and sometimes even unintelligibility, demands that the reader "participate actively in the work—much more than usually the case—in order to infer the necessary continuations and conclusions" (101). Bely's confused linguistic structuring is used consistently throughout the novel. The narrator presents a vague and clumsy picture of the space of Petersburg and the behavior within it. Many of the questions posed by the narrator are left unanswered, for instance, "What is this Russian Empire of Ours?" (Bely 1) and "Apollon Apollonovich was the head of a Government Institution. Oh, uhhh what was its name?" (Bely 5). The narrator's speech, as Alexandrov notes, is the antithesis of Apollon's verbal exchanges, which, as the narrator describes, "had to have a goal, plane and straight as a line" (Bely 122). The disparity between character and narrator can be attributed to Bely's "definition of the reality of Russia" (Alexandrov 128); that is, a nation experiencing political and social anxiety on the brink of upheaval rather than a well-organized and structured machine.

Bely approaches both the city and the novel in terms of an outward movement and expansion relating to its sociopolitical role. The placement of the material city in the novel and the ways in which it is treated by the narrator's often vague and unnatural

language demonstrates Bely's desire to put a modern Petersburg into dialogue with the Russian consciousness. Historically, the city represented a movement away from and, indeed, a re-centering of Russian ideals, as Peter the Great envisioned the city a new center, and one that would move it towards the West. In the Prologue, the narrator describes Petersburg's cartographic placement, establishing its role as both a geometric and geographic space. For Bely, this space extends beyond the city's physical structure into the novel itself, thus setting up its physical and geographical presence, as he describes:

Petersburg not only appears to us, but actually does appear—on maps: in the form of two small circles, one set 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: from here, from this very point surges and swarms the printed book; from this invisible point speeds the official circular. (Bely 1)

Timothy Langen's claim regarding the inaccuracy and gratuitousness of this proclamation rests on his notion that "the city of St. Petersburg does occupy space" and that "zero-dimensionality does not strengthen the case for St. Petersburg's existence" (75).

Although his assertion that, indeed, "St. Petersburg *does* exist in the novel" is valid, Bely's pronounced use of symbolism throughout the novel (particularly in his portrayal of the city) implies that the relationship between the symbolic and the actual are less important than how the reader creates the city for herself psychologically. In other words, the philosophical ambiguity present in the narrator's description of the city is consistent

with his role throughout the novel: he is consistently unreliable. In aligning the narrator's assessment of how Petersburg appears on maps with Bely's notion of cerebral play, the city's physical existence, then, is merely the projection of its presence within the mind, not only appearing "to us" but also "on maps." In this way, Bely uses the lens of heterotopia. Although his projection of the material Petersburg in the novel situates it an "unreal" image of the city, it is ultimately a reflection and projection of the real city, allowing it to exist as simultaneously material and imaginary.

In his articulation of the polarity between Eastern and Western values, Bely uses disjunction in the relationships of Petersburg's inhabitants, which in turn speaks to disorder and anxiety on a cultural level. The disparity between Apollon and Nikolai Ableukhov is symptomatic of Russia's escalating political and social tension at the beginning of the twentieth century. Bely characterizes East and West by way of this father-son pairing: The powerful, yet alienated, rational intellectual senator; and the confused, impressionable, emotionally-driven son. His use of binaries draws upon conflicting cultural notions of value, reconsidering what ought to be valued with respect to Russian culture. Bely's choice to position this relationship within the space of Petersburg symbolizes Russia's larger positioning in the modernizing world. These problematic and often fragmented familial relationships are indicative of fragmentation on a national level, as "the old values were no longer adequate to the new realities" (Bely xii). Likewise, Bely's use of language throughout the novel reflects a sense of anxiety and impending catastrophe, and his use of elapsing time (as seen in the ticking bomb) demonstrates Russia's unstoppable and inevitable progress into the modern. In doing so, Bely positions Petersburg as this precise "mathematical point" (2) from which a shifting

and modernizing Russian identity can be assessed and reevaluated through his representation of the city's material structures.

The material structuring of St. Petersburg, and particularly its geometric composition, enables and encourages its movement and expansion. For Bely, the city's central public vein for mobility is Nevsky Prospect, the main road through Petersburg, which as he notes, "consists of a space for the circulation of the public...Nevsky Prospect, like any prospect, is a public prospect, that is: a prospect for the circulation of the public (not of air, for instance)" (2). Such a space, for Bely, facilitates the movement and continuity of the city, both linearly (as in the physical structure of Nevsky Prospect) and circularly (for the social movement of the public). Likewise, the public's movement within its space contributes to the city's expansion. Barta discusses this in relation to the city's "walkers," who lose their individual identity as they move through the space of Petersburg. The narrator notes that, "Petersburg streets possess one indubitable quality: they transform passersby into shadows" (Bely 22), and is particularly true for Nevsky Prospect. As movement is itself transformative, Petersburg's veins for movement also contribute to the city's transformation. Bely's presentation of Nevsky describes not so much the road's physical constitution but rather its spatial positioning. It is the public movement on and in the road that defines its presence within the city. The narrator notes, "All the shoulders formed a viscous and slowly flowing sediment...In keeping with the laws of the organic wholeness of the body, [Alexander Ivanovich] followed the shoulder and thus was cast out onto the Nevsky" (Bely 178). Nevsky's wholeness is contingent on its faceless parts, as the people moving through it are merely part of its conceptual machinery.

Historically, Nevsky Prospect has had a significant role in St. Petersburg's cultural mythology. Gogol's short story "Nevsky Prospect" (1895) provides a "tour" of the street over the course of a single day. Julie A. Buckler explains in *Mapping St. Petersburg*, "reader and narrator stand together on a corner and watch life go by at appointed intervals." Moreover she suggests that Gogol's story "constitutes in literary terms the kind of edifying and comprehensive tour he [Gogol] proposes for his model architectural route" (80). Bely's use of narration in *Petersburg*, published 21 years later, follows this model. Bely, however, brings the reader into the characters' movements within Nevsky's, allowing her to also circulate rather than simply watching as a bystander. This literary usage of Nevsky stems from its lack of unity in its historical conception, as it was not planned to be the city's main street, but rather a road called "Great Prospect" intended to lead travelers *out* of the city (Buckler 81). Its symbolic use, then (and particularly for Bely) is due to its inherent misdirection, speaking to Petersburg's conceptual irony. The city, in other words, as initiated by Peter the Great was itself intentional, artificially wrought in an effort to Westernize Russia. How the city uses Nevsky's actual space deviates from the prospect's intention, bringing to light Petersburg's inherent creativity, one that changes and adapts with its movers.

As a cultural structure, Nevsky Prospect carried a number of social and even cultish implications. It thrived on its own internal movements, which ranged from "high-placed bureaucrats to lowly clerks, naval and army officers, important gentlemen, nouveaux riches, and bohemians," who all "sauntered along the street" (Volkov 146). The relationship between the people and the spaces through which they move (and are expected to move) through the city narrows the social gap among the city's citizens. All

of Petersburg's inhabitants, regardless of status or occupation, must move within the same cultural and physical spaces. As Volkov notes, what expresses difference is *how* they move. He points out that "Some moved with the precise tread appropriate to capital denizens, while others gawked around" (147). As creative centers, individuals perform "life-creation" through movement. The parts (the people and their movements) constitute the whole (the city itself). This is evident in Apollon's movement down Nevsky. The way in which he chooses to move through and use Nevsky's space allows him to create his own version of Petersburg. The narrator notes, "he was cut off from the scum of the streets by four perpendicular walls. Thus he was isolated from the people" (Bely 10). His affinity for symmetry contributes to his creation of his city, as he opts to see his world through a lens of structure, and consequently, that which is outside of his structure cannot enter into his "city."

For Bely, Petersburg itself is intrinsically geometric, and because of this there is necessarily a close relationship between Apollon and the city. Nevsky Prospect, as the narrator points out, has a linear symmetry with a "rectilineal principal" (Bely 11). As the Senator moves along and within this geometric space, he reaffirms its orderly, "Western" symmetry. The intersection of St. Petersburg's prospects participates in the city's creative expansion, as the narrator continues, "[the prospects] should expand into the abysses of the universe in planes of squares and cubes" (Bely 11). However, as Barta points out, the city also retains its swampy, Eastern foundations, particularly "off the well-lit boulevards, in the little swamp-infested passages of Vasilyev Island" where the workers live (254). This chaotic space is not part of Apollon's frame of reference, as he "did not like the islands: the population there was industrial and coarse" (Bely 11). The islands are

physically asymmetrical, incongruent with his love of geometry, and, ultimately for him, a space of discomfort and unease.

Bely's use of geometry as a socio-political symbol is also seen in his portrayal of Apollon's political stature and behavior, and according to Maguire and Malmstad, he "quintessentially embodies what the city represents for Bely" (109). Apollon's representation of rigid, structured symmetry is indicative of the West, yet physiologically he also possesses "Eastern" qualities like large, green ears. In attempt to align himself with the West, Apollon's vision for Russia's political structure is evident in Bely's portrayal of the senator's presence and movements. Apollon's construction of a rigid and geometric ecology reflects his desire to rigidly orchestrate his own internal machinery. The narrator illustrates this in the first chapter in relation to the senator's response to his heart problems: "Apollon Apollonovich had abandoned himself to his favorite contemplation, cubes, in order to give himself a calm account of what had occurred" (Bely 14). When confronted with fear, which is often irrational and uncontrollable, his response is to cognitively contemplate structure. In doing so, he is able to organize and control his psychological sense of wellbeing by way of cognition, which, for Bely, opposes the primacy of the creative. Apollon's affinity for an orderly and rigid configuration of his environment permeates his connection (or lack of connection) with others. This structuring works to alienate him not only from his son, but also from the citizens of Petersburg—those with whom he, as a senator, ought to be connected.

Regarding Apollon's movement through the city, his perception of both it and himself changes when he walks rather than when he sits in his carriage. The carriage protects him, whereas walking exposes him to the elements of the city. The narrator

describes how as he crossed a square “his fear of space awakened” (130). Physically interacting with the city rouses emotion within the senator, and it is his physical connection with the materiality of the square that allows him to recognize his fear of open space. Kern notes that, “Russia was universally viewed (and feared) as the country with boundless space” (4). Similarly, the senator’s fears and desires, like Russia’s, are deeply connected. Bely uses the structures in which Apollon more or less contains himself to express this. Apollon’s movement through the material structures of Petersburg ultimately demonstrates his inability to connect with the city. His symbolic role as being characteristically Apollonian (and thus “Western”) expresses the city’s problematic relationship with Western ideals. As Pushkin referred to Petersburg as being “a window to Europe,” Apollon is seen ironically looking at Petersburg *through* windows, from his home, office, and carriage. He, in other words, personifies the historical disconnection between the city and Europe, and it is not until he can step out of his carriage and physically move through the open space that he can confront this tension.

Apollon’s need for order can be seen in his isolated movement through the public space of the city. It occurs primarily on the Nevsky Prospect, the city’s center for the public’s circulation. As he makes his way down the Prospect in his carriage, the narrator observes how “Apollon Apollonovich Ableukhov was gently rocking on the satin seat cushions. He was cut off from the scum of the streets by four perpendicular walls. Thus he was isolated from the people” (Bely 10). This isolation places Apollon not only within the preciseness of the carriage’s square geometric structure but also surrounded by luxury, further indicating his segregation from the “common.” This placement in turn isolates him from city’s structures, inhabitants, and even its commercial and economic

movements, signifying the irony of his role as a public representative. His progression through and relationship with the city is thus ineffectual, as “we never really see him *act*. Instead we ‘see’ his thoughts, hear his words, and are told about his endless dictation of directives, all of which have no effect on the world that is crumbling around him” (Maguire and Malmstad 112). By lapsing “into unthinking contemplation of pyramids, triangles, parallelepipeds, cubes, and trapezoids,” Apollon unintentionally creates (Bely 11). By contemplating the city’s geometric structures, the senator is participating in cerebral play, establishing the city’s presence in his own mind and ultimately allows him to ignore the city’s problematic components.

Apollon’s disconnection with Petersburg can also be seen in his contemplation of the Neva and the islands. As he passes through them, he thinks that they “must be crushed!” (Bely 11). For Petersburg at the beginning of the twentieth century, the islands were where the lower classes lived, and the senator’s position in the carriage both physically and symbolically separates him from Petersburg’s poverty. The narrator describes Apollon’s train of thought as he passes by the islands:

While gazing dreamily into that illimitability of the mists, the statesman suddenly expanded out of the black cube of the carriage in all directions and soared above it. And he wanted the carriage to fly forward, the prospects to fly to meet him—prospect after prospect, so that the entire spherical surface of the planet should be embraced, as in serpent coils, by blackish gray cubes of houses; so that all the earth, crushed by prospects, in its rectilinear principle,

unembraceable infinity; so that the network of parallel prospects, intersected by a network of prospects, should expand into the abysses of the universe in planes of squares and circles: one square per “solid citizen,” so that.... (11)

The narrator’s description of Apollon’s movement through the city expresses the senator’s conflicting attitudes and beliefs. Although he is motivated by his love of symmetry and simplicity, he also desires to exist outside of himself, away from the confines of structure, as evident in the mist’s “illimitability” and his own psychological expansion, yet within the safe confines of the carriage, his “black cube.” In doing this, Bely demonstrates modernity’s tension between structure and chaos, and more specifically, the coexistence of these kinds of spaces. For Apollon, illimitability, particularly with respect to space, can neither be fathomed nor quantified; it is beyond him, and consequently he is unable to appropriately navigate his love of symmetry. His to move into endless space is indicative of his deeper desire to move beyond his spaces of comfort; that is, the spaces of symmetry.

With respect to Nikolai, his own movement through the material Petersburg acts as his attempt to return to a center. In other words, if the city itself, as Bely claims, is a mathematical point expanding outward, Nikolai is seen working through the symbolic in hopes of finding its location. Much of the novel points to Nikolai’s childhood as being a symbolic center for him, as the narrator mentions he “yearned to return to his real home: the nursery” (Bely 220). In “The Eternal Return: Andrej Belyj’s *Kotik Letaev*,” Samuel Cioran suggests that much of Bely’s writing reflects his own traumatic childhood, and likewise expresses his personal desire to reconfigure his own childhood,” and particularly

his relationship with his parents (25). This can be seen reflected in Nikolai's response to his mother's return from Spain:

He could not hold back; he rushed to her.

'Is it really you, my boy?....'

He could not hold back. Sinking on his knees before her, he threw his arms around her. He pressed against her knees and broke into racking sobs—why, he did not know. His broad shoulders began heaving (he had received no affection these last few years).

'Mamma, it's you....'

And he wept. (Bely 277)

Rather than finding a center, by reuniting with his mother, the center returns to Nikolai, and he becomes like a child. Through this experience, he is able to at last express emotion, which the narrator describes as "a meaningless boiling liquid in his head" (276). This, effectively, characterizes Bely's implementation of circularity within the novel, as emotionally Nikolai repeatedly returns to this childhood center, yet understands that he cannot truly become a child again.

Bely expresses Nikolai's longing to identify and return to a center when he receives a letter from "The Unknown One," notifying him that the bomb has been delivered. In this moment, Nikolai experiences a number of emotions. Above all he is filled with the desire to cognitively understand what is happening and his role in the life and death of his father. The narrator describes how Nikolai "tried to remember that events of the mortal world do not infringe in the least on thought, and that the thinking

brain is merely a phenomenon of consciousness” (102). This action of remembering connects the novel with cerebral play, and Nikolai’s inability to understand the material world through his cognition is, according to Bely, due to his inadequate use of creation. In “The Magic of Words,” Bely argues that cognition is nothing more than a “mute word or a mute mathematical sign,” and because of this, it “thus becomes a mere nomenclature of mute and empty words...Cognition here becomes ignorance” (102). Ultimately, given the symbolist worldview prescribed by Bely, Nikolai cannot understand this experience through thought. The narrator further describes the inadequacy of cognition:

His *true* contemplative spirit was capable of illuminating the way for him, even with *this*; capable of illuminating even...this....All around—*this* rose. It rose as fences. At his feet he noticed a gateway and a puddle. And nothing gave illumination. Consciousness struggled in vain to give illumination. It gave no illumination. Horrible darkness! Looking around, he crept up to a blot of light from a street lamp. Under the blot a stream of water babbled in the gutter, an orange peel swept past. (Bely 127)

Bely’s discussion of the “true contemplative spirit” in the context of the *Petersburg* posits it as a product of art, what he refers to as “cognition through revelation” or “symbolic cognition.” Art, for Bely, is a pathway to a “more essential” cognition; that is, religious cognition, as the symbolists regarded religion as “a system of consistently unfolding symbols” (“Symbolism as a World View” 78). Nikolai’s inability to illuminate his circumstances is offset by the narrator’s descriptions of the material city. These

seemingly unrelated city components (fences, gates, the street lamp, gutter water, and the orange peel) act as symbolic pieces of Petersburg and likewise attempt to replace the limits of cognition with the materials moving within the city. Their movement, in the context of cognition, represents the role of symbols in illuminating understanding. Nikolai's potential for true contemplation is present in the city structures rather than within the mind itself. Understanding, for Nikolai, cannot be derived from nothing, as Bely argues "the worlds of abstract concepts... are not real worlds," and likewise, his "thoughts" alone are not real. They must be accompanied by their symbolic, creative, and material manifestations.

Nikolai's seeking out an eternal and central "Symbol" to which he can return primarily occurs for him physically, as, like the city, the body functions as a center. In the moment following Nikolai's activation of the bomb, the narrator describes how having been "deprived of his body, he nonetheless felt his body: the invisible center, which had formerly been consciousness... Logic had turned into bones, and syllogisms were wrapped all around like sinews. The contents of logic were now covered with flesh" (Bely 168). Here, in engaging the bomb, he synthesizes West and East—the bomb has precisely twenty-four hours before it will explode. His philosophical understanding of his action then shifts, and not only is he able to contextualize the symbolic, but the symbolic also becomes woven into his father's physical presence. Apollon's fondness for structure, and likewise his representation as "Western," is synthesized (for Nikolai) with the Dionysian "flesh." In this moment of anxiety his father becomes human, and the full effect of Nikolai's impending task is realized.

Ultimately, for Bely, the modern is essentialized by way of the symbolic. Through his deliberate use of Petersburg as both the symbolic and actual nucleus for a post-Enlightenment Russia, he reaffirms the city's importance within the national psyche. This, in turn, evokes a greater public awareness of its importance for the West. For him, Petersburg's real, material existence as a creative and expanding center further works to recreate and authenticate for itself what it means to be both modern and Russian. Likewise, Bely uses the novel to parallel this movement, as the roads, buildings, and people of *Petersburg*, and their eternally circular (and linear) movements, continue the city's outward expansion. Bely's implementation of symbols throughout *Petersburg* works to reassess Russia's persistent issue of identity, as its geographic positioning contributes to its bipolar ideological positioning. His synthesis of West and East by way of the symbolic speaks to the anxiety of modernity and likewise, affirms the city's own disjointed unity. For Bely, Russia is indeed unified; however, it needs to continually return to that precise, mathematical center that is (for him) the locus-point of culture and creativity. This center is present in the novel's Epilogue, as Apollon in his old age looks back upon his life through his memoirs, which the narrator predicts will be published following his death. Regarding these, he states, "And they have seen the light. They are most witty memoirs: all Russia knows them" (Bely 292). Even in the novel's conclusion Bely retains this issue of a center. Apollon's symbolic treatment of his own movement through life, like the city, is centralized in the creative and lasting expression of his identity. In writing the memoirs, he is at last successfully returning to his own center and affirms his own identity. He, moreover, unifies and repositions Petersburg within Russia's cultural identity, and as such, his memoirs function as the "eternal Symbol" for

which he had been searching. In this same sense, Bely is writing his own city, repeatedly returning to its locus. Like Apollon's memoirs, it is within the locus of creativity and consciousness that enables him to speak to the greater Russian consciousness.

CHAPTER III

PETERSBURG: THE IMAGINARY CITY

Petersburg's cultural identity has, in many ways, been structured and determined by its mythological foundations. Gregory Kaganov notes that there is a "basic myth" of Petersburg's history that relates to how Peter the Great "defied the elemental forces, both natural and human" in founding the city (332). Because of this, the city's symbolic underpinnings have historically been tied to its alleged unnatural and forced foundation. Volkov describes the Petersburg's beginnings as having both a "grim 'underground' mythology" as well as an "official mythology, which was sparkling and optimistic" (14). The relationship between the city and its people deviates from Petersburg's political intention to reconcile Russia's relationship with the West, and for Peter to "have a clean break with the past" in his own terms (Volkov 10-1). Petersburg's mythological foundation plays into the city's symbolic construction in *Petersburg*. In using myth, Bely initiates a dialogue with the past, confronting Russian cultural identity in relation to its historical presence in the Russian imagination. This chapter provides an examination of how Bely draws from the city's mythological foundations to dramatize the material Petersburg, engaging with its heterotopic space. Much of the city's portrayed unreality relates to his symbolic representation of the material city. Bely's imaginary rendering of the city distorts its familiar symbols and spaces to create dialogue with the historical, reorienting Petersburg within the modern Russian imagination.

In terms of Bely's portrayal of the imaginary components of Petersburg, he presents them by distorting the city's fixed material symbols. In this way, it is through the intentional misrepresentation of the familiar that give way to their reassessment. Much of

this relates to images of life and death, reorienting the cultural understanding of Petersburg's role as a living, Russian city. Myth creatively and symbolically constructs or (in Bely's words) *illuminates* reality within the consciousness. Matich notes in "Poetics of Disgust" that in Bely's novel, life "enacts the inexorable end of Petersburg as represented in the apocalyptic myth of the Petersburg text; Bely's images tap into a grotesquely baroque representation of the dying city, one that stands in contrast to the traditional image of classical Apollonian beauty and restraint" (65). The novel's dramatization of the city uses images of decay, darkness, and disgust. However, it is through these symbolic components of the city that facilitates Bely's attempt to reconstruct life by drawing upon myth, as the narrator asserts in the Epilogue that, "[the sun] makes the desert seem greenish and deathly. However, life *is* deathly" (292). The city is dying, as Matich notes, and its material and architectural beauty "has been invaded by putrefaction," juxtaposing life and death (68). Bely builds the city through disgust and humanizes the city by way of myth, presenting it as a living being, capable of life in the presence of death and disgust.

By dramatizing Petersburg's cultural space, Bely provides a symbolic structuring for the ways in which its inhabitants behave within the material city. Petersburg's own mythology connects the modern city with its symbolic cultural foundations. In the novel, because Petersburg is composed and organized by myth, the ways in which its inhabitants move and operate play into and are part of this mythology. The function of the mythological with respect to polycentric modernities is how both East and West are mythologized within the culture, and in this case, within Russian culture. Bely uses *Petersburg* to demonstrate the problems associated with misrepresenting not only the

East, but also the West. Subsequently he addresses the greater cultural need to understand how Russia fits into these myths and how these myths figure into Russian identity. Bely's portrayal of Apollon as Nikolai seeks to embody these myths. Apollon's obsession with symmetry and structure is offset by his chaotic private life. Similarly, Nikolai fetishizes cultures and mythologies he does not understand in attempt to synthesize East and West and, moreover, his own placement within those cultural spaces. By juxtaposing East and West through the characters' behaviors, Bely dramatizes Petersburg's problematic, liminal cultural status, putting the city into conversation with Russia's cultural imagination.

The dichotomy of the Apollonian and Dionysian is present in the relationship between father and son, Apollon and Nikolai. Through this pairing, Bely symbolically mythologizes East and West. The symbolic representation of these components connects Petersburg (and thus Russia) with Western mythology. Importantly for *Petersburg* in terms of Bely's symbolic use of Western mythology, the Senator and Nikolai both possess Apollonian and Dionysian characteristics—neither embodies solely one set of qualities. For Apollon, the Apollonian is most clearly demonstrated within his mental life; his love of symmetry and tendency to contemplate cubes when moving through Petersburg is indicative of these traditionally Western qualities. The Dionysian, however, can be seen primarily in his physical appearance. His green ears, according to Barta, are indicative of this, as green relates to the natural world, one that is unstructured and chaotic (257). Apollon's ears are described as being “green all over and enlarged to immense size, against the bloody background of a Russia in flames.” This depiction, the narrator notes, was provided by a “trashy humor rag...spawned with staggering swiftness

on prospects swarming with people” (Bely 5). This image establishes the senator’s disconnection with the people, as there is substantial disparity between his public and private lives. In public his world is structured and orderly; at home his family life is confused and chaotic, evident through the rape of his wife, her absence, and his fractured relationship with Nikolai (Barta 257).

Nikolai, like his father, desires to be rational and orderly. He chooses, for example, to study Western philosophy at the University, fascinated with Kant’s notion of Categorical Imperative. However, he contradicts this ideal by allowing himself to be persuaded to commit patricide by a radical leftist group, alluding to his impulsiveness. Moreover, in the private space of his room, he juxtaposes East and West. The space of his room is described as “shadows, shadows. And out of the shadows there, green patches of armchairs; and emerging from the shadows there— the bust of —it stands to reason— Kant,” exhibiting the overlapping of Eastern and Western elements (Bely 279). Nikolai cognitively desires to think rationally, yet emotionally and aesthetically implements Eastern qualities, including Asian, Indian, and African artifacts as in “the hanging African shield...the rusty Sudanese spears...and the spotted leopard skin with gaping jaws...a dark blue hookah” and even “a varicolored cage” with green parakeets” (49). The narrator comments, “Thus was a brilliant student transformed into an Oriental” (Bely 27). Nikolai essentially fetishizes the Far East, idealizing it ideologically from the naïve confines of his private space, and it is through this behavior that Bely demonstrates his childishness. This childishness is often seen in how he operates within this space, as he is often portrayed as being overwhelmed and burdened by it. For instance, when he believes he has misplaced the bomb, Nikolai is seen standing “over a heap of objects...agonized,”

as he cannot remember where he placed the bomb. By implementing both Apollonian and Dionysian qualities within both the senator and Nikolai, Bely presents them as modules in the city's imaginary machinery, demonstrating Petersburg's conflicting identity as ideologically representing both East and West.

The ideological tension between East and West can also be seen in the actions of Nikolai and Apollon. In Bely's treatment of their relationship, symmetry plays an important role in conveying the Apollonian and Dionysian. Bely connects their behaviors to spatial and temporal components when introducing them to the reader, and in doing so allows their polarities to speak for ideological tensions. Their unsynchronized behaviors are present at the beginning of the novel, for example, during breakfast, the senator asks his valet, "Is Nikolai Apollonovich up yet?" to which he responds, "No indeed, sir, he's not up yet...." (Bely 4). The narrator characterizes this as being the typical rhythm of their relationship, as "It was precisely half past nine. Every morning the senator inquired about the times of his awakening. And every morning he made a face. Nikolai Apollonovich was the senator's son" (Bely 4). Apollon's existence within these symmetrical structures allows him to create a dialogue with himself; that is, one that is predictable and secure. Nikolai, on the other hand, exists and behaves outside of these structures, creating tension. Fundamentally, the novel establishes this father-son relationship as lacking continuity, as Apollon lives within the preciseness of time whereas Nikolai ignores it. Driving this disconnect is the narrative's linguistic structure and organization, and Bely establishes their unsynchronized behaviors prior to defining the nature of their relationship. The novel's creative motion and its political implications also exist within this parent-child relationship, as it is through language that Bely

constructs Apollon's prioritization of order over connection. The Apollonian and Dionysian components present in Apollon and Nikolai establish the tension between East and West, as neither behaves consistently; both are equally insecure about his beliefs and conventions. By dramatizing this tension within the novel's relationship core relationship, Bely fractures a deeply familiar moral structure—the family. Through this fracturing, he disorients the preexisting cultural expectations for morality, questioning what ought to be regarded as a moral center. The guiding, moral center, for Bely, is present in the individual act of creation, as it is through this that one can achieve a symbolic understanding of the eternal (“Symbolism as a World View” 78).

The narrator's treatment of Nikolai exposes his vulnerability and naivety to the reader and particularly in his relationship with Apollon. This is expressed through their routine interaction as with meals or their movements through the space of the house. The polarity between their behaviors in these spaces expresses a clear antipathy, yet both men are portrayed having both Apollonian and Dionysian characteristics, operating and existing on the threshold between East and West. Nikolai's study of Kant, as Maguire and Malmstad point out, is offset by his very existence, as his conception was the result of Apollon's rape of his wife, Sophia Petronova (Bely xiv). The thread of his life, in other words, has been repeatedly tied to “sin” and, as Alexandrov notes, “Nikolai himself had become a ‘composite of disgust, fright, and lechery’” (135), which are, again, associated with the East. Bely repeatedly places Nikolai in spaces that speak to his own internal, personal dialogue as well as his continual dialectic with the city of Petersburg—one that attempts to reconcile East and West. As Langen notes, he “lives in a different world, one where the distances have shrunk. ‘Manchurian caps’ and Japanese ambassadors pass him

in the street; the “east” confronts him in his daily life” (82-3). In this way, the mythification of his own life allows him to operate in the spaces of both East and West.

Nikolai’s association with the East, like his father’s association with the West, is emphasized particularly in his private space. When he comes home after escorting his mother to her hotel, he “hobbled into his bedroom”—a movement that suggests a lack of control and balance, characteristics associated with the West. The narrator continues by noting that “He stood for awhile in the darkness: shadows, shadows and—the lacework of light cast by the street lamp” (Bely 284). Here, Bely is weaving together West and East. The “darkness” is part of the natural world, rather than manmade, indicative of the Dionysian, and thus the East—the chaotic space of nature. The light coming from the streetlamp, however, is part of the city’s constructed machinery, representing modernity and the West. This paring illustrates Nikolai’s placement between conflicting ideologies. He then “from habit,” as the narrator describes, “took off his watch and looked at it: three o’clock” (234). He is, quite literally, removing himself from time, placing himself in a context of chaotic and timeless space, again associated with the Dionysian. Langen points out, Nikolai’s rooms “seem to be the only area in his life that he can control,” as “the Ableukhov residence, cold, gleaming, angular, reflects the taste (and, mirrorlike, the image) of the aged senator” (15-6). Even the spaces he inhabits suggest a polarity with Apollon, and similarly, structurally they are indicative of his turn towards the East in attempting to reconcile his own indeterminate center, one that struggles to understand his own placement within both a familial and national context.

Jacob Emery argues that the novel is set up to grapple with the issue of kinship, and even the “basic conundrum that parent and child are at once the same person, in the

same flesh, yet somehow horribly, inexplicably different” (78). For Nikolai, this epiphany evokes the realization that he is biologically (and thus creatively) connected to his father through “bone,” “sinews,” and “flesh.” By aligning Apollon’s physical parts with reason (“consciousness,” “logic,” and “syllogisms”), he is able to identify these qualities within himself, evoking an unforeseen connection with his father. Moreover, by destroying his father physically, he would be working against creativity and likewise against the source (or center) of his own creation. Because, for Bely, the physical body operates as a center, Nikolai’s physical return to his father following the bomb’s detonation in the senator’s study further demonstrates the novel’s use of circularity. The narrator describes how Nikolai “not knowing why himself, began running back...and not knowing where he was going, he found himself—on the bed (right on the very pillow!) sat Apollon Apollonovich.” His subconscious desire to physically connect with his father is indicative of his search for the center. Moreover, their roles are reversed, and Apollon is described as a child, as Nikolai “rushed to the helpless little body, the way a wet nurse rushes to a three-year-old toddler who has been entrusted to her, whom she has forgotten about, and who has fallen down” (288). In this moment, his relationship with his father becomes instinctual rather than rational, and it is through the senator’s visible helplessness and weakness Nikolai is able to humanize his father. Similarly, Bely humanizes Petersburg within the novel by unearthing its weaknesses and imperfections.

Nikolai’s identity crisis, as demonstrated through his conflicting interests, is one that has been present since his birth, and it is connected to both his and his father’s belief that indeed he is “vile” and a “scoundrel.” Similarly, Nikolai views his physical connection with his father as also being vile, and both father and son express their

respective disgust by way of the body. An example of this occurs when Apollon is thinking about how Nikolai was the person dressed up in the domino costume, stirring the press. He wonders if his son is “really of *his own blood*? The son, after all, could prove to be the son of Anna Petrovna because of the accidental predominance of maternal blood... Only a *mongrel* could embark the *undertakings of this sort*” (Bely 124). Apollon’s belief in his son’s vileness is tied to blood and lineage, and likewise connects Nikolai’s behavior with genetic baseness. Apollon, moreover, cannot take responsibility for his son’s alleged vileness, and he convinces himself that it is the fault of his wife, as the first line of the novel somewhat ironically establishes that “Apollon Apollonovich Ableukhov was of venerable stock: he had Adam as his ancestor” (Bely 3). It is by associating his son with an inferior lineage that Apollon distances himself from him. Likewise, Nikolai distances himself from his father, as the narrator describes:

When Kolenka was called his father’s spawn, he felt ashamed. The meaning of ‘spawn’ was later revealed to him by his observations of the peculiarities of animal life. And Kolenka wept. He transferred the shame of his conception to his father. And he understood that everything that exists is ‘spawn.’ People as such do not exist: they are all ‘things conceived,’ an unpleasant sum of blood, skin, and meat—and meat sweats and goes bad at warm temperatures. (Bely 229)

At its core, Nikolai’s connection with his father is tied to physical shame, and predominantly due to his conception, occurring not out of love, but of rape and “sin.”

Likewise, Nikolai views his life animal-like, composed merely of flesh and “meat.” This, according to Langen, is what stunts his emotional growth, as he “deprives himself of the singular, transcendent force of love” (49). Bely mythologizes this love, and it is seen in his use of language. The sentence “And Kolenka wept” alludes to the New Testament depiction of Jesus weeping for the death of Lazarus, which is viewed in Christian mythology as an expression of divine love. Here, Bely connects religious mythology to that of the Ableukhov’s, situating Nikolai’s broken relationship with his own father within the context of a divine symbol, as for Bely, Christ (or the idea of Christ) exemplifies the embodied symbol, “the Word became flesh” (Langen 47). The connection with flesh is important here, as the antipathy present between Nikolai and Apollon is due to flesh. By constructing flesh as something other than itself (i.e. “the Word”), Bely reconstructs the relationship. This, too, is how Bely approaches Petersburg. The activity of “Words” becoming “flesh” is, effectively, how he configures *Petersburg*, and in doing so, he reconstructs the city’s identity. Moreover, it is through the re-representation of shame that facilitates symbolic creation.

Nikolai’s fetishization of the East, what Langen refers to as “orientalist fantasies,” are continually collapsed by the Petersburg through which he moves, and his indulgence in those fantasies in his own private space only “act as a retreat or falsification,” rather than being an act of creation (Langen 83). Nikolai’s relationship with the East, and particularly the Far East, is present throughout the novel and is evident intensely in his personal space. Langen points out that throughout the novel, much of what connotes Nikolai’s obsession with the Far East is tied to *things*—“decor, books, bed,” as he often attempts to tie these objects to spaces he ultimately does not yet understand (16).

Building on Langen's claim, Bely's use of the Far East with respect to Nikolai can further be understood as his attempt to synthesize East and West. He is, in other words, creating and organizing his own city, a modern and globalized Petersburg. His connection with ancient Egyptian culture in particular plays heavily into his environment, and indeed is present in the Epilogue in which the narrator describes Nikolai's work in North Africa. This allusion to the ancient connects the myth of Petersburg to ancient mythology. The narrator describes Nikolai's academic devotion to philosophy, a discipline he gravitated towards at the University. He notes in particular his fascination with the Far East, including his interest in Buddhism. For Nikolai, "Buddhism had surpassed all religions in two respects: in the psychological—it taught love for all living creatures; in the theoretical—its logic had been developed by Tibetan lamas" (Bely 164). Even here there exists a tension between the logical and the affective. Nikolai, like Bely himself, is seeking out the symbolic synthesis of the two within an urban context. Likewise, he finds himself both drawn to it and consequently seeking to implement it within his understanding of Western philosophy.

Nikolai's fascination with the Far East, as Langen points out, is consistent with Bely's own fascination with Egyptian pyramids and sphinx. With respect to the city of Petersburg itself, Bely connects the geometry of Egyptian ruins with the geometry of the modern Russian city, and he does so by placing Nikolai, who symbolizes a modern Russia, alongside Egypt. In the Epilogue, the narrator describes Nikolai sitting "on a pile of sand. Before him is an immense moldering head that is on the verge of collapsing into sandstone thousands of years old. Nikolai Apollonovich is sitting before a Sphinx." Nikolai, as the narrator notes, having been "engulfed by Egypt...foresees the fate of

Egypt in the twentieth century. Culture is a moldering head: everything in it has died; nothing in it has remained” (Bely 292). Bely used this language towards culture throughout his writings; however, it peaked in his writing of *Petersburg*. His belief in a decaying culture contributed to his belief in the need for individuals to continually contribute to its creation, as he asserts in “The Magic of Words,” that the purpose of human beings “lies in the creation of life” and for this, he emphasizes language or what he refers to as “living speech” (95). Because they are a product of creation, words, for Bely, provide deeper insight into “the essence of phenomena” than mere “analytic thought.” Living speech is “the very condition of existence of mankind itself” (95). The power present in language is, according to Bely, the creative agency that revitalizes a dying, moldering culture, and it is for this reason that the text of *Petersburg* is capable of reinvigorating the dying city. Important to this is how Petersburg’s inhabitants interact with the city’s cultural symbols, particularly the mythological figure of the Bronze Horseman, whose presence in the novel initiates Bely’s reassessment of Russian identity.

As Maguire and Malmstad assess, of all the novel’s characters, Alexander Ivanovich Dudkin’s role in *Petersburg* is most problematic (126). Langen posits that Dudkin, like the other characters in the novel, is a caricature; he “exaggerates the essential” (60). Bely’s use of caricature can be understood as his dramatization of the symbolic, and in doing so he draws attention to important components of the tension between both East and West within the modern Russian city. In this way, Dudkin embodies the artificial quality of the city itself. He, like Petersburg, is an unnatural abstraction of what he “ought” to be. Ultimately the figure of Dudkin is used to demonstrate Petersburg’s modern mythology, and Bely uses specific images to represent

this, including solitude, wandering, heaviness (both physically and emotionally), and coldness (Maguire and Malmstad 126). Like Apollon, Dudkin also looks to his environmental components to soothe and calm his nerves, particularly when fear and paranoia overwhelm him. Moments after Nikolai engages the bomb, Dudkin senses that “Something had happened, most likely...” and he enters into a “delirious flight” (169). In managing this fear, the narrator mentions, “thoughts of tea, vodka, Styopka, and Revelation calmed him” (Bely 169). As the Senator contemplates cubes (components of Western thought) in order to control the anxiety associated with his chest pains, Dudkin looks to cultural artifacts to remind himself of how he ought to interact with and understand the city-space. His movements and actions highlight the Dionysian, as Robert Mann notes, the pieces of Dudkin’s life are grounded in Dionysian rituals: sex, intoxication, smoke, dance, and death (519). Importantly, Dudkin’s role is one that accentuates movement. He is, in other words, reconciling himself with the city by way of his movement within and through particular spaces. In terms of *how* Dudkin constructs his own understanding of his role in the city, the narrator emphasizes his desires, which are only satiated by movement:

He felt the desire to be permeated by the fog and to drown in the nonsense that was chirring in his brain, to extinguish the flashes of raving by exercising his legs. He had to pace from prospect to prospect, from street to street, until the brain was numbed, and then collapse on the table of some eatery and let the vodka burn his gullet. (170)

Dudkin's movement through the streets of Petersburg is punctuated by desire and satiation. He is haunted by a sense an "outline" is coming after him, "dooming him irrevocably" (171). The relationship between his movement and the city is not a destination, but rather it is a quest to find and understand the source of his fear and anxiety.

Dudkin's relationship with cultural and environmental artifacts is part of what Bely refers to as his "habitation," which Bely symbolically represents as being "unpleasant and insolent." Consequently, Dudkin "had an urge to get out of the room—into the dingy fog, there to merge with shoulders, backs, greenish faces on a Petersburg prospect (170). Maguire and Malmstad discuss Dudkin's habitation as Bely's peculiar use of irony—signaling the room's dissymmetry with what is considered to be an appropriate environment. It is "the place to which Dudkin 'ascends' from the 'abyss' of the city," and a space in which visions occur, deepening his understanding of his own life and the decisions he must make (Maguire and Malmstad 126). Bely uses Dudkin to bring ancient mythology into dialogue with the modern, as Langen suggests, "These massive, immobile pyramids are one antithesis to Dudkin's shabby St. Petersburg garret, a dwelling notable for its lack of solidity. The whole thing seems at times to be imaginary and abstract—like Dudkin himself" (17). The words "imaginary" and "abstract" allude to the historical notions surrounding Petersburg's cultural placement. Dudkin's garret is representative of the city itself. Bely uses the space of Dudkin's garret to remind the reader that the modern Russian city, like ancient Egypt, is a shifting, crumbling entity (Bely 292). Important to this notion of culture is how objects within the novel are disrupted, and this is seen primarily through the presence of the bomb. The bomb's explosion alters not its

intended object (Apollon), but rather his environment, as Langen notes, “and with it the physical aspect of a lifetime’s worth of accumulated significance” (17). Physical cultural artifacts, in other words, are given little consequence. It is through the characters’ ability to creatively express the experience of these artifacts that allows it meaning, as seen in Nikolai’s writing about Ancient Egypt and Apollon’s memoirs. The broader metaphor of the bomb demonstrates the impending erosion of physical, cultural artifacts. However, for Bely, within the collective imagination, culture is safeguarded by its artistic representation.

An important figure in Bely dramatization of myth is in his iconoclastic treatment of the moving presence of the Bronze Horseman—the cultural symbol that ultimately represents Petersburg itself. His use of this symbol occurs both psychologically, seen in Apollon’s hallucination, as well as physically, as seen in Bely’s reoccurring references of its presence within the city. This reference not only connects the symbol of the Horseman to his Golden Age predecessor and Russia’s most beloved poet, Aleksandr Pushkin, but also it is through this allegedly blasphemous portrayal of a national symbol that Bely evokes an awareness of the novel’s role in reconfiguring Russian identity. Bely’s use of and allusion to the Bronze Horsemen, as both a character as well as a symbol of the Petersburg, occurs throughout the novel. Importantly, the Horseman stands as an image of both Peter the Great and Apollo, combining ancient and modern mythologies. Olga Matich refers to the figure of the Bronze Horseman as “the city’s genius loci and the novel’s symbol of panoptic power...the most powerful tail² of all and the all-seeing

² According to Matich, “As in English, the colloquial ‘tail’ means ‘detective’ in Russian” (46).

panoptic eye of the city” (46). Indeed, the Horseman’s movements through the imaginary Petersburg connects with those of its inhabitants. In writing the city, Bely places the Horsemen as a key figure in how the inhabitants, particularly Nikolai and Dudkin, attempt to deal with the material city. The anxiety experienced separately by both men relates primarily to their inability to find an “individual center.” This fear subsists as personal, internal trauma, and relates to their own fear of the city’s power, which, quite literally, haunts them. Psychologically, the Horseman follows Nikolai and Dudkin through the city, serving as a reminder of the fractured relationship between the historical Petersburg and its presence in the modern imagination.

The Horseman’s visit to Nikolai occurs following his meeting with secret police agent, Pavel Yakovlevich, on the very spot where two and a half months earlier he agreed to assassinate his father. In bringing the Horseman into *Petersburg*, Bely brings him into dialogue with the city’s cultural and historical mythology, and as Barta argues, into dialogue with Pushkin’s poem (*Bely, Joyce, and Döblin* 28). As the Bronze Horseman comes alive in front of Nikolai, the narrator describes:

The face of the Horseman and the bronze laurel wreath flared. And a many-tonned arm extended imperiously. It seemed that the arm was about to move, and the metallic hooves at any moment would come crashing down upon the crag, and through all of Petersburg would resound:

“Yes, yes, yes...

“It is—I...

“I doom: irrevocably!”

For a moment everything was suddenly flooded with light
for Nikolai Apollonovich. Yes, he understood: he must.
Roaring with laughter he fled the Bronze Horseman. (Bely
149)

At the presence of the Horseman, the city takes on Dionysian qualities, as the narrator describes the presence of storm clouds, moonlight, and swirling green vapors. The Horseman, being present within this as well as the symbol of the city, is contradictory, and many of Bely's readers criticized him for using the city's sacred symbol irreverently. Bely's Horseman, unlike Pushkin's, is an iconoclast; he portrays him as both majestic, yet "steely," meddling in the affairs of Petersburg's inhabitants. His behavior is contradictory, as Barta points out, he is seen putting Dudkin at ease even as he orders him to murder Lippanchenko, the man who ordered Apollon's death (*Bely, Joyce, and Döblin* 29). By distorting the symbolic reality of Petersburg, Bely reconstructs its identity by disfiguring it. He essentially uses the mythological image of the Horseman to both literally and symbolically flood Petersburg with the light of its own reality, and one that must reassess its role not only for Russia, but also for modern culture as a whole.

Dudkin's encounter with the Bronze Horseman in the garret establishes a particular kind of relationship between the Horseman and Dudkin; the Horseman as a symbolic image of the historical city and Dudkin as a caricature of Petersburg's modern mythology. As Matich notes in "Backs, Suddenlys, and Surveillance," in this moment, it is as if the Horseman enters Dudkin's body and they are "momentarily one" (46). Directly before the Horseman appears, the narrator states "And something steely entered his soul...And his mission took shape" (Bely 212), and the Horseman, who has been

pursuing Dudkin, becomes part of him. Matich calls this unification a “metamorphic” image—a moment in which the pursuer and the pursued become one (46). Keeping in mind the Horseman’s symbolic representation of both Apollo and Peter the Great, as well as Dudkin’s bacchian role, Bely’s fusing of these two characters symbolically and literally welds together old and new mythologies. Within this image of unification, there is a familial component, as the Horseman, in first addressing Dudkin states, “Greetings, my son!” (214). The Horseman acts as an image of the city’s father, Peter the Great, and in doing this, Dudkin becomes part of the mythological city, and consequently Petersburg’s cultural genealogy.

In situating Petersburg’s mythology in the context of modernity, Bely uses the image of the bomb to symbolically illustrate culture’s explosive nature. In *Petersburg*, the bomb is a symbol of the modern, bringing with it anxiety and a sense of the apocalyptic. Bely’s own desire for “explosion,” and the bomb’s presence both physically and psychologically speaks to the overarching theme of life-creation. The bomb’s potential for destruction illuminates its capacity to un-create. Considering Bely’s emphasis on the importance of life-creation in reassessing Russian values, the presence of the bomb expresses culture’s need to un-create before it can re-create. The way in which Nikolai both understands and treats the bomb expresses his expanding connection with the city and with himself. The bomb expresses the “explosion” or the change associated with the modern, as well as modernity’s apocalyptic potential, a presence that both captivated and troubled Bely’s imagination. The image of the bomb is central to the novel. As a cultural symbol, the bomb itself represents both creation and anti-creation. It

is the cornerstone of Nikolai's anxiety, and the ticking fixture upon which Apollon's life and death rests.

Significantly, Nikolai's awareness of his ticking watch reminds him of the bomb, and the movement of time reengages his anxiety. The narrator notes that, "He understood that his fears had not been mastered...And everything grew unsteady" (284). Although the bomb has been stolen and is no longer a threat, Nikolai continues to hold onto its psychological implications. In other words, he continues to operate within the space and time of an impending explosion, as "Everything—was bursting" (Bely 284). Elrich's discussion of symbolist movement, and particularly Bely's "longing for a liberating explosion," connects this image to the modern as well as Russia's East/West tension, as the desire to self-destruct is indicative of the "Dionysian" (18). In this moment of anxiety, for Nikolai, the reality of the bomb's non-existence does not align with his fear. It is the sound of the bomb's ticking that jars his understanding of the gravity of his impending action and its moral consequences. The moment the bomb begins to tick, the narrator describes its physical presence through its metaphorical presence as a "bomb" within Nikolai: "Nikolai Apollonovich understood that he himself was a bomb. And he burst with a boom" (Bely 168). Bely draws upon the psychological to illuminate the ethical, as he addresses his understanding of its presence. Nikolai becomes the bomb: a chaotic, explosive center that, when set off it expands outward, like the city. Yet unlike the city, the bomb destroys rather than creates, and likewise, it works against the center to which Nikolai desperately attempts to return. His anxiety is a product of his awareness of the bomb's anti-creation and ultimately its ability to decentralize.

In the Epilogue's discussion of Nikolai's recent research and work in Egypt, Bely's own culture is placed into dialogue with ancient Egypt. The narrator notes, "Nikolai Apollonovich is sitting before the Sphinx...He foresees the fate of Egypt in the twentieth century." The narrator then imparts that, "Culture is a moldering head: everything in it has died; nothing has remained. There will be an explosion: everything will be swept away" (292). Here, symbolic explosiveness culminates, and Bely connects the historical ruptures seen in ancient civilizations to the modern. The "moldering head" connects the symbolic to the actual, and in this case the moldering sphinx. Here, Nikolai is no longer wrestling with the bomb, and he has transferred this obsession to another culture and another time. This transference of focus allows him a deeper understanding of his own historical moment as well as the spaces in which he lives and moves. Nikolai's past relationship with both himself and the bomb is indicative of Bely's own relationship with culture. As he continually returns to the physical bomb, toying with the idea of patricide, Bely continually returns to his symbolic cultural bomb, attempting to understand Russia's own ideological and historical configuration.

Bely's use of myth within the context of the modern novel is ultimately epistemological. He uses myth as a means by which one can come to know how the spaces he/she inhabits contributes to her larger knowledge of the world—through symbol. James West notes that in order to understand the real (or physical) world, an individual "state of consciousness" is required. This consciousness, then, leads to "a strong emphasis on the status of myth, art and religion in the cognitive process," and "on the role of experience in human knowledge, and on questions of a more psychological than philosophical nature" (94-5). Importantly for Bely, the creative is critical for individual

consciousness, as the narrator comments with respect to Nikolai's struggle to "illuminate" the material world, noting how "there was no center of consciousness" (Bely 127). His statement connects consciousness with the idea of a center, arguing that consciousness itself is not a center, and for Bely, is it useless. Consciousness requires creation. Myth, in this sense, connects the symbolic to the actual. Bely's knowledge of the cultural importance of symbols positions the novel as an ongoing dialectic, connecting Russia's historical imagination to its modern reality. By using the imaginary, mythological Petersburg, Bely acknowledges the connection between the cultural awareness of the city's imaginary, symbolic constructs and its material reality. This heterotopic relationship seen in *Petersburg* ultimately gives the city voice and agency, putting it into conversation with both past and future.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

When Boris Nikolaevich Bugaev died on January 8, 1924, fellow symbolist poet, Marina Tsvetaeva wrote that Andrei Bely was “a captive soul... a being caught between two worlds... The earth seemed to be sending him back to the place from which he had been tossed out, and *that place* again returned him. In short, earth and heaven played ball with him. We—watched.” Poet N. Valentinov remembered him as being “disembodied, non-physical,” and other acquaintances expressed questions as to whether Bely ever *really* physically existed at all. His critics were particularly cruel, as following his death, Georgy Adamovich assessed that Bely “had birth pangs through all the thirty years of his life as a writer, but he died barren” (qtd. in Langen 7). In spite of both praise and criticism, Bely’s life was predicated on a desire to uncover knowledge of both himself as well as the various national, spiritual, and psychological contexts in which he lived. Indeed, Bely’s own troubled life can be seen reflected in his writing, as, like him, it is often disembodied, doing so most self-consciously in *Petersburg*. Much of the criticism following its publication asserted that *Petersburg* was thrown together rather than composed; that the novel was a random compilation of symbols and not an organized, intentional narrative. However, *Petersburg* is intentional. Its disjointed unity provides an image of Bely’s heterotopic, evocative Petersburg, and one that provides a symbolic context for understanding a particularly troubling historical moment not only for Russia but the entire world. It is through the novel’s symbolic orientation that anxiety can be understood in both material and psychological contexts. In its toying with the material

and immaterial city, *Petersburg* carefully and artfully expresses for its readers Bely's personal and deep-seated notions surrounding both Russian and individual identity within a heterotopic, often distorted, space.

Jeri Johnson's conjecture that "cities in literature represent something other than themselves and cities in literature represent at least themselves," indeed speaks to Bely's heterotopic vision in *Petersburg* (60). As a historical, national, and cultural space, Petersburg can be fundamentally viewed as both real and unreal: geographically real, as it indeed "exists on maps," yet psychologically unreal, repeatedly characterized within Russian writing as a contrived and forced space. Bely's projection of Petersburg within the novel posits it as an imaginary space, distorting its material composition in order to reframe it. The city in *Petersburg* is a projection of a modern and reconfigured Russian city, one that responds to its predecessors' accusations as being "un-Russian" by proclaiming and identifying for itself what it means to *be* Russian. The novel is Bely's creative reflection of the city's material and imaginary spaces, putting them into conversation with each other. He, in other words, expands Aleksandr Pushkin's assessment of Petersburg as being "a window on Europe." Bely, rather, situates his own heterotopic *Petersburg* as a window through which culture and modernity can be examined beyond a European context and within a larger, global context.

In deriving understanding of Bely's treatment of the material and imaginary constructs within *Petersburg*, what is evident through the novel's larger placement within modernity is how it operates in a global, cultural dialogue. Langen notes that, "the four corners of the earth' converge most visibly in the experience of Nikolai Apollonovich" (82). Nikolai, effectively, interacts with the world within the confines of his room. His

research in Egypt later in his life allows him to take his limited, cognitive understanding of culture and apply it physically. The narrator describes that Nikolai “has been engulfed by Egypt” and consequently, his understanding of himself as well as his relationships with both his father and Russia have shifted and have done so only by way of the creative. In this way, Nikolai’s writing provides him with a means by which he can understand culture’s “moldering head” and reimagine culture for himself (292).

Consistent with Bely’s view of symbolism in “The Magic of Words,” which posits that understanding requires creation. Likewise, Nikolai’s attempt to understand both Eastern and Western philosophy through mere contemplation is, for Bely, insufficient; he *must* create it. The narrator adds that “And it seems that not everything has died. There are sounds of some kind; there is a roar in Cairo; a special kind of roar; it reminds him of the same sound: deafening and hollow, with a metallic, bass oppressive quality. And Nikolai Apollonovich is drawn to mummies...What about Kant? Kant is forgotten” (292). Nikolai ultimately realizes that his reading and understanding of Kant cannot facilitate his search for what Bely calls the “eternal Symbol,” one that facilitates a center; he must do so via creation (“The Emblematics of Meaning” 187). Bely’s notion in that music “ideally expresses the symbol” is important here, as the sound in Cairo symbolically expresses the modern. The “metallic, bass quality” is akin to the sounds associated with the Horseman’s movement through Petersburg, serving as a reminder that culture will, like the bomb, explode. Moreover, culture will not stay the same; it will continually mold and rupture. The city must continually and self-consciously reassess itself.

At its core, *Petersburg* is a text of centers, and particularly the individual and cultural need to return to a center. The novel begins with a central “mathematical point”

present within the city, and ends with the observation that “Nikolai Apollonovich did not return to Russia until the demise of this father;” Russia being a familial and geographic center for Nikolai. For Bely, however, the “center” is not unique to Petersburg, but rather he identifies centers everywhere, including the individual’s role as a center. This image of multiple centers, moreover, connects *Petersburg* with geomodernism, as it is through the de-centering of local modernities, as Friedman concludes, allowing for “the possibility for polycentric modernities and modernisms at different points of time and in different locations” (426). Petersburg is but one geographical construct within the broader, global context of modernity. Indicative of Bely’s use of polycentric modernities is the narrator’s portrayal of Nikolai in the Epilogue. Not only does Egypt engulf him, but also he is “himself a pyramid,” just as he was “the bomb,” bursting with a boom. These physical cultural artifacts will not last; however, their creative manifestation (seen in Nikolai’s writing) will remain, at least symbolically. Similarly for Apollon, his memoirs serve as the creative center from which he can assess his own life. Ultimately, Bely shows both Ableukhov’s deriving meaning from their own lives through expression rather than cubes, symmetry, or even Kant.

By extending the limits of *Petersburg* beyond Russia and bringing it into a transnational dialogue, what exists is a reimagining of modernism’s presence as a global, cultural phenomenon. *Petersburg* is an inquiry, and it urges its reader to question her own beliefs regarding “this Russian Empire” (Bely 1). However, the novel inquires beyond Russia by bringing it into conversation with modernity as a whole. Brooker and Thacker’s notion that being “modern” implies “an intrinsic relation to time and history” and moreover “to past, present and future cultural practices” indeed applies to the novel.

Bely's knowledge and application of the historical intentionally evokes dialectic with present and past (1). He, effectually, reimagines the historical, allowing it to speak and move through the city via the material and psychological structures of *Petersburg*. The city, as Michel de Certeau observes, operates like a proper name, as it facilitates "a way of conceiving and constructing space on the basis of finite numbers and of stable, isolatable, and interconnected properties" (385). Yet for the novel, these "stable properties" move and interact with themselves, the city's constructed space, and Petersburg's inhabitants. Bely's *Petersburg* not only utilizes the city's interconnected spatial and material properties, but, in doing so, Bely acknowledges the profound interconnectedness of the material city and the Russian imagination.

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