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MONGOLS**

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Bely's *Petersburg***

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BELY AND THE MONGOLS

Geopolitical Visions in Andrey Bely's *Petersburg*

Thomas Edward Sandys Bamforth

Beginning in the times of Peter the Great, two perspectives have competed and clashed in the Russian consciousness. How are we to understand our endless geographical spaces? Were they a blessing or were they a curse? A burden beyond our capabilities that oppressed our nation and sucked out strengths that could have worked to build civilisation, social well-being, and comfortable European forms of life?

- Stanislav Kuniaev¹

As for Petersburg, it will sink.

- Andrey Bely²

Abyssus abyssum invocat.

- Pavel Florensky³

I. Introduction

Andrey Bely's novel *Petersburg*, which first appeared in 1913, has been ranked along with Joyce's *Ulysses*, Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* and Kafka's *Metamorphosis* as among the most seminal, if not the most widely known or read, literary works of the twentieth century.⁴ It enjoys a similar narrative structure to *Ulysses*, although it would be more accurately described in Bakhtinian terms as using

techniques of montage and polyphony, rather than as a stream of consciousness novel.

Although *Petersburg* stands on its own, Bely originally conceived of it as a sequel to his 1909 work, *The Silver Dove*. Bely's initial intention was that these works would form the first and second instalments in a trilogy to be entitled *East of West?* in which the urban and rural experience of early twentieth century Russia would be contrasted. The third instalment was to be a somewhat Gogolian grand reconciliation of themes. Here, the thesis and antithesis lay between the blindly destructive Russia of the East, portrayed in *The Silver Dove*, and cold, lifeless, and stultifyingly rational world of the West.⁵ They constituted for Bely "two Russias between which lies an abyss". For Bely, the fascination lay in what might be produced from the Russian abyss. The apocalyptic sense in which Pavel Florensky identified the tension between East and West in Bely's schema, *abyssus abyssum invocat*, was to be resolved in the third volume tentatively entitled "The Invisible City".⁶

Conceived on the eve of the First World War and the Russian Revolution, it was as project that was perhaps inevitably doomed to failure. Russia's losses, first to the German Empire and then to the intolerant material positivism of the Bolsheviks, meant that, in Nina Berberova's words, "Russian symbolism ran its course like a Greek

tragedy: born on the eve of a new era of the world, it had its Furies, its sublime conscience, and it went down to defeat in the unequal struggle for eternal values against the 'oncoming Huns'".⁷ As with Gogol's *Dead Souls* Bely never completed the final instalment, and went on instead to produce *Kotik Letaev* (*Kitten Letaev*), a novel that deals with his childhood and the possibilities of pre-natal consciousness.

While much has been written about *Petersburg* and Bely's attendant interests in the theory and practice of symbolism, anthroposophy and the portrayal of urban themes in late imperial Russia, few critics have commented extensively on Bely's geopolitical imagination. In part this is because Bely's previous novel, *The Silver Dove*, deals much more overtly with grand themes such as the conflict between East and West and their accompanying attributes: spirituality versus rationality, the decay and superficiality of modernity, and the search for some higher form of truth - in Bely's case an obsession with the philosopher Vladimir Soloviev's ideas about Divine Wisdom as embodied by Sophia or the Eternal Feminine. More particularly, critics such as Ada Steinberg have viewed *Petersburg* as an "urbanistic" novel.⁸ Both the name and superficial content of the novel imply that Bely's principal concern was with Peter the Great's city, his window on the West, to the extent that it ignores the broader themes in Russian cultural and

intellectual history. However, this appearance is, like the city itself, deceptive. One of the main observations Bely makes about St Petersburg is that it turns its inhabitants in shadows. The evanescence of the city, often likened by Bely to a grey floating cloud, and of the novel's dramatis personae suggest that they are "forms of thought which have not yet found their way through to the threshold of consciousness".⁹ It is the city's artificial construction and the impression it creates both of ephemerality and physical intangibility, rather than any substantive interest in St Petersburg itself, that make it the locus for the novel's action. Bely had also considered calling his novel "Cerebral Play" – a title that perhaps more directly indicates the novel's whimsicality and scope.¹⁰ While Petersburg may appear, at one level, to be about the problem of 'Russia and the West', the novel is in fact suffused with historical references, analogies, imagery, and ideas that show a deep concern for, and understanding of, the themes of Russia's geopolitical dilemma. It is perhaps because *Petersburg* was such a successful fusion of these themes and ideas that Bely never needed to complete his intended trilogy.

In *Petersburg*, Bely uses techniques of fragmentation, montage and polyphony that Bakhtin first observed in the writings of Dostoevsky. The result, as Steinberg rightly notes, is that Bely is able to generate a series of fantastic images of a "more complex

reality resulting from the mutual intersection of various fragments of the everyday sequence of events".¹¹ By breaking up, superimposing and juxtaposing images in a manner reminiscent Eisenstein's theory of photomontage, Bely is able to generate a hyper-reality through the creation of sequences involving "non-existent combinations of existing images".¹² The effect created here is contrary to Steinberg's argument in *Word and Music in the Novels of Andrey Bely*. In this work of literary criticism, she writes that *Petersburg* is not "parodic" in the same way as Dostoevsky's novels on the grounds that no "two opinions bear equally on the one object".¹³ It is, however, the very juxtaposition of images in *Petersburg* that makes it both a highly parodic novel, by reflexively satirising its own characters and parodying the features of some major Russian literary works, and an extremely claustrophobic one. Bely's approach to the use of words and images means that both the language and the imaginative space of the novel are highly contested and open to a multiplicity of meanings and interpretations. Words and images cease to be the battleground of just two competing voices, but contain an inherent epistemic instability that makes it impossible to categorise the novel as solely "urbanistic" or concerned with a single aspect of Russia's East/West divide.

Further, Bely was particularly interested in music and saw words as having a primary musical meaning which underpinned their semantic one: "sounds symbols possess *independent* significance on which the meaning of the word is *simultaneously* superimposed".¹⁴ It is no coincidence, therefore, that *Petersburg* appeared at the same time as Scriabin's *Prometheus* (1911), Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* (1913), and Prokofiev's *Scythian Suite* (1914).¹⁵ Even in the musicality of Bely's text, something of this apocalyptic dissonance based on the 'Asiatic' or Scythian themes of his musical contemporaries can be sensed.

It is the contention here that in *Petersburg*, a novel which is set in the year 1905 against the background of Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, Bely provides a striking contribution to the debate about Russian identity. The novel's characters and imagery are part of an overall geopolitical vision of Russia that reflects and comments upon many of the key themes in Russia's cultural and historical relationship with the East.

II. Images of the City

Bely's portrayal of St Petersburg provides an implicit criticism of the dominant late nineteenth century geopolitical view that the existence of a planned, 'European' city demonstrated Russia's

essential alliance with the West. Daniel Brower notes that “tsarist officials and educated Russians in the mid-century possessed cultural maps on which they located the border separating civilised Europe and backward Asia within their own country”.¹⁶ St Petersburg came to be the embodiment of this geopolitical conception. The much satirised rationality and linearity of St Petersburg’s cultural map, like the physical intersection of the city’s streets and prospects, are transposed onto the city in its official aspect. For Senator Apollon Apollonovich, the novel’s embodiment of arthritic authoritarian rationality, “only his love of plane geometry had invested in him the polyhedrality of a responsible position”.¹⁷

Capital cities, especially planned ones, tend to be architectural models and manifestations of state ideology. As Yuri Lotman comments, cities can either be isomorphic or antithetical to state ideology. In an isomorphic state, such as Rome, Jerusalem, or Moscow, the city personifies the state and can be seen as an idealised model of the world whose centre it is.¹⁸ In the cultural semiotics of space, such cities tend also to be concentric. They are frequently, like Rome, Jerusalem and Byzantium, the centre of the universe over which they rule – the known world, the faithful. Further, such cities are physically characterised by being constructed around hills and thus they mediate figuratively between heaven and earth. They also have divine founding myths, such as

Romulus and Remus, which give the city a distinct beginning, but which signify no end.¹⁹ Despite its pretensions, St Petersburg represents a model of urban development that is antithetic and eccentric to that of its august fellow imperial cities. In the antithetic model "*urbs et orbis terrarum* can be perceived as antagonistic to each other".²⁰ The apparent disjuncture between St Petersburg and Moscow, and its relation to the rest of Russia, are a constant theme in Russian literature as well as significant current of thought in *Petersburg*. The city is also literally eccentric in that it gravitates away from the centre. Such cities are at 'the edge' and are frequently located on the seashore or at the mouth of a river. They consequently present a challenge to nature both in their atypical location and in the artificiality of their construction. "This city", writes Lotman, "is founded as a challenge to Nature and struggles with it, with the result that the city is interpreted either as the victory of reason over the elements, or as a perversion of the natural order".²¹

In addition to attempting, by cartographical sleight of hand, to locate Russia firmly within Europe, the urban geography of major Russian cities reflected a sense of imperial self-importance and was the visual manifestation of the autocratic ideal:

In the imperial urban vision state functions merged with the social order: symmetrical, harmonious building facades fronted streets laid out with geometrical precision, usually radiating out from central squares, where troops from the garrison paraded and around which were located the imperial administrative buildings, the Orthodox cathedral, and the central market place. Whether on the borders or in the hinterland, these cities were frontier posts of autocratic power and European civilisation.²²

The intensity of Russia's geopolitical debate about its rightful position as a European power by both inclination and geography increased with Peter the Great's construction of St Petersburg. The inauthenticity of Russian cities particularly struck Peter Chaadaev. "At home", he wrote, "we are as if aliens, in our cities we look like nomads".²³ Chaadaev's incarceration in a madhouse for expressing such seditious sentiments indicated the hypersensitivity of the authorities to any aspersions that were cast on the image of state power. Urban geography was thus a sphere of competition for differing ideological and political visions. Countering Chaadaev, one tsarist bureaucrat claimed that, despite the immense wealth of Asiatic Russia, the "Nevski Prospekt alone is worth at least five times as much as all Siberia".²⁴ Here the contrast is between the high street and the tundra, the scene of bustling commerce and European high culture, and the inhospitable backwardness of Russia's possessions beyond the Urals. With the shaving of beards,

the introduction of European dress, the adoption of Prussian military technology and expertise, and the construction of a new capital, Peter the Great attempted to mould Russia as a European power. While Russia's new political orientation may have been focussed on the West, however, it could not avoid the geographical reality of its Asiatic hinterland.

What symbolist writers such as Bely and Alexander Blok observed in the construction of St Petersburg was the extremely thin geographical reasoning that underpinned the state's formal ideological position in relation to the West. No cartographical enterprise could alter the fact that Russia's Western and Eastern possessions were in fact contiguous and that it is impossible to identify any meaningful geographical divide between them. In his poem "The Scythians", Blok vividly identifies the futility of the conventional designation of the Ural mountains as the political and cultural divide between Europe and Asia. In the epigraph, he quotes Solov'ev: "Panmongolism! Though the name is fierce/yet is caresses my ear". Rejecting Russia's turn to the West under Peter the Great, Blok continues:

Your gloss-faced Europe through the unending plain
We'll lure within our deep forest-spaces,
Our tangled deeps, and turn on you again,
Swooping, our Asiatic faces.

Come to the Urals then, they're clear and wide,
And rage along the dark ravines.
With callous Science let the Horde collide,
The Mongols with the massed machines.²⁵

Blok's literary preoccupation with the *sauvage* is clear, as is his view that false 'scientific' Europe will be bloodily destroyed by a reincarnation of the Mongol Horde 'swooping' down from the steppe. Here, far from presenting an impregnable natural barrier separating Europe and Asia, the Urals are "clear and wide"; they are, in Blok's poem, an invitation for invasion rather than an absolute delineation of the frontier. The geographical imagery of the poem also serves to identify Russia as part of a savage, threatening Asiatic realm. Europe is not a separate sphere, but forms part of the "unending plain" – a frightening acknowledgement of Russia's vast expanses that also forms a motif in Bely's novel.

Blok's reclamation of Asian geography, and Russia's place within it, is in sharp contrast to the geopolitical vision of Peter the Great. If Russia were to be a genuine European power, as Petrine reforms intended to make it, then it should also be geographically part of Europe. The problem was that the Greek system of geography that posited three separate continents, Europe, Asia and Africa, also saw them as being divided by large bodies of water.

Greek maps indicated that Europe and Asia were divided by an enormous Sea of Azov that stretched almost to the Arctic coast. The remaining land was divided by the river Tanais, or the Don.²⁶ While the correct geographical information had been available for some time, the inaccuracy of the picture only began to cause concern with Russia's ideological movement to the West. To avoid the embarrassment of a European power possessing a long contiguous border with Asia, Petrine geographers attempted to find other geographical markers that would act as a division. V. N. Tatishchev solved the problem by moving the boundary from the largely fictional stretch of the Tanais River to the Ural Mountains.²⁷ The 'discovery' of a new dividing line between Europe and Asia suited the Petrine project perfectly.

With this boundary, Russia's old fur colony of Siberia was transformed in a stroke into an Asiatic and thus quintessentially foreign region, clearly and calmly set off from a metropolis west of the Urals which could now be portrayed indisputably, indeed objectively, as a part of Europe.²⁸

More importantly still, the appointment of the Ural Mountains as the inter-continental dividing line, transformed the way in which the Russian Empire saw itself. Russian victory over Sweden in 1721 led Peter the Great to adopt Latin terminology to proclaim Russia to be an *imperium* with himself as *imperator*, instead of the former

designation of Moscow as *tsarstvie*, or tsardom.²⁹ With the continental divide, the Russian Empire could now resemble other European empires more closely in that it had a metropolitan centre in Europe and a colonial territory in Asia. Official Russia had adopted both the language and form of European imperialism.

In *Petersburg*, the historical, cartographical and philosophical superficiality of the city, the disparity between the form and the content of Russian imperialism, is the premiss of the novel. The novel's prologue contains a clear statement of the conundrum faced by tsarist bureaucrats aware of the precariousness of their geopolitical position and is worth quoting in full:

Your Excellencies, Your Worships, Your Honours, and Citizens!

.

What is this Russian Empire of ours?

This Russian Empire of ours is a geographical entity, which means: part of a certain planet. And this Russian empire includes: in the first place – Great, Little, White and Red Rus; in the second place – the kingdoms of Georgia, Poland, Kazan, and Astrkhan; in the third place it includes ... But – et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

This Russian empire of ours consists of a multiple of cities: capital, provincial, district and downgraded; and further – of the original city and of the mother of Russian cities.

The original capital city is Moscow, and the mother of Russian cities is Kiev.

Petersburg, or Saint Petersburg, or Pieter (which are the same) actually does belong to the Russian Empire. And Tsargrad, Konstantinograd (or, as they say, Constantinople), belongs to it by right of inheritance. And we shall not expatiate on it.

Let us expatiate at greater length on Petersburg: there is a Petersburg, or Saint Petersburg, or Pieter (which are the same). On the basis of these same judgements, Nevsky Prospect is a Petersburg prospect.

Nevsky Prospect possesses a striking attribute; it consists of a space for the circulation of the public. It is delimited by numbered houses. The numeration proceeds house by house, which considerably facilitates the finding of the house one needs. Nevsky Prospect, like any prospect, is a public prospect, that is: a prospect for the circulation of the public (not air, for instance). The houses that form its lateral limits are – hmmm ... yes: ... for the public. Nevsky Prospect in the evening is illuminated by electricity. But during the day Nevsky Prospect requires no illumination.

Nevsky Prospect is rectilinear (just between us) because it is a European prospect; and any European prospect is not merely a

prospect, but (as I have already said) a prospect that is European, because ... yes....

For this very reason, Nevsky Prospect is a rectilinear prospect.

Nevsky Prospect is a prospect of no small importance in this un-Russian – but nonetheless – capital city. Other Russian cities are a wooden heap of hovels.

And strikingly different from them all is Petersburg.

But if you continue to insist on the utterly preposterous legend about the existence of a Moscow population of a million-and-a-half, then you will have to admit that the capital is Moscow, for only capitals have a population of a million-and-a-half; but as for provincial cities, they do no, never have had, and never will have a population of a million-and-a-half. And in conformance with this preposterous legend, it will be apparent that the capital is not Petersburg.

But if Petersburg is not the capital, then there is no Petersburg. It only appears to exist.

However that may be Petersburg not only appears to us, but it actually does appear – on maps: in the form of two small circles, one set inside the other, with a black dot in the centre; 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.³⁰

In this satirical rehearsal of a formal bureaucratic disquisition on the nature and extent of the empire, Bely demonstrates both the ossification of official language and the emptiness of the concepts it is supposed to articulate. At every turn, what appears to be the beginning of a tedious and predictable answer to an equally tedious and predictable official question runs into semantic and ideological confusion. The bald description of the lands that fall under the Russian crown stops suddenly at Astrakhan, presumably with the realisation that to continue would be to include the undesirable Siberian steppes as part of the great Russian realm. Similarly, the Nevsky Prospect is apparently a European prospect because its houses are numbered and it is rectilinear. Such is the power of the geometricity and rationality of the European enlightenment that, during the day, the Nevsky Prospect "requires no illumination". This is perhaps in contrast to the rest of Russia that lives perpetually in an unenlightened Asiatic fog: other Russian cities are, after all, "a heap of wooden hovels".

The point at which the narrator becomes most disconcertingly lost, however, is when he compares St Petersburg to Moscow. Moscow is, according to Muscovite state ideology, in direct

succession to the two great centres of Orthodoxy: Kiev and Constantinople. Ivan IV's marriage to Sophia Palaeogenitus, the daughter of the last Byzantine emperor, meant that Moscow could claim to be the centre of the true faith, the 'Third Rome', after the fall of Constantinople to Ottoman armies in 1453. Moscow is, in Yuri Lotman's phrase, an isomorphic city: it is coterminous and ideologically coextensive with the state it represented until the reforms of Peter the Great. St Petersburg lacks this legitimacy, just as, in the narrator's emphasis on the importance of numeration in a European Prospect, it lacks Moscow's million-and-a-half population. Under the circumstances, either the existence of Moscow is a "preposterous legend", or it is St Petersburg that "only appears to exist". On this point the narrator is highly equivocal: St Petersburg "not only appears to us, but actually does appear – on maps". Unlike Moscow, which has the whole apparatus of religious, ideological and demographic legitimacy, St Petersburg can only proclaim its existence, no matter how forcefully, as a theoretical point on a map from which official instructions are issued, no doubt in the equally petrified language of the state bureaucracy. Importantly, for Bely, St Petersburg "has no dimension". It exists only in the artificial, created world of an administration that itself represents not so much the state, as an imagined pseudo-European realm that is both eccentric and antithetical to the Russia's geographical reality. In geopolitical terms, St Petersburg is the

product of the Latinate and westward looking *imperii* of Peter the Great, rather than the more organic *tsarstvie* of Ivan IV.

The rectilinear impersonality of official St Petersburg is embodied in the novel by the aging Senator Apollon Apollonovich Ableukhov. He bears certain similarities to both historical and literary figures such as the arch-reactionary Konstantin Pobedonostsev, Chief Procurator of the Holy Synod, Pythagoras, and Tolstoy's famous bureaucrat Alexei Karenin in *Anna Karenina*. The resemblances are typical of what Ada Steinberg has called the "fragmentary prototypes" in *Petersburg*.³¹ Apollon Appollonovich, in his love of linearity and his reactionary aristocratism, resembles Pythagoras; his ears, his personal coldness and his interest in agriculture (promoting the "import of haybalers into Russia") link him to Karenin. The analogue with Pobedonostsev arises from his former profession as a professor of law, his anti-semitism, his reactionary politics, and a contemporary caricature in the popular press of 1905.³² Here, Apollon Appollonovich/Pobedonostsev "was not in the least agitated when he contemplated his ears, green all over and enlarged to an immense size, against the bloody background of Russia in flames. Thus had he recently been portrayed on the title page of a gutter rag, one of those trashy humour rags put out by the kikes, whose bloody covers in those

days were spawned with staggering swiftness on prospects swarming with people".³³

For Apollon Appollonovich, the external world is reduced to the hyper-rational form of St Petersburg's geometrically planned centre.³⁴ Consequently, the senator takes refuge from the "swarming" crowd of the 1905 Revolution in "proportionality and symmetry". For hours on end, the senator would "lapse into unthinking contemplation of pyramids, triangles, parallelipeds, cubes, and trapezoids". In the subchapter entitled "Squares, Parallelipeds, Cubes", Bely has the senator travelling in his cube-like carriage "separated from the scum of the streets by four perpendicular walls". As he does so, he enters a geometrical meditation that reveals his ideal vision of Russia:

While gazing dreamily into that illimitability of mists, the statesman suddenly expanded out of the black cube of the carriage in all directions and soared above it. And he wanted the prospects 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 grey cubes of houses; so that all the earth, crushed by prospects, in its lineal cosmic flight should intersect, with its rectilineal 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 cubes: one square per 'solid citizen' so that ...

While dwelling in the centre of the black, perfect, satin-lined cube, Apollon Appollonovich revelled at length in the quadrangular walls. Apollon Appollonovich was born for solitary confinement. Only his love for the plane geometry of the state had invested him in the polyhedrality of a responsible position.³⁵

Apollon Appollonovich's views are highly consonant with the state's own geometrical ideology. Similarly, it is his love of plane geometry that qualifies him for a high ranking position in the state bureaucracy. The senator's geopolitical vision here is of both Russia the entire earth bound, and physically crushed, by the eternal laws of mathematical harmony with individual space sharply defined and delineated, "one square per solid citizen". It is an image that is at once universal and particular and it can only occur in the flight of fantasy that sees the senator suddenly expanding in consciousness beyond the narrow linear confines of his carriage in order, godlike, to "soar above it". Like official St Petersburg itself, the senator's image is a fantasy of mathematical perfection that has no correspondence with reality. St Petersburg is both a dot on the map, whose being is only proved by geometrical coordinates, and a state ideology that is metonymically transposed onto all Russia.

Consequently, the narrator can say, a few lines later, that “all Petersburg is an infinity of the prospect raised to the n th degree. Beyond Petersburg there is nothing”.³⁶ The official capital city, embodied by Apollon Apollonovich, is isomorphic with an artificial state. Like the stagnant prosaic language that describes them, both the capital and its projection as a European Russia are ultimately detached from reality and deprived of existence.

In terms of Bely’s theory of symbolism, the artificial rationality of the western philosophical tradition is replicated in the linearity of St Petersburg’s streets. These systems serve to hide reality and to suppress human creativity. In Bely’s linguistic and philosophical geopolitics, then, the state’s ideological construction based on the semiotics of St Petersburg is ripe for regeneration. As is Blok’s poem, the boundaries that separate Europe from Asia, and the cultural divide that it is supposed to represent, are “wide and clear”. Set against the background of the 1905 Revolution, *Petersburg* is also suffused with images of the threat from the East, often taking the form of “Manchurian hats” symbolising revolutionary soldiers returning from the war against Japan. The geopolitical suggestion seems to be that, like the bomb that is destined to blow apart the senator’s frigidly ordered study at the end of the novel, ossified European Russia is facing regenerative

destruction from the East: "With callous Science let the Horde collide/ The Mongols with the massed machines".

III. Shadow World

Through the existence of St Petersburg as a dot on the map without any tangible reality, Lubomir Dolozel has argued that "Bely links the existence of the visible city to the 'invisible' point at the centre. Thus at the very beginning of the text, the fundamental opposition in the semantic base of the novel is introduced: the opposition between *visible* and *invisible* narrative worlds".³⁷ The unreality of the city as a dimensionless mathematical coordinate is reinforced by Bely's repeated image of the city as nebula. Referring to one of the founding myths of the city, that it had been constructed so that it actually floated on low-lying clouds above the inhospitable swamp chosen by Peter the Great for his capital, Bely writes: "on his shadowy sails the Flying Dutchman winged his way toward Petersburg from there, the leaden expanses of the Baltic and German Seas, in order here to erect, by delusion, his misty lands and to give the name of islands to the wave of onrushing clouds".³⁸

The consequence of the city's dubious ontology is to make its characters and streetscapes equally chimerical. Bely uses the

Gogolian technique of identifying characters by their most salient physical features, thus depriving them of any sense of full, three dimensional, existence and contributing to the air of artifice that is already prominent in the novel. Apollon Apollonovich is thus identified frequently by his ears; Nikolai Apollonovich's contact with 'The Party', left vague, sinister and undefined, is through Alexander Ivanovich Dudkin who is in turn identified by his "utterly smoke sodden face" and appears as "a bluish shadow";³⁹ and police informers are indicated by a profusion of moustaches, noses and bowler hats.⁴⁰ Consequently, shortly after having confronted Dudkin about 'the Party's' instructions to him to assassinate his father using a bomb hidden in a sardine can, Nikolai sees the following paranoid streetscape: "Rolling toward them down the street were many-thousand swarms of bowlers. Rolling toward them were top hats, and the froth of ostrich feathers. Noses sprang out from everywhere. Beaklike noses: eagles' and roosters'; ducks' and chickens'; and - so on and so on – greenish, green and red. Rolling toward them senselessly, hastily, profusely". The grotesquerie of the St Petersburg streets directly contradicts the geometrical transparency of Apollon Apollonovich's vision in the carriage. As Bely writes, "the Petersburg streets posses one incontrovertible property; they transform passers-by into shadows".⁴¹

There is a strong sense in which, at play beneath the lineal regularity of official St Petersburg, there is another dimension: a land of shadows that exists in a “semantically unstable twilight”.⁴² This second dimension comes across most clearly in Dudkin’s insomniac hallucinations that take place against the “yellow wallpaper in his habitation on Vasilievsky Island ... the insomnia evoked the memory of a fateful face with very narrow little Mongol eyes”.⁴³ The “fateful face” belongs to the Persian Shishnarfne who appears in Dudkin’s room as a “black contour”.⁴⁴ Observing the problems associated with being a shadow visitor to a city whose existence itself is dubious, Shishnarfne comments “its not customary to mention the fact that our capital city belongs to the land of the spirits when reference books are compiled. Karl Baedeker keeps mum about it. A man from the provinces who hasn’t been informed of this takes only the visible administrative apparatus into account; he has no shadow passport”.⁴⁵ The need for such a passport becomes clear with the realisation that, aside from a ‘visible’ administration, St Petersburg contains no reality. Its inhabitants, represented by their salient physical features, are monodimensional or, at best, two dimensional as in the case of Shishnarfne himself – “he had leaned against the window and had become a contour (or, two-dimensional), had become a thin layer of soot of the sort you knock out of a lamp”.⁴⁶ According to Shishnarfne, the reality of the city is to be found, not in its

rectilinear prospects, but in an underworld of shadows and contours that pass in and out of visibility. The real geographical location of the city, and of the activity that goes on inside it, is not represented by coordinates, but lies in a supernatural realm:

Petersburg is the fourth dimension which is not indicated on the maps, which is indicated merely by a dot. And this dot is the place where the plane of being is tangential to the surface of the sphere and the immense astral cosmos. A dot which in the twinkling of an eye can produce for us an inhabitant of the fourth dimension, from whom not even a wall can protect us. A moment ago I was one of the dots by the window sill, but now I have appeared ...⁴⁷

The contrast between the St Petersburg that exists, i.e. the fourth dimension inhabited by Sishnarfne, and the St Petersburg as represented by the visible, albeit non-existent, administration is further illustrated if one were to imagine the arrival in St Petersburg of a visiting Papuan. Such a person would be "an earthborn being" and would be conditioned by the fact that "in Papua there exist institutions of legal order, perhaps approved by the Papuan parliament".⁴⁸ The contrast, according to Sishnarfne, between Papua in which there exists a "natural human world and natural government" and St Petersburg could not be greater. For the Papuan visitor, expecting to find in Petersburg an equally natural

state of affairs, “a visible administration”, there would be no apparent need to obtain a passport for the world of shadows.⁴⁹ However, because “we do not live in a visible world”, the Papuan will be disappointed in his visit. As Lubomir Dolozel observes, “having no visible administration, Petersburg is ruled by the world of shadows”.⁵⁰ The nature of the shadow world is unknown as “the biology of the shadow world has yet to be studied”. What is certain, however, is that whatever else the inhabitant of St Petersburg may be, he lacks both the rights and the ontological reality of a Papuan. What is beyond doubt is that “our capital city belongs also to the world beyond”.⁵¹

In the context of the 1905 Revolution, Bely’s attack upon the state and its ideological and linguistic underpinnings is vituperative. Dudkin’s interlocutor from the shadow world, the contour-like Sishnarfne, is in fact *Enfranshish* spelt backwards. In *Petersburg*, not only do the far-off Papuans possess a “natural human world and natural government” entirely absent in Russia, but basic political concepts such as enfranchisement are forced to seek a vaporous underground existence in Persian disguise. The geopolitical image of Russia as both a repository of European civilisation and the possessor a divine *mission civilisatrice* is Asia is reversed. St Petersburg’s artificial prospects, and their ideological implications, would shock visitors from apparently less civilised other lands.

Further, some of the main aims of the 1905 Revolution, greater political rights and freedoms ("*enfranshish*"), are in Bely's novel imported from the East in the form of a shadowy Persian.

Just as Sishnarfne appears from Dudkin's larynx in moments of hallucinatory tension, so the presence of the crowd in St Petersburg ebbs and flows through the novel in changing form. The crowd is also part of an intangible shadow world both because it is indicated only by its predominant characteristics – the noses, top hats and the froth of ostrich feathers – and thus has only an impressionistic reality. In addition, Bely's depiction of the crowd suggests the political ferment occurring beneath the apparently well-ordered harmony of the state. Cities are, as Daniel Brower has written, the image of state power that finds its parallel in the defined and coherent hierarchy of the social order, its rank and privileges.⁵² What lies below the extent of state power, such as the crowd, is a threat to the existing order. Bely's depiction of the crowd in *Petersburg* both evokes the growing tension and the potential for chaos in the year 1905, and goes to the centre of his geopolitical vision in the novel.

The complex images of the crowd that Bely creates further undermine the official rational world of St Petersburg as the

projected image of state ideology. Shortly before his fantasy about “squares, parallelepipeds, cubes” Apollon Apollonovich had looked across the Neva, away from the rectilinear geometry of official St Petersburg, toward the Vasilievsky Island. “Apollon Apollonovich did not like the islands: the population there was industrial and coarse. There the many-thousand human swarm shuffled in the morning to the many-chimneyed factories”.⁵³ Typically for the arch-conservative tsarist bureaucrat that he is, the senator’s vision of Russia is a rural one in which the primary image of the state’s relation to its subjects is of the familial Tsar-Babushka variety: on his desk a model “silver peasant (definitely a loyal subject) was raising a convivial bowl”.⁵⁴ The proletarian mass that inhabits the Vasilievsky Island consequently represents a threatening urban world. It is subject neither to the geometrical state hierarchies of official St Petersburg, nor does it conform to the senator’s idealised familial vision of tsar-subject relations. Further, St Petersburg’s industrial population lies beyond the state’s reach and is connected to the ordered city of Apollon Apollonovich by the bridges across the Neva. Reacting to his perception of the threat from the islands, the senator’s vision is that the inhabitants of the islands “must be crushed! Riveted with the iron of an enormous bridge, skewered by the arrows of the prospects...”.⁵⁵ The effect of attempting to crush the islands with the geometrical rationality of the state, however, is

counter productive as the population is able to move from the islands into the heart of the city by using the bridges:

Don't let the crowd of shadows in from the islands! Black and damp bridges are already thrown across the waters of the Lethe. If only they could be dismantled...

Too late....

And the shadows thronged across the bridge.⁵⁶

In its move across the bridge, the crowd in *Petersburg* begins to adopt certain apocalyptic characteristics. Gone are the initial images of middle class theatre-goers and secret policemen – the top hats, ostrich feathers and prominent noses. The Neva River, suddenly becomes transposed into the Lethe, one of the rivers of Hell that contains the 'waters of oblivion' which induce forgetfulness on those who drink it. The image of the crowd is further likened to a millipede that moves with an ominous, unthinking certainty: "without head, without tail, without consciousness, without thought, the millipede crawls as it did crawl, it will crawl as it did crawl".⁵⁷ The crawling millipede is also given a political overtone with the appearance of "Manchurian caps" among the crowd. As Bely writes: "the composition of the myriapod [millipede] was changing; and the observer could already note the appearance of a black shaggy cap from the blood-stained field of Manchuria".⁵⁸ More chillingly still,

“the horde had already shown itself on the Nevsky in the shape of a Manchurian cap”.⁵⁹

In Bely's geopolitical imagination, the image of the crowd is one that is both a threat to, and yet at the heart of the imperial Russian state. The crowd emerges most threateningly from the industrial slums of Vasilievsky Island and present the dual problem for conservative state ideologues such as Apollon Apollonovich of being beyond the state's control and representative of an industrial and proletarian vision of Russia greatly divorced from that of an idealised paternalistic state. The crowd is a complex image that changes as the novel progresses. It becomes transposed into an unthinking millipede that moves with a diabolical certainty, “the millipede crawls as it did crawl, it will crawl as it did crawl” that symbolically emerges from Hell to cross the Neva that itself has been transposed into the River Lethe. This occurs at the same time as, perhaps even because of, the addition of defeated soldiers returning from the disaster of the Russo-Japanese War, the “Manchurian caps”. While the crowd is at its most ominous when linked to the hellish swarms returning from Russia's Asian empire, the image is turned in on itself because it is only made possible by the architecture of Russian modernity and state control – the bridges. Bridges, for Bely, take the place of the railways for Karenin in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. They are at once the image state power

and the deliverer of destruction: Anna Karenina commits suicide by throwing herself under a train.⁶⁰ The bridges in *Petersburg* act as an image of similarly destructive modernity. They are a conduit for the hellish/Asiatic/proletarian mob that exists beyond state's sphere of rational control, to pass into the official, geometrical heart of St Petersburg. Just as is Bely's theory of symbolism the symbol is an explosive phenomenon that threatens to blow apart arthritic intellectual systems with the newness of perception, the presence of the crowd, with its potent mix of workers and soldiers, represents the potential destruction of an artificial and geriatric state embodied by Apollon Apollonovich.

Apollon Apollonovich's self assurance that the islands will be crushed at the beginning of the novel is, by the end, reversed. Whereas the prospects at the centre of the city looked like "arrow heads" threatening the destruction of the islands, by the end of the novel, like the Sphinx in Blok's poem "The Scythians", the "Vasilievsky island looked at the senator nakedly, tormentingly, insultingly".⁶¹ Rather than being a threat from without, however, the existence of the shadow world in Petersburg represents an alternative vision of Russia that exists coextensively with the state's official ideology. The world of shadows and the world of the prospects depend upon each other: "there is in the endlessness of running prospects the same endlessness of an endlessness of

intersecting shadows running into endlessness. All of Petersburg is the endlessness of a prospect raised to the nth degree. Beyond Petersburg there is nothing".⁶² In Bely's geopolitical vision, the Russian Empire suffers from a dual existence, both aspects of which are either forced into an underground or hyper-rational unreality. This geopolitical paradox is both at the heart of the Russian state and at the epistemic centre of *Petersburg*.

IV. Cerebral Play

The section of Bely's novel in which this exchange between Shishnarfne and Dudkin takes place is significantly called *Petersburg*. It locates the city not in some logically embedded European state, but in a semantically and epistemologically unstable universe. The world of Apollon Apollonovich is turned upside down. Despite its imperial pretences to greatness, the average Papuan, for Bely the inhabitant of a distant and fantastic realm, has more ontological reality or better government than the average inhabitant of St Petersburg. The instability of the world in *Petersburg* is further exaggerated when the Shishnarfne disappears at the end of his conversation into Dudkin's larynx.⁶³ Not only do the inhabitants of St Petersburg exist in a metaphysical city, but they are each the products and creations of the other's overactive imaginations.

"Cerebral play", Bely's alternative title for *Petersburg*, "is only mask. Beneath this mask is the invasion of the brain by forces unknown to us".⁶⁴

Like the duality of the Russian state with its mutually dependent shadow and official opposites, cerebral play is at the centre of the novel. It arises in opposition to, and as a consequence of, the cerebral repression of western logical positivism and its concomitant streetscape and state ideology. Just as, in Bely's theory of symbolism, the symbol threatens to burst through the artificiality embodied by Apollon Apollonovich, cerebral play is a product of human creativity and is thus part of the "quintessence of mankind". For Apollon Apollonovich "every verbal exchange had to have a goal, plain and straight as a line. He relegated everything else to tea drinking and smoking what he called 'buts'".⁶⁵ Despite these self-imposed intellectual restrictions that would seem to confine the senator to the narrow world of official Russia and St Petersburg, as he "sits in his office while his shadow, penetrating the stone wall ... swoops down upon the people in the fields ... it roams over vast expanses of the Samara, Tambov, and Saratov regions".⁶⁶ In his imagination, therefore, the senator is aware of the vast geographical expanses of the Russian state.

The senator's cerebral play, in which he flies over Russia, takes on cosmic dimensions in *Petersburg*:

The cerebral play of the wearer of diamond-studded decorations was distinguished by strange, very strange, extremely strange qualities: his cranium was becoming the womb of thought images, which at once became incarnate in this spectral world.

Oh, the better that Apollon Apollonovich should never have cast off a single thought, but should have continued to carry each and every thought in his head, for every thought stubbornly evolved into a spatiotemporal image, and continued its uncontrolled activities outside the senatorial head.

Apollon Apollonovich was like Zeus: out of his head flowed goddesses and genii. One of these genii (the stranger with the small black moustache) arising as an image, had already *begun to live and breathe* in the yellowish spaces. And he maintained that he had emerged from there, not from the senatorial head. This stranger turned out to have idle thoughts too. And they also possessed the same qualities.

They would escape and take on substance ...⁶⁷

Part of the illusoriness of St Petersburg is that it is constituted by the subconscious play of idle thoughts. Where these thoughts originate is a conundrum of the novel. In Bely's theory of symbolism, he posits a higher unity of being that is apprehended in "thousands of images and thousands of forms" each of which links back to, and is an image of, some higher form. Idle thought is, in a sense, a pure category. It does not just belong to the senator, but also to his creator: the narrator. As Bely writes: "the consciousness of Apollon Apollonovich is a shadowy consciousness because he too is the possessor of an ephemeral being and the fruit of the author's fantasy: unnecessary, idle cerebral play".⁶⁸ There is, in *Petersburg*, a chain of creation in which each of the characters is the ephemeral product of the author's and ultimately of the reader's imagination. The liminal status of the characters and the action in Petersburg is reinforced figuratively and literally by the importance of the images of bridges and doorways (one of the offices of Apollo is as the god of doors).⁶⁹

The geopolitical connotations of the actions of cerebral play become evident in the analogue between the senator and Zeus. Like Zeus, the senator soars above the universe, or Russia, casting thunderbolts – for Apollon Apollonovich these take the form official circulars that "sliced up the patchwork field of humdrum life".⁷⁰ However, he also bears close resemblance to Zeus' father Saturn or

Chronos. Here, the themes of filicide and patricide and of the apparent immutability of the Russian state come into play. Chronos/Saturn sought to stop time and generational change by swallowing his children at birth. Zeus, with the aid of his mother, escapes and is eventually able to overthrow Chronos and restart the cycle of time.

In a dream sequence entitled "The Last Judgement" which takes place shortly before a sardine tin bomb, placed in the senator's study, is set to go off, both the themes of immutability and change are conflated. Nikolai Apollonovich comes from a noble line of Mongols descended from the Kirgiz-Kaisak Horde. He is visited in this dream by one of his ancestors in the form of a "multi-rayed nimbus". "In its centre was a wrinkled countenance, its lips gaping *Chronically*. Thus a hallowed Mongol entered the room: millennial breezes wafted".⁷¹ The suggestion of Mongol destructiveness, built up by images of insipient revolution in the crowd and through Blok's poem, is ultimately undermined. The "Mongol cause", despite its appearances goes hand in hand with the autocratic rationality of tsarist Russia. In the dream sequence we learn that "Kant too was a Turanian". Instead of destruction, Nikolai Apollonovich's ancestor wants reason and order: "paragraph one – the Prospect. Instead of value, numeration: by houses, floors and rooms for time everlasting ... Not the destruction of Europe but its

immutability".⁷² The Mongol ancestor, however, turns out to be Nikolai's father who in turn transmogrifies into Saturn. Despite the slaughter associated with the Mongol invasion of Russia, linked to the Ableukhov family through their Kirgiz-Kaisak ancestry, "the circle of time had come full turn. The kingdom of Saturn had returned. The flow of time had ceased to be. All was being destroyed".⁷³

Here Bely is attacking geopolitical stereotypes about the East/West divide. Despite the image of the destructiveness of the East, late eighteenth century Russian thinkers saw in China particularly a model for tsarist Russia. It was, as Mark Bassin comments, the land of "the wise Confucius, the good Emperor, the morally just individual, and the scholar". The sense of Asiatic stagnation and backwardness that characterised late nineteenth century views, and frequently meant that Asiatic despotisms became a shorthand for describing Russia's own political system, was entirely absent. Like the "Mongol cause" in Petersburg, there is a consonance between the East and official state ideology. As Count Uvarov, the tsarist Minister for Education wrote in the 1830s, the Chinese enjoy "leur suprême bonheur dans la plus parfaite immobilité".⁷⁴ What proves destructive in the dream sequence is not the Mongol threat, but the ominous references to the sardine tin bomb, whose count down indicated with the French "sa tourne – sa

tourne".⁷⁵ "The bomb", as Samuel Cioran has noted, "is the concrete emblem of those cosmic forces which have been illegally compressed into the mental box of both Ableuhkovs. Its consequential explosion is a metaphysical necessity arising out of a false relationship with the world".⁷⁶

In keeping with Bely's reversal of geopolitical roles, the other potent image of destruction in the novel is Peter the Great. Despite his role as the founder of the Russian Empire's artificial capital city, the disconsolate figure of the emperor haunts the streets in *Petersburg*. Nikolai's encounter with Falconet's famous bronze statue of Peter the Great in Senate Square has overtones of Evgenii's fatal meeting in Pushkin's poem "The Bronze Horseman" and the statue comes to life. "And a many-tonned arm extended imperiously. It seemed that the arm was about to move, and that the metallic hooves at any moment would come crashing down upon the crag, and through Petersburg would resound: ... I doom: irrevocably".⁷⁷ Despite being the apparent originator of the static western oriented Russian capital that Bely holds in such contempt, the image of Peter the Great in the novel contains much of the explosive creation of Bely's ideal symbol. The geopolitical problem for Russia is not so much the reforms of Peter the Great, but the fact that, like the half-word/half-term that signifies the onset of stagnant language, the reforms failed half way:

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

Russia, you are like a steed! Your two front hooves have leaped far off into the darkness, into the void, while your two rear hooves are firmly implanted in the granite soil.⁷⁸

The image of the Petrine Bronze Horseman leaping “across history”, yet with its hind legs still interred in the statue’s granite pedestal, the Russian soil, recalls the similarly false geographical divide between Europe and Asia of the Ural mountains. The revolutionary destruction of the Petrine project is ultimately flawed, just as the inertia of the “Mongol cause” belies its apparent threat.

Bely’s ultimate geopolitical vision is, consequently, a paradoxical one. The Mongol conquest has only brought stagnation to Russia in the form of apparently hyper-rational Western philosophical and governmental traditions. We learn, however, that the Mongol project is one of artificial order and repressive geometrical harmony. Peter the Great’s project is ostensibly a

creative one, but only ends up instituting a false division of the Russian lands. The problem Russia faces is that, as in language, renewal and regeneration are impossible without an explosive creative force. It is through the subconscious development of cerebral play, suppressed by the symbolic linearity of St Petersburg's streets, that Bely comes to the geopolitical crux of the novel:

Kulikovo field, I await you!

And on that day the final sun will rise in radiance over my native land. O Sun, if you do not rise, then, O Sun, the shores of Europe will sink beneath the heavy Mongol heel, and foam will curl over those shores. Earthborn creatures once more will sink to the depths of the oceans, into chaos, primordial and long-forgotten.

Arise, O Sun! ⁷⁹

For Bely, the Muscovite victory in the Battle of Kulikovo in 1389 was a sign of the victory of Europe over Asia. It was the commencement of the false divide that, in his view, has benighted Russian history. Similarly, however, the cataclysm needed to remove the falsity of the divide will only issue in an equally undesirable era of "chaos, primordial and long-forgotten". Salvation, for Bely, lies in the

creation of the new geopolitical symbol – the Sun: an image of all creativity, unity, power and of Russia's rebirth free from the constriction of an exclusively Mongol or European political, philosophical or geographical heritage.

V. Conclusion

The apparent conundrum of the Russian Empire's geographical location, stretching west to east from Finland to China and Mongolia, and south to north from Poland to the Arctic, is one that has occupied Russian writers, politicians and thinkers since Peter the Great. In an age of increasingly deterministic nationalism leading up to World War One, Russia's geographical enormity and ethnic and linguistic diversity began to prove increasingly problematic. In 1833, Count Sergei Uvarov, the Minister of Education, attempted to introduce and inculcate the concept of 'Official Nationality', in which the slogan "Autocracy, Orthodoxy and Nationality" was deployed as an ideological state prop. For conservatives, represented in the novel by Apollon Apollonovich, this was fundamental in both their understanding of the nature of Russian institutions and as an attempt to overcome the problems inherent in Russian geography.⁸⁰ Whatever the Empire's diversity and centrifugal tendencies may have been, it was united by the pre-rational, elemental links between Tsar and subject, God and

believer. For conservative thinkers, the state was held together by the notion of the Tsar-Babushka: an umbilical connection drawing upon the image of the state as an organic family unified by fatherly authority. The third part of Uvarov's formula, "nationality", was understood to mean "official patriotism, unconditional admiration for governmental Russia, for its military strength and police power, for Russia in its official aspect".⁸¹ The potential for geopolitical fissure here was undermined by a call, in essence, to familial obedience.

Such organic visions of the Empire were, of course, as limited as they appeared to be inclusive. The incantation "Autocracy, Orthodoxy, Nationality", did not extend beyond the boundaries of 'European' Russia. Orthodox believers predominated in the Western half of the Empire, although official Orthodoxy did not include the large population of Old Believers, and the idea of official nationality limited itself to ethnic Russians. Paradoxically, then, the very ideology that was intended to unite the inhabitants of the Russian Empire was only meaningful to a minority of the population to whom it applied. Added to Russia's geographical problematic, then, was the disjuncture between official ideology and the reality of a sprawling, ethnically and linguistically diverse empire.

Central to this debate about Russia's identity and position in world were competing geographical visions. As Mark Bassin writes:

“a geographical vision is a cultural construct, and it is only by understanding it in this manner that we can appreciate its most basic analytical significance, namely that a society’s picture of foreign peoples and places is above all an expression of its own domestic mentality”. In view of this, Uvarov’s proclamation, in the wake of the Napoleonic invasion of Russia in 1812 and the Decembrist attempt to assassinate Alexander I in 1825, reveal an underlying anxiety about official Russia and the future of its institutions. In European Russia’s relations with, and understanding of, its geographical contiguity with Asia, these visions have gone through a series of what Mark Bassin has also called “inventions”.⁸² As Rudyard Kipling saw it, Russians were essentially easterners, and their basic conundrum only arose once they attempted to imitate the West:

Let it be clearly understood that the Russian is a delightful person till he tucks in his shirt. As an Oriental he is charming. It is only when he insists upon being treated as the most easterly of western peoples instead of the most westerly of easterns that he becomes a racial anomaly extremely difficult to handle”.⁸³

Whereas Uvarov hoped to link Russian identity and nationality to the more ‘advanced’ Western parts of the empire and sought to adopt some of the language and imagery of European nationalism, Kipling, himself a major contributor to the development of

'Orientalism', saw Russians as fundamentally Eastern. Bely's conception, however, of how Russians were to "understand our endless geographical spaces", is bound up in an essential view of the unity of opposites. As J.D. Elsworth writes, "all the apparent alternatives in the novel are reducible to identity. East and West, revolution and reaction, father and son – these are not opposites, but warring embodiments of a single principle: Mongolism".⁸⁴ However, Bely does not entirely reject the European state tradition, as Elsworth implies. What he articulates in the novel is a criticism of the geopolitical disunity of Russia brought about an artificial East/West divide.

Through his theory of symbolism, and the introduction of philological and philosophical concepts into *Petersburg*, Bely is able to create a dramatically original expression of Russia's geopolitical dilemma. As John Malmstad writes, "the 'truth' in *Petersburg* is given in no postulate, but takes form from a complex of contradictions and half-truths that are in ceaseless movement".⁸⁵ In Bely's conception, the ossification of language that this attempt to quantify the "ceaseless movement" of words and images implies, leads him to call into question the very existence of the St Petersburg. Language, in Bely's schema, is of fundamental importance as the building block of the state. The artificiality of the Petersburg streetscape, and consequently the Russian Imperial

state in whose image it was built, rests upon the suppression of the "living word".

This suppression of the quixotic nature of truth and reality, and more significantly for Bely, how it is expressed, constitutes a historical cycle. In the novel's epilogue, Nikolai is in Egypt where he sees a comparison between the civilisation of the pyramids and that of twentieth century Russia: "Nikolai Apollonovich had been engulfed by Egypt. He foresees the fate of Egypt in the twentieth century. Culture is a mouldering head: everything in it has died; nothing has remained. There will be an explosion: everything will be swept away".⁸⁶ On the eve of World War One, and followed by attempts under the USSR to remould the former Russian Empire into a cohesive hyper-rational state, the expression of Andrey Bely's geopolitical vision in *Petersburg* could not have been more prescient.

ENDNOTES

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