

Andrei Bely's Theory of Symbolism: The Relationship

Between Bely's Theoretical Writings and His Novel

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Abstract

In writing about Andrei Bely's theory of Symbolism, it is common for academics to note that he believed art (which includes his own imaginative literature) to be capable of initiating a real spiritual transformation within an individual. Whilst this idea is considered to be central to Bely's theory of Symbolism, very few academics go beyond recognising it as his ambition. This study comprises a discussion of Bely's treatment of ideas, his influences and, using his theoretical writings in conjunction with a relevant scheme taken from Anthroposophy (of which Bely was a devotee), a process through which Bely hoped to achieve his ambition of initiating spiritual transformation. This scheme breaks down the ideas which contribute to Bely's process of spiritual transformation into three successive stages, entitled: Imagination, Inspiration and Intuition, which are then used to enact a reading of Bely's novel *Petersburg*, with a focus on the character arc of the novel's protagonist, Nikolai. Drawing on Bely's belief that his imaginative literature may be insufficient in passing over the esoteric knowledge required to initiate such a transformation, it is argued that his theoretical essays act as a buttress, which clarify the supposed teachings of his imaginative literature using a shared system of literary symbols which are reflected in both his theory and his fiction. Such an intimate relationship between a writer's imaginative literature and their theoretical writings, in which they rely on one another to achieve an ultimate goal, is unusual. But considering them in this way: in which Bely's theoretical essays act as a description of a process, and his novel *Petersburg* as an illustration of the process, produces a new and original reading of the novel *Petersburg*, and qualifies as an elaboration on the topic of spiritual transformation within Andrei Bely's aesthetics.

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Introduction - Andrei Bely's Treatment of Ideas: Inheritance and Innovation

In *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, Arthur Symons writes that over time, “The forces which mould the thought of men change, or men’s resistance to them slackens; with the change of men’s thought comes a change of literature” (Symons 6). Symons is of course writing about the rise of Symbolism in 19th Century France, yet the crux of his argument: the idea that cultural forces inform or else fuel the decline of one mode of literary discourse, and subsequently give rise to another, holds true; literary movements are not entirely self-instigating, they feed off ideas from other discourses. For one literary movement to reach maturity it must begin by upsetting, either drastically or by degree, the tenets of the formerly dominant movement. This may be through innovation in the realm of literature, or else it may be through a systematic debasing of the ideas used rhetorically to justify a mode of literature. Frequently it is both, and the innovation within literature works in tandem with the general drift of ideas from generation to generation. This compromise is picked up by Symons as he traces both the concrete and theoretical changes in French literature during the 19th Century. In his study, Symons argues that French Symbolism began as a deliberate attempt to overthrow the Positivist strain in literature so that room could be made, once more, for the idea that literature speaks to a reality inaccessible to the senses alone. Symons writes that: “after the world has starved its soul long enough in the contemplation and the rearrangement of material things, comes the turn of the soul” (Symons 6). This general insight into the more elusive influence of cultural forces is then given concrete justification, in which - perhaps to make the distinction more emphatic - Symons situates French Symbolism as the antipode to its predecessor, Realism. The words he uses to pass over a sense of what makes Realism -

words such as ‘exteriority,’ ‘materialism,’ and ‘description’ - find their opposite when he goes on to outline French Symbolism. This comes either directly through the word’s antonym, as when, in his argument, the ‘material’ clashes with the ‘spiritual,’ or when ‘description’ clashes with ‘suggestion,’ or else he opts instead for ideas suggestive of opposition, as can be seen when, rather than looking upon the exterior of things, the Symbolist attempts to “disengage the ultimate essence, the soul, of whatever exists” (Symons 8). Thus in the course of his argument French Symbolism is situated as a revolt “against exteriority,” and “a materialistic tradition,” in which “Description is banished,” in an effort to “spiritualise literature” (Symons 8). It can be argued that this trend was not exclusive to French literature, but symptomatic of a general shift in aesthetics which swept across the continent of Europe.

In Andrei Bely’s novel *Petersburg*, a passage under the sub-chapter ‘Comte-Comte-Comte’ can be said to retranslate Symons’ argument into terms demonstrable of a similar change within Russia at the turn of the 20th Century. In this sub-chapter, the novel’s two main protagonists - the Senator, Apollon Apollonovich, and his son, Nikolai Apollonovich - discuss the subject of Nikolai’s studies: a book written by the Neo-Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen. Apollon asks him about the author and the conversation goes as follows:

“Cohen, a most important representative of European Kantianism.”

“Did you say - Comedianism?”

“Kantianism, papa...”

“Kan-ti-an-ism?”

“Yes, exactly...”

“But surely Kant was refuted by Comte? It’s Comte you’re talking about?”

“No, not Comte papa, I’m talking about Kant!...”

“But Kant isn’t scientific...”

“It’s Comte who isn’t scientific...”

“I don’t know, I don’t know, old chap: in our days people didn’t think like that...” (Bely 158).

The generational gap between Apollon and Nikolai is keenly felt, yet it doesn’t manifest as a mere gap in age, but a difference in the ideas which mould their thought and character. One way in which this intergenerational difference can be interpreted coheres well with Symons’ distinction, and is in fact fundamental to Bely’s theory of Symbolism. For instance, John Elsworth notes that at the heart of Bely’s theory is a fundamental conception, which may be distinguished as “a division in man between a rational and intuitive response to the world” (Elsworth 10). Nikolai, by disagreeing with Apollon, is arguing in favour of the Neo-Kantian idea (though not limited to Neo-Kantianism) of “the possibility of cognition outside the sphere of sensory perception” (West 197). This stance does not deny that Positivism is a tool through which truth can be deduced, but actually expands the definition of truth to accommodate both the rational and the intuitive. This idea recalls Symons’ argument by identifying an antithetical structure to the nature of being. It stipulates a conflict. And it highlights a consistency (though not without its limits) with the overarching theoretical undertakings of the Symbolists as a trans-national movement. This means that Bely’s rational/intuitive dichotomy not only recalls Symons’ material/spiritual dichotomy, but provides a framework that literally maps onto Symons’ dichotomy in a coherent way. It hardly needs to be argued that you could replace Symons’ use of the words ‘material’ and ‘spiritual’ with Bely’s use of ‘rational’ and ‘intuitive’, without altering the fundamental argument of either writer. Thus it can be maintained that both the French and the Russian Symbolists have identified, and are writing in order to confront, a similar binary duality that splits the nature of being.

Yet - and despite this fundamental consistency - we cannot also deny that there is a fundamental difference to Bely's and Symons' thinking. This difference is not a difference in the previously identified, foundational idea of antithesis, but one of elaboration and ambition on how to confront such an antithesis. The distinction is glossed over, but hinted at, in D.S. Mirsky's encyclopedic *A History of Russian Literature*. Mirsky writes that: "the principle difference between French and Russian Symbolists was that while, for the French, Symbolism was merely a new form of poetical expression, the Russian made it also a philosophy" (Mirsky 430). It is the final clause of this quote that is vital for the current discussion. The idea that "the Russians made it also a philosophy" (Mirsky 430), identifies that the Russian Symbolists considered Symbolism as an idea greater than literature alone. That is, that Symbolism was capable of supplying answers to real-world problems - perhaps, even, that Symbolism can be a legitimate approach to the world in a similar vein to other philosophical systems, such as Stoicism or Hedonism.¹ This idea can be explained, in Bely's terms, by a brief foray into the structure of his novel *Petersburg*. Robert Mann writes that the world of *Petersburg* "is torn in a struggle between warring sides of the human spirit" (Mann 508). Taking his inspiration from Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, Bely organises his characters into two separate groups acting under the influence of two competing wills, framed conceptually as the 'Apollonian' and the 'Dionysian'. The Apollonian concept accounts for what may be called the will to order. Out of this side of the human spirit issues our determination for harmony, reason and rational inquiry. The Dionysian, on the other hand, is a similarly pervasive idea that embodies the emotional, impulsive and intuitive characteristics of human consciousness. Within *Petersburg*, Apollon - as his name suggests -

¹ Roger Keys writes that Bely "viewed Symbolism as a *mirooshchushchenie*, an attitude to the world, rather than a literary school concerned with such matters as verbal style and artistic structure" (Keys 4-5).

is situated as a character who personifies, almost absolutely, the concept of the Apollonian. Nikolai, on the other hand, is more complex in character. Throughout the novel he exhibits a greater balance between the two warring aspects of the human spirit, though the intensity of each differs depending on the context of his situation. His Apollonian side is illustrated by his philosophical ambitions; his Dionysian side finds an outlet under the guide of his alter-ego, the 'Red Domino'. If, as Elsworth writes, "Bely's theory of Symbolism is an attempt to prove that it is in Symbolism that the reconciliation of all dualities is to be found" (Elsworth 10), then it would be logical to consider Nikolai (who accommodates for both the rational and the intuitive) to be one who has, at the very least, the potential for such a reconciliation. By extension, one could even argue that Nikolai is more representative, in this regard, of Bely's understanding of what Symbolism ought to be: a means of reconciling fundamental psychic dualities. After all, his Neo-Kantian position is neither Apollonian nor Dionysian, but pivots between the two, not reconciling them, necessarily, but allowing for both wills to enter into consideration. And this is perhaps where one can distinguish Bely's theory of Symbolism from Symons' understanding of French Symbolism most acutely. Symons identifies French Symbolism as the antagonist of French Realism, that is: as a concrete movement of emphasis, in which the French Symbolists actively prioritised the 'spiritual' over the 'material'. Like Symons, Bely identifies two psychic extremes, represented as the rational and intuitive modes of being, yet his ambition is one of active reconciliation, rather than the maintenance (or mere identification with one side) of the same pointed antagonism.

With Bely's ambition identified, it is necessary to confront the incoherencies within the way he presents his argument. The first question we have to answer is: What is the relation between the Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy and the Positivist/Neo-Kantian dichotomy? Apollon's belief in Positivism signifies that he believes the only true reality is the

reality apprehended by the senses. Nikolai's belief in Neo-Kantianism signifies that he believes in "the possibility of cognition outside the sphere of sensory perception" (West 107). Bely's arrangement of these conflicting beliefs is meant to exemplify the Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy at the heart of the novel's structure. Yet they don't cohere. Positivism may be symptomatic of the Apollonian, but the Apollonian is not strictly Positivist. And we know - for it has already been remarked - that Neo-Kantianism is neither Dionysian nor Apollonian, but hangs in the balance, and merely allows for metaphysics to be considered alongside rationality as a valid form of cognition. Thus our first question begs another question: On what grounds does Bely think this conflation of incoherent dichotomies is justifiable? Elsworth clues us in on Bely's rather eccentric way of thinking when he writes that, "All Bely's works, both theoretical and literary, spring from an original intuition to which all the tools of science and philosophy that he employed were made subservient" (Elsworth 10). That is, in Elsworth's understanding, all of Bely's thinking is oriented around the fundamental idea that our experience of the world is divided between rational and intuitive interpretations which we struggle to reconcile, and every idea used by Bely in order to explore (or justify) this understanding is manipulated to fit within its boundaries, which is also an assumption that posits his fundamental idea as ultimate. Following from this, it can be argued that the Dionysian/Apollonian dichotomy used in *Petersburg* seems to be a way of subsuming a history of ideas into a single, conceptual framework. Using this all-encompassing conceptual framework, Bely is able to assimilate (in his own mind) ideas which bear little to no relation to one another as soon as their nuances are considered. Thus, whilst there is a pointed antagonism to his thinking, on either pole of this antagonistic conceptual framework there is a mass synthesising of ideas. This synthesising habit of Bely's follows two syncretic moves: firstly, the subsumption of ideas,

secondly, the overturning of them to fit his own outlook. In this way, all philosophical dichotomies are considered to be different forces of the same suspension. So long as every idea can be divided into either the rational or the intuitive, the terms of their opposition become less important than their formal properties.²

Knowing now, as we do, that Bely's theory of Symbolism relies on the manipulation of philosophy, one might be tempted to suspect that Bely came to synthesis (as a method) artificially, as a way of shaping ideas to fit his outlook, rather than organically allowing ideas to shape his outlook. On the face of it, it seems that at the heart of Bely's thinking is a dogmatism to an axiomatic and pre-eminent idea which governs his approach to all other ideas and renders them elastic. It would be worthwhile investigating why this is the case. And it seems to be connected to the literary theory concerning the symbol. For the sake of consistency within this argument, it is best to begin with the inheritance Bely (and Russian Symbolism) owed to French Symbolism, and therefore best to begin with the fabled beginnings of Symbolism in the French tradition, which is also the beginning of Symbolism as a "major study of literature" (Fowlie 13) in general. In his study *Poem and Symbol: A Brief History of French Symbolism*, Wallace Fowlie traces the origins of Symbolism to Charles Baudelaire's sonnet 'Correspondances'. He writes that this poem practiced "symbolism instinctively long before it reached consecration in theory and manifesto" (Fowlie 28-29) and served as an "aesthetic basis" (Fowlie 13) for the motivation that lies at the heart of the movement. Before we enact a reading of Baudelaire's sonnet, it is best to outline an approach that will help to explain what Baudelaire is attempting in theory, and how he achieves it in

² For this reason Bely's use of 'synthesis' isn't strictly dialectical. Bely overlooks the differences between ideas and focuses exclusively on their similarities. He is happy to discount their tensions, favouring the ways in which they can be compared rather than the ways in which they contrast.

practice. In this regard, it is best to break down Baudelaire's aesthetics into successive stages - stages related to artistic creativity - which we will term as participation and preservation.

Baudelaire's sonnet, writes Fowlie, "reassigns to the poet his ancient role of vates, of soothsayer, who by his intuition of the concrete, of immediately perceived things, is led to the *idea* of these things" (Fowlie 29). This idea may be understood as a particular mode of perception in which the world of the senses - the physical or material world - is approached as a medium for the apprehension of something more. This something more is, essentially, the "transcendent, noumenal world beyond" (Keys 9). In this sense the poet, using the "divine power of the imagination" (Mankovskaya 52), is considered to be able to glimpse in their immediate perception of phenomena the world beyond, and intuit from it a mystical kind of knowledge. Thus the imagination is the faculty of the poet which gives to phenomena - which etymologically means 'to shine' - its brilliance, or pellucid quality that brings to light a certain transcendental insight. In other words, the imagination is that which allows for the transmutation of phenomena which, through the prism of feeling, manifests a meaning greater than the limitations of its form, which would otherwise be mundane, commonplace and material. Fowlie argues that this is the cause of what Baudelaire considered to be the 'correspondence' that takes place between the object of perception and the perceiving subject. Fowlie writes that: "The experience of the poet is the participation of all things invading him, with their harmonies and analogies" (Fowlie 29). Therefore the poet becomes to be understood as an interpreter - as a clairvoyant, even - whose imagination is "a translucent medium for the unimpeded reflection of other-worldly 'realities'" (Keys 184), which, in turn, allows the poet to move from the world of empirical facts to the world of values. It is vital to remember here that these values, which constitute the raw-material of meaning and supply the potentiality for meaning, are considered to be inherent within the object of perception

itself, and are merely intuited rather than created by the onlooker. This is an important distinction for later on in our discussion.

After this act of participation, the poet's task is to preserve his insight by effectively reproducing the correspondence in words. Before we proceed to give a concrete explanation of how Baudelaire's 'Correspondances' achieves this, it is necessary to ground his aesthetics within its historical context. According to Fowlie, Baudelaire wrote 'Correspondances' during a time in which "philosophers had been humbled in the presence of the positivistic scientists" (Fowlie 29). If Symons' argument holds true that ideas are, in a sense, possessive - that they generate a cultural force, which in turn modifies literature in accordance with its own, elusive demands - then we have an opportunity to set Baudelaire's innovation in the realm of aesthetics against the backdrop of the previously dominant mode of literature: Realism. Victor Erlich writes, in his essay 'Russian Poets in Search of a Poetics', that, during the period of Realism, language "was seen merely as a medium of transmitting thought, a pointer, a pure denotation" (Erlich 56). With this in mind, we shall now consider the first stanza of Baudelaire's poem 'Correspondences'. Baudelaire writes:

Nature is a temple, where the living
 Columns sometimes breathe confusing speech;
 Man walks within these groves of symbols, each
 Of which regards him as a kindred thing (Baudelaire and McGowan 19).

The first comparison made between the concepts 'nature' and 'temple' establishes the context of which the rest of the poem is an elaboration. If we consider this first clause in a rhetorical sense, it can be read as a statement of intent, or else a generalisation of the subject which the

rest of the poem is written to prove as true. For this reason, the initial tension of the metaphor: “Nature is a temple,” is loose, and necessarily so. Its looseness creates an atmosphere of ambiguity; it invites curiosity because any statement that conflates A with B requires explanation.³ And so, for the rest of the stanza Baudelaire works to tighten his comparison by the suffusion of further comparison. To the question: In what way is nature a temple? Baudelaire responds with metonymy. He takes words associated with both concepts and brings them closer together by emphasising their similarities. Thus ‘columns,’ which are metonymically linked with the construction of temples, are compared (using metonymy) to a group of trees, which rise in the same way as if to build a temple in (or out of) nature. By subtle comparisons such as these the initial metaphor is extended. Yet in its extension the metaphor is changed from metaphor to symbol, for if a metaphor is a comparison of one thing with another on a figurative level (which is made possible by the connotative forces of words), a symbol affirms both the figurative and the literal at once: it is a kind of literalism about metaphor, which reflects the union of materiality and insight in the apprehension of the symbol, and suggests a process in which the insight is preserved. Using Baudelaire’s sonnet as an aesthetic basis for the process, we can outline it as follows: the poet approaches metaphor, integrates it with the literal, and by doing so gives force to the spiritual dimensions of the symbol. This may be seen as a forced collapse together of concepts which, being a kind of synthesis, is evocative of Bely’s treatment of ideas.

If, in the act of participation, the poet identifies with the object of perception to such a degree that the object acquires a spiritual, as well as an empirical existence, then in the act of participation the poet transcends percepts. If, in the act of preservation, the poet integrates the

³ “As for metaphor, where you’re really saying ‘this *is* that,’ you’re turning your back on logic and reason completely, because logically two things can never be the same and still remain two things” (Frye 32).

literal with the metaphorical, then in the act of preservation the poet creates an idea, and therefore transcends concepts. In Bely's thinking this qualifies as an example of an altogether "higher form of cognition" (Erlich 56). The relationship between the symbol and Bely's extension of it into the realm of philosophy leads from this point. Bely adopted the stance that this higher form of cognition was an act of 'theurgy': a divine act, which ushers into the material world otherwise latent, spiritual realities. By exposure to the spiritual realities communicated in symbolist literature, Bely believed that the sensibility of readers (and therefore of society) would be augmented to the extent that their perception of reality becomes fundamentally heightened. Symbolism was therefore the means of attaining an ultimate goal: the transfiguration of society. Roger Keys, in his study *The Reluctant Modernist: Andrei Belyi and the Development of Russian Fiction, 1902-1914*, writes that:

What appeared to count for Belyi... at the turn of the century was not *art* at all, but *life*, life in the world seen as being intrinsically connected with life in the 'world beyond'. Art was thought of as a secondary phenomenon, therefore, the task of which was to communicate awareness of the reality of spiritual forces in the universe and, in so doing, enable the individual to transform his life accordingly (Keys 162-163).

The way in which Bely considered art to be capable of this will be discussed in the first chapter of this study. What is important for this introduction is the way in which Bely's extension of artistic principles into the realms of philosophy, politics and society initiates a change in Bely's theory of Symbolism as opposed to anterior theories of Symbolism. One of Bely's principles is to emphasise individual creativity. For instance, Elsworth writes that:

Bely's fundamental notion is... that individuals who develop individually to the point of awareness that they partake in a common subject... can unite through that awareness in a community that demands no sacrifice of individual freedom (Elsworth 29-30).⁴

Yet is this not at odds with the Baudelaire's idea that the poet is a clairvoyant whose role is to interpret spiritual realities? Baudelaire's idea assumes that all symbols have pre-existent symbolic connotations, which in turn limits the variety of ways in which a thing can be interpreted, and thus imposes limits on an individual's freedom of interpretation. It asserts, even, that the possibilities of interpretation are finite and subject to laws beyond an individual's capacity to create. This is diametrically opposed to Bely's belief that "creation has primacy over cognition" (Elsworth 19), which is itself a development upon the Neo Kantian philosophy of Heinrich Rickert.⁵

By 1907 Bely abandons his original stance and comes to see Symbolism not as a matter of clairvoyance but as a matter of creation, which is to say that the artist is no longer considered an interpreter but a creator of spiritual realities. Keys writes that:

From about 1907, as we have seen, Belyi tacitly abandoned the type of overtly mystical aesthetic which he had defended hitherto and, along with it, the naive 'correspondence' theory of language which it had entailed. He no longer seemed to regard language as a translucent medium for the unimpeded reflection of other-worldly 'realities' (Keys 184).

⁴ This is corroborated in Bely's essay 'Apocalypse in Russian Poetry' where he writes that: "In Lermontov we see the collision of two modes of relation to reality. Individualism battles against universalism. The result will either be enslavement of mysticism by esthetics (or vice versa) or the fusion of mysticism with esthetics in a theurgic union of religious creativity. In the latter case the result will be the birth from the depths of poetry of a new religion hitherto unknown to the world" (Bely and Jakim 97).

⁵ It must be remarked that this development was not endorsed by Heinrich Rickert, who, when told of Bely's views, "clearly dissociated himself from them" (Elsworth 19).

Keys further writes of this change as a movement “towards a more immanent ‘expressive’ aesthetic, as opposed to a transcendent, ‘mystical’ one” (Keys 176). Bely’s later ‘expressive’ aesthetic asserts that “the artist, in common with other creative humans, creates an order that is not present in raw nature” (Elsworth 34), and that language itself is “a formative or creative medium, forging new realities rather than mechanically reproducing pre-existent ones” (Keys 184). Thus rather than language being a reflection, or interpretation of a spiritual reality, Bely comes to consider himself to be like “a divine creator capable of giving material form to the postulates of knowledge, of summoning a different world to being” (Morrison 4). The idea of ‘creative activity’ comes to be central to Bely’s theory of Symbolism in this phase of its development. As Elsworth writes, in Bely’s understanding ‘creative activity’ is seen as “the manifestation of man’s striving towards unity with God” (Elsworth 26), and, furthermore, this ‘creative activity’ - exemplary in art - is considered to be “an active force for the complete transformation of reality” (Elsworth 27).

In the following chapters, we shall be outlining the way in which Bely considered art to be capable of influencing a spiritual transformation within the individual, and, in addition, discussing the way in which he illustrates this transformation in his novel *Petersburg*.

Chapter 1 - Andrei Bely's Theory of Symbolism

In his book, *Andrei Bely: A critical study of the novels*, J. D. Elsworth asks: "What, in the end, is the relation between the theory and the novels?" (Elsworth 52). Questions such as this, if they are given near the close of two whole chapters dedicated to an exposition of a theory (as is the case in Elsworth's study), serve to highlight a fundamental problem. Art, in Bely's theory, was seen as a vessel for the quickening of a greater purpose. This purpose was ultimately extrinsic to the art itself. In Bely's theory art was a medium for the communication of a heightened way-of-seeing, a perception and a mentality that would transform the self of the individual and lead inevitably to a spiritual revolution, not only in the individual but in society as a whole. But if it "ought to be through works of literary art," that this way-of-seeing "is actually communicated to the reader" (Elsworth 52), then what possible utility can a theoretical discussion have towards achieving this goal? Certainly, when Bely's motivation for writing is concerned, the relation between the theory and the novels is somewhat vague. But this is not to say that they were written with a separate intention. Elsworth comes to the conclusion that Bely was motivated, and must have been motivated, by a suspicion that his readers may not be "able to derive from the literary text alone all that the theory says it should convey" (Elsworth 52). The theory is therefore an attempt to buttress the teachings he hoped to convey through the spiritual dimensions of his novels. Elsworth justifies this assumption by writing that Bely's novels "increasingly come to embody the principles of construction which need the guidance of his theory if they are to be understood" (Elsworth 52). In this sense Bely's theoretical writings can be approached as a kind of lesson, or, as Elsworth puts it, a "tool for interpretation" (Elsworth 52), which, by their design, endow his readers with the requisite means for the proper interpretation of his novels.

Such an idea suggests that Bely's theory has an instructional value. Yet when one turns to his essays this is not immediately clear. Whilst being famed as one of Russian Symbolism's "leading theoreticians" (Gasparov 3), Bely did "not seek to be a systematic philosopher" (Elsworth 51). Though he does, as a foundation for his essays, employ ideas taken (or borrowed) from philosophy, Bely refuses "to distinguish between artistic and non-artistic texts as vehicles for expressing his creative personality" (Keys 162). It is generally true that we have preconceived notions of how a theoretical text might read, especially if the text is written with the intention of being instructional, as Bely's are. The differences between a theoretical and a literary, or artistic text, are subtle and at times approximate one another, but in the sense that they are different, in Bely's case, we think of them as being different in attitude. This attitude determines approach and this approach, which may be seen to fluctuate within the text, determines style. If we are to generalise, the difference we expect is a fundamental difference analogous to the difference between philosophy and poetry. Whereas a poem tends towards the dramatic and the concrete (or iconic), philosophy tends towards the semantic and abstract. If a poem is marked by its soft focus, its ambivalence and its lightness of assertion, a philosophical text is marked by its hard focus, its semantic invariance and its heaviness of assertion. If we take it to these extremes, however, we pass over the subtle ways in which the two tend to overlap. It is possible, and occurs often in philosophy, that by sudden enthusiasms an abstract discussion comes to approach the condition of poetry. But in Bely's case this is more an inevitability than a possibility. The likelihood that Bely's theory departs from the philosophical mode for the poetical seems to be more like a structural necessity than a mere eccentricity of style. For instance, it is not uncommon, writes Elsworth, for Bely to put forward a "staid philosophical argument," before drifting "into a passage of a visionary nature" (Elsworth 7). These passages are written in a "lyrical, highly metaphorical

style that seeks to persuade by other means than rational argument” (Elsworth 7). This quote is most revealing in the way Elsworth equates Bely’s departure from rational argument with a change in rhetoric. It is suggestive, firstly, of the fact that poetry has a rhetoricity of its own, and secondly, that the rhetoricity unique to poetry necessitates a larger awareness of what it achieves (rhetorically) by aesthetic means. If we begin with the act of reading a poem we necessarily begin with our first response, which is of an aesthetic nature. Namely, we appreciate the beauty of a poem - its way of bringing about an emotional response - before we consider its meaning. Of course, to proceed with this line of argument we must tread carefully, for the judgment of beauty is not limited to poetry. There are lines of exquisite beauty within philosophical texts, and there’s no reason to consider these as being separate from what we may call a philosophical approach to writing. But the difference, as I see it, is that a philosophical statement can be re-stated without any loss with regard to its truthfulness. The concomitant affects which a philosophical statement might evoke can be separated from the statement itself, for the statement is true insofar as the argument it makes is rational. More broadly, this is to say that the philosophical commitment is to the proposition, not to the sentence stating it. On the other hand, as Philip Wheelwright writes:

In the case of poetic, and more generally of expressive discourse... such prosaic restatement is not possible without essential loss... truly expressive symbolism - in a poem, for example, means, refers, awakens insight, *in and through* the emotions which it engenders, and that so far as the emotion is not aroused the full insight is correspondingly not awakened (Wheelwright 79).

The meaning of a poem is therefore borne out of, and inextricably woven around our emotional response to it. In this sense the value of poetry is different to the value of

philosophy. The hard focus of philosophical writings is an attempt to delineate ideas with definite outlines, and for this reason its use of language is necessarily represented by terms with strict definitions. A mark of poetical or expressive writing on the other hand is its soft focus. Consequently, a soft-focus leads to a poem's meaning being ambivalent. This is not to say that poetry does not have its precision, but that it is precise insofar as it "corresponds to a real ambivalence in the nature of things" (Wheelwright 63). This ambivalence requires a sympathetic and sensitive reader - that is, a reader with a literary sensibility - to uncover or even recreate its meaning, for the poet's task, unlike the philosophers, is not to justify a concept through argument, but exemplify an idea which eludes precise argumentation. Thus when Elsworth writes that Bely's visionary passages are not an attempt to persuade a reader by rational argument, what he means is that they are written to find a hospitality within the imagination of the reader, and rather than persuade the reader of their meaning, instead make the reader feel them to mean something. The success of these passages rests upon whether or not Bely has been able to pass over to the reader the aesthetic response he desired to pass over, and, as well as this, for the reader to recognise the relationship this aesthetic response has to the philosophical aspects of his essays, which work to clarify in stricter terms the initial aesthetic response.

If a literary sensibility is vital for the reading of Symbolist art, then Symbolism must be a joint endeavour - a form which must be discussed in terms of both creation and reception aesthetics. This point is stressed by both Bely and his peers. For instance, in his essay 'Thoughts on Symbolism', Viacheslav Ivanov writes that:

Symbolists do not exist if there are no Symbolist-listeners. For Symbolism is not merely the creative act alone, but the creative reciprocal action, not merely the artistic objectivisation of the creative subject, but also the creative subjectivisation of the artistic object (Ivanov 37).

When Ivanov writes of Symbolism needing a Symbolist-listener he is referring to the same idea which motivated Bely to write his theory. Yet this does seem rather paradoxical. If Bely's essays are designed in order to endow his readers with a literary sensibility, whilst also approximating the style of his novels, then, surely, to interpret his essays one would need a literary sensibility in the first place. Ivanov and Bely seem to resolve this paradox in the same way. Just as Ivanov writes that: "Symbolism is the art which transforms whoever accepts it into a co-participant in creation" (Ivanov 33), so, Elsworth writes that, for Bely:

... [his] theory of Symbolism regards artistic form as essentially dynamic in nature, and rests upon the assumption that the good reader is guided by the form of the work back to the artist's creative process, which he then re-enacts (Elsworth 28).

Like Ivanov, Bely considered art to have a reflexive relation between the creative and interpretive imaginations. Symbolism is therefore a reciprocal action. It relies on a degree of sympathy between reader and writer, which, by some invisible influence, we come to recognise only as our awareness increases.

But what are we becoming aware of as we develop a literary sensibility? And what is the process through which this awareness develops? These two questions are, essentially, the topic of this chapter. Yet if we presuppose that the iterative process of sympathetic understanding leads to a place in which Symbolism becomes an end and a justification in itself, we are led also to a cyclical argument and, therefore, we are at a loss for any point of

departure. For this reason I am going to use Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophical scheme as a relevant prism for Bely's theory. Bely met Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Anthroposophy, in 1912, a year before the publication of his novel *Petersburg*, though it is possible he was familiar with Steiner's works as early as 1909. Whilst many of Bely's theoretical writings were anterior to this interest, it is clear that he found in Steiner's doctrine such a close affinity to his own understanding of Symbolism that his adoption of it "did not entail the rejection of anything he had previously believed" (Elsworth 37). As was discussed in the introduction, like Russian Symbolism, Anthroposophy too was designed to pragmatically "reconcile the spiritual and the material" (Elsworth 37). Yet whilst this shared endeavour suggests a closeness between the aim of the Symbolists and the Anthroposophists, their method for achieving it was different. Elsworth writes that, "in *The Philosophy of Freedom* Steiner argues that it is possible to overcome the division into spirit and matter, or ego and the world, upon which all dualistic systems depend, by examining the nature of thinking itself" (Elsworth 40). Bely, on the other hand, was convinced that these dualities could be reconciled by one's engagement with art. The anthroposophical scheme therefore is not a perfect analogue for Bely's theory of Symbolism. However, as D. S. Mirsky writes, Anthroposophy is, still, "a crudely elaborate, concrete, and detailed expression of the Symbolist mentality" (Mirsky 466). Therefore, if we can examine what the Anthroposophists describe as the psychological process one must pass through to acquire this mentality, and apply the same process to Bely's essays, we may be able to examine the way in which their design guides one towards their shared mentality. Whilst this may seem, at first, like a speculative approach, it is clear that Steiner's views "influenced Bely's own philosophical outlook" (Elsworth 42). It is also clear that this influence appears in Bely's other literary works, including *The Silver Dove* and *Kotik Letayev*, with the former being published before

Petersburg, and the latter after (Elsworth 43). If a knowledge of Anthroposophy can elucidate the novels which came before and after *Petersburg*, it is also likely that *Petersburg* too can be elucidated in the same way, especially as the biographical evidence indicates that Bely, whilst writing *Petersburg*, was very much one of Steiner's pupils. This approach will allow us to use the scheme as a guide, and bridge the gap between Bely's theoretical writings and his novel *Petersburg* by providing a structure and a narrative. Yet to remain consistent, we must stick to the elements of Bely's theory which share a clear, mutual concern with the tenets of Anthroposophy.

We learn from Elsworth that there are three stages to Steiner's anthroposophical scheme, which outlines the chronological series of psychological events one must pass through in order to acquire the Symbolist mentality. Elsworth writes that:

The process of true cognition, which is to restore the unity of nature and thought, consists of three stages: imagination, inspiration and intuition. Imagination is the state in which one becomes aware of spiritual realities, inspiration that in which one perceives them, and intuition in which one becomes united with them (Elsworth 44).

For the rest of this chapter these three stages will serve as an outline through which Bely's theoretical essays can be formalised into a comprehensive theory of Symbolism.

The first stage one must pass through to acquire "true cognition," is to "become aware of spiritual realities" (Elsworth 44) through the practice and development of the imagination. It would be worthwhile, to begin with, to go over what is meant by 'spiritual realities' and the imagination's role in becoming aware of them. To this end it is best to juxtapose a spiritual reality with its opposite, which we might call a material reality. E. M. Forster, in his essay on

‘Anonymity’, writes about what he sees as the two main functions of language. The first function, he writes, is to pass over information, and to illustrate this he gives the example of a signpost “hung up at the edge of a tramline” (Forster 146) which reads ‘Stop’. To Forster this represents an attempt at passing over pure information. In this example the value of the word ‘Stop’ is given to the accuracy of the information: “if the tram comes,” he writes, “the information is correct” (Forster 146) and if the information is correct then the language used has performed its function. The value of informative writing then is how well it corresponds to a material reality. The second function he assigns to language is its potential for creating ‘atmosphere’. The purest example of this, he writes, is to be found in lyric poetry. Lyric poetry, for conveying “no information of any kind” (Forster 147), has a different value to informative writing. It is valued not for its correspondence with a material reality, nor for the accuracy of its information, but for its power “to raise our emotions or quicken our blood” (Forster 149). Hence if we take a few lines of lyric poetry, for instance: “With ships the sea was sprinkled far and nigh, / Like stars in heaven” (Wordsworth 307), we know that these birdlike notes are of no use to us in our day to day reality. And the more one studies the comparison of a ship to a star the more it repels the intellect, for we know, if we take this attitude, that if you were to place a ship alongside a star they would be nothing alike.⁶ And yet there is something in the comparison of a ship at sea and a star in the sky that finds a response in us, and releases us from the demands of reason. We are happy to accept that whilst a ship is physically nothing like a star, the vastness of the sea is much like the vastness of the sky, and the flickering light of a ship-at-sea flickers as a star flickers against the backdrop of night. The question we have to consider here is what reality, what truth, even, do

⁶ This is not the same as saying that the incomprehension of simile is the result of considered attention to it. Rather, if we were to approach the likes of simile and metaphor with dogmatic rationalism, we would have to take account of the fact that thing A is not thing B, thereby ruining the poetic effect.

these lines point to. If the example of the signpost points to a material reality, and serves to pass over information, we may, perhaps naively, take up the materialist position of affirming it to be 'true' due to its correspondence. If the signpost says 'Stop', and the tram stops at the signpost, it therefore "corresponds with reality - with the facts - with what is actually the case" (Wheelwright 282), and this is clarified for us through the senses. However, the lines by Wordsworth do no such thing. In these lines the ships are not merely ships, but ships felt to reflect a star-like quality. Within the comparison Wordsworth is augmenting reality, and it therefore cannot be considered true by the same materialist criteria. In this respect it does not correspond to a material reality, per se, but a reality transformed by experience. Its truth is therefore of an evanescent nature, for it relies on an appreciation of context, as Philip Wheelwright elucidates:

A poetic utterance invites our imaginative assent, which is to say our depth assent, to some degree or other and in some context or other. So far as we yield such assent joyfully and gain insight in so doing, there is a real and valid sense in which we can speak of 'poetic truth.' Even though an individual statement in a poem would be false if taken out of context... the relevant question is, How true is it within the context? (Wheelwright 302).

A poem, as Forster writes, is not an attempt at passing over information so much as it is an attempt to create 'atmosphere'. And so when we speak of a spiritual reality we are, in turn, speaking of the experience of things, not as it corresponds to "the laws of science or logic" (Forster 150), but for its correspondence with our emotions through our imagination. In our example, whilst the emphasis of the lines is given to the sense-data of ships, stars and the sea, this emphasis is not so much on how they figure pragmatically as information but how they figure as an undivided experience. Each unit of imagery is not pictured in isolation,

but as an amalgamation of one single, complex scene, wherein the grandeur of the stars and the wonder we feel in their presence accompanies us in our contemplation of the ships. In this sense the insights given in poetry are collected in and by the emotions we feel in response to its specific, contextual elision of ideas. The lucidity of the insight is directly related to the intensity of feeling we have in our response. If a poem strikes us as true it stirs our curiosity; if it strikes us not at all we dismiss it as not worth our time. Thus if we are to profit from the reading of poetry we must develop a spiritual responsiveness to words. With regard to the anthroposophic scheme, this is, essentially, what is meant by the imagination allowing us to become aware of spiritual realities. The materialist conception of truth must be set aside, and the reader must become aware of a different kind of truth.

The first question we must try to answer is how Bely's essays are designed in order to pass over this knowledge. This can be understood through an examination of the style and structuring of his essays. The structure of Bely's essays often follows a pattern noted by Elsworth, in which Bely puts forward a "staid philosophical argument," before breaking off "without warning into a passage of a visionary nature" (Elsworth 7). Two passages found under the subheading 'Action' in Bely's essay 'The Mask' can serve to illustrate this. The first will be taken from the introduction and the second will be taken from his conclusion. Bely begins by writing that:

Word does not have the power to express the ineffable, and so we turn to music. But music is a call to action. And to the extent that music expresses the unconditional foundation of being (will), it is an unconditional sign of action, an action which expresses being (Bely and Jakim 28).

In this extract Bely is alluding to a number of philosophical concepts by a number of different philosophers, all of which he has synthesised into a single, rather complicated argument. This argument can only be understood if we also understand Bely's conflation of the concepts.

Bely does not formally articulate the underlying concepts within the passage, though his synthesis of them can be unpacked as follows. Firstly, Bely echoes "Kant's definition of time as 'the form of inner sense' and reaches a position where the temporal element in art is equated to the artist's inner experience, his creative transformation of chaos" (Elsworth 23). Secondly, Bely "uses a system," taken from Arthur Schopenhauer's epistemology, to classify art "in terms of time and space," with music at one extreme as the "supremely temporal art," and architecture and sculpture as the art forms most concerned with space, "at the other" (Elsworth 22). Music, in this formulation, becomes the expression of man's 'inner sense'.⁷ Underlying this whole formulation, too, is an idea derived from Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, in which, "building on Schopenhauer's epistemology," Nietzsche divides "the world into Dionysian and Apollonian aspects - Dionysian, of course, signified passion, feeling, sensuality, while Apollonian clearly connoted reason, order, and structure" (Rosenthal 68-69). Bely has conflated these terms so that 'inner sense', 'Dionysian', and 'temporal' exist and merge at one end of the spectrum, whilst 'outer sense', 'Apollonian', and 'spatial' exist and merge at the other. If we remember the distinction made between a 'spiritual' and a 'material' reality, we can assign each of these aspects, and their representative artistic mediums, according to their correspondence to these different realities. Music, Schopenhauer insists, "is the voice of the Will itself," for it "expresses states of being," and "gives direct experience of emotions" (Rosenthal 66). We have already

⁷ Similar to this, and implicit within Schopenhauer's classification of art, is Kant's definition of space as the form of "outer sense" (Elsworth 23).

designated the experience of emotion to the ‘atmospheric’ quality in literature, which we may, in this instance, expand to our understanding of art in general. By doing so we come to the conclusion that music, as the most atmospheric of art forms - for music, as Schopenhauer writes, is more readily capable of evoking emotion than any other - is the art form which best reflects our spiritual reality. However, according to Bely, the problem with music is that it is ineffable - it “speaks not of things but of... [the] realities of the will” (Schopenhauer 162) - and therefore cannot be translated by, or into, a ‘word’. Instead, Bely writes, we find the affect of music most clearly expressed by action. In his essay ‘Sacred Colours’, Bely writes that “feelings are actions of the will” (Bely and Jakim 59). Feelings are therefore “where reside the ‘motives’ for convictions” (Elsworth 14), so that the way we act becomes a reflection of our emotions, which in turn represents the ineffable.

How this opening paragraph qualifies as a “staid philosophical argument” (Elsworth 7) requires explanation, for it seems anything but ‘staid’, and might be more accurately described as cavalier. Such an argument can only qualify as ‘staid’ in the sense that it invokes known philosophical authorities. However, Bely’s treatment of these authorities is unusual, for he groups them together without any regard for their differences. This is very much a feature of the Symbolist mentality. “All Bely’s works, both theoretical and literary,” writes Elsworth, “spring from an original intuition to which all the tools of science and philosophy that he employed were made subservient” (Elsworth 10). Bely’s treatment of philosophy as subservient emerges out of his belief that Symbolism is a “system of a higher and more general order in a world which human intellectual activity has become fragmented into specialized branches of scientific knowledge, to the detriment of our grasp of the world in its totality” (West 101). Bely’s pragmatic use of philosophy serves to illustrate the reconciling

powers of Symbolism, “by uniting, through synthesis, what analysis has torn asunder” (Mankovskaya 66).

At the moment we are dealing with the subject of the essay. In the first paragraph we have a synthesis of a number of philosophical concepts, all of which have been bound together into a single, unified concept. This synthesis, for being a collection of a number of philosophical concepts, cannot be classified under an umbrella term on the basis of the first paragraph alone, though there is a suggestion in the final paragraph that Bely considers all of these concepts to be expressed most accurately by Nietzsche’s concept of the Dionysian. In the final paragraph Bely writes:

There will again be days when on blossoming springtime meadows, amid violets and lilies of the valley, to the ecstatic howling of long pipes and the laughter of bells, youths clothed only in tiger skin and crowned with green leaves will whirl under the moon, sanctifying the great action with their chaste dance (Bely and Jakim 28).

Just as the introduction was used to denote the Nietzschean concept of the Dionysian spirit of music, so this conclusion abounds in clear allusions to the Greek God, Dionysus. Such images as “blossoming springtime meads,” and “youths clothed only in tiger skins” (Bely and Jakim 28), through their association with nature and with primitive man, and with “all that life in flowing things” (Pater 13), are used to connote a Dionysian ritual - an event characterised by intoxication, enthusiasm and reverie. This is no more obvious than in the phrase “to the ecstatic howling of long pipes” (Bely and Jakim 28), which, as Walter Pater clarifies, is symbolic of the Dionysian concept through the Greek God’s “connexion with the satyrs” (Pater 17). Pater writes that “Dionysus inspires and rules over all the music of the

reed” (Pater 18), which the Satyr would pluck and trim “into musical pipes” (Pater 17). With this evidence at hand we may say that, thematically, there is a consistent conceptual current binding the introduction and the conclusion to Bely’s essay together.

Thus in terms of continuity Bely’s argument never deviates from its subject. And yet, when both passages are read together they seem radically different in terms of style. If we study the first paragraph we find that its statements are declarative. To state that a thing ‘is’ something else, or that one thing ‘does not’ amount to another is to state with a degree of certainty. If we consider the assertorial weight of these declarations we would have to say that they assert heavily, with a firmness and a conviction that reflects a mind untroubled by doubt. Bely is capable of asserting in this way due to the underlying philosophical works he obliquely refers to. These works are marked by their attachment to logic and reason as methods for attaining truth. Their use of terminology is strict, which rhetorically aims to alleviate the potential for doubt by being semantically invariant. Each keyword is used in order to denote a single meaning, without suggesting a possible other-sense to the word used. In the first paragraph Bely adopts this style of writing. His discussion remains abstract. His use of language is denotative. His statements are literal, and are meant to be taken literally. And the structure of his argument develops in a lucid and logical manner, even if the lucidity of his argument may be enhanced by a greater understanding of the works he refers to.

However, the further Bely goes beyond this first paragraph, the further he drifts from a denotative style, grounded in reason, to a poetical style, expressive of the imagination. The term ‘expressive’ here is key to acknowledging the difference between these two paragraphs. Within the conclusion we may say that Bely is light with his assertions. To use the words: “there will again be” (Bely and Jakim 28) is to make an assertion, but it is not the assertion of a present or universal fact. To say that ‘there will again be’ is to say that the present state of

things will change in the future. What occurs after this assertion is a projection, or a premonition, of the nature of this change. Such a statement is marked by a kind of acquiescence, for to say that one thing will be another thing in the future is to express a hope or a desire for a thing to become present. For this reason the assertion must be made lightly, as no event can acquire the status of fact until the event has occurred. And so we can rightly assume that Bely is expressing a desire for a thing ‘to be’ rather than declaring that a thing ‘is’. In this way Bely’s final paragraph only approximates “the character of a literal statement... without quite totally attaining it” (Wheelwright 69).

In terms of rhetoric, if we were to judge this conclusion on the same basis as the first paragraph, we would find the conclusion to be lacking in persuasive power. But it would be wrong to compare them in this way, for they are written to appeal and convince in different ways. Bely’s projection is the first suggestion of this fact. To look ahead into the future is a creative act that requires the use of the imagination, and, due to Bely’s belief in the mimetic relationship between the creative and interpretive imaginations, it is the first suggestion that he is attempting to effect a change in the reader’s way of interpreting.

The specifics of how Bely has tried to effect this change, however, requires a great deal of unpacking. Whereas the first paragraph was written to appeal to the rational faculty of the reader, the final paragraph is written to be intuited, for, to use Kantian terminology, Bely forwards his argument not by fixed concepts but by the essence of an idea. This shift in rhetoric we might summarise as a movement from the concept-thinking of the philosopher to the image-thinking of the poet, which is also a movement from figures of knowing to figures of the will (Bloom 388). Thus instead of developing upon the abstract understanding of the concept of the Dionysian, Bely has concluded his essay by attempting to demonstrate the inspiring power of music dramatically. At first this may seem contradictory. If, as Bely

writes in his introduction, words cannot express the ineffable, then how can Bely demonstrate that they do, using words? In another essay entitled ‘The Song of Life’, Bely writes that “song begets poetry; rhythm forms poetic meter; the complexity of poetic meter engenders poetic prose, i.e. style. Style transfigures the word” (Bely and Jakim 39). In this sense, “the idea of poetic rhythm,” becomes “the outward expression of the Dionysian impulse,” and, therefore, “the metrical norms of poetry are developments from, and rigidified forms of, an original rhythm” (Elsworth 50). It was Bely’s belief that the combination of “sound and rhythm,” was capable of inspiring words with the potential to “bypass reason and appeal directly to the unconscious” (Rosenthal 66). By appealing to the unconscious the affect of these words upon the reader would, theoretically, replicate the qualities of music and pass over to them a sense of the ineffable.

A closer look at the style of Bely’s conclusion in ‘Action’ allows us to specify the concrete nature of his change in rhetoric. The change in rhetoric leads to a change in diction, which, as is explained in the former paragraph, is more akin to the conventions of poetry than it is to the conventions of philosophy. This is most obvious in the conclusion in the way he combines verbs with human action represented by imagery. By combining the spatial element of representation (the ‘outer sense’) with the temporal element signified by verbs (the ‘inner sense’), Bely has successfully demonstrated action. This is significant because, by his own definition, the reconciliation of space and time into a single whole represents “the musical inner essence of the image in flux” (Fink 288), which is one way of defining the literary symbol. The word ‘symbol’ comes from the Greek root *symbolon* which meant, literally, ‘that which is thrown or cast together.’ Similarly, Bely considers the literary symbol to be the “fusion of form and content” (Elsworth 21). However, as Roger Keys elucidates, “this was not the content of art as it is envisaged in traditional literary aesthetics... that is to say the

imaginative embodiment of specific characters, situations, and ideas” (Keys 186). Content for Bely was “the form of the creative process” (Keys 186). It was Bely’s belief that our first act when perceiving the world was creative. This idea he takes from Kant, and is predicated on the theory that “the mind is more than an onlooker... of the world it knows” (Wheelwright 76). Bely believed, like Kant, that the mind is constituent in our perception of the world, and our first act when perceiving the world makes use of the imagination by “a synthesizing of the manifold of sensation into intelligible patterns” (Wheelwright 77). Philip Wheelwright explains this idea as follows:

To look at a tree and recognise it as the thing we humans mean by the word ‘tree’ is possible only because my mind is actively fusing the fleeting impingements of sensation into a meaningful, recognisable whole. A woodpecker, a dog, and myself each has his separate business with the tree; and as each perceives and recognises it in a way largely impervious to the others (Wheelwright 76).⁸

After this initial creative act is performed, our cognition follows, and gives form to the “fleeting impingements of sensation” (Wheelwright 76). According to Bely this is how a literary symbol is created. Elsworth explains the process succinctly when he writes that the symbol is “the process of passing objective reality through experience and thus endowing it with meaning” (Elsworth 21). “What is important in the symbol,” however, “is not so much the features taken from nature as the manner of their transformation through the experience of the artist.” Elsworth writes that “this is what Bely understands by style. The creative process is expressed in artistic form” (Elsworth 22). In this sense, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge hinted at in his own definition of the artistic symbol, the creator “assumes a sort of

⁸ Roger Keys writes that Kant argues that “the mind actively transforms the brute data of sense experience into the phenomenal world of which we are aware by means of our innate ‘forms of perception, space and time.’” (Keys 193).

participation mystique... with the idea symbolised” (Fletcher 18). When a subject assumes, by an “unmediated vision” (Fletcher 18), a psychological connection with an object or experience, they bind, at least partially, this object or experience with his or her own identity. Thus the artistic symbol can be considered, abstractly, as a kind of bi-directional movement, in which, by the projection of that musical inner essence within us upon an image of the external world, phenomena and noumena merge to produce the symbol. It is by the demonstration of this idea in his essay that Bely answers, implicitly, how “what is inexpressible by word can be expressed by action” (Bely and Jakim 28).

There is a distinction to be made, however, between the qualities of the artistic symbol, or Symbolist writing, as a form of language, and artistic writing that is not strictly Symbolist. If style is necessary for the creation of a symbol, then there must be a qualitative difference between an unstyled word and a word expressed with style. An unstyled word would, in Bely’s understanding, lack symbolic content, which is another way of saying that the word would lack the suggestion of emotional experience in the writer, and would, therefore, be incapable of evoking or recreating the same experience in the reader. This is unusual, for, according to Bely and the Russian Symbolists in general, every word was once a symbol. “Language,” according to Bely, “makes possible the original act of creation with which all human culture begins” (Elsworth 31). This original act was considered to be the act of naming. This act of naming, according to Bely and Arthur Symons in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, was a creative act which rendered “harmless the hostile surrounding world by imbuing it with meaning” (Elsworth 31). For this reason, “the word itself is a symbol” (Elsworth 31), for man projects upon the objects of their ‘outer sense’ a value that is not inherent within the object itself. Bely believed that the words produced in this act of naming always carried with it the integral experience of the namer, and thus to repeat the

word would be to resound the same experience and therefore re-participate, imaginatively, in the creative act. However, Bely believed that the advent of the Enlightenment had led to the atrophy of words. Bely outlines a process through which this was said to have happened: “The word gave birth to the figural symbol - the metaphor; the metaphor appeared as something actually existent; the word gave birth to the myth; the myth gave birth to religion, religion to philosophy, philosophy to the [abstract] term” (Elsworth 31). The term, according to Bely, is “a word bereft of content” (Bely and Jakim 40). A word bereft of content, I believe, can take two forms, with one being more extreme than the other. The lesser extreme is to be found in Realist literature, which, as William Butler Yeats wrote in his essay ‘The Symbolism of Poetry’, “was always tending to lose itself in externalities of all kinds” (Yeats 44). The lack of content in this period of literature was due to the Realists tendency to care more about tracing the outline of an object than attempting to pass over their experience of the object. If an object is not transformed by the experience of the artist then the object would inevitably lack a meaning that was ideally self-transcendent of itself. This idea is corroborated by Arthur Symons in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, in which he writes that: “It was the age of Science, the age of material things; and words, with that facile elasticity which there is in them, did miracles in the exact representation of everything that visibly existed, exactly as it existed” (Symons 6). To say that a word lacks content is to say that the word is, firstly, lacking a temporal aspect, and secondly, used with an emphasis on its spatial dimensions. But a word bereft of content can take on a more extreme guise, in the sense that it can be employed for purely abstract purposes. This is, according to Bely, due to the influence of philosophy. Jorge Louis Borges wrote that, “if we go in for abstract thinking,” as philosophers must, “we have to forget that words were metaphors” (Borges 23). By forgetting that words were metaphors we are taking away the comparison collected in the

symbol between the objective world and our subjective experience of it. Abstract words correspond to nothing concrete, and as it is the world of phenomena that anchors our inner sense to experience, to make a word abstract - to create a term bereft of content - is to strip the word of its power to evoke the sympathy of shared experience, which is vital if one wishes to stir the emotions, or we might say, the Dionysian response, of another. Poets regularly take advantage of this linguistic fact by the poetic device of returning a word to its etymon (Bloom 5), which is a way of retracing what Walter Pater called “the finer edges of words” (Pater 66). When a word, by common usage, is made abstract, the word “is given to the effect and not the cause” (Borges 23). For example, if one studies the etymology of the word ‘ruin’, used to refer now, more generally, to the ossified result of a thing being damaged, one would find that the original meaning of this term referred instead to the movement of ‘a collapse, a rushing down, a tumbling down’. As the word has evolved over time, the sense of movement in the verb ‘ruo’ has been lost, and the word has “led to the substantive *ruina*” (Bloom 3). In this sense, the verbal quality of movement, which is a characteristic of the literary symbol, is a return to the creative process of participation: a refocusing on the inherent creativity found in the act of casting together the external world of image and the duration of experience that is our inner sense. Thus Bely’s concept of ‘style’ can be said to be a way of returning language to its metaphorical, and therefore symbolic properties.

When we speak of metaphorical language we are in turn speaking, semantically, of a connotative use of language. It was previously noted that the language used in the first paragraph was denotative. In the final paragraph the language used is maximally connotative. Wallace Stevens, in his essay ‘The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words’, writes that:

... language, considered semantically, evolves through a series of conflicts between the denotative and the connotative forces in words; between an asceticism tending to kill language by stripping words of all association and a hedonism tending to kill language by dissipating their sense in a multiplicity of associations. These conflicts are nothing more than changes in the relation between the imagination and reality (Stevens 13).

The final sentence in this quote is telling when considered in relation to Bely's essay. The transition of language on a semantic level is also a transition from an argument situated in reality, and the literal use of language, to an argument situated in the imagination, and the figurative use of language. This would mean that, in order to read Bely's essay appropriately, the reader must also mirror this transition psychologically, and begin to appreciate language for its symbolic properties. We might say, therefore, that by requiring the reader to engage with the symbolic properties of language, Bely is successfully communicating an awareness of spiritual forces to the reader, for the imaginative use of language requires an imaginative reading, and the imagination is the prism through which our spiritual reality (our reality as it relates to our being, our emotions) is apprehended. However, we can be more specific on the particular effects of this transition on the reader. By juxtaposing the two styles in such close proximity Bely amplifies their differences. One effect of the denotative use of language is that "we gravitate spontaneously toward naive verbal realism" (Burke 18). And so, if the denotative attitude of the reader was maintained, and carried over to the final paragraph, the words used would be taken to correspond in a positive sense to objects, as if there was no qualitative difference between the word and the object the word referred to. In terms of meaning, the denotative use of a word refers to a collective representation. However, as Kenneth Burke writes: "Language, to be used properly, must be 'discounted.' We must remind ourselves that, whatever *correspondence* there is between a *word* and the *thing* it

names, the word is *not* the thing” (Burke 18). In order to do this, writes Burke, we must develop “a feeling for the *principle of the negative*” (Burke 18). He explains this principle in the following way:

Quite as the word ‘tree’ is verbal and the *thing* tree is non-verbal, so all words for the non-verbal must, by the very nature of the case, discuss the realm of the non-verbal in terms of *what it is not* (Burke 18).

“The word’s ‘meaning’” he further writes, “is not identical with its sheer materiality” (Burke 16). Because of the imperfect correspondence between the word and the thing it names, there is conceptual space in which one can augment the meaning of a word by applying it in a new context. This is what is known as the connotative use of language. Connotative language, in this sense, comes to be understood as concealed figuration, which, when unravelled, reveals a meaning other than its empirical use. Burke gives a few example of how this can be done in the following quote:

The most obvious formal instance of this feeling for the negative discount is irony, a figure which, at its simplest, states A in terms of non-A (as when, on a day of bad weather, we might say, ‘What a beautiful day it is!’). And all metaphor involves a similar feeling for this discount. Thus, the expression to ‘sail the ship of state’ is interpreted properly only insofar as we know that statesmen are not sailors and the State is not a ship (Burke 18-19).

The second example is the most important for the present discussion because it illustrates how the principle of the negative can be used as an expressive resource which adds a new dimension to things. This new dimension is achieved in metaphor, and therefore in a symbol

too, by resemblance. If we consider Burke's example for a moment, we can begin to understand how this resemblance is created. Firstly, we have the State (an abstract concept) compared to a ship (a concrete image). This comparison embodies the concept of the State within the physical presentation of a ship, and so the ship becomes the conceptual representation of the State. But this alone is not enough. If one was to merely say that 'a state is a ship' we would be unlikely to accept the comparison, for we are given no indication of the way in which a ship is statelike and a State shiplike. Thus it seems that in this comparison the added caveat of the verb 'to sail' is what truly creates the resemblance between the State and a ship. The added spiritual dimension given in the act of sailing imbues the comparison with its necessary, concrete representation of action. The creation of the metaphor goes as follows: the ship is made to be a vessel for the concept of the State - giving the abstract concept a concrete presentation - and then the concrete is given life, movement, action - a will, even - by the temporality given to it by the verb 'to sail'. This verb brings the abstract concept of a State into contact with the spiritual life of human action. If we then consider the meaning of what is suggested by this comparison, we may interpret it, abstractly, to mean that a State, much like a ship, requires one to man, lead, or give it direction. But to come to this conclusion, as Burke writes, we have to forget that a ship is not a state and a state not a ship. And so, if we are to interpret the metaphor properly, we have to forget the stark differences between our understanding of what a ship and a State truly are, and instead focus all of our attention on the essential similarities between the two, which is given to us in the verb 'to sail'. This verb is the force that binds the two inherently different concepts together, allowing each to beget in resemblance where no prior resemblance existed. But to return again to our interpretation of the metaphor, it is clear that the speaker is attempting, by creating this metaphor, to communicate an idea about the nature of a State, and not the nature of a ship or

sailing. The image of a ship, and its associated idea ‘to sail’, stand in to present the speaker’s idea about the nature of a State indirectly - by a poetic figure, or trope. The desired effect of this is to alter our attitude, to break down our literal understanding of what a ship and a State truly are, and demand of us the use of our imagination, which Wallace Stevens defines in his essay ‘The Imagination as Value’ as: “the power of the mind over the possibilities of things” (Stevens 136). The connotative use of language, therefore, initiates the reader’s imaginative participation in the spiritual properties of objects. When read imaginatively, words with an external, material reference are considered not for what they truly are but for what they may be made to represent.

It is clear then that there is a case for ‘spiritual forces’ being communicated through language, and that these forces are contained within the verbal structure of an imaginative proposition. And, in addition, for a reader to become aware of them it requires a feeling for the principle of the negative. But there is a qualitative difference between the apprehension of these spiritual forces and what Bely demands of his readers. For Bely, it is not enough to merely become aware of these forces, one must participate in their symbolic properties to the extent that they embody them, and feel them to be true. For instance, he writes in his essay ‘The Song of Life’, that: “The music must pour into our blood so that our blood becomes music; and we will then understand that transfiguration is within us and immortality is with us” (Bely and Jakim 38). Thus a problem remains on the subject of rhetoricity. If, as Elsworth writes, “the replacement of the analytic by the Dionysian understanding cannot be brought about by persuasion on the level of rational conviction” (Elsworth 51), then how does Bely convince his readers of the actual reality of spiritual forces? The answer to this problem is very much bound up in Elsworth’s statement. However, for the sake of accuracy I think there should be a slight amendment made to the quote. I think it would be more apt to consider this

change in rhetoric, not as a replacement of one system of rhetoric for another, that is, not as a definite movement from one set of principles to another, but as a kind of movement in which the Dionysian understanding outstrips the analytic. This is the case because if you were to trace the transition in style (as we have done), the passage under the sub-heading ‘Action’ becomes like an illustration of the way in which the imagination at first subsumes, and then elevates what is reasonable, to arrive at a truth that at first contains, but then exceeds, the limited reach of rational discourse. Due to this, the Dionysian understanding would not be antithetical to reason - it would not be irrational - but it would be, in some way, above and beyond rationality, or supra-reasonable. The Dionysian understanding, therefore, does not replace rationality so much as it transcends it.

Notions of transcendence, especially within the context of rhetoric, aligns Bely’s poetic style with the literary theory of the Sublime.⁹ However, Bely is not explicit on this point in his theoretical writings. The Sublime’s role in the transformation of the individual is more explicit in his novel *Petersburg*, but as this novel is the subject of the next chapter we shall leave that specific discussion for when we come to it. Nevertheless, much of what he writes in his theoretical essays seems to suggest the involvement of the Sublime affect as an integral part in the budding symbolist’s transformation. If we recall the scheme taken from Anthroposophy, the second stage, termed inspiration, is, I believe, synonymous with the Sublime experience. But to make this leap we will have to examine the evidence for there being a relationship between inspiration, as Bely understands it, and the literary theory of the Sublime.

⁹ Robert Doran, in his study entitled *The Theory of the Sublime: from Longinus to Kant*, writes that: “... if a passage of persuasive rhetoric can be said to exhibit *hypsos* [the Sublime], it does so only insofar as it *transcends* its persuasive function” (Doran 41).

To this end the first thing we can do is examine a passage from Bely's essay 'Recollections of Vladimir Solovyov'. In this essay Bely remembers attending a reading by Solovyov. Bely recalls this reading as follows:

As he was reading the 'Tale about the Antichrist,' when he arrived at the words "Elder John rose like a white candle," he rose up from his armchair. Lightning was flashing in the window and Solovyov's face was trembling in a lightning of inspiration. Here I couldn't refrain from saying something that was particularly close to my heart, something I had found in the dialogue of the 'Third Conversation.' Startled, Solovyov looked at me. And in response to my 'timid' remark, incomprehensible to all the others, he said to me: "Yes, yes. That's right." I felt then that a special connection had been formed between him and me (Bely and Jakim 84-85).

To help illustrate what is happening within this passage, and to demonstrate the relationship between inspiration and the Sublime, I am going to summon an idea that seems consistent with theories of inspiration, and, as it happens, with the Russian language's own definitions of inspiration. This idea is that inspiration, as a creative process, is split into two phases.

Vladimir Nabokov, in his essay 'The Art of Literature and Commonsense', writes that: "The Russian language which otherwise is comparatively poor in abstract terms, supplies definitions for two types of inspiration, *vostorg* and *vdokhnovenie*, which can be paraphrased as 'rapture' and 'recapture'" (Nabokov 378). The term 'rapture' is given to denote the initial, physical affect of inspiration on the artist. Nabokov describes this affect in his essay as follows:

It is a combined sensation of having the whole universe entering you and of yourself wholly dissolving in the universe surrounding you. It is the prison wall of the ego suddenly crumbling away with the nonego rushing in from the outside (Nabokov 378).

Thus the affect of ‘rapture’ is the dissolution of the ego, a feeling, that is, of transcending into a state of indivisible oneness with the universe. This description replicates the structure of experience known as the Sublime affect, which Robert Doran summarises as:

... a *dual* structure of being *overwhelmed* or *overawed* - as indicated by the Greek terms *thaumasion* (wonder, awe, admiration) and *ekplexis* (astonishment, amazement, stupor) - coupled with the idea of being *exalted* or *elevated* - as expressed in the notion of *ekstasis* (literally: a going outside or beyond oneself, self-transcendence, rapture) (Doran 10).

Already in this quote we find that ‘rapture’ is used as a term synonymous with *ekstasis* (ecstasy), which, as Doran further writes, is also “explicitly related to an experience of the divine as a momentary transcendence of the human condition” (Doran 43). We find these two terms, and the concept, united once more in Bely’s discussion of the idea he designates as ‘Flight’, which means, “to fly away from ourselves” (Bely and Jakim 39), but, in my opinion, may be more accurately rendered as ‘to fly away from our self’. Bely writes that ‘Flight’, which is described as a physical affect, occurs when one is capable of “thinking rhythmically” (Bely and Jakim 39). He describes the affect as: “ecstasy, enthusiasm, the being consumed by fire” in which “ecstasy raptures our body” (Bely and Jakim 39). This idea I consider to be an instance of misprision, a deliberate attempt by Bely to conceal the influence of another by using his own terminology. This becomes more pertinent later in our discussion, but for the sake of exemplifying the relationship between inspiration and the Sublime, it is worthwhile to briefly go over a passage in Nietzsche’s *Ecce Homo*, in which he describes the affect of inspiration. Nietzsche describes the affect as, “A rapture whose

tremendous tension occasionally discharges itself in a flood of tears,” and which gives to the inspiree, “an instinct for rhythmic relationships that arches over wide spaces of forms” (Nietzsche 756). Therefore, the idea that one must be able to “think rhythmically” (Bely and Jakim 39) is given to the idea of the inspired ‘rapture’, and, furthermore, Bely’s idea of ‘Flight’ is found to have its precursor in Nietzsche’s own understanding of inspiration.

With this in mind let us return to the passage found within Bely’s ‘Recollections of Vladimir Solovyov’. Firstly, we are going to examine the character of Solovyov within this passage. Bely writes that: “As he was reading the ‘Tale about the Antichrist,’ when he arrived at the words “Elder John rose like a white candle,” he rose up from his armchair” (Bely and Jakim 84). In this description of the event it seems that Solovyov was so thoroughly taken in by his own reading of the poem that his actions began to replicate the scene he was describing. This is suggestive of what Longinus, in his treatise on the Sublime, describes as the effect of *phantasia*. Doran writes that:

In rhetoric, *phantasia* denotes the orator’s ability to influence an audience through the conjuring of images. The listener ‘sees’ in the mind’s eye what he or she is hearing; the things described are experienced *as if* they were actually present (Doran 69).

Phantasia is considered to be a means of achieving the Sublime affect “precisely because it transcends sensibility” (Doran 71). There is a relationship here between *phantasia* and Bely’s idea of “thinking rhythmically” (Bely and Jakim 39). Rhythm is considered by Bely to work in tandem with the imagination, for, as he writes, “rhythm multiplies the images” (Bely and Jakim 39), which is to say that rhythm acts as a binding force, allowing for the smooth elision

of succeeding images. Yeats, in his essay 'The Symbolism of Poetry', describes the way in which rhythm works to induce a trance-like state, and immerse the listener or reader more fully into the reading of a poem. Yeats writes:

The purpose of rhythm, it has always seemed to me, is to prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, which is the one moment of creation, by hushing us with an alluring monotony, while it holds us waking by variety, to keep us in that state of perhaps real trance, in which the mind liberated from the pressure of the will is unfolded in symbols. If certain sensitive persons listens to the ticking of a watch, or gaze persistently on the monotonous flashing of a light, they fall into the hypnotic trance; and rhythm is but the ticking of a watch made softer, that one must needs listen, and various, that one may not be swept beyond memory or grow weary of listening; while the patterns of the artist are but the monotonous flash woven to take the eyes in subtler enchantment (Yeats 48).

The most glaring piece of evidence that Solovyov has been induced into a trance-like state, such as the one Yeats describes, is when Bely makes a remark, and, "Startled, Solovyov looked at me" (Bely and Jakim 85). This remark lifts Solovyov out of his trance - it suggests a shift in his state of consciousness - and, according to Bely, leads to a "special connection" (Bely and Jakim 85) being formed between him and Solovyov, with Solovyov asking him "to go home and bring back a manuscript... which touched on the subject our views had unexpectedly converged" (Bely and Jakim 85).

In between these two instances: the immersion and successive lifting of Solovyov's trance, Bely mentions inspiration explicitly. Bely writes that: "Lightning was flashing in the window and Solovyov's face was trembling in a lightning of inspiration" (Bely and Jakim 84). Here Solovyov is described as being under the physical affect of inspiration we have

given to the term ‘rapture’. Bely intimates this moment of ‘rapture’ in Solovyov’s “trembling” (Bely and Jakim 84) facial contortions, which suggests that Bely himself understands what the physical affect of inspiration is like and how it manifests dramatically. But whilst this may provide evidence for Solovyov experiencing the state of inspired ‘rapture’, what is more interesting is Bely’s description of the event. I propose that Bely himself, in the recollection of this event, has ‘recaptured’ his own experience of inspiration, and the evidence for this is twofold. Firstly, Elsworth tells us that Solovyov “was associated for Bely with his most intimate mystical experiences”, and that this meeting between Bely and Solovyov was “preceded by a vision of the advent of Antichrist and the end of world history” (Elsworth 24-25). Secondly, in the paragraph prior to Bely’s description of Solovyov experiencing inspiration Bely recalls trying to talk to Solovyov about Nietzsche, with varying degrees of success. I mention this only to suggest that, in the act of writing his essay, which, as a recollection, occurred long after the event, Bely had Nietzsche and his ideas fresh in his mind. And so we can return to the line in question: “Lightning was flashing in the window and Solovyov’s face was trembling in a lightning of inspiration” (Bely and Jakim 84). What is most interesting in this description is not how Bely was able to recognise in a trembling face the full, mysterious affect of inspiration - which would be quite a feat of perception - but how his recollection of it is characteristic of what Neil Hertz, in *The End of the Line*, calls a Sublime turn. A Sublime turn is a sentence or a line which exhibits “a transfer of power (or the simulation of such a transfer) from the threatening forces to the poetic activity itself” (Hertz 6). Lightning - a natural phenomenon characteristic of the Dynamic Sublime - is, in this instance, transferred to the figure of Solovyov. The fact that this description is in itself suggestive of the Sublime experience, suggests also that Bely, in writing this passage, was himself inspired. If we take a look, once more, at the line: “Lightning was flashing in the

window and Solovyov's face was trembling in a lightning of inspiration" (Bely and Jakim 84), and compare it to a line from Nietzsche's description of inspiration, in which he writes: "like lightning a thought flashes up" (Nietzsche 756), we find a possible source for this inspiration. Nietzsche's influence on Bely is considered by Elsworth to be "so pervasive that its limits are difficult to define" (Elsworth 9). And at times, such as this, it seems as if Nietzsche finds an echo in Bely's own writing, which is to suggest that there is an intersubjective relationship between Nietzsche, Bely and his essay on Solovyov. This is reminiscent of Longinus's theory of *zelosis-mimesis* (zealous imitation or, better, emulation), which he describes as "a secularized version of divine inspiration, *enthusiasmos* (Literally: 'ecstasy arising from possession by a god')" (Doran 65). This divine theory of inspiration is made secular by Longinus's adaptation of the original theory, in which, "Just as the gods 'inspired' the poet in the theory of *enthusiasmos*, the great writer of the past 'inspires' the literary aspirant" (Doran 66). It is already implied within Bely's theory of Symbolism that a reader can be influenced on a spiritual level by what they read. And the fact that Bely echoes Nietzsche in such a way would suggest that the relationship between the creative and interpretive imaginations - necessary for Bely's theory of Symbolism to work - can lead to inspiration if one writer can successfully impregnate their reader with their own ideas. This is what Bely means when he writes that, "Rapture is the rejoicing in ideas" (Bely and Jakim 59).

How though does Bely attempt to pass over this sublime experience to his readers through his essays? To experience the Sublime in the first case one would need to have reached a degree of spiritual responsiveness - a high-mindedness as Longinus terms it - before their perception can be receptive to sublimity. But if we take for granted that a devoted reader of Bely's essays attains this responsiveness, there still remains the question of how one

writes in such a way that this experience can be passed over. We are given an indication of how this can be achieved when Bely writes that: “The poetic symbol - made complex by the relation of music to it, transformed by voice, and shaded by mimicry - expands immeasurably” (Bely and Jakim 10). The key idea to take away from this quote is his understanding that a poetic symbol “expands immeasurably” (Bely and Jakim 10). This I take to be an allusion to Kant’s theory of the Sublime, in which he comes to the conclusion that the Sublime in nature occurs when we encounter the seemingly paradoxical instance of a “finite presentation of infinity” (Doran 228). This occurs when one is confronted with an object of such a magnitude (‘absolutely great’ or ‘colossal’ in Kant’s terminology), that it overwhelms the imagination beyond its maximum capacity, and comes to be perceived by the onlooker as a representation of limitlessness. This, of course, relies on the onlooker’s perception, for “the sublime is not a judgment that applies to objects but rather to the mind” (Doran 212), and so the sublime is not therefore innate within the object itself but can be produced by an object when it is brought into contact with a high-minded perception, so long as the object is seen to present limitlessness. Yet a symbol is not an object, and so our question is: how can a symbol be made to present limitlessness, or, as Bely puts it: “expand immeasurably” (Bely and Jakim 10)? The problem here is that the Sublime is famously ineffable - it eludes all form - and so any attempt at giving form to the Sublime experience in words, in any positive sense, is impossible. But, according to Kant, a sense of the Sublime can be passed over, in art, by a negative presentation - that is, by the indirect presentation of an idea, so long as the form of this presentation also exhibits the judgment of beauty. In Kant’s philosophy beauty is a judgment come to when an artistic representation of a thing produces a harmony between the imagination and understanding. Unlike the Sublime, the judgement of beauty belongs to the object and therefore follows an objective criterion. For a

thing to be judged as beautiful, Kant believes, it must exhibit purposive form. And so there is an intrinsic relationship between the form of the object and the judgment of beauty. This beautiful form acts as a repository for the possibly Sublime idea, which is itself contrapurposive. Kant formulates this fusion of purposive form and contrapurposive sublimity as sublimity-within-beauty, which, as Doran writes, is possibly interpreted as “a relation between content and form” (Doran 277). Doran writes that:

On this reading, Kant appears to imply a two-layered structure: on one level, the artwork, whether beautiful or sublime, exhibits purposive form and is judged according to taste; but within purposive form, the sublime content (and perhaps even sublime expression) nevertheless shows itself to be a kind of *redeemed* contrapurposiveness - contrapurposiveness redeemed by purposive form - without thereby losing the force that in nature allows the contrapurposiveness to produce the feeling of the sublime (Doran 277).

Doran further explains how this may be achieved in poetry:

... sublime poetry allows us to experience the supersensible in an analogous manner to the sublime in nature: for just as sublimity in nature was based on a finite presentation of infinity, sublimity in art (exemplarily in poetry) is based on a (sensible) image of a (nonsensible) rational idea, that is, a poetic *figure* (an indirect presentation) (Doran 282).

This is, as we have already discussed, a feature of the poetic symbol. The principle of the negative is exemplified by an indirect presentation of a nonsensible idea through the use of sensible images. And thus, whilst the Sublime is ineffable, it can be symbolically circumscribed, and through this circumscription, “expand immeasurably” (Bely and Jakim 10).

The next step towards true cognition, which in Anthroposophy is termed Intuition, cannot be sufficiently discussed in Sublime terms, for Intuition is concerned with the life of the reader after the Sublime experience - its lasting effect upon the individual. Bely's theory of Symbolism is not limited to texts, but expands into the reader's life away from reading. Bely's intention in his art and his essays was ultimately the transformation of the self, as Vladimir E. Alexandrov writes:

Bely's belief in a transcendent also explains the considerable pains he took to dissociate his theory of symbolism from mere aestheticism. He was ultimately interested in nothing less than the 're-creation' of man, and spoke of Zarathustra, Buddha and Christ as being 'artists of life' as much as givers of law (Alexandrov 166).

And so, inevitably, our discussion must move away from the texts and into the life of the individual, which is to say that we must begin to discuss how the experience of reading has a lasting effect on the reader's life. For this purpose we need to translate the aesthetic principles of inspiration and the imagination into the religious terminology we find in Solovyov's metaphysics, for Bely's theory of Symbolism has religious ends, religious aspirations, even, that make use of art as a vessel for the verging upon them.¹⁰ Elsworth tells us that Bely's theory of Symbolism "is religious because it is the way of overcoming the duality between the ego and the world. In neo-Kantian terms the duality was between the thought and content of knowledge. Translated into the terminology of Solovyov this same duality is the central

¹⁰ Kirk Pillow writes that: "For Kant a formally beautiful work of art may exhibit aesthetic ideas which remain unknowable in themselves despite their exhibition within a frame of determinate form. What the unboundedness of aesthetic ideas indicates remains to be seen" (Kirk Pillow 446). For Bely this experience was seen to have a religious significance. It was considered to be indicative of the truth that there is such a thing as a spiritual reality, and that to apprehend this reality was to verge upon the threshold of the divine.

metaphysical problem: the split between God and creation” (Elsworth 26). To understand the intricacies of this translation we have to remember that, as Bely writes, Solovyov’s metaphysics was essentially a “gnostic philosophy” (Bely and Jakim 79). Gnosticism comes from the Greek word for knowledge: *gnosis*, which in a theological context primarily meant a knowledge of God, however, as Gnosticism is essentially a negative theology, this also means, paradoxically, a knowledge of the unknowable. In Gnosticism the knowledge of God, which is more accurately described as being known by Him, is come to through the experience of *gnosis*. As an experience, *gnosis* is described in similar terms to the Sublime. Doran tells us that the experience of the Sublime is “the experience of mental limits,” which is at the same time “the threshold of the divine” (Doran 87). Similarly, the experience of *gnosis* is considered to be “transcendence become immanent” (Jonas 284), and, being “professedly ineffable” (Jonas 286), follows the Sublime characteristically as an almost identical mystical experience, different only in the interpretation of its meaning. Jonas writes that the experience of *gnosis*:

... involves an extinction of the natural faculties, filling the vacuum with a surpassingly positive and at the same time in its ineffability negative content. Annihilation and deification of the person are fused in the spiritual ecstasis which purports to experience the immediate presence of the acosmic essence (Jonas 284).

The last sentence of the quote is telling when we try to highlight the differences between Kant’s theory of the Sublime and *gnosis*. It is clear from the quote that even despite Kant’s religiosity, the difference between his theory of the Sublime and *gnosis* is a difference between the secular and the religious. Kant does not credit the Sublime with an ultimate

significance. The Gnostics did credit *gnosis* with a deeply religious significance rooted in the sect's cosmology. The experience of *gnosis* was thought to be the recognition or the discovery of the *pneuma* (the deep-self or divine spark) left over in the human psyche after the fall of man and the disappearance of their acosmic creator. We find this general idea carried over into Anthroposophy in similar terms when Elsworth tells us that, in Anthroposophy:

The essential recognition of the divine, the higher Ego, within the individual ego, is also spoken of as the meeting with Christ, or as the birth of Christ within the individual (Elsworth 45).

In both doctrines we have a similar instance of a split between God and man being reconciled. Likewise, the effect of this experience on the individual's life is also described in similar terms. Elsworth further writes that the recognition of the higher Ego within the individual ego leads to "a symbolic 'death' of the old man in preparation for the 'resurrection' of the new" (Elsworth 45), which, as Hans Jonas writes in *The Gnostic Religion*, is mirrored in Gnostic theology:

It is the aftermath rather than those elusive 'experiences' themselves - what was felt to be their lasting effect on a 'reformed' life - which can speak to us (Jonas 287).

Both systems of thought are in clear agreement that the effect of such an experience as *gnosis* (which here is used synonymously with Inspiration and the Sublime) is an endowment that has an effect on one's system of values. For the rest of this chapter we are going to discuss the way in which Bely considered such an experience to change an individual.

In his essay ‘Tolstoy’, Bely identifies two different types of genius, which he terms as the “genius of life,” and the “genius of the word” (Bely and Jakim 73). The genius of the word is another way of saying an “artistic genius” (Bely and Jakim 67). Different to the artistic genius is the genius of life, which Bely defines as one who has the “ability to actualize the beauty they have seen” (Bely and Jakim 67), which is a way of saying that their genius is demonstrable through their actions rather than their words. To illustrate this difference, Bely asks us to consider the differences between Dante and Francis of Assisi. Whereas “when Francis writes poetry, he loses his authentic meaning for us,” Dante was never capable of embodying the same “depth of experience” (Bely and Jakim 68) found in his poetry, within his actions. According to Bely, it is the task of the artistic genius to realise that “at the deepest base of artistic creativity lies the need to understand this creativity as an activity directed at the transfiguration of reality” (Bely and Jakim 67), and so attain a union between art and life, or words and actions. Upon realising this, the artist is said to “encounter silence” (Bely and Jakim 69-70). Bely writes that this encounter signals the beginning of a complete change in the artist’s system of values:

... this is a fateful moment in the life of geniuses: the genius enters into war with himself; words begin to demand life and life begins to demand words; verbal creativity becomes cognizant of its true goal: to become a creativity of life, but this can be achieved only if one has authentic life within oneself. Here the artist of words realizes that the whole technical side of his creativity is a burden which obstructs the movement of creatively experienced life; And, conversely, the artist of life realizes that the treasures of his experience are the property of all mankind; he seeks the possibility of renouncing these riches for himself and transmitting them to all mankind, for he can think of himself only as being connected with the whole world; and then he has recourse to words. This is the moment when the great writer becomes silent and the great man of silence begins to speak (Bely and Jakim 70).

What Bely outlines here is a transition in which the artist goes into a state of quietude, because, according to his theory, the “Deepening of inner life begins with the great experience of silence” (Bely and Jakim 69). The paradox used in this passage: that silence begins to speak, does not therefore mean what we might first interpret it to mean. It does not mean that silence can generate a meaning more astonishing than words. Rather, Bely uses the term here to mean something more like the Romantic idea of solitude, in which one practices a kind of hermeticism and goes into isolation for the purpose of deep and meaningful contemplation. During this period of silence, Bely writes that the artist is confronted with what he phrases as a “dark point” (Bely and Jakim 70). This dark point calls him to “overcome himself as a genius in the name of a higher order of genius” (Bely and Jakim 70). Bely elaborates on what he means by this when he writes that:

This dark point is actually the peak of genius; it is an attempt to fuse words about life with a life which cannot be described in ordinary words; muteness begins to speak; words become symbols (Bely and Jakim 70).

This period of transition is not without its dangers. “Not all men of genius rise to the peak of their genius,” writes Bely, “some perish just before their peak; think of Nietzsche’s suffering or of Gogol’s torments or of Dostoevsky’s epileptic fits” (Bely and Jakim 70). Nonetheless, it is said that when Leo Tolstoy “stood on this peak before the face of the universe... his life-wisdom extinguished his former artistic genius” (Bely and Jakim 70) and he fortunately transcended into a new state of being.

At the time of meeting Tolstoy as a child, Bely writes that the mere “presence of the great elder always seemed symbolic” (Bely and Jakim 72) as if he was in the presence of some strange greatness. Writing his essay later in life, Bely feels as if he has understood the significance of the change in Tolstoy that astonished him as a child. He writes that the man was different in his later years to the man that wrote *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* (Bely and Jakim 70). When he spoke to Bely and the small congregation of other children in Bely’s youth, he spoke to them “clearly and simply,” but for the whole time (for Bely, at least), “you couldn’t help feeling that, behind all that clarity, something mute and bottomless was looking out at you” (Bely and Jakim 73). This spurs Bely to hypothesise that after “the artistic genius in Tolstoy deliberately immersed himself in silence,” he was, “replaced by a philosopher and preacher,” and therefore become not merely an artist, but “himself a work of art” (Bely and Jakim 73). Tolstoy is considered as a resounding success of the spiritual transformation which Bely sought after: “The word became flesh,” writes Bely, “the genius of life and the genius of the word united in a higher unity” (Bely and Jakim 73). In Bely’s opinion, Tolstoy had become an artist of life, similar to the likes of “Confucius, Muhammed, or Buddha” (Bely and Jakim 68) and in doing so, had attained Intuition.

We now have a beginning and an end to what Bely hoped to achieve through his literary works. The system laid out in this chapter prepares us for a reading of *Petersburg* by confronting and helping to clarify the two most puzzling features of Bely’s theory of Symbolism, which are: how art (and literary art in particular) can be said to change a reader’s mentality, and what Bely considered to be the qualities of such a change. In effect, we have formalised Bely’s expository writings into a sort of grand narrative, which leads one to the ultimate end of Bely’s ambitions. By turning this into a narrative, by which I mean a series of events, we now have the opportunity to map the system on to the narrative of Bely’s novel

Petersburg in a more coherent fashion. And so, in the next chapter of this dissertation, we will be discussing the way in which the process outlined here is mirrored in the character arc of Nikolai, the protagonist of Bely's novel *Petersburg*.

Chapter 2 - Nikolai's Spiritual Development

In his essay 'Nabokov and Bely', Vladimir E. Alexandrov comments upon what he sees as an essential affinity between the two novelists, he remarks that: "The praxis of both writers is of course precisely to conceal or make difficult what is most important" (Alexandrov 362). This method of concealing or making difficult is what the reader of Andrei Bely's *Petersburg* first encounters. *Petersburg* begins unconventionally. Rather than being thrown immediately into the storyline the reader is confronted with a Prologue. So enigmatic is this Prologue that, for a long time, critics have analysed it in search of a hidden code or system that might lend itself to a more comprehensive reading of the novel. At this stage of the chapter, it is not my plan to give an explanation of what this elusive, hidden code may be, but to describe the effect this Prologue has on the reader's first encounter with the novel, and furthermore explain why this is important to the novel's structure.

The novel begins with an address to "Your Excellencies, your Highnesses, Lords and Ladies, Citizens!" and a question: "What is this Russian Empire of ours?" (Bely 11). From here the narrator of the Prologue goes on to try and answer the question. He speaks of the Russian Empire, the space it takes up on Earth, its many territories, its cities, the cultural significance of these cities, and even of the famous Nevskii Prospekt in St. Petersburg. And all the while the reader expects a sort of conclusion, an answer that might clarify for us what the Russian Empire is. Yet no answer is forthcoming. The narrator appears to deviate from the subject of his initial inquiry and question, instead, the presupposition that St. Petersburg is the capital of the Empire. In a puzzling, non-committal way, the narrator says:

If, however, you persist in asserting the quite ridiculous legend to the effect that there exists a population of a million-and-a-half in Moscow - then it will be necessary to concede that Moscow must be the capital, for it is only in capital cities that we find a population of a million-and-a-half; in provincial capitals there is not, never was and never will be a population of a million-and-a-half. And in accordance with that ridiculous legend it transpires that the capital is not Petersburg (Bely 12).

If a legend is something unevicenced - unvalidated by science and spread by hearsay - then it is a curious thing to introduce into an argument which began with an almost scientific, data-driven extrapolation of what constitutes the Russian Empire. The deviation made by the narrator is a deviation from a logical approach to sophistry. It is, of course, a false syllogism to say that: A capital city is the city with the most inhabitants, Moscow has the most inhabitants, therefore Moscow is the capital city of the Russian Empire, for it is based on a false premise. A capital city is not decided on the grounds of its population, but for its cultural, historical and geographical significance. The tone of almost comic facetiousness suggests that the narrator does not believe in his own assertions. But even if one buys into the narrator's reasoning, the reader is still unprepared for his striking conclusion: "if Petersburg is not the capital, then Petersburg does not exist. It merely seems to exist" (Bely 12). There are many relevant questions to ask with regard to this statement, but one of the most important may be: what does Bely gain by making the reader question the existence of the novel's setting, St. Petersburg? Roger Keys, in his study *The Reluctant Modernist: Andrei Bely and the Development of Russian Fiction, 1902-1914*, writes that: "At the root of everything in this novel lies ambiguity, the fact that it is impossible to make definite statements about the meaning, or value, or ontological status of anything within the fiction" (Keys 277), and this may be the beginning of an explanation for the Prologue. On

logical grounds, the argument made is erroneous. But there is reason to believe that this is the whole purpose of the Prologue. The fact that the existence of the novel's setting has been questioned at the very start of the novel throws the reader into the story with a marked feeling of uncertainty. It complicates. It baffles. It upsets the expectations of the reader, and calls into question the reliability of the narrative voice. And for this reason it invites curiosity. In this way, where it fails as a logical argument, it succeeds in creating an atmosphere of uncertainty.

After the *Prologue* the narrator carries on with his deviancy though in an altogether different way. He no longer creates arguments in the manner of the *Prologue* but interrupts the telling of the story with rather remarkable claims, mostly with regard to the idea of 'Cerebral Play'. Maria Carlson, in her essay 'Theosophy and History in Andrej Belyj's *Peterburg: Life in the Astral City*', explains this idea as follows:

Cerebral play derives from the fundamental occult (theurgic) notion that *consciousness* creates form, i.e., that if properly focused, thought can give rise to objective corporeal being. Unlike scientific positivism, which claims that matter creates thought (thought as electrical impulses caused by chemical reactions in the matter of the brain, for instance), this fundamental principle of many occult systems claims that, on the contrary, *thought* creates *matter*. Consider the operative analogy (and analogy, not deduction, is the basic mode of logic in mythic and occult thought): God abstractly thinks the universe, and then the force of his Divine Thought, expressed through the Divine Word, brings the universe into material being (Carlson 31).

The first mention of this idea comes in Chapter 1, when the narrator says: "and in the consciousness of the inhabitant cerebral games swirled round" (Bely 18). At this stage of the novel the reader is uncertain about what this may mean, but the more one reads, the more the idea begins to reveal itself. As is the case with this instance, the idea of 'Cerebral Play' is

given a variety of different names, all used interchangeably to express the same, fundamental idea. For example, other instances include such mentions as, “And he thought: no, it was not him thinking - the thoughts thought themselves” (Bely 40), “the *invisible* thronged in” (Bely 57), and, more clearly, in the lines, “Apollon Apollonovich warmed his hands at the fire, while his cerebral play, limiting the senator’s field of vision, continued to erect its misty planes” (Bely 43). It is not until later in the chapter, however, that the idea is clarified as not being mere ‘thought’ as we would ordinarily understand it, but a particular species of thought that has real implications on the novel’s plot. In Chapter 1, under the subheading ‘*Catching sight of him, they opened wide, they shone, they flashed*’, Apollon Apollonovich is described riding in his carriage through the streets of St. Petersburg. As he passes through the crowds, Apollon is struck by “a pair of wild eyes,” which, “recognising him, went wild” (Bely 31). To Apollon, these eyes were not the eyes of any regular man: “he saw not a face,” but “a skull in a top hat and a huge pale-green ear” (Bely 32). The peculiar malevolence Apollon sees in the eyes of this man sends him into a slight panic. His “heart began to beat faster,” and in his chest “the sensation was born of a growing, crimson sphere, on the point of exploding into pieces” (Bely 32-33). It is not until the second chapter that this stranger is revealed as being Alexander Ivanovich Dudkin, an agent for a revolutionary party with plans to assassinate the senator. Most remarkably, at the end of the first chapter, the narrator credits Dudkin’s existence to Apollon’s thought, that is: Apollon is said to have literally created Dudkin using the power of his ‘Cerebral Play’. The narrator says:

Once his brain has erupted in the mysterious stranger, that stranger exists - exists in fact: he will not vanish from the Petersburg Prospects, as long as the senator exists with thoughts of this kind, because thought too exists (Bely 74).

This comes after an even more significant revelation. The narrator says, just prior to this passage, that:

This shadow arose by chance in Senator Abeluekhov's consciousness, receiving there its ephemeral existence; but Apollon Apollonovich's consciousness is a shadow consciousness, because he too is possessed of ephemeral existence, being the product of the author's imagination: needless, idle cerebral play (Bely 73).

In this quote 'Cerebral Play' is clearly denoted as being the same as 'imaginative thought' and in turn, the novel, presided over by the narrator, is suggested as being the product of his imagination. Just as we clarified in the first chapter of this dissertation, 'Cerebral Play' is used to posit, as Alexandrov writes, Bely's belief in "the primacy of thought or imagination over 'reality'" (Alexandrov 164). This leads Pierre Hart, in his essay 'The Ironic "I" in Peterburg', to write that: "Like a set of Russian nesting dolls, the character's experience simultaneously contains and is contained within another, that of the narrator being primary" (Hart 34). Yet, as Keys argues, this interpretation does "not provide a completely satisfactory account of the entire content of *Petersburg*" (Keys 229-230). Contrary to Hart's interpretation, there are a few suggestions within the text that the narrator isn't quite as authoritative as one is led to believe. For example, the narrator says, in Chapter 1, that:

Here, at the very beginning, I have to interrupt the thread of my narration, in order to introduce the reader to the location of a certain drama. In advance I must correct an inaccuracy that has crept in; it is not the fault of the author, but of the author's pen: at this time trams were not yet running through the city: the year was nineteen hundred and five (Bely 23-24).

This is clearly an example of the narrator's deviancy, but it may be a deviancy he has only a limited control over. Another similar example of this is evident, too, when the narrator says:

The author, having once displayed these pictures of illusions, ought quickly to break off the thread of narration with this very sentence; but... the author will not behave like this: he has sufficient right not to do so (Bely 73).

If what the author is describing is an 'illusion', why does he decide not to break off the thread of narration, even if he suggests that he 'ought' to? One possible answer is given by Keys, who writes that, "in *Petersburg* the world of the here and now (the 'visible world') may not mark the limit of possible experience" (Keys 227). In Keys' understanding, there are powers within the world of *Petersburg* "that ultimately move the universe" (Keys 227). These powers, he writes, "may lie beyond empirical appearance (i.e. exist in the 'invisible world'), and yet intervene in human affairs" (Keys 227). If this is true, and the narrator is subject to them, then these occult forces may guide the author's pen just as the author's pen guides the character's actions. Occult forces, in this way, are the novel's true author, and the narrator's word, therefore, "is no more the final court of appeal in this novel than is that of any of its confused protagonists" (Keys 230).

Aside from the narrative voice, another source of ambiguity is given by the sheer, exuberant allusiveness of the novel. Throughout *Petersburg* there are both veiled and explicit references to anterior works of literature. "The insistent references to noses," writes John Elsworth in *Andrei Bely: A Critical Study of the Novels*, "provide covert reference to Gogol's Petersburg tales" (Elsworth 104). Fyodr Dostoevski's works, *The Devils* and *The Brothers*

Karamazov, both find an echo through Bely's presentation of "the themes of revolution and parricide" (Elsworth 104), and the scene in which Morkovin interrogates Nikolai Apollonovich in a seedy drinking house "resembles the location of Raskol'nikov's first meeting with Marmeladov" (Elsworth 104-105) in Dostoevski's novel *Crime and Punishment*. As well as his poetry serving as a prelude to every chapter of *Petersburg*, Alexander Pushkin's *The Bronze Horseman* is represented by the mysterious character (and statue): The Bronze Horseman, who haunts the Petersburg streets at night. Tchaikovsky's "operatic version" (Elsworth 104) of Pushkin's 'The Queen of Spades' is referenced when Sofia Petrovna Likhutina "expects from Nikolay Apollonovich the passionate behaviour of the operatic Hermann" (Elsworth 104). And Goethe's 'Erlkönig' finds a mention when "Nikolay Apollonovich recalls his nurse's and his father's recitation" (Elsworth 103) of the poem. Elsworth writes that, "the whole principle behind the network of literary allusions is, as E. Starikova has put it, one of 'maximum generalization'," his prolific use of allusion, "is not to set a specific set of comparisons of one thing with another, but through the gradual merging and fading of references to suggest an infinite comparability of anything with anything else" (Elsworth 105). The effect this has on the reader, according to Elsworth, is that "he begins to see similarities where it is no longer possible to be certain that they were deliberately planted there by the author" (Elsworth 105). Bely's excessive use of allusion creates an atmosphere of uncertainty - of ambiguity, even - for its over-abundance augments the gravitas of its significance. This overwhelms the reader, and leads him or her into patterns of thought that may distract from "what is most important" (Alexandrov 362) in the novel's storyline, which, as will be discussed, is itself unclear.

As well as literary allusions, Bely's allusions to philosophical works creates a similar effect, yet one more integral to both the structure of the novel and his ultimate goal to use art

as a means of transfiguration. The likes of Plato, Auguste Comte, Gregory Skovoroda and Kant all receive a mention within the text, but it is Nietzsche's influence which proves most vital. In his essay, 'Apollo and Dionysus in Andrei Belyi's *Petersburg*', Robert Mann writes that Bely weaves "Nietzsche's Apollo-Dionysus opposition into the thematic centre" (Mann 507) of the novel. "History, as Belyi interprets it in *Petersburg*," writes Mann, "is an eternal tension between Apollo and Dionysus. The world is torn in a struggle between warring sides of the human spirit" (Mann 508). Every character within the novel, apart from the elusive White Domino, are subject to these warring sides of the human spirit, with each concept endowing every character with certain personality traits. As his name suggests, the Apollonian concept is exemplary in the figure of Apollon Apollonovich, whose mind is always relentlessly yearning to impose order upon the world around him. The Dionysian concept is perhaps most exemplary in the terrorist leader Lippanchenko whose name, too, is reminiscent of Dionysus' satyr-like companion, Pan. Lippanchenko is the chief agent of chaos within the novel, the mastermind behind the plot to assassinate the Senator. "The techniques by which this state of affairs is established in *Petersburg*," writes John Elsworth, "extend beyond the plot and the characters to the most insignificant details of imagery and description" (Elsworth 101), and for this reason the idea deserves a detailed study beyond the scope and intentions of this chapter. But its effect on the reader, however, is in-keeping with the present study. Nikolai Bogomolov, in his essay 'Prose Between Symbolism and Realism', writes that:

The endless sequence of symbolic meaning that almost every element of the novel possesses, from the tiny details of form up to global historiosophical problems, endlessly expands the artistic world of the novel (Bogomolov 34).

This is of course very similar to the prior quote by Elsworth. However, Bogomolov's interpretation that the pervasive use of imagery and description symbolic of Nietzsche's Apollonian and Dionysian concepts 'endlessly expands the artistic world of the novel,' can be read as imbuing the novel with "a finite presentation of infinity" (Doran 228) which may initiate, within the right mind, the effect/affect described by Kant as the Mathematically Sublime. It may be Bely's intention, through his prolific use of symbolic imagery, to overwhelm the reader in precisely this way by creating an intricate, inexhaustible web of figurative meaning which transcends the reasonable limitations of its form.

Bely's use of irony and humour is yet another way of obfuscating any potential reading of *Petersburg*. Even the plot, which is composed of themes we would typically regard as quite serious, such as patricide and revolution, as well as events of utmost severity, as when Sergei Segeivich Likhutin attempts to hang himself, are all frequently made to seem ridiculous. One of Bely's habits is to build up suspense in a storyline, taking it as close as he can to a potential impasse, and then self-consciously making it absurd. This is done explicitly in Chapter 5 of the novel when Apollon tries to confront Nikolai about his reputation as the 'Red Domino'. After being told about Nikolai's affiliation with a revolutionary party, Apollon manages to corner Nikolai in their family drawing room. The scene is set, the suspense has reached a certain pitch, Nikolai is unable to "tear himself away from his father" (Bely 301), and then the narrator intervenes, and says, "But here I have to make a brief digression" (Bely 301). The narrator then addresses the reader directly and explains exactly why he must delay the telling of the story, he says: "O, worthy reader: we have revealed the outward appearance of the bearer of the bejewelled insignia in exaggerated, overly harsh lines, but without any humour" (Bely 301). The story is self-consciously delayed, apparently, to make it more

humorous, and in the same passage the narrator goes on to compare Apollon Apollonovich to “the skeleton of an old gorilla in a tight frock coat” (Bely 302). This final image is so far removed from the initial scene, so incongruous with its prior seriousness, that, when we return to the drawing room, the whole atmosphere of the confrontation is modified from a confrontation of serious import, to a conversation between a man in fancy dress and a very fancy gorilla.

The plot of the novel is itself an example of this technique. This is clear when Nikolai, after promising an underground, revolutionary party that he will assist them in assassinating his father, receives, firstly, a bomb from Dudkin, and, secondly, a note from Sophia with his instructions. From this moment on Nikolai runs around the streets of St. Petersburg in a tremendous amount of distress doing whatever he can to *not* follow up on his promise. What we may call the main storyline, that of a terrorist plot to assassinate a government official, is built up and then forestalled as Nikolai contends with the occult forces guiding the story and, furthermore, his actions. Ironically, therefore, even when the bomb is set off - harming no-one - Apollon has already retired from his post, and so “even a successful assassination would be politically meaningless” (Elsworth 92).

Once the reader has clued in on this pattern much more of the novel begins to make sense. For example, as his alter-ego, the ‘Red Domino’, Nikolai acquires an infamous reputation. He is regarded by the press as an elusive figure of terror, and the characters within the novel all regard him, too, as a person with potentially villainous intentions. Hart writes that, “his appearance produces a widespread anxiety among the novel’s characters,” yet from a reader’s standpoint, “it is difficult to regard him as a harbinger of destruction” (Hart 272). When Nikolai, under the guise of the ‘Red Domino’, actually tries to terrorize Sophia, he “trips and sprawls full length while dressed in costume” (Hart 272), and further receives a

few well deserved kicks for his effort before being chased away by a policeman.¹¹ Such is the facetiousness of *Petersburg* that Nikolai only becomes in any sense a true villain through naivety and complacency - as when the bomb goes off and destroys a part of his family home - but by this point he has been cast as so listless, ineffectual and clumsy that he can hardly be regarded as a true agent of chaos. It is one thing to have a habit of falling over at critical moments. But it is another thing altogether to make a promise to assassinate your own father, realise you can't do it - do everything within your power not to do it - and still manage to almost assassinate him and at the same time destroy your family home. Ultimately, Nikolai is rendered as absolutely, comically unfit to be an archetype villain, despite the reaction he engenders in other characters.

Bely's irony and humour lead inevitably to bathos, and following this the reader is led to question the seriousness of the story. The potential meaning that could be passed over to the reader if any of these events did reach an impasse falls away and becomes inconsequential. The events and their suspenseful build-up tease the reader with the potentiality of meaning, the potentiality of an apotheosis in which the point of *Petersburg* might reveal itself, but this point, nonetheless, remains unclear. In fact, there is a real sense in which the plot of *Petersburg* (which we have also called the storyline) can be regarded as a 'nominal' subject, which we may define as: a systematic construct used for the purpose of allowing for a 'true' subject to be worked into the text on a more subliminal level. This would mean that the plot, from Bely's perspective, is a secondary consideration, selected primarily for its ability to accommodate the same system of literary symbols found in his theoretical essays. Evidence for this may be that much of the literary symbolism used within *Petersburg* can also be found within Bely's anterior theoretical essays. In the context of Bely's belief that

¹¹ In this scene the narrator also refers to Nikolai as a "pathetic clown" (Bely 170).

his theoretical writings and his imaginative literature would need to be read together this makes sense, for it allows the many texts to correspond, even if only on a symbolic basis.

Nonetheless, in the face of overwhelming evidence, we can still say, with certainty, that Bely has gone to great lengths to make any potential reading of *Petersburg* difficult to validate. As Keys writes, *Petersburg* is a novel in which:

Nothing can be clearly authenticated, and this appears to be as true for the reader as it is for the individual characters, for the narrator, and perhaps even, finally, for the implied author (Keys 227).

Yet this does not necessarily limit the ways in which *Petersburg* can be read, but rather opens up the novel to a wider variety of interpretations. Its ambiguity is the reason for its richness. And so, when “it is not expected that any major image in the novel should have a single and unambiguous meaning” (Elsworth 107), when “the attentive reader is denied a simplistic answer to the story’s fundamental questions” (Bogomolov 33), we must be cautious not to overstate the significance of any part of the novel’s contents. Therefore, the following reading is going to stick to the subject of this dissertation. It is going to trace Nikolai’s journey in the terms set out in the prior chapter, that is, by focusing primarily on Nikolai Apollonovich and the “act of self-transcendence such as the theory of Symbolism discusses” (Elsworth 107). But it must be remarked that this reading is, in no way, exhaustive, even if it is a commentary on the idea central to his theory of Symbolism.

In the first chapter of this dissertation we outlined a process through which art, in Bely's theory, was considered capable of initiating a real, spiritual transformation in an individual. In this chapter we are going to apply that process - which was split into three stages entitled: Imagination, Inspiration, and Intuition - to the character arc of the novel's main protagonist, Nikolai Apollonovich. The difficulty with this reading is that within *Petersburg* there is no mention of Nikolai studying a work of art, nor encountering art in any meaningful way. He reminisces about his nurse and father reading Goethe to him as a child, and Sophia fleetingly compares his actions to Hermann in Tchaikovsky's operatic rendition of Pushkin's 'The Queen of Spades,' but Nikolai himself is never portrayed as having a particular interest in art. There is, however, good reason for us to take up the idea that the bomb Nikolai receives from Dudkin stands in as a symbol for art. Elsworth writes that:

It is not expected that any major image in the novel should have a single and unambiguous meaning. The relation of the bomb to the forces of destruction cannot be overlooked. But there is sufficient evidence that the image contains, through its other associations, something of the idea of a real spiritual transformation, indicating the potentiality in the Ableukhov's, particularly in Nikolay Apollonovich, for an act of self-transcendence such as the theory of Symbolism discusses (Elsworth 107).

The evidence Elsworth is referring to here exists as much in the text of *Petersburg* as it does in Bely's habitual, symbolic use of the image of a bomb. Elsworth further writes that:

The image of explosion was always one of Bely's favourite ways of expressing the idea of apocalyptic transformation, and the identification of the self that undergoes spiritual transformation with a bomb recurs later, too, in *Notes of an Eccentric* (Elsworth 106-107).

Further evidence of this symbolic association can be found in Bely's essay 'The Song of Life', in which he writes that, "The goal of art is to blow up the sleep of life" (Bely and Jakim 33), and in his essay 'The Meaning of Art,' in which Elsworth tells us that, "He compares art to a bomb, and the evolution of art forms the path of a bomb from the hand that throws it to the walls of a prison it is to destroy" (Elsworth 27). It is on the basis of this recurring motif that we may take up the idea that within *Petersburg* the bomb stands in, symbolically, for art.

2.

When both Apollon and Dudkin interact with the bomb, a necessary question we have to ask is: Why is Nikolai's spiritual journey the more profound? One answer may be that Nikolai possesses the bomb for a longer period of time. But when you consider this answer within the wider context of the novel's structure it becomes too simplistic. Taking his inspiration from Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, Bely has separated his characters into two different groups. Each of these groups act under the influence of one of two competing wills, framed conceptually as the 'Dionysian' and 'Apollonian'. The "Dionysian drive," according to Erman Kaplama in his essay 'Kantian and Nietzschean Aesthetics of Human Nature: A Comparison Between the Beautiful/Sublime and Apollonian/Dionysian Dualities', is a concept that "embodies the emotions, impulses, intuitions, feelings, experiences and character traits underlying the tragic character of human nature" (Kaplama 179). The Apollonian, on the other hand, is a concept that embodies what we may call the 'will to order.' Out of this side of the human spirit issues our determination for harmony, reason and

rational inquiry. All of the characters within *Petersburg* embody these concepts in varying degrees, and the extent of their embodiment determines their fate. A comparison of the character traits of Nikolai, Apollon and Dudkin will help to reveal why Nikolai's spiritual journey more closely resembles the process set out in Bely's Theory of Symbolism.

If, as John Elsworth writes, "Bely's theory of Symbolism is an attempt to prove that it is in Symbolism that the reconciliation of all dualities is to be found" (Elsworth 10), then in *Petersburg*, for a character to become a Symbolist, they must be able to reconcile the Dionysian, Apollonian duality at the heart of the novel's structure.

Within *Petersburg* Apollon is framed as the character in which the Apollonian principle is "manifested most strongly" (Mann 508). His urge for law and order and his "clumsy, Socratic rationality" (Mann 525) make him incapable of fulfilling the first stage required to reconcile his split nature: Imagination. It must be remembered throughout this discussion that we are not talking about the imagination's fundamental role in perception, but about its role in becoming aware of spiritual realities. Becoming aware of spiritual realities "requires a belief in the possibility of cognition outside the sphere of sensory perception" (West 197), and Apollon is a committed Positivist. Apollon's imagination is as fundamental to his perception as any other characters, though, as "an unenlightened prisoner of Scientific Positivism" (Carlson 32), he remains oblivious to the thought-forms he has the power of engendering. Characteristically, Apollon's unawareness of spiritual realities can be attributed to his habit for discounting emotional impulses by reflecting on them in an entirely scientific manner, as Sandra Joy Russell writes in her essay 'The City as Dialectic: Andrei Bely's Creative Consciousness, its Nietzschean Influence, and the Urban Centre in *Petersburg*':

When confronted with fear, and particularly fear of his own mortality... [Apollon's] response is to contemplate structure. In doing so, he is able to organise and control his sense of well-being by way of cognition, which, for Bely, opposes the primacy of the creative (Russell 39-40).

Evidence for this can be found in Chapter 1 of *Petersburg* when the narrator says that, "System and symmetry soothed the senator's nerves" (Bely 24). Or, more dramatically, when Apollon first encounters the 'shadow' that will later be revealed to be Dudkin. Riding in his carriage through the streets of St. Petersburg, Apollon meets Dudkin's gaze and reacts in a singular way. Bely writes that:

Apollon Apollonovich caught sight, at the corner, of a pair of wild eyes: the eyes expressed one impermissible quality: the eyes recognised the senator; and, recognising him, went wild; maybe the eyes had been waiting for him at the corner; and catching sight of him, they opened wide, they shone, they flashed (Bely 31).

In this example Bely tells us that Apollon has recognised within the eyes of this 'shadow' a certain malice, and this recognition of malice has produced an emotional response best defined as terror. Apollon is so struck by Dudkin's gaze that he falls backwards into his carriage, presses his hand to his heart and loses his top-hat in the process. To this rather dramatic reaction Apollon responds in the following way:

Apollon Apollonovich, mechanically replacing his top hat and holding his black suede-clad hand to his galloping heart, once again gave himself over to his beloved contemplation of cubes, in order to come to terms, calmly and rationally, with what had happened (Bely 33).

By contemplating structure, by contemplating ideal forms, Apollon neglects his capacity for introspection. According to Kant, our imagination fuses “the fleeting impingements of sensation into a meaningful, recognisable whole” (Wheelwright 76). Apollon’s imagination recognises within the eyes of this ‘shadow’ a certain malice. But rather than delve into his inner, emotional life, and consider why this ‘shadow’ provoked such an emotional response, he attempts to discount it using his capacity for reason. In his study *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James writes that, “If you have intuitions at all, they come from a deeper level of your nature than the loquacious level which rationalism inhabits” (James 73).

Throughout *Petersburg* Apollon stays at the level of rationalism. When it is later revealed by the narrator that Apollon has, literally, created Dudkin’s existence, we begin to understand the full extent of his malaise. Apollon is incapable of becoming spiritually aware because of his Apollonian limitations, and the consequence is his inadvertent projection of unacknowledged thoughts, or fears, into the world (Alexandrov 164). The peculiar laws of *Petersburg* make a reality of Carl Gustav Jung’s aphorism: “Projections change the world into a replica of one’s unknown face” (Jung 92); Dudkin is the product of Apollon’s overlooked emotional life, but Apollon, too much the Apollonian, is incapable of ever knowing this. His Apolline consciousness, as Nietzsche writes, has, “like a veil, hid that Dionysiac world from his view” (Nietzsche 21).

At the other pole of *Petersburg*’s Nietzschean framework is the quintessentially Dionysian character, Alexander Ivanovich Dudkin. In contrast with Apollon, Dudkin’s perception of ‘reality’ is augmented by his willingness to look upon and embrace the world through an imaginative lens. When Dudkin first meets Nikolai, and places the bomb in his possession, he reveals to Nikolai that he has been “reading the history of gnosticism, Gregory of Nissa, Siranin, the Apocalypse” (Bely 111). These subjects are selected by Bely to

establish Dudkin as an erudite and introspective character, for they help to reveal his openness to occult, mystical and religious works on the topic of the 'self'. His imaginative, mystical personality is further clarified when he makes the rather Blakean remark: "That's right: and that's where everything is something else, objects are not objects: this is where I came to the conviction that the window is not a window; the window - is an opening to infinity" (Bely 120). The idea that an object is not an object, but a microcosm which reflects the macrocosm, is not a conclusion that can be come to except through the imagination. Such a movement requires a swerve in meaning, a process of negation, which, by dissociating the idea of the object from the concept 'object' opens up an infinitude of possibilities because it declines to crystallise any. Thus a window is no longer considered as the object 'a window,' but an idea which, in context, can be used to represent an opening into infinity.

Mann writes that, "As fellow victims of the Dionysian horror, Dudkin and Nikolai are united by similar experiences and a similar intuitive way of interpreting what has happened to them" (Mann 519). It will be revealed later in the novel that Dudkin has an intimate knowledge of everything Nikolai comes to experience.

In Chapter 4, at the Tsukatov's ball, Sofia Petrovna Likhutina hands Nikolai a letter demanding that he fulfils his promise to the revolutionary party and use the package, which contains a bomb, to assassinate his own father. From this moment on, until Chapter 6, Nikolai is often described in a way that suggests he has been a sacrifice within a Dionysian rite. For example, Bely writes that, "In the first moment after reading the note something bellowed pitifully in his soul: bellowed as pitifully as a meek bull under the knacker's knife" (Bely 245). This is the beginning of Nikolai's Sublime, mystical experience. After Nikolai leaves the ball, only then was he

able to appreciate for the first time the full horror of his situation. How could that be? And for the first time he was seized by a fear beyond expression: he felt a sharp thumping in his heart: the side of the archway in front of him began to revolve; no sooner did the darkness touch him than the darkness enveloped him; his ‘self’ was nothing but a black receptacle, unless it was a cramped box room buried in absolute darkness; and there in the darkness, in the place of his heart a spark ignited ... with frantic speed the spark turned into a crimson ball: the ball expanded, expanded, expanded; and the ball burst: and everything burst (Bely 247-248).

In Gnostic parlance, the ‘spark’ is another word for the *pneuma*: a person’s vital spirit, soul, creative energy or ‘deep self’. The *pneuma* is considered to be a remnant of mankind’s former divinity before the Fall. To recognise the ‘*pneuma*’ - to recognise that there is an immortal, divine spark within one’s self - is to undergo the experience termed in Gnosticism as *gnosis*: a transcendent, mystical experience correlative with the Sublime¹². This experience seems to initiate a change in perception in Nikolai. No longer does Nikolai consider, as he did earlier in Chapter 5, that “man himself was nothing but a pillar of steaming blood” (Bely 296). Rather, when Apollon tries to confront Nikolai about his reputation as the ‘Red Domino’, Nikolai looks his father over, and thinks that, “this slight five-foot body of his father’s, which couldn’t be more than a couple of feet in circumference, was the centre and the periphery of a certain immortal centre: that was where, when all was said and done, the ‘self’ was located” (Bely 299). Flesh is no longer merely flesh to Nikolai, it is the packaging of an immortal spirit.

Nikolai’s mystical experience is prolonged until it reaches an apotheosis near the end of Chapter 5. Bely uses the time in between to create an association between Nikolai’s heart

¹² One vital difference between the Sublime and *gnosis* is that in Gnosticism the emphasis isn’t placed on the mystical experience itself, but its aftermath: how one continues to live after being enlightened (Jonas 287). The question of the aftermath will prove to be important when we discuss the differences between Dudkin’s and Nikolai’s character arcs.

and the bomb. He writes, for instance, that after the Tsukatov's ball, Nikolai's "death-throes had been dragging on: and under his heart something was swelling, swelling, swelling" (Bely 301). The association between Nikolai's heart and the bomb is consummated as the bomb seems to be embodied within him, and starts to affect him physiologically. Bely writes, "Bomb - a swift expansion of gases ... The roundness of the gases' expansion aroused in him a forgotten absurdity, and against his will a sigh burst into the air from his lungs" (Bely 304). The identification of Nikolai's heart and the bomb reaches a totality in the subchapters '*Pepp Peopovich Pepp*' and '*The Day of Judgement*' near the close of Chapter 5. Upon returning to his room after his confrontation with Apollon, Nikolai comes across the bomb once more. Nikolai turns the key and sets off the device's timer. Incapable of following through and stowing it under his father's pillow, he wonders if he should crush it under his heel, and then, as Bely writes:

At that thought he felt something which positively made his ears twitch: he experienced such an immense attack of nausea (from the seven glasses he had drunk), as though he had swallowed the bomb like a pill; and now in the pit of his stomach something was distending: made of rubber, perhaps, or else of the material of very strange worlds (Bely 313).

Nikolai cannot stow the bomb under his father's pillow, nor bring himself to crush it under his heel, because it exists at once within the sardine-tin and within the very pit of his stomach; to destroy it would be to irrevocably destroy himself, and, as will be discussed, the source of his own creation.

Harold Bloom writes in his study *The Art of Reading Poetry* that "Longinus tells us in the experience of the Sublime we apprehend a greatness to which we respond by a desire for

identification, so that we will become what we behold” (Bloom 40). Tellingly, it is in the scenes where Nikolai identifies with the bomb that we find the most clear evidence that Nikolai has had a spiritual awakening. Bely draws upon the power of religious conversion to illustrate that Nikolai has been, “not merely challenged and thereby invigorated,” as Neil Hertz writes, “but thoroughly ‘turned around’” (Hertz 47). In a somnambulant state, Nikolai begins to open up to imaginative truth. He begins by reflecting on his philosophical beliefs, and then on religion. Bely writes, “The lawgivers of the great religions had expressed various rules in the form of images; Nikolai Apollonovich respected the lawgivers of the great religions, as it were, without, it goes without saying, believing in their divine essence” (Bely 314). Despite not believing in the divine at this stage, what is revealed immediately in the next subchapter ‘*The Day of Judgment*’ qualifies not only as a slackening of former beliefs, but an actual experience of the divine made manifest. Nikolai’s total identification, that is, total embodiment of the bomb, precludes a flight, or transcendence beyond mundane reality. ‘*The Day of Judgement*’ begins with the passage:

And in just such a condition he sat before the sardine-tin: he saw - and did not see; he heard - and did not hear; it was as though at that lifeless moment when this weary body had tumbled into the embrace of the armchair, this spirit had tumbled straight from the parquet of the floor into some lifeless sea, into a temperature of absolute zero; and he saw - and did not see: no, he did see. When his weary head bent down silently on to the desk (on to the sardine-tin), in through the open door to the corridor the bottomless infinity gazed at its own reflection, that strange thing that Nikolai Apollonovich had tried to cast off as he made the transition to the current business: to his distant astral journey, or sleep (which, we observe, is the same thing); but the open door went on gaping amongst all that was current, opening into its own profundity, not current at all: cosmic infinity (Bely 315).

As a description this bears all the hallmarks of mystical literature's "self-contradictory" (James 420) flavour. To see and not see, to hear and not hear, to be at once within your body and without it, is to overcome "all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute" (James 419). Even the mention of Absolute Zero - which is the point of stasis - is also the point of timelessness, and is it not true that to experience timelessness is also to experience immortality, or at the very least an intimation of immortality? Bely's mystical personality allows this to go beyond mere intimation. Nikolai is not only within some divine realm but face-to-face with divinity: a God which one cannot see, but apprehend being seen by. Bely writes:

"Nikolai Apollonovich had the impression that something standing outside the door in the infinity had looked at him, that some kind of head was poking through (the moment you looked at it, it vanished): the head of a *god*" (Bely 315).

What follows is a phantasmagoric vision in which Apollon assumes the figure of Saturn: the ancient God infamous for devouring his own sons, in fear that they may usurp him. Bely twists this mythological tale into something less malevolent. He writes that:

Bereft of body, still he felt his body: some invisible centre that had previously been both his consciousness and his 'self', turned out to possess a semblance of the former, burnt to ashes: Nikolai Apollonovich's logical premises turned into bones, the syllogisms around these bones wrapped themselves into rigid sinews, the content of his logical activity developed flesh and skin; and so the 'self' of Nikolai Apollonovich again displayed its bodily form, although it was not a body; and in this *non-body* (in the exploded 'self') someone else's 'self' was revealed: this 'self' had rushed in from Saturn and to Saturn it returned (Bely 320).

Russell interprets this as follows:

For Nikolai, the 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, creating an unforeseen connection with his father; by destroying his father physically, he would be working against creativity and the source of his own creation (Russell 42-43).

This is revealing, but it can only count as one part of a satisfactory answer. Under the guise of the ‘Red Domino’ Nikolai has waded deeper and deeper into the Dionysian aspect of his personality until the “godlike, passionless,” aspect of his personality “had flown away,” and only “naked passion remained” (Bely 212). In this state Nikolai couldn’t pass through the stage of Inspiration, for in this state he had forgotten his self, and had become one part within the Dionysian egregore. Following Nietzsche’s theory in *The Birth of Tragedy*, inspiration in *Petersburg* follows a bi-directional movement. Just as “the whole vision of the poet is nothing but the light-image that healing nature holds up to us after we have glimpsed the abyss” (Nietzsche 47), so it seems that in *Petersburg* one has to plunge into the Dionysian abyss before the healing light of Apollo, the God of individuation, illuminates a path back to self-hood, and allows one to give form to their cognitive dissonance.¹³ This is the Nietzschean sublime, and it engenders in Nikolai an understanding of the spiritual forces working over himself, and his father, in two ways. Firstly, Nikolai is able to identify his own qualities in his father and decides to spare him. Secondly, at the end of his vision, Nikolai realises “that he was only a bomb” (Bely 321) - an instrument for the revolutionary party and

¹³ Bely writes in his essay 'Sacred Colours' that, "One must step into the darkness before one can step out of it" (Bely and Jakim 53).

a sacrifice within a Dionysian rite. His spiritual awakening has coincided with a growing awareness of the spiritual forces at work within *Petersburg*.

How does this affect the direction of the plot? Straight after his vision, in Chapter 6, Nikolai seeks out Dudkin. In the subchapter ‘*Revelation*’, Nikolai, showing “nothing short of inspiration” (Bely 351), tells Dudkin about the note he received at the Tsukatov’s ball and of his mystical experience upon receiving it. This subchapter is a turning point in the novel. As if to stress the closeness of their states of mind, Bely has Nikolai repeat, in other words, Dudkin’s Blakean remark in Chapter 2. Nikolai says that:

... there’s something left from last night: everything’s the same - and yet different ... Look at that shop window, for instance ... There are reflections in it: there’s a man in a bowler hat going by - look ... he’s gone ... There are you and me, can you see? And it’s all - somehow strange (Bely 352).

Dudkin, who, “as far as the realm of ‘somehow strange’ was concerned... was quite an expert” (Bely 352), does what he can to help Nikolai understand his experience. He explains to him that his new state of mind has been discussed “In fiction, in poetry, in psychiatry, in studies of the occult” (Bely 352), and that the sensation of his experience is called, in psychiatry, a ‘pseudohallucination’: “a kind of symbolic sensation, a sensation that doesn’t correspond to the stimulus” (Bely 353). Dudkin then expatiates Bely’s own understanding of the differences between symbol and allegory, and advises that Nikolai reads the work of mystics. Before the end of the subchapter, they both agree that the bomb should be cast into the Neva, and Dudkin, suspecting that there is something amiss within the party, sets off to discuss the note with Lappanchenko.

Similarly enlightened, it is expected that Nikolai's and Dudkin's character arcs would end similarly. Yet the foreshadowing remark made by Dudkin in Chapter 2 - that he is on the verge of mental illness (Bely 109) - turns out to be true. In his unwell state, Dudkin betrays the revolutionary cause and murders Lippanchenko. Why does Dudkin descend into madness and not Nikolai? It is a curiosity of Bely's theory that on the verge of attaining Intuition some artists may fall into madness. "Some perish just before reaching the peak," he writes in his essay 'Tolstoy', "think of Nietzsche's suffering or Gogol's torments or of Dostoevsky's epileptic fits" (Bely and Jakim 70). In Bely's theory, where symbolism ends, where the influence of art ends, incarnation must begin: "We must make Christ incarnate, just as He made himself incarnate" (Bely and Jakim 63). Reflecting on the events of *Petersburg* in Chapter 6, Dudkin considers the role he and Nikolai have played in the party's plot to assassinate Apollon:

What a life: here - it might end badly; he, Alexander Ivanovich, was slowly going out of his mind. Nikolai Apollonovich was crushed by difficult circumstances; something damaging had settled in their souls; it wasn't a matter of the police, or of arbitrary force, or of danger, but a rottenness in the soul; was it permissible to set out upon the great cause of the people without first being cleansed? He recalled: "With the fear of God and with faith go forward." But they had gone forward without any fear. And did they have faith? Going forward like that, they have gone beyond, they had transgressed a law of the soul: they had become transgressors, not in the ordinary sense, of course... but in another" (Bely 366).

Despite being aware that he may have sinned, Dudkin does not yearn for redemption.

Nikolai, on the other hand, has an experience that demands he recognises his transgressions.¹⁴

¹⁴ Jorge Louis Borges writes in *This Craft of Poetry* that: "The Gnostics said the only way to be rid of a sin is to commit it, because afterwards you repent it" (Borges 109).

In Chapter Seven, upon finding out about the terrorist plot through his wife Sofia, the Second Lieutenant, Sergei Sergeivich Likhutin confronts Nikolai about the bomb and the plan to assassinate his father, Apollon. As Mann writes, Likhutin “is the central Christian symbol of the novel, alongside the White Domino, with whom he is inextricably bound artistically” (Mann 522). Face to face with Likhutin, and forced to confront his misdeeds, Nikolai undergoes a “Christianizing change” (Mann 522). Unable to explain himself to Likhutin, Nikolai only manages a curious silence: “His dark-cornflower, deep blue eyes and his shock of shining hair expressed a vague, unutterable silence” (Bely 501). Is this silence not reminiscent of the silence Bely saw in Tolstoy’s quietude, when his “creative activity, having expressed much in words, spoke even more eloquently by silence” (Bely and Jakim 73)? The same Tolstoy in whom, “The word became flesh: the genius of life and the genius of the word united in a higher unity” (Bely and Jakim 73)? As Elsworth writes, for Bely “art will only achieve its true aim when it ceases to exist” (Elsworth 27), which is to say that art will cease to exist once man has been re-created and become an artist of life, like “Zarathustra, Buddha and Christ” (Alexandrov 166). According to Bely, Tolstoy’s silence was at once his “final creative gesture,” and “his first religious gesture” (Bely and Jakim 74). And so it is that Nikolai’s silence comes to be seen as his first movement towards Intuition. Confronted by Likhutin, Nikolai becomes like a parody of Christ at his crucifixion:

Here was - a mouth swirling in martyrdom, here - eyes of cornflower blue, here - a shock of shining hair: clad in the fury of flames, with wide-spread arms nailed in the air by sparks, with hands palms upwards in the air - palms that were pierced -

- Nikolai Apollonovich, splayed out in the form of a cross, was suffering there in the light’s luminosity and pointing with his eyes at the red sores on his hands; and from the gaping heavens a broad-winged archangel was pouring on him cooling dew - into the incandescent furnace...

- “He knows not what he does...”

Suddenly... - a dizzying crash, a hissing, a snorting: the bright luminosity starts to pulsate and shatter to pieces, sweeping away the tormented image in vortices of sparks (Bely 504).

As Hans Jonas tells us, the process of *gnosis* “is climaxed and closed by the ecstatic experience of deification” (Jonas 286). Equal to this interpretation is the more strictly Anthroposophic explanation given to us by Elsworth, in which he writes that:

The essential recognition of the divine, the higher Ego, within the individual ego, is also spoken of as the meeting with Christ, or as the birth of Christ within the individual. The path of initiation in all mystical traditions has involved the symbolic ‘death’ of the old man in preparation for the ‘resurrection’ of the new (Elsworth 45).

There is no real difference in these interpretations: Nikolai has been reborn into a plane of existence previously unattained - which is, after all, what Intuition requires.

We can say with certainty that, for Nikolai: transcendence has become imminent - but what, exactly, has Nikolai transcended? Transcendence, according to Harold Bloom in his study *Omens of Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection*, “means a climbing beyond the material universe and ourselves; insofar as we are nothing but units of that universe” (Bloom 20). And, certainly, there is an argument to be made that *Petersburg* exists as a polemic against materialism and its shortcomings - especially as an interpretive mode. But Nikolai never was the novel’s representative of materialism, that was Apollon’s role; Nikolai exercises both Apollonian and Dionysian qualities. Rather, one way of interpreting Nikolai’s transcendence is as an ultimate swerve away from Nietzsche’s Apollonian-Dionysian duality altogether. Following this interpretation, Mann writes that:

By introducing the theme of the White Domino, however, Belyi establishes an opposition between the pagan outlook and Christian spirituality, whereby both the Dionysian and the Apollonian must be viewed as essentially similar, violent forces contrasting with the example of Christ. In the end, Nikolai turns away from both the Apollonian and the Dionysian, seeking refuge in the Church. Christ, in Belyi's view, waits in the wings, a preferable alternative to the human morality of the classical gods. Clearly inspired by Nietzsche's theory of Apollo and Dionysus, Belyi nevertheless rejects Nietzsche's preference for the pagan worldview. *Petersburg* draws its artistic inspiration from Nietzsche, but at the same time it is a polemic with Nietzsche's Dionysian philosophy (Mann 525).

Yet is this interpretation not flawed in a very crucial way? The Apollonian and the Dionysian are not merely world-views, nor merely modes of interpretation. They are innate aspects of the human condition. They are the two poles of mankind's psychological makeup. The characters of *Petersburg* suffer, not from possessing these innate aspects, but from an imbalance of these aspects. Apollon is too Apollonian, Dudkin too Dionysian. To say that Nikolai simply 'turns away' from his own psychology, and chooses Christ's example, neglects the fact that Christ too was human (and subject to human passions), and that for Belyi transcendence occurs, not when one rejects their split nature and chooses another path, but when one reconciles their split nature. After all, one cannot choose their condition; if one could simply adopt something other than the human condition one would cease to be human. No, it is in the reconciliation of these dualities that a new path is revealed. It is only after Nikolai has ventured through the Dionysian, and understood his own Dionysian impulses, and seen in his father the reflection of his own Apollonian qualities, can he transcend them all. This offers a more satisfactory ending to *Petersburg*, for it follows more closely the path outlined in Bely's theory of Symbolism.

As if to emphasise Nikolai's newfound harmony, his father Apollon, a character representative of the Apollonian, and his mother Anna Petrovna, a character representative of the Dionysian, are reunited, and the Apollonovich household acquires a tranquility entirely unlike that which had preceded his mother's return. As the product of both characters, it is fitting that Nikolai is the character to find a balance between both aspects of mankind's split nature. Nikolai's yearning for innocence, which is a motif carried throughout the novel, is finally attained as his parents are reunited. In Chapter Eight, when all three characters are together in the family home, "it was just like old times" (Bely 549):

After the scene in the drawing room Apollon Apollonovich made it clear to them in all his bearing: everything had now returned to normal; he dined with a healthy appetite, he joked and listened attentively to stories about the beauties of Spain: a strange, sad feeling arose in his heart; as though (it occurred to Kolenka) there had been no time; as though all this had happened yesterday: he, Nikolai Apollonovich, was five years old; he was listening intently to his mother's conversations with his governess (Bely 550).

What is the significance of this return to childhood, this return to innocence? One cannot help but be reminded of the instruction in Matthew 18:3, which reads, "Verily, I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3, Holy Bible: King James Version). Nikolai's re-birth nominates him as one to whom the kingdom of heaven is open, and his return to innocence can be said to be representative of this fact. Being reborn, Nikolai is elected as an artist of life. And so, as the scene unfolds, the question of the bomb and its portents lingers in Nikolai's mind. Under the illusion that Likhutin has swept through his home and disposed of the bomb, Nikolai brushes his doubts aside. He does not know that Apollon, upon finding the package and, being

curious about its contents, had stolen it into his keeping. In the final scene of the novel the bomb - the novel's symbol for art - goes off, killing no one. The path of the individual towards becoming an artist of life, in the manner of Christ, Buddha and Zarathustra, has led to a place in which art has fulfilled its purpose - it is no longer necessary, but only for Nikolai.

The story of *Petersburg* is not over yet. In the Epilogue, we are given an insight into Nikolai's life after the event. Like a wandering prophet - like Vladimir Solvy'ov, in fact - Nikolai is said to have moved to Egypt, where he is seen "striding for days on end through the fields, the meadows, the forests, watching with a sullen indolence the work in the fields" (Bely 564). He no longer reads Kant, but the Christian theologian Skovoroda. He sees no one, and lives alone. Often he is said to hear the Dionysian roar from afar: the "same old sound; deafening and - dull: with a metallic, bass, oppressive tinge" (Bely 563). The same historic forces are still abroad, but Nikolai has dismissed it all. Just as with Leo Tolstoy (in Bely essay 'Tolstoy'), for Nikolai "the final mystery of artistic creation produced an explosion," which showed us once and for all that the end of art is also "the periphery of religious creativity" (Bely and Jakim 74).

Petersburg seems to offer the promise of an apocalyptic event - despite its irony, humour and bathos. If there is a conclusion, or less a teaching to *Petersburg* - and Bely's theory of Symbolism assumes that art must have a kind of esoterically didactic quality - it is that for society to unfetter itself of its malady as he hoped it might, it is not by revolution, but individual revelation which, en masse, may finally affect a change.

Conclusion

Each chapter of this dissertation has a function. In terms of narrative there are clear, logical developments from one chapter to another. Yet I feel, and expect the reader to feel, that the content gives rise to more questions than it does provide answers. It has not been my goal to provide answers, but to detail as accurately as possible Bely's aesthetics: his influences, his theory of literature, and the way the two work to produce the novel *Petersburg*. This is no easy task. For the first part of this conclusion I am going to discuss the problems that arise when it comes to writing about Andrei Bely's aesthetics.

The Introduction to this dissertation is an attempt to place Bely and his ideas within a historical context. In this endeavour I took up the position that what is most essential to a writer's indebtedness to another writer is not his or her style, but his or her stance (Bloom xi). Bely's style of writing: his poetic approach to both theory and fiction, may be illustrative of his stance, but it is the stance that makes the style a necessity. In common with many other writers at the time in Russia, Bely considered literature to be able to reflect the divine. This is not a new idea. A similar stance can be found in the poetry of William Blake, in the writings of Emmanuel Swedenborg, in Gnostic scripture and in the writings of the Allegorists of Ancient Greece. It is an idea almost as old as literature, and the historical development of this idea would require a study of its own. For the sake of this dissertation and the limitations placed upon it I needed to find a reasonable cut-off point, which I found in the poetry of Charles Baudelaire. Baudelaire's influence on French Symbolism and, subsequently, Russian Symbolism, is well documented, and can be coherently framed within a historical context as the beginnings of a push-back against Realism and the cultural dominance of Scientific Positivism.

There is uncertainty with regards to how Bely came to this stance. With most writers one can intuit through their style, their subject-matter and the ideas which concern them most, a vague sense of which other writers they have been influenced by. This is less so the case with Bely. Bely's relation to other writers is uncertain because he takes and subsumes ideas to fit his own, eccentric outlook. Readers may be impressed by a certain phantasmagoric quality, reminiscent of Nikolai Gogol. They may even sense the same dense, dark and inexorable atmosphere one comes to associate with the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky. But it would be a stretch to claim that either of these writers have played a large part in contributing to the grand vision Bely had for his work. One may even look towards Bely's own era, at the works of his contemporaries, in search of a vital influence. But to do so is to realise that there are enough differences between Bely and his contemporaries to call into question the whole notion of a movement we might call 'Russian Symbolism'. Again, the question of whether there was a movement we might call 'Russian Symbolism' is beyond the scope of this present study. And in my effort to get into the heart of my own topic I decided to give all of my attention to Bely's own theory of Symbolism, without much recognition (or else, elaboration) given to the way he deviates from his contemporaries.

By setting Bely's ideas in a historical context, I have also managed to begin discussing his treatment of ideas and the aspiration to which his ideas were ultimately designed. The first chapter begins where the introduction ends: with a discussion of how Bely foresaw a complete transformation of society through the influence of literature. In an effort to formalise his theory of literature I turned, as expected, to his own theoretical writings. This task was complicated for three reasons. Firstly, Bely's essays are incomplete (Elsworth 8). He never did explicate the entirety of his vision within his theoretical writings. Secondly, and perhaps because he didn't set down his vision in a single theoretical work, there are many

instances of what Elsworth phrased as “vagaries in terminology” (Elsworth 7), which requires an understanding of the many terms Bely uses to explain what is, in fact, the same fundamental idea. One cannot even approach Bely’s theoretical essays without a working knowledge of Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche. But whereas these philosophers used their terms with exactitude, Bely approaches them with caprice. Thirdly, and finally, Bely wrote most of his theoretical works in a poetical style. At times this style can make Bely’s message unclear. Bely wanted to pass over a sense of the power of Symbolism, of a different kind of knowledge, and of a different way of thinking. This way of thinking is not reducible to logic and reason. You cannot prove the efficacy of Symbolism except by symbols. The abstract language of theory disallows for the possibility of participation, which is essential for the experiential type of knowledge which is both felt and apprehended in the presence of symbols. This makes his poetical style essential for passing over what he intended to pass over: a spiritual responsiveness to language which can be applied to his works of literature. But it also leads to ambiguities. A poetical style requires a greater degree of interpretation than a theoretical style. And so I was faced with the question: How can I trust in my own interpretation? In this regard, the first chapter of this dissertation cannot be read in isolation. Just as Bely’s theory makes more sense when it is read in conjunction with *Petersburg*, it is only in the light of the second chapter of this dissertation that the first chapter is clarified. This is both intentional and necessary. Bely wrote his theory as an aid to his fiction, and together they are a combined effort to transform the sensibility of his readership. My dissertation has attempted to clarify that, despite Bely’s eccentric ideas, his theory and his fiction are different ways of explaining (and attempting to initiate) the same process of spiritual transformation.

I have avoided making any judgments on whether or not I think Bely's ideas are true. This is because Bely's ideas do not beget definitive answers. Bely's theory of Symbolism and his novels do not lend themselves readily to rational interpretation. In fact, approaching Bely on purely rational terms is near impossible. If one does not simply buy into his argument, accept his premises, and appreciate them on their own terms, one cannot begin to understand what he is trying to say. Thus we are confronted with the paradox that to remain objective, we must suspend our impulse towards rationality, which is, after all, our only method for attaining objectivity. Because of this, the only way to get a hold of Bely's ideas and examine them is to illustrate them, and by illustrating them, make them sensible within the context in which he details them. If this research is at all 'essential' it is because it provides an outline of an underlying structure for what on the surface seems chaotic. It elucidates the ultimate goal of Bely's writings, and the way his aesthetics are designed in order to attain this ultimate goal.

If I were to provide any recommendations for future research, it would be with the prerequisite that the scope of the research allows for greater elaboration than this project. The question of whether there was such a movement we might call 'Russian Symbolism', and Bely's place within it, would help to situate him more firmly within a tradition. One way of doing this may be by looking more closely at writers and movements within Russian Literature. Another way may be to focus exclusively on the idea that literature reflects the divine. The latter, I believe, would be more fruitful, but would also require quite serious erudition. I have mentioned in passing that this idea can be found in the Allegorists of Ancient Greece and in Gnostic scripture, as well as in writers commonly regarded as being visionary or mystical. If similarities were to be found between all of these texts one may be able to come to certain conclusions which might be reasonably considered universal to the

human condition, which in turn may also hint at the possibility of real spiritual transformation as discussed in Bely's own writings.

Further research related to the topic of this dissertation may also include a closer look at the obvious attempt at myth-making present in Bely's essays on Vladimir Solovyov and Leo Tolstoy. It is clear that this attempt at myth-making is essential to his theory. Elsworth writes that, the path towards a religious community in both Bely's and Ivanov's understanding, "is by way of myth, which is seen as a collective form of symbolic creation" (Elsworth 30). If we take as an example the culture of the United States - because it is a relatively new culture - we may say that the ideas we associate with the country are ideas given to us (and it) by the country's literature and, more generally, art. Perceptions of the United States would not be the same if it were not for the optimism of Walt Whitman's poetry; the Mississippi river would be less remarkable if it were not for the novels of Mark Twain. There is a real sense in which literature can give a soul to a culture, and by doing so modify one's outlook by projecting onto things a greater significance. At the heart of every culture is a mythology, and one could proceed with further research on Bely's descriptions of such figures as Solovyov and Tolstoy (which cast the figures as almost prophet-like) as an attempt to create a new mythology which would have an effect on the outlook of society.

If this dissertation adds anything new to the corpus of research on Andrei Bely it is this: many researchers have mentioned (often in passing) that Bely hoped his literature could initiate real spiritual transformation within an individual, none have attempted to explain, in depth, how he believed this might be done. For reasons already noted, this can never be a resounding success. There is always going to be an element of doubt. Such an attempt necessitates one to draw lines between ideas reflected from theory to fiction and back to theory. And discussing these reflected ideas requires one to find a relevant heuristic which

accommodates for Bely's convoluted theory to be given a coherent narrative. As a task it is laborious, overwhelming, and destined to be imperfect. But I hope there is much to be gleaned from the attempt.

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