

Bely and Pynchon: Anatomists of History

Alexei Lalo

Some imaginative grounds for invidious comment there was. The maintenance of secrecy in the matter, the confining of all knowledge of it for a time to the place where the homicide occurred, the quarter-deck cabin; in these particulars lurked some resemblance to the policy adopted in those tragedies of the palace which have occurred more than once in the capital founded by Peter the Barbarian.

—Herman Melville (BB 103)

Both Herman Melville and Andrei Bely (1880–1934) have found “some imaginative grounds for invidious comment” on “the capital founded by Peter the Barbarian.” However, the former did it in passing, just to enhance the ambiguity about Captain Vere and his course of action, whereas the latter dedicated to this capital his most powerful work, the novel *Petersburg*, first published in 1916.¹ Who could foretell that a new “tragedy of the palace”—in this case, the “red horror,” to use the phrase from Bely’s novel—was bound to occur only one year later? Yet Bely’s vision of Russia’s “Interregnum in Providence” (another Melvillean phrase [MD 311]²) between the two revolutions—that of 1905 and that of February 1917—was insightful, encyclopedic, satirical, and almost prophetic. Ironically, much like the setting of his most accomplished novel, Bely himself was haunted throughout his life by paranoiac images of provocation, conspiracy, secrecy, and supposedly had a persecution complex—as if he were a character from a Pynchon novel.

How relevant are *Petersburg* and its world to Pynchon’s oeuvre? Why would one even think of juxtaposing an obscure Russian modernist of the early twentieth century with an American postmodernist, our contemporary? Pynchon may or may never have read Bely. Vladimir Nabokov, who taught at Cornell while Pynchon was a student there, was a consistent proponent of *Petersburg* as one of the best literary works of the twentieth century (57, 85). Yet Nabokov never taught *Petersburg* as part of his course; nor did Pynchon take great interest in the course, as far as I can judge. It is tempting for a critic to draw the

succession line Bely–Nabokov–Pynchon, but not only would it be another futile, arbitrary line imposed on literary history; it would be a misunderstanding too. Bely's influence on Nabokov has always been considered dubious (although Mikhail Bakhtin, for instance, was convinced that Bely exerts his power over every single Russian writer of the post-*Petersburg* epoch [LB 145–46]), and Nabokov's influence on Pynchon (with the possible exception of *V.*) might be virtually non-existent. Apart from that, the vast cultural gap between the United States and Russia makes any resemblance in literary endeavors seem a mere coincidence—often a meaningless one. This is why only an imaginative and contingent comparison is feasible for now, not a full-fledged study.

On the other hand, both Bely and Pynchon have often been compared with James Joyce (not always for different reasons); both of them majored in natural sciences in college (Bely in chemistry, Pynchon, at first, in engineering-physics); and both have adhered, to put it mildly, to extremely unconventional styles of intellectual and commercial demeanor. It might be added that one of the first treatments of entropy in world literature was by Eugene Zamyatin, who, like most noteworthy Russian writers of that time, referred to Bely with reverence and awe. After a brief overview of *Petersburg* for the sake of readers who are unfamiliar with it, I shall start with remarks about genre peculiarities of Bely's and Pynchon's novels (bearing in mind, however, that excessive classificatory zeal is profoundly alien to the values put forward by their respective endeavors) and then move to some themes and motifs recurring in their works.

It is quite unfortunate and hardly explicable that Bely, a leader of the Russian symbolist movement, remains relatively little known (or underestimated) in the English-speaking world. Although three independent translations of *Petersburg* have been made and his several other novels are now available in English, Bely is not very widely read or appreciated, while several literary works of disputable artistic and cultural importance and/or more or less derivative of *Petersburg* enjoy considerable popularity (a good example is Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*). Bely's major novel not only sheds light on the Russian character and literary history but remains the only Russian work unchallengeably comparable to the achievements of Joyce, Proust and Kafka, and thus belongs in the high-modernist tradition of the first quarter of our century.

The lack of interest in one of the most complex and powerful achievements of Russian literature may lead to a superficial idea of Russian character and a distorted perception of relatively recent history. There is some black humor to the fact that *Petersburg* is nowadays

called “crime capital of Russia.” Its ongoing poignant tale obviously needs another Bely to retell it to us.

Not only *Petersburg* should be made the subject of such a comparative analysis but also Bely’s other works: poetry, prose fiction and essays. (Bely possessed the rare capacity to write even scholarly articles in rhythmic prose, as if they were poems. His objective as a literary artist was to create the dynamic world of sound in each of his novels rather than traditionally mute or static texts.) Most notable are his novels *Silver Dove* (1909), *Kotik Letaev* (1922) and *Baptized Chinaman* (1927), his literary memoirs, and the book of essays *Symbolism* (1910). However, the present notes focus on *Petersburg* and Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon*, but also refer to several other novels.

Both novelists satirize the world built on binary oppositions, dualities or dichotomies: God/devil, good/evil, animate/inanimate, revolutionary/reactionary, elite/preterite, and so forth. For both of them, these are but “idle cerebral play” (Bely, P 35), incompetent to deal with the modern or postmodern condition, not alternatives but rather complementary ingredients in the Russian character’s intellectual middle or constituents of Puritan (and post-Puritan) mental attitudes and practices in the United States. Conformism and nonconformism for both imply the same familiar flip-flop, and as Bely’s translators Robert Maguire and John Malmstad note, “the most useful rhetorical model” for *Petersburg* is “not either/or, but both/and” (xviii). However different their approaches to language and novelistic discourse are, Bely and Pynchon both realize that the Enlightenment’s hope for overall rationalization via simplistic classifications and drawing arbitrary lines and false boundaries has proved counterproductive, and its aftermath brings manifestations of boredom, anxiety and paranoia, and thus, to quote *Mason & Dixon*, “serve[s] the ends of Governments” (345).

1

Petersburg, a novel in eight chapters with a prologue and epilogue, was planned as a sequel to *Silver Dove*, Bely’s first novel, but soon became a fully independent project. The book dwells on and aims to exhaust the myth of Petersburg as it was created by major Russian political and cultural figures throughout several centuries (including Peter I, Alexander Pushkin, Nikolai Gogol and Fyodor Dostoevsky). The city becomes a symbol for Russian turmoil and chaos at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The novel is set in Petersburg between the two Russian revolutions (according to the narrator, it is October 1905). It intermingles elements of political thriller (like Joseph Conrad’s *Secret Agent*), social and

Menippean satire (an important Russian predecessor is Gogol), and high-modernist experimental fiction (of the order of *Ulysses*). The novel was widely acclaimed in Russia upon its release, most notably by the young Bakhtin.

The two protagonists are the father and son Ableukhovs, Apollon Apollonovich and Nikolai Apollonovich. The father, a sixty-eight-year-old Senator and a former university professor of law, is a conservative politician, an epitome of the dying czarist regime, who is, in both senses of the word, terrorized by radical revolutionaries. His son is a young nihilist, an expelled student of Western philosophy (Kant, neo-Kantianism), affiliated with an organization that plots to use him to assassinate his father. The father and son have developed an uncanny love-hate relation. Nikolai's mother, Anna Petrovna, the Senator's ex-wife, a much younger and still attractive woman, left for France with her Italian actor-lover two and a half years earlier, but comes back to Petersburg in the course of the novel for a short visit. Bely's portrayal of the Ableukhov family is a sparkling parody of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*.

Another group of characters is represented by an agent-provocateur (and double agent), Lippanchenko, and a radical revolutionary, Alexander Dudkin. In the course of the novel, the latter goes insane and, blaming Lippanchenko for all his misfortunes (alcoholism, poor health, hallucinations, etc.), murders his boss with manicure scissors.

The love story of the novel is a "French triangle": Nikolai, his childhood friend Sergei Sergeevich Likhutin and Likhutin's wife, Sophia Petrovna. Sophia Petrovna is simultaneously attracted and terrified by the young Ableukhov, who dresses up in a red domino at balls and thus personifies the "red threat" Russia was doomed to just a few years later. Nikolai's behavior causes a public scandal and brings about his father's resignation and subsequent retirement. Having failed to commit suicide, the not-quite-sane Likhutin challenges Nikolai to a travesty of a fistfight, tears his suit apart and then apologizes for that.

At least three fantastic creatures also appear in the novel: Someone Sad and Tall (a mock Christ-figure), Shishnarfne-Enfranshish (a mock devil-figure), and the Copper Rider (a monument to Peter I in Petersburg).

By blackmailing Nikolai, Dudkin is able to give him a sardine-tin containing a bomb. At the end of the novel, the bomb explodes in the Senator's study; but the Senator is in his bedroom at the time and thus remains intact. While his father rusticates to write memoirs and shortly dies, Nikolai goes abroad with his mother and then also moves to their country mansion, where, ironically, he grows a beard and starts going to church.

2

Bely and Pynchon belong in the same literary tradition, that of Menippean satire or anatomy, in both Bakhtin's and Northrop Frye's classificatory schemes. One thing that makes Bely unique in Russian letters of the twentieth century is his breadth of scholarly interests, his encyclopedic erudition in many apparently unrelated areas. This gargantuan scope allowed him to create a literary compendium of his times in *Petersburg*, to exhaust the topic of this city in Russian literature and intellectual history, to anatomize it to the level of the anonymous idle cerebral play and to burlesque both the old planimetric system and the emerging red horror so that afterwards no one in Russian literature has been able to fly on such wings of excess. He may have understood that himself and encrypted it into the novel: "Beyond Petersburg, there is nothing" (P 12). Beyond the city or beyond the novel? Similarly, Pynchon is one of the few authors alive today whose works deal with "intellectual themes and attitudes" and who "shows his exuberance in intellectual ways by piling up an enormous mass of erudition about his theme or in overwhelming his pedantic targets with an avalanche of their own jargon," to quote from Frye's discussion of the genre of anatomy (311).

Furthermore, Bely's and Pynchon's major novels can be ascribed to the sub-genre of the anatomy of history, which dates back to Petronius as its founding father but is also present in Rabelais, Cervantes, Proust and a number of contemporary authors including, in the United States, Don DeLillo, Tom Robbins, John Barth and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., to name only a few. The "genre's memory" (to use a Bakhtinian notion again) of menippea is described by Eumolpus in the *Satyricon*, who ruminates on the content and form of an epic poem about the civil war and asserts that a poet's job is very different from a historian's in that it requires a more poetic temperament but no less training and knowledge, and should resemble "prophetic ravings" rather than the dry factual accuracy "of a solemn speech before witnesses." "The unfettered inspiration must be sent soaring through riddles and divine interventions" (129–30). This assertion can be juxtaposed with an excerpt from Wicks Cherrycoke's *Christ and History* in *Mason & Dixon*:

"Facts are but the Play-things of lawyers,—Tops and Hoops, forever a-spin.
 . . . Alas, the Historian may indulge no such idle Rotating. History is not
 Chronology, for that is left to Lawyers,—nor is it Remembrance, for
 Remembrance belongs to the People. History can as little pretend to the
 Veracity of the one, as claim the Power of the other,—her Practitioners, to
 survive, must soon learn the arts of the quidnunc, spy, and Taproom Wit,—

that there may ever continue more than one life-line back [. . .]—not a Chain of single Links, for one broken Link could lose us All,—rather, a great disorderly Tangle of Lines.” (349)

Bely’s approach to history is very similar: he is much more interested in Petersburg as a metaphor and in its history as a history of the idea of how it has been inherited and disinherited by father figures (Peter I as a founder and his heir, Senator Apollon Apollonovich Ableukhov) and sons (most notably, Dudkin the terrorist and Nikolai Apollonovich). Bely’s city so swarms with human conflict and mental constructs that it eventually appears as an animate creature. The real setting of his novel is not Petersburg but, as he himself would argue, “the soul of the person not available in the novel and whom no one has ever met,” possibly hinting that his novel might be read as a fantasy (Nabokov 85) or even hallucination. The whole concept of the novel is built on the interaction and interpenetration of the animate and inanimate (like a leitmotif of *V.* or *Gravity’s Rainbow*): in this Bely is a more adventurous modernist than Joyce or Proust and anticipates the postmodern condition. *Petersburg* abounds with people becoming objects or shadows and with shadows or ephemeral thoughts becoming people. The very word “ephemeral,” beloved by Bely, suggests something transitory, being in flux, motion or change, and, as we shall see, echoes motifs in Pynchon’s works. The problem of overcoming vulnerability, so ubiquitous, for instance, in the postwar American novel (cf. Pynchon’s “American Vulnerability” in *Vineland* [346]),³ was evidently acute and topical for Bely and some of his characters, even at the cost of turning into an inanimate object. Thus Nikolai Apollonovich dreams he falls asleep with his head on the bomb-containing sardine-tin, becomes the bomb, and “bursts with a boom” (167–68).

The two novels are not perfect anatomies or menippeas. It would be unreasonable to expect contemporary writers to ape Rabelais or Burton. The major difference is that the twentieth-century anatomies strive to make of knowledge a fantasy, to embed the Menippean elements in quasi-factual material.⁴ Nevertheless, both novels do exhibit a number of formal characteristics of the anatomy, according to Bakhtin’s and Frye’s classifications.⁵ I shall name only a few.

The use of incidental verse: Pynchon is more inventive in this, but Bely’s novel is written with such a “will to rhythm,” as he would say, that, as Nabokov suggested, it is difficult to ascribe it to either prose or poetry.

The *philosophus gloriosus*: Pynchon travesties many contemporary cultural debates in his novel (but that is a topic for a separate study).

Bely satirizes a large number of his coevals in his novel, but like Pynchon in *Vineland*, his major aim is to mock the “government-defined history” (VI 354), a history thinking itself in the dichotomies of good and evil, in the contrasts of V.’s “victimizers and victims, screwers and screwees” (49). As ever in Pynchon’s career, the “pedantic targets” in *Mason & Dixon* are Freud and Jung. And narrowly Freudian attempts to account for the immense complexities of the father-son theme in *Petersburg* are doomed to fail.

The use of real historical figures: Unlike Pynchon, Bely uses Peter I metaphorically, but the devil, Christ and their numerous impostors and impersonators make up for the shortage of real people in *Petersburg*. One of the characters, Lippanchenko the provocateur, was loosely built on newspaper articles about Azef, a famous double agent eventually arrested by the police. David McDuff quotes Bely’s memoirs, written in the early 1930s:

[C]ould I have known then that at that very time Azef was living in Berlin under the pseudonym Lipchenko; when, many years later, I discovered this, my astonishment knew no bounds; and if one takes into account the fact that the perception of Lippanchenko, as a hallucination, is built on the sounds l-p-p, then the coincidence looks truly striking. (qtd. in McDuff xiv–xv)

Pynchon allegedly once told Jules Siegel, “Every weirdo in the world is on my wave length,” and that after he had made up the Trystero postal empire with the muted post horn as its emblem and published *The Crying of Lot 49*, one such weirdo wrote to inform him that the horn really existed as the symbol of a private postal service in the Middle Ages. Pynchon claimed to have gone to the library to make sure his correspondent was right (Siegel 93). Both Bely and Pynchon would seem to have had some communications with other orders of reality, at least on the level of hallucinations and dreams. Later in his life, Bely liked to call himself a crank or weirdo. According to Cherrycoke, “History is hir’d, or coerced, only in Interests that must ever prove base. She is too innocent, to be left within the reach of anyone in Power. [. . .] She needs rather to be tended lovingly and honorably by fabulists and counterfeiters, Ballad-Mongers and Cranks of ev’ry Radius” (350).

Although Bely wrote in 1912–1914 about recent history—Russia right after the fiasco of the Russian-Japanese War in late 1905—the

novel's vantage over historical events is that of the most outlandish narrator in world literature, strangely akin both to his counterpart in the "Cyclops" episode of *Ulysses* (in that both are "speaking" narrators) and to Cherrycoke. All three are quite unlike their omniscient counterpart in another postmodern anatomy of history, Barth's *Soft-Weed Factor* (1966). The narrator is aptly described by Bakhtin in his lectures on Bely from the early 1920s, and more recently (in English) by Maguire and Malmstad:

Constant uncertainty, constant tension, constant change are the normal modes here. We must bend to the will of the narrator, and allow that it is highly capricious. He ironizes and he bumbles; he lyricizes and he prattles; he plays the sophisticate, he plays the fool; he identifies himself with this or that character, only to draw back and mock all the characters, the reader, and himself. At times he appears omniscient, like a typical nineteenth-century literary narrator; at times he admits to being as baffled as anyone else. Such swings of tone, manner, and posture can occur with bewildering speed, often within a single sentence. . . . [T]he novel is posited entirely in the narrator's mind. . . . We can never safely generalize, evaluate, or predict. . . . We find no anchor in the world of this novel, no ethical ballast: we never know where we ought to stand on any given question. (xix)

This reading of Bely seems more adequate than, say, a remark in McDuff's otherwise brilliant introduction to his translation of the novel claiming that Bely's "immersion" in Rudolf Steiner and his anthroposophy "saved" him from "a kind of fascism" in his "repugnant view" of both East and West (xviii). Two misunderstandings underlie this statement. First, the narrator must be kept separate from the author since their views and judgments may or may not overlap. McDuff's condescension should aim toward *Petersburg's* anonymous narrator. One of the generic characteristics of menippea is a blasphemous, playful, loquacious and unreliable narrator, who ought to be analyzed as just another character. Bely's narrator resembles Herbert Stencil of *V.* with his "stencilizing" of historical plot-lines in the novel. Similarly, Bely the person should not be confused with Bely the author. The former's temporary hobby exerted no direct influence on his major novel except via his implementing an artistic scheme. While its author may or may not have employed Steiner's theory while writing it (he certainly did, no doubt about it), *Petersburg* is concerned with more tangible and pressing problems of Russian intellectual history and literary art than "etheric bodies," "no soil underneath one's feet" or "thinking hands" (McDuff xix). It is also obvious that Bely's fiction, like

that of many another noteworthy author in the twentieth century, is informed by some kind of antinomianism as a way of opposing simplistic binary oppositions. The same is true of Pynchon's: for neither author does being a moralist necessitate being a moralizer.

The kinship between Cherrycoke and Bely's narrator is conspicuous. The parson (some sort of fallen or false priest) lies a lot, profanes his listeners and the reader, and, like America itself, just does not know how to "be serious" (M&D 337). He is corrected several times by his listeners and even by the presumable authorial voice. That voice is rarely heard directly (I shall cite an example below); rather, it is curiously intermingled with that of the elderly clergyman, who may be both part of Pynchon's ego and his alter-ego (Charles Mason is not Pynchon's only ironic self-portrait, as many reviewers have noted). They both seem to value taproom wit, gossip and flimsy speculation more than serious and all-wise discourse. Pynchon himself, or his narrator, does away with the possibility of such discourse by a compassionate address to readers supposedly lost in the labyrinths of *Gravity's Rainbow*: "There are things to hold on to. . . . [Section break] You will want cause and effect. All right. Thanatz was washed overboard in the same storm that took Slothrop from the *Anubis*" (663).

Perhaps grasping *Gravity's Rainbow* will be less difficult for Russian readers than it has proved for others, including Pynchon's compatriots. As Dmitri Galkovsky, a prospective reader of Pynchon, asserts in *Endless Deadlock*, his recent treatise on Russian intellectual and literary history written very much in the tradition of *Petersburg* (albeit the latter is but a work of fiction):

Russia is a country wherein everything comes true, where *cause and effect have switched places*. You had opened an umbrella, and thus the rain started to pour. That is why the West is to blame for our misfortunes. There they make a joke, here we have a simoom rushing through. The question of the thinker's answerability is the most dramatic one in the least answerable country—in Russia. If there were no such sham, made-up country, the West might have been free. Yet it is in the position of Balzac's student upon whose word the life of a Chinese mandarin depends (a tale beloved by Dostoevsky). That's the way it is in Russia. Once someone thinks of something in the West, here they start doing it. Russia is an implementation of the West. Someone has said thus: "America is the West's material training ground, but Russia is a spiritual one." (My translation; emphasis added)

Pynchon sets the narrative frame of *Mason & Dixon*, within which Cherrycoke narrates his "Tale about America" (7), in a dual

interregnum: “Christmastide of 1786” (6), after adoption of the Articles of Confederation and before adoption of the Constitution. This novel plays other variations on *Gravity’s Rainbow’s* theme of the Zone—a lawless, anarchic, temporarily ungoverned territory in time or space—including the missing eleven days and St. Brendan’s Isle (between East and West, between Europe and America [M&D 712–13]). These are metaphors for freedom and Emersonian transition “from a past to a new state,” where “power resides” (Emerson 271). Bely’s Petersburg is comparable: a city between Europe and Asia, between West and East, “invisible,” “unreal,” almost nonexistent as a tangible entity.⁶ However, the Islands and their population in *Petersburg* are drastically different from the St. Brendan’s Isle utopia in *Mason & Dixon*: “Don’t let the crowd of shadows in from the islands! The black and damp bridges are already thrown across the waters of Lethe. If they could only be dismantled” (13), the narrator warns us. Maguire and Malmstad explain in their commentary that the “bridges across the Neva can be drawn to allow ships to pass or, in case of civil emergencies, to control the flow of people from one part of the city to another” (Bely, P 305). As a matter of fact, those islands (the Vasilyevsky, for instance) were inhabited mainly by factory workers or lumpenproletarians, who played the decisive role in the events of 1917. This little chapter of *Petersburg* is titled “The Inhabitants of the Islands Startle You,” as if to suggest that Bely’s prophetic vision is likewise startling.

Bely dreamt of finding his “true life” in the “second space” of human consciousness, of a possible breakthrough to a more meaningful existence, by merging with “Russian spaces,” Russian nature as “lucid resplendent clearings” (Bely, TCA 46)—not unlike Pynchon’s “glimpses into another order of being” (GR 239), or “America of the Soul” (M&D 511), or “green free America of their Childhoods” (VI 314). Critics usually seek an anthroposophical meaning behind Bely’s pronouncements. But Bely was much too complex a person and artist to fit into any religious or philosophical doctrine. For both novelists, fiction, as “the realm of the Subjunctive” (M&D 543), the West, the America of the Soul, manifests itself as an existential alternative to the declarative, the simplistic, the binary—to time and death. For them both, fiction means freedom, a possibility for their demiurgic creative efforts to come true.

4

Cherrycoke thus depicts what Uncle Ives calls Captain Shelby’s ignoring and defying of “‘the Power of the Line’”:

“’Tis all there [. . .] the whole squalid Tale, transcending the usual Neighborly Resentment, tied in to that strange rising of Spirit throughout the Countryside,—from a certain cock of the Hat, to the Refusal of all further Belief in Boundaries or British Government,—a will’d Departure from History.” (579)

Something distinctly non-European is going on in America. Captain Shelby himself points out the intrinsic American love of complexities:

There is a love of complexity, here in America [. . .]—pure Space waits the Surveyor,—no previous Lines, no fences, no streets to constrain polygony however extravagant [. . .] warranted properties may possess hundreds of sides,—their angles pushing outward and inward,—all Sides zigging and zagging, going ahead and doubling back, making Loops inside Loops,—in America, ’twas ever, Poh! To Simple Quadrilaterals. (586)

This critique of the American experiment recalls Bely’s conviction that Russia is neither a European country nor yet compatible with Asian cultures. Bely might have believed in some “Dark Engineers” of a “Sino-Jesuit conjunction” (M&D 288) who could eventually end Russia’s cataclysms. Jokes aside, Bely was arguably the only Russian writer of the early twentieth century for whom, again, dualities like revolution/reaction, East/West, red/white were not alternatives but complements, even interchangeable. Senator Ableukhov, described as looking like “an Egyptian depicted on a rug” (P 123) for his body consisting of only straight lines (all bones and sinews), fears open spaces and favors planimetry and everything straight, countable and flat:

The senator’s study. A desk loomed, but it was not the main thing. Bookcases lined the walls. To the right, Nos. 1, 3, and 5, and to the left, the even numbers. The shelves sagged beneath the books arranged according to plan. In the middle of the desk was a textbook entitled *Planimetry*.

Before going to bed, Apollon Apollonovich very often used to leaf through this little volume, so as to quiet the restless life inside his head with the most blissful outlines of parallelepipeds, parallelograms, cones, and cubes. (158)

Riding in his carriage, the Senator is “cut off from the scum of the streets by four perpendicular walls” (10). His passion for closed rooms and plane figures suits his position as a high-level state bureaucrat. Besides, he is called “Bat” by his fellow workers at the Ministry. A

minute but crucial detail, Ableukhov "considered all flowers the same, bluebells" (21):

And now, as he looked pensively into that boundlessness of mists, the man of state suddenly expanded out of the black cube [of his carriage] in all directions and soared above it; and he desired . . . that the whole spherical surface of the planet should be gripped by the blackish-grey cubes of the houses as by serpentine coils; that the whole of the earth squeezed by prospects should intersect the immensity in linear cosmic flight with a rectilinear law; that the mesh of parallel prospects, intersected by a mesh of prospects, should expand into the abysses of outer space with the planes of squares and cubes: one square per man-in-the-street, that, that . . .

He was in the habit of giving himself up for long periods of time to the insouciant contemplation of: pyramids, triangles, parallelepipeds, cubes, trapezoids. He was seized by anxiety only when he contemplated the truncated cone.

As for the zigzag line, he could not endure it.

Here, in the carriage, Apollon Apollonovich took pleasure for a long time without thought in the quadrangular walls, residing at the centre of the black, perfect and satin-covered cube: Apollon Apollonovich had been born for solitary confinement; only a love for the planimetry of state clothed him in the polyhedrality of a responsible post.⁷

Apparently, Bely did not see any profound difference between reactionary czarist rule and the red horror of the socialist and communist future of Russia: both regimes end up thinking in terms of one square per man-in-the-street. Pynchon would probably applaud Bely's rendering of Ableukhov's love for the planimetry of state since this grotesque caricature of a statesman accords so well with Pynchon's view of individual freedom and its constraints. Pynchon's anatomical dissection of American history and his demonstration of the unhappy ending of the American dream are oddly reminiscent of Bely's gloomy but prophetic picture of Russian hopes inevitably resulting in just another impasse and despair. In any case, Apollon Apollonovich would not enjoy the United States as the America of the Soul, and resplendent clearings annoy him a lot. Indeed, Ableukhov vividly personifies They of both *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon*. Numerous affinities link *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Petersburg*, which both depict, as Bely would argue, a "subconscious life of crippled thought forms in the symbols of time and space" (letter to Ivanov-Razumnik, Dec. 1913; my translation).⁸

Both Pynchon and Bely seem to see affinities among secrecy, bureaucracy and tyranny. Their novels convey a Kafkaesque sense of bureaucracy. As Milan Kundera wrote of Kafka:

To situate a novel in the world of obedience, that of the mechanical and the abstract wherein the only human adventure is to go from one bureau to another, this is what seems contrary to the very essence of epic poetry. From whence the question: how did Kafka succeed in transforming that gross anti-poetic matter into fascinating novels?

One can find the answer in a letter he wrote to Milena: "The bureau is not a stupid institution; it would reveal more of the fantastic than of the stupid." The phrase harbors one of the greatest secrets of Kafka. He knew how to see what no one else saw: not only the capital importance of the bureaucratic phenomenon for man, for his condition and his future but also (which is yet more surprising) the poetic virtuality contained in the phantom character of the bureaus. (136; my translation)

5

A few comments remain to be made on Bely's "chronotope of the city," as Bakhtin would say. The twentieth-century novel has been remarkably successful in this regard: Conrad's London, Joyce's Dublin, Henry Miller's Paris, Mikhail Bulgakov's Moscow, and so forth. The tradition includes Bely's Petersburg. I disagree with Maguire and Malmstad's assertion that Bely's city is "so vivid and 'real' that sometimes we almost think we are reading a gloss on Baedeker" (xiii–xiv). It is Pynchon who elaborately satirizes all sorts of European cultural tourism to colonies, "the outhouses of the European soul" (GR 317), in *V.* and *Mason & Dixon*. Bely's Petersburg, albeit teeming with precise architectural and topographical minutiae, should be understood metaphorically as a specter, a phantom or a rather empty symbol of Russia's inherent yet desperate yearning for "the Western vector," as some politicians are in the habit of putting it these days. Bely strove to create something diametrically opposite to a Baedeker guidebook: he realized his novel would be widely read and wanted it to shed light on Russia and tell us a "squalid tale" of its past and future. An alert reader does not, however, neglect the comical, at times carnivalesque, effects throughout the book. The "laughter culture" of this novel and its sparkling burlesque of the Russian intellectual and political scene make it immune to charges of decadence, excessive pessimism, etc. Pynchon's last novel to date, however, is incomparably more advanced in its irony and self-irony: as I have argued elsewhere, it is almost an

anatomy of the anatomy, a self-ironical and deceitfully restful account of Pynchon's own contribution to the postmodernist novel and the anatomy.

Bely never got to write the third novel of the trilogy he had initially projected, a sequel to *Silver Dove* and *Petersburg*. It was to be titled *Nevidimyi Grad (Invisible City)* and dedicated to some kind of "happier future" city. Although a prolific writer, Bely never managed to conceive this novel, possibly because he had to accomplish other projects: the long poem *Glossolalia* (1922), numerous novels, brilliant memoirs, verse and criticism. However, the idea itself was superb: not necessarily aligned with Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, but rather somewhat akin to the motif of "Mobile Invisibility" (M&D 485) in all Pynchon's novels—and in his life as well; about some prospective would-be Russia whose "solid citizens" find individual freedom and self-reliance preferable and routinize the charisma of its leaders.⁹

I have discussed some similarities between Bely's and Pynchon's oeuvre.¹⁰ The most striking difference between the two is that, to adapt William Plater, for Bely, "[p]aranoia is a highly rigorous, integrative, self-preserving mode of behavior amid . . . real cultural chaos" (188), whereas for Pynchon, it largely involves assumed chaos.¹¹

—European Humanities University, Minsk

Notes

¹The first edition was released by Sirin in Russia in 1916, although Bely had finished the novel at least two years before. Later editions, including the 1922 Berlin one, are the results of Bely's nervous and hasty reworking or, worse, the work of communist censors.

²Pynchon seems to have inherited his attention to the word "interregnum" from Melville. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Geli Tripping thus describes the Zone's essence for Slothrop, quoting Tchitcherine: "'Forget frontiers now. Forget subdivisions. There aren't any. [. . .] You'll learn. It's all been suspended. Vaslav calls it an "interregnum." You only have to flow along with it'" (294). In *The Crying of Lot 49*, during her nighttown wanderings, Oedipa meets, among many others, "a Negro woman with an intricately-marbled scar along the baby-fat of one cheek who kept going through rituals of miscarriage each for a different reason, deliberately as others might the ritual of birth, dedicated not to continuity but to some kind of interregnum" (123).

³Josephine Hendin argues in her chapter on Pynchon that "the dream of vulnerability is the dream of the age. Pynchon has the intense sensitivity to the evil the dream contains, an analytic brilliance at extracting a villainy behind every smile, a stunning accuracy about what is wrong with emotional life in this culture now" (207).

⁴I am grateful to Professor Josephine Hendin of New York University for this and other comments on the manuscript. I would also like to thank Robert Riedl and his partner for their stylistic remarks.

⁵See Bakhtin's chapter on menippea (which stunningly echoes Frye's treatment) in the second edition of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. I have used the Russian-language text, 179–275.

⁶Bely correctly saw his role and position in Russian literary history as transitional from one century to the next, at the borderline between the epochs of realism and symbolism/modernism. The idea of mobility, movement or motion pervades his best novel, as does that of ubiquitous mutability and transmutation. His endeavor is thus close to Pynchon's. Many years after writing *Petersburg*, Bely wrote that "we [Russian symbolists] are neither the end of the century, nor the beginning of a new one; rather, a battle of the centuries within the soul" (AB 167; my translation).

⁷This is an infrequent case where I judge McDuff's translation (16) more adequate than Maguire and Malmstad's (cf. 11).

⁸It would be possible to juxtapose Pynchon's mythology of the Rocket with Bely's treatment of the Bomb, and, for instance, Gottfried with Nikolai Apollonovich as victims of "provocation" (a favorite word of Bely's) who merge with or turn into the inanimate weaponry. The love-death theme also connects Bely and Pynchon, especially considering *Silver Dove* and *V.*, their respective first novels.

⁹Bely wrote in 1914 to a friend about his plans to write *Invisible City*:

I am having a feeling of guilt right now: I wrote two novels and gave my critics a perfectly fair right to reproach me with nihilism and absence of a positive credo. Trust me: I have it, but it has always been so intimate and bashful that it would hide in deeper layers of my soul than the ones I employed while writing *Silver Dove* and *Petersburg*. I want to reveal now for the sake of what I have such a negation of the present in *Petersburg* and *Dove*. (Letter to Ivanov-Razumnik, 4 Jul. 1914. *Petersburg* [Leningrad: Nauka, 1981] 518; my translation)

He might have revealed something similar to *Mason & Dixon* in mood and emphasis.

¹⁰A certain resemblance also exists between the way Likhutin attempts to hang and the founder of Inamorati Anonymous to burn himself, and how both failed. Symptomatically, Likhutin's failure is caused by the bad quality of the apartment's ceiling (131–36), whereas his American suicidal counterpart is hampered by his spouse's avid extramarital sexuality (CL 113–16).

¹¹Bely truly surpasses himself in *Petersburg* in that he overcomes his own paranoia to anatomize intellectually and artistically a crucial thread in Russian history—that of Peter I—that still provokes cultural debates in Russia, debates whose anxiogeneity unfortunately prevails over their intellectual quality.

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