

THE WORLD OF THE NOVEL “PETERSBURG” BY ANDREI BELY

Eva MALÍT^I

Institute of World Literature, Slovak Academy of Sciences,
Konventná 13, 813 64 Bratislava, Slovakia

The Russian symbolist Andrei Bely was one of the pioneers of experimental aesthetics. Bely's creative method in the novel Petersburg was based on his perception of symbolism, which he associated with ethics and religion. To create the world of the novel, he used symbolic-anthroposophical artistic approaches. The world of the novel differs from reality, which is, according to non-materialistic philosophies, apart from God, because it is created by God. It is as if the symbolic reality of Petersburg were divine, as if it should have been God or God-Devil, here represented by the author's subject. Steiner's deity, the most universal being of the human ego, so-called manas comes to life. It embodies the author's anthroposophical “ego”. The text of the novel, which is simultaneously the author's world, was created in the disharmonious relation of the author's subject to external reality. It can be perceived as a form of the occult text that became popular in twentieth-century literature.

The Russian symbolist of “the third wave”, Andrei Bely, by proper name Boris Nikolaevich Bugaev (1880-1934), entered the history of literature as a significantly experimenting writer, as a pioneer of experimental aesthetics. He belonged to the so-called Moscow group of Russian symbolists, which centred both practically and theoretically on the development of and research into the principles of creative work within the framework of the extant forms. Bely's search for a symbolic creative method was linked with his comprehensive outlook on symbolism, which he perceived in close interconnection, even almost identically with ethics and religion. Therefore, for him, the “theory of symbolism was and is predetermined by all the processes of the development of Western European science”.¹ His vision of the world in this sense was developed from a characteristically symbolic platform up to an anthroposophical understanding as he had shown it transparently in his novel Petersburg. He inserted R. Steiner's bases of “secret learning” in the novel before making personal acquaintance with him in Dornach and before entering his anthroposophical society.

¹ MÁCHAL, J.: *O symbolizmu v literatuře polské a ruské*. Práce slovanského ústavu v Praze, Vol. XVI, p. 151.

Bely's experimental artistic approaches, which he used for the creation of the world of the novel, understood in representative relation with respect to the Creator's gesture, can be named symbolic-anthroposophical. His Petersburg represents a unique world, a different, artistic reality, through which he deepens Baudelaire's vision of the allegorized city, so inspiring to him. The symbolic or symbolic-anthroposophical world of the novel differs from everyday reality, which is, according to non-materialistic philosophies apart from God because it is created by God. By contrast, it is as if the symbolic reality of Petersburg were divine, as if the reality itself should be God or God-Devil which is here the author's subject. Steiner's deity comes to life here, the most universal being of the Ego, so-called manas. This is how the author's anthroposophical "self" is incarnated in the novel Petersburg.

The symbolic world of the author's subject of Petersburg is, according to K. Mochulsky, a "peculiar world – unbelievable, fantastic, monstrous, the world of fright and horror, the world of perverted perspectives, soulless people and moving dead. It looks at us through the phosphorescent eyes of the corpse, it paralyzes by horror, conjures by hypnotic suggestion. And the most horrifying is that this world, created by an ingenious lunatic really exists."² For today's vision, Mochulsky's partly one-sided interpretation is to some extent absolutely precise: Bely's symbolic (in the common understanding unreal) world is, paradoxically, nearly real. It is the text of the novel, created, "begotten" in a peculiar, disharmonious relation of the author's subject to the outer reality. Relying on the symbolic erotic-aesthetic conception of artistic creation (Soloviov, Florensky) where creation is a product of the erotic copulation between the artist and reality, such a relation can only be named: the "violation of reality".

Bely's creation is an ingenious fight between the inverted soul of the artist and its living world. "Through my efforts to name everything that enters my field of vision, I actually protect myself from the hostile world that is incomprehensible to me and which attacks me from all directions; by the sound of the word I humble these elements; the process of the naming of space and time phenomena is the process of magic; each word is a magic formula; when I conjure up a phenomenon, I humble it in principle," Bely says.³ The work can be perceived as a magic formula, as a form of the occult text, which gained popularity in modern literature of the twentieth century.

Andrei Bely tried to penetrate into the symbolic, unseen reality from the very beginning of his creative writing. His attitude in artistic depiction of the world was not connected merely with anthroposophy, it was also a matter of personal background. It is visible, for example, in his books of poems *Zoloto v lazuri* (1904), *Pepel* (1909), and *Urna* (1909) associated with this idea. These poems were written before he got acquainted with anthroposophical teaching. The novel Petersburg is an

² Močulskij, K.: *Andrej Belyj*. Paris. YMCA Press 1955, p. 169.

³ BELYJ, A.: *Magija slova*. In: *Simvolizm kak miroponimanie*. Moskva, Republika 1994, p. 132.

illustrative example of his personal understanding and completion of the creation of a “canon” of the genuine direction, deeply rooted in the author and literally manifested, towards a new quality, embodying and anticipating many trends of modern European prose.

In the work arising from symbolism, entirely innovative, experimental procedures were also applied connecting it on the spatial axis with related trends recently born in the arts of the West. At the same time it is “reinforced” with the characteristic Russian accentuation of the tradition on the time axis. The functioning of both coordinates gives particular dimensions to the work: it “lives” in a certain way.

Petersburg is, in some measure, comparable with the creation of “the stream of consciousness”, with Joyce’s “Ulysses”, Proust’s “A la recherche du temps perdu” or with the works of Virginia Woolf. From the perspective of the author’s creative language we can speak about an experiment within the intentions of surrealism (Bely’s use of the so-called “dark language” of collective non-consciousness).⁴ Petersburg was evaluated by the Russian philosopher N. Berdyaev, and later in more detail, by the American J.E. Malmstad, as a work metaphorically transforming the principles of cubism.⁵ The novel is “deeply rooted” in the traditions of Russian literature, developing from the works of Pushkin, Gogol, and Dostoyevsky. In this sense there is an unbiased insight of Ivo Pospišil; he writes about the ability of Russian literature to take over foreign models in general, but re-create them internally under the autochthonous appeal; the result then makes an impression of an “early” phase, an incomplete form of a model, and, simultaneously, of a broken model, that is the shape created through innovation. He calls it Russian “pre-post model”.⁶ At the same time it should be said that the author’s creative method is individual and personal to the utmost limits.

An entirely unusual feature for Russian literature of that period⁷ was the transfer, the reconstruction of the vision in the novel from the point of view of the subject from “the outside” into “the interior”, that is into the author’s consciousness. The Russian writer provides a panoramic picture of the consciousness together with

⁴ Bely’s “za-um” is the search for and discovery of the “language of instincts” or, more precisely, “language of reflexes”. See BUGAJEVA, K.N.: *Vospominanija o Belom*. Berkeley, Berkeley Slavic Specialties, 1981, pp. 46-51.

⁵ BERDAJEV, N.: *Astrašnyj roman (Razmyšlenija po povodu romana A. Belogo Peterburg)*. In: BERDAJEV, N. *Krizis iskusstva*. Moskva 1918; MALMSTAD, J.E.: *Posleslovije*. In: BELYJ, A.: *Gibel senatora (Peterburg)*. *Istoričeskaja drama*. Berkeley, Berkeley Slavic Specialties 1986, p. 208.

⁶ Pospišil, I.: *Postmodernizmus a konec petrohradské literatury*. *Slovak Review*, 3, 1994, 2, p. 116.

⁷ The years 1913-1914 are reported to be the official date of the writing of the novel, it was however, initiated earlier. K. Mochulsky writes about several manuscript texts he had at his disposal: a) typed pages from the editorial office of a “magazine” of 1911, b) ten and a half pages of the text from a “book” publisher’s office of 1912, c) text in the third collection Sirina of 1913, d) the same text in the book edition of 1918, e) text abridged by the author for German translation of 1919, f) substantially revised text for two-volume Russian edition in Berlin Epoch of 1922. See: Močulskij, K.: *Andrej Belyj*. YMCA Press 1955, pp. 179-180.

subconsciousness which is usually almost non-cognizable. However, it is characteristic of him, that the projection of consciousness and subconsciousness is peculiar, reversed: the background becomes foreground. The author records the status of subconsciousness as “the reversed side of the moon”, which, however, is the “obverse” as the image “behind the mirror”, where there is, beside the work its author and even its recipient...”my novel as a whole depicts the subconscious life of the deformed forms of ideas by the symbols of place and time ...My Petersburg is in principle the fixed life of human subconsciousness, with the consciousness torn from its substance; the real location of the story of the novel – is the soul of a person not presented in the novel, exhausted by brain activity; and the characters in the novel represent the forms of ideas, which actually do not reach the threshold of consciousness... The novel might be entitled Brain Game,” Bely writes in his letter to Ivanov-Razumnikov of December 1913.⁸

The division into “reversed” conscious and “obverse” subconscious life of the human ego limits in the novel two time-spaces: the real, historic, actually “conscious” time and space, and the symbolic, “subconscious” time and space reconstructible by psychoanalysis. The reader learns only from some allusions that the action takes place in 1905 in the atmosphere of growing revolutionary commotion. The centre of the action is, of course, the metropolis Petersburg. The projection of the events is different, symbolic, in the other time and space “behind the mirror”, Petersburg being also different.

The irrational space “behind the mirror” completing with its fourth dimension the three-dimensional world “in front of the mirror” is, from the perspective of psychological analysis, somewhere on the border between being and nonbeing; products of subconsciousness, that means dreams and delusions, are materialized in it. The author draws attention directly to dreamy and delusionary associative “many-mirroring”. For instance “...although Apollon Apollonovich is woven from our brain, he is able to astonish us with another, amazing being, coming in the night...” (56).⁹ Or: “O, Petersburg, Petersburg! Hidden in the mists, you hunted me with that empty brain game: you – the cruel heartless man; you, the restless delusion; it happened that you had tormented me for years; and I ran along your horrifying prospects and flew to that iron bridge beginning at the end of the world and leading to infinite remoteness; beyond the Neva river, illusions of islands and buildings rose on the other side of the grave in green distances and deceived with false illusions that the end is real and that it is not the howling infinity, which drives the pale mist of the clouds to the streets of Petersburg. And from the islands restless shadows are passing; thus the sequences of visions reappear in the reflections on prospects, where they run around, and in their own reflections when they are reflected as mir-

⁸ BELYJ, A.: *Peterburg*. Leningrad, Nauka 1981, p. 516.

⁹ I quote from the Slovak translation prepared for publication by Eva Maliti-Fraňová according to the Russian edition: BELYJ, A.: *Peterburg*. Leningrad, Nauka 1981.

ror in mirror, where even the fragment of time spreads in the infinity of eons: so you wander about from subway to subway and survive through centuries" (55). "The novel of "many mirroring" is, therefore, like a dream about dream... It is also reflected in its symbolism – it is often multilayered, one symbol covering another one.

As far as the storyline and composition are concerned, the hero of the novel – the city of Petersburg – is perceived within the space "behind the mirror" as a dream or delusion. Petersburg is a grievous, returnable, "stony" dream of the central character of Apollon Apollonovich; it symbolizes the ossified state machinery, choking the normal natural essence. Such a dream has its attributes and symbolism. They are different geometrical figures, corresponding to the classical and empire architecture of the metropolis. Apollon Apollonovich imagines them immediately before falling asleep or dreaming during his journey in a lacquer carriage, which protects him by its geometry of a regular cube reliably against the chaotic reality of the outer world. The "lines" come to the fore – the lines as the names of the streets in Petersburg, through which the black carriage rushes also as a certain generalization of dehumanized shapes of a planned, actually nonliving, "dead city", figuratively speaking "lines" lining the life within and throughout the country.

The second Petersburgian dream is also returnable, which is reflected by the storyline of Nikolai Apollonovich, the son of Apollon Apollonovich. In contrast to the motionless, "stony" dream it is characterized by motion – restless, convulsive, tossing. It is the motion belonging to "flying" dreams, from the psychological point of view evoked by unrealized eroticism, or more precisely, by disenchantment with it.¹⁰

Two motions, two forces are also symbolized by the passage of the novel referring to its leitmotif: "Russia, you are like the horse! Two front hooves rose to the dark and emptiness; and the two back ones penetrated firmly into the granite" (99). The picture of Russia "fettered by tradition" before the "jump into the vacuum" of the modern world, abstracted from the famous statue of Peter the Great on a horse by E. Falcone and presented within the spirit of Pushkin's poetry, contains and links the motionless, taming strength, pressure, but also the "lift force", a sort of ascending self-motion, a fettered motion. This is the principle of the whole novel of bitter feeling of unfulfilled desire.

The "torn off" (flown-away) motion in the "flying" dream corresponds to the irrational spaciousness of a "stony" dream, in a way mortifying the category of time. It is a transcendental, characteristically floating motion. The effect of fettered flying, floating limited by something, is achieved by the author at the level of vocabulary, for example by frequent use of the verb "letat" (to fly) in connection with the noun or a series of words eliminating flight as such – meaning the accelerated mo-

¹⁰ It is known that the storyline for Nikolai Apollonovich (for his relation to Sofia Petrovna) was based on the unhappy love of the author for the wife of the Russian poet Alexander Blok; in broader connections, the point is the feeling of disenchantment after his significant investment in the preparation of the unsuccessful 1905 Russian revolution controlled and directed by the czar's secret service.

tion on the ground (*on podletel, trojka letit, kareta poletela, leteli po ulici*, etc.). The author is able to evoke feelings of relaxation, freedom, flying within a sentence or the whole passages using the peculiar symbolic language, capable of transferring reality into another reality.

There are also other compositional procedures that are associated with the dreamy essence. Repetition, associative reappearance of certain motifs are based on the principle of *déjà vu* (such motifs have characters, their feelings and states, various sceneries and situations, etc.) in the function of copulas, presented as integrated pictures with repeating or cunningly varying expressions. The author inserts them into the text in terms of his poetics, sometimes as a whole, sometimes only as a fragment, or hint, thus evoking particular ideas and feelings.

Two redreams about Petersburg are the two leading “pith” lines of the novel composed on the principle of poetry (repetition). Regular repetitions in the text of the work, which represents a panoramic insight into consciousness and subconsciousness, reflect the status of obsession.

The author “drags” the reader into the space “behind the mirror” not only through the semantic side of the text but also through its phonetics.¹¹ Bely puts content into accord: harmonization of liquids, labial vowels and glottal sounds gives rise to emotion; images and ideas grow around the sounds. He creates the sentence through music, chapters are created in particular tonality and the fable emerges from alliterations and assonances. Bely’s prose is – instrumented, K. Mochulsky writes.¹² The euphonic principles of Bely – the poet applied in prose are even in their starting points close to the conceptions of French symbolists, where the “relation sound – meaning was...understood in a synthesizing idealistic way”.¹³

The theoretical contemplations of P. Florensky, the Orthodox thinker, Bely’s contemporary and close friend are conducive to the reconstruction of Bely’s procedures. There are indisputable analogies between Florensky’s theory and Bely’s artistic praxis, following from the points of contact of their way of consideration towards the abstract (they both “saw” the world also within mathematical approaches, in his youth, Florensky was the pupil of the mathematician Professor Bugacv, Bely’s father).

According to the theory of literary names of P. Florensky, the name (of the character but also of the literary work) is an instrument of magic penetration into reality and both the character and the literary work are the force-field of its name-image. From this perspective, it is the name of Petersburg with its phonetic form that is crucial in Bely’s novel. In Russian pronunciation, “u” is dominant.

¹¹ For more details about the sound motifs and the rhythm of the novel see: BELYJ, A.: *Masterstvo Gogola*. Moskva–Leningrad 1934, pp. 306–307; HÖNIG, A.: *Andrej Belyjs Romane. Stil und Gestalt*. Forum Slavicum, 8, München 1965.

¹² MOČUĽSKÝ, K.: *Andrej Belyj*. Paris, YMCA Press 1955, pp. 180–181.

¹³ FRANEK, L.: *Funkcia rýmu vo veršovej štruktúre. (Na pozadi slovenských prekladov P. Claudela)*. In: *Slovak Review*, 3, 1994, 1, p. 22.

“U” belongs to the leitmotifs of the novel, it is repeated as the motive of revolution: “... úúú: it rippled through the space; the sound – and was it a sound? If it was a sound, it definitely was from the other world...úúú was noiselessly scattered through the fields beyond Moscow, beyond Petersburg, beyond Saratov: but it was not the hooter of a factory siren or of the wind, and the dog did not howl either. Did you also hear the October song of the year 1905? The song has not been here before; the song will not be: never.” (77) P. Florensky contemplates over the essence of the sound “u” as follows: “...‘u’ is internally contradictory. The calling for boundless completeness conceals a destruction: *U is on the borderline between being and nonbeing*. The basic tragedy of the Byronic perception of the world consists precisely in this inner controversy, in the desire for this borderline and incapability to reach it without self-destruction, in human efforts to merge with nature, with its humid fruit-bearing loins, and all-swallowing depths.”¹⁴ Florensky describes in detail the sound “u” as the motif of “unsatisfied desire, the water element and universal human love sadness”, mostly of a feminine character.¹⁵ From the point of view of sounds, the word Petersburg is borderline in the novel as both the name and the hero are connected to its determinant – revolution through “u”. Such a connection symbolizes the beginning of the end, death being encoded in birth itself. The principle of the eternal ideal, completion of which means the definitive end, finality, death – and therefore is rationally unreachable – is valid throughout Bely’s novel.

The abstract, as if transcendental world located in the “behind-the-mirror” time and space is, from the perspective of its idea, symbolic. The author cannot depict such a world, he has to create it in the role of Demiurge.¹⁶ It naturally has other laws, logic and connections of cause and effect than the rationally explicable world. An idea of the transcendental world as presented by P. Florensky in the work *Mnimosci v geometrii*¹⁷ on the example of Dante’s cosmology from the Divine Comedy could help in elucidating them. He describes how Dante and Virgil arrive in Purgatory, where in one point, at the level of Lucifer’s navel – they turn upside down and they reach the earth in the same way as they have left it. According to him, from this Dantean-Ptolemaic conception of the world follows another perspec-

¹⁴ FLORENSKIJ, P.A.: *Mená*. Revue svetovej literatúry, 29, 1993, 2, p. 126.

¹⁵ Contemplations of G. P. Piretto in the passage Petersburg, the city on the water – about the role of the water element in the novel – can also be read in this line. See: *Pietroburgo città d’acqua*. In: *Andrej Belyj: Tra mito a realta. Teoria e practica letteraria*. Milano, Edizioni Unicopli 1984, pp. 53-61.

¹⁶ The emphasis is lead on the expression “as if” – models of visions on transcendental world are known; Bely, however, constructs his own supernatural world, in these models rooted only in archetypes of the way of fantasy, the world which is in its symbolic supernaturality natural, real or more precisely trustworthy.

¹⁷ FLORENSKIJ, P.A.: *Mnimosci v geometrii*. Moskva 1922, reprint O. Sagner, München 1985, pp. 15-17.

tive which is valid beyond the border dividing the world into real and illusory.¹⁸ In this perspective, the space and the passing of the time are different. In such a world the concrete matters become abstract, details in a peculiar seeing are synthesized. It is the optics with Platonic, idealistic starting points, which transform the material world into the reflection of an idea.¹⁹

The principle of synthesis dominates in the novel. The synthesis as seen by the author begins after the disintegrating analysis. From the point of view of abstraction, Bely uses synecdoche for synthesizing (noses flow along the streets). In terms of this principle different passages or expressions, sometimes in different contexts, are connected indirectly through hidden associations. For instance: "Zavizzala bešenaja sobaka"- the point is that the infuriated husband yells at his unfaithful wife, then in the same subchapter "postel žalobno zavizzala", and – "razdalsja i nečelovečeskij vopl", although now in other connections. The principle of repetition, associative reappearance is projected into all levels of the work, story-compositional, stylistic-lexical, and phonic-semantic.

The phantom visions of father and son, by which the panorama of consciousness is "obsessed", reappear, they are "amplified" by inner author's projection ("effect of a Christmas ball", "fish-eye optics").²⁰ The returns of the "son" evoked by associative sequences have equally negative emotional charge as the "father" motifs of dehumanized bureaucratism. The concluding tragic catharsis is also caricatured in both lines of the spirit of the author's scepticism. Bely abstracted the picture of Apollon Apollonovich from the reminiscences of his own father, where the father-son relationship was very complicated. It is reflected in the relationship of Nikolai Apollonovich to his father in the novel. Most researchers see the author himself as the prototype for Nikolai Apollonovich. It seems to have been forgotten that in the abstract world of subconsciousness the phenomena from the perspective of reality

¹⁸ Florensky proves the reality of the irrational world with its "reverse perspective" in the passage (see below), by the analysis of spaciousness in icons of the saints by medieval Russian masters. FLORENSKIJ, P.: *Molennye ikony Prepodobnogo Sergija*. In: FLORENSKIJ, P.: *U vodorazdelov mysli*. Paris, YMCA Press 1985. The ritual magic formula from the phantasmagoric dream of abused revolutionary Alexander Ivanovich Dudkin is "Énfranshish" backwards, which is then the name of the absurd character of the Persian Shishnarné.

¹⁹ The rule of the physical optics gives the projection of the "real" picture into "transcendental" reflection through the lens of the "artistically" clairvoyant eye with its ambivalent essence of "divine-diabolic" vision.

²⁰ According to K. Mochulsky there are only two living characters among the dead, non-living ones in Petersburg – Apollon Apollonovich and Nikolai Apollonovich. This interpretation, which was repeated by the Czech translator of the novel J. Šanda in 1969 takes account of the superficial vision rather than of the in-depth structure of the novel. Apollon Apollonovich and Nikolai Apollonovich are equally non-living as other characters, the author himself calls them puppets or shadows, they only differ by projection. But Mochulsky touched, in terms of the Freudian psychoanalytic interpretations, the possibilities to explain the text mythologically.

are subject to illogical splitting and merging. The obsessed phantom Nikolai Apollonovich can be not only the mirror of his creator but also the reflection of his rival in love, whose real object might also have been he himself.²¹

In the symbolic world of Bely's text the symbols have their own esoteric function as well. They are not the symbols in the traditions of modern thought, it rather concerns the original cognitive signs, something that, together with its second part, with its reversed side, creates a whole (from Greek *symballein* – put together). Thus the abstract symbol, phenomenon, materialized in the text and really existing, has its counterpart in the concrete phenomenon from reality which is symbolized. Symbols arise organically from the author's imagination, from his individual vision of the world, and their archetypal essence is collective.

The penetration into the archetypal structure fixed in the novel will help uncover the essence of Bely's symbolism. Through such a procedure, the symbols will show their whole semantic field in archetypes transformed from the collective consciousness into individual non-consciousness. In his letter to Bely written in 1904, Florensky defines the symbol within these intentions as well: "...a symbol is not something conditional created by us on whim or caprice. The symbols are created by the spirit according to particular laws and with inner necessity, and this always happens when some parts of the spirit begin to function with exceptional vigour. It is not by accident that the symbolizing and the symbolized are conjoined. The parallel of the symbolism of various nations and different epochs can be proved historically."²²

Among symbols, the rider on the horse stands out in the novel, in crucial passages either as a rider or as a horse (Russia, you are like a horse). Bely's Peter the Great on the horse refers visually to the famous statue by E. Falcone in Petersburg, literally in the form of an allusion to Pushkin's 'Copper rider'. Indirectly, but generally, he refers to the tradition of Russian literature, where the horse embodies Russia (e.g. in the conclusion of Gogol's *Dead Souls* the troika tearing to the unknown is also compared to Russia). However, the horse also has another symbolism. In Indo-European mythology, the horse was part of the realm of the dead, horse sacrifices were brought to the dead, in the visions of some nations, the horse served as a vehicle for the transition from one world to the "other".²³ In most folk epics the hero wanders on a horse into

²¹ Several authors write about Bely's controversial and complicated relation to Blok in connection with their breakup – both human and creative. The most frequent motif associated with the character of Nikolai Apollonovich – "...and although he did not smile, he had a funny appearance: rolled in a coat, he looked hunchbacked and, moreover, without hands, with a senselessly shaking wing of a coat in the wind..." (e.g. 47) – is based on the recollection of a meeting followed by strife between Bely and Blok in September 1906. It is remarkable how this relation was artistically transferred into the work of A. Blok; it is for instance reflected in his "lyrical drama" *Balaganchik* of the years 1905-1906.

²² FLORENSKII, P.A.: *Mnemosi v geometrii*, op. cit., p. 28.

²³ *Mify narodov mira*. Vol. I, Sovetskaja enciklopedija, Moskva 1987, p. 666.

the realm of the dead (it is always a communicating, all-knowing horse, symbolizing “all-comprising” knowledge unreachable by a terrestrial).

The symbolism of the beyond helps in general to interpret Bely's novel and indicates other connections. The underworld understood as the “other”, “next” world, the world “behind the mirror”, embodying the state of chaos, is in harmony with the “split” quintessence of the work, where the reversed projection of the phenomena introduces us into a different time and space. The author leads the reader to an abstract vision, slightly exaggerating, he introduces him to the “other world”. The symbolism is bound to the ancient storyline. The well-known epic story about the living soul, which, accompanied by its horse or another “omniscient” person (e.g. Dante in his Divine Comedy is accompanied to “the other world” by Virgil) wanders with the aim of reaching the underworld and then comes back to the world of the living – the so-called archetype of rebirth comes back to life in a transformed form.²⁴ The storyline based on the cycles about the first human couple is known from the Greek myth of Orpheus,²⁵ but it actually belongs to the oldest epic stories of oral tradition in general, heroic epics in particular. It was introduced into written literature as a great theme, referring to the original form by Dante in his Divine Comedy. M. Bakhtin mentions that Gogol also intended to write “Dead Souls” as an epic similar to the Divine comedy on the principles of this archetype”.²⁶

The archaic story of wanderings through the underworld is characteristic for thematizing the alienation of an individual in modern twentieth-century literature. The original static spaciousness of the archetype is usually projected into the *topos* of an allegorized city. The role of this type of literature with tragic final catharsis is cleansing and the works, particularly in terms of their subjectiveness, of the author's interiorized experience, can actually be perceived against the background of Dante's Divine Comedy as certain “purgatories”.

As Lucifer's navel is Dante's epicentre, the borderline point for the entry into another spatial perspectives, with Bely it is the city of Petersburg. In the Prologue to the novel, the narrator minimizes it to a point on a map, which can be seen as a lens with a particular dose of interpretative fantasy, where the “beams of light” of the meanings of the work both converge and diverge: “Be that as it may, Petersburg is not only in imaginations but also on the map: as a circle set in a circle with a black point in the middle. From this mathematical point, which is dimensionless, news is spread energetically about the fact that – it is: from this point there the leaves from the printed book circulated; a circular took off stoplessly from this invisible point” (10).

²⁴ The Swedish researcher Magnus Ljunggren interprets the novel Petersburg through “rebirth”. See LJUNGGREN, M.: *The Dream of Rebirth*. Stockholm, Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis, Stockholm Studies in Russian Literature 1982.

²⁵ There is also another type associated with the initiating cycle – Heracles.

²⁶ BAKHTIN, M.: *Epos a román*. In: *Skrotenie absurdity*. Bratislava, Tatran 1972, p. 102.

From the point of view of the original ancient storyline the most important is the role of the narrator, the invisible and unknowable “live soul” that leads the reader “across the border” to the underworld. The storyteller is the author himself (who else can reveal the secrets of the author’s subconsciousness). He records the seen by his attentive clairvoyant eye, which could be understood as the “God’s eye”, if it were not the negative look indicating that it is actually the devil’s eye. This is how the underlying symbol of God-Devil is polarized in the novel. Bely’s disharmonious novel is in fact harmonic in the symbolic level; however, it is a universal harmony between Good and Evil. The storyteller attracts attention to himself from time to time in the text, using the “human” singular, or parodically the “scientific” (“divine-diabolic”) plural, mocked and doubted by “divine-diabolic” omnipotence of the czar’s secret police: “And now let us look into his soul; but at first let us have a look into a small restaurant; and the surroundings of the restaurant. We have reasons for it; if, in the role of the author we record the fate of each accidental character with painstaking accuracy, the reader believes us: our approach will be confirmed in the future. In natural pursuit of the unknown described by us, we have just anticipated senator Ableukhov’s wish to constantly have the secret police close at his heels...Let us go to meet the senator; and while the reckless agent is idling away, let us become such an agent ourselves. Wait, wait...haven’t we overdone it a little? Could we be an agent? And, moreover, there is no agent. And he doesn’t sleep, I swear, he doesn’t sleep...” (36-37)

Similarly as in the “other world” of heroic epics or in Dante’s “Purgatory” also in Bely’s “Petersburg”, the characters suffer for someone’s sins, they are tormented by the essence of human egoism and its consequence – estrangement. In their lifelessness they change into the symbols of the broken world of human relations, lonesome playthings in the hands of their fortune (of their author), or in the spirit of the author’s plays with the perspective of the two-dimensional shadows, which simply cannot fit into the real three-dimensional world.²⁷ However, the negative harmony of Petersburg is not perfect intentionally and its purgatory role is not fulfilled either. The author’s skepticism also predominates over such a polarization; the evidence is the caricatured catharsis in the conclusion (bungled murder).

Skepticism and irony are here merely a narrative disguise, accompanying phenomenon of the anxiety of the frustrated, alienated individual in a city. Bely described the state of anxiety in the structure of the text, in its texture. He used the motif of narrow stairs for this purpose. The narrow, small stairs belong to the leitmotifs of the novel. A gruesome copper rider approaches Dudkin on the narrow stairs, a phantasmagoric Persian Shishnarné spooks Dudkin on the narrow stairs, Dudkin

²⁷ Bely’s “shadow” can be understood according to Jung based on the so-called anti-ego. It is simultaneously the model of the Platonic vision of the really existing world as non-existing reflection, of real phenomena as transcendentally extant ideas. For this, see AVENARIUS, A.: *Takmer absolútina skepsa, podaná geometrickým spôsobom*. (Almost absolute scepticism, presented in geometrical way). From manuscript.

and Nikolai Apollonovich run on the narrow stairs and during conversation with anthroposophical elements they agree on immediate liquidation of the already activated time bomb. The motif of the narrow stairs is generally very frequent in Russian literature (it appears in authors and works which significantly influenced the twentieth-century world literature: Pushkin's *The Queen of Spades*, Gogol's *Nevsky Prospect*, Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, etc.); it symbolizes the feelings of anxiety and fright.²⁸ The states of anxiety were reflections of the author's aim. In 1913, in his letter to Ivanov-Razumnik, who later directed dramatization of the novel, Bely wrote that it was not revolution that concerned him in Petersburg, but provocation of revolution,²⁹ which necessarily evokes anxiety. From the perspective of compositional necessity of catharsis, the logical completion of the work is the symbolic murder of a parent, unsuccessful, caricatured killing of father. In the novel *Petersburg* he symbolized the generational need to kill father in "himself" and everything what the world of fathers meant to him; it is thus the unrealized exchange of generations (the murder failed) in the broader connections of Russia of those days.

The world of the novel *Petersburg* by Andrei Bely is a live and life-creating world which is, from the point of view of the author's creative method on the borderline of subjectivity, it is a magic text. P. Florensky wrote about the non-acceptability of magic in creation; according to him, a work of art is the antinomy of construction and composition. The construction reflects reality as such, with its interior bonds and relations, in the struggle and cohesion of its strengths and energies. The composition is conditioned by the inner world of the artist, creator, his interior. The work of art is harmonious if both components are balanced. If construction prevails in the work, it becomes unilaterally unbiased. The artist devotes merely attention to the relations between the forces of reality and it deviates from portrayal. By contrast, if the composition element is dominant, the work will be extremely subjective "za-umny" until it is no longer a portrayal. The recipient is impressed by the appeal of sensory material: colours, lines, sounds, suggestions, which is, according to Florensky, the lowest level of the magic. He offers the examples of the nonconscious magic of supremacists (representatives of Russian abstract painting), the music of Scriabin. In both cases (when one aspect prevails) this is the end of art and the beginning of magic; as he puts it, the "efforts to give Adam back the rule over the world illegally without blessing" are typical of but harmful to human naturalness.³⁰

The world of the novel "Petersburg" by Andrei Bely is, beside its magic, highly artistic, almost artistically perfect. Does it mean that the time of universal identification of art and magic has come?

²⁸ TOPOROV, V.N.: *O strukture romana Dostojevskogo v svjazi s archaičnymi schemami mifologičeskogo myšlenija. (Prestuplenije i nakazanije)*. In: *Structure of Texts and Semiotics of Culture*. The Hague–Paris 1973, p. 248.

²⁹ BELYJ, A.: *Peterburg*, op. cit., p. 516.

³⁰ See FLORENSKIJ, P.A: *U vodorazdelov mysli*. Vol. 2. Moskva, Pravda 1990, pp. 417-418.