

Seditious Modernism(s) in Stout Dictatorships (Two Cunning Fictional Strategies)

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on two masterpieces of Russian modernism that foreground Moscow and Petersburg, two urban spaces that are well-rooted in collective and individual local consciousness: *Master and Margarita* by Michail Bulgakov and *Petersburg* by Andrei Bely. Both cities are portrayed in the turbulent political context of early 20th century as real borders between the European civilization on the one hand and the worst barbarity on the other. My aim is to compare the strategies of both key representatives of Russian modernism whose approaches to the same task is rather different. They project dystopic worlds whose inhabitants have lost faith in art, religion and science and where history is only a bad dream, from which the individual can no longer wake up. The article identifies concepts used to explore these urban spaces, emphasizing the auto-referential style of both authors.

Any quest for the fascinating craft of building imaginary urban spaces puts the enquirer in an unusual situation, subtly referred to by Italo Calvino in his *Invisible Cities*:

I could tell you how many steps make up the streets rising like stairways and the degree of the arcades' curves and what kind of zinc scales over the roofs; but I already know that this would be the same as telling you nothing. The city does not consist of this, but of relationships between measurements of its space and the events of its past. As this wave of memories flows in, the city soaks up like a sponge and expands. [Calvino 1978, 4]

The erratic faces of an urban space change according to the devices of its cultural representation – be it verbal, pictorial, musical, architectural etc. One of the tropes which highlight the artistic practices drawn on by a multilayered urban architecture is the *urban palimpsest*.

My study draws on two urban palimpsests, Petersburg and Moscow, as created by Russian writers Andrei Bely and Mikhail Bulgakov, in their novels *Petersburg* and the *Master and Margarita*. Both cities are represented as potential thresholds between the European civilization and a terrifying barbarity, against the background of the political turmoil of the early 20th century. In what follows, my aim is to uncover the workings of these two key representatives of Russian modernism who take on the same

task: to create dystopic worlds whose inhabitants have lost the certainties of art, religion or science and where history is a nightmare from which the individual is not even trying to awake. I will also identify concepts which are suited to the review of these two urban universes in turmoil. And last but not least, I will look to track the complementary relationships between various artistic discourses used by both authors, showing how they turn poetry, music, architecture, sculpture or painting into flexible devices working for their specific purposes.

Both novels push urban spaces of individual and collective consciousness in the foreground, keeping an open door to the tie-ups between a particular city on one hand, and Western civilization and the history of modern art on the other.

In Bulgakov's novel, Moscow is the epitome of a Stalinist city. The gap between this communist society and normal urban spaces is unbridgeable. On the very verge of darkness, Bulgakov meticulously tracks the features of a nightmarish world created in the wake of Red-October: a *dystopia*, a post-civilization, post-European universe. Playing the part of a generic Mephistopheles, professor Woland, a non-canonical figure of the underground world, uses all the tricks in the book in his attempt to reshuffle this universe mired in fear and to punish its aberrations, which he exposes in his variety show: "*Today and Everyday at the Variety Theatre an added attraction: Professor Woland performs Black Magic with a full expose.*" And – as Varenuška, the deputy manager of the theatre cleverly points out: "The whole point of it is *the expose*" [Bulgakov 1986, 87]

Bulgakov uses Woland to detail the deviations, the aberrations, the abuses, the poisoned cabalas and the crimes of the communist political rule. His Moscow is a city where hell looks like a communal apartment (*komunalka*) where every tenant strives to make his or her neighbours' existence unbearable; a city where people vanish every day for no reason at all; where you are arrested and imprisoned just because someone else covets your two small basement rooms with a sink – a real paradise: "*It was a completely private apartment, with its own entrance and a sink with running water, he emphasized with a particular pride*" [Bulgakov 1996, 115]. In this same city the Master is symbolically crucified by ideological censorship and by literary critics. This is the all-round paradise of thieves, scoundrels, swindlers, secret service informers, of a few talented and many failed artists, equally commissioned by the authorities to praise communism – as almost all the members of the Russian Union of Writers, known as MASOLIT, enthusiastically do. The mental asylum run by Professor Stravinsky, where more than one character in the novel ends up, personifies the city.

Over the four days and nights they spend in Moscow, Woland and his infernal retinue – Azzazello, Hella and the cat Behemoth – ensure that as many as possible of the culprits (both individuals and institutions) pay a high price for this. What at first sight looks like a wave of random destruction across the city is in fact the enactment of a sequence of symbolic verdicts which restore the moral, cultural, ideological and social models overturned by communism.

In a different way, in Bely's novel the city of Petersburg represents the ideal model of civilization, as dreamt up by its founder, Peter the Great, an Athens of the North, part of the European cultural heritage, an embodiment of Apollonian architecture, as

epitomized by its main artery, the Nevsky Prospect: “Nevsky Prospect is rectilinear (just between us), because it is a European prospect; and any European prospect is not merely a prospect but (as I have already said) a prospect that is European, because... yes...” [Bely 2009, 12]

As commentators put it: “For Apollon Apollonovich, the external world is reduced to the hyper-rational form of St. Petersburg’s geometrically planned centre. The senator takes refuge from the ‘swarming’ crowd of the 1905 Revolution in ‘proportionality and symmetry.’” [Edward. Bamforth 2005, 23]

Bely’s novel starts at the very moment when this urban space is under siege, assaulted by barbarity and by the alien force of the red plague. The storyline revolves around an anarchist plot to detonate a bomb in the sparse, severe, classical home of Apollon Apollonovich, a pillar of the political Establishment.

Less wedded to reality than the ferociously blow-by-blow precise Bulgakov, Bely transfers much of his auctorial burden onto a symbolic discourse operating within a polar system of reference. The antipodes of this system could be either *the street* versus *the tundra* [Edward. Bamforth 2005, 9] or European versus *Scythian*; or the *city* of Petersburg versus the surrounding *islands*. In all these variants, on one side there is Peter’s legacy - urbanity, civilization, order, rationality, in short, the city; on the other, there is the barbarian natural disorder, fighting to conquer Peter’s classical Summer Gardens, the statues and of the caryatides of his urban architecture and to set up the reign of red anarchy. “And all that was to be heard was: ‘revolution-evolution.’ And again: ‘Revolution-evolution.’ That was the one thing these guests so-to-speak argued about constantly.” [Bely 2009, 82]

In view of the above, a comparison between the two novels reveals an epistemological metaphor, which is at the heart of the design of the city for by both authors. This is the concept of *Carnival* as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin. [Bakhtin 1984, 33–35] Both Bulgakov and Bely make full use of this multilayered category. In both novels a particular urban world is temporary turned upside down.

A fatally ill Moscow is healed by the infernal carnival set in motion by Woland, whilst in contrast a serene and normal Petersburg is contaminated by the carnivalesque red virus of the barbarian islands. As Bakhtin confirmed, *Carnival* is a double edged sword. [Bakhtin 1984, 35] It has a constructive as well as a destructive facet. Nonetheless its forces can challenge a strong dominant order and its set of norms: the Petrine European legacy, in *Petersburg*, and the aberrant communist order in *Master and Margarita*, two opposite but equally authoritarian models of politics, civilization, ideology and culture.

Overrun by the carnivalesque forces, the two cities immediately become vast living theaters. Almost all the events that occur in Bulgakov’s novel can be seen as *performances* in the theatrical meaning of the word: its plot is a shrewd and ingenious “*mise en scène*.” This show is Bulgakov’s means of challenging the Bolshevik darkness and of imagining its swiftest possible destruction. In Bely’s Petersburg, the power of the trinity *Evolution-Revolution-Strike* turns order, reason and geometry upside down. To the dismay of Apollon Apollonovich, people begin to look like living masks; red clowns roam the streets and bridges day and night: “Then by the bridge she no-

ticed a very strange sight: right over the canal by the parapet of the bridge in the middle of the night a red, satin domino was dancing; and the red domino's face was a black lace mask." [Bely 2009, 76]

The glamorous ball organized by Nikolai Petrovich Tsukatov, one of the most insightful episodes of the novel, also revolves around the red domino, foretelling the immediate future of the city: "A bright, blood-red domino, treading jerkily, dragged is velvet across the lacquered panels of the parquet: it left traces on the parquet panels in the floating crimson flicker of its own reflections; it was as though a fitful pool of blood, spreading crimson across the ballroom." [Bely 2009, 209] This is the young anarchist Nikolai Apollonovich, Apollon Apollonovich's son in disguise: father and son turn up as the two carnivalesque sides of the same world and of the same historical moment. In the *Master and Margarita*, Woland also directs a magnificent Great Satan's Ball, giving purpose and momentum to Moscow's carnival.

On the one hand, there are significant differences between the two writers and their carnivals. In Bulgakov's case, the show has a therapeutic role in as much as it attacks the malignant Stalinist order. After this episode, Moscow will never be the same again. On the contrary, in Bely's novel, the carnival is the main symptom of a social, political and cultural pathology. Petersburg will bear its marks forever in much the same way as Moscow will remember Woland. In this respect, *The Epilogues* of the two novels are highly revealing. By this point it becomes clear that the farce is the genre of choice for both writers, although in Bely's case this is a tragic farce.

On the other hand, there is a functional convergence between the carnivals in the two novels, which in both cases have the hallmarks of *apocalyptic* shows. This study lacks the space to list in full the apocalyptic attributes of the two urban shows in the wake of which magnificent blasts and fires spread across large areas of the two cities. We know for instance that at one point during the long process of revising his manuscript Bulgakov did consider burning Moscow to a cinder as the most appropriate ending for the novel [Proffer 1996, 369].

From a different point of view, it is exactly this type of Bakhtinian carnival that has the limitless ability to emerge as the ideal framework for the complicity and the syncretism between the different arts.

In *Petersburg* as well as in *The Master and Margarita* the crisscrossing between various artistic discourses takes on what I would call an *Indexical function*. The two authors use the hybrid discourse of the arts to identify Evil, to judge it and, when necessary, to punish it.

An equation between *Art* (as freedom) versus *Communism* (as oppression) is clearly set up by both Bulgakov and Bely. (Roland Barthes, among others, has provided the theoretical tools to handle the relationship between unobstructed artistic *pleasure* on the one hand and oppressive *ideology*, on the other. [Barthes 1982, 34–50] For an entire generation of modernist Russian writers, Art was the only means of therapy and escapism they had left in a communist hell bereft of hope. The complicity between poetry, fiction, music, fine arts, architecture etc. was given a *soteriological* role. More than ever, the syncretism of the arts operated as an efficient tool in crippling the oppressive political rule. [Rzhevsky 1998, 8–9]

In *The Master and Margarita* the four days of Woland's visit give power to an "artistic regime"; a reign of genuine artistic freedom is superimposed over the real life communist regime. A sumptuous hyper-reality is instated in the city throughout Woland's visit. The backbone of Bulgakov's fictional world is provided by a rich artistic intertextuality (or rather inter-mediality) closely interconnected with self-reflective mirroring.

Music, for instance, plays an important part in the novel, starting with the more or less open allusions to Gounod, to Berlioz or to Stravinsky (a composer cherished by the modernist Russian generation) and continuing with the musical show at Satan's Great Ball, consisting of famous artists belonging to the very Western heritage programmatically rejected by communism:

Without ceasing to play for an instant, the orchestra, now standing, immersed Margarita in sound. The man towering above the orchestra turned his back to it and bowed low, his arms spread wide, and Margarita, smiling, waved at him. (...) "Who's the conductor asked Margarita, as she flew away." "Johan Strauss!" cried the cat. And may they hang me on the liana vine in the tropical forest if an orchestra like this ever played at any other ball. They are all world-famous. And please note, not one of the musicians took sick or refused to play. (Bulgakov 1996, 224–225)

Often in Satanized Moscow music suggests and emphasizes meaning, resolves, judges or even punishes. See for instance the grotesque episode at the Moscow branch of the Entertainment Commission whose disreputable bureaucrats can't stop singing against their will in a large hysterical choir, before they have to be evacuated to the mental hospital run by Professor Stravinsky.

However the major artistic complicity that reigns in Bulgakov's Moscow is rooted in the European legacy of the so called *Ur-Faust* tradition, the repository of a rich literary memory. *Historia von D. Johann Fausten, dem weitbeschreyten Zauberer und Schwarzkunstler* (edited in 1587) is the fountain-head of a well-articulated paradigm of European literature, illustrated in turn by Marlowe, Goethe, Thomas Mann, Michel de Ghelderode and Paul Valéry. However, the main point here is that since its beginnings this has been a genuinely inter-artistic tradition: a Faustian pattern printed on a literary and at the same time on a musical fabric and a European creative model which magnetically draws into his sphere satellite cultural products. An insightful dialogue between the Master and the culturally innocent Ivan runs as follows:

So there you see... why even the face you described... the dissimilar eyes, the eyebrows. By the way, forgive me, but you probably haven't ever heard about the opera *Faust*, have you? (...) There you are, thee you are... it is not surprising! But Berlioz, I repeat, amazes me... [Bulgakov 1996, 113]

As for Andrei Bely's *Petersburg*, it embodies perfectly the syncretism of the arts praised and practiced by the symbolist movement in general and by Russian symbolism in particular, as an alternative to the communist barbarity. As Nina Berberova puts it: "Russian symbolism ran its course like a Greek tragedy: born on the eve of a new era of the world, it had its Furies, its sublime conscience, and it went down to

defeat in the unequal struggle for eternal values against the “oncoming Huns” [Berberova 1952, 105].

Among the artistic discourses deployed by Bely in his novel, we should mention music, architecture, sculpture and the fine arts. Bely has a solid reputation for mastering subtle visual tools intertwined with poetry and prose. Not only is his crafting of urban scenes chromatically significant, his characters’ feelings are frequently translated into colors.

As a paradigm of normality, of Europeanism and of civilization Petersburg’s hallmark is “white and silver”. The symbolic alternative is red: see, for instance at the sumptuous ball, there is an emphatic opposition between the white-blue-silver costumes and masks on the one hand, and the red and crimson domino on the other. The young anarchist Nikolai Apollonovich, appals the city as the Red Clown, a reverse of his father’s apollonian preference for white, grey and other cold hues.

Since the theoretical elaboration on this subject is extensive, I will move on to look at music, a key area in the novel. As Ada Steinberg points out: “Bely was particularly interested in music and saw words as having a primary musical meaning which underpinned their semantic one: sounds symbols possess *independent* significance on which the meaning of the word is *simultaneously* superimposed”. [Steinberg 1978, 37] According to her: “It is no coincidence that *Petersburg* appeared at the same time as Scriabin’s *Prometheus* (1911), Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* (1913), and Prokofiev’s *Scythian Suite* (1914).” [Steinberg 1978, 37]

No wonder that for some characters of Bely’s novel – Nikolai Apollonovich for instance – sounds and especially music are a key interpretive tool:

Terrible antiquity, like the assailing cry of a rushing taxicab, suddenly gathered strength in the sounds of ancient singing. Nikolai Apollonovich intuited this singing rather than recognized it. Be soothed now, you feelings of passion...” Only just before an automobile’s roar had been heard. “And sleep now, you heart without hope... “A-a-a” came a roar in the doorway: a gramophone’s loud speaker?” [Bely 2009, 316]

His mother Anna Petrovna, a repressed wife, is aware that playing “Chopin’s roudlades” in the drawing room is the only way she can rebuff her husband. While in Sofia Petrovna Lihutina’s fashionable salon, Wagner’s operas are a token of normality before they are rudely displaced by the no less fashionable anarchist political discourse:

If on the other hand Sofia Petrovna’s visitor turned out to be either himself a musician, or a music critic, or simply a music lover, then Sofia Petrovna would explain to him (...) that she intended to study meloplastics herself, in order to perform the dance of the flight of the Valkyries in no less a place than Bayreuth itself. [Bely 2009, 81]

However, for the Russian novelist, in the reign of accomplice arts, sculpture is the real king. Petersburg is epitomized by Falconet’s illustrious sculpture of a mounted Peter the Great: the *Bronze Horseman*, as Pushkin called it in a no less famous poem. He is a safeguard of normality and true civilization. As a harsh defender of these values against the red pest, the statue comes to life as a *Bronze Guest* who, as in the *Don Giovanni* opera, arrives in the home of the anarchist Dudkin to rebuke him:

... the attic room itself opened on to the inexplicable, while in the middle of the threshold, from the riven walls admitting spaces of a vitriolic hue – bowing his wreathed and green-hued head, extending his green-hued arm, stood an immense body, burning with phosphorus. It was the Bronze Guest.’ [Bely 2009, 410]

The European order of Petersburg, which Apollon Apollonovich is so keen on, is frequently symbolized by the classical caryatids which adorn the sumptuous old Petrine buildings. When they sink, this signals the beginning of the end and the fall of the root values embodied by the city:

... the caryatid at the entrance, about to crash down – is another blow of the stone; he chase is ineluctable; and the blows are ineluctable. (...) then everything will turn around: the attic will collapse and Petersburg will be destroyed; the caryatid will be destroyed under the blows of that metal. [Bely 2009, 411]

In both Bulgakov’s and in Bely’s novels Moscow and Petersburg are used as vast urban theatres where fine arts, music and architecture are integrated into magnificent, sometime extravagant shows of obvious apocalyptic dimensions. In both cases this happens in times of political, social and cultural fracture which mark important historical turning points: before and after Europe, before and after civilization, before and through communism.

In short, what happens in both cases is a sudden and unexpected shift in cultural frames of reference. Woland and his retinue in one novel, the anarchists of the islands in the other, challenge and temporarily manage to dismantle an established cultural order, turning it upside down in a true carnivalesque manner.

Accounting for such a tangled processes is very difficult. This is why both Russian modernists turn to the languages of the arts as mitigating systems. If properly handled, the syncretism of the arts works as an ideal tool for someone like Bulgakov, who has, in the European tradition, a readymade integrated artistic repository such as the Faustian tradition. These narrative discourses are cunningly manipulated as tools devised by novelists like Bulgakov and Bely, keenly interested in the own craft of fiction.

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BURIČSKÝ MODERNIZMUS V SILNÝCH DIKTATÚRACH (DVE VYDARENÉ FIKČNÉ STRATÉGIE)

Urban Landscapes. City-Texts. Russian Modernism. Dystopia.

Mestské prostredie. Ruský modernizmus. M. Bulgakov. A. Belyj. Dystópia.

Príspevok sa zameriava na dve veľké diela ruského modernizmu, ktoré vysúvajú do popredia Moskvu a Petrohrad, dva mestské priestory, dobre zakotvené v kolektívnom a individuálnom lokálnom vedomí: *Majster a Margaréta* Michaila Bulgakova a *Peterburg* Andreja Belého. V búrlivom politickom kontexte začiatku 20. storočia sú obe mestá zobrazené ako skutočné prahy v rámci európskej civilizácie na jednej strane a najstrašnejšieho barbarstva na strane druhej. Štúdiá komparatívne sleduje stratégie obidvoch kľúčových predstaviteľov ruského modernizmu, ktorí pristúpili k tej istej úlohe rozličným spôsobom. Ide u nich o projekciu dvoch dystopických svetov, ktorých obyvatelia stratili istotu v umení, náboženstve a vede a kde dejiny sú len zlým snom, z ktorého sa jednotlivec už nedokáže prebudiť. Identifikuje koncepty vhodné na skúmanie týchto mestských svetov, zdôrazňujúc autoreferenčné poslanie oboch autorov.

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