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The Null Chronotope and Cerebral Play
in Bely's *Petersburg*

Andrei Bely's *Petersburg* is a novel deeply rooted in a specific time and place. The events surrounding Nikolai Ableukhov's failed attempt at parricide occur during the period of September 30th to October 4th 1905 (Burkhart 183), and the Russo-Japanese war and 1905 Revolution serve as a crucial backdrop for both the actions of the protagonists and the musings of the narrator (Ellsworth 89). Similarly, the city of St. Petersburg dominates the action and imagery of the novel both as a concrete locale and, on the broader symbolic level, as (to use Dolgoplov's term) a „nexus (*uzel*)“ linking historical epochs as well as metaphysical layers of reality (314–15). Bely depicts the ephemeral divide between the perceptible world and an underlying transcendent reality as uniquely permeable precisely in the city of St. Petersburg, which provides for the occasional revealing, though obscure, glimpse into the novel's noumenal realm. Although the apparent, subjective, or perceived world of *Petersburg* (in which the basic plot of the novel takes place) functions more or less according to ordinary novelistic conceptions of time and space, I intend to demonstrate that the underlying objective reality of *Petersburg* is inherently devoid of spatial and temporal characteristics.

Since this study is concerned with the literary representation of space and time (or rather their absence or unreality), it will be useful to invoke Bakhtin's concept of the literary chronotope, which he defines as representing „the intrinsic connectedness of

temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (84). While all literary genres and sub-genres possess their own chronotopic perspectives, the novel has the potential to depict a potentially infinite variety of time-space interrelationships. It is therefore possible to speak of each novel as possessing its own chronotope, its own particular conception of time and space. *Petersburg* is unique in this regard in that its chronotope is entirely negative — it is a novel without time and space. In *Petersburg*, time and space do not have objective reality; they are merely an abstraction applied to the world by the novel's characters via the processes of perception and cognition.¹ The reader is occasionally granted limited access to this underlying reality, as are the novel's characters, especially those capable of engaging in „cerebral play (*mozgovaia igra*),“ a cognitive act by which the world of *Petersburg* is, in so far as it is perceived, consciously or unconsciously manipulated or transcended. I will refer to the unique chronotope of *Petersburg* as the „null chronotope.“ Despite the interconnectedness of (non-) time and (non-) space that this concept assumes, I will, for the sake of clarity, analyze the (non-) space and (non-) time of *Petersburg*'s chronotope separately. Though artificial, this division is also appropriate to the novel, as its narrator frequently discusses space and time in separate passages and as separate concepts.

¹ The null chronotope's representation of time and space as mediators of perception is broadly reminiscent of the Kantian conception of space and time as transcendental „categories:“ „[time and space] apply to objects only so far as they are considered as appearances, but do not present things in themselves“ (Kant, 166). This „Kantian“ metaphysics functions not only as part of the novel's philosophical/chronotopic framework, however, but also as a major thematic element in the characterization of Nikolai Apollonovich. As Zink argues (273–85), Nikolai Apollonovich's character arc describes an obsession with Kant, followed by a „crisis of Kantianism“ leading up to his botched parricide, which culminates in his rejection of Kantian philosophy in the epilogue: „Kant? Kant is forgotten“ (Belyi 1995, 577). This reading has some interesting parallels in Bely's own early infatuation and later disillusionment with the neo-Kantian philosophers Cohen and Rickert (Steinberg 533): „Nikolay's 'Kantianism' is a piece of bitter irony by Bely at his own expense“ (ibid 541). For more on Bely's complex reception of Kant and the Neo-Kantians, see Zink (17–131, 264–306).

Space

We are given our first glimpse of the objectively spaceless nature of reality as Apollon Apollonovich, overcome by a migraine, enters his home:

1) And here it will do no harm to remember: the things that fledged past (the pictures, the grand piano, the mirrors, the mother-of-pearl, the incrustations on the small tables) [...] could have no spatial form [...] The illusion of a room took form; and then it would then fly apart without trace [...] and when the lackey slammed behind him the heavy doors to the drawing-room [...] Behind the slammed door there turned out to be no drawing room [za dver'iu ne okazolos' gostinoi]: there turned out to be... cerebral spaces: convolutions, gray and white matter, the pineal gland [...] The house — the stone colossus — was not a house: the stone leviathan was the senatorial head (37).²

Space, and thus the extension of objects in space, is described in this passage as illusory. The items in Apollon Apollonovich's house are endowed with spatial characteristics only in so far as they are perceived by the Senator; they do not and cannot intrinsically possess such characteristics. Once they have left the senator's field of vision, these items, now devoid of extension in space, seem to disappear. Everything, including the house itself, is, in its perceptible form, a product of the Senator's mind, hence the identification of the house with the „senatorial head.“ Apollon Apollonovich's headache, which impinges upon his ordinary perception, therefore gives shape to the space around him, fusing with and determining the characteristics of the house.

We later learn that the senator's son Nikolai Appolonovich has also had several similar experiences in the same house:

2) From time to time, between the two doors of the entrance porch, he (like Apollon Apollonovich) was assailed by a certain

² Belyi 1981, 36. All quotations from *Petersburg* are based on the original 1916 text of the novel. The English translation is that of David McDuff (1995), which I have amended slightly where I felt that a different rendering would better highlight textual elements particularly relevant to the current study. I have added references to the corresponding page numbers in Dolgopolov's 1981 Russian text of *Petersburg* in the footnotes.

strange, very strange, exceedingly strange condition: [...] Imagine merely that beyond the door there was nothing, and that if one were to fling the door wide open, the door would open on an empty, cosmic immensity [*bezmerznost'*], into which all that was left was for one to... throw oneself headfirst, in order to fly [...] past [...] stars and crimson planetary spheres — in absolute zero, in an atmosphere of two-hundred and seventy-three degrees of cold (317).³

Like the Senator, Nikolai senses that the world around him has no objective spatial reality outside of his perception. Beyond his immediate field of vision, all that exists is „an empty, cosmic immensity.“⁴ In this passage, the nothingness beyond the door (i.e. beyond what Nikolai can perceive) is equated with infinity, represented here by the celestial realm.⁵ This seemingly paradoxical representation of space as both infinite and negative is possible only in the context of the null chronotope. If space is merely a function of perception applied by perceivers to the objectively spaceless outside world, then this world can be artistically represented as either nothingness or infinity: since relationships between objects in a spaceless world are not really spatial, these objects can be characterized either as infinitely far apart (the cosmos) or infinitely close together (the appearance of nothingness)⁶

³ Belyi 1981, 235.

⁴ In „The Captive Spirit“ Marina Tsvetaeva wrote that Bely's „native element was that of empty space“ (2: 308). „Empty space“ and the existential terror associated with it is a complex theme running throughout Bely's work. For more on „empty space“ in *Petersburg*, see Piskunov (200–5).

⁵ That *Petersburg's* underlying reality is in some way linked with an „astral world“ similar to that of Rudolph Steiner's anthroposophy (to which Bely was at least at some point passionately committed) seems to me to be undeniable. For the astral world as such, see Steiner (406–7). While the possible anthroposophical underpinnings of *Petersburg's* noumenal world are certainly relevant for a full understanding of the novel's metaphysics, this subject is simply too complex to explore within the context of this study; for now I am only concerned with the objective unreality of space and time in the world of the novel. For the links between anthroposophical thought and imagery and *Petersburg*, see Alexandrov (106–52). For the opinion that Bely used the vocabulary of anthroposophy only because he had no other language suitable to his task, see Dolgoplov (256–57).

with equal validity. This phenomenon is explored in greater depth in another passage:

3) Amidst his four mutually perpendicular walls he [Dudkin, N. K.] seemed to himself a prisoner captured in expanses [*v prostranstvakh*] [...] if only this narrow little interval between walls was not equal in volume to the whole of world space.

World space [*mirovoe prostranstvo*] is deserted! His deserted room! [...] A beggar's abode would seem excessively luxurious compared to the wretched furnishings of world space (414).⁷

Given that Dudkin imposes spatial attributes on his room via his act of perception, these puzzling statements about the poverty of „world space“ are, within the metaphysical/chronotopic framework of *Petersburg*, wholly accurate. For Dudkin, the area he currently perceives is the only part of the world endowed with spatial characteristics. The „wealth“ and „poverty“ here referred to can, therefore, be understood as spatial, and Dudkin's room is indeed more „luxurious“ for him than all of „world space.“ In the context of the null chronotope, „world space“ is an illusion, an empty concept without objective reality, hence its relative poverty in comparison to Dudkin's room.

Apollon Apollonovich has a different kind of intuition of the true nature of space as he is falling asleep:

4) Sometimes (not always) just before the very last moment of diurnal consciousness, Apollon Apollonovich, as he went to sleep, would notice that all the threads, all the stars, forming a bubbling vortex, made a corridor that ran away into an immeasurable expanse and (what was most surprising) he would feel this corridor began from his head, i. e. it, the corridor, was an infinite extension of his own head, the crown of which suddenly opened — an extension into an immeasurable expanse (180).⁸

⁶ If there is no space, then objects cannot inherently possess extension, because extension presupposes a space within which to extend. Without extension in space there would be nothing for an observer to perceive, hence the irrelevance of infinite proximity vs. infinite distance as a way to *artistically represent* non-space. Of course, neither concept has objective relevance to an inherently spaceless world.

⁷ Belyi 1981, 303.

⁸ Belyi 1981, 138.

As in passage 1, the outside world is here represented as having become spatially concentrated in the area of the Senator's head, suggesting that the world as normally perceived is itself a function of his cerebral activity. That world is also represented spatially as an „immeasurable expanse (*neizmerimost'*),” which, as explained above, is here indicative of its non-spatial character. The repeated identification of the cosmos with the unperceived, and thus non-spatial, world that Apollon Apollonovich is here able to intuitively apprehend represents (outside of any anthroposophical significance it may have⁹) an attempt to describe the nature of non-space in the spatial terms outside of which human understanding cannot function.

The theme of cosmic infinity as representative of the objectively non-spatial nature of reality appears again as the narrator contemplates the terrorist ringleader Lippanchenko's impending death:

5) What would we feel?

We would feel that our disjointed organs, flying and burning, no longer bound integrally together, are separated from one another by billions of versts; but our consciousness binds that crying outrage together — in a simultaneous futility; and while in our backbone, lacerated to the point of emptiness, we sense the seething of Saturn's masses, the stars of the constellations furiously eat into our brain...

If we were to imagine all this to ourselves bodily, before us would arise a picture of the first stages of the soul's life, which has thrown off the body... (528)¹⁰

Based on this passage, one can speculate that in the word of *Petersburg* death somehow involves a transcendence of or escape from ordinary perception, which allows the dead or dying person to comprehend the true nature of a reality that is, among other things, spaceless. The use of the cosmos to represent non-space works in the novel both on a figurative and on a literal

⁹ „When the human astral body has been drawn away by sleep, it belongs not only to the Earth, but to worlds of which still other regions of the world universe (stellar worlds) are a part” (Steiner 407). For a reading of Apollon Apollonovich's dream as an „astral voyage,” see Alexandrov (133—139).

¹⁰ Belyi 1981, 384.

level — while on the one hand functioning as a metaphor for the „everywhereness“ of all matter in a non-spatial world, it is also indicative of the fact that, in a spaceless world, all things, including planets, stars, and individual human bodies, would, in a sense, all be in the same „place“ at once. This theme is further elaborated during the scene in which Dudkin encounters Shishnarfne, a mysterious, vaguely demonic „Persian“ who may be, among other things, a hallucination brought on by Dudkin’s insanity:

6) Insanity itself, in essence, stood before him like a report by his diseased organs of sense — to his self-conscious ‘I’; [...] The overtaking and attacking was being done by the organs of his body, which had grown heavier; and, as it fled away from them, his ‘I’ was becoming a ‘not-I,’ because it is through the organs of sense — not from the organs of sense — that ‘I’ returns to itself; the alcohol, the smoking, the insomnia were gnawing at his body’s feeble constitution; the constitution of our bodies is closely connected to the spaces; and when it [that is, the constitution of Dudkin’s body — N. K.] had begun to disintegrate, all the spaces had cracked... (415)¹¹

Just as Lippanchenko's death transcends the perceptual mediation of space, Dudkin's insanity carries with it a glimpse into the true nature of reality. Although this very complex reality clearly has some supernatural or occult characteristics that, for Dudkin, assume the form of Shishnarfne, for now we are only concerned with the non-spatial quality of that reality. Dudkin understands his insanity as a product of the degradation of his sensory organs brought on by excessive drinking, smoking, and insomnia. The change in his perception (via his sensory organs) has, by enabling him to bypass the normal cognitive filter of space, disassociated Dudkin from his own physicality, which, in so far as it is perceived, is itself spatial (“the constitution of our bodies is closely connected to the spaces”). While Dudkin normally perceives his own body (in his capacity as „self-conscious ‘I’”), thereby spatially differentiating that body, and thus himself, from the rest of the world via the act of perception (“it is through

¹¹ Belyi 1981, 303.

the organs of sense — not from the organs of sense — that ‘I’ returns to itself”), this spatial differentiation has now started to break down: „His ‘I’ was becoming a ‘not-I.’” Dudkin perceives the breakdown of ordinary (illusory) spatial relationships as the destruction, or „cracking,” of space.

Time

The non-temporal nature of objective reality is unambiguously revealed to Nikolai Apollonovich during a dream he experiences after falling asleep with his head on the sardine-tin-bomb with which he has been ordered to kill his father:

7) ‘And what sort of chronology do we have, anyway?’

But Saturn, Apollon Apollonovich, bursting into loud laughter, replied:

‘None, Kolenka, none: our chronology, my dear boy, is zero [vremiaischislenie, moi rodnoi, nulevoe]...’ (323)¹²

Like space, time in *Petersburg* is an illusion, an abstraction applied to reality via the act of perception. Apollon Apollonovich, like his son, is dimly aware of the unreality of time, having intuited its true nature during a near-fatal exposure to cold in his youth:¹³

8) At that hour of his lonely freezing it had been as though someone’s cold fingers had stroked his heart; the icy hand beckoned; behind him — the ages had receded in immeasurability; ahead of him — the hand revealed: immeasurabilities; the immeasurabilities flew towards him. The icy hand! (565)¹⁴

¹² Belyi 1981, 239.

¹³ For the „demonic” character of the „category of ice” trope in Bely and his contemporaries, see Piskunov (203–4). As Nivat points out (355–57), the „second space” of *Petersburg* is, in its capacity as „cosmic void,” inherently icy: „This space, ‘outrageous’ to the mind, is a frozen space [*Cet espace „scandaleux” pour l’intelligence est un espace glacé*]” (356).

¹⁴ Belyi 1981, 410.

Just as the Senator experiences space in passage 4 as infinity, here he experiences time in similar terms. As we have observed in regard to space, time, as objectively unreal, can be artistically rendered either as infinity or as pure simultaneity with equal veracity, as human cognition cannot comprehend true atemporality other than as a temporal abstraction.

Directly after her encounter with the white domino, Sofia Petrovna Likhutina has a vision of the Bronze Horseman in which she experiences the absence of time:

9) Scarcely had she moved on, seeking a support for her consciousness, than she wanted to summon up the impressions of yesterday, — and yesterday fell away again [...] Before her fled the love of this unhappy summer; and the love of the unhappy summer, like everything else, fell away from her memory; [...] Her whole life fled past, and her whole life sank away, as though her life had never been, [...] Some kind of void began directly behind her back [...] the void extended into the ages... (230—31)¹⁵

Whereas Apollon Apollonovich in passage 8 experiences time as infinite or immeasurable (*neizmerimost'*), Sofia Petrovna experiences it as a void (*pustota*), and witnesses time, as well as her own life in it, disappearing. The Senator experiences time (or in both passages „the ages [*veka*]”) as, at first, speeding into infinity, whereas Sofia Petrovna sees emptiness spreading into time. Both of these seemingly contradictory visions can be compatible only if we understand time as an illusion and the experiences of these characters as glimpses of its true nature. Once again, it makes no difference whether that nature is expressed in positive or negative terms, as simultaneity and infinity are equally plausible artistic representations of atemporality.

During an aside, the narrator hints at the possibility of the relativistic depiction of time in the context of the null chronotope:

10) A day and a night, that is: a relative concept, a concept that consists of a multivariety of moments, where the moment — is either a minimal segment of time, or — something, well, different, psychical [*dushevnoe*], able to be defined by the fullness of

¹⁵ Belyi 1981, 174.

psychic events — not by a figure; [...] it is an hour, or a zero; the experience grows in the moment, or — is absent in the moment (533).¹⁶

Here we have a striking parallel with passage 3, where it is asserted that Dudkin's tiny one-room flat is superior in „richness“ to all of world space. Given that time „exists“ only in so far as it is perceived, and that one perceives time with greater or lesser fullness according to the intensity of one's experience during that time, then time, as a function of perception, can in fact be „defined by the fullness of psychic events.“¹⁷

Right before passage 9, Sofia Petrovna has a different kind of temporal experience during her encounter with the white domino:

11) Now, look: someone sad and tall, whom she thought she had seen a large number of times, quite recently, today... The sad outline had a sad, caressing voice — a voice she had heard a large number of times, had heard quite recently, last night... (227–29)¹⁸

Sofia Petrovna senses that she has already had this experience countless times before. In another passage, Nikolai Appolonovich has a very similar sensation:

¹⁶ Belyi 1981, 387.

¹⁷ Burkhart makes a distinction between *Petersburg's* „narrative time“ (*Erzählzeit*, the objective measurement of „real“ time taken up by the events of the plot) and „narrated time“ (*erzählte Zeit*, time as it is experienced in the novel), emphasizing the greater „reality“ of the latter:

The „real“ time of the novel [is] not the objective [...] but rather the *subjective* lived time [*erlebte Zeit*], [...] which one may also call internal, biological or intensive time“ (183).

This approach recognizes the primacy of time as it is experienced over „objective“ time in the novel; I disagree only in positing that *Petersburg* actually has no objective time whatsoever. The novel represents time (and space) by means of chronotopes specific to the perceptions of its various characters, but this is only, as it were, on the surface: beneath is the null chronotope, which „pokes through“ in passages like those I have quoted so far. For more on this „hierarchy of chronotopes,“ see the conclusion.

¹⁸ Belyi 1981, 172–73.

12) Nikolai Apollonovich made an effort to remember; and — remembered: he had stood in a similar fashion in the gusts of the Neva wind, leaning over the railing of the bridge, and had looked at the bacillus-infected water [...] (all this had happened once: had happened a great many times) (245).¹⁹

Passages such as these would seem to indicate that time in *Petersburg* has a cyclical nature and that events are endlessly repeated.²⁰ Although this cyclical conception of time might seem to contradict any underlying assumption of the objective unreality of time, it is in fact only an alternative perspective that fits logically within the framework of the null chronotope. I have already demonstrated that atemporality can be artistically rendered as infinity and that the unreality of space can similarly be depicted as endless space. If space and time are depicted as infinite (and matter is depicted as extending endlessly into space, which, given the underlying assumption that matter has no objective spatial characteristics, would make sense), then it follows that all possible events have already occurred an infinite number of times and will be repeated *ad infinitum*. Time is therefore cyclical only in so far as it is perceived as infinite, which is in turn merely an abstraction forced upon atemporality by human cognition. Although Sofia Petrovna and Nikolai Apollonovich become able to dimly apprehend atemporality, they understand it only in temporal terms; infinite repetition is a logical consequence of this phenomenon. Outside of human perception, there is, of course, no such thing as repetition, only atemporality.²¹

¹⁹ Belyi 1981, 184.

²⁰ For example: In its lonely study the bald head, that had laid on a hard palm, raises itself above the stern oak desk... like a dark thing this world spread itself before it... the seasons, the sun and the light have been kindled by dark things; from the ages history has run right up to the moment when — the bald head, that had lain on a hard palm, has raised itself above the stern oak desk... The circle has closed (Belyi 1995, 504; 1981, 367—68).

²¹ The notion of cyclical time naturally calls to mind Nietzsche's „eternal return“ (*ewige Wiederkunft*). For Bely's reception of Nietzsche's thought see Zink (132—252). Interestingly, Zink (284) also finds elements of the “eternal return” in Bely's unique reversal of the Neo-Kantian philosophy of Hermann Cohen by which „time runs not forward, but backward, and ends at zero“ (282). On the mystical level, Dolgoplov sees Bely as placing the (Soloviovia) apocalypse *in*

Nikolai Apollonovich has a somewhat different experience of infinite repetition during the dream sequence already quoted in passage 7:

13) And Nikolai Apollonovich remembered: he — the old Turanian — had been reincarnated a great number of times; had been incarnated today, too... (320)²²

Like passage 12, this passage describes a conception of time in which events are endlessly repeated. I have attempted to demonstrate that this phenomenon can be explained only by the null chronotope. The idea of metempsychosis suggested in passage 13 does, however, present a problem: how can the migration of a „soul“ from body to body over time be understood given the objectively atemporal nature of reality? If time is only a function of perception, would this not imply that, if reincarnation is possible, those „souls“ being reincarnated actually exist in multiple (or even infinite) incarnations simultaneously? The only possible conclusion is that this is in fact the case. In order to explain this seemingly paradoxical statement, we must posit a state of affairs that, while not necessarily implied by the unreality of space (and hence the unreality of the extension of matter in space), is certainly suggested by it, namely the undifferentiated nature of material reality. I find it reasonable to tentatively claim that, in the world of *Petersburg*, all things are one, and the individual self is only an illusion, a function of perception like space and time. Since reality is in fact an undifferentiated mass, differentiation being only a function of the spatial and temporal filters through which human perception and cognition strain our version of reality, Nikolai Apollonovich actually *is* both himself and a Turanian; he is not only *everywhere* at all times, but also *everything*. This is also suggested by Dudkin's experience, brought about by the degradation of his sensory organs, of „not-I“ in passage 6.

the past, as the “beginning of all beginnings” (*nachalo vsekh nachal*) (257). This complex web of ideas (particularly as they relate to the artistic rendering of reality in the context of the null chronotope) would seem to warrant further study.

²² Belyi 1981, 184.

The self as differentiated from the rest of material reality is thus only a function of cognition; as Dudkin's sensory organs deteriorate he begins to apprehend the objective unreality of the differentiated self.²³

Cerebral Play

I have so far attempted to demonstrate that, in the world of *Petersburg*, time and space are imposed upon a reality objectively devoid of spatial and temporal characteristics. Although this imposition of time and space is, as a function of ordinary human perception/cognition, typically a passive or mechanical process, the world of *Petersburg* also allows for an ancillary phenomenon by which the spatial and temporal attributes imposed on reality via perception can be manipulated in non-standard ways or even dispelled entirely. This disruption of ordinary perception, designated in the novel as „cerebral play (*mozgovaia igra*)„ is a creative activity similar to artistic creation²⁴ in that it involves the directed and intentional production of the fictive spatio-temporal phenomena perceived.

The first character we see engaging in cerebral play is Apollon Apollonovich. The senator's ability to endow the objects

²³ In „Works and Days“ (1912) Bely had already begun to formulate his own take on human individuality as an illusion dividing the phenomenal word from the noumenal:

Endless is the inner path, [...] but the laws of the path are identical for all stages; and the foundations of the path are all the same: the dualism between our fleeting glimpse of the objects around us and our fleeting glimpse of the abyss which lies beyond them; and the boundary which we falsely imagine between these two glimpses is „I“ (quoted in Dolgoplov, 311).

Bely's conception of the human individual self is a complex topic far too large to treat in any detail in this study. Nivat suggests the existence in Bely's thought of a kind of „primitive unity“ akin to Jung's (339). Alexandrov also describes Bely as positing a „transcendent unity“ (104).

²⁴ In her study of Bely's aesthetic theory of „creative consciousness“ (*schoepferische Bewusstseins*) Deppermann describes the creative (albeit not necessarily artistic) faculty as a constitutive base of consciousness in general (84–85).

around him with extension in space (and time) via cognition is spelled out in metaphorical terms as the birth of those objects, including Dudkin, from his mind (head):

14) The cerebral play of the wearer of diamond decorations was distinguished by strange, highly strange, exceedingly strange qualities: his cranium became the womb of mental images that were instantly incarnated into this ghostly world [...] Each idle thought stubbornly developed into a spatio-temporal image, continuing its — by now unchecked — activities outside the senatorial head [...] We have already seen: one such spirit (the stranger with the small black moustache), coming into being as an image, had then quite simply *begun to exist* in the yellowish expanses of the Neva (35).²⁵

The cognitive act by which Apollon Apollonovich gives form to the world around him is here defined as cerebral play. The combination of the epithet „idle,” which so often attends explicit references to cerebral play, and the use of the adverb „stubbornly (*uporno*)” to characterize the creative spatio-temporal perception of Dudkin that occurs through the medium of the Senator's consciousness, speak to the fact that this variant cognition is in fact not under Apollon Apollonovich's control. As Alexandrov states, „the dominant characteristic of cerebral play is its consistently intrusive character” (115).²⁶ Elsewhere in the novel, cerebral play is described specifically as the intrusion of external (perhaps occult [Ellsworth 100]) elements into one's ordinary cognition: „Cerebral play is only a mask; behind this mask the invasion of the brain by forces unknown to us is accomplished” (65). Cerebral play is thus best characterized as perception intentionally manipulated by some force alien to the consciousness of the perceiver.

As his growing madness continues to undermine the normal functioning of his sensory organs, Dudkin becomes increasingly aware of the illusory nature of the world as he had once perceived it. Although he fears for his sanity, Dudkin also vaguely understands that his hallucinations are a function of cerebral

²⁵ Belyi 1981, 34–35.

²⁶ For a dissenting opinion, see Piskunov (206 note 1), who argues that Alexandrov is mistaken in depicting Bely's characters as devoid of free will.

play — that is, they are perceived spatio-temporal phenomena without objective physical reality. Despite his fear of pursuit and persecution (whether by the secret police, his own revolutionary organization, or Shishnarfne), he consoles himself with the thought that, in light of the cerebral play disrupting his consciousness, the world of appearances, as unreal, cannot affect him:

15) 'That's *them* looking for you...'

Aleksandr drew a deep breath and vowed to himself in advance not to be excessively frightened, because the events in which he might now be involved were simply idle, cerebral play (395).²⁷

Although Dudkin's cerebral-play-inspired visions merely replace one spatio-temporal construct (the world as it would ordinarily be perceived) with another (his hallucinations), and are thus no more objectively veridical than those generated without the intrusion of cerebral play, these hallucinations are nevertheless revelatory in that they provide a vague insight into the nature of the world beyond human perception: „Here [that is, in his garret during a hallucinatory experience, — N. K.] objects are not objects: here I have reached the conviction that the window is not a window; the window is a slit onto immensity” (ibid 113). By exposing the fact that perception does not in itself represent a direct apprehension of reality, but is rather an interpretive process that can be hijacked by external forces through cerebral play, these hallucinations serve to call the attention of both Dudkin and the reader to the ephemeral nature of all perceived physical reality in *Petersburg*. Like many of the complex symbols in which *Petersburg* abounds (such as the Bronze Horseman, the white domino, or the caryatid), the ultimate transcendental referent of Dudkin's visions is the true nature of reality and the otherwise ineffable force or forces that govern it. For Dudkin, these forces and their ability to manipulate his perception via cerebral play are (at least in part) personified by Shishnarfne, who was present

²⁷ Belyi 1981, 289.

in Helsingfors at the inception of his madness²⁸ and who returns at its apotheosis:

16) Alexandr Ivanovich clearly remembered now having seen this face in a Helsingfors coffee house [...] namely: it had been in Helsingfors that all the symptoms of the illness that menaced him had begun; it was precisely in Helsingfors that the whole of that *idle cerebral play, play that seemed as if inspired by someone else*, had begun (398–99, italics added).²⁹

Nikolai Apollonovich also undergoes an invasion of his consciousness by external forces that is accomplished via cerebral play. He experiences this phenomenon as the intrusion of independently generated thoughts into his own cognition. As these thoughts intensify, he comes to find their origin in the sardine-tin-bomb.³⁰

17) But there were still these swarms of thoughts that thought themselves; [...] who was the author of the thoughts? [...] It was not his head that was thinking, but... the sardine tin [...] if his head was thinking, then his head — it too! — had also turned into the sardine tin with dreadful contents... (428)³¹

The intrusion of external forces that breaks down Dudkin's ordinary mode of perception is in Nikolai Apollonovich's case connected with the bomb, which he receives from Dudkin himself, who in turn had received it (through Lippanchenko) from the shadowy organization to which he is attached and of which Shishnarfne is a member. Both characters thus begin the process of the breakdown of their ordinary cognition, the intrusion of foreign thoughts, and the revelation of the true nature of reality via contact with this sinister organization, which itself partakes

²⁸ The true catalyst for Dudkin's madness is, by his own admission, a "dream" in which he (probably) participates in a witches' Sabbath (Belyi 1981, 676 note 41). His insanity and, by extension, his consequent revelations thus have as their impetus communion with forces not merely occult, but Satanic.

²⁹ Belyi 1981, 292.

³⁰ Zink understands the seemingly harmless sardine-tin with its „terrible contents“ as an ironic take on Kant's „thing in itself (*Ding an sich*)“ (276–77). For more on the role of Kantian metaphysics in the novel, see note 1.

³¹ Belyi 1981, 313–14.

of the transcendental, objectively non-spatial/temporal reality behind that which is perceived: „The top of the movement is a universal, fathomless void” (114). The revelations brought about by contact with the noumenon provide both Nikolai and Dudkin with mystical insight and destructive transformation — Nikolai, whose connection with the unseen world is severed after the explosion of the bomb, survives his brush with objective reality but is forever changed, whereas Dudkin, whose sustained contact results in his murder of Lippanchenko, lapses into complete insanity.

Conclusion

I have so far attempted to demonstrate that in *Petersburg* the concept designated as cerebral play represents a process by which external forces interfere with human consciousness, manipulating the creative act of perception to produce specific spatio-temporal manifestations that, in so far as they are perceived, are thereby endowed with the same ephemeral reality as that which is perceived without the aid of cerebral play. It is in this sense, then, that Apollon Apollonovich „creates“ Dudkin (see passage 14 above), who not only enjoys his own independent existence outside of Apollon Apollonovich's field of vision, but himself goes on to create, via the mediator of cerebral play, the specters of Shishnarfne and the Bronze Guest.

Shishnarfne is thus the creation of Dudkin, and Dudkin of Apollon Apollonovich. What, then, is the origin of the senator? The answer to this question is provided not only within the text of *Petersburg*, but also by its very nature as a product of verbal artifice:

18) Apollon Apollonovich's consciousness is a shadowy consciousness, because he too is the possessor of an ephemeral existence and is a product of the author's fantasy: superfluous, idle, cerebral play [...] and even if Apollon Apollonovich is woven from our brain, he will none the less be able to frighten with another, stupendous existence that attacks by night. Apollon Apol-

Ionovich is endowed with the attributes of this existence; all his cerebral play is endowed with attributes of this existence (65).³²

Just as Dudkin is given physical shape by virtue of his perception by the senator, Apollon Apollonovich is a product of the cerebral play of the author/narrator. Although cerebral play is here identified (or at least correlated) with the process by which the fictional world of *Petersburg* has come to be, it is not simply another name for the creative act. Cerebral play, it must be remembered, is as a rule directed by external influence. I have attempted to outline the existence in *Petersburg* of a hierarchy of manipulated perception/creation whereby a character at once creates the world around him in so far as he perceives it and is in turn created by the perception of some other consciousness; who, then, stands at the top of the pyramid? In other words, what is the source of all this cerebral play? Although it may not be possible to answer this question with complete certainty, it is clear that, at the very least, the city of St. Petersburg itself numbers among the primary sources:

19) There, outside the windows, Petersburg pursued and chased with its cerebral play and tearful spaciousness (560).³³

Petersburg, Petersburg! Falling like fog, you have pursued me, too, with idle cerebral play (288).³⁴

As a nexus point where the terrestrial and the supernatural, the sensible and the numinous intersect (Dolgoplov, 314–15), Saint Petersburg at once partakes of the forces at play behind the false veil of perceived reality and inflicts its own dark dreams on those able to apprehend its transcendent essence. One of its victims is the narrator, and the novel *Petersburg* is a vision inflicted upon his consciousness via the interference of the city's cerebral play.

Since *Petersburg's* various characters, places and events represent a complex system of layered spatio-temporal reality as perceived by the characters themselves, it follows that, as in all

³² Belyi 1981, 56.

³³ Belyi 1981, 406.

³⁴ Belyi 1981, 214.

novels, the depiction of the various realities that make up *Petersburg* must necessitate a variety of literary chronotopes. The null chronotope as I have described it does not, of course, preclude the possibility or even the necessity of chronotopic diversity in narrative. Given that *Petersburg's* characters structure the world around them by applying spatial and temporal characteristics to it via the act of perception, it follows that the world of the novel, in so far as it is depicted through the consciousness of a given character, must in practice be described largely in conventional spatial and temporal terms. It would, therefore, be more accurate to posit a multiplicity or even a hierarchy of chronotopes in *Petersburg*. While various „positive“ chronotopes pertain during the snatches of more traditional narrative (generally those in which characters act), the null chronotope nevertheless remains the underlying concept of space and time assumed by the novel as a whole.

The null chronotope is thus always present, in the background, as it were, even as other, more incidental, chronotopes temporarily take the stage. Some of these superficial chronotopes are native to specific literary genres or derived from obvious sources: the Dudkin/Lippanchenko story, for example, adheres closely to conceptions of space and time typical of the crime story, the Ableukhovs' relationship plays out according to the chronotope of the family novel, complete with flashbacks, awkward dinner-table scenes, and the Dickensian *deus ex machina* of Mrs. Ableukhov's sudden re-appearance, and the disastrous love triangle of Sofia Petrovna, Nikolai Apollonovich, and Sergei Likhutin self-consciously plays with chronotopes borrowed from *Anna Karenina* and Chaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades*. Other chronotopes, such as that of the cramped, frenetic, and banal world of Sofia Petrovna's drawing-room, are linked with unique situations and characters. It is when these pockets of traditional space-time give way to the fantastic, whether in the form of dream-scenes, visions, or the narrator's bizarre observations, that the scales fall from the eyes of character and reader to reveal the illusory nature of the world of appearances. As Steinberg writes, „...the deliberate conventionality of reality is only a means, a path lead-

ing to Bely's sacred goal: the fantastic nature of the other-worldly world" (545). The chronotope of this „other-worldly world," which, though often hidden, is always present and active beneath the superficial time-space of *Petersburg's* other competing perspectives, is the null chronotope.

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