Magnus Ljunggren

PETERBURG – ĖLLIS'S "MOST IMPORTANT WORK"

Andrej Belyj's novel *Peterburg* is to some extent a collective work. Belyj himself has described human creation in such terms, and he certainly knew how to exploit his friends artistically.[1] During several crucial Symbolist years he was especially close to his colleague Lev Kobylinskij, a.k.a. Ėllis, whose fantasies and delusions infiltrated his work and to a particularly high degree influenced *Peterburg*, written in 1911-1913. Nothing Ėllis himself wrote either in Russia or in exile is especially outstanding, so that with some overstatement *Peterburg* can be characterized as his "most important work."

Peterburg portrays a split city that reflects a split nation. On another level the novel can be said to depict a split psyche. The cityscape consists of the mainland, which is the bastion of tsarist reaction, and an island world that is home to the revolution. The main link between these two topoi is the Nikolaj Bridge over the restless Neva. The islands lie half shrouded in fog and mist. The mainland acquires features of the conscious side of the personality, while the archipelago figures as a seething, unruly subconscious. Unable to deal with the pressures beneath it, this "city-psyche" threatens to explode. Remarkably, it was precisely at the point where the split became clearly visible in the plot of the novel that the psychiatric concept of "schizophrenia" formulated by Eugen Bleuler a few years earlier had its breakthrough in Russia.[2]

[1] See Belyj, *Načalo veka*, ed. A. Lavrov (Moscow, 1990), 35.
[2] This happened in April-May 1912 while Belyj was working on the novel in Brussels. It was then, on 11 May 1912 (New Style) that Eugen Bleuler's theory of schizophrenia was introduced by Dr. Michail Kutanin at the Moscow University psychiatric clinic. See "Otčety o naučnych sobranijach vračej" in *Trudy Psichiatričeskoj kliniki Moskovskogo universiteta*, t. 1 (Moscow, 1913).

The dichotomy of the "city-psyche" can clearly be traced to Ėllis's Symbolist ideas, according to which the modern individual--not least Belyj--was catastrophically divided.[3] Although he declared that he admired insanity--the most basic personality split--as a higher insight, he was also afraid of it.[4] He sometimes agitated Belyj by telling him that the writer's "contour" had freed itself from him and--in conformity with the Romantic concept of the double--was living its own life.[5] He portrayed the world as a shadow kingdom in which the shadows had become the masters of their owners.[6] At the same time, Belyj suggests that Ėllis himself--physically obtrusive, whispering excitedly and provocative--sought to transform himself into precisely this emancipated shadow of Belyj's. Especially during the period of Belyj's overwrought polemic with the Petersburg writers around 1906-07, Ėllis assumed the role of the double on which the novel is partly based.[7]

Ėllis deliberately aroused and egged Belyj on with his suggestive maneuvers and improvisations as he acted out his shifting identities. Belyj notes in his various memoir portraits of him that his "soul" bore within it "the deepest enigma," that at bottom he "*was never what he seemed to himself and to us*."[8] He was a man of the night who shut out the light of day and "collected" dreams.[9] Our world was in the hands of the demiurge, this Baudelairian declared, so it was appropriate to contribute to its ongoing disintegration by playing with demonic forces. During the 1905 Revolution he went so far in his maximalism as to approve of terror. He had

[3] *Načalo veka,* 43.
[4] See Ėllis,"Dnevnik 1905 g." in *Pisateli simvolistskogo kruga. Novye materialy*, ed. A. Lavrov (St. Petersburg, 2009), 333-49 –and Belyj's memoir portrait of his friend in two sections of *Načalo veka* (39-64).
[5] Ibid., 59, Belyj, *Vospominanija ob A. A. Bloke* in *Andrej Belyj o Bloke,* ed. A. Lavrov (Moscow, 1997), 327.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Belyj, *Vospominanija ob A. A. Bloke*, 280-81, 327-28.
[8] Belyj, *Vospominanija ob Aleksandre Aleksandroviče Bloke* (Letchworth, Hertfordshire, 1964), 99, and *Vospominanija ob A. A. Bloke*, 42.
[9] He reportedly had 80 dreams in his arsenal. See Maks Vološin's diary entry of 8 December 1907 (New Style) in "*Sredotoč'e vsech putej…". Izbrannye stichotvorenija i poėmy. Proza. Kritika. Dnevniki* (Moscow, 1989), 509.

recurrent fantasies centered on "the bomb."[10] On some occasions he took the issue to its extreme: the choice was between rebellion and the monastery, between "the bomb" and "the hair shirt."[11]

When in chapter two of the novel the terrorist, who is significantly enough called the "Unknown One," arrives at the Ableuchov "yellow house" on Petersburg's magnificent mainland side clutching the formless bomb in "a not exactly small yet not very large" bundle and by his mere presence alarms young Nikolaj and frightens his high-ranking father Apollon, there are echoes of Ėllis's early visit to the writer's home in the Arbat and his provocative behavior toward Belyj's conservative father, Nikolaj Bugaev.[12] The "Unknown One"--with the revolutionary cover name the "Elusive One"--comes from the alien island world as a kind of messenger from Nikolaj's (and the mainland's) chaotic unconscious. The "yellow house" itself, which in Russian humorously connotes a "madhouse," was one of Ėllis's favorite expressions. He had sworn to the young Belyj that he [Belyj], who is so clearly evident in the portrait of Nikolaj, was destined to end up in "the yellow house."[13] He meant this in a positive sense, for: ". . . remember, the best ones find a haven in the yellow house."[14]

Nikolaj--symbolically enough on the Nikolaj Bridge--promised the terrorists to blow up his father, thereby accelerating the revolution. At the moment when the "Unknown One" shows up on his doorstep he is not fully aware of this promise. He has suppressed it. The whole unreality of the situation lies there shrouded in his psychic fog. Gradually as the pair converse, the truth dawns on him; it throws him into a panic because he is split and both wants and does not want to commit the assassination.

---

[10]See, for example, *Načalo veka*, 45, 48.
[11] Ibid., 47.
[12] *Načalo veka*, 50-52
[13] Ibid., 54.
[14] Ibid., 51.

His interlocutor talks about his poor, smoke-stained garret on Vasilij Island. As Elena Gluchovskaja has noted, he has both inner and external features in common with Ėllis: his glittering eyes (that initially pursued Nikolaj's father out in the city) and pale face, the mustache he keeps tweaking, the raised collar, not to mention his lonely obsessiveness and almost hysterical tension.[15] Gradually emerging more and more clearly in his description of his abode are details of Ėllis's boarding house room, which Gluchovskaja has also shown.[16] The "Unknown One" lives the same nocturnal life as Ėllis and is a prisoner of his visions. When he hasn't isolated himself in his attic he frequents noisy taverns, surrounded by sales clerks and coachmen. There is a connection with Ėllis here as well:[17] the gramophone music in the background—"The Negro's Dream"--is the same melody to which Ėllis would lip-synch in his identity games.[18]

As the "Unknown One" confesses to Nikolaj it is as though the confessor himself splits. He tells him that the satanic terrorist organizer, the even more anonymous "person" (*osoba*, which has the same Russian root as the word for "special") has materialized out of a water stain on his soiled wallpaper and taken control of him. He is forced to isolate himself to avoid the police, which has allowed the "Person" to become all-powerful in his life.

The plot that follows centers on the mysterious bundle and Nikolaj's growing anxiety. In a gradual inner process he admits to himself that he really has made the promise, that he harbors a desire to murder his father. Soon he begins fiddling with the dirty sardine can containing the infernal contraption and in a semiconscious state activates its timing mechanism. The ticking

---

[15] See Elena Gluchovskaja, "Znakomyj neznakomec, ili O vozmožnoj prisutstvii Ėllisa v romane Andreja Belogo "Peterburg"" in *Sed'maja meždunarodnaja letnjaja škola po russkoj literature. Sbornik statej* (St. Petersburg, 2011), 140-43. Like many of Belyj's other characters, of course, the "Unknown One" combines features of many individuals, but the Ėllis prototype is central..

[16] "Znakomyj neznakomec…", 145-46.

[17] "Znakomyj neznakomec…", 146-47.

[18] Ibid., 147. (*Načalo veka*, 49, 62-63.)

bomb is accompanied by dreams, trances, and peculiar spiritual convulsions as Nikolaj confronts within his being the entire destructive impulse of which the murder weapon itself is a manifestation. It was at this point in the writing process that Belyj, like Ėllis before him, joined Rudolf Steiner's Theosophical--soon to become Anthroposophical--colony. Steiner's cosmogony supplied him with powerful material for the novel, and it was not for nothing that it was Ėllis who became his guide in the world of the occult.[19]

Yet another meeting with the "Unknown One," who has now been given a name (or rather, à la Ėllis, a pseudonym), Aleksandr Dudkin, leads both Nikolaj and himself to the insight that they have both been deceived by the "Person," who at bottom is in his utter nihilism a provocateur, a slippery double-dealer. This "Person" gradually assumes more and more features of tsarist agent Azef. Just a few years after finishing the novel Belyj acknowledged that as a revolutionary Ėllis had been involved in a "political game" that had a connection with Azef's dual role.[20] In his memoirs, Belyj also calls Ėllis a "provocateur"--a deceptive chameleon who had no firm foundation for anything he did.[21] This--while the bomb ticks away--is the beginning of Nikolaj-Dudkin's awakening to who the "Person" really is.

Now, in the sixth chapter of the novel, Dudkin's impoverished and filthy home environment is depicted in even greater detail. As in Ėllis's room, there is a cot and a worn blanket that he once was given by his mother.[22] His father is never mentioned by so much as a word. It was like that with Ėllis as well. He had grown up with his mother. His father, Lev Polivanov, a prominent pedagogue whom Belyj venerated, had never adopted him. Their

[19] See especially Belyj, *Načalo veka. Berlinskaja redakcija (1923)*, ed. A. Lavrov (St. Petersburg, 2014), 753-757 - about Ėllis's arrival in April 1912 in Brussels, where he agitated Belyj and his partner Asja Turgeneva with expositions of the occult.
[20] Letter of 8 June 1916 to Natal'ja Pocco (Belyj file in the Goetheanum Archive, Dornach).
[21] "Znakomyj neznakomec…", 144. (*Načalo veka*, 45.)
[22] "Znakomyj neznakomec…", 146.

biological link remained a truth known to only a little circle of the initiated. The fact that Polivanov had played a central as role as a second father in Belyj's life during his years at the Gymnazium, of course, contributed to bringing him and Ėllis even closer to each other as a kind of foster brothers.

In his efforts to get as clear a picture as possible of the situation, Dudkin is drawn irresistibly to the "Person," who is now also identified as Lippančenko, a name that contains an allusion to his "stickiness" and repulsive intimacy (attributes reminiscent of Ėllis).[23] Dudkin goes to visit him at his dacha, which is located far out to the east in the outskirts of the archipelago. At this point it is Lippančenko, the "Special One," who acquires more and more features of Ėllis: Belyj, incidentally, speaks of the "special" nature of his friendship with Ėllis.[24] In a gesture typical of Ėllis, the ravenous Dudkin reaches for Lippančenko's Duchess pears (which according to Gluchovskaja was one of Ėllis's favorite fruits).[25] He desperately tries to overcome the leader's hold on him and reveal his duplicity, but Lippančenko knows how to defend himself, subduing Dudkin with his almost hypnotic gaze and impetuously shifting role-play. At his side the "hypnotist" has his corpulent lady friend Zoja Zacharovna Fleisch, obviously a caricature of the many plump, rather elderly maternal figures who took Ėllis under their wings.[26] She asserts that Lippančenko lives under great pressure, a price he must pay. She describes him as a child who cries out in anxiety at night and struggles with bad dreams and monsters—precisely how Belyj presents Ėllis in his memoirs.[27]

[23] Belyj uses the verb "prilipat'" to describe Ėllis (*Načalo veka*, 49, 62-3).
[24] Belyj, "Material k biografii (intimnyj), prednaznačennyj dlja izučenija tol'ko posle smerti avtora," RGALI, f. 53, op. 2, ed. chr. 3, l. 55.
[25] "Znakomyj neznakomec…", 139, 147. (*Načalo veka*, 49, 62-63.)
[26] "Znakomyj neznakomec…", 147. (*Načalo veka*, 49.)
[27] *Načalo veka*, 45.

At Lippančenko's Dudkin spots yet another evil projection of his own psyche: the mysterious Persian Šišnarfnė, who soon begins confronting him in a nightly hallucination when he returns to his garret. Dudkin has to the end tried to believe that it was merely the police wanting to search his room (something that happened to Ėllis after 1905). Now--like Ivan Karamazov--he is driven into "other worlds" and finds himself engaged in a conversation with the Devil himself. And this Devil, of course, expands on Ėllis's themes, elaborating the terrible fantasies that have been further stimulated by immersion in the occult realities that Rudolf Steiner conjured up for his two devoted Russian disciples.[28] At once comical and cosmic, the scene is reminiscent of Ėllis's torrential verbiage as described in Belyj's memoirs. Šišnarfnė declares that he inhabits a shadowy dimension that is a mirror image of life "down here." He says he belongs to the night, a Shadow of shadows that wants to enlist Dudkin in his mirror kingdom and through a criminal act tether him forever to the other side and give him his own "shadow passport." Mingling ailments and astral journeys, this caricature of Ėllis is both trivial and metaphysical. Perhaps Šišnarfnė is merely a smudge of soot on the window or a germ in the sick and rain-drenched city that has infected Dudkin.[29]

After all this Dudkin feels that he must overpower his evil half Lippančenko. He finally manages to break the hypnotic spell and commit a brutal murder—with a pair of nail scissors—out at Lippančenko's. The price he pays, however, is mental illness. At the moment of the murder, feverishly identifying with the Bronze Horseman on Senate Square as he sits astride his victim's corpse, Dudkin loses his mind. But of course he has borne the split within his own being the whole time, for Lippančenko is a part of himself.

[28] On Steiner's importance for *Peterburg* see my article "*Peterburg* and Switzerland" in *Twelve Essays on Andrej Belyj's Peterburg* (Gothenburg, 2009, 133-37).
[29] Significantly, in *Načalo veka* Belyj gives Ėllis recurrent demonic epithets (47, 49, 51, 329).

Dudkin will end up in the same predicament as Friedrich Nietzsche. Indeed, like Ėllis, he is a Nietzschean. Belyj was for a long time fixated on Nietzsche's psychic lapse into mental illness, never able to decide whether it was an act of freedom or a spiritual eclipse.[30] Here as well in the novel the question remains open, even if the satirical perspective predominates. The murder scene was in fact written at the same time (the summer of 1913) that Belyj definitively broke with Ėllis, who had just abandoned their shared occult "spiritual science" and entered his next "incarnation" as a Catholic.

Peterburg would seem to corroborate both Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung, who while the novel was taking shape began feuding with each other. Freud spoke of psychoanalysis (which at that point was becoming widely acknowledged in Russia) as a consciousness-raising process, a draining of the deepest unconscious strata of the psyche. Jung pointed to the Self--located between conscious and unconscious, like Nikolaj's bridge--as the part of the psyche that must reinforce the conscious foundations of the personality and curb the destructive forces within it. Jung's analytical psychology developed into a word of warning not unlike Belyj's: if humanity does not learn to master its inner demons, culture may collapse.[31]

Nikolaj has once again pushed the bomb out of his conscious mind and been reunited with his father and returning mother. When the explosion finally takes place in the yellow house he falls to his knees before his father and protests his innocence. In the epilogue he is sent out of the germ-infested city to foreign continents. He is finally repatriated to Russia, and he is seen in a village church, somewhat saintlike, perhaps--in a veiled reflection of Belyj's (and several of his friends') new involvement with Anthroposophy--on the way toward psychic rebirth. And with

[30] See A. Lavrov, *Andrej Belyj v 1900-e gody. Žizn' i dejatel'nost'* (Moscow, 1995), 111-12.
[31] On the correspondences between Belyj's prose and Jung's psychology and on Belyj's friend and Jung's patient (just after *Peterburg*) Ėmilij Metner as the living link between the two, see my *The Russian Mephisto. A Study of the Life and Work of Emilii Medtner* (Stockholm, 1994).

that the novel grows into a summary of the 1905 social upheaval experienced by an entire generation of Russians.

At the same time, anticipated in Dudkin's apocalyptic visions at the foot of the Bronze Horseman, *Peterburg* points forward toward new Russian disasters. Ėllis was remarkably prophetic. After the revolutionary illusions had faded, he remarked to the Menshevik Nikolaj Valentinov that the future in Russia would be horrific, an orgy of evil. All that really remained was to fall to your knees and pray.[32] His predictions came true. He may at first glance look like the elusive, myth-ridden decadent immortalized in Marina Cvetaeva's poem "Čarodej,"[33] but in the final analysis he appears as something more: a witness of the age, a seismograph, an expressionistic word-painter whose powers could only be fully manifested orally in verbal excesses and leaps of imagination.[34] And so it was that he came to provide substantial material for one of the great novels of the twentieth century.

Translated by Charles Rougle.

[32] N. Valentinov, *Two Years with the Symbolists,* ed. by G. Struve (Stanford, Calif., 1969), 160-62.
[33] As portrayed by Cvetaeva Ėllis constantly changes character. He is both angel and demon but also sorcerer, prince, knight, a hissing cobra, ventriloquist, king of tricksters, mutineer, werewolf and sacred dancer, as well as a Napoleon.
[34] Belyj also emphasizes that what he said far surpassed what he wrote (*Načalo veka*, 64).