

Magnus Ljunggren
The Uncle's Murder

1.

On 2 November 1911 Andrej Belyj sent a brief letter to Aleksandr Blok. It is one of the most important reports we have about his work on *Peterburg*, as it provides unique information on how he began writing the novel and what in particular occupied his mind during this initial stage. At this point he had already been writing intensely for several weeks and had given his planned sequel to *Serebrjanyj golub'* a name: *Lakirovannaja kareta*.¹ The title is a reference to the original beginning of the text, in which Senator Ableuchov sets off through central Petersburg, isolated and protected from a chaotic and menacing world in a lacquered carriage that like his lustrous house on the Neva Embankment has special symbolic significance. Already here there are associations both to the bombing of Interior Minister Pleve's carriage in the middle of Petersburg in the summer of 1904 and to the regular trips between home and the university that Belyj's father made in a hired carriage through central Moscow when Belyj was still a child—thus the revolutionary turmoil of 1905 was contaminated with his early memories of the Arbat in the 1880s. For the time being *Lakirovannaja kareta* remained the working title of the novel. It was not until a couple of months later in Petersburg itself that Vjačeslav Ivanov would give it its new and definitive name.

For several weeks now, Belyj had been staying together with Asja Turgeneva in the countryside outside Moscow, the only place where he could find the peace to work. Even more important, the city had become for him an expressionistic theme of horror and source of anxiety. He reports that once a week he was forced to have contact

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¹Belyj / Aleksandr Blok, *Perepiska 1903–1919*, ed. A. V. Lavrov (Moscow, 2001), 416.

with Moscow, but that every time he ran away from it “like a madman” with a bundle of newspapers that seemed to be full of nothing but horrible events such as the ongoing disturbances in China, where Sun Yat-Sen’s uprising had led to a civil war that Belyj juxtaposed with the so called “Kuprin incident,” a reference to the rumor that his fellow writer Aleksandr Kuprin and some colleagues had amused themselves during a drunken orgy by killing and hanging up cats from the ceiling, and the murder of the well-known public figure Petr Trubeckoj.²

Remarkably, Belyj does not mention the assassination a month previously of Prime Minister Stolypin at the Kiev Opera House. It is surely there in the subtext of the letter, however, and it is of obvious significance to the theme of terrorism in the novel. The murder was known to have been committed by a Jew, Dmitrij Bogrov, who, similarly to the likewise Jewish Azef, played a double role as a police spy actively involved in acts of terrorism. In the next passage of his letter Belyj notes that he has read Aleksej Šmakov’s *Svoboda i Evrei*, which, in the same vein as the so called *Protokoli Sionskich Mudrecov* in the wake of the 1905 Revolution, accused the Jews of involvement in a worldwide conspiracy mainly targeting Russia, a demonic intrigue in which everything was permitted. Šmakov was a notorious anti-Semite who actively participated on the side of the prosecution in the government-supported Bejlis case, which began at this time and would run parallel with Belyj’s work on the novel. Belyj does have some reservations—he declares to Blok that he has not become some sort of *černosotenec*—but he was clearly under the influence of the powerful nationalist-racist atmosphere that reigned in Russia at this moment in history.³ He feared a Mongolian-Semitic assault on the Russian nation, a dual threat that he concretized in the explicitly Mongolian-Semitic features of the diabolical terrorist leader Lippančenko’s repulsive physiognomy. Belyj was doubtless especially distressed by Ėmilij Metner’s and Anna Minclova’s militant racism—the former’s focusing on the Jews, the latter’s accentuating the threat from the East and the Tartars.

Thus the significant and the trivial are given equal space in Belyj’s letter—the revolution in China and the Jews’ alleged attempt to

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

dominate the world are juxtaposed with the consummate cynicism of certain writers and a murder without apparent political connotations. Belyj views all of these events as manifestations of a single phenomenon, namely the impact of destructive forces on both the macro- and microlevels, a Europe in the process of disintegration, looming apocalyptic perspectives. He says he hears “the movement of the races,” “the noise of time” — the latter expression would later recur as the title of a book by Osip Mandel’shtam — that would lead to the day when “peoples would rush to destroy each other.”⁴ At best perhaps Belyj’s racist diatribes can be read as a form of metaphysical confrontation with himself, especially in view of the fact that he would eventually incorporate so much of his own generation into the disgusting Lippančenko and expressly attempt to unveil the destructive “Mongolian” impulse in his alter ego, the young generation’s representative Nikolaj Ableuchov, the son who has sworn to murder his powerful and likewise “Mongolian” father in the name of the revolution. In such an interpretation the novel is a prophecy about Russia’s approaching cataclysms in the twentieth century.⁵

It is obvious from other letters to Blok around this time that Belyj associates the historical situation with both the Tartar conquest of medieval Russia and the invasion of 1812. He emphasizes in the correspondence that the Symbolist writers — himself, Blok, and Ivanov — must forget their earlier differences and join forces like medieval Russian princes in order to rescue the nation at this fateful hour. Their spiritual community and resistance is crucial if Russia is to withstand the alien assault.⁶ As is especially clear from his memoirs, a keyword for Belyj during these years is *begstvo*, frequently repeated on all levels: from the city, from suffocating, amoral, materialist civilization, away into new dimensions, away into a spiritual reality.⁷ Soon Rudolf Steiner’s Theosophy, subsequently reshaped as An-

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ilona Svetlikova’s insightful commentary on the novel in *The Moscow Pythagoreans. Mathematics, Mysticism, and Anti-Semitism in Russian Symbolism* (New York, 2013) lays particular emphasis on this Aryan-Semitic “racial conflict.”

⁶ Ibid., 395, 409.

⁷ Cf., for example, his summary of the situation in letters to Blok of 22/23 March 1912, shortly before Belyj left Moscow: “net — bežať, bežať, bežať!” (ibid., 443). See also my article “The Street Chase in *Mednyj vsadnik* as the Keynote Theme in *Peterburg*”, *Med blicken österut. Hyllningsskrift till Per-Arne Bodin*, ed. P. Ambrosiani et al.

throposophy, would become the means by which he would accomplish this goal, providing the refugee from Russia occult spiritual training that aspired to deter destructive psychological impulses and elevate the soul of the individual and eventually that of the people to a higher consciousness. As Belyj becomes a member of the Anthroposophical Society in 1913, in the epilogue to the novel Nikolaj Ableuchov flees urban civilization once and for all.

This persistent flight motif may ultimately hark back to Evgenij's desperate scramble to escape the statue of Peter the Great he has challenged in *Mednyj vsadnik*, a chase that to a high degree is the blueprint for the novel. In the apocalyptic final scene of the second chapter, a key passage that (judging by almost identical wordings) Belyj sketched out at the time he wrote the letter to Blok, the bomb-thrower Dudkin, after having confronted the terrified senator in his carriage on Nevskij Prospekt and delivered the bomb that is to serve as the murder weapon, has a vision at the foot of the Bronze Horseman of approaching racial war and the Tartar conquest of Russia. Like Evgenij before him, he flees in panic. Later in the novel he will choose to make common cause with the rampaging Horseman and infuse boiling bronze into his veins to give him the strength to lift himself out of dependence on the Mongolian-Semitic terror. Here the Horseman seems to symbolize national destiny, but it leads Dudkin down the wrong path. His *begstvo* is over, but he merely unleashes new violence by brutally murdering the terrorist leader, and he ends up losing his mind.

2.

Thus in his important letter to Blok Belyj refers to the recent murder of Petr Trubeckoj as a momentous sign of the times that is apparently comparable to the outbreak of revolution in China. How can he attribute such significance to this crime? What was it that really happened on 17 October 1911 in Novocherkassk just as he was embarking on his project?

The 53-year-old Trubeckoj was a figure with a broad political background. Marshal of the Nobility in Moscow, a member of the State Council, he was also noted for having built up a network of

(Stockholm Slavic Papers 23) (Stockholm, 2014), 227–232.

Russian charitable institutions. He was both a man of extraordinary social skills and a very talented practical organizer. He owned a great deal of land in Ukraine and was at home in many different spheres. He was charming and charismatic, an extrovert and a good mixer who particularly enjoyed female company. Suddenly he was shot by his own nephew, 27-year-old Vladimir Kristi. Kristi was an intellectual seeker of truth of Belyj's generation, four years his junior, who after the 1905 Revolution had gone through a Tolstoyan phase, wandering barefoot around the country in search of the meaning of life and working in the fields together with the peasants. At an early age he had married a young beauty, Marija Michalkova, but according to newspaper reports of the murder, their relationship had successively cooled, and she began tormenting him by flirting provocatively with other men. She evidently became especially involved with his uncle, who, middle-aged charmer and ladies' man that he was, is said to have risen to the occasion and played along. It infuriated Kristi, whose jealousy and sense of personal humiliation were reported to have driven him to commit the crime.⁸

Belyj never met Petr Trubeckoj, but he did know his philosopher half-brothers Sergej and Evgenij. Sergej had played an especially important role in his life. He was a close acquaintance of his father, mathematician Nikolaj Bugaev (a man with his own strong philosophical interests), who was a leading representative of the professorial generation in Moscow that Belyj's Symbolism in many respects attacked and challenged. Belyj later described his 1902 debut prose work *Simfonija (2-ja, dramatičeskaja)* as a "bomb" thrown into a Moscow that was dominated by these professors.⁹ This bomb struck down his father (who died of heart disease shortly thereafter), and it most certainly struck Sergej Trubeckoj, who following Belyj's debut seemed to be invisibly accusing (and subsequently opposing) him for his "deed." Soon, during the climactic phase of the 1905 Revolution, Trubeckoj, then rector of Moscow University, unexpectedly died. Belyj's guilt-ridden obituary¹⁰ suggests that he perhaps felt guilty for this sudden demise.¹¹ Here, in fact, is an important source of the intrigue in *Peterburg*, for during the very same period in Octo-

⁸ See "K ubijstvu kn. P. N. Trubeckogo," *Utro Rossii* 6(19) October 1911.

⁹ Belyj, *Na rubeže dvuch stoletij*, ed. A. V. Lavrov (Moscow, 1989), 348.

¹⁰ Belyj, "Knjaz' S. N. Trubeckoj," *Vesy* 9—10 (1905).

ber 1905 when Trubeckoj passed away, Senator Ableuchov, surrounded by his son's murky plans of murder and the threat of revolution and the bomb, clutches at his heart in his lacquered carriage. Soon, physically and psychologically broken by the pressure of the dramatic chain of events, he decides to leave his post as head of the huge bureaucracy. The text of the novel, in fact, very specifically alludes to Sergej Trubeckoj's funeral procession through Petersburg.¹²

Thus what had happened was that the half-brother of this prematurely deceased paternal figure, like himself politically active, had been shot by his nephew, who like Nikolaj Ableuchov was a senator's son and (at least earlier) had been influenced by the Tolstoyan spirit of rebellion. These connections would seem to have some significance for the plot of Belyj's novel. In addition, there was also an Oedipally-colored love triangle involving a rivalry between "son" and "father." What Belyj does in the novel is to interweave the political and erotic motifs.

Here there are two triangles. Nikolaj is closely bound to his mother, who has left his senator father for a frivolous romantic affair with a young lover who has perhaps realized Nikolaj's own secret dream. Nikolaj's own parallel romantic failure with Sof'ja Lichutina, whose army officer husband in several respects echoes Senator Ableuchov, drives Nikolaj to promise the terrorists he will murder his father, and at that point the two triangles merge. As has often been pointed out, the escapade with Lichutina harks back to Belyj's obsession in Petersburg with Ljubov' Blok. His fellow poet was his rival on several levels, and at the same time Lichutina also has features in common with Belyj's mother (who flirted with her Petersburg admirers in Belyj's childhood). In letters while the affair was going on and later in his memoirs, Belyj declared that his failed romance with Ljubov' Blok around the time of the 1905 Revolution aroused murderous thoughts in him (as well as increased terrorist sympathies).¹³ What he read in the press about Vladimir Kristi's wife

¹¹ Belyj, *Na rubeže dvuch stoletij*, 364; Belyj, *Načalo veka*, ed. A. V. Lavrov (Moscow, 1990), 276.

¹² Belyj, *Peterburg*, ed. L. K. Dolgopolov (Moscow, 1981), 77, 665 (note 25).

¹³ Cf. Belyj's letter of January 1907 to Ėmilij Metner (RGB, f. 167 (Metner), op. 1, kart. 1, ed. chr. 51), *Vospominanija ob A. A. Bloke* in *Andrej Belyj o Bloke*, ed. A.V. Lavrov (Moscow, 1997), 238, and *Meždu dvuch revoljucij*, 79, 92.

must have activated his memories of what he perceived to be Ljubov' Blok's narcissistic trifling with his feelings. In his memoirs he talks about vapid *kukly* (precisely the same terms used to describe Sof'ja Lichutina) whose artful games triggered criminal impulses in young men. He cites the example of his friend Ėmilij Metner's brother-in-law, who at about this time, in 1906, first murdered a young woman who had toyed with his emotions and then took his own life.¹⁴

It is quite clear that Senator Ableuchov entirely lacks Petr Trubeckoj's documented charisma. He is an absent-minded and anxiety-ridden reactionary who is closely related to Belyj's father.¹⁵ In his political role, of course, Ableuchov has also borrowed features from Ober-Prokurator Pobedonoscev, who ossified life in Russia and was finally forced out of office by the events of 1905. At the same time, it should be noted that the reactionary Pobedonoscev also made significant contributions to charitable institutions—as did Trubeckoj and also, incidentally, State Secretary and Actual Privy Councillor Otto Buksgevdén, who was murdered in 1907 in Petersburg by his mentally disturbed son (whom Belyj erroneously believed to be a revolutionary). Here, then, is yet another source of inspiration for the theme of patricide in the novel.¹⁶

There is yet another central reality behind this web of intrigue. Belyj knew another senator's son—Leonid Semenov-Tjan'-Šanskij, a Petersburg native who wrote poetry in the Symbolist vein who had also been pressed into participating in the terror and had even for a moment contemplated murdering Grand Duke Vladimir. Immediately thereafter he converted to a Tolstoyan and “went out to the people.”¹⁷ There is no mistaking the significance of Semenov's personal example to the structuring of the novel, and in Belyj's inner eye he and Kristi may conceivably even have converged to some degree. For in the epilogue Nikolaj Ableuchov appears as a kind of Tolstoyan—he has fled the city and tramps through the fields reading

¹⁴ Belyj, *Meždu dvuch revolucij*, 125.

¹⁵ In her study Svetlikova emphasizes the distinctly Aryan component of the elder Bugaev's mathematically-based philosophy.

¹⁶ See “The Real Patricide behind *Peterburg*” in my *Twelve Essays on Andrej Belyj's Peterburg* (Gothenburg, 2009), 45–50.

¹⁷ See Belyj, *Načalo veka*, 277–81 (the chapter “Leonid Semenov”).

the eighteenth-century philosopher Skovoroda, whose pragmatic Christianity was a predecessor of Tolstoj's doctrine. Belyj himself had now discovered Rudolf Steiner in the role of a second Tolstoj. His goal was no longer social reform but self-perfection through meditation.

3.

For Belyj, then, the outbreak of revolution in China and the murder of Petr Trubeckoj exactly one week apart, on 10 and 17 October 1911, respectively, were paradoxically connected. Both pointed toward the same thing: the crisis of civilization, a cultural catastrophe. What was needed at such a moment was to flee and pursue moral self-control as a means of defending both oneself and the nation. Thus through a network of personal associations, the drama in Novocherkassk came to cast something of a shadow over what was to become *Peterburg*. To some small degree the rebellion of a jealous husband against a prominent member of the State Council seems to have helped Belyj to structure his novel by allowing him to weave not only erotic and political but also private and, in the broad sense, cultural-philosophical strands into the plot.

*Translated by Charles Rougle
Dates are according to the Gregorian Calendar*