

Thirddnesses: Creative Cognition in Andrei Bely's Symbolist Metaphysics and the Semiotics of Peircean Epistemology

Rachel Funari

Tripartite models of existence are as old as Western philosophy itself. Aristotle conceived of existence as form and matter united in substance, while Christianity defines the Trinity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Both phenomenological and epistemological systems use trichotomies to explain the ineffable, for example psychology (Ego, Id and Superego) and linguistics (signifier, signified, sign). Whether the ineffable – cause, meaning, origin, truth – be conceived of as metaphysical and divine or merely immaterial and unknowable, reality is usually understood in opposition to it. This essay demonstrates how a metaphysical theory, Andrei Bely's symbolism, and an epistemological theory, C S Peirce's semiotics, both figure reality as an activity of the human subject, a welding of sense and thought that is much more a realisation of the ineffable than in opposition to it. For these thinkers, without the welding of immaterial and material through a human act of embodiment, there is no experience of the world. In their foreword to volume one of *The Essential Peirce*, Nathan Houser and Christian Koesel note that the collected essays of the book were written “while Peirce’s realism was limited to a single universe, that of thirddness – or the world of thought.”¹ This third world of thought is also the realm of reality for Bely.

The Symbolist movement in Russia arose in the 1870s, seeking a new language to express both the transcendental and the personal, a language

of images to embody the deepest emotional experience and reject the prosaic, customary and rational in the contemporary world. Bely became a prominent thinker of the movement in the early 1900s, transforming symbolism from a “method into a complex metaphysical philosophy”² of the symbol, which was heavily influenced by theosophy and theurgy. Indeed, Bely himself understood symbolism as a rearticulation of older metaphysical models: “It is as though we were reliving in our own age the entire past: India, Persia, Egypt, as well as Greece and the Middle Ages all rise up and pass before us... For it is in the overwhelming abundance of the old that the newness of symbolism is to be found.”³ American logician, mathematician and philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, writing in the last half of the nineteenth century and overlapping at the turn of the century with Bely, elaborated his theories of thirdness, or trichotomy, over many papers and was a pioneer of semiotics.⁴ His semiotics is founded on the thirdness of the sign, which is a uniting principle (of subject and predicate, of object and interpretant). Bely’s symbolism and Peirce’s semiotics can be understood as locating reality within a creative act of human cognition.

Bely’s most famous novel, *Petersburg*,⁵ was written in 1916 (and subsequently revised). Its publication prompted other Russian novelists such as Pasternak⁶ to include Bely in the top echelon of modern writers. Vladimir Nabokov considered *Petersburg* to be one of the greatest novels of the twentieth century.⁷ *Petersburg* uses symbols in three major ways: to present the Symbolist worldview; to represent the inner states of characters; and to demonstrate that living in the “real” world of the symbol is to take action that results in the symbolisation of the self. These three functions of the symbolic together demonstrate how Bely’s metaphysical symbolism adds morality to the more strictly pragmatic epistemological semiotics of Peirce.

In “What is a Sign?”⁸ Peirce defines the sign as something that “conveys to the mind an idea about a thing.”⁹ The essence of the sign is its use as a mediator between thought and thing, realising being as the unity of the cognition it expresses. A thing can be material or immaterial, concrete or abstract, thought or physicality, as it is simply the subject of cognition. A sign, then, turns things (or objects) into representations of understanding, which in turn are used to create new understandings, or cognition. Existence is a function of the sign, an effect of consciousness rather than a reality outside of the human being’s ability to perceive. Signs are the tools of representation that allow qualities to be conceptualised through comparison with the qualities of other things. The trichotomy of the sign – thing (object), thought (interpretant), mediator/representation (representamen) – is based on the trichotomy of conception, in which the fact of being unites an undifferentiated substance with particular qualities in order to create a definite

object: the substance defined. For Peirce, this is a process from the manifold (being) to unity (substance), and the originating trichotomy that realises thingness consists of “ground,” an abstraction by which we understand a quality of a thing; “correlate,” some other thing which exemplifies the quality; and “interpretant,” an idea that allows a subject to give meaning to an object by relating the correlate and ground.¹⁰

Let us use a mouse to demonstrate this theory of conception. We see something quick and grey scurry across our line of sight. We ask ourselves, “What is it?” Quick, grey, and scurrying are all conceptualisations that we have already encountered, say in a car, in a suit jacket, and in an old man in a rush. These three objects are all signs, but clearly the mass that ran across our sight was neither a car, a jacket, nor an old man. The image that then arises in our mind to unite the concepts of grey, scurry and quick is that of a mouse. Thus we use that mental image¹¹ to understand that what scurried across our line of vision was a mouse. The mouse becomes real to us because as a sign it expresses the qualities of quickness, scurrying and greyness that we so briefly encountered.

In “On a New List of Categories,”¹² Peirce identifies three types of sign that relate an interpretant to an object: icon, index and symbol. In the above example the car, old man, and jacket are all examples of indexes, as they point to shared qualities with the object of attention (mouse). Other mice, the ones we have seen before or looked at in books, serve as icons because they offer a direct reflection of the object. Finally, the word “mouse” is a symbol because it shares no qualities with the physical mouse but has come to represent it through association or convention. The subjectiveness of this schema is part of Peirce’s pragmatism (as his philosophy came to be labelled), his view that reality is located in the usefulness of a belief rather than its transcendent truth. Peirce’s semiotics is pragmatic because the meanings of a sign are not based on an objective truth external to it but on their usefulness and sense within the system of cognition.

Symbolism, as discussed in Bely’s “The Emblematics of Meaning,” is a response to systems of meaning such as Peirce’s, which Bely saw as divorcing thought from feeling and meaning from teleology.¹³ Bely in particular responded to Kant’s epistemology, but Peirce’s semiology is rooted in a similar logic to Kant’s, one that does not try to understand that which cannot be known, that which is outside of cognition. Bely’s symbolism is a metaphysical understanding of being. It accepts that what cannot be known exists and is part of (though also prior to) conception and can be experienced or affirmed, though not known. Bely calls this truth of being “value,” and similarly to Peirce’s pragmatism, this value is rooted in a sense of usefulness. However, for Bely, usefulness is transcendent truth and value its

ineffable grounding: “This value is not determined by cognition. On the contrary, it is value that determines cognition. In fact, the formation of a concept of value is impossible...”¹⁴

Bely’s sense of value is taken from philosopher Heinrich Rickert’s notion of purposiveness¹⁵ and, despite its ineffability, Steven Cassedy attempts to define it, describing value as an affirmation of a judgement of the necessity of a thing.¹⁶ On this personal level of judgement and affirmation, Bely’s symbol unites feeling (which is one sense of value) with an object (again, not necessarily material). Thus, the process of symbolisation is one of expressing meaning by giving value to being. Bely’s symbol, which like Peirce’s sign is a trichotomy that results in unity, realises the truth of being. It operates across all areas of human knowledge, uniting an idea with its value. This embodiment of the affirmation of life in a willed recognition is a creative act for Bely and gives the symbol a positive quality that the sign does not have for Peirce. The symbol introduces ethics into cognition by way of value, allowing the normative to transcend to the ideal through purposiveness. To be ethical is to act with purposiveness, having affirmed the value of a thing.¹⁷ Symbolisation, then, points to ethical action by embodying value.

Peirce also finds a sense of value in signs, though this value is one of complexity of function rather than affirmation of will, thus relating more to the sign itself than the person who creates the sign. For Peirce, a sign with the most value is one that acts as all three types of signs:

The value of an icon consists in its exhibiting the features of a state of things regarded as if it were purely imaginary. The value of an index is that it assures us of positive fact. The value of a symbol is that it serves to make thought and conduct rational and enables us to predict the future. ... The most perfect of signs are those in which the iconic, indicative, and symbolic characters are blended as equally as possible.¹⁸

Despite the lack of transcendence that such a sign offers (its value is not outside or separate from the sign) this idea of a multivalent sign is quite similar to Bely’s symbol, with iconicity providing the link between inner feeling and the form of the symbol, indicativeness embodying the inner feeling in the form, and the symbolic providing something like Bely’s notion of value – the utility of the sign. That said, Bely does not relate rationality to the symbol. The symbol can make thought and conduct true and right, which is not at all the same thing as rational.

For Peirce, a thing comes into existence through a proposition. The proposition must have the three parts that make thinghood: a subject, a

predicate and a copula. The copula is “is,” or the fact of being.¹⁹ Bely’s symbol also requires a proposition, but the copula of a Symbolist statement is not simply “is” but “Let it be.” In addition, Bely adds an affirming “Yes” to his proposition, which he likens to Kant’s categorical imperative and refers to as a judgment. This affirming statement of recognised value is a fourthness that recognises the triplicity of the symbol.²⁰ In this way, Bely’s system also sees the realm of human experience as one created by human understanding. Without a sense of value an object is not real; if it is perceived without the creative act of valuing that makes an object into a symbol, it is merely a form without content, a Peircean symbol that can never be an icon or index, a symbol drained of its ethical value. Bely writes:

Purposiveness is a metaphysical condition for theory of knowledge. From this it is clear that the transformation of epistemology into metaphysics occurs at that fateful moment when we realize that we are introducing an ethical element into cognition.²¹

The ethics of Bely’s symbol is demonstrated in *Petersburg* through the major characters of the novel, all of whom struggle with a major dilemma: for Nikolai, whether to kill his father; for Dudkin, whether to support Lippanchenko’s Party activities; for Apollon, a way to give up his exalted position in the bureaucracy. Symbolisation can be an act of bad ethics. For example Apollon’s penchant for symbolising everything into his beloved geometric shapes – squares, parallelepipeds and cubes²² – figuratively presents his desire for order, justice, the rightness of Law. Nikolai’s donning of the red domino is his attempt to symbolise himself as Sophia Petrovna’s insult (“red buffoon”). The wrongness of this act, its creative force emerging from desire, revenge and self-flagellation, is symbolised in Nikolai’s inability to be the domino with dignity: he stumbles, trips or runs away, flailing awkwardly.

In *Petersburg*, when a symbol is an embodiment of the ethically good, or positive value, it is the symbolisation not of desire but of sacrifice, when desire is turned into a sacrificial act that affirms a person’s role in time, in space, in history, in reality. The sacrificial act of symbolism is transcendent because the symbolisation not only happens in the here and now, but is part of a history of symbolisation, desire and sacrifice that repeats in time, in space, in other people’s lives and in their own symbolisations. Thus Dudkin’s final sacrifice, his self-symbolisation, in suicide, is influenced by the Flying Dutchman and recalls the Bronze Horseman, both representations of Peter the Great (xii; 10; 304; 352).

Bely’s notion of a symbol is similar to Peirce’s idea of an index in function, but not in purpose or value. Both Peirce’s index and Bely’s symbol

represent by pointing to a concept rather than being a likeness of a concept or merely associated with a concept. But, for Bely, a symbol is a creative embodiment of cognition rather than a mere representation of it. This gives Bely's symbol not only a transcendence that is not given to Peirce's index (because the symbol becomes something greater than and separate from its parts) but a metaphoric function that lies in the deeply personal. As a creative act, not one of pure cognition, the making of a symbol is an act of will to externalise the internal in an image, and a choice of what image will best express the internal experience.

The iconicity of the symbol, the shared qualities that it points to, may be several steps removed. Let us, again, take the mouse for an example. This time, however, the mouse is Bely's, offered as a symbol in *Petersburg*. When Bely writes "a mouse!" in the novel, his words do not represent an actual mouse but the Senator, Apollon Apollonovich Abluekhov, who is associated with a mouse through his big ears, his greyness, and his scurrying. The coupling of the idea of "mouse" and the qualities of the Senator in the image of mouse creates a new meaning of "Senator-as-elusively-underfoot-and-about-to-be-trapped," and hence the mouse is a symbol. This use of symbols is one method in which Bely constructs the circular structure of the novel, referring to events that will or have already happened. For example, when Nikolai receives the bomb from Dudkin, a mouse gets caught in a trap. The mouse runs around in circles, but is not killed. Dudkin expresses revulsion towards the mouse, but the narrator tells us that Nikolai has "a tender feeling toward mice," (54) which foreshadows Nikolai's agony over whether he does or does not want to murder his father. Either way, the Senator cannot escape the trap that has been set for him, nor does he die in it.

Just as symbols can be interpreted by the reader they can also be misinterpreted by Bely's characters. Dudkin is horrified at the plot to murder the Senator, and his revulsion for the mouse is an indication of his unawareness that the mouse is symbolic of the Senator (compared to Nikolai's awareness of Apollon's presence within the mouse), which is in turn symbolic of his obliviousness to how he is being used by Lippanchenko in the plot to murder the Senator. Saying that Nikolai and Dudkin attribute (or fail to attribute) symbolic meaning to the mouse is not to say that as characters they have symbolised the mouse but that Bely, through his narrator, uses symbols such as the mouse to guide the reader's understanding of the relationships between people, events, and their consciousness and unconsciousness of their roles in the world around them.

Quite apart from the characters' symbolising, the narrator largely tells his story through symbolisation. The visual elements of the novel are sym-

bolic of a character's inner state (or the mind of the people – bureaucrats, students, soldiers, workers), or an indication that someone's inner state will end up acting upon another character. The narrator uses features, colour, weather, animals and gesture as symbols. He also uses repetitiveness of phrases and sentences to signal to his reader when they should recognise a symbol. For example, the narrator highlights who is being noticed, who is hiding, and how they are being noticed – or symbolised – by other characters through facial features. Sophia Petrovna continually effaces herself, burying her nose in her muff, while other characters are perceived as noses, as if they were simply protuberances of the city, threatening forms to sniff one out.

Colours are used to represent states of mind. When a character is alone and secure, present in his or her self, not being symbolised by others, there is whiteness: "On this extraordinary morning, a little figure, all in dazzling white, sprang out of dazzling white sheets... It [Apollon] began, as was its habit, to firm up its body with calisthenics" (70). Likhutin prays while kneeling "in a dazzling white shirt crossed by suspenders" (86). Mostly, people wander around in greyness (the colour of fog, the colour of officers) and their houses and living spaces are yellow (the colour of the state and insanity, the colour of the Mongols, the colour of death and stagnation). Red is the colour of emotion and revolution.

Eyes are an important symbol in the novel, a character's will or value made visible. Likhutin, for example, is described as wearing "dark blue spectacles, and no one knew the colour of his eyes, nor their marvellous expression" (45). Apollon notices Dudkin from a crowd because Dudkin's eyes "grew rabid, dilated, lit up and flashed." Apollon himself symbolises those eyes, his consciousness hurling Dudkin toward him with "dizzying speed" as "an immense crimson sphere." When the sphere turns into Dudkin's eyes, Apollon "understood rather than remembered" that Dudkin has a package (the bomb) in his hands. In that moment, Apollon understands that Dudkin is a bringer of death to him, his heart reacting to the bundle by dilating, feeling like "a crimson sphere about to burst into pieces." The two images of a red circle link Dudkin with Apollon's heart, but this awareness is only momentary for Apollon. The symbol of Dudkin's eyes, his face, fades as later Apollon is "perplexed by the difficulty of assigning it to any of the existing categories" (14). Here Apollon is purely cognising and cannot create a new category (assassins?) to encompass Dudkin, though every time Apollon encounters Dudkin he will associate him with his eyes.²³

The symbolic is the world as created by humans to realise their emotional lives, and the world in which they can make change – alter themselves and take their places in history. Petersburg, as a city, is a particu-

larly apt symbol of symbolisation because it was a city created by a monarch to embody his personal conception of what a city should be. It is in a quite literal way a symbolic city. By using Petersburg as the setting of his novel, Bely turns Petersburg into an index referring to the city of recent Russian literary tradition, that city created by Pushkin, Gogol, and others.²⁴ However, the narrator of Bely's story makes Petersburg into a symbol of the real, the third world, the one Bely describes in "The Magic of Words":

Outside of speech there is neither nature, world, nor cognizing subject. In the word is given the original act of creation. The word connects the speechless invisible world swarming inside the subconscious depths of my individual consciousness with the speechless, senseless world swarming outside my individual ego. The word creates a new, third world: a world of sound symbols by means of which both the secrets of a world located outside me and those imprisoned in a world inside me come to light.²⁵

Petersburg can be understood as a symbol for the word, sound materialised. It is the third place, the realm of the symbol where action joined with creative thought is embodied through value. Petersburg, radiant with lit and shimmering objects and peopled by men with noses and bowlers, is also a city of shadows and myriapods, the disconnected inner selves of the discontented and revolutionary. The world of bowlers meets the world of shadow selves in Petersburg, which unifies these worlds in the symbol, allowing the shadow to don a bowler and realise himself as substantiated hallucination.

In Bely's metaphysics, because the symbol is the realisation of the internal in the external, the realm of the symbol is the real. For Peirce, reality as interpreted experience cannot exist without cognition, which creates the thirdness that is reality out of an object and a meaning. But for Bely experience can exist without reality as created through symbolisation, lived through either the world of thought and feeling or that of action and materiality. The characters of *Petersburg* generally only glimpse the world of the real, living most often through thought or action but unable to unite these worlds within the symbolic. Some shuttle between the two worlds of unreality, and others, namely Nikolai and Dudkin, are vouchsafed time in the third realm of the real through their abuse of alcohol or by way of hallucinations and dreams. The two revolutionaries live mostly in the shadow world of thought. The Party itself is in the shadow world, existing on thought divorced from value, rendering those of its revolutionaries who would like to live in the real, such as Dudkin and Nikolai, impotent to act. Nikolai decides that his inability to eat, dream, and love like everyone else began once he

made his promise of patricide to the party (229), while Dudkin goes increasingly mad after the value of his ideas was lost during his exile (57-60).

Dudkin's hallucinated conscience, Shishnarfne, who initially appears as a very material presence to Dudkin, situates Petersburg in the fourth dimension, whose citizens must gain passports to enter:

"Petersburg is the fourth dimension which is not indicated on maps, which is indicated merely by a dot. And this dot is the place where the plane of being is tangential to the surface of the sphere and the immense astral cosmos. A dot which in the twinkling of an eye can produce for us an inhabitant of the fourth dimension, from whom not even a wall can protect us. A moment ago I was one of the dots by the window sill, but now I have appeared..."

"You need a passport **here**. However, you are also registered there. The passport has been made out inside you. You yourself will put our signature on it inside you by performing an extravagant little action. It will come, it will come." (207)

Dudkin will confirm his passport to the fourth dimension – symbolise himself – when he murders Lippanchenko and commits suicide on top of the dead body so that he will appear to his witnesses as an icon of the Bronze Horseman. His material self will be transformed into a symbol that is the image of his despair, his final action realising his rejection of the thoughtless world of shadows and participation in the realm of the real that seeks to co-opt history from its cycles of stagnation. This is a symbolisation of the self realised in an act of sacrifice, which in the world of Bely's novel provides the only permanent access to reality – creative cognition leading to action that contributes to the flow of history.

Unlike Dudkin and Nikolai who are impotent in their worlds of thought, Likhutin and Apollon are able to act, but their actions have become divorced from meaning. Apollon makes laws and shows up at ceremonies, but his cognition has become stagnant, dead, one of empty "blissful outlines of parallelepipeds, parallelograms, cones, and cubes" (158). Likhutin is an officer and a husband who lays down marital law and martial order, but his actions are no longer informed from within himself, and do not express his desire or will.

Dudkin is not the only character in *Petersburg* who becomes a symbol of himself. A person can be symbolised by others as well as himself. Sergei Sergeevich Likhutin, for example, is made of wood, his body becoming cypress when he is angry and his wooden fist raising as if to bash something: "Sometimes his wooden fist, which seemed to be carved from fragrant hard wood, raised above the little table, and it seemed that any mo-

ment the little table would fly into pieces" (89). This raised wooden fist is the active material manifestation of his self-repression, crushing the emotion he will not show to his wife. Likhutin is like a wooden man to Sophia. She is unaware of how much he wants to love and touch her, and the position that serves him as his identity is unclear to her – he "is in charge of provisions somewhere out there" (42). When she does reach out to him, reacts to his emotion, Likhutin can only reply, "Nothing... in particular" (89). Likhutin is not only a symbol of empty authority to Sophia's salon guests ("that army type" (42)) but he becomes a symbol of "nothing in particular" to his wife and is thereby alienated from her and from his own emotions, unable to live as someone in particular.

Sergei Sergeevich's symbolisation by others is a symptom of his symbolisation of himself. He had achieved a creative life in a way that the other characters have not been able to, making himself of cypress like the icon he prays to (86), a solid and smooth representation of goodness. But his creative cognition has ceased and he is turning into an icon rather than a symbol – a dead representation of the affirmation of being. Sergei Sergeevich's symbolic self becomes abstracted, putrid (in the language of Bely²⁶), as he ceases to be creative and merely represents an empty image of authority, no longer enacting the value of the roles he embodies. As he becomes more abstract – as husband, as organiser of provisions, as protector, as authority, and most of all as an embodiment of his culture – he metaphorically dies, symbolised in his suicide attempt.

The suicide attempt is a creative act of self-symbolisation, a resurrection of value. But, as with Jesus, whom he is symbolically connected with, Sergei Likhutin rises again. He does not die by hanging but saves himself in the end, finding action instead of death, reconnecting his symbolic self with his value as a citizen of Petersburg and supporter of the bureaucracy by attempting to save Apollon Apollonovich. In one sense Likhutin is the most pure of *Petersburg's* characters because he attempts to live as a symbol, in a "real" world of thoughtful action, but ultimately his psychological neediness undermines his effort. The last time we see Likhutin acting, he is pleading to Nikolai to allow him to fix his coat, allowing Nikolai's reality to subsume his own in the desperate desire to be liked. Perhaps it is only in death, such as Dudkin's, that "reality" can be achieved once and for all.

All of the major characters in the novel are forced by their city to experience being in the material world of noses and bedsheets; in the cosmic world of planets and geometry, universal space and eternity; in the historical world of political forces and social upheavals; and in the psychological world of sex, ego, and the void. However, only one of these worlds spurs a character to action. The truth of value appears to be located precisely in the

connection of all these worlds, but for each character reality can only be comprehended in one. The modern Russians that Bely creates are defined by their desire not to live in the real, to avoid the responsibility of moral choice that this entails. The existential crises that the characters must go through in order to become moral actors, to recover the loss of autonomy of their “self-knowing ‘I’” (211; 212) and the dislocation of their self-contained centre, is rooted in their inability to integrate the different categories of experience into reality.

Nikolai, unlike Likhutin, is never able to symbolise himself ethically, to take right creative action. His attempts at symbolisation always stem from a place of self-disregard and thus his symbolic actions are destructive. Nikolai’s promise to the Party is a symbol. He made it when he symbolised the Petersburg citizen (“And thus it consisted of the promise that had come into being at the Bridge – there, there – in a pure gust of Neva wind, when over his shoulder he had caught sight of bowler, cane, mustache...”) as embodying his inner feeling of disgust with the biological:

And he understood that everything that exists is ‘spawn.’ People as such do not exist: they are all ‘things conceived.’ Apollon Apollonovich is a ‘thing conceived,’ an unpleasant sum of blood, skin, and meat – and meat sweats and goes bad at warm temperatures.

Nikolai’s destructive impulse arose upon the inflammation of his lust for Sophia Petrovna and his disgust with this lust: “there is something wrong with the way he experienced feelings of passion” (229). This sexual disgust becomes nihilism when Nikolai chooses his father as its symbol. Nikolai circularly associates lust with sex and sex with his father and his father with things and things with their eventual deterioration. The double meaning of the word “conceive” seems to prove that the physical body is an illusion and should be destroyed. In this way Bely does not make acts of symbolisation purely conceptual. They stem from the deepest psychology of a person – desire. Nikolai’s promise, then, is the symbol of his desire to blow apart “this decrepit earthen vessel” (230), his own, his father’s, and the people’s, which will all be a consequence of his act of patricide.

Nikolai experiences his nihilism through the symbols of zeros and 1 (225-226). 1 is the singular person he wants to be and the infinity of zeros are the bursting circles of never-ending irrelevance that he feels he is. Nikolai’s sense of unimportance is realised physically in his experience of himself as ashamedly skinny, his attempts to make something of himself being merely gaseousness. Nikolai as murderer is the idea/value that can give his number substance, that can make him an active “I” in time rather than a nothing zero in eternity. The city of Petersburg manifests the sym-

bolic in the physical and unites Nikolai's plan (external) and his promise (internal) into the reality of the bomb. Patricide becomes a symbol realised in the image of the bomb – merging and embodying an act (bombing one's father) and an idea (self becoming a something). The patricidal plan exists because of a moment of emotion.

Once the bomb is created it will not go away, despite Nikolai's desire that it would. But instead of being a unity created through a value of utility, it is a value of negativity – a “dissimulation” (229) rather than a simulation, a refusal of value rather than an acceptance of it. Though the plan is real, existing in the third world, it will only exist there momentarily, as its emergence in dissimulation dooms it to the world of shadows. Nikolai refuses to become a symbol – embody his plan – and exist in reality. The plan itself contains the seeds of its demotion into the shadow world: the imaginative shadow Nikolai casts on someone else to deflect suspicion at his father's fantasised inquest (228-29). Despite this condemning mental preparation for the creation of more unrealities in the shadow world of politics and conspiracy, the imagined materiality of the plan has more action, depth, and will than the bungled version that actually comes off. The Nikolai of the thought-realm continues to exist as a meaningless 1, retreating back to the world of pure ideas. The shadow scapegoat, “whoever it might be,” is safe.

While Bely's theoretical writing describes an ideal system of creative conception, *Petersburg* seems to indicate just how degenerate from this ideal Bely felt the thoughts, and thus reality, of his contemporaries were. This disjunction points to a major difference between Peirce's semiotics and Bely's symbolism: for Peirce, thirdness is the world we live in, and for Bely, it is the world we should live in. For Peirce the human subject is a rational creature, using logical processes such as inference and deduction to form the relations of cognition, to unify conceptualisation in the infinite interrelation of signs. In this sense, the thinker is in control of his or her cognition. For Bely, the human subject is ultimately a dreamer and we are all shadows of each other's dreams, not necessarily in control of our own dreams, let alone our appearance in the dreams of others. Life is what happens when people make their dreams reality. In the symbolic words of Bely:

... we have seen another idle shadow – the stranger. This shadow arose by chance in the consciousness of Senator Ableukhov and acquired its ephemeral being there. But the consciousness of Apollon Apollonovich is a shadowy consciousness because he too is the possessor of an ephemeral being and the fruit of the author's fantasy: unnecessary, idle cerebral play. ...

Cerebral play is only a mask. Under way beneath this mask is the invasion of the brain by forces unknown to us. And granting that Apollon Apollonovich is spun from our brain, nonetheless he will manage to inspire fear with another, a stupendous state of being which attacks in the night. ...

Once his brain has playfully engendered the mysterious stranger, that stranger exists, really exists. He will not vanish from the Petersburg prospects as long as the senator with such thoughts exists, because thought exists too.

So let our stranger be a real stranger! (35-36)

Just as the characters of *Petersburg* make real themselves, each other, and the objects around them, Bely's symbolism conceives of scientists, philosophers, and clerics as engaging in symbolisation, embodying value in an image-idea of God, the atom, the mind, etc. Peirce's semiology would be for Bely just an element of the symbolic structure, one symbolisation of how value is realised in conception. The symbolic, in this sense, is not explanatory, but descriptive. Peirce may well agree. While both thinkers theorise existence as created in the embodiment of experience, Peirce internalises material experience while Bely externalises emotional perception.

This essential divergence is apparent in Peirce's and Bely's very different use of language. As Peirce's semiology is a theory of knowledge rather than meaning, his language is rooted in the rational and abstract. As Bely's symbolism is a theory of meaning, his language is rooted in the creative and personal. Peirce is formal and logical, universalising the personal through the shared experience of things, whereas Bely is figurative and poetic, de-universalising shared experience through the individual experience of things. Though both theorists claim to offer a universal theory of human conception, Peirce's theory is better suited to explaining how we cognise the outer world and Bely's to how we cognise our inner world, perhaps not a surprising divergence between the thoughts of an engineer (Peirce) and a poet (Bely). Despite this fundamental opposition of starting points, both thinkers see semiosis as the creation of reality and the location of subjecthood. For Bely, the recognition and affirmation of this subject's creative powers is a rejection of both nihilism and objectivity, the ethical investment of mere things with a deeply personal value.

- ¹ Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel, "Introduction" in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings, Vol 1*, ed. Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992) xiii.
- ² D S von Mohrenschildt, "The Russian Symbolist Movement", *PMLA* 55.4 (1938) 1195.
- ³ Andrei Bely, "The Emblematics of Meaning" in *Selected Essays of Andrei Bely*, ed. and trans. Stephen Cassedy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) 112.
- ⁴ Kloesel and Houser, "Introduction" xx.
- ⁵ Andrei Bely, *Petersburg*, trans. Robert A Maguire and John E Malmstad (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).
- ⁶ John E Malmstad, "Preface" in *Andrei Bely: Spirit of Symbolism*, ed. John E Malmstad (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987) 9.
- ⁷ Robert A Maguire and John E Malmstad, "Translators' Introduction" in *Petersburg* by Andrei Bely, trans. Robert A Maguire and John E Malmstad (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978) vii.
- ⁸ Charles Sanders Peirce, "What is a Sign?" in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings, Vol 2*, ed. Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998) 4-10.
- ⁹ Peirce, "What is a Sign?" 5.
- ¹⁰ Peirce, "What is a Sign?" 5-6. Peirce defines the interpretant as a "mediating representation which represents the relate to be a representation of the same correlate which this mediating representation itself represents."
- ¹¹ "Mental image" is my description of Peirce's interpretant, which Peirce defines elsewhere as arising "upon the holding together of diverse impressions." See "On a New List of Categories" 292.
- ¹² Charles Sanders Peirce, "On a New List of Categories" in *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne Weiss and Arthur W Burks (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1931-1935) 287-305.
- ¹³ Bely, "The Emblematics of Meaning" 113-23.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.* 127.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.* 125.
- ¹⁶ Steven Cassedy, "Bely's Theory of Symbolism" in *Andrei Bely: Spirit of Symbolism*, ed. John E Malmstad (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987) 301.
- ¹⁷ Bely, "The Emblematics of Meaning" 124-27.
- ¹⁸ Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne Weiss and Arthur W Burks (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1931-1935) §448.
- ¹⁹ Peirce, "On a New List of Categories" 2.
- ²⁰ Bely, "The Emblematics of Meaning" 154.
- ²¹ *Ibid.* 125.

²² Bely, *Petersburg* 44. Subsequent references to this work will appear in the main body of the text.

²³ Maguire and Malmstad discuss the symbolic importance of the spherical in Bely's novel in their introduction, xx.

²⁴ Maguire and Malmstad, "Translators' Introduction" xiv.

²⁵ Andrei Bely, "The Magic of Words" in *Selected Essays of Andrey Bely*, ed. and trans. Stephen Cassedy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

²⁶ Bely, "The Magic of Words" 94.