

Unreal Cities East and West: Bely's *Petersburg* and Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*

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The experience of modernity in *fin-de-siècle* Europe and America is often described in schismatic images of a traumatic discontinuity between past and present, rooted in a series of technological, social, and cultural transformations, and generating a chasm of incoherence and ambiguity. Traditional beliefs and values no longer seemed to conform to or to make sense of the multiplicity of immediate perception. Time was perceived to be out of joint and the physical environment took on an aura of unreality. The symbolism of the turn of a century seemed only to intensify the feeling of disharmony.

The abrupt nature of change was a salient feature of the modern sensibility. According to Henry Adams, "in 1900, the continuity snapped" and history broke into halves.¹ Virginia Woolf displayed even greater audacity in locating the sudden break with the past: "On or about December 1910 human nature changed . . . All human relations shifted – those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature".²

Evidence that Woolf was not expressing an isolated sentiment can be found in Walter Lippmann's *Drift and Mastery* (1914), where he remarked on the malaise of the times in strikingly similar terms: "We are unsettled to the very roots of our being. There isn't a human relation, whether of parent or child, husband and wife, worker and employer, that doesn't move in a strange situation. We are not used to a complicated civilization, we don't know how to behave when personal contact and eternal authority have disappeared. There are no precedents to guide us, no wisdom that wasn't made for a simpler age. We have changed our environment more quickly than we know how to change ourselves".³ The secularization of culture under the impact of scientific theory; the standardization of time; the communications revolution effected by the telephone, the telegraph, and the advent of daily newspapers; the

irrevocable momentum of urban-industrialization provide only a hint of the enormity and inclusiveness of change in this period.

Urbanism encapsulated these transformations in concentrated form. The modern cityscape bombarded its inhabitants with a host of disjunctive visual impressions and experiences. Efforts to give artistic expression to these multifarious impressions and experiences took on many forms, including Blaise Cendrars's simultaneous poetry, Cubist experiments in form led by Picasso and Braque, cinematographic advances such as cross-cutting and montage, and experimental fiction. Many of the modernist novels appearing during the first decades of the twentieth century were, not surprisingly, set in cities: the Dublin of Joyce's *Ulysses*, the Berlin of Doblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, the Vienna of Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*. This paper will examine two of the major "city novels" of modernist fiction: Andrei Bely's *Petersburg* (1916, revised 1922)⁴ and John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* (1925).⁵ Owing to the purported "exceptionalism" of Russian and American national identity, a comparison of the image of New York and Petersburg lends itself to a sustained reflection on Russian and American culture. This paper, therefore, has a dual focus. First, I intend to examine some of the myths motivating Russian and American history in general, and the tradition of New York and Petersburg in Russian and American culture in particular. I will then proceed to a discussion of Bely's and Dos Passos's novels in this wider cultural context. This dual focus is in turn animated by the argument that New York and Petersburg compressed in intensified form the divisions in Russian and American society which had apparently reached a culmination in the first decades of the twentieth century and which constituted a betrayal of the past covenant of Russian and American cultural identity. Discontinuity and unreality were rooted in a profound cultural crisis exacerbated by convulsive change that had brought both countries to the brink of an abyss. Indeed, the very nature of change (in the Russian and the American mind at any rate) isolated the two countries from the fixed and supposedly dominant pace of Western European development.

From the very beginning of their history, Americans had seen themselves as progenitors of a new concept of progress. The absence of a feudal tradition, the establishment of republican institutions, and the vast abundance of land drawing the new settlers westward propelled America into the future, leaving the tradition-bound Europeans far behind. American progress seemed to compress European advances into a shorter time span, proceeding by a disruptive fluctuation between stability and "shake-up periods".⁶ This disruptive, rapid pace inevitably caused periodic ruptures between societal institutions and cultural norms that has been aptly termed a "cultural lag". As early as 1881 (just two years before time was standardized by the railroad companies and

Frederick Winslow Taylor began his experiments in "scientific management" to speed the pace of production), the physician George Beard coined the phrase "American nervousness" to define the effects of modernization: "The modern differ from the ancient civilizations mainly in these five elements – steam power, the periodical press, the telegraph, the sciences, and the mental activity of women. When civilization, plus these five factors, invades any nation, it must carry nervousness and nervous diseases along with it".⁷

The accelerated and uneven nature of development is likewise a feature of Russian cultural perception. Perhaps Gogol put it most succinctly in his notorious *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends*: "More events take place in Russia in ten years than occur in other states in half a century".⁸ In the early nineteenth century, Russia grappled with a whole range of issues that in Western Europe had unfolded over the course of a much longer span of time: secularization, the role of a national language and its significance for the development of a national literature, indigenous folk culture versus cosmopolitan Western European models, and the role of the individual in society.⁹ In the mind of the philosopher Chaadaev, writing in the early 1800s, the very absence of history in backward Russia afforded the Russian people a unique chance to avoid the mistakes of Western European development, thereby "skipping" historical stages. This view was echoed in the second half of the century in populist thought. And Leon Trotsky, reflecting on "the fundamental riddle of the Russian Revolution" in 1932, found the key in "the law of combined development of backward countries – in the sense of a peculiar mixture of backward elements with the most modern factors . . .".¹⁰

The widespread perception of "shake-up periods" in the United States. A law of "combined development" in Russia. If we look at the rise of the urban centers of New York and Petersburg as the quintessence of these unique patterns of development, they emerge as modernist cities *par excellence*, reflecting the uncertainty and disharmony of the modern temperament.

This image of New York and Petersburg is reinforced by certain attitudes toward urbanism that informed Russian and American thought. Instead of promoting community and the fulfillment of Russian and American ideals, a western city like Petersburg and a sprawling metropolis like New York went against the grain of national identity, their very presence symbolizing division and the betrayal of traditional values. A brief examination of the city in Russian and American history should suffice as a clarification of the context of *Manhattan Transfer* and *Petersburg*.

As Bely makes clear in the opening pages of his novel, Petersburg is, by virtue of the circumstances surrounding its conception and construction,

"un-Russian" (P, p. 2). Appropriately labeled by Dostoevsky as "the most abstract and intentional city in the whole world", Petersburg was the brainchild of Peter the Great, and a vital component in his fervent attempt to wrest Russian society from the doldrums of backwardness and bring it in line with Western European development. The binary opposition between rational Western European thought, superimposed on a resistant Russian landscape, and the instinctive culture of the "soil" and *sobornost'* (organic community) embodied in the *mir* (village commune) and the *muzhik* (peasant), has characterized the search for a national identity. This opposition, often defined in Russian by the antonyms *consciousness* (*soznatel'nost'*) and *spontaneity* (*stikhiinost'*) was a direct result of the Petrine reforms. Succeeding generations of the Russian intelligentsia were locked in heated debate about the benefits of Western culture and technology against the time-honored notion of a Russian society based on the organic bond of the village commune. The symbol of this conflict was the city that bore the name of Peter the Great, constructed through the conscious imposition of rigid European geometric spatial concepts on a soft marshland (as in Pushkin's poem *The Bronze Horseman*: ". . . the young city,/The grace and wonder of the northern lands,/Out of the gloom of the forests and the mud/Of marshes splendidly has risen . . .")¹¹ in blatant defiance of the elemental forces of nature.¹² The mythical value of the two poles of Russian development represented by the un-Russian Petersburg and the Russian Moscow was not lost on Russian thinkers. Even foreigners could not ignore the artificiality and division of Petersburg. Thus the Englishman Sir Mackenzie Wallace, on his trip to Russia, captured the unreal aura of the city: "In the midst of a waste howling wilderness, (the traveler) suddenly comes on a magnificent artificial oasis . . . The streets, the squares, the palaces, the public buildings, the churches, whatever may be their defects, have at least the attribute of greatness, and seem to have been designed for the countless generations to come, rather than for the practical wants of the present inhabitants".¹³ Petersburg served as a source of inspiration for many Russian writers, not least among them Pushkin, Gogol, and Dostoevsky, who created a literary tradition of the city that Bely was to draw on and expand in his novel.

Combining reverence for the magnificence of Petersburg and compassion for the common man alienated in an urban environment, Pushkin's poem *The Bronze Horseman* set the tone for future portrayals of the city. In stories like "The Overcoat" and especially "Nevsky Prospect", Gogol invests the cityscape with an illusory, surreal quality that clearly anticipates the modernist sensibility.¹⁴

But once let dusk fall upon the houses and streets . . . and Nevsky Avenue comes to life again and everything begins to stir; it is then that the mysterious

time comes when the street lamps invest everything with an alluring, magic light . . . There is a certain purposefulness or something that resembles some purpose in the air at this time. It is something that is very difficult to account for: everybody seems to be strangely excited. Long shadows flit over the walls and the road, their heads almost touching the Police Bridge.¹⁵

Restless agitation, disembodied shadows, intangible forces, generated by the division between East and West, privileged and destitute, backwardness and modernization, make up the panorama of Petersburg in the nineteenth century imagination.

Urbanism in the United States has traditionally been viewed as a "cancerous growth" on a nation endowed with seemingly limitless natural resources and bountiful land. The pastoral image of the independent yeoman farmer tilling the land and living in harmony with his natural environment, originating in the writings of Crèvecoeur and Jefferson, exerted considerable influence on American thought. Cities were regarded as European fabrications, uprooting people from the land and infested with class conflict. In the early 1800s, when the need for domestic manufacturing became imperative, factory towns like that in Lowell, Massachusetts, were designed to prevent the germination of industrial cities like Manchester, England. The great chronicler of English industrialism, Charles Dickens, visited the sylvan environment of Lowell and voiced his approval of the town as an alternative to the English model. He refrained from comparing the factory system at Lowell to the one in England he knew so well, but nevertheless noted: "The contrast would be a strong one, for it would be between Good and Evil, the living light and the deepest shadow".¹⁶ The rapid rise of industry and the unprecedented influx of immigrants in the post Civil War era speeded the expansion of urban centers for the control and integration of the emerging market economy. Industrialization and urbanization were inevitably accompanied by a growing inequality and a consequent rise in labor unrest. The new waves of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe did not succumb to assimilation as readily as the former Anglo-Saxon settlers, and nativist sentiment flourished. Cities were singled out as the breeding ground for "un-American" proletarianism among the immigrants and "overcivilization" among the privileged upper classes. Josiah Strong depicted the city as the "storm center" of American civilization, harboring "dangerous elements": "Here the sway of Mammon is widest . . . Here luxuries are gathered – everything that dazzles the eye, or tempts the appetite . . . Dives and Lazarus are brought face to face; here, in sharp contrast, are the ennui of surfeit and the desperation of starvation".¹⁷

Veblen described the rise of a new class in the cities indulging in "conspicuous consumption" and a lower class obsessed with "pecuniary

emulation", consciously separating themselves from the real world of labor.¹⁸ Reformers like Jane Addams and Jacob Riis sought to paint a sympathetic and personal portrait of the desperate plight of the urban masses. Writers like Howells, Crane, and Dreiser captured the misery, luxury, and restless confusion that characterized the modern American city. In Crane's short novel *Maggie*, the tenement seems to come to life in an unsettling vision: "Eventually they entered into a dark region where, from a careening building, a dozen gruesome doorways gave up loads of babies to the street and gutter . . . The building quivered and creaked from the weight of humanity stamping about in its bowels".¹⁷ The personification of material surroundings reproduced the eerie and uncanny quality of modern urbanism. Dreiser's first novel, *Sister Carrie*, was an urban tour de force, portraying the uncertainty, confusion, and alienation of the individual in the modern city, adrift in a vortex of unseen forces. Dreiser's novel combines the unreal aura of a world of surface glamor and appearances with the brutal nether world of spiritual and material destitution.

It is worth noting that the image of drifting was not confined to the literary imagination. Searching for an appropriate metaphor for the divisiveness of American social and political life, Walter Lippmann came up with the dichotomy drift and mastery. The features of this binary opposition bear a curious resemblance to the Russian concepts of consciousness and spontaneity. Drifting was a quasi-dreamlike state arising from the uncertainty and congestion of the post-frontier nation of trusts. An unfamiliar and menacing future caused man to cling tenuously to the traditions of the past, and, so Lippmann declares, "the only philosophy with any weight of tradition behind it was a belief in the virtues of the spontaneous, enterprising, untrained and unsocialized man".²⁰ Mastery, on the other hand, infuses the democratic process with the rational concepts of scientific method, "the substitution of conscious intention for unconscious striving".²¹ The unchanneled desires of a chaotic, Bergsonian *elan vital* could hardly provide a viable solution to the problems facing a nation dissolving into entropy. In the view of American Progressive intellectuals like Walter Lippmann, and Russian Westernizers, including the Marxists under Plekhanov in the late nineteenth century (Lenin's Bolshevism being a unique admixture of conscious control and spontaneous "voluntarism"), spontaneity only fueled the fires of social chaos. Spontaneous forces, whether Josiah Strong's "dangerous elements" in swelling urban tenements, or the backward Russian peasantry and nascent proletariat, reflected the seemingly irreconcilable divisions plaguing American and Russian society in the modern age. The irrational, intuitive elements of spontaneity belonged to Russian and American myth: the simple *muzhik* and the "soil" idealized by Russian Populists and writers like Tolstoy, and the American yeoman

farmer and the frontier immortalized in the works of Crèvecoeur, Jefferson, and Cooper.

In this context of consciousness and spontaneity, past versus present, cultural myth set against the modern experience, Petersburg and Manhattan Transfer emerge as novels that attempt to embrace and comprehend the kaleidoscopic nature of modern urbanism while recoiling from its implications. As an integral part of this effort to fathom the unreality and accelerated pace of city life, Bely and Dos Passos experimented with form and language.

The focus on language was itself a reflection of the incomprehensibility of modernity that eluded traditional forms of discourse. In *Nature*, Emerson observed that "(t)he corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language . . . new imagery ceases to be created, and old words are perverted to stand for things which are not . . .".²² Language assumes a dual function in Petersburg and Manhattan Transfer. It preserves the creative and vital source of words in a corrupt society and enables Bely and Dos Passos to present, through experimental techniques, a comprehensive vision of a fragmented society.

Toward the end of Manhattan Transfer, Jimmy Herf laments: "If only I still had faith in words" (MT, p. 366). This faith in words has been shaken by the betrayal of archetypal American values. Old phrases have been divested of meaning or willfully distorted. The joy of life has been denied by abortion, the right to liberty has been mocked by the deportation of immigrants, and the pursuit of happiness has reverted into the pursuit of the big money. In USA, Dos Passos affirmed his own faith in the power of the living word. U.S.A. itself was "mostly . . . the speech of the people", and in the corrupt era of the big money, the deprived section of a divided nation could only muster words as a bulwark against "POWER SUPERPOWER".²³

For Bely, living speech is "the very condition of existence of mankind itself".²⁴ Thus Bely shares the view of the importance of speech expressed by Emerson and Dos Passos with the crucial difference that he regards the degradation of language as the basis for the corruption of society. In a well-known essay from 1909 entitled "The Magic of Words", he distinguishes between "word-terms" and "living, imaginal speech". The proliferation of conventionalized word-terms in bureaucratic Russia forms a linguistic pendant to the geometric landscape Bely describes in Petersburg. The task for the writer is then to infuse this dead language with the creative, imaginative force of living speech. Bely explodes the narrow confines of word-terms by his inventive use of language, and in Petersburg creates a "system of sound" to convey the restless energy of real life.

At first glance, it might appear that Petersburg and Manhattan Transfer contain too few points of convergence to warrant a sustained comparative

examination. Bely's novel deftly fuses social, historical, psychological, and political themes into the framework of a plot of suspense, set between September 30 and October 9, 1905 in a city divided between the rich and powerful and the poor and disaffected, in a country shaken by defeat at the hands of the Japanese and by revolutionary upheaval at home. Apollon Apollonovich Ableukhov, a high government official modeled in part on Konstantin Pobedonostsev, the arch-conservative lay head of the Russian Orthodox Church and chief advisor to Tsar Nicholas II, and Tolstoy's Aleksei Karenin, is Bely's scathing portrait of a representative of the Tsarist ruling class. His son Nikolai has become involved in a revolutionary organization, in particular with Dudkin – a *raznochinets* (a Russian intellectual not of gentle birth) who lives on one of the islands surrounding the administrative heart of the city. However, Nikolai is also contacted by another revolutionary, Lippanchenko (in reality a police agent) who persuades him to plant a bomb in the house of a high government official – Nikolai's father. This simple plot unfolds at a relentless pace, driven by the incessant ticking of the bomb. Dudkin convinces Nikolai to remove the bomb, but he fails to do so. The bomb explodes, hurting no one, but the lives of Apollon and his son are irrevocably changed.

Dos Passos's novel traces the lives of successful and unsuccessful men and women attracted by the enticing allure of America's greatest metropolis. The time span of the novel is much longer than Petersburg, beginning about 1904 (indicated, interestingly enough, by newspaper headlines of Japanese victories over Russia) and ending in the early twenties. Dos Passos catalogues the frustrations and emptiness of urban existence through a host of representative characters. Ellen Thatcher achieves success as an actress, but is described as being devoid of feelings. Jimmy Herf, a reporter, finds his situation in New York "hopelessly confusing", in part because of his lack of desire to attain success, and eventually leaves the city. George Baldwin rises to prominence as a lawyer and political broker through corruption and deceit. Bud Korpenning comes from upstate New York to find the "center of things", but remains an outcast and is finally driven to suicide. Congo Jake, an immigrant from France, fulfills the American Dream by becoming a bootlegger. Another immigrant, Anna Cohen, struggles to make a living in a factory, and dies in a fire.

A closer look reveals striking similarities between the two novels. In both, the city itself becomes a protagonist, influencing the fate of the characters. A dominant atmosphere of urban unreality is apparent from the compositional structure in Petersburg and Manhattan Transfer. The world of Petersburg in Bely's novel fluctuates between the visible and the invisible, and the author confesses that his characters are nothing more than the conscious design of "cerebral play", making them both

abstract and concrete, products of the imagination who nevertheless influence the course of events in the real world. In his article on Dos Passos's *1919*, Jean-Paul Sartre argues that Dos Passos creates characters whose "words are cut off from thought", an observation that could apply to *Manhattan Transfer*. Furthermore, Sartre points out that "(a)cts, emotions and ideas suddenly settle within a character, make themselves at home and then disappear without his having much to say in the matter. You cannot say he submits to them. He experiences them. There seems to be no law governing their appearance".²⁵ Bely's characters seem subject to much the same principle. Thus "thought-images" form a womb inside Apollon's brain only to evolve into "spatiotemporal" images which continue their "uncontrolled activities outside the senatorial head" (P, p. 20). Such methods of characterization are an extension of the notions about language that also form a link between the two writers.

Bely and Dos Passos employ experimental narrative techniques and draw on literary tradition from a variety of sources. Bely was obviously influenced by (and exerted an influence on) Russian Formalist theory, Futurism, and avant garde art forms. His novel anticipated later developments in these areas, including the Suprematist experiments of Malevich, the architectural innovations of Tatlin, and the cinematic breakthroughs of Eisenstein. Much has been made of Bely's connection with the anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner, but *Petersburg* also bears the stamp of the Russian philosopher Vladimir Soloviev, particularly his concept of pan-Mongolism and his apocalyptic narratives.

Many of Dos Passos's experiments in literary technique were indebted to the European avant garde, including the simultaneous poetry of Blaise Cendrars and German Expressionism. However, his debt to indigenous sources should not be ignored: experiments in montage and cross-cutting conducted by G. W. Griffiths, the urban sketches and fiction of Stephen Crane (e.g. the articles comprising his *New York City Sketches* and the novel *Maggie*) and Theodore Dreiser (*Sister Carrie*, *The Color of a Great City*), and the social criticism of Thorstein Veblen. Thus both writers incorporated and expanded on literary tradition while embracing modern forms of expression.

Taking as my primary focus how Bely and Dos Passos depict *Petersburg* and New York as divided cities of destruction that had subverted the historical destiny of both Russia and America and led them to the brink of apocalyptic annihilation, it becomes obvious that both writers draw on the themes I have outlined above to underscore the disjunction between past values and present reality. The pervasive unreality of the cityscape is a product of a cognitive lapse in which beliefs no longer conform to the visual environment. Moreover, both novels are set at the beginning of the twentieth century, at a time when Russia and America appeared to be standing at a historical turning point.

The divided landscapes of Petersburg and New York are no more apparent than in the gulf between the "shadows from the islands" and representatives of the Tsarist autocracy such as Apollon Apollonovich in Petersburg and between workers, immigrants, and the rich and successful in Manhattan Transfer. In both cases, the outcasts seem to embody the promise of Russian and American society. The amorphous masses working in the factories on Vasilevsky Island are peasants who have been uprooted from the soil. Instead of continuing the tradition of the land commune, which for Herzen and other Russian radicals could form the basis for a peasant socialism, enabling Russia to "skip" the capitalist stage of development, these peasants now comprise the nascent Russian proletariat. Apollon Apollonovich is not blind to the threat posed by the island inhabitants:

Apollon Apollonovich did not like the islands: the population there was industrial and coarse. There the many-thousand human swarm shuffled in the morning to the many-chimneyed factories . . . Apollon Apollonovich did not wish to think further. The islands must be crushed! (P, p. 11)

Of course, the necessity for crushing the islands is especially acute in the revolutionary year of 1905, with mass meetings and demands for strikes in the capital (P, pp. 62–63). The islands, whose buildings have "squatted submissively" (P, p. 158) before the omnipotence of the Tsarist state, are now rising against it. The spontaneous rage of an oppressed mass, having been transferred from the community of rural space to the alien confinement of urban space, is bursting at the seams and prepared to shake the foundations of the conscious western structure of Petersburg. The division of Russia into two nations in order to transform a backward, religious country into a civilized secular state has spawned the forces that will eventually destroy it.

Apollon is obsessed and comforted by the straight lines and sharp edges of geometric forms, the triumph of consciousness over spontaneity. The ragged dwellers from the islands disturb this structural symmetry supported by bureaucratized word-terms stifling all forms of creativity. Although opposed to his father as a representative of Tsarist absolutism, Nikolai has nevertheless embraced Western rationalism in the figure of Kant. It is worth noting that Chaadaev criticized Kant's reliance on the "pure" reason of isolated individuals, arguing that true understanding can only be attained through collective consciousness.²⁶ Similarly, Bely clearly seeks a reconciliation of opposites in a total vision of ultimate synthesis. An indication of this desire can be seen in the figure of Dudkin, who, like Nikolai, has been under the sway of mysticism, modernist literature, and a certain Western philosopher, albeit a very different one than Kant. He declares to Nikolai that "I was a Nietzschean. We are all

Nietzscheans, and you are a Nietzschean, although you wouldn't admit it" (P, p. 57). In telling Nikolai of his exile for revolutionary activity, Dudkin makes a revealing comment: "Everything is built on contrasts: the public good is what got me to those icy spaces. And the more I sank into the void out there, the more I gradually shed Party prejudices. Categories, as you would say" (P, p. 57). Or the speculative union of doubt, as Dos Passos would say.²⁷ Products of rational thought, categories and geometric forms were divisive elements in an age of fragmentation. For Bely, man could only resolve the dilemma of binary opposition that had plagued Russian history in general and the history of Petersburg in particular by seeking reconciliation instead of fostering divisions.

In Dos Passos's New York, the immigrant community and impoverished workers find themselves caught in the vise of an expanding business-consumer society obsessed with material success and equating that success with Americanism. This new nation is a far cry from the America founded by immigrants landing at Plymouth Rock and setting out to build a new and unique society. Rather, it is a nation displaying unmitigated hostility to those who once were its promise. Dos Passos sees the new immigrants drawn to the United States by its promise of a better life only to find that the phrase "land of opportunity" has become hollow and is no longer relevant to their experience (MT, p. 49). Immigrants from southern and eastern Europe are faced with the dilemma of retaining their cultural heritage or succumbing to the forces of assimilation: a Jew shaves his beard (in a scene reminiscent of an episode in Abraham Gahan's short novel *Yeki*) after seeing an ad for a Gillette razor portraying the "face of a man who had money in the bank" (MT, pp. 10–11); a Jewish girl renounces the traditions of her religion against her mother's wishes, crying "I aint a Jew no more . . . This aint Russia; it's little old New York" (MT, p. 22). Workers like Bud Korpenning come to New York ready to work, but never find the "center of things". "I can work", asserts Bud when told that it's looks that count in the city (MT, p. 5). The real world of work has been displaced by the unreal world of appearances. The status seekers in Manhattan like George Baldwin and Ellen Thatcher feel no empathy for the plight of these foreigners. The boundary between the respectable world and the nether world of immigrants, like in Petersburg, is sharply drawn and immediately recognizable.

Walking west along 4th (Baldwin) skirted Washington Square . . . the large windowed houses opposite glowed very pink, nonchalant, prosperous. The very place for a lawyer with a large conservative practice to make his residence . . . He crossed Sixth Avenue and followed the street into the dingy West Side, where there was a smell of stables and the sidewalks were littered with

scraps of garbage and crawling children. Imagine living down here among low Irish and foreigners, the scum of the universe. (MT, pp. 50-51)

The smell of poverty makes Ellen instinctively recoil from a boy brushing against her.

Through the smell of the arbutus she caught for a second the unwashed smell of his body, the smell of immigrants, of Ellis Island, of crowded tenements. Under all the nickelplated, goldplated streets enameled with May, uneasily she could feel the huddling smell, spreading in dark slow crouching masses like corruption oozing from broken sewers, like a mob. (MT, p. 395)

Petersburg and New York are divided cities with the "swarms" (in *Petersburg*) or the "crowds" (in *Manhattan Transfer*) a constant reminder of the opposition between an unreal and unnatural urban environment and uprooted peasants working in factories in Petersburg and immigrants living in tenement slums in New York. Furthermore, the presence of these masses, however shadowy their existence, goes against the animus of Russian and American cultural exceptionalism. The image of a Russian socialism based on the economic structure of the land commune has been thwarted by the establishment of a landless proletariat in the cities. In the United States, despite ominous premonitions to the contrary, the immigrants, far from posing any grave threat to the establishment of a corporate structure, succumbed to the hegemony of American standardization. As early as 1910, Jane Addams had spoken out against the "reversal of our traditions" committed by the United States government in expelling Russian immigrants suspected of radical sympathies.²⁸ For Dos Passos, the tragic irony of life in twentieth-century New York was precisely this reversal of American traditions. A nation of immigrants was now deporting "undesirable elements" during the Red Scare of 1920 (MT, p. 289).

The reversal or subversion of cultural traditions is thus magnified and consummated in an urban environment. Bely and Dos Passos depict their cities as focal points of an acute crisis of culture. The break with past myths is definitive. In the opening pages of *Petersburg*, Bely underscores the unique environment of the capital city by branding it "un-Russian" and "strikingly different" from all other Russian cities (P, p. 2). The architectural layout of Petersburg was conceived by imitating European notions of symmetry. Furthermore, both novels express the triumph of urbanism over nature. In Petersburg, the threat of floods is a constant reminder that the city was built on soft marshland (P, pp. 10, 205). The earth, or rather, the "soil" of Russian myth, has been "crushed by prospects" (P, p. 11).

The vertical thrust of the New York skyline symbolizes that the

direction of American life has changed. In one of the impressionistic passages that preface each chapter of *Manhattan Transfer*, an old man walking toward Broadway with a little boy mumbles: "I remember when it was all meadows" (MT, p. 249). New York is no longer a starting point for a horizontal movement westward. It has become an end in itself. The meadows of agrarian myth have been replaced by skyscrapers, or human filing cases, as Lewis Mumford once described them.²⁹ To paraphrase Emerson's vision, the curving horizon has been displaced by the mathematical lines of the city.³⁰

Continuity has snapped in Petersburg and New York, and modern urban man is left dangling with no cultural reference points. In the chaotic atmosphere of Petersburg, "the past is dismantled", "(h)istory has changed" and the "ancient myths are not believed" (P, pp. 213, 231). In New York, the past has become nothing more than "yellowed yesterdays" seen through a stereopticon at a Nickleodeon (MT, p. 291). The "old-time air" is gone, and now "it's nothing but money in New York" (MT, pp. 262, 378). Abruptly severed from the past as a source of meaning and identity, the denizens of Petersburg and New York experience apprehension of the future. In Petersburg and *Manhattan Transfer*, this anxiety is expressed in apocalyptic terms.

Bely and Dos Passos were, of course, not alone in viewing the future with a sense of foreboding. In Russia, writers like Dmitrii Merezhkovsky in his trilogy *Christ and Antichrist* (1896–1905) and Vladimir Soloviev in his *Tale of the Antichrist* (1900) saw the forces of good and evil coming to a head. For Merezhkovsky, the reign of Peter the Great had sparked the struggle between Christ and Antichrist. Because of his reform of certain church rituals, Peter himself was portrayed as the Antichrist by Old Believers clinging to the traditional practices of the Russian Orthodox Church. In Soloviev's tale, the Antichrist is paradoxically a benefactor of mankind. Although this apocalyptic literature often reflected the peasant religious mentality, two events in Russia, the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–05 and the revolution of 1905, were a more direct cause of the belief in the imminent collapse of tsarism.

The resounding Russian defeat in the war, the first defeat of a European power by Asian forces, conjured up memories of the Mongolian sweep across Russia and the ensuing "Mongol yoke". Russia had long been regarded as a bulwark against Asia, a theme that runs through Soloviev's tale as well as Bely's novel. In Petersburg, the threat of Mongolism is ever present, and Bely evokes the memory of the battle of Kulikovo in 1380, when Russian forces defeated the Mongols. However, in the wake of the Russian defeat by the Japanese, a time of upheaval appears to be at hand in Russia. In a crucial passage, Bely links the construction of Petersburg with the omen of its demise:

From that fecund time when the metallic Horseman (Peter) had galloped

scraps of garbage and crawling children. Imagine living down here among low Irish and foreigners, the scum of the universe. (MT, pp. 50–51)

The smell of poverty makes Ellen instinctively recoil from a boy brushing against her.

Through the smell of the arbutus she caught for a second the unwashed smell of his body, the smell of immigrants, of Ellis Island, of crowded tenements. Under all the nickelplated, goldplated streets enameled with May, uneasily she could feel the huddling smell, spreading in dark slow crouching masses like corruption oozing from broken sewers, like a mob. (MT, p. 395)

Petersburg and New York are divided cities with the "swarms" (in Petersburg) or the "crowds" (in Manhattan Transfer) a constant reminder of the opposition between an unreal and unnatural urban environment and uprooted peasants working in factories in Petersburg and immigrants living in tenement slums in New York. Furthermore, the presence of these masses, however shadowy their existence, goes against the animus of Russian and American cultural exceptionalism. The image of a Russian socialism based on the economic structure of the land commune has been thwarted by the establishment of a landless proletariat in the cities. In the United States, despite ominous premonitions to the contrary, the immigrants, far from posing any grave threat to the establishment of a corporate structure, succumbed to the hegemony of American standardization. As early as 1910, Jane Addams had spoken out against the "reversal of our traditions" committed by the United States government in expelling Russian immigrants suspected of radical sympathies.²⁸ For Dos Passos, the tragic irony of life in twentieth-century New York was precisely this reversal of American traditions. A nation of immigrants was now deporting "undesirable elements" during the Red Scare of 1920 (MT, p. 289).

The reversal or subversion of cultural traditions is thus magnified and consummated in an urban environment. Bely and Dos Passos depict their cities as focal points of an acute crisis of culture. The break with past myths is definitive. In the opening pages of Petersburg, Bely underscores the unique environment of the capital city by branding it "un-Russian" and "strikingly different" from all other Russian cities (P, p. 2). The architectural layout of Petersburg was conceived by imitating European notions of symmetry. Furthermore, both novels express the triumph of urbanism over nature. In Petersburg, the threat of floods is a constant reminder that the city was built on soft marshland (P, pp. 10, 205). The earth, or rather, the "soil" of Russian myth, has been "crushed by prospects" (P, p. 11).

The vertical thrust of the New York skyline symbolizes that the

direction of American life has changed. In one of the impressionistic passages that preface each chapter of *Manhattan Transfer*, an old man walking toward Broadway with a little boy mumbles: "I remember when it was all meadows" (MT, p. 249). New York is no longer a starting point for a horizontal movement westward. It has become an end in itself. The meadows of agrarian myth have been replaced by skyscrapers, or human filing cases, as Lewis Mumford once described them.²⁹ To paraphrase Emerson's vision, the curving horizon has been displaced by the mathematical lines of the city.³⁰

Continuity has snapped in Petersburg and New York, and modern urban man is left dangling with no cultural reference points. In the chaotic atmosphere of Petersburg, "the past is dismantled", "(h)istory has changed" and the "ancient myths are not believed" (P, pp. 213, 231). In New York, the past has become nothing more than "yellowed yesterdays" seen through a stereopticon at a Nickleodeon (MT, p. 291). The "old-time air" is gone, and now "it's nothing but money in New York" (MT, pp. 262, 378). Abruptly severed from the past as a source of meaning and identity, the denizens of Petersburg and New York experience apprehension of the future. In Petersburg and *Manhattan Transfer*, this anxiety is expressed in apocalyptic terms.

Bely and Dos Passos were, of course, not alone in viewing the future with a sense of foreboding. In Russia, writers like Dmitrii Merezhkovsky in his trilogy *Christ and Antichrist* (1896–1905) and Vladimir Soloviev in his *Tale of the Antichrist* (1900) saw the forces of good and evil coming to a head. For Merezhkovsky, the reign of Peter the Great had sparked the struggle between Christ and Antichrist. Because of his reform of certain church rituals, Peter himself was portrayed as the Antichrist by Old Believers clinging to the traditional practices of the Russian Orthodox Church. In Soloviev's tale, the Antichrist is paradoxically a benefactor of mankind. Although this apocalyptic literature often reflected the peasant religious mentality, two events in Russia, the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–05 and the revolution of 1905, were a more direct cause of the belief in the imminent collapse of tsarism.

The resounding Russian defeat in the war, the first defeat of a European power by Asian forces, conjured up memories of the Mongolian sweep across Russia and the ensuing "Mongol yoke". Russia had long been regarded as a bulwark against Asia, a theme that runs through Soloviev's tale as well as Bely's novel. In Petersburg, the threat of Mongolism is ever present, and Bely evokes the memory of the battle of Kulikovo in 1380, when Russian forces defeated the Mongols. However, in the wake of the Russian defeat by the Japanese, a time of upheaval appears to be at hand in Russia. In a crucial passage, Bely links the construction of Petersburg with the omen of its demise:

From that fecund time when the metallic Horseman (Peter) had galloped

hither, when he had flung his steed upon the Finnish granite, Russia was divided in two. Divided in two as well were the destinies of the fatherland. Suffering and weeping, Russia was divided in two, until the final hour . . . There will be a leap across history. Great shall be the turmoil. The earth shall be cleft . . . As for Petersburg, it will sink . . . The yellow hordes of Asians will set forth from their age-old abodes and will encrimson the fields of Europe in oceans of blood. There will be, oh yes, there will – Tsushima! There will be – a new Kalka!

Kulikovo Field, I await you! (P, pp. 64, 65)

Petersburg will sink and be destroyed, like the ancient city of Atlantis. Since its inception, Petersburg has been the symbol of Russia divided, of conflict between East and West. Because of this artificial division, the Tsarist edifice has started to crumble and will eventually succumb to the irrational, spontaneous forces it had so long attempted to suppress. As the symbol of a divided nation, it is hardly accidental that the Revolution of 1905 erupted in the capital, where the "shadows from the islands" were pitted against the Tsarist autocracy. Russian historical development, tenuously balanced between the rational ideas of the west and the mystical concepts of the east, was rapidly approaching a breaking point. Diaghlev captured the mood of 1905 when he observed that same year: "We are witnesses of the greatest moment of summing-up in history, in the name of a new and unknown culture, which will be created by us, and will also sweep us away".³¹

The situation in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century seemed markedly different from that in Russia. While Russia suffered a humiliating defeat in the east, the United States was expanding its economic frontier to Asia. The Revolution of 1905 only reaffirmed the decline of Tsarist autocracy in the face of mass disillusionment and opposition. The first decade of the twentieth century in the United States, on the contrary, is often depicted as being a secure period of relative quietude preceding the tumultuous events of the postwar period. Viewed in this light, Dos Passos could be accused of having reacted to the uncertainty of the postwar period by creating a prewar America beset by concerns of the twenties. However, the suggestion that there was a conscious break between the complacency of the prewar years and the tensions of the twenties and thirties is far from adequate. A recent scholar attempts to debunk this view by listing some events in American history between 1898 and 1917. This period "opens with the assassination of a president; numbers among its most dramatic episodes the last of the Indian wars, the sustained brutality of the Philippines repression, and the bloodiest labor battles in United States history; records a thousand lynchings and a score of serious race riots . . .".³² Labor unrest and a nativist backlash against the influx of immigrants overcrowding the tenements around the turn of the century generated apocalyptic pre-

dictions of class warfare and revolutionary upheaval – decidedly “un-American” concepts. A dominant image during this period was that of a Volcano under the City, ready at any moment to wreak destruction on urban centers.³³ A Volcano under the City would, of course, also be an apt phrase for Petersburg in 1905. Both Russia and the United States were therefore perceived by many to be at a crossroads.

Dos Passos uses another phrase to describe modern New York: a City of Destruction (MT, p. 366). This image is taken from John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), which up until the Civil War ranked with the Bible as the most popular book in America.³⁴ In Bunyan's allegory, the Pilgrim journeys from the City of Destruction, having been informed that “this our city will be burnt with fire from heaven”, to the Celestial City where he will find salvation.³⁵ This Celestial City, standing “upon a mighty hill” recalls John Winthrop's vision of a shining City on a Hill. It is clear that twentieth century New York is nothing less than a betrayal of this progressive vision – the City on a Hill has degenerated into a City of Destruction. The modern Babylon and Nineveh is built of steel, glass, concrete, and tile (MT, p. 12) but is not immune to destruction.

An indication of the unreality of this City of Destruction is seen when the character of Jimmy Herf appears for the first time. Returning to New York by boat on the 4th of July, Jimmy repeats the immigrant experience. Seeing the statue of Liberty, the excited boy asks his mother what the statue holds in her hand. “That's a light, dear . . . Liberty enlightening the world” (MT, p. 69). A beacon of light illuminating the world; Jimmy has arrived at the City on a Hill, Bunyan's Celestial City. But something is wrong here. There seems to be an underside to this Celestial City. Squalor exists side by side with magnificence.

Streak of water crusted with splinters, groceryboxes, orangepeel, cabbage leaves, narrowing, narrowing between the boat and the dock. (MT, p. 69)

The cab smells musty, goes rumbling and lurching up a wide avenue swirling with dust, through brick streets sour-smelling, full of grimy yelling children, and all the while the trunks creak and thump on top. (MT, p. 70)

The river is besmirched with the waste of conspicuous consumption (recalling the fruit crates outside Gatsby's house after one of his parties and Eliot's modern Thames), the sounds and smells from the streets are overwhelming. Dos Passos juxtaposes the symbols of American identity (4th of July, Statue of Liberty, the Declaration of Independence) with the reality of urbanism. These images do not connect, they rather contradict, reinforcing a sense of unreality and a premonition of decay.

In Petersburg, too, industrialization has polluted the atmosphere. The “turbid germ-infested” Neva flows through the city and “a dark ribbon,

a ribbon of soot" rises from the chimneys of factories (P, p. 29). The glitter and magnificence of the capital has become tarnished. Apollon's house has yellowed and Apollon, toward the end of the novel, finds himself stripped of his former glory and power.

Apollon Apollonovich is not the god Apollo. He is a civil servant. (P, p. 231)

And against the fiery background of a Russian Empire in flames stood, instead of a firm, gold-uniformed statesman, a hemorrhoidal old man, unshaven, uncombed, unwashed, in a tasselled dressing gown! (P, p. 236)

The dilemma confronting American and Russian society at the turn of the century was nothing less than how to preserve the meaning of a unique national culture in the face of a reversal of traditions. In twentieth-century New York and Petersburg, cultural myths are either no longer believed or have lost their capacity to inform the cultural functioning of society. The search for a national identity in the United States and Russia had taken the form of cultural exceptionalism, usually set in opposition to the pattern of European development. This search became an integral part of the formulation of a distinct national literature. One only has to think of passages from novels like Melville's *White Jacket* ("We Americans are the peculiar, chosen people – the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world") or Gogol's *Dead Souls* ("(T)he *troika* dashes on and on! . . . Is it not like that that you, too, Russia, are speeding along like a spirited *troika* that nothing can overtake? . . . The bells fill the air with their wonderful tinkling; The air is torn asunder, it thunders and is transformed into wind; everything on earth is flying past, and, looking askance, other nations and states draw aside and make way for her") to realize the impact of the myth of exceptionalism.³⁶ Russia's destiny was to synthesize West and East, and by "skipping stages" establish a unique social corpus based on land communes. The American vision was embodied in the yeoman farmer moving westward and striking a tenuous balance between civilization and savagery.

New York and Petersburg became symbols of the dismantling of those cultural myths. For Bely and Dos Passos, the corruption of American and Russian ideals was reflected in the willful distortion of language and the formation of an urban working class, causing them to regard the future of their societies in apocalyptic images. If cultural exceptionalism was no longer valid, if the reversal of traditional values was conclusive, the meaning of a distinct American and Russian identity had ceased to exist.

One alternative for the two countries was to accept the end of exceptionalism and adjust self-perception to fit European cultural patterns,

an idea, however, that was inherently abhorrent to the Russian and American psyche. Another possibility was to retain the idea of exceptionalism in a new form. Instead of a Russian agrarian socialism, the Soviet Union under Stalin underwent a cruel process of unprecedented industrialization. The unique construction of "Socialism in One Country" was based on the premise that the Soviet Union could accomplish in a short span of time what it had taken Europe decades to complete. Gogol's words from his *Selected Correspondence* were vindicated. The "new Soviet man" could say with confidence that he lived in an exceptional society. American society responded to Turner's concern of what the closing of the frontier would mean to an American identity shaped by the frontier experience by creating new frontiers, offering the example of a consumer society based on corporate capitalism to the world as a new and unique vision. Under this new guise, American and Russian exceptionalism formed a binary opposition in the world arena. The reversal of traditions was thus transformed into a new form of cultural exceptionalism, a mirror image of the past.

NOTES

1. Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), p. 457.
2. Quoted in Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, eds., *Modernism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 33.
3. Walter Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1961), p. 92.
4. I have used the translation of the 1922 text by Robert A. Maguire and John E. Malmstad (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978). Quotes from the novel will be followed by *P* and the page number.
5. John Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1953). Quotes from the novel will be followed by *MT* and the page number.
6. See Aileen S. Kraditor, *The Radical Persuasion 1890–1917* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), p. 55.
7. Quoted in Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p. 258.
8. Quoted from William Mills Todd III, *Fiction and Society in the Age of Pushkin* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 1.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
10. Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution* (London: Pluto Press, 1977), I, p. 72.
11. Alexander Pushkin, *The Bronze Horseman and Other Poems*, translated by D. M. Thomas (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 247.
12. The Russian word for spontaneity is derived from the adjective *stikhiinyi*, meaning spontaneous, uncontrolled, but also elemental, as in the sense of a natural catastrophe.
13. Sir Mackenzie Wallace, *Russia on the Eve of War and Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1961), pp. 218–219.
14. See Marshall Berman's discussion of this aspect of Gogol's oeuvre in *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* (London: Verso, 1985), pp. 195–206.
15. Nikolai Gogol, *The Overcoat and Other Tales of Good and Evil*, translated by David Magarshack (New York: Norton, 1957), p. 167.

16. Charles Dickens, *American Notes and Pictures from Italy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 70.
17. See Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982), p. 102.
18. See Max Lerner, ed., *The Portable Veblen* (New York: Viking, 1948), pp. 72–111.
19. Stephen Crane, *Maggie. A Girl of the Streets* (Gainsville: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1966), pp. 12–13.
20. Walter Lippmann, op. cit., p. 103.
21. Ibid., p. 148.
22. *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1903), vol. 1, p. 35.
23. John Dos Passos, *The Big Money in USA* (New York: Modern Library, 1937), p. 525.
24. *Selected Essays of Andrei Bely*, edited and translated by Steven Cassady (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 95.
25. Jean-Paul Sartre, "John Dos Passos and 1919" in Andrew Hook, ed. *Dos Passos. A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 64.
26. Andrzej Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979), p. 83.
27. John Dos Passos, op. cit., p. 151.
28. Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House* (New York: New American Library, 1981), p. 288.
29. Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1966), p. 535.
30. See Morton and Lucia White, *The Intellectual Versus the City* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 205.
31. Quoted in James Billington, *The Icon and the Axe. An Interpretive History of Russian Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1970), p. 504.
32. Peter Conn, *The Divided Mind. Ideology and Imagination in America, 1898–1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 2–3.
33. See Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace. Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880–1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), p. 31.
34. Alan Trachtenberg, op. cit., p. 101.
35. John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 2.
36. Herman Melville, *White Jacket* (London: Constable and Co. Ltd., 1922), p. 189; Nikolai Gogol, *Dead Souls*, translated by David Magarshack (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 259.