

ANDREJ BELYJ'S *THE CHRISTENED CHINAMAN*  
RESOLUTION OF THE CONFLICT OF FILIAL GUILT

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Konstantin Močul'skij writes (1955:16): "Bely's literary work is an attempt to exorcise the chaos in and around himself; to save himself from destruction, to find solid ground, to find reason in the confusion of delirium". The cause of this chaos and confusion has traditionally been ascribed to Belyj's own unhappy childhood. In his memoirs, *On the Border of Two Centuries* (1930:71-79), he describes in detail the mismatch of Nikolaĭ Vasil'evič Bugaev, a Professor of Mathematics at Moscow University, and Aleksandra Dmitrievna Egorova, one of Moscow's most dazzling beauties. Their conflicting views and the domestic quarrels concerning the upbringing of the son are often cited by critics as a major formative element in Andrej Belyj's creative imagination. Nowhere is the conflict more vividly portrayed than in the autobiographical novel *The Christened Chinaman*. This novel is not only the culmination in artistic form of the family triangle, but, as I hope to illustrate, the novel provides a resolution to the problem of family, which had so haunted Belyj's earlier works.

The importance of the father figure in Belyj's prose was first discussed in a brilliant article by Vladislav Chodasevič, entitled "Ableuchovy - Letaevy - Korobkiny" (1927:255-279), referring to the three major families in the novels *Petersburg*, *The Christened Chinaman* and *Moscow*. The article is informative and thoughtprovoking in both its isolation and unification of the themes of parricide and sexual awakening in Belyj's prose. Chodasevič correctly notes that by the early 1920's one theme had basically "stabilized" in Belyj's prose. This theme finds the protagonists in each of the novels, in spite of their age differences,

at a moment of sexual awakening which is connected with a desire of parricide. What Chodasevič describes but never identifies is, of course, the classic Oedipus complex, later mentioned by name by Močul'skij (1955:154) and Oleg Maslenikov (1952:42).

The term Oedipus complex has been so overworked since its original application that it is perhaps prudent to return to the source. In *Totem and Taboo* (1913: 129) Freud describes it thus:

He regarded his father <...> as a competitor for the favours of his mother, towards whom the obscure fore-shadowings of his budding sexual wishes were aimed. Thus he was situated in the typical attitude of a male child towards his parents to which we have given the name of the 'Oedipus complex' and which we regard as the nuclear complex of the neuroses.

In the same work Freud goes on to note:

the two taboo prohibitions which constitute its core - not to kill the totem [the father] and not to have sexual relations with a woman of the same totem - coincide with the two crimes of Oedipus, who killed his father and married his mother, as well as with the two primal wishes of children, the insufficient repression or the re-awakening of which forms the nucleus of perhaps every psychoneurosis.

Freud's theory has remained as the central element of psychoanalysis where it has been largely unchallenged until recently.<sup>1</sup> The process of psychoanalysis as practiced by Freud and his followers is essentially a return by stages to these early desires first in order to understand them better and then to improve the present day state of mind of the subject.

This stepping back into memory has certain parallels with two of Belyj's early novels. Chodasevič outlined not only the obvious theme of parricide in *Petersburg* but he also made a convincing case for its sexual origins. For example, the sight of the family's coat of arms, a knight being gored by a unicorn, brings to Nikolaj's mind a "crazy" thought: "[he] imagined Apollon Apollonovič at the moment of fulfilling his conjugal relationship, and with a new force he felt a familiar nausea (thus he had been conceived)" (*Petersburg*, 1916:181). An interesting omission by Chodasevič is Belyj's earlier novel, *The Silver Dove* (1909). Here the young hero Dar'jal'skij is seduced by Matrena, the mistress of Kudejarov, the father figure of the Dove

sect. In both novels the heroes are young adults conscious of their sexual potency and of their adversary position to their fathers. A further regression to the stages of childhood and the first awakenings of consciousness takes place in two later novels, *Kotik Letaev* (1916) and *The Christened Chinaman* (1921). The major difference between the two is the focus of the "I" which is centripetal and egocentric in the first novel. In the second novel which is concerned with the perception of others and the relationship of the "I" to those others, the focus becomes more centrifugal, even if not completely altruistic.

*The Christened Chinaman* was first published in 1921. At that time it was called *The Transgression of Nikolaj Letaev: (Epopee - Volume I)*: "The Christened Chinaman", "Chapter 1". In 1922 five of the fifteen chapters appeared in the Paris journal, *Sovremennye Zapiski*, under the simplified title "The Transgression of Nikolaj Letaev". Neither the journal, nor subsequent bibliographers, indicated the incomplete nature of the text, which served as the basis for the Chodasevič article. In 1925 Belyj expressed a desire to unite *Kotik Letaev* and *The Transgression* as simply *Kotik Letaev I* and II. This idea was abandoned in 1927 when there appeared a separate volume *The Christened Chinaman* which was identical to the text of the earlier *Transgression* except for the omission of a two page "Instead of a Foreword".

The change of title, or more precisely, the replacement of the original title by a chapter heading is significant. Chodasevič, working with the incomplete 1922 text, speculated that the crime to come would be parricide. Maslenikov, with the advantage of hindsight and of the full text, scoffs at this idea, and he, like Močul'skij, points to Belyj's own explanation that the "transgression" was intended to refer to an episode in his schoolboy days. As a sixteen year old in the fourth grade of the Polivanov gymnasium Belyj recalls (1930: 65) how he had skipped several weeks of class in order to read books on his own in the library. Accordingly, if we are to believe the author, the original title became meaningless when the work did not progress in time beyond the life of a six year old to the life of a sixteen year old. This widely accepted explanation, however, cannot fully account for Belyj's words in his "Instead of a Foreword" to the first edition. Here he describes the major theme of the novel thus: "In it the childhood of the hero is depicted at that critical point, where the child, becoming an adolescent, by that very fact commits his first transgression: the

original sin, heredity appears in him" (1921:23). To argue as does Chodasevič that Belyj's omission of the introduction in the later editions is a retreat from this position requires one to ignore the fact that this very "transgression" occurs in the novel.<sup>2</sup>

A more likely explanation for the change of titles is the fact that the novel centers around the figure of the father. In the earlier edition, Belyj had taken pains to avoid direct comparisons between the fictional Michail Letaev and his real life father, Nikolaj Bugaev. In the same introduction (1921:23) he had written:

In the depiction of Kotik's parents I used in part some (just a few) features, taken from my own parents, but the entire story [fabula], the arrangement of [individuals'] characters, the configuration of human relationships are the fruit of the author's purest phantasy; and he, who draws a parallel between the childhood of the author and the childhood of 'Kotik' will fall into a profound error, based on the fact, that not a single artistic detail, not one of the dramatis personae is an invention out of nothing, but rests upon that which has been observed in one's self and around one's self; art is embodied in the free composition of traits, one or another character trait of Kotik's father, for example, passes through a series of people, observed by the author; to return: the character of Professor Letaev is composed by the author out of a whole group of people, each of which possessed one or another idiosyncrasy ...

In accepting the title *The Christened Chinaman* Belyj directs the attention of the reader to the father. Apparently he had reconciled himself with the accuracy of the portrayal, which he had earlier sought to deny. Indeed, by the time Belyj writes his non-fictional autobiography, *On the Border of Two Centuries*, in 1930, he uses several quotations from the novel to characterize his father. He also recounts numerous identical incidents and in one place even admits: "I won't stop at a description of my father: I described him in 'The Christened Chinaman' ..." (1930:15).

Irrespective of historical or personal motivations in the renaming of the novel, the new title does broaden the focus of the novel and underlines the importance of the father. This new emphasis on father plus the concept of "transgression" return us to the Oedipus complex. Like all of Belyj's works, *The Christened Chinaman* has multiple levels of meaning. The factual and psychological retracing of the child-parent relation-

ship is paralleled on the stylistic level by the use of the key word "rod" ("kin" or "genus").<sup>3</sup> The frequent occurrence of the root "rod" makes it the central leitmotif of the novel. This technique of imbedding a key word in the novels has already attracted critical attention for *The Silver Dove*, *Petersburg* and *Kotik Letaev*.<sup>4</sup> Readers of modern prose may be more familiar with the technique as employed by Vladimir Nabokov in his novel *Lolita*. Long before the famous case of Quilty, Belyj uses italics to identify the first clue in *The Christened Chinaman*. The root is first encountered as the "generous" (blagorodnaja)<sup>5</sup> tendency used to dispel foul thoughts like the sticks of potassium permanganate used to eliminate the foul smells emanating from the toilet. Other early hints are contained in the "genus" of activities (rod, 1927:32) of those listed in the father's notebook and the Deogenetrix (bogorodica) and Silvergenerosity, a Belyj neologism (srebrorodie, 1927:38) with its echoes of "Vaše Blagorodie". The connection between "rod" and birth is forever appearing in the oft-mentioned "congenital birthmark" of the mother (rodinka, 1927:87) and in the image of the "multigenetrix" (mnogorodnaja dama, 1927:19). Finally Kotik comes to the conclusion that his "transgression" - selfconsciousness - is actually connected with the "results of difficult birth" (posledstvija trudnych rodov, 1927:171).

While "rod" is the central motif of *The Christened Chinaman*, it is also the logical extension of that theme as developed in the earlier novels. For example, a similar moment of clarity is found in *Kotik Letaev* (1918:52): "Genetical relatedness (rodstvennost') is - a reflection of my composition of consciousness". In *Petersburg* (1916:262) we find: "when Kolen'ka was called his father's exgenerate (otrod'e), he was ashamed; 'exgenerate' had been disclosed through observation of the ways of the life of animals; and Kolen'ka cried; the shame of his genesis (porozhdenie) he transferred - onto his father". In *The Silver Dove* it is first the "congeneracy" (srodstvennost', 1909:I, 272) which brings Dar'jal'skij and Matrena together. Ironically, this "genitor" (roditel') as he is disparagingly referred to by Abram the wanderer, is unable to fulfill Matrena's desire to "generate" (rožat') a child, the "generation of the spirit" (roždenie ducha, 1909:I, 288) so eagerly awaited by the Dove sect. It is, of course, the fruitless union with Matrena which brings about the wrath of the carpenter and results in his decision to dispose of Dar'jal'skij.

In the earlier novels these transgressions all lead

to the eventual downfall of the hero. As noted Dar'-jal'skij is executed on the orders of his spiritual father, Kudejarov, for his sexual failure. Nikolaj Ableuchov is likewise a failure: he too is impotent, first in his inability to commit parricide and then in his inability to prevent the explosion of the bomb. Kotik Letaev finishes the novel bearing his name with his own symbolic crucifixion. Only in *The Christened Chinaman* do we find a positive resolution of the conflict. Again, the clue is found in the root "rod". The first element of the renewal is the acceptance of the historical continuity between father and son, the father who is "progenitor" and "genitor" (rodovoe and rodnoe, 1927:172). Along with this realization comes the shared responsibility for original sin (pervorodnyj grech, 1927:183) and a return to our origins in the book of Genesis.

The movement of the novel back to beginnings on both the psychological and stylistic level finds a parallel and its clearest expression on the third level, the level of myth. The final chapters of *The Christened Chinaman* are replete with Biblical imagery and references. Kotik pictures himself as Adam, Lot and then Isaac. His father is seen at different times as Moses, then Abraham, then Enoch, Methuselah and Melchizedek. The most important image, however, is that of the covenant or testament between Abraham and God the Father. Abraham receives God's assurance that he will become Father of Nations in return for faith in one God, the sign of which covenant will be circumcision. This is, of course, the essence and basis for the entire Old Testament. But whereas the Old Testament gives example of and hints of the new life, such as the assumption into heaven of Enoch and Elijah, only the New Testament gives promise of eternal life for all. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who is crucified, dies and is buried, takes on new meaning in his resurrection from the dead.

This myth is the message of Saint Paul. It is in Paul's The Fifth Gospel or The Letter to the Romans that Gentiles are now shown the way to entry into the New Covenant, one which no longer requires circumcision. Paul recounts the path of the people of Israel and their descent from Abraham, but he also offers the franchise of eternal life to all who are willing to accept and believe in Christ. The sign of this new Covenant is baptism, the christening. This is the road which Kotik symbolically relives in his dream. Pursued by Herod's warriors, he is crucified, dies and is buried. The single most important element of this dream

sequence is Kotik's resurrection. As Paul writes (1 Corinthians 5:1): "if Christ was not raised, then our gospel is null and void and so is your faith". Through the identification with Christ and His resurrection comes the confirmation that Kotik's sacrifice is pleasing and acceptable to the father. As Christ on the Cross atones for original sin, Kotik's sacrifice releases him from filial guilt.

Belyj's artistic embodiment of the message of St. Paul places him in the nineteenth century tradition of Dostoevskij and Tolstoj, both of whom often seemed to be rewriting the New Testament for their contemporaries. Belyj's re-awakening in the spirit of Paul can be traced to the year 1913 and to the person of Rudolf Steiner. In *On the Border* (1930:169) Belyj notes: "the most significant experiences of my life fall in October 1913". Belyj elaborates on this comment in his *Reminiscences of Rudolf Steiner* written in 1928-1929.<sup>6</sup> The crucial days for Belyj are spent in Christiania from October 1-6, 1913 listening to Rudolf Steiner's lecture series "Das fuenfte Evangelium: Aus der Akasha Forschung". The encounter with Paul as interpreted by Rudolf Steiner has far reaching consequences for Belyj. First there is the acceptance of Christ (1929:483): "Aber ich werde es immer wissen, weil ich es weiss: Jesus ist der Freund, den ich oft vergessen habe, der aber mich nie vergass". Simultaneously there is a release from the filial guilt vis-à-vis his mother, which also flows directly from this identification with Christ:

Man erinnerte sich an das erste: "Mama!" und die Antwort: "Mein Sohn!" Aber man nahm noch nicht wahr, dass man nicht ein "Sohn", sondern nur ein "Ziehsohn" war. Und ploetzlich, "dreiunddreissig" Jahre nach der Geburt, im Oktober 1913, entdeckte man dieses "Zieh"-Sohn, eine Entdeckung, die alles veraenderte, auf einem Schlag, saemtliche Bilder der Erinnerung. Sie fielen ab wie lose Huellen, dahinter erschien das Antlitz des Ganzen, mit ihm die Revolution der Biographie: "Nicht Sohn - Zieh-Sohn, nicht in Moskau geboren - nirgends geboren: seit Anbeginn der Zeit im Antlitz des 'Ich' seiend". Dieses Antlitz ist Jesus. (1929:473)

Finally there comes corroboration of a point made by Nina Berberova (1969:157) that Belyj who had been seeking a father eventually found one in the Doktor. Once again the stimulus for this feeling of "usynovlenie" is "'Das fuenfte Evangelium', das mich dem Doktor nahe brachte, fast bis zu dem Gefuehl von ihm als

Sohn angenommen zu sein" (1929:451).

In *The Christened Chinaman* (1927:214) the narrator recounts: "I concluded a covenant with him". The "covenant with the father" is for Freud equivalent to the creation of a totemic system, for as he notes: "All later religions are seen to be attempts at solving the same problem [of filial guilt]" (1913:144,145). If the beginnings of art and religion converge in the Oedipus complex, then it is not surprising that a resolution of that complex is similarly a synthetic one. Indeed, the acceptance of Christ, the narrator's answer to his guilt, is the means of uniting the psychological, stylistic and mythical elements of the novel.<sup>7</sup>

At the psychoanalytical level Belyj, the forty year old writer, successfully regresses to the point of the six year old narrator to confront the memories of his father and mother and to redefine his position vis-à-vis them. On the stylistic level he comes to grips with this period of his life by his very act of artistic creation, recreating his parents and the ambivalent concepts of "rod". In so doing he imposes a verbal order and with this verbal order he establishes control over the questions of "birth", "gender" and "generation" which had so dominated his artistic career up to this point. On the mythical or spiritual level, Belyj finds or rediscovers the mystery of Christ and the meaning He and His sacrifice bring to life.

One final note concerning the theme of "rod". After the publication of *The Christened Chinaman* in 1921 a major change can be seen in Belyj's writings. Instead of fictional autobiography he turns increasingly to accounts of real life: to his *Reminiscences of Blok* and his series of factual autobiographies: *On the Border of Two Centuries*, *The Beginning of the Century*, and *Between Two Revolutions*. In his later novels, *Moscow* and *Masks* the focus is no longer on the self, but on the other inhabitants of Belyj's make-believe world. Presumably Belyj had faced his own neurosis, the Oedipus complex, and had artistically conquered it. At the very least he had put it into some perspective and seemed capable of leaving it behind him. It would be incorrect to say that the theme came entirely to an end. Some of the most inspired and enlightening pages of Belyj's critical writings can be found in his final critical study *Gogol's Craftsmanship* (1934:17-71) where he discusses the story "The Terrible Vengeance" and the problem of "rod". But for Belyj the problem of "rod" ceased to be a personal one; rather it became simply one of many other interesting literary phenom-

ena to be viewed and studied with dispassionate distance.

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#### NOTES

1. The exclusive role of the Oedipus complex has been recently challenged by Heinz Kohut. See Susan Quinn, "Oedipus Vs. Narcissus", *The New York Times Magazine*, November 9, 1980, 120-131.
2. In a review based on the 1927 text "Andrej Belyj: Kreščenyj kitaec" Chodasevič tries to defend his former argument of parricide by claiming that this expanded text of *The Christened Chinaman* is still incomplete. He ignores the conclusion and refuses to accept the fact that the novel constitutes an artistic whole.
3. The totem as defined by Freud is "the common ancestor of the clan" (1913:2). One might also note that the word "totem" comes from the Ojibwa, an Algonquian language, "ototeman" meaning "his brother-sister kin".
4. See my article, "Andrej Belyj's 'The Magic of Words' and *The Silver Dove*", *Slavic and East European Journal*, XXII, 1 (1978), 464-472; Helene Hartmann-Flyer, "The Time Bomb", in: *Andrej Bely: A Critical Review*, ed. Gerald Janecek (Lexington 1978), 121-126; Gerald Janecek, "An Acoustic-Semantic Complex in Belyj's *Kotik Letaev*", *Slavic and East European Journal*, XVIII, 2 (1974), 153-159. Belyj's fascination with sound and sense associations is well documented. It is perhaps best illustrated in his *Glossalolija*: "Poëma o zvuke", 1922, which is in turn heavily influenced by Rudolf Steiner's theories of eurythmy. Freud was also occupied with thoughts of words at the time, as seen in his remark about children: "They are never ready to accept a similarity between two words as having no meaning: they consistently assume that if two things are called by similar-sounding names this must imply the existence of some deep-lying agreement between them" (p.56).
5. Andrej Belyj, *Kreščenyj kitaec* (1927; reprint München 1969), 17. Subsequent page references are to this edition, which is the most accessible one. The Russian word "blagorodnyj" is often translated as "noble", but more precisely means "of noble birth". In English the use of "generous" to mean "of noble birth" is archaic. The usage does, however, effectively

preserve the morphological and etymological associations of the Russian word.

6. *Vospominanija o Štejnere* cannot be found in any bibliography of Belyj's works. There is a single reference to such a project in a letter to Ivanov-Razumnik of March 2, 1927. See *Cahiers du Monde Russe et Soviétique*, XV, 1-2 (Janvier-Juin, 1974), 82. The manuscript found its way to the West in 1972 and has appeared in an excellent German translation by Svetlana Geier. The Russian manuscript has not yet been published.
7. Just as the concept of "rod" unites the various aspects of the novel, it also serves as the basis for a curious connection between Steiner, Freud and St. Paul. Belyj has written of the importance in his life of another series of Steiner's lectures entitled *The Bhagavad Gita and the Epistles of Paul* (New York 1971), trans. by D. Manges and Doris M. Bugby. In his book Steiner points to the importance of "rod": "In everything that will be said in these lectures on the Bhagavad Gita remember what has often been referred to, namely, how the ancient blood-ties, racial connections, tribal kinships, had special significance and only gradually did they cease" (12). The problem of kinships is for Freud equally all-encompassing: "the beginnings of religion, morals, society and art converge in the Oedipus complex" (1913:156). Few remember, however, that it is Paul in the New Testament who first condemns the "union of a man with his father's wife" (I Corinthians 5:1).

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