

East and West Literary and Cultural Paradigms

Dr Anna Ponomareva

SSEES/UCL

London WC1H 0BW, UK

The avant-garde on a planetary scale: in the middle of colours

The aim of my presentation is to underline the importance of Western esoterism in its Theosophical and Anthroposophical forms in Russian and Georgian Symbolist movements. In particular, I am going to discuss the presence of karmic ideas in Andrey Bely's travelogue *Veter s Kavkaza* [A Wind from the Caucasus] (1928) and Grigol Robakidze's novel *გველის პერანგი* [The Snake's Skin] (1926).

My previous research (Ponomareva 2005) establishes links between karmic ideas and Bely's ornamental prose. Bely defines karma as "the artistic culture of inner life" (RGALI, f.53, op.1, n.81, l.95) and illustrates these ideas further in *Veter s Kavkaza* (1928), using colours to encode them. His last novels are also dedicated to the discussion of Anthroposophical concepts rather than to providing any narrative ideologically accepted in the USSR in the late 1920s. The following Bely's words were recorded by Zaitsev on 5 February 1931, after Bely received a confirmation that his other novel, *Maski* [Masks] had been approved by Soviet censors: "In *Masks*, I had been playing an extremely complex game with All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks). And I won it" (in my translation and cited from Spivak 1988).

My hypothesis is that Robakidze could be familiar with the concept of karma. The notion is discussed in *The Snake's Skin* where the presence of colour symbolism is also significant. Robakidze's studies in Tartu (1901) and Leipzig (1902-1906) as well as the establishment of Gurdjieff's Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man in Tiflis in 1919 might be named as sources of his information on Western esoterism.

In addition to avoiding the strict censorship of the Soviet regime, the use of these ideas by the Symbolists might be also related to their intention of giving cosmic dimensions to their avant-garde writings, in which imagination, inspiration and intuition are important on a planetary scale.