

## Individual Session

### East and West: Literary and Cultural Paradigms

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#### The Avant-Garde on a Planetary Scale: in the Middle of Colours

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**Abstract:**

The turn of the 20th century and the first several years of the new millennium was the time of great experiments in Arts related to adding unusual novel facets to their traditional artistic forms. As contemporary artists and composers, literary figures took part in similar trials and mixed the verbal with the visual in their texts. This article is going to illustrate the use of colours by two Symbolist writers, Andrey Bely (1880-1934) and Grigol Robakidze (1880-1962), and to explain the importance of the light paradigm in creating multi-layered meaningful messages in their novels of 1926, Bely's *Москва* and Robakidze's *გველის პერანგი*. The methodological framework which is used here has been formed by several ideas from cognitive poetics (Stockwell, 2020) and paratextual studies (Genette, 1997; Batchelor, 2018). To a large extent, this article further expands and deepens the author's arguments which have earlier been expressed in her work on Bely's novel *Petersburg* (Ponomareva, 2017) where the spiritual dimension of his arguments is underlined and explained in terms of ancient Indian philosophical ideas that prepare the foundations of Theosophical and Anthroposophical teachings.

**Keywords:** Symbolism, Andrey Bely, Grigol Robakidze, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

The turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first several years of the new millennium was the time of great experiments in Arts. Perhaps in contemporary terminology this process can be called creating multimodal interpretations of various works of music, paintings and literature by adding to their primary features unusual facets from other artistic forms. For example, a number of compositions by Alexander Scriabin (1871-1915), a Russian composer, might be perceived as visible because colours have been added to their sounds. The work of Mikalojus Čiurlionis (1875-1911), a Lithuanian painter, shares the same framework, however, there the artist adds musical dimensions to his canvases. Writers and poets have also taken part in similar experiments as their contemporaries in music and art. They attempted to make words being pictorial by attaching colours to their various verbal images. In many ways these visual effects were not just hues of particular paints but meaningful auras which helped writers and poets explain their expressions and thoughts in more detail.

It is impossible to talk about colours in literature without mentioning the name and work of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832). His study of colour phenomena, *Zur Farbenlehre* (1810) [in English *The Theory of Colour* (1840)], is an attempt to understand colour in its own terms and to see it as the “deeds and sufferings of light” (Raines: no date, online). Later, nearly a century after Goethe’s publication, his ideas have been taken roots in literary works of two Symbolist writers, Andrey Bely (1880-1934) and Grigol Robakidze (1880-1962). My article is going to illustrate the use of colour by these authors and to explain the importance of the light paradigm in creating multi-layered meaningful messages in their novels of 1926, Bely’s *Москва* [published in Russian, part of his cycle of Moscow novels (1926-1932)] and Robakidze’s *გველის პერანგი* [published in Georgian, translated into English as *The Snake’s Skin* (2016)].

Although these novels have appeared at the same time, they are associated with different stages of their authors’ careers: for Bely it was closer to the end of his life; for Robakidze it marked nearly the pick of his literary and social activities. Moreover, commenting on other phases related to Bely’s and Robakidze’s lives, it is difficult to avoid mentioning the fact that they were born in the same year, in 1880. Meanwhile, discussing these number puzzles is not the aim of my article. They have been brought up to emphasise that it is challenging to talk about inspirational issues in one’s creativity in general, and between these authors in particular. In other

words, when Rayfield describes the birth of Blue Horns (ცისვერყანწელები), a group of Georgian Symbolist writers in which Robakidze was a leading figure, as

The sleepy boulevards and cafes of Kutaisi were transformed in 1916 by a group of former local schoolboys who had returned from university in Saint Petersburg and casual study in France and Germany, they were determined not only to avoid conscription, but to foist a cult of Oscar Wilde, Paul Verlaine, and Russian Symbolism on the local intelligentsia (Rayfield, 2020, p. 230).

Or Robakidze himself claims that “I came out of Symbolism” (Robakidze, 1923, p. 19 – in my translation). It might be more appropriate to stand with Goncharova’s point which Tsvetaeva (1929) reproduces as the following: “...influence, influence *on*. Pressure is on, influence is *into*, like river to river, go and figure whose water it is – the Rhone’s or the Leman’s. It’s new water, unprecedented. Confluence” (cited in Peters Hasty, 2017, pp. 37-65).

Cognitive poetics (Stockwell, 2002/2020) and paratextual studies (Genette, 1997; Batchelor, 2018) provide an additional theoretical support to framing my ideas. This methodology has already been used in my article (Ponomareva, 2017) which focuses on Bely’s other novel, *Petersburg* (1916). There I argue that reading Bely’s work requires to be engaged with his process of thinking. This might be achieved when one is going to trace several sources related to understanding colours and perception which have been consulted by Bely when he has been working on his theory of Symbolism and on *Petersburg* in particular. Thus, his ‘thought-forms’ in colours, or descriptions of people and events, might be interpreted through the prism of his reading of Goethe’s *Theory of Colours* (1810), Theosophical literature, in particular Leadbeater (1902) and Besant (1901), and Shcherbatskoy’s work on Buddhist logic (1903). To me, these books are the paratext of Bely’s novels and theory as without them it is difficult to interpret his texts and understand his arguments in detail. Moreover, this ‘threshold’ to Bely’s world also underlines the importance of merging East and West literary and cultural paradigms there.

The creation of ‘thought-forms’ in colours continues in Bely’s novels of Moscow cycle. He planned to write a four-volume epic under the general title *Moscow*. However, Bely could not complete his plans; he died in 1934.

There are only three publications in his Moscow series: the first volume is called *Moskva [Moscow]* (1926) and consists of two parts, *Moskovskii chudak [The Moscow Eccentric]* and *Moskva pod udarom [Moscow is under attack]*, and the second volume is titled as *Maski [Masks]* (1932). The novels are Bely's epic of Moscow in which the city is portrayed as the metropolis and the symbol of Russia in 1915-1916<sup>1</sup>.

From Bely's letter 177 of 1-3 March 1927 to Ivanov-Razumnik (Belyi i Ivanov-Razumnik, 1998: 481-509), in which he analyses his life, literary career and work and presents them in seven-year cycles, it is possible to find his explanations on how Moscow novels can be interpreted. According to him, he does not have intention to juxtaposed Petersburg to Moscow; his motives are different. Bely intends to use the results of his experience in one period, the years of 1916-1922, the time when he was working on the second edition of his *Petersburg*, for the benefits of another life period, 1923-1929, when he initiated and continued his writing of Moscow novels. Moreover, he evaluates these two phases as two episodes in which his soul has become mature and entirely committed to have the knowledge of itself (Belyi i Ivanov-Razumnik, 1998: 508 – in my summary and translation into English).

To him, the progress of deepening self-knowledge is the result of meditations, in which it is necessary to develop one's perceptions, create their visual images and 'see' them in detail (Ponomareva, 2017, pp. 147-162).

This time one episode from *Moscow* (1989, pp. 230-231 – in my translation) is chosen to illustrate the importance of colours in reading Bely's novel:

Overall, it is spring!

And Moscow.

... Here is a street with a row of facades (one facade after another as Hades is made by Hades itself) and suddenly the quietest narrow street appears.

Over there a wooden house, with oak and olive colouration and the half-circle of carving of above window superstructure, stood also beautified by carving below: it was the winged horse Pegasus who was pressing himself from the right as well as from the left to Gor-

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<sup>1</sup> Only the first part of *Moscow* has recently been translated into English as *The Moscow Eccentric* by Brendan Kiernan (2016).

gon (hooves and manes were under her snakes). It was clear that Pegasus was wonderfully carved. It was unclear to the residents that here a legend was carved. Here, in the eyehole of the gates, which was deep and narrow, the corner of a shed was sticking out, a rope was dangling with dry cloth of lemon and blue colours, the solid wall of a two-floor house was showing white, the house was looking into Paschekov close through the overrun foliage of a big green garden that was pouring a nightingale's tereu over Moscow – and with a girl perched in her grey-and lilac dress and dancing in the wind skirt.

Above her there were clusters of white lilac in full blossom in the deep and blue cornflower skies where a cloud was melting in the wind and disappearing in waifs.

All these are Moscow!

This abstract depicts Moscow as a legend. Here a passer-by who is able to appreciate the great window decorations of wooden houses might see a carving of Pegasus, the white winged divine stallion, a son of Poseidon and the Gorgon Medusa. However, this is just a starting point to develop a spiritual vision of the city. Next, Bely crafts the image of a girl in her grey-and lilac dress. The colours of her dress are carefully chosen by the author. First, the colours of the girl's outfit are mixed; it is a combination of grey and lilac. Secondly, these colours might be decoded using Leadbeater's explanations. He does not specify lilac on its own, but the colour is mentioned when the spectrum of blue is explained:

...light blue marks devotion to a noble spiritual ideal, and gradually rises to a luminous lilac-blue, which typifies the higher spirituality, and is usually accompanied by sparkling golden stars, representing elevated spiritual aspirations (Leadbeater, 1903, online)

Leadbeater's interpretation of grey is the following:

...heavy leaden grey expresses deep depression, and where this is habitual its appearance is sometimes indescribably gloomy and saddening. This colour also has the curious characteristic of arranging itself in parallel lines, as has that of avarice, and both give the impression that their unfortunate victim is imprisoned within a kind of astral cage (Ibid).

Applying these theosophical interpretations of colours, it is possible to understand several elements of Bely's myth of Moscow. *Moscow under Arrest* (1926), from which the quotation is taken, narrates the story of the city when it has been "imprisoned within a kind of astral case": this is reflected in grey shades on the girl's dress. However, in the future, the city is facing better perspectives. They are depicted in the lilac hues of the dress.

The glow of human bodies which one can perceive during his or her meditation is a projection of people's feelings and emotions portrayed in colour. In terms of Theosophy, this is an astral body or plane. In Bely's girl, i.e. the symbol of Moscow, it is possible to see even the larger projections of her sensations. The paragraph before the last sentence in the quotation above from Bely's novel provides more hints on the spiritual advances of Moscow: white and blue colours are mentioned there. The lilac bush is in full blossom and its flowers are white. Neither Goethe or Leadbeater specify the colour white: to them, it is the light itself, and all other colours are put on a spectrum between light and darkness.

There is also a tale of a city in Robakidze's novel. *The Snake's Skin* is a story of one British soldier named Archibad McAsh who makes his epic journey across Persia and at some point of this trip discovers his Georgian identity and becomes Archil Makashvili. During his physical and spiritual voyage Archil comes to Tbilisi. There is a quotation below which represents the narration of this city legend<sup>1</sup> (Robakidze, 2014, pp. 197-198 – in my translation):

In Mtsheta a hawk flew up from a tsar's hand. The hawk took after a pheasant. The tsar is waiting but neither hawk nor pheasant is seen. The tsar is going to find them. He reaches a gorge. There is a stream of sulphur colour in the gorge. In the stream there is the drowned pheasant. And the hawk is also there. The tsar makes a foundation of the city there.

This is a legend of the capital.

Tbilisi starts with sulphur bathhouses and ends with sulphur bathhouses (in this a metaphysic takes out metaphysics).

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<sup>1</sup> In spite of the fact that there is an English translation of this novel (its details are listed in my References), it has been impossible to obtain its copy.

Small houses and small streets. On a narrow street one can jump from one balcony to another. Here and there are coffee houses. Beards are coloured by henna. Nails are sharpen slightly and also coloured by henna. On hands there are prayer beads, either from amber or gisher\*. Talking is slow and quiet. Eyes do not search for anybody (perhaps they look only for themselves in the far away land).

A bathhouse attendant stands next to the entrance of a bathhouse.

... It is very true that having a sulphur bath is exceptionally good.

There feasts are always taking place. This is also the case now. Legs are short. Trousers are wide as if they were puffed out. On the waist there is a big silver belt. A silk colourful Baghdadi-type headscarf\*\* is running through the belt. His head is either a rounded pumpkin which is used to make wine dippers or a pestle for a stone mortar. At the back of his head is a cup like a black mushroom. His entire figure is like a hot pepper.

\*Rustaveli had a gisher necklace (the translator's footnote).

\*\* Pirosmanni wore this type of headscarf (the translator's footnote).

Here Tbilisi has two portraits. Its big one reveals the city as a huge entity of houses, streets and people. Its smaller version takes the image of one bathhouse attendant. It appears that the larger image produces more glow. The following bright colours are easily identifiable there: reddish-brown (henna), amber and gisher.

At this stage of my research, it is not possible to provide a reference to any document which specifies Robakidze's reading before or at the time of writing his novel. My application of Leadbeater's interpretations of colours to the text of *The Snake's Skin* is more a hypotheses-driven than evidence-based decision. However, there are several examples from Robakidze's work which point to the possibility of his appreciation of these ideas focused on combined East and West literary and cultural teachings. First of all, his article on Andrey Bely – originally written in 1918 – operates with the following concepts: maya [“deceptive folds of the magical veil of radiant Maya” – in my translation (Robakidze, 2004, p. 459)], astral fluids (464), Theosophy (465), astral body (Ibid.). There are also references in his novel: extremely poetic use of colours in various descriptions (Robakidze, 2014, p.

114), nirvana [“one of the Persians – (his face is nirvana) – is looking at something” – in my translation Ibid:124], upadhi (Ibid: 130).

Among potential sources of Robakidze’s knowledge of some Theosophical and Anthroposophical concepts borrowed from ancient Indian philosophy might be his various university courses abroad, in Tartu (1901) and Leipzig (1902-1906), as well as the likelihood of his possible connections with Gurdjieff’s Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man established in Tiflis in 1919. The probability of Robakidze’s reading Goethe’s *Theory of Colour* (1810) is very high having in mind his knowledge of German and the time of his literary career.

To some extent, Ram’s statement might be interpreted as a support of my arguments: “Robakidze viewed symbolism as a «technique» by which creatively to render the «underlying insights of the Georgian Orient»” (Ram, 2005: 251). It is precisely there, in this methodological part of Robakidze’s application of the modernist form to his national content, it is possible to identify the presence of Bely’s philosophical ideas as they have made his version of Russian Symbolism. On the other hand, using one’s practice does not mean to be fully aware of how it has been established and what is behind it. However, my references above, related to mentioning Robakidze’s terms, provide evidence on his knowledge of their philosophical use.

Thus, based on my axiomatic suggestion, let us try to interpret the colours from the quotation above, about the legend of Tbilisi, using Leadbeater’s definitions:

henna (reddish-brown)– “greenish-brown, lit up by deep red or scarlet flashes, denotes jealousy, and in the case of the ordinary man there is nearly always a good deal of this color present when he is what is called ‘in love’” (Leadbeater, 1903, online).

amber – “this is a very good color, implying always the possession of intellectuality. Its shades vary, and it may be complicated by the admixture of various other hues. Generally speaking, it has a deeper and duller tint if the intellect is directed chiefly into lower channels, most especially if the objects are selfish; but it becomes brilliantly golden, and rises gradually to a beautiful clear and luminous lemon or primrose yellow, as it is addressed to higher and more unselfish objects” (Ibid.).



Leadbeater does not provide any comments on gisher (gagat), but this stone is usually black or dark brown. In this way, it corresponds to the idea of darkness.

The application of theosophical interpretations of colours to Robakidze's description of Tbilisi creates a chance to add extra features to his image of this city: now the "astral body" of Tbilisi becomes more visible, with its passion, intelligence and dark forces which are beaming there.

My indications related to Robakidze's conceptual visualisation of colours in his novel is to a degree approved by the author himself. He dedicates his *Snake's Skin* (1926) to Goethe. There Robakidze names *Der Erl-könig* (1782) [the poem is translated into English as *The Erl-King*], but not *The Theory of Colour* (1810), as his inspiration. However, the last line of Robakidze's dedication has a specific expression, "to Goethe's eye" (Robakidze, 2014, p. 11). This gives me an opportunity to argue that the author of *The Snake's Skin* has his strong intention to see like Goethe, or in other words, to create his texts in which the presence of visual components is important.

This practice is different from the contemporary fashionable immersive experience projects which take advantages of experiential technology. It has a specific agenda and even a tradition. The roots of this tradition can also be found in Goethe's work, in his fairy tale *The Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily* (1795). In one of its episodes the King and the Green Snake are discussing values: "'What is grander than gold?' inquired the King. 'Light,' replied the Snake. 'What is more refreshing than light?' said he. 'Speech,' answered she" (Goethe, 2019, p. 6).

Goethe's set of light and speech appears in Bely's and Robakidze's works as the combination of word and colour. Their duo is also meaningful as the conceptual application of colour in the description of characters and images in their novels gives opportunities to add extra layers to their stories and to put them in the context of cosmic spirituality rather than fixing them within the parameters of one human life or one historical period. Moreover, as this article argues, colours putting by Goethe on the scale between light and darkness, adjusted by teachings in Theosophy and Anthroposophy, help the symbolists create new literature which uses an artist's palette to mix the human and the universal.

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