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## АНДРЕЙ БЕЛЫЙ И ИСАЙЯ

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**Аннотация:** Тема гибели и возрождения — постоянный мотив в творчестве Андрея Белого. Ощущение катастрофы присутствует на личном, национальном и космическом уровне. В значительной степени Белый опирается на Откровение Иоанна Богослова, однако иногда обнаруживается связь и с так называемым Апокалипсисом от Исаии, в частности, с его пророчеством о развратном городе, который за свою греховность был разрушен мстительным Богом, а затем возродился в новой форме. Так, Москва и Петербург в романах Белого представляются городами-разносчиками болезней; городская цивилизация описывается враждебной людям и противоположной природе. Сочинения Белого являются своеобразной эхокамерой, полной цитат и аллюзий. Он часто цитирует самого себя, многократно повторяет ключевые заимствованные фразы. Одна из них — цитата из Апокалипсиса пророка Исаии «Ужас и яма и петля для тебя, житель земли!» проходит сквозь все творчество Белого. Она также встречается в его письмах, которые, на наш взгляд, должны включаться в общий корпус художественных текстов писателя.

**Ключевые слова:** проза Белого, Апокалипсис от Исаии, современный город, греховность, эхокамера, цитаты.

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## ANDREJ BELYJ AND ISAIAH

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**Abstract:** The theme of doom and resurrection is a constant in Andrej Belyj's works. Catastrophism on the personal, national, overarching cultural and cosmic planes are always present. To a significant degree, of course, he draws upon Revelation, but he has a recurrent need of Isaiah's Apocalypse and its mighty prophecy about the "city of confusion" that is condemned for its sinfulness and destroyed by the vengeful God to eventually arise in a new form. It is no coincidence that in his great novels, Belyj condemns Petersburg and Moscow as breeding grounds of disease. He regards urban civilization as hostile to humans and contrary to nature. His collected works are an echo chamber abounding in quotations and allusions. Especially often he quotes himself, returning to borrowed key phrases. An especially important passage about the sinful city from the Isaiah Apocalypse — "Fear, and the pit, and the snare, are upon thee, O inhabitant of the earth" — runs throughout Belyj's oeuvre (since his letters should also be regarded as one of his artistic genres).

**Key words:** Belyj's prose, Isaiah Apocalypse, catastrophism, modern city, sinfulness, echo-chamber, quotations.

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At the beginning of what is known as “Isaiah’s Apocalypse” in the Book of Isaiah, there is a powerful prophecy about the destruction of a metropolis, followed by the advent of a new era. The first chapter of the apocalypse, 24, which in the New International Version bears the rubric “The Lord’s Devastation of the Earth,” declares that God will destroy his creation as punishment for humanity’s sinful ways. The entire world will “languish and fade away.” All joy will be darkened, and the few who remain will call out in vain to the Lord. Beset by terrible tremors and quakes, the earth shall reel to and fro “like a drunkard” and never rise again. The heathen “city of confusion” will be reduced to a pile of rubble.

One key passage is 24:17, which in the King James Version reads: “Fear, and the pit, and the snare, are upon thee, O inhabitant of the earth.” In the New International Version it is condensed somewhat to: “Terror and pit and snare await you, people of the earth.” The Russian translation is also shorter: “Užas i jama i petlja dlja tebja, žitel’ zemli!” As in fact Vladimir Orlov managed to point out in the late Soviet period, Nikolaj Gumilev quotes it in his poem *Zvezdnyj užas*, written shortly before he was executed in 1921 and published that year both in volume two of the Acmeists’ *Cech poëtov* and in his last poetry collection *Ognennyj stolp*. There an old man one starlit night foretells misfortune for his young descendants: “Gore! Gore! Strach, petlja i jama / Dlja togo, kto na zemle rodilsja.” Basing himself on the ex-Symbolist critic of the 1920s Jurij Verchovskij, Orlov emphasizes that here in his final phase, Gumilev seems to be returning to the Symbolism out of which his poetry once emerged before he turned against the movement. As in the works of the Symbolists, the perspective of the poem is apocalyptic, a dark commentary on the age that is at the same time deeply personal. The cocky romantic world conqueror has become a pessimistic witness of the times [11, p. 126–127].

In a 2004 article on Andrej Belyj's novel *Serebrjanyj golub'*, Nikolaj Bogomolov argues that Gumilev was even more indebted to Symbolism than Orlov asserts, since his Bible quotation probably came via Belyj [9, p. 176–177]. Near the end of Belyj's first novel, the young poet Dar'jal'skij realizes that in his desire to unite with and reincarnate the mother earth of Russia by participating in the orgiastic rituals of the Khlyst sectarians, he has been playing irresponsible games with the holiest of holies and conjured up satanic forces from the depths of the common people. Although she has features of a witch, he is irresistibly attracted to the peasant woman Matrena, the incarnated Earth Mother and the bearer of the future world redeemer: "No on uže načinal ponimat", čto to — užas, petlja i jama: ne Rus', a kakaja-to temnaja bezdna vostoka pret na Rus' iz étich radeniem utončennych tel. "Užas!" — podumal on" [7, p. 188, 193]. Bogomolov emphasizes that here, as in Gumilev's poem, the stars light up the firmament [9, p. 176]. Dar'jal'skij is in the power of the mystical Doves, the captive of their diabolical leader. He is doomed, and soon he will be murdered.

The allusion to Isaiah has been pointed out earlier by Aleksandr Lavrov in his doctoral dissertation *Andrej Belyj v 1900-gody* [10, p. 291]. In the notes to Belyj and Aleksandr Blok's correspondence, Lavrov also notes that the quotation occurs in Belyj's letter of 10 January 1913 from Berlin, where it figures in a very detailed report just before the founding of the Anthroposophical Society and at a point when Belyj was deep into work on his second novel, *Peterburg* [8, p. 486, 489 (note)]. In the context of his occult meditation exercises and closely related interpretation of the Symbolist experience centered on the 1905 Revolution, Belyj attempts in this letter to explain to Blok what has now become clear to him. He wants to show why in this situation it is Rudolf Steiner's spiritual science that offers him the only possible way out of the crisis besetting Symbolism and Russia. He stresses that the Anthroposophical meditations he is engaged in are painful but enlightening. It is as though he casts off his "old soul" and is simultaneously reborn and fortified. To illustrate what he is experiencing, he quotes Afanasiy Fet and his own and Blok's earlier works. Notably, by so doing he is distancing himself from what the newly minted Acmeist Gumilev — echoing Brjusov — stands for. Blok and Belyj himself had tried to conjure up the soul of the people in their poetry, but the result was "užas i petlja Tebe, čelovek!" The reason was exactly what had been suggested in *Serebrjanyj golub'*, namely that those who were unprepared and ignorant had allowed themselves to be misled by black magic. As is evident from the famous, anguished apostrophe to Russia toward the end of *Mertvye duši*, Gogol' before them had sensed the eyes of that soul upon

him. Unable to cope with it, however, he perished. Now Steiner was urging Belyj and other nationally conscious Russians to train themselves to discern what it was saying and be in a position to reverse the nation's disastrous course. Russian Symbolists, and with them all of Russia, must undergo a purification process in order to avoid "the fear and the pit" and rise to new life [8, p. 486, 489 (note)].

Thus here, I think, there is link between Serebrjanyj golub' and Peterburg. In the former the poet escaped to the countryside, the sectarians, the earth. In the latter the young heroes are imprisoned in a doomed metropolis of stone that recalls Isaiah's city. In that text Belyj had already prophesied apocalyptic cosmic quakes and tremors as the judgment upon this Petersburgian Babylon. In a second letter to Blok written in Berlin at the same time, he describes the German capital in terms strongly reminiscent of the Russian city: perverted and corrupt. Influenced by his friend Ėmilij Metner's anti-Semitic characterization of Berlin musical life as ruined by "Jewish commerce," Belyj speaks of Berlin as "perniciously Judaized" [8, p. 502]. He took care to conceal such outbursts in the novel, but the tendency is present below the surface, and it is not for nothing that the destroyer of the city, Lippachenko, has Mongolian-Semitic physical characteristics.

Belyj, in fact, alludes to Isaiah on several different occasions. Interestingly enough, Isaiah's judgment falls again some ten years later when the writer again portrays Berlin, the city to which he was driven in temporary exile. In his essay *Odna iz obitelej carstva tenej* (1924) he notes of the decadent and morally lax post-war atmosphere in the city: "Opuskaju glaza, čtoby ne brosit'sja i ne kriknut': 'O petlja i jama tebe, buržuaznyj Sodom!'" He describes the scene as organized madness, hallucinatory confusion, pervasive malice and baseness, where speculation and "Negro drums" have turned life upside down. One hears a distant echo of Metner here, but now there are some new expressions of racism (that will also soon reappear in Belyj's trilogy of Moscow novels). In addition to the "Japanese mugs" that could be glimpsed in Peterburg, here it is black, "primitive" cultures that seem to be invading Europe and setting it on the path to disintegration [4, p. 33].

The truth of the matter is that throughout his works, with more or less explicit Biblical support, Belyj regards urban civilization as hostile to humans and contrary to nature. It is no coincidence that in all of his powerful novels he condemns Petersburg and Moscow as breeding grounds of disease. His collected works are an echo chamber abounding in quotations and allusions. Especially often he quotes

himself, returning to both his own and borrowed key phrases. As early as 1911, just before he began working on *Peterburg*, he in fact cited Isaiah in his article “Epipet” in connection with the complex anguish he experienced in March of that year as he contemplated the Sphinx and the nearby pyramids at Giza. It was outside Cairo that the idea of his novel was born as he mused on the riddle of the Sphinx, much as he a few years earlier had sat and meditated at the foot of the Bronze Horseman statue in Petersburg and sought an answer to Puškin’s question about the fate and future of Russia. He writes that both at the Sphinx and high up on the pyramids he sensed the presence of treachery and terror, the “provocation” and diabolical duplicity that would become a central theme in his literary interpretation of Russia’s contemporary tragedy. It was as though everything had been turned inside out and nothing was what it purported to be. He seemed to hear the heavy thud of a falling body, accompanied by the words: “Užas i petlja tebe, sovremennyj čelovek” [3, p. 179]<sup>1</sup>. This, he concluded, was Cairo’s message: “Petlja i jama tebe zdes’, sovremennyj čelovek!” [2, p. 214]. After having been confronted with the Devil himself, who has emerged from an anti-world where everything is its opposite, Aleksandr Dudkin in *Peterburg* wishes that the city would be reduced to rubble [5, p. 306]. Finally, in the epilogue, Nikolaj Ableuchov finds himself in Egypt, where he becomes aware of modern humanity’s perdition and here, among the massive stone pyramids, recognizes his own doomed civilization. The overwhelming experience of Giza is palpable throughout.

Belyj’s impressions of Egypt as described in his memoirs written in the 1930s again return to Isaiah. They climax in the vertigo he felt as he climbed a pyramid and the urge to simply throw himself into the abyss, for everything around him seemed to cry out “Užas, jama i petlja tebe, čelovek!” Here there is a direct connection between Isaiah’s judgment and what Belyj later wanted to convey in *Peterburg*, namely awareness that he no longer was master over himself [6, p. 395, 389, 390].

It is interesting to note that Belyj’s first reference to Isaiah was in an article entitled “Sfinks” from 1905, the revolutionary autumn in which *Peterburg* is set. The theme of the Egyptian Sphinx had aroused his interest early on, for it embodied the ambiguity that was inherent from the beginning in his symbolic language and dreams of an approaching transformation of the world. Here he describes how lis-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. also Belyj’s North African travel sketches, where it is the pyramid of Cheops that appears to pronounce judgment: “Užas, petlja i jama tebe, čelovek sovremennostil!” (“Afrikanskij dnevnik,” ed. S.D. Voronin, in Rossiijskij Archiv. Istorija Otečestva v svidetel’stvakh i dokumentach XVIII–XX vv. Moscow, 1991, p. 346.)

tening to Čajkovskij's music during the course of the Revolution caused him acute anxiety. Within these harmonies he discovered hidden dimensions that suddenly brought the listener face to face with horror. There was the Fourth Symphony, whose final section descended into "hysteria," and the Sixth, the "Pathétique," that seemed to end with "everything collapsing," which made Belyj want to shout "Užas i jama i petlja" [1, p. 45].

Thus an important Biblical passage runs throughout Belyj's oeuvre (since his letters should also be regarded as one of his artistic genres), and it seems to have influenced Gumilev as well, when in his final year of life he returned in some degree to his Symbolist beginnings. The quotation appears in Belyj's works in at least six or more slightly varied versions. Such returns to favorite quotations are also typical of him, as he attempts to achieve new echo effects in different contexts. It is especially the addressee that changes: "inhabitant of the earth" ("žitel' zemli") becomes (thou) "man" ("čelovek") or (thou) "modern/contemporary man" ("sovremennyj čelovek") and finally (thou) "bourgeois Sodom" ("buržuaznyj Sodom"). Occasionally he uses "the pit" ("jama"), sometimes "horror" ("užas"). Only "the snare" ("petlja") occurs everywhere.

The theme of doom and resurrection is a constant in Belyj's works. Catastrophism on the personal, national, overarching cultural and cosmic planes are always present. To a significant degree, of course, he draws upon Revelation, but as we have seen, he also has a recurrent need of Isaiah's Apocalypse and its mighty prophecy about the "city of confusion" that is condemned for its sinfulness and destroyed by the vengeful God to eventually arise in a new form.

There is profound significance in the fact that in 1911 Belyj traveled from Egypt directly to Jerusalem, the holy city whose contours are conjured up by Isaiah. This is what Belyj is searching for — Sodom's opposite, the otherworldly, purified, resurrected city far beyond "fear, and the pit, and the snare."

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