

PART I

TOWARDS A THEORY OF IDENTIFICATION WITH PETERSBURG SPACE

In the St. Petersburg carnivals of recent years, maskers were costumed as the buildings, monuments, and other landmarks of their city.¹ For all the manifold colors of the Venetian *carnivale*, one would look in vain for a person masquerading as the Rialto bridge or the Cathedral della Salute. No, it is Petersburgers who are especially prone to act out or literalize the metaphor of Petersburg space as self in this particular way and in so doing participate in a tradition associated with Russia's northern capital since the late nineteenth century.

This book is a study of that important strain of Petersburg poetry and prose in which the poet identifies himself powerfully with a space, be it a private room, an imperial square or *prospekt* (avenue), or an architectural monument. The phenomenon of the writer's identification of his "self"—individuality, body, psyche—with urban spaces, while not exclusive to Petersburg literature, is one of its salient characteristics in the twentieth century, and one that pervades more than one poetic "school." The importance of Petersburg architecture and space in this tradition has been noted before the Silver Age, to be sure. But the intimate quality and the dynamics of this poetic dialogue with space at the beginning of the new century and beyond have never been studied in adequate detail. Our book is a first attempt to do just that. *My Petersburg / Myself* is not then a general poetics of space à la Bachelard's *La poétique de l'espace*,² but the peculiar identification with space at the end of the imperial Petersburg tradition in Russian letters, a phenomenon whose complexity and intensity may be unique in world literature.

The spatialization (spatial treatment) of the struggles of modern man and the human individuality in difficult, even apocalyptic times, is so important

¹ These costumes, when not in use during the Petersburg carnivals, are displayed at the Interior Theater on Nevskij Prospekt. They were designed by Nikolaj Beljak, Mark Bornštejn, and Fuat Samigullin.

² Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).

because in a tradition without a Proust or an existentialist literature the complexity of the human psyche and experience, so prominent in the novels of the great “psychologist” Dostoevskij, moved directly from the garrulous prose of the underground man to these highly personalized visual treatments of the poetic or creative biography in space. Thus the typology of spatial treatments we present in these pages encompasses the psychological complexity of twentieth-century man in perhaps its most compelling Russian version—as “othered” into or onto urban space.

PETERSBURG AND THE IDENTITY OF THE RUSSIAN ARTISTIC INTELLIGENTSIA

The Rumanian philosopher Emil Cioran has written humorously about the Russians’ penchant for pondering the problem of their own national identity, both collectively and as individuals. What does it mean to be Russian? Is one Eastern, Western, a curious Eurasian mix? Orthodox or cosmopolitan? He remarks that it is impossible to imagine an Englishman or Frenchman (or their respective literatures) obsessed with this question the way Russian literature has been for 150 years.³

In 1836 the Russian philosopher Petr Čaadaev asked “Who are we?” and “When are we?”, and concluded that the incompleteness of the answer and of Russian historical experience was probably a result of *where they were*, their geographical location.⁴ Čaadaev, denied after his “First Letter” the right to publish in Russia for the rest of his life, did not have the opportunity to solve these problems, and they have been thrashed out in Russian literature, philosophy, and political thought ever since. The problem became especially acute in the Silver Age (1890–1920 circa), when most of the writers in this study entered the literary arena. This was so because the Russians of their generation shared an apocalyptic sense that history, and particularly the Petersburg period of Russian history, was about to end, and that the time remaining for Russia to make her mark in world history and culture was severely limited. After the Bolševik Revolution of 1917, attempts to impose a Soviet supranationality (albeit with a largely “Russian” content) and to create a Soviet cultural monopoly further clouded the problems of what was “Russian” in Russian literature and culture. In that framework of Soviet-Russian culture, Petersburg was severely debunked from its erstwhile central importance. In

³ E. M. Cioran, *The Temptation to Exist*, trans. Richard Howard (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968), 311.

⁴ Peter Yakovlevich Chaadayev, *Philosophical Letters and Apology of a Madman*, trans. Mary-Barbara Zeldin (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1969), 165 ff.

Soviet parlance and ideology there was a renewed attempt to make Petersburg “peripheral.”

For very long periods Petersburg had not been considered sufficiently Russian in the national consciousness. Gogol’ had called Petersburg an “*ak-kuratnyj nemeč*” (a fastidious German) and a “foreigner in its native land,” and many Petersburgers are viewed similarly by their compatriots. In reaction Petersburgers, writers and artists in particular, appear to bolster their sense of identity by affixing it to place: in so doing they unwittingly invert the Slavophile attachment to the Russian earth. For there was no solid earth under Petersburg. Given its swampy location and the turbulent waters under it, the Petersburgers chose to identify with the man-made buildings and squares of the northern capital instead of the barren landscape.

As in many other things, it is Dostoevskij who first understands this ploy, putting it into the mind of the ultra-Westernizer Karmazinov in *The Possessed*: “Holy Russia is a poor, wooden, and—and dangerous country.... In Europe ... there are stone structures there and people have something to hold onto.”⁵ Hence it is no wonder that studies concerning a Russian poetics of space have dealt more often with Petersburg’s European spaces than with Moscow. Petersburg, with its Western Neoclassical buildings, statuary, and strict urban layout, is a strikingly organized space, emblematic of the Western education and mentality of its sophisticated citizenry and intelligentsia. The architecture and “foreign” look of Petersburg space is the surface manifestation of its differences from the rest of Russia, differences which in the mythology of the city and the minds of its writers are not skin deep. Differing form implies a different, or differently shaped, content. A Petersburgers’ “Russianness” is delineated in a way unlike that of a Muscovite or a Pskovian.

In our definition, Petersburg poets and writers are those who explicitly associate their creative lives and their *oeuvres* with the Northern capital, and who are emphatic about their “city sense,” be that sense positive, negative, or essentially mixed. We speak of such writers as Dmitrij Merežkovskij, Aleksandr Blok, Innokentij Annenskij, Anna Axmatova, Osip Mandel’stam, Nikolaj Gumilev, Georgij Ivanov, Vladimir Sirin-Nabokov, and Iosif Brodskij, to mention the main ones treated on these pages. The list could be vastly lengthened to include Vaginov, Sosnora, Kušner, Rejn, Krivulin, and, of course, Andrej Bitov.⁶ Of major poets more associated with Moscow, two can be said to have experienced very important “Petersburg periods,” Vladislav Xodasevič

⁵ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Possessed*, trans. Andrew R. MacAndrew (New York: Signet Classic, 1962), 353.

⁶ Viktor Krivulin and Andrej Bitov, while they engage Petersburg, do so somewhat differently than the older writers and Brodskij, upon whose works the present study is based.

and Andrej Belyj. The latter, in his great novel *Petersburg*, used the presentation of Petersburg man in architectural space he inherited from Puškin's *The Bronze Horseman* through Gogol's Petersburg tales to Dostoevskij's "White Nights" and "The Double" and his post-exilic novels. In joining this great tradition, however, Belyj infused notions of modern psychology, Nietzschean and Neo-Kantian philosophy, and Anthroposophy into his treatment of characters in space. His novel is a kind of compendium of the themes and motifs of the Petersburg tradition up to 1910. Yet Belyj initiates imaginative structures or models of identification of self with space that were subsequently adopted and modified by others throughout the first third of the twentieth century and beyond. The images of Belyj's great novel, like those of Dostoevskij and Gogol' before him, left an indelible impression on the writers and, seemingly, on the space itself, imbuing it with unavoidable literary and cultural associations.

The inclusion here of Annenskij, and to a lesser extent, Axmatova, who in addition to Petersburg wrote many poems about Carskoe Selo (as had Puškin), is deliberate. For a long period Carskoe Selo represented an idyllic alternative to the darker urban Petersburg environment in Russian letters. In the period we treat, however, we shall see certain of the idyllic traits of Carskoe Selo being incorporated into the greater Petersburg poetics.

This book will present a virtual typology of imaginative structures in which Petersburg writers present their own existential/biographical experience in spatial, visual terms. We will see a pattern of intimate identification with spaces—parks, gardens, urban planning, buildings, houses, rooms, corridors, ensembles—indeed, with architecture in the broadest sense of the word. In Petersburg poetry and prose this is hardly the only use that space has been put to over the last 200 years. But it is striking in the modernist tradition. We concentrate on these varied and complex treatments of space because they convey the tragedy and psychological richness of the human creative personality in time. In the texts and passages chosen they constitute a dominant in the Jakobsonian sense.

SHUTTLING BETWEEN TRAGEDY AND IDYLL: A NEW TRADITION IN THE PETERSBURG MYTHOLOGY

The intimate identification of the writer with Petersburg space in the period of which we speak represents a new turn in the 200-year mythology of the city, a mythology totally inscribed in literary art. When historical events are incorporated they are mythologized as literature, as verbal art, as specific additions to what Vladimir Toporov has called the global *peterburgskij tekst* (Petersburg

text).⁷ Toporov and Jurij Lotman have mapped the semiotic markers of this “text” over the first two hundred years of its existence.⁸ We are dealing with a particular period when treating the human self and its vicissitudes in terms of Petersburg spaces became a dominant. This period begins in the Silver Age around 1890 and continues in the works of writers whose identification with Petersburg began at that time; it further continues, with marked interruptions, in the Soviet period and in the emigration. Iosif Brodskij is the exception treated here, a writer born in the Soviet period (1940) who consciously embraces and embodies the Petersburg attitudes of his literary forebears. He is important for our subject as his articulation of the identification with Petersburg space is often stronger and more blatant than that of his predecessors. He not only carries the same tradition forward, but contributes substantially to its development in the latter half of the twentieth century.

As mentioned above, the positive and negative literary mythologies of Petersburg arose very early and have been treated descriptively and ideologically by Nikolaj Anciferov in several books, by Ettore Lo Gatto, and by Leonid Dolgoplov.⁹ Lotman and Toporov have covered much of the same material in structuralist, semiotic terms. Critical histories such as Solomon Volkov’s and Katerina Clark’s embrace much more than contributions of great writers to a discrete artistic trend; they treat culture, and largely political culture.¹⁰ Interesting recent work on the metaphysics and memories of Petersburg space has been conducted by Renate Lachmann and Svetlana Boym, and by the Petersburg writer Viktor Krivulin,¹¹ and recent volumes of conference

⁷ V. N. Toporov, “Peterburg i peterburgskij tekst ruskoj literatury,” *Semiotika goroda i gorodskoj kul’tury: Trudy po znakovym sistemam XVIII* (Tartu: Tartu University Press, 1984), 4–29.

⁸ Jurij M. Lotman, “Simvolika Peterburga i problemy semiotiki goroda,” *Semiotika goroda i gorodskoj kul’tury*, 30–45.

⁹ Nikolaj Anciferov, *Duša Peterburga*, in “*Nepostižimyj gorod...*” (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1991); Ettore Lo Gatto, *Il mito di San Pietroburgo* (Milan: Feltrinelli Editori, 1960). On Leonid Dolgoplov’s many works on Petersburg writers, see especially *Andrej Belyj i ego roman Peterburg* (Leningrad: Sovetskij pisatel’, 1988).

¹⁰ Solomon Volkov, *Petersburg: A Cultural History*, trans. Antonina W. Bouis (New York: The Free Press, 1995); Katerina Clark, *Petersburg, Crucible of Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

¹¹ Renate Lachmann, *Memory and Literature: Intertextuality in Russian Modernism*, trans. Roy Sellars and Anthony Wall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001); Viktor Krivulin, *Oxota na Mamonta* (St. Petersburg: BLIC, 1998). See also the edited volume *Metafizika Peterburga*, Peterburgskie čtenija po teorii, istorii i filosofii kul’tury 1 (Sankt-Peterburg: “Eidos,” 1993).

proceedings and anthologies offer eclectic approaches to the question of what one collection terms “the phenomenon of Petersburg.”¹²

We highlight here the artistic trend we call “intimate identification with space” because it interfaces in interesting ways with the aspects these scholars have treated, and requires separate and detailed treatment. The “fantastic and intentional” Petersburg of these imaginative spaces is the modern Petersburg, a Petersburg where Yeats’ “terrible beauty” often dominates, where modern self-reflective European man with his sophisticated preoccupations posits himself as Russian man, and Petersburg finally achieves a degree of “Russian-ness” before being re-peripheralized and re-cosmopolitanized (with a clear negative and elitist connotation) in Soviet propaganda. It goes without saying that the literary texts in which this trend is embodied are among the greatest monuments of prose and poetry in the entirety of Russian literature.

Almost all great cities, for example Rome, have origins steeped in myth. In this Petersburg is no exception. Yet most cities arose in a period when oral tradition dominated, and the literary codification of the founding myths occurred centuries later, when those myths had solidified. In Petersburg’s case, the simultaneous formation of and interpenetration between orally-based urban folklore and written responses to the city meant that myth has not been merely a latent subtext of its literature. Literary versions of the city have always had the peculiar power to define it, to continue shaping it in an ongoing reprise of its foundations in myth. The character of the Petersburg myth itself can be related to the archetypal image of the city in Western civilization, which, as Burton Pike notes, is a highly ambivalent one.¹³ Sometimes it has been seen as the earthly “contact point” with the divine, a sacred incarnation of the heavenly on earth; early, and for the most part state-commissioned, celebratory odes stress Petersburg’s miraculous appearance, amazing beauty, and precedence over all other earthly cities. Peter himself referred to the Summer Garden as “*moj paradiz*” (my paradise), thus appropriating the role of liaison to the divine for himself. Yet often some sin or sins are associated with the founding of cities (as in the archetypal myth of Cain), a transgression against the rural countryside and its way of life amidst and against which the city arose. In idylls and pastorals the rural setting is often portrayed nostalgically and sympathetically as a contrast to “evil urbanism.” In founding St. Peters-

¹² See, for example, *Fenomen Peterburga*, ed. Jurij N. Bepjatyx (St. Petersburg: BLIC, 2001); *Moskva-Peterburg, pro et contra: Dialog kul'tur v istorii nacional'nogo samosoznaniija. Antologija* (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo russkogo xristianskogo gumanitarnogo instituta, 2000).

¹³ Burton Pike, *The Image of the City in Modern Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981). See chap. 1 in particular. See also Jurij Lotman’s classification of Petersburg as an “excentric city” in “Simvolika Peterburga.”

burg, a modern city as a new capital, Peter's sin exceeded that of most founders. It was a sin against rural Russian folkways, but it also went against the cultural tradition of all of Russia as embodied in Muscovy and the Orthodox religion—a more powerful betrayal in the negative mythology. Moreover, calling it *Saint* Petersburg after the founder of the Christian Church, while the tsar was far from a saint, added a note of blasphemy that the religious Moscow boyar opposition and the Old Believers could not help but exploit. The impostor, Peter, was vilifying the name of St. Peter, founding an anti-Orthodox city, both secular and foreign, a European and godless accretion on the body politic. This led to the association of the new capital and the European secularization of Russia with the reign of Antichrist, which the actual limitation of the Orthodox Church's erstwhile authority (debunked to one of Peter's ministries, or Collegia) only exacerbated. The curse of Petersburg's emptiness was laid upon it at the very outset, in its lack of Russian Orthodox content, and over time, in history, with the words pronounced, according to legend, by Peter the Great's first wife, Evdokija Lopuxina, "*Peterburgu byt' pustu!*" (May this place be emptied out!) Emptiness, "the abomination which devastates," was proclaimed both as the city's essence and its inexorable tragic destiny.

The Russian word for fate or destiny, *rok*, is a Slavic root associated with time intervals, with the words *srok*, *urok*, *priuročit'*, which in Russian all denote time-bound concepts. (The Polish word *rok* means "year," as does the Ukrainian *rik*, *roku*.) Petersburg was inaugurated as a new historical beginning for Russia with all the Enlightenment optimism and expectations of progress on its new historical path. Yet with the European look of its built environment and the prominence of its statuary in a culture where even two-dimensional representation in icons had been opposed (as in the *ikonoborčestvo* of the seventeenth century), Petersburg was a space beset from its inception with charges of foreignness and imitation, and threatened with tragic retribution to be visited upon it in time.

The emptiness and emptying-out of the city space over time led us to formulate the notion of Petersburg's *negative kenosis*, which we shall refer to repeatedly in these pages. *Kenosis*, an Orthodox concept characteristic of many Russian saints (including Boris and Gleb), derives from the belief in the complete, literal incarnation of Jesus Christ. The kenotic Christ descended literally and fully to the conditions of humanity (pain, physical frailty, death), pouring his divinity out of himself as a gift to the wayward world which he endeavored to bring back to God the Father. He became *syn čelovečeskij* (the Son of Man) with all that that entails, and this pouring-out of oneself, which may appear as excessive passivity in the eyes of the secular world, is a gift actively given and an aspect of *imitatio Christi*.

With Petersburg, an impostor city with no “divine content” to pour forth, a perverse *negative kenosis* occurs. The city pours out its own chaotic version of emptiness onto its spaces and inhabitants, often appropriating and negating any positive content therein. It is emptied out as a punishment, and that process has no redeeming features nor beneficence for Russia or Russians for much of the city’s history. In the Silver Age texts to be considered here we shall observe the slow transformation of this perverse negative *kenosis* into something positive. *Writers in their texts*, through their verbal art, begin to bring about the expiation over time of Peter’s sins. Time is perceived as accelerated at the end of the Petersburg period, which Anciferov hailed as a period of the “renaissance of love and sympathy for the Northern capital.”¹⁴ Artists and art historians such as Benois and Grabar’ began to see Petersburg as beautiful and, more importantly, as representing a special form of *Russian* beauty. Ironically, love for and acceptance of Petersburg grows strong in a period of apocalyptic premonitions when it and imperial Russia are threatened with total emptiness, destruction, and loss. Identification, acceptance, and love come, moreover, as an acknowledgment or result of Petersburg’s accumulated and present suffering, in which these writers and artists actively participate. Suffering in time “Russianizes” Petersburg.

In such a seminal text as Puškin’s *The Bronze Horseman*, the “Petersburg tale” which Toporov sees as inaugurating a generic subtype in Russian literature, the positive Enlightenment myth in the “Introduction,” with the author’s proclaimed love for the young capital and pointed odic praise for its architectural beauty, coexists in sharp contradiction with the suffering inflicted on the space—the destruction by the flood and the ruination of the lives of Petersburg’s inhabitants, emblemized in the total destruction of Paraša’s house (and her death), which represents the life and hopes of the little man, Evgenij. The built environment is the force of the new order, and chaos is embodied in the revenge of nature, the vengeful elements, “the malice of the Finnish waves,” which resent the straightjacket of the embankments in the flood of 1824 so dramatically presented in the *poëma*. The elements, in their revolt against the tsar’s historical will, lead to Evgenij’s derangement, madness, and his eventual death. Sixty years later Petersburg writers would still identify themselves with Petersburg creatures like Evgenij, and their creative lives and aspirations would still be associated with tragedy-ridden Petersburg spaces, but their attitudes towards the founder and the space would undergo a material change. The forces of chaos leading to the destabilization and dissociation of the personality, schizophrenia, doubling and multiple personalities—

¹⁴ Anciferov, *Duša Peterburga*, 123. This and all further translations from the Russian, unless otherwise indicated, are our own.

associated in the nineteenth century with the terrible weather, floods, fogs, cold, and reflections in the mirror of the Neva—would be combined with the chaos of historical events. Goljadkin’s madness and Svidrigajlov’s suicides are preceded and seem precipitated by atmospheric, climatic events.¹⁵ In Nekrasov’s “O pogode” (“About the Weather”), climatic conditions stand both for historical rebellion, destructive blows against order, and the *creative destruction* of art and artist.¹⁶ In the Silver Age the rage of the elements against Petersburg is compounded by historical events. Thus in Blok’s *The Twelve*, the winds of *history* combine with nature as a force of chaos and destabilization of the artist’s personality: “Black wind. / White snow. / The wind, the wind! / A man can no longer stay on his feet.”¹⁷ These are the snows and winds of history, of *historical vengeance* (Blok’s term) wrought on Petersburg in time and on the writer who feels himself inexplicably bound with and permeated by that weather and space.

Желтый пар петербургской зимы,
Желтый снег, облипающий плиты...
Я не знаю, где вы и где мы,
Только знаю, что крепко мы слиты.

Yellow steam of Petersburg winter,
Yellow snow clinging to stone slabs,
I don’t know where you are and where *we* are,
All I know is that we are inextricably bound.¹⁸

As we shall see, the “Mongol chaos” underlying Belyj’s Petersburg and the “Judaic chaos” underlying Mandel’stam’s are imbibed in the bacilli-infested waters of the Neva; they are within the Petersburg creature as much as they are outside him.

Representations of Petersburg in which weather and events destabilize and empty the city/self are called herein historical treatments, representing mythologization of historical events. Those where the city/self remains whole, unperturbed, and triumphant in the face of time and climate are called ahistorical or anti-historical treatments, denying the destabilizing force of events and the eerie “noise of time.” To present the besieged Petersburg and the

¹⁵ These are characters in Dostoevskij’s *The Double* and *Crime and Punishment*, respectively.

¹⁶ Such a relationship between weather and artist is seen especially in the death of Italian soprano Angiolina Bosio (who died in Petersburg of pneumonia in 1859) in part 4 of the cycle.

¹⁷ Aleksandr Blok, “Dvenadcat’,” *Sočinenija v odnom tome* (Moscow: GIXL, 1946) 257.

¹⁸ Innokentij Annenskij, “Peterburg,” *Stixotvorenija i tragedii* (Leningrad: Sovetskij pisatel’, 1959), 199.

Petersburg writer as stable and indestructible, writers take the unexpected tack of resorting to urban Petersburg idyll and the closely related urban elegy (a generic category to be discussed in chapter 2). Tragedy-ridden Petersburg is one of the least likely sites in Russia for Baxtin's idyllic chronotope, yet it is seen repeatedly in the art of modern writers who identify with Petersburg. It is as if they are following Lermontov's dictum "*Kak budto v bure est' pokoj*" ("As if there were tranquility in a storm").¹⁹ This is an *as if* that is possible in imaginative Petersburg space, in the realm of art.

¹⁹ This is the final line of Lermontov's 1832 poem "A lone sail whitens" («Белеет парус одинокий»).