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Unsaintly St. Petersburg?: Visions & Visuals

Though according to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* alternate names for a rose would not diminish its seductive scent, the history of Russia's occasional capital attests to the enormous political and psychological weight of nomenclature: originally St. Petersburg, briefly Petrograd in 1914, then Leningrad in 1924, and now once more St. Petersburg – though in danger of becoming Putinburg – the city seems determinedly Petered (and, according to several recent reports on its physical condition, petering out).

The proliferation of names for the northern capital has bred a bewildering chaos that today reflects the twists and turns of Russia's history: current newspapers refer to "Petrogradskoe upravlenie vnutrennikh del" (the Petrograd Administration of Internal Affairs, presumably, on the "oblast'/raion" level); the church diocese is "Leningradskaia eparkhiia," while the city itself bears the formal label "Sankt-Peterburg," as well as the colloquial, intimate sobriquet of Piter.¹ Needless to say, each variant evokes culturally-freighted associations with turning-points in the nation's

¹ E-mail message on SEELANGS by Alina Israeli, October 4, 2002.

tumultuous past.

Russian -\$JD((from the Dutch for “town/city”) lacks the pejorative connotations of its English equivalent, which dictionaries define neutrally, but American colloquial usage (“this is a burgh”) equates with torpid, regressive non-being. Indeed, as Russia’s challenge to West European elegance, scale, and panache, Petersburg was envisioned by its conceptual father in utopian, hyperbolic terms, as a resplendent showcase of Russia’s bounties within a progressive European context. That the city for most of its existence has borne its founder’s name merely observes international conventions of denomination. But... what of the Saint/Sankt, especially pertaining to a tsar deemed demonic by numerous citizens/subjects, contemporaries, and generations of Slavophilic Russians? The city’s renowned literary image, in fact, sooner privileges ominous darkness over sunny sanctity, despite (and frequently because of) the White Nights that seem a violation of nature, and especially the specific

makeup of human nature.²

The copious scholarship on the literary myth of Petersburg has analyzed various texts' inscription of its imposing aesthetic grandeur – coupled, however, with a psychological and moral destructiveness, an inhumane dedication to flamboyant display at the cost of Christian values, to which the metropolis seems eerily indifferent. A speedy glance through three centuries of major literary statements about Petersburg reveals three different images of varying complexity, which roughly may be categorized as positive, negative, and mixed:

(1) the city as an aesthetically imposing creation, evident in the 18th century

² Moreover, the Russian tradition ups the ante by almost invariably, it seems, contrasting the intellectual, abstract, and forced origins of the new capital with the more provincial but organic development of Moscow. (During the post-Soviet era, however, the seismic changes in budget-rich Moscow increasingly have made Petersburg into a museum piece in dire need of renovation.)

ode, which exalts Petersburg's magnificence in terms surprisingly scant in particulars, in Petr Viazemskii's classical poem "Peterburg" (1818), and also in the quasi-odic sections of Pushkin's *Mednyi vsadnik/Bronze Horseman* (1833), which, however, also spotlights the brutal imperviousness to individual human life associated with the city's origins, and thus launches the dual myth of the city. The narrator's ambivalence communicates itself through the contrast of such impassioned apostrophes as "Liubliu tebia, Petra tvorenie" with a lexicon of violence and mayhem, plus the elegiac tone identified with the Evgenii line in the narrative poem;

(2) the metropolis as an "unnatural," malevolent locus of ambition, insanity, and fantastic visions. Explored not only in Pushkin's *Mednyi vsadnik*, but also his "Pikovaia dama" and *Evgenii Onegin*, this image acquires an other-worldly dimension in Gogol's "Nevskii Prospekt," "Nos," and "Shinel'," which construct the metropolis as a demonic domain of phantasmagoria in terms blending fascinated horror and hatred (if you recall, the Devil lights the lamps on the major thoroughfare, Nevsky). Gogol's bleak perspective on Petersburg as "all deceit, all dreams" is elaborated in Dostoevskii's *Bednye liudi*, *Dvoinik*, and *Prestuplenie i nakazanie* – the last famously characterizing Petersburg as the most

abstract and intentional of cities, one conducive to hallucination, psychological disintegration, and murder;

(3) finally, a complex, mixed view of Petersburg emerges in Andrei Belyi's stunning novel *Peterburg* (1913-14/1922), which, like Andrei Bitov's *Pushkinskii dom* sixty-odd years later (wr. 1970, pd. 1978) offers an encyclopedic summary of the city as a cultural entity/repository inseparable from its philosophical and literary treatments. Blok, Akhmatova, Mandel'shtam (who wrote "Living in Petersburg is like sleeping in a coffin," Volkov 447), and Brodsky in their verses had aureoled the city in a wealth of conceptual and aesthetic attributes that Bitov's novel absorbs in an archeological mode.

The cumulative impact of these inscriptions has predisposed critics to speak not of Petersburg, but of its myth, as though its literary image supersedes its phenomenological/ontological identity. Indeed, Bitov once observed, "We read Leningrad like a book" (cited in Volkov 526). A cryptic site of phantoms, delirium, and delusion, it also functions as a hostile sanctuary for insentient bureaucrats impervious to individuals and their needs. Studies by N. Antsiferov, Leonid Grossman, Nils Ake Nilsson, Donald Fanger, Robert Maguire, and others have habituated us to

conceive of Petersburg as a profoundly literary and literarized locus, and this strand of scholarship, frankly, has worn rather thin through iteration.

Slavists' conservative attachment to the logocentric trough largely ignores three equally rich repositories of images – specifically, MUSIC (Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony/"Leningrad," such operas as "Nos," "Pikovaia dama," and the songs of the rock group Aquarius, headed by Boris Grebenshchikov); FILM (e.g., Sergei Eisenstein's *October [Ten Days that Shook the World]* ([1928] and *The End of St. Petersburg* [1927] by Vsevolod Pudovkin and Natan Zarkhi, as well as adaptations, including Grigorii Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg's *Overcoat* [1926]); and ART, created by Russia's foremost painters, set designers, and graphic artists. These visuals constitute a neglected heritage in which literature not infrequently serves as a reference point or mediator. They are the focus of my talk today.

Given Russia's cult of Pushkin – cleverly ironized, incidentally, in Iurii Mamin's subversive film *Sideburns (Bakenbardy)*, 1990) – the originator of the city's myth predictably remains not only the most illustrious but also the most illustrated author. To show you a small sampling of graphics and set designs [SHOW #1–17]. Gogol' also attracted several notable artists

[SHOW #18-20], as did Dostoevskii [SHOW #21-26].

Not confined exclusively to illustrations of verbal texts, visual renditions of St. Petersburg also compose an independent category. Fascinatingly, images of Petersburg unrelated to literature tend to be what linguists call less “marked.” In other words, they frequently convey the atmosphere or the topography/look of the city’s sundry areas in a relatively neutral manner.

If the verbal myth of St. Petersburg instantly invokes the names of Pushkin, Gogol’, Dostoevskii, Belyi, and Bitov, then the roster of primary image-producers in art embraces Alexandre Benois, Vladimir Favorskii, Evgenii Lansere, Anna Ostroumova-Lebedeva, Mstislav Dobuzhinskii, Pavel Shillingovskii, and Il’ia Glazunov.

The dramatic difference in the image of Petersburg once it gains independence from the verbal text is all too evident in representative works from the 18th and early-19th-century. As you can see, they have, above all, documentary value [SHOW # 27-30], whereas later decades produced more atmospheric, psychologically-infused images, especially of the Falconet statue of Peter I unveiled in 1782 and rendered immortal by Pushkin’s verses [SHOW #31].

In the 20th century, three members of Mir Iskusstva/The World of Art gained renown for their numerous depictions of the city, which function above all as visual documentation. Three major traits link these works: (1) the striking dearth of people in the urban scape— few if any human figures fracture the spatial continuity, as if the artists conceive of St. Petersburg as an unpopulated terrain or, perhaps, one quintessentially resistant or inimical to human presence; (2) a focus less on the showcased resplendence of the city than on little-known and smaller-scale areas within it; and (3) diversity of artistic media, from canvas to lithograph.

LANSERE:

The first of the trio is Evgenii Lansere (1875-1946), son of the sculptor Evgenii Lansere and nephew of Benois, who showed a fascination with Peter I, as well as the city he founded. [SHOW #32]. Lansere's works during the 1900s had a historical cast, for he strived to convey the aura of the Petrine era, its colossal changes through foreign borrowings, implied specifically via the persistent presence of ships. Boats in general, while part of Lansere's detailed, often apparently static renditions of the cityscape [SHOW # 33-34], metonymically inscribe cultural interaction and expansion, the goal of Peter the Great's programmatic innovations. If

juxtaposed with Lansere's many paintings of Peter abroad, these visuals acquire a dynamism that celebrates the vigor and energy invested in the creation of the city.

The painting "Early-18th-Century Petersburg" (1906) [SHOW #35] depicts a corner of Vasil'evskii Island, with the building of the Twelve Colleges running perpendicular to the Neva. Several one-storey buildings and the masts of ships skirting the island are visible in the distance as the city goes about its everyday commercial life. The overcast sky and rolling grey waves (Petrova, *Mir iskusstva* 281) suggest the battle with the elements that has been a constant motif in the history of St. Petersburg. No other representative of the retrospective tendency within the World of Art group (Benois, Somov) matched Lansere's enthusiasm for the Petrine era, its beauty, and its achievements. And few paintings contradict the literary image of St. Petersburg as strongly and directly as his portrayal of an amorous couple gaily strolling along the city's pier. [SHOW #36]

OSTROUMOVA-LEBEDEVA:

St. Petersburg dominates the thematics of the female graphic artist and engraver Anna P. Ostroumova-Lebedeva (1871-1955) [SHOW her portrait #37], whose gallery of city portraits resulted from the collaboration

between Mir Iskusstva and The Community of St. Eugenia (1896-1920), a publishing house and subsection of the St. Petersburg Committee of the Red Cross. St. Eugenia published guidebooks to Petersburg museums and Russian towns, albums and monographs on modern artists, table-calendars, and illustrated works of Russian classical literature, such as Pushkin's *Bronze Horseman* with Benois's illustrations (in 1923). Members of the World of Art who helped to design their printed materials included Boris Kustodiev, Ostroumova-Lebedeva, and Mstislav Dobuzhinskii. The main item produced by St. Eugenia was its black and white or multi-colored postcard, printed with a variety of techniques—color and tinted lithography, xelography (engraving on wood, one of Ostroumova's specialties), phototype, zincography, helio-engraving.

Ostroumova-Lebedeva's engraved views of Petersburg, like Mstislav Dobuzhinskii's watercolors, enjoyed immense popularity. The symbiosis between St. Eugenia and Mir Iskusstva, activated through Benois's vigorous efforts, gave birth to the picture postcard as a cultural genre meriting attention (St. Eugenia printed catalogues of postcards, mounted exhibitions of them, and released a special magazine titled *Postcard* in 1904). Both "large" and "small" Petersburg figure in Ostroumova's oeuvre.

Between 1908 and 1910 she produced a series of colored woodcuts of both the city's famous, central spots, and its little-known nooks, and her illustrations to Vladimir Kurbatov's book *St. Petersburg* (1913) comprised black-and-white engravings that "fixed" the appearance of various, often ostensibly unprepossessing, locations from diverse perspectives. Works such as these testify to Ostroumova's role as the city's visual chronicler [SHOW #38-45].

DOBUZHINSKII:

Perhaps foremost among the three is Mstislav Dobuzhinskii (1875-1957), whose urban images extend beyond Russia, to include Wilno, Naples, etc., etc. [SHOW his portrait #46] Like many members of the World of Art, Dobuzhinskii in his postcards practiced the art of the silhouette, so popular in the 18th century. His drawings for Dostoevskii's *Belye nochi/White Nights* (1922), like his illustrations to Nikolai Antsiferov's *Peterburg Dostoevskogo* (1923), contrast with Benois's to *Mednyi vsadnik/The Bronze Horseman*. They privilege not the wide squares and the Neva, but the outlying districts, dead-end lanes with rickety streetlights, dank courtyards, and dark, "meandering canals in which the reflections of

the surrounding tenements tremble and collapse” (Petinova, 195).

Acknowledging Dostoevskii’s influence on his artistic perception of the imperial capital, Dobuzhinskii captured its “nonimperial” aspects – “the outskirts, dimly lit, empty, and sad. In [... his] works, Petersburg’s walls, roofs, and chimneys formed fantastic landscapes filled with anxiety and anticipation” (Volkov 225). The artist confessed, “Those sleepy canals, endless fences, dark wells of courtyards—it all astonished me with its sharply drawn, even eerie features. Everything seemed extraordinarily original, imbued with bitter poetry and mystery” (Volkov 224).

Dobuzhinskii’s seventeen illustrations for *Belye nochi*, realized in a graphically austere fashion, rhythmically alternate white paper with patches of black ink and virtuoso linear drawings (Petinova 195), starkly creating an atmosphere of quiet despair (Volkov 225). Desolate stretches of water and streets emphasize the loneliness of the individual in the modern city (Rosenfeld 89).

Dobuzhinskii’s album of autolithographs, *St. Petersburg in 1921* (1923) became a classic of Russian printed graphic art. (Petinova 211). It represented his farewell to the city, which, as he later noted in emigration, “was dying before my eyes with a death of incredible beauty, and I tried to

capture as best I could its terrible, deserted, and wounded look” (Volkov 224). [SHOW #47-58]

To conclude:

On June 1991, shortly before Leningrad recovered its old name of St. Petersburg, a new monument to Peter the Great was unveiled at the Petropavlovsk Fortress. Crafted by the emigre artist/sculpter Mikhail Shemiakin, now a resident of the U.S. [SHOW #59], the statue is unusual in that for the wigless, disproportionately small head Shemiakin cast a life mask of the tsar made by Rastrelli in 1719 (Volkov 541). That head, we might recall, conceived of “the window onto Europe.” Four months later, after impassioned debate and the failed coup against Gorbachev, the city Peter founded once more became St. Petersburg. Brodsky hailed the event with the words, “Returning the city’s previous name is a means of at least hinting at continuity, if not establishing it. [...] It is much better for those [who will be born in St. Petersburg] to live in a city that bears the name of a saint than that of a devil” (Volkov 544). Shades of Gogol’!!!!

And, finally, a prophecy! If the circle of nomenclature has closed, next year, which marks St. Peterburg’s tercentenary, no doubt will complete another circle—that of ritualistic activities and their chroniclers.

Amidst the “no holds barred” celebrations (which foreigners will be able to experience only vicariously), television cameras will capture kindred festivities from previous eras rendered familiar by the visual historian of Russian “types” and seasonal rituals, Boris Kustodiev, whose *Night Gala on the Neva* (1923) provides MY closure.

List of Works

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