

Petersburg in the Poetry of the Russian Emigration

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Petersburg is one of the recurrent and most extensive themes in Russian émigré literature, including poetry. In the artistic consciousness of those who tragically found themselves outside of their native country after the October 1917 Revolution, the former capital of the Russian empire represented one of the most important spaces. Understandably, socio-political and cultural factors played a primary role here: Petersburg was customarily associated with state power, military glory, the flourishing of sciences and the arts (including, of course, the city's unique characteristic of itself being a work of art), but there was also something else, less subject to rational logic and which, perhaps, can be conveyed only by the metaphysical language of poetry.¹ This can be seen in an example that, at first glance, seems rather amusing, but is most graphic and significant. The Muscovite, Ia. N. Gorbov, who after Moscow University studied in the Petersburg Nikolaev military academy, wrote the following in a review of the book of poetry *Blue World* (*Sinii mir*; New York, 1961) by an émigré poetess N. Belavina, who not only had never lived in Petersburg, but, also apparently, had never even been there (at age five she was taken from the Crimea to Constantinople, then to Yugoslavia and from there to the West):

In St. Petersburg, whether on Ekaterininskii or Morskaia, on Kamennooostrovskii or on Nevskii or on the Moika, or someplace else, on some evenings, one could see from the window, or from the depths of the room, some kind of blue light, amazing but not strange, lightly glimmering, come right up to the glass, of a kind that one wanted to ask it some unspoken question and receive an unspoken answer, or exchange glances or a smile... St. Petersburg was a unique city. The blue evening

light, probably, even now remains there as something unique... The title *Blue World*, written in blue letters on Nonna Belavina's poetry collection, reminds those who saw the St. Petersburg blue light of its magic. Or perhaps an eternal promise of a better future, the elusive Bluebird? (*Vozrozhdenie* [Paris, 1962], 126)

It is curious that in the review, Belavina, who never saw Petersburg with her own eyes, is transformed almost into the inveterate Petersburg author. The closeness between the title of her collection and the luminous effects of the Petersburg air are based on the reviewer's sensory "aberrations" and are deeply associative in their origin. The last sentence about Maeterlinck's Bluebird somewhat clarifies the nature of these associations but it does not entirely dispel the sensation that Belavina's verse is permeated with the Petersburg atmosphere with which she was not familiar!

At the heart of this curiosity, however, lies a very important and serious problem. The "Petersburg syndrome" does not necessarily testify to the fact that a poet was born in the city on the Neva. Rather, it is a matter of the profound intentions of Russian poetic culture in general, gravitating in its moral and spiritual insights toward the Pushkinian artistic heritage and therefore, inseparably linked to the "Petersburg period" of Russian literature understood in the broad historical perspective.

Indisputably, the former residents of Petersburg were the ones who felt the greatest nostalgia for Petersburg. "You have to be a 'Peterburzhets' (resident of Petersburg in Russian) in order to understand the longing for Petersburg," someone wrote under the pseudonym Petronius in the sketch "Petersburg." You have to be thoroughly soaked by the miasmas of the Marquisan Meadow, smoked by the Petersburg fogs, in order to dream of Petersburg amidst the glitter and comfort of European centers. Berlin and Paris are now seething with such dreamers; and we dream about our foggy swamp as

ardently as mountaineers thrust into the valleys dream about their azure heights” (Petronius, 1921: 3).

In emigration, however, even those who had never been there and knew the city only from books or oral tales also wrote poems about Petersburg (or about the adjacent cultural-geographical areas). One example is A. Shteiger, who wrote the two-part cycle *Tsarskoe Selo*, whose interest in Petersburg was purely literary in origin. Georgii Adamovich, who knew Shteiger well, recalled that he “was capable of asking endlessly about Petersburg, about the Poets’ Workshop (Tsekh poetov) about the evenings in the Stray Dog [café], even about the Petersburg ballet. For him this was some kind of paradise lost, incidentally, not even lost but unfamiliar because he had never been in Petersburg.” (Adamovich 1956: 33). It is worth comparing this with the remark of Iurii Terapiano about the kind of “Petersburg syndrome” that developed among the émigré intelligentsia dreaming about the city “which they had not seen in their lifetime.” (Terapiano 2002: 185). This syndrome, in which not only Petersburg residents, but even people who had never been in the Russian capital found themselves “captives of its magnificent granite” (an image from the poetry of O. Annenkova, who never left Russia but remained there as an “internal émigré”) was so widespread among the emigrant community that it cannot but attract attention to itself.

Petersburg was a symbol of paradise lost, exile from which became a turning point in Russian history. The symbol of the symbol—the horseman on the rearing steed, receded into historical oblivion and gave way to new idols.² The fall of one state order and its replacement by another was accompanied, as is usual and happens in times of stormy revolutionary cataclysms, by active myth creation in society. On one side of the border, in the USSR, Petersburg, which became Leningrad, in Soviet mythology

was turned into the “cradle of three revolutions,” into the legendary location sanctified by semi-official Soviet historiography, linked with the name of “the leader of the worldwide proletariat.” This did not, however, hinder the city’s provincialization, economic decline and gradual loss of its former greatness. On the other side of the border, in emigration, Petersburg personified the lost state power, the utopian dream of rebuilding the collapsed state.³ Forced to live in a phantom socio-political reality, the emigrants naturally dreamed of their own state, capable of uniting them not virtually or metaphysically but as full-fledged citizens with equal rights.⁴ This is the source for the émigré longing for Petersburg as a city that once played the role of a unifying center for a Russia of diverse peoples.

This characteristic leads us to a very essential point for an understanding of the “Petersburg myth” in general and its frequent occurrence in emigration in particular. It boils down to the fact that the image of Petersburg, the center of the national-cultural cosmos, more so than any other Russian city, is inseparable from Russian literature. It is in equal measure the creation of Peter and Pushkin, as can be seen, for example, in the lines from the poem of Ivan Bunin, “The Day in Peter’s Memory” (Den’ pamiati Petra): “Great and sacred City,/ Created by Peter and Pushkin.” The Russian émigré poet, A. Topol’skii, who lived in Warsaw, went even further in his notion of the true founder of Petersburg: “You were created./ Not by Peter but by Dostoevsky.” In this context, it is worth mentioning the mocking epistle of the satirical poet Don-Aminado (A. P. Shpolianskii) to Igor Severianin. While striving for a parody, at the same time the poet established a certain truth that was difficult to refute when he wrote in one of his verse feuilletons called “The Reason of all Reasons” (Prichina vsekhn prichin) (Don-Aminado 1920: 3):

Well, is this Petersburg fruit
A peach or a pear?!
How we lived! How we ate!
What did we read, what did we listen to
Near the Neva's granite waters?!

<...> And at times I think with sadness,
Keeping an eye on gloomy fate,
That it is the result of sins
And that everything was the sum
Chiefly of verse!...

This very pointed idea is not without its metaphysical depth about the “responsibility” of poetry for everything that happened to Russia and its capital. It once again emphasizes the dense, mystical, literary (and artistic in general) aura enveloping Petersburg that was perceived in emigration as the most genuine and real life. Even the name of the city, Petrograd, was used by Pushkin in the “Bronze Horseman” (1833) long before August 18, 1914, when Russia entered World War I and the seemingly “German” name “Sankt Peterburg” was cast off. “O’er darkened Petrograd there rolled/November’s breath of autumn cold.” It may be somewhat of an exaggeration, but without on the whole distorting the true scale of the significance of Pushkin’s genius for the life of the Russian emigration, one could say that the entire emigration, like Fedor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, the hero of V. Nabokov’s novel *The Gift*, linked his life “to the purest sound from Pushkin’s tuning fork” (Nabokov 1963: 97).

“Liza wrung her hands at the Winter Ditch (Zimnei Kanavkoi), the white plumage of Herman’s hat was visible, the Hussar pelisse of Lermontov gleamed in the dark

window, and someone's hands tossed a silvery fur on the sloping shoulders of Natalia Pushkin." This fragment from Antonin Ladinskii's sketch "St. Petersburg" (Sankt-Peterburg) (Ladinskii 1928: 4) is not only the usual allusion to Russian literature's treasured names and texts. The role of such citations and allusions went beyond the framework of a usual literary device in the tragic situation of exile and separation from one's roots and sources, when it was necessary as if anew to show that they were an inseparable part of oneself. The inseparability of the city on the Neva and Russian literature is a fact that cannot be removed from the spiritual biographies of either one.

In his poem "Kamnegrad" cursing the allegorical Beast that destroyed the Russian capital, the famous Russian poet Konstantin Bal'mont, who found himself in exile, wrote:

The capital is a thought, where the pivot is the Nevskii [Boulevard],
Where the Neva was married with Pushkin,
Where Dostoevsky, the spirit of Copernicus,
And the slayer of matter,
Said the most elevated words.

The ghosts of Russian literature therefore appear momentarily on the streets and in the alleys of Petersburg in the emigrants' poetry even when the city was least inclined toward literary play as, for instance, in the second poem from V. Bulich's cycle "A Medal for the Defense of Leningrad" (Medal' za oborony Leningrada) in which the heroes of Pushkin's "Queen of Spades" and the "Bronze Horseman" appear in the city that has been besieged by the Nazis. Who would think to reproach the poetess for inappropriate literary associations?!⁵

For the exile, alluding back to Petersburg literary motifs (not necessarily mentioning them directly but rather in the form of a hidden, implicit dialogue with Russian literary tradition as such) became a demonstrative form of affirming his

native rights to the appellation of a Russian writer, even if his rights of Russian citizenship had been repudiated. Nekrasov's famous formulation about "the poet and citizen" ("You could be not poet, but you obliged to be citizen" – "Poetom mozheshty ne byt', no grazhdaninom byt' obiazan") in this case appeared to be turned inside out. For the refugee poets, Petersburg (to paraphrase Dostoevsky's well-known saying about "the most premeditated city"), the most literary polis in Russian history, became more than a memory about its former beauty and power, or a search for a glorious but vanished past, or a sorrowful lamentation about disrupted human and creative fates. All these elements indisputably are present in some form or another in the emigrant interpretation of the Petersburg theme but they are only its component parts. The integrative factor is the consciousness that through Pushkin's Petersburg or the Petersburg of Dostoevsky in its infinitely varied forms, the writer is united with the mother lode of his native culture. In this sense one can speak without irony [‘aieronii] about the "therapeutic" functions of the "Petersburg text" of Russian literature for the émigré writer or poet, especially about the elimination of the psychological burden of cultural rejection. Marc Raeff, who has studied the history of the Russian emigration, was undoubtedly correct in writing that "a veritable Pushkin cult developed in Russia abroad.... In emigration...the educated Russians rediscovered Pushkin as someone truly their own, the poet closest to them not only by language and form, but also by his stress on individual creative freedom, a freedom utterly destroyed in Bolshevik Russia" (Raeff 1990: 96).

We shall touch on only one theme that was persistently developed in émigré poetry, the theme linked to Pushkin's "Queen of Spades." The story is represented frequently and diversely in the "Petersburg text" of the emigration; it literally grips the poets' imagination with its haunting magic and its unresolved puzzle. Those who

alluded to it include N. Agnivitsev (“Sankt-Petersburg,” 1923:15); V. Dukel’skii (“Epistle to S. L. Bertenson” [Poslanie k S. L. Bertensonu] 1962: 24-29); Kal’ma (“Queen of Spades” [Pikovaia dama], *Otkliki*, no. 2, March 23, 1921, p.8); V. Popper (“To My Friend” [Moemu drugu], 1987); S. Pregel’ (“Queen of Spades” [Pikovaia dama], 1953: 24-25); M. Vega (“Petersburg,” 1955: 35-48), V. Zlobin “To Obliging Maidens without Malice” ([Liubeznym devam ne na zlo], *Sovremennye zapiski* (Paris), no. 24 (1925), pp. 172-173)—the list is probably incomplete. Poets preferred this theme, of course, primarily, but not exclusively, because of its connection to Pushkin’s work. It is worth noting that in almost all of the poems mentioned above, the focus is on the operatic version of *The Queen of Spades* or, as in the case of Dukel’skii, its theatrical metaphysics. See also the poem of Igor’ Severianin, “Play the Whole Evening” (Igrai tselyi vecher): “Play for me from *The Queen of Spades*/Almost the most painful of operas,/So touching in this most/Rational, hardhearted Europe” (*Segodnia* [Riga], no. 100, May 6, 1927, p. 2).

The memory of Petersburg as a scenic, theatrical spectacle was seemingly revived through this mystical card game theme, through which the secret of fate itself could be glimpsed. (Incidentally this was characteristic not only of émigré but also of “continental” poetry as, for example the poem of V. Zorgenfrei, “German” or “Windblown and Suntanned Like a Sailor” (Obvetrennyi i zagorelyi, kak matros) by N. Pavlovich (1922: 26). In other words, it blends together the Pushkinian theme of a card game puzzle as a metonym of fate (which possesses a unique and dense Petersburg coloration) and personal memories about the imperial capital that are inconceivable outside of a theatrical perspective. Thus occurs the artistically rewarding transformation of cultural archetypes and traditions into personal creative emotions.

The vast theme of preserving the spiritual precepts of the Silver Age in emigration belongs to this same line of historical-cultural and historical-literary reminiscences and allusions of the “Petersburg text.” The émigrés, who had been subject to persecution and denunciation in the Soviet period, found themselves in an exile of long duration. Many of them perceived the past epoch as their own real life in art; for them, the names of Aleksandr Blok, Nikolai Gumilev, Mikhail Kuzmin, Anna Akhmatova and Osip Mandel’shtam were not some kind of abstract textbook signifiers but stood for familiar Petersburg poets. In this sense, the “Petersburg text” expressed some kind of cultural space densely populated with artistic associations that in the émigrés’ consciousness went back to the exclusively concrete, memorable and sensorily recognizable past. An example is Gumilev’s “lost streetcar” that rumbled loudly in émigré poetry and directly linked the exiles’ nostalgia with the Petersburg themes. See, for example, the poem by Argus, “In Petrograd” (V Petrograde) (1959: 261) or I. Chinnov’s “Poets Just Up and Died” (A poety vzali da i vyerli) (Chinnov 2002, II: 18) or the image of the “lost streetcar” in the poem of Iurii Ivask, “Portuguese Proletariat” (Portugal’skii proletarii) (1970: 46).

Undoubtedly, the specificity and recognizability of the Petersburg past only intensified the metaphysical overtones of the theme of the capital on the Neva, joining together distant and recent times in a unified literary image as, for example, in Vladimir Nabokov’s three-line requiem “In Gumilev’s Memory” (Pamiati Gumileva) (1923) (2002: 26).

Proudly and clearly you died, you died as the muse taught you.

Now, in the quiet of the Elysian Fields, Pushkin speaks with you

About the flying bronze Peter and about the savage African winds.

The above discussion in no way denigrates the literary school that used the popular Pushkinian term of the “dowager in purple” as the other center of the Russian cultural

cosmos. The division of poetry (and literature in general) into “Muscovite” and “Petersburg” was applicable to Russian literature abroad throughout its entire history, beginning with the early days of the Changing Landmarks (smenavekhovtsy) movement (see, for example, the article “Unrealized Petersburg” (Neosushchestvlenyi Peterburg) by Emmanuel. Mindlin [1923: 2-3]) and including both the prewar and postwar periods. For the first period see the article by N. Otsup, “About Poetry and Poets” (O poezii i poetakh) in connection with the response to the collection by Berlin poets, *Grove* (Roshsca) (Otsup 1932: 142) or his review of the Fifth Collection of the Union of Young Poets and Writers in Paris (1931) in the journal *Chisla* (no. 5 [1931], p. 230). For the postwar period, see, in particular, P. Sergienko’s review of the poetry collection of the former Petersburg resident, Z. Trotska (her real name was Zil’berkveit), “Under One’s Breath” (Vpolgolosa): “From the technical point of view, Zinaida Trotska’s poems are constructed in the spirit of the prerevolutionary “Petersburg school”; they are put together well and they are harmonic” (*Sovremennik* [Toronto] no. 5 (1962): 75). Such examples are numerous.

The basic line is the apotheosis of a poetic vision of the world from distant exile—the uniqueness, exclusivity of “resplendent St. Petersburg” (the pithy term of the poet N. Agnivitsev).⁶ The coloration of all the details of everyday life is determined by the fact that they once were part of the “Petersburg cosmos” or were connected to it in some way and bear some mark. One symptomatic but entertaining example utilizes puns. In a rather experimental “quatrain about snow” (the collection *Sannoderzhavie* [Paris, 1939]) by a former Petersburg resident, B. Bozhnev, that nevertheless maintains the necessary serious tone, the coloration takes on not only an external linguistic form but also, which is particularly important, an inner intonation. The

verse entails word play on the first part of the name Saint (Sankt in Russian) Petersburg:

A saint-puff of smoke (sankt-dymok) rises from saint-smokestacks (sankt-truby)

Saint-doves (sankt-golubi) stroll along the saint-roofs (sankt-kryshe...

The snow fell like a milky epilogue,

But I already hear a prologue of [future] shining.

For the Russian emigrants, it was an incontrovertible fact that Petersburg was the most beautiful city on the earth; the local population in the countries of exile, which regarded Petersburg as the end of the world, however, reacted to such views with disbelief.⁷

The sacred nature of Petersburg was reinforced by the tragic bloody spectacle that was played out on the stage of Russian history in the revolutionary period. In the eyes of the Russian intelligentsia, the first victims of the prophecies about the “collapse of humanism” and the decline into cultural savagery were the Petersburg poets, Aleksandr Blok and Nikolai Gumilev. With their death, as Nina Berberova wrote, “a historical period was closing...a cycle of Russian destinies was being completed,...an epoch was stopping to turn and rush off to other predicaments” (Berberova 1969: 128). “The death of the poet,” a scant century after the fatal shot on the Black River, recurred in Petersburg. The Pushkinian halo that illuminated the Poet with a prophetic gift was transformed in the new historical circumstances into a symbol of martyrdom and violent death.

In émigré literature the sadness about Petersburg of the “days of yore” was inexhaustible. Sometime it acquired the tones of a lightly ironic burlesque as, for example, in the poem of P. Iakobi, “About Thirty Years Ago” (Let 35 tomu nazad) that was printed in the Riga weekly *Dlia vas* (1934, no. 20, May 13, p. 14):

About 35 years ago,

The splendid Neva glittered with lights
 And Karabchevskii flew from the Senate
 In beaver fur to a masquerade
 About 35 years ago.

 About 35 years ago
 Maestro Galkin drew us to Pavlovsk,
 Captivating with “Medved” or “Palkin” caviar.
 Ah! There was balyk (dried sturgeon)! A row of hors d’oeuvres...
 About 35 years ago!

The Petersburg theme in emigration is characterized, however, on the whole, by tragic visions and “specters on the Petersburg ice” (as in the poem of G. Ivanov, “A January Day. On the Neva’s Bank” (Ianvarskii den’. Na beregu Nevy, 1923). It was a subject that was often treated in the tone of a requiem. In the literature of exile, Petersburg embodies its most true image of a spectral city, a phantom city (cf.: “Petersburg is not stucco, not stones. Petersburg is an apparition” Weidle: 10). Seemingly, the prophecy of the Empress Avdotia, who cursed Peter I’s insane undertaking, was fulfilled: “May this place be empty!”

The motif of the historic mistake of Petersburg’s founder and of the fatal prophecy first resounded in the verse of the future émigrés before, in fact, they had emigrated. Thus, for example, in the poem “Petrograd,” written in 1918, when he had not yet left Russia, P. Bulygin rhetorically questioned the “wonder-working builder” (the poem was published in Bulygin 1922: 67 and reprinted in *Petersburg v stikhotvoreniakh* 1923: 96):

Threatening with a mighty arm,
 He gleams in the wind in the yellow fog.

Will freedom pay back Peter in some way?

He didn't expect such a denouement...

It would have been better to remain as it had been in the olden days,

But here He carved out a window...⁸

Your Son was wise, Sovereign!

Why did You destroy Him?⁹

The lament for the “dead city” became one of the recurrent themes of poetry in emigration.¹⁰ The variations are the most diverse, but the set of topics and their repetition are rather constant and stable. Thus the comparison of Petersburg with Rome in the period of its decline was invariable: “I compared your fate/ With the bitter glory of Rome” (Ant. Ladinskii, “Elegy,” 1937: 11). In another poem by the same author, “Our climate—the Muses and the Elements” (Nash klimat—muzy i stikhii), the fall of Rome and the Russian revolutionary storm are mixed together (*Russkie zapiski* [Paris-Shanghai] I, 1937, p. 132). Similarly, parallels were drawn between the fate of the Russian capital and the destroyed Pompeii. In this case, the destruction refers to an inner, spiritual break that cannot be repaired by any external physical efforts. Only the emigrants from Petersburg (or those like Anna Akhmatova, who “plugged their ears” but remained faithful to the precepts of the pre-Soviet period) were able fully to evaluate the monstrous damage to the city that was generated by the revolutionary Vesuvius.

A little less than a half century later, A. Borman (the son of the well-known political and social figure, writer and publicist, A. V. Tyrkova-Vil'iams), one of those who had to leave his native Petersburg, wrote in his memoirs, “Yes, if I were now to walk along the forgotten but still familiar streets of the city in which I grew up, then

all these dark thoughts and memories would probably grip me and I would see all around only restored (sometimes perhaps even not badly) dead buildings from which the former Petersburg life had flown, that once had bubbled...It probably would seem to me that I was walking in restored Pompeii, in the rebuilt ruins in which life had begun to stir” (Borman 1969: 3).

The death of Petersburg, smothered by the “whirlwind of rebellion,” as the poet I. Voinov expressed it (“The City Depopulated by Crimson Banners [Gorod, obezliuzhennyi alymi znamenami], *Novaia Russkaia Zhizn'* [Helsingfors], no. 150, July 6, 1921, p. 3) was one of the central motifs of the great mass of texts written, in particular, in the early period of the development of refugee poetry although it also echoes in one form or another in later works. See, for example, the poem of R. Blokh, “You are Sad Again, My Friend, My Dear One” (Ty snova grusten, moi drug, moi milyi [1919]): “Look, the huge city has died/ The crosses are burning from the cathedrals’ summits” (Blokh 1928: 12) or the later story by I. Lukash, “The End of Petersburg”: “The entire former life has already withered away. Even earlier than the people, things and stones surrendered to the cold silence and desolation. Petersburg, with its frozen colonnades, embankments and empty palaces stood in the snow like a majestic sepulcher, and the striking of the chimes in Petropavlosk Fortress sounded like a penetrating funereal tolling in the frozen silence” (Lukash 1934: 3).

The following are a sample of the numerous poems in which the poets mourn the death of Petersburg. I. Tkhorzhevskii, in "On the New Year" (Na novyi god) (*Novaia Russkaia Zhizn'* [Helsingfors], no. 1 [1920]) wrote:

The fireplace is enveloped by the flame of losses:
The pain hovers over the heap of consumed years;
And in scarlet wounds, dead Petrograd
Looks out from the ashes, a city of lepers!

In the poem "Petersburg" ("Here he is, the former charmer") (1921), V. Nabokov wrote about the city, tormented by hunger, a "fallen sovereign," who had "died, grief-stricken and alone" (Nabokov 2002: 240).

The image of Petersburg drowning like Atlantis,¹¹ is engraved in the poem by M. Vega, "Atlantis" (Atlantida) ("We lived then," 1994-1997, III: 138):

And in the slow circling of white snowstorms,
Where the striking of chimes is discerned through the wind,
That shadow, that spirit, whose name is Petersburg,
Cannot help recognizing its Atlases.

In the poem by A. Golovina, "Oceanic Depth, Oceanic Breadth" (Okeanskaia glub', okeanskaia shir', Golovina 1989: 107), if Petersburg is not yet dead, then it is bleeding in agony.

Petersburgh, Petersburg, Petrograd, Leningrad...
This, Krylov's shining Summer Garden.

Why is it eternally in blood and snow?

The memory of those who were expelled from the "Petersburg paradise," in preserving the past, thus purposely or unwittingly idealized this past, elevating it above the unenviable present. This idealization was naturally mixed with a feeling of acute dislike, hatred and vengeful malice toward the new masters of the city at whose hands, as Ivan Bunin wrote, "her beauty, her stronghold/ And altars were destroyed" ("The Day in Peter's Memory").

The Russian emigration was able energetically to cultivate the "Petersburg myth" on this soil that was so vigorously fertilized by irreconcilable socio-political conflicts. At the basis of this myth was a nostalgic perception of Petersburg as the incomparable "capital of the world": "There was only one capital on earth,/ All the others were

simply cities” (G. Adamovich.) In the context of the refugees’ unstable life, loss of foundations, and the painful sensations of a phantom existence, attributing the features of a “super-city” or “the best city on earth” to the “Northern Palmyra” was equal to an assertion of the proud recognition of one’s own past—origin, memory and tradition—as the highest cultural value despite all the social upheavals. At the strictly poetic level, this emotional effect of “patriotic condescension” was manifested by the fact that the Petersburg setting totally suppressed any other settings that were alien to the émigré, no matter how enchantingly beautiful they actually were.

One thing remained invariable in the varied projections of Petersburg onto the exile’s surrounding world: Petersburg was the “universal city” (Blok), the center of the world. There are innumerable examples in Russian émigré poetry in which the capital on the Neva is described as beyond comparison to any other city on earth; it does not seem like there is any example of the opposite viewpoint. Despite the individual creative preferences, political or other priorities, worshipping of different, sometimes opposite, ideals and idols, the poets were completely unanimous on this point. The following are some examples of what could be termed “Petersburg-centrism” or even “pan-Petersburgism.”

A Petersburg mirage pursues V. D. von Ditrichshtein in the Sea of Mramora in the poem “White Steed” (Belyi zhrebii, Ditrichshtein 1965: 122):

This prickly night the Bronze Horseman
Flies above the smooth surface of the black waters,
And Peter is wrathful, on the victorious way,
Calling his people to glory!

N. Svetlov (whose real name was Svin’in), who left Petersburg in his youth and lived in China, corrects and evens out the crooked urban space in the poem “Overseas” (Za rubezhom; *Russkaia poeziia Kitaia* 2001: 476):¹²

The crooked street in front of me
Takes on a Petersburg look.

As if embodying the words of A. Perfil'ev in his poem "Point" (Tochka) that "The distance between Petersburg and Paris/ is a few steps" (Perfil'ev 1976: 123), the Paris landscape borders on the Petersburg one in the poem of G. Adamovich, "You Are Here Again...Unfaithful, What Do You Want? " (Ty snova zdes'...Nevernaia, chto nado [*Novyi zhurnal*, no. 58 (1960), p. 93-94]:¹³

Obedient words fly as in days of yore
With some kind of Neva-like breeze from the Seine.

The day comes, almost supernaturally bright.
The predawn fog is dispersed,
The eternal spire of the Admiralty
Soars above the arch on the Champs d'Elysée.

The same approach is characteristic of the poem by G. Raevskii, "The Frost is Getting Harder and Cracking" (Krepchaet i treshchit moroz, [*Vozrozhdenie* (Paris), no. 1367, February 28, 1928, p. 3]):

Suddenly I see when awake
Not the frozen Seine,—
The ice, snowy wind and the Neva,
Unique in the universe.

Similarly, N. Otsup wrote in his postwar cycle "Emigrant" (Otsup 1993: 160):

The Place de la Concorde and Champs d'Elysée,
But the Sadovaia [Street] and Nevskii [Boulevard] in memory,
The Petersburg land above Blok,
Tolstoy and Dostoevsky above all countries.

V. Korvin-Piotrovskii dreams in Berlin of the “Winter Capital” in the poem “I Fell in Love with Ponderous Berlin” (Ia poliubil Berlin tiazhelyi).

Boston looks like Peterhof to V. Dukel’skii in “Athens of the North” (Afiny Severa) (Dukel’skii 1965: 28):

Boston seemed to me like
A window to the past; my mother assured me:
“Here is Peterhof—no more and no less!”

Z. Trotskaia, who experienced two emigrations, living first in Paris and then in New York, could not figure out in which city she was (“I Often Dream About Some Kind of Dim Light” [Mne chasto snitsia svet kakoi-to smutnyi] [Trotskaia 1961: 9]):

I am not in the same city as an hour ago.
I wandered, I remember, earlier in Paris—
Now New York...no, it’s like Petrograd.

In K. Pomerantsev’s poem, “Florence,” Petersburg blends together with Florence (*Sodruzhestvo* 1966: 372):

Outside the window is the Florentine sky
And the Petersburg dawn in it.

The “illusions,” “aberrations,” “displacements” of memory, “confusing” an alien expanse with one’s native one, overlaying one on another were often motivated by the peculiar emotional state of the author himself (in poetry) or of his hero (in prose).

Often the play on Petersburg and emigrant locations is connected to the Neva and the “rivers of Babylon.” The Neva is the initial location for comparison (cf. the kind of mirror-like complementary images of Odoevtsevaia’s two books of memoirs, *On the Banks of the Neva* and *On the Banks of the Seine* (Na beregakh Nevy i Na beregakh Seny). In the emigrant consciousness (in particular of former Petersburg

residents), the Neva is not only an invariable structural element of the “Petersburg text,” but also serves as a customary trope, the basis for related emotional and spiritual states as, for example, in the poem by V. Lur’e, “Rotation” (Krugovorot, Lur’e 1987: 100):

But now you again became more dear to me
And my head spins as before.
May you be colder and sterner tomorrow,
Than the Neva covered by thick ice.

As a result of the above-mentioned play on spaces, the Neva can appear in Paris¹⁴ or in London,¹⁵ New York¹⁶ or Rome,¹⁷ or even in China.¹⁸ Presumably, this spatial confusion in which one geographical location can be moved freely to another, no matter what real physical distance separates them, is a specific feature precisely of émigré literature, unwittingly adapting the ancient genre of the journey to the nomadic world view imposed on it. See, for example, the lines in the poem by O. Il’inskii, “Triumphal Arches” (Triumfal’nye arki): “Where are we? In New York? But the barriers have been washed away:/ We have been pushed into the framework of another stratum:/ Through the slit in the cast iron fences of Petrograd/ Ice floes dive into the spans of the bridge” (Il’inskii 1966: 68). This brings to the spatial “play” inversions and “strange rapprochements” built on whimsical cultural-historical associations. The time and space of history are based on mirror reflections either they are parallels of urban architectural ensembles or a polite national mutual exchange of “services”: at one time life mobilizes French tutors for the upbringing of Russian Onegin and Larins, at another, the descendants of the latter are mustered to provide the taxi service of the French capital. See, for example in “Diary in Verse” (Dnevnik v stikhakh) by N. Otsup (1993: 449):

The embankment, the expanses of the Neva,
The Seine with the second-hand booksellers on the Quai,
The Russian chauffeurs at Montmarte,
And Monsieur Triquet at the Larins.

The emigrants were particularly upset by what they regarded as an oppressive act of violence against Petersburg—the changing of its “beautiful-terrible” name (Zinaida Gippius) into Leningrad, even though in the émigré milieu the city had many parodic names, in particular Hamburg (city of Ham; in Russian “Ham” means a boor): “An alien, evil name ‘Leningrad’! In that city where giants lived” (M. Kolosova); “What did they do to you, my city?! They renamed you...” (Iu. Trubetskoi). The attitude of Russian outcasts to their former capital closed a circle of the historic transformations in its appearance. In the postwar DP camps a joke made the rounds: “Where were you born?” “In Petersburg.” “Where did you go to school?” “In Petrograd.” “And where did you live after that?” “In Leningrad.” “And where would you like to return to?” “To Petersburg” (Stosius 1970: 4).

The changing names of the city—Petersburg-Petrograd-Leningrad (just like Tsarskoe Selo-Detskoe Selo-Pushkin)—provide a pattern for a corresponding cyclical depiction of various stages of its history. This pattern is maintained in the lyrical as well as the novelistic genres, as, for example in the poetic cycle of A. Ugriumov, *Saint-Petersburg-Petrograd-Leningrad*¹⁹ or the trilogy of novels by D. Vonliar-Liarskii, *Cain’s Smoke* (Kainov dym) with the first part—*Sin at the Door* (Grekh u dveri) (*Petersburg*) (Paris, 1933),²⁰ the second part—*Petrograd* and the third—*Leningrad*. See also the story by Lada Nikolaenko, “Petersburg in Leningrad” (an excerpt from “A Story about Losses,” *Grani*, no. 1, 1969)²¹ or the punning poem by V. Nabokov, “Leningrad” (1924) (Nabokov 2002):

Sometimes, there are

Great changes...
But, ardent men,
What does this dream mean?
There was Petrograd, it is worse
than Petersburg, I won't hide it,
but no matter how you look at it,
it isn't like Troy:
why then did you give it a nickname—
so affectionately, moreover,
in honor of Helen?²²

The renaming affected not only the city as a whole but also separate parts and elements such as streets and squares. The city's new qualities engender the amusing term "the Soviet Neva" in *Diary in Verse* (*Dnevnik v stikhakh*) by N. Otsup (part 1, chapter 14) and the joke of the above-mentioned poet-satirist Argus: "Now, in view of the stormy development of Soviet industry, the Liteinyi [Boulevard] is being renamed Staleliteinyi [Steel Liteinyi]."

The renaming of Petersburg was accompanied by an incongruous redressing of the city in Soviet clothing. The emigrants, however, continued to believe that despite the funeral rites for "the old Petersburg," the spirit of the city was indomitable and neither red Petrograd nor Soviet Leningrad was capable of destroying it. The tradition of calling the city Petersburg or even St. Petersburg, not only in everyday speech but also in poetry, was a constant in émigré poetry in both the pre and postwar years.

Like the child of the Emperors,
city of glory and victories,
a trace of the past in you,
despised by the innovator.

But you served as the capital
with the tsars for hundreds of years
And you live as Their right hand
although already without the name,

Thus wrote N. P. Solodkov in the poem “City of the Past” (Gorod proshlogo) published in the Brussels émigré journal *Chasovoi* (no. 338 [1954], p. 22).

The return to Petersburg or its revival is a major theme in emigrant poetry although, in the words of Nabokov from the poem “Petersburg” (“Here he is, the former charmer,” 1921), nothing of the “former or kindred” can be found in it.

An expression of the hidden desire to spy on the life in one’s native city can be found not only in the familiar “free” lyrical fantasies but also in the epic tales. The hero of V. Krymov’s novel *Fugue* (Fuga, Paris, 1935), the last part of the trilogy, *For Money*, sets out for Petersburg to recover hidden jewels. On the whole, the novel was not well received by the critics; for example, Iu. Mandel’shtam wrote of “the awkward and severe boredom emanating from every page of the novel” (*Vozrozhdenie*, no. 3515, January 17, 1935, p. 4). Another reviewer, N. Reznikova, however, wrote sympathetically: “Here the author reflected the desire of all emigrants to at least peek out of the corner of their eyes into Russia, to have the opportunity to breathe its air, to see with their own eyes what was happening there, in the motherland, which became so distant” (*Rubezh* [Harbin], no. 7 (1935), p. 24).

Osip Mandel’shtam’s famous wish—“In Petersburg we shall meet again,/ As if we had buried the sun in it/And for the first time we shall pronounce/ A blessed, senseless word...” —inspired a number of responses in refugee literature. For example, G. Ivanov was referring to these lines in his poem, “A Quarter of a Century Passed Abroad” (Chetvert’ veka proshlo za granitsej, 1951): “And the prophecy of a distant friend/ Surely must be fulfilled” (Ivanov 1994, I: 395). Ivanov cites them also in his

sketch “Sunset over Petersburg” (Zakat nad Peterburgom) (1953) (Ivanov 1994, III: 469-470): “And sometimes the words of poets contain a magical force. And what if, suddenly, Mandel’shtam’s prophecy will come true all the same and

In Petersburg we shall meet again?
But who will meet? Ghosts? After all,
All those who shone in 1913,
Are only phantoms on the Petersburg ice...”

In a letter to Iu. Ivask of January 2, 1945, Iu. Gal’ cites the Mandel’shtamian return to the “sun buried in Petersburg” (Gal’ 1955: 99); A. El’kan alludes to this image indirectly at the beginning of his memoirs about Petersburg: “The cold, snowy, hungry winter of 1919. Petersburg. We had not yet buried the sun then, our strange northern sun, raspberry red in the frost and pale gold in the long spring days without nights” (El’kan 1960: 287).

However, the very idea of returning to Petersburg as a reincarnation of the past life was illusory because of the impossibility of implementing it. Indeed, V. Nabokov (in the poem “For Nocturnal Wandering I Don’t Need,” 1929) (Dlia stranstviia nochnogo mne ne nado) related how his “passportless shadow” “jumps with customary silence...onto the Russian shore of the border river” and “secretly, easily, effortlessly,” having overcome the obstacles, makes its way through to his native city (Nabokov 2002: 346-347), but all this is either a metaphysical exaggeration or the fruit of a nocturnal imagination. And if one even supposes the improbable as Nabokov did in another poem “Refugees” (Bezhtensy 1921)—that the exile, after all, can dip in the same water twice and return to his native Petersburg, once he is there, he will, all the same, feel like a stranger (Nabokov 2002: 236). Directly addressing the already deceased Mandel’shtam, N. Otsup wrote in *Diary in Verse* (Otsup 1993: 420):

“In Petersburg we shall meet again...”
There is no one to meet, my dear
Osip...Neither you nor Gumilev are alive
And Akhmatova became gray-haired,
And like me, Ivanov and Adamovich
Are not young, brothers in springtime,
In fate: neither falsity nor fogs,
Nor hope...

Apparently, Iosif Brodskii closes this circle. In the poem “December in Florence” (Dekabr’ vo Florentsii, 1976), he also (and, evidently, primarily) had Petersburg in mind when he wrote, “there are cities to which there is no return” (Brodskii 1998-2000, III: 113).

The poet’s return may be virtual, but the return of poetry cannot. The émigré poet I. Chinnov, who during the period of perestroika managed to visit Petersburg, the city of his birth, completed his poetry collection *Autograph* with the poem “The Solemn Façade Was Illuminated” (Byl osveshchen torzhestvennyi fasad). The poem ended with the following lines (Chinnov 2002: 535):

And it is a vain labor to dream
That our corpses will travel to Petrograd <...>
But [our] poems will make it. The poems will make it.

NOTES

¹ The metaphysics and mythology of the historic parallels connected to the Petersburg theme represent an extensive cultural stratum in émigré literature as well. Without dealing with it in this work, I shall refer only to one amusing example. In the middle of the eighteenth century, the English traveler Robert Wood published the book, *The Ruins of Palmyra, otherwise Tedmor, in desert*. (This ancient city, located in northeast Syria, was destroyed by

the Romans in the third century during the reign of the Empress Zinoviia.) This book was given as a gift to Catherine II with the inscription: “To Catherine II, the Zinoviia of northern Palmyra.” After the October Revolution, the former northern Palmyra fell into the hands of a person with the name Zinov’ev (the pseudonym of Grigorii Evseevich Radomysl’skii, 1883-1936), who did everything possible to destroy it.

² In one of the cartoons published in the émigré newspaper *Golos Rossii*, published in Berlin, the Bronze Horseman was depicted in the following way: against the background of people falling off their feet from hunger, Trotsky sat on the playful horse with a laurel wreath and five-pointed star on his head; see *Golos Rossii*, no. 27, February 1, 1920, p. 3.

³ At the same time, in the consciousness of the emigrants, the “former Petersburg” invariably embodied the idea of the imperial, powerful city. See in the article by the above-mentioned Petronius: “About half the entire population of Denmark lives in Copenhagen. About a sixth of the population in London. A tenth of the population in Paris. In Petersburg (pre-Bolshevik) a total of one hundredth. Yet in no other world capital was the power (derzhavnost’) of the state felt as much as in this center, thrust to the very edge of the unbounded Empire, by its periphery. The illogicality of Petersburg seemingly left its imprint on its autocracy. The dream of the poet and the logic of the historian yielded in the face of this illogicality” (*Golos Rossii*, no. 610, March 15, 1921, p. 3).

⁴ The image of the so-called “émigré state” can be found frequently in verse by refugees. See the figurative expression of the dilemma of the state duality of émigrés, the feeling of those who lived in France of non-allegiance to either of the “flags”—the Soviet or French—in the poem of Georgii Ivanov, “My Passport Burned Sometime” (*Pasport moi sgorel kogda-to*) (1955) (Ivanov 1994, I:537): “The red flag or the tricolor?! Divine will or fate?! The mild predawn/ breeze does not answer.” Cf. with Adamovich’s poem, “When We Shall Return to Russia” (*Kogda my v Rossiuu vernemsia...*) (1936): “The miserable flag fluttered above us like a tricolored disgrace” (Adamovich 1999: 94). With regard to the “émigré state” motif, see the poem of V. Pereleshin, “We” (My) (1934): “In all republics and kingdoms,/ Having intruded into alien cities,/ We are a state in states,/ Having united forever.” (Pereleshin 1989: 7).

⁵ Pushkin’s two works, “The Bronze Horseman” and “The Queen of Spades,” which fulfill a special role in Russian culture as prototexts that created a long tradition, became some of the most popular sources of references in émigré poetry. Without delving into this question here (for greater detail see V. Khazan, *On an Interpretation of Some Classical Topics in Russian Émigré Poetry*, forthcoming), I shall refer only to an example from the musical rather than the literary sphere—the cantata “The Bronze Horseman,” written in 1953—the year of the 250th anniversary of the founding of St. Petersburg—by a graduate of the Imperial Aleksandrovskii Lycée, A.S. Il’iashenko (1884-1954) (a composer of symphonic music who had worked in the editorial division of the office of the State Duma).

⁶ This term had been repeated after him by many émigré poets and writers. See, for example, the opening of the sketch by G. Ivanov, “Sunset over Petersburg” (*Zakat nad Peterburgom*) (1953): “Resplendent St. Petersburg was at the time of its flourishing indeed a splendid capital” (Ivanov 1994, III: 456) or Iu. Trubetskoi’s prose description of Petersburg’s desolation in the period of revolutionary apocalypse: “Resplendent St. Petersburg faded. The works of Monferrant, Gvarengi, Rossi, Cameron and Voronikhin faded” (Trubetskoi 1950: 32).

⁷ See, for example the story of I. Surguchev “Fourteen Old Men” (*Chetyrnadtsat’ starikov*) in which the narrator-hero describes to a French family the unique beauty of Petersburg and encounters a naive lack of comprehension: “I said that in Europe you wouldn’t find many quays like the Petersburg ones, streets like Nevskii Boulevard or squares like the Palace or Senate Squares.

Then Koko himself began to speak, slightly ruddy after having eaten:

‘Is there steam heating in Russia?’

I said that there was no steam heat in Russia.

‘Then how do you manage with your cold?’ the host inquired.

I replied, ‘When it is cold, they light fires in the streets. People come out of all the houses and warm themselves. Having warmed up, they go back and go to sleep.’

Looking around, they smiled approvingly and believed it” (Surguchev 1927: 143-144).

⁸ An allusion to the prologue of Pushkin’s poem, “The Bronze Horseman.”

⁹ He later developed this theme in his long poem “Newly Fallen Snow” (Porosha).

¹⁰ The depiction of Petersburg as the new capital of European Christian civilization, created by the “miracle-making builder” with an anti-Roman purpose, takes a turn in the direction of a necropolis theme. See Lebedev 1993: 47-62.

¹¹ On the motif of the sunken Atlantis in Russian émigré poetry see Khazan 2002: 1-20.

¹² S. Gollerbakh, in designing *Three Homelands* (Tri rodiny), the poetry collection of V. Pereleshin, who had lived in China, depicted on the cover the figure of the Bronze Horseman and a Chinese dragon behind him.

¹³ In the story “Lutetia” by N. Gorodetskaia, the heroine, a Russian emigrant living in Paris, loses her topographical orientation and not knowing exactly “where she was living,” “she went along the embankment of the Seine and thought about the blue Neva, and, like a victory march, recited “The Bronze Horseman” (Gorodetskaia 1934: 3). Like her, the hallucinating hero of G. Gazdanov’s story, “Queen Mary” (Kniazhna Meri, 1953), is infatuated with the lines from Blok’s poem, “Night, Street, Lantern, Pharmacy,” applying them to his own Parisian “terrible world,” although “it could have been anywhere— in London or Amsterdam—this perspective of a winter street, lanterns, the dim light of the windows, the silent movement through the snow and the cold, the uncertainty of what happened yesterday, the uncertainty of what would happen tomorrow, the slipping consciousness of one’s own existence...” (Gazdanov 1996, III: 554).

Incidentally, a similar contiguity was possible also in Soviet poetry, but in that case, it was invariably ideological: a comparison of revolutionary Petrograd with Paris of the period of the great French Revolution, when “gloomy Petrograd/ became gay Paris for an hour” (German 1929: 17).

¹⁴ See, for example, in the poem by G. Struve, “The February Day is Painfully Uneasy” (Fevral’skii den’ tomitel’no-trevozhen): “The February day is painfully uneasy/ The clouds are lilac above the Seine/ I recall—more agitated and stern—/Another ice-bound river.” (Mednyi vsadnik 1923: 215-216). On a parodic-comic level, creating a flavor of emigrant folklore, see in the story by Teffi “Town” (Gorodok): “A river flowed through the town. In olden days they called the river Sekvana, then the Seine, and when a little city was founded on it, the inhabitants began to call it ‘their Neva’” (Teffi 1998, III: 146).

¹⁵ L. Strakhovskii compares the Neva to the Thames in the poem “Over the Thames” (Nad Temzoi) (Strakhovskii 1953: 13; first published in *Russkaia Mysl’* [Sofia], nos. 10-12 [1921], p. 177). Similarly, N. Nadezhdin, who wound up in London during his wanderings as an emigrant, wrote in the long poem “Dissuasion”: “Longing arises for my former life./ What am I longing for? For my homeland./ I look at the Thames, and the Neva/ is what I see again as if in reality” (Nadezhdin 1925: 114).

¹⁶ In the poem of B. Nartsissov, “Morning on Broadway (Nartsissov 1958: 42), the Neva “flows” in the center of New York.

¹⁷ In the poem of V. Sumbatov, the waves of the Neva mix with the currents of the Tiber: “In the currents of the Tiber, I see the waves of the Neva,/ The reflections of Petersburg palaces...” (Sumbatov 1969: 6).

¹⁸ A. Parkau, living in Harbin, in the poem “Recollection” (Vospominanie) described the Sungari as indistinguishably reminiscent of the Neva.

¹⁹ This is the name of the cycle in the manuscript (preserved in the Russian archive in Leeds. MS 1396/1041. My thanks to Dr. R. Davis for the opportunity to see the manuscript.) In the book by A. Ugriimov, *My Past and Thoughts: A Notebook of Verse* (Perezhitoe i peredumannoe: Tetrad’ stikhov, [Cambridge 1958], pp. 84-87), these poems are not formally united into a cycle.

²⁰ The book was published initially in English and only later in Russian.

²¹ In emigration the expression “Leningrad’s Petersburg” (Leningradskii Peterburg) was common; see the article by that name by Georgii Petrov (*Grani*, no. 18 [1953], pp. 39-50) or the series of sketches by B. Fillipov, “Leningrad’s Petersburg in Russian Poetry (Leningradskii Peterburg v russkoi poezii).

²² The play on words here concerns the renaming of Petrograd into Leningrad, which in Russian sounds close to Elena’s City or Elenagrad (Elena is the Russian name for Helen).

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