The St. Petersburg Text and Its Nabokovian Texture

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AVERTISSEMENT

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... to the Letniy Sad took him for walks.¹

Létniy Sad: Le Jardin d'Eté, a public park on the Neva embankment,
with avenues of crow-haunted shade trees (imported elms and oaks)
and noseless statues of Greek deities (made in Italy); there, a
hundred years later, I, too, was walked by a tutor.²

The following remarks will proceed via the broadly semiotic concept of TEXT
to a discussion of the concrete motif texture in Nabokov’s works. There is no
need to wax theoretical about semiotics here, but for the sake of explaining what
is meant by St. Petersburg “as a text” some observations of a more general
nature are still in order.

This notion (peterburgskii tekst) was put forward by the Tartu-based Slavic
poeticicians, Lotman, Toporov, and others in their work The Semiotics of the City
and Urban Culture: St. Petersburg.³ According to their view, the former capital
of imperial Russia should not be regarded just as a politico-historical fact, but
“as a text on the one hand and, on the other, as a mechanism for generating
texts.”⁴ In other words, St. Petersburg can also be used as a name for an
intertextual construct: as any compound text (albeit with many authors) it can be
variously activated in literature, tapped for literary allusions, transformed by
rewriting, even parodied.

What is more, Russian literature may be said to contain a deep core of basic texts
determining the surface features of other works using St. Petersburg as a theme.⁵
Among such generating texts one should obviously include The Bronze
Horseman (1833), The Queen of Spades (1833), and other works by Pushkin; the
Petersburg Stories (1842) by Gogol; or the novels of Dostoevsky, above all
Crime and Punishment (1865-1867). Among Russian modernist works, one
finds the novel Peterburg (1913) by Belyi, as well as the poetic corpora of Blok,
Mandel’shtam, Akhmatova (followed by dozens of lesser lights). From more
recent Russian literature, one might name, for example, Andrei Bitov’s The
Pushkin House (1978), which already represents a manifestly postmodern
rendition of the theme.

¹ Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse by Aleksandr Pushkin, English translation, with a
³ Semiotika goroda i gorodskoi kul'tury: Peterburg, A. E. Malts, ed. (Tartu: Tartu
gosudarstvenny universitet, 1984).
⁴ Iu. M. Lotman’s Foreword to Semiotika goroda, p. 3. Unless otherwise indicated, the
translations into English are by the author of this article.
⁵ V. N. Toporov, "Peterburg i peterburgskii tekst russkoi literatury. (Vvedenie v temu),”
As to Nabokov, the proposition of the present paper is that his works, too, could be profitably studied in the light of this concept. The role of the historical St. Petersburg in the author’s life has been documented by biographers. In what follows, the emphasis will be placed squarely on the textual manifestations of St. Petersburg in Nabokovian writing. This is of course a topic for an ample study, and here it will be possible to present just some bits and pieces of the overall argument. I will trace the occurrences of the St. Petersburg theme (1) in Nabokov’s Russian verse; (2) in his autobiography Speak, Memory; (3) in narrative fiction. Special heed will be given to intertextual links between the autobiography and the image of St. Petersburg in Nabokov’s fiction. (For a chronologically ordered list of the materials surveyed, see Appendix.)

Verse

It seems appropriate to start the survey from an anthology of verse entitled St. Petersburg in Poems by Russian Writers, printed in Berlin in 1923. Among the many pieces by émigré authors, ensuring that the book could not come out in Soviet Russia, the collection also includes a lesser-known long poem by Nabokov bearing the title “Peterburg, Poema.”

Apart from its length — 183 lines, the longest contribution in the anthology — this piece hardly distinguishes itself from the productions of other aspiring versifiers admitted in the collection, and it far from vies with the work of such established poets as Mandel’shtam, Bunin, or Blok, also on the collection. In fact, it is a poem not entirely devoid of clichés (of the type: “Oh, city loved by Pushkin,” and so forth). The patriotic theme of St. Petersburg as a city buried in the golden past, now robbed by a subhuman crowd, is handled in a ponderous manner that seems remote indeed from the light satirical touch of the mature artist. Neither do the concluding lines stir: “There are many such as I. We / Roam the world unable to sleep / And we know: the buried city / Will be resurrected again: everything there will become / Wonderful, joyous, and new, — / But the thing is that the past, that what was native to us, / We will never find again…”

What this poem goes to show, above all, is the very conventional manner in which the theme of St. Petersburg was used in early Nabokovian verse. There is a fair number of poems by Nabokov devoted to this theme (Appendix), but there would be little need to list such pieces here, if they did not represent the first

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6 As was in fact suggested by Toporov in a footnote — a brave footnote at that time — to his 1984 study: "There is a particular need to resolve the question of Nabokov's relationship [to the St. Petersburg text]" (p. 14).


8 For a much expanded version of this paper, see Studia Slavica Finlandensia 9 (1992).

9 Peterburg v stikhovoreniakh russkih poetov, Gleb Alekseev, ed. (Berlin: Sever, 1923).

10 Ibid, pp. 84-85. Originally, the poem had been issued in Rul', 17 July, 1921. It was not reissued in Nabokov's 1979 Stikhi.
inklings of a concern that was to assume great prominence in the author’s later
writing. As such, they are telling precisely for their banality, and it is worth
noticing that in Nabokov’s fiction the youthful poems are often made the butt of
systematic autoparodies. As just one example, we may recall The Gift where
Fyodor assumes a sarcastic attitude towards émigré poems “replete with
fashionable clichés” — among these, “the Neva’s parapet on which one can
hardly discern today the imprint of Pushkin’s elbow.”\(^\text{11}\) This turns out to be the
hallowed image employed by Nabokov himself in the 1924 poem “Sankt-
Peterburg:” “[...] the imprint of his elbow Pushkin left on the granite.”\(^\text{12}\)
There are many such autoparodies. Still in Pnin, the author heaped scorn on
“nostalgic elegies” by émigré writers dedicated to a lost capital “that could be
little more to [the poet] than a sad stylized toy.”\(^\text{13}\) In his prose fiction, Nabokov
had already found other uses for the theme.

The Autobiography

This is not to say that the author’s nostalgia for his native city wouldn’t be
genuine. When Nabokov evokes, in Speak, Memory, pre-revolution St.
Petersburg as the setting of his (both culturally and materially) opulent boyhood
such descriptions cannot but strike an authentic note. But the authenticity of
these passages is not at issue. Here, I will concentrate only on the intertextual
relationship between Speak, Memory and fiction.

There would be much to say about this subject — for example, in terms of
meteorological matters. It is always winter in Nabokov’s St. Petersburg, in
autobiography and fiction alike, and a small anthology could be filled with
descriptions of the hibernal capital lifted from the author’s novels and stories.
Vadim in Look at the Harlequins! is obviously speaking for his creator when he
says that he “had never seen [his] native city in June or July.”\(^\text{14}\)
Similarly, the topography of Nabokov’s St. Petersburg has peculiarities of
its own. There are two main streets in this reconstructed city: the Morskaya Street
(or Bol’shaia Morskaia ) in the most fashionable section of the capital where the
Nabokov town house stood and the Nevski Avenue (the official main street).
One may recall, for example, the episode from Speak, Memory of Nabokov’s
mother riding in her sleigh (for it is again winter) “down Morskaya Street toward
Nevski Avenue”\(^\text{15}\) to acquire a gift for her ailing son. Or one recalls the lovingly

\(^{11}\) The Gift, trans. by Michael Scammell and Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with the author
\(^{12}\) Stikhi, Vera Nabokov, ed. (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1979), p. 143. The motif of Pushkinian elbows
also figures in the essay “Pouchkine ou le vrai et le vraisemblable,” La Nouvelle Revue
42.
and very precisely delineated itinerary from the Nabokov house to the Tenisheev School along the same streets.\textsuperscript{16}

Very few heroes in Nabokov’s fiction venture beyond this region, while at the same time dozens of topographical details and other realia borrowed from along the Morskaya - Nevski route keep recurring as fictional motifs: the names of shops, movie theatres, clubs, or hotels; a model of a sleeping car in the window of Société des Wagons-Lits et des Grands Express Européens on Nevski; or the wooden pavements of the St. Petersburg avenues. A large list of such recurring realia could again be compiled — much larger than the present space allows.

As a particularly telling example, I single out only the role reserved for the Nabokov house on Morskaya. Here is how the author describes his boyhood home:

\begin{quote}
We have now moved to our town house, a stylish, Italianate construction of Finnish granite, built by my grandfather circa 1885, with floral frescoes above the third (upper) story and a second-floor oriel, in St. Petersburg (now Leningrad), 47, Morskaya (now Hertzen Street).\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

Now (June 1992) the street has been re- genuined (back to Bol’shaia Morskaia ), and there is even a plaque on No. 47 commemorating Nabokov’s birth in that house. But — plaque or not — all readers of Nabokov are familiar with the textual occurrences of the house on Morskaya.

As early as in “Peterburg. Poema,” mentioned above, the speaker draws attention to his former home street: “Morskaya Street. Under the [Palace] arch, / On the red inner wall / Leans, like a mush room on a stump, / A large clock ...”\textsuperscript{18}

In the early, 1925-1926 play The Man from the USSR the hero (an émigré agent named Kuznetsoff) is setting out on a clandestine trip across the Soviet border. He is asked to deliver a package to an address in Leningrad:

\begin{quote}
MRS. OSHINEVSKI
[... ] Here’s the address — is it clear?
KUZNETSOFF
Yes, certainly. Only now it’s not Morskaya Street but Hertzen Street.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

In Pnin the narrator remembers riding his bicycle “home to our rosy-stone house in the Morskaya, over parquet-smooth wooden pavements.”\textsuperscript{20} And in Look at the Harlequins!, when Vadim journeys to the Leningrad of the sixties, the reoccurrence of the motif gives rise to a small metafictional joke. Noticing, among other sights, “the facade of a house on Gertsen Street,” Vadim has an eerie sense of familiarity. He surmises that he “may have gone there to some children’s fete ages ago”\textsuperscript{21} — possibly, to one of the parties in 47 Morskaya

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[16]{\textit{Ibid}, pp. 184-185.}
\footnotetext[17]{\textit{Ibid}, p. 109.}
\footnotetext[18]{Peterburg v stikhotvoreniiakh russkikh poetov, p. 83.}
\footnotetext[20]{Pnin, p. 175.}
\footnotetext[21]{Look at the Harlequins!, p. 211.}
\end{footnotes}
described by Nabokov in Chapter Eight of *Speak, Memory.* An ontologically vertiginous impression — basic to *Look at the Harlequins!* — is thus created that fictional creatures may attend parties (in the real St. Petersburg) given by their maker.

**Narrative Fiction**

Altogether, there are fourteen novels by Nabokov (seven of them written in Russian) and sixteen stories (thirteen in Russian, two in English, one — “Mademoiselle O” — in French) where the St. Petersburg setting figures in one way or another (Appendix). But in what ways? Here, one may note that there are two major strategies that Nabokov uses to subvert direct representations of St. Petersburg in his fiction. Both of these have to do with the distinction, drawn by the Tartu semioticians, between the city as a *linguistic/toponymic complex of motifs* and the city as an actual place, or a *spatial locus.*

I will round up the discussion by looking into some Nabokovian uses of St. Petersburg (a) not as a place, but as a source for linguistic and toponymic play; (b) as a place, but a place that is permanently absent from the narrative reality — serving instead as a source for new fictions embedded within the main one.

First, as regards toponymic punning, one may notice Nabokov’s dislike of the 1914 renaming of his native city (brought about by patriotic zeal): “*Peterburg was sunk to Petrograd against all rules of nomenclatorial priority.*” Even less, evidently, did he like the 1924 name change. As he has the hero of the 1932 story “*The Reunion*” explain: “Grammatically, Leningrad can only mean the town of Nellie.”

It is this satirical attitude that motivates the many puns based on the Slavic root -grad (i.e., gorod, or ‘city’) in Nabokovian fiction. In the Russian original of *Invitation to a Beheading* the headsman M’sieur Pierre hails from “*Vyshnegrad*” (in the English version this was changed into “*Upper Elderbury*” [cf. -burg]). In *Bend Sinister*, the capital of Krug’s home country is named “Padukgrad,” after the dictator Paduk. In *Pnin*, the hero suffers from sonic disturbances...
caused by workmen drilling “Brainpan Street, Pningrad.”

In Pale Fire, this root engenders the name of the Zemblan capital, “Uranograd” — and significantly, that of the Zemblan assassin Gradus. Compare Kinbote’s absurd gloss on “Leningrad used to be Petrograd.” Or: “Gradus should not kill kings, Vinogradus should never, never provoke God. Leningradus should not aim his pea-shooter at people.”

Lastly, when we move on to occurrences of St. Petersburg as a spatial locus in Nabokov’s fiction, an all but regular narrative pattern is seen to emerge. Notably, while St. Petersburg figures as a setting in a large number of these texts, it is seldom that the city is chosen as the locus of action on the primary level of the narrative reality. More often, St. Petersburg functions, as an element of the embedded, second-level narrative world: as an object of reminiscences, dreams, hallucinations, stories within stories. Accordingly, while literary historians have discussed the St. Petersburg text in Russian letters in terms of a fictional hero “living, thinking, and suffering” in St. Petersburg, in Nabokov’s case we should rather speak of the hero reminiscing, dreaming, or otherwise producing new fictions about the absent (and therefore unreal) city.

This choice by the author brings about a narrative peculiarity that is very characteristic of Nabokov’s fiction. That is, the narrative point of view employed in a given novel or story may shift at any moment from one level to another, from the present reality of the (émigré) characters to the reconstructed and more or less fantastic past in St. Petersburg. Here are but samples of this narrative strategy in action.

In the 1927 story “The Doorbell” the hero Galatov, just arrived in Berlin, catches sight of a sign in German:

“I. S. Weiner, Dentist. From Petrograd.” An unexpected recollection virtually scalded him. This fine friend of ours is pretty well decayed and must go. In the window, right in front of the torture seat, inset glass photographs displayed Swiss landscapes. [...] The window gave to Moika Street.

In the next excerpt from The Gift (which abounds in such shifts) it is difficult to locate the precise point in the discourse where the slipping into the past begins:

[Berlin] He found his street, but at the end of it a post with a gauntleted hand on it indicated that one had to enter from the other end where the post office was, since at this end a pile of flags had been prepared for tomorrow’s festivities. [...] He scrambled over boards, boxes and a toy grenadier in curls, and caught sight of the familiar house [are we already in St. Petersburg?], and there the workmen had already strectched a red strip of carpet across the

29 Pnin, p. 63.
31 B. V. Tomashevskii’s phrase; quoted by Z. G. Mints et al. in ”Peterburgskii tekst’ i russkii simvolizm,” Semiotika goroda, p. 78.
32 For a discussion of this strategy in a broader narrative-theoretical framework, see my Problems of Nabokov’s Poetics: A Narratological Analysis (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1985), pp. 76-80.
33 Details of a Sunset and Other Stories, p. 104.
sidewalk from door to curb [now we are], as it used to be done in
front of their house on the Neva Embankment on ball nights.34
This narrative pattern was already firmly established in Nabokov’s first novel
Mary, which is in its entirety based on shifts between Ganin’s Berlin present and
his replayed romance in St. Petersburg. In The Defense Luzhin is driven insane
by the persistent interpenetration of the St. Petersburg memories into his present.
Still in Pnin, the hero’s American reality is on occasion made interchangeable
with his memories or hallucinations of a childhood in St. Petersburg.
Here the theme that we have been tracing also joins the larger Nabokovian
concerns with the past versus the present, or fiction versus reality. So we may
conclude by observing that what applies to the Nabokovian treatment of the past
in general, applies to the autobiographical theme of St. Petersburg as well. In
other words, both are irretrievable. You can dream about them, or invent new
fictions about them. But you can never go back — to the past, or to the twice
(now thrice) renamed city.

APPENDIX

St. Petersburg in Nabokov’s Works

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<th>Year</th>
<th>In Verse (Drama)</th>
<th>In Fiction (Memoirs)</th>
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<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>Stolitsa [To the Capital]</td>
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<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>U dvortsov Nevy ia brozhu, ne rad [By the Neva’s palaces I wander, not glad]</td>
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<td>1921</td>
<td>Peterburg, Poema</td>
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<td>1921</td>
<td>Mechtal ia o tebe tak chasto, tak davno [I dreamt of you so often, for so long] — “... knigu o liubvi, o dynke nad Nevoi / ... / ia pereslystval” [A book about love, about mist over the Neva / ... / I leafed through]</td>
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<td>1921</td>
<td>V. Sh. — on meetings with V[alentina] Sh[ulgina] in St. Petersburg (cf. Speak, Memory)</td>
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<td>1921</td>
<td>Detstvo [Childhood] — “... kogda khodil zimoi / vdol' skovannoi Nevy velikolepnym utrom!” [... when I walked in winter / along the frozen Neva on a magnificent morning!]</td>
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<td>1922</td>
<td>Peterburg</td>
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<tr>
<td>1923</td>
<td>Petr v Gollandii [Peter in Holland]</td>
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34 The Gift, pp. 334-335.
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Source</th>
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<td>1923</td>
<td>V kakom raju v pervye prozhurchali [In what paradise first sprang forth] — “I vdol’ Nevy, vsem noch’e spav ... / ... / ia shel” [And along the Neva's bank, not sleeping for the whole night ... / ... / I went]</td>
<td>A Matter of Chance — A.L. Luzhin’s recollections</td>
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<td>1923</td>
<td>Sankt-Peterburg — uzornyj inei [St. Petersburg — patterned by frost]</td>
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<td>1924</td>
<td>Sankt-Peterburg</td>
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<td>1924</td>
<td>K rodine [To the motherland] — &quot;... kak nebo nad Nevoi&quot; [... as the sky over the Neva]</td>
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<td>1925</td>
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<td>1925-1926</td>
<td>(The Man from the USSR — the theme of return</td>
<td>Mary — Ganin’s recollections of his romance (cf. Speak, Memory)</td>
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<td>1926</td>
<td>Lyzhyi pryshok [The Skijump]— the theme of return</td>
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<td>1926</td>
<td>Ut pictura poesis — “Ja pomnui, nad Nevoi moei / byvali smerki” [I remember that over my Neva / there used to be dusk]</td>
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<td>Year(s)</td>
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<td>1931-1932</td>
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<td>Year</td>
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<td>The Real Life of Sebastian Knight — V’s recollections of a history taking place in Bend Sinister — “Padukgrad” (First Love [- Chapter Seven, Speak, Memory])</td>
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<td>1974</td>
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