



The St. Petersburg Text and Its Nabokovian Texture

Tammi Pekka

Pour citer cet article

Tammi Pekka, « The St. Petersburg Text and Its Nabokovian Texture », *Cycnos*, vol. 10.1 (*Nobokov : Autobiography, Biography and Fiction*), 1993, mis en ligne en juin 2008.
<http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/publication/item/479>

Lien vers la notice <http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/publication/item/479>
Lien du document <http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/cycnos/479.pdf>

Cycnos, études anglophones

revue électronique éditée sur épi-Revel à Nice

ISSN 1765-3118 ISSN papier 0992-1893

AVERTISSEMENT

Les publications déposées sur la plate-forme épi-revel sont protégées par les dispositions générales du Code de la propriété intellectuelle. Conditions d'utilisation : respect du droit d'auteur et de la propriété intellectuelle.

L'accès aux références bibliographiques, au texte intégral, aux outils de recherche, au feuilletage de l'ensemble des revues est libre, cependant article, recension et autre contribution sont couvertes par le droit d'auteur et sont la propriété de leurs auteurs. Les utilisateurs doivent toujours associer à toute unité documentaire les éléments bibliographiques permettant de l'identifier correctement, notamment toujours faire mention du nom de l'auteur, du titre de l'article, de la revue et du site épi-revel. Ces mentions apparaissent sur la page de garde des documents sauvegardés ou imprimés par les utilisateurs. L'université Côte d'Azur est l'éditeur du portail épi-revel et à ce titre détient la propriété intellectuelle et les droits d'exploitation du site. L'exploitation du site à des fins commerciales ou publicitaires est interdite ainsi que toute diffusion massive du contenu ou modification des données sans l'accord des auteurs et de l'équipe d'épi-revel.

EPI-REVEL

Revue électronique de l'Université Côte d'Azur

The St. Petersburg Text and Its Nabokovian Texture

Pekka Tammi

Academy of Finland, Helsinki

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

Létniy Sad: Le Jardin d'Été, 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 poeticsians, 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 Commentary, by Vladimir Nabokov, 4 vols. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1975), Vol. 1, p. 96.

² *Ibid*, Vol. 2, p. 41.

³ *Semiotika goroda i gorodskoi kul'tury: Peterburg*, A. E. Malts, ed. (Tartu: Tartuskii gosudarsvennyi 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)," *Semiotika goroda*, pp. 14-15.

As to Nabokov, the proposition of the present paper is that his works, too, could be profitably studied in the light of this concept.⁶ The role of the historical St. Petersburg in the author's life has been documented by biographers.⁷ 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.⁸ 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 1923.⁹ 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."¹⁰

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

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).

⁷ Andrew, Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Part* (London: Hamish Hamilton 1977), pp. 89-105; Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990), pp. 37-135.

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

⁹ *Peterburg v stikhotvoreniakh russkikh 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."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."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."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."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"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 (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1963), p. 43.

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 Française* 48 (1937), p. 368.

¹³ *Pnin* (London: Heinemann, 1969), p. 45.

¹⁴ *Look at the Harlequins!* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), p. 210. This is verified by Boyd, p. 42.

¹⁵ *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Putnam's, 1966), p. 37.

and very precisely delineated itinerary from the Nabokov house to the Tenishev School along the same streets.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:

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 Herzen Street).¹⁷

Now (June 1992) the street has been re-renamed (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 mushroom on a stump, / A large clock ..." 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:

MRS. OSHINEVSKI
[...] Here's the address — is it clear?
KUZNETSOFF
Yes, certainly. Only now it's not Morskaya Street but Herzen Street.¹⁹

In *Pnin* the narrator remembers riding his bicycle "home to our rosy-stone house in the Morskaya, over parquet-smooth wooden pavements."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"²¹ — possibly, to one of the parties in 47 Morskaya

¹⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 184-185.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 109.

¹⁸ *Peterburg v stikhotvorenniakh russkikh poetov*, p. 83.

¹⁹ *The Man from the USSR and Other Plays*, trans. by Dmitri Nabokov (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/Bruccoli Clark, 1984), p. 109.

²⁰ *Pnin*, p. 175.

²¹ *Look at the Harlequins!*, p. 211.

described by Nabokov in Chapter Eight of *Speak, Memory*.²² 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.²³

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*.²⁴

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.”²⁵ 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.”²⁶

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]).²⁷ In *Bend Sinister*, the capital of Krug’s home country is named “Padukgrad,” after the dictator Paduk.²⁸ In *Pnin*, the hero suffers from sonic disturbances

²² *Speak, Memory*, pp. 162-165.

²³ There are other occurrences of the Morskaya house in fiction. Should we add that even the Nabokov phone number in St. Petersburg — “24-43, *dvadtsat chetire sorok tri*” (*Speak, Memory*, p. 235) — reoccurs as a motif in fiction? It is reversed in a famous address: “342 Lawn Street” (*Lolita* [London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1959], p. 37).

²⁴ Iu. M. Lotman, “Simvolika Peterburga i problemy semiotika goroda,” *Semiotika goroda*, p. 30.

²⁵ *Speak, Memory*, p. 47.

²⁶ *Details of a Sunset and Other Stories*, trans. by Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with the author (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976), p. 129. In the Russian original, entitled “Vstrecha,” the pun was on *piatiletka* (‘five year plan’). See *Sogliadatai* (Paris: Russkie zapiski, 1938), p. 132.

²⁷ *Priglasenie na kazn'* (Paris: Dom knigi, 1938), p. 99. *Invitation to a Beheading*, trans. by Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with the author (New York: Putnam's, 1959), p. 110.

²⁸ *Bend Sinister* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972), p. xi.

caused by workmen drilling “Brainpan Street, Pningrad.”²⁹ 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.”³⁰

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,³¹ 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.³²

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.³³

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 stretched a red strip of carpet across the

²⁹ *Pnin*, p. 63.

³⁰ *Pale Fire* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962), pp. 102, 154, 231.

³¹ B. V. Tomashevskii’s phrase; quoted by Z. G. Mints et al. in “Peterburgskii tekst’ i russkii simbolizm,” *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

Year	In Verse (Drama)	In Fiction (Memoirs)
1916	Stolitse [To the Capital]	
1916	U dvortsov Nevy ia brozhu, ne rad [By the Neva's palaces I wander, not glad]	
1921	Peterburg, Poema	
1921	Mechtal ia o tebe tak chasto, tak davno [I dreamt of you so often, for so long] — "... knigu o liubvi, o dymke nad Nevoi / ... / ia perelistyval" [A book about love, about mist over the Neva / ... / I leafed through]	
1921	V. Sh. — on meetings with V[alentina] Sh[ulgina] in St. Petersburg (cf. <i>Speak, Memory</i>)	
1921	Detstvo [Childhood] — "... kogda khodil zimoi / vdol' skovannoi Nevy velikolepnym utrom!" [... when I walked in winter / along the frozen Neva on a magnificent morning!]	
1922	Peterburg	
1923	Petr v Gollandii [Peter in Holland]	

³⁴ *The Gift*, pp. 334-335.

1923	V kakom raiu v pervye prozhurchali [In what paradise first sprang forth] — “I vdol’ Nevy, vsiu noch’ ne spav ... / ... / ia shel” [And along the Neva’s bank, not sleeping for the whole night ... / ... / I went]	
1923	Sankt-Peterburg — uzornyiinei [St. Petersburg — patterned by frost]	
1924	Sankt-Peterburg	A Matter of Chance — A.L. Luzhin’s recollections
1924	Iskhod [Departure] — “... perekinulis’ iz temnoty / v temnotu — o, muza, kak nezhdanno! — / iavstvennye nevskie mosty” [... from one darkness / to another reached — Oh Muse, how unexpectedly — / distinctly visible Neva bridges]	
1924	K rodine [To the motherland] — “... kak nebo nad Nevoi” [... as the sky over the Neva]	
1925		A Letter That Never Reached Russia — the narrator’s recollections of a romance in St. Petersburg (cf. “Tamara,” Speak, Memory)
1925-1926	(The Man from the USSR — the theme of return	
1926	Lyzhnyi pryzhok [The Skijump]— the theme of return	Mary — Ganin’s recollections of his romance (cf. Speak, Memory)
1926	Ut pictura poesis — “Ia pomniu, nad Nevoi moei / byvali sumerki” [I remember that over my Neva / there used to be dusk	
1927		The Doorbell — Galatov’s recollections
1929	Dlia stranstviia nochnogo mne ne nado [For nighttime peregrination I do not need] — the theme of return	

1929-1930	The Defense — Luzhin's school years
1930	The Eye — Smurov belongs "to the best St. Petersburg society"
1931	A Bad Day — Peter's recollection of the lantern slides (cf. Speak, Memory)
1931-1932	Glory — the theme of return
1931-1932	Lips to Lips — the setting of Ilya Borisovich's novel
1932	The Reunion — the pun on "Leningrad"
1932	Orache — takes place in St. Petersburg (cf. father's duel in Speak, Memory)
1933	The Admiralty Spire — the narrator's recollections of a romance in St. Petersburg
1934	The Circle — Bychkov's recollection of the Godunov house "on the Quay"
1934	In Memory of L. I. Shigaev — the "view of Neva" hanging on Shigaev's wall
1934	A Russian Beauty — the heroine's recollections
1934	Despair — Herman enters the University of St. Petersburg in 1914
1935-1936	Invitation to a Beheading — "Vyshnegrad"
1936	(Mademoiselle O [— Chapter Five, Speak, Memory])
1937-1938	The Gift — Fyodor's recollections
1939	The Visit to the Museum — the theme of return
1939	Ultima Thule — Falter hails from St. Petersburg

1941		The Real Life of Sebastian Knight — V's recollections A Forgotten Poet — the narrator's (re)construction of a history taking place in St. Petersburg
1947	To Prince S.M. Kachurin — the theme of return	Bend Sinister — "Padukgrad"
1948		(First Love [- Chapter Seven, Speak, Memory])
1951		(Speak, Memory)
1955		Lolita — "St. Petersburg, Fla.," "Krestovski"
1957		Pnin — Pnin's (and the narrator's) recollections
1962		Pale Fire — "Leningrad used to be Petrograd," "Gradus," "Vinogradus," etc.
1969		Ada — the pun on "Nevada"
1974		Look at the Harlequins! — the theme of return