OTHER BOOKS BY SOLOMON VOLKOV

Young Composers of Leningrad
(*Leningrad and Moscow, 1971*)

Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich
(*New York, 1979*)

Balanchine's Tchaikovsky:
Conversations with Balanchine on His Life, Ballet and Music
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From Russia to the West:
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(*New York, 1990*)

Joseph Brodsky in New York
(*New York, 1990*)

Remembering Anna Akhmatova:
Conversations with Joseph Brodsky
(*Moscow, 1992*)

ST. PETERSBURG

A CULTURAL HISTORY

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ıre and as its influential interpreters for the Russian educated ;es. Their contribution to the comprehension of the city's grandeur mystical significance is invaluable. For many decades their most :eptive works were deemed too controversial for Soviet readers were not reprinted. Only now are they coming out of the shad-. Their passionate desire to enlighten their audience, to make lable the highest achievements of the human spirit, in conjunction ı their erudition and cosmopolitanism, makes these authors timely necessary today in Petersburg.

My book is to a great degree a tribute to these writers. In ad-ɔn, for the more than seven years needed to complete my work, a stant source of intellectual sustenance was James H. Billington's rpretative study of the development of Russian culture, *The Icon the Axe*. Reading it strengthened me in my resolve to write this ık, not as an encyclopedia of Petersburg culture but as an elabo-:d conceptual history of the development, over several centuries, he Petersburg legend and the Petersburg mythos.

CHAPTER 1

describing how the great city of St. Petersburg was built, how the mythos of this wonder was created, and how classical Russian literature from Pushkin to Dostoyevsky boldly and brilliantly interpreted the image of the city and, in the end, profoundly changed it.

Alexander Pushkin was nervous and angry. The poet was in the second week of his self-imposed exile in Boldino, the small steppe estate of his father some six hundred miles from Petersburg. Pushkin's purpose in coming here was to write poetry, in solitude and peace, far from the bustle of the capital. But the verse, spitefully, wouldn't come. His head ached, his stomach hurt; could it be the heavy Russian diet—potatoes and buckwheat groats?

He was worried about his substantial debts. The only way to get rid of them was to hope for inspiration from God, to produce something significant, and then sell that "something" profitably to his Petersburg publisher. But it was difficult for Pushkin to concentrate on poetry; he was tormented by jealousy, obsessed with worry about his young wife, who remained in Petersburg. The famous beauty, Natalya, was flattered by the attentions of the social lions, while the temperamental Pushkin naturally climbed the walls. He crudely berated his wife in a letter from Boldino: "You're pleased that studs chase after

you like a bitch, their tails stiff up in the air and sniffing your ass; nothing to be happy about! . . . *If you have a trough, the pigs will come.*"[1]

The dreary autumn weather would have plunged anyone into deep depression. But Pushkin, despite his African ancestry, loved the northern clime. He hoped that the Russian autumn would bring him inspiration, as it always had. It tormented him first, then paid off; verse finally came. The happy poet awoke at seven in the morning, worked in bed until three in the afternoon, then rode horseback in the mud for two hours, cooling off his head, overheated with ideas.

"I started writing and have already written tons,"[2] he announced proudly to his wife in a letter to Petersburg dated October 30, 1833. The next day at dawn, in his quick but beautiful hand, he finished the fair copy of his narrative poem, *The Bronze Horseman.* We know that because of the notation on the final page: "five after five a.m." (that is, contrary to his habit, the poet had worked all night).

Pushkin rarely documented his work with such accuracy. Apparently, even he, who never underestimated his genius, understood that in those twenty-six October days he had achieved something unique and extraordinary. (Which may also be why he asked five thousand rubles from his publisher upon returning to Petersburg, an unheard of sum in those days.) The poet's intuition did not fail him: *The Bronze Horseman* is still the greatest narrative poem written in Russian. It is also the beginning and at the same time the peak of the literary mythos about St. Petersburg.

The Bronze Horseman, subtitled by the author "A Petersburg Tale," is set during the flood of 1824, one of the worst of many that has regularly befallen the city. But the poem begins with a grand and solemn ode honoring Peter the Great and the city he founded, "the beauty and marvel" of the north. Then Pushkin warns, "Sorrowful will be my tale," though previously he had treated the flood of 1824 frivolously, noting in a letter to his younger brother, Lev, "*Voilà une belle occasion à vos dames de faire bidet.*"[3]

Then there is a sharp change in the protagonist, point of view, and mood. From Peter the Great and the early eighteenth century the action of Pushkin's poem jumps to his contemporary Petersburg, where the poor clerk Yevgeny dreams of happiness with his beloved Parasha. A storm begins and rages into a flood. Caught in the center of the city, in Senate Square, Yevgeny saves himself by climbing onto a marble lion. Before him, towering above the "outraged Neva," is the statue of Peter, "an idol on a bronze steed," the Bronze Horseman

The waves that cannot reach Peter, "the powerful master of fate," who had founded the city in such a dangerous location, threaten to engulf Yevgeny. But he is more worried about the fate of his Parasha. The storm recedes and Yevgeny hurries to her little house. Alas, the house has been washed away and Parasha is missing. Her death is unbearable to Yevgeny, who loses his mind and becomes one of Petersburg's homeless, living on handouts.

It is a plot typical of many a romantic tale. If Pushkin had ended it there, *The Bronze Horseman*, imbued with resounding verse that is at once ecstatic and precise—to date no translation has fully captured its brilliance—would not have risen to the philosophical heights at which it still serves as the most powerful expression of the ambiguity and eternal mystery of St. Petersburg's mythos.

No, the culmination of this "Petersburg Tale" is still ahead. Pushkin brings his hero back to Senate Square. Yevengy once again faces the bronze "idol with outstretched hand / The one, whose fatal will founded the city beneath the sea." So Peter the Great is at fault for Parasha's death. And Yevgeny threatens the "miracle-working builder." But the madman's attempted rebellion against the statue of the absolute monarch on his rearing steed is short-lived. Yevgeny runs away imagining that the Bronze Horseman has come down from his pedestal to pursue him. No matter where the panicked Yevgeny turns, the cruel statue keeps gaining on him, and the terrible chase continues through the night under the pale Petersburg moon.

Thereafter, ever since that night, whenever Yevgeny makes his way through Senate Square, he proceeds cautiously; he dares not look up at the triumphant Bronze Horseman. In imperial Petersburg no one may rise up against even a statue of the monarch; that would be blasphemy. The life of the now completely humiliated Yevgeny has lost all meaning. In his wanderings he comes across Parasha's ruined little house, washed up on a small island, and he dies on its doorstep.

This brief retelling of the comparatively short poem (481 octosyllabic lines) might create the impression that Pushkin's sympathies are fully with poor Yevgeny, who became the prototype for an endless line of "little people" in Russian literature. But then the mystery of *The Bronze Horseman* would not have puzzled Slavic scholars the world over for the last one hundred fifty years and given rise to the hundreds of works approaching it from literary, philosophical, historical, sociological, and political points of view.

The mystery lies in the fact that while the reader's first emotion is acute pity for the poor Petersburger, the perception of the poem

does not end with that; new emotions and sensations wash over the reader. Gradually one understands that the author's position is much more complex than it might at first have seemed.

The Bronze Horseman in Pushkin's poem obviously represents not only Peter the Great and the city he founded but also the state itself and just about any form of authority—and, even more broadly, the creative will and force, upon which the society depends, but which also clash inevitably with the simple dreams and desires of its members, the insignificant Yevgenys and Parashas. What is more important—the individual's fate or the city's and the state's triumph? It is Pushkin's genius that he does not present a clear-cut answer. In fact, the text of his poem is open to opposing interpretations and so compels each reader to resolve its moral dilemma anew.

The opening lines of *The Bronze Horseman*, depicting Peter the Great as he decides to found Petersburg, are perhaps the most popular in Russian poetry. Every year millions of Russian schoolchildren memorize them: "On the shore of empty waves *He* stood, filled with great thoughts, and stared out."

This is a mythologized image, of course. But almost everything having to do with the founding of Petersburg is surrounded by legends, great and small. According to one of them, on May 16, 1703, on an island (which was called Zayachy, "Hare") in the estuary of the Neva River, chosen because of its access to the Baltic Sea, Peter tore a halberd from a soldier's hands, cut out two sections of peat, laid them crosswise, and announced: "The city will be here!"[4] Then, tossing the halberd aside, Peter picked up a shovel and work began. This was the start of the six-towered fortress with the Dutch name Sankt Piterburkh, named by the tsar not after himself, as the popular misconception has it, but after his patron saint, Apostle Peter.

Another legendary image recorded in the manuscript entitled "On the conception and construction of the Ruling city of St. Petersburg," which appeared shortly after Peter's death, presents the eagle that suddenly appeared over Peter's head as the foundation of the fortress was being laid. The anonymous author stressed that this was exactly what had happened when Constantinople was founded by the first Christian emperor, Constantine the Great. Peter buried in the foundation a golden ark with a piece of the remains of Holy Apostle Andrew, the first to bring Christianity to Russia.

Contemporary historians are skeptical about these legends, justly noting their propagandistic character. In 1703 Peter already was planning to proclaim the Russian Empire, which he did in 1721, taking the title "Great" along with Russian Orthodox Emperor. So imperial symbols and parallels, particularly the traditional Russian historical analogy with the "New Rome"—Constantinople—were very important to him.

In fact, Peter was not even on Zayachy Island that fateful day when the city was founded. The initial work on the small piece of land—about 750 meters long and 360 wide—was directed by Alexander Menshikov, one of Peter's most trusted lieutenants and the future first governor of Petersburg. Prosaic facts also contradict Pushkin's grand lines cited earlier: the area wasn't all that "empty." The Swedish fort of Nienschanz stood nearby and a populous fishing village was situated on the opposite shore.

One thing is absolutely clear, though—Zayachy itself was uninhabited, a miserable swampy place that would never have become the site of the future imperial capital if not for the will and vision of Tsar Peter.

What moved him? What led to that strangest of choices, later resented and dismissed by hordes of critics? And their argument was sound—that for geographical, climatic, strategic, commercial, and nationalistic reasons, the mouth of the Neva was no place for the new capital of Russia or any large city.

The answer is probably rooted as much in Tsar Peter's psychology as in the complex political and economic reality of early-eighteenth-century Russia. Peter was born in 1672, the fourteenth child of Tsar Alexei of the Romanov dynasty, and was eventually crowned in 1696 in Moscow, then the capital of all Russia, inheriting an enormous, relatively backward country. He believed it needed radical *perestroika* or "restructuring" and, therefore, maximal increase in contacts and trade with the West. In many ways, Russia was already prepared for the rule of a reform-minded tsar. It simply did not expect that the new autocrat would be a person with Peter's extraordinary character and habits.[5]

Peter grew up to be tall (over six feet seven inches) and strong. He could easily roll up a silver plate or cut a bolt of cloth in the air. He was tireless in all his pursuits, businesslike, with an insatiable thirst for knowledge. He longed for sea air. This was exactly what Russia needed as well. Let's not forget it had long struggled to gain access to the sea, with its tempting promises of lucrative trade with foreigners.

But few of the Russian boyars—mostly the old noble councillors who surrounded the young tsar—expected Peter to take up the work of *perestroika* with such passion, demolishing along the way all the proprieties and customs of his ancestors. Muscovite tsars were supposed to sit enthroned majestically in the Kremlin, not imitate—as Peter soon began doing—the crude manners and habits of Dutch or German skippers and craftsmen.

Peter turned out to be an amazing monarch, and not only by Russian standards. He seemed to know everything and be able to do anything. As a young man he had mastered fourteen trades, including woodworking, carpentry, and shoemaking. He considered himself a good surgeon. They say Peter left a whole sack of teeth he had pulled; he loved to practice dentistry, terrorizing his courtiers. But the tsar prided himself particularly on being the best shipbuilder in the land. The launching of every new ship was also an excuse for a great drinking bout. Usually stingy, Peter spared no expense on these occasions.

As no Russian monarch before or after him, Peter was full of contradictions and paradoxes. On occasion he could be merry, gentle, and kind. But more often he was horrible in his wrath, frighteningly unpredictable, and needlessly cruel, personally torturing his enemies in hidden chambers. Of course, he had to fight for power and sometimes for his life. Barbaric incidents like the Moscow uprising of the Russian irregular army in 1682, when soldiers with fearsome pikes speared many of Peter's relatives and tore them apart before his eyes, must have greatly influenced his character and behavior. Still, his dominant trait was unlimited confidence in his own righteousness. As a true Russian autocrat, he considered himself the absolute sovereign whose subjects were deprived of every right. By providential design, he could not be wrong; therefore his every wish had to be obeyed, no matter what the cost.

At times Peter seemed to be a simple, sincere, and accessible man. But he also perceived himself as a demiurge, a kind of divine actor whose stage was not only Russia but all Europe and more. Not for nothing did the chancellor, Count Golovkin, upon bestowing the honorific "the Great" on Peter speak glowingly of a Russia that had "come out of the Darkness of Ignorance onto the Theater of Glory of the whole world" under the emperor's leadership. Peter was challenging, demanding, deliberately outrageous. This love of the grand gesture marked all his actions. A dramatic change of form was no less important than a change of content as far as Peter—the actor on the world stage—was concerned. In fact, he was apparently convinced that the form often determined the content. This conviction of Peter's was to become an integral part of the entire future Petersburgian culture.

Despite the opinion of many later historians Peter loved Russia, its talented people, its colorful language, the country's rituals and its food, particularly *shchi* (cabbage soup). But he hated Russian filth, indolence, thievery, and the fat, bearded boyars in their heavy clothes. He hated Moscow, too, the ancient Russian capital where he was almost murdered, and its rebellious soldiers, whom he constantly suspected of conspiracies against him.

So Peter started with a vengeance to change Russia's traditions and symbols. He ordered the boyars' beards to be cut (and at the same time the beards of the rest of the population, save the clergy and the peasants) and forced them to dance minuets at the Parisian-style "assemblies" he instituted. He gave his army a new uniform (and, of course, new weaponry) of the Western type, a new banner, and new orders, and he modernized the Russian alphabet. All these mostly symbolic transformations signaled in no uncertain terms the coming of the new age for Russia.

But the greatest expression of Peter's sovereign willfulness, his Russian maximalism, and his addiction to the supersymbolic gesture was, ultimately, the founding of St. Petersburg. Retrospectively, this feat became loaded with a multitude of interpretations and explanations; but the idea of establishing a new city just then and on just that spot seemed in fact to be no more or less than the act of an incredibly rich, reckless, and sometimes lucky gambler risking it all in one supreme wager. Peter wanted to astonish Russia and the entire civilized world, and he succeeded.

In fact, this seemingly crazy idea had developed gradually. The first impulse toward a concept of a city that would be completely novel, even avant-garde, for Russia came to young Peter back in Moscow. There he would sneak off into the foreign settlement, where German, Dutch, Scots, and French craftsmen, merchants, and mercenary soldiers lived, to enjoy their company and friendship.

A clearer image of his ideal city, one that had nothing in common with the muddy, dangerous Moscow, where Peter's enemies could hide in the crooked streets, formed during the young tsar's trips to Europe, particularly to Holland. First Peter started to fantasize about a

place like Amsterdam: clean, neat, easily observable and therefore controllable, on the water, with rows of trees reflected in the city's canals. Then Peter's vision grew much grander: *His* city would soar like an eagle: it would be a fortress, a port, an enormous wharf, a model for all Russia, and at the same time a shopwindow on the West.

Yes, a shopwindow, and not an ordinary one. The comparison of Petersburg with a window into Europe belongs not to Peter but the Italian traveler Count Francesco Algarotti, who used it in his *Lettera sulla Russia* in 1739. Peter would not have come up with this metaphor, if only because his attitude toward the West, like everything else with him, was ambivalent. Peter often repeated, "We need Europe for a few decades, and then we must show it our ass." The proud autocrat probably would have preferred the way Pushkin put it a hundred years later: "Russia entered Europe like a launched battleship—accompanied by the hammering of axes and the thunder of cannons." This desire to speak with Europe on equal terms, even if accompanied by cannon fire, is also very typical for subsequent generations of Russian writers, including the more Western-oriented like Nikolai Gumilyov.

A great Russian historian, Vassily Klyuchevsky, always insisted that "moving toward Europe was only a means toward an end in Peter's eyes and not the end itself."[6] He pointed out that the goal of Peter's legendary trips to western Europe was always to steal the latest know-how and to lure highly qualified European specialists to Russia. All that helps explain why, once he wrested access to the Baltic Sea from the Swedes, Peter did not use the important centers already established there—like Riga, Libava (Liepājā), or Revel (Tallinn)—as a base, even though their locations, not to mention their climate, were much more conducive for regular contacts with the West.

Peter wanted a clean break with the past, but he wanted to make that break on his own terms. He didn't need a test site already "spoiled" by existing ties with western Europe. Only the island in the mouth of the Neva seemed like a suitable laboratory for the tsar's grand experiment.

The first house in Petersburg—for Peter himself, two rooms and a storeroom that doubled as bedroom—was built of fir logs by the tsar with the help of soldiers in three days, in May 1703. Its walls were painted to resemble brick, the better to remind Peter of his beloved Amsterdam. The city plan was small-scale at first. But since with every

day the tsar's appetite increased, the plan became more elaborate. The Amsterdam model was soon abandoned. Peter was now going after no less than a northern Paris or Rome. Instead of naturally developing on high ground, Petersburg was begun on lowland, below sea level—a risky and fateful decision, resulting in much danger for its future inhabitants. The tsar plotted the city with ruler in hand as a system of islands, canals, and broad, straight *pershpektivy* (prospects, from the Latin *pro-specto*, to look into the distance), so that it would present a clear geometrical pattern. The main *pershpektiva*, the nearly three-mile-long Nevsky Prospect, was built in 1715.

To realize all these constantly changing plans, tens of thousands of workers from all over the country were herded to the Neva delta. It was a motley crew—peasants, soldiers, convicts, captured Swedes and Tatars. There was no housing, no food, no tools for them; they transported excavated dirt in their clothing. Drenched by pouring rains, attacked by swarms of mosquitoes, the wretches pounded wooden pilings into the swampy ground. How many died of starvation, disease, and exhaustion? Probably hundreds of thousands. Peter did not care, so no one kept track.

Later, the official court historian, Nikolai Karamzin, would sigh, "Les grands hommes ne voyent que le tout," explaining, "Petersburg is founded on tears and corpses." The severe Klyuchevsky seconds this conclusion: "I doubt one could find a battle in military history that led to the death of more soldiers than the number of laborers who died in Petersburg. . . . Peter called his new capital his 'paradise'; but it turned into a big cemetery for the people."[7] Not only the humble builders of Petersburg were terrorized by Peter. The celebrated French architect Alexandre Jean-Baptiste LeBlond, who designed the general plan for the city's construction, was, according to a historian, "beaten by the tsar and soon after died." Other foreigners who worked on "the New Rome"—Italians, Germans, Dutch—feared Peter as they had never feared their own rulers. "Everything trembled, everything submitted wordlessly," commented Pushkin.

Peter's muzzled and stunned subjects were showered with dozens of harshly worded ukases calling for more speed and more order in erecting the tsar's ideal city: decrees on more recruits; decrees on the highly regulated model houses for "noble," "wealthy," and "common" people; decrees ordering all Russian stonemasons to Petersburg and banning the construction of stone buildings in all other cities of the country; decrees on the obligatory delivery of stones by

ship and land for paving the streets of his "paradise," with the exact number of stones necessary (there were enormous fines for each undelivered stone).*

Pushkin, who thought that Peter "despised humanity perhaps more than did Napoleon," was puzzled: "It is worth pondering: the difference between Peter the Great's state accomplishments and his temporary ukases. The former are the fruit of a broad mind, imbued with good will and wisdom, the latter *are often cruel, willful, and, it seems, written with the knout.*"

The tsar's knout whistled mercilessly and constantly, so the city grew at incredible speed. Declared the new capital of Russia in 1717, it had over forty thousand residents by 1725, toward the end of Peter's reign—an eighth of the country's urban population. The emperor had succeeded in building a unique monument: not a pyramid, or a cathedral, but an entire city that quickly overshadowed the former capital, Moscow.

Under the jealous and impatient eye of Peter—which usually led to one architect beginning some building or other, a second one continuing it, and a third completing it—were built the Peter and Paul Fortress and the Admiralty, with their proud spires, the Twelve Collegia (ministries established by Peter on the European model), and the most famous and beloved of Petersburg's beautiful public parks, the Summer Gardens, creating the stylish rectangle that for the next one hundred fifty years set the tone for the construction of Petersburg.

State establishments had to be built with a pomp worthy of a great empire, although the emperor personally still preferred simple rooms for himself, where everything was functional. His house in the Summer Gardens had a carpentry workshop, with a sign the tsar put on the door: "No one without orders or who has not been called inside may enter, be he stranger or a servant of this house, so that at least here the master may have a quiet place. Peter."

To amuse himself, Peter went to the most luxurious house in Petersburg—the stone palace of the capital's first governor, Menshikov. It is characteristic of Peter's upwardly mobile Russia that Menshikov, a man without a noble lineage but hardworking, sneaky,

* A typical ukase intended to protect the wooden streets of Petersburg and signed by Peter read, "from this time on all clamps and nails used on men's and women's shoes may no longer be sold and no one may have any; just as no one, no matter his rank, may wear shoes or boots shod this way; and if someone does have shoes or boots shod this way, he will be fined harshly, and the merchants who keep such clamps and nails will be sent to hard labor and their property confiscated."

merry, and brilliant, went from being a hot-pastry vendor to the tsar's batman and then to the highest positions in the empire. Light and air poured into the huge windows of the palace, which stood on Vasilyevsky Island, on the banks of the Neva. The large main dining room had tables along the walls each of which could hold a whole roasted bull.

Peter and Menshikov's other guests ate a lot and drank even more. A fat court jester rode the room on a small horse and shot a pistol every time the tsar drained his goblet. That was the signal for deafening cannon fire on the embankment which overpowered even the roars of Peter's inebriated entourage. A foreign visitor noted that on such occasions more gunpowder was used up than for the storming of some fortresses.

Peter himself sliced the enormous pies that were brought in one after another. One time a beautiful female midget jumped out of a pie completely naked except for some red ribbons. The tsar and his guests were delighted, for Peter loved dwarves, jesters, and all kinds of monsters, and the imperial court had dozens of them.

Once the guests had stuffed themselves, they danced until two in the morning. The physically inexhaustible Peter adored the energetic Western dances and forced his overweight boyars to jig, too; this was an obligatory part of his "civilizing" program for Russian society. The emperor particularly insisted that old men with gout dance; he was amused by their suffering. Once they caught their breath they went back to the table to continue the party till dawn. No one dared go home or even leave the room without Peter's permission. Foreign ambassadors fell to the floor and instantly fell asleep. Guests urinated on them, while Peter held the candle.

The tsar was not known for his fastidiousness. Pushkin relates, in the historical notes he collected under the English title *Table Talk*, the following story:

> Once a little Negro servant who accompanied Peter I on a walk stopped to relieve himself and suddenly shouted in terror: "Sire! Sire! My intestine is coming out!" Peter came over to him, looked, and said, "Liar: that's not an intestine, it's a tapeworm!"—and he pulled the tapeworm out with his fingers.

Pushkin concludes," The anecdote is rather dirty, but it depicts Peter's customs." The morning after such a party, they took a hair of the dog and then went to one of Petersburg's thirty or so bathhouses. The

men's and women's baths were next to each other on the riverbank. They undressed right in the street and went inside to steam. When the heat became too much for them, they ran out and jumped into the river. In winter, when the river froze, the lobster-red giant of a tsar and his entourage could be seen frolicking naked in the snow.

And always after a relaxing drinking interlude came more stressful, exhausting work. Peter once described himself as a man pulling uphill while millions pulled downward. But those passive and obedient slaves considered themselves innocent victims of the tsar's whims, the most trying of which was the creation of St. Petersburg. The underlying hostility toward the new city was expressed in folk legends and prophecies that crystallized simultaneously with the construction of Petersburg even before it was completed.

According to one such instant legend, perhaps the most popular, Eudoxia, Peter's first wife, whom the tsar forcibly exiled to a convent, cursed the new city: "Sankt-Peterburg will stand empty!"[8] This pronouncement clashes head-on with Peter's no less famous "The city will be here!" Word of mouth spread about the kikimora, a dreadful mythic creature that hopped into the bell tower of the Trinity Church (Petersburg was founded on the day of the Trinity).[9] This was also supposed to foretell the quick destruction of the city, and nature itself suggested the source: the almost annual floods repeatedly wreaked havoc in the city.

The grim "underground" mythology about Petersburg persisted in spite of the official imperial mythology, which was sparkling and optimistic. In the official hierarchy, Peter the Great was a demiurge and his creation, Petersburg, stood as a result of nothing less than divine inspiration. In the folk consciousness, every change Peter wrought on Russia, and especially the new, rootless capital that had devoured so many Russian lives, was the result of the devil's machinations. So the masses nicknamed Peter the "Antichrist tsar." The belief in the imminent end of Petersburg, which would also bring the end of the world, was widespread in Russia at that time. Resentful comments overheard about the "cursed city" or the "Antichrist tsar" brought complainers swiftly before the dreaded Secret Chancellery both during Peter's lifetime and after his death in 1725. They were then beaten mercilessly with the knout, burned with hot irons, broken on the rack, or had their tongues torn out. But the anti-Petersburg talk didn't cease. Although it was suppressed, it created a constant accompaniment for the continuing expansion and beautification of the capital.

□ □ □

In the sixty years after Peter's reign, Russia had six rulers, the result of early deaths and palace coups. Of them, if we omit Peter's niece, the tall and heavy Anna Ioannovna (during whose reign, 1730–1740, Petersburg was twice desolated by suspicious fires, which greatly simplified the official policy to transform the city from wooden buildings to stone), only one consistently pursued Peter's dream of a modern "New Rome"—his daughter the Empress Elizabeth, who came to the throne with the support of the palace guards in 1741.

The blonde beauty Elizabeth, merry, "voluptuous" (according to Pushkin), physically strong like her father but, unlike him, uninterested in affairs of state, gave the Italian architect Francesco Rastrelli, her favorite, a free hand to fulfill his exquisite architectural projects. Temperamental and capricious, Rastrelli built luxurious royal residences in a lacy Baroque style outside Petersburg—in Peterhof and Tsarskoe Selo, later celebrated in the poetry of Pushkin, who lived there, and in the twentieth century by Anna Akhmatova.

In twenty years, Rastrelli, who did not hesitate to spend Elizabeth's treasure, managed to change the face of Petersburg: he added a dose of southern fantasy to its northern European solidity. Rastrelli's triumph was his project for the Winter Palace—the imperial residence on the Neva. Begun in 1754 and completed in 1817, after the architect's death, this grand building does not seem bulky or pretentious despite its more than one thousand rooms and almost two thousand doors and enormous windows.

The light blue walls of the Winter Palace seemed to dissolve in the generous sculptural order. It glowed against the pale northern sky and steel gray river. The white columns were arranged in a syncopated rhythm that created an unexpected effect of motion. When one looked at the Winter Palace, it appeared to be flying, an impression compounded by its shimmering reflection in the Neva.

The Winter Palace cost two and a half million rubles, equal to the value of forty-five tons of silver. This expense and others like it had to be glorified in prose and poetry and captured in engravings and paintings. The first members of the Russian intelligentsia, created by Peter, gladly accepted their commission: to describe his Petersburg. Hadn't Petersburg opened the way for talented people, no matter what their origin? they argued. Hadn't Peter founded the Academy of Sciences, the first Russian newspaper, the first public museum and library—all in Petersburg? Pushkin expressed this attitude succinctly: "the government is ahead of the people; it likes foreigners and cares

about the sciences." Hurrying after the government, the intelligentsia in its widening rift with the masses did not simply reproduce the smart facade of Petersburg; it improved on it. This imperial "socialist realism" was probably begun by the engraver Aleksei Zubov, whose enormous work *Panorama of Petersburg* (1716) depicts with punctilious naturalism not only actual buildings but those that were only in the planning stage at the time.

Peter the Great, having eradicated much of the old Russian culture, quickly scattered new seeds into the soil, and the young shoots took root in Petersburg. The writers of that period delighted in the newness of their capital, relished its rapid growth, and took pride in its lush palaces and brimming cultural life. The dark current of anti-Petersburg folklore apparently did not reach them or was rejected as "barbaric."

These writers identified with Petersburg to the point of dissolving into it. Even if they were bought off by the government, they didn't feel it—their enthusiasm was unadulterated. Their service to the state, which for them was identified with imperial power and symbolized by Petersburg, was devoid of cynicism.

In the verses of Antioch Kantemir, Vassily Trediakovsky, Mikhail Lomonosov, or Alexander Sumarokov describing Petersburg, archaic in style now but still full of energy and feeling, the tendency to find parallels with mythological gods and goddesses is striking. Even in his lifetime Peter was compared to God. So only one more step was needed for the city of St. Peter to be forever identified by his descendants as the city of Emperor Peter. This remarkable shift in stress exists to this day.

That is why eighteenth-century odes to the tsar and his new capital are imbued with the themes of "divine law," or Providence, whose power brought about the city's foundation. Also, there is the sense of almost childlike wonder at the miracle of the instantaneous appearance of Petersburg in an inhospitable setting. It was the early bards of the capital who started referring to Peter as "miracle-working builder," an image that Pushkin used masterfully and from a completely different vantage in *The Bronze Horseman.*

Peter the Great did not need flattery while alive and even less when dead. His heirs were not so self-confident. So the emotional tone of our sincere court writers rose higher and higher until it reached its limit—at least for prerevolutionary Russian literature—in its praise of the Empress Catherine II, who, like Elizabeth, was brought to [illegible] inspired by gifts and champagne.

Catherine, who reigned thirty-four years (1762–1796), is the best-known Russian ruler in the West after Peter.[10] Her notoriety is based primarily on innumerable romantic escapades and the extravagant favors she showered on her lovers, including the talented Grigory Potemkin, the propaganda genius after whom the inglorious "Potemkin villages" were named. As hardworking as Peter and endlessly vain, Catherine was also pronounced the Great. And as with Peter, the evaluation of her significance in Russian history depends on the historian.

The opinion of twenty-three-year-old Pushkin—as much a historian as a poet—is aphoristically sarcastic:

> If ruling means knowing human weakness and using it, then in that case Catherine deserves the awe of posterity. Her brilliance blinded, her friendliness attracted, and her generosity attached. The very voluptuousness of this clever woman confirmed her majesty. Creating only a weak resentment among the people, who were used to respecting the vices of their rulers, it caused vile competition in highest circles, for one needed neither intelligence, nor achievements, nor talents to obtain the second place in the government.

Catherine brought a new style of architecture to Petersburg. From fanciful baroque, so beloved by lighthearted Elizabeth, it switched to an imitation of antiquity and started to acquire its now famous neoclassical look, somewhat analogous to European architectural fashion but undeniably Russian, with drama and grandeur. Catherine, herself German, spoke Russian with a thick accent. Her architects were French, Italian, and Russian; but Petersburg already had obtained its own set of stylistic rules, filtering and transforming foreign influences. We could even say the city did not really change but that its successive builders had to adjust to it somehow, as clever servants adjust to the caprices of a haughty master.

Under Catherine, twenty-four miles of the Neva's banks were "dressed in granite" (Pushkin) from Finland. These severe monumental walls with their numerous stairs leading down to the water became as important a symbol of Petersburg as the stone bridges that spanned the Neva and the city's canals at the same time.

Vainglorious Catherine wanted to be popular not only in Russia but in Europe as well. Ten days after ascending the throne she proposed to Denis Diderot and other French *philosophes* that their epic *Grande Encyclopédia* be printed in Petersburg. Having declared that Russia had entered a new era and was now a superpower, Catherine

was prepared to do everything to prove it. In particular, even though she understood nothing of art by her own admission, Catherine began assembling the collection that was to transform the Hermitage into one of the great art museums of the world. At Paris auctions she bought paintings by Raphael, Giorgione, Titian, Tintoretto, Rubens, and Rembrandt. From the collection of Sir Robert Walpole alone, Catherine selected fifteen Van Dykes at once.

These extravagant purchases and the other bold and generous acts of the new empress quickly became the talk of Europe, as she had intended. Invited by the publicity-hungry Catherine, the first fellow travelers, mostly French, came to Petersburg to learn—under the gaze of the empress's keen gray eyes—more about this progressive city and then to relate to the civilized world the thrilling news: Russia had every right to call itself a European state. Following Voltaire's example—unlike Diderot, he never reached Petersburg but, for a generous fee, wrote *L'Histoire de l'empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand*—they proclaimed Catherine the Northern Semiramyde and Petersburg the Northern Palmyra. Catherine's policy of controlled cultural exchanges met with considerable success.

One of Catherine's wisest cultural decisions was to invite to Petersburg—at the suggestion of Diderot—Etienne Falconet, the Parisian sculptor, to erect an enormous equestrian monument to Peter I. Fifty-year-old Falconet arrived in the Russian capital in 1766 with his seventeen-year-old student, Maria Callot, and twenty-five pieces of luggage, to spend the next very difficult twelve years there. Falconet's voluminous correspondence with Catherine—though they were both living in the same city!—contains ample evidence of the obstacles he encountered: the nervous and touchy sculptor constantly complained, expressing outrage and disgust over countless problems—red tape, sloppy workers, the absence of supplies and materials—faced by any foreigner trying to build something in the Russian capital. The empress, in typical Russian fashion, tried to reason with him and calm him down.

From faraway Paris, Diderot advised Falconet how to approach his task. The sculptor, Diderot suggested, ought to surround the statue of Peter, in the spirit of the era, with symbolic figures of Barbarism (dressed in fur skins and gazing fiercely at the emperor), Love of the People (extending her arms to Peter), and the Nation (enjoying tranquillity while comfortably reclining on the ground). Understandably interested, Falconet shot back from Petersburg, "The monument

will be realized with utmost simplicity. It will not have Barbarism, Love of the People, or the symbol of the Nation."[11] The sculptor's own model of a horseman who had just galloped up on a cliff, his right hand extended, had already been approved by Catherine.

Curious Petersburgers flocked to Falconet's studio in droves. Accustomed to the critical reactions of Parisians, the sculptor could not understand why the Russians would scrutinize the model of the statue, then leave without a word. Did their silent attentiveness indicate disapproval? He calmed down only after long-term foreign residents of Petersburg explained that restraint was the main characteristic of the capital's populace. The city, which had recently celebrated its fiftieth anniversary, had already developed a particular psychological type: "all buttons buttoned," unsentimental, tending to irony and sarcasm—characteristics that remain valid to this day.

All the while, Falconet's tribulations continued. He could not get the laurel-crowned head of the horseman right. At last it was completed by Callot, and, they say, all in one night. The only known woman sculptor of the period created what is generally acknowledged to be a very good likeness of Peter the Great. The face is comparatively small but broad, with jowls, a slightly pointed nose, and a sharp, willful jaw; the raised brows shade the fanatical gaze of the protruding eyes. Peter seemed to be both staring transfixed into the distance and at the same time angrily squinting at the viewer, something Pushkin noted later.

Nothing about this monument was simple, and every detail of the sculpture elicited arguments and nagging doubts in the sculptor and his clients. How should the horseman be dressed? What kind of horse? Lengthy discussion was provoked by Falconet's idea of having a snake—allegory of evil and envy—under the horse's hoofs. Catherine, who was to make the final decision on this issue, was unsure: "The allegorical snake neither pleases nor displeases me."[12] The question was resolved only after a flattering letter from Falconet to Catherine: every great person—Peter and, of course, the Empress Catherine—courageously overcame the envy of ungrateful contemporaries, insisted the sculptor; thus the snake could not be left out. Catherine, sensitive to every flattering comparison with Peter, agreed: "There is an ancient song which says, if it is necessary, then it is necessary. That is my answer regarding the snake."[13]

It took four years to find a site for the monument. Even more dramatic was the search for and delivery of a huge hunk of granite for the pedestal. The stone was located twelve miles from the capital

and even after initial carving weighed over fifteen hundred tons. It took thousands of people to move it and the process lasted over three years. The court poet, Vassily Ruban, sang its praises in verse typical of the epoch:

Colossus of Rhodes, tame your fiery gaze,
And the tall Pyramids along the Nile
Can stop considering themselves miracles!
You are made by mortal hands,
But this is a Russian mountain untouched by human hands,
Which heard the voice of God from Catherine's lips
And came to the city of Peter through the Neva's depths,
And fell beneath the feet of Peter the Great!

On August 7, 1782, on the hundredth anniversary of Peter's ascension to the throne and sixteen years after Falconet began his work, the monument was at last unveiled. The sculptor himself was not there to see it. After an especially nasty argument with Catherine and accusations by courtiers that he had squandered money, Falconet fled to Paris. His last contribution to the monument was the text of the laconic inscription, which was to be engraved on the pedestal: "For Peter the First erected by Catherine the Second." The final version of the inscription, edited by Catherine, read, "For Peter the First from Catherine the Second." An accomplished writer, Catherine achieved much simply by removing the predicate. In Falconet's draft, the accent was on "erected," that is, on the monument. Catherine brought the "First-Second" continuity closer, thereby stressing, and legitimizing, her status as heir to the great monarch.

Petersburgers of various estates—from aristocrat to peasant—gathered at Senate Square on the banks of the Neva. The monument was covered with special curtains that opened when Catherine appeared; cannons were fired and military music resounded. The guards passed in review before the monument with their banners lowered.

On the occasion, Catherine declared an amnesty for criminals and debtors in jail. During a special liturgy celebrated by Peter's tomb in the Cathedral of Peter and Paul, the metropolitan struck the tomb with his staff and cried, "Arise ye now, great monarch, and behold your pleasing invention: it has not withered in time nor has its glory dimmed!" This call to Peter was pronounced with such passion and bathos that the heir to the throne, little Paul, became afraid that "grandpa would get out of the coffin." An aristocrat standing nearby quietly remarked to his neighbors, in an exercise of low-key Petersburg humor, "Why is he calling him? Once he gets up, we'll all get it!"[14]

Even though almost everyone immediately appreciated the more obvious virtues of Falconet's monument, it is unlikely that the first viewers really understood they were present at the unveiling of one of the great European sculptures of the eighteenth century. And as they circled the statue of Peter, discovering ever new aspects of the emperor's depiction—wise and determined lawmaker, fearless military leader, unbending monarch who would not be stopped—the gratified Petersburgers could not foresee that Falconet's work would become the most important and most popular representation of their city, and that the tortuous process, fraught with cultural and political overtones, of elevating this statue to an enduring symbol would be started by a yet unborn Russian poet.

Senate Square was a most appropriate site for the monument, because the Senate itself had been decreed by Peter; the Admiralty stood nearby and the square was situated in the busiest part of the city. The monument was always surrounded by curious admirers. It was here that revolutionary guardsmen gathered in 1825 in an attempt to prevent Nicholas I from taking the throne. Since this took place on a morning in December, the rebels were called "Decembrists."

A massive artillery round scattered the revolutionaries. "Between shots you could hear blood streaming along the street, melting the snow and then freezing, red on white," one of them recalled later. By evening the hundreds of corpses had been cleared away and the blood covered with fresh snow. But the blood was never wiped away from the marmoreal face of Petersburg—the city's history would continue as it had begun.

And yet what idyllic harmony had preceded it. By the early nineteenth century, in the reign of Alexander I, people managed to forget completely about the bones on which this Northern Palmyra had been built. They tried not to recall the grim interlude of 1796–1801, the reign of Catherine II's extravagant son, the tyrant Paul I.

Paul's own courtiers killed the "snubnosed villain" on a chilly March night. Unhappy with his unpredictable and sometimes bizarre edicts, they rushed into his bedroom in the new residence, the Mikhailovsky Palace, in the heart of Petersburg, just painted his favorite shade of red, and strangled their master. When the news reached the emperor's son, Alexander, a sentimental dreamer who had known

about the conspiracy, he burst into tears. His hysterics were swiftly cut short by one of the conspirators, who ordered, "Stop playing the child and go rule!"

The majestic Mikhailovsky Palace with its golden spire still stands as a haunting symbol of regicide—not the first or the last in Russian history. In 1838, a sixteen-year-old freshman named Fyodor Dostoyevsky would cross the doorstep of the castle, which by then had been converted to the engineering school. He didn't excel as an engineer, but he did become one of the most visionary and influential builders of the Petersburg mythos.

The early years of the new emperor, Alexander I, blue-eyed and nearsighted (both literally and metaphorically), could be characterized by a single line from Pushkin's poem—"The marvelous beginning of Alexander's days"—a nostalgic line that would become extremely popular in early-twentieth-century Petersburg. The war of 1812 with Napoleon, called the Patriotic War in Russia, united the entire society—peasants, intelligentsia, nobility—around its liberal monarch in nationalistic fervor.

In 1814 the pensive tsar rode a white horse into Paris, accompanied by victorious Russian troops (among whom were the future Decembrists). Triumphant Petersburg celebrated this providential union of Russia and Europe in a brilliant new architectural style: the Russian Empire. Created with the participation of domestic masters, it was the refined apotheosis of neoclassicism. Petersburg's main features, ordered and severe, took the shape we know today. St. Isaac's Cathedral was begun; Palace Square was completed.

Educated Russians of the first decades of the nineteenth century regarded their capital with special love and attachment. It was a city that inspired wonder and admiration. For in Petersburg their enormous country, so backward a mere century ago, appeared ennobled, disciplined, and directed—under the enlightened leadership of Emperor Alexander—to become a rightful member of a common Europe.

For these poets, writers, artists, and patrons Petersburg was not simply the symbol of Russia's political triumph and military ascension; it was also the embodiment of its flowering culture. Willpower had overcome savage nature, and refined Petersburgers enjoyed the fruits of civilization as did the inhabitants of other important European capitals.

The city was extolled in this manner—perhaps for the last time with such sincerity and harmony—by the impressionable and feckless

poet Konstantin Batyushkov, later elevated to the rank of "Columbus of Russian Art Criticism," in his article "A Stroll to the Academy of Arts" (1814):

> Marvelous buildings, gilded by the morning sun, were reflected brightly in the clean mirror of the Neva, and we both exclaimed unanimously, "What a city! What a river!" "The only city!" the young man repeated. "So many subjects for the artist's brush! . . . I must leave Petersburg," he continued, "I must leave it for a bit, I must see the ancient capitals: old Paris, sooty London, in order to appreciate Petersburg's worth. Look—what unity! how all the parts respond to the whole! what beauty in the buildings, what taste, and what variety from the mixture of water with buildings."

Having put Paris and London in their place, Batyushkov finished with a toast:

> How many wonders we see before us, wonders created in such a short period, in a century, just one century! Glory and honor to the great founder of this city! Glory and honor to his successors, who completed what he had barely begun, in the course of wars, internal and foreign discord! Glory and honor to Alexander, who more than anyone, during his reign made beautiful the capital of the North!

Such a classic speech would have been impossible for the Decembrists, who in their own words "no longer believed in the good intentions of the government." Their favorite aphorism, "The world is beginning to learn that nations do not exist for tsars but the tsars for nations," was previously unthinkable in Russia, where the concept of monarchy was traditionally viewed as sacred.

In 1825 these first modern Russian dissidents marched boldly into Senate Square, their weapons drawn. The crowd looked on speechless. These armed men were no longer loyal subjects but claimed to be intellectually and morally free citizens of Russia—not classicists at all but revolutionary romantics. It was the first crack in the facade of Petersburg's neoclassical Empire.

Pushkin's *Bronze Horseman* further opened this first crack. The poem was interpreted by many as an allegory and requiem for the failed Decembrist uprising, which had threatened to flood Petersburg just as the elements had a year earlier. On the day of the uprising Pushkin was two hundred miles away, in the village of Mikhailovskoe, serving his five-year exile for his nonconformist thinking, by the order o

Alexander. Now Nicholas I was on the throne, succeeding his elder brother Alexander, who had died in 1825—under somewhat mysterious circumstances—far away from Petersburg, in the southern city of Taganrog. Soon Nicholas recalled Pushkin to Petersburg for a private audience.

Deemed extraordinary by contemporaries, this meeting between tsar and poet in 1826 immediately became the stuff of legend. It was said that Nicholas I and Pushkin spoke for two and a half hours, an audience no minister was granted at the time. What did the imposingly handsome, thirty-year-old emperor with blond hair and hypnotizing, cold gray eyes talk about with the poet, who was three years younger, of medium build, with abrupt movements, curly hair, and a dark complexion? Pushkin, deeply touched, ran from Nicholas's study with tears in his eyes. "How I would like to hate him! But what can I do? For what can I hate him?" In his turn, Nicholas announced to his stunned courtiers that he had just talked with "the wisest man in Russia."

The emperor's question to the poet was, "Pushkin, would you have taken part in the rebellion on December 14th, if you had been in Petersburg?" Pushkin replied honestly and boldly that without any doubt he would have been in Senate Square with the revolutionaries. "All my friends were there."

As we know, Pushkin was forgiven by Nicholas, who appreciated directness and honesty. Then the conversation turned to Nicholas's intended far-reaching reforms; the emperor asked Pushkin for advice and support. The tone and content of the conversation brought to Pushkin's mind the illustrious reformer, Peter the Great. A virtuoso manipulator, Nicholas had undoubtedly been striving for that very effect.

At that moment a spiritual triangle was created: Peter I–Nicholas I–Pushkin. This must be kept in mind when reading *The Bronze Horseman,* which was completed eight years after the Decembrists were defeated. The potential readership for almost everything Pushkin wrote in those years was divided in two: Nicholas and everyone else. Nevertheless, even though Pushkin began his "Petersburg tale" with a panegyric, he quickly gave it a tragic character.

Pushkin was prepared to agree with Nicholas, who maintained with hypnotic willfulness that Russia needed an absolute sovereignty, that without a strong ruler the country would perish. At the same time Pushkin feared and hated tyranny.

Before Pushkin, Petersburg had known only praise. But

Pushkin's vision of the city was dualistic. His evaluation of the role of Peter and his reforms, of the civilizing effect of the city, and of the future of autocratic rule (that is, the past, present, and future of all Russia) seems in *The Bronze Horseman* to rest in balance. Neither took precedence. But their equilibrium was not clearly fixed: the scales trembled and vibrated.*

Nicholas I did not live up to Pushkin's hopes. Later Anna Akhmatova even felt that the tsar had tricked the poet consciously. Outraged, she told me that Nicholas "did not keep his word, and *that* is unforgivable for an emperor."[15]

More important, he also tricked the country, which had expected reforms from the young, energetic tsar. Gifted in many ways—he knew several languages, was a brilliant orator, and played the flute—Nicholas was fixated on order.[16] He pictured Russia as a gigantic mechanism that had to function exactly as he (wisely) set it. An echo of Peter's mania could be seen in that, and at first, the people, hypnotized, blindly obeyed the new emperor. But Nicholas lacked his predecessor's monumental vision, and the times were quite different too. The tsar's unwavering confidence in his own infallibility was no longer enough to drag Russia forward.

Nicholas was called by one ironic observer the "Don Quixote of autocracy." But this peculiarly Russian Don Quixote tried fanatically to turn his capital into an army barracks, with no room for disobedience or any flash of independent thought. For only in the army, the emperor believed, could be found "order, strict, unconditional legality, where there are no 'know-it-alls' or the passion of contradiction. . . . everyone is subordinate in a single, definite goal, everything has its designation." Nicholas often repeated, "I regard all human life as service," and also, "I need people who are obedient, not wise."

With this attitude, the emperor obviously began to regard Pushkin and other leading intellectuals expendable. Nicholas was not particularly upset by Pushkin's death in 1837, at the age of thirty-seven, in a Petersburg duel. (By contrast, this tragic event would later be considered, by all literate Russians, one of the greatest catastrophes in Russia's cultural history.) When another brilliant Russian poet, twenty-six-year-old Mikhail Lermontov, was killed in a duel in 1841, Nicholas is supposed to have said disdainfully, "A cur's death for a cur."

* As Russia's most popular poet after Pushkin, Alexander Blok wrote in 1910, underlining the nervous instability that transfixes the reader, "*The Bronze Horseman*—we all exist in the vibrations of its bronze."

In the three decades of his austere reign (1825–1855), Nicholas I froze Petersburg and all Russia. Already in the era of Alexander I, the poet Vassily Zhukovsky complained that the residents of Petersburg "were mummies, surrounded by majestic pyramids, whose grandeur exists not for them." Nicholas succeeded brilliantly in bringing Petersburg's image even closer to his beloved barracks. The splenetic and wise friend of the late Pushkin, Prince Vyazemsky, noted sadly, "straight, correct, evened out, symmetrical, monotonous, and complete, Petersburg can serve as an emblem of our life. . . . In people, you can't tell Ivan from Peter; in time, today from tomorrow: everything is the same."

So it was in December 1828 that nineteen-year-old Nikolai Gogol came to this disciplined, haughty, cold city from the bright, gentle, warm Ukraine. The ambitious provincial—skinny, sickly, and big-nosed—arrived in Petersburg with radiant dreams, confident of conquering the capital instantly. As with most young men, even those with talent, these dreams proved somewhat difficult to realize.

In one of his first letters home to his mother, young Gogol shared his impressions of the capital, revealing the sharp eye of its future vivisector:

> Petersburg is a rather large city. * If you want to stroll its streets, with squares and islands in various directions, you will probably walk more than 100 versts, and despite its size, you can have anything you might need without sending far, even in the same building. . . . The house in which I live contains two tailors, one *marchand de mode,* a shoemaker, a hosiery manufacturer, a repairer of broken dishes, a plasterer and house painter, a pastry shop, a notions shop, a cold storage for winter clothing, a tobacco shop, and finally, a midwife for the privileged. Naturally, this building has to be plastered all over with gold signs. I live on the fourth floor.[17]

Walking through the streets in the daytime, Gogol eagerly plunged into the bustling life of the capital. He spent hours peering into shop windows on Nevsky Prospect, which displayed such exotic fruits brought from overseas as oranges, pineapples, and bananas.

Unable to resist, Gogol ate in one French pastry shop after another. He visited the Academy of Arts, praised by Batyushkov, where

* At this time the population of St. Petersburg was rapidly approaching a half-million.

the works of the professors and the best students were on display; Gogol formed close friendships with some of the latter.

In the popular newspaper *Severnaya pchela* (*Northern Bee*), Gogol could read about literary news, in which he was desperately interested, as well as about government postings, robberies, and suicides. The paper allotted a lot of space to reports and discussion of fires—a subject always topical in Petersburg. And, of course, there were constant predictions of another feature of life in the capital—floods.

In politics, both foreign and domestic, *Severnaya pchela* cultivated the greatest caution and unbounded loyalty to the emperor. The careerist editor, Faddei Bulgarin, who did not mind stooping to denounce his colleagues to the secret police, strictly obeyed the orders given him from above by the chief of the gendarmerie, who was also chief censor: "Theater, exhibitions, shopping mall, flea market, inns, pastry shops—that's your field and don't take a single step beyond it."

In the evenings foppish Gogol headed for the theater, "my best pleasure." The streets of Petersburg were illuminated by thousands of oil lamps and the recent innovation, gaslights. The combination of light, darkness, and fog gave the city a spectral appearance. Expensive carriages pulled by teams of six horses drove up to theater entrances. Dandies escorted well-dressed ladies, mysterious and, to the young provincial, seemingly inaccessible; laughter and bits of gallant compliments in French melted into the damp air. Mounted police helped the drivers park the numerous coaches blocking the square.

On the stage of the Imperial Alexandrinsky Theater Vassily Karatygin, a six-foot giant with a roaring baritone and majestic gestures, stunned audiences with his Hamlet. Like all authors in Russia, Shakespeare was subjected to strict censorship. Nicholas personally made sure that no political allusions or even curse words as gentle as "devil take it" were spoken on stage.

Gogol was delighted by Karatygin's acting. Later he recalled that the great actor "grabs you up in a heap and carries you off, so that you don't have time to realize what's happening."[18] Nicholas, too, was well disposed toward the actor, who resembled him physically. Once the emperor, accompanied by an aide, dropped by the actor's dressing room.

"They tell me you portray me well," he said to the actor. "Show me."

"I don't dare, Your Imperial Majesty!"

"I'm ordering you!"

Karatygin pulled himself together, grew visibly taller, his eyes took on a steely, hypnotizing hue, and he barked at the adjutant, "Listen, dear boy, make sure that actor fellow Karatygin receives a case of champagne!"

Nicholas burst out laughing and the next morning a case of champagne was delivered to the actor's house.

With stories like these, it is no wonder Gogol began to set his sights on a great Petersburg career including an attempt to join the imperial theater as an actor. A calamity. Then he tried to become a painter, then a bureaucrat, and, finally, a teacher. Gogol thought he was ascending the ladder of success and wealth, but he was stuck every time on the bottom rung. Petersburg persistently refused to recognize him; and Gogol, in turn, came to hate Petersburg. The city would remain forever alien to him: inviting but hostile, a world he could never conquer. And when Gogol began writing, the grotesque and alienated image of Petersburg quickly became the center of his prose.

Gogol's first Petersburg novellas appeared in 1835—*Nevsky Prospect, Diary of a Madman,* and *Portrait;* then came *The Nose,* which Pushkin published in 1836, shortly before his death, in his journal *Sovremennik;* and then in 1842, the most famous work of this cycle was published, *The Overcoat.*

Gogol, and through him all later imagery of Petersburg, was heavily influenced by E. T. A. Hoffmann; even a hundred years later, in her *Poem Without a Hero,* Akhmatova curses the "Petersburg devils" and calls them "midnight Hoffmanniana."

Like Hoffmann, Gogol combines the oppressively quotidian with unrestrained fantasy. A beautiful stranger met on Nevsky Prospect turns out to be a cheap prostitute. A mysterious portrait has fatal powers. A smug bureaucrat's nose escapes from his face and assumes an independent personality.

These incredible events could take place only in Gogol's Petersburg—a terrifying and demonically captivating city, seen through the wide eyes of a young southern provincial, scared of life. Gogol's early febrile impressions of the city, stirred by the pen of a literary genius, pour out in a passionate kaleidoscope of romantic monologue, a colorful phantasmagoric picture worthy of Chagall, describing the central and most famous street in the capital:

> O, don't trust that Nevsky Prospect! . . . It's all deceit, all dreams, it's all not what it seems! . . . For God's sake, get away from the street lamp! And walk by as fast as you can. You'll be lucky if it does nothing more than spill its noisome oil on your elegant coat. Everything else besides the street lamp breathes deceit. It lies all the time, that Nevsky Prospect, but especially when night thickens upon it, separating the white and pale walls of the houses, when the entire city turns into thunder and sparkle, myriads of carriages falling from the bridges, postilions shouting and leaping on horses, and when the demon himself lights the lamps only so that he can show things in their not real form.

As a beginning writer, Gogol roamed the clean, orderly streets of Petersburg—the emperor was fixated on cleanliness and hygiene—which were filled with grand ceremonial proceedings of all kinds. In his personal life Nicholas I was ascetic and moderate, rising at dawn and working eighteen hours a day. But he understood the need for public rituals that underscored the solidity of the empire and of his divine right to rule.

Petersburg was the city of the court and of an enormous garrison. It was filled with a multitude of clerks; ordinary people did not jam its streets. The rabble, as it was called then, behaved with care when they came to Petersburg. With a vigilant eye, the capital's self-important police (immortalized by Gogol in *The Nose*) interfered in every trifle. On New Year's Day, the emperor opened the Winter Palace to all; thirty thousand and more came. Food and drink were provided in abundance for the common folk. Quietly and in awe, the solemn crowd awaited the appearance of Nicholas and his wife.

They would arrive to the strains of a polonaise followed by his retinue in full dress, as the light from thousands of candles flooded the huge reception room. Nicholas kindly but coolly spoke with "his" people, as he walked among these coachmen, servants, and craftsmen. At the end, the guests left satisfied and sober. Nothing was stolen—not a dish or a utensil. The law and order so dear to the emperor's heart prevailed.

For high society the balls at the Winter Palace were naturally much more luxurious, with succulent dinners for a thousand guests seated in the shade of orange trees. The empress adored masquerades and wanted the women of the court to appear there in their fancies dresses—velvet and lace, gold, pearls, and diamonds. "The empress would rest her gaze on a beautiful new gown, having turned her disappointed eyes from a less fashionable dress. And as the empress's gaze was law, the women dressed up, and the men grew bankrupt and sometimes stole, in order to dress their wives," a rather puritan

ical lady of the court indignantly fumed in reminiscence. At these masquerade balls, Nicholas I paid especial attention to lovely young debutantes.

It was the persistent demands of the court entourage that led to Pushkin's death. Pushkin's wife, the beautiful Natalie, who was so much in demand at these balls, was the hub of love affairs, gossip, and intrigues. This atmosphere of real and imagined affairs led to the poet's tragic duel. One can easily see how Pushkin's ambivalence toward the court and the emperor caused him a lot of pain. But Gogol, the untitled, poor, and extremely ambitious outsider, did not interest Nicholas in the least, and so suffered even more.

That gave even greater passion to Gogol's alternative mythos of Petersburg. In literature he justifiably felt like a mighty monarch, not simply juggling verbal worlds with blinding virtuosity, but, as he truly believed, influencing the course of life itself through his writer's magic. Gogol juxtaposed the brilliant balls and posh receptions that were beyond his reach to his own obsessive vision of the capital. In revenge, he built a monster Petersburg inhabited by caricatures, a mirage Petersburg, and finally, a deserted, ghostly Petersburg. Balzac wrote about Paris this way and Dickens about London. But Gogol's mystical Petersburg is much more the fruit of his fevered imagination, far removed from the reality of the city.

The constant themes of Gogol's eccentric, intriguing, highly comic, sentimental, wildly romantic, distorted, and ultimately overpowering Petersburg tales are fog, darkness, cold reflecting surfaces, and fear of vast open spaces. Every one of these themes is totally exaggerated and taken to extremes. Gogol's Petersburg, in the words of his delighted fan Vladimir Nabokov, is turned into "a reflection in a blurred mirror, an eerie medley of objects put to the wrong use, things going backwards the faster they moved forward, pale gray nights instead of ordinary black ones, and black days."[19]

In his influential *Overcoat,* Gogol places the petty clerk, a direct descendant of Yevgeny from Pushkin's *Bronze Horseman,* in the middle of an endless Petersburg square, "which looked like a terrifying desert." It is here that robbers seize the overcoat, which the clerk had acquired with such painstaking labor, even though a square is far from the best place for a mugging.

Deprived of his metaphorical overcoat, Gogol's hapless hero is left naked to face his main enemy—the city, where, according to Gogol, there is eternal winter, where even "the wind, in accordance with Petersburg custom, blew at him from all four quarters" (again

impossible in reality) and where the white snow whipped up by the cutting wind is identified with the useless deadly paper snow that falls on the helpless individual from anonymous ministries and offices—a Kafkaesque image forty-one years before Kafka's birth. Of course, the poor clerk dies and indifferent Petersburg, according to Gogol, goes on without him as if he had never existed.

In a similar situation Pushkin would probably hesitate to bring a final judgment. But Gogol has no doubts: the culprit is Petersburg, ruthlessly destroying the personality, a soulless heap "of houses tumbled one upon the other, roaring streets, seething mercantilism, that ugly pile of fashions, parades, clerks, wild northern nights, specious glitter, and base colorlessness."

Gogol's image of a demonic Petersburg became mystical. The city of his imagination is not really a city at all anymore but a land of the living dead: a black hole that sucks people into it, the Great Nothing. "The idea of the city," Gogol wrote, is "emptiness taken to the highest degree." The deep-seated rejection of Petersburg so typical of the common people rose to the surface in his writing, slowly but inexorably becoming part of the social and philosophical discourse of the educated classes.

Gogol was the first (1837) to publish an extended literary comparison of the old and new capitals—Moscow and Petersburg—starting a long line of such essays, right up to Yevgeny Zamyatin's *Moscow-Petersburg* (1933). In the popular consciousness Moscow symbolized everything national, truly Russian, and familiar. Moscow was a city whose roots went back to religious tradition, making it the rightful heir of Constantinople, and thus the Third Rome, as the Orthodox monks of the sixteenth century taught. ("There can be no Fourth Rome," they added.)

Peter the Great subordinated the church to the state. Petersburg, despite certain external religious attributes fixed to official legends, was planned and built as a secular city. Moscow's silhouette was determined by the "forty times forty" churches and their belfries. Petersburg's silhouette is made of dominating spires.

The people perceived the godless, foreign-looking Petersburg as alien, a gigantic squid sucking the lifeblood out of Russia. Gogol legitimized that view by formulating the people's vague doubts into the famous line, "Russia needs Moscow; Petersburg needs Russia."

Gogol's verdict became a catchphrase for the Slavophiles, the influential nationalistic literary, philosophical, and—as much as the post-Decembrist climate allowed—political movement of the times,

which called for a special path of development for Russia, eschewing Western models. They considered the entire "Petersburg" period of Russian history to be a tragic mistake and saw salvation in a return to pre-Petrine, patriarchal norms and forms of social life. "Long live Moscow and down with Petersburg!" was their battle cry.

Almost every utterance by Gogol—who considered himself to be a divinely endowed person, prophet, and spiritual adviser—was law to the Slavophiles. But even the so-called Westernizers, who dreamed of a Russian constitution and European-style parliament, recognized Gogol's importance, especially after his early death in 1852. Gogol's mystical picture and negative assessment of Petersburg's significance reigned in the minds of his contemporaries, easily outweighing the preponderant hundred years of praise for the capital.

This was an extremely rare instance when the writing of a single man, albeit a recognized literary genius, could change so drastically the established perception among the educated classes of a great city. But this is the way literature works in Russia. Hence the Petersburg mythos changed from Peter's version to Gogol's.

Gogol had a powerful ally in this unprecedented achievement—Nicholas I. For the Russian intelligentsia of the mid-nineteenth century, haughty, autocratic Petersburg grew completely confused with the monumental, neoclassical Nicholas. Finally, the two blended into one. Neither had lived up to the expectations of the intelligentsia.

People had counted on reforms from Nicholas, but he tightened the screws instead; they had expected mercy, but he vengefully hanged five leaders of the Decembrist uprising. After Pushkin, many other major writers including Gogol had offered to become enlightened allies of the Russian autocracy. Their civic aspirations were rejected and Nicholas created the "Third Division of His Imperial Highness's Own Chancellery," the precursor of the Soviet ideological secret service.

Nicholas's role in forming the image of Petersburg can be compared negatively to that of Peter the Great. Peter reached out to the young Russian intelligentsia. Under Nicholas, Petersburg stopped being a city in which a principled intellectual could have an honest career. Even writers who sold out were rewarded unenthusiastically. The days of Catherine the Great, when a successful poem in praise of the empress and her capital could receive a royal recompense, say, a gold snuffbox sprinkled with diamonds, were gone for good. A touring

Italian singer like the famous tenor Giovanni Rubini was more likely to be so rewarded.

A contemporary complained that under Nicholas I, "little attention was paid to Russian literature"; the government had based its strength "on a million bayonets instead of a philosophical dream. There was no profit in being considered an archmonarchical essayist."[20] On the contrary, in intellectual circles it had become quite fashionable to abuse the Petersburg so beloved of Nicholas: cruel, bureaucratic, officious, where even the streets were attention-straight, as if on parade. "That granite, those bridges with chains, that neverending drumming, all that has a depressing and overwhelming effect," a hotheaded Slavophile summed up in disgust.

Following in the footsteps of Gogol, hurling a challenge and waving a fist at the capital, since one couldn't threaten the emperor, was considered a sign of artistry and freethinking. These temperamental and amusing attacks on Nicholas's Petersburg would make a wonderful anthology. And the prose and poetry of Apollon Grigoryev (1822–1864) are among the most inspired of the lot.

A great fan of Grigoryev's, the symbolist poet Alexander Blok later characterized him as a stormy and tormented youth with the soul of Dmitri Karamazov. Grigoryev moved from patriarchal Moscow at the age of twenty-one to Petersburg, supported by Freemason friends. He said he "was transported to another world. This was the world of Gogol's Petersburg, the Petersburg in the era of its miragelike originality. . . . a strange and *poshly* world."

I believe Grigoryev was the first to apply the many-meaninged Russian word *poshly* to Petersburg, a word Nabokov, a Petersburger in exile, tried to explain to his American students a hundred years later. "Russians have, or had, a special name for smug philistinism—*poshlust*. *Poshlism* is not only the obviously trashy but mainly the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive. To apply the deadly label of *poshlism* to something is not only an aesthetic judgment but also a moral indictment."[21]

Even in Russia, which loves its poets, Grigoryev is not very popular. He was too bohemian: he drank wildly with Gypsies (when he didn't have enough money for vodka, he drank cologne and kerosene, a habit that remains among Russian alcoholics today), married a prostitute, and died in Petersburg—a few days after release from debtors' prison—from a stroke following a violent argument with his publisher.

I remember the fascination with which I opened a volume of

Grigoryev's poems. It was in 1959; I was fifteen, in my second year in Leningrad, where I had moved from Riga to study. Like multitudes before me, I was enchanted by the beauty and magic of Leningrad's white nights. They begin in May, and it was wonderful on a night like that to stop with a sweetheart on the bridge aptly called Bridge of Kisses, and declaim from *The Bronze Horseman*: ". . . the transparent twilight of dreamy nights, the moonless glow . . ."

What a shock it was to come across a demonic picture of a white night, stylistically similar to the invective of Grigoryev's peer Charles Baudelaire:

And in those hours when my proud city
Is covered by night without dark or shadow,
When everything is transparent, then a swarm of disgusting visions
Flickers before me . . .
Let the night be as clear as day, let everything be still,
Let everything be transparent and calm—
In that calm an evil illness lurks—
And that is the transparency of a suppurating ulcer.

It's hard to imagine that this Masonic exposé, which Grigoryev called "The City," was published in 1845, twelve years before *Les Fleurs du Mal*. And it appeared in the popular and fully loyal Petersburg journal with the pompous title *Repertoire of the Russian and the Pantheon of All European Theaters,* controlled by the ambition-driven government spy Faddei Bulgarin. And then this virulently anti-Petersburg work by Grigoryev was praised ("a marvelous poem") by the liberal guru of that period, the leading literary critic, Vissarion Belinsky. That's how wide the gamut of anti-Petersburg moods ranged then in Russian culture—from the extreme right to the extreme left. . . .

The irony of subsequent events led to the situation a bit more than a century later in Khrushchev's Leningrad, when I could not bring this poem of Grigoryev's into school to discuss it with my literature teacher because its spirit, aesthetics, and symbolism would have seemed subversive and I could have provoked serious trouble.

Naturally, I debated "The City" fiercely (though not very loudly) with my best friend. And, of course, we immediately sensed the viciousness of its attack: the mystical and democratic Grigoryev denied the image of the white nights painted by the rationalistic and aristocratic Pushkin in *The Bronze Horseman.*

In the second half of the nineteenth century it became possible

to denigrate not only Pushkin and his idealized Petersburg of the introduction to *The Bronze Horseman* but also Falconet's equestrian statue of Peter I, which had inspired Pushkin. Typical is the impromptu verse of the cynical and sharp-tongued epigrammist Nikolai Shcherbina (1821–69). Shcherbina had the snake under the horse's hoofs of Petersburg's founder elicit associations that were directly the opposite of the noble imagery of the eighteenth century:

No, it wasn't a snake the Bronze Horseman
Trampled, galloping forward,
He trampled our poor people,
He trampled the simple folk.

And this was not written by someone from the opposition but a major government official! In folktales Falconet's monument had long been compared to one of the horsemen of the apocalypse. It was clear that the people's view of Peter and his reforms, so long stifled and suppressed, had become firmly rooted in public cultural life, that oral tradition had been transformed into the literary tradition, and the opinion from "below" and from "above" on Petersburg had merged and almost coincided.

"Sankt-Peterburg will stand empty!" That legendary curse was now discussed in the salons of Moscow and Petersburg, but it also became the topic of popular poems such as "Underwater City" (1847) by Mikhail Dmitriev, which predicted with unsuppressed glee the coming inexorable flooding of the capital, unimaginable not only in Pushkin but even in Gogol.

Now the belfry spire
Is alone visible from the sea.

The government tried to stop the anti-Petersburg literary flood. The head of the vicious Third Division and the chief of the gendarmerie, Count Alexander Benkendorf, issued guidelines, eerily similar to the ones proclaimed a hundred years later by Stalin's ideology chief, Andrei Zhdanov: "Russia's past was amazing, its present is more than marvelous, and as for the future, it is greater than anything the wildest imagination could picture; that is the point of view for examining and writing Russian history."

The hack writer Alexander Bashutsky, fulfilling the commission from the literary police, issued an idealized "Panorama of Saint-

Petersburg": incredible descriptions of a lovely city in which cleanliness and order reigned, without brawls, fights, drunkards, prostitutes, or beggars. Planning a luxurious edition, Bashutsky ordered special engravings from London, but the ship delivering them sank. So did the Panorama: no one bought it and Bashutsky lost a lot of money. The sophisticated public in the capital did not accept descriptions of Petersburg cooked up from recipes by the gendarme chief.

However, the *Physiology of Petersburg,* a two-volume anthology published in 1845, became extremely popular. Belinsky participated in it under the editorship of young Nikolai Nekrasov, the poet, gambler, and entrepreneurial publisher. Nekrasov saw that the foreign bookstores in Petersburg were selling many copies of small, elegant books from Paris titled *Physiologie de l'amoureux* or *Physiologie du flaneur,* with amusing descriptions of all Parisian types. So Nekrasov collected articles by his friends about Petersburg mores and personages. He wanted to make money, and he needed something sensational. The book he put together gave the stunned reader a picture of the Russian capital that had nothing to do with Bashutsky's cloying Panorama.

Even though Nekrasov's collection contained Belinsky's brilliant thoughts on the popular theme Petersburg and Moscow, as well as articles about the Imperial Alexandrinsky Theater and the typical clerk and journalist of the capital, most of the space was devoted to the city's outskirts and lower depths—coachmen, organ grinders, tramps, drunkards, and prostitutes, huddled in filthy attics or stinking cellars.

Gogol's style and ideas clearly influenced this collection. The authors were not embarrassed by their dependence on him; on the contrary, they flaunted it. For instance, the illustration for Nekrasov's satiric poem "The Clerk" was a funny wood engraving of the hero of the poem angrily reading Gogol's *Overcoat.*

Establishment reviewers were outraged: "How could people with unspoiled, much less with refined taste find interesting caricatured descriptions of the dirtiest sides of the lives of a janitor, lackey, coachman, cook, store keeper, evening butterfly or dolly?" As usual, the reading public responded vigorously to this rhetorical question: the entire press run of *Physiology of Petersburg* sold out immediately. Its success was promoted by two rave reviews. Each appeared anonymously but were written by the anthology's two main contributors—Belinsky and Nekrasov. Obviously, in the increasing competition for [illegible] ethics did not count for much.

Inspired by his success, Nekrasov quickly prepared a new edition, *Petersburg Anthology,* which came out in early 1846. Once again, Nekrasov, Belinsky, and other leading writers took part, but what really put this publication on the historical map was the debut of twenty-four-year-old Fyodor Dostoyevsky, with his novel significantly titled *Poor Folk.*

Dostoyevsky wrote *Poor Folk* in a little over nine months in a narrow furnished room in an apartment house near St. Vladimir's Cathedral in Petersburg, the result of an intensive psychological insight the author later called "the vision on the Neva." He had seen a Petersburg story taking place in dark corners, a pure and honest petty clerk, a humiliated and sad girl. . . .

Gogol's *Overcoat,* the quintessential Petersburg parable of a clerk, had been published only two years earlier. "We all came out of *The Overcoat,*" Dostoyevsky is alleged to have said. But the beginning writer, borrowing much from Gogol, had rejected his cruel irony. His hero is no grotesque marionette but a living, suffering, thinking man, described with warmth and lyric grace. He loves and is loved, but that love ends tragically, for there can be no happiness in a city where there is "wet granite underfoot, around you tall buildings, black, and sooty; fog underfoot, fog around your head."

Gogol read and generally liked *Poor Folk* but he failed to appreciate the originality of Dostoyevsky's style. He found the work too wordy and "talky."

Dostoyevsky himself did not realize at first that *Poor Folk* was sounding a completely new note in Petersburg literature. He worked on the novel another half year after it was finished—Dostoyevsky never again polished his work this thoroughly. His roommate, the young dandy Dmitri Grigorovich, who had already published a story, full of bravura, about organ grinders in *Physiology of Petersburg,* took the manuscript to his friend Nekrasov. Grigorovich and Nekrasov started reading the novel aloud, in turn, and stayed up all night. When they got to the last page, Nekrasov wept unashamedly.

And in a typically Russian burst of spontaneity now called "Dostoyevskian," they decided to visit Dostoyevsky. It was a warm white night in May. Dostoyevsky was back from a nocturnal walk and sitting in the window, too excited to sleep, when Grigorovich and Nekrasov burst in. All three began an agitated, exalted conversation with outbursts, quick leaps from topic to topic, and copious quotations from the shared idol, Gogol. The scene could have been a page from some future novel of Dostoyevsky's.

Later that same day, early in the morning, Nekrasov appeared on Belinsky's doorstep, exclaiming "A new Gogol has appeared!" The critic remarked dryly, "You have Gogols growing like mushrooms." But once he had read the manuscript, Belinsky had to see Dostoyevsky immediately. "Bring him here, bring him quickly!"

Once he met the sickly, pale, freckled, blond, and very nervous Dostoyevsky, the critic was even more touched. Indicating a space about two feet from the floor, he kept telling his friends, "He's little, just this tall." When they later met Dostoyevsky, they were very surprised: the young writer was taller than Belinsky.

Dostoyevsky admitted once to his brother, "I have a horrible flaw: unlimited pride and ambition." The raves from Belinsky, Nekrasov, and their friends convinced him he was a genius. Wanting to be distinguished in some way from the other participants in the *Petersburg Anthology,* he approached Nekrasov and demanded that every page of *Poor Folk* be outlined with a special black border.

Poor Folk was published without any borders. But that did not interfere with the sensational and unprecedented reception given Dostoyevsky's novel and the whole anthology. Several hundred copies were sold in the first few days. Nekrasov's edition became one of the three great best-sellers of Russian literature of that period, the other two being Gogol's *Dead Souls* and Count Vladimir Sollogub's satirical travelogue, *Tarantas.*

Count Sollogub, a fashionable writer close to court circles, ran around Petersburg and pestered the other writers in the anthology. "Who is this Dostoyevsky? For God's sake, show him to me, introduce us!"[22] Terrified of the competition, the cynical Bulgarin attacked the anthology in his newspaper, *Severnaya pchela.* He accused the authors of slavish imitation of Gogol and called the movement the "natural school" for its attention to the darker side of life. In his reports to the secret police, he went much further: "Nekrasov is the most abandoned communist: you need only to read his poetry and prose to be assured of that. He keeps singing the praises of revolution."[23]

We all know that attacks can help a book's popularity. Belinsky immediately expropriated the derogatory label, which has so often happened—from ancient Gothic to later impressionism—in world culture. In his next article, Belinsky announced that the "natural school" was a good name for new voices in literature: all the old ones were not natural, that is, artificial and false. And the term "natural" remained for Russian literature of the Gogol era.

The young Dostoyevsky, though he gave Gogol his due in allusion and associations in his later writings, was actually moving further away from his idol. His bold new novella, *The Double* (subtitled "A Petersburg Poem"), irritated Belinsky, who was ever changeable in his moods and opinions.

A Petersburg clerk who is losing his mind and is pursued by his double seems a typical Gogolian subject. But Dostoyevsky, who was suffering from as yet undiagnosed epilepsy, described his hero's madness with clinical precision. This was the beginning of Dostoyevsky's fearless immersion into the depths of the subconscious.

Belinsky justly saw this as a betrayal of the idea of the social novel, which was so close to the critic's heart. Dostoyevsky's "sentimental novel" *White Nights* made Belinsky no happier, for it was a touching fantasy that grew out of the writer's wanderings through the suburbs and back alleys of Petersburg. In a letter to a friend, the critic complained, "Each new work of his is a new fall. . . . We were tricked, my friend, by 'the genius' Dostoyevsky!"

Breaking with Belinsky, Dostoyevsky began attending meetings of young people in the home of the nobleman Mikhail Petrashevsky, one of the first Russian socialists, who resembled a stage villain and behaved with great impudence. For instance, one day Petrashevsky came to the Kazan Cathedral on Nevsky Prospect dressed as a woman. He stood on the women's side of the church and prayed loudly. His thick black beard, which he did not bother to shave or even cover up, upset the women. They summoned a policeman, who addressed the disturber of the peace with the words, "Kind lady, I believe you are a man in disguise." To which Petrashevsky replied without hesitation, "Kind sir, I believe that you are a woman in disguise." The policeman was stunned; Petrashevsky slipped out of the church, leaped into his carriage, and rushed home.

Every Friday Petrashevsky, the well-educated eccentric whom we would now describe as "a character out of Dostoyevsky," hosted fifteen to twenty young people, the cream of the capital's intelligentsia: clerks, officers, teachers, musicians, artists, scholars, and writers, among them Apollon Grigoryev. In the lively, companionable atmosphere, they read lectures, discussed the ideas of the French utopian socialists Count Henri de St.-Simon and Charles Fourier, and current issues like censorship and emancipation. Petrashevsky's "Project for Emancipation of the Serfs" was one of the most daring political documents of the time. Several members of the circle openly called for

revolution in Russia. Worried by the birth of socialist society in the capital, the secret police placed an agent provocateur in Petrashevsky's circle.

On February 22, 1848, a ball given by the tsarevich was interrupted by the unexpected arrival of Emperor Nicholas, who announced to the astonished guests, "Gentlemen, saddle your horses! A republic has been proclaimed in France!" The tsar really had planned to send troops to aid the dethroned Louis-Philippe but changed his mind and instead tightened the controls in his already choking capital.

Nicholas and his entourage were in a panic and feared the worst. Once, the empress returned from a walk and related happily that the residents of Petersburg still raised their hats to her. "They're bowing! They're bowing!" she exclaimed delightedly. Traumatized for life by the Decembrist uprising of 1825, Nicholas assiduously sought and snuffed out conspiracies. The Petrashevsky circle was an ideal target for him.

On the night of April 22, 1849, after a regular Friday night meeting at Petrashevsky's house, the members were arrested on orders written by the tsar: "Begin arrests. . . . God speed! May His will be done!" They were driven in special black carriages to the Third Division. (Stalin's victims were brought to the Lubyanka Prison in cars dubbed Black Marias.) Among the thirty-four "conspirators" arrested was a constant visitor to Petrashevsky's home, Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Next to his name on the list were the words "One of the most important."

Dostoyevsky and the others in the case were kept in solitary confinement in the Peter and Paul Fortress. Nicholas was furious: "Let them arrest half the residents of the capital, but they must find the threads of the conspiracy." Dostoyevsky was interrogated and the investigator promised, "I am empowered by the Tsar to pardon you if you tell me everything." Dostoyevsky said nothing. The sentence, pronounced by a military court, read, "Death penalty by firing squad." In the case of the "state criminal" Petrashevsky, twenty-one other people were also condemned to death.

Nicholas worked out the ceremony of the execution himself. A lover of military maneuvers and parades, he selected the square of the Semyonovsky Life Guards Regiment as the site. In the 1960s, when I attended plays at the Leningrad Theater for Young Audiences and crossed the vast square now named Young Pioneer, I had no idea that it was there that Dostoyevsky and his comrades were brought under gendarme convoy on December 22, 1849.

They were made to stand on a wooden platform erected in the middle of the square. Dostoyevsky managed to tell his neighbor the plot of a new novella he had written in the Peter and Paul Fortress. A young, frightened priest gave the condemned men a last sermon. Dostoyevsky later said, "I didn't believe it, I didn't understand, until I saw the cross. . . . A priest . . . We refused to confess, but then we kissed the cross. They wouldn't joke with the cross!"

Dostoyevsky and the others were dressed in white canvas robes with long sleeves that reached almost to the ground, and pointed hoods that fell over their eyes. Petrashevsky laughed hysterically and said, "Gentlemen! We must look ridiculous in these rags!" He and two others were tied to three stakes hammered into the ground in front of the platform. The orders rang out: "Pull the hoods over their eyes!" The squad aimed their rifles at the men. "I was in the second row, and I had less than a minute to live," Dostoyevsky later recalled in horror.

But instead of gunfire there was a drum roll: retreat! A general rode up to the platform and read Nicholas's decree reducing the death penalty to hard labor. One of the men tied to the stake went mad. Another cried out angrily, "Who asked him?" No one felt any gratitude to the emperor, who had come up with this sadistic ritual. Dostoyevsky never forgave Nicholas for the "tragicomedy" of his mock execution. "Why such mockery, so ugly, unnecessary, useless?"

Sent to Siberia to the Omsk Fortress, which served as prison, Dostoyevsky spent four years in heavy shackles, day and night. He didn't take up a pen for almost ten years.

Here, in the Omsk Fortress, Dostoyevsky learned in 1853 about the start of the Crimean War, in which the Russian Army fought against the Turks and then the British and French, who had joined them. Things did not go so well for Russia. Nicholas had expected a triumph. Despite the emperor's endless stream of orders, bureaucratic inertia and embezzlement prevailed. It became clear that decades of military parades on the squares of Petersburg were no substitute for technological progress. The Russian Army was backward and poorly equipped. The loss in the Crimea turned into a cruel and absolutely unforeseen humiliation for Nicholas's Petersburg.

The sharp-tongued poet Fyodor Tyutchev authored a typical Petersburg bon mot: "Nicholas has the facade of a great man." Under the pressure of the fateful events in the Crimea, the facade crumbled, and according to people close to the emperor, the huge and haughty fifty-year-old man "wept like a baby every time he heard more bad news."

In February 1855 Nicholas got the flu and died within a few days, according to the official version. (Some historians think it was suicide.) He called his elder son, Alexander, to his private apartments in the Winter Palace and confessed, "I'm turning my command over to you in disorder." His last advice to his heir was "Hold on to everything," and he gave an energetic shake of his fist, despite swiftly approaching death. Even on his deathbed—an iron cot with a gray soldier's overcoat instead of a blanket—Nicholas remained true to himself.

Petersburgers, awed by the thirty-year reign of the "Don Quixote of autocracy," refused at first to believe the news of his death. "I always thought, and I wasn't alone, that Emperor Nicholas would outlive us, and our children, and maybe our grandchildren," wrote one in his diary.

The writer Ivan Turgenev, a curious and sociable man, headed for the Winter Palace to check out the rumors and approached a guard. "Is it true that our Sovereign has died?" The soldier grimaced and said nothing. But Turgenev persisted stubbornly until the soldier barked, "It's true, move along." Seeing that Turgenev still didn't believe him, he added, "If I said that and it weren't true, I'd be hanged." He turned away. Only then did Turgenev believe it.

Fate and his personal qualities made Nicholas play a unique role in the development of Petersburg culture. He both encouraged and stifled it. "They chase us toward enlightenment with the whip, and with the whip they punish the overly educated," noted Alexander Herzen. Nicholas, like Stalin one hundred years later, personally interfered in all areas of culture: literature, music, painting, theater, opera, ballet, and architecture. In every field he considered himself a specialist.

During the reign of Nicholas and under his personal supervision, the majestic ensembles of the Palace and Senate Squares, the magnificent St. Isaac's Cathedral, and other impressive architectural complexes like the famous Teatralny and Mikhailovskaya Streets were built. A good measure of the importance Nicholas attributed to architecture can be seen in an order he gave forbidding residents of Petersburg from building houses over seventy-seven feet high, that is, higher than the cornice of the Winter Palace. The majority of these projects were executed by Nicholas's favorite architect, Carlo Rossi, born in 1777 in Petersburg to an Italian ballerina. Nicholas valued Rossi's artistic genius and his honesty, determination, and responsibility for his work.

Rossi, in planning the construction of the Imperial Alexandrinsky Theater, proposed covering the enormous hall with a special system of metal girders—a risky idea for those times. Nicholas doubted their strength and ordered construction stopped. His vanity stung, Rossi wrote the tsar a letter stating that should anything happen to his roof, he should be immediately hanged on one of the theater's trusses, as an example to other architects. Such arguments always worked with Nicholas, and he allowed the building to be completed. Performances continue to this day in the theater, one of the city's most beautiful. Nothing has gone wrong with the roof yet.

People were not as durable as girders, and one after another broke during the emperor's reign. The critic Kornei Chukovsky used to proclaim, "A writer in Russia must live a long time," but Pushkin, Lermontov, and Gogol did not live up to this maxim. Nicholas did not care. Even though he had begun his reign with an audience for Pushkin, he ended it by keeping Dostoyevsky from writing. Such was the evolution of the emperor's attitude toward Russian culture.

Konstantin Kavelin, a professor at Petersburg University, wrote to a Moscow friend on March 4, 1855, "That Kalmyk demigod, that fiend of clerical-uniform enlightenment, who had cut out the face of thought, who had destroyed thousands of characters and minds, has kicked the bucket." He added, as if echoing the formula of Benkendorf, chief of the secret police, on Russia's "past, present, and future": "If the present were not so horrible and grim, and the future so mysterious and enigmatic, one could go mad with joy."[24] Petersburg's residents feared that things would be even worse under the new emperor, Alexander II.

Alexander, tall like his father, was handsome and blue-eyed. Despite Tyutchev's crack that when the emperor spoke with an intelligent person, he looked like a rheumatic standing in a draft, he gradually loosened the reins. It began with trifles. Under Nicholas, beards were definitely frowned upon. Now, when the clerks of a ministry asked for permission to grow at least mustaches, the new emperor replied, "Let them wear beards, as long as they don't steal."

Tyutchev called the new period "a thaw," one hundred years before Ilya Ehrenburg used the same term for Khrushchev's reforms after Stalin's death. Alexander II pardoned the surviving Decembrists and members of the Petrashevsky circle, including Dostoyevsky. The writer returned to Petersburg wearing a martyr's halo. He quickly published the novel *The Insulted and the Injured,* which he had planned in exile, yet another variation of his old best-seller, *Poor Folk.*

It presents the same picture of the capital, viewed by an attentive observer, with the familiar, almost stereotypical details: the inky black vault of the northern sky, beneath which grim, angry, and soaked passersby vanish in the foggy distance of a Petersburg street, illuminated by weakly flickering lights.

The reading public greeted *The Insulted and the Injured* with enthusiasm. Meanwhile, Dostoyevsky continued wandering around Petersburg, greedily peering into the city's rapidly changing features. This process of change was greatly influenced by the decree of February 19, 1861, whereby Alexander II emancipated the serfs.

The historic and far-reaching decision to repeal serfdom was taken against the advice of most of Alexander's entourage. Gendarmes on horseback patrolled Nevsky Prospect from early morning on the day of the announcement, expecting agitation and possibly rebellion.

The capital was unusually excited, but happily so: people gathered in all parts of the city, discussing the staggering news, embracing and weeping in joy. Someone would start reading the proclamation aloud, and others would chime in with cries of "Long live the Emperor!" and sing the national anthem, "God Save the Tsar." A relieved Alexander II recorded in his diary, "The day was absolutely calm, despite all anxieties."[25]

Waves of freed serfs invaded the capital to earn a living. In 1858, with a population of almost half a million, Petersburg was the fourth-largest city in Europe after London, Paris, and Constantinople. In 1862, Petersburg had 532,000 residents, and in 1869, according to the first major census, 667,000.[26] Factories and plants were mushrooming outside the city and the capital's new residents settled there. Drinking, brawling, crime, and prostitution flourished in these neighborhoods. Taverns and brothels popped up all over the city. *Golos* (The Voice), a Petersburg newspaper, complained in 1865, "Drunkenness of late has taken on such horrifying proportions that it forces us to think about it as a social catastrophe."[27]

Another newspaper described the "mecca" of the Petersburg alcoholics thus: "Stolyarny Alley has 16 houses (8 on each side of the street). These 16 houses have 18 drinking establishments, so that those wishing to enjoy merry-making liquids and who come to Stolyarny Alley do not even need to look at the signs: come into any house, even any porch—and you'll find wine." On neighboring Voznesensky Prospect there were six taverns, 19 bars, 11 beer halls, and 16 wine cellars.[28]

Cheap prostitutes, drunk and heavily made up, patrolled the streets. These were the loners, the most worn and derelict of the lot. Their more successful young colleagues worked on Ligovsky and Nevsky Prospects, while the most enterprising joined the more respectable of the city's 150 brothels.

Nicholas I, with his mania for order in all areas, tried to control prostitution as well. In 1843 he created a system of police and medical supervision of the oldest profession, twenty years before England did. In Dostoyevsky's day around two thousand prostitutes were registered in Petersburg, more than in Berlin or Marseilles, but fewer than in Paris or New York.[29] Naturally, there were many more unregistered prostitutes, without the official "yellow" passports.

Prostitutes were recruited primarily among peasant girls who came to Petersburg; many were the wives and daughters of soldiers; others belonged to the bourgeoisie. But the ranks of prostitutes were also filled with women from bankrupt noble families and impoverished clerks—in the words of a newspaper writer of those days, "women who have nothing to eat, who have been desiccated by need, jabbed by the needle that gives pathetic pennies for painstaking labor."

Often in the families of retired clerks, the Petersburg journalist wrote, "even mothers sell their daughters into depravity, out of oppressive poverty." The lot of most was poverty, drunkenness, death from disease, usually venereal, primarily from syphilis, which spread quickly in Petersburg despite police-medical actions.

Wandering through the city, Dostoyevsky would come out from "drunken" Stolyarny Alley, onto nearby infamous Haymarket Square, where quite recently executioners had publicly whipped serfs from the provinces. I always shudder when I read Nekrasov's poem that draws a parallel between the fate of oppressed serfs and of literature in Nicholas's Russia:

Yesterday, around six,
I dropped by Haymarket;
They were beating a woman with a knout,
A young peasant woman,
Not a sound from her breast,
Only the whistling whip . . .
And I said to the Muse, "Look!
It's your own sister!"

Haymarket was the "belly" of Petersburg. Crowds bustled there from morning till night, buying up food piled high on counters under light awnings. Noise, mud, and a strong rotten smell ruled there.

Lusty pie men bustled around the counters with their hot wares. Like their "patron," Menshikov, who was Peter's friend and the first governor of Petersburg, they were a thieving, brazen lot—if a buyer complained that the filling contained a piece of rag, they replied haughtily, "What did you expect for three kopecks, velvet?"

The city became a melting pot for the many ethnic groups of the Russian Empire. Depending upon the year, 10 to 20 percent of the capital's residents were non-Russian, a motley mix of sixty groups. The biggest were Germans, Poles, Belorussians and Ukrainians, Finns and Swedes, Jews, Balts, and Tatars. Some, particularly the Germans, occupied a prominent place in the capital's bureaucratic machine. Others became tradesmen and craftsmen.[30] Thousands huddled on the outskirts in rude huts and barracks.

For them the city was not Petersburg but "Piter"—a nickname that indicated familiarity, a certain irony, cynicism, affection—a complicated mixture that characterized the newcomers' attitude to the capital that took them in. This attitude was reflected in the rhymed proverb *"Piter boka povyter"* (Piter wore them out), which many years later found its way into *Poem without a Hero,* by Akhmatova, herself intensely fascinated by Dostoyevsky's Petersburg.

Even as Petersburg exploited, humiliated, and unified its new residents, it challenged, urged on, and refined them. Vistas for all kinds of activities opened up for the hardest-working and cleverest. You could buy or sell anything in Petersburg.

For instance, Stock Exchange Square was the place to buy exotic shells, huge tortoises, monkeys, and talking parrots. A parrot that could chatter in Italian went for one hundred rubles—a huge sum in those days. A vendor immediately offered a big rooster, also for a hundred rubles. "But for that price I could buy a parrot that talks," a potential purchaser argued. "Mine doesn't talk but he's a terrific thinker," was the immediate rejoinder.

Naturally, the capital's seething commercial activity, coupled with the sharp increase in population, fed a growing crime rate. According to official statistics, close to ten thousand crimes took place each year in Petersburg. But there were few serious cases, thanks to the extraordinary police controls: around one hundred murders and attempted murders, around fifty rapes, about forty passed counterfeit bills, and about a dozen cases of arson.

Petersburg had two mortal enemies—water and fire—which emptied the city many times. The two most memorable floods were in 1777 and 1824. (The flood of 1924 later joined their number.) The

fire of 1862 was remembered longest, for most of the commercial section—Gostiny Dvor, Apraksin Dvor, Shchukin Dvor, and Tolkuchy Market—burned to the ground during several weeks of May and June of that year. Even the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and numerous private homes were destroyed; losses were in the millions of rubles. A stunned eyewitness described an apocalyptic scene: black clouds of smoke, a fiery sky, and columns of flame showering huge sparks. A strong wind tossed burning embers to the roofs of distant houses, even across the Fontanka River, which burst into flames like torches.[31]

The populace, horrified at the sight, panicked. Dostoyevsky too shared these feelings. In the extremely tense atmosphere of such substantial reforms, where opposition to the emancipation arose on both right and left, even the fires became political events.

In late 1861 Petersburg was shaken by the first serious student unrest in the country's history. According to a hostile observer, the students, in demanding more autonomy, "very artfully achieved the greatest scandal possible. The authorities were forced to arrest them two or three times a day, in the streets, in huge crowds. To the students' great delight, they were detained in the Peter and Paul Fortress."[32]

The reaction of Petersburg society was sharply divided along political lines, as had become habitual: some, primarily the intellectuals, supported the rebellious students; the rest attacked them fiercely. The term "nihilist," first used by Turgenev, became commonplace. The author had used it to describe Bazarov, the hero of his novel *Fathers and Sons*—a young antisocial positivist with anarchist overtones. One of the most famous revolutionaries of the period, the theoretician of terror Sergei Stepnyak-Kravchinsky, explained the essence of "nihilism" this way: "The basis of this movement was unencumbered individualism. It was the negation, in the name of personal freedom, of any restraints placed on man by society, family, or religion."

All this situation needed to explode was a lit match. First it happened figuratively: on May 14, 1862, a radical proclamation spread throughout Petersburg. "Young Russia," as it was titled, called on the people to kill the tsar and destroy the ruling classes. If that were not enough, it also mocked religion, family, and marriage. Like "a thunderclap over the capital,"[33] the leaflets taught the stunned and outraged residents that revolutions go hand in hand with national disasters. The mysterious and threatening Young Russia (nihilists?) advocated mass arson to provoke a not-so-natural disaster of their own.

Two days later, mass fires did break out in Petersburg. Was it

coincidence or accident? Was it really arson, and if so, by whom? A desperate act by nihilists or a coldly calculated provocation by the authorities, attempting to discredit the young revolutionaries?

Even today, historians still cannot answer these questions. It is important that back then, in stifling, charred, smoke-blanketed Petersburg, public opinion, aided by official newspapers, blamed the long-haired, bespectacled student "nihilists" and Poles rebelling against Russia's suppression of their homeland's independence.

A rumor that the city was being torched on all sides by three hundred villains spread among the masses. Witnesses were found who had seen "nihilists" smearing fences and walls with special flammable mixtures. Students were afraid to walk around in the streets in uniform because of the many attempts at mob justice. Even in educated circles people said that Petrashevsky and his group were behind the fires. As one politically engaged woman wrote to another, "all the exiles in that case have been pardoned; and perhaps this is how they are expressing their gratitude. I don't know how one can be merciful anymore."[34]

Clearly Dostoyevsky, as one of the pardoned Petrashevsky circle, had reason to feel uncomfortable during that period. He desperately begged Nikolai Chernyshevsky, the idol and mouthpiece of young radicals, to keep his followers from committing arson.

The calm and ironic Chernyshevsky later described with cold mockery Dostoyevsky's arrival as a visit from a madman: "Seeing that the mental state of the poor patient was one in which doctors forbid any disagreement with the sufferer, I replied, 'All right, Fyodor Mikhailovich, I will obey your wishes!' "

Almost in total panic, Dostoyevsky rapidly scribbled a magazine article demanding "the widest openness (*glasnost*)" from the government in investigating the causes of the fires. The writer was upset: "Without a doubt, fewer houses and streets would have burned down if people had not been taught by blows to the face and other forcible measures to forget their own active role in keeping the public and social order." Dostoyevsky's unsigned article was promptly banned by the preliminary censors, and Alexander II himself added a wrathful "Who wrote this?" to his copy.[36]

Petersburg was no longer the same. Surrounded by a ring of grim, sooty factories, littered with hovels and ugly tenements, the great city was threatening to become a nightmare, far worse than the most horrible fantasies of Gogol or Apollon Grigoryev.

This new, lugubrious Petersburg—new not only to Dostoyevsky but also to the unsettled native Petersburgers—gave the writer a powerful inspiration for the most famous murderer in Russian literature—the former student Rodion Raskolnikov, the protagonist of the novel *Crime and Punishment*.

This novel is the quintessential Petersburg work. The city is an important character, as important as Raskolnikov. Outside of Petersburg, the student fallen on hard times was unthinkable; he was the creation of the new Petersburg. According to Dostoyevsky this "most fantastic city in the world" "was invented" (also Dostoyevsky's expression) by Peter the Great and his heirs. In the same spirit the writer's imagination had invented the delirious vision of the Petersburg superman / nihilist, stalking an old woman pawnbroker with ax concealed beneath his overcoat.

Raskolnikov's "ugly dream" of murder for profit was also, according to Dostoyevsky, the specific emanation of the Petersburg atmosphere. In that sense Petersburg, with its historic pride as a city pretending to have conquered nature, is a co-conspirator in the ideological crime of the impoverished student, who with devilish pride breaks "natural" social boundaries. Joseph Brodsky, with a subtle feeling for the stylistics and poetics of Dostoyevsky, even maintained in our conversation that "Raskolnikov's idea about killing the old pawnbroker is definitely a personal one," meaning that Dostoyevsky himself had considered robbery, and even murder for gain. And Brodsky added, half in jest, "Considering what society does to an author, he has every right to think this way."

Raskolnikov loves people and despises them; "two contradictory personalities alternate in him," Dostoyevsky says. Parallel to his double personality, a double image of Petersburg develops in *Crime and Punishment:* on the one hand, "the marvelous panorama" of the Neva (even though it makes a "grim and mysterious impression"); on the other hand, the depressing sketches of an urban hell with their "disgusting and sad colors."

"This is a city for the half-mad. . . . There are few more grim, harsh, and strange influences on a man's soul than in Petersburg. Just think of the climatic influences!" the investigator mockingly reminds Raskolnikov, and the author the reader. The picture of Petersburg is painted with broad strokes, brief descriptions (in the style of stage directions), and a multitude of exact, concrete details.

The color yellow, which Dostoyevsky hated, dominates the picture. Yellow was associated with the capital, where many houses were traditionally painted that color. In *Crime and Punishment,* yellow

wallpaper and furniture persecutes the heroes, who seem to be placed inside a whirling painting by van Gogh.

The book's first sentence calls our attention to the extreme heat of those two weeks during which the novel's action takes place. Dostoyevsky stresses the heat and humidity and unbearable stench later on—they form a counterpoint to Raskolnikov's feverish, overheated state.

Raskolnikov lives on that "drunken" Stolyarny Alley, next to the Haymarket Square described earlier. Dostoyevsky uses the grotesque ensemble of that part of Petersburg for full effect, down to the tiniest detail: the tenements filled with pathetic renters in their coffinlike rooms; the bars, brothels, pawnshops, police offices.

In the novel thirteen steps lead to the top floor of Raskolnikov's building, to his room; curious tourists can count them today in Petersburg. From the gate of Raskolnikov's house to the house of the moneylender he intends to kill are 730 steps, by Dostoyevsky's count, and that is also correct.* Even the stone under which Raskolnikov hid the stolen goods was real. Dostoyevsky once pointed it out to his wife while on a walk, and when she asked how he had ever ended up in that deserted courtyard, he replied, "For the reason that brings pedestrians to out-of-the-way spots."

Dostoyevsky's Petersburg is an "invented" city, which nevertheless has all the signs of reality. That is why in Germany, where Dostoyevsky's European (and worldwide) fame began, *Crime and Punishment* was admired both by the naturalists of the 1880s and the neoromantics and expressionists of the early twentieth century. Raskolnikov, swinging his ax at the moneylender's head, is incomparably more real than Gogol's Nose praying in the Kazan Cathedral. But at the same time, it is an unreal, symbolic figure, and just as unreal, in Dostoyevsky's oft-proclaimed conviction, is the Petersburg that gave rise to Raskolnikov.

The writer's pen had turned the spectral city of his imagination into "Dostoyevsky's Petersburg," something solid and familiar to all of us. It happened thanks to his virtuoso manipulation of exact details and the unity and power of the book's mood. When *Crime and Punishment* was first published, the apparent accuracy of its description confused the critics, even the hostile ones: "Before you is the real city with familiar streets and alleys."[37] Naive people! Of course, more

* Dostoyevsky also selected the victim's profession with great care, paying attention to the circumstances of contemporary Petersburg. Usury became a widespread phenomenon in the capital during the 1860s.

perceptive readers immediately suspected that Dostoyevsky was not simply depicting naturalistically the difficult life of the capital's "lower depths," but was creating his own mythos about Petersburg.

The leading radical critic, Dmitri Pisarev, defending Dostoyevsky against accusations of slandering "the whole body of Russian students," used this very point: how can one speak of slander if the action takes place in a mysterious and strange city; according to the perceptive Pisarev, the reader of *Crime and Punishment* experiences "the sensation of ending up in a new, special, and completely fantastical world, where everything is done inside out and where our ordinary concepts cannot be enforced."

The hypnotic effect of Dostoyevsky's vision is incomparable. His impulsive narrative, sometimes almost incoherent but always masterfully organized, is so overwhelming that it sweeps away even the fiercely resisting reader. Therefore, Dostoyevsky's Petersburg is a reality that will exist as long as there is Russian literature. For decades Dostoyevsky's interpretation of the city was the only possible one for a great majority of people in Russia and the West.

Typical of that is the confession of the writer Vladimir Korolenko, no great fan of Dostoyevsky's. When Korolenko graduated from a provincial high school in 1871 and arrived in Petersburg, he saw it through Dostoyevsky's eyes: "I liked everything here—even the Petersburg sky, because I had known it already from descriptions, even the boring brick walls blocking that sky, because I knew them from Dostoyevsky."[38]

Dostoyevsky's landscape of the city is a markedly prosaic one—the suburbs where the "poor folk" live, "the insulted and the injured." His identification with the new "plebeian" population of the capital was so strong that he rejected all the Petersburg architecture of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, that is, the buildings that were considered masterpieces before and after him.

Dostoyevsky was convinced that those buildings were pathetic imitations of European styles. The writer's gaze slid scornfully along the panorama of Petersburg: "Here's the characterless church architecture of the last century, there's a pathetic copy in the Romanesque style of the turn of the century, and there's the Renaissance."

Dostoyevsky's aesthetic judgments arose from his political and social viewpoints, primarily his total rejection of Peter the Great and his reforms. According to Dostoyevsky, Peter struck a blow against the Russian Orthodox Church—the main support of the national spirit; attacked Russian traditions; and dug a chasm between the peo-

ple and the educated class. Dostoyevsky considered Peter the first Russian nihilist. His wife recalled that the writer spoke passionately of Peter as if he were his worst personal enemy.

Therefore, Dostoyevsky considered Peter's founding of Petersburg a criminal act: a nihilistic gesture, a meaningless challenge to nature, traditions, and the people's spirit and well-being. In his notebook, the writer quotes Pushkin's line from *The Bronze Horseman,* "I love you, Peter's creation." As if trying to justify himself before the Pushkin he idolized, he notes, "I'm sorry, I don't love it. Windows, holes—and monuments."

This anti-Petrine position—and all of Dostoyevsky's so-called pessimistic, perverted work, alien to socialism—was condemned in Stalin's Soviet Union. The dictator did not like Petersburg, but he respected Peter the Great, even though he considered him insufficiently cruel.*

This rejection of Dostoyevsky lingered for decades after Stalin's death. The Soviet Union reluctantly published Dostoyevsky, included him stingily in school curricula, and continued to scold him for "ideological mistakes," as if he were a contemporary dissident.

The Soviet authorities' suspicion of Dostoyevsky was manifest in trifles. For instance, I merely quoted Dostoyevsky's words on Peter's despotism and his "anti-people attitude in the highest degree" in an article published in the Moscow journal *Sovetskaya muzyka.* This elicited a harsh rebuke from *Sovetskaya kultura,* a newspaper of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. This may seem funny now, but at that time neither I nor my frightened colleagues at *Sovetskaya muzyka* felt much like laughing.

The most "intentional" city in the world—that is Dostoyevsky's famous and final condemnation of Petersburg. That "intendedness," that is, artificiality, the total absence of national roots, is an intolerable flaw and sin in Dostoyevsky's eyes. That built-in lack of national sentiment in the Russian capital is, according to the writer, the cause of Petersburg's constant hostility toward the true Russian personality.

Dostoyevsky had been to London, Paris, and Berlin. Those metropolises had horrified him, and he was disgusted to find similar traits in Petersburg. He hated bourgeois Europe, and so he rejected the necessity of a "window into Europe," as Petersburg's apologists portrayed it. It was a window, Dostoyevsky said, through which the Russian elite looked at the West and saw all the wrong things.

* Stalin once expressed his concern in a heart-to-heart with a favorite actor: "Peter didn't kill enough of them."

A city like that certainly had no right to exist. It had to vanish. And here Dostoyevsky enthusiastically picked up the folklore tradition prophesying the destruction of the city that came into being unrightfully. As we recall, Petersburg was supposed to be deserted (the "curse of Tsaritsa Eudoxia"), flooded, or destroyed by fire. Dostoyevsky invented his own, more fantastic version, which at the same time seemed in its striking simplicity to be the only possible version for the disappearance of Petersburg.

Dostoyevsky let his beloved idea come from the lips of the hero of *The Adolescent,* a novel written in 1874 that holds a special place in the writer's oeuvre. This passage is the crowning moment of the Petersburg mythos in Dostoyevsky's interpretation. Characteristically, it is in this text that Dostoyevsky makes a pointed reference to Falconet's equestrian statue as depicted in Pushkin's *Bronze Horseman,* starting in fact a polemic with him and at the same time continuing the literary and cultural tradition so vital for Russian society:

> A hundred times amid the fog I had a strange but persistent dream: "What if, when this fog scatters and flies upward, the whole rotten, slimy city goes with it, rises with the fog and vanishes like smoke, leaving behind the old Finnish swamp, and in the middle of it, I suppose, for beauty's sake, the bronze horseman on the panting, whipped horse?"

Dostoyevsky's Petersburg mythos, incorporating the discoveries of French writers (Hugo, Balzac, Flaubert), the German Hoffmann, the English Dickens, and the American Poe, in its turn substantially altered the perception of Western metropolises by their residents. Raskolnikov the Petersburg student began to wander the streets of Berlin, Paris, and London. Nietzsche admitted (in *Twilight of the Gods*), "Dostoyevsky is one of the happiest discoveries of my life." For many a French writer, the image of the back streets of Paris was forever tinged by his impressions of *Crime and Punishment.* Raskolnikov's spirit hovers over Rainer Maria Rilke's *Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge.*

Dostoyevsky's Petersburg became part of the Western cultural and spiritual experience even more than Gogol's Petersburg, because in general Dostoyevsky's novels, which were rightly labeled "ideological" by Russian critics, do not suffer significantly when their ver-

bal tissue is transplanted to another language—unlike the virtuoso works of Gogol, often built on pure wordplay, or even more so, the works of Pushkin, whose writings are almost naked in comparison with those of both Gogol and Dostoyevsky. Western audiences accept on faith the perfection of Pushkin and his Petersburg creations. But at least part of Pushkin's renown in the West paradoxically rests on the popularity of three Russian operas based on his works: *Boris Godunov* by Modest Mussorgsky (premiered in 1874), and Peter Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* (premiered in 1879) and *Queen of Spades* (premiered in 1890).

The paradox is made all the greater by the fact that Mussorgsky and Tchaikovsky, for all their enormous respect for Pushkin, moved far from his style and emotions in their music. The artistic and psychological strivings of both composers—who differed so markedly from each other in their lives and work—coincided with the ideas and emotions of their contemporary, Dostoyevsky.

Parallels of this sort are inevitably tentative. Mussorgsky and Tchaikovsky each created his own highly idiosyncratic and enormous world with clearly marked boundaries. Nevertheless, their works are so closely entwined with Dostoyevsky's artistic ideas and produce an effect that so remarkably resembles that created by reading some of his more troubled outpourings that a comparison between the writer and the two composers becomes unavoidable. All the more so, since Mussorgsky and Tchaikovsky contributed to the Petersburg mythos—the former with a few extraordinary compositions, the latter with a long line of his principal works.

The cult of Petersburg began with poetic odes. The problem of Petersburg was first posed in a narrative poem. The dismantling of Petersburg was also performed by literature. For over one hundred thirty years literature reigned almost unchallenged there.

Opera and ballet flourished in imperial Petersburg in the early nineteenth century, but they did not have a substantial impact on the Petersburg mythos. They were exotic flowers that ornamented the grim reality of Nicholas's Petersburg but did not confront the "damned questions" the city asked its residents.

The situation gradually began to change. The way was prepared by the general upsurge in Russian culture, a revolution that took place by the middle of the nineteenth century in music and then in art. This revolution changed contemporaries' perceptions of Petersburg. For too long it had been reflected in the mirror of literature. Of course, the mirror had been held by geniuses—Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoyevsky.

The crystalline mythological image of a majestic, beautiful city, the imperial capital, was replaced in that mirror, thanks to these writers, with another reflection—phantasmagoric, with horrible but still beautiful features. Little by little even that image began shattering, fading, disappearing.

Then the mirror in which Petersburg was seen came into the hands of different people: musicians and after them, artists. Their lives were no less eccentric, mysterious, and strange than the fate of the city in whose palaces and cramped apartments they lived, on whose luxurious and beckoning prospects they strolled, lost in thought, on whose granite embankments they stood in quiet joy or in profound, black depression, and whose captivating legend they transformed decisively, irrevocably.

And this is how it happened.