

« JULIE A. BUCKLER »

Mapping St. Petersburg





JULIE A. BUCKLER

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IMPERIAL TEXT AND
CITYSHAPE

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❧ *For Natalie* ❧

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INTRODUCTION

Petersburg not only seems to appear to us, but actually manifests itself—on maps: in the form of two small circles, one set inside the other, with a black dot in the center; and from this very mathematical point, which has no dimension, it proclaims forcefully that it exists: from here, from this very point surges and swarms the printed book; from this invisible point speeds the official circular.

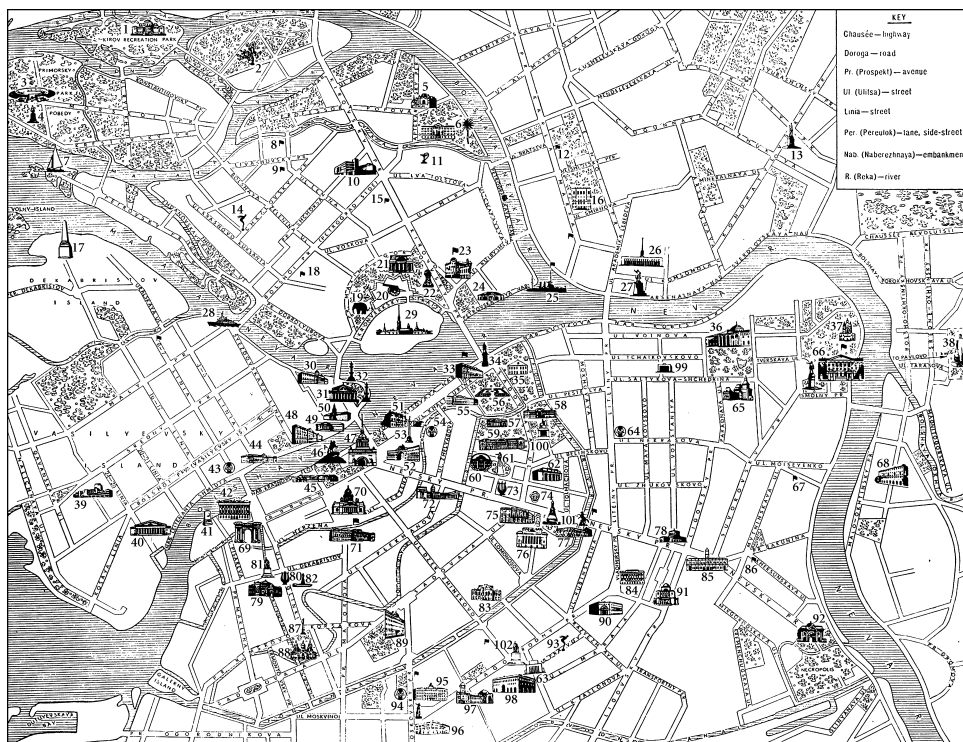
—ANDREI BELY, *Petersburg*

AS THE CAPITAL of the Russian Empire, St. Petersburg was the seat of pomp and policy, but “Piter,” as insiders have always liked to call it, was also the literary capital of tsarist Russia, not to mention its own favorite literary subject. Self-regarding St. Petersburg virtually *wrote* itself into existence, so vast and varied is the Russian literature that charts this city in all its aspects. The textual “map” of St. Petersburg—that is, the sum total of genres, topoi, and tours that cover the city in writing—constitutes a detailed literary analogue for urban topography.

St. Petersburg has been comprehensively mapped in terms of the literary mythology created by Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Blok, Bely, Akhmatova, and Mandelstam, and by scholars who tease out allusions and influences within this select group of authors and texts. Cultural historians treat the literary tradition together with the visual and performing arts in a chronology of overdetermined cultural high points such as “The Bronze Horseman,” the Winter Palace, and “Swan Lake.”¹

Imperial St. Petersburg, thus conceived, might seem a city composed almost exclusively of palaces and slums, populated entirely by pampered aristocrats, the desperate poor, and writers of genius who immortalized both in artistic masterworks.² The textual mapping of imperial St. Petersburg was, however, a project that ranged over the entire city and across a broad spectrum of literary forms and tonalities. Much of this literary production, which insistently and prolifically maps the city in all its aspects, has been relegated to the margins of cultural history.

When the eighteenth-century classicist ideal of unified continuous facades



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| 1. S. M. Kirov Central Recreation Park | 17. Obelisk in Memory of the Decembrists | 32. Rostral Columns |
| 2. Oak-Tree of Peter the Great | 18. House Lenin Lived In | 33. Branch of the Central Lenin Museum |
| 3. S. M. Kirov Stadium | 19. Zoological Gardens | 34. Monument to A. V. Suvorov |
| 4. Monument to S. M. Kirov | 20. Historical Museum of Artillery | 35. Summer Garden and Summer Palace of Peter the Great |
| 5. Lenin Electrotechnical Institute | 21. Lenin Komsomol Theatre of Drama | 36. Taurida Palace |
| 6. Botanical Gardens and Botanical Museum | 22. Monument to the destroyer <i>Steregushchy</i> | 37. Smolny Cathedral |
| 7. T. U. Water Sports Centre | 23. Museum of the October Revolution | 38. Monument to I. P. Pavlov |
| 8. Lenin Memorial Flat | 24. Cottage of Peter the Great | 39. Kirov Palace of Culture |
| 9. Lenin Memorial Flat | 25. Cruiser <i>Aurora</i> | 40. Plekhanov Mining Institute |
| 10. Leningrad City Council Palace of Culture | 26. Finland Railway Station and Metro Station | 41. Stele at <i>Aurora</i> Anchorage |
| 11. Pavlov Medical Institute | 27. Monument to V. I. Lenin | 42. Museum of the History of Leningrad |
| 12. May 1 Club | 28. Local Sea Port | 43. Pavlov Memorial Flat |
| 13. Monument to M. I. Kalinin | 29. Peter and Paul Fortress | 44. Academy of Arts |
| 14. Winter Swimming Pool | 30. Literary Museum | 45. Central Historical Archive Building |
| 15. Kirov Memorial Flat | 31. Central Naval Museum | 46. The Bronze Horsemen—Monument to Peter the Great |
| 16. Vyborg Palace of Culture | | |

FIGURE I.1. Map of Cultural Monuments from 1950.
(Courtesy of Harvard Map Collection.)

proved logistically impossible for Petersburg, the Masonry Construction Commission devoted its energies to placing freestanding monumental buildings at key locations. These grand-scale edifices visually unified the space of the city along the perspectives of avenues and embankments, and lessened the impact of the intermediate “gray areas” in between.³ Literary and cultural histories from the imperial period and most of the twentieth century have replicated this building strategy, orienting themselves either toward the monumental, or toward unsightly areas that radically undercut the illusion of unbroken panorama. The palaces and slums of St. Petersburg may seem like familiar literary territory, but other aspects of the city’s history, its “gray areas,” are decidedly underdocumented, if not invisible. The myth of imperial St. Petersburg thus excludes aspects of the city’s cultural life characterized by mixed aesthetic tastes and social experiences. As I hope to show, the familiar mythology of St. Petersburg leaves out much of the *middle*—the ground-level urban experience that is more representative and thus less visible than the extremes of rich and poor. This study aims to revise the traditional literary “monumentalization” of Petersburg, and to offer a more decentralized view of a broader urban topography that includes noncanonical works and underdescribed spaces.

Myriad literary works that failed to achieve the status of Pushkin’s “Bronze Horseman” or Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* nevertheless played an ac-

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|--|---|---|
| 47. Admiralty | 69. “New Holland” Architectural Ensemble | 85. Moscow Station |
| 48. Zhdanov State University | 70. St. Isaac’s Cathedral | 86. Lenin Memorial Flat |
| 49. Academy of Sciences | 71. Leningrad City Council Executive Committee | 87. Obelisk in Memory of Russian Sailors Fallen at Tsushima |
| 50. Museum of Anthropology | 72. Kazan Cathedral–Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism | 88. St. Nicholas’ Cathedral |
| 51. State Hermitage. Pushkin Museum | 73. State Philharmonic | 89. Obraztsov Railway Engineering Institute |
| 52. Palace Square | 74. Theatre of Comedy | 90. Vladimirskaia Metro Station |
| 53. Alexander Column | 75. Saltykov-Shchedrin State Public Library | 91. Museum of Arctic |
| 54. Pushkin Memorial Flat | 76. Pushkin Theatre of Drama | 92. Alexander Nevsky Lavra |
| 55. Lenenergo Central Department | 77. Zhdanov Palace of Young Pioneers | 93. Winter Swimming Pool |
| 56. Monument to Champions of Revolution in the Field of Mars | 78. Ploshchad Vosstaniia Metro Station | 94. Mendeleyev Memorial Study |
| 57. Mikhailovsky Garden | 79. Kirov Opera and Ballet Theatre | 95. Lensoviet Technological Institute |
| 58. Engineers’ Castle | 80. Rimsky-Korsakov State Conservatoire | 96. Tekhnologicheskii Institut Metro Station |
| 59. State Russian Museum | 81. Monument to Rimsky-Korsakov | 97. Vitebsk Railway Station |
| 60. Maly Opera Theatre | 82. Monument to M. I. Glinka | 98. Pushkinskaya Metro Station |
| 61. Monument to A. S. Pushkin | 83. Gorky Theatre of Drama | 99. Chernyshevskaya Metro Station |
| 62. Winter Stadium | 84. Lensoviet Theatre | 100. Monument to Peter the Great in Klenovaya St. |
| 63. Children’s Theatre | | 101. Monument to Catherine II |
| 64. Nekrasov Memorial Flat | | 102. Monument to A. S. Griboyedov |

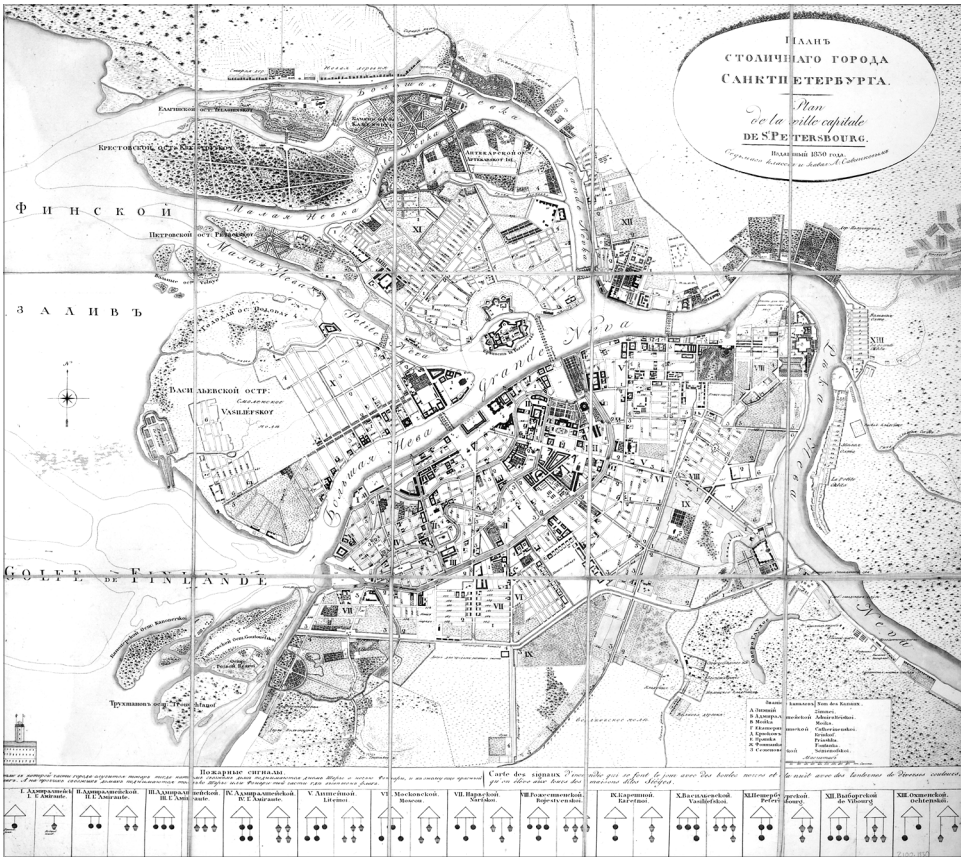


FIGURE I.2. General Map of Petersburg from 1830.
(Courtesy of Harvard Map Collection.)

tive part in shaping the discourse of the very cultural mythology that later excluded them. I seek a corrective to High Romantic images—those two poles of the Petersburg binary purveyed, ironically, by middle-class writers during the heyday of literary realism—that elide the cultural middle of the imperial period. The Petersburg corpus is indeed a dense network of intertextual references, shot through with common themes and formal properties, but it is also the case that this body of texts appears unified because its boundaries have been established and maintained by a tradition. The poet Joseph Brodsky asserted that St. Petersburg would always be the capital of Russia, regardless of official designation. Its primacy is based upon “the second Petersburg, the one made of verses and of Russian prose,” whose excerpts Soviet schoolchildren learned by heart: “And it’s this memorization which secures the city’s status and place in the fu-

ture—as long as this language exists—and transforms the Soviet schoolchildren into the Russian people.”⁴ This second literary-canonical Petersburg insistently inscribes itself upon human subjects and transforms them into textlike bearers of cultural legacy.

A fuller accounting of writing about Petersburg is essential, precisely because the Russian imperial capital has been characterized so persistently in textual terms. Petersburg, it is said, is a city whose identity has depended on literature in compensation for its unusually short history. Vladimir Toporov’s essay “Petersburg and the Petersburg Text of Russian Literature” thus synthesizes the mythology of the city into a single text.⁵ Yuri Lotman suggests that Petersburg mythology is subject to a double reading, one utopian and the other apocalyptic, whereby a motif such as the Falconet monument snake can be read plausibly and simultaneously in contrasting ways.⁶ Lotman thereby proposes Petersburg as the ultimate hermeneutic object, comprehensible only through multiple, seemingly incompatible readings. Petersburg has not yet been treated, however, as I propose to do, in terms of a cultural network that cannot be reduced to a single textual structure, as a body of texts that collectively provides a structural analogue for the material city, and not merely an artistic refraction of it. The geographical, material entity that is Petersburg corresponds to an equally complex structure comprised of diverse literary forms, interrelated in spatial terms, and modeling specific sites of urban life. Throughout, this study poses two central questions: What kinds of writing correspond to specific places in Petersburg or to particular aspects of imperial-era Petersburg life? How does writing constitute imperial Petersburg, both before and after the imperial period?

Searching for Middle Ground

The sociocultural middle in St. Petersburg served a vital function over the course of the nineteenth century in effecting the transition to the pre-capitalist phase of pre-revolutionary Russian history. Yet the middle has long been the least studied aspect of Russian urban culture, dismissed with reference to Russia’s lack of an established bourgeoisie like that in England and France. In Russian cultural criticism, the literary middle has been an object of abuse, reviled as the refuge of vulgar epigones, where “pure” aristocratic and folk cultures are contaminated by market influences, and authentic genres are diluted. Yet, as I hope to show, a great deal of urban cultural negotiation takes place on this same middle ground of literature.

The underdocumented middle ground of St. Petersburg also reflects a larger problem in Russian imperial historiography. The “middle” represents a kind of conceptual outpost, so vexed is this notion for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russian literature, social life, and urban geography. It has often been asserted that the West’s burgeoning middle estate—in the parlance of Marxist the-

ory, the capitalist class, or bourgeoisie—had no real equivalent in Russia, but it may be more accurate to say that Russia's "missing bourgeoisie" was rather "an indeterminate, ambiguously delineated one."⁷ In the imperial capital, new property owners were concentrated among the merchants, a group whose cultural influence in Petersburg did not correspond to its amassed capital, as was to a greater extent the case in Moscow.⁸ Instead of a property-owning class whose influence came to rival that of the declining aristocracy, it is said, Russia had its intelligentsia—a tiny minority rich only in moral and cultural values—to mediate between privileged elite and illiterate peasantry. Imperial Russia's middle ground in social, cultural, and political terms has, however, come under historiographical reassessment in recent years.

The middle estate as formulated by Catherine the Great's instructions—a category of urban residents known as *meshchane*—designated those who were not nobles, high clergy, merchants, or peasants. This definition encompassed nontaxed members of the urban community, such as low-ranking or unranked administrative personnel, artisans, and petty tradespersons. During the first half of the nineteenth century, however, the middle space of society and culture was more often associated with the *raznochintsy*, those intermediate "people of various ranks," who did not belong to the juridical-social categories of estate (*soslovie*). This notoriously vague term has been evoked in terms of "shifting and indeterminate boundaries, spontaneous development, and multiple structures," which seems the only way to characterize the "range of interstitial groups" between the primary established social categories.⁹ By the 1880s, the term *raznochintsy* had become closely linked to the radical intelligentsia and had lost its usefulness as a categorization of Russia's indeterminate cultural middle. Moreover, the second half of the nineteenth century was marked by the accelerating growth of new interstitial groups. Late imperial urbanization led to increasing numbers of professionals in fields such as law, medicine, engineering, and education, as well as artists, entrepreneurs, and industrialists who did not fit the traditional categories of estate.¹⁰ These new groups were distinct from the traditional intelligentsia, who typically considered social service far more important than private life and individual expression. Like the intelligentsia, professional groups did, however, recognize the need for a legal framework to protect individual freedoms as well as impose public obligations.

The term "middle class" with reference to imperial Russia has come to connote "the transcendence of traditional estate loyalties in favor of wider class identities" in connection with social structures that establish "intermediate identities" between the family and the state.¹¹ This definition emphasizes the importance of civic and social practices in the formation of a middle class, instead of taking the more traditional Marxist approach of treating class in connection with the base-superstructure model and with political life.¹² In Russia, although the bourgeoisie did not come to power, the cultural landscape of the

nineteenth century can thus be seen as an ever-expanding, increasingly messy middle ground.

As an overarching concept for this study, the “middle” unites the various approaches to the city explored in the following seven chapters. My perspective on the middle itself is similarly multi-angled. In the geographic sense, the middle does not specify the physically central part of Petersburg, but rather those spaces that might occupy the “middle distance” in a visual representation, although they never serve as the focal point. Because the middle is considered ordinary it may not seem worthy of notice, but the middle is everywhere. Seen in socio-economic perspective, the middle includes that amorphous portion of the urban population to which nonaristocratic nineteenth-century writers generally belonged (or, that portion in which aspiring writers became enmired), and which so often afforded them subjects for literature, Petersburg legend notwithstanding. Considered in evaluative terms, the middle refers to writers of no more than average talent, and to writing that is largely undistinguished, even derivative. From a generic standpoint, however, the intermediate levels of the neoclassical hierarchy generated vital emergent forms neither noble nor humble, including lyric poetry, prose fiction, and history. Nikolai Karamzin’s late eighteenth-century ideal of “pleasant” language emerged from that same part of literature and became the basis for nineteenth-century Russian literary fiction. These middle categories then dominated literary production, and from these, “Petersburg” literature, including those best-known works describing aristocratic and indigent urban subcultures, took shape. The entire Petersburg literary corpus—canonical and noncanonical exemplars—participates in the collective project of constituting the cultural middle, with writing as the ultimate medium.

In grammatical terms, a middle verb form or voice allows the subject to perform while also being affected by the specific action, in other words, to be both subject and object. In logical terms, the middle term in a syllogism is presented in both premises, but does not appear in the conclusion. Middling writers documented the milieu they knew best—their own—and this reflexive state of affairs became the hidden pretext for the Petersburg corpus, which then covered its tracks. In functional terms, the cultural middle may mediate; it is the medium or midwife that acts as conveyance, assists in bringing something forth, or marks an intersection. The cultural middle may surround, as mediums are wont to do, or be surrounded—that is, be besieged amidst an encompassing environment. Where does the middle begin and end, however, if it is to be conceived as more than a baggy catchall for those diverse parts of urban text and topography that fall between identifiable extremes? I seek the middle primarily in its functions within the urban context, as directly related to the preceding definitions, if not limited to them.

The cultural middle has a relational existence, as I conceive it, produced through the dialogic relation, in the Bakhtinian sense, of different populations

and interests in the city. This cultural middle seems closely related to space itself, which has been similarly proposed by social theorists as constituted by the nature of links between separate entities. Of course, the same claim could be made for the spaces of “high” and “low” culture; all levels of culture are interconnected, and the middle cannot be articulated in isolation from the rest. My project aims at an archeological reconstruction of a complex discursive formation—the full textual articulation of imperial St. Petersburg as a cultural object.¹³

Mapping Textual and Cultural Space

The notion of time has underwritten influential Western cultural paradigms such as Darwin’s theory of natural selection and Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis.¹⁴ In contrast, the Newtonian view of space as fixed and abstract has persisted throughout modern history, in spite of the many developments in theories of space that have suggested its integral connection with human social and cognitive patterns.¹⁵ The nineteenth century saw a paradigm shift linked to changing practices in the natural and social sciences, as well as in artistic form, all of which began to treat space as multiple and heterogeneous, produced by subjective points of view and derived from the particular features of human physiology.¹⁶ Traditional Marxism, however, did not occupy itself explicitly with questions of space, considered to be a reflection of social structure and class conflict, and not an autonomous determinant of social relations.

In the terms of the twentieth-century social materialist Henri Lefebvre, space represents “social morphology,” the form of lived experience, and “a materialization of ‘social being’”; space is constituted by particular social relations that give it meaning.¹⁷ Michel de Certeau has argued that everyday activities are the means of producing space or “practiced place.” An act of reading is thus “the space produced by the practice of a particular place: a written text, i.e., a place constituted by a system of signs.”¹⁸ In the paradoxical case of narrative fiction, an essentially temporal medium creates the illusion of events unfolding in physical space, while “a succession of spatial scenes” provides the sense of time passing.¹⁹

A powerful sense of the city as a physical object in space and historical time can similarly be constructed by literary practices. The very project of representing the city in writing is a utopian one, however, associated with classical and Enlightenment conceptions of the city, since no single artistic mode, not even the elastic and form-swallowing novel, can fully accommodate the complexities of urban life. The city is thus invoked in terms of synecdoche such as stage, market, labyrinth, fortress, temple, palace, library, archive, and museum.²⁰ Still, the perceived need to attempt a complete representation is central to the urban experience. Raymond Williams finds that Dickens’s vision of Lon-

don ultimately lies “in the form of his novels,” in which “the experience of the city is the fictional method” and “the fictional method is the experience of the city.”²¹ Neo-Kantian sociologist Georg Simmel posited a connection between human intellect and urban environment by characterizing modern sensibility as a response to the city with its circulation of money and excesses of stimuli.²² Experience, fictional methods, and people themselves may be products of the city, but they also play their part in shaping the urban environment. “The city,” declares Lefebvre, “is the work of a history, that is, of clearly defined people and groups who accomplish this *oeuvre*, in historical conditions.”²³ In the seemingly charged significance of every street sign, statue, facade, and foundation stone, cities project a complex, textual coherence. Although the urban *oeuvre* may seem a cultural text in its own right, however, it is produced in part by actual writing that employs various mapping strategies.

Peter the Great, Petersburg’s founder, has been characterized as a man for whom “geography was far more real . . . than history,” a monarch “in love with space,” which he saw as continuous and accessible.²⁴ When Peter imposed his vision upon the Neva swamplands with ruler, pencil, and force of will, he thus drafted a new map of reality. In truth, before Peter, Russians lacked the map-making skills to produce a comprehensive geographical account of their territory. Seventeenth-century Muscovite cartography retained a medieval character, with pictorial representations of landmarks on hand-drawn maps, little sense of scale, and views from impossible positions in space. Only after Peter’s Grand Embassy to Europe of 1697–98 did the Russian state begin to produce accurate scaled maps that pronounced themselves “an instrument of rule” and “an advertisement . . . of knowledge as power.”²⁵ The beginning of modern European-style mapmaking in Russia precedes the founding of St. Petersburg by only five years, and this effort would have its institutional base at the Naval Academy and the Academy of Sciences in Peter’s new city.

According to the humanistic cultural geography that has taken shape since the late 1970s, metaphors such as text and map have replaced the more scientific paradigms of system and machine in descriptions of cultural landscape.²⁶ The guiding metaphor of the map structures the exercise of cultural cartography, offering a model at once more overtly material and more obviously figural than that of a printed text. No longer seen as a mirror—an empirical, scientific, and direct representation of the world—the map has been re-visioned as rhetoric.²⁷ New-style geographers have welcomed this shift in guiding trope from duplicitous model to self-acknowledged metaphor as a long-overdue recognition of the essentially cultural construction of human knowledge. Put simply, maps are disingenuous about their own rhetorical nature, professing scientific disinterestedness, but they nevertheless reflect choices about inclusion and exclusion and, therefore, represent a set of interests or power relations. Seeing mapping as metaphor, moreover, can uncover the interests behind other seemingly self-evident and inviolable cultural topographies. Canonization stud-

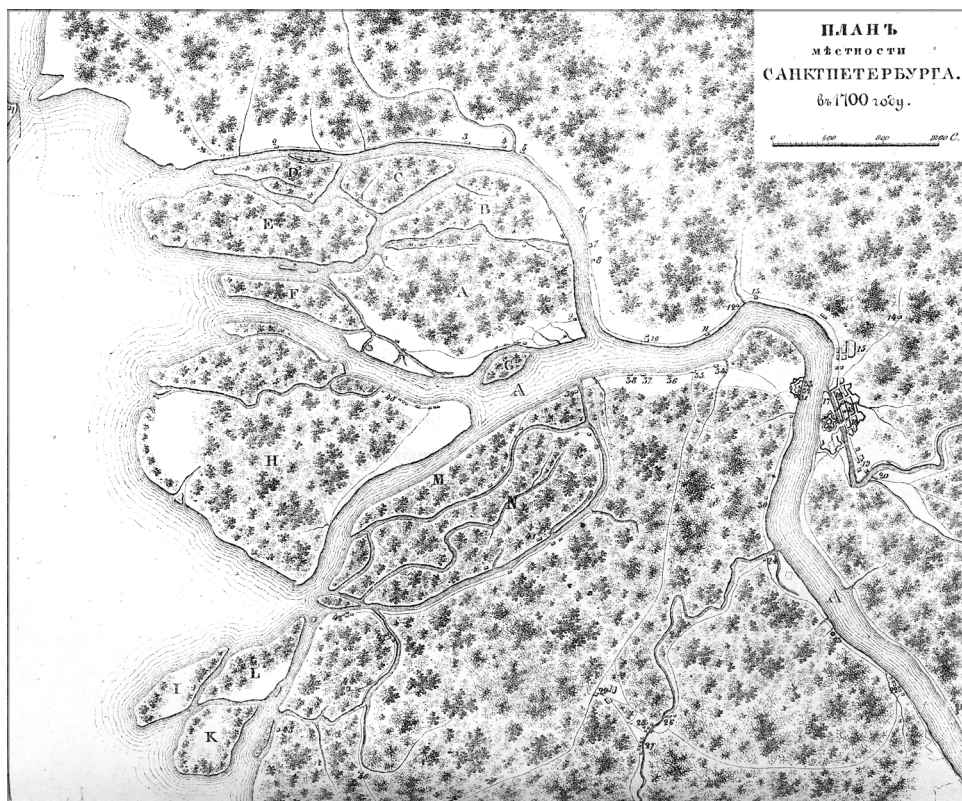


FIGURE I.3. St. Petersburg Environs in 1700, from 1853 *Plany S. Peterburga*.
(Courtesy of Houghton Library at Harvard.)

ies, for example, ask how written texts have been put “on the map,” as seemingly natural facts of cultural life and spontaneous expressions of national greatness channeled by writer-representatives.

The English-language term “topography” has been associated with three different meanings over time.²⁸ Topography originally denoted “a description of place in words,” or a kind of travel literature, but later came to mean “the art of mapping a place by graphic signs.” Ironically, in a further slippage, the third meaning of topography, now dominant, simply designates “that which is mapped.” Thus “the place of writing” (*topos* + *graphein*) has come to mean the always-already-written terrain rather than its description. Landscapes can, however, be brought into another kind of being by written texts, which, like map-making, elaborate topographical relationships.²⁹

The connection between cartography and literature came into relief during

the Renaissance, as evidenced by a surge in cartographic activity, coincident with the growing importance of the self as a literary construct, and this self's relation to the idea of national space.³⁰ Russia, of course, is a special case, since it remained locked into a largely premodern worldview until the reign of Peter the Great. Literary mappings of self and imperial capital did not become a widespread practice in Russia until the nineteenth century, when lyric poetry and literary prose, investigative journalism, travel literature, memoir, and autobiography all flourished.

It was only in the nineteenth century that Russian culture began to exhibit what Yuri Lotman and Boris Uspenskii call the "structural reserve" that constitutes the "neutral axiological sphere" of culture—in other words, the middle zone of behaviors neither "holy" nor "sinful" that developed in the medieval West. Even the dramatic cultural changes in Europeanizing eighteenth-century Russia can be seen as a simple inversion of the old culture's binary values, not unlike pagan Russia's adoption of Christianity in the tenth century.³¹ "Polite society" of the early nineteenth century and its associated conventions thus constituted a new public space where creative forms such as literature evolved.³² The writers who compiled Nikolai Nekrasov's 1845 *Physiology of Petersburg* (*Fiziologiiia Peterburga*) did not seek to emulate the aristocratic Petersburg literary tradition of Pushkin, Prince Odoevskii, or Count Sollogub, however. As Vissarion Belinsky declared in his introduction to this compendium, the writers of *Physiology* lacked "any pretensions to poetic or artistic talent," and hoped merely to initiate a new literary practice of social inclusiveness in Russia, following the lead of France.³³ Belinsky claimed that Russian literature of the mid-1840s was richer in works of genius than in works of ordinary talent. Masterpieces such as Griboedov's play "Woe from Wit" (*Gore ot uma*) or Pushkin's novel in verse *Eugene Onegin* were *not* surrounded by "a vast and brilliant entourage of talents that could serve as intermediaries between them and the public," and thus lead this public further along the path established by the greats.³⁴ Russian literature desperately needed this middling sort of writer, often embodied by the figure of the modest journalist, because without this writer literary institutions faltered and the public ran out of reading material. Belinsky argued that literature should resemble the natural world in its diversity and consist of many different genres and species. A national literature cannot consist only of masterworks and works of no merit whatsoever, concludes Belinsky, because "ordinary talents are essential for the richness of literature, and the more of them there are, the better it is for literature." Belinsky himself did not live to see it, but, in fact during subsequent decades of the nineteenth century the cultural landscape saw exactly this sort of growth in the middle ranges of literature. St. Petersburg was the preferred destination of middle-range writers, most of whom came from the provinces in hopes of becoming literary professionals.

Changes in literary expression shifted the literary center of gravity: literature

grew increasingly thick around the middle. The middle space of literary production and reception expanded horizontally, while the formerly capacious realms of high-style discourse grew cramped and musty. The new emphasis on aspects of social life that had previously been invisible to literature (the so-called Natural School) represented one such mid-sectional trend, describing the everyday with recourse to unexpected linguistic flourishes and rhetorical figurations. Poetic forms grew more diffuse in style and diction, while continuing to fulfill their traditional elevating function through satire, as in the urban verse of Nekrasov. The distinctions between stylistic registers became less clearly demarcated, and the in-between spaces dilated and eventually outgrew the named literary forms against which these bastard aesthetic structures had initially defined themselves. Nonaristocratic writers intent on inscribing themselves upon the cultural map produced much of this new literature. All of these changes gradually transformed the ideal neoclassical generic hierarchy into a lateral network, which then became topographical in literary works that traversed the city. The diffuse and distended literary works that filled nineteenth-century thick journals attest to the expanding cultural space of the middle, offering a vivid contrast to the time-space compression typical of both neoclassical and modernist art. The boom in middle prose genres—of wordy, overextended stories, novels, feuilletons, and sketches by middling writers—was part and parcel of this cultural expansion.

How is it that a city with such a finite history inspired such a vast quantity of writing? Certainly it is significant that St. Petersburg was the center of Russian publishing and book trade during the imperial period. During the second half of the nineteenth century, active printers, publishers, and booksellers such as the Glazunov family, M. O. Vol'f, Adolf Marx, Aleksei Suvorin, and many others considerably broadened the city's literary culture. In an 1881 sketch devoted to life in the capital, the journalist Vasilii Mikhnevich invoked an 1877 statistical study that attributed forty-five percent of the books published in Russia to Petersburg, as opposed to Moscow and the provinces combined, and claimed an even larger share of Russian journalism for the periodical press.³⁵ He characterized primacy in the book business as a measure of Petersburg's distinctively intellectual atmosphere: "Along with fashionable hats and frock-coats of the latest cut, new ideas, new concepts, and knowledge are ordered from Petersburg, and the reigning tone and direction of the given moment in Russian intellectual life—for which Petersburg serves as the concentration point—is disseminated." These figures of speech, like the prologue to Bely's *Petersburg*, cast Petersburg as a great writing-machine blanketing the rest of Russia with its ceaseless production.³⁶ Moreover, the expansion of the imperial bureaucracy in St. Petersburg also produced a seemingly inexhaustible flood of paper, which in turn generated more bureaucratic work, which generated more documentation, and inspired literary efforts that described this strange world. Writing both literally and metaphorically *covers* the city of Petersburg.

As Belinsky had hoped, the middle ground of literature expanded, swelled by the ranks of competent practitioners, and eventually included literate residents of the capital not counted among the intelligentsia. In this regard, Nikolai Sveshnikov's *Memoirs of a Fallen Man* (*Vospominaniia propashchego cheloveka*, 1896) is of great value in reconstructing the lower end of the later nineteenth-century Petersburg book trade—a rich, virtually untapped source of information about the middle range of culture in the capital. Sveshnikov worked as a dealer in the book market that served members of the urban lower middle classes through its own channels of distribution, primarily in stalls around Bolshaia Sadovaia Street, and most specifically, at the Apraksin market. In 1897, Sveshnikov also produced a series of sketches called “Petersburg Apraksin-Booksellers and Secondhand Dealers” (*Peterburgskie knigoprodavtsy-apraksintsy i bukinisty*) that provide an intimate look at this meeting-point of literacy and trade.³⁷ Sveshnikov portrays popular literature as part of the middle ground in Petersburg writing, a cultural space that served an increasingly diverse portion of the city's population during the nineteenth century.³⁸ The mass daily newspapers similarly served a heterogeneous urban middle readership in Russia beginning in the era of the Great Reforms.³⁹ These developments were neither sudden nor unprecedented in Russian letters. Even canonical texts by writers such as Pushkin and Gogol from the earlier part of the nineteenth century prefigure the growing space of the cultural middle, providing a meeting place for hybrid literary genres and mixed populations within the space of a single fictional work.

This study attempts to remap the Russian imperial capital, but not simply by providing a reverse image of the literary tradition with Pushkin and Dostoevsky at the margins. Instead, I propose a new integration in terms of architectural and literary eclecticism (chapters 1 and 2); literature that travels around the city (chapter 3); spaces of interchange between oral and print literature (chapter 4); the ambiguous relationship between urban center and margins (chapter 5); shared experience as meeting ground in a city to which so many came from elsewhere (chapter 6); and the city as collective textual and memorial repository (chapter 7).

This study treats particular sites within writing about imperial Petersburg—physical areas, aspects of city life, and persistent themes. I juxtapose canonical texts by prominent authors with works from the margins of these well-charted oeuvres, as well as works by lesser-known figures, so that clusters of texts can be experienced in terms of interrelationship rather than intertextuality. I also disperse my attention over a wide textual field, of which fictional prose is only one component. Texts of a quasifictional and nonfictional nature participate no less significantly in the discursive project of constructing imperial Petersburg.

While this study ventures into the final years of the imperial period, so-called Silver Age texts are not the focus of my project. The emphasis is on the period 1830s–1890s, with what I hope is an equal distribution of attention across the years preceding the Great Reforms and the years following them. I have not lim-

ited myself to texts written during the imperial period, however, but sample writing about imperial Petersburg produced after the 1917 revolution. I am interested in the ways that the imperial-era discourse has been recapitulated and reappropriated demonstratively in the post-Soviet period, and in the perpetual return of persistent *genres* of writing about imperial Petersburg.⁴⁰

A word about the Soviet period is necessary at this point. The features of imperial Petersburg as constituted in Soviet-era writing up to the late 1980s and early 1990s could well serve as the subject of an entire volume. The shifts of perspective adopted in relation to imperial Petersburg throughout this multidecade period have yet to be traced carefully, particularly during the post-Stalin years, when practices of preservation, the cultural politics of place naming, and the canonization of imperial-era texts revealed inconsistent and ambivalent attitudes toward the past. A thorough critique of imperial Petersburg mythology would reconstruct the entire grid of intelligibility that took shape during the Soviet period. This study includes only limited references to the Soviet period, however, in illustrative examples of official and dissident discourse. Ironically, too, logistics have obliged me to omit the in-between, eclectic middle level of post-Stalinist Soviet discourse. This very middle level has, however, emerged strongly in the flood of publications about imperial Petersburg from the post-Soviet years, and these are discussed in more detail.

Chapter 1 discusses architectural eclecticism, which flourished in Petersburg during the 1830s–1890s, exemplified by apartment houses, public buildings, commercial institutions, and private homes. A hybrid blending of diverse period and style elements, architectural eclecticism is an urban phenomenon expressive of new social groupings such as the professional middle class and independent entrepreneurs, who found aesthetic voice by making their mark on the cityscape. Eclecticism thus manifests the cultural middle in its function as medium and meeting place. Chapter 2 juxtaposes the notion of architectural eclecticism with literary works about Petersburg, examining eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts in terms of genre and style. The alleged eighteenth-century uniformity in this writing proves as elusive as the corresponding purity of origin ascribed to Petersburg architecture of the neoclassical period. Writing about Petersburg—even in monuments of the literary myth such as Pushkin’s “Bronze Horseman” and Gogol’s “Nevsky Prospect”—is revealed to be insistently hybrid. The canonical Petersburg sites treated by these two famous works are not inviolate spaces of cultural heritage, but rather energetically contested, interrogated, and, ultimately, constituted by diverse literary discourse. Chapters 1 and 2 map a shared space of culture that expanded over the course of the imperial period—a fascinating cultural reserve denigrated and neglected by grand-standing Slavophiles, principled populists, late-imperial elitists, bourgeois-hating socialists, and dissident nostalgics, each group for its own particular reasons. Only since the 1990s has attention begun to rest seriously upon the unwritten middle ground of the imperial period, with Russians taking an interest in the

historical bases for market democracy, and with academic fashion in the West, subject to its own forms of cultural elitism, treating aesthetic categories such as “middlebrow,” “mainstream,” and “everyday” more generously. This study adopts a conception of everyday life in keeping with Yuri Lotman’s vision of a cultural boundary zone, where practices of lived life engage in complex ways with the codes of a dominant discourse.⁴¹

Chapters 3 and 4 look at two complementary genres—travel literature and urban legend—which both render the middle space of urban culture as a dynamic, heterogeneous environment that gives rise to flexible and mobile forms of discourse. In contrast to eclecticism, which has only recently been inscribed onto the cultural map of imperial Petersburg, these two genres have always been warmly acknowledged as Petersburg traditions. Chapter 3 examines Petersburg travel literature, including conventional guidebooks, cultural histories, and subjective journeys detailed in feuilleton, sketch, and memoir. The sum product of this travel literature, an on-going literary project that traces the contours of the imperial capital, is a cultural terrain claimed by diverse, competing interest groups. Chapter 4 treats a different sort of collective discourse—urban legend, which traverses Petersburg according to its own characteristic means, moving freely about the city, transcending social hierarchies, and creating provisional communities. Urban legend represents the discourse of the city in perhaps its purest form; writing cannot effectively capture such legend, a largely oral form that leaves only random traces behind in texts.

Chapter 5 returns to the physical space of the city in terms that parallel the rise of eclecticism; it investigates parts of the city that were both central *and* marginal and looks for common ground in these representations, while also exploring their paradoxes. The palace-parks inhabited by the royal family and visited by the Russian public were located at the furthest distance from the city proper. These ensembles are central sites of Petersburg discourse in guidebooks, albums, poetry, and memoirs, but as architectural complexes they were surprisingly vulnerable to the vicissitudes of both imperial and postimperial life. The dacha regions to the north and south, in contrast, became sites of satire and parody, often self-directed, for writers who scraped together the wherewithal to enjoy the dubious pleasures of Petersburg’s natural environment. The city slums, many located in central portions of Petersburg, were inhabited by the most socioeconomically marginal citizens of the imperial capital, and yet, these literary sites were much favored by middling writers and journalists, evolving into one of the most-documented spaces of Petersburg life. Finally, the industrial regions of the city—an increasingly prominent aspect of imperial Petersburg over the course of the nineteenth century—remain nearly invisible in the Petersburg literary corpus, in marked contrast to the literatures of London, Paris, and New York. The writers of populist orientation who assiduously covered the city from mid-century onward had a fondness for colorful street life, but with very few exceptions, they remained stubbornly retrograde in their ap-

proach to the modernizing Petersburg of their time. Chapter 5 reveals “central” and “marginal” to be highly contradictory structuring principles in Petersburg literature and argues that, in this regard, the cultural middle is produced by oscillations between unstable social and literary poles.

Chapter 6 locates a middle ground in a much-practiced literary and autobiographical genre—the common story of writers who came to the capital from Moscow or the provinces and found themselves roughly initiated into the ways of the city. This chapter takes up the conundrum of the striking similarities among texts in the Petersburg literary corpus, attributing this literary curiosity to a shared perspective, and explores the dialogue between imitation and tradition in the vast body of middling writing about the imperial capital.

Chapter 7 explores the city as collective property in terms of memory and loss, as the result of time, urban cycles of growth and decline, oft-recalled catastrophes such as floods and fires, and commercially or ideologically motivated destruction sanctioned by city authorities. A city is always engaged in simultaneous processes of remembering and forgetting, erasing, reconstructing, and rewriting, and these efforts often take parallel textual form, or, alternatively, constitute the city in textual terms. Institutionalized forms of remembering such as memorial cemeteries, city history museums, and place names make these connections explicit. The conclusion to this book reflects upon writing and remembering in connection with Petersburg’s 2003 tricentennial celebrations, also looking back to 1803 and 1903.

The Collective Text of Petersburg

Some cities are more “storied” than others, to use a term for city settings that represent a “*transmitted* literary paradigm,” a topos, whose symbolic space casts a “long shadow of literary precedent.”⁴² Perhaps this paradigm has not been transmitted from writer to writer so much as slavishly reproduced in St. Petersburg’s case, since so much literary writing about the city quite literally covers the same ground.⁴³ The Petersburg Text of Russian literature has been characterized in terms of the striking similarity among its component texts and the irreducible conflicts that lie at the city’s core, as Nikolai Antsiferov did in *The Soul of Petersburg* (*Dusha Peterburga*, 1922).⁴⁴ Toporov characterizes the “Petersburg Text of Russian literature” in the same way:

The first thing that strikes the eye in analyzing the specific texts comprising the “Petersburg Text” . . . is the astonishing closeness the various descriptions of Petersburg bear to one another, both in the works of a single author and in those of diverse authors . . . right up to coincidences that in another case . . . might have been suspect as plagiarism. . . . The impression is created that Petersburg implicates its own descriptions with incomparably greater insistence and obligation than any

other objects of description that can be opposed to it (for example, Moscow), substantially limiting authorial freedom of choice.⁴⁵

The structural affinities across the Petersburg Text arise from the “monolithic character” of the central idea: “the path to moral salvation, to spiritual rebirth under conditions when life perishes in the reign of death, and lies and evil triumph over truth and good.”⁴⁶

Or perhaps writers merely transcribe the text that the city dictates—a story of bad weather, bad moods, and, quite frequently, bad writing. Due to the Russian imperial capital’s northern latitude, Petersburg residents expect rain, raw damp air, gray skies, fog, slush, mud, penetrating wind, and biting cold, except during the “White Nights” in June and July. Catherine the Great was reportedly fond of declaring, “We have eight months of winter, and four months of bad weather.”⁴⁷ The pernicious climate was certainly responsible for the early deaths from tuberculosis and pneumonia of many young intellectuals. In the nineteenth-century literary tradition, Petersburg’s unhealthy air also stands for the malignant influence of the city, which destroys Russia’s most promising young artists and social activists. The unstable but reliably bad Petersburg weather is much more than a realist setting that determines character; it reflects an earlier literary solipsism associated with romanticism, according to which an individual’s inner state is projected—writ large, so to speak—on his environment.

The interpenetration of literature and weather in the Petersburg tradition can be abundantly illustrated, but a few examples will suffice here. The first is from Nikolai Gogol, who left an unfinished fragment from the 1830s that begins, “The rain was prolonged and raw when I came out onto the street.” The narrator elaborates with peculiar relish:

The smoky-gray sky foretold that the rain would continue at length. Not a single band of light, not in any spot was there a break in the gray shroud. The moving screen of rain almost completely curtained off everything that the eye had formerly seen, and only the front-most buildings flickered as through thin gauze . . . the roof was nearly lost in the rainy fog, distinguished from the air only by its damp gleam; water gurgled from the drainpipes. There were puddles on the pavement. The devil take it, I love this time.⁴⁸

The narrator watches the inclement weather drive a self-satisfied civil servant, a portly lady, and a merchant couple from the streets. “Douse them, rain, for everything,” importunes the narrator. He takes malicious pleasure when the rain comes down harder, “as if wanting to press this swampy city down even lower.” Gogol’s brief treatise on the weather functions as antinarrative, washing away all possible characters or events—hence the fragment, which, along with the unnecessarily distended prose work, constitutes a favorite Petersburg literary form.

Fedor Dostoevsky underscores the interrelationship of weather and narrative when his antihero Goliadkin wakes up at the opening of the 1846 story “The

Double" (*Dvoinik*, subtitled "A Petersburg Poem"): "Finally, the gray autumn day, dull and dirty, peered into the room at him through the dim window so angrily and with a grimace so sour that Mr. Goliadkin could no longer possibly doubt that he was not in some far-off land, but rather in the city of St. Petersburg."⁴⁹ Goliadkin is merely the passive recipient of these impressions, since the Petersburg climate itself represents the more striking character. Later, Goliadkin's double appears as he gazes despairingly into the Fontanka on a "terrible" night: "damp, foggy, rainy, snowy, fraught with abscess, cold, ague, quinsy, and fever of every possible type and sort, in a word, with all the gifts of a St. Petersburg November."⁵⁰ It may be that the weather, as well as the figure of the double, reflects Goliadkin's stormy mind. On the other hand, it seems that the weather drives the narrative. Goliadkin is lashed by wind and wet, which "as-sail" him until the decisive internal break occurs.

For Dostoevsky, Petersburg weather and Petersburg narrative are implicitly one and the same in syntactic terms. Dostoevsky thus comments on the sufferings of little Nellie in *The Insulted and the Injured* (*Unizhennye i oskorblennye*, 1861) with a sentence as long and insistently morose as the bad-weather season to which it alludes: "It was a gloomy story, one of those dismal and excruciating stories that so often and so unobtrusively, almost secretly, transpire under the heavy Petersburg sky, in the dark, concealed back alleys of the enormous city, among the turbid boiling of life, blind egoism, conflicting interests, dispirited vice, and hidden crimes, amidst all this infernal hell of senseless and abnormal life."⁵¹ A more explicit connection between text and weather is proposed in a 1844 feuilleton by Nekrasov, a minidrama titled "Preference and Sunshine" (*Preferans i solntse*), in which a civil servant muses upon the dreary summer weather: "The unhappy residents, wishing to show off their new summer outfits, cannot understand why, for such a protracted period, there hangs over their heads a hazy, dark-gray veil, from which daily drips a fine, close and penetrating rain that induces low spirits in the same way as a dull article printed with the tiniest compressed typeface."⁵² This remark transforms Petersburg weather into an uninviting *text* in figurative terms—rendering culture from nature, as the Petersburg myth habitually demands.

Nekrasov trumps Dostoevsky's weather-mania with his poetic cycle "About the Weather" (*O pogode*, 1858–65), in which atmospheric conditions represent a constant that unites diverse aspects of life in the capital. The first part of the cycle begins with the just-averted threat of flooding on a day that is "murky, windy, dark, and dirty," when tears appear to be streaming down the windows.⁵³ Hoping to escape his melancholy mood, the poet-narrator goes for a walk and joins a funeral procession on its way to the cemetery. The rain is replaced by hail and snow, as fog covers the city. Only the narrator can make it all out via the medium of poetry. For Nekrasov, bad weather does not constitute merely the precondition or occasion for writing, but also the source of literary plots, since the narrator documents the misfortunes that the weather brings to the city's in-

habitants—epidemics, fatal frosts, and fires—in his all-inclusive, middle-range urban poetry. When the weather is bad, the Petersburg writer is in his element.

For many writers, the city represents the much-reviled locus of their deepest, most treasured suffering.⁵⁴ Pushkin famously wrote to his wife Natalia in 1834, “Do you really suppose that swinish Petersburg is not repulsive to me? That I enjoy myself living amidst pasquinades and denunciations?”⁵⁵ Belinsky declared, “If one suffers in Petersburg, one is a true human being.”⁵⁶ Writers often expressed their ambivalence toward the city in terms of paradox, as did Herzen when he pronounced himself indebted to Petersburg for his moral and emotional suffering: “Nowhere did I give way so often to so many sorrowful thoughts as in Petersburg. Burdened by heavy doubts, I would wander along its granite pavements, close to despair. I am obliged to Petersburg and grew to love it for these minutes.”⁵⁷

In his poem “The City” (*Gorod*, 1845), Apollon Grigor’ev responds to Pushkin—who in “The Bronze Horseman” declared, “I love you, Peter’s creation”—with a paradoxical paean of his own: “Yes, I love it, this vast, proud city / But not for that which others love.”⁵⁸ Grigor’ev venerates the “stamp” of suffering that he sees everywhere in Petersburg. In Nekrasov’s poem “The Unfortunates” (*Neschastnye*, 1856), Petersburg similarly leaves its “mark of depression” on every face and object.⁵⁹ Vasilii Sleptsov claimed, “Petersburg cannot possibly be anyone’s homeland,” whereas Vsevolod Garshin asserted that Petersburg, despite the torments he experienced there, was the *only* Russian city that represented “a genuine spiritual homeland.”⁶⁰ The Petersburg Text resembles an echo chamber, in which writers cannot help responding to other voices in the tradition and to their own earlier pronouncements.

The vocabulary of mental illness is part of the Petersburg lexicon, which includes a rich selection of words for a troubled inner state—exhausted, lonely, hopeless, feverish, morose, anguished, anxious, depressed, insane, terrified, agitated, and alienated.⁶¹ Vsevolod Krestovskii, author of the novel *Petersburg Slums* (*Peterburgskie trushchoby*, 1864–67), wrote an 1860 poetic cycle titled “Depression” (*Khandra*) that seems in this respect emblematic of Petersburg literature from the latter part of the nineteenth century. “Melancholy. . . Again melancholy!” declaims Krestovskii’s poetic alter ego, who sits alone in a dark room, mentally reviewing his psychological and moral decline since coming to Petersburg, and working himself up to suicide. Visions pass before him. In one, he lies, “torpid, in the fetters of a dream,” under an ancient pine tree on a winter night. The pine whisperingly lulls him to sleep and urges him to forget treacherous spring, whose flowers will fade. “I am more faithful,” chants the pine. “My gloomy hue does not fade / And my quiet refuge is never-failing.”⁶² Thus the Petersburg bard returns again and again to his depression, that dependable source of inspiration, as if to the safe and enfolding embrace of the gloomy pine tree.⁶³

Melancholy used to be understood as an excess of “black choler,” one of the

four humors whose balance accounted for an individual's temperament. The poet Gérard de Nerval proposed a metaphor for depression in his 1853 poem "The Disinherited" (*El Desdichado*), declaring, "My lone star is dead, and my bespangled lute / Bears the black sun of melancholia," with recourse to a figure that Julia Kristeva characterizes as "dazzling with black invisibility," summing up "the blinding force of the despondent mood."⁶⁴ This particular line of the poem also enacts the depressive's search to express his experience: "The verb 'bears' points to that bursting out, that reaching the signs of darkness, while the learned word *melancholia* serves to bespeak that struggle for conscious mastery and precise meaning." The Petersburg Text, too, can be summed up as a collective attempt to exorcise black melancholy through writing, with Nerval's "black sun" a particularly fitting image for St. Petersburg's extreme northern darkness in autumn and winter.

Kristeva's theory of melancholia suggests that the depressive retains the use of signs, although with radically reduced affect. "Let us keep in mind the speech of the depressed—repetitive and monotonous," she writes. "Faced with the impossibility of concatenating, they utter sentences that are interrupted, exhausted, come to a standstill. . . . A repetitive rhythm, a monotonous melody emerge and dominate the broken logical sequences, changing them into recurring, obsessive litanies."⁶⁵ In the depressive, an abyss separates language from affective experience, although the subject may be a lucid observer of his own misfortune. The artist, in contrast, has control over the use of signs, and the work of art is therefore the sign of a vanquished depression, the work of mourning through the agency of a symbolic system such as language, and an articulation of loss in semiotic terms. The Petersburg Text nevertheless retains an affinity with the language of the depressed, as a meeting of nineteenth-century literary practice (long-winded and repetitive prose) and Petersburg setting. This corpus thus represents an obsessive melancholic utterance that refuses to complete the work of mourning.

According to cultural mythology, then, Petersburg is the capital of bad weather and dark moods that give rise to a sublime literary tradition. But Petersburg might just as easily be reconceived as the city of *bad writing*, so persistent are the deplorable literary habits that pervade the Petersburg Text. Many fictional prose works, poems, memoirs, and cultural tributes to the city are self-indulgent, long, overstuffed with "writerly" adjectives and irritatingly rapturous (what the Russians call *vostorzhennye*) epiphanies. Petersburg moves a would-be author to express in writing his distinctively sensitive and perceptive response to the city, which, ironically, uncannily resembles all of the Petersburg lyrical epiphanies that have preceded it. The young poet described in Semen Nadson's "A Child of the Capital, From the Days of Youth . . ." (*Ditia stolitsy, s iunykh dnei* . . . , 1884) perfectly embodies this Petersburg writer-figure and his literary excesses. Nadson's poet does not mind the quotidian urban environment seemingly inhospitable to poetic reverie, since he has learned to find

Everywhere poetry—in the fogs,
 In the rains, which never tire of pouring down
 In the kiosks, flower-beds, and fountains
 Of faded city parks,
 In the designs of frost in winter,
 In the haze of sullen clouds,
 Set afire by winter dawn. . . .⁶⁶

This Petersburg poet wears his melancholy as a badge of honor and a sign of creative genius. As it turns out, however, the moody exaltation experienced by Nadson's poet makes him ordinary in Petersburg terms.

Even the most revered contributors to the Petersburg corpus sometimes follow the pattern of bad Petersburg writing, taking flight in lyrical epiphany. Thus Gogol concludes his witty "Petersburg Notes of 1836" (*Peterburgskie zapiski 1836 goda*) with an insistently pastel vision of quiet Lent, when the city assumes a "picturesque" aspect. Gogol's narrator stands by the Neva and admires the "rosy" sky and the "azure fog," which gives a "lilac" cast to the buildings on the Petersburg Side, gazing upon the spire of the Peter-Paul church-tower, "reflected in the infinite mirror of the Neva."⁶⁷ The narrator warms up with a vague poetic pronouncement: "It seemed as if I were not in Petersburg; it seemed as if I had moved to some other city, where I had already been, where I knew everything and where there exists that which is lacking in Petersburg. . . ." The epiphany then reaches its peak in fatuous self-assertion: "I love spring deeply. Even here, in this wild north, it is mine. It seems to me that no one in the world loves spring the way I do. With spring, my youth comes to me; with spring, my past is more than remembrance: it stands before my eyes and is ready to splash in tears from my eyes." The more the narrator sets himself apart by drawing attention to his writerly sensibility, the more he belongs to this Petersburg literary tradition. The Petersburg Text, in fact, inevitably tends toward self-parody in this way, or, at least, toward stylistic registers where parody is indistinguishable from pathos.

Like Gogol's piece, Dostoevsky's "Petersburg Visions in Verse and Prose" (*Peterburgskie snovideniia v stikhakh i proze*, 1861) describes a "fantastic, magic vision" remembered by the narrator from his youth, when he stood by the Neva on a January evening and contemplated a misty second Petersburg rising into the air:

Some strange thought suddenly stirred inside me. I shuddered, and at that moment my heart seemed to fill with a hot spurt of blood, suddenly boiling up from a surge of a powerful, but previously unknown sensation. I seemed to understand something at that moment, which up until that point had only stirred within me, but had not been consciously realized. It seemed that my eyes had been opened to something new, to a completely new world that was unfamiliar to me and known only by some murky rumors or secret signs. I suppose that my existence began at that precise moment.⁶⁸

While the ironic feuilletonistic style of Dostoevsky's older narrator throughout this piece suggests he has renounced the visionary excitement of his younger self, this passage can also be read as a wishful meditation on becoming a writer in an improbable moment of sudden transformation. What remains unclear, as in Gogol's epiphany, is whether the author depicts a first-person narrator-character as a typical self-dramatizing Petersburg literary hack or ironically characterizes his own younger *self* this way. Even the Nadson poem—surely composed in all seriousness—is careful to distance the writing subject in the poem from its author. Is St. Petersburg a school for bad writing? Bad writing about Petersburg is a literary meeting place welcoming to both ordinary people and great writers. For all that Petersburg is constantly invoked as a “riddle” or an “enigma,” writers cannot stop themselves from characterizing it in the most luxuriantly banal terms.

In the discourse around the cultural middle in imperial Russia, the word *meshchanstvo*, akin in meaning to *petit-bourgeoisie*, carries associations of vulgar philistinism. Nikolai Pomialovskii—whose radical-idealist views, unrealized literary potential, and early death from alcoholism caused him to be canonized as the “emblematic” Petersburg intelligentsia writer—made his literary debut with a novella titled *Petit-Bourgeois Happiness* (*Meshchanskoe schastie*, 1861). Pomialovskii's novel questioned whether an educated young man of nongentry origin could find his place in Russian society, conflating the dilemma of the so-called *raznochinets* with the *meshchanstvo* class origins this hero hoped to leave behind. Alexei Pisemskii's late novels, among them *The Petit Bourgeoisie* (*Meshchane*, 1877), castigate rising capitalists for their acquisitive immorality, and illustrate the extent to which the notions of *intelligentsia* and *meshchanstvo* had diverged by this time, at least from the perspective of the former. The cultural war between *meshchanstvo* and intelligentsia shapes modern Russian intellectual history because “the Russian intelligentsia needs to fight meshchanstvo to construct its own identity,” obscuring their common social origins.⁶⁹ While the intelligentsia considered itself the bearer of intellectual and moral values, dismissing the *meshchanstvo* for prizing material comfort above all, the two groups nevertheless shared a condition of deprivation, a common experience of exclusion from Petersburg privileges and pleasures.⁷⁰

All of this textual evidence makes it difficult to dispute Antsiferov and Toporov when they assert the remarkable similarity of discourse across the Petersburg Text. Perhaps, however, the striking unity in intelligentsia accounts of the city constitutes an *intentional* unity rather than an inadvertent one, based on a literary elitism not so different from that displayed by the aristocrats who made *raznochintsy* authors feel so inadequate during the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century. Intelligentsia writers posited their superiority in intellectual and moral terms, of course, and not according to wealth, position, or breeding. Petersburg critics and theorists of both the imperial and postrevolutionary periods then replicated these attitudes. It might be, thus, that the persistent sense