

# St. Petersburg and Moscow in twentieth-century Russian literature

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## **St. Petersburg and Moscow in twentieth-century Russian literature: The view from the street**

At one pole, St. Petersburg, the rectilinear city built on desolate marshland by the sheer force of one man's will, gazing from Russia's northern border toward the West and modernity; at the other, Moscow, sprawling and chaotic capital of old Rus', geographical and emotional heart of Russia. This is the central dichotomy around which Russia's urban myth has grown, a myth in which the country's two largest cities are as inherently opposed as the masculine and feminine genders of their Russian (or not-so-Russian) names (*Sankt-Peterburg* and *Moskva*, respectively).

In his essay 'Moscow — St. Petersburg', Yevgeny Zamyatin joins the long line of Russian writers who have reflected on this dichotomy. Even as he does so, however, Zamyatin registers a change in the relative position of both cities. The prevailing nineteenth-century view of Petersburg had been as emblem of soulless, bureaucratic Russia—a 'foreign' city that threatened at any moment to disappear back into the mist whence it had miraculously emerged. For Zamyatin writing in 1933, by contrast, Petersburg is notable first and foremost for its *solidity*—for the enduring nature of its stone architecture and its inhabitants' determination to preserve the past they share with their city. Petersburg's name may have changed (to Petrograd, in 1914, and then to Leningrad, in 1924), but it remains more essentially itself than Moscow—in the nineteenth century, regarded as a truly 'Russian' city and associated with tradition and domesticity, but here viewed as ephemeral, quick to change: a young woman chasing indiscriminately after the latest fashions and striving to 'out-Corbusier Corbusier' (Zamyatin, 1970: 134).

Zamyatin's stance is exemplary of the shift in cultural position of Russia's two main cities following the revolution. The so-called Preservationists had argued loudly for the conservation of Petersburg's historical spaces throughout the first decades of the twentieth century (see Clark, 1995), and it was primarily as store of the country's cultural heritage that this city went on to feature in the twentieth-century imagination. This differs sharply from its prerevolutionary status as center of all modern Russia's ills and focal point of this generation's sense of apocalyptic foreboding. As this essay will describe, the shattering events of the revolutionary years would shift this reputation, along with the title of capital, to Moscow—soon to surpass Petersburg in the national imagination as *the* site of state authority and to become the Soviet Union's central symbolic space. Written on the brink of Moscow's reconstruction under Stalin, the 'capricious sixteen-year-old girl' Zamyatin depicts is one that would soon be brought under the strict control of Stalinist central planning. The nineteenth century had seen St. Petersburg fall from monument of imperial power to symbol and chaotic urban center of modern Russia; the twentieth century saw Moscow become a place where control was again asserted from above and power given architectural body.

This is not to say that either of Russia's main cities was easily tamed. They remained sites of resistance, spaces occupied by inhabitants whose memories and habits preserved and created narratives that could not be as easily planned or fixed as new streets, nor destroyed and cleared as rapidly as were so many of their landmark buildings. The basic structuring device of a city's form, the street is the space in which urban design comes

into contact with the urban process—in Michel de Certeau’s terms, where order imposed from above meets everyday spatial practice asserted from below and the totalizing impulse of the planner’s discourse meets the ‘swarming mass...of singularities’ that make up the text of the city as lived (de Certeau, 1984: 97). Blurring the boundaries between public and private, material and imagined, the street is the central locus of my discussion, which follows the trajectories of its chosen writers through the city streets to plot the path of the Russian city as planned and as lived through the twentieth-century cultural imagination.

Where St. Petersburg was the main focus of the nineteenth-century urban imaginary and, in many ways, the focal point of Russia’s search for identity, this essay centers on Moscow, which, I argue, fulfilled a similar function for twentieth-century Russia. A brief excursus on pre-revolutionary St. Petersburg and existing Russian urban myths thus sets the scene for a survey of the evolving image and status of Moscow as capital of the new Soviet state. This is not to dismiss the importance of Petersburg-Leningrad for twentieth-century Russian culture, but on the contrary, to recognize that the very richness of its literary landscapes deserves more space than the present essay permits.

### **Revolution in Petersburg**

Peter the Great founded St. Petersburg in 1703, but it was Pushkin’s famous 1833 *poema*, *The Bronze Horseman (Mednyi Vsadnik)*, that plotted the course the city would take in Russian cultural consciousness and laid the foundations for what the semiotician Vladimir Toporov has identified as the ‘Petersburg text’ of Russian culture. A body of

texts as much about one another as about the city they describe, the works making up this metatext have both mirrored and shaped the material city, which, Toporov argues, came to be defined above all by the irreconcilable antinomies of its physical and symbolic landscape (Toporov, 1995). These antinomies are at the heart of Pushkin's text, which tells the tale of one of the many great floods to threaten this precariously positioned city—in this poem and in the many works that followed it, a space in which civilization and nature collide, the stern lines of stone do battle with the chaotic swirling of water and wind, and the beauty of urban form sits in uncomfortable proximity to the misery of the life lived within it. The phantasmagoric chase through the city's nighttime streets with which the poem ends—the 'little man' hero, Evgenii, pursued through the city's empty squares by the famous bronze statue of Peter come terrifyingly to life—suggests the madness of Peter's plan, and the urban phantasmagoria that could be the only result of the forced creation of modern public space where, as Marshall Berman has argued, public life had as yet been allowed little room to develop (Berman, 1982: 181-9).

For modernist writers at the turn of the century, the contradictions upon which St. Petersburg was built seemed to have reached their apogee. The capital, by now industrializing apace, was a city of ever-starker contrasts, which threatened constantly to erupt (and, during the revolutionary years of 1904-1905, in fact did so) in the old conflict between rulers and ruled, imposed order and elemental rage. This is the city depicted by Andrei Bely in his novel, *Petersburg* (1913), which adds to Pushkin's city a mystical dimension connected to the decade's widespread sense of cultural crisis and dread of impending apocalypse. The cold, Western rationality of the city's external form and its

governing bodies had exhausted itself, Bely's novel asserts, and only barely contained the seething, Asiatic hordes of its squalid working-class peripheries.

Bely's vision of the city was far from unique during the pre-revolutionary modernist period, the irony being that never before had the Russian capital been such a vibrant and cosmopolitan cultural center. Russia's artists were at the forefront of European cultural production, generating some of the most innovative and radical works of early modernism—often precisely in an attempt to portray the uniquely agitated atmosphere of the tsarist city's last years and the revolutions that ensued.

Like Bely, Aleksandr Blok (1880-1921) was part of the second, deeply spiritual, generation of Russian Symbolists. In Blok's early poetry, the poet's search for the ideal realm of knowledge and perfect beauty embodied by the elusive 'Beautiful Lady' is played out in mystically shimmering rural landscapes; his later turn to the city acts, in part, as a declaration of his despair as to the success of this spiritual quest. In collections such as *The City* (1904-1908), the poet wanders the streets of a nightmarish city which, hovering on the border between the real and the imaginary, is threatened by the same lurking chaos that animates Bely's novel. The city is a 'terrible world' (the title of his 1909-1916 collection), whose many contradictions become painful signs that the harmonious unity of the ideal will never be achieved. Both alienated from the life of the city and helplessly embroiled in it, Blok's oft-solipsistic speaker occupies a position of total isolation, no more able to make contact with the ideal realm toward which he strives than with the real one through which he moves. Filled with grotesque and hostile figures,

the streets of Blok's poetry register the traumatic experiences of the thwarted 1905 revolution—but also the poet's growing sense of the intelligentsia's fatal detachment from the Russian people who suffered most from these events.

Perhaps unsurprising, then, is the extent to which Blok strove in his work to engage with urban popular culture of the period and to incorporate its themes and motifs. As Yuri Lotman has shown, it was in urban culture that Blok saw salvation for himself and the ailing intelligentsia of which he was part (Lotman, 1981). Oppressed by the elitist and lifeless culture of his own class, Blok turned to the naïve culture of the city crowd: it was only by immersing itself in the 'real' life of the city, he believed, that the intelligentsia would overcome their isolation and the transformation of the social and cultural environment be achieved. The culmination of these efforts is found in what many regard as Blok's masterpiece, *The Twelve (Dvenadtsat')*. Written in a few days in January 1918, the poem depicts the procession of twelve soldiers through the streets of Petrograd in a polyphonic montage of topical slogans, snatches of soldiers' songs, revolutionary marches and *chastushki* (simple rhyming songs) that, in one reading, is modeled directly on the folk *balagan* (Gasparov, 1994). The many cacophonous voices with which the poem speaks express the tumult of the revolutionary city streets and finally provide the speaker with a route out of his solipsism and into the elemental rush of history.

Blok was not the only member of the intelligentsia to feel that culture had reached a point of crisis to which Symbolism was ill equipped to respond; indeed, as Boris Eikhenbaum argues, the success of *The Twelve* rests on lessons learnt, at least in part, from the

Symbolists' most provocative pre-revolutionary successors, the Russian Futurists (Eikhenbaum, 1918: 3). Tearing onto the literary scene in 1912 in a hail of provocative shouts, these poets made the city streets the stage for outrageous performances of their determinedly coarse and 'non-literary' verse. They were explicit about their desire to capture the life of the city in their work: '[t]he smooth, calm, unhurried rhythms of the old poetry do not correspond to the psyche of the modern city-dweller,' Vladimir Mayakovsky declared, in an echo of Marinetti and his cult of speed: 'feverishness—that's what symbolizes the tempo of modernity' (Khardzhiev, 1997:13). In poems such as 'Night' (1912) and 'Morning' (1912), a series of rapidly exchanging cubistic images animate Mayakovsky's urban landscape and offer a multiperspectival vision that declares a newly frenetic way of moving through and perceiving the city street.

Importantly, Russian Futurism was a movement that arose in Moscow. By contrast, Acmeism—the other main post-Symbolist grouping in Russian poetry—continued to take St. Petersburg as its main theme. A comparison of the former's aggressively iconoclastic, willfully chaotic art with the classical intonations, precisely detailed objects and measured rhythms of the latter reveals the shift already taking place in the cultural positions of Russia's two main cities before the revolution. Far from the shifting and phantasmagoric space found in Bely's or Blok's work, the city of such Acmeist writers as Osip Mandelshtam (1891-1938) and Anna Akhmatova (1889-1966) is defined above all by order and form. In collections such as Mandelshtam's *Stone* (*Kamen'*, 1913) and Akhmatova's *Rosary* (*Chetki*, 1914), St. Petersburg is turned from symbol of modern Russia's ills into bastion of its cultural heritage and spiritual well being.



Moscow, meanwhile, was shaking off its homely reputation with the help of Mayakovsky and the Futurists. These artists sought not to produce cultural artifacts, but rather, through their sorties into the urban environment, actively to rejuvenate social consciousness through disruptive mass performance. Audience reaction was an integral part of their confrontational art, which relied upon the same transgression of boundary between text and audience as that which had so attracted Blok to folk theatre and the *balagan*. Joan Neuberger has connected Futurism with the wave of hooliganism that spread through Russian cities in the wake of the 1905 revolution, seeing both as a potentially threatening extension of the folk carnival; while the latter's challenge to established hierarchies and claim to the city's spaces was permitted and even expected within the confines of the carnival, the inversion of civilized values practiced by the hooligans and the Futurists—who refused to be limited to specific times and places—posed a serious threat to structures of authority (Neuberger, 1993).

If, as I am suggesting, twentieth-century Moscow takes the place occupied by St. Petersburg in the nineteenth as the site where state authority was most vigorously contested, the difference between the 'little man' hero of Pushkin's *The Bronze Horseman*, Evgeny, and these new, futurist-hooligan 'little men' is nonetheless clear. The powerless Evgeny's one act of resistance—the shout 'I'll show you!' ('uzho tebe!'), directed at the statue of Peter—is defiant, but pathetically so; by the end of the poem, he has lost everything. The Futurists, reviving his cry, amplify it to a programmatic rejection of the state, culture, and the old order of things. Turning away from the elite culture of

the tsarist capital and the past, they sought in Moscow a new culture of the city street and of the energetic, modern individual. The northern city, Petersburg, was left frozen on the border between the immortality promised by its cultural heritage and the death and oblivion that apocalypse or obsolescence would bring.

### **Moscow and the Modernist Experiment.**

In stories such as Zamyatin's 'The Cave' ('Peshchera', 1920), the Petrograd of the immediate post-revolutionary period is pictured as a cold and desolate place—a wasteland whose inhabitants must burn the books that are the last remnants of their cultural heritage in order to stay alive. This was, in part, a reflection of historical reality; the winter of 1918-1919 was a particularly bitter one in the city. The bleak picture of the city in such texts also testifies, however, to the widespread sense of the city's spiritual demise; gutted of resources as well as the intelligentsia bearers of its cultural identity, Petersburg-Petrograd appeared in much literature of the period as a cold and deathly place, the grave of a civilization that had been thrown from the steamship of Soviet modernity.

Moscow, by contrast, although beset by many of the same material hardships as Petrograd, was bolstered by its new status as capital of the young state. Home to many of the avant-garde artists who, even before the revolution, had worked to reject the culture of the past, Moscow—a city that had previously featured in the Russian imagination as the country's sedate and ancient centre—was now the focus of their enthusiastic plans for the construction of a socialist utopia. As we will see, however, the totalizing vision of

these plans produced many of the same tensions between order and spontaneity as had characterized pre-revolutionary Petersburg and, indeed, Peter the Great's own achievements.

In practice, post-revolutionary Moscow remained much as it had been. In part, this was due to the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1924, which signaled a return to pre-revolutionary street-trading practices. But the city was also a historical space that, *pace* Zamyatin, retained memories of its rich past. As the narrator of Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky's *Postmark: Moscow (Shtempel—Moskva, 1925)* reflects,

‘...people just like me have walked, day after day, year after year, century after century, from crossroad to crossroad, around squares, past churches and markets, encircled by walls, immured in thought: Moscow. On top of their footprints lie more footprints and more footprints still; on top of their thoughts, more thoughts and more thoughts still.’ (Krzhizhanovsky, 2013: 172)

Krzhizhanovsky's provincial newcomer to the post-revolutionary capital struggles to reconcile the city's disparate elements—to bridge mentally the centuries-wide gap between the cold acronyms of the new Soviet present (‘the symbols CC RCP (B)’) and the religious buildings and characterful names of Russia's past (‘the crooked belfry of the Church of Nine Martyrs, by the Humpbacked Bridge’). Such stark juxtapositions thwart the wandering narrator's search for the ‘meaning of Moscow;’ unable to untie this ‘city-tangle’ and identify the threads from which it is composed, the narrator must concede that its multiply authored landscape and lack of clearly definable center are its very essence. Just as any attempts to build new streets in Moscow along Petersburgian straight lines

‘immediately got muddled in a morass of bystreets, blind alleys, crossings, and windings’ (Krzhizhanovsky, 2013: 178), so the narrator’s own attempts to describe Moscow proceed in winding sentences that perform the very unmappability they describe. Implicitly, however, navigating their twists and turns is the only means by which the reader can access the true text of the city’s streets.

Nonetheless, Krzhizhanovsky does in fact echo Zamyatin’s emphasis on Moscow’s readiness-to-change, albeit in a positive key; devoting himself to a study of Moscow’s past, Krzhizhanovsky’s narrator amasses considerable historical evidence to suggest that, despite the nineteenth-century insistence on the city’s slowness to change, the city had always been quick to reconstruct and redefine itself. What to Zamyatin appears fickle, though, appears to this speaker simply a matter of necessity, given the frequency with which the old city’s wooden buildings were destroyed by fire; for him, it represents proof of the city’s resilience. Either way, that this narrative of Moscow’s ability to reinvent itself emerges in the context of the 1920s says much about the extent to which these years were defined by change and experiment.

Krzhizhanovsky identifies an intimate link between the ever-changing physical form of the city and the psychology of its inhabitants, ever ready to adapt to new circumstances. The connection between space and psyche would be a central tenet of the modernist plans for urban living debated in the 1920s, in Russia as abroad. Avant-garde planners sought through the creation of communal living, working, and social spaces actively to mould in these inhabitants a new, Soviet subjectivity.

Nineteenth-century epitome of the glaring social injustices of capitalism and the atomized forms of social life it encouraged, the city was the logical site for the new generation's utopian plans—not least given the prerogative of rapid urbanization for a state that was attempting rapidly to accelerate through several stages of historical development. Urban planning was needed to speed the cultural revolution and 'the transition to a new, socially superior way of life' (Ginzburg, cited Kopp, 1970: 135), but also, more pragmatically, to answer the basic necessity of improving quality of housing in order to ensure increased productivity amongst workers. The proposed solution was 'social condensers,' buildings that sought to combine spaces of work and housing and fundamentally to rethink notions of public and private space, work and leisure time. Characterized by their use of transparent materials such as glass, their emphasis on communal spaces, and forms designed with an eye to standardized production, these buildings sought a new approach to the use of space that subordinated individual functions more and more to social ones in a utopian effort to effect 'the transformation of man' (Kopp, 144).

Such ideas seem a world away from the classical forms of tsarist St. Petersburg; yet for all the social radicalism of these architects' plans, their emphasis on the rationalization of life as well as their desire to accelerate the country's historical development aligns their project with that of Peter the Great. Indeed, the state's assumption of 'sole responsibility for all that related to housing, urban design, and land use' (Kopp, 5) created much the same centralized conditions for urban planning that had ensured the success of Peter's vision; and although modernist planners such as Moisei Ginzburg were careful to

emphasize their desire to ‘stimulate the transition to a socially superior mode of life, *stimulate but not dictate*’ (cited Kopp, 141), the top-down manner in which they sought to impose their utopian plans met with some resistance from below.

This conflict is dramatized in Yuri Olesha’s 1927 novel, *Envy*, which stages the confrontation of the rational planner with the urban inhabitant. The novel’s first part is narrated by Nikolai Kavalero, an outsider with a penchant for extravagant metaphors who has been taken into the house of Andrei Babichev, a model Soviet citizen laboring to build a communal cafeteria and provide the proletariat with the perfect sausage. Kavalero lives on Babichev’s sofa, and it is from this position—lying quite literally ‘below’ the planner, Babichev—that he describes, in ‘lustrous and stereoscopic’ manner, the new, utilitarian social order being constructed from on high (Olesha, 2004: 69).

Joining forces with Babichev’s misfit brother and spinner of tall tales, Ivan, Kavalero plots to undermine this new world through a ‘conspiracy of feelings’ that insists on the necessity of ‘old world’ values such as imagination and art. Kavalero and Ivan Babichev first meet in front of a street mirror; emblematic of the unique perspective that the pair turns on the world through which they move, its distorting effects represent a subjective mode of interacting with space that cannot be completely controlled. The increasingly disjointed and fantastic narrative of the novel’s second part is a counterpart to Mayakovsky’s urban poetry, whose futurist escapades the two heroes continue: their insistent ‘resistance to the routine’ (Wolfson, 2011: 69) seems both born of the street and, in some sense, to produce it. The wild places that increasingly impinge upon the novel’s

urban landscape—as for example the peripheral wasteland that is the site of Kavalero’s dreamlike first encounter with Ivan’s destructive machine, Ophelia—become figures for the realm of private fantasy that counters efforts to rationalize human existence.

Ophelia features in what seems to be the novel’s climax—a confrontation between the two sides on the square outside Andrei’s cafeteria that, as Ivan and Kavalero emerge from the crowd to challenge Andrei and his towering cafeteria, might be read as a parodic recapitulation of Pushkin’s *The Bronze Horseman* (‘We’ll show you!’). Yet the text continues, and the vertical drama of the earlier *poema* is superseded by the horizontal drama of the national football game that follows, much as the characters’ attempts to wage war according to clearly opposed ideological positions—new and old, progress and decadence, rationality and feeling—are repeatedly undermined. Ivan and Kavalero end the novel chased into the disgusting bed of their old—and decidedly old-world—landlady; Andrei, his youthful comrades, and the new world they are building seem unaffected.

Does this represent the failure of old-world values? Such was the contemporary interpretation. The ambiguity of the novel’s ending, and of the text as a whole, suggests, however, that the conflict is a less straightforwardly dichotomous one than may first appear, and lies less in the novel’s content than its form. Abounding in myriad unexpected images, the text offers not a panoramic view of the city, but a highly idiosyncratic view of it as it is lived. Its structure—which ‘moves back and forth and sideways, but not forward,’ switches constantly between action and reflection, and

combines straightforward narrative with letters, songs, notes, and even museum labels (Peppard, 1999: 91)—asserts and celebrates the inevitably haphazard nature of urban life as it takes place in the city street, a space that can be planned but never controlled completely.

Kavalerov's markedly visual imagination echoes Krzhizhanovsky's assertion that Moscow is a 'city of images' (Krzhizhanovsky, 2013: 184); *Envy* as a whole implicitly agrees with his contention that this orientation toward the *visual* is what ultimately differentiates Moscow from Petersburg, the product above all of abstract *ideas* imposed from above. As noted by Kazimiera Ingdahl, the drafts of Olesha's novel frequently describe perception in terms of film technique (Ingdahl, 1994). The comparison of Kavalerov's eye with the lens of a camera is for one critic '[n]o doubt influenced by Eisenstein's experiments with cinematic montage, which was itself based on the carnivalesque "theater of attractions"' (Brandist, 1996: 130). Yet it also evokes another filmmaker of the 1920s, Dziga Vertov. Although his seminal *Man with a Movie-Camera* was not released until 1929, moments in Olesha's completed novel read like scripts for this film, which creates a portrait of the city defined above all by its daily cycles and rhythms:

'(Gates were being opened. A glass was being filled with milk. A man who had worked though the night walked to the window and was amazed, not recognizing the street in its unfamiliar lighting... The morning had begun.)' (Olesha, 2004: 49)



The scene is reminiscent of the montage sequences that make up Vertov's film, which juxtapose seemingly disparate aspects of the urban landscape and the activities of its inhabitants to describe the relationship between the two.

More fundamentally, parallels can be drawn between the unusual, transformative perspective of Olesha's novel and Vertov's interest in the possibilities that film introduced for 'exploring, even reconstructing, space and... establishing a new relationship between the human body and the physical world' (Widdis, 2003: 60). No less invested than modernist planners in reimagining space and man's relationship to it, these modernist artists differed from their architectural counterparts in the mobile nature of their vision, projected always from the level of the individual and attuned above all to the rhythms of the city as experienced, rather than planned, space. The visibility of such works attests to the plurality that still by and large characterized Russian culture as well as the Russian city during the 1920s; a city very much in transition, Moscow remained a space above all of possibility.

### **Stalinist Moscow**

The crooked and unique view 'from below' that Olesha claims for his protagonists was not one that the individual artist would be allowed to keep for long, just as the streets of Moscow themselves were soon to be straightened out and Kavalero's beloved street mirrors replaced by the clear glass, marble and stone of 'New Moscow,' the massive centralized reconstruction project begun in the thirties—the so-called Moscow General Reconstruction Plan, approved by the Central Committee in 1935. Plans centered on the

proposed Palace of the Soviets, whence broad boulevards were to extend in grand radial arteries. Far from making the city more legible for the pedestrian, however, this systematic reordering of the cityscape envisioned ordered space on a scale readable only from the panoramic heights of state power. In this light, Andrei Babichev's plans for a revolutionary cafeteria begin to look decidedly modest.

In his *Culture Two* (1985), Vladimir Paperny notes this shift of scale and axes, which he adds to the list of binary oppositions that for him define the contrasting cultures of the twenties and the Stalinist thirties ('Culture One' and 'Culture Two'). If the twenties had been an era of horizontality, when the memory of the revolution and the excitement of a new beginning fostered a society fuelled by an inclusive socialist vision, the nineteen thirties saw a shift to a new *verticality*. Rather than a 'big village' (an enduring topos of Moscow's myth), Moscow was now the city of cities, the center of the world that would have at its own center the dramatically towering Palace of Soviets.

This is further evidenced by the period's revival of the myth of Moscow as 'third Rome,' an idea that dated back to the pronouncements of sixteenth-century Russian monk, Filofei of Pskov, and positioned Moscow as succeeding Rome and Constantinople as divinely elected centre of 'true' (Russian Orthodox) Christianity and imperial dominion. Katerina Clark has preferred to speak of Moscow as 'fourth Rome' in this context, since 'it was not...to be a model and center of Christianity. Rather, it was to be the capital of a *different*, post-Christian, belief system' (Clark, 2011: 2).

Hampered by technical and financial problems, the Palace of Soviets would never be built, but the design eventually selected, after two architectural contests spanning the years 1931-1934, is a defining one for the culture of these years. Absurdly monumental, the winning tower—designed by Boris Iofan, Vladimir Shchuko, and Vladimir Gelfreikh—was to be topped by a statue of Lenin so high it would extend above the clouds, making literal Stalinism's declaration that a secular heaven on earth had replaced any religious heaven. Directing all eyes upward, it would serve as looming reminder of the penetrating gaze to which all were now subject. The heroic goalkeeper of Olesha's football game and its level playing field is replaced by the state aviator, popular hero of the nineteen thirties, and his refrain (in the words of a famous song), 'I can see everything from above, keep that in mind!' (Paperny, 1985: 63)

Nonetheless, the reconstruction of Moscow was pitched as beneficial for all citizens, as the viewer of Aleksandr Medvedkin's 1938 film *New Moscow (Novaia Moskva)* might have felt reassured. A sequence near the beginning of the film shows the buildings and environs of old Moscow being destroyed and replaced instantaneously with simulations of the buildings to come. Dark, disorderly streets and derelict buildings are replaced by the straight lines of grand prospects and stone buildings; grand archways open up the city's spaces, flooding them with light and opening up vistas of the rest of the city beyond. Repeatedly contrasted with the bustling life of the Moscow streets it was to replace, however, the glorious city of the future appears lifeless, a fantastic projection far removed from the everyday, lived space of the present. Unperturbed by the buildings that

are literally shifting places outside her window, the young architect's wise old grandmother continues to sip her tea.

Other works of the 1930s position Moscow on a similar border between real city and fantastic symbol. The most famous example is Mikhail Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*, written between 1928 and 1940. The text usually features near the top of lists of 'Moscow' novels—yet while its setting is indisputably the Soviet capital of the thirties, the actual landscape of the city is oddly difficult to make out, so that not only the reader-tourist but even a native Muscovite might be forgiven for struggling clearly to envision it. This is perhaps unsurprising for a novel that hinges on the visit of a devilish figure named Woland and his retinue of tricksters to the capital, and their subsequent efforts to confound its residents. Given the ubiquity of discussions about plans for the 'New Moscow' during this period, however, and the many tangible signs of their rapid execution, the visitors' ability to distort the city's spaces seems also to offer commentary on this reconstruction project.

The novel's famous opening stages a meeting between two pompous members of the Moscow literary establishment, Mikhail Berlioz and Ivan Bezdomnyi, and a mysterious stranger who claims to have been witness to Pontius Pilate's judgment of Christ, and so to have the seventh proof of God's existence. So far, so fictional; yet the reader, like the characters themselves, struggles to shake off the realism apparently guaranteed by the scene's precisely described location (at Moscow's well-known Patriarch's Ponds). This

uncanny layering of the real Moscow and the unbelievable events to which it plays host is typical of the novel as a whole.

As Medvedkin's *New Moscow* vividly shows, the question of the city's construction was not one that could be ignored by the inhabitants of Moscow, who watched as the city's landscape shifted before their eyes and beneath their feet. In Bulgakov's novel, the names of a few key buildings, streets, and institutions are repeatedly referenced; the movement of characters between these locales, however, is characterized above all by curious rifts in space:

‘However upset Ivan might have been, still he was struck by the supernatural speed at which the pursuit was taking place. Not twenty seconds had passed after leaving the Nikitskiye Gates before Ivan Nikolayevich was already blinded by the lights on Arbat Square. A few seconds more, and here was some dark lane with sloping pavements where Ivan Nikolayevich went crashing down and injured his knee. Again, a well-lit main road—Kropotkin Street—then a side street, then Ostozhenka and another side street, cheerless, ugly, and poorly lit. And it was here that Ivan Nikolayevich finally lost the man he so needed. The Professor had vanished.’ (Bulgakov, 2010: 50)

Street names are precisely specified (a circumstance from which more than one Moscow tour guide has profited), yet the combined effect of this topographical precision is not to clarify Ivan's route but, rather, to render it the more confusing: if Ivan is dizzied by the ‘supernatural’ speed with which he manages to cover the quite sizeable distance between

the Arbat and Kropotkina street, the reader's own attempts mentally to plot this journey are left similarly reeling by the speed with which Bulgakov's sentences progress.

Thus connected to the city's physical space, the oft-remarked pace of the novel's narrative seems, on this level, intended to echo the breathtaking rapidity with which the construction of the ideal city-utopia was supposed to progress (witness the almost instantaneous erection of buildings on fresh piles of rubble in *New Moscow*). It is as though the spaces in between do not exist—much as, one might suggest, the necessarily piecemeal nature of Moscow's grand reconstruction demanded that its citizens look not at the many half-built spaces it still contained (the 'cheerless' side streets through which Ivan runs in the cited passage), but instead at those few completed structures that served to project the city to come. Imperative was the ability to see into the bright Soviet future and to make 'the old Moscow houses appear transparent, and through them...clearly see their future stone, cement, and marble successors' (Lev Kassil', cited in Livers, 2004: 204). Stumbling through dark side streets and blinded by the lights on the Arbat and Kropotkina, Ivan demonstrates the confusion this inevitably caused.

Here, one also detects a critique of a prevailing discourse of the period whereby bright light and, in particular, the sun were invoked as a symbol of Stalin and Stalinist culture's 'solar dimensions' (Livers: 221). *Master and Margarita's* use of sun and moon imagery is one of its most insistent motifs; acting as an overwhelmingly negative force throughout the novel, the harsh light of the sun is rejected by Bulgakov along with the polarized, absolutist worldview it represents in favor of the moon and the muted light it casts on

another, more subtly shaded order of existence—one that acknowledges man’s flaws and emphasizes above all that knowledge can only ever be partial and gained through experience. Deprived of the experiential knowledge of the city’s spaces that was so central to the thought and ideology of the Soviet avant-garde in the 1920s, the novel’s characters move through a Moscow that is an emblem of the moral dead ends that underlay Stalinist urban planning.

Indeed, the kind of clarity that the grand restructuring of Moscow was supposed to bring through the *cleansing* of the city on all levels is exposed as both vicious and, ultimately, futile: at the end of Bulgakov’s novel, Woland looks down on a city where nothing has changed. The people of Moscow have failed to learn any lessons from what has occurred and continue to live according to their own selfish and petty concerns—but this is symptomatic of a larger failure, that of the transformation of the city itself into the pure, utopian capital of official discourse. As in Olesha’s novel, the diversity of styles and the openness of Bulgakov’s narrative attitude recall and celebrate the haphazardness of a Moscow past, and stand as a declaration in support of the city’s own incorrigible spirit.

### **Late-Soviet Cities**

Bulgakov’s novel goes to fantastic lengths to counter the controlling urban vision of Stalinism; Stalin’s death in 1953 cleared the way for a more everyday kind of resistance to urban grandiosity. Ushered in by calls for ‘unpolished reality’ and ‘sincerity’ in literature from writers and critics alike, the so-called ‘thaw’ period reacted to the excesses of Stalinism and the ordeals of the Second World War through renewed attention to the

everyday life of the ordinary Soviet citizen. In Paperny's terms, this shift of focus and scale signals a return to the 'horizontal' principles of Culture One. While, however, thaw-era artists reached back to the culture of the 1920s, the radical avant-garde experiments and utopian urban visions of this earlier period were replaced by the search for a newly intimate city in which to lead, quite simply, an ordinary life.

Films such as Marlen Khutsiev's 1961 *Il'ich's Gate* (*Zastava Il'icha*, released in censored form as *Mne dvadtsat' let* (*I Am Twenty*) in 1965) are typical of the period. The film tells the story of three young men as they come of age and try to make sense of the world and their purpose in it. Crucially, their stories are played out against an urban landscape made up predominantly of the city's courtyards, streets, and parks—places, that is, where urban inhabitants actually live and spend their time. The city of Khutsiev's film is thus a new incarnation of the Moscow-as-big-village topos: an intimate space, characterized, by and large, by the opportunities for community and friendship it provides. The May Day parade that is one of the film's central scenes is typical of its approach; shot from within the crowd, the scene emphasizes the parade as a moment of spontaneous connection with and celebration amongst fellow citizens. The camera records the flow of the crowd, lingering on the faces and actions of the people in it—neither threatening and chaotic mob nor regimented Stalinist parade, but, rather, a community of autonomous and self-valuable individuals (Woll, 2000).

At the same time, the youthful protagonists of the thaw era—the first generation to come of age after the war—must orient themselves in a social and historical space still in the



shadow of Russia's immediate Stalinist past and the devastation of wartime. This was quite literally the case: as symbols of victory and a new era of Soviet power, Stalin had ordered the erection of seven *vysotky*, towering skyscrapers constructed around the city between 1947 and 1957. The buildings do not appear in Khutsiev's film, just as its older, war-scarred characters fail to offer its protagonists guidance. Instead, as suggested by the film's original title (*Il'ich's Gate*, a working-class neighbourhood named for Vladimir Il'ich Ulyanov, alias Lenin) and its opening sequence (in which several Red Army soldiers walk through the early morning streets), its heroes find in Moscow's marginal spaces traces of a historical period when the distance between society's proclaimed ideals and the hypocrisy of its reality appeared less stark.

'Suspended in time, between an unthinkable past and not quite imaginable future' (Neuberger, 2009: 81), Khutsiev's heroes reach back through Moscow's streets to an earlier *time* for alternative models; the heroes of Vasily Aksenov's novella, *Starry Ticket* (*Zvezdnyi bilet*, 1961), another coming-of-age story, look for them along a *spatial* axis. In this text, Moscow is displaced from its geographical and historical location by 'westernizing' descriptions of the city as a buzzing metropolis full of traffic and other modern conveniences—an extension of the real phenomenon whereby *stilyagi* ('style hunters,' the derogatory name given to postwar counterculture youth) referred to central streets in Soviet cities as 'Brodvei' in clear defiance of the official symbolism attached to such urban spaces (Yurchak, 2006: 193). Speaking in trendy urban slang peppered with Anglicisms and references to Western culture, these characters listen to jazz and spend the majority of the novel in Riga—the most 'Western' of Soviet cities, but nonetheless

the site of their coming-to-consciousness as socialist citizens. Their maturation thus involves movement *away* from the center represented by Moscow, rather than, as generally the case in Stalin-era Socialist Realist literature, towards it (Clark, 1981).

The energy that characterizes Moscow in both Aksenov's novel and Khutsiev's film bespeaks the renewed vitality of this younger generation and the independent life they lead in the courtyard and the street; it also positions them as heirs to the Futurists and the post-revolutionary avant-garde. While their determined exuberance may not be enough to counter the corruption still at the heart of the city and society at large—Aksenov's novella ends with the mysterious death of the older brother, newly a doctor of physics and implicitly the victim of workplace machinations by his older colleagues—both texts also end with hope; in the latter, the younger brother gazes at the cosmos his dead brother had hoped to conquer and vows to use the 'starry ticket' he has been bequeathed to reach a better future. By the end of the decade, this hope had faltered. Even before the 1968 invasion of Prague brought the thaw period to a definitive close, crisis threatened a younger generation that seemed increasingly to lose a sense of larger purpose. In later thaw works, such as Khutsiev's 'sequel' to *Il'ich's Gate*, *A July Rain (Iul'skii dozhd'*, 1966), the life of the city and the flow of its inhabitants constitutes an alienating experience; the streets of this film, either empty or oppressively busy, lack the community of *Il'ich's Gate*, while the camera's lingering focus on individual faces feels uncomfortably intrusive, its gaze returned by their own hostile and defensive stares. Lacking both symbolic weight and the meaning born of interpersonal connections, the

public spaces of late thaw culture's Moscow show signs of an emptiness that would be more acutely felt with each passing decade of late Soviet society.

The rapidity with which this feeling took hold is demonstrated by *Moskva-Petushki* (written in 1969-1970, shortly after the Prague Spring; published in English as *Moscow to the End of the Line*, 1980), the rambling monologue of Venichka, a gentle drunkard who is trying to get from Moscow to Petushki, a town in the Moscow region. At the beginning of the novel, Venichka wakes from a drunken stupor in a Moscow doorway, before heading for Kursk station to catch a train to Petushki—in the text, an Edenic paradise where Venichka's lover and son live. Growing steadily drunker with the passing of each stop, however, Venichka apparently falls asleep, misses Petushki, and ends up back in Moscow. A dark and threatening place of ominously empty streets, the capital in this 'novel-poema' is the hellish counterpoint to the purity and light associated with Petushki, and is overshadowed by the oppressive but elusive presence of the Kremlin—which Venichka claims never to have seen, despite the many years he has lived in Moscow. It is only at the novel's end that, pursued by four mysterious thugs, he finally collides with the Kremlin's walls. After one last desperate sprint to escape, Venichka has his throat pierced in a dark doorway much like that in which the novel-poema began: the empty space at the city's center turns out to have a magnetic force that is stronger than Venichka's faith in Petushki and the salvation from chaos and despair that might await him there, could he reach it.

The similarities with Pushkin's poem-tale, *The Bronze Horseman*, which ends with the 'little man' Evgenii's death in the shadow of the eponymous statue, again reveal the continued resonance of the Petersburg text in twentieth-century depictions of Moscow. Where, however, the drama of Pushkin's poem rests on the question of whether Peter the Great's forceful modernization was historically justified (despite its many casualties), Venichka's circular journey through the featureless Moscow landscape of *Moskva-Petushki* exposes the absurdity and purposelessness of history, which goes nowhere but exacts a high price nonetheless.

The hopefulness that still characterized the sixties generation is thus markedly absent in Erofeev's novel. For all its criticism of late-Soviet society, however, the almost exuberant excessiveness of *Moskva-Petushki*'s verbal fabric is also a celebration of the imaginative possibilities opened up by its hero's defiantly inebriated state. The text is a veritable mosaic of cultural references, open to diverse interpretation: as a modern picaresque, an alternative gospel (Gasparov and Paperno, 1981), a 'carnivalized carnival' (Lipovetsky, 1999), and more. As such, the text itself arguably escapes the 'looking-glass logic, enchanted space, [the] vicious circle' (Lipovetsky, 1999: 77) that Venichka—trapped in an eternal *zapoï* (drunken bout) that echoes society's entrapment in *zastoi* (stagnation)—cannot.

Indeed, if in its last decades the Soviet system and its symbolic order became increasingly emptied of meaning, this was arguably accompanied by a resurgence of individual creativity in the city. Groups such as the Moscow Conceptualists took creative

advantage of the emptiness they saw at the core of the Soviet utopia, building an artistic practice on ‘contiguity, closeness, touchingness, contact with nothing’ (Kabakov, cited Epstein, 1995) to show that ‘language is only language and not the absolute truth, and once we understand this we will obtain freedom’ (Dmitry Prigov, cited Lipovetsky, 1999: 218; see also Boym, 1994).

Prigov’s own poetic cycle, *Moscow and Muscovites* (*Moskva i moskvichi*, 1982), is an example of the tactics employed. The cycle presents a potted history of the city, in which a Moscow inhabitant, keen to define the ‘mystique of Moscow’, rehearses the many myths that have grown up around the city. The speaker’s apparently naive interpretations of these myths—the hyperbolic declaration, for example, that all peoples of every nation originated in Moscow, the center of the world—in fact merely take them to their logical conclusion, highlighting the porous boundary between fact and fiction and the dangerous ease with which the latter can usurp the former. Combining odic language with modern colloquialisms, the cycle’s haphazard layering of discourses does less to describe and situate the city than to deconstruct it; repeatedly invoked, even the capital’s name threatens to lose all meaning. This battle between sense and nonsense ends:

Но нет, Москва бывает, где стоим мы  
Москва пребудет, где мы ей укажем  
Где мы поставим - там и есть Москва!  
То есть - в Москве

(But no, Moscow is where we are standing / Moscow will be where we order it to be / Where we put it – that’s where Moscow is! / That is — in Moscow.)

Hovering on the brink of tautology, the glorious climax at which the speaker’s logical knots attempt to arrive is finally undermined by the laconic ‘clarification’ offered in the last line. The effect is comedic, but also, more seriously, serves to expose the gap

between the real Moscow in which the speaker stands and the empty verbiage of the various ideological myths competing to assert power over that space and its inhabitants. Echoing the contradictory opening statements of Bely's *Petersburg* ('[i]f Petersburg is not the capital, then there is no Petersburg' and 'beyond Petersburg there is nothing'), the poem's jocular tone conceals a more profound reflection on the fictionality of the Russian city and the power of these fictions to shape surrounding actuality.

Such radical critique of mythic constructs inevitably also calls into question the power with which the poetic word is invested—not least, given the poetic origin and dissemination of many of the myths in question. Prigov's parodying of literary clichés combines with his irreverent conceptualist poetics—built on laconic colloquial speech and gestural performance—in order to demonstrate the same skepticism toward the potential and significance of the *poetic* word as toward any other. Where late tsarist Petersburg, over-determined by symbolism, had seemed on the brink of apocalyptic destruction, the literary, political, and historical constructs surrounding Moscow had, by the end of the Soviet period, lost their weight; if the city was in danger of disappearing, it was into discourse. Once again, the remedy proposed is a return to the real city, unfixed and unfixable in language, produced by the day-to-day existence of its inhabitants in the streets.

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