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The Myth of St. Petersburg in the Mirror of Modern Literature

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Abstract. The purpose of this study is to systematically describe of the transition of the St. Petersburg text from a living literary tradition to a hypertrophied, fragmentary, and self-reflexive mythological code. The question of how political cataclysms (revolutions, blockades, the renaming of the city) and the change of place names transformed the archaic myth had not previously been addressed comprehensively: studies either focused on the classics of the 19th century or identified individual postmodern techniques without connection to the archaic stratum. The scholarly contribution of this work lies in identifying the stable structure of the “archetype of death”, which remains stable across ideological shifts and becomes the core of Russian cultural identity. The article contains sections devoted to the theory of the St. Petersburg text, examination of political upheavals as catalysts for the transformation of the St. Petersburg text, and comparison of key mythemes (of water and death). The research methodology included comparative analysis of the corpus of texts, and semiotic deconstruction of recurring narrative nodes. St. Petersburg in modern literature is not a topos, but an operator of cultural memory; the myth of the city has outlived its referent and turned into an autonomous generator of meanings. The resulting model can serve as a tool for deciphering other “urban texts” of Russian culture.

Keywords: St. Petersburg text, cultural identity, city mythology, urban text, myth hypertrophy, 20th–21st century Russian literature

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Миф о Петербурге в зеркале современной литературы

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Аннотация. Цель исследования – системное описание перехода «петербургского текста» из живой литературной традиции в гипертрофированный, фрагментарный и саморефлексивный мифологический код. Данный вопрос раньше не рассматривался в комплексе: исследования либо останавливались на классике XIX в., либо фиксировали отдельные постмодернистские приемы без связи с архаическим пластом. Научная ценность работы – в выявлении устойчивой структуры «архетипа смерти», который сохраняется при любых идеологических сдвигах и становится ядром русской культурной идентичности. Статья содержит разделы, посвященные теории петербургского текста, анализу политических катаклизмов как факторов его трансформации и сопоставлению ключевых мифологем (воды, смерти). Методологическую основу исследования составили анализ корпуса текстов, семиотическая деконструкция повторяющихся сюжетных узлов. Петербург в современной литературе – не топос, а оператор культурной памяти; миф о нем пережил свой референт и превратился в автономный генератор смыслов. Полученная модель может служить инструментом для дешифровки других «городских текстов» русской культуры.

Ключевые слова: петербургский текст, культурная идентичность, мифология города, городской текст, гипертрофия мифа, русская литература XX–XXI вв.

Вклад авторов. Разработка идеи, сбор и анализ исследовательских данных, написание статьи – С.А. Румянцева; редактирование – М.М. Голубков. Все авторы прочли и одобрили окончательную версию рукописи.

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Introduction

The myth of St. Petersburg was formed under the influence of two opposing but complementary sources: folklore and official literary tradition. In folklore, the key role was played by Tsarevich Alexei's mention of the words of Peter I's wife, Evdokia Lopukhina, during his interrogation: "Petersburg will be empty" (Dolgoplov, 1977, p. 60). This saying, perceived as a curse, became the basis of a mythologeme that turned the city into a symbol of God's wrath, a place of evil, disorder and unnaturalness – an "unnatural" settlement imposed by force and alien to the Russian soul. In legends, songs, and anecdotes, St. Petersburg appears as

a ghost town cursed by heaven itself, where cold, foreign customs, and moral degradation reign supreme. This myth is not just transmitted verbally – it becomes a cultural code in which the city is associated with tragedy, betrayal, and divine punishment.

In contrast, official literature, especially during the imperial era, was dominated by apologetic narratives extolling St. Petersburg as a “window to Europe”, a symbol of enlightenment, civilization, and imperial power. Poets, historians, and statesmen portrayed the city as the product of Peter the Great’s genius, the embodiment of reason, order, and progress. However, as L. Dolgoplov (1977) emphasizes, the discussions around St. Petersburg has never been reduced to disputes about its historical origin – they were and still are disputes about the attitude toward it. In other words, it is not about how the city was founded, but about how to understand it: as a blasphemous monster or as the greatest achievement of civilization.

Social Cataclysms as Catalysts for the Transformation of the Petersburg Text

The October Revolution of 1917 and the subsequent renaming of the city as Leningrad in 1924 caused a fundamental change in the fate of the St. Petersburg text of Russian literature. A number of researchers, following M.V. Rozhdestvenskaya, believe that from this moment on, the classical St. Petersburg text described by V.N. Toporov effectively ceases to exist, giving way to the ideologically reoriented “Leningrad text”, where Lenin replaces Peter in the role of a demiurge (2002, p. 10).

Although some scholars, such as I.Z. Veisman (2005), discuss the transformation and continuation of the tradition, others, such as V.I. Tyupa, insist on a fundamental break: “The Leningrad text, if it can be identified and described, is not a continuation of the Petersburg one”, since “toponymy in the art of word is fundamentally more important than topography” (2005, p. 91). The same position is held by M. Aucouturier, who notes that “the renaming of the city ends what V.N. Toporov called the ‘Petersburg text of Russian literature’” (1997, p. 164). At the same time, some modern research relies on the “Leningrad text” as a continuation of St. Petersburg text, especially in the context of literature of the 21st century, for example, the study of N.A. Kolondaeva (2021).

On the other hand, a concept of the “chapter” of the St. Petersburg text has been proposed, suggesting that at different historical stages this chapter retains its basic structural elements, but at the same time it is enriched with new semantic layers and associations under the influence of external events, for example, the emigration of the early 20th century or the Great Patriotic War. This idea is developed by Z.G. Mints, who points out that “the Petersburg text” of the Russian Symbolists appears as a “chapter” in the continuously developing “Petersburg text of Russian literature” (2004, pp. 103–115), and I.Z. Veisman, according to “the Petersburg text’s attraction to openness has found realization in the Leningrad text of Russian literature, which can be considered as the ‘chapter’ of the St. Petersburg text or separately from it” (2005, p. 4).

Regardless of the chosen point of view, it is obvious that in the period from the 1920s to the 1990s, the St. Petersburg text turned out to be divorced from its classical foundations. Its mythological structure has not disappeared, but has undergone severe deformation: the former semantic components have been reinterpreted, ideologized, or taken to extremes. For modern authors, such as A. Astvatsaturov or A. Obukh, it is fundamentally important to distinguish between St. Petersburg and Leningrad as two toposes bearing two radically different cultural codes.

As already noted, the term “Petersburg text”, introduced by V.N. Toporov (2005), is well-established and continues to develop by incorporating works of contemporary literature, that is, by accumulating new semantic strata.

In modern literature, interest in the St. Petersburg intertext has not faded, but it already exists as a conscious game with a hapertrophied myth. According to the research of D.F. Kerimova (2017) and of V.D. Chernyak and M.A. Chernyak (2018), modern writers (T. Tolstaya, A. Bitov, M. Veller, et al.) actively appeal to the images of Pushkin, Gogol, and the Symbolists, but they do so through the prism of personal, autobiographical experience and non-fiction genres. The St. Petersburg text today is no longer an organic semiotic medium, but a consciously exploited set of mythologemes, vivid but largely disconnected from its original source.

Transformation of the Archetype of Death in the Petersburg Text

The transformations of the Petersburg text were caused by political reasons, but the literary roots remained the same. The abnormality of the city of Peter, originating from the prediction of E. Lopukhina, becomes an important mythologeme. In *Crime and Punishment*, F.M. Dostoevsky collects the leitmotifs of the St. Petersburg myth and reveals the plots that are invariably present in subsequent texts. The city here is an environment that has a strange effect on people; it infects them, like the world ulcer from Raskolnikov’s dream, where microscopic creatures infect everyone, giving rise to madness and delusion.

Raskolnikov sees the destructive influence of St. Petersburg, but does not realize it; Svidrigailov succeeds in tracing a person’s immersion into the environment:

And another thing: I’m convinced that Petersburg is full of people who walk around talking to themselves. People who are halfway mad. If we had any scholars worth the name, then doctors, jurists and philosophers could carry out priceless studies in this city, each according to his specialism. Where else would you find so many dark, drastic, strange influences on the soul of man? Consider the influence of the climate alone!¹

Indeed, Raskolnikov’s theory, generated not by him, but by the city itself, seemed to be looking for its own hero who could embody it: first, he sees a gallery of characters who are dying of poverty and hopelessness – Marmeladov, Katerina Ivanovna, the girl on the boulevard; then he accidentally finds out the time when the

¹ Dostoevsky, F.M. (1973). *The Complete Works* (Vol. 6, p. 357). Nauka. Leningrad Branch Publ. (In Russ.)

old woman will be home alone; finally, he finds arguments in favor of the correctness of the theory, having overheard a conversation between an officer and a student in a tavern.

But even after the murder, Raskolnikov does not feel relief: the city continues to suffocate and drive him crazy; only in penal servitude, far from St. Petersburg, does the hero take the first step towards getting rid of the pernicious idea of those who have the right and those who do not.

A similar “deprivation of normality in the world”, “the discord of dreams and reality” (Bashkeeva, 2023, p. 70) is reflected in modern literature. Let it be hyperbolized and ironic somewhere, but the same immersion, like being dragged into the swamp of fiction, into an unreal world, is depicted by prose writers in the 21st century.

Andrey Astvatsaturov, a hereditary St. Petersburg intellectual and philologist, builds his texts as a “novel in short stories” – a genre referring to the traditions of Russian literature and ideally suited to depict the fragmentary, mosaic experience of life in modern Petersburg. The author himself sneers at the “loose” composition of his books, but this apparent randomness, plotlessness, and flickering episodes, reminiscent of a kaleidoscopic game, are a deliberate artistic device reflecting the very nature of the city.

In his essay reflections, Astvatsaturov directly contrasts “St. Petersburg” and “Moscow” writers, deducing this difference from the atmosphere of the two capitals. He notes that the St. Petersburg authors “were clearly inferior to them [the Moscow ones] in inventiveness and loquacity, and were more restrained, as if they were hiding something”². This restraint and secrecy, in his opinion, are dictated by the city, where it is always damp and cold. He quotes a “mad philosopher” who claimed that “geniuses are not born where it is damp, cold and there is no snow”³. Thus, Astvatsaturov’s ironic, light and funny prose is not a denial of the traditional St. Petersburg myth, but its new version adapted to modernity, where nonsense and absurdity are hidden under the mask of intellectual humor.

In A. Astvatsaturov’s *Skunkamera*, urban space generates grotesque and absurd situations: a prostitute who steals a client’s pants and false teeth; a philologist threatening a neighbor with a pencil as a “philologist’s weapon”⁴. These are not everyday sketches, but a kind of urban folklore, a byword of every Petersburger, reflecting the deep, irrational beginning of life in this city. For Astvatsaturov, St. Petersburg is a place of growing up, of cultivation, where irony becomes a defense mechanism against the pressure of oppressive urban mythology.

Katya Pizyk shows a completely different, but equally mythologized facet of St. Petersburg in the novel *The City Does Not Accept*. Her protagonist is a student from out of town, for whom the city becomes a place of initiation, a collision with the harsh reality of the 1990s. If Astvatsaturov’s 1990s were bohemian parties with foreigners, then Pizyk’s were poverty, a dormitory, hunger and marginality.

² Astvatsaturov, A. (2019). *People in the Nude* (p. 121). AST Publ. (In Russ.)

³ Astvatsaturov, A. (2021). *Skunk Chamber* (p. 49). AST Publ. (In Russ.)

⁴ Astvatsaturov, A. (2021). *Skunk Chamber* (p. 10).

The city here is an animate, hostile creature that “does not accept” strangers. It is physiological: the heroine sees “black shimmering slime”⁵ in the dead ends of the courtyards, and the sculptor, a native of St. Petersburg, creates statues of animals with human genitalia. The space of the city is hypertrophied to the grotesque: a dormitory with “conjoined Siamese buildings”⁶, “the yellow stone vagina of the underpass”⁷. Even the love drama here is brought to an absurd horror: the heroine is ready to have surgery on her nose because, according to her chosen one, he “interferes with giving a blowjob”⁸. St. Petersburg in Pizyk’s novel is a phantom city, a source of pain and a lesson where absurdity and cruelty become the norm.

Elena Vyakhyakuopus in the detective story *From the Abyss with Love* and Anton Sekisov in *Vaginov’s Room* bring to the fore the mystical, irrational component of the Petersburg myth. The plots of both novels unfold on the verge of sleep and waking, reality and delirium. The missing children may be victims of either a maniac or ancient mythological harpies that come to life on city monuments. The heroine has nightmares where she makes dumplings out of living people, and the investigation leads her to a world where another country runs through St. Petersburg.

Sekisov goes even further, literally settling his philologist hero in the apartment of the writer-educator Konstantin Vaginov. The house on the Griboyedov Canal becomes a portal to a surreal world where the neighbors are half-crazed poets and philosophers, and a kidnapped girl languishes behind one of the doors. The characters record deaths as something ordinary (“another massacre in a St. Petersburg communal apartment”⁹), classifying them according to the Kabbalistic system. The urban space is saturated with madness: a foreigner, having left, remembers with horror that, in his opinion, “one half of the residents of St. Petersburg are crazy, and the other half are alcoholics”¹⁰. Petersburg here is a place where reality is distorted, and literature (Vaginov’s study) requires a willingness to self-destruct.

Alexey Konakov in the novel *Tabiya Thirty-Two* and Arina Obukh in *Next Stop – “Pionerskaya Street”* offer their variations on the theme of total alienation and the rewriting of myth. Konakov creates an alternative reality where the streets of St. Petersburg are named after chess players, not artists. But this “new” city remains hostile: it “causes attacks of disgust”¹¹ and its winds awaken paranoia. St. Petersburg is a chessboard where people are pawns in someone else’s game.

Obukh uses the form of an obituary tale to tell about the tragic fates of real St. Petersburg artists. Her narrative is built as a chain of stories about how the city “takes away” people: suicides, disappearances, inexplicable cruelty. The ending of each story is always the same – “Petersburg took her away”. This is an extreme

⁵ Pitsyk, K. (2016). *The City Does Not Accept* (p. 221). Eksmo Publ. (In Russ.)

⁶ Pitsyk, K. (2016). *The City Does Not Accept* (p. 16).

⁷ Pizyk, K. (2016). *The City Does Not Accept* (p. 10).

⁸ Pizyk, K. (2016). *The City Does Not Accept* (p. 24).

⁹ Sekisov, A. (2023). *Vaginov’s Room* (p. 217). Alpina Publ. (In Russ.)

¹⁰ Sekisov, A. (2023). *Vaginov’s Room* (p. 186).

¹¹ Konakov, A. (2024). *Tabiya Thirty-Two* (p. 241). Individuum Publ. (In Russ.)

concept of the city as an independent force hostile to man, acting according to its own cruel and inexplicable laws. “Petersburg is unexpectedly deprived of its usual clear and strict lines – for her it is a space of possible events, changeable, subtle moods, a city-atmosphere” (Veretenova, 2025, p. 256).

Transformation of the Archetype of Water in the Petersburg Text

The prediction “Petersburg will be empty” is traditionally interpreted as the city’s doom to death from water – both the swamp on which the city stands and the indomitable Neva, which raged and claimed the lives of the city’s inhabitants during Peter’s lifetime, may be to blame. In fiction, this plot acquires the motif of a fatal death that haunts the inhabitants of the city. In *Crime and Punishment*, the Neva becomes not only the cause, but also an omen of an imminent finale.

An almost obligatory feature of Dostoevsky’s St. Petersburg is its “dampness”: “The concepts of water, fog, rain, and snow are represented in almost all its components, while realizing almost exclusively negative signs” (Shurupova, 2021, p. 128).

Raskolnikov has a dream about blue water before the murder, but immediately after the murder he sees “a bucket on a bench, half-filled with water”¹², into which he dips both his hands and his face. This is no longer a utopian oasis, but the beginning of a destructive whirlpool. Rodion also planned to get rid of the stolen goods with the help of water: “Throw everything in the ditch, in the water. End of story”¹³, but in the end he throws a coin into the water, which he was given on the street by people who mistook him for a beggar. And this tossed coin becomes a symbol: “It felt as if he’d taken a pair of scissors and cut himself off from everyone and everything, there and then”¹⁴.

Finally, the water shows the hero that it can bring death to the inhabitants of the city: a woman passing by jumps off a bridge, and Raskolnikov only watches as “The dirty water parted and swallowed up its offering”¹⁵. This scene seems to warn that death is about to happen: on the same day Raskolnikov accidentally sees Marmeladov’s death.

A little later, the hero learns the tragic fates of women whose lives were connected with Svidrigailov, a hero around whom the atmosphere of death hovers. His wife – “and just as soon as she got in – a stroke!”¹⁶ – and the sixteen-year-old, to whom an intimate relationship with Svidrigailov is attributed, allegedly also threw herself into the water in winter, just to avoid meeting Arkady Ivanovich. Perhaps this is why Rodion suggests the path of a drowned woman to Sonya, having seen her life from the inside: “It would be more just, a thousand times more just and

¹² Dostoevsky, F.M. (1973). *The Complete Works* (Vol. 6, p. 65).

¹³ Dostoevsky, F.M. (1973). *The Complete Works* (Vol. 6, p. 84).

¹⁴ Dostoevsky, F.M. (1973). *The Complete Works* (Vol. 6, p. 90).

¹⁵ Dostoevsky, F.M. (1973). *The Complete Works* (Vol. 6, p. 131).

¹⁶ Dostoevsky, F.M. (1973). *The Complete Works* (Vol. 6, p. 175).

more reasonable, to plunge headfirst into the water and end it all!”¹⁷ In some modern texts, water also has a dangerous attraction, the ability to beckon and shape destinies.

In Elena Vyakhyakuopus’s novel *From the Abyss with Love*, water acquires a mystical character: “Gulya went down to the river... She bent over the black water, and the last ray illuminated a small boy at the bottom... She laughed and stepped forward”¹⁸. Here, water is not just an element, but a portal to another reality, tempting and deadly.

Anton Sekisov’s flood motif appears not for the first time: before *Vaginov’s Room*, in *God of Anxiety*, the characters already experience a flood in small rooms in St. Petersburg. “The destructive force of the water element in St. Petersburg is activated within the apartments of the main characters” (Smirnova, 2024, p. 113). And this affects the main character, because since childhood he “understood” that all bodies of water are connected, and therefore sea monsters can get anywhere.

Arina Obukh takes the water theme to the extreme in her collection of short stories *Next Stop – “Pionerskaya Street”*. Water is capitalized – “Is this respect? Or a holy horror? This is something fishy: the poet said that we are descended from chordates. Water. The foremother. The first house. From which we were expelled”¹⁹. The scene at the Neva River becomes a metaphor for total alienation: the heroine is balancing between life and death, and the act of her companion, who did not attempt to save the girl, becomes the impetus for the heroine to envision herself as a drowned woman. One of the scenarios of the imagined death is similar to the ritual immersion of a girl in water. This is an act of a kind of “art house”, where death becomes a performance:

German grabs her, picks her up. Saved.

But she hasn’t had time to get over the horror yet. She wants to feel granite under her feet. Herman is still holding her.

The pause drags on. It’s starting to drizzle. And she casts a glance, saying, it’s raining, let me go, we have to go. In response, he casts his gaze: “No, don’t. It’s arthouse”.

– Herman, what are you doing?!

This question sounded silly, almost like “Hey! Where are you going?!”

He lowered her into the water. Gradually. And, one might say, carefully.

First, the edge of her cloak went into the water, then she was entirely engulfed by the element.

She’s floundering, trying to grab onto that very step.

He holds out his hand to her. She understands that he will get her out after all. Then she will kill him, throw him overboard, burn him, but for now he will pull her out. He touches her head with his hand and pushes her down abruptly²⁰.

As G.R. Nasibullova notes, “here the Neva is a hopeless situation in which the heroine finds herself” (2025, p. 108). In this context, water retains its fatal function, but acquires new meanings – from a mystical portal to a tool of ritual murder.

¹⁷ Dostoevsky, F.M. (1973). *The Complete Works* (Vol. 6, p. 245).

¹⁸ Vyakhyakuopus, E. (2023). *From the Abyss with Love* (p. 215). AST Publ. (In Russ.)

¹⁹ Obukh, A. (2024). *Next Stop – “Pionerskaya Street”* (p. 7). AST Publ. (In Russ.)

²⁰ Obukh, A. (2024). *Next Stop – “Pionerskaya Street”* (pp. 191–192).

Conclusion

The study shows that the St. Petersburg text of Russian literature, which was formed under the influence of folklore and official narratives, underwent radical transformations in the 20th–21st centuries. Whereas in the 19th century the city was presented as a space of moral and existential crisis (N.V. Gogol, M.F. Dostoevsky), in modern prose it becomes an arena of the grotesque, the absurd, and the mystical. The renaming of St. Petersburg to Leningrad in 1924 marked not only a change in the toponym, but also a rethinking of its mythological structure.

Modern authors (A. Astvatsaturov, K. Pizyk, A. Obukh, A. Sekisov, etc.) do not reject classical motifs, but rethink them, exploring the city as a hostile force absorbing the individual. Water, death, madness – these archaic elements of the St. Petersburg myth take on new forms: from mystical portals to attributes of ritual murders.

Thus, the modern “Petersburg text” exists as a complex system of hypertrophied mythologemes. This is no longer the artistic interpretation of the same phenomenon integral semiotic code described by V.N. Toporov, but a set of intensively exploited images: a labyrinth city, an absurd city, a dream city, a death city. From Astvatsaturov’s restrained irony to Obukh’s total pessimism, these strategies represent an attempt at life in a space where myth has finally supplanted reality.

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