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St. Petersburg: “Marooned on the Neva’s Marsh Delta”

St. Petersburg is another marsh metropolis and an icon of modernity. St. Petersburg for Amery and Curran (2006: 15) is “one of the most celebrated and legendary cities in all of Europe.” Certainly it is one of the most celebrated and legendary cities in *modern* Europe, and is arguably the modern European city par excellence as most of the other major European cities had medieval or ancient beginnings as we have seen with Paris, Venice, and London. Founded in 1703, it achieved this status precisely because it was “situated unnaturally in a swamp,” or “on inhospitable marshes,” or “over swampland” as Lehan (1998: 125, 146, 147) variously puts it. St. Petersburg represents the triumph of a modern city over premodern wetland. Like Venice and Boston, St. Petersburg was built on piles. Even with its piles, Thoreau (1982: 276) relates in *Walden* how “it is said that a flood tide, with a westerly wind and ice in the Neva, would sweep St. Petersburg from the face of the earth.” Or in the terms of Michel Serres (1995: 16) of the city as plaque, as excrescence on the face of the earth, this catastrophic conjunction of tide, wind, and ice, a disastrous combination of the elements of air and water, and of the solid, liquid, and gaseous, would flush the plaque of the city from the “mouth” of the river in the marsh, and from the body of earth. The very element of water that the city excluded in order to be created could come back to destroy it in a return of the geographical and historical repressed.

St. Petersburg for Amery and Curran (2006: 15) is also “Peter the Great’s version of a European paradise forged from the swamps” in the delta of the Neva River. Amery and Curran are implying that swamps are not paradise,

but are a wasteland as they go on to suggest when out of “such wastes ... where the saturated ground ... [was] shrouded in the mists ... a new Russia [was] born.” St. Petersburg was “born fully grown” for Smith (2012: 44) as a monumental brainchild out of patriarchal Peter’s brain box. St. Petersburg was also born out of the womb of the maternal and monstrous marsh with human labor and labor pains, all of which were largely ignored and forgotten. The union between patriarchal brain and maternal marsh womb produced a monument and a monster, a monumental and monstrous city.

St. Petersburg for Billington (1966: 181) was “the most impressive creation of his [Peter the Great’s] turbulent reign ... In 1703 Peter began building his new city at the point where the Neva (‘Mud’) River disgorges the water of Lake Ladoga out through swamps.” In other words, the river vomits the water of the mud river up through its throat (one sense of “gorge”) and out through its swampy mouth, hardly an auspicious place for a city and hardly a wetland-friendly metaphor for a swamp. Billington is implying that the land was regurgitating liquid and solid matter, rather than digesting and excreting dead matter and procreating new life through the fertile cloaca of its delta. Deltas are the most fertile of all ecosystems. They are at the bottom of the digestive and reproductive systems, not at the top. Deltas are not located at the “*mouth* of the river,” but are to be found at the other end of the body, at the bottom of the river catchment whose head is at the top.

The conventional nomenclature of the mouth of a river is a misnomer as water and solid matter flow out at this point, and not in. This is a mistaken view of anatomy, and so it should be called by the name for the *other* end of the body. Seagoing and ocean-faring explorers always say that they entered the *mouth* of a river as it would not be gentlemanly to say that they entered the rectum of the river, let alone to use other more vernacular and vulgar terms. The mouth of a river is, in fact, at the opposite end of the earthly alimentary canal or digestive tract of the river in conventional nomenclature of the head of the catchment. The conventional nomenclature of the “mouth of the river” inverts the rectum and the mouth in order to occlude the excretory functions of the river and to hide the fact that the exploratory journey up the river is a journey up the rear and inner passage entering through the rectum rather than a journey down the upper and inner passage entering through the mouth (see Giblett, 2011: chapter 10).

More recent nomenclature of the head of the catchment is at odds with the traditional terminology of the mouth of the river as they are at opposite ends of the river but both are at the same end of the human body. These geographic metaphors of “the head of the catchment” and “the mouth of the river” continue to be used uncritically without considering the politics of language, the body, and the earth that they are engaged in and in which they engage their users. The founding father, such as Tsar Peter, of a city, such as St. Petersburg, in or at the mouth of a river, or at least at the point where a river, such as the Neva, disgorges (though this preserves the throat and mouth metaphor) and so more precisely defecates into the sea, such as the Baltic Sea, was in fact establishing the city at the opposite end of the digestive tract.

The beginnings of St. Petersburg as what Berman (1988: 176) calls “the city in the swamps” has grown up into what Amery and Curran (2006: 16) call “the mythology of St. Petersburg” and into what Volkov (1995: xiii) calls “the Petersburg mythos,” which for him was “fully formed in the second half of the nineteenth century.” The mythos “included the official legends of the miraculous appearance of the lovely city in a marsh” as if the city sprang fully formed out of the head of Tsar Peter, like Pallas Athene being born out of the head of Zeus. Just as Zeus swallowed the pregnant Metis in order to appropriate the maternal function of giving birth, so Peter consumed the labor of workers and the fertility of the maternal marsh “teaming [*sic*] with wildlife” according to Amery and Curran (2006: 16) in order to give birth to St. Petersburg out of his own brain box as both monumental and monstrous city, monumental not least for the monuments erected in it and monstrous for its greedy consumption of human labor and laborers and of the monstrous marsh.

The city did consume immense amounts of human labor befitting the despotic Tsar Peter. Dluhosch (1969: xxi) relates how, “within three years[,] the new city devoured an army of one hundred and fifty thousand workers.” The human cost of building such a city in the swamp for Billington (1966: 181) was “probably greater than that involved in building any other major city in Europe.” As Ellul (1970: 29; emphasis in the original) puts it, “*our* cities need no foundation sacrifice, for by their very existence they swallow up and destroy vital forces, both material and spiritual, of the millions of men sacrificed to them . . . The city devours men,” not to mention women and children, marshes and swamps. The city is an orally sadistic, greedy monster.

St. Petersburg is monstrous, monumental, and grotesque. As such, it is a typical modern city like Paris, both monumental and monstrous (or grotesque) at the same time, and in the same place of the marsh. The monumental is erected on the grotesque lower earthly stratum of the marsh. The marsh makes both the monumental and monstrous possible. Without the marsh, there would be no monumental and monstrous city. The same *modus operandi* applies to Paris too as we have seen.

The Bronze Horseman

No greater or more fitting monument to the founding of the monumental city of St. Petersburg can be found than Falconet's statue unveiled in 1782 of Tsar Peter riding a horse (Volkov, 1995: xii and xxv). It only became known as "the bronze horseman" after the publication of Pushkin's poem of this title in 1837, half a century after the unveiling. Pushkin's poem for Berman (1988: 182) is "a kind of Petersburg Book of Genesis, beginning in the mind of the city's creator-God." Berman is alluding to the Judeo-Christian god of Yahweh who created land and water and divided them as Peter did, but his allusion also applies equally to the Grecian god of Zeus giving birth to his "brain-child" out of his brain box as Peter gave birth to St. Petersburg out of his brain box. The St. Petersburg myth was begun perhaps singlehandedly by Pushkin in the early nineteenth century with this poem, which for Volkov (1995: 4) is "still the greatest narrative poem written in Russian." Indeed, according to Berman (1988: 182) it is for many writers "the greatest Russian poem," period. It helped to found, and certainly to perpetuate, the "Petersburg mythos" of the city founded, in its own words, on "the moss-grown miry bank" (cited by Amery and Curran, 2006: 15) of the marshy Neva River.

The opening lines of *The Bronze Horseman* for Volkov (1995: 6) are "perhaps the most popular in Russian poetry." They depict Tsar Peter founding St. Petersburg in 1703, more than a century before Pushkin's poem was first published:

There, by the billows desolate,
He stood, with mighty thoughts elate,
And gazed; but in the distance only

A sorry skiff on the broad spate
 Of Neva drifted seaward, lonely.
 The moss-grown miry banks with rare
 Hovels were dotted here and there
 Where wretched Finns for shelter crowded;
 The murmuring woodlands had no share
 Of sunshine, all in mist beshrouded. (Lednicki, 1955: 141)

The marshlands of the Neva were for Tsar Peter a tabula rasa on which he could inscribe his city, dispossess the native Finnish inhabitants, and colonize them and the marshlands in one fell swoop of feudal or despotic power. Pushkin (cited by Volkov, 1995: 5) relates in his poem that the tsar “founded the city beneath the sea” on what Volkov describes as “lowland, below sea level” (11). This marsh had to be filled to raise it to the same or higher level than the surrounding countryside to try to prevent flooding.

Pushkin’s poem goes on to relate how:

that city young,
 Gem of the Northern world, amazing,
 From gloomy wood and swamp upsprung,
 Had risen, in pride and splendor blazing.
 Where once, by that low-lying shore,
 In waters never known before
 The Finnish fisherman, sole creature,
 And left forlorn by stepdame Nature,
 Cast ragged nets. (Lednicki, 1955: 141)

The marsh here is a harsh stepmother, not the great mother. The city of enlightenment is situated in, and brings light to, the dark swamp and its benighted and deprived people, though the city never successfully dispelled the mist and fog. The city of enlightenment could reimagine and engineer (re-imagineer) the place, drain the marsh, convert it into canals, separate earth and water, and try to control water, but it could not control the atmosphere and the microclimate in which air and water were mixed in fog, mist, and murk (as Bely’s *Petersburg* shows and as we will see later).

Volkov (1995: 7) perpetuates the St. Petersburg mythos himself into the late twentieth century as the location for the city of “a miserable swampy place” was “no place for the new capital of Russia or any large city.” Generally

a swamp is no place for a city; specifically a swamp was no place for such cities as St. Petersburg and New Orleans (as we will see in Chapter 11). For Volkov the swampy site “would never have become the site of the future imperial capital if not for the will and vision of Tsar Peter.” Yet will and vision alone do not build cities; human labor and an earthly (and watery in this instance) site are required too.

The monumental modality, rather than the monstrous, caught the imagination of many others writing in the following century after the foundation of the city and before Pushkin’s definitive poem. One Prince exclaimed that:

I see the city of Peter, wondrous and majestic,
By the will of the Tsar erected from the marshes,
The inherited monument of his mighty glory . . .
Art here waged everywhere a battle with nature
And everywhere blazoned its triumph. (Cited by Fanger, 1965: 104)

Marsh and monument are inimical to each other, just as swamp and city are, and so the former had to make way for the latter. Bruited as the triumph of art over nature, the building of the city in the swamp is also a triumph of despotism over the despicable, absolutism over the abject, monumentalism over the monstrous, the city over the swamp. But the oppressed lives on as the repressed, and the repressed returns not least in tropes, dreams, and slips of speech, no less and unsurprisingly so than in the work of Dostoevsky, St. Petersburg’s premier native writer. Stefan Zweig ([1942] 2014: 357) encapsulates the paradox of St. Petersburg with its monumental upper side and its monstrous nether world as for him it is “a city planned by princes with audacious minds, a place of broad avenues and mighty palaces—yet at the same time still the oppressive St Petersburg” of Dostoevsky.

Dostoevsky’s St. Petersburg

The late nineteenth century saw not only the rise of this St. Petersburg myth but also the rise of the counter St. Petersburg myth in which for some writers, such as Dostoevsky, St. Petersburg was “that rotten, slimy city” (cited by Volkov, 1995: xv). Such a slimy city is the fitting habitat for Dostoevsky’s “underground man.” The slimy city is also the counterpoint to what

Norman O. Brown (1959: 281–283) calls “the city sublime.” The sublime and slime come together in Zoë Sofoulis’s (cited by Giblett, 1996: 27) parenthetical portmanteau word s(ub)lime in which slime counters and subverts the sublime as propounded by Bakhtin, rather than inverts it, or complements it as advocated by Hugo (as we saw in Chapter 3). St. Petersburg is the city s(ub)lime.

St. Petersburg has also been similarly called “the unreal city.” Alluding to T. S. Eliot’s description of London in “The Waste Land” as “unreal city,” St. Petersburg for Berman (1988: 176) is “the archetypal ‘unreal city’ of the modern world.” Berman is certainly drawing on Fanger (1965: 105) who argues that “at the heart of the myth of Petersburg is the image of an unreal city, an image countenanced historically by the fact of the city’s founding as an arbitrary act of will (thus Dostoevsky’s designation of it [in *Notes from the Underground*] as ‘the most abstract and intentional city in the world’) and countenanced . . . by the peculiar Petersburg situation” in a marsh. Boris Jakim’s recent translation of Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* has “on the face of the earth” instead of “in the world” (Dostoevsky, 2009: 6). Jakim’s translation evokes the idea of St. Petersburg being an excrescence, a grotesque protuberance, on the face of (the body of) the earth situated, in a word, in a swamp. Abstract and metaphysical city is posed against material (maternal) swamp and physical labor. Indeed, for Fanger (1965: 104) “against the abstract grandeur of the city is posed the concrete loss of humble lives.” He is probably referring to the loss of humble human lives in the construction of the city, but his comment applies equally to the loss of humble nonhuman lives, such as plants and animals, in the destruction of the marsh.

Berman (1998: 183) also cites part of the same passage from Dostoevsky as Fanger in a slightly different translation in which St. Petersburg is “the most abstract and premeditated city in the world,” but does not cite what Dostoevsky’s underground man goes on to say in parentheses that “there are premeditated and unpremeditated cities.” Cities located in marshes and swamps are, by necessity, premeditated cities as they entail deliberate acts of design and construction, whereas unpremeditated cities are not founded in swamps as they come to be willy-nilly, such as the result of old trade routes. St. Petersburg for Holquist (1972: 547; emphasis in the original) was “first of all a *made city*.” All cities are made in the sense that they are built

by human hands, but some cities are more made than others as human brains designed them before human hands built them. Wetland cities are more made cities than other cities. Wetland cities are planned and planted in wetlands as the result of premeditation. They are not born organically, for example, at the intersection of terrestrial trade routes or in the location of a market, though they may grow organically as Paris and London as fellow swamp cities were to do at the intersection of riverine, oceanic, and terrestrial trade routes in the liminal wetland zone between these routes. Premeditated cities are abstract cities, whereas unpremeditated ones are concrete, material cities.

The peculiarity of St. Petersburg's situation in a marsh, Fanger (1965: 105) goes on to suggest, has "been remarked [upon] countless times, but perhaps most memorably by [the Marquis de] Custine":

The slow melting of the tints of twilight, which appeared to perpetuate the day in struggling against an ever-increasing gloom, communicated to all nature a mysterious movement; the low lands of the city, with their structures a little raised above the banks of the Neva, seemed to oscillate betwixt the sky and water, which gave the impression of their being about to vanish in the void ... That little spot of earth which seemed to detach itself from the water and to tremble upon it like the froth of an inundation, those small, dark, irregular points scarcely observable beneath the white of the sky and the white of the river, could they form the capital of a vast empire?—or rather, was it not all an optical illusion, a phantasmagoria?

Walter Benjamin notably explored phantasmagoria in his work on nineteenth-century Parisian passages, or arcades. Writing on Benjamin and phantasmagoria, Cohen (1993: 219) describes how, "in nineteenth century usage[,] this term designated both a form of magic lantern show [illustrated in Cohen, 1993: 216] and a psychological experience when the distinction between subject and object breaks down." As a result of this breakdown, the subject becomes object in the reified and alienated relationship between the worker and work, consumer and commodity, such as with the trawler of supermarket aisles confronted by a dazzling array of brand varieties. Cohen goes on to argue that in "the magic ... of commodity fetishism ... social relations ... take on the phantasmagorical form of relations between things" (222). For Benjamin (1999a: 14) "reifying representations ... enter the universe of

a phantasmagoria” in which the consumer is placed under what Benjamin (1973b: 233) called “the phony spell of a commodity.”

The phantasmagoria for Benjamin has its representative human figures and manifest expressions. For him “the *flâneur* abandons himself to the phantasmagoria of the marketplace” and Haussmann is “the champion” of “the phantasmagoria of civilization” whose “manifest expression” is “his transformation of Paris” (Benjamin, 1999a: 14–15). An earlier expression and champion is Tsar Peter’s transformation of St. Petersburg. In the case of both cities, an abject wetland is transformed into a phantasmagorical city in which the subject is objectified by commodity capitalism in modernity. For Benjamin “modernity” is “the world dominated by its phantasmagorias” that he saw exemplified in the arcades and the *flâneur* (26). This is no less so than in the founding and building of the cities of modernity, such as St. Petersburg, and in the capital of modernity in Paris, built in premodern and abject swamps and marshes. Here in the abject swamps and marshes the distinction between subject and object has not yet been constituted, a distinction in which the subject is placed over and defined against an object; here the phantasmagoria of commodity capitalism has not yet broken down the distinction between them in the reification of subject into object under the phony spell of a commodity; here the magical life of the Great Goddess of the marsh and swamp casts its binding spell over the body immersed in them before the city drains and fills them and creates its phantasmagorias, not least of itself, as Custine and others have seen, and critiqued, such as Benjamin and Dostoevsky have done.

In Dostoevsky’s novel *The Adolescent* the narrator has a recurring dream or nightmare that St. Petersburg has reverted from a slimy and foggy city to a swamp:

A hundred times amid the fog I had a strange but persistent dream: “What if, when this fog scatters and flies upward, the whole, rotten slimy city goes with it, rises with the fog and vanishes like smoke, leaving behind the old Finnish swamp, and in the middle of it, I suppose for beauty’s sake, the bronze horseman on the panting, whipped horse?” (Cited by Amery and Curran, 2006: 112)

This kind of apocalyptic dream of the city rising up from the swamp recurs in Dostoevsky’s short story “A Weak Heart” in which “a new city was forming

in the air” (cited by Berman, 1988: 192), a ghostly counterpart or sublimated version of the city in the swamps. For Berman this story evokes “most memorably” the reputation of St. Petersburg in Dostoevsky’s time “as a strange, weird, spectral place” (192). St. Petersburg, in a word—Freud’s word—is an uncanny place. The sublime city built in a swamp is doubly sublimated for Dostoevsky in rising from the swamp to leave behind, revert to, and be desublimated back into the uncanny swamp in which it was built.

Dostoevsky not only sublimated and desublimated the city, but also personified it in his first published feuilleton in which St. Petersburg stands in “the dismal Ingerman[n]land swamp” (cited by Fanger, 1965: 141). This is a fitting locale for a city characterized by Dostoevsky in the same piece as a sulking, discontented grumbler. Ingermannland is the ancient Finnish province in which St. Petersburg was located. St. Petersburg for Dostoevsky, as Fanger argues, not only has a character, but also *is* a character (26). The dismal swamp city in Dostoevsky’s description lies also beneath a black sun of metropolitan melancholy as in his last feuilleton (cited by Fanger, 1965: 144). It also lies next to “the black water of the Fontanka,” one of the tributaries of the Neva as Dostoevsky (cited by Fanger, 1965: 161) relates in *The Double*. Water, Fanger notes in citing this passage, is “the element on which the city is built” (161), though no European city has literally been built *on* water. Swamp cities, such as St. Petersburg and Venice, have to separate out the elements of land and water to create the surface on which the city can be erected.

Black water is a persistent trope of melancholia based on the Western philosophy of the four elements and humors. In the Western philosophical theory of the four elements going back to Aristotle and taken up in the Elizabethan “world picture” of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (see Giblett, 1996: 160), water is the element made from the mixing of the qualities of coldness and wetness. It gives rise to the humor of the phlegmatic. Earth is the element made from the mixing of the qualities of the coldness and dryness. It gives rise to the humor of the melancholic. This psychopathology is a fitting humor for a city set in drained swamps in northern climes that wrested and “reclaimed” earth from water by Tsar Peter’s workers.

Bakhtin ([1963] 1984a: 75) notes how Dostoevsky observes both “the Petersburg slums and the monumental Petersburg” as integral parts of the same city. In the terms of Bakhtin’s work on Rabelais and the carnivalesque,

the slums are grotesque and the monumental city is sublime. Moreover, the slums are the grotesque lower city strata, whereas the forts and prospects are the monumental upper city strata. St. Petersburg as a sublime and grotesque, monumental and monstrous city in the work of Dostoevsky is not only the offspring of this fruitful union but also, like Paris, the outcome of the fatal union of city and swamps in which the latter were destroyed to create the former.

As an aside here, Fanger (1965: 228) claims that “the grotesque ... has received little attention in its own right” and goes on to cite and discuss Hugo’s “Preface” to *Cromwell* as an exception (as discussed in Chapter 3). Naturally Fanger cites Bakhtin’s ([1963] 1984a) work on Dostoevsky (in which the grotesque does not figure). Coincidentally and unfortunately for both, Bakhtin’s work on the grotesque in which he also discusses Hugo’s “Preface” (as we have seen in Chapter 3) was published in Russian in the same year as Fanger’s study (Bakhtin, [1965] 1984b). Perhaps it is an unfortunate incidence of literary nonserendipity that neither writer had the benefit and support of the other’s study, or a fortunate incidence of literary serendipity that both were on to the same thing at the same time. The grotesque has since received a lot of attention, not only in relation to the human body as one would expect following Bakhtin’s ([1965] 1984b) discussion of the grotesque lower bodily stratum (Giblett, 2008a, chapter 4), but also in relation to what could be called the grotesque lower earthly stratum of swamps and marshes (see Giblett, 1996: 127).

Bakhtin’s ([1965] 1984b: 26–27) work on the grotesque and the neoclassical bourgeois body is also applicable by analogy to the modern city, such as St. Petersburg, that “presents an entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body [and city], which is shown from the outside as something individual ... strictly limited mass, the impenetrable façade.” By contrast, for Bakhtin “the artistic logic of the grotesque image ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body [and the city] and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body’s [and city’s] limited space or into the body’s [and city’s] depths” (317–318). The grotesque image leads into the city’s depths of what could be called the grotesque lower urban stratum of its slums and the swamps on which it was built.

The building of the city of St. Petersburg was also only possible “as a large scale exercise in absolute royal power,” as Dluhosch (1969: xxiv and xxix) puts it, in “one of the most incredible feats in the history of city building,” not least because of its swampy site. Yet rather than an exercise in “absolute royal power” of feudal times as Dluhosch suggests, Berman (1988: 178) argues that “Peter was closer to the Oriental despots of ancient times.” The importance, as Deleuze and Guattari (1986: 21) put it following Wittfogel in his study of Oriental despotism, of “large-scale waterworks for an empire” applies to the draining and filling of swamps for the building of the city. St. Petersburg is no exception.

Bely's *Petersburg*

Yet St. Petersburg is also a modern city just as Tsar Peter was, as Maguire and Malmstad (1978: xv) put it, both “an ‘eastern’ despot” “in the single-minded tyranny with which he acted” and a “western” ruler with “his vision of a modern state.” Peter, and St. Petersburg, straddled east and west, ancient and modern, sacred and secular. St. Petersburg was for Holquist (1972: 552) “a militantly secular city.” In Bely's *Petersburg*, in which the city is “the main character” and “the real hero,” “Petersburg represents the modern city generally,” as Maguire and Malmstad (1978: ix, xv, xxiv), the translators of *Petersburg*, put it in their introduction. In *Petersburg* the fog is a minor character that makes a regular appearance with its sister mist and its brother murk (see, for instance: “the greenish murk” (Bely, [1916–1928] 1978: 9, 273); “the dingy fog” (9, 127, 170); “the dark greenish fog” (10); “swirling whorls of mist” (16); “the brain-chilling murk” (23); “dank mists” (51); “the malignant fog” (107); “the sky had become a solid mass of dirty slush. The fog had come down to the ground” (119); “the dingy murk” (131); “the grayish fog” (139); and “pale gray misty haze” (273).

St. Petersburg for Maguire and Malmstad (1978: xv) was “a planned city . . . built on a trackless bog.” The wetland location for the city is described in the novel as “the mossy marshes” (Bely, [1916–1928] 1978: 10). Later in the novel one character states that “Petersburg in built on a swamp” (205) as an explanation for the bad climate. Maguire and Malmstad (1978: 346) have a note

at this point that “the Neva takes its name from the Finnish *newa* or *newo*, meaning swamp.” It is a mystery then as to why Maguire and Malmstad say in their introduction that the Neva is a “trackless bog.” Trackless is pejorative, though presumably the Finns knew their way around in it and through it, and bog, marsh, and swamp are not synonymous but are different types of wetlands. As Margaret Attwood (cited by Giblett, 1996: 3; emphases in the original) puts it, “*swamp* is when the water goes in one end and out the other, *bog* is when it goes in and stays in.” Swamp is also when the water goes in, through, and comes out among trees; marsh is when the water goes in among, through, and comes out among grasses. Swamp is a wooded wetland; marsh is a grassy wetland; bog is a peaty wetland. In the case of the Neva, marsh is the most precise term, though various writers use other terms as we have seen.

The statue of the Bronze Horseman (and Pushkin’s poem) haunts Bely’s ([1916–1928] 1978: 213) *Petersburg* in which Peter and his horse uncannily come alive and bring the repressed past into the present so that time is figured as circular: “the bronze-headed giant had been galloping through periods of time right up to this very instant, coming full circle.” Temporally the city of St. Petersburg for Holquist (1972: 548) “had its home in the *chronos* of political history, Moscow in the *Kairos* of eschatological time.” Spatially the city of St. Petersburg had its home in the slime of a wetland, Moscow in dry grassland. Temporally the time of St. Petersburg set in a marsh had its home in the prehistory of matrifocal time and in the now-time,¹ or *Kairos*, of *aquaterra* time; the cities of St. Petersburg and Moscow had their home in patriarchal history. St. Petersburg set in a marsh has its home in the cyclical now-time of birth–life–death–birth, whereas the cities of St. Petersburg and Moscow had their home in the linear time of birth–life–death.

Both cities were located in, and made sense of, what Bely’s ([1916–1928] 1978: 53) *Petersburg* calls the “measureless immensity” of “the Empire of Russia” and of “the orphaned distances of the provinces.” St. Petersburg represented what Holquist (1972: 548 and 552) calls “the triumph of reason over brute nature,” and so for him it is the “most unnatural of cities.” In Peter’s own words, the “city was to be laid out ‘in the manner of the Dutch’ with regular blocks and straight canals penetrating the territory of the city at right angles to each other” (Dluhosch, 1969: xix; see also Billington, 1966: 181). It was to be an exemplar of the rectilinear grid plan town.

The rectilinear grid plan town was an instrument for penetrating “the virgin soil of the Neva delta” (Amery and Curran, 2006: 20). Drainage was the means for dividing the land from the water in a God-like gesture drawn from Genesis and for creating what Berman (1988: 177) calls “the clean slate” or *tabula rasa* on which “the inscriptions” of the grid and ultimately the city could be written. The city in the swamp first has to erase the swamp to create a full and smooth surface on which the city could then be inscribed. For Deleuze and Guattari (1977: 11), “some kind of full body, that of the earth or the despot, a recording surface, an apparent objective movement, a fetishistic, perverted, bewitched world are characteristic of all types of society as a constant of social reproduction.” In the case of wetlands, the earth is constituted as full body to be drained or filled. In the case of St. Petersburg set in a marsh, the despot Peter and the earth were constituted as full body.

According to Egorov (1969: 23), it was “Peter’s idea to drain the swamps of St. Petersburg by means of canals” just as the Dutch and Venetians had done. The grid plan town of St. Petersburg symbolizes for Egorov “man’s conquest of formless nature by means of conceptual precision” (26). The formless chaos of the marsh had to be ordered in and by conceptual precision in another God-like gesture drawn from the biblical book of Genesis of creating order out of chaos.

Drainage and the grid plan town in the case of St. Petersburg not only brought order out of chaos and a city out of swamp but also was a means to exercise military might over the populace and the place and to produce an object for aesthetic appreciation. Volkov (1995: 11) relates how Tsar Peter “plotted the city” as a “system of islands, canals and broad, straight . . . prospects,” literally meaning “to look into the distance.” The most famous of these is Nevsky Prospect, nearly three miles long, built in 1715. The prospect has a military function of being a vantage point for seeing an approaching enemy from afar. Traditionally it applied to a castle or fortified village atop an eminence. In the eighteenth century the military function of surveillance was sublimated into aesthetic appreciation for the “pleasing prospect” of “the gentleman’s park estate” (see Williams, 1973: 121). The castle, fortified village, and gentleman’s house all had a commanding prospect of the country before and below them. Tsar Peter went one step further and constructed not only a city with its fortresses of Peter and Paul Fortress and Admiralty Fortress (see

Egorov, 1969: 7), but also a city *as* fortress with commanding prospects of the country (both land and water) around it. Yet what Berman (1988: 189 and 179) calls “the city’s lower depths” “conceal festering slums” from the prying eyes on its “commanding heights.” These commanding prospects were of the country surrounding the city from which a threat to the city could come, but not of the city itself from within which a threat to the city could also come, as indeed it did in 1905. Haussmann’s boulevards in Paris had been the autocratic response to this problem by opening up to view the city’s lower depths of the slums, creating prospects of the interior of the city and making the interior penetrable by the military and paramilitary forces of the monarch.

“Prospect” also has a double temporal meaning in English, and presumably in Russian too as Russian “Prospekt” is cognate with the English and also as the senator in Bely’s ([1916–1928] 1978: 10) *Petersburg* “loved the rectilinear prospect” as “proportionality and symmetry soothed the senator’s nerves” and “this prospect reminded him of the flow of time between the two points of life.” The prospect is a way of colonizing and enclosing time and space, the measureless immensity of both territorial and historical Russia and the orphaned distances of its provinces. In Bely’s *Petersburg* the central character states that “Petersburg is built on a swamp” and that “for the Russian Empire Petersburg is just a dot. Just look at the map” (205). The prospect colonizes space and time at the level and from the point of view of the city and the dweller, but the city at the level and from the point of view of empire and the map is just a dot.

The central character elaborates later to himself on the temporal and cosmic implications of his interlocutor’s point: “Petersburg is the fourth dimension which is not indicated on maps, which is indicated merely by a dot. And this dot is the place where the plane of being is tangential to the surface of the sphere and the immense astral cosmos” (Bely, [1916–1928] 1978: 207). In other words, St. Petersburg is situated in time but is not indicated on maps that only show space and the city as a dot. And this dot is the place where the plane of the city is tangential to the surface of the sphere of the earth. The dot touches on the surface and slices past the earth and its wetlands. The city might represent the “triumph of reason over brute nature” in the form of the wetland and the “conquest of formless nature [also in the form of the wetland] by means of conceptual precision,” but it is only a point on a tangent

that touches at one minuscule point on the surface of the earth and a point in time both of which are lost in the measureless immensity of Russia and the cosmos. Bely puts St. Petersburg and Peter's project into perspective.

Bely seems to be subscribing to the division in the Kantian sublime between the dynamical sublime in which "man" exercises power over "nature" and regards himself as superior to nature, and the mathematical sublime in which reason is more powerful than "man" and man is inferior to reason. St. Petersburg in relation to "nature" represents man's power over nature whereas St. Petersburg in relation to reason, or the cosmos and eternity, represents man's and St. Petersburg's inferiority.

In constructing a fortress city Tsar Peter, in the words of Volkov (1995: 12), "succeeded in building a unique monument" of "an entire city." St. Petersburg has its monuments, the most famous of which is the monument to Peter, the bronze horseman (as we have seen). Yet the city itself is also a monument, not least to Peter. His achievement in founding the city, or more precisely having "tens of thousands of workers from all over the country" do so, was heightened by the unsuitable location for a city of "the swampy ground" (11) in the Neva's marshy delta. The workers from the country made the city; without country workers, the city was not possible. The monumental capital was also what Volkov calls "the monster capital" (xvii) not least because of its tentacles attaching it to the country and on which it parasitically fed.

In Bely's *Petersburg* the sublime city in the swamp is not sublimated further into a spectral city (as with Dostoevsky) but is desublimated back (also as with Dostoevsky) into the swamp from which it came, and in and on which it was built. Nevsky Prospect becomes what Berman (1988: 265 and 264) calls in his reading of Bely's *Petersburg* "the Nevsky's swamp" of "a sort of primal ooze" in which in Bely's ([1916–1928] 1978: 178) words "all the shoulders [of the people in the street] formed a viscous and slowly flowing sediment. The shoulder of the senator stuck to the sediment, and was, so to speak, sucked in." Although Berman (1988: 264) notes Bely's vision of St. Petersburg in 1905 "as a primal swamp" and the fact that the city was built in a primal swamp, he does not make the connection between the two and the fact that Bely draws wittingly or unwittingly from the rich and fertile history of the city's past in order to figure its present.

Not so with W. G. Sebald (2003a: 48) for whom

marooned on the Neva's marsh delta
St. Petersburg under the fortress,
the new Russian capital,
uncanny to a stranger,
no more than a chaos erupting,
buildings that began to subside
as soon as erected, and nowhere
a vista quite straight. The streets
and squares laid out according
to the Golden Section, jetty walls and bridges,
alignments, façades and rows of windows—
these only slowly come towards us
out of the future's resounding emptiness,
so as to bring the plan of eternity into the city
born of the terror of the vastness of space.

The city has a dark underside, and it was built on repressing that other side in order to keep at bay not only the sublime terror of the vastness of space outside its walls, gates, suburbs, and so on but also the slimy horror of places inside, beneath, and before it, under its streets, houses, buildings, and so on and in its sewers and slums. Presumably Sebald had read James Thomson ([1880] 1993: 64), as the latter refers to “vast wastes of horror-haunted time” in his *City of Dreadful Night*. The city of dreadful night is a bulwark, not only against the terror of space, against patriarchal and monumental abstraction, but also against the horror of time, against matrifocal and monstrous pre-history of the Great Goddess of the swamps and marshes. The city not only marks out a grid of allotments on the earth, but also marks a place in history. The sublime is as much a matter of time as it is of space. The quaking zone of the swamp, by contrast, mediates between time and space, place and history in the cyclical now-time of birth–life–death–birth.