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Author(s): Ian K. Lilly

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Imperial Petersburg, Suicide and Russian Literature

IAN K. LILLY

IN classical Russian literature, as in other literary traditions, suicide has often provided the denouement for adulterous affairs that go drastically wrong. Among the best known works of this kind are Leskov's *Ledi Makbet Mtsenskogo uezda* (Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District, 1864) and Lev Tolstoi's *Anna Karenina* (1873–77),¹ whose heroines withdraw from unsatisfactory marriages but fail to find happiness in new relationships. Burdened by past lives to which they cannot return, they escape from their predicaments by killing themselves. Karamzin's enormously popular and much imitated 'Bednaia Liza' (Poor Liza, 1790) fits a similar mould, since its peasant heroine has the assurance of marriage to a well-to-do, handsome and industrious young man of her own class, yet decides, not without some encouragement from her mother, to accept the advances of a frivolous nobleman with whom she has nothing in common. When her lover solves the problem of his large gambling debts by marrying a rich widow, Liza has to confront the prospect that her peasant friend will not now want her to be his bride. With her world torn apart, she finds no outcome but to drown herself.

These examples of literary suicide well illustrate Margaret Higonnet's view that nineteenth- (and late eighteenth-) century authors consciously feminized suicide and reorientated it towards love. As she writes,

Ian K. Lilly is Senior Lecturer in charge of the Department of Russian at the University of Auckland. The author would like to thank the University of Auckland Research Committee, and the Russian and East European Center, University of Illinois, for their support of this research.

¹ The dates here and below are those of writing, not publication. All translations are the author's.

This nineteenth-century reorientation of suicide towards love, passive self-surrender, and illness seems particularly evident in the literary depiction of women; their self-destruction is most often perceived as motivated by love, understood not only as loss of self but as surrender to an illness: *le mal d'amour*. [...] The great literary suicides of the nineteenth century, Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina, imply disintegration and social victimization rather than heroic self-sacrifice. [...] The abandoned woman drowns, as it were, in her own emotions.²

In all three Russian narratives it is powerful emotions that propel women into situations from which only sudden death seems to offer relief. Moscow, as the city where Anna Karenina throws herself under the wheels of a train and Liza jumps to her death in a pond, is, like the provincial locale of the Leskov tale, devoid of symbolic meaning. Similarly, the setting of 'Bednaia Liza' in the old capital has no role to play as such in explaining the factors behind Liza's spontaneous decision to end her life. Instead, that story's lavish preamble on Moscow and its proud history aims above all to draw the patriotic reader away from translated fiction originating in Western Europe.

By contrast, those suicides which feature in the elegant chain of Russian literary works that elaborate the myths of Imperial Petersburg — the so-called Petersburg text³ — clearly break this pattern. Not only is the emphasis placed squarely on male self-destruction, complete with its motives of heroic self-sacrifice, at least in the eyes of the perpetrator, but the few women suicides in the Petersburg text result not from defeated love, but from economic and moral degradation in the cruel environment of the capital. Thus, the very titles of those works show

² Margaret Higonnet, 'Suicide: Representations of the Feminine in the Nineteenth Century', *Poetics Today*, 6, 1985, 1–2, pp. 103–18 (106), reprinted as 'Speaking Silences: Women's Suicide' in *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1986, pp. 68–83 (71). Writing at the same time, Howard I. Kushner traces the impact of this literary convention on the popular myth of female suicide as an individual emotional act: 'Women and Suicide in Historical Perspective', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 10, 1985, 3, pp. 537–52.

³ The term 'Petersburg text' was first used by V. N. Toporov in his article 'O strukture romana Dostoevskogo v sviazi s arkhainymi skhemami mifologicheskogo myshleniia (*Prestuplenie i nakazanie*)' in *Structure of Texts and Semiotics of Culture*, ed. Jan van der Eng and Mojmir Grygar, The Hague, 1973, pp. 225–302 (226). It recurred in R. D. Timenchik, V. N. Toporov and T. V. Tsiv'ian, 'Sny Bloka i "Peterburgskii tekst" nachala XX veka' in *Tezisy I Vsesoiuznoi (III) konferentsii "Tvorchestvo A. A. Bloka i russkaia kul'tura XX veka"*, ed. Z. G. Mints, Tartu, 1975, pp. 129–35, and reached full elaboration in Toporov's major essay 'Peterburg i peterburgskii tekst russkoi literatury', *Uchenye zapiski Tartuskogo gos. universiteta*, vyp. 664 (1984): *Trudy po znakovym sistemam*, xviii (*Semiotika goroda i gorodskoi kul'tury; Peterburg*), pp. 4–29, where the key authors of the Petersburg text are enumerated (pp. 14–15).

The literary suicides considered in this article are those that take place in Petersburg. Thus, a work such as Chekhov's 'Rasskaz neizvestnogo cheloveka' (Story of an Unknown Man, 1891–93) has been passed over in silence. Although displaying such commonplaces of the Petersburg text as a heroine who grows up without parents or any other close family, a senior civil servant who is incapable of sensitivity towards others' feelings and a revolutionary terrorist, this story closes with the heroine's suicide in Nice after taking several decisions she wrongly believed would improve her emotional life.

their characters' subordination either to the distinctive topography of the city (for instance, Gogol's 'Nevskii prospekt', Krestovskii's *Peterburgskie trushchoby*, Andreev's 'V tumane' and Blok's 'Noch', ulitsa, fonar', apteka . . .') or to an idea (Dostoevskii's *Prestuplenie i nakazanie*), rather than their identity as individuals and central role in the narrative, as is the case with Katerina Izmailova (Lady Macbeth), Anna Karenina and Liza, and indeed Madame Bovary herself.

Given the imperial capital's unique and strangely marginal role in Russian culture, it should not be unexpected that suicide is treated differently in the Petersburg text than elsewhere in Russian literature. Such aspects of the city as its creation over a short space of time at the behest of a single dynamic individual, Peter the Great, as his new secular and Western-style seat of power, its geometrical layout as a seaport at the delta of a river and therefore susceptibility to flooding, and its impossible historical destiny as the successor to Moscow⁴ all served to mark it as un-Russian, the very antithesis of earlier Russian cities, and therefore as unnatural, illusory, even unfit for human habitation.

In general terms, suicide in the Petersburg text has much to do with political standing and with ideology and therefore its origins can be traced to Greek and Roman antiquity. If ideological motives characterize suicide in the Petersburg text in a meaningful way, they do so largely because of the real-life example of the radical eighteenth-century thinker Aleksandr Radishchev.

Arrested for trying to circulate copies of his anti-serfdom and anti-autocratic treatise *Puteshestvie iz Peterburga v Moskvu* (Journey from Petersburg to Moscow), Radishchev was initially sentenced to death by guillotine in July 1790 but was soon exiled to Eastern Siberia instead. He finally succeeded in returning to Petersburg upon the accession of the well-educated young Alexander I in March 1801. Thinking he could at last have some of his ideas enacted into legislation, he accepted appointment to the Commission for the Drafting of Laws and from early 1802 threw himself into its work. Radishchev's rationalist principles were offensive, however, to other commissioners, and the chairman, Count Zavadovskii, is said to have threatened him with further

⁴ According to the early sixteenth-century doctrine of Moscow the Third Rome, 'Two Romes have fallen [Rome and Constantinople], the third stands [Moscow] and a fourth there shall not be.' On this matter, see Ettore Lo Gatto, *Il mito di Pietroburgo: Storia, leggenda, poesia*, Milan, 1960, p. 16 and *passim*, R. G. Nazirov, 'Peterburgskaia legenda i literaturnaia traditsiia'. *Uchenye zapiski Bashkirskogo gos. universiteta*, vyp. 80 (1975): *Seriia filologicheskikh nauk*. 26 (*Traditsii i novatorstvo*, vyp. III), pp. 122–35 (122–23) and Iu. M. Lotman and B. A. Uspenskii, 'Otvzuki kontseptsii "Moskva — Tretii Rim" v ideologii Petra Pervogo. (K probleme srednevekovoi traditsii v kul'ture barokko)' in *Khudozhestvennyi iazyk srednevekov'ia*, ed. V. A. Karpushin, Moscow, 1982, pp. 236–49.

exile in Siberia. On 8 September of that year, the Tsar issued edicts on the Senate and ministries that effectively cut short the programme of legislative reform. Three days later, Radishchev drank the full glass of nitric acid his eldest son, Vasilii, was about to use to clean some tarnished epaulettes. Vasilii, however, did manage to snatch a razor from his father just as he began cutting his throat. Radishchev expired some fifteen agony-racked hours later.

Recent commentators on Radishchev's last hours, by contrast to most of their predecessors, see a direct relationship between his sudden death and the dashing of his political aspirations.⁵ To be sure, he had long endured family misfortune, notably the premature deaths of both his wives. Yet his self-destruction, which he, as a rationalist, claimed as the individual's inalienable right, stands primarily as an eloquent statement in defence of his political ideals. As those ideals were not to be realized in the Petersburg and Russian Empire of his day, he acted to ensure he could take them unsullied to his grave. In the process he became a martyr for the democratic cause, basing his actions on the model of the Roman statesman and Stoic philosopher, Cato, whose suicide 'out of love for his native land' Radishchev refers to repeatedly in the course of his writings, beginning with his *Zhitie Fedora Vasil'evicha Ushakova* (Life of Fedor Vasil'evich Ushakov, c. 1788), an account of the life and suicide of a fellow student in Germany.⁶

It was, of course, crucial to Radishchev's understanding of the meaning of his life that he should bring about his own death not during his harrowing experiences in Siberia or elsewhere in the Empire, but in Petersburg, the locus of political authority and the Russian city that had fostered Western rationalism and political ideologies far more than any other. Moreover, it was Petersburg, with its reduced public profile for the Church and thus with a reputation as a 'centre of godlessness', that could more easily accommodate the unchristian act of self-destruction than older Russian cities.⁷

⁵ Thus, Iu. M. Lotman ('Poetika bytovogo povedeniia v russkoi kul'ture XVIII veka', *Uchenye zapiski Tartuskogo gos. universiteta*, vyp. 411, 1977, *Trudy po znakovym sistemam*, VIII, pp. 65–89) describes Radishchev's final act as a 'lesson in patriotic firmness and unflinching love of liberty' (p. 86), and P. S. Shkurinov (*A. N. Radishchev: Filosofiiia cheloveka*, Moscow, 1988) writes of it as 'a special form of heroic affirmation of human dignity and honour' (p. 22).

⁶ Aleksandr Radishchev, 'Zhitie Fedora Vasil'evicha Ushakova', *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 3 vols, Moscow–Leningrad, 1938–52, I, p. 197. On ideologically and politically motivated suicide in the ancient Mediterranean world, see above all Miriam Griffin, 'Philosophy, Cato and Roman Suicide', *Greece and Rome*, 33, 1986, I, pp. 64–77 and 2, pp. 192–202.

⁷ The strongly negative stance of the Russian Orthodox Church towards suicide is reflected by Nikolai Berdiaev, *O samoubiistve: Psikhologicheskii etiud*, Paris, 1931, Moscow, 1992. In the same spirit, Dostoevskii writes with incredulity in his *Dnevnik pisateilia* (Diary of a Writer) about a newspaper report on an unemployed young Petersburg seamstress, Mar'ia Borisova, who leapt to her death from a fourth-floor window while holding an icon of the Mother of God in both hands (October 1876, chapter I, iii). Dostoevskii subsequently fictionalized that report as 'Krotkaia' (The Meek Woman), which is discussed briefly below.

While real-life suicide in Petersburg and its fictional equivalent are not one and the same, the various instances of suicide in the Petersburg text nevertheless reflect to a fair degree the urban reality of the day. On the one hand, the best evidence for the notion that there is a response in the Petersburg text to the life-threatening environment of the capital is that many of the cases of suicide that feature in it are merely fictionalized versions of events reported in the daily press. Thus, Blok's first poem on this theme is simply entitled 'Iz gazet' (From the Newspapers). Alternatively, several pieces of short fiction treating suicide have been classified either by their authors or by later commentators as examples of the so-called physiological sketch, the mid-nineteenth-century genre that documented the lives of typical members of the lower classes living in the big cities.⁸ On the other hand, the kinds of ideological justification offered for several cases of self-murder are consistent with Russian and Muscovite tradition.⁹ Petersburg had continued to attract profound hostility throughout the Empire well into the nineteenth century, particularly from disaffected religious groups and those who considered it a stilted imitation of a Western metropolis which, imitation or not, was still alien to Russian culture. Moreover, Radishchev's tragic destiny, to say nothing of his banned political ideas and moral courage, remained a fascinating subject of conversation among intellectuals for the rest of the tsarist era and beyond.

The first — and the most influential — instance of suicide in the Petersburg text itself comes from Gogol's 'Nevskii prospekt' (1834), which, as Donald Fanger remarks, is the 'most direct of his fictional attempts at a statement about the city'.¹⁰ What is crucial about this tale is not only that prostitution is depicted here for the first time in a major work of Russian fiction as a characteristic of Petersburg society (as it would continue to be in much subsequent pre-revolutionary Russian

⁸ On the role of the 'physiological sketch' as a building-block of Krestovskii's massive *Peterburgskie trushchoby*, see G. N. Kudriavtseva, 'Siužetnye situatsii i motivy romana V. Krestovskogo "Peterburgskie trushchoby"' in *Voprosy khudozhestvennogo metoda, zhanra i kharakterna v russkoi literature XVIII–XIX vekov*, ed. A. I. Reviakin, Moscow, 1975, pp. 203–26 (217, 219–23).

⁹ Such an ideologically charged suicide as Radishchev's was hardly alien to Russian or Muscovite tradition. Suffice it to point to repeated instances of mass self-immolation by Old Ritualists as the best means of ensuring the purity of their values. For example, Robert O. Crummey, *The Old Believers and the World of Antichrist: The Vyg Community and the Russian State, 1694–1855*, Madison, Wisconsin, 1970, pp. 45–57, describes in detail various waves of 'death by fire' among recalcitrant congregations in the North during the period 1665–89.

¹⁰ Donald Fanger, *The Creation of Nikolai Gogol*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1979, p. 111.

literature),¹¹ but also that it is a street-walker who drives an innocent man to end his life by being a flagrant contradiction of his Italianate aesthetics.

Piskarev, the protagonist of this story's primary plot, is captivated by a young woman on the capital's main promenade who is just as beautiful as Pietro Perugino's 'Bianca' and has features that are just as divine. Unfortunately, as the narrator bluntly explains on introducing him, Piskarev's pursuit of her is doomed because, as an artist, he 'belongs to Petersburg society as much as someone appearing to us in a dream belongs to the material world'. Artists are a rare breed in this city, where all men are 'either civil servants, merchants or German artisans' and, it is implied, are moral dwarfs without exception. Artists, condemned to a city in such a northerly location yet with magnificent Italian-style architecture gracing its centre, can be only feeble substitutes for their Italian counterparts. Concomitantly, the young woman's Madonna-like appearance is far less real than it seems, as he discovers when she promptly leads him to her disorderly lodgings in a brothel.

Thus, where Radishchev had read as real the tsars' 'Potemkin government', with its enlightened trappings shielding a political and legal sham, so Piskarev took Petersburg's façade as symbolizing the arrival of Western civilization, whereas it merely obscured a way of life little different from that of the standard barbaric provincial town. Gogol' makes no mistake about this view by deriving a grotesque and vulgar simile from the only architectural monument mentioned in the story, the recently completed General Staff Building, a high-point of the accomplishments of Carlo Rossi. In the story's second to last paragraph, the narrator reflects on the paradoxes of life, where everything is the opposite to what it should be:

One person has an excellent chef, but unfortunately, such a small mouth that he cannot put into it more than two tiny morsels. Another has a mouth the size of the arch of the General Staff, but, alas, has to make do with some German dinner consisting mainly of potatoes.

Shattered by this bitter experience, Piskarev is able to reclaim his vision of moral beauty as an inalienable reflection of physical beauty only in his dreams. His idealized image of the young woman appears to him spontaneously in his sleep, yet but once. That is in a scintillating

¹¹ Victims of prostitution appear in the Petersburg text in the works referred to in this article as well as others by Dostoevskii, Garshin, Andreev, Nekrasov and Blok, particularly the latter's lyric cycle 'Gorod' (The City, 1904–08) in almost its entirety, in Krestovskii's *Peterburgskie trushchoby* and Remizov's *Krestovye sestry* as noted below, and, for example, in Chernyshevskii's *Chto delat'?* (What Is To Be Done?, 1862–63), Kushchevskii's 'Istoriia shvei' (Story of a Seamstress, early 1870s), Nadson's 'Slezy' (Tears, c. 1880), Chekhov's 'Znakomyi muzhchina' (A Male Acquaintance, 1886) and Bunin's 'Petlistye ushi' (Loopy Ears, 1916).

ballroom scene at her mansion, a property whose veneer of Westernized elegance contrasts starkly with the setting in which he last saw her. However, it is now he who feels inadequate, since he was not given time to change out of his working clothes when called urgently to join her. He is thus not dressed for dancing with her and manages to speak with her alone only momentarily before he wakes up.

Piskarev's alienation from Petersburg society and life itself rapidly gains pace. He resorts to opium in order to reclaim her ideal form but goes mad in the process. When he finally meets her again and proposes reforming her through marriage, she rejects him outright on the grounds that domestic chores such as washing and darning are no match for the chance to remain idle.

This devastating response causes Piskarev to run away and lock himself in his room, where he does such a bad job of cutting his throat with a razor that his death agony lasts for several hours. Although the first suicide in the Petersburg text, this is more gruesome than all future ones. The artist is mourned by not a single Petersburger and his burial, by convention, is devoid of religious rites. While it has not been established definitively that Gogol' knew of the circumstances of Radishchev's death, the philosophical principles Piskarev lives for and his ugly, drawn-out expiry nevertheless suggest the political idealist as a possible model. As Victor Erlich concludes, 'The contrast between the tragic end of Piskarëv and the happy ending of the Pirogov story speaks for itself. The smug, the vulgar, the callous are here to stay. The pure of heart are crushed by the unbearable discrepancy between their dreams and "revolting" actuality.'¹²

A daring work for its time, 'Nevskii prospekt' traces in clear outline the great potential of the suicide theme in the Petersburg text. Not only does Piskarev's moral and aesthetic rejection of Petersburg result in an earlier as well as more violent death than those of almost all later heroes, but the prostitute who provokes it highlights the debasement of moral values, the low worth given to human life and the obsession with money that will afflict most subsequent Petersburg characters. Whether or not Piskarev's actions were derived from those of Radishchev, it is clear that Piskarev dies in defence of an ideal. Just as the creation of Petersburg by the will of a single powerful and ruthless individual ensured the city would remain highly politicized, so those who, like Piskarev, considered it a perversion of a true European capital were fated to be ostracized if not destroyed for such a stand.

Although Gogol' returned only once, and then fleetingly, to suicide in a Petersburg context, he did so with a still sharper focus on monetary values. The second part of the revised version of 'Portret' (The Portrait,

¹² Victor Erlich, *Gogol*, New Haven, 1969, p. 79.

1841–42) includes a vignette about a certain Prince R., whose family had fallen on such hard times that he could only marry the beauty of his dreams by borrowing heavily from a pawnbroker. Their extravagant wedding is the talk of Petersburg and the couple's happiness inspires envy. However, within a year the bridegroom's personality becomes poisoned, since that money-lender, like those elsewhere in the story, is an agent of the devil. The Prince torments his loving wife, who talks of divorce, but he responds by taking a knife to her. She is saved by onlookers, whereupon he turns the knife upon himself.

Literary suicide next occurs in 'Svistul'kin' (1855), a grotesque satire along Gogolian lines by Grigorovich that alone among accounts of suicide in the Petersburg text takes its title from the hero's name. Ivan Svistul'kin, narcissistic as a little orphan and brazen-faced and frivolous as an adult, has expectations for his social position that grossly outstrip what he can reasonably make of it, especially since he lacks both a career and any sustainable private income. Moreover, as a devotee of the artificial side of Petersburg, he hankers after Western *haute couture* and is generally preoccupied with details of his appearance. To highlight such fastidiousness, the narrator remarks that 'there are as many hairdressers in Petersburg as there are taverns in Moscow'.¹³ So obsessive is Svistul'kin's behaviour that he runs up debts, goes for months without eating properly and squanders a small inheritance, just in order to be seen every afternoon promenading on Nevsky and dining in its smart cafés.

When his bizarre plan for marrying the only daughter of a well-off German baker culminates in a fiasco, he compulsively makes for the elegant menswear stores and spends his last roubles on a greatcoat in the latest style and a shirt with an embroidered front. He immediately puts them on and makes such a show of his new shirt in the mid-winter frost under his unbuttoned coat that he catches a heavy fever. With his dreams now shattered, however, he sees no future for himself and therefore deliberately damages his health in the bitter cold. Unwilling to reverse his path to self-destruction, he dies a lonely death in a hospital. Svistul'kin is quite strange but his desperate method of escape from Petersburg's absurd fashion-consciousness and its money-grubbing Germans is sufficiently well motivated.¹⁴

If the tone of Grigorovich's novella bears comparison with that of the satirical exposés in 'Nevskii prospekt',¹⁵ an analogue to the serious themes of the Piskarev plot can be found in Vsevolod Krestovskii's

¹³ D. V. Grigorovich, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 12 vols, Petersburg, 1896, II, pp. 279–377 (357).

¹⁴ M. V. Otradin, 'Peterburgskie povesti D. V. Grigorovicha (Problema geroia)', *Filologicheskie nauki*, 1977, 2, pp. 21–31 (25).

¹⁵ See L. M. Lotman, 'Posleslovie' in D. V. Grigorovich, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, Moscow–Leningrad, 1959, pp. 705–23 (717).

blockbuster *Peterburgskie trushchoby: Kniga o sytykh i golodnykh* (Petersburg Slums: A Book About Haves and Have-Nots, 1862–67), which highlights suicide as a conceivable end-result of Petersburg's destructive social and economic environment.

One of the several main characters in this novel is Masha Pövetina, a bastard daughter of Prince Dmitrii Shadurskii and Princess Anna Chechevinskaia. Named after Mary Magdalene and raised very happily by devoted foster parents on the tranquil fringes of Petersburg, she is removed without notice at the age of nineteen by Amalia von Spiltze, her guardian. With von Spiltze's connivance, Shadurskii's only legitimate son, Vladimir, gets her drunk, seduces her and makes her not his wife, as promised, but his kept woman. After a year he tires of her and abruptly stops paying her. Her elderly landlord throws her out of her quarters, auctions her belongings to recover unpaid rent and then outrages her by inviting her to become his kept woman at twice the income she had had from the younger Shadurskii. From then on, with her foster mother dying of a broken heart and her foster father going mad, she is completely at the mercy of still more callous Petersburgers in positions of power.

The novel also follows the life of Ivan Veresov. A bastard son of Tat'iana Shadurskaia, the Prince's wife, he is disowned at birth by both his mother and her estranged lover, Osip Mordenko, a former serf on the Shadurskii estates. Veresov has a miserable childhood in a particularly seedy inner-city Petersburg tenement and, despite his meagre talents, has to provide for himself from the age of ten, even though his father, by now the archetypal Petersburg pawnbroker,¹⁶ could easily have lent a hand. Miserly in the extreme towards his customers, Mordenko is not only unable to treat his own flesh and blood any differently, he is deeply worried that his son might want to kill him for his money. Such fears are heightened by the fact that Veresov, given his living circumstances, has inevitably come into contact with criminal elements. Thus, when there is a break-in at Mordenko's flat and an attempt on the life of his cook, Veresov is automatically implicated. He is condemned by his father, arrested and imprisoned. Although he manages to persuade his interrogators of his innocence, the stigma of imprisonment makes it hard for him to find work on his release. Unemployed, homeless and starving, Veresov concludes that the only way he will be able to fill his stomach will be as a petty thief, distasteful as that is to him.

¹⁶ The *rostovshchik* is a key, if infrequent, character in the Petersburg text. Such figures occur in works by Gogol', Dostoevskii, Sologub and Remizov mentioned in this article, and, beyond it, in various works of prose and poetry by Nekrasov, particularly his story 'Rostovshchik' (1841).

At this point, the paths of Masha and Veresov cross.¹⁷ Terrified of what might become of her, Masha would have leapt to her death in the icy waters of the Fontanka but for stumbling upon the sleeping Veresov and realizing that there are other Petersburgers who are just as destitute as she is. However, as there is little they can offer each other, they go their separate ways. Short of drowning or hanging herself — thoughts that are constantly on her mind — Masha finds prostitution inescapable. By a cruel irony, Masha's second attempt to jump into the Fontanka is averted by an older woman known on the streets only as Chukha, but who in reality, unbeknown to either of them, is her own mother.¹⁸ Chukha, introduced at the beginning of the novel as Princess Anna Chechevinskaia, had been ostracized by her class and cheated financially by the Shadurskii family and by Mordenko and likewise had found descent into the Petersburg sex trade the only way she could eke out an existence. In the end, Masha survives only by living in a brothel run by a penny-pinching German. Her wishes are fulfilled without much delay when she starts coughing up blood and promptly dies a gory death from consumption. Although Masha's early demise has complex origins, it anticipates the several cases in the Petersburg text of prostitutes coming to a violent end by either their own hand or another's.

Meanwhile, Veresov also fares badly. True, he does receive a death-bed admission from his father that he had no role in the break-in and he finally discovers who his mother is and meets her. However, she tricks him into tearing up the big-figure promissory notes Mordenko held against the Shadurskii family that would have made up the bulk of Veresov's inheritance, pleading that, were the debts discharged, the Prince, Princess and their son would be financially ruined. Revolted by both his parents' contradictory behaviour towards him and by the mercenary atmosphere of the former pawnbroker's where he has been living, he resolves to strike out on his own. However, the deep wounds his parents have inflicted on his tender soul do not heal, particularly in view of Shadurskaia's latest bout of hostility towards him, and he begins to feel that life holds no future. He realizes his father's fortune was gained only by squeezing the poor and so wants none of it. What he really hopes to do is provide a proper life for Masha. He devotes himself obsessively to furnishing rooms in his flat for her and tries desperately to track her down, but all he stumbles on is her funeral. This blow is too much and it remains only for Veresov, by now quite cut off from reality, to shoot himself. Just as there was no place in Petersburg for Piskarev,

¹⁷ V. V. Krestovskii, *Peterburgskie trushchoby*, Part Five, viii.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Part Five, xxi.

so too it had none for this other 'incorrigible idealist', as Krestovskii finally calls him.¹⁹

If self-destruction appears in the Petersburg text in only isolated instances before the mid-1860s, Krestovskii's *Peterburgskie trushchoby* and Dostoevskii's mature narratives which are set in the capital make the phenomenon more familiar.²⁰ At the same time, Dostoevskii tends to treat suicide as a psychological and philosophical problem rather than an environmental or political one, with the result that the Petersburg aspect is not always crucial. Moreover, the complexity of his characters frequently produces suicides that are long contemplated, but not actually committed. This is to say that Dostoevskii's literary pre-eminence enables him to rise above at least some of the common-places of the Petersburg text.

Thus, *Idiot* (1867–69), which is nominally located in the capital and does feature some of its literary stereotypes — such as Natas'ia Filippovna (who allows several rich men to bid for her body against each other) and Ptitsyn (a successful pawnbroker) — makes rather little of the city's environment as an influence on the characters, particularly in respect of the attempted suicide of Ippolit Terent'ev.²¹

The earliest victims, or rather, would-be victims of suicide in Dostoevskii's fictional Petersburg²² feature in Part II of *Prestuplenie i nakazanie* (Crime and Punishment, 1865–66). They are Mikolai Dement'ev (chapter 4) and Afrosin'iushka (chapter 6), two uncomplicated characters who, like Svidrigailov much later in the novel, influence the central figure's ruminations about ending his own life. When Mikolai, a young peasant from Riazan province, leaves his painting job in the building where the murders have just been committed, he recovers some jewellery Raskol'nikov had apparently dropped on the footpath while making his escape. Mikolai's behaviour is fairly innocent, since all he does is pawn these valuables at the tavern opposite in order to go on a lengthy drinking-bout. However, his sudden disappearance arouses suspicion. Panicked into believing he will be accused of the crime, he goes to an empty coach-house and is just about to hang himself when a worker disturbs him. Straight away, he asks to

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Part Six, xlv.

²⁰ The most extensive study of suicide in the works of Dostoevskii is N. N. Shneidman, *Dostoevsky and Suicide*, Oakville, Ontario, 1984 (hereafter Shneidman).

²¹ On the image of Petersburg presented in *Idiot*, see N. E. Falikova, 'Simvolicheskaia topografiia romana F. M. Dostoevskogo "Idiot"' in *Sovremennyye problemy metoda, zhanra i poetiki russkoi literatury*, ed. V. N. Zakharov, Petrozavodsk, 1991, pp. 123–31.

²² Since only fiction and poetry are considered here, no mention will be made of Dostoevskii's *Dnevnik pisatel'ia* (Diary of a Writer, 1876–81), whose Petersburg suicides are all real-life ones, with the exception of the transformation of the seamstress Mar'ia Borisova's actual self-destruction into 'Krotkaia', on which see below. On the relationship between accounts of suicide in the *Dnevnik* and 'Krotkaia', see T. V. Zakharova, "'Dva samoubiistva"' (Fakt — kontekst — obraz v "Dnevnikе pisatel'ia" F. M. Dostoevskogo)' in *Fakt i khudozhestvennyi obraz*, ed. G. G. Ermilova, Ivanovo, 1989, pp. 80–88.

be able to turn himself in at a police station, from where word of his actions soon reaches Raskol'nikov.

The other scene shows an exhausted Raskol'nikov standing on the Ascension Bridge²³ over the Catherine Canal at dusk on the second day after the murder. He peers into the waters and would have fainted but for the sudden distraction of a drunken woman with a haggard face leaping over the handrail to what she hopes will be her death. The wretched Afrosin'iushka had previously tried to hang herself but was saved by neighbours. This time she is rescued by a policeman while Raskol'nikov stands by, apathetic and uninvolved. While Mikolai primarily helps in the characterization of Raskol'nikov, Afrosin'iushka, thanks to Dostoevskii's indication of the impoverished environment, comfortably fits the literary type of the alienated lower-class woman who is driven to destroy herself by Petersburg's harsh social conditions.

At the end of Part II, the rolling drunk Marmeladov is fatally trampled by a pair of horses. In view of the drunken state of Afrosin'iushka as she threw herself off the bridge just hours earlier, his death might appear to have been staged as an accident but really to be an act of self-destruction stemming from his intolerable personal crisis — his complete inability to hold a job and feed and clothe his wife and step-children and his unconscionable use of his daughter's earnings as a prostitute to feed his alcohol dependence. However, as N. N. Shneidman stresses, Marmeladov embodies important Christian principles, whereas 'suicide, for Dostoevsky, is the prerogative of nihilists and unbelievers, and Marmeladov is not one of them'.²⁴

Raskol'nikov's constant thoughts since the murder of either drowning himself in the Neva or putting a gun to his head,²⁵ although never acted on, clearly relate to the Petersburg context. While S. V. Belov goes too far in insisting that Petersburg itself is a 'participant in Raskol'nikov's crime',²⁶ it is clear that his destructive urges prosper in the crowded environment and sweltering summer heat of the capital. These were, of course, problems he had hoped to alleviate with his new-found fortune.²⁷ Moreover, both the intended murder victim and Sonia Marmeladova, to whose guilt he compares his own and who plays the crucial role in his 'resurrection to a new life', are mainstays of

²³ As identified by A. S. Burmistrov, 'Peterburg v romane "Prestuplenie i nakazanie"', *Prometei*, 11, 1977, pp. 71–85 (81).

²⁴ Shneidman, p. 46.

²⁵ On this matter, see Ralph G. Koprince, 'The Question of Raskol'nikov's Suicide', *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 16, 1982, 1, pp. 73–81 and Shneidman, pp. 36–40.

²⁶ S. V. Belov, *Roman F. M. Dostoevskogo 'Prestuplenie i nakazanie': Kommentarii*, Leningrad, 1979, p. 27.

²⁷ On this issue, see Adele Lindenmeyr, 'Raskolnikov's City and the Napoleonic Plan', *Slavic Review*, 35, 1976, 1, pp. 37–47.

the Petersburg text — the former a pawnbroker and the latter a young woman forced into prostitution as the only means of ensuring her and her family's material survival.

The only major character in *Prestuplenie i nakazanie* who in fact kills himself is Svidrigailov. His motivation for suicide is unambiguously psychological and is rooted in several ghastly events that precede his arrival in Petersburg: his brutal persecution of both the deaf-and-dumb teenage Resslikh girl and his servant, Filipp, who subsequently hang themselves, and his complicity in the suicide of a second teenage girl and in the sudden death of his wife. While the setting of Svidrigailov's self-destruction fits the Petersburg text perfectly, with its flood motif, its location on the unfashionable Petersburg Side and the emphasis on the demonic associations of suicide²⁸ — to parallel the connections Gogol' in particular draws between the devil and the capital — the grotesquely humorous atmosphere in which Dostoevskii steeps Svidrigailov's 'departure for America' sharply distinguishes this depiction of suicide in the Petersburg text from all others.

The other Dostoevskii novel which features self-destruction in Petersburg is *Podrostok* (The Adolescent, 1874–75).²⁹ In quick succession, in chapters 8 and 9 of Part I, Kraft and Olia bring their young lives to an abrupt end, Kraft for mainly philosophical reasons ('Russians are a second-rate breed of people, on the basis of phrenology, craniology and even mathematics'), but Olia in order to forestall a grim fate in the capital.

Olia, a neighbour of Arkadii Dolgorukii and thus only a minor character in the broad narrative structure, has come to the capital from Moscow with her mother, whose long dead husband had been swindled by a Petersburg merchant. The well-educated Olia advertises in a newspaper for work as a tutor but discovers to her horror that the address near the Ascension Bridge she is invited to go to by a German woman is a brothel. A second response, from Versilov, is no more than a calculated insult: he offers to find her steady employment and, while doing so, will support her financially. Fearful of surviving in Petersburg without sacrificing her cherished values, Olia writes a stylistically incongruous two-line suicide note and hangs herself. She thus fits the mould of the orphaned and penniless young woman who cannot survive in the sinful capital, but she makes her escape early on, before first descending into prostitution like Masha Pövetina and others.

²⁸ Linda Ivanits, 'Suicide and Folk Beliefs in Dostoevskii's *Crime and Punishment*' in *The Golden Age of Russian Literature and Thought*, ed. Derek Offord, Basingstoke and London, 1992, pp. 138–48. Her article also makes a case for regarding Marmeladov's death as self-inflicted (p. 141).

²⁹ On the topography of Petersburg in this novel, see T. V. Tsiv'ian, 'O strukture vremeni i prostranstva v romane Dostoevskogo *Podrostok*', *Russian Literature*, iv, 1976, 3, pp. 203–55.

Dostoevskii's last case of suicide in a Petersburg context comes in 'Krotkaia' (The Meek Woman, 1876). The unnamed self-murderer in this piece of short fiction is a fifteen-year-old orphan who fails to find a job despite her education and is initially too proud to marry any man chosen for her. In the event, her only option, if she is to survive economically, is marriage either to a fat shopkeeper or to a pawnbroker who is willing to buy her from her malicious guardian aunts. Having discovered in the mean time that the shopkeeper had beaten his two previous wives to death, she is left only with the pawnbroker. He, however, as vicious and manipulating as any pawnbroker in the Petersburg text, is obsessed with money for its own sake and an unrelenting domestic tyrant to boot. The young woman's only means of escape from this 'psychology of entrapment', as Robert Louis Jackson describes her husband's attitude to her,³⁰ is through violence. After she fails to seize a chance to shoot him, it remains for her to take her own life by jumping out of an upstairs window. To suggest that she 'kills herself because of emotional frustration'³¹ is to play down the fragility of her economic and social situation. She is thus not much less a victim of the Petersburg environment than Masha Pövetina, who, as noted, is likewise a young orphan woman cheated by those whose clear moral obligation is to protect her.

Closer to the end of the century and more consistently in tune with the Petersburg text, Vsevolod Garshin and Fedor Sologub not only wrote stories about self-destruction in the context of the capital,³² they would eventually experience suicide there themselves. Garshin, the victim of hereditary self-destructive tendencies, threw himself — or, less likely, fell — into a stairwell in Povarskoi pereulok in 1889, with fatal consequences.³³ When, in September 1921, Sologub and his wife and co-author, Anastasiia Chebotarevskaia, were forbidden by Lenin to emigrate, she made the ultimate political protest by jumping from the Tuchkov Bridge into the Neva and drowning.

If Garshin's 1880 story 'Noch'' (Night) describes an anguished intellectual's narrow failure to bring off his own death with only a single reference to the story's setting in the capital, Petersburg's grim social conditions are described so graphically in 'Proisshestvie' (An Incident, 1878) that the reader cannot fail to view them as primary causes of the hero's eventual suicide.

³⁰ Robert Louis Jackson, *The Art of Dostoevsky: Deliriums and Nocturnes*, Princeton, 1981, p. 238.

³¹ Shneidman, p. 93.

³² On suicide and near-suicide in Garshin, see above all Hamilkars Lejins, 'Suicide in Garshin's Life and Stories', *South-Central Bulletin* [New Orleans], 27, 1967, 4, pp. 34–44.

³³ Peter Henry, *A Hamlet of his Time, Vsevolod Garshin: The Man, his Works, and his Milieu*, Oxford, 1983 (hereafter *A Hamlet of his Time*), p. 229.

'Proisshestvie' tells of a petty government clerk, Ivan Nikitin, whose unrequited affection for a young but educated prostitute, Nadezhda Nikolaevna, drives him to drink. He grovels before her so unashamedly that she feels the marriage he seeks would be even more a betrayal of true love than her own sordid occupation. In a moment of contemplation she imagines that the best she can ever hope for is to jump one winter's day into an ice-hole on the Neva. Agreeing to meet Nikitin one more time, she takes care to dress modestly and tries not to provoke him, but he still behaves irrationally and threatens to murder her. She is sufficiently attuned to his predicament and state of mind to realize after leaving him that he will kill himself, but returns only in time to hear the fatal shot ring out.

Some scholars have traced the sources of this story to the Petersburg fiction of Dostoevskii;³⁴ however Gogol's 'Nevskii prospekt' and Krestovskii's *Peterburgskie trushchoby* appear even more relevant. Prostitution is the key social cause of both Nadezhda Nikolaevna's would-be and Nikitin's actual suicide. Moreover, Nikitin's inability to develop his platonic interest in a street-walker exactly parallels that of Piskarev.³⁵ More importantly, Nadezhda Nikolaevna's descent from an idyllic early childhood on the steppes into a life of prostitution via orphanhood and deception at the hands of Petersburg relatives and a smooth-talking fop is clearly reminiscent of the fate of Masha Povetina.

Meanwhile, among the stories of Sologub from the 1890s are several that end with the suicide of a young person in either a provincial town or a vaguely urban setting, such as 'Uteshenie' (Consolation, 1895-97) and 'Krasota' (Beauty, 1898) respectively.

While those stories deal essentially with the consequences of their characters' identity crises, 'Ulybka' (The Smile, 1897) is a tale about a Petersburger who is ultimately defeated by his own heartless city. Like so many other bachelors in Petersburg fiction, Grisha Igumnov is an outsider. His father has died before the story begins, and his physical unattractiveness, poor dress, taciturnity and awkwardness make him the subject of other children's taunts. Then, as later, he finds it impossible to make friends, male or female, and is always easily cheated. As an adult, he enters the civil service but loses his position through an inability to concentrate following the death of his devoted mother. He fails in an attempt to get a new job and is forced to pawn the last of his mother's jewellery. He is soon so indigent that he cannot even eat regularly, let alone pay his rent. Suddenly, against the backdrop of the massive and imposing gilded central dome of St Isaac's Cathedral,

³⁴ See, for instance, Robert Louis Jackson, *Dostoevsky's Underground Man in Russian Literature*, The Hague, 1958, chapter vi, and F. I. Evnin, 'F. M. Dostoevskii i V. M. Garshin', *Izvestiia Akademii nauk SSSR, Seria literaturny i iazyka*, 21, 1962, 4, 289-301, esp. pp. 295-96.

³⁵ Cf. Henry, *A Hamlet of his Time*, p. 70.

he realizes that bringing about his own end has its attractions. 'Everything was unfriendly and alien to the starving and powerless man', the narrator remarks. Liudmila Kleiman even suggests that the gold of the dome symbolizes the money this weak character does not have nor has ever had.³⁶ A former colleague encounters him by chance but, being self-satisfied and devoid of human sympathy, like many Petersburgers, he does not grasp the poignancy of Igumnov's request for a rouble. As soon as they part, Igumnov disappears into the 'cold and heavy waves' of the Neva.

Sologub subsequently reworked the basic idea of 'Ulybka' but with a sharp political edge, a development made possible, as far as publication was concerned, by the censorship relaxation that followed the 1905 Revolution. The protagonist of 'Golodnyi blesk' (The Glimmer of Hunger, 1907), Sergei Moshkin (from *moshka*, 'midge'), is a village schoolteacher who loses his job after an inspector finds correspondence of his published in a 'leftist' Volga newspaper. Moshkin spends the next year in Petersburg frantically searching for work but exhausts his finances in the process. Moreover, he becomes acutely aware that his poverty has distanced him from attractive young women, elegant clothes, fine homes, in sum, a comfortable life. He advertises his skills, but he gets a single anonymous reply from an address in the Izmailovo district. When the job turns out to involve long hours of menial editorial work for little pay, his patience finally snaps. Inspired by a newspaper report about a frenzied and starving madman who slashed a famous painting in an art gallery, which he had read on the way to meet his potential employer, Moshkin threatens her, vandalizes her works of art and, after walking the streets for some time, throws himself to his death in a canal. Moshkin, like Igumnov, is thus destroyed by Petersburg and the material smugness of its better-off citizens, but in addition has to bear the cross of the political non-conformist.

Unlike the other writers represented here, Leonid Andreev spent little time in Petersburg. Nevertheless, among three of his most important stories on suicide, one has a very vague Moscow setting, a second is located in the provinces but its key incident takes place in Petersburg, and the third is enveloped by that environment.

'Rasskaz o Sergee Petroviche' (The Story of Sergei Petrovich, 1900) is about a young Nietzsche devotee with an anxiety about failure. As time goes by, he retreats into a world of abstractions, begins to drink heavily, suffers something akin to delusions of grandeur, goes mad and finally takes a fatal dose of cyanide. There is no real sense of the atmosphere of Moscow, where he is a student, only a passing reference to two toponyms, the Sparrow Hills and the slums of Khitrovka, and

³⁶ Liudmila Kleiman, *Ranniaia proza Fedora Sologuba*, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1983, p. 98.

then purely on the grounds of realistic detail. Sergei Petrovich's crisis clearly has a psychological, not environmental, basis.

By contrast, 'Molchanie' (Silence, 1900), a brief story about the relationship between an arch-conservative, taciturn parish priest and his daughter, shows that personality and locale together can provoke self-destruction. Against her parents' wishes, Vera had gone to Petersburg, a city that, according to her father's clerical stereotype, is 'terrifying and incomprehensible'. She returned in a state of deep depression, although what happened there is not even alluded to. James Woodward, the most explicit among commentators on this story, suggests she goes to the capital as a rebel 'against her parents' values . . . and there she encounters ideas and a way of life which reinforce her antipathy'.³⁷ Given the strength of her desire to visit Petersburg, what actually happens to her there might have been more ominous than that. In any event, her experience was so harrowing it drove her to throw herself under a train a week later.

Andreev's major story set in the capital, 'V тумane' (In the Fog, 1912), however, leaves no doubt that it is the environment of Petersburg, specifically its damp climate, lax upbringing among the educated classes and the ready availability of prostitutes,³⁸ that is the key to the hero's undoing. This is a story about a grammar-school boy, Pavel Rybakov, who, in the seedy atmosphere of a pervasive yellow November sea fog, comes to the realization that he is caught between love for the pure and unattainable Katia Reimer and the consequences of his encounter with a whore two years earlier. Now totally revolted by that experience, which gave him venereal disease, and oppressed by the fog, which 'sullenly and imperiously creeps into the room, like a shapeless yellow-bellied reptile', he senses he cannot ever be cured. He goes out into the damp night, meets a streetwalker and has a verbal duel with her. He then turns violent, stabs her mortally and finally puts the knife into his own heart.

This murder-suicide, sensational though it seemed, was nevertheless so realistic that critics reviewing the story on its publication in late December 1902 cited reports in the daily press of similar incidents taking place in Moscow and Kiev.³⁹ Significantly, Andreev must have decided that a work of fiction with such an outcome was not appropriate to just any large city of the Russian Empire but was much more in keeping with Petersburg. The city's literary mythology was, of course, highly developed by that time and Andreev strove to make his

³⁷ James B. Woodward, *Leonid Andreev: A Study*, Oxford, 1969, p. 64.

³⁸ Cf. V. I. Bezzubov, *Leonid Andreev i traditsii russkogo realizma*, Tallinn, 1984, pp. 29–30.

³⁹ Cf. V. N. Chuvakov, Notes on 'V tumane' in Leonid Andreev, *Povesti i rasskazy v dvukh tomakh*, Moscow, 1971, 1, p. 669, republished in modified form in Andreev, *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh*, Moscow, 1, 1990, pp. 624–28.

story part of that tradition, particularly in the opening paragraph, then in the grim description of the Neva just before Pavel's final human encounter, and lastly in the only two sentences that follow his act of self-destruction:

The cold city was suffocating in the lead-coloured fog that night, right until dawn. Its deep streets were unfrequented and silent and in the garden ravaged by the autumn the solitary, mournful flowers quietly faded away on their broken stems.

The explicitness of the locale and the ugliness of the suicidal act described here and in contemporary stories, such as Garshin's 'Proisshestvie' and Sologub's 'Golodnyi blesk', contrast strongly with those of literary self-destruction or would-be self-destruction set elsewhere in the Empire. A case in point is Gor'kii's strongly romanticized 'Samoubiistvo' (Suicide, 1894). In that story a gentleman checks into a seedy hotel in a large, unspecified city with the intention of killing himself. A prostitute, mistaking his room for that of a client, knocks on his door and they talk. He gives her all his money and asks her to go, while begrudgingly coming to the view that she is in fact a metaphor for life. He tries to shoot himself but calls her back, whereupon he tries again, but she 'saves' him.

It is at this same time that the suicide motif gains prominence in poetic contributions to the Petersburg text. Both Nekrasov and Garshin had already broached this issue in one poem each, but it was during the 1900s that Petersburger Aleksandr Blok would show its full potential.

Nekrasov, the first major poet after Pushkin to focus on the capital, wrote extensively throughout his career about Petersburg's underprivileged. However, it is only in his late nine-quatrain 'Utro' (Morning, 1872–73) that he extends his catalogue of the city's social ills beyond starvation, disease, alcoholism, the abuse of women and spiritual dispossession. He writes in the dual contexts of the horrors of the capital and the desolation of the Russian countryside, which he still knew well.

Nekrasov's early-morning Petersburg provides a concentrated spectacle of devastation. The victims, as in later poetry, are anonymous and very generalized figures. A fire breaks out, there is an execution, two officers are riding to the outskirts to fight a duel and the Peter and Paul Fortress cannons signal the threat of a flood. An additional focus is the power of status and money and the powerlessness of those who are its victims. While traders give their customers short measure in order to eat well themselves and a high-ranking bureaucrat is accorded a lavish funeral, the lower classes are represented by a prostitute and a petty thief. She is shown returning home from a night of degradation and he

is caught red-handed by a caretaker. The cumulative effect on the city's poor of such suffering, as conveyed in the last two lines, is that the weakest ultimately find refuge only in self-destruction:

Где-то в верхнем этаже раздался
Выстрел — кто-то покончил с собой . . .

This sole description of urban suicide in Nekrasov's poetry evokes powerfully the alienation of those too destitute to live anywhere but in garrets, where they are cut off from even the minimal social contacts that are possible in this hostile and meaningless city.

The next reference to suicide comes some three years later, now less clearly located in Petersburg but identifiable as such on biographical grounds, in Garshin's 'Mne zhalko vas, rodimye mesta . . .' (March 1876).⁴⁰ This poem also juxtaposes the lyric hero's rural origins and the squalid environment of the big city. While Garshin is euphoric when evoking the summertime flora and fauna of the southern steppes, he too describes the people's tormented existence in what seems an ever overcast city by means of a long list of forms of their mental and moral decay. Suicide is merely noted as a phenomenon the citizenry have grown used to.

While one can only speculate about the influence of Nekrasov on Garshin's poem, the first of Blok's lyrics about urban suicide leaves few doubts. 'Iz gazet' (December 1903),⁴¹ the account of a mother leaving her children in bed one Yuletide morning while she goes out to throw herself under a train, is frequently cited in recent discussions of Blok's debt to Nekrasov.⁴² It is reminiscent of the older poet in theme (a mother driven to desperation abandons her young), in its jarring contrasts of mood (the tragedy strikes the children amid their joyful Christmas games), in the use of a bystander to comment on the events and in its purported documentary character, as a real-life incident drawn from the pages of a newspaper.

Although the locale in this poem is not made explicit, it may be assumed to be Petersburg, for, as Iurii Lotman once remarked, the city for Blok is always Petersburg.⁴³ Indeed, the next suicide poem, 'Povest'' (A Tale, January 1905), is quintessentially Petersburgian. The setting is a typical street on a rainy evening, where the grey

⁴⁰ V. M. Garshin, *Sobranie sochinenii*, Berlin, 1920, pp. 449–50.

⁴¹ Z. G. Mints, in her essay 'Blok i Dostoevskii' in *Dostoevskii i ego vremia*, ed. V. G. Bazanov and G. M. Fridlender, Leningrad, 1971, pp. 217–47 (225), notes that both Blok and Dostoevskii drew on newspaper stories for their writings about suicide in the Petersburg context.

⁴² See, for example, N. N. Skatov, 'Rossiia u Aleksandra Bloka i poeticheskaia traditsiia Nekrasova' in *V mire Bloka: Sbornik statei*, ed. A. A. Mikhailov and S. S. Lesnevskii, Moscow, 1981, pp. 89–91. However, Skatov does not actually link 'Iz gazet' and 'Utro'.

⁴³ Iu. M. Lotman, 'Blok i narodnaia kul'tura goroda', *Uchenye zapiski Tartuskogo gos. universiteta*, vyp. 535, 1981, *Blokovskii sbornik*, iv, p. 16.

passers-by heading home from work catch the light of the lamps and look like ‘apparitions of the lifeless capital’. Suddenly, a frenzied ‘daughter of nocturnal merry-making’ drops her baby and leaps out of an upstairs window to a gory end on the roadway. Thus, the figure of the prostitute–suicide that occurs in the Petersburg prose text is carried over into the poetry.

However, the key Blok poems on suicide, from much later in his career, are the middle three lyrics of his cycle ‘Pliaski smerti’ (Dances of Death), all three of which have a night-time setting. These are the celebrated but often not fully understood ‘Noch’, ulitsa, fonar’, apteka . . .’ and ‘Pustaia ulitsa. Odin ogon’ v okne . . .’, texts written in October 1912, and ‘Saryi, saryi son. Iz mraka . . .’ of February 1914.⁴⁴

As Dmitrii Likhachev explained some years ago, the pharmacy Blok had in mind in the first two of these poems was located on Petrograd Side just before the wooden bridge to Cross Island. This bridge, which, unlike other Petersburg bridges, was not policed, was a frequent launching point for self-inflicted drownings. The pharmacy, the nearest human outpost in this remote area of the city, was where victims’ bodies were usually taken. In turn, the weak light from the kerosene street-lamps showed the way to the pharmacy and was reflected in the black waters of the Malaia Nevka.⁴⁵

‘Noch’, ulitsa, fonar’, apteka . . .’ can thus be seen as a grim soliloquy by someone on the bridge who cannot decide whether or not to jump into the icy river. For that individual, what is meaningless and dim (‘bessmyslennyi i tusklyi’) is not so much the lamplight as life itself. Living for another quarter century will not bring better personal prospects. There is no escape (‘Iskhoda net’) other than by drowning, even though existence might possibly hold more meaning than death.

The third ‘Dance of Death’ has the conventional perspective of a bystander rather than a participant of the action. However, it moves swiftly into the world of the macabre: a skeleton enters the pharmacy at night, noisily steals a phial of poison, almost waking the owner, and escapes to offer self-destruction to two faceless women waiting outside under the street lamp. The suicide motif is thus more obvious, with the skeleton delivering what the pharmacist himself would not provide to two people so desolate they have made a death pact with each other.

⁴⁴ On the inner coherence of this cycle, see in particular I. V. Fomenko, ‘Tsikl stikhotvoreniia A. Bloka “Pliaski smerti”’: Zametki k interpretatsii’ in *Voprosy romanticheskogo miroponimaniia. metoda, zhanra i stilii*, ed. N. A. Guliaev, Kalinin, 1986, pp. 57–71, and David A. Sloane, *Aleksandr Blok and the Dynamics of the Lyric Cycle*, Columbus, Ohio, 1988, pp. 277–88.

⁴⁵ D. S. Likhachev, ‘Iz kommentarii k stikhotvoreniiu A. Bloka “Noch’, ulitsa, fonar’, apteka”’, *Russkaia literatura*, 21, 1978, 1, pp. 186–88. Much less convincing alternative prototypes for this pharmacy, both on Officer Street in the central city, where Blok lived from mid-1912, are adduced by Iu. I. Budyko, ‘Apteka, ulitsa, noch’ . . .’, *Neva*, 30, 1984, 11, pp. 197–99.

Although there is no pharmacy in 'Staryi, staryi son. Iz mraka . . .', the setting and perspective are otherwise unchanged. Timeless street lamps stand out against the pitch dark, there is the black water that, like a bullet, offers oblivion —

Как свинец, черна вода.
В ней забвенье навсегда.

— and three indistinct figures glide about. Few clues are given as to whom they represent, except that one is a prostitute, another a debauchee. All, in any case, occupy a zone between a life devoid of positive values and self-inflicted death, just like the protagonist of 'Noch', ulitsa, fonar', apteka . . .'.⁴⁶

The last major suicide in the Petersburg text comes in another highly stylized work, Remizov's *Krestovye sestry* (Sisters in the Cross, 1910). This novella traces the destiny of various characters, above all the orphan Marakulin, who, despite shedding his early naivety, becomes increasingly revolted by the mercenary and immoral environment of Petersburg. Eventually defeated, he escapes by throwing himself from an upstairs window. However, in *Krestovye sestry*, as in Belyi's *Peterburg* (1916), the serious themes derived on the one hand from writers such as Pushkin, Gogol', Dostoevskii and Nekrasov, and on the other hand from bitter autobiographical experiences, are frequently undercut by echoes of Gogol' in his more facetious moments, particularly 'Shinel'' (The Overcoat, 1841), his satire on the bureaucracy.⁴⁶

Thus, in the first of several ironic twists, the luckless anti-hero Marakulin is given the same name and patronymic (Petr Alekseevich)⁴⁷ as the dynamic founder of the city that will destroy him. Despite being labelled a 'German' by his peers for punctiliously discharging a menial clerical job, he is suddenly dismissed over a minor bookkeeping irregularity. As he searches for alternative work, he has to pawn his possessions and move to cheaper lodgings on the fifth floor of the Burkov House.

There he meets and falls for Vera Ivanovna (Verochka), a young woman from the south who aspires to a career on the stage. In a biography perfectly in keeping with the Petersburg text, Verochka suffers first as an orphan and then as the kept woman of a rich Muscovite who quickly tires of her and sends her to the capital for dramatic training. When she fails to make the theatre her vocation

⁴⁶ Among other things, Marakulin is also a caricature of Raskol'nikov. On this, see in particular Jo Ann Bailey, 'Narrative Mode as a Thematic Problem in Remizov', *Russian Literature Triquarterly*, 19, 1986, pp. 177–96 (191) and Lucyna Kapala, 'The Concept of the Sacred in Aleksey Remizov's *Sisters of the Cross*', *Scottish Slavonic Review*, 14, 1990, pp. 101–15 (107).

⁴⁷ On Marakulin's names, see V. N. Toporov, 'O "Krestovyykh sestrakh" A. M. Remizova: Poeziia i pravda', *Uchenye zapiski Tartuskogo gos. universiteta*, vyp. 857, 1989, *Blokovskii sbornik*, ix, pp. 138–58 (146–48).

through lack of talent, she sells herself shamelessly to an elderly courtier. Marakulin, on discovering her new situation, has a mind to burn all the clothes and gifts the old man has showered on her, but instead runs for his poor, righteous life.

Before long, he retreats into happier memories of his youth in Moscow, where his friend, Pavel Plotnikov, often went out of his way to be kind to him. Later, in Petersburg, Plotnikov could easily have boosted Marakulin's flagging spirits, but fails to detect the cry for help. Marakulin has already endured one lonely jobless Petersburg summer,⁴⁸ but this next time he is determined to act decisively. He seeks out Verochka and chances upon her among a group of slovenly women caught in a police round-up, supposedly for soliciting on Nevskii prospekt, but is unable to confront her. From there, the penniless Marakulin descends into the abyss. Among other things, he has a ghastly nightmare, becomes disoriented, of all places, in the central city, confronts Falconet's statue of his namesake on the embankment and then sleeps out near the Finland Station. This episode casts Evgenii of Pushkin's 'Mednyi vsadnik' (Bronze Horseman, 1833) in a new light, intimating that, but for going out of his mind, he too was a potential Petersburg suicide. Marakulin returns to his garret disconsolate and finds the holy fool Akumovna, his only remaining acquaintance, uncharacteristically incapable of interpreting his dream. He promptly jumps out of the window, with fatal consequences.⁴⁹

It is usually Belyi's *Peterburg* that is thought of as the crowning component of the Petersburg text.⁵⁰ That is certainly the case insofar as it treats the impending collapse of the imperial system. There are, however, no instances of completed suicide in the novel, only attempts, but on personal grounds rather than as a response to the Petersburg environment. Thus, Nikolai Ableukhov seriously contemplates throwing himself into the Neva after a love-affair goes wrong.⁵¹ In addition, following a drinking bout, Morkovin suggests suicide to Nikolai as one possible way out of his difficulties with his father⁵² and Sergei Likhutin twice tries to terminate his life in defence of his military honour, first by shooting and later by hanging,⁵³ but is unsuccessful each time.

⁴⁸ There are of course strong parallels with the dreamer of Dostoevskii's 'Belye nochi' (White Nights, 1848).

⁴⁹ On the causes of Marakulin's suicide, see also A. S. Svarovskaia, 'Problema gerioia i sredey povesti A. Remizova "Krestovye sestry"', *Khudozhestvennoe tvorchestvo i literaturnyi protsess* [Tomsk], 9, 1988, pp. 47–58 (56–57).

⁵⁰ See, for example, Pekka Pesonen, 'Semiotics of a City: The Myth of St. Petersburg in Andrey Bely's novel *Peterburg*', *Semiotica*, 87, 1991, 3–4, pp. 349–68 (361).

⁵¹ Andrei Belyi, *Peterburg*, Moscow, 1981, p. 47.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 214.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 136 and 195.

Nevertheless, a good argument can be made for viewing *Krestovye sestry* as the culminating stage at least in the evolution of two key Petersburg character types — the prostitute (as depicted by two of the seven sisters, Evgeniia Aleksandrovna as well as Verochka) and the marginalized young bachelor whose hopes for a place in the life of the capital can never be fulfilled and who is thus fated to bring about his own death.

It therefore appears that the archetypal suicide victim in the Petersburg text is a young man bereft of both family and fortune who is divorced from the local economy either by being unemployed or by working in a field that is of little relevance to the philistine community of the capital. Grigorovich's Svistul'kin, Krestovskii's Veresov and Sologub's Igumnov and Moshkin all share these attributes. However, even more characteristic are Gogol's Piskarev, Garshin's Nikitin and Remizov's Marakulin, each of whom has the same background as the archetype but in addition is morally outraged that the woman he idealizes integrates herself into that economy by means of sexual commerce. As a group, these men typically kill themselves by firearm, razor or poison behind closed doors or, if outside, then under the shadow of night.

Female characters who resolve to commit suicide occur less frequently in the Petersburg text — Krestovskii's Masha Povetina, Dostoevskii's Olia and those in three lyrics by Blok ('Iz gazet', 'Povest'' and 'Staryi, staryi son...') are the chief examples — yet without exception they do so because they cannot or can no longer submit themselves to the degrading effects of prostitution. Dostoevskii's 'Krotkaia' hardly departs from this pattern, given her role as the chattel of a money-grubbing pawnbroker. These women tend to die either by drowning in darkness or jumping from upstairs windows in broad daylight before an audience.

However they take their lives, these characters act to reaffirm either cherished ideas (the men) or personal autonomy (the women), in both cases spiritual and moral values that have been expunged by Petersburg's artificial ambience and harsh social and economic reality.