

Sculptured History: Images of Imperial Power in the Literature and Culture of St. Petersburg (From Falconet to Shemiakin)

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# Sculptured History: Images of Imperial Power in the Literature and Culture of St. Petersburg (From Falconet to Shemiakin)

SVETLANA EVDOKIMOVA

Since its founding in 1703, St. Petersburg has been the site of an intense cultural and historical polemic concerning Russia's national identity. Indeed, St. Petersburg is more than a city; it is a process that reflects a crucial reorientation in Russian cultural and historical development. It may be viewed as a cultural symbol of imperial Russia in and of itself—as a window on the West and a window on Russia—but, in this article, I would like to narrow the focus and to discuss some of the city's cultural sites as “windows” on St. Petersburg itself and, by extension, on modern Russia.

As demonstrated by the French historian Pierre Nora, any culture can be accessed through the study of what he calls “places of memory.” These places, real or imaginary, generate intense emotions that express themselves in pilgrimages, ideological battles, or commercial investments. A nation infuses such places with highly charged symbolic meanings, and, consequently, they reflect the people's values and collective identities. Memory connected with this kind of site borders on the mythical because it reaches beyond the relevant archival material and into our imagination, fears, projections, and fantasies. This is by no means a static phenomenon but rather a dynamic process, as each generation imbues these “places of memory” with new meanings.<sup>1</sup> A classic example of this dynamic process can be seen in the history of the reception and symbolic meanings of the Eiffel Tower and its transformation from a threatening symbol of modernization, to one of poetical inspiration, and finally into a commercial symbol of Paris and France sold to eager tourists as an image on key rings or T-shirts.<sup>2</sup>

An earlier version of this essay was delivered at a Hofstra University conference on “St. Petersburg: 300th Anniversary. The City as a Cradle of Modern Russia” (November 7–8, 2003), and at a Vassar College conference on “300 Hundred Years of St. Petersburg in the Arts” (November 2003).

<sup>1</sup>For the notion of “places of memory” see Pierre Nora, ed., *Realms of Memory*, 3 vols. (New York, 1996–98); and Nora's *Rethinking France: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, trans. Mary Trouille (Chicago, 2001).

<sup>2</sup>For an analysis of the cultural role of the Eiffel Tower see Henri Loyrette, “The Eiffel Tower,” in *Realms of Memory*, 3:349–76.

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According to Nora, this kind of symbolic history, one that views truth as relative, is better suited to our times than one that values facts and objectivity above all else. Such a history is more subjective, yielding a variety of Frances or Russias of the people's imagination and national visions. I find this model particularly applicable to the study of St. Petersburg and its evolving mythology, which prompts such questions as: How does Peter the Great's legacy evolve in Russian history? What is St. Petersburg's role in Russia's past, present, and future? How does St. Petersburg reflect or determine the course of Russian history? Does St. Petersburg empower or disempower the individual?

Some of these questions, I believe, are best answered through the study of the city's "places of memory." This essay will focus in particular on one of St. Petersburg's most important symbolic sites—Etienne Falconet's statue of Peter the Great, known as the Bronze Horseman, and its refigurations in Russian culture.<sup>3</sup> An understanding of its history and the various responses that it has generated provides a vivid snapshot of Russian cultural perspective on the role of St. Petersburg and Peter the Great's legacy in Russian history. The myths surrounding this sculptural site speak volumes about modern Russian national identity.

For obvious reasons, Peter's role in Russian history has been associated with the role of St. Petersburg, the city that stood as a symbol of his achievements, his policies, and imperial power in Russia. Likewise, almost immediately upon the unveiling of Falconet's monument to Peter the Great in 1782, the sculpture assumed a symbolic status as the cultural emblem of the city. Thus, from the beginning an important connection between Falconet's sculpture and Russia's historical destiny was established: if the Bronze Horseman stands for St. Petersburg and St. Petersburg represents Peter's role in Russian history, then the monument to Peter emerges as a symbol of modern Russian history, as initiated by Peter the Great. Most of the ambiguities, riddles, contradictions, and oppositions that inform St. Petersburg's mythology are indeed captured in Falconet's monument.

## SEMIOTIC POTENTIALS OF FALCONET'S STATUE OF PETER I

The equestrian statue of Peter the Great was intended by Falconet to celebrate Peter's almost superhuman achievement in building a new city on the swamps of northern Russia, and, even more broadly, it was conceived by him as "the symbol of the whole nation he civilized."<sup>4</sup> The base of the statue, a fifteen-hundred-ton granite block called "the thunder rock," was crafted into the shape of a breaking wave over which the bronze statue of Peter

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, N. Antsyferov, who referred to the Bronze Horseman as *genius loci* in his *Dusha Peterburga* (Petrograd, 1922), 27.

<sup>4</sup>Quoted in Bruce W. Lincoln, *Sunlight at Midnight: St. Petersburg and the Rise of Modern Russia* (New York, 2000), 94. For a detailed history of Falconet's monument see S. O. Androsov, "O statue Petra Velikogo raboty Fal'kone," in *Fenomen Peterburga*, ed. Iurii Bespiatykh (St. Petersburg, 2000), 209–19. See also A. L. Kaganovich, "Mednyi vsadnik": *Istoriia sozdaniia monumenta* (Leningrad, 1975). The most recent fundamental study of the history of Falconet's monument is Alexander M. Schenker, *The Bronze Horseman: Falconet's Monument to Peter the Great* (New Haven, 2003). Bernini's image of Louis XIV on a mountaintop has been shown to be the ultimate source of Falconet's Peter I (possibly via Lubrun's work). See Walter Liedtke, *The Royal Horse and Rider: Painting, Sculpture, and Horsemanship 1500–1800* (New York, 1989), 78.

the Great was erected (Figs. 1 and 2). The horse is trampling a serpent beneath its hooves—a reference to Peter’s victory over the forces of Chaos and the underworld.<sup>5</sup> The tsar is represented as galloping on the horse with an enigmatic gaze on his puffy face and his right hand in a gesture about which there has been much speculation. To what degree is Peter really in control of his mount? Is he about to fall back, to recover himself, or to soar up into space? Is he urging the steed on or restraining it in the face of some catastrophic hazard? Is his right hand trying to calm the river that threatens to engulf the city? Some of these questions were voiced by the famous French political thinker Joseph de Maistre in *St. Petersburg Nights*, where a character inquires of the Peter statue: “Does your hand protect or threaten?”



FIG.1 Etienne Falconet, *The Monument to Peter I* (known as The Bronze Horseman). Unveiled in 1782. Photograph taken by the author.

Other elements that may be “semiotized” as part of the statue’s architectural context also played a role in how it was originally perceived. The immediate architectural surroundings of the statue—the buildings of the Senate, the Holy Synod, St. Isaac’s cathedral, and the Admiralty—suggest that the monument to Peter was intended to supplement the religious, judicial, legal, administrative, and financial images of power

<sup>5</sup>For an interpretation of Falconet’s Peter I and Pushkin’s the Bronze Horseman in terms of the central Indo-European myth of the battle between the storm-god (order) and the serpent (chaos), see my “*Mednyi vsadnik: Istoriia kak mif*,” *Russian Literature*, no. 28–29 (1990): 441–60. See also my *Alexander Pushkin’s Historical Imagination* (New Haven, 1999).

with a new vision of imperial authority.<sup>6</sup> The imperial imagery is further emphasized by Falconet's choice of an equestrian statue, a choice that implicitly links the monument to its famous Roman predecessor—the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius in Rome. The wreath of laurel crowning his head and the overall heroic stature of the imperial horseman make the link with the legacy of ancient Rome unmistakable. The Roman



FIG. 2 Etienne Falconet, *The Monument to Peter I (The Bronze Horseman)*. Unveiled in 1782. Photograph taken by the author.

<sup>6</sup>See V. N. Toporov, "Peterburg i Peterburgskii tekst russkoi literatury," in *Semiotika goroda i gorodskoi kul'tury: Peterburg. Trudy po znakovym sistemam* (Tartu, 1984), 18:432.

legacy was, predictably enough, stressed by many of the eighteenth-century writers.<sup>7</sup> As discussed by Bruce Lincoln and recently by Alexander Schenker in his excellent book on the history of the statue, Falconet himself avoided direct association with the Aurelian model, as evidenced by his statement to Diderot, “I would no more think of clothing my Peter in Roman armor than I would dare to dress a statue of Scipio, Caesar, or Pompei in a long Muscovite coat or French jacket,” and his conviction that Peter’s style of dress had to “be that of all nations, of every man in any time. In a word, it is to be purely heroic.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, despite some affinities between the two sculptures (the most obvious similarity between the two monuments being the oratorical or protective gesture of the extended right hands of Marcus Aurelius and Peter I, respectively), in many ways Falconet’s monument almost represents the antithesis to the famed Marcus Aurelius statue. Falconet’s spirited charger rearing above the edge of the wave-shaped rock, with a passionate but majestic rider on it, has little in common with its Roman antecedent, which depicts a sturdy steed regally raising one of its forelegs, bearing a patrician horseman fully in control of his mount.<sup>9</sup>



FIG. 3 Carlo Rastrelli, *The Monument to Peter the Great* (1747). Erected in front of the Mikhailovsky Castle in 1880. Photograph taken by the author.

<sup>7</sup>See, for example, Sumarokov’s words on the opening of the Imperial St. Petersburg Academy of Arts: “Our descendants will see you, Petropol’, in another form: thou shalt be the Northern Rome ... thou shalt be the eternal gates of the Russian Empire and the eternal abode of the most honored children of Russia and the eternal monument to Peter I and Catherine II” (Antsyferov, *Dusha Peterburga*, 52).

<sup>8</sup>Quoted in Lincoln, *Sunlight at Midnight*, 93–94.

<sup>9</sup>On the Bronze Horseman’s connection to the Marcus Aurelius see in particular Alexander M. Schenker, *Bronze Horseman*, 188–98. The rearing horse was not, however, Falconet’s invention; it was characteristic of Baroque art in general. Leonardo’s projects for the Sforza and Trivulzio monuments in Milan (1487–90) became the most important source for the rearing horse in Baroque art. For the history of the rearing horse in art see Liedtke, *Royal Horse and Rider*.

By contrast, one of Falconet's immediate predecessors and competitors, the renowned Italian sculptor Carlo Rastrelli, crafted a sculpture of Peter the Great, the casting of which was completed between 1745 and 1747, precisely in the tradition of Marcus Aurelius (Figs. 3 and 4).<sup>10</sup> This impressive baroque monument shows the powerful figure of the tsar in imperial attire sitting on a heavy but beautiful horse with a luxurious tail and an elegantly raised right foreleg, set above a marble edifice decorated with two bronze



FIG. 4 Carlo Rastrelli, *The Monument to Peter the Great* (1747). Erected in front of the Mikhailovsky Castle in 1880. Photograph taken by the author.

<sup>10</sup>The monument was not approved by Catherine the Great and remained in a warehouse for some fifty years. It was erected in front of the Mikhailovsky Castle as late as 1800.



bas-reliefs of the battles of Poltava and Hango, and an allegorical composition with trophies. The subversive meaning of Falconet's statue is elucidated by a comparison between his and Rastrelli's monuments to Peter. The difference is not limited to the energy and expressiveness of the Bronze Horseman in contrast to Rastrelli's calm and staid rider; the two pedestals speak no less eloquently of the sculptors' differing views of their subject. Rastrelli's heavy, square, classical, and fully traditional pedestal reflects his conventional approach to the representation of imperial power as founded on authority, might, and stability. Although the allegorical images filling the bas-reliefs relate to Peter's achievements and his military victories, the overall static silhouette of the monument does not convey the sense of movement or change of historical direction that were characteristic of Peter's reign. This monument may be a tribute to Peter's might and his power, but it is not a tribute to his vision as a reformer and founder of the new modern Russia. In contrast, the huge granite base of Falconet's statue transcends the sense of stability implicit in the stone out of which it is carved. The rock, shaped as a tempestuous wave, suggests violent, elemental movement. The surface beneath the dynamic rider is moving as rapidly as he is galloping. Thus, Peter emerges as a true transformer. Leaping over the edge of what is both a huge, rugged rock and a wave, the emperor seems to master both stone and water, land and sea. More important, he represents dynamic movement, an open-ended process of transformation rather than final achievement. The pathos of Falconet's Peter the Great, therefore, is not in the consolidation of his power—after all, Falconet's choice of classical toga and a laurel wreath is indicative of Peter as a legislator rather than a conqueror—but in his ongoing effort as a transformer and reformer. This is precisely why this monument has always been interpreted in the context of a *direction* that Russia should take in her historical development, that is, in the context of Russia's imagined future.

The differences between Falconet's statue and more classical "Aurelian" representations of the imperial power did not escape the attention of those who found themselves in opposition to the Russian Empire. Criticism of the city and the statue emblemizing it was most explicitly articulated by the Slavophiles and by some radicals, as well as by representatives of countries incorporated into the empire. The most eloquent example of the critical response to the monument of Peter the Great in highbrow literature is offered by Adam Mickiewicz, who articulated the "underground mythology" of St. Petersburg and laid the foundation of the negative, "anti-state," "anti-empire" myth of Falconet's famous sculpture. Suspicious of Peter's legacy and Petersburg's imperial authority, Mickiewicz depicts Petersburg not as glorious Rome, but as Babylon. Just as he juxtaposes Petersburg to ancient Athens or Rome, so he contrasts the monument to Peter the Great with its Roman counterpart—Marcus Aurelius. He immediately recognizes Falconet's subversive plan but, unlike Falconet, interprets the statue's deviation from the Roman model in a very negative light. Falconet's bronze Peter is an antithesis to the peaceful, dignified, and benevolent Roman emperor, caring for his subjects in a fatherly manner and surrounded by a loving populace. Marcus Aurelius's steed "strides evenly—It will advance to immortality," and the rider, while blessing his people with one hand, checks the spirited steed with the other. The colossal figure of the Russian tsar, by contrast, is far from being calm, fair, and noble. He is not even in control of his steed: "His



charger's reigns Tsar Peter has released; / He has been flying down the road, perchance, / And here the precipice checks his advance."<sup>11</sup> While Marcus Aurelius advances to immortality, the bronze Peter the Great advances to a precipice, inevitable catastrophe, and a void.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to point out, however, that by interpreting Falconet's monument in apocalyptic terms and emphasizing the chasm that opens up beneath the hoofs of the frenzied steed, Mickiewicz chose to ignore some of the more constructive semiotic potentials inherent in the monument's original architectural surroundings. At the time of the statue's official unveiling in 1782, Vasilevskii Island was connected with the Admiralty Quarter by the St. Isaac Pontoon Bridge, which lay almost completely perpendicular to the monument of Peter (see Paterson's painting of 1794. See also a drawing by Vasiliï Sadovnikov; Fig. 5). The vertical line of the bridge followed the direction of the tsar's extended hand, so that the horseman originally may have been perceived as galloping

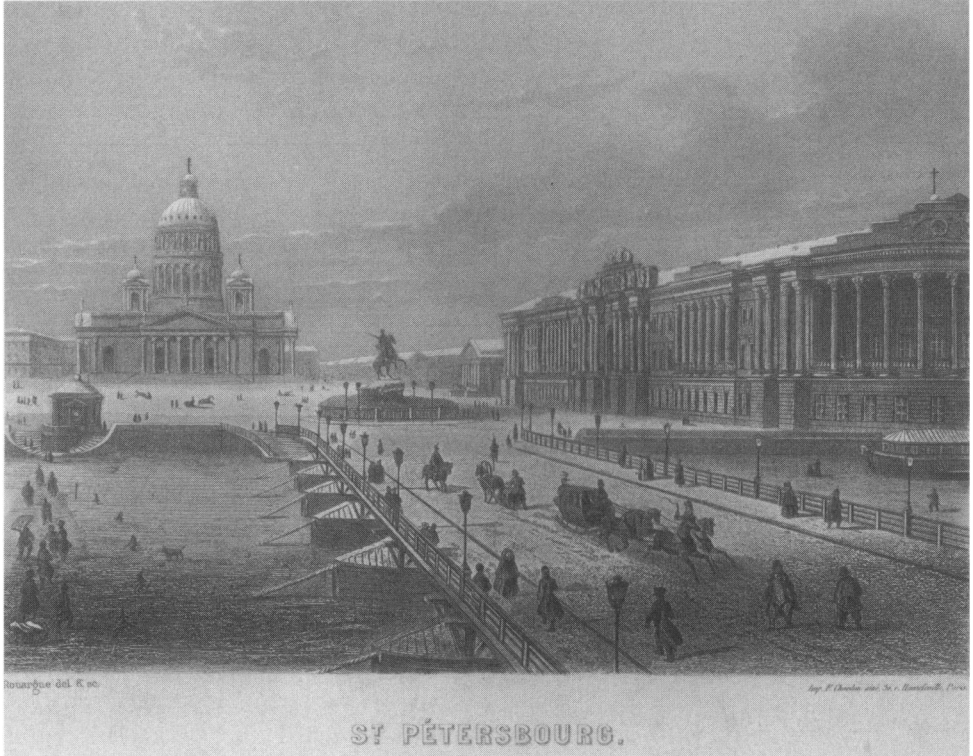


FIG. 5 The 1820s view of St. Isaac's Cathedral, the Senate, the Bronze Horseman on Senate Square, and St. Isaac Pontoon Bridge connecting Vasilevskii Island with the Admiralty Quarter. A photograph scanned from a print probably after a drawing by Vasiliï Sadovnikov. (Courtesy of Tatiana and Tomas Venclova, New Haven, CT, USA).

<sup>11</sup>Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefathers' eve (prologue and scenes I.-V.)* by Adam Mickiewicz, ed. George Rapall Noyes, trans. Dorothea Prall Radin (London, 1925), 350.

<sup>12</sup>Note also that even Falconet's choice of the huge Finnish rock as the base of the monument is interpreted by Mickiewicz as symbolizing the tsar's expansionism, or what we could call colonialism: "But Peter could not rest on Russian ground; / His native land was small for such as he: / His pedestal they sought beyond the sea" (*Forefathers' eve*, 349).

onto the bridge. Accordingly, Peter then may be seen as trying to cross the river and to connect the left and right banks of the Neva, that is, to overcome the gulf separating the ruling elite's left bank and the commoners' right bank. In fact, this interpretation would be fully congruous with Peter the Great's actual social reforms, aimed at bridging the gap between the ancient nobility and the less-privileged classes. Crossing the bridge may also be symbolic of Peter's attempt to bring Russia closer to the West and to connect the mainland to the new lands. Regardless of whether or not we try to "semiotize" the bridge as part of the Bronze Horseman's initial ensemble, I contend that the presence of the bridge suggests a much less threatening image of the steed than the one created by nineteenth-century writers and poets, as the rider seems to be leaping onto the bridge crossing the Neva rather than soaring into open space, as it is presented in Mickiewicz's famous lines: "With hoofs aloft now stands the maddened beast, / Champing its bit unchecked, with slackened rein: / You guess that it will fall and be destroyed. / Thus it has galloped long, with tossing mane, / Like a cascade, leaping into the void, / That, fettered by the frost, hangs dizzily."<sup>13</sup> Mickiewicz must have seen the bridge onto which Falconet's horseman seems to be galloping, but he consciously chose to ignore this semiotic potential in favor of the negative mythology of the void. By contrast, Pushkin's celebrated polemical response to Mickiewicz is much more ambiguous.<sup>14</sup> The Introduction, which emphasizes Peter's ambitious plan of the Westernization of Russia, or "bridging" the gulf separating Russia and the West, mentions specifically Petersburg's bridges as part of Peter's project of Westernization ("Bridges are hung across the waters"). When Pushkin uses the word "abyss" (*bezdna*) in his own celebrated description of the Bronze Horseman, he is doing so through the eyes of Eugene and footnotes this description with a reference to Mickiewicz. Moreover, Pushkin is trying to be very precise in his description of the monument's immediate surrounding. He makes his hero observe that during the flood the pontoon-bridge connecting the left bank to the right bank was temporarily removed due to the poor weather conditions: "He was thinking that the bad weather was not subsiding, that the river was further swelling, that perhaps the bridges were already removed from the Neva."

The ambiguity of Falconet's monument and its contradictory semiotic potentials evidently held a special appeal for Pushkin, who fuses two diametrically opposed interpretations of Falconet's statue, presenting them as thesis and antithesis, to produce a complex and contextualized vision of Peter: the eighteenth-century poetic tradition of eulogy, reflecting the official ideology of the empire; and the unofficial folk and "dissident" tradition, representing the views of "the injured and the insulted," that is, of the political or religious malcontent.<sup>15</sup> By incorporating the two traditions or the two mythologies of St. Petersburg, dubbed by Solomon Volkov the "official imperial mythology" and the "grim 'underground' mythology," Pushkin articulated the fundamental dichotomies of the Petersburg myth and created the most memorable literary image of Falconet's statue,

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 350.

<sup>14</sup>There can be no question that Pushkin's "The Bronze Horseman" is, in part, a polemical response to Mickiewicz. For a detailed analysis of "The Bronze Horseman" as a response to Mickiewicz see Samuil Shvartsband, *Logika khudozhestvennogo poiska A. S. Pushkina* (Jerusalem, 1988), 119-36.

<sup>15</sup>See L. M. Pumpianskii, "'Mednyi vsadnik' i poeticheskaia traditsiia XVIII veka," in *Pushkin: Vremennik Pushkinskoi komissii* (Leningrad, 1939), 4-5:91-124.

which henceforth became the central point of reference for the so-called Petersburg Text of Russian culture.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, whether by accident or design, Falconet created an ambiguous monument. But the sculpture undoubtedly generated a powerful polemic not only because of the semiotic complexity of the monument itself but also because of the controversial interpretations of Peter's role in Russian history. The cultural and literary reception of the monument recasts the bronze mount alternatively as a horseman of the Apocalypse or as a messenger of the new Russia, depending on the perspective taken on Peter's role in Russian history. As opposed to the static symbolism of Marcus Aurelius, whose bronze image represented the Roman model of heroism, the bronze likeness of Peter became an equally immortal but ambiguous, dynamic, and evolving symbol of Russian historical destiny. Falconet's subversive plan to create a statue of the first Russian emperor that would defy the traditional image of imperial power based on the model of Marcus Aurelius set the tone for subsequent subversive readings of the statue itself. In what follows I will discuss some of the stages in the development of this symbolism.

It should be stressed that while the official, pro-Peter myth dominated eighteenth-century literature, in the nineteenth century, as the love affair between Russia and the West was turning sour, and with the deteriorating conditions of life in the city and the failure to deal with post-Reform realities, Peter and his statue began to acquire more and more demonic features. While Pushkin's text is situated at the junction of these two traditions, gradually, Mickiewicz's and "poor" Eugene's readings of the bronze horseman became the dominant point of reference in meditations on the city, culminating in the works of Dostoevsky, Gogol, and Belyi. These two conflicting traditions reflect the general attitude toward cities expressed by major European thinkers. While the thinkers of the Enlightenment viewed cities as the engines of civilization, commerce, and communal spirit, later intellectual figures, reflecting on the cultural and economic changes brought about by sentimentalism, Romanticism, and industrialization, began to concentrate on the cost of such achievements. Thus, a French intellectual, Mercier de la Rivière, observes of Paris: "The threatening wheels of the overbearing rich drive as rapidly as ever over stones stained with the blood of their unhappy victims."<sup>17</sup> Especially by the end of the nineteenth century, symbolists like Merezhkovsky, Briusov, Belyi, and Blok espoused the apocalyptic interpretation with a vengeance. "The Bronze Horseman" evolves into "The Pale Horseman," a text with obvious apocalyptic connotations.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Solomon Volkov, *St. Petersburg: A Cultural History* (New York, 1997), 14.

<sup>17</sup>See Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York, 1960). The same image of blood will be echoed by Blake in his London: "Hapless soldier's sigh runs in blood down the palace walls" and by the Russian historian Nikolai Karamzin, who in his *Notes on Ancient and Modern Russia*, chided Peter for setting the city "amidst rippling swamps, in places condemned by nature to be barring and in want. ... How many people perished, how many millions and how much labor were expended to realize this objective? One might say that Petersburg is founded on tears and corpses." Karamzin's conclusion is that "man shall not overcome nature" (Karamzin, *Zapiska o drevnei i novoi Rossii* [Moscow, 1991], 37).

<sup>18</sup>Blok's narrative poem "Retribution" and Bely's apocalyptic novel *Petersburg* are both set in this city. In the words of the poet Innokentii Annensky, alluding to Falconet's statue: "The tsar did not manage to kill the snake, and it survived to be our idol" (*Tsar' zmei razdavil' ne sumel, / I prizhataia stala nash idol*). See Annenskii, *Stikhotvoreniia i tragedii* (Leningrad, 1990), 186. In other words, it becomes the city of the devil, upon which all

## THE BRONZE HORSEMAN'S SCULPTURAL METAMORPHOSES: FALCONET, KLODT, TRUBETSKOY, SHEMIAKIN

In the process of this literary demonization of St. Petersburg and its powerful emblem, the Bronze Horseman, a portentous change occurred in the sculptural renditions of the images of imperial power. Falconet's statue became an obvious central intertextual factor in subsequent sculptural representations of Russian emperors. As St. Petersburg became Russia's imperial city and as the empire began to show its tyrannical and autocratic nature, the sculptural emblems of imperial power changed from glorious and magnificent, although perhaps ambivalent, to ominous. This process continued into the twentieth century and culminated in Paolo Trubetskoy's monument to Alexander III and in a recent emblem of Russian/Soviet imperial tyranny—Shemiakin's monument to Peter I.

As early as 1913, in his poem "The Three Idols," Valerii Briusov pointed to the conspicuous continuity between Falconet's Peter I, Klodt's Nicholas I, and Trubetskoy's Alexander III, one that shows the latter two emperors in an increasingly unfavorable way.<sup>19</sup> He juxtaposes the victorious galloping of Falconet's steed and the regal gesture of Peter's extended hand to the restrained trot of Klodt's equestrian sculpture of Nicholas I, and to the severe immobility of Trubetskoy's Alexander III. In 1918, D. I. Zaslavskii outlined an apocalyptic history of St. Petersburg through a discussion of its "four horsemen."<sup>20</sup> Starting with Falconet's monument to Peter the Great, he then briefly refers to August Montferrand's and Peter Klodt's monument to Nicholas I (in St. Isaac Square) and Paolo Trubetskoy's monument to Alexander III, concluding with a prophesy that the forth horseman should be erected on the Marsovo Pole—the Pale Horseman, bringing death and destruction.

Indeed, if we compare Falconet's statue with Klodt's sculpture of Nicholas I (1856–59), it becomes immediately obvious that Klodt's Nicholas represents the corrosion of the Petrine legacy. Located in the immediate proximity of the Bronze Horseman—in fact, following in the footsteps of the bronze Peter I—this horseman stands almost as a parody of his magnificent predecessor (Fig. 6). In contrast to the tsar-reformer, Nicholas I is a powerful military figure, attired in the uniform of the Russian guard. A despotic ruler who saw the crushing of the Decembrist revolt on the neighboring Senate Square with its famous equestrian statue of Peter I, he seems also to be crushing or at least diminishing his legacy. The statue's design reflects Nicholas's conservative orientation: the huge granite rock of Falconet's monument is replaced with an ornate, traditional pedestal filled with allegorical and contemporary figures and placed on a short platform made of red granite with three steps; the horse rears on its hind legs but is far from making the formidable leap of Peter's steed; this horseman is prancing rather than jumping forward in an attempt to overcome an obstacle. In other words, this statue represents the taming of the Bronze Horseman.

frustrations and fears are projected. Long before the Revolution, the symbolists declared Petersburg the most terrifying of all European cities.

<sup>19</sup>Valerii Briusov, "Tri kumira" (1913), in his *Sobranie sochinenii v semi tomakh* (Moscow, 1973), 2:187–88..

<sup>20</sup>D. I. Zaslavskii, "Chetyre vsadnika (Peterburgskie siluety)," in *Moskva-Peterburg: Pro et Contra*, ed. K. G. Isupov (St. Petersburg, 2000).

With Paolo Trubetskoy's monument to Alexander III the degeneration of the equestrian image of imperial power reaches its apogee. By 1909, the date of the unveiling of this controversial monument, the spirit of the city had shifted from something represented by a dynamic tsar on top of a crashing wave (on the crest of history) to a static tsar crushing his horse beneath his own weight. Alexander III emerges as an ominous caricature of the Bronze Horseman. The riders seem to embody the two polar attitudes toward Peter the Great's legacy, toward Russia, its imperial city, and the direction that it was taking.



FIG. 6 *Monument to Nicholas I*, situated on St. Isaac's Square. Unveiled in 1859. Designed by August Montferrand, the horse and the tsar carved by Peter Klodt. Photograph taken by the author.

Trubetskoy's monument to Alexander III was originally set on Znamenskaia Square (present-day Ploshchad' Vosstaniia) near the Moscow train station.<sup>21</sup> It features a heavy rider clad in traditional Russian dress with knee-high boots and a hat on an equally heavy horse (Figs. 7 and 8). The pedestal is a plain stone base—a clear antithesis not only to the Bronze Horseman's rock shaped as a wave but even to the more traditional pedestals of the Nicholas sculpture and Rastrelli's Peter I with their allegorical figures and scenes of the emperors' achievements. In fact, it is highly revealing that in his initial sketches Trubetskoy played with the idea of a pedestal similar to that of Falconet's statue—a huge rough-edged rock. His replacement of the dynamic pedestal of the Bronze Horseman with a plain square platform reflects his polemical concept and his desire to present Alexander III as the very antithesis to Peter I. The antithetical nature of the monument is obvious: Falconet's elegant, spirited “proud mount,” with a luxurious tail and a magnificent mane, leaping from the edge of the rock is replaced with an overweight, broad-legged steed with a clipped tail (compare Figs. 9 and 10), refusing to carry its master further, digging its hoofs into the ground and stubbornly lowering its head.<sup>22</sup> The image of the



FIG. 7 Paolo Trubetskoy, *The Monument to Alexander III*. Unveiled in 1909. Photograph taken by the author.

<sup>21</sup>In 1937 it was removed from Ploshchad' Vosstaniia and placed in an interior courtyard of the Russian Museum, where it was ostensibly separated from the city. According to popular folklore of the day, the monument became “the prisoner of the Russian museum.” Currently it is located in the courtyard of the Marble Palace, located between the Field of Mars (Marsovo Pole) and the Neva River.

<sup>22</sup>Curiously, the motif of the clipped or cut tail was part of the subversive folklore surrounding the Bronze Horseman. Thus, in “The Overcoat” Gogol, for example, mentions “the eternal joke” (*vechnyi anekdot*) about

horse refusing to go forward and lowering its head must also have been perceived as a reference to the then well-known Viktor Vasnetsov's painting *A Knight at the Crossroads* (1882; Fig. 11), suggestively portraying a knight on a horse in a very similar pose, stopping at the sight of the field of death covered with tombstones and human skulls, with crows hovering above it. The sculptor was clearly inviting the later Romanovs to contemplate how far they were removed from the true Petrine spirit. The very stout bronze figure of



FIG. 8 Paolo Trubetsky, *The Monument to Alexander III*. Unveiled in 1909. Photograph taken by the author.

how the tail of Falconet's steed was cut off (*podrublen khvost u loshadi Fal'konetova monumenta*). See Nikolai V. Gogol', *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Leningrad, 1938), 3:146.



the counter-reformist and unpopular Russian tsar appears as a grotesque version of Russia's famous reformer: while Peter I gloriously raises his right arm, Alexander III bends his right arm akimbo in a gesture suggesting command and brutal force, ready to crush anything in its way, thereby undoing Peter's celebrated gesture. Alexander III's huge fists lack the ambiguity of the Bronze Horseman's "body language." They merely dominate and threaten. This is an image of stagnation.

It is hardly surprising that Trubetskoy's masterpiece immediately caused a public scandal. While the more reactionary sector of society was indignant, the democrats—



FIG. 9 Etienne Falconet, *Monument to Peter I* (The Bronze Horseman). Photograph taken by the author.

notwithstanding their attitude toward Peter the Great's reforms—welcomed the monument as a powerful indictment of the tsarist tyranny. The folklore of the day underscores the unpopular view of the tsar: *Na komode begemot, na begemote idiot, na idiote shapka* (“The chest-drawer supports an hippopotamus, the hippopotamus holds an idiot, and the idiot wears a hat”). For many, the mighty image of Alexander became an emblem of all Russian rulers and the tyranny of monarchy in general. Thus, for example, Kornei Chukovsky in his memoirs about Ilia Repin insists that, as a committed democrat and an enemy of tsarism, Trubetsky represented this “guardian of monarchy” as a gloomy and



FIG. 10 Paolo Trubetsky, *The Monument to Alexander III*. Unveiled in 1909. Photograph taken by the author.

immobile scarecrow. Likewise, Repin, who was present at the unveiling of the monument, was, according to Chukovsky, an ardent admirer of the monument. In response to the reactionary press's suggestion that the monument should be demolished, Repin said in one of his welcoming speeches: "I congratulate myself, all of Russia and all of our posterity on this work of genius."<sup>23</sup>

Trubetskoy's intent, however, extends beyond either a true rendering of Alexander III, who was a giant of a man, or a caricature of the oppressive Russian regime. He simultaneously draws on folklore images of Russian legendary heroes (*bogatyrs*), such as Vasnetsov's *Three Bogatyrs* (1898; Fig. 12) or *A Knight at the Crossroads*, and on the tradition of the imperial equestrian monument. By combining the Russian folk motif with the Western equestrian paradigm, he subverts both the Slavophile expectations of Russianness as a source of power and goodness and the Westernizers' trust in the European Enlightenment as a model for Russian historical destiny. Considered in the context of his "interscultural" dialogue with Falconet's Peter I, his monument to Alexander inevitably raises the issue of Peter the Great's legacy in Russia's historical development. If Falconet's



FIG. 11 Viktor Vasnetsov, *A Knight at the Crossroads*. 1882. Oil on canvas. (Photograph scanned from Viktor Vasnetsov, *V. Vasnetsov* [Moscow, 1959]).

steed is symbolically associated with Russia (we recall Pushkin's words addressed to Peter: *Rossiia podnial na dyby* ("[You ] spurred Russia"), then Alexander III's horse (Russia) seems not only tamed (as also in the case of Nicholas I), but immobilized. Now we witness Russia's spine breaking under the heavy burden of its rider. The question then is: does this bronze Alexander III represent the heavy burden of the Petrine heritage or rather its betrayal?

Zaslavskii's comments on the third apocalyptic horseman of St. Petersburg are a good illustration of this dilemma:

<sup>23</sup>Kornei Chukovskii, *Il'ia Repin* (Moscow, 1983), 24.

Here he is, the tsar-carpetbagger (*meshochnik*) of the Russian land, a man with a small head and a large beard, on his horse-hog with its huge croup. ... Could it be that this is Peter's flamboyant steed turned swollen, blown up, and heavy? ... [Before us] ... there is not a *bogatyr*-warrior, but a peasant ploughman in a military uniform on a hog-like horse. He cared neither about Europe nor about Russia. ... The rider-carpetbagger is disgusted by the noisy city of St. Petersburg. Turning his back to the river of the Neva and to Peter, he is looking toward the East, toward Moscow. ... Let the European fast steeds gallop forward. Rearing up his mount, the Bronze Horseman follows their lead. But on Znamenskaia Square there is ... a monument of genius to Russia's country bumpkins (*derevenshchina*), to Russia's historical inertness, sluggishness, obscurantism, and ignorance.<sup>24</sup>

Trubetskoy's monument to Alexander III signifies, therefore, a complete break with, and perversion of, the central figure in the St. Petersburg myth—Falconet's statue to



FIG. 12 Viktor Vasnetsov, *Three Bogatyrs*. 1898. Oil on canvas. The Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia. (Photograph scanned from Viktor Vansetsov, *V. Vasnetsov*. Moscow, 1959).

Peter I, which had become durably and deeply embedded in Russian imperial history. The sculptural mutation of the Bronze Horseman into Trubetskoy's heavy and oppressive rider is symbolic of the nation's political and cultural development, gradually closing its "window onto Europe." Trying to protect the imperial monuments that revolutionary Russia was ready to destroy, Alexander Benois commented on the artistic merits of Trubetskoy's statue of Alexander III, making an insightful observation about the sculptor's

<sup>24</sup>D. I. Zaslavskii, "Chetyre vsadnika (Peterburgskie siluety)," 394–95.

artistic goal: “Alexander III on Znamenskaia Square is not merely a monument to a certain monarch, it is a monument characteristic of a monarchy that is doomed. This is no longer a legendary monarch-hero, not a horseman riding toward an open space, but a horseman who overbears his horse with all his weight, who is leaning so close over its neck that the horse can no longer see anything.”<sup>25</sup> In anticipation of Russia’s almost complete break with the West European tradition and Peter the Great’s legacy, the monument to Alexander III, placed in front of the Moscow train station and turning its back to the central emblems of St. Petersburg—the Neva River and the Bronze Horseman—marked the end of the imperial history of St. Petersburg. An immanent transfer of the Russian capital to Moscow was prophesied in this last equestrian image of imperial power. Nearly one hundred years separates Trubetskoy’s monument to Alexander III from another important image of Russian imperial power. Mikhail Shemiakin’s monument to Peter I, unveiled in 1991—a crucial turning point in Russian history—seems to have nothing in common with its celebrated rival. Far from making a mockery of the Bronze Horseman, this new statue of Peter seems to simply obliterate any connection with its antecedent. Yet as an inimitable, although repeatedly reproduced image of St. Petersburg, Falconet’s statue is an inescapable archetypal model for any monument that would claim a new interpretation of the Russian past. For what is at issue now (as it has been for over two hundred years) is a question of national identity closely intertwined with the way Russians perceive Peter the Great.

Set in the Sobornaia Square of the Peter and Paul Fortress, on the right bank of the Neva (as opposed to the Bronze Horseman positioned on the left bank), Shemiakin’s statue is the complete opposite of Falconet’s Peter I (Fig. 13). If Falconet’s Peter implicitly turns his back on Russia’s past, Shemiakin’s turns his back on Falconet’s statue. Shemiakin systematically reverses all the emblematic attributes of Falconet’s Peter and pushes this reversal to the extreme. The galloping steed is substituted not even with a stubborn and immobile horse, as in the case of Trubetskoy’s Alexander III, but with an armchair, merely a piece of furniture. Modeled after K. B. Rastrelli’s *Wax Person* (“Voskovaia persona,” 1825), this sedentary figure of Peter is not “alive.” This Peter is clearly out of tune with nature and belongs to the closed space of a study.<sup>26</sup> The Peter and Paul Fortress, which, according to Kliuchevsky, was not a window to Europe but a “military outpost against Sweden,” further contributes to the ominous symbolism of this sculpture, regardless of the fact that originally Shemiakin had intended it to be placed in the Summer Garden rather than the Peter and Paul Fortress. There is no sense of space around it—only the walls of the notorious prison, a place of incarceration of many political prisoners and of the death of Peter’s son, Alexis. In this context, the image of Peter in the chair may also

<sup>25</sup>See Aleksandr Benua, “O Pamiatnikakh,” in *Aleksandr Benua razmysliaet...*, ed. I. S. Zilbershtein and A. N. Savinova (Moscow, 1968), 62–70, 68. Among the monuments recommended for demolition, Benois complains, there were not only Trubetskoy’s Alexander III and Klodt’s Nicholas I but also Falconet’s Peter I.

<sup>26</sup>Mariia Virolainen connects Shemiakin’s Peter I to the tradition of the desacralization of the tsar, more specifically to the Russian folk drama *Tsar Maximilian*, featuring the tsar in the chair-throne placed in the middle of the peasant hut. The tsar remains sitting and observing a series of executions and burials taking place on stage for the rest of the play. See her “Dva Petra (Pamiatniki Fal’kone i Shemiakina),” in *Rech’ i molchanie: Siuzhety i mify russkoi slovesnosti* (St. Petersburg, 2003), 282–86.

be an allusion to Nicholas Gay's famous painting featuring Peter I sitting in a chair and interrogating his son Alexis.

The statue's overall design reflects a significant change in the nation's perception of imperial power from heroic and romantic to oppressive, despotic, and, ultimately, insignificant and prosaic. The pedestal is almost completely eliminated so that the sculpture is not placed significantly above the level of the observer, as is customary in monuments to tsars. The tsar is garbed neither in a classical toga, nor in military dress, nor any kind of heroic attire, but in a generic eighteenth-century European outfit. By eliminating all



FIG. 13 Mikhail Shemiakin, *Monument to Peter the Great*. Unveiled in 1991 in St. Petersburg, Russia. Photograph taken by the author.



references to Peter's military, stately, or reformatory accomplishments, this twentieth-century vision of Peter not only completely deprives the Russian tsar of his glory but also dramatically reduces his imperial authority, presenting him as a layman rather than a tsar. There is not a trace of the Bronze Horseman's heroic gesture or Alexander III's physical might in Shemiakin's sculpture: both of Peter's hands with exaggerated, predatory, long fingers clutch nervously at the armrests. Rigid and erect, this Peter seems to be inhuman in his stillness, his deadly immobility providing a macabre contrast to the gripping gesture of his skeleton-like fingers. This is not an image of a hero, but rather of a tyrant—not a regal one though, but a mundane and ordinary one. Shemiakin's Peter marks the eclipse of the empire.

The most iconoclastic and suggestive aspect of the statue, however, is the emperor's tiny, bald head, a detail that on the symbolic level further strips the tsar of his might. If natural hair, a wreath, a crown, or a helmet on a mighty brow are traditional emblems of power, then the tiny, bald head of Peter unambiguously points to his diminished role in history, his lack of historical vision. The historical concept underlying Shemiakin's bronze representation of Peter returns us to the old polemic surrounding the unveiling of Falconet's Peter I with a new twist and new ironies. Shall post-perestroika Russia follow the example of European democracies, import a Western-style capitalism, and become a *evrochlen*, to use one of Chernomyrdin's most amusing expressions, or should it seek its own paths of national development? As the "window onto Europe" had been closed for a long time, and as the reopening of this window resulted in a new obsession with the so called "euro-standard" (*evrostandart*), the answers to these questions are as contradictory and as ambivalent as ever. As Russia is currently carving its second "window onto the West," eager to set its Communist past aside in the name of capitalism and opening the way for Western commodities to flood the Russian market, with the Western style becoming the preferred way of life for the "new Russians," the role of Peter and his symbolic sculptural images acquire a new dimension. Now not only is doubt cast upon Peter's legacy in respect to his politics of Westernization, but the idea of absolute power as the only source of reform is called into question. The macabre figure of the tyrant with a tiny head and exaggerated fingers clutching at the armrests completely deflates the traditional image of the emperor as a source of authority, power, vision, and historic change. This image of Peter I reflects a complete loss of faith in imperial power. Shemiakin's strikingly iconoclastic and grotesque monument to Peter clearly adds fuel to the fire of the old controversy. He simultaneously engages in "intersculptural" dialogue with Falconet and suggests a radical departure from the traditional representations of imperial power. Unlike its predecessors, this sculpture is intended to inspire in the observer not admiration, awe, veneration, fear, respect, and pride, but an ironic smile, almost a sense of superiority.

The cultural perception of the Bronze Horseman, St. Petersburg's most eloquent "place of memory," underwent dramatic changes in the process of its consecutive sculptural and literary recastings. As a sign of St. Petersburg, Falconet's monument to Peter I has remained a central point of reference in literary, artistic, and cultural discussions of Russia's national identity and its relation to Peter's heritage for more than two hundred years. Ironically, the apocalyptic readings of the statue have faded away from the urban folklore of contemporary Russia as the Bronze Horseman has become one of the most frequently



reproduced images in the Russian tourist industry and a worn-out tourist attraction for visiting provincials, foreigners, and newlyweds. Unlike Eugene from Pushkin's poem, present-day grooms are no longer afraid that the bronze Peter will steal away their brides. On the contrary, the modern "underground" myth casts Peter as the patron of the city and protector of family hearth, thus returning the myth to its official origins. The Bronze Horseman ceases to be a symbol of Russia's apocalyptic destiny and becomes a prosaic, protective presence similar to the famed Marcus Aurelius sculpture, whose affinity with, or difference from, Falconet's statue originally stirred such an intense polemic. His right bank rival, Shemiakin's memorial to Peter I, seems to take upon itself the underground negative aspect of the statue's mythology, freeing Falconet's rider from its demonic and apocalyptic dimension. In the course of its two hundred year history and in response to the changing ideologies of the state, the Bronze Horseman has been alternatively eulogized, demonized, tamed, subverted, rejected, and domesticated. This sculptural transformation marks the nations' move from monarchy and autocracy to totalitarianism, and, finally, democracy.