

ST PETERSBURG CHRONOTOPE IN THE PROSE
OF RUSSIAN WOMEN WRITERS OF THE LATE THIRTIES

Paola Ferretti

Within the rich tradition of *svetskaja povest*,¹ developed in Russia particularly during the thirties and early forties of the nineteenth century, the contribution made by female authors appears numerically and artistically remarkable. A point of departure from virtually a void, this “feminine” production in prose “gained women entry to the field of Russian letters as both authors and characters”,² ensuring them a legitimacy otherwise denied.³

Since Lenskij’s celebrated assertion “Я модный свет ваш ненавижу” the genre was generally associated with a form of self-criticism in the representation of the laws and behaviours characterizing high society, which varied from reluctant acceptance or partial adherence to ironical denigration and harsh deprecation. The same degree of variety can be detected in the corpus of female production in this genre, although canonical themes of love and marriage were generally treated by women from a more accentuated critical perspective, and with a particular emphasis on discontent with the custom of arranged marriages.

¹ On the subject, see particularly E. C. Shepard, *The Society Tale and the Innovative Argument in Russian Prose Fiction of the 1830s*, “Russian Literature” 1981, X; K. Städtke, *Die “svetskaja povest” (Erzählung aus der “grossen Welt”)*, in *Zur Geschichte der Russischen Erzählung*, Berlin 1975.

² J. M. Gheith, *Women of the 1830s and the 1850s: alternative periodizations*, in A. M. Barker, J. M. Gheith (eds.), *A History of Women’s Writing in Russia*, Cambridge 2002, p. 86.

³ Also in the case of women poetic production, prior to 1830 there was not an established tradition in Russia, see J. Vowles, *The inexperienced muse: Russian women and poetry in the first half of the nineteenth century*, in A. M. Barker, J. M. Gheith (eds.), *A History of Women’s Writing in Russia*, cit.

Urban setting was not merely one of the many narrative ingredients used for a genre which was conceived since the beginning as “a novella of upper class life in the metropolis”.⁴ If it appeared as the ineluctable setting for the tales on the beau monde, specific localization in St Petersburg, with its unique *realia* and atmosphere, was perceived as the most congenial topographic choice.

Significantly, one of the first examples of society tale, the story narrated in *Večer na bivuaše* (appeared in 1823) by Bestužev-Marlinskij, begins as follows: “Года за два до кампании княжна Софья S. привлекала к себе все сердца и лорнеты Петербурга: Невский бульвар кипел вздыхателями, когда она прогуливалась”.⁵ And it is presumably not fortuitous that one of the founding texts of St Petersburg myth, Puskin’s *Pikovaja dama*, was considered at the same time an original specimen of *svetskaja povest’*.

In fact, the constitution of a Peterburgskij tekst, incipient at the beginning of the thirties in Russia, proceeded parallelly with the exploitation of the patterns and devices offered by the genre of *svetskaja povest’*. The two paths crossed particularly interestingly in one text dated 1836, although published only posthumously, Lermontov’s *Knjaginja Ligojskaja*, in which attacks on ‘svet’ are associated with severe criticism of the impact of the Northern capital on the life of individuals.⁶

The choice of employing St Petersburg as urban landscape seems to bear peculiar implications in the case of women authors. A first attempt in observing how differently *svetskaja povest’* combines with certain topics in male and female authors has already been made, in recent years. In his essay entitled *Another time, another place: Gender and the Chronotope in the Society Tale*, Joe Andrew, while arguing that a number of society tales “are organized around a series of ‘set-pieces’, virtual tableaux vivants which are usually chronotopic in essence”,⁷ tried “to establish how chronotopes are used differentially by

⁴ C. Kelly, *A History of Russian Women’s Writing, 1820-1992*, Oxford 1994, p. 57.

⁵ A. Bestužev-Marlinskij, *Večer na bivuaše*, in *Russkaja romantičeskaja povest’* (pervaja tret’ XIX veka), Moskva 1983, p. 102.

⁶ In this work ‘svet’ is totally identified with St Petersburg society. On this subject see M. Belkina, *Svetskaja povest’ 30-ch godov i Knjaginja Ligojskaja Lermontova*, in *Žizn’ i tvorčestvo M. Ju. Lermontova*, Sbornik I, Moskva 1941. For a discussion of Lermontov’s attitude towards St Petersburg on the background of his personal experience and of late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century literature, see particularly I. Serman, *Moskvič v Peterburge*, in *Michail Lermontov. Žizn’ v literature. 1836-1841*, Jerusalem 1997.

⁷ Specifically, the author briefly analyses The City, The Spa town, The Provincial

male and female writers, and to ask whether male and female characters inhabit different chronotopes, or the same chronotopes differently". In his study of a sample of eighteen tales, he observed that "In the works written by men, the use of St Petersburg, or, occasionally, Moscow, may be said to be largely semantically neutral (...), the city is not presented as a place of danger for women per se, as it is in equivalent tales by women writers", and came to the conclusion that "a recurrent theme in society tales written by women is the collision between a pure, warm, idealistic heroine and the cold corruption of the St Petersburg svet".⁸

Moving further in that direction, we will try to investigate more in detail the impact of the theme of St Petersburg in female narratives of the late thirties. Our analysis will be mainly focused on two texts, which appeared in the same year, 1837: Elena Gan's *Ideal* and Marija Žukova's *Baron Rejchman*.

Published originally in 1837 in Osip Senkovskij's "Biblioteka dlja čtenija",⁹ *Ideal* recounts the story of the young Ol'ga: married to an artillery officer older than her and indifferent to her rich spiritual world, the woman lives in adoration of the work of a St Petersburg's poet, Anatolij Borisovič T. She encounters him at her arrival in the capital, where she moves from a provincial town following her husband, and falls in love with the brilliant young man. While visiting his study, she happens to read one of his letters addressed to a male friend, to discover that he was going to treat her just as one of the many victims of his seduction, and experiences a shocking disillusion. She recovers from physical and spiritual illness only when she leaves St Petersburg. Based supposedly on Gan's personal experience,¹⁰ *Ideal*

Town, Nature and Isolation, Card-playing, Duelling, The Church, Theatre / Opera, The Morning Visit, The Library, The Private Room/Study, The Ballroom and Salon (J. Andrew, *Another Time, another Place: Gender and Chronotope in the Society Tale* in N. Cornwell (ed.), *The Society Tale in Russian Literature from Odoevskii to Tolstoi*, Amsterdam-Atlanta 1998.

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 129-130.

⁹ The tale attracted Belinskij's critical attention: it was considered exemplifying of both her talent and her defects, absence of irony among them (*Polnoe sobranie sočinenij*, vol. VII, Moskva 1955, p. 670). See the English translation in J. Andrew (ed.), *Russian Women's Shorter Fiction: An Anthology, 1835-60*. Oxford 1996. An Italian translation, edited by G. Spendel, appeared in 1995 under the title *L'uomo ideale*, Milano 1995.

¹⁰ It was noted that "it is difficult not to recognize Gan and Senkovskij in the leading protagonists of 'Ideal'" (M. Ledkovsky, C. Rosenthal, M. Zirin, eds., *Dictionary of Russian Women Writers*. Westport, Connecticut/London, 1994, p. 194). Significantly, anyhow, Senkovskij felt obliged to intervene in the first published version,

was differently evaluated: as a highly sentimental tale,¹¹ as a “poetičeskaja avtobiografija romantičeskoj ženščiny-pisatel’nicy”,¹² or, following Belinskij’s judgment, as one of the most conscious declarations of emancipation of women in Russia.

Inserted in the cycle of short stories published in 1837 under the title *Večera na Karpovke*,¹³ Marija Žukova’s *Baron Rejchman*¹⁴ offers the picture of another married woman, Natal’ja, mother of a little boy of four and infatuated with her husband’s lieutenant Levin. She is obliged to bring to an end her sentimental relation under the combined pressure of Baron’s crude threats of retaliation against their son, the power of spiteful society rumours, and the weakness of the same Levin, her presumed lover. Žukova’s story was frequently seen as providing in its main character a prototype of Anna Karenina, and unavoidably criticized for being much inferior to Tolstoj’s heroine.¹⁵

Attitude towards high society appears highly differentiated in the two texts. If Gan’s polemical remarks are powerfully related to the issue of the role of women in Russian society, as distinctly remarked

as noted by Belinskij: “когда эта повесть была напечатана в одном журнале, сцена возвращения домой поэта была исполнена самых грязных, цинических подробностей, а поэт был представлен пьяным: эта была дружеская услуга досужего журналиста, охотника поправлять чужие сочинения” (V. Belinskij, *Polnoe sobranie sočinenij*, VII, cit., pp. 671-72).

¹¹ J. Mersereau Jr., *Russian Romantic Fiction*, Ann Arbor 1983, p. 289. See also C. Kelly, *A History of Russian Women’s Writing, 1820-1992*, cit., pp. 109-119.

¹² V. Sacharov, *Forma vremeni*, in *Russkaja romantičeskaja povest’*, Moskva 1992, p. 16.

¹³ SPb. 1838. The book was reviewed favourably by Belinskij, who wrote: “Мало книг, которые мы прочли нынешний год по обязанности, доставили нам столько удовольствия, как эти Вечера” (V. Belinskij, *Polnoe sobranie sočinenij*, cit., II, p. 566).

¹⁴ Translated in J. Andrew (ed.), *Russian Women’s Shorter Fiction: An Anthology, 1835-60*. See Kelly’s detailed presentation of *Baron Rejchman* and of Žukova’s work in general in the chapter devoted to her in *A History of Russian Women’s Writing, 1820-1992*, cit., pp. 79-91. The tale is here persuasively interpreted as the triumph of the notion of male “honour”. Among the other things, Kelly writes in her essay: “Romantic love, we are led to see, is a fiction which men are prepared to entertain as long as it does not threaten ‘honour’, the hierarchical network of relations cementing male society” (p. 85).

¹⁵ “The dilemma of a mother caught between love for her child and passion for her lover and the lover’s ultimate reluctance to sacrifice all for love foreshadow elements of Tolstoj’s *Anna Karenina*” (*Dictionary of Russian Women Writers*, cit., p. 749). See on this particularly R. Iezuitova’s comments, as quoted by C. Kelly, *A History of Russian Women’s Writing, 1820-1992*, cit., p. 84-85.

by Belinskij,¹⁶ Žukova's critique is on the other hand restrained, originating from an internal point of view, and conforming therefore more conventionally to the expected frames of reference of *svetskaja povest'*. Although different in the narrative treatment of their fictional heroines' sentimental endeavours, and in the authorial responses to their personal strategies, the two stories share a few features in the use of urban frame, in its representation and in its intersections with the intimate life of female protagonists.

The fate of the two fictional women offers another variation on the subject of marital discontent so typical of society tale in Russia. As elsewhere in Western Europe, high society's sexual code of rules tacitly contemplated the possibility of relations outside marriage; far from being considered unsuitable as a literary theme, the motif of adultery was therefore not uncommon in early nineteenth century Russian literature set in the beau monde,¹⁷ adequately complementing the topical treatment of the marriage plot.¹⁸

Both attracted by extramarital relations, the two heroines of these texts end up succumbing to society and conjugal forces, and experiment a disenchantment in their beloved ones. Their vivid inner life, particularly tense in the spiritual Ol'ga, less evident in the frivolous Natal'ja, contrasts rather canonically, with respect to the rules of *svetskaja povest'*, with the emptiness of mundane exposure and its arid preoccupations for decency, "public" virtue and respectability. The two female protagonists are both featured as "dreamers",¹⁹ in search of

¹⁶ According to him, Elena Gan gave expression to "„лубокую скорбь об общественном унижении женщины" (*Polnoe sobranie sočinenij*, cit., VII, p. 675).

¹⁷ In her taxonomy of sexual transgression in the heroines of Russian classic literature, O. Matich notes that "while there are literary taboos regarding unmarried noble girls, adultery is not proscribed among social equals within the gentry class", and quotes the case of Puškin's Tat'jana. Evgenij Onegin "does try to seduce her later, when she is a married woman and a member of Petersburg society" (*A Typology of Fallen Women in Nineteenth Century Russian Literature*, in P. Debreczeny ed., *American Contributions to the Ninth International Congress of Slavists*. Vol. II, Kiev 1983, p. 329). For an historical reconstruction of Russian conjugal customs, see N. L. Puškareva, *Častnaja žizn' russkoj ženščiny: nevesta, žena, ljubovnica (načalo XIX v.)*, Moskva 1997.

¹⁸ See the binary typology identified in E. C. Shepard, *The Society Tale and the Innovative Argument in Russian Prose Fiction of the 1830s*, cit., pp. 132-133.

¹⁹ See in Baron Rejchman: "Но как узнает об этом мечтательница?" (*Russkaja romantičeskaja povest'*, cit., p. 382); in *Ideal*: "· быстро летело время для молодой мечтательницы" (Ivi, p. 240), "· се веселия бедной мечтательниц" (p. 241). For both texts, all subsequent references will be made by page number to this edition.

something else, more idealistic and less profane than what destiny had reserved to them. The content of their dreams varies distinctly, but it is mainly focused on true love as opposed to absence of emotions typical of the beau monde: love is placed above convenience and security of marriage by Ol'ga and initially even above maternal feelings by Natal'ja.

Both fictional women are nevertheless heavily subject to the power of 'svet', as its opinion influences their behaviour. In the case of Gan's Ol'ga, it is mostly her moral integrity that brings her to reject love: *Ideal* is a story of self-imposed rejection and repentance, in which the heroine's thirst for elevated spiritual values is only initially satisfied, and the false ideal is later refused. The second povest' is a story of imposed sacrifice and regret in the name of 'svet', in which Natal'ja's expectations about a more idealized life are repressed and regretted.²⁰

'Svet' is coherently shown in these narratives as disseminating its code through its most powerful instrument: *spletnja*. Amplified by high society's gossiping, adultery is in both cases assumed to have been committed even before its actual occurrence. As it was noted, "Society talk is poisonous: aristocratic women, in works like Gan's *Ideal*, Rostopchina's *Činy i den'gi*, and later Tur's *A Mistake* and Nadezhda Khvoshchinskaja's *Anna Mikhailovna* destroy others by means of gossip as effectively as men kill one another in duels or on the field of battle".²¹

The notion of "mnenie sveta" recurs emblematically throughout the narration in *Baron Rejchman*. It is initially perceived by the heroine rather neutrally, as a part of her knowledge of life.²² The story is framed by scenes of conjugal dialogue: carried on in a light and reciprocally allusive tone at the beginning, the conversation ends with the husband's implacable one-way irony once society talk has proved its power, after Natal'ja has challenged the rules of 'svet'.²³ The most terrible perspective conceivably awaiting her husband is "сделать баснею

²⁰ The notion of "sacrifice" appears in both texts, *žertva* asked to Natal'ja by Levin is denied in *Baron Rejchman*, offered by Ol'ga in *Ideal*.

²¹ J. M. Gheith, *Women of the 1830s and the 1850s: alternative periodizations*, cit., p. 87. The fateful power of malignant society rumours was particularly effectively illustrated in one of the most popular tales of those years, Odoevskij's *Knjažna Mimi*, appeared in 1834 in "Biblioteka dlja čtenija", vol. VII. In this narrative "spletnja" is explicitly shown as responsible for bringing to death its victims.

²² See for instance: "как говорили в свете" (p. 364).

²³ "Но свет судит иначе" (p. 376), "Да это весь город говорит!" (p. 376), "По городу разнеслись слухи" (p. 377), "Скажи, ужели слухи..." (p. 384).

города имя его” (p. 390). The four-year old son Koko is then presented as a hostage in the hands of Baron Rejchman, willing to reassess social inescapability for his adulterous wife. The niche of labile freedom Natal’ja had initially secured to herself by negotiating with her husband²⁴ is drastically eliminated²⁵ after her “Petrarchan”²⁶ relationship has become of public domain, has raised a scandal and even evoked the possibility of a duel.

In the case of *Ideal*, the critical distance between the heroine and high society talk is definitively more pronounced: “Женщину от колыбели сковывают цепями приличий, опутывают ужасным что скажет свет” (p. 231).²⁷ Immersion in St Petersburg’s narrow svet conflicts with the wider horizon she had gained through her extensive readings in her mother’s library in her early years. The pure and learned Ol’ga tends therefore to react differently from the *koketka* Natal’ja to “гостинные чувства” (p. 231) and to high society’s merciless and unjust judgments. Having already experienced the power of “нелепые обвинения” (p. 227) when she had occasionally overheard, unseen, a typical *svetskij* conversation, taking for granted her adultery,²⁸ Ol’ga is capable of effectively differentiating her behaviour from that of a “светская женщина”.²⁹

Although presented in different narratives and by female authors of diverse origins and talent, assertions quoted above already seem to suggest a common perception of the intersections between urban landscape and the influence of svet on women’s life. The impression is that the power of high society is accentuated by the power of the city in fatally dilating the net of mundane gossiping.³⁰

²⁴ He declares at the beginning: “ревность мужа стесняет свободу жены, а я не хотел бы отнимать твоей” (p. 367). The illusory character of the couple’s serene conversation is emphasized by reiterated allusions to theatricality of their gestures and assertions, while Natal’ja repeatedly looks at herself in the mirror.

²⁵ He finally ironically states: “ты свободна в выборе. Но я возьму с собою Коко” (p. 392).

²⁶ In similar narrative circumstances, this definition is echoed in *Ideal* by the term “platoničeskaja ljubov’” (p. 248).

²⁷ Society’s talk is coherently contrasted in this *povest’* by a second typology of dialogue: honest conversation between Ol’ga and her true friend Vera, while Anatolij’s malicious talk is misunderstood by Ol’ga as an honest one.

²⁸ “весь город об этом говорит” (p. 227).

²⁹ The author remarks: “Светская женщина (...) сто раз обдумала бы (...), но для женщины (...) которая идет по стезе идеальной добродетели, приличия света были ничто” (p. 246).

³⁰ The power of city gossip in actively presenting as real something which is false is explicitly mentioned in the poet’s cynical letter in *Ideal*: “Мои услужливые

The Northern capital acts in fact equally crucially in another direction: it concurs in creating false impressions on individuals and events. For both women it alters the connotations of reality by showing the male objects of their love in a much better light than they really are. In the case of Gan's *Ideal*, St Petersburg shadow accentuates the positive, idealistic connotations of Ol'ga's Romantic poet. This is reflected both in the structure of the tale and in a few explicit assertions. While narration of the heroine's previous life has a provincial setting, the central event, her encounter with Anatolij, is set in St Petersburg and preceded by emphatic authorial declarations in which mention of the city occurs twice: "Но вот Ольга в Петербурге. В Петербурге, говорите вы? – Да, она здесь, она в театре" (p. 233). The woman, on the other hand, will only be able to recover from her infatuation when she leaves St Petersburg.³¹ Notably, a theatre in St Petersburg is shown as the most appropriate set for the appearance of the celebrated poet. Centrality of St Petersburg setting seems carefully prepared, in the previous part of narration, by repeated allusions to the capital as the source of all temptations, including fashionable French novels and a young gentleman arriving at the province ballroom directly from the Northern capital.³² Insertion of St Petersburg passages in the climactic points of both narrations seems aimed at intensifying the illusory and deceitful character of public life in high society. Although *Baron Rejchman*'s structure is articulated differently,³³ its central part being occupied by a "non St Petersburg" section, a similar device can be observed in this povest': thanks to accumulation of allusions to the capital, an atmosphere of fateful expectation with respect to the following chapters, set in St Petersburg, is created.³⁴ It is there that action moves back again, after the interlude, and it is in the three subsequent chapters, *Svidanie*, *Rešimost* and *Ešče bal*, that the story of

друзья, по просьбе моей, распустили слух о моей смертельной болезни" (p. 248).

³¹ As it was noted by N. Cornwell, *Another Time, another Place: Gender and Chronotope in the Society Tale*, cit., p. 129.

³² While Ol'ga's emotional disconcert at the contact with "петербургский адонис" (p. 220) is taken for granted ("все кричали по секрету о ни на что не похожем смятении полковницы Гольцберг в то время, как петербургский танцевал с нею", p. 219), auto-referential "петербургский кавалер" (p. 219) seems exclusively absorbed by admiration of his own image reflected in a mirror (ivi).

³³ A certain Puškinian orientation of *Baron Rejchman* was incidentally noted: particularly "its laconic ending owes something to the conclusion of Puškin's *Queen of Spades*" (*Dictionary of Russian Women Writers*, cit., p. 749).

³⁴ See particularly: "И это почти накануне отъезда моего в Петербург!" (p. 384), "Г-н Левин изменяет нашим красавицам: он едет в Петербург" (p. 385).

Natal'ja's disillusionment in Levin is developed.

Multiple reiteration of the world *obman* occurs significantly in these sections of Žukova's tale.³⁵ The individuals are seen as permeated by the same illusory character of the city and of high society. Stylistically, the impression of St Petersburg as a site of *obman* is created in *Svidanie* by the opening passage, in which reference to the illusory character of the summer of St Petersburg is metonymically extended to the city itself. From the Polar climate of the Northern capital descends its extremely short summer, one such that could hardly be considered real: "Известно, что в Петербурге сентябрь часто вознаграждает за лето, которым на севере иногда пользуются в одном воображении" (p. 385).

Also in Gan's story Ol'ga first privately meets her *ideal* in a similar temporal frame:

Это случилось в сентябре, веселом и ясном в южных краях, где ветерок играет еще в зеленых листьях деревьев и небо снова принимает светлый весенний цвет, но туманном и дождливом в Петербурге.

Однако ж как бы наперекор обычаям двух климатов в тот год на берегах Невы в сентябре мелькнуло теплое солнце (pp. 235-236).

For both women St Petersburg setting in the two texts appears therefore crucial in establishing the reverse of their expectations: the celebrated poet reveals himself as extremely far from the sublime ideal nourished by Ol'ga for years, and the complicated strategies displayed by Levin in pretending to do or to be something else end up with disenchantment and abandon for Natal'ja.³⁶

Significantly, it is entering the city frontiers that means accepting being subject, willing or not, to its power in confusing the boundaries between reality and appearance, it means becoming part of the game of *obman*. Whereas Natal'ja is well integrated in St Petersburg society,

³⁵ Only in *Svidanie* the word *obman* and its derivatives appear 4 times.

³⁶ Allusion to the fatally "petrifying" impact of St Petersburg deceptions on the lives of these women is made in both narratives: "Она остановилась на одном месте, как окаменелая" (*Baron Rejchman*, p. 391); "По часам, как заведенный автомат, она вставала, ложилась, ходила гулять" (*Ideal*, p. 249). A generally paralysing effect of the Northern capital on inner life is also prospected by Lermontov in *Knjaginja Lgovskaja*: "Какое-то печальное равнодушие, подобное тому, с каким наше северное солнце отворачивается от неблагодарной здешней земли, закрадывается в душу" (chapter IV). In *Knjažna Mimi* more moderate narrative consequences of St Petersburg setting are on the other hand emphasized by the very first epigraph: "Извините, сказал живописец, если мои краски бледны: в нашем городе нельзя достать лучших".

and her fatal access to the capital is only a return from her summer dacha, Ol'ga is immediately detected as a *provincialka*, she is trapped on her arrival.

The notion of a particular effect related to the very entrance in St Petersburg was brought to a remarkable degree of narrative awareness in a contemporary text, *Knjaginja Lgovskaja*: “Говорят, что, въехавши раз в петербургскую заставу, люди меняются совершенно”.³⁷ Its author gave on several occasions his highly personal contribution to the myth of St Petersburg, variously expressed in his oeuvre, from *Primitivnoe poslan'e* to *Maskarad*, *Štoss* and *Skazka dlja detej*, not to mention *Panorama Moskvy*. Lermontov's statements in *Knjaginja Lgovskaja* on St Petersburg and its being a sort of quintessential expression of high society as opposed to the “ancient capital” were echoed in another narrative text produced in those years and published as well in 1837: *Činy i den'gi* by Evdokija Rostopčina.³⁸ In this text, particularly relevant in a discussion on *svetskaja povest'* and the treatment of urban frame, depiction of the different effects of St Petersburg and Moscow on the fictional characters is also brought to narrative surface.³⁹

Effective representation of St Petersburg is marked in Gan's and Žukova's texts by another intriguing feature. The statement regarding the fact that “the society tale narrative unfolds indoors”⁴⁰ acquires in the case of women prose a particular relevance.

Women's social marginality, confinement to the domestic sphere, involves a peculiar narrative appropriation of St Petersburg chronotope: rather than represented by visions of water and granite or architectural *realia*, its essence is basically evoked through interiors, and captured by the urban portions visible from a window.

St Petersburg spatial organization as emblematically focused on interiors was recently analysed within a rather unique example of society

³⁷ The assertion is part of the discussion on St Petersburg and Moscow developed in chapter VI of *Knjaginja Lgovskaja*.

³⁸ On her work see particularly V. Belinskij, *Stichotvorenija grafini E. Rostopčinoj*, in *Polnoe sobranie sočinenij*, Vol. V, Moskva 1954, pp. 456-461; VI. Chodaševič, *Grafinja E. P. Rostopčina*, in *Stat'i o ruskoj poezii*, Petrograd 1922; M. Fajnštejn, *Pisatel'nicy puškinkoj pory. Istoriko-literaturnye očerki*, L. 1989, pp. 83-104. An English translation of *Činy i den'gi* appeared in H. Gosילו (ed.), *Russian and Polish Women's Fiction*, Knoxville 1985.

³⁹ See particularly the first letter sent by Vadim Svirskij to her sister. Here the eulogy of Moscow echoes Lermontov's one in *Panorama Moskvy* in very similar tones.

⁴⁰ E. C. Shepard, *The Society Tale and the Innovative Argument in Russian Prose Fiction of the 1830s*, cit., p. 134.

tale, the already mentioned *Pikovaja dama*, where it was seen as complementary to that of *Mednyj vsadnik*, all externally oriented:

Организация пространства в *Пиковой даме* построена на оппозиции *внутренний/внешний* таким образом, что основной пространственной единицей, основным семиотическим локусом является *дом* и его *интерьер*, представленные не только как реалии, но как лексемы мифологического словаря (откуда они и переходят в ПТ). *Внешнее* пространство ограничено фрагментом, видимым из *окна дома*.⁴¹

In the case of women prose the narrative treatment of the dynamic internal/external seems tacitly following a pattern of conscious or unconscious rules, which tend to reappear in the most different cases. The women portrayed in these *povesti* are certainly allowed a quite limited spatial freedom.⁴² Their movements are controlled, forced from one interior to another. They spend most of their narrative time retreating to their rooms, stepping into salons, intruding themselves in men's cabinets. This is particularly evident in the case of *Baron Rejchman*: the entire *povest'* is structured as a series of chapters set in more or less private interiors,⁴³ where all "action" is located. This aspect may also be related to the lack of a distinct urban toponomatics in these tales, St Petersburg unequivocal location notwithstanding. It appears to be as quite peculiar to women's prose, especially if we confront it with detailed descriptions of St Petersburg itineraries produced in the case of male protagonists of *Knjaginja Lgovskaja*, or, in analogue genre conditions, by other male authors. A certain awareness of this orientation seems to be proved by the circumstantiated account of the male hero's urban wanderings in *Činy i den'gi*. Through the limited perspective visible from the window of their study or boudoir, life flows under the eyes of the heroines of these tales as a

⁴¹ Т. Сив'ян, Интерьер петербургского пространства в *Пиковой даме* Пушкина, "Slavica tergestina", 8, 2000, p. 194. The idea of the peculiarities of "St Petersburg window" is interestingly developed: "Мотив *ока-окна* (...) универсален, т. е. не привязан именно к Петербургу. Однако Петербург, точнее ПТ, как бы вбирает в себя орпеделенный круг семантических единиц, чтобы потом сделать их *своими*, превратить в собственные дифференциальные признаки. Иными словами, опасно не только *окно* как таковое, но *петербургское окно*" (p. 196).

⁴² This tract was highlighted as typical of *svetskaja povest'*: "Close confinement of setting is complemented in the society tale by restricted physical movement" (E. C. Shepard, *The Society Tale and the Innovative Argument in Russian Prose Fiction of the 1830s*, cit., p. 135).

⁴³ Although indebted to common literary climate and conventions of the time, with respect to narrative organization, Žukova's choice of titles and her frequent use of French epigraphs in *Baron Rejchman* seems closely reminiscent of *Knjažna Mimi*.

distant spectacle:

Наталья Васильевна подошла к окну. Иней искрился тротуаров, как искрились глаза ее вчера; теперь они томны, и длинные темные ресницы почти совсем закрывают их. Она печально смотрела на живую картину, которая представилась взорам ее. Казалось, мороз, налагая оковы на растительную жизнь, пробуждал новые силы в животном мире. Пешеходы не шли, а летели, как бы мороз приставлял им крылья (p. 372).

Sometimes the picture offered by the window frames the hero of their own sentimental life:

Она желала бы только знать, что она любима, видеть его издали, из окна.
- Ах!..

Наталья Васильевна в самом деле подошла к окну и в самом деле увидела Левина (*Baron Rejchman*, p. 372).

В один вечер она сидела одна в своей комнате; (...) сильный ветер порою завывал в трубе (...), снег стучал в окно, экипажи разъезжали по улице (...). Это жизнь вне дома еще более усиливала в ней чувство одиночества. (...) У дверей раздался звук колокольчика. (...) Анатолий вошел в комнату (*Ideal*, p. 241).

Significantly, even when a wider look at the city is allowed, it turns into a description of details of interiors. It is the case with Šukova's chapter entitled *Svidanie*, in which, during one of Natal'ja's mundane gatherings "v kabinetě ee", she encounters Levin after a separation, exchanges with him a conversation with a double-meaning and is handed an ambiguous note.⁴⁴ The scene is introduced by a specifically urban fragment, in which the above mentioned assertion ("Известно, что в Петербурге сентябрь часто вознаграждает за лето, которым на севере иногда пользуются в одном воображении") continues as follows:

Несмотря на это, обитатели островов оставляли уже веселые дачи свои, и по Неве, Фонтанке, Мойке тянулись барки, нагруженные мебелью всякого рода и представлявшие смесь предметов, кажется, дивившихся взаимному положению своему (p. 385).⁴⁵

Not surprisingly, transported in the open air the domestic objects

⁴⁴ Curiously, in both texts the two young men leave behind themselves written traces of their insipience: Levin's "zapiska" and Anatolij's "pis'mo" are read with more or less indignant surprise by the two heroines.

⁴⁵ Significantly, this passage also contains mention of a few topographic *realia* (Neva, Fontanka, Mojka) otherwise scarcely present in the tale. In the case of *Ideal*, we are only told, about Ol'ga's brief itinerary outside: "Вот она одна в одной из самых многолюдных улиц Петербурга" (p. 247).

now furnishing the Neva seem to acquire themselves a certain vital character. The picture of the barges on the Neva “carrying the luggage of the *beau monde* back from the country villas, with a jumble of fashionable objects heaped together on board”⁴⁶ is shown as an ordinary St Petersburg scene, a sort of annual ritual and pacific inundation:

Там цветочные горшки стояли на столах, взгроможденные на диваны; там кресла прятались под ширмами, на которых лежали тюфяки и подушки; там лавровое дерево возвышалось между картонами с шляпками, и поваренные кастрюли красной меди светились возле мраморной головки Венеры. Там на атласном табуретке сидела чопорная кухарка, разговаривая с лакеем в синем сюртуке (pp. 385-386).

Here women’s ability in describing interiors, which was also a typical feature of *svetskaja povest’*, is applied to an urban landscape in which confused assemblage of objects alludes to chaos, displaying inversion of order, location, ethics and even social status.

In another vision of St Petersburg “under feminine eyes”, presented in *Baron Rejchman*, the result is that what is external, extradomestic and non-human is compared with what is internal, human, and domestic:

Это было ясное зимное утро. Солнце роскошно рассыпало алмазы и золото по снежным пеленам, в которые природа закутывает наш северный край на длинные шесть месяцев. Как сонливая красавица, нехотя открывая свои прекрасные глаза, приподнимается на подушках и, брося мгновенный взгляд на опущенные шторы и комнату, погруженную в приятный полусумрак, снова засукает сладким сном, так солнышко в это время года мгновенно является на горизонте, объемлет огненным взором столицу во всем пространстве ее и снова скрывается на долгий покой, оставляя по себе, как бы в утешение бедному жителю севера, полнеба, заженного разноцветными огнями зари (p. 371).

The form of *svetskaja povest’* was central not only with reference to access of women to the Russian literary scene. Though a “doomed genre”,⁴⁷ it contributed significantly to the general evolution of Russian prose. From the various attitudes towards Russian society of the time descended different approaches to society tale and its conven-

⁴⁶ C. Kelly, *A History of Russian Women’s Writing, 1820-1992*, cit., p. 88.

⁴⁷ R. Peace, *Svetskaia povest’ and the ‘world’ of Russian literature*. In: N. Cornwell (ed.), *The Society Tale in Russian Literature from Odoevskii to Tolstoi*, cit., p. 123. This essay contains a brief but challenging discussion of further developments of *svetskaja povest’* in major classic authors, particularly Gončarov, Turgenev and Tolstoj, seen as virtually “expanding the horizons of the genre”(ivi).

tions,⁴⁸ as well as different degrees of complexity, also in female-authored texts.⁴⁹

It is difficult, nevertheless, not to agree with the assertion that “where the lover heroes of society tales written by men are seen as polarized between feelings and convention, like their female counterparts, the heroes of society tales written by women are more often directly associated with social artificiality”.⁵⁰ An important part of this sense of artificiality and deceit seems to be conveyed by representations of St Petersburg; whether consciously or not, female appropriation of its myth appears strictly related to the registration of its devastating effects on the life of women with a heart and mind.

However immature Russian women prose of the thirties can seem, if compared with the masterpieces contemporarily produced by Puškin or Lermontov, it witnesses the search for its own, original path towards expression of the literary self, only partially inhibited by narrowness of society tale and by the claustrophobic effects sometimes generated by it.

⁴⁸ A strong awareness of the narrative clichés related to this fashionable genre and its expected topics is for instance signalled by Žukova in the opening passage of her chapter entitled *Bal* (and consisting rather in après-bal reminiscences): “Нет, я не стану описывать бала! Блеск огней, блеск алмазов, нарядов и красоты, сборное место страстей, которые расхаживают в праздничных полумасках; кому это неизвестно?” (p. 368).

⁴⁹ Rostopčina adopts in her *Činy i den'gi* an intriguing structure in which the epistolary frame is counterpointed by confessional fragments and narrative-within-narrative.

⁵⁰ See C. Kelly, *The 'Feminine Pen' and the Imagination of National Tradition: Russian Women's Writing, 1820-1880*, in *A History of Russian Women's Writing, 1820-1992*, cit., p. 58.