

# I

## *First General Impressions*

If you've visited and lived in Moscow and you don't know such parts of it as, for example, Zamoskvorechye and Taganka—then you don't know its most characteristic qualities. Just as the Trastevere in ancient Rome, perhaps not without reason, boasts that in it are preserved old Roman types,<sup>1</sup> Zamoskvorechye and Taganka can boast a similar preeminence before other parts of the enormous city-village, the monstrously fantastical and at the same time the splendidly developed and extensive growth called Moscow. From the nucleus of all ancient Russian cities, from the Kremlin, or the fortress, there grew first a white, trading town; then came an earthen city, and various suburbs began to spread beyond the Moscow River. The old-fashioned way of life escaped from the influence of the administrative regime and was unfalteringly concentrated in them. Deprived of the possibility of developing independently, it sank into stagnation on its own account. The general law

---

1. Colorful Trastevere is an area of Rome that adheres to its age-old, lower-class roots.

of our history is the withdrawal of the *zemstvo* system of life from the external norm into the solitary and stubborn seclusion of sectarians.<sup>2</sup> This was also repeated in Moscow, that is, in the development of its way of life.

Have you ever visited Zamoskvorechye? It has frequently been depicted satirically. Who hasn't described it that way? Truly only a lazy man! But up until now, no one, not even Ostrovsky,<sup>3</sup> has treated its poetic aspects. But these aspects exist—well, just as a first example, the external aspects, and obvious ones. In the first place, it's a good thing that the further you enter it, the more Zamoskvorechye drowns in green gardens in front of you; in the second place, its streets and lanes branch off so freely that they must have grown on their own and were not laid out. . . . You will be sure to get lost, but you will do so with pleasure. . . .<sup>4</sup>

Come walk with me, for example, from the Large Stone Bridge, straight, straight ahead, as the crow flies. We pass the so-called Marsh. . . . Yes! The main thing is, imagine that we're walking there late one evening. We pass the Marsh with the official building of the Wine Exchange; so far there's nothing special here. As a matter of fact, there is, except one would have to turn into Bersenevka or Solodovka, but we won't go there. We reach the Small Stone Bridge, the only old-fashioned bridge to somehow survive the zeal of our reformer-builders, which reminds me of bridges in Italian towns, for instance, those in Pisa. Before us are the three main arteries of the Zamoskvorechye, that is, strictly speaking, there are only two: the Large Polyanka and the Yakimanka; the third one between them is not that large. These two arteries lead us to the so-called gates: one, the right artery, to the Kaluga Gate; the other, the left, leads

---

2. The elective district council in Russia from 1864 to 1917.

3. Alexander Ostrovsky (1823–1886) was a Russian playwright, regarded as the greatest dramatist of the Russian realistic period. He described the less well-heeled classes in his dramas.

4. Ellipses in this translation are part of the author's original text unless otherwise noted.

to the Serpukhovskiy Gate. But the gates aren't what matters, all the more so because once upon a time they marked the end of the city's arteries, but they no longer exist, and the city has grown broader, beyond these gates.

I could go with you along the right artery; moreover, I could escort you at its festive, triumphant moment on the clear morning of August 19, when large crowds of people are moving in a religious procession to the Donskoy Monastery, and all the sidewalks are filled with the population of the right bank of the Zamoskvorechye, dressed in celebratory fashion; the air quivers with the sound of bells of old churches, and everything rejoices for some reason, happy to be alive, whether with the combination of the most trivial matters or with something larger, I don't know, but in common, even though vague; yet something affects the entire crowd for the moment. And truly, I'm an incorrigible, inveterate Muscovite—this moment is splendid. Some kind of general feeling is shared by the whole assorted crowd; it seizes you, too, a civilized man, if only you don't stubbornly resolve not to submit to the impression, and if you stubbornly struggle against this form.

But you and I won't go along this artery: instead we'll go along the left one, where, as soon as you set out, you'll encounter a large Italian house designed in fine Italian architectural style. We proceed for a while along this artery, and nothing special strikes you. One house after another, most of them made of stone and of good quality, each clearly intended for a single family; there are spikes on top, the houses are guarded by watchdogs on chains at night; your nerves shudder from the sudden, ferocious barking of a dog, who rushes the fence in a fit of jealousy and vehemence. Among the stone houses from time to time there are small, low wooden houses, but they're somehow neglected, uninviting looking, as if aware that they're out of place on this fine, wide, large street.

Further on: pause for a moment in front of the low, dark-red church of Gregory Neocaesaria with its onion domes. It's not

really lacking an original physiognomy, though *something* was obviously being mulled over in the architect's head when it was being built; but in Italy this *something* would have been built on the grand scale in marble; yet here the poor fellow executed it on a small scale and made of brick. Nevertheless *something* emerged, whereas nothing comes of the large number of churches built after the reign of Peter the Great. However, I was mistaken when I said that the architect would have built something on a colossal scale in Italy. In Pisa I saw the church of Santa Maria Della Spina, a tiny little church, but so heavily adorned and, at the same time, so strictly styled, that it seemed grandiose.

Now we've reached the Polyansky Market; meanwhile it's become very dark. Here and there lights have been lit in houses, not only in taverns.

We won't stop in front of the Church of the Assumption in Kazachye. Although it was at one time an old church because its name alludes to the presence of Cossacks, the zeal of its wealthy parishioners had long since renovated it and now, like the old cathedral in Tver, it has taken on a general, official character. Let's turn left. In front of us stretch lovely, cozy houses with very long fences; the houses are by and large one story, with mezzanines. There's light coming from the windows, and there are boiling samovars on little tables; everything inside looks so domestic and welcoming that if you weren't a family man or a visitor, a certain feeling of envy would begin to discomfort you. An Arcadia created in your own imagination attracts and teases you, although, perhaps, it doesn't really exist in fact.<sup>5</sup>

Continuing to walk with you to the left, I lead you into the most original part of Zamoskvorechye, in the direction of the Ordynsky and Tatar suburbs, and at last to the neighborhood of Bolvanovka, called that because here, according to local legend, our princes met the Mongol tax collectors and bowed down to the Tatar idols.

---

5. A mythical region of simple peace and quiet.

Right here on the Bolvanovka began my somewhat-conscious childhood, that is, a childhood that had and retained some sort of meaning. I wasn't born here; I was born on Tverskaya; I can remember myself from the time I was three or even two years old, but that was my infancy. Zamoskvorechye nourished and pampered me.

I'm intentionally emphasizing this geographical fact of my personal life. Perhaps I'm obligated to the strength of my first impressions for the outcome of the intellectual and moral processes that occurred within me, my turn to the passionate worship of the zemstvo national life.

I intend to write not an autobiography, but a history of my impressions; I take myself as the object, as a complete stranger; I view myself as one of the sons of a particular era, and therefore, only that which characterizes this era in general way should be included in my reminiscences; my personal details will enter the picture only insofar as they serve to portray the era.

That task is even easier for me, if you like, because I have long had the accursed custom of reasoning, more than describing.

And so, first of all, I have to pause on one personal trait of my early development, which seems to me to be very characteristic of our entire generation. The process of reflection began unusually early in me, before I was five years old, namely from the time when, by the will of fate, my family moved to a remote and strange corner of the world called Zamoskvorechye. I recall very clearly, as if it were only yesterday, that at the age of five, I already had an Arcadia for which I pined, a lost Arcadia, which, in comparison to the present, seemed to me to be somehow sad and gray, precisely gray. For me this Arcadia was life near the Tver Gates, in the house of the Kozins. Why this life seemed to me to be suffused with some sort of light, why even at my young age I would always pass that house with a trembling heart, even though its ownership had long since passed to a new owner, and why I often visited that house under the pretense of looking

for a new apartment, trying to recall the nooks where I played in my childhood, why, I say, this Arcadia pursued me, is a very complicated matter. On the one hand, there's the general characteristic of my era, and on the other, if you like, it was something physiological, hereditary, and domestic.

Our entire family had its lost Arcadia, one of a rich life with our late grandfather before the French incursion, which destroyed his two houses on the Dmitrovka; and in particular, one of my aunts, who was an extremely dreamy and exalted woman, filled with this "golden age"; and besides, they represented two different eras.

I was born in 1822. I can recall myself and my unconscious impressions at the age of three. The social catastrophe that occurred at this time, a catastrophe some of whose victims my father knew personally from his stay at the University School for Noblemen, had a major impact on my childlike feelings.<sup>6</sup>

Adults consider children somehow stupid and never suspect that at least something of what they see and hear impacts their souls and their imaginations. For example, I remember as if in a dream, but I really do remember, how they carried the body of Tsar Alexander I back, and what strange fear prevailed in the air at that time. . . .<sup>7</sup>

No one and nothing can convince me that ideas aren't something organic, carried by, and wafting in the air, substantial, something due to the order of succession. . . .

That which drifted at the time over everything, that which greeted me on my entrance into the world, I can, of course, never express as well as did the highly gifted and passionate Musset in his *Confessions d'un enfant du siècle*.<sup>8</sup> I will remind you of this remarkable passage, with which I will conclude this sketch of

---

6. "Social catastrophe" refers to the rout of the Decembrist Revolt.

7. Aleksandr I died in Taganrog in 1825 and his body was transported by train back to Moscow.

8. *Confession of a Child of the Century* (1836) (Fr.) is a novel written by Alfred de Musset (1810–1857), the French poet and dramatist.

the threshold of my impressions: “During the wars of the Empire, at that time, when husbands and brothers were serving in Germany, anxious mothers produced a fervent generation, pale and nervous. Conceived between battles, educated in schools amid the sounds of war, thousands of children regarded each other gloomily, while testing their weak muscles. From time to time their bloodstained fathers would appear, lift them to the chests covered in gold, then lower them to the ground, and remount their horses.”<sup>9</sup>

But the war ended: Caesar died on a distant island.

Then an anxious youth sat himself on the ruins of the old world. All these children were drops of fiery blood that had intoxicated the earth: they were born amid battles. They held the whole world in their heads; they looked at the earth, the sky, the streets, and the roads—everything was deserted, and only the sound of parish church bells sounded in the distance.

Three elements shared the life that offered itself to these children: behind them a past, destroyed forever; ahead of them, the dawn of an immense horizon, the first rays of the future, and between these two worlds, something like the ocean, which separates the Old World from America; I don’t know, something indefinite and unsteady, a sea that was troubled and threatened shipwreck, at times crossed by some distant white sail or a ship at a slow speed; the present century, our century, in a word, and one that separates the past from the future, and that is neither one thing nor the other, and that resembles both one and the other, and at every step one wonders: Am I walking over seeds or more ashes?

Only the present was left for them, the spirit of the age, the angel of dusk, who is neither night nor day; they found him seated on a sack of bones, wrapped in a cloak of egotism and shivering from the cold. The torment of death crept into their

---

9. This passage is Grigoryev’s own version, since Musset’s *Confession* was still not available in translation at the time.

souls at the sight of this vision, half-mummy and half-dust; they approached it like the traveler in Strasbourg who's shown the corpse of the daughter of the old count Saarwerden,<sup>10</sup> embalmed in her casket wearing her wedding dress. That childish skeleton is terrible, because on her thin pale fingers she still wears a wedding ring, while her head disintegrates into dust amid the flowers.

"Oh, peoples of the future!" the poet concludes his introduction. "When on some hot summer's day you're bending over your plow in the green field of your fatherland, when under the rays of the bright, pure sun, the earth, a bounteous mother, will smile in her morning attire on the peasant farmer; when, wiping from your tranquil brow the sacred perspiration, you'll rest your eye on the endless horizon and remember us, who'll no longer be living—you'll tell yourself that we paid dearly for your future peace; pity us more than all of your forebears. They had a great deal of sorrow, which rendered them worthy of compassion; and we lacked that which consoled them.

---

10. Strasbourg is a county located in Lorraine, France.