

Yana Meerzon

To the Poetics of Neighbourhood in Sergei Dovlatov's Émigré Writingsⁱ

The theatricalization and mythmaking of America in the Russian literature dates back to the early 1920s, when Soviet writers dramatized New York through the mise-en-scene of its futuristic bridges and skyscrapers. These writings, financed by the Soviet government, were meant to establish the “national and ideological” identity of their readership at home (Etkind 142). In the 1970-80s, however, the theatricalization of the American landscape in Russian expatriate literature had radically changed, as had its anticipated readership. At that point, it reflected the Russian exilic writers’ double dilemma: to make it in the dream-city (New York) and the dream-country (America) of their youth, and to achieve a sense of closure with their home country. This duality marked the writings of Vasily Aksyonov, Sergei Dovlatov and Joseph Brodsky, each of whom held a particular view of America and the American. Aksyonov, for example, saw himself rather as a tourist in the US, while Dovlatov established himself as the voice of the diaspora. In contrast to both Aksyonov and Dovlatov, Brodsky lived the life of a poet-philosopher, to whom the dimensions of time and language were more significant than that of geography. The peculiarity of their exilic experience and of cultural and linguistic estrangement provided each of these writers with the possibility to re-think in different ways their youthful myth of America as a centre of cultural and political freedomsⁱⁱ.

This article examines how Sergei Dovlatov imagined and constructed his America. I argue that by re-creating the mentality, the geography and the social-cultural practices of the 1980s Russian New York, in his short stories Dovlatov presented a version of Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities” (1991). A site of the immigrants’ unforeseen “diasporic intimacy” created by shared alienation (Boym 251-252), Dovlatov’s New York is not “opposed

to uprootedness and defamiliarization but is constituted by it” (Boym 252). Dvlatov depicts the Russian Forest Hills both as a simple unit of urban planning, defined by something as formulaic as Henri Lefebvre’s “entrance and exit between qualified spaces and a quantified space” (qtd. in Mayol 10), and as one’s highly personal space and experience, marked by the immigrants’ “hope of the possibilities of human understanding and survival, of unpredictable chance encounters; [...] by the images of home and homeland” (Boym 253). In its complexity, life in Dvlatov’s neighbourhood takes on the quality of a theatrical *mise-en-scène*, when every dweller is assigned a social role and hence obliged to wear a public mask in order to be accepted by the communityⁱⁱⁱ. Dvlatov’s stories tell us that in the practice of neighbourhood living, “to go out into the street is to constantly run the risk of being recognized, thus pointed out. The practice of the neighbourhood implies adhesion to a system of values and behaviours forcing each dweller to remain behind a mask playing his or her role” (Mayol 16). Hence, “to submit or not to submit” to these social and therefore theatrical codes of behaviour is the only choice that Dvlatov’s characters have to make. How these choices are made and what interpersonal relationships are formed in such a neighbourhood defines the core of Dvlatov’s émigré fiction.

Dvlatov’s work written in America – both his short stories and journalism – was an important example of building an exilic community on page and on stage of the Russian diasporic life. It reflected, archived, and recreated the life of the 1980s Russian Forest Hills. It evoked the phenomenon of neighbourhood both as highly idiosyncratic phenomenon of the Russian diasporic experience - the atmosphere and the social practices of the life in a small village, and as something common to many other diasporic practices of cosmopolitan metropolis. In other words, one could argue, on the pages of his émigré prose, Dvlatov has re-enforced the sense of diasporic intimacy, which “can be approached only through indirection and intimation,

through stories and secrets. It is spoken of in a foreign language that reveals the inadequacies of translation. [...] In contrast to the utopian images of intimacy as transparency, authenticity and ultimate belonging, diasporic intimacy is dystopic by definition; it is rooted in the suspicion of a single home; in shared longing without belonging” (Boym 252).

In his ironic and slightly distorted depictions of people living in close proximity to each other, relying on their neighbours and at the same time making fun of them, Dovlatov prose reminds one of Bruno Schultz’s surrealistic stories on the one hand, and Anton Chekhov’s tragic-comic style on the other. It also continues other exilic authors’ tradition (from Nabokov to Conrad) of depicting their émigré dwellings in order to better understand the life in a new land.

As my primary example, I discuss Dovlatov’s major novel of his American period *Inostranka (The Foreign Woman, 1986)*^{iv}, which creatively depicts the social, linguistic, and interpersonal tensions in a Russian diasporic neighbourhood. In my theoretical framework, in addition to Svetlana Boym’s work cited above, I draw on the writings of the French sociologist Pierre Mayol, the Russian/American literary critic Alexander Genis, as well as Joseph Brodsky’s essay “O Serezhe Dovlatove” (“About Sergei Dovlatov),” a rare example of dedicated analysis of Dovlatov’s poetics and proof of its significance within the Russian literary process^v!

On the Urban Setting of Dovlatov’s American Prose

Dovlatov names three cities –Leningrad, Tallinn, and New York – as the three landmarks of his life journey. Leningrad, for Dovlatov, occupies the position of cultural and spiritual capital; Tallinn is a city of vertical dimensions that forces one to focus on one’s own spiritual life and existential dilemmas (*Remeslo* 129-130). New York – the chameleon city – becomes his “definitive city.” A city of contrasts, New York, as Dovlatov writes, is “relaxingly blithe and

lethally dangerous. Excessively generous and pathologically stingy. [...] Its architecture reminds of a pile of children's toys. It is nightmarish to the point of attaining a certain harmony" (130). Channeling Mayakovsky's futurist depiction of New York's bridges and skyscrapers, Dovlatov writes: New York's architecture "brings back memories of the canvasses of third-rate cubists. New York is real. It does not cause one to feel a museum-like awe. It is created for life, work, entertainment, and death" (131).

Dovlatov's recognition of New York's diversity and his fascination with the city's incongruence mark the writer's vision. His New York reminds one of the monumentality of Diego Rivera – another foreigner spellbound by America's urban wilderness. Here, "present, past, and future are running in the same harness. [...] One feels as if in a ship packed with millions of passengers" (*Remeslo* 131). At the same time, an intonation of acceptance and a cadence of destiny are heard in Dovlatov's phrases dedicated to his new home: "This city is so diverse that you feel there is a nook for you too. I think that New York is my last, definitive, final city" (131). Pathos, however, is not Dovlatov's natural intonation, so he finishes this sad ode to New York with something that would be more appropriate to Anton Chekhov's writing, a little self-irony that immediately undermines the seriousness of the previous statement: "There is only one way out of here - to the moon" (131).

This tension between the immigrant's fascinating but somewhat enclosed present and his/her somewhat idealized past, its geography and its people, characterizes Dovlatov's prose. One of his last stories, *Filial (Zapiski veduschego)/The Affiliate*^{vi} is an example of such tendency: a type of literature written in exile, the story re-creates for its readers the sense of inevitability and the feeling of rupture that marks the experience of an exilic subject. The action takes place in a Los Angeles hotel, where Russian historians, writers, journalists and politicians meet for a

three-day conference. The events unfold in the claustrophobic space of the present, whereas the protagonist's unexpected meeting with his first love takes the reader into the narrator's memory, his past: the landscape of his beloved city of Leningrad, the dusky park paths of their first kiss, and the narrator's dark hours of suffering from the pangs of jealousy. This geographical richness takes on the dimension of the imaginary, since the narrator does not share his memories with his new friends or the participants of the seminar. He does not even share them with his first love, who suddenly re-appears at the door of his hotel room twenty odd years after. The same tendency of the present falling through time into the narrator's past is found in other stories of exile written by Dovlatov. For instance, a letter from home that the protagonist of his 1985 novel *Remeslo* (*Craft: A Story in Two Parts*), Dovlatov himself, receives, re-emphasizes this past/present interdependency: "You're never going to become an American", the letter says. "And there is no escaping your past. The skyscrapers around you are a myth. What's around you is your past. Which is us. Crazy poets and artists, alcoholics and scholars, soldiers and inmates" (*Remeslo* 194).

In America, therefore, the author's past would constantly take on the qualities of the present, into which his characters would fall, much like Alice in Wonderland does when she looks into the rabbit hole. "In America", another Russian emigre, Alexander Genis would write, "like in afterlife, one has to pay for one's sins" (68). From here an exile's past seems to be safe and clear, although often tragic. In America, however, if people accept their present – their new dwelling, new city - as something more real than their past, if they find the way to deal with their nostalgia, they can find love and happiness. This is exactly what the semi-autobiographical protagonists of many of Dovlatov's books set out to do. In *Remeslo*, Dovlatov would write:

I went out to Broadway. Right on the sidewalk there were purses and umbrellas laid out. A huge black man was standing there next to a tape player box and shuffling a shiny deck

of cards. Smoke was rising up from hot dog stands. The porno shops smelled like lollipops. Countless boom boxes filled the air with pulsating sounds. I was walking through the rattle and hum. I was part of the crowd but still felt like an outsider. But maybe everyone there felt this way? Maybe this is the well-hidden secret of America – to be able to be one of many, but deep down to keep something unique? (211)

Dovlatov died without giving an answer to this question, which in essence suggests the act of one's integration into American life as the act of leaving the diasporic neighbourhood^{vii}. One can argue that perhaps if Dovlatov had overcome the language barriers and started fully integrating into the English-language milieu of the American literary cityscape, this act of integration –e.g., making Greater New York his new neighbourhood - would have been possible. Dovlatov did not take this step: he did not master the new language and he did not live to see the time when his books would find their way back home, to post-Soviet Russia. His reader, his neighbourhood, was to remain the author himself, his own I, his exilic Self. As he wrote, “once in the West, you stop having a feel for your audience. What do you write and for whom? For Americans about Russia? For Russians about America? Turns out you write for yourself. For that familiar and close person. For that monster who watches you with disgust combing your hair in front of the mirror” (*Remeslo* 204) Who was that reader and that writer, that "monster" watching Dovlatov's literary alter-ego in the mirror of his own exilic writing, in the mirror of his half-imagined and half-real neighbourhood? In the following, I will attempt to approach this difficult question.

Sergei Dovlatov: “An ethnic writer living 4,000 kilometers away from his audience”
(qtd. in Genis 135)

A seasoned journalist, Dovlatov always saw himself as a writer. However, typically for the absurd Soviet world which Dovlatov had so masterfully depicted in his pre-immigrant short stories, his brilliant prose written in Russian and addressed to the Russian reader was first

published and recognized in *samizdat*, in the West. In 1976 the Russian émigré journals *Vremya i my* (*Time and Us*) and *Kontinent* (*Continent*) published three of his stories; in 1977 the American press Ardis published Dovlatov's novel *The Invisible Book* in Russian, with an English version appearing in 1979. Unfortunately, these publications brought Dovlatov no popularity with the Soviet authorities. He was expelled from the Union of Journalists and lost his livelihood. By 1978, the year of his exile to the US, Dovlatov had almost no publications at home, most of his short stories being banned by Soviet censorship. His first book of short stories was about to be published in Tallinn when on KGB orders its typeset forms were destroyed.^{viii} Coupled with other circumstances of his private life, these events led to his ultimate decision to emigrate. In August 1978 Dovlatov left the Soviet Union for Austria; he arrived in the United States in February 1979, New York soon becoming his new professional base.

In his autobiography, Dovlatov wrote that upon his arrival to America, “he had spent the first six months on his couch searching for himself in the new life” (qtd. in Dovlatov, Elena 28). This was not entirely true: in New York, Dovlatov established and then co-edited the Russian-language newspaper *Novy Amerikanets* (*The New American*) (1981-82), and worked as a host on *Radio Svoboda* (Radio Liberty). At the same time, *The New Yorker* started publishing his short stories in translation, “making Dovlatov only the second Russian writer, after Vladimir Nabokov, to appear in the prestigious journal.”^{ix} By 1990, the year of his death, Dovlatov had established himself as the voice of the Third Wave of Russian immigration, and was admired by his diasporic readers and English-speaking audiences alike. Dovlatov reached the apex of his popularity when his works reached Russia, even if only posthumously, in the late 1980s and mid-1990s.

In 1981, as his attempt at reconciliation with the new city and his new life, together with a few friends, Dovlatov rented a poorly furnished office in the heart of Manhattan. The corner of Broadway and 14th Street, not too far from Central Park, became the home of the Russian weekly newspaper *The New American*. Writing for this newspaper was Dovlatov's attempt to create a cultural niche – a certain type of literary neighbourhood- for the Third-Wave Russian emigration, where writers, journalists, artists, poets, and intellectuals could contribute in their native language (Young 36-38). Without any knowledge of English, these immigrant intellectuals were condemned to either some part-time jobs within the Russian community or other menial work in the outside world. Dovlatov's newspaper was meant to start a stimulating dialogue between its authors and its readers, who were well-educated, but somewhat lost in the new country. It created a semblance of true communication for Russian intellectuals and their readers in America, a first virtual “neighbourhood” that united the lost souls of the Russian immigrant community. “The newspaper enticed its readers with its down-home voice, bringing the Third Wave together as one group. Everything that was going on in the newspaper was an inside matter” (Genis 176). Dovlatov recognized this emotional power of the newspaper to create the “real” and the “virtual” circles (or neighbourhoods) of friendship. In the chapter “Nashi lyudi” (“Our People”) of his novel *Remeslo*, Dovlatov vividly describes the people who made the newspaper their home: “besides the staff, the editorial boardroom was home to quite mysterious personalities. We were like a magnet for all sorts of demoralized, displaced, disillusioned, and disoriented people” (184).

The same people who made the newspaper their home will make up the core of Dovlatov's fictional world, its invented neighbourhood, which he re-created on the pages of his short stories. In the novel *A Foreign Woman* (the focus of the following sections), one finds an

example of how Dovlatov's newspaper associates, real neighbours and friends find their way onto the pages of his other literary work. The novel presents Dovlatov's semi-fictional Forest Hills community and his personal "gallery of exilic characters" (Genis 185), which he uses to "mythologize the Third Wave of Russian immigration as one big family" (180).

In the centre of the novel is Marusya Tatarovich, the daughter of a Soviet functionary, who came to the US by pure chance. She remembers neither the reasons for leaving home nor those for staying in America. The logic of cause-and-effect escapes this character's actions; chance rules over her life, so much so that Marusya's life struggles, her ignorance of the American ways of life, and her emotional and financial dependency on the dwellers of Forest Hills, become the centre of the narration. Step by step Marusya, the newcomer, submits to the routine of life of people who share her native language and culture, the neighbourhood; while the émigrés collectively help her to deal with cultural assimilation and linguistic acculturation.

Dovlatov's literary neighbourhood turns into an extension of Marusya's personal affairs. Thus in *A Foreign Woman*, to use Mayol's reasoning, the neighbourhood becomes "the space of a relationship to the other as a social being, requiring a special treatment. To leave one's home, to walk in the street, is right away to commit a cultural, non-arbitrary act: it inscribes the inhabitant in a network of social signs that preexist him or her" (12). In this sense, the neighbourhood—both real and literary—can become a space of personal safety for the émigré and a type of social restraint: a container, an enclosed society to live in which would mean to subject oneself to this society's rules and expectations. The story of Marusya Tatarovich is the history of how many immigrants would negotiate their desire to assimilate to the new country and their search for personal safety within the immigrant community.

Dovlatov approached this question in many of his pre-émigré writings as well as his stories written in America⁸. Specifically, he dealt with this issue in his 1986 collection of short stories entitled *Chemodan (The Suitcase)*. Here, Dovlatov used the suitcase as its main metaphor. A reservoir of memory, the suitcase reflects the theme of the collection – that of departures and returns - and serves as a preview of the book’s structure (Tsivian 648). The personal effects in the suitcase jog the narrator’s memory and give the theme to each of the collection’s stories:

I looked at the empty suitcase. On the bottom was Karl Marx. In the lid was Brodsky. And between them, my lost, precious, my only life. [...] That was all I had acquired in thirty-six years. In my entire life in my homeland. At this point, memories engulfed me. [...] Memories that should be called ‘From Marx to Brodsky’. Or perhaps, ‘What I Have Acquired’. Or simply ‘The Suitcase’. (Dovlatov, *The Suitcase* 6)

The image of the suitcase as a metaphor of the enclosed space, a container, re-appears in Dovlatov’s other works. In *A Foreign Woman*, it grows into an allegory of space: suitcase one might suggest turns in this novel into the metaphor of a neighbourhood, a unit of social, geographical, and interpersonal dimensions that characterizes the life of a group.

Such a group life would depend on the geographical and social dimensions of its dwelling. In *A Foreign Woman*, the life of a fictional neighbourhood resembles the geography and the habits of the Russian émigré quarter of 108th Street and 64th Avenue in Forest Hills, Queens, where “the six brick buildings [are] clustered around a supermarket, inhabited primarily by Russians” or “recent Soviet citizens” (*A Foreign Woman*, 3). This neighbourhood “stretches from the railroad tracks to the synagogue. A bit to the North is Meadow Lake; to the South is Queens Boulevard. And we’re in the middle. One Hundred Eight Street is our central highway” (3). This neighbourhood, in other words, serves Dovlatov as a strategic point, the stage on which the theatre of Russian émigré life takes place. Here, the neighbourhood collectivity is defined by the Forest Hills’ emotional settings as an “inevitable system of relationships imposed by space”

(Mayol 15). It presents an amalgam of its dwellers' social behaviour with the expectation that each of them must yield to "the general process of recognition [of the neighbourhood] by conceding a part of himself or herself to the jurisdiction of the other" (15). Thus, in Dovlatov's prose, the neighbourhood as a geographical category and a literary metaphor is defined by the inherent sense of contained life, predetermined by external circumstances, something that neither the protagonist nor people close to him can change.

Those emigrants who break the rule by adapting to American ways of life become double exiles, both as regards their home culture and their diasporic community. In *A Foreign Woman*, Lora and Fima, a married couple for whom emigration had become almost a honeymoon, play the role of double émigrés. Upon arrival in America, Dovlatov writes, "they decided to settle in New York. In a year's time they spoke tolerable English. Fima signed up for accounting courses. Lora took lessons from a manicurist. In a few months they found jobs [...] Soon they bought their own house, a small brick affair in Forest Hills. [...] Happiness was as natural and organic for them as good health" (*A Foreign Woman* 34).

Through the presence of Lora and Fima in his fictional neighbourhood, Dovlatov evokes an irresolvable tension between the inhabited, familiar space of the Russian space of Forest Hills and the rest of New York. He depicts Greater New York as "an independent state: people from Texas appear as foreigners, and inhabitants of Iowa look as if they had arrived from another planet, so the Russians are just as much at home as many other foreigners, since everybody speaks English with an accent" (Young 180). At the same time, he reduces the action space of the novel to "the corner of 108th and 64th Street", "the place where Dovlatov himself lived", the "vantage point [from which] he describes each character in the story" (181). In other words, it is the complex relationships within the neighbourhood, and between its dwellers and Greater New

York, that mark the interpersonal dimensions of Dovlatov's stories. Perhaps it is this fear of becoming too settled in Russian America and the need to eventually leave one's space that put Lora and Fima of *A Foreign Woman* on the margins of this story. Perhaps it is this same anxiety that eventually forced Dovlatov himself to the margin of his own diasporic habitat. By 1990, as Young writes, in Dovlatov's own writing this sense of fraternity started to gradually disappear with the writer becoming more popular and more accepted with his Western publishers and English-speaking audiences (47).

Sergei Dovlatov: the New American and Neighbourhood-Maker

Dovlatov, like many Russian intellectuals of the period who found themselves removed from their country, was spellbound by the myth of American democracy, by the country's promised rights and freedoms. A representative of the *thaw* generation of Soviet artists and intellectuals, Dovlatov imagined American democracy as a horizontal landscape of equality, a social and cultural system that guarantees everybody the right to be oneself. In Dovlatov's youth, Brodsky writes, "freedom of movement was out of the question. When all of a sudden this became a possibility, it was too late for many of us to realize it: we did not need a physical realization of this freedom anymore. The idea of individualism had become for us but an abstract, metaphysical idea. [...] In this sense, we had achieved in our consciousness and on paper a much more tangible freedom than it would have ever been possible to achieve physically anywhere" (*O Serezhe* 69). Gradually, Dovlatov found his personal niche within this democracy. He embraced the principles of autonomous being as the fundamental law of a democratic society, and applied these laws to his own émigré existence.

As a resident of the Russian-American Forest Hills community, Dovlatov propagated the ideals of individual freedom just as he had done at home. Although Dovlatov “could not stand smugness, stinginess, the bourgeois haughtiness, self-righteousness, intolerance to others, and cowardly narrow-mindedness” (Genis 185), he made peace with the characters of his stories - his former compatriots and now his neighbours. These are the people whom Dovlatov welcomes into his newly made “artistic household”.

Creating such characters Dovlatov also commented on the emotional and social make-up of the Third-Wave emigration, which although being extremely diverse externally, internally still carried the mark of life under totalitarianism. Paradoxically, as is often the case with Dovlatov, although he “despised the norm, the notion he desired the most and feared the most”, this norm became the centre of his exilic prose (Genis 185). The photographic precision of the depicted landscape and its inhabitants helped Dovlatov to domesticate English-speaking America for his new readers.

At the same time, he understood the hazards of democracy and the weight of personal responsibility that rests on the American writer. The freedom to write but not to be heard of, the freedom to publish but not be read, was the most difficult of the human rights that any writer, émigré or not, Russian or not, had to accept when landing in the US. “Autonomy and self-sufficiency [...] can also mean one is lost in the landscape. Democracy [...] is a great equalizer. Dovlatov was akin to Brodsky in the naturalness with which they both fit in with the horizontality of the landscape. Almost of the same age, they belonged to a generation that consciously chose to live on societal margins [...] Brodsky and Dovlatov made their exile a point of view, their alienation a literary style, their solitude a freedom” (Genis 141).

Not surprisingly, Dovlatov was the only Russian émigré prose writer whose work received special recognition from the Nobel Prize laureate Joseph Brodsky. Written on the first anniversary of his death, Brodsky's essay "About Sergei Dovlatov" demonstrates the author's admiration for his fellow writer's literary talent and existential stance. As Pyotr Vail writes, in Dovlatov's desire to shake away exilic suffering Brodsky had recognized "a literary and existential ally, one who had been trying to impart to Russian prose the same qualities he [Brodsky – Y.M.] has been trying to instill in Russian poetry" (385). In Dovlatov's prose, Brodsky also recognized a tone of estrangement similar to his own, the existential, not necessarily geographical, attitude of a lonely poet.

Much like Brodsky, Dovlatov took language and the process of writing as the only idols worth worshipping both at home and abroad. A humble servant to the prosody of poetic utterance, Brodsky saw in Dovlatov a fellow servant of the Russian language, a prose-writer whose writing style is comparable to that of poetry. He emphasized the accessibility of Dovlatov's prose, the elegance of style, and his skill in grabbing the reader's attention. As Brodsky wrote, Dovlatov "strove on paper to achieve conciseness [...] of poetic language; he really took concision to the limit. [...] We are a wordy and polysyllabic nation; we are a nation of the subordinate clause [...] Serezha was above all a master of style. His stories are held together by the rhythm of each individual sentence and cadence of his authorial utterance. They are written like verse; plot in them is secondary, used as a pretext" (*O Serezhe* 66-67).

Dovlatov focused his stories on his literary alter-ego, the character "Sergei Dovlatov," who would appear on his pages both as character-narrator and character-participant. Imagining his literary settings, Dovlatov relied on his readers' knowledge of the depicted landscape, the life of the Russian Forest Hills. The effect created by this device resembles Boym's diasporic

intimacy, since the author refused to place himself above his characters, portraying the residents of New York's 108th Street as his equals, becoming a part of them. In his stories, "Dovlatov would speak of himself in a cursory manner [...] Mixing himself in with others, he becomes part of a multicoloured pattern. Rather than embroidering his autobiography, Dovlatov weaves it like a carpet" (Genis 14). Hence, the presence of "Sergei Dovlatov," perhaps even more than his ability to inscribe the distorted images of his friends and relatives into his work, made Dovlatov's literary landscapes easily recognizable.^{xi} The intimate tone of his prose manifested itself within the angles of literary focalization: the author's point of view – i.e., his ability to find humour in the most unexpected situations – made his writing autobiographical.

For those unfamiliar with the events or the people described in his stories, the photographic quality of the portrayed image gave Dovlatov's stories seeming authenticity, specifically when the author "appears as a figure in the text, where he is truthfully depicted as an established Russian writer with many books to his credit in Russian, English, and other languages. [...] Like all the rest of the characters to be met on the corner of the 108th Street, the author too is shown in his relation [...] to emigration, and to the fortunes and misfortunes of life in the United States" (Young 186). The street encounters and the public life of the Russian émigré community become extensions of the author and his characters' private lives.

Using techniques of concretization similar to newspaper sketches, Dovlatov's writing creates an impression of a documentary that at the same time borders on caricature. Dovlatov's humour feeds off peoples' fear, so in his prose, this binding of the funny and the inevitable becomes the norm not the exception; it marks his writing as self-reflective and absurd. Recognizing Dovlatov's irony as his own, Brodsky wrote that in his stories, a sense of absurdity of what goes on both within and outside of his consciousness is characteristic of Dovlatov's

vision of émigré realities (*O Serezhe* 65). In his short stories, Brodsky explains, Dovlatov invents “a certain type of consciousness, a type of worldview that has not existed or has not been described before. The writer reflect[ed] a reality, not as a mirror but as an object which is attacked by that reality. [...] The character appearing in his short stories is not quite in line with the Russian literary tradition but rather autobiographical. This is a person who does not justify reality or himself; this is a person who shrugs it off” (*O Serezhe* 68). The focus of Dovlatov’s creative laboratory, therefore, rests on the process of making literature itself. Although he does not necessary reveal the devices of his literary mediation, Dovlatov’s stories appear as marked by “the narcissistic quality,” typical of meta-fictional narrative (Hutcheon 6).

At the same time, for a writer who often distorts reality by heavily modifying his prototypes, Dovlatov’s writing, paradoxically but logically, presents an almost exact snapshot of the landscapes surrounding his semi-fictional characters. Precision to detail as well as empathy for his characters distinguish Dovlatov’s literary portraits; while the fictional landscape he creates on his pages is as detailed as the language he uses. In Dovlatov’s short stories, the émigré dwelling, its geographical landscape and interpersonal environment, the markers of a certain cultural neighbourhood, “appears as the domain in which the space-time relationship is the most favorable for a dweller, who moves from place to place *on foot, starting from his or her home*. Therefore, it is that piece of the city that a limit crosses distinguishing private from public space: it is a result of a walk, of a succession of steps on a road, conveyed little by little through the organic link to one’s lodging” (Mayol 10). The émigré neighbourhood appears in Dovlatov’s prose bound together by the immigrants’ shared language, memories, customs, system of cultural references and values, economic struggles and opposition to the new culture, which “push[es] the dweller to behave as if ‘on guard’ within precise social codes” (Mayol 15). This may create a

sense of intimacy and safety among the neighbourhood's dwellers, who otherwise would have nothing to do with one another "back home". Dovlatov's literary rendering of the Russian Forest Hills reveals the processes of how neighbourhood as such can turn into "an object of consumption that the dweller appropriates by way of privatization of the public space" (Mayol 13). The topography of the Russian Forest Hills with the *Dnieper* deli as its centre allows the author to freely focus on the divine comedy of the everyday. This is how he describes the life of his community in the pre-internet, unglobalized era of their 1970-80s American exile:

If you're interested in the latest news, stand in front of a Russian store. The best place is the Dnieper. It's our club, our forum, our assembly, our news agency. Here you can get any information you need, or discuss the latest article in the press, or get a bodyguard, a driver, or a hired killer. Or buy a car for a hundred dollars. Or purchase Soviet medicines, or meet a merry and undemanding lady. They say marijuana and guns are sold here, foreign currency is exchanged, shady business deals are made. Everything about the people in our neighbourhood is known here (*A Foreign Woman*, 70).

Dovlatov vividly depicts the mechanisms of social behaviour that turn the marginality of life in the diasporic neighbourhood into the centrality of the exilic experience. In his short stories, Dovlatov also shows how the neighbourhood itself, its geographical characteristics and the dwellers' "knowledge of the surroundings, daily trips, relationships with neighbors (politics), relationships with shopkeepers (economics), diffuse feelings of being on one's territory (ethology)" often become one's "*place of a recognition*" (Mayol 13).

On Theatricality of the Neighbourhood Dwelling

In the novel *A Foreign Woman*, however, Marusya Tatarovich fails the exercise in assimilation, in alienation and solitude. Very soon upon her arrival in New York, she discovers that even if she tries very hard, it is next to impossible to tread a safe path for herself and her little son, Leva, in this great city. The newcomer always has the choice of integrating into the

new society or retreating back to the life of one's ethnic community. Marusya chooses the second path. Although it seems that Marusya's decision to become a housekeeper in her cousin's household was simply a matter of chance, the way Dovlatov describes his character's combat with the city sheds light on the true story of the exiles' setting-in: "Early in the morning Marusya would run to the subway stop, then spend an hour in the rumbling, scary underground of New York. A daily portion of fear" (*A Foreign Woman* 40). Slowly, in Marusya's eyes, this city takes the shape of a real town with its stores and attractions, but it never becomes friendly, as if insisting on Marusya's cultural and linguistic strangeness as an uninvited émigré. "New York was an event for Marusya, a concert, a spectacle. It became a city only after a month or two. Gradually the chaos revealed figures, colours, sounds. The noisy marketing intersection suddenly fell apart into its constituent units: a grocery store, a cafeteria, an insurance agency, and a delicatessen" (40). Still, the city gives Marusya the shivers; it constantly reminds her of her otherness, her not being able to belong, to share with the city the memories of her past and create together with it the story of her present. Hate is the feeling that Marusya reserves for it: "New York gave rise to feelings of irritation and intimidation in Marusya. [...] Marusya envied the children, the beggars, the policemen – everyone who felt part of the city. [...] From the subway to the jewelry sweatshop was three hundred eighty-five steps. Sometimes, if Marusya almost run, it took only three hundred eighty. Three hundred eighty steps through the motley, festive, chattering crowd. [...] The daily dose of fear and uncertainty" (40-41). As a result, Marusya returns to the safety of her neighbourhood; she becomes a housekeeper in Lora and Fima's household, where she "was fed and healthy. She had enough clothing. [...] This was like a sanatorium for Party workers, not a real life" (44).

However, as it often happens with Russian emigrants, the more Marusya feels nostalgic, the more the neighbours warm up to her, since, as Mayol reminds us, neighbourhood is “the place of passage by the other, untouchable because it is distant, and yet recognizable through its relative stability; neither intimate nor anonymous” (12). And so, this is how the neighbourhood becomes the extension of Marusya’s life in it. As soon as Marusya gives up her attempts to assimilate, one by one the inhabitants of the Russian Forest Hills start making visits to her house. First, it is the journalist Zaretsky, who drops by to interview Marusya on the subject of sex under totalitarianism; then other men begin picking her up “wherever she went: at the store, the bus stop, in front of the house, by the newsstand” (*A Foreign Woman* 50). This turn of events, however, creates a new set of challenges for Dovlatov’s character and for her relationships with the neighbourhood and its unwritten codes of behaviour. Marusya “tossed her muskrat coat too casually on the couch,” when “the community likes people to behave more modestly” (56). At the end, she finds a solution for this growing dependency and tension in her affairs with the community. She finds herself a lover: Rafael Jose Belinda Chicorillio Gonzalez or simply Rafa, a true New Yorker, becomes the Latin-American hero of the Russian émigré neighborhood, the anarchic force that brings the community together.

At first Rafael has difficulty with the dwellers. In the chapter symbolically called “On the Street and at Home,” Dovlatov writes: “men thought Rafa was a gangster or even a terrorist. Women thought he was an ordinary drunkard. [...] They felt that anyone in Marusya’s place should be humble, pathetic and dependent. Even better, sick with shot nerves” (71). At the same time, in Rafa’s company, Marusya “did not seem pathetic or humiliated. She learned to drive very quickly. She often appeared in the Russian stores, buying expensive fish, roast beef, and black caviar. [...] Rafa resembled a spoiled son of Aristotle Onassis. He acted like a man who

had no money but was protected by his father's billions. [...] The émigré society could have forgiven them almost anything: welfare cheating, mooching, drugs. Everything except fecklessness" (72). At the end, however, it is Marusya and Rafa's irresponsibility, their tendency for personal anarchism that attracts the neighbourhood and makes it possible for Marusya to "arrive," to make peace with herself, with America, and with the neighbourhood.

Hence, as Dovlatov shows us in his stories, life in the diaspora and by extension in the neighbourhood takes on the elements of everyday theatricality, which in its own turn generates performative behaviour in people. Such behaviour, although somewhat paradoxically, reinforces the sense of diasporic intimacy: on one hand the neighbours boost their self-image in front of others by hiding the truth about their economic humiliations; on the other, they voluntarily come together in one unified gesture of helping one another. This is how Dovlatov evokes the phenomenon of neighbourhood or diasporic intimacy in his novel: at the climactic point, the parrot Lolo – Rafa's alter-ego - escapes Marusya's house. The noisy, reckless and rowdy bird flies away from the window to leave Marusya in full despair, crying for home, blaming immigration for her misfortunes. Rafa, however, acts as a true city dweller: he knows the power of the neighbourhood and activates its energy "by undoing the constraints of the urban apparatus" (Mayol 13). He teaches the Russian Forest Hills a lesson in communal compassion. By utilizing the dispatcher services of his brother's taxi business "Zigzag Success", Rafa mobilizes not only all the taxi drivers who work on the 108th street, but the entire population of the Forest Hills:

Something strange was happening in our marvelous neighbourhood. About three dozen cars with their lights on raced down our streets. Sirens wailed. [...] An hour later all the streets in Forest Hills were crawling with cars. [...] By nine, Baranov, Eselevsky, and Pertsovich joined the chase. Yevsei Rubinchik followed in his Oldsmobile, Pivovarov in his refrigerator truck, Arkady Lerner in his green Volvo, and Lemkus on a beat-up

Harley-Davidson, which the Baptist community had given him. Karavaev and Zaretsky came out on foot. (Dovlatov, *A Foreign Woman* 107)

Ironically, the runaway bird turns up on his own, with his tail half gone and his “militant Semitic profile” expressing “repentance and tenderness” (108). The neighbourhood, however, comes together in a singular effort to finally become a group, so as to prove that besides its physical and interpersonal dimensions, Dovlatov’s Forest Hills can also take on the symbolic aspect of an imaginary community. In its diasporic intimacy and “as a result of its everyday use”, Dovlatov’s émigré neighbourhood “can be considered as the progressive privatization of public space. It is a practical device whose function is to ensure a continuity between what is the most intimate (the private space of one’s longing) and what is the most unknown (the totality of the city or even, by extension, the rest of the world)” (Mayol 10).

Hence, Dovlatov’s literary rendering of the Russian diasporic neighbourhood can also function as a metaphor of the self, marked in exile by that same irresolvable squaring of the circle of émigré life. The two are interconnected in Dovlatov’s writing. His prose, always semi-autobiographical, featuring the I of the author in the slightly crooked mirror of the I of the narrator-protagonist, close in its cadence to poetry, cinematic in its structure, and somewhat nostalgic and self-ironic in its tone, constitutes the focus of Dovlatov’s artistic project. Dovlatov evokes on his pages the image and the spirit of “the folks from down home,” in which the spatial limitation is mirrored in the temporal limitations of the length of the event, and is simultaneously extended by the protagonist’s work of memory.

Conclusion: Dovlatov and his Literary Neighbourhoods

In his short stories and journalistic reportages written in America, Dovlatov taught his readers to accept the conditions of their new life; he encouraged them to humour, accept, and

possibly understand those neighbours and acquaintances who in emigration – often by sheer force of circumstances – become their close friends. This way Dovlatov showed his readers humility, the experience that Joseph Brodsky saw as the most important lesson in personal dignity that the process of emigration and adaptation can teach one (*The Condition* 25). As Brodsky wrote, Dovlatov “does not make drama out of what’s happening to him because he is not contented with drama, whether physical or psychological. [...] He is remarkable in his rejection of the tendency for tragedy endemic to Russian literature, as well as its consolatory drift. The tone of his prose is tongue-in-cheek in a reserved way, if one considers the desperation of the condition he describes” (*O Serezhe* 68). In Dovlatov’s tone of personal dignity, one can hear the voice of an exilic poet, someone who chose to live his life in America as if there had not been any rupture, as if nothing significant, i.e. forced emigration, had happened to him. On the pages of his journalistic reportages and short stories, Dovlatov attempted to domesticate the impersonal and impressive New York, and hence to bring it closer to the Russian émigré community whose life appears in his work slightly distorted and surreal. He mixes documentary modes of narration with devices of literary estrangement, such as humour and hyperbole^{xiii}. This stylistic phenomenon reflects Dovlatov’s vision of an émigré writer as one who constructs his own exilic or imaginary New York: a grotesque and nostalgic replica of the “Russian” corner of 108th Street and 64th Avenue in Forest Hills, Queens, New York.

REFERENCES

Aksyonov, Vasily. *The New Sweet Style*. Trans. Christopher Morris. New York: Random House, 1999. Print.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London and New York: Verso, 1991. Print.

Bondarenko, Vladimir. "Plebejskaya proza Sergeya Dovlatova". *Nash Sovremennik*. 12 (1997) 257-270. Print.

Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books, 2001. Print.

Brodsky, Joseph. "O Serezhe Dovlatove". *O Dovlatove. Stat'i, retsenzii, vospominaniya*. Ed. Elena Dovlatova. New York - Tver': Drugie berega, 2001. 64-72. Print.

---"The Condition We Call Exile". Joseph Brodsky, *On Grief and Reason: Essays*. New York : Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1995. 22-35. Print.

Dovlatov, Sergei. "Remeslo". *Sobranie sochineniy v 4 tomakh*. Tom 3. St.Petersburg: Azbuka-Klassika, 2006. 7-213. Print.

---. *Sergei Dovlatov. Rech' bez povoda... ili kolonki redaktora. Ranee neisdannye materialy*. Moscow: Mahaon, 2006. Print.

---. *The Suitcase*. Trans. Antonina W. Bouis. New York : Grove Weidenfeld, 1990. Print.

---. *A Foreign Woman*. Trans. Antonina W. Bouis. New York : Grove Weidenfeld, 1991. Print.

- Dovlatova, Elena. "Novy Amerikanets v novom svete" in Sergei Dovlatov *Rech' bez povoda... ili kolonki redaktora. Ranee neisdannye materialy*. Moscow: Mahaon, 2006, 28-34. Print.
- Etkind, Alexander. *Tolkovanie putesthestvii: Rossiya i Amerika v travelogakh i intertekstakh*. Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2001. Print.
- Galloway, David J. "Sergei Dovlatov's *Zona* as Metatextual Memoir". *Canadian Slavonic Papers*. 50.3/4 (2008). 325-340. Print.
- Genis, Alexander. *Dovlatov i okrestnosti*. Moscow: Vagrius, 2000. Print.
- Goffman, Erving. [*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*](#). Doubleday: University of Michigan Press, 1959. Print.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *Narcissistic Narrative : the Metafictional Paradox*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1980. Print.
- Mayol, Pierre. "The Neighbourhood". *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Eds. Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard, and Pierre Mayol. Trans. Timothy J. Tomasik. Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1998. 7-16. Print.
- Semenenko, Aleksei. "Ėstonskij period Sergeja Dovlatova: ot 'podensčiny' do mifotvorčestva," *Scando-Slavica*. 54.1 (2008) 32-49. Print.
- Sobolev, Olga. "Chekhov and Dovlatov: The Art of a Storyteller". *Essays in Poetics*. 31 (2006): 305-318. Print.
- Tabachnikova, Olga. " 'The World is Ugly and People are Sad'. On Chekhov Ethics and Aesthetics in the Works of Sergey Dovlatov". *Essays in Poetics*. 31 (2006) 319 -355. Print.
- Tsivian, T.V. "Veschi is chemodana Sergeya Dovlatova i byvshaya (?) sovetskaya model' mira". *Russian Literature*. XXXVII (1995), 647-658. Print.
- Vail, Pyotr. "Brodsky o Dovlatove". *Russian Literature*. 47 (2000). 383-387. Print.

Young, Jekaterina. *Sergei Dovlatov and His Narrative Masks*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2009. Print.

ENDNOTES:

ⁱ I would like to thank Professor J Douglas Clayton for initial feedback on this work, and Mr. Dmitri Priven for his help with translating original Russian quotations into English. I am using the BGN/PCGN romanization system for Russian names and titles. I use the spelling “Sergei Dovlatov” as it appears in Dovlatov’s English language books published during the author’s lifetime. The other Russian names have been altered unless specified otherwise.

ⁱⁱ For more on this subject consult my earlier publications: *Performing Exile - Performing Self: Drama, Theatre, Film*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.; "The American Landscape Reconsidered: On the Theatricality of Urban America in Russian Émigré Writings, with Special Focus on the Works of Vasily Aksyonov", *Performance, Exile and 'America'*, (Eds.) S. Jestrovic & Y. Meerzon, Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, 2009, 93-115.

ⁱⁱⁱ I use the concept of “everyday theatricality” as it was formulated by Erving Goffman in his 1959 seminal study on the performative aspects of peoples’ behavior in society, entitled [*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*](#) (University of Michigan Press).

^{iv} This novel was published in Russian under the title *Inostranka* in New York by Russica Publishers in 1986. It was translated into English in 1991 as *A Foreign Woman*.

^v Brodsky’s relationship with the Russian émigré literary scene is a topic that deserves a separate study. It is not a secret that for any Russian exilic writer living in the 1980-1990s America, Brodsky’s support or rejection could cost not only his/her English language publications but his/her entire literary career. That is why this essay is significant in reading anew Dovlatov’s prose.

^{vi} Written in 1988, in New York, *The Affiliate* was published for the first time in Russia, in the journal “Zvezda”, n. 10, 1989.

^{vii} His last stories, those that were to make his new book, focus on the even more enclave-like space of a Russian colony not far from New York.

^{viii} More on this subject see Semenenko, Aleksei “Éstonskij period Sergeja Dovlatova: ot ‘podenščiny’ do mifotvorčestva” *Scando-Slavica* 54.1 (2008) 32-49. This article provides a detailed analysis of Sergei Dovlatov’s Estonian period (1972-75) and examines his work for the newspapers *Molodež Ėstonii* and *Sovetskaja Ėstonija*. It discusses the similarity between Dovlatov’s journalistic and literary writing, the mechanisms of mythmaking and the use of such colloquial genres of storytelling as the anecdote, as his primary literary devices.

^{ix} “Prominent Russians: Sergei Dovlatov”. RUSSIAPEDIA (<http://russiapediia.rt.com/prominent-russians/literature/Sergei-dovlatov/>; February 5, 2013).

^x In Dovlatov’s writing, the title of a short story often suggests an enclosed communal space, such as that of the prisoners and their guards in *Zona: Zapiski nadziratelya/ The Zone: A Prison Camp Guard's Story* or the collective experience of the Soviet absurd in *Zapovednik/The Reserve*, the territory of the natural park of the Pushkin’s estate in the village Mikhailovskoye which has been turned into a monument of Russian cultural heritage and mythology.

^{xi} On meta-textual tendencies in Dovlatov’s prose see Galloway David J "Sergei Dovlatov's Zona as Metatextual Memoir" *Canadian Slavonic Papers* V. 50. N. ¼ (2008) 325-240.

^{xii} For more on this subject see Vladimir Bondarenko “Plebejskaya proza Sergeya Dovlatova” *Nash Sovremennik* 12 (1997) 257-270; Tabachnikova Olga “ ‘The World is Ugly and People are Sad’. On Chekhov Ethics and Aesthetics in the Works of Sergey Dovlatov” *Essays in Poetics* 31 (2006) 319-355; and Sobolev Olga “Chekhov and Dovlatov: The Art of a Storyteller” *Essays in Poetics* 31 (2006) 305-318.