Late and Post-Soviet Russian Literature

A Reader

Book 1

Perestroika and the Post-Soviet Period
Cultural Syllabus

Series Editor: Mark LIPOVETSKY (University of Colorado-Boulder)
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“He gave me as a gift,” “The two are in love and happy,” from *If There Is Something to Desire: One Hundred Poems* by Vera Pavlova, translated by Steven Seymour, translation copyright © 2010 by Steven Seymour. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc. Any third party use of this material, outside of this publication, is prohibited. Interested parties must apply directly to Random House, Inc. for permission.

Translations of Vladimir Sorokin’s “Petrushka” and an excerpt from Evgeny Grishkovets’ “How I Ate A Dog” with the permission of the Galina Dursthoft Literary Agency.
Late and Post-Soviet Russian Literature: A Reader documents the last several decades of cultural change in Russia. Technology, media, political and economic policy, the arts, and the day-to-day activities of ordinary citizens continually reshape Russia and its culture. Sometimes these changes are monumental, with human activity and ideas working together to influence many areas of cultural endeavor at once. More characteristically, people engage in divergent practices that communicate a range of ideas about individual identity, community, and nation. These ideas often differ substantially from each other, reflecting the needs and desires of many individuals and groups simultaneously.

Given the multiplicity of views expressed at any given moment, whose perspective should be considered representative of an era or a nation? Who is entitled to define the times or change them? These questions, which have engaged scholars in anthropology, history, philosophy, sociology, and other fields, have shaped the study of Russian literature as well. The events, ideas and works included in this book illustrate how these questions have influenced the study of Russian literature and why these questions remain relevant today.

When the question of who and what define a nation or an era is considered in terms of multiple events, ideas, and behaviors, rather than a single “who” or what,” art and our interpretations of it become powerful forces because of, not despite, their interaction with other fields of activity. By acknowledging the multiple
and simultaneous events taking place during any given era, we foreground their interaction. Literature, culture, and how we study them are constantly shaping, and being shaped by, their social and historical contexts. Cultural change is thus the model and the subject of our study.

One of the goals of this reader is to capture the multiple voices and meanings that have emerged in the last several decades of cultural change in Russia. Literary texts, essays, and scholarly writings are all represented. Many of the works in this volume appear in English translation for the first time, contributing new perspectives to the broader picture of cultural change. By integrating literary texts with the perspectives of politicians, journalists, and cultural critics, this volume presents views that range from individual needs, dreams, and agendas to efforts to understand those strivings from alternative perspectives. In this way it attempts to address the local and global meanings of the keywords that are used to describe cultural change.

In keeping with its intent to accommodate multiple viewpoints, *Late and Post-Soviet Russian Literature: A Reader* is modular in structure. These volumes may be used on their own, but they readily lend themselves to integration with other materials. This first volume, which treats Perestroika and the post-Soviet era, easily accommodates films (Timur Bekmambetov’s *Night Watch*), fiction (by Vladimir Sorokin, Victor Pelevin, Boris Akunin, Dmitrii Bykov, and others), performances (Evgeny Grishkovets’ *How I Ate a Dog*), performative readings (The Presnyakov Brothers’ *Terrorism*), and discussions of current events. Readers may pair the later volume (on the Thaw and Stagnation periods) with a history of Russia that chronicles events from the Thaw to the post-Soviet period in order to further explore the relationship between cultural change and broader developments in Russia’s economy, its practice of democracy, and its participation in global affairs.

The themes that organize each volume allow for investigation of a cross-section of perspectives on topics of global interest. By layering literary and scholarly texts of the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods within three thematically organized sections, the present volume encourages discussion of the interaction between
methodology, context, and content. Parallel with developments in recent scholarship, it challenges binary constructions of culture—such as Soviet vs. anti-Soviet, or Art vs. State—and emphasizes the range of values, discourses, and activities that organize the lives of ordinary citizens.

The tendency to encapsulate multiple events, ideas, and behaviors using a single keyword reveals how we “chronicle and capture cultural change by creating common categories of meaning.”¹ The period of de-Stalinization from the mid-1950s to mid-1960s is called “The Thaw”; it was followed by the years of “Stagnation,” when the reforms of the Thaw were revoked and Stalinist policies were partially rehabilitated. The short period from 1987 to 1991, which witnessed the collapse of the Soviet ideological and political order, was named perestroika. The term perestroika refers to the policy of restructuring Soviet political, cultural, and economic systems that was instituted in the 1980s. The term literally means “restructuring,” but it also evokes a variety of events, experiences, and ideas, ranging from Ronald Reagan’s 1987 exhortation to Mikhail Gorbachev to “tear down this wall” to the risky, but real, possibility for Soviet citizens to publicly assert new social identities. As readers, we may be attracted to keywords for their tendency to “sum up” the spirit of an era. The broadly encompassing meaning that the term perestroika holds for a global audience, however, coexists with the diverse and individual meanings that it held for those who lived through it. Keywords “proliferate in usages and meanings” during times of cultural change, so that a single term encompasses many individual “strategies of action.”²

The new keywords introduced during the mid- and late-1980s—perestroika and glasnost’ (openness)—meant many different things to Russians during this time of instability. Perestroika initiated nothing less than a revolution in the cultural sphere.


² Ibid., 528.
Together with the policy of *glasnost’*, Perestroika empowered public figures to take up the unfinished business of de-Stalinization that had begun during the Thaw period, as well as analyze the failures of communist ideology. They exposed the worst “achievements” of the Party, such as the rampant corruption, the cruel methods used to torture political prisoners, and other abuses that affected the health and quality of life of ordinary citizens, and did so in public forums where they could be discussed openly for the first time. Unfortunately, this process did not lead to the persecution of any former Soviet officials. In the absence of this crucial step, and with the devastating economic collapse of the early 1990s, many began to associate economic hardship and corruption with Perestroika. In turn, many also began to nostalgically idealize the Soviet past. This nostalgia continued into the 2000s, even after living standards for the Russian population had significantly improved. Capitalizing on the increased demand for oil and gas worldwide, some cultural figures during the first presidency of Vladimir Putin worked to create associations in the popular imagination between the increased role Russia played in the world market in the 2000s and the dominance of the Soviet Union in world politics in decades past.

In literature, *perestroika* and *glasnost’* meant first and foremost a steady relaxation of censorship laws and the gradual reinstatement of a great number of literary works banned during the Soviet period. Among these works were canonical texts by Russian modernists: Mikhail Bulgakov’s novellas, Anna Akhmatova’s *Requiem*, Evgeny Zamyatin’s *We*, Osip Mandelshtam’s late poems, Andrei Platonov’s novels and other works, Boris Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago*, works for adults by Daniil Kharms and other absurdist writers, the entire oeuvres of Vladimir Nabokov, Nikolai Gumilev, Mikhail Kuzmin, and many others. Also reinstated were realist works from the 60s-80s, such as works by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Vasily Grossman’s *Life and Fate* and *Everything Flows*, and Anatoly Rybakov’s *Children of the Arbat*, which became an international bestseller. The works of underground and émigré writers from the Stagnation period, including Venedikt Erofeev, Evgeny Kharitonov, Dmitrii Prigov, and Andrei Sinyavsky, were now published for the first time. As a result, a unique cultural situation emerged in which
multiple literary voices and movements were entering the Russian literary tradition all at once. For the first time, the history of Russian literature could include the Silver Age (1900-1910s), the modernists of the 1920s, and Soviet underground and émigré literature from the 1920s through the 1980s.

This rapid expansion of the literary field was not an easy process. Almost every publication in the Perestroika years had to overcome resistance from censors and Party control. The reshaping of the literary canon, coupled with the reevaluation of the Soviet experience, generated heated debates among contributors to literary journals. The discussions revealed irreconcilable contradictions between liberal and nationalist approaches to Russian history and culture. Both groups were critical of the Soviet regime, yet the former interpreted the Soviet past as a brutal archaizing movement that did not allow for the inclusion of Russian culture in the cultural history of modern Western civilization while the latter blamed communism for aggressive methods of modernization, resulting, they claimed, in the invasion of foreign ideas (Marxism) and anti-national forces (Jews) into the Russian national tradition. While these debates continued, members of the artistic community became divided in their attitudes toward literary experimentation and new developments in postmodern writing. Some critics and writers perceived these new trends in literature—represented by Liudmilla Petrushevskaya, Victor Pelevin, and Vladimir Sorokin—as immoral and detrimental to the development of Russian literature. Others accused realist writers of being aesthetically conservative and, in many ways, reproducing the banalities of Socialist Realism (except that in these new realist works, the Soviet past was critiqued, rather than valorized).

It is a curious fact that the period of cultural history following Perestroika, stretching from the early 1990s to the present, has not yet been identified with a unifying keyword. The “post-Soviet” era remains dependent on the Soviet past, tethered to it by the hyphen and prefix “post.” Perestroika effectively ended when the seventy-year long reign of the Communist Party came to a close, but in the post-Soviet era that has followed, links to the Soviet past in politics
and culture remain relevant, even after the death of its ideology and economic system. The modular structure of the present volume accommodates this feature of late and post-Soviet literature and culture: amid cultural phenomena that are shared between today’s global and commodity cultures, for example, what seems to be novel in the Russian context often turns out to be historic.

Current debates about new directions for Russian literature reflect new cultural conflicts and divisions. The growth of popular literature and the marginalization of so-called “serious” literature, the financial troubles that threaten the existence of long-established literary journals, the emergence of venues for distributing literary texts online, and the general commoditization of the cultural sphere have contributed to new paradigms for the development of post-Soviet literature. At the same time, new ideological pressures emerged when television stations, film studios, newspapers, and other media were bought by the government or came under the control of figures with close ties to the Kremlin. The post-Soviet period presents at once the emergence of new literary voices and the resounding echoes of Soviet-era ideologies.

How postmodern subjectivity interacts with gender and sexuality is the focus of the section “Rethinking Identities.” By the 1990s new categories of writing, such as “women’s prose” and “gay literature,” had emerged in Russia, but these categories assumed unified communities of writers and readers when in fact the authors’ writing practices reveal highly individual approaches to constructing gender and sexuality. Liudmilla Petrushevskaya’s short stories, prose by Linor Goralik, and poems by Vera Pavlova do not present a unified female subject. Moreover, their work presents a challenge to the notion of a stable identity. Luce Irigaray’s description of feminine language—“‘she’ goes off in all directions … in which ‘he’ is unable to discern the coherence of any meaning”—helps to illustrate the degree to which rigid models of identity were unsuited to writings about women, and also exposes the fact that

distinctly masculine uses of language had dominated the project of redefining the nation, its people, and its mythologies. In his essay “Invitation to a Beheading,” Slava Mogutin contrasts his dynamic writing with the rigidity of the law. Told by a state prosecutor that “you might be a good writer but the content of most of your articles is criminal,” Mogutin determines that homophobia is so thoroughly integrated into the imagined identity of the nation that his work, despite its inclusive aims, becomes interpolated into binary constructions in which one is either heterosexual and normative, or homosexual and criminal. As new models for the expression of identity emerged in the 2000s, so did the reaffirmation of stereotyped gender roles; as Oksana Robski proposes, consumerism and the subculture of *glamour* came to provide a viable and attainable, if wholly commoditized, path to social freedom. 

The section “‘Little Terror’ and Traumatic Writing” presents approaches to defining the self through violent encounters with the past and various Others. Evgeny Grishkovets’ play *How I Ate a Dog* draws the spectator into the author-narrator’s efforts to reconstruct his identity as he confronts the numerous iterations of his self which emerged from the trauma he experienced while serving in the Russian Navy. In the Presnyakov Brothers’ play *Terrorism*, the threat of a possible terrorist attack generates nervousness and boredom, a combination that destroys the play’s characters. Lev Rubinshtein’s essay “Smoke of the Fatherland” reveals the violence concealed inside everyday discourses of nostalgia, while Elena Fanailova’s “Lena and People” and poems by Andrei Rodionov lay bare the idea that post-Soviet society communicates through violence. Essays by Serguei Oushakine and Alexander Etkind explore possible reasons for the prevalence of violence in post-Soviet society and discourse.

The final section, “Writing Politics,” explores popular writings by authors whose works appear at the intersection of politics, media, and literature. Beginning with the influential postmodern writers Vladimir Sorokin and Victor Pelevin—both of them acutely aware of literature’s ability to appropriate and challenge dominant cultural discourses—then introducing the nostalgic, violent, nationalist ideologies of Aleksandr Prokhanov and Eduard Limonov, this section presents writers’ diverse approaches to
challenging reigning political ideologies, while emphasizing the need for reading practices that see literature as more than a mere market commodity or political propaganda. The participation of the popular writers Dmitrii Bykov and Boris Akunin in the anti-Putin protest movements that began in 2011, and their extensive use of social media and websites to circulate their work, have brought new readers to their already sizable audiences. Bykov’s satire encourages a critical perspective on post-Soviet politics, while Akunin’s detective novels criticize nostalgia for the past and encourage engaging with institutional problems of the present. The film director Timur Bekmambetov takes a different approach to the problems of the present. His *Night Watch* series, based on the novels by Sergei Lukyanenko, presents a world in which “everything is clear, the beginning and the end, good and bad,” so that “terrifying contradictions will be resolved in one way or another.”

Aleksandr Tarasov argues that “if *The Matrix* tells the viewer to ‘wake up and revolt,’ the *Night Watch* series tells him to ‘sit quietly and obey the regime.’” The popularity of all the works presented in this section, their range of views and widespread distribution, require us as readers to make responsible choices about how to engage with them.

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Part 1

Rethinking Identities
Part 1. Rethinking Identities

One of the goals of writing and reading literature is to represent and understand perspectives that differ from our own. Writing can create unique, self-ascribed literary identities: some of the works presented in this volume proclaim the emergence of new attitudes toward self-identity that confront previous writing practices and demand to be read on their own terms. In addition to introducing new identities and affiliations, the performance of identity in literary texts can allow communities that traditionally have been marginalized to assert their distinctiveness. These challenges to dominant literary discourses can lead to the questioning of existing value systems in the study of literature.

In addition to empowering new voices, however, writing and reading practices can lead to the creation of stereotyped or otherwise problematic identities that become imposed upon the writing subject. For example, not all Russian women writers who published their work during the late 1980s and early 1990s appreciated the label “women’s prose” that was applied to their writing. Moreover, using binary constructs such as “dominant” and “secondary,” or “center” and “periphery,” as organizing principles is problematic. As debates about identity politics have demonstrated, if we agree that there is a center, then all of the diverse identities surrounding that center become “peripheral.” This can lead to an unsystematic consolidation of distinct identities based on gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation, despite the fact that these categories clearly are not analogous to one another. As David Palumbo-Liu has observed, grouping “marginalized” people together constitutes
a form of typecasting in which individual identities become lost. The discussion of “racial and other minorities and women is geared to a set of historical narratives about ‘them’ precisely as groups, rather than individuals.”¹ This chapter considers some of the new developments associated with the exploration of identity in Russian literature, and encourages discussion of some of the problematic ways these identities have been characterized.

Helena Goscilo observes that in the Russian literary tradition, with the emergence of glasnost’ in the late 1980s editors and the public began to take notice of women writers. The phenomenon of “women’s prose” was heavily debated, but the term, as Goscilo notes, did not refer exclusively to literature by or for women. Female writers and critics alike defined “women’s prose” as writing preoccupied with “emotional life” and characterized by “triviality, coquettishness, and empty decoration.” If male writers could retreat from politics to produce writing with “serious implications,” women writers were perceived as writing about a petty world of domestic concerns. It comes as no surprise, then, that women writers often rejected the label of “women’s prose,” with the writer Tatyana Tolstaya arguing that “bad” male writers could also produce “women’s prose” when they tended toward the superficial. Despite Tolstaya’s claim, the practice of labeling literature according to the biological sex of the author continues. The literary critic and writer Olga Slavnikova, when asked about the enduring popularity and relevance of women’s writing, argued that women are “genetically programmed” to be indispensable: “In extreme situations, when men are obliged to die, women are obliged to survive.” In 2012 the provocative writer Zakhar Prilepin published 14, a collection of women’s writing intended as a follow-up to 10, a collection of writing by men published in the previous year. In a press statement ostensibly intended to publicize 14, Prilepin characterized prose by men as “full of a sensation of gloom and the burdens of life,” while “women’s prose, in some indefinable way, escapes from this

feeling.” “But to be blunt,” he continued, “judging from the quality of the texts, men’s prose is better.”

The question of how to interpret such characterizations of women and their writing is complex. Tolstaya’s negative characterization of “women’s prose” argues for the separation of gender and biology. Her dismissal of “women’s prose” as a mode of writing suggests that for her, themes and styles conventionally associated with women’s writing are not the inherent product of women’s genes or chromosomes, but are simply characteristic of bad writing. However much Tolstaya’s claim that “talent is talent” expresses a healthy suspicion of the notion of genetically determined identities, it also refuses to acknowledge the underlying biases that associate “bad” writing with women.

Undoubtedly, the greatest of contemporary Russian women-writers is Liudmilla Petrushevskaya, whose novel *Time Night* (1992) we strongly recommend for courses on contemporary Russian literature and who is represented in this volume by three short stories written in the 1990s. Petrushevskaya’s prose (and dramas) are usually treated as examples of “chernukha” (a dark and gloomy hyper-naturalism that became popular in the years of Perestroika). However, her contribution to Russian literature and her lasting impact on future generations of writers (e.g., the New Drama movement of the 2000s) can be better seen in the context of Russian modernism. It is not only Petrushevskaya’s heroines who frequently interpret their own lives in recurrent dialogue with the prominent cultural figures of the past (most illuminating is the example of Anna Andrianovna, the protagonist and unreliable narrator of *Time Night* who sees herself as the reincarnation of Anna Akhmatova). Petrushevskaya herself typically combines painstaking attention to the details of everyday life with concealed (or obvious) references to esteemed literary and cultural models. Such references are easily detectable in the stories included in this volume: “Hygiene” replays both the Apocalypses and the Hollywood-inspired story of global

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catastrophe; “New Family Robinsons” refers to Defoe’s classic, and “The Fountain House” not accidentally contains in its title the address of Akhmatova’s residence. By this means Petrushevskaya transforms the scene of everyday life, permeated by everyday violence—mainly against and between those closest to each other—and the mundane struggle for power and domination between and within genders, generations, families, and the like into the site where “eternal values” are rigorously tested and discarded. The woman standing in the center of these global catastrophes concentrated into the space of a two-room apartment, hospital ward, remote hut, or similar small space, thus literally appears to be the one who carries the burden of responsibility for the stability and future destiny of the entire world: her prosaic, meager decisions and seemingly trivial choices immediately attain the importance of mythological actions, eventually affecting everyone and everything around her.

The poet, essayist, and prose-writer Linor Goralik directly continues Petrushevskaya’s line of inquiry in her cycle “They Talk.” Each snapshot of modern everyday speech included in this cycle presents a climax of a mundane tragedy (or tragicomedy) that invites the reader to restore the missing pieces of the puzzle in his/her imagination. The very design of these intentionally fragmentary stories, in which climactic conclusions are excluded from the text but can be imagined by the reader, tangibly outlines the unifying context shared by the characters and the reader. This context is truly historical as it implies shared dramas, yet at the same time it consists predominantly of the mundane and “a-historical.” Goralik inherits this understanding of social history as the product of everyday relationships between ordinary men and women from Petrushevskaya.

Much like Petrushevskaya’s heroines, the poet Vera Pavlova, also included in this chapter, has stated: “I am not a poet, I am a woman in love.” Her statement, in its rejection of the gender-neutral “poet” and embrace of the gender-marked “woman,” is consistent with the accessibility and sensuality of her creative work. Pavlova has noted that she began writing poems in a maternity ward, immediately after the birth of her first child (“Poetry came at the same time the
Part 1. Rethinking Identities

milk did”), and she has not resisted interpretations of her work that lean toward the biological (like DNA, “an ideal poem ... contains all the information about its author”). The power of her gendered poetic world has resonated with readers in Russia and abroad. Reviews of her poetry, however, reveal that some critics read her work as an affirmation of existing distributions of power. The critic Boris Paramonov, for example, likens her work to a “child’s album,” and the experience of reading her poems to the pleasure of being seduced by a “talented imp”: “Imagine Lolita twisting Humbert around her finger ... and at the same time writing excellent poems.”

If we draw from the readings included in this chapter, we can make the case that writings by women are so diverse that any attempt to generalize about “women’s writing” should be met with well-deserved suspicion. As we have seen, however, this has not stopped critics and writers themselves from generalizing about women’s writing in troubling ways. To enter into this debate is to confront a question that remains central to discussions of identity politics: individual identity and agency are important to maintain, but have we emphasized individuality to such a degree that it has become impossible to mobilize against essentializing discourses? Challenging the very notion of a center is one way that women writers have responded to this dilemma. This is not to say that Russian women writers have united against oppression by embracing an anti-patriarchal politics. Rather, they have circumnavigated, each in her own way, the institutional structures that support essentializing evaluations of their work. Pavlova and Goralik have experienced emigration (Pavlova to the United States, Goralik to Russia after periods in Ukraine and Israel) and expanded the linguistic, cultural, and national parameters that might be used to evaluate their


writings. All three of the women under discussion have worked in diverse media: Goralik is a columnist, visual artist, translator, and author of comic books; Petrushevskaya performs as a cabaret singer; Pavlova has authored libretti, collaborated with visual artists, and explored new media as instruments for distributing poetry. They have intervened in the processes and institutions responsible for perpetuating assumptions about their work. The same cannot be said for all who read them.

Slava Mogutin is explicit about challenging stereotypes with his art and life. “I’ve always enjoyed breaking taboos and stereotypes,” he writes. “I think that’s what real art is about, and I’ve paid my dues for expressing myself in the most radical and honest way.” In 1994 he attempted to register for the first same-sex marriage in Russia with his American partner, the artist Robert Filippini. For this, his writings, and his activism, he was compelled to leave Russia in 1995. Mogutin’s art, inseparable from his life, aims to trouble conventional assumptions about identity and its formation. His poetic alter ego performs a kind of literary coming out in “My First Man” with the words “I have never written or reminisced about it,” but then subverts any notion of a unique identity with the line, “I entered his life and unceremoniously appropriated it.” If the poem is about discovering oneself, it also acknowledges the role that appropriating another’s identity might have in shaping the self. By challenging the notion that the self can only be defined in opposition to an Other, the poem rejects the binary hierarchies that serve to reinforce difference and oppression.

The so-called literature of glamour, epitomized by Oksana Robski, offered another, more conformist, approach to re-shaping one’s personal and social identity. About the lifestyle of the moneyed class but addressed to a broader audience, this prose not only promotes self-expression through the accumulation of material signs of prestige and power, it also presents consumerism as a path to individual and social freedom. The narrative fails to acknowledge the contradiction present in the fact that buying consumer goods makes the protagonist and her story subject to the whims of fashion and the market. Nonetheless, it is a model for self-fashioning that quickly moved into the cultural mainstream of the Putin era, mainly
Part 1. Rethinking Identities

through television shows and advertisements, magazines, and the highly mediated lives of celebrities. Robski herself became such a celebrity, as did Kseniia Sobchak, a former socialite who went on to become an organizer in the anti-Putin protest movement. Like many public personalities whose fame is to some degree dependent upon their ability to showcase consumer goods (whether in magazine photos, advertisements, or reality television shows, at sponsored events, or on the red carpet) Robski’s popularity suggests, despite multiple contradictions, that participation in consumer culture and individual freedom are compatible ideals.

The various strategies of self-determination exhibited by the artists found in this chapter include ignoring, confronting, and even encouraging the expression of preconceived categories of identity. In this, they reveal the limitations of existing institutions for the distribution and evaluation of literature. These strategies, along with the writers’ extensive work in other media, also confront the idea that artists can only freely express their ideas within specially designated venues, where women’s writing, queer literature, or any other such cultural category that is set up in opposition to a central “norm” can be safely explored. The editors of this anthology considered whether concentrating these writers in a single section constituted the creation of exactly this sort of venue and risked contributing to the reductive reasoning that we can appreciate art only to the degree that it challenges existing conventions. Ultimately, it became clear that to consistently leave the work of dismantling reductive categories to the artists themselves was to absolve readers of literature of any responsibility in the process. We hope that the readers of this volume will work toward reformulating some of the problematic terms that have been used to evaluate their writing.
Excerpts from *Dehexing Sex*
by Helena Goscilo

Perestroika or Domostroika?
The Construction of Womanhood under Glasnost

To see ourselves as others see us!
—Robert Burns, “To a Louse”

So many representations, so many appearances separate us from each other.
—Luce Irigaray, “When Our Lips Speak Together”

Messages from Russia:

A woman should primarily love, care [for], and cherish her own family.²

Women by nature are destined to be weaker…. Men are women’s major game…. A woman without a family is without a master, like a stray animal.³

Women in the West [who] always ask why so few women in our country hold government and other leading posts don’t imagine how many women tyrants have made themselves comfortable in these posts and are tormenting both sexes. Female bureaucracy is more horrible than its male counterpart—a male bureaucrat can still be moved to pity by one’s belonging to the fair sex [sic], whereas a female bureaucrat can’t be moved by anything. I feel sorry for our embittered women, running wild and tortured by the burdens of life. But I pity the men just as much. In the West it is now fashionable to fight men to the death. Nothing has been heard about this yet in our country. Thank God. If women enter

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Western women feminists have teeth like sharks.\(^5\)

Clearly, from Russia without love.

These opinionated pronouncements emanate not from men but rather from educated Russian women of the intelligentsia, whose reflex response to the very terms *woman writer* and *feminist* recalls Dracula recoiling from a cross. That seismic reaction symptomatizes the fundamental discrepancies in assumptions and orientation between Russian female authors and the majority of their Western readers. The two operate by different, often antithetical, codes. Witness the case of Natal’ia Baranskaia, whose story “Nedelia kak nedelia” (*A Week Like Any Other*, 1969) impressed Western feminists by its purported expose of patriarchal oppression. Some have even dubbed this piece, which chronicles the dehumanizing effects of women’s double duty on the professional and home fronts, the angriest feminist cry to emerge from the Soviet Union.\(^6\) Yet during an interview with me in spring 1988, Baranskaia (not having read Roland Barthes and learned of the author’s death) asserted that her story, far from exposing the heroine’s husband as a chauvinistic exploiter, actually portrays the power of love. Although she intended to document the hardships endured by today’s women in Russia, Baranskaia protested, she deemed it unjust to hold men responsible for conditions that she imputes exclusively if hazily to the “system.” What Baranskaia *did* criticize was Western women’s efforts to displace men from their “natural” position of superiority, and the “unfeminine” tactics deployed in that campaign. Why, for instance, did the British publishing house adopt the name Virago —


which Baranskaia understood only in its secondary meaning, as a termagant, a loud, overbearing woman, and not in its primary dictionary definition, as a woman of great stature, strength, and courage? As Baranskaia’s indignant bafflement evidences, a Western audience reads according to a set of presuppositions and assimilated imperatives that Russians manifestly do not embrace—indeed, even find alien and repugnant.

As a result of the radical self-assessment by the educated segment of society in the West during the last two decades, feminism has fundamentally transformed people’s ways of perceiving and thinking about women. That transformation in turn has influenced the norms guiding the production and consumption of culture. For the reconceived image of woman (womanhood “with a human face”) has infiltrated not only the process of reading texts, watching films, viewing paintings, and decoding advertisements and commercials, but also the very environment that incubates these artistic and media forms. In the United States, Germany, France, and England, where awareness of gender problems inflects the sensibilities of readers, viewers, writers, and directors alike, a more or less shared set of cultural experiences allies authorial choices with audience expectations and reactions. Recent fiction and film in the United States and England, for example, draws on a cultural context informed by the issues, if not necessarily the values, of the twenty-year-old feminist movement. Examples range from Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale (1985), Erica Jong’s series of unzipped novels, and Fay Weldon’s mordant shockers to Alison Lurie’s The Truth About Lorin Jones, David Lodge’s best-seller Nice Work (1989), such films as Working Girl (1988), The Life and Loves of a She-Devil (1989), and Switch (1991), and various media messages (e.g., the commercial for Virginia Slims claiming “You’ve come a long way, baby!”) that subliminally or overtly promote a more self-conscious version of gender.

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7 Interview with Natal’ia Baranskaia in Moscow, conducted and taped by Helena Goscilo (13 May 1988).

8 Written in the early 1990s.
Recent Soviet films and prose authored by men or women lack a comparable context and, consequently, the fund of referents available to Western artists and their public. Since discourses and artistic codes and conventions partially derive from specific sociocultural circumstances, it is critical to contextualize contemporary Russian inscriptions of womanhood in order to grasp what underlies the failure at communication, let alone agreement. Accordingly, my discussion offers a selective commentary that falls into four unequal segments: (1) a summary of institutionalized concepts of gender in Soviet society, with a glance at the status of feminism within that structure; (2) an assessment of the impact glasnost has had on the Soviet concept of womanhood; (3) an examination of how orthodox Soviet views are reflected, challenged, or subverted in late Soviet women’s writing in general; and (4) a necessarily brief, closer look at three women writers whose heterodox authorial practices discomfited Soviet readers in the late 1980s and provoked heated debate.9

Context

Formally, Russian women in the Soviet Union enjoyed rights that their Western counterparts might have envied. In the classic Marxist conviction that women’s emancipation depends upon their integration into productive labor, the egalitarian Soviet Constitution guaranteed women not only full political and civil rights but also access to most trades and professions, in addition to fixed equal pay for equal work.10 Because an ongoing need for an expanding labor force intensified the government’s efforts to retain female workers, until de-Sovietization ninety percent of Russian women were


employed (the highest percentage in the world)\textsuperscript{11} in areas ranging from engineering and law to sanitation and construction. Women, in fact, accounted for 52 percent of the labor force.\textsuperscript{12} Moreover, thanks to the legislation written in 1988 by the Soviet Women’s Committee under Zoia Pukhova, the state vouchsafed women two years of maternity leave and job security for three years after parturition. It also provided free public child care facilities and legal abortion and divorce for a nominal fee.

As no less a figure than the once omniscient and now roundly discredited Lenin declared, however, “Equality before the law does not automatically guarantee equality in everyday life.” The disjunction between the paper rights conferred upon women and the bleak reality of their empirical experience dimmed the glow of the pseudo-utopian picture implied by the Constitution. Ever since the Stalin period, when the official culture joined women’s economic role to the glorification of maternity and the reaffirmation of women’s traditional familial duties, the Soviet state and the society exhorted women to be both producers and reproducers. As a consequence, they bore the double load of full-time work and all domestic responsibilities. One might say that Russian women were in labor wherever they turned. Men’s unwillingness to assume any household or parental obligations left the woman alone to cope with rearing children and cleaning house, cooking, laundering, shopping, etc. Over a million women suffered the stress of single parenting while holding down regular jobs.\textsuperscript{13} In a country in which perpetual shortages of goods, shoddy products, lack of appliances, poor medicine, deplorable services, and inefficiently run institutions made everyday life a trial, women with a family had insufficient time and energy for career advancement. Hence, in spheres considered

\textsuperscript{11} Figures vary, depending on source. In 1990 one of the most frequently cited statistics was 86 percent of women were working outside of home. Broadcast by Ted Koppel, “Sex in the Soviet Union” (January 1991).

\textsuperscript{12} See also Helena Goscilo, “Russian Women Under \textit{Glasnost},” \textit{New Outlook} 2, no. 4 (Fall 1991): 45-50.

suitable for women, they disproportionately clustered on the lowest rungs of the personnel hierarchy, even though employers readily acknowledged that female employees were more reliable and quick (not to mention sober) than their male counterparts. According to a freelance journalist in Moscow, few women harbored ambitions to assume top positions, knowing that prestigious establishments, especially, strictly observed a quota system, based on the unofficial but widespread formula: “We already have one Jew, two non-Party members, and two women.”

The writer Tatyana Tolstaya and others deplored the so-called recent [i.e., during late Soviet period — eds.] feminization of Russian society pointed out that women account for over eighty percent of the country’s doctors and teachers, but she overlooked the low prestige of these specializations in the USSR as well as their links with nurturing and child raising. Women constituted ninety percent of pediatricians, but only six percent of surgeons; in the late 1970s the powerful USSR Academy of Sciences boasted 14 women among its 749 members (Lapidus 188); in 1986 men made up over 84 percent of the influential Soviet Writers’ Union. Of the approximately 15 percent of women, none held key executive posts. Editorial boards typically consisted of seven to eight men, with one token woman, at best.

Under Soviet rule, most Russian women concurred that they felt crushed by emancipation. They complained that the average woman underwent twelve abortions during her lifetime (abortion was the chief mode of contraception, and some women had as many as thirty), and that she received no help from her husband with the children or the housework yet was forced to work for economic reasons, often under hazardous physical conditions, and so lived in a state of unrelieved tension and exhaustion.

14 Index on Censorship 3 (1989).

15 Here, as elsewhere, discrepancies in statistics reflect different sources. The variously reported averages seem to range from twelve to fifteen. […]

16 Nearly half of Russia’s female workers engaged in unskilled labor. In agriculture, manual labor remained women’s province, for machinery tended overwhelmingly to be entrusted to men.
women writers and sundry commentators repeatedly lamented the arduousness of women’s lives in the USSR, few appeared to make connections between official policy and women’s situation. In that connection an article by the American journalist Robert Scheer entitled “Where Is She, the New Soviet Woman?” expressed outraged bemusement:

Many of my Soviet male friends tended to be primitive oppressors as regards women, viewing them as a mixture of beast of burden and sexual toy. More depressing, they seemed to find some moral confirmation in the laws of nature for clearly supremist and exploitative views that would be abhorrent [to them] in any other arena of life. It seems never to have occurred to anyone here that if women had political power in the Soviet Union one result might have been the greater efficiency of shopping and a vast increase in the production of labor-saving devices for the household. Why has there been such scant improvement, after decades of socialist organization, in the objective conditions that women now find themselves in? The answer is that women in the Soviet Union lack political power even to the degree experienced in the capitalist West. The disenfranchisement of more than half of the population is no minor discrepancy in a society struggling with questions of freedom and representation.17

Gender disposition in the Soviet Union corroborated Simone de Beauvoir’s aperçu that men have found more complicity in women than the oppressor usually finds in the oppressed. Russian women internalized official propaganda and the traditional male system of prerogatives so thoroughly that they themselves propagated the very inequities that marginalized them. Even among the tiny minority of self-proclaimed feminists, some believed that a woman completely realized her essence and her destiny only through motherhood; that domestic tasks were “unfitting for a man”; that nature endowed women with the traits of nurturing, softness,
Helena Goscilo. Perestroika or Domostroika?

In short, they essentialized, by mistaking social constructs (femininity) for biology (femaleness). […] In the springs of 1988 and 1990, while conducting interviews in Moscow and Leningrad with some thirty female authors encompassing the full spectrum of background, age, and worldview, I repeatedly (and often in unexpected contexts) encountered the refrain, “A woman shouldn’t lose her femininity.” When asked what constitutes femininity, most cited gentleness, sensitivity, maternal instincts, and the capacity to love. When I suggested that these were not necessarily inborn traits, virtually all of the women resisted the very concept of a constructed identity. 19 Ironically, in a country ruled by ideological impositions, women did not grasp the politics of gender formation. In irrationally hoping that general improvements in living conditions would ease their lot, without agitating for a fundamental reassessment of entrenched female-male roles, Russian women unwittingly reinforced gender stereotypes. Whereas Western women sought a “room of their own,” years of officially promoted self-sacrifice habituated Russian women to “burdens of their own”—which they seemed reluctant to jettison on the grounds (or, rather, quicksands) of a biologically ordained self.

Russian women frankly admitted that the majority of Russian men scorned domestic tasks as an inherently female province, proved often unsatisfying sexual partners (given to “premature congratulations”), and were conspicuously absent parents (paternity had virtually disappeared from the vocabulary); they likewise recognized that conditions of employment invariably favored men, even though they were less reliable workers. Yet, when exhorted to seek redress through political action on their own behalf, Russian women not only shied away from feminism but violently denounced it. As Nina Beliaeva, a feminist lawyer, observed, the


19 […] For instance, the cult of maternity, despite its complicity with official demographic campaigns and the heritage of Stalinist coercion, persists as an ineradicable fixture of Russian thinking.
very word “smacks of the indecent, the shameful,” and for many was associated with masculinization or lesbianism (universally despised). Feminism conjured up the specter of “bright, slovenly, raucous women with blunt gestures, bugging eyes, and cigarette smoke, in a small but vociferous procession of women declaring war on the opposite sex.” Indeed, even otherwise enlightened Russians conceived of feminists as vengeful, mustached hags or harridans thirsting for the wholesale metaphorical (if not literal) castration of men, intent on crushing or replacing them so as to gratify their lust for power, compensate for their self-doubts, or enact their lesbian inclinations.

In addition to equating feminism with the masculinization or perversion of women, Soviets also stigmatized it on two counts: for decades it had been discredited as springing from bourgeois values. Many Westerners puzzled by Soviets’ uncompromising rejection of it failed to realize that Russians entertained a reduced and uninformed, or historically overmarked, concept of feminism. [...] Second, given its manifestly political nature, feminism during Glasnost had little chance of taking root in a country that had suddenly lost faith in any political engagement as an activity. Many women, in fact, maintained that they preferred to leave the “dirty business” of politics to men, confining their energies to the more “authentic” spheres of family and intimate circles of friends, in a replay of Western Victorian scenarios.

**Glasnost**

Glasnost witnessed a growing receptivity on Soviets’ part to Western tendencies and a readiness to assimilate what earlier would have been dismissed as quintessentially Western phenomena incompatible with Soviet principles. Indeed, one might reasonably

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20 The few lesbians whom I have encountered in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, plus several gay men, would represent exceptions. [...]  
attribute to Western influence the influx in the then USSR of what in the West could signal a burgeoning feminist awareness: (1) surveys of popular responses to questionnaires designed to highlight possible gender differences, such as the opinion polls reflecting attitudes to sexual practices, marriage, and divorce;\textsuperscript{22} (2) articles in various publications devoted to women’s issues and exhorting increased attention to them;\textsuperscript{23} (3) the opening in 1990 of a Center for Gender Studies within the Academy of Sciences […]; (4) the formation of a separate women’s section within the Writers’ Union, headed in Moscow by Larisa Vasil’eva […]; (5) a sudden spate of publications of neglected women’s literature from the past (Ekaterina Dashkova, Nadezhda Durova, Karolina Pavlova, Evdokiia Rostopchina) and various collections of contemporary women’s prose that materialized in the late 1980s and early 1990s (*Zhenskaia logika, Chisten’kaia zhizn’, Ne pomniashchaia zla, Novye Amazonki […]*); (6) the emergence (and prominence in the media) of individuals who committed themselves, despite formidable odds, to the dissemination of feminist ideas, for example, the independent Leningrader Olga Lipovskaia, editor of *Zhenskoe chtenie*, founded in 1988 and consisting of articles, original poetry and prose by women, and translations of texts pertinent to characteristic feminist concerns; and (7) the proliferation of women’s organizations, including Preobrazhenie, LOTOS (an acronym for the League for Society’s Liberation from Stereotypes), the club SAFO, a network of women’s councils […], and an international women’s press club called 33 Women and One Man, the man being the rotating elected “hero of the month,” ironically dubbed the “Knight of Perestroika,” whom the thirty-three women interviewed collectively in an effort to enhance mutual understanding between the sexes.

Parenthetically, it is worth noting that the reaction of a prominent male political analyst on Soviet TV to the formation of

\textsuperscript{22} Many of these were published in *Moscow News*, a flagship of glasnost.

\textsuperscript{23} In 1988 *Moscow News* introduced a regular column entitled “She and We,” dealing specifically with women’s issues and featuring diverse items ranging from letter and opinion polls to editorials and “think pieces.”
this club drove home the dire need for consciousness-raising in Soviet society. According to his “professional” judgment, women could be reporters and good interviewers, “especially if they are young and attractive, but never political commentators or serious analysts because the latter are at variance not only with tradition, but with the very makeup of women, their physiology \[sic\] and way of thinking.”

In a similar vein a lawyer deploring the morals of prostitutes branched out into the following startling generalization:

I respect the emancipation of women, but one perhaps ought to think of restoring the old rule banning women from restaurants in the evening unless accompanied by men. The woman who hangs outside a restaurant waiting to be let in, who sits at a table without a man, a glass of cognac in her hand, does not give others any reason to have a flattering opinion of her.

Items appearing in such publications as *Moscow News* in the late 1980s testified to a strong division of opinion among Soviets regarding woman’s “proper niche” in life. That such issues were being debated at all awakened moderate optimism among some Soviets. […]

These, however, were miniature pockets of revolutionary change, more cosmetic than systemic. Isolated developments on a modest scale, they virtually drowned in countercurrents, some new and imported from the West, others of immemorial domestic origins. After years of essentially denying that sex and the body exist, the Soviets discovered both — as a source of pleasure and economic gain. Especially the exploitation of women’s bodies as marketable commodities and objects of displaced male violence, which Western

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24 *Moscow News*, 1-8 January 1988, 12. According to several feminists in Moscow, the press club smacked of frivolity and “coquetry,” had no serious platform, and contributed little to the betterment of women’s social status. Interview with Natal’ia Filippova, former member of Preobrazhenie (Moscow, May 1990), recorded by Helena Goscilo.

feminists (notably Andrea Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon, and Susan Brownmiller) have combatted, suddenly found unsavory expression in diverse aspects of late Soviet culture: (1) the highly publicized beauty contests that secured the then sixteen-year-old Mariia Kalinina (Miss Moscow 1988) and seventeen-year-old Iuliia Sukhanova (Miss USSR 1989) dubious fame; (2) a relentless barrage of films onanistically relying on female nudity, explicit sexual acts, and prolonged or repeated rape as a means of attracting viewers so as to amass profits (e.g., Kh. Kaiziev’s Shakaly [Jackals, 1990], A. Eidamadzhan’s Za prekrasnykh dam! [To Beautiful Ladies, 1990]); (3) a wave of video parlors (videosalony and videokluby) trafficking principally in sadomasochism and pornography; artistic milestones with such subtle titles as Devushki, razdevaite’s! (Take It Off, Girls!), Obnashennaia sredi kannibalov (Naked Among the Cannibals), Ty ne oboidesh’sia bez neboli’shogo rasputstva (You Can’t Do Without a Little Sluttishness), and Biust i taz—vot chto samoe glavnoe (The Bust and Pelvis Are What’s Most Important) [...]; (4) heavy metal concerts during which female performers bared all (apart from musical talent); (5) display of female bodies au naturel on covers of any and all publications, ranging from fashion magazines to scholarly economic journals (e.g., Eko), on dashboards of taxis, on posters peddled in subway stations, and so forth; (6) the Soviet issue of Playboy photographed by Sasha Borodanin, which raised hopes of a profitable career abroad in many a pneumatic Soviet breast; and (7) a dramatic increase in, and a cynical respect for, prostitution as a ticket to material well-being and social prestige. In a 1990 survey, Soviet women ranked prostitution eighth in a list of twenty top professions; over one-third of high school girls freely admitted that they would exchange sex for hard currency (Koppel).

The significance of these novelties in the Soviet Union could not be compared to that in the West, given the primitive level of

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knowledge among Russians then about anything pertaining to sex. Virtually no sex education existed in the USSR; condoms were in disastrously short supply, and 70 percent of high school students who engaged in sexual intercourse did not use contraceptives the first time; owing to Russians’ fundamental ignorance of biology, some women reached the fifth month of pregnancy before realizing their condition; and, finally, every fourth abortion that occurred in the world was performed in the USSR (according to Koppel’s research). These were not ideal circumstances for the radical sexual revolution of the type that took place under glasnost. […] After decades of puritanism Russian males flocked in thousands to inspect, and to parade their appreciation for, what the society had denied them for so long. Within one social category, at least, the politics of erogenous commitment ousted earlier political idols: truck drivers quickly replaced the portraits of Stalin decorated with medals, which they used to display routinely on their windshields, with coyly pouting pinups free of any and all decoration.

One might argue that such regressive sexist innovations pervaded only popular culture, and a minority within it, without impinging on “high culture,” the intelligentsia’s arena of significant activity. Such arguments, however, do not withstand close scrutiny. While pornography may he purchased by the proletariat, it is produced by writers—not necessarily talented ones, but members of the intelligentsia nonetheless. Surveys canvassing opinions regarding sexual, marital, and familial issues during the late 1980s unambiguously confirmed that both sexes across a broad social spectrum upheld the double standard. […] Women’s organizations, while affording members platforms for self-expression, not only failed to be taken seriously by those empowered to change women’s lot but also lacked the political weight to effect improvements in women’s social and political status. And scholarly feminist publications sparked enthusiasm in the West but left the educated Russian public largely skeptical and indifferent.[…]

If beauty contests and pornographic videos propagated a degrading and reductionist image of womanhood, the titles of recent prose collections [of the late 1980s-early 1990s], such as those
mentioned, likewise enforced hoary gender stereotypes through their code-affirming implications: for example, *Zhenskaia logika* (Female Logic, 1989) relied on the tiresome and tireless fantasy of women as irrational, unpredictable creatures ruled by emotion and whim; *Chisten’kaia zhizn’* (A Clean/Pure Life, 1990) evoked the hackneyed pseudo-ideal of woman as virgin or sterile/sterilized housekeeper, and so forth. Editors continued not only to exclude or drastically underrepresent women in anthologies of prose and poetry but also to withhold their birthdates while supplying that information for all the male contributors, on the understanding that women, unlike men, wish to hide their age (according to the cliché that women grow old, while men become distinguished […]). To the perceptive reader the markedly different treatment of these authors, who, moreover, served as isolated representatives of their gender, set them apart—outside the “malestream”—and betrayed the deep-rooted gender bias that for decades prevailed in all spheres of Soviet cultural life and continued to do so during glasnost. Yet the majority of Russians, including those trained in deciphering the values and political allegiances attaching to ostensibly innocuous discourse, seemed impervious to sexist language or strategies. Though sensitized to the encoded sociopolitical connotations of literary and journalistic statement, they could not detect the articulation of gender politics in verbal formulations that any educated Westerner would find crudely chauvinistic.

**Women Writers**

How do women born and raised in such a culture perceive and inscribe themselves in their texts? The answer is, problematically. Russian women’s reluctance to explore the liberating political and psychological potential of feminism […] paralleled Soviet female authors’ categorical disavowal of themselves as specifically women writers, even though they and their society at every turn underscored their Otherness. Whenever gender issues were raised, irreconcilable self-contradictions riddled the impassioned reactions of both. Asked by an American scholar how she felt as a woman writer, Viktoriia Tokareva replied: