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CHAPTER I

Introduction: new perspectives on women and gender in Russian literature

Rosalind Marsh

This selection of essays provides an overview of key issues in Russian women's writing and of important representations of women by men, between 1600 and the present. The book has two main aims. Firstly, it hopes to make a contribution to the contemporary feminist project of rediscovering the 'lost continent of the female tradition'[1] of Russian literature, which forms part of the wider interdisciplinary initiative by social historians, political scientists, psychologists, art and film historians to reconstruct the political, social and cultural experience of Russian women as a whole. Secondly, it incorporates some new thinking on gender issues in the works of Russian male writers, in order to shed further light on the patriarchal Russian literary tradition. Unlike most previous feminist studies of Russian literature, which, to borrow Elaine Showalter's terms, have tended to concentrate on either 'the feminist critique' ('revisionary readings' of masculine texts and criticism)[2] or 'gynocritics' (the rediscovery and analysis of literature by Russian women),[3] it is hoped that this comparative study will facilitate an exploration of the historical and cultural context of women's writing, and the differences, if any, between the writing of women and men in Russia, which no book focusing entirely on women's writing can achieve.[4]

Many of the essays presented below are revised versions of papers first presented at a conference on 'Women and the Former USSR', held in the University of Bath in March–April 1993, but others have been offered specially for inclusion in this book. There is no unanimity of viewpoint in the collection, although all the western contributors are influenced by the

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theory and practice of feminist criticism. Many of the essays have a strong theoretical basis and make use of much secondary material; while others, such as Elena Trofimova's, rely on close readings of texts for which few secondary sources are available. Both methods are valuable, and reveal different aspects of women's creativity and the position of women in Russian society.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH INTO WOMEN AND GENDER IN RUSSIAN LITERATURE

Until the 1990s, feminist criticism of Russian literature had lagged some way behind the recuperation and reinterpretation of writing by American and European women, initiated in the late 1960s under the influence of the second wave of the feminist movement in the USA and western Europe. Feminist criticism of Russian literature had also failed to keep pace with research into the history and contemporary situation of Russian women by historians, sociologists and economists, which began in the mid-1970s.[5]

Until very recently, most histories of Russian literature paid scant attention to women writers, as the majority of critics who established the Russian literary canon, masculine and feminine, in both Russia and the West, were conditioned by the patriarchal Russian cultural tradition.[6] The irredeemably patriarchal nature of Russian and Soviet society, in which power has always been in the hands of men, has been amply documented by historians and political scientists,[7] and, to a lesser extent, by literary scholars, although there is as yet no systematic history of Russian misogyny or of the suppression and distortion of women's writing in Russia.[8] Russian male writers and critics have frequently been unduly harsh and dismissive in their judgements of women writers, probably because they have felt threatened by them or have had little interest in the themes they have chosen to treat. Moreover, journals, publishing houses and literary criticism in Russia have always been dominated by men, although some women critics in the nineteenth century, the Silver Age and the 1920s, such as 'Evgeniia Tur', Elena Koltonovskaia and Aleksandra Kollontai, have

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managed to express views which differed from those of their male contemporaries. Yet, as Barbara Heldt has shown, 'women's writing in Russia has proved especially vulnerable' to male-dominated literary criticism, creating on the part of women writers 'a peculiar awareness of their otherness'.[9] Such criticism has sometimes undermined the confidence of Russian women writers, leading them to conformity, silence, or even suicide.[10]

The fundamental assumptions of patriarchal ideology – the perception of woman as object, 'immanence', 'nature', passivity or death, as opposed to man as subject, 'transcendence', 'culture', activity and life,[11] have dominated all aspects of Russian social, political and cultural life. Many Russian women writers and critics too – along with western critics of Russian literature – have internalized this objectified vision.[12]

In recent years, under the pressure of western feminist criticism, some male critics in the West have been persuaded to include sections on women writers in general studies of Russian literature, although in a book published as recently as 1989, dealing with a period which had witnessed a great resurgence of women's writing, N. N. Shneidman claimed that: 'The number of Soviet women writing today is indeed small. The index of any history of Soviet literature does not list many female authors who merit attention'.[13] The masculinist version of the Russian literary canon has also been accepted by some women critics, such as Xenia Gasiorowska, who argues that: 'Women writers, though widely read in Russia, contributed but little to the greatness of Russian literature, which has no George Sand, Jane Austen or George Eliot'.[14] Until very recently, the study of Russian women's literature has also suffered, with some honourable exceptions,[15] from what John Gross calls 'residual Great Traditionalism':[16] a tendency to reduce and condense the range and diversity of Russian women writers to a small band of 'the great', which has usually meant Karolina Pavlova in the nineteenth century, and Anna Akhmatova and Marina Tsvetaeva in the twentieth century.

It was not until the late 1980s that pioneering feminist research on Russian literature by western scholars eventually

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got under way.[17] One advantage of the relatively belated rediscovery of much literature by Russian women is that Slavists have been able to learn from an impressive body of feminist scholarship and theory amassed by scholars working in other disciplines, fruitfully adapting their insights to the Russian context.[18] Yet, even in the 1990s, it is still fair to say that the 'feminist critique' of masculine texts and criticism has only just begun in relation to Russian literature. 'Gynocritics' was in an even more embryonic state until 1992–4, when a number of important new works of bibliography and criticism were published almost simultaneously, adding tremendously to our knowledge of Russian women's literature and necessitating a radical reinterpretation of Russian culture as a whole.[19] These introductory works, however, have still left ample scope for further research.

MAIN THEMES OF THIS BOOK

Whereas most previous feminist critiques of the image of women in Russian literature have focused on a reinterpretation of nineteenth-century Russian literature, or on socialist realism,[20] the critics represented in this volume who engage in a feminist re-evaluation of twentieth-century texts by Russian male writers suggest that stereotyped images of woman also abound in 'alternative' literature written outside the confines of the socialist realist tradition. Eva Buchwald and Graham Roberts analyse the stereotypes of feminine passivity, silence, confinement and hysteria portrayed in the modernist works of Leonid Andreev and Daniil Kharms, demonstrating that avant-garde literature in Russia can be as misogynistic, if not more so, than realist fiction. Gerald S. Smith's study of Aleksandr Velichanskii, a poet of the glasnost era whose work is almost entirely concerned with the portrayal of women, sheds more light on the contemporary literary construction of women's identity by Russian men. Smith's analysis, along with female images in the works of such contemporary male prose writers as Anatolii Kurchatkin and Eduard Limonov, suggests that glasnost and the sexual revolution in Russia have intensified the

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innate male chauvinism and voyeuristic tendencies of many Russian writers, who have simply shifted their focus from woman as mother or symbol of virtue to a more explicit portrayal of woman as sexual object, even as victim of rape.

In its study of Russian women writers, this book seeks to complement and build upon the valuable new works of bibliography and criticism which have appeared in the 1990s. While the *Dictionary of Russian Women Writers* (1994) has accomplished the basic task of identifying forgotten women writers and reclaiming their work from oblivion, encyclopaedia entries are no substitute for a more extended discussion of the lives and works of individual women writers. This collection is a response to the continuing need to establish a more accurate and systematic history for Russian women writers, to facilitate the rediscovery of the many minor women writers who were the links in the chain that bound one generation to the next, and to provide full and close readings of certain Russian women writers whose work remains insufficiently studied, or who have been partially misrepresented by other critics. Extensive footnotes are needed in many of the articles, because the study of Russian women writers is still such a new field that very few assumptions can be made about it, and much fresh information must be included as an essential aid to future researchers.

Some contributors, such as Demidova, Rosenthal and Goscilo, provide general surveys of women writers in the nineteenth century, the Silver Age and contemporary Russia; while others, such as Rosslyn, Marsh, Gary Harris and Sandler, analyse individual women writers hitherto little known in the West. Such an exploration of Russian women's writing in a historical context may well help to corroborate the view that some western feminists have expressed since the late 1960s, that 'a special female self-awareness emerges through literature in every period'.[21]

This collection combines a study of the history and biography of women writers with close readings of literary texts. These themes are predominantly treated in Parts One and Two of the book respectively, although the present thematic grouping is imperfect and indicates only bias. Whereas Catriona Kelly, in

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her monumental *History of Russian Women's Writing, 1820–1992* (1994) largely eschews biography in order to concentrate on textual analysis,[22] many contributors to the first part of this volume acknowledge that it is important not only to unearth and reinterpret 'lost' works by women writers, but also to document their lives and careers, which have exerted a significant influence on their fiction. As Virginia Woolf argued in her 1929 essay 'Women and Fiction': 'In dealing with women as writers, as much elasticity as possible is desirable; it is necessary to leave oneself room to deal with other things besides their work, so much has that work been influenced by conditions that have nothing to do with art'.[23]

Our study makes it clear that many women writers in Russia, as in other cultures, have been disadvantaged, harassed and marginalized, and that their unjustly neglected works contain much of interest both for literary historians and contemporary women readers.[24] To the objection that male authors too have been subject to considerable persecution from censorship and political tyranny in Russia and the USSR,[25] it can be argued that, while this is undeniably true, some women writers have been unfortunate enough to suffer twice over, from both political and patriarchal persecution (to name only a few, the lives of Karolina Pavlova, Anastasiia Verbitskaia, Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva, Ol′ga Berggol′ts and Iuliia Voznesenskaia are cases in point).

As Toby Clyman and Diana Greene have noted, the former obscurity of women writers in Russian culture can be attributed to three main factors: the bias of Russian critics;[26] the impact of adverse social conditions;[27] and the creation of literary theories by later critics who retroactively eliminated them.[28] One such theory was the conception of 'committed literature' and 'the new woman' which prevailed in the 1860s, excluding the works of many women writers before that date; another was socialist realism, developed in 1934, which imposed a monolithic, male-dominated ideology on male and female writers alike.

Most feminist historical research into Russian history and culture has hitherto concentrated on the modern period since 1800,[29] but the essays by Rosalind McKenzie and Faith Wigzell

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help to bridge this gap, contributing to the rediscovery of the significant place which women and 'women's literature' occupied in Russian culture long before the 'woman question' was put on the political agenda of the nineteenth-century Russian radical movement. Whereas much previous research has focused on the history of gender inequality, female oppression and male dominance in Russian and Soviet culture, McKenzie suggests that in some seventeenth-century texts women began to be portrayed with greater realism and psychological motivation than we have hitherto been led to believe. While adding to the documentation of women's marginalization and subordination in Russian society, Wigzell's essay exploring the roles of women as readers of fortune-telling books and as amateur and professional practitioners of magic in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries also helps to establish a specific urban market of Russian women readers from the 1790s, and to recover the private sphere of women's experience, yielding insights into the role of sexual difference in Russian society, and of patterns of female ritual and sociability.

Many contributors to Part One, such as Marsh, Rosenthal and Mikhailova, seek to investigate the relations between literature by women, women writers' lives and the changing status of women in Russian society. This results in a historical, political, sociological and economic analysis which is rather different from Kelly's modernist aim of identifying 'texts which . . . execute the task of representing female creativity', laying an 'emphasis on the text as representation of varying forms of literary identity, of a fictional self'.[30]

However, some contributors, especially in Part Two, also share Kelly's interest in the nature of female identity and creativity, and provide new interpretations of texts by Russian women. With the exception of Stephanie Sandler's new study of Ol′ga Sedakova, a major contemporary poet about whom little has hitherto appeared in English, the writers chosen for detailed treatment here – Anna Bunina, Nadezhda Khvoshchinskaia, Lidiia Zinov′eva-Annibal, Anastasiia Verbitskaia and Lidiia Ginzburg – are different from those selected for close reading in Kelly's *History*, and have hitherto received little

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critical attention in English. Anna Bunina is of particular interest, because she is a rare example of a Russian noblewoman who, early in the nineteenth century, managed to achieve an independent life, educate herself and gain a considerable poetic reputation. Lidiia Zinov'eva-Annibal and Anastasiia Verbitskaia represent two different strands of women's literature of the Silver Age: Symbolism and feminist realism. Mariia Mikhailova reinterprets Zinov'eva-Annibal's *Tridtsat' tri uroda* (*Thirty-three Abominations*, 1907), previously known as one of the first Russian works openly to treat lesbian themes in literature,[31] in the light of the author's strange and tragic biography; while Pamela Davidson reinterprets Zinov'eva-Annibal's little known verse play *Pevuchii osel* (*The Singing Ass*, 1907) as a satire on the views of her husband Viacheslav Ivanov, and on Russian Symbolism in general. My essay on Anastasiia Verbitskaia, who is generally disparaged as a writer of sensational blockbusters, argues that Verbitskaia deserves reassessment for her realistic treatment of women's issues and her feminist publishing activities. Jane Gary Harris's study of the early journal of the prominent literary scholar Lidiia Ginzburg represents the first analysis of the feminist and lesbian elements in her writing, which have formerly been taboo in Russian discussions of her work. Ginzburg's previously unpublished writings afford a striking illustration of one of the most pervasive themes in lesbian criticism, that 'woman-identified writers, silenced by a homophobic and misogynistic society, have been forced to adopt coded and obscure language and internal censorship'.[32]

Feminist research on Russian literature is still, unfortunately, being pursued more vigorously by foreign critics than by Russian women themselves. Nevertheless, since the inception of glasnost a number of texts by Russian women of the past and present have been published in Russia, although these have rarely been presented from a feminist point of view.[33] Although a few articles on the history of women's literature by Russian female scholars have now reached an international audience,[34] and 'women's courses' and seminars are conducted at two Moscow universities,[35] there is as yet no institutional backing

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for such isolated endeavours comparable with the Centre for Gender Studies in Moscow which promotes the feminist analysis of contemporary Russian society, and access to feminist critical sources is still quite limited.[36] One aim of this book is to encourage the development of feminist literary criticism within Russia by including three articles by Russian critics which reflect the advances which are now being made in the understanding of the history of Russian women's writing by Russian women themselves. The juxtaposition of essays by Russian and western scholars frequently serves to highlight interesting similarities and differences in their approach to Russian women's literature.

In rediscovering their own feminine literary tradition, contemporary Russian women critics sometimes accept assumptions widely established in Russian literary criticism which have now been challenged by western feminist critics. Whereas Ol′ga Demidova, for example, accepts the usual Russian view that male critics welcomed women's literature in the 1820s, western scholars, including Wendy Rosslyn, have argued that the tendency to idealize the female sex and to attribute moral superiority to it could be interpreted as an example of Russian male critics' patronizing attitude to women writers.[37] As Linda Edmondson has pointed out, such views of women's moral superiority are close to the anti-feminist argument that women are obliged to be better than men in order to deserve equal status, and that women must remain on their moral pedestal if they are to retain the respect of men.[38] Demidova also claims that Romanticism had a wholly positive influence on the development of women's literature in the nineteenth century, whereas Catriona Kelly contends that Romanticism's impact on women writers was ambiguous, to say the least, since it emphasized the masculine nature of inspiration and the role of the male genius.[39] In her study of women writers of the Silver Age, Mariia Mikhailova has to a certain extent internalized the essentialist notions of men and women prevalent at that time, in the works of Otto Weininger and Elena Koltonovskaia,[40] notably the view that women are more inclined to all-embracing passionate love than men, and that creativity in

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women may be a substitute for an unsatisfactory love life. Sometimes Russian critics do not comment on the feminist implications of texts by Russian women: for example, Elena Trofimova, in her analysis of the contemporary poet Nina Iskrenko, does not refer to her playful deconstruction of gender stereotypes, which has been emphasized in western criticism.[41]

KEY ISSUES IN THE STUDY OF WOMEN AND GENDER IN RUSSIAN LITERATURE

It will be useful here to explore certain general questions which have been raised by previous feminist criticism of Russian literature, with the aim of stimulating further debate without in any way pre-empting the views expressed by other contributors to this volume. One particularly controversial issue is whether there is a separate women's literary tradition in Russia – a claim which cannot be conclusively proved or disproved. On the one hand, literary influence is always difficult to establish in any culture, and there is no doubt that many Russian women writers were also deeply influenced both by individual male writers and by the masculine culture of their time. Many nineteenth-century women writers did not know each other,[42] and their domestic isolation made it difficult for them to form any kind of 'movement' until the early twentieth century. Moreover, the severe criticism, distortion and neglect to which Russian women writers have been subjected has meant that every successive generation 'has found itself, in a sense, without a history, forced to rediscover the past again, forging again and again the consciousness of their sex'.[43] The greatest historical discontinuity has been caused by the Bolshevik Revolution and Stalinism: only since the advent of glasnost have some women critics and writers begun to rediscover their own literary tradition as a whole, not to mention their feminine literary subculture.[44]

Notwithstanding all these obstacles, a certain tradition in Russian women's poetry and autobiographical writing has been tentatively postulated by other feminist critics.[45] In the twentieth century, particularly in contemporary Russia, women

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