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Edited by Adele Marie Barker and Jehanne M Gheith
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ADELE MARIE BARKER AND JEHANNE M GHEITH

Introduction

> What we know does not satisfy us. What we know constantly reveals itself as partial. What we know, generation by generation, is discarded into new knowings which in their turn slowly cease to interest us . . . The facts cut me off. The clean boxes of history, geography, science, art. What is the separateness of things when the current that flows each to each is live? It is the livingness I want.
>
> JEANETTE WINTERSON, *Gut Symmetries* (82–3)

In presenting the history of women's writing in Russia from its beginnings to the present day, we have been guided by the desire to incorporate the "livingness" of which Jeanette Winterson speaks. To capture that essential living quality of the women writers presented in this volume, the eras in which they lived, the literary lives they led, and the places they occupied within a tradition long dominated by men is the task we have set before ourselves in this volume. Women's literary endeavors have, with few exceptions, occupied obscure, indeed often unseen places in the history of Russian literature. As we set about the process of reintegrating women writers into the history of Russian literature, we wanted to recover lost literary lives, address factual gaps in our knowledge, and rethink the contexts within which women's writing has been produced. Our journey has led us to examine questions of gender and genre, to reconsider traditional periodization and classifications of literary versus non literary, high versus low, public versus private, and to query the relationship between women's literary productivity and mainstream Russian literature.

The essays that follow are in an important sense the product of many hands over many years. Our approaches and insights have benefited immeasurably from the pioneering work of Slavic feminist scholars such as Barbara Heldt, Catriona Kelly, and Mary Zirin, and from feminist

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scholarship in the field of European and American women's writing.[1] Much of our initial research was prompted by the same questions feminist scholars had asked about European and American women's writing. Were Russia's women writers, under the influence of the liberal social and political movements of the middle of the nineteenth century, writing what could be termed feminist fiction, and, if so, how does the understanding of what it means to write feminist fiction differ between cultures? Several of the essays (see Catriona Kelly's and Rosalind Marsh's in particular) struggle with these different cultural definitions of feminism in moving towards an understanding of how women's political and social views translated themselves into fiction.

Like much feminist scholarship, ours was often guided by the question of whether women's writing comprises a separate tradition or not. The chapters in this volume suggest that while there was not a separate tradition of women's writing in Russia, neither was that writing a part of what has come to be known as the mainstream. From the second third of the nineteenth century and perhaps even earlier, women writers were influential and widely read. Their writings interacted with those penned by men at every level; men and women read each other's drafts, their published works, reviewed each other's works in the literary journals of the day, and were influenced by each other's literary productions. In the twentieth century Russia's women writers have likewise been powerfully engaged with the male tradition. Stephanie Sandler notes in her chapter on "Women's Poetry Since the Sixties" that women poets' primary allegiance in Russia has not been to other women poets and that their works do not make genuine and complete sense outside the context of their male contemporaries and precursors. By the same token, however, the pervasive presence of the male tradition within their works has in no way prevented women writers in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from seeking out "models of an authoritative female voice" (Hodgson, 208). Thus, the twin strands of Russian literary tradition have been inseparable while simultaneously drawing upon their own distinctive role models.

Despite the inseparability of the two traditions, women's writings have been largely lost, and, when recovered, have rarely been studied in relation to writings by men. It is precisely because Russia's women writers were as much a part of mainstream literary life as they were that the act of omitting them from a history of Russian literature leaves one with a radically incomplete picture of Russia's literary life during the formative years of its development.

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If some of our questions replicate those asked by our colleagues studying women's literature in other countries, some are also specific to the Russian historical and cultural experience, notably how certain long-held cultural stereotypes played themselves out in the lives and works of the women writers represented in this volume. How, for example, did the semi-sanctified role of the mother, so deeply embedded in Russian thought as to border on national obsession, both enable and impede women who took up the pen? Likewise, how did certain Orthodox concepts such as that of humility or *smirenie*, deeply ingrained in the Russian religious imagination, become, as Judith Vowles points out in "The Inexperienced Muse," a source of both pride and ambivalence for the women poets she discusses?

As we set out to compile this history, we wanted to avoid replicating the paradigms of literary histories we were trying to rethink. Any history, after all, is by definition arbitrary, providing closure and periodization, defining schools and movements in ways that, while often useful, also seem artificial. How, we wondered, could we at once construct a history and yet remain true to what Jeanette Winterson calls its "livingness"? Thus, we have tried to discuss these writers in ways that do not compartmentalize them and that question standard periodizations and contextualizations. Further, we have deliberately avoided trying to reconcile contradictions between contributors, preferring instead to assemble a history that is open ended, allowing the contributors to engage in dialogue with each other. Marsh and Kelly, for example, disagree over the degree to which women's involvement in major public campaigns affected the development of women's writing. Marsh also challenges the argument that Russia lacked an earlier tradition of women's prose writing, arguing that by the turn of the century Russian women writers had a number of literary precursors on whom to draw, both Russian and foreign.[2] In her view, the tradition of poetry has deeper roots than that of prose in Russian women's writing, partly because poetry is a more intimate, confessional genre particularly well suited to women's talents, and partly because women's prose has frequently been denigrated as a genre devoted exclusively to love and trivial themes (180). Further, she argues, Russian women were heirs to a problematic prose tradition in which women were expected to conform to images of what Heldt has termed "terrible perfection."[3] Jehanne Gheith, in "Women of the Thirties and Fifties" takes issue with Marsh, avoiding what she sees as essentializing women's talents. We regard these different approaches as

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productive to our critical thinking and as opening dialogue regarding the primacy of and preference for certain genres at particular moments in literary history.

The essays in this volume also open up a variety of methodological approaches. Several of the chapters (Zirin's, Vowles's, and Gheith's) reconstruct the contexts within which women's writing was produced and acquired meaning. Women writers in the eighteenth century, as Vowles points out, were largely "left out of the familiar circles, formal associations, salons, and 'society' where so much of literary life then took place" (63). Thus women rewrote and invented myths, according to Vowles, "as a way of establishing female legitimacy and authority" (70). In her essay on the Silver Age, Jenifer Presto similarly shows how the Symbolist perception of the world and women's place in it blinded an entire generation of poets to facets of women's lives and works that lay outside their mystical constructs of the Beautiful Lady or *Prekrasnaia Dama*. It was left to Symbolist poets such as Mirra Lokhvitskaia, Poliksena Solov'eva, and Zinaida Gippius to create an image of woman as agent rather than muse or ideal, whose unique function was to inspire male poets to take up their lyres.

The context within which women's writing was produced is also discussed in the chapters on Soviet women's writing by Anna Krylova and Adele Barker. Krylova argues that the categories many Russians and western Slavists have used in analyzing the Soviet period have tended to valorize dissident voices at the expense of those who occupied central places in official Soviet literary life. She calls for different ways to understand the narratives of those who were "official" and to develop new categories of analysis from within their works. Looking at literary life not from the margins but from the center out, forces us to reorganize the ways in which we have traditionally viewed both moral and aesthetic categories within the Soviet context. Likewise, Barker finds the problem of identities a much more telling prism through which to view women writers from the late 1950s on than the positioning of these writers within the binary hierarchy of official versus non-official. Barker argues that irrespective of where they stood vis-à-vis the center, since the end of the Stalin period women writers have been engaged in negotiating a complex system of identities articulated for them during the Soviet period. Beth Holmgren similarly contends that we need to re-evaluate some of the common assumptions upon which our approaches to Soviet literature have been based. Taking issue with the long-standing notion that *embourgeoisement* is necessarily equated with bad literature, Holmgren posits that positioning a text somewhere between

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"authentic" folk art and the highbrow does not mean that it is "therefore aesthetically inferior and morally suspect" (Holmgren, 232). Traditionally, for example, western Slavists' use of the term Socialist Realism or even "official literature" to describe a work of literature was tantamount to a critical kiss of death. In her essay on perestroika and post-perestroika literature, Helena Goscilo takes the need to recontextualize Russian women's writing a step further by celebrating the ways in which women's writing simultaneously participates in both high and low culture and in the breakdown of these categories.

The two chapters that discuss women's literary productions outside of Russia also implicitly question some of the traditional frameworks within which Russian women's writing has been studied. In her discussion of the Paris emigration, Catherine Ciepiela demonstrates that Marina Tsvetaeva's influence was much larger within the Paris circle than had previously been thought. Olga Bakich and Carol Ueland, in their chapter on Russian women writers in Harbin, open up new perspectives about the relationship of Russia to the East and to the Far Eastern emigration, a topic which until now has been treated from an almost entirely ungendered perspective.

Juxtaposing the essays with one another in order to create new ways of seeing is an important part of the process of recontextualization. Moving between Ciepiela's essay on the Paris emigration, for example, and Bakich and Ueland's article on the Far Eastern emigration creates a sense of the importance of locale and culture for art in exile: in both emigrations maintaining that link to Russian culture was vital, but the means by which that link was secured were often different.[4] While Gippius, Tsvetaeva, and others defined themselves within and against Parisian norms, the Harbin writers such as Marianna Kolosova or Natal'ia Il'ina were working in a country where they lived a completely segregated life from Chinese culture and were, in fact, viewed as lower class citizens by the local Chinese community. Other juxtapositions emerge as well. To read Zirin's discussion of Verbitskaia's autobiography alongside Marsh's discussion of Verbitskaia's fiction gives us a richer sense of the interrelationship between fictional and autobiographical selves at the turn of the century. Similarly, if we look at Zirin alongside Krylova, we are able to see not only the shift in autobiographical discourse in the Bolshevik period but the similarities in political and social pressures at very different times in history that occasioned the production of less than completely truthful autobiographies.

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The reader will also note that several authors appear in more than one chapter. For example, Nadezhda Khvoshchinskaia is discussed by both Vowles and Gheith; Zinaida Gippius is dealt with by both Presto and Ciepiela; Tsvetaeva appears in chapters authored by Presto, Ciepiela, and Hodgson; I. Grekova is taken up by Holmgren and Barker, and Liudmila Petrushevskaia by Barker and Goscilo. We have purposely overlapped these discussions in order to present Russian literature through a different prism, one that does not allow for a neat movement from Sentimentalism to Romanticism to Realism, slowly merging into the Silver Age and then Socialist Realism and beyond. We also wanted to allow multiple facets of these authors to emerge.

Another way in which this volume re-envisions the history of Russian writing is through reperiodization (e.g. Kelly's, Gheith's and Zirin's essays). Unlike traditional histories of Russian literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Kelly's neither starts with the reign of Catherine II nor ends with the death of Pushkin; rather her essay covers the years 1760 to the early years of Pushkin's literary development in the 1820s. Although in general she subscribes to Pushkin's centrality, by redrawing the map of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Kelly allows other developments in literary life at the time, such as the importance of conversations between sisters in literary works, to emerge from Pushkin's shadow. Gheith's essay also forces a re-examination of common assumptions about period as she focuses on the 1830s and 1850s within the context of women's writing rather than the more commonly held divisions of the 1840s and 1860s. Zirin's chapter presents an unlikely periodization, one that begins with 1783 and ends in 1971, tracing moments in between that look like no traditional division used to characterize these periods. She discusses the rhythms of women's self-writing, which moved from memoirs or autobiography based on western European models in the early nineteenth century, then departed from this model in the middle of the century, and finally returned to an autobiographical voice with the rise of Modernism in the late nineteenth century. By discussing women's writing within a different kind of time frame, Zirin suggests an alternative way to place women's autobiographical writings, one that reveals the historical and social developments that make certain kinds of life writing possible. Through this kind of realignment, we hope to challenge some of the traditional categories and judgments usually made about a work of art based on the period to which it has traditionally been assigned. Although most critics will agree that such categories are useful

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classifying devices rather than representations of literary and social realities, these periodizations are so common that it is often difficult to see beyond them, thus limiting our ability to account for developments that do not fit within traditional parameters. To call received historical periodizations into question is to understand Russian literary history as messier, more complex, less predictable, and hence more vital than it has heretofore been understood.

Traditionally, little attention has been given to how women articulated their own experience. Tracing the evolution of women's writing through their autobiographical statements reveals much about the articulation and the aesthetics of female self-representation; it also shows how those representations interacted with the public and political world. When asked, for example, how women are portrayed in Russian literature, most readers will refer to *Anna Karenina*, which is, of course, a brilliant representation of a woman – but through a man's eyes. Further, most readers will not be aware that there are also female-authored texts that powerfully inscribe female experience. The appearance of autobiography at once marks the entry of genres once thought to be non-literary into the literary canon and at the same time enables us to talk about the ways women inscribed their own experiences. In her chapter on prerevolutionary autobiography, Mary Zirin discusses the growth of autobiography in mid-nineteenth-century Russia, a phenomenon she connects to the rise of journals devoted to history and a concomitant increase of autobiographical accounts in socio-literary journals. Zirin sees an inherent contradiction in women's autobiographies of this period: torn between the "impulse to disclose the 'truth' of their lives and social imperatives that discouraged disclosure" (102) nineteenth-century Russian women's autobiography interrogates the notion of autobiography as "truthful disclosure" when composed under certain kinds of political and social pressures. Zirin's essay thus suggests how autobiographical statements could also be reflective of women's participation in both the social and literary realms. Similarly, Anna Krylova's "In Their Own Words? Soviet Women Writers and the Search for Self" takes up this relationship between political pressure and personal statement as she discusses how women's official autobiographies were constructed during the Stalinist era. Krylova argues that biography was something one was not necessarily born with but had to acquire as a way of legitimizing oneself in Soviet society, an argument that encourages us to rethink the traditional divide between the personal and the political as the two became conflated within

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the Soviet era. Looking at these two essays together suggests among other things that the imperative to write politically correct autobiographies was not limited to the Stalin period alone.

The essays on autobiography in this volume thus question our traditional assumptions of what it means to write autobiography and the longstanding insistence that autobiography be truthful. Given the social dictates of several of the eras we discuss, where full disclosure was discouraged, the way in which autobiography came to be composed adds a different perspective to how political and personal identities become conflated at certain moments in history. Finally, Holmgren in "Writing the Female Body Politic (1945–1985)" adds yet another dimension to the argument as she discusses how the image of the whole woman threatened to displace the Socialist Realist hagiography with normal biography, as High Stalinism gave way to the more domestic fictions of the forties.

The theme of autobiography also raises the question of the way in which these writers fashioned their authorial personae. As Kelly notes in her chapter, when women began to set pen to paper in the eighteenth century, they were "trapped in a net of *topoi* that precluded original expression" (48). From the images of the Amazonki, to Sappho, Corinna, and Niobe, Russia's women writers were the recipients of models of self-presentation that did not necessarily speak to their experience. One recalls Tatiana in Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* sitting down and attempting to write her famous love letter to Onegin but having no words or images on which to draw in her own language. With whom then were these women to identify? Although many of the images they inherited were outworn, Vowles makes the point that women reached for them anyway, transforming them in the process, as did the poet Anna Bunina with Sappho, as a way of "resisting the formation of boundaries between men's and women's writing and language" (68). Part of the impetus to revise these images and make them useful to women's experience in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the women writers' fear of being overly identified with the male tradition, particularly with the male-dominated tradition of poetry in Russia. Even into the twentieth century, the paucity of past models continued to be a problem for women writers. Although the hallowed images of woman as the incarnation of suffering Mother Russia resurfaced powerfully during the Stalin era, the tendency towards self-mythologization Hodgson notes in poets such as Akhmatova (216) suggests that the images and *topoi* that were part of women's received poetic inheritance were not always sufficient to their poetic imaginations.

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The question of *topoi* raises the larger question of the tradition, a question which underlies most of the essays in this volume. The problem of literary tradition is a particularly charged one in Russia because of the panoply of male stars produced in the nineteenth century. Many of the women writers discussed in this volume were not simply responding to a male literary tradition into which they had wandered – one comprising Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Chekhov – but were active creators of that same tradition, working alongside and often independent of their male colleagues. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Russia's women writers experienced a complex relationship to the tradition, positioned as they were simultaneously within and outside it. The situation for Soviet women writers has been no less complex. Throughout most of the twentieth century, Soviet writers received different and often conflicting signals as to how to respond to and integrate the literary and historical past into their works. In the early days of the Bolshevik state, Lenin and others sought to find a way to incorporate the elitist literature of the past into the education of the worker. Later, after the death of Stalin, the historical and literary past would provide the values necessary for the re-evaluation of Soviet society. Both Holmgren and Barker look at how Soviet women writers responded to the call either to distance themselves from the past or to embrace it when it was expedient to do so. Both, for example, discuss how it was in the best interests of women writers during the Stalin era to dissociate themselves from the past and from women writers both past and present who were perceived to be "scribblers."

One of the most persistent *topoi* that Russian women writers have struggled with has been that of the body – a set of constructs and paradigms so deeply embedded in Russian national and cultural consciousness that even now they are still powerfully deployed as metaphors within contemporary Russian women's fictions. In western feminist theory the relationship between women's writing and the body has been informed by the age-old binary division between mind and body – spirit and matter. From the time of the early Christian fathers, women's bodies have been consigned to the dual domains of the maternal or the sexual, venerated on the one hand, damned on the other. This cultural bifurcation of the female body has created a social scenario in which to dwell too much within the body is to be sexually provocative, risking being branded promiscuous; yet, to be too little of the body is to be barren. Finding the middle ground between these two becomes nearly impossible.[5] Thus women appear to lose on all counts. And as writers they find themselves

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even more conflicted, for the very act they are engaged in – the articulation of self and body – is antithetical to woman's socially constructed identity which renders her, whether whore or madonna, outside verbal discourse. Yet, as Terry Eagleton has recently noted, such dichotomies are invalid, as aesthetics and intellect cannot be separated from the body. Ultimately, maintains Eagleton, to the degree that aesthetics has its origins as a discourse of the body, the creative act thus becomes as much a function of physical selves as of the intellect.[6]

These same tensions which are present in western thinking about women's bodies are pervasive as well throughout Russian literary and cultural history, with the added difference that a powerful folk tradition linking the image of the mother with the "damp mother earth" (*mat' syra zemlia*) placed the image of the Russian mother not only in close proximity to the Mother of God "Bogoroditsa" but to the land itself in all its various incarnations – as fertile, as suffering, as depleted, garnering ever more loyalty and love the more she suffered.[7] The ensuing social and cultural tensions caused by these complex images of the feminine engage many of the writers represented in this volume. In "The Inexperienced Muse" Vowles notes that anxiety about the body is often manifest as a fear of appearing immodest (68). Thus the image of the constrained body, created by women writers themselves in the nineteenth century, suggests that while women writers manifested a certain transgressiveness in taking up the pen, in all other matters of gender stereotypes, they conformed to cultural norms of femininity. Ciepiela discusses the appearance of the deformed or mutilated self (128) as an important category for women, one to which they increasingly retreat as their poems are branded ugly. Presto notes in her essay that the Silver Age poet Mirra Lokhvitskaia, unlike other women poets of her generation, focuses on the corporeal in her lyrics, enacting a metonymic relationship to the body. Lokhvitskaia fantasizes about transforming her heart into an unmediated organ of song, thereby creating an identity between poetic voice and female body – an identity that would later become central in French feminist theory of writing the female body.[8] The image of the female body acquired a particular configuration during the Stalin era in which, in Holmgren's words, "the good body was the hard body," (225) and in which woman's body, paired with the male worker in the visual propaganda of the day, "accented both her likeness and subservience to a stereotypically masculine model." And yet, while exhorted to hone their bodies to help build the socialist workers' paradise, Soviet women were also called upon to

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