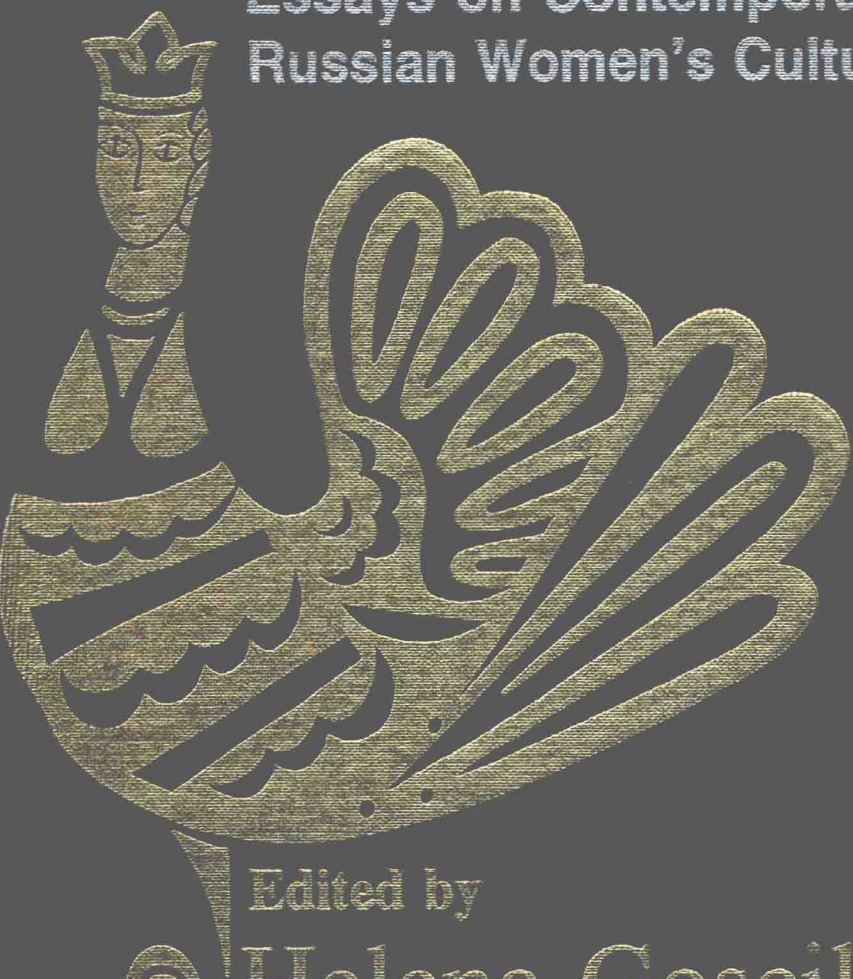


Fruits of Her Plume

Essays on Contemporary
Russian Women's Culture



Edited by

Helena Goscilo

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Russian Woman's Culture**

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Fruits of Her Plume

To the vivid memory of
the late
Inna Varlamova
Svetlana Mikhailova
Irina Velembovskaia

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INTRODUCTION

Helena Goscilo

"Punctuality," as the saying goes, "is the courtesy of kings." Yet tardiness, however ill bred, offers inestimable advantages. A latecomer to a feast, for instance (once the ritual of apologies and explanations has run its course), automatically eludes some potential hazards. With the edge of ravenous appetite in the more punctual guests blunted, she need not scramble in unseemly fashion for the most enticing dishes. Nor need she initiate fumbling conversation, for by then, presumably, talk is purling along as uninhibitedly as the wine that has mellowed the company into tolerant affability. Perhaps most important, by observing the effects of the meal on those already at table, she may circumvent the excesses and errors in choice of the gathering's more "kingly" members.

As with dilatory guests, so with Slavists. Arriving only now at the prolonged and clamorous feast of gender studies, they are ideally positioned to reap the potential benefits of informed judiciousness enabled by belatedness. Without wading into the intellectual combat that split pioneering feminists into alienated factions, they may weigh the pros and cons, for example, of the universalizing French concept of *écriture féminine* elaborated by Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, as opposed to the strongly empiricist tendencies of American feminists and the Marxist-socialist element (especially in film studies) of the British pragmatists—both of whom emphasize the historical and social reality of women's experience.¹ They may also gauge with the coolness of hindsight the relative merits of dominant trends within feminism, some of which have settled into their own brand of orthodoxy: the Lacanian revision of Freud, for instance, which animates the research of Juliet Mitchell and especially of Jane Gallop; Carolyn Heilbrun's theories of androgyny; and

notions of body representation (mainly in the visual media) influenced by Laura Mulvey's article on the male gaze (1975)—indebted, in its turn, to John Berger's trenchant analysis of art production and consumption (*Ways of Seeing*, 1972).² In short, unlike academics in other national literatures who laid the theoretico-critical groundwork for feminist and gender studies, Slavists embarking on a feminist course need not generate fundamental principles *ab ovo*. Their task consists rather of assimilation, development, and adaptation.

The accelerated boom in feminist scholarship since the early 1970s has produced a plethora of reassessments, reconstellations, and indefatigable meta-commentary. Just how extensive a menu of proliferating feminisms confronts the unwary neophyte may be deduced from the mammoth anthology of selected criticism signally titled *Feminisms* and from surveys of feminist scholarship such as Janet Todd's *Feminist Literary History* (1988) and Janet Wolff's more recent *Feminine Sentences* (1990).³ In light of this *embarras des richesses*, it is unstartling to hear some Western academics elide "postfeminism" with all the other postisms currently in vogue (post-Marxism, postcommunism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, postmodernism, etc.). This reflex identification of (over?)abundance with exhaustion implies that Slavists have finally joined a feast that has petered out or is in the process of doing so. Whether such a view accurately reflects the current situation each reader of this volume will have to decide for herself.

Within Russian studies, the majority of book-length feminist (or, more precisely, gender) projects have come from historians, sociologists, and economists rather than specialists in literature.⁴ In fact, among Slavists the program of cultural reclamation launched in the initial stages of Anglo-American feminism, when scholars rescued numerous literary texts from arguably undeserved oblivion, still remains in its embryonic phase. Yet even without (re)turning to the past in order to salvage a *bypassed* tradition, they have no shortage of material, for the last decade has witnessed the ascendancy of Slavic women in multiple

spheres of artistic creation that historically have devalued them as a deductible addendum: literature, film, and the pictorial arts.

Asked whom they consider today's foremost Russian writer or film director, even male respondents acknowledge Liudmila Petrushevskaiia, Tat'iana Tolstaia, Kira Muratova, and Lana Gogoberidze (a Georgian) as the most powerful and original practitioners of their craft.⁵ Indeed, any roster of contemporary figures meriting serious attention would be incomplete without such names as Ol'ga Bulgakova, Tat'iana Nazarenko, Natal'ia Nesterova, and Larisa Zvezdochetova in art; Nina Gorlanova, Elena Makarova, Tat'iana Nabatnikova, Valeriia Narbikova, Marina Palei, Nina Sadur, Bella Ulanovskaia, Liudmila Ulitskaia, Larisa Vaneeva, and Svetlana Vasilenko in fiction and drama; and Zoia Ezrokhi, Elena Ignatova, Nina Iskrenko, Inna Lisnianskaia, Olesia Nikolaeva, Elena Shvarts, and Tat'iana Shcherbina in poetry. While women's social, political, and economic status has steadily deteriorated during the *glasnost'* and post-*glasnost'* era, in the realm of cultural creativity women undisputedly have come into their own. This volume of essays, then, may be said to engage not only women's artistic production but also the most colorful and thought-provoking examples of recent Russian culture.⁶

The essays collected here examine women's works in order to identify the distinguishing traits of gendered cultural products and of the individual talents that gave them birth. The theoretical and critical positions of the contributors diverge dramatically and, I believe, fruitfully. While Caryl Emerson's polemical essay argues forcefully against the advisability of harnessing Bakhtinian concepts to women's issues, Natal'ia Ivanova demonstrates how Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of carnival may be productively applied to the prose of Tolstaia and Petrushevskaiia. Nicholas Žekulin posits the gynocentric parasitism of women's writing during the early 1980s, focusing on its gendered "localization" of themes universalized in malestream fiction and thereby rendered acceptable. The implication of women in domesticity analyzed

by Žekulin reverberates in Svetlana Boym's investigation of the links between kitsch and the "feminine" as exemplified in several works by Tolstaia, Gogoberidze, and Zvezdochetova. This same complex, shifting relationship between the domestic/familial and the artistic also underpins the essays by Beth Holmgren and Stephanie Sandler: the first traces the complex construction of an identity undertaken by the wife and widow of the acclaimed "great poet" Osip Mandel'shtam,⁷ while the second explores the way in which three lyric poets use retrospection and a female viewpoint to recast the biblical story of Lot's wife.

Recent debates around body discourse, feminist criticism, and postmodernism inform both Nadya Peterson's study—which challenges the "erotic" label attached to Narbikova's texts—and my own essay, which sifts through the rhetorical elements of body inscriptions in Petrushevskaiia, Tolstaia, and Narbikova. The paradoxical consequences of Russia's recent liberalization emerge clearly in the two entries that compare early and later (*glasnost'*/*perestroika*) phases of two authors' professional development: Richard Chapple surveys the career of Viktoriia Tokareva, one of Russia's most popular and successful women writers, in the process evaluating the effect of *glasnost'* on her authorial strategies. Similarly, Thomas Lahusen assesses the treatment of gendered temporality in the two large-scale narratives that frame the career of Natal'ia Baranskaia, doyenne of contemporary Russian women's fiction. Jerzy Kolodziej scrutinizes gendered features in the quasi-novel of Iuliia Voznesenskaia, expelled from Russia in mid-1980 for her activities as a member of the Maria feminist group, while Darra Goldstein dissects the sophisticated revision by Elena Shvarts of a female "tell-tale heart" in the poet's cycle of verses about a heretical nun. John Givens's essay completes the circle, in that its close reading of "Peters," the story that propelled Tolstaia to international fame, relies on Bakhtin's theory of discourse.

Scope of subject matter and specificity of address determined my ordering of the essays. Their sequence follows a centripetal

or telescopic movement: from the broad theoretical sweep of Emerson's contribution through narrower purviews to Givens's detailed explication of a single story. I deviated from this principle of organization only when more compelling considerations suggested alternatives; Ivanova's contribution, for example, struck me as more effectively placed after Emerson's, as an immediate response to it.

Although I did not elicit any group debate by circulating the essays among the contributors, our multiple approaches to women's issues and our varied concerns resulted, quite spontaneously, in a pregnant dialogue vital to any collection of this sort. On first reading, the differences among the pieces may strike the reader more dramatically than the parallels. Sandler's avowedly feminist position, for example, has little in common with the critical standpoint from which Chapple discusses Tokareva's writings and could not be more remote from Emerson's near-dismissal of the entire feminist enterprise. These postures yield very different critical discourses and modes of argumentation. The diversity in structure and tone is likewise striking: Boym's and my occasionally playful modulations contrast sharply with the unwavering sobriety of Goldstein and Žekulin; Holmgren proceeds through accretion, Lahusen through juxtaposition; Kolodziej adheres strictly to a commentary on Voznesenskaia's novel, whereas Peterson moves beyond Narbikova's texts to elucidate their appropriation of techniques from Conceptualist art; and so forth.

To some extent the absence of uniformity mirrors the pluralism that constitutes one of the most appealing features of women's creativity in Russia today. The heterogeneity is not fortuitous, however. My constitutional antipathy to monologism prompted me to seek out contributors with divergent opinions, interests, and methodologies. The wish to include readings of Tolstaia and Petrushevskaja that do not concur with mine was a major consideration when I came to enlist participants in this enterprise. Hence I am happier about the clashes than about the overlaps in the volume. It was inevitable, I think, that Tolstaia,

Petrushevskaja, and Narbikova, as well as Bakhtin, should function as Goethe's red thread, loosely binding the essays together. My reluctance to pull that thread tighter in this Introduction stems from principle, not turpitude.

Notes

1. For a thorough and balanced summary of the conflicting principles that have fueled the heated debate between the French feminists and their Anglo-American counterparts, see the excellent review essay by Betsy Draine, "Refusing the Wisdom of Solomon: Some Recent Feminist Literary Theory," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 15, no. 1 (Autumn 1989): 144-70. See also Toril Moi's Introduction to *French Feminist Thought: A Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 1-13.

2. See in particular the early study by Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (New York: Pantheon, 1974), and her *Women: The Longest Revolution* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), as well as the frequently cited study by Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982). Also Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* (1975), vol. 16, no. 3:6-18; Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1975/1982); John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972).

3. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, eds., *Feminisms* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991); Janet Todd, *Feminist Literary History* (New York: Routledge, 1988); Janet Wolff, *Feminine Sentences* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

4. See, e.g., William M. Mandel, *Soviet Women* (New York: Doubleday/Anchor, 1975); Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978/1990); Gail Lapidus, *Women in Soviet Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Barbara Alpern Engel, *Mothers and Daughters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Barbara Holland, ed., *Soviet Sisterhood* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); Chanie Rosenberg, *Women and Perestroika* (London: Bookmarks, 1989); Mary Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989); Lynne Attwood, *The New Soviet Man and Woman* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Barbara Evans Clements, Barbara Alpern Engel, and Christine D. Worobec, eds., *Russia's Women: Accommodation, Resistance, Transformation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Mary Buckley, ed., *Perestroika and Soviet Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

5. During my trips to Moscow in 1990 and 1991, Russians of both sexes repeatedly singled out Petrushevskaja and Muratova (especially on the basis of her film *The Asthenic Syndrome*) as the most interesting of current artists.

6. Studies analogous to this volume are scheduled for publication in the near future and possibly will appear before *Fruits of Her Plume*, e.g., Jane Costlow, Stephanie Sandler, and Judith Vowles, eds., *Sexuality and the Body in Russian Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press); Toby Clyman and Diana Greene, *History of Russian Women's Literature* (Westport, CT: Greenwood). A major bibliography of Russian women writers from the Kievan period to the present also is scheduled to be published in 1993: Marina Ledkovsky, Mary Zirin, Charlotte Rosenthal, eds., *Biobibliography of Russian and Soviet Women Writers* (Westport, CT: Greenwood) (title tentative).

7. I enclose the term in quotation marks not to impugn Mandel'shtam's virtues as a poet but to underscore the fact that Nadezhda Mandel'shtam here was operating within the cultural genre of "great poet's widow."

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