8. 'How Women Should Write': Russian Women's Writing in the Nineteenth Century

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The question of how to write about women in Russian literature of the nineteenth-century can be solved in various ways. We can add women writers into literary history, or we can try to write a separate women’s history with the aim of identifying fields and genres where women’s presence seems to be obvious, as did Barbara Heldt. We can also look for the specificity, originality and independence of women’s creativity and discuss women’s writing within various models, which follow not the paradigm of struggle, but rather the ‘model of connection and development’, as suggested by Jehanne Gheith, or fall within the ‘pattern of forgetfulness’, as proposed by Catriona Kelly. In our reading of women’s literature we will bear in mind the ‘double-voiced discourse’ of women in culture, and pay attention to the

means and ways by which women writers approach their cultural border
existence and to how they negotiate their positions within the dominant
patriarchal discourse and its ideological binaries. This short reflection on
literary practices of Russian women writers in the nineteenth century seeks
to depict and analyse strategies of women’s creative ‘nomadism’, the ways
of writing and finding one’s own place within a strange cultural territory
and to name some of the innovative approaches which helped women to
write themselves for themselves and for the history of literature. We do
not see the women authors as a homogenous group. Instead, we would
like to pay attention to diversity of genre, different types of protagonists
and the differences between ideas and themes and narrative strategies.
We also recognize the differences among the authors’ positions on literary
creativity. If some tried to adopt and adapt literary imagery and topoi
which were considered conventionally male, others created an alternative
space for women in their own right within, but separate, from the male
world. A third group chose a border existence, while a fourth spoke from
the female margins which they recreated, renamed and revized into a
space of innovative possibilities. Accordingly, it is our aim to trace women’s
literary history of the nineteenth century as a unity with differences.

When the Westernization of Russian culture began in the seventeenth
century, women’s writing was restricted to private correspondence, but in
the following century women began to feature in the cultural landscape.
‘Women in Russia, therefore, went in three generations from near-invisibility
[…] to the greatest degree of political and public prominence their society
could offer’, writes Catriona Kelly, commenting primarily on the lives and
works of Catherine II and Ekaterina Dashkova.

But an entirely new situation arose at the end of the century. The real
foundation for women’s participation in literature was the works and
ideas of N. M. Karamzin, who used gender in his campaign for a new
literary language and a new literature. As Iu. M. Lotman says: ‘particular
store was laid by women in this exercise. Ladies’ taste was declared the
supreme arbiter of literature, and the educator of future generations of
enlightened Russians was declared to be the educated woman, familiar

5. Catriona Kelly, ‘Sappho, Corinna, and Niobe: Genres and Personae in Russian Women’s
Writing, 1760–1820’, in A History of Women’s Writing in Russia, ed. by Adele Marie Barker
6. On women in eighteenth-century culture and literature see, for example, Women and
Gender in 18th-Century Russia, ed. by Wendy Rosslyn (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).
with the heights of culture, and gracious within and without’. A role in Karamzin’s project was allotted to the woman writer, even if at first she wrote not in Russian but in French. As Lotman observes, for Karamzin the specific nature of women’s writing had two manifestations: ‘firstly this is pedagogical literature for children, and secondly the literature of feeling, devoted to love. Both, moreover, are distinguished by their intimacy – they are destined for the immediate audience. This is literature which arises from speech and from everyday life’.

The feminization of literature in Karamzin’s time had a double aspect and contradictory outcome for women: on the one hand it legitimized femininity as publicly significant and creative; on the other hand it laid down strict limits for the creative representation of the female. Accepting the conditions proposed, women were to write according to defined rules, within a set thematic range and in appropriate language. Moreover, the ‘inexperienced muses’ were encouraged to be modest and unpretentious and therefore, most women writers prefaced their texts with excuses, figures of self-disparagement and protestations of lack of ambition, which often derived from their immediate artistic and financial dependency on male patrons.

A complication in this situation was the role of sentimentalist feminization in the ideological conflict between the Karamzin and Shishkov schools. Feminization was associated with the former; the Shishkovites and (in a different manner) the supporters of serious ideologically-significant literature rejected the sensibility, sentimentality and the salon style which were associated with femininity. However, some women (Anna Bunina, Anna Volkova and Ekaterina Urusova) were accepted into the Colloquium of Admirers of the Russian Word, headed by Shishkov, though not into Arzamas, the grouping of literary innovators, with its principles of play and

8. Lotman, p. 60.
10. Some similar examples from the works of Anna Naumova and Maria Izvekova are discussed in, for example, Frank Göpfert, Dichterinnen und Schriftstellerinnen in Russland von der Mitte des 18 bis zum Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts: Eine Problemskizze (München: Verlag Otto Sagner, 1992), pp. 46–51.
dilettantism, even though the sphere of dilettantism and wit, including linguistic play, was also often associated with women.11

Thus, at the very beginning of the nineteenth century we see the situation which was to reproduce itself over and over again during the century (and indeed later): the patriarchal cultural canon reconstructs and reorganizes itself. The male ideologists controlling these processes use conceptions of femininity and the practices of women’s writing to construct their own theories and for the purpose of their own ideological battles, but all this has nothing to do directly with real women;12 for women writers, and their life and literary practices, it creates the boundaries within which they are to exist and write. Some of them submit to the patriarchal dictat,13 but others attempt to find the means to speak in their own language in the situation of linguistic and generic constraint, to exist where, in Lacan’s expression, woman does not exist.

A typical example is the work of Anna Bunina (1774–1829), the first woman who can be called a professional poet with a public reputation.14 Studies of her poetry speak of ambivalence15 or the splitting and the splintering16 of her personal and creative identity. Bunina did not support Karamzinist feminization and in her poems she attempted themes that

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12. As Kelly correctly observes, the people on whom a woman was dependent in real life – father, husband, patron – were rarely reminiscent of the ideal sensible hero of the sentimental tale (Catriona Kelly, ‘Sappho, Corinna, and Niobe: Genres and Personae in Russian Women’s Writing, 1760–1820’, pp. 47–48.


14. See Wendy Rosslyn, Anna Bunina (1774–1829) and the Origins of Women’s Poetry in Russia (Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997).


were considered profoundly masculine (war, politics and philosophy) and
did not limit herself to the recommended repertoire of love and sensibility.
On the other hand, the theme of women’s writing was personally important
to her, as can be seen, for example, in the allegories ‘The Peking Stadium’
(‘Pekinskoe ristalishche’) and ‘The Fall of Phaethon’ (‘Padenie Faetona’).
In her poem ‘A Conversation between Me and Women’ (‘Razgovor mezhdu
mnoi i zhenshchinami’), the lyric heroine answers with bitter irony the
bewildered question why she does not sing of women: because it is only
possible to be a poet in the male literary world by playing by the rules
of the stronger sex. The principled ‘unfemininity’ of her poetry is a free
choice and a tactical decision in the situation of lack of creative freedom
which Bunina well recognized. In the dilemma which offered itself – to be
a woman or a poet – Bunina chooses the latter, but this decision does not
save her from inner disjunction, nor from condescending and sometimes
mocking judgments on her poetic talent by male colleagues and critics,
for whom she was still, to quote Wendy Rosslyn, ‘an ambiguous figure’.

The dual, double place of the female poet turned out to be a traumatic
space for Bunina and most of her younger sisters. At the beginning of
the nineteenth century the literary salon was the more ‘natural’, real and
symbolic place where the legitimization of woman as a creative being,
turned out to be possible.

Literary salons, the vogue for which came to Russia from France, were
primarily associated with urbanité. The skill of urbanité was principally acquired

17. A similar route was taken by Elizaveta Kul’man (1808–25). Key to her work was the
reinterpretation of myth. As Judith Vowles writes, ‘Her poetry thus belongs to the
tradition of women’s revisionary writing that rewrites and invents myths as a way
of establishing female legitimacy and authority’. ‘The Inexperienced Muse: Russian
Women and Poetry in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century’, in A History of Women’s
Writing in Russia, ed. by Adele Marie Barker and Jehanne M. Gheith (Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 70. Another path was to agree to be not a poet
but a poetess. See Diana Greene, ‘Praskov’ia Bakunina and the Poetess’s Dilemma’ in
Russkie pisatel’nitsy i literaturnyi protsess v konise XVIII – pervoi treti XX vv., comp. by

18. Rosslyn, ‘Conflicts over Gender and Status’, p. 62.

19. On literary salons and the role of women within them see, for example, M. Aronson and
S. A. Reiser, Literaturnye kruzhki i salony (Leningrad: Priboi, 1929); V. E. Vatsuro, Iz istorii
literaturnogo byta pushkinskoi pory (Moscow: Kniga, 1989); Literaturnye salony i kruzhki,
pervaia polovina XIX veka, ed. N. L. Brodskii (Moscow: Agraf, 2001); Lina Bernstein,
‘Women on the Verge of a New Language: Russian Salon Hostesses in the First Half
of the Nineteenth Century’, in Russia-Women-Culture, pp. 209–224; I. Kontorovich, ‘“Samyi
nezhnii zvuk Moskvy”: salon Zenaidy Volkonskoi’, Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 20
through participation in lively and entertaining social conversation, the organization and maintenance of which, was thought to be women’s business and skill. Salons were associated with women’s speech and narrative and were usually neutral territory, a space where people of different allegiances, ideas and literary parties met. The hostess was the guarantor of tolerance (and to some degree egalitarianism), the arbiter of taste, the ‘legislator’ and a culturally significant figure. As a rule, she was not only the organizer of conversation and a listener, but also a writer, who could ‘publish’, that is, offer her own works for reading and discussion. In this sense the salon was a place of joint cultural activity for men and women, where women even had some advantage. However, it is important to recall that the conventions of social etiquette were in operation; the obligatory compliments showered on the ‘authoresses’ often had nothing in common with real discussion of texts and took them out of the sphere of serious literary life, into the sphere of ladies’ dilettantism. Women who took up literature and were associated with salon culture (Zinaida Volkonskaia, Aleksandra Smirnova-Rosset, Evdokiia Rostopchina and to some degree Karolina Pavlova) existed in the sphere of ‘artistic everyday life’ (to use Iu. N. Tynianov’s term) and met with notable difficulties when they tried to demonstrate their right to engage in literary craft outside the drawing room on the professional literary stage. If they accepted the rules of the game and agreed to the conventions of feminization, which set the boundaries for women’s self-expression, they gained the reputation of a ‘salon or ballroom poetess’, like, for example, Evdokiia Rostopchina (1811–58).

20. For example, the memoirist B. N. Chicherin never tires of mentioning the ability of salon hostesses to conduct ‘lively, slightly mocking, brilliant conversation, full of playfulness and subtle irony’; ‘unfailingly fluent lively and merry conversation, with a hint of the most overt and ingenuous coquettishness’. ‘Vospominaninia’, in Russkoe obschestvo 40–50-kh godov XIX v., ed. by S. L. Chernov (Moscow: MGU, 1991), p. 70.
21. Moreover, as Judith Vowles observes, publications associated with salons, ‘almanacs, elegant literary collections modeled on Karamzin’s Aonidy, offered a middle ground between private circulation and commercial publication: they were a favored place to make a debut’ (‘The Inexperienced Muse’, p. 65).
24. Rostopchina was accorded literary fame in the 30s. Later, after 1846, her poetic fame faded and the new generation of critics (Chernyshevskii and Dobroliubov) wrote of her scornfully. Rostopchina wrote long poems, verse drama, stories and novels, but her most popular works (in the view both of contemporaries and later readers) were her lyrics. On Rostopchina see, for example, M. Sh. Fainshtein, Pisatel’`nitsy pushkinskoi pory: istoriko-literaturnye ochernki (Leningrad: Nauka, 1989), pp. 83–104.
Key themes for Rostopchina’s lyrics were those associated with society life: the masquerade and the ball. The exceptionally rich and metaphorphically weighty motif of the masquerade was used in two ways in the romantic context. On the one hand, it was associated with the motifs of pretence, deception, mimesis and concealment: individuals act out what the mask they have assumed depicts. But on the other hand, the mask can be understood as a means for liberation. The mask does not conceal, but, on the contrary, protects the authentic I, it hides all the social roles and statuses inscribed on to the face and body and when wearing the mask it is possible to be authentically oneself. Both can be found in Rostopchina, in ‘Putting on an Albanian Costume’ (‘Nadevaia albanskii kostium’), ‘Why I Love Masquerades’ (‘Zachem ia liubliu maskarady’) and other poems. There is always a gap between mask, costume and face, a space for play, in which it is possible to create one’s own ‘elusive’, ‘performative’ identity. In Rostopchina’s work the mask acquires not only standard romantic connotations, but also gender connotations, as do the motifs of society, ball and dancing. The society drawing-room and the ballroom are, for Rostopchina, not only the territory of pretence, deception and worldliness, but her own positive space, characterized by positive epithets: merry, colourful, luxurious, festive, joyful and intoxicating. It is a place where women are allowed to speak and in describing it she can talk about themes which are branded taboo by the dominant discourse.

Poetry in general is a dangerous experiment and a dangerous occupation for women: Rostopchina agrees with these judgements by contemporary critics. In her poem ‘How Women Should Write’ (‘Kak dolzhny pisat’ zhenshchiny’), she calls on women not to depict their feelings openly, but to shroud them with a veil of reticence and ‘decent’, not to display them to general view, to society. But repressed sensual experience can be illuminated indirectly, through the depiction of the ball, the dance and music. Here she can talk about the taboo experience of the body, about women’s bodily pleasure, preserving the erotic connotations associated with the motif of


dance in the culture of the time, but reducing the theme of crime and punishment. Although the poetess entitles her key poem on this theme ‘Temptation’ (‘Iskushenie’), it talks not about sin, but about joy, happiness, ecstasy and the bodily pleasure resulting from sensual experience of smell, taste and touch. Uncontrolled female pleasure is conveyed by the rhythmic pattern of the verse: in this pulsating flow of speech, the music, sound, and rhythm (the semiotic in Kristeva’s term) are almost more important than the sense (the symbolic), which for contemporary feminist critics (Hélène Cixous) is the sign of specifically female language, the female manner of writing. Contemporaries saw the source of this feminine element of Rostopchina’s style as salon chatter, the tradition of brilliant, lively, flowing social conversation, and this (not only the theme of the poetry) was the reason for calling Rostopchina a ‘salon poetess’.

Rostopchina, as Judith Vowles notes, sought the path to female creative self-realization within the separate, specifically female sphere, but did not consider it limited. Her position met with various responses, approving and scornful, from male critics and with polemics from her female ‘work colleagues’. Vowles writes of her sharp dispute with the poet Elizaveta Shakhova (1821–99), who had chosen the path of intense religious mysticism and accused Rostopchina of shallowness and frivolity, in turn receiving reproaches of coldness and indifference from the latter. Another polemical female response to Rostopchina’s position, in Vowles’ view, was the poetry of Iuliia Zhadovskaia (1824–83), where the image of the lyrical heroine (a modest provincial young woman) and the style (simple and ‘natural’) contrasted to the aristocratic Rostopchina’s lyrics with their salon luxuriance and brilliance. But Rostopchina’s chief female opponent in

28. Some poems by Rostopchina, written at various times, are called ‘Verses for Music’ (‘Stikhii dlia muzyki’).
33. See Rostopchina’s poems ‘To the Indifferent One’ (‘Ravnodushnoi’, 1830) and Shakhova’s reply, ‘The Woman and the Ball’ (‘Zhenshchina i bal’, 1840) and ‘To Women Poets’ (‘K zhenschinam-poetam’, 1845).
the view of both contemporaries and posterity was undoubtedly Karolina Pavlova (1807–93).

Pavlova has several texts addressed to Rostopchina, which are constructed on the device of contrast: ‘We Are Contemporaries, Countess’ (‘My sovremenniki, grafinia’), ‘To Countess Rostopchina’ (‘Grafine Rostopchinoi’), and ‘Three Souls’ (‘Tri dushi’). Pavlova contrasts herself, with her Slavophilism, modesty, independence, sedentariness, domesticity and professionalism, to Rostopchina, the cosmopolitan Petersburger, follower of George Sand, aristocrat, the beauty showered with compliments, the free artist and the dilettante. Some of the self-characterizations mentioned are incorrect, or would be overturned by Pavlova’s later life, when she decided on a public quarrel with her husband and a divorce, left Russia and lived in Germany. But the point of the argument was not biographical contrasts or similarities, but different understandings of the nature and role of the woman poet, emphasized by Pavlova. She considers Rostopchina’s position to be treachery, betrayal of the artistic gift. In ‘Three Souls’, Pavlova writes of the woman poet who turned the ‘sacred gift’ into a ‘noisy rattle’ and chose ‘humdrum banality’, ‘everyday dullness’ and ‘noisy high society’ for the sake of compliments, pleasure and enjoyment. To Rostopchina’s ‘noisy rattle’, Pavlova opposes her ‘mute’ muse, her ‘sad verse’ and her understanding of poetry as ‘sacred craft’.

The poetic dialogue described here has key significance for understanding the history of women’s writing; Rostopchina and Pavlova chose different means of writing in the patriarchal world. Rostopchina accepts the rules of the game and remains within the sphere legitimized as feminine, but she destroys it from within or, to be more precise, she re-writes and remakes what is permitted by patriarchal discourse in her own way, she makes her own statements ‘in italics’, to use Nancy K. Miller’s expression. The female italics in Rostopchina’s case are mainly intonation; Rostopchina’s female language and the feminine element are associated with melody, music, rhythm and sound (in this sense Pavlova’s mention of the ‘noisy rattle’ is very germane). Pavlova, however, chooses the path of resistance to feminization, the path of stubborn and, as she constantly emphasizes,

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35. In this poem Rostopchina is not mentioned by name. However, the poem displays the very type of woman author as Rostopchina, who is explicitly addressed in former poems.
36. ‘You who live on in the destitute heart’ (‘Ty, utselevshii v serdtse nishchem’).
hopeless struggle for woman’s right to write ‘unfemininely’, to write as she feels like writing, about whatever, not looking over her shoulder at the recommendations and admonitions of the male censor. Acquisition of voice is achieved through overcoming the torments of muteness. The themes of muteness, wordlessness, silence and inexpressibility are key for Pavlova and are obviously associated, not only with the romantic tradition, but also with the struggle for women’s right to speak.

Both strategies of women’s writing are significant and productive, but recognition of this became possible only with a gender-oriented reading of the poetic epistles of the authors named. Amongst their contemporaries, Rostopchina had the reputation of being disreputable and Pavlova of being masculine. However, these differences were unimportant for other patriarchal critics, who were concerned not with the real works of real women poets, but with existing *a priori* ideas about women’s writing. This is why M. E. Saltykov-Shchedrin calls Pavlova’s lyrics the work of a moth or siskin and why V. Pereverzev accuses Pavlova of having seen and heard nothing apart from salon society and empty society conversation and of having depicted only this ‘trivial little world’ without ‘introspection or self-analysis’.

However, any attentive and fair-minded reader cannot fail to see that introspection and self-analysis are the main elements in Pavlova’s lyrics. Hers is poetry which tells of stubborn resistance to fate and the banality of life, of the hidden life of a soul which goes from one ‘hopeless hope’ to another; it is a poetic history of losses, useless delusions and loneliness and at the same time a testimony to the triumph of will and the desire to move forward. These are lyrics which are full of reflection and merciless self-knowledge; they are tense and emotional, but absolutely unsentimental, even when the theme is love. It is not surprising that she was sometimes called ‘male’ (at times with admiration, at times with scorn). However, Pavlova’s lyric heroine (not hero!) is neither masculinized nor sexless: she is always a woman, and a woman poet. In Pavlova’s poetry the issues of

40. V. Pereverzev, ‘Salonnaia poetessa’, *Sovremennyi mir* (1915), 12, 185–88.
existential loneliness and the poet’s failure to be understood, which are common to humanity in general and to the romantics, have an evident gender aspect. Pavlova’s key motif of the path turns out to be particularly tragic, because the path is an element of women’s fate: women pass from the paradise of innocent dreams, either straight to the ‘banal life under lock and key’ of social decency, or to the sufferings and disillusionments of the unrealized soul, which ‘remembers itself as if it were another’. This emotional concealment is intensified by women’s muteness. The motif of muteness is associated both with the woman poet and with woman as such, whose soul is unable to speak, has not been taught to speak and cannot express itself.

The themes named here are combined in a very unusual text by Pavlova, the story ‘A Double Life’ (‘Dvoinaia zhizn’, 1844–47), the prose part of which tells the ‘usual story’ of a young woman from high society; the poetic fragments describe the nocturnal life of her soul and tell us that Cecilia is a gifted poet, although no-one (least of all she, herself) suspects it. In her half-waking dreams the ‘mute’ heroine meets with a ‘severe genius’, acquires speech and receives the potential to tell her own story in the first person, but the story finishes precisely at this moment, as Catriona Kelly remarks. Even so, Cecilia’s drama is not swallowed up by silence: it is narrated by the author’s sister-voice.

Severely critical of the female world and the accepted representations of femininity, Pavlova constantly discusses them and tries to assert the right to speech and to a real life for herself and all her ‘mute’ sisters. A similar theme and the discourse of sisterhood can be heard unexpectedly forcefully in the work of Nadezhda Durova, in her romantic stories and especially in her famous ‘Journals of a Cavalry Maiden’ (‘Kavalerist-devitsa, proishestvie v Rossii’, 1836). Here we meet with a surprising paradox: Durova, who in life assumed a male name, wore male clothing and led a male way of life, writes all her texts with a female narrator and the so-called ‘female theme’ occupies a prime place. In Durova’s Journals the questions of the place and situation of women in traditional patriarchal society are raised very openly and fearlessly, especially in the chapters about childhood where the

41. ‘Da mnogo nas, tainstvennykh podrug’ (‘And many of us, mysterious women friends’), ‘Liubliu ia vas, mladye devy’ (‘I love you, young maidens’), Laterna magica.
42. Here Pavlova solves one of the most ‘insoluble’ problems of women’s writing; she adapts the exclusively masculine image of the poet-genius, and the situation of his love for his beloved Muse, with the aid of inversion of gender roles.
central figures are mother and daughter, whose relationship is depicted unsentimentally and dramatically, in contrast to the sentimental idealizing tradition. In the Journals, the mother and other women is associated with surveillance and coercion. Dependency, stereotypicality, absence of choice, primordial inferiority and subjection to unceasing observation and control are marked, especially by the mother, as essential attributes of femininity. Within the bounds of the female world, the heroine sees only two alternatives: to submit to the destiny of the eternal slave and prisoner, or to become a monster in public opinion. But she finds a third path: in order to remain herself, she ceases being a woman and becomes a soldier. As she tells the unusual story of her life, Durova creates the legend of a woman who found freedom and the possibility for self-realization in spite of all stereotypes. Part of this self-realization is her autodocumentary text, written in the person of a woman. It is also important that in spite of the eccentricity of her own choice, Durova does differentiate herself sharply from other women and frequently addresses her ‘young peers’ in the text, particularly when discussing women’s lot and their lack of freedom.

Discussion of femininity and masculinity can be seen, as mentioned, in some romantic stories by Durova, such as ‘The Game of Fate, or Illegal Love’ (‘Igra sud’by, ili Protivozakonnaia liubov’), which was originally published under the title ‘Elena, the Beauty of the City of T.’ (‘Elena, T-skaia krasavitsa’) in 1837, and others. However, the novel became the dominant literary genre in the 1830s and 1840s, and came under the particularly rigid control of patriarchal institutions (publishing, journalism, criticism and censorship). The exclusively masculine, romantic concept of the prophetic genius, together with the theory of social realism and the demands that literature be the teacher of life and participate in ideological battles, relegated the female a priori – as secondary, insignificant and private – to the margins of the literary process.

The female was usurped by male literature and existed, as Barbara Heldt says, in a state of

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44. Heldt, in her Terrible Perfection, pp. 64–76 sees special potential for women’s self-expression in autobiographical genres and in lyrics. Even if one agrees in part, it must be observed that such texts were not in practice published in the author’s lifetime. Durova’s memoirs were the rarest exception. On women’s ego-texts see, for example, Catherine Viollet and Elena Grechanaia, ‘Dnevnik v Rossii v kontse XVIII – nachale XIX v. kak avtobiografcheskaia praktika’, in Avtobiograficheskaia praktika v Rossii i vo Frantsii, ed. by Catherine Viollet and Elena Grechanaia (Moscow: IMILI RAN, 2006), pp. 57–111; I. Savkina, Razgovory s zerkalom i Zazerkal’em: avtodokumental’nye teksty v russkoi literature pervoi poloviny XIX veka (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2007), pp. 9–289.

under-description. The idealized, infantilized, de-individualized female was part of a world view that had no place for real women and women writers.

However, in spite of the dictat of the canon, women were also able to destabilize it surreptitiously in their prose and to find or invent possibilities for self-expression. Their innovations were not associated with central ideas (as seen by critics), nor with conflicts between ideas, nor with the development of plot paradigms, but primarily with narrative practices and changes of emphasis in the depiction of major and minor characters. The women writers of the 1840s and 1850s problematized the concepts of periphery and centre, undermining the division between them, and created the conditions for the literary legitimization of the female and the female voice. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the chief prose genre for women was the story. Jehanne M. Gheith says that women usually wrote diagnostic texts, society tales and works focusing on the problems of women. Catriona Kelly notes that the women writers of the 1830s and 1840s used the society tale, transformed it and also created a new type of story, which she calls the provincial tale, defined as ‘a medium-to-full-length prose narrative set in the Russian countryside, and depicting a young female protagonist’s struggles not to limit her life according to the accepted expectations for women from landowning families’. Women writers used existing popular genres and invented their own variations on the story genre and thus aimed to reconstruct cultural space in such a way as to find a place in it for the female heroine and female writing.

In the first half of the nineteenth century the most prominent figures in women’s prose were Mariia Zhukova and Elena Gan (1814–42).

Practically all studies of Gan’s work agree that her chief interest was the unusual woman, the feminized variant of the romantic exile.

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46. Heldt, Terrible Perfection, p. 16.
47. See Jehanne M. Gheith, ‘Women of the 1830s and 1850s: Alternative Periodizations’ in A History of Women’s Writing in Russia, p. 88.
50. On the romantic exile as the literary prototype of Gan’s heroines see Kelly, A History of Russian Women’s Writing, p.112.
The extraordinary female protagonist is created in various ways: by using exotic material, by taking traditional motifs in the depiction of women to extremes (the mania for self-sacrifice in ‘Theophania Abbiadzio’ (‘Teofaniia Abbiadzhio’, 1840), or in ‘The Numbered Box’ (‘Numerovannaia lozha’, 1842); or by depicting a strong heroine who experiences romantic alienation, a conflict with her surroundings, like Ol’ga in ‘The Ideal’ (‘Ideal’, 1840), or Zenaida in ‘Society’s Judgment’ (‘Sud sveta’, 1840). The histories of these heroines are similar in many ways: childhood paradise, mother’s early death, persecution by the crowd which makes accusations of excessive intellect and pride, self-sacrifice for a male other, and unfulfilled hopes for family happiness. Both texts conclude with the heroine’s first-person narrative about herself, the leitmotif of which is the feeling of unrealized personality and rejection of ordinary life in favour of spiritual endeavour. The sharp conflict between woman and the world around her and the critical depiction of male characters, have allowed some researchers to call Gan ‘the Russian George Sand’, but the ideas at which her rebellious protagonists arrive have very little in common with women’s emancipation or gender inversion, the assimilation of male roles. Gan’s heroines are not satisfied with either male or female roles, only with angelic ones, signifying a total ban on sexuality. However, whilst they refuse to tie themselves to the adult, sexual, male world and retreat into the nunnery of spiritual innocence, Gan’s heroines still feel the imperative to create and write. The central themes of Gan’s last unfinished work, ‘A Futile Gift’ (‘Naprasnyi dar’, 1842), are the nature of female talent and the possibilities for women’s creative self-realization. Here she distinguishes creativity from authorship. The heroine of the story, Aniuta, is a female romantic poet (a soothsayer), who brings her gift to fruition and is happy so long as she lives by the laws of inexpressible, wordless, poetic revelation. However, the attempt to go public, the moment of contact with the real world and

51. Utballa (Utballa, 1837), Divine Judgment (Sud bozhi, 1840).
52. On this see Kelly, A History of Russian Women’s Writing, p. 117 and Andrew, Narrative and Desire in Russian Literature, p. 131.
54. Drawing here not on the romantic conceptions of the poet-prophet, but on the conceptions of the Jena romantics, which were assimilated in Russia and which viewed the feminine, the female, as creative. See Kelly, A History of Russian Women’s Writing, p. 34 and N. Ia. Berkovskii, Romantizm v Germanii (Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1973).
the reader, turns out to be extremely dangerous or even impossible for a woman – to adopt a rational, professional relation to creativity (within the male world of competition and conflict) is perceived as betrayal of her gift. With her typical romantic maximalism, Gan takes the problem to extremes and makes it visible and significant. In this sense, Catriona Kelly thinks, ‘as a writer who eschewed compromise, she was suitably inspiring in the absolutist conditions of Russian culture’. 55

Unlike Gan, her contemporary Maria Zhukova (1805–55) was considered by contemporary and later critics to be a standard, mediocre writer with no special virtues or innovations. Only the “squint-eyed” view (Sigrid Weigel’s term) 56 on her work by feminist critics helped to reveal the important innovatory potential of her prose, connected with the range of the (female) protagonists she depicts and the nature of the narrative.

Zhukova’s prose, starting with her first work in her first cycle, ‘Evenings by the River Karpovka’ (‘Vechera na Karpovke’, 1837–38), gives a voice to those female types that had remained on the periphery of plot in contemporary literature, the silent extras and semi-comic figures: the plain Jane, the old maid, the provincial, the hanger-on, the kept woman and the old woman. 57 The main thing which interests her is the woman who does not usually become a literary heroine, the ordinary woman and her fate, which includes not only relationships with men, but also perhaps no-less-complex and often dramatic relationships with other women. Like Durova, Zhukova depicts conflictive mother-daughter relationships, complex simultaneously loving and competitive relationships between sisters and relationships between female friends. 58

Zhukova’s narrative practices are especially interesting. Beginning with ‘Evenings by the River Karpovka’, she presents rich contradictions and a tension between narrated stories and the framing plot, a frame which, in Joe Andrew’s view, allows us to speak of the polyphony of a text that

problematizes ideas about authorship and gender: ‘[…] by using male narrators, whose view she does not necessarily share, she was able not only to create a truly polyphonic work, but also to problematize and interrogate the very notions of authorship and gender, as well as the interconnections between these two concepts’. Hoogenboom uses the term pastiche to denote this tension and sees in it a means for expressing female ‘protest against traditional plots for women’s lives’. Hoogenboom considers that the numerous digressions (which so irritated the critic ‘elinskii) are a street demonstration of a literary kind: the looseness and incompleteness are a kind of protest against the social order. The idea expressed by the narrative of the fluidity, incompleteness and unpredictability of life is, in Hoogenboom’s view, very important for Zhukova. Hoogenboom points out the special functions of the motifs of nature and the provinces in her work: ‘In Zhukova’s aesthetics, a country walk best evokes the large, relatively flat expanse of real lived life, the standard by which she measured narrative in realist fiction […] This kind of progression actively resists the eventfulness of literary plot, which in some way revolves around a beginning, a middle, and an end. In her most subtle critique of the society tale, Zhukova uses a narrative strategy that subverts a linear narrative and closure’.

The openness and unstructuredness which almost all Zhukova’s commentators note (with or without approval) is connected with the fact that Zhukova orients her narrative strategies to oral narrative or chatter. In the late texts the narrator is often a female chatterbox or a provincial gossip. This narrative technique presents a female view of things and unites the public with the personal, the private, insisting on its value.

What is important here is the discourse of the provinces and also the special position of the female narrator, who is situated inside the outside (she is an insider who is simultaneously an outsider) and has a somewhat confused and distorted perspective. The narrator and Zhukova’s heroines describe provincial space as marginal, but they do not escape to the

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61. Hoogenboom, p. 92.
62. Hoogenboom, p. 91.
63. Cf. Kelly’s ideas about the escape plot as an obligatory element of the provincial tale...
centre or contest marginalization, rather they try to turn the latter into building blocks for the construction of their own identity, try to rehabilitate and reconstruct what the dominant cultural discourse sees as non-being, nonexistence. In a sense they repudiate the values of oppositional and hierarchical thinking and create new possibilities for Russian literature.54

The period 1830–50 was the time when women stepped into the literary arena, when women’s writing and women writers were professionalized: in their lyrics, autodocumentary genres and prose, they try to find strategies and methods for representing the female in literary discourse, despite the patriarchal tradition that absolutely dominated criticism. And in this sense Aleksandra Zrazhevskaia (1805–67) is a complete exception, since she could be called the first critic of a pro-feminist persuasion in Russian literary history. Her essay ‘The Menagerie’ (‘Zverinets’, 1842), consists of letters to Varvara and Praskov’ia Bakunina. The first letter contains a short autobiographical sketch, a sort of reduced novel about the formation of a woman writer and in the second section, Zrazhevskaia polemises vigorously with patriarchal prejudices about the unnaturalness of women taking up literature and its dangers for them. She notes that women’s inability to compete in the sciences and arts is associated with lack of education and the limited and false societal understanding of the nature and role of women. Zrazhevskaia describes the concrete means by which critics hold women writers back and counters with a short but favourable review of the women’s writing of her time, naming Avdot’ia Glinka, Elizaveta Kul’m, Olimpiada Shishkina, Elena Gan, Maria Zhukova, Nadezhda Durova, Elizaveta Kologrivova, Aleksandra Ishimova, Karolina Pavlova, Evdokiia Rostopchina and Zinaida Volkonskaia, offering a practically exhaustive list of the women writers of the 1830s and 1840s. In another article she suggests that women writers ‘cease to act separately’ and ‘gather all together’ to publish their own journal.65 Here the woman question is articulated in part, which takes us to a new and different page in the history of Russian women’s writing.

When Evdokiia Rostopchina stated regretfully that the 1850s, ‘our chaotic and repugnant time’, as she called it, were ‘not in favour of poetry, and particularly not of women’s poetry’,66 she was saying something

(A History of Russian Women’s Writing, pp. 59–78).
64. Similar narrative strategies and themes can be seen in the stories of Sof’ia Zakrevskaia (1796–1865?) and Anastasiia Marchenko (1830–1880?).
66. Evdokiia P. Rostopchina, Talisman. Izbrannaia lirika. Neliudimka, drama. Dokumenty, pis’ma,
essential about the shifting of aesthetic paradigms and the crucial effect it had on women’s writing in the middle of the century. Rostopchina experienced the transition of values in her own literary career when she became the object of mockery in the pages of literary journals, such as *The Contemporary* (*Sovremennik*), and among radical critics, such as Nekrasov, Dobroliubov and Chernyshevskii. For them, Rostopchina represented the social and gendered Otherness that the new members of the *raznochinets* intelligentsia associated with the decadent morality of the aristocratic past. For the emerging intelligentsia, who were to challenge the philosophical and aesthetic values of their romantic predecessors, an aristocratic woman writer was a cultural relic, self-deluded and unable to signify symbolic authority. As already pointed out, the literary discourse of the emancipatory 1860s was quite different from the earlier sentimental-romantics discourses that had openly presented gender difference. While the latter presented a complementary rhetoric, which, nevertheless, invited women writers to participate in generic literary innovations such as novels and diaries, the emancipatory Realism of the 1860s had its own contradictions: there was a tendency to absorb the difference, which did not favour women writers, since women were expected to write ‘as well as men’.

The turbulent years of the great reforms – social, cultural and political transformations challenging the backwardness of Russian society, including the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 – promoted women to participation in higher education, individual liberation and equal cultural opportunities. The prominence of the ‘woman question’ as prime mover for the emancipation movement is evident. However, in the ‘awakening’ of women into a new consciousness, as the woman question was symbolically defined in the discourses of the ‘thick journals’, men and women were placed quite asymmetrically: women – still mainly from the upper classes – longing for cultural activities were to be re-educated, while male agents were the new teachers, as so well imagined in Chernyshevskii’s novel, *What Is to Be Done? (Chto delat’?)* 1863).

Expectations notwithstanding, the woman question did not have an entirely positive influence on women writers. Although its discourse encouraged

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women to go public and to appeal to the egalitarian programme to meet their educational needs, the educated woman was, nevertheless, unable to redress the balance of the asymmetric cultural and aesthetic tradition of woman as deviant, as the historical and aesthetic backward Other. The new egalitarian concept did not allow a woman writer to seek refuge in her difference when it came to the conventions of genres, themes, or narrative strategies. It demanded great courage to claim cultural difference in that ‘egalitarian’ time. And when Rostopchina did so, she became an object of malicious laughter that turned into misogynistic irony aimed at women’s so-called ‘original way of thinking’, that is, not ‘with the head’ but ‘with the heart’.  

Women involved in the teacher dyad were in an ambiguous situation. Dependent on the main values of the social transition, the new cultural type, the educated woman (the kursistka and nihilistka) was formed on the fragile basis of the rationalistic concepts of the master discourse. The ‘new woman’ seemed to be emerging as a derivative of utilitarian reason, as an adjunct of the rationalistic and egalitarian principles of the neo-enlightenment, according to which every human being, including women, had the promise of developing into a reasoning subject through (self) education. However, while aiming at new egalitarian knowledge, the new woman had to distance herself from the negative connotations of feminine backwardness embodied in the old ridiculed figures of the boarding-school girl (institutka) and the caricatured aristocratic salonnière. They represented the Other as the feminine difference which was marginalized outside the new ‘learned woman’, who now had to absorb the romantic erroneous delusions into the new ideal of rational perfectibility.

Women writers were also in an ambiguous situation: to be raised from cultural inferiority on to the stage of historical consciousness meant that they risked becoming disconnected from their cultural potential and from their female predecessors. We should be aware that the egalitarian woman question did not automatically provide new literary opportunities for women in the second third of the century. All too often, the sheer volume of (male) egalitarian rhetoric on the woman question drowned out women’s voices and their literary imagination, which was denigrated as ‘backward’, ‘too narrow’, ‘subjective’, ‘melodramatic’ and lacking social relevance. The disconnection between the woman question (the discourse of male critics shaping ideally liberated feminine images) and the issues of women’s fiction,

69. N. N., ‘Stikhotvoreniia grafini Rostopchinoi’, Otechestvennye zapiski (1856), vol. 109, no. 12, 77–85, see especially pp. 81, 82, 85. See also Rosenholm, Gendering Awakening, pp. 361ff.
70. Rosenholm, Gendering Awakening, pp. 342ff.
with the way women wrote about them, resulted in frequent accusations that women writers were either not progressive or had nothing to say about the women’s movement. Neither the ‘idea of the equality of all people without distinction’ which was ‘the magnet which drew so many young idealistic women into the “ nihilist” camp’, nor the radical movement of the 1870s and 1880s, which offered many socially – and culturally – displaced women the fascination of the new ‘family’, expected women to produce any autonomous aesthetic activities as a sign of their liberation.

The dilemma for many women writing in mid-century was that, on the one hand, they used fiction for discussing women’s situation, doing so in large part through the topics and genre conventions common to their female predecessors of the 1830s; but on the other hand they experienced pressure to deny the female influence of women’s prose, which was often held up as an example of bad writing. This ambiguity, this being between different literary traditions, they absorbed into their writings. The egalitarian rhetoric, stressing social activity for the sake of the ‘common cause’, could have caused, as Catriona Kelly suggested when speaking of women writers of the 1860s, ‘hostility towards imaginative writing and to ambivalent narrative stance amongst those committed to women’s emancipation’. We can find some confirmation for this thesis in the diaries and autobiographical writings of the women of the 1860s in their yearning for education in scientific knowledge; for example, in the aesthetically and historically significant memoirs of Elizaveta Nikolaevna Vodovozova (1844–1923) At the Dawn of Life (Na zare zhizni, 1911). And yet, although we agree that the period was controversial for women’s writing, there is still no doubt, as Jehanne Gheith has stated, that ‘the second third of the nineteenth century was crucial in the development of Russian women’s writing’.

71. See, for example, N. Shelgunov on V. Krestovskii in Nikolai Shelgunov, ‘Zhenskoe bezdushie (Po povodu sochinenii V. Krestovskogo-psevdonim)’, Delo (1870), vol. 9, no. 11, pp. 1–34.
72. Stites, The Women’s Liberation Movement in Russia, p. 100.
75. Kelly, A History of Russian Women’s Writing, p. 78.
76. E. N. Vodovozova, Na zare zhizni, 2 vols (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1987), II, 82.
77. Gheith in A History of Women’s Writing in Russia, ed. by Adele Marie Barker and Jehanne
There was a large number of women writers in the middle of the century. The first prose works of many of them came out in 1848 and 1849, when the fact that women’s writings were not considered part of the realism of the ‘social’ worked in their favour: it was easier to get such writing published in a time of particularly restrictive censorship, as Gheith sees the controversial 1850s. A contemporary critic, N. Sokolovskii, confirms this, noting in 1860 that ‘one only has to follow our literary development of the most recent period to find out that there is an abundance of literary works that belong to women writers. One only has to scan any issue of The Russian Herald (Russkii vestnik) of the last two or three years to become convinced of my words’. However, the radical advocates of the new Realism, such as Shelgunov and Chernyshevskii, who read and evaluated such popular women authors as, for example, Evgeniia Tur, or Nadezhda Khvoshchinskaia, as if they were in the tradition of the male pen, failed to see them as writing on the ‘burning questions’ of the time. Women did, in fact, participate in the discussion of the woman question. They asked the question in an unexpected way, not in the utopian manner, but in a manner close to their everyday life, which meant they were not perceived as being ‘progressive’. Jane Costlow has stated though, that ‘the variety of their narratives as well as the diversity of their talents and strengths is apparent in their own efforts to name the “Woman Question”’. Ambivalence is a common position women writers share, despite their differences. We can speak of a frontier existence, or writing from the middle ground, from where they negotiate controversial norms and gender expectations, a place between extreme aesthetic and ideological positions, which they avoid or reject. The border existence relates both to aesthetic identities and cultural-historical locations; women writers, for example, seldom took the lead in aesthetic schools or political groupings and seldom participated openly in disputes between literary circles, which were the domain of the male authorities.

M. Gheith, p. 85.
79. N. Sokolovskii, ‘Nasha zhenskaia literatura poslednego perioda’, in *Svetoch* (1860), XII, 1–42 (1).
83. A. M. Skabichevskii, a literary critic, stated in 1886, speaking of Krestovskii, that she ‘stayed outside all existing movements of literary circles and parties of her time, [that]
Another common feature of women’s Realist prose is the fact that women writers quite clearly chose female figures as their main characters and studied the world from a female viewpoint and in the family setting. Hardly any woman writers would not have discussed the awakening of the new woman. Here, too, is an ambiguity common to many realistic works of such popular, though different, writers as Khvoshchinskaia, Avdot’ia Panaeva, Tur, Nadezhda Zhadovskaia or Marko Vovchok. Although their heroines were not provided with the aura of the ‘strong woman’, it is the female characters and their depiction that contribute to the evolution of the types and characters of realistic prose. Women’s heroines are not just ready-made representations of utopian concepts, but diverse, complex, individual characters. They can also be interpreted positively as being as contradictory as life itself, as the contemporary prose-writer and critic Mariia Konstantinovna Tsebrikova (1835–1917) remarked, reviewing Khvoshchinskaia’s heroines.

Nadezhda Dmitrievna Khvoshchinskaia (1822–89), one of the most important writers of the nineteenth century, was known for her many pseudonyms and wrote prose mainly under the name of V. Krestovskii. Her collected work published in six volumes includes poetry, novels, stories, sketches, drama, art and literary criticism and translations. Her main characters are women – defenceless daughters, old maids, fallen women – victims of the social system and its hierarchy, which offered only limited options for women trying to escape arranged marriages and searching for alternative solutions. Like many other women writers of her time, she draws on the provincial environment which gives women’s literature its specific tone. Like her sisters, Sof’ia Dmitrievna Khvoshchinskaia (Iv. Vesenev, 1824–65) she lived thoroughly through her heart: in his Istoriaia noveishei russkoi literatury 1848–1890 (St Petersburg: tipografia gazety ‘Novosti’, 1891), p. 237. Nikolai Kotliarevskii, another critic from the late nineteenth century, recognized that the literary activities of all these ladies [dam, A. R. and I. S.] [Zhukova, Gan, Khvoshchinskaia, Janish, Rostopchina, Korshin, Kokhanovskaia, and Tur] were not united by any universal programmes: in his Ocherki iz istorii obshchestvennogo nastroeniia shestidesiatykh godov, Vestnik Evropy (1914), vol. 2, pp. 225–52 (241).

86. She was one of the three sisters, all writers of prose. On Sof’ia D. and P. D. Khvoshchinskaia see, for example, Dictionary of Russian Women Writers, ed. by Marina Ledkovsky, Charlotte Rosenthal, Mary Zirin (Westport et al.: Greenwood, 1994), pp. 289–91.
87. Polnoe sobranie sochinenii V. Krestovskogo, 6 vols (St Petersburg: A. A. Kaspari, 1912–13).
and Praskoviia Dmitrievna Khvoshchinskaia (1828–1916), she examines the impoverished gentry by focusing on the despotic and hierarchical relationships within the patriarchal family. In novels and novellas such as Anna Mikhailovna, Who Actually Ended Up Satisfied? (Kto zh ostalsia dovolen?, 1853), Free Time (Svobodnoe vremia, 1856), Stagnant Water (Stoiachaia voda, 1861) and A Domestic Matter (Domashnee delo, 1863), she describes conflicts between parents and children, which are reflections of the era and critiques of serfdom. Nadezhda Khvoshinskaia gives voice to the women of the provinces and holds a unique position in the development of Realist literature by her reworking of the narratives of the dispossessed and downtrodden.

Her pioneering novel, The Boarding-School Girl (Pansionerka, 1861), which is central to the realistic representation of nineteenth-century literary heroines, focuses on process whilst presenting the Russia of the pre-reform 1850s. Her realist middle-ground position suggests – according to Gheith – that there are diverse historical, often invisible, layers of moral ideals in the memory of society and the individual, which should not be forgotten since they correspond to hopes and aims, to be tested later in more stable times. Khvoshchinskaia is interested not in stasis or result but in process and struggle. Her focus is on growth, embedded in detailed depictions of the social setting and of the psychologically authentic inner world of the characters. Lelen’ka, the boarding-school girl, represents the educated woman whose voice echoes the thrilling promises of education and independent labour for the new woman. Lelen’ka’s empowerment derives from her rejection of self-denial, of marriage and family as the only preserves for women. Instead, the story is of a woman’s quest to be herself and to dream for herself. Lelen’ka refuses marriage and escapes to St Petersburg to become an artist and translator. What makes the novel significant, however, is not only the independence Lela vehemently manifests, but also the skilled narrative strategy. The omniscient narrator follows Lelen’ka’s growth from the inner perspective and empathetically records the development of her mind and body. Her development is described with psychological realism and records self-doubt, conflicts, reversals and despair. However, in the last ‘emancipatory’ chapter, which covers a mere


89. Gheith, Finding the Middle Ground, p. 159.
coup of hours, after seven chapters showing several years, the narrator
ceases to comment on Lelen’ka’s innermost feelings and withdraws. We now
listen to the dialogue between the former teacher Veretitsyn and his female
pupil, the Lelen’ka who has outgrown him. Empowered by will-power
and work, Lelen’ka takes the role of the teacher. The disparity between
the psychological and ideological narrative voices in the text is achieved by an
aesthetic strategy which tunes into a historical dilemma. By this the author
appears to claim that true emancipation for the new woman cannot be
achieved without conflict between love and labour. The ending is left open
and the choices made by the new woman reveal a dilemma which points
to the limited liberties allowed by society, especially for women. The new
woman’s options of being free or lonely show the writer’s skilful art and
ideological realism: the ‘unwholeness’ of narrative and heroine implicitly
criticizes ready-made and utopian concepts of emancipation, which did not
take account of women’s real-life circumstances and the unresolved struggle
between emotion and willpower. Moreover, the openness and the narrator’s
silence respect Lelen’ka’s convictions. Dialogue gives autonomy to the
character; the narrator does not swallow her up; Lelen’ka does not dissolve
in the other’s power to give meaning, but has her own voice. Thanks to this
narrative method, the new heroine is allowed to rescue her own story and
thus she is spared the destiny of numerous literary ladies who vanish into the
hero’s story, as Joe Andrew has pointed out.90

Lelen’ka was exemplary for many, but another feature common to
other women’s works is that the woman question was not only about law
and education. Mary Zirin comments on Chernyshevskii’s *What is To Be
Done?: ‘Women saw no such easy happy endings for their heroines’.91

The domestic sphere and the family relationships, which are at the centre
of women’s prose throughout the century, reveal at the micro-level the
hierarchical injustices deeply rooted in autocratic society. The texts are
diagnostic in Gheith’s term, ‘showing the evils of Russian society – specifically,
the difficulties of women’s position – without suggesting a realisable
resolution of them’.92 Diagnostic prose includes the motifs of, for example,
injustice, family and marriage, women’s education, social prejudices,

90. Joe Andrew, “‘The Lady Vanishes’. A Feminist Reading of Turgenev’, *Irish Slavonic
Studies*, 1987, 8, 87–98.

91. Mary Zirin, ‘Women’s Prose Fiction in the Age of Realism’, in *Women Writers in Russian
Literature*, pp. 77–94 (87).

92. Gheith, in *A History of Women’s Writing in Russia*, ed. by Adele Marie Barker and Jehanne
M. Gheith, p. 94.
the prominence of ethical commitments and moral norms in women’s socialization and female self-sacrifice. An innovative sphere includes the reworking of female images to bring in whole communities of women missing from men’s narratives. A third common element is the voice of Cassandra which women writers often use when they communicate with reality to express scepticism rather than Utopianism.

Critique of social injustice is one of the most common motifs in women’s writing. Many women writers challenge social and other hierarchies and anticipate social transformations, as in such novels and novellas as *Sasha* (1858), *Three Fates (Tri doli, 1861)*, *The Plaything (Igrushechk, 1858)* and *A Living Soul (Zhivaia dusha, 1868)* by Marko Vochok (Mariia Aleksandrovna Markovich, née Vilinskaia, 1833–1907). Her prose resonates with the debate on serfdom and brings the folk voice and rhetoric into literature, especially the Ukrainian oral tradition, as well as provincial nobility and the escape plot. She introduces the peasant woman in the new role of proud narrator who tells of the iniquities in her life and speaks not only of suffering but also of love and hope; ‘laughter, song and love itself – qualities which Vovchok always celebrates’, 93 aid the downtrodden to bear the humiliations of life and subvert the power of the privileged.

Injustice is often linked with women’s critique of the limited knowledge of the world provided for them by fiction and the perception that the romantic world is incompatible with real life. However, while women’s formal education was limited, knowledge, in the form of a construct arising from special female life conditions, often devalued by the (male) public, could have the potential to undermine social and gender hierarchies and expectations. In the story ‘The Touchstone’ (‘Kamen’ pretknoveniia’, 1862), 94 the prose-writer and memoirist Ol’ga N. (Sof’ia Vladimirovna Engel’gardt, 1828–94) points both to knowledge based on female experience and to the importance of reading novels as a means of communicating women’s knowledge to other women, in order to build alliances, however virtual. This communication occurs between a young Russian widow and the French woman writer, George Sand, whose novel becomes a sign and a medium for the criticism of Westernizers’ and Slavophiles’ ideologies for their condescension to women.

The most innovative element in women’s novels from the middle of the century is the revision of women characters. Female characters refuse to be only ‘silent bearers of ideology’ and begin to speak. To allow women to speak presupposes that they are given roles as narrators, as main characters and that they appear as actors in a cultural and historical context; they speak in domestic spheres, and with other women. Among the foremost prose-writers who rewrite women characters and give voices to women in their domestic lives are Evgeniia Tur (Elizaveta Vasil’evna Salias de Turnemir, 1815–92), Nadezhda Stepanovna Sokhanskaia and Iuliia Valerianovna Zhadvovskaia (1824–83), who wrote from the 1850s to the 1870s.

Evgeniia Tur’s literary texts were accused of being ‘women’s prose’, lacking any contribution to society. However, her prose can be re-interpreted as highly social and re-valued as aesthetically innovative if we broaden the definition of social action. This approach assumes a clear reallocation of the point of view from hero to heroine and focus on her historically significant world of family and marriage as the locus of action. Both in her fictional works and large body of criticism, Tur examines families and marriages and their social implications with radicalism, especially when women, as in her novels, find a more fulfilling life, peace and harmony outside the conventional family. This happens in ‘The Niece’ (‘Plemiannitsa’, 1851) and ‘Antonina’ (‘Antonina’, 1851), which is what motivates Gheith to speak of the anti-marriage plot as a characteristic of Tur’s stories. By refusing (unhappy) marriage as the only way of life, women challenge autocratic society, since the social, economic and moral norms which structure relationships between genders and generations in the family correspond with those in society. By presenting society from the woman’s point of view and examining women’s experience in and outside marriage, Tur emphasizes women as social agents.

Gheith has shown in her analysis of Tur’s prose works that she rewrites central elements of Realist nineteenth-century narratives by ‘supplementing’. On the one hand, the writer accepts the basic premises; on the other, the focus is relocated from the alienated hero (such as Turgenev’s) to the heroine, who is empowered by participation

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96. Gheith, Finding the Middle Ground, p. 147.
97. Gheith, Finding the Middle Ground, p. 131.
in domestic female communities and, even more, by her communication with female family members. Gheith’s analysis of *Antonina* shows that, for Tur, communication is an aesthetic and ethical concept. She tells the story of one woman as many (daughter, governess and mother), whose story will live on in the communication with other female destinies told in other stories, here by Antonina’s stepdaughter. Gheith uses the term ‘aesthetics of communication’, an ethical paradigm that resists alienation, death and cynicism and defends emotional commitment and the intimate dialogue that is so vivid and spontaneous in the everyday life of women-centred relationships.

The emphasis on communication and women-centred dialogue figures frequently in women’s texts, so much so that we can say that communality and empathy mediated by dialogue between women is significant in women’s texts throughout the century. Bearing in mind Khvoshchinskaia’s view that it is rather the need to ‘relate everything’, the ‘talkativeness’, which is at the heart of women’s Realism, and not the final word, we arrive again at the idea of communication as a mode for women’s aesthetics. To give women their distinctive voice requires a female community which can provide a nurturing lap for empathy and support in the struggle for women’s own voice.

A fine example from mid-century is the society tale, ‘A Conversation After Dinner’ (‘Posle obeda v gost’iaxh’, 1858), by Nadezhda Stepanovna Sokhanskaia (Kokhanovskaya, 1823–84). Again we have a situation where one woman tells her life story to another. The narrator, a provincial upper-class woman, tells how she was married off by her mother to a man she hardly knew, and disliked, but in the end found peace with him, the marriage and herself. The plot can be read either as the forced/unhappy marriage plot, or as the heroine’s growth and spiritual triumph through ‘narrative death and resurrection’. And yet what makes Sokhanskaia’s story so challenging and captivating is the idea that only by telling her story, and by telling it to another woman, can the heroine restructure her experiences and give them new, positive meanings. The process of telling is at the very centre of the plot. We listen to women chatting in a corner,

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100. V. Porechnikov, ‘Provintsial’n’ye pis’ma o nashei literature’, in *Otechestvennye zapiski* (1862), 5, 24–52 (38).
getting easily and almost immediately into mutual understanding and emotional commitment. The woman-centred dialogue is an alternative space for women in their own right, finding themselves within, but separate from the male world. This women-centredness is empowering. Women telling their life stories make sense of, and valorize their experiences, as has been suggested by Joe Andrew, ‘against the background of the hostile, official (male) world of the government official in whose house they sit, two women sit together, and create space and meaning for themselves, their own gynocentric “universum”’. Here we can also find a subversive element, analogous to Tur’s ‘supplementation’. We are told about a conventional ‘tragedy’ of a woman forced into an unhappy marriage, but who at the end is reconciled to her situation. The dialogue, with its connection to living language, on the other hand, points to the concept of story-telling amongst women and at the same time the significance of story-writing itself. Language, communication, conversation and story-telling bring women together, establish bonds between them and help women to create alternative spaces within the main male narrative and gendered culture.

Due to the radicals’ resistance to female speech, one can assume that male critics felt uncomfortable whilst listening to women, whose Realism they criticized for its predilection for detail. Female critics and women writers saw it differently, like Khvoshchinskaia, who states that women’s novels are interesting for their ‘facts’ and for ‘being full of the small details of women’s everyday life; details told by women are worthy of being trusted, since in the details you feel the truth’. Details are given significance in women’s Realism in general, not least by Khvoshchinskaia, who, ‘like others, viewed as a fundamental challenge for Realist writing the relation between details and an idea or ideal’. Details stand for the whole, as also do incidental events occurring throughout and explaining the whole: wallpaper, furniture, clothing, plants and animals and silent witnesses seem to know more than the protagonists’ closest relatives. The innermost experiences of the characters are often encoded by a characteristic epithet, a physical detail, or a manner of speech. We get to know the characters through their surroundings, which point to their subjective worlds and emotional experiences; the object perceived becomes the subject, an

102. Andrew, Narrative, Space and Gender in Russian Fiction, p. 76. Italics original.
103. Porechnikov, p. 51.
operation that shatters the boundary between art and life. Another feature of women’s literary method is the inseparability of life and art.

The insistence on life’s details – and the denial of separation and distance in favour of communities and communication – gives women’s Realism its specific tone: narratives are told in a literary intonation which calls for empathy, but which also provides women’s Realist voice with the tone of Cassandra; Mariia Tsebrikova hears women’s prose opposing the easy solutions of the emancipation. While praising the female speech in her review of a woman’s text, Khvoshchinskaia stresses women’s ability not only to speak the truth, but also to talk with empathy. The truth, however, is bitter, as the writer says. The statement indicates the reciprocal permeability of life and art by appealing to the authenticity of women’s inner intonation. The bitter experience does not vanish into the text’s spiritual ‘idea’, but goes on nomadizing in the narrating, in the pathos of tears and in barely suppressed anger.

A good example is the long novel, Women’s Lot (Zhenskaia dolia, 1862) by Avdot’ia Iakovlevna Panaeva (1819/1820–93), author of The Tal’nikov Family (Semeistvo Tal’nikovykh, 1848), ‘one of the first fictionalized accounts of childhood in Russian literature’, and of several novels written in collaboration with N. A. Nekrasov. She was also author of the famous Memoirs (Vospominaniia, 1889) which reflects her unique private and professional involvement with one of the century’s literary and political centres, the radical journal The Contemporary. The novel is in many ways representative of women’s Realist literature and repeats many of the themes and aesthetic strategies of women’s ‘diagnostic’ literature; it focuses on various difficulties of women’s situation in society, especially the moral and emotional challenges, but does not present any one particular solution. Its aims are didactic in that it calls for social improvement and change.

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105. N. D. Khvoshchinskaia’s non-Utopian tone motivates Tsebrikova to recall the mythic Cassandra-figure, the female prophet and a stranger in the androcentric world, see Mariia Tsebrikova, ‘Khudozhnik-psikholog (Romany i povesti V. Krestovskogo-psevdonima)’ in Obrazovanie (1900), I, 17–34 (18) and (1900), 2, 37–54. See also Rosenholm, Gendering Awakening, p. 367.
106. Porechnikov, p. 38.
110. See Gheith, in A History of Women’s Writing in Russia, ed. by Adele Marie Barker and Jehanne M. Gheith, p. 94.
in women’s lives, including educational, economic and family reforms. While openly discussing the woman question and supporting it, the novel points out that legal reforms are insufficient without moral transformation: ‘And don’t expect anything for now from the emancipation of women!’ the (male) narrator warns women expecting liberation as a result of emancipation discourse. The development depends on men: ‘So long as men do not grow morally, women’s emancipation is totally impossible’. Panaeva’s scepticism may have an autobiographical basis, since she was the object of gossip on account of her unconventional marital relationships, but it also anticipates the critique of the equality discourse, which was made by feminist writers at the end of the century. Whilst Panaeva says that women should not trust in talk of liberation, she emphasizes the importance of women’s own talk. Through ‘true talk’ women can be united, grow conscious of their common lot and create a community which can reflect their common oppression. Her voice is hopeful, though not without disharmony, as it expresses much scepticism and suspicion. A woman writer’s answer to the woman question is far more realistic than that of her male utopian contemporaries, since she deals with the practical consequences of theoretical discussions, pointing out that women who are encouraged to awake into emancipation will also risk being judged ‘shameless’.

The 1870s and 1880s are notable not only because of the increased number of women writers, but also because of their diverse thematic, ideological and aesthetical orientations. Different generations of writers participated in the literary process simultaneously: some writers from the 1860s, such as Khvoshchinskaia, were still writing, alongside young authors starting their careers in the 1880s. There are several reasons for the increased number of women writers. Thanks to secondary and higher education, more women had the opportunity to participate in the literary process whilst urbanization and industrialization brought changes in women’s social status. Above all, this affected the landed gentry, whose unmarried daughters were obliged to work to support themselves. By the turn of the century the majority

113. Gheith in A History of Women’s Writing in Russia, ed. by Adele Marie Barker and Jehanne M. Gheith, p. 93.
114. See Frank Göpfert, Dichterinnen und Schriftstellerinnen, p. 138.
115. See, for example, Christine Johanson, Women’s Struggle for Higher Education in Russia, 1855–1900 (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1987).
of women writers came from urban families or humble backgrounds, as had Valentina Dmitrieva and Elizaveta Militsyna (1869–1930). Apart from various areas of society still closed to women, art, literature and journalism offered educated women professional opportunities. Many women writers began their careers as journalists, amongst them Anastasia Verbitskaia (1861–1928), Varvara Tsekhovskaia (‘Ol’ nem, O.N.’, 1872–1941), the poet and dramatist Nadezhda Aleksandrovna Lokhvitskaia (Teffi, 1869/70–1905) and Liubov’ Iakovlevna Gurevich (1866–1940), publisher and co-editor of the journal Northern Herald (Severnyi vestnik, 1885–98). The founding of journals addressed to women (Zhenskoe delo, 1899–1900, Zhenskii vestnik, 1904–16 and Zhurnal dlia zhenshchin, 1914–26) and the rise of mass publishing by the turn of the century helped women to popularize their prose in ‘thick journals’ and turned their sensational novels into bestsellers.116

Of the historical factors which increased women’s literary activity and supported their artistic self-confidence, we should mention the fruitful inter-relationship, from the 1880s until 1917,117 between the women’s movement and various modernist movements, with their positive, if somewhat ambivalent influence. Fin-de-siècle aesthetics and philosophical movements defending individual and unconventional decisions in life, together with feminist ideas by the turn of the century, emphasized women’s right to express themselves. Conflicts that the new woman experienced, and which she narrated in literature, were related to her devotion to a socio-political cause and to the struggle with emotional insecurities linked with taboo female sexuality. The linkage between the women’s movement and the philosophical and aesthetic programmes that emerged with the advent of Modernism in the 1890s, the Silver Age, was complex and had great impact on women’s lives. With Rosalind Marsh,118 we argue that many women writers contributed to the women’s movement through their fiction, translations, criticism and journalism, as well as through the new role-models they created, as did Sof’ia Vasil’evna Kovalevskaia (1850–91) for example, through her career as a mathematician and a writer of the popular semi-autobiographical novella, The Nihilist Girl (Nigilistka, 1892),

or Mariia Konstantinovna Bashkirtseva (1858–84), an artist famous for her *Journal* (1887), who became the inspirational embodiment of all ‘those Russian men and women who rebelled against pragmatic collectivist ideals and exalted impressionism and the autonomy of art’ at the end of the nineteenth-century Realist age.

Unlike women writers of the 1860s with their ascetic spirit, while devoting their intellectual passions to a common socio-political cause, women writers at the turn of the century were attracted by artistic and literary creativity as a cause worthy of individual devotion. Women’s self-confidence as literary subjects grew strongly, thanks to the encouraging legacy of female predecessors, both Western European and Russian. Women were also conscious of a number of contemporary female media professionals, editors, journalists and publishers, offering their support. Female writing was legitimized by a gender culture which preferred individualism and difference; women used the crisis discourse implicit in new theoretical, aesthetic and socio-political concepts to depict the new world and the new woman from a female perspective, analogous to that of their Western-European female colleagues, by the turn of the century. Simultaneously, however, women had to resist the essentialist notions of the complementary gender ideology embedded in the Symbolist movement. The growth and ambiguity of the modern ‘crisis’, which seemed to support women’s literary and artistic creativity at the turn of the century, reminds us of an analogous situation at the beginning of the century. Then, too, Russian women entered the literary arena, as writers and readers, by contributing to the differentiation of cultural and literary blocs – during the transformation of classicism into sentimental and, later, romantic paradigms. At both points we see the disintegration of old, social and symbolic agreements and of former canons. The analogy motivates us to ask whether it is this crisis discourse, the shift towards to the anti-rational, which reveals the disintegration of old, social and symbolic agreements of former canons, and whether it was this collapse which helped women to take part in the historical drama for the move on to the literary stage. Is it the moment of transformation which accepts the female as one of the differences and women’s writing as an innovative force?

As in earlier women’s literary history, it was women’s aesthetic flexibility that made their literature elastic and topical enough to answer to the requirements of the new times. Women authors reacted to the new times with different literary genres, both as Realist writers condensing in their popular novels the ‘signs of the times’ and as Modernist authors focusing on metaphysical questions in the poetry and prose of the Silver Age from its decadent beginnings to High Symbolism.

Despite the differences in the socio-cultural situation of women writers by the turn of the century, compared to the period of the development of Realism between the 1830s and 1880s, there are certain themes, images and narrative forms that persist. The genres women preferred throughout these decades are the short story and the novella, which was serialized in ‘thick journals’. The backbone of the Realist tradition was still the escape plot. There was also a clear emphasis on socio-political themes. Women writers took up the ‘accursed questions’ with a commitment which showed political awareness, but also the limits of political activities in Russia, as in Tat’iana Shchepkina-Kupernik’s Her First Ball (Pervyi bal, 1907), in which the heroine commits a terrorist act by shooting her dancing partner, a representative of reactionary power.

Women Realist writers at the turn of the century were concerned with growing industrialization and urbanization; they depict the changing situation of peasant and working-class life with broadly-based ethnographic empiricism. By the turn of the century, the disruptive growth of cities and industrialization, and the rapid intensification of social and cultural differences, as well as of political conflicts, had brought a new readership which included the nascent middle class and the mass audience in need of a new kind of reading and of authors skilled to create it. It was the new prose fiction of various women authors which appealed to the new readers.

One of the most talented and popular realists of the period was Valentina Iovovna Dmitrieva (1859–1947). Her work belongs to the transformation period; she wrote, on the one hand, in the tradition of nineteenth-century Realism, putting art to the service of the people, but on the other hand, took up all the major questions of the time: concerns of town and country, the peasant question, the social circumstances of urban workers and the intelligentsia.

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These topics she often approached with the perspective of a woman, not only oppressed within the patriarchal family, but also endowed with ‘optimism reflect[ing] the life-affirming quality that characterizes most of her work’, like the heroines of Khves’ka the Orderly (Bol’nichnyi storozh Khves’ka, 1900) and Akhmetka’s Wife (Akhmetkina zhena, 1881). Dmitrieva should be revalued for her large body of work, her thorough knowledge of, and intensive focus on, rural and urban working life, as an author whose Realist inspiration reached far into the Soviet period and not least for her anti-sentimental narrative view of peasant life, which should be noted when we rewrite the traditions of village prose. Of special interest are the detailed images of peasant life that the author knew through working as a teacher, village doctor and radical activist in rural villages. Her novellas and stories, like Clouds (Tuchki, 1904), Heave-ho! (Maina-vira, 1900) and The Bees are Buzzing (Pchely zhuzhzhat, 1906), deal with peasant life with deep understanding and empathy for the heavy burden of men, women and children, like the ten-year-old peasant boy Dimka slaving in the glass factory (Dimka, 1900). Dmitrieva’s contribution to the Realist depiction of rural life testifies to innovative power; in authentic, non-standard language and with detailed knowledge, she shows women not only as victims, but as independent figures resisting social prejudices with courage and humour, as does Spirinodikha, the soldier’s wife in Akhmetka’s Wife, who has to take care of two husbands after the first, presumed dead, returns home. Dmitrieva’s famous memoirs, Round the Villages (Po derevniam, 1896), deal with peasant life during a diphtheria epidemic and portray, in a fine and sensitive manner, the feelings of an intellectual woman who works in the villages as a doctor and tries to cope with the prejudices and cultural hostility of peasant and working-class society.

What is persistent in women’s Realist literature throughout the century is that the criticism of society is made through depictions of women’s lives. The great theme, in very different stories of the turn of the century, is that of happiness as imagined by the new woman. This is also manifested in a number of story titles. Female happiness is the particular topic explored by Lidiia Ivanovna Veselitskaia (V. Mikulich, 1857–1936). In her humorous trilogy about Mimi (‘Mimi the Bride’ (‘Mimochka – nevesta’, 1883), ‘Mimi

at the Spa’ (‘Mimochka na vodakh’, 1891) and ‘Mimi Poisoned Herself’ (‘Mimochka otravilas’’, 1893), the author shows the ‘commonest story of an upper-class woman’, one of the Mimis and her maman. Mimi’s story of boredom and dependence is, as it were, the latest link in the chain of frustrated heroines beginning with those of Bunina, Gan and Rostopchina. Why is Mimi not happy? She could dance, draw and play the piano quite well, but her soul was not ready for life. The author points out critically that the woman question is not only an economic, but also a moral question, in the sense that women should learn to take care of themselves and dare to make their own decisions. Marriage is not the only option any more, as the contemporary woman critic, E. Koltonovskaia wrote in her essay on Ol’ga Shapir’s novella, They Didn’t Believe Her (Ne poverili, 1904): ‘Women of the bourgeois class understood that their salvation was in work’.125

The new moral and cultural values were now embodied by new women, who no longer only expressed the ‘desire for a profession in the abstract’,126 but were shown in their actual professional lives, where, though exploited and victimized, they were responsible for their actions. This is the topic of many stories, such as ‘A Peasant Woman’s Tears’ (‘Bab’i slezy’, 1898), or ‘Holiday’ (‘Otdykh’, 1896), another strong story by Ekaterina Pavlovna Letkova (1856–1937), or ‘Daughter of the People’ (‘Doch’ naroda’, 1904) by Anastas’iia Romanovna Krandievskaia (1865–1938), where the working-class girl goes her own independent way, notwithstanding the patronizing expectations of her two upper-class benefactresses. The traditional escape plot is now transferred to the working-class context and the new heroine’s active stance is motivated by her professional commitment.127 The new heroine is a cook’s daughter who is becoming a teacher, as in Khvoshchinskaia’s novella, The Schoolmistress (Uchitel’nitsa, 1880); and in Ol’ga Shapir’s novella, Avdot’ia’s Daughters (Avdot’iny dochki, 1898), Sasha becomes a midwife.

The work of Ol’ga Andreevna Shapir (1850–1916) awaits re-evaluation in the contexts of the history of Russian political movements and the history of Russian literature. Shapir, with more than thirty years of literary activity as a prose-writer and publicist and as an activist of the first wave of the women’s movement,128 was connected with liberal and revolutionary

125. E. Koltonovskaia in Kazakova, p. 41.
127. See Kelly, A History of Russian Women’s Writing, p. 143.
128. Irina Jukina, ‘Pobornitsa zhenskoi svobody’, Preobrazhenie (1997), 5, 95 and Irina Jukina,
circles and reflected on political debates in many of her writings, such as her novel, *In The Stormy Years* (*V burnye gody*, 1906). She was also deeply involved in the European women’s movement and the gender question became the main focus of her literary activities. We would like to point out that her role was, as Kelly has put it, ‘in some ways the most “typical”’, but also one that gave a unique evaluation of the ‘new woman’ between historical periods, as Olekhova has pointed out.

In her prose, Shapir develops the themes of female slavery (*rabstvo*), self-definition and the new woman. In her first period (1879–87), she explores female slavery in the novel, *A High Price to Pay: A Family Story* (*Dorogoi tsenoi: iz semeinoi prozy*, 1882), in which a heroine gives herself up totally to the needs of others, rejecting her own career and professional ambitions. An exemplary novel of female slavery is *Funeral Feast* (*Pominki*, 1886), which shows what remains after such a self-abnegating life: after her death, the life of Aunt Katia is barely recalled and her devotion to others is not appreciated by her descendants, indeed quite the opposite. The depiction of female self-abnegation reveals Shapir as a radical cultural critic: she rejects the sacred significance of female self-abnegation asserted by religious ideology. In the period 1879–1904, Shapir accomplishes a gendered inversion whereby, like other contemporary women writers, she replaces male characters with women whose desires and deeds now organize the plot. Shapir creates female characters who, in the 1870s and 1880s, still have to fight the same battles as the heroines from the beginning of the century, but then grow into independent ‘new women’, as envisioned by the socialist feminist Aleksandra Kollontai in her political essays and fiction written at the beginning of the twentieth century. As did many of her women contemporaries, Shapir explores the modern conditions of the ‘new woman and contributes to the genre development of the Russian woman’s novel’. She combines the Realist traditions of her female predecessors, didactic and schematic plot lines with sharp and sensitive focus on society’s new class hierarchies in order

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to combine class and gender perspectives. It is the working-class woman whose life and setting the author vividly depicts in detail, and who, the author believes, is ready to take up the challenges of the modern world. The new woman is shown in contrast to an ‘old’ woman, like Eva in One Woman of Many (Odna iz mnogikh, 1897), or like Lidiia and Rita from the novel Antipodes (Antipody, 1880), both being figures of transformation but with different kinds of life strategies. Common to the new heroines is challenge to the tragic image – ‘All or Nothing’ – of the woman in Russian literature.

The new woman reappears in the later work, such as the novels Mirages (Mirazhi, 1889) and In The Stormy Years. In the latter, Shapir shows three models for women which were possible in the 1870s-1880s, symbolized by three sisters: one embodies the female self-abnegation of a revolutionary, the second devotes herself to the medical profession and the third takes part in the ‘stormy years’ as an adventurous game. Shapir broadens the woman question, not only emphasizing work, but also the aim for equality in difference; the new woman strives for independence in life and love. The author makes her new heroine reject the culture of ‘slavish’ self-abnegation (smirenie) and self-victimization, the highly idealized values cultivated by Russian philosophical and aesthetic discourse as essential markers of a Russian woman. In 1896–1904, the new woman is formed in such novels as She Returned (Vernulas', 1892) and A vdot'ia's Daughters and the story ‘Dunechka’ (‘Dunechka’, 1904), where the main motif, the path, emphasizes the heroine’s departure for a new foreign world. Shapir shows the difficult psychological obstacles that the new woman has to overcome. The author encourages the heroines to make their own decisions, however painful. The heroines are fatherless and mothers play an important role, not so much as educators, but rather as allies. Shapir recalls the literary tradition of her female predecessors, while simultaneously adopting the new possibilities given to women writers within the expanded ideological differentiation of Realism and within the feminist movement.

On this basis she realizes the aesthetics of difference. Shapir’s gender awareness allows her to recognize the double standard of Russian literary critics who praise the male pen as the norm and devalue women’s literature as second-rate. For Shapir the aim was to speak ‘on behalf of women’, not

132. Quoted by Jukina, in Vestnik proekta 'novye vozmozhnosti dlia zhenshchin, p. 27.
to ‘imitate the masculine pen’.

Not so much equality, as the equal value of gender difference, was Shapir’s principal aim, which made her one of the most interesting and important feminist writers of the late nineteenth century.

A genre able to react to the social and cultural ambitions of the new broad reading public, to popular culture, as well as to the challenges and opportunities for writers in the new market-driven publishing world, was the sensational novel. The definition of the genre used by scholars identifies its earlier Western European model and emphasizes its popularity, the material success of its authors, its woman-centred topics and characters and the female readers and writers. The women’s sensational novel developed in the first decade of the twentieth century and became a best-seller which appealed above all to women, of all classes. It was a product of new aesthetic preferences, new kinds of fantasies and new forms of distribution by literary and commercial institutions.

Amongst the best-selling women novelists of the early twentieth century were Nadezhda Aleksandrovna Lappo-Danilevskaiia (1874–1951), Evdokiia Apollonovna Nagrodskaia (1866–1930), with her novels The Wrath of Dionysus (Гнев Диониса, 1910) and The Bronze Door (Бронзова дверь, 1911), and Lidiia Alekseevna Charskaia (1875–1937), the celebrated children’s writer. The most famous was the playwright, prose-writer and publisher, Anastasiia Alekseevna Verbitskaia (1861–1928), with her massive romance novels. Verbitskaia’s blockbusters were enormously popular among middlebrow readers, the target of highbrow attacks and were later rejected from the Soviet canon as pornographic and decadent. They are part of Russian and women’s literary history, from the 1880s to the 1920s, and reach out to contemporary popular literature, merging literary and commercial impulses. With numerous editions of her works, Verbitskaia achieved a commercial success unparalleled in her time; this was later on achieved for other women too, as their publisher presented motifs and relationships

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138. Her popular novels include, The Minister’s Wife (Zhena ministra, 1912), Princess Mara (Княжнина Mara, 1914), A Russian Gentleman (Русский barin, 1914) and The Duty of Life (Долг zhizni, 1917).
that were repeated and varied by women prose-writers over the next three decades.¹⁴⁰

Verbitskaia combines art and entertainment in a successful and appealing way, which invites readers to participate in the current, decadent lifestyle of self-gratification and sexual pleasures. The novels combine art, love, politics, personal freedom, philosophical and cultural trends and social and national types, attitudes and lifestyles, into a ‘kind of cultural department store’,¹¹ urging readers to ‘shop for everything from Isadora Duncan to Nietzsche, Social Darwinism, anti-Semitism and Kraft-Ebbing’s sexual theories as an explanation of mental disease’.¹⁴² This ‘digestible package, a consuming read’,¹⁴³ coupled with ‘an active social consciousness, a willingness to write for the market and a desire to popularize the messages worked out in “high” cultural forms for the rapidly growing “middlebrow” audience’,¹⁴⁴ characterize her best-sellers, The Spirit of the Time (Dukh vremeni, 1906), The Keys to Happiness (Kliuchi schast’ia, 1908–1913) and the trilogy Yoke of Love (Igo liubvi, 1914). All her novels cross boundaries of gender and class. She emphasizes women’s right to sexual desire ‘not constrained by guilt’,¹⁴⁵ making these novels innovative and radical. An example is the new heroine Mania El’tsova in The Keys to Happiness, an unconventional and liberated woman whose stormy life is recounted through various sexual entanglements and international artistic success. The significance of Verbitskaia’s literature lies in her willingness to show independent-thinking women from various classes challenging social expectations, even if paying a price in personal happiness. Verbitskaia’s novel transcends its own time:¹⁴⁶ she explores themes still relevant to women and her work invites the reader to see parallels between her fin-de-siècle pot-boilers and today’s popular fiction where women writers again play a central role, introducing

¹⁴⁵ Kelly, A History of Russian Women’s Writing, p. 151.
readers to, and educating them about, new market-led lifestyles, depicting women’s sexual and emotional differences from men, and as did Verbitskaia, introducing the new woman and reforming her sexual, emotional and intellectual capacity. Without doubt the appearance of women writers in the field of mass literature and their popularity among the readers can be seen as an innovative break. On the other hand, however, while women did write bestsellers, they wrote popular literature, which was not highly appreciated by the old elite. Women still wrote at the margins, i.e. in the field of popular culture, which was still young and uncanonized within Russian literature. From the point of view of the critics they still remained second-rank writers: here we also recognize the double standard which would take place in Russian Modernism and Symbolism as well: on the one hand, women authors enjoyed success among the readers and actively took part in the literary process, on the other hand, their literary work was not valued by established critical opinion.

Just as the first appearance of women on the literary stage in the early nineteenth century was a collective action, no less distinguished, strong and original was the literary performance of women authors at the end of the century. Charlotte Rosenthal perceives the richness of women’s voices during that period: ‘the Silver Age period was more a Golden Age for women writers, especially for female lyric poets’. Apart from poetry, she also refers to the new ‘women’s novel’ as a new genre and draws the conclusion, which has received general assent, that ‘the modernist movement proved to be especially beneficial to women’. Catriona Kelly, defining the years 1880–1917 as a distinguished period in women’s literary history, also suggests that ‘this era saw women prose writers develop a multi-faceted and powerful critical-realist tradition, but that it also saw an increase in the power and dynamism of a contradictory, anti-realist, tradition’. It is quite easy to trace the different traditions of the period: the Realist narrative practised in ‘thick journals’, the sensational novel and Symbolist and post-Symbolist writing, mostly poetry, published in art journals and literary almanacs.

The Golden Age of Modernist women writers and the diversification of women’s writing were linked to the discourse of crisis, which targeted the understanding of gender and femininity; this discourse emphasized disruption and the shaking foundations of Realism and Positivism, which would fracture in several directions, theoretical, political and aesthetic. In the spirit of the Nietzschean Superman, intellectuals were looking for the philosophical, ‘other-than the rational subject’.

Women writers benefited from this concept of the unique personality to legitimate their literary activity and subject identities as artist and author. Simultaneously, however, they had to resist the expectations that women were not creators, but rather objects of art. The Modernist period was thus highly contradictory for women’s literary ambitions.

Femininity was given a central role in literary-philosophical discourses, both in popular and elite thinking. Especially for the Russian Symbolists, the feminine was essential to the aesthetic concept based on the utopian unity of dual forces beyond the real and the ideal realms. Femininity was endowed with the utopian and mythical powers of a mediator between the cosmic and earthly worlds, quite like the religio-mystical Eternal Femininity of Solov’ev’s philosophical concept of the Divine Sophia which, together with Otto Weininger’s ideas of gendered creativity in his Geschlecht und Charakter (1903), influenced the Symbolists’ aesthetic aspirations.

However, as the critical research on Symbolism has shown, the fact that gender was discovered as a layer of the human subject and that femininity had a firm place in modernist and Symbolist discourse did not mean that women were accepted as creative equals to men. The feminine category was perceived as the Other, a mirror, a reflection for the male creator’s construction: it covered the unconscious forces of creativity, was comprehended as the ‘other’ to the masculine category in the complementary models of modernism, like androgyny. In Symbolist aesthetics the feminine was the material of art. Women writers, not accepted as purveyors of signs, functioned as signs for the male creator in need of a Muse and this became the main function for women in the social and the aesthetic world divided by gender roles and dominated by Symbolist men.

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Many women writers took up Decadent crisis discourse in order to reflect upon, and to clarify, what the mystic feminine meant for themselves. They expressed discomfort with the stereotype of reduction to a sign for the male interpreter and the function granted to women by Symbolist theory. They tested and varied representations of the Eternal Feminine and developed strategies of inversion accomplished by mimicry and deconstruction of dual gender hierarchies. Women writers reacted differently to expectations of them as women and poets. Their poetic and cultural strategies often remained ambiguous, like the practices of mimicry and subversion, which approached each other when women played out the function of the mystical Muse or the *femme fatale*. This is what, for example, Liudmila Vil’kina (1873–1920) did in her poetry. In her sonnet collection, *My Garden (Moi sad, 1906)*, her aim is to identify feminine creative subjectivity. As Kirsti Ekonen has argued, she does this in ways similar to those identified decades later by Western feminist theoreticians such as Luce Irigaray by aspiring to language which is woman-centred, even within a male-centred world. Vil’kina tried to find her own womanly voice, but ended by saying farewell to the ‘strange and dead words’ of the Symbolist ‘house of language’.¹⁵⁵ She turned towards a new kind of not-yet-existing language, embedded in the bonding between historical Russian women authors, such as Pavlova, and mythological female figures, such as Antigone. The strategy of turning towards something not yet in existence can be interpreted as unproductive, leaving *My Garden* as Vil’kina’s sole published book, alienated outside the Symbolist context. Her voice was, however, original and innovative, premature in its form. Such was also that of many other highly talented and independent women writers of the modernist period, as Poliksena Sergeevna Solov’eva, Nina Ivanovna Petrovskaia and Lidia Zinov’eva-Annibal. Even if forgotten by high literature, their

¹⁵⁵. Ekonen, pp. 231, 234.  
¹⁵⁶. In her story, ‘The Unheard-of Woman’ (‘Nebyvalaia’, 1912), Poliksena Solov’eva depicts the relationship between a male philosopher and the muse, showing the muse as a product of male ‘creative genius’, without any empirical presence. Nina Petrovskaia, conventionally interpreted by literary history scholars as the very symbol of Decadence, rejects in her collection of stories *Sanctus amor* (1908) the mystification and metaphorization of womanhood, revealing herself in her own works as anti-decadent, see Ekonen, pp. 236–61 and pp. 262–96; Nancy L. Cooper, ‘Secret Truths and Unheard-of Women; Poliksena Solov’eva’s Fiction as Commentary on Vladimir Solov’ev’s Theory of Love’, *Russian Review*, 56 (1997), 178–91.
voices are embedded in the heritage taken over by Russian women writers now, at the end of the twentieth century, which is again another period involved with crisis discourse and post-modern poetics' challenging role with its innovative woman-centred *écriture feminine*.

Modernist aesthetic movements demonstrate the double positioning of women writers and the split in their psycho-cultural identity which can easily be recognized throughout the nineteenth century: women writers were both in and outside the androcentric sphere of culture and women's writing, whether located at the margins of the system in a kind of alternative space, or integrated into the system and subject to its rules, was always dependent of the male canon. Its specific character was in relation to what was allowed to male writers, either as an overvaluation of, or as a rejection of, the male canon. This becomes obvious in relation to the Symbolist movement. Women were given the right to join the cultural context, but in writing they had to cut themselves out of the concept of male interpretation of femininity, and go their own ways, stressful and lonely, without associating with any literary circle, a characteristic feature of Russian women's literary history during the nineteenth century. Crisis discourse, which sought to replace the exhausted canons, emphasizing difference, was the space which women adopted to their advantage for their aim at self-assertion by aesthetic performance. Esteemed forms of aesthetic activity were replaced by re-valued forms of creative communication, such as the salons which re-emerged as the space for women to combine public and private, pre-aesthetic and the high poetic of Symbolic aesthetics.

Zinaida Nikolaevna Gippius (1869–1945) was not only a famous *salonnière* in Petersburg and Paris, but a central figure in Symbolism, who influenced other women poets in several ways. She was a brilliant and innovative poet, a prose-writer, a productive critic and one of the few women canonized by high literature. Her strong, masculine narrator’s voice is heard above all in her poetry whose topics are often more spiritual, although they do not avoid the corporeal either. Gippius is exemplary in showing us that whatever aesthetic strategy and ideological position women writers of the Modernist period took up, they were forced to deal with femininity. She also discussed the female creator’s subjectivity as a theoretical question in her essay,

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‘The Beast-God’ (‘Zverebog’, 1908), which deals with the double standards in the cultural sphere for men and women and criticizes femininity for its polarized essence, as a beast in the empirical world and as god, a feminine principle. Femininity in its Symbolist contexts is the topic of many of her poems. However, Gippius does not grant female creativity any positive qualities, even though she sees a special role for it in its utopian mode – as a metaphor for the new people in the stadium when the polarized relation between the sexes is overcome. Like other women writers within the Symbolist context, Gippius also aimed to exceed dualist binaries. The strategy of androgyny, displaying herself as an extraordinary individual merging feminine and masculine categories, led her, however, into a dilemma: she was both inside and outside, an active stranger in the Symbolist circles where she saw women’s experiences differing from those of men, though herself as a creative exception amongst women. She adopted the canonical male voice for her poetry, as the active and creative agent (the spirit), while marking the feminine as the voice for passive contemplation (the soul). She also irritated the public by creating contradictory images of the self, both in her art and her life, that made her virtually unreadable within the established gender binaries of Symbolist dualism.

Finally, the gendered dilemma of the Symbolist movement is made obvious by the literary career of Lidia Dmitrievna Zinov’eva-Annibal (1866–1907), the Diotima of Russian Symbolism. Her biography has two versions: the first shows her as part of the life-creation (zhiznetvorchestvo) practicing within high Symbolist circles (along with her famous husband and the leading ideologist, Viacheslav Ivanov), where she is the embodiment of the Symbolist image of woman as the ideal Muse and passive object of worship; the second version shows her finding her own independent voice while writing herself out of Symbolist aesthetics. The latter development is marked by a number of original works, including her play, The Singing Ass (Pevuchii osel, 1907), the short story ‘Thirty-three Abominations’ (‘Tridtsat’ tri uroda’, 1907) and a collection of semi-autobiographical

160. Ekonen analyses, for example, the poems ‘Ona 1’, ‘Ona 2’, ‘Zhenskost’ and ‘Vechnozhenstvennoe’.
162. Ekonen, p. 160.
164. Presto, p. 144.
short stories, *The Tragic Menagerie* (*Tragicheskii zverinets*, 1907). Already in *The Singing Ass*, Zinov’eva-Annibal responds to Symbolist ideas with ‘ironic satire and subversion rather than [...] supportive echo’, as Pamela Davidson has shown.¹⁶⁶ In ‘Thirty-three Abominations’, she shows that the construction of a female author-subject on the basis of the metaphors offered by Symbolist aesthetics was impossible and the gender discourse of the Symbolists became an object of parody. The story, which is based on the diary of the female narrator, tells the love story of two women actresses. The setting is the apartment of one of the women, and they never leave it, except at the end; in the catastrophic culmination, Vera sacrifices her love and the narrator to pose in front of thirty-three painters, who produce thirty-three abominations, but cannot reproduce the original. Vera commits suicide and the female narrator becomes a mistress of one of the male painters. The story is, obviously, metaleterary, taking place in the world of art and dealing with central categories of Symbolist aesthetics, such as mirrors and masks; it uses mimicry as the main strategy, in order to subvert the object of its parody, Symbolist aesthetics.¹⁶⁷ In the context of Symbolism, parodying mimicry shows that life cannot be turned into art, yet that art has an influence on life, like the thirty-three abominations which did change the women’s lives.¹⁶⁸

If ‘Thirty-three Abominations’ is the work of transformation showing the uselessness of Symbolist mythology for female creativity, *The Tragic Menagerie* is the key work, original and expressive, endowed with deep identity as well as with desire for an autonomous and female-centred world beyond isolation within male-centred cultural institutions. The work demonstrates the author’s way of finding her own language while freeing herself from alien roles and the pressure of masculine inversion. The stories narrate the journey of a girl’s self-discovery as an inner drama, where emotions and experiences are perceived in sensory contact with nature, animals and one’s own body. It is this positive mythology of the ‘green world’¹⁶⁹ that enables the author to name and to give shape to her creative existence beyond dualities and binaries. According to Costlow, ‘as an account of the author’s own genesis, *The Tragic Menagerie* imagines verbal creativity

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¹⁶⁷. Ekonen, p. 305.
¹⁶⁸. Ekonen, pp. 315, 318.
grounded in a profound, often anarchic connection to Nature. A woman of profound imagination finds liberation not only from the constraints of scholarly institution and the “stone prison” of the city, but from words of authority that do not name her experience. Zinov’eva-Annibal’s works emphasize that just as there is an inter-relationship between life and art, there is also a relationship between creativity, art and the natural world, where the human is embedded within. The dilemmas of human embeddedness in nature, as part of meadows, forests, seas and the animal world, as well as in our own animal nature, imply a more broadly painted view of the world and the future: with its implicit ecological visions the author ‘suggest[s] that the destruction of nature is also a destruction of ourselves’. In her critical voice protesting against the inequities between nature and culture, Zinov’eva-Annibal constitutes an important nodal point; her work reminds readers of the important role played by nature in nineteenth-century women’s writing and speaks to future women writers who react to the environmentally and spiritually ravaged world of the post-Soviet period. With many other women writers from the turn of the century and the Silver Age, Zinov’eva-Annibal sank into oblivion for two generations of Russian readers; many abandoned fiction, and took to other literary activities, as editors, translators and reviewers, or went over to children’s literature, as did Krestovskiaia, Letkova, Shchepkina-Kupernik, Militsyna, Gurevich, Dmitrieva and Verbitskaia.

There were a number of writers of the twentieth century who were to take up the heritage of earlier generations and give shape to a new and original voice in Russian literature. Amongst them were such innovative authors as Sofiia Iakovlevna Parnok (1885–1933), Adelaida Kazimirovna Gertsyk (1874–1925) and Elizaveta Iurievna Kuzmina-Karavaeva (1891–1945), as well as the already well-known and great creators of Russian poetry, Marina Tsvetaeva and Anna Akhmatova. Throughout the nineteenth century, Russian women poets and prose-writers were engaged in the challenge trying to work out ‘how women should write’. In literature-centred Russian culture, literature was always endowed with special ideological obligations that were, as a consequence of the high status of literature, submitted to rigorous control. The terms pointing to women and women’s

practices of writing were used by the dominant patriarchal discourse in the cultural and ideological struggles: in the debates between ‘archaists’ and ‘reformers’ at the beginning of the nineteenth century, in the discourse on social emancipation and the ‘woman question’, in philosophical concepts of Russian Symbolism, and so on. The use of these gendered terms reveals that real women and the practices of their writing were set aside and ignored, displaced into Otherness, as an outcome of a structural marginalization and colonization of women’s literature. Nevertheless, as we hope to have shown, women of the nineteenth century did not only accept the challenge and learn to answer the male questions, but they learned to formulate their own questions and topics. They broke out of the silence, adopted various genres, topics and narrative strategies. They learned to communicate while writing and they created a tradition, which was not – or to a very small extent – noticed by contemporary male critics. Meanwhile, we know that the history of Russian women’s writing is not only a history of ‘facts’, neither is the silence, nor invisibility a proof of women’s non-existence in literary history. Feminist literary criticism has succeeded in its task to narrate, and accordingly, to create a tradition of Russian women’s literature of the nineteenth century to be passed on to successive generations.