Learning the Lessons of the Past: The "Sin" of Woman's Creativity in the Russian Cultural Tradition

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In order to comprehend the present and to change behaviors, we must first perceive the strength of cultural myths generated over decades, even centuries. A particularly powerful factor contributing to the continued existence of any myth is its beauty. Hence our excursion into the aesthetically pleasing, but for women deadly myths promulgated in cornerstone works of the Russian literary canon of the artistically endowed, creative female as the object of patriarchal wrath, not infrequently expressed in violent vengeence.

At the center of our study is the actress. The first women in Russian culture to employ their talents professionally were stage performers--actresses, singers, dancers. Over the two hundred years of their professional involvement Russian actresses have inspired no small number of literary texts devoted entirely to them and, equally important, the effects they wreak on male viewers, indeed all of patriarchal society. In patriarchy's mythologization of the creative woman we find the classical binary oppositions of sexist gendering: from her physical appearance to the depths of her soul, the actress is a woman marked as at least abnormal, more often a threat even to man's physical existence. As a challenge to patriarchal structures, as a force which seeks to exert itself into the traditionally male construed environs of creativity, the actress ultimately must be contained, and when not containable--removed.
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For those of on the front lines of teaching these days it’s becoming increasingly more difficult to sell the past. Students want to know about what’s going on now, they want ethnic conflicts that have simmered for centuries explained in fifty minutes or less; feminists are no more patient. They just can’t seem to understand why Soviet, particularly Russian, women can’t get their act together and rebel against the oppressive patriarchal system. I say this with humor, I hope you understand, but the point is serious. In order to understand the immensity of change required now to reverse decades, in some cases centuries, of behavior, we need first to perceive the strength of the myths that reinforce those behaviors. By way of a brief excursion into the history of one nest of motifs in Russian culture I intend to demonstrate to you how pervasive the message has been, how beautifully the lesson delivered, that a woman’s creativity is the sole possession of her male guardian, and his alone, and that any attempt to liberate that gift from his control be punished, usually through violence, most often ending in death.

When we first began our investigation into the subject of traditional representations of female creativity in Russian literature we were surprised to see how pervasive a theme it was. This was our first lesson: though both of us had spent the larger part of our lives reading and discussing Russian literature, we had never even noticed women’s creativity as an independent subject. In fact, few themes in classical Russian literature have been afforded the beatific sanctity of woman’s creativity and artistic talents. What balm could be more soothing to the tired body than her songs and poems? Whose dance would better restore the wearied soul? Whose song—the rended heart? Jaroslavna’s lament in the Lay of Igor’s Campaign; the rhymes and fairy tales of Aleksandr Pushkin’s nanny, Arina Rodionovna, or the maidens’ chorus in his Eugene Onegin; the haunting song of Ivan Turgenev’s “living relic,” Luker’ia; Natasha Rostova’s
vibrant peasant dance after the hunt in Lev Tolstoy's *War and Peace*; Grandmother's inspiring stories, songs, nursery-rhymes, and prayers in Maksim Gor'kii's *Childhood*; the list is endless. Women's creativity has always been the object of deep sentiment and fond memory in canonical Russian literature.

Looking more closely at the examples cited above (and many others that our reader herself may recall), we noticed that they all share a single distinctive feature: woman reveals her talent in a domestic setting, in no case is her art also her vocation or profession. She sings, dances, tells stories for the exclusive edification and enjoyment of her family and loved ones. Her stage is the family circle, her remuneration—gratitude and love. But what is the attitude of this same tradition to women's creativity in the professional sphere? How did these same writers and their contemporaries depict the aspirations and accomplishments of those women who chose to exercise their creativity beyond the walls of the patriarchal household? What are the lessons being taught aspiring actresses (writers, painters) today? To answer this question we chose to examine pre-Revolutionary Russian literature's portrayal of women as actresses. It was, after all, first on the stage, in the mid-eighteenth century, that women crossed the threshold of professional art in Russia.¹

More important from the point of view of gender analysis, the actress—unlike her sisters in other media—could neither hide her femaleness behind the cover of pseudonyms nor practice her art in any realm other than that of the male-dominated public sector. She was always woman, and she was always the object of scrutiny. Indeed, her uniqueness among women and among artists may in large part explain why she is so richly represented in memoirs and other documentary sources as well as in Russian belles-lettres, memory alone suggesting a veritable chorus line of heroines from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: in innumerable lyric poems dedicated to contemporary performers by Pushkin, Nikolai Nekrasov, Aleksandr Apukhtin, and Aleksandr Blok (to name only a few), Aleksandr Herzen's *The Magpie Thief* (Soroka-vorovka), Aleksandr Druzhinin's *The Singer* (Pevitza), Nikolai Leskov's "The Wig Master: A Graveside Tale" (Tov. chudozhnik: rasskaz na mogile), Ivan Turgenev's *Post Mortem* (Klara Milich) (Posle smerti (Klara Milich), Aleksandr Ostrovskii's *Talents and Admirers* (Talanty i poklonniki) and *Guilty without Guilt* (Bez viny vinovatyve), Anton Chekhov's "The Choir Girl" (Khristyka) and *The Seagull* (Chaika), Aleksandr Sumbatov's *The Celebrity's Husband* (Muzh znatenostii), Piotr Gnedich's *Monreel Flesa* (P'esi mukhi), Aleksei Tolstoi's "The Actress" (Aktrisa), Aleksandr Kuprin's "Last Debut" (Poslednii debut), "On the Way to Fame" (K slava), and "The Demigod" (Polubog), Maksim Gor'kii's "First Debut" (Pervyi debut), "Theatrical" (Teatr'noe), and "The Rehearsal" (Repetisiia), and Pantaleimon Romanov's "The Actress" (Aktrisa).² Together with numerous later Soviet depictions,³ these fictions offer a disturbing image of the professional handmaids of Terpsichora, Melpomene, and Thalia.
In the metaplot we reconstruct from these variations on a theme the actress inevitably appears as a woman beyond the pale. No matter what the criterion, she always falls outside the female "norm" of her respective epoch and social stratum, her distinctiveness repeatedly underscored by way of comparison with other female characters. The actress herself may assess her unusualness, as does Ostrovskii's Elena Kruchinina in Guilty without Guilt, declaring herself "a strange woman" (8:401). But more often the heroine's peculiarity is noted by surrounding characters or the narrator. Recollecting Lidochka Gneatneva, the first-person narrator of Kuprin's "On the Way to Fame" reiterates: "you don't meet women like that everyday," "no single image would be adequate to her inexplicably unique and subtle portrait" (1:199).

The actress's difference is often signalled first by some oddity in her appearance, her body, her physicality betraying some violation of the norm. She may be more perfect than life, a "flawless beauty," like Kuprin's Lidia Gol'skaia ("The Last Debut"), Leskov's Liubov' Onisimovna ("The Wig Master"), and real-life actress Varvara Asenkova as memorialized by Nikolai Nekrasov. Each is a goddess who descends unto the kingdom of mortals only to lose her unearthly perfection, then her life. More frequently, however, the actress tends to fall short of reigning standards, like Turgenev's Klara Milich, "that swarthy, dark wench with coarse hair and a moustache on her upper lip" (8:408), and Chekhov's 'Choir Girl':

Sensing that this woman in black with the angry eyes and long white fingers had formed the impression of her as something despicable, ugly, Pasha became ashamed of her plump red cheeks, her red nose, and the bangs across her forehead that refused to be brushed back. And it seemed to her that if she were thin, her face not powdered, and her hair brushed back, that she might be able to hide the fact that was not a proper woman (4:319).

In wishing she resembled the stereotypical "proper" young lady of the mid-1880s Pasha is not alone. The actress's hairstyle, make-up, and her clothes usually evoke disapproval. Klara Milich, for one, does not wear gloves, an unconscionable liberty for the 1880s. Aleksei Tolstoi's "Actress," here seen through the eyes of her husband's neighbor, resembles a cupie doll: "pugnosed, with apple-like circles of red rouge drawn on her cheeks. . . . nothing about her was real. She wore a collection of rings, but they were all brassy, with glass stones, the whole lot of them worthless; she had a lornette that was missing its lens, and lace that looked as if it had been ripped from a doll's dress" (1:136).

In the relatively superficial features of the actress's physical appearance two familiar extreme stereotypes of female characterization emerge: the angelic and the demonic. The "angel" achieved her epitome in the serf actress.
Leskov's Liubov' Onisimovna describes in detail how her master had his favorites dressed as virgin saints before having them delivered to his private chambers. Herzen's Aneta is a vision in white who lacks only wings. As for the "demon," she has been most effectively captured in caricature by Nadezhda Teffi:

The demonic woman differs from the average woman most often in the way she dresses. She wears a black velvet cassock, a chain across her forehead, a bracelet on her ankle, a ring with an empty setting "for a cynaste which absolutely will be delivered by next Tuesday," a stiletto under her collar, rosary beads on her elbow, and a portrait of Oscar Wilde on a garter turned inside out.

She also wears all the usual objects of a woman's wardrobe, only not in those places where they're supposed to be worn. And so, for example, the demonic woman allows herself to wear a belt only on her head, an earring only on her forehead or around her neck, a ring on her thumb, and a watch on her leg...

The demonic woman may occupy any of a number of possible social positions, but more often than not she's an actress. ("The Demonic Woman," 75)

These extremes in appearance extend much deeper, to all aspects of her social and psychological being. The actress's lifestyle also puts her outside the "norm," the "norm" here defined by authors as that of a profoundly patriarchal society. The fate of the "normal" woman—marriage, motherhood, and managing a household—eludes the actress. Hers is a nomadic existence, the particular manifestations of which vary over time to reflect changing historical conditions in the theater. She may have no home at all, or her home may be a cheap hotel or rented room. Actresses in the serf theater, themselves possessions, had not even a corner to call their own. Slaves of their masters' every whim, they knew neither privacy nor security. Actresses in the provincial traveling theater of the second half of the nineteenth century were no longer possessions, but they too bad no place to call their own. In The Seagull Chekhov's Irina Arkadina and Nina Zarechnaia, whose names bear obvious symbolic reference to their otherworldliness, lead the lives of eternal wanderers. Ostrovskii's Kruchinina "prows over Russia" (Guilty Without Guilt, 8:417), her living conditions not much better than those described by Kuprin in "On the Way to Fame": "tiny windows, a low, crooked ceiling with exposed beams, bare plaster walls blue with mold, a narrow little iron bed, and a table with a mirror covered with an embroidered towel. Lidochka lit a dirty lamp missing its lampshade. . . ." (1:222). In the later nineteenth century more or less stable urban companies were formed, and theater professionals were able to establish homes. But the actress's
domicile still hardly resembles the comfortable family nest or the proverbial "man's castle." According to her husband's manservant, Nina Aleksandrovna's apartment is "a train station, a transient hotel.... All sorts of riffraff hang about the place, sleeping the day through and not letting you have a wink of sleep at night. Dinner's been over for hours, and they want you to put on the samovar. Someone comes through the front door, and you're supposed to put food on the table. You walk into the living room in the morning, and there's some bum sleeping on the sofa.... Everybody's shouting, giving orders, like you work in a tavern" (Sumbatov, The Celebrity's Husband, 1:150-151). Fifty years and a Revolution later the actress's home life has changed little: "... people started showing up at the Protoklitovs' at all hours of the day, without warning. For the most part they were poorly mannered young people in imported pullovers, carrying record players, and of a cynical frame of mind. Guests, they made themselves at home, while he [the actress's husband] felt like he was their guest" (Leonov, Road to the Ocean, 6:81).

In that intricate mesh of themes and devices that gradually enveloped the actress in patriarchal fiction her unstable domicile operates as a spatial metaphor for her unsettled social relations, especially with men. Her personal life lacks permanence, professional demands deleteriously affecting her fulfillment of a lover's, wife's, or mother's (in short, a woman's) obligations. Marriage, be it officially contracted or common-law, is bound to be at least unhappy, love affairs--be they with beloved or just another in a long series of paramours--are destined to fail. Extra-marital affairs end in brutality, psychological abuse, and abandonment. The actress either cannot get married in the first place or, if she does, she cannot stay married. Through that familiar reversal of roles whereby the victim is first held to blame for her own victimization and then cast as victimizer of others, a man's relationship with the actress comes to prove harmful, than fatal, to his health. An illustrative example can be found in Aleksei Tolstoi's "The Actress" in which the woman's decision not to leave, but to return home, leads to her long-suffering, abandoned husband's suicide.

By this point it should come as no surprise that when it comes to motherhood, that stage when the "normal" female can expect to achieve the pinnacle of her womanhood, is for the actress but ultimate proof of her inability to become the "proper lady." Like the themes of wrecked home and unhappy love, the motif of the actress's failed motherhood is prevalent and copiously described that distinct patterns emerge, again reflecting social conditions and medical realities of the respective epochs depicted. If a child is born, s/he will be neglected or abandoned. Grisha meets his "guilty without guilt" mother, Elena Kruchinina, only as an adult. In Chekhov's Seagull, Treplev's social maladaptation as an adult stems from neglect by his mother Irina Arkadina. But Grisha and Treplev are exceptional; they
achieve adulthood. The majority of the actress’s offspring die in childhood, afflicted from birth by a range of maladies emblematic of the physiological toll of mother’s career on the unborn fetus. Herzen’s Aneta delivers a frail child destined to follow her to the grave. Aniuta’s “anemic, “sickly” son in Gor’kii’s “The Rehearsal” “walks the earth as if balancing on a tightrope” (16:202). Finally, the growing social acceptability of abortion can be traced through the rising incidence of artificially terminated pregnancies in this canon. For example, when she commits suicide Kuprin’s Lidiia Gol’skaia takes with her to the grave the fetus she “bears under her heart.” Later in the twentieth century Leonov’s Liza (Road to the Ocean), Lidin’s Liudmila Sergeevna (“Giselle”), Trifonov’s Lalia (The Long Goodbye), Ganina’s Agrippina (“Golden Solitude”) all abort pregnancies. Clearly, our authors are not only unable to separate women from their reproductive functions, a woman’s career appears here as abdication of her responsibility to bear and raise children. There can be no doubt either as to whose lineage is threatened by the abdication: when the child’s sex is mentioned, the victim of mother’s career is male.

In short, the actress is destined never to be wife, mother, or keeper of the hearth. Her lifestyle, like her appearance, sets her in opposition to all that patriarchy holds dear: home, husband, and healthy male progeny. The extremes suggested in her outward appearance carry over to her sexual conduct. According to the canon, the actress can be either “nun” or “whore,” in exceptional situations both.

Of the two possibilities writers overwhelmingly prefer the “whore,” and the actress more often practices the license of “the worldly sinner” (Leonov, Road to the Ocean, 6:162) than the chastity of the “nun.” As Nekrasov’s “Actress” explains matter-of-factly, catering to patrons’ whim is just one more professional risk:

One can always come chasing after us,
It’s a credit to our face and fame.
We even take a certain pride in it.

Each has all the admirers she needs,
No sooner than she first sets foot on stage!
And, if the truth be known, I also claim
A couple dozen to my name. (Nekrasov, 1:365)

In the same vein, now from a “patrons” perspective, Ostrovskii’s male protagonists interpret the actress’s profession as designed principally to satisfy male needs. As Dublerov instructs the mother of an aspiring starlet: “You should want
your daughter to be constantly surrounded by wealthy young men, and, what's more, her friends should be only upstanding citizens of the community, like us. But we're busy all day, what with family and business affairs, or community obligations, the only free time we have--a few hours in the evening. Where can one relax in greater comfort, so to speak, than in the company of a young actress..." (Talents and Admirers, 8:236).

At the other extreme, the actress assumes the role of social recluse, stone maiden, virgin saint. This variation is complicated by the always underlying possibility of the other extreme. The "nun's" chastity is under constant threat. Plot often builds on the question of whether the virgin will or will not submit. Leskov's Liubov Onisimovna, dressed as a saint, serves the sexual whims of her master, while Turgenev's Aneta finds the wherewithal to repulse the advantages of her lecherous owner, preserving her virtue only by consciously sacrificing it to another man. Another recluse, Nekrasov's Asenkova, in diametric opposition to the unnamed actress quoted above, guards herself from "the desires of wealthy old men and young upstarts" and "nobly" understands her profession:

You rejected it all. . . . You hid yourself away
Like a forbidden fairy.
And to your art you gave all of yourself
With a soul unsullied and unswayed. (Nekrasov, 1:146-147)

Like Asenkova, Ostrovskii's Aleksandra Neg'sina cloisters herself from admirers, in order "to be honest" (Talents and Admirers, 8:239). And as characterized by her sister, Turgenev's Klara Milich was "untouched, unapproachable" (Turgenev, 8:432). Her impassiveness to male desire reinforced by repeated comparison to a statue and a marble figure as well as by the subtle significance of her stage name, Klara Milich, derived from the French for pure love [claire ame].

These stereotypes have only recently become the subject of feminist research into Russian and Soviet literature, but they are familiar from the volumes of gynocriticism practiced in other fields, particularly in English and American feminist literary studies. Does the actress differ from the thousands of fallen angels and saintly whores whose corpses already litter the path of Russian and European literature? From a descriptive vantage the difference lies only in consistency and degree, the actress marking the poles at each end of the larger spectrum of fictionalized variations on female behavior. From a functional vantage, however, the actress distinguishes herself from other heroines by simultaneously existing in two realms--that of her personal life outside the theater and of her professional, creative life, her repertoire, in front of the footlights. She leads a truly "double life," the two facets of which are not set off from each
other and juxtaposed (as they are, for example in Karolina Pavlova's novel of the same title) but compounded and reinforce each other.

Whereas outside the home the non-actress tends to reveal an aspect unknown or repressed inside, these two realms are virtually interchangeable for the actress, who conducts herself in private as she does in public, and vice-versa. On stage the actress has no need to act. She plays not another character, but herself. Her art is confessional, a continuation of her real-life offstage drama. For example, Kuprin's Lidia Gol'skaia, rejected by her lover and stage partner, tries to convey to him the feelings she herself experiences through the words of her heroine. The play is Gol'skaia's last opportunity to move her seducer and co-star Anemopodistov to marry her: "He . . . had to respond, he had to sense my own suffering in the words of another" ("The Last Debut" 1:45).

Off stage the actress conducts herself as if still in grease paint. Herzen's narrator, himself an actor, perceives Aneta at home as an extension of her characterization of the heroine of D'Aubigny's and Caignez's La pie voleuse, the story of "a wounded, tender creature": "In her every feature one could read the admission that had sounded in her voice the evening before" (The Magpie Thief, 4:227). Aneta's gestures, poses, and intonations as she recounts her life story to the narrator in her bedchamber are so highly aestheticized that they impress even the connoisseur narrator. On and off stage Aneta (even her name is a cliche for the early nineteenth-century dramatic heroine) is theatrical device personified. Similarly, when Klara Milich confesses her feelings to Aratov on a Moscow boulevard, the hero thinks to himself: "a theatrical performance" (Turgenev, 8:414-415). Chekhov's Arkadina explains herself to her son by quoting Gertrude from Shakespeare's Hamlet (The Seagull, 13:12), and her encounter with Trigorin bears all the qualities of a staged scene (The Seagull, 13:42). The paradox: off stage the actress never removes the mask of her heroine, on stage she wears no mask, employs no devices, but plays herself.

From a descriptive vantage the actress's dual existence in two realms has been regarded as a handicap, as proof of her status as "imitator," not a professional who has learned her craft (Dijkstra, 120-121). Analyzed in terms of plot function, this dual existence is precisely what distinguishes the actress from other females. Just as she passes on and off stage, the actress moves between embedded fictional and and "non-fictional" realms. She is, essentially, a fictionalized fiction, the concept of female as conceived by and for males raised one degree. As sign she is both signifier and signified, as metaphor--both tenor and vehicle. She is, in short, the heroic heroine, the woman doubly exceptional, her plot doubly significant. If by definition the hero(ine) distinguishes him/herself from other characters by crossing (or
attempting to cross) boundaries demarcated by other characters who remain stably within their appointed realms, then the actress differs from other heroines in that she potentially engages in a double violation of boundaries demarcating traditional female space.7

Both violations are intrinsically linked to her choice of profession. The actor’s art by nature requires that on stage the performer use not only her emotions and her intellect, but her entire being. She must “walk out onto the stage and give herself over to the eyes of the crowd, to arouse in them those feelings which she would present solely to her master” (Herzen, 4:213). And this, from the point of view of Russian patriarchal culture, is “incompatible with the chaste modesty of the Slavic wife” (Herzen, 4:217). Stepping onto the stage, she surrenders her most private self to the audience. She becomes a public object of desire, any satisfaction she herself receives equated with sexual gratification: “Give the stage your sorrow, as you have given it your beauty and your talent, and the stage will give you that which neither I nor . . . any man could” (Sumbatov, 1:246). This public display of what rightfully belongs “solely to her master” illuminates the tendency to characterize her either as a “whore” or, in those cases where the writer chooses to refute that image (as does Nekrasov on behalf of Asenkova), to offer her the protection of the opposite extreme, the nun’s habit, asexuality, aloofness.

On the first level, that of the conflict between her personal and professional life, with the resolution of which the non-actress heroine’s story usually concludes, the actress sets out having already made the choice to cross the threshold of the patriarchal household and pays the price of family happiness. That bridge has been crossed, the decision—we are reminded time and again by the cost she must pay—is irrevocable. Never can she know both home and stage. Liubov’ Onisimovna can at best be nanny to another woman’s children; Kuprin’s Gnetneva deprives herself of a respectable suitor and comfortable life; Chekhov’s Zarechnaia is doomed to a road of solitary wandering. Like Tolstoi’s “Actress,” she can never come “home.”

But actress heroines often endure more than just loss of family and loved ones. As the price for their art they risk self-destruction, either spiritual or physical. The actress either “sells her soul to the Devil” (Leonov, 6:224), or she joins the “tragic ranks” of “the unfortunate Rachel and Asenkova . . . , the sublime Adrienne, poisoned and then cast from her grave . . . , and Duncan, whom fate first robbed of children and lover and then strangled with her own scarf” (Leonov, 6:503). She sacrifices her entire existence on the altar of art. Herzen’s Aneta, forced onto the stage as an indentured slave, is claimed by the cumulative effects of longterm abuse. Leskov’s Liubov’ Onisimovna, who was also driven to the
stage but attempted escape, dies the victim of prolonged alcoholism, her addiction a means to flee the pain of her miserable life. The more conscious the woman's choice, the more likely she is to end her own life, and later in the century, again as women began to exercise more freedom and choice, the incidence of suicide increased and the circumstances of death came to occupy ever greater space in the narrative. Reading these death scenes, one cannot help but note a peculiar, almost perverse tendency for repetition and retarded plot action to emphasize the pain and prolongue the agony.\textsuperscript{8} Consider, for example, Kuprin's rendering of Lidiia's final moments in "The Last Début":

Suddenly Gol'skaia stopped and walked slowly towards the footlights. She no longer wept, no longer wrung her hands in despair; a clear tranquility came over her. In her hands a crystal vial containing a dark liquid glistened. . . . She surveyed the audience with her large, wondering eyes. . . ., paled, stumbled, and fell to the ground with a terrifying, heart-rending scream. . . . The curtain slowly lowered in the deathly silence, then, in an instant, the theater shook with a storm of applause (1:46-47).

What might explain the high mortality rate for actress-heroines? Having already sacrificed home, love, and children for her career, for what does she give up her life? In structuralist terms, what boundary has she challenged? What taboo has she violated?

The compounding and mutually reinforcing interconnection between the actress's existences on and off stage dictates that she will be in life (death) as she is in her art. Her second quest, now as an artist, is somehow to surpass the banalities of life as they limit her performance. The actress who on stage remains within the limits of performance, who cannot break free of the demands of script, director, stage partner, or audience expectation will not die. She remains a cliche, and the cliche, though no longer "living," never desists. Chekhov's "Choir Girl" and Tolstoi's "Actress," both bound by banality in their art, are as indestructible as the commonplaces they play. Rejected by her latest lover, Kolpakov, Chekhov's Pasha recalls "how three years ago a certain merchant had beaten her up for no reason whatsoever" ("The Choir Girl," 4:323). That Pasha has survived Kolpakov and others after him is underscored by the narrator in the very first line of the story: "Once, when she still was younger, more beautiful, and more vocal. . . . (Ibid., 4:318). The Celebrity's Husband calls his wife's onstage repertoire "a melodrama from days immemorial. . . . Always the last act, a ridiculous culmination" (Sumbatov, 1:237). Menestrel's inability to liberate herself from melodrama on stage finds its parallel in her failed suicide attempt, itself a dramatic cliche, in life.

However, if on stage the actress succeeds in transcending the limits of instruction, direction, manipulation, or expectation, in other words, if she overcomes cliche with her performance and creates a new image, the odds are very
good that she will die by story's end. Gol'skaia's "last debut" is her best performance. With it she joins the ranks of the great, moving her audience first to silence, then stormy applause, then shock. Herzen's Aneta, Nekrasov's Asenkova, Turgenev's Milich depart the realm of craft and die in the act. In those rare occurrences when the actress-author does not keel over on stage immediately following her best performance, chances are that she has been so psychologically scarred by the experience that little remains of her life. In Gor'kii's "The First Debut," for example, the young heroine experiences all the traumas we now know to be associated with severe post-rape syndrome. After only one performance she leaves the stage a psychological cripple. The demise of the clichéd female type on stage is, ultimately, the death of the female. A good actress is a dead actress.

On this second level, when the actress stops merely fulfilling assigned, predetermined roles, when she literally becomes author and creates of herself and by herself a new life form, her own artistic image, she violates patriarchal culture's ultimate taboo in relation to women. She liberates herself from the biological and enters the realm of Culture. In the literary canon this achievement is, logically, signalled now by the dissimilarity between the actress as we have seen her off stage and the image she creates on stage. Apukhin's "Singer," a "carefree salon beauty," over the course of her song metamorphoses into a martyred veteran of passion and unrequited love. At home in her apartment Romanov's Anna Reingardt lives the life of a religious woman, the daughter of a czarist general. Coming out from behind the backdrop, she creates the reverse image of a revolutionary rebelling against god.

Assuming the role of author, the actress stops being a mimicker, a marionette in the hands of those around her and achieves total freedom from existing stamps and clichés, from the stock of theatrical canon. Pushkin's Laura in The Stone Guest renders an inspired interpretation of her role, not just obedient fulfilment of the playwright's master plan. In her performance "The words flowed as if borne/Not from slavish memory but from the heart" (Pushkin, 5:380). Young Iv'eva, the heroine of Kuprin's "The Demigod," breaks lose from her partner. Try as he might, the menacing Kostromskoi cannot take her off mark, cannot infect her with his own artistic cynicism, cannot convert her to the faith of a failing provincial star. Just the opposite, her performance marks the end of his career and leads him to withdraw from the theater.

What is at stake here is power, power over oneself and over others. The actress-author not only liberates herself of external influence and constraints, she establishes her own rule, a common metaphor for which is the victor's wreath: "Long with remain supple before our eyes/Her triumphant wreath" ("Do the arches still cast shadows...,") Pushkin...
teatr, 3:10). Bolshe Druzhinin's Singer, Ostrovskii's Negina or Kruchinina, Kuprin's Iur'eva, Gaetneva, or Gol'skaia, or Romanov's Reingardt, she seizes control of her audience. Her reach, moreover, extends beyond her viewers' sexual fantasies. In this distinctly male paradigm of sexual politics which can have only one winner and one loser (Stoltenberg), she takes possession of their hearts and their minds, their entire beings.

As with all other aspects of her portrayal, the actress's power over her audience has inspired diametrically opposed interpretations. In those rare occasions where she is regarded as a benign force, the actress-author appears as a sort of spiritual mentor, a "university of feelings," endowed with the gift of healing and uplifting. This is the version preferred by Aleksandr Herzen, whose narrator yearns to speak with Aneta in order "to thank her for those sacred moments, for the profound shock which purged my soul of various trash" (4:224). Aneta's performance leaves him in a fevered state: "I was unwell and threw myself onto my bed, where I hallucinated, sleeping and not sleeping, in both cases with the image of the unfortunate maid-servant before my eyes. . . . In a word, thousands of variations of La pie voleuse ran through my head the night long" (4:224-25). Socialist Realist writers developed a particular fondness for this version, invoking as role models the great actresses of the past—the Ermolovas, Vaganovas, and Savinas—"after whose performance the viewer became kinder, more noble, more responsive and who knows what else. . . . He became more sensitive, more intelligent. And you know for yourself: how could he forget or not love his teacher! That was more than just theatrical success, it was something quite different entirely" (Moskvin, "The Little Actress," 456).

The other side of the "university of feelings" is the seducer and debaucher of the viewer's (i.e., the male's) soul. Combining elements from both the Russian and European traditions, Ivan Turgenev produced the most terrifying of these demons in his Post Mortem (Klara Milich). Surrupitiously, unnoticed by the hero or his friends, Klara penetrates Aratov's soul and gradually takes total control of him. The hero eventually realizes that he has been taken prisoner, but, as Turgenev repeatedly reminds the reader, he is helpless against her power:

"No, he is not in love, how could he fall in love with a dead woman whom he had not even liked when she was alive, whom he had almost forgotten? Not! But he was in her power. . . . in her power. . . . he no longer belonged to himself. He had been taken. Taken to the point that he even made no attempt to liberate himself by joking at his own ridiculousness or nurturing if not confidence, at least hope that all this would pass, that all this was nothing but nerves. He didn't even attempt to prove to himself that he had been taken, or to do anything else!" (8:436).
How does Klara take control of her victim? Least of all by her mastery of technique. "Essentially Klara's reading did not appeal to him either... although he couldn't really explain why exactly. It had made him uncomfortable, that reading, it had seemed sharp, lacking harmony... It was as if it had destroyed something within him, had exerted itself on him by force" (Turgenev, 8:407). Her movements, and gestures, her entire external appearance violate the hero's aesthetic sensibilities. And yet, at the same time, Aratov is totally incapable of shaking himself free of "that swarthy gypsy, whose singing and reading and very appearance he disliked" (Turgenev, 8:408). Klara takes him through magical agency, with her talent, by violating cliched interpretations of the stock material of the late nineteenth-century stage (e.g., Tat’iana's letter to Onegin in Pushkin's Evgenii Onegin), and, of course, by her most original interpretation of the stock tragic heroine, her death in role on stage. Caught in Klara's clutches, Aratov loses his health, then his sanity, then his life. The only force that can contain Milich, that can reclaim authorship from this vampire woman, is Turgenev's framing male narrator.

Milich syndrome has proved to be an extremely popular disease in Russian literature, so influential that not even the forced 'doctoring' of Socialist Realism could cure it. In the ensuing "Thaw" of the 1950-1960s, the actress returned to the pages of Russian writing little changed from her nineteenth-century grandmothers. In Iurii Nagibin's "Wanted: Gray Human Hair" Milich dons sweater and jeans to haunt Aratov's double. Women writers who took up the actress as heroine in the 1960-1970s (e.g., Malia Ganina, Alla Drabkina, and Nadezhda Kozhevnikova) accepted the oppositions inherited from their male predecessors, contributing a corrective by way of adding more psychological depth to the body behind the mask with first-person narration and internal monologues delivered by the actress herself.

Exceptions to this tale of misery and gloom (e.g., Marina Tsvetaeva's The Story of Sonechka) are rare, the alternatives they propose serving only to underscore in reverse the dominant stereotype. To this day, the image of the actress described above continues to exert a tangible influence on the ways in which female stage professionals (now extended to include directors and writers) are portrayed in contemporary artistic literature as well as in the new publicism of perestroika (Nemee-Ignashev and Dotlibova).

Why rehearse yet another string of ruined lives? What lessons has the actress to teach us? Today, at a time when we witness rapid social change in the USSR, when demographic and ethnic minorities are demanding an equal role in the creation of their own cultures, legitimate expectations have arisen for the expansion of women's art. The time
appears ripe for just such a development, and of late women have come to occupy more prominent positions within the cultural establishment. Poets Marina Tsvetaeva and Anna Akhmatova, victims of Stalinist terror and post-war stagnation [zastoi], now figure centrally in the iconostasis of the new openness [elastnost']. Although for radically different reasons, the names of writers Tat'iana Tolstaja, and Liudmila Petrushevskaja, and Nina Sadur, director Genrietta Ianovskaja, artistic director Tat'iana Doronina, actress Natal'ia Negoda, and conductor-composer Viktoria Dudarova (to name only the most prominent) have become synonymous with perestroika. But is this women's art?

Before we can begin to speak about a women's movement in Soviet Russian art we will first need to define just what alternatives that art might propose. To survive that art will need at least to acknowledge and, ultimately, challenge obstacles and preconceptions that have developed over centuries. If actresses are at all typical of what expects women in other creative professions, the movement for independence will be slow, laborious, and not without victims. As for those few women named above who have gained acceptance Joanna Russ, one of the few feminists to include the actress in her study, offers a sobering reminder:

The re-evaluation and rediscovery of minority art (including the cultural minority of women) is often conceived as a matter of remedying injustice and exclusiveness through doing justice to individual artists by allowing their work into the canon, which will thereby be more complete, but fundamentally unchanged. Sometimes it's also stressed that the erasing of previous injustice will encourage new artists who will provide new (or different) material—and that all of this activity will enrich, but not change, the canon of art itself.

1 "Domestic theater at Court and in the households of influential boyars facilitated the appearance of women on the stage (already in the chambers of the Empress Sofia). In the public theater female roles were first played by women in 1757, immediately after the creation of a permanent Russian theater. The first Russian actresses were Mařia and Ol'ga Anan'zhiny and Musina-Pushkina, of whom the first married Grigorii Volkov, the second Shumskii, and the third—Dimitrevskii. The outstanding actresses of the eighteenth century were Mikhailova and Troepol'skaia" ("Teatr," Entsiklopedicheskii slovar', v. 64:740).

2 Additional artistic literature based on life in the theater, including a number in which women appear as central protagonists, are listed in Danilov, Russkii teatr.

3 Works from the Soviet period we have consulted include: Marina Tsvetaeva's Story of Sonechka [Povesti o Sonechke], Iuri Oleh's A Roster of Good Deeds [Spisok blagodejani], Leonid Leonov's Road to the Ocean [Doroga na okean], Mikhail Bulgakov's Theatrical Novel [Teatral'nyi roman], Nikolai Moskvin's "People's Artist" [Narodnyi artist] and "The Little Actress" [Maleń'kaia aktрисa], Vladimir Lidin's "Giselle" [Zhigel'] and Natal'ia Baranskaia's "A Negative Giselle" [Otritsatel'naia Zhigel'], Iuri Trifonov's The Long Goodbye [Dolgoe proshchanie], Maria Ganina's "On Tour" [V gastiroyakh] and "Golden Solitude" [Zolotoe odinochestvo], Iuri Bondarev's The Act [Igra], Iuri Nagibin's "Wanted: Gray Human Hair" [Trebyutia: sedye chełovecheskie volosy], Natal'ia Kozhevnikova's Helen the Beautiful [Elena Prekrasnaia], Viktoria Tokareva's...
"Thou Shalt Not Create..." [Ne sozvori...], and Liudmilla Petrushevskaia's *Colombine's Apartment* (Kvartira Kolombiny).

4 Here and throughout this paper we cite our own translations from original Russian sources cited below. Translations of the majority of these works (a measure in itself of the extent to which they have entered the canon) are available in English, however, we have not had adequate opportunity to check their accuracy, especially in rendering nuances relevant to the present study.

5 The surname "Zarechnaia" connotes an existence "across the river," that is, in the given context, beyond the limits of the earthly or everyday. "Arkadina," derived from Arcadia, suggests the actress's connection to some distant utopian realm of fantasy and dreams.

6 The origin of these views as male is underscored by the explicit identity of the narrators: in Herzen's *The Magpie Thief*, Aneta's story is retold by a male to two other men; Liubov' Onisimovna's story, much of it related in typical Leskovian *skaz* technique, is framed by the adult male who first heard it as a young boy; Turgenev's hero, Aratov, dies under the influence of the demonic Klara, but his tragedy is preserved and retold to us by a male acquaintance; Kuprin's "The Last Debut" and "The Demigod" share anonymous, but implicitly male narrators, while the source of "The Way to Fame" is Liudmila Mikhailovna's rejected male suitor; all three of Gor'kii's tales have as their source an adult male who witnessed the events described as a theater apprentice. In connection with the larger problem of male perception of the actress we note here one device in particular which merits separate study: the use of binoculars by male characters within the text to possess and dissect the female on stage (on the subject of women as objects of the male gaze in cinema, see Kaplan, *Women and Film*).

7 Here we borrow our definition of the hero from Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Fairy Tale*. For a feminist reconsideration of the implicit sexist bias in Propp's formulation and its implications for interpretation of the heroine, see Frye, *Living Stories/Telling Lives*.

8 On sexual perversity and the portrait of women as ill or dying, as well as interesting speculation on the raised importance of suicide as a motif of turn-of-the-century European art, see Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*.

9 Here we follow Rosaldo in distinguishing Culture (a predominantly male controlled phenomenon) from the untrained, "uncivilized" natural culture (e.g., folk culture, domestic culture) associated with women (*Women, Culture, and Society: A Theoretical Overview*).
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