Present Imperfect
PRESENT IMPERFECT

Stories by Russian Women

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Introduction by
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UNTIL THE 1980S, Russian women’s fiction often lacked bite: It tended to settle for politically safe themes, unmemorable character portrayal, plotlines that neither intrigued nor challenged the reader, and a rather flaccid style of fatigued realism. With a few memorable exceptions, such as Natalya Baranskaya’s A Day Like Any Other (1969), I. Grekova’s “Ladies Hairdresser” (1963), Galina Scherbakova’s “Wall” (1979), and several mildly ironic stories by Viktoria Tokareva, that fiction coasted along largely unnoticed. Its docility paralleled women’s tacit accommodation with their unacknowledged status as second-class citizens in a society falsely advertising itself as gender-democratic.

Contrary to George Orwell’s dire prediction, the eighties brought not only perestroika but also several remarkable individual female talents in addition to a post-Stalin generation of young women writers whose sense of self and text clearly signaled a new sensibility. Tatyana Tolstaya made her stunning debut in 1983 with “’On the Golden Porch...’” and subsequently published a series of playfully profound stories unequaled in their dense verbal texture, lushly poetic style, and tantalizing shifts in viewpoint. 1 Ludmilla Petrushevskaya, whose first stories appeared in 1972, but whose later works were systematically rejected by countless journals for a full decade, suddenly found acceptance and even popularity. Her psychologically freighted, deceptively laconic litanies of existential horror introduced readers to her unique authorial signature: the obsessively garrulous narrator harboring ghastly secrets that surface
through a colloquial, often agrammatical language designed for defensive obfuscation. The receptivity of Russian culture to physiology during and after glasnost (what Russians call chernukha, roughly translated as “grime and slime”) assured Petrushevskaya’s stark portrayal of life’s underbelly a ready, if sometimes uncomfortable, audience. Toward the close of the decade, Ludmilla Ulitskaya finally broke into print with her marvelously insightful, fine-tuned portraits of small and adolescent girls, young, middle-aged, and old women, often projected against a background of historical turmoil or social oppression. Ulitskaya’s clarity of vision and strong command of language sounded a genuinely fresh note in her affectionate depiction of Jewish life and frank but unsensationalist exploration of sexual impulses in all their manifestations. Although at first glance Ulitskaya’s stories resemble Petrushevskaya’s in their gynocentrism and taboo-breaking, on closer inspection, their unshakable faith in the significance and effectiveness of ethical behavior contrasts with Petrushevskaya’s bleak conviction that people are fundamentally maimed and isolated in an alienated world.

As the Soviet Union crumbled, in an unprecedented publishing venture, Larisa Vaneeva and Svetlana Vasilenko compiled and saw through publication two anthologies of New Women’s Writing: The Woman Who Remembers No Evil (1990) and The New Amazons (1991). Russian critics’ shocked response to the contents, which included works by Vaneeva, Vasilenko, Nina Sadur, Irina Polyanskaya, Marina Palei, Valeria Narbikova, and Elena Tarasova, left no doubt that these narratives violated stale Soviet preconceptions of what is permissible or desirable in women’s writing. Disapproval focused above all on what critics called the “unnecessary” explicitness of physical details and on the “unladylike” behavior of the female protagonists. Indeed, both volumes not only enthusiastically embrace a “disobedient,” transgressive concept of female creativity, but, for the first time in contemporary Russia, programmatically assert their status as specifically women’s texts.

What apparently escaped affronted critics’ notice was the thematic and stylistic diversity, vital imagination, and verbal boldness that mark many of the narratives. Not only do the selections bear the distinctive imprint of each author’s voice but their aesthetic and emotional impact makes earlier women’s fiction seem rather generic and timorously pallid by comparison. In that respect the entries in Present Imperfect both mirror and overlap with the two Russian anthologies, which also contain stories by Vasilenko, Palei, Polyanskaya, and Nina Sadur. As four of the most original practitioners of New Women’s Prose—that is to say, narratives by the
post-Stalinist generation that unhesitatingly transgress against Russia's inbred Victorianism about bodily matters—that quartet would inevitably be included by anyone assembling a volume of current Russian women's fiction. Together with the other authors here, they provide a reliable index of the range, depth, and richness of that segment of Russian cultural production today.

The late Lydia Ginzburg, like Ksenia Klimova, stands somewhat apart from the rest, both by virtue of her profession (she made her living as a critic) and the nature of her text. “Conscience Deluded” is characteristic of Ginzburg's manner in that its location on the border between fictional narrative and philosophical essay exemplifies the problem of categorizing her writing according to genre. In its meticulous dissection of multiple levels of moral psychology, this meditation on filial guilt, self-delusion, and the infinite complexity of our inner censoring mechanisms recalls Ginzburg's evocative recreations of the Leningrad blockade as well as some of her up-close cultural analyses. As “Conscience Deluded” illustrates, it would be an exaggeration to claim that gender is even a peripheral issue for Ginzburg, whose concerns accord completely with High Culture masculinist preoccupations. Indeed, the figure of the remorseful but dithering son from the intelligentsia whose stunted sentiments retract almost completely in his father's hour of need stands at the heart of Andrey Bitov's fiction, with which Ginzburg's narrative has appreciably more in common than it has with the other selections in this volume. Thus the value of Ginzburg's narrative in this anthology is that of Otherness; notwithstanding her renowned mentoring of young Leningrad/Petersburg female poets, Ginzburg as author of “Conscience Deluded” represents, in a sense, what New Women's Prose both implicitly and explicitly defined itself against. Above all, the rigorous exclusion of all sensuality and sexuality in a text that deals with the gradual extinction of the human body underscores the peculiar sexlessness of Ginzburg's perspective on life, as if her public solution to her lesbianism demanded a denial or a radical marginalization of all libidinous appetite. “Conscience Deluded” may best be read, perhaps, as a contrast to the other selections in the anthology.

Known principally as a journalist, Klimova likewise straddles genres in her short pieces on the dispossessed and socially stigmatized, which implicitly argue for a more enlightened attitude toward the physically handicapped. Although physiology is a salient element in the poetics of Petrushevskaya, Palei, Ulitskaya, Vasilenko, Vaneeva, and Scherbakova, irreversible bodily affliction as a sociopsychological dilemma plays little
part in their œuvres. Since Russians are more inclined to dwell on spiritual and emotional malaise, Klimova’s emphasis on the partly incapacitated body—drawn in “Steps” without bathos—represents something rare in contemporary Russian prose. By contrast, “A Marriage of Convenience” belongs to the sizable corpus of recent women’s literature that demythologizes the institution of marriage, exposing it as a pragmatic arrangement untouched by the much-vaunted panacea of love. If formerly marriage and, above all, love tended to be the end-all and be-all of at least younger women, those lyric dreams of a heart-match have soured into nightmares. New Women’s Prose spotlights the discrepancy between the promise of love and its disillusioning reality. Although individual men’s drunkenness, violence, and terminal self-involvement frequently account for the replacement of breathless expectation with contemptuous resentment, in such stories as Nina Sadur’s “Worm-Eaten Sonny,” the essentialist assumption is that men are inherently incapable of generosity, tenderness, and affection.

Yet current Russian women’s literature hardly whitewashes female psychology and conduct either, as evidenced by Galina Scherbakova’s ironically titled “The Three ‘Loves’ of Masha Peredreeva.” In Scherbakova’s sardonic treatment, the materialistic protagonist, motivated exclusively by self-love, instances a new type of woman. This type is also at the center of Tokareva’s novella \textit{First Try} (1989): The insensitive, market-oriented self-seeker for whom men serve as stepping-stones to a more comfortable future and whose priorities clash with the preceding generation’s. Although Masha’s attempts to manipulate everyone in her orbit reveal simultaneously her moral and intellectual limitations and the gullibility or tough selfishness of contemporary Russian society, her petty machinations ultimately triumph.

Scherbakova vividly and economically captures the mores of “big city” life, of a small provincial town, and of the lethargic countryside, still mired in the torpor of preindustrialist rhythms. Eschewing all sentiment, she deftly conveys the spite and competitiveness of a loveless mother-daughter relationship, devoid of respect and sustained by the co-dependency that springs from the grim living conditions in Russia, which necessarily have transformed family relations into a support system fueled less by genuine attachment than contingency and an absence of alternatives. Strained, tense relationships between mothers and daughters figure prominently in contemporary Russian women’s fiction (e.g., in Petrusheskaya, Nadezha Kozhevnikova, Elena Makarova) and in film (e.g., Viacheslav Krishtofovich’s \textit{Adam’s Rib} [1991]), often metonymically rep-
resenting the conflicts between generations, the ruptures in Russian history that inform the novellas of Yury Trifonov and Vladimir Makanin.8

Generational incompatibility likewise plays a key role in Vasilenko's first-person narrative "Piggy," but serves as a prelude to anagnorisis that culminates in an affirmation of familial bonds. The frightened incomprehension of the heroine's son regarding her participation in what for him is the traumatic spectacle of slaughtering the family pig has its analogue in her alienated irritation with her mother, whose dowdy appearance and naive country habits elicit her daughter's pity and embarrassment. Since in Vasilenko's world—polluted by nuclear waste and human brutality—animals and children alone are the repositories of "uncontaminated" values, the combination of slain pig and her son's revulsion at the act effect the epiphany that brings about her reconciliation with both son and mother. As in Greek myth, the ritual of bloodletting restores harmony. Typical of Vasilenko, violence and physical realia that many would find offensive (the smell of sweat, urine, offal, and pig manure, the sight of spilled blood and evisceration) have a double-edged capacity to repel and wreak havoc, on the one hand, and to catalyze a self-confrontation that brings about a more profound moral awareness, on the other. Like most of Vasilenko's texts, "Piggy" makes a strong appeal to the senses through the heroine's sensual pleasure in the world refracted through her vision: We are invited to luxuriate with her in the aroma of grass, dill, and overripe apples, the texture of the ground under her feet, the tar on the shed, and so forth.

Whereas Vasilenko's authorial manner shares many features with that of Vaneeva and, to a lesser extent, Ulitskaya and others, she resorts to a modernist technique not often invoked in contemporary Russian women's fiction: the suspension of plot narrative through an apostrophe to the reader that refers directly to the act of authoring and thus fractures the "realist" illusion. That device, which in her prizewinning story "Going After Goat-Antelopes" (1989)9 combines with the equally uncommon ploy of providing more than one possible ending, implies that everything in life is susceptible to narration. As soon as we attempt a narrative, we "tell stories" from an inescapably limited, subjective perspective. In a sense, this break in the regular tempo of verisimilar narrative is the equivalent of Petrushevskaya's loaded omissions, her telling silence.

Whereas Scherbakova perceives little that is redemptive or even desirable in the biological accident of family, and whereas for Vasilenko the family may provide sanctuary from existential terrors, Ulitskaya conceives of successive generations as an image and guarantor of continuity.
In “March 1953,” as in “Gulia,” “Barley Soup,” and the novella *Sonechka* (1992), families transmit the legacy of humanistic values that ensure decency—a paramount imperative in her fictional world. The conclusion of “March 1953” synchronizes three separate fates, two of them entangled in the plotline elaborated in the story, the third occurring behind the scenes, in Russian history. Reminiscent of Tolstaya’s “Rendezvous with the Bird,” they all register a rite of passage: a young Jewish girl’s entry into womanhood and her great grandfather’s and Stalin’s “transition” to the next world. The intersection of deaths is critical to Ulitskaya’s themes of continuity and moral responsibility: The old Jewish shoemaker Aaron dies peacefully, having passed on his tolerant wisdom to the courageous Lily, a heritage that contrasts pointedly with Stalin’s bloody legacy of suspicion, betrayal, and wholesale murder. Without commentary, Ulitskaya eloquently juxtaposes, on the one hand, the results of Aaron’s philosophy of life—moral and physical resistance to injustice, in the form of Lily’s victorious battle with Bodrik, the anti-Semitic bully—with the consequences of Stalin’s, on the other—the camps, in which her Stalinist father (“the son of decent parents”) works for the KGB. Thus the biological change that signals the girl’s new capacity to create life and perpetuate her family line (the flow of menstrual blood) temporally coincides with the biological change (Stalin’s death) that will prevent others’ blood from flowing needlessly in loss of life.

In her low-key acceptance of the body, its drives and functions, Ulitskaya unproblematically refers to the groin, to pubic hair, to menstruation and vomiting, and to sexual attraction at puberty. Just as matter-of-factly she documents the anti-Semitism that persisted throughout the Soviet regime and reached its apogee during the hysterical witch-hunts under Stalin. Ulitskaya’s admirable sense of balance, her capacity to understand both sides of an issue, to identify mitigating circumstances for questionable actions infuse her stories with an aura of warmth that might, but should not, be confused with sentimental reassurance.

Like Ulitskaya, but in more concentrated form and in greater detail, Marina Palei acknowledges the physical dimension in life. Her early training in medicine doubtless accounts in part for her emphasis on the body—an emphasis that runs counter to decades of Soviet puritanism and that leaps from the pages of such stories as “The Day of the Poplar Down,” “The Losers’ Division,” and “Rendezvous.” Her novella *Cabiria from the Bypass*, the first third of which is extracted here, similarly flouts Soviet conventions of propriety in portraying, with humor and zest, the epic-scale sexual adventures of its insatiable heroine. Analogized through
her name with the ancient gods of fertility and the idealistic prostitute from Fellini's film *The Nights of Cabiria* (1956), Cabiria devotes her energies singlemindedly to intercourse with any willing and available man. The novella has much in common with Tolstaya's "Fire and Dust," but above all it revives the tradition of Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones,* with its rollicking series of sexual encounters and its unhesitating preference for honest lust over pious repression. Presented through her female cousin's sardonic eyes—not judgmentally, but with reluctant admiration and awe—Cabiria ultimately emerges as the irrepressible, self-regenerative life force. That uncontainable robustness communicates itself on the authorial level too, for Palei mimics her protagonist's exuberance through vigorous narrative momentum and colorful verbal pyrotechnics.

Equally impressive not only in its display of the powers of language, but also in its self-assured creation of an animistic universe is Nina Sadur's story cycle *Percipient,* to which the three selections in this volume belong. With the aid of folklore, Sadur materializes a world of enigmatic, uncontrollable forces to which human volition seems irrelevant. Populated by witches, cats, and pseudohuman creatures, full of totemic objects invested with magic powers (e.g., rings, seeds, pieces of cloth, hair), this environment vibrates with emanations that point to the irrationality (or inexplicability) of its most significant phenomena. As in fairy tales and E.T.A. Hoffmann's works, beings and objects undergo transformations, people lapse into hypnotic-like states, cast spells, and experience visions and dreams that suggest contacts with an unknowable realm. That realm, ultimately, consists of the subconscious and unconscious layers of the psyche, or, in spiritual terms, the soul.

Sadur's paramount interest lies not in social, but in psychological and metaphysical issues. Hence the deaths, "births," "supernatural" communications, symbol-laden dreams and "prophesies" that reticulate throughout her narratives. Taking the traditional situation of a romance as her starting point, Sadur proceeds to encode violence, hatred, jealousy ("Witch's Tears"), awakened sexuality ("Rings"), sexual fears ("Dear Little Redhead"), and guilt in a maximally condensed, elliptic form that scrupulously omits any and all clarification. Her stories of love, female friendship, motherhood, and failed relations may be called psychic dramas, with passionate impulses and emotions (the submerged portion of the iceberg) concretized in ambiguous but tangible matter (the visible tip).

Sadur's daughter Yekaterina, a youthful newcomer to literature, clearly owes a debt to her mother, to the fin-de-siècle strand in Russian Symbol-
ism, and to E.T.A Hoffmann's *Kunstlernovelle*. "Kozlov's Nights," in fact, reads like a recasting of Hoffmann's "The Golden Pot" in the spirit of Fyodor Sologub, who also yoked polarities—spirit and matter, good and evil, life and death, love and hatred—and explored "abnormal" psychological states (e.g., Kozlov's tormenting languor), "supernatural" powers (Alyonka), and occurrences that defy logical explanation. Sadur resorts to folklore *topoi* (e.g., magical metamorphoses, appearances and disappearances, and the seductive but deadly *rusalka* [mermaid]) to orchestrate the atmosphere of a sensual, fantastic borderline state of near-trance in which the artist Kozlov yearns and languishes. At the same time, she creates a palpable everyday world through minutely particularized descriptions that transmit the look, smell, or feel of a locale or item. For the artist Kozlov, who molds wax figures that appear to take on life, the dividing lines between tangible and imagined, alive and dead, fatal and salvatory blur and lose significance. Caught, like Hoffmann's Anselmus, between the safe love of the meek, predictable Asya (Hoffmann's Veronika) and the bewitching allure of the reputedly lethal Alyonka (Hoffmann's Serpentina), Kozlov thrashes about, awaiting his fate, which, at story's end, remains undecided. As does Nina Sadur's cycle, "Kozlov's Nights" conjures up dark forces that swallow up human will. And, just as in *Per- cipient*, the helpless individual remains ultimately isolated, unknowable not only to others, but also to himself.

If the Sadurs perceive the self as impenetrable, Irina Polyanskaya's "The Game" posits the transparency of others. The entire story, in fact, consists of a psychological reading by an adult woman of a girl in whom she perceives her former, immature self. Projection, identification, and semiotic skills—as key components in interpreting "the human text"—converge in this first-person record of several near-wordless chance encounters with an adolescent that trigger the act of analysis. However discerning, the narrator's dispassionate explication of the girl's naive self-presentation both finalizes the object of her ironic dissection and reveals the rigorously guarded limits of the narrator's understanding. That self-congratulatory comprehension never translates into active empathy, which would require an *emotional* output in addition to the safely intellectual observation that preserves distance. When the narrator finds her status of self-positing subject imperiled by the girl's demanding gaze, she flees from the threat of becoming an object, from losing her precarious power of detached observer, and achieves a dubious victory in the "game" by diagnosing her "opponent" as "mad." Polyanskaya's story performs the task, unusual in the Russian context, of showing woman as
disengaged and aloof, unwilling to assume the role of surrogate mother—a withdrawal that belies the reassuring Russian myth of women's eternal readiness to nurture the needy and to bandage wounded psyches. Likewise, the coolly sardonic tone of Polyanskaya's narrative militates against the popular notion of women's emotional, intuitive apprehension of the world and its inhabitants.

Current women's prose in Russia, then, has extended the boundaries as well as multiplied and intensified the hues of fictionalized womanhood. In the process of doing so, it has relegated manhood and its inscription to the periphery. Of the selections in this volume, only the narratives by Ginzburg and Yekaterina Sadur proceed from a male viewpoint; Vasilenko and Polyanskaya depict an almost exclusively female universe; and in the remaining stories, men play decidedly secondary roles. Such perennial issues as ethical choice, the inviolability of the self, generational clashes, family relations, and sexuality are elaborated through women-centered plots. Resolutions hinge on decisions and actions undertaken by females of will, appetite, and energy, whether they be Ulitskaya's gutsy Lily, Scherbakova's vulgar Masha, or Palei's liberated, lascivious Cabiria.

Stylistically, too, New Women's Prose has broken fresh ground, drawing creatively on folklore and myth, engaging in wordplay, and exploiting the destabilizing potential of irony. In contrast to the wordy near-journalese of Russian women's fiction of the 1970s, today's female authors challenge and pleasure their readers through texts that engage, puzzle, and intrigue as much by the complexity of their manner as by the originality of their perspectives on reality.

Notes


3. For samples of these reactions, see the volume of annotated translations titled Skirted Issues: The Discreteness and Indiscretions of Russian Women's Prose,


5. Ulitskaya’s “A Chosen People,” however, is a notable exception, insofar as it offers a mystical reading of three women’s physical infirmities. That story and others by authors included in this collection appear in *Lives in Transit: Recent Russian Women’s Writing*, ed. Helena Goscilo (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ardis, 1995).


