
WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A WOMAN WRITER

Models of "the Self" in Alexandra
Zrazhevskaya's "Menagerie"

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In Russia of the 1820s-30s the woman writer stops being an amusing domestic sight and starts claiming a certain status, offering her works to the journals and publishers. A decade later, in the 1830s-40s, thick Russian journals start publishing critical articles that do not merely mention women's names complementarily or present disparate works by women, but also introduce a new notion into the cultural common use, or, rather, a new discourse — that of women's literature.¹

Around the same time different types of autodocumentary genres² appear in literary use (letters, diaries, journals, confessions, autobiographies, etc.) and their very discussion becomes the object of criticism (Tartakovskii, 1997: 49 and 103-113). Despite the fact that the memoirs (overwhelmingly French) that inundated Russia at the beginning of the century were written by a considerable number of women, the first Russian female writer's autobiography dates to 1847-1848. This is regarded to be *Autobiography* by Nadezhda Sohanskaya, written as a letter to P. Pletnyov and only published in 1896 (Clyman & Vowels 1996: 10; Held, 1987: 87-93).

1 V. Botkin in the preface to the translation of two chapters from the book *Shakespeare's Female Characters* by Mrs Jameson uses the term "women's aesthetics", by which he means the process of introduction of the women's sense and sensibility into "the architectonics of the literary work" (Botkin 1841: 64). On the reception of the women's literature in the Russian criticism of the time, see Savkina 1998: 23-51.

2 The term autodocumentary genres here is used to denote a group of texts aiming at authenticity (Ginzburg 1971: 10) which is performed through the identity of the author-narrator-protagonist (see Lejeune 1988: 193). Lejeune calls this group of texts *literature intime*.

However, it appears that there was a text written and published earlier, in the beginning of the 1840s, and that it is almost entirely dedicated to the discussion of the women writers' identity within the boundaries of autodocumenting genres. In this instance it is genres and not a genre that will be discussed, since Alexandra Zrazhevskaya's text "Menagerie" presents a mixture of the epistolary genre, autobiography and critical essay.

Alexandra Zrazhevskaya (1805–1867) was born in St. Petersburg in an architect's family, and was educated in a boarding school in the capital. She started writing very early and became well-known as a translator, but also appeared in public as a critic, as well as the author of some original texts, for example, the novel *Pictures of Friendly Relations*, which had two editions, in 1833 and 1839. (On Zrazhevskaya's biography see : Faynshteyn 1989: 125–137; Dmitrieva-Maymina 1992: 358–360.) Apart from this novel, Zrazhevskaya wrote a five-volume work *Woman's Age* (*Zhenskii Vek*), which we only know from her letter to M. Zagoskin. In the letter she asks for his assistance in campaigning and with the distribution of the novel. The work never appeared, and the manu-

script was destroyed. Zrazhevskaya herself explains the reasons for her request: "I have no means of subsistence, and I only live from literature. Besides, my work deserves attention" (Zrazhevskaya 1850: 4). Great literary ambition combined with the disadvantages of her life circumstances, as well as the painful perception of the critics' and society's biased attitudes to the woman writer, were some of the reasons that finally brought her to a mental institution.

One of the most important and painful issues for Zrazhevskaya was the problem of the woman author and her own identity as a writer. She discusses these issues in her piece "Woman: a poet and author", which appeared in 1842 in the journal *Moskovityanin*, with a note "an abstract from the novel", possibly from *Woman's Age*. The text consists of two chapters which abound in characters and events, but nevertheless the author focuses on discussions of art: literature, painting, theatre, and, most of all, the problem of the woman author.³ It could even be seen as an essay of literary criticism, written in the form of "a novel abstract".

In fact, it appears that Zrazhevskaya did not possess outstanding fiction-writing abilities, her stronger sides being essay discourse and

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3 Z. uses the word *avtoritsa* to denote the non-existing female version of the "author". It is worthy of interest in general, how vigorously Zrazhevskaya assaults different forms of sexism in language. She constantly invents and uses words of the feminine gender to denote the creative occupations: *poetka*, *stihotvoritsa*, *avtoritsa*, *avtorishcha*.

critical discussion, and the use of the novelistic settings could be explained by the fear of abandoning conventional channels or, possibly, inadequate self-appraisal. In her letters, for example, she refers to herself as a talented novelist, and as the mental disorder progresses the exaggerated claims appear to be a symptom of megalomania. In those instances when Zrazhevskaya does not try to create "talking puppets" to channel her salient ideas, the outcome is much more interesting and original. This is exactly the case of the essay "Menagerie" that the present article focuses on.

The essay consists of two parts written in the form of letters addressed in the first instance to Varvara Ivanovna Bakunina, and in the second to her daughter Praskov'ya Mihailovna Bakunina.⁴

The genre of "familiar letter" was extremely popular in literary spheres (especially of the so-called "Pushkin circle") in the 1820s and '30s, as this kind of epistolary was at the same time of a public and intimate character, also having double, or even multiple objects of address. On the one hand, the text of a letter was addressed to a particular person,

as well as to all the members of a literary circle, and, on the other hand, it presupposed a possible historical audience, that of posterity. Letters of this kind – free and intimate in their style (unlike the essayist "open public letter") constituted a literary dialogue, a way of building the literary identity of the addresser and the addressee as members of a common literary circle, community, "brotherhood" (See Stepanov 1966; Todd 1994). The word "brotherhood" here may mark the gendered nature of the literary community, i.e. an assembly of men, occupied with male business – literature (Kelly 1994: 23-26).

The two chapters of Zrazhevskaya's text are close in genre to that of "familiar letter", but both letters constituting "Menagerie" are addressed to women. This is not a formal nomination in the subtitle; the text, as it unfolds, actually creates the images of the addressees.

Thus, the image of Varvara Ivanovna Bakunina conveyed in the letter consists of several models. First of all she is "a dear Maman", enlivening the idyllic reminiscences of childhood: "caresses", "nurture", "motherly

4 Varvara Ivanovna Bakunina was a talented woman, a memoir writer, her daughter – a quite well-known poetess. It is interesting that the latter did not agree with Zrazhevskaya's ideas articulated in the essay and wrote a poem-rebuff "The response to Zrazhevskaya" (*Moskovityanin*, 1842, N3) in which she decisively denies "women's poetry" the right to existence. On the Bakunins see *Russkie pisateli 1800-1917. A Biographical Dictionary*, ed. by Nikolaev T.I., p. 144-145. On Praskov'ya Bakunina also see Greene, 1955: 43-58.

concern" (Zrazhevskaya 1842: 1).⁵ The salient features of her representation are those of a loving, warm and understanding protection. The signature at the end is in keeping with the aforementioned maternal model of the addressee: "with a childish devotion looking forward to your reply, Alexandra Zrazhevskaya".

The image of the mother, however, is complicated and complemented by two significant connotations – the addressee is positioned as an artist: "vivid in my memory is the image of a Madonna that came to life under your brush" (1). The image of Madonna certainly reinforces the concept of holy maternity. Another connotation is that of a creative, enlightened woman, "a creative mother": "the first seeds of this harvest were sown by you" (1); as well as of a friendly but demanding critic: "and I dare to present this still immature thing to your selective taste"(1).

The addressee of the second letter – P. M. Bakunina – is presented as a friend, a sister in art, a colleague in poetic vocation: "Dear friend! You owe me the few pages you promised to dedicate to me, I am waiting for your epistle in verse" (5). The author acts as a benevolent reviewer and critic of the addressee's poems, expressing confidence in the mutual concern, modelling the perspec-

tive of the latter, introducing the elements of dialogue into her text: cues and questions of the epistolary interlocutor – "You are asking what I have done and what I am doing now" (6) – as well as her hypothetical reaction. Thus, the letter is positioned as an element of a dialogic correspondence, since the text of one of the correspondents always includes remarks supposedly made by the other, and "every letter is not only a separate cue, but also the model of the whole dialogue in general" (Paperno 1974: 214). The author of the letter assumes the shared problems of her and the addressee's creative careers – "Can your lot be the same?" – and awaits a mutual understanding and emotional participation:

Correspondence is very much opportu-
ne for my present circumstances. You
just keep the pace, my friend, don't lag
behind, and I shall not cause a delay.
Friendship is a beautiful feeling! I had
wonderful friends, wonderful like you,
in the full sense, clever and sensitive,
with a pure and refined taste. I lived in a
paradise, and suddenly like a bolt from
the blue evil circumstances turned
everything to their own ends – all my
friends were thrown to the end of the
world, I was defeated and shattered, like
Napoleon at Berezino, – miserable, I

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⁵ Later when quoting "Menagerie" only pages will be given.

was evicted out of the magic circle. /.../ What was I to do? Your guess is right: as if I extricated myself, crawled in and settled down in heavens – fence by fence with your small estate. (7)⁶

The representation of both addressees implies existence of a united "magic circle" of creative women, a special women's place, a kind of a female settlement in the poetic heavens.

The awareness or sense of a group identity, as Susan Stanford Friedman argues, is characteristic of women. Conceptualising themselves they cannot abandon their belonging to "the female world" and not take into account those projections of the feminine that are reflected in the dominant culture: the self constructed in women's autobiographical writing is often based on, but not limited to, a group consciousness – an awareness of the meaning of the cultural category WOMAN for the patterns of the women's individual destiny. Instead of seeing themselves solely as unique, women often explore their sense of shared identity with other women, an aspect of identity that

exists in tension with a sense of their uniqueness .

However, in Zrazhevskaya this tension between group identity and the sense of one's own uniqueness seems mitigated by her transforming and limiting the group that she identifies with, "we, women" is specified as "we, creative women", "we, writers". This idea is not only developed through the model of correspondence, in which she constructs the image of addressee as well as their imaginary dialogue, but it is also to be seen in the literary-critical part of her second letter. She mentions the names of other women in literature, positively reviewing their works, which suggests Zrazhevskaya's efforts to demarcate a certain specific group of women writers as well as to consider it as a unique and unified community. She also expresses similar ideas in another article, in which she appeals to women authors to "not act without co-ordination," but "get assembled" and publish their own journal. (Zrazhevskaya 1842a: 220).⁷ The idea of the common circle, of

6 "Переписка очень кстати в моем теперешнем образе жизни. Только держись, друг мой, не отставай, а за мной дело не станет. Дружба, прекрасное чувство! у меня были прелестные друзья □ то есть пепестные как ты, в полном смысле пелестные, умные, чувствительные, с чистым и нежным вкусом. Я жила как в раю, и вдруг откуда ни возьмись □ злые обстоятелства, все перевернули по-своему □ друзей моих всех забросили на край света: я раззорилась в пух и прах, как Наполеон под Березино, □ меня бедную вытолкали из заколдованного круга. <...> Что же мне делать? □ ты угадала: я точно вкарабкалась, вползла и зажила в поднебесьи, □ двор об двор с твоею маленькой усадьбой".

7 These facts allow for a correction of Barbara Held's conclusions on the absence of the attempts in the Russian literature for the women to get united into specifically female groups (Held 1987: 2), though one has to agree that these appeals by Zrazhevskaya remained practically unheard.

the writers' sisterhood appears to be extremely important for Zrazhevskaya.

In the first letter of the epistolary essay "Ménagerie", addressing her "creative mother" V.I. Bakunina, Zrazhevskaya notes: "After the long search, I have finally found you and I rush to present a brief sketch of my existence" (1). Thus, the first part contains a brief autobiographical sketch – a reduced *Bildungsroman*, the novel of the formation of a woman-writer, which shows, through personal experience, the main stages of her development: early awakening of an overpowering desire to write, parents' prohibition and its violation, advice and warnings of a male mentor and at the same time censor (in Zrazhevskaya's case it was V. A. Zhukovskii), education, self-education and self-improvement, female sisterly support, hardships and finally obstacles arising on entering the "male world" of literary competition and market.

The version of the life narrative suggested by Zrazhevskaya conforms to the patterns characteristic of the time. Thus, E. N. Gracheva, researching similar texts in her article "The picture of poet's childhood in the material of life descriptions at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century"⁸ discerns a few recurrent themes structuring the image of the character. Already in early childhood the poet is distinguished by the

acuteness of senses, "sensitivity of soul", inclination for day-dreaming and fantasising, passion for reading and the arts, intensive studies even at the hour of leisure (Gracheva 1995: 324-326). A significant element of the plot is the moment of realising one's poetic vocation, which "can be dissected into three components: reading (listening to a story), inspiration, realising one's own vocation, described as the desire to follow it" (Gracheva 1995: 327).

Thus the realisation of one's poetic vocation was often depicted as a "prodigy" a kind of a divine revelation. The 1830s witnessed the development of a certain pattern of the life story of a woman poet in the article by A. Nikitenko about Elizaveta Kul'man (the first publication in *Biblioteka dlya chteniya* in 1835). It developed the following biographical paradigm: "a young, chaste soul of genius living in the fantasy world – persistence and diligence – an enormous role of the male mentor – collision with life – early destruction". A majority of these elements are present in Zrazhevskaya as well, though some of them are considerably transformed. However, together with the "common places" of the "life descriptions" of the poet/poetess, there are some absolutely unique and original motives in her autobiographical sketch that appear to be transcending the femininity myths and gender stereotypes

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8 "Представление о детстве поэта на материале жизнеописаний конца XVII -- начала XIX в."

already constructed by that time around the figure of the woman writer.

First, she depicts her writing not only as "an irresistible call of nature", but as a conscious choice: "I have created for myself another fate"; important as well as unexpected in this context is the active grammar structure: "I" is the subject, and "fate" an object. Despite this, one can say that the motive of "prodigy", or, revelation, is still retained when she describes how the emperess Mariya Fyodorovna approved of and rewarded the novel, secretly sent to her by Zrazhevskaya, which she called her "first childish experiment".⁹ This high patroness' participation in her fate is presented by the narrator as a Blessing if not the Annunciation. The role of the male mentor receives unusual stress as well. V. A. Zhukovskii, with whom the young writer "started correspondence" (note: "I started correspondence with him"; and not:

"he with me") steps in as somebody who warns and discourages the young woman from a choice that is dangerous and difficult.

V. A. Zhukoskii replied to me that "authorship brings women out of their quiet circle, that all women writers are exceptions and that all paid dear for their glamorous fame, that it is something that will influence all my life; that authorship entails a thousand troubles, that I will need to study the language, accumulate data as well as my own observations of nature and society since only then one can know what to write about and how to write and that all that demands great work". (3)¹⁰

But having listened to his warnings respectfully, she acts contrary to them:

⁹ Here, one should note an interesting age aberration, related to Zrazhevskaya's developing the motive of the early vocation. "Being eleven I already composed novels, fantastic travel stories, I was scolded, mocked, my works were torn apart and burnt – but it did not transform me, the passion turned into nature." (2) ("Одиннадцати лет я уже сочиняла романы, фантастические путешествия, меня бранили, смеялись, рвали в клочки и жгли мои произведения – но не исправили: эта страсть обратилась в природу". Immediately after this she tells the story of her secretly writing a novel devoted to the emperess, which she sent to her and received a royal present for her "first childish experiment"(2). However, here the date of this event is given – 1828, which testifies to the author's age of 23. The narrative is, nevertheless, constructed in such a way as to impose on the reader the impression of the child writer (which is related to the topic of the early vocation and with the model of the "chaste, child's soul").

¹⁰ "В. А. Жуковский отвечал мне, "что авторство выводит женщин из их тихого круга, что женщины-писательницы составляют исключение и очень дорого заплатили за блестящую славу свою, что это нечто такое, что должно иметь влияние на целую жизнь мою; что с авторством соединены тысячи неприятностей, что я должна изучать язык, скоплять сведения, собственные наблюдения в природе и обществе, только тогда можно знать, о чем писать и как писать, и все это требует больших трудов".

... but believe it or not your goddaughter¹¹ was not at all frightened by that, her thoughts not at all changed, I /.../ studied day and night, with a bind on my eyes I was rushing forward headlong, not fearing rocks or pitches. Sometimes jolts stopped me in full swing, I stopped to think but my spirit did not falter. (3)¹²

Her writing is featured as a craft, a profession: it is not daydreaming, not writing down the divine revelation dictated to her, but work, the production of texts that she describes employing expressions like: "I wrote a novells; "I published *The Letters*"; "waiting for the response of the censorship on two more manuscripts", "I would like to keep the literary fame" (2-3).

The most interesting thing in Zrazhevskaya's brief life story is the degree of her consistent and insistent emphasis on the role that women played in her development as a writer (note also that her autobiography is addressed to the woman and the addressee's perspective is constructed as friendly and

understanding). The first creative seeds are sown by Maman, the Blessing is received from the emperess Mariya Fyodorovna. In the beginning of her creative career, she encountered another woman that "liked to scribble on the paper", and the spirit of competition and mutual critical appraisal of this small female "literary circle" stimulated her further writing efforts.¹³ Wherever Zrazhevskaya writes about women (both in the first and second letter), they are presented as friends, colleagues, the salient feature being that of solidarity, not competition.

The main differentiating trait of Zrazhevskaya's biography is the enormous self-confidence, the fact that she presents herself as an autonomously and actively working subject and a professional writer. Certainly, the text contains many run-of-the-mill forms of self-denigration ("you won't be bored to scan this *nonsense*"; "*polite* journals responded benevolently"; "the passion to scribble on the paper", etc.), but they are immediately disavowed, as this nonsense is presented as "eight books *published by me*"; the jo-

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11 This nomination of the addressee suggests that V.I. Bakunina is Zrazhevskaya's godmother, which also explains the forms of address like "Maman" (though the word *krestnitsa/goddaughter* may be used here metaphorically).

12 "поверьте ли вашу крестницу нисколько не испугало это, не переменило мыслей ее, я <...> училась дни и ночи, с завязанными глазами опрометью мчалась вперед, не боясь ни камней, ни ям. Иногда толчки останавливали меня на всем бегу, я задумывалась, но не упала духом".

13 "Тут как-то нечаянно я познакомилась с одою, барыней любительницей прекрасного в слове: это была г-жа В...., урожденная княжна Х...ва. Познакомясь, мы взапуски марали бумагу; она не щадила меня, критиковала, смеялась, исписала поля моих первых тетрадей своими примечаниями — и как бы вы думали? — она не утомила во мне любовь к литературе, напротив, это еще пуще подстрекало меня."

urnals reviewed them *benevolently*; one translation was published by the Russian Academy, another one (that of Balzac) "I marked all over with notes, no worse than an archaeologist"; "it is difficult to be a good translator, and even more so a good writer"; "the attacks of critics and their endless questions 'why isn't it like this, or like that?' could be answered only by 'this had to be like this...', *because I wanted it to be so*" (4); speaking of her failures she compares herself with no one, but "*Napoleon at Berezino*" (7) (*my italics* – I. S.). The image of the "self" in the autobiographical text is thus structured as an active, resolute, autonomous, enlightened and energetic woman, who has consciously chosen writing as a profession and who is not deluded as to the hardships this choice is fraught with. All of the above conforms neither to the stereotypes of femininity nor to the limits of female writing delineated by the criticism of the time. If the criticism of the time did put up with women's writing, it was so only if women operated within their legitimate prescribed roles.

Woman is a weak though pleasing creature, "the adornment of man's life", thus, she may perfect herself through self-reflexivity in verse, remaining within the diarylike sphere of intimacy. In this case, women's poetry is referred to as "sweet nonsense", amateurishness, "sweet social talk" (*lyubezny*

svetskii razgovor), gossip, etc. On the other hand, woman was allowed to write within another role: a mother could compose pedagogical pieces and literature for children. In any case, she should not appear in the public scene, where she could compete with men, where the mastering of language and its power are at stake. She should not take up writing as a craft.¹⁴ And it is exactly woman's conscious choice of writing as a profession that Zrazhevskaya discusses in her text. Building her own identity as an active and free creative personality Zrazhevskaya cannot entirely disregard the existent conventions, stereotypes and myths of femininity dominant in the patriarchal culture as well as their particular national-cultural modifications in Russia of the 1840s.

Reflecting on the peculiarities of women's autobiographical texts, Susan Stanford Friedman notes that women, not recognising themselves in the reflections of cultural representation, develop a dual consciousness – the self as culturally defined and the self as different from cultural prescription. This kind of a double consciousness, a double code to self-interpretation creates the impression of the lack of integrity, inconsistency and disruption of the subject, which has been noted by many researchers of women's autobiographical writing and which determines the paradox, pointed out by Estelle C. Jeli-

14 Also see on this: "Поэзия – опасный дар для девы" (on reception of women's literature and women writers in Russia in the first part of the 19th century) (Savkina 1998: 23–51).

nek, that women often depict a multidimensional, fragmented self-image coloured by a sense of inadequacy and alienation, of being outsiders, or “other”; they feel the need for authentication, to prove their self-worth. At the same time, and paradoxically, they project self-confidence and a positive sense of accomplishment in having overcome many obstacles to their success – whether it be personal or professional (Jelinek, 1986: xiii).

In the second part of “Menagerie” Zrazhevskaya concentrates on disclosing the complexity of the woman author's position as that of other, a weird and ugly creature from the point of view of stereotypical representation supported and reinforced by the male criticism. The second letter, addressed to P. M. Bakunina, in part continues the autobiographical direction of the first letter, now elaborating on the period of the woman author's life after she dared to step into the public scene. This situation is featured as the actual present of the narrator. It should be stressed here that the core of the problem is not women's creativity here, but their appearance in public, in the professional writing market, because, as Zrazhevskaya writes

... the gift to write poetry or prose is a wonderful gift, but despite any perform-

ance suited to the goal, the first success always depends on the public voice, and that voice in its turn on the criticism of journalists and the efforts of book traders. Thus, for subsistence, a poet, a prose-writer (whatever the talented person is) needs attention to his works, leniency, and, most importantly, that the public voice acknowledges them as valuable, i.e. valuable in the usual sense – expenses on books, some enthusiasm, a lot more patience and an abyss of labour. And without all these together, I came to be convinced, one should better stay home, and I couldn't – that's just the trouble! It is expensive to publish on one's own and it is often impossible to publish again without expenses, and to stop publishing is to waste all the previous work. It is too late to reify myself, I have come too far to try turning back. This is the bitter and stinging frame that edges my sweet literary life. (6-7)¹⁵

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The difficulties of this kind await any “talented person”, but for a woman, in the author's view, the case is aggravated by the social and cultural biases expressed by the “beasts” of criticism. Zrazhevskaya discloses the patriarchal biases of criticism though she does not

¹⁵ “дар слагать стихи или писать прозой в своем роде прекрасный дар, но, несмотря на никакое исполнение соответствующее цели, – первый успех всегда зависит от общественного голоса, а голос этот очень много от критики журналистов и усердия книгопродавцев. Итак для существования – поэту, прозаику, кому бы то ни было, но человеку с талантом – необходимы внимание к его трудам, снисхождение и главное, чтоб общий голос признал бы их ценными: то есть в обыкновенном смысле – расход на книги, немножко энтузиазма, еще больше терпения и бездна трудов. А без этого и всего этого вместе я убедилась, что лучше сидеть

use the term in describing the obstacles that she has to overcome on her way to the literary world, where she seems "strange and unusual", where "she is alien". First she challenges the typical critics' pronouncement that writing is contradictory to female nature.¹⁶ Next, her statements suggest that she is accusing the "beasts" of patriarchal criticism of what in contemporary language could be phrased as a pornographic view of the woman writer, tabooing the writing experience for women:

What can a woman write? What are the passions she will speak of? — every-one will point at her, adding, she must have experienced that if it occurred to her. So would the terrible beast say. (8)¹⁷

Zrazhevskaya responds vigorously and in great detail to the third argument of misogynist criticism, that of the absence of the great thinkers and writers among women ("Newtons and Kuv'es /.../, Shillers, Goethes, Tasses and other men of genius" /9/).

дома, а дома не сидится, беда да и только! Дорого издавать на свой счет — без расхода невозможно часто печатать вновь, а перестать печатать нельзя — пропадут все прежние труды: овеществовать себя уже поздно, я слишком далеко зашла, чтоб ворочаться назад, вот та горькая и колючая рама, которая окраивает мою сладкую литературную жизнь".

16 "влечение сочинять, печатать и громко высказывать свои мысли считают за какую-то безобразную химеру с надутым лицом, дурными наклонностями и очень неприличною душе в женской обертке".

17 "Что может сочинить девушка? о каких страстях заговорит она? — всякий укажет на нее, прибавляя: — видно испытала эта, мало если подумала. Так говорит тот страшный зверь".

Exclusively and solely because you do not prepare us to be the Newtons and Decartes. Take a look: our eyes are sharper, hearing more refined, touch more delicate, and sensitivity in general — on a higher level. Our nerves are thinner, while women's muscles are not weaker than men's, look at the peasant woman: she can plough, thresh and chop wood — coping with all the male tasks. Give the woman schooling, subordinate her to labour, labour and labour, establish women's universities and you will see if the woman can possess a strong and subtle mind, solidity, genius, ingenuity and endurance to labour. /.../ Weren't it you who as-

sured us /.../ we are only beautiful when we are frivolous, when we are dolls and chatterboxes, /.../ that except for /.../ coronets, bracelets, earrings and dancing we shouldn't rack our brains with anything; that everything else is man's business. (9-10)¹⁸

One can only be surprised at the extent of Zrazhevskaya's disclosing of patriarchal representation of the sociocultural stereotypes as eternal and natural long before the existence of the feminist and gender-oriented criticism. Her saying that "women writers-autodidacts, /avoiding/ men's mockery, /.../ at the first instance, at the very outset /.../, do not develop, but on the contrary, stifle and destroy persistent observation and reflexivity which produce great truths" (10),¹⁹ sounds in keeping with the themes of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. In her text, Zrazhevskaya constructs the traditional male perspective both directly, through including the cues of the imaginary opponents, "raging beasts" (11), and indirectly, in her polemic responses, by italicising the male definitions and attributes of the feminine.²⁰ This can be interpreted with the help of Domna Stanton, so that the speaking "I"

constitutes the reading "you" as the representation of the society's view of women and thus as the personification of the writing interdiction (Stanton 1987: 13).

Embarking on a dialogue with the patriarchal point of view, the author to a certain extent reproduces it in her response, adapts to it, repeating the current popular opinions on how a woman should write. For instance, she appeals to women writers to create works based on the "human heart, on what is tender, meek, gentle, fair in it" (5).²¹ Unlike men writers – "the owners of knowledge, wisdom, strength, reason", "pleasing" themselves by describing "the passionate, the terrible and the beastly", woman has an inenormous lot of the viceless human passions. "Being *sinful and weak* I can speak of those passions as well without blushing" (8). Woman should "please people by writing beautifully, she should return to the word /.../ its beauty, purity, holiness" (9). Supporting the critics' favourite metaphor of "the inexperienced female pen", which cannot produce anything legible without a male mentor, Zrazhevskaya speaks of her "child's inexperience"; after passionate appeals for equal educational opportunities for

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18 "Оттого именно и единственно, <...> что вы не готовите нас в Ньютоны и Декарты. Посмотрите: глаза наши острее, слух тоньше, осязание нежнее, вообще восприимчивость наша выше мужской. Нервы наши тоньше, мускулы у женщин не слабее мужских, посмотрите на крестьянку: она и пашет, и полотит, и дрова рубит, — исправляет все мужские работы. Дайте женщине школу, подчините ее с детских лет труду, труду и труду, учредите женские университеты, кафедры, и тогда посмотрите: дается ли женщине сильный и тонкий рассудок, основательность, гениальность, изобретательность и переносчивость трудов. <...> Не вы ли уверили нас, <...> что мы тогда только

прекрасны и милы, когда мы *ветренницы, куклы, болтушки, резвушки*, что кроме *пуклей, фероньерок, браслет, серег и кон-тратанцев* нам не о чем и голову ломать, что все другое — дело мужчины.”

19 “писательницы-самоучки, <избегая> мужских насмешек, <...> при первом порыве, в самом источнике <...> не развивают, напротив душат, уничтожают в себе упорную наблюдательность и размышление, от которых рождаются великие гениальные истины”.

20 Compare this with the metaphor by Nancy K. Miller speaking of women expressing themselves within the masculine culture through the use of the italics to bring in their own tone (Miller 1980: 25-45).

21 “на человеческом сердце и на том, что есть в нем *нежного, кроткого, ласкового, божеского*”.

22 “Мышление, чувство и силу, внутреннюю, живую способность олицетворять словами видимые и невидимые предметы: ощущения, чувствования наши и впешние влечения, добродетели, пороки, заблуждения, странности, и — забавляя ум, пленяя сердце, неприметно впечатлевать в них истины, необходимые для нашего благополучия, истины самопознания, которых без того слушать не станем. А этою способностью равно наделены мужчины и женщины. Всякая книга есть осуществленная мысль, чувство и сила писателя; если она доставляет мне наслаждение, пользу, то непременно светит, согревает и влагает в душу мою силу, сообщая какую-нибудь истину, которая своею новизною пленяет, животворит, и я готова вам показать сотни книг женского рода, которые выдержат эту пробу”.

women, she reassures the reader: “no, no! I'm not categorically insisting on granting women university or pulpit /.../ in that case they will really lose all their beautiful femininity, /.../ I'm only saying this in rebuff to our persecutors” (10; *my italics* — I. S.) Meek, gracious, viceless, innocent, exquisite — these epithets determined and limited the possibilities for women's writing within the criticism of the time — both in the compassionate articles (e.g. Kireevskii 1834) and in the openly misogynist pamphlets (e.g. “The Women Writers” by Rahmannyi). But as soon as she has reproduced these stereotypes, Zrazhevskaya immediately and vigorously renounces them. The question of an opponent (a part of the essay is an imaginary dialogue with the “beasts” of criticism) “What do you understand by authorship?” is followed by the answer:

Thought, feeling and strength, internal and alive, an ability to embody in words visible and invisible objects: perceptions, inner feelings and impressions, virtues, vices, aberrations and whims; the ability while entertaining the mind and captivating the heart to unobtrusively inform them with the truths necessary for our well-being, the truths of self-knowledge that otherwise we wouldn't listen to. Men and women are equally endowed with this ability. Any book is an executed thought, feeling and strength of the writer; if it gives me pleasure, then it is necessarily of benefit for me — it enlightens, enlivens and invigorates my soul, when it informs me with some truth which captivates with its novelty and revives me, and I'm ready to show you hundreds of women's books that will endure this test. (11-12)²²

Challenging the traditional views that allow women the sphere of feelings, and exquisite self-reflection, Zrazhevskaya recurrently names wit, strength, ability for philosophical thinking, ambition, craving for success and fame as the female attributes.

And to infuriate the desperate hater of women writers even further, I added: I don't know what is unattainable for the female mind, there is no depth that it would be unable to penetrate. Women catch instantly the truths that men philosophers spend fruitlessly centuries upon. /.../ If women can find time for dances, cards, visits and gossip as well as other time-killers without being reprimanded on the infringement on the roles of daughter, wife, mother, housekeeper; why do you charge them with a criminal offence when they instead of wasting their time on miserable distractions would want to spend it on peaceful enjoyable occupations, so inherent for human beings. (13)²³

The last point is especially interesting since the struggle is carried out "on the enemy's

territory": pretending to accept the male perspective of the female destiny, Zrazhevskaya demonstrates its inner contradiction and invalidity, since some "natural, female roles ("society, beauty, adornment of life") do not correlate to others, no less dear to the male heart (daughter, mother, wife, housekeeper) which questions the central patriarchal assumption of the "naturalness" of the "predestined" female socio-cultural roles.

Zrazhevskaya rebels against the assumption of modesty and humility being appropriate for women and makes a call to them to abandon, through authorship, the domesticated locuses: boudoir, parlour, dressing-room or children's room – in favour of the historical scene.

See for yourself: which is the way? When we were deprived of everything: university, pulpit, freedom – everything taken by the fathers, husbands, brothers, sons...well, then! I am not sad, if they took it, so be it; they hedged us in a special domain: boudoir, parlour, toilet room, handed over rearing of the children to us, family life – I agree – but

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23 "И чтобы еще более взбесить отчаянного ненавистника женщин-писательниц, я прибавила: не знаю, на что не ундрится тонкий женский ум – нет глубины, в которую бы он не проник. Женщины ловят налету эти вековые истины, над которыми так бесплодно трудятся философы-мужчины. Но, заметьте, женщинам везде больше опасностей, за все более достается. <> Если женщины находят время для танцев, визитов, пустой болтовни, карт и подобных уничтожений времени, и это им не вменяют в нарушение обязанностей дочери, жены, хозяйки, матери; то почему же вы им вменяете в преступление то, когда они, вместо праздного истребления времени на ничтожные рассеяния, будут проводить все то же самое время в мирных, приятных занятиях, так свойственных человеку".

why weren't we as well deprived of the male lot – ambition: from the boudoir, dressing-room or parlour, one can't jump *pas en avant* into history. Were not father, husband, brother, son seducing me with their example, were not they soliciting a place in history from dawn till dusk – I would be the quietest creature! but when /.../ by their own example they have awakened my taste to the wreath of history – and at the same time only provided me with boarding, with a doll, a toy, a petty surface of life, of word and thought – merciless! – why are you surprised that we have armed ourselves by authorship in the boudoir, parlour and toilet room. All other arms you have taken away from us, while infusing us with the same tastes and ambitions – what else is there for us to fight with? (14)²⁴

The text is full of oscillations between the discourse of mimicry (by your example and admonition you have awakened in me), and that of struggle (have armed ourselves, arms,

fight) and rebellion, that Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck write about reflecting on women's autobiographical texts (Brodzki & Schenck 1988: 7–12). However, rebellion and challenge appear more powerful and constant than accommodation. In the dialogue with the imaginary enemy, “the desperate hater of women writers”, she always takes an active offensive position. She ironizes, mocks, discloses. When imitating the dialogue she uses the verbs responded, retorted, interrupted; she uses the pronoun I as opposed to we and realises what kind of reaction may follow her statements (“given the occasion he wouldn't fail to try to intimidate me for my brave attempt to convince him of my female dignity” /14/).

The active resistance to the patriarchal, hostile “reader's you” is one of the ways of designing the female and writer's identity by starting from the contrary, although not the only one. Many studies of the autodocumenting genres develop the idea, first articulated by Mary Mason, that women writing about themselves create their identity thro-

24 “Рассудите сами: ну как тут быть. Когда все у нас отняли: университет отняли, кафедру отняли, свободу отняли, – все у нас отняли отцы, мужья, братья и сыновья... хорошо! я не огорчаюсь: отняли так отняли; отвели нам особый удел: будуар, уборную, гостиную, порочили воспитание детей, домашний быт – согласна – бе бунтую – да зачем же вместе со всем тем не отняли у нас мужского же удела – тщеславия: из будуара, уборной и гостиной не прыгнешь *pas en avant* – в историю. Не соблазняя меня своим примером отец, муж, брат, сын, не помогая они с утра до ночи, ежедневно на моих глазах местечка в истории – я была бы спокойнейшее существо! но когда <...> собственным примером и наставлением пробудили во мне вкус к венку истории – и в то же время предоставили только пансион, только лишь куклу, игрушку, поверхностное и мелочное в жизни, в мысли, в слове – безжалостные! – чему вы дивитесь, что мы вооружились и в будуаре, и в уборной, и в гостиной авторством. Все другое оружие вы отобрали себе, а вкусы и усремления в нас вдохнули – чем же нам побеждать?...”.

ugh others: "disclosure of the female self is linked to the identification of some "other". This recognition of another consciousness, this grounding of identity in the relation to the chosen other seems to enable women to write openly about themselves. (Mason 1980: 210) In the examples given by Mason it is primarily men who are featured as "others", since they are the significant others through whom women's own identity is created. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck point out that this "delineation of identity by alterity," as Mary Mason defines it, this self-definition in relation to significant others, is the most pervasive characteristic of the female autobiography (Brodzki & Schenck 1988: 8).

In Zrazhevskaya's text the role of others in the creation of her own identity is extremely important as well. However, all men except for Zhukovskiy are depicted as a unified, nameless, homogenous group of "strangers", enemies, "beasts" in the "menagerie". The male figures usually significant for women's self-writing, i.e. father, brother, husband, son, actually appear only as the various pseudonyms of the male misogynist aggression: "fathers, husbands, brothers, sons have deprived us of everything" (14). She never refers to herself as a father's daughter, as a brother's sister, as a wife. The concepts of

daughterhood, sisterhood, motherhood are related exclusively to the female and the creative: Maman – the creative godmother, sisters-writers, children – books ("my child-loving heart even suffers for the step-children" /4/ – she says of her translations).

Images and voices of other women, as has been pointed out, are extremely important in "Menagerie", The short text is overflowing with women's names (unlike men, women are always named in the text). Apart from the two addressees, Varvara and Praskoviya Bakunina, the emperess Mariya Fyodorovna who had blessed her creative life; the friend-rival, lady V...; Madame de Stahl, the author's favourite (3-II) as well as "our Russian Bunina" (II) – the literary predecessors, "who were punished for their wit, gift and unusual impulse" (II). As the examples of women writers, whose works meet the highest criteria demanded from authorship, she names A. P. Glinka, E. Kul'man, O. Shishkina, Zeneida R-va (E. Gan – I.S.), M. Zhukova, N. Durova, Fedor Fan-Dim (E. Kologrivova – I. S.), A. Ishimova, K. Pavlova, Dolorosa (E. Rastopchina), Z. Volkonskaya,²⁵ actually suggesting an exhaustive list of the women writers of the 30s-40s, providing a brief but benevolent review of their writing.

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25 Some authors are named by Zrazhevskaya through paraphrasing, *sochinitel'nitsa Skopina Shuiskogo* (O.Shishkina), *the author of the novel "Ol'ga"*, *the author-aristocrat* (Z.Volkonskaya).

The mentioned ideas of sisterhood and solidarity are reinforced by the representation of women authors as twins of the narrator. Multiplying the sequence of images, or at least, the list of the names of women who write successfully and actively, Zrazhevskaya constructs a representative figure of the woman writer. By including herself into this united community she constructs her identity as partial and split but at the same time significant and representative. Interesting enough is that when she depicts her own writer's biography, she primarily speaks of hardships, dangers, failures, struggle. The stories of other women writers underline the creative achievements and luck. These features are especially prominent in the image of the addressee of the second letter: her friendly "you" is a variant of the author's more successful alter ego: "Can your lot be the same? — but you are in paradise, you delight everyone by your talent for verse, win the laurels of praise from your endless friends and admirers — including me; you are in bliss — at least you don't have a reason to complain of the struggle of heavenly poetry and earthly materiality, while I..." (7).²⁶ All other women prose writers as well

as poetesses that are mentioned by Zrazhevskaya are characterised as good and successful writers through expressions like "wonderful gift", "delightful novels", "tender, clever, deft, experienced pen", "remarkable works", and "entertaining novellas" (12). The idea of the successful and acknowledged female gift objectified in others creates the ground for the self-confidence and legitimises her own claims. Speaking of Zinaida Volkonskaya's brilliant gift, she exclaims: "It seems to me that the wreath of European fame has been given me as well" (12-13).²⁷ It remains unclear whether she feels the heaviness of the laurel wreath when she identifies with Volkonskaya, or it is an exaggerated self-appraisal, but in any case, the depiction of herself as part of the representative cultural group of Russian women writers that she models in the same text motivates the high self-esteem and the right to speak and write as a woman and a writer at the same time.

At this point, Zrazhevskaya does not simply try to legitimise the female existence within the dominant culture, to win back a corner for women, but she appeals to her friends in writing to bravely write in their own way, to

26 "Неужели и твоя такая доля? -- но ты в раю, восхищаешь всех своим стихотворным талантом, рвешь лавры похвал твоих бесчисленных друзей и почитателей — в том числе и мои; ты блаженствуешь — по крайней мере не имеешь причины жаловаться на борьбу небесной поэзии с земной вещественностью, а я..."

27 "Мне кажется, что уж мне самой надели венок европейской славы..."

be independent: "So far, apart from the princess Zenaida Volkonskaya, A. P. Glinka and countess E. Rasstopchina, our women verse-makers did not engage in the real poetry but walked the trampled path and mimicked men". (5)²⁸

Thus, the main effort of the text appears to be directed at creating one's own identity as the woman writer. This is carried out in different ways: through the gender transformation of the autobiographical paradigm; through the "rule of contraries": questioning the stereotypes of femininity and patriarchal biases against women's creativity while reproducing them; through structuring the female writers group identity by using the images of sisters in writing; through the use of the genre of familiar letter with a female addressee. All these elements provoke the "gender-oriented reading" and create the model of female audience as well as of the female reader's "you".

In the process of writing (and even in the very act of the public appearance, a publication, in a journal, of the "familiar letter") she structures the female subject as creator, or as creating subject, that is declared to be existent and valuable. Of course, the opponents, both back in the past and in the present have always had the question ready at hand: How legitimate are her ambitions? Did she have any talent herself? Can she be called a writer herself? 196

As was pointed out in the beginning of the essay, Zrazhevskaya's fictional abilities were mediocre. However, she was endowed with other gifts, that of a spirited essayist and of a talented critic, that may not have developed fully. The tragic fate of this woman may serve as another example of the "futile gift": if the patriarchal culture had such difficulties "digesting"

28 "До сих пор, кроме княгини Зенеиды Волконской, А. П. Глинки и графини Ростопчиной, наши стихотворицы не занимались истинною поэзиею, а шли избитою тропею и передразнивали мужчин".

the appearance of women writers, it could not, all the more so, allow either place or name for a “pro-feminist” woman critic. Although one place was found for her — the madhouse, where Zrazhevskaya met her last days in full oblivion.

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