Engendering the Russian Body Politic

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One political myth that has persisted through the greater part of Russian history, regardless of the particular form in which political power was expressed, imagines Russia (both Imperial and Soviet) as consisting of two sometimes opposed entities: the state and the Russian people or nation. The mythologeme of the "Russian people" was well developed by the end of the nineteenth century and exploited most strikingly in the twentieth by Stalin. The opposition between the state and the people or nation is not gender neutral. The state, be it Tsarist or Soviet, is constructed as masculine, and the people or nation as feminine. As Joanna Hubbs shows, the bifurcation between "Father Tsar" and "Mother Russia" can be traced back to the reign of Ivan the Terrible, but a similar division of roles persists throughout the Soviet period.¹ Nina Perlina points out that although the Russian word for "revolution" is grammatically feminine, the historical revolution "was largely a masculine undertaking" and was mythologized as such.²

The radical utopias projected by such revolutionary feminists as Aleksandra Kollantai did little to dislodge traditional Russian gender mythologies. Kollantai, writing in 1921, says that the pregnant woman "ceases to belong to herself — she is in service to the collective — she 'produces' out of her own flesh and blood a new unit of work, a new member of the labor republic."³ According to Kollantai, the needs of the family will be provided by the state in the form of communal housing, communal kitchens, children’s homes, and day-care centers, making it possible for women to combine professional work and family life. This revolutionary restructuring of everyday life was never realized. Furthermore, notwith-
standing Kollantai’s Marxist definition of motherhood not as reproduction but as production, Soviet ideology revitalized the traditional myth of Mother Russia.

Maia Turovskaja, a feminist critic writing in post-Soviet Russia, traces the representation of this mythology in films made during the time of Stalin. The 1939 film *The Member of the Government* constructs the heroine’s genealogy as a creature of the party of Lenin and Stalin — as Turovskaja puts it, as a creature of “an all-encompassing patriarchal Will.” Chosen to become a member of the Supreme Soviet, Aleksandra Sokolova proclaims: “Here I stand before you, a simple Russian woman [she uses the somewhat derogatory term “baba”], beaten by my husband, frightened by the priest, shot at by our enemies. . . . And the party and our Soviet power elevated us and me as well to this tribune.” Turovskaja shows how in the postwar film *The Oath* the heroine is transformed into a mythologized “Mother Russia.” The heroine presents a letter written by her husband to Lenin to his new incarnation, Stalin, and in so doing embodies, as Turovskaja puts it, “a purely Russian mythology: the Motherland [Rodina-mat’] before the face of the Father of nations.”

Far from disappearing with the last vestiges of Soviet power, this mythology of Mother Russia, together with certain related constructions of the feminine, have reappeared with particular force during recent years, against the backdrop of glasnost, perestroika, and the collapse of the Soviet empire. These political changes have also made possible the creation and publication of new forms of criticism, both literary and social. A new generation of writers has appeared, among whom women writers figure importantly. Collections specifically devoted to “women’s writing” — certainly a vague and problematic term — have been steadily published at least since the late 1980s.

This chapter seeks to provide an overview of the reconfiguration of Mother Russia and the responses, both direct and indirect, to her resurrection. I will begin with the writings of politically conservative authors, some of whom are well known outside Russia. I will show how the revision of Mother Russia is itself a response to the perception of a breakdown in the political, social, and natural order. I then turn to a specific response to these writings in the work of two very different authors, both of whom can loosely be identified as politically “liberal.” The last section of the essay examines the prose of several new Russian women authors, tracing how and to what extent their configurations of
woman represent “oppositionalist” writing. What strategies are deployed in this writing to defamiliarize Mother Russia? Of particular importance here will be the image of the female body.

I. MOTHER RUSSIA: TAKE ONE

A 1988 essay by the literary critic Irina Sheveleva, entitled “The Feminine and the Maternal” offers a very clear example of the conservative construction of woman and the nation. For Sheveleva the feminine is identified with the home and the homeland. The essence of the feminine is the sense of belonging to a place and a people. In her discussion of women’s poetry Sheveleva writes that “the poetess does not only imprint ‘nature,’ she conveys the sense of her own native belonging” (166). The “earth, one’s own native tongue, and strong native roots” constitute for Sheveleva woman’s “dowry.” The familiar intimate landscape of the home is linked to the overarching ethnic construct of the national group and the political construct of the nation. Woman, as keeper of the home, bears, but does not define, the values of the nation. Sheveleva asks “To be the mistress of your own home — what could be more natural for a woman?” To be mistress means to be the home itself, “to bear its habits and customs in your blood” (166). The link between the home and the nation is enhanced by the woman’s reproductive function, by means of which she has access to “the most intimate secrets of being” (167). Sheveleva chastises the poet Bela Akhmadulina for writing that her baby makes it impossible for her to work, for there is no greater creative work for a woman than caring for a child. But significantly, this theme of the maternal is subordinate to the theme of the home and the native soil and speech. “To accuse women poets of nostalgic patriarchalism, of an attachment to an age-old image of home, of the hearth, is the same as accusing them of being women” (167). To paraphrase Sheveleva, the primary social problem facing Russia today is the need for women to return home, and the primary function of the woman poet is to preserve her “inherited native word.”

For all her concern with the home and the domestic as opposed to the public sphere, Sheveleva’s construction of the feminine places woman once again at the service of the nation. The domestic, in Sheveleva’s reading, does not mark out the space in which the individual is free from the state, as in traditional Western liberal ideology. For Western middle-class women, the domestic sphere became a prison, but for Soviet and
Eastern bloc women and men, the family could be a refuge. In *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed* Slavenka Drakulic writes: “When there is no space in society to express your individuality the family becomes the only territory in which one can form it, exercise it, prove it, express it.” But Drakulic goes on to say that “a family is too limiting, there is not space enough in it for self-expression either.” In more extreme conditions of the labor camp, the domestic offered a form of resistance. Evgenia Ginzburg, who spent seventeen years in the gulag for not denouncing someone, describes how the recreation of some smattering of a domestic space within the prison barracks offers the female prisoners a moment of reprieve from the police state of the prison. For some contemporary Russian feminists, the collapse of Soviet ideology with its emphasis on work, service, and its derogation of the private sphere, means the ideological possibility, if not the economic one, of abandoning the work force and returning home. Under the Soviet system, not working at a government-approved position was tantamount to the crime of “parasitism.” The poet Joseph Brodskii was charged with this crime. But for Sheveleva, in contrast, the domestic space, far from offering an alternative to the state, and by the same token, woman, the keeper of the domestic space, are both vessels which are to preserve the identity of the larger national entity, and reproduce its values and language. Indeed, there is no distinction between the public and the private, no moment or utterance that is free from the new totality of nation, blood, and soil that Sheveleva and others like her wish to reestablish for Russia. Sheveleva’s construction of the feminine and of the “homeland” denies history, sexuality, and rejects difference altogether. The notion of cultural or social intercourse with culturally distinct others as a constituent part of identity is conspicuously absent from her view. The same absence can be noted in other similar conservative writers publishing in *Our Contemporary* (“Nash sovremennik”), most notably Ksenia Mialo, a participant in a 1993 roundtable entitled “The State of the Russian Nation,” who advises “a strict Russocentrism in every word about our future” and urges “all Russians to concentrate on what is their own, their own, their own.” This emphasis on homogeneity and inwardness, evidenced in Sheveleva’s statement that “for the sensation of the limitlessness of that which is one’s own one needs attachment to and rootedness in the earth” offers a striking contrast to Bakhtin’s emphasis on the concept of exchange as constitutive of identity: “that which takes place on the bound-
ary between one's own and some one else's consciousness, on the thresh-
old." In Sheveleva's scheme, woman, who has no identity of her own, is
the ideal receptacle for the language, culture, soil, and blood that she only
inherits, but never forms. Modernity and even the process of historical
change are rejected in favor of the endless reduplication of the same. A
similar but more subtle framing of the question of woman and national
identity can be found in Valentin Rasputin's novella Farewell to Matera,
published in 1976. Widely hailed as a masterpiece of "village prose," the
story tells of the imminent flooding of the Siberian island and village,
both called "Matera" for the sake of misguided progress: the Angara river
is to be altered as part of a reservoir connected to a new hydroelectric
dam. The heroine of the tale, very untypically for Soviet literature, is an
old woman named Dar'ia, who quietly resists the destruction of her
village and way of life. As David Gillespie writes: "In the almost four
decades since Stalin's death, Rasputin's Dar'ia still offers Soviet litera-
ture's most profound rejection of the materialist dream of a technological
utopia." In contrast to her grandson, who proclaims that man is master
("tsar" is the Russian word he uses) of nature, Dar'ia says that Matera was
given to people in order that they might live from its resources and then
pass it on to the next generation. Dar'ia thinks of herself and her fellow
human beings not as "masters," but as pitiful, weak, "little" creatures, who
have forgotten "their place under God." As Gillespie puts it, Dar'ia is
the "repository of past values and traditions in the island." Gillespie's
choice of words is significant: woman as womb is a "repository" and not a
creator of culture. Dar'ia's role as "repository" is expressed in her relation
to her dead ancestors and to her house. She goes to the cemetery to ask
forgiveness and guidance and there seemingly receives the ghostly answer
that she must clean and prepare her house before it is destroyed. She
comes to the conclusion that "truth lies in memory"; "he who has no
memory has no life." Rasputin's Dar'ia can be seen as a fictitious
embodiment of Sheveleva's ideal women, for she has no other role than
to be mistress of an albeit doomed house, and to "bear its habits and
customs," as Sheveleva writes, in her blood.

For Rasputin, as for Sheveleva, identity is given by place. In Farewell to
Matera, the narrator comments that "you are not only that which you
carry within you, but also that which is around you, and to lose it is
sometimes more terrible than losing an arm or a leg . . . perhaps it is only
this that is eternally passed on, like the holy spirit, from person to person,
from fathers to children and from children to grandchildren, restraining
and guarding them, directing and purifying them.” Among all the vil-
lagers, Dar’ia has best absorbed “what is around” her, what is passed from
fathers and not mothers, to children. Dar’ia alone prepares her hut for its
immolation. She whitewashes it and places fir branches in its corners, as
if for a holiday, all the while sensing the meaningfulness of her actions.
Dar’ia is mistress of her house, but not of Matera. That role is given to a
mysterious poltergeist-like masculine figure called the “Master,” who
prowls the island at night. The woman too old for childbearing or sexual-
ity is the vessel for a masculine-given culture.

In her recent essay “Gynoglasnost: writing the feminine,” Barbara
Heldt offers the following gender analysis of village prose:

Much of village prose is about the squandering of a female ecology, and concomi-
tant male guilt. Although the Soviet system stands accused, it has a gender — a
largely male bureaucracy is set against female Nature. In other words the Good
Mother is Russia, but she is either dead or threatened with imminent destruction.
The Wicked Stepmother is the Soviet Union who has taken her place and is
destroying her children. Traces of the Good Mother can be found in very old
women or a younger one who dies or is victimized.

Heldt’s reading provides a necessary caution to those who might see
Rasputin as offering a pro-feminist gyno-ecologism in *Farewell to Matera.*
Only the aged Dar’ia is positively valued by the narrator; her middle-aged
daughter-in-law, in contrast, who lives on the mainland, puts on weight,
gets her hair cut in a fashionable style, and becomes interested in and
knowledgeable about the illnesses from which she suffers. The narrator
comments that the inhabitants of Matera have no time to be sick. The
daughter-in-law’s knitting is fashionably lacy, and therefore full of holes,
but Dar’ia’s is waterproof. It should be noted that the production of
textiles, one of the most ancient womanly crafts, appears in traditional
patriarchal societies as means of establishing, maintaining, and evaluating
order, civil, domestic, and even cosmological. The woman weaving in the
home is a sign that everything and everyone is in her place. The daughter-
in-law’s flaws — fashion, illness, and fat — are all symptoms of the overde-
velopment, excess, forgetfulness, and loss of homogeneity that comes
from leaving Matera. In the story foreignness appears in the form of
the government official in charge of the flooding, a character with the
unattractive name of “Zhuk,” which means both “beetle” and “shyster,”
who has a “dark gypsy face.” The gypsy, who has no native home, is the
antinomy of Matera. “Matera,” with its associations of both “mother” and “mainland,” as Gillespie points out, is a self-sufficient island, which has “enough spaciousness and wealth, and beauty, and wildness, and every kind of creature in twos.” Leaving the timelessness and geographic isolation of Matera and entering the historical present—at the time of the story’s publication, this meant the Soviet present—inevitably means evil and decay, which Rasputin expresses in specifically and traditionally anti-feminine terms. Both Plato and Tolstoy construe fashion as a sign of the excess of decadent urban culture.

Rasputin’s “Cherchez la Femme,” published in 1990, returns to the gendered thematics of Farewell to Matera, but in a more explicit and direct way. Rasputin begins by quoting from the work of a little-known late nineteenth-century woman writer named N. A. Lukhmanova, whose work was praised, Rasputin adds, by the philosopher Vasilii Rozanov. Rasputin emphasizes that what he is about to quote was written by a woman. The Truth about Woman is uttered by a woman, but only one legitimized by a male. Lukhmanova describes a decline in female beauty, and an increase in women’s “nervousness to the point of hysteria . . . bordering on psychopathology.” Rasputin finds Lukhmanova’s observations to be true of Russian women today. Much has been written about the construction of the hysterical woman in fin-de-siècle Europe, both from the point of view of the hysterical and the doctor, but what is relevant here is the argument that the construction of hysteria was a way of reasserting patriarchal control over women at a time when feminism threatened that control. A similar argument may be made about Rasputin, namely, that his assertion of a resurgence of hysteria is a means of reasserting control over women in post-totalitarian Russia, at a time when the possibility exists for the emergence of a non-Soviet feminism.

Rasputin’s cure for the new outbreak of the old pathology is not medical, as it was at the turn of the century, but moral. The age-old cure for hysteria, “wandering womb,” is marriage and pregnancy, or, in Rasputin’s terms, a return to the “essence” of womanhood, defined as “preservation” or “protection”: Shelter, warmth, tenderness, the satisfaction of needs, faithfulness, softness, flexibility, mercifulness—this is what a woman consists of. Feeding her family, caring for her husband, raising her children, being a good neighbor—this is the circle of her concerns.

Rasputin goes on to say that Russian woman’s true role is not “civic,” but “familial,” and that given Russian woman’s “character,” that role is
“sacrificial.” For Rasputin, Dostoevsky’s self-sacrificing saintly prostitute Sonia Marmeladova is a prime example of Russian womanhood. That Rasputin chooses Sonia from all the other female characters in Crime and Punishment is significant. Raskolnikov’s sister, Dunia, who repels the lecherous Svidrigailov’s advances with a revolver, and who plans to start a publishing company with her fiancé, Razumikhin, is apparently not a typical Russian woman. Rasputin’s “cure” for the “pathology” of late twentieth-century Russian women is really a cure for the pathology of late twentieth-century Russia. Rasputin links the perceived decline in present-day Russian women to a perceived decline in Russian culture as a whole, the burden for which lies on women. The emphasis on “protection” is significant in this regard. From what is it that women are to protect their families, and by extension, all of Russia? From an unwanted intrusion of otherness and change. Translated into national terms, this means restoring and conserving the Russianness of Russia, protecting Russia from heterogeneity. The anxiety over “otherness” evidenced in Rasputin, Sheveleva, and as we will shortly see, another conservative writer, Belov, emerges full-blown as blatant anti-Semitism in their colleague at Our Contemporary, Igor Shafarevich, whose notorious essay “Russophobia” characterizes Jews as a hostile subnation within the greater nation of Russia.

The anxiety over otherness in Rasputin is not limited to questions of ethnic identity, but can be traced to the level of gender. A profound distrust of women’s otherness lies at the roots of the ideological construction of Rasputin’s Matera and “Cherchez la Femme.” Woman, let out of the house, is not simply dangerous to herself, but to man. In the myth of autochthony that writers like Rasputin seek to create, the original Russians would, like the sown men of ancient Thebes, spring into being without sexual intercourse, and the Russian nation would arise without communication or contact with the outside world — recall Ksenia Mialo’s emphasis on Russocentrism. This myth defines women as the first outsiders, the first nonnatives. They are emblematic of all difference and diversity.

Rasputin’s masculinist myth is concealed under an insistence on the proto-feminine origins of Russian culture: “at the foundations of our culture lie feminine principles.” He reminds his readers of the role of the cult of Mary as the protector of Russia, whose repeated intercession, it was believed, saved Russia from “enemies and misfortunes.” Rasputin
writes: “Russia from time immemorial believed in itself as the Home of the Mother of God.” According to Rasputin, modern Russian women have forgotten that they carry within them “the stamp of the mother of God.” The author’s vision of women eliminates actual historical Russian women, especially those who happen not to be Orthodox Christians. Extrapolating from Rasputin’s argument, a Russian “her-story” can be traced, in which each stage corresponds to a particular construction of Woman, who either serves, rejects, or betrays Man. Premodern, patriarchal Russia corresponds to Russia as the mother of God. Late nineteenth- and late twentieth-century Russia — each time period representing a collapse of Empire — corresponds to Russia the hysterical woman. A further parallel between these two periods is that in each, feminism begins to emerge. To restate the analysis given earlier, Rasputin’s diagnosis for each is the same: when women express desires of their own, they forget and deny their truest selves. In repressing their desire to be mothers and homemakers, women become hysterics. A close relative of the Hysteric is a figure that Rasputin calls the Goddess of Revenge and Destruction. Rasputin uses this label for several late nineteenth-century women revolutionaries — Vera Zasulich, who shot at the Governor General of St. Petersburg in 1878 and was acquitted by the jury, and the women who participated in the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881. Mother Russia’s “sick” daughters turn on Father Tsar. The rage and repressed desire formerly expressed in the hysteric’s language of symptoms is turned outward, against Russia.

It seems that Rasputin fears a resurgence of female violence in the present, or rather, that this violence has infected society as whole. Late twentieth-century Russian society has become feminized in the sense that it has gone mad. Rasputin speaks of its “inability to provide itself with necessities, unwillingness to give of itself in work” and “violent passion for complete license.” In this language of unbridled desire and unwillingness for sacrifice is a portrait of woman undomesticated. In accordance with the particular cast of his gender politics, Rasputin links the breakdown of post-Soviet Russian society as a whole with a perceived “breakdown” — this is Rasputin’s word — of Russian women in particular. Rasputin’s characterization of society’s “madness” follows immediately upon his description of the “tragic breakdown of woman,” portrayed in, among other literary works, Vasilii Belov’s *Raising Children According to Doctor Spock.*
Belov's story chronicles the collapse of the Zorin family. The setting is an unnamed urban area. Zorin, a low-level construction supervisor with a drinking problem, is in constant conflict with his wife, Tonia, who works in a library and earns more than he. Tonia sees "a threat to her independence in his every action." He only wants closeness, she, only distance. The narrator's and Zorin's point of view are indistinguishable here. Zorin is passionately devoted to his little daughter, Lial'ka — unlike Tonia, who, in his words, wants to turn her into a "walking robot" by raising her in senseless obedience to Dr. Spock's principles. "She has to urinate and move her bowels at a definite time of the day!" thinks the exasperated Zorin. For American readers, this portrait of Dr. Spock is somewhat startling, since Spock is known and even blamed for a lack of discipline in his approach to the upbringing of children. In the episode that marks the beginning of the end, Tonia takes Lial'ka for her regular evening walk even when the child is obviously feverish. The next day Zorin is called from the day-care center to bring her home. Shortly thereafter Lial'ka is hospitalized with pneumonia, and her mother refuses to stay overnight with her. Zorin leaves home. He spends a short time with his boss Fridburg, but feels uncomfortable with the "falsely hospitable atmosphere of the Jewish family." Note the gratuitous anti-Semitism of the narrator's characterization.

Near the end of the story, after having been fired from his job, in part due to the letters of complaint written against him by his wife, Zorin muses on the nature of women in general. There is something "fish-like and cold" in women, especially in their tolerance for abortions. He thinks about the "rusalki," the powerful female figures in Russian folklore associated with water and woods, dangerous to men. Women who drowned were believed to become "rusalki." Zorin imagines his wife as a rusalka, who figuratively "drowned" in her job and in her quest for emancipation and then turned on him in revenge. Zorin thinks: "They put their husbands in prison and write denunciations against them." The story's final scene takes place on the street. Tonia beats Lial'ka for disobedience and walks off, leaving her to her father's comforting embrace. From Rasputin's and Belov's point of view, the "tragic breakdown of modern woman" is not only her betrayal of man, but her violence against her children, born and unborn. Modern woman, in this view, is a threat to the future of Russia. Rasputin's most recent word on Mother Russia can be found in the 1993 roundtable on "The State of the Russian Nation," which I have
already touched upon. Here Rasputin’s tone shifts to a lament over the collapse of the Russian empire. The passage is worth quoting in full:

Even now we do not know the condition of the Russian nation, whether she can still be found in one national body, or whether because of the most recent shocks, attacks, and hostilities, she has been shaken loose from it and scattered among Russian cities and villages which do not have any spiritual or blood ties among them. We will hope that things have not reached this point and that the national instinct and the national memory have not yet been beaten out of us forever. And if this is so, if the nation for all her tragic losses is alive — towards what should we turn for her ingathering, cure, and mobilization, if not to the national spirit, where shall we seek support, if not in national worth and national conscience?32

The word that I have translated as “nation,” natsiia, is grammatically feminine. Rasputin avoids the term “narod” (people), which is grammatically masculine, and similarly the grammatically neutral “gosudarstvo,” which suggests a politically formed entity, and is usually translated as “government.” The passage reveals a certain confusion in its metaphors. It is difficult to say exactly what the difference is between the nation and the “national body.” It seems that the nation refers to a spiritual quality or identity, and the national body to the physical territory of the former Soviet Union or of Russia. However, Rasputin goes on to draw a distinction between the nation, on the one hand, and the national memory, the national spirit, and the national conscience, on the other, all of which must be relied upon for the “ingathering, cure, and mobilization” of the nation. It is not clear what is meant by the “national body” out from which the “nation” has been “shaken.”

The language of diaspora — the Russian nation is scattered among disparate villages and cities — and ingathering is clearly biblical. Compare, for example, Ezekiel 11:17: “Thus says the Lord God: I will gather you from the peoples, and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered” and 11:19: “And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them.”

The prophetic subtext signals two themes: first, a messianic association of Russia with the biblical Israel, and secondly, Rasputin’s engendering of the Russian nation as feminine. Zion’s evil is expressed figuratively in many prophetic texts as harlotry. For example, Zion is an unfaithful wife, who has abandoned her husband, God, to play the harlot (Jeremiah 3:6). The pain which Zion then endures is compared to that of a woman abandoned by her lovers. Jeremiah continues: “and you, O desolate one,
what do you mean that you dress in scarlet, that you deck yourself with ornaments of gold. . . . Your lovers despise you” (4:30). Diaspora, God’s punishment for the unfaithful nation (recall that Rasputin lists “faithfulness” as a specifically feminine virtue), can be seen as in feminine terms: the violation of the physical integrity of the body politic can be compared to a loss of virginity. The nation’s “whoring” and subsequent “rape” are two sides of the same coin. In terms of the conservative construction of Russian national identity, “whoring” means cultural intercourse with the West, from rock and roll to democratic pluralism, the abandonment of what conservatives call “historic Russia,” and more viscerally, what is referred to in conservative writing as the “sale of Russia,” the ceding of territory to Japan, for example, and the rise in prostitution between Russian women and foreigners for hard currency.  

The historical processes that have taken place in the former Soviet Union since the collapse of Empire in 1991 are mythologized in biblical terms. The rhetorical strategy is similar to what we have seen earlier. The metaphor of the feminine nation is the prism through which events are evaluated. Diaspora is the ultimate punishment for the loss of the “good mother,” to use Barbara Heldt’s phrase, expressed in the valorization of such figures as Rasputin’s Dar’ia in Farewell to Matera, her replacement by hysterical and ultimately violent daughters, and the corresponding dual collapse of the Russian family and of national identity. The engendering of the Russian body politic as Mother Russia in conservative prose denies the possibility of representing women in anything other than a mythological light. Woman is either the pure Mother of God or the evil rusalka. Demystifying Mother Russia, however, opens up the possibility of alternative representations of women and their experience. Similarly, nonmythological representations of women may serve in turn to demystify Mother Russia. The next part of this essay examines these interrelated strategies in recent Russian writing, some of which are direct responses to Sheveleva, Rasputin, and other conservative writers, and some of which are responses to the broader phenomena of glasnost and the end of the Soviet Empire. A preliminary caveat is necessary. To search for “feminist” constructions of Russia and of the feminine in current Russian writing would be mistaken, for many reasons. Any essentializing construction of national or gender identity that neglects actual individual Russians and actual individual Russian women would simply be the other side of the conservative coin: a different content perhaps, but the same totalizing
structure. We would be on more certain ground with writing that, while not necessarily “feminist,” is fragmentary, ironical, or critical, writing in which old women are not divinized and young women demonized. While not being able to offer an exhaustive survey of current Russian writing, we will discuss some examples, not all of them authored by women, that take this stance.

II. MOTHER RUSSIA: TAKE TWO

In 1992 the Russian emigré writer Fridrikh Gorenshtein published a short story entitled “Last Summer on the Volga” in the liberal journal The Banner (“Znamia”). Gorenshtein, the author of a number of film scripts, including “Solarus” and “A Slave of Love,” began to attract critical attention in the former Soviet Union in 1991. “Last Summer on the Volga” provoked controversy because of its unattractive images of Russia. The narrator, who announces himself to be a Jew, and as such, forced into a condition of “rootlessness” by the surrounding Russian society, makes one last trip along the Volga before leaving for Berlin. The narrator finds himself surrounded by “symbols” of Russia in the form of two women whom he encounters. These symbols are quite similar to what we have already seen in Rasputin and Belov, but they are given an ironic twist. It is very likely that Gorenshtein refers to Rasputin and Belov indirectly in a scene in which the narrator goes to a restaurant occupied mostly by drunks, who, while realizing that he is not a “local,” do not reject him. The narrator comments “in the company of ‘Russian wisemen’ you can’t sit incognito.” In other words, the “Russian wisemen,” or Russian nationalists, always keep tabs on who is who, who is Russian, who is Jewish, and so forth. “Last Summer on the Volga” as a whole, as we will see, is a parodic response to the “village prose” and postvillage prose of Rasputin and Belov. While in the restaurant the narrator meets a pale blonde, reduced to begging. She eats food left on other people’s plates and lives in a shack along the river with a doll for company and a suitcase full of scraps of bread, which she eats with damp gray salt wrapped in a rag. Because of her pallor, and a “lifeless” sinful quality about her, the narrator compares her to a “rusalka.” The woman, Liuba, tells the narrator that she has served time in a prison camp for the murder of her mother-in-law, and that she is stranded in this small town on the Volga because she
does not have enough money to return to her village and family. The narrator decides that Liuba, “the beggar rusalka,” is a symbol of all of Russia.

The second symbol is an old woman with nondescript features, “the kind you see many of and therefore don’t notice.” What makes this particular old woman so striking is the “enormous pig’s head” she holds against her chest, close to her own head. The pig’s head gives the old woman “individuality.” The narrator is “amazed” at the correspondence between the physical features and expression of the old woman and the pig. It strikes him that the old woman is the perfect image for Liuba’s mother-in-law, the “criminal-victim.” Furthermore the old woman with the pig’s head is a “second hypostasis of Russia, who tramples on and consumes everything around her . . . and in the first place, herself” (50). The narrator concludes that the traditional image of the Russian maiden meeting the “black limousines” of the government officials with bread and salt should be replaced by his two hypostases of the old woman, “Mother-in-Law Russia” carrying an aspic made of her own head, and Liuba, bringing her bread crusts and “damp gray salt.”

The grotesque old woman is at once perpetrator and victim, a Mother Russia, or, as Gorenshtein mockingly puts it, “Mother-in-Law Russia,” who feeds not Father Tsar or Father Stalin, but Father Apparatchik with her own flesh. The contrasts between Gorenshtein’s “Mother-in-Law Russia” and Rasputin’s Dar’ia are striking. Gorenshtein’s old woman destroys her home by goading her daughter-in-law to murder; Dar’ia is the conservator of hearth and home. Dar’ia is very nearly fleshless and belongs more to the spirit world of her ancestors than to the here and now. Gorenshtein’s Mother-in-Law is emphatically corporeal; her alter ego, the pig’s head, has features that “swim in fat.” In her self-destroying and self-rejuvenating fleshiness, Gorenshtein’s Mother-in-Law carnivales the saintly spirituality of the old women of village prose.

The final irony of Gorenshtein’s “Last Summer on the Volga” is turned against the narrator himself. The rusalka-beggar Liuba turns out not to be what he first thought. When at the end of the story the narrator unfolds the piece of paper on which “Liuba” has written her address, he finds only the name written over and over, with pictures of the sun, moon, clouds, and crosses. “Liuba” had been playing a part, the part she knew was expected of her: the criminal victim with the heart of gold. The
narrator's second "hypostasis of Russia" steps out of her prescribed role, at the same time masking her true identity. Gorenshtein's rusalka remains a cipher, unlike the vicious child abusing rusalka of Belov's *Raising Children According to Dr. Spock*. "Liuba" ultimately rejects the narrator's literary stereotypes.36

### III. MOTHER RUSSIA DECONSTRUCTED

In a recent article entitled "The Russian Question," the prominent liberal critic Natal'ia Ivanova draws attention to the conservative preoccupation with Russia as a monolithic idea, as opposed to Russia the many-sided historical reality.37 She argues that hidden underneath the "spirituality" of such writers as Rasputin, who, as we have seen, call for a return to "Mother Russia," to the soil, conceived as the source of identity (Shevleva is another example), there is a perverse embodiment, in the sense that spiritual qualities are linked to a specific territory and a specific nation. The nation is not defined in terms of coexistence through citizenship, but by the link of blood. The "people" are thought of as a biological entity. According to Ivanova, this concept of the "body politic" minimizes the possibility of heterogeneity. For Ivanova gender politics plays a crucial role in the conservative construction of the so-called "Russian idea." Love for Russia is eroticized in the publicistic writings of the conservative authors, whereas in their fiction romantic love is absent, and young women, and female sexuality in general, are portrayed in extremely negative terms. Ivanova writes "all the emotional content is oriented toward the fecund womb." Sexuality is divorced from maternity. She goes on to say that in the writing of Rasputin and Belov "the more we are called on to love the Motherland, the less sexually mature is the relationship between the heroes to women as women."38 We have already discussed Rasputin's horror at "modern" Russian women, be they of the late nineteenth or the late twentieth century. In Ivanova's view, this eroticized love for Mother Russia, "insulted and injured by foreign rapists" is tantamount to symbolic incest. According to Ivanova, since the nationalists believe Mother Russia to have perished, their love for her is also equivalent to "necrophilia." Ivanova polemically turns the tables on Rasputin, who sees sexual pathology in modern women. Ivanova "diagnoses" sexual pathology in Rasputin.
IV. FROM MOTHER RUSSIA TO “LIVING IN RUSSIA”

Gorenshtein and Ivanova attack the myth of Mother Russia head on. Both can be said to use the techniques of carnivalization, in the sense that they lend a grotesque embodiment to the exalted spiritual love for Mother Russia touted in nationalist writing. Gorenshtein carnivalizes Mother Russia herself and Ivanova carnivalizes love for Mother Russia. Gorenshtein explicitly links his absurd “hypostases of Russia” with surrealist writing, and Ivanova’s claim about conservative incest and necrophilia can be seen in a similar light, as surrealist criticism. The technique of carnivalization figures importantly in the literary works of several prominent Russian women authors, including, for example, Tat’iana Tolstaiia and Ludmila Petrushevskaia, both of whom have been translated into English. Helena Goscilo argues that these authors use the female body as a source of “rhetorical devices” that oppose the standard male-authored tropes. According to Goscilo, Petrushevskaia emphasizes “the body as a site of violence” and “hyperbolized ingestion and regurgitation.” Goscilo sees Tolstaiia’s techniques of irony as a way of “discrediting the paradigm of stable home, marriage, motherhood, and domestic cares”—a paradigm that, as we have seen, has taken on a political edge in the works of Russian conservative nationalists.

In contrast to this parodic and surrealist writing, the task of demythologizing Mother Russia is also being accomplished by realist writers who focus on everyday Russian life, and in particular, women writers who foreground aspects of women’s experience that previously had been ignored or suppressed in officially sanctioned literature. One aspect of this writing operates on the level of exposé. It is now possible to publish work about the horrendous conditions in Russian hospitals, abortion clinics, prisons, and orphanages. Once forbidden topics are now old hat. In recent women’s writing, the theme of the hospital, and of the configuration of the body in illness, both in the hospital and without, is of particular significance.

In the conservative writing that we discussed earlier, women’s physicality is either divinized or demonized, depending on whether we are speaking about maternity or sexuality. In Rasputin’s “Cherchez la Femme,” Russian woman is either likened to Mary, the mother of God, or to an allegorical Goddess of Destruction. It should be observed that the
divinization of women’s ability to bear children is not unique to conservative or to male writers. As Julia Kristeva has observed, the feminine is consecrated as the maternal in Western culture, and Russian culture, with its emphasis on Mary as the Mother of God, is far from exceptional in this regard. Natal’ia Sukhanova’s story “Delos,” first published in the liberal journal The New World (Novyi mir) in 1988, is a case in point. Sukhanova, it should be noted, made her literary debut with this story. The narrator, a male obstetrician, philosophizes in the following terms about the pregnant woman:

I do not know anything more beautiful than a pregnant woman . . . what ideal — cosmic! — roundness of the belly burdened by new life. There is no miracle that is rounder or more even! The son of God also lay with his head down . . . in the weightlessness of the maternal waters. A world within a world . . . I do not know anything baser than the obligation to help a woman get rid of a baby!

The pregnant woman, in this view, has aesthetic, cosmological, and Christian significance. But on the very next page, the same narrator castigates “literature” for its descriptions of maternity as “necessarily sacred.” If women are cruel, he reflects, then they are portrayed as “the children of hell.” He concludes: “But labor and pregnancy — it’s indecent to write about such things — men’s passion might be dulled.” The narrator’s paean to pregnancy is ironically undercut by his own characterization of literary stereotypes.

The difference between Sukhanova and Rasputin is the political agenda. Rasputin links alleged female sexual pathology to female political violence. Furthermore Rasputin metaphorically projects the ills of the Russian nation onto the supposed sexual ills of modern women, who have abandoned their role as mothers and homemakers and therefore suffer from “hysteria.” These very same women are made to bear the symbolic blame for the waywardness of the Russian nation, expelled and dispersed from the national body. In Rasputin, woman’s body is a site for a contest about national identity. Women’s bodies as such and women as individuals are rendered invisible. Women and their bodies are usurped by the Body Politic. Women and their experience are absorbed by this forced symbolic service to the conservative vision of the Russian nation.

In contrast, the women’s writing that I am going to discuss thematizes the problem of women as individuals in conflict with the state and the oppressive conditions that it imposes on ordinary life. The hospital is the
site where this conflict unfolds. In both stories to be discussed the hospital and the prison are explicitly linked. Iulia Voznesenskaia’s *The Female Decameron* (*Zhenskii dekameron*), first published in Russian in 1987 in Israel, offers an early example.\(^{47}\) Voznesenskaia was one of the founders of a feminist religious group, called “Mariia.” She spent time in Siberia for her work and was exiled from the former Soviet Union in 1980. Her writing is distinguished from the current generation of women writers in Russia in that it is itself a form of dissident activity. In *The Female Decameron*, ten Soviet women are quarantined in a maternity hospital due to an outbreak of a skin infection. To pass the time, they tell stories—about first love, revenge, jealousy, money, and whether it is better as one of a couple to be left or do the leaving. Among the women characters is a party worker who spouts clichés about the family as the fundamental building block of the state (9). This sort of party slogan is juxtaposed to the list of “forbidden topics” that the other women describe as part of their everyday experience: rape, labor camps (“a camp is a camp, whether it’s under the star or the swastika” \(^{[34]}\)), crime, drug use, and abortion.

The work of Marina Palei explicitly takes up the connection between the hospital and the prison. Palei, one of the “new” women writers, spent some time as a medical student in Leningrad, but finished her studies at the literary institute instead. She has published in the “liberal” journals, in a 1991 anthology called *The New Amazons*, and has a collection of her own. In the preface to her “Day of the Catkins,” Marina Palei writes:

> I only wanted to show the exceptional peculiarity of that place of transition called the hospital, where the individual appears in the world and where more often he or she leaves it. The existential nature of this institution, which with terrible simplicity reveals the basis of life and death, corresponds to the nature of the army barracks, the prison cell, the module of a spacecraft, the barracks of a concentration camp. . . . The list could be continued.\(^{48}\)

The hospital, like the other institutions on Palei’s list (with the possible exception of the spaceship), is a place of punitive state control. The Foucauldian overtones of the hospital-prison link have been noted by several authors.\(^{49}\)

It is significant that in Palei’s “The Day of the Catkins” the two patients are women. The first is dying of liver cancer, which has been discovered by the surgery she has just undergone. She is tormented by thirst, but is forbidden to drink for unexplained medical reasons. The orderly, a young woman studying to be a doctor, soaks some cotton in
water and places it on the woman’s lips. She is embarrassed by the profuse
gratitude she receives. When the dying woman asks to be taken out into
the fresh air, the surgeon (a man) cruelly replies: “Soon! They’ll carry you
out!” The woman is not told in any other way of her condition. The
supervising nurse rebukes the orderly for wasting time on a dying patient.
The second patient, an old woman operated on for a bowel obstruction,
now suffers from uncontrollable diarrhea. Ignoring the nurse’s growing
irritation at her, the orderly tirelessly and kindly cleans her and changes
her bedding—in violation of the nurse’s order not to “waste linen.”
Outside, the poplar catkins which covered the street and stuck to every-
thing—the “dry hot sperm of summer”—have been washed away by rain.

In “Day of the Catkins” women’s bodies are the place where the state’s
punitive control reveals itself in starkest terms. In the writing of Rasputin,
Sheveleva, and Belov, the intersection between women and the state takes
place on a mythological plane. The nation is constructed as feminine, and
the supposed moral ills of women correspond to the ills of the nation. The
actual conditions of women’s lives are ignored. Marina Palei redresses this
silence. The Soviet state and the nationalist writers may find it convenient
to glorify mythological images of Mother Russia, but those images belie
the state’s brutality toward individual women’s suffering. What makes
this brutality more horrifying is that it is an unexamined part of everyday
life. To depart from it is a waste of the state’s time and resources. Palei
restores the physicality of women’s bodies in nonmythological, “realist”
terms. The women patients’ thirst, cold, dizziness, and incontinence all
merit simple, humane care. Each of these ills is rendered as part of the
physical business of living and dying. Women’s bodies are reembodied.
In “The Nymph from the Canal” (“Kabiriia s obvodnogo kanala”) Palei
continues her study of the female body in illness. The story might be called an anti-bildungsroman of a young woman with the absurd
name Raimonda Rybnaia (“Raimonda” was the name of a French revolu-
tionary, “rybnaia” suggests “fish”). Raimonda discovers the pleasures of
sex at an early age. Her capacity for pleasure is not diminished even as
she suffers one illness after the other and ultimately dies. Using a series
of remarkable images and philosophical digressions, Palei interrogates
what Laura Mulvey, in her study of the pleasure of narrative cinema, has
called the coding of woman as that which is to be looked at. Men are
the “controllers of the gaze” and women, the objects on display. I call
upon Mulvey’s work not only because it helps us understand what Palei is about in this story, but also because Palei explicitly refers to one of America’s most reproduced film icons. In one scene, a woman’s room is plastered with images from forensic medicine. Different types of bullet holes and strangulations are displayed. In one corner, referred to by the narrator as the “icon corner,” there is a prominent photograph of Marilyn Monroe. The representation of woman as an object of beauty and sexual desire is linked to violence. This violence is perpetrated by the “normal” police power of the state, by “Western” commercial culture, and by the now collapsed Soviet order. Palei subversively links the aesthetic gaze with the medical therapeutic gaze. The doctor is likened to a voyeur, and at one point in the story, the presence of the patient at a medical demonstration is compared to a striptease. To cut open the patient, and penetrate into the interior is to render palpable and quantifiable that which ultimately cannot be known. The state’s power and the intrusive therapies of medical science are intertwined. The main character is at once a product of this specularization — she cares mainly about her figure and her supply of cosmetics — but at the same time, she escapes from it. Raimonda suffers from a disease in which the body sloughs off its skin and mucous membranes. To render the human individual as only body is to kill, but to deprive the human being of unique embodiment is also to deny the possibility of selfhood.

In “The Sterile Zone” Irina Polianskaia, another recent woman author, also publishing in the collection The New Amazons, takes a different approach to the theme of women and the hospital, emphasizing not the physical, but the existential side of women’s experience there. A woman, the first-person narrator of the story, enters the hospital for an operation. She welcomes the chance to escape the constant oppressive presence of others in her daily life, in particular, her neighbor, with whom she must share a kitchen and bathroom, and who appears to the narrator as a tormentor, epitomizing her lack of privacy, and threatening her very existence as an individual. The narrator describes how the hospital stay will provide her with a unique opportunity for “complete solitude, inviolable independence” denied her by the political and economic conditions of life in Russia. The woman’s body is to be violated — by the surgeon’s knife — but her sense of self is enhanced. In the second part of the story, the narrator imagines another “sterile zone.” She pictures her father’s life in a labor camp many years earlier, and how the primitive
scientific laboratory he might have been able to establish would have provided him with the same sense of well-being that she now experiences in her "sterile zone." Only in the hospital and in the prison can the individual experience him- or herself as an autonomous being.

Polianskaia's story, in one sense, recapitulates a theme familiar to readers of Dostoevsky and Solzhenitsyn. The hospital and the prison provide the opportunity for spiritual renewal. In Dostoevsky's "The Peasant Marei" and in Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, for example, the first-person narrators describe a quasi-religious conversion and a sense of unity with all of suffering Russia. What distinguishes Polianskaia's story is that the heroine finds a momentary release from the enforced collective existence that she ordinarily leads. Her sense of renewal is not in union with "Russia," but independence from "Russia." Her brief escape into individuality—a value highly criticized by Dostoevsky, Solzhenitsyn, Sheveleva, and Rasputin—comes at the cost of great physical suffering.

Polianskaia's heroine undertakes a heroic quest for solitude and privacy (for which there is no adequate Russian word), and more fundamentally, a sense of autonomous selfhood. Given the distortions of life in Russia, she can only do this from her hospital bed. Polianskaia's heroine wants to be able to define the boundaries of her own "I" without being subject to the unwanted and unpredictable intrusion of others. In contrast, in Belov's *Raising Children According to Doctor Spock*, Tonia is vilified for her desire for independence. The question of autonomy brings us back to problems raised at the beginning of this essay. The revolutionary feminist Aleksandra Kollantai promoted the idea that the pregnant woman "ceases to belong to herself," but belongs instead to the collective. In the Stalinist years, women were represented as the creation of an "all encompassing patriarchal will." Throughout twentieth-century Russian history, the left and the right sought to harness women both physically and symbolically to a mythologized collectivity, whether it be the Socialist Russia or, as in the most recent conservative vision, a newly ingathered Mother Russia. The engendering of the Russian body politic as feminine renders individual women invisible and unrepresentable as such. The reembodying of women's bodies—not in the pornographic images that have drawn so much attention in the press—and the reinvention of the idea of individuality may help to unravel trends that have held sway for so long.
NOTES

I am grateful to Bruce Rosenstock and Anna Kaladiouk for their helpful comments on this chapter.


2. See Nina Perlina, “From the Editors,” Russian Review 51, no. 2 (April 1992): v and 156 of the same issue, where Perlina discusses the symbolic adoption of the revolutionary heroine Larisa Reisner into a divinized and patriarchal Bolshevik Pantheon.


5. Ibid., 137. For more on gender roles and the culture of Stalinism, see Beth Holm gren, Women’s Works in Stalin’s Time: On Lydii Obukovskaia and Nadesdha Mandelstam (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 5–14.

6. For comparable trends in other parts of the world and other historical time periods, see Gender and History: Special Issue on Gender, Nationalisms and National Identities 5, no. 2 (Summer 1993), and in particular Samita Sen’s “Motherhood and Mothercraft: Gender and Nationalism in Bengal,” 231–43 and Beth Baron, “The Construction of National Honor in Egypt,” 244–55. For a comparable discussion of gender and nationalism in the Ukraine, see Solomea Pavlychko, “Between Feminism and Nationalism: New Women’s Groups in the Ukraine,” in Perestroika and Soviet Women, ed. Mary Buckley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 82–96.

7. Irina Sheveleva, “Zhenskoe i materinskoe . . .,” Nash sovremenник 3 (1988): 165–68. Further references to this work will be included parenthetically in the text.


13. Mikhail Bakhtin, “Appendix II,” in Bakth, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics,


17. Ibid., 285.

18. Ibid., 237.


21. For Plato, see Bruce Rosenstock, “Athena's Cloak: Plato's Critique of the Democratic City in the Republic,” forthcoming in Political Theory. The triad of fashion, illness, and fat appears in Tolstoy's “Kreutzer Sonata.”


25. For more on Dunia, see Nina Pelikan Strauss, Dostoevsky and the Woman Question: Re-Readings at the End of a Century, forthcoming from St. Martin's Press.

26. “Russofobiia” was first circulated in samizdat form and was first published in Nasb sovremennik in 1989.


28. Ibid., 171.


30. For more on the folklore of the rusalki, see Hubbs, Mother Russia, 27–36.


34. For more on Gorenshtein and the controversy surrounding his works, see my “A Curse on Russia: Gorenshtein's Anti-Psalom and the Critics,” Russian Review 52 (April 1993): 213–27.

35. Fridrikh Gorenshtein, “Poslednee leto na Volge,” Znamia (January 1992): 35. Further references to this work will be included parenthetically in the text.

36. A literary precedent for some aspects of the narrator's relationship with Liuba
may be found in Dostoevsky, whom the narrator mentions more than once in the story. In The Idiot the Swiss peasant girl Marie, seduced and abandoned by her lover, now ill with tuberculosis, is the target of the local children, who throw stones at her. Prince Myshkin becomes her benefactor and teaches the children to love her. In “Last Summer” the local children throw stones at Liuba, but the narrator cannot defend her. She defends him against the oldest one, a teenage bully.


39. I take the phrase from ibid., 204.


42. Helena Goscilo, “Monsters Monomaniacal, Marital, and Medical,” in Sexuality and the Body in Russian Culture, ed. Jane T. Costlow, Stephanie Sandler, and Judith Vowles (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 217. For more on the image of the body in recent fiction, see the introduction to this collection.


46. For a discussion that emphasizes Sukhanova’s anti-abortion stance, see Heldt, “Gynoglasnost,” 468–69.


49. See, for example, Costlow et al., “Introduction” to Sexuality and the Body, 32.


52. For more on Palei and the gaze, see Goscilo, “Speaking Bodies,” 156–57.