Winter 2000

Review Of "Dehexing Sex: Russian Womanhood During And After Glastnost" By H. Goscilo, "The Explosive World Of Tatyana N. Tolstaya's Fiction" By H. Goscilo, "Gender And Russian Literature: New Perspectives" Edited By R. Marshi, And "Russian Women In Politics And Society" Edited By W. Rule And N. Noohan

Sibelan E.S. Forrester
Swarthmore College, sforres1@swarthmore.edu

Dehexing Sex: Russian Womanhood during and after Glasnost by Helena Goscilo; The Explosive World of Tatyana N. Tolstaya's Fiction by Helena Goscilo; Gender and Russian Literature: New Perspectives by Rosalind Marsh; Russian Women in Politics and Society by Wilma Rule; Norma C. Noonan

Review by: Sibelan Forrester
Signs, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Winter, 2000), pp. 556-561
Published by: The University of Chicago Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3175569
Accessed: 07/10/2014 14:10

Dehexing Sex: Russian Womanhood during and after Glasnost. By Helena Goscilo. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996.

The Explosive World of Tatyana N. Tolstaya's Fiction. By Helena Goscilo. Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1996.

Gender and Russian Literature: New Perspectives. Edited by Rosalind Marsh. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Russian Women in Politics and Society. Edited by Wilma Rule and Norma C. Noonan. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1996.

Sibelan Forrester, *Swarthmore College*

For years, major works in Slavic women's studies have typically begun with a reminder that we Slavists began to consider gender later than Americanists or Western Europeanists, whose work led many of us to feminist research. Perhaps we can stop rehearsing this now, twenty years after the publication of Dorothy Atkinson, Alexander Dallin, and Gail Warshofsky Lapidus's *Women in Russia* and ten after Barbara Heldt's *Terrible Perfection: Women and Russian Literature.*[1] Today the major Slavic and East European conferences include panels on women's and gender issues as well as racism, ethnicities, and sexualities; there is a rich body of publications; and interdisciplinary work in women's studies at all levels is nurtured by the Association for Women in Slavic Studies and other organizations, which often present some of the most exciting work in the field.[2] The four volumes reviewed here contribute significantly to this variety of scholarship on gender and women in Russian society and literature.

Helena Goscilo is a prolific and unfailingly interesting scholar, matching intellectual liveliness with a witty and sometimes provocative style. *Dehexing Sex: Russian Womanhood during and after Glasnost* blends literary analysis and cultural studies into a snapshot of gender relations in Russian public discourse of the early 1990s. Several of the chapters have already appeared in other venues (one is in Rosalind Marsh's *Gender and Russian Literature*), and, as Goscilo notes, some information is no longer up to date. At times

[1] Dorothy Atkinson, Alexander Dallin, and Gail Warshofsky Lapidus, *Women in Russia* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1977); Barbara Heldt, *Terrible Perfection: Women and Russian Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

[2] The Association for Women in Slavic Studies maintains a Web site at http://130.58.154.91/slavic/awss.

the writing grows a bit motley, with fascinating sections not wholly bound to their surroundings; however, the book as a whole is informative, detailed, and packed with information on everyday life and with nourishing footnotes. Many of the attitudes and practices that Goscilo describes strikingly resemble pre-Revolutionary and Soviet Russian ideas and ideals of essential gender difference, so the book should serve as a good overview of the topic even as glasnost recedes further into history. Goscilo makes clear her own position as a visitor to Russia, no matter how experienced and knowledgeable; she identifies her own opinions and is not threatened when the individuals or texts she quotes disagree with her. In some parts of the book this security in citation develops into a kind of polyphony, a broader than usual snapshot that is most revealing of a transitional time and place.

Goscilo's topics include the construction of womanhood in the glasnost years, gender in Russian cultural rhetoric, grammar and the body in writing by women, hospitals as venues of feminine experience and settings for fiction about women, and pornography's new place in Russia. The book also gives a vivid and accessible discussion of several of the most interesting women writing in Russia today—from Liudmila Petrushevskaia to Marina Palei. The entertaining presentation provides insight into a period when Russia was fashionable but Russian women and gender relations seldom appeared in the Western media. How many Westerners heard, for example, that Gorbachev "vowed to liberate women by enabling their retreat into their proper domestic domain, where they could fulfill their preordained roles of mothers" (35)? No wonder the Western media liked the man and made him out to be a hero of international diplomacy.

In *The Explosive World of Tatyana N. Tolstaya* (the attentive reader may note that the writer's initials are indeed TNT), Goscilo presents the writer who inspired her own turn to an intensive study of women as writers, actors, and signifiers in Slavic literatures and societies. Ironically, Tolstaya herself is no feminist; indeed, she has gained a certain notoriety for her denunciations of feminism and feminists—despite her admitted ignorance of feminist theory and praxis. In this book as well, Goscilo allows her subject's opinions to coexist with her own capacious intelligence, using them at times to illustrate larger issues of gender and self-presentation in Russian culture and the Russian literary establishment. One chapter is devoted specifically to feminist topics, but a feminist perspective informs the whole book.

A bouquet of critical reactions to Tolstaya's writing provides an excellent overview of the late Soviet literary establishment—varying from the welcoming tone of the prominent older "women's prose" writer I. Grekova

(pseudonym of mathematician Elena Ventsel) to the irritated and irritating complaints of more orthodox Soviet-type critics. Most objections involve Tolstaya's extravagant style (perhaps critics were accustomed to a very gray Soviet literary scene?), but critics also perceive her authorial distance from characters and events as a "coldness" or "cruelty" unforgivable in a woman writer. Once again, literary scholarship serves to illuminate what is expected of women, and of women writers in particular, in post-Soviet Russia. In a brief conclusion, Goscilo suggests that although Tolstaya has published no stories since taking up residence in the United States, the same stylistic and provocative sparks characterize her journalistic punditry. Her analysis of the stories offers proof enough that Tolstaya is an artist of considerable stature and that Goscilo herself—whose work is infused with a nearly Tolstayan stylistic opulence—may be a writer of comparable cultural significance.

Rosalind Marsh's anthology *Gender and Russian Literature* sprang from a 1993 conference at the University of Bath on "Women and the Former USSR," bringing together work by scholars from the United Kingdom, Russia, and the United States. Along with Goscilo, the contributors include such prominent Western scholars as Arja Rosenholm, Charlotte Rosenthal, Wendy Rosslyn, Stephanie Sandler, and Marsh herself. Several of the articles are interdisciplinary, combining examinations of literary careers or topoi with biographical information and outlines of the material conditions of literary production. Marsh's introduction is a thorough overview of Slavic women's studies in the mid-1990s. The volume also demonstrates the intimate relationships between the writings and experiences of Russian women and the research of Western feminist scholars, in which, ideally, each upholds and illuminates the other.

A necessary part of early feminist work on the Russian literary tradition is the recovery of excellent female literary critics, particularly from the early twentieth century, and the investigation of the less formal roots of the tradition before them. Elena Trofimova is a contemporary Russian literary critic of the same tradition whose article introduces the works and elucidates the artistic personalities of the poets Tatiana Bek, Nina Iskrenko, and Tatiana Smertina. Both Trofimova and Sandler, who treats the better-known Moscow poet Olga Sedakova, provide thoughtful and informative introductions to individual writers for anyone interested in contemporary women's poetry (and, I hope, a spur for more translations into English). Rosslyn's article on Anna Bunina (1777–1828) is a fine introduction to a poet whose work is too little known, especially since Bunina makes a fascinating comparison with women writers of the same period in England and France. Faith Wigzell offers an elegant cultural study of women and

fortune-telling from 1770 to 1840; Olga Demidova outlines the broad sociological and discursive context of Russian women's writing in the nineteenth century; Rosenthal compares biographies of female prose writers in the "Silver Age" period at the turn of the twentieth century; Marsh reconsiders the novelist Anastasiia Verbitskaia, who was wildly popular before the Revolution but written out of literary history in the Soviet period's reconfiguration of class, gender, and stylistic norms. Jane Gary Harris, studying the early journal of writer and literary theorist Lidiia Ginzburg, examines the choices that faced a brilliant young student who had a range of male role models to choose from in the 1920s but was obliged to conceal her lesbian sexuality in "an environment of ethical and political 'taboos'" (263).

The technical quality of the collection is high, despite several typographical errors in Russian citations, particularly when Russian is transliterated into the Latin alphabet. As Marsh points out in her introduction and a few well-placed editorial footnotes, some of the contributors seem determined to prove that regressive gender stereotyping is alive and flourishing today in Russian academia—or perhaps that they can employ irony in impenetrably subtle ways. On the whole, the collection is a rich resource, well indexed, covering a wide range of generic and temporal territory, and a fine choice both for scholars of Russian literature and for nonspecialists who would like to compare their own areas of expertise with analogous periods or authors in Russia.

Wilma Rule and Norma Noonan's *Russian Women in Politics and Society* offers another variety of materials and perspectives on the political and social lives of Russian women in the twentieth century, this time from sociological, historical, and political rather than literary standpoints. The collection contains a great deal of useful information—sometimes so much that the individual authors jump from topic to topic or compact their data into an inelegant density. In some cases, as in Noonan's article on the Bolshevik legacy and Russian women's movements, the constraints of extreme brevity mean that one piece of information is adduced to support an assertion in an arguable manner; for example, Noonan suggests that the growing problem with abandoned or "unsupervised" children toward the end of the 1920s resulted from government statements that society, not the individual, was responsible for many aspects of domestic life and child rearing (79). Contributors tend to concentrate on the Soviet period, with a fair amount of statistical information on the Tsarist period and (with a few exceptions) a smaller amount of post-Soviet information given in footnotes. The focus on the Soviet period is understandable given the connection of certain kinds of scholarship to Cold War obsessions on the one hand and the need to introduce a gendered perspective to Sovietology on

the other. Still, for all its interest as a political phenomenon, the tokenized, ineffective, and ultimately antifeminist co-optation of women in Soviet political bodies reveals less about the workings of the society (which, after all, had no option for free elections or public debates on issues) than it does about the window dressing practiced by Party authorities and so appears to occupy a disproportionate amount of attention in the collection. The recent historical transition from Soviet to Russian also leaves certain kinds of information "dangling": statistics on the Soviet period include women from the non-Russian republics, who are of continuing comparative interest but should not be considered as peripheral examples of the same phenomena or rendered invisible by the widespread assumption that Russian women are representative of Soviet women and vice versa. Alexander Ardishvili's article on economic and social problems before the collapse of the USSR, for all its valuable economic information, reveals another tendency inherited from the masculinization of Sovietology: women appear as a specific topic on a single page, late in the piece. Needless to say, this can hardly be considered feminist research.

As a whole, however, the collection is a good general introduction to several issues, conveying specialized information along with a fruitful combination of disciplinary approaches; some of the articles are both informative and highly readable. Rule and Nadezhda Shvedova give a detailed and optimistic presentation of the success of the "Women of Russia" Party in the 1993 elections, and Noonan's brief conclusion usefully ties the various contributions together to extrapolate their implications for Russian women in the future. The clear and thoughtful article by Joel C. Moses, "The Communist Era and Women: Image and Reality," answered many of my long-standing questions about how and why supposedly progressive gender policy in the USSR was accompanied, after an initial period of promising developments, by setbacks in actual gender relations and regressive ideology. Richard Anderson's article on the Russian constitution illuminates the sources of the different approaches to feminism taken by Russian and middle-class Western women: "In contrast to democratic polities, which affirm the personhood of males but often have done so at the expense of denying the personhood of women, the Soviet polity denied full personhood to both men and women" (138). Scholars with an interest in female politicians or heads of women's organizations will find considerable individual detail on these figures, though other classes of Soviet and Russian women tend to appear only in general or statistical terms. The articles complement one another, with occasional repetitions, and the book is filled out with a useful selective bibliography.

Russian Women in Politics and Society, like Marsh's *Gender and Russian*

Literature, underlines the collaborative and interdisciplinary nature of much of the best feminist scholarship on Russian culture and society. Scholars such as Marsh, Noonan, Rule, and Goscilo (who herself has edited several anthologies) demonstrate that the comparatively late start of feminist studies in the field has allowed scholars to select the most productive and promising of the theories and practices developed in the West and to apply them, for the most part, with a marked respect for the experience and authority of Russians and East Europeans themselves—particularly the women whose lives and writings form the subject of these works. |

Russia, Women, Culture. Edited by Helena Goscilo and Beth Holmgren. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996.

Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology. By Eric Naiman. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997.

Barbara Evans Clements, *University of Akron*

These two books are very fine examples of the contributions currently being made by literary scholars to the study of the history of women in Russia and the Soviet Union. The anthology edited by Helena Goscilo and Beth Holmgren is explicitly a work of women's studies. Eric Naiman's analysis of ideology in the 1920s is not, but both advance our understanding of the practices and ideas that constituted the culture within which Russian women made their history.

Goscilo and Holmgren's *Russia, Women, Culture* is a collection of articles that engage a wonderful variety of topics. The book ranges widely in time, from the eighteenth century to the late twentieth, and in the process leaps across the now crumbling topical boundaries between literary and historical studies and between high and popular culture. It also clears the analytical chasm that has separated the study of Russia before and after the 1917 revolution. Here are studies of public spaces such as bathhouses and beauty parlors and private expressions such as scrapbooks. There are several articles that discuss the meanings of fashion for Russian women and others that deal with those theaters of high culture, the salon and the dance. Seven of the fourteen articles take elite women as their subjects, but there are also studies of peasants and the urban middle classes. The authors' approaches to their topics are as diverse as the topics themselves. Goscilo has contributed an article on early nineteenth-century fashion that is entertaining,