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The Occulted Woman in Russian Silver Age Decadent Poetry

ABSTRACT: Forrester E.S. Sibelan, *The Occulted Woman in Russian Silver Age Decadent Poetry*. "Poznańskie Studia Slawistyczne" 11. Poznań 2016. Publishing House of the Poznań Society for the Advancement of the Arts and Sciences, pp. 97–111. ISSN 2084-3011.

The article outlines the cultural context of Russian women who contributed to the development of decadent poetry in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, most now forgotten or “occulted” (eclipsed, crowded out). Given the importance of gender theories and “feminine” discursive space in the Silver Age, this phenomenon must be examined; it is not just a typical example of women written out of literary history. The article suggests reasons why decadence may have appealed to women as well as why Russian women who adopted a specifically decadent position might not have been taken seriously. It ends by suggesting why more famous Russian poets (especially Axmatova and Cvetaeva, whose reputations have lasted and grown) achieved more lasting influence thanks to their occulted female predecessors.

KEYWORDS: Russian Silver Age poetry; Women poets; decadent; feminist; gender; literary scholarship

1. Introduction

Decadence has not been the most widely cited and studied poetic current of the Russian Silver Age (perhaps because it is so unlike Socialist Realism), and outside Russia even well-known poets such as Konstantin Bal'mont and Valerij Brjusov tend to be mentioned briefly before a course of study moves on to the younger generation of Symbolists, Andrej Belyj and Aleksandr Blok. The decadents are taught as a movement largely derivative from French Symbolism, important primarily because they lead to later poetic achievements, especially those of the Russian high modernists Axmatova, Mandel'stam, Pasternak and Cvetaeva. The poetic activity of Russian decadence (as of the whole Symbolist movement) involved a significant number of women writers, but female speakers and poets have

subsequently been blocked out, or occulted, by male Symbolist poets and written out of the story by many female as well as male critics. The gender-balanced list of the “Big Four” makes clear that this distortion did not impact the next generation of Russian poets. I would argue that this resulted from the presence and productivity of the female decadent poets, among other female Symbolists.

The word “occult” in the title of this article has a dual sense: it describes an esoteric science such as astrology, palmistry or Tarot, and in that way it suits the culture of the *fin-de-siècle*, so interested in all kinds of occult sciences. In astronomy, the term’s meaning is even more appropriate: an observer cannot see an occulted body because something else is blocking it. Astronomers infer the presence of invisible heavenly bodies by observing their influence on the movements of other, visible bodies. It may be possible to establish where female decadent poets have been important and influential by seeking their impact on their contemporaries and on later Russian poets.

Women have often been “written out” of literary history (for Anglophone decadence cf. Beckson 1982; Showalter 1993); Dale Spender provocatively outlines the process of critical excision of Anglophone women writers in general (Spender 1989). G.L. van Roosbroeck (1927) describes French decadence, the model for Russian poets, emphasizing both pathology (a fatal pallor; the scent of pharmacies; orgies and demonic perversions) and the gendered deviance of the necessarily male poet (not only a dandy’s fine clothes, but make-up and other signs of the feminine, read as the effeminate). This paradox – that male decadents adopt “feminine” garb and behaviors, while female decadents are invisible – is one I will return to below.

Women’s importance in Russian decadence is difficult to measure when readers today hardly know them, although some significant projects in Russia and elsewhere have sought out neglected Russian women poets, including some of the decadents (cf. e.g. Ученова 1989; Ledkovsky et al. (1994); Kelly (1994); Tomei (1999); Barker, Gheith (2002); web sites of poetry such as “Бабий бунт”). These women’s writing has particular value for the study of gender and sexuality, as many of them explored alternative sexualities. (The taboo on homosexual and lesbian discourse in the Soviet period surely explains some of the later willful ignorance of their work.)

One might observe three overall tendencies in feminist and gender scholarship, and in scholarship on Russian women's writing in particular, parallel to the general development of 20th-century feminist scholarship. One move seeks an "even playing field" for women writers, so finds and (re)publishes their texts to make them available for readers, students and scholars. A second move argues that reading and studying women demands new and different approaches and may argue for a specifically female tradition of reading (especially, of women reading other women), and consequently of women writing *differently from* as well as outside the dominant male tradition. This difference can make them "unreadable" with standard patriarchal strategies and therefore requires development of new ways of interpreting and understanding. A third, usually later move examines gender in a wider variety of contexts and addresses the construction of gender in texts by men as well as women. All three of these moves are essential for meaningful recuperation of forgotten authors such as the Russian women decadents.

2. This Article's Focus

This article will look at the *fin-de-siècle*, roughly from 1890 to 1910, when decadent poetry was a vibrant movement in Russia, mainly connected with the Symbolist movement. Much of the most useful scholarly work on this movement occurred about 100 years later, as the Soviet Union was ending and feminist literary scholarship was beginning in Russia and flourishing abroad. The late 1980s and early 1990s also integrated Soviet and "foreign" scholarship: much of the best work on Russian literature (including both Silver Age writings and Soviet "underground", samizdat or dissident writing) was done outside the Soviet Union – often by émigré scholars such as Professors Marina Ledkovsky (1924–2014, born in Berlin) and Simon Karlinsky (1924–2009, born in Harbin). These scholars addressed gender and sexuality in ways that simply were not possible in Soviet scholarly discourse. The peculiar status of feminism in the USSR and the socialist countries exacerbated the limits on this discourse: feminist scholarship, like feminist movements in general, would have been flagged as a bourgeois excrescence, no longer needed under the egalitarian

conditions of socialism. Attwood (1990) shows how “natural”, essentialist gender assumptions were in fact energetically taught in Soviet schools, perhaps out of fear that the birth rate of the USSR’s European population would drop even further without such intervention. The Silver Age in particular was always a tricky period for Soviet scholarship, not distant enough in the past to be “safe” for non-Marxist analysis, and yet fondly remembered as a period of great cultural achievement. Much of the best Soviet scholarship on the Silver Age was done in private: at small conferences, in personal conversation, at provincial institutions, or focused on non-ideological issues such as metrical qualities.

Despite the resurgent patriarchy in many post-socialist nationalist ideologies, today there is a significant body of feminist scholarship in Eastern Europe and Russia – though (for understandable reasons) it tends to emphasize recent writing, and political or sociological issues, more than literature of the past. The late glasnost’ and immediate post-Soviet periods intentionally retrieved the writings of some suppressed aristocratic authors, such as Evdokiia Rostopčina; she had remained in print until the Revolution in books or with her lyrics set to music as *romansy*, and (as a late Romantic) was an important precursor for the decadent poets. Karolina Pavlova, a more intellectual poet who received the stamp of approval from male Silver Age gatekeepers such as Brjusov, remained in print through the Soviet period, though not copiously. It is worth returning now to some of the scholarship of the 1990s, because despite all the efforts toward more inclusive readings the picture of Russian decadence has fossilized with the women written out. The earlier publications and analyses can form part of an intervention to bring this picture into better focus.

Why, in turn, is it important to return to these women writers? Because, as Charlotte Rosenthal has pointed out, the Russian Silver Age was a watershed for women writers. Never before had successful and important Russian women writers *remained* successful and important long after they died, retaining popularity with readers (including later poets), but also attracting the attention of scholars and entering the canon for publishers and creators of literature syllabi.

3. A brief survey of the literature

Good resources on women writers and especially Russian women poets are available in English as well as in Russian: earlier decades are treated in Amanda Ewington's *Russian Women Poets of the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries: A Bilingual Edition* and Diana Greene's *Re-inventing Romantic Poetry: Russian Women Poets of the Mid-Nineteenth Century*. A longer range of eras is provided by Ledkovsky et al. (1994), Kelly (1994) and Tomei (1999). Numerous poems are available online at <<http://www.babiy-bunt.ru/>> and <<http://lib.ru/LITRA/>>. Adele Barker and Jehanne Gheith's *History of Women's Writing in Russia* includes an article by Jenifer Presto on the women of Russian Symbolism, as well as a range of other chapters.

For our purposes it is also important to note that Silver Age writers were much more frank and open about sex and sexuality than Russian public discourse allowed in previous decades, or later in the Soviet period. Prudery has contributed to censorship of many topics of particular interest to women authors and reader. The editor of *Tsaritsy muz* comments tersely in her notes that Marija Škapskaja – whose poems of the 1920s touch on themes such as sex, childbirth, miscarriage and abortion – treated “decadent themes” (Ученова 1989: 434)¹. Here we see the term “decadence” applied to a woman writing after the decadent era, strictly speaking, had ended: the term offers an additional way of writing her out of literary history, and of censoring or sidelining expression of central elements of female experience. Romantic love is a fine topic for a woman, but individual and trivial; sex, abortion and childbirth as in Škapskaja's poetry are “decadent”. However, even when decadent poetry is taken seriously, as in the discussion to be examined below, women are written out there as well. Censorship of discourse about sex and sexuality by necessity privileges dominant heteronormative ideologies (and here again we might posit that concern with the birth rate supports that censorship). In more recent Soviet scholarship, a more detailed and respectful treatment of Silver Age culture

¹ The same notes specify that Glafira Galina was exiled from the capital after her poem *Les rubjat* (They're cutting down the trees) was correctly read as a critique of Tsarist suppression of student protests (426). In 1989, at least, pre-Revolutionary women poets were taken more seriously if they wrote about politics – in acceptable ways, of course.

such as Natal'ja Boneckaja's book on Evgenija Gercyk belittles women of the preceding, positivist period in highly stereotypical terms, suggesting that the author knows those women from caricatures such as Avdotja Kukshina in Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons*. To cite Boneckaja:

Надо сказать, что эти девушки [А. и Е. Герцык – S.F.] формировались в 1880–1890-х гг. отнюдь не как вугарные нигилистки – стриженные, очкастые, женское дополнение к “реалистам” (Д. Писарев) и позднейшим народникам. В России возник и набирал силу также совсем другой женский тип – тип женщины-артистки, интеллектуалки и поэта, бросающей вызов мужчине в области высокого творчества, ради профессионального роста порывающей с семейными стереотипами (Бонецкая 2012: 24–25).

(It must be said that these young women [the Gercyk sisters] were formed in the 1880s and 1890s not at all as vulgar nihilist girls – crop-headed, in glasses, the female supplement to the “realists” (D. Pisarev) and the later populists. A completely different female type had arisen in Russia and was gaining strength – the type of a woman-artist, a female intellectual and poet, who cast a challenge to the man in the sphere of elevated creativity, breaking with familial stereotypes for the sake of professional growth) [my translation – S.F.].

This description of the woman-artist might well have been welcomed by many of those female positivists, who presumably took to wearing glasses to correct their vision rather than wearing them as props. Unlike gender, class has always been handled well by Russian literary scholars, but critics have often used class to discredit authors, especially female authors. (How many lower-class, never mind proletarian women before the Revolution were literate?) The entry of gender into the picture, as above, tends to distort critical lenses.

4. Features of Russian Decadence

Russian decadence shares salient features with most other *fin-de-siècle* national varieties: writers were preoccupied with sex (including deviant or non-standard sexualities), dandyism, and greater latitude for gender play and expression based on Weininger's *Sex and Character*, translated into Russian in 1908². The import of sex could not be the same for men as

²Weininger's book, while allowing that an individual could be something other than a polarized extreme masculine or feminine, conveyed a vague threat of punishment for those

for women in the decadent movement: part of the greater presence of sex in public discourse was the idea that men *thought* about sex rather than just indulging in it. Almost every influential ideology of the time held that women were or should be sexually active only to please their men and to conceive children. Women who *thought* about sex, either imagining or analyzing, or who sought it for pleasure were both sinful, “loose”, and masculine or mannish. As Showalter points out, in the context of Anglophone decadence, “Thus decadent art was unmanly and effeminate, while New Women’s writing was unwomanly and perverse” (Showalter 1993: x). Added to the Wieningerian suggestion that sexually deviant individuals would not find personal happiness, this led to a kind of masochistic pose for female decadent writers that could be somewhat appealing. Besides that whiff of sexual corruption, the decadent was urban, cosmopolitan, theatrical, self-absorbed, dandyish, and perhaps given to wearing makeup, *déclassé(e)*, threatened by depression or suicide, a user and perhaps abuser of drugs or alcohol, and interested in various occult sciences and unorthodox religions such as the Khlysty or the Old Believers.

Van Roosbroeck (1927) notes that French decadents were in rebellion against the bourgeois. Against what did decadence react in the Russian case? Certainly the bourgeois, but also positivism, which had dominated educated Russian intellectual discourse for some decades in the 19th century. Among other things, positivism had suggested that women could aspire to the same status as men by shedding their gender attributes (cutting their hair, etc.). Moreover, and importantly, decadence could express despair about the Russian political and cultural scene. Some of the most influential figures of the time were Nietzsche (cf. Beatrice Rosenthal’s works, especially *Nietzsche in Russia*), Weininger, Spengler – and last but not least, the artist and diarist Marija Baškircева.

Thus, within Russia itself, decadence worked as a striking foreign import (from the French, and later also from the English) and as a way of tuning local feelings and responses: despair at the political situation, disillusion with positivist *Bazarovshchina*, the sense that the energies of

who deviated from the grammatically gendered extremes of masculinity and femininity. This meshed with the masochistic tendencies of decadence, expanding Weininger’s influence in that period.

Russian Realism were in decline (with the physical death of many major writers, and others, like Tolstoy, turning away from literature), or that Realism was moving into other channels and genres with the rise of shorter prose, such as stories by Chekhov, Gorky, Andreev, Bunin – many of which also included a hefty dose of decadence. Numerous literary figures of the time could see literal decadence in their family trees: the Gertsyik sisters were from an aristocratic Polish family that no longer maintained its former style; Aleksandr Blok saw his own father as a degenerate. The Russian Empire had offered a conservative, even reactionary destination for minor European nobility who lost their positions in the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, or the disturbances of 1848. In Russia their elite educations and mastery of languages made them desirable as teachers, governesses, or tutors. But these individuals too brought a sense of the loss of old values, the Gothic ruins of a once-grand family heritage, and passed this family mythology along to their children or charges. Spengler codified similar feelings in his *Decline of the West*, which was popular in Russia as in Western Europe³.

Marija Baškircева's diary had a huge impact on both male and female readers, but especially on female ones, even more so once the original French text was published in Russian translation. Anna Tavis has pointed out that Baškircева's narcissism was transformative⁴: her diary brought a focus on the self together with her ambition and dedication to art. Given current standards of female behavior, these were very, very decadent things. In the diary, an attractive young woman was making paintings instead of babies, and seeking sex, if at all, for pleasure rather than out of duty or the desire for reproduction. Baškircева, whose early death also

³The negative view of Russia's current "declining" state eventually gives way to Eurasianism, which attempted to infuse Russianness with new "Asiatic" blood. It makes sense given Eurasian history that the movement would be a macho thing: patriarchal, and based on a history where Mongol invaders were liable to kill Slav men but took Slav women captive, kept the beautiful ones for their harems and sold the less beautiful ones into slavery. (Note the etymology of the word "slave" in many West European languages, where it replaced medieval words such as "serf".) Unlike positivism (with its crop-headed women in blue-tinted glasses), and decadent Silver Age culture with its many feminine and effeminate traits and important, successful women writers, Eurasianism did not offer much space for women to participate actively.

⁴Personal conversation, summer 1993.

acted out the masochistic impulses of female decadence, chose Art rather than the standard Female Fate, be it seen as joyful and fulfilling or as tragically limiting. The Silver Age had not yet discarded older assumptions that a woman who publishes her own literary effusions is a loose woman – “une femme émancipée”, in Belinskij’s telling description (Belinskii 2002: 28–32). Like Baškircева, the decadent woman was in a tricky spot to begin with – primed by readings like Weininger’s *Sex and Character* to assume that any unhappiness or difficulty she encountered was a result of her own nature rather than of social inequities, and torn between options that never offered complete happiness or productivity, or even satisfying completion of duty. The proper, self-effacing and modest women writer is outlined in Rostopčina’s very accommodating (or subtly ironic?) poem *Как должны писать женщины* (1840, How Women Should Write). Nadezda Tëffi’s story *Демоническая женщина* (1913, The Demonic Woman), now widely available on the internet, gives a humorous and parodic depiction of a decadent woman, right down to the character’s failed attempts to publish her poetry.

It is also telling that some important women decadent poets were most productive after the official end of the decadent movement in Russia; these include Zinaida Gippius, Mariëtta Šaginian (in her first, poetic incarnation), and Nadežda L’vova. These poets continued to write in decadent style once the men had moved on, or they simply started later, continuing the moves of decadence after the “crisis of Symbolism”. They were widely read, and some of them were very popular: Šaginian’s collection *Orientalia* went through multiple editions before the Revolution and is cited as outselling Axmatova’s *Четки* (Rosary) through its various editions. As the Big Four Russian modernist poets were beginning their careers, the women decadents were very much in evidence.

What decadence as a movement or a moment might have offered to women is clear, though not unambiguously positive. This included the chance to participate in culture without abandoning one’s feminine identity – and perhaps even to be punished for it in a gratifying, poetically productive way. Moreover, the non-conformist decadent pose expressed not only disillusion with positivism as well as the Russian autocracy, but also the particular hopelessness of the talented, creative woman in that society. As mentioned before, for women decadence rejected the relative optimism of

the positivist era that women could escape the downside of female fate by shedding the feminine trappings, attaining a scientific education, and perhaps devoting themselves selflessly to revolutionary struggle rather than to family happiness⁵. In the Realist era, women were most powerful and lastingly influential either as avatars of Terrible Perfection (or, in Jehanne Gheith's term, "the Necessary Woman" as foil to the Superfluous Man), or as real-life examples of revolutionary action, various assassins or martyrs. Nothing could be further from the heightened individuality of the decadent writer than joining a movement, submerging one's individuality in the group cause, and struggling for the well-being of a whole nation. For poets in the Silver Age, like Gippius, these societal causes were more likely to be expressed in publicistic prose than in poetry.

Thus, decadence offers women discursive space for a specifically female voice, a renewed concern with emotions and emotional states, fine points of style and aesthetics⁶, as well as its response to the sense that not all was as it should be either in Russia or in this life. Women's dissatisfaction with the options offered to them (marriage, children; muse or secretary, etc.) could overlap the general decadent dissatisfaction with the supposedly desirable fate of *благополучие*, bourgeois well-being, financial prosperity, and for women the stress on making babies for a new generation and focusing on their *благополучие* in turn.

At the same time, the decadent position of a female writer might be taken less seriously by Russian readers. The disadvantages of a woman's position could seem almost by their nature to lead to decadent attitudes, expressions of despair, and even the temptation to suicide, and this "logical" consequentiality would make women's decadent writings look more biographical, emotional and personal, thus less philosophical and generalizable to any human being. Ultimately the male reader (and perhaps the female reader too?) might assume that a woman was quite naturally

⁵ Boneckaja's prejudiced summation of the positivist women is not unique: historians in the West too have done better by the Russian feminists and positivists of the 19th century than have literary scholars.

⁶ Aesthetic refinement is at times in the Silver Age coded as masculine in opposition to crude female sexuality: see Varvara in Fëdor Sologub's *Petty Demon*, or the Old Believer Mar'ja Dmitrievna in Mixail Kuzmin's *Wings*, who encourages the young hero to think of his body as a source of pleasure but then horrifies him with her sexual advances.

dissatisfied with her fate – who would want to be a born a woman in that time and place? A self-sacrificing young Positivist man, à la Lopuxov⁷, would marry a woman in name alone to secure her permission to study medicine in Switzerland, giving up a share of his own *благополучие*, since divorce might be difficult if he later wanted to marry for love. Perhaps in intentional contrast to this self-sacrifice, the male decadents could adopt a pose of devouring women, taking advantage of them emotionally and sexually, and using the ideology of “moments” to exploit them sexually: see Vladislav Xodasevič’s memoir *Конец Ренаты* (1928, The End of Renata) and general societal opinion about Brjusov’s relationship with the young L’vova. A woman’s fate and any resulting dissatisfaction are limited, personal things, less indicative of society as a whole than are large class issues or political oppression. Heldt’s point in *Terrible Perfection* that Russian women have been more recognized as poets and autobiographers than as prose authors underlines that women have been more welcome in genres where self-expression is prioritized, rather than prose fiction, and especially the great novel, which addresses all of society, and in which women form part of the story rather than shaping the narrative as authors⁸. (This has been less true in recent decades of Russian literary history; many late-glasnost publications of recent women’s writing focused precisely on prose.⁹)

Heldt points out how many of the women involved in the Silver Age schools besides Symbolism were married to men in the movements where they participated, and also how many women poets were outside the well-known schools that to this day continue to influence the way poetry of the period is taught. In 1925 a list of these “outside” poets included Barkova, Butjagina, Cvetaeva, Inber, Krandievskaja, Loxvitskaja, L’vova, Odoevceva, Parnok, Pavlovič, Polonskaja, Radlova, Stolica, Šaginjan, and Volčaneckaja (Heldt 1987: 116). Pachmuss’s *Women Writers in Russian*

⁷Lopuxov is the first hero of Nikolaj Chernyshevskij’s novel *Что делать?* (What Is to Be Done?).

⁸See also Jehanne Gheith’s *Finding the Middle Ground: Evgeniia Tur, V. Krestovskii, and the Power of Ambivalence in Nineteenth-Century Women’s Prose* (Northwestern University Press, 2004) for a sophisticated analysis of two of the most successful women prose authors in nineteenth-century Russia.

⁹On Russian women’s prose in the decadent era, see Komisaruk 2009.

Modernism includes poetry by Gippius, Mirra Loxvickaja, Poliksena Solov'eva, de Gabriak, Tèffi, and Adelaida Gertsyk in English translation (Pachmuss 1978). Ученова (1989) *Царицы муз* (Caricas of the Muses) includes poetry by a number of women whose careers overlap the decadent period (or immediately follow it) and whose poetry as represented in the volume has decadent elements: Čjumina, de Gabriak, Galina, Gercyk, Gippius, Inber, Loxvickaja, L'vova, Nagrodsckaja, Parnok, Solov'eva, Stolica, Šaginjan, Ščepkina-Kupernik, Škapsckaja, Tèffi – as well as the better known, and certainly sometimes decadent, Axmatova and Cvetaeva. The volume's "imperial" title, *Царицы муз*, may reflect the decision to limit each poet's work to what had been published before (or, in a few cases, in) 1918, the end of the Tsarist period, but very probably this also limits the time scope of the "decadent" poetry in the volume. A number of female decadent poets are available in print and also online, and some have even been addressed in scholarship (especially Loxvickaja, cf. Presto 2002). However, these poets have been re-published and addressed primarily in cases when scholars and readers are looking intentionally for women writers.

5. What inspired this paper

This paper was inspired by a few pages in *Шатры страха. Разговори о Мандельштаме* by Naum Vajman and Matvej Ruvim. Well into this thick volume the well-read and thoughtful authors begin to discuss how Innokentij Annenskij's poetry (sometimes in derivative forms via Brjusov) offered Osip Mandel'stam a crucial way out of the dilemmas posed by Symbolism. Decadence, in this form, offered a "projectless" position as an alternative to theurgic Symbolism, whose project the Acmeists perceived as bankrupt (Вайман, Рувим 2011: 279). Ruvim sums up the other important decadents: Brjusov (careerist decadent), Sologub (solipsistic decadent) and Balmont (narcissist decadent) – but does not mention a single woman, not even Gippius, the one woman among the Symbolist and decadent poets who is generally recognized as important (and one who, incidentally, played a role in Mandel'stam's earliest success as a poet) (Вайман, Рувим 2011: 283). Women – except for Akhmatova, to some extent – are left out

of the whole of this provocative take on literary history in a way that is unfortunately typical. Most probably, the two well-read authors have never had cause to browse the work of the women decadents.

And yet they dwell on Annenskij, a poet and critic who regularly read what Symbolist women were writing, and who wrote influentially about them. In particular, he published a thoughtful review article about women Symbolists, *Онь*, in the journal “Apollon”. (Perhaps because it was published after Loxvickaja’s death in 1905, it treats Gippius and Solov’eva but not Loxvickaja.) Experienced translators of Annenskij such as Boris Dralyuk and Margo Rosen mention the “flickering” or “shimmering” they find in his poems, the difficulty of conveying their subtlety without coming off as sentimental or simplistic. Could the decadent elements of Annenskij’s work be described as “feminine” qualities? Compared to Brjusov, who clearly used female poets for his own purposes¹⁰, Annenskij took women poets seriously. (Maksimilian Vološin was a third poet of the time who intentionally mentored women poets, and a close friend of the Gercyk sisters.) Cvetaeva noted in her memoir of Vološin that his poetic voice was entirely male or masculine despite his support of women writers; Brjusov attempted a whole volume of “woman’s” verse, under the pseudonym “Nelli”. Yet it is Annenskij whose poetry most raises the question: if we did not know that certain lines were his, would the voice sound feminine to us?

One might ask how much Vajman and Ruvim leaving women out of the discussion reflects their unfamiliarity with the women poets of decadence – who, aside from Gippius, have not been much remembered or studied. Mandel’stam himself later strove to align himself with high-status male writers – indeed, with writers such as Annenskij. Not every reader of Russophone poetry is a Mikhail Gasparov, who searched out secondary and tertiary poets if he knew the first-rank poet he was examining might have been reading them. (This was out of scholarly conscience, not as a feminist statement.) Mandel’stam may have needed a masculine example to pick up the useful elements from decadence that Vajman notes in his

¹⁰The all-female poetry-reading scene in Cvetaeva’s (Цветаева 1925) memoir essay *Geroj truda* (Hero of Labor) gives a polemical view of how Brjusov understood, or rather misunderstood, women writers.

work. For Axmatova, similarly, pointing to Annenskij as the source for her poetic approach may have allowed her to continue poetic strategies she had learned from reading Loxvickaya (Rosenthal 1992: 38; Presto 2002: 140), while crediting a man who had assimilated useful features of female decadent poets into his poetry. Moreover, by the time Axmatova was reminiscing about her discovery of Annenskij, who in the USSR remembered Loxvickaja, despite her two Pushkin prizes? For most scholars and readers, the lineage of the Poets' Guild, as well as the typical image of Russian decadence, follows the male DNA.

6. Conclusion

Scholars should look more closely at the women of Russian decadence, whose work is now not difficult to find. The dimensions of this brief paper do not allow me to go into more detail, but each of the poets whose name has been briefly mentioned here is worth a second look. Moreover, their influence on better-known contemporaries and later poets, men as well as women, is a rich and open topic for scholarly research.

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