Writing in No Man’s Land: Lidiia Zinov’eva-Annibal’s *Tragicheskii zverinets* and Liudmila Petrushevskiaia’s *Vremia noch’*

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**INTRODUCTION**

The use, by many Russian writers and critics, of the categories *muzhskaia* and *zhenskaia* to designate a text’s literary merit is common, yet controversial (Goscilo, 1996). For whilst the *muzhskaia* category admits all writing by men and therefore constitutes the mainstream – indeed the “malestream” (Goscilo, 1996, p.15) – of Russian literature, it does not admit all writing by women. The exclusion, notes Helena Goscilo (1996, p.16), is usually justified on the grounds that women’s writing is often poor quality: clichéd and formulaic. But then much men’s writing is also poor quality. This means that the only distinction between the two categories is ultimately the gender of the text’s “voice”: a male voice is indicated either because the empirical author is a man, regardless of whether or not his work is about women or narrated by a female character, or because the narrative voice is coded “male”, that is, it confronts stereotypically masculine themes and employs a masculine style: explicit, non-sentimental, individualized (Goscilo, 1996, p.16-17). A female “voice”, on the other hand, must have a female author and either confront stereotypically female themes (the domestic, the family, emotions) or adopt a “feminine” (sentimental, saccharine) (Goscilo, 1996, p.16) voice. Ultimately, therefore, the malestream/zhenskaia dichotomy rests on the assumption that if female authors write with a stereotypically “feminine” style or focus on “feminine” themes, the result is inevitably poor literature.

This article undertakes to prove that the binary malestream/zhenskaia classification of Russian literature and the assumptions it makes are flawed. Firstly, we identify two writers whose work cannot be defined in either category. Secondly, we refute the assumption that all original writers write male-style. Instead we argue that truly innovative writers challenge the malestream/zhenskaia dichotomy in itself, by
developing an alternative mode of writing which is potentially groundbreaking. Finally, we argue that this alternative mode of writing is not simply the domain of late twentieth-century writers who happen to be contemporary with the growth of feminist discourses in Western Europe and America, but can also be seen in the work of earlier writers. The two works analysed in this article, Lidia Zinov’eva-Annibal’s *Tragicheskii zverinets* and Liudmila Petrushevskaia’s *Vremia noch’*, have been chosen because, despite being very different in terms of their historical context, style, and content, they manifest some key similarities which enable us to exemplify the alternative mode we are theorizing clearly in a short article. There are, however, potentially several female – and even male – writers who have written in this alternative mode, but whom we have no space to discuss here.

**PROBLEMATIZING CLASSIFICATION**

As readers may not be well acquainted with *Tragicheskii zverinets* and/or *Vremia noch’*, we begin with a brief synopsis of each text. Lidia Zinov’eva-Annibal’s *Tragicheskii zverinets* (1907) consists of nine short stories which depict the childhood and adolescence of the heroine-narrator, Vera. Vera’s childhood is spent on her family’s estate, amidst animals, governesses, peasant friends, and her mother, a devoted Christian. Vera soon becomes a rebel: she steals, lies, bullies, denounces God, and plays sadomasochistic sexual games. Eventually she is sent to a boarding school, from which she is expelled, afterwards spending time in Italy. Here, on a deserted beach, she bathes naked in the sea and re-experiences the natural world of her childhood. This experience has a strong impact on Vera, restoring her wild but passionate enthusiasm for life. *Vremia noch’* is a collection of night-time jottings by the protagonist-narrator, Anna, a second-rate poet who lives with her grandson, Tima, and her Schizophrenic mother, Sima. The narration is not chronological, but at various points in the novel, Anna also shares the flat with her daughter – Tima’s mother Alena – who eventually has two more children, a temporary son-in-law, Sasha, and Anna’s criminal son, Andrei. Anna describes food shortages, the difficulty of finding work, her daughter’s sex life, her son’s criminality, and various other personal problems. At the end of the novel she is alone: her mother is in a psychiatric hospital, her son is on the run, her daughter and her daughter’s children have gone to live elsewhere.

*Tragicheskii zverinets* and *Vremia noch’* cannot be classified as malestream literature because they are written by female authors and focus on explicitly “female” themes (the family, relationships,
emotions, female sexuality). But to classify these texts as zhenskaia literatura is also impossible. Zhenskaia literatura is meant to “cherish and console” (Goscilo, 1996, p.73), whereas Tragicheskii zverinets depicts violence and death. For instance, as Vera looks into the eyes of a dying wolf:

Я вижу в их углах белок. Он весь кровавый. Зрачки напряжены, прямо в мои зрачки. В них стиснулась несносная боль, [...] тоска и последний, безнадежный, остановившийся ужас.¹

(Zinov’eva-Annibal, 1907, p.50)

Likewise, Vremia noch’ describes excrement, violence, madness, and harrowing backstreet abortion. For example, Anna’a acquaintance:

родила с помощью укола шестимесячного сына, тот мяу кал всю ночь при открытом окне, пока она мыла полы [...] ай-яй, потом к утру затих, на что она и рассчитывала. За всю ночь даже к нему не подошла.²

(Petrushevskia, 1996, p.366)

Further, zhenskaia literatura is clichéd, yet Tragicheskii zverinets and Vremia noch’ are highly original and critically acclaimed (Costlow, 1997; Kelly, 2001; Laird, 1999; Dalton-Brown, 2000). Indeed, Petrushevskia’s characters are far removed from the glamorous, physically attractive, or at least “feminine”, heroines typical of zhenskaia literatura: they are independent, foul-mouthed, and aggressive; their bodies are flabby, spotty, ageing, and menstruating. Likewise, in Tragicheskii zverinets, Vera’s mother is paralyzed, Dasha the servant has scrofula and smells, the governess Aleksandra Ivanovna has dandruff, Lucia – Vera’s lover – is consumptive. Vera herself is brazen and violent.

Whilst Tragicheskii zverinets and Vremia noch’ do not fit into either the zhenskaia or malestream categories, it is also impossible to classify them alongside male-style anti-establishment literature.

¹ “I see the whites in the corners [of his eyes]. They are all bloody. His pupils stare straight into mine. Compressed inside them is unbearable pain, […] sorrow, and a final, hopeless, enduring horror” (All translations in this article are my own).

² “had an injection which made her give birth, after six months of pregnancy, to a baby boy which then mewed all night by an open window whilst she mopped the floor [...], awww, aw, aww, but was silent by morning (which is what she was counting on). That whole night she didn’t go over to him even once”.

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Certainly it seems tempting to associate Petrushevskaya with the once subversive Metropol’ writers, particularly Evgenii Popov and Victor Erofeev, both of whom, like Petrushevskaya, are famously dysphemistic. She has also been likened to Victor Pelevin and Vladimir Sorokin (Latynina, 2004). But, firstly, Petrushevskaya refused an invitation to join Metropol’ (Goscilo, 1993, p.148). Secondly, in contrast to most contemporary male-style dysphemistic writers, Vremia noch’ portrays almost exclusively female experience. Thirdly, unlike much postmodernist “zero-level” writing, which uses fantasy and shock tactics, Vremia noch’ explores everyday problems and suffering: Petrushevskaya has said in an interview that it is an “encyclopaedia” of the experiences of Russian women, collected over seven years by talking to real women about their lives (Laird, 1999, p.39).

Zinov’eva-Annibal was also accused of imitating alternative male-style writing, in this case the fin de siècle decadent and Symbolist “cult of the body” (Davidson, 1996). Indeed, many of Zinov’eva-Annibal’s early works were derivative of her husband Viacheslav Ivanov’s ideas: her play Koltso even incorporates Ivanov’s poetry. But these early works received little critical attention. Tragicheskii zverinets is less preoccupied with the body than her earlier Tritsat’ tri uroda, an erotic lesbian novel that was actually banned (Pyman, 1994, p.273), and this suggests that in Tragicheskii zverinets Zinov’eva-Annibal had started to develop her own voice (Costlow, 1997). That this new voice went beyond male tradition is recognized by Zinaida Gippius, who claimed that the Tragicheskii zverinets stories were “женски-теплые”3 (Davidson, 1996, p.161).

But there is a more fundamental reason why neither Tragicheskii zverinets nor Vremia noch’ can be classified as male-style alternative writing. For if unconventional or subversive male-style writers are initially located outside the main/malestream because of the prevailing socio-political climate, they are still potentially malestream and, when the socio-political climate changes, they enter the malestream. Even if, like the Metropol’ writers, their writing is still considered “alternative” (Porter, 1994), it is nevertheless an alternative mode of writing within the malestream. But, as we have shown, Tragicheskii zverinets and Vremia noch’ cannot be accommodated into any part of the malestream. Thus, whereas male-style alternative writers challenge convention within the malestream, writers (female or male) like Zinov’eva-Annibal and Petrushevskaya, who mix aspects of male-style and zhenskaia literatura, challenge the malestream itself as a category. So although they might share some

3 “full of womanly warmth”.
of the features of malestream “alternative” writing – explicit reference to the body, unconventional syntax – Zinov’eva-Annibal and Petrushevskaya go much further.

AN ALTERNATIVE MODE

As Tragicheskii zverinets and Vremia noch’ evade classification as either malestream or zhenskaia, logically we must assume that each develops a mode of writing which combines malestream and zhenskaia characteristics, overcoming the usual dichotomy. This recalls Hélène Cixous’s (1976) theory of écriture féminine which, despite the misleading name, aims to be both masculine and feminine, thus overcoming the opposition between the two terms. To avoid confusion, particularly since Cixous herself dislikes the term écriture féminine and prefers the idea of bisexuality in life and in writing (Moi, 2002, p.106), we will use the term “bisexual writing” instead of écriture féminine in this article. Bisexual being or writing includes both masculine and feminine coded characteristics, regardless of the sex of the author: it is the “nonexclusion either of the difference or of one sex” (Cixous, 1976, p.884). In other words, the masculine and feminine continue to be distinct, but they can be used/embodied simultaneously, and by both men and women. Cixous (1976) argues that this distinguishes her theory of bisexuality from a theory of bisexuality which would overcome difference by theorizing a single being/mode of writing which does not distinguish masculine and feminine elements.

In discussing Cixous’s theories alongside Zinov’eva-Annibal and Petrushevskaya, we must be cautious: applying theory blindly would result in artificial and unimaginative readings. This is especially important because we are using French theory to explore Russian literature. As Nanette Frank argues, imposing Western European or American theories on Russian literature risks suppressing and distorting the different cultural experience of Russian women (Heaton, 1997, p.65). And indeed, neither Zinov’eva-Annibal nor Petrushevskaya has described herself as a “feminist”. Moreover, although Cixous’s theories are groundbreaking, they are also sometimes ambiguous, idealistic, and contradictory (Moi, 2002), so we should interpret them cautiously. Cixous herself is wary of theory and favours a poetic mode of writing: “I let myself be carried off by the poetic word” (Moi, 2002, p.117). To avoid these various pitfalls, we will interpret Cixous’s theories not as a rigid discourse but as semi-creative writing which we will use selectively to inspire our discussion.
The female body

The first aspect of Zinov’eva-Annibal’s and Petrushevskaja’s writing that we will consider is the mixing of male and female characteristics in the narrative voice. In many ways, the narrative voice of both texts is stereotypically male: Anna is dysphemistic and obscene (“наше говно и пропахшие мочой одежды” [Petrushevskaja, 1996, p.394]); Vera is blasphemous and rebellious: (“Да я и не хочу исправляться. А я хочу все наоборот” [Zinov’eva-Annibal, 1907, p.196]). Moreover, Goscilo (1996, p.58) argues that certain grammatical structures are coded male and others female. On this basis, Petrushevskaja’s text is rich in “male” grammar: exclamation marks (“У нас денег нет […]! Нету!!!” [Petrushevskaja, 1996, p.381]), imperative verbs, greater use of the indicative than the subjunctive; Vera’s narration in Tragicheskii zverinets is also full of “male” exclamation marks and imperative verbs. Goscilo notes that most zhenskaia literatura is written in the third person, thus denying the female protagonist subject status. But both Vera’s and Anna’s position as active subject (not passive object) is stressed through their function as first-person narrator.

Despite these “male” characteristics, there is a pervasive sense of femaleness in the narrative voice of both texts. How this sense is created, despite the use of predominantly male-coded language is suggested by Cixous (1976, p.875 and p.880): “Woman must write herself”; “Censor the body and you censor […] speech”. Indeed, one way to pervade a text with real femaleness, rather than with femininity (culturally stereotyped femaleness), is to make frequent reference to the female body. Indeed, there are constant references to women’s body, abortion, and menstruation (“Красная Армия пришла” [Petrushevskaja, 1996, p.365]) in Vremia noch’ and, in Tragicheskii zverinets, to women’s bodies (for example, Vera’s naked “мокрое тело” [Zinov’eva-Annibal, 1907, p.276]), and to female sexuality.

But the most obvious inscription of the female body in both Tragicheskii zverinets and Vremia noch’ is the maternal theme. In Tragicheskii zverinets, Vera’s mother’s is the second most present character after Vera. Additionally, the text is full of maternal imagery: water (the pond, the sea) recall the womb and the “waters” which

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4 “our shit and our urine-smelling clothes”.
5 “Actually I don’t want to mend my ways. I want the opposite”.
6 “We haven’t got any money […]! Haven’t got any!!!”.
7 “The Red Army’s arrived”.
8 “wet body”.
break when giving birth; enclosed spaces (dark cupboards in which Vera hides, the damp, dark cave in Italy) recall the womb; the young of animals (bear cubs, a young crane, tadpoles, dead foals) recall birth and pregnancy. Many of these images are linked to nature and, indeed, nature itself has feminine connotations: for Cixous (1986) it is the “feminine” term in the binary opposition culture/nature, where man is associated with culture (order, civilization) and woman with nature (chaos, the wilderness). Nature is also connected with the maternal via stock phrases such as “mother earth”/“мать сыра земля”. As Vera grows up in and loves the countryside, nature is in a sense her “cradle” or womb.

From this angle, we can interpret the prevalence of “mother nature” in Tragicheskii zverinets in terms of Zinov’eva-Annibal’s interest in the cult of Dionysus, which centres around the cycle of nature: death/sacrifice (winter) and renewal/fertility/ecstasy (spring). For Ivanov, whose ideas influenced Zinov’eva-Annibal (Davidson, 1989), this cycle is epitomized at the human level through sexual love, which reflects the two stages of sacrifice (destruction of one’s individuality to merge with another) and renewal/ecstasy (union). Through this re-enactment of the Dionysian cycle, humans transcend the earthly and access the “spirit” of the universe (Davidson, 1996). The pattern of this cycle is seen in Tragicheskii zverinets when Vera bathes in the sea in Italy: she transcends her individuality to merge with the whole (sacrifice), then experiences joy in transcendence.

И море плачет?
Или оно все слезы, все слезы камней, и паучков, и крабов, и мои, слезы земли?
Конечно, мне хорошо [...].
Я уже давно не плакала. Слишком давно... так, от радости.

(Zinov’eva-Annibal, 1907, p.279)

Here there is sexual imagery (“целую”, “лижу”)10, but even more striking is the maternal imagery in the adjacent passages. Vera is

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9 “I kiss the pebbles and lick them once more with my tongue: salty. My tears? Or the sea water? Sea water is also salty.

Is the sea crying too?
Or is the sea itself tears, tears of the rocks, and the spiders, and the crabs, and are my tears the tears of the earth?

Of course, I feel good [...].

I haven’t cried for so long, too long... like this, from joy”.

10 “kiss”, “lick”.
naked, bathes in water, and sits in a “damp, dark cave” (womb/foetal imagery). Moreover, this maternal imagery is associated with the earth and therefore with Vera’s childhood in the countryside, her “cradle”. At this stage in Tragicheskii zverinets Vera is alienated from her (nature-loving) mother; the accumulation of maternal imagery in this scene suggests that Vera now effectively returns to her “source” (her mother, nature). Indeed, after this incident on the beach Vera is “reborn” with a new enthusiasm for life and nature, symbolically expressed in the next story, which depicts a springtime scene in which Vera rescues a newborn baby.

Vera’s “rebirth” contains an important suggestion: the creative aspect of the maternal (female) body: Vera is originally “created” by the womb and is now “recreated” by it. We have noted that Zinov’eva-Annibal and Petrushevskaia give their texts a female texture by referring to the female body, but by referring specifically to the mother they also suggest that the female sex is inherently creative. This challenges the assumption that female (creative) writing should be unoriginal and only successful if it imitates men.

The idea of the creative female body is also found in Vremia noch’. In addition to frequent references to pregnancy, given the almost total absence of fathers, the mothers in Vremia noch’ construct an emphatically female genealogy (Gosclo, 1996, p.36). This female lineage suggests that woman is the creative force in the world. We can also interpret Anna’s apartment as a trope for the womb: children grow up there and then leave. It is also the “womb” of Anna’s creativity: it is here that she writes the night-time jottings which constitute Vremia noch’. When she is alone in the apartment at the end of the novel, Anna’s manuscript ends: her literal womb is redundant (she acknowledges her “старость”¹¹ [Petrushevskaia, 1996, p.394]; all her children have left) and by analogy her writer’s “womb” ceases to function. Indeed, earlier Anna claims, “я, если не буду […] писать, я умру”¹² (Petrushevskaia, 1996, p.340) and, ultimately, this happens: her writing trails off at the end of the novel, leaving us to presume she has just died – a note at the beginning of the novel indicated her death, but without a date.

Cixous suggests that the mother’s voice is a source of inspiration acquired during the child’s pre-oedipal stage of development, when s/he identifies him/herself entirely with the mother’s body and cannot discern her/his separate identity. Even without Cixous’s Lacanian interpretation of the mother, specific references to the direct influence

¹¹ “old age”.
¹² “If I don’t write […] I will die”.
of the mother on her children in *Tragicheskii zverinets* and *Vremia noch’* are also suggestive of the mother/female as a creator and creative influence. In *Vremia noch’*, Anna is a poet, which already suggests that she is creative. Most of the other writers Anna refers to are also women, and it is her daughter, not her son, in whom she claims to recognize a literary talent. Anna inserts comments into Alena’s diary and encourages her to be a writer. When Alena ridicules Anna’s poems, Anna replies that her poems “feed” the family, a phrase we can interpret also as referring to “creative” fodder. Anna also tries to influence Andrei, writing him letters and a book on bon ton. Symbolically, she gives the nurse at her mother’s hospital a pen as a gift. When Anna dies, Alena sends the manuscript of her mother’s diary to a publisher, literally propagating the mother’s voice through herself.

In *Tragicheskii zverinets*, Vera’s mother’s words also have a strong impact on her daughter. The adult Vera, who narrates *Tragicheskii zverinets* in retrospect, says that she remembers certain words of her mother’s clearly. Indeed, her mother even writes down one of their conversations in a letter left to Vera when she dies. Most significantly, at the end of the novel, after Vera’s “renewal” in Italy, a “feather” (“nepo”) falls from nowhere and touches her face. The word “nepo” also means “quill”, so this could well symbolize Vera’s new creative energy, particularly since the feather falls from the sky, giving it connotations of heavenly inspiration. *Tragicheskii zverinets* is usually considered a semi-autobiographic work (Costlow, 1997), in which case Zinov’eva-Annibal could be referring to her own inspiration as a writer. It is notable that when the feather touches Vera she is performing a maternal act: holding a child to her breast and carrying it to safety. Thus the maternal/female and the creative are juxtaposed.

Zinov’eva-Annibal’s and Petrushevskaia’s use of female imagery and female creative tropes to imbue their narrative with femaleness has a specific advantage over writing in a style perceived to be stereotypically female (sentimental, saccharine). It means that they are not restricted in terms of lexis or content: even if they use stereotypically male-coded language – dysphemism, obscenities – or write about harsh reality rather than domestic havens, this cannot undermine the female emphasis running through the text. They thus succeed in making their texts simultaneously male and female – that is, bisexual.

**Fluids**

*Tragicheskii zverinets* is rich in imagery relating to fluids: the sea, lakes, blood, tears. In *Vremia noch’*, fluids are practically the
dominating motif: urine, blood, waters breaking, drink, vomit and, on nearly every page, “слезу” and forms of the verbs “плакать”/“рыдать”. Cixous’s texts are also full of fluids and words pertaining to fluids: “rivers”, “sea”, “basin of water”, “milk”, “ink”, “blood”, “burst”, “flood”, “overflow” are just a handful from her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa”. As Toril Moi (2002, 115) notes, “water is the feminine element par excellence”, so references to fluids is another way of inscribing the female body into writing.

But the fluids metaphor has another function in Cixous’s theory: it expresses the non-fixity of masculine and feminine elements in her text, emphasizing their merging – their “fluidity”. This concept of “fluidity” is central to the concept of bisexual writing, which is writing which works “on the difference” (Moi, 2002, p.106). In her essay “Sorties”, Cixous lists pairs of terms which reflect the original binary opposition “man/woman”. We have already referred to the culture/nature opposition; others include day/night, head/emotions, action/passion (Cixous/Clément, 1986, p.63-64). These binary oppositions are precisely what we see also in the malestream/zhenskaia dichotomy: culturally, the “male” term is positive, the “female” term is negative. Influenced by Derrida’s notion of différance, Cixous attempts to undermine this binary logic by problematizing the idea that meaning is produced by reference to the direct opposite of the first term in each binary pair and is therefore fixed and stable (Moi, 2002, p.104-06). Rather, as Derrida argues, meaning is infinitely variable; signifiers – such as “man” or “woman” – are in a constant state of “free play” or “deferral”, changing their meaning in terms of the presence or absence of any other signifiers in the language (Moi, 2002, p.104-06). One way in which Cixous represents this playful non-fixity of meaning in her work is through the fluidity motif. As well as the use of words related to liquids or flow, she expresses this fluidity by breaking up conventional syntax: “sweeping away syntax, breaking that famous thread” (1976, p.886). Examples include her use of long, multiple-claused sentences, semi-colons, and ellipses. These elements make Cixous’s syntax less rigid so that meaning flows from clause to clause and spills off the line.

Whilst we are not suggesting that Zinov’eva-Annibal or Petrushevskaia developed a parallel Derridean theory, it is interesting that both their styles feature ‘fluid’ characteristics. The whole structure of Tragicheskii zverinets is built up of very short paragraphs, often of just one line each, so that meaning “flows” down the page:

13 “tears”, “to cry”/“to sob”.

10
Likewise the frequent use of ellipses and anaphora create the effect of flowing movement: “Сестра...я сама...мой мир”\(^{15}\) (Zinov’eva-Annibal, 1907, p.289). \textit{Vremia noch’} also features ellipses and unfinished sentences – indeed the last line of the novel is unfinished and nonsensical: a list of family members ending: “[…] Серафима, Анна, простите слезы”\(^{16}\) (Petrushevskaia, 1996, p.396). Often paragraphs are not distinguished, so the text flows in a stream. This fluidity heightens in the last pages of the novel, where punctuation is minimal and sentences are no longer distinct:

Ой какие ногти, надо будет остричь, отросли как у Вия, а на руках тоже, как же за тобой тут смотрели, ничего, видишь, и трико тут целое, и майка бельенькая, видишь, тебе прямо ниже колен, как комбинация, ну маленькая какая у нас мама, а валенки потом, держись за меня […]”\(^{17}\)

(Petrushevskaia, 1996, p.390)

Given that it breaks down conventional syntax, this style is certainly a possible way in which Petrushevskaia and Zinov’eva-Annibal create an alternative mode of writing. Whilst too original to be associated with \textit{zhenskaia literatura}, the association with the female body fluids constantly evoked in the text gives the language a female dimension which is absent from most male-style experimental syntax. It also metaphorically emphasises that, like Cixous, Petrushevskaia and Zinov’eva-Annibal write texts which are ambiguous, with little plot, where meaning, like language, is fluid and open.

\(^{14}\) “The purple dusk, and the silence dressed in purple.
I lie motionless.
Where is the invisible flow carrying me?
Does it matter where?”

\(^{15}\) “Sister…myself…my world”.

\(^{16}\) “[…] Serafima, Anna, forgive, tears”.

\(^{17}\) “Oh look at those nails, we’ll have to cut them, they’ve grown like a devil’s, and on your hands too, do they call this looking after you, never mind, you see, your underthings are all fine, and your vest’s all white, comes right down past your knees, like a slip, what a small mummy you are, then the boots, hold onto me […]”.
Anti-classification

The description we have from this analysis of Zinov’eva-Annibal’s and Petrushevskaya’s alternative mode of writing is itself fluid, for whilst we have found similarities in their evasion of gender categories, their use of female imagery, their fluid style, their open meaning, we cannot definitively “define” their mode of writing, for any definition would overlook important differences between them. One important difference is in Petrushevskaya’s use of irony and black humour: it is not always easy to establish when Anna is sincere, when she is being naïve, when she is lying, and when she is being sarcastic. The result is a playful, though cynical ambiguity which, again, makes the text’s meaning more fluid and makes a rigid interpretation of the text impossible: meaning is elusive – Anna cannot be categorized, just as her narrative subverts the zhenskaia/malestream classification.

In *Tragicheskii zverinets*, this irony is absent. Instead, Vera is elusive because her descriptions are impressionistic and emotionally charged. She frequently reminds us that she is narrating from memory, and that her account may be inaccurate. Moreover, Vera is in a constant state of emotional flux and transformation: hot tempered, sensitive, inquisitive – we are never certain whether the Vera of one story, or even paragraph, is the same as the next. Perhaps this is why *Tragicheskii zverinets* was published as a collection of stories, rather than as a novel: the suggestion is that the heroine is different in each “chapter”. As in *Vremia noch’,* this means that Vera cannot be definitively understood and/or classified by her reader. Again, this fluidity of character compares well with Cixous’s ideas of fluidity and difference: the avoiding of stable definitions and identities.

Actually, the indefinability of Zinov’eva-Annibal’s and Petrushevskaya’s mode of writing recalls Cixous’s non-definition of bisexual writing:

> It is impossible to define a feminine [i.e. bisexual...] writing [...] for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded – which doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallocentric system.

(Cixous, 1976, p.883)
IMPLICATIONS

Clearly, a positive aspect of the indefinability of Petrushevskai'a's and Zinov'eva-Annibal's mode of writing is that it spares them the sorts of restrictions associated with the malestream category. But it is idealistic to presume that critics will recognize the existence of something which cannot be defined. Practically speaking, the malestream/zhenskaia categorization will surely remain so long as there is no definable alternative. Yet Tragicheskii zverinets and Vremia noch' clearly negate both the malestream and zhenskaia classifications, so an alternative mode of writing must exist.

Indeed, this mode of writing carries implications for Russian literature even if it is not acknowledged – perhaps because it is not acknowledged. As it is, Tragicheskii zverinets and Vremia noch' are usually considered malestream works on account of their critical acclaim. But this malestream categorization provides a useful disguise – it makes their alternative mode of writing less vulnerable to sexist critique; and in this disguise, alternative writing propagates ideas which challenge binary gender logic. This is especially true because overt feminist discourse is generally mistrusted in Russia and is usually perceived as “anti-man” rather than “pro-equality” (Goscilo, 1996, p.11). That this “disguised” mode of literature provides a forum where women’s issues can be discussed openly and heard respectfully is a significant gain. It opens literature up to a mass of female experience, to new perspectives, and new styles, and it allows imaginative experiments to be conducted by mixing the masculine and feminine, reinterpreting both terms and taking them out of a rigid, uncreative binary opposition.

True, we can raise the objection frequently leveled at Cixous: that her bisexual writing is elitist and idealistic with little practical impact on women’s lives (Bray, 2004, p.18). But here Abigail Bray’s interpretation of Cixous is useful. Bray argues that Cixous is an avantgardist who plays on the revolutionary potential of art, a “revolutionary phrase maker” (2004, p.31). This description would not be appropriate for either Zinov'eva-Annibal or Petrushevskai'a, given that neither is consciously a feminist. But the idea that literature has a political function does strike a chord in Russian culture, where writing and politics have always been “inextricably linked” and the notion that literature can be politically powerful fully acknowledged (Heaton, 1977, p.66). Zinov'eva-Annibal could, and Petrushevskai'a can, be only too aware of this, for both lived through periods of political censorship: the years following the 1905 Revolution and the Stalin years respectively.
In the Russian context, it may well be that the movement towards a freer mode of expression, uninhibited by traditional gender categorizations, will advance all the more effectively if it continues to emerge subtly and subversively from literature, rather than through an explicit feminist discourse.

Works Cited


