



MARJA RYTKÖNEN

About the Self and the Time

On the Autobiographical Texts by
Ě. Gerštejn, T. Petkevič, E. Bonner,
M. Pliseckaja and M. Arbatova



ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

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Tampere November 2004
Marja Rytönen

| | |
|---|-----|
| Acknowledgements | 3 |
| Introduction | 7 |
| Russian Women's Autobiographies as an Object of Research..... | 10 |
| The Literary Material..... | 13 |
| General Aspects..... | 13 |
| About the Authors and the Texts..... | 16 |
| The Structure of the Study | 22 |
| 1 Genre and Gender: Theoretical and Methodological Background | 25 |
| 1.1 Autobiography as a Literary Discourse - Problems of Definition..... | 27 |
| 1.1.1 Autobiography, Documentary, Testimony, Memoirs... .. | 30 |
| 1.1.2 Autobiography in Contemporary Russia - The Search for a Cogent Reality?..... | 34 |
| 1.1.3 Reading Life Narratives | 42 |
| 1.2 Gender and Subjectivity in Literary Texts..... | 45 |
| 1.2.1 Reading Female Subjectivity and Agency | 46 |
| 1.2.2 Analytic Tools of Feminist Narratology | 53 |
| 2 Contextualising the Autobiographical Texts..... | 61 |
| 2.1 Female Subjectivity in the Russian Literary Context..... | 61 |
| 2.2 Russian Women's Autobiographical Writing - Between Life and Literature | 72 |
| 2.2.1 Overview of the 19 th Century | 73 |
| 2.2.2 Overview of the 20 th Century | 77 |
| 2.3 Reading the Texts: "Autobiography Is Not Literature" | 81 |
| 2.3.1 The Emerging Self..... | 82 |
| 2.3.2 "Mothers and Daughters" | 90 |
| 2.3.3 Writing Subjectivity | 93 |
| 3 On the Other Side of Reason: Tamara Petkevič's Gulag Memoirs | 99 |
| 3.1 Narrative Features of Gulag Literature..... | 101 |
| 3.2 The Story of "the Untimely Child" | 105 |
| 3.2.1 Ideas Crystallised | 111 |
| 3.2.2 "Unworldly Silence". The Story of Survival | 114 |
| 3.3 The Myth of Tatjana vs. Tamara's "Subjective Reality" | 118 |
| 4 The Path of a Ballerina. The Story of "I, Maija Pliseckaja..." | 121 |
| 4.1 "What was I like?" - The Making of Maija | 123 |
| 4.2 Constructing the (Past) Self | 126 |
| 4.2.1 Narrating Through Irony | 126 |
| 4.2.2 Modelling the Image | 129 |
| 4.3 Waiting for the Big Moment?..... | 135 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| 5 Elena Bonner's Memoirs of Girlhood: <i>Mothers and Daughters</i> | 139 |
| 5.1 Narrating As Reminiscence | 140 |
| 5.2 Constructing Intimacy..... | 146 |
| 5.2.1 "Cemetery Berries" and "Princess Džavaha"..... | 147 |
| 5.2.2 The End of Childhood | 150 |
| 5.3 Through the Eyes of the Daughter..... | 153 |
| 6 Èmma Gerštejn's Literary Memoirs..... | 161 |
| 6.1 A Subtle Tactic of Narrating..... | 162 |
| 6.2 Subjectivity | 170 |
| 6.2.1 Veiled | 172 |
| 6.2.2 Two-fold..... | 174 |
| 6.3 Narrating the Self in the Shadow..... | 177 |
| 7 Arbatova's Feminist Autobiography - Between Fact and Fiction | 183 |
| 7.1 A Feminist Confession..... | 187 |
| 7.1.1 Identifying Practices of Writing..... | 187 |
| 7.1.2 Feminist's Lessons: Voicing the Violent and Discovering the Sensual | 189 |
| 7.2 Making and Breaking Models..... | 193 |
| 7.2.1 Searching for a "Common Cause" | 193 |
| 7.2.2 The "Beloved Self" | 196 |
| 7.3 Through the Eyes of the Daughter II..... | 200 |
| 8 Preliminary Conclusions: Constructing "The Self" | 209 |
| 8.1 The Quest for the "Self" | 211 |
| 8.2 The Others..... | 212 |
| 9 Transcending Boundaries? The Autobiographical, the Sexual and the Body | 223 |
| 9.1 Bittersweet Experience | 224 |
| 9.2 "Memory Work" | 229 |
| 9.3 The Power of Love..... | 232 |
| 9.4 Carmen's Rebellion | 240 |
| Conclusions. Autobiography is Literature | 245 |
| References | 251 |

Introduction

This study focuses on five Russian women's autobiographical texts of the 1990s from a literary and gender point of view. As a research task formulated in one short sentence, it nevertheless touches upon several areas of problems, which my purpose is to elaborate in this study. First, to introduce the character of the five texts I am dealing with I quote some extracts from them:

(i) Я вспоминаю как все это было. Я хочу писать правду. - Но Вы не можете писать лишь свою собственную правду. Была еще и правда страны...

I recollect everything the way it really happened. I want to write the truth. - But you can't just write your own truth. There was also the truth of the country...

(ii) Я не могла принять эту систему строго подобранных умолчаний. (...) Настало время, когда все эти темные места можно и нужно высветить.

I could not accept this system of strictly selected silences. (...) The time has come when these blank spots can and should be illuminated.

(iii) И они прожили ночь массового насилия, общую парашу для мужчин и женщин, крики ненависти, издевательский хохот. К каким своим историческим воспоминаниям они присовокупили эти?

And they lived through the night of mass rape, the common loo for men and women, savage cries, sarcastic laughter. In which historical memoirs of theirs could they discuss these?

(iv) Если меня спросят: "Это было?" — Я отвечу — "Нет". "Это правда?" — "Конечно."

If you ask me, "Did this happen?" I will reply, "No". If you ask me, "Is this true?" I will say, "Of course."

(v) ...[Н]игде в мире нет такого количества подложных дат, фальшивых документов, семейных тайн и фиктивных историй, как в России. (...) Насколько правдива эта книга? Не знаю. Макс Фриш говорил: "С человеком что-то случается, а потом он придумывает про это историю".

...[N]owhere are there so many false dates, fake documents, family secrets and fictitious stories as in Russia. (...) How truthful is this book? I don't know. Max Frisch once said: "When something happens to a person, he invents a story about it".

These quotations¹ exemplify the specific literary features of the texts. It has been as fascinating as it has been puzzling to discuss and interpret texts written in order “to illuminate blank spots” of the Soviet past, “to tell the truth” about the past, or “to create a story about one’s own life”. It has been fascinating to read *how* the authors write about their lives, and the Soviet past, and it has been challenging to try and interpret according to which models, conventions, and structures the texts - truths and lives - have been created. I use the word “created” because I consider these texts fictional in the sense that every autobiography is a fiction, a construct. However, while reading these texts, written by people most of whom are still alive, written about their own lives, I came across the ethical aspect of reading autobiographical writing. It does matter, if the text purports to describe allegedly real events and experiences, especially when they are disturbing, traumatic and tragic.

Although the texts I am investigating have been published in the *post*-Soviet era, their literary features and themes to a certain extent relate to the Soviet period and Soviet discourse. In each text the past, the Soviet past, stands for a period which, according to the writers, has been represented “untruthfully” in earlier accounts of that past. In their own texts they now reveal and aim to tell their own truth about the time. How do these texts relate themselves to the changes in late 20th century Russia? How can we read the texts as autobiographical texts written by women? These questions bring me to the fundamental question of my study: what and how do these texts tell about the representation of women’s life and experience through autobiographical discourse in late twentieth-century Russia?

A central term underlying my research is *gender*, which I understand to signify a network of social, cultural and symbolic meanings attached to human beings, biological women and men, according to which they are situated and situate themselves as women and men in society, and which constitutes a hierarchical system of value.² A frequently used term in this study which is closely connected with gender is *experience*. I understand that our subjective, lived experience of social reality is inextricably linked to signification processes in which we participate as subjects, and constitute our subjectivity in interaction with the system of social, cultural and symbolic meanings. I will use these terms pragmatically as analytic tools rather than make comments on theoretical discussions around them among feminist scholars.

In this study I will apply the term *autobiographical texts*. It has been asked, why do I use the form “autobiographical” and not “autobiography”? In

¹ The quotations stem from (i) Pliseckaja (1996/1994), (ii) Gerštejn (1998), (iii) Petkevič (1993), (iv) Bonnèr (1994/1991; and the English edition 1992) and (v) Arbatova (2002). All translations from the original Russian are mine, except for Bonnèr’s text in which I use the English edition (1992).

² My understanding of gender has been influenced by the writings of de Lauretis (1984, 1987) and Braidotti (1994).

view of the research literature discussed in Chapter 1, it can be noted that the concept of autobiography is problematic, not least when applied to different national literary contexts. In this sense autobiographical is less controversial and offers more space for negotiation than autobiography. “Autobiographical” in no way exhausts all the aspects these texts might have: they are documentary, non-fictional, memoir texts etc. On the other hand, my choice of this particular term over, for instance, “memoirs” is connected with feminist theory and the focus on the significance of the autobiographical in women’s texts. Thus the choice of the attribute *autobiographical* arises from my research task and from the mode of reading the texts as the authors’ self-produced accounts on their lives, thus stressing their position as subjects. I will discuss autobiography as a literary discourse and genre in more detail, but it should be noted, that this study does not aim to produce a new understanding of the vast field of discussion and research dealing with them.

The phenomenon of *remembering* the Soviet time in the previous decade has produced a vast number of autobiographies and memoirs in Russia. The five texts I am dealing with are part of this popular branch of literature. The authors are relatively well-known figures in Russia, some of them even abroad. For some of them being well-known has provided them with a specific public status as a memoirist. Approaching the texts as *women’s autobiographical* texts, however, makes them part of a rather marginal research field within the *mainstream* of Russian literary studies, both as autobiographical and as women’s texts. In Russia autobiography has not traditionally been considered an esteemed object of literary studies,³ and although research on Russian women’s writing has already produced important knowledge of Russian cultural history both in Russia and in the West, the significance of gender in literary production has not gained much ground in Russian literary studies outside the field of gender and feminist studies themselves.

The sample of texts I have chosen to analyse here represents the lives of well-known Russian women, who write about the past as a time “in the whirlwind the Soviet system”. Reading them from a gender point of view also evokes another story. My thesis is, that the autobiographical texts written by M. Arbatova, E. Bonnèr, E. Gerštejn, T. Petkevič and M. Pliseckaja, represent a specific process of remembering through corporeal experiences of repression, violence, sexuality. This aspect brings them close to what feminist theory has put forward in the investigation of female subjectivity: they construct narratives of women’s sexuality, agency and identity.

³ See Savkina (2001, 10).

Russian Women's Autobiographies as an Object of Research

My interest in women's autobiographical texts of the 1990s was stimulated by the transformation of politics, especially in the field of culture during *perestroika* (1985-1991) and the emergence of female authors as a collective and quite specific phenomenon of that time.⁴ Of course, recent research on women's cultural history has had a major impact on my study as also have feminist literary studies in the West. The importance of autobiographical writing as a means to explore the ways in which female subjectivity is constructed was evinced in Western feminist literary studies, especially in the 1980s. The term "autobiographical" was connected with the feminist agenda of making the personal count as political, and with the importance of taking women's experiences into account when producing knowledge about their lives and selves (see, for instance, Cosslet, Lury & Summerfield 2000, 2).

Russian women's autobiographies and memoirs have traditionally been considered as important *subsidiary* material for exploring or constituting historical times, events or figures. As literary texts in their own right Russian women's autobiographical texts have still been investigated relatively little, although they have begun increasingly to interest feminist literary scholars, historians and sociologists. Scholars have pointed out the importance of reading these texts as part of women's cultural history and as texts on female subjectivity:

It seems that the autobiographical genre has offered Russian women a place and a mode of becoming self-aware, expressing their views and searching for their own way of representing their lives and experiences. Russian women's autobiographical texts offer rich and diverse material for research - yet they have not been previously studied.⁵

The concern this statement expresses in the last sentence is beginning to be rectified, although much autobiographical material produced by Russian women still remains largely unexplored.⁶

It was pointed out by Barbara Heldt in her ground-breaking book *Terrible Perfection* (1987) that autobiography as a literary genre has suited Russian women writers well, because it is indefinable enough to give space for more free form of expression. As a so-called boundary genre it offered a relatively open mode for the representation of female experience, which has

⁴ See, for instance, Rovenskaja (2000); Gabriéljan (1996).

⁵ Research plan of the multidisciplinary project "Models of Self: Russian Women's Autobiographical Texts 1800-2000" funded by the Academy of Finland (1998-2000). The project produced a significant number of individual articles, a few monographs and an anthology of articles (*Models of Self*) on Russian women's autobiographical texts.

⁶ It can be said that this applies to Russian autobiographical writing in general. I will touch upon this in subsequent chapters.

often been considered marginal or exceptional in the literary canon. However, due to the literary status of autobiography as a boundary genre, these texts have often also remained outside literary studies.⁷ In a way this genre reproduced the marginality of women's experience in literature and culture.⁸

In this study it is not my aim to prove whether or not autobiography is an especially feminine discourse. I deem it meaningful to think of it as a historically and culturally specific literary mode for representing life stories. What this study seeks to interpret is the ways in which contemporary Russian women have used the autobiographical genre and how they have represented their lives in this discourse.⁹

Investigating women's texts in order to analyse representations of female experience can lead to circular thinking, where gender becomes equated with woman. However, this kind of approach does not mean that these texts have been created, or exist, in a void. Therefore, we should consider how and why the studies of women's literature and feminist studies, have emerged in the first place. As Mary Eagleton writes:

British and American feminist critics in the 1970s were preoccupied with the idea that women writers had been silenced, by and large excluded from literary history. ...[T]he key interest... [was] to rediscover the lost work of women writers, while providing a context that would be supportive of contemporary women writers, and ... to manifest "what it is to be female", to declare the experience and perceptions that have been unheard. Aware that critical attention concentrated mostly on male writers, these critics demanded a status and recognition for women authors. But the aim was not simply to fit women into the male-dominated tradition; they also wanted to write the history of a tradition *among* women themselves (Eagleton 1996, 1).

Thus, it is not simply literature produced by women that is being investigated, but also the influence of *the prevailing values* attached to women's writing in society. As Eagleton argues, literature produced by women has been ignored or excluded from literary history and female experience and perception were left in the shadow of a male-dominated tradition. The aim of the feminist

⁷ As Puškareva (2000, 65) and Savkina (2001, 10) note, autobiography, especially in the 18th - 19th centuries, was not considered a *literary* genre in Russia, cf. Puškareva: "[А]втобиографии же были 'не совсем литературой' и за счет этого могли создавать для их авторов своеобразную психологическую нишу./ Autobiographies were not 'real literature' and due to this they could offer for their authors a specific psychological sphere".

⁸ For instance, Irina Savkina notes that in the 19th century it was suggested that female creativity could be channelled into the genres of diary, memoirs and letters (Savkina 2001, 15).

⁹ I use the term *genre* to refer to conventions of autobiographical writing, that is, the historical literary context in which this genre has formed (in Russia), and the term *discourse* to refer to a specific way to represent social reality (these definitions can be found in Lehtonen 1998, 32 -, 183).

critics is to specifically orientate attention to female perception in this hierarchical system.

In the Russian context the question of gender in literary history forms a similar kind of research problem as in the Western context, to which the quotation above refers.¹⁰ History of women's writing has started to be investigated more widely and thoroughly in the last decades, and the need to assess female tradition in literature has been proclaimed by researchers as well as writers. In Russia the first anthologies by Russian women writers were published in the turn of the 1980s-90s. As the Russian literary scholar T. Rovenskaja points out in her investigation of contemporary women's prose, historical consciousness about a female perception and tradition in literature is rare among Russians:

Проблема идентификации женской прозы 80-90-х годов и женщины-писательницы в качестве говорящего субъекта становится основной характеристикой данного литературного феномена и, одновременно, ключом к пониманию его сути. Почему эта проблема так важна в разговоре о женской прозе? Именно на уровне идентификации проявляется вся сложность и противоречивость настоящего феномена. Воспитанные в условиях пренебрежения к миру фемининных ценностей, явлениям и понятиям фемининного ряда, включая ассоциативные языковые конструкторы, женщины-писательницы, однако, предпринимают попытку идентифицировать себя с этим миром, открыть его в себе. (Rovenskaja 2000)¹¹

In the material I am interested in, the question of identifying with the author's own female perception and historical experience of the world becomes one of the main common aspects I found in the texts. The representation of female experience¹² is woven into the textual fabric, which conforms to prevailing generic conventions of autobiographical writing, like writing for the good of a common cause, writing the truth about the past etc., but also brings out

¹⁰ In a similar vein, research on Russian women's literature has shown how women authors have been marginalized in literary research and canons, and questioned the premises of such aesthetic and historical norms that contribute to this marginalization. See, for instance, Barker & Gheith (2002); Kelly (1994), Ledkovsky, Rosenthal & Zirin (1994); Marsh (1996); Rosenholm (1999), Parnell (1996); Rosenholm & Göpfert (2002); Savkina (1998, 2001); to name just a few.

¹¹ "The problem of identification of women's prose of the [19]80s-90s and the woman writer as a speaking subject becomes a constitutive characteristic of this literary phenomenon and, simultaneously, a key to understanding its essence. Why is this problem so important in the discussion of women's prose? Exactly on the level of identification emerges the whole difficulty and contradiction of this phenomenon. Brought up in the circumstances of contempt towards the world of feminine values, phenomena and notions, including associative linguistic constructions, women writers, however, strive to identify themselves with this world, open it for themselves."

¹² On theorizing on of female experience see Chapter 1.

the author's interaction with these conventions in the discourse. It is important to situate these texts in the tradition of female autobiographical discourse in Russia because of the long history of ignoring the influence of this tradition. It is equally important to adopt methods of feminist theory in order to interpret the texts from the viewpoint of female subjectivity, because the texts are open and offer interesting material for such a methodological approach.

The Literary Material

General Aspects

The study focuses primarily on the following texts: Elena Bonner's *Дочки - матери* (1994/1991) (transl. in English *Mothers and Daughters*, 1992), Tamara Petkevič's *Жизнь - сапожок непарный* (1993, *Life is an Odd Boot*), Maija Pliseckaja's *Я, Майя Плисецкая...* (1996/1994, I, Maija Pliseckaja)¹³, Emma Gerštejn's *Мемуары* (1998, *Memoirs*) and Marija Arbatova's *Мне 40 лет* (1999, *I'm Forty*). Why did I choose these five texts as primary research material, and not, for instance, women *writers'* autobiographical texts¹⁴, or texts written by so-called ordinary women, or, by émigre writers¹⁵? By choosing these particular texts I do not suggest that they are especially *autobiographical* in some "pure" sense. Nor do I suggest that these are "the best" autobiographical texts in my opinion. Initially, I wanted to do research on texts which included the so-called autobiographical pact, thus not extending the research to fiction, which also may be interpreted as autobiography, be based on autobiographical material or imitate autobiographical literary devices. I aimed to concentrate on a specific field of autobiographical writing: retrospective writing on "the self and the time", that is, autobiographies and memoirs, "non-fictional" texts, which I sought to interpret from a literary point of view.

After reading various autobiographical and memoir texts written by women and published during the 1990s (especially in literary journals) and noticing that there still remained a large amount of texts to be read, I also decided to concentrate on qualitative rather than quantitative aspects in my research. The above-mentioned texts were especially inspiring from my point of view, because they were different enough from each other and so represented the

¹³ Also translated in English, *I, Maya Plisetskaya*, but in this study no references are made to it.

¹⁴ Cf. Natal'ja Baranskaja: *Странствие бездомных* (The Wandering of the Homeless). Жизнеописание. Семейный архив. Старые альбомы. Письма разных лет. Документы. Воспоминания моих родителей, их друзей. Мои собственные воспоминания. М., 1999. Nina Katerli has published documentary texts on her childhood and her mother (1997, 1998); see also her recent documentary novel "Сквозь сумрак бытия", *Звезда* 12/2002; Nina Gorlanova's prose texts have an autobiographical timbre in them.

¹⁵ Nina Berberova, *Курсив мой/ The Italics Are Mine*; see Olga Demidova's research on Russian émigre women's autobiographies and memoirs: Demidova (2000) and (1998).

diversity and variety offered by this particular mode of writing¹⁶, but they also shared important similarities which offered a common ground for interpretation and contrasting between them. In the following I will explicate some of the similarities and differences between the texts.

The authors of the texts thus range from ballet dancers to literary historians, which may seem a wide range. A look at the thematic structures of the texts shows that they differ from each other in this aspect as well: one text is a Gulag testimony, another presents literary memoirs and so on. The choice of texts which differ from each other in content and structure was intentional. My interest in women's autobiographical texts stems from the various functions, forms and possibilities this genre has offered and continues to offer writers. It is not my purpose to claim that these texts represent certain "prototypes" of autobiographical writing, as my sample is not representative enough to suggest such a hypothesis. However, by choosing texts that differ from each other in structure and content the various possibilities this genre can offer have been taken into account - if not all, but some of them.

The texts have important similarities as well. An important feature that links these texts with each other is the status of their authors: 1) They are well-known women. Pliseckaja is an international star, former artist of the Bolshoi Theatre, Bonnèr is a famous dissident and human rights activist, Gerštejn was an esteemed literary scholar, Arbatova is a feminist writer and TV-celebrity, Petkevič is a St. Petersburg actress and former labour camp prisoner. In this sense they have a familiar social status of a memoirist, a person who has experienced or accomplished something extraordinary, which gives them a good reason to write about their lives.¹⁷ Although this feature to some extent structures the life-stories, it does not prevent the authors from addressing issues which are perhaps, so to say, everyday, "ordinary". Thus, they offer interesting material from the viewpoint of the representation of public and private spheres of life in women's autobiographical texts. In choosing a sample of texts written by fairly

¹⁶ Cf. Harris (1990, 3; et passim) notes, for instance, that "[d]iversity of form has characterized autobiographical discourse since the beginning of the Western literary narrative tradition. One of the consequences of this diversity has been the complexity and confusion plaguing attempts to describe it."

¹⁷ Thus this study does not include such contemporary texts which deconstruct the traditional status of a memoirist. For instance, in the contemporary women writers' anthologies *Новые амазонки* (The New Amazons, 1991) and *Русская душа* (The Russian soul, 1995), the authors purposefully deny any "particularity" or "remarkability" of their biographies, and instead stress their "typicality". The literary journal *Moskva* published a text which starts by asserting the importance of ordinary people's memoirs: "Мемуары обычно пишут люди известные и значительные. (...) Перед тобой же, дорогой читатель, лежит книга, где описывается жизнь людей мало кому известных, ничем особенно не примечательных./ Memoirs are usually written by persons who are famous and significant. (...) In front of you, my dear reader is a book which describes the life of people who are not famous, not remarkable in any particular way." (Ševjakova 2000, 3).

well-known women I am interested in contemplating how through these texts they construct their lives as women in the public eye. 2) All the above-mentioned writers are educated, intellectual women who have been brought up in an urban environment (Moscow or Leningrad). 3) They belong to the Soviet generations: they have lived most of their lives in the Soviet Union and their socialization has taken place during the Soviet period, although in different times. 4) In the texts they construct their lives on an experience of the Soviet society which can be called marginalized: although the most famous of them, Maija Pliseckaja, became a famous prima ballerina during the Soviet period, her text constructs a picture of her past based on a contradiction between her public career and the story of her personal life. The other authors also purport to tell in their texts stories which they deem of importance from the point of view of an individual's history and memory, experiences which have not been dealt with properly if at all in the public discourse. To put it more clearly, these authors' attitude to and perception of the Soviet era and its official politics are critical in these texts. This does not mean that all autobiographical texts in this period were such, on the contrary. However, it is a phenomenon of the 1990s that critical views about the Soviet Union became commonplace in Russian public discourse.

Three of the authors, Bonnèr (1923), Petkevič (1920) and Pliseckaja (1925), belong to the same generation born in the 1920s, whose families, especially their parents, were afflicted by the purges of the 1930s. The year 1937 is a crucial year in each of their biographies and texts. All of the writers experienced the loss of at least one of their parents in childhood or adolescence, which they describe in their texts. Gerštejn (1903-2002) belongs to the generation born before the 1917 revolution. The main characters of her text - the modernist poets Ahmatova and Mandel'stam - were affected by the political upheaval in the 1930s-40s, the time on which many of the literary historical materials and personal accounts in Gerštejn's memoirs concentrate. Arbatova, as the author points out in her text, belongs to the first generations born after Stalin's death (1957). Thus, her historical experience of Soviet society formed in circumstances rather different from the others'. As we shall see in the analyses, her text comments and criticizes the legacy of the Soviet system more explicitly than the other texts. These generational differences are here seen as a strength, which makes it possible to compare the differences across generations and the similarities through generations.

The time of the publication of the texts (the 1990s) is one of the criteria for choosing them. It is connected with the easing of official censorship, when the publication of many previously banned texts took place. They have been written in different times, and to a certain extent, some of them continue from where the thaw period in the 1960s ended. I take the time of their publication as a sign that these texts are connected with a similar kind of process concerning politics of remembering, culture and literature.

As to the genre of the texts, I am inclined to call them by the term *autobiographical texts*. In the Russian context, as has been pointed out by previous research, they would perhaps rather be called reminiscences (*воспоминания*) or memoirs (*мемуары*) (save, perhaps, for Arbatova's text). I characterize them by the term autobiographical because each of them directly describes the past life and experiences of the first person narrator. The typical generic feature of memoirs, the emphasis on the description of other people and the surrounding world, is most prominent in Gerštejn's work, but the other texts also share this feature of memoir literature. As a difference between Gerštejn's and the other texts, the latter do concentrate on the life of the author-narrator-protagonist, the first person narrator, whereas the former focuses primarily on the lives of other characters. Insofar as the writing of these lives is based, as the narrator herself also points out, on her own observations and life near the main characters, and describes her development and experiences as well (as will be shown in more detail later) the text can be called autobiographical.¹⁸ A further analysis of its narrative tactic and its content gives support to this notion.

It has been suggested that autobiography is a genre where the relationship to others forms a necessary constituent of its composure (see Miller 1996). On the other hand, a memoirist, when writing about others, necessarily writes about him/herself as well. The attribute form *autobiographical* (and not autobiography or memoirs) moves the definition concerning the texts' generic features towards looser terms, but it also points to the fact that the authors write retrospectively about their own past, in their own names. In this study, the 'autobiographical' bears an important reference to feminist theory, where this term has become a principal constituent in the study of female subjectivity.¹⁹

About the Authors and the Texts

Marija Ivanovna Arbatova's characterization as a professional writer in *The Dictionary of Russian Women Writers* of 1994, states that she is dramatist, film scriptwriter, poet and publicist. In the course of the 1990s she also became a TV-celebrity and politician. She is described as "scion of intellectual family", who lived through the hippy period of the 1970s, studied first philosophy at university and then enrolled in the Gorky Institute. During her student years she got married, gave birth to and raised twin sons. Many of her works in the early 1980s were not published until *glasnost*' in the late 1980s. Melissa T. Smith (1994) characterises Arbatova as a liberal feminist in a recognisable Western sense, who is concerned with issues of physical exploitation of women, equal rights in the domestic and social spheres, and ecology. Arbatova founded a club

¹⁸ It received the small Booker Prize for the best autobiographical work in 1998.

¹⁹ Cf. Cosslet, Lury & Summerfield (2000, 2); and Bossinade (2000, 147): "Wie kaum ein anderer Zweig der Literaturwissenschaft ist die Autobiographik ... zu einem Gebiet geschlechtshistorischer Erkundungen geworden".

for intellectual women called “Клуб женщин, вмешивающихся в политику/Club for women who meddle with politics”, and she stood as a candidate for the election to the Duma, among other things.²⁰

Her autobiographical novel *Мне 40 лет* (I'm Forty) was first published in 1999. The second edition of this autobiographical text appeared in 2002, with modifications in the structure, additions to the content, and with a new title *Прощание с XX веком I-II* (Farewell to the 20th Century I-II).²¹ My discussion here will be based on the first edition.²²

Arbatova's autobiographical text in many ways brings out tensions between the public and the private for a woman writer, which will be contemplated in this book. My analysis of the text will strive to look at it from the point of view of its production in a context of a certain female public sphere, and not as a product attached to the author's persona.²³

The story of the book follows the chronological line of the narrator-protagonist's 40 years of life, however, some flashbacks in the form of her parents' and grandparents' stories occur during the narrative.²⁴ The book covers her childhood in Murom, a provincial town where her father worked as a teacher of philosophy, her falling ill with poliomyelitis as a one year old child, the treatment of this illness and its consequences in Soviet children's hospitals during her childhood and adolescence.

The text also describes the protagonist's road to literature. According to Arbatova, a woman writer was most vulnerable in this system because of sexual harassment, both physical and psychological. She describes her situation in the early 1980s when she was unable to publish her texts. The 1990s bring big changes into her life. She divorces her first husband, becomes involved in feminist activities and politics, and meets her second husband. In the end the narrator presents an alternative course of events in her life, starting from the fates of her grandparents - but as an end result it turns out her life has brought her to a point at which she can look back at her life, accept it, and start another.

²⁰ For further biographical and bibliographical data see Smith (1994); and Arbatova's website <www.arbatova.ru>.

²¹ Regarding why she wrote another version of her autobiography so soon, the author answers: “...СМИ начинали путать меня - писательницу со мной - общественной деятельницей. Я не считаю, что человек, решившийся идти в политику, не должен писать искренние книжки о себе. Увы, время считает иначе и лишает меня возможности писать о жизни от первого лица./ ...The Mass media began to confuse me - the writer, with myself - the politician. I don't think that people, who have decided to go into politics shouldn't write frank books about themselves. Alas, the time thinks otherwise and deprives me of the chance to write about my life in the first person.” (Arbatova 2002, 7)

²² References to the second edition will occasionally be made.

²³ See Lukjanova (1999), who considers the book *Мне 40 лет*, I'm Forty, the author's self-promotion.

²⁴ This is modified in the second edition, where the story begins from the ancestors and proceeds from there in chronological order.

Elena Georgievna Bonner's parents were dedicated party workers: the father, Gevorg Alihanov, was a prominent Armenian communist and a secretary of the Comintern, and her mother, Ruth Bonner was "dedicated to bringing culture to the masses". Bonner's given name was Ljusja, as she refers to herself in her text. In May 1937 her life as Ljusja, however, ended because of her father's arrest. A few months later the mother also was arrested and sentenced to hard labour as the wife of a traitor. Bonner started an autonomous life, working and studying in Leningrad. She volunteered as a nurse in the war and in 1945 was discharged as a disabled veteran. However, she could study in a medical institute and became a paediatrician. She also worked as a writer and editor. She married her fellow-student, and gave birth to a daughter and a son in the 1950s. In the 1970s Bonner met her second husband, Andrej Saharov, in connection with their common work for human rights. In 1980 Saharov was exiled to Gorky and in 1984 Bonner followed him. In 1986 their exile ended and they returned to Moscow. She has described the years spent in Gorky in a book *Постскриптим/ Alone Together* (1987).²⁵ After Saharov's death in 1989 she continued her work for human rights in Russia. In 1993 she lent her support for Boris Eltsin, but withdrew it in 1995 in protest against the war in Chechnya. In recent years she has given statements and speeches against Putin's regime for the same reason.²⁶

The book *Дочки - матери/ Mothers and Daughters* is a memoir of childhood in Stalin's Russia. As the preface of the book tells us, it was started after the author's mother died in 1987. The writing of the text begins from a letter written to the authors' children about her family history, but as it occurs, the writing process continues and expands into a manuscript for a book. The text describes Bonner's childhood starting from her first memory and continuing to dwell on recollections of her early childhood in her parents' house in Leningrad where the central figure was her mother's mother, Grandmother Tat'jana Bonner, called Batanja. As put by Elena Gessen in her review of the book, the rifts in the philosophy of life between Bonner's parents and grandmother puts the protagonist in the chiasma of two opposite approaches: the party ideology of her mother, "a woman party worker, anti-bourgeoisie, maximalist" and grandmother's traditional, solid way of life, with a vivid sense of duty, responsibility, and goodness (Gessen 1994, 201).

The narrative goes towards the end with the late 1930s describing the protagonist's schooldays, participating in the literary circle and writing for a

²⁵ I have not included this text in my investigation although it offers interesting insight into the theory of life writing. If compared with the text I'm interested in, *Postskriptum* deals with Bonner's day-to-day life with his husband, whereas *Dočki - materi* concentrates more on her family history and childhood.

²⁶ See <www.brandeis.edu/departments/sakharov/h_description.html#Bonner.bio>; See also a part of her speech given at the Hannah Arendt awards in Germany, in English entitled "Living a big lie in Putin's Russia" to be found in the website: <www.eng.yabloko.ru/Publ/2001/Papers/sunday-times-180201.html>.

school journal. The story of childhood ends with the description of the day when her father was arrested. The epilogue refers to the end of the writing process in 1989, and it outlines the subsequent fate of her family members, life without parents and then later the life with her mother after her release from the Gulag. The book ends with words about the feeling of guilt passed on from generation to generation, and the exclamation: “Mothers and daughters!”

Emma Grigor’evna Gerštejn, a literary critic, editor and memoirist was a graduate of Moscow State University’s Department of Social Sciences (1924). In 1936 she embarked upon her research on Mihail Lermontov, under the tutelage of Boris Ėihenbaum, but without any institutional affiliation. She wrote numerous articles on Lermontov’s biography, which were the basis of her best known work in this area *Судьба Лермонтова* (Lermontov’s Fate, 1964). Gerštejn became a member of the Writers’ Union in 1965. She has since written memoirs of Osip and Nadežda Mandel’štam, whom she met in 1928 and Anna Ahmatova, whom she met in 1934. Her memoirs of the Mandel’štams were prompted by N. Mandel’štam’s earlier memoirs of her husband and attempted to set the record straight, but they also offered new material on O. Mandel’štam’s exile (*Новое о Мандельштаме*, *New Materials on Mandel’štam*, 1986). Gerštejn has also prepared the posthumous publication of Ahmatova’s unpublished prose works.²⁷

Gerštejn’s book *Мемуары/ Memoirs* (1998) contains the previous memoirs *Новое о Мандельштаме* (*New Materials...*), which form the first part of text, represented by two chapters “Вблизи поэта/ Near the Poet” and “Мандельштам в Воронеже (Mandel’štam in Voronež)”. The first chapter describes and accounts for Gerštejn’s meeting with the Mandel’štams in a sanatorium, the second presents information on the Mandel’štams’ exile based on S.B.Rudakov’s letters to his wife. The second part of the book contains six chapters: “Лишняя любовь (Superfluous Love)”²⁸, which is a retrospective narrative of the author’s love affair with Anna Ahmatova’s son, “Anna Ahmatova and Lev Gumilev”, which represents Lev Gumilev’s letters to the author written in the mid-50s, “Перечень обид (Flow of Insults)”, which is again a retrospective narrative of Gerštejn’s life in the 1920s-40s and on the Mandel’štams, “Nadežda Jakovlevna” is a semi-literary, semi-auto/biographical account of Osip Mandel’štam’s life and poetry in the 1930s, “Молодой Мандельштам сквозь разную оптику (The Young Mandel’štam Through a Different Perspective)” is a short account of the descriptions of the young poet in others’ texts and words, and “В сорок восьмом (In Forty-eight)”, a diary entry on one day, 29 April 1948. The third part consists of five shorter chapters, which relate to Gerštejn’s meetings and discussions with Ahmatova (e.g., “Книга жизни (Book of Life)”), or to others’ reminiscences of her (“Старые

²⁷ For biobibliographical data see Meyer’s article in *The Dictionary of Russian Women Writers* (1994).

²⁸ First published in 1993 in *Novyj mir*.

собеседницы - Old Companions”) and one chapter on Pasternak “Несколько встреч с Борисом Пастернаком (Meetings With Boris Pasternak)”.

Thus, the memoirs represent a wealth of literary material on different aspects of the poets’ lives and work. What interests me in this text is the representation of the narrator’s own self either through these others or in the shadow of the others, more specifically, I will focus on the chapters “Вблизи поэта (Near the Poet)”, “Лишняя любовь (Superfluous Love)”, “Перечень обид (Flow of Insults)” and “Nadežda Jakovlevna”. In contrast to the other texts, as already mentioned, Gerštejn’s book does not offer a coherent account on her own life, but presents fragments and recollections of the famous Russian poets’ lives and her own in connection with these. However, a review on the book states that it is not just “subsidiary material for the biographies of Ahmatova and Mandel’stam, but a very harmonious, lyrical, rather even a sentimental artistic work” and suggests it was for Gerštejn “that one novel which each person can write” in their lives (Zolotonosov 1998). However, the overall tone of the review gives reason to believe that Gerštejn’s life was sad and pitiful²⁹, and her book is remarkable in the sense that it makes the “great” to look like any other “minutiae” of an epoch.

In the course of the research I read Gerštejn’s text through the perspective of writing about one’s life through, or, rather, in the shadow of others. As feminist literary scholarship on (Russian and other) female autobiography has shown, this is an appropriate narrative approach for writing about a woman’s life, which has traditionally not been considered socially and historically important in itself. My aim, however, is to read the text from the point of view of representation of female experience.

Tamara Vladimirovna Petkevič was born in Petrograd in 1920. Her parents fought in the same Red Division during the Civil War. In the 1930s her father was a director of a peat works near Leningrad. In 1937 he was arrested. After this the whole family came under suspicion and finally Petkevič moved to Central Asia, Frunze to escape NKVD agents. There she married and started a study at the Medical Institute. However, surveillance continued there too and she was arrested and sentenced to seven years of hard labour in 1943. Her talent as an actress and the theatre director Aleksandr Gavronskij, who was also a prisoner, became her rescue in the Gulag. After her release Petkevič continued to work in the theatre.³⁰

Petkevič’s book *Жизнь - сапожок непарный*/Life Is an Odd Boot (1993) is a description of her life before and during the imprisonment. It describes her life from childhood to the arrest of her father, her own arrest and imprisonment in the Gulag. A fragment of the text was first published in the

²⁹ It says that the pervasive thesis of the text is Gerštejn’s love for a man (L.Gumilev) who did not need that love, and the essence of her own situation in life was her maladjustment for the role that was given to her (Zolotonosov 1998).

³⁰ Biographical notes from Galitsky (1999).

collection of women's Gulag memoirs *Доднесь тяготееет. Записки вашей современницы* (1989) also published in English.³¹ A play called "По ту сторону смысла (On the Other Side of Reason)", based on a fragment of Petkevič's memoirs was performed by a St. Petersburg student theatre in 2000.³² There are no indications in the texts as to when the memoirs were written, but in theory they may at least have been started in the 1960s when, due to the relative liberation of the political atmosphere, many ex-convicts felt their testimonies were needed. The regime then, however, was not ripe to face the accountability of the past and most memoirs remained unpublished, or were published abroad (Smith 1996, 2, 38).

The text starts by describing life in the 1920s in Petrograd. The father's arrest in 1937 is a turning point in the protagonist's life. She is expelled from the *Komsomol* and she and her family become targets of constant surveillance. The protagonist, then a young woman, strives to continue her life, find friends and work, but her reputation as the daughter of the people's enemy hampers her efforts. After receiving letters from her friend, Erik, who had moved to Frunze, and his declaration of love, she decides to move away and start a new life in 1941. During the war, she receives a letter informing her that her mother and one sister have died of hunger in Leningrad, that the other sister has survived and has been sent to an orphanage. In 1943 the protagonist is arrested and taken for interrogation. She is eventually sentenced to hard labour.

The text continues with descriptions of the sadistic treatment of the prisoners by their guards, of other women prisoners who came to be friends and foes, descriptions of nature, of transfer to another prison, scenes of violence, protesting against inhuman work-loads, etc. A turning point in the protagonist's life takes place when she performs at an evening for the others and finds out that she is talented, and she meets intelligent, creative people with whom to discuss. Documents about the protagonist's father's and her own rehabilitation are included in the book. The book ends with a reference to her subsequent life in theatre, which is "already another life".

Maija Mihailovna Pliseckaja was born in Moscow. Her father was a communist working in the mining industry and her mother was a film actress. The father was arrested in 1937 and the mother was sentenced to a prison camp for several years as the wife of the people's enemy. The daughter was taken care of by her aunt. Her early talent and the family traditions in ballet helped Pliseckaja on her way to ballet. She graduated from Moscow Choreography School in 1943, joined the ensemble of the Bolshoi Theatre the same year and was a member of it until 1990. Her first tour with the Bolshoi to USA and Canada took place in 1959. She became prima ballerina assoluta in 1960. During her career she has performed in the leading roles of classical ballets and

³¹ *Till My Tale is Told. Women's Memoirs of the Gulag* (1999).

³² A review on the play can be found in *Петербургский театральный журнал* 22/2000: <www.theatre.ru:8084/ptzh/2000/22/103.html>).

collaborated with famous choreographers. Her career still continues as a teacher of young dancers all over the world, e.g. in Finland. She is married to the composer Rodion Šchedrin. In 2000 she received Russia's highest civil honour, the medal for the service to the Russian state, second degree, from President Vladimir Putin.³³

Her memoirs *Я, Майя Плисецкая...* (publ. in English *I, Maya Plisetskaya...*, 2001) were first published in Russia in 1994. Since then they have been translated into French, German, Japanese, English and other languages.³⁴ The book has received much publicity, and especially in the West it has been read as a revealing account on Soviet reality and an artist's everyday life, written by a world famous ex-Soviet artist. In my discussion of the text I will concentrate on the aspect of how the life of a famous female artist is represented.

The text consists of Pliseckaja's life story from her first childhood memory to her performance on her fiftieth anniversary as a performing artist in 1993. The story of her being *невыездная*, unexportable until 1959, is, as the narrator herself comments, a faithful description of that time, and, together with the childhood experiences, it forms a main constituent of the life story. Pliseckaja mentions in the course of the narration that she relies on her own diaries of the time, which may explain the "day-to-day" account.

Towards the end Pliseckaja draws the conclusions of her life, and states that she would have gladly been born in a more fortunate country than the Soviet Union. As an artist with an exceptionally long and successful career, and with bitter life experience, she deliberately writes her book as a legacy for future generations. The end of the book, however, is not the end of her career - as the last sentence has it, she is still waiting for her *звездный час*, her big moment.

The Structure of the Study

In the discussion of the theoretical and methodological frame-work of the research in Chapter 1 the main purpose is to represent and discuss theories that highlight the specific qualities of these texts as literary constructs and to demonstrate what is at stake in the reading of the texts as autobiographical texts by Russian women. This discussion is not so much an attempt to define what an autobiographical text is, but to show what the problems and possibilities of these texts and their literary definitions are. Another important part of the first chapter is that the "autobiographical" refers to a specific approach to these texts from a feminist point of view of female subjectivity. This is why I make specific efforts to explain the meaning of female subjectivity, female experience and gender when reading these texts. Chapter 1 introduces the analytic tools that are used in reading the texts.

³³ Biographical data: Räsänen (2000); The International Maya Plisetskaya and Rodion Shchedrin Foundation, <www.shchedrin.de/index.htm>.

³⁴ They also appeared in Finnish in 2003.

The second chapter is dedicated to the literary context of female subjectivity in Russia. The aim of this chapter is to outline a network of meanings connected to female authorship in Russia in history, and to contextualise the texts in Russian culture. I will seek to establish connections to the objects of research and previous Russian women's autobiographical writing. This chapter gives an introduction to the texts, their motifs and to some other similar texts by women. Chapters 3 - 7 then present individual analyses of the texts narrative features. The order of the chapters is the following: in Chapters 3-5 I discuss texts by women of the 1920s' generation, starting with Petkevič's Gulag memoirs (Chapter 3) which vividly introduces the importance of the historical and moral context of this autobiographical discourse in Russia and the importance of recording individual, human experience in Russian culture. The discussion continues with Pliseckaja's text (Chapter 4), which also articulates the need to deal with repressed experiences but which are now represented from a different point of view: that of a famous ballerina, who recollects her difficult but successful career as a well-known public persona. The third text of the 1920s generation is Bonnér's (Chapter 5) which offers yet another contrast to the previous two with its perspective of a well-known dissident who recollects her family history, childhood and becoming a woman in Stalin's time. Chapter 6 contemplates Gerštejn's literary memoirs bringing in the aspect of age in memoir writing (she is the oldest of the authors), and representing a specific literary subgenre. Chapter 7 makes a contrast to the previous because it focuses on the text of the youngest autobiographer, Marija Arbatova. This text brings us back to Petkevič's with its reference to discourse of Gulag memoirs and with its metaphorical construction of the first person narrator's life as a teleological development: from imprisonment (suffering) to freedom (success). The aim of these chapters is to contrast the texts with each other, and this order of texts seems a good choice for this purpose. In Chapter 8 I make some preliminary conclusions about the literary analyses, and seek to integrate the theoretical frame with the analyses. This task continues in Chapter 9, which contemplates the texts more from a thematic point of view: the representation of female subjectivity and sexuality, which emerges as an important feature in the texts.

1 Genre and Gender: Theoretical and Methodological Background

This chapter focuses on two main aspects that interest me in the material I have chosen to analyse: the problem of autobiographical discourse as a literary, historical and national construct and the influence of feminist theory of gender and sexuality on doing literary, textual research. The aim is to critically and pragmatically reflect on problems of defining autobiography, memoirs and other non-fictional genres and to consider the differences between Western and Russian theories of the genre. I make a digression on the basic ideas of what feminist semiotics and narratology mean when reading women's texts, after which I introduce the analytic tools of my own approach to reading the texts as literary autobiographical texts.

The use of the term *autobiographical* refers to the methodological and theoretical premises that form the base of this study,¹ that is, theories and methods from the areas of feminist, literary and cultural studies. In the Introduction I already endeavoured to explain why I use the more elusive term "autobiographical" instead of "autobiography". This is further explained in the discussion of different approaches to defining "autobiography", where I lean mostly on Western theories about the "autobiographical pact", and discuss the applicability of the term "autobiography" to the Russian context.

The importance of autobiographies as research material in feminist studies was partly already discussed in the Introduction.² Feminist theory is also important from the point of view of Russian cultural studies.

Feminist studies on Russian literature and cultural history pay attention to the context of production and reception of literary texts, thus taking into account that literary texts are not produced in a void, independently of social reality, cultural conventions and values.³ This, however, does not mean that we return the textual meanings to "extra-textual" referents. As Kelly (1994, 7)

¹ It has been remarked that this term is more fashionable than and has absorbed the genre of memoir (Holmgren 2003, x). This might well be so, but I deem this term adequate from the viewpoint of my current task and apt in evoking subjectivity in the texts.

² As the editors of the anthology *Feminism and Autobiography* (2000, 2) state: "There has always been a strong feminist interest in the autobiographical, beginning with the attempt to connect the 'personal' with the 'political', and the concomitant emphasis on women's experience as a vital resource in the creation of women's knowledge. As awareness has shifted from women's experience as a given, to the complex construction of gendered subjectivities, the field of autobiography has become a central preoccupation and a testing-ground for feminism." However, autobiography has not been an unproblematic concept for feminists: see Kolkenbruck-Netz & Schuller (1982).

³ Such studies include, *Constructing Russian Culture in the Age of Revolution: 1881-1940* (1998) and *Russian Cultural Studies: An Introduction* (1998) ed. by Catriona Kelly and Stephen Shepherd; *Women and Russian Culture* (1998) ed. by Rosalind Marsh; *Russia, Women, Culture* (1996) ed. by Helena Goscilo and Beth Holmgren.

writes, texts “refract” experience, rather than reflect it. A further formulation that elucidates this approach to literary texts is offered by Kelly and Shepherd when they note that the term cultural studies⁴

... is used ... to denote an approach in which “culture” has its anthropological sense of the totality of relations obtaining in a given society, and textual expression is understood as part of an intricate network in which *symbolism* is as important as *materialism*. (Kelly & Shepherd 1998, 4, italics MR)

The texts are approached both as unique literary texts and as products of a culture, as cultural artefacts.⁵ Adele Barker points to the importance of considering Soviet Russian texts from a cultural point of view, because “... it enables ... to lift ... texts out of the purely literary domain into one in which they can be seen as cultural documents, *which speak to issues of how gender identity, the public and private personas, and cultural mythologies [are] constructed and played out...*” (Barker 1998, 54, italics MR). Another important feature of cultural studies approach is that texts are not classified according to certain aesthetic values - they are not put into order.⁶ Thus, the questions, what is literature or what it should be like are rather converted into: on what basis can we ask these questions? (Cf. Cornwell & Wigzell 1998, 49)

Although there are critical reservations about the applicability of (mostly) Western feminist theory (and Western theories in general) to Russian studies, it is perhaps needless to say how important they have been in perceiving women’s writing as a historical and cultural phenomenon, and in this sense they have provided important groundwork for studies on Russian women’s writing. Of course, one has to be aware of one’s theoretical assumptions and pay attention to the differences of the Russian context in relation to the Western one.⁷ On the other hand, it is good to keep in mind, that there is no “naïve” reading; one always has assumptions and theories of reading, conscious and not so conscious.

It has been emphasized in recent studies on Russian autobiographical literature that it is important to recognise the different historical development of the literary genre in Russia in comparison with the Western - a point which is

⁴ On the relations between Russian culturology and Western cultural studies, see Kelly, Pilkington, Shepherd and Volkov (1999, 12-17).

⁵ I seek to follow Kelly (1994, 7-8), who in her *A History of Russian Women’s Writing* deems it important “to give due attention to the textual fabric and to the specific context which has constructed it, externally and internally”.

⁶ In other words, literary texts are not contemplated for the sake of literature and the aim is not to define them as good or bad. Literature is seen as a way of parsing the world, an area belonging to human culture and way of life. See, for instance Grossberg, Nelson & Treichler (1992, 2).

⁷ For example, Adele Barker points out that feminist postmodernist theories are not necessarily applicable as such to certain Soviet women writers’ texts (See Barker 1998).

not difficult to agree with (cf. *Models of Self*, Savkina 2001, Holmgren 1994, Harris 1990). But, *how* is Russian autobiography different?

It has already been pointed out in several studies, that the term “autobiography” - as understood in the West - suits Russian culture poorly. Russian culture has not had the same emphasis on individuality as Western culture (*Models of Self*, Savkina 2001, cf. also Offord 1998).⁸ Indeed, during the research process I have become aware that the term autobiography can be problematic in a Russian context: it can be a tool for cultural colonialism, when the cultural and historical contexts are not adequately acknowledged. The problem is that there are still few studies on Russian autobiographical or memoir literature in general, and more studies on the literary aspects of these genres and on different types of texts are needed.⁹

In this study I approach the problem of definition - which is one of the more controversial problems in the study of autobiographical literature¹⁰ - from the point of view of the material I am working with. The term autobiographical texts, as was noted, refers more to the discursive elements of the texts than defines the genre of autobiography.

1.1 Autobiography as a Literary Discourse - Problems of Definition

Defining the autobiographical genre is deemed a difficult task because of its status as a boundary genre, which is located somewhere between literature and life or, fiction and reality.¹¹ The difficulty would then be how to differentiate

⁸ Some studies have proposed that the Soviet project also encouraged individuals to engage “in specifically Soviet modes of self-constitution”, see Hellbeck (2000, 71), and Oleg Kharkhordin’s study *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: a Study of Practices* (1999, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press).

⁹ Beth Holmgren (2003, ix-x) puts it eloquently: “[T]he memoir, with its generic slippage between art and document, subjective expression and dedicated record, often falls through the cracks separating the relatively recently developed academic fields of literary studies and historiography. We assign memoirs in our courses haphazardly, enjoy them enormously, yet rarely bother with their structural and stylistic analysis.”

¹⁰ See Harris (1990).

¹¹ See, for instance the anthology of articles edited by Olney (1980) in which differing notions on autobiography are expressed: cf. Mandel (1980, 49; 53), who writes that “autobiography is not a recollection of one’s life” but “an artifact, a construct wrought from words”; however, on the other hand, he continues that “the author’s intention is to convey the sense that ‘this happened to me’, and it is this intention that ... makes the result different from fiction”. Olney (1980, 241) in his turn states: “In the act of remembering the past in the present, the autobiographer imagines into existence another person, another world, and surely it is *not* the same, in any real sense, as that past world that does not, under any circumstances, nor however much we may wish it, now exist.” Renza (1980, 295) concludes that “...autobiography is neither fictive nor non-fictive, not even a mixture of the two. We might view it instead as a unique, self-defining mode of self-referential expression, one that allows,

fiction from reality. The questions raised in the collection of articles on Russian women's autobiographical writing *Models of Self* (2000) describe this difficulty in reading autobiographical texts:

If we differentiate non-fiction literature as a special type of writing, what do we mean with it? Are we talking about texts which *sincerely testify to a certain truth*? Or are we talking about texts which lay claims to be *accepted as truth*, as stories about *what really happened*? Or do we mean by non-fiction that the author strives purposefully, with the help of certain narrative strategies, to emphasise referentiality and authenticity of the text, thus creating quite distinct conditions for reading? (*Models of Self* 2000, 8)

These questions open some possible approaches to the problem of defining autobiography as a genre: as a problem of truth, author's intention or reading. My own approach to the texts has been more or less clear from the beginning: I read them first and foremost as *literary constructs*, not as accounts of truth as such. But the question is, of course more complicated than that. When discussing my theme in scientific conferences and seminars I have encountered either wondering questions of whether I "*really believe what Pliseckaja writes is true*" or warnings about dismissing the significance of traumatic events and reality a text purports to describe. The question whether events in an autobiographical text have really happened in reality is not the principle of my understanding of the texts considered here. I am especially interested in *how* these texts represent (or, refract) supposedly real life experiences. However, I have also had to realize that the relationship between a text and reality cannot be entirely avoided. The definition of autobiography as a literary genre stands (or falls) on the very assumption of a referentiality *of some kind* between the text and the reality it purports to tell about.¹² However, if a text claims to represent facts about something, this does not mean that these facts are not formed, narrated, produced in a certain manner: *someone* has moulded and represented them *somewhere*.

Although I think that every autobiography is fiction, the point that the texts *contend* they are based on real life events and the authors are writing about their own lives bears an important aspect from the point of view of *reading and*

then inhibits, its ostensible project of self-representation, of converting oneself into the present promised by language."

¹² One tricky example of this kind of "failure" and the significance of the "authenticity" of the author for readers was the case of Binjamin Wilkomirski alias Bruno Dösseker, a Swiss writer who wrote memoirs of his childhood during the Holocaust (Bruchstücke, aus einer Kindheit 1939-1948 (1995)). This book received several international prizes until it was discovered that the story and the author's experiences were not authentic, but fictive. However, those who had experienced the Holocaust also believed the story to be authentic and true. (More on this case: see Ganzfried 1998.) This case was brought to my attention at the VI ICCEES World Congress panel on Russian women's life stories on 31st July 2000 in Tampere.

interpreting the texts. I believe that the difference between writing autobiographical fiction and writing an autobiography with one's own name has influence on the narrative strategies used in writing, and on the reading of the texts.¹³ For example, in the first case, the reader is perhaps more inclined to interpret certain details in connection with the author's life (to search for possible referentiality), whereas in the latter case the reader may be more prone to observe what the author has concealed about his/her life (to search for possible failure in referentiality). One result of my study is the insight that in some cases the difference between autobiographical and fictional texts lies in the ethics of reading.

A common feature of the objects of my research is that they contain what can be called an autobiographical pact, as defined by Philippe Lejeune; the identity of the names of the author, narrator and protagonist, and the expression of the author's intention to tell the truth.¹⁴ However, as, for instance, so-called postmodernist texts have shown¹⁵, these features form a literary convention, which can be used to steer the reader's attention in a certain direction, they are not in themselves a sign of a text's "non-fictionality". They can be used to distract the reader and to undermine the concept of "telling the truth". Thus to say that the texts contain an autobiographical pact is not to say very much. As was already mentioned, this feature, however, influences the *reading* of the texts. It is noteworthy that Lejeune's theory of the autobiographical pact has been formed in another historical situation and based on different literary material than the Russian texts in question here.¹⁶ Thus, historically, Arbatova, Bonner and other (Soviet) Russian autobiographers and memoirists have been influenced by "the exhibitionist performer ... Jean-Jacques Rousseau"¹⁷, who is the model case of Lejeune's theory of autobiographical pact, but, they have also been influenced by patriarchal, totalitarian regimes and their legacy for writers and literature (see Holmgren 2003, Balina 2003, Kolchevska 2003).¹⁸

¹³ Of course, the so-called autobiographical pact (the identity between the author, the narrator and the main character implied through the identity of the names) can deliberately be broken: a good example of this is the Finnish writer Kari Hotakainen's *Klassikko* (The Classic, 1997); or the Russian conceptualist artist and writer's Dmitriy Prigov's *Живые в Москве* (Live in Moscow, 2000).

¹⁴ Cf. Lejeune's article "The autobiographical pact" (1989, 11, 22). In a later development of the subject in the article "The autobiographical pact (bis)" Lejeune states, that this definition was a starting point for later contemplation of the genre and would not work out of the context, but that it was perceived as a conclusion (ibid. 121).

¹⁵ On postmodernist autobiographical texts in the Russian context see Lipovetsky (1996).

¹⁶ It is, however, interesting that Lejeune's textual definitions of autobiography as a genre and the Soviet literary scholar Lidija Ginzburg's definition of documentary literature resemble each other, as Savkina notes (2001, 27).

¹⁷ See Miller (1988, 49).

¹⁸ For a study on the poetics of Russian autobiographical prose see Nikolina N.A. 2002. *Poetika russkoj avtobiografičeskoj prozy: učebnoe posobie*. Moskva: Flinta, Nauka.

By all this I do not mean to say that “referentiality” is only a feature of non-fictional texts: my concern here is with specific formulae of autobiographical writing. The texts in question here demonstrate the importance of the author’s lived experience as a testimony to certain events and subjective truths about the past in a situation when not only they, but perhaps a society as a whole, experience a specific need to have that testimony (cf. Holmgren 2003).

1.1.1 Autobiography, Documentary, Testimony, Memoirs...

When analysing the actual texts one runs into the question of national specific features of autobiographical and memoir writing. There already exist discussions on the differences between theories of Soviet Russian documentary and of Western autobiography (cf. Harris 1990 17-26, Savkina 2001, 26-31). Although this study does not deal specifically with these differences, it is appropriate to consider some features of this discussion and the differences. This discussion especially concerns the differences between Western and *Soviet* Russian theories, because, as will be seen below, the texts I am investigating share features of Soviet Russian documentary writing.

Jane Gary Harris has suggested that the principle difference between Western and Soviet Russian theories is the emphasis on individual, personal and confessional mode in Western studies and on the authenticity and fact in the Soviet/Russian studies (1990, 14-15).¹⁹ The different emphasis - personal vs. authentic - would seem also to be implied in the different terminology in Western and Soviet/Russian theories: in the West autobiography is the commonly used concept while in Russia the wider concept of documentary literature is more frequent than autobiography. As Savkina points out, there are several reasons for this difference²⁰: for instance, “...Russian mentality or the peculiarities of Russian cultural tradition which have not had the same accent on individualism and personality as the so-called ‘Pan-European tradition’” (Savkina 2001, 27). This refers to characteristics of a specific Russian mentality: collectivism, forming of identity through others, representation of the “I” as a part of a certain “We”, which is then reflected on the forms of documentary literature (ibid. 28). On the other hand, Savkina further notes that the *individualistic* course of life *was* described although not in documentary literature, but in the tradition of autobiographical novel (ibid. 29).²¹

¹⁹ Savkina argues that Harris exaggerates Soviet/Russian theorists’ emphasis on “factuality” and “authenticity” and points out that like their Western colleagues the Russian researchers are interested in the *literary* aspects of autobiographical genres (Savkina 2001, 26).

²⁰ See also *Models of Self* (2000, 6-7).

²¹ In a recent Russian study on Nabokov’s autobiographical works entitled *Авто-био-графия* (Auto-bio-graphy) the author points to a *textual* difference between Western-European and Russian autobiography: “Если для европейской автобиографической традиции метарефлексия по поводу возможностей и ограничений письма ‘от первого лица

Another reason for the terminological difference Savkina mentions is that the term autobiography became familiar to Soviet citizens as an official formula of one's life course which was required when applying for a job or for studying or travelling abroad etc. "It was a self-denunciation, or rather, a proof that one is ideologically in accordance with the requirements of a 'Soviet citizen'" (Savkina 2001, 29).²² Thus, the word "autobiography" has had different connotations altogether, which has further complicated its use for a literary genre as such.²³ It has been more widely used as an attribute in connection with literary texts: *автобиографический роман, жанр, автобиографическая проза* - autobiographical novel, prose, genre etc.

Further, some studies on Russian women's autobiographies reveal an incongruity between Western theories of female autobiography and the Russian material (Holmgren 1994, 128-129; Fitzpatrick 2000). For example, according to Sheila Fitzpatrick (2000) the mode of *intimate confessions*, recurrent in Western autobiographies does not occur in Soviet Russian women's autobiographical and memoir literature, which are rather testimonial representations of time and past. Intimacy, as Fitzpatrick defines it, refers to emphasis on the private sphere of life, that is, relationships, family, inner life, sexuality - these aspects are notably absent from Soviet autobiographies.²⁴

As was already mentioned, this incongruence between theories and texts, between Western readers and (in our case especially Soviet) Russian material sometimes produces a feeling of dissatisfaction in Western readers, who expect

единственного числа' - традиционный и характерный элемент (...), то в русской традиции он практически не представлен./ If *metareflection on the possibilities and boundaries of writing 'in the first person singular'* are a conventional and characteristic element for the Western European autobiographical tradition, in the Russian tradition it remains unrepresented" (Malikova 2002, 9). It is, however, unclear what this "Russian tradition" entails in Malikova's understanding. At least in the case of my material this statement, if I have understood it correctly, does not apply.

²² Marina Balina (1992) argues that the Soviet critics "wilfully sidestepped the very word 'autobiography,' carefully substituting for it such terms as documentary prose, non-fictional prose, factual literature..." She continues that "[t]he concept of 'autobiography' (familiar to the Soviet reader in two forms: the autobiographies of statesmen and the form which one needed to fill out upon starting a job) was only with difficulty perceived as a literary genre. The requirement of socialist realism to depict typical phenomena of socialist reality completely precluded the very idea of the personal biography, singular and unique by definition." (Balina 1992, 14.) However, a question may arise as to how conscious the avoidance of the term "autobiography" was.

²³ Galina Akbulatova writes about her experience of compiling an anthology of texts by Russian women writers from the provinces in the early 1990s, and notes that when she asked the authors to enclose their autobiographies - for information for Western slavists, as the anthology was to be published abroad - some misunderstood this to mean the official Soviet formula, while others wrote more freely (Akbulatova 1997, 81, 83-4).

²⁴ See also Holmgren (1994). This study will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

to find something else in the texts than they do.²⁵ It is, of course, important to be aware of these expectations, as Kelly states:

...[T]here are some problems with always reading “official” Soviet first person narratives as though they were inadequate and insufficient... This is partly because reading for omissions makes the hiatuses and silences of Soviet diaries take on a false particularity, as though “telling all” were an effortless activity in other societies, and as though genre conventions of autobiography, in fact one of the more nationally idiosyncratic genres, translated effortlessly from society to society. (Kelly 2000, 68)²⁶

However, in recent research on “official” Soviet autobiographical texts the emphasis is interestingly on *how* the texts are constructed in the specific time and space in the Soviet era - instead of focusing solely on what was silenced in them. They also show that the authors use or were encouraged (by the state, ideology, political actors etc.) to use the autobiographical discourse for certain purposes, which influences the textual construction of life and self (see, for instance, Holmgren 1993, Hoogenboom 1996, Liljeström 2000b, Hellbeck 2000).

The texts I am investigating share and conform to specific features of Soviet Russian memoir and autobiographical writing. One of the important features is their status as testimonies of eyewitnesses and participants of past traumatic events. The Soviet era with its “official” and “unofficial” cultures has, in this sense, had a major influence on the texts and their nature as literary constructs. According to Balina (2003, 190) dissident memoirs were influenced by socialist realist memoir etiquette, and both modes of writing were influenced by the officially accepted Soviet mode of representing reality and history. Although the dichotomy between official and unofficial has disappeared since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the texts I investigate relate closely to the

²⁵ See Barker (1998). For an illuminating example, with which I can well identify, I quote Laura Engelstein’s review of Russian women’s memoirs in Stalin’s time, published in the West in the 1970s-80s. Engelstein notes that the authors describe the public, historical events rather than their private lives, and explains this feature by the authors’ “unconscious attitudes that are products of the system they denounce” (1985, 104). Engelstein continues that “[i]n particular, [the] narrative choices reflect the same subordination of private sensibility to the demands of public life” which she sees as a restriction of the individual by the state. She also lets the reader understand that it could have been expected that the authors *as women* would have challenged this “taboo against intimate self-revelation” (ibid.).

²⁶ In her example Kelly refers to the anthology of Russian women’s life stories edited by A. Posadskaya-Vanderbeck and B. Alpern Engel *A Revolution of Their Own* (1998) and the editors’ striving to “restore wholeness and unity” to one of their informant’s life-stories by persuading her to tell about her private life. In the informant’s own opinion, however, her political work - and not private matters - was what really mattered about her life. In other words, the editors endeavoured to look behind the rhetoric of gender equality, while the informants were reluctant to do so (see also Keinänen 1999).

Soviet past as re-interpretations from the viewpoint of the protagonist, or the first person narrator, as a figure representing a particular, “true” version of history reconstructed retrospectively (ibid.). A notable feature of the texts is also their subjectivity, resembling another mode of Soviet autobiographical writing which, according to Balina, emerged in the 1950s to criticize the socialist realism model of memoirs, and imitated rather the subjective process of remembering (ibid. 191). According to the study on Russian memoir prose by Zoja Vatnikova-Prizel (1978, 21) there are two tendencies in this mode of writing: *летописное*, memorial, where the author concentrates on the events, which s/he has witnessed or participated in and *автобиографическое*, autobiographical, which centres on the author’s personality (*личность*), inner world and environment.²⁷ In other words, the latter concentrates on “the self” (*воспоминания “о себе”*), and the former on “the times” (“*о времени*”).

There is a certain elusiveness in the understanding and use of Russian and Western terminology concerning autobiography, but it seems that for (Soviet) Russian literary criticism the demarcations between “the self” and “the time” are a more or less constant variable.²⁸ And, it seems, in contemporary literary context this, in part, continues to be so.

Balina discusses the situation during *glasnost*’ in the 1980s, and writes that the theme “About the Times and About Myself, *or rather About Myself and About the Times* ... is one of the most important ... themes ... occupying contemporary Russian writers” (1992, 13 - italics MR), focusing on the popular genre of memoirs on the Soviet period of the time. The converting of the Soviet slogan “*О времени и о себе/ About the time and about the self*” to “*О себе и о времени/ About the self and about the time*”, which shifts the focus from the historical times to the subject of writing, is significant. In the texts by Gerštejn, Petkevič, Bonner, Pliseckaja and Arbatova, this shift of focus is apparent, and in some cases it is made explicit.²⁹ In the texts Balina examines this focus means that in the 1980s texts took on an “exposé” function, where writers were asking for public forgiveness for past events, or accusing and denouncing society and the historical course of events. Texts emerged that had been written “for the drawer” at a time when their publication had not been possible. Balina writes:

Autobiographical memoirs undoubtedly predominate in the Soviet literature of the 1980s. This is made possible by the unusually expanded borders of this genre in

²⁷ Vatnikova-Prizel includes in the memoir genre diaries, notes, memoirs, literary portraits, autobiographies (1978, 25). Further, Burkhart (1983, 59) states that in autobiographical texts the relationship between “the world” and “the self” is more explicit than in other literary texts.

²⁸ As Kuznesov (1971, 135) states: “Казалось бы, выражение Маяковского ‘расскажу о времени и о себе’ и есть универсальная формула мемуаров./ It would appear that Majakovski’s expression ‘I will tell about the time and about myself’ is the universal formula of memoirs”.

²⁹ This aspect will be discussed in Chapter 2.

contemporary prose. The chance to talk about the world and one's place in the world along with one's personal history, the chance to recount not only the simple facts of one's biography but also to discuss one's hidden inner problems, makes this genre extremely attractive in contemporary Soviet literature. (Balina 1992, 24)

This tendency has continued and developed in the 1990s as well. The motivating core for the author's writing, according to Balina, was to understand what "is" and what "was" together with the reader, whom the author sees as his or her equal, and who knows the author and the time (ibid. 25). The apparent reasons for this shift in emphasis and the phenomenon of retrospective autobiographical writing lie in the historical and cultural situation during the late 1980s and the early 1990s.

1.1.2 Autobiography in Contemporary Russia - The Search for a Cogent Reality?

...[T]here is the irreducible fact that someone **was**
or something **happened** in past times.

Liz Stanley³⁰

According to articles and reviews on the literary field in Russia since *perestroika*, there were and are quite a few very different concurrent literary tendencies due to the shift of paradigm - the end of the status of socialist realism as official literary policy and the arrival of freedom of speech and freedom of the press - that took place in 1990-1.³¹ In the late 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s critics pay attention to new literary trends such as metarealism, conceptualism, "other" literature, émigré literature, returned literature, postmodernism, and new women's prose, to mention a few, which emerged in the wake of *perestroika*, when the publication of previously censored texts, both Soviet and foreign, was taking place, and these texts "invaded" literature almost simultaneously, and created, to quote Mihail Ėpštejn, an "untimely" space. Ėpštejn describes the literary situation after the *glasnost*' period as follows:

Прежде всего, какой может быть литературный процесс в условиях одновременного вхождения в литературу четырех евангелистов, Петра Чаадаева, Василия Розанова, Джеймса Джойса, Александра Солженицына, и тридцатилетних неоконцептуалистов? Вместо процесса в привычном понимании, т.е. линейной последовательности событий, перед нами некое пространство, со многими входами и выходами: Набоков приходит, Фадеев уходит, кто-то, вошедший через один вход, теперь входит через другой, как, например, Горький или Твардовский. Все разновременное совершается

³⁰ Stanley (2000, 11)

³¹ See Ėpštejn (1991); Latynina & Dewhirst (1998).

одновременно, и трудно вытянуть из этого гудящего многотысячного улья одну восковую нить. (Ėpštejn 1991, 226)³²

The mix of different historical times through the simultaneous publication of works written at different times is characteristic of the turn of the 1990s; hence Ėpštejn's resistance to use the concept of "literary process", which denotes "linear chronology of events" and his preference for the concept "literary space", which would include the overlapping historical processes.³³

The notion of an untimely space can be applied to the literary context of the texts I have chosen to analyse in my research. Some texts were written substantially earlier than their subsequent publication, in the 1990s lets assume. With their publication, however, they become a part of a similar discursive landscape and a similar historical situation and share a similar sphere of reception in the public as those written later. This aspect of the material also serves to reveal the 1990s not as an entirely new situation when "everything changed", but as a continuum of certain processes which had been latent, and came to the surface with the easing of public control and change of ideology.³⁴

Many of the autobiographical texts published in Russia during the 1990s in general, and those investigated here as well, deal with the Soviet period. Already earlier, since *perestroika* and *glasnost* in the mid 1980s, literary works increasingly started to deal with certain "unmentioned" topics of the Russian and Soviet past which had not previously been discussed in public (cf. Marsh 1995). As Rosalind Marsh (1995, 43) notes: "Two words ... 'truth' and 'need'

³² "First of all, can we talk about a literary process in a situation where the four evangelists, Petr Ćadaev, Vasilij Rozanov, James Joyce, Aleksandr Solženicyn and 30-year-old neoconceptualists enter literature simultaneously? Instead of a process in its conventional meaning, that is, as a linear chronology of events, there is a certain space before us with several entries and exits: Nabokov enters, Fadeev leaves, someone, who came in from one entry, now comes in from another, like, for instance Gorkij or Tvardovskij. Dissynchronous processes take place at the same time, so it is difficult to decipher one wax fibre of this buzzing beehive."

³³ Cf. Latynina & Dewhirst (1998, 67): "...[I]t also became apparent that it was no longer possible to use a term that had been very popular in Soviet times, 'the literary process'. ...[I]n the minds of literary critics it has been replaced by 'the literary situation', or, even more accurately, 'the literary landscape'... It is a landscape that is blurred and fuzzy, sadly lacking harmony and charm."

³⁴ On the different times of writing the texts see Introduction. Another text which will be referred to, Svetlana Ŗenbrunn's *Розы и хризантемы* (Roses and Chrysantemums), was written during the 1950s-60s, but, according to the author herself, it was rejected by the publishers until it eventually was published in 1999. By this time the publishers were, apparently, ready to print a text of this extent and quality. For example, Ŗenbrunn reminisces how in the years of *perestroika* a young editor of the literary journal *Novyj mir* said to her: "Ваше время прошло/ Your time has passed" and she had to agree saying: "Жаль, что прошло, так и не настав/ It's a pity that it passed, because it never really even came". (Ŗenbrunn 2002, 262-264.)

reflect... the enormous need of the Soviet people for the return of their collective memory, for truthful information about the past, which they had been denied so long.” During this time, according to Marsh, the relationship between history and literature was at its most significant in Russia: “...[L]iterature and cultural debate played a more important role than either political science or historiography in ‘preparing *perestroika* in the minds of people’” (ibid. 2).

Although the most significant political and historical vehemence of literary works coincided with *glasnost*’ and *perestroika* era 1985-1991,³⁵ historical issues and history have continued to interest Russian readers in the 1990s. In 1999 it was stated in the journal *Вопросы литературы*: “В последние годы мемуары стали одним из самых популярных литературных жанров. Все больше литераторов пользуются возможностью напрямую высказаться о времени и о себе” (*Voprosy literatury* 1999, 3).³⁶ Here I am interested in the possible reasons for this phenomenon.

One of the obvious and important ones is the historical situation in the early 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Svetlana Boym notes the following about the general attitude to history and remembering:

There was a great confusion about what was to be commemorated and what was to be forgotten. One had a distinct sense that people were living out history, but it was less clear what the true Russian history should look like. Should it be presented as the history of the great Russian state, as a suppressed history of the Orthodox Church, or as the history of resistance to Bolsheviks? History appeared to be rewritten every day. (Boym 1994, 229)

The scope of the cultural phenomenon of remembering is manifest in the current popularity of memoirs and autobiographies among contemporary Russian readers and authors. “Everyone is writing memoirs, young and old”,

³⁵ By the end of the 1980s the interest in historical literature declined, and in the 1990s “it had served its purpose” (Marsh 1995, 197). Svetlana Boym points out that “in spite of great social transformation and the publication of revealing documents and onslaught of personal memories, short-lived public reflection on the experience of communism and particularly, state repression, failed to produce any institutional change. (...) The collective trauma of the past was hardly acknowledged; or, if it was, everyone was seen as an innocent victim or a cog in the system only following orders.” (Boym 2001, 58.)

³⁶ “In recent years memoirs have become one of the most popular literary genres. More and more writers take the opportunity to express their thoughts directly about the time and the self.” Similar statements had also been made earlier: Marina Balina writes that “[e]veryone in the former Soviet Union is writing memoirs: those coddled by the government and those persecuted, former ministers and former convicts, writers and collective farmers, workers and intellectuals” (1992, 13). Still earlier, in the 1970s, Adol’f Urban notes that “[n]owadays everyone is writing autobiographies” (1977, 193). Thus, writing memoirs and eye-witness accounts is a process that has continued to exist in the late 20th century Russia (the Soviet Union) at least, since the 1960s. However, the political and cultural context for writing and reading memoirs and autobiographies after *perestroika* is different from that in the 1980s or 1970s.

notes Aleksandr Genis in his own memoirs on the writer Sergej Dovlatov, but continues in an ironic tone that in earlier times people used to write memoirs in order to glorify the past – nowadays they write memoirs in order “to convince themselves that it was” (Genis 1999, 9-10). The writer Nina Katerli in her autobiographical text describes how she travels back after decades in the 1990s to the town where her mother was born and raised and her grandfather-doctor had been a prominent figure, and wonders if this provincial home-town of her mother had ever even existed. But the confirmation follows immediately:

Нет, Шарья-то безусловно - была. Точно известно, что там многие годы прожил наш дед, там росла мать, родились ее брат и сестра. Меня впервые привезли туда на месяц летом сорокового, а потом на четыре военных года. Да, все это было - имелся свидетель, мой двоюродный брат, у которого даже в паспорте, в графе “место рождения” указано “Шарья”. Но и он, как я, был убежден: в город детства билетов нет. (Katerli 1998, 69)

No, Šarja did exist, absolutely. It is known that for many years our grandad lived there, my mother grew up and her brother and sister were born there. I was taken there for the first time in the summer of 1940, and after that I spent there four years during the war. Yes, all of this happened - we had a witness, my cousin, in whose passport it even stands in the column “place of birth Šarja”. However, he, as well as I, was certain: there were no tickets to the town of childhood. (Katerli 1998, 69)

The task of restoring the past is thus impossible, as it is impossible to travel back to childhood. Yet, it does not erase the fact that there have been places, people, experiences, which one can reach through memory. Katerli’s text is thus suggestively entitled “Возвращение/ The return”.

At the end of the 1990s and at the beginning of the 21st century memoirs and autobiographies as a phenomenon of late 20th century in Russia have occasionally generated interesting discussions in literary journals. Here some concern has been expressed about whether such “non-literary” forms of writing have replaced or suppressed “proper” prose writing.³⁷ In 1999 and 2000 the literary journal *Вопросы литературы* (*Voprosy literature*) urged writers and specialists to give their views about the popularity and significance of this genre in contemporary Russian culture. In 2003 the literary journal *Знамя* (*Znamja*) extended the discussion to other documentary or non-fiction texts in the discussion “Non-fiction literature: fiction and reality” where specialists in different areas were asked whether fiction had lost its primary status in readers’ preferences, and non fiction (essays, documentary literature, memoirs etc.) taken its place. In the following I will gather and outline some main traits of these discussions.

³⁷ This concern is expressed, for instance, in the journal *Znamja* (2003, 1).

The reasons given for writing memoirs in these discussions are surely as diverse as their authors, who range from writers of the younger generation to those advanced in years with different life experiences, but, as one writer notes, who have one thing in common: they are or were *Soviet* generations. Aleksandr Borščagovskij, who himself has been a repressed Soviet writer, states that “[l]ie...is the main inspiration of memoir literature” (1999, 11) referring to the state of affairs that prevailed during the Soviet regime, when official documents and truths were not always reliable. He takes the view that his duty as a memoirist is “not only a literary but... a civil duty” to reverse the lie (ibid. 11-12). The words duty, obligation, need or, desire to remember occur frequently in the contemporary writers’ responses to why they started to write memoirs. They experience the need to “understand” and “feel” the past, to “remind” the new generations and “leave behind a testimony” (*Voprosy literatury*, 1999).

Some of the discussants are reluctant to define what they have written as memoirs, and understand the dynamics of their texts more widely: it is either “pseudo-memoirs”, “past-and-thoughts” á la Gercen, or “notes” of bygone years. For instance, the poet Sergej Gandlevskij (born in the 1950s), writes that his aim in writing the pseudo-autobiographical prose text “Трепанация черепа” (The opening of the skull, 1995) was not to write a text which was absolutely true to reality, but to create an aesthetically inventive story based on real events (1999, 13). This view is shared by several other writers. To account for the popularity of documentary texts in the 1990s, Gandlevskij suggests that because during the Soviet regime reality, the prose of life, *быт*, was repressed and instead Utopian views represented in a banal, poetic style, fantasizing calls forth rejection in today’s Russia. Today’s literature needs to give things their real names, “вернуть яви убедительность/ to return cogency to reality” (Gandlevskij 1999, 15). To paraphrase Genis, another writer born in the 1950s, memoirs seek to deal with the paradoxical concept of “невыдуманная реальность/non-fictional reality” (Genis 1999, 9). This could be one explanation for the popularity of memoir and documentary literature in Russia in the past decade (Gradskova 2002, 504).³⁸ And, indeed, many of the texts this study addresses were written first and foremost in order *to mediate information* concerning the past, primarily Soviet, experience: atrocities, purges, repression, family relations, and everyday life. The autobiographical texts claim to have a reference to real, lived experience. “Это было” - “This was” or “This has happened” is a phrase that occurs in numerous autobiographies and memoirs published during the 1990s. In one sense it is quite a common and widely used rhetorical expression. It purports to convince the addressee about the correspondence between written word and

³⁸ This is nothing new in itself: Deming Brown mentions that already in the thaw period of the 1960s and in the 1980s “[a] key word in critical parlance was *dokumental’nost’* (documentariness) - which meant the writer’s reliance on the display of facts rather than the workings of his imagination. (...) Many simply felt that ... for the moment, verifiable truth was more important than finesse and fantasy.” (Brown 1993, 62)

reality. In the case of this study of women's autobiographical texts it is also connected with the specific representation of the "underrepresented", that which has been marginal, silenced in history and society. There are many examples.

"Да разве было такое время? Не приснилось ли мне все это? Нет, не приснилось. Сохранились любительские фотоснимки. Все это было! Было!/
Was there such a time? Haven't I just dreamt all this? No, no I haven't. Photos have remained of this time. All of this has been, it has!" writes Nadežda Poljakova (1996, 141) reminiscing on the time when she lived with her husband in a newly built house where they sat at one table with other inhabitants from different Soviet nationalities to have dinner and she was the only one to represent the Russian nationality. This recollection is somewhat nostalgic.³⁹ But the text as a whole represents the past from a very mundane perspective. Every prosaic detail of the first person narrator's life in the 1940s-50s is worth mentioning: the mice in her student bedroom are described in great detail, the student canteen and the food there have a special meaning, and her helping around a poor girl, who turns out to be a clever thief, are important constituents her life narrative, much more important than the war, or that the famous scholar, Boris Èihenbaum, helped her to get a student place at Leningrad University.

Further, writers bring out their personal need to "share with others" what they have experienced during their life-times, to "directly tell about their life", or to write down what only they, and no one else, remember. The historical time frame - after the Soviet Union - can also explain this aspect of Russian memoir writing: the generations who lived during the Soviet time stand against the force of oblivion. They have become historical personalities, whose way of life has become a museum piece. (*Voprosy literatury*, 1999.)

³⁹ Nostalgic attitudes towards the Soviet era are not exceptional. The short story of another writer, Natal'ja Bank "A trip to Komarovo" is a text flavoured with nostalgia for the distinguished and motivated teachers of the faculty of philology in Leningrad. The reason why this recalling of "great" scholars and "splendid" lecturers is needed now is justified by the narrator in the following manner: "Сколько лет разделяют филфак моей юности и тот, что закончила, например, Татьяна Толстая? Даже если десять, неужели факультет изменился настолько, чтобы подвергать его только поношению и не найти ни слова благодарности тем, кто учил? Тон устных мемуаров талантливой писательницы, услышанных недавно, поразил меня, вызвал протест. Вроде бы пора и привыкнуть к тому, как теперь выворачивается наизнанку буквально все, что было в нашем прошлом. Но всякий раз по живому режет эта тенденция, когда заходит речь о том, что ты сам пережил, сам знаешь с иной - доброй - стороны./ How many years separate the philological faculty of my youth and the one, from which, e.g., Tatjana Tolstaja graduated? Even if it's 10 years, could the faculty have changed so much, that it can only be slandered and not a word of thankfulness can be found for those who taught? The tone of the oral recollections of the talented writer I recently heard surprised me, and I wanted to protest. It's like one has to get used to the tendency, that everything which was in our past has to be turned up-side down. But, this tendency hurts each time when it concerns something which you yourself have experienced and known from a different - positive - perspective." (Bank 1993, 248)

In a more recent discussion on the popularity of non-fiction literature in the journal *Znamja*, Gandlevskij and other specialists reiterate this view. Marina Balina even suggests that this is not only the state of affairs in Russian culture, but a worldwide phenomenon: there is a growing interest in the “small”, “concrete” and “personal” instead of “epochal”, “fictitious” and “universal” (*Znamja* 2003, 4). In the years after *perestroika* history is represented through the experiences not only of writers and politicians, so-called great personalities, but also of ordinary people. And it is not only the intellectual, highly educated people’s memoirs which have been printed.⁴⁰

A prominent example of representing ordinary people’s experiences in her works is Svetlana Aleksievič the Belorussian journalist and writer. She wanted to give a voice to the “small” people in history, those, who did not write their memoirs, and whose experiences have not been addressed before.⁴¹ According to Aleksievič, it is fascinating in the ordinary people’s accounts of their experiences of war, or, nuclear catastrophe that they come to represent the problems of human existence in everyday life, *бытийное* and *бытовое* side by side. She states that at the end of the 20th century art lost its ability to respond to specific aspects of human experience. Hence, according to Aleksievič, the current attraction of authenticity and belief in facts, hence her own interest in the stories of those “small” people who would never themselves write them down. (Aleksievič 2000, 38-40.)

Taking together the bits and pieces of discussion presented above, writing and publishing memoirs in the 1990s Russia is connected with a multifaceted process of a paradigm shift: concepts lose their previous meaning; there is a need to tell the true version of history. “Common history” is fragmented into individual testimonies and stories about history. This process can also result in certain tensions between history and an individual’s life.⁴² The question is, which issues can be discussed in a public discourse and which not?

⁴⁰ Such publications are, for instance, the anthology of Russian women’s memoirs and biographies *Женская судьба в России* (Women’s Destiny in Russia, 1996), which includes memoirs by peasant and working class women, and the memoirs of Aleksandra Čistjakova *Не много ли для одной?* (Isn’t This Enough for One Woman? 1998).

⁴¹ This approach (the interest in the “small, ordinary people’s” fate) may be a specific feature of Russian realistic literature and its authorship. Cf. the Russian classical memoirist Alexander Herzen’s *My Past and Thoughts* (1852-68).

⁴² There have been similar observations concerning other post-communist societies and people’s conceptualising of their past experiences. Michielsens’ research on Bulgarian women’s life-stories after the collapse of the communist regime in the 1990s discusses the difficulties of telling one’s life in a frame where concepts, emotions and thoughts lose their meanings (2000, 186, 188). Skultans’ research on Latvian life-stories in the 1990s deals with the need to remember and bring out the past traumatic experiences under a totalitarian regime (1997).

This concerns especially traumatic experiences of the past connected, for example, with the Gulag or the war.⁴³

It is partly this tension - between history and subjective experience, the self and the time - that are discussed in the second round of discussion on memoirs organised by the journal *Voprosy literatury*. This part, published a year after the first one, discusses some of the opinions presented in the latter, and ponders in greater detail upon the meaning of writing memoirs in Russia and elsewhere. One of the main questions intriguing the discussants is, to what extent should the memoirist be open, that is, present his/her *personal* opinions and impressions. Some ask whether the author even has a right to be subjective, others consider subjectiveness a generic part of memoirs (*Voprosy literatury* 2000, 6, 16).⁴⁴

Further, some consider that the commercialising of publishing in Russia in the 1990s has favoured memoirs of political and civic figures as well as memoirs of famous persons telling the story of their own lives, in which case readers are interested in finding out what those famous people reveal about themselves (ibid. 15; see also Prokhorov 2003, 70). In this respect literature is compared to commodities of different quality: the literary market is divided between high and low culture.⁴⁵

Others see memoirs at first hand as a problem of memory, because for a long time “memory was in fact the only repository of real history contrary to the official, Soviet”, arguing that there might not be any collective memory of such extreme circumstances as prison and labour camp (except in the statistics). Then it would be crucial to ask how and why authors of memoirs remember what they remember (Ščerbakova 2000, 33-34, 37).

The discussion presented briefly above touched upon several aspects of memoir and autobiographical literature in contemporary Russia: moral, ethical, philosophical, historical, commercial. These are connected in various ways to the aspect of memoirs and autobiography as a cultural phenomenon. The interest in memoirs and autobiographies in today’s Russia is connected with the need to restore the experiences and reality of the past which were left unarticulated in the Soviet public discourse and with the disintegration of the Soviet Union, risked being relegated to oblivion (Gradskova 2002, 504). There has emerged

⁴³ In the Finnish context the problem of history and memory connected with especially traumatic experiences has been investigated by Peltonen (2003).

⁴⁴ Many discussants in this connection mention Emma Gerštejn’s memoirs as an example where the author’s “moral right” to remember without the removal of subjectivity is guaranteed by her “taste” and “talent” (*Voprosy literatury* 2000, 6).

⁴⁵ Nikolaj Rabotnov, for instance, quotes the American writer of best-seller crime stories, Mickey Spillane’s, words that “salted nuts sell more than caviar” - the Russian equivalent for salted nuts being fried sunflower seeds; Ol’gert Libkin compares the situation on the literary market to the situation in a grocery store, where the choice between different products has increased significantly, and people are just learning to distinguish between different brands (*Znamja* 2003, 11; 13).

the need to represent certain subjective, lived experience, which has previously been suppressed. Hence the formulation “about the self and the time”, with the shifted emphasis to the “self” rather than to the time.

1.1.3 Reading Life Narratives

Russian critics and writers point to the aspect that non-fiction or documentary literature is not “*not* fiction”, because it is not free from fantasy: the author of a non-fiction text remembers, forgets and invents things (Znamja 2003, 5). This, of course, is not entirely a new idea, but, nevertheless, an important aspect of documentary literature as a discourse. Gandlevskij points out in his account that “we receive everything in the world through a prism of fantasy ...” and that the Russian words “meaning - *смысл*” and “fantasy - *вымысел*” have a common root for a good reason (ibid. 6). Yet a third discussant states that in real art (meaning high-ranking literature in contrast to popular literature) fiction and non-fiction co-exist, because if a text is “real literature”, fantasy is not obligatory - only selection and aesthetic organisation are obligatory (ibid. 13-14). The understanding of the word fiction is decisive in this respect. According to Toker (2000, 124-5), “any selection from the flow of reality, whether in our memory, oral narratives, or written texts, is already a fiction, a *construct*”, although conventionally in literary studies fiction means feigning, constructing events, characters, images that are fictional. As the literary scholar, Lidija Ginzburg, who contributed prominently to the theory of documentary literature in Soviet Russian literary studies, states about the difference between fiction and documentary literature:

Литература вымысла черпает свой материал из действительности, поглощая его художественной структурой; фактическая достоверность изображаемого (...) становится эстетически безразличной ... Документальная же литература живет открытой соотнесенностью и борьбой двух этих начал. (...) Особое качество документальной литературы - в той *установке на подлинность*, ощущение которой не покидает читателя, но которая далеко не всегда равна фактической точности. (1977/1971, 9)⁴⁶

Ginzburg’s formulation here brings important aspects of documentary literature to the fore, which are important in understanding the textual qualities of the material at hand in this study: (a) the texts are based on “real” experiences, (b) but also “artistically (narratively) structured”, (c) the reader is

⁴⁶ “Fiction literature derives its material from reality, forming it into an artistic structure; the factual plausibility of what is being described (...) becomes aesthetically unimportant... Documentary literature exists in an open relation and battle between these two. (...) The special quality of documentary literature lies in that orientation toward authenticity of which the reader never ceases to be aware, but which is far from always being the same thing as factual exactitude.”

aware of the “referentiality” of what is being described. Toker explicates the latter quality further:

Factographic narratives (memoirs, autobiographies, travelogues, diaries, letters notebooks, historical compilations etc.) imply the reader’s understanding not only that the characters are historically identifiable people, but also that all the narrative details relate ... to actual events, locations, and realia. (Toker 1997, 191)

The question is, then, to a large extent, of the mode of reading documentary texts as stories based on real events. The reader’s attention and awareness is guided by the fact that the author, a real living person, narrates, or more specifically, contends in the text that s/he narrates, about experiences that have happened to him/her, or that s/he has witnessed. This evokes an important *ethical* dimension which guides the reading and interpretation.⁴⁷ Furthermore, the arranging of material into text entails important narrative aspects, which have to be considered as well: “any personal perception is selective; memory affects a further sieving; and the process of composition involves further choices between things to include and things to leave out” (Toker 2000, 125).

In reading the texts as narratives, as literary constructs, with different linguistic/narrative elements which can be analysed, it is important to take into account that they are also representations of life, texts produced and read in a certain historical time by a certain historical person. In my study I want to identify both the mimetic and the semiotic aspects of writing and reading these texts. In fact, feminist studies on autobiography (here I refer to Smith 1993, Miller 1988, Brodzki & Schenck 1988), semiotics (de Lauretis 1984, 1987) and narratology (Lanser 1986) have stressed that the mimetic and the semiotic are equally important in signification processes. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan has formulated a position which suits as a starting point for the discussion below, and as an elucidation of my own reader approach:

Whereas the notion of “subject” marks the limits of the self to positions where it manifests itself in different social systems, the concept of “I” (even when it is tinged with the realization of split and flux) surpasses the symbolic order and covers the bodily sensations, psychic inner processes and the role of an active agent. (Rimmon-Kenan 1995, 21)⁴⁸

My concern here is first and foremost with the different narrative strategies in representing and constructing the female subject’s/I’s experience. By narrative strategy I mean the use of the narrative voice, the first person narrator, in each text; the relationship between different narrative levels (the author, narrator, protagonist) and their connection to the private and public, the

⁴⁷ See Markku Lehtimäki’s article on the poetics and ethics of non-fiction (2000).

⁴⁸ Translation from the Finnish publication of the article is mine.

personal and the common aspects of the representation of a woman's life story in each text.

The problem of this approach is revealed in the question: does there have to be a subject/I before the construction/representation or is it the product of the latter? Rimmon-Kenan (1995, 29-30) stresses in her approach to narration its aspect of accessibility: it shifts the debate from "which was first" to the act of reaching ("I", representation) itself, without claiming that the one or the other is ever actually reached. In the narrative analysis of the texts I will ask, (a) what subject positions are accessible to the women autobiographers in their texts and (b) how does this position render the representation of the female experience accessible.

In the autobiographical discourse the "I" is said to be the subject and object of narrating. The pronoun creates the illusion of a "self" present to itself and continuous with the "past self"; the past "I". However, recollections are not the recapitulation of the past, but the past in the present - they are the past interpreted and constructed by the subject in the writing. (Kerby 1991, 24, 28, 30). In order not to consider this "I" as merely a textual figure but as an effect of the autobiographical discourse's process of signification in which the writing and reading subjects are actively involved, a closer look at the "subject in discourse", and its meaning in this study, is necessary.

As a conclusion on the literary features of the type of autobiographical texts I am investigating, it can be said that they are fictive in the sense that they select, condense and omit things from the "flow of reality", organize them in the linearity of sentences, constitute them into stories. The textual aspect of referentiality and authenticity, connected with the representations of specific and often traumatic experiences of social reality cannot be by-passed when reading them.⁴⁹ As was also already noted, this does not mean that referentiality is not a feature of fictional texts, on the contrary. As will be discussed below, I understand literary texts as both semiotic and mimetic. What is important in the case of the texts chosen for investigation in this study is the pact between the reader and the author, established textually (the proper name; telling the truth), its historical context in a situation when the Soviet epoch has ended, and the cultural context of suppressing certain experiences, topics, themes in public discourse connected with this epoch and female experience.

⁴⁹ Touching upon similar problematics between life and writing in auto/biographical studies, Liz Stanley states: "Am I proposing that *there is only writing* and that lives of the past are not recoverable at best, mere fabrications of the researcher and of writing at worst? Am I arguing that there is no life in the contact zone [between the text and the reader-researcher]?(...) The bald answer to my ... question, 'Is there life in the contact zone?' is, then, both no and yes. No, there isn't, in the resurrectionalist sense of 'recovering the past'; yes, there is, *in the sense that there were things that happened and people who lived*. But the answer isn't terribly interesting - it is the question, and the issues it raises, that incites, provokes, interests." (Stanley 2000, 27-28, italics MR)

1.2 Gender and Subjectivity in Literary Texts

When talking about the “identity between the author, narrator and protagonist” it is necessary to take into account the criticism that poststructuralist linguistic and semiotic theory of the subject and the “I” have practised against the existence of an autonomous, self-sufficient “I”. To put it briefly, “I” is a pronoun which has no single referent but is context-bound: whoever says “I” means him-/herself in that moment, and does so in order to separate him/herself from “you”. What does the identity between the author, the narrator and the protagonist then mean, if we understand authorship and subjectivity as a function of discourse, and not as coherent entities represented by the text.

Die Frage nach dem Subjekt des Textes ist [in der Autobiographie] eng mit der Frage nach dem Subjekt im Text verschränkt. Wenn “Autor” und “Autorin” eine Funktion des Textes, nicht seine autonomen Urheber sind, welchen Status hat dann das “Autos” (=Selbst), das die Autobiographie darzustellen beansprucht? (Bossinade 2000, 143, italics MR)⁵⁰

Are the concepts of “I” and “self” linguistic constructions, a function of discourse, where the “I” is called forth by discourse, and does not exist as a referent outside language?⁵¹ However, language does not exist outside social reality or historical context, it is itself not an autonomous entity, but a system constructed in time and space.

Theorists of autobiography have often referred to the French linguist’s, Emile Benveniste’s, definition of the subject of language as a split subject⁵²: it is divided into *the speaking subject* and *the subject of speech* (Silverman 1983, 45-46). These subjects are seemingly “united” with the help of the pronoun “I”, which as it were invites the subject to the illusion of a continuous, undivided self

⁵⁰ “The question about the subject *of* the text is [in autobiography] tightly connected with the question about the subject *in* the text. *When ‘the author’ is a function of the text, and not its autonomous creator, what status does ... ‘the self’ then have, which the autobiography purports to represent?*”

⁵¹ This poststructuralist revelation, however, has not so profoundly influenced autobiographical writing in general: on the contrary, works in which the author relies on the representative function of language and does not question this function, are quite popular, they have not “vanished”. Notions where the autonomous existence of the “I” is denied have not replaced the more traditional notion of an autobiographical “I”. In his book on autobiography and reference John Paul Eakin declares: “In the age of poststructuralism we have been too ready to assume that the very idea of a referential aesthetic is untenable, but autobiography is nothing if not a referential art” (1992, 28); “Notwithstanding the poststructuralist notions of the absence of reference in the field of subject, ...[i]n indeed, we do ‘go on’ with autobiography, genre or not, true or not...” (ibid. 25).

⁵² See, for instance, Lejeune (1989, 7-9, 33)

(Kosonen 1996, 187-188). However, because the “I” is split into the speaking subject and subject of speech, it cannot be completely present to itself, it has no fixed position or meaning.

Julia Kristeva (1989, 274-275) stresses that Benveniste’s speaking subject is also influenced by the recognition of the other, “you”, and his/her discourse; the subject is not a self-contained concept, because it is produced only in communication, in discourse, which forms the subject and the meaning: “The subject *is* not; he makes and unmakes himself in a complex topology where the other and his discourse are included. (...) The subject and *meaning* are not; they are produced in the discursive work.” Thus, in this linguistic, semiotic understanding of the subject, there is no subject prior to discourse and language.

These semiotic-linguistic notions of the subject and meaning are an excellent illustration of the structures of language and signification. However, as has been pointed out, they tend to exclude the *extra* textual; the social and cultural-historical; aspects of the production of meaning. This semiotic subject is disembodied, as though it were universal, representing common values of humanity, and for this reason it has been criticised and revised in feminist theory.

1.2.1 Reading Female Subjectivity and Agency

The problem of female agency and subjectivity has been crucial to discussions of female autobiography since the 1980s.⁵³ Sidonie Smith starts her study on subjectivity, identity, and the body in women’s autobiographical writing in the 20th century by deconstructing the notion of the “universal subject”. She states that the latter’s existence is grounded on the *exclusion* of other subjects:

This history of the universal subject ... underwrites a history of the female subject, for the architecture of the universal subject rests upon and supports the founding identifications of those that are the nonuniversal, the colourful, among whom is “woman”. (Smith 1993, 11)

According to Smith the notion of the universal subject derives its universality by excluding and rejecting other subjects, that is, in the case of the Western history of literature and philosophy, subjects other than white, middle-class, heterosexual male subjects. Smith is referring to the history of Western philosophical thought, which constructed the universal subject on the grounds of its thinkers’ experience, the experience of the white, male, middle/upper class, rational, heterosexual subject. His/their experience was universalized on the grounds that in essence, *every* subject’s inner experience of *humanity* is basically “the same”. Seemingly genderless, this universal subject reflects its

⁵³ See Benstock (1988), Brodzki & Schenck (1988), Jelinek (1986), Mason (1980), Stanton (1988).

desires and its “self” on others who thus become marginalized because of their difference as non-white, non-heterosexual, non-male etc. However, it is the existence and the simultaneous refusal of these different others that help the universal subject to define itself as “disembodied” and “universal”. The universal, male subject represents itself as the norm, and the others, different as deviations from the norm. (Smith 1993.)

Feminist theorists, like Smith, have argued that the subject is always differentiated, because if we deal with subjects, we deal with female, male, black, Jew, European, lesbian, working-class etc. subjects. This insight became relevant when dealing with texts produced by women, or writers of minorities - it was necessary to give a voice to those who had been suppressed and marginalised by the patriarchal/dominating system (Rimmon-Kenan 1995, 22). One of the consequences of the recognition of this differentiation is that the subject is always gendered (Kosonen 1996, 183). The universal subject and its objectivity have been announced as myth of the male individuality disguised as disembodied, transcendental subject (Smith 1993, 4, 7-8).

The question of subjectivity became a prominent topic for discussion within contemporary feminist theory, which is tightly connected with postmodernism.⁵⁴ In the study of female autobiography the problem of female agency and postmodernism is addressed by Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck in the following manner:

At this felicitous juncture of feminism, psychoanalysis, and modern critical theory, the case of autobiography raises the essential problem in contemporary feminist theory and praxis: the imperative situating of the female subject in spite of the postmodernist campaign against the sovereign self. Thus the critical and political stance ... is to *maintain female specificity and articulate female subjectivity without either falling back into essentialism ... or retreating into a pure textuality that consigns woman ... to an uncoverable absence*. Modern theory ... warns of the dangers of positing selfhood, indeed eulogizes and then celebrates the death of the author. But a feminist agenda cannot include further or repeated marginalization of female selfhood without betraying its own political program. Instead, the feminist enterprise should ... take its cue from contemporary theory and not promote a simplistic identification with the protagonist of the autobiographical text; at the same time, however, *it should provide the emotional satisfaction historically missing for the female reader, that assurance and consolation that she does indeed exist in the world which a femininity defined in purely textual terms cannot provide*. (Brodzki & Schenck 1988, 14, italics MR)

⁵⁴ See, for instance, Butler, Judith & Scott, Joan W. (eds.). 1992. *Feminists Theorize the Political*, Routledge; Benhabib, Seyla, Butler, Judith, Cornell, Drucilla & Fraser, Nancy. 1995. *Feminist Contentions. A Philosophical Exchange*. New York and London: Routledge. My own understanding in this study is influenced especially by Sara Ahmed's *Differences That Matter. Feminist Theory and Postmodernism* (1998).

I agree with Brodzki and Schenck and their concern about the situating of the female subject in the literary text. The problem connected to this, as the authors point out, is how to avoid essentialism on the one hand and pure textuality on the other. Different solutions to this have been offered by feminist researchers, but, like the problem of the referentiality of a literary text, it is not solved.

Shoshana Felman has brought up an interesting aspect in reading women's autobiographies, that of the “taboo” of writing about a woman’s life in a public literary discourse. She provocatively suggests that women do not have an autobiography:

I will suggest that *none of us, as women, has as yet, precisely, an autobiography*. Trained to see ourselves as objects and to be positioned as the Other, estranged to ourselves, we have a story that by definition cannot be self-present to us, a story that, in other words, is not a story, but *must become* a story. And it cannot *become* a story except through the *bond of reading*, that is, through the *story of the Other* (the story read by other women, the story of other women, the story of women told by others), insofar as this story of the Other, as *our own* autobiography, *has as yet precisely to be owned*. (...) Rather ... we might be able to engender, or to access, our story only indirectly - by conjugating literature, theory, and autobiography together through the act of reading and by reading, thus, into the texts of culture, at once our sexual difference and our autobiography missing. (Felman 1993, 14)

According to Felman, women lack a model of autobiography which does not construct women’s experience of life according to or compared with the male norm of autobiography, or according to models of symbolic femininity.⁵⁵ To put it broadly, because the norm set by autobiographical literature is grounded on so called *general* human experience, which, as feminist theory has put forward, is based on *male* perception of world, it posits women as *other*, and, as others they constitute their autobiographies through their otherness. Feminist theorists have suggested various strategies for reading women’s writing which would take into account sexual difference.⁵⁶ Nancy K. Miller’s theoretical work (1988, 1996) has been pivotal for me in understanding the

⁵⁵ An interesting example that illustrates the difficulty of writing a woman’s autobiography in history is offered by Marguerite Yourcenar, who states in the notes on the writing of her well-known novel *Memoirs of Hadrian* that it would have been impossible for her to have a woman as a protagonist, because women’s life in that time was too restricted and too secretive. If a woman had told about her life, she would have been accused of not being a woman any more (See Yourcenar, Marguerite. 1984. *Hadrianuksen muistelmat*. Porvoo: WSOY, 306).

⁵⁶ See, for instance, the overview by Brodzki and Schenck (1988); for a recent “revision” of theories on women’s autobiography see Miller (1996) and Hyvärinen, Peltonen & Vilkkö (1998) for a discussion of gender in auto/biographical studies. Savkina offers an exhaustive overview of feminist theories on autobiography (2001).

historical and cultural consequences of the influence of the values connected with gender for women's writing. She has proposed a term feminist "overreading" of women's "underread" texts, which takes into account these values of a specific culture and society in the processes of the production and reading of literary texts.⁵⁷

Miller's theorizing on gender in literary production and reception offers also useful insights for the analysis of Russian women's autobiographies. Her fundamental assumption and argument is that women writers have had an altogether different relationship to authorship from men, and that this is explained by their different social, cultural and historical status (1988, 1996). Thus, Miller makes a principle distinction between male and female authorship, however, stressing that this difference is not caused directly by biology but it is a difference produced by their different relationship to cultural and literary symbolic power. In her theoretical writings Miller (1988, 4) examines how women are read and read themselves as writing subjects, the relations between "female authorship and literary history in a particular cultural context". As literary theorists have become more and more concerned with texts (as the quotation from Brodzki and Schenck demonstrated), it is crucial to be aware of the gender of the author. This is why Miller emphasises the notion of context and female authorship:

Because women have not had the same historical relation of identity to origin, institution, production that men have had, they have not, I think, (collectively) felt burdened by *too much* Self, Ego, cogito, etc. Because the female subject has juridically been excluded from the polis, hence decentered, "disoriginated", deinstitutionalized etc., her relation to integrity and textuality, desire and authority, displays structurally important differences from that universal position. (1988, 106)

Miller's answer to how to read female authors' texts is the theory of "gender-marked reading", which recognises and renders explicit the notion that reading and writing are gender-related activities, that there is no "neutral" reading to begin with. Miller's reading subject can identify and decipher the inscription of a female subject through the practice of gender-marked reading. A thorough exploration of the inscription of the female subject in reading is offered by Teresa de Lauretis's theory of the subject as an active producer of meaning.

Teresa de Lauretis in her theory of semiotics, subject and experience (1984) brings forth the significance of the social reality in which subjects are situated and the experience of the individual as important constituents of subjectivity. De Lauretis stresses that women's experience of social reality, of

⁵⁷ Nancy K. Miller's work on gender and autobiography has been discussed in Finnish literary and sociological research on auto/biography by Kosonen (1995) and Vilkkö (1997).

social practices, is based on the experience of sexuality, which determines gender. The question she poses is “how the experience of sexuality, in engendering one as female, does effect or construct what we may call a female subject” (ibid. 166-7). This calls forth a critical discussion of semiotics, which has addressed the question of the subject prominently. De Lauretis criticises the semiotic subject on the ground, that it is limited to “the ... linguistic, or language-determined, perspective”, which does not acknowledge that subjects are “concurrently and often contradictorily engaged in a plurality of heterogeneous experiences, practices, and discourses, where subjectivity and gender are constructed, anchored, or reproduced” (ibid. 171-172).⁵⁸ In other words, the theories de Lauretis criticises have, according to her, not taken into account the social reality which is experienced differently by subjects due to their different relationship to social symbolic systems.

De Lauretis criticises the semiotic method (to which the narratological method is connected) of analysing texts as “purely” cultural, “testable” products which have little to do with physical reality, with physical subjects.⁵⁹

The concept of experience is central in de Lauretis’s theory, where it is seen as constitutive of subjectivity and gender. Leaning on C.S. Peirce’s theory of meaning⁶⁰, experience, according to de Lauretis, is “an ongoing process by which subjectivity is constructed semiotically and historically” and, more accurately: “a complex of habits resulting from the semiotic interaction of ‘outer world’ and ‘inner world,’ the continuous engagement of a self or subject in social reality”. De Lauretis’ aim in her critique of semiotics is “to restore the body to ... the subject of semiosis” which had mostly relied on linguistic determination, excising the body, and sexuality (ibid. 182-3.)

To revert to the initial question quoted earlier, de Lauretis rephrases it now as

is the female subject one constituted in a particular kind of relation to social reality? by a particular kind of experience, specifically a particular experience of sexuality? And if we answer that, yes, a certain experience of sexuality does effect a social being which we may call the female subject; if it is that experience, that complex of habits, dispositions, associations and perceptions, which en-genders

⁵⁸ De Lauretis characterises Kristeva’s concept of the speaking subject as “narrowly linguistic”, because it does not pay enough attention to the social context of the subjects.

⁵⁹ This view, which de Lauretis criticises, has received critical attention not only in feminist theory, but also from other fields of literary theory and theory of narrative (see for instance Ridell 1992, Rojola 1991).

⁶⁰ Peirce stresses that the interpretants, or significate effects, of signs can be described in three classes: 1. *feeling* produced by the sign, 2. *energetic* interpretant - usually a mental effort, “an exertion upon the Inner World” produced by the first, and 3. *habit-change*, which is called forth through the mediation of the former two: “a modification of a person’s tendencies toward action, resulting from previous experiences or previous exertions” (de Lauretis 1984, 173-4).

one as female, then *that* is what remains to be analyzed, understood, articulated by feminist theory. (ibid. 182)

Feminism's practice of consciousness raising (the collective articulation of women's sexuality and gender) can, thus, be seen as a practice, "which has produced, and continues to elaborate, a radically new way of understanding the subject's relation to social-historical reality". According to de Lauretis, feminism has "effected a habit change in readers, spectators, speakers, etc." and through that created "a new social subject, women". (ibid. 185-6.) And, finally, we have an approach to the female subject and experience, which takes into account both semiotics and sexuality:

This is where the specificity of a feminist theory may be sought: not in femininity as a privileged nearness to nature, the body, or the unconscious..., not in female tradition simply understood as private, marginal and yet intact, outside of history but fully there to be discovered and recovered; not, finally, in the chinks and cracks of masculinity, the fissures of male identity or the repressed of phallic discourse; but rather in that political, theoretical, self-analyzing practice by which the relations of the subject in social reality can be rearticulated from the historical experience of women. (1984, 186)

Going through de Lauretis's theoretical thinking in her writing on semiotics and experience is fundamental for the theorizing of my own approach to analysing Russian women's autobiographical texts, which, as we shall see, come to articulate experiences of sexuality, body, and violence. To theorize the meaning of these representations, we need a literary, narrative theory which takes these representations into account, makes them visible in the interpretation of the texts. De Lauretis argues for the role of the reader as a "differentiated subject", a subject with body, that is, with distinct experiences of social reality.

This said, Nancy Miller's request for a "gender-marked" reading also becomes more comprehensible:

I would propose, then, the notion of gender-marked reading: a practice of the text that would recognize the status of the reader as a differentiated subject, a reading subject named by gender and commitment in a dialectics of identification to deciphering the inscription of a female subject. (Miller 1988, 57)

These theoretical constructs by de Lauretis and Miller (among others) stress the importance of reading for the representation of female subjectivity and experience formulated in texts, and bringing them to the realm of *literary* analysis, which tends to either exclude them or stigmatize them by naming them "women's issues".⁶¹

⁶¹ Kosonen is somewhat critical of this mode of reading, which she considers a "reading by a competent, feminist overreader", and points out that when reading women's fiction or autobiographies, the (feminist) researcher cannot bypass or escape the dominant culture and

I continue the theoretical ponderings on reading for sexual difference by asking, what it means to read these texts from the aspect of sexual difference: what does it mean to *read for difference*? The problem that occurs here is that connected with *representation* and *mimesis*. It can be said that locating the “female” in the name of the author - taking it as a guarantee of gender identity - the feminist reader (as defined above by Miller) in a way determines the sex of the signature in advance and *then* starts to interpret the text from the point of view of sexual difference. This theoretical approach has been criticised because, it is argued, the meaning of the sexual difference in a text is thus determined by the feminist reader in advance, and is based on an essentialist view of sex and gender⁶²; or because the reader takes the position of “the feminist overreader” who controls and thus authorizes the meaning of gender in the text (Kosonen 1995, 173). The feminist theorist Sara Ahmed formulates the danger included in “the sex of the signature” in the following passage:

Although the sex of the signature is assumed as already available in a pre-existing sexual and authorial identity, it remains inscribed by the feminist reader, projected as prior (already there) from the position of posterity. And, indeed, it is the question of the status of the feminist reader that may begin to complicate the notion that the sex of the signature is both prior and transparent, determining or guaranteeing the meaning of the text. (Ahmed 1998, 127)

Ahmed, then, continues that emphasising the gender of the signature is not “simply essentialist”; she argues that “essentialism is itself impossible as such”: “Any positing of pure essence always requires contingent and non-essential details and so is always already contaminated by its other.” (ibid. 91). Instead of assuming a direct, unmediated relation between “Woman” and “women”, the signifier and the subject-effect, Ahmed suggests the theorization of that relation as “over-determined”, that is, mutually defined in discourse, which can help to acknowledge how “the meanings of ‘woman’ become stabilised or fixed in time and space in a way which constitutes the boundaries of women as embodied subjects.” (ibid.):

Thinking of the relation between “woman” and embodiment in terms of over-determination ... is a direct critique of any attempt to empty the signifier woman from the open and complicated history of its enunciation which over-determines the lived, corporeal experiences of women. Woman, as signifier, becomes a trace of the weight of female bodies. (Ahmed 1998, 93)

male model completely (1995, 173-174). I find Kosonen’s critique justified, but it does not diminish the insight that the reader is the locus of interpretation, and influences the production of meaning of the text.

⁶² For instance, Miller (1988, 15-16) discusses the dilemma between “essentialism and theory” in feminist criticism of the 1970s-80s.

As was argued earlier, the inscribing of the sexual difference in women's texts helps to read the underread, that, which has been left unnoticed, unaccounted for, in the so-called gender-neutral reading. I already referred to Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan and her way of approaching literary narratives from the point of view of *accessibility*, a term which I conflate with the strategy of reading both for semiosis and mimesis - narration is neither representation nor mimesis, but an *act reaching* for both:

On the one hand, *access* means "approach," "passage," "channel," "doorway," implying the presence of some further space. By analogy, this suggests that narration opens or constitutes a direct approach to reality and subjectivity. (...) [On the other hand] From the point of view of ideological theories, narration can be seen as putting in motion an interaction between discursive practices, but ... I believe that the interaction issues in a gesture of substitution offering indirect access to a "world." The whole process, and in particular the final leap, requires - like the operation of "Access" - trust or faith governed by convention. (Rimmon-Kenan 1996, 20)

This means that the ontological question between "signifier" and "signified", "reality" and "representation" (which was first?) can be avoided (Rimmon-Kenan 1995, 29-30), and instead focus on the act of narrating, which is seen as "the only access to what is otherwise inaccessible" (Rimmon-Kenan 1996, 21).

In her feminist theory of text Ahmed formulates the notion of "in-between-ness", which denotes the textual relations between the woman writer and the woman reader. It is neither the signature nor the reading which guarantees the meaning of the sexual difference. The text offers the structural limitations for interpreting, but it is also open to different readings (Ahmed 1998, 128). The dual nature of discourse and language - as both signifier and signified - and the speaking subject - as both the subject of enunciation and the subject of utterance - mean that they are not fixed, but fluid. However, as Ahmed states, there are points of fixation which can be taken into account by the consideration of context. This happens by asking what the context of writing and reading of a text is. After this lengthy explanation about what it means to read for female subjectivity and experience, I can say that in my study this approach (of accessibility and in-between-ness) will be applied by contextualising the texts and their textual representations of female subjectivity in Russian culture and in the history of Russian women's writing.

1.2.2 Analytic Tools of Feminist Narratology

In analysing the narrative strategies of the texts I use terms borrowed from narratology. In order to combine the strategy of reading for female subjectivity a feminist revision of narratology is needed. Susan Lanser (1986) is one of the first to have combined feminism and narratology in literary studies.

The aim of her combination has been in asking, “whether feminist criticism ... might benefit from the methods and insights of narratology and whether narratology ... might be altered by the understandings of feminist criticism” (ibid. 342). Lanser seeks to combine through the application of these two approaches the mimetic and the semiotic aspects of literature, in other words, to acknowledge the dual nature of literary texts as representations of life and linguistic constructs (ibid. 344). Thus, a feminist narratology:

would reflect the mimetic as well as the semiotic experience that is the reading of literature, and it would study narrative in relation to a referential context that is simultaneously linguistic, literary, historical, biographical, social, and political. (ibid. 345)

My own use of narratological concepts in feminist reading of texts is less orientated to principally alter narratological method (as has been the case for Lanser and Miller⁶³), but I deem it important to make explicit, that “theory ... says more about the reader than about the text”, and therefore it is necessary to ask why, to what end certain aspects of the texts are highlighted. Thus it should be noted that the dividing of texts into narrative elements (such as plot, fabula, narrator, heroine, focalization etc.) is in itself artificial, because any literary text forms a unity of different elements, which are tightly connected with each other and together create the text and its meaning. To analyse separate factors helps to explicitly demonstrate *how* the text creates certain effects and meanings in the reader. A feminist narratological approach, as described above by Lanser, also helps to further explicate the meaning of certain narrative elements not just as pure textual elements, devoid of reference, but in connection with different referential contexts.

In her article on feminist narratology Lanser demonstrates the importance of the distinction between public and private narration when considering women’s texts. According to her, public narration means “narration (implicitly or explicitly) addressed to a narratee who is external”; private narration means narration “addressed to an explicitly designated narratee who exists ... within the textual world” (ibid. 352). This distinction is important because:

For women writers ... the distinction between private and public contexts is a crucial and a complicated one. Traditionally speaking, the sanctions against women’s writing have taken the form not of prohibitions to write at all but of prohibitions to write for a public audience. (Lanser 1986, 352)

⁶³ In a more recent article Lanser remarks that the inclusion of feminist theory in narratology has not proved a success: “[D]espite a decade of attention by a few narratologists, the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality have remained on the margins of narratological inquiry...” (1999, 168).

Although Lanser works on Anglo-American material, this notion also holds true in the case of Russian women's writing.⁶⁴ Lanser distinguishes yet another level between the private and the public: the semi-private, which means narration that is "private but is designed to be read as well by someone other than its officially designated narratee" (ibid. 353). Thus, a text may be public in that it comes to perform the female self through conventions designated for the public to read, but it also inscribes the restrictions of that performance for the female subject. What is noteworthy is that historically women have often chosen private forms of narration - letters, diaries, memoirs addressed to one's family (ibid.).

Although in the material I scrutinize, the autobiographical narration is intended to be public, in the sense that the texts have been meant to be published, this distinction - public/private, common/personal, the self/the time - has relevance in relation to the use of narrative strategies, the use of the first person narrative voice, in each text. The writers share a customary "public" status of a memoirist: they are either women in the public eye, dissidents, conservers of culture, or advocates of human rights. This is preserved and enhanced in the texts through the inscription of their name and/or their social status as an intellectual, ex-convict of the Gulag etc. On the other hand, their female experience stirs in the realm which has - traditionally, conventionally speaking - been perceived as private. The different public, private, semi-private levels of autobiographical narration employ different narrative strategies: these will be the object of narratological analysis. They are seen in connection with the "rhetorical context of narrative - its generic status and the public or private level of narration" (ibid. 357).

One of the important narrative aspects of autobiographical texts is the relationship between the author, narrator, and protagonist; the narrative voice of the texts. These concepts are combined in the narrative "I" (the first person narrator figures in each text of my material), but it is important to recognize that, in fact, the "I" who narrates is not the same as the narrated "I" or the author's "I". These are different narrative levels, which are linked with the help of the narrative voice, the "I".

In this study I analyse the different narrative levels for the representation of the female "I". In order to discern the differences between the narrative levels, the concept of *focalization* is useful. The different narrative perspectives are focalized through one narrative voice, the voice of the narrator. According to Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (1991/1983, 94-95), focalization and narration are always separate in first-person retrospective narratives. The focalization may be external - the narrative perspective is that of the first person narrator at the moment of writing - or internal - the narrative perspective is that of the first person narrator at the moment of the narrated events. It may be, however,

⁶⁴ See, e.g. Savkina 1998.

difficult to say exactly whether the focalizer is external or internal (ibid. 97). Logically, the focalizer in autobiographical and memoir narratives is always external; however, the narrator can focus voice and perception through the figure of the “past self” and his or her experiences as a rhetorical device. There are also different levels of focalization which have different functions: perceptual, psychological, ideological (ibid. 99-109).

I place special emphasis on the structure of the plot⁶⁵ in these texts. All of the texts share some features of a specific kind of development story. Most notably, the Gulag testimony by Petkevič, the development of an artist by Pliseckaja and the feminist *Bildungsroman* by Arbatova; Gerštejn’s text remains less coherent in this sense, but as we shall see below, the development of the first person narrator can be read in it. Bonnèr’s text concentrates on her childhood, but it represents important features of her identity as an adult, and in this sense represents a continuation between the past and the self. The fabula⁶⁶ of the narratives bears a resemblance to a development story, where the “hero” overcomes obstacles, which leads to a gradual growing of consciousness and finding of one’s identity, which may or may not lead to the hero’s adaptation to society. However, what *happens* in the story of the female protagonists’ life is not equivalent to crossing a boundary between the internal and external sphere or of developing, *changing* in the classic manner of a protagonist in, for instance, a *Bildungsroman*, or a mythical text (de Lauretis 1987, 43).

According to de Lauretis, Juri Lotman’s theory of plot represents the mythical hero always as male, “regardless of the character’s gender”, because the obstacle (sphinx, dragon, sorceress, villain) is morphologically female. “Female” is the space where the action takes place, and which the hero needs to penetrate in order to move to another space (ibid.), or reach the stage of final change (death, home).⁶⁷

Susan S. Lanser notes that theories of plot based on Propp’s morphology, presume that it is the heroes’ intentional deeds that lead to textual

⁶⁵ In the structuralist analysis of literary texts scholars have differentiated two aspects of the events of the texts and their succession. I use the term “plot” to refer to the form of the events’ “exposition, the order in which they are communicated in the work” - Tomaševskij uses the term *sujet* in the same meaning. The other level of events is that of “the sum total of interconnected events communicated in a work” which is called fabula (Russ. *фабула*). (See Томашевский 1925, *Теория литературы*, Л., 137; cited in Lotman, Jurij 1977/1971. *The Structure of the Artistic Text*. University of Michigan, 232.)

⁶⁶ See the previous note.

⁶⁷ “Female is what is not susceptible to transformation, to life or death; she (it) is an element of plot-space, a topos, a resistance, matrix and matter.” (ibid. 43-44.) For instance, in a mythical prototype of a *Bildungsroman* the son sets out to find his father, and thereby, his true identity. After finding it he returns home and reintegrates into society. In a modern version the possibility of an autonomous identity is rejected and the antihero remains alienated from society. His journey is nevertheless accounted for as ironic and absurd, which points to his superiority of society. (Ferguson 1983, 228.)

activity - the crossing of the boundary or the surpassing of the obstacle; “they assume a power, a possibility, that may be inconsistent with what women have experienced both historically and textually, and *perhaps inconsistent even with women’s desires*” (1986, 356, italics MR).

Lanser (1986, 357) outlines in her theory of feminist narratology a different notion of plot in connection with women’s texts and suggests that for the female subject “[t]he act of writing becomes the fulfillment of desire... (...) Communication, understanding, being understood, becomes not only the objective of the narration but the act that can transform ... the narrated world.” In other words, the communicative act of narrating (female experience) may be viewed as a theory of plot which takes into account the sexual difference. This formulation of narration as a communicative act remains somewhat elusive (in principle every act of narration is communication). However, if we explain what is meant by sexual difference and gender in this connection, that is, locate the difference not *in* the text but in the context of the production of meaning, we may better formulate the specificity of the difference in question, as pointed out by de Lauretis:

For the female subject, finally, gender marks the limit of deconstruction... (...) This is precisely the insistent emphasis of feminist criticism: gender must be accounted for. It must be understood not as a “biological” difference that lies before or beyond signification, or as a culturally constructed object of masculine desire, but as semiotic difference - a different production of reference and meaning... (de Lauretis 1987, 48)

Thus, the context of producing reference and meaning should be considered from the historical perspective of gender. This brings to mind what researchers of Russian women’s writing in the late and post-Soviet period have put forward. That the specific female difference is based on the recognition of the suppression of the other in the prevailing culture, and of the women writers’ project of starting to formulate this other, female, as their own lived experience, and see this in contrast to the Soviet model of a heroine, who is constructed according to the male norm of serving the common cause, becoming the equal of man, notwithstanding her sexuality, her duty in the private realm of home as a wife and a mother. (Cf. Parnell 2000, Gabriëljan 1996, Rovenskaja 2000.)

My analysis of the women’s autobiographical texts will discuss what Felman formulated in the above quotation; that women do not yet have an autobiography, or we do not know exactly what this autobiography might be like. However, a story of a woman’s life can be constructed through the bond of reading. The reading strategy to be used takes into account the meaning of sexual difference in signification process, because women’s stories are not self-present, but must be constructed. Thus, what is at stake in this study is to move towards understanding how (structurally, thematically) these texts represent female subjectivity and experience.

The women's texts I am dealing with address issues concerning the past of the nation of the "we", from which the writing subject the "I" is a part. Thus the autobiographies are not stories of individuation, but of "... discovery of a past which is absent from the surface [and] involves a community" (Ahmed 1998, 137).

In these texts an important aspect in the relation between the "I" and the "we" is the narration of the experience of violence: in childhood, in a prison camp, in the family, in society, in art, in human relations. This violence is structured hierarchically and is transmitted through relations between parents and children, the state and the individual, men and women. It also has the aspect of the subordination of female sexuality and female sexualization in a society based on patriarchal values.

This hierarchic relation is transmitted through different intersubjective levels in family, in institutions, in cultural production, and it is part of the corporeal experiences of women, which are constructed in the autobiographical texts. This does not mean that *female* experience is equal to body, nature or sexuality.⁶⁸ What is meant by "corporeality" as a strategy in feminist theory, is that the subject constitutes his/her identity, his/her experience in the community through his/her place in it; the first place in the world and the first situation in reality one occupies is one's body. The body understood in this way is not reducible to biology or restricted by social conditioning: it is a border, a surface in which material and symbolic processes overlap and are constructed into forms of power and knowledge. (Braidotti 1993/1991, 171; see also Moi 1999, 63, et passim.)

This strategy, then, opens up an opportunity for producing alternative forms of knowledge and representations of subjectivity (Braidotti 1993/1991, 171). In this way the autobiographical texts under discussion here can be seen as involved with both the history of gender and the history of nation. How the representations of female corporeal experiences can be interpreted in each text and how do they relate with each other - this is the subject in the next chapter. In the texts I analyse how the writers constitute their own female identity. A route to answering this question is taken by tracing the story of the female

⁶⁸ Thus, corporeality and representation of experiences of body as such are not an aspect of primarily *women's* texts, but also an equally significant part of men's texts. Here, however, I am interested in exploring the specific instance of representing corporeal experiences in women's autobiographical texts and their relation to the material and symbolic hierarchies between genders.

development represented in the texts and contrasting it to the prevailing images of femininity in Russian culture.

2 Contextualising the Autobiographical Texts

In this chapter I strive to contemplate what it means to read the texts I have chosen for analysis from the perspective of constructing female subjectivity in literary discourse. First, I approach the meaning of gender in connection with female subjectivity in Russian literary context, where “women’s literature” has conventionally been a derogatory concept on the one hand, and feminine images have been prominent national symbolism of culture on the other.¹ Second, I will look at the “tradition” of women’s autobiographical writing in Russia: what function it has fulfilled for writers, what the restrictions have been, and how the objects of research can be placed in this field.²

2.1 Female Subjectivity in the Russian Literary Context

Historically female authorship and women’s literature in Russia have often had a weak, marginalized status in the dominant cultural sphere.³ At the end of the 1980s a group of female writers joined together behind a common programme declaring the existence and importance of women’s literature, a term historically connected with the status of second-rate writing, and claiming their place in literature as “writing women”, promoting their own ways of expressing themselves, and seeking for a connection with their female predecessors.⁴ Traditionally and stereotypically the notion of women’s literature is understood as writing about love, romance, about “women’s issues”, which document merely the personal concerns of a woman writer, which are not of interest in literature.⁵

In literary history the prominent images of “Woman” have often been created by male authors. Women authors and their literary images have remained in the margins of literary institutions (Burkhart 1983; Heldt 1987; Kelly 1994; Savkina 1998, 2001; Rosenholm 1999). In the field of literary and cultural production female authors encounter images of symbolic femininity created for and of them - like, for instance, the myth of a strong woman - when they set out to create their own images of themselves.

¹ Of course this is not to say that this is a particularly Russian phenomenon. Rather I seek to justify the interpretations I have made of the texts of the representation of female subjectivity and sexuality and its significance in this cultural context.

² Looking into “traditions” and themes of Russian women’s autobiographical writing here is not, to borrow Leigh Gilmore’s expression, meant to depend on the notion of “a shared female experience” or to “locate female identity and experience in a unitary, transhistorical and unifying grounds of meaning” (see Gilmore 1994, xii).

³ Cf. Kelly (1994, 2-3); Savkina (1994, 5); Goscilo (1996, 16); Marsh (1996, 13).

⁴ Cf. Vasilenko’s story about the formation of the first Russian women’s collective effort at publishing (2000). See also, for instance, Gabriëljan (1996, 42), Rovenskaja (2000), and Žerebkina (2003, 61).

⁵ See Lipovskaya (1994, 131), and further below.

Autobiographical writing has offered both a rather conventional pattern for the representation of feminine identity in culture and a passage-way for the representation of female experience. In other words, to borrow Holmgren on Čukovskaja's and Mandel'shtam's memoirs, the authority attached to the feminine role of the preserver of the Russian intelligentsia's cultural values gave these female writers a specific subject position connected with feminine ideals of care-taking and self-sacrifice in Russian culture. However, the writers used this position in an innovative way: "...they moved from the position of self-declared caretakers to (undeclared) creators of influential cultural/political texts *and* a new kind of dissident community" (Holmgren 1993, 26).

"Woman" and femininity form symbolic images in Russian culture.⁶ The "strong woman" in Soviet fiction performed the function being a sign for equality and the specific Russian "oneness" (cf. Dunham 1960, 482). During and after *perestroika* writing on the role of woman as a wife and mother, the guardian of the home and family values, considered this female position a crucial constituent of the moral and ethical values of society.⁷ In her book *Soil and Soul* Elena Hellberg-Hirn contemplates the central feminine symbols connected with Russia as Motherland, and Mother Russia. She points out that the notion of nation understood as Motherland indicates an understanding of the origin of the nation in a timeless, natural way: "... [T]he myth of Motherland ultimately refers to the nation seen as a metaphorical family, whose time... is non-historical" (1998, 112). Hellberg-Hirn notes that motherhood forms a central constituent in Russian tradition (ibid. 116-7): it prevails through the ages,

⁶ Representations of feminine symbolics in the Russian context have been discussed by Oleg Rjabov in his book *Matuška Rus'* (2001), which is entirely dedicated to this theme and by Elena Hellberg-Hirn in her book *Soul and Soil. The Symbolic World of Russianness* (1998) especially in the chapter "Mother Russia: Soil and Soul". Both works analyse historical and philosophical writings and cultural imagery of Russianness and the identity of Russians, the symbols usually connected with Russian national identity as well as literary and popular representations of it. In my discussion of literary representations the symbolic images play a certain role in the form of a metanarrative of the symbolic meanings attached to femininity in Russian culture.

⁷ Conservative writers held that Soviet women, who had long been working for the state, should resume their (domestic) roles as the guardians of moral values and transmit them to children. See, for instance, writing by Valentin Rasputin (1990) and Tatjana Okulova (1990). According to Olga Voronina (1994, 135-137) this was a more general view in debates about the nature of a "real" woman (as opposed to "Soviet") during *perestroika*: "The main point ... is to remind women that it is they who are the guardians of the home fires, that their place is in the home, but at the same time they should not forget that the head of the family is of course the man" (ibid. 137). Incidentally, the topic was also touched upon in *Литературная газета* (Literary Gazette, 41/2002) in a contribution called "Чего же хочет женщина" (What does the woman want), in which the writer expresses his concern about the moral decay of contemporary women, the concern behind this being, what will happen to "us", for the woman has always been the guardian of morality.

but mutated into various forms, which reflect the changing functions of the Mother image (ibid. 120). According to Hellberg-Hirn:

[i]n the course of recent Russian history, the ambivalence of the Soviet and post-Soviet modernization project and the vagaries of nationalist discourse are reflected in changing portrayals of women as victims of social backwardness, icons of modernity, or privileged bearers of cultural authenticity. (Hellberg-Hirn 1998, 124)

Thus, symbolic femininity, “Woman”, comes to represent social change in a *passive* way, as a victim, an icon, or bearer of culture. Woman represents images of nation as a mother, bearer of tradition, ethnicity and origin, which involve and reinforce the idea of a natural national identity, guaranteed through birth and blood. However, the images of “Mother Russia” as Hellberg-Hirn continues, are dominated by male voices and male views, and there are few active female voices to be heard (ibid. 130). Despite their centrality in iconography, women are usually on the margins of polity⁸: they are other.

Traditionally in Russia the combination “women’s literature” has been equated with second-rate literature about women’s petty issues in life, which are of no interest in so-called serious literature. For example, Russian women writers in the 1860s were criticised because of their “inability” to separate life and work; according to literary critics women’s works on their everyday lives were very interesting in life but boring and trivial in literature, and the critics’ opinion was that it was more difficult for women writers to free themselves of their own “I” than it was for men writers (Rosenholm 1999, 351).

For comparison it is interesting what the following critic says about women’s prose in the 1990s:

...[Ж]енское так и остается женским, то есть личностное отношение к жизни из-за инерции отрицания, малого жизненного опыта так и не было преодолено, обобщения художественного жизни так и не явилось, а вместо литературы остается личность, документ о личности (Kiljakov 1996, 110)⁹

Thus, according to Kiljakov, a literary critic of the 1990s, women writers are not capable of separating themselves from their own personal lives and turning this into literature, quite similarly to what critics complained about in the second half of the 19th century. Kiljakov takes the view that women’s texts are

⁸ See Yuval-Davis, Nira 1997. *Gender and Nation*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications; and Gordon, Tuula 2002. *Kansallisuuden fyysiset, sosiaaliset ja mentaaliset rajat. Sukupuolitetut rajat. Gendered Borders and Boundaries*. Komulainen, Katri (toim.). Joensuun yliopisto. *Psykologian tutkimuksia* 22. Joensuu: University of Joensuu. 15-37.

⁹ “...[W]oman remains woman, that is because of lack of abnegation and scarcity of life experience the personal relation to life could not be transcendent, life could not be turned into artistic quality. Instead of literature we have a person, a document of a personality.”

without artistic generalization of life, they remain documents about the female self. The question remains, what would be wrong with that? The women writers' group, Новые амазонки/ The New amazons, emerged as and from the protest *against* derogatory notions about women's literature and sought to represent just that: women's perspective on the world and themselves (cf. Vasilenko 2000, 33; Žerebkina 2003, 61). The notion quoted above stands on the hierarchically structured binary opposition between symbolic masculinity and femininity: the masculine/male is associated with the general, common for "all humanity", the feminine/female as exceptional, specific and personal.

The observations presented above imply that literary texts are produced not in a void, but in a certain cultural context which is structured according to social and symbolic systems of value. Braidotti's description of the function of the term gender elucidates these systems and their working:

As such, "gender" in feminist theory primarily fulfills the function of challenging the universalistic tendency of critical language and of the systems of knowledge and scientific discourse at large. This tendency consists in conflating the masculine viewpoint with the general, "human" standpoint, thereby confining the feminine to the structural position of "other." Thus, the masculine qua human is taken as the "norm," and the feminine qua other is seen as marking the "difference." The corollary of this definition is that the burden of sexual difference falls upon women, marking them off as the second sex, or the structural "other," whereas men are marked by the imperative of carrying the universal. The symbolic division of labor between the sexes, which the term "gender" helps to explain, is the system set up by phallogocentrism, which is the inner logic of patriarchy. In other words, this system is neither necessary as in historically inevitable, nor is it rational as in conceptually necessary. It simply *has come to be*, as the powerful foundations of a system in which we are all constructed as either men or women by certain symbolic, semiotic, and material conditions. (1994, 151-2)

That "the masculine qua human is taken as the 'norm,' and the feminine qua other is seen as marking the 'difference'" - this has been a prevailing constituent of the Russian literary context. This situation is described by Nina Gabriëljan (1996) with the help of a linguistic-cultural context. She points out that in Russian grammar the masculine gender represents the general human form (incorporating, thus, both genders), whereas the feminine gender is designated only for women. She states that

...грамматика в неявном виде отражает тенденцию рассматривать женщину (и весь женский символичный ряд) как нечто недолжное и частное, которое необходимо держать под контролем общего, главного - мужского, иногда - за счет поглощения этого частного женского общечеловеческим мужским. (Gabriëljan 1996, 39.)¹⁰

¹⁰ "...the grammar indirectly reflects the tendency to consider woman (and the whole feminine symbolisim) as something unnecessary and separate, which has to be controlled by the

Further, Gabriëljan demonstrates that during the Soviet era there was a connection between political discourse - strict regulation of all human spheres of activity - and latent discrimination of the feminine which occurred as the double exploitation of women's labour at home and at work, as absence of an independent women's movement, as lack of tolerance towards dissidence and experiments in the arts, and most of all, towards stylistics, which were defined pejoratively as "feminine" (ibid. 42).

The latter circumstance is exemplified by short autobiographical texts of women writers from the provinces¹¹ who account for their difficult path to a literary career and recognition. Some of the contradictions between the official notions and a woman writer's identity can be traced in the account of Marina Lišanskaja on her work:

Пишу короткие рассказы на так называемые "женские темы" (...) То есть, пишу на те темы, которые в советской литературе всегда считались "мелкими". (...) Вопреки насаждаемому мнению, что нет "женской" и "мужской" литературы, а есть литература плохая и хорошая, уверена: женская литература, литература со своей тематикой и своим, женским взглядом на мир - есть, и считаю, что именно сейчас и именно в нашей стране ее значение должно возрасти. (Skvorcova-Akbulatova 1995, 217-218)

I write short stories on so-called "women's issues" (...) That is, I write about themes that in the Soviet literature were always considered "petty". (...) Against the prevailing opinion that there is no "women's" or "men's" literature, but only literature that is good or bad, I'm certain: women's literature, which has its own thematics and own, female perspective - exists, and I think that precisely now and precisely in our country its meaning is bound to increase. (Skvorcova-Akbulatova 1995, 217-218)

The reason for the need for a specific "women's literature" as defined by Lišanskaja, is the collapse of established values, ideologies and truths, promoted through the official political rhetoric.¹² In a similar vein Kelly (1994) and Holmgren (1994, 143) suggest that with the disappearance of the political oppositions, there was more space for women's writing, which does not conform to the political and social demands but represents a different kind of experience

general, essential - the masculine, sometimes incorporating this separate, feminine with the human masculine."

¹¹ *Русская душа. Сборник поэзии и прозы современных писательниц русской провинции.* (The Russian Soul. Anthology of poetry and prose by contemporary women writers from the Russian provinces, Skvorcova-Akbulatova (ed.) 1995). For a more detailed discussion on them see Rytönen (2002).

¹² Cf. the manifesto of *Novye amazonki* in their anthologies: "[Ж]енская проза есть. (...) Она существует как неизбежность, продиктована временем и пространством./ Women's prose exists. (...) Its existence is a necessity, dictated by the time and the place" (quoted in Vasilenko 2000, 31).

of womanhood.¹³ For example, the poet N. Sidorova writes that her literary biography was greatly influenced by the fact that she had been seriously ill since childhood: she had not been able to attend state education, but had had to remain at home, bedridden. Sidorova considers, however, that this isolated circumstance gave her a certain benefit; freedom from ideological constraints:

В этом скованном, уединенном моем положении была и хорошая сторона. Я оказалась свободна от влияния идеологической пропаганды, которой были пронизаны все сферы образования и культуры в Советском Союзе. Я была свободна в выборе своих интересов и читала то, что мне хотелось. (...) Первые свои стихи я увидела в районной и областной печати в 1972 году. Это была лирика - стихи, наполненные личными чувствами и переживаниями. В те годы у нас существовало убеждение, что литература и искусство должны своими художественными средствами поддерживать линию коммунистической партии. Все, что противоречило этому закону, не имело право на жизнь, а все, что было лишено определенной гражданской позиции, оставалось как бы в тени, без внимания и поддержки официальной критики. (Skvortsova-Akbulatova 1995, 44-5)

This fettered, isolated situation of mine also had a positive side. I was free from the influence of ideological propaganda, which permeated every sphere of education and culture in the Soviet Union. I was free to choose my interests and I read what I wanted. (...) My first poems I saw in district and regional print in 1972. It was lyrics, poems full of personal emotions and experiences. In those years we had a conviction that literature and art should with their artistic methods support the policy of the communist party. Everything which contradicted this law had no right to exist, and everything which was devoid of a certain civic position, remained as if in the shadow, without the attention or support of the official criticism. (Skvortsova-Akbulatova 1995, 44-5)

Her bedridden condition, tied within the private sphere of home, is paradoxically perceived by her as freedom: freedom to choose according to her own interest, freedom to write what she wanted. The writer stresses the contradiction between her own interests and the official propaganda which permeated education and culture. It comes about that with the expiring of the

¹³ Thus, Kelly (1994) suggests that the new situation during *perestroika* for many women writers, who had been writing on “apolitical” themes - family, home, human relations - was more favourable than for men writers who had established themselves during the Soviet period. Andrej Bitov’s commentary on the situation produced by *glasnost* gives an illustrative example of how important the “system” was as a “co-author” of his works (see Bitov 1999, 428: “...я все потерял, когда стало все можно/ ...I lost everything when everything became allowed”). As Holmgren (1994, 143) points out, at the beginning of the 1990s “...women writers have grown more numerous and ... more respected in Russian prose... (...) Indeed, we may be witnessing a very productive moment for the ascendancy of women writers as the old binary opposition of official versus dissident is crumbling into a multitude of political platforms and special interest groups.”

official propaganda and ideology, there opens up more, or at least a different space for the kind of writing she had produced.

However, it is also evident that Russian women writers form quite a heterogeneous group when it comes to attitudes towards “women’s literature”. A well-known example is Ljudmila Petruševskaja (born 1938) whose texts are most highly valued in literary criticism and very often considered (by feminist researchers) as representing a female perspective. However, her own definition of her works marks them as “male prose” and not “women’s literature”.¹⁴ Another prominent prose writer, Marina Palej, (born 1955) describes in an essay¹⁵ her experimentation with gender identities in her writing. True, she calls this not “experiment” but “freedom from gender”, that is, Palej suggests that when she writes about a male protagonist it has nothing to do with gender and everything to do with “being human”. Palej takes the view that as a professional writer she can rid herself of her gender, which happens precisely with the help of grammatically masculine forms of language. (Palej 1997.)

Are these notions of Petruševskaja and Palej examples of conforming to prevailing notions about the “second-rate status” of women’s writing, or a result of a desire for both identification and separation from the prevailing values, is a question of its own, but they do illuminate the cultural context around female agency and subjectivity in Russia.¹⁶

In her article on the works of contemporary Russian women writers of different generations¹⁷, Christina Parnell presents a thesis that these texts bring out not so much a *deconstruction* of gender roles in Russian culture, but a *reconstruction* of sexual difference. As Parnell points out, this difference does not go back to a dichotomy between male and female, man and woman, but is based on the representation of the biological and social experience of women:

In diesem Sinne wird Weiblichkeit im Werk russischer Autorinnen als andere Erfahrung innerhalb der symbolischen Ordnung beschrieben und erkundet, deren Bedeutung sich nicht aus der Gegensetzung zum Männlichen (in seinem

¹⁴ See Sigrid McLaughlin’s essay in *The Dictionary of Russian Women Writers*, where it is stated that Petruševskaja argues that “[t]here is no existential difference between men and women” and “[w]hile writing, the author must become genderless” (1994, 505).

¹⁵ In English: “The Development of My Creativity: The Road to Freedom Beyond Gender” (see Palej 1997).

¹⁶ Cf. Rovenskaja (2000): “[Б]олезненный, внутренне противоречивый и неустойчивый симбиоз следования традиции и, одновременно, пафоса сопротивления с ней, преодоления ее отражает суть явления современной женской прозы, а также произведений писательниц, рассматриваемых вне ее контекста./ ...[A] morbid, inwardly contradictory and unstable symbiosis of conforming to tradition and, simultaneously, of resisting it, surpassing it, reflects the essence of the phenomenon of contemporary women’s prose, and works by women writers who consider themselves beyond this definition.”

¹⁷ Parnell discusses works by Eva Datnova (born 1975), Elena Sazanovič (born 1964), Nina Sadur (born 1950), Svetlana Vasilenko (born 1956).

ontologischen Verständnis) herleitet, sondern als Verkörperung von echter Differenz die Opposition “männlich”/ “weiblich” unterläuft. (Parnell 2000, 159)¹⁸

Parnell suggests that contemporary Russian women writers are not apt to represent the constructive character of gender identity; to deconstruct the gender difference; but instead are inclined to trace in their texts what has so far, for various social and historic-cultural reasons, been suppressed or excluded as the Other, which includes the female; and to perceive this otherness in their texts.¹⁹ Likewise Gabriëljan (1996, 41-42) contends that during the Soviet era the priorities and aims defined by that regime had a military character, associated with masculinity and patriarchy; it is thus no surprise that in the late 1980s feminist and women’s movement emerged and anthologies of women’s writing appeared one after another. As Gabrieljan writes, many writers of these anthologies strived to

...вырваться за пределы той ситуации, когда женщина видит себя исключительно глазами мужчины, а не своими собственными, перестать копировать мужское перо, но реализовать в своем творчестве те качества, которые закодированы в патриархальной культуре как женские. (1996, 42)²⁰

In the previous chapter I discussed the importance of considering the meaning of gender in the signification process, and referred, among others, to Nancy K. Miller’s theory of “gender-bound” reading (see Miller 1988, 57). The notion of gender-bound reading is based on the hypothesis that there *is* something to be represented, and that the act of narrating engages the narrating subject in interaction between literary images and their own constructions of reality. In addition, it is the reader who is to differentiate the text, the subject and the meaning in gendered terms (ibid.). The tracing of the specifically female can be read, according to Parnell, based on the idea of searching for an independent subject with her own experience, without suppressing the other (Parnell 2000, 161). Parnell calls this the moment of genuine difference (*echte Differenz*), which is not based on binary patterns of thought and perception (ibid.), but on the author’s construction of real (lived, corporeal) experience. The idea of

¹⁸ “In this sense femininity in Russian women’s texts is described and explored as another experience in the symbolic order, the meaning of which is not derived from the masculine (in its ontological understanding) but as an embodiment of a real difference it negates the opposition masculine/feminine.”

¹⁹ “Aufgrund zahlreicher sozialer und kulturhistorischer Hintergründe steht für die russischen Autorinnen einfach nicht die Frage, Geschlechtsidentität als konstruiert zu erkennen, d.h. die *fließenden Grenzen* eines mit sich nicht identischen weiblichen Subjekts darzustellen, sondern es geht darum, dem bislang unterdrückten Anderen, und dazu gehört das Weibliche, Gestalt zu geben.“ (Parnell 2000, 160-161)

²⁰ “...break away from a situation where woman sees herself through the eyes of man, and not through her own eyes, stop copying male writing, and begin to realise in her own work those features, which have been encoded in the patriarchal culture as feminine.”

“working out special ways of perceiving, of feeling and thinking, that have been marginalised by the Soviet symbolic order” (Rosenholm 2002) is also useful in the reading of the material I am working with. I have observed that in the women’s autobiographical texts I am reading the authors strive to represent their own, lived experience in order to reconstruct a coherent picture of the self, and not to deconstruct identity in their writing (Rytkönen 2000). This resonates with what was earlier said about women writers’ search for self-identification in contemporary prose texts: the process of self-identification through the text becomes a central constituent of the text (Rovenskaja 2000).

As numerous researchers have observed, women’s prose works in the last decade, especially those published in specific anthologies, represent female protagonists and their experience in a way that has occasioned the recognizing of these texts as a specific phenomenon in Russian literature (Savkina 1994, Goscilo 1996 and 2002, Gabrieljan 1996, Azhgikhina 2000, Rovenskaja 2000). Many researchers have also recognized the sombre aesthetics of this representation, connected with female experiences of everyday reality, sexuality, psychosocial circumstances. As, for example, Rovenskaja (2000) notes:

Женскую прозу конца 80-х можно сравнить с пациентом психотерапевтического сеанса, пришедшим лечиться от бессонницы, решившимся на честный и искренний разговор о себе, и неожиданно с недоумением и брезгливостью рассматривающим открывшуюся в процессе самоанализа катастрофическую картину выжженной пустыни собственного “я”. (...) Более того, самоидентификация становится одной из главных целей женского литературного творчества в целом.²¹

In my discussion of the five texts which are the objects of the research in this study, similar observations come to the fore: writing about past times and past experiences opens up a therapeutic discussion about the self.²² The texts of my material and the texts Rovenskaja’s article deals with relate to the same cultural moment in history, the same cultural situation for women writers. The specific features of this cultural situation emerged in the observations above are the need for a specific “women’s literature” after the collapse of established values, ideologies and truths, promoted through the official political rhetoric; the

²¹ “Women’s prose at the end of the 1980s can be compared with a patient attending a psychotherapeutic session, who has come to seek for a cure for insomnia, and decided to have an honest and frank discussion about herself, and who suddenly with confusion and revulsion realizes the catastrophic picture of the burnt desert which is her ‘self’. (...) Beyond this, self-identification becomes one of the main targets of female literary creativity as a whole.”

²² A similar observation is made in Mihail Zolotonosov’s review of the recently published collection of stories *Брызги шампанского. Новая женская проза/ Sprinkling Champagne. New Women’s Prose* (2003). The critic says he had to consult a psychotherapist (!) in order to be assured that the hopelessness and despair the women’s stories represented was in fact “realistic” (Zolotonosov 2003). That the critic had to verify the “validity” of the stories is symptomatic of the attitudes to women’s writing.

demise of the official propaganda and ideology, which has opened up more, or at least a different space for that kind of writing; the sombre aesthetics of the representations connected with female experiences of everyday reality, sexuality, psychosocial circumstances. Another interesting observation, made by Žerebkina (2003, 65), is that much of late and post-Soviet women's writing uses authorial practices of the autobiographical genre.

If we take seriously the observation that women's writing - published in the 1980s-90s - fulfills a *therapeutic* function - as an honest and frank discussion about oneself -, a project of self-analysis, during which the subject discovers "a catastrophic landscape of a burnt desert" - then we might consider this aspect a significant phenomenon of women's writing, which merits closer analysis.

The expression by the memoirist, Marija Konisskaja, in her text "Злые годы - Severe Years" graphically describes the task of reconstructing the experience, and the representative practices used in this task. The memoirist-narrator mentions as an impetus for writing that her children have urged her to write "about everything".²³ From the narrative it can be concluded that Konisskaja is an educated, intellectual woman and a painter. She describes her experiences in the siege of Leningrad during the Second World War, and starts her narrative with a familiar proclamation: "Давно пора сесть за стол и записать все, что было/ It's about time to sit down and write all that happened then" (Konisskaja 1992, 65). The author's aim in writing is not literary, but, as she notes: "Я же хочу только отметить ход событий и очень боюсь описывать литературно, художественно. Это не в моих возможностях и не в моих задачах/ I only want to write down the course of events and dread to deliver a literary, artistic description. That is not possible for me nor is that my task." (ibid. 79). The writer here denies any fictional aspect in her writing, which is only aimed at being a descriptive account of the course of events, which have occurred in her life and which she has perceived. The question is of memory and the past, of the tragedies of war and Stalin's time.

The narrative is, indeed, plain and unembellished, which at times strikes the reader as disturbing, even repulsive. As the narrator mentions, there are many descriptions of the siege of Leningrad but: "езде много неправды и нет правды/ they contain lies and no truth" (ibid. 65). The motivation is thus twofold: to tell what was, and to tell it authentically. The need to tell her own story arises from the contradiction the narrator has observed between her own experiences and the literary descriptions of the siege written later. The description especially of the people as heroic during that time is criticised by Konisskaja: she does not recognize herself in those heroic people described in the stories told about the siege of Leningrad. She notes that perhaps "...это только мы и только те люди, которых я наблюдала, такие *не героические*,

²³ This evokes a resemblance with Natal'ja Dolgorukaja's well-known memoirs of the 18th century (cf. Hammerberg 2003, 93).

вернее, не такие героические, какими описаны ленинградцы в напечатанных позднее мемуарах/ ...it's only we and only those people I observed who are *not heroic*, or rather, not so heroic as the Leningrad people in the memoirs published later” (Konisskaja 1992, 65, italics in the original). The emphasis on the word “heroic” draws attention to the contradiction between the national myth of the heroism of the Soviet people during World War II, and the perception the narrator has of the same events. The narrator rejects the heroism ascribed to her as a survivor of the siege of Leningrad, she does not recognize herself from that myth, nor does she wish to construct her experience by referring to it.

The plain mode of writing in Konisskaja’s narrative is emphasised and especially effective in describing the everyday life of the protagonist during the siege, her evacuation to Ukraine, her transport to Germany and her return home, repatriated after the war. She describes her life in the country in “primitive” conditions with two children, how she was treated by the Germans and, after her return home, by her fellow-citizens.²⁴

It could be said that the striving to describe only the course of events, using no literary or fictional device, as the narrator claims, turns against itself. Exactly because of the lack of literary euphemisms the impact of the described scenes is very “literary”, at times even surrealistic. The narrator seeks to distance herself from previous literary descriptions (which she finds untrue), and just “document” what she has gone through in those years. Because of the dynamic definition of literary, or fiction²⁵, it becomes practically impossible to draw a clear distinction between fiction and so-called non-fiction. It might be suggested that we need to move towards a different understanding of aesthetics in relation to such texts as Konisskaja’s, or, those of Varlam Šalamov.²⁶ However, in the case of recent Russian women’s writing, we might be inclined to acknowledge that there is a need for different epistemological conceptions, taking account of gender. Helena Goscilo (1996, 91) states that Russian women’s writing published in the 1980s and 1990s does not follow the lines sketched by Russian classics for the female body and female experience: in their texts the heroines are often ugly, dirty, bloody, they suffer from alcoholism,

²⁴ The narrator describes how she was beaten by her German hosts: “Пинками и ударами они вытолкнули меня во двор, где стали извивать двоим. Особенно неистовствовала она./ Kicking and beating they threw me into the courtyard, where they began beating together. The hostess was especially rampant.” (Konisskaja 1992, 84); how in the primitive conditions she maintained her intimate hygiene; how after the Soviet troops’ invasion of the country, Russian soldiers only “drank and marauded” and “of course, raped” (ibid. 88).

²⁵ See the reference to Toker’s definition above.

²⁶ This is what Toker points out in her study on Gulag narratives and documentary literature.

abortion, rape. Goscilo sees this as an inscription of “the epistemological and conceptualizing habits that produce specific fictions or texts”.²⁷

I consider that the texts investigated here have an aspect which is echoed in the need to tell the truth about their authors’ Soviet past but not exhausted by a political, common national duty or task to record a testimony of the by-gone years. What emerges in these texts can be aligned to the representation of the writers’ experiences “through the remembrance of their bodies” observed in contemporary women’s prose writing (Rosenholm 2002). It can also be aligned to what Šalamov called the “literature of the future” stating: “It is not writers who will speak, but professionals who possess the gift for writing. And they will tell only what they know and have seen. Accuracy - that is the force of the literature of the future.” (cit. in Toker 1997, 209). On the one hand, these texts represent authorised voices of the process of re-writing history from the viewpoint of an individual human being answering the topical question in the aftermath of the Soviet Union: who were we, who are we and what will become of us? These texts in part continue certain themes in Soviet Russian society and culture which came to the surface already in the so-called thaw period of the 1960s as well as continuing and undermining certain practices of representation characteristic of the Soviet discourse. In the following subchapter the aim is not to define what female autobiography in Russia is, but to outline some aspects of the tradition of women’s autobiographical writing in Russia and possible continuities in the texts analysed in this study.

2.2 Russian Women’s Autobiographical Writing - Between Life and Literature

How do contemporary Russian women write about their lives through the autobiographical discourse? Before embarking on a response, the question must be specified and contextualized. I want to analyse what the narrative strategies are like in the representation of female experience used in these texts, and, in so doing, it is important to consider what consistencies and differences we can observe between these and earlier autobiographical writing. The aim in this chapter is to identify specific literary aspects (themes and structures) of Russian female autobiography and to locate the objects of analysis in this tradition.

At first it must be said that this undertaking is accompanied by considerable reservations, because little research has been done on specifically literary aspects - that is, strategies and traditions of textual representations of the first person narrator’s experience - of women’s autobiography in Russia.

²⁷ Arja Rosenholm writes that “[i]n many texts of the 1980s and 1990s women writers investigate their past through the remembrance of their bodies. The body is experienced as a kind of memory body into which traces of the Soviet history are inscribed”; and that they use “physiological realia” as a literary effect (Rosenholm 2002).

Previous studies on the subject²⁸ have been instructive in my approach to Russian women's autobiographies. Still, much of what is said below, is based on a few studies (concentrating on a fragment of a vast material), and the discussion is tentative.

Barbara Heldt suggested in her *Terrible Perfection* (1987) that Russian women's autobiographies are doubly inaccessible to Western readers: first, as *Russian* autobiographies, second, as *Russian women's* autobiographies. Heldt establishes and discusses the rich tradition of Russian women's autobiographical writing in the 19th and 20th centuries. Mention has already been made of her well-known thesis on autobiography and poetry as the literary genres which have offered Russian women more freedom in the representation of their experience through writing than fiction, which was dominated by male authors, especially in the 19th century.

The research on Russian women's autobiographies (and fiction) available today further elucidates and complements Heldt's argument about the possibilities offered by the genre of female autobiography. While new material on the subject indicates that Russian women have written autobiographical texts through different times²⁹ and that this genre has offered them "...a forum for aesthetic and philosophical self-construction" and their texts "aim at a psychological self-reflectivity for intellectual women" (*Models of Self* 2000, 9) this genre has also been greatly influenced by the "dominant (male) tradition" (see Savkina 2001). To map out interrelations and intertextual features between these two aspects - self-construction and conformity to tradition - in the following I will look at findings of the research on Russian women's autobiography in the 19th and 20th centuries.

2.2.1 Overview of the 19th Century

As Clyman and Vowles note, one of the reasons for the success of autobiographical literature in the 19th century was its function as an outlet for critical voices in a society which practised censorship on publications. This gave reason to emphasise "the documentary value and moral significance of personal, autobiographical literature as a corrective to official history and official

²⁸ Articles by Holmgren (1994), Hoogenboom (1996), Zirin (2002) and by many others; Monographies by Heldt (1987), Holmgren (1993) and Savkina (2001); Anthologies *Russia Through Women's Eyes* (1996), in which Clyman and Vowles's introduction offers a brief historical overview of women's autobiographical writing in the 19th and early 20th centuries and *Models of Self* (2001), which offers an interdisciplinary approach to Russian women's autobiographies. The book *Writing the Siege of Leningrad: Women's Diaries, Memoirs and Documentary Prose* by Simmons and Perlina (2002) introduces an important field of Russian women's documentary writing in 20th century.

²⁹ The first autobiographies by Russian women date from the last third of the 18th century, but they were published only decades after their authors' death (see, for instance, Zirin 2002, 100).

representations of Russian society” (1996, 20). As was noted earlier, this continues to be the case in the works of the 20th century and my own material. However, in the 19th century it was not usual for women to write their autobiographies for publication, because of “the constraints of femininity and society’s hostility toward women who stepped out of the private realm” (ibid. 22).³⁰ This aspect is not so evident in the late 20th century texts, when women and women writers have long been drawn to the public realm; however, as we could draw on the literary critique of a female-authored text cited above, symbolic meaning of feminine creativity in Russian culture has been connected with rather negative merits.³¹ Although women have written and published their works during literary history, “the female autobiographical subject emerging within historically differing cultural practices of identity production is unevenly authorised - hierarchically and symbolically subordinated to the male subject - by varying modes of dominant discourse.” (*Models of Self* 2000, 13.)

Mary Zirin notes that Russian women’s pre-revolutionary autobiographies fall into three periods. During the first period, the early nineteenth century, women’s autobiographical writing was influenced by Western European models, where the narrator was usually also the protagonist. Then, by the mid-nineteenth century, the model of feminine modesty seems to have influenced women’s life-writing and the narrator figured mostly as an observer and chronicler of others’ lives. Towards the end of the century, with the modernist spirit of the time and its emphasis on individuality (among other things) women’s autobiographical texts represented the narrator as the centre of attention. (Zirin 2002, 101.) However, it may be difficult to draw distinct lines between different periods when individual texts are concerned.

One of the continuing features connected with Russian women’s autobiographical writing (diaries, letters, memoirs etc.) is that their texts are often given the status of “eyewitness accounts”, “contemporary testimonies” on social and political phenomena, significant literary and cultural figures, and they have usually not been considered as writing about the female self or as literary texts by women. This comes up especially in Irina Savkina’s monograph *Пишу себя...* (2001, Writing the self...) on women’s autodocumentary texts of the first half of the 19th century contemplating female autobiographies, memoirs, diaries and letters most of which have previously not been examined as literary texts in their own right. These women’s texts remained mostly unpublished during the

³⁰ This is evident in N. Sohanskaja’s (1823-1884) autobiography (see Clyman & Vowles 1996, 22-25), Savkina (2001, 212-240) and Zirin (2002, 103-104).

³¹ See Kelly (1994, 2-3): “And the most important Russian received idea of all is that women’s writing is simply not very interesting. Indeed, how could it be, when it deals with women’s limited experience, rather than with men’s enormous experience of the social and political issues which have been central to the dominant discourse of Russian literature, critical realism, and reflects women’s small woes, rather than the tragically coloured priestly mysticism which has shaped so much Russian poetry?”

authors' life time and were published only later as "historical documents". The pioneering status of Savkina's study derives from the approach to the texts employed in it: to read the texts as women's literary representations of their own selves.

One of the most interesting conclusions of Savkina's work is that the women autobiographers created their texts as if in the presence of *чужое слово*, "the word of the other". On the one hand, this "other" represented the self as the other, the female addressee in the form of "you"; on the other hand, there was simultaneously the word of the other as the patriarchal (male) censor restricting the inscribing of the female "I" (Savkina 2001, 150, 254-255, 327, 338-339). Savkina notes that the women's texts in her investigation were not "pure" autobiographies; the writers also used techniques from other genres. Through this strategy the autobiographers explored and challenged prevailing models of femininity and female conduct (ibid. 338). As Savkina notes, these results complement Heldt's view of female autobiography as a genre which *liberated* women from the constraints of the more "fixed" (male) prose tradition. The research concludes that the autobiographical genres of the time offered the women a *relative* freedom from the dominating literary models of femininity by way of giving space for literary experimenting on them in the first place.³² This observation shows how the writing subject, the female subject, through "writing herself" enters the social realm of discourse, and constructs her experience through interaction with cultural models and social reality.

The tradition of diary-writing, memoirs and letters can be seen as a part of conventional feminine values which reinforce the "private" nature of women's roles and confine them in these. In the first half of the 19th century, as

³² However, Savkina points out that in the 1830s-40s women prose writers also expressed challenging images of femininity, so the notion that fiction could not provide Russian women with their own expression has to be revised. Savkina states: "Образ Я в женских автодокументах строится на пересечении имеющихся дискурсов женственности, с ориентацией не только на социокультурные половые стереотипы, но и на конкретные, распространенные в современной авторам литературы образцы. (...) Все вышесказанное ... не позволяет так радикально ... разделять женскую автодокументалистику и прозу (по крайней мере, если вести речь о первой половине XIX века), ибо свобода самовыражения авторского Я в первой - весьма относительна, а степень зависимости второй от господствующей литературной традиции вовсе не абсолютна./ The image of the 'I' in women's autodocumentaries is built on a junction of prevailing discourses on femininity, referring not only to the socio-cultural gender stereotypes but also to concrete, dominating models in the contemporary literature. (...) The above... does not allow such radical ... division between women's autodocumentary and prose (at least if the question is about the first half of the XIX century), because the freedom of the self-expression of the authorial 'I' in the former is quite relative, and the degree of dependency on the dominating literary tradition in the latter is not at all absolute." (2001, 338-339) On Russian women's prose in the 1830s-1840s see Savkina (1998).

Savkina notes, autobiography and women's writing intersect with each other in Russian literary criticism:

Одновременно с отодвиганием женской литературы в область незрелого, детского, маргинального в русской критике того же времени ... развивается идея о том, что автодокументальные жанры и особенно дневник - это тот вид текстов, куда может быть канализировано женское творчество. (Savkina 2001, 15).³³

Many of the tensions concerning women writers in the early 19th century were connected with questions about (upper class) women's roles in society. Women's education provided them with certain capabilities but their efforts to realize them were not approved of because of prevailing notions of femininity.³⁴

In the second half of the 19th century the "Woman question" was one of the burning social issues, especially in the 1860s, and dramatic changes occurred in the discussions of women's role in society.³⁵ Radical thinkers and philosophers promoted women's right and duty to be part of building a new and more equal society. As Rosenholm (1999) has stated, in literary production women writers were, however, still a rarity. During this time, however, large numbers of women began to write specifically autobiographical literature: typical works produced in this time include family chronicles, childhood and school memoirs, and reminiscences of work. The autobiographical writing produced at this time has, thus, often served as chronicles of literary and social life (Rosenholm 2000, 119). In many of the women autobiographers' texts of the time there was a sense of *servicing* the community (as a woman), as a mother or as a professional (Clyman & Vowles 1996, 28). This aspect of service continues to be central in Russian women's autobiographies in the 20th century as well, especially in the works of revolutionaries and political activists.³⁶

The time around the turn of the 20th century can be characterized as a time of countering ideals both for literature and for femininity. Modernist notions began to emerge which promoted exceptionality and individuality instead of exemplariness and the serving of society. The emergence of a new

³³ "Simultaneously with the shifting aside of women's literature to the field of immature, childish, marginal in Russian critique of the time ... the idea is developed that autodocumentary genres, and especially diary, form the kind of writing where women's creativity can be channelled." (Savkina 2001, 15). Beyond that Savkina notes – referring to Domna Stanton – that from the 19th century practically to the present day "autobiography" gains in literary critique a prevalently negative value when adapted to women's texts whereas autobiography in connection with men's texts is a positive term (Savkina 2001, 15).

³⁴ See Savkina (1998).

³⁵ On the Russian woman question of the 1860s and femininity see Rosenholm (1999).

³⁶ For a comparison on the cause-serving aspect of women's autobiographical writing see Rosenholm's article on Elena Štakenšnejder's diaries; Rosenholm notes that "[t]he story mediated by the diaries is split; it serves several 'causes' of public and hidden selves, not just one Grand Cause hidden behind the autobiographical text" (2000, 119-120).

reading public and the commercialization of the literary market also promoted interest in “personalities”. Clyman and Vowles note that towards the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century “a different image of femininity emerged”. This image was represented especially by the diary of Marija Baškircева (1860-1884), which “revealed her innermost thoughts”, spoke “frankly about taboo subjects” and made the writer herself “the center of attention”. (Clyman and Vowles 1996, 41.) This was a modernist counter image for serving the community, which also persisted to exist. The latter continued in such revolutionary autobiographies as Vera Figner’s (1852-1943) and other revolutionaries’ autobiographies in the 20th century and offered exemplary models for the new Soviet woman (ibid. 44-45).

The autobiography of the famous and popular woman writer Anastasija Verbickaja autobiography (*Моему читателю, To My Reader*, 1908), according to Clyman and Vowles, combines “the old ideas of endurance and compassion, as well as woman’s right to self-fulfilment, including sexual experience.” Rosenthal notes that Verbickaja’s autobiography “both follows Russian literary traditions and breaks with them” (2002, 165). The author presents herself as an example for the reader, but also undermines traditional feminine images of “selflessness and serving others” (ibid.). According to Rosenthal the cause Verbickaja’s autobiography serves is her “own quest for selfhood” (ibid. 173), which resembles that of Marija Baškircева’s autobiographical text. However, this line of autobiographical writing faded out with the advent of the new Soviet social order but, as Clyman and Vowles note, the latter did not prevent “the development of a rich twentieth-century tradition of women’s autobiography” (1996, 45-46).

2.2.2 Overview of the 20th Century

A specific interest in this study focuses on Beth Holmgren’s article “For the Good of the Cause: Russian Women’s Autobiography in the 20th century”, where texts by Soviet Russian women are contemplated from the point of view of “important patterns of influence and response” (1994, 128). This article is especially valuable, because it considers a variety of texts and their practices of representation.³⁷ However, it must be noted from the outset that Soviet autobiographical writing by women still remains largely unexamined from the literary point of view, and my reliance on Holmgren’s article is based on the fact

³⁷ Another important source on literary practices of Soviet autobiographical writing is Hilde Hoogenboom’s (1996) article on the revolutionary autobiographies of the early Soviet period. Other studies concentrating on Soviet Russian women’s autobiographies investigate 1-3 authors and their works: see, for example, Harris on Lidija Ginzburg (1996; 2003), Kolchevska on Evgenija Ginzburg (1998; 2003), Pratt on N.Mandel’stam, L.Ginzburg and L.Čukovskaja (1996), Robey on N.Mandel’stam (1998). The latter focuses on the written, fictional self in N. Mandel’stam’s two-volume memoirs.

that the texts it deals with resemble those I investigate from the point of view of the narrated time and the representation of female selfhood: they share some of the rhetorical features and influences adopted by the texts Holmgren investigates. Thus my discussion of Soviet Russian women's autobiography has to be approached with appropriate reservations.

The main thesis of Holmgren's article is that in the autobiographical writing of the 20th century the women authors' lives were not important enough *per se* for writing memoirs and autobiographies but, instead some greater cause legitimating the writing of their own lives - ideology, revolution, cultural heritage of the Russian intelligentsia, description of the violation of human rights in a totalitarian state etc. - was often evinced as the motivation for writing autobiography or memoirs. In fact, this has been seen as characteristic of Soviet literature in general: literature served "the social command", that is, the demand that a literary text should be about social and political topics.³⁸ This feature of documentary and memoir writing was already apparent in 19th century Russia (see above). According to Hilde Hoogenboom revolutionary autobiographies from the first half of the 20th century were meant to be material for historians of the revolutionary movement; they were "designed" to be such historical material which resulted in a coherent representation of the revolutionaries' biographies. (Hoogenboom 1996, 78-79.) The purpose of Soviet autobiographies was to pass on knowledge to future generations (Kelly 2000, 65; Liljeström 2000b, 81).

Holmgren approaches the women's autobiographies of the 20th century from the viewpoint of their "thematic emphasis and ... the relationship between the author's service and self-conception." She notes that Soviet Russian women's autobiographies:

... are written for the good of often conflated political and cultural causes: to expose and combat the injustice of a repressive state and to perpetuate a high culture informed by moral action and concern for the oppressed. (...) At the same time ... these different types of oppositional writing tend to impose their own conformist positions: They either endorse a prescriptive, male-oriented political or cultural model or project the ideal of the heterosexual female *intelligent* ... who upholds traditional notions of high culture and proper social conduct. That is, Russian women autobiographers often articulate the position and standards of privileged women in the first world, figuring themselves as the defenders of an ideology, morality, or culture under siege. (Holmgren 1994, 128)

Thus the texts Holmgren is interested in seem to perpetuate the feminine images of the second half of the 19th century, referred to above in Clyman and Vowles' study, with representations of serving the community as a woman. This serving is subordinated to more general "political and societal" causes, which obliterate certain aspects of women's lives, considered to be "personal". It is interesting, that although the women authors often shared the experiences of the

³⁸ See, for instance, Kelly (2000, 65).

“colonized”, according to Holmgren they nevertheless represented the standards of “privileged women in the first world”.

Holmgren formulates her material - which consists of prison camp memoirs, revolutionary autobiographies, literary memoirs and autobiographical texts - in three representative sets: (1) revolutionaries and prisoners, (2) cultural conservators and (3) rebels within the cause. The first two groups include autobiographies representing the female self through service to a political or cultural cause. In these texts women autobiographers often follow “the ‘generic’ male model of a committed revolutionary” and overlook sexual experience (ibid. 129), or “represent themselves as the arbiters of proper human - and especially female - behavior” in the form of a “model of straitlaced, sentimentalized, heterosexual womanhood” (ibid. 135), or their texts were “devoted to recovering and sanctioning outlawed figures and works” of the Stalinist era (ibid. 136). In all of these cases, according to Holmgren women “write of themselves in carefully restricted, socially approved ways” (ibid. 140), which means, according to Holmgren, the exclusion of female sexuality.

The third group, “rebels”, includes autobiographies which do not conform to the feminine model of service for political and cultural causes. On the contrary, the autobiographies Holmgren refers to, Marina Cvetaeva’s, Ljubov’ Blok’s and Nadežda Mandel’štam’s, represent “rebellious life stories” where women explore their identity, sexuality, experiences in an unconventional way for that time (ibid. 141-143).³⁹

Hoogenboom notes in her article that although the revolutionary memoirs of the 1920s “were valued as ‘unmediated’, ‘eyewitness’ accounts” they were, in fact “mediated by several factors” (1996, 78). One of these factors is the image of femininity in the society of that time, which the women writers strove to escape. Hoogenboom writes:

Did it matter to Figner and others that they were women? Her feminism, shared by her generation, assumed that, once women showed that they could perform like the best of men, the woman question had been solved in theory. They emphasized that they were worthy of an education and that they were fired by ideological zeal, evidenced by self-sacrifice. Yet their attempts at gender-neutral autobiographies expose the stereotypes they tried to counter, and contain evidence of the circumstances particular to this generation of Russian women. (1996, 79-80)

On the grounds of Holmgren’s (1993, 1994) and Hoogenboom’s (1996) studies of Soviet women’s autobiographies it turns out that female selfhood, sexuality and identity constituted a problematic issue for women writers, because in the social and symbolic hierarchy they were considered secondary,

³⁹ In this respect they are reminiscent of the earlier autobiographies of Marija Baškircva and Anastasija Verbickaja.

not important enough for literary representations.⁴⁰ Thus women wrote about themselves and their lives in ways which were accessible in the dominant discourse: through prominent social and political causes, which gave them and their writing a status as witnesses of important historical events, conservators of artistic and cultural values, and models of correct, proper female conduct.⁴¹ This forms an important pattern of influence on Soviet women's writing and a frequent response to this influence, although there are exceptions to these patterns. In the case of Cvetaeva, Holmgren refers to the availability of artistic forms for her and her status as an artist, and for N. Mandel'shtam other women, especially Ahmatova's example, encourage her to transcend gender roles.⁴² However, Holmgren also suggests that the crumbling of political oppositions into various political groups would prove to be fruitful for women's writing, because literature and cultural life, would not then be dominated by political causes. New women's prose published in the 1980s-90s already points in this direction. (Holmgren 1994, 143.)

The motifs for and functions of writing articulated in the texts of my material, if seen in the light of Holmgren's formulation of Soviet women's autobiographical writing, in certain aspects conform to the conventions of Soviet autobiographical and memoir writing, that is, the writers tend to represent themselves as "witnesses" and "participants" of events or epochs with historical, political significance, which gives them something to write about, a legitimate reason, a "cause" for writing about their own lives and own experiences. This aspect of the texts can be seen to be connected with the political changes which occurred first in the 1950s-60s and then in the 1980s-90s, giving impetus for numerous memoirs and autobiographies accounting for the experiences of Soviet generations of intellectuals. The texts I am interested in do participate in

⁴⁰ Marianne Liljeström (2000a, b) has discussed later forms of such highly conventionalised biographies of "revolutionary women" written in the 1960s and 70s in the Soviet Union. Like Hoogenboom, Liljeström also pays attention to coherence in these texts. The writing women conform to the male norm, which means that in these texts the personal and the domestic is almost entirely absent, and the emphasis is on service to the Soviet ideological cause. Liljeström writes that "...the Revolutionary Woman is constructed as 'gender-neutral' without home, family, personal life, children and sexuality." However, Liljeström continues that "the authors' depictions of themselves construct gender as an element in their identity. (...) However hidden, gender is not only a key element in the identity of these women, but often it is the warrant for their activities." (2000a, 120-121.)

⁴¹ Pratt (1996, 68) describes the Soviet women memoirists "angels in the Stalinist house" who "sacrifice[d] the extreme self-centeredness of the autobiographical genre for the sake of their role as angels in the house of the Russian intelligentsia, for the sake of their function as guardians of its cultural and spiritual well-being."

⁴² Robey (1998, 249-250) shows how N. Mandel'shtam's memoirs construct her rhetorical self acknowledging gender "as an unavoidable fact which shapes others' perception of her as a poet's wife and as the mistress of a household during the Stalin years" and "taking an ironic stance toward them".

this “history writing”, writing for a common cause; the documenting of Soviet history; but the texts also contain evidence that they are not either writing for the common cause or writing the own self unrestricted by conventional representations of womanhood. These texts bring out a complexity of related issues, concerning intersubjectivity, memory, testimony and subjectivity.

2.3 Reading the Texts: “Autobiography Is Not Literature”

The statement quoted in the title above comes from Marija Arbatova’s autobiographical novel *Мне 40 лет/ I’m Forty*. Despite the fact that this statement creates an apparent contradiction with the writer’s profession as a playwright and prose writer and the aim of this study - to contemplate autobiographical texts as literary texts - it brings important insight into the *literary* aspects of the texts in consideration here, especially as women’s autobiographies. As “documents of the female self” and representations of genuine (gender) difference Russian women’s autobiographical texts can be viewed both as important historical accounts of women’s lives and as literary constructions of those lives; and, at least in my material, they encourage both of these views.

Relating the autobiographical texts I am interested in to those of Russian women’s previous autobiographical writing in the 19th and 20th century reveals and contextualizes conventions of the genre practised in them: Pliseckaja, Gerštejn, Petkevič, Bonnèr and Arbatova (and other autobiographers and memoirists) are not writing in a void; their writing is influenced by existing conventions of autobiographical and memoir writing.⁴³ There are recurrent themes in women’s autobiographies which are connected to “the experiences of the female sex in patriarchal Russia”, as Zirin (2002, 115) puts it. Heldt’s investigation of 19th and 20th century autobiographies by women contemplates the main themes in this writing: “the public versus the private life, mothers and daughters, and the woman emerging as a writer” (1987, 65). According to Heldt the themes “seem to repeat themselves in numerous autobiographies” (ibid.). The fluctuations between public and private life occur in the texts of my material, and form a crucial aspect in the narrative strategies of the female self in autobiographical discourse. “Mothers and daughters” forms a central structuring feature of the female self in numerous contemporary women’s autobiographies, and also in two of the texts examined in this study. The overall thematic emphasis in these texts either focuses on or stems from the presence of the female self as the first person narrator, and her experiences.

⁴³ Cf. Hoogenboom (1996, 79) about revolutionary autobiographies: “Genre conventions create a relationship of parts to the whole, affording a perspective from which to decide what is typical or unusual in a revolutionary autobiography. Conventions also provide an artistic structure that places demands on both writer and reader in the form of expectations, which must be fulfilled or accounted for in some ways.”

The motifs given for writing in the autobiographical texts in my material range from telling the truth about one's life and the past to recollecting and understanding past events. The phrase "I want to restore the truth of my life" articulated, for instance, in Maija Pliseckaja's autobiography, is a frequent expression in autobiographical texts in general, as is the notion that through the representation of their own lives the autobiographers seek to represent something common to others of the same generation or the same epoch. These articulations point to *intersubjectivity*, relations between the common and the personal.⁴⁴

In contemporary Russian culture, memoirs and autobiographies are connected with certain "public stories": those of re-writing history, telling the truth about history, or of interest in famous people's biographies. There is also a growing emphasis on the individual, in contrast to the previous emphasis on the collective in official (and unofficial) Soviet discourse (see Balina 1992, 13; 2003, 196). As pointed out by Gilmore (1994, ix), "Whether and when ... any particular text appears to tell the truth, ha[s] less to do with that text's presumed accuracy ... than with its apprehended fit into culturally prevalent discourses of truth and identity".

2.3.1 The Emerging Self

Many well-known Soviet Russian women memoirists have written their texts in order to commemorate those whose lives were destroyed by the Soviet regime.⁴⁵ This brings up the functions of the author as a "cultural conservator" and "prisoner" presented in Holmgren's article, writing their texts as testimonies of injustice and repression by the Soviet state. Èmma Gerštejn's accounts on the life of the modernist poets and their immediate circles, to which she herself belonged, have been considered an important document of the atmosphere of the time.⁴⁶ In the well-known chapter of the book "Nadežda Jakovlevna" the writer announces that her aim is "подойти ближе ... к тому, что терзало и томило

⁴⁴ As Cosslett et al. state: "[Intersubjectivity] may be used to refer, on the one hand, to the relationship between personal narratives and the public stories available within popular culture, and, on the other, to the relationship between the narrator and the audience. It thus enables us to ask about the ways in which experience is narratively and dialogically organised. Both of these relationships are crucial to the process of "composure" by which narrators produce a story of themselves with which they can live in relative psychic comfort. But the notion of silencing suggests that women's stories typically do not reach the public domain as readily as men's, and also places on feminist researchers an obligation to elicit the unspoken (and perhaps unspeakable) private story." (Cosslett et al. 2000, 3-4)

⁴⁵ Cf. Cornwell (1998, 163): "The memoir form has assumed considerable importance in twentieth-century Russian literature, due ... to its vital documentary role as witness in the preservation of memory. (...) [I]t is not surprising that many, if not the majority, of leading memoirists have been women." See also Holmgren (1993) and Proffer (1992/1987).

⁴⁶ See, for instance, Kagan (1999, 418).

ero [Osip Mandel'stam] в те дни/ to get closer ... to what tormented and troubled him [Osip Mandel'stam] in those days” (1998, 413), and she is able to do this because: “...ведь я была рядом с Мандельштамами именно в эти годы (1928-1937)/...I was near the Mandel'stams precisely in those years (1928-1937)” (ibid). At several points in her text the author points out the importance of understanding the time, the circumstances, and the atmosphere in which people lived:

Ведь даже самые талантливые “шестидесятники”, при всех своих заслугах и достоинствах, не могут представить себе повседневную жизнь людей 30-х годов. У них все сливается в один мутный поток “советского образа жизни”, как будто все семьдесят лет он был одинаков. (1998, 201)

Even the most talented of “the 60's generation”, with all their merits and prestige, cannot imagine the everyday life of people in the 1930s. They mix everything into one muddy stream of “the Soviet way of life”, as though it was the same during the whole 70 years. (1998, 201)

Gerštejn motivates her writing because it is connected with the important literary figures, her closeness with them, and her being a witness of the life during the 1930s. This also resembles what Holmgren argued in her study *Women's Works in Stalin's Time* (1993) on women's literary memoirs, that the female memoirists in the post-Stalin era could claim a privilege of experience as widows, daughters and friends of repressed writers. As will be discussed in more detail, the narrator in Gerštejn's text also gets closer to what tormented and troubled *her* in those days. Throughout the narrative in *Memuary* there are signs of a personal impetus for writing which account for the writer's own development in the 1920s-1940s. This is verified by Gerštejn's own words in an interview in which she says that she needed a *personal* impetus for writing her memoirs (Vrubel'-Golubkina 1999).

The aspect of personal and common impetus for writing becomes especially evident in Gulag literature. In the vein of an eyewitness testimony, Tamara Petkevič's Gulag narrative begins with a note from the author (*от автора*):

Эта книга могла возникнуть только потому, что во мне жила не отменяемая потребность вернуть в жизнь хотя бы некоторые имена, обстоятельства прежних лет и судьбы ушедших людей. Эти люди мучились, страдали и погибли, не реализовав своих богатейших возможностей. Их мужество, человечность, их дружба сформировали и спасли меня. (...) Если эта повесть затронет души тех, кто найдет в себе желание пройти вместе с нами по этапам отчаяния и надежд, я буду полностью вознаграждена. (1993, 5)

This book could come into existence only because there was an irreversible need to revive at least some names, circumstances of long-gone years, and fates of departed people. These people languished, suffered and died not being able to

realize their rich potentials. Their courage, humaneness and friendship moulded and rescued me. (...) If this story touches the soul of those who find in themselves a desire to go together with us through the stages of despair and hopes, I am fully rewarded. (1993, 5)

This note of the author is a recurrent motif occurring in other women's Gulag narratives: for instance, Evgenija Ginzburg's and Elena Glinka's texts.⁴⁷ The authors write in order to publicise what they have witnessed, in order to protest against injustice and violation of human rights they and others have suffered. The author above experiences an "irreversible need" to revive the past events. In the case of women's prison camp memoirs, according to Holmgren, this also included the task to "...present themselves as the arbiters of proper human - and especially female - behavior. (...) Although [the writers] prove the special capacity of women to 'remain human' under hellish circumstances ..., they uphold a confining model of straitlaced, sentimentalized, heterosexual womanhood." (Holmgren 1994, 135.)

Petkevič's text contains evidence that the task of writing for her was also a personal quest for her own self, and, as the quotation above indicates, it is meant to be a personal quest for the reader as well, who might find "a desire to go together with" her "through the stages of despair and hopes". This view is supported by the unconstrained account of the writer's personal feelings, worries and relations.⁴⁸ This does not diminish the aspect of writing for others, for a common cause but, I suggest, it also evinces the personal, the subjective, lived experience. In contrast to those Gulag testimonies Holmgren is referring to, Petkevič's text does not represent the protagonist as "an arbiter of proper female conduct", but as a woman who learns to deal with this extreme experience with the help of others: it is she who is being educated by the others, not vice versa. This means that it is ultimately perhaps not so clear what this experience has been, and, despite the efforts to give common features to Gulag (or Holocaust) literature, we perhaps do not know what this literature is, or what it *might* be (Felman & Laub 1992, 95).

⁴⁷ "Я оказалась не только жертвой, но и наблюдателем. (...) Я старалась все запомнить в надежде рассказать об этом тем хорошим людям, тем настоящим коммунистам, которые будут же, обязательно будут когда-нибудь меня слушать./ I was not only a victim, but an observer. (...) I strove to remember everything in the hope of telling about this to those good people, to those real communists, who will, absolutely, one day listen to me." (Ginzburg 1998, 8).

⁴⁸ In comparison to accounting for personal feelings, Evgenija Ginzburg writes about her hesitations about including her relationship to Anton Val'ter in her book: "Я долго сомневалась, уместно ли писать о таком личном в книге мемуаров, посвященных нашей общей боли, нашему общему стыду./ I hesitated for long time, whether it is appropriate to write about such a personal matter in memoirs dedicated to our common pain, our common shame" (Ginzburg 1998, 399). Toker (2000, 126) states that "[s]ince Gulag memoirists usually wish to give pride of place to communal concerns, they tend to downplay the workings of a single individual's autobiographical consciousness."

In Pliseckaja's text the narrator herself stresses many times that she was independent, disobedient, hated collectivism - in a word, stresses her *individuality* in opposition to collectivism, which resembles the modernist traits in the autobiographies of Marija Baškircева and Anastasija Verbickaja around the turn of the 20th century. The title of her text "I, Maija Pliseckaja" is already a sign of the need to stress the individual traits in her autobiography. It is not just "Maija Pliseckaja", or the life of Maija Pliseckaja, but her "I", the self, that is the primary subject of the text. This can be seen as a conscious deviation from the "Soviet" (and Russian) convention of representation of the self, where the emphasis is placed on the "I" as a member of a community, collective, "We", rather than as individual (Savkina 2001, 28).

However, the common-with-others aspect of the author's life is tightly connected to her collisions with the regime, society's constraints and the suppressed aspects of her family history:

Хотелось бы мне рассказывать про "Спящие", "Лебединые", как я кидала большие батманы, про красивых партнеров. Но с какого конца ни взглянешь на свое детство, все оборачивается к политике, к сталинскому террору. (1996/1994, 58)

I would like to tell you about "Beauties", "Swans", how I threw *batteman*, about handsome partners. But no matter from which end I look at my childhood, everything returns to politics, to Stalinist terror. (1996/1994, 58)

The narrator recounts her parents' fate in the 1930s, her father's arrest and execution, her mother's arrest and sentencing to prison camp. This story of tragic events, which were common for her generation of intellectual women, is represented as being at odds with the story of her art and profession, the story of her individual talent, which form, or as the narrator in the excerpt above writes, she would like them to form the focus of the life story. Nevertheless, in "Instead of Preface" the writer recognises her duty to record her testimony, and recall times past, because she "[w]as a participant/ [у]частницей была" (ibid. 10), and the narrator declares she wants to tell the truth about her life and through that about the lives of Soviet artists. Thus, on the level of rhetoric the narrator also leans on formulas which represent her as one of "us", Soviet people.

A text that also concentrates on the personal story of the narrator-protagonist is Marija Arbatova's autobiographical novel. As a feminist writer and activist, Arbatova deliberately gives her text a political meaning: she strives to connect the personal with the political and challenge the division between literature and life, art and everyday. The title, *Мне 40 лет/ I'm Forty*, contains the personal pronoun "I" to emphasise the individual, as in Pliseckaja's text. Arbatova's agenda is to banish Soviet taboos, including the taboo of writing about a woman's (sexual) life. However, the author notes in the second edition

of her text, that after the first publication of her autobiography, her openness her life was criticised in the media because of her role also as a politician:

Предполагая упреки в откровенности, я все-таки описываю некоторые события с точностью до деталей. В каком-то смысле, это стриптиз на фоне социализма, прочитав который горько вздохнут сверстницы - сотни женщин подходили ко мне после первого издания книги и говорили, что у них все было так же. В каком-то смысле это предупреждение молодым девчонкам, потому что, как мы ни старались кричать о правах женщин, свинство пока с трудом идет не убыль, и они ежедневно сталкиваются с тем же самым. Единственное, чем я могу помочь, это утверждением, что так быть не должно. И чем меньше мы будем бояться говорить об этом вслух, тем быстрее изменится мир, в котором мы живем. (Arbatova 2002)

Assuming complaints about being too openminded, I nevertheless describe some events meticulously. In a sense this is a striptease against the backdrop of socialism and after reading it my contemporaries will sigh with bitterness. Hundreds of women came to talk to me after the first publication of the book and said they had had the same experiences. In a sense it is a warning for young girls, because no matter how much we have tried to draw attention to women's rights, the swinishness endures, and they run into it daily. I can only help by assuring that that's not the way it should be. The less we are afraid to say it out loud, the sooner the world in which we live will change. (Arbatova 2002)

Arbatova's text also refers to the contemporary need to know about the past, because "нигде в мире нет такого количества подложных дат, фальшивых документов, семейных тайн и фиктивных историй как в России/ nowhere in the world are there so many false dates, distorted documents, family secrets and fictional histories as in Russia" (Arbatova 1999, 3). The conventional Soviet formula "about the time and about myself" is, however, reversed in her text as "not only about myself, but about the time as well". This seems a conscious choice, to put the individual first and the time second.

Besides this, Arbatova's writing concentrates on the protagonist's consciousness and development as a woman from an outspokenly feminist point of view. This is something that is not typical of the other texts. It can be pointed out as a comparison to the other writers that Arbatova was born in 1957. Thus, her experience of the Soviet society is different from the experience of the other women, whose biographies were very much influenced by Stalinist terror. However, Arbatova's representation is also *reminiscent* of the previous generations' experiences. The text provides an account of Soviet society institutions (school, health care, family) as *topoi* of repression, as a kind of meta-Gulag. Further, we can note that Arbatova's formative years coincide with the years of so-called stagnation in the 1970s, when the private, personal sphere

of life offered a realm for self-realisation.⁴⁹ Finally, Arbatova's literary education is different: she is a professional writer, who has already written several texts based on her experience as a woman, mother and writer. She belongs to the same generation as the writers Svetlana Vasilenko and Nina Gorlanova, who also share feminist views about "women's writing" and in their texts express a distinct, female perspective (see Arbatova 1995).

As a further contemporary example of breaking the dominant (Soviet) model of writing about the self is Nadežda Poljakova's text "Точка, точка, запятая.../Dot, Dot, Comma..." which is defined as *новелла*, a short story. In contrast to Arbatova's or Pliseckaja's texts, however, there are no metatextual indications that the text is "directly" autobiographical, except for the first person pronoun "I" and the similarities between the author Poljakova's and the heroine's biographies.⁵⁰ There are, on the other hand, no signs in the text, that the reader should have any doubts about the identity between the author, narrator and protagonist.

The text starts with a quotation from Dostoevsky's "Adolescent" about the shameful of writing about one's own self. The opening sentence refers directly to this quotation: "Мне двадцать один год. Я не подросток. /I'm twenty one. I'm not an adolescent" (Poljakova 1996, 106). The narrator characterizes herself, if not as exceptional, at least as unlike many others, a trait of her character which according to her, "might be good" or it "might be bad":

Но, должно быть, из этой моей черты и возникла эта подлая влюбленность в себя, о которой сказал Федор Михайлович Достоевский устами своего персонажа, литературного героя, от имени которого написан *Подросток*, и которая позволяет и мне без стыда писать о самом себе (Poljakova 1996, 107)

Probably this feature of my character led to the vile admiration of myself, of which Fedor Mihajlovič Dostoevsky has pronounced through the mouth of the hero in whose name *The Adolescent* has been written. This feature allows me to write about myself without shame. (Poljakova 1996, 107)

The traits of the taboo of writing about the self go back to the nineteenth century Russian novels, and the narrator ambitiously challenges this tradition. Thus, in the case of Poljakova, as well as Arbatova and Pliseckaja, the question is of writing against something, the canonic writers, the official "truth", Soviet society, etc. Another noteworthy observation about Poljakova's text is that the story focuses on the description of the protagonist's consciousness, her inner

⁴⁹ Another (auto)biographer born in the 1950s states: "В моей жизни все события - частные. Я не могу вспомнить ничего монументального. Что и дает мне смелость вспоминать. Хотя вспомнить особенно нечего. Не только мне - всем./ In my life all events are private. I can't remember anything monumental. That gives me the courage to reminisce. Although there is nothing really to remember. Not just for me - for everyone." (Genis 1999, 10)

⁵⁰ See article on Poljakova in *Dictionary of Russian Women Writers*.

thoughts, inner developments, and not some historically important events or persons. They are mentioned, but as if to stress their non-centrality in her life, the narrator shortly passes over them.⁵¹

In Bonnèr's text the narrator explains her desire to write as a means to transmit knowledge about the past to her children: "Я поняла, что мало знаю о маминой семье, еще меньше - о семье ее отца. Я мало, а мои дети почти совсем ничего. Захотелось рассказать им хоть то, что помню. (Bonnèr 1994/1991, 14)/ I remembered that I knew little about my mother's family and even less about my father's family. I knew little, and my children knew almost nothing. I wanted to tell them at least what I remembered." (Bonner 1992, 11) This gives her an impetus for recording her family's story, which results in an intimate narrative about a girl's growing up.

On the other hand, the recollection of one's family and ancestry written for children is one of the usual functions already of early autobiographical writing in Russia, and of women's autobiographical writing in particular.⁵² In Bonnèr's text this reason for writing is also connected to certain political and societal circumstances in history - the 1920s and 1930s -, which are perhaps not so familiar to younger generations. The handing down of knowledge to younger generations - due to the lack of verifiable historical documents and accounts - is a generally acknowledged aspect of documentary writing, and we can find numerous examples of this motif in women's autobiographical texts.⁵³ So, for instance Irina Grivnina writes in her "Attempt at a Memoir":

⁵¹ Some scholars have observed that women write more about emotions than men, who are oriented to exterior events (see, for instance, Puškareva 2000). The division, in my opinion, is not so clear-cut, and would merit further investigation.

⁵² "В XVIII веке, на ранних этапах формирования мемуарного жанра... мемуарист из дворянской среды осмыслял себя, как правило, ... в пределах 'собственной домашней истории'... Соответственно этой семейно-родовой 'домашней' доминанте воспоминания писались тогда, по признанию самих мемуаристов, 'о себе, для себя, для моих', то есть для удовлетворения своих личных духовных запросов, для детей, потомков, укрепления семейных традиций.../ In the 18th century, during the early phase of the forming of the memoirs as a genre... the memoirist of the noble class thought of him/herself, as a rule... within the borders of his/her own domestic history... According to this generic, domestic dominant reminiscences were written, according to the memoirists themselves, about their self, for themselves, for their 'own', that is, to satisfy their own spiritual endeavours, for the children, offspring, to strengthen family traditions..." (Tartakovskij 1999, 48-49). In the second half of the 19th century Clyman & Vowles (1996, 29-31) link this vein in women's autobiography to the inspiring example of Sergej Aksakov's family trilogy. In their family chronicles women often paid special attention to the women of the family, and they were addressed to children and grandchildren.

⁵³ In a journal article on Tamara Petkevič's play, which is based on her book it is stated that for today's students the year 1943 (the year of Petkevič's arrest) is paradoxically more remote historically than the year 1904 with *The Cherry Orchard* (Dmitrevskaya 2000, 2). The author of the article does not contemplate why this is so, but probably she refers to the fact

Мы были “книжные дети”, мы жили в мире книг, как нынешняя молодежь, наши дети, живет в мире гитарных аккордов. Хорошо это или плохо? Не знаю. Мы заперты были в коммунальные клетушки гигантского города. Нам полагалось быть счастливыми, об этом каждое утро говорили и пели в передаче “Пионерская зорька”. Но почему-то мы искали возможность уйти и уходили далеко, далеко, мечтая над книгами, написанными в прошлом столетии. Сегодняшние молодые открыли вдруг, что за границами Российской империи существует мир, живой непохожий на тот, в котором мы жили. Я не говорю о детях эмигрантов, я - о тех, кто живет в Москве, но может слушать звезд современного рока, смотреть фильмы, путешествовать по Европе. Пожалуй, им занятно было бы узнать о том, как путешествовали мы, отгородившись от мира очерченным настольной лампой кругом света, в котором лежала растрепанная книга... (Grivnina 1993, 144)

We were “bookish” children; we lived in a world of books, as youth nowadays, our children, lives in a world of guitar accords. Is that good or bad? I don’t know. We were locked in communal closets of a gigantic city. We were supposed to be happy. This was told to us every morning in the programme “Pioneer’s dawn”. But for some reason we looked for an opportunity to leave and we left far, far away, dreaming of books, written in the 19th century. Today’s youth have suddenly discovered that beyond the borders of the Russian empire exists a world, vivid, unlike the one we lived in. I’m not talking about emigrants’ children, but of those who live in Moscow, who can listen to the stars of contemporary rock, watch films, and travel in Europe. Perhaps they would like to know how we travelled, withdrawn from the world, in the halo of the desk lamp’s light, which illuminated a torn book. (Grivnina 1993, 144)

The younger generations live their lives in such different cultural and social circumstances that they may well not understand the former generations, “bookish children”. This is why the author has “attempted” to write her memoirs: to inform the younger generations about her generation’s dreams. The quotation expresses the meaning of being one of the Soviet generations, “we”, in this case the dissident community - not unlike official Soviet rhetoric. Although Grivnina’s and Bonner’s addressees are different (for Bonner her own children and for Grivnina coming generations in general) they both entail the idea that it is the narrator’s task to explain and pass on the experience of the older generations to the younger ones.

However, in Bonner’s text this testimonial side of the story is almost overshadowed by the “intimate” story of the family: what the text focuses on is the account of the protagonist’s childhood memories and of the relations between the family members, especially between mothers and daughters. In fact, the narrative concentrates on the matrilineal side of the family and centres on the protagonist’s psychological development, in which the relations between women

mentioned by several other authors, that in their experience the Soviet era was filled with false documents and dates, fictive histories and family secrets (Arbatova 1999, 3).

in the family play a crucial role. The narrating takes place through memories of the protagonist including not only the course of events but also corporeal sensations and the author's experience of growing up a woman, that is, her socialization. The image of mother has emerged quite frequently in recent Russian women's autobiographical texts, especially as the daughter's project of trying to understand the mother and her self. The story of "mothers and daughters" forms a continuous line between different periods of time in Russian women's autobiographies.

2.3.2 "*Mothers and Daughters*"

Heldt (1987, 77) has noted that in the Russian novel, which describes richly the relationships between fathers and sons, there are few mothers and daughters "occupying centre stage". In my material, in the texts that contemplate this relationship it is represented as an important aspect in the protagonist-narrator's psychological development. As Heldt (*ibid.*) points out: "Understanding one's mother is, for better or for worse, the preface to self-understanding [in women's autobiographies]...". This is the case especially in Bonner's and Arbatova's texts, in which the female line of their family becomes a principal constituent of the protagonist's life story and psychological development.

Motherhood in Russia has symbolically been associated with natural, life-giving Mother Earth (Barker 1986, 48). In Russian literature, mother was an all encompassing, protective and nurturing figure in the background. During the Soviet period motherhood became one of the most important feminine features in official discourse and iconography (Liljeström 1995, 243, 273). During the *glasnost*' period in the late 1980s in Russian women's prose the idealized qualities of the Soviet mother were exaggerated and turned into mother's psychological abuse and despotism in the family (Savkina 1994, 5). The image of the mother in the autobiographical texts of my material, which contemplate this figure in more detail, is often not loving and tender, but strict, distant and authoritative. In Arbatova's text the description of the mother figure is more critical than in Bonner's, where the beginning and the end of the story frame a quest for understanding the mother and to bringing to the surface what had previously been tacit: the difficult relations between mothers and daughters through generations. In Arbatova's text the mother figure is directly connected with the first person narrator's feminist stance: she states directly that it was mostly her mother's life story (as she views it) which made her a feminist, in other words, which made her protest against the model of a woman's life (as a self-sacrificing appendage to her husband) which her mother represented. However, the representation of different generational experiences of the Soviet epoch and the quest to understand these form an important part of both texts.

According to Helena Goscilo, in post-*glasnost*' literature and films in the early 1990s the mother figure was represented in ways focusing on continuation and connection as well as disconnection between different generations, rather than constructing a linear (causal) development of historical events. The mother represents both the past and the future through her reproductive powers: "...[M]aternity absorbs both past and future, collapsing them into a paradoxically timeless image of stasis in the 'present' of the viewer's and reader's experience" (Goscilo 1996, 36). This is a different notion of time than presented in other historical literary works of the *glasnost*' period:

Glasnost "fiction" and drama ... intent on recuperating an officially withheld past not only sustained the fictional pretence poorly but also reduced history to the transparency of fully accessible facts inertly awaiting incorporation into a comprehensive Truth. By contrast, perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the pertinent works of Krištofovich, Ščerbakova, and especially Petrushevskaja⁵⁴ is the complex, paradoxical way in which they trope temporality as female physicality, to produce an ambiguous, dispiriting view of Russian history that merits analysis. (Goscilo 1996, 37)

According to Goscilo the above mentioned works could all be given the subtitle "Mothers and Daughters", because in each of them the mothers are represented as "reproducers and survivors", they "double as daughters" and "family genealogy defines itself in female terms" (ibid.). Goscilo points out that the generational continuum in these works does not denote development, change or progress as in Russian novels describing the patrilinear descent from fathers to sons, but, on the contrary, "the daughter, despite her too visible rebellion, actually replicates her mother" (ibid.). I am not inclined to agree that, for instance, in Petruševkaja's text there is no aspect of development *at all*. In my understanding of the text and its ambiguously different narrative voices and levels, it is the *act of narrating* of the story which gives rise to the split in the woman as mother and daughter, laid bare for the reader to decipher (Rytkönen 1997). I would contend that it is a different kind of development than the teleological form of constant evolution and progress, which is perhaps what Goscilo means here. This difference is connected with a different perspective on *time* and *space* in women-centred works.

The narrated spaces in the works (bathroom, bed, apartment, kitchen) "all spotlight the adynamic nature of history ... not as extraordinary battles but, rather, as everyday prosaics and troped as successive generations of women" (ibid.). As Julia Kristeva notes in her article "Women's Time" (1993, 166), feminine or female subjectivity seems to be linked with repetition and perpetuity on the one hand and, on the other, with the menstrual cycle, pregnancy and

⁵⁴ The works Goscilo discusses are: Krištofovič's film *Rebro Adama* (1991), short stories by Galina Ščerbakova *Ubikivisty* (1992) and Ljudmila Petruševskaja *Vremja noč'* (1992).

everlasting re-entry. This subjectivity, Kristeva continues, appears to contradict a certain notion of time; that of time as a plan, teleology, a linear and future-oriented flow of events; the time of history (ibid. 167). The features explained by Goscilo tend to represent this difference between perspectives, perceptions connected with feminine subjectivity and “the time of history”.

Although on the surface the texts explored here echo the rhetoric on truth and the revision of history, the actual representations of the past tend to concentrate on the experiences lived daily by the authors. In that sense, what Goscilo states about the works she discusses can be applied to these autobiographies:

All three works erase the commonplace Soviet separation between the private and the public, between the everyday and the historical. If read as narratives of national history ... the works propose a disturbingly sombre view of Russia's past at odds with the glasnost phase of cultural commentary. That view originates in the conviction that Soviet Russian history has had no course but has merely undergone a fundamentally static replaying of the same elements, even as its propaganda trumpeted the revolutionary change that its surface appearance sometimes confirmed. (Goscilo 1996, 42)

Although in the case of the material I am interested in I would not go as far as to say that the representation of the historical in the texts “originates in the conviction that Soviet Russian history ... has merely undergone a fundamentally static replaying of the same elements”, I think, referring to Kristeva's notion of feminine subjectivity and time, that they are connected with a different experience of historical time: that of female subjectivity, when it is thought of as maternal time (Kristeva 1993/1979, 167). In the texts by Bonnèr and Arbatova, this experience is oriented towards understanding the mother (the past) and the self (the present) as constituents of identity.

In the women's autobiographies discussed here, the relationship to the mother does not leave much room for idealization of the mother figure, on the contrary. The relationship between the mother and daughter is described as ambivalent. Nevertheless it is also an important constituent in the construction of identity of the first person narrator: the mother serves as a reflection of the daughter's own image as different from *and* the same as the mother.

In the sample of the texts in my material, the mother is not a benevolent figure, but is often seen by the narrators as a mediator, and a victim, of society's failures or misfortunes. However, in the texts this is not unambiguously represented, because the mother is often a counter figure, who comes to reflect the identity of the narrator-daughter herself.

2.3.3 Writing Subjectivity

Memory, which is perceived to be individual and subjective, is also “intersubjective and dialogical (...) and ... a matter of public conventions and shared rituals” (Cosslett et al. 2000, 5). In the discussion of contemporary non-fiction literature in Russia, memory was connected with notions of silenced or repressed memory which, as it seems, now is “permitted” to exist. However, the notion that now we are able to read and write “true” history of the country, instead of a previous “false” one, is as much influenced by power-relations and exercises similar kind of excluding of certain aspects (Gradskova 2002, 503-504). The ongoing need to return to cataclysmic events in history especially to those which had not been discussed publicly prior to *perestroika*, implies the insistence on people’s memory as opposite to earlier times’ manipulation of history.⁵⁵ From the 19th century on, the writer of an autobiographical text turns into an important repository of documenting historical events. When testifying becomes the corner stone of this kind of autobiographical narratives, they carry with in them a certain subject position, invested with authority, as Felman and Laub note: “By virtue of the fact that the testimony is *addressed* to others, the witness, from within the solitude of his [or her] own stance, is the vehicle of an occurrence, a reality, a stance or a dimension *beyond him[or her-]self*” (1992, 3).

To a certain extent these texts can be seen as “testimonies” of the past, and the authors encourage the readers to recognize this aspect of their writing. In the case of Pliseckaja’s text, where the narrator on the one hand insists on her individuality and independency, and on the other hand leans on a common, collective experience of a generation as a guarantee for authority:

Я спрашиваю себя, не усугубляю ли драму своей семьи? Не злоупотребляю ли черной краской в повествовании? Но все это было. Все правда. Так было прожито. Выстрадано. Оставило рубцы на сердце. Я не хочу сглаживать острые углы, утаивать гадливые подробности. Так жило мое поколение. Я его дитя. Не лучше, не хуже. (Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 69).

I keep asking myself, don’t I exaggerate the drama in my family’s life? Don’t I use too much black in my narrative? However, all of this has happened. Everything is true. This is how we lived and how we suffered. It left scars in our hearts. I don’t want to make my story more gentle or to hide any disgusting details. This is how my generation lived. I’m its offspring. No better, no worse. (Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 69).

⁵⁵ See Smith (1996). During the Soviet era history was constantly being re-written, as, for instance, Tatjana Tolstaja (1998, 42) writes: “Скажем, люди исчезают с фотографии один за другим, по мере их исчезновения из жизни или с политической арены. В периоды же оттепелей часть фигур, изъятых со снимка, внезапно возвращается: им снова разрешено быть./ Thus, people disappear from photographs one after another as they disappear from life or the political arena. In the periods of thaw part of the figures taken out from the pictures suddenly return: they are allowed to be again.”

Here the author is convincing herself of the memory of the past she has. The hesitations of the author regarding her task of restoring the truth of her life, as she puts it, is a sign of doubt caused by the discrepancy between the past and the present. This discrepancy, as we shall see, is overcome by the act of narrating, in which the past is made part of the present self, who wishes to understand that past. This extract reveals the fluctuation between public and private, social and subjective that are inseparable from each other in the discourse. The narrative constructs the “I” in a continuing contradiction between public and personal, which reflects the writer’s status as a Soviet citizen, a famous artist and a woman.⁵⁶

A text approaching the problem of memory and need to remember from a slightly different point of view is Elena Bonner’s *Mothers and Daughters*, where the narrator does not insist on factuality but instead on actuality: “Если меня спросят: ‘Это было?’ — Я отвечу — ‘Нет’. ‘Это правда?’ — ‘Конечно’. (Bonner 1994/1991, 5)/ If you ask me: ‘Did this happen?’ I will reply: ‘No’. If you ask me: ‘Is this true?’ - I will say: ‘Of course’.” (Bonner 1992, 7) This points to the discursive work the writing subject goes through. The testimonial rhetoric (“This happened”, “This is true”) is a sign to the reader that although it is a question of writing, written words, what is being written bears a relation to real events, which the witness, “the narrator-as-eyewitness” connects to language (Felman & Laub 1992, 101). The testifying of tragedies of past, however, is further complicated through individual memory, which filters the experiences, and through the arranging of the memory in writing, in which some things are included, some omitted. By denying that “this has happened” and still insisting that “this is true”, the narrator points rather to the subjectivity of her account: what has been written is true for her, in other words, the narrator acknowledges that she does not own the truth but she nevertheless can stand as a witness to truth.

Arbatova’s text offers stories about the narrator’s grandparents, consisting of family legends, documents and stories handed down. The narrator’s aim is to understand her ancestors’, and thus her own life course. The question is of writing these past stories down for her self, to construct the history of her life. Arbatova notes at the beginning of her text that she writes her autobiography in order to “look closely at the events of the past life and accept them”. This aspect of writing points to the autobiographical practice of constructing (female) identity through writing, making the past life “material” which can be constructed into a life-story. This statement represents an understanding of autobiography not as a means to revive past lives or give

⁵⁶ For instance, the narrator reminisces on the scene of the father’s arrest at home, a scene that is familiar from many literary works and films but, as the narrator stresses, the horror of experiencing it personally cannot be exhausted with them (Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 51-52); the narrator also promotes her right to a subjective truth, no matter if that truth does not stand the test of the nation’s truth (ibid. 367).

children information about family but as an instrument to analyse, construct one's own life.

A common observation which can be made on the basis of these texts is that they are rich in accounts of everyday details of the past life.⁵⁷ As already mentioned, this feature of contemporary documentary writing serves to document the “lost” everyday Soviet reality.⁵⁸ In the 1980s-90s works in which the narratives of the previously marginalized or suppressed come to the fore began to appear centre stage. These texts criticise and undermine what was esteemed in the official Soviet discourse, and they strive to represent what was “other” for the previous order. This other includes the female.⁵⁹

The writing subjects base the representation of the past on their personal experiences by stressing the perception through body and senses. This emphasises the account of the presence of the writing subject in a certain time and place: this occurs in the phrases, for example, that the writing subject saw something with her own eyes or heard something with her own ears. This aspect in the texts functions not only as an assurance that the question is of an eyewitness account, but also as a representation of female subjectivity. The act of writing and remembering are represented as the construction of the past through memory and body:

Я болела в маминой комнате, и это как-то приближало меня к ней, мне было уютно быть почти на ее месте. И впервые за это время мама мне приснилась. Она сидела за столом в красной связанной кофточке поверх какой-то очень нарядной белой блузки, как в последнее время до болезни, а я сидела по другую сторону, и мы через стол держались за руки, вернее, я держала в руках ее левую руку и целовала ее — никогда в жизни этого не было, мы просто не могли себе такое представить и позволить — ведь всю жизнь внешне отношения были такими, что это сделать было нельзя. А в последнее время, последние месяцы мне часто хотелось как-то физически приласкать маму, но все стояло это “нельзя”. А во сне все было легко — и руку ее целовать и плакать — все было можно. И самое странное, что утром после этого сна было так светло, будто я действительно побывала с ней. С этого сна начались воспоминания. (Bonnèr 1994/1991, 13-14)

⁵⁷ Descriptions of everyday life were an important feature of literary works already in the 1960s-1970s' *bytovaja literatura*, in which the focus, in contrast to socialist realism, was on the private rather than on the public sphere of life (Kelly 1994, 345; Katz 1998, 195). In the everyday literature of the time social reality was described with acknowledgment of its influence on the characters' consciousness, and seen in the perspective of the individual (Katz 1998, 195). There is also an important aspect of gender connected with descriptions of *byt*: in the 1960s-1970s many Soviet women writers' texts concentrated on the representation of domestic difficulties in a Soviet middle-class woman's life (Kelly 1994, 344-5).

⁵⁸ Gradszkova suggests that this is one reason for the popularity of memoirs in today's Russia (2002, 504).

⁵⁹ In studies of contemporary women writers' texts this has been observed by Parnell (2000), Rosenholm (2002).

I lay ill in Mama's room, and that brought me closer to her somehow. It was cozy being almost in her place. And for the first time since she died I dreamed about her. She was sitting at the table in her red sweater over a very dressy white blouse, just the way she had been right before her illness. I was across the table from her, and we were holding hands. Or rather, I was holding her left hand in mine and kissing her. This had never happened in my life; we simply would never had imagined or permitted ourselves such behavior - after all, our relationship had never made that possible. And lately, in the last months I had often wanted to show some physical expression of my love for her, but that "Forbidden" sign was always there. I was afraid of scaring her, afraid that my actions would make her wary, worry that things were bad and that I was concerned for her health. And so I behaved like a stone block. But in the dream it was so easy - to kiss her hand, to weep - it was all permissible. And the strange thing is that in the morning after that dream, I felt the radiance of having been with her. The memories began with that dream. (Bonner 1992, 10-11)

This quotation reinforces the interrelations between memory, the unconscious (dream) and the body. These interrelations both enable the subject of writing to remember as well as to act upon her to write. The symbolic meaning of the daughter's body in the mother's bed reinforces the corporeal, generational connection, continuity between the past and the present. However, there is also the moment of difference in the present: after the mother's death the daughter is allowed to kiss and caress her, which was earlier forbidden. After the "Forbidden" sign is gone, it is easier to look back. What can be considered as a gender difference in relation to the past and to identity formation is connected with the relationship between the mother and the daughter. In a culture where primarily women take care of children and heterosexual relations are a norm, the son's (sexual) identity is based on separation from the mother, whereas the daughter's identity is based on identification with the mother. In the case of Russian and Soviet history it was often women, mothers and daughters, in the family who survived in times of political and military upheavals. It was often their task to keep going, to pass on knowledge from generation to generation.⁶⁰ This aspect is highlighted in Bonner's text.

"Body" in this case needs to be understood as an aspect of a different strategy of reading the texts, which is based on the notion that subjects come to interact with the world first through their body, which is a locus for cultural, social and intersubjective meanings. It is connected with both discursive constructions of symbolic femininity in culture ("Woman") and the real, lived experiences of women.

Although the material I am working with was published in the 1990s, the crumbling of political oppositions which Holmgren (1994) suggested as a potential liberating factor for the representation of female experience in women's texts in the 1990s in her article discussed above does not yet seem to

⁶⁰ This idea has been evinced in the studies of Engel (1983) and Holmgren (1993).

have had a major impact on the conventions of autobiographical writing, or, more specifically, on the *formulae for motivating* writing about one's own life. The authors in my material state that they write in order to testify to certain events of the past, in connection with Soviet Russian history, which started to be re-interpreted first during the post-Stalin period (and were not published) and then during *perestroika* in the late 1980s (Marsh 1995; Smith 1996). This aspect of testimony, however, does not prevent the representation of the personal experiences, that is, the specific psycho-sexual circumstances of women's lives. In their representations of female selfhood and identity the texts represent the protagonist-narrator as "embodied", as a feeling and experiencing human.

I agree with Holmgren that political and cultural reasons have had an important influence on women's autobiographical writing, but we might also interpret this as influence *on the level of motivation and textual formulae for (public) writing*. By this I am suggesting, that different political situations and public discourses favour writers with a certain status (e.g. political dissidents) and certain representations of womanhood (cf. revolutionaries, Soviet writers). Although it is important to read the texts in the context of politics and cultural influence, it is also important to think about the writers as *subjects*, who, when writing, are aware of the generic conventions, use them and create literary constructions of their lives according to them (cf. Hoogenboom 1996, 78-79).

Thus, what I contend has to be emphasised when reading these women's autobiographies, are the writing strategies, which are influenced by traditions of memoir writing in Russia (writing in order to testify, to serve a common historical purpose, to serve the community etc.) and the political, cultural spirit of the time of their writing and publishing. Then it becomes interesting to see how the female subject is inscribed in the text in this frame. As I hope to show, the texts give evidence that the writing subject is involved in representing experiences which escape the political and the social questions of the time, and refer to another identity, that is, specifically female identity. The aim of my readings is to contextualise the historical specificity of these texts and their meaning in relation to the previous and parallel Russian and Western cultural and literary tendencies, and not so much to point out that they are radical.⁶¹

⁶¹ It has been pointed out that women's writing of the 1960s and 1970s paved the way for the women writers of the 1980s and 1990s. These texts have gained from their immediate predecessors so that they are more supplementary than radical in breaking taboos on sexuality and subjectivity and in challenging stereotypes of femininity. See Barker (2002), Holmgren (2002), Sandler (2002).

In this chapter I explored, how contemporary Russian women write about their lives through the autobiographical discourse. I did not yet so much try to answer the question, as to show the relevance of asking this question in the first place. To read the texts from the point of view of their writing techniques and the representation of female experience is the task in the next chapters.

3 On the Other Side of Reason: Tamara Petkevič's Gulag Memoirs

The name of Tamara Petkevič's memoirs, *Жизнь - сапожок непарный* (Life is an odd boot), bears a direct reference to Marina Cvetaeva's poem starting with the verses: "Молодость моя! Моя чужая/Молодость! Мой сапожок непарный!" In the poem, the lyrical "I" expresses her feeling of alienation and confusion when thinking back to her youth, her younger self.¹ Petkevič's text is a description of the heroine's journey "to the other side of reason" in the Soviet prison camp in the 1940s where the first person narrator looks back and recalls this "alien time" of her life. I have chosen this text and begin my analyses with it because in my view it is very representative of the (moral) need for recollecting the repressed Soviet past in the 1990s and it bears a reference to the earlier time, the thaw period of the 1960s, when this kind of literature and memoirs began to appear. I chose to examine this text among other Gulag reminiscences by Russian women, because it is probably not so familiar for Western readers.

Gulag² literature published in the 1980s-1990s, is largely an outgrowth of the thaw period of the 1960s (see, for instance, Smith 1996, 2; 37-38), and this theme remains still quite acute in the literary field of the 1990s. As Kathleen Smith points out in her study on popular memory in the late and post-Soviet period, in the 1960s these memoirs were not really officially accounted for, because the regime then was not prepared to be held accountable for the past. During the *perestroika* period beginning from the mid 1980s, this topic resurfaced in public discussions with the help of civic organizations committed to the memory of the victims.

The difference from the earlier period of publication is that the 1990s saw not only the end of the Soviet Union but also the closed archives of the Party were opened and the system of the Gulag could be investigated through

¹ See Цветаева, Марина 1982. *Стихотворения 1917-1922. Стихотворения и поэмы в пяти томах*. Т. 2. New York: Russica Publ., 135.

² ГУЛАГ, ГУЛаг - Государственное управление исправительно-трудовых лагерей, поселений и мест заключения. Существовало в 1934 - 1956 гг. при НКВД. (*Большой толковый словарь русского языка 1998*). Toker gives credit to Solženicyun for popularizing the term and shifting its meaning to include the whole of the camp system in the USSR (Toker 1997, 188: n. 1). See also Ivanova (2000, xxi): "The concept of 'Gulag,' which A.I. Solzhenitsyn introduced into the study of world history, is by no means limited to the system of Soviet forced-labour camps that existed from the 1930s to the 1950s. The Gulag as a unique socioeconomic phenomenon emerged under Stalinism, but its historical roots can be traced to the ancient and enduring traditions of tyranny and authoritarianism of the Russian state, whose laws consistently defended and preserved the interest of the empire without guaranteeing the rights and freedoms of the individual."

documents, figures and files.³ However, the move towards a representation and understanding of what it was like to be on the other side of the barbed-wire takes place with the help of subjective accounts of the experience, for instance, in Gulag memoirs. They represent the “history of feelings” as the Belo-Russian writer Svetlana Aleksievič states:

Мой факт - не событие, а чувство; а сюжет - жизнь. Я пишу историю чувств в надежде, что человек всегда хочет прочитать о другом человеке, а не о войне или Чернобыле. Собираю доказательства не того, что мы были, а скорее - как мы были. Какие. И как отвечали на вопрос, зачем мы были. (Aleksievič 2000, 38)⁴

In its own way, Gulag literature is part of this “history of feelings” because they testify to the importance of personal testimony in the understanding of the epoch (see Toker 2000, 3).

Another difference in relation to earlier times is that recently Gulag memoirs have become objects of *literary* studies (Toker 2000, 8). The analysis will deal with deciphering similarities and specific features of Gulag narratives in one particular text by Petkevič and ponder upon their meaning from the point of view of the subject, of writing about a woman’s Gulag experience.

³ Cf. Sergej Larin (2000): “Теперь, как мне кажется, на первый план в этой тематике выходят аналитические работы: труды историков, правоведов, юристов, журналистов, занятых изучением прежде недоступных архивов и хранилищ КГБ, Генпрокуратуры, цензурного ведомства./ At the present, as it seems to me, the theme [of the Gulag] is discussed first and foremost in analytical works: studies by historians, legal scholars, lawyers, journalists who have investigated previously inaccessible archives and repositories of the KGB, the general procurator, the bureau of censorship” (Larin 2000); I. Ščerbakova (2000, 35, bold orig.) writes: “Если в течение нескольких десятилетий у нас главным историческим альтернативным источником была память, то с начала 90-х годов впервые возникает **документ**. Происходит то, на что никто и не надеялся: приоткрываются секретные архивы и все историки бросаются от воспоминаний к документам. А что, в сущности, такое секретные архивы? Это то, что наша система считала нужным сохранить, то есть **память системы**./ If in the course of some decades our main alternative historical source was memory, and then from the beginning of the 90s for the first time occurs **document**. Happens what no one could even hope for: secret archives are opened and all historians rush from reminiscences to documents. What in fact, are these secret archives? They are what our system deemed necessary to preserve, that is, **memory of the system**.”

⁴ “For me facts are not events but feelings; and plots are construed in life. I write the history of feelings hoping that people always want to read about other people, not about the war or Chernobyl. I collect proof not in order to state that we were, but in order to represent how we were. What we were like. And how we answered the question why we were.”

3.1 Narrative Features of Gulag Literature

An important constituent of this type of narratives is their informative nature. This influences the rhetoric framing the purpose of writing and the “pact” with the reader. The purpose of writing in Petkevič’s text is formulated both at the beginning and at the end. At first, the author brings out the importance of her writing as preserving the memory of those who did not survive: “These people suffered and died not being able to realize their rich potentials. Their courage, humanity, their friendship formed and rescued me.” (Petkevič 1993, 5.) At the end, the narrator refers to a third party and says, her confession is an attempt to answer the question asked of former convicts, how a human being could survive the prison camp and live after it. Gulag narratives often serve consciousness-raising purposes and their primary function has been that of enlightening people about the system of the Gulag, its inhumanity and violation of human rights, as well as of the experience itself (Toker 2000, 6). However, these texts also form a literary genre of their own, which draws attention to their aesthetic, literary features. It becomes more relevant to ask *how* the experience has been represented.

As Toker and other researchers point out, the specificity of the narrative aspects of Gulag memoirs stems from the field of experience it strives to represent.⁵ The tensions between literature and experience mark this specificity:

One of the main problems of Holocaust literature and its study (the same is to a large extent true of the vast literature of the Gulag) is the inadequacy of the communicative function of language and the powerlessness of traditional aesthetic forms in the face of the unimaginable experience that the authors must record... (Toker 1997, 205)

Although from my point of view this statement somewhat mystifies writing about such experiences as the Holocaust and the Gulag, as those who write about it are concerned first and foremost with describing the experience, it points to the more general problem of boundaries between aesthetics and life. Echoing this notion, the protagonist in Tamara Petkevič’s memoirs asks how the experience of one human being, thrown into the flow of history, can find its place in history. By history I refer to such understanding of the past which is based on a rational explanation of cause and effect as a teleological continuum of events towards the present. The narrator-protagonist’s question emerges during her imprisonment, in the middle of the barbarism and cruelty among the prisoners. It is the discrepancy between institutional, official history writing and individual memory and perception of the events that makes the protagonist wonder if her and others’ perceptions and experiences will ever reach the others

⁵ Cf. also Michael Rothberg: “How does the memoirist represent realistically this space of death behind the barbed wire curtain? How can a language that must remain ordinary portray the heterogeneity of the extreme without neutralizing it?” (Rothberg 1999, 96.)

on the other side. The concern and urge to write about one's own experience is motivated by this discrepancy between official history and subjective memory.

As was observed above, the primary reason for writing Gulag memoirs is to mediate information about it. In line with this is their particular political function, which aims at undermining the justification of a regime that upholds such an inhuman legal system. An obvious political impact of this kind of narrative is the act of writing in itself: testifying about the small people's fate in a totalitarian system. The subject position offered in such writing can be illustrated by the example of a Finnish Gulag testimony, the memoirs by Anna Petrovskaja, a Soviet woman of Finnish origin:

It was not easy to start the story of my life. Many years have gone by and many things have been forgotten, and I wouldn't like to remember everything. But *this is my life-story, one of many millions, yet unique, because it tells the story of my life.* I don't know if this is a typical fate of the women of my generation, but *it is a very ordinary story* about those times when the great and mighty Soviet Union dictated the limits of living *of the most insignificant citizen.* I'll try to live, once more, through all that again, remember those events which I have *witnessed during my life.* (Petrovskaja 1993, 5)⁶

The writer emphasises the ordinariness of her fate ("one of many millions", "it is a very ordinary story"), but also the uniqueness ("It tells the story of my life") contrasting the Soviet state with her own insignificant self. This passage indicates the moral and political authority invested in this type of autobiographical writing and the subject position it offers: through it the most insignificant citizen can challenge the great and mighty state by the memory and witness of her own life. The back cover text of the book enhances this subject position in clichéd phrases: "Anna Petrovskaja's story is one of the many thousands: the life-story of a woman living under violence and egoistic male despotism. A woman, who had no right or chance to defend herself against Stalin's system of tyranny". This highlights the specific quality of this Gulag testimony because it has been written by a woman, and simultaneously the typicality of her fate as one speaking for many thousands (see Vettenniemi 2001, 182).

The importance of this particular political function of Gulag narratives has somewhat decreased as the regime it criticised no longer exists. This makes more space for a different kind of approach to them and their political aspects, because the context of their reception is no longer defined by the dichotomy of "official - unofficial". Kelly (1994, 371) has noted that women's memoirs of the post-Stalin era *lack* political analysis and commentary.⁷ However, we could also look at the question of politics from another angle, than as a representation of a

⁶ Translation from the original Finnish is mine.

⁷ "...[T]here is nothing by a woman writer which attempts the general analysis of Razgon's *Nevydumannoe*, let alone Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*" (1994, 371 note 67).

general analysis of extensive materials where the author-narrator “...instructs the readers in camp realities according to the pedagogical principle of escalating difficulty, the starting point usually being the familiar surface as created by Soviet education with its shallowly traditional ‘humanistic’ values...” (Toker 1997, 207-8). We could approach these texts from a perspective more sensitive to the narrative style, especially in the use of the narrative voice. As Toker points out, the author-narrator of a Gulag testimony can take the position of a “teacher” who educates the reader about the camp reality, *or* that of a “participant”. The prominent Gulag writer, Varlam Šalamov (1907-1982), has argued that the literature of the future should not be written by writers, but by participants, who tell what they have seen.⁸ The participant-perspective would encourage the reader to “undergo a shock of initiation, a personal experience of liminality” (see Toker 1997, 209).⁹ The reader would then perhaps be able to imagine “the unimaginable” and identify with the protagonist. In the same vein Natasha Kolchevska (1998, 151) suggests that in Evgenija Ginzburg’s *Kpymoï mapupym (Into the Whirlwind)* “...the author/heroine...narrates, speaking not *for* [fellow inmates, MR], in the colonising voice of a master author, but as *one* of them.”

Similarly, in Petkevič’s memoirs the narrative perspective is that of a participant: it concentrates on representing the day to day existence in the camp and its psychological, physical and emotional impact on human beings, or rather, the protagonist as one among the others. Without suggesting that Solženicyn’s work on the Gulag is non-participant, it could be, then, seen that “being political” can be understood in another sense of personal engagement, in which case, the narrative would not be taken only as an enlightening piece of evidence about the horrors of the Gulag, but also as an intersubjective act of becoming involved in dealing with the experience, and the phenomenon, both for the author and the reader. This also draws attention to the fact that concentration and labour camps form a many-sided experience and cannot be reduced to a certain general pattern.¹⁰ Although in the case of Petkevič’s and many others’ Gulag testimonies it is a matter of proclaiming their own, personal

⁸ “It is not writers who will speak, but professionals who possess the gift for writing. And they will tell only what they know and have seen. Accuracy - that is the force of the literature of the future.” (Šalamov, Varlam 1985/1978. *Kolymskie rasskazy*. Edited by Mikhail Geller. London: Overseas Publications Interchange. 152. Cit. in Toker 1997, 209).

⁹ The word ‘liminal’ is derived from ‘limen’. See *Oxford English Dictionary* (on the net: www.oed.com): ‘liminal’ - **a. gen.** Of or pertaining to the threshold or initial stage of a process. *rare. b. spec.* in *Psychol.* Of or pertaining to a ‘limen’ or ‘threshold.’

¹⁰ See Michael Rothberg’s article on Ruth Klüger’s testimony of Holocaust experience, where he states that “[t]he ‘truth’ of the concentrationary universe is that it is not one” (Rothberg 1999, 96).

testimonies in order to make them part of the national memory¹¹, it is not only a matter of communicating information, but of constructing that information, making sense of it.

The narrative voice in Gulag narratives is usually two-fold:

[T]he attitude of the memoirist as the *narrating voice* is different from the attitude of the memoirist as the *focal character* of the text, the prisoner who has witnessed the events and situations described: the *focalizer* was a sharer of the *common* lot, yet the retrospectively narrating *voice* belongs to a concrete historical *individual* with his or her private memory, antecedents, and affiliations. (Toker 2000, 77, italics orig.)

This narrative perspective aligns Gulag texts to the description of psychological development of the *Bildungsroman*: the protagonist gradually gains political understanding and social experience (Kelly 1994, 368). Kelly points out that in women's Gulag memoirs this happens in "the crucible of relations between women who share a prison cell or camp barracks" (ibid.). Indeed, women's prison camp is an environment "where males are outsiders, and where successful interaction between women inmates is the chief condition for staying alive" (Peterson 1996, 179).¹²

Both narrative aspects of a development story and relations between women can be found in Tamara Petkevič's prison camp memoirs. When the protagonist enters the camp zone, she is inclined towards thoughts of committing suicide. However, meeting a familiar woman in the camp and her motherly concern and care for the protagonist then help her to get rid of this thought and make her think of the future as a chance to tell others about her experiences. This and other scenes are recurrent in other (women's) prison camp memoirs. Toker (2000, 82) has defined a set of nine *topoi* which structure Gulag narratives, most of which recur in individual narratives.¹³

In my analysis, however, I focus on how the subjectivity of the experience is narrated in this particular text, and how the writing subject, on the

¹¹ Olga Adamova-Sliozberg writes in *My Journey*: "I was determined to go on thinking, to remember everything, and to survive to tell to others what I had seen. I would bear witness!" (1999, 38)

¹² On pre-revolutionary women prisoners' accounts of female friendship see Barbara Alpern Engel (1983, 202). Referring to Tzvetan Todorov Vettenniemi notes that in prison camp literature women inmates are most likely to practise such "feminine" values as compassion and concern for individual people. He sees the lack of such descriptions in men's texts as a gender-bound phenomenon, whereby "men loath to display their altruistic side" (2001, 226).

¹³ These nine *topoi*, which will not be analysed here specifically, include (1) the arrest, (2) dignity, (3) stages (Russ. *эмань*), (4) escape, (5) moments of reprieve, (6) "room 101" - a particularly disturbing event, about which the author remains mute, (7) chance, (8) the zone and the larger zone, (9) end-of-term fatigue. According to Toker at least seven of these are displayed in individual texts. (2002, 82-93). More or less all of these can be identified in Petkevič's narrative.

other hand, uses this genre (its conventions and formulations) in constructing her own perspective of the Gulag. Although the author expresses her wish to inform others and the narrative has a moral message which is recognizable for contemporaries, the narrative also suggests that this experience cannot be mediated, told, described for others through language:

Тогда, за один бесконечный день 30 января 1943 года, все сразу потеряв, я поняла про жизнь самое жестокое. И то, как измывались над отцом, какую он сносил муку, - поняла тоже. Но собственный опыт не похож ни на чей другой. Он - дело особое. (Petkevič 1993, 118)

Then, in that one endless day on 30 January 1943, after losing everything at once, I realized the cruellest thing about life. I also realized how my father was mocked, how he endured pain. But the experience of one's own doesn't resemble anyone else's. It is special. (Petkevič 1993, 118)

A closer analysis of the narrative strategy used in Petkevič's text shows that it purports to represent the inner, participant perspective of the protagonist-narrator, but that it also remains silent and relies on conventional forms of representation about certain themes.

3.2 The Story of “the Untimely Child”

The text begins with a depiction of childhood in 1920s' Petrograd. The protagonist's parents were revolutionaries, who participated in the political upheaval during the revolutionary events. The family lived, apparently, in relative comfort: they had a big house and domestic help. However, the childhood description is characterised by an atmosphere of insecurity and loneliness which the protagonist experiences in her family:

В нашей квартире царил мрачноватый порядок. Квартира была огромной - из шести комнат. Круглый зал с нишами, столовая, папин кабинет, гостиная, детская... При кухне еще комната - седьмая, для прислуги. *Меня, вероятно, нередко оставляли дома одну, потому что помню, как в загустевшей тишине я бродила по всем комнатам.* (Petkevič 1993, 8, italics - MR)

Our apartment was predominated by quite a sombre order. It was huge - with six rooms. A round parlour with niches, a dining room, Papa's study, a sitting room, a nursery... By the kitchen there was an additional room, the seventh, for the maid. *Apparently I was quite often left home alone, because I remember walking round the rooms in complete silence.* (Petkevič 1993, 8, italics MR)

The narrator reminisces mostly about scenes and events where she as a child felt misunderstood or mistreated, herself not understanding her parents. This childhood description serves as an overture for the tragic events to come. A harbinger of the events is also mentioning how the father used to beat her for no

apparent reason, as the narrator recalls. Pondering on the reasons why a man, who, according to neighbours and friends was “a fine man”, “not an evil man” would “mercilessly beat a silly child” the narrator notes:

Возможно, это были издержки фронтовой контузии. А может, таким образом избывалась скопившаяся за годы гражданской войны жестокость. Никто мне этого сейчас уже не объяснит, а мучает это по сию пору. За что? Почему? Не ошибаюсь в одном: я была несвоевременным ребенком. (Petkevič 1993, 13)

It’s possible, it was war-time frustration or, perhaps, it was a way to offload aggression accumulated in the civil war. No one is left to explain it to me now, but it torments me to this day. What for? Why? I’m not wrong about one thing: I was an untimely child. (Petkevič 1993, 13)

The story of the father’s illogical punishment of her and the questions asked in the extract above, can be read as a metaphor for the situation of those who fell victim to political purges at that time. The extract echoes the tales of imprisonment and punishment of allegedly innocent people, “untimely children” of the Soviet state, which included the protagonist’s father, as well as herself. The narrator inherits her father’s fate as a daughter of the people’s enemy, and many others with her. The fathers leave their children a legacy of guilt and incomprehension:

В наследство достались неразрешимые вопросы: почему с моим отцом, со множеством таких, как он, жизнь обошлась именно так? (...) О чем он думал сам, что чувствовал при аресте? Потом, идя ему вслед, уже не разумом, а клетками ощущала, как он переносил свою долю. (ibid. 48)

I inherited unsolvable questions like, why did life take such a turn for my father, and for many others just like him? (...) What was he himself thinking about, what did he feel when he was arrested? Later, when I followed in his footsteps, I knew through my cellular tissue, not through my brain, how he went through his part in life. (ibid. 48)

This commentary by the narrator at the beginning of her story sets the tone (in the reader) for the future story to be read: the reader is about to know how the narrator gets to know how her father “went through his part in life”, and how she went through hers. Petkevič’s own story of the Gulag, however, starts a few years after the father’s arrest, and the narrative includes a description of Tamara’s youth and her short search for her own role in life, to break free from the legacy of guilt, which nevertheless ends up with a repetition of her father’s fate.

A notable constituent of the narrative is the discrepancy between the perspective of the protagonist and the narrator: the former is the experiencing subject and the latter is the narrating subject, who represents the course of events

retrospectively. The difference emerges through the narrative voice, which, for example, quotes the protagonist's thoughts in the past, "then", which seem naïve in the time of writing, "now". The using of a self-narrated inner monologue, that is, quoting by the narrator of her own thoughts in the past, establishes the position of the author-narrator as an authoritative narrative instance. In the quotation below, reflecting questions emphasise the protagonist's disbelief of what is happening to her and her family and persuade the reader to sympathise and wonder with the protagonist:

Значит, тюрьма, арест - это еще не все? Есть нечто более ужасное? Как может человек ходить "под номером", без фамилии? На папе, на людях нашиты номера? Если бы мне, например, сказали, что превратят в какое-то животное, я была бы не в состоянии представить себе конкретность такого превращения, могла бы ощутить лишь ужас. (ibid. 50)

So, the prison and the arrest are not yet all? There is something more terrible? How can a person be called by a number, not by a family name? There are numbers put on Papa, on people? If I was told, for instance, that people are turned into some kind of animals, I would not be capable of imagining it concretely. I could only feel terror. (ibid. 50)

The protagonist's questions purport to represent her, the past self's, disbelief and naïveté after the disappearance of her father before she herself experienced what is described in the above quotation. The reader, who quite probably also knows what happened to people who disappeared and who might be familiar with other similar stories of arrest and disbelief shares something of the narrator's position, anticipating the future course of events. However, as the narrator emphasises, the reader is not necessarily able to imagine them concretely. In this way she differentiates her experience from that of the reader, who probably has not experienced the same.

The difference between the protagonist and the narrator structures the story and its continuum from there and then to here and now. Dorrit Cohn explains the use of this technique in fiction narratives in the following manner:

...[R]etrospection into a consciousness ... is no less important a component of first-person novels than *inspection* of a consciousness is in third-person novels. The same basic types of presentation appear, the same basic terms can apply, modified by prefixes to signal the modified relationship of the narrator to the subject of his narration: psycho-narration becomes self-narration (on the analogy with self-analysis), and monologues can now be either self-quoted, or self-narrated. (Cohn 1983/1978, 14)

Analysis of the narrative voice and focalization give further clues of the narrative strategy of the text. As Rimmon-Kenan points out, in first person retrospective narratives' focalization and the narrator are separate functions (1991/1983, 94). In Petkevič's case, the perceptive focalizer is the protagonist,

the experiencing subject, whose thoughts and perception are the focus of the narrative. The one who structures this experience and evaluates it, the ideological focalizer, is the narrator, who commands knowledge of the further development of events. In principle, retrospective narration of one's own past is characterised as outer focalization, that is, there is a necessary difference in time between the protagonist's and the narrator's perception. However, in the sort of self-quoted narration Petkevič's text represents, the narrator strives to identify herself with her past feelings and experiences, thus imposing silence on the events or explanations to come. The strategy of self-quoted narration is especially evident in the text. The narrator, of course, knows more than the protagonist, but the latter's thoughts and events of her life are articulated as if occurring only at the time of writing or just as fresh as at the time of the actual events. Genette (1986, 198-199) calls this a temporal paralipsis where the narrator imposes silence on him/herself. This narrative strategy is used in order to create an illusion of a coherent story of development from the protagonist's ignorance to cognition, thus, it resembles the structure of a *Bildungsroman*, describing how the protagonist goes through a transformation, usually from naïveté to knowledge gained in the course of events.

The narration is chronological, which also emphasises the structural journey from then to now. After the description at the beginning of the rather insecure childhood, a turning point in the protagonist's life takes place marked by the date when childhood ended: "Мира, в котором мы до сих пор существовали, не стало. И никакого другого не было тоже. Было 23 ноября 1937 года./ The world in which we had lived until then, came to an end. And there was no other world either. It was 23 November in 1937." (Petkevič 1993, 39).¹⁴ The exact definition of the date, when "everything changed" and childhood was over denotes the chronology of life course understood as a continuum where one phase is followed by another. In these and other reminiscences concentrating on the Soviet era it has also other meanings besides this. The naming of a concrete date and moment in the protagonist's life means for her a personal tragedy, but simultaneously it denotes a time in the country's history which had a rather similar meaning for many others and in that sense is a metaphor for a collective fate.¹⁵

¹⁴ A similar sentence occurs in Bonner's text: "Я стала другой. И детство мое кончилось. В ночь с 27 на 28 мая 1937 года, на московском бульварном кольце, у памятника Пушкина (Bonner 1994/1991, 281)/ I had changed: my childhood had ended. On the night of May 27, 1937, on the Moscow Boulevard ring, by the statue of Pushkin." (Bonner 1992, 307)

¹⁵ Sometimes important political dates coincided with personal ones. For example, Galina Erofeeva recalls in her memoirs the time around the murder of Kirov, because it coincides with her birthday. At the time she was an adolescent girl, which gives this tragic landmark a kind of a humorous flavour: "На расспросы сыновей о трагических событиях 1937-1938 годов я вполне обоснованно могла дать такой простой ответ: в шестнадцать-семнадцать лет меня мало трогала, а может, и вовсе не интересовала политика; я жила и увлекалась другим. (...) Ведь помню же до мелочей митинг 1 декабря 1934 года по поводу убийства

Another narrative aspect that draws attention in Petkevič's text is the word of the others. This means that the others' word is drawn as a part of the narrative in the form of their own direct speech primarily in letters addressed to the protagonist, and quoted in the text itself. The author's note (*от автора*) at the beginning of the book emphasises the importance of restoring "names, circumstances of bygone years and fates of people who have passed away". This points to the importance given to the sympathy and friendship shared with the protagonist, which, according to the author, had saved her. Except for giving a voice to people who were not able to tell their own stories, these letters also serve the function of illustrating the protagonist's character and her development - they participate in the construction of the image of the past self. For instance, reading and writing letters offers comfort:

Главным было схватить ток, напряжение письма. Если к тому и слова совпадали с "ритмической основой", тогда письмо утешало. Я пропитывалась им, припадала к нему как к источнику жизни. Я и сама часто писала оголтело, страстно, словно в забытьи. (Petkevič 1993, 340)

The main thing was to catch the flow, the tension of the letter. If the words were in accordance with the "rhythmic basis", then the letter was comforting. I nourished myself with it, pressed myself to it like to a life spring. I myself often wrote wildly, passionately, as if in delirium. (Petkevič 1993, 340)

Reading and writing help the narrator to momentarily escape the circumstances of the Gulag. Perhaps they offered a way to resist the overarching system of the Gulag. As Kolchevska (2003, 160) points out, the tradition of prison poetry, remembered only in the mind, represents "the last border that cannot be transgressed by a system that has violated [one's] life and ... body in every other way". They serve as a technique of survival in the camp.

The letters written by others quoted in the text construct the description of the protagonist's development and her changing situation in the prison camp. They begin to appear in the text, especially towards the end of the story, when the protagonist has made friends with other intellectual women and men in the Gulag theatre company. For instance, they serve as "authentic" evidence concerning the injustice the narrator-protagonist suffered, when battling for her

Кирова. Мне в этот день исполнилось четырнадцать лет, и я плакала горше всех, потому что считала, что вперед никогда мой день рождения не будет приносить мне радость./ To my sons' questions about the tragic events of 1937-1938 I could answer very simply with good reason: at 16-17 politics interested me little, perhaps not at all; I was occupied with other things. (...) I remember in detail the meeting on the first of December in 1934 concerning Kirov's murder. That day was my 14th birthday, and I cried bitterly, because I thought that from now on my birthday will never bring me any joy." (Erofeeva 1998, 7) In Anna Larina-Buharina's memoirs the protagonist's birthday coincides with the day of Lenin's death, and her father decides that her birthday will be transferred to May (Larina-Buharina 1989, 216).

right to get her son (born in the labour camp) back from his foster mother after her release. The narrator quotes one letter “out of the many written by friends in 1957 to the court”, as she writes, “...как попытку увидеть в случившемся не столько личную беду, сколько преступление режима/ ...in order to see in this incident not so much a personal misfortune, but a crime of the regime” (Petkevič 1993, 468). The lengthy letter gives the reader a testimony about the narrator-protagonist from the “outside”. It serves to bring out her dignity in the eyes of the others, readers, and the community. It is characteristic that this should happen through the words of others - it has been seen as an important constituent, especially of women’s autobiographies (Mason 1980; Watson 1988).

The protagonist goes through different phases from despair to hope in the course of the story, but in the end, despite these difficulties she gradually grows to accept of her life the way it has been. That the question is to a certain degree of a development story is reinforced by the ending. The story ends in a statement which rounds up the gathered life experience and gives a synthesis of the plusses and minuses:

Я, в общем, изумляюсь и жестокости жизни, и мудрости, с которой она пересчитала пережитое на отрицание, проклятие и на любовь. Тому, что благодаря способности слышать и любить людей душа каким-то чудом восторжествовала над ненавистью... Благодарю жизнь за все человеческое, что встретилось на пути. (Petkevič 1993, 498)

In general, I’m awed by life’s cruelty, and its wisdom, which which it accounted my experiences to negation, curse and love. I’m awed by the ability to listen and love people thanks to which my soul in a miraculous way overcame hate... I thank life for all the humanity I’ve met on my journey. (Petkevič 1993, 498)

This resembles a sanctuary of life, a final acceptance of what has happened after a spiritual awakening. After all that has been experienced there is little left but awe at life’s ways. The reference to “humanity” which shows the way to this harmonious end, resembles what Holmgren has noted about Soviet Russian women’s prison camp memoirs as representing the protagonist as a spokesperson for common, human values; however, if we look at the story as a whole, this ending can be seen rather as rhetorical device. It is not so much the representation of the protagonist as a defender and founder of human values, but her own growth to restore her own value as a human being with the help of others.

Petkevič ends her story with acceptance of the prison camp experience and the restoration of her self after it, but it leaves open how she managed to cope with her life after it, for instance, to pursue a career in theatre: “Впереди было еще немало драм, радостей, ошибок и горя, но то во многом была уже другая жизнь./ There was still much drama, joy, mistakes and sorrow to come, but that is already another life” (Petkevič 1993, 499). Thus the Gulag also

represents another life and the protagonist is another person. This experience is therefore, like an “odd boot” in her biography.

As a result of outlining the narrative structure in Petkevič’s text it can be seen that the narrator-protagonist stresses the importance of the individual perception and experience of the Gulag, by identifying herself with the protagonist’s perceptual and psychological observations. On the other hand, the narrative stresses such incidents and events which have by now become themes of Gulag literature, and point to collective rather than individual aspects of the experience.¹⁶

3.2.1 Ideas Crystallised

As seen above, Gulag narratives form a genre with its own conventions. This may be a result of the similarity of the outward procedures concerning the arrest, conviction, imprisonment and release. Another reason might be that the textual/literary representation of certain experiences tends to be formed rather as a collective than an individual, exceptional experience, and the authors are well aware of their task to bring out the moral extent of the experience. Thus, although the story is based on the individual’s experience, in many cases the authors strive to describe the fates of many others, which they had witnessed. In Petkevič’s case, we can read the narrator-protagonist’s personal development, but also the moral duty of documenting the life of the others and their words.¹⁷

Recurrent *topoi* in Gulag narratives can be and have been discerned. For instance, Peterson and Ščerbakova mention seeing oneself in a reflection, and the awe at what one sees there¹⁸, non-participant descriptions of lesbian relationships in the prison, and humiliating scenes in the camp. These recur in Petkevič’s narrative as well.

¹⁶ Cf. Toker: “...[T]he sense of narrative coherence is bolstered by highlighting specific aspects of the content of the testimony - the dominant concerns of a memoir thus turn into *themes*, semantic redundancies that double as constituents of aesthetic structures” (2000, 126).

¹⁷ This is why in the case of Gulag narratives there is not necessarily any clear division between autobiography - emphasising the author’s identity and experience - and memoirs - focusing on the public-interest data that the author has been in a position to store (Toker 2000, 82).

¹⁸ See Peterson (1996, 184); Irina Ščerbakova writes: “...[O]чень характерный для женских воспоминаний эпизод у Евгении Гинзбург, когда она впервые после нескольких лет, проведенных в тюрьме, видит себя в зеркале - и видит не себя, а свою мать. Я слышала от нескольких женщин: это она у меня взяла, это я ей рассказала. А на самом деле они просто пережили то же самое. Это их общая судьба./ ...[A] very characteristic episode in women’s memoirs is written by Evgenija Ginzburg, when she sees herself in the mirror for the first time after many years in prison - and she sees not herself, but her mother. I heard from a number of women: she took it from me, I told her that. As a matter of fact they just experienced the same. It is their common fate.” (2000, 33-34.)

The narrator, thus, sees a reflection of herself in a mirror and does not recognize herself: “[Н]е сразу сообразила, что это я. Поблизости, однако, никого другого не было. Уловить что-то ‘свое’ в явившемся откровении было уже невозможно./ ...I didn’t immediately recognise that it was me. However, there was no one else around. It was impossible to catch something of my ‘own’ in that vision” (Petkevič 1993, 167). Another recurrent scene is connected with the mocking or repression of the female prisoners’ femininity and sexuality. In Petkevič’s story during the heroine’s interrogations prior to her conviction, a woman guard gives a piece of advice to Tamara: “‘Забудьте, что вы женщина!!! Да, да, придется об этом забыть’, - бесновалась она./ ‘Forget that you are a woman!!! Yes, yes, you have to forget about it’, she raved” (ibid. 121). On the other hand, a male guard reveals that he has watched Tamara for some time and fallen in love with her. For another example, another ex-Gulag convict Sarra Kul’neva, recalls in her memoirs how a male interrogator told her to go back to her cell and fix her appearance because: “You’re a woman!” (1991, 96).

In these scenes women are either deprived of their feminine features, or they are mocked because of the lack of femininity. Nadya L. Peterson notes that a special means of resistance towards male guards represented in women’s camp literature are episodes where women prisoners highlight their femininity despite the discouraging circumstances of the prison (1996, 181; see also Kolchevska 1998, 157).

There are also scenes referring to experiences of violence to which women prisoners were collectively subjected. Petkevič’s story contains an episode in which the women prisoners are exposed to male violence in a colony where men and women are placed in the same facilities. This meeting triggers a scene of uncontrollable sexual violence against women and a scene of a mass rape. The narrator describes how she managed to escape from this violence:

Выхлынуло и начало распространяться что-то животное и беспощадное. Женские крики глушили ржание, нечеловеческое сопение... (...) Мы заползли с ней в самый темный угол нар, желая превратиться в ничто, в пыль, в дым, чтобы нас никто не видел, чтобы не видели, не слышали мы. (...) Пятеро мужчин подошли совсем близко и... сели на нары. Сначала была только скорость понимания, что они - защита, что мы теперь вне опасности! (Petkevič 1993, 180)

Something brutal and ruthless spurted out. Women’s cries deadened the roaring, the inhuman snorting... (...) We crawled... towards the darkest corner, and wished to change into nothingness, into dust, smoke, so that no one would see us, and we wouldn’t see or hear anything. (...) Five men came very close to us and... sat on the bunk. At first there was only the quick understanding, that these are protectors that we are out of danger! (Petkevič 1993, 180)

This scene represents a specific instance of gendered violence in the Gulag. Another writer, Elena Glinka in a story published in 1989, has described in detail the systematic rape of women in the Gulag. That it had not been usual to deal publicly with such scenes of sexual violence is indicated in author's preface to the text: "I have written a documentary story... I am sure you will not print it!... We have been silent for long, for decades, we have suffered and taken our pain with us to the grave." (1989, 111) The tale, however, was printed and it attracted wide attention in Russian media.¹⁹ This articulation is now in demand because of the long repression of these stories.

In Petkevič's story descriptions of sexual violence or of sexual relations between men and women are not described in such detail as in Glinka's story. In the above quotation, the protagonist strives to protect her self from "seeing or hearing anything" and this testifies to her own escape from the threatening situation. The narrator describes meeting lesbians in the prison, but she rarely refers to any sexual character of her own relations. However, during the time in the camp she becomes pregnant by a high-status male prisoner, a doctor, and subsequently gives birth to a son. The text does not tell whether this relationship took place with the protagonist's consent or without it. More attention is given to the fact of pregnancy itself, and the subsequent struggle over the protagonist's right to keep her child. Other relationships seem to be platonic, for instance, the protagonist meets a male tutor in the prison, who educates her and helps her to be recruited for the Gulag theatre. A rare moment of desire emerges, however, near the end of her imprisonment, when the story of her first real love is told in the text. This description is aligned to the discourse on romantic love and it emphasises the redeeming power of love.

The recurrent scenes of losing one's feminine features, losing one's physical and mental integrity etc. described above would seem to suggest that body and sexuality in Gulag testimonies are narrated in a conventionalized manner, characterised by reticence rather than openness, and stresses the collective nature of those experiences rather than representing them as a site of the personal experience (cf. Toker 2000, 88). These scenes are as if crystallised ideas of an individual's perception of the collective experience. Although the narrator documents her, the protagonist's, inner feelings and movements in a detailed manner, there are spheres of experience which either remain in the domain of the collective, or which remain unarticulated. The combination between the individual and the collective implies that Gulag testimonies are hybrid forms that mix features of different categories of narratives (Toker 2000, 82; see also Skultans 1997).

Thus the narrator-protagonist is indeed *one* among the many and the traumatic experiences of losing one's physical and mental integrity are *repeated*

¹⁹ As Elena Trofimova states: "The publication of Glinka's stories created a huge sensation among the reading public and aroused the interest of the media..." (1994, 216).

from one text to another. The narrator seems to suggest that this is so because the individual experience is special, and because there is or was no space for the representation of such experiences in institutional history writing. Through the autobiographical pact with the readers, the authenticating “I”, this, and other narratives, “mediate between individual memory and official history” (Kolchevska 2003, 149).

3.2.2 “*Unworldly Silence*”. *The Story of Survival*

As two men, former members of the Party, talk about the possible reasons for their being in the camp, their simple, easy conversation about the probable reasons for the mass destruction of fellow-citizens in the middle of the horrible conditions, sexual violence etc. shocks the protagonist. One of them suggests that the vast building projects in Siberia and elsewhere are in need of work force - prisoners in general are cheap and available work force for this purpose:

И они прожили ночь массового насилия, общую парашу для мужчин и женщин, крики ненависти, издевательский хохот. К каким своим историческим воспоминаниям они присовокупили эти? (...) А разговор этот я не забывала. Ничто его не могло стереть из памяти. (...) Неужели плановое “рассудочное” превращение огромнейшей части людей в поголовье для блага других — правда нового общества? Того общества, за которое бились мой отец и мама? (Petkevič 1993, 181)

They had lived through the night of mass rape, the common loo for men and women, cries of rage and mockery. In which historical memoirs of theirs did they enclose this? (...) I did not forget this conversation. Nothing could erase it from my memory. (...) Could it be that a planned “rational” transformation of a vast number of people into livestock for the sake of others’ well-being is the truth of the new society? That society, for which my father and mother fought? (Petkevič 1993, 181)

The narrator here contrasts the writing of official, institutional history based on facts, numbers and political struggle and the irrational, brutal experiences of individuals that she witnessed in the prison. As the narrator states, she did not forget the conversation, she could not forget it because it differed from her own perception of things, and made no sense to her human experience. What especially strikes the narrator is that the men speculate apparently calmly on the possibility that the imprisonment of innocent people was part of a greater plan, not even a mistake or misunderstanding (as those imprisoned often reckoned). It is here that we can hear the specific political dimension of the writing. The men’s ponderings on the causes for the mass deprivation of people’s freedom and lives is incomprehensible for the narrator and it makes her wonder how one is to reconcile the individual human

experiences and the objective, intelligible history writing. Natasha Kolchevska (1998, 156) suggests that in her Gulag memoirs Evgenija Ginzburg “...although probably not consciously... engages in a dialogue with a masculine tradition that has valorised spiritual over physical experience, and the general over individual.”

The gradual gaining of self-consciousness about what she has gone through in the Gulag is delineated in the course of the story: although questions get few answers, by and by the protagonist finds survival mechanisms. Petkevič’s text describes the “inner” growth and development of the heroine through the difficult experiences to the conception of the author-narrator. The heroine is slightly different from those, for instance, in Evgenija Ginzburg’s or Irina Ratušinskaja’s text: the protagonist resembles more an intellectual but ordinary woman, who goes through and survives the Gulag with the help of the inmates and the discovery of her talent in acting, and who, in the end, wins the struggle to restore herself after the collapse of her identity as a human being. In other words, the perspective is overtly less politicised, that is, directly against the Soviet system, and centres more on one woman’s perception and experience.

After the loss of childhood, freedom, and control of her life, the protagonist gradually regains her self-esteem and identity in and through the writing of her story. In the end the heroine has developed, with the help of her friends, an original life philosophy. In my view, the narrative is not just about telling the truth about the injustice of the Soviet regime. It is about coping with the experience, living it through, making it part of collective popular memory, as well as a part of the narrator-protagonist’s identity. It is about the psycho-philosophical consequences of the experience, which become more and more apparent towards the end of the narrative. Thus, the text belongs to the type of Gulag literature in which the author, as an end result of the experience, finds something useful in it.²⁰

²⁰ Cf. Varlam Šalamov’s notion that the camp was an entirely negative experience. Markova & al. suggest that there were two perspectives - one negative and one positive - of the Gulag, which depended on in what kind of circumstances the prisoners came upon there (work, companion) (Markova, Volkov, Rodnyj & Jasnyj 1999, 53-54). They write: “В лагерях того времени сидело множество замечательных, высокообразованных людей, которые светом своего разума и своей души разгоняли тьму гулаговских лагерей и общение с которыми оставляло на всю жизнь светлые воспоминания. Именно это и определило тот факт, что появился другой полюсный взгляд на опыт жизни в лагере: лагерь многому научил, закалил характер и позволил начать новую жизнь на воле после освобождения./ In the camps of that time [the 1940s – MR] there were many fine, educated people, who drove away the darkness of the Gulag through the light of their mind and spirit, and whose company left bright memories for the rest of one’s life. It was exactly this that defined the fact that there appeared another, different perspective on the life experience in the camp: the camp taught many things, tempered character and made it possible to start a new life in freedom after the release.” (Ibid. 54)

In her book Petkevič accounts for her own personal fight for herself, but she does not present a ready-made solution. Already after her release from the prison, but as an ex-convict under threat of being either imprisoned anew or becoming an informer (that is, one of “them”) the protagonist goes through a night of empowering herself against this threat:

Вслепую, спотыкаясь о десятки маленьких и больших страхов, один на один с высшим повелением, без посредников и спасителей, сравнивая себя со всеми Роксанами и “Нордами”, которые доносили на меня, я на четвереньках выползала к свету, перемещаясь к самой себе, к собственной точке в пространстве, которую должна была ощутить единственным местом обитания. (...) Я просто-напросто не могла жить так, как “желало” МГБ, а не я сама. (...) Проснувшись ночью, я ощутила, как откуда-то прибывали и прибывали силы. Вскинувшись с постели, я стала вихрем кружиться по комнате, кружиться в инстинктивном первобытном танце без музыки, слившись с ритмами вселенной, в согласии с ними и с ней. С силой выбрасывала в стороны руки, рубила, крушила собственный страх. (...) Я, наконец, победила страх. Рассчиталась с ним. Это была первая и главная победа моей жизни. (Petkevič 1993, 447)

Naphazardly, stumbling into dozens of bigger and smaller fears, face to face with the highest command, without mediators or saviours, comparing myself with all those who had informed against me, I crawled on all fours into light, transferring into myself, to my own point in space, which I felt as my only place of living. (...) I just couldn't live like that, like MGB²¹ “wished”, and not as I wished. (...) After awakening at night, I felt, how from somewhere strength kept coming and coming. I got up, began to spin like a whirlwind around the room, spin in an instinctive, a primitive dance without music, merging with the rhythms of the universe, in accordance with them and with it. I energetically threw my hands aside, hammered and smashed my fear. (...) At last I defeated fear. Settled with it. It was the first and biggest victory of my life. (Petkevič 1993, 447)

The protagonist tries to find her own self in order to fight against fears (“transferring into myself, to my own point in space, which I felt was my only place of living”). The protagonist finds strength in herself which helps her to settle with fear: “Смерть - страшна. Конечно. Но я приручала себя к мысли о ней./ Death is terrible. Of course. But I accustomed myself to the thought of it.” (ibid. 449)

The scene described above is mystical, spiritual and has religious connotations of enthusiasm and trance, although it is not unequivocally God, faith in whom gives strength. After moments of despair and doubt the heroine finds something in herself which gives strength even to overcome the fear of death. However, this victory was not gained solely on her own, but through friendship and communication with exceptional personalities, people who cared for others. After all, with the help of “good people” Petkevič was accepted a

²¹ MGB - Ministerstvo gosudarstvennoj bezopasnosti, Ministry of State Security.

member of the theatre company of the Gulag, which became the true saviour of her return to life: “Ни освобождение ... ни даже полная формальная реабилитация не дали мне прямого выхода в жизнь. Свободной для меня оставалась одна дорога - театр./ Neither did the liberation from the camp... nor the full formal rehabilitation give me a direct passage way to life. For me there was only one way free – theatre.” (ibid. 498), as the narrator notes in the epilogue. Theatre becomes what the narrator characterizes as “надмирное пространство/ an unworldly space” where she could lead her “орбитальные комплексы боли, муки и творчества/ earthly complexes of pain and creativity” (ibid.). What is more typical of Petkevič’s narrative is the statement that, everyone has his/her *own* “unworldly space”: “Оно, конечно же, у каждого - свое”.²²

In Petkevič’s story “political” does not mean only the opposition to the Soviet system. It means first and foremost overcoming oneself, and becoming oneself. Through the representation of her development the narrator-protagonist gains this sense of herself, although, as the word “unworldly” suggests, the “earthly complexes, pain and creativity” largely remain a sphere outside of the life story itself. There is perhaps no language available to her to describe these. The most disturbing scenes are narrated in the conventionalised, crystallised language of collective experiences, which are common to many others, or which are rather implied and hinted at than described and signified directly through language. These silences, as I suggested above, are connected especially to experiences of the body. In contemporary women’s prose published in the 1980s and 90s the experience of alienation, “colonisation” regarding one’s own body (by the state, by institutions, by technical-medical notions of sexuality) becomes an important aspect of this writing. These texts bring out the suffering of the female body especially within specific institutions (maternity clinic, abortion clinic, hospital) which recalls the *topos* of a prison camp (Cf. Costlow, Sandler & Vowles 1993, 32). Perhaps these repressed personal experiences of violence and colonization of the body in women’s Gulag testimonies find their representations only later or in the younger generation’s texts, where the gloomy, detailed pictures of body and sexuality become a literary *topos* of their own.

²² Cf. Vettenniemi: “Women protagonists in particular have registered the perseverance of the profound or ancient Russia, that of peasant virtues and Christian faith. Finally, the 1990s witnessed a revival of prison camp philosophies. Ingrian protagonists have engaged in another round of spiritual wrestling and they manage indeed to identify divine guidance in the shadow of death. Communist ideology is thus demoted to a secondary role as the instigator of violence. Hilma Kilkinen too makes frequent reference to God, only that she delves deep into lessons of existential variety applicable to herself alone” (2001, 245).

3.3 The Myth of Tatjana vs. Tamara's "Subjective Reality"

In the "Apologia" to Petkevič's text a parallel is drawn between a famous feminine image in Russian literature and the protagonist of the text:

Гармоничный и светлый Пушкин понимал, что мир сложен и страшен. (...) Жутковатый сон Татьяны, которую окружила всякая нечисть. Но мог ли гениальный поэт XIX века предположить, что Татьяна не во сне, а наяву будет много лет находиться в адском логове? (...) Воспоминания Т.В. Петкевич - воистину роман... Конечно 'роман' надо понимать условно, в кавычках, ибо все события здесь - подлинные... (Egorov 1993, 500)²³

In this excerpt the atrocious dream of *Evgenij Onegin's* female character Tatjana²⁴ is compared with real experiences of a "real-life Tatjana". This parallel is meant to heighten the effect of what the female author of her own story has to tell readers, by bringing it together with the imagery connected with Puškin's Tatjana - a modest, innocent girl encounters tragedy and all sorts of atrocities, but survives, because she is inwardly strong - and stressing that this is not a dream or fiction: "all the events are authentic".

The description, thus, is reminiscent of, and directly refers to the image of the strong Russian woman created in works of Russian literature. As literary sources of the myth of the strong Russian woman Rjabov (2001) refers to N.A. Nekrasov's poem "Русские женщины/ Russian Women", which is dedicated to the wives of Decembrists, who followed their husbands to exile in Siberia, and to Puškin's poem *Evgenij Onegin*, whose female character, Tatjana Larina, is a literary representation of an ideal Russian woman. These texts construct the myth of the Russian woman as physically and morally strong, and they stress the Russian woman's caring nature, empathy, self-denial, asexuality (Rjabov 2001, 123-124). According to Rjabov (2001) and Dunham (1960), the strength of the Russian woman is a continuous myth in Russian literature and philosophical thinking. In Soviet fiction, as analysed by Dunham, images of women were provided with a "fullness of character", *цельность*, which was expressed in qualities like "selflessness, endurance, generosity, ability to adjust to stress, ability to solve immediate problems" and most of all "unselfconsciousness". Dunham considers that this image is derived partially from Soviet ideology, but

²³ "The harmonious and bright Puškin understood that the world is complicated and terrible. (...) The atrocious dream of Tatjana was surrounded by all kinds of demons. But could the ingenious poet of the 19th century have assumed that Tatjana will be in a hell hole not in her dream but awake for many years? (...) The reminiscences of T.V. Petkevič are a genuine novel... (...) Of course, 'novel' has to be understood here conditionally, because all the events are authentic..." (Egorov 1993, 500).

²⁴ Cf. Tatjana's dream in *Evgenij Onegin*, Chapter Five, verses XI-XXI.

more than that, from “the literary tradition” of the 19th century. (1960, 460, 474-5, 481.)²⁵

The plot into which the writer of the “Apologia”, the philologist and historian B.F. Egorov, sets Tamara, that is, the plot of a male hero, Onegin, in which the female character Tatjana represents the moral values the cynical, excessively experienced hero has lost, posits her as a victim who is nevertheless able to withstand the trial because of her moral endurance, already described long before her by the Russian poet. Reminiscences of the Gulag, as has been mentioned, have a specific ethical dimension to them and their task is to testify to the underrepresented reality of labour camps. This high, moral plea of Petkevič’s book as a woman’s Gulag narrative is connected to the symbolic feminine image of Tatjana Larina.

By aligning Tamara with Tatjana, Egorov suggests that through her experiences the author embodies the features of the Russian feminine soul: In Puškin’s poem Tatjana is the one who experiences unhappiness, but she survives because, unlike Onegin, she has a strong attachment to the ground, to the earth, and she has physical, mental and moral strength (Rjabov 2001, 123). Egorov eulogises Petkevič’s survival of the Gulag as a morally and physically high accomplishment, which is in line with the ideal feminine qualities in Russian literature: “Сколько же было у юной Тамары причин для нравственного надрыва, слома, падения! (...) Адские муки заключенного, да еще молодой красивой женщины” (Egorov 1993, 501).²⁶ Egorov counts the protagonist among the people, who could “preserve their humanness and help others ... to fight Evil” in which he sees “something religious, even mystical”. In my view, this stands in contradiction to what Petkevič’s text stresses. It is true that the scene about Tamara’s spiritual wrestling has religious connotations. The protagonist as it were decides to sacrifice herself and stand against the system as a martyr. However, there are also other aspects to be found in Petkevič’s story: that the experience of an individual has no equivalent anywhere, that it is not rationally comprehensible, and that it is not possible to survive on one’s own, but only with the help of others. Thus, if we turn to Petkevič’s own text, it escapes and at least indirectly seems to be more critical of such images and eulogies, which tend to turn into artistic, symbolic representations which ultimately overshadow people’s real lived experiences.

The narrator points out in the text that her and many others’ suffering in the camps was not recorded in the country’s history: it was long ignored as non-existent. She refers to lines in N.A. Nekrasov’s poem “Русские женщины/

²⁵ However, Dunham considered the idealization of these feminine qualities and the new role of woman in the Soviet society not as a result of continuous development in history but as an enhancement of the “[gender] contract”, “double duty”: to hold a job like a man and take care of the family.

²⁶ “The young Tamara had so many reasons for moral rupture! (...) Infernal agony of a prisoner, who, in addition, was a young, beautiful woman.”

Russian Women” which raises the question of national memory of victims of the state’s violence against its own citizens, “Всё ли нас, бедных, добром поминаете/Или забыли давно?...” and states: “Не поминали! Даже не допустили в ‘народную память’. Сбросили со счетов всех времен./ We were not remembered! We were not even permitted in ‘the national memory’. We were excluded from the accounts of all times” (Petkevič 1993, 286). On the other hand, her being a woman in the camp could be seen as summarised in the sentence: “Forget that you are a woman”, uttered to her by a female guard in prison. The protagonist receives this prohibition and the loss of physical features of femininity as a form of breaking not only the prisoner’s life (*судьба*) but also her human nature (*природа*) (ibid. 196). This is why she, like many others, was writing the book in the first place, to let people know of the experiences “on the other side of reason”, and this is where she encounters the previous images of femininity as the eternal victim of male power, who but is saved thanks to her moral inner strength. What the story is about then, is the construction of the sense of self, of the identity, and not so much of constituting the self as either a heroine surviving in inhuman conditions or a victim of injustice and violence.

4 The Path of a Ballerina. The Story of “I, Maija Pliseckaja...”

In contrast to the text analysed in the previous chapter, I now read the autobiographical text written by another woman born in the 1920s, whose biography was also “broken” by the Stalinist repression in the 1930s, but whose life took quite another course: the autobiographical text by Maija Pliseckaja. Memoirs of famous people, especially artists and actors, form a certain type of popular autobiographical writing, in which the mass reader is interested to find out how these famous people have lived, what they “reveal” about their (and others’) lives. In Russia, too, such writing has become increasingly popular: this can be seen in the increase of interest in the lives of celebrities, which is channelled into commercial use in the new book market.¹ This interest is part of the popularity of Maija Pliseckaja’s autobiography and, it could be said to have influenced the genesis of her book. I have chosen to analyse her text because in this respect it is very representative of the autobiographical writing published in the 1990s.

Although I am here not making an inventory of famous people’s auto/biographies and their general structural features, it is appropriate to note that M. Pliseckaja’s book is a story of a well-known cultural figure, a world-famous ballerina. What interests me in this respect is how this text represents the life story of the artist.² I am interested in reading how this public persona represents her own life and own image as a well-known female artist.

What can perhaps be anticipated from a world-famous ballerina’s autobiography is the story of her fame and fortune, spiced with the story “behind the scenes”. In the case of *I Maija Pliseckaja...* (1996/1994) special interest is directed towards the tensions between the artist and the Soviet regime, a well-known predecessor for this being another famous Soviet female artist’s, Galina Višnevskaja’s, memoirs *Galina*, which Pliseckaja mentions in her text.³ However, in contrast to Višnevskaja, Pliseckaja was not expelled from the Soviet Union (nor did she defect to the West) and she wrote her memoirs after *perestroika*, 1991-1993, whereas Višnevskaja wrote them earlier, in the 1980s. Pliseckaja’s memoirs were a best-seller when they were published in 1994.⁴

¹ Alexander Prokhorov (2003, 70) notes how memoirs of celebrities have become a best-selling item for Russian publishing houses. See also Ovsjannikov (2000, 15).

² For a comparison, see Prokhorov’s (2003) analysis of another successful Soviet artist’s, El’dar Riazanov’s memoirs.

³ After two unsuccessful attempts to use a ghost-writer the author turns to her friend Galina Višnevskaja and asks who helped her to write *Galina*. “No one” the singer answers, advising Pliseckaja to write the book herself.

⁴ According to Pliseckaja her book was sold out in three days (Interview with Pliseckaja broadcast on Finnish radio: <www.yle.fi/mikaeli/arkisto/kulttuuri/plisetskaja>). The book has been translated into several languages. A review in the Finnish newspaper *Helsingin*

An interesting feature of the text is connected with the time of its writing, in the break between two epochs, Soviet and post-Soviet. In the opening chapter “Вместо предисловия (Instead of a Preface)” the narrator describes at length the making of the text, which she declares she has written herself, as the first sentence of the book states. The chapter informs us how there were apparently two previous but unsuccessful attempts to ghost-write her memoirs, which finally led Pliseckaja write them herself.

The beginning also informs us about what the writer was thinking “inside her head” while writing down her story: “[Э]то не печатают, побоятся, заставят смягчить, подправить. Но все же писала./ This will not be printed, it is too risky, and I will have to soften this, make corrections. But I went on writing” (1996/1994, 9). Although the writer, thus, fearlessly continues to write and “call things with their own names” (ibid.), the anticipation expressed here by the narrator turns upside down. The path of writing down her story is namely further complicated by the change in the political atmosphere at the time of writing:

Книга рождалась на самом сломе эпох. То, что вчера было смелым, даже непроизносимым, - устаревало вмиг, за прожитой день. Что-то вроде соревнования пошло, кто больше ругательств недавно еще всеильным организациям и высшим правителям отвесит. Новая конъюнктура началась. Конъюнктура на разрешенную смелость. (Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 9)

My book was born in the break between two epochs. What yesterday was courageous, even unutterable, became obsolete in a second, in one day. It was like a competition for who most curses the organisations and the leaders which a moment ago were all-powerful. A new conjuncture had started. The conjuncture of permitted courage. (Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 9)

Thus, writing her “preface” in 1994, a few years after the drastic changes and the disintegration of the USSR took place, the narrator feels that what she has written is already *passé*, and the story as she has written it is no longer of interest to the people of the formerly Soviet state. This is why the beginning of the text is actually a plea to readers: the narrator recommends the readers to skip those passages which already seem too familiar, but also points out that her story is part of history writing for future generations. In other words, the writer implies that the political changes and the increase of texts presenting “permitted courage” have - unintentionally - changed the meaning of her writing.

There are also other alleged restrictions affecting her writing which are mentioned in the first chapter: “...[М]не всегда казалось, что книги пишутся людьми совершенно необыкновенными. Сверхумными. Сверхучеными. А тут балерина берется за перо./ I always thought that books are written by

Sanomat, however, notes that the English translation, which appeared in 2001, came perhaps too late, as the peak of interest in Soviet memoirs was already past (see Räsänen 2002, 1).

exceptional people. Superintelligent and superscholarly people. And, here I am - a ballerina, taking the pen into her hand” (Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 8). The sentence refers to both her gender and profession which are not commonly associated with the pen, перо, the poet’s instrument, in the history of Russian literature. Perhaps this is why the narrator feels the need to refer to George Sand in the course of the text in comparison to herself, because Sand was a writer and was living with a composer, just as Pliseckaja herself is: “Буду вторая Жорж Санд (муж тоже композитор).../ I’ll become the second George Sand (whose husband was also a composer...)” (ibid. 299). The author thus seeks identification with a famous woman writer in history.

Thus, in this opening chapter, the narrator makes a pact with the readers, which comprises her claim to tell the truth, the story of her writing the book, the historical and cultural restrictions and circumstances influencing her writing. After these preliminaries the journey with the narrator can begin: “Значит, в путь, читатель. С Богом!.. / Let’s start the journey, my reader. Godspeed!..” (ibid. 10). This start addresses the reader directly, as if face to face, persuading him/her to take up the perspectives offered by the text.

4.1 “What was I like?” - The Making of Maija

The life story is divided into 49 chapters which have descriptive titles named after places⁵; people⁶; events⁷; and, of course, after the ballets she performed in. The titles tell a story of an artist who lives through the difficult *Lehrjahre* but who is also successful. Some of the chapters are connected with more everyday life topics: “Как я одевалась/ How did I dress?”, “Как нам платили/ How we were paid”, “Почему я не осталась на Западе/ Why I didn’t stay in the West”. These latter chapters are part and parcel of the “truth about the Soviet artist’s life”, which the narrator wishes to tell the reader in her book.⁸

The dividing of the life story into chapters with distinct themes and names demonstrates a structuring of a life story into separate sections and themes. The events are represented as chronologically as possible: even so, if some events overlap in the narrative, the narrator notes which was the right order of the events.⁹ There is a sense of a purposeful path and journey from

⁵ “Dača and Sretenka”, “Spitzbergen”, “My first year in the theatre”, “Apartment on the Ščepkinskij”, “Passage to India” etc.

⁶ “Relatives”, “Ščedrin”, “Work with Jakobson”, “Mark Chagal paints me” etc.

⁷ “Father’s arrest”, “Mother disappears”, “Concert at CK”, “Stalin’s birthday” etc.

⁸ These chapters include accounts which have drawn exceptional attention in Western reviews. See, for instance, Boccadoro (2003).

⁹ Balina (2003, 191) notes that linear retrospective narrative was a typical feature of the memoirs of socialist realism.

childhood to adulthood, from “then” to “now”. The narrator uses the metaphor of journey or path in her text.¹⁰

From the description of earliest childhood on, the text represents an image of the protagonist as a strong and independent personality. In the chapter “Какой я была в пять лет/What was I like at the age of five” the narrator expresses her early maladjustment to collective life:

Чтобы приручить, меня отдали в детский сад. (...) Моя коллективная жизнь была недолгой. Все во мне, скорее от природы, противилось “общественной жизни”. Из нас сразу стали делать маленьких ленинцев, октябрят, непрерывно восторгающихся “счастливым детством”. С самой первой возможности я убежала. Путь к дому занял часа полтора. (Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 16-17)

In order to tame me, I was sent to a kindergarten. (...) My collective life was short. Everything in me, or rather, in my nature, protested against “collective life”. They started to turn us into little Leninists and Octobrists, constantly admiring the “happy childhood”. I escaped at the first chance. The road back home took about one and a half hours. (Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 16-17)

It is interesting, how the protagonist’s short “collective life“ is connected with her nature - everything “in her nature” protests against the communal, the collective. On the other hand, the protagonist is one among many (“they started to turn *us*”), but there is no indication how other children reacted to this activity. There is no mention of her parents’ disapproval of collectivism, or communal life either. Thus, the origin of her dislike of communal life is located in her nature. This is an important feature of the story as a whole. The image of a free-willed child of nature, who is not to be tamed, is created from the very first pages of the life-story, and is an ongoing theme in the text. The narrator-protagonist’s collisions with the Soviet regime begin in her childhood and they continue through her life until the Soviet regime is replaced by another one. The central idea of the writer’s life story can be read already in Chapter 1, “Даща and Sretenka” - it is a story of a strong-willed *individual*, who could not be forced to conform to the common norms even in the hard times:

Я была ребенком своевольным, неслухом, как все меня обзывали. Спустила по течению ручейка свои первые сандалики. Вместо корабликов, которые усмотрела на старинной почтовой открытке. Мама долго убивалась. Достать

¹⁰ Cf. the beginning of the text: “So, let’s start the journey, my reader. Godspeed!...” (Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 10). In the story of her repression during the 1950s, the narrator notes minutely the details of this time and makes a plea to the reader: “[Я] желаю, чтобы ты читатель, неспешно, скрупулезно проследовал день за днем, день за днем путем моей маленькой Голгофы осени 1956 года./ I hope that you, my reader, have followed the path of my little Golgotha in the autumn of 1956 quietly, scrupulously, day after day, one day after another.” (ibid. 191)

детские туфельки было задачей неразрешимой. Иди, побегай по всей Москве. “Трудное время, трудное время”, - причитала мама. Так я и слышу с тех пор по сей день - трудное время, трудное время. Бедная моя Родина!.. (Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 11-12)

I was a self-willed child and everyone considered me disobedient. Instead of little boats I had seen in an old postcard I put my very first sandals to float in a brook. Mama was upset for a long time. To buy children’s shoes in that time was a mission impossible. Go running through whole Moscow. “Hard times, hard times”, - Mama used to say. Since then I hear this - hard times, hard times. My poor Motherland!.. (Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 11-12)

From a narrative point of view, the narrator here and elsewhere depicts the heroine, herself as a child, from above: the perspective is not the past self’s, the child’s, that is, the narrator in the text is an external focalizer who perceives the events retrospectively and is authoritative. “Hard times” come between Maija and her “poor homeland”, Russia. It is noteworthy that it is not the fact that she had floated her sandals in the brook that, according to the narrator, upsets her mother, but the fact that it was impossible to get new ones. Thus, her being a self-willed child is not depicted as a problem *within* the family, but in connection with the state, the surrounding society, where there was a shortage of children’s shoes. These depictions of early childhood serve the function of making way and establishing the meaning of Maija’s life, as it later had turned out to be.

From the first chapter on, references to the future career of Maija also serve the structure of the story: the protagonist acquired strong legs already as a child; she could heroically endure physical pain and loved to perform - already as a child. In fact, the first memory with which the first chapter starts, relates to Pliseckaja’s profession: “Ходить я стала в восемь месяцев. Этого сама не помню. Но многочисленная родня шумно дивилась моим ранним двигательным способностям. От этого удивления и началось мое самопознание./ I could walk at the age of eight months. I don’t remember this myself, but the numerous relatives vociferously marvelled at my early abilities in motion. My self-conception began from this astonishment” (Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 11). The seeds of the heroine’s future career were, thus, sown in the eight-month-old infant, her talent was “there”, ready *in* her as a child.¹¹

¹¹ A similar feature is to be found in the famous film actress’s, Nonna Mordjukova’s, autobiographical tales in her book *Не плачь, казачка!* (Don’t cry, Cossack girl!, 1998) where the narrator tells her story of becoming an actress in the 1950s. An ignorant girl, also “a child of nature“ from Southern country, Kuban, the protagonist arrives straight in the capital, Moscow, to take the exams for the arts school. Naïvely she had not prepared anything to perform. After a moment of embarrassment and shame when it is her turn to perform on the stage, she suddenly starts telling local stories and incidents of life in her homeland, and makes the auditorium full of examiners roar with laughter (see Mordjukova 1998, 87-90). The talent was thus already “there” in the protagonist, it was in her nature.

Because the time of childhood cannot be reclaimed, the past and its events cannot be controlled by the narrator. However, the character of a person can be reversed by constituting some of its features independently of time, independently of external events (Bakhtin 1988, 141).¹² This character can be seen to be at hand early (in childhood, youth), so that the character does not change, it is merely “filled in” (ibid.). This narrative strategy allows Pliseckaja to dispel the influence of the Soviet regime over her, becoming a talented, successful ballerina. She was talented, so it seems, from her birth. She was also independent, free-willed, from her birth, it was her nature. This auto/biographical type (cf. Bakhtin 1988, 141) has the consequence that the narrator depicts the past self from the outside, as the one who controls the protagonist’s past, present and future. Not much space is yielded to such personal, psychological ponderings concerning the past self, as, for example was the case in Petkevič’s text, nor does the narrator strive to identify with her past self’s experiences and perceptions, but limits the description to outward, “public” events, where occasional glimpses of the personal serve as rare exceptions.

Thus, the narrative voice in *I, Maija Pliseckaja* is permeated with the status of the *public* image of the adult author, that is, the famous dancer, who writes about her career retrospectively. The narrative strategy - described above - serves to create an image of the narrator-protagonist as an exceptional artist and *individual*.¹³ Consequently, it forms a distance between the present and the past, between the narrator-protagonist and her experience instead of representing a “resurrection” of past experiences.

4.2 Constructing the (Past) Self

4.2.1 Narrating Through Irony

The combination of such notions as “international star” and “house arrest”, “daughter of the people’s enemy” and “prima ballerina assoluta” connected with Pliseckaja’s biography creates a contradiction. It concerns the question how did she survive, how did she manage to succeed in circumstances in which her father was arrested as a people’s enemy, and her mother sentenced to labour camp as his wife. The narrator resolves these severe circumstances of her biography in many cases with irony. The narrator is notably present in the text, as was noted earlier on, and lets the irony of her situation be heard in the narrative voice. For instance, in the following passages she uses irony in

¹² Bakhtin notes that this, in his words energetic, type of biography was first established by Plutarch: “one must portray [the man] by means of his deeds, his speeches and other extensions and expressions...” (1988, 141).

¹³ Cf. the discussion about the title of the text in Ch. 2.

describing the role of ballet and her own role as an artist during the Soviet regime:

Во все времена знатных гостей потчевали балетом. Да, впрочем, делают это и до дня сегодняшнего. С чем-чем, а с балетом, дескать, у нас завсегда полный порядок. В Москве в ту пору суперзвезд не было. Семенова все еще числилась женой “врага народа”, и допускать ее до праздника советско-германской дружбы не следовало. Кому-то из чинов пришла мысль вызвать из Ленинграда Уланову со своим извечным партнером Сергеевым. Что ж, и в головах чинов бывают светлые мысли. (Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 97)

At all times well-known guests were feasted on ballet. Yes, by the way, they do that up to this day. If everything else was not in order, we have always had a well-organised ballet, they say. At that time [1939] there were no superstars. Semenova was still “the wife of the people’s enemy”, and she could not be admitted to the celebration of the Soviet-German friendship. One of the officials got the idea to invite Ulanova from Leningrad with her old partner Sergeev. What can I say; sometimes bright ideas even pop into the heads of officials. (Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 97)

This ironic statement about the Soviet officials serves the narrator further to distance herself as a Soviet artist from the Soviet regime, represented by the officials, who are here represented in a ridiculous light: even *they* sometimes got bright ideas. The expression “потчевали/ feasted” serves to distance the ballet, her ballet, from the officials: the ballet was and is one of the “dishes” that could be served up to honoured guests. And further, the superstar of the ballet, Semenova, was “the wife of the people’s enemy”. These points construct the ballet as something which was at the mercy of the regime. But, of course, at the same time it saves the narrator-protagonist from the fate of her parents. In the chapter on Pliseckaja’s mother’s imprisonment and exile in Ćimkent, the latter adjures the heroine to become a good dancer (“Не забывай, ты должна стать хорошей танцовщицей. У тебя есть талант./ Don’t forget that you must become a good dancer. You are talented”, *ibid.* 63).

Other instances in the text exemplify the use of irony as a distancing between the narrator and also the Soviet regime. The narrator reminisces, for instance, how she learned not to sleep in her first own accommodation in a communal building for artists, or, what her first apartment shared with her husband was like: “Квартира была крохотная... Две комнатенки и кухня. Всего 28,5 м (двадцать восемь с половиной метра)/ The apartment was very small... Two little rooms and a kitchen. 28.5 (twenty eight and a half) square metres in all” (*ibid.* 226), deciphering the area in letters and making a point of how small it was. Of course this was not exceptional in itself at that time; someone might say that the apartment was relatively big for two people considering the circumstances. However, by making herself an example, the narrator strives to show how Soviet artists lived, she as one among them. The

irony serves both to distance herself from the past and to generalize her experience.

This also occurs in the following passage about the preparations for Stalin's 70th birthday in 1949, at which Pliseckaja herself performed:

Наши братские советские народы ломали головы, какой сюрприз приготовить благодетелю человечества к светлому празднику. Даже открыли музей подарков венценосному вождю. Газеты печатали океаны телеграмм и писем, адресованные “доброму Иосифу Виссарионовичу”. Все “изгалялись” в подхалимаже, какие бы еще слова выдумать, как бы поиступленнее лизнуть, отличившись, рябую да усатую диктаторскую морду. Поэты слагали оды, композиторы - песни, пряжи-умельцы ткали ковры. А артисты мечтали об участии в юбилейном правительственном концерте. (Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 144)

Our Soviet brother nations profoundly considered, what kind of surprise to prepare for the benefactor of human kind on his jubilee. A museum for the gifts of the crowned leader was even opened. Newspapers published tons of telegrams and letters dedicated to the “dear Iosif Vissarionovič”. Everyone toadied, trying to come up with words to stand out in the frenzied licking of the pockpitted dictator with his moustache. Poets composed odes, composers - songs, master weavers made carpets. And artists dreamed of participating in the festive governmental concert. (Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 144)

Again, the preparations for the jubilee of “the benefactor of human kind”, Stalin, are made look ridiculous in this quotation. The last sentence refers apparently to the narrator-protagonist herself, a young dancer at the time, because her dream came true: she was accepted to perform at the jubilee. The next sentence refers to this: “Это сейчас я так думаю. А тогда все застлал сам факт участия в юбилейном светопреставлении./ That is how I think about it now. Back then all was overshadowed by the fact of participation in the festive end of the world” (ibid). Thus, it is only later that she can use an ironic tone and make the preparations and the “dictator” look ridiculous. In fact, the performance at this jubilee at the time made her name as a ballerina with a potentially damaging biography, and secured her future, as the narrator mentions (ibid. 148).

The quoted passage above abounds in exaggerated images relating to the preparations of the birthday. This exaggeration is irrupted by the “modest” sounding sentence: “And artists dreamed...” with slight self-irony. The ironic tone continues throughout the description of the preparations for the festive event, with minute information of how many times, in which order, they had to rehearse for the number and the day of the performance itself, with a description of long queuing for the admission to the place of the jubilee itself, and security procedures which took hours. The narrator remarks that “Вам, наверное, скучно читать это. Но время до выхода на сцену длилось бесконечно/ it’s probably boring for you to read this. But waiting for the performance lasted

forever” (ibid. 147). Finally, performing the number, the dancer almost fell, because the polished parquet floor was too slippery for dancing.

The use of this ironic voice points to the superiority of the narrator’s perception, cognition, emotion and ideology over the protagonist’s (Rimmon-Kenan 1991/1983, 96). The narrator is ironic even towards her past self, and thus moulds the life story purposefully from the point of view of the present. The use of the ironic voice and the anecdotal style of narration also smooth the description of the harsh circumstances of the time. As Prokhorov (2003, 73) points out, “political veracity” is no longer the prime purpose of memoirs published in the post-Soviet period, but rather to offer the readers tales of those times to be amazed and entertained.

4.2.2 Modelling the Image

Pliseckaja’s autobiography represents a life story of a successful artist, a feature that emerges through the narrator’s self-conscious remarks concerning the readers and their (anticipated) expectations. The strategy of narrating can be characterized as serving the purpose of creating the life story of an exceptional personality and performer,¹⁴ a professional and an artist.¹⁵ The aim is to represent a public, representative and exceptional life story, in which descriptions of intimate inner thoughts and experiences have been rather put aside. Although the story accounts for Pliseckaja’s family, it is in the vein of a genealogy of an artist, as her family tree includes many former dancers and choreographers of ballet.¹⁶

The narrator addresses the readers of her text directly, guiding their attention and giving advice on how to read. This rhetorical device invites the readers to share the narrator’s point of view. The latter, for instance, poses direct questions for the readers:

¹⁴ Cf. Deborah Bull: “The ballerina aspiring to chronicle her lifetime’s achievements has to make a choice. Either she stakes her claim to the bookshelf by pointing out (immodestly) the extraordinary nature of her talents, or she underplays her gifts to such an extent that readers are left wondering just why they bothered to shell out the price on the cover. For some ballerinas, this isn’t an issue. Their legendary status is a given and recording twenty five curtain calls and reviews most of us would kill for doesn’t seem in the least conceited. Maya Plisetskaya is one of these (quoted from: <<http://www.deborahbull.com>>)”.

¹⁵ In Russia, the first wave of Russian professional memoirs emerged in the late tsarist period, when the memoirists’ experiences in public and professional life gave them courage to “exercise the very considerable authority of the nineteenth-century Russian writer” (Holmgren 2003, xxi). According to Prokhorov, the post-Soviet professional memoirists “...concentrate on promoting themselves as successful figures...” rather than as writers (2003, 73). This is also true of Pliseckaja’s text, despite the narrator’s worried comments on how she, a ballerina, is taking a pen in her hand.

¹⁶ The text includes a chapter about Pliseckaja’s husband, Rodion Ščedrin, with glimpses on their private life. More on this below.

Я скачу по своей жизни галопом. По всей своей суматошной жизни. Все яснее, что невозможно полно рассказать о прожитом. Лишь урывки. Размытые контуры. Тени... Разве это было? Да было. (...) Что тебе еще интересно узнать обо мне, читатель?.. (Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 371)

I go through my life with tremendous speed. My whole busy life. It becomes clearer that it is impossible to tell about everything. Only pieces. Dim contours. Shadows... Did this really happen? Yes, it did. (...) What would you still like to know about me, my reader? (Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 371)

To answer the question the text includes details about her everyday habits, which fulfil the function of “completing [her] image”. In this text a woman artist narrates her own life “as if ghost-written by herself”, as one reviewer interestingly put it.¹⁷ The narrator goes through her life and picks out things she deems interesting for the readers. The orientation to reader-expectations can also be seen in the style of language: the sentences are at times short, sometimes consisting of a single word, which refers to spoken, rather than written language (see the excerpt above). The narrator seems to be telling her story immediately, face to face, to the reader. On the other hand there are scenes rich with colourful, ironic language (as above), which serve to distance and objectify the past and align the perspective to the present, “post-Soviet”, one.

A similar mode of narrating is engaged in the text of another woman artist, Nonna Mordjukova: It pictures the famous actress’s development into her profession and illustrates her technique of acting. It represents the actress as a rural woman in the city, a woman who symbolizes the real values of the nation. In one passage, the narrator as it were apologizes for having described her inner perception of herself, where she indirectly comes to question her role as this rural, “strong woman”. The narrator describes her own thoughts about herself and her life, with a touch of pleading for understanding and compassion from the reader. This description of her self, however, requires the following apology: “А я вот *не удержалась*, чтобы не написать ‘автопортрет’. Здесь все чистосердечно./ Well, I *couldn’t help* but write a ‘self-portrait’. Everything here is open-hearted.” (Mordjukova 1998, 126, italics MR).¹⁸ The narrator

¹⁷ Cf. Robert Gottlieb’s review on the book’s English translation *I, Maya Plisetskaya*: “She insists that she wrote her book herself, and it reads as if she did - or, rather, as if she had dictated it into a tape machine. (It’s as if she was her own ghost-writer.)” (2001, 2)

¹⁸ Illustrative parts of the passage are worth quoting because they portray the idealized strong Russian woman and her own anxiety about this role: “Я - это вечный посыльный на труд, на исполнение, на добычу. На работе - до самого дна! Что ни роль, то все с вегетативной бурей - до истощения нервной системы. Что ни семейные дела, все я, я, я... (...) Я широкоплечая, у меня туфли тридцать девятого размера, руки могут выдержать по двадцать килограммов каждая. (...) Я и сама знаю, что меня много, много по размерам и по проявлениям. Не хочу, чтобы меня жалели, но, может быть, и спросил бы кто: ‘Не устала ли? Сыта ли?’ (...) Как сын родился, тут я совсем с ума спятила. (...)”

apparently supposes this does not meet with the expectations of the reader because she apologizes for this self-portrait (“I couldn’t help but write...”), although, it is not very clear what exactly there is to apologize for. Is it the fact that the narrator gave a self-portrait? Or is it because it touches upon the narrator’s inner, personal feelings about herself and her role, which would not, apparently, belong to this kind of “public” life story? Or, does this break with the conventions of Soviet Russian memoir writing, where the author rather dispels him/herself than brings out personal concerns? (Cf. Savkina 2001, 28.)

When areas of personal life come up in Pliseckaja’s text, they are treated as if in passing by or in connection with her public role as an artist. In the chapter about her husband, Rodion Ščedrin, the story of their encounter and falling in love with each other intertwines with the story of a successful but repressed ballet dancer in the Soviet Union. The narrator recounts, that the “intoxicating romance” gave her strength to endure her recurring exclusions from tours abroad (Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 220-221). They spend a summer together in Sortavala, in a cottage on Lake Laatokka, far away from Moscow and, apparently, from her “tail”. After the holiday, something occurs that worries the protagonist:

К концу августа беспокойство ... охватило меня. Появились все признаки, что забеременела. (...) А может, родить? И расстаться с балетом? Ан жалко. После “Спартака” и чешского турне я в хорошей форме. Худая. Повременю маленько. Срок еще есть. Танцевать или детей нянчить - выбрала первое. Щедрин без восторга, но согласился. (Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 221-222)

By the end of August I was overtaken by ... anxiety. All the signs pointed to one thing: I was pregnant. (...) I should, perhaps, give birth? In that case, to part with the ballet? But it’s a pity. After the performance of “Sparta” and the Czech tour I was in good shape. Thin. I’ll postpone it a little. There is still time. To dance or to nurse children - I chose the first one. Ščedrin is not thrilled, but he agreed. (Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 221-222)

Все им, им, ему, ему! Я и сейчас не могу взять лучший кусок: он даже не будет для меня вкусен, - или занять в транспорте более удобное место. Мне спокойнее, душе моей, если сяду на неудобное... (...) А я вот не удержалась, чтобы не написать ‘автопортрет’. Здесь все чистосердечно./ I was always sent to work, to accomplish, to get. I was at work to the very end! Whatever the role I would act it with burgeoning energy to the exhaustion of the nervous system. Whatever domestic scores, always I, I, I... (...) I’m broad-shouldered, my shoes are the size 39, and my arms can carry up to 20 kilos each. (...) I know myself that I’m big, in size and in expression. I don’t want to be pitied, but, perhaps, sometimes someone could ask: ‘Aren’t you tired? Have you eaten enough?’ (...) When my son was born, I went totally berserk. (...) Everything for him, him! Even now I cannot take the best piece: I can’t enjoy it, - or take the more comfortable seat. I feel better, if I sit uncomfortably... (...) Well, I couldn’t help but write a ‘self-portrait’. Everything here is open-hearted.” (Mordjukova 1998, 124-126.)

As a ballet dancer, the protagonist encounters a typical dilemma at a certain point in her life of whether to have children or a career. In the context of a “conventional” Soviet woman’s biography these two issues would not have been mutually exclusive (cf. Rotkirch 2000), but as Adair points out, for a female ballet dancer there often at some point emerges a choice between motherhood and career (1992, 49).¹⁹ This is the case for the first person narrator in Pliseckaja’s text as well in this excerpt. According to the autobiography Pliseckaja did not have children later either, at least the topic is not mentioned. This is quite an interesting passage, although it is not highlighted in the text.²⁰ On the other hand, Pliseckaja does not victimize herself for not having children and this decision is not extraordinary, at least for contemporary readers. However, by mentioning this incident - as trivial as it may be in the text - the narrator brings out that this was her choice; she could go *beyond* the conventional female biography and dedicate herself to work and art. Not becoming a mother is a choice the heroine is free to make, but it is also an aspect of her life which, apparently, has to be mentioned in the text, albeit in a subordinate clause.²¹

By contrast, as Pliseckaja’s text tells us, getting married was an advantage from the point of view of her career as a Soviet ballet dancer. To get married, the narrator recalls and emphasises, was originally her idea: it gave her the opportunity to work relatively freely, because the officials were more prone

¹⁹ Adair continues that this is connected with practical and economic reasons: “Those dancers who do have children and continue dancing almost certainly need to have full-time help at home... Touring also makes childcare arrangements extremely difficult...” (1992, 50)

²⁰ For a comparison, Mordjukova treats the question of motherhood in more conventional terms, but, as with Pliseckaja, the child question comes up abruptly, unprepared, for the reader. In the midst of the narration of her student years in Arts School, the reader is told that the heroine has got married and given birth to a son. Mordjukova had a son whose life turned out tragic. The narrator in the text represents herself as a loving mother filled with guilt.

²¹ A similar kind of “proving” of one’s professionalism and independence is also exemplified in Mordjukova’s text: the protagonist leaves her young son for four months and goes to make the film *Komissar* at a distant location. She does not see her son during the four months, even though she had had the chance to have a few days off. She deems it is best not to see her son for a short time, because it would make the situation even worse. The protagonist wallows in self pity and guilt, because while she was away, it happened that her son became involved with alcohol and drugs, which then ruined his life. The analogy with the film she was shooting at the time is interesting: it is the story of a female officer who becomes pregnant and has a child during the October Revolution. Since she is dedicated to her political duties, she leaves the new-born child and returns to the front. Mordjukova’s autobiographical memories on the making of the film and its implications in her real life reproduce an analogous representation of woman as a mother, a domesticated woman, whose neglect of her maternal duties - leaving her child - lead to the spoiling of her child’s life. The film can be interpreted in various ways. The concentration on the female character, the officer, and her decision bring out interesting aspects of the Soviet gender system and its representation in the film. For a feminist interpretation of the film see Rosenholm & Korhonen (1990).

to let her travel to tours in the West when there was a husband waiting back home. The two incidents taken up here point to the narrative being a representation of the author's *professional* life. Both cases, which touch upon several public *and* private concerns in a person's life, are represented primarily from the point of view of their meaning for the author's career as a ballet dancer.

This is where gender and sexuality become interesting from the point of view of the description of a woman's biography in this "public" mode of narration. Miller notes that in a life story by a female artist, the woman writer comes to differ from the conventional female biography in society: The exceptional woman is exceptional often exactly because of her gender, because she could surpass the conventional biography of her gender, where as an exceptional man is exceptional as such, as an exceptionally talented etc. person, not in relation to his gender (Miller 1996, 126). Although claiming to tell the truth about her life, and "[d]espite the identity between the 'I' of authorship and the 'I' of narration" reading Pliseckaja's autobiography is, as Nancy K. Miller puts it in relation to famous French women writers' texts, "like shaking hands with one's gloves on" (1988, 58). Thus, describing her life as an artist, a professional and as a woman in the public eye, the author leaves out what is the "flip side of the official, reconstructed personality" (ibid.).

The narrative voice, the irony, the addressing of the reader serve the moulding of the public self-image in the narrative. The narrator is overtly confidential, but there is little intimacy in her voice. One could of course ask, why should there be? Is it not a stereotypical notion in itself to expect that (especially) women should address intimate events and thoughts in their autobiographies? Perhaps Pliseckaja has written her story *against* such notions, and concentrates on public life story. We could hold this idea in mind while analysing how the modelling of the self-image enters not only the textual biography, but results in a certain (textual) image of the female body as well.

The tool of her art, body, is treated in the text first and foremost from the perspective of its professional aspects in a ballet dancer's life. It is stated that her physical qualities (strong legs, suitable physique, and endurance) as well as her talent pave her way to a career in dance and ballet. In her performing art, despite the lack of technical mastery, which she herself mentions in the text, it is reported how she finds ways of optimally harnessing her physical qualities. In addition, the text emphasises that the ballet dancer's body must physically endure trauma and pain (see the chapter "Мои травмы. Мои врачи/ My Traumas. My Healers"). Issues concerning the classical ballet's perception of the female body and sexuality also occur in the text in connection with an important stage of the protagonist-narrator's identity as a dancer.

The classical ballet emphasises line, weightlessness, lift, ethereality of the body - the corporeality is as though vanished. The ideal body size and shape restrict the female body's shapes in favour of boyish "shapelessness". The classical ballet's repertoire of women's roles offers swans, fairies, innocence.

(Wolff 1990, 136.) Body is the instrument of Pliseckaja's art, and it must be continuously controlled and trained. Being overweight is a catastrophe, the natural functions of the female body are a nuisance - menstruation is called "наше женское нездоровье/ our female ailment", which might restrict the dancer's ability to perform (Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 323).

Being a famous person also makes demands on a person's appearance, especially if she is female. The chapter called "Как я одевалась?/ How I dressed?" is dedicated to the description of how the narrator-protagonist could manage to obtain good-looking and individual clothes in Moscow. It was important to look good because, as the narrator states: "Смотрят на меня. Я на виду./ People look at me. I am in the public eye" (ibid. 207). Clothes became an important way of expressing oneself because of the "discipline imposed by the social dicta upon one's physical appearance" (Vainshtein 1996, 65-66). The narrator states that wearing outstanding dresses was her way of making a statement while she was under repression and was not allowed to participate in tours in the Western countries: "Моя полутеатральная одежда была моим бунтом, мятежом, вызовом системе. Даже наши тугоумные вожди чувствовали - что-то здесь не просто, наряжена - как на сцене, не понашенски./ My semi-theatrical clothes were my way of revolting, my challenging of the system. Even our half-witted leaders felt that there is something deliberate in this, she's dressed up as if on the stage, not in our conventional manner." (Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 207-8).

The book includes dozens of photos of the author in her celebrated roles and meetings with well-known people. The pictures of a beautiful, graceful woman artist in numerous roles during her long career form a stark contrast between the narrative's prose about the miserable every day life and the repression. The cover of the Russian edition is in this respect an important constituent of the life story as well: it pictures Pliseckaja in a black suit - a suit reminiscent of a modern dancer rather than a classical ballerina - balancing on her toes on top of an apple, lifting the other leg high above the head. The pose catches a moment of challenging the equilibrium; it captures the dancer in motion. One could say that it represents a different view of the ballerina Pliseckaja, which other pictures inside the book depict as the "ethereal", classical ballet dancer in a feminine, innocent swan costume. The cover image's photo is rather androgynous, which suits the book's narrative strategy perfectly: it is the image of a proud and strong woman who does not want to overemphasize the "weaknesses" of her sex or the difficulties of her life. Pliseckaja's approach in the text to conventional women's roles reinforces her image as a determined and unconventional woman, a creator of her own life, at least in her autobiography. The plethora of photos is surely also part of the influence of the new book market on the packaging of books: it raises the readers' interest and appetite for reading about well-known people's lives.

4.3 Waiting for the Big Moment?

The central plot in Pliseckaja's story of her own life is, quite understandably, the story of her public life, the public career as an artist, the "Swan", impersonating a cultural icon of the Soviet era.²² Experience of purges in childhood constitutes a break in her artistic biography, and is constructed as a cause of much controversy and repression during her career and her struggle to be herself.

In the first chapter of Pliseckaja's book called "Dača and Sretenka", the narrator recalls a picture at her childhood home, a copy of the painting "Princess Tarakanova".²³ She eloquently describes the picture where the Princess stands "in a beautiful, theatrical pose, in a velvet, *décolleté* dress" and identifies with her:

В тяжелейшие для себя времена ... я вспоминала эту картину. Бедную княжну Тараканову. В бессильном отчаянии, боли от абсурда, лжи, подлости, идиотизма я хотела станцевать такой балет. Излить горечь свою людям. (Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 13)

In the most difficult times ... I remembered this picture and the poor Princess Tarakanova. Weakened by despair and pain caused by absurdity, lies, villainy, idiocy I wanted to dance this kind of ballet. To pour my bitterness into others. (Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 13)

Here the narrator identifies herself with a feminine image of a victim, a theatrical and beautiful victim, whose moments of terror when facing death by drowning in her cell are captured in a work of art. Interestingly, the narrator modifies the plot inscribed in the painting, by stating that she wanted to turn her own despair, pain and bitterness into dance. Despite her experiences which lead her to identify with the historical image of a female victim, the narrator-protagonist has managed to make a long and successful career, and thus resist the possible plot the recalled painting refers to. Perhaps her dance would have been a symbolic negation of such a plot? The narrator's plan about the ballet, however, is not realised.

At the end of the narrative a turning point is to be found, where the narrator ponders, whether she would like to be twenty again, if she now had the opportunity:

²² In Russia ballet has been a privileged sphere of culture and art since the 19th century; V. D. Bobrov writes that during the Silver Age Russian ballerinas along with poetesses added to "the fascinating charm of the time and represented the highest achievements of Russian culture." They were "magicians of dance" and "legends". (Bobrov 1998, 108.)

²³ This picture mentioned in the text is probably a reproduction of Konstantin Flavicki's (1830-1866) famous painting *The Princess Tarakanova*, 1864 (Tretyakov Gallery), which portrays this would-be princess in St. Peter's and Paul's fortress incarcerated there by Catherine II as a possible pretender to the throne.

Для балета двадцать - самое подходящее дело. (...) Если так - давайте мне двадцать. Возьму. Попробую пожить по-иному да поумнее. Постараюсь - твердо обещаю - избежать целой горы ошибок, которых я за жизнь столько понатворила. Но не делаю ли новых? Характер-то мой не поменяется. А если брать двадцать, то, верно уж не будет ни Кутузовского проспекта, ни встречи с Щедриным, ни "Кармен-сюиты", ни "Дамы с собачкой"? Нет, не согласна. Тогда Бог с ними, с двадцатью. Пускай останется так, как задано... (Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 472-3)

In the ballet to be twenty is most fortunate. (...) If so, let me be twenty. I'll buy it. I'll try to live differently, more wisely. I'll try - I promise - to avoid a whole bunch of mistakes, which I have made during my life. But won't I make new mistakes? My character is, after all, the same. // And if I were twenty again, then, there would be no Kutuzovskij *prospekt*, no meeting with Ščedrin, no "Carmen Suite", no "Lady with a Dog". // No, I don't want to be twenty. Farewell to that. Let everything remain the way it has happened... (Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 472-3)

After a moment's delight at the prospect of having a different, more fortunate life, the present state of life is seen to be the most fortunate, after all. The life experience gained by the narrator-protagonist forms the story of development, its end result, in the text itself: whether it is the end result of the whole life is another question, "another story".

Pliseckaja's life story ends with the description of the protagonist's rehearsal for the jubilee of her 50 years on the stage. This coincides with the 1993 *putsch* in Moscow and the performance is under threat: the whole performance may not take place. The performance is, however, organised and in the end the protagonist awaits her turn to appear on the stage with thoughts of the fifty years of performing in ballet: "Мгновенных пятьдесят лет, долгих-долгих- долгих пятьдесят лет я ожидаю своего выхода в последней кулисе на мужской стороне. Может, сегодня мой звездный час?.. / Fifty momentary years, fifty long-long-long years I wait for my appearance behind the last coulisse on the men's side. Perhaps today will be my big moment?.." (Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 482). This ending emphasises that the development is not over, in fact, it is perhaps just beginning.

I, Maija Pliseckaja represents and constructs the ballerina, the cultural icon, as a metaphor to her poor homeland, Russia, who suffered during the hard times of the Soviet period. Its narrative techniques (orientation to reader expectations) and representations of the attractive female artist (in dozens of photos) are proof of the influence of the new book market. Pliseckaja uses the metaphor of Golgotha when describing her situation as an "un-exportable" ballerina during the 1950s. The ballerina suffered and sustained the communist regime, and continued her career after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, continuing to look for new opportunities in the 1990s. Her significance as an important cultural figure was also recognized by the new regime. The text

represents her, like her “poor homeland”, looking into the future, waiting for her big moment to come.

5 Elena Bonner's Memoirs of Girlhood: *Mothers and Daughters*

Elena Bonner's text *Дочки - матери* (*Mothers and Daughters*) about the author's childhood in Stalin's time can in certain aspects be seen as an exceptional autobiographical text in the context of this study. Compared to the other texts it focuses on a different time in the protagonist's life from a different perspective: it documents the private history of a girl and her family during the 1930s, which was a tragic and traumatic time for intellectuals and party people, described in numerous artistic works, documents and memoirs. Beyond this, the text employs a narrative strategy recounting the unconscious, imaginative resources of the mind, rather than emphasising the documenting the past "the way it was". In contrast to the other two texts by the 1920s' generation of women (Petkevič and Pliseckaja) this text touches upon "repressed" experiences of the female body and sexuality. However, either because of the author's status as a political activist and public figure, or because the theme of this text (childhood under Stalin) the text has not gained much (positive) attention in previous studies on Russian women's autobiographies.¹ This is why I have chosen to include it in my research and place it after the analyses of Petkevič's and Pliseckaja's texts.

The narrative in *Дочки - матери*/*Mothers and Daughters* is episodic rather than chronological: it concentrates on depicting single incidents more than on constructing a linear train of events. However, the narrative concentrates on the protagonist's gradual gaining of consciousness about the events and the family relations around her. At the beginning of the text the narrator informs the reader of the impetus for her writing: after the mother's death she wanted to access memories connected with her mother, which for her meant delving into inactive layers of memory: "[В]оспоминания - это когда не знаешь, что впереди./ [R]eminiscence is not knowing what lies ahead." (Bonner 1994/1991, 5/ Bonner 1992, 1). The accessed memory opened up a wealth of details: forgotten names and incidents, apparently unimportant, but serving as important constituents and clues for her biography and identity.

Thereafter the text documents the last day of her mother's life and the funeral, which relate to the year 1988. The actual writing process starts from a letter written to her children in order to inform them of the family history ("Я начала писать письмо детям./ I began writing a letter to my children." Bonner

¹ Helena Gosciolo (2003) analyses the text in her article "The Italics Are Hers: Matrophobia and the Family Romance in Elena Bonner's *Mothers and Daughters*." Beth Holmgren mentions Bonner's text in an endnote in her article on women's autobiographies in the 20th century (1994); Sheila Fitzpatrick likewise mentions the text in an endnote (2000).

1994/1991, 5/ Bonner 1992, 1.)² The letter, which the narrator calls boring for the readers, then develops into a whole manuscript for a book.

The narrative employs the narrator's perspective of herself as a child. It goes through different phases of childhood (learning to read, friendships, school etc.), relationship to parents, especially the mother, minor and major events in the family life, and culminates in the end of the childhood on the day (or night) of her father's arrest. The epilogue has been written in 1991 and briefly outlines the subsequent developments in the family's and the narrator's own life, returning to the beginning, to the figure of mother, by quoting a passage from her mother's diary written shortly before her death.

5.1 Narrating As Reminiscence

The narrative strategy in Bonner's text recalls that in Petkevič's text, where the narrator relives her past and identifies with her past self. In a way, in Bonner's text this tactic is taken a step further and the narrator as it were recreates the past, relying - as the preface has it - on the memory which she allows to guide her. As it turns out at the beginning of the text, memory is a rich source of material, which keeps coming and coming:

Я начала писать письмо детям. Что знаю о маминой семье, что слышала, что помню. Вначале вспоминать было трудно. Я как будто пробиралась через лесной завал, чтобы выйти на дорогу. Не могла припомнить чье-то имя, название места. Они всплывали в памяти ночью, уже почти во сне. Просыпаясь, я сделала открытие - память надо будить. Тогда писать стало легче. Как будто мне дали в руки клубок ниток. Я взяла за конец и потянула. Нитка все тянется и тянется. // Садясь за машинку, я каждый раз не знала, куда она меня приведет. Так пришло второе открытие - воспоминания - это когда не знаешь, что впереди. (Bonner 1994/1991, 5)

I began writing a letter to my children. What I knew of Mama's family, what I had heard, what I remembered. At first remembering was difficult. It was like making my way to the road through a felled forest. There were names of people and places I could not recall. They surfaced at night, almost in my sleep. When I woke up, I made a discovery - the memory has to be awakened. Writing grew easier then. I had been handed a ball of string. I took one end and pulled. The string kept coming and coming. // Sitting down at the typewriter, I never knew where I would be led. That was my second discovery - reminiscence is not knowing what lies ahead. (Bonner 1992, 1)

² And further: "Зачем я написала вам это письмо, дорогие мои доченька и сынок? На память. Чтобы самой не забыть. И потому, что годами появляется чувство необходимости знать, откуда ты./ Why did I write this letter to you, my dear daughter and son? To remember. So that I don't forget. So that you know. And because with the years comes the need to know where you came from." (Bonner 1994/1991, 24/ Bonner 1992, 19)

The connection between the unconscious, writing and remembering thus emerges consciously as the writing technique, and the author suggests here that the writing “happens” to the subject (“...I never knew where I would be led.”). The narrative encourages reading it as a flow of memory, which is not so attached to documenting facts as to describing a subjective memory of the past.

Goscilo (2003, 56) points out that despite “sophistication in formulating such distinctions relevant to retrospection” the text itself disappoints the reader, because it lacks “depth of introspection”. It is of course the reader’s prerogative to evaluate how a text fulfills the task it sets out to accomplish. However, it is also important to consider the context (historical, literary) in which the text is situated. For the time being I am first concerned with examining the narrative voice, which, in my opinion, turns out to be sophisticated in this text.

In Bonnèr’s text the narrative voice is focalized through the protagonist’s (as an experiencing subject) perception and the narrator’s consciousness. This narrative strategy is used in order to represent the story as if through the perspective of the past self as a child. The narrative voice thus strives to combine, not put asunder, the past and the present. A representative sample of the narrative voice can be traced in the following extract. This is the scene at the protagonist’s home at the time of Kirov’s murder in 1934. As the narrator comments, her parents were “Kirovites”, and thus this event bodes ill for them:

...[М]ама крикнула папе, чтобы он шел ужинать. Мне захотелось посидеть с ними, и я встала. В это время зазвонил телефон. (...) Телефон стоял в столовой, и я слышала (и слушала) все разговоры. (...) Звонил Матвей из Ленинграда. И сразу после маминого “здравствуй” я поняла, что она ему не обрадовалась, как обычно, а стала говорить что-то тревожное, вроде: “не может быть”, “ужасно”, “ужасно”, “ты уверен” - и позвала папу каким-то упавшим, почти беззвучным голосом: “Геворк, это Матвей, там...” Что “там” - она не сказала, а, передавая трубку, опустилась в кресло... (...) Первой очнулась Батаня. Она сказала, что завтра же едет в Ленинград и ей надо билет. Мама сказала, что не понимает, какое отношение имеет к Батане то, что случилось. Но Батаня уже пошла в нашу комнату, и было слышно, как она выдвигает из-под кровати чемодан, открывает сундук - складывается. Это было очень обычно для нее. (...) ...[П]отом я видела много раз, как сидят, когда в доме покойник. Но они все были не только подавленные, какие-то потухшие. Они были как затравленные. (...) Они казались мне подпольщиками. (...) Вышла Батаня, и меня поразило, что никто ... не встал, когда она поздоровалась с ними. Она была в халате, но уже спокойная, как всегда и сказала: “Немедленно в кровать” - это мне, конечно, а не им. Когда они разошлись, не знаю. (Bonnèr 1994/1991, 173-176)

Mama called Papa to come eat. I wanted to sit with them so I got up. Just then the telephone rang. (...) The telephone was in the dining room and I could hear all the conversations. (...) It was Matvei from Leningrad. Right after her “hello” I could tell [mama] wasn’t as pleased to hear from him as she usually was, and she kept saying anxious things like, “impossible,” “horrible, horrible,” “Are you sure?” She called Papa in a hollow, almost soundless voice. “Gevork, it’s Matvei, it’s...”

She didn't say what it was, but after she handed the receiver to Papa she sank into an armchair...(...) The first to break the silence was Batanya. She said she would go to Leningrad tomorrow and needed a ticket. Mama wondered what the incident had to do with Batanya. But Batanya was in our room already, and I could hear her pulling the suitcase out from under the bed and opening the trunk. She was packing, which was very typical of her. (...) I later witnessed that kind of silent sitting many times, in a house where someone had died. But this night my parents and their visitors weren't only saddened, they seemed extinguished somehow... haunted. (...) They looked like conspirators to me. (...) Batanya came in and I was shocked that no one ... stood up when she greeted them. She was in a bathrobe, but by now had regained her usual calm and she said, "Get to bed immediately." That was for me, of course, not them. I don't know when they all left. (Bonner 1992, 185-188)

The narrative includes the perspectives of the "I" of an 11-year-old girl as a perceptive, internal focalizer of the narrative. She is the one who sees, hears and notes things in her environment (Rimmon-Kenan 1991/1983, 99). It is she who hears - and, as the original Russian text brings out, listens to - all the conversations that take place in the phone, it is she who hears the anxiety in her mother's voice, and does not yet know what has happened. The psychological focalization is as though divided between the protagonist and the narrator, as the *cognitive* and *emotional* attitude (ibid. 102) to what is being narrated are certainly influenced by the perception "now", that is, the adult-narrator's knowledge of what happened to her parents and other "Kirovites" in the years to come. The ideological focalizer is usually the narrator, in this case the adult-narrator (ibid. 105) who evaluates the scenes described in retrospect (cf. the sentence "I later witnessed that kind of silent sitting many times, in a house where someone had died."). Although these different focalizations are as if realized through one narrative voice, the voice of the first person narrator who tells about the things the "I" of the text hears and sees ("Mama called Papa to come eat", "She was in a bathrobe"), about the comments on the events ("I don't remember what they talked about", "They looked like conspirators to me") and about the overall characterisation of the events ("...my parents and their visitors weren't only saddened, they seemed extinguished somehow... haunted."), focalization is separate from narration (ibid. 106). The narrative strategy, however, stresses the focalization through the child's perception yet by explicating in the text itself those passages in italics which directly employ the narrator's - who is able to move between the past and the future of the narrated events - perspective and comments.

In this way the narrative technique concentrates on "what happened" instead of "*why* it happened" but, as the authorial comment at the beginning of the text indicated, at the same time it is "not what happened", because it is already an interpretation made in hindsight. With the help of the very techniques of fiction narration "from the past to the future, and from today, when everything is known, to the past, through the intersection of these two

perspectives an exceptionally impressive representation is created” (Gessen 1994, 201). The motto of Bonner’s writing “This did not happen, but this is true” accentuates the creative, active nature of remembering and writing in a positive way, in other words, as a construction of a possible past, not as a way to point to the impossibility of reaching the past, or the self. What is being told, then, is “fiction” in the sense that it comes from the narrator’s mind and memory. That this is so is also reflected by the author-narrator: “[У] меня все ‘лирическое’: и то, что из страны ‘давним-давно’, и то, что сегодняшнее.../[E]verything I am writing is ‘lyrical’ - both what is from the land of long ago and what is from today.” (Bonner 1994/1991, 127/ Bonner 1992, 138)

Goscilo sees the narrative strategy used by Bonner in a quite contrary way:

...[T]he interplay between the split temporal frames urges the reader to accept the young Bonner and her purported thoughts, responses and actions as “accurately recalled” in part *because* the older and wiser Bonner’s strategically “subsequent” reassessments point to the limitations of her childhood perspective, which the editorializing italics mutate from an orienting subjectivity to an analyzable object. Bonner’s critical backward glance, in other words, pre-empts us. (Goscilo 2003, 56)

As I noted in my discussion on the excerpt from Bonner’s text above, the narrator uses the “younger” self as a focalizer, through whose eyes and perception the events are narrated. It is, however, logically not the younger self who is narrating in the text, but the adult self, as always in retrospective narratives. It is also not only the younger self’s thoughts, responses and actions that are narrated in the text, but, as I endeavoured to show in the analysis of the (emotional, cognitive, ideological) focalization above, also the adult self’s. Therefore I do not think that the commentaries in italics point to the limitation of Bonner’s childhood perspective, and thus construct the “older” and “wiser” Bonner’s status as an authoritative instance on remembering herself. Rather, the comments in italics comment on her (the older and wiser Bonner’s) way of remembering.

Another text published recently in Russia which employs a similar kind of narrative strategy through the perspective of a small girl growing up is Svetlana Šenbrunn’s *Розы и хризантемы* (Roses and Chrysanthemums, 2000).³ It, too, focuses on family relations, especially relations between mothers and

³ Svetlana Šenbrunn was born in Moscow and worked as a script-writer for television; in 1975 she emigrated to Israel. She has published in the Russian-language literary journals *Grani*, *Kontinent*, 22, translated Hebrew literature and in the 1990s published two anthologies of her stories. Her novel *Rozy i hrizantemy* (Roses and Chrysanthemums) was a nominee for the Booker-Smirnoff prize in 2000 and it was praised in literary reviews for its minute description of life in the 1940s-50s Moscow. (Djakova 2000; Vasil’ev 2000).

daughters, and it blurs the borders between fact and fiction.⁴ In a similar way to Bonner, Šenbrunn's text uses the perspective of a small girl. The narrative voice, however, is less self-conscious in the text, that is, it is mostly implicit, the narrator does not comment the events or their subsequent development, she does not make direct allusions to politics etc. The author and the protagonist share the same name, but any commentaries on the "purpose" or "function" of the text from the narrator's side are absent. There are no actual references in the text to the writer, or the time of writing and the narrator seems to blend with the heroine's perspective, that is, narrator comments are minimal. The writer, narrator and heroine, however, share the same name, which indicates an autobiographical aspect. The narrated time is at the end and after the Second World War (1943-1951), and the text contains many dialogues between adults, which the protagonist overhears. What implies, however, that the question can be of a semi-fictional, semi-autobiographical text is found at the end of the novel; the protagonist, an 11-year old girl, walks on the street, pondering on what she sees and feels.

Я иду по нашей улице. Одна. От школы к нашему дому. День тихий, теплый, легкие облачка плывут по голубому небу, какой-то пух летает в воздухе... Или не пух, так, пылинки какие-то... А может... всего этого нет? Может, мне только кажется?.. Я останавливаюсь. Смотрю на небо. Дома... Трамвайная линия... Стена... Окна... Все кажется?.. Нет, не может быть!.. Почему не может? Снятся же нам сны. Во сне мы думаем, что все правда. А потом оказывается, что это сон. Может, это тоже сон?.. Особенный такой... И он мне снится... Я думаю, что все есть - на самом деле есть, - а на самом деле ничего нет... (...) Что же мне делать? Идти домой или нет? Приду домой, увижу папу и буду бояться с ним говорить... Говорить с кем-то, кого нет... (...) Как же узнать правду?.. (Šenbrunn 2000, 517-518)

⁴ The story is about a girl who comes to Moscow at the end of the Second World War with her mother. She is four years old. They find that the apartment which belonged to their family is occupied by other people. After considerable efforts the mother manages to prove that the apartment is theirs. In the meanwhile she and her daughter have to live in the streets with no money and food. In the apartment their life continues to be needy. They live on the mother's pension which she gets due to her invalidity. The mother's time passes in search of food, while the daughter is left alone in the apartment for long periods of time. The mother's attitude towards the daughter cannot be described as tender or loving. On the contrary, she is described as frustrated and fierce most of the time. The mother's mother moves in to live with her daughter, which adds to the mother's frustration. When the father returns from the front where he has worked as a correspondent, the mother expects him to take over his duties as a breadwinner. The father, however, plans to become a Soviet writer, which does not please the mother. The family lives in the one-room apartment, with the father writing his novel on war. Eventually the grandmother has to leave. The father disappears occasionally to drink with his friends and returns home usually on all fours. The mother maintains some features of her previous life-style by teaching the daughter French and sending her to piano classes as well as obtaining help with the household. Family life is saturated with quarrels between the parents, which the daughter can listen to unhindered.

I am walking on our street. Alone. From the school to our house. It's a quiet, warm day, light clouds glide across the clear blue sky, and a feather flies in the air... Or not a feather, but, dust particles... What if... none of this exists? What if it all just seems to me? I stop. I look at the sky. Home... The tram line... Wall... Windows... All just seems to me? No, it cannot be!.. Why not? We all dream, don't we? In the dream we think that everything is real. And then it turns out it was a dream. Perhaps this is also a dream?.. A special kind of dream.... And I'm dreaming it... I think that everything exists – and as a matter of fact there is nothing... (...) What should I do? Go home or not? I come home; see Papa and start being afraid of talking with him... To talk with someone who doesn't exist... (...) How can we know the truth? (Šenbrunn 2000, 517-518)

This passage of the thoughts of an 11-year-old girl marks the involvement of the narrative voice, that is, the narrator in the story: the lines between real and dream, the line between the self and the outer world becomes unclear in this passage where perception through the eyes is equated with dreaming. This is a comment on the narrative itself: the perception of the protagonist and the voice of the narrator are not as self-evident and not as identical as it would seem in the course of the narration. In Šenbrunn's text the textual material can be interpreted in a way that brings out different perspectives on what is being told from the perspective of the narrator. In Bonnèr's text the narrator herself comments on the scenes described and often offers additional descriptions of how things subsequently turned out. This is commented upon by the narrator herself, when she contends that everything she writes is a "lyrical deviation", that is, a personal addressing by the writer to the reader. In a way the narrator addresses the reader and wonders herself why she has remembered things the way she has, but without offering any answers to the questions.

What is interesting in the writing process of Šenbrunn's text - which took place in the 1950s-60s - as the author herself has commented (Šenbrunn 2002, 264) is that according to her, this text "was not written"; it "wrote itself" - just as Bonnèr comments in her preface about the writing process of her text. Šenbrunn also says that what the text contains is almost totally based on "documentary material" and she had felt it her *duty* to conserve the figures in the texts "as they had been in life". To combine the two perspectives, the child's and the adult's, had been an "intuitive and unintended" result. Thus, it is the memory of that time as the author had perceived it, remembered it, at the time of writing. The duty to remember and the intuitive narrative strategy point to the testimonial character of such texts, but also to the subjective, personal perception through memory. They are both *about* history and *making* that history.⁵

⁵ Ulla-Maija Peltonen (2003, 20-21) states that historical (individual) experience and historical (collective) consciousness overlap in folklore and memory narrative, both of which give information about historical experience as a subjective, individual memory and about historical consciousness as collective and public memory.

5.2 Constructing Intimacy

Thus, in Bonner's text the author-narrator emphasises that the writing of the memoirs happened spontaneously, as she described the process of writing: she sat down to write and wrote what surfaced in her mind.⁶ Of course, the manuscript has surely undergone editing, and by referring to the text's own expressions about its "spontaneity" I do not mean to say that it should be considered any more "authentic" than other literary texts. These textual features point to its self-awareness as a literary text. The comments of the narrator at the beginning and in the course of the narrative, and the narrative strategy of focalization through the perception of the past younger self *create* a feeling that one is dealing with representations of personal experiences and subjective perception.

What makes a life-story intimate, how to define intimate? Surely Bonner's, a well-known human rights activist's and dissident's, memoirs are also an eyewitness testimony of the political events of the past. Calling the text an intimate story does not necessarily dispute its testimonial character. Although Sheila Fitzpatrick notes, that Soviet Russian women "remember their lives and structure their narratives in terms of great public events...rather than personal milestones" (Fitzpatrick 2000), this does not mean that the two cannot co-exist. As Fitzpatrick also points out, the *time of writing* is significant in this matter: memoirs written in the 1920s-40s may often differ from those written later, for instance, in the 1990s.⁷

However, these are not the only indicators that the question is of an intimate story. The text entails rich depictions of bodily sensations, inner movements of mind and feelings; both positive depictions of happiness, love, joy, admiration but also negative descriptions of fear, anger, shame, hatred, pain experienced by the protagonist. Nevertheless the story simultaneously also focuses on the historical, political drama of the time of narration, but as depicted from the inside one family. The inside and the outside of that family, that is, the intimate and the societal are inseparable in the narrative. Thus, the text

⁶ According to Balina (2003, 191-192) from the late 1950s on a subjective mode of memoir writing emerged in Soviet literature, which was called "autodocumentary", "lyrical prose", "documentary prose" "memoir-autobiographical prose", and which differed from the conventions of memoirs of the time: "An attempt to construct the memoir according to the nature of memory removes the distance between the memoirist and the object of his or her reminiscences, including the author and the protagonist of his or her narrative, into one tidily connected life cycle."

⁷ Cf. Rotkirch, who points out that Fitzpatrick's thesis of the preference for testimonial mode of narration holds only for the beginning of the 20th century, and argues that "[t]he 1990s autobiographies seem to have been written *against* the canons of testimonies, with the permission and encouragement to think only about oneself." (Rotkirch 2000, 35).

articulates both the public, collective and the personal, intimate. This is exemplified in two episodes denoting, in different ways, the end of childhood.

5.2.1 “*Cemetery Berries*” and “*Princess Džavaha*”

Although Bonner’s story is set in a time and space in which the events of a collective trauma of a nation take place, the text often focuses on the description of the protagonist’s development in childhood. This description is primarily connected with the relationship between parents and children, and especially, mothers and daughters. In this subchapter I will concentrate on the narrative tactic of presenting this personal development, and how it comes to combine the intimate and the testimonial, that is, how the personal interacts with the common, ritualistic memory.

A frequently used structure in *Дочки - матери/ Mothers and Daughters* is the narrating of a similar event at two different points in the author’s life. This emphasises the identity of the “I” and constructs the continuity of the “I”. Narrating these events twice is not an indication of the importance of the events as such, but an indication of their importance for the narrator-protagonist’s identity. This narrative structure implies an endeavour to make the subject whole, and to restore the childhood experiences as they are remembered by the narrator. An important and interesting feature of the text is the question of secrets and silences between different generations, parents and children. The narrator reminisces on how at the age of five she made her first secret trip to a forbidden area near their family’s summer place, and crossed a railway bridge over a river:

Было очень страшно смотреть на идущего по мосту человека и непреодолимо хотелось самой идти по этим перекладинам.// Однажды я решила и пошла. Я совсем не помню свой путь на ту сторону ... но очень хорошо помню, как я вернулась к мосту и поняла, что почти не имею сил заставить себя проделать обратный путь. (...) Я не могу сказать, как страшно мне было. (Bonner 1994/1991, 51)

It was very scary to watch a person on the bridge, yet I desperately wanted to walk from tie to tie myself. // One time I decided to do it. I don’t recall how I got across ... but I remember coming back to the bridge and realizing that I didn’t have the strength to force myself to make the return trip. (...) I can’t describe how terrified I was. (Bonner 1992, 52)

The image of the running water, the river, and the bridge over the water with people crossing it, and the feeling of fear and excitement attached to this image are full of both personal and symbolic significance. The water’s movement and transparency are terrifying, but by crossing the bridge the fear can be overcome. The next day the crossing is already easier, and eventually it becomes habitual, and the protagonist is able to pick strawberries from the other

side of the bridge, where there is a cemetery, and amaze the adults with her juicy berries. In italics the narrator accounts for a similar memory, relating to the events of 1937, when her parents were arrested. She is on a walk with the boy she loved, who starts reciting a poem by Marina Cvetaeva “кладбищенской земляники крупнее и слаще нет.../ nothing is bigger or sweeter than cemetery berries”:

И я рассказала о мосте, кладбище и землянике. А до этого никогда никому не говорила, казалось как-то очень интимно все это. С тех пор мост этот и корзиночка всегда приходили на память, как талисман на счастье, когда надо преодолеть что-то страшное, трудное. (Bonnèr 1994/1991, 52)

And I told him about the bridge, the cemetery and the wild strawberries. I had never told anyone about it before; it was all somehow too intimate. Ever since then that bridge and that basket always come to mind like a lucky charm whenever I have to overcome something terrible and difficult. (Bonner 1992, 53)

This incident forms a constitutive part of the construction of the narrator’s identity in the text: the protagonist learns to trust herself and overcome fear of doing something which is not quite allowed but still exciting. In a way this is similar to what we could observe in Pliseckaja’s narration about her childhood, where the protagonist is described as an “early version” of the narrator-as-adult. In a similar way in Bonnèr’s text childhood is described as a repository of the features that become the most important in the constituting of the narrator’s identity as “Elena Bonnèr”.

The silence concerning this childhood experience, which the narrator calls intimate, with the bridge, the cemetery and strawberries is broken when the protagonist first shares it with the boy, and then through the narrating, with the readers. The intimacy refers here to the fact that the protagonist did not reveal her secret trips to the other side of the river at home: it was her secret, and in a way, a breaking of the control of the adults (nannies, parents, Grandmother) in her life.

Another important event in childhood, at the age of five, is learning to read. The most important figure in her childhood, Grandmother Batanja, teaches her how to read, and in the same summer when the crossing of bridge took place, she

...перешагнула барьер, который отделяет знание букв и умение сложить их в слова от желания читать, и к концу “дачи” стала меньше бродить по лесу и реке, потому что ... Батаня привезла на дачу большой в красном переплете с золотом (марксовский) том Жуковского и несколько раз читала из него вслух. ...[Я] зачитывалась Жуковским до одури, до того, что мне все это снилось. (Bonnèr 1994/1991, 54)

crossed the barrier that separates knowing the letters and knowing how to form words from the desire to read. By the end of our *dacha* season I was spending less

time in the woods and along the river. ... Batanya brought a big heavy book bound in red and gold (the Marks edition) of Zhukovsky and would read to me aloud from it several times. (...) I read Zhukovsky until I got drunk on him, until I dreamed Zhukovsky every night. (Bonner 1992, 55-56)

The narrator calls the desire to read a “crossing of barrier”: it opens up a whole new world for the protagonist, whose reading is a physical experience (“I got drunk”) and books come into her dreams. Reading becomes another way of evading the control of the parents later in the text, when the protagonist reads “forbidden” books of the time by Anastasija Verbickaja and Lidija Čarskaja. The narrator reminisces how she used to read Čarskaja’s and Verbitskaja’s works at the age of twelve, and to imagine that sometimes she saw a glimpse of Princess Džavaha, one of Čarskaja’s heroines, in her reflection. The reading of these “forbidden” books is connected with her friendship with a girl, Lelia, who shares the books with her. When Bonner’s mother finds out what she reads, she confiscates the book and insists on knowing where the daughter had got it. However, the protagonist does not betray her friend, and remains silent. Susan Larsen points to the resemblance of this passage to Čarskaja’s girls’ stories with rebellious heroines, which “thousands of Russian girls” read (2000, 141-143). These girls could identify themselves with the girl-heroines and their defiance of parental control. As Larsen points out, the protagonist in Bonner’s text goes as far as to break into her father’s locked drawer, which she had never done before, and take the book back in order to return it to Lelia: “As she insists on her right to keep her own secrets, Bonner also asserts her resemblance to Charskaia’s most daring heroines, who were equally persistent in their rejection of adult claims to know and control girls’ secret pleasures.” (ibid. 167).

The depiction of childhood is permeated with secrets, silences, overhearing conversations, seeing or hearing things that the protagonist should not have heard or seen. The family history is permeated with tensions between the Grandmother and the parents, who occupy different social strata and keep company with different social circles. The protagonist’s identity is further influenced by the fact, that her father, Gevork Alihanov, is not her biological father. The biological father, who is referred to merely as “OH/he”, is a shadowy figure, and the non-biological father is perceived as the only real father. As it turns out, the latter had also had a family before his marriage to the protagonist’s mother. The protagonist comes to know this when she is eavesdropping on her father’s testimony during a purge session, and someone asks him about his former wife. The secrets and silences between parents and their children reach their climax in the scenes in which the end of the protagonist’s childhood is depicted: both, as a collective experience of a generation and as a personal transition to maturity.

5.2.2 *The End of Childhood*

A major turning point in the protagonist-narrator's life is the arrest of her parents in 1937. This marks the end of her childhood ("Я стала другой. И детство мое кончилось./ I had changed: my childhood had ended." Bonner 1994/1991, 281/ Bonner 1992, 307), and the beginning of a different, autonomous time in her life without the parents. Simultaneously the time also marks the turning point in the lives of many other Soviet people and in the history of the country. These depictions relating to the 1930s were an organic part of autobiographical literature published in Russia after *perestroika*. Scenes of arrest are a hallmark of the cultural memory about this time. As a review of Bonner's text has it *Дочки - матери/ Mothers and Daughters* with its depiction of the time through the small girl's perception with rich detail on the circumstances and atmosphere, succeeds in combining the common with personal, the historical with the everyday (Gessen 1994, 200).

The depiction relating to the day of the father's arrest in the Alihanov family is a testimony of historical events and time which were experienced by many others as well. At the time the protagonist is fourteen years old, a school-girl whose life is primarily occupied with school, friends and her boyfriend. The protagonist with her friends have of course noticed the disappearance of families around them in the house of *Komintern*, where they live, and she hears her parents talking in half sentences about it. The unknown fate of these families is denoted by the metonymic expression the children use relating to these families: "между прочим/ by the way". The protagonist does not witness the arrest of her father. The scene after the arrest is between the mother and the daughter at home. They, apparently, send each other secret messages in the presence of the soldiers who have come to search their home:

Я сделала шаг к ней, но споткнулась о лежащие на полу книги и посмотрела вниз. А когда подняла глаза, мамин взгляд меня остановил. Он был как стена. Как приказ. Я не могла послушаться. Она смотрела на меня долго. "Прощается, - подумала я. - И боится, что я расплачусь. Тогда и она тоже..." Домыслить я себе не разрешила. (...) Она посмотрела на меня и протянула руку. Мне показалось, что ко мне. Но она положила раскрытую ладонь на стакан, как будто греет ее. Потом стала тихо гладить подстаканник. Я почувствовала, что могу заплакать. Наверно, и мама это ощутила, потому что другой рукой чуть оттолкнула меня и сказала: "Люся-джан, иди к себе". Я поняла, что она боится моих слез. Или, может, своих? Никогда она меня так не называла. Я тогда же поняла, мгновенно, что ей просто хотелось сказать папино слово. Я пошла к себе, хотя нестерпимо хотелось сесть рядом, прижаться, плакать. (Bonner 1994/1991, 275, 277)

I took a step toward her, but tripped over books on the floor and was forced to look down. When I raised my eyes, Mama's gaze stopped me. It was like a wall. An order. I couldn't disobey. She stared at me a long time. She's saying goodbye, I thought. And she's afraid I'll start crying. Because then she will too. I stopped

thinking. (...) She looked at me and reached out, and I thought she wanted me. But she put her palm down on the glass, as if to warm herself. Then she gently caressed the glass holder. I thought I was going to cry. Mama must have felt it too, because with her other hand she gave me a nudge and said, "Lusia-djan, go to your room." I knew she was afraid of my tears. Or maybe her own? She never called me that name. I realized she simply wanted to use Papa's word. I went to my room even though I was dying to sit next to her, to hold her and to cry. (Bonner 1992, 298, 300)

The communication without words - through looks (like a wall) and gestures (caressed), codes (Lusia-djan) - refers to the intimacy of the scene, the personal feelings of individuals in a situation when their intimacy and privacy have been broken: their home is searched and made public, a crime scene, and their personal relations can be used as evidence or means to reveal weaknesses. Goscilo (2003, 58) finds fault with Bonner's depiction for not interpreting the mother's "painfully eloquent body language" in this scene. However, it is by laying bare the circumstances of the arrest and eloquently describing the body language, that the narrative makes perfectly clear what is going on between the mother and daughter. This scene refers to the unarticulated history of one family, with secrets, untold stories, unfinished sentences, silences, which could not be broken. However, the silences are broken now through the narration of the story to others: the narrator tells her side of the story, in relation to her mother, while the father's story remains untold. The mother's story is told through the words of the daughter - the silence between the daughter and the mother remains.

The protagonist seeks for comfort from her mother, who is not in a position to permit herself to give it. By contrast, the protagonist becomes, must become, herself a caretaker and she makes her mother tea and sandwiches. Later she will send her mother packages to the prison camp take care of her younger brother, become a nurse during the war taking care of the wounded, and an activist "taking care" of the human rights of the nation.

The culmination of this scene is when the mother sends the protagonist to stay overnight with a friend, in order to protect her. The protagonist, however, walks the whole night alone in the streets in a state of shock and fear. This is the turning point of her life, when she "changed: and ... childhood ended" (Bonner 1992, 307).

Another turning point in the protagonist's life occurs when she grows up into a physically mature woman. This episode relates to a more intimate, nevertheless also a most common turning point in a woman's life: the menses. The event is given special status in the narrative in the description where the heroine, as it were, anticipates the coming change in her life, when walking in summer rain in the streets:

Улица вновь стала обыкновенной - с машинами, ожившими трамваями. С людьми. Мне стало неудобно среди них без платья. Я заметила, что майка как-то почти стыдно облегает мою уже появившуюся грудь, а через ткань просвечивает темная кожа вокруг сосков. (...) Казалось, что я потеряла что-то нужное, важное, необходимое и никогда уже не смогу вернуть. (Bonnèr 1994/1991, 202)

The street went back to being ordinary - with cars and reanimated trolleys. With people. I felt uncomfortable not wearing my dress. I noticed that my T-shirt was almost shamefully clinging to my newly formed breasts and that the dark skin around my nipples was showing through the fabric. (...) At home, changing into dry clothes, I burst into tears. I sensed that I had lost something necessary, important, that I could never get it back again. (Bonner 1992, 217)

The sense of losing something necessary refers to the loss of innocence, of childhood and the transition to maturity, from girlhood to womanhood. At once the heroine is told that what is happening to her is normal for every girl and from now on she has to protect herself from getting pregnant. It is, however, not so much the appearance of the actual menses that the narrator pays attention to, but her/the heroine's attitude and perception of the event. There are important psychological and social features connected with the depiction which make it, if not a turning point in the life-story, then at least an important key to the construction of the narrator-protagonist's identity as a woman. What is important in connection with the narrative structure in this depiction is the narrator's observation that the protagonist was ignorant of what she was going through. The fact that she was not "prepared" strikes the adult narrator as surprising:

Мне до сих пор странно, что я много читала, много общалась в это время со сверстницами и девочками старше, жила несколько месяцев в лесной школе и в пионерских лагерях и ничего не знала о том, что раньше или позже, но у девочек происходит физиологическое взросление. Однако факт - будучи девочкой бойкой, шустрой, неглупой и в общем контактной, в чем-то я действительно в то время оказалась менее подготовленной, чем мои сверстницы. (Bonnèr 1994/1991, 205)

I still can't believe that I was well-read, had spent a lot of time with girls my age and older, had lived for several months in the forest school and in Pioneer camp, and didn't know that sooner or later girls undergo physiological maturity. But the fact remains - I was a sassy, clever, not stupid, and sociable girl and yet in that sense and at that time I really was less prepared than my peers. (Bonner 1992, 220)

I will come back to this passage in more detail later on, but suffice it to say that in this depiction the voice of the adult narrator, a physician and dissident, touches upon her incipient socialization into sex roles, surrounded by embarrassment and ignorance.

The two depictions of episodes where the childhood ends are indicative of the two-fold narrative focus of the text: testimonial and intimate. The first episode – arrest – is common to other testimonies about the time and proliferates in memoirs written and/or published during *perestroika*. It testifies to the time of terror and the year 1937 which marks Stalin’s time. The narrative voice through the protagonist-focalizer, however, also brings out the intimate relations between the daughter and the mother during the arrest, indicative of both the topic’s “taboo” character during the Soviet time and the taboos in the family concerning the complex relations between the family members. The second episode – menses – describes a hallmark of a girl growing up a woman, relating to what is perceived as a more intimate part of life, but also a collective experience in a woman’s life.

According to Fitzpatrick and Holmgren, intimate narrating about personal hallmarks of life or themes concerning sexuality, is not characteristic of much *Soviet* Russian women’s autobiographical writing. Instead, the narratives are thematically structured around important historical and political issues, “causes” which legitimate the writing about one’s own life as a testimony. In spite of the proximity of the theme of Bonnèr’s text to politically significant events of history (Stalin’s time, purges), and the author’s status as the wife of a prominent male dissident, the text focuses on her personal experiences in childhood, the intimate relations in her family, the private story of her family.⁸ Further, as we shall see in more detail below, it concentrates on the female line of the family, and touches upon the usually unmentioned experiences of female sexuality. Of course, the claim about the text’s intimate and personal character does not erase the intersubjective aspect of the text as a product of the subject’s interaction with social reality and cultural models. Bonnèr is not inventing a new literary language or new genre, but the theme of her writing together with the sophisticated narrative technique mark her text as special among the other texts and other women’s autobiographies and memoirs (especially of her generation).

5.3 Through the Eyes of the Daughter

I will now seek to outline traits of the relationship between mother and daughter in Bonnèr’s text, and how they can be seen to be connected with female subjectivity. Firstly, the relationship between mothers and daughters is not described as unproblematic. In contrast, the relationship between grandmothers and their grandchildren is described as ideal, where the parties understand each other more easily than in the relationship between a mother and a daughter. This goes both for Bonnèr’s own relationship to her mother and grandmother and her mother’s relationship to her mother and grandchildren.

⁸ Bonnèr has written a separate book on her life together with Andrej Saharov, *Alone Together*, or in Russian *Постскриптум*.

Although the process of remembering childhood begins after the mother has died, as a means to recover memories of her, the narrating also brings out seemingly disturbing experiences. The story forms a circular pattern where at the beginning we can read about the narrator's yearning and lamenting for her mother's memory and the loss of her closeness. In the end, we can read the mother's own words in her diary, represented in the text of the author, who continues her lamenting and yearning to understand herself and the former, in and through the story the reader has just read. In between, however, through the protagonist-focalizer the narrator also recalls the less pleasant experiences of her childhood connected with the relationship. The narrator perceives the mother as a strict parent, who did not allow her children many favours. The narrator recalls her being especially strict towards her: as an example of this she describes how her mother once said to the protagonist that she was ugly. The narrator herself recalls envying the mother, who was beautiful and admired:

Я не могла определить, что мне [в ней] больше нравится, я завидовала и волосам, и тому (я и это уже тогда видела), что все видят мамину красоту и любят ее. *А мама упорно и часто твердила мне, что я некрасивая, я с трудом сдерживалась, чтобы не закричать, не заплакать, не впасть в истерику - а иногда и не могла сдержится.* (Bonner 1994/1991, 46, italics MR)

I couldn't decide which I liked better and I envied the hair and the fact that everyone saw Mama's beauty and admired her (I could see that even then). *Mama persistently and frequently told me that I was ugly; it was all I could do to keep from screaming and crying and having hysterics - sometimes I couldn't stop myself.* (Bonner 1992, 46, italics MR)

The daughter understood through the example of her mother that for a woman beauty is a way to gain other people's admiration. It then comes as a shock for the daughter to hear from the mother that she was not beautiful.⁹ The protagonist, however, finds ways of defying the mother's influence on her. Once, when the mother is combing the daughter's hair, she says something very unusual:

[Р]асчесывая мои волосы после мытья, мама вдруг сказала легко и весело: "Удивительно хорошо они у тебя, Люська, лежат, а это очень облегчает жизнь". (Bonner 1994/1991, 63)

When she was combing my hair after the shampoo, Mama suddenly said in a light and cheerful tone: "Your hair is amazingly beautiful the way it falls, Luska. When

⁹ Mary Zirin (1993, 262) makes a similar observation from Nadežda Durova's 19th century memoirs: "...Durova's mother constantly denigrated Nadezhda's feminine worth: '[...]every day my mirror and Mama told me that I was very ugly'".

you grow up you won't have to do anything with it, and that makes life much simpler." (Bonner 1992, 67)

This scene describes a seemingly spontaneous bonding between the two, but for the first person narrator this represents a rare occasion in her life, because she was used to being washed by nannies, rather than her mother; and used to the latter's being not specifically tender towards her.¹⁰

The text does not explain why the mother would insist on the protagonist being ugly, this is merely represented as a part of the memory on childhood and the relationship. According to feminist psychoanalysis of the mother-daughter relationship, the mother's experience of being a woman in a society with patriarchal values and prevailing heterosexuality and her anxiety about her own role as a woman in that society affect her relationship with the daughter in which she sees herself.¹¹ These passages refer to the narrator's relationship to the mother *as a woman*, how the narrating subject - as a woman and a daughter - envied her mother's beauty and was influenced by the latter's anxiety for the daughter: the anxiety about the daughter's (and mother's own) sexuality. However, a split between the mother and the daughter occurs, when the narrator sees herself in a mirror, which, apparently unexpectedly, offers a revelation to her:

Однажды летом 1936 года я, посмотрев на себя в зеркало, *увидела*, что я очень красивая, прямо так, что сама задохнулась от какого-то невероятного, переполнявшего все мое существо чувства радости, счастья, еще чего-то. Я эту минуту помню по ощущениями и сейчас, но больше никогда такого чувства не испытывала. (Bonner 1994/1991, 47, italics MR)

But then in the summer of 1936 I looked in the mirror, and *decided* that I am very pretty, so pretty that it took my breath away with an incredible feeling of joy and happiness and some other feeling I didn't know, filling my entire being. I can recall that moment to this day, and I've never experienced another one like it. (Bonner 1992, 47, italics MR)

Here the narrator tells about seeing herself as beautiful (in the English edition she *decided* that she is very pretty), despite her mother's words to her earlier. This causes a feeling of happiness, of joy, and "some other feeling". Was this feeling caused by the knowledge that she could see herself differently; that, in fact, the mother could not tell her what she was like? The passage above, the daughter's separation from the view of her mother indicate the identity work the daughter has to do in order to become autonomous inside the institution of

¹⁰ This is, of course, not exceptional in Russian context: in the 19th century mothers (in noble families) had other duties than caring for children (Engel 1983, 12), during the Soviet period a dominating model was that of a working mother (Temkina 1997).

¹¹ Cf. Chodorow (1978, 102) who notes that mothers sometimes identify their own sexuality with that of their daughters, not recognizing the daughter as an individual person.

motherhood in patriarchy, “the radical surgery” between the mother and the daughter in herself, as Adrienne Rich has put it (1986/1976, 236). As a result there is a split between the woman-as-daughter and as-mother. The separation of the two also comes up in a later phase in the protagonist’s life.

Later, in the 1940s-50s after the mother’s release from the camp, the protagonist and the mother live together in the same apartment. The life together is not easy: the mother does not approve of the protagonist’s and her friends’ way of life as did not the mother’s mother either of her way of life. The relationship between the mother and the daughter becomes more complicated from the grown-up daughter’s point of view:

Меня раздражало, что мама все еще воспринимает меня четырнадцатилетней - той, которую оставила, и до бешенства доводили ее вопросы “Куда ты идешь?”, “Когда вернешься?”, “Где шляется?” На любое замечание я готова была крикнуть: “А иди ты ко всем чертям!” Сдерживала не близость - жалость. (Bonner 1994/1991, 298)

I was annoyed by the way Mama still treated me like the fourteen-year-old she had left, and her questions drove me crazy: “Where are you going?”, “When will you be back?” “Where have you been gallivanting?”. I wanted to shout: “Go to hell!” every time she said something to me, but I controlled myself. And I think that proximity breeds compassion. (Bonner 1992, 328-329)

The expression “Where have you been gallivanting?” reminds the protagonist of her childhood, when parents controlled her whereabouts. The control practised by the parents, especially the mother on the protagonist, and the latter’s secret attempts to challenge this control form an interesting aspect of the construction of the self (see above).

The significance of the mother-daughter relations in the subsequent life of the protagonist is a further question in Bonner’s text. The figure of the grandmother represented a very different life style and different values than Ljusja’s mother, and she is a very important figure in the life story. The grandmother stands for the motherly care which Ljusja lacked from her own mother. Gosילו (2003, 64) states that the “true mothers” of Bonner’s text are the grandmother and Bonner herself. I would contend that the figure of the grandmother is more complex and controversial than this. There is also a tension between the mother and daughter in Batanja’s and Ruth Bonner’s relationship, which is represented in the text. Ljusja Bonner receives of her grandmother as not one of “us”, that is, the “Party people” (1992,40).¹² It is also noteworthy that the grandmother’s attitude to femininity and sexuality is strict. When Ruth, already arrested and in prison, in a letter asks for a small mirror and tweezers in

¹² “...[П]апы-маминых друзей я всегда ощущала как своих, а этих [Батаниных друзей] как чужих/ I always perceived Papa’s and Mama’s friends as my own kind and Batanya’s as strangers.”

order to attend to her looks, Ljusja “for some reason” becomes angry and decides to pluck her eyebrows for the first time in her life. The grandmother then says something the narrator will “never forget”: “Ты что - готовишься стать постельной принадлежностью кому-нибудь?/ Are you preparing to become somebody’s bedroom property?” (Bonnèr 1994/1991, 295/ Bonner 1992, 324). This would imply that the anxiety connected with sexuality between mothers and daughters goes back to Ruth and Tatjana Bonnèr’s relationship. I would argue that this kind of heredity between generations of mothers and daughters is one of the ideas that Bonnèr’s text brings out. Secrets, silences and differences between the generations are constantly present, and the narrator-protagonist “detects” them, although they are not discussed in the family. In her mother and grandmother she sees two different ways of living, which helps her not to admit to parental control, but gives her tools to perceive a similar pattern between generations.

When in Bonnèr’s case the protagonist grows older life with her mother - who had been released from the prison camp - becomes unbearable. When she gets married and becomes pregnant, her mother advises her not to give birth, because the doctors think it would cause a threat to her health and she does not approve of the father of her grandchild - just as Ljusja’s grandmother had not approved of her sons-in-law. However, the birth of grandchildren changes the situation and the mother’s attitude, as the narrator describes:

Главным в ее жизни стали внуки. Поразительно, сколько тепла и какого-то внутреннего свечения сохранила она для них. И от внуков осталось еще и правнукам! Маленькие дети говорят: “Моя мама самая хорошая”. Перефразируя, мне всегда хотелось сказать: “Моя мама - самая хорошая бабушка”.(Bonnèr 1994/1991, 300)

Only the grandchildren mattered. It was amazing how much warmth and inner radiance she had preserved for them. And the grandchildren gave her great-grandchildren. Little kids say: “My mother is the best.” I always wanted to amend that a bit to: “My mother is the best grandmother”. (Bonner 1992, 330-331)

The narrator, obviously, interprets the change that occurred in her mother as favourable: she seems to point out that her mother finally showed the love and affection towards her grandchildren which Ljusja had missed in her childhood. According to the narrator, the mother now realizes what is important in life:

Могла ли я представить себе, что моя мама, женработник, партработник, антимещанка и максималистка, никогда не дававшая себе воли назвать нас с Егоркой каким-нибудь ласковым именем, будет штопать скатерти, шить мне платья, обшивать и наряжать Таню, станет “сумасшедшей” бабушкой и прабабушкой, для которой ее внуки и правнуки станут главным “светом в окошке”, оправданием всех потерь и утрат, всей жизни. (Bonnèr 1994/1991, 89)

Could I have ever imagined that my mother, a Party worker, antibourgeois and maximalist, who never allowed herself to use a tender word to Egorka or me, would be mending tablecloths, sewing dresses for me, dressing up Tanya, could turn into a “crazy” grandmother and great-grandmother, for whom her grandchildren and great-grandchildren would be the chief “light in the window,” the justification for all the losses of her entire life. (Bonner 1992, 89-90)

The narrator sees her mother’s life from the perspective of her own experience of childhood. This love for the grandchildren, as the narrator indicates, has “returned” the mother, a committed worker and activist in her youth, to her family. It also means a recovery for the narrator, who had lacked her mother’s attention as a child:

Просто она этим трудным, почти непреодолимым шагом до конца отдавала нам себя, свою теплую, живую любовь, которая выше и больше абстрактных идей и принципов. Так она перед самой смертью сказала, что в жизни надо просто по-доброму жить. (Bonnèr 1994/1991, 90)

It was simply that with that difficult, almost impossible step she fully gave herself to us, her warm, living love, which was higher and greater than abstract ideas and principles. She said almost before her death that in life you must simply live in a good and kind way. (Bonner 1992, 90)

In the words “she fully gave herself to us, her warm, living love” the narrator sees her mother’s affection for the grandchildren as a kind of healing process, a return to life, after the trauma of losing the husband and being in the prison camp.

Helena Goscilo (2003, 59) has interpreted Bonnèr’s representation of her mother as “matrophobic” in that Bonnèr distances herself from her “as a failed progenitor” and “as the dread personification of Soviet womanhood, the product of an ideology the adult Bonner finds morally and politically repugnant”. Although evidence can be found about the latter statement in the text (see the quotations above), I would say that the concept of matrophobia in connection with Bonnèr’s representation is exaggerated. On the grounds of the text it can be seen, that even though the narrator describes the change in the mother, it is perhaps more a change in *her* way of interpreting the mother’s life. Rather than distancing, the narrator strives to understand her mother and she does this by seeking aspects of her mother’s life she can identify with. As Tess Cosslett (2000, 145) writes on the matrilineal narratives in women’s autobiographies (produced in a different social and cultural setting than Bonnèr’s text): “In retrospect, the reader can now see the recreation of [the mother’s] story ... as part of that process of recovering/making matrilineal connections, trying to explain/excuse her mother’s behaviour by retrospectively imagining her point of view”. I deem this is a part of Bonnèr’s project of writing, too. The first person

narrator looks back on and constructs the past, childhood experiences, in order to understand (the self in) the present.

That the narrating is in fact a project of understanding the self through the mother emerges in passages where the narrator concretely explains how she herself realised what it means to be a parent:

Как я орала, рассказать невозможно. Так же потом орала моя Таня, если ей надо было взять кровь из пальца, зачинить зуб или сделать что-нибудь подобное. Что при этом чувствовали мама и папа, я поняла, когда подобную операцию делали ей... (Bonnèr 1994/1991, 63)

It's impossible to describe how I screamed through the whole thing. My Tanya screamed the same way if they had to take a blood sample from her finger, fill a tooth or something like that. I realized how my parents must have felt when Tanya had her tonsils removed... (Bonner 1992, 67)

There are many descriptions of the protagonist's being ill in the text. Being ill meant for the young Bonnèr that she got her mother's undivided attention for herself. When her own daughter has the same illness as she herself had as a child, the narrator realizes she is going through the same worries as her parents did when she was ill, and she realizes how her parents "must have felt". Relations between children and parents form a continuing, recurring pattern. In the case of the matrilineal relations between Bonnèr, her mother and grandmother, there is the feeling of guilt:

У мамы было чувство вины перед бабушкой за свою судьбу, которая рикошетом прошла по бабушке. У меня - перед мамой за мою судьбу и мое счастье. Дочки - матери! Дочки - матери! (Bonnèr 1994/1991, 302)

Mother felt guilty in front of Grandmother because her fate ricocheted into her mother's life. I feel guilty toward my mother for my life and my happiness. Mothers and daughters! Mothers and daughters! (Bonner 1992, 333)

The text actually ends with these words, and the reader may wonder if the exclamation is meant as a sign of understanding the special meaning and importance of this relationship in a woman's life, or for a feeling of inability to break the chain of hereditary guilt between mothers and daughters. The actual text and its writing imply the former.

In the last pages of the text, the readers can also hear the narrator's mother's voice, when a passage from her notebook is included there. The narrator offers the passage quoted as her mother's "own words" written shortly before her death. It is interesting to ponder, why the narrator chose that passage, what else the mother had written in her book, and what it meant for her. As such, the reader, however, is left without explanations and with the daughter's story about her mother's life as she sought to understand it and herself in it.

6 Èmma Gerštejn's Literary Memoirs

The memoirs of the literary scholar and historian, Èmma Gerštejn (1903-2002), have become a prominent work on Russian modernist literary history. Her *Memuary* (1998) focuses on the lives and works of repressed writers of the Soviet period, Osip Mandel'stam, Anna Ahmatova and Lev Gumilev. I have chosen to concentrate on these memoirs because of their significance in Russian culture and (women's) literary history. These memoirs are significant not only from the perspective of the history of modernism in Russia, but also from the perspective of the author's age (95 when the memoirs were published in 1998) and experience, and the representation of gender and sexuality in Russian culture. They add an important chapter to the autobiographical writing by Russian women along with the texts by the women of the 1920s' generation, and they continue the tradition of literary memoirs by Russian women.

Holmgren (1993) describes how dissident Soviet Russian women of the post-Stalin period engaged themselves in writing down and preserving the male artists' life and work. This project combined writing, domestic sphere and dissident activity - a historic conflation in Russian literature - with the feminine traits of "moral fervor", "self-sacrifice", "a capacity for care-giving". Men writers such as Osip Mandel'stam, Mihail Bulgakov and Boris Pasternak, in their fictional works had already described the female helpmates of the male heroes, "blessed wives". In these images, according to Holmgren, the real life wives "confront a culturally imposed gender gap between preserving and creating". In other words, when writing down their own stories, they were faced with the existing literary feminine images created by the male artists, and they supposedly settled with the position of this described "help mate", "blessed wife" who preserved his creator's art. (Holmgren 1993, 10-12, 22-23.)

However, according to Holmgren, especially two women autobiographers, Lidija Čukovskaja and Nadežda Mandel'stam, were empowered by the figure of one unofficial female artist, Anna Ahmatova, who in Stalin's time through her unofficial poems "demonstrated the possibility of a woman writing about these times from her own perspective" (ibid. 23-24). Whereas for unofficial male writers the domestic sphere represents a refuge, a space where artistic creation is possible with the help of female care-givers, thus idealizing the domestic, Ahmatova "uses it as a resonating place of torment - a private space where women agonize over their victimized loved ones and cope with the dual reality of Stalinist life" (ibid. 24).

Gerštejn's memoirs are connected with these early works by their theme: the documentation and remembrance of the lives of the modernist poets. In a similar vein, *Мемуары* (Memoirs) commemorates repressed Russian poets, their lives and their works, and participates in the building of a modernist canon in post-socialist Russian literature (Smith 2001, 75). However, parts of it were

written considerably later than those of Čukovskaja's and N. Mandel'stam's texts, and her work is in some sense a response to that of N. Mandel'stam.

Irina Žerebkina in her monograph shows that the prominent Soviet women literary scholars Lidija Ginzburg, Ol'ga Frejdenberg and Gerštejn had to combat against the influence of prominent masters and teachers in order to achieve a place of their own in the professional life. The difficulty of identification as a woman intellectual was, according to Žerebkina, signified by these scholars in their texts. (Žerebkina 2001, 227.)

Writing "in the shadow of others" is a constitutive structure for Gerštejn's text, but it is also a narrative tactic, through which the writing subject encloses the construction of her own self.

In my discussion on Gerštejn's text I concentrate in more detail on certain parts of it, namely those which, in my view, deal more or less directly with the author's own life situation and her relationship to the main characters of her text, especially the chapters "Near the Poet", "Superfluous Love", "A Flow of Insults" and "Nadežda Jakovlevna".¹

6.1 A Subtle Tactic of Narrating

Following Bourdieu on biographical discourse, Alexandra Smith (2001, 77-8) notes that the narrative in Gerštejn's text is based on poetic and theological discourses where the artist is represented as a creator with exceptional imaginative qualities: "...Gershtein persistently underlines the prophetic qualities of the poet's imagination, thereby creating for herself a privileged position of witness and initiated reader" (ibid. 78). This is in line with what Holmgren has formulated regarding the Soviet Russian women autobiographers as "cultural conservators", who through the privilege of their experience as wives, daughters, helpmates of poets could turn their life stories into a testimony to the precious artistic and cultural values of the dissident community of the time. Undoubtedly this is an important constituent of the structure of the text. But to say this about Gerštejn's text is not to establish the distinctive character of her narration. The text contains features which imply that it combines the main characters' story with the story of the first person narrator through a subtle tactic of narrating.

As stated above, published and partly also written later than the works Holmgren has investigated, Gerštejn's memoirs continue in a certain sense the line of women's writing represented by N. Mandel'stam's and L. Čukovskaja's memoirs. Gerštejn's, however, have less of the heroic status of a dissident reputation granted to the previous texts, due to the fact that these were already written and published as *samizdat* and *tamizdat* publications in the post-Stalin

¹ Therefore my narrative analysis here will not deal with the whole text, since the book contains, for example, letters and diary entries (written by others) with commentaries presented as documentary material about the fates and lives of repressed people.

period, and represented and, in part, also created an unofficial counter-culture in that time. In this sense the atmosphere in which Gerštejn's memoirs were received at the end of the 1990s is less characterised by the division into "official - unofficial"² - and the memoirs also encourage an "apolitical" interpretation of themselves.

In the work's reception the emphasis has been rather on their literary and biographical worth³, on the fact that they continue the tradition of preserving the cultural heritage of repressed Russian poets. This is seen in the status the text was immediately given in 1998, when it received the small Booker prize.⁴ The status is described in detail in the following extract from the text dedicated to Gerštejn's memory:

Она обладала на редкость цепкой и умной памятью на встречи и высказывания этих поэтов. И донесла эту память до тех дней, когда ее драгоценные воспоминания были востребованы временем. С беспощадной правдивостью и безукоризненной честностью воссоздала Эмма Герштейн образы великих в самые трагические моменты их жизни. И поэтому ее *Мемуары* ... бесценны. (Glocer 2002)⁵

The position which accorded to Gerštejn and her memoirs in this obituary is very much connected with the reputation of the poets, mainly Ahmatova and O. Mandel'stam, who are the objects of her recollections, and it stresses the symbolic status of the memoirist as "a vessel" who carries the memory of these poets in her mind, uncontaminated, immaculate, waiting to get out when the time is right and when it is possible. Thus, the author is given the symbolic function of a "conservator" of the life of the great poets, whom she knew in life, and of a "gatekeeper" of high cultural values, of which she was part because of her contact with the poets. Indeed, Gerštejn has herself stressed the special quality in a memoirist, by stating, that a memoirist should have a "special kind of memory".⁶ As will be proposed below, this position of a

² Svetlana Boym (2001, 65) notes that in the mid 1990s "[c]ultural life in Russia ceased to be centralized or divided between official and unofficial culture; it was in constant upheaval, accelerated, transformed and occasionally inflated, like the society itself."

³ See Smith (2001); Zolotonosov (1998).

⁴ Gerštejn shared the prize with Mihail Bezrodnyj.

⁵ "She possessed an exceptionally sharp and clear memory of the meetings and utterances of these poets. And she carried this memory until the day when her precious reminiscences met the demand of the time. With unrelenting truthfulness and immaculate particularity Emma Gerštejn recollected the images of the great poets in the most tragic moments of their lives. That is why her 'Memoirs' ... are priceless."

⁶ "У мемуариста должна быть специальная память. Настоящий автор воспоминаний может десятилетиями где-то в глубине сознания хранить интонацию или жесты того или другого персонажа, возрождающие содержание важных эпизодов индивидуальной или общественной жизни./ A memoirist should have a special memory. A true author of reminiscences can preserve for decades somewhere at the bottom of his/her mind the

conservator and gatekeeper is creatively used in Gerštejn's narration, and however subtly, it momentarily transcends this model of writing. Here I want to shed more light on the aspect of the narrator's own involvement, or, to use Žerebkina's term, *удовольствие*, pleasure, in writing, thus following the spirit of Holmgren's example in exploring the narrative from the point of view of the female self in the texts of N. Mandel'stam and L. Čukovskaja. According to Žerebkina, Gerštejn's practices in creating memoirs imply that she shares an understanding of language as a medium for the subjectification and reflection of "reality": Gerštejn's memoirs aim at encompassing the truth of the living in connection with the dead (2001, 232-231).

The very first chapter, "Вблизи поэта/ Near the Poet"⁷, begins with a description of the narrator's first meeting with the Mandel'stams in the late 1920s in a sanatorium. The chapter as a whole sheds light on some episodes in the life of the Mandel'stams from the end of the 1920s until the death of O. Mandel'stam in 1938 as the narrator-memoirist had observed them. It ends with her last meeting with the poet, and with the eventual message about his death. If seen from the perspective of "poetic and theological discourses" the chapter represents the evidence of how Gerštejn became acquainted with the Mandel'stams, how the meeting of O. Mandel'stam was an initiation to a different, special life, and how a special connection was formed between the three of them:

...И Осип Эмильевич сказал в придаточном предложении - "мы все трое такие беспокойные люди", а я приняла эту фразу как признания с недавней меня внутренней тревоги... Надежда Яковлевна нашла во мне сходство со своей старшей сестрой. (Gerštejn 1998, 8)

...Osip Ėmil'jevič said in a subordinate clause - "the three of us are restless people". I took this phrase as a sign of recognition of the gnawing anxiety inside of me... Nadežda Jakovlena found a resemblance between me and her older sister. (Gerštejn 1998, 8)

A specific connection between the narrator and the Mandel'stams is thus outlined in this passage. The narrator then describes how she becomes a member of the domestic circle of the Mandel'stams. The text satisfies the readers' expectations and provides meticulous descriptions of what O. Mandel'stam looked like, how he spoke, how he read his poems, how his voice resounded etc. The narrative displays what was said in the obituary above: "She possessed an exceptionally sharp and clear memory of the meetings and utterances of these

intonation or gestures of persons, which can restore important episodes of individual or social life" (Gerštejn 1999, 19).

⁷ This chapter was previously published in Э.Г. Герштейн 1986. *Новое о Мандельштаме. Главы из воспоминаний. О.Э. Мандельштам в воронежской ссылке (по письмам С.Б. Рудакова)*. Paris: Atheneum.

poets.” This is what is expected of the memoirs and the memoirist-narrator has fulfilled the task. Gerštejn elsewhere agrees with this task of the memoirist: by accomplishing this she becomes a “genuine” author, who is capable of preserving precious information at the bottom of her mind (Gerštejn 1999, 19).

According to Žerebkina (2001, 240), the premise of Gerštejn’s writing is the function of representing “reality” as an eyewitness. The everyday life in the household of the Mandel’shtams is represented through short episodes and anecdotes, describing everyday details, meetings with people, and relations between them. For instance, Gerštejn describes how the couple, without a place of their own at the time, stayed a while in the narrator’s father’s house, in her room, and how O. Mandel’shtam turned it into a “dishevelled hell”: “Белая зановесочка на окне? - И вот она сорвана с одного гвоздя и прицеплена уже косо. Чистое покрывало на кровати? - Ногами его, нечищенными ботинками./ A white curtain on the window? - And off it goes, torn off from the one side, and hung lop-sided. A clean blanket on the bed? - He put his feet on it, with dirty boots on” (Gerštejn 1998, 26).

The narrative includes many anecdotes and episodes of this kind which describe her life near the Mandel’shtams. Everything recounted in the text seems to be related to them. The narrator recalls how her mother used to read Blok; his poem “Возмездие” was especially important to her, because it reminded her of her elder daughter’s fate. She raises this because O. Mandel’shtam also made his remarks on the pages of the publication, and the narrator laments the disappearance of the book. Such references to close relatives are scarce and they are usually connected with incidents which include the Mandel’shtams, whom the narrator apparently counted as her closest friends at the time.

These episodes attempt to recover lively details of that time and people from the viewpoint of an eyewitness and to combine them into a story of the “invisible” side of life: the Mandel’shtams’, her own, and of that time in general.⁸ According to Holmgren, L. Čukovskaja’s and N. Mandel’shtam’s works also depict the “invisible” life of the poets, and she characterizes the latter’s book as “a personal articulation of an unspeakable past”, and refers to reviewers’ positing of its worth as “literary and biographical criticism” (1993, 136-137).

Much the same things can be said about Gerštejn’s work. Despite Gerštejn’s own assertions expressed in the text that the two prominent memoirs by Ahmatova and N. Mandel’shtam were politically tendentious, there seems to be little change in the overall account of the poets’ life, compared to N. Mandel’shtam’s memoirs. Gerštejn, true, reveals perhaps more of the darker side of O. Mandel’shtam’s and others’ life, and diminishes his status as a “dissident

⁸ Žerebkina calls this - following Foucault - the evidence of the archives which refers to the unconscious, affective sensitivity (2001, 240-241).

hero”⁹, however, she too establishes the poet as an apocalyptic figure, a seer, and a spiritual guide.

The narrator goes through different accounts by Ahmatova and N. Mandel'stam in their memoirs, which circulated in different versions. She gives her own version of the circumstances, claiming, for instance, that N. Mandel'stam is incorrect in her account of who took which manuscripts with them from their apartment. She then continues to describe, how, in her opinion, the Mandel'stams wanted to “sacrifice” her for the sake of others, as one of the people to whom he had presented his anti-Stalin poem, and to involve her in their play at “the political struggle”, to draw attention to his case. In these passages Gerštejn is also involved with her own image and own version of the events, the depiction of which in N. Mandel'stam's memoirs caused her to protest against such an approach.

If considered from the viewpoint of the construction of the “self” in text, these episodes, then, serve to establish the narrator's “privileged position as witness and initiated reader”, a “genuine” author and memoirist. This position also makes way for the construction of subjective memory. In this case, the memoirist has a specifically powerful position to present and promote her version because she has outlived the others. Thus, if attention is paid to the point of view of the construction of the self by the narrator, these encounters and episodes are also connected with more personal points of her own biography, although this story is dispersed throughout the story of the main characters' lives. This subtle tactic of narrating through subjective memory, however, creates space and engages the narrating subject in construction of her experiences and past self.

Thus, in the chapter “Вблизи поэта/ Near the Poet” we find that the memoirist-narrator had experienced a serious mental trauma in her youth, and she was deeply depressed (Gerštejn 1998, 7). She was twenty five and sent by her father to the sanatorium where she met the Mandel'stams. As the passage quoted a little earlier shows, she soon feels that the Mandel'stams understand the gnawing anxiety inside of her. Nadežda especially seems to help her to “open” herself in the healing process, to deal with the anxiety, as the narrator remarks.

⁹ Cf. Žerebkina (2001, 240): “В результате основным методом письма Эммы Герштейн становится текстологическая фиксация вненормативных характеристик субъективности, проявившаяся в наиболее скандальных свидетельствах ее *Мемуаров* - например, в приводимых ею разоблачительных материалах следственного дела Осипа Мандельштама или показателях сексуальности людей, которых русская культура лишила всяких проявлений сексуальности - Осипа и Надежды Мандельштамов, Анны Ахматовой и др./ As a result, the basic method of Emma Gerštejn's writing is the textological fixation of abnormative characteristics of subjectivity, which occurs in the most scandalous accounts of her *Memoirs* - for instance, in the revealing materials concerning the investigation connected with Osip Mandel'stam, or in the indicators concerning the sexuality of persons which the Russian culture has deprived of any expressions of sexuality - Osip and Nadežda Mandel'stams, Anna Ahmatova and others”.

And, as we were told, the narrator reminds Nadežda of her sister, who is “a mentally disabled woman”, which was a less pleasant analogy for the narrator. However, for Nadežda this was rather a compliment, because she liked people who deviated from the norm. The narrator concludes:

И, тем не менее, ее сочувственное внимание имело на меня благотворное влияние. Она обладала абсолютной несмущаемостью, и, беседуя с ней, я постепенно избавлялась от присущей мне скованности. (Gerštejn 1998, 9)

And despite everything her compassionate attention had a favourable influence on me. She was absolutely uninhibited, and, talking with her, I gradually got rid of my typical reticence. (Gerštejn 1998, 9)

The narrator recalls how she sought for solace and talked openly with the Mandel'stams. They visit her home and meet her family, said to have comprised six people with different professions and interests, who were somewhat strange, each in their own ways, and who had been artificially gathered (forced by the circumstances) under the same roof, her father's house. As the narrator notes, their house was

сосредоточием страстей, слез и упрямства, а также скрытых шрамов от взаимно наносимых душевных ран. Особенно это проявлялось в напряженности, с которой мы все сходились за обеденным столом. (Gerštejn 1998, 15)

the focus of passions, tears and stubbornness, as well as of hidden scars from mutually inflicted mental wounds. This occurred especially in the tension of our conversation at the dinner table. (Gerštejn 1998, 15)

The narrator recalls how she felt alien in the house, because she was different, she did not fit in: she was unemployed and unmarried. She felt alien in the society, as can be gathered in subsequent chapters, and these circumstances in her youth led her to depression.

Through the acquaintance with the Mandel'stams and new experiences the narrator, however, gradually gains strength: “И по мере того, как жизнь закаляла меня, я все более и более из ‘прислоняющегося’ превращалась в ‘поддерживающего’./ And gradually as life tempered me, I changed from ‘the one who is supported’ into ‘the one who supports’.” (ibid.) This tempering through life experiences has been suggested to be an essential constituent of a female *Bildungsroman*. Although Gerštejn's text does not present a coherent story of the narrator's life (as the other texts in this study tend to do), this can be found fragmentarily in the passages relating to her development as a person.

The chapter “Лишняя любовь/ Superfluous love”¹⁰, as the title tells, is about the narrator’s relationship which turned out to be superfluous, that is, her relationship with Ahmatova’s son, Lev Gumiljev. The motivation for writing given by the narrator in the text is her observation that the younger generations know little about the 1930s: “...[О]ни не могут представить себе повседневную жизнь людей 30-х годов./... [They] can’t imagine the everyday life of the people in the 1930s” (1998, 201). This chapter continues to record the narrator’s personal perspective on the narrative, and the events described. At the time of the first publication of the text, this was not positively received. One critic writes:

В тридцатые годы Эмму Герштейн коллеги называли “поэтом архивов”. В этой книге о поэтах настолько нет поэзии, что это уже почти порыв, почти обида - литературоведа на метрическую расчетливость стиха.// Только память и правда о тридцатых годах. Будто не известно, что память наивна, а правда - *душечка*? (Skul’skaja 1994, 286)¹¹

The critic refers to the elusiveness of such concepts as memory and truth: people are prone to remember what they like and the truth is a subjective opinion about events.¹² However, if we concentrate on what the aim of the narrator is - to shed light on the everyday life of the 1930s - and what the text itself represents, its subjectivity can be seen in another, more positive light.

Besides the impressions on the everyday lives of the famous poets, the narrative reveals the narrator’s search of her own place in society, of her becoming a literary scholar, a person in her own right. In one passage she reminisces in a sad tone, how her relatives had travelled to Yalta for a vacation, but she “...не ездила никуда, ведь я всегда была безработной./ ...had never travelled anywhere, because I was always unemployed.” (Gerštejn 1998, 257). Her first trip to the South takes place when she goes there to gather material for her research on Lermontov. She is granted the trip in late autumn, in November “...чтобы, не дай Бог, я не провела на казенный счет лето или бархатный сезон в Крыму./...so that, God forbid, I wouldn’t spend the summer or the autumn season in the Crimea at the state’s expense” (ibid. 255).

¹⁰ First published in 1993. Герштейн, Эмма 1993. Лишняя любовь. Сцены из московской жизни. *Новый мир* 11-12.

¹¹ “In the thirties Emma Gerštejn’s colleagues called her ‘the poet of the archives’. In this book about the poets there is no poetry at all, which makes it almost an outburst, almost an insult by a literary scholar on the metrical calculation of a poem.// Only the memory and truth about the thirties. As if it were not known that the memory is naïve, and the truth *душечка*?”

¹² The term ‘душечка/ dušečka’ refers apparently to Čehov’s short story of the same title (“The Darling”). In the story the female heroine Olen’ka changes her behaviour and opinions whenever she changes her companion. (Чехов, А.П. 1988. *Избранные сочинения*. Душечка. М.: Художественная литература. 361-371.

The story of her love for Ahmatova's son gives a rather different picture of the relationship than, as the author herself states, is often assumed.¹³ It was thought of as Gerštejn's unrequited love for L. Gumilev.¹⁴ Why this relationship becomes a topic of memoirs in the first place, is, of course, connected with the fact that Gumilev is Ahmatova's son, and thus serves as an important figure in the latter's biography. However, in "Лишняя любовь/ Superfluous Love" the narrator, besides the observations on the relationship between the famous mother and her son, voices her personal concerns. She recalls her youth and her dreams:

Когда-то в юности, я мечтала, что встречу мужчину, который будет опорой, духовным руководителем, другом и защитником. Эта мечта давно была забыта. Не было вокруг меня мужчин, живущих большой и ровной творческой жизни. Все, с кем можно было найти общий язык, были неврастениками, усталыми и неудовлетворенными людьми или застывшими, подменяющими условными рефлексам движение живой души. А главное - все они были заняты только собой. (Gerštejn 1998, 252)

In my youth I dreamed that I would meet a man, who would be my support, spiritual guide, friend and defender. This dream was long forgotten. There were no men around me who would live a grand and steady creative life. All with whom I found a common language were neurotic, tired and dissatisfied people or stiff men who had replaced the vivid emotions with conditional reflexes. And, most of all they were all just interested in themselves. (Gerštejn 1998, 252)

In this situation, as a single, 35-year-old woman, she finds a friend in Lev:

Он мне был дорог как друг, которого я любила, редко видя. Я любила его мысль, высказываемую всегда с изящным и своеобразным лаконизмом, унаследованным от матери, его мужественную, как у отца, поэтическую взволнованность, благородство, с каким он нес свое тяжкое бремя, сравнимое с исторической судьбой преследуемых малолетних претендентов на престол. Я жалела его и про себя называла почему-то по-французски *victime* (жертва). (Gerštejn 1998, 252)

He was dear to me as a friend, whom I loved, but seldom saw. I loved his reflection, which he always expressed with distinguished and original laconicism, inherited from his mother, his masculine, poetic disquiet, like his father's, the noble way of carrying his heavy burden, which compared to the historical fate of

¹³ Cf. Gerštejn's interview with Irina Vruble'-Golubkina: "А вот такие дураки, которые написали: 'Бедная Эмма, которая всю жизнь страдала от неразделенной любви', - какая это все пошлость, а считается у них замечательным рецензентом./ There are these blockheads, who write: 'Poor Emma, who suffered her whole life from unrequited love', - what insipidity, but they think he's an excellent reviewer." (Vruble'-Golubkina 1999, 21)

¹⁴ This view is expressed in Zolotonosov's article (1998).

persecuted minor pretenders. I felt pity for him and for some reason secretly called him in French *victime*. (Gerštejn 1998, 252)

This passage describes the narrator's love for the descendant of the great poets, who has inherited the best qualities of his parents, but who is, nevertheless, a victim, who involves protection. Indeed, in the course of the narration Lev's figure is pictured as somewhat vulnerable.¹⁵ Thus, the narrator reverses the relationship of which she initially dreamed: she supports and defends this *victime*, who needs her, not vice versa.

In the chapter "Перечень обид/ A Flow of Insults", in accordance with the title, the narrator goes through different insults she has experienced during her life. Many of them are connected with her social status. Her alleged bourgeois origin caused her problems in being accepted in Soviet society. She loses her job, apparently because her father works at the Kreml' clinic, and their family lives comfortably, but the true reason, according to the narrator, is that she was not a member of the *Komsomol*. In her twenties she goes through a nervous breakdown, attempts suicide and is sent to a sanatorium where she then meets the Mandel'stams. The narrator's education, her three-year study of language and literature at university, turned out to be practically a waste of time: the rector of the university admits that the university did not equip the students for any profession. The best the graduates could apply for was a job as a bookkeeper (ibid. 393). The text describes insults on a more intimate level, that of her relations with the Mandel'stams. The tone of the chapter is confessional, and it continues the personal perspective employed in the previous chapters.

However, it is the chapter "Nadežda Jakovlevna", also published in the journal *Znamja* in 1998 which attracted the public's attention with its description of the Mandel'stam's daily life (Zolotonosov 1998). However, it is an intriguing text in many other ways: it comments upon questions of writing literary history, the anti-Soviet culture's strategies of constituting images of itself, and the connections between life and art in O. Mandel'stam's poetry of the 1930s based on the author's own impressions. The narrative tactic in this chapter gives further indications that Gerštejn's writing fluctuates between personal and common, subjective and objective.

6.2 Subjectivity

At the beginning of the text "Nadežda Jakovlevna" the memoirist-narrator uses quite a cautious writing strategy and starts with several references

¹⁵ The narrator mentions how Lev took exams at university, although he was faint with hunger (Gerštejn 1998, 210); how the waiter gives him a drink before his turn, because there is something in the combination of his joyful, bright look and shabby clothes (ibid. 202); or how he covers his excessively thin neck with a scarf, in order not let his mother break with sorrow. This feeling of pity is also connected with Anna Ahmatova.

to the reception of O. Mandel'shtam's poetry. She quotes Hardžiev quoting Ahmatova quoting O. Mandel'shtam's verses, and continues to refer to K. Čukovskij, A. Blok and V. Šklovskij, who are all equally intrigued by the philosophy of the poet's writing. She then continues more controversially with comments on "actual mistakes" in Anna Ahmatova's memoirs on the poet's life written after his rehabilitation. The narrator argues that when N. Mandel'shtam wrote her memoirs in the 1950s-60s to commemorate her husband's fate as a victim of Stalin's regime, Anna Ahmatova wrote her own memoirs following exactly what the former had written, in order to make it look like a coherent, "true" picture of his life: "Листки ни в одном слове не расходились с Надиными версиями. При этом они были изначально задуманы как тенденциозная вещь./ Her 'Listki' didn't differ from Nadja's version by a single word. Besides, they were meant to be tendentious." (Gerštejn 1998, 415-6)

The narrator continues to argue for this statement by depicting a scene where Ahmatova disapproves of her notes on Mandel'shtam because they included a reference to a quarrel in which Osip was involved: "Нет, нет! Об этом нельзя писать! (...) Потому что... (...) потому что Осип был неправ!/No, no! You can't write about that! (...) Because... (...) because Osip was wrong!" (ibid. 416) - she recalls Ahmatova's words. The narrator notes, that the poet's literary portrait was constituted on a suppression of a whole strata of his colourful and stormy life (ibid.). It is here that the narrator's position as eyewitness and participant in the process of commemoration of Osip Mandel'shtam's life motivates the writing, because, as the narrator states, she was near the Mandel'shtams during the last decade before the poet's death and "[н]астало время, когда все эти темные места можно и нужно высветить/ the time has come when those dark areas can and need to be illuminated" (ibid.).

In the text "Nadežda Jakovlevna" the presence of "the speech of the other" abounds, playing a specific role in Gerštejn's memoir narrative as a whole, as Smith writes:

The structure of Gershtein's narrative is such that it enables her not only to act as her friend's biographer but also, while taking into account both Mandel'shtam's pronouncements, and his wife's explanations of them, to verify the truthfulness of the representation of such and such an event. (Smith 2001, 84)

This means frequent references to and actualizations of the main characters' voices in the narrative, which serve either to verify Gerštejn's own observations, as Smith mentions referring to Bahtin (ibid. 83), or, to give a polemic tone to her statements. Bahtin formulates the notion of an internal or cloaked polemics in literary discourse by noting that every literary word senses its readers and critics and reflects their anticipated resistance, values and views. Internal polemics plays an important role, especially in autobiographies. (Bahtin 1991, 283.) Besides the verification of certain events and their truthfulness and

the argumentation for the advantage of her own point of view, the speech of the other structures Gerštejn's narrative on the level of the representation of the narrator's self. This can be called veiled subjectivity, because it takes the form of a verifiable, truthful account of past events, but can also be seen as the narrator's own subjective viewpoint of the past.

6.2.1 *Veiled*

One of the intriguing passages in this chapter is with Gerštejn and O. Mandel'stam in the latter's home, where the following scene takes place. Nadežda's brother, Evgenij Jakovlevič, Gerštejn's lover at the time, is on holiday with his wife, Elena Mihailovna. When Gerštejn is visiting the Mandel'stams, another visitor drops in. While he is there, Osip Ėmil'evič finds out that Evgenij Jakovlevič will stay longer on the holiday than was planned. He, as the narrator let's understand, knows this interests and worries Gerštejn, but, since the brother is on holiday with his wife, it would not be appropriate to discuss the relationship in the presence of an outsider. However, as the narrator suggests, this is exactly why O. Mandel'stam starts to talk about it in the presence of her and the third person:

Начинаются нервные телефонные переговоры с тещей Евгения Яковлевича. Беготня в коридор к аппарату, доверительные пересказы Яхонтову, кто что говорит. Вот уже отец Елены Михайловны вызывает к телефону Осипа Эмильевича: он нашел дату последнего письма из Кисловодска. (...) Но Осип Эмильевич начинает обсуждать с Яхонтовым возможный обратный маршрут путешественников. Он говорит с обычным своим тревожным красноречием, но по его лицу пробегает скрытая улыбка, которую я скорее угадываю, чем вижу: он испытывает удовольствие, украдкой поглядывая на меня. И мне кажется, что Яхонтов это тоже понимает. Ведь спектакль разыгрывается специально для меня, для того, чтобы понаблюдать за мной, нанося мне раны. Я молчу. Это злит его. Мандельштам ни к чему не умел быть равнодушным. (Gerštejn 1998, 425)

Nervous telephone calls start with Evgenij Jakovlevič's mother-in-law. Running back and forth to the telephone, confidential discussions with Jahontov on who says what. Now, Elena Mihailovna's father wants to talk with Osip Ėmil'jevič: he has found the date of the last letter from Kislovodsk. (...) He starts to discuss with Jahontov the best route back home. He is speaking with his usual troubled talkativeness, but over his face runs a secret smile, which I rather guess than see: he experiences pleasure in giving me stealthy glances. And I think Jahontov also realises that. You see, this performance is especially played for me in order to watch me, to hurt me. I keep quiet. It irritates him. He could not be *blasé* towards anything. (Gerštejn 1998, 425)

By the end of this passage, it seems that the narrator is in an imagined dialogue with Mandel'stam's supposed responses: he is "giving stealthy

glances” with a “secret smile” on his face “experiencing pleasure” over the play with the narrator’s love affair with a married man. This is reinforced by the present tense, which intensifies the presence of the experience, showing “presence of memory”.¹⁶ In addition, here and elsewhere, the text creates an impression that the narrator relives the scene in writing which results in the surfacing of emotions. This impression, to be more precise, is an effect of the narrative voice, which as a rule has an outward, narrator-focalizer, but now shifts to inner focalization. In the field of psychological focalization, the emotional level of focalization can be objective (neutral, outward) or subjective (coloured, engaged) (Rimmon-Kenan 1991/1983, 103). In the passage above, the narrator identifies with her past self to the extent that relives the emotions she goes through in the scene. Interestingly, this is what the narrator noticed herself about N. Mandel’stam’s writing when the latter was working on her own memoirs:

Начав писать свою первую книгу, Надя очутилась как бы в состоянии шока. Она погрузилась в свою ушедшую жизнь с Осипом Эмильевичем, постепенно по ступеням переживая все ее повороты. Это было беспощадное вживание в казалось бы забытую жизнь, а в действительности лишь временно отодвинуто вглубь. (Gerštejn 1998, 415).

Having started to write the first book, Nadja was as if in a state of shock. She became absorbed with her past life with Osip Ėmil’jevič, gradually, step by step reliving it with its turning-points. It was a ruthless insight into an apparently forgotten life, but in fact it was only temporarily transferred into the depths of her mind. (Gerštejn 1998, 415).

The episodes with subjective narrative voice emerge in the course of the narrative occasionally, but they give further indication that in writing the memoirs, and grounding her authority in writing them on the fact that she was near them, necessarily also involves the narrator in writing about her own development, emotions and experiences.

Gerštejn’s memoirs also follow N. Mandel’stam’s example in the manner of writing a poet’s biography.¹⁷ Insofar as Gerštejn’s narrating moves in the realm of intimate life and subjective perspective of the author, the narrating subject becomes absorbed with her past life and constructs it in the text. The quote above and other passages of the chapter which touch upon more intimate situations in their friendship are certainly meant as illustrations of the main characters’ lives and not so much the narrator’s own life. The “I” of the past

¹⁶ This is a term used by Vilkkö (1997, 167).

¹⁷ Cf. Holmgren (1993, 166): “In both content and form Nadezhda Mandelstam’s text transgresses many of the implicit conventions of Russian and Soviet memoir writing - the whitewashed portraits, the decorous language, the proscription on the very intimate and unpleasant, the author’s circumspection and self-effacement.”

exists and is present insofar as it establishes her position as a witness, a “mediator” of events in the poets’ lives. The constant references to the words of others, and stressing the correctness of her insights, in contrast to those of the others, however, creates an impression of paying dues or polemicizing other memoirists.¹⁸ In Gerštejn’s case this other is notably N. Mandel’štam. Gerštejn’s narrative engages in polemics with N. Mandel’štam’s prominent memoirs, in which she herself was not represented in a benevolent manner (see Proffer 1992; Holmgren 1993, 167). Thus, some aspects of paying personal dues are discernible.¹⁹ The narrator’s aim is to present her own account as objective, a literary historical fact as understood by herself.²⁰ Although the memoirist Gerštejn employs different strategies of objectifying her narrating (referring to other sources, to well-known scholars) and appealing to her unique position as an eyewitness, who posits “authentic” information on what she accounts, the personal, subjective style that structures her text brings in her personal involvement and agenda.

6.2.2 Two-fold

However, this veiled subjectivity of the narrative voice has another function in the text. Although the narrative, in which the author-narrator is prominently present, at times turns into quite subjective accounts, as seen above, this subjectivity is part and parcel of Gerštejn’s understanding of a historical fact, as her interpretations of O. Mandel’štam’s life and poetry indicate. In the latter part of the chapter “Nadežda Jakovlevna” Gerštejn contemplates what insight O. Mandel’štam’s poems provide about his life and emphasises the importance of this aspect on his life and poetry: “Но если мы будем судить о поэте по книгам его вдовы, вместо того чтобы судить о его жизни по его книгам и высказываниям, мы никогда не доберемся до истины./ If we are to

¹⁸ This is also a typical constituent of memoir writing in Russia in general Cf. V.A. Černyh (1994, 68) on Puškin’s and Ahmatova’s autobiographical prose: “Характерной особенностью многих автобиографических заметок Пушкина и Ахматовой является их полемичность. Одной из важных побудительных причин к написанию мемуаров... являлось необходимость ответа на неприемлемые...высказывания в печати, задевавшие их честь и честь близких им людей./ A characteristic feature of many autobiographical notes by Puškin and Ahmatova is their polemic nature. One of the important initiating reasons for writing memoirs... was the necessity to respond to unacceptable... statements in print, which concerned their honour and the honour of the people close to them.”

¹⁹ Gerštejn criticises this feature in N. Mandel’štam’s memoirs (see Holmgren 1993). In regard to herself she notes that she did not write in a malicious manner about Nadežda, but vice versa (Vrubel’-Golubkina 1999, 14)

²⁰ In an interview Gerštejn says that N. Mandel’štam started to fear her as “a bearer of truth” (Vrubel’-Golubkina 1999, 3).

judge the poet on the basis of his widow's books, instead of judging his life on the base of his own books and statements, then we will never achieve true knowledge" (Gerštejn 1998, 444).

The memoirist suggests that O. Mandel'stam's poems are the truest source of knowledge and truth about his life, and he himself is accorded the biblical aura of a prophet, in the vein of Russian literary tradition. The chapter ends with a quote from his early poem where, according to Gerštejn, he prophesizes his own fate - which is the fate of the Russian poet, along the same lines as Ahmatova, Cvetaeva, Majakovskij and other Russian poets:

Способность видеть вдаль, другими словами, прорицательная сила гения, проявилась у Мандельштама в ранней молодости. Ему было 20 лет, когда он постиг свою судьбу до самого конца. Имею в виду стихотворение об испуганном орле, лучшем из трех ..., развивающих единую тему драматического раздвоения высокого, почти космического духа и хилой плоти. (Gerštejn 1998, 445)

The ability to see into remoteness, in other words, the power of a genius to prophesy, appeared in Mandel'stam in his early youth. He was 20 when he grasped his final destiny. I point to his poem about a startled eagle, which is the best of the three ..., developing the continuing theme about the dramatic splitting of a high, almost cosmic mind and a frail body. (Gerštejn 1998, 445)

Gerštejn's auto/biographical representation is a mixture of everyday life observations and impressions made by her in the marginalized literary elite circle and of the myth of a poet, a genius with the ability to foresee his/her own fate and turn it into poetry (see Smith 2001, 78). These narrative elements in Gerštejn's representation and understanding of life and poetry/art resemble features of Jurij Tynjanov's concept of "literary personality" (*литературная личность*). According to Svetlana Boym, the literary personality, which is not identical with either the actual personality or with the lyrical persona, draws attention to the elusive boundaries between literature and *byt* (Boym 1991, 22). Gerštejn's argument that we should study what has been said by the poet in his poetry and see it in connection with his life events in order to achieve *istina* goes hand in hand with Tynjanov's "cultural poetics of the author's life", which refers to the influence of personal life on literary facts and vice versa (*ibid.*).

But what about the narrator herself? Is she merely a vessel that carried this information within herself waiting for the right moment to reveal it, as she has written in the chapter "Nadežda Jakovlevna"? What are the dynamics between the subject of Gerštejn's writing and its object: the lives of "literary personalities"? Isn't the author a literary personality of her own writing in analogue with the literary personalities of the Mandel'stams and Anna Ahmatova? Gerštejn's text is in constant dialogue with other texts, representing the dialogue between her own experiences and the literary personalities. The narrator as a witness has first-hand knowledge of the events - and this is where

Gerštejn employs the cultural myth of the custodian of cultural values. This position, which is based on the privilege of experience, described in Holmgren's work, and hinted at in Smith's article, gives Gerštejn's text the promise of an "anonymous depoliticized discourse which pretends to be non-ideological and transparent" (Boym 1991, 27). Smith suggests that Gerštejn's reproduction of the speech and beliefs of her contemporaries as depoliticized discourse points to her own belief in the self-sufficiency of art and culture (2001, 83).²¹

The cultural myth of the preserver of cultural values makes (it possible for) Gerštejn to recount her subjective experiences and observations because they are connected with another pervasive Russian cultural myth: the Russian Poet. Life besides the prominent names of Ahmatova and Mandel'stam as a caretaker, witnessing their artistic work, gives Gerštejn's experiences cultural significance and importance, and every scene, which is there to describe the poet's personality can be seen through this perspective. The interconnections and intertextualities between life and poetry make the subjective experience of the author-narrator part of the poetic world where the literary personalities live and die. It is of undoubted importance here that the cultural myth of the destiny of the Russian Poet is based on the interconnections between life, art and death, not only metaphorically but also literally (Boym 1991, 21). Those who knew the poets in life can immortalize them and their art after death. However, the subjectivity and authenticity, which are the grounds on which the authority of the "I" is constituted, are simultaneously what undermines it. This becomes apparent in the reception of Gerštejn's work in Russian media and literary circles. However, this may also be due to the fact that her memoirs are meant to be polemic to previous testimonies on Mandel'stam. Gerštejn vividly argues in her memoirs that she is being faithful to reality.

We can of course ask, like Irina Vrubeľ'-Golubkina does, why Gerštejn wrote her memoirs 20 years later than, for instance, N. Mandel'stam? Not wanting to appeal to the author's intention as a guarantee of the meaning of the text, the answer to this question nevertheless supports the view of the two-fold meaning of subjectivity in her text. She says in an interview that she needed a personal impetus, a personal interest in writing: she could not write "into nothingness". That interest emerged, as Gerštejn says, when Lev Gumilev published his books, which annoyed her. She was also annoyed by such characterizations, where she was pitied, because her love was allegedly not requited. (Vrubeľ'-Golubkina 1999, 21-22.)

The previous literary memoirs by Ahmatova, N. Mandel'stam, L. Čukovskaja and others serve as a model and counter-model for Gerštejn's writing, which follows this tradition of Russian women's writing in many ways. The narrator engages herself in the conservation of the prominent literary figures

²¹ Smith makes the same insight on Nikolaj Hardžiev's *Статьи об авангарде в двух томах* (Articles on avant-garde), which she analyses along with Gerštejn's memoirs.

of Russian poetry, but, as the analyses above show, she employs this model quite creatively. In the light of the narrative structure - the frequent references to the fact that the author writes on the authority based on her own experiences - it can be said that the narrative voice on the one hand enhances the individuality, the uniqueness of the narrator's representation. It enhances the notion that what the narrator describes cannot be represented by anyone else: it is a question of a unique experience and insight (cf. Nemzer 2002). On the other hand, if we are sensitive to reading the text from the point of view of the female subject, it reflects the first person narrator's own life course, her own engagement in the described events, touching upon even her own development at the time as a single woman with an unstable professional status. This experience emerges due to the narrative strategy of writing subjective memoirs on the main characters, which are an integral part both of the writing of the literary memoirs and the writing of the author's self.

6.3 Narrating the Self in the Shadow

Gerštejn's project of writing aims at a different end than that of the other four texts. She is writing *memoirs on others*, prominent figures in Russian modern literature and culture in the 20th century. However, on the verge of writing her memoirs she also comes to include her own life experience, although in a more fragmentary and less self-conscious way than those of the writers. The fragments of her own life story, scattered through the pages of her memoirs, can be read to build a story of her own life, and her own development as an individual and a writer.

As we saw in the discussion Gerštejn's narrative focuses on the lives of others, and the narrator has the status of an eyewitness and a gatekeeper, who through her individual experience can serve the community with her unique descriptions. However, the emphasis on subjectivity and uniqueness also makes way for the construction of the narrator's own development, although in a less coherent and rather episodic narration. If we read the episodes from the perspective of the narrating subject, they structure a story of the protagonist's life "near the poet" as the title of one of the chapters states. It recounts events in her own life, however, defined by her relationship with the main characters of her memoirs. As stated in the previous subchapter, the narrative voice in the memoirs shifts between objective and subjective. In the four chapters discussed, the narrative voice is occasionally very subjective, and focuses almost as much on the narrator's experience as on the description of the main characters.

Beyond this the reader of the memoirs may also find support for the notion that N. Mandel'stam served as an important "female other" for the

memoirist, both as a model for identification and separation.²² Thus, although the figure of O. Mandel'stam is represented as a spiritual guide for the young protagonist when she first met him, the female figure of N. Mandel'stam exerts no less influence on her, as the text reveals.

It was already shown that N. Mandel'stam identified a similarity between her own sister and the protagonist, and that she had the power to make the protagonist talk more openly about herself. The chapter "Перечень обид/ A Flow of Insults" - which accounts for various circumstances in the narrator's professional and love life - begins with two anecdotes about N. Mandel'stam's childhood and youth, which, according to the narrator testify to typical traits of her future life. She then continues to describe a conversation she had with her during their first, most intense period of friendship, when the latter used to stay overnight with her. The two young women tell each other about their first loves. Nadja's story is about her first sexual experiences with two men on one night, and, although the narrator notes that her stories were usually not without "elements of fantasy", she reminisces that she had a feeling she was involved with a "существом какой-то другой породы, и ... приняла Надю в свое сердце такой, какой она была./ ...person of another kind and ... took Nadja into her heart the way she was" (Gerštejn 1998, 388).

Gerštejn then tells her own story, which is a sadder story about her love for a boy two years younger than she was. Her love remained unrequited, and the story ends after several years with the crushing words of the boy, already a young man: "Это нездорово. Тебе надо лечиться./ That's unhealthy. You have to cure yourself." (ibid. 390). Nadja's response to this unhappy story makes the protagonist feel better:

И как же легко отнеслась ко всему сказанному Надя - мой новый друг. Она удивительно умела действовать на угнетенную психику. Она снимала все комплексы. Ведь главным лозунгом ее жизни было: "То, чего люди стыдятся, вовсе не стыдно". Выслушав мою исповедь, она сказала: "Это похоже на Ахматову". (Gerštejn 1998, 390)

How smoothly Nadja, my new friend, responded to everything I had said. She had an amazing effect on a depressed mind. She shed away all complexes. Her main slogan was: "What people are ashamed of, is nothing to be ashamed of at all." After listening to my confession she said: "That reminds me of Ahmatova." (Gerštejn 1998, 390)

Although Gerštejn's narrative focuses on the two prominent figures of modern Russian literature, Ahmatova and O. Mandel'stam, N. Mandel'stam stands for a more important figure from the psychological aspect of narrating

²² The importance of "female others" in the construction of a female memoirist's identity in a Russian context is observed at least by Holmgren in the works of Soviet women writers (1993) and Irina Savkina in women's autodocumentary texts of the early 19th century (2001).

about the “I”. It is connected with significant experiences in Gerštejn’s personal life and development: sexuality, relationships, intimate conversations between women are connected with depictions of Nadja.

Although Gerštejn’s text does not represent a similar kind of quest for the self as N. Mandel’stam’s *Hope Against Hope* and *Hope Abandoned*, do in Holmgren’s view, or the other texts in my study here, certain passages in her book show that the memoirist comes to write about her own psychological development when writing about the main characters and her own personal relations with them. The description of the self through other women, in this case N. Mandel’stam, enables the narrator to describe her own experiences and feelings, as was the case in the story about the first love. This female other has an unburdening effect on the protagonist’s mind in a concrete matter such as in this unhappy love story, but, I would contend, also on a more symbolic level, on the level of narrating about a woman’s life in an unconventional manner. Julia Watson suggests in her article on modern Western women writers’ autobiographies, that “*for the woman writer*, the tactic of writing in the shadow of an Other can be an act of liberation from the constraints of conventional accounts of female lives” (1988, 182).

To revert to the question about the “plot” in this narrative - there is no textually coherent story of the development of the narrator: the story exhausts itself with the establishing and preserving of the memory of the poets and their lives. However, *how* this is done, that is, on the level of the plot, there is evidence that the act of writing in itself carries an important meaning for the writer, and in this respect, a story of development can be discerned, that of the development of a writer. Thus, in the course of the narration, we can see that the narrator has the role of a conservator and a gatekeeper: she cherishes the artistic legacy of the poets, but she also has a different perspective on that artistic circle. Although she perhaps does not radically “transgress the behavioural boundaries for a female *intelligent*” as, according to Holmgren (1993, 172-173) N. Mandel’stam does, in a subtle way, through the narrating of others’ lives, she narrates her own development, her own story, in a fragmentary manner.

In the chapter “Перечень обид/ A Flow of Insults” in which the narrator’s difficult circumstances in the 1920s and 30s are described, the narrator mentions the difficulties of finding her place in society, and her rejection of and maladjustment to it. In this the position of the narrator is similar to that of Pliseckaja’s and Petkevič’s protagonists; the heroines felt they were “different” from others. In the discussion of these texts above, the description of childhood experiences was given specific meaning in the protagonist’s feeling of being, to borrow Petkevič’s case, an “untimely child” - Gerštejn’s memoirs do not include many allusions to childhood (it was not directly connected with the main characters), but the same theme occurs in the description of the narrator’s youth.

In her early twenties Gerštejn felt estranged from her studies at university, where she studied a three-year programme on language and literature. She was drawn to literary work; however, she had no means or chances to fulfill herself as a writer:

У меня тоже заглохло тяготение к собственной литературной работе. В Брюсовский институт мне ходу не было - ведь я ничего не писала. У меня сохранялась мечта переехать в Петроград, но Надя-невестка меня запугивала, что я не справлюсь с самостоятельной жизнью без помощи родителей. Перспектива поселиться, может быть, в студенческом общежитии с этой ужасной, бойкой, современной молодежью меня парализовала. Цвет передового литературоведения, сосредоточившийся в Петрограде, тоже отпугивал меня новизной деловитого, сухого и замысловатого формального метода. Правда, я любила читать книги Шкловского, но не за его теории, а за отдельные умные афоризмы. (Gerštejn 1998, 393)

My devotion to literary work died down too. I had no access to Brjusov's institute, because I hadn't written anything. I cherished the thought of moving to Petrograd, but my sister-in-law Nadja scared me by saying I wouldn't get on by myself without the help of my parents. The thought of settling, perhaps, in a dormitory with that terrible, brisk contemporary youth paralysed me. The elite of literary criticism that was concentrated in Petrograd also scared me with its new, matter-of-fact, complicated formalistic method. I liked to read Šklovski's books, not because of his theories but because of occasional clever aphorisms. (Gerštejn 1998, 393)

Nor did she find like-minded people in her family, or in professional life:

“Тебе не нравится наше общественное устройство? Так, борись, наконец”, - говорил мне вышедший из терпения отец. Я не знаю, способна ли я вообще к политической борьбе, требующей храбрости и твердости, которых у меня не было. Но если бы посредством тренировок я достигла некоторых успехов в этом направлении, я не видела бы вокруг себя политических единомышленников и союзников. (...) Вот каким образом с самой молодости ... я чувствовала себя отщепенцем. У меня оставалось тяготение к более тонкой и богатой духовной культуре, но не было знаний, были определенные вкусы в искусстве, доступные немногим, но не было у меня и таланта. Словом, я принадлежала к числу тех, кто ... “не помещался” в современной жизни. (ibid. 394)

“You don't like our social structure? So, protest, for goodness sake.” - my father said to me when he lost his temper. I don't know whether I'm capable of political struggle, which demands courage and strength which I didn't have. But even if I had achieved something in this direction through training, I wouldn't see any kindred-spirits or allies around myself. (...) In this way from my very youth ... I felt I was a renegade. I was drawn to more sensitive and rich intellectual culture, but I lacked the expertise, I had a particular taste in art, but I lacked the ability or

talent. In a word, I was one of those who ... didn't fit the contemporary life. (ibid. 394)

Her mental stress at the time achieves its culmination, and, at the age of 25 she attempts suicide by taking an overdose of opium:

В это время позвонила по телефону моя Лена, а мне не так уж хотелось умирать, и я ей сказала о случившемся. Меня откачали, был устроен семейный совет, в котором деятельное участие принимала Лена. Она твердила: “Тебе надо переменить среду”, - и советовала моему отцу достать мне путевку в “Узкое”. (ibid. 392)

At that time my [friend] Lena called me. I didn't want to die so much any more, so I told her what had happened. The opium was pumped out and a family counsel was organised, in which Lena took an active part. She assured us: “You have to change the environment”, and she advised my father to get me an admission note to the sanatorium “Uzkoe”. (ibid. 392)

In this sanatorium, then, the protagonist meets the Mandel'stams, who had a decisive effect on her life. Yet the narrator states that however important her meeting with the Mandel'stams was, it could not compensate her for a profession (ibid.). Being close to those who wrote did not compensate for her own need to fulfill herself professionally.

Gerštejn has stated that already in childhood she started to think about writing: “Думать о мемуарах я начала еще в детстве. У нас была большая и сложная семья, и я была уверена, что, достигнув взрослости, я напишу обо всех нас ‘роман’: слова ‘мемуары’ я не знала./ I started thinking about memoirs already as a child. We had a large and complicated family, and I was certain that when I grow up I would write a ‘novel’ about all of us: I didn't know the word ‘memoirs’ then” (Gerštejn 1999, 15). Starting a career as a literary critic and editor, and then as a memoirist, Gerštejn has partly realized her ambition for a literary career. This story of her becoming a writer in her own right is a story that can be read “in the shadow” (to use Julia Watson's metaphor) of her recording the lives of others. This story is scattered in fragments inside the narration about the great poets' lives, and, with the help of the other audacious female character, N. Mandel'stam, the female narrator comes to narrate her own, personal experiences.

7 Arbatova's Feminist Autobiography - Between Fact and Fiction

The fifth text to be analysed *Мне 40 лет* (I'm Forty, 1999) was written by Marija Arbatova, a writer born over fifty years later than Gerštejn. A representative of post-Stalin generations, Arbatova is famous for her reputation as the best-known feminist in Russia. Initially she was a playwright and in the late 1980s her plays became known as representatives of "new theatre", in which the author addressed "taboo" topics about a woman's life in Soviet society¹. She became more widely known in the 1990s thanks to a TV talk show for women, where she appeared in the role of a feminist commentator. I have chosen to analyse Arbatova's text because she belongs to a different generation than the four others (that is, to the post-Stalin generation), yet her text brings out similar themes and topics as they do. Her text is specifically oriented to women readers, its narration is deliberately didactic and assumes a popular readership - these all are features which (in different degrees) could be observed in the other texts. However, my aim is not to represent this text as particularly innovative - I would say the innovations in this text are part of the articulation of the new female subjectivity in literary discourse which emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

What has been pointed out in reviews on Arbatova are the topics she writes about, which are closely connected with those sides of a Soviet Russian woman's life which have not often been the object of public discourse: issues concerning female sexuality and body. In addition, it is often pointed out that Arbatova writes from an explicitly feminist perspective, which then serves as a negative characteristic of her texts.² In a way Arbatova can be compared to contemporary women's prose writers in Russia, who at the turn of the 1980s-90s

¹ Latynina writes in her review of Arbatova's *Меня зовут женщина/ My name is Woman*: "Я не помню, чтобы кто-то еще так откровенно, не прикрываясь вымышленными персонажами с спасительным местоимением 'она', рассказывала бы о гинекологических исследованиях, абортах, родах, и надо отдать должное писательнице - она сумела привлечь внимание к этим не слишком обсуждаемым вне медицинских статей темам./ I don't recall anyone having discussed so openly, without hiding behind fictive characters and the salvaging pronoun 'she', about gynaecological examinations, abortions, giving birth, and I have to give credit to the writer - she has managed to attract attention to these themes, which have been addressed only in medical publications." (Latynina 1997, 11.) Melissa T. Smith notes: "Her concern for issues of the physical exploitation of women, equal rights in the domestic and social spheres, and ecology expresses itself in journalistic writing, political engagement (as founder of 'Harmony'..., a liberal feminist organization for members of the creative intelligentsia), as well as her dramaturgy" (1994, 36).

² This opinion can be discerned in Lukjanova (1999) and Latynina (1997).

were engaged in making their own voices heard and who express openly feminist views about their writing as “women’s writing”.³

Like much of this recent prose writing, Arbatova’s texts and her autobiography concentrate on the protagonist’s, an urban, educated, intellectual woman’s, experiences in Soviet society. The autobiographical novel depicts her childhood permeated with control practised by her mother, Soviet institutions (school, hospital, literary institutions); as well as her sexual education and personal relations. Arbatova’s fame as a TV personality has added to the proliferation of her works,⁴ and surpassed her reputation as a writer in the media. The author acknowledges this herself and comments on it in her text with slight self-irony.

В этой жизни я всегда ощущала себя писательницей, которую, в силу моего темперамента, постоянно путали с кем-то другим. (...) Не удивляюсь, когда жёлтая газета сообщает: “По слухам, феминистка Маша из передачи ‘Я сама’ решила написать пьесу...”...Когда сборник прозы *Меня зовут женщина* представляют как текст ток-шоу, в котором я принимаю участие в качестве героини. (Arbatova 1999, 456)

In this life I have always felt I was a woman writer, who, because of my temperament, constantly gets mixed up with someone else. (...) I am not surprised when the yellow press announces: “Rumours have it that the feminist Maša from the programme ‘Ja sama’ decided to write a play...” ...Or when the collection of prose texts “My Name Is Woman” is presented as a text about a talk show, where I take part in the role of a heroine. (Arbatova 1999, 456)

According to Gessen (1998) since the 1990s Arbatova has called herself not just *писательницей*/ a woman writer but *писательницей-феминисткой*/ a feminist writer. Arbatova is engaged in promoting women’s rights not only in literature, but also in politics.⁵

The narrative voice in Arbatova’s text engages in an autobiographical pact, as do the other authors in this study as well: the author expresses her aim to tell about her own life, sincerely. The women prose writers already mentioned in many of their texts use autobiographical narrators, but these narrators are not always identical with the authors. Nina Gorlanova uses the autobiographical narrator frequently in her texts not only as a narrative technique, but also to emphasise the writer’s subjective voice. Popular women’s literature today in

³ See Vasilenko (2000); and Žerebkina (2003, 61-62).

⁴ “Пожалуй, никто не сделал столько, сколько Мария Арбатова, чтобы представить понятие феминизма широким народным массам./ Perhaps no one has done so much as Maria Arbatova to introduce the notion of feminism to the broad masses of population [in Russia]” (Gessen 1998, 50).

⁵ Among other things, she stood for election to the Duma in 1999 on the list of СПС (Союз Правых Сил - The Right Union). She participated in the presidential campaigns of El’cin and Èlla Pamfilova.

Russia includes detective stories, the most famous of which are Aleksandra Marinina's books with Anastasija Kamenskaja as their heroine. The Russian literary scholar and critic Elena Trofimova notes that Marinina's detective represents a new, modern feminine figure, who is not interested in pleasing the opposite sex, or getting married (2002, 347-346), which can be perceived as non-traditional feminine features in Russia.

It has been said that the heroines of Arbatova's early prose texts are female versions of the "superfluous man", "Pečorin wearing a skirt"; women who are successful and strong, but in the battle between the sexes they suffer defeat (Smith 1994, 36). Arbatova's texts promote a modern woman's right to personal happiness, which has not been very typical of Russian literary texts, at least not very long. The description of the development of the narrator-protagonist in *Мне 40 лет/ I'm Forty* is, however, fraught with pain, suffering and shame, which on the other hand is reminiscent of recent women's prose writing with gloomy descriptions of the female characters' fates and lives. The text represents this gloomy side of the protagonist's life as an effect of power hierarchies of society and a cause for a conscious feminist politics of identity.

Arbatova's early prose texts have been published in a collection of short stories *Меня зовут женщина* (My Name Is Woman, or: They Call Me a Woman, 1997). The stories in the collection seem to be autobiographical, but, as one critic notes, it is difficult to say whether they are or not. The heroine and narrator of the stories resembles the author in the light of biographical data, but there is no clear autobiographical pact: "Вот такая она, воительница, правозащитница, главная российская феминистка. Героиня произведений Марии Арбатовой, или сама Мария Арбатова — кто поймет-разберет." (Rahaeva 1998, 224.)⁶

Мне 40 лет/ I'm Forty has an autobiographical pact, that is, the names of the author, narrator and protagonist are identical. However, the text is described on the cover as an autobiographical *novel*, a term referring to a work of fiction. In the Preface the author points to the impossibility of writing truthfully about the past Soviet times, because, "nowhere are there so many false dates, fake documents, family secrets and fictitious stories as in Russia" (Arbatova 1999, 3). In the second edition of the autobiography (*Прощание с XX веком*, Farewell to the XX century, which is defined as autobiographical *prose*) the author also gives another, more general idea about the human signification process: "Насколько правдива эта книга? Не знаю. Макс Фриш говорил: 'С человеком что-то случается, а потом он придумывает про это историю'./ How truthful is this book? I don't know. Max Frisch said: 'When something happens to a person, he invents a story about it'." (Arbatova 2002, 9).

⁶ "That's the way she is: a fighter, an advocate of women's rights, the Russian feminist. Is it the heroine of Marija Arbatova's works or Marija Arbatova herself - who can tell?"

It would not be fruitful to argue whether Arbatova's autobiography is more a work of fiction or a documentary text. This applies to the other texts in this study as well. The authors claim the referentiality of their texts; they do not always credit them with absolute truth, but admit the subjectivity of their representation. What is more interesting is that Arbatova's texts mentioned above promote the autobiographical side in them making them a fruitful ground for identification for other women. In my view, identification and representativeness are keywords for Arbatova's autobiography.

It is noteworthy, that certain features in Arbatova's writing are reminiscent of feminist autobiographies written in the 1970s and 1980s by Western women writers, and explored by Rita Felski (1989). However, as Felski points out, the social and empirical environment of late capitalism in which the Western feminist autobiographical texts have been produced differs significantly from that of late socialism and the texts (and feminist movements) likewise involve different social meanings. Felski writes in 1989:

The analysis is not, however, extended to Eastern bloc countries... The arguments developed in my analysis regarding the contemporary political functions of realist and avant-garde art and the sociological phenomenon of a feminist public sphere derive from a discussion of Western late capitalist societies and cannot be applied to Eastern bloc countries, where such issues as feminism and the oppositional status of literature acquire a quite specific meaning and importance, and the constraints upon literary production differ fundamentally in nature and degree. (1989, 17).

The history of the women's movement in the West looks quite different than that in Russia.⁷ However, in form and content Arbatova's text has similarities with Western feminist autobiographies, as defined by Felski, but the social and literary contexts of their reception are different. In Russia feminism as a concept has had a quite pejorative connotation (see Kelly 1994, 350-1). According to Gessen's article in the journal *Itogi* (1998), feminism is associated with Marxism in general opinions in post-Soviet Russia, and hence causes "an allergic reaction" in people. Although feminism has gained ground, for instance,

⁷ Russian feminists in the early 20th century aligned feminism with socialism (see e.g. Hoogenboom 1996). Posadskaya (1994, 8) notes that after the 1917 revolution feminism "was classed as a bourgeois, alien movement, and for many years ceased to exist." Equality between the sexes was conflated with the Soviet communist ideology, and it was guaranteed "on paper" - praxis was often a different matter (see Goscilo 1996). In the 1930s the woman question was declared "resolved" and labelled feminism a phenomenon typical of Western society with petit bourgeois values (see Buckley 1989, 111-112; Savkina 1994, 5). For a difference between Western feminist autobiographies, examined by Felski, and Arbatova's, it is noteworthy that in the former a heterosexual relationship and motherhood as central values in women's lives are often undermined, whereas this is not the case in the latter. As Rotkirch points out, in Russia "socially autonomous womanhood does not exclude marriage or motherhood." (Rotkirch 2000, 135-6)

in universities in the form of gender studies, and women often are active in various non-governmental organisations which provide help, for instance, to women suffering from male violence, feminism is not necessarily the word with which they readily characterise themselves and their activities.⁸ In this sense, those who call themselves feminists are very much aware of the negative connotations of this word. Arbatova recognizes this in her text. I shall revert to this.

7.1 A Feminist Confession

7.1.1 *Identifying Practices of Writing*

What, then, is common to Arbatova's text and certain Western autobiographies (which Felski calls *feminist confessions*) is that they concentrate on the development of a feminist, female protagonist, and that their writing strategies encourage women readers to identify with the experiences represented in the texts. Thus, the next characterization could quite easily be applied to Arbatova's text:

The obligation to honest self-depiction which constitutes part of the autobiographical contract is ... mitigated by the feminist recognition that it is the representative aspects of the author's experience rather than her unique individuality which are important, allowing for the inclusion of fictive but representative episodes distilled from the lives of other women. The fact that the authors ... write autobiographies explicitly and self-consciously *as women* is of central importance as an indication of the shifting conceptions of cultural identity which are in turn echoed in the changing forms and functions of autobiography (Felski 1989, 94)

The first point refers to the notion commonly attached to the tradition of modern Western (male) autobiography as "a mirror of selfhood" (Gusdorf 1980, 33) and as a referential pact where the "I" swears to tell the truth (Lejeune 1989, 22). Western feminist autobiographies have undermined or defied these by enhancing the representativeness rather than individual truth: the authors represent themselves explicitly as women, identifying with other women. On the back cover of Arbatova's book, similar features appear:

Автобиография — это не литература, а инструмент, с помощью которого можно взглянуть в события собственной жизни и принять их. Эта книга не претендует ни на что, кроме истории женщины, которой с самого детства было лень притворяться. Фанатизм искренности я отношу не к личным

⁸ Cf. Lipovskaya (1992, 73); Gessen (1998). On the social and political significance of women's non-governmental organizations in Russia in the 21st century see Salmenniemi (2002).

заслугам, а к тому, что принадлежу к первому поколению, родившемуся без Сталина. Надеюсь, что книга эта — не только обо мне, но и о времени; эдакий стриптиз на фоне второй половины двадцатого века. (Arbatova 1999, 3)

Autobiography is not literature. It is a means to look closely at the events of your own life and accept them. This book does not strive to be anything else than a story of a woman who since her very childhood found it difficult to pretend. I don't credit my fanatic candour to myself but to the fact that I belong to the first generation to be born without Stalin. I hope that this book is not only about me but also about the time - a kind of striptease against the backdrop of the second half of the 20th century. (Arbatova 1999, 3)

Beside the common wish to represent not only her self, but also the time, the author explicitly says she is writing about herself as an individual, and a woman. In addition, the first sentence bears a resemblance to previous feminist writing in the West: the aim is not to defamiliarize the reader with what the text describes, but to involve and to make her identify with the author-narrator, who claims to be writing sincerely, intimately (Felski 1989, 97-8). Feminist autobiographies describe a woman's development in a realistic way in order to appeal to women readers who can identify with the narrator's story.

The covers of some of Arbatova's books suggest that they are marketed in a way that emphasises the persona of the author. This is yet another feature which has been pointed out in Felski's study: "Feminist literature is often marketed in such a way as to foreground the persona of the author through the inclusion of photographs and biographical details which link the text to the life and act as a guarantee of its authenticity." This is true of many of Arbatova's texts. It says on the back cover of the book *Меня зовут женщина/ My name is woman*: "Сегодня Марию Арбатову знает вся страна как со-ведущую первой и самой популярной телевизионной программы о женщинах 'Я сама'. (...) В этой книге собраны [её] рассказы ..., которые (...) рисуют живую картину послеперестроечной России, и в особенности, пробуждающегося женского самопознания."⁹ The aspect of bringing out the person of the author and the provocative blurbs reflect the influence of the commercialisation of the Russian book market since the beginning of the 1990s on the genesis of Arbatova's books.

Despite these thematic-structural similarities with earlier Western texts, the above mentioned features are perhaps motivated by circumstances, by the situation of women writers in the past fifteen years or so. It has been pointed out that around the turn of the 1980s and 1990s Russian women writers emerged as

⁹ "Today the whole country knows Marija Arbatova as the co-speaker of the first and most popular TV programme on women, 'On my own'. (...) This book includes [her] stories which (...) draw a vivid picture of Russia after *perestroika*, and especially of the emergence of female self-awareness".

a collective group for the first time in Russian literary history - as evidence of this the publication of nine anthologies of women's literature in that time is evinced, and, especially, the formation of the group "New Amazons", which published two anthologies with a programmatic preface about women's literature. As Rovenskaja notes, the representation of new names, with short biographical notes or commentaries on their works, and often a photo of the author, had specific aims:

Авторы целенаправленно знакомили публику с именами и лицами писательниц, что делало контакт с ними более личным, интимным. Это приобретало особый смысл, так как женская проза изначально была обращена не на "объективное" (в патриархатном значении), но на предполагаемое гендерно-мотивированное воспроизведение окружающего мира. При этом критерием подлинности становилась степень субъективности авторского мировосприятия и способов передачи своих мыслей и чувств. "Автографы" писательниц давали, тем самым, ключ к пониманию психологической и идейной логики их произведений, реконструируемой ими эстетики. (Rovenskaja 2000)¹⁰

Thus the orientation to identification in Arbatova's work is not unique in the Russian context but can be taken as a sign of women writers' situation when they encounter the readers in a cultural context where female experience is not highly ranked, and where a feminist woman writer has not been a figure on the public scene for a very long time (see also Žerebkina 2003, 65). In Arbatova's case putting her picture on the cover of the book when she is already a well-known woman serves to draw attention to her personality in public, and not "to present a new name" as in the women prose writers' anthologies. In her case the photograph (as in Pliseckaja's case) serves to raise the interest of the public to read about celebrities' lives. Nevertheless, the aspect of identification is central in her texts as well, and purposefully enhances the aspect of authentic communication between the author and the readers.

7.1.2 Feminist's Lessons: Voicing the Violent and Discovering the Sensual

Due to the public role of the author, it can be said that the narrator of *Мне 40 лет/ I'm Forty* is aware of her role as a model for others and she takes this position for herself. This influences the structure of the narration, so that it acquires certain didactic, enlightening features. The text is about becoming self-aware, recognising one's patterns of behaviour, and questioning those patterns.

¹⁰ "The authors purposefully acquainted the public with the names and faces of the writers, which made contact with them more personal and intimate. This had its own purpose, because women's prose was initially addressing not an 'objective' (in the patriarchal meaning), but a presumably gender-motivated representation of the surrounding world. Beyond this, the degree of subjectivity of the authors' world view and means of mediating their thoughts and feelings became a criterion for authenticity. 'The autographs' of writers thus gave a key to understanding the psychological and conceptual logic of their works, and their aesthetics."

Sexuality and relations between the sexes are the main agendas of this text. This feature also occurs in the text with the Western autobiographies.

Marija Arbatova is well aware of her own role as a woman writer and the images of women in Russian literature, and she aligns herself with feminist views about notions of femininity in literary history.¹¹ Arbatova's life story begins with a comparison between life and a box of chocolates.¹² Citing the beginning of the film *Forrest Gump*, where the hero reminisces on his mother's words¹³, and making it the motto of her book, the narrator identifies with the film's crippled boy – she too was crippled in her childhood. “The school” of her early years in hospitals and sanatoriums where she was treated from the consequences of childhood poliomyelitis set the theme in the life-story. The text includes references to labour camp vocabulary when the narrator is accounting for her time in a boarding school, and in hospital:

Примерно двести маленьких калек в корсетах, ортопедических аппаратах и на костылях благоденствовали в режиме, приближённом к лагерному. (...) С того момента, когда на меня напялили ортопедическую обувь - страшные, тяжёлые, как глиняные горшки, ботинки тюремной гаммы ... я начала считать советскую ортопедию карательной. (...) В то время как у здоровых детей существовала семья, ставящая на стол тарелку с едой, целующая на нос, не изнуряющая уборкой, а главное, отчётностью за неё, мы, как зеки, целиком растили себя сами. (Arbatova 1999, 34-35)

About two hundred little crippled children in corsets, orthopaedic equipment and with crutches lived happily according to a daily order, which was close to one in a labour camp. (...) From the moment, when I had my orthopaedic shoes put on - horrible, heavy, like clay jugs, prison boots... I started to think of Soviet orthopaedics as a form of punishment. (...) Whereas healthy children had families to put the food on the table, to kiss them on the nose, not exhausting them with cleaning work, and most importantly, with accountability, we, like prisoners, brought up ourselves entirely on our own. (Arbatova 1999, 34-35)

However, the difficult and painful experience, so the narrator assures us, has made the protagonist stronger, different from other children: even as a child she knows how to defend herself against teachers and other “normal” students. However, her “education” continues in her youth when she is subjected to

¹¹ See her article (1995, 26-27): - “Все эти бесконечные ‘Татьяны Ларины’ и ‘Наташи Ростовы’, все эти ‘душечки’ русской литературы, органично перекочевавшие в советскую и постсоветскую действительность, одновременно и мечта неуверенного в себе мужчины и способ зомбирования женщины./ All these endless ‘Tat’jana Larinas’ and ‘Nataša Rostovas’, all these ‘darlings’ of Russian literature, who have organically migrated to Soviet and post-Soviet reality, are simultaneously the dream of an insecure man and a means to make a zombie out of her.”

¹² In the second edition of her autobiography the chronology of narrating has been altered compared to the first edition, and the story starts with her grandfather's biography.

¹³ “Life is like a box of chocolates...”

several violations of her physical and mental integrity by her superior, either in experience or in physical strength. The experience in the boarding school is an allusion to literary models of Gulag testimonies. This lends the narrator a characteristic “aura” of a Soviet dissident, martyred through her painful experience.

The author-narrator discusses the discriminatory practices of society and attitudes towards women based on the protagonist’s own experiences and those of her girlfriends. In the next quotation the narrator discusses the issue of sexual violence against women in Soviet society through her own and others’ personal experience:

Если кто-то скажет, что слишком часто со мной происходили такие истории, я рассмеюсь ему в лицо. С моими подругами это происходило ещё чаще, независимо от того, носили они имидж “хорошей девочки” или “протестующей хипповки”. Над одной моей подругой в пионерском возрасте совершил насилие пожилой уважаемый родственник, в семью которого её отправили отдыхать; другую изнасиловал сосед по коммуналке, в которой она ночевала в гостях, не зная, что надо запирать дверь, внешне вполне интеллигентный мужчина; третью изнасиловал муж подруги, потому что она боялась кричать; четвёртую - консультирующий её психиатр; пятую... (...) Насилие пронизывало всю советскую жизнь, сексуальная сторона отношений даже вербализовалась как иерархия властных функций: “я её возьму”, “она будет подо мной”, “я её..”. С одной стороны, партнёрская роль женщины в сексе как бы не подразумевалась, с другой, получалось, что баба только об этом и думает. Сложив оба тезиса, мы получали, что она только и думает о том, чтобы стать жертвой. (1999, 123)

If someone says that these incidents happened to me far too often, I’ll laugh in his face. To my girl friends it happened even more often, notwithstanding whether they had the image of “a good girl” or a “revolting hippie”. One of my friends was raped in her formative years by a respected senior relative, with whom she was sent to stay for a holiday; another was raped by a neighbour, a quite intelligent looking man, in a communal apartment where she stayed as a guest, not knowing you have to lock the door; a third was raped by the husband of her friend, because she was afraid to scream; fourth – by a psychiatrist she consulted; fifth... (...) Violence pervaded Soviet life, and the sexual side of relations was even verbalized as hierarchical power relations: “I will take her”, “I will be on her”, “I will ... her”. On the one hand, woman’s role in sexual relations was not even thought of in terms of an equal partner, on the other hand, it was assumed that woman thinks of nothing else. If we combine these theses, we can conclude that a woman constantly thinks about being an object, a victim. (1999, 123)

The extract above shows how the narrator makes her life an example from which readers can draw important lessons. Her own and her girlfriends’ experiences are made part of the textual construction in order to establish a connection with women readers who may identify with them. The narrated experiences are represented as a result of the hierarchical power relations of

society – the experiences are seen as consequences of the subordination of women and their sexuality in a patriarchal society.¹⁴ Thus, the first sentence would seem to refer to those who do not believe that this is a widespread practice, but tend to see it as a result of/reaction to a provocative behaviour by the woman. The author-narrator seeks allies among women who have experienced the same, but whose experience so far has not been articulated in society.

On the other hand the narrator openly celebrates her female sexuality in the form of stories about the numerous romances and adventures which have crossed her path and she generously shares her experience with the readers, which she addresses as girls, *devuški*¹⁵:

Изучение “науки страсти нежной” одарило меня огромным набором цитат, правил, ходов и приёмов. Но то, что через много лет мне объяснили сексопатологи про четыре основных типа мужчин, я уже в юности чуяла кожей. Приведу типизацию в помощь девушкам, чья кожа еще “не так чувствительна”. (Arbatova 1999, 126)

The study of the “art of tender passion” gave me a tremendous variety of quotes, rules, ways and means. What sexopathologists explained to me about four basic types of men, I could sense with my skin already when I was young. I present the typology here to help girls, whose skin is not yet “so sensitive”. (Arbatova 1999, 126)

The emphasis on sexuality in the life story of a female protagonist became a part of Western female authored novels in the 1970s, as Ferguson states: “The groundwork for expanding the notion of female development beyond purely sexual maturity was paved by ... novels ..., which claimed for women the right to sexual adventures as part of their development” (1983, 229). This may well be seen as a part of the sexual revolution and women’s sexual emancipation in the 1960s in the West. In Russia, the end of the Soviet era meant a sexual liberation on the level of the public discourses - the behavioural revolution took place earlier, in the era of the so-called stagnation in the 1970s which can also be called the time of “personalised culture”¹⁶, and which coincided with Arbatova’s youth. In this respect Arbatova’s feminist agenda can also be likened to the one in the West, although in Russia it takes place - in the

¹⁴ Cf. Gabriéljan (1996, 39): “Глаголы выражающие эротические отношения между полами ... имеют субординационную окрашенность, предписывая женщине роль пассивного сексуального объекта, а мужчине - активного субъекта.../ Verbs expressing erotic relations between the sexes ... are coloured by subordination, prescribing the woman the role of passive sexual object and the man - that of the active subject.”

¹⁵ According to Nohejl’ (1996) positive descriptions of sexuality remain a rarity in contemporary women’s prose (see also Zolotonosov 2003).

¹⁶ The notions of “personalised” culture and sexual behavioural revolution stem from Rotkirch (2000, 224-239).

public sphere - a little later. However, the Russian Soviet experience of sexual liberation and the articulation of sexuality derives from a different historical and cultural background than in the West.

To realize that others have the same kind of experiences is an important part of “making the personal political”: “The text is read less for its own sake, as a literary construct, than for its content in relation to its similarities and differences to the reader’s own life. Reception, in other words, is strongly functional and often collective.” (Felski 1989, 93.) By assuming the role of a more experienced woman the narrator offers her own experience as a guide for younger/less experienced girls, who are, perhaps, at the beginning of their path to discovering their sexuality. This is knowledge gained in intimate relations and given to be consumed in intimate relations, it is given in order to enlighten and to help. In a way one could say that this is what feminism in the West prompted women to do: to explore their own experiences and selves and make them heard, political, that is, to let the invisible and silent in patriarchal society speak and show to other women who could identify with them.

7.2 Making and Breaking Models

7.2.1 Searching for a “Common Cause”

Based on its representation of the protagonist’s development, Arbatova’s text could be characterized a feminist *Bildungsroman*. The plot concentrates on the protagonist’s development from a young girl and a woman living in a patriarchal society to being more self-aware of this role and becoming more critical of it and of society. This narrative strategy includes a specific distinction between the protagonist and the narrator. The narrator can be characterised as authoritative - she can move freely between past and present, she knows what the protagonist thinks, and can readily convey this to the readers. The narrative voice can be characterized as being divided between the perceptive focalizer - the protagonist, and the psychological and ideological focalizer, the narrator, as can be drawn from the following example:

Эти строки не для того, чтобы прибавить к моему декамерону ещё одну историю. Их будут читать мужчины, и, может быть, это их хоть раз остановить от свинства. Их будут читать женщины, побывавшие в подобных ситуациях и, как я прежде, считающие себя единственными виновниками. Пусть они знают, что в цивилизованном мире, если женщина говорит “нет”, но почему-либо не может сопротивляться, ситуация квалифицируется как насилие. (Arbatova 1999, 122-123)

These lines are here not in order to add another story to my Decameron. They will be read by men, and, maybe, it will stop them even once from being swine. They will be read by women who have been in situations like this, and, as I used to, think that they alone are to blame. They should understand that in a civilized

world, if a woman says “no”, but for some reason cannot offer resistance, the situation qualifies as violence. (Arbatova 1999, 122-123)

This quotation, in my opinion, brings out the function of the text as a site for mutual identification between the author-narrator and her readers: the narrator prompts the readers to identify with the text, in addition, she herself identifies with the putative readers and her own past self (“as I used to”). The text thus concentrates on the perception of the protagonist at the time when events occur, but the narrator acts as a psychological and ideological authority over these experiences by analysing them and giving them meanings. This reinforces the aspect of the protagonist as an example from which the readers can learn, as the narrator herself has learned. In the extracts quoted earlier, the narrator also makes herself, that is, herself as a protagonist, and other women represented in the text, into examples whose behaviour she, now the feminist analyst, explains to the readers. In comparison, Felski writes:

Feminist confession ... is ... concerned with ... delineating the specific problems and experiences which bind women together. It thus tends to emphasize the ordinary events of a protagonist’s life, their typicality in relation to a notion of communal identity. (Felski 1989, 94)

This narrative tactic, then, is used to reinforce the typicality of the experiences - the protagonist is one of many, and the use of an authoritative narrator as the mediator of experience and knowledge. In this sense the tactic resembles that in Petkevič’s and other Gulag narratives, where the protagonist’s experience - as one of the many - is also described in the form of a *Bildungsroman*, where she gains the awareness of the narrator. However, this strategy of writing also brings out the problems of such exemplary narratives: “[T]he very process of recording intrudes upon that which is being recorded and changes it. (...) Life itself is revealed as literary material awaiting processing by the author, who begins to experience her own life self-consciously as a text” (ibid. 113). In the case of Arbatova’s text, making protagonist into an example and a model can at times cause disbelief and criticism. The narrative represents the protagonist’s life in chronological order, from the difficult childhood to the disappointments of youth, becoming a mother of twins, becoming a writer etc. The tone of narration is self-ironic, but in the end it creates the image of the protagonist as a positive model, who is able to overcome the conflicts and difficulties and grow more self-aware. It puts the narrator-protagonist in the position of a teacher, who knows “what is best”, because, when looking back on her own life, the benefit of hindsight gives her the authority and opportunity to see it as a purposeful path towards the present. A teleological understanding of life-writing is evident here, and it leaves practically no space for dealing with

different approaches to these problems, or with alternative models (Kolkenbrock-Netz & Schuller 1982, 162-163).¹⁷

One way of turning life's misfortunes into good fortune, is to invent a "what-if" story, which presents a different version of one's life, how it might have been, had the circumstances been more favourable, as in Arbatova's text. The what-ifs represent an apparently ideal version of the protagonist's biography, which would have led to a more successful result thanks to the benefit of hindsight. However, as it turns out, the end result after all would have been far from successful. If Arbatova, as the what-if story suggests, had become a successful and respected Soviet poetess, she would, says the narrator, be in great agony at the age of forty, after the changes of *perestroika*: she would have difficulties in fulfilling her artistic and other human potential, because what she has gone through in her real life story, represented in her text, has helped her to survive and find ways of fulfilling herself. Thus the what if story is rejected, and the declaration at the beginning of the book ("to look closely at the events of your own life and accept them") is restored and reinforced:

Я оглядываюсь назад, на эти сорок лет с удовольствием, напоминая одну высокородную особу, просидевшую 25 лет в лагерях. Ей переломали руки, ноги... Она ездила на инвалидной коляске, улыбалась и говорила: "Подумать только, в какое интересное время мы живём!" (...) Мне сорок лет... иногда кажется, что всё уже было. Иногда кажется, что всё ещё только начинается. (Arbatova 1999, 458)

When looking back at my forty years I remember one noble person who had been in prison camps for 25 years. Her legs and feet had been broken... She was in a wheelchair, smiled and said: "Just think what an interesting time we are living in!" (...) I am forty... Sometimes it seems that everything has already happened. Sometimes it feels that everything is just beginning. (Arbatova 1999, 458)

Here, again, is a reference to the prison camp theme: the narrator seems to equate her experience of life with that of the woman who had spent 25 years in the camps. The experience has not made her bitter, but, as the narrator lets us understand, she is eager to learn more of her time and world around her, as is the narrator.

The openness of Arbatova's narrator about her past, sexuality and career are a means to convert her story into a representative example for women and for men. Arbatova, as is said at the beginning of her book, uses autobiography as an instrument, a means of telling the story of a feminist who wishes to give an example and support to other women, who have not yet seen the constraints of

¹⁷ The authors analyse Anja Meulenbelt's autobiography in following manner: "Die Autobiographie von Anja Meulenbelt also zeichnet sich durch ein illusionär-ideologisches Totalitätskonzept aus, das das 'weibliche Subjekt' als neue Heroine formuliert./ The autobiography of Anja Meulenbelt presents itself as a pseudo-ideological concept of totality, which forms the 'female subject' as a new heroine".

the patriarchal order, or are not able to resist it. The “private” in this text is “public” because of the manner in which it is narrated: everything that is told is subjugated to the author’s political purpose in writing this book. The forming of subjectivity, or the reflective process of “memory-work”, which occur especially in Bonner’s text, are not its primary concern. Thus, the openness about an active woman’s sexual life seems fairly purposeful: it is meant to give both an educative and typical example for other women to identify with.

7.2.2 *The “Beloved Self”*

Thus, considering what was said above, what can be deemed problematic in connection with Arbatova’s feminist project in her text is its teleology: the narrator fully owns her heroine, her past and past experiences, ignoring the existence of “difference”: different experiences, ways of life, sexualities etc., and the difference in her self connected with retrospective narrating about the experiences. The author, for instance, expresses seemingly simplistic views on housewives, Russian feminists, men reinforcing certain stereotypes instead of seeing them as part of the hierarchical structures of society. The feminist poet and literary critic, Nina Gabriëljan, has noted of Arbatova’s prose that it is built on dichotomist thinking. The author uses the tactic of reversing existing patriarchal dichotomies, but in so doing she does not escape them, but may in fact reinforce them, and narrow her own space within that system.¹⁸

However, stereotypes themselves have first to be recognised, in order to become critical of them. In this sense, it is important to acknowledge the already noted function of the text as site of identification and consciousness raising for readers: the question is of a realistic autobiography where the author represents her experiences for others to read and identify with and possibly to learn from them. We may ask for whom the book has been written. Perhaps the answer would contain (most probably) ordinary Russian girls and women, who are not so familiar with feminist thinking, but who could recognise themselves in the text.

The didactic tone of narrating, its consciousness-raising aspect have given rise to irritation among some Russian readers. The heroine of the text can at times appear self-righteous and self-centred, as the critic Irina Lukjanova notes in her review, where she calls Arbatova’s writings filled with self-admiration which turns into self-promotion. However, she also recognizes the identifying factor of the text:

¹⁸ Gabriëljan (1996, 50): “В дихотомическом, жестко бинарном мире мужское и женское пространства борются друг с другом за саморасширение, и - парадоксальным образом - это приводит к усыханию, сужению этих пространств./ In a dichotomist, rigidly binary world male and female space struggle one against the other for more space for themselves, and - paradoxically - this leads to withering and restricting of these spaces.”

...[Л]юбой нормальный человек ... не может не сочувствовать Маше, прошедшей через болезнь, тяжелые операции, восстановление изуродованного лица, через чудовищное советское время и продолжающие оставаться чудовищными детские больницы. (...) Все это могло стать настоящей книгой, при одном маленьком “если”. Если бы Арбатова ... художественно осмысляла действительность в некотором отрыве от себя, любимой. (Lukjanova 1999, 33).¹⁹

The problem with Arbatova’s text, according to Lukjanova, is the lack of aestheticism, the lack of distancing herself, “the beloved”, from the text. In the light of what has been discussed above, this observation is accurate, but its consequence is seen differently by Lukjanova. The critic does not really acknowledge the tasks Arbatova’s text purports to fulfil, but measures it against the concept of aesthetics. Lukjanova’s statement sheds interesting light on the prevailing division between literature and life, although the critic recognises the feeling of sympathy for the protagonist caused by the text. Further, according to Lukjanova, Arbatova’s style is one reason for the poor development of feminism in Russia.²⁰ The status of feminism in today’s Russia surely makes an interesting topic in connection with Arbatova’s texts and their reception, but suffice it to say here that if we take into account the prevailing connotations of feminism in Russia, the book offers an alternative and exceptional insight into the life of a woman who fulfills herself as a feminist on the personal, political and professional level.²¹

¹⁹ “Any normal person ... can’t help but sympathise with Maša, who has gone through sickness, serious surgery, reconstruction of her ruined face, through the horrible Soviet time and still horrible children’s hospitals. (...) All this could become a real book, if it weren’t for one little ‘if’. If only Arbatova ... would creatively conceive of the world a little bit more distanced from her beloved self.”

²⁰ See Lukjanova (1999, 32): “Наговорить колкостей с милой улыбкой, привести в пример себя, своих мужей, своих детей как идеальную модель построения отношений в современной семье - в этом, в основном, заключается феминизм Марии Арбатовой в его телевизионном варианте./ To present acridities with a tender smile, to make oneself, one’s husbands and children an example of ideal model of the relations in a contemporary family - this is what, broadly, Marija Arbatova’s feminism in its TV-format consists of.”

²¹ To mention briefly some interesting points in Lukjanova’s article, the author names with cynical irony the topics which “the babuška of Russian feminism” strives to “explain Russian women”: “Женщина как личность самодостаточна и независима от мужчины. Отношения в семье должны быть партнерскими... Женщина в праве сама выбирать свой образ жизни, партнеров и так далее. Каждый да стирает носки свои. Если муж в новых экономических условиях лежит на диване и предъявляет трудящейся жене претензии, то для чего такой муж? Нельзя позволять себя давить и собою манипулировать. Бьет не значит любит. Надо помогать жертвам насилия. И тому подобное. Аксиомы, постулаты и права так просты и при этом так еще непонятны дремучим русским менталитетом, что нужен феминизм и Маша Арбатова - пророк его.../ Woman as a personality is independent of the man. The relations in the family should

Thus, although the text promotes the heroine as an example, which might be received as authoritative and self-promotion, on the other hand it could be viewed as forming an important symbolic model of identity. As Felski puts it: “The creation and affirmation of symbolic identities constitutes a recurring need on the part of marginalized social groups, fulfilling a desire for self-validation in the face of the hostility of a dominant culture” (1989, 119). The text represents the protagonist’s experiences as a feminist in a culture where feminism is deemed alien and incongruous with the traditional values of that culture. The description of her becoming one of the first feminists on TV touches upon the problems she encountered:

Я шла в передачу пропагандировать определённый набор идей и должна была стать первой феминистской, запущенной в широкий контекст. В передаче сначала даже были некоторые раздумья, можно ли называть человека феминистской, прилично ли это, нормативно ли, но это было моё жёсткое условие.// Конечно, если б я человеческим языком с весёлыми байками читала лекции о феминизме, гуманитарный стандарт в стране явно бы не понизился. Но, никто не предлагал учебного формата. (...) Страна и руководство канала заказывали шоу, и им было всё равно, феминистка я или жираф с двумя головами. И мне предстояло упаковывать горькую пилюлю прав человека в золотой шуршащий фантик. (Arbatova 1999, 432)

I went on the show to propagate certain ideas and I was to become the first feminist in a wide context. There were at first even some hesitations on the programme as to whether a person can be called a feminist and whether it is appropriate or normative, but that was my strict condition.// Of course if I read lectures on feminism in understandable language and good humour, the humanitarian standard in the country would not get lower. But, no one assumed an educational form. (...) The country and the leaders of the channel ordered the show, and it didn’t matter to them whether I was a feminist or a two-headed

be equal... Woman has the right to choose her way of life, partners and so on. Each should wash their own socks. If a husband in the new economic circumstances lies on the couch and makes demands on his working wife, what’s the need of such a husband? One should not permit oneself to be suppressed or manipulated. To hit doesn’t mean to love. One has to help the victims of violence. And so on. These axioms, postulates and rights are so simple, and besides, so poorly understood by the gloomy Russian mentality, that what we need is feminism and Maša Arbatova, its prophet...” It is noteworthy that the real social problems behind these topics in themselves do not seem to concern the author, only the fact that a feminist, Maša Arbatova, is explaining them makes them somehow banal. At the end of the article the author compares Arbatova’s text to that of Darja Aslamova’s *Приключения дрянной девчонки* (The Adventures of a Bad Girl), to the advantage of the latter, mainly because “...Даша не ищет для своей наготы никакого идеологического прикрытия.../ Daša doesn’t hide her nakedness behind any ideological safeguard”. I do not agree with the notion that a literary text is void of ideology if it simply does not admit to subscribe to one. In the case of Aslamova’s text the newly received permission to speak about sex in public in the early 1990s and equating this discourse on sexuality with freedom (of speech, for instance) banish any problems linked with the kind of behaviour the text promotes.

giraffe. And my task was to wrap the bitter chunk of human rights in golden rustling paper. (Arbatova 1999, 432)

The text thus also serves as an apology of the author's public image and public activity, by which she seeks to explain and defend in the quotation above. She had to meet the expectations of "the country and the channel's leaders" who, according to her, were really not interested in feminism as a social and political agenda, but in entertainment. Arbatova in her book responds to feminists who blamed her and her appearance in TV "...в дискредитации женского движения и вольной трактовке терминов/ for harming the reputation of the women's movement and arbitrarily rendering terms" (ibid.). In her defence the narrator points out that the media in which she worked had its own peculiarities, and that she had to "повысить ценность идей феминизма в сознании женщины на кухне, которой я сто лет не снилась; и докричаться до неё через толщу ежедневно решаемых ею проблем/ elevate the esteem of feminism in the mind of the woman in the kitchen who would not have dreamed of my existence in a hundred years; and reach her attention through the layers of problems she solved daily" (ibid. 433). The narrator thus implies that her intentions in the programme were good (to educate people, to help women) but she had a hard time making it work in the way she had intended. The autobiography also serves as a defence of the "self", and the author-narrator offers a rejoinder to her critics.

In conclusion it can be said that this text is read less for its own sake, that is, to achieve primarily aesthetic pleasure, than for its realistic representation of the author's life. The author also does not intend her text to be read as pure literature, but as she puts it, the writing of the text serves as a way to think about past experiences and accept them. However, although the author declares that the text "is not literature" this does not mean that it uses no fictional devices. In fact the text is called an autobiographical novel. I suppose this declaration could be seen as criticism of the prevailing, conventional notions about literature and aesthetics.²² Within the literary institution women's writing about "their" sphere of life has been considered "not literature" but documentaries (which lack the aesthetic composition of the material), which are thus less worthy of literary research.²³

The discussion on Arbatova's text raised the observation that it represents itself as a site for identification for readers, especially for other women. The writer of the text in a way downplays the purely literary, aesthetic aspect of her text by stating at the beginning of her book that "autobiography is

²² In the second edition of the text, *Прощание с XX веком* (Farewell to the 20th Century, 2002), there is an additional explanation of the sentence quoted: "И у меня нет комплексов по поводу писательской планки этого текста./ And I don't have any complexes concerning the literary level of this text" (Arbatova 2002, 8).

²³ Cf. the discussion in Chapter 2 of this study.

not literature” but “a way to look at the life’s events and accept them”. This statement was further enhanced by the narrator’s forthright, unmediated, approach to the reader and by the confessional mode of narration, where special emphasis is placed on the textual means of creating a feeling of authenticity.

Therefore it is as if the lack of literary distancing (cf. Lukjanova) serves as a literary device of its own kind, only it is not used to draw attention to the text itself as a literary construct, but as “the authentic self-expression of an authorial subject”, as Felski notes about a similar feature in (Western) texts she defines as “feminist confession”²⁴:

The more obviously “literary” the text - the more clearly it signals its fictional status through such textual features as irony, parody, and self-reflexivity, extended use of symbolic and “poetic” language, or elaborated narrative structures - the less likely the reader is to respond to the text as the authentic self-expression of an authorial subject. (...) [Feminist confession] attempts ... to achieve the reverse of the defamiliarization which Russian formalism identified as the key function of literature, in order to inspire a process of involvement and identification by persuading readers that they are reading an intimate communication addressed to them personally by the author. (Felski 1989, 97-98)

Although the texts Felski describes as “feminist confessions” imitate such forms of writing as the diary and the letter, which are not exactly what Arbatova’s text represents, the idea is applicable to it, and can offer an adequate way of analysing it. Arbatova’s text can be seen to include this idea of a process which invites the readers to be involved and identify with the author’s described experience.

7.3 Through the Eyes of the Daughter II

Arbatova’s narrator directly says in her autobiography that her mother’s “idiotic biography” was a main influence on her becoming a feminist. Interestingly, the cause for conflict between the mother and the daughter’s lives is seemingly almost the opposite of that in Bonner’s narrative. The narrator-daughter thinks that her mother sacrificed her own creativity and potential for the sake of her husband and family for no other apparent reason than the patriarchal notion that a wife’s biography is dependent on the husband’s. What is common, on the other hand, is the experience of lack of maternal attention and care in childhood.

Arbatova does not give many positive descriptions of her mother, whereas in Bonner’s text the reader could to a certain extent sympathize with the mother, thanks to the narrator’s own striving to understand her. In Arbatova’s

²⁴ In this connection Felski refers to the statement found in Kate Millet’s autobiography *Flying* which states: “This is not literature”. A similar statement is to be found in Arbatova’s autobiography.

text the authoritative voice of the narrator depicts the mother as controlling, selfish, and inconsiderate towards her. She sees her mother as a “professional” victim, whose existence is, on the one hand, dependent on someone taking control over her life for her, and on the other, on her being able to control the lives of those around her.

There are also further tensions between her childhood, family and society: as the narrator looks back on her childhood, she feels that her parents gave her, a one-year-old child, simple-mindedly to the mercy of society when what she really needed was parental care. This lack of attention to one’s own children because of complicated circumstances in life also emerge in the other women’s texts, for instance, in Svetlana Šenbrunn’s text the narrator-protagonist is left alone to stay in a cottage with a strange family for a whole summer while her parents take for a trip together across the country. The protagonist’s feeling of being left alone is strong, because the parents do not even send her letters. Petkevič’s text contains a reminiscence of being left alone, without parental care, in their big house, and later she is left to live with her grandmother when her parents decide to take only the younger sisters with them for the father’s new assignment. Bonnèr also recalls spending summers without her parents but in the safe care of her grandmother, or with other children in a pioneer camp. The description of the end of childhood, however, when the father’s arrest and the search of their home take place, is imbued with a feeling of being abandoned: at the time the mother appears to be too devastated because of the arrest of her husband to notice her daughter’s fear and to support her.

In Arbatova’s text the narrator’s depiction of her mother in the chapter “Мама” brings to the fore the despotic, controlling and abusive mother figure; quite a contrast to what more traditional, conservative views of motherhood would represent.²⁵ According to the narrator “[маме] хотелось, чтоб мир близких начинался с неё и заканчивался ею, она не имела частного пространства и не подозревала, что частное пространство другого священо/ [Мама] wanted that the world of her nearest to start and end in her, she did not have her own personal space, and it did not occur to her that the personal space of others is sacred” (1999, 32).

The narrator depicts several incidents in her mother’s life which represent her as a selfish, unhappy, “professional victim”; who spoils everybody else’s life because her own life is spoilt. Nevertheless, the narrator seems to know what really bothers mother:

Развестись маме не хотелось — в этом случае, во-первых, пришлось бы стать самостоятельной, во-вторых, брак с успешным мужчиной оказался главным социальным достижением ее жизни. Осталось последнее — превратить семью в ад. (Arbatova 1999, 30)

²⁵ See for example Tat’jana Okulova’s eulogy of self-sacrificing, altruistic motherhood and the role of woman-mother as the preserver of Russia’s sacred traditions. (1990, 183, 184).

Mother did not want to divorce - in that case, firstly, she would have had to become independent, secondly, marriage to a successful man was the best social achievement of her life. There was one thing left - to change the family life into hell. (Arbatova 1999, 30)

This ironic attitude to mother's biography also serves as an indicator of the mother's influence on the narrator's life. Writing about the mother's influence, about her bad behaviour serves as a liberating outlet from the mother's control over her life in her childhood, in a somewhat similar way as to that in Bonner's text. The serious consequences of the poliomyelitis from which the protagonist suffered throughout her childhood and youth are overshadowed by the mother's own, "invented" illnesses:

Вместо того чтобы поддержать отца и помочь ему вытянуть семью, она стала третьим ребёнком. Прежде решения за неё принимала бабушка, и теперь, оставшись самостоятельной, мама не знала, что делать со свободой. Ей было некуда себя деть, и она выстроила эмоциональную жизнь вокруг своих псевдоблезней. "Больное сердце" закончилось, когда в двадцать лет, родив близнецов и подыхая от перегрузки, я жёстко отказалась выполнять какое-то её распоряжение. Она "легла умирать", вызвали "скорую", приехал молодой врач, сделал кардиограмму, посмотрел на меня, всё понял и сказал: "Как вам не стыдно! Посмотрите, в каком состоянии ваша дочь. У вас сердце, как у спортсмена." (Arbatova 1999, 29)

Instead of supporting Father and helping him to support the family, she became a third child. Grandmother used to make decisions for her, and now, after becoming independent, Mother did not know what to do with her freedom. She didn't know where to go, and she built her emotional life around her pseudo-diseases. The "heartache" ended, when at twenty, after giving birth to twins, dying of too much work, I refused to obey one of her orders. She "lay down to die", called the ambulance and in came a young doctor, took the cardiogram, looked at me, understood everything and said: "Aren't you ashamed of yourself! Look, in what condition your daughter is. You have the heart of an athlete." (Arbatova 1999, 29)

The narrator as it were makes the story of her mother into an educational, "warning" example: this is what happens when women are not emancipated, do not fulfill themselves apart from their role in the family. They become like naughty children who must be told to behave themselves. Thus, the narrator expresses her criticism especially towards society for its idealization of motherhood and defining a woman/wife through her husband.

Although Arbatova's text does not give a smooth description of her mother, the narrator does not entirely blame her either. The explanation for her becoming a feminist points a finger at society, in which, despite women's education and ideology of equality between the sexes, women's status could well be dependent on that of the husband. However, there are also other explanations in the mother's biography.

It is interesting that the narrator sees her mother's inability to be autonomous as a legacy of the latter's despotic mother, who in turn was a victim of unfortunate circumstances of various kind in her childhood. Another reason is found in the family history, which is mere "repression" and "unspoken traumas". The narrator traces the psychologically abusive attitude towards children back to her grandmother's childhood, when the latter's father punished her most severely. The narrator presents the following story about the incident:

Семья была настолько книжная, что популярнейшим совместным досугом были читки вслух и обсуждения. Юная библиоманка, бабушка Ханна, старшая из семи детей, за это жестоко поплатилась, предпочитая книжку помощи по хозяйству. У мальчика это бы приветствовали, у девочки - жестоко карали. Однажды она зачиталась так, что не открыла родителям запертую дверь. Предполагая самое ужасное, прадед выломал дверь и обнаружил погружённую в книжку Ханну, машинально качающую кроватку с орущим изо всех сил младшим братом.

Наказание было чудовищным. Торопившийся к ученикам прадед схватил дочь за руку, притащил в класс мальчиков и высек перед всеми, сняв с неё трусы. Сегодня благодаря психоанализу мы знаем, что такие истории дают неврозы, подобные последствиям группового изнасилования в детстве. Думаю, это сломало биографию самой бабушки, но и хорошо прошло по моей матери и дяде. Мне, полагаю, тоже перепало. (Arbatova 1999, 214-215)

[My mother's] family was very literary. Their favourite entertainment was reading aloud and discussing the books. A young bibliophile, Grandmother Hanna, the eldest of seven children, had to pay a price for this, because she preferred reading a book to domestic chores. In a boy this would have been a welcome feature, but in a girl it was punished severely. Once she was so absorbed in her reading that she didn't open a door that was locked to her parents. Assuming the worst, Great-grandfather broke in and found Hanna, absorbed in reading, mechanically rocking the cradle in which her little brother was crying.

The punishment was severe. Great-grandfather hurried back to his pupils, grabbing his daughter by the hand, dragged her into the class with the boys and whipped her in front of everybody after taking off her panties. Today, thanks to psychoanalysis, we know that such incidents cause neuroses, which have consequences similar to a mass rape experienced as a child. I think, that this was decisive in Grandmother's biography, and it also came through to my mother and uncle. And I suppose I had a share of it as well. (Arbatova 1999, 214-215)

The theme of the hereditary or learned shame and the consequences of this are discussed in more detail in the second edition of Arbatova's biography *Прощание с XX веком* (Farewell to the 20th century, 2002). In this second edition the narrator explains the last sentence in the quotation below: she herself has whipped her seven-year-old sons twice in a similar frenzy as her great-grandfather. The latter was not aware, as the author thanks to psychoanalysis is now, of the psychological consequences of such beating. Thus, the narrator tries

to decipher and also understand the reasons behind the shame, and sacrificing in her mother's life:

Все обращалось вокруг бабушки Ханны... То, что с ней сделал собственный отец, было бедой, но осознавалось как позор. Полагаю, что именно в логике этой путаницы мама и скрывала факт наличия предыдущей семьи у моего отца.

Тема женской жертвенности ради мужчины активно разрабатывалась бабушкой и в биографии моей мамы достигла совершенно театрального апогея. (Arbatova 2002, 69)

Everything revolved around Grandmother Hanna... What her own father did to her was a misfortune, but was conceived of as shameful. I suppose that due to the logic of this confusion Mama hid the fact about the existence of my father's previous family.

The theme of female sacrifice for the sake of the husband was actively developed by Grandmother and in the biography of my mother it achieved its theatrical culmination. (Arbatova 2002, 69)

On the grounds of the passages above, it can be stated, that the narrator is engaged in a similar kind of project of trying to understand her mother and her self, the past and the present, to the narrator in Bonnèr's text. Both texts tend to represent the mother (and the grandmother) as victims of their time, and themselves as explorers and explainers of the circumstances of all their biographies. In this sense both narratives "collapse the mother's story into that of the daughter: the daughter is seen as possessing a privileged insight into the relationship, and her account is seen as giving a 'true' representation of the mother" (Lawler 2000, 15).

However, as was already stated, in Arbatova's representation the mother figure is far less sympathetic than in Bonnèr's, therefore it appears that the latter representation emphasises more understanding and accepting than the former, in which both feminist critique and the critique of Soviet society constitute an important ideological position for the narrator. It is, however, interesting that both writers create and use the theme of "mother and/or mother-and-daughter" as a locus of writing (cf. Hirsch 1989, 132). In Bonnèr's case the tactic of writing about her mother through childhood experiences brings out the emotional, bodily memory. Although Arbatova's father was a writer and an important figure for the young heroine of the text, the writing subject and creativity are connected with her identity as a mother, but in a very different manner from Bonnèr's case:

Как всякая семейная баба, я писала, создавая окно в домашнем хозяйстве. В основном делая это лёжа в холле на ковре, пока у детей был дневной сон. Это меньше всего было похоже на "работу". Я клала сыновей в разные комнаты, но не садилась в комнате за письменный стол, а ложилась посередине в холле, чтобы успеть допрыгнуть к тому, что заплачет первым,

быстрее, чем он разбудит второго. *Я писала много и быстро, считая “муки творчества” позой бездельников. Какие там муки, если у тебя близнецовый конвейер. И, вообще, если для тебя это мучительно, зачем писать.* (Arbatova 1999, 174 - 175, italics MR)

Like any other housewife, I wrote making a window out of the household. I often did it lying in the hall on a carpet during the children’s nap. Least of all it resembled “work”. I put my sons in different rooms, didn’t sit down behind a desk, but lay in the middle of the hall in order to rush in time to whoever started to cry first, so that he wouldn’t wake up the other. I wrote a lot and fast, considering “pains of creation” an idler’s pretence. What pain can you feel if you have twins? And anyway, if you are in pain, why write in the first place. (Arbatova 1999, 174 - 175, italics MR)

In this quotation the narrator describes her situation as a young mother and writer, both contrasting and combining the two roles: writing is not work for her - it is freedom from the domestic sphere. She does it *lying* on the carpet, not sitting behind a desk. In the text the narrator defines herself as “a housewife who writes plays” (ibid. 207). This statement conceals a considerable amount of self-irony, because she is an educated and recognised playwright. The irony of a woman writer’s situation appears in this passage as a belittling of one’s own work: her work is not real work, but instead it is therapy for the house-wife. It is also noteworthy that her life as a mother of two small children does not give her the luxury of sitting behind the desk and “creating”. On the other hand, the conception of creativity itself is demystified: for the narrator “pains of creation” are a myth which has nothing to do with her own creativity. For her creative work means *freedom* from pain, it is not even work.²⁶ In the quotation the

²⁶ Another Russian woman writer, V. Tul’čina, associates her becoming a writer with her becoming a mother. Tul’čina states in her short autobiography that the person Tul’čina lives separately from the author Tul’čina, but the motivation to separate the two is not because she thinks of her writing as separate from her life, but because she identifies this duality with the birth of her child, with which the birth of the author in her coincided. Her roles as author and mother are *linked* with each other, as she herself notes, most of all because of the fact that she belongs to the female sex: “Оба события тесно взаимосвязаны. В первую очередь, тем счастливым обстоятельством, что имею честь принадлежать к женскому полу/ Both events are tightly linked with each other. First and foremost by the happy circumstance that I have the honour to belong to the female sex.” (Skvorcova-Akbulatova 1995, 120-121.) Adrienne Rich’s description of her own situation as a poet and the mother of small children can also be instructive in connection with Arbatova’s understanding of her own creativity. Rich (1996/1972, 88-89) writes: “I want to make it clear that I am *not* saying that in order to write well, or think well, it is necessary to become unavailable to others, or to become a devouring ego. This has been the myth of the masculine artist and thinker... But to be a female human being trying to fulfil traditional female functions in a traditional way *is* in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination. The word traditional is important here. There must be ways and we will be finding out more and more about them, in which the energy of creation and the energy of relation can be united. (...) In the late fifties I was able to

narrator in a way universalises her own experience: she was able to write productively in this manner, and, thus, others' creative pains seem like pretence to her.

On the other hand one should perhaps not be so quick to point to "universalising" one's experiences, if one looks back on the narrator's explanation of her becoming a feminist because of her mother's idiotic biography. Her mother made a career of being a house-wife, according to the narrator, suffocating and repressing her own creativity and her need for self-fulfillment. By occupying herself with a career in writing despite (or because of) two small children, the narrator seeks to break this model. That for the narrator this tactic in writing has specific political meanings comes to the surface in other descriptions, which concern woman's role *solely* as a mother at home. In the next passage the description of a Soviet housewife is almost a caricature:

Соседки, мамыши сверстников моих детей (...) постепенно превращались в клинические существа с тяжёлым взглядом скота, идущего на бойню. Они целый день стояли в очереди, у плиты, у стиральной машины, у гладильной доски, бегали по дому с тряпкой и пылесосом. Уже почти ненавидели собственных детей, и всё время дёргали их, орали, запрещали землю, лужи, возню и лазанье на деревья. К вечеру они дожидались "сверхчеловека" - мужа с работы, снова орали на детей, потому что "папа устал", металась у стола с тарелками, смотрели кино "про любовь" по телевизору и ложились с мужем в постель, о чём потом отзывались с большим омерзением. (Arbatova 1999, 178)

The neighbours, mothers of the children same age as mine (...) little by little changed into clinic creatures with a heavy look of cattle, going to the slaughterhouse. They stood all day in queues, beside the hearth, the washing machine, the ironing board, ran around the house with a rag and vacuum cleaner. They already almost hated their children and nagged them constantly, yelled, forbade soil, puddles, noise and climbing trees. In the evening they waited for the "super-man" husband from work, again yelled at children, because "father is tired", bustled about in the kitchen, watched a movie "about love" in TV and went to bed with the husband, about which they later talked with disgust. (Arbatova 1999, 178)

The narrator gives a stereotypical depiction of these women and, true, over-generalizes them. However, as was already also pointed out, to deconstruct and criticise the stereotypes, one has to become aware of them in the first place. Perhaps, as Labovitz notes in her analysis of the female *Bildungsroman* in the

write, for the first time, directly about experiencing myself as a woman. The poem was jotted in fragments during children's naps, brief hours in a library, or at 3.00 a.m. after rising with a wakeful child. (...) Yet I began to feel that my fragments and scraps had a common consciousness and a common theme, one which I would have been very unwilling to put on paper at an earlier time because I had been taught that poetry should be 'universal,' which meant, of course, non-female."

twentieth century, before the heroine can find a mentor and a role model for herself, “she has the burden of creating new ones and of breaking the old models” (1986, 236).

Arbatova’s book to a large extent differs from the other four texts in this study from the generational, temporal, and professional points of view. But, following Žerebkina, it can be said that the five texts share similar autobiographical practices of representation of the forbidden, the corporeal, the biological in the late Soviet and post-Soviet context (Žerebkina 2003, 65). Reading Arbatova with Felski’s theory of (Western) feminist confession brought out the significance of this representation in connection with the writer’s political, feminist agenda. I would contend that the other texts also share to a certain extent the practices of identification and representation of the female experience.

8 Preliminary Conclusions: Constructing “The Self”

In this and the next chapter I seek to integrate the findings of my literary analyses conducted in the five previous chapters with the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 1 and the historical context of Russian women’s writing outlined in Chapter 2. As already stated, the aim is not to stress the radicality of these texts but to contextualise the historical specificity of the phenomenon of women’s autobiographical writing in Russia in the 1990s.

As has been noted, the control of “female publicity” (what women may do and say in public) and the control of female sexuality have shaped the forms in which women’s life experience has been represented (Miller 1996, 110). According to Žerebkina, late Soviet and post-Soviet women’s writing in Russia realises a conscious ideological protest against the preceding, official Soviet representations of women: in contrast to the public, official women’s images of the Soviet era, the main sphere of representation of femaleness is the sphere of family. In this sense, this sphere is not just “private” but it stands for the “non public”, “unofficial”. (Žerebkina 2003, 63.) It is difficult to draw clear lines between private and public in these texts, not least because these concepts themselves are not accurate and employ different meanings and values in different contexts¹. In this sense, the notion of semi-private or semi-public narrative act coined by Lanser (1986, 353) in connection with women’s texts might help to escape the juxtaposition between “private” and “public”.² Accordingly, we might call these texts semi-public or semi-private narratives of women’s lives, which strive to represent that which was forbidden, unofficial, non public.

The women autobiographers and memoirists whom this study concerns are all educated, intellectual women who have proved themselves on various

¹ See Susan Gal’s article, where she approaches the dichotomy from the perspective of Peircian semiotics: “A semiotic approach to public and private suggests that ... ‘public’ and ‘private’ are not places, domains, spheres of activity, or even types of interaction. Even less are they distinctive institutions or practices. Public and private are co-constitutive cultural categories, as many have pointed out. But they are also, and equally importantly, indexical signs that are always relative: dependent for part of their referential meaning on the interactional context in which they are used.” (Gal 2002, 80.)

² The concept “semi-private” has also served to describe women’s activities in Soviet Russia. Temkina (1997, 51) uses it in connection with women’s place in the Soviet Union: “I assume that the Soviet woman was and is strong enough in that semi-private sphere. It was a special kind of activity to organize a household in conditions of total deficit and a system of state distribution and privileges. This sphere demanded special skill and organizational and communication experience. Therefore it empowered those who operated in it. Women’s networks and communication were enormous. Women’s interests in the fulfilment of the role of working mother were realized through these networks. Political passivity of women is connected not only to structural/ situational and socializational factors, but also to the realization of women’s interests outside of social movements and politics, in the sphere of secondary interactions, e.g. social networks as a way of horizontal interaction (ibid.).”

arenas of cultural, artistic and political activity. For the four writers, Arbatova, Petkevič, Pliseckaja and Gerštejn, the finding of their place in society was a result of difficult struggle. This construction of the past as struggle constituted an important part of the narrated self. In Bonnèr's text, too, the story of her childhood is a locus for the adult narrator's discovered but also constructed self. The first person narrators search for the constituents of their identity in a past which is lost.

The constructions of "bygone years", "self-discovery", reliance on "subjective reality as the only one available for them", are features that characterise contemporary Russian memoirs according to Balina (2003, 195-196). I agree with Balina on the basis of my own material because, for all the writers - Gerštejn, Petkevič, Bonnèr, Pliseckaja, Arbatova - subjective recollection of the past was an important motivation for writing. It is another matter, however, to discern exactly how this subjectivity differs, for instance, from the memoirs and autobiographies of earlier times. To some extent the emphasis on "the self" can be seen as a reaction against patterns of official Soviet memoir writing, "о времени и о себе" - about the time and about the self, where the latter and its memory was subordinated to official history (see Balina 2003, 189). "The self" is here the focus and initiator of recollection, and "the time" comes second.

Writing "against" something does not necessarily mean writing "free" from something. These writers were not inventing a new revolutionary language to describe their subjective reality when they wrote, nor do I believe that it was their aim to do so. As has been observed, they use conventional totalizing concepts as, for example, truth, in order to point to their own truth as distinctive of the official truth. Also, their wish is to mediate knowledge about the past for future generations, because, as they write, they were eyewitnesses and participants. In part their writing gives didactic examples. These features can be found in official Soviet memoirs. (See Balina 2003, Liljeström 2000a). However, the texts do express a sophisticated understanding of writing as fiction, where reality is constructed. Their writing serves as a way to construct an understanding of the past for themselves, or of themselves.

The texts would seem to reproduce images of the strong Russian woman, a bearer of important national and social values of society insofar as they represent the protagonists as *survivors* and *carriers* of the memory of their experiences. In that sense they are heroines, who have accomplished the task of surviving, preserving their humanity and telling their stories to future generations, much in the same vein, as described by Holmgren in her article on 20th century Russian women's autobiographies (1994). This description, this plot, would seem to be in accordance with the motifs given for writing in the texts.

The act of *narrating* itself forms an important constituent of the story about the past as a survival story of the self, and the construction of the non-

public experiences of the self. The narrators create the past by looking back at it through the prism of their subjective memory. Through this process of memory narrative the “self” is constructed. The story of the self in these texts was not so much structured around an inner change, a teleological growth through change in the status of the protagonist, or perform a deconstruction of the self, the “I”, but a *recovery* of selfhood, a confirmation of subjectivity, which had been fractured in the clash between gender (their experience as women in Soviet society), class (educated, intellectual) and national identity (the controversy with the state) in the past.³ The narrators’ seek thus to “reproduce in the present a sense of what they were in the past and seek a unity between” the non-public experiences of the past and the present self (Labovitz 1986, 20-21). In this construction of the self at least two main narrative-thematic lines can be observed: the story of the quest for the self and the story of the self and others.

8.1 The Quest for the “Self”

The texts resemble each other in certain structural and thematic features. On the basis of their themes, the texts share the representation of a similar, bitter experience of the bygone years. They also include a more or less noticeable narrative structure of the quest of the narrator-protagonist: she strives to find her place in society or to live through and survive tragic and sometimes violent events. Especially noticeable is the resemblance between Petkevič’s and Arbatova’s texts in which the protagonists grow through difficult experiences to accept their lives and fates: in Petkevič’s Gulag testimony after the collapse of her family and home and the deprivation of her freedom, the restoring of the narrator-protagonist’s own self as well as the community of her friends in the prison camp are represented as the nodal points which rescue her in and after the prison camp. Arbatova’s texts structures the protagonist’s childhood with her difficult experiences of an illness as a story of survival (literally) reminiscent of Gulag narratives, in which the protagonist grows to be different from the others, autonomous, and in which the network of personal relations between women helps her to find alternative ways of coping with patriarchal values in society. Both texts represent the protagonist as a martyr, a victim, who, nevertheless, is now in the narrative testifying her survival. The narrative structure of quest for the self in writing is noticeable in the other texts as well.

The life experience gained by the narrator moulds the narrating of the protagonist’s the life story, which grows through difficult experiences and comes nearer in the end the position of the narrator, by way of sanctioning the

³ Cf. Liu (1997, 45): “Gender, class, and national identities clash rather than conjoin, resulting in woman’s loss of one identity or another and in her fractured subjectivity with regard to the nation.”; Grice (2000, 44) notes that in telling their national and personal stories female voices are fractured and at times evasive rather than authoritative like male voices.

knowledge gained by the protagonist.⁴ If we think of what *happens* in the course of the life story, it is the surviving of difficult times and endurances that takes place. The quest of the female protagonist is the gaining of her own self, the restoring of her own self *in* writing (cf. Labovitz 1986, 248). These endurances in themselves did not change the protagonists: the endurance is there as something they had gone through, and because of that, they have become, finally, who they are, but the story of the quest did not take them to another space. They had not arrived “home”, or settled down, after finding a safe place in which to write down their story, but their stories, as the open endings implied, continue. They suggest that they continue to live, and continue to write their stories.

Indeed, searching for one’s self and identity in the past or with the help of reminiscence has been considered a central thematic constituent of the female *Bildungsroman*. Labovitz (1986, 248)⁵ states that the heroines start “a search for the self lost in childhood” and “the road from ‘nothingness’ to selfhood is traversed in the quest”. This serves as a common constituent of the self in each text (in different proportions) and thus create another kind of image of the narrator not as victim, nor a bearer of national and symbolic values, but as her “self”, made coherent with the help of narrating, or confessing, her life experience which becomes a life story.

The “other” also forms an important constituent in the texts in different ways. For Pliseckaja the most prominent other is, perhaps, the state, against which she creates the story of her life and career. Petkevič directly construes the image of her self through others’ words by citing letters written by others to her. In Gulag narratives the community of women represents an important moral support for the protagonist. In Arbatova’s narrative as well, the community formed by the network of personal relations, especially between girlfriends, is represented as a site of constituting female and feminist identity of the protagonist, as well as the female public sphere of readers.

8.2 The Others

The figure of the other has received wide resonance in theoretical thinking on women’s autobiographies. Mary Mason formulated in her influential article “The Other Voice” that in women’s autobiographies significant others (husband, father, God etc.) played a significant role in the construction of the

⁴ Felski sees this as a typical feature of a feminist *Bildungsroman*: “[The] disparity between the perspectives of narrator and protagonist gradually disappears during the course of the developmental narrative, the two perspectives finally converging at the conclusion of the text, which typically serves to explicitly sanction the knowledge gained by the protagonist” (1989, 136).

⁵ Labovitz’s study on the female *Bildungsroman* is based on three Western and one East-European novel by women writers.

woman writer's autobiographical self and this was what constituted the difference of women's autobiographies in relation to men's autobiographies (Mason 1980, 210).⁶ Since then it has been suggested, i.e., by Françoise Lionnet, that the construction of the self in relation to the other could be more generally a central feature of autobiographical writing, that is, not a gender-based feature in itself (cf. Miller 1996, 111). In the material I am dealing with, "the other" comes forward in several different narrative forms. 1) It is the community of women and men which helps the protagonist-narrator to survive through a common feeling of solidarity and care-giving. 2) The others as the significant others whose influence on the narrating self (and her status as a writing subject) has been constitutive, and through which the narrating subject constructs the story of her own self. 3) The state as the other in the form of a counterforce to the "self" which leads to the formation of the non-public self. 4) The relationship between the mother and the daughter - the most significant feature involved in the representation of sexual difference.

In Bonner's and Arbatova's texts the tensions between different generations - between mothers and daughters - and the search for the matrilineal heritage represent a self-reflexive view on history, on truth, and experience. Roberta Maierhofer, who in her study explores contemporary Western women's autobiography and the mother-daughter relationship in them, outlines the "self-reflexive" narrative structure of feminist autobiographies:

What truth we come to know in reading autobiography derives not from the *facts* of a life truly remembered, but from the *meaning* the autobiographer assigns to and extracts from the representation of experience... In feminist autobiographies this understanding that "experience" and "memory" are historical and cultural readings is reflected in the narrative structure that takes on a form of self-reflexivity, which is not to be mistaken with the poststructuralist concept of a self-reflexive text. This self-reflexive stance demands, as Ilene Alexander has stated, "a looking back and saying what multiple truths might have been, the multiple realities, the multiple experiences in the world." (Maierhofer 1999, 186-187)

In these texts, written in the context of late 20th century Russian culture and society, this aspect of facts and truths would seem to have a central importance: paraphrasing Bonner, it is not the facts that she has narrated, but those experiences which matter and represent the truth to her. By way of shifting

⁶ In connection with Russian women's autobiographies Sarah Pratt has analysed works by prominent women writers adapting Mason's theory: see Pratt (1996). Irina Savkina gives a central meaning to the addressee in diaries by Russian women from the first half of the 19th century: "The formula 'the diary is not addressed to anyone' shifts into 'the diary is addressed to no one'. The addressee... is a double, one's *own* female *You*, *You-I*, and at this moment there opens up a space for female prattle, conversation with one's self, 'female corporeal language'. But, at the same time in all the texts there is *You* as a censor, judge and spy, in front of whom one has to cloth oneself in the 'masquerade' of femininity." (Savkina 2001, 150.)

the focus from the historical facts to the family and the relations between different female generations - daughters, mothers, grandmothers - these texts focus not on history as a linear continuum of events, but the reciprocity of these relations, the understanding of the self through others, against others, in relation to others and in relation to the historical circumstances.

For a particularly negative representation of the mother figure in recent autobiographical texts we can turn to Svetlana Šenbrunn's text *Розы и хризантемы* (Roses and Chrysanthemums, 2000). The narrator-protagonist, who at the beginning of the story is four years old, bears few positive accounts of the mother: she is described as a monster, who torments her little daughter and her husband by constantly reminding them of her own condition as an invalid, the difficulty of bringing up a child on her own during the last years of war, by controlling the household and every one in it in a despotic manner.⁷ The harsh attitude towards the small daughter would seem unmotivated and unnecessary.⁸ There are few direct explanations for this behaviour. However, the text contains references and indications which can also help understand the mother's behaviour: when she arrives in Moscow with a small child she finds that their apartment has been occupied by a colleague of her husband, who is in the front. The mother and the child are left on their own on the streets until the

⁷ The conversations quoted between the mother and father are at times very vivid in their nuanced "documentation" of their relations, as, for example, when the father after his return from the war, tells his wife he wants to be a Soviet writer: "[Мама:] - Да, как же!.. Боже мой, пять лет нищенствовала, светлого дня не видела, надеялась, что с твоим приездом заживу, наконец, как человек... - Мама всхлипывает - тоненько-тоненько. Никто так не плачет, только она. (...) Папа вздыхает. - Нинусенька, пойми, - он поглаживает рукой подбородок, - я не могу упустить этот шанс - может быть, последний в моей жизни. - Шанс! Тебе наплевать, что я бьюсь как рыба об лед. Наконец-то, после стольких лет, отрывалась возможность зажить более-менее спокойно. Так нет - нужно, видите ли, писать роман! Поразить человечество своими талантами! Если ты собирался быть великим писателем, не следовало жениться и заводить ребенка! Да, да, порядочный человек прежде, чем обзавестись семьей, взвешивает свои возможности./ [Mother:] - Yes, of course!.. My god, five years I lived in misery, not one single day of joy, and hoped that with your return I revive as a human being at last... - Mama sobs - so very gently. No one can wipe like she does. (...) Papa sighs. - Ninusen'ka, understand - he rubs his chin with his hand, - I can't let this chance go by - it may be the last of my life. - Chance! You don't care a bit that I struggle like a fish on dry land. At last, after so many years, there is a possibility to live more or less peacefully. But, oh no - this one has to write a novel! To amaze humankind with his talent! If you were going to be a great writer, you shouldn't have got married nor had a child! That's right, a decent human being weighs his potentials before he starts a family." (Šenbrunn 2000, 141-142.)

⁸ A couple of examples of the mother's attitude as received by the protagonist: "Это черт, а не ребенок! - говорит мама./ - She's a devil and not a child! - Mama says." (Šenbrunn 2000, 28) "[Светлана:] - Больно!!! - Больно? Так тебе и надо, что больно! Так тебе и надо! Дрянь такая! У всех дети как дети, а у меня урод проклятый!/- [Svetlana:] - It hurts!!! - Hurts? It's only fair that it hurts! It's only fair! You filth! Others have ordinary children, but I have a damned fright!" (ibid. 48)

mother manages to prove that the apartment rightfully belongs to her family. To a certain extent “Mama’s” position is understandable: she has had it hard providing for her daughter alone without support from her husband in the difficult circumstances in the aftermath of the war. On the other hand it seems that she abuses her daughter. She is both the victim and the culprit.

However, as the hearing/writing subject, the daughter/writer is the one who potentially has the opportunity to hear of these vicissitudes and damages in the mother’s voice. In recording the mother’s voice it becomes part of the linearity of language; it becomes involved in a signification process, which, in a way, enables the revision of the mother-daughter relationship. In *Mothers and Daughters* Bonner regrets that she and her mother could not get across the unspoken barrier of showing affection to each other, but, it seems, the writing offers a chance to break that barrier. If Šenbrunn’s text is read from this perspective, the author would seem to imply that the mother’s behaviour was a result of the severe circumstances in war-time Moscow as a single mother. Further explanation comes when emerges that the present order in society is foreign and unacceptable for the mother, whose family was part of the former bourgeoisie: she cannot bear to send her daughter to a Soviet school: she teaches Svetlana herself at home for the first year (for instance French) and makes her learn to play the piano. Further explanation can be found in the relations between the mother and her own mother, who lives in the same room and little by little becomes senile. The protagonist hears the following conversation between two sisters, her mother and aunt:

- Теперь ты видишь, в какой установке я живу, вздыхает мама. - И это при второй группе инвалидности.

- Ужас, ужас, - всхлипывает тетя Тамара. - Она раньше не была такая.

- Большим умом она никогда не отличалась, - замечает мама, - а теперь совсем сдурела.

- Ниночка, неужели мы тоже будем такие? - спрашивает тетя Тамара, промокая глаза платочком.

- Кто знает - может, еще и хуже, - фыркает мама. (Šenbrunn 2000, 126)

- Now you see in what circumstances I live, Mama sighs. - And that’s moreover the second degree of invalidity.

- Awful, awful, sobs Aunt Tamara. - She was not like that before.

- She was never among the cleverest, - notes Mama, - but now she’s completely lost it.

- Ninočka, you don’t think we’ll be like that? - Aunt Tamara asks, wiping her eyes with a handkerchief.

- Who knows, perhaps even worse, - Mama snorts. (Šenbrunn 2000, 126)

This almost anecdotal dialogue points out the genealogy, the burden of heritage in the female generational chain. The younger women anticipate and see their future in the older (“you don’t think we...”) and the foreboding of future is as easy as switching places (“...perhaps even worse”). Glimpses of this kind in

the text which have scant narrator comments give reason to suspect the apparent division into good and evil.⁹ The circumstances of society, and the collapse of the mother's world view with the advent of the younger Soviet generations is further elaborated at the end of the text, where the mother has a long discussion with one of Svetlana's teachers. The latter's father was a victim of political purges. Convinced that her father was innocent, the daughter set out to clear his name by volunteering for the war with numerous others just like her. The mother sees this as a stupid, rather than a heroic thing to do:

- Ах, какая глупость!.. - говорит мама.
- Глупость?!
- Можно подумать, что их смерть что-то изменила!..
- Еще бы! Разумеется, изменила - мы выиграли войну!
- Нет, вы меня не поняли, - говорит мама. - Я не в этом смысле...
- Во всех смыслах. Кто бы ни были на самом деле их отцы, но они - герои!
- Извините меня, Нина Константиновна, дорогая, но вы сами подумайте: черта ли лысого с этого героизма, когда человека уже нету? Нет, знаете, я придерживаюсь старой мудрости: лучше быть живой собакой, чемдохлым львом!.. Никогда не соглашусь, будто в этом есть некий высший смысл. Никакого смысла, поверьте мне, одни слезы. (Šenbrunn 2000, 509)

- Oh, how stupid!.. - Mama says.
- Stupid?!
- Did they really believe their death would change something!..
- Definitely! Of course it did - we won the war!
- No, you didn't understand me, - Mama says. - I didn't mean in that sense...
- In every sense. It doesn't matter who their father was - they were heroes!
- Excuse me, Nina Konstantinovna, dear girl, but think for yourself: what the hell does it mean to be a hero, when a person is no more? No, look, I follow the old wisdom: it's better to be a living dog than a dead lion!.. I will never agree that there would be some kind of a higher purpose. There's no purpose, believe me, just tears and sorrow. (Šenbrunn 2000, 509)

In this conversation, as elsewhere in the text the narrator's comments are minimal, and they are intertwined with the perspective of the protagonist, Svetlana, who hears over the conversation from another room. Bahtin has described this poetic device, first discovered in Dostoevsky's novels, as "the multiplicity of independent, separate voices and minds, genuine polyphony of equal voices" (Bahtin 1991, 20). These voices represent different perspectives which can be commented upon by the narrator, but which are not subordinate to her perspective. The heroine, who hears, is a child, although it is of course the

⁹ Cf. Lapina (2000, 1): "The novel is social and psychological, domestic, ethical, sad. Apparently, it is autobiographical, which gave critics an excuse to blame the author for a too open self-exposure. The girl doesn't really like her mother and loves her father; who socially appears to be quite a measly figure. Is that appropriate, they ask. Others welcome the good old novel, where it is clear whom to sympathize with, whom to pity, whom to condemn."

adult narrator who is the locus of voicing. The narrator, however, does not directly address the reader, that is, enter the metanarrative level outside the events described. In Bahtin's words: "The composition of the voices and their interaction is important for [the writer]" (1991, 378). This gives further support for an interpretation of the text, which allows for a more open understanding of the characters, especially the mother, than a mere division into good and evil.

The writer Nina Katerli has written a short autobiographical story called "V-4-52-21" about her own mother, the writer Ekaterina Katerli. The cryptic title refers to a telephone number to her childhood home in Leningrad, when the narrator's mother was still alive. The adult narrator reminisces on the mother: "Мама занимала в моей жизни очень большое место. Но поняла я это только теперь./ Mama had a very important place in my life. But I have understood this only now." (Katerli 1997, 42). Her mother died young, in a time when the narrator still thought of her as just a parent, nothing more or nothing less. The loss of the mother was unexpected. The narrator tries to telephone her mother, go back in time to mend her wounds.

Perhaps because the mother had passed away too early, she is described in a rather idealized manner: she was protective, all-embracing, happy, and could make others happy with her positive attitude on life. She was beautiful, intelligent, energetic, brave and proud, and, the narrator was proud to be her daughter, the daughter of the writer Lenočka Katerli. That was her perception as a child. However, later, reading the mother's letters and diaries, the narrator comes to realize that her mother's life was not all that easy: the social demand to write "production novels" and the Party's demands on writers were discussed in the letters, which reveal to the narrator how her mother blamed herself for boring writing. However the letters, where the mother writes about nature and animals, themselves represent, as the narrator notes, "true, open-hearted, good prose". The narrator explains her mother's consenting to write "boring production novels" with the latter's sense of duty:

Но почему мама не писала в своих романах об этом - о природе, о зверях? Зачем вымучивала сцены с парторгом ЦК? Повторю: не из страха, не из желания угодить, не потому, что иначе не станут печатать. Не из-за куска хлеба. Не только из-за куска хлеба. Нет, это был долг. Так надо. Так и только так! (Katerli 1997)

Why didn't Mama write in her novels about this - about the nature and about animals? Why did she force herself to write about the Central Committee's party organizer? I emphasize: not through fear, not through desire to please, not because otherwise her texts wouldn't be printed. Not for a piece of bread. Not only for a piece of bread. No, it was her duty. That was the way things had to be done. Like that and only like that! (Katerli 1997)

Although Katerli's description of her mother differs from the other texts mentioned in its idealization of the mother, it, too, strives to understand the

mother and her circumstances: why she had done things the way she had done them. Again, the situation in the society is given as an explanation. The daughter feels she is in a position where she can see those circumstances. Thus, it is *her own* view of the past and her mother which gives her a key to understanding the mother and her actions. We can also read the daughter's guilt about how she had not understood the mother's importance for her life in her youth, while her mother was still alive. The act of remembering and restoring, actually, the latter's figure, is an act of repentance in a vein similar to Bonnèr's text: the past is thus explained and restored for the present, and the core of the daughter's identity, the symbiotic union with mother, re-established.

The descriptions of the relationship between the mother and the daughter in the texts can be interpreted as a *self-constructing* act of the daughter. In both Bonnèr's and Arbatova's text this is a constituent of the process of writing about the mother: to understand the mother and her life and so to construct one's own identity and subjectivity. Bonnèr's representation can be seen as an exploration and explanation of the difficulties of understanding and connecting between different generations; between mothers and daughters. In this representation Bonnèr's mother experienced ambivalence towards her own mother, who represented the old, pre-revolutionary world, and Bonnèr herself experienced ambivalence towards her own mother because they too belonged to different worlds - the mother was a committed Party worker when Bonnèr a child, and subsequently, probably not least because of what happened to her mother and father, became herself a dissident. Similarly, in Arbatova's representation the mother was controlled by her own mother, who had difficulties in adapting to Soviet society, and whose traumatic experience, apparently, caused a complicated relationship to men, mixed with feelings of subordination and shame. The mother inherits this complex and it is the daughter, narrator-protagonist, who finds ways to break this pattern in her own life.

In a way the mother figure becomes the bearer of the changes of time, she is in-between different eras, different ways of life, the past and the present, which the daughter is now in a position to decipher. In Bonnèr's and Arbatova's texts the mother stands as a metonym of the nation, symbolising the trauma caused by the historical time both on a personal and national level, because it is not only the narrator's family which comes under the vicissitudes of time - many people around them are also affected. In these texts the narrator, the daughter, writes the missing story of the mother which is connected to the history of the nation. The mother figure symbolises the damage caused on both personal and national level, and it also symbolizes the silence concerning that damage. In Bonnèr's text especially the narration through the child's corporeal, emotional perception stands for the striving to tell the family's, the mother's and the nation's untold history. In Arbatova's text the narrator's quest for identity and

knowledge about the past point to the untold stories of her family, which become inscribed through her body.¹⁰

In Bonner's text the question about the "we" concerns the "we" of the past, the family, the nation, and the violence this family (and nation) had to go through, but it also concerns the "we" of the future. The "I" is telling her story, her family's story, to the others, her children, in order to pass on knowledge. In this sense the story is related to the intimate side of family life: "The violence, which is unspeakable is traced as a story of intimacy, of becoming intimate with one's (lost) family..." (Ahmed 1998, 137). As Bonner recalls in her text, after her mother's release from prison, the topic of her time there was avoided in the family because of the mother's health: the daughter did not want to upset the mother although it was obvious the mother could not escape her past, her experience. In addition, in life, their love for each other remains "unspoken", unaccounted for. It is in the act of narration, that the story of love and understanding are discovered and come to the surface. The process of remembering the past and narrating it becomes a form of being close to those who were taken away from the narrator: her parents, grandmother, the love of her youth. Sharing her story with others - with children, with readers - means breaking the silence: the silence about the family/ies, whose life was shattered by violence. This is not merely a story about the lost generation - the orphans of 1937 - it is a story about becoming and being that generation, through the act of bearing witness to others' (untold) stories. However, the reader acknowledges, that the "I" tells *her* side of the story, and the story of the others, the mother, cannot be merged into the story of the "I", in other words, the stories are not equivalent. The text itself is an attempt to understand the legacy of the past, which cannot be known or represented. As the narrator says, what is told did not happen, but it is true. This could mean that the author is aware she does not own the truth, but it does not prevent her from bearing witness to it (Felman & Laub 1992, xiii).

As in Petkevič's text the "I" is part of the "we"; the family and the nation. The violence she first experienced in her family through her parents, then through her father's fate and finally her own and fellow prison inmates' lives, constitutes the story the community; the narrating of the others' and one's own untold stories of the Gulag. Because it is a story about the lost history of a family and the violence it went through, this is an intimate story where the aspect of bearing witness does not become compatible with truth, but with it the narrating itself. The violence the female subject goes through and survives is represented by the narrator retrospectively. The narrating of the story itself

¹⁰ For explorations of woman's and/or mother's body and national identity see Liu (1997) and Grice (2000). Grice notes that the body of the mother becomes the source of the daughter's national identity and her subjectivity through the telling of her, and, thus, the nation's story (2000, 49-50).

constitutes the fact of constructing the lived experience and gaining of consciousness, of “selfhood”.

Pliseckaja’s life story, as far as it is the life story of an exceptional woman, could be seen as an individual story, a famous artist’s autobiography, but it is as much a story of “we”, again through the family, and community. It is an untold story of her family and of her female experience in the Soviet ballet, in the world of Soviet notions of art, where the female subject both found asylum (because of her talent) and felt alienated (because of her family history, her role as a woman dancer). The narrating of the story through the personal experience brings to the surface her perceptions of her body both as an instrument of specific notions of gender in the (Soviet) ballet and her own perception of that body.

In Gerštejn’s narrative, the “I” receives and practises the authority of writing thanks to the community to which she belonged (great Russian modernist poets’). In this community she became a custodian of the cultural heritage of the nation with other women caretakers like her. In narrating she constructs her experience as part of the community, the “we”, constructing and practising the status of a custodian of cultural heritage. Through the narration of her own perceptions and personal experiences (as a witness and participant) she also constitutes her own self as constructed in this relation between the I and the we, which brings to the fore the hierarchical structures concealed in this relation.

Arbatova’s text is constructed in interaction with an alleged female public sphere, composed of women readers who share similar experiences of sexuality and society with the narrator-protagonist, and can thus identify with her. This is taken into consideration in the making of the narrative itself, as seen in the previous chapter, and this creates a specific political, and more specifically, feminist dimension for the narrative. By making her own experiences heard, the writing subject seeks for confirmation by the readers which make her experiences not merely personal but common, collective.¹¹ An important part of this is the influence of the new book market and the writer’s anticipation of the post-Soviet mass reader’s new expectations of self-revelation, shared emotional and intimate experience, frankly described sexual encounters

¹¹ The notion of female public sphere is formed from Felski’s (1989, 164) conception of feminist public sphere, which draws upon Habermas’ model of bourgeois public sphere of late seventeenth and eighteenth century society. The political developments in the 1960s-80s saw a differentiation of this concept in relation to gender, race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation and so on. The feminist public sphere, thus, constitutes “a discursive space which defines itself in terms of a common identity; ...the shared experience of gender-based oppression which provides the mediating factor intended to unite all participants beyond their specific differences” (ibid. 166). I use here the notion of *female* public sphere, because the women’s and feminist movements are just emerging in Russia, but, as Arbatova’s (and other women writers’) text exemplifies, women do share a common experience of “gender-based oppression”.

and daily *byt*. These influences are surely part of Arbatova's and Pliseckaja's writing, quite probably also of Bonnèr's and Gerštejn's intimate revelations.

Thus, in all of these texts, it is not the "I" or the "we" but rather the relation between "I" and "we", between self and community, which is constructed in the narration, where the writing subject interacts with the social and cultural structures and meanings. In this relation there can be a chance to hear the female subject speaking, and, then, it may be possible to interpret, to read for the sexual difference, in other words, not to read the woman-as-text, but to read the female autobiography as a speech-act, where women constitute their lives and experiences in and through language, where they speak *to* others, to their families, to their readers, to other women, to themselves.¹² This particular aspect of the texts could be interpreted with the help of feminist postmodernist theory, which takes into account the referentiality between the textual and the contextual, the "subjectivity of objectivity", the corporeality of constructing knowledge.

¹² On reading women's texts as a speech act see Ahmed (1998, 130, 134).

9 Transcending Boundaries? The Autobiographical, the Sexual and the Body

В современном мире трагической фигурой, через которую проходят непосредственно все боли мира, считаю Женщину.

Светлана Василенко¹

The representation of issues concerning sexuality and body through autobiographical writing, form an intriguing meeting point for the texts discussed in the previous chapters (cf. Žerebkina 2003, 65). It is through this area that the texts can be made to converse with each other through different generations and specializations. In this chapter I endeavour to show how the representation of body and sexuality comes up in these texts. The comparison between the texts brings out how generational differences are inscribed into the representation of subjectivity, and, on the other hand, what the limits and boundaries are of representing lived experience involved with the genres of autobiography and memoir.

For a specific contextual framework for the representation of female sexuality and body in the 1990s, I draw on research on contemporary women writers' literature, where this theme has given rise to discussion (cf. Costlow et al. 1993, Goscilo 1996 and 2002, Nohejl 1996, Žerebkina 2003).² It has been noted that in Russian women's prose texts of the 1980s-90s "the heart has lost its status as the privileged organ of women's experience, displaced by the uterus and the bodily lower stratum that are the locus of women's pain and pleasure" (Goscilo 1996, 94). Beyond this, hospitals and maternity clinics often form the milieu in Russian women's prose texts of the time (Goscilo 1996, Costlow et al. 1993). It has been noted that in these *topoi* - the maternity clinics and hospitals - which were supposedly created to preserve life, "one finds instead an atmosphere of punishment and denunciation" (Costlow et al. 1993, 32). In fact, the women described in these scenes have so little control over their fate, their bodies, that they resemble, as Costlow et al. note, prison memoirs (*ibid.*).

Description of "physiological details" in women's prose texts of the 1980s-90s appears to be used not merely as "symptomatic of physical brutality under deteriorating living conditions" but as a rhetorical device to different ends (*ibid.*, 91; see also Nohejl 1996). Regine Nohéjl even suggests that the

¹ "I think that the tragic figure in the contemporary world, through which goes the entire world's pain, is Woman" (Vasilenko quoted in *Непомнящая зла*, 1990, М.: Московский рабочий, 82).

² Already in the 1960s and 1970s, in the post-Stalin, pre-glasnost' decades, women writers were becoming a significant part in Soviet fiction and non-fiction and depicted the domestic sphere and the needs and emotions of a female subject. They thus paved the way for the women writers in the 1980s and 1990s (see Barker 2002, Holmgren 2002, Sandler 2002).

descriptions of “the pregnant body as alien, an exhibit of an irrational force” and the situating of the body in hospitals as a sign of “something abnormal, pathological meaning” are not only a reflection of the intolerable conditions of gynaecological wards (as a fact of reality), but, in fact, a symptom of a deeper mental condition of a society with a deeply traumatized relation to sexuality which as a result creates such deformities in everyday life (Nohejl’ 1996, 60). Nohéjl suggests that the Orthodox-Byzantine tradition, with its repression of the body, together with the upheavals of modernization formed in the Soviet society a specific mix of “technical” liberation of sexual life (laws on abortion³, liberal marital legislation, women’s equal participation in production etc.), significant gaps in sexual education and the enduring of sex roles - a mix, which she calls “repressive de-sublimation” (ibid. 60-61).⁴

The “repressive” points to the fact, that sexual relations were seen in their technical-functional aspect, without the psychological and emotional aspects of personal sexual identity. In the women’s prose works discussed by Nohéjl this “repressiveness” appears in the form of exceptionally gloomy and unembellished descriptions of the act of (hetero)sexual intercourse as something “automatic” and the lack of communication between the sexes. Further, Nohéjl suggests that Russian women’s texts do not aim at deconstruction of the prevailing structures (as in Western feminist discourse). (ibid.)

9.1 Bittersweet Experience

In “I’m Forty” Arbatova makes it one of her tasks to bring to the fore the experiences of female body and sexuality and to enlighten Russian (women) readers on issues concerning female and male sexuality and the hierarchical power relations between them in society. As noted in the previous discussion on the text, the textual practices used in it construct the life (story) as a teleological, purposeful path toward a specific end, which structures the heroine-narrator as a female model. What Arbatova’s text also does, however, is that it criticizes the prevailing order, where men are active and women passive, and making her protagonist an active female subject in sexual matters. The writing practices used in this text, however, make this representation rather didactic, and they

³ Soviet Russia was the first state in the world to give women the option to have a legal abortion in 1920 (however, in 1936 it was again banned by law, and permitted again in 1956)(Liljeström 1995, 264).

⁴ Cf. also Rotkirch (2000, 144): “In the Soviet Union, the first modest amounts on sexual education in schools were not introduced until 1981. It is still not systematically and efficiently taught in Russian schools. Only with the advent of perestroika did this kind of sexual knowledge [information about menstruation, pregnancy, contraceptives, personal hygiene etc.] become widely, if randomly, available through the mass media, popular science books and books for children and adolescents.”

construct the heroine as a new model of womanhood (cf. Kolkenbruck-Netz & Schuller 1982).

In the following I will further look at Arbatova's autobiographical text from the point of view of *making* her story of becoming politically aware, more specifically, how the representation of sexuality constitutes the feminist narrator-protagonist's development.

Arbatova's autobiography tracks down, or rather, constructs the protagonist's life experiences as a story about her becoming what she is. Considerable explanatory weight is given to her childhood experiences.⁵ These experiences in the boarding school and hospitals were discussed earlier, suffice it to say that this "school" is represented as making her a relatively autonomous child: Arbatova describes herself to be early mature in her youth, because of her experiences in the boarding school for children suffering from the consequences of childhood poliomyelitis, and long periods spent in hospitals for painful operations on her legs. When she is back at the ordinary school she feels herself older and more experienced than the other pupils:

Одноклассники казались совсем маленькими детьми. Они не знали, что такое боль, что такое настоящее унижение и как ему противостоять. Они не умели и не желали пользоваться отпущенными здоровьем и свободой. На фоне больничных и интернатских детей они казались немного дебильными, а интриги их выглядели детсадовскими. (Arbatova 1999, 67)

The classmates appeared to me like little babies. They didn't know what pain was, what real humiliation was, and how to resist them. They didn't know how and didn't want to take advantage of my lack of health and freedom. Compared to the children at the hospital and the boarding school, they seemed a little feeble-minded, and their intrigues resembled those of the kindergarten. (Arbatova 1999, 67)

The narrator recalls that she became aware of sexual life relatively early. When she was in the second grade at school, she "was explained everything about sex life" in an after-school circle, "everything" meaning the "technical aspects" of sexuality "without a single normative expression". Soon thereafter she started to read Boccaccio's *Decameron*, but her mother removed her of the book with "cries of anger", and hid it. However, after having found the book in the bathroom, she naturally read it with even greater attention, and was very disappointed at its content. This experience, as the narrator states ironically, made her lose her interest in forbidden literature for good. (Arbatova 1999, 15-16.) In the eighth grade, the girls at her school would entertain themselves in the lavatory by smoking and looking at foreign pornographic magazines. When

⁵ Arbatova presents the view that a person's childhood forms a decisive constituent of his/her subsequent psychological life and she is familiar with Alice Miller's theories on the impact of childhood trauma on a person's psyche (see <http://www.arbatova.ru>).

relations with boys begin the protagonist writes about them in her diary, which her mother and brother read with the consequence of controlling her by not letting her go out. After this, as the narrator notes, she learned to safeguard her privacy.

The emphasis on sex as an important constituent in childhood and youth was already hinted at in the previous chapter. It could be seen as a constituent of modern feminist thinking, where issues of female sexuality and body are central. On the other hand, it could also be seen as a constituent of the specific historical and cultural conditions in Soviet Russia, as suggested by Nohéjl above. This aligns the text with the other women's autobiographical texts discussed here, which are not engaged in a (consciously) feminist project, but which nevertheless come to touch upon similar issues, which Arbatova makes political in her text.

Further, the narrator describes how she at school longed for “her own circles”, that is, the youth from the university, hippies at discos, and never-ending parties. At the age of fifteen she and her girlfriends became acquainted with artists, hippies, “seekers of freedom” by way of abnormal behaviour and clothes. The community of hippies was her and her girlfriends’ “university”. One of the topics that intrigued the company of girls was the loss of “the maidenhead”:

Воспитанные на русской литературе, мы совершенно не понимали, почему мужская честь охраняется дуэлями, а женская - отказом от половой жизни. Почему у мужчины она категория нравственная, а у женщины - физиологическая. И много дискутировали об этом. (Arbatova 1999, 73)

Educated by Russian literature, we didn't understand at all why a man's honour is protected by his participating in duels and a woman's by her abstinence from sex life. Why for a man honour is a moral category, but for a woman - a physiological one. We talked a lot about this. (Arbatova 1999, 73)

This passage is characteristic of the narrative style of revealing the double standard embedded in Russian culture with simple, naïve questions asked by the protagonist. It also brings out the sharing of experiences with the close circle of girlfriends which forms an important constituent of the protagonist's development in youth. It is in this network of girlfriends that the protagonist finds escape from the control in her family, at school, in society, which only seem to suppress and control her (sexuality). It is these personal relations, the personal sphere of life which become increasingly important in the 1970s-1980s in Soviet society (Rotkirch 2000, 169). The community formed of personal relations, was, apparently, a fruitful ground for potential resistance to the prevailing common models and structures. The narrator points out, that before she even had heard about feminism, she had found certain aspects of her experience as a woman not right. For example:

Я ещё не знала слова “феминизм”, но всё равно считала, что если я накрасила глаза, а мужчина считает, что это сигнал к сексу, то он слишком много на себя берёт. Потому что я сама решаю, кто до меня дотронется, а кто нет, и никто никогда за меня этого решать не будет, какой бы дискомфорт он при этом ни испытывал. (Arbatova 1999, 78)

Меня считали развязной за то, что я не смотрела мужчине в рот и не строила из себя дуру, даже когда это выгодно. Через много лет я узнаю, что всё это называется феминизм, и он не умаляет роли мужчины, а только предъявляет ему другой набор норм. (ibid., 80)

I didn't yet know the word “feminism”, but I still thought that if I use make up, and the man then thinks that this is a signal for sex, he has far too high an opinion of himself. Because I decide myself who touches me and who doesn't, and nobody can ever decide that for me, however uncomfortable he might feel about that. (Arbatova 1999, 78)

I was thought to be arrogant because I didn't look the man in the mouth and didn't pretend to be dumb, even when it would've been in my interest. After many years I've found out that all this is feminism, and it doesn't diminish the role of the man, but only offers him a different set of norms. (ibid. 80)

It could be suggested that Arbatova's familiarity with Western feminist thinking has helped to make the experiences constructed and shared on the personal level to assume a more explicitly political turn, but it had not been a necessity for her becoming and being critical of prescriptive gender notions in the first place.⁶ What is also characteristic in the latter excerpt is the notion that her feminism does not call heterosexual relations into question, that is, the role of the man as a partner, but instead, his role is seen as part of the existing “set of norms” which have to be replaced by another set of norms which would give more space for female desire.⁷

Arbatova's style in her autobiography has been criticized as non-literary, her language un-grammatical and incorrect, and thus its status as a work of literature has been questioned (Lukjanova 1999). What this criticism fails to see is that the text does not pretend to offer the readers just pure literary, aesthetic pleasure. The pleasure it offers is connected with identification, with the recognition and articulation of issues that have not usually been the theme of literary texts: the representation and construction of experiences of female sexuality and body not according to prevailing models of femininity in Russian culture (cf. Arbatova's reference to classical literature and its images of femininity) but instead from the point of view of women and their corporeal experiences (Parnell 2000, Žerebkina 2003). As Arbatova herself declares in the autobiography, thanks to her belonging to the generation born in the de-

⁶ See for a similar notion Vasilenko (2000, 36).

⁷ See Rotkirch (2000, 135-136); Nohejl (1996, 59).

Stalinising period in the late 1950s, and the experience in the “personalised” culture of the 1970s-80s, she feels herself empowered, however, to discuss these themes. Her texts and those of other women writers undermine the specific boundary between literature as creation and everyday language as a means of communication sustained by traditional literary institutions and canons (cf. Haug 1992/1983, 38). From the perspective of the women writers’ texts centering on women and their experience this boundary is fictitious.

The specific aspect of addressing problems of women’s sexuality and making this a political project aiming at raising consciousness and changing the prevailing structures emerges in the collection of Arbatova’s short stories *Меня зовут женщина* (My Name is Woman or: They Call Me a Woman, 1997) - which the writer herself calls a political pamphlet. The short stories discuss the specific condition of female sexuality in late and post-Soviet society. Her text deals with childbirth, abortions, gynaecology, both as means of controlling women and their bodies exercised in specific institutions and as experiences of real women. The narrator of the title story declares that as long as there are people who think that it is not suitable to discuss these things publicly, women would continue to be treated as if they were punished for being women:

Все это произошло со мной семнадцать лет тому назад только по той причине, что я - женщина. И пока будут живы люди, не считающие это темой для обсуждения, это будет ежедневно происходить с другими женщинами, потому что быть женщиной в этом мире не почетно даже в тот момент, когда ты делаешь то единственное, на что не способен мужчина. (Arbatova 1997, 60)

All of this happened to me seventeen years ago only because I am - a woman. And, until there are people thinking this is not a theme for discussion, this will happen daily to other women, because being a woman in this world is not respected even at that moment when you do the only thing of which the man is not capable. (Arbatova 1997, 60)

Describing the experience of the female protagonist in a maternity clinic where her sex is represented at its most biological, the text shows how powerless she is in this institution in decisions concerning her own body, which is turned into an object of different medical procedures, and a site of shame and humiliation. The representation of woman as biological, as a physiological entity, which was silenced in Soviet culture, became a specific feature of post-Soviet women’s writing in Russia (Žerebkina 2003, 64). This subjectivity, this construction of past (traumatic) experiences forms the basis for the character of the texts as women’s writing. As has been suggested (Parnell 2000, Žerebkina 2003, 65), late and post-Soviet writing on female experience is based on a construction of the author’s *biological* and social experience, or, biological authorship, not on discursive or performative female authorship. In the construction of female experience (as a survivor, a victim, and a martyr), the

autobiographical genre, or the autobiographical mode of writing is a main constituent of the experience: the writing female subject confesses the past experiences which have previously been silenced or forbidden.

9.2 “Memory Work”

Bonnèr’s text offers an example in which the writing of childhood experiences takes the author on a journey into the sensual, corporeal origins of her identity. The main experience of the subject’s transition from childhood to maturity was already described from the perspective of narrative strategy, of combining the general with the personal. The technique of associative and emotional rather than analytical writing permeates the whole text. Here I would like to concentrate on those passages which focus on the construction of the protagonist’s experiences of what could be called the representation of “female socialization”; this notion is understood here primarily as a process whereby the female subject constructs herself into existing social relations (Haug 1992/1983, 33).

It has been noted that in this text “Bonner gingerly steers around questions of sexuality and seems preposterously unaware of her own repressions” (Goscilo 2003, 58). However, if seen from the perspective of her generation of women this autobiographical account of childhood is, I think, quite unusual in its description of the protagonist’s development. If contrasted with Pliseckaja’s and Petkevič’s texts, the description of the protagonist’s physical, psychic and mental growth in childhood and girlhood in Bonnèr’s text is in its own league. The forbidden, the repressed female body and its functions are presented by the caregiver, the dissident, the physician Bonnèr in the description about the appearance of the protagonist’s first menses. This passage, for one thing, is several pages long, and it describes in detail how the protagonist experienced this event (of course, from the retrospective perspective of the narrator). According to the narrator, the protagonist is totally ignorant of what is happening to her, and thinks she is sick. When she tells her mother, the latter at first gets upset, but soon the protagonist is calmed down:

Тогда мама успокоилась и стала говорить, что вообще все со мной правильно, и я здорова и могу встать, только мне надо в трусики что-то положить и тогда я буду ходить. Но я снова ничего из ее объяснений не поняла, хотя успокоилась, правда, вставать не хотела, потому что было на мне все какое-то грязное, противное, и себя я чувствовала грязной и противной. (Bonnèr 1994/1991, 203)

Mama calmed down and said everything was fine, I was healthy, and could get up, but I had to put something into my panties so that I could walk around. Her explanation didn’t explain anything, though she did calm me down. But I didn’t want to get up because the things I was wearing were dirty and sticky and I felt filthy and repulsive. (Bonner 1992, 218)

The mother fails to give a satisfactory explanation to the protagonist, which would relieve her feeling of dirt and disgust. She leaves the daughter in the room, and discusses the situation with the house help, Ol'ga Andreevna:

Мама вышла в соседнюю комнату, дверь она не закрыла. Я слышала, как она сказала Ольге Андреевне, что у меня “мензес”. Слово было как будто незнакомое, но одновременно казалось, что я его раньше слышала где-то или читала. (...) А Ольга Андреевна стала ругать маму. Она говорила, что ей и в голову не могло прийти, что у мамы “ребенок не подготовлен”, что “ее девочки” всегда были подготовлены... (Bonner 1994/1991, 203-204)

Mama went into the next room without shutting the door. I heard her tell Olga Andreyevna that I had my “menses.” The word was unfamiliar, but at the same time I had the feeling that I'd heard or read it somewhere. (...) Olga Andreyevna scolded Mama. she said that it never occurred to her that “the child was not prepared” and that “her girls” were always prepared... (Bonner 1992, 218-219)

Ol'ga Andreevna then tells the protagonist to wash and instructs her how to use sanitary towels. However, the protagonist “уже чистая и одетая (clean and dressed now)” still feels “противная самой себе (disgusted with herself)”. The former then instructs her about sexuality and sexual relations:

Она долго говорила, что я уже почти взрослая и теперь должна всегда вспомнить, что “соприкосновение с мужчиной” приведет к тому, что у меня будет ребеночек. Она несколько раз повторяла про “соприкосновение” так, что я спросила, а как же в трамвае или поезде, когда все толкаются. Тогда она сказала, что я все-таки чересчур глупая и что я сама со временем пойму, о каком соприкосновении она говорит... (...) И как ни странно, но после ее объяснений чувство брезгливости к самой себе у меня прошло. (...) И оставалась только некоторая неясность насчет “соприкосновений”. (Bonner 1994/1991, 204)

She spoke a long time: I was almost grown up and had to remember always that “a man's touch” would lead to my having a baby. She repeated touch several times and I asked what to do in the trolley and train when everyone is rushing. She said I was being extremely silly and that I would understand with time what kind of touching she meant... (...) My feeling of disgust left me after her talk. (...) It was only the confusion about “touching” that remained. (Bonner 1992, 219)

This description of the event is in itself not unusual; on the contrary, it is probably very typical for women of her and other generations. What is unusual is the attention given to it by the writer, and its actual articulation in the first place. By making this stage of her biography a part of public discourse, however, the writer gives to it a specific meaning in this public context, and we can read it as a description of the girl's socialization into the prevailing notions about body and sexuality. First, it is noteworthy that the mother, who at first

calms the protagonist down, does not say *to* her what is going on with her, but to the maid, and the protagonist hears this through the open door. It appears that the mother had not educated her, had not “prepared” her, and in the end this task is left to the maid, Ol’ga Andreevna, whose explanation helps the protagonist to get rid of her feeling of disgust with herself. The narrator as it were points out that the proper knowledge made her feel not ashamed of herself.

Further, the protagonist is roughly instructed by Ol’ga Andreevna on the structure of sexual relations: she, as an almost grown-up woman is now an object of male desire, and thus, has to remember to beware “a man’s touch”. The humorous description about the misunderstanding concerning “the touch” shows how distanced the narrator (still) conceives of this experience, which must have been embarrassing for her/the protagonist. The narrator now remembers herself in that situation and looks back at this scene in retrospect and “from above”, as if standing beside herself. The protagonist’s ignorance and embarrassment is further described in a scene where she gets her menses while in school and asks her school friends - who seem to be more educated on the issue than herself - about “the touch”:

Я почувствовала, что “оно” началось на последнем уроке, а когда чуть привстала, то увидела на скамейке мокрое пятно. После звонка я попросила девочек ... принести мне пальто из раздевалки. “Что, просидела?” - как-то беспечно и обыкновенно спросили они, так что я поняла, что они давно все знают. Они принесли мне пальто, и тогда я решила спросить у них про соприкосновение. Разговор был долгий и неприятный. Я была рада, что вели мы его уже на улице, по дороге домой, в сумерки ... и мне не очень были видны их лица. Я поняла, что для того, чтобы родился ребенок, нужно совпадение трех вещей - чтобы была ночь, лежать на кровати и чтобы была любовь. Именно в таком порядке - ночь, кровать, любовь. И он может походить и на мать, и на отца. (Bonnèr 1994/1991, 204-205)

I felt that “it” had started in our last class, and when I rose from my seat I could see a wet spot on the bench. After the bell I asked two friends ... to bring me my coat. “Did you stain?” they asked casually, as if it were an ordinary occurrence, and I realized that they knew all about it. After they brought me my coat, I decided to ask them about touching. The conversation was long and unpleasant. I was glad we had it outside the way home, in twilight ... and I couldn’t see their faces very well. I learned that in order for a baby to be born, three things must coincide - night, lying in bed, and love. In that order: night, bed, love. And the baby can resemble either the mother or the father. (Bonner 1992, 219-220)

The schoolfriends’ explanation does not make her feel any better but instead it increases the protagonist’s embarrassment about the subject. Judging by the explanation, the girls were not so highly educated in sexual issues either, but, apparently, relied on everyday practices observed from adults, popular culture, etc.

The passage about the first menses and the story about the “man’s touch” also point to the fact that sexual issues were repressed in the family and at school. The protagonist was ignorant and thus, it seems, powerless in relation to what happens with/in her body. With the maid’s instructions she becomes subordinated to the prevailing social structures of sexuality, when she is told that she should now be aware of “a man’s touch” and the possibility of becoming pregnant: to control the uncontrollable body. The experiences described differ from those in Arbatova’s text, where the protagonist is early educated about the technical sides of sexual life, however, this did not include the emotional and psychological side of relationships either. In Gerštejn’s memoirs, as we shall see below, the relatively liberal sexual attitudes of the 1920s culture also remain, as though outside the narrator’s own corporeal experience as a phenomenon of the surrounding world, to which she adapts herself technically, but not emotionally and psychologically.

The repression of body and sexuality in society comes up in Bonnér’s text, too, as a lack of physical contact in the family. At the beginning of the text the narrator describes how only after the mother’s death, could she caress her in a dream: in the mother’s lifetime it was “not allowed”. By way of narrating now, after several decades, in retrospect about her becoming a woman there seems to be a wish to break this silence, as well as the lack of physical contact and showing emotions. In her definition of the method of collective “memory work” of women, Frigga Haug (1992/1983, 36) notes: “Writing is a transgression of boundaries, an exploration of new territory. It involves making public the events of our lives, wriggling free of the constraints of purely private and individual experiences.” Bonnér’s project of writing about her childhood experiences is reminiscing of exploring of “sexualization of female bodies“. It can be viewed as an act of narrating, seeking to make public what had been previously repressed, non-public. In this sense it can be called “memory work”, which makes “purely private and individual experiences” public, and the voice of the female subject audible for the reader. However, Bonnér’s project of memory work goes further, because it voices the tacit history not only of the individual, but the collective history of the nation and especially the female line of the family. Hence the plural form in the title mothers and daughters. It implies that the individual “I”, and the individual body are not only the subject of her own actions, but also the repeater of others’ actions, between sameness and difference.⁸

9.3 The Power of Love

Parts of Gerštejn’s memoirs on the Mandel’shtams concentrate on the time she was a member of their domestic circle, which was also the time of a

⁸ This observation is made by Molarius (1997, 123-4) on the mother-daughter relationship in Anja Kauranen’s fiction.

fairly open-minded sexual culture in the 1920s-30s. Compared to Bonner's description, which also focuses on the 1930s, but from an adolescent's point of view, the picture is quite a different one. It can be suggested that Gerštejn's description is influenced by the more liberal attitudes in urban culture in the 1920s, as Bonner's text echoes the more regressive tendencies of the 1930s policy. As stated earlier, what draws attention in the narrative is that there are, in a way, two voices, through which the narration takes place. One is the literary historian's and the other is the narrator's as an experiencing subject, who constructs her own feelings and self-perception with the help of and through the others. For instance, on the one hand, the narrator admits she shared the broad-minded notions of her time on intimate life: the only thing that mattered was individual taste - who happened to like what. On the other hand the narrator "now", at the time of writing, sees her own actual behaviour to be in contradiction with "theory".

Свой союз с Осипом Эмильевичем Надя называла "физиологической удачей". В ту пору все ее рассуждения и шалости были пронизаны разговорами об эротике. *Как я относилась к этому?* Моральная и эстетическая сторона подобных сюжетов меня нисколько не беспокоила. *Мы жили в эпоху сексуальной революции, были свободомыслящими, молодыми, то есть, с естественной и здоровой чувственностью, но уже выработанной манерой истинных снобов ничему не удивляться.* (...) *Сейчас я понимаю, что в моей голове была нелепая мешанина из искусственной теории и совсем не подходящей к ней моей собственной манеры поведения.* (424, italics MR)

Her union with Osip Ėmil'jevič Nadja called a "physiological success". At that time all of her tricks were saturated with discussions on erotica. *How did I feel about this?* The moral and aesthetic side of such *sjužets* did not bother me at all. *We lived in the age of sexual revolution, we were free-thinking, young, that is, with natural and healthy sensuality, but we had already developed a blasé manner of not marvelling at anything.* (...) *Now I understand that in my head was a ridiculous jumble of artificial theory and my own manner of behaviour, absolutely incongruous.* (424, italics MR)

This illustrates the course of the narrator's thought as she formulates it now at the time of writing, and her desire to understand her past self in connection with her present self. It occurs that she was not sexually "liberal" in her youth, a thought implicit in the expressions "a *blasé* manner of not marvelling at anything" and "a ridiculous jumble of artificial theory", but only affected by the time's and the specific community's liberal atmosphere on speaking about sexuality and the stage of her life she was in ("young, with healthy sensuality").

The passages concerning her intimate relations and friendship with the main characters, also bring to the fore the narrator's own personal experiences. This occurs in an episode in which the protagonist is visiting the Mandel'stams.

It depicts how she misses the last tram home and has to spend the night at the Mandel'stams. Thereafter follows a description where that evening “Осип Эмильевич проявил неожиданную агрессивность, стал ко мне недвусмысленно приставать, в то время как Надя в крайне расхристанном виде прыгала вокруг, хохоча, но не забывая зорко и выжидающе следить за тем, что проследует дальше./ Osip Ěmil'evič showed unexpected aggression towards me, started without a doubt to make advances to me; whereas Nadja, looking extremely ragged, jumped around, roaring with laughter, but not forgetting to watch very closely and awaiting what would happen next” (1998, 425). Nothing, however, happens, because, as the narrator states, she “had no desire to play such games”.

This account paints quite a colourful and expressive picture of life in the domestic circle of the Mandel'stams in the 1930s. As is known, the memoirs were received as a scandal in the literary world, mostly because, it was argued, these descriptions of intimate life had nothing to do with the great poet's art. Gerštejn, however, is saying the opposite in her memoirs. This description, among others, serves to shed light on the colourful sides of the poet's life which had been omitted from the prominent memoirs of N. Mandel'stam and Anna Ahmatova (Gerštejn 1998, 416). Although this scene concerns the writing subject as well, the main emphasis is on Osip Ěmil'evič who “showed unexpected aggression towards” her, and “Nadja ... not forgetting to look very closely” - the tension promised by this scene is resolved by the protagonist's refusal to be part of “such games”, and the narrator places herself outside the erotic nuances ascribed to the others. This and other similar pictures serve as testimonies of the true nature of the Mandel'stams life and the atmosphere at that time, as Gerštejn formulated her task in writing: she felt it was necessary to describe what “tormented and troubled” him then. However, as was already pointed out, the memoirs go beyond this aim, because the descriptions deal simultaneously and necessarily with her subjectivity, albeit the narrator draws a clear line between the behaviour of the main characters and herself. According to Źerebkina, Gerštejn legitimizes Osip and NadeŹda Mandel'stams' sexual “aberrations”, but by simultaneously emphasizing her non-participation in them, she combines sexual categories with moral ones (Źerebkina 2001, 255). This structures sexuality in terms of normative/aberrant and female sexuality in terms of heterosexual relations (ibid. 256).

A reading where attention is oriented not so much to asking *what* has been described (and being shocked, annoyed etc. by it) but *how* it has been described, serves as a means for understanding the description as a creation by the writer of her past experiences through a subjective interaction with social practices, in other words, the writing subject's interaction with a community, and the construction of her experience in that community.

Where this notably occurs is the chapter of her book entitled “Superfluous love” which purports to tell about the circumstances in which

people in the 1930s lived, and which includes the story about the narrator's love for Lev Gumilev. In this story the narrating subject's desire and self-perception momentarily come to the fore. For instance, after a night spent with Leva, she walks him to the station the next evening and looks secretly at him: "В телефонной будке он стоял лицом к аппарату, а я смотрела на его тонкую шею, выглядывавшую из-за мехового воротника, на склоненную голову в фуражке, я любила его./ He stood in the call box with his face towards the machine, and I looked at his thin neck, showing under the fur collar, and at his head with the cap on. I loved him." (Gerštejn 1998, 203). This description of looking at the lover's uncovered thin neck signals a rather rare moment of desire in the story itself. It is the female subject's view, which constructs the experience of feelings under the strain of the circumstances (Leva is on his way to the Lubjanka prison) and the rather condemning attitudes of others towards their relationship. The passage quoted above has a feeling of being surrounded with these attitudes and looks, of the others:

Вечером я зашла за Левой к Мандельштамам, чтобы ехать с ним на вокзал, как обещала. (...) Надя успела мне шепнуть что-то вульгарное до отвращения. Мы ушли, сопровождаемы косыми взглядами Осипа Эмильевича. (...)

Мы нежно прощались на платформе. А из заколоченного на три четверти окна почтового вагона кто-то чужой внимательно смотрел на нас сверху. Черный, жесткий, цепкий глаз. (Gerštejn 1998, 203-204)

In the evening I dropped in at the Mandel'stams to get Leva and see him to the station, as I'd promised. (...) Nadja managed to whisper me something vulgar and repulsive. We left accompanied by Osip Ėmil'evič wry looks. (...) We said tender goodbyes on the platform. Some stranger looked closely at us from above through the carriage window, three quarters of which were nailed up. A dark, unkind, persistent look. (Gerštejn 1998, 203-204)

The love affair between Gerštejn and Anna Ahmatova's son, Lev Gumilev, proves to be superfluous in circumstances where the latter is constantly under the pressure of arrests and sentences, and the surrounding community's condemnation or ridicule of the affair because, among other things, of their age difference: Gerštejn was 9 years older than Gumilev. The text records the phases of this love affair and its fading because of the outer world's opposition. In this narration Gerštejn looks back at her own untold story of love and loss:

Я жила воображением, рисовавшим физические пытки и нравственные муки Левы. То вдруг на меня находила облегчение, казалось, что вот сейчас, в эту минуту, ему лучше, что-то произошло. Каждая женщина знает это сумасшествие бессилия, когда сидит кто-нибудь из близких. Только мне никто не сочувствовал. (Gerštejn 1998, 254)

I lived imagining Leva's physical tortures and mental agony. And suddenly I felt relief, as if right now, at this minute he's better, something happened. Every woman knows this insanity of powerlessness, when someone close is in prison. Only there was no one feeling sympathy towards me. (Gerštejn 1998, 254)

The last sentence is a reference to the position of the narrator in her community. In the stories about the lives of "the greats" she had been rather a marginal character, a member of the domestic circle, a conservator and an eyewitness, like other numerous women who had helped in preserving the manuscripts or sent packages to prison and the camps (see Holmgren 1993). Her experience is constructed from the point of view of this community of women. Unlike the great poet, her contemporary and friend, Anna Ahmatova, who wrote the famous poem about the experiences of women who were left at home without information about their loved ones' fates, Gerštejn wrote her own experience in those days sheltered by memoirs dedicated to the lives of "the great".⁹ In her writing she, rather like N. Mandel'stam before her, momentarily comes to construct her own past experience, and past feelings, as seen in the passages above. The subtle tactic of writing about one's own experiences in this form, which in this sense differs from the other texts, in which the women write more directly about their own lives, is rather like an analogy to her position in the hierarchy of the community, which she describes, as that of a "helper", "conservator" - it also emerges in the text itself. The narrator reminisces on Anna Ahmatova's account of her visit to her son in prison:

В течение своего рассказа Анна Андреевна обронила: "Лева вам кланялся". Таким деланно-небрежным тоном говорят дамы при коротком светском визите. Трудно было понять, сказана эта фраза из снисхождения ко мне или из опасения за гордость угнетенного сына. Поэтому, когда пришло время отправления Левы по этапу в лагерь и Анна Андреевна дала мне адрес пересыльной тюрьмы со словами: "Теперь вы можете ему написать", я долго сидела перед листом чистой бумаги и не могла найти нужных слов. Потому что любовь моя была поругана. (Gerštejn 1998, 256)

During her account Anna Andreevna said in passing: "Leva sent his greetings to you." This artificially nonchalant tone is characteristic of ladies on a short Society visit. I had difficulty understanding whether this phrase was said to me with condescension or with suspicion of her oppressed son's pride. That's why, when the time came for sending Leva to the camp in transit and Anna Andreevna gave me the address of the transfer prison saying: "Now you can write to him", I sat for a long time in front of an empty sheet of paper and couldn't find the right words. Because my love had been polluted. (Gerštejn 1998, 256)

⁹ According to Žerebkina this traditional feminine role in Russian culture assigns Gerštejn to the frame of the "second rate" author, and does not give her a chance to have her "own" place in culture (2003, 263).

For that community this love was *лишняя*, superfluous, but the narrator tells her side of the story. The writing down of her story in this way can be interpreted, at least, as constructing her development as a female subject, although through the stories of the more “significant”, “great” people. By so doing she comes to reflect on her own position in the community then, as a single, non-professional woman in a society which she felt was hostile towards her, in which she had difficulty finding her place, and among people whose lives and work seemed infinitely more significant than her own.

The perspective chosen by Gerštejn is interesting because she does not actually dwell on the fate of Lev Gumiljev as a victim of state repression (although she does that too), but on her own relationship to him and its effects on her perception and position in the dissident community. As already mentioned, descriptions of female sexual pleasure are rare in comparison with descriptions of pain. In this respect, the story of Gerštejn’s and Lev Gumilev’s love during the 1930s, which are conventionally seen as a gloomy, repressive time in Soviet history, is not so common. Another uncommon place for a story of sensual love is the prison camp.

In Gulag narratives the physical and moral survival of the protagonist through inhuman conditions form the core of the story. As already mentioned, the corpus of Gulag testimonies forms a literary genre for which certain literary conventions and narrative structures are common: Leona Toker (2000, 82-92) defines a specific set of *topoi* in Gulag narratives, with recurrent structural features. These features follow the prisoner’s journey through the “Archipelago” from the day of the arrest to the day of freedom. A special constituent in women’s Gulag narratives are the descriptions of friendship and reciprocal caregiving among female prisoners (Engel 1983; Holmgren 1994). What is perhaps not a conventional constituent of these texts is the description of love and romantic feelings.¹⁰ Evgenija Ginzburg, for instance, includes the story of her relationship with her second husband in the camp zone with apologetic explanatory comments on why such a personal relationship should be included in a documentary story.¹¹

Tamara Petkevič’s Gulag narrative includes descriptions of her relationships both in the camp and outside of it. In her text, however, there are no apologetic comments about why she chooses to tell about her personal life, about her love life, in the camp. In fact, one of the most important constituents in the narrative about her own survival is the story of how the protagonist finds

¹⁰ The animal sexual instinct that emerged in those circumstances has been described more often, for instance, in Solzhenicyn’s *Archipelago Gulag*.

¹¹ Rotkirch (2000, 149) notes in her study of St. Petersburg sexual autobiographies in the 1990s, that in an autobiography by a woman with experience of labour camps it occurs that she had never told even her children either about the labour camp or about her love affairs during the time in the camp, which made the latter “doubly shameful and silenced”.

true love in the camp for the first time in her life. This passage is coloured with nuances of romantic love at first sight:

Образовавшийся изнутри дверной прямоугольник света в эту секунду пересекал незнакомый высокий мужчина. Он был по пояс раздет. На голые плечи была накинута телогрейка бежевого цвета. Кому-то, находившемуся перед ним, он что-то увлеченно доказывал. (...) Он смотрел на меня. Я — на него. Пораженно, пригвожденно, утратив способность видеть кого-нибудь, кроме именно этого человека. (...) Время прекратило ход. Его не стало вовсе. (...) Я не понимала, что со мной происходит. (...) Как во сне переступила я, наконец, порог навстречу неизбежности. Нам сказали: “Знакомьтесь”. (...) Я знала, что он ... спросит [остаться со мной - МР]. Хотела, чтоб так сказал. (...) О господи, как же прекрасно было все это! (Petkevič 1993, 344-5)

At that moment an unknown tall man went through the rectangle of light at the doorway. His was naked from the waist up. He had a beige quilted jacket hanging over his bare shoulders. He was anxiously showing something to someone standing in front of him. (...) He looked at me. I looked at him, amazed, nailed to the ground, without being able to see anyone else but him. (...) Time stood still. It ceased to exist. (...) I didn't understand what was going on in me. (...) As in a dream I, finally, crossed the threshold to meet the inevitable. We were introduced. (...) I knew that he would ask to stay with me. I wanted him to say so. (...) Oh God, how wonderful it all was! (Petkevič 1993, 344-5)

The couple finds a “life of their own” in the barracks, and the protagonist takes this as an escape from the circumstances:

Всегда во всем неуверенная, сомневающаяся, я в тот момент личной волей и властью отменила для нас режим и запреты зоны. Была абсолютно уверена в том, что ничто недостойное не посягнет на эти мгновения жизни. (...) Слепящее сочетание неискренности и огня. Истинно, оно сулило счастье и погибель... (ibid. 346)

Always unsure about and suspecting everything, at that moment I overcame the discipline and prohibitions of the zone with my own will and power. I was absolutely sure that nothing bad could take these moments of life from us. (...) A blinding combination of innocence and fire. It truly foreboded happiness and disaster... (ibid. 346)

The love affair with Kolja ends unhappily: He dies in the camp of disease. This description is not unconventional in its literary language and representation, but its occurrence in a Gulag testimony is significant, not least from the point of view of the narrating subject herself. The meeting and the love form a turning point in the protagonist's life in the prison camp: “Встреча с Колей — переворот, круча, брошенное чем-то могучим лассо. Я не узнавала себя. Вот, оказывается, что означает любить. Это ко мне пришло впервые! Впервые в жизни. В неволе! / Meeting with Kolja was a turning point, a steep, a lasso thrown by something powerful. I didn't recognize myself. So

that's what it means to be in love. It was the first time for me! The first time in my life. In prison!" (ibid. 347).

Although physical and mental oppression and suffering are everyday life in the prison camp, Gulag narratives rarely dwell on descriptions of these aspects, on the contrary (Toker 2000, 88). In Petkevič's text the description of the loss of physical and mental integrity is introduced when the protagonist first enters the zone. The descriptions in her text are similar to those in other Gulag narratives, which suggests they are typical, characteristic incidents of life in the Gulag. Thus, descriptions of physical insults have no such significance from the point of view of the narrating subject's development, as was the case in Bonner's text, where their importance as individual experiences is emphasised. On the other hand, descriptions of friendship are significant, and in Petkevič's case, including the description of first love. It is noteworthy from the point of view of the writing subject, the individual, who in the prison was one among many (Toker 2000, 77-78). Narrating about the first love is, however, not necessarily a customary narrative constituent of a Gulag testimony. In Petkevič's text, however, it was an unexpected turning point in the protagonist's life in the prison. In a similar vein, as seen above, Gerštejn's text describes rare moments of happiness and love, which, however, were of temporary nature, in a time which was altogether not so happy for the people around her.

It has been pointed out that documentary literature might not so much be read for the sake of knowledge, as for the sake of self-scrutiny: the sympathetic reader might identify with the protagonist and think what he/she might have done in the same situation (Toker 2000, 6). What also needs to be taken into account is that the writer - besides the desire to enlighten the reader - also writes in such a way that this identification becomes possible. In the passage described above, a woman, an ex-prisoner, describes her feeling of true love, and expresses her own amazement at how this could happen to her in the prison camp. Through the expression of this amazement she aligns herself with the position of the reader. As has been stated, although at the present stage the practical need for documentary stories - as a means of enlightening people - about the Gulag is reduced, and the artistic merit attracts more and more attention, the aesthetic facet is not to be separated from the "historical and admonitory" impact (Toker 2000, 6). What Petkevič's story exemplifies is that the Gulag narratives can be contemplated from other points of view as well, not just historical, aesthetic or political, but that of the individual, feeling, human being.

What this story can tell us, is that the prisoners were also "ordinary" people, who had ordinary feelings, not just extraordinarily cruel experiences. Besides being a description of human behaviour in extreme situations and an important eye-witness testimony on atrocities, Petkevič's narrative brings out seemingly common joys and sorrows of human life, which are not beyond the reader's reach. This is something which helps the reader to understand how

people could go through the Gulag experience and with which the reader can identify: not because the protagonist represents herself as a victim of violence and rape in the camps, or because she survived the experience thanks to her exceptional moral and mental strength but because “the ordinary life” - which in a way in this context might seem banal - in the camp gave her strength. In this story the writing subject also inscribes herself into the structure of normative heterosexuality in contrast to “deviant” lesbian love in the prison camp. This cherished memory of heterosexual, “real” love harbours the narrator’s subjectivity in conventional, safe patterns of behaviour as a counterbalance to the irrational and abnormal experience of the Gulag.

If Petkevič’s and Gerštejn’s descriptions of their loves during difficult times are contrasted, it can be seen that in both cases this description is closely connected to the narrating subject’s representation of sexuality. In Petkevič’s story the feeling of love empowered the protagonist to ignore the prison camp discipline, offered her an “inner freedom”, but it also inscribes her into the normative structure of heterosexuality. For Gerštejn, the love affair with Lev was something which was not approved of by the outer world, her friends. In the description of the time of sexual emancipation, however, it comes to stress the writing subject’s normative behaviour as moral, when the text emphasises her non-participant role in the “deviant” behaviour of the main characters. The autobiographical discourse bears a significant role in these representations. Because the texts’ tradition-bound status as truthful accounts and testimonies about the Gulag, or about the literary circles relies on the autobiographical pact between the author-narrator and the reader, the narrating subject, the “I”, constructs herself as a trustworthy eye-witness.

9.4 Carmen’s Rebellion

Maija Pliseckaja’s life story offers, as can be expected, descriptions of physicality, body and dance: as was pointed out, the text informs the reader about her appearance, her clothes, her physical capacities and her role in public. Aspects of body, gender and dance intertwine in the text, which deals with a rather specific sphere of experience, that of the world of ballet. For instance, as was already pointed out, the narrator briefly mentions her decision to choose dance over having a child, which is a fairly typical constituent in a female ballet dancer’s life: it is usual that having children interrupts and may even end the ballet dancer’s career (see Adair 1992, 49). I earlier interpreted the narrating of this choice in Pliseckaja’s text as the woman artist’s construction of herself as an *exceptional* woman, who led a life and fulfilled herself beyond the limits of conventional femininity, became, in a way, “more” than a representative of her sex.

Another recurrent conflict a female dancer seems to encounter in the world of classical ballet concerns the representation of female sexuality.

The classical ballet's repertoire of gender images, despite 20th century experiments, continues to reinforce 19th century notions of gender:

... ballet has been seen to stress sexual dimorphism, i.e. difference in the relative sizes of women and men; men virtually always lift and manoeuvre women, embodying strength and exhibiting control over the more fragile ballerina. (...) Contrast in movement vocabularies, narrative roles and costuming for men and women further reinforce these oppositions and distinctions and (...) perpetuate nineteenth-century gender stereotypes of "female difference/male dominance". (Novack 1993, 43)

As already mentioned, the classical ballet's ideal of femininity is "ethereal", which reinforces rather the weightlessness, lift from the ground, virginity than feminine shapes or mothering.¹² Besides the permanent images of gender, the classical ballet is characterised by its historical longevity (Novack 1993, 42).¹³ Perhaps at a certain point of the career a question that arises for classical ballet dancers is whether they are satisfied with performing the same roles time and again. Pliseckaja reminisces on her situation at the beginning of the 1960s; the protagonist feels that it is time for her to look for something new:

А танцевала я все старый репертуар.
Опять "Лебединое озеро", опять "Дон Кихот", опять "Спящая красавица"...
Снова - "Лебединое озеро", снова "Дон Кихот", снова "Спящая"... Вновь -
"Лебединое озеро", вновь...
Что ж, так и до конца моих балетных дней? Только "Лебединое"? Исполдволь
стала терзать тревога. Неудовлетворенность. Надо что-то новое, свое
сделать. Обязательно новое. Обязательно свое. (Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 337)

I continued to dance the old repertoire.
Again "Swan Lake", again "Don Quixote", again "The Sleeping Beauty"... Anew
- "Swan Lake", anew "Don Quixote", anew "The Sleeping"... Once more "Swan
Lake", once more...
So, do I continue like this till the end of my days in the ballet? Only "Swan
Lake"? Gradually I became anxious. Dissatisfied. I have to do something new,
something of my own. Absolutely something new, something of my own.
(Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 337)

The moment for deviating from the repertoire of classical ballet seems fortunate, because the dancer has been awarded the greatest honour that a Soviet

¹² At the beginning of the 20th century, for instance, Isadora Duncan (1878-1927) protested against the stereotypes of women in ballet and created her own style: she danced barefoot in loose clothing and was inspired by the ideas of Ancient Greek dance and the rhythms of nature (Banes 1998, 74).

¹³ Pliseckaja asserts this by quoting a well-known Russian writer of the 19th century, who said that he loved ballet for its constancy and states herself: "Скоро я без малого пятьдесят лет на сцене, а репертуар тот же... / Soon I shall have danced almost 50 years on the stage, and the repertoire is still the same..." (1996/1994, 80)

artist can achieve: The Lenin Prize in 1964. This afforded her a relative freedom *vis à vis* the political leadership and a chance to do something on her own. Pliseckaja starts to plan the ballet *Carmen Suite* with the choreographer Alberto Alonso and her husband, who arranges the music. Although the ballet is not of her own choreography (her own choreographies came later on), it represents something of her own, something different from her status as the prima ballerina of the Bolshoi Theatre, who charmed the public in “Don Quixote” or “The Sleeping Beauty”. As the text tells us, the reception of the ballet when it was premièred was not enthusiastic. The public expected a conventional ballet, and was not ready for the new form, new language, which the *Carmen Suite* represented. The officials did not approve of the ballet’s representation of the female character, and decided to ban it. In the “history” of the making of the ballet narrated in the text, it is suggested that the main reason for the ban were Soviet puritan notions concerning female sexuality, which the image of Carmen in the ballet transgressed. After the première Minister Ekaterina Furceva demanded changes in the choreography, which she considers “pure erotic”: “Секс на советской сцене не пройдет... /Sex would not go to the Soviet stage...” (Plisetskaja 1996/1994, 348).

The making of the ballet *Carmen Suite* is represented in the autobiography as Pliseckaja’s estrangement from the classical ballet and the roles it offered for a prima ballerina. This break also resulted in conflict with the notions about female sexuality promoted in classical ballet. It was acceptable to perform classical female characters who are chaste and passive, but nevertheless objects of the public’s gaze from the perspective of male heterosexual desire, but to represent a female character with her own desire was not acceptable. In her book on the history of gender in dance, Christy Adair (1992, 79) states: “Dance provides an ideal opportunity for the voyeur. (...) [The woman] is there in the flesh constantly exposed.” To represent a female character showing her own desire, rather than being a mere object of gaze and desire, breaks the conventional gender contract of classical ballet. The conflict with Minister Furceva is described with irony when the narrator quotes Furceva’s words to her: “Костюм поменяйте. Юбку наденьте. Прикройте, Майя, голые ляжки. Это сцена Большого театра, товарищи.../ Change your costume. Wear a skirt. Cover your bare thighs, Maija. It’s still the stage of the Bolshoi Theatre, comrades...” (Pliseckaja 1996/1994, 347). Furceva’s recommendations here are represented as hypocritical; the classical ballet dancer’s costume is hardly meant to cover the dancer’s bare legs, on the contrary: “In dance the close fitting leotard, the *tutu* which displays the crotch and legs and the low cut tops emphasise the woman’s ‘to be looked-at-ness’... The audience is in the role of the voyeur in relationship to the dancer” (Adair 1992, 72).

The narrating about the conflict between puritan notions and the performance of the ballet *Carmen Suite* is meant to ridicule the Soviet officials of the time and to stress Pliseckaja’s own struggle to fulfill herself artistically,

and her final victory over the officials, when the ballet, finally, becomes a success. The narrative also ridicules the puritan, hypocritical notions expressed by Soviet officials concerning the performance of women dancers in ballet.

The representation of the strong female character in ballet in this sense is not merely political. It is also connected to the classical ballet dancer's identity as a woman. This emerges in other autobiographical accounts of dancers about their own careers and identity as women and dancers (see Novack 1993, 38, 40). The discrepancy between the female dancer and the roles of the classical ballet may be evinced because of the dancer's feminist critique of the repertoire of female characters, or the denial of being creative, free in expressing oneself through motion, or the combination of these. In Pliseckaja's case the question is rather of her right and need to realise her talent in different ways in dance, but, as could be seen above, it also collided with specific notions about sexuality and gender in the Soviet culture of that time. What is symptomatic is that when the question is about female sexuality and desire, it provokes rejection in a society based on patriarchal values: representations of female sexuality are described as "mere erotic", or, as in the case of Arbatova's and other women writers' texts (see Vasilenko 2000) in the 1980s, "mere gynaecology". In Pliseckaja's own presentation of her struggle with the officials, her urge to do something of her own in the case of the ballet *Carmen Suite* becomes noteworthy from the perspective of sexual difference because it undermined the social and ideological constraints on what kind of and how female characters could be portrayed on stage. The critical notions stigmatised her performance as "erotic" and "formalism", whereas her own view stressed her right as an artist to explore new areas of expression in dance.

A more forceful experience, but not altogether remote from Pliseckaja's in the Soviet ballet, is presented by Arbatova in her story of going "into literature": she, like many other women writers of the 1970s-80s, encountered claims of writing on "gynaecological issues", when they addressed such themes as abortion, or other experiences connected with female sexuality. As Nohéjl points out, representations of women's experiences with abortion or maternity clinics are a sign of a specific combination of repression and liberation in Soviet sexual culture. As the popular saying goes, "there was no sex" in Soviet (official) culture.¹⁴

That representations connected with various aspects of sexuality and body emerge in these women's autobiographical texts is a feature that deserves to be seen in the larger context of Soviet Russian culture. As already observed, they relate to the cultural condition in which female sexuality has been a site of forbidden themes in the field of literature. The texts represent the female body

¹⁴ Ažgihina (2001) notes that in classical Soviet literature, relations between woman and man are devoid of references to sexuality, except as a crude and repulsive act.

and sexuality in quite differing ways. The differences in the approaches of these texts point to different cultural, generational and existential aspects connected with female sexuality.

If we compare these texts through the rather fictional perspective of generations of mothers and daughters, it might be tempting to suggest that Arbatova in her text is actually *working through* the pain and embarrassment the previous generations of women, her mother and grandmother, experienced and in silence (because of fear of being repressed, abandoned, condemned) passed on the shame connected with them to her through patterns of behaviour. Petkevič's narrating about the loss of physical and mental integrity rather repeats familiar incidents that occur in other Gulag testimonies and brings out her experiences of true friendship and heterosexual love found in the prison as her salvation. Gerštejn's text describes the abnormal behaviour of the main characters, but constitutes moral attitudes to sexuality by stressing her own non-participation and normative (heterosexual) behaviour. Pliseckaja's representation of her experience as a woman with her own artistic project posits the female body as a boundary between what is acceptable and what is not, and thus stands for the fractured female subjectivity in conflict with notions of femininity and national identity. Bonnér's project of writing about her childhood experiences reminiscent of the "memory work" conducted by the individual exploring the "sexualization of female bodies". This memory work can be viewed as an act of narrating, seeking to make public what had previously been non-public, thus "crossing the boundaries of private and public". Arbatova's text lets the experiences of violence and pain as it were go through the protagonist's body, as individual experiences, and constructs them as an integral part of the narrator's identity. But in so doing, also presents the protagonist-narrator as an example, a new heroine, whose own activity and practices aim at forming new models of behaviour.

Bonnér's project of memory work goes further, because it voices the tacit history not only of the individual, but the collective history of the nation and especially the female line of the family. The text combines in a specific way the testimonial mode of autobiographical writing with the emphasis on the female individual and her sexuality in the vein of the Western feminist project of "memory work".

As different as these texts are in their representation of the corporeal experiences of female sexuality, as a whole they represent what was unsaid in the previous official or public culture. They do not necessarily deconstruct prevailing models, but rather *construct* what has been perceived as marginal, forgotten: the experience of sexuality and femininity through corporeal experiences of women.

Conclusions. Autobiography is Literature

The starting point for this study was to investigate how women's autobiographical texts published in the period after *perestroika* in the 1990s represent and construct female experience of the past. The "New women's prose" of the time brought out especially controversial and unconventional literary images of womanhood and suggested that there had emerged a different emphasis on female subjectivity in literary and cultural production among women writers. The aim of this study was to investigate texts which included the so-called autobiographical pact, that is, texts which could be characterised as "non-fictional", or "documentary" autobiographical texts. What I was especially interested in analysing in them was how the women writers represented their lives and experiences (of womanhood) in this "documentary" mode of writing. This combination revealed several interesting and challenging problems, which this study has sought to contemplate, but not to solve completely.

Thanks to my education in modern literary theory I had learned that meaning and subject *are* not; instead, they are continually constructed as "a play of signifiers", not by an immediate, transparent relationship between words and their referents. However, in their texts the authors of my material were concerned first and foremost with telling the truth about the past, with witnessing and testifying to past events, and writing their life stories in the spirit of authentic communication with the reader. I had expected to find texts that would be more "postmodernist" and playful in their narrative techniques and approach to writing about the past, but instead the texts I had chosen were seriously involved with mediating information and representing true experiences of the past. At the beginning of my research there was, thus, a gap between my reading theory and the material to which I sought to apply it. In this study I have endeavoured to fill this gap and find ways of literary and gender analysis that would take into account the specific nature of these texts.

The autobiographical texts analysed here emphasised the documentary, authentic, non-fictional character of the writing. The writing was based on the authors' retrospective perception of what had happened to them in the past. The texts conformed to a modern but realistic paradigm of literature, in the sense that they did not challenge - that is, consciously confuse - the borders between the author, the reader, and the heroine, or invent a new language to describe their experiences. However, they also showed a sophisticated attitude to writing and memory. While reading these texts the ethical aspect of reading autobiographical writing became significant. It does matter if the text purports to describe so-called real events and experiences, especially when they are disturbing, traumatic and tragic, and excluded from institutional and official historical accounts. One result of my study was the important insight for me that there is an important ethical aspect connected with reading autobiographical texts.

However, I was not keen to read the texts as transparent accounts of reality: as literary texts they necessarily select and omit things from the “flow of reality”, organising them in the linearity of sentences, in a language, which is itself a social and cultural construct. The texts were not free from Soviet conventions and traditions, yet also not determined by them. This is why the slogan, reminiscent of the Soviet formula, *о себе и о времени - about the self and the time*, came to represent the texts’ quality as autobiographical texts in a specifically matching manner.

The authors were especially concerned with giving voice to past tragic and traumatic experiences - this was the reason for writing the autobiographical text, as we remember from the extracts at the beginning of the study. In the course of the research I have come to consider this writing process not only as a representation of traumatic events in the authors’ individual lives, but as a phenomenon pointing to painful spots of society and culture as a whole in the aftermath of the Soviet period.

Я очень хочу свободы, связанной с ощущением полноценности, и всем того же желаю. Я карабкаюсь сквозь бетонные стены семейного сценария, сквозь барщину опыта в совковом браке, сквозь решетку тоталитарных запретов, проросших сквозь тело. (Arbatova 1997, 283)

I want freedom with a feeling of self-esteem, and I wish that for everyone. I clamber over the concrete walls of my family scenario, over the hard labour of Soviet marriage, over the fence of totalitarian prohibitions, grown through my body. (Arbatova 1997, 283)

This extract from Marija Arbatova’s short story¹ relates to the narrator’s perception of herself as a woman in Soviet Russian conditions of life. Clambering over the walls of established models of the behaviour, institutions, with which her biography, her “self” is permeated is an apt metaphor for the writing in the autobiographical texts this study has dealt with. In order to clamber up a wall, one needs a foothold and places to rest, which offer a moment to summon one’s strength, and a chance to carry on with the clambering. “Clambering”, “foothold” and “places to rest” represent the options the autobiographical discourse offers for the writers. On the one hand it is a legitimate channel for constructing literary representations of the individual, “non-public” experience and on the other, a chance to raise this “non-public” in the public discourse.

The model of life-writing, which could be discerned in these texts, was the narrating of one’s life as an eyewitness, a participant of the past, connected with historical events, names and spaces. This conforms to what has been called a testimonial mode of writing by Russian women; writing for a common cause, where the author engages herself in the collective reconstruction of cultural

¹ “Последнее письмо к А. /The last letter to A.” (Arbatova 1997).

memory. The aspect of testifying about a lost tradition, injustice, human rights abuses etc. gives the female author a legitimate cause for writing about her own life and past as a representative story. The authors of the texts investigated were significant cultural figures, dissidents, artists, who related their lives to certain historically significant events, names and spaces, “sites of memory”, which form an important constituent for the motivation for writing.

My discussion of the texts, however, suggested that beyond this, these sites of memory are not constituted solely by the story of witnessing to historical events and names alone. With the help of feminist semiotic and narrative theory, which advocate for contextualising women’s texts in social reality and cultural production I could claim that beyond the features of testimonial writing, they also represented the narrator-protagonist’s experience relating to the forbidden, the unsaid, and the non-public: corporeal experiences of female sexuality, feelings and human relations. Against earlier studies on Soviet Russian women’s autobiographies these features have been considered as exceptional or marginal in the testimony about the past (Holmgren 1994, Clyman & Vowles 1996). In this vein the texts share some of the features that emerged at the turn of the 20th century and the modernist trend in art and culture with its emphasis on the individual and the exceptional (Clyman & Vowles 1996).

Я вот уже который день не могу оторваться от мысленных рассказов самой себе. После меня останется так много погибших жизней... Не защитила я их хотя бы словом, хотя бы памятью... Молчу, молчу и терзаюсь тем, как получилось сейчас и тем, что давно было. Сейчас ничего не делаю и главное не хочу. Залезла в свое одиночество как в черную дыру. Спустилась в прошлое и совсем погибаю. (Bonnèr 1994/1991, 301)

For the last few days I’ve been unable to give up telling myself stories. So many ruined lives will remain after me. ...I didn’t defend them with a single word, or even a memory. ...I keep silent, I keep silent and torment myself with how things are now and they were a long time ago. Now I do nothing and, most important, I don’t want to do anything. I’ve crawled into my solitude as if it were a black hole. I’ve sunk into the past and I’m perishing in it. (Bonner 1992, 332)

This extract from the notes of Bonnèr’s mother, quoted in the latter’s memoirs, in many ways represents an important prehistory for the memoirs, and, I would contend, for the other texts as well. These *мысленные рассказы* - stories told in her mind - remained silent, inside of her mind, and the subject of remembering could not be released from the past. It is much this legacy of silence, that Bonnèr’s and the other texts are dealing with. With the help of sites of memory, the footholds and places to rest, the authors of the texts could engage in constructing the self and the past, clambering through this tacit past.

The reading(s) of the texts can be characterized as a learning process the researcher goes through. This is symptomatic of autobiographical studies, as Anni Vilkkö notes:

When writing about women's autobiographies and their ways of parsing their lives through writing, [one is] simultaneously speaking about [one's] own experience as a reader of these life-stories and attempts to rewrite this experience, rearrange and signify it into a research text. (Vilkko 1997, 27).

This echoes what Shoshana Felman stated about the bond through reading for sexual difference, which will help to construct women's stories about their lives. I believe that reading the texts through this prism, we can read not only the testimony of traumatic history and politics, but also the constructions of female subjectivity based on women's experiences.

That the representation of various aspects of sexuality and body emerge in these women's autobiographical texts is a feature that deserves to be seen in the wider context of Russian culture. It can be seen as the process of dealing with past experiences, reconstructing them, and making them heard. This can be seen in the specific context of Soviet Russian culture, which was characterised by the term "repressive de-sublimation" - a peculiar mixture of repression and liberal attitudes towards sexuality. The differences in the approaches of these texts reveal different cultural, generational and existential aspects connected with female sexuality.²

The authors representing and constructing their experiences through autobiographical writing were involved with questions of what they should include and exclude in their texts. At some points of Soviet history this question has been crucial, even fatal for memoirists (cf. Balina 2003). Autobiographical writing, although closely connected with subjective process of remembering, is also a highly conventionalised manner of representation through language, and it is also important to see what has and what has *not* been included in a life story. Remembering the past can also be an exploration of how an individual remembers, and what these individual memories can tell of society, and of history, how they can represent something that has been hitherto unmentionable. Remembering becomes an important means to construct that history, although it relies on subjective perception of the past, but, as has been noted, subjectivity is what makes such memory narratives valuable because they take the reader closer to the experiencing subject (Peltonen 2003, 19). Russian women's writing at the beginning of the 21st century continues to prefer the "concrete" and subjective over the "universal", even so that this thematical feature (the female) has turned out to be a literary device.³

² However, it is important to consider the findings of recent research on the post-Stalin and pre-glasnost' period, which point out that during this time women writers already paved the way for these bolder representations of female subjectivity in post-Soviet women's writing (see Barker 2002, Holmgren 2002, Sandler 2002).

³ Cf. Žerebkina (2003, 71) who observes that at the end of the 1990s there emerge authors who represent strategies of *performing the female* in their work and experiment on the mimetic biological experience of femaleness on the level of both content and form.

Some might say that this study fails to establish what an autobiography is, and what a female autobiography is. They are quite probably right. Although my main interest in these texts did not focus on their connections to the Soviet tradition of memoir writing, its influence cannot be ignored. These texts have a lot in common with the genre of memoirs in the Soviet period, official and unofficial. It should not be forgotten that the new book market has directly and indirectly also influenced the production of these books, particularly Pliseckaja's and Arbatova's texts. In the case of the latter, the Western model of feminist confession has surely affected the constitution of the feminist life story.

What my persistent use of the term "autobiographical" in this study has aimed to bring out, is that the feminist theory about the importance of the autobiographical in women's studies and the importance of contextualising women's writing, helps to convey unconventional features in these texts, which contradict or escape the tradition of memoir writing and the tradition of representing femininity in Russian culture, and which help to constitute new knowledge of female subjectivity in Russia.

Especially, according to Žerebkina, the work by the poet Vera Pavlova represents the autobiographical as a performative strategy. Cf. also Kukulin (2000, 2).

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