

# The Prose of Life

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Russian Women Writers  
from Khrushchev to Putin

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*mir* and received a similarly cautious response from Tvardovskii's successor, namely, that although the prose was engaging, the stories were not publishable.<sup>2</sup> Why did *Novyi mir* believe these authors' works to be more inflammatory than the first major exposé of the gulag? Both Grekova and Petrushevskaiia focused on the daily lives of Soviet women. The key to the editors' decisions lies in Russian culture's enduring uneasiness concerning the everyday and female experiences, and how these two combine in fictional form. While Solzhenitsyn, with the approval of Khrushchev, revealed the horrific conditions of the vast prison camp system, Grekova and the young Petrushevskaiia had produced more unsettling assessments of Soviet reality by depicting the quotidian of decidedly apolitical women.

Gender and *byt* (everyday life) were inherited problems in late Soviet culture. Functioning as two halves of an equation, they suggested that women are inclined toward domesticity, childcare, and the endless minutiae needed to support a family, constituting a major portion of the quotidian.<sup>3</sup> In this book I examine how female prose authors from the 1960s to the 2000s used everyday life first as an arena for discussing selected problems (1960–84) and then moved from this tentative description to a more encompassing and damning assessment of how men's and women's lives differ (1985–91). After 1991 female writers depicted the problems of women's daily life from a markedly artistic viewpoint. Six authors exemplify this shift: Natal'ia Baranskaia, I. Grekova (the pseudonym of mathematician Elena Venttsel'), Liudmila Petrushevskaiia, Tat'iana Tolstaia, Svetlana Vasilenko, and Liudmila Ulitskaia. In the 1990s nine women's anthologies, along with the writing of Petrushevskaiia and Tolstaia, made women's prose an undeniable yet controversial part of the cultural landscape. Female authors appropriated everyday life as a venue for commenting on often overlooked "women's" issues, even as the nature of *byt* itself drastically changed before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

### The Gender of Everyday Life in Russian Culture

The everyday is a problematic concept that Russian culture consistently and insistently links to women. *Byt* not only refers to

daily life but also to a corrosive banality threatening the higher aspirations of *bytie* (spiritual or intellectual life)—a quality that distinguishes *byt* from more optimistic Western conceptions of the quotidian. Vladimir Nabokov connects *byt* to *poshlost'*, the soul-killing realm of the material, crass, and insensitive. Female tasks (caring for others, maintaining a household) are a part of *byt*, and the negative adjectives connoting the quotidian echo the alleged attributes of women's lives in Russian culture: petty, small-scale, mundane, exhausting, repetitive.<sup>4</sup>

The myriad problems women confront reappear daily as a new set of crises, effectively erasing previous accomplishments. The resulting ateleological and small-scale struggle sharply differs from traditional "male" activities and *bytie*. Masculine actions often involve sweeping claims to permanent change, whether through philosophical generalizations or the USSR's doomed attempt to build a Marxist utopia. The gender of *byt*, however, is feminine.<sup>5</sup>

Distinctions between masculine and feminine were evident in Soviet iconography, which was dominated by robust builders of communism creating cities or attempting to redirect the flow of rivers—all within the larger project of forging a new civilization. While the male was proactive in culture, the female was assumed to be reactive. Women were relegated either to supporting male-mandated efforts or coping with the effects of state edicts on everyday life.<sup>6</sup>

The implied passivity of reaction exists alongside a problematic corporeality (*telesnost'*). Both Russians and Westerners deem women's activity more physical than mental, unworthy owing to its reduced scale, ephemeral nature, and constricted existence within the home as marked space. Eve Sedgwick has identified a key result of this association: the gendered equation of man/woman as "separate yet equal" becomes the subordination of the female by the male. This inequality was abundantly evident in the Soviet quotidian, which revealed the USSR's much-vaunted gender egalitarianism to be as illusory as its citizens' political freedoms. Even when the state wished to improve the status of women, assumptions that *byt* was female and derivative were impediments.<sup>7</sup>

Russian culture sees the feminine and everyday as secondary yet crucial.<sup>8</sup> The intelligentsia, the group that produced almost

all the women authors discussed in this study, envisions *byt* as a conduit to *bytie*, the realm of the spiritual and intellectual. Two trends clarify Russian intellectuals' complicated relations to daily life. First, early in its history the intelligentsia as "bearers of consciousness" became synonymous with the Enlightenment in its metaphorical and historical sense. Bringing the quintessential European culture of rationality to post-medieval Russia was the prerogative and responsibility of the intelligentsia. What resulted was a mandate to educate, which in turn presumed an object neither enlightened nor conscious: the common people (*narod*), typified by the "backward" peasant woman. The more pessimistic intellectuals became over Russia's myriad problems, the further they diverged from the *narod* and its quotidian existence. Before, during, and after the USSR the Russian intelligentsia tried to reconcile *byt* and *bytie*.<sup>9</sup>

It is also important to realize that the intelligentsia existed in a nearly constant state of crisis during the Soviet era. Vera Dunham believes that this uncertainty and change increased demand for domesticity, a key part of *byt*. Sof'ia Petrovna, the title character in Lidiia Chukovskaia's novel (written 1939–40) attempts to preserve a normal home during the Stalinist terror, while several years later state images of heroic mothers characterized women's activities as a humble "second front" contributing to the male military victory over Nazi Germany. In both contexts *byt* is female and marginal yet essential. This subordinate/crucial status was especially pronounced during the Thaw (1953–68) and its emphasis on private life, which built on the government's earlier ambivalent representation of women's efforts in *byt*.<sup>10</sup>

Stalin's successors during the Khrushchev era and more conservative Stagnation (1969–84) periods saw women's quotidian existences as complementing collective-oriented public life. From this viewpoint female success depended on an allegedly innate ability to tend to what Barbara Heldt succinctly terms the "little things" around the home.<sup>11</sup> Men, the dominant Soviet logic continued, were responsible for great events and universalizing pronouncements. Writing about English literature, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar make the analogous contention that the overlapping spaces of home and private life—central to both the quotidian and contemporary conceptions of the individual—delineate woman as man's fallible foil, prone to circular activity,

limited in "natural" talents to fornication and procreation. These actions are invisible because of their very ordinariness. Women nevertheless are the prime movers of modernity as they maintain an undervalued yet key domestic arena within which the individual develops.<sup>12</sup> Both female activities and *byt* as their temporal context chronically escape notice: the everyday is omnipresent yet unnoticed. The female writers I examine here found these traits to be both a blessing and a curse when they appropriated the quotidian as a venue for discussing women's lives.

### Envisioning the Quotidian: Ambivalence and Apocalypse

Despite the similar gendered nuances that have accrued over the centuries, the Russian conception of *byt* significantly differs from its Western counterparts. The European quotidian is an arena for escape from control (particularly that of the state), where individual choice redeems tedious materiality. For Michel de Certeau decisions in the European everyday are an opportunity for small-scale resistance and transgression, two possibilities important to Russians regardless of gender. Differentiating "strategies" from "tactics," de Certeau perceives the latter as a tool for the less powerful. A "tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily. . . . [A] tactic depends on time—it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized 'on the wing.'"<sup>13</sup> The quotidian helps those who can exploit it in their struggles against the more powerful.

The connection between daily life and resistance is not new. For Western modernism daily life had a woman's face, which Andreas Huyssen describes as images of crowded cities, industrialized female workforces, and social unrest. As with de Certeau's description, in this context disorder is more liberating than threatening. Maurice Blanchot elaborates: "The everyday must be thought [of] as the suspect (and the oblique) that always escapes the clear decision of the law, even when the law seeks, by suspicion, to track down every indeterminate manner of being."<sup>14</sup> This formulation, while too dramatic for the French culture to which it referred, fits the Stalinist era (1928–53), which purged personal life (*lichnaia zhizn'*) of its suspect counterpart, individual

life (*chastnaia zhizn'*). This strategy of the 1930s and 1940s reflected the tautological reasoning of totalitarianism: the state criminalizes the quotidian, which in turn becomes the locus for future transgression as perceived by the ever-watchful state.<sup>15</sup>

For Western intellectuals everyday life harbored the potential for escape from control. In the 1960s and 1970s the Birmingham School and the advent of cultural studies canonized the contemporary quotidian as a refreshingly interdisciplinary area for study. Beginning in the 1980s, Western scholars of gender, race, and a bevy of related fields saw studies of everyday life as an alternative to the restrictions of normative history.<sup>16</sup>

Unlike in the West, Russian scholarship binding *byt* to any type of resistance dates from the 1990s. Soviet political strictures only partially explain this divergence. More fundamentally, the intelligentsia saw—and continues to see—the everyday as a barrier to *bytie*. This line of reasoning, which authors such as Ulitskaia have challenged, assumes that the quotidian frustrates meaningful human endeavors: either agency is abandoned to a force beyond the individual's control (war, political repression) or petty problems hinder higher aspirations.

According to this logic, daily life cannot promote independence; at best it is a physical counterpart to the world of ideas (*bytie*). Iurii Lotman's key definition of *byt* upholds this reasoning and yields a series of interesting suppositions. "*Byt* is the ordinary flow of life in its real and practical forms. It is the things that surround us, our habits and everyday behavior. *Byt* surrounds us like air and, like air, is only noticed when it is spoiled or in short supply. We notice the peculiarities of others' *byt*, but our own escapes us—we are inclined to consider it 'just life,' the natural norm of practical existence [*bytie*]. *Byt* is thus always located in the realm of practice; it is above all the world of things."<sup>17</sup>

*Byt* is the world of the mundane made invisible by unimportance, omnipresence, and its subordination to the symbolic cosmos of *bytie*. The gap between *byt* and *bytie* reiterates the Eastern Orthodox separation of body and soul and their gendered equivalents, female and male. This dichotomy is analogous to the modernist distinction between masculine high and female mass culture, a division that Huyssen attacks.<sup>18</sup> The parallel conceptions of modernism and theology underscore the twentieth century's

dependence on the same conservative thinking it tried to evade: polarization as worldview shaped modernism, Orthodoxy, and the Soviet scientific atheism that attempted to replace it.

The quotidian is defined by what is not, namely, the spiritual and intellectual realm. For Stephen Hutchings this juxtaposition distinguishes Russia's "cultural *binarism*" from European "philosophical *dualism*." Because Russian culture is built on binaries, it cannot contain a neutral space, which would be the equivalent of a moral vacuum.<sup>19</sup> Unlike in the West, daily life cannot be impartial. There is no middle ground, whether between *bytie* and *byt*, male and female, or good and evil. Indeed, the conception of neutrality as a threat guided critical assessments of women authors' depictions of *byt*, as attacks on the "amoral" everyday in Baranskaia's and Grekova's prose showed.

As Hutchings and Huyssen argue, the early twentieth century provided some of the most serious attacks on the everyday. Roman Jakobson, never doubting that *byt* is the enemy of civilization, makes explicit those concerns embedded in Lotman's later and more balanced assessment of the quotidian. Discussing the failure of the futurist and acmeist poets to remake Russian culture, Jakobson identifies their foe as the "stabilizing force of an immutable present, overlaid, as this present is, by a stagnating slime, which stifles life in its tight, hard mold. The Russian name for this element is *byt*." Only slightly overstating this concept's etymological and cultural uniqueness, he claims that "in the European collective consciousness there is no concept of such a force as might oppose and break down the established norms of life."<sup>20</sup> Equating *byt* with immobility and a threat to meaning takes on additional significance when one remembers that the quotidian is the realm of women, needed to continue Russian civilization yet hindering *bytie* and the "established norms of life."

Jakobson's dire formulation negates the utopian rebelliousness implicit in Blanchot's axiom that everyday life invigorates through chaos. *Byt*, to use a key Stalinist verb, wrecks organized efforts to change existence and even sabotages previous progress. Both conceptions, however, assume that everyday life is what a culture deems commonplace. This shared basis raises a key problem, namely, typicality (*tipichnošt'*) as the quotidian's ability to point to its own essence. Often typicality is an image or

character symbolizing the ethos of an era irrespective of whether the image is actually “average” in a statistical sense. Such a conception continues a pattern central to nineteenth-century Russian realism, when the “superfluous man” was an ideological type who critiqued the educated Russians’ inability to change society. This type mutated during Stalinist socialist realism, producing the messianic positive hero. Like his predecessor, this (usually male) character supposedly reflects the “typical” essence of his age. The positive hero, however, must safeguard the radiant future, not perpetuate the doubt and ennui of his negative counterpart in critical realism.<sup>21</sup>

Despite holding diametrically opposing views, Soviet dissident Andrei Siniavskii and nineteenth-century radical Nikolai Dobroliubov both mined the quotidian for ideological meaning. Digging beneath the literary image of *byt*, they tried to identify and transform the typical as the essence of Russian culture. Siniavskii critiqued the immorality he espied in Soviet *byt*, an everydayness whose principles were shaped by Dobroliubov and the earlier critic’s own disgust at the corrupting apathy of the tsarist quotidian. Siniavskii and Dobroliubov exemplify their respective centuries’ attempts to read literature as social consciousness, implying a depiction of the quotidian that first diagnoses and then cures social ills. Not surprisingly, these efforts failed. By its very nature the quotidian frustrates final answers, theoretical generalizations, and universalizing prescriptions endorsed by those intellectuals Gary Saul Morson sardonically labels “semi-otic totalitarians.”<sup>22</sup> *Byt* resists attempts to identify its essence. This intractability complicates appropriation by women authors, some of whom perpetuated the failed efforts of Siniavskii and Dobroliubov but (as I explain in chapter 1) with a different agenda.

The derivative connotations of female and quotidian in Russian culture complement each other. Long considered devoid of serious talent, women are consigned to *byt* as an ontological dead zone where materiality has vanquished the reason and consciousness the intelligentsia deifies. Because the female purportedly lacks great mental potential, critics assume her to be particularly vulnerable to the twin phantoms haunting literary representations of *byt*: *poshlost’* and *grafomanstvo* (bad writing).<sup>23</sup>

Echoing Nabokov, Svetlana Boym describes *poshlost’* as “the

Russian version of banality, with a characteristic national flavoring of metaphysics and high morality, and a peculiar conjunction of the sexual and spiritual.”<sup>24</sup> In her view, combining opposites threatens the sound esthetic judgment traditionally claimed by the intelligentsia. *Grafomanstvo*, a compulsive desire to express oneself in (low-quality) writing, is to literature what *poshlost’* is to the intelligentsia’s sense of taste: an anti-esthetic potentially contaminating its antipode. Both labels often mask other intentions. The critic’s explicit attack may employ a phrase (e.g., *obyvatel’*) conflating suspect morality and dubious taste, but the signified transgression is not using literature as moral instruction.

This hostility derives from worries over threats to high culture: *poshlost’* and *grafomanstvo*, critics surmise, can reduce art to unintended farce as the ethical force of the written word degenerates into meaningless scribbling. What results is the victory of *telesnost’* (the physical, *byt*) over *ideinost’* (the ideational, *bytie*). *Poshlost’* and *grafomanstvo* are anathema to the intelligentsia’s maxim that the mental/spiritual triumphs over adverse material conditions. This belief is paramount in the post-Soviet era precisely because intellectuals have discovered their redundancy in the new era of commercialization and “low” genres.

Given this long-standing hostility to daily life, Lotman’s investigations of *byt* in general and its neutrality in particular were truly groundbreaking. Due to his own intellectual interests and Soviet censorship, however, Lotman’s work examined the already distant quotidian of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: this everydayness was less a living force than a collection of museum pieces. Lotman and his colleagues at the Tartu School nonetheless created a valuable precedent for Russian studies of private life, the quotidian, and gender in the 1980s and 1990s. Subsequent investigators focused on the Soviet period, itself now doomed to the “enormous condescension” E. P. Thompson laments in history’s treatment of events.<sup>25</sup> In the first post-Soviet decades, translations of Western theorists such as Michel Foucault and an upsurge in Russian interdisciplinary research made cultural studies (and analysis of the everyday) more familiar to academics in the former USSR.

Beginning in the 1980s Western Slavists turned their attention to *byt*. Their new interest arose from the expanding field

of cultural studies and a desire to move beyond Cold War investigations with their “top-down” analyses of the *nomenklatura*. This move often entailed revisionist critiques of the Soviet state’s previously posited monolithic character. Indeed, scholars showed how everyday life made distinctions between the personal and political counterproductive and often impossible. The shift in analysis from policy to the quotidian likewise helped bring women’s experiences out from under the long shadow of Kremlinology, where they had been “hidden in plain view.”<sup>26</sup>

These new studies envisioned *byt* less as a neutral space than as a network of signs indicating how the everyday reflects and perpetuates cultural anxieties and the sociopolitical factors creating them. The ordinariness that Nabokov scorns and Jakobson fears led to myriad discoveries for scholars, where each detail within the quotidian hints at the *bytie* Russian culture prizes. Re-evaluating *byt* brings forth its own problems, as Morson suggests in critiquing the urge of “semiotic totalitarians” to construct cultural coherence from the everyday’s scattered parts. The recent upsurge of interest in everyday life has scholars negotiating a careful path between the Scylla of neglect and the Charybdis of totalizing interpretation. The present study is indebted to both recent and pioneering discussions of everyday life, whose precedents now permit an investigation of how women’s prose developed around *byt*.

### Gender and Everyday Life in Soviet Culture

Daily life’s banal facade hides a host of cultural complexities. As Joan Scott suggests, one of the most important of these is how the everyday acts as the arena within which men and women experience gender. This is especially true in Russia, with its tendency to use female experience as shorthand for the nation’s perceived backwardness and alterity in the face of European modernity.<sup>27</sup> Women’s lives symbolized the antithesis of Western progress and, later, the Marxist-Leninist script for history.

Soviet policy had a paradoxical and unfulfilling relationship with *byt*. Following the lead of the prerevolutionary intelligentsia, the victorious Bolsheviks despised the everyday as a petty

frustration foiling ideational attempts to create a new society. The government, however, also recognized daily life as the key battlefield of what Sheila Fitzpatrick has famously termed the “cultural front.”<sup>28</sup> The quotidian was an irksome indication of the revolution’s unfinished agenda. Bolshevik attempts to create communal living and radical poet Vladimir Maiakovskii’s 1920s polemic against *poshlost’* signaled the fact that daily life imperiled the Soviet project as much as the Whites did. *Byt* also reflected more elemental struggles with materiality—famine, a decaying infrastructure, shortages of goods—hindering the march toward communism. However, unlike the Civil War or a Five-Year Plan, by its very nature the everyday contained what Mikhail Bakhtin deems a chronic “inconclusiveness” that denies closure or any attempt to declare victory over *byt*.<sup>29</sup>

The Bolsheviks feared that *byt* contaminated female citizens, leading to a politicized association of “backward” females with an equally unenlightened quotidian. The decade after 1917 emphasized the liberation of women from the old *byt*. Although Stalinism for its part promoted women’s industrial labor, it supported the patriarchal family as the basic unit of society by limiting divorce and criminalizing abortion. At the same time, the state literally and figuratively policed the private sphere to secure a quotidian that, not properly subdued during the 1920s, now needed to be purged. While *byt* was still far from being a priority, it fell under the state’s panoptic gaze. This sort of attempt to watch over the everyday recalls Blanchot’s protests against the state’s relation to a quotidian it distrusts in terms of an “inexhaustible, irrecusable, always unfinished daily that always escapes forms or structures (particularly those of political society: bureaucracy, the wheels of government, parties).”<sup>30</sup> The most successful Soviet attempt to break down the boundaries between public and private was the communal apartment (*kommunalka*), with its ubiquitous and inquisitive neighbors. This pragmatic approach to managing (but never solving) the enduring Soviet housing crisis looms large in the fiction of women writers well into the 1990s.

After the Soviet defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945, attempts to harness women and their meddling *byt* to the cause of post-war recovery coexisted with the validation of female citizens as a