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Karin Sarsenov

Is it a sin to travel?

Itinerant women in post-Soviet narrative

The cultural construction of the journey as a narrative of masculine identity poses problems for the conceptualization of the female traveller in general and of the female Russian migrant in particular. Three contemporary prose pieces dealing with women's migration reveal subtle and often sophisticated ways of playing with the stigmatization of Russian women as prostitutes and of destabilizing the patriotic discourse that outlaws women's movement.

Since the late 1980s, when exit permits became increasingly easy to obtain, Germany has been the major receiving country of Russian emigration.¹ Legislation encouraging repatriation of ethnic Germans and Jewish people, paired with intensive exchange at all levels of society — from culture, education, and state administration to business and criminal networking — have made Germany one of the most familiar among the alien lands surrounding contemporary Russia. This is probably one of the reasons why German (or at least Germanic) destinations figure prominently in contemporary Russian literature dealing with the issue of migration.

Historically, Russian responses to German culture range from deep antagonism to enthusiastic apprenticeship, from paying obeisance to the treasures of high culture to showing contempt for the materialistic, philistine world-view of the middle class. Germany has been an active partner in the ping-ponging of national stereotypes that since the Enlightenment has formed ideas about Russian culture: charges have met countercharges, sins have been transformed into virtues, and received ideas has been made cornerstones of theories of national identity.² In the late twentieth century, when history was being rewritten in the wake of the Perestroika and, due to the sudden influx of Western consumer goods and new possibilities of travelling, the question of national identity became unpleasantly tangible, traces of this east-west controversy could not but sneak into the literature of the day. In a number of cases, travelling women propelled the articulation and/or deconstruction of national values and ideas.

Expressing, defining or understanding the nation is never an innocent occupation: by defining the terms for inclusion into a community, nationalism inevitably works to exclude those who do not meet the demands.³ Even though men and women often participate with equal zeal in nation-building processes, the roles assigned to them on a representational level remain essentially different. Women are imagined to be responsible for the reproduction of the nation, both in terms of biology and culture. Their purity therefore becomes a vexed issue: their reproductive activity should not be contaminated by alien elements, which in part remains their responsibility and in part becomes the task of men. Masculine national identity relies on images of defenders of a feminized, virtuous nation, which provides men with agency for change and

expansion into the future. Women, on the other hand, through their repetitive labour of cultural transmission function as links to an (Arcadian) past, which, together with their general task of symbolizing the nation, deprives them of the agency assigned to men. This has given rise to a set of easily identifiable rhetorical strategies, which tropes the nation as mother, whore, victim, virgin, and so on. Helena Goscilo has indicated the importance of these images for the perestroika culture in general, where the prostitute emerged as a metaphor of Russian intercourse with its former enemy in the Cold War.⁴ In works featuring travelling women, this metaphor acquires additional strength, due to the difference culture attributes to men and women's relation to space.

In numerous studies, feminist geographers have explored how the so-called "friction of distance" influences people differently depending on gender. Long-term structures in human history restrain women's movement and impart an inherently masculine taint to the myth of the "wide open space". Eric J. Leed posits "the sessility of women and the mobility of men" as one of "certain realities in the history of travel".⁵ Cultural obstacles that delayed the acceptance of women's unaccompanied travel — horse-riding, bicycling, driving, and flying — on the one hand, and endorsement of foot-binding, high heels, and tight skirts on the other, have served to fix women both metaphorically and physically to one spot.

But, as any ethnographer or historian would object, there are plenty of long-standing structures that stimulate women's travel. Patrilineal living arrangements make the bride move to her husband's village or country; during times of rapid urbanization, women without male protection have moved to towns to make their living — today the global "maid-trade" is estimated to comprise between 1 and 1.7 million women at any one time.⁶ However, these structures are not reflected in the cultural construction of travel. Although a myriad of women have indeed set out on dangerous and distant journeys, few stories have been told about them. In the grand narratives of Western culture, beginning with the *Odyssey*, male heroes explore and conquer space, in order to return to a home that in every aspect is coded feminine: as motherland; as maternal, fertile soil; as inhabited by the custodian of the hearth. The image of the waiting, passive Penelope and her repetitious, fruitless labour at the loom has moulded the conception of proper women's work for centuries.

Janet Wolff summarizes this tendency: "The ideological construction of 'woman's place' works to render invisible, problematic, and in some cases impossible, women 'out of place'."⁷ What Irina Sandomirskaja terms "one of the basic metaphors of European culture", the so-called "myth of the journey", central to our conception of home, nation and belonging, ends up being essentially gendered.⁸

Most factors that historically have limited women's mobility have been abolished by now, at least in the parts of the world touched by industrialization, democratization, and other facets of modernity. Today, the most mobile segments of any population are the ones whose resources either are substantial enough to allow for the additional effort of travel, or scanty enough to make movement the only possible means of survival. But despite glamorous images of travelling businesswomen and assertive backpackers, residues from older conceptions of women's mobility are not difficult to detect. Domosh and Seager remark: "Women on the loose are almost never valorized — in any culture. Indeed, geographical 'looseness' in women is assumed to be a universal marker for sexual wantonness — or at least cause for concern about their respectability."⁹ Sandomirskaja makes an analogous observation,

founded on traces in the Russian lexicon: in Russian, as in English, words for movement are used to denote the quality that distinguishes a prostitute from a virtuous woman (note the Russian "*shliukha*", from "*shliat'sia*" (to loaf about), "*guliashchaia zhenshchina*" (woman who passes from hand to hand) and the English "streetwalker".¹⁰

The itinerant woman therefore simultaneously upsets (at least) two inter-related representational modes: nationalism's dependency on images of female passivity, modesty, and purity, and, secondly, the cultural taboo attached to female mobility, resulting in sexual stigmatization of the unaccompanied female traveller. In otherwise unconventional, rebellious, and parodic works of the late 1980s and early 1990s, this "double bind" produces staple images of female immigrants with a particular emphasis on their promiscuity and/or their trading of their bodies.

Vladimir Kunin's *Intergirl* (1987) attributes Germanic soulless materialism to social democratic Sweden, including such implausible details such as alcohol-serving gas stations and "boys" pushing customers' carts in the supermarket.¹¹ Despite its scandalous subject — hard currency hookers were *personae non gratae* in Soviet literature — the novel is emphatically patriotic in its understanding of the (female) exile. Tania's journey from the motherland is construed as the movement between the binary oppositions of the insidious "traitor of the motherland" and the tragic "exiled". In Sovietese, the former denoted political dissidents during the Soviet period, while the latter was used for the same dissidents in Imperial Russia. Initially, Tania is placed firmly with the traitors, falling pray to western consumerism. But in the tragic grand finale, she is elevated to a righteous "exile", when her love for the motherland drives her to suicide. In the cinematic adaptation of the novel, her ascent to the exile status is underlined by a Russian choir on the soundtrack, performing "Along the Wild Steppes beyond the Baikal", recounting the fate of a pre-revolutionary "sufferer for the truth". Tania's all-embracing Russian soul apparently could not fit into the petty, calculating, and materialistic environment, and her willingness to sacrifice herself redeems her from her former sins.

Viktor Erofeev wrote about his traumatic pre-perestroika experience of being denounced in the Metropol scandal, using a female alter ego in *The Russian Beauty* (1994). The male genius transposed into a woman predictably becomes — not a female genius, but a super-whore, carrying the national treasure between her legs, declaring: "a beautiful woman, boys, is national property, and not any cheap stuff for trading."¹² She therefore compares favourably to her girlfriend Ksenia, who "traded herself" to a Parisian dentist and wastes her days in suburban boredom.

If these two novels rely on the discourse of Cold War antagonism, Vladimir Sorokin's play *Hochzeitsreise* [Wedding journey] (1994) deals with the trauma of World War II.¹³ The play brings together the progeny of a German SS officer and a female Jewish NKVD officer, both guilty of severe war crimes. Because of his father's transgression, Gunter, son of the SS officer, suffers from a magnified sense of guilt, expressed in particular in his propensity for masochism. No such feelings trouble Masha Rubinstein, the adventurous daughter of the NKVD officer, who is able to cure her husband following a homemade pop-Freudian recipe. Despite of the general atmosphere of sacrilegious fun with intelligent values, the play is surprisingly conventional in its metaphors. Again, Russia is troped as a promiscuous woman whose beauty, unsurprisingly, is able to "save the world".

The fact that men authored all the above examples has prompted my investigation of three prose pieces written by women. The complex relationship between gender and creativity cautions against the idea of women's inherent immunity to sexist representational strategies, or a priori assumptions of a common feminine standpoint. Nevertheless, the topic of itinerant women presents authors with an option to re-negotiate the position from which gender and national identity are articulated. I will here investigate texts by Liudmila Ulitskaia, Nina Sadur, and Mariia Rybakova that deal with women's migration, with the aim of extracting their responses to this challenge.

Some notes on the authors: Liudmila Ulitskaia (b. 1943) is a well established author who has been publishing since the end of the 1980s and received wide attention when she was awarded the Medici prize in 1993 for her novel *Sonechka*; in 2001 she was the first woman to receive the Russian Booker for her novel *Kazus Kukotskogo* (The Kukotskii Incident). Nina Sadur (b. 1950) belongs to the same generation of writers who were unable to publish before the onset of perestroika. She is mostly known as the writer of plays such as *Chudnaia baba* [The Marvelous Old Woman] and *Pannochka*, but has also received acclaim for her prose, for example the folkloric cycle *Pronikshee* [Touched]. Mariia Rybakova (b. 1973) has appeared in journals and published two books. Unlike the other two authors, she has spent long periods of time abroad (Germany, USA). She belongs to a well-known literary family, being grand-daughter of Anatolii Rybakov, author of *The Children of Arbat* (1988).

Decency and calculation

In Liudmila Ulitskaia's 2002 story "Zü-ürich", the plot follows a female "hunter", Lydia, whose matrimonial efforts rest on an undifferentiated desire for increased social status, intimacy, and protection. She shares her ambition with many a woman in the Russian cultural imagination, from the inventive Liudmila in the film *Moscow does not believe in tears* (1980), to Zoia in Tatiana Tolstaia's story *Okhota na mamonta* [Hunting the Woolly Mammoth] (1997).¹⁴ In Ulitskaia's tale, the prey is much more exciting than Zoia's bearded engineer in Tolstaia's story: as the title conveys, he is Swiss. This fact allows a multitude of national stereotypes to come into play. Lydia possesses a range of qualities that distinguishes her favourably from her peers: she pays great attention to personal cleanliness and works meticulously and energetically to reach her goal, i.e. qualities conventionally attributed to foreigners, specifically those of Germanic extraction. The narrator uses a good portion of irony in Lydia's portrait, but nevertheless the somewhat awkward girl manages to attract the reader's sympathy: the detailed descriptions of Lydia's methodical preparations appeal to any reader with a modicum of pedantic inclinations.

However the pleasure of indulging in Lydia's ordered universe is soon dissipated. Lydia's accomplishments are traced back to the efforts of her mentor, the Latvian Emilia Karlovna, in whose house Lydia worked as a servant during her teens. The "Germanic" skills and worldview inherited from Emilia come under suspicion when it is revealed that Emilia is "a bit of an anti-Semite", that her father had participated with enthusiasm in the *Judenfrei* programme during WWII, and that her husband was a captain in the NKVD. Cleanliness and good manners apparently have a seamy side.

Although Lydia's attempt to get married to a foreigner has little in common with the violent and often drug-based misery of prostitution, the shadow of stigmatized sexual licentiousness is forever present in the text:

The exhibition was international, so black-marketeters had come from the whole city, big-bosomed sweethearts, the pioneers of international business, had brought their fresh goods in silk panties with rough elastics. Lydia didn't have to worry — it wouldn't occur to anyone that she also was out hunting.¹⁵

Lydia's background in a poor, scattered rural family differs little from that of the above-mentioned "sweethearts" and to create an image of "decency", she has to borrow Emilia's silverware and entertain her guest with stock phrases learnt by heart from textbooks. That decency is a social category becomes more than evident. Lydia's future spouse, Martin, also turns out to strut in borrowed plumes: himself from likewise poor circumstances, his wealth is really his wife's, and social markers such as taste and manners are learnt from her. Furthermore, decency turns out to be if not an antonym, then at least a substitute for love. Emilia's exemplary performance as a wife to the Russian officer, whose agency was responsible for her father's death, is explained not as an act of love, but as a result of her alleged decency.

Lydia's marriage would in popular terms be labelled "marriage by calculation". But the narrator complicates this simple explanation. In a seemingly contradictory discussion of Lydia's personality, the narrator comes to the conclusion that she is cunning, insincere and simple-hearted, all at the same time. This matches Lydia's own assessment of herself as cleverer than anyone else she knows except for Emilia — certainly an emphatically simple-hearted statement. Lydia's understanding of the word "clever" is shown to be synonymous with "calculating". Having arrived in Zürich, she discovers that "here everybody turned out to be as clever as she was, they calculated everything in advance". The age-old Russian complaint about the philistinism and materialism of European values is recycled in this connection: "Lydia discovered that here, happiness was measured in numbers". Despite this "European" talent for calculation, she does not have to compromise her feelings in her quest for a spouse: she finds Martin attractive, especially in comparison with the dishevelled Russian men she had known. But when the narrator later explains that Martin shared all the qualities with which he had enticed Lydia with other Swiss men, the basis of her amorous fascination turns out to be closely connected to her struggle for social mobility.

Despite of the protagonists' efforts to achieve an air of decency, the essential poverty of their spiritual make-up is signalled by the dreary formulations used in the area of sexuality: "Just the thought of it [that Lydia might be willing to sleep with him — K.S.] made him excited. [...] He had to wait a little before he could urinate". The story's final scenes also point to the superficial character of the protagonists' emotional life. The external cover of manner, taste, and hygiene, so important for Lydia's devotion, proves easy to remove: Emilia suffers a cerebral haemorrhage and her table manners deteriorate to those of an infant. This deprives her of Lydia's affection, who makes no attempts to help the sick woman and her family.

To summarize: Liudmila Ulitskaia's story "Zü-ürich" posits "calculation" as a basis for understanding the phenomenon of marital migration. However, it does not resort to repeating simplified discourses that outlaw certain types of marriages in favour of other, "normal" ones. Rather, it shows the intricate connections between different types of desire: amorous, sexual, social, and financial; and the impossible task of separating the one from the other. It also complicates the notion of decency: this trophy that entitles you to a place on

the right side of the dividing line between the Madonna and the Whore is severely compromised by its association to anti-Semitism and superficiality. Prostitution figures as a stigma that any woman must work hard to avoid, but the story poses the question whether alternative, external respectability, is any better. Although the story to a large extent relies on received ideas about German middle class culture, it shows the allegedly "Germanic" traits to be present among Russians as well, thus questioning the importance of nationality, and underlining the "imagined" quality of nationhood.

The journey, the ring, soil and blood

Nina Sadur's novel *The German* (1997) pictures a Russian woman's love for a German in colours borrowed from the fairy-tale "The feather of Finist the bright falcon". According to Vladimir Propp, the tale has its origins in the myth of Cupid and Psyche, the tale that in Western tradition gave birth to the fairy-tale "The Beauty and the Beast".¹⁶ All these tales feature mysterious, elusive grooms, and the active part is played by the heroine, who has to fulfil impossible tasks to reunite with her beloved. Joseph Campbell mentions the myth of Cupid and Psyche as a reversal of the standard structure, implying the exceptional character of this woman-centred myth.¹⁷

In "The Feather of Finist, the Bright Falcon" the journey functions as a major organizing device. Here, the girl leaves her native land, and, with the help of the three sisters Baba Iaga, she reaches the Thrice-Ten Kingdom beyond Thrice-Nine Lands, to break the spell put on Finist by an evil queen. She successfully completes her task and the young man accompanies the girl to her home, thus closing the circle. When Sadur chooses to furnish her travel narrative with quotations from this tale, expectations arise about a rewriting of the heroic plot of the journey, centring on a female subject.

Apart from the folkloric references, the novel is also engaged in a dialogue with nationalist discourse, the values of which are embodied in the concept of *rodina* (native land, motherland). Irina Sandomirskaia has investigated the "archaeology" of this concept, drawing on material consisting of postwar Soviet political phraseologisms. In her corpus, she elucidates a set of narratives that together form a more or less coherent patriotic discourse. One group of narratives bases the plot on the trope of the journey. Sandomirskaia pays special attention to its geometrical form: the circle-shaped trajectory describes the utopian return to the lost native land and serves as an affirmation of the concept of *rodina*. This trajectory is typical of Soviet village prose, which celebrated the so-called "little native land" (*malaia rodina*) at the expense of the great, anonymous and degenerate city. The one-way journey, on the other hand, is characteristic of negative narratives about *rodina*, such as those concerning the traitor and exile.

In connection to the subgroup of narratives that express "love for *rodina*", Sandomirskaia mentions three fundamental "myths": the myth about the journey, the soil, and the blood. "Myth" is used interchangeably with "metaphor", and to my mind, the usage corresponds to Svetlana Boym's definition of mythologies as "cultural common places, recurrent narratives that are perceived as natural in a given culture but in fact were naturalized and their historical, political, or literary origins forgotten or disguised".¹⁸ Within the complex mythology of "the journey", only the one with a trajectory that confirms the motherland in its essential feminine quality, the journey in the form of a ring, back and forth, expresses the "love for *rodina*". "Soil" alludes to the fertility of the native land, and pictures its dependants as "plants", which

thrive in its life-giving depths, but die when torn away from it. "Blood" depicts Rodina in bodily terms, creating an imagined physiological bond between all subscribers to the concept.¹⁹ In Sadur's novel *The German*, whose title immediately gives rise to expectation of a national theme, all three "myths" are employed.

The novel is made up of fragments that only on closer examination begin to cohere. The main character, Aleksandra, appears first as the narrator, but occasionally changes into a third person protagonist. The time/space coordinates are not plainly stated, but are given in passing, and could often only be deduced from contextual evidence. The main plot line follows Alexandra's journey first to the Black Sea and then to Berlin. However, it is further complicated by the presence of a parallel story, based on the fairy-tale, but set in a contemporary, rural milieu. The two plots eventually merge, but at the beginning, a one-sentence quotation from the tale can suddenly interrupt the narration, leaving the reader bewildered.

That said, it is possible to discern a chronology spread out over different seasons: the novel begins with a description of "spring", in which there are some disturbing statements about homosexuality:

And there are no androgynes. And no homosexuals. And no other sexual minorities either. And if there are some, then only a few. And they are once again persecuted, judged, beaten, languish in prison. All are of distinctly different sexes. That makes everyone feel hot.²⁰

Then comes "summer". The narrator, "Aunt Sasha" finds herself at the Black Sea, courted by a young boy, Kirill, and a waiter with black eyes. In December she visits Berlin and meets Gottfried. Then, from January to April, she waits for him to call or write, in the company of her male friends, mostly during what seems to be drinking sessions. The novel ends in a rewriting of the fairy-tale: the narrator finds herself as a servant in the house of Frau Knut (the evil queen), also inhabited by a lodger (the beautiful young man). As in the tale, the narrator has to buy three nights from the man's guardian, until he finally wakes up and recognizes her: "And they lived happily, and noticed neither the world, nor the time, they just kept looking [at each other]".

A leitmotif is interpolated in this complicated structure that at a first glance seems to have no connection to the other plot lines of the novel. But, as often happens in Sadur's work, the leitmotif carries a heavy symbolic load, crucial for the overall interpretation of the novel.²¹ This particular leitmotif, describing a lonely monk's wandering on the outskirts of Russia, actually contradicts basic presumptions that rule the narration in which it is intermingled.

The importance of the leitmotif is signalled when the novel does not conclude with the happy fairy-tale ending. First, a new ending is attached — as the girl grows older, her groom gradually transforms back into a falcon. Then, the tale begins all over again: "He had three daughters. Two normal ones, but the youngest was a Down." The neat closure, so typical for the fairy-tale genre is rejected, and instead the novel ends in a way that makes us suspect that the Falcon's lover keeps searching for him forever, in what actually is a panegyric to the never-ending movement. Blatantly contradicting the heterosexual core theme of the fairy-tale — a girl's quest for her male beloved — the subject of Sadur's version turns out to be a male monk:

A little monk walks on [the black earth]. His hands and feet are covered by blood. The teeth are worn down to the gums. He walks, patiently, walks around all Russia without stopping. He walks by himself, blows on the grey feather, amuses himself²²

The monk's wounded appearance corresponds to the Bright Falcon's revenge for the injuries the girl's sisters inflicted on him in the tale:

Gnaw, gnaw a stone. Find one and gnaw it, until you wear down your teeth to the gums, until they bleed. Drag a pig-iron staff, drag with your little hands until you wear it down to the very hook, by which you hold the staff. And wear iron boots. Until you wear holes in them. And all these things — thrice!²³

This wandering monk is provided with ambiguous gender attributes: although he is male, we learn about his "unsexed femininity", and the "womanly skirt" of his long robe. This indefinite creature inhabits a space where "it is always early spring", which challenges the narrator's wholly self-assured, albeit whimsical, propositions in the beginning about the non-existence of androgynes in springtime. The novel thus rewrites one of the principal myths of heterosexual love and replaces the yearning female subject with the desexualized figure of a monk.

The utopian circular trajectory of *rodina* is likewise exchanged for the open-ended route of pilgrimage. Although the mythologies both of the ring and the soil are employed, they are forced to connote something radically different than the feminine safety of home and hearth. Instead, the ring and soil are posited betwixt and between, in the liminal space between what is, and what is not, Russia; what is, and what is not, spring:

On the outskirts of Russia. On the very very distant, narrow outskirts, where just a bit and Russia ends, where she flows over into other, foreign lands. On the patient, narrow outskirts of Russia that surrounds her all, locking her into an unbroken ring, it is always early spring. The last snow has just melted there, and the black, shining soil has not woken up yet, and on this soil, a little patient monk keeps walking.²⁴

The ring is certainly "unbroken", but the way Russia is said to "flow over" into other lands as a river, underlines the permeability of the ring. Instead of reaffirming the self-identity of the homeland, and the otherness of the foreign, the novel rather points at the continuum that unites instead of separates.

Here, the figure of the monk activates yet another national myth, or rather, counter-myth: the understanding of Russians as essentially "nomadic". If the narratives Sandomirskaja investigated traced their origins in the consolidating efforts of a central power, the myth of the Russian wanderer relates the traumatic story of efforts to escape from the outrages of this power: serfdom, religious hegemony and military conscription. Drawing primarily on Russian Slavophile thinkers and historians of the nineteenth century, N. A. Khrenov proclaims the wanderer to be a "dominant personality type in Russian culture."²⁵ Sadur's novel constitutes the cultural heritage of the polymorphous social margins of Russian and Soviet society, including religious sectarians, pilgrims, bandits, fools in Christ, beggars, homeless people, runaway serfs and prisoners, as an alternative to the binary opposition between *rodina* and *zagranița* (foreign countries). The image of the monk, amusing himself with

the grey feather, connects to the radical Christian idea of "wayfaring in the name of Christ" (*Strannichestvo vo imia Khrista*), one of many ascetic deeds the Orthodox Church acknowledges. This idealized and pre-modern understanding of Russianness as "transcendental homelessness" may seem to be of little help to Russian women abroad, targeted by sexually stigmatizing rhetoric. However, when the novel replaces the fairy-tale quest for a bridegroom with the religious search for God — a presumably "unsexed" pursuit — it thereby refuses to articulate the question of national identity in gendered terms and, consequently, polemicalizes the gendered imagery of nationalist discourse.

The continuum between *rodina* and *zagranița* is also alluded to in the ambiguous treatment of "blood". In the section that deals with the narrator's visit to Berlin, her acquaintance tries to convince her about their resemblance:

He got angry, and began to point at traits of his body that resembled hers. (You look like me.) The cheekbones, the slanting form of the eyes. But the blood? Blood?! [...] No, no, there's something wrong here. Not the blood and not the poverty-stricken signs of the face, my dear mute (you cannot speak my language, which means that you are mute). You are not mine in this life, some paths have got entangled, and something brought you to me.²⁶

The quoted passage proves a physical resemblance between the Russian (poverty-stricken) woman and the presumably totally different German. The question about the blood, the very essence of national belonging, provokes a forceful rejection: when such a close kinship is proposed, the narrator answers by silencing the Other, rendering the German (*nemets*) "mute" (*nemoi*). But the strength of the narrator's rejection suggests that the resemblance is greater than the difference: the blood does not matter.

The essential stability and life-giving qualities of the soil is similarly questioned: "Beyond Moscow, beyond all Russia's cities lie abandoned lands. Dying villages do not have the strength to hold on to them." The soil seems to reject its inhabitants, who cannot "take root" in it, but seem to be scattered around in a centrifugal movement. At the beginning of the novel, when the narrator steps into a swampy meadow, the mortal qualities of the soil are hinted at: "Try to step in your own footsteps, think of the word "soil". What a nuisance, what an imprecise kind of soil. You keep living, then suddenly you get caught. The soil disappears."

Nina Sadur's novel *The German*, whose title evokes associations to a range of nationalist tropes based in WWII propaganda on *rodina* versus "the Fascists", eventually turns out to subvert the core symbols of this rhetoric. The novel construes two ideologically conflicting plots. The first, based on the fairy-tale, understands Germany in terms of the folkloric notion of the evil magic kingdom. This plot is adorned with xeno/homophobic and chauvinist phrases such as the following:

Berlin is the capital of homosexuality. Its bad, inhuman eye created the demon Marlene Dietrich [...] How I hate homosexuals! [...] Then there's the newspaper Labour.²⁷ I subscribe to it, and read it every day with my morning coffee. [...] The most beautiful people have begun to move out silently from my house [...] And only Chechens move in: one Tatar,

manager of a vegetable shop, an incomprehensible Jew from L'vov.²⁸

This plot is contrasted with the leitmotif of the monk, in which nationalist mythologies such as the journey, the ring, the blood and the soil are deconstructed, and the indeterminate nature of any borders, including gender distinctions, is emphasized.

The hackneyed associations between women's mobility and moral corruption first seem to be deconstructed by the use of a female protagonist in a heroic, patriotic quest: a woman performs the circle-shaped journey and takes up a subject position in an affirmative tale of *rodina*. Then, the narrative voice of this tale becomes increasingly more discredited by its unmotivated outbursts and derogatory language. Finally, when the leitmotif of the monk makes the core symbols of *rodina* erode, the novel radically destabilizes the patriotic discourse of the Centre, replacing it with a tribute to untargeted movement in the periphery.

The prostitute and the parrot

Maria Rybakova's novel *Anna Grom and her Spectre* (1998) features the old story of unrequited love, with the use of a compelling narrative device: the novel is constructed as an epistolary novel from a dead Russian woman to her German beloved. In letters, numbered from the third to the fortieth day after the narrator has committed suicide by hanging herself, the story of the one-sided love affair with a graduate student in Greek and Latin languages, a certain Wilamowitz, is recounted.²⁹ Travel is central to the novel: narration starts off from the point when Anna Grom leaves Moscow for Germany, and her tale about her life there is intermingled with perceptions from her own posthumous travel in the other world.

The novel is neatly structured according to the chronology of afterlife, outlined in "The revelations of the venerable Theodora to the venerable disciple of Vasilii Novyi, Grigorii", a text from the Russian Orthodox hagiographic tradition.³⁰ Here, Theodora recounts in detail the twenty trials taking place during three days following her death. After the trials, she was taken to Heaven, where she stayed until the ninth day. After that she descended into hell and was shown the horrors of the underworld until the 40th day, when she arrived, at last, at the site of her final rest.

In *Anna Grom and her Spectre*, the first period of trial is omitted, narration starts only at the third day, i.e. corresponding to the soul's visit to Heaven. During these days, in letters no. 3 to 9, narration concerns Anna's life in Russia, her journey to Berlin, and how she lived there before she ran out of money. On the ninth day, corresponding to the descent to hell, she depicts her struggles on the Berlin job market in clearly infernal terms:

The unqualified work that humiliated [me] and forced me to survive on an amount significantly less than the minimum wage raised the curtain over the abyss of evil. And the more this curtain was lifted, the less [evil] became connected to humiliation. Gradually, evil forced [me] to stop feeling anything, probably in order to make it impossible to recognize it against the background of this loss of consciousness and for it to lose the name of evil.³¹

The letter from the ninth day ends with a mention of her registering at the Department of Greek and Latin languages:

So, I entered into the well-kept garden of German classical philology — and I did not expect that this garden would turn into a labyrinth, at the end of which you will find not the exit, but a dark thicket of an impassable forest, that bore the same names: Latin and Greek.³²

In this way, the time she spends as a student at this department, which will bring her and her beloved Wilamowitz together, becomes equated to the soul's wandering in the abyss of hell. The fact that events in Anna's life are arranged according to Theodora's chronology of death adds a metaphysical dimension to Anna's geographical movement, which associates with a long Soviet/Russian tradition of comparing the West to the land of the dead.³³ This happens, for instance, in the aforementioned film *Intergirl*, whose marital migrant heroine ends her life tragically in a gloomy Swedish landscape.

Her mention of a labyrinth in connection with the Department of Greek and Roman languages, and her description of Wilamowitz as "the bright fleecer who stabbed the bull" brings to mind the myth of Theseus and Ariadne.³⁴ This myth involves male travelling: Theseus must venture upon a journey to Crete, sacrificed by his father to king Minos as fodder to the Minotaur. In one version of the myth, Ariadne hangs herself after having rescued Theseus from the labyrinth with her famous thread and subsequently having been abandoned by her beloved. Her story is one of aborted travel: she was supposed to accompany Theseus back to Athens, but his deceit made her movement stop short. In Rybakova's novel, Ariadne is allowed to continue her journey after death, entangling her lover in the thread of her story.

At an early stage, the narrator answers the question she apparently expects the reader to find central: "You never asked me why I left Russia for Germany, probably because you suspected the most banal of all reasons: that I came here for a better life, because of the money, that is to say. Well, that's how it was; why should I conceal that?" The narrator responds to the Western nationalist discourse that stigmatizes immigrants on the basis of their allegedly immoral incentive for moving. Although the narrator gives an account of a couple of liaisons of varying duration with German men, she leads a life very different from the archetypal *Intergirl*, who deliberately exchanges sexual services for a secure, prosperous life abroad. Anna Grom works at a post office by night and attends courses in Greek at the university by day. Nevertheless, she finds herself persistently confronted with other people's efforts to define her along the spectrum ranging from Madonna to whore:

How are you to explain that this immigrant from the Eastern Bloc, who can barely pronounce two words in German, twenty years old, in a bizarre dress, with a hairdo that is out of fashion — how can she know Leibniz? Girls that know Leibniz speak German. Girls that know Leibniz don't get into a car with the first man that comes along.³⁵

The narrator does not engage in an explicit polemic with these and similar sexualized discourses. Instead, she reformulates her understanding of the prostitute. The motif of the prostitute appears unexpectedly, after a long exposé over a rainy Hamburg: "And at night the famous Reeperbahn lit up, on which prostitutes were still to be found" (91). Then follows an anecdotal

account of Wilamowitz' uncle and his incident with a parrot. Commenting on a parrot's ability to speak any language, the narrator then uses the prostitute as a metaphor of language acquisition: "It's surprising how indifferently a parrot passes from hand to hand, exactly like a prostitute from the Reeperbahn." However, this particular parrot refuses to comply with his owner's expectations. Instead of repeating phrases of the owner's choice, it reproduces awkward speeches from the owner's past and future. The parrot demands more than the owner's distracted attention and manages to become his sole obsession. Finally, when the news from the future grows increasingly unpleasant, the uncle sells it.

This apparently disconnected anecdote might be regarded as a *mise en abyme*; an emblematic story with significance for the interpretation of the whole novel. The metaphorical bond drawn between the prostitute and the parrot points in the direction of Anna: the discourses she confronts due to her status as a destitute immigrant from the East rapidly define her as a (potential) prostitute. Her experience of language acquisition, which she stresses was a rapid process, associates her with the parrot. But like the parrot, she has a creative way of responding to her "owner", i.e. Wilamowitz, who possesses her emotionally. In her letters, Anna confronts Wilamowitz with the often dreary details of her life in his shadow, which could have much the same effect on him as had the parrot's unpleasant selection of voices from the past on his uncle.

The associative chain "prostitute" — "parrot" — "Anna" inverts the hierarchy of power relations between immigrant—resident; woman—man, on which she constantly comments. She posits herself as prostitute/parrot, a marginal, objectified creature, which is only tolerated when serving the narcissistic needs of the male subject. However, her act of posthumous narration manages to change the semantic field of this metaphor. From conveying a disengaged, mechanical mirroring of the male subject's activities (sexual or spoken), this prostitute/parrot is suddenly able to manipulate her own sexual/textual activity and thereby to draw attention to herself as a person in her own right.

Anna Grom and her Spectre is a multi-levelled novel, which comments on the exchange between Russian and German high culture, using a sophisticated game of riddles and puns. It frames the narrative of a travelling woman with intertextual references to journeys that were not realized — Theodora's incorporeal one and Ariadne's interrupted one. The narrator has ventured on a journey ending in her own suicide, i.e. a plot that differs little from well-known tragedies of misplaced women. But by letting her story start, rather than end, with this suicide, she manages to outwit the discourses that deny her the status of an autonomous subject in the narrative of travel.

Conclusion

The cultural construction of women's migration is negotiated within a space framed, on the one hand, by the nationalist trope of the nation as woman, and on the other, by the close connection between masculinity and mobility. In the context of Post-Soviet migration, this framework has generated glossy pictures and titillating narratives of vulnerable, beautiful women on the move, whose room for manoeuvre is limited to the choice between different men and which often end tragically. This article argues that female authors' texts about women's travel relate to these discourses, but simultaneously offer resistance in an intricate, indirect, but nevertheless discernable manner. I have investigated three contemporary prose pieces, in order to understand in what way discourses of national belonging and gender regulations interact in literary

texts. In many ways, they repeat standard features of stories about itinerant women: the death of the heroine (Rybakova), highlighting of her materialist incentives (Ulitskaia), a general rejection of the international marriage plot in favour of domestic religious seeking (Sadur).

However, all three authors remain profoundly suspicious of the nationalist trope of the prostitute, whose spectre lingers over any woman who enters on an open-ended journey from her homeland. Liudmila Ulitskaia's story "Zü-ürich" provides the alternative to prostitution, external respectability, with anti-Semitic overtones, thereby deconstructing the notion of decency. Nina Sadur's novel *The German* concentrates on core symbols of national belonging and by stating their elusiveness, it subverts the nationalist discourse responsible for the stigmatization of women out of place. The narrator of *Anna Grom and her Spectre* provides the tragic story of misguided female spatial movement with an unexpected posthumous continuation, which rearticulates the story from her own point of view.

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- ¹ *Rossiiskii statisticheskii ezhegodnik*, Goskomstat Rossii: Moskva 2002.
- ² On the importance of German idealism for both Westernizers and Slavophiles during the nineteenth century, and Western intellectuals' subsequent adoption of the concept of the "Russian soul", see: Robert C. Williams, *Russia Imagined. Art Culture, and National Identity, 1840–1995*, New York: Peter Lang 1997; Svetlana Boym, *Common places. Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press 1994.
- ³ Nira Yuval-Davies has pointed to the gendered dimensions of nationalism in: *Gender and Nation*, London: Sage 1997.
- ⁴ Helena Goscilo, "The Gendered Trinity of Russian Cultural Rhetoric", *Dehexing Sex. Russian Womanhood During and After Glasnost*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1996.
- ⁵ Eric J. Leed, *The Mind of the Traveler: from Gilgamesh to Global Tourism*, New York: Basic Books 1991, 113.
- ⁶ Mona Domosh and Joni Seagar, *Putting Women in Place: Feminist Geographers Make Sense of the World*, New York: Guilford 2001, 130.
- ⁷ Janet Wolff, "On the Road Again: Metaphor of Travel in Cultural Criticism", in: *Cultural Studies* 7:2 (1993), 234.
- ⁸ Irina Sandomirskaia, *Kniga o rodine. Opyt analiza diskursivnykh praktik*, Vienna: Gesellschaft zur Förderung slawistischer Studien 2001, 57.
- ⁹ Domosh and Seagar, 118.
- ¹⁰ Sandomirskaia, 60.
- ¹¹ Vladimir Kunin, "Interdevochka", *Emigratsiia. Dve povesti i roman*, St Peterburg: Novyi Gelikon 1994.
- ¹² Viktor Erofeev, *Russkaia krasavitsa*, Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia 1994, 136f.
- ¹³ Vladimir Sorokin, "Hochzeitsreise", in: *Serdtsa cheterykh*, Moscow: Ad Marginem 2002, 301–355.

- ¹⁴ Elena Stishova discusses "Moscow does not believe in tears" as part of an exposé of the Cinderella–motif in Soviet/Russian film in "Priklucheniia Zolushki v strane bol'shevikov," *Iskusstvo kino* 5 (1997), 99–107. Tolstaia's story is published in *Liubish' -- ne liubish'*, Moscow: Oniks, Olma–Press 1997.
- ¹⁵ Liudmila Ulitskaia, "Zü–ürich", *Skvoznaia liniia. Povest', rassказы*, Moscow: Eksmo–Press 2002, 135. Here and elsewhere, translations are mine — K.S.
- ¹⁶ O. Iu. Trykova, "Rol' skazki v otechestvennoi proze XX veka (na primere romana N. Sadur 'Nemets')," *Pedagogicheskii vestnik* 2 (1998) http://gw.yspu.yar.ru/vestnik/novye_issledovaniy/6_2/. Trykova analyzes The German from a folkloric point of view. She finds quotes from the version of the fairy–tale published in Afanasiev's collection *Narodnye russkie skazki* in Sadur's story.
- ¹⁷ Campbell, Joseph, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, London: Paladin 1988, 97.
- ¹⁸ Boym, 4. Boym derives this definition from Lévi–Strauss and Roland Barthes, 293.
- ¹⁹ Since Sandomirskaiia's investigation focuses on Soviet nationalist rhetoric, she does not mention the Nazi doctrine of *Blut und Boden* (blood and soil) used to assert German supremacy over Jewish people, which irrevocably has discredited these metaphors in a Western context.
- ²⁰ Nina Sadur, "Nemets", *Chudesnye znaki*, Moscow: Vagrius 2000, 187.
- ²¹ For an investigation of leitmotifs in Sadur's novel *The Garden*, see Karin Sarsenov, *Passion Embracing Death. A reading of Nina Sadur's novel The Garden*, Lund Slavonic Monographs, 3, Lund 2001.
- ²² Nina Sadur, *Nemets* 270.
- ²³ Ibid. 249.
- ²⁴ Ibid. 220.
- ²⁵ N.A. Khrenov, *Kul'tura v epokhu sotsial'nogo khaosa*, Moscow: Editorial URSS 2002, 273. See also Boym, 77, on Petr Chadaev's idea of Russia's "transcendental homelessness" and that idea's connection to the writings of Louis de Bonald.
- ²⁶ Nina Sadur, *Nemets*, 251.
- ²⁷ *Labour (Trud)* was a Union paper during the Soviet period, and is now mostly read by pensioners and the lower strata of the working class. In the late Soviet period, *Labour* was the most "boulevard" of the otherwise politically oriented Soviet newspapers, publishing reports of UFOs, bigfoot, etc. It is owned by Gazprom, a state company, and its political views conform to the government's.
- ²⁸ Sadur, Nina, *Nemets*, 247.
- ²⁹ The erudite reader associates his name with the German classical philologist Ulrich von Wilamowitz–Moellendorff (1848–1931).
- ³⁰ Velikaia Cheti–Minei, 26 March.
- ³¹ Mariia Rybakova, "Anna Grom i ee prizrak", *Glagol* 47 (1999), 31.
- ³² Ibid. 33.
- ³³ For details, see Eliot Borenstein, "Selling Russia: Prostitution, Masculinity, and Metaphors of Nationalism after Perestroika", in Andrea Lanoux and Helena Goscilo (eds.), *Gender and*

National Identity in Russian Culture, DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press 2006.

³⁴ In her review of Rybakova's book, Nadezhda Grigor'eva mentions the intertextual references to this myth as well as to the Revelations of the venerated Theodora and Sorokin's *Hochzeitsreise*. The review is one of many examples of the ambivalence with which women authors still are received. Although Grigor'eva does not hesitate to compare Rybakova with Nabokov, she furnishes her review with spiteful phrases such as "pero 'molodykh bab'" ("the plume of 'young dames'") and "iz mel'koi bab'ei ekonomii" ("due to petty female economy"). See Nadezhda Grigor'eva, *Novaia Russkaia kniga 2* (2000). www.guelman.ru/slava/nrk/nrk3/20.html.

³⁵ Mariia Rybakova, *Anna Grom i ee prizrak*, 15.

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