

Mirrors in Russian Women's Autobiographical Writing:
The Self Reflected in Works by Alla Demidova and Vera
Luknitskaia

Karin Sarsenov
University of Lund, Sweden

The terms used in the title of this article are neither innocent nor unproblematic. As the other contributions to this volume testify, the mirror is an overdetermined metaphor whose signifying powers can be applied in virtually any context. In relation to women, the mirror conjures up a cloud of patriarchal power, crystallizing in a myriad of images depicting female vanity, which for centuries have circumscribed women's agency. Finally, autobiographical writing, which frequently has recourse to the mirror motif, is an ardently contested genre. It borders fact and fiction and raises numerous taxonomical questions and problems of definition. Moreover, with its focus on the self—a culturally contingent entity—the genre highlights processes of identity formation in their specific historical and cultural contexts. My essay grapples with these concepts as a means of coming to terms with two particularly relevant examples of contemporary Russian women's life writing: the works of the actress Alla Demidova and the literary scholar Vera Luknitskaia.

In Russia, the autobiographical genre's development took a slightly different path than in areas influenced by Western Christianity. Western historiographers of autobiography (or other, more inclusive genre denominators such as life writing or self writing) often connect the genre with the progressive evolution of individualism and the idea of an autonomous, liberal self. Over the centuries, the textual devices constructing the self in terms of an inviolable space, separated and hidden from the public eye, become more stringent (Jolly 2001). Confessional types of autobiography attract

readers' attention with their sometimes scandalous transgression of this private/public divide. In Russia, where individualism never constituted the ideological foundation of national or imperial identity, such a display of inner life was often perceived as illegitimate egoism.¹ Jochen Hellbeck, Barbara Walker and Irina Paperno, among others, have pointed to the strong tendency towards historicism in nineteenth-century Russian life writing, and to the prevalence of a Hegelian impetus to connect the narrative of self to the nation's historical development. In the twentieth century, public disclosure of the intimate struck a discordant note with the general culture of dissimulation, impersonation, and imposture that reached its peak during the Stalinist period (Kharkhordin "Reveal"; Fitzpatrick).

Instead, as Walker has argued, Russian life writing has been preoccupied with the documentation not of the self, but of important others, indirectly asserting the author's affiliation to prominent intelligentsia circles and other possible sources of virtue. In Walker's investigation of the contemporaries memoir, life writing emerges first and foremost as a process by which power relations between the intelligentsia and the state, between different intelligentsia circles, and between individual members of specific circles were negotiated.² This function of life writing was underpinned by the relative institutional weakness of the state that promoted personal relations as the dominant repository of power (Walker 332). Oleg Kharkhordin (*Collective* 174) observes a general tendency to conceptualize the self as being defined in Russian culture not by the individual, but rather by the relevant community.

Beth Holmgren shows how the memoir for this reason has become the dominant autobiographical subgenre in Russian literature. With its focus on the factual description of historical processes, it legitimizes its author's egocentric effort in the public task of contributing new historiographical information. The autocratic regimes that have prevailed during Russian history have added extra urgency to this task: the pressure of censorship and other techniques obstructing unlicensed public expression have increased individual responsibility to produce alternative versions of historical events and processes, able to compete with the official ones.

In autobiographical works from the post-Soviet period, these lofty ambitions have largely been abandoned, the political and

moral restrictions that earlier curtailed the genre have been lifted, and readers can now enjoy even the most egocentric, politically compromising, and sexually explicit revelations. However, questions regarding the relationship between the individual and different collectives are far from resolved and keep resurfacing in autobiographical writing. In the texts, boundaries between the self and what is perceived as the alien are delineated, negotiated, defended, and trespassed upon. These boundaries convey the subject's pledges of allegiance and concomitant distancing in terms of social identity and status group, revealing, for example, the narrator's relationship to class, sexuality, gender, nationality, and ethnicity.

Here, the mirror motif is of crucial importance for several reasons. First, the mirror is the master metaphor for the genre of autobiography as a whole. A brief look at bibliographic records of literary criticism reveals hundreds of entries on autobiography where mirrors that are dark or broken, shattered or critical, embellish the otherwise crudely informative titles. Similarly, practitioners of life writing show a strong predilection for this particular metaphor. A notable Russian example is Anna Akhmatova, who compiled poems dedicated to her by other poets in a notebook she called "In 101 Mirrors" (Kraineva and Sazhin). Titles of recently published Russian autobiographical works include *V zerkale stseny* 'In the Mirror of the Stage' (Siuzanna Serova, 2008), *Ne otrazhaia's' v zerkalakh* 'Not Reflecting in Mirrors' (Alla Radzinskaia, 2005), *U zerkala* 'In Front of the Mirror' (Riurik Nagornichnykh, 2007), *Kniaginia Tat'iana: V zerkale veka* 'Princess Tat'iana: In the Mirror of the Century' (Tat'iana Metternikh, 2004), *Volshebnoe zerkalo vospominaniia* 'The Magical Mirror of Memories' (Liudmila Lopato, 2003) and *Razbitoe zerkalo: Istorii iz moei zhizni* 'The Broken Mirror: Stories from My Life' (Iurii Chernov, 2002). The mirror's capacity to objectify the self parallels the autobiographer's efforts when creating his or her textual double. Second, in texts concerned with delimiting personal and collective space, mirrors often prove instrumental. In the anthology *The Semiotics of the Mirror* Iurii Lotman states that the administration of boundaries is the privileged function of mirrors: "In most cases, the mirror appears as the boundary of the semiotic organization and the boundary between 'our' and 'foreign' worlds" (4).

In his book *Literary Mirrors* (1991), Abram Vulis presents a de-

tailed survey of how mirrors appear, function, and interact in European literature and art, with a special focus on works from the Russian cultural heritage. When accounting for his results from bibliographic research, he mentions seventeen Russian literary works, among which only one is written by a woman author—Nadezhda Gippius's. The gendered distribution between authorial persons versus fictive ones in Vulis's discourse is striking: the authors and artists mentioned are almost exclusively male, while women appear predominantly as persons portrayed in novels and on canvases. The same happens in Lotman's anthology mentioned above. Semiotic theory is here applied to numerous artistic texts using the mirror motif, but no woman-authored works are among them. This is most unfortunate, taking into account the strong cultural connection between mirrors and femininity, and the role mirrors play in the construction of feminine identity.

As Jenijoy La Belle has shown, in Western elite culture the patriarchal dichotomy between man/mind and woman/body has continuously been reworked in images of women enthralled by, appalled by, and identifying with their bodies as reflected in the mirror. The identification process has been part of the social formation of woman, the molding of her personality into the constricted space allotted to her. Failure to identify with the mirror reflection generally connotes madness, as in Sylvia Plath's autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* and in Zinaida Gippius short story "Mirrors."³ On the other hand, women's undue interest in the glass has also provoked cultural sanction, as happens in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, for instance, when Eve is distracted by her reflection in a pool of water. This double bind has created a generally negative perception of the mirror in feminist thought, as the "silvered trap" of patriarchy, in Simone de Beauvoir's words, or, in Luce Irigaray's view, as "a male-directed instrument of literal objectification" (qtd. in La Belle 9 and 179). Supported by an overwhelming number of literary sources, La Belle discusses the mirror as women's "intimate companion of self-definition" (174), a tool in the process of realizing a self that cannot be separated from its corporeal reality—for good and for bad.

Against this background, the investigation of woman-authored texts in which the mirror motif is fundamental to the construction of the autobiographical self becomes a subject of intense interest.

This essay examines two such texts: Demidova's *Begushchaia stroka pamiati: Avtobiograficheskaia proza* 'The Flying Line of Memory: Autobiographical Prose' (2000) and Luknitskaia's *Ego – Echo* (2003). In both texts, the mirror motif operates at different levels of the texts, both explicitly and implicitly. My analysis aims to map out the operations performed and to locate the boundaries delineated.

Demidova's and Luknitskaia's works represent two distinct subgenres within autobiography. Demidova's background in Iurii Liubimov's Taganka Theater and her presence in both art-house and popular Soviet cinema place her work firmly within the genre of celebrity autobiography. Luknitskaia is mostly known for having published materials from the archives of her husband, the writer and literary scholar Pavel Luknitskii. She recently published his early biography of Nikolai Gumilev and a volume containing excerpts from her husband's diary, documenting his intimate relationship with Akhmatova (Rylkova 100-01). In her work *Ego – Echo*, she departs from the publicly endorsed role of the dutiful widow devoted to the legacy of her gifted spouse.⁴ She now applies her own considerable literary talent to the task of coming to terms with her sexuality, trauma, and family mythology. Luknitskaia's text has literary ambitions, making abundant use of modernist literary devices such as stream of consciousness and plot and character fragmentation.

The difference in subgenre affiliation accounts for the disparity in authorial stance: Demidova remains aloof, lectures on matters pertaining to the acting profession, and is conspicuously reticent regarding her personal life. Luknitskaia, on the other hand, performs an in-depth investigation of the different layers of her self-identity, including excursions into the realm of the unconscious, with a generous display of feelings and intimate detail. What unites the two authors, however, is the fervency with which they affirm their social identity as members of the intelligentsia. In my examination of mirrors as markers of personal and social boundaries, the contested issue of *intelligentnost'* 'belonging to the intelligentsia' will resurface more than once.

To date, Demidova has published nine books, all of them based on her experience as an actress, five of which are explicitly autobiographical.⁵ The autobiographical works show a great degree of overlap, with specific chapters and passages recurring in several books.

If we read the texts in sequence, it seems as if we are witnessing an ongoing editorial process, with a continual shifting of emphasis.

Demidova experienced late Soviet culture as its varnish of Marxist-Leninist state ideology was quickly eroding. Her frequent travels to Western Europe during this period provided her with ample opportunity to reflect on the relationship between individual and society, the constitution of the self, and the formation of national, social, professional, and other identities. These questions are also central to her autobiographical works. Her choice of mirror metaphors when searching for adequate titles should come as no surprise: "I love mirrors. But my relationship to the mirror is mystical. ... Every actor takes a look in the mirror before entering the stage, not – 'how do I look?' but with a purely subconscious curiosity – it is not he, but a phantom's reflection. The actor must visualize this phantom while acting. Therefore in one way or another, a mirror is encoded in all the titles of my books" (Demidova 14-15).

The mirror's emblematic significance for the acting profession, referring to the creative process of impersonation, is not the only reason for encoding the mirror in the books' titles. Another is Demidova's involvement in Andrei Tarkovsky's autobiographical film *The Mirror*, mentioned in each of her autobiographical works. Above all, however, Demidova's texts are profoundly self-reflective. For example, in her autobiographical *Flying Line of Memory*, she devotes an entire chapter to the subject of "the characteristics of memory," in which she reflects on the mechanisms of remembering. Only after that chapter does the actual transcription of memories begin, where she also outlines the limitations of the remembering subject:

...Fate has offered me meetings with many people, but my egoistic memory has fixed only that which concerns me. We often condemn people who write "I and..." But how can one write differently? Obviously, I'm the one writing, therefore – "I and N." Theater or literary scholars will recreate people's portraits without even knowing them well. That, however, is something very different. When you know a person well, he shows you only that side of him that he wants to show. For instance, Vysotskii was very multi-faceted, but to me he always showed the same side. Therefore some of my reminiscences appear one-sided and short. (10)⁶

This is a key passage in Demidova's autobiographical project. Here, she describes how she navigates the pitfalls of the genre of self-writing in the Soviet/Russian context, with its highly ideologized perception of the self/collective relationship. On the one hand, it should not be surprising that she is made uneasy by the sharing of intimate details characteristic of Western European and some post-Soviet autobiography, since she was raised in postwar Soviet Union, with its culture of denunciations and strict social control. As she puts it, "And, furthermore ... is it absolutely necessary to be outspoken about everything in life? 'If you only knew from what rubbish poetry grows, knowing no shame ...' – but is it necessary to wash this dirty linen in public?" (15).⁷ Consequently, relationships with her parents, her husband, and possible lovers or children receive little mention. In a brief chapter describing her career, she mentions that a stage manager who favored her used to organize the rehearsals in his office, the women dressed only in swimming suits. However, she did not find anything extraordinary in these arrangements at the time. This is the extent to which she ever reveals any intimate details. On the other hand, if she had concentrated exclusively on safe subjects, such as her theater entourage, this would have dissociated the text from the autobiographical genre entirely.

For Demidova, the solution was to write the self as it is reflected in other people, creating portraits that focus the relationship between the self and the other, documenting which specific facets of herself she has revealed to different people. Of the fifty-two chapters in *The Flying Line of Memory*, fourteen are specifically devoted to important people she knew, such as Tarkovsky, Innokentii Smoktunovskii, Sergei Paradjanov, and Larisa Shepit'ko. However, she strictly follows the method outlined in her introduction, i.e., writing about herself while allegedly writing about another person. As a result, the structure of the chapter on Paradjanov, for example, is based on an enumeration of the different outlandish gifts he gave to her. By explicitly dealing with Paradjanov instead of focusing on herself, she indirectly conveys information about her own personality as well and reveals the nature of the relationships she was able to build.

The very need to navigate between the dirty linen of self-revelation and the self-effacement of collectivism is nevertheless

something to which Demidova objects, as evident in another area on which she focuses: Soviet ideology, which proclaimed the rule of the masses and the devaluation of those outstanding individuals who were not the organic offspring of the masses. That ideology created difficulties for these individuals as they tried to cultivate a viable self: “the intelligentsia in our Soviet system could not afford the luxury of confession in art. We kept our thoughts and feelings to ourselves; in this battle with the system, perhaps we also lost ourselves” (292). She notes the resulting “dependence on other people’s opinions” (168), and protests against the notion that “if we are not [members of] the masses, then we are not of interest” (307). The Soviet tendency to view the self as constituted in the eyes of the relevant community, which Kharkhordin documents, is here lamented as an obstacle to creative development.⁸

Consequently, Demidova is concerned with a normative discussion of the ideal self, which she summarizes in the idea of *intelligentnost’*, i.e., the quality uniting members of the intelligentsia. Interestingly, she understands that quality as something that precedes and conditions personality:

For me, the concept of *intelligentnost’* means a special quality of the soul. *Intelligentnost’* is not hereditary; it is not conditioned by profession and is not acquired by education. It is a mode of perceiving the world. ... Il’ia Averbakh was an absolute intelligent. All his actions, his work, and his relations with others revealed the quality that we call “culture,” i.e., that which society has accumulated over many centuries. This defined his thoughts, feelings, human dignity, capacity for understanding others, the inner wealth of his personality, the level of his ethical and aesthetic development, and the constant self-improvement of his soul. (226 emphasis in the original)

An analysis of this passage reveals a polemic with the standard scientific view of personality. In exemplifying *intelligentnost’* via director Il’ia Averbakh’s psychological makeup, she is describing dimensions of personality that current psychological research claims are both hereditary and attainable in suitable social environments, such as through education. Since in her understanding *intelligentnost’* is something beyond genetics and social adaptation, for her this qual-

ity acquires religious or at least metaphysical dimensions.⁹

A second property of this ideal self is *estestvennost'*—the quality of being natural, guileless. Demidova outlines this concept using a bipartite model, where one surface should correspond to the other: naturalness is “the correspondence of an object to itself” (155). Again, the metaphor of the mirror appears: “It is important to identify the exact addressee for the roles you play, in the same way as it is important to know for whom you are writing a book, a review or making a film... (For yourself? For the person you see in the mirror? It turns out that these are two different characters)” (75). Thus the self and the mirror reflection are posited as two separate surfaces, between which, ideally, a relationship of correspondence prevails.

In a chapter devoted to this subject, the idea of naturalness is closely connected to one's capacity to conform to social conventions, to perform in a manner that is intelligible to others, rather than straightforwardly to express a presumed pre-discursive self. Naturalness, of course, is a key issue to Demidova's profession—this is the aim of every effort to impersonate. However, Demidova applies the idea of correspondence between surfaces universally: “naturalness in both art and life – this is a sort of heightened artistry” (156). Again, the self is constructed in relation to other people, and in relation to different dimensions of the self.¹⁰

The most valuable function of the mirror in Demidova's texts, however, is its metaphorical use in the conceptualization of fictionality. Paraphrasing a Chinese legend about the existence of an independent world beyond the mirror that disappears from sight when the mirror is forced to reflect the physical world, she constitutes art as something both autonomous and metaphysical (118). In response to Leninist clichés, such as the definition of Leo Tolstoy's work as a “mirror of the Russian revolution,”¹¹ and the socialist realist dogma's reverence for reality, she advances the idea of the inherent otherness of art, as the independent world beyond the mirror:

True art is never an impassive mirror. The power and richness of ‘the second reality’ is located in its multiple extensions and dimensions, the synthesis of all the features that are scattered throughout life, seemingly without any deep inherent connection. Art discloses these connections, finds them, and creates its

own reality. The magic of art lies in the submersion into something that is radically different from everyday life. (119)

This romantic view of art and the artistic self is obviously characteristic of her generation in general, coming of age during the late Thaw and early Stagnation period (the 1960s). But in Demidova, this view acquires extraordinary precision and an inherent symmetry. She inserts the mirror as an overarching principle of her work—as instrumental in her understanding of art, in her portrayal of the self through its reflection in others, and in her understanding of the self's different dimensions and their relations.

Demidova's autobiographical work demonstrates an explicit commitment to individualism as defined by Steven Lukes. According to him, individualism has four components: the intrinsic value and dignity of the individual, autonomy, privacy, and self-development (as paraphrased in Kharkhordin *Collective* 3). Demidova refers to dignity and self-development in connection to *intelligentnost'*, and the value she places on autonomy is implied in her dismay at the prevailing dependence on others' opinion. Finally, her eschewal of all intimate detail evidences her profound allegiance to the value of privacy. However, the idea of the self as constituted in the eyes of the relevant community is also very much present in the great attention she pays to her colleagues and the care with which she selects them. By combining collectivist and individualist approaches, Demidova attains an air of aristocratic moderation, which also distinguishes her screen and stage persona.

Demidova's use of the mirror is primarily rhetorical: she uses it as a convenient metaphor to convey her arguments and observations. The mirror motif is employed on a deeper level in Luknitskaia's text, where it alludes to the motif's vast literary heritage.

Before examining her text, a brief recapitulation of this heritage is in order. From Vulis's discussion in his book *Literary Mirrors*, it is possible to extract a number of discrete connotational fields in which the mirror motif operates in European cultural history. The most significant can be described as follows:

- A mirror may perform the social function of reminding the observer of what she or he looks like to other people (cf. the point advanced by Umberto Eco, referenced in Julia Chadaga's article in this volume).

- A mirror might refer to the legend of Narcissus, whose infatuation with his own reflection in the water resulted in a double extinction: Narcissus died, leaving only a flower behind, and the nymph Echo, in love with Narcissus, withered away, remaining as a reflection of other people's voices, i.e., a vocal mirror.
- A mirror may have magical functions, as often happens in fairy-tales, cf. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, H. C. Andersen's *The Snow Queen*.
- Accounts of dreams in literary works may function as mirror reflections of other levels of fictional reality.
- Parody may function as a distorting mirror: it creates an unfaithful double of the work or genre that is being subjected to ridicule, a double that breaks away from its original—the work parodied—and leads a separate life.
- A mirror may connote the whole complex of meanings imbedded in the mythologem of the double.
- A mirror may function as a door to a world radically different from the ordinary one, as in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*. The translation of the work into Russian coined a new word—*zazerkal'e*, literally 'that which is on the other side of the mirror'—which thereafter became a staple expression in the genre of fantasy.
- Stream of consciousness, as a literary device, may be understood as a mirror-like reflection of a person's thoughts.
- The structure of a literary work may be arranged according to the symmetry of a mirror, i.e., the mirror's capacity to create images that correspond exactly to their original, except of course that mirror images are in reverse. In this case the mirror constitutes a structural element of the text.

The list overlaps in broad outline with the one presented in an article by Iu. I. Levin (8-9) included in the anthology *The Semiotics of the Mirror* under the heading "Semiotic Potentials of the Mirror." Though certainly not exhaustive, this catalogue is nevertheless helpful as a point of reference when approaching literary texts in which mirrors have a conspicuous presence. As we shall see, Luknitskaia's

text touches upon all these connotational fields.

The myth of Narcissus is encoded in the title of Luknitskaia's autobiographical work *Ego – Echo*, inviting a reading in which mirrors may take center stage. The two epigraphs of the book contain an indirect allusion to the mirror motif. The first one, “Fantasticheskoe sostavliaet sushchnost' deistvitel'nosti” ‘The fantastic constitutes the essence of reality,’ cites Dostoevskii and may evoke the concept of *zazerkal'e*, the extraordinary world on the other side of the mirror. The fantastic is what humans are able to create using their imagination, and *zazerkal'e* denotes the space in which this creative work takes place.

The second epigraph, which quotes Nikolai Gumilev's poem “Canzonet Two” from the collection *Pillar of Fire* (1921), engages Plato in detecting the presence of the otherworldly within the quotidian, dull, and habitual. The first stanzas of this poem conjure up the everyday world as a dust-laden wasteland, cruelly marked by the march of time. Only in the last stanza do the lines borrowed by Luknitskaia introduce a competing luminous, dynamic, and euphonious world, the rightful dwelling place of lyrical personae: “Tam, gde vse sverkan'e, vse dvizhen'e / Pen'e vse, – my tam s toboi zhivem.” ‘There, everything moves, there everything sparkles, / sings – we're there, you and I, we live there’ (Gumilev *et al.*, 120). The next lines, not quoted by Luknitskaia, introduce the mirror: “Zdes' zhe tol'ko nashe otrazhen'e / Popolnil gniiushchii vodoem” ‘What's here is our reflection in a stagnant pond’ (Gumilev *Sobranie* 44). The Platonic idea of the world as a mere reflection offering only shadows of a more radiant reality is here embodied in the image of a stagnant pond (literally, reservoir) that functions as an imperfect mirror. By citing only the first part of the stanza, focusing on the brilliant original, and omitting both the obscuring-mirror device and its equally distressing reflections, Luknitskaia invites a reading of her text that might penetrate these reflecting surfaces to delve instead into the essence beneath.

The suspicion of mirrors embedded in the epigraph quoted from Gumilev is further developed in the preface, which consists solely of Marina Tsvetaeva's well-known poem from her Czech period, “To Steal Away...” Here, the poet ponders different indirect strategies to overcome time and gravity, all involving an elimination

of the visual, audible, and tactile traces that the human body leaves behind, such as shadows, echoes, and ashes. In the second stanza, the mirror reflection is explicitly mentioned as one of these imprints linking the soul to the earthly and temporal: “Mozhet byt’ – otkazom / Vziat’? Vycherknut’sia iz zerkal?” (3). ‘Perhaps by refusal / To win? To cross oneself out / of the mirrors?’ (Golstein 154).

These introductory quotes from Silver Age poetry reveal marked interest in reflection, repetition, symmetry, optical illusion, and distortion, i.e., in operations integral to the connotational field of mirrors. Such operations also serve as functional elements on the structural level. The text is divided into a preface, twenty “Preludes,” an epilogue, and a “New Book” with “Prelude no. 1.” This somewhat haphazard organization omits the principal parts, which the preludes are supposed to precede. The internal division corresponds only loosely to the plot; in spite of the incompleteness suggested in the table of contents, the text is carefully composed according to beginnings, climactic episodes, and closures. However, the temporal structure is emphatically complex, leaving the reader with the laborious task of piecing the timeline together.

In the first ten preludes, an obviously traumatic period in the autobiographer’s life constitutes the temporal center of the narrative. In 1944, she works in a light bulb workshop in Piatigorsk, but suffers from social reprisals because of her parentage. Her father’s service in the Tsar’s army made him a so-called *byvshii* ‘former person,’ and her mother recently had been arrested, accused of counterrevolutionary crimes according to the infamous political paragraph 58 in the criminal code. Vera has no place to live, since her grandmother had been deported and her apartment confiscated. We follow her often vain efforts to find a safe place to rest, and witness the dangers she confronts, her vulnerability to sexual advances from coworkers, NKVD ‘People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs’ personnel, and anyone who offers shelter for the night. From this temporal spot, frequent excursions are made backwards in time: memories from childhood partly spent in Leningrad, dialogues with her grandmother, her first love, how she receives news of her father’s death during German occupation, and sketches from her parents’ lives before her birth. The excursions predominantly unfold as stream of consciousness, presenting, as it were, a mirror of her thoughts. Also

interpolated in the narrative of homelessness are her mother's letters and notes from her time as a prisoner in various NKVD facilities, the last one being a labor camp in Kolyma.

The very first lines of "Prelude no. 1" describe what at first seems like an unsuccessful attempt at renting a corner in a woman's house. Her request is declined, and the narrative jumps back to 1943 when she entered a vocational school which resulted in her present employment. Only in "Prelude no. 11" we learn that this very episode constitutes the closure of the homelessness narrative. The woman changes her mind, agrees to take her as a lodger, and provides her with both material and emotional comfort. In terms of plot, preludes nos. 1-10 form a unit, connected by their temporal focus on the period of homelessness, and framed by two pieces of the episode that ended it. In the next ten preludes, the temporal leaps continue, but now the narrative is more or less chronologically structured, beginning with her birth and ending with the deportation of her grandmother. Consequently, the mirror can be regarded as a metaphor of the text's overall architecture. The temporal fragmentation of the storyline conjures up an image of the story as a broken mirror, on which a beam of light bounces irregularly, from one piece to the next.

In "Prelude no. 11," the bliss of her new home endows the furniture with magical qualities. A chest of drawers turns out to be a messenger from her childhood: "The chest of drawers is impossible to move. But only at a first glance. Actually, it has arrived from the past. Which means that it can fly..." (142). Not coincidentally, a mirror is placed on top of the chest of drawers, its fairy-tale connotations contributing to the overall atmosphere of miraculous transport. The mirror acts as a magic device, propelling the flight of the chest of drawers from the narrator's childhood in her aunt's richly decorated apartment in Leningrad to her present dwelling. Moreover, her childhood chest of drawers, in turn, acts as a magical device, turning paintings into mirrors. It is filled with precious fabric, which Vera uses to dress up like the people portrayed on the Renaissance and Impressionist canvases in her aunt's home: "I am the same as they are in the paintings" (145). Structurally, the mirror is placed in the very center of the story, with ten preludes completed and ten more to go. It also assists the transfer of the storyline back

to the miracles of her childhood, which constitute the main theme of the second half of the book.

The motif of flight in connection to the mirror refers to Tsve-taeva's poem in the preface, with its urge to overcome gravity by manipulation of mirrors. It also links to the epilogue, an account of a dreamlike state in which the narrator hovers close to the ceiling. She is forced to descend by a verbal attack from a "quadratic man," who claims, "Everything is discovered and researched ages ago. And about you, too" (292). His voice makes her body melt and trickle through the bottom of the bedstead. However, she manages to oppose this destructive attempt at external definition, ascends to the ceiling again, and counters with her own powerful enunciation of the self: "if I can only tell it all without scholarly baggage. Without research, assumptions, versions, and hypotheses. What I say is in me, it exists, just as I exist" (294). The text starts off with Tsvetaeva's proposal to efface optical traces in mirrors so as to acquire freedom from gravity, and ends in an emphatic denunciation of this very strategy: to fly is to recuperate the self, to make discursive imprints, and not to allow others to turn one into a mirror reflection of their hypotheses.

The narrative is structured around a number of climactic events, the importance of which is signaled through recurrent allusions and hints before they are actually reported. One of these is the drama connected with the narrator's birth, which has been developed into a myth of origins based on the figure of the double. Already in "Prelude no. 1," this myth is evoked fleetingly as "the story of my name," a story yet to be told. The significance of the name Vera is also stated in "Prelude no. 11" when her landlady, during the epiphanic moment of offering shelter, reacts strongly to her name, adding, "It has an interesting story." Only in "Prelude no. 12" is Vera's story actually told. As a young boy, her father accidentally caused the death of his own sister, who was named Vera. Later, when he saw a girl who looked like her, he promptly married her. His first-born child seemed stillborn and was taken to church for an emergency baptism, then placed in a coffin. Her father snatched her out of the coffin and demanded that she be christened a second time and given the name Vera. The story firmly establishes the narrating Vera's self-identity as the double of her deceased aunt, a notion which recurs

in her father's poetry, which he dedicated to her: "You are my Vera, who has returned to life" (219). Again, the narrator places an operation within the connotational field of the mirror motif—the mirror's doubling effect—at the very center of the textual structure. The process of doubling becomes integral to the myth that provides the autobiographical self with an answer to the most basic existential question: why do I live?

Doubling also recurs in Vera's frequent reports of dreams, both in the sense of the dream as a mirror reflection of the ordinary level of fictional reality, and as an element pertaining to the contents of her dreams. Two identical dreams portend her discovery of her grandmother's deportation. In the two dreams, the narrating Vera finds herself in an empty room without a ceiling and with no sky above, only emptiness. When suddenly the front wall disappears, she calls out for her dead aunt: "I can't exist just as one half! Vera, rescue me!" (273). In the morning she interprets the missing wall as her missing mother, and when she learns of her grandmother's deportation, the meaning of the room's emptiness and its surroundings is revealed. The traumatic moment that inaugurates the period of homelessness, the principal temporal unit of the text, is thus preceded by a set of mirroring dreams, both involving invocations to the narrator's other half, i.e., her double.

In the second part of the text, the narrator documents her experience as an amateur actress, when she played the lead in the school play. The account of her performance, rife with amusing detail, might well be regarded as a parody of the play itself, a piece of unequivocally dull socialist realism. By placing a distorting mirror in front of the over-explicit script describing the historical exploitation of the working people, she is able to express the absurdity of her own situation. She suffers the stigma of being the daughter of a "former man" and can thus readily identify with the exploited heroines she depicts in the play. She is even able to take preemptive revenge for an actual injustice by pinching her counterpart's leg while acting the housemaid—her counterpart being a girl who in the future actually will employ her to do household tasks. The experience of having to conceal her class origins (her parents belong to wealthy and refined families) and to feel shame over admired relatives brings about a sense of non-correspondence and asymmetry in her text. The social

function of the mirror—to reproduce the image of the self as others see it—only serves to emphasize the ostracism to which she is subjected: the image does not correspond to her own perceptions of herself and her background. As in Demidova's text, Soviet collectivism is emphatically repudiated in favor of a self-endorsed individualism: "I love to sing, and in choruses, too. But I don't understand living in chorus [all together]. I live by myself – with all the hues of my life" (127).

As announced in the epigraph from Dostoevsky, the text places the notion of *zazerkal'e*, the fantastic, the creative work of human imagination, at the center of ontological reality. The fantastic is not conceived as something distant, fabricated, and fundamentally different: the magical chest of drawers, the source of the narrator's creativity, arrives from her own childhood, not from another, separate reality. In opposition to her childhood *zazerkal'e*, she posits worlds of destruction inhabited by creatures that are not human. For instance, in one of the many episodes during her homeless period emphasizing her sexual vulnerability, she becomes the involuntary witness to a sexual encounter between a deranged woman and a dwarf. The passage emphasizes that the dwarf belongs to another world through the use of such epithets as "unearthly" and such direct statements as the following: "It was something from the beyond, not connected to this world, and, moreover, it was loathsome, slippery, wet!" (74). Metaphors that put the dwarf's humanity into question, describing his fishy eyes and his pumpkin of a head, unambiguously convey utter disgust.

Adi Kuntsman has investigated such explicit expressions of disgust in Gulag memoirs that register the intelligentsia's reaction to same-sex relations among convicted criminals. Kuntsman views such disgust as a means of protecting the sense of self and particularly of sustaining class distinction between the intelligentsia and the criminals. A common rhetorical device in these memoirs is to relegate those involved in homosexual acts to a non-human world, i.e., to describe them as animals or infernal creatures, as happens in both Luknitskaia's text and in Evgeniia Ginzburg's *Into the Whirlwind* (Kuntsman 315, 320). In *Ego - Echo*, such intense feelings of disgust are declared at two more points in the narrative, both connected to sexual assaults and both described in such a way as to

deprive the perpetrators of their humanity.

An NKVD officer who tries to rape the narrator is perceived as a bear: “In the doorway I see an unfamiliar man. Or rather quite familiar, from an old dream that never seems to end. It’s him, the Bear, now in real life. He sprawls in the middle of the room, turned to the door. His legs are spread, his uniform trousers in rumpled folds at his feet, his genitalia exposed, face red, eyes closed, a bubble of saliva at his mouth” (60). The untranslatable euphemism for genitalia in the Russian original, *sametskoe khoziaistvo* ‘family jewels,’ underscores the bestial quality of the officer, using the word for animals of the male sex—*sametskoe*. Similarly, in reporting a lesbian assault among beggars in a churchyard, Vera’s description is dense with infernal detail: the narrator is forced to engage in a strange ritual, to whisper prayers of unknown origin, and when it dawns on her that she has been sold into sexual service, she denounces her perpetrator as an Antichrist.

These three incidents all speak about threats to her self-identity: the episode with the dwarf challenges her intelligentsia-based concepts of romantic, modest sexuality, which denounce the deviant, the filthy, and ugly. The shame she experiences during her encounter with lesbian sexuality in the churchyard similarity protects the class-based boundaries between her and the “the blind, the palsy, and the gamblers” (92). Finally, the zoomorphic description of the NKVD officer serves to sustain boundaries between perpetrator and victim that in reality were often blurred—evidence of the frailty of these particular boundaries is even provided later in the text, in an inserted narrative by the daughter of a Kolyma NKVD investigator. She reports her father’s death at the hands of his former colleagues, now prisoners. The random way in which friends became executioners and executioners became convicts was one of the intelligentsia’s most terrifying experiences during the Stalin era. It prompted desperate attempts to separate perpetrators from victims, a separation that often proved unfeasible. Luknitskaia’s reports of traumatic experience indirectly convey the most treasured—because violated—facets of her identity, which could be described in terms of Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu and Johnson). This capital consists of her honorable ancestry and the intelligentsia habitus she has acquired. Not accidentally, the report from

the churchyard that affirms her distance from the lumpen is interrupted by memories of the literary education she received at home and her skillful poetry recitation as a child. As her performance in the school play shows, this cultural capital still had trade value, albeit with the persistent threat that the very class background that provided her valued skills could be used against her.

To sum up: Luknitskaia's text privileges the world beyond the mirror, using its reflective qualities to convey the feeling of fragmentation she experiences. By juxtaposing the fantastic *zazerkal'e* to the beastly and infernal, she makes a strong statement about her own social identity as it pertains to class and sexuality. As she comes to terms with her personal identity, the mirror's doubling function provides an image for her acute feeling of loss. She constructs her self-identity as composed of two halves: the dead child Vera and the living daughter of Vera's involuntary killer, the bond between the two girls being so intense that one cannot exist without the other. The repeated deprivations she suffers—the loss of father, mother, and grandmother—reactivate this image of doubling, of splitting into two halves, of one half losing contact with the other. *Ego – Echo* is, as the title tells us, a book about the self, but more about its boundaries—about how these boundaries are constructed, violated, and imposed, but also how they dissolve in symbiotic relationships with nurturing people, and finally how the very sense of self disperses in dreamlike experiences of flight. That flight gives birth to a more profound enunciation of her self as the creative subject of her own discursive constructions.

These two woman-authored autobiographical texts indicate that the mirror is a multifunctional tool, lending itself to such a diverse set of tasks that its prevalence in male-authored canonical work does not create an obstacle for female self-expression. However, in one relevant respect these texts respond to the literary heritage of the mirror: both have omitted one of the most frequently encountered uses of the mirror motif in European culture—to connote female vanity. The two authors forcefully affirm the productiveness of mirroring: in Demidova's text, the image of the self-absorbed beauty lost in her own reflection is replaced by a conception of the process of mirroring as a both existential and professional activity, aimed at achieving maximum correspondence between different aspects of

the self, on the one hand, and its different social functions, on the other. Luknitskaia constructs her text as a series of echoes, emanating from the ego, an ego that achieves completion only in the totality of its traces. Both texts document the narrators' ability to avoid the enslaving capacities of the mirror, which they use, instead, for their own productive ends.

Notes

1 On the cultural situatedness of the private/public distinction, see Weintraub (1997).

2 By this term, Walker has in mind the numerous works with titles such as "So-and-so in the Memoirs of Contemporaries (*sovremennikov*)" and the like (Walker 128).

3 For a discussion of the mirror motif in *The Bell Jar*, see La Belle (126); for an analysis of Gippius's writings on female madness, see Sherbinin (2002).

4 According to Gosילו "Widowhood," taking on the sacred duty of Nikolai Gumilev's true widow was part of Akhmatova's skillful self-promotion (61). In a preface to her husband's diary, Luknitskaia identifies this enterprise as the foundation of Akhmatova's relationship to Pavel Luknitskii (Rylkova 101).

5 Her list of publications includes the following: *Vtoraia real'nost'* (1980), "A skazhite, Innokentii Mikhailovich..." *Razgovor s Innokentiem Smoktunovskim vedet Alla Demidova* (1988), *Vladimir Vysotskii, kak ia ego znaiu i liubliu* (1989), *Teni zazerka'ia. Rol' aktera: tema zhizni i tvorchestva* (1983), *Begushchaia stroka pamiati* (2000, 2003), *Akhmatovskie zerkala: akterskie zametki* (2004), *Zapolniaia pauzu* (2007), *V glubine zerkal* (2008), *Pis'ma k Tomu* (2010). The contents of *Zapolniaia pauzu* are identical to those of *Begushchaia stroka pamiati*.

6 Here and elsewhere, unless otherwise stated, translations are my own. From now on, page numbers within parentheses refer to *Begushchaia stroka pamiati*, 2000.

7 Internal quote from Akhmatova's poem "I don't need martial hosts arrayed in odes..." (413).

8 Elena Koreneva, a star of Soviet cinema of the 1970's, makes a similar reflection in her novel-biography *Idiotka*, describing her experience as an émigré in the United States: "A sudden change occurred in my awareness of how suppressed I was when a student, dressed exactly as me, sat down in front of me during a lecture: a blue pull-over and a neat white collar. The similarities were many: the silent presence at the lectures, the deeply hidden 'inner world,' straight posture while seated. This was a student from the People's Republic of

China. He turned out to be my own reflection in the mirror. This convinced me that our inner condition affects how we move and how we dress. Total control over my behavior and an orientation towards the opinion of others – that’s what my appearance signaled. ... I kept silent, because I understood that I had no opinion of my own, it was not formed yet, I could declare something, but I could not argue. We had always been in the company of ‘our circle,’ where unanimity reigned with regard to the system, the GULAG, Sakharov, dissidents, bureaucracy and censorship. ... I had never had to say something from my own subject position. My ‘I’ was always ‘we’” (320-23).

9 Women autobiographers rather frequently discuss the concept of ‘intelligentnost’. Political scientist Vera Pirozhkova (b. 1921) considers the legacy of the intelligentsia pernicious, entailing an “inner weakness of creative faculties” (1). Tat’iana Okunevskaia (1914-2002) continues on a similar note, “Why can’t I tell a person right in his face what I think about him?! Decaying intelligentsia! [*Intelligentskaia gnii!*] As Dad said, I come out with God knows what in front of superiors, when I’d better keep silent, but I can’t bring myself to tell off an insignificant person, although he’s a scoundrel” (172). These judgments echo the ferocious denunciation of the intelligentsia as a class characteristic of the early Soviet period, to which Demidova objects.

10 Such a relational understanding of the self is subject to an intense scholarly debate within sociology, where this model competes with the more autonomous or fluid conceptions proposed by Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman. For an overview, see Mason.

11 For a discussion of the significance of the mirror in Lenin’s literary theory, see Macherey (106).

Works Cited

- Akhmatova, Anna. *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova*. Ed. Roberta Reeder; trans. Judith Hemschemeyer. Edinburgh: Canongate, 1997.
- Bourdieu, Pierre and Randal Johnson. *The Field of Cultural Production : Essays on Art and Literature*. Cambridge: Polity, 1993.
- Demidova, Alla. *Begushchaia stroka pamiati*. Moscow: ESKMO, 2000.
- Fitzpatrick, Sheila. *Tear Off the Masks! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005.
- Golstein, Vladimir. *Lermontov’s Narratives of Heroism*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1998.
- Gosilo, Helena. “Widowhood as Genre and Profession á la Russe–Nation, Shadow, Curator, and Publicity Agent.” *Gender and National Identity in*

- Twentieth-Century Russian Culture*. Eds. Helena Goscilo and Andrea Lanoux. DeKalb: Northern Illinois UP, 2006. 55-74.
- Gumilev, Nikolai Stepanovich. *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh. T. 2, Stikhi 1916-1921 gg. i stikhi raznykh let*. Washington: Kamkin, 1964.
- Gumilev, Nikolai Stepanovich, Burton Raffel, and Alla Burago. *Selected works of Nikolai S. Gumilev*. Albany: State U of New York P, 1972.
- Hellbeck, Jochen. "Russian Autobiographical Practice." *Autobiographical practices in Russia = Autobiographische Praktiken in Russland*. Ed. Jochen Hellbeck and Klaus Heller. Göttingen: V&R, 2004. 279-98.
- Holmgren, Beth. "Introduction." *The Russian Memoir: History and Literature*. Ed. Beth Holmgren. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2003. ix-xxxix.
- Jolly, Margaretta, ed. *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*. Chicago: Dearborn, 2001.
- Kharkhordin, Oleg. "Reveal and Dissimulate: A Genealogy of Private Life in Soviet Russia." *Public and Private in Thought and Practice: Perspectives on a Grand Dichotomy*. Ed. Jeff Weintraub and Krishan Kumar. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997. 333-64.
- . *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1999.
- Koreneva, Elena. *Idiotka: Roman-biografiia*. Moscow: AST, 2003.
- Kraïneva, V. I. and V. N. Sazhin. "Iz poeticheskoi perepiski A. A. Akhmatovoi." *Problemy istochnikovedcheskogo izucheniia istorii russkoi i sovetskoi literatury. Sbornik nauchnykh trudov*. Leningrad: GPB, 1989. 191-202.
- Kuntsman, Adi. "'With a Shade of Disgust': Affective Politics of Sexuality and Class in Memoirs of the Stalinist Gulag." *Slavic Review* 2 (2009): 308-28. Web. 20 Jan. 2011.
- La Belle, Jenijoy. *Herself Beheld: The Literature of the Looking Glass*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988.
- Levin, Iu. I. "Zerkalo kak potentsial'nyi semioticheskii ob'ekt." Lotman 6-24.
- Lotman, Iu. M., ed. *Trudy po znakovym sistemam. 22, Zerkalo-semiotika zerkal'nosti*. Tartu: TGU, 1988.
- Luknitskaia, Vera. *Ego-Ekho*. St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Sudarynia, 2003.
- Macherey, Pierre. *A Theory of Literary Production*. Trans. Geoffrey Wall. London: Routledge, 1978.
- Mason, Jennifer. "Personal Narratives, Relational Selves: Residential Histories in the Living and Telling." *Sociological Review* 52.2 (2004): 162-79. Web.

20 Jan. 2011.

Okunevskaia, Tat'iana. *Tat'ianin den'*. Moscow: Vagrius, 1998.

Paperno, Irina. "Personal Accounts of the Soviet Experience." *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 3.4 (2002): 577-610. Web. 20 Jan. 2011.

Pirozhkova, Vera. *Moi tri zhizni: Avtobiograficheskie ocherki*. St. Petersburg: Zhurnal Neva, 2002.

Rylkova, Galina. *The Archaeology of Anxiety: The Russian Silver Age and Its Legacy*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2007.

Sherbinin, Julie W. de. "Haunting the Center": Russia's Madwomen and Zinaida Gippius's 'Madwoman.'" *The Slavic and East European Journal* 46.4 (2002): 727-42. Web. 20 Jan. 2010.

Vulis, A. Z. *Literaturnye zerkala*. Moskva: Sovetskii pisatel', 1991.

Walker, Barbara. "On Reading Soviet Memoirs: A History of the 'Contemporaries' Genre as an Institution of Russian Intelligentsia Culture from the 1790s to the 1970s." *Slavic Review* 59.3 (2000): 327-52. Web. 20 Jan. 2011.

Weintraub, Jeff. "The Theory and Politics of the Public/Private Distinction." *Public and Private in Thought and Practice: Perspectives on a Grand Dichotomy*. Ed. Jeff A. Weintraub and Krishan Kumar. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997. 1-42.

Zdravomyslova, Elena. "A Cultural Paradigm of Sexual Violence Reconstructed from a Woman's Biographical Interview." *Models of Self: Russian Women's Autobiographical Texts*. Ed. Marianne Liljeström, Arja Rosenholm and Irina Savkina. Helsinki: Kikumora, 2000. 207-28.