



# ZINAIDA ALEKSANDROVNA VOLKONSKAYA

Readings in Russian Literature: The Nineteenth Century  
IIIT Hyderabad  
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## “Moscow’s Apollo”



Portrait of the Writer and Musician  
Princess Zinaida Alexandrovna Volkonskaya,  
née Princess Beloselskaya-Belozerskaya (1879–1862),  
Dressed as Tancred (from the Opera by G. Rossini)  
F. Bruni  
Oil on Canvas, c. 1820  
“Virtual Russian Museum”  
St. Michael’s Palace  
St. Petersburg

# Zinaida Aleksandrovna Volkonskaya (1792-1862)

- Belonged to an extremely wealthy and powerful family.
- Spent much of her childhood and youth abroad, in Italy, moved to Russia in 1817
- French was her first language
- Wrote in French, and 1824 onwards, Russian
- Hosted one of the most important salons in Moscow (By the second quarter of the 19th cent., Moscow begins to see upper-class and mercantile investment in art and culture).
- Wrote poetry, prose fiction, and travel memoirs
- Wrote and sang opera, played Joan of Arc in Schiller's *Maid of Orleans*

Portrait of Princess Zinaida Volkonskaya (1830)  
Orest Kiprensky  
Oil on Panel  
Hermitage







*В салоне Зинаиды Волконской*

*In Zinaida Volkonskaya's Salon (c.1899-1908?)*

Grigory Myasoyedov

Oil on Canvas, Rumyantsev Museum

# The Space offered by Literary Salons

- The notion of a predefined “femininity” and “masculinity” and the expectation of conformity was traumatic for women writers (Rosenholm and Savkina, para. 8).
- The feminized literary salon offered a “‘natural,’ real and symbolic place where the legitimization of woman as a creative being turned out to be possible” (ibid.).
  - But some women writers rejected it, for precisely this reason.
- The fashion for literary salons came from France.

# The Space offered by Literary Salons

Salon gatherings involved “participation in lively and entertaining social conversation, the organization and maintenance of which, was thought to be women’s business and skill. Salons were associated with women’s speech and narrative and were usually neutral territory, a space where people of different allegiances, ideas and literary parties met. The hostess was the guarantor of tolerance (and to some degree egalitarianism), the arbiter of taste, the ‘legislator’ and a culturally significant figure. As a rule, she was not only the organizer of conversation and a listener, but also a writer, who could ‘publish’, that is, offer her own works for reading and discussion. In this sense the salon was a place of joint cultural activity for men and women, where women even had some advantage ...

# The Space offered by Literary Salons

However, it is important to recall that the conventions of social etiquette were in operation; the obligatory compliments showered on the 'authoresses' often had nothing in common with real discussion of texts and took them out of the sphere of serious literary life, into the sphere of ladies' dilettantism. Women who took up literature and were associated with salon culture (Zinaida Volkonskaia, Aleksandra Smirnova-Rosset, Evdokiia Rostopchina and to some degree Karolina Pavlova) ... met with notable difficulties when they tried to demonstrate their right to engage in literary craft outside the drawing room on the professional literary stage. If they accepted the rules of the game and agreed to the conventions of feminization, which set the boundaries for women's self-expression, they gained the reputation of a 'salon or ballroom poetess'" (ibid., para 9).

# “Autocracy, Orthodoxy, Nationality”

- The words of Tsar Nicholas (Nikolai) I's Education Minister Sergei Uvarov
- Policy for his reign: stressed importance of the Russian Language and Orthodox Religion
- *Inorodtsy*: ethnic Siberians, nomadic groups, Jews, even some Christians (Poles), other Asians became “aliens”
- Volkonskaya was secretly a Catholic and was likely to face sectarian restrictions. So she left for Rome.
- In the development of a national culture, where does patriotism end and xenophobia/racism begin?



# “To Princess Z.A. Volkonskaya”

(A madrigal by Pushkin; Translation Source: post-edited Google Translate output)

Среди рассеянной Москвы,  
При толках виста и бостона,  
При бальном лепете молвы  
Ты любишь игры Аполлона.  
Царица муз и красоты,  
Рукою нежной держишь ты  
Волшебный скипетр вдохновений,  
И над задумчивым челом,  
Двойным увенчанным венком,  
И вьется, и пылает гений.  
Певца, плененного тобой,  
Не отвергай смиренной дани,  
Внемли с улыбкой голос мой,  
Как мимоездом Каталани  
Цыганке внемлет кочевой.

In the midst of dissipated Moscow,  
Amid gossip over whist and Boston,  
Amid ballroom murmurs of rumours  
You love the games Apollo plays.  
Queen of Muses and Beauty,  
You hold with a gentle hand  
The magic sceptre of inspiration,  
And over the pensive brow,  
Twice crowned with flowers,  
Genius twists and burns.  
A singer, captivated by you,  
Do not reject a humble tribute,  
Listen to my voice with a smile,  
As when passing by Catalonia  
The gypsy listens to the nomad.

# Volkonskaya to Pushkin

(Translation Source: post-edited Google Translate output)

“Великий русский поэт должен писать или в степях или под сенью Кремля, а творец Бориса Годунова принадлежит городу царей. Какова же должна быть мать, зачавшая человека, чей гений есть полнота силы, изящества и простоты, который, являясь нам -- то дикарем, то европейцем,-- то Шекспиром или Байроном, то Ариостом или Анакреоном,-- но всегда Русским, переходит от лирики к драме, от песен нежных, любовных, простых, порою суровых, романтических или язвительных, к величественному и простодушному тону строгой истории.”

“The great Russian poet must write either in the steppes or under the shadow of the Kremlin, but the creator of Boris Godunov belongs to the city of tsars. What kind of mother must she be who has conceived a man whose genius has the fullness of strength, grace and simplicity, who, being to us - now a savage, now a European, now Shakespeare or Byron, now Ariosto or Anacreon - but always Russian, who passes from lyrics to drama, from tender, loving, simple, sometimes harsh, romantic or caustic songs, to the majestic and ingenuous tone of a rigorous story.”

# Autobiographical Elements

- *This is a story masquerading as a letter about a dream, in which Zinaida Volkonskaya includes herself and other historical figures as characters.*
- Includes herself as a character in the story, premised on a supposed dream.
- Volkonskaya's own mother had died when she was a child.
- Historical Figures:
  - Ivan Alekseyevich Gulyanov (1789-1841), the founder of Russian Egyptology
  - Jean-François Champollion (1790-1832), first great modern Egyptologist, made the first scientific attempt to decode the hieroglyphs



Bonaparte and his Chief of Staff in Egypt (1863)  
Probably oil on canvas



# The Figure in the Dream

Who is this figure,  
who has been old  
even when she was young?

# The Figure in the Dream

- The figure represents Egypt itself, feminized: “the daughter of ancient Egypt” (16)
- *What is the mummy’s stated purpose?*
- *What does Egypt represent in the story?*

# Secret, Privileged Knowledge

- What are the secrets of ancient Egypt, its wisdom and its knowledge about universal questions that unite all humanity?
- What is the nature of this forbidden, mystical and spiritual knowledge?

***“my words would cut themselves into hearts as deeply as the magic signs carved on the pyramids; but, like those signs too, their meaning would remain closed, except to initiates” (16).***

***“These songs must only ring out when other, sibling, sounds rise in response to them” (18).***

- What can we learn from ancient Egypt?
  - For example, what can we learn about death and mortality?

***“the powers of life in nature are perpetually bubbling next to the powers of death” (17).***

# Solace in Mortality/Temporary Dwelling

*“The triumph of man lies, rather, in the word! This sign here shows the opening of the lips; from this hot spring rush thoughts, feelings, anger, prayers, passions – all flowing in a torrent of picturesque words – making man as much a creator as the gods. He at one and the same time imagines, confers form, describes, inspires, and rules over life and nature” (17).*



# Classical References

- Reads a letter and then falls asleep in her Roman villa while reading/looking at hieroglyphs and has a dream.
- Fascination with classicism: she read the letter in her father's house, where she "grew up in the shade of Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Italian works of art, my youthful gaze becoming schooled to ideal forms" (14).
- Elevated, worshipful tone of writing about Mummies, hieroglyphs, the god Ptah etc.
- Writes that she sits "on a purple couch in the ancient Greek style" (15)
- References to Greek and Roman works of art and mythology:
  - the Temple of Diana in Ephesus and the Venus de' Medici, specific works of art
  - Medusa, Faun
- The mysterious figure tells her that "Isis ... is the very image of my life, the reflection of my earthly existence" (15).

# Classical References

- **Duality** of experience/phenomena at the heart of this text:
  - Young – Old
  - Ephemeral – Eternal
  - Life – Death/Afterlife (“the powers of life in nature are perpetually bubbling next to the powers of death” (17))
  - Knowable – Unknowable/Secret
  - Rational Knowledge – Mystical (Irrational) Knowledge
    - “the spiritual apprehension of knowledge inaccessible to the intellect, may be attained through contemplation and self-surrender” (Oxford dictionaries)
  - Light – dark → “The dark sun”
- Reference to **Memphis**, the capital of the ancient Egyptian religion, until the Edict of Thessalonika in 380 CE, which led to its abandonment in favour of Nicene Christianity. *What is the significance of this reference?*

# A Tone of Apology

- “Moreover, the ‘inexperienced muses’ were encouraged to be modest and unpretentious and therefore, most women writers prefaced their texts with excuses, figures of self-disparagement and protestations of lack of ambition, which often derived from their immediate artistic and financial dependency on male patrons” (Rosenholm and Savkina, para 4).

# A Tone of Apology

*“Forgive me, my dear Gulyanov, for occupying you at such length with my delirious fancies; forgive me, if my dream should contradict your opinions of the Hieroglyph in some manner which I do not suspect. For what system does not vanish in a dream, where imagination alone triumphs over the mind, over Logic and Reason? In very truth I was not thinking of you, nor of Champollion, at the time when I conversed with the Mummy come to life. But in my waking hours, as you well know, I am always in agreement with you, recognizing that you are my one true guide to the labyrinth of signs; I resign all my own suppositions about the Hieroglyph before the power of your genius.*

*Forgive this amatrice of antiquity her fantastical aberrations, and be always persuaded of her most cordial feelings for you.*

*(1829)*

*Princess Zinaida Volkonskaya”*



# Assignment 1

- Paper-viewing for Q1 today.
- For Assignment 1, read A.S. Pushkin's story "The Shot."
  - Feb 14: 2/3 questions (guideline: 400 words each).
  - Use your time judiciously!

***... Also, ALL art is imaginative, even classicism!***

***Nothing "real" about classicism or the Enlightenment, which are also idealisms, rooted in notions of Reason.***

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