

# Luminaries

Princeton Faculty Remembered

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# Nina Berberova

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I do not remember exactly when, during those early days of graduate school, I met Nina Nikolaevna Berberova for the first time. I had known about her from my mother, Natasha Chances, and grandfather, Samson Soloveitchik, who, in turn, had known her in Paris, where they were all part of the Russian émigré community in the 1920s and 1930s. Nina Berberova and my grandparents moved in different circles of the intelligentsia and were affiliated with different émigré political/literary journals. Nevertheless, the circles did sometimes intersect on the pages of a journal or at a social event. Berberova recalled, for example, a social gathering at her country home, where my mother, as a teenager, had been surrounded by admiring men. During the spring before I entered graduate school, Berberova and my grandfather

had been featured speakers at a Russian Studies symposium convened by Fred Warner Neal, professor of international relations at Claremont Graduate School.

Nina Berberova started teaching at Princeton in 1963.<sup>1</sup> She had arrived in the United States from France in 1950 and had then, in 1958, begun to teach Russian, as a lecturer, in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Yale University, where she stayed until she moved to Princeton. She came to Princeton because Richard Burgi, chairman of Princeton's Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures in 1963, invited her and another Russian-language lecturer, Veronica Dolenko, to follow him when he moved from Yale to Princeton. At the time, at age sixty-two, she had already led an extraordinarily full life. She would continue to lead an exciting life, far beyond the confines of an academic life, in the two decades that followed her retirement from Princeton in 1971 until her death, in Philadelphia, in 1993.

As a young woman, Berberova had been a part of the cultural "scene" of Russia. She remembered attending the funeral of one of Russia's great Symbolist poets, Alexander Blok, in 1921, the year before she left Russia for good. She lived, for years, with one of Russia's foremost émigré poets, Vladislav Khodasevich, until his death in 1939. As a member of the Russian émigré community in Paris in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, and later, too, in the United States, she herself wrote prose and poetry, autobiography and biography, literary criticism and drama.

She brought to her teaching a sense of the vitality of the cultural happenings of Russian émigré life. Her love of poetry she infused into her courses on Russian poetry. When we graduate students walked into her classes, always taught in Russian, we were absorbing something other than a scholar's analysis of a poem.

<sup>1</sup> Some of the material in this memoir is based on my articles, "Nina Nikolaevna Berberova," *Dictionary of Russian Women Writers*, ed. Marina Ledkovsky, Charlotte Rosenthal, Mary Zirin, (Westport, Connecticut, and London: Greenwood Press, 1994), pp.77-79, and "Berberova Imbued with Joie de Vivre," *Trenton Sunday Times*, May 22, 1994.

We were actually experiencing, actually tasting the flavor of Russian Symbolist poetry, whose peak was 1890-1910, from someone, a poet, who had known the Russian Symbolists about whom she spoke. As a writer herself, she could analyze a poem with a poet's intuitive grasp of how it is shaped. As a writer and member of the intelligentsia, she spoke a beautiful pre-revolutionary Russian that has, with few exceptions, all but disappeared.

Berberova both analyzed and, in her reading aloud of the poetry, reproduced the musicality of Alexander Blok's poems and the disjunctures contained within the lines of Innokenty Annensky's verses. She mimicked perfectly the stinging, tart, acerbic stabs of jealousy enfolded in Marina Tsvetaeva's line, addressed to her former lover, "How is Life with Another?"

Berberova's courses, filled with *explications de texte* analyses of the poems, were also filled with anecdotes about the love lives of the poets and the cultural gossip of the period, as if these juicy tidbits were about incidents that had happened here and now and just around the corner. It was clear that the personalities of these literary figures were evoked by someone who had spent a great deal of time in their presence.

When Berberova read the poetry, she performed — just as Russian poets who give poetry readings today expect that they will be public, certainly *not* understated, events. She explained that when we listened to her read the poetry of Khodasevich, or of Acmeist poet Osip Mandelstam, we were participating in a piece of Russian cultural history that extended back to the nineteenth century, back to the so-called "father of Russian literature," Alexander Pushkin. She told us that Khodasevich had explained that he reads in the style of Russian poetry-reading to which Pushkin and later "Petersburg poets" adhered. This way of reading poetry has continued to the present in the poetry-reading manner of the recently deceased Joseph Brodsky, also a part of the Petersburg tradition.

Berberova also explained that there was another way of reading poetry, very different from the Pushkin style. This was a

declamatory mode, one favored by the early twentieth-century poet Vladimir Mayakovsky and later poets. This tradition, too, lives on, in the reading style of poets like contemporary Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko.

Thus, when Berberova taught poetry, it was not dead-on-the-page material to be yawned at and struggled through. Rather, here was someone who herself was intimately involved, in life and art, with Russian poetry and Russian poets. Poetry mattered, the way that food and water mattered — and this, too, was a part of the Russian tradition of literature that was conveyed to us, consciously and unconsciously, in every seminar and every office-hour discussion of literature.

Berberova's courses on late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Russian prose, as well as her courses on poetry, reflected her own literary tastes. In her reading performances, she often leaned toward the modernists. For instance, she translated four T. S. Eliot poems into Russian; the translations appeared in *Novyi zhurnal* (New Journal), an émigré journal, in 1962. While she loved and primarily taught the modernists, the structure and style of her own prose, surprisingly, fit more into the tradition of nineteenth-century realists.

Among Russian writers, she held in particularly high esteem Vladimir Nabokov's fiction and Andrei Bely's poetry and prose. An early champion of Andrei Bely, she directed many doctoral dissertations on this Russian Symbolist's works, and thus contributed greatly to scholarly interest in Bely among Russian literature specialists in this country. Among her star students, for example, was John Malmstad, a Harvard University professor of Russian poetry and one of the country's leading Russian poetry experts.

Berberova gave generously of her knowledge and her time to students and non-students alike. When the eminent Russian émigré linguist Roman Jakobson came to Princeton to deliver the Gauss lectures, she invited graduate students to attend. At the

time, the Gauss lecture series was open by invitation only to a small number of faculty. Berberova told the story of Jakobson's asking her, since she, like him, now exceeded the age of sixty, whether she still stood or whether she now sat when she taught. She stood, she informed him. He, five years her senior, announced to her that he had "sat down."

Berberova invited students to lunch in the faculty club or at her apartment. Every year, she hosted a small Thanksgiving dinner for a few students and former students. We would gather in Berberova's small rented apartment in University housing on Stanworth Lane, among the memorabilia of Russian culture — photographs and art works of Russian writers. At one point during those years, a caricature of Nabokov with a butterfly net in his hand popped up on the wall near her front door. The latest books, journals, and newspapers, in Russian, French, and English, would always be stacked on the coffee table in her living room, as if waiting to be included in the conversation.

Berberova's celebration of Thanksgiving, a custom of her new country, was indicative of her personality. She lived passionately in the moment. She was proud to adopt the favored mode of transportation of her new country: she was proud that she had learned to drive. She was proud to adopt the language of her new country and spoke often, and disdainfully, of those émigrés who refused to learn English and who refused to throw themselves into American life.

Berberova had strong opinions about everything — people, literature, politics, the gossip of literary politics of the Russian émigré cultural community, social policy, the Soviet Union, American presidential elections, current events, the places to get the best bargains on sophisticated, elegant clothes with a Parisian flair, the latest films, the latest art exhibits, the latest books, the latest articles in the *New York Review of Books*. She hated provincialism. She hated conventionality. She detested the bourgeoisie. She detested sentimentality. She detested the dead, glazed eyes of

anyone who retreated from the energy of a profound engagement with life. She was friendly to all sorts of people from all sorts of walks of life. She was intensely interested in life.

I am not the only person to have conjectured that the title of Berberova's 1981 book, *The Iron Woman*, about Moura Budberg (Baroness Maria Ignatievna Benkendorf-Budberg), referred not only to Budberg, but also to Berberova herself. Berberova was a tough, hardy survivor of not one, but two emigrations, first from Russia and then from France. The traumas of emigration are etched into the lines of some of her most compelling poetry. The first three lines of her poem "Separation," composed in 1945, are stark and blunt in their characterization of the life of an exile: "Separation resembles a terrible story:/ It begins at night,/ And it has no end." Another poem, untitled (part of the cycle, "Five Poems," published in 1956), is a chilling, sobering reminder of the rootlessness of émigrés in general, and in particular, of the special qualities of rootlessness of Russian émigrés, whose paths back to their homeland had been blocked because they were now *personae non gratae* in the Soviet Union. Here is an excerpt from that poem:

The cashier asked: Round-trip ticket?  
 "— Only one-way. Irrevocable journey" . . .  
 "Would you like to go back?  
 "Where? I have no place to go."

Had Berberova's role been confined to her contributions up to the time of her retirement, she would have left behind a legacy of which to be proud. She trained several generations of students of Russian literature. She recorded her version of Russian cultural life in her memoirs, *The Italics Are Mine*, which came out first in English in this country, in 1969, and then, three years later in Russian, in West Germany.

She was the author of short stories, such as "Billancourt Holidays"<sup>2</sup> and of an anthology of short stories, *The Easing of One's*

<sup>2</sup> Paris, 1937–1938.

*Fate*.<sup>3</sup> She was the author of novels, such as *The Last and the First*<sup>4</sup> and *Without Sunset*.<sup>5</sup> Her play, *Madame*, was staged in Paris in 1938. She wrote three biographies, *Tchaikovsky*, *Borodin*, and *Alexandre Blok et son temps*.<sup>6</sup>

In the United States, she continued to publish her own prose and poetry in émigré journals. Her literary analyses and book reviews appeared both in émigré journals and in American professional academic journals devoted to Russian literature. She edited and contributed commentary to a collected edition of Khodasevich's works: *Collected Poems of Vladislav Khodasevich*.<sup>7</sup> After retirement, she continued to write, publish, and reissue her works.

Increasingly, as members of her generation died off, Berberova acted as a source for Soviet, European, and American visitors interested in the pre-revolutionary and émigré period of Russian literature. She had a steady flow of visitors and letters with inquiries, from around the world, about the Russian and émigré life with which she was so familiar.

In the years after retirement, the convergence of three forces gave new life to Berberova's writings and to her place in Russian cultural history. First was the women's movement in the West, which increased interest in women's creative accomplishments. Second, there was *glasnost*, which meant that in the Soviet Union, and then, in post-Soviet Russia, people, works, and cultural movements once banned by Soviet authorities were now welcomed, invited, published, and celebrated. Finally, by the late 1980s, Berberova was one of the last living representatives of the Russian émigré period. Thus, in the USSR and in the West, there was a real interest in Berberova both as a writer and as a person.

Extensive articles and writings in literary journals and newspapers by and about Berberova began to appear in the Soviet Union and abroad. A collection, *Poems (1921–1983)*, came out in Russian

<sup>3</sup> Paris, 1948.

<sup>4</sup> Paris, 1930.

<sup>5</sup> Paris, 1938.

<sup>6</sup> Paris, 1937; Paris, 1938; Paris, 1948.

<sup>7</sup> Munich, 1960.

in 1984. Her fiction, translated into French and English (including *The Accompanist* and *The Tattered Cloak and Other Novels*), has been highly praised in Europe and the United States as well as in Russia, where it has appeared in the original. I have seen her works on the shelves of bookstores in Moscow, Paris, New York, and Chartres. Near the end of her life, she herself returned to Russia for the first and only time since the 1920s. The visit was a triumph. Russians squeezed into packed halls to see her and to hear her speak.

And here in Princeton, a few months after her death, a French movie, "The Accompanist," based on her fiction, was playing in the Montgomery movie theater, where Berberova had so often seen European art films.

Nina Berberova lives on in her writings, in the knowledge of and love of Russian literature that she transmitted to her students, in her capacity to make Petersburg and Paris culture come alive, in her fierce and passionate dedication to the preservation of Russian culture.

▶ ————— READING LIST

*Tchaikovsky* (Paris: Egloff, 1948)

*Alexandre Blok et son temps* (Paris: Éditions du Chêne, 1947)

*Poems. Selections* (New York: Russica, 1987)

*The Accompanist*, trans. Marian Schwartz (London: Collins, 1987)

*The Tattered Cloak and Other Novels*, trans. Marian Schwartz (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991)

*The Italics Are Mine*, trans. Philippe Radley (London: Chatto & Windus, 1991)