

## Lydia Ginzburg's Victory and Defeat<sup>1</sup>

The recently published volume *Passing Characters* (*Prokhodiashchie kharaktery*) has changed our mode of understanding the psychological prose of Lydia Ginzburg—a mode to which we had managed to grow accustomed during the preceding twenty-seven years, and which we treasured dearly. This perception was formed by Lydia Yakovlevna's own publications between 1982 and 1989, in which she readdressed her old texts to contemporary readers. As a result she began to be perceived as a current, contemporary writer, working in a completely unique genre, conventionally called “in-between prose” (*promezhutochnaia proza*). The impact on readers rendered by her publications from the eighties was exceptional in its strength and, most of all, in its immediacy. I will quote the remark of one of her readers who has since passed away, and who was over the age of fifty at the time of the first publications of Ginzburg's prose. Recalling the significance of his first readings of Ginzburg's essays, he said: “She explained to me my own self.” This completely corresponds to the feeling I had, and I think it is very close to what many others have felt then and since. Ginzburg gave us the language and conceptual apparatus for understanding ourselves and our milieu. In an obituary, Marietta Chudakova described the effect of Ginzburg's texts in the following way: “In the past 10–15 years, with her own hands, with her individual efforts, she raised the level of the country's spiritual life” (*Chudakova 1990*).

Thus, this understanding of Ginzburg's prose, which became our custom, was a reception from the point of view of the present, and a reception that was saturated by a maximal vested interest. I would like

1     Remarks on the occasion of the publication of *Ginzburg 2011* (and its presentation in Moscow in December 2010).

to underscore still two more implicit qualities of this reception. First, it was an undifferentiated one: it included all of Ginzburg's prose taken as a whole, *en bloc*, without dividing it into separate layers. Although in the publications of the 1980s these separate layers were marked off both in chronological, and in generic respects, neither of these markers played a principal role in our reading of Ginzburg's texts. What played a principal role was the division between Ginzburg's scholarship (*literaturovedenie*) and her prose. Her prose was received regardless of all the markers as one large mass, uniform in its quality and in its value. Such a reading, of course, was based on the striking stylistic uniformity of all of Ginzburg's prosaic creations that were known to us. Galina Danilovna Murav'eva, a close acquaintance of Ginzburg's, said that the author found her style already in her earliest notes, or more precisely did not find it, but had it from the very beginning. Emily Van Buskirk quotes a phrase from one of Ginzburg's friends about the comic dissimilarity between Lydia Yakovlevna and her mother: "A chicken laid an eagle egg" (*Van Buskirk 2011: 517*). In reference to Ginzburg's style, one wants to continue this metaphor: "it seems the eagle egg immediately hatched an eagle who knew how to fly." But while our reception of Ginzburg's prose was so integrated, still it seems to me—although here I am stepping onto the shaky ground of purely subjective sensations—that this reception nonetheless had a "dominant," and that this *dominant* was actually formed by a completely definite stratum of Ginzburg's prose. If one recalls the generic separations of the volume *Chelovek za pis'mennym stolom* (*Person at a Writing Table*): 1) essays 2) reminiscences 3) narratives—then it seems to me that the first division of this volume—essays—held the greatest significance. Although we were all stunned by "Notes of a Blockade Person," too, as well as "Delusion of the Will" and the other narratives, it still seems to me that the most directly important for us were such texts as "About Old Age and Infantilism," "Generation at a Turning Point," and "At One with the Legal Order." Precisely these and texts like them stood at the forefront of our minds.

Ginzburg's new book (of 2011) forces us to take final leave of this so customary, immediately-interested reception of Lydia Yakovlevna's texts. First of all, it is not the essay that is the *dominant* of this book. The kind of essay found in this book, and never made known before, is written

with Ginzburg's habitual analytical strength, but one can hardly say that these essays explain ourselves to ourselves. These essays explain history for us—for example, such objects of history as Soviet literature. In this book there are also portraits of *littérateurs* and scholars, portraits that are similar to Khodasevich's sketches in their mercilessness—but, once again, these portraits are engaging most of all in the degree to which one is interested in history, and not one's own life and soul. But it is not the historical portraits that constitute the book's *dominant*, and not the essays. The *dominant* is formed by two astounding narratives: "A Story of Pity and Cruelty" and "Otter's Day."

One cannot say that these two texts revealed a new, previously unheard-of Ginzburg. "A Story of Pity and Cruelty"—is yet another narrative about the death of a close relative, along the lines of "Delusion of the Will." "Otter's Day" is the original version of what was later transformed into "Notes of a Blockade Person." But being unified by common, and meanwhile psychologically concrete characters, a common entourage and clearly defined (although different in two cases) plot skeleton, "A Story of Pity and Cruelty" and "Otter's Day," gathered under one cover, confer a new quality. Ginzburg as a storyteller emerges into the foreground of this book.

These two texts in particular allow one to view Ginzburg with a new gaze. This is a view not from the perspective of the present, but from that of history. Ginzburg's prose legacy appears to us for the first time in its heterogeneity. For the first time one can speak about the early, middle and late periods as about essentially different strata of Ginzburg's creativity. And most importantly of all—for the first time the central drama of Ginzburg's entire life becomes sharply visible.

It turns out that "in-between prose," an idea that Ginzburg quietly but firmly defended in the late period of her creativity, was only a palliative, or one could go even further and call it "*bonne mine à mauvais jeu*" (*khoroshei minoi pri plokhoi igre*). It turns out that Ginzburg considered the genre of notebooks "literature for impotents" (*Ginzburg 2011: 532*), and saw her true calling in the creation of a novel in the spirit of Proust—a novel that presupposed the creation of a particular world. It turns out that she progressed rather far along this path. "Otter's Day" and "A Story of Pity and Cruelty" compel one to try hard to guess at what this novel could have

resembled in its final form. It turns out that from this point of view life in the blockade was for her not a terrible misfortune, but an exceptional opportunity, which gave her unprecedented experience (*opyt*). And it turns out that in the end she was unable to fulfill her goal.

This historical fiasco of Ginzburg's is staggering in scale, specifically on the strength of the scope of the results that were achieved. Why did she suffer defeat where more traditional writers—from Bulgakov and Pasternak to Grossman and Solzhenitsyn—each in his own way, achieved their goals? But this kind of analysis is a task for the future. Now, the main thing is that for the first time we can understand completely what stood behind all of Ginzburg's words, which we knew, about the tragedy of failed realization. One recalls Ginzburg's fragment about the tragedy of Pushkin's life (*Ginzburg 2002: 195*). In her opinion, Pushkin's tragedy did not consist in the fact that he was killed, nor in the fact that he was persecuted, nor in the fact that his friends backed away from him, nor in the fact that his wife did not love him. For Ginzburg, Pushkin's tragedy was in the fact that the trap that was set for Pushkin did not allow him to concentrate on work. She writes: "We, who can no longer be surprised by the sight of human pain, feel pain because of this tragedy to this day." I knew all of these statements by Ginzburg about the lack of realization, understood their autobiographical subtext, and nevertheless considered Ginzburg a victor. Now I see her colossal defeat, and feel pain because of this tragedy.

## Notes on Contributors

CARYL EMERSON is A. Watson Armour III University Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Princeton University, with a co-appointment in Comparative Literature. Research interests have focused on Mikhail Bakhtin, nineteenth-century Russian literary classics (Pushkin, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky), and Russian opera and vocal music. Current projects include: Tolstoy, Bernard Shaw, and Shakespeare; the prose, drama, and literary criticism of the Russian modernist Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky; and the adaptation of the Russian literary tradition to the Stalinist-era stage.

ANDREW KAHN is Professor of Russian Literature at the University of Oxford and Tutor and Fellow at St. Edmund Hall, Oxford. His interests include Russian poetry and Enlightenment literature and thought. His most recent book is *Pushkin's Lyric Intelligence* (2008) and he is currently working on Mandelstam's poetry.

KIRILL KOBRIN is a writer, historian, and journalist who lives in Prague. He is acting managing editor of Radio Liberty, and editor of the magazine *Neprikosnovennyi Zapas* (Emergency Ration). His interests include the cultural and political history of twentieth-century modernism, the political and philosophical context of non-fiction writings in Russian literature, and Lydia Ginzburg. His article on Ginzburg as a representative of the 1920s generation appeared in *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* (2006). He has recently published *Evropa: konets 'noulevykh'* (*Europe: End of the "Noughties"*), a book of essays.

SERGEI KOZLOV is a Professor on the Faculty of Philology at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow. His current research interest is in the comparative history of human sciences in the modern Europe. He has two books currently in press (both with Moscow's Russian State

Humanities University): *Ernest Renan: Philology as Ideology and Implantation: Sketches of the Genealogy of Historical-Philological Knowledge in France, 1840–1940*.

IRINA SANDOMIRSKAIA is a Professor of Cultural Studies at the Center for Baltic and Eastern European Studies of the University Södertörn, Sweden. Her scholarly interests include critical theory, philosophy of language, and Soviet cultural history. Her article “A Politeia in Besiegement: Lidiia Ginzburg on the Siege of Leningrad as a Political Paradigm” appeared in *Slavic Review* in 2010.

STANISLAV SAVITSKY is director of the program in Curatorial Studies and Art Criticism at St. Petersburg State University (Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences). He is also a Senior Research Fellow at the Russian Institute of Art History in St. Petersburg. His research interests include the history of Soviet culture, the Formalist school, the history of gardens, and modern and contemporary art. His articles on Lydia Ginzburg have appeared in *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* and *Antropologiya revoliutsii*. In 2007 he published a collection of Ginzburg’s pre-war articles, for which he wrote an introductory article “Individual’noe obaianie istorii” (“The Individual Charm of History”). His first book was on the history of Leningrad “underground” culture.

ALYSON TAPP is visiting assistant professor of Russian at Reed College. She received her PhD in 2011 from the University of California, Berkeley, and her scholarly interests include narrative, emotion and the history and theory of the novel.

LAURENT THÉVENOT is Professor at the École des hautes études en Sciences Sociales, Paris. With Luc Boltanski, he originated “sociologie pragmatique,” a new trend in political and moral sociology in France, with the publication of *On Justification* dedicated to the most legitimate modes of evaluation governing political, economic and social relationships. In *L’action au pluriel; sociologie des régimes d’engagement*, he analyzed the practical engagements with the world that maintain both personalities