

• CHAPTER SEVEN •

Transcendence Deferred: Women Writers in the Provinces

Man is by his very nature more universal than woman.

—Vissarion Belinsky, 1840

Transcendence is unevenly distributed and experienced.

—Claudia Rankine, 2015

By now the patterns literature has used to structure Russian space have become familiar: the extreme homogeneity and interchangeability of provincial places, their second-rate and second-hand culture, namelessness and placelessness, static and fundamentally ahistorical nature. Above all there is the endlessly rehearsed provinces-vs.-capitals opposition: the further one moves from the imaginary center—the metropole, wherever it might be—the more one finds that meaning is diluted, coherence fades, and entropy prevails. To be a provincial writer is to confront the challenges created by such a schema; to be a female provincial writer is to find those challenges compounded. And yet a number of women made successful careers writing in and about the provinces, including a group sometimes called the *provintsialki*—the provincial ladies—who were for several decades among Russia’s more widely read authors. To some degree their writing complicates the familiar image of provincial places as blank and meaningless, but it also reveals that they were never allowed to forget about the symbolic and geographic systems that relegated them to marginality. As a result, their work often reveals an especially direct engagement with these systems.

Beginning in the 1830s, women writers developed a subgenre of prose fiction that Catriona Kelly has termed “the provincial tale”—generally a young woman’s

coming-of-age story set outside the capitals (whether in a small town or on a minor gentry estate) and often focusing on the various obstacles women must overcome if they are to lead lives that are to any degree satisfying. Sometimes characters in these tales manage to overcome obstacles (arranged marriages, controlling aunties, etc.) and forge their own way—hence what Kelly calls “the escape plot”—while others end up immured in provincial misery.¹ In some versions of the story, *provintsiia* itself is what women must escape (as in Nadezhda Khvoshchinskaiā’s *Boarding School Girl*); in other versions, female characters find it possible to live more or less free lives in provincial places. Sometimes the heroine is a manifestly exceptional person, superior to everything and everyone around her; sometimes she is an ordinary provincial lady.² But for virtually all these protagonists, means are modest, prospects are limited, impediments and coercion are everywhere: the provincial tale is largely about constraints.

Despite such constraints, the *provintsiialki* do not always reprise the images of stagnant provincial life made familiar to us (and to readers in these women’s era) by men’s texts. At times women writers make a case for the virtues of *provintsiia*; indeed feminist critics have argued that some women writers sought in the provinces a version of Virginia Woolfe’s room of one’s own, a space of cultural productivity located at a welcome remove from the male-dominated literary culture of the capitals.³ Of course the attempt to do so carried risks: the *provintsiialki* worked in constant, anxious awareness of the powerful hierarchies (*stolitsa* > *provintsiia*, male > female) that could return at any moment to haunt their narratives, and some of their attempts to rethink the meaning of provincial places were more successful than others, both aesthetically and biographically. But the effort itself, which continued in (some) women’s writing for several decades, was significant in that it sought alternative ways of imagining Russian space and Russian lives outside of the capitals.

The *provintsiialki* were well-educated and had connections in the capitals (hence their ability to publish and eke out a living by writing), but in general they were forced by circumstances to live in the provinces. While some abhorred their environment’s coarseness and intellectual poverty, others made their peace with provincial life, even embraced it.⁴ What is most important for my purposes is that these writers typically refused to assign more semiotic weight to the metropolises than to other places, and they often actively figured themselves—or they were figured by readers and the literary establishment—as provincials, or as authors explicitly if not exclusively identified with provincial places and themes.

Provincial women were doubly marginal, as Irina Savkina has pointed out, and art making is different on the margins.⁵ As a result, writing by women, like writing produced in and about *provintsiia*, inevitably raises questions about canonization and periodization—how we decide what is good and what is bad, what

is up-to-date and what is behind the times—simply because the standards and timelines we have developed to make such assessments are grounded in certain kinds of work and not in others.⁶ Just as accepted literary periodizations (the age of Romanticism, of Realism, etc.) tend to stigmatize female authors as “behind,” so writing in and about places deemed provincial will often fail to reach an acceptable level of “modernity.”⁷ This stigma attaches persistently, for instance, to the “smaller” national literatures on Europe’s periphery, where spatial decentering has often been experienced as temporal decentering. As Pascale Casanova writes, “To be decreed ‘modern’ is one of the most difficult forms of recognition for writers outside the center.”⁸

It is also one of the most difficult forms of recognition for women writers, particularly in the nineteenth century. In Russia, critics at times “rejected women’s entry into realist writing just when realism would become the main path for writers’ professional aspirations in creating a specifically Russian national literature.”⁹ According to standards taking hold by the 1840s, in order to count as both realistic and modern, Russian literature needed to be publicly oriented and explicitly *engagé*—which meant it also had to be masculine. Certain earlier modes of writing had been fairly congenial to women (the “society tale,” for instance, and the literature of “sensibility”), but once literature was supposed to be the work of professionals in the public sphere, women’s contributions were less welcome.¹⁰ In France and America, too, women were often systematically excluded from consideration as “serious” writers, since seriousness—like “realism”—tended to be defined against modes of writing in which women had already proven themselves highly productive.¹¹ In Belinsky’s 1843 essay devoted to women writers (and especially to Elena Gan), he allows that in the past, when Russian literature served merely as light entertainment, work by women writers differed little from that written by men. But, he implies, once Russia began to approach a “European” level of culture—at which time literature would “serve as the mainspring of social life in every phase of its historical development”¹²—women would probably have less to contribute.

The genre of the provincial tale reflects women’s need to negotiate this situation: stories about the limitations faced by provincial women could be read as a response to the oppression of women generally, thereby fulfilling the new injunction to produce socially engaged literature. And the provincial tale typically underlined precisely the kind of subjugation that women writers were expected to denounce—that is, the subjugation women and girls experienced within marriage and the family. As Kelly writes, “effective propaganda for the emancipation of women demanded that they be represented as unfree, yet capable of freedom.”¹³ The provincial tale allowed writers to dramatize this tension, staging conflicts between provincial women—unfree, but worthy of freedom—and the limitations imposed on them by a restrictive milieu.

The authors whose work I have taken as examples—Elena Gan (1814–42), Mariia Zhukova (1805–55), and Nadezhda Khvoshchinskaia (1824–89)—lived most of their lives in the provinces, and all were well known in their day. I focus on them in part for these reasons, but more importantly because they made explicit their interest in provincial places and themes, and were seen as provincials by readers. Critics spoke of them “as one speaks of one’s poor provincial relatives”; even today, many articles about Zhukova originate in publications devoted to local and regional studies, and Gan’s biographers often ignore her aristocratic lineage and sophisticated education to focus instead on her provincial origins.¹⁴ Although they wrote at a time when readers had already formed an idea—not a positive one!—of what “the provinces” were, these women nonetheless chose to figure themselves as provincial authors—certainly to some degree *faute de mieux*, but also, perhaps, in an attempt to imagine how a positive authorial identity might also be something other than a *stolichnyi* one.

Elena Gan: The Female Genius in the Provincial Crowd

Elena Gan’s work was praised in her lifetime, but her reputation was also well served by her premature death (in 1842 of tuberculosis, at the Lermontovian age of 28). The fact that she died Romantically young and in the provinces caused her biography to dovetail with what was seen as the message of her fiction: talent, especially women’s talent, will go to waste in a Russian backwater. Witness Belinsky’s reflection on her career: “Distance from the life of the capital is a great misfortune for both soul and talent: they either fade into apathy and idleness, or they take on a provincial style [*provintsial’noe napravlenie*].”¹⁵ (And for Belinsky, as I have argued in chapter 5, the term “provincial” carries connotations that are somewhat complex, but always negative. Provincialism for him represents narrowness of culture—a fatal flaw in an artist, because it marks a failure to be in step with one’s times.)

Gan’s work often features heroines who are trapped in and oppressed by provincial life (its gossip, conformity, low levels of culture), but at the same time these women generally possess an innate refinement that will remain untouched by circumstances; despite degrading surroundings, they are anything but degraded (indeed they tend to wear their spiritual superiority on their sleeves). They are, however, persecuted. In “Society’s Judgment” (1840), for instance, the provincial “crowd” (*tolpa*, a recurring word in women writers’ descriptions of genteel local society) sees a gifted authoress as a monstrous “freak of nature.”¹⁶ Taken together, the titles of two of Gan’s stories—“Society’s Judgment” and “A Futile Gift” (1842)—would seem to encapsulate her portrait of provincial mores and their devastating effect on anyone, especially any woman, who is superior to those

around her. As she writes in "The Ideal" (1837), "for a man with an elevated mind, life in the provinces is unbearable; but for a woman whose nature has placed her higher than the crowd, it is truly awful."¹⁷

But by showcasing such squandering of talents, Gan also highlights the possibility of female genius. In order to do so, she uses the provinces to stand in for what all of Russia—indeed, all the world—might be thought to inflict on Romantic geniuses and sensitive souls. In "The Ideal," nothing changes as the sensitive heroine moves with her military husband from town to town (from the "filthy streets of a Jewish settlement" to a garrison village "full of half-wild Ukrainians")—"today, tomorrow, and forever, always the same thing."¹⁸ Gan's provincial environments can be read as an intensified version of *any* society's deadening banality, their coarseness serving to highlight the exceptionalness of her heroines. For Gan, as Kelly writes, "the social exile of the woman writer emerges as the distant equivalent of the political exile of the male writer, as celebrated by Russian Romanticism. To be marginal is a tragedy, but it is also a mark of social distinction."¹⁹ And this kind of marginality, while it is perhaps especially visible in a provincial backwater, in the end is determined not by geography but rather by a character's unchangeable and mysterious inner essence.

"The Ideal" drives home the point with the character of Olga, the poetic—*highly* poetic—young girl who has been married off to a coarse army officer. The story's opening lines suggest it will adhere to a familiar template: it opens at a provincial ball, which, as Herzen wrote around this time, "has already been described a thousand times."²⁰ There are a few hints of *poshlost'* (excessive hair pomade, etc.), but provincial vulgarity or awkwardness is not the point. Rather, the setting serves mainly to highlight the lovely heroine—her "simplicity" and grace, her bearing at once "childlike" yet "noble, even a little proud"—as she enters the ballroom, looking around her "as the Christians once did when they faced wild beasts in the Roman colosseum."²¹ The narrator's attention is fully absorbed by "this unusual woman," this "bright poetic soul . . . surrounded by a swarm of poisonous wasps."²²

While the ball is indeed a painful social occasion, its painfulness has nothing to do with its provinciality; rather, the heroine's character is simply too elevated for any form of society. "A soul that longs for deep, true feeling," "a mind that sees the emptiness beneath propriety's masquerade"—such beings will never be reconciled with "that despot, society," but will be obliged to live "while holding burning coals in their hands."²³ Holding burning coals in one's hands is a problem that has no geographical solution: like Pushkin's Tatiana, Gan's Olga is no better off in Petersburg, where life proves to be as shallow as it is in the provinces (and where she is cruelly seduced by a heartless poet with "fiery black eyes").²⁴

Olga's innate superiority makes her the target of incessant gossip from "the crowd," who resent her "cold indifference" to society's "petty envy and gossip, the

plague of provincial towns” and sneer at her preference for solitude, her devotion to reading, and her “simplicity of dress” (in listing the qualities that most provoke her heroine’s jealous peers, Gan checks off all the Tatiana boxes).²⁵ Much the same pattern repeats itself in “Society’s Judgment,” in which once again we learn that a woman’s “slight deviation . . . from run-of-the-mill ordinariness” will be severely punished, no matter where she is (and daring to write stories, as this heroine does, is quite beyond the pale).²⁶ Gan’s provinces are bad, but for the exceptional woman they are not necessarily worse than anyplace else.

And in one sense the provinces may be better: in more than one of Gan’s stories, a far-off corner of the world allows girls the kind of unstructured but rigorous education that is generally denied them elsewhere, one that would be almost inconceivable in the capitals. In “The Ideal,” Olga’s mother, who herself has “read all of French philosophy,” gives her daughter access to a large library (“from Plutarch to Genlis to Mme. de Stael”), cultivating in her “a sense of honor to the very highest degree” through the study of “great men’s magnanimous deeds” in classical history. Thus Olga learns to “feel and act on the model of the ancients,” adhering to such principles “in spite of all obstacles, just as the Roman did when he sacrificed himself to his own word.” Here, Gan says, Cicero takes the place of Balzac: Olga’s “perfect isolation” makes possible a kind of classicism—an orientation toward a “higher,” ancient world—that would not be possible in a more worldly environment.²⁷

Gan’s female characters who grow up in this kind of rural isolation can be shaped by an intellectual life that has nothing provincial about it; indeed some of them receive a markedly classical education that aspires to *universality*, thereby removing it from any specific time or place. Although in “The Ideal” this upbringing occurs in an unnamed part of Crimea, in “Society’s Judgment” the heroine receives a comparable education—the same emphasis on antique texts and virtues, with the same disastrous consequence once she enters “society”—in the Russian provinces, where “[her] mind and heart mature under the influence of the Golden Age.”²⁸ In deep *provintsiia*, for Gan, it is sometimes possible to create an environment that “is nurtured not by the spirit of [one’s] own time” but by that of the ancient world.²⁹ In such an intellectual environment, it might not really matter where you are: just as, say, Ralph Waldo Emerson, living in the civilizational backwater of Concord, Massachusetts, could will himself to believe that his own intellect placed him at the very center of world culture, so might a girl in the Russian countryside read Cicero and Mme. de Stael and imagine something along the same lines.

Absolute distance from the capital makes possible what any degree of proximity would preclude—that is, the ability to orient oneself toward an entirely different “center,” far from the capital’s worldliness in time as well as in space. Gan

never suggests that the provinces are or could be home to a *social* life congenial to the elevated soul; in fact she rarely depicts a “society” that is anything other than degraded, no matter where it is located. Instead what an isolated place can provide is respite from all sociality and recourse to the universal. Whereas the ideal gentry estate, as we have seen, mirrors the contemporary culture of the capitals, Gan’s imaginary *glush’* enclaves train their gaze on an ideal much further afield than Moscow or Petersburg, looking toward some far-off time and place embodying precisely those virtues that are not represented in any iteration (provincial or *stolichnyi*) of contemporary society. Such a gesture toward universality—the insistence on occupying a position that is effectively *above* any provinces-capitals binary—makes sense for those who are profoundly socially marginalized, including women.

Mariia Zhukova: A Provincial Life “Poor in Events, but Rich in Feelings”

Mariia Zhukova (1805–55) was also widely read in her day and was probably even more consistently associated with the provinces than was Gan. Born in Arzamas, she grew up there and in the nearby countryside before spending most of her adult life in Saratov, traveling occasionally and making a living by writing and copying paintings. She married young but lived separately from her husband.³⁰ Her depiction of provincial life is somewhat more sanguine than Gan’s: *provintsii*a for Zhukova can be painfully constraining, especially for women, but it is also the locus of friendship, folk traditions, warm patriarchal social relations, and nature. In Zhukova’s world, it is people in the capitals who are more likely to be superficial, their social relations shaped by conformity and deception, while provincials are capable of deep and sincere emotion.

Zhukova’s early story “The Provincial Girl” (“*Provintsialka*,” 1837—the first Russian text to use this form of the word in a title) might be read as a kind of manifesto, laying out a defense of why one might choose to write about *provintsii*a and provincials, and why one might do so in a way that does not simply recapitulate the already-familiar tropes. The story opens in an aristocratic Petersburg drawing room where characters are identified by their titles in French (la Comtesse de C***, etc.). The heroine Katia is entirely at home in this environment (she is at this point the worldly widow of a general), but she has never lost the appellation *provintsialka*—a word that seems to represent for her an honorific or an elective identity, a part she chooses to play in the *grand monde*. Katia’s success in the capital’s high society is only underscored by the fact that she is always called *provintsialka* (“*Mon cher*,” asks one old aristocrat of another at a ball, “how could such a

miraculous creature appear from the provinces?”),³¹ a role that allows her to expatiate charmingly on the superiority of provincial life (thus her uncle teases her for believing that friendship is “higher, purer, and more perfect” in the provinces).³²

Indeed the chief opposition at work throughout this story is less provinces-vs.-capitals than it is provinces-vs.-high society (*svet*), as when the uncle scolds, “O *provintsialki, provintsialki!* You look on everything in a strange way, you take offense at everything, always with prejudice against the upper classes [*protiv vysshego klassa!*]”³³ In such passages Zhukova describes life in the capitals not just in negative terms, but in precisely those negative terms that other writers use to describe the provinces—suggesting that she is not so much complicating the provinces-capitals binary as she is revaluing its two poles. Thus the capital is a “desert” (*pustynia*) where no sincerity and authenticity are possible (“Le grand monde est un bal masqué”) and where people can only repeat received ideas, but the provinces are “real life”.³⁴ “Oh, Uncle, it’s dull living in this desert (*v etoi pustyne!*)! . . . My provincial instincts seek emotion and thought, and real life is flying away from me!”³⁵

In the tale’s brief Petersburg prologue, Katia encounters the man (Mstislav) whom she loved and idolized in her innocent provincial youth, thus setting up a backstory that provides the plot. Briefly: Katia and Mstislav had fallen in love when he was stationed in her town in 1812; Mstislav abandoned Katia; Katia married the old general; Katia was widowed. In Petersburg Katia is reunited with Mstislav, who has been conveniently cut down to size; they marry and settle in the countryside: the end. The story seems to move past prologue only after it leaves the capital (via a perfunctory detour to Italy, necessary to the plot), whereupon it goes back to the provincial world that has shaped the heroine—“back,” that is, in the sense that for any narrative that opens in the capitals, *provintsii* represents a return (whether to childhood or to a mythic collective past, etc.).

In many narratives, *provintsii* is accessible only in memory; it is long lost, effectively cut off from everyplace else (e.g., Goncharov’s hero can see Oblomovka only in his dreams as he lies asleep in Petersburg). But Zhukova sets the main action of “The Provincial Girl” in an old-timey and idealized version of *provintsii* while nonetheless allowing her characters to move freely between the provinces and other locations: her provinces are not stagnant places, cut off from other places and from historical events. In 1812 even Katia’s quiet family circle is talking about Wellington, reading newspapers, figuring out maps: “Had some long-time inhabitant of Kaluga, Tambov, Penza or some district town [*uezdnyi gorod*]” seen these places, he would recognize the enlivening effects of the campaign (even in the provinces, “the private [*chastnost*] has given way to the social [*obshchnost*], as if some wizard had . . . transferred the isolated little town to some other place”).³⁶ Indeed Zhukova’s portrait of provincial social mores has little in common with what we have come to expect. There is none of the punishing gossip so often

evoked in descriptions of provincial women's lives; at balls Katia is dressed tastefully and "simply."³⁷ Though the locals worry that Katia's true worth will go unrecognized in the small town ("If only she were in Petersburg, walking down Nevsky! There they'd recognize her value!"), she lives happily with her father, an upright civil servant who exhibits a kind of solidity and self-confidence rarely ascribed to provincial characters.

However, Zhukova first introduces the reader to *provintsiia* with a sharp caveat—a kind of preemptive concession—by representing the district town through the eyes of a sophisticated capital-dweller who happens to be driving through: "It's true, the picture of a district town flatters neither the eyes nor the imagination." This "fine resident of Petersburg," looking out the windows of his carriage and experiencing "involuntary horror" at the sight of the dilapidated little houses, "is seized with cold at the thought—what if we ourselves were fated to pass a whole life in these tiny little houses?"³⁸ Zhukova's long description marshals many of the same details we have seen in texts that insist on the inert and grubby materiality of provincial places ("wooden houses covered with boards," etc.). But unlike those writers, Zhukova is not interested in making us believe that such physical details are the signs of a degraded life; rather, her point is that we must look beyond them: "Would the passing [Petersburg] beauties believe it if you told them that in these little houses with their tiny windows . . . people live cheerfully, indeed often very happily, and that in this monotonous and quiet life there is love and poetry?"³⁹

In other words, her celebration of provincial life transpires under the sign of "nonetheless": *provintsiia* can be defended, but only defensively ("the life of a district town is so insignificant . . . that I fear I may bore you").⁴⁰ Thus we read about the idyll of Katia's childhood only after being asked to overcome our "involuntary horror" at the appearance of a provincial town that "flatters neither the eyes nor the imagination."⁴¹ Only if we manage to get past our disgust we will we appreciate the heroine's "little room" looking out on a "little garden" with "little birch trees" (*komnatka, sadik, berezki*), and beyond that churches, greenery, a path stretching toward open fields, and finally, beyond that, to Katia's mother's grave—all evoking in the heroine not melancholia but happy memories.⁴² The panoramic view blurs the line between town and fields, home and nature, conflating provincial small-town domesticity with pastoral.

The dullness of provincial life is acknowledged: the town itself is much like the one in Zhukova's later story "Nadenka"—one of "our provincial towns," "like any other provincial town," with the same sense of iterativeness and predictability that we have learned to associated with such places.⁴³ "The Provincial Girl" imagines a traveler coming upon Katia's hometown: "Exhausted by monotony the traveler walks, his gaze seeking vainly for something new: everything is the same!"⁴⁴ But here the town is also, to a degree, revalued. Yes, in a place where nothing happens

the years blend together, Zhukova admits, but boredom has its benefits: “in this monotonous picture there is life, charm, . . . the secret activity of nature, a whole world of insects buzzing among the flowers.”⁴⁵

Thanks to such eventlessness, provincials like Katia—especially women, who are the only real provincials, according to Zhukova’s definition—*feel* more deeply than do others:

If a provincial’s days are poor in events, they are nonetheless rich in feelings; feeling is deeper and more religious where it is more concentrated, and if the inhabitant of the *grand monde* [*svetskii zhitel’*] can sometimes be accused of lightness of feeling, the provincial woman [*provintsiialka*] sins by her excess and intensity of feeling . . . I speak here of provincial women, because in district towns men are occupied with state service, the latest order, the governor’s arrival, denunciations and replies . . . they have no time for feelings. . . . But Katia—ah! Katia was a true provincial! Her outer life was like one of those streams that are quiet and peaceful on the surface, while the water boils at the bottom.⁴⁶

Zhukova claims that such a life is well suited to a particular kind of narrative, one that focuses on everyday reality and on the long stretches of time that intervene between life’s rare moments of drama and intensity:

Sometimes history [*istoriia*] appears to us as a unified whole, but only because history, not taking account of details, takes from the life of its hero only the main features, considering them only from one point of view . . . and omitting everything that bears no direct relation to the role that he plays in the chronicles.

But if one were to consider the details of this typical hero’s life, she continues,

seeing him in his private everyday life as we see our friends, he would appear to us far more trivial, often weak, inconstant—in a word, an ordinary person, not so different from others. The greatness in him would be lost in his everyday life precisely because [this greatness] appears rarely rather than always, at long intervals that are taken up with trifles; but history neglects this.⁴⁷

Katia learns the same lesson when she reencounters the chastened Mstislav and recognizes him as just “a man like other men, with all the same trifling weaknesses.” Like *provintsiia*, the thoroughly humbled, “realistic” version of one’s original erotic desire is a commendably reasonable choice.

Zhukova seems to have found in *provintsiia*, always so strongly associated with the everyday and monotonous, a particularly good setting for driving home her

key point: there are no heroes in the *real* world. When Zhukova writes that “the life of a provincial is like a path winding among the fields in the flat plains of Penza or Samara province,” she is using *provintsii*’s slow rhythms to “[resist] the eventfulness of a literary plot. . . . In Zhukova’s aesthetics, a country walk best evokes the large, relatively flat expanse of a real lived life.”⁴⁸ Indeed the story closes with a final defense of the everyday and its place in literature: “In each person’s life there are minutes, hours, and years of truly poetic existence; they pass, and the person reenters the usual circle of life, utterly prosaic, attracting no attention.”⁴⁹ This gesture serves to align not just Zhukova’s narrative technique but also the provinces themselves with “real life.”

Zhukova’s later story “Nadenka” (1853) reprises many of the same themes as “The Provincial Girl.” Once again in “Nadenka,” the provinces are not cut off from the capitals but are closely tied to them, and characters seem to travel easily back and forth. *Provintsii* is set against *svet* (high society), in comparison to which it is characterized by sincerity, simplicity, folk culture, patriarchal social relations, useful labor, and a rich inner life; the eponymous heroine finds happiness in “prayer, nature, and labor.”⁵⁰ Again the line between provincial and pastoral (*derevnia*) is blurred, particularly in Nadenka’s luxuriously overgrown garden (so unlike “those regal [*tsarstvennye*] gardens” in Petersburg, we are told), and in her little house “at the very edge of the town” on a street leading out to fields and woodlands.⁵¹ In this social world the noun “provincial” (*provintsial*, *provintsialka*) can occasionally be deployed as a mild insult (“the young man dances well, he’s from Petersburg, nothing like our provincial boys [*nash brat provintsial*]”; “oh those poor provincial girls, always putting on airs!”), but in such cases it tends to characterize the speaker more than it does the person being described.⁵² And even those locals who aspire to high society (*svetskie*) ways—showing off their French, copying Moscow dress patterns, etc.—are not marked by any particular awkwardness or inauthenticity; the heroine’s mother, for instance, speaks “pure Parisian French,” if somewhat bookish and dated.⁵³

As a proud, impoverished widow who misses the high status she enjoyed in the town when her husband was alive, Nadenka’s mother desperately wants her daughter to make a prestigious match. The plot revolves around her attempts to marry Nadenka off to Lemetev, a fashionable young visitor from Petersburg (“*un jeune homme tout à fait distingué*”) whose talk of fancy balls, foreign authors, and Italian opera causes a stir in provincial society.⁵⁴ Lemetev is marked by what Savkina calls a kind of *superstolichnost*, a deliberately highlighted “hyper-capitalness” that defines his character. “Coldly formal, somehow British, ‘gentlemanly’” (with “gentlemanly” in English), he induces envy and anxiety in the townspeople. They conclude that his statue-like demeanor must point to “the mysteries of Petersburg *comme-il-faut*,”⁵⁵ but in fact we are given to understand that beyond

this *superstolichnost'* there is virtually nothing to his character. Lemetev falls in love with Nadenka, but only slowly does he come round to the idea that he might marry a simple girl and live happily and within his means in the provinces, rather than finding a rich bride and living in the capital. Here as in "The Provincial Girl," sober, *realistic* choices make for a reasonably happy ending.

But "Nadenka" is distinguished from Zhukova's earlier story by its sustained attention to nature and its explicit focus on far-off steppe towns, whose very remoteness, the narrator contends, saves them from provincial taint. A long paean to such places opens the text:

Think of me what you will, but I openly declare my passion for our provincial towns [*gubernskie goroda*], and not those that are close to the capitals, the ones that are covered with the dust of the big post road, the ones that could be taken for suburbs of the capital: no! I declare my passion for our towns far off on the wide steppe, like the towns scattered on the banks of the Volga, for instance. Yes, I love them, and I love them despite their sickly streets and their bad sidewalks, and their squares packed with little houses marked for demolition, despite even their dusty boulevards and their ever-sagging lime-trees. I love them for this broad steppe stretching out as far as the sea and embracing the town with its green waves, and for their light blue caressing sky, and for their dark warm nights, and for the broad Volga with her hilly banks and green flood-lands with their copses, bright lakes and poplar stands at the very foot of the hills. I love their little villages and dachas with their gardens and groves, stretching deep into the steppe and scattered over the spurs of the hills, and the rich fields where the golden grain ripens and the fragrant melons patches spread out, or the high sunflowers descending in tall ranks across the hillside, whose dark foliage recalls the vineyards of rich Burgundy.⁵⁶

The passage continues in this vein, as do various others throughout the story, enumerating the steppe's insects and ducks, sunflowers and snails, deploying noticeably specific nature vocabulary (names of grasses, etc.), and emphasizing the openness and freedom of the steppe: certainly this landscape constitutes anything but a provincial blank.

Yet once again, such praise is expressed under the sign of "despite" ("Think of me what you will . . . I love them despite . . ."), with the result that the luxurious nature description ends up sounding vaguely compensatory (we may not have Burgundy's vineyards, but we do have sunflowers and snails!). The idea that a provincial life is worth living—that it is in fact *real* life—must always be defended. Nadenka's mother is bitterly disappointed that her daughter has no wish to escape *provintsii*a, which is as much as to say that there is nothing special about Nadenka: she is just an "awkward *provintsialka*," her mother thinks, with "no longing for

anything better,” “satisfied with her life in a backwater [*glush'*] and with her petty [*meschanskimi*] occupations.”⁵⁷ In this her mother is correct: Nadenka is ordinary. But then so is Lemetev, the narrator tells us, despite his Petersburg credentials.⁵⁸ Once again, as in “The Provincial Girl,” ordinarieness is associated with the provinces and with *reality*—and both are thought to possess a degree of dignity worthy of serious representation. Zhukova’s provincials know this: they may pay attention to dress patterns and gossip from the capitals, but their concerns are sincerely and deeply local, and they are not trying to escape.

Nadezhda Khvoshchinskaia: “What Kind of Life Is This?”

Not so for the heroine of Khvoshchinskaia’s novella *The Boarding School Girl* (*Pansionerka*), for whom staying in the provinces would mean ending her life, certainly figuratively and perhaps literally as well. Khvoshchinskaia was of a later generation than the other writers considered in this chapter, and *The Boarding School Girl*, which was first published, and widely read, in *Notes of the Fatherland* in 1861, reflects historical shifts that were beginning to promise new opportunities for women who embraced “modernity.” These opportunities were as yet more likely to be imagined than enacted, but in Khvoshchinskaia’s novella they change the course of the heroine’s fate. Indeed the author of *The Boarding School Girl* presents her *provintsialka* with a stark choice: escape or death.

Khvoshchinskaia herself lived virtually her whole life (1824–89) in the provinces (Ryazan) where she was part of a modest gentry family. Having been born two decades after Zhukova and a decade after Gan, she belonged to a generation that enjoyed more opportunities to make a living by writing. She was the oldest of three very literary sisters—occasionally referred to as “the Russian Brontes”—all of whom wrote and published. Khvoshchinskaia was well-enough educated (at home and very briefly in Moscow) to qualify as an intellectual; in fact provincial society seems to have deemed her too intellectual, judging from the fact that she married only toward the end of her life.⁵⁹ For decades she relied on her writing to support herself and other family members, making and maintaining the requisite literary connections in Petersburg and publishing stories in prominent journals (under the male pseudonym “V. Krestovskii”). Virtually all of her work is set in the provinces, and much of it explores female characters’ attempts to negotiate the severe constraints placed on them by provincial mores and by their lack of economic autonomy.

The Boarding School Girl is built around a psychological battle between a very young provincial woman and a somewhat older man from the capital, a contest of wits with life-changing consequences (and a very common post-*Onegin* storyline, which more than one woman author rewrote in ways granting more agency to the heroine). Khvoshchinskaia explores the possibility and the consequences of overt

female rebellion, mapping the “battle of the sexes” onto geography: in order to win, the heroine must escape the *gubernskii gorod* and make her way to the capital. Because she does escape, she wins; had she stayed in *provintsiia*, she would have lost. Only in Petersburg is the girl able to come out on top.

The title *The Boarding School Girl* refers to the status of the heroine, fifteen-year-old Lolenka, who is a day student in a school for (more or less) genteel girls in an anonymous *gorod N*. To be a *pansionerka* was not the same as being an *institutka*: state-sponsored *instituty* were more elite than private *pansiony*. Furthermore, day students like Lolenka were of even lower status than their fellow *pansionerki* who were boarders. Thus Khvoshchinskaia's heroine, as a member of a petty gentry family clinging to its technically and tenuously noble status, comes from a social stratum that is significantly overrepresented in nineteenth-century Russian fiction—overrepresented, I think, because of the remarkable self-consciousness, doubt, and observational acuity encouraged by unstable social status.

Khvoshchinskaia's *gorod N* is entirely familiar: once again we find stasis, pettiness, pervasive meanness, and extreme cultural poverty, all combined with strenuous aspirations to gentility; by 1861 the trope was so well established that a few words could suffice to evoke this version of the provinces. Unlike Zhukova's provincial towns, Khvoshchinskaia's seems to be entirely cut off from the rest of the world, tightly circumscribed, and minimally connected to the surrounding world of nature and agricultural labor. Within its confines, physical space is illegible; all we see are the ravines, puddles, ruts, and fences that chop up the landscape and reinforce the sense that there is simply *nowhere to go*.

Nor is there anything to do: Khvoshchinskaia's characters complain incessantly of a mysteriously powerful idleness. Forms of the word *skuchno* (dull, boring) recur constantly, climaxing in a passage that represents provincial *skuka* as being virtually apocalyptic, so intense it may presage “the end of the world”:

“It's dull!” said Veretitsyn.

“But what's to be done? Wait a bit, it'll get more cheerful.” [said Sofia]

“When?”

“Soon. When something reaches an extreme, that means it'll be over soon. Everyone's gotten so bored that they surely have to stop feeling that way soon. This is just before the end.”

“Before the end of the world?”

“Of something . . .”⁶⁰

We are struck by this bizarre insistence on the extremity of provincial boredom, a boredom that presents itself as both overdetermined and inescapable; clearly, these characters are not just complaining about an idle afternoon. Instead, like

characters in British colonial and postcolonial literature who find themselves “stuck” on a periphery they experience as meaningless, Khvoshchinskaiia’s provincials are registering what a scholar of postcolonialism has called “the pervasive banality of the local space that imprisons its dwellers.” Believing themselves to be “left out, existing on the margins” of all events that matter in the world, these postcolonial subjects can imagine no forward movement in historical time, at least not as long as they occupy a peripheral space.⁶¹ Thus Khvoshchinskaiia’s provincials, instead of imagining time, imagine the end of time.

In *The Boarding School Girl* most characters’ movements are confined to an unlovely garden, overgrown but fenced in and described as a “wasteland,” where they wander purposelessly, going nowhere.⁶² Here, over the back fence, Lolenka encounters the bitter young intellectual next door, Veretitsyn, who has been exiled to the provinces for some vague and not-too-serious political offense (not serious enough, that is, to make him interesting: Veretitsyn is a whiner who never stops blaming his misery on circumstances beyond his control, even once he manages to escape N). In a series of conversations, Veretitsyn deliberately convinces the innocent Lolenka that her life is empty, stupid and pointless (which in fact it is). He also introduces her to Shakespeare, which stands in here for the life of the mind generally.

Veretitsyn torments his young neighbor in large part to distract himself from his own impossible love for the impossibly good Sofia, the text’s paragon of self-sacrificing femininity (about whom we learn little except that she is “perfect”). As Veretitsyn pines away for Sofia, Lolenka pines away for Veretitsyn. Sofia in the end allows herself to be married off to a rich landowner in order to please her mother; Veretitsyn nevertheless loves only Sofia, pointlessly and from afar; Lolenka, initially heartbroken over Veretitsyn, opts out of love altogether, as we will see. As this summary suggests, *The Boarding School Girl* aims to frustrate any desire we might have to see the characters’ desires met—at least their romantic ones. Veretitsyn and Lolenka confront each other in a plot that inevitably makes us think (and perhaps hope) that they might become lovers, but the *telos* in this book is emphatically *not* family life: in fact if Lolenka wins this particular battle of the sexes, her prize will not be the boy, but rather the right to be done with all boys.

Up to a certain point, Khvoshchinskaiia’s plot would seem to recapitulate a pattern we know well from Pushkin, Lermontov, and other male writers: sweet young girl encounters cynical older man who both enlightens and wounds her. But the difference is that in this text the girl, rather than serving as a vehicle for the male hero’s development, keeps hold of the narrative, which comes to be about *her* transformation and her life. Veretitsyn lacks the intellect and magnetism of an Onegin or Pechorin: his ideas are ready-made, and he is full of self-pity. After he has tutored Lolenka—condescendingly, sententiously—in vaguely radical ideas,

and after she has dutifully taken them all in, Lolenka creatively (mis)interprets what Veretitsyn has taught her, and she uses it to transform her life. In the end the male character becomes merely a vehicle for the heroine's development: Lolenka turns out to be the extraordinary one, as evidenced by her ability to pull herself out of the provincial slough.

The Boarding School Girl is structured around the conversations that lead to Lolenka's transformation. All these exchanges take place over a fence, a physical barrier that evokes both the battle lines drawn between the characters—they are “facing off”—and the borders dividing the horrid town of N from the rest of the world.⁶³ These conversations turn out to be a test of wills in a way that Veretitsyn did not anticipate, since he initiated the exchange only out of boredom and spite: in the book's opening passage he looks over the fence at the girl studying in her garden and declares, “I don't want her to be happy! . . . She'll learn to be miserable! . . . I'll teach her to be bored.”⁶⁴

Veretitsyn wants Lolenka to recognize the pointlessness of her entire life: he does his best to convince her that her studies, her music, her efforts to be a dutiful daughter—as well as Romantic ideals, “great men,” and history generally—are without meaning or value. “You're memorizing nonsense—and that's the way it has to be!”⁶⁵ “You're a fine, obedient, affectionate daughter: you're only doing your duty. Always behave that way. Always live that way. Always live entirely for your father and mother. . . . *You're their property* . . . you have no right to ask to live any way you want.”⁶⁶ Veretitsyn is simply echoing and mildly ironizing the patriarchal injunctions that are constantly being directed at Lolenka from other sources. Thus her mother scolds her, “how dare you not want what your father and I want!” and the matchmaker who has found Lolenka a loathsome suitor tells her bluntly, “just submit, you have to submit.”⁶⁷

Lolenka offers some resistance to her opponent's bitter irony—but I like studying, she objects weakly, and even embroidering is not so bad—but Veretitsyn wins the battle handily. Indeed at this point, Lolenka would seem to have lost everything: acceding to the truth of Veretitsyn's indictments, she deliberately fails out of school and provokes her parents' terrible ire. Veretitsyn then rubs salt in her wounds, mocking her for acting on his words, upbraiding her for what he now describes as a useless and selfish act of rebellion. Disclaiming all responsibility for Lolenka's actions, he again invokes patriarchal norms, this time virtually without irony: “a young girl should be modest, industrious, respectful toward her parents, satisfied with everything . . . and what are you?” “Willfulness causes disorder. Be satisfied with what you're given.” “How are you going to get by in the world? . . . Sentimentality and willfulness have unhappy and even unseemly consequences. . . . People must coexist somehow. That's why laws, rules, proprieties were invented to hold them together.”⁶⁸

In her despair Lolenka adopts the familiar interrogative mode of the radical intelligentsia (what is to be done?), repeating over and over to herself the classic how-to-live questions: "What kind of life is this? What's housework? Swearing, nonsense, racket. . . . What kind of people are these? What are studies but useless memorization?"⁶⁹ "Living this way was impossible [*tak zhit' nel'zia*]; everything was totally wrong . . . other people lived differently . . . the peasants seemed to live better . . . why embroider a collar? . . . Was there nothing else?"⁷⁰ "It's impossible to live like this."⁷¹ At times her vocabulary is explicitly political, a protest against "tyranny," as when she cries, "I am not a slave!"⁷²

As the words "I am not a slave" suggest, there is always the possibility of physical violence in this text, though most of it happens offstage or is just hinted at. Lolenka goes home to "supper and abuse" ⁷³; the entire household fears her father's rage; her schoolmates will be beaten for failing exams; her little brothers are tied to table legs to force them to study. Occasionally Khvoshchinskaia comes close to representing the abuse: Lolenka's siblings are beaten, and after Lolenka fails her exams, we are told in passing that "her mother beat her, and not just once."⁷⁴ All of this violence, whether depicted or alluded to, is domestic; Veretitsyn, for example, suffers no physical violence as a result of his political crime. In fact domesticity in this book basically *is* institutionalized violence, with a little forced labor thrown in; child-raising and family life are at best pointless drudgery. In Khvoshchinskaia's critique of domesticity we see most clearly her book's relationship to the radical novel: as Herzen did in *Who Is to Blame?* (1847) and as Chernyshevsky would soon do in *What Is to be done?* (1863), Khvoshchinskaia focuses on domesticity and women's liberation as a way of raising questions about politics and about everyone's liberation.⁷⁵ At the end of the book we learn that Veretitsyn's love, the angelic Sofia, has devoted herself to a specifically domestic version of feminine self-abnegation, forsaking all personal satisfactions in order to serve her family in an offstage world that we never see—a solution Veretitsyn says makes Sofia a saint and a martyr, but not an option that the text would seem to be endorsing.

Given the meagerness of the resources (cultural, social, and economic) at Lolenka's disposal, and the formidable power of her adversaries, the reader expects her to give up and "submit." But instead Lolenka rebels, thereby effecting her own transformation: having formed the "stubborn, ardent, burning conviction" that her life is bad, she *acts on* this conviction.⁷⁶ And since Khvoshchinskaia does not illuminate the source of her heroine's strength, when we read the final words in what seems to be the main body of the book—"Mama, you can kill me on the spot, but I will not marry"—we are struck above all by the *inexplicability* of Lolenka's metamorphosis.⁷⁷ Immediately after these dramatic words, we encounter an ellipsis, then a chapter break, and finally a chapter that functions as a kind of epilogue.

At this point—"you can kill me" followed by an ellipsis—the reader is likely to assume that Lolenka has either died or has been consigned to a death-in-life provincial existence: so convincingly has Khvoshchinskaia described the hellish constraints of provincial life that any other ending seems impossible. However, the next words we read are "eight years had passed since that time": having just left Lolenka a virtual prisoner in a provincial hellhole, we now meet her—suddenly, miraculously—as a free subject in the midst of utter cultural plenitude: she is sitting in the Hermitage.⁷⁸ Lolenka is now an artist, serenely occupying the museum's Spanish Room and painting copies on commission (a fact to which I will return in a moment). We are left with the question: how did Lolenka get here? And why is her escape—so obviously a crucial juncture in the story—*not narrated*?

The text makes quick work of the implausible development, informing us that Lolenka wrote a desperate letter to her aunt/godmother in Petersburg, with the result that the aunt rescued her: apparently the only mechanism Khvoshchinskaia could find to ensure Lolenka's deliverance was an auntie-*ex-machina*. Once in Petersburg, the brief explanation concludes, Lolenka studied art and languages, living with her aunt; when she was able to support herself through translations and paintings, she stopped accepting any help from her relation. Indeed Lolenka insists tiresomely on her economic independence, often belaboring the point; she will not even accept a gift of opera tickets from her aunt, so as not to risk becoming "a burden" ("I don't cost her a thing," she says).⁷⁹

Not only does Khvoshchinskaia deposit her heroine in Petersburg and make her an economically self-sufficient knowledge worker, she also situates her as a member of a genuine *public*. Before describing the new-and-improved Lolenka, the novel's final chapter opens with a careful description of the "unusually large number of visitors . . . gathered inside the halls of the Hermitage" that day, detailing the great variety of people who have come together in this open public space to look at art ("well-dressed ladies," "ladies less well-dressed but with a noticeable claim to the right to knowledge and understanding," "very respectable people . . . who looked at one object for a long time . . . and talked among themselves softly and animatedly," "provincial men and women with unfeigned emotion," even "common people [*prostye liudi*]").⁸⁰ In Russia in 1861, such an audience for art was, if not a fantasy, then at best a work in progress—certainly not an uncontested reality. All the more interesting, then, that Khvoshchinskaia signals Lolenka's unexpected triumph by locating her as a member of this (fantasy?) public.

Lolenka has not only escaped the provinces, she has made her way to the anti-*gorod N*: against N's deadly cultural attenuation, the capital—which is represented, none too realistically, as a giant museum open to all—is a distillation of everything that capital-C Culture can do for you. One thing the capital does for Lolenka is allow her to win the battle that Veretitsyn initiated in their far-off

provincial town. There Lolenka would have lost, but in Petersburg the roles are reversed, and she wins: in the Hermitage it is she who first observes and identifies Veretitsyn, laughing at his confusion; she is serene while he is flustered. Above all Lolenka makes a strong case for the life she has chosen, justifying her “abandonment” of her parents against Veretitsyn’s accusations of disloyalty and egoism. Veretitsyn charges that “as long as there were still people” (family members) to whom she had obligations, Lolenka had no right to escape, to which Lolenka retorts, “Injustice, persecution had reached an extreme . . . didn’t I have the right to wish to tear myself away, to come to hate the memory of the past?”⁸¹

Even as Veretitsyn castigates Lolenka for the selfishness of her choice (selfishness, it seems, being the worst possible sin in a woman), Khvoshchinskaia has her heroine argue passionately for her right to forget her *personal* history. “I don’t want to remember that time [in N],” Lolenka insists, “it brings back so many absurdities . . . it’s past—and finished. I live in the present.” “I remember nothing. . . . Haven’t I said that already? . . . If you had [truly] known me [in N], you would not be surprised that I’ve cast off my yoke and that I choose not to remember anything about it. . . . There’s nothing painful or difficult! I don’t remember, so I don’t burden my memory.”⁸² Lolenka has appropriated a cultural heritage—a vast one, all that is represented by the words “the Hermitage”—and has used it to replace her personal history. By earning money in a modern economy, she integrates herself into the circuits of print culture and sociality that make possible an explicitly modern way of life in the metropole. Her rooms, we are told, are full of newspapers; she “[knows] and continually [reads] a great deal,” conversing easily with a group of educated peers on political topics of the day.⁸³ Khvoshchinskaia’s heroine has joined *history*, history in the sense of “public time” (“time experienced by the individual as public being, conscious of a framework of public institutions in and through which events, processes and changes happened to the society of which he perceives himself to be part”)—a history to which the provincial Town of N provided no access.⁸⁴

Lolenka casts Veretitsyn and his peers as “people of the 40s” against her own ascendant “people of the 60s” generation: “*You* carried things to the point where *we* had to fight and suffer in order to escape from under that oppression, and devise for ourselves some possibility of living more easily!” she says, “why did you allow yourselves to be broken? Why didn’t you renounce your prejudices, conquer your weaknesses, work more energetically? You’re bored, full of melancholy and bitterness because you’re always regretting something and remembering something.”⁸⁵ To remember is to be “bored” and ineffectual; clearly, it is better to forget. It would seem that Lolenka has effectively turned the tables on her adversary.

However, as Veretitsyn urges Lolenka to recognize, now that she has “won,” the result is that she is completely alone. Lolenka has no intimate ties, nor any

mutual obligations that cannot be immediately dissolved by economic exchange, as we see when her obsession with autonomy leads her to pay her aunt back with money for a freely offered gift. And the ever-ticking clock in her room—a room organized around what the text describes as “strenuous, uninterrupted work calculated by the clock”—suggests the dry and perhaps sterile regimentation of a life that excludes all possibility of romantic love.⁸⁶

Khvoshchinskaia herself denied that the ending of *The Boarding School Girl* was supposed to be happy, or that Lolenka was supposed to represent an “ideal contemporary working woman.”⁸⁷ But more interesting than what Khvoshchinskaia said about her novel is how the text itself goes about trying to imagine a *way out* for a girl whose situation, in reality, would likely have afforded none at all. This way out involves—in fact necessitates—both a shift to the capital, and an emphatic rejection of romantic love. In fact perhaps one useful way to think of *The Boarding School Girl* is to conceive it as the polar opposite of a romantic comedy, a genre that has been described as “entertainment in the service of the biological imperative”: romantic comedy exists to assure us that boy and girl will hook up and stay hooked, simply because, as Shakespeare’s Benedick says in *Much Ado About Nothing*, “the world must be peopled.”⁸⁸ In *The Boarding School Girl* Lolenka decides that there is no worse fate than peopling the world. Watching her mother beat her little brothers, she wonders numbly, “will I really have children one day? Will I really live like this?”⁸⁹

The main reason she must escape *provintsia* is that *provintsia* represents the obligations of family, from which Khvoshchinskaia’s heroine must unbind herself in order to live an authentic life (a message that could not be further from the one we will take from Tolstoy’s two great novels, which generally represent family life as the only authentic life there is). Khvoshchinskaia allows for no possibility of forward movement through reproduction: when Lolenka is obliged to care for small children, it is not for her own offspring but for her younger siblings, which means she does not even have the option of convincing herself—as reproductive futurism would have us believe—that these children somehow represent her future.⁹⁰ In the end Lolenka’s vision of the future, like the visions we find in many utopian fictions, would have difficulty accommodating the bearing and raising of children, a detail that does not bode well for its sustainability.

Only in the metropolis can Khvoshchinskaia’s heroine recreate herself as a markedly modern subject; her only possibility of a future is located in the capital, where she can replace the vertical relationships that structured her past life with the up-to-date horizontal idea of the cohort (“our generation,” as she says repeatedly). If in the end the alternatives Khvoshchinskaia imagines seem imperfect as well as improbable (as is suggested by the stridently doctrinaire nature of her heroine’s diatribes: “Slavery, the family! . . . Precepts of submission to tyranny!

. . . She's guilty, your Sofia! She serves evil, teaches evil"⁹¹), it is not hard to understand why: the text's unconvincing ending—much like the flimsy ellipsis that stands in for any real explanation of exactly *how* a girl like Lolenka might escape the provinces in order to make her way to Petersburg and modernity—signals to us that *The Boarding School Girl* is probably trying to imagine an escape that is not yet quite imaginable.

For provincial women writers, geographic marginality underscored the marginality of femaleness. And while the *provintsialki* were not regionalists (they often settled outside their native *gubernii*, and their narratives tend to be set simply “in the provinces” rather than in a specific location), literary history has treated them much as it has treated the regionalists who are the subject of the next chapter: both groups have been seen as not quite “universal” enough to attain to the status of the highest art. It is therefore not surprising that the *provintsialki* felt obliged to make a case, whether explicit or implicit, for the significance and the aesthetic highness of their work. Elena Gan, by depicting “exceptional women” who were tragically isolated and misunderstood in provincial society, evoked the sad fate of the Romantic (male) genius who figured in so many canonical texts. Mariia Zhukova, by arguing for a close relationship between the provinces and ordinary, “real” life, implied that provincial settings were especially well-suited to literary realism, a mode of writing that in her time was deemed respectably up-to-date. Nadezhda Khvoshchinskaia adapted the provinces/capital opposition to her own purposes by using it to plot an escape route for her heroine, one that gestures toward a future in which women and provincials would be able to join progressive history.

In structural terms, the feminine and the provincial occupy similar positions. Both are typically imagined as secondary and dependent, limited to the particular, lacking the weighty and *universal* significance of things male and *stolichnye*. “Man is by his very nature more universal than woman,” writes Belinsky in an essay on Zhukova, since man is able to “detach himself from his individual personality and transfer himself to many different situations . . . while woman is locked within herself.”⁹² Capitals make the same claim to universality: they “create the appearance of unity” for the entire nation by “taking upon [themselves] the role of *complete* spokesman for *all* national and state interests and opinions.”⁹³

In the next chapter we will have occasion to revisit the structural relationship between women's writing and provincial or regional writing by men. In the 1870s a male journalist whose focus is his native region feels compelled to issue a plain-tive reminder: “the provinces *truly exist*,” he insists.⁹⁴ Here we note a clear parallel with women's writing, the very existence of which is perennially called into question. Even when a feminist scholar like Irina Savkina asks “whether there in fact

exists [in Russia] a specifically woman's literary tradition," she feels compelled to conclude that the answer is probably no: in Russia as elsewhere, what Germaine Greer once called "the transience of female literary fame" makes the development of such a tradition exceedingly difficult.⁹⁵ As a result, Elaine Showalter writes, "each generation of women writers has found itself, in a sense, without a history."⁹⁶ As we have seen in preceding chapters, to be without an accessible and coherent history is the same problem that haunts provincials: like the culture of Kukshina's provincial town in *Fathers and Sons*, the culture of women's writing burns down again and again, leaving no evidence that might certify its existence as a tradition, just a few disconnected artifacts.

Thus when the nineteenth-century critic Nikolai Shelgunov diagnoses the provinces' eternal "dependence" and "submissiveness," he might easily be talking about a sex—the second one—rather than a place: "There is something that makes the provinces the provinces . . . and that 'something' is their dependence on some power lying outside themselves—a dependence that is acutely felt, and that places on them a stamp of well-known submissiveness, a consciousness of non-autonomy, a second-rate position, depriving the provinces of any boldness, sureness of themselves, authority."⁹⁷ Like what is female, what is provincial is essential, but not primary. Both require defending and redeeming, and neither has an easy way of laying claim to the kind of uncontested universality thought to characterize the highest art. As the American poet Claudia Rankine has noted in another context, "Transcendence is unevenly distributed and experienced."⁹⁸