ALEXEI LOSEV’S PHILOSOPHICAL NOVEL THE WOMAN THINKER AND THE PROBLEM OF THE ETERNAL FEMININE

Alexei Fedorovich Losev is one of the last representatives of the Russian philosophical school of the Silver age. He was born in 1893. As a student at Moscow University he attended meetings of the Vl. Solov’ev Religious-Philosophical Society where he met N. A. Berdiaev, S. N. Bulgakov, V. Ivanov, I. A. Il’in, E. N. Trubetskoi, Father P. Florenskii, S. L. Frank and other outstanding representatives of Russian philosophical thought. After the revolution, Losev was not exiled in 1922, unlike most of his elder contemporaries, since he published his own works only in the late 1920s. But the publication of his book The Dialectics of Myth in 1930 was followed by his arrest and imprisonment in a labor camp, and then by a prohibition to write on philosophical questions and almost twenty years of forced silence. In his time in the philosophical “underground” Losev worked on translations, classical mythology, studies in mathematics and literary works. He started writing his philosophical prose as far back as the spring of 1932 when, as a convict, he was building the channel linking the Baltic and White seas. It is there that he created the stories I was 19 years old . . ., The Theatre-Goer, Correspondence in a Room and the novella Tchaikovsky’s Trio. I shall focus on a single example of Losev’s prose, namely his novel The Woman Thinker, which was finished in December, 1933, soon after he was released from the forced labor camp. Without performing a complete analysis of the novel, I shall attempt to

4. The novel The Woman Thinker and Losev’s letters to M. V. Yudina were published for the first time in the magazine Moskva in 1993.
answer a single question of principal importance for its interpretation: why it raises the problem of the eternal feminine and how Losev resolves it.

Before turning to the main topic of this article I shall say a few words about the plot of the novel and the biographical circumstances that gave rise to it. The main subject of the novel is the meeting of the philosopher and writer Vershinin with the remarkable female pianist Radina, the history of his relationships with Radina's three “husbands” – Pupochka, Bakhianchik and Beethovenchik – and her faithful friends Telegin and Vorob’ev. There is no doubt that in many aspects Vershinin is the alter ego of the author himself. The figure of the female pianist or singer appears often in Losev’s novels and stories. Most probably, the appearance of this figure was influenced by Losev’s acquaintance with the famous singer A. V. Nezhdanova, to whom Losev dedicated one of his first articles Two world-outlooks in 1916. It is possible that in the forced labor camp at the channel linking the Baltic and White seas Losev met Amata, the daughter of the well-known expert in classical philology F. F. Zelinsky: like A. F. Losev, in the 1930s she was a prisoner at Medvezh’ia Gora where she worked as a camp pianist.5 But there is no doubt that the outstanding pianist Maria Veniaminovna Yudina was the prototype for Radina in Losev’s novel The Woman Thinker.

Losev met M. V. Yudina on the eve of his arrest. Yudina had long been interested in philosophy and religion. Her spiritual aspirations brought her in 1927 to Father P. Florenskii and in the first half of April 1930 to Losev. Their second meeting took place in late 1933 when Losev was released from the labor camp. In his letter to Yudina of February 16, 1934, Losev admitted that she interested him as a “woman,” moreover, a woman “in substance – as a source and bosom of miraculous revelations, an incorruptible and powerful beauty, a charming might of a genius, talent and inspiration” (II, p.146). “I felt in your playing,” explained Losev, “my own realm of thinking, hidden – maybe unclear even to yourself – philosophical realizations, the fascinating depth and breadth of perspicacity which I had discovered only in the most important philosophers” (II, p. 146). Losev’s attitude to Yudina was not run-of-the-mill sexual attraction. He sincerely meant what he said when he addressed the following words to her: “I am too young and imperfect to be an elder and guide, but I am too much a philosopher to be a mere admirer and not to understand your delicate weaknesses” (II, p. 150). He dreamed of their joint service “to our great common inner cause” (II, p. 150) – the true Orthodox Church.

When The Woman Thinker was finished Losev handed over his novel to Yudina for reading. The pianist perceived the novel as a lampoon directed against her and permanently broke off relations with its author. Yudina was particularly angered by the everyday scenes, such as Radina’s hysterics in the communal kitchen during a scandal with her neighbors when it becomes clear that not only does she “play the piano,” but also “sleep with three bumpkins”