

## LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR:

Vladimir Zlobin's book *A Difficult Soul* (reviewed in the *Slavic Review*, 40, no. 3 [Fall 1981]: 505–506) reveals a number of “religiously heretical, politically radical, and sexually unconventional aspects” (to quote from my introductory essay to it) in the life and writings of Zinaida Gippius. These are the very aspects Temira Pachmuss has been resolutely sweeping under the rug in her numerous publications on Gippius. The outcome of assigning the book to this particular reviewer was a foregone conclusion.

Instead of reviewing the book or discussing its actual content, Pachmuss dismisses its author, Vladimir Zlobin, as mendacious and psychotic. This is the same Vladimir Zlobin to whom she expressed her gratitude in the preface to her book *Zinaida Hippius. An Intellectual Profile* (Carbondale, 1971) for his help with research and whose pronouncements on Gippius she generously cited throughout her book. She then proceeds to review two pages out of my twenty-page introductory essay, pretending they are the entire book and “a principal justification for Karlinsky's book,” a book I did not write, only edited. These are the pages where I speak of the sexual identity of Gippius and point out the bowdlerizations to which Temira Pachmuss has subjected this entire area of the poet's life and writings.

The review attributes to me statements I never made and credits me with “discoveries” and “suppositions” to which I have no claim. I never alleged that sexual frustration made “Gippius the unique writer she is” (Pachmuss conflated two unrelated passages to obtain this phrase). I neither wrote of the poet's masculinity nor claimed she was a lesbian — in fact, I denied that possibility (see my introduction, p. 10). What I wrote about was the ambivalence of the poet about her own sexuality and of her attraction to the androgynous role both in life and in literature. I based my statements on her own admissions and on the memoirs of two people who knew Gippius intimately over many decades, Vladimir Zlobin and Sergei Makovskii. If Temira Pachmuss believes that Makovskii's memoir on Gippius is “of dubious authenticity,” why did she cite it as a primary source no less than ten times in her own book?

But the androgyny of Gippius was also described or mentioned in the memoirs of, among others, Ivan Bunin (*Vospominaniia* [Paris, 1981], p. 41) and Nina Berberova (*Kursiv moi* [Munich, 1972], pp. 278 and 282). All these contemporaries of Gippius could not have “project[ed] present-day mores and values onto Russian society at the turn of the century” and “mutilated [the evidence] to fit modern, preconceived notions” — Bunin, Makovskii, and Zlobin all died before the onset of the recent sexual revolution.

I never wrote that “prior publications on Hippius are inadequate because scholars are unwilling ‘to see . . . the sexually unconventional aspects’ (p. 19) in Hippius.” The stricture and the passage in single quotation marks applied to one scholar only: Temira Pachmuss. On page 18 I explicitly praised *Paradox in the Religious Poetry of Zinaida Gippius* by Olga Matich (Munich, 1972) for its fair and objective treatment of all the aspects of this poet's *oeuvre*, including the ones I called “unconventional.” Matich's chapter on love (pp. 63–79) deals with the importance of androgynous love in Gippius and carefully places this topic within the context of Russian culture of the early twentieth century.

Zinaida Gippius was a contemporary of Sigmund Freud and Havelock Ellis in the West and a friend and literary ally of Vasilii Rozanov and Fedor Sologub in Russia. Like these men, she was a pioneer of explicit writing on sexual themes, including sexual variants and minorities. Temira Pachmuss insists that Gippius had nothing to do with such topics because “social conventions precluded their consideration on the printed page.” But Gippius wrote concretely and courageously about sexual ambivalence, her own and that of others, in her books, essays, stories, and poems from 1899 on.

Commentators, such as Vladimir Zlobin and Olga Matich, have interpreted her writings on this theme with honesty and insight. Temira Pachmuss tries to pretend that none of this exists or that it pertains to something abstract and intangible, such as “the mystery of sex” or “the ultimate spiritual reality.” Her denials and her out-of-context quotation of the poet’s statement to Boris Savinkov constitute a form of censorship, which Pachmuss seeks to impose on a poet whose work she herself has, paradoxically, made so abundantly available to the scholarly community.

Yes, by all means let us view Gippius as “an *enfant de son siècle*” — not of some imaginary, prim, Victorian age, where Temira Pachmuss seeks to place her.

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PROFESSOR PACHMUSS REPLIES:

I did not discuss Simon Karlinsky’s entire introduction because Hippius’s views of religion, politics, androgynous love, even her interest in sexual ambiguities are abundantly represented in my own books, articles, and introductions to her works. Moreover, I selected, translated, and published her stories concerning “sexual variants” precisely because these issues were very much in harmony with her *Zeitgeist*. Clearly, I never pretended that “none of this exists.” I also reproduced in both English and Russian Hippius’s spirited conversations with Merezhkovskii and others on the “mystery of sex,” the “mystery of two,” and the “mystery of three.” It is a question of emphasis: Karlinsky chooses to stress sexual issues in Hippius, whereas I prefer to emphasize the originality and literary value of her metaphysical universe.

What I specifically objected to in Karlinsky’s introduction are his statements that Hippius experienced “the enormous burden of frustration which her need for love and the impossibility of consummation imposed on her” (p. 8) and that Merezhkovskii was asexual (p. 14). Karlinsky believes that the passages omitted by me from Hippius’s diaries — some information which she explicitly wished to be withdrawn from publication in deference to the survivors of Savinkov and Filosofov, with whom she was intimate — support his emphasis on her supposed frustration and inability to achieve consummation. In fact, neither this material nor any of the available primary sources supports this interpretation. Furthermore, in her diary, *About the Cause*, Hippius speaks of Merezhkovskii’s love affairs with a number of women. Karlinsky chooses to disregard this information in order to fit Merezhkovskii into his preconceived notions about him.

Karlinsky takes me to task for simultaneously expressing gratitude and criticizing Zlobin and Makovskii, whose statements Karlinsky uses to support his hypotheses. The point, of course, is not gratitude or criticism, but how careful one is in using such material in formulating an interpretation. I am indeed grateful to Zlobin for his help in deciphering Hippius’s references to people, dates, and events mentioned in her letters and diaries. I am also grateful to Makovskii for occasionally insightful statements. I refrained, however, from asking Zlobin “to formulate religious and sexual modalities” of Hippius for obvious reasons, including his mental instability. And I do not trust Makovskii’s pronouncements about Hippius’s alleged biological inability to engage in heterosexual relations because he did not produce evidence to support his views.

I quite agree that scholars should not sweep substantive issues of a writer’s life and work “under the rug,” and I can think of only one critical gesture that performs a greater disservice to the writer: to “discover” things that are not there.

TO THE EDITOR:

In his exchange with Sidney Monas about, among other things, my role in the Western debate about Solzhenitsyn, John B. Dunlop made this statement: “Monas seems to adhere