

Chapter Four

The Woman Writer as Interpreter of Creation: Mariia Pospelova

This chapter explores the possibilities Sentimentalist discourse could offer to a woman writer interested in exploiting religion and virtue for her self-image as an author. My examination suggests that Mariia Pospelova (1780, 1783, or 1784–1805) engages with the concept of nature as an earthly paradise, justifying her writerly activity by references to the equation of woman with nature, innate goodness, and virtuousness. My analysis of reviews on Pospelova will reveal that the popularity in Sentimentalist culture of woman's image as a pious virgin and innocent country maiden transferred to the perception of the author and, in Pospelova's case, to descriptions of her early death in particular. In her writings Pospelova found ways of revising the role ascribed to women in the pastoral. While the traditional pastoral instrumentalises woman as a symbol of harmony and as the mute object of male adoration, Pospelova lends a voice and authority to the female author-character by employing pastoral imagery in her philosophical and religious reflections. Hers is an example of a Sentimentalist woman author who achieved this without fundamentally challenging the Sentimentalist conceptualisation of women.

Pospelova's life and work

Pospelova was born at some time between 1780 and 1784, a few years before the French Revolution. The various implications of the fact that the exact year of her birth is unknown will be discussed below. She published two collections of poems and philosophical and religious reflections in the course of her short life.¹ Her family lived in Vladimir, the culturally thriving capital of the eponymous province, some 180 kilometres north-east of Moscow. At the time, such a distance was considered quite short and there were occasional trips to Moscow,

1 Mariia Pospelova: *Luchshie chasy zhizni moei*. Tipografiia gubernskago pravleniia: Vladimir 1798;
Mariia Pospelova: *Nekotorye cherty prirody i istinny, ili ottenki myslei i chuvstv moikh*. Tipografiia senata u Selivanovskago: Moscow 1801.

which would take about two days.² Her father earned a modest income as a clerk.³ The youngest of a family of ten, Mariia Pospelova had five brothers and four sisters. After their father's death, the family found themselves in financial difficulties. Nonetheless, their mother managed to place her sons in educational institutions to prepare them for state service, and to marry off her four elder daughters, while Mariia stayed by her side.

Within their modest family means, her siblings helped their youngest sister to educate herself. From a young age she was an eager pupil, teaching herself music, drawing, and French. Her earliest known literary work, a tale in verse, *Nepostoianstvo shchastia* (The Inconstancy of Happiness), was written when she was just twelve.⁴ Her apparent interest in science reveals itself in her use of scientific terms including 'atom', 'forfor', 'planety', and 'teleskop' (atom, phosphorus, planets, telescope). Her work also displays a familiarity with the heliocentric planetary system and her interest in astronomy is reflected in notes on the theory that the sun and stars will one day be extinguished. Her collections further contain references to scientific laws such as the speed of light.⁵

While Mariia Pospelova was largely self-taught, she also had a mentor in Vasilii Podshivalov, the editor of a journal, *Priiatnoe i poleznoe preprovozhdenie vremeni* (Pleasant and Useful Pastime), who helped her develop her gift for writing and published a few of her poems. Most of Pospelova's poems, however, circulated in manuscript form, as was common at the time for male and female writers alike. The circulation of works by a contemporary author in a group of people with a shared interest in literature was part of salon culture and regarded as a domestic form of publishing. In 1798, with the help of F.T. Pospelov, a relative, she published a collection of poems of considerable literary and poetic skill, entitled *Lushchie*

2 For a brief description of Vladimir's role as a centre of cultural life and its connection to Moscow, see Katherine Pickering Antonova's study on a provincial gentry family during the first half of the 19th century,

Katherine Pickering Antonova: *An Ordinary Marriage. The World of a Gentry Family in Provincial Russia*. Oxford University Press: Oxford 2013, pp. 10–12.

3 Mary Zirin: 'Pospelova, Mariia Alexeevna'. In: Zirin, Mary, and Marina Ledkovsky et al. (eds): *Dictionary of Russian Women Writers*. Greenwood Press: London 1994, pp. 514–516 (p. 515).

4 B. Fedorov: *O zhizni i sochineniiakh devitsy Pospelovoi*. Tipografia Plavil'shchikova: St Petersburg 1824, p. 6.

5 Pospelova 1798, 'Gimn Vsemogushchemu', pp. 27–37 (pp. 29–30); 'Sumerki', pp. 51–62 (p. 53).

Pospelova 1801, 'K solntsu', pp. 116–130 (pp. 124–125);

'Razmyshlenie na novoi 1800 god', pp. 52–70 (pp. 63–64).

chasy zhizni moei (The Best Hours of My Life).⁶ The title echoes a preface by Salomon Gessner, who claimed that the idylls offered to the reader were the fruit of his most pleasurable hours spent in the countryside, far from the rush and depravity of city life.⁷

Pospelova's print publication was extraordinary in that she was not only virtually the first woman author to publish a complete collection of works but, most notably, a woman who lived in a provincial town, that of Vladimir on the Klyazma river.

Pospelova dedicated her publication to the wife of Alexander I, Elizaveta Alexeevna, whom she addresses in her preface, praising the Grand Duchess' virtue before declaring that she would be honoured if Alexeevna approved of her work.⁸ Complying with Sentimentalist expectations, she begs forgiveness for any shortcomings in her writings, and for having included many non-panegyric poems, which constitute the majority in the collection. In her attempt to obtain the royal family's symbolic approval, Pospelova presents herself in a public light.⁹

The first three poems in *The Best Hours of My Life* are panegyric odes to the royal family. When Pavel I was presented with her ode dedicated to him, he rewarded Pospelova with a diamond ring. The royal attention aroused the interest of men of letters such as Gavrila Derzhavin, Mikhail Kheraskov, and Nikolai Karamzin. Prince Ivan Dolgorukii called her 'the Muse of the Klyazma river'. Having read her work, a rich Muscovite proposed marriage, promising to alleviate her and her mother's financial difficulties. Pospelova rejected him, either because she had no

6 M. Makarov: 'Mariia Timofeevna Pospelova'. *Damskii zhurnal* 16, 1830, pp. 34–38 (p. 34);

D. Mordovtsev: *Russkiiia zhenshchiny novago vremeni. Biograficheskie ocherki iz russkoi istorii*. Cherkasov: St Petersburg 1874, Vol. III, p. 42;

Zirin 1994, 'Pospelova', p. 515;

Amanda Ewington (ed. and transl.): *Russian Women Poets of the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*. Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies at the University of Toronto: Toronto 2014, p. 347–359.

7 Salomon Gessner: *Idyllen*. Voss, Ernst (ed.): Reclam Jun.: Stuttgart 1988, p. 15.

8 This preface and its English translation can be found in the Appendix.

9 On the function of dedications in 18th-century Russian literature, see Natal'ia Kochetkova: 'K istorii odnogo literaturnogo posviashcheniia A.M. Kutuzova'. In: *Russian Literature. Special Issue. 18th Century Russian Literature* 52, 2002, pp. 271–281 (p. 274);

on dedications in Russian women's writing, in particular regarding translations, see Wendy Rosslyn: *Feats of Agreeable Usefulness*, pp. 127–140.

feelings for a man many years her senior, or because her mother wanted to keep her at her side.¹⁰

A second collection of poems appeared in Moscow in 1801, entitled *Nekotorye cherty prirody i istinny, ili ottenki myslei i chuvstv moikh* (Some Traits of Nature and Truth, or Traces of My Thoughts and Feelings). Pospelova's family was living in Moscow at the time and may well have assisted her in finding a publisher. While her first collection was dedicated to a member of the royal family, *Some Traits of Nature and Truth* is dedicated to 'dusham blagorodnym i chuvstvitel'nym', i.e. 'noble and sensitive souls'. In the preface Pospelova apologises for her lack of education and stresses the importance of virtue. While her first collection featured three prominently placed panegyric odes, one such ode, celebrating the accession to the throne of Alexander I, concludes her second collection. *Some Traits of Nature and Truth* opens with six translations of psalms, followed by a religious ode and a poem celebrating a military victory. By placing her psalm translations at the beginning, Pospelova may have wanted to demonstrate her conformity to the Sentimentalist conception of women as pious; it may also have been intended as an allusion to her interest in education. A further important theme in this collection is the philosophical and religious contemplation of human existence. Pastorals only appear in the second half of the collection, perhaps because they belong to a lighter genre. Finally, almost a third of Pospelova's work consists of poems which express respect for the existing order.

In 1803 Pospelova's family left Moscow. Her eldest sister's husband was transferred to St Petersburg for his work. Pospelova accompanied her sister to help her settle into the new environment. During her year in St Petersburg, she attempted to entertain her sister by writing a novel entitled *Al'manzor*, written—as Amanda Ewington argues—in the spirit of François René de Chateaubriand's *Atala*.¹¹ Pospelova also began work on *Georgii, ili otroch' monastyr'* (Georgii, or The Otroch' Monastery), which is based on a 17th-century Russian legend. Pospelova finished neither of these works, apparently finding her writing style wanting and refusing to publish anything before she had become more accomplished in her craft. Nevertheless, someone must have persuaded her to publish an ode, also written in 1803, in celebration of Alexander I's birthday.¹²

10 Makarov, p. 35;

M. Khmyrov: 'Russkie pisatel'nitsy proshlago vremeni. Mariia Pospelova'. *Rassvet. Zhurnal nauk, iskvstv i literatury dlia vzroslykh devits* 12, 1861, pp. 257–263 (p. 260); Fedorov, p. 9.

11 Ewington, p. 348.

12 Fedorov, p. 10.

In 1804 Pospelova returned to Moscow to live with her mother and be close to two of her sisters; shortly thereafter, she contracted consumption. The death of three of her nieces—all named after her—seemed to foreshadow her own, less than a year later, on 8 September 1805; she is buried in Donskoy Monastery.

Pospelova's critics and reviewers

Pospelova lived through the Russian aftermath of the French Revolution, a time when people were growing disillusioned with the Enlightenment notion that progress and civilisation could bring happiness to humanity. Its rationalistic approach fell out of favour as more and more writers turned to utopian descriptions of primordial happiness, which they attempted to convey in idealised visions of nature. Largely inspired by the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the notion of nature as an earthly paradise implies that women, thought to be estranged from culture, are particularly suitable symbols of goodness. The trend reinforced the Sentimentalist image of woman as a pious and virtuous being who longs for the hereafter.

Unlike more recent articles, 19th-century reviews on Pospelova tended to reproduce the Sentimentalist image of woman, which they project onto the author, describing her as a selfless young woman, an innocent country maiden, a precociously talented writer imbued with heavenly inspiration, or even as an angelic creature. Most biographical accounts focus on Pospelova's very young age, even though, at the time, publications by girls in their teens were not unusual.¹³

While commentators agree on the year of her death (1805), how old she actually was at the time is a matter for debate, and of some interest in terms of the age at which she published her first collection of poems in 1798. Mary Zirin mentions 1780 as the year of her birth, which would have made her eighteen that year.¹⁴ Earlier authors argue for 1784 or 1783, in which case she would have been only fourteen or fifteen in 1798, more in keeping with a romantic view of the poet, and with echoes of the Sentimentalist tendency to infantilise women.¹⁵ In one of the

13 Rosslyn 2000, *Feats of Agreeable Usefulness*, pp. 34–35.

14 Zirin 1994, 'Pospelova', p. 514;

Alessandra Tosi: *Waiting for Pushkin. Russian Fiction in the Reign of Alexander I (1801–1825)*. Rodopi: Amsterdam 2006, p. 134.

15 Khmyrov, p. 257;

Grigorii Gennadi: 'Pospelova, Mariia Alekseevna'. In: Gennadi, Grigorii (ed.): *Spravochnyi slovar' o russkikh pisateliakh i uchenykh umershihkh v XVIII i XIX stoletiiakh i spisok russkikh knig s 1725–1825 g.* [n.pub.]: Berlin 1876, p. 183;

poems published in the 1798 collection, the narrator declares that she is sixteen, which would point to the year 1782 as Pospelova's year of birth. However, lyrical persona and author are not necessarily identical.¹⁶

Some reviewers of her life and work portray Pospelova as an innocent child of nature, identical to the narrator of her work. A case in point is the article published by B. Fedorov in 1824. Almost twenty years posthumously, the article continues to project the Sentimentalist image of woman onto Pospelova, opening with four lines from Vasilii Zhukovskii's poem, 'A Country Churchyard. An Elegy' (Sel'skoe kladbishche. Elegiia), a translation of Thomas Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard'. The passage expresses regret about the fact that a rare pearl often remains hidden in an unfathomable abyss, and that a solitary lily's scent is wasted in the desert. The quotation creates an image of a young Pospelova claimed by death before her writerly gift could fully develop. The metaphors of the pearl and the lily refer to the world of nature, and confirm the Sentimentalist equation of woman and nature. In particular, they echo the frequent cliché of the young and innocent woman (or, in pastorals, the shepherdess) who lives peacefully in the remote countryside, far from civilisation. The article emphasises Pospelova's modesty—which Sentimentalist discourse expected from women writers—by claiming that she never sought fame, that her works were destined to be read by friends and family, and that she never desired to impress anyone with her knowledge, nor to be seen as a scholar.¹⁷

Another review on Pospelova appeared in 1874, almost seventy years posthumously. Its author, D. Mordovtsev, presents an image of Pospelova as an innocent country maiden, emphasising what a rare and precious phenomenon she was by calling her a 'samorodok', Russian for 'nugget', the symbol of a naturally talented person. Although the reviewer concedes that a nugget requires the attention of a gem-cutter to reveal its true value, he is reluctant to present in positive terms the support Pospelova received from men of letters, regretting the fact that the nugget had been polished and shaped, and the effort had paid off in monetary terms. Instead, he dwells on Pospelova's secluded upbringing in provincial Vladimir, then a vibrant cultural centre, as has been pointed out. He emphasises her natural and precocious talent, claiming that her literary gift was spoilt once she had gained the reputation of talented woman author and people began to visit her.

Fedorov, p. 14;

D. Mordovtsev, p. 45.

16 'Raz s shestnadtsat' uzh vstrechala / Ia s ulybkoiu vesnu': Pospelova 1798, 'Vesna', pp. 112–116 (p. 115).

17 Fedorov, pp. 3–4.

The review reveals the wish that a naturally gifted woman writer such as Pospelova should remain in an uneducated, 'unpolished' state rather than shine in the public light.

M. Makarov compiled a set of notes on women writers and published an article on Pospelova in 1830, in which he presented her less as an innocent child of nature than as a gifted writer, her mentor Podshivalov's protégée. He mentions the support she received from other important men of letters including P. Sokhatskii, Kheraskov, Derzhavin, and Karamzin. Although Makarov mistook her patronymic, which was Timofeevna rather than Alexeevna, his review is an interesting source of information about the male and female authors Pospelova may have known or been familiar with. He also believed that it was works by other women authors which inspired her to take up the pen.¹⁸

Nevertheless, most reviewers, including Federov and M. Khmyrov, who published an article on Pospelova in 1861, reproduce the Sentimentalist literary ideal of woman as a virgin ready for self-sacrifice. Several articles suggest that Pospelova refused a marriage proposal from a man much older than her so that she might be able to continue to care for her mother. Accounts of her death reveal a similar attitude, for instance when Fedorov claims that Pospelova died at the very hour the church bell was ringing for Mass. Heroism and self-sacrifice are other features added to her image by these reviewers, whose accounts of her death tell us that, ill with the consumption she contracted in her early twenties and sensing that death was near, Pospelova called for her sister but passed away in solitude, unwilling to subject her sibling to her own frightful appearance. Selflessness is another feature both Fedorov and Khmyrov ascribed to Pospelova, referring to a letter she had reportedly written to her sister in St Petersburg, which stated that it was her duty and pleasure to comfort her loved ones even in times when she, being seriously ill herself, was in need of support.

In their analyses of Pospelova's work, reviewers were reluctant to quote works she had written in the Sentimentalist vein, among them her pastorals and other pieces in which a female lyrical persona praises Creation, and whose tone is excessively rapturous. The critics seem to have preferred Pospelova's philosophical reflections, especially the ones published in *Some Traits of Nature and Truth*, which received high praise for their bold and lofty metaphors reminiscent of

18 Göpfert notes that Makarov's collection on Russian women writers belongs to the domain of journalism rather than to literary history, and that his comments should therefore be taken with a pinch of salt, see

Frank Göpfert: *Russische Autorinnen von der Mitte bis zum Ausgang des 18. Jahrhunderts*. Teil 1. 1750–1780. Göpfert: Fichtenwalde 2007, pp. 16–17.

Derzhavin's. Reviewers also drew attention to Pospelova's panegyric odes, creating the impression that, although their biographical accounts reproduced a Sentimentalist image in their praise of her as an angelic being, they felt uncomfortable with the impact of this perception on her literary self-image. The philosophical reflections in *Some Traits of Nature and Truth* make abundant use of sublime Ossianic and Romantic metaphors, ultimately proving more attractive than the somewhat sugary lyrical excesses of her Sentimentalist pastorals and hymns to Creation, which predominate in her first collection, *The Best Hours of My Life*. Unlike Anna Smirnova, mentioned in Chapter Three, who brought Romantic metaphors to bear on her representation of the woman poet, Pospelova used Romantic imagery only in her philosophical reflections.

Nature worship

One review of Pospelova's life and work refers to her first collection, *The Best Hours of My Life*, or, by another title, *V uedinenie uklonivshiisia ot mira Khristiianin, ili uslazhdenie moei zhizni* (A Christian Who Has Turned away from the World to Solitude, or the Delight of My Life).¹⁹ It reflects Pospelova's affinity with works of a profoundly religious nature popular at the time, such as Karamzin's *Besedy s bogom* (Conversations with God). The poems in this collection are also strongly influenced by the philosophical trend of Sensationalism, which I have outlined in Chapter Two.

Pospelova refers to relevant authors in her list of writers worthy of her admiration, including Gessner, Rousseau, James Thomson, and the Genevan natural scientist Charles Bonnet.²⁰ She also appears to have paid particular attention to the works of Karamzin, Russia's chief advocate of Sentimentalisation, for instance in her conception of 'natural' art, which alludes to his views on this topic. In his poem 'Darovaniia' (The Gift), published in 1797, Karamzin distinguishes between the inspiration the poet receives as he is standing in an Ossianic landscape typical

19 S. Russov: 'Pospelova, Mariia'. In: Russov, S. (ed.): *Bibliograficheskii katalog rossiiskim pisatel' nitsam*. [n.pub.]: St Petersburg 1826, p. 36.

Andrei Bolotov's daughter is reported to have read a work called *Khristiianin v uedinenii* in the 1780s and other works celebrating nature as an earthly paradise, i.e. works he thought particularly suitable for girls. This attests to the then great popularity of such works, especially for young women, see

Olga E. Glagoleva: *Dream and Reality of Russian Provincial Young Ladies. 1700–1850*. Carl Beck Papers: Pittsburgh 2000, p. 29.

20 Pospelova 1801, 'Iiun', pp. 92–104 (p. 104); 'Iasnaia zimnaia noch', pp. 150–160 (pp. 158–159).

for Romantic aesthetics, where the poet is exposed to the rough elements of untamed, uncultured, wild nature, and the inspiration which results from careful observation of an idyllic scenery. Honouring vastly gifted artists including Apelles, the ancient Greek painter, 'The Gift' praises the way in which poetic works depict nature. Nature is the object of works created by someone who is receptive to its beauty. Karamzin's narrator alludes to poetry as follows:

Натуры каждое явление
И сердца каждое движенье
Есть кисти твоя предмет;
Как в светлом, явственном кристалле,
Являешь ты в своем зеркале
Для глаз другой, прекрасный свет;
И часто прелесть в подражаны
Милее чем в природе нам:
Лесок, цветочек в описаны
Еще приятнее очам.

*Every feature found in nature,
And every movement of the heart
Becomes a subject for your brush;
In your mirror you present,
As though in a crystal clear and light,
The wondrous world for another eye;
And often your imitation's beauty
Is greater even than nature's own:
A wood, a flower in your description
Becomes more beautiful to the eye.²¹*

Karamzin adds a footnote to the last line quoted here, which explains the relationship between nature and art in more detail, repeating that the imitation of nature can be more attractive than the original:

Все прелести изящных Искусств суть нечто иное, как подражание Nature; но копия бывает иногда лучше оригинала, по крайней мере делает его для нас всегда занимательнее: мы имеем удовольствие сравнивать.²²

21 Translation by Emily Lygo.

22 Nikolai Karamzin: *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvorenii*. Lotman, Iurii (ed.): *Sovetskii pisatel* : Moscow 1966. 'Darovaniia', pp. 213–227 (p. 219).

*All the wonders of the fine Arts are in essence nothing other than the imitation of Nature; but the copy can sometimes be better than the original, or at least make it more engaging for us: we have the pleasure of comparison.*²³

Pospelova's prose poem, 'Sumerki' (Twilight), seems to take up the issue of the relationship between art and nature. In contrast to Karamzin, however, she considers nature to be more pleasing to the eye than any imitation of art:

Все превосходныя произведения искусства есть ничто иное, как подражание Природе, как изливание ея, и все славныя картины Апеллесов, Рафаелев и Корреджиев есть не что иное, как одна тень Природы, один лучъ красоты ея.²⁴

*All wonderful works of art are nothing other than the imitation of Nature, its outpouring, and all the famous paintings of Apelleses, Raphaels and Correggios are nothing more than a single shadow of Nature, one ray of her beauty.*²⁵

The opening of this quotation echoes the beginning of Karamzin's comment almost word for word. Pospelova's prose poem also refers to famous artists including Apelles, which suggests that she was familiar with works not only by Karamzin but also by Renaissance artists such as Raphael or Correggio. Even though she denies that art can surpass nature in its beauty, she accepts Karamzin's view to some extent when she emulates his example of praising the way in which poetry reflects Creation.

In response to the deistic and pantheistic ideals of her time, Pospelova's work celebrates nature, presenting it as a Garden of Eden where the wandering lyrical persona continuously perceives manifestations of God's presence. Especially in her first collection, *The Best Hours of My Life*, the narrator bears similarities to the narrator of Karamzin's 'Progulka' (A Walk), whose religious feelings are aroused by his immediate surroundings, which he scrutinises with great care and attention. Pospelova's poetic and philosophical reflections in *The Best Hours of My Life* also very closely imitate Karamzin's 'A Walk', insofar as her narrator also goes for walks in nature, extolling its beauty, and voicing her veneration of the Creator of this earthly paradise.

Closeness to nature, both as a writer and as her narrator's voice allows Pospelova to describe Creation in her literary works. She expresses her gratitude to God for having endowed her with the ability to feel, perceive, and understand the miracles of the natural world. In spring and in daytime, which feature prominently in *The Best Hours of My Life*, she admires nature. In winter and at night,

23 Translation by Emily Lygo.

24 Pospelova 1798, 'Sumerki', pp. 51–62 (pp. 51–52).

25 Translation by Emily Lygo.

when its beauty is invisible, she muses on human vanity and on life's ephemerality, which are the main topics of *Some Traits of Nature and Truth*.

Contrary to Karamzin, however, whose world view seems to reproduce Ptolemy's geocentric system, Pospelova's interest in science compels her to describe a heliocentric constellation of the planets. She does, however, attribute extraordinary importance to the sun and to light, especially in *The Best Hours of My Life*. This imagery may have been influenced by the Masonic theme in Karamzin's writings. Pospelova also alludes to the notion that life existed on other planets, a view perhaps inspired by Karamzin's 'A Walk'. It also features in Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle's manual about astronomy for women, *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (Conversations about the Variety of the Worlds), published in 1686.²⁶

In their virtuousness, Pospelova's female lyrical personae not only resemble the narrator in Karamzin's 'A Walk', but also the ideal author outlined in his 1794 essay, 'What Does an Author Need?'.²⁷ Pospelova's poetic reflections describe walks in a natural environment and contemplations on Creation where woman is always flawless and morally impeccable. Likewise in her pastorals, where women are always virtuous beings who represent the object of male desire.

If, in Karamzin's 'A Walk', man is virtuous, elsewhere he is not quite so good. Erast in *Poor Liza* is corrupt, first seducing and then abandoning an innocent country maiden, and marrying a rich widow to solve his financial problems. Karamzin's men are frequently deprived of the innate goodness so strongly championed by Sentimentalism. Woman, on the other hand, is the epitome of virtue and morals, and if she fails to adhere to these principles, she must end her life in suicide, as in Karamzin's *Poor Liza*.²⁸ It is a gender pattern reproduced in Pospelova's works.

In her descriptions of Creation, Pospelova employs the Sentimentalist celebration of nature, and of the idea that women in particular were closer to nature than culture. *The Best Hours of My Life* features most of her poems in which woman's closeness to nature becomes evident. They often refer to Genesis, bearing titles

26 Pospelova 1798, 'Gimn Vsemogushchemu', pp. 27–37 (p. 30);

Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle: *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes*. Calame, Alexandre (ed.): Didier: Paris 1966. 'Second soir. Que la Lune est une Terre habitée', pp. 46–75, 'Troisième soir. Particularités du Monde de la Lune. Que les autres Planetes sont habitées aussi', pp. 76–101.

27 Karamzin: 'Chto nuzhno avtoru?' In: *Izbrannye sochineniia* (2 vols.), Khudozhestvennaia literatura: Moscow 1964, Vol. II, pp. 120–122.

28 Inna Gorbatov: *Formation du concept de Sentimentalisme dans la littérature russe. L'Influence de J.J. Rousseau sur l'œuvre de N. M. Karamzin*. Peter Lang Verlag: Paris 1991, p. 134.

such as 'Vesna' (Spring), 'Utrenniaia progulka' (A Morning Stroll), or 'Maisкое утро' (May Morning); nature is invariably described as an earthly paradise and as a repository of divine wisdom.²⁹ Close observation of nature supplies proof of God's existence and benevolence. Pospelova's 'Twilight' presents the narrator's perception of nature as a reflection of paradise; she addresses nature as a 'clear reflection of the perfection of the Almighty' (ясное зеркало совершенств Всемогущаго). Heaven and earth merge in her admiring gaze which perceives paradise in everything. The same poem reveals Pospelova's pantheistic approach, in which God's existence manifests itself in nature:

Чрез тебя [натуру] созерцаем мы Безначальное, Безконечное, Всесовершеннейшее, везде сущее Существо...³⁰

Through you [nature] we perceive the Being that has no beginning and no end, is all powerful and omnipresent...³¹

The narrator's eye wanders from the most minute objects of Creation, such as a grain of sand, to the most majestic, such as the stars in the sky, finding in them evidence of God's plan. Inspired by contemplation of nature, she associates astronomical knowledge with praise of the Creator. The Earth is one world among an infinity of others, a notion which makes frequent appearances in Pospelova's work.³²

Especially in *The Best Hours of My Life*, Pospelova reproduces the Sentimentalist feminisation of nature: she is the daughter of God and the agent of Divine Providence. 'Vremia' (Time) attributes angelic features to nature depicted as a young woman bathed in bright light, who is called a 'Daughter of the heavens / In a light and radiant robe' (Дщерь небес / В ризе светлой, лучезарной). Since nature is regarded as an earthly paradise, a person suitably predisposed in mind and spirit is capable of internalising and appropriating the notion of paradise, just as the narrator is in Karamzin's 'A Walk'. The natural environment on a spring morning in May, for instance, leaves the lyrical persona's soul enraptured.

Spiritual illumination

Being open to the divine essence of nature enables Pospelova's lyrical persona to be spiritually illuminated. Spiritual illumination can be achieved equally through

29 Pospelova 1798, 'Vesna', pp. 112–116; 'Utrenniaia progulka', pp. 75–83; 'Maisкое утро', pp. 73–74.

30 Pospelova 1798, 'Sumerki', pp. 51–62 (pp. 52–53, 56).

31 Translation by Emily Lygo.

32 Pospelova 1801, 'Iiun', pp. 92–104 (p. 99); Pospelova 1798, 'Vremia', pp. 21–26 (p. 21).

religion or through nature. The parallel is evident in the frequent recurrence of the expression 'Blessed is he who...' (*blazhen, kto...*) in *Some Traits of Nature and Truth*, where it also refers to a realm of spiritual delight.³³ To Pospelova, there is no room for sorrow in the heart of a person who can attune herself to nature. Having delivered an ecstatic description of Creation, the narrator in 'Twilight' declares that 'My soul is in sympathy with Nature' (Душа моя симпатически согласуется с Природою).³⁴

Pospelova's work mainly ascribes being in harmony with nature to the female narrator, endorsing Sentimentalism's conception of women as pure and virtuous creatures. The flawless woman who mirrors paradise occurs throughout all genres, be they lyrical prose poems or pastorals. Whenever a poem is about happiness, Pospelova's lyrical persona speaks in a female voice and conforms with the Sentimentalist idealisation of woman.

Pospelova's tendency to paint an idealised image of women emerges particularly strongly from the similar use she makes of paradise in her panegyric and religious odes, psalm translations, and celebrations of Creation. In her panegyric odes which open *The Best Hours of My Life*, Pospelova ascribes angelic features to the tsarina's soul and appearance.³⁵ Rulers are often said to bear God's likeness, which is why they are destined to restore paradise on earth.³⁶ A religious ode describes heaven as the seat of God, whose throne is surrounded by angels.³⁷ Translations of psalms open *Some Traits of Nature and Truth*, depicting heaven, the true believer's spiritual paradise, the place where light shines in perpetuity. By associating her female narrator with similar notions of paradise and light, Pospelova achieves a symbolic elevation.

Pospelova's narrators often describe spiritual illuminations which resemble mystical experiences, enhancing her symbolic authority. In 'May Morning' from *The Best Hours of My Life*, for example, she is receptive to Creation and therefore in a position to be spiritually illuminated:

33 'Blazhen, kto s dobrymi druzhitsia!' (p. 14), 'Blazhen narod, Ego poznavshii!' (p. 22), 'Blazhen, kto Vechnago boitsia' (p. 25), 'Blazheny te, cho upovaiut / Na Boga — im gotov venets' (p. 25), all in Pospelova 1801.

34 Pospelova 1798, 'Sumerki', pp. 51–62 (pp. 60–62).

35 Pospelova 1798, 'Oda na den' Tezoiementstva Eiia Imperatorskago Vysochestva Velikoi Kniagini Elisavety Alekseevny', pp. 1–5.

36 Pospelova 1798, 'Oda na torzhestvennoi V' 'ezd Ikh Imperatorskikh Velichestv v Moskvu', pp. 6–11 (p. 9).

37 Pospelova 1801, 'Oda na den' Rozhdestva Khristova', pp. 33–39.

Все виды прелестями блистают
И дух в восторг приводят мой.³⁸

*Every vista sparkles with charm
And enraptures my spirit.*³⁹

Similarly in ‘Twilight’, where nature is described as follows:

Ты возвышаешь душу мою, ты наполняешь сердце мое небесною сладостию.

You inspire my soul, you fill my heart with heavenly sweetness.

In the same poem, contemplation of nature leaves the female narrator enraptured:

Сердце мое пресыщено твоими благодеяниями. Ты наполнила душу мою райским удовольствием.⁴⁰

*My heart is sated with your blessings. You have filled my soul with heavenly pleasure.*⁴¹

In the poem ‘Spring’ from *The Best Hours of My Life*, the narrator even compares herself to an angel because of her receptivity to the beauty of Creation. She describes the idylls of spring before declaring,

Погружена в размышленьи
Я в молчаньи здесь стою,
Иль в сердечном восхищеньи
Я натуре песнь пою,
Иль пришед в восторг небесной
Духом к небесам парю.
Тамо благодсти чудесной
Жертву приношу мою.
Души чувством благородной
Свет блаженства райской зрю, —
Свет небесный, лучезарный,
Благ божественных зарю,
Что я? что в сии минуты?
Ангел, или человек.⁴²

38 Pospelova 1798, ‘Maisкое utro’, pp. 73–74 (p. 73);

39 Ewington, pp. 357–359 (p. 357).

The entire Russian original and an English translation of this poem can be found in the Appendix.

40 Pospelova 1798, ‘Sumerki’, pp. 51–62 (57, 62).

41 Translation by Emily Lygo.

42 Pospelova 1798, ‘Vesna’, pp. 112–116 (p. 114).

*Deep in contemplation,
 In silence here I stand,
 Or in heartfelt admiration
 I sing a hymn to nature,
 Or in a heavenly rapture
 My soul soars to the skies.
 I bring my sacrifice
 To the miraculous goodness.
 With feelings of a noble soul
 I see the light of heavenly bliss—
 I see the heavenly, radiant
 Light of divine goodness,
 What am I? In these moments?
 Angel or human?⁴³*

Like the true believer in Pospelova's psalm translations, the lyrical persona experiences spiritual illumination. However, while in the psalms the reason for this illumination is faith, here it is the narrator's receptivity to Creation. Pospelova's 'Gimn Vsemogushchemu' (Hymn to the Almighty) further illustrates the narrator's response to a near-mystical contemplation of nature:

*Какой небесной дух объемлет мой восторг?
 Я сладость райскую в душе своей вкушаю, ...⁴⁴
 What heavenly spirit can encompass my joy?
 I taste Edenic sweetness in my soul, ...⁴⁵*

The soul of the pious woman poet reflects nature, the mirror image of paradise. In *The Best Hours of My Life*, Pospelova enhances her female lyrical persona's symbolic standing by describing her spiritual illuminations and making her resemble a mystic. The elevation goes even further in her philosophical contemplations, which are the main topic of *Some Traits of Nature and Truth*. Here the narrator reflects on the importance of virtue, condemning people who fail to respect it. In her judging of other people's behaviour, the narrator comes across almost as a saint, albeit one who may be accused of vanity.

Pospelova's presentation of her female lyrical personae as mystics resembles the strategy of other religious women writers at the turn of the 19th century, such as Anna Turchaninova, whose poems address questions of faith, vanity, virtue, and death. She praises virtue in 'Utekhi Dobrodeteli' (The Pleasures of Virtue),

43 Translation by Emily Lygo.

44 Pospelova 1798, 'Gimn Vsemogushchemu', pp. 27–37 (p. 35).

45 Translation by Emily Lygo.

longs for the hereafter in 'Oda dostoinstva smerti' (An Ode on the Worthiness of Death), and warns people about the transitoriness of life in 'Sebe Epitafia' (An Epitaph to Myself).⁴⁶ 'V moem sadike' (In My Little Garden) celebrates solitude and spiritual introspection, and refers to nature as the place where divine truth is revealed:

Там природы глас священный
мне ту истинну вещал:
что из смертных тот блаженный,
кто лишь сам себя познал.⁴⁷

*There, nature's sacred voice
Entrusted to me that truth:
That of all mortals he is blessed
Who only came to know himself.*⁴⁸

In 'Glas smertnago k Bogu' (The Voice of a Mortal to God), Turchaninova's lyrical persona associates images of paradise with professions of faith, just as Pospelova's has done:

Мысль когда к тебе стремится,
в сердце образ твой живет;
ничего дух не страшится,
Рай в душе моей цветет.⁴⁹

*When my thoughts turn to you,
Your image lives in my heart;
My spirit fears nothing on Earth,
Heaven blossoms in my soul.*⁵⁰

Pospelova's pastorals feature similar images. Here, however, the notion of paradise is associated to the shepherdess, whose image the shepherd carries in his soul. For women poets with religious inclinations, such as Turchaninova or Pospelova, perfection is personified either by God if the narrator is female, or by a woman if the narrator is male.

46 Anna Turchaninova: [Unpublished poems.] Russian National Library, Russkii rukopisnyi fond, Fond Derzhavina № 43, XXV, pp. 101–107. 'Utekhi Dobrodeteli', (f. 3). 'Oda dostoinstva smerti', (f. 3–4); 'Sebe Epitafia', (f. 5–6).

47 Turchaninova, 'V moem sadike', (f. 2).

48 Translation by Emily Lygo.

49 Turchaninova, 'Glas smertnago k Bogu', (f. 4).

50 Translation by Emily Lygo.

In presenting her female narrator as a mystic, Pospelova combines an element of irrationality with Sentimentalism's idealised conception of woman. The mystical female character's receptivity to the divine essence elevates her above common people. In keeping with Sentimentalist literary convention, she is also flawless and virtuous. As an article on Pospelova demonstrates, women writers often had to come to terms with other people's unflattering views of them. The reviewer reports that her talent aroused suspicions that she might be immoral, a monstrous abnormality.⁵¹ Are references to aspects of her image which emphasise her commitment to the Sentimentalist ideal of femininity Pospelova's attempt to avoid perceptions of women authors as repulsive aberrations of nature?

Writing as a spontaneous act

In her representation of the creative process in *The Best Hours of My Life*, the moment of inspiration and the time of writing are brought closely together. The prose poem, 'Razsuzhdenie' (Deliberation), for instance, opens as follows:

После прекраснаго дня наступила тихая ясная ночь. Все было тихо, все безмолвствовало, и Природа предалась уже приятному успокоению. Проводя сумерки в разговорах с друзьями милыми душе моей, оставила я их наслаждаться приятно-стями сна: но растроганное сердце мое, разсенные мысли мои не позволяли мне вкусить онаго.

After a beautiful day came a quiet and clear night. Everything was quiet, and nature gave in to pleasant calm. After spending the twilight in conversation with friends dear to my soul, I left them in order to enjoy the pleasures of sleep: but my heart that was so touched, my ranging thoughts did not permit me to taste them.

The lyrical persona then contemplates the night sky, which inspires her to reflections on human existence. These reflections constitute the main theme of the text, which concludes with a hint that she was recording her thoughts as soon as they occurred to her:

Но сон смыкает уже зеницы мои. Я ослабеваю, — перо упадет из рук моих.⁵²

*But sleep is already closing my eyes. I weaken—the pen falls from my hands.*⁵³

51 Mordovtsev, p. 41.

52 Pospelova 1798, 'Razsuzhdenie', pp. 63–72 (p. 63, p. 72).

53 Translation by Emily Lygo.

In other poems, such as 'A Morning Stroll' from *The Best Hours of My Life*, which renders the narrator's impressions, immediacy is evoked by terms which refer to the landscape around her (my italics):

*Везде слышимы хоры маленьких сладкогласных птичек. [...] Здесь видны гроты, коих никакое искусство человеческое произвести не может; тут на зеленой ветке розмарина с восхитительными трелями поет соловей весеннюю песню свою.*⁵⁴

*Everywhere can be heard the choirs of little sweet-songed birds [...] Here you can see caves who could not have been produced by any human art; there on a green branch of rosemary a nightingale sits and sings, with wondrous trills, its springtime song.*⁵⁵

The narrator stands in a landscape described as an earthly paradise; most verbs are in the present tense, which is typical both of references to paradise and of panegyric odes, which tend to associate the tsar and tsarina to God or an angel. Elegies, on the other hand, which recall moments of the past, are in the past tense. By presenting nature as a Garden of Eden and the narrator as its interpreter, Pospelova responds to the cultural discourse of her time. As Karamzin maintained in his essay, 'What Does an Author Need?', a poet should have a sensitive heart. He also demands harmony between the poet and his inspiring environment. Pospelova's female lyrical personae display just these features; moreover, they endorse the Sentimentalist conception of woman as a being more akin to nature than culture. Since Creation is inherently good and a poet receptive to Creation, the notion of goodness transfers to the poet. Pospelova's narrator is an artless, pious, and virtuous woman who records anything her attentive eye discerns. The creation of literature is described as a spontaneous act. Rather than a combination of inspiration and craft, it is a 'splurge of emotions', to use Matt Barnard's expression.⁵⁶

Pospelova's attitude stands in opposition to the Classicist view of the artistic process, which Nicholas Boileau defined as a time-consuming, careful, and often tedious activity, and which he summarised in his advice to the poet to carefully 'polish' his verse.⁵⁷ In Sentimentalism, the conception of writing as a spontaneous

54 Pospelova 1798, 'Utrenniaia progulka', pp. 75–83 (p. 75, pp. 77–78).

55 Translation by Emily Lygo.

56 Matt Barnard: "Splurge of Emotion" or a Combination of Inspiration and Craft? Poetry's Great Debate and the Lessons of Rhyme and Reason', *The Times* 9 Sept. 1999, p. 41.

57 'Polissez-le sans cesse et le repolissez'. Nicolas Boileau: *Satires, Épitres, Art poétique*. Collinet, Jean-Pierre (ed.): Gallimard: Paris 1985, p. 231.

In English: 'Polish, repolish, every Colour lay', see Nicolas Boileau: *The Art of Poetry*. Soames, William (transl.): Bentley and Magnés: London 1683, p. 11.

act was highly esteemed because it was believed to document innate human goodness. Contrary to Enlightenment discourse and its more pessimistic conception of the human character, Sentimentalism emphasised the potential of revealing and reverting to humanity's prelapsarian goodness. Due to their close association with nature, women were thought to be particularly able to manifest innate goodness; their alleged estrangement from civilisation made them the ideal medium for a poetic interpretation of Creation. In the Sentimentalist myth of artistic creation, the poetic work is naturally perfect; no editing and shaping—'polishing'—is required to enhance its quality.

Pospelova's statements about the spontaneous creation of poetry may not have borne much resemblance to her actual writing practice, but were more likely her way of justifying her writerly activity. As mentioned in my biographical overview, both her brothers and sisters and, at a later stage, her mentors advised her on her literary endeavours—a far remove from the image of a girl abandoned in nature suggested here.

In the preface to *Some Traits of Nature and Truth*, however, she also refers to her alleged closeness to nature as an explanation of why she became a writer. This preface is longer than that of her first collection, *The Best Hours of My Life*, which she wrote mainly to attract the patronage of Elizaveta Alexeevna, Alexander I's wife, to whom it is dedicated. As has been mentioned, the 1801 preface is dedicated more broadly to 'noble and sensitive souls', of whom she asks forgiveness for any shortcomings they may find in her work, declaring that their benevolence is the only reward she is seeking from the publication. These concluding remarks, relatively short in comparison to the remainder of the introduction, are her way of meeting the requirements of modesty expected of Sentimentalist women poets. The main part of the introduction tells the reader about her poor childhood, despite which she is eager to acquire knowledge. She further stresses that the careful observation of nature has helped her to educate her mind, an ability which distinguished her from other children. She also claims to have been spiritually illuminated by nature:

Природа одарила меня чувствительностью, образовала разум мой способным к размышлениям. Святая истинна озарила его небесным лучем своим. Бедной ребенок, возрастающий в углу маленького домика, забвенной счастьем, не забыт оними. Кипящее желание к познанию воспламеняло дух мой. Внимание к трогательным красотам природы отличило меня от детей обыкновенных.

Nature has given me sensitivity, made my intellect capable of reflection. Holy truth has enlightened it with its heavenly ray. A poor child, growing up in the corner of a small cottage, forgotten by happiness, was not forgotten by them. A burning desire for knowledge enflamed my soul. Attention to the touching beautiful details of nature set me apart from ordinary children.

Next she refers to the contemplations of nature described in her first collection of poems, *The Best Hours of My Life*, before introducing her reflections on questions of morals and virtue which she intends to present in *Some Traits of Nature and Truth*. Again, she expresses regret that she was not given a more thorough education:

Между тем любимая природою и ненавидимая счастьем, я плакала,
грустила, и унывала от того, что способы к просвещению были отняты от меня, и
что лучшие способности мои должны были оставаться усыпленными.⁵⁸

*Meanwhile beloved of nature and spurned by happiness, I wept, grieved and was miserable because the paths to enlightenment were taken from me, and my best qualities were destined to remain dormant.*⁵⁹

Pospelova here declares that self-knowledge is the most precious kind of science, and that she writes chiefly to celebrate nature and virtue. She is probably making a virtue out of necessity in declaring that her writing of poetry is simply inspired by nature and therefore artless—it is a way of not appearing self-important. Her preface makes it clear that Pospelova was very eager to acquire knowledge but may not have had sufficient means to do so. Another explanation is that it was unseemly in a woman to openly admit her interest in learning and study, which may be why she played it down.

The shepherd's torments

As mentioned before, Pospelova's female lyrical personae are always in harmony—and therefore happy—with nature's paradise. This contrasts with Anna Bunina's poetry, in which a woman's feelings sometimes fall far short of flourishing nature. On the other hand, when Pospelova addresses emotional grief, she uses a male narrator, for example in most of her pastorals, where the rejected shepherd's feelings clash with the idyllic nature of a *locus amoenus*. Pospelova imitates the pastoral's traditional gender pattern, according to which an unhappy shepherd laments his beloved's absence. Both collections, *The Best Hours of My Life* as well as *Some Traits of Nature and Truth*, feature some poems where a male narrator expresses his grief at being separated from his beloved, 'Ekloga' (Eclogue), for instance, in the former, and 'Golos liubvi' (The Voice of Love) and 'Voskhishchenie vliublennago'

58 Pospelova 1801, 'Liubeznaia dobrodetel'! Milaia chuvstvitel'nost'! [n.p.].

59 Translation by Emily Lygo.

(Admiration of One in Love) in the latter.⁶⁰ Probably due to the pastoral being a lighter genre, they tend to be placed at the end. In contrast, Pospelova tended to place panegyric odes, religious and philosophical reflections at the beginning of her works. In her poem 'Eclogue' from *The Best Hours of My Life*, the shepherd's emotional torments render him blind to his idyllic environment even though nature presents itself in its most appealing guise of a magnificent morning in spring. The star-crossed lover only sees an ugly world. He neglects his flock of sheep, no longer cultivates his garden, and begins to long for death. Only when his beloved has returned does he rediscover happiness and harmony with his spring-like environment. As occurs frequently in pastorals, the beloved shepherdess has only feigned coldness to test the truth of his feelings, thus displaying her virtue.

'The Voice of Love' is a further illustration of woman's function in the pastoral to instil happiness in the shepherd. A single glance of his beloved is enough to fill his heart with joy, and to be loved by the woman he adores is a feeling he compares to paradise:

Милой, милой быть любимым,
Это в жизни сущий рай.⁶¹

*By my dear, my dear, to be loved
Is heaven on earth.*⁶²

To the male narrator of the poem 'Admiration of One in Love' from *Some Traits of Nature and Truth*, it is the presence of his beloved Tashin'ka which restores nature to a state of blossoming growth, just as Persephone's reappearance revived spring:

Вся природа предо мною
Вид прелестной приняла;
Она Ташинька тобою
Оживилась, расцвела.⁶³

*All nature before me
Has taken on a wondrous aspect;
Tashin'ka, you have made her
Come to life, and blossom.*⁶⁴

60 Pospelova 1798, 'Ekloga', pp. 94–102; Pospelova 1801, 'Golos liubvi', pp. 198–200; 'Voskhishchenie vliublennago', pp. 196–198.

61 Pospelova 1801, 'Golos liubvi', pp. 198–200 (p. 200).

62 Translation by Emily Lygo.

63 Pospelova 1801, 'Voskhishchenie vliublennago', pp. 196–198 (p. 197).

64 Translation by Emily Lygo.

In her role as mediator between heaven and earth, the shepherdess in Pospelova's work is assigned the task of transferring a glimpse of eternal light to man: the narrator exclaims that even when the sun does not shine, Tashin 'ka's presence illuminates darkness for him.

Pospelova's interpretation of the pastoral also merges concepts of nature and youth. This is illustrated in the poem 'Svirel' (The Pipe) from *Some Traits of Nature and Truth*, again written from a shepherd's point of view. He describes his idyllic environment, singing the praise of his beloved Klarisa. In his description of the landscape, young girls and boys literally blossom like flowers:

Пастушки миляя цветите,
Цветите юны пастушки;
Сердца любовью живите,
Как солнца луч живит цветки!⁶⁵

*Blossom, gentle shepherdesses,
Young shepherd boys, blossom;
Bring your hearts to life with love
As sunlight brings to life flowers!*⁶⁶

In this world of everlasting spring, youth, and happiness, woman never experiences disappointment in love, and her feelings for her beloved shepherd are pure and absolute.⁶⁷ In poems which celebrate Creation, the landscape never contrasts the feelings of the female narrator. In the poem 'Spring' from *The Best Hours of My Life*, which describes a stroll in an idyllic landscape, the female lyrical persona recognises the reflection of paradise in nature whenever she turns her gaze to it, and this insight fills her with happiness.⁶⁸ Women live in an ideal and idyllic world of innocent happiness and peace, where disharmony and conflict are non-existent; neither envy, nor mockery, nor artificial behaviour is known among them, as the poem 'Večernee razmyshlenie' (Evening Reflection), from *The Best Hours of My Life* suggests.⁶⁹

Although feelings of shared love are the source of happiness, they cannot protect humans from the blows of Fate, as the example of Doris and Tsintsia in 'Nepostoianstvo shchastii' (The Inconstancy of Happiness), probably inspired by Gessner, from *The Best Hours of My Life* demonstrates. The couple dies in a

65 Pospelova 1801, 'Svirel', pp. 85–91 (p. 89).

66 Translation by Emily Lygo.

67 Pospelova 1798, 'Večer liubvi', pp. 117–119.

68 Pospelova 1798, 'Vesna', pp. 112–116.

69 Pospelova 1798, 'Večernee razmyshlenie', pp. 84–93 (pp. 91–92).

storm on a journey that should have taken them to a new land.⁷⁰ The poem is a reminder that true happiness is not to be found on this earth, but awaits the virtuous and pious only in the hereafter.

Gothic imagery

The image of woman as an angelic creature is particularly evident in those poems by Pospelova that exhibit features of otherworldliness and Gothic elements. Pospelova uses the fundamental elements of pastoral literature as a framework, but combines them with Gothic imagery in order to evoke the bleak mental disposition which seizes the man who grieves the absence of his beloved. The Gothic elements thus illustrate the mental hell he traverses.

The collection *The Best Hours of My Life* includes two poems which feature Gothic imagery and elements of otherworldliness. In 'Zhaloba neshchastnago liubovnika' (Complaint of an Unhappy Lover) and in 'Stenanie pri grobe druga' (Grief at the Grave of a Friend), the male narrator refers to Gothic imagery and elements of otherworldliness in order to express his grief about the separation from a beloved person.⁷¹ Perhaps these poems are placed in the second half of the collection because they address the topic of love, which was considered to be a lighter genre, in contrast to the panegyric poems, which are placed at the beginning of the collection.

'Complaint of an Unhappy Lover' illustrates how the individual with whom the narrator is in love often has features of otherworldliness. The male narrator longs for death after having lost his beloved. While being tormented by his death wishes he suddenly has a vision in which he recognises the girl he loved. She has the appearance of an angel, and is the image of virtue and innocent charm. When the apparition of the woman with the otherworldly features disappears, the man's wish for his own death grows even stronger, and he wants to join his beloved in the hereafter.⁷²

Otherworldliness and Gothic imagery also help to create the gloomy ambiance in the poem 'Grief at the Grave of a Friend'. In this poem Doris is grieving over the death of his friend Aris, and during a sleepless and moonlit night he visits the grave where his friend is buried. Leaning over the cold marble of the tombstone

70 Pospelova 1798, 'Nepostoianstvo shchastiia', pp. 129–139;

Gessner 1988, 'Mirtil. Thyrsis', pp. 43–44; 'Der Sturm', pp. 126–128.

71 Pospelova 1798, 'Zhaloba neshchastnago liubovnika', pp. 103–111; 'Stenanie pri grobe druga', pp. 120–128.

72 Pospelova 1798, 'Zhaloba neshchastnago liubovnika', pp. 103–111.

he remembers how his friend had a foreboding of his own death: he had heard the voice of an angel telling him that paradise lived in the heart of the virtuous.⁷³ This poem is the only instance where paradise and virtue are symbolized not by a woman, but by a man. A precondition for this function is that he appears as a virtuous, mysterious, and supernatural being, like the women in Pospelova's other poems.

Two pastorals in Pospelova's *Some Traits of Nature and Truth*, 'Nichto ne mozhet uteshat' v razluge s miloiu' (Nothing Can Comfort Me When I'm Parted from My Beloved) and 'Pechal' ili priblizhenie zimy' (Sorrow, or the Coming of Winter), feature Gothic imagery but do not include any elements of otherworldliness. In each of these an unhappy shepherd grieves over the absence of his beloved woman. The Gothic imagery used to depict nature reflects his state of mind. In 'Nothing Can Comfort Me When I'm Parted from My Beloved', the sorrowful shepherd wanders the earth, revisiting all the places where he shared happy moments with his beloved (my italics):

Там с ревом водопад шумящий
С скалы серебристы воды льет:
Здесь тихо ручеек журчащий
По бархатным лугам течет,
Цветы, кусточки орошает
Кристаллом чистых вод своих,
Или серебристыми играет
Струями на песках золотых.
Там мрачной бор вдали чернеет
На диком бреге шумных вод;
А здесь приятно зеленеет
Из ветвей соплетенный свод.
Там сосны, дубы возвышают
Свои вершины к облакам,
Вкруг черны тени простирают;
А здесь прелестной вид глазам
Лужок зеленой представляет
Своей приятной пестротой.⁷⁴

There roars a waterfall noisily
As its silver waters pour from a cliff:
Here a brook gurgles quietly
As it flows over velvet meadows,

73 Pospelova 1798, 'Stenanie pri grobe druga', pp. 120–128.

74 Pospelova 1801, 'Nichto ne mozhet uteshat' v razluge s miloiu', pp. 130–138 (pp. 131–132).

*It scatters all the flowers and bushes
 With crystals of its waters pure,
 And then it sends out streams of silver
 That play upon the golden sand.
 There a far-off gloomy wood's
 On wild banks of noisy waters;
 But here it's green and pleasant to be
 Beneath an arch of twining branches.
 There the pines and oaks raise up
 Their treetops to the clouds above,
 And round about them stretch out shadows;
 But what a wondrous sight is here
 Presented by a lush green meadow
 With its pleasing dappled colours.⁷⁵*

The shepherd goes to the blooming meadows, to a little brook with crystal waters and to a grove. Each one of these manifestations of a *locus amoenus* is compared to that of a *locus terribilis*, a dark and barren place. Romantic and Gothic features appear in the guise of roaring waterfalls tumbling from cliffs, dark coniferous forests on the shores of thunderous waters, pine and oak trees whose tops are so high that they touch the clouds and cast dark shadows on the ground. Such references to a *locus terribilis* depict the bleak state of mind into which the separation from his beloved has thrown the shepherd. The dichotomy is emphasised by the syntactic structure of this section. The adverb *zdes'* (here) introduces descriptions of the *locus amoenus*, whereas lines which portray the *locus terribilis* begin with *tam* (there). Just as in other poems which include imagery associated with the paradise myth, these opposing pairs of adverbs are indicators of the two contrasting worlds of paradise and hell.⁷⁶

The poem 'Sorrow, or the Coming of Winter' also describes a gloomy Gothic landscape. The *locus terribilis* stands for the male narrator's state of mind. The *locus terribilis* also foreshadows the barren state of nature that the winter season brings:

В какой природа дикой мрачной,
 Угрюмой облеклася вид!
 Нет прелестей в долине злачной.
 Борей свирепствует, шумит;—

75 Translation by Emily Lygo.

76 Stephen Lessing Baehr: *The Paradise Myth in Eighteenth-Century Russia. Utopian Patterns in Early Secular Russian Literature and Culture*. Stanford University Press: Stanford CA 1991, p. 8.

*What a wild and gloomy, sullen
Look has nature taken on!
No beauty in this luscious valley.
The North Wind is raging noisily;—*

Nature acts as a mirror for the desolate state of mind into which the beloved girl's absence casts the male narrator. Just as in the classical myth Persephone's descent into the dark underworld provokes the arrival of cold and inhospitable winter, the parting from Lizeta prevents our shepherd from finding heaven on earth again. Her absence causes him to long for death:

Тоскою грудь моя стесненна
И хлад разлит в крови моей.
Душа страдает возмущенна,
Уж радости нет места в ней.⁷⁷

*Sadness weighs heavily on my breast
And cold is poured into my blood.
My soul is suffering, tormented,
Has no place now for any joy.⁷⁸*

However, in the shepherd's soul, the image of his beloved Lizeta continues to exist; her presence has the power to bring paradise into his soul, even in the midst of winter.

These poems further exemplify the strong association in the pastoral of heaven, woman and the paradisiacal nature of spring. Their absence, which is often associated with Gothic imagery, kindles the male narrator's creativity. Woman's purpose in the pastoral is to inspire the man; she is the object of his elegiac monologues. Since laments about the beloved's absence are expressed by a man, never by a woman, the pastoral instrumentalises and objectifies woman, suppressing her ability to articulate conflict.

Pastoral imagery in philosophical and religious reflections

In her philosophical and religious reflections, Pospelova employs metaphors of the *locus amoenus* and the *locus terribilis*, as well as Gothic imagery. These are the only instances where a female narrator addresses topics which deal with conflict and disharmony. Most of the reflections on existential fears and spiritual doubts can be found in *Some Traits of Nature and Truth*, where they constitute

77 Pospelova 1801, 'Pechal' ili priblizhenie zimy', pp. 179–185 (pp. 179–180).

78 Translation by Emily Lygo.

the main theme. In poems such as 'Chelovek' (A Person), 'Groza' (The Thunderstorm), 'Osen' (Autumn), or 'Iasnaia zimniaia noch' (A Clear Winter's Night), Pospelova employs the pastoral's contrasting metaphors, combining them with religious topics. She depicts the idyllic nature of spring when emphasising the strength of Christian belief, opposing this imagery to a gloomy landscape, reminiscent of the rejected shepherd's bleak state of mind, when musing on the absence of spiritual faith.⁷⁹ Often she adds Gothic elements to her depiction of the *locus terribilis*. The fundamental difference between her philosophical essays and her pastorals is therefore the choice of topic and the gender of the narrator: rather than expressing grief about the unattainability of a beloved person, Pospelova's female narrator voices her concerns about the lack of religious faith and virtues in her fellow men and women.

The philosophical thoughts articulated in the poem 'A Person' exemplify Pospelova's tendency to adapt pastoral metaphors to reflections on the human condition. Here the lyrical persona associates with a feeling of hope the soothing light of the sun as it reappears after dark clouds have passed. The scene includes the key elements of a *locus amoenus*: gentle and pleasant Zephyrs, trees turning green, lilies and roses beginning to blossom, water babbling in little brooks, the smiling Graces making an appearance, extending their hands—happiness and peace reign everywhere.

However, when hope is absent, the author draws a truly apocalyptic picture: gone is the nightingales' delightful song; gales, monsters and serpents are hissing, howling, moaning and whistling; the gaping maw of an abyss has replaced the delightful flower-strewn fields; anguish and despair reign; eyes throw venomous darts, a sickening stench rises from seething rivers of blood.⁸⁰ Nature no longer reflects paradise but has been transformed into a hellish vale of tears, as inhospitable a place as the *locus terribilis* in which the pastoral's afflicted shepherd finds himself.

In Pospelova's essay 'The Thunderstorm', the absence of a *locus amoenus* offers the narrator an opportunity to reflect on people's limited control of their lives. Pospelova describes the shift to a far-from-idyllic setting in great detail: the birds have fallen silent; cowed sheep no longer cavort cheerfully in green meadows; the lilies' heads are drooping. Instead, the wildness and unrest of an Ossianic landscape presents itself to the reader: black crows emit their strident croaks, dark clouds gather,

79 Pospelova 1801, 'Chelovek', pp. 104–114; 'Groza', pp. 190–196; 'Osen', pp. 70–84; 'Iasnaia zimniaia noch', pp. 150–160.

80 Pospelova 1801, 'Chelovek', pp. 104–114.

thunder and lightning approach, torrents of rain and hail batter the ground. The battle of the elements shows the vanity and insignificance of human existence. The text concludes with the narrator's moralising call to lead a pious and virtuous life.⁸¹ This is an impressive illustration of Pospelova's strategy of transferring *locus terribilis* imagery from a love-lyrical context to a moralistic-religious contemplation.

The idyllic setting of the *locus amoenus* also serves as a contrast in another of Pospelova's essays, 'Autumn'. The narrator describes her impressions of an autumnal landscape, contrasting it to the pleasant state of nature in spring and summer. The green of the meadows has turned a yellowy red, the flowers have gone, dry leaves are falling to the ground, the colourful butterflies have vanished, as have the little birds—everything is dismal and gloomy.⁸² The absence of spring imbues this narrator with melancholy, just as the pastoral's unhappy shepherd. By describing autumn rather than spring, the text avoids the Sentimentalist expectation placed on the female voice to symbolise paradise. Similarly, by presenting an unidyllic winter setting in 'A Clear Winter's Night', the female narrator does not need to launch into rapturous odes to Creation, but is allowed to express her true thoughts instead.⁸³

The female lyrical persona of Pospelova's philosophical reflections is not shown in an idyllic spring setting; in other words, she does not personify Creation. So, rather than serving as an immediate instrument for the glorification of a male Creator, she externalises the idyllic aspects of pastoral imagery, which she uses to illustrate her reflections. However, the traditional woman's role of embodying spiritual truth and flawless virtue eventually prevents her from finding answers which would transcend an excessively pious and moralising, one-dimensional view, thereby restoring the Sentimentalist idealisation of woman. Pospelova's female narrator experiences only fleeting unhappiness. While her insights into the ephemeral nature of human life and the moral imperfection of human nature might conjure up moments of depression, at the end of her philosophical reflections, her trust in the bliss awaiting the true believer in the afterlife always gains the upper hand. By employing a female narrative voice in her philosophical essays, Pospelova's final argument, therefore, always reasserts woman's embodiment of piety and religious faith.

The Sentimentalist idealisation of woman as an angelic, dispassionate, transcendental creature forced these stereotypes on religiously-inclined female authors,

81 Pospelova 1801, 'Groza', pp. 190–196.

82 Pospelova 1801, 'Osen', pp. 70–84.

83 Pospelova 1801, 'Iasnaia zimniaia noch', pp. 150–160.

leaving little room for deviation in their philosophical thoughts. While, in *The Best Hours of My Life*, Pospelova presents a mystic female narrator, the moralistic writings collected in *Some Traits of Nature and Truth* endow the narrator with saintly features. Pospelova's female protagonists adopt a behaviour which Iurii Lotman has described as 'sacrosanct' in reference to Anna Labzina.⁸⁴ In their writings both these women authors strive for saintly status, a position which, as Lotman argues, entails 'the sin of pride', i.e. the belief that they are entitled to judge other people's conduct. Many of Pospelova's essays contain strong warnings about the horrors which await unbelievers and the morally deficient after death. In 'A Morning Stroll', for example, she advises humans to lead a virtuous life so that they may arm themselves with a shield of patience.⁸⁵ The choice of word intensifies her warning's strongly moralising tone, since the shield (*shchit*), is a word associated with battle or war; the shield also occurs in the Bible, where it protects the virtuous and upright.⁸⁶ By lecturing others about their failure to adhere to social or religious rules, these female authors were able to subvert the Sentimentalist image of the mute, voiceless woman.

Summary

Chapter Four has argued that the image of woman as a pious virgin and innocent country maiden is deeply rooted in Sentimentalist culture, and is reproduced in the way many critics portray Pospelova, emphasising her young age, her early death and her provincial origins. It further demonstrated Pospelova's adoption of the Sentimentalist equation of woman with nature in order to legitimise her own status as a writer, presenting her female narrator as an interpreter of Creation in emulation of Karamzin's 'A Walk'. Since Sentimentalism considers woman to be flawless and closer to natural goodness, this role is easy for a woman writer to adopt as she creates her writerly self-image. Pospelova grasped the emergence of Gothic imagery, making use of the conceptualisation of women as saints or angelic otherworldly creatures to enhance women's symbolic value.

In contrast to Karamzin, some of whose male protagonists do not epitomise innate goodness, Pospelova's women are invariably in tune with nature. In her pastorals, only man expresses his emotions, venting his grief about the absence of his beloved in abundant lyrical monologues, while woman is the mute object

84 Iurii Lotman: *Russlands Adel. Eine Kulturgeschichte von Peter I. bis Nikolaus I.* Böhlau: Köln 1997, p. 335.

85 Pospelova 1798, 'Utrenniaia progulka', pp. 75–83 (p. 80).

86 Ephesians 6:13–23.

of his adoration. In her philosophical and religious reflections, Pospelova partly manages to revise this role, which impedes her ability to articulate conflict; she creates disharmony by contrasting the pastoral imagery of the *locus amoenus* to that of the *locus terribilis*, and by associating both with religious topics rather than the more traditional love context. However, her concluding calls of the female narrator to remain virtuous and faithful restore the Sentimentalist notion of woman as the bearer of moral integrity.