

Susan Ingram, *Zarathustra's Sisters: Women's Autobiography and the Shaping of Cultural History* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 197 pp.

What do Lou Andreas-Salomé, Simone de Beauvoir, Maitreyi Devi, Asja Lacis, Nadezhda Mandel'shtam, and Romonla Nijinsky have in common? They were all 'muses' of a twentieth-century male artist or intellectual – women whose association with an acknowledged genius significantly shaped their own autobiographical writings. This, at least, is Susan Ingram's contention in *Zarathustra's Sisters: Women's Autobiography and the Shaping of Cultural History* and apparently the main rationale for including such diverse individuals within the same analytical framework. In reading these women's 'life-writings', the author seeks to 'establish the modern, mythological parameters' operating in autobiographical writing and 'to determine how they work as ethics of personality' (p. 21). Highlighting their rejection of traditional morality and conscious search for a unique voice, she sees her subjects as 'important precursors of a movement in the academy that has been considered postmodern' (p. 22). What in these women's lives, we may legitimately ask, leads her to this startling and certainly not immediately obvious conclusion? In other words, how did Ingram's 'Zarathustrian' women earn this distinctive designation?

The author appropriately begins by quoting an excerpt from *Thus Spake Zarathustra* that introduces the reader to her key premise, namely the intellectually fertile companionship these six women experienced in the course of their lives: 'Companions the creator seeks, not corpses, not herds, not believers' (p. 3). In six brief chapters the author offers a fascinating glimpse into her protagonists' complex personalities and lives. Of all of her subjects, the one that has undoubtedly attained the greatest prominence in her own right is the French feminist philosopher and novelist Simone de Beauvoir who also happened to be Jean-Paul Sartre's lover. According to Ingram, de Beauvoir needed Sartre in order to recreate her literary self as part of a unique partnership: 'her story required a hero, not one who would insist upon her doing the cooking and the housework, but rather one who would respect her independence and encourage her to be his equal partner' (p. 57). What Ingram is trying to show is that women like de Beauvoir and Lou Andreas-Salomé, Nietzsche's one-time friend and only female member in Freud's

psychoanalytical Wednesday society, endeavored to live their lives as works of art. In Nadezhda Mandel'shtam's case, this work of art centered on the life of her husband, the Acmeist poet Osip Mandel'shtam who disappeared in Stalin's gulag and whose legend his widow consciously and heroically strove to erect and maintain.

In marked contrast to the burgeoning scholarship on Andreas-Salomé, Mandel'shtam, and particularly de Beauvoir, the academy has so far neglected the lives of the three remaining women discussed in *Zarathustra's Sisters*. It is precisely their rescue from historical oblivion that constitutes the book's main strength. Who other than an expert on the influential religious scholar Mircea Eliade would have known that as a young student in India Eliade fell passionately in love with his teacher's daughter whom he later immortalized without her knowledge in a novel aptly titled *Maitreyi*? Who other than a ballet aficionado would have been aware of the existence of Vaslav Nijinsky's Hungarian wife Romola who attempted to write her husband, the celebrated dancer of Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*, into mythology? Like Mandel'shtam who devoted the better part of her life to the preservation of her husband's literary fame, Nijinsky's efforts to forge a male legend paradoxically also served to create her distinct self as a wife and heroic companion of a suffering genius, at least in Ingram's reading. Asja Lacis, a Latvian-born communist, theatre activist, and friend of the German writer Walter Benjamin (hence her inclusion in this volume), has been equally forgotten by history.

To a feminist reader there is something disconcerting, even disturbing in the fact that female subjects should be analyzed primarily on the grounds of their association with a man. While these women's close relations with a famous male artist or intellectual undoubtedly played an important role in their personal lives, the author's singling out of this particular aspect of their life-experience proves unnecessarily reductive. Does it really make sense to view these six women as mere 'sisters' of a (male) literary creation (and self-avowed 'creator')? Why not as creators in their own right? Though Ingram chooses to emphasize the 'relationality of subjectivity', this concept, though certainly valuable, lacks the analytical power to render her account sufficiently coherent and convincing. Moreover, her excessive reliance on scholarly jargon and technical vocabulary does not render an argument that is already difficult to grasp any more lucid. Take this choice example: 'Targeting the potentiality and slipperiness of the Munchhausen-esque proclivities residing in the Zarathustrian

spirit of these autobiographical texts will prove to be the study's coup de grâce' (p. 128). Whatever may have united Andreas-Salomé, de Beauvoir, Devi, Lacia, Mandel'shtam, and Nijinsky – the fact that they were postmodernist trailblazers whose life-story was inextricably bound up with the life of a male companion – surely pales in significance when compared to the manifold differences of cultural background, temperament, and aspirations that characterized the lives of these six extraordinary women who deserve to be known in their own right and on their own terms.

Susanne Hillman
University of California San Diego

Margarita Balmaceda, James Clem and Lisbeth Tarlow (eds.), *Independent Belarus: Domestic Determinants, Regional Dynamics, and Implications for the West*, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2002, 483 pages.

Belarus had an election on 19 March 2006. As predicted, Alyaksandr Lukashenka was re-elected for a third term with 82.6 of the popular vote, even though a third term was not supported by the Belarus constitution. The electoral results (subsequently questioned by the United States and the European Union, but tacitly supported by Russia) have been dismissed by the small Belarusian oppositional movement as an unconstitutional seizure of power. At the behest of opposition leader and presidential candidate, Alyaksandr Milinkevich, ten thousand people initially gathered in Minsk in protest. While this prompted fleeting hopes for the opposition's claim to a nascent 'denim revolution' in Belarus, the protest was ultimately unsuccessful as group numbers dwindled with the onset of a driving snow storm and the (admittedly delayed) arrest of key protestors.

Belarus is distinguished as one of the only former Soviet republics to resist moves toward democratisation and market reform in 1991 following the collapse of the former Soviet Union, and more recently in reaction to the Rose Revolution of 2003 Georgia and the Orange Revolution of 2004 in Ukraine. *Independent Belarus*, edited by Margarita Balmaceda, James Clem and Lisbeth Tarlow, explores this recalcitrant country according to five perspectives: domestic politics, the Belarusian economy, the relationship between Belarus and Russia, the relationship between Belarus and its European neighbours, and