



The Route to Transnational Womanliness in Nina Berberova's *The Italics are Mine* (1969)

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The Italics are Mine is not only an account of Berberova's memories of her emigration from Russia through western Europe to the US. It is a narrative experiment which deconstructs social and literary conventions by using different narrative forms (see Russo 2020, 27; see also Todorov 1981, 95-6). The writer includes letters, essays, poems, and lists, so as to trace her past, as well as to relocate her self in western Europe first, and in North America later.

This study will dwell on Berberova's emigration to western Europe and to the US and, in particular, on her memoirs of her journeys to the southern regions of the US. In her descriptions of southern lands of the US, she tends to show little reticence about her sexual orientations (see Peterson 2001, 503). By considering de Beauvoir's remarks (1997, 20-34) on unequal relationships between men and women, and Kristeva's theories (1994, 183-4) on the alienation of the self, this work aims to analyse Berberova's physical and metaphorical transnational travelling (see Cronin 2009, 9; see Zaccaria 2017, 32-8), which leads her to look into her inner world and to re-explore her sexuality.

Finally, the paper will centre on the unpublished sequel to Berberova's biography, "Deathbed Dialogues," in order to give insight into the writer's depiction of her achieved womanliness, of what being a woman means. It will delve into Berberova's transcultural passage to her North American identity (see Kalb 2001, 141-46), bringing to light her subversive attitude and her sexual orientation.

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***The Italics are Mine*: narrative structure**

In light of the recent political and geopolitical changes, the upsurge of interest in the translingual literature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has been remarkable over the last few years. The narratives written by migrant writers often mirror the trials and tribulations they grappled with during their migration. Such works dwell on the intersection between self and textuality and, accordingly, they centre on the splitting of the self, on the relationship between the living self and the writing self, between the present and the writer's memories. As criticism has often pointed out (see Wilson 2009, 186; see Connolly 1993, 39-41), transnational writers explore their inner worlds and self-translate the events of their own lives in their autobiographical texts. Not only do they reconstruct the geographies of their routes, but they also self-translate their linguistic itineraries and their memories, by intertwining their source languages and their target languages. As a result, the most common issues they deal with are dislocation, uprootedness, homelessness, emigration, in-betweenness, bilingualism (see Phillips 2006, 133). Writing about oneself means discovering one's own identity and looking into the past from the perspective of the present. It leads to "creative distancing," which allows the writer to analyse their own lives from different space-time angles. An autobiography is the result of an in-depth analysis of past events, which the writer examines with the objectivity of "time distancing," by adopting the impartial look of those who travel across diverse cultural environments (see Wilson 2009, 186-7; and Serafin 2008, 9-10).

In this article I mean to analyse a twentieth-century Russian-American writer, who emigrated from Russia to the US. Born in Saint Petersburg in 1901, Nina Berberova left for Berlin in 1922 and then moved to Paris in 1924, before settling in the US in 1950. The reason why I have chosen Berberova is linked to the historical background of her emigration, the interwar period and the Cold War, which caused many Russian intellectuals to leave for western Europe and the US. Unlike Nabokov and Brodsky, who paved the way for Russian-American translingualism, Berberova dwells, in her autobiography, *The Italics are Mine*, on further elements connected with her emigration, like the condition of migrant women, gender roles, sexual identity and the discoveries generated by uprootedness and homelessness in the vast North American spaces. The autobiography led her to a complex process of self-discovery and to unearth some unconventional and dissident aspects of her inner world.¹ At the beginning of her autobiography, she writes the following words to zero in on the apparent solipsistic dimension of her account:

I WOULD LIKE TO WARN THE READER: THIS BOOK is about myself, [...]; an autobiography, [...]. It is the story of my life, and in it I loosely follow the chronological order of events and uncover my life's meaning. My mind lives in the past as memory and in the present as my awareness of myself in time. (Berberova 1993, 3)²

¹ *The Italics are Mine* was translated from Russian and published in the United States in 1969. The work was first written in Russian and titled *Kursiv Moi* (see Barker 1994, 554). The Russian edition was published in 1972 and revised in 1983 (see Berberova 1993, iv).

² All quotations from *The Italics are Mine* will refer to the edition listed in the bibliography. Page numbers are given parenthetically in the text. Capitals and italics are in the text.

Like previous translingual autobiographies, which contain flashbacks, repetitions, and flashforwards, and often mingle memories in the whirlpool of the past, *The Italics are Mine* is a linear description of the writer's emigration from Russia to the US through western Europe, although Berberova often conjures up, in the last part of her autobiography, some memories which she refers to in the first section of the work. The evocation of the past occurs through the employment of different narrative forms, like letters, poems, essays, lists, in order to make her autobiography a multi-perspective work, tracing the stages of her emigration by means of heterogeneous narrative languages (see Russo 2020, 54-8).³ The writer's recollections often take her back to her literary activities in Berlin and in Paris.

Berberova recalls her days in Russia by quoting verses written by her friends and poets of her time, like the ones about freedom, composed by her classmate, Natasha Shklovskaya, in Saint Petersburg: "Ah, if only I could fly / From the earth into the sky / And forget those chains of lead / That my liberty impede. / Live in freedom, sorrowless, / Sing my song in happiness" (57). The autobiography is also interspersed with notes about her meetings with poets and intellectuals during her stay in western Europe. In particular, she quotes the calendar of her meetings with Nabokov in Germany: "Before me lies my calendar of the year 1932: / October 22. Nabokov, in *Lat. News*, with him in a café. / October 23. Nabokov. At Khodasevich's, then at Aldanov's. / October 25. Nabokov. At Struve's lecture, then in the Café Danton. [...]" (311-12). Letters to and from intellectuals are frequent; the letter which is worth mentioning is the one titled "TO THE WRITERS OF THE WORLD" (228), written by a group of Russian writers to express their concerns about their living conditions. They strongly criticise the Soviet Regime on account of its censorship and strict control of the intellectuals' activities. In particular, the final part of the letter reads as follows:

We are personally doomed. [...] As from a dungeon we send you this letter. We write it at great risk, at risk of death it is sent to you abroad. We do not know if it will reach the pages of the free press. But if it does, if our voice from beyond the grave rings out among you, we beseech you: Listen, understand, think it over. (231)

A long diary, "The Black Notebook," contains Berberova's memories of World War II, and the final section, "WHO IS WHO" (533), is a biographical list of the names of the people she mentions in the autobiography, which provides Berberova's opinions about them as well. She considers Nabokov, for instance, "The greatest writer in the Russian language of this century, and one of the greatest contemporary writers in any language" (567). Needless to say, Nabokov was Berberova's model and an example of perfect bilingualism. The use of multiple narrative forms provides the autobiography with documents and sources, which make it both a travel narrative and a historical document. In addition to being a personal account of her route to the West, *The Italics are Mine*, therefore, reveals information about the events which influenced

³ In this regard, Fraser writes that "THE ITALICS ARE MINE is a compendious, digressive book more than five hundred pages long. It is like an émigré's travel trunk, fitted with mirrored compartments and secret drawers and stuffed with all sorts of memorabilia and written forms. Among them are: (a) Lists, [...]. (b) Scraps and jottings, [...]. (c) Letters, [...]. (d) Philosophical digressions and meditations. (e) Accounts of Nina's dreams, [...]. (f) Stories of real people's lives [...]. (g) Chunks of quotation from the prose and verse of Russian and European authors. (h) Literary essays and reviews. (i) Two sections of intimate journal [...]. (j) Confessions. (k) Veils. Palpable omissions. Pockets of air. Silences" (1996, 45-6; capitals in the text).

the geopolitical situation in western Europe. The voices and the narrative and poetic forms from Berberova's contemporary émigrés in the work represent her collective experience, as well as her pursuit of her self, whose identity is contaminated by the influence of various cultures and social milieus. Thus, Berberova includes different texts in her autobiography with the purpose of highlighting the "choral" experience of Russian émigrés, to recall Bakhtin's theory about intertextuality and dialogism. As is known, among its multiple overtones, intertextuality entails a connection between texts, and a dialogic relationship between people, places, facts and literary expressions. The combination of multiple literary expressions in the autobiography brings to the fore the problems which groups of literati and intellectuals had to deal with. The intertextual dialogue in the autobiography evokes, therefore, heterogeneous voices and points of view (see also Todorov 1981, 95-9).

Unlike her Russian-American predecessors, like the aforementioned Cournos, Nabokov, and Brodsky, Berberova quotes texts of different literary forms to conjure up the events of her emigration from an exotopic angle, to use Todorov's hermeneutic approach (1981, 95-9). The most famous Russian-American émigrés, for example, describe their emigrations from a subjective stance; they dwell, in their autobiographies, on other migrants' memories too, but they do so through the filters of their individual points of view. Nabokov's *Speak, Memory. An Autobiography Revisited* (1966) brings back the stages of the writer's emigration throughout western Europe, but does not follow a chronological order, in that the writer often diverts the reader's attention to his thoughts about life, and to his frequent metalinguistic remarks on his source language and his target language(s). As a result, his work is mainly permeated by his solipsism and by the steady presence of his self, which filters his impressions from the outer world. Cournos describes his itinerary from Russia to North America through Europe, and then back to Russia, by including, in *Autobiography* (1935), a chronological and linear description of the geographical spaces he travelled through. Although Cournos sometimes quotes passages from famous poets and writers, he maintains a subjective perspective and employs, like Nabokov, such literary fragments for linguistic purposes, to carry out the linguistic analysis of his childhood languages and of his target language. Brodsky's essays collected in *Less than One* (1986) and in *On Grief and Reason* (1995) focus on the writer's philosophical considerations on exile and emigration, and are permeated by solipsistic overtones. Berberova's predecessors do not frequently comprise in their works other voices, or, sometimes, they do so in order to draw linguistic comparisons.

Berberova does not avoid focusing on her self and on her identity, but she quotes, at the same time, different texts with the purpose of analysing her experience, by combining both her stance and other émigrés' points of view. The inclusion of such texts is the means she uses to *seam* voices, as she often writes, and to make an in-depth exploration of her own world and of her condition of exiled woman (see Kalb 2001, 149). She includes writings and experiences to recall her hardships, and to trace the stages of her linguistic and cultural route. Therefore, the quotations from other émigrés' texts, such as the aforementioned letter to the writers of the world, characterise the exotopic views, i.e. the descriptions of the writer's world through the different views of *others*, from her contemporary émigrés' angles. Such émigrés could perceive Berberova's experience well, since they underwent the same hardships (see Kalb 2001, 151). By comparing sources and experiences, the writer aims to re-locate her self in Europe and in the US, and to provide a new representation of migrant

women. What makes this autobiography stand out is, among other things, the fact that it mirrors Berberova's thoughts and position, which, at the same time, do not overlook what being a woman means for a Russian émigré like her. As I will explain further in the article, this writer shows unusual determination to change the role of women during the difficult route to America.

Travelling and deconstructing boundaries

Among the sections of the long autobiography which depict Berberova's emigration throughout Europe and then to North America, I mean to focus on the pages about her journey to the US and, in particular, to the southern areas of the US. Starting from the principle that, to concur with Cronin, "[t]ravelling to another country with a different language makes exoticism readily identifiable" (2000, 9), the North American itinerary led the writer along some southern states of the US, whose exotic-like atmosphere re-shaped her world in terms of linguistic and sexual identity. Her departure for the US is described in the final chapter titled "Not Waiting for Godot" (see Antonucci 2004, 45). Before investigating the North American journey, as well as the deconstruction and the subversion of western cultural values, it is worth wondering what makes the North American itinerary stand out in *The Italics are Mine*. Towards the end of her autobiography, Berberova decides to leave Paris for the US, showing her courage as a woman moving overseas, unlike other European migrants who, having decided to remain in Paris, were unable to change their lives, thus recalling the two protagonists of Becket's work, Vladimir and Estragon. In particular, Berberova mentions four causes which prompted her to go away: solitude, her "[...] inability [...] of making ends meet in Paris" (477), her divorce from her second husband and the lack of "intellectual nourishment" (478). Although the emigration to western Europe marked a breakthrough towards achieving her emancipation and her literary ambitions, Berberova realised that her freedom had not been completely attained yet. She spent time with many Russian intellectuals in New York, where her expectations were partially met. However, her horizons broadened in the southern states of the US, where she "[...] was struck by the immensity and emptiness of space" (509). Berberova's frequent descriptions of wide North American spaces start from the northern and central states of the US, from Washington to Colorado:

I saw space and emptiness in all their power when, as if on a straight line drawn with a ruler, I left Washington for Colorado, driving through the green hills of Maryland, through the wheat fields of Kansas. "Kansas is boring", I was warned. "You drive straight for six hours and it's always the same". For six and a half hours in Kansas there was a sky like nothing I had ever seen: it took up all the visible space, while the earth was just a thin crust, its weak support, a completely two-dimensional flatness without thickness. (511)

Along her route through the US, Berberova sees different landscapes and climates and, impressed by the vastness of the New World, is aware that her European status of exiled woman is blurred by the North American culture. The arrival in the US marks the end of her European phase. Crossing the North American borders means losing her European identity or, better, her western European identity; it leads to further hybridisation, linguistic loss, a feeling of being adrift and the need to re-discuss her inner world. In light of Enevold's analysis of travelling women writers, a woman's escape (an escape overseas in *The Italics are Mine*) is actually "[...] an escape from

patriarchal values and boundaries" (2004, 77). The emigration to the US represents Berberova's attempt to sever her links with a male-oriented world, which conditioned her literary activity in Europe. The European environment represents the nest (the first part of the autobiography is titled "The Nest and the Anthill") Berberova means to escape from, since it stands for "suffocating security" (Peterson 2001, 497) and dooms her to male submission. If emigration within the European boundaries does not really change her status of exiled woman struggling against immobilizing obligations, like domesticity and wedlock, her journey on the roads connecting the states of the US fosters the awareness of a new belonging. Unlike Kerouac's travelling throughout the US, Berberova's wandering fills her inner world with new meanings and increases her desire to know the culture of the US. As she sees new places, the close link between her physical journey and her psychological journey gradually comes to light. Travelling along the inland areas of the US leads the writer to deconstruct her settled Russian mindset and to dig into her own psychological universe, thus unfolding her real identity. The discovery of the southern states of the US unveils the various facets of her psychological and cultural mosaic. Berberova's journeyings throughout the US foreshadow her emerging new womanliness and add to her subversive attitude, as a result of the social gaps she witnesses in the New World. The first impressions on social differences become apparent during her visit to some northern cities of the US, like New York and Chicago, where the glittering skyscrapers hide homeless people and the problems of black communities. Her impressions come into view both when she visits Chicago, which, in the writer's memory "[...] has remained a city of fantastic perspectives, luxury and poverty, elegance and dirt" (518), and when she travels to the southern states of the US, like Florida, where the writer sees the poor outskirts of Miami, shanty dwellers, barefoot people and numerous signs of urban decadence. In this regard, she writes: "Then I go to the black districts of Miami, [...]. People are poor there; [...]. There are many abandoned houses in the outskirts of big and small cities and villages, and deserted stores, churches, garages, workshops [...]" (516). She visits numerous states in the southern areas of the US, like Missouri, Kentucky, Virginia, New Mexico, Colorado, Oklahoma, and South Carolina.

The list of the places described in the autobiography is not meant to merely focus on Berberova's journey to the US. The geographical areas in the US represent the setting of her cultural route and of the deconstruction of European values. The North American spaces expand her horizons, her view of the world, and lead the writer to question the way of life in the western world. Berberova's comments on poverty and social gaps in the US overthrow, in the middle of the Cold War, the European mindset about the superiority of western civilisation. The more she travels throughout the southern states of the US, the more the autobiography is informed with descriptions of the North American social dichotomy. The writer cannot help noticing the role of women in the poorest areas of the US. As she describes the poor neighbours in Miami, she claims that "[s]ome houses are full of children, mostly naked, and in the kitchen and bedroom one senses a matriarchy – she bears, gives birth, feeds, cooks, works all day, is the provider and the master in the house" (516). Her descriptions of the contradictions of North American society often contrast with stereotyped views of the West, in terms of economic development and women's emancipation. The discovery of the North American lands leads the writer to realise that Americanisation has generated an unreal depiction of the US, and that, as Chomsky (2003, 86-8) claims, what sounds North American is not necessarily fair or right.

As the traveller experiences the exotic-like atmosphere of the South of the US, and once she is thoroughly aware of the contradictions of the western world, she gradually discloses her *ego*. Every border she goes through leads her to remote spaces and, from an introspective perspective, to the abyss of her inner world. Travelling is an exploration of her own intimate universe, it is a process that deconstructs European space boundaries, creating a new expressive dimension. The spaces of the South of the US are the mirrors of her own identity, and reflect the deepest meanings of her being and of her past. Berberova's subversive attitude, as a result of her physical and psychological travelling, actually appears in her first considerations about gender issues and womanliness in the European section of her autobiography. Her disclosing identity indirectly emerges through references to texts written by her female friends. She often cites, for instance, the Russian poet Gippius, with whom she shares, in the autobiography, the idea that sexual and gender liberation are religious and revolutionary pursuits (see Peterson 2001, 502). The inclusion of certain lines and passages in the autobiography informs the text with destabilising elements and overtones. The intertextual dialogue, which ensues from the evocation of different female voices in *The Italics are Mine*, paves the way for the writer's investigation into her own feelings and sexual orientations. One of the most remarkable texts in the autobiography is a poem, "Eternal Feminine," which Gippius wrote for her and whose lines, as Berberova writes, "showed her unexpected tenderness towards me and touched me" (245). Gippius' ambiguous sexual orientations were not unknown (she was bisexual) and her verses represent intertextual elements to deconstruct western European conventions. The lines which Berberova quotes from Gippius do not hide romanticism and involvement: "In the yellow sunset you shine like a candle. / Once again, silent, I stand before you" (246). On the one hand, Berberova does not employ any filters when she refers to her homosexual/bisexual friends or to literary works featuring issues of gender and sexuality; on the other hand, she is never explicit about the different shades of her own sexuality. In this regard, she dwells, in a short passage, on some considerations about her femininity and womanliness, revealing her attitude to sexuality:

I must [...] say that I never suffered from being born a woman. I somehow compensated for this *deficiency*, which I never felt as a deficiency: not when I earned my daily bread, not when I built (or destroyed) my life with a man, not when I struck up friendships with women and men. Not when I wrote. I didn't even always remember that I was a woman, and yet still "femininity" was my asset, this I knew. Perhaps one of my few assets. (438)

Deficiency is linked, in this passage, with womanliness, in terms of social equality and rights. The writer recognises that such a deficiency emanates from the stereotypes and prejudices pertaining to women's weakness. Moreover, she discloses her masculine side and implicitly hints at her sexual orientations in the following passage:

I had a good deal of what men have (but I didn't cultivate it, perhaps out of fear of losing my femininity). There was physical and emotional endurance, there was a profession, financial independence, there was success, initiative and freedom in love and friendship, the know-how of making a choice. [...] And there was the search for help in a man, the expectation of advice from a man and gratitude for his help, support and advice. (438)

She remembers her female friends in her autobiography. Apart from the ambiguous relationship with Gippius, which, as I have underlined, represents the writer's ground to discuss homosexuality in her autobiography, there are other examples of Berberova's reticence on her supposed homosexuality in *The Italics are Mine*. In addition to mentioning her friendship with a prostitute, Manechka, in Moscow, with whom she shared a communal apartment, the writer names a young lady, Virginia. Berberova quotes a passage from Lev Tolstoy's diary, dated November 29, 1851, in which he writes about his homosexuality. Berberova does not openly admit her love for Virginia, but she quotes Tolstoy to justify her close relationship with certain women, like Virginia, as a normal step in every man's and woman's moral and cultural development:

Tolstoy in 1851 did not know, as he did not to the very end of his life, that at least half of all people feel this way at one time or other in youth. And so it was with me, though I never "wanted to cry" and never did love to "spoil" my life. But I know now that Virginia sometimes wanted to cry. In this her feeling for me was different from my feeling for her. (99)

Berberova explains that her love for Virginia is different from Tolstoy's love for men; her feelings for Virginia were platonic, whereas Tolstoy's attraction for men was characterised by "a terrible aversion" as well (99). She enjoyed, as she writes, talking to her friend Virginia about love; she even mentions two marriage proposals from two men, which she refused on the grounds of her alleged freedom. Freedom was the main reason why she left her husband Khodasevich, considered by her the source of oppression and dependence. However, Berberova does not casually hint at such marriage proposals when she describes her friendship with Virginia: she means to remove any suspicions on the reader's part about her sexual orientations. The writer claims: "I knew all that was mine would return because there was Virginia and those wonderful things we had in common. What would have become of me without her? Without saying anything to me about myself she understood all, but never stopped me when she saw me live and waste myself" (102). Berberova supports women's emancipation and asserts that her own freedom was preserved while living with Virginia. Khodasevich and Berberova actually represent, as the writer gradually uncovers her intimate dimension, an exchange in gender roles, in that the former is often depicted, in *The Italics are Mine*, as the feminine side of the couple; the latter is the masculine one, owing to her efforts to avoid inequalities, which led her to literary success and independence.

Besides her feminine qualities, Berberova highlights her masculine ones by stating that she does not lack most of the successful features that men usually have. She shows unusual determination during the difficult route to North America; to concur with Peterson, Berberova is "a powerful creator of herself, a woman who, [...], managed to preserve and nurture her intellectual and personal independence" (2001, 494). However, as she seems to reveal her masculine side and to be at ease with such discourses, she highlights her womanliness, as well as her fragility and her need to be helped and supported by a man. She, therefore, provides a double-layered image of her womanliness, so that her inner world features the peculiarities of both sexes. What primarily emerges in the above-mentioned passage is the gradual duality of her gender identity. Berberova does not openly discuss issues pertaining to gender and sexuality when she narrates her life in Europe. She recalls her literary discussions with

intellectuals in the Russian communities in Berlin and in Paris, and she never hides, at the same time, her dependence on men during the European years. As she writes, when she returns to her memories of her former husband, Khodasevich, “I felt life more intensely with him, I was more fully alive than before meeting him, I burned with life in its contrasts; [...] I was not alone in seeking life itself in its strongest manifestation, beyond the concepts of comfort and security” (236). Berberova expresses a romantic allegiance to Khodasevich in terms of comfort and security and, therefore, her European years are still pervaded by masculine protection. Much as she tries to highlight women’s voices prior to her passage to the US, by means of the texts she quotes (written by her female friends), her womanliness and independence do not blossom until she moves overseas. In order to trace the route of Berberova’s womanliness from Europe to the US, it is necessary to highlight de Beauvoir’s remarks on unequal relationships between men and women. According to the French philosopher (see de Beauvoir 1997, 20-34), relationships between men and women have always been characterised by women’s inferiority; women are identified as *objects*, whereas men represent *subjects*. As de Beauvoir (1997, 24) argues, the existence of the *Other* has the purpose to emphasise the power of the *One*, the Almighty. Following Hegel’s principle of dichotomy, the world cannot be explained without the existence of oppositions and dual relationships, in which one element or entity is opposed to the other. Likewise, the *subject* prevails and represents its superior nature by opposing the *object*. The *subject* becomes essential through its dichotomy with the *object*, which is not essential, but inferior. Being the *Other*, woman can only make man stand out in her opposition against the *One*, man. Berberova’s European experience was marked by her relationships with intellectual men, especially with her husband. If Berberova’s background in western Europe is steadily shadowed by the presence of men, her accounts of the long journeys throughout the southern States of the US originate from her voice only.

In light of Kristeva’s theories (1994, 183-4) on the alienation of the self, generated by cultural non-belonging, Berberova, by crossing the North American borders, alienates and deconstructs her European identity, the *Other*, which includes men’s shadow, and discovers the opportunity to be both the *One* and the *Other*, as she comprises the double nature of human beings. As I have discussed before, travelling throughout the South of the US entails crossing borders in the vast geographical spaces of less known parts of the country (see also Ciani Forza 2012, 37-8). Berberova experiences the aspects of North American culture and becomes aware of multiple identities and perspectives. As she crosses the frontiers separating the States of the US, her cultural traits and the linguistic elements of her motherland recede from view; her identity is pervaded by different views, voices and new cultural values (see also Zaccaria 2017, 35-6). However, the writer does not completely reveal her sexual orientations in *The Italics are Mine*, even in the last section about her journey to the US; she extends her discourses to such themes as homosexuality and bisexuality when she travels overseas, but her “love for women is placed in the narrow context of youthful romantic friendships” (Peterson 2001, 503; see Fraser 1996, 60).

The sequel to *The Italics are Mine* and sexual identity

As she underlined in one of her private notebooks (see Peterson 2001, 503), Berberova was planning to write an additional section in her autobiography, titled, in

the English translation, "Deathbed Dialogues."⁴ The "Deathbed Dialogues" represent an important document for the writer towards achieving her real identity, as it openly centres on gender and sexual orientations. In her dialogues, dated October 5, 1983, the writer gives insight, for the first time, into sexual and gender issues which she implicitly mentions in *The Italics are Mine*. In one of the passages about sexuality in the "Deathbed Dialogues," Berberova acknowledges the existence of different sexual overtones and orientations; she pinpoints six types of sexual identities and the one she belongs to is bisexuality, as she represents the category of double-sexed people (see Antonucci 2004, 48). With regard to the group pertaining to bisexuality, she writes as follows:

I have long believed that this group is the most thought-provoking [...], complex, and the most modern, as well as the one that has understood itself more deeply than the others; having understood itself, it accepted itself and now lives in full harmony with this acceptance and understanding. Therefore this [group] is the happiest one in the world (Peterson 2001, 503; see Berberova 1983, 4-5).⁵

Being aware that the "Deathbed Dialogues" would be published after her death, the writer leaves behind the reticence she maintained in her autobiography and overtly admits her bisexuality. As regards the sexual identities which she recognises in the "Deathbed Dialogues," Berberova states that heterosexuals "live according to clichés" (Peterson 2001, 503; see Berberova 1983, 5), while homosexuals are a small group. Bisexuals are the most outstanding group if they are considered from historical and ethical stances. One of the reasons why Berberova never reveals her bisexuality directly in her autobiography is her need to comply with the narrative structure of her work; an autobiography could not disclose her intimate feelings towards women; such feelings are presented as the expressions of her compassion for other exiled women. As a consequence of her long journeyings throughout the South of the US, the writer lets her heart speak and is explicit about her sexual orientation, as she reveals her attraction for those men who have both masculine and feminine traits, and for those women with masculine features. As she writes in the dialogues, "I love feminine men and mannish women" (Peterson 2001, 504; see Berberova 1983, 5). Berberova is proud of her bisexuality in the "Deathbed Dialogues," since she considers it the perfect state for her; however, she admits that she had never had sexual relationships with women; she writes "I chose the women with whom I lived, but did not sleep" (Peterson 2001, 505; see Berberova 1983, 6). The peculiarities of Berberova's identity change during her passage from Russia to the US through western Europe. From being a heterosexual woman who is aware of multifaceted sexuality, she finally admits her bisexuality.

Although changes in the writer's identity along the route to the New World come into view, Berberova asserts the consistency of her identity and dwells on the concepts of *beings* and *becoming* in *The Italics are Mine*. When she refers to her European years, she writes: "And already then the idea came to me that I *was*, *am*, and *will be*, but

⁴ The "Deathbed Dialogues" were never published and were written in Russian in 1983, titled "Predsmertnye dialogi." They are kept at Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, in the *Nina Berberova Papers*, Series II, Writings 1, 1-20.

⁵ Hereafter, the English translation of the quotations from "Predsmertnye dialogi" is from Peterson's article "The Private 'I' in the Works of Nina Berberova." References to the original version of the "Deathbed Dialogues" will be given parenthetically in the text.

perhaps will not *become*. This did not scare me. There was for me in *being* an intensity I did not feel in *becoming*" (236). Berberova's journey throughout the US outlines an evolving process, in which the writer redefines and recomposes her identity and depicts the contradictions of the New World. Travelling means discovering, negotiating one's values and beliefs, as well as accepting new perspectives (see Enevold 2004, 74). However, the writer does not only reveal her innermost feelings in terms of gender identities, but she also claims her unchangeable self, since she emphasises her *being* rather than her *becoming*. In spite of the evident changes in the writer's identity, which led her to acknowledge different overtones of her sexual orientations, she points out the consistency of her ontological identity. The alleged unchangeable nature of her *being* emerges in the autobiography, whose descriptions of her transnational routes are imbued with her memories, overshadowed by men, in the Russian communities of western Europe. To concur with Fraser, "As Khodasevich's girlfriend, she moved directly into a close-knit community of famous literary men, many of them as old as her father" (1996, 39). The "Deathbed Dialogues" are undoubtedly the writings which trace the writer's transnational path towards freedom, her progress towards *becoming* the epitome of transnational womanliness. Thus, travelling from Europe to the US, and to the southern areas of the US in particular, re-maps the author's identity as well as her transition from *being* to *becoming*, although such a passage is not apparently perceived by the writer herself. The unpublished final acts of her autobiography mark the writer's expatriation as an escape from heterosexuality, considered the long-established sexual expression emanating from Russian conventional patterns of chauvinist male behaviour. The process of Americanisation redefines the writer's sense of belonging and forges, at the same time, her gender identity, as the deepest expression of her new nationality. Her journeyings condition her changing identity and symbolise the passage to a transnational dimension which unfolds her multifaceted sexual identity. Berberova's assertions in the "Deathbed Dialogues" represent a self-fulfilled woman, whose courage, strength, and destabilising attitude triumph over the fears generated by her rootless life in Europe. The affirmation of her self takes place as a result of multiple discourses in *The Italics are Mine*, which she employs to write about her emigration in relation to other émigrés, and to conceal her most intimate views. The discourses on sexuality are thus extended to the sequel to the autobiography. In the "Deathbed Dialogues," Berberova's "I" becomes more objectively discernible: it is the transnational identity which overtly combines masculinity and femininity.

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