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Karolina Pavlova and Louise Colet

Materials for a Cross-cultural Study

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Karolina Pavlova and Louise Colet were almost exact contemporaries. Both devoted their lives to poetry, as writers, translators and human beings, and both died abandoned and impoverished. Pavlova lived in Russia under Nikolai's oppressive regime, while Colet had the apparent good fortune to be born in France where political and social constraints were far less, and where women had long played a prominent role in public life. Yet there is a surprising similarity between the careers of the two poets; I offer a brief sketch of the parallels as material towards an analysis of the multiple aspects that determined these poets' creative lives,

- 1) their nationality--the political moment, the literary milieu, social custom
- 2) their gender--its effect on their personalities, their conduct in relation to social expectation
- 3) their careers--their pursuit of recognition and their response to their critics
- 4) their art--its genre, thematics, stylistics

The women were born within three years of each other, Pavlova in 1807 in Iaroslavl, Colet in 1810 in Provence, 50 kilometers west of Aix. Both received

unusual educations for women; Pavlova knew French, German, Italian, Spanish, Swedish, Polish and Dutch, while Colet knew Italian, English, Greek and Latin. Pavlova began writing verse young, first in French and German; Colet began writing at age twelve.¹

Pavlova studied with tutors, as Moscow University was only opened to women officially in 1876. Colet's achievement is perhaps the more remarkable in that, unlike Pavlova, she had no tutors and public schooling for women was not available in France until the end of the 19th century. Furthermore, she had to endure daily persecution by her siblings for her passion for reading (and possibly for her temper as well), while Karolina was cherished by her family.

Both families faced financial reversals early in the lives of the daughters: Napoleon's armies destroyed Pavlova's family estate in 1812, and Colet's father's death when she was fifteen forced her to move from the family house to her grandmother's in Lyon, beginning her life-long struggle for financial survival.

Pavlova and Colet first fell in love with poets whom they met in salons. Colet met Arsene Thevenot at the salon she frequented in Nimes and was her first love as Adam Mickiewicz was for Pavlova (although it was Colet's great love Flaubert who is comparable in literary stature to the Polish poet). These first loves were based in a shared passion for poetry. The women's marriages too have (unfortunate) parallels. As we know, in 1836 the writer Pavlov married Karolina

for her money which he subsequently squandered. Furthermore, he took up with her poor relation, Miss Tannenberg, which led to the dissolution of the marriage by the late 1840s. Louise Colet had an equally unhappy marriage which had many of the same problems. Her husband too failed to provide for her financially and had other women. Louise married Colet because, penniless and already twenty-three years old, she longed to leave Provence and her hostile relatives for the literary life of the capitol. Hippolite Colet was an aspiring composer who was about to take a teaching position at the Conservatory in Paris. Louise's brother-in-law had tried to prevent the marriage with this penniless son of a veterinarian, hoping to find a wealthy match for the beautiful Louise, but unlike Pavlova's uncle in the case of Mickiewicz, he was unsuccessful in preventing the marriage which took place in 1835 (the year before Pavlova's). In Paris Hippolyte Colet soon began giving more than music lessons to the society women he taught; by 1838 he included among his lovers Teresa Guiccioli, a former mistress of Byron.

When Pavlova and Colet began to receive attention for their work, their husbands made difficulties. Khomiakov's wife noticed that Pavlova's husband began to be jealous that his wife's verse was getting more recognition than his own short stories; Hippolyte Colet too was jealous of his wife, both for her beauty--he made her dress to cover her beautiful arms and shoulders so that she looked like "a Quakeress" according to Alfred de Musset--and for her literary success that

contrasted with his failure as a composer (he would open her mail and forge letters to her correspondents). Like the Pavlovs, the Colets had money troubles: He earned very little and was miserly and despotic with household expenses, while Louise struggled desperately to earn her own money. The Colets stayed together until 1843 when Hippolyte moved to his own apartment and the couple filed for a legal separation. Nvertheless Hippolyte returned in 1848 to be nursed by Colet until his death some months later from a lung ailment.

Pavlova had a son (also named Ippolit) with her husband; Colet had a daughter, Henriette, five years after marrying her by-then unfaithful Hippolyte. Victor Cousin acknowledged paternity and provided for the child's maintenance. Colet had two more children, a son in 1843, and another five years later, but both died in infancy, to her great grief. Once grown, both poets' children became estranged from their mothers: in 1854 Ippolit left his mother in Europe to live with his father in Russia and later fell out with his mother over his marriage. He died in 1882, eleven years before his mother. Henriette Colet was a difficult adolescent who refused to live her mother's nomadic life and turned to her father's conservative relatives who in 1862 sent her to board in a convent (Louise was violently anti-clerical). Though Louise begged Henriette to join her on her second trip to Italy, Henriette preferred to stay at the convent. Her aunt subsequently

married her to a respectable devoutly Catholic doctor; Louise had already left for Italy and did not attend the wedding²

Pavlova and Colet began their careers in literary salons, where they met the most famous literary figures of their time and established their reputations as poets. From 1839-1844 Pavlova gathered Russia's leading poets and philosophers in her salon in Moscow on Thursdays. On these same Thursdays, beginning in 1841 and continuing for as many years, Louise Colet was gathering the creme de la creme of French literary and philosophical circles in her Paris salon on the Rue de Brera. It was attended by her lover Victor Cousin, Sainte Beuve, Eugene Scribe, and other Immortels of the Academie Francaise. Colet's salon was more informal than those of her more fashionable rivals--its popularity was increased by Colet's poulet a la Provencale--and also more politically liberal and activist. Pavlova's salon had a more refined atmosphere, if Leonid Grossman's reconstruction is accurate.³

Although their central roles in their impressive salons should have earned them esteem, both women provoked the mockery and scorn of the men in their circles. They were accused of self-dramatization and excessive theatricality (neoclassical in both cases) by their enemies. This is how Panaev described Pavlova:

In her pose, her glance was something affected, rhetorical. She stopped between two marble columns, with dignity she inclined her head slightly at my bow and then extended her hand to me with the majesty of a theatrical empress...⁴

Flaubert's friend Louis Bouilhet said of Colet that "She has a natural lack of naturalness," and another friend, the editor Maxime du Camp, wrote

The opinion she has of her beauty ended up making her uglier. Her eyes lowered, her lips pursed like a heart, she used to ask candidly: "Do you know where the arms of the Venus de Milo were found? In the sleeves of my dress."

While it might be possible to attribute some of the coincidental patterns in the lives of Pavlova and Colet to their anomalous situations as women poets, the points of contact in their creative work are more fortuitous. Both began writing poetry at periods of transition from poetry to prose and from romanticism to realism. During the successful period of their careers, both were admired for the "virility" of their verse. The Contemporary praised Pavlova's Double Life by saying that "it was difficult to recognize in it the tender hand of woman"; Victor Cousin, who only after this became Colet's lover, said that when he read her unsigned submission to the Academie of the prize-winning "Musee de Versailles," he had "attributed her poetic talent to a man, and upon opening the seal was most surprised to learn that it was the work of a young woman."

It is not surprising that both Colet and Pavlova wrote on the theme of woman (Colet wrote on "Charlotte Corday" [1842]); "Les Femmes de Shakespeare"; "Saintes et Folles" [1845]; "Ce qui est dans le coeur des femmes" [1852]; Le Poeme de la Femme in 3 volumes containing "La Paysanne," "La Servante," and "La Religieuse" [1854]. Pavlova's Dvoinaia zhizn', "Tri dushy," and Kadril' are conspicuously devoted to problems faced by women). The shared interest in outstanding female personalities would also account for why both women worked on poems about Joan of Arc: Pavlova translated Schiller's Joan of Arc in 1835; Colet won her first prize from the Academie Française in 1839 for her description of the young Marie d'Orleans' statue of Joan of Arc at the Musee de Versailles. Later in their lives both published descriptions, Pavlova's Fantasmagorii in verse, of the places they had seen in their travels as well as works inspired by the loss of their beloveds. More unlikely, both chose Mirabeau as a subject: Colet wrote a book on his youth, La Jeunesse de Mirabeau, in 1842; and Pavlova set Mirabeau in dialogue with Caliostro in "Razgovor v trianone" six years later.

The poets maintained their creative activity to the very end of their lives, despite the difficulties they faced after their fame had begun to decline. The turning point of their careers was largely determined by the greatest passion in their lives, in both cases of men considerably younger than the poets. Pavlova met

Boris Utin in Derpt in the spring of 1853 when he was still a student, twenty-five years her junior. Their relationship ended three years later, but was already troubled towards the end of 1854 at a time when Pavlova's literary fame was declining. By that time Utin was becoming an important figure in liberal circles. He became a professor at the University of St. Petersburg. Pavlova's break with Utin was traumatic and formed one of the important components of her collection of poetry published in 1863.

Louise Colet, despite having won the poetry prize of the Academie Française four times, is still known today principally for having been the only love of Flaubert's life. They met in 1846 in Paris when Flaubert was an unknown young man from the provinces, eleven years Colet's junior. They maintained an intermittent and increasingly stormy relationship for eight years, which ended in 1855 as he was finishing Madame Bovary. The end of the affair was the greatest loss of the many Colet experienced. She described their relationship in her novel, Lui, which she wrote in the winter of 1858-1859.8 The novel was extremely successful, in part because it also contained an account of Alfred de Musset's version of his relationship with George Sand, who had caused a sensation with her account of it in Elle et lui. Sand's book had been answered by Paul de Musset's <u>Lui et Elle</u>, and the whole business was parodied in <u>Eux</u> by Gaston Lavalley, then in Eux et elles, histoire d'un scandale by Lescure, and finally in the press in Eux

brouilles.⁹ But Colet's novel earned its success. her engagingly energetic narrative is full of vivid detail drawn from her diary account of her own relationship with Musset, though her idealized version of it is hilariously distant from her derisive diary account of their unsuccessful sex life.¹⁰

After their literary fame began to decline, both women left their cities for foreign lands. In 1855 Pavlova visited Italy and Constantinople, eventually settling in Dresden in 1861; Colet spent most of the decade from 1858 to 1868 in Italy, and went to Egypt in 1869 to cover the opening of the Suez Canal for <u>le Siecle</u>, whence, like Pavlova, she too traveled to Constantinople.

Although her last few years were spent in Paris, Colet had few friends left and took little pleasure in her brief visits to Normandie with her daughter, who did not share her mother's grief over the fate of the Communards. Colet did maintain one famous friend in the last lonely period of her life, Victor Hugo. The two had become friends in 1852 towards the beginning of his eighteen years of exile in the Channel Islands; she wrote him regular reports on life in Paris and laundered his mail for him at great personal risk.¹¹

Pavlova's solitude in Dresden was similarly mitigated by the friendship of an important literary friend, A. K. Tolstoy whom she met there in 1861. As Colet had helped Hugo, Pavlova performed a valuable service for Tolstoy in translating his work into German. Because of her isolation, waning fame and ill health, Colet was perhaps fortunate in dying seventeen years earlier than Pavlova, who outlived A. K. Tolstoy by fourteen years and her son by eleven years. Despite the fame both women had attained in their prime, they found themselves abandoned by friends and family for the long period at the end of their lives, and their deaths went unnoticed.

These parallels suggest that the difficulties of Pavlova's career should not be attributed to the particular nature of Russian culture. Rather, there seems to be a dynamic that transcends cultural specificity. Considering the vast differences between nineteenth century Russia and France, the coincidences outlined above are especially remarkable. In addition to the censorship under the tsars, the situation of women under Russia's relatively backward conditions and the tradition of prudishness in Russian public life severely limited the scope of Pavlova's life and art, whereas Parisian life and letters were known for the opposite qualities.

Even as individuals Pavlova and Colet represent extremes of the differences between Russian and French cultures: Pavlova had a Germano-Russian background while Colet was from the south of France and had an Italian father. Colet was famous for her extravagant southern beauty and behavior. And while Pavlova liked to epater her critics, Colet went farther in her famous attack on Alphonse Karr, editor of Les Guepes: because he maligned her in print, she went to his house, nine months pregnant, armed with a kitchen knife and tried to stab

him in the back; Karr wrote that he survived only because she raised her arm over her head in a melodramatic gesture, rather than stabbing him sideways which would have been more effective. He later had the knife hung in his entry hall with the inscription "presented in 1840--in the back." Pavlova might have done better to have followed Colet's example in "l'affaire Karr" in dealing with Ivan Ivanovich Panaev, editor of Sovremennik, instead of apologizing to him for writing poetry.¹²

Despite these radical differences in culture and personality, the dynamic of the poets' fates seems to have been the same: Both women were fierce idealists who took themselves seriously as poets even though they were women. While this attitude and their real talent generated some admiration, ultimately it earned them jealousy and hostility from their families and ridicule from their literary circles. Barbey d'Aurevilly called Colet a "horrible gargoyle," ¹³ Maxime de Camp said she was a "literary androgyne," and Flaubert instructed her to "show us your muscles, not your glands,"15 remarks which characterize the many attacks on Colet's role as woman poet. The condescending attitudes, rejections and obstacles to their visions of self as poets rendered the women more intensely ambitious, hypersensitive and self-conscious than they would have been under better circumstances. This established a downward spiral generated by their struggle against the unfair and often vicious treatment they received. The dynamic of literary circles and the tendency of sexism to distort women's art and lives appears to have been even

more powerful than individual personality and the influences of the particular cultures to which Pavlova and Colet belonged.

APPENDIX

A Colet-Pavlova Conundrum

The following strophes are drawn from verses by Colet and Pavlova excerpts from which have been capriciously interspersed here. All were originally written in French. It is amusing to try to identify the author of each strophe. Six literary scholars have made the attempt, making an average of 2.4 mistakes, from one to four errors per scholar, counting each of the seven strophes separately. You are invited to take up the challenge. The solution may be found on page X.

Tu me dis: Aime l'art, il vaut mieux que l'amour;

Tout sentiment s'altere et doit perir un jour!

Pour que le coeur devienne une immortelle chose,

Il faut qu'en poesie il se metamorphose,

Et que chaque pensee en sorte incessament,

Sentir, c'est aspiirer!...c'est encor la souffrance;

Mais creer, c'est jouir, c'est prouver sa puissance;

C'est faire triomper de la mort, de l'oubli,

Toutes les passions dont l'ame a tressailli!

Et j'avais dit: "Puisque rien ne contente,

Puisque nos jours si tot sont revolus,

Qu'importent donc, dans cette vie errante,

Quelques bonheurs ou quelques pleurs de plus?

Il nait parfois d'innocentes hosties,

Etres places ici par le seigneur,

Pour reveler aux ames pervertis

Que l'Homme va vers un monde meilleur.

Les autres n'etaient que des phantomes pales,

Repoussant mon coeur d'un coeur epouvante;

Mais toi, fier amant des choses ideales,

de ma passion t'emut l'immensite.

Tu la sentis vraie et tu compris qu'en elle,

Ainsi que dans l'art, ta passion a toi,

Etait contenue une essence eternelle;

Ton coeur s'attendrit, et tu reviens a moi!

Va, je sais bien que jamais n'est saisie

L'altiere beaute qui plane devant nous.

A notre toucher s'enfuit la poesie,

Et comme les morts nos bonheurs sont dissous.

A toi toujours, ce qu'aucun mot n'exprime,

Chaque pensee et chaque tendre emoi,

Et chaque espoir, et chaque elan sublie,

Toute ma vie et tout mon etre--a toi!

Solution

Colet 1846:

Tu me dis: Aime l'art, il vaut mieux que l'amour;

Tout sentiment s'altere et doit perir un jour!

Pour que le coeur devienne une immortelle chose,

Il faut qu'en poesie il se metamorphose,

Et que chaque pensee en sorte incessament,

Sentir, c'est aspiirer!...c'est encor la souffrance;

Mais creer, c'est jouir, c'est prouver sa puissance;

C'est faire triomper de la mort, de l'oubli,

Toutes les passions dont l'ame a tressailli! (p. 180)

Pavlova 1837:

Et j'avais dit: "Puisque rien ne contente,

Puisque nos jours si tot sont revolus,

Qu'importent donc, dans cette vie errante,

Quelques bonheurs ou quelques pleurs de plus?

Il nait parfois d'innocentes hosties,

Etres places ici par le seigneur,

Pour reveler aux ames pervertis

Que l'Homme va vers un monde meilleur. (p. 497-8)

Colet 1851 (extracts from <u>Veillee</u>):

Les autres n'etaient que des phantomes pales,

Repoussant mon couer d'un coeur epouvante;

Mais toi, fier amant des choses ideales,

de ma passion t'emut l'immensite.

Tu la sentis vraie et tu compris qu'en elle,

Ainsi que dans l'art, ta passion a toi,

Etait contenue une essence eternelle;

Ton coeur s'attendrit, et tu reviens a moi! (p. 164)

Va, je sais bien que jamais n'est saisie

L'altiere beaute qui plane devant nous.

A notre toucher s'enfuit la poesie,

Et comme les morts nos bonheurs sont dissous.

Pavlova 1837:

A toi toujours, ce qu'aucun mot n'exprime,

Chaque pensee et chaque tendre emoi,

Et chaque espoir, et chaque elan sublie,

Toute ma vie et tout mon etre--a toi! (p. 496)

1

FOOTNOTES

1. The material for Pavlova's biography is drawn from P. P. Gromov, "Vstupitel'naia stat'ia" Karolina Pavlova: Polnoe sobranie stikhotvorenii (M., L.: Sovetskii pisatel', 1964), pp. 5-72 and Barbara Heldt Monter, "Introduction," A Double Life (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1978, pp. ixxiv. The literature on Colet is at least as diverse in its assessment of her life. She is mercilessly ridiculed in D. E. Enfield, A Lady of the Salons (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923) and Emile Gerard-Gailly, Les Vehemences de Louise Colet (Paris, 1934) and valiantly defended in Francine Du Plessix A Life of Louise Colet (New York: Gray, Rage and Fire: Simon and Schuster, 1994). More balanced and documented accounts can be found in Joseph F. Jackson, Louise Colet et ses amis litteraires (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937), L. Auriant, "L'Envers d'une muse, Les oeuvres libres, CCII, Paris 1938, n. 202, pp.189-276, and Eugene de Mirecourt,

Histoire contemporaine, portraits et silhouettes aux XIXe siecle, Louise Colet (Paris: Librairie des contemporains, 1869). Mirecourt, whose assessments can be of other contemporaries can be scathing, says Colet has "tout a la fois la distinction de la grande dame et le sans-gene de l'artiste" (45), though he gives full attention to her fierce temper.

- 2. This is Gray's version. She shows that Colet's sister-in-law Sidonie Colet made "devious attempts to separate her from her mother (pp. 311-316), and describes her adolescence as tempestuous. Enfield sides with Sidonie, quoting only the non-injurious half of the same letter, and says of Henriette: "In spite of an upbringing as injudicious as can well be imagined, [Henriette] grew into a gentle, amiable, intelligent young woman" (p. 102).
- ¹ Leonid Grossman, <u>Vtornik u Karoliny Pavolvoi, stseny iz zhizni moskovskikh</u> <u>literaturnykh salonov 40-x godov,</u> Knigoizdatel'stvo pisatelei v Moskve (moscow, 1922).
- 3. <u>PSS</u>, p. 9.
- 4. Gray, p. 255.
- 5. Monter, p. xvi.
- 6. Gray, p. 66.

- 7. Louise Colet, <u>Lui, roman contemporain</u> (Paris: Bourdilliat et Compagnie, 1860). English translation by Marilyn Gaddis Rose in <u>Lui, A View of Him</u> (Athens and London: Univeristy of Georgia Press, 1986).
- 8. Jackson, p. 246.
- 9. The nature of Colet's transformation of life into art here would provide rich material for a study of her artistic method. See Gray, pp. 225-29. See also Enfield's hostile account of the whole affair (pp. 82-100) and assessment of the novel: "The sentiment is false and sickly. It appeals to a side of us that good taste, common sense, education repress but cannot extinguish" (p. 87) and "She showed once and for ever the barrenness and the littleness of her own soul. Showed that her emotions, after all, belonged to the realms of sentiment and sensuality. Love and passion, in spite of all her storms and had tears, passed by the poor Muse" (p. 100).
- 10. Jackson, p. 196. Andre Maurois omits this information in his biography of Victor Hugo, Olimpio (trans. Gerard Hopkins, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956). He also omits mention of their correspondence and of Colet's visit to Hugo in his Guernsey home. He suggests that Colet was among Hugo's multiple lovers in Paris (p. 181), while Jackson claims that their correspondence began after Hugo's exile before they had ever met (p. 225).
- 11. Letter of 12 October 1854, in Sobranie sochinenii (1915), II, 323-

332, cited by Diana Greene in "Karolina Pavlova's 'Tri dushy': The

Transfiguation of Biography," <u>Proceedings of the Kentucky</u> <u>Foreign Language</u>

<u>Conference</u> 1984, pp. 15-24.

- 12. Gray, p. 73.
- 13. Gray, p. 222.
- 14. Quoted in Gray, p. 232.

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