

Introduction

*Between the fullness of desire and the fulfillment of desires,
between the fullness of suffering and the emptiness of happiness—
my choice was made from birth and before birth.*¹

Marina Ivanovna Tsvetaeva (1892–1941) is finally receiving recognition as one of the major Russian poets of this century. In her lifetime she was admired by such renowned poets as Boris Pasternak and Rainer Maria Rilke; Anna Akhmatova saw her as an equal. Yet she had to struggle to have her writings published. Some of her major works appeared only posthumously and remained unknown to the wider Russian audience until recently. In the last twenty years interest in Tsvetaeva—her life and work—has quickened, stirred in this country by Simon Karlinsky's pioneering studies. More and more of her works are published and translated. Joseph Brodsky and Susan Sontag are among her admirers. In Paris, Tsvetaeva books fill the book stores. In New York and Boston, Claire Bloom reads her poems to packed audiences. In Russia, Tsvetaeva scholarship flourishes and biographies of her, her letters, and reminiscences by her contemporaries are widely read. She has also become a cult figure; tours of people old and young visit her Moscow apartment, leaving lines from her poetry on the walls as she used to do. One of her plays has been produced for the first time; new editions of her poetry are sold out. A Tsvetaeva museum is planned.

What brought about this resurrection? Certainly it is the power of her poetry. Tsvetaeva herself stressed that she did not belong to her time, that a poet belonged to no time and to all time, to no country and to any country. She sang about the passion of love and the yearning for a better beyond, about the fate of the poet, about alienation and loneliness. Death was always there.

Tsvetaeva had nothing but contempt for the materialism of the philistines. In her lyrical world what mattered was the intensity of being, heroism, cour-

age, and Rostand's panache. She was never part of a group; she stood alone in poetry as in life. She was oblivious to politics, but her ethical standards inform all her work; she despised the fat, the greedy, and the bigoted. Victory had no meaning for her; hers was the lost cause and her hero was the outsider—the outlaw and the artist. She had no respect for church or state; only the individual mattered to her.

Though she was nurtured by the values of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the rhythm of Tsvetaeva's innovative poetry expressed her own revolutionary time. She became a modern poet, using verbs sparingly, creating her own syntax and mixing the sacred with the vernacular. Language was her companion, her master, and her slave. She would sacrifice everything to find the right word, the right sound. The poet and critic Mark Rudman catches her special quality: "Her meaning resides in her tone of voice, her manner of address, how she says and unsays. She is classical, terse, quick, elliptical: on a tightrope."²

Tsvetaeva has often been perceived as a victim of her time. Karlinsky, the eminent Tsvetaeva scholar who introduced her to the American reader in 1966, summed it up in his first book: "Exile, neglect, persecution and suicide may have been the fate of Russian poets after the Revolution, but perhaps only Marina Tsvetaeva experienced *all* of these."³ She grew up in the cultured milieu of the Russian prerevolutionary intelligentsia only to be thrown—alone with two small daughters—into the turmoil of Moscow under War Communism. Her younger daughter died of starvation there. In 1922 she joined her husband, Sergey Efron—who had fought with the White Army—in Berlin and lived in Prague and Paris until her return to the Soviet Union in 1939. She had to face total condemnation in the Soviet Union and hostility among the émigrés. When she returned to the Soviet Union, the Stalin terror was in full force. Her daughter and sister were sent to the Gulag; her husband was arrested and later executed. Tsvetaeva tried to survive for the sake of her fifteen-year-old son—but in 1941 she hanged herself.

Writing about Andrey Bely, Tsvetaeva commented that "being persecuted and being tortured do not really require persecutors and torturers; for that our most ordinary selves are sufficient."⁴ Tsvetaeva knew this only too well, since she had been tortured always by her own demons. I have been looking for those demons. From the very beginning I felt that in Tsvetaeva's early romantic poetry there was a vulnerable, passionate human being who was desperately searching. Searching for what? Did she want to be a mother or an Amazon? Did that troubled and troubling voice call for wild Gypsy love or for death? Did her beloved sad mother ever hear her? Where was her father?

What was the lost paradise of her childhood really like? Whatever carried this voice—ecstasy or despair—it was a compelling, authentic voice. I began my journey into the labyrinth of Tsvetaeva's soul to discover the drama of her life. Not one of the biographies in Russian, German, or French has dealt with these questions, and the English and American studies, though inevitably tracing some emotional patterns, have been interested primarily in other aspects of her life and work. But Tsvetaeva herself was keenly interested in the essence, the "myths" of people and the psychological forces that motivated them. In her portraits of other writers—Voloshin, Bely, Bryusov—and certainly in her autobiographical prose she looked beyond the facts to a deeper understanding of the characters. As Vladislav Khodasevich, her fellow poet, wrote, "in the foreground we have a psychological pattern which is of interest in itself, without regard to the historical and literary personality of the memoirist."⁵

Marina Tsvetaeva's poetry, her autobiographical prose, and her letters leave no doubt that her childhood left her deeply wounded. Pain remained the feeling she knew best, and the memory of the family—whether she idealized or analyzed it—never left her. The need to understand the roots of her early fixation on the mother-child symbiosis—which took different forms, but never changed—made me turn to Freudian concepts and the more recent analytical studies by D. W. Winnicott, Heinz Kohut, Alice Miller, and others. Some studies by Lacan's followers, such as Julia Kristeva, have contributed different insights into the same problems. Svetlana Elnitskaya's linguistic studies have been invaluable for decoding Tsvetaeva's lexicon.⁶

If analytical theories often confirmed my original sense of Tsvetaeva as a "prisoner of childhood" (Alice Miller's term), she never actually fitted any category. She was endowed not only with the genius of her poetic gift, but with a passionate nature and a brilliant mind that made her tragedy unique. What follows, then, is not a case history but an attempt to understand Tsvetaeva's persona through a close reading of her texts, my own interest in psychoanalysis, and the use of psychological theories to lend more substance to my intuitive interpretation. Though I will use psychological terms as sparingly as possible, it is important to define some analytical concepts and to suggest how they apply to the forces that shaped Tsvetaeva's life. These concepts are wounded narcissism and depression.

The narcissistic wound dooms the individual to remain in his or her own world. According to Freud, every child is born with a primary narcissism, with feelings of omnipotence and a need not only for love but also for the acceptance of its individuality, which, in turn, allows it to develop a strong

and independent self. Yet when this response is lacking, as it was in Tsvetaeva's case, the child will internalize both the "good" (adored) and the "bad" (rejecting) mother. The result is an internal "splitting," when contradictory drives are invested with equal force and tear the individual apart (Tsvetaeva's duty vs. rebellion, poet vs. woman, control vs. freedom). Barbara Shapiro writes in *The Romantic Mother*, a brilliant study of the English romantic poets, that such a split "prevents both the formation of a mature, cohesive self and the sense of a cohesive, concrete reality outside of the self."⁷ If this splitting is not resolved, the child forfeits its chance to leave this primary, pre-oedipal narcissism behind and to enter the world of the Other, the real world. Instead it will remain bonded to the fantasized world of its childhood. The idealized image of the mother will provoke a desire for re-fusion with her, rage for the rejection experienced, and consequent guilt and fear. To gain love and attention, the child may create a "false self" which may find acceptance from the Other, but never security. This loss of the true self leads to the tragedy of the narcissistic persona.

Depression, which Julia Kristeva, in her book *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, calls "the hidden face of Narcissus," that feeling of rejection, futility, and loneliness, can be associated with the feeling of losing one's self.⁸ Unless it is resolved it will surface again and again. Often, as in Tsvetaeva's case, depression is temporarily overcome by feelings of "grandiosity"—superiority and contempt. She wrote that "*Ne daigne*" ("Don't condescend") was her motto and she wanted it on her tombstone.

Tsvetaeva had still another defense against depression: intensity and self-annihilation in fusion with nature, with love and pain, with rage and loneliness. That passion fed her poems, but destroyed her life.

Tsvetaeva remained permanently tied to her childhood experience and unresolved primary conflict. She repeatedly stressed the importance of the first seven years of her life. Her mother, Mariya Aleksandrovna—herself deeply depressed and self-centered—was unable to give her the love and response she needed. Mariya Aleksandrovna found in romantic music and romantic literature the excitement she had missed in her life and she transmitted those unreal romantic standards to this daughter. In real life, however, Tsvetaeva's mother treated her with harshness, criticism, and contempt veiled by a pretense of tenderness, security, and "togetherness." She wanted her to compensate for her own emotional frustrations, to be what she wanted her to be, without respecting her individual needs and natural gifts. Tsvetaeva's early poetry conveys her mother's sadness, her powerful, seductive charm, and her own dependence on her. What is missing is any emo-

tional reciprocity, as we shall see in the poem “Mama Reading.” The child tries unsuccessfully to get mother’s attention while mother is reading and the last lines of the poem shock us with the cruel truth of mother’s pre-occupation: “Mother wakes up from her flight into fancy: / children are bitter prose.”⁹

Tsvetaeva’s father, an art historian dedicated to the building of a museum, followed the conventional pattern of his time by committing himself totally to his professional ambition. He was kind but distant. Emotionally he seems to have been almost absent; his absence in the life of Tsvetaeva’s mother did not go unnoticed by the child. Tsvetaeva recognized that her Russian heritage came from him; she admired his total commitment to his museum and wrote that his stinginess was “the stinginess of an ascetic, for whom *everything* is superfluous for his body-self and *everything* is too little for his spirit-self, an ascetic who has made a choice between thing and essence.”¹⁰

Tsvetaeva was fourteen when her mother died. She was left without her mother’s guidance and without a chance to rebel against that guidance as many more fortunate adolescents do. Mother had again abandoned her and the conflict remained unresolved. Tsvetaeva was left with an insatiable hunger for a total fusion of mother and child as well as with a concealed rage for having been rejected. After years of feeling unseen and unwanted, she could not form an autonomous identity and never knew whether she wanted to be mother or child. She knew only the pain of loss and the yearning for the unreachable.

Thanks to her craft, Tsvetaeva created a world of her own, a world in which she could rise above ordinary people, ordinary life, ordinary love. In real life she saw no place for herself. Her damaged psyche is most obvious and destructive in her many love affairs. She tells us in her autobiographical prose that when she was still a child, her mother asked her which doll she liked best and she chose the one with the passionate eyes. But “it was not the eyes that were passionate: I ascribed my own feeling of passion to those eyes . . . Not I alone. All poets do (and then they shoot themselves because the doll isn’t passionate).”¹¹

Trying to understand herself, Tsvetaeva believed that she had chosen “the impossible love” subconsciously from childhood on: “That first love scene of mine [Tatyana and Onegin] foreordained all the ones that followed, all the passion for unhappy, non-reciprocal, impossible love. From that very minute I did not want to be happy and thereby pronounced the sentence of non-love on myself.”¹² Yes, all her love affairs ended in disappointment and pain. But it was not a matter of choice. Tsvetaeva was simply not able

to see the Other, to accept the limitations of ordinary, reciprocal love. As a woman and as a poet she needed and demanded love, adoration, communication, but for her love really meant oceanic, magical, transcendent merger in which the Other—beginning with the doll—was endowed with the passion that was her own. Thus she loved men and women. It never mattered to her because she did not see the Other—she was “in love with love,” with the fire that burned inside her and needed to be expressed in poetry. Tsvetaeva’s desire for passion never died. Yet her basic conflict between the reality of personal relationship and her need for merger with her art remained as well. In her poem “On a Red Steed” the persona sacrifices her childhood, her lover, even her son, in order to be a poet.

What did it mean to Tsvetaeva to be a poet? Tsvetaeva was not conventionally religious, but she subscribed to the concept of poets in the hands of a higher power, the poet’s God: “The condition of creation is a condition of being overcome by a spell. [. . .] Something, someone inhabits you, your hand is the fulfiller not of you but of him. Who is this? That which through you wants to be.”¹³