

Escape From Earth: A Study of Tsvetaeva's Elsewheres

In Tsvetaeva's work, earth is essentially a place of exile where her persona stands "with only one foot." From its confines she time and again seeks to return to her original home in the sky by escaping into the worlds of dreams, poetry, and, for a while, an impassioned correspondence. Perhaps nowhere is Tsvetaeva's otherworldly orientation more strongly evident than in the imagery of her numerous flights, evocations of azure skies, and artistic simulations of the air and space of dreams. These pervade the *poemy* written at the time of the civil war and the correspondence-related works of the mid-twenties. In the late twenties and thirties, by contrast, there is a conscious turning away from aerial imagery to the immediate world, and finally a turning away from poetry itself to death. The poet's imperative need of some form of exit from the "here" and "now" for survival is borne out by her work and is perceptively, though somewhat critically, remarked on by Pasternak in his autobiographical essay:

All her life Marina Tsvetaeva protected herself from everyday routine by means of work, and when it appeared to her that this was an extravagance and that for the sake of her son she should temporarily sacrifice this captivating passion and glance around soberly, she perceived a chaos which had not been filtered through the creative process, immovable, strange, and inert; in fright she recoiled, and, not knowing where to escape from this horror, she hastily hid in death, thrusting her head into a noose, like under a pillow.¹

Tsvetaeva was a romantic who acutely experienced the rift between reality and idea, body and spirit, thought and feeling: "U menia mysl' i chuvstvo, slovo i delo, ideologiya i prirodnyi stroi—splosh' raznye i splosh' vrazhduishchie miry."² Her aversion to this world stemmed in part from an active dislike and discomfort with its physicality, or, as she calls it in "Naiada"—"vechnaia tret'ia partiia v liubvi." For her this physicality was the main obstacle which prevented direct contact with the essence of beings and things; it is well illustrated by her attitude toward the sea. If in her imagination she early identified with the sea's free spirit, confusing the "svobodnaia stikhiia" of Pushkin's "K moriu" with *stikhi*, in real life it overwhelmed and alienated her. She was unable to cope with its physical immensity and insurmountability, and she did not like the limitations implied by the horizontal axis, preferring to it the vertical axis of heights and depths. These factors, together with her own bodily discomfort, prevented her from communicating with the sea's essence.³

1. Boris Pasternak, "Avtobiograficheskii ocherk," *Proza 1915–1958* (Ann Arbor, 1967), p. 46.

2. Aleksandr Bakhrakh, "Pis'ma Mariny Tsvetaevoi," *Mosty* (Munich), 1961, no. 5, p. 311.

3. For Tsvetaeva's account of her "relationship" to the sea, see M. Tsvetaeva, *Moi Pushkin* (Moscow, 1967); her essay "Natal'ia Goncharova" in *Volia Rossii*, no. 5–6 (1929);

Not surprisingly, therefore, air, the least physical of the elements, the element which stands in direct opposition to earth and sea, emerges as the substance *par excellence* of Tsvetaeva's imagination. Unlike the other elements, experience of air in reality does not contradict its image in the imagination. Flight best expresses the poet's delight in the dynamism of the spirit and its poetic journeys; motion itself was for her the essence of dreams, the imagination, and even God.⁴ In "O Germanii," written in 1919, she exclaimed: "*Die Seele fliegt!*"—bol'shego ved' ne skazal i Novalis. Bol'shego nikto nikogda ne skazal. . . . zdes' vse i vsia, i *krome net nichego*."⁵ In the same piece she described her impulse to break through all limits into flight: "'*Ausflug*.' Vy tol'ko vslushaites': vylet iz . . . (goroda, komnaty, tela, roditel'nyi padezh). Ezhevskresnyi vylet *ins Grüne*, ezhechasnyi—*ins Blaue. Äther, heilige Luft!*"⁶ Flight also served as a metaphor for the saving force of creative work; Tsvetaeva was convinced that a poet's falls cannot be fatal as long as he continues to write: "On—dazhe razmakhnuvshis' s kolokol'ni—/ Kriuk vymorochit . . . Ibo put' komet—/ Poetov put'."⁷

Although fanciful flights and intimations of heavenly elsewheres are to be found in Tsvetaeva's early volumes (*Vechernii al'bom*, *Volshebnyi fonar'*, and even *Versty I*), "home" in these works is still situated in this world, albeit other worlds co-exist, mingle, and vie with it. There is, however, a pronounced increase in the frequency of otherworldly references during the revolutionary and civil war periods. Moscow itself, the poet's celebrated earthly home and "possession" in *Versty I*, becomes an object of commiseration and later is vehemently renounced by Tsvetaeva for its capitulation to the Soviets:

Первородство—на сиротство!
 Не спокаюсь.
 Велико твое дородство:
 Отрекаюсь.

Тем как вдаль гляжу на ближних—
 Отрекаюсь.
 Тем как твой топчу булыжник—
 Отрекаюсь.

(“Москве”)⁸

and her *poeta*, *S moria*, in Marina Tsvetaeva, *Nesobrannye proizvedeniia*, ed. Gunther Wytrzens (Munich, 1971) (hereafter cited as *NP*).

An extensive discussion of the sea in Tsvetaeva's work is to be found in Ieva Vitins, "Escape from Earth: A Study of the Four Elements and Their Associations in Marina Cvetaeva's Work" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1974), the chapter entitled "Water."

4. Gaston Bachelard, in *L'Air et les Songes: Essai sur l'imagination du mouvement* (Paris, 1943), p. 12, writes: "dans le règne de l'imagination, l'infini est la region ou l'imagination s'affirme comme l'imagination pure. . . ." Above all, the imagination denotes for him "une type de mobilité spirituelle. . . . Un vrai poète . . . veut que l'imagination soit un voyage" (p. 8).

5. Tsvetaeva, *NP*, pp. 470–71.

6. Tsvetaeva, *NP*, p. 471.

7. Marina Tsvetaeva, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia* (Moscow, 1965), pp. 231–32 (hereafter cited as *IP*).

8. Tsvetaeva, *NP*, p. 209.

In order to escape the chaos of civil strife, her heroines tear themselves free from the shackles of earthly obligations and travel skyward on a fiery Pegasus-like steed of poetic inspiration:

Ох, огонь-мой конь—несытый едок!
 Ох, огонь—на нем—несытый ездок!
 С красной гривой свились волоса . . .
 Огневая полоса—в небеса!⁹

They become resolute Amazons ready to challenge gods and fate in a sky whose lower heights are disturbed by carnage.

In the cycle "Razluka" (1921), the poetic voice, together with oneiric flight, emerges as the only means by which the heroine can overcome the downward pull of the despair of separation and the pressures of existence, yet fulfill an imperative need to assert herself by defying fate. Her would-be suicide by falling from a Kremlin tower is averted by an angel warrior, one of the frequent guises of Tsvetaeva's muse during this period:

Уроненные так давно
 Вадымаю руки.
 В пустое черное окно
 Пустые руки
 Бросаю в полуночный бой
 Часов,—домой
 Хочу!—Вот так: вниз головой
 —С башни!—Домой!

Не о булыжник площадной:
 В шепот и шелест . . .
 Мне некий Воин молодой
 Крыло подстелет.¹⁰

She severs herself from the hold of her child to journey, by steed, into a sky that is both a "*grad osiiannyi*" and an "*orlinaia vys'*" in the hope of rescuing the husband she fears dead from the hands of fate. "Razluka" is but one of the many works of Tsvetaeva in which separation serves as a point of departure for the poet's own verbal flights.

In *Na krasnom kone*, also written in 1921, earthly attachments are seen to be incompatible with a desire to serve one's art. The heroine is forced to relinquish earthly ties by her masculine muse, here a Genius on a red steed who has protected her from harm since the cradle.¹¹ She desires and pursues him on

9. Tsvetaeva, *IP*, p. 132.

10. Tsvetaeva, *NP*, p. 140.

11. In her reminiscences, Ariadna Efron suggests that this "Genius" was inspired by Blok, whom Tsvetaeva idolized all her life, but whom she never got to know in person. He was the inhabitant "tekhn ee vershin, kotorye Tsvetaeva schitala dlia sebja nedosiagaemyimi" (Ariadna Efron, "Stranitsy vospominanii," *Zvezda*, 3 [1973]: 177). The dominant images of fire, snowstorms, and winds in the work tend to support this view.

earth, but he eludes her and ruthlessly destroys all that she holds dear there; only after she puts on the armor of an Amazon, takes to the sky on a white steed to do battle with him, and is vanquished by him, does she by her martial ardor gain his favor. Far from the fray below, she then grows wings and waits for him to carry her on his steed further into the azure—and, poetry:

Сей страшен союз.—В черноте рва
 Лежу—а Восход светел.
 О кто невесомых моих два
 Крыла за плечом—
 Взвесил?

Немой соглядатай
 Живых бурь—
 Лежу—и слежу
 Тени.

Доколе меня
 Не умчит в лазурь
 На красном коне—
 Мой Гений!¹²

The pattern of this *poema*, a recurrent one in Tsvetaeva's work, illustrates the Dionysiac and Apollonic stages of the creative process.¹³ Tsvetaeva's heroine first immerses herself in the chaotic whirlwind of events on earth, its "*zhivye buri*"; she then separates herself from this chaos by taking flight, thereby distancing herself from it; in an equestrian dream, "*konnyi son*" (the heroine's own definition of the *poema*), she relives what she experienced below, for the time being a speechless spy ("*nemoi soglyadatai*") of what has transpired; this dream, in turn, will be rendered at its conclusion (and that of the *poema*), into the written lyrical work before us.

Tsvetaeva's skepticism about the possibility of personal fulfillment in real life is evidenced also by her folklore-based *poemy*, two of which were written during the civil war period. In these *poemy*, she truncates the happily-ever-after endings of the original tales and ignores their moral strictures; her unions take place not on earth but in the sky and in death: "there," not "here." Hence, in the poet's rendition of the tale "Tsar'-Devitsa," her Amazon-like Tsar-Maiden and the musician Tsarevich are prevented from a real meeting in life by the machinations of a jealous stepmother and are joined only after they commit suicide and ascend to the sky while the kingdom on earth enters the throes of revolution.

In "Pereulochki," written in 1922 shortly before Tsvetaeva's departure from Russia and inspired by the *bylina* "Dobrynia i Marinka," a sorceress-seductress uses words to seduce a man and take him on a verbally imaginative journey by

12. Tsvetaeva, *IP*, pp. 441–42.

13. Tsvetaeva's familiarity with Nietzsche's work is reflected in her essay "Iskusstvo pri svete sovesti" and in correspondence. For a discussion of the essay, see Angela Livingston's article, "Tsvetaeva's 'Art in the Light of Conscience,'" in *Russian Literature Triquarterly*, no. 11 (1975), pp. 363–78.

water, fire, and air, by boat and steed, beyond the limits of earth into an azure "second land." This azure, it appears, is only the threshold of the heavenly realms: "Pervaia tsvel' / Prigorod lish'! / Etikh zemel' / Trideviat' ikh!" But there, cut off from the world, the sorceress transforms the man into an aurochs and leaves him. Her verbal magic is geared to seduce and dupe not only her victim, but the reader as well; for she carries both away from the real world into the world of the imagination. Whereas in the original *bylina* the victim is returned to his former shape and the evil sorceress is punished, in Tsvetaeva's interpretation, he is left to wander in azure fields, and the sorceress, presumably, returns to earth to seduce anew.

Mólodets (1922), although written in exile, also belongs to this group of folklore-based *poemy* (its source is the tale "Упыр"). The heroine here, in contrast to the Marusia of the tale, ultimately chooses to leave a loving husband and infant on earth in order to join the vampire she loves in a fiery blue sky:

Та—ВВЫСЬ,
Тот—ВБЛИЗЬ:
СВИЛИСЬ,
ВЗВИЛИСЬ:

ЗНОЙ—В ЗНОЙ,
ХЛЫНЬ—В ХЛЫНЬ!
До-мой
В ОГНЬ СИНЬ.¹⁴

In these *poemy*, flights reflect the heroines' need to distance themselves from the demands and obstacles of real life and their desire to surrender to ecstasy, no matter what its source. The urge is to escape physical involvements and to substitute for them a spiritual passion, hence the "*ogn' sin'*." The flights trace the passion of the flesh metamorphosed into that of the spirit, and the sexual partners with whom the heroines are united are mythical, spiritual beings. As the persona of *Poema Kontsa* later points out, home is not in the bedroom, but in the sky toward which she rushes on her mythical steed: "Konem, rvanuvshim konoviaz' — / Vvys'! —i verevka v prakh."¹⁵

Tsvetaeva's emigration to the West in 1922 heightened her sense of homelessness on earth and her skepticism about the likelihood of finding fulfillment in real life relationships. Russia receded into a distance still painfully immediate and became identified with this distance: ". . . tot bezprovolochnyi udar, / Kotoromu imia-dal'." The note sounded in her poetry shortly before exile—"Zdes' net svidan'itsa / Zdes' tol'ko provody"—prevailed. In the cycle "Berlin," Tsvetaeva spoke of this time as one of a brotherhood of the dispossessed, of

14. Marina Tsvetaeva, *Mólodets* (Letchworth, Eng., 1971), p. 105. Professor Simon Karlinsky, in his study, *Marina Cvetaeva: Her Life and Art* (Berkeley, 1966), p. 228, perceptively links the image of physical ascension and apotheosis experienced in these folklore-inspired *poemy* with similar images in later *poemy*, finding that they demonstrate "the close connection in the poet's mind between the notions of artistic creativity and total union or fusion with another being, or, possibly, with the universe. . . ."

15. Tsvetaeva, *IP*, p. 453.

universal orphanhood, and of a heaven of Spartan friendships. Her aversion to the physical cares and restrictions of daily life was aggravated by conditions of extreme poverty which deprived her of privacy and time for writing.

The pressures and demands of such an existence assumed in her work the shape of an enclosed space, a prison from which she sought an exit. Departure from this space into other worlds is preceded by a collapse of walls, ceilings, doors, and the subsequent appearance of gaps which lead out. In the cycle "Son," one goes to sleep in order not to see walls, or to remove the ceiling, or to unlock the doors of one's own body. In "Drevniaia tshcheta" the persona emphatically states her desire to step out of her body: "Ponimaesh', chto iz tela von—khochu!"¹⁶ Conversely, the poet saw her working paradise as a quiet, and above all, empty room, one reminiscent of her azure skies:

A worker's paradise, my paradise, and since it is paradise, it is naturally unavailable here. In emptiness—in silence—from morning on. Paradise first of all is an empty place. Even if spacious, spacious—tranquil. Tranquil—light. Only emptiness imposes nothing, does not force things out, does not exclude. In order that everything might be, it is necessary that there be nothing. Everything cannot bear nothing. . . .¹⁷

Tsvetaeva, particularly in the mid-twenties, relied on correspondence as a means by which to escape into another reality. The impetus for her flights, or now, more accurately, defiance of ordinary space, became a desire for perfect communication, for escape from the spiritual isolation and poverty of her daily life and *byt*. Like sleep, she notes in "Zaochnost'," correspondence breaks down the wall of ordinary space and opens up a different space through which a message can be carried. Once the communication is completed, the space again becomes an impenetrable wall. Although Tsvetaeva felt the dream to be the most perfect form of otherworldly communication, she viewed correspondence as the second best, one whose laws were the same as the dream's.¹⁸ Consequently, the atmosphere of her epistolary poems is strongly reminiscent of that of dream-scapes, and her communiqués frequently take place on the borderline between waking and sleeping. They resemble the *poemy* described earlier. In both, passion, because it is not consummated, is sustained at an intense level, so well captured by the fiery blue of *Mólodets* and delineated by Iurii Ivask as Tsvetaeva's Bacchic paradise: "*Vakkhicheskii rai, uvekovechennaia obessmerchennaia zemnaia strast' v ee napriazhenneishem momente. . .*"¹⁹ To one of her correspondents, Alexander Bakhrakh, she wrote of the passionate nature of her epistolary world: "Ia *strastnee* Vas v moei zaochnoi zhizni: chelovek *chuvstv* ia v zaochnosti prevrashchaius' v cheloveka *strastei*, ibo *dusha* moia—*strastna*, a Zaochnost'—*strana Dushi*."²⁰ Most important, perhaps, correspondence allowed intimacy without recourse to the senses and, in Tsvetaeva's case, it gave birth to poetry; yet the very

16. Marina Tsvetaeva, *Posle Rossii* (Paris, 1928), p. 125.

17. Tsvetaeva, "Natal'ia Goncharova," p. 42.

18. Marina Tsvetaeva, *Neizdannye pis'ma* (Paris, 1972), p. 271.

19. Iurii Ivask, "Pis'ma M. I. Tsvetaevoi Iu. Ivasku (1933–1937)," *Russkii Literaturnyi Arkhiv* (1956), p. 230.

20. Bakhrakh, "Pis'ma Mariny Tsvetaevoi," p. 328.

physical distance which the poet's words had to traverse was in itself a prerequisite for such intimacy; physical proximity inevitably would have destroyed it.²¹ Tellingly, her most impassioned correspondence was with men she barely knew in person—Bakhrakh, Pasternak, and Rilke (whom she never met).

The poet's intention to transcend the limits of ordinary reality in the cycle "Provoda" (1923) is indicated by her dedication to Pasternak: "Moemu bratu v piatom vremeni goda, shestom chuvstve i chetvertom izmerenii—Borisu Pasternaku."²² She entrusts her poetic voice to telegraph wires and orders it to tear through the restrictions imposed on it by the meter of the poetic line and that of space. She orders it to outdistance time with its "false accounts" so that her message might reach her departing friend. The intense despair at separation that begins the cycle smolders as a pent-up passion within the persona's body, bursts as a cry from her womb, and then matures with patient waiting into a first-born child-song, one which for the persona has greater significance than a real child:

Песнь! С этим первенцем, что пуще
 Всех первенцев и всех Рахилей . . .
 —Недр достовернейшую гущу
 Я мнимостями пересилю!²³

The ineffectuality of physical separation on the spiritual bond of the two poets is also the theme of "Ras-stoianie: versty, mili" (1925). There the verbal prefix *ras-*, designating undoing, splitting, separating, and tearing part, becomes the main motif of the poem as the persona dwells on how the conditions of life have "moved apart," "transplanted," "unglued" and "unsoldered" their two fates, yet notes that theirs is a spiritual, poetic fusion and not a physical one that can be undone.

When, in "Provoda," the persona realizes that she will not be able to meet with her poet-friend in real life, she conjectures that perhaps they will meet in a dream: "Avos' uvidimsia vo sne." In the *poema*, *S moria*, written on the seacoast, such a meeting is arranged. Whimsically, aided by an impossible north-southerly wind, the persona jumps into the other poet's dream. Via this lightning-speed route she bypasses all impediments of *byt*: her communiqué reaches him unstamped, uncensored, weightless, and without errors; the dream allows the persona to be dispatched *in toto*. Real time can be temporarily ignored, for dawn is the dream's sole "censor." Both in form and content the *poema* is in keeping with its definition as the "stenogram of a dream."

Initially, its persona suggests an equality between her own creative force and that of the sea by which she strolls; both play with and transform the things that come to them; she sees them participating in a mutual game. What the sea tosses on shore is picked up by the persona; her verbal art (mouth) makes each

21. Tsvetaeva herself recognizes this fact in a letter to Pasternak: "Ia by ne mogla s toboi zhit' ne iz-za neponimaniia, a iz-za ponimaniia. . . . Ia tebia ponimaiu izdaleka, no esli ia uvizhu to, chem ty prel'shchaesh'sia, ia zal'ius' prezren'em, kak solovei pesnei. Ia vzlikuiu ot nego. Ia izlechus' ot tebia mgnovenno. Kak izlechilas' by ot Gëte i ot Geine, vzglianuv na nikh . . ." (Tsvetaeva, *Neizdannnye pis'ma*, pp. 310–11).

22. Tsvetaeva, *IP*, p. 753.

23. Tsvetaeva, *Posle Rossii*, p. 74.

item evoke a motif from her past; each is savored according to its merit; none is found satisfying, and the splinters she finds to foretell the poets' future tell of the temporal and empty nature of fame.

As the dream draws to a close, her attitude to the sea changes. She senses the insignificance of her own brief life and creative chatter (*molot'*) when juxtaposed to the seemingly timeless and mighty grinding (also *molot'*) of the huge mill that is the sea. The bits and pieces that it deposits on shore are mere leftovers of what is contained in its elemental depths, just as the poem is but a shorthand of the poet's intent, her "depths." Whatever is given expression, whatever surfaces, is unsatisfyingly fragmentary and imperfect. When the persona finds a perfect starfish, its value lies in wholeness. Just as she wanted her "entire being" to reach her addressee, she wants something perfect and whole to offer as a gift from the seacoast. The starfish presents itself as a direct and untransformed link with the sea's primordial depths. As such, it is more ancient than the Star of Bethlehem and more reliable than the unsure red star of the Soviets which resulted from the breaking off of one of the points of the Star of Bethlehem. It can establish a contact between the ocean and the failure the heroine sees in the Soviet state. After suggesting that her perfect and natural star replace the one she considers temporal and faulty, the persona, tired, wants to be joined in "mutual" sleep with her addressee. The dream begins to fade and the landmarks of the seascape (*marina*) that she (*Marina*) has been describing and those of her own facial features blend, recede, and fade out of sight, as do the words of the *poema*: "Nos, dumal? Mys! / Brovi? Net, dugi, / Vykhody iz— / Zrimosti."²⁴ And the poets go into a dreamless sleep, itself analogous to eternity.

Tsvetaeva's heroine does not fare as well in making contact with her addressee in the epistolary *poema* that followed, *Popytka komnaty* (1926), an ambitious and masterful exploration of the psychology of space. Part of its failure as a communication, Tsvetaeva thought, was due to her inability to decide to whom she was addressing it, Pasternak or Rilke.²⁵ In the *poema*, the heroine tries her hand at creating a setting and atmosphere which would induce her addressee to appear. First she attempts to fashion an imaginary room; in this task the unknown and magnetic quality of the "fourth wall" dominates her consciousness, presenting itself mainly as the space behind her back. However, she is unable to rid herself of the fears and insecurities that concentration on it brings to mind. Even when she shifts her focus to the ceiling or floor, paranoia resulting from previous associations oppresses her. Because she herself feels uncomfortable and hedged in within the cerebral design of her construct, the addressee does not respond to her summons.

Indeed, the very idea of constructing the delimiting space of a room is alien to the poet's inclination to break through the confines of rooms into open space. Perhaps recognizing this, the heroine alters her approach and now hopes to create

24. Tsvetaeva, *NP*, p. 537.

25. A discussion of Tsvetaeva's friendship with Pasternak is to be found in Jane A. Taubman's "Marina Tsvetaeva and Boris Pasternak: Toward the History of a Friendship" in *Russian Literature Triquarterly*, no. 1/2 (1972), pp. 303-21; and Olga Raevsky-Hughes's "Boris Pasternak: Marina Tsvetaeva (K istorii druzhby)," *Vestnik russkogo khristianskogo dvizheniia*, no. 100 (1971), pp. 281-305. The initial versions of Tsvetaeva's letters to the poet were subsequently published in Tsvetaeva, *Neizdannye pis'ma*.

a dream in which the two can meet, for the dream is defined here as an abyss, a wall-less room consisting of planes: "Komnata? Prosto—ploskosti."²⁶ Her ride through this abyss by phaeton will not be fatal as it was for Phaëthon, for whereas his carriage had no brakes, a table which materializes because of the writer's need to lean will serve as brakes for hers (it must be remembered that in Tsvetaeva's view, a poet's falls are never fatal). Objects and meetings in this dream world come about by an unspoken mutual agreement. The two friends' projected meeting place recalls Dushenka's magical home in Bogdanovich's *poema* by that name.

The interval of the heroine's waiting for the arrival of her addressee is filled with a digression on corridors, the spatial equivalents of waiting. For as waiting connects two events in time, the second of which will take place in the future, corridors connect rooms; both have a quality of being "in transit." Tsvetaeva fully explores this temporal and spatial association. Life's events are reduced to a maze of corridors; the body itself is seen as a house with corridors of coursing blood and a corridor-like network of nerves which the poet merges with the railroad network by which she expects the addressee, whom she anxiously awaits, to arrive. Finally, the heroine becomes the light at the end of the corridor-tunnel through which the addressee is carried by the train and the wind, the mythical messenger of poetry by which Tsvetaeva's heroines frequently make contact with their addressees.

But the meeting of the two friends is on this occasion but a greeting, for the heroine abruptly goes off into a dreamless sleep. The walls of her own room disappear, the ceiling caves in, and the room fills with water.²⁷ All that remains of the two are their voices calling each other in the vocative case. Again, the heroine recognizes, as she did in "Provoda," that her strength is in her poetic voice, not in her skill as an "interior designer" of rooms.

It is by this voice that Tsvetaeva, after Rilke's death at the end of 1926, tried to reach him in her epistolary work, "Novogodnee." (Many of the images in this work crystallized from a dream she described in a letter to Pasternak.²⁸) In a series of conjectures and childlike questions her thoughts focus on the dead poet's new sense of perception and her own altered perception of life under the impact of his death. Underlying her reflections is a refusal to accept life as a totality of experience or death as an empty void in which the dead poet has become nothing and in which she, still alive, has disappeared from his thoughts. For her the event demands the postulation of a third reality which is neither life nor death; she feels that it is a state in which (as in dreams) one experiences an expanding consciousness, acquires new senses, and becomes part of a nothingness where all is possible.

She questions the poet about his skyward journey and suggests that his course is analogous to her own poetic journeys. As he rises upward, divisions

26. Tsvetaeva reiterates that it is impossible to fashion a real room which approximates the space of a dream room in a letter to Anatolii Shteiger in 1936 (see Marina Tsvetaeva, "Pis'ma Anatoliiu Shteigeru," in *Opyty*, 5 [1955]: 61).

27. For an account of Tsvetaeva's quandary over *Popytka komnaty* and a more complete discussion of the work, see pp. 136–52 of Vitins, "Escape from Earth." Water imagery, particularly inundations, frequently accompany the onset of sleep or departures in Tsvetaeva's verse (as they do in Mayakovsky's "Pro eto" and Mandelstam's "Bessonitsa"). Bachelard discusses this phenomenon in *L'Air et les Songes*, p. 33.

28. See Tsvetaeva, *Neizdannyye pis'ma*, pp. 319 and 325.

and oppositions cease as they do in the realm of correspondence; body and soul become as one. She now reasons that the two of them did not meet in real life because their strongest common bond was otherworldliness; "Iz vsego *togo* odin lish' *svet* tot / Nash byl, kak my sami tol'ko otsvet / Nas,—vzamen vsego sego —ves' *tot svet*!"²⁹

Her conjectures about the nature of the heavens are informed with a child-like wonder and recall some of her earlier aerial heights. Again, as she notes in a letter to Pasternak, much of her intuition about the atmosphere of "that world" derives from dreams:

How well I know that world! From dreams, from the air of dreams, from the dense clutter and urgency of dreams. How I dislike this [world], how degraded I feel in this one. Just try to conceive that world: its light, illumination, objects lit *differently* with your light, with mine.³⁰

She suggests that there are many heavens and that they are terraced like mountains, that God is a growing baobab tree, and that the air there is like an empty Aeolian tower resonating with sound. Tsvetaeva concludes her "letter" in anticipation of meeting the dead poet, if not in person, then, as she meets with all her correspondents, through poetry:

—Досвиданья! До знакомства!
Свидимся—не знаю, но—споемся.
С мне-самой неведомой землею—
С целым морем, Райнер, с целой мною!³¹

The *poema* itself integrates images from Rilke's poetry and echoes his fascination with death (its particular space) and his recognition of the inadequacy and incompleteness of life.

The last of Tsvetaeva's correspondence and dream related *poemy* was *Poema vozdukh* (1927), which is both a synthesis of the earlier *poemy* in its perception of space and a departure from them. It, too, relies heavily on the dream experience for its atmosphere, but, unlike the earlier works, the heroine's goal is no longer union with an addressee or a mythical figure. Her goal is solitary and unceasing cerebral flight. Throughout the work the theme of captive existence mingles with the themes of sleep, death, freedom, and creativity as the dreamer journeys upward into transcendence through the seven realms of air. Each air is characterized by the quintessence of some physical state and each, in turn, suggests a psychological frame of mind, a state of being.

The heroine's travels again start at the brink of sleep; she praises night for its sharpening of one's senses. As the ascent begins, the heroine-poet is joined by a nameless companion-poet. While on earth, the poets are "together," yet separate, and it is only when they have left the bounds of earth and entered into the "first air" that they enjoy togetherness. Because this level is not yet free from earth's gravity, however, they experience difficulty and are forced to struggle.

29. Tsvetaeva, *NP*, p. 484.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 318.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 485.

Images recall the adversities of the civil war period with its famine, typhus, and atmosphere of imprisonment. For the poets, this imprisonment is solitary confinement within their lungs; the shortage of breath they suffer is reminiscent of Blok's fate. They can either accept this condition or stop breathing the air of oppression and strife altogether. By choosing the latter course, they break through the confines of their cell, metamorphose into lungs, and advance into the freer space of the second air where the heroine sings the joys and wonders of self-propelled flight, recommending it over the less trustworthy flight of airplanes:

Но сплошное аэро—
 Сам—зачем прибор?
 Твердь, стелись под лодкою
 Леткою—утла!
 Но—сплошное легкое—
 Сам—зачем петля
 Мертвая? Полощется. . .
 Плещется. . . И вот—
 Не жалейте летчика!
 Тут-то и полет!³²

By the time they leave this air and enter the next, they have lost the last of their physical attributes—weight—and have become pure spirits. At this point, they have arrived at the threshold of the realm where, in "Pereulochki," the sorceress parted ways with her companion, telling him that he must go further alone; elsewhere, too, Tsvetaeva stresses the ultimately solitary path of the spirit: "—Ты i put' i tsel', / Ты i sled i dom. / Nikakikh zemel' / Ne otkryt' vdvoem" ("Beregis' . . .").³³

Each of the poets now travels separately through a liquid and plashing third air, a rare and harsh judgmental fourth air, and a fifth air replete with elemental sound. Each movement upward corresponds to a movement downward into essence. The sixth air forms a transition from the upper regions into an air that is better than air, the realm of abstract thought. With her entry here, the poet, who has always felt herself to be an exile on earth, returns to her home in the sky, the native soil (*grunt*) of those who feel themselves to be homeless on earth, the other soil. Of her body, the Orpheus-like head alone remains, and the *поэма*, in images recalling Mandelstam's poem "Ia nenavizhu svet," concludes in a hymn to the unceasing and boundless activity of the human mind:

. . . Из лука—выстрелом—
 Ввысь! Не в царство душ—
 В полное владычество
 Лба. Предел?—Осиль:
 В час, когда готический
 Храм нагонит шпиль
 Собственный—и вычислив

32. Ibid., p. 556.

33. Tsvetaeva, *IP*, p. 200.

Всё,—когорты числ!
 В час, когда готический
 Шпиль нагонит смысл
 Собственный. . .³⁴

With this solo flight into infinity and its declaration of the primacy of the mind over spirit, Tsvetaeva's journeys away from earth ended. The more abstract and inventive her explorations of space and dreams became, the further her cerebral flights took her in search of essence, the less accessible her works became to readers. Their failure to understand her meaning ("ot polnogo nedokhozheniia ot nechego ne poniatnosti") accentuated her own growing sense of isolation.

In the late 1920s and 1930s, the expansive vision which characterized the *poemy* of the early twenties lost its scope and became inverted. Undoubtedly the death of Rilke and a decrease in the volume and intensity of her correspondence with Pasternak, as well as a disillusionment with him as a person, contributed to Tsvetaeva's abandonment of her spacious dream and correspondence worlds.

Instead of breaking out through the walls of existence into space, the poet retreated to the more immediate world of nature, things, and her own past. The house of "Dom" (1931) is an extended metaphor for the persona; its windows gaze into the self and its past; in its confines she intends to live out the rest of her days—" . . . Ot ulitsy vdali / Ia za stikhami konchu dni— / Kak za vetviami buziny"³⁵—no longer addressing herself to untold heights. In "Kust" (1934), not finding anyone who needs her in this world, she turns to a bush for a listener. Yet even her love for nature is threatened by the incursions of man: the trees which, in the cycle "Derev'ia" of 1924, brought her closer to the sky that she loved, in the "Derev'ia" of 1934 have become city dwellers who must struggle like their brother-poets for survival in an environment threatened by the encroachments of modernity. A shaky bus ride in *Avtobus* (1934–36) takes her out of town and deposits her into the lap of nature where she joyously greets the green beauty of the fields and is elated by an anticipation of freedom, only to discover that this freedom is illusory. Men have limited this joy by arbitrarily enclosing it in gates, ones which for her summarize existence itself:

И вдруг—огромной рамой
 К живому чуду—Аз—
 Подписанному—мрамор:
 Ворота: даль и глаз

Сводящие. (*В сей рамке*
Останусь вся—езде.)
 Не к ферме и не к замку,
 А сами по себе—³⁶

34. Tsvetaeva, *NP*, p. 562.

35. Tsvetaeva, *IP*, p. 293.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 556–57.

In a letter to Iurii Ivask in 1934, Tsvetaeva separated herself from the "machine and aviatational" air of modern times and rejected it. She wrote that she felt compelled to turn toward "the stalactite caves of prehistory," "the underground realm of Persephone and Minos."

Significantly, at this time also, Tsvetaeva in her prose reminiscences emotionally returned to the Russia of her youth; it became for her a surrogate form of escape, another elsewhere. In her poetry, the *dal'* (distance) which with emigration had become synonymous with Russia, reasserted itself, now summoning her to the home that she had renounced:

Даль, прирожденная, как боль,
Настолько родина и стол
Рок, что повсюду, через всю
Даль—всю ее с собой несусь!

Даль, отдалившая мне близь,
Даль, говорящая: "Вернись
Домой!" Со всех—до горних звезд—
Меня снимающая мест!
(“Родина”)³⁷

Yet for the time being she resisted its call and it was her poetic craft that remained her most constant means of escape from the realities of existence. Whereas in the 1920s she had paid tribute to it in the guise of a romantic Genius-Muse and the fiery Pegasus-like steed which carried her into azure skies, her tribute in the thirties in the cycle "Stol" (1933) was to her writing table, the mundane and concrete object which had faithfully accompanied her everywhere:

Мой письменный верный стол!
Спасибо за то, что шел
Со мною по всем путям.
Меня охранял—как шрам.

.....

Строжайшее—из зеркал!
Спасибо за то, что стал
(Соблазнам мирским порог)
Всем радостям поперек³⁸

She links it with the forest: her own poetic growth has kept the tree in it alive. It is on this table that she wants to be laid out when she dies. With characteristic Tsvetaevan humor and self-irony, the persona envisions herself in death modestly covering her nakedness with the wings which in earlier days gave her access to infinite heights.

37. Ibid., p. 297.

38. Ibid., pp. 297–98.

When Tsvetaeva's dire family circumstances precipitated a return to the Soviet Union in 1939, she almost ceased to write original poetry. And when she did write, she no longer felt it to be an intrinsic need: "*Ja svoe napisala. Mogla by, konechno, eshche, no svobodno mogu ne . . .*" (August 1940).³⁹ By not writing, however, Tsvetaeva relinquished her surest exit from the terrors with which she was faced at the time and forfeited what she herself had earlier called the poet's protection from fatal falls.

Death had never been distant from her poetry—her otherworldly flights, explorations of space, and desire for novelty and transcendence can be read as mental journeys into the realm of death. Like the traveler in Baudelaire's "Le Voyage," a work that she translated in the year before her suicide, Tsvetaeva at an early age had discovered the rift between the "immeasurable dream" and the "limitations of the seas"; she had left her native home; in poetry and correspondence she had journeyed toward the realization of her dreams until she was deceived by them as well. Tired and disillusioned, the poet had literally and figuratively returned to the realities of the world from which she had departed. Still desirous of finding novelty, she felt now that only death could lead her to it:

Смерть! Старый капитан! В дорогу! Ставь ветрило!
Нам скучен этот край! О Смерть, скорее в путь!,
Пусть небо и вода—куда черней чернила,
Знай—тысячами солнц сияет наша грудь!
(“Плаванье”)⁴⁰

39. Tsvetaeva, *Neizdannye pis'ma*, p. 611.

40. *Mastera russkogo stikhotvornogo perevoda*, vol. 2, Biblioteka poeta, Bol'shaia seriia (Leningrad, 1968), p. 258.