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AN ARITHMETIC OF RESISTANCE: TSVETAEVA'S *MOTHER AND MUSIC*

I

This essay will be a study of Marina Tsvetaeva's *Mother and Music*, a memoir written in Paris in 1934, one of the several prose pieces that belong to her years of emigration, 1922-1939.

Mother and Music is related to poetry in three ways. First, its subject is the origination and growth of a poet. Second, it is oriented as much to words, even to component parts of words, as to the tale being told and idea conveyed, for, as Tsvetaeva said: "A poet's prose differs from a prose writer's prose – its unit of effort is not phrase but word – often syllable".¹ And, third, it tacitly enacts the metaphor for poetic creativity which she put forward, a few years earlier, in the essay "Art in the Light of Conscience". I shall start with this metaphor.

It is a mathematical, an arithmetical one. Poets writing in this century have often invoked the (apparent) certainty of the natural sciences or that of mathematics, to support an account of their creative experience. Ezra Pound wrote, in 1912, that "what the analytical geometer does for space and form, the poet does for the states of consciousness".² In "Art in the Light of Conscience", Tsvetaeva declared that "genius" meant:

To let oneself be annihilated right down to some last atom, from the survival (resistance) of which will grow – a world. For in this, this, this atom of resistance (resistivity) is the whole of mankind's chance of genius. Without it there is no genius – there is the crushed man who [...] bursts the walls not only of the Bedlams and Charentons but of the most well-ordered households too.

¹ MARINA TSVETAEVA, letter to V.V. Rudnev, quoted in V. SHVEITSER, *Byt i bytie Mariny Tsvetaevoi* (Paris, Sintaksis, 1988), p. 408.

² EZRA POUND, *Selected Prose 1909-1965* (London, Faber and Faber, 1973), p. 332.

There is no genius without will [...]. Will is that unit to the countless milliards of the elemental onslaught thanks to which alone they *are* milliards [...] and without which they are noughts – bubbles above a drowning man.³

The metaphor (or implicit simile) in the second paragraph, though somewhat less direct than Pound's analogy, is striking. What you are overpowered by, in your creative condition, is compared here to a row of noughts – scrawled, say, on a page – which could remain just that: nought, in themselves nothing, and for you an annihilation. Their negative and destructive effect can be transformed by your act of will. This act, by which you turn nothing into something (into everything – "a world"), chaos into creation, is compared to the act of writing a figure one in front of a row of noughts, turning them in a trice into thousands or millions.

With similar appeal to a precise science, Tsvetaeva's contemporary and friend Boris Pasternak invoked "theoretical physics" when, propounding a theory of creativity (that same year, 1931, as it happened), he wrote of the poet as making a copy of reality when reality had been altered by "a force 'called feeling'", a ray of force comparable to a ray of light.⁴ Like Tsvetaeva, he tried hard to convey what he once, in a letter to her, self-consciously named the "objectivity" of art.⁵ Years earlier, he had invoked precision and objectivity of another kind, those of verse metrics, when he likened the way reality needs art to the way a line of trochaic verse, which has stopped mid-word on its last down beat, needs the expected light upward feminine syllable.⁶ He is different from Tsvetaeva in that he sees the poet as relatively passive, as one who copies, or supplies; for Tsvetaeva the poet always fights back.

Another contemporary poet, and friend of Tsvetaeva's, Osip Mandelstam, also appealed to mathematics in an account of poetry:

The sight of a mathematician squaring some ten-figure number without pausing to think fills us with a certain astonishment. But all too often we lose sight of the fact that a poet raises a phenomenon to its tenth power, and

³ *Art in the Light of Conscience: Eight Essays on Poetry by Marina Tsvetaeva*; trans. and ed. ANGELA LIVINGSTONE, (London, Bristol Classical Press, 1992), p. 152.

⁴ BORIS PASTERNAK, "A Safe-Conduct", *Pasternak on Art and Creativity*; ed. ANGELA LIVINGSTONE (Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 101.

⁵ Letter of 25 March 1926, included in *Pasternak, Tsvetayeva, Rilke, Letters Summer 1926*; ed. Yevgeny Pasternak et al., trans. M. Wettlin and W. Arndt, (London, Jonathan Cape, 1986), p. 45. [Note: "revelations" (line 7 on p. 45) should be replaced by "revelation".]

⁶ From "Pasternak's Early Prose Fragments", in LIVINGSTONE, *Pasternak on Art and Creativity*, p. 33.

the modest exterior of a work of art often deceives us as to the monstrosly condensed reality it possesses.⁷

His metaphor, like hers, speaks of a swift, enormous increase; it also speaks of the ordinary look of something which is actually extraordinary; and it too refers to arithmetic. Just square this number, just add a unit in front of these zeroes. But, although, unlike Pasternak's, his poet *is* conceived as active, he too has nothing of Tsvetaeva's notion of withstanding. For her, it is both an action and a reaction.

The reaction is to something perceived as an "onslaught" [наитие],⁸ the uncontrolled "elemental", something overwhelming that most people cannot cope with (if it happens to them). Elsewhere in "Art in the Light of Conscience" we read: "Genius: the highest degree of subjection to the invasion [наитие] – one; control of it – two." And later: "Why out of all those who're walking along the streets of Moscow and of Paris does it come upon, precisely, me, and come externally in such a way that I don't foam at the mouth and don't fall down on flat ground?" Tsvetaeva shares with some Romantics the experience of poetic power as a sudden possession or invasion and, despite what she says about an unchanged outward appearance, she is not far from Pushkin's poet who, in the midst of the "nothingness" of daily living, suddenly has his heart and tongue ripped out by a "seraphim".⁹ But she differs from this tradition in her avoidance of any hint of "another world", whether it be Shelley's "interpenetration of a diviner nature through our own" or Viacheslav Ivanov's conception of the poet's union with "the world soul".¹⁰ Perhaps it is because the consolation of "other worlds" is not available to her that she introduces a tacit heroism or bravery and insists on the action of "will". Her reaction to what possesses, invades, attacks, is an act of opposition: my unit against those ciphers; their flood, stopped by my thumb.

⁷ "Utro akmeizma" (1913), my translation. Published translations of this essay can be found in CLARENCE BROWN, *Mandelstam*, (Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp 143-46 and in *Osip Mandelstam: Selected Essays*; trans. SIDNEY MONAS (Austin and London, University of Texas Press, 1977), pp. 128-32.

⁸ *Naitie*: in my translation of "Art in the Light of Conscience" (see fn.3), I have rendered *naitie* as "visitation", but do not wish to perpetuate this: the meaning is not personal. The dictionary gives "inspiration", but Tsvetaeva is evoking the etymology of the word – a "coming upon" (*na*: upon; *-it-*: come or go). Joseph Brodsky, on the occasion of his visit to the University of Essex for the conferment of an honorary degree (in 1987), suggested "dawning".

⁹ ALEKSANDR PUSHKIN, "Poet" (The Poet, 1827), and "Prorok" (The Prophet, 1826).

¹⁰ The expressions quoted in the sentence occur in P.B. SHELLEY, "A Defence of Poetry", in *Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley in ten volumes*; ed. R. Ingpen and W.E. Peck, (London, Ernest Benn, 1965), vol. VII, p. 136, and VIACHESLAV IVANOV, "O granitsakh iskusstva" in *Borozdy i mezhi* (Moscow, Musaget, 1916), *passim* (194), respectively.

I want to look at *Mother and Music* in the light of this two-part model, onslaught and resistance, and shall further divide "resistance" into two stages: first, acceptance, endurance, non-evasion ("to let oneself be annihilated"); second, opposition, the countering with something of one's own ("there is no genius without will"). The second stage is the transforming one, the poetic act *per se*; the first is a *sine qua non*.

"Resistance" characteristically informs Tsvetaeva's work and thought. If we were to follow her habit of juxtaposing writers, setting up various lapidary dualities – for example, "Pasternak is a taking in, Mayakovsky is a giving out"¹¹ – and try to construct a set of antitheses involving Tsvetaeva herself, we might start: "Mayakovsky joins the vanguard, Tsvetaeva the Resistance", or: "Pasternak yields, Tsvetaeva resists". In the very vocabulary of *Mother and Music* there are traces of the art-as-resistance model I have indicated.¹² "Mother did not educate – she tested: our power of resistance". "After such a mother there was only one thing for me to do – become a poet: to escape her gift, which would have suffocated me or made me a transgressor of all human laws" (we recall the "drowning man" or the "crushed man who bursts the walls"). And, likening the grand-piano to mountains: "the mountains weigh only on you and to remove them you must either go away or go up them. Go up the piano. Go up with your hands. As mother went up." The whole Memoir, in theme and composition, follows this model.

I shall mention here one other idea important to Tsvetaeva's conception of the poetic, or, as she generally calls it, the "lyrical": excess [излишек]. It is implicit in the model. There are too many noughts on the page. (Even one would be too many, as it means nothing.) When the "one" creates "milliards", there is too much for us to deal with. Joseph Brodsky writes, in an essay on Tsvetaeva's work, that one of the differences between art and reality is that

in art, owing to the properties of the material itself, it is possible to attain a degree of lyricism that has no physical equivalent in the real world¹³

Of course he is not calling the lyrical unreal. He means it is something more, something "over and above". There seems to be a link between his

¹¹ *Art in the Light of Conscience*; trans. LIVINGSTONE, p. 109.

¹² Subsequent quotations from this work are in my own translation, made from "Mat' i muzyka" in MARINA TSVETAeva, *Izbrannaia proza v dvukh tomakh 1917-1937* (New York, Russica, 1979), vol II, pp. 172-90. But a good translation of the whole of it is to be found in MARINA TSVETAeva, *A Captive Spirit: Selected Prose*; ed. and trans. J. Marin King (Virago, London, 1983), pp. 271-94.

¹³ JOSEPH BRODSKY, *Less than One: Selected Essays* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1986), p. 183 (from "A Poet and Prose"; trans. Barry Rubin).

idea and Tsvetaeva's many statements about excess or overlargeness, and especially the paragraph in *Mother and Music* which defines "lyricism" as

that of which there is always too little [...] which itself is shortage [...] that of which there cannot be too much because it is itself *the too much*

Tsvetaeva knew Rilke's work well and may here have been remembering the momentary attainment of excess which the acrobats, in the Fifth Duino Elegy, always fail to sustain: practising a new turn, at first they cannot perform it, then, the moment they can, it becomes nothing, at

die unsägliche Stelle, wo sich das reine zuwenig
unbegreiflich verwandelt – , unspringt
in jenes leere zuviel.
Wo die vielstellige Rechnung
zahlenlos aufgeht.

(the ineffable spot, where the pure too little
incomprehensibly changes, veering
into that empty too-much.
Where the many-digitated sum
solves into zero.)¹⁴

Again we have a mathematical metaphor about art; again the "too much" which always risks being "empty", noughts only.

All Tsvetaeva's writing presents a solidity which works against this risk. She builds with words, leaning them firmly against one another, not like ladders in space¹⁵ but like walls on and in the ground, as if to object to the fragility and evanescence of the artistic. Her own examples of excessiveness are often solidly fleshy. Mayakovsky, she says, is too large and dynamic for his own poems, they split at the seams from him, rupture their metres;¹⁶ the poet Voloshin, visiting her, was too big to get into her room;¹⁷ in one poem there are "tears bigger than eyes".¹⁸ *Mother and Music* is all about hugeness and over-abundant strength – of the assailant and of the resister.

¹⁴ RAINER MARIA RILKE, *Duino Elegies*; trans. J.B. Leishman and Stephen Spender, (London, Chatto and Windus, 1975 [first published 1939]).

¹⁵ Rilke's image, later in the Fifth Elegy.

¹⁶ In "Epic and Lyric of Contemporary Russia" in *Art in the Light of Conscience*; trans. LIVINGSTONE, pp.104-29.

¹⁷ In "A Living Word about a Living Man", in *A Captive Spirit* (see fn. 12).

¹⁸ "V chas, kogda moi milyi brat" (At the hour when my dear brother) in the cycle "Provoda".

II

The Memoir depicts a child (Marina Tsvetaeva from the age of one to that of thirteen) withstanding, both by accepting and by countering (and thereby transforming, as the one the noughts), an overpowering elemental force. The force is her mother's passionate and impatient influence, and her insistence that the daughter become a musician.

Maria Alexandrovna Mein wanted her first daughter to be the successful concert pianist she would herself have been if she hadn't given up career for family. She interprets the child's first babbling utterance as "gamma" (i.e. "musical scale") and starts teaching her music before she is a year old. By the age of five Marina is practising the piano four hours a day. Her whole experience of her mother is an experience of music and power. She is "born not into life but into music". The implicit blood recurs: "Mother gave us/ Marina and sister/ to drink from the opened vein of lyricism". It is also a flood, an "inundation" – which may recall the risk of drowning in the quoted "Art in the Light of Conscience" piece. And the "countless milliards" of the onslaught, there, are recalled here too in the excessiveness of all that the mother gave:

From the first minute to the last, how she gave to us [...] pressed upon us [...] poured down, pounded down right to the brimful – impression upon impression and memory upon memory, as if into a travel-trunk already crammed full [...]. Mother truly buried herself alive in us [...].

This happened to both girls, but the piano-playing only to Marina. "Mother martyred me with music" [Мать меня музыкой замучила]. Marina did not like playing the piano. Nevertheless, the Memoir is a hymn of praise to the instrument. Most of it consists of affirmative, affectionate descriptions of all the piano's aspects and accoutrements (or almost all – she disliked the score and the metronome). Fourteen reasons are given for loving the piano keys; there are vivid connotations of clefs and symbols; the keyboard, the music-stand, the pedal, the piano-stool, the cabinet of music-books – all are exhibited in enthusiastic detail. And – six perspectives on the grand piano itself: it is the one that you sit at; the one others sit at; the one you stand over; the panels you gaze into (her first ever mirror: a pre- and anti-Lacanian moment of entering the familial-integral world of music, the law of the Mother); the revealed strings you peer down at; and finally it is the images its whole shape calls to mind. In all this there is no word about what music she played, not a word about music as moving sound except, separately and admiringly, about the mother's playing. Her own was her doom. Her future virtuosity she compares to a husband whose name will be either Henri or Nikolai, from the H (or Russian N) shape the veins make on

the back of her hand as it practises in the prescribed way. This husband-bound playing is contrasted absolutely with the gloriously free playing of her mother who "descends onto the keyboard like a swan onto water." Marina loves swans: the treble clef is a swan which she traces out innumerable times on the stave.

Since the three concluding glimpses given of the mother at the piano are presented as stages towards her early death, I surmise that the swan analogy was chosen in recollection of Rilke's "Der Schwan", a poem in which a swan's gliding out serenely onto the water is an allegory for human dying. Marina was thirteen when her mother died; she then gradually stopped practising. The Memoir ends with her likening the vanishing of music from her life to the ebbing of the sea which "leaves hollows, at first deep, then growing shallow, then scarcely moist. These musical hollows – traces of maternal seas – stayed in me forever". Her emergence from both music and mother is marked by a perspectival switch in the water imagery. Before, there was an inundation which she was under; now there are pools she looks down at. In a slightly earlier passage, as she grew older and taller the piano went down – from above her head to up to her throat, then up to her chest, then her waist. For this child, becoming a poet is growing up.

III

I shall now take up the concept "resistance" and shall start with the "acceptance" stage. The child in the Memoir accepts the maternal assault, "lets" it happen, in a number of ways. By doing the four hours' practice conscientiously, playing "with all my repulsion towards playing" (as if saying "with all my enthusiasm"). By interpreting her mother's every harshness or error as something of value: when, for example, she told her things that were above her head, this was beneficial because "children don't need to be instructed, but to be spellbound". By understanding the mother's offering as not solely music but as "the lyrical" altogether. But more than anything else, by identifying herself with the mother as female and setting the female at the centre of the (Memoir's) world, relegating males to the periphery.

At this point I propose to dwell on the central placing of the female and to take, first, a prolonged glance at the opening sentence, to reveal in it an energetic revision of the traditional evaluation of the sexes. This will also be an occasion for adumbrating the difficulty of translating Tsvetaeva's prose.

"When, instead of the desired, predetermined, almost ordered, son Alexander, there was born nothing more than I, mother, swallowing a sigh, said 'at least she'll be a musician'." Conventional preference for a son, strengthened (scarcely mockingly) by three positive adjectives, which are balanced by three (not quite ironic) negative phrases in respect of the

daughter – "nothing more than", "swallowed a sigh" and "at least" – is multiply undermined. It is undermined, not just by our extra-textual knowledge that this girl will live up to the imperial and national-poet connotations of the name "Alexander", but internally, by a grammatical cunning. This is where translation cannot suffice and we have to look at the Russian.

Когда, вместо желанного, предрешенного, почти приказанного сына Александра родилась только всего я, мать, самолюбиво проглотив вздох, сказала: "По крайней мере будет музыкантша"

The five masculine words, all in the first half of the sentence (to be superseded), have unstressed, so-called "feminine", endings, while of the five feminine-gender words (born, I, mother, said, musician) the first three, occurring at the intonational highpoint, are strongly stressed: *родилась* (*was born*) on its ending, then *я* (*I*) and *мать* (*mother*) as prominent monosyllables. Moreover, as the genitive form of "Alexander" is identical with the nominative of the corresponding girl's name, this ambiguity, coming adjacent to *родилась*, enables us to read, above the text, "Alexandra was born". The mother's attitude is thus subtly subverted from the beginning. The daughter refuses to be regrettable. At the same time, through manipulation of grammar, she shows herself already accepting and identifying herself with the maternal force. The juxtaposition of the two monosyllables *я, мать* (*I, mother*), is so devised that they seem not opposed but conjoined, and suggest that the comma either be removed – *я, мать*: "I am mother" – or be made to indicate apposition: "I, that is to say – mother".

The Memoir can be analysed as an expansion of these two motifs: the valued but unborn or unstressed male; the stressed and balanced strengths of two joined females.

Here are some moves towards such an analysis. Mother teaches infant daughter the notes of the scale: "*do*, Musya, *do*, and here is *re – do, re*". For the child these names call up images which associate strength with femaleness. *Do, re* becomes, it's true, Doré, the male illustrator, but then, from *doré* (*golden*) it suggests a "dark-gold" place of origins at the bottom of the heart which is the place of Undine the water-maiden, one able to control dangerous waters. *Do, re* thus mutates from male to female. *Re, mi* becomes Rémy, the boy-hero of the story "Sans famille" whose happiness, we're told, is lost when he is sold to a wandering musician: this is a boy who, like "Alexander", is not there.

So far I am unravelling meanings tight-knit in the opening paragraph. More loosely and obviously, there is in the Memoir another fairy-tale boy sacrificed to music. This comes near the end, so that the recollection of a real girlhood is framed by accounts of two not quite real boys – the fictional

Rémy at the beginning, and the unnamed boy at the end, associated with fiction by having "gold-shining" hair. He appears at the second of the dying mother's three last informal piano recitals, at which, absorbed in listening, he unwittingly travels forward on his chair, to fall under the piano at the player's feet:

She helped him get up and [...] lightly smoothed his forehead as if reading herself into it. (The son Alexander). I shall never forget my mother with that boy who belonged to someone else. That was in all my lifetime the deepest *bow*.

(Whose bow? The boy's to the mother – deeper than Marina's own homage to her? Or the performer's to the perfect audient – deeper than to Marina whose own rapt listening was shadowed by her reluctance to perform? Or that of Tsvetaeva the writer who bows more deeply to her mother, by giving her, in her prose, this filial boy, than ever before "in her lifetime"?)

So the framing fable goes from a fictional boy who loses his family, is sacrificed to a musician and is linked to her "predetermined" but never born son Alexander; to a hypnotised boy who sacrifices himself to a musician, belongs to another family and is also linked, in memory, to the unborn son; meanwhile the real story within the frame is of a girl who is born, who belongs in her family and who *escapes* her threatened sacrifice to a musician.

Throughout the Memoir there are liked but excluded male figures, such as the stepbrother Andrei, who is not allowed to learn music because his mother, the previous wife, sang and boys don't sing, and the father, whose actual very distinguished achievement and fame are not even mentioned while his inability to sing *is*, along with his bad habit of laying (unclean) newspapers on the (holy) piano.¹⁹

It also contains many whimsical devaluations of masculinity. Whereas the "flat" sign suggests a secret signalling between mother and daughter, the negating "natural" sign suggests a "fool", someone who doesn't count, "a husband"; and the treble clef is a graceful swan while the bass clef is coarse and barbaric.

In other ways the narrative restores the masculine, while still subordinating it. Andrei finds his own way into music, by learning the guitar and playing all his songs to the mother on her deathbed. This seems another instance of Tsvetaeva's posthumously presenting her mother with a "boy who belonged to someone else", at the same time proving her to have been wrong: Andrei, not Marina, should have been trained in music. But it

¹⁹ Ivan Vladimirovich Tsvetaev (1846-1913) was the founder of the Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow. His work on this huge project had a considerable effect on Marina's childhood.

is still mother, even when dying, who distributes approbation, and Andrei's belated musical development has nothing of the challenge, defiance, effort, the engagement of wills, that make the two female persons central.

A meditation on the shape of the grand piano contributes to this theme of allowing the masculine a gentle subordinate success. It suggests both that of a middle-aged, waist-coated male dancer, the expert all the girls at the ball want to dance with, and that of an orchestra conductor (seen from the back): a controller of girls, and a controller of music. Yet mother controls them both, by controlling the piano; Marina, standing a little way off, hears her transform it and its metaphoric male figures from "hippopotamus" into "dragonfly".

IV

Displacement of a traditional male centrality, and self-identification with a central femaleness, facilitate the proto-poet's acceptance of a potentially crushing force, and represent the non-evasion which is the first component of "resistance". Its second component, the wilful countering of the force, the setting of the unit in front of the noughts, is found in the Memoir's subversion of its own title and topic. *Mother and Music* is, finally, about not Mother's, but Marina's, not music but writing.

For a start, it is itself a piece of writing, which, by surviving and being read by us, usurps the power of the once would-be dominant music. More important, within the text everything musical leads to something literary: to books, stories, images, words.

Do, re became a book. *Re, mi* became a story. The legendary Undine enters the text as the product of typically poetic word-play: удлинном, удлинном (*isolated, Undine-like*). Names of notes conjure colours and images and, with them, such poets as Bely and Rimbaud who linked the alphabet with colours. Poems Tsvetaeva will later write are mentioned as originating in the piano experience. The child's love of the piano is love of the *names* of its constituent parts: клавиши, клавиатура, бémol, ивоире, Elfenbein.²⁰

Despite mother's prohibition, she pores over her stepsister's music books, which are full of songs, i.e. of words and narratives, and she explains the dashes and gaps that will later be characteristic of her poetry as deriving from the way words to be sung are hyphenated and strung out beneath the staves. There is no description of musical sound in the Memoir but plenty of play with verbal sound: *klaviatura* sounds like wings of an eagle; *pedal'* gives rise to *pedel', pudel', padal'* (all of which lead outside the family,

²⁰ *Klavishi* – keys (Russian); *klaviatura* – keyboard (Russian); *bémol* – flat (French, Russian); *ivoire* – ivory (French); *Elfenbein* – ivory (German). Tsvetaeva grew up trilingual.

"beadle" being exemplified by her brother's tutor, "poodle" – the dog in "Sans famille", *padal'* meaning "carriage").

Even the hated metronome pays tribute to verse, for from it "there flowed onto me streams of the most tactless lyricism" – with double meaning of "tactless": discourteous towards mother and her hopes, and (as *takt* also means "beat") suggestive of poetic metres which, in her case, will be generally irregular or complex. It is interesting that Tsvetaeva relates the metronome to death: if she had not obliged it to contribute to verse it might, therefore, have annihilated her, like the "elemental" she has to endure and withstand – another trace reference to the "genius" model in "Art in the Light of Conscience".

Most powerfully of all, the physical piano becomes the mysterious material of verse. The mirrored face, when the child looks into the black panel of the instrument, comes back "from its darkest depth", like "a rose dipped in a pond of ink", and the author with easy transition remarks: "thus, all my life, in order to understand the simplest thing, I had to dip it in verse and see it *from there*".

As we saw, the opening sentence contains direct speech of the mother: "she'll be a musician". This the whole subsequent text proceeds to contradict, in the ways I have indicated and also in a number of explicit statements that break out in it like sighs of relief from the grown-up memoir-writer: "After such a mother, there was only one thing for me to do – become a poet". "But all this [interest in clefs] was a written, scribal, writer's fervour". "[She] demanded from me – herself! From me who was already a writer." "and how she never recognised that all my 'unmusicality' was only, only *another* music!"

The final sentence of the Memoir is at once a conclusion to this series of statements and an answer to the opening sentence, which we looked at. Carefully balanced like that one, it again equates in strength the daughter and the mother by setting them in similar phrases side by side. This time, however, the explicit assertion is of the daughter's liberation. Есть силы, которых не может даже в таком ребенке осилить даже такая мать (*There are powers which cannot, even in such a child, be vanquished even by such a mother*). That "mother" gets the last word I take to be a final homage to her: from woman to woman and from artist to artist.

V

I should like to point out the skill with which Tsvetaeva here, as in all her work, takes the opportunities afforded by Russian grammar. How by slightly over-extending its normal word-order allowances she produces unusual jolts of lucidity and sharpness. A single instance: at the end, when the child

stops practising, it is because mother is dead and there's no one to care how she plays, and also because her fear has gone,

from the consciousness that from there she could see (me, all of me) better [...] that she would grant me, me just as I am – forgiveness.²¹

This is from J Marin King's translation which, although I have used my own for quotation hitherto, is excellent in its rendering of Tsvetaeva's syntactic emphases. King succeeds in keeping the child-shout, "me!", as an interruption of the reflection on otherworldly vision, and cleverly gets the notion "forgive" to the climactic end. But not everything has been fitted in: Tsvetaeva so arranged syntax and sequence that "she-me-me" occurs as one unit:

that she me me (such, as I am) will forgive

A dative 'me', as required by "forgive" in Russian, is followed by an accusative "me" (on which the stress naturally falls: "the real me"). So this is like "I – mother" at the beginning.

Sometimes such patterns can be retained in translation. With smallest changes, I will translate one other expertly wrought sentence from this Memoir. Andrei (Andryusha) has been playing guitar to the ailing mother:

And who knows if she didn't then regret that *then* she obeyed the old llovaisky grandpa and her own young second-wifely tact instead of her clever, crazy heart – that is, that, forgetting all grandpas and wives, the first wife and herself the second, the musical grandpa of Asya and me as well as Andryusha's historical grandpa, she didn't sit us down, me at a writing-desk, Asya at her porridge, Andryusha at the grand-piano: 'do, Andryusha, do, and here is *re – do, re ...*' (which in my case led to nothing more than Doré, Gustave.)

But I see I have said nothing yet of the main *dramatis persona* of my childhood – the piano itself.²²

I have added the next sentence to show Tsvetaeva taking up straightforward subject-verb-predicate narration as contrast with the light complexities and near-metrical rhythms of the quoted long sentence. There, the hinting at sadness and sympathy and the humorous tracing in of what-might-have-been are done through a litany of familial relations closely interlinked with grammatical ones. This virtually comes across in translation, all but the tunefulness of the inflectional endings – which are, every one of them, either accusative or accusative-genitive, while mother, nameless and syntactically subordinate, functions as the active nominative to all these persons. The

²¹ *A Captive Spirit*, p. 293.

²² My translation, but see also J. Marin King's in *A Captive Spirit*, p. 287.

etymonic echo in *умного, безумного* is reduced by me to an alliteration ("clever, crazy"), but the chime of repetitions throughout the passage is still there – from "then" to "*then*", from "she didn't then regret" to "she didn't sit us down", and the "at ... at ... at ..." leading up to the "*do ... do... do...*" of what could have happened, before the swerve back down to what *did*. But then *do* is also Russian for "before" and, as prefix, can work somewhat like the German *Ur-*, and this reflection brings a complication into the whole hypothesising pattern which is untranslatable.

In 1914, Tsvetaeva wrote in a letter (about herself and her sister):

Mother died at 37, unsatisfied, unreconciled. Her tormented soul lives in us – only we reveal what she concealed. Her mutiny, her madness, her thirst grew in us to a scream.²³

Twenty years later, *Mother and Music* is the full revelation of another's torment. It is also, in structure as well as in statement, a conversion of the multitudinous "zeroes" of that other's oppression into the "milliards" of one's own art.

²³ Letter to V.V. Rozanov, 8 April 1914, in M. TSVETAEVA, *Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh*, (Moscow, Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1988), Vol. 2, p. 455.