Marina Tsvetaeva

Translated and introduced by Angela Livingstone

Marina Tsvetaeva, *born in 1892, published her first work in 1911. After the Revolution she wrote poems supporting the fight against Bolshevism, and emigrated in 1922. She returned to Russia in 1939, and committed suicide in 1941.*

Angela Livingstone *(born 1934) read Modern Languages (German and Russian) at Cambridge, graduating with first-class honours in 1956; she obtained her PhD in 1986. She has taught in the Literature Department of the University of Essex since 1966, and became Professor of Russian Literature in 1992. She has published books on Pasternak and a study of Lou Andreas-Salomé, and has translated Tsvetaeva's essays on poetry* (Art in the Light of Conscience; *Bristol, 1992). She continues to translate Pasternak and Tsvetaeva, and is currently beginning research on Andrei Platonov.*

The Poet as Ratcatcher

I

'Krysolov: The Ratcatcher' is a 'poema' (a long poem in several parts) subtitled 'A Lyrical Satire' and consisting of some two thousand lines divided into six cantos or, as they are headed, 'chapters'. I present here some sections from my unfinished translation.

The Poem was written by Tsvetaeva in 1925, mostly in Všenory near Prague, in the first stage of her exile; it was finished in Paris, at the beginning of the second stage. In February 1925 her son Georgii was born – 'in the full heat of my dream about the Ratcatcher and its first chapter'; Georgii, from his very birth, was always known as 'Mur' – the name of a legendary cat. I have not seen anyone comment on the equally present murine element in this name. Nor indeed on the closeness in sound of the Latin for 'rat' (*mus, muris*) to 'Muse' and 'music' (in Russian: *Muza, muzyka*).

'The Ratcatcher' must be the angriest celebration of music ever written. Music is praised throughout, but mainly through attacks on those who attack or ignore it. In Canto 5 three kinds of explicit attack upon music are satirised: the marginalising, the demonising, the sentimentalising. Most of the work is concerned with those who ignore it, living in the ways its absence allows. The market folk in Canto 3, the dreams dreamed in Canto 2, and the whole life-style of the burghers of Hamlin with their attitudes of caution, calculation and moderation,

along with their immoderate hoarding of material goods, their endless getting and spending, are presented as anti-musical, as are all unoriginality and conformity – on the part of the councillors whose opinions drift along with the Mayor's, of the rats who get fat the moment they find food, of the children who so submissively go to school every day. Tsvetaeva sees them all as various kinds of more or less helpless liars, concealers of what she calls the 'essence', that which is missing from the 'homes of the rich' (C2) and is lauded by the Ratcatcher in his Town Hall speech (C5).

'Essences' don't belong in our deconstructive times, and Tsvetaeva's enthusiasm for the very words for 'essence' (*sut'*, *sushchnost'*) has an old-fashioned ring. Her values, in life as in art, namely self-dedication, risk-taking, passion, talent, joy – though they may sound romantically absolute – are more understandable to us than her reiteration of 'essence', 'spirit' and 'soul'. She is certain of a truth and of the need to tell it. Meanwhile, the only pure non-liar, for her, is Music itself. Musicians can lie, instruments can lie (as the Piper says in Canto 4), but on the 'last day' (Piper, Canto 5) music will need neither instrument nor player – it will sound straight (from Heaven?) into your soul.

In such passages Tsvetaeva speaks as one in the wilderness giving warning to those gone astray. Moreover, God's own voice is heard, albeit in German, right at the beginning of the Poem, in the 'Digression about a Button'. "Mensch, wo bist /du/ ?" she quotes the Lord saying to Adam (*Genesis* III, 9) when Adam is hiding and has already put on the fig-leaf which, according to Tsvetaeva, was the proto-button, the first-ever concealment of the naked truth, leading directly to the hypocrisies of Hamlin Town. 'Naked' is a word the Piper (dressed in green, but spiritually undisguised) uses of himself several times. And "Mensch, wo bist du?" is Tsvetaeva's shout throughout the Poem. "Where are you, Man, among the distraction, indulgence and clutter of your life? Can't you hear the music?"

Two readings seem prompted by the story. Rats and children, punished for unthinking materialism and lives of conformity, drown deluded in stagnant ponds. This is the first. In the second, we see them being genuinely, gradually, seduced by music and drowning not in mud but in sound – that is, in art, in the spirit. Many lines suggest that the music drawing them on has dispensed with its performer, has become absolute. According to this second reading, all are transformed, being taught to discover the 'essence'. Most commentators seem to take this as the only appropriate reading, at least as regards the children, but the first must certainly be entertained as well: the sanity of the Old Rat's voice (C4) shows up the stupidity of the voices of the other rats; and there is the fact that the children, notwithstanding their non-murine joyousness in response to the first sound of the flute, have much in

common with the rats: they too go as more or less mindless herds towards the water: "I'm only going because everyone's going", some of them say, and "Don't think, just follow!" – these sarcastic words of the Piper's are memorably the last in the Poem.

Funny, sarcastic and down-to-earth as it is, with its lively linguistic inventiveness, the Poem can thus also be read as a work of prophecy, of salvation. In this connection it is interesting that the children are drowned – whereas some versions of the legend (such as Browning's) have them enclosed in a mountain – for Tsvetaeva's 1935 memoir 'Mother and Music' describes her mother (a frustrated concert pianist) deluging, 'inundating', her childhood with music; she considers she was born 'not into life but into music', and shows that this painful, exhausting upbringing was also the introduction to an elemental and saving lyricism she was never to abandon.

Everything in 'The Ratcatcher', as in all Tsvetaeva's work, radiates from this one high value, actualised either in the lengthy negations of those things that negate poetry or in lyrical affirmations such as 'Hindustan' / 'Pagoda domes' (C4) or 'Fur-quiet' / 'Minstrel' (C5).

It has often been pointed out that Tsvetaeva's 'world' is divided into two. On the one side, there is Art, which she sometimes calls, or associates with, *bytie*: (true) being. On the other, there is Everything Else – the falsity and dullness of everyday life: in Russian, *byt*. This duo of concepts, *byt i bytie* (both incorporating the verb 'to be') – often invoked by writers on Tsvetaeva and used by Viktoria Schweitzer for the title of her 1992 biography of her – corresponds to the maximalism characteristic of much in Russian thinking. Ecstasy *or* boredom; Heaven *or* Hell (there is no 'Purgatory' in the Orthodox cosmology); all *or* nothing. This dualism of extremes informs Tsvetaeva's essays about poetry. In one of them, 'Art in the Light of Conscience', room is also made for moral goodness but, for all her huge respect for this, Tsvetaeva makes clear she would never choose it. In 'The Ratcatcher', virtue is the Hamliners' most boring quality.

The world is also divided into two different kinds of excess. Tsvetaeva once defined the lyrical as 'that of which there cannot be too much because it is itself *the too much*'. In her poem-cycle 'The Poet', poetry is compared to a river in flood, an excess of water, a bursting of limits. In 'The Ratcatcher', she plays on words with the prefix *pere-* (over; too much). [Most of this is not yet translated, but see beginning of Canto 2 and 'transcolorations' (*pereliv*) in Canto 4.] With their habit of cultivating easy happy mediums, the Hamlin burghers know nothing of the lyrical excess. Yet their pursuit of security, wealth, comfort and food is excessive in its own way (an excess of 'fat' is how Tsvetaeva repeatedly describes it), and this is what attracts the rats. (One way or another, there is no chance, with Tsvetaeva, for anyone to represent an honourable

middle ground; no modest productive medium or compromise could ever be valid.)

As well as being a head-on confrontation of art and *byt*, 'The Ratcatcher' is a political-economic satire. It is an indictment of all social search for material prosperity, and also of the Bolshevik revolution in its later stages, especially of the New Economic Policy of the early 1920s, in which commerce and Bolshevism came together. The Bolsheviks are depicted as rats from the beginning, but it should be borne in mind that rats are not unambiguously dislikeable. Here they first enter, after all, as the enemies of music's enemies, and they preserve recollections of their earlier idealism – which, who knows, they may regain once they thin down. To go along with the customary disgust these animals provoke would probably show us to be conformists as dull as the Hamliners.

In her essay 'The Poet on the Critic' (1926) Tsvetaeva tells how she writes poetry. She *hears* the poem, pre-existing in some other dimension, then tries to capture its sounds in her words. In 'The Ratcatcher' – in which music, the heard art, stands for all arts – motifs of hearing and sound recur again and again. The stark word *zvuk* (sound) occurs exceptionally often, and often where we would expect some sweeter term such as 'melody', 'tune' or 'song'. The very phenomenon of sound is foregrounded, with both its bad and its good possibilities. The rich houses' smell turns into a 'sound' (C2); the rats' entry is conveyed through pattering and squealing (C3); sacks of grain are imagined as submitting to a roar or a hiss (C3); sound is 'our king and our priest' (C4); 'tones of tone' (my free translation of *gamma gamm*: scale of scales) lead to heaven/death (C4); the schoolboy is oppressed by the sound of the alarm-clock (somewhat reminiscent of the hated metronome that plagued Tsvetaeva's pianistic childhood) (C6); he thinks of school as a 'hum' (C6); he is enticed by 'a new sound', which becomes 'Sounds! Sounds! . . .' (C6). Many evocations of sheer sound cluster around the central affirmation of music.

But the chief sounds are voices. There can hardly be a more dialogal work this side of drama. The amount of narrative is tiny; in Canto 4 there is none at all. Instead there are numerous voices – sometimes long speeches by individuals: the Town Crier, the Mayor, the Romanticist, the Piper, each addressing a large number of listeners. Sometimes there are groups of voices – the market people's, the collective councillors', the rats', the children's: these are conveyed in series of short separate utterances, with an effect of continuous chatter or debate or, most often, of a crowd all talking at the same time. Nobody – no body – is ever visually described, all are only heard. We audially imagine the burghers thumping and shuffling along in their hundreds after the light-voiced musician. Voices occupy most of the text, but the theme is their

rats turn into the burghers, the entire town of Hamlin becomes enchanted by art. Music (it seems) will win: the deafest business head, the loudest gossip-monger, will acknowledge it in the end.

As for Tsvetaeva's own voice – in one sense, we never cease to hear it, raging with sarcasm in onslaughts on the philistines, or joining with the Piper in singing of beauty and bliss. But there are also at least two levels of direct authorial intervention in the fiction. First there is the level at which the implied author enters, as it were, to point something out, as in the piece starting 'one eye glaucous' (C3), or as when she makes the Piper interrupt his seductive promises with hints at his real plan (to drown everyone) – 'excellent places for rowing and fishing' (C6). Second, there is a level at which Tsvetaeva herself seems to speak from outside the Poem, uncontrolled and unedited, as if she could not stop herself from rushing in: '*I* wouldn't touch him with a yard-stick!' she interjects, in brackets, at the first mention of the Burgomaster (C1); in the piece about dreams (C2), as though impelled to guess (being a writer herself) what a Hamlin writer would pettily dream of, she inserts: 'scribblers – commas'; at the Mayor's announcement 'Every warehouse purged of the predators', she sardonically slips in (as if in his voice): 'every head – of ideas' (C5); and in the Piper's song promising the children heavenly pleasures, which already contains a good deal of reference to differences in the education of boys and of girls, there comes, uncommented, a stanza that appears to be a sudden expression of Tsvetaeva's own view of the matter: girls are promised 'heavy care' and 'despair' (my rhymes cover the original's 'heaviness' and 'bitterness'). I have already mentioned how, most autobiographically of all, she alludes, in the midst of Canto 1, to the birth of her son.

All in all, there is the most abundant Bakhtinian heteroglossia, as well as – to invent a word – abundant hetero-ictia*. In June 1926, having read 'The Ratcatcher', Pasternak wrote to Tsvetaeva, from Moscow, of the 'floundering of the whole being which has felt the shock of your complex heteroicteal poema' in which 'the *physical* quality of the speech' is paramount and in which (above all in Cantos 4 and 6) the chief component is the rhythm. So I shall say something now about translating Tsvetaeva's rhythms and metres.

II

First, a few words about other – grammatical – problems that arise for the translator of Tsvetaeva.

A great deal of this Poem cannot be translated, or even imitated. Not merely because some features of Russian are bound to elude us, but because it is precisely those features that Tsvetaeva seizes on, wildly

exploiting them pushing them to their extremes, making them exceptionally visible. The opening line offers an example. *'Star I daven gorod Gammeln'* means literally, 'Old and longstanding (is the) town Hamlin'. Words for all these words can be found. What cannot be found is an English form for the grammatical *form* of the two adjectives; both appear in their 'short form', a form very often used in normal Russian for adjectives in the predicative position. Characteristically, short forms can suggest more energy and robustness than the attributive long forms. Tsvetaeva lays this bare by creating a 'short form' for an adjective which does not usually have one: *daven* for *davnii*. Its strangeness now retrospectively estranges the preceding adjective (*star* – the short form of *staryi*: old), already energetically prominent as the first word of the Poem.

That the Poem opens on an irregularity warns us that irregular and conspicuous form will be a large constituent of the whole work. Not only is music the Poem's main subject, but a raggedly angular, impedimented form makes its own music consistently over-noticeable. Likewise, not only is the Poem's message the need to reveal 'essences' but a considerable part of its form consists in decisively revealing its own devices and methods. No least trick, turn or slither of the poet's mind and voice is veiled, but everything comes to the fore, blurted and odd. *'Star i daven ...'* is a confusingly charming beginning, bringing as it does something of a legendary note into a work of modern hatred. Along with its arrogation of a right to linguistic freedom, *daven* introduces a quaintly mocking element for which English cannot easily find an equivalent. Then, in the following two lines come four more short-form adjectives, up to the deliberate contrast in line four where a solid long-form one appears (*slavnyi*: splendid). From the beginning there is this militant, ambiguous enchantment.

Another fundamental element of Russian, naturally important in all Russian poetry and especially exploited by Tsvetaeva, is the presence of the morphological endings of nouns and adjectives, the suffixes of grammatical function. Russian's wealth of endings vastly exceeds the meagre 's' of English plurals and possessives.

Here is a small example. Section Two of Canto 3 starts with four lines which formally contrast with the thirty or so lines that follow – in six ways: (i) by being short (dimeters, to be followed by a series of trimeters); (ii) by being a heap of nouns and adjectives (to be followed by a compound statement based largely on verbs); (iii) by their close-knit alliteration and assonance; (iv) by their metre, / . / . (to yield to / . . / . /); (v) by their pattern of stressed vowels, which goes 'o – a – a – a – o – a – o' (not echoed in what follows); and (vi) by their pattern of endings: the two nominative singular nouns with zero endings are swamped by the accompanying five words in the genitive plural, ending

-ok, -ov, -ykh (from line five on, this genitival clump is ousted by a new dominance of the nominative; indeed for the next twenty-two lines there are *no* more partitive or possessive genitives at all). All of this has its musicality, additional to that proceeding from phonic and rhetorical components. But whereas the first five of the features I have listed can be imitated in English translation, the sixth cannot. The four lines are these, with word-for-word translation:

Górod gryádok	Town (N) of-plantbeds (G)
Gámmeln, nrávov	Hamlin (N), of-morals (G)
Dóbrykh, skládov	Good (G), of-stores (G)
Pólnykh ...	Full (G) ...

The next line, the start of the contrast, runs: *'Méra! Svyashchénnyi kŕik!'* – 'Méasure! A hóly cáll!'

Here are three of my many attempts to translate these lines:

A	B	C
Beds of vegeta	Town of serried	Town of plantbeds
bles, the morals	Plantbeds, spotless	(Hamlin), stores all
Laudable, the	Morals, well-stocked	Full and morals
Cellars full but ...	Cellars ...	Goodly ...

In 'A', although I made changes, leaving 'Hamlin' implicit, resolving 'plantbeds' into vegetable ones, splitting a word over the line-ending (as Tsvetaeva does do elsewhere), filling out the last line, I was able to copy most of the meaning and the metre. But my attempt to pull the lines into something of the pulsing repetitive tautness the original ones get from their shared genitive endings, by making '-ble', '-al', '-ull' endings comparably conspicuous, inevitably brings about a different effect from the original's. 'B' and 'C' are less eccentric renderings which remove my added idea of 'vegetables' and emphasise the tidiness in the Hamliners' gardening. But the greater accuracy has meant forfeiting the attempt to imitate the pattern of endings.

I have been pointing to features that cannot be rendered in translation. I shall now look at something that any reader (one does not have to be Pasternak) would probably agree is the most important feature of the Poem: its metres – which *can* to some extent be imitated or reflected in English. Many good translations of Tsvetaeva have been made without metre; to me, however, her metres are so dominant and original that to ignore them seems a betrayal.

In all her poetic work, and very notably in 'The Ratcatcher', Tsvetaeva takes metre to its extreme, varying it, sharpening it, breaking it, braking it. The Poem contains a multitude of metrical patterns and innovations, with many strongly contrastive switches. The firm trochaic tetrameter

established in the opening two quatrains, for example, is suddenly interrupted, quite uncomfortably, one may feel, by an equally emphatic dactylic trimeter; then *this* gives way, after only two lines, to regular dactylic tetrameters alternating with / . . / . / . (a dactyl and two trochees): after only two quatrains of this there come some quite wayward dimeters. In Canto 2, to note another example out of hundreds, a regular pattern of . / . . / , alternating with . / . . / . . , switches four times, in the course of sixteen quatrains, to / . / . . (.) – for instance at 'Chef - of tasting'. One may sense here an effect of impatiently beating time for a band of dull players. The version I have made does not preserve the whole of this metrical detail, but it preserves some of it, and my point is that to a considerable extent it *is* possible to copy such things as the swerve, here, from the taut iambic to the even tauter trochaic line-openings.

The Piper is characterised (as Pasternak notes) by an anapaestic rhythm. Ternary metres are a special problem for us, as Russian has only one stress to each word, so that even a complex consonant cluster is hastened over when the stress falls elsewhere in the word (as in *serdtselóv* – 'catcher of hearts' – in Canto 4). In English a three-syllable word will tend to acquire two stresses. Thus the key-word 'Indostan' is purely anapaestic, while its English equivalent, 'Hindustan', even though thought of as an anapaest, will read as / . /

Tsvetaeva's passion for metre finds full scope in this Poem, which, as well as the numerous ternary, binary, and – most characteristic of her – *mixed* ternary-binary metres, also offers many of her favourite choriambs – / . . / – in interesting combinations with other powerful metres; and instances of what Simon Karlinsky has called 'monomacers', lines consisting each of a single syllable (unfortunately having to be mixed with polysyllables in English); and there are other familiar idiosyncrasies, such as (i) starting a line with a strong monosyllable that belongs syntactically and semantically to the preceding line, or to a line in the previous stanza, and which throws the scansion of its own line quite out (eg *'Konechno – vnuchat / Ded (Tochku – prozaik)'* (C2)); or (ii) breaking a word up by means of a hyphen in order to obtain a second stress in one and the same word. *'Bessil'nykh ne zlob'!' / (Krysinaya drob'.)'*, when written out normally, as here, would scan . / . . / , twice. But Tsvetaeva puts in some unorthodox hyphens: *'Bes-sil'nykh ne zlob'! / (Kry-sinaya drob'.)'*, so that the scansion of each line becomes / / . . / In fact every line in the quatrain these two lines belong to, as well as every line in the accompanying three quatrains and couplet, has the same metre, a single stress followed by a choriamb:

Zlóst' tékh któ nė yést:
Né yést' - nàdòyést!
Bés-síl'nykh nė zlób'!
(Krý-sínàyà drób'.)

Even in Russian, with its stronger stresses, this unusual pattern is not quite compulsory, and Tsvetaeva felt it necessary to state in a footnote that of the five syllables in each line the first, second and last were to be stressed. In any English translation the desired metre will almost certainly be very much less evident. In the Russian stanza quoted, given the presence of the hyphens, only line two would (without the footnote) have been read otherwise – . / . . / –, whereas in the following English version:

Spíte of thóse whò dòn't eát!
Féd úp with nò féed!
Dón't ángėr thė wéak!
(Ráts' páttėring féet.)

– which is semantically extremely close and which can indeed be scanned / / . . / (or almost: there is one extra syllable, 'of' in the first line), there remain many possibilities of other scannings. Because stress is more subtle and mutable in English and because English has far more short fleeting words ('of', 'to', 'a' and 'the' continually demand to be taken into account), we would have to provide many more stress-markings and footnotes to make sure of the required effect.

Karlinsky has commented that, by her unconventional use of hyphens, Tsvetaeva 'violates the very basis of Russian prosody'. One may wonder whether, in Canto 3, when mocking the staid Hamliners' horror at the violence done to language by the rats/Bolsheviks, she had herself in mind as something of a ratbolshevik in this respect. Her treatment of language often seems violent. The omissions, ellipses, insertions, can shock and infuriate; she will repeat words with the same prefix *ad nauseam;* she will tear apart firm syntactic units and shove parenthetic exclamations, explanations or other extraneous matter, between the wrenched parts – for instance, at the beginning of Canto 1, describing Hamlin: 'Really touchingly it's like / (*I* wouldn't touch him with a yardstick!) / Him, the Mayor, the Burgomaster'.

Only in a few lucky passages has my translation turned out to be a word-for-word one. Because I am doing what I can towards keeping metre and rhyme, I have had to make changes; I have endeavoured to make all my changes in accord with the tsvetaevan spirit. Very rarely I have added a line to get a rhyme; quite often I have added, or omitted, a word, or a few words, for the rhyme or rhythm. The phonic density of

the original can rarely be reproduced. For instance, in the 'rich homes' section (C2) I could not imitate the lush – or, in this context, fatty – sibilants occupying thirteen of the seventeen lines about 'essence', 'essentiality', 'matter', 'materiality' – eg:

*Ne su***schch***nost' ve***shch***ei:*
*Su***shch***estve**nno**st' ve***shch***i . . .*

Many examples of this sort of thing could be given.

'The Ratcatcher' is not a work of which one is likely to say: 'Each word in it is indispensable; every line – finely crafted.' At first reading it can appear straggly, repetitious. But on subsequent readings, I have found, it becomes vibrant and unified; a strongly conceived, multiply knotted structure grows palpable. Not only the well-defined rhythms, but very many motifs and images, are cleverly interlinked throughout the work. It holds together, though, above all, through the sustained urgency of the authorial voice, the unusually exposed energy of the poetic persona who, despite all irony and malice, is, in such a poem, duple – at once the author and the eponymous heroine.

* *heteros* (Gk): different; *ictus* (Lat.): stress