

INTRODUCTION

I

'Good poetry is always better than prose,' Tsvetaeva wrote. Prose as good as hers, however, is very rare. In the Soviet Union as in the West, Marina Tsvetaeva is now generally acclaimed as one of the four great Russian poets of this century. But she has yet to be acknowledged as the consummate writer of prose that she also was.

The three poets whose names are sometimes bracketed with hers – Osip Mandelstam, Boris Pasternak and Anna Akhmatova – also wrote excellent prose; the prose of Mandelstam and Pasternak, written mainly in the 1920s, ranks as high as their work in verse. The 1920s were in fact a remarkable decade in Russian literature. The renaissance of poetry at the turn of the century was followed by an efflorescence of prose that had the concentration and power of poetry, whether its writers were actual poets (such as Belyi, Kuzmin, Mandelstam, Pasternak, Sologub) or solely prose writers (Babel, Olesha, Pilnyak, Platonov, Remizov, Zamyatin). Roman Jakobson called it the 'prose peculiar to an age of poetry'.¹

Although she lived abroad from 1922, Tsvetaeva remained creatively in touch with the best literary work being done in Russia, and her prose can well be compared with Pasternak's and with Mandelstam's (who stayed there). It is as carefully wrought as theirs is, as demanding and as rewarding of effort from the reader. It is, however, unlike theirs in its overt and personal passionateness, its dialogic orientation, and its intent focus on etymology.

Much of Tsvetaeva's prose, like much of Pasternak's and Mandelstam's, is centrally concerned with the subject of poetry. Collected here in English translation are eight essays by Tsvetaeva on poetry, along with some poems, mostly written much earlier but thematically related. Some parts of her memoirs – of her childhood and of poets who had been her friends – would contribute to our theme but I have not included them, as they are, in the main, already available in English, in a collection

translated by Janet Marin King.² For reasons of space I have left out one other piece that I would like to have included, an essay entitled 'The Poet Mountaineer' (about a young *émigré* poet, N. Gronsky). The purposes of my collection are to make Tsvetaeva more widely known as a writer of prose (only one short piece overlaps with J. M. King's book), and to help communicate to English-readers her thoughts about what it means to be a poet. Few have done as much as she has to explore the processes of creation and the feelings of the exceptionally creative person in the ordinary world.

A short chronology of Tsvetaeva's life is given on pages ix-x. Here I will mention only three aspects of that life which it will be useful to have in mind as one reads her work. These are: plenty, poverty and exile. Each of them furnishes a metaphor for an aspect of Tsvetaeva's relation to poetry.

Daughter of a highly accomplished musician and a highly successful scholar; 'inundated' with lyricism in her childhood; given a good classical education (largely at home); speaking fluent German and French from childhood on, and acquainted with the best literary works in those languages as well as her own; travelling in Italy, Switzerland and Germany (albeit forced to by the needs of her consumptive mother); spending a year in France at the age of sixteen; publishing a volume of her poems at her own expense at seventeen; easily meeting poets, artists and scholars during her adolescence: Tsvetaeva started life in conditions of not indeed wealth but a certain cultural and material good fortune.

At the Revolution, nearly all her family property was seized. For five years she experienced desperate poverty, living in Moscow with her two small children, unable to earn her keep, her husband away in the Civil War with the White Army and completely out of touch for two years; her younger daughter died of starvation. Later on, in *émigré* life, she again lived in less dire but still hampering poverty, in an endless struggle to keep going.

Most of Tsvetaeva's works were written in exile, 'in the emigration'. From about 1925, when most post-1917 *émigrés* from Russia had come to realise that there would be no going back, 'the emigration' became a distinct category within Russian literature. Its largest and most active centre was Paris, and it was there that Tsvetaeva settled in November 1925. She was welcomed and noticed, she gave readings of her work, and she was able to publish most of what she wrote during the fourteen years of her life in Paris. But she also acquired hostile critics, particularly when her essay 'The Poet on the Critic' appeared soon after her arrival. In the essay she quite deliberately offended *émigré* writers' and readers'

sensibilities with attacks on their obsession with the past and with her assertion that real creative force was to be found not amongst them but 'over there' in Russia. She earned a further onslaught of criticism when she repeated this judgment two years later with reference to Mayakovsky. *Émigré* Russians were, for the most part, as dismissive of Soviet literature as most Soviet critics and publishers were of *émigré* literature, and they especially hated Mayakovsky for his loud support of the Soviet regime. Tsvetaeva stood out among the *émigré* writers for her conviction that her true readers had remained in Russia. She was neither pro-Soviet nor pro-communist, any more than she was pro-capitalist: her arguments against government interference in the arts, and against any 'command' or 'demand' whatever from the 'time' to the poet, make it clear enough that she was far from favouring the Soviet system, and she did not wish to go back to Russia where she knew she would not be published. 'There, I wouldn't be published, but I would be read; here I'm published – and not read,' she wrote in 'The Poet and Time',³ and a few years later she wrote to a friend: 'Everything is pushing me into Russia, where I cannot go. Here no one needs me. There I'm impossible.'⁴

Each of these three experiences had a metaphorical significance for her poetry. Emigration was the physical counterpart to the spiritual condition of being a poet. 'Every poet is essentially an *émigré*,' she writes in 'The Poet and Time', '*émigré* from the Kingdom of Heaven and from the earthly paradise of nature.' And, in the same paragraph: 'Next to that emigration, what is ours?' Struggle with material hardship was a counterpart, perhaps even one that she needed, to the labour of writing and struggle with its material, which she repeatedly insists on. And the comparative plenty of her early life is a counterpart to the spiritual wealth and 'fullness' of being born with a talent, with 'genius', as she did not hesitate to name it (honouring not her self but genius *itself*).

Tsvetaeva knew herself to be extraordinarily gifted, and felt she shared this with very few; in 1935 she told a friend: 'The only equals in strength to myself that I have met are Rilke and Pasternak.' 'Strength', in Russian *sila*, translatable as 'power' or 'force' or even perhaps 'energy', is a central concept for Tsvetaeva, as it was for Pasternak. Tsvetaeva conceived an intense admiration for Pasternak when she read his book *My Sister Life* (see the essay 'Downpour of Light'), and just as intensely admired Rilke, whom she never met but with whom she corresponded in his last year of life. (The relations between these three poets can, to some extent, be studied in their now published correspondence⁵ of the year 1926.) It was in the mental company of those two, above all, that Tsvetaeva lived while writing the essays presented here. As we see from them, Pasternak was

the poet she most often turned to, wrote about, and compared others with; I am making him the chief reference point in my discussion of her own work in this Introduction because of his importance to her, and because his prose too, in one way or another, is largely *about* being a poet.

All the essays translated here were written in the period of Tsvetaeva's emigration – the first of them in Berlin in 1922, the rest in France between 1924 and 1933. In her earlier years she had been primarily a lyric poet; during the 1920s she turned to writing long narrative poems (*poemy*); in the 1930s she became mainly a prose writer. The question as to why Tsvetaeva turned to prose may be answered in several ways. Because it was better paid and she was poor, and anyway *Volya Rossii*, the journal which had been publishing her poetry, closed down in 1932 – this is the reason she herself gave in a letter, adding to the word 'prose': 'which I love *very* much, I am not complaining. All the same, it is somewhat forced on me.' Because she found she could extend poetry into prose, win prose's space over for poetry's activity: Joseph Brodsky speaks of her 'transferring the methodology of poetic thinking into a prose text, the development of poetry into prose';⁶ and she herself said 'A poet's prose is something other than a prose writer's prose; in it, the unit of effort, of diligence, is not the sentence but the word, sometimes even the syllable.'⁷ Perhaps too, because, in Pushkin's words, 'the years incline us toward severe prose' and, growing older, she preferred a medium that could give shape to her past and extent to her thoughts.

II

Marina Tsvetaeva's writing about poetry consists equally of celebration and defence. She writes in praise of poetry. And she writes to explain poetry to the mistrustful; to protect it from misuse and calumny; to insist that not everyone can judge it. In these essays she is often didactic, corrective, polemic, angelic (message-bearing), constructive – of almost unbuildable bridges. She is at once exclusive and welcoming, as if saying: 'Don't cross this bridge if you lack the courage and the wit, but if you have them, *come!*' The essays seem written to make the matter both easy and difficult, to make readers select themselves and arrive with pounding hearts. Brodsky says (differently): 'she tries, often against her will, to draw the reader closer to her, *to make him equally great*' (my italics). It seems that Tsvetaeva will do everything possible to make us like, read and live

with poetry. She will do nothing that might reduce, dilute, undermine, popularise it. Essential to her thought is that poetry is *not* a continuation of the ordinary and the commonplace, but is the opposite of what the 'philistine' supposes it to be; something other, yet, at the same time, not marginal or distant, but of the essence; a kind of knowledge, and a kind of event, *not* a technical learnable craft; 'elemental', not formal – she loathes all formal or formalist approaches.

I have quoted twice from Joseph Brodsky's essay 'A Poet and Prose', and perhaps the best I could do, in introducing Tsvetaeva's prose, would be to point to the whole of that essay. What Brodsky says there – about a 'crystalline' growth of thought, the energy of her style, an instinctive laconicism and how rare Tsvetaeva is in this, being 'fenced off from her contemporaries by a wall composed of discarded superfluity'; as well as his description of her 'harsh, at times almost calvinistic, spirit of personal responsibility' – can surely not be bettered. But I shall try to put stress on the sheer intelligence he has noted in Tsvetaeva's writing, and on her 'dialogic' manner; and to point to certain recurrent figurative usages in her accounts of poetry-writing.

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Many poets write very good prose, but few take one's breath away, as Tsvetaeva does, by their mental energy, their skill in pursuing a thought to its furthest and clearest conclusion, and their analysis of a concept for all it both denotes and connotes. Energy of mind, a kind of laconic thoroughness, also enables her to give new vitality to old concepts:

Equality in gift of soul and of language – that's what a poet is. So there are no poets who don't write and no poets who don't feel. If you feel but don't write, you're not a poet (where are the words?). If you write but don't feel, you're not a poet (where is the soul?). Where is the essence? Where is the form? Same thing...⁸

Comparison with Pasternak may be instructive here. Pasternak was as concerned as Tsvetaeva was to describe the moment of 'what is called inspiration', and a good deal of his work attempts to do this. Probably the main difference between his view and hers is that he regards that moment as one of change in the world itself, in the very surroundings, while her emphasis is on the person (the creating mind) of the poet, its invasion by other forces. In a poem of 1917,⁹ Pasternak writes that poetry

is the peas grown wild and sweet,
 it's tears of the cosmos in pods,
 it's Figaro hurtling down
 from flutes and from music-stands
 like hail onto planted beds.

Meanwhile Tsvetaeva (1923) uses the universe to explain the poet:

...for a comet's path
 is the path of poets: burning, not warming,
 tearing, not tending...¹⁰

Another difference is in the ways they make the reader work. Pasternak is difficult because he leaves things unclarified, presents dense image clusters which feel right but which have not been cerebrally thought through; he rarely comments on his own statements. But Tsvetaeva sets out to clarify everything, makes explicit the meanings hiding in every ambiguity, thinks everything through, offers abundant commentary on what she has just stated. Yet she too is hard to read because the commentaries often introduce further complexity, and because she is able to be brief and sudden even while being expansive. Reading Pasternak's prose, one tends to search underneath it for hidden patterns and pressures, for the sunk forms causing the rising shadows. In Tsvetaeva's, everything is brightly lit and outlined – so brightly that far more angles, curves, juxtaposed and counterposed shapes and bulks show up than one had ever suspected expository thinking could be composed of.

I will quote a passage by each poet about the moment of 'inspiration'. In his autobiographical work *A Safe Conduct*, Pasternak describes what first prompted him to write. There was, he says, a kind of race going on between nature and love, which carried him onward in a fast movement, and:

Often I heard a whistle of yearning that had not begun with me. Catching up with me from behind, it provoked fear and pity. It issued from the point at which everyday life had become torn away and it threatened perhaps to put brakes on reality, or perhaps it begged to be joined to the living air, which in the meantime had got a long way ahead. And what is called inspiration consisted in this backward glance.¹¹

It sounds definite, yet is strangely obscure. What is actually going on? Is a train hidden here? What is the 'living air'? How can he say 'this backward glance' when no glance has yet been mentioned? It seems that inspiration consists in looking out from oneself, from absorption in some

intense feeling, to the neglected ordinary world. But we have to guess and be content with probability. By contrast, Tsvetaeva writes:

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 (it's the same man!) bursts the walls not only of the Bedlams and Charentons but of the most well-ordered households too.¹²

She too, working hard to describe the inspirational moment, keenly distinguishes the poet from the rest of the world. But her idea, while not transparent, does yield to visibility: a force threatens to crush you; if you are crushed, you're the one we call 'mad' or 'depressed' or 'lost' in everyday life; but if you survive – by opposing to it (as she says in the next paragraph) a single unit of will, like a one to a row of zeros, thus (in a marvellous numerical metaphor) converting them into millions – you are the one we call 'genius'. Inspiration consists in almost wholly submitting to an onslaught, in just resisting it. Typical is her threefold repetition of 'this', calling attention to what is extraordinary; typical too the explanatory shout in brackets, indeed the use of brackets altogether, suggesting that there are always further ways of developing an idea.

Pasternak seems carried away, along, by feeling which generates ardent thought; Tsvetaeva – upward by an ardour of brainpower which generates equally ardent feelings. Pasternak speaks as if to himself, as indeed Tsvetaeva has pointed out ('thinking aloud – speaking in his sleep or his half-sleep'),¹³ while Tsvetaeva, except perhaps for her meditative work on word-stems, sounds and affixes, which is like a lyrical address to language itself, speaks declaratively and to us.

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No less than at the monumental pairs of ideas that form the basis for many of her essays, Tsvetaeva is gifted at close analysis within a narrow range. We find her taking to pieces – tenderly – a poor poem by some unknown nun (in 'Art in the Light of Conscience') or – ferociously – a solecism committed by one of her critics (in 'The Poet on the Critic') and tirelessly scrutinising the implications of lazy, or just common, parlance. Both, grand vision and close scrutiny, are her forte. Meanwhile, much of the prose consists of something in between these: a wrestling with, shaking of meaning out of and into, such concepts as poet, genius, time, conscience.

Intolerant of cliché and of wordiness, Tsvetaeva has developed a style

in which heady lucidity is produced by the contradiction between two feeble commonplaces. By juxtaposition she will annihilate both 'poetry is inspiration' and 'poetry is craftsmanship' ('The Poet on the Critic'), both 'only modern poetry is any good' and 'all poetry is good except the modern' ('The Poet and Time'); or write a commonplace herself either to transform it or to make it crackle against its immediate contradiction: 'Everyone is free to choose his favourites. No one is free to choose his favourites' ('The Poet and Time'). (She would never consider expanding this into 'while in one sense it is true that everyone...yet in another sense it could also be said...!')

Close to the device of rapid contradiction is the exercise of looking at something from a position exactly contrary to the usual: 'The opposite shore had not yet reached the ferry'; or, 'seen from the future, the child is older than its father'; and why should not the bass notes be called 'high' and the treble ones 'low'? – a reflection developed in the 1935 memoir 'Mother and Music'. These examples have a ludic, amiable quality which called to my mind two formulations by Paul Celan in which, too, the opposite of a common view is tried out: 'Spring: trees flying up to their birds'; 'Bury a flower and put a man on its grave'.¹⁴ However, they are not of this kind. Celan's sayings are pictures, made for the sake of the shock of sadness or delight and, above all, of sight: a surreal renewal of vision. He jolts and charms. Tsvetaeva jolts and provokes. Her 'other-way-round' ideas, as all her attacks on fixed habits of mind and speech and her readiness to embrace their contrary, at least momentarily, are contrived for the sake of a renewal of *thought*. They are an attempt at conceiving, however slightly touched on, some fundamentally different order of things – almost in the manner of Nietzsche, like whom she is very aware of the conventionality of language – and distantly echo some of the language-work done by Russian Futurists such as Kruchonykh or Khlebnikov.¹⁵

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The reader of this obstructed and uncompromising prose has to be as agile and vigilant as a rock-climber. But the rocks do have summits. For all its digressions, this style conduces to climactic summations, often to epigrammatic statements or even proverbs. In 'The Poet and Time', a muscular journey through notions of time culminates in a proverb both cited and revised: 'However much you feed a wolf, it always looks to the forest. We are all wolves of the dense forest of Eternity.' A tendency to the epigrammatic and the antithetical or paradoxical informs the whole

style: 'to lose oneself in the alien and find oneself in the kindred' ('Epic and Lyric'); 'having given everything, it gives everything once again'; 'valleys fight, peaks unite' ('The Poet and Time').

Climbing towards a summit, and reaching it, is a characteristic pattern and can be noted on the scale of the phrase, of the paragraph and of the whole essay. On the scale of the essay, Tsvetaeva will approach the top of her investigation or exposition with words like: 'Now, having cleared my conscience of all omissions...having acknowledged my dependence upon time...I finally ask: Who is my time that...I should...serve it?' ('The Poet and Time'). The journey to the desired point is often experienced almost as a physical walk and climb (as in 'Downpour of Light': 'having worked my way out from the dreamy eddies'). Similarly, the analysis of the poems in 'Two Forest Kings' is presented as a movement up toward the most vital moment ('we come now to the peak...of the ballad' and a little later, 'And at last, the last – an outburst...') from which she can only go down, to a valley of strongly exhaled 'conclusions'. On the scale of the phrase, characteristic is such a sequence as: 'not this, not this, not this – *this*' (thus about the dream-door in 'Art in the Light of Conscience', and the train carrying Mandelstam in 'History of a Dedication'); or: 'not only this, but *this* too' – a way of presenting the thing indicated as a pinnacle as well as appearing to take us beyond some expected limit. And on the scale of the paragraph, here are seven sentences from 'The Poet and Time':

Everything is point of view. In Russia I'll be understood better. But in the next world I'll be understood even better than in Russia. Understood completely. I'll be taught to understand myself completely. Russia is merely the limit of earthly understandability, beyond the limit of earthly understandability in Russia is an unlimited understandability in the not-earthly. 'There is a land which is God, Russia borders *with it*...'

We climb the paragraph by ledges that go: better – even better – completely – myself completely – limit – unlimited – God; or by ones that go: Russia – next world – Russia as limit to the earthly – the unlimited non-earthly – Russia bordering with God. And other such upward paths can be traced; for example, one leading from 'I' to others (the quoted words are Rilke's).

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Tsvetaeva's style is vocal and dialogic. The vocative case alternates

frequently with fast-moving indicatives and interrogatives. Statements are made through dramatised interchanges between two persons. Or other persons are visualised (auralised), joining in with the author, countering, inquiring, reminding her of something she has forgotten – voices of others or variant voices within herself. Others' rejoinders are fitted in to the text of her own voice, so that the reader has to pause and work out who is speaking; and words mid-sentence may be put in quotation marks or emphasised as if quoted, a method much used by Dostoevsky; and indeed there is something in Tsvetaeva's polyphonic monologue, with its digressions and disquisitions, yet with its single underlying passion, that recalls something of the speaker in 'Notes from Underground', a comparison which makes noticeable the absence, in Tsvetaeva, of any neurosis or negativity. She is all sane – if complex – affirmation. (It is curious that Tsvetaeva did not particularly value Dostoevsky's work.)

Tsvetaeva will sometimes introduce a counter-argument to, even a refutation of, the argument she is about to propound, as if to forestall someone's saying 'but what about *this*?' Setting out, for instance (in 'The Poet and Time'), to claim that no one worthy of respect ever denies the importance of the past, she'll start with Mayakovsky, whom she admires and who did just that. This tendency of Tsvetaeva to provoke herself by offering disproofs of her own argument, to surmount or to incorporate them, accounts for much of the vitality of her style. Another quasi-dialogic form is what might be called her rhythmic paragraphing. A proposition, developed as far as possible in one direction, is followed by its re-statement in the initial form, to be taken now to its extreme in another direction, as if it were from someone else's point of view. The word 'dialogue' could also be applied – on a larger scale – to the way the dual constituents of a given essay's theme are played against each other, since each side is usually given its full say, full validity: time and timelessness, the moral and the elemental, Pasternak and Mayakovsky, even Zhukovsky and Goethe. At the same time we are generally led to accept one point of view, for Tsvetaeva's is not a manner that sets us free to choose, to diverge or to add. We will agree with her that 'time' is less than timelessness, that the elemental (to those who experience it) is greater than the moral, that Goethe is more elemental than Zhukovsky. Only in 'The Poet on the Critic' is one side not given a full voice; and only in 'Epic and Lyric' are the two sides held in lofty balance.

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Even more than with poetry, Tsvetaeva is concerned with poets or, more

exactly, with the poet. While her memoirs¹⁶ portray poets as the individual persons she knew, the present essays (except for the first section given here of 'History of a Dedication') discuss them solely as creators of poetry. She does not often analyse particular poems, although she quotes from those she admires with a readiness that suggests a fellow-creative sympathy. She does analyse a poem by Mandelstam in 'History of a Dedication', does look closely at parts of poems, for example in 'Poets with History', and there is her marvellous comparison of Zhukovsky's 'Erlking' with Goethe's (though these are not exercises in formal analysis, which she despised as much as she despised the pedagogic method of 'paraphrase'; what she points to in poems is the quality of feeling, degree of originality, the words' meanings, derivations and connotations). But her main concern is with the poets – their common experience, their difference from one another and their difference from non-poets; from critics, readers, 'philistines', workmen, scholars.

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The poet is no initiator or inventor, but a medium, and in the way Tsvetaeva conceives of this there is again a certain – albeit incomplete – coincidence with Pasternak. According to him, the poet merely makes a faithful copy of the inspirationally changed world, of the strange 'new category' in which reality has arisen. According to Tsvetaeva, whose account of creativity is less visual, more aural, the poet, overwhelmed by the *stikhiya*, the elemental, seems to hear or half-hear an already written poem which she must work immensely hard to recapture and write down. This process is described in 'Art in the Light of Conscience' and in 'The Poet on the Critic': 'To hear correctly is my concern. I have no other.' The Lutheran tone is not random: it is a declaration of lonely faith and of will. But Tsvetaeva's stress on the poet's will is unlike anything in Pasternak.

Tsvetaeva rejects any link between art and ethics. She would not call a book, as Pasternak once did, 'a cubic piece of burning smoking conscience – and nothing more'. Yet her idea of an 'SOS' from the world's phenomena does bring a compassionate note into the creative process (somewhat like Pasternak's 'whistle of yearning'), and there is something burningly moral in her thought that art, regarded ethically, is wicked, just as there is in the loudness and anguish of her insistence not merely that it does not, but that it *cannot*, care whether it harms its users. The artist's fidelity to 'the essence' she calls his 'sin before God'. Thus 'the book' itself is not conscience, but Tsvetaeva's *discussion* of 'the book' contains a good deal of conscience. Moreover, it is not because of any virtuous message,

but because of its sheer elemental force, that she predicts for Pasternak's *My Sister Life* a good effect on a very large scale: 'And no one will want to shoot himself and no one will want to shoot others!'

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One of Tsvetaeva's main metaphors for poets is 'fullness': being too big for the surroundings, excess, overflow. A poet is not just presented with answers, but is 'outgalloped' by them. He is 'brimful', 'overfilled', has more than he needs. Of what? Not of feeling (this is not Wordsworth's 'overflow of powerful feeling'), but of power itself: 'an excess of power, going into yearning' ('Mother and Music'). This explains his strengths, faults, joy and grief. Thus, in Tsvetaeva's view Pasternak's 'chief tragedy is the impossibility of spending himself – income tragically exceeds expenditure' ('Epic and Lyric'). Likewise, in a fine essay on the artist Natalya Goncharova (written in 1929) she explains why Pushkin married a thoughtless young beauty, in the following terms: 'the pull of genius – of overfilledness – to an empty place...he wanted the nought, for he himself was – everything'.¹⁷ Poets who, as persons, were physically large, fascinated her: one of the main things we remember about Voloshin from her account of him in the memoir 'A Living Word about a Living Man',¹⁸ is that he seemed too stout to get into her tiny study; Mayakovsky's tallness is related to his being, as a poet, too large for *himself*. Whether things fit within themselves, whether there is room, how filled or empty a thing is – this range of ideas is important to Tsvetaeva. In 'Mother and Music'¹⁹ we read that the reason there cannot be 'too much' of the lyrical is that it itself *is* the 'too much'. And a poignant instance of imagery of size is Tsvetaeva's conviction that over there, in spacious Russia, 'if they'd let people speak', there was, as in the West there wasn't, room for her.

III

What follows is a brief account of each of the essays included in this volume, with a glance at the circumstances of its writing and an indication of its main content.

'A Downpour of Light' (1922) – 'the first article of my life' – is the discovery, celebration and communication of a fellow-poet, Boris Pasternak, whose volume of verse *My Sister Life* Tsvetaeva received from him shortly after leaving Russia; Pasternak did not leave. *My Sister Life* was to mark the beginning of his fame, 'A Downpour of Light' the beginning of a long correspondence between the two poets. Although she feels that Pasternak, as poet of nature, is unlike herself, Tsvetaeva feels sufficiently alike in 'strength' to be able to 'speak for' him to the world outside Russia. So the first essay in this book expresses a creative kinship, with which all the accounts of difference in the subsequent essays stand in contrast.

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'The Poet on the Critic' (1926) – 'the work in which Tsvetaeva found herself as an innovative prose-writer' (Simon Karlinsky)²⁰ – contrasts sharply with 'A Downpour of Light': instead of acclamation, there is demolition; instead of speaking for another, she now defends herself; she demonstrates how a poet works, discusses – announces – how a critic should work. The essay earned her enemies in the Russian community in Paris for its sharp *ad hominem* attacks on writers venerated there, including Zinaida Gippius and the 'Olympian' Ivan Bunin (who was to win the Nobel Prize in 1933), as well as for its fierce attacks on certain prevalent categories of critic and on the tasteless 'mob' of readers. Along with 'The Poet and the Critic', she published a selection of sentences by the critic G. Adamovich (object of her scathing analysis in the opening section) to prove his incompetence. People were offended, articles were written against her, the influential Gippius sought to organise a hostile press campaign. We though, far from the fray, may see the work as a powerful defence and description of the poet in society and a liberating devastation of all pretentiousness, in the tradition of Pushkin's 'Poet and Crowd' (1828) and of a kind with Alexander Pope's 'Essay on Criticism' (1711). 'Let such teach others who themselves excel/And censure freely who have written well' is exactly her opening argument, and we can hear her too in: 'Some have at first for Wits, then Poets, past/Turn'd Critics next, and proved plain fools at last', or (her disdain for the 'formalists') in: 'Some drily plain, without invention's aid/Write dull receipts, how poems may be made.' Thus two great poets, in different lands and times, rather similarly turn their sharpest critical light on contemporary critics of poetry; and when we find Tsvetaeva being called 'captious' or 'aggressive' we should remember that her 'aggressive' writings belong in an honourable tradition.

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'History of a Dedication' (1931) offers another attack upon falsehood, as well as, like 'Downpour of Light', an instance of the relation between two poets, this time less unmixedly celebratory. It differs in form from the other pieces in this volume: an affectionate, humorous recollection of an episode in her friendship with Mandelstam is followed by the sarcastic analysis of a dishonest 'recollection' of the latter which another *émigré* poet, Georgii Ivanov, had published a few years earlier. It is a good example of Tsvetaeva's use of prose to defend a fellow-poet; she was also defending the Russian past she had known against distortions of it. Unluckily, the defence did not reach its public; it was not printed until long after her death.

The two sections of the essay presented here are the second and third parts of a three-part memoir. I exclude the first because it does not contribute to our subject: she describes there how one day in 1931, in France, burning old manuscripts with a friend's help, she came across something in print containing a poem Mandelstam had addressed to her. She then withdrew from the flames what turned out to be the untruthful memoir – and consigned it to the flames of her criticism.

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'The Poet and Time' (1932) is described by Brodsky²¹ as 'one of the most decisive' of her essays for understanding her work, and as making 'a semantic frontal attack on the positions held in our consciousness by abstract categories (in this case, an attack on the idea of time)'. What matters, says Tsvetaeva, is not whether a work is modern or not, but whether it is genuine or not; and genuine art is always 'contemporary' – it cannot but show its time since it is what actually creates the 'time'. Not to be contemporary, in this sense, is to go backward. The essay makes a sustained assault on the general esteem for certain *émigré* writers, but its main theme is the timeliness of poetry, its 'contemporality' – a word I have formed by analogy with 'temporality', in order to avoid the clumsy and diffuse sound of 'contemporariness', the 'momentary' sense of 'contemporaneity', and the inapposite connotations of 'modernity'.

*

'Epic and Lyric of Contemporary Russia' (1932/3) is a comparative exposition of the poetic personalities of Pasternak and Mayakovsky. Implicitly, it is a defence of these two 'Soviet' poets against *émigré* antipathy, particularly of Mayakovsky who, as leading Soviet poet, was much disliked 'in the emigration'. Tsvetaeva had published a cycle of poems to Mayakovsky after his suicide in 1930, and she dedicated numerous poems to Pasternak. (Pasternak too had been a passionate admirer of Mayakovsky before the latter put his oratory at the service of the Bolsheviks, so that there are some elements of a threefold relationship here, except that Mayakovsky, who felt warmly towards Pasternak, was, for political reasons, somewhat cold to Tsvetaeva.)

The essay is a tremendous *tour de force*, which one would like to be able to memorise whole and quote: a series of lapidary formulations of differences between the two poets. Some of them, perhaps, are not hard to discern: Mayakovsky to be read in chorus, Pasternak against all choruses; Mayakovsky a giving out, Pasternak a taking in. Others, though, are the product of a rare insight and grasp: how people 'follow' Mayakovsky but 'go in search of' Pasternak; Mayakovsky – a collective noun, Pasternak – adjectival; and neither of them able to depict human beings, Mayakovsky because he exaggerates them, Pasternak because he dissolves them. Even someone who does not know the work of Mayakovsky or of Pasternak can enjoy the essay – for its conjuring up of two fundamental ways of being and writing; and for the large, finely handled balances of material throughout it, amounting to something like a choreography in which the two poets meet, diverge, feign approach, grow distant, look across the distance. A prominent feature in this patterning is that the essay begins by invoking unity ('all poets are one poet'), thereupon opens out into the world of differences, and concludes in a new, now tensely equilibrated unity by quoting in full a poem by one of these poets (Pasternak) in praise of the other (Mayakovsky).

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'Two Forest Kings' (1933/4): Zhukovsky's translation of Goethe's 'The Erlking' is one of the best-known poems in Russian; schoolchildren learn it by heart. Tsvetaeva offers a close reading of it based on her analysis of its departures from the German original. This essay is, in fact, the only example included of her going systematically through a text, looking at its every word. She is once again laying siege to a reigning cliché, to a canon she does not wish to abandon but wishes to make its maintainers conscious of. She writes with perfect knowledge of German and with justified

confidence. The ineffable, 'terrifying', 'more-than-art' quality which she finds in Goethe's poem, but not in Zhukovsky's, provides an illustration of what the 'elemental' means to her.

*

'Poets with History and Poets without History' (1934) is, like 'History of a Dedication', given here in incomplete form – these are the first two parts of a six-part essay. There are two reasons for this. One is that parts 3-6 are again about Pasternak and tend to rehearse what is said about him elsewhere. The other is that the original Russian text is lost: the essay was written for a Belgrade journal and was published in Serbian, so that we do not hear her voice in it as strongly as in the other works.

It is natural to ask where Tsvetaeva places herself in the classification she proposes – with the epic poets who have 'a history', forever walking ahead to something new, or with the lyric poets who dip again and again into the same 'sea'. Her deliberately failed attempt to cast Alexander Blok as the sole exception – that is, as belonging to both categories – suggests that the vacancy for such an exception remains unfilled: does *she* fill it? In 'The Poet on the Critic' she insists that her poetry changes with the years, and that no one has the right to judge it who hasn't read all her work: a poet 'with history' then. At the same time, her understanding and prolonged defence of the lyrical, here, as well as her being able to 'speak for' that pre-eminent lyricist Pasternak, give her a very close affinity to those 'without history'; moreover, her own 'epic' poems, though long, remain essentially lyrical. (In several letters, however, Tsvetaeva declared she did not like the sea. She preferred mountains: 'The ocean is a dictatorship... A mountain is a divinity.')

*

'Art in the Light of Conscience' (1932) is placed last – despite being written in the same year as 'The Poet and Time' – both because I wished to end with its final paragraph, Tsvetaeva's powerful, conclusive statement about herself as a poet, and because, being about art generally and ranging over a number of writers, it opens out and away from the concentration on a single poet in our first piece. It was initially meant to be part of a book which would have had this title and would have contained 'The Poet and Time'; but nothing came of this. Tsvetaeva complained to the editor of the journal which printed it about excisions he had made, saying he had shortened the essay by a half and 'made it

unintelligible by depriving it of its links, turning it into fragments'. No omitted sections, however, survive, and we are not obliged to find it fragmentary, at any rate not disturbingly so.

Tsvetaeva's liking for puns and homonyms is fundamental in this essay. The word for art, *iskusstvo*, is related to words meaning temptation, *iskus* and *iskushenie*; and enticement and seduction occur throughout the essay – art is a seduction away from matters of conscience. But *iskus* also suggests artifice, as well as meaning a test, or even a novitiate (period of testing), and the text brings to the surface these notions submerged in *iskusstvo*. The main point of the essay is that art is not 'holy' as people think, but is power and magic: 'When shall we finally stop taking power for truth and magic for holiness?' Art is not virtuous, but elemental, coming upon the poet in a *naitie*: I have translated this word as 'visitation', but it means a 'coming upon' – no personal being is implied.

As always, Tsvetaeva puts strongly both sides of the debate, thinks herself into the opposite position to her own. Thus she acknowledges the absolute rightness of conscience and morality, giving all honour to priests and doctors, to Gogol who burned his writings in case they were harmful, to Tolstoy who demanded the destruction of the world's best works of art because they lacked moral lessons, and to 'artless' poems by unknown folk with visions of goodness. Whereupon she declares that she elects the life in art, in 'full knowledge' of its amorality and dangerousness, and in a spirit of choosing at once damnation and Heaven.

IV

It is almost as difficult to translate Tsvetaeva's prose as it is to translate poetry. Everywhere there are rhythms, rhymes, half-rhymes, echoings of vowel or consonant or word-structure, which just don't happen in the English words required to carry the meanings; everywhere there are expressive idiosyncrasies of punctuation (such as the frequent use of the dash) which often don't work in English. Here are just three examples of sound-repetition from 'The Poet and Time' (examples can be gathered from every page of every essay). 'A great work...reveals all that is not-place, not-age: for ever': the last four words suggest, through their phonic weft, much more than can be conveyed – *ne-vek/navek*. One could change 'for ever' to 'for all ages', but only at a high price. She writes of service to 'change – betrayal – death' (*smene – izmene – smerti*): the

second and third words repeat different elements of the first one; I thought of trying to emulate the pattern with a slight mistranslation, 'change – exchange – extinction', but decided it was more important to be semantically faithful. 'Over here is – that Russia; over there is – all Russia': this reads like a short, dancing poem in the original: *zdes' tá Rossiya, tam – vsyá Rossiya*. Tsvetaeva's many lexical inventions, or near-inventions, cannot be reproduced, and above all, her exhaustive permutations on a given word-stem rarely find an English equivalent. One translation-elusive sentence (in 'Art in the Light of Conscience') runs: 'Art is that through which the elemental force holds [*derzhit*] – and overpowers [*oderzhivaet*]: a means for the holding [*derzhaniya*] (of us – by the elements), not an autocracy [*samoderzhavie*]; the condition of being possessed [*oderzhimosti*], not the content [*soderzhanie*] of the possessed condition [*oderzhimosti*].' Similarly difficult are her permutations on some common idiom. Thus in 'Mayakovsky is endlessly trying to climb out of his skin', the idiom *iz kozhi lezt'* means to try one's hardest, do one's utmost, go hell for leather; and both the transferred and the literal meanings serve Tsvetaeva's argument. For the multiple elaborations of this idiom I have used the English 'to go all out for...', which at least keeps the essential concept 'out' but is far from rendering the full physical and tragic quality of the Russian.

Certain words central to Tsvetaeva's thinking elude satisfactory translation. I have rendered *obyvatel'* as 'philistine', which is roughly the way it is used nowadays, but *obyvatel'* comes from the verb 'to be', used to mean one who 'was' in a given place, namely a 'resident', the common resident of a town, and is probably closer to 'man in the street' or 'provincial', in the insidious sense these can have of narrow-minded, with cramped horizons, reluctant to exercise intelligence. *Bol'shoi*, *krupnyi*, and *vysokii* mean 'big', 'large' and 'high', and are commonly used of artists and poets, with reference to both worth and reputation. The English adjectives cannot easily be used like this and so I have substituted 'major', 'important' or 'significant', and 'lofty', well aware of failing to do justice to the simplicity and concreteness of the original.

A less frequent but important word used by Tsvetaeva is 'formula'. The Russian word sounds the same as the English; however, in Tsvetaeva's use it often means not a dry or fixed piece of language, but language which has successfully caught and preserved something elemental. Thus in the poem on page 189 she writes affirmingly of 'the flower's formula', and once, in 1919, she jotted in her diary: 'Two things I love in the world: song – and formula', adding a note to this, two years later: 'that is to say, the elemental – and victory over it!'

NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

1. Roman Jacobson, 'Marginal Notes on the Prose of the Poet Pasternak' in *Pasternak: Modern Judgements*, ed. Donald Davie and Angela Livingstone (London, 1969) p. 135.
2. Marina Tsvetaeva, *A Captive Spirit: Selected Prose*, ed. and tr. J. Marin King (Ann Arbor, 1980; London, 1983).
3. See p. 93.
4. Letter to A. Tesková, 25 February 1931, in Marina Tsvetaeva, *Pismak Anne Teskovoï* (Jerusalem, 1982) p. 89.
5. Boris Pasternak, Marina Tsvetayeva, Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters: Summer 1926*, ed. Yevgeny Pasternak, Yelena Pasternak and Konstantin M. Azadovsky, tr. Margaret Wettlin and Walter Arndt (London, 1986).
6. 'A Poet and Prose' in Joseph Brodsky, *Less than One: Selected Essays*, (Harmondsworth, 1986) pp. 176-194.
7. Quoted from Viktoria Shveitser, *Byt i bytie Mariny Tsvetaevoï*, (France, 1988) p. 408.
8. See 'The Poet on the Critic', p. 48.
9. 'Definition of Poetry' in the cycle *My Sister Life*, first published 1922.
10. See p. 192.
11. Quoted from 'A Safe Conduct' in *Pasternak on Art and Creativity*, ed. and tr. Angela Livingstone (Cambridge, 1985) p. 76.
12. See 'Art in the Light of Conscience', p. 152.
13. See 'Epic and Lyric...', p. 108.
14. Paul Celan, *Collected Prose*, tr. R. Waldrop (Manchester, 1986) pp. 11-12.
15. See especially the chapters entitled 'Hylaea' and 'Decline' in Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History* (London, 1969).
16. See, for example, her very fine essays on the poet Maksimilian Voloshin ('A Living Word about a Living Man') and the poet Andrei Belyi ('Captive Spirit'), also the essay about the poet Mikhail Kuzmin ('Otherworldly Evening'); translations of all these are included in *A Captive Spirit* (op. cit.).
17. M. Tsvetaeva, *Izbrannaya proza v dvukh tomakh*, ed. A. Sumerkin (New York, 1979) p. 301. The essay has not been translated.

18. In *A Captive Spirit*.
19. *ibid.*
20. Simon Karlinsky, *Marina Tsvetaeva: The Woman, Her World and Her Poetry* (Cambridge, 1985).
21. Joseph Brodsky, *op. cit.*
22. Letter to Pasternak of 23 May 1926, in *Letters: Summer 1926* (*op. cit.*) p. 119.