

And now he is ready, having raised to his lips the reed, his
innocent fife, to tell you things you had better not listen to ...
Aleksandr Blok, 'On Lyricism'

What shall I do with this measurelessness
In a world of measures?

Marina Tsvetaeva, 1923

Introduction

Many of the writers now recognised as the greatest of the twentieth century were unable to publish during the Soviet period and were more or less severely persecuted. Marina Tsvetaeva (pronounced Tsvetàyeva) was doubly *non grata* – for her White sympathies and for having emigrated. Her work was not published substantially in Soviet Russia until 1965 and even then it was censored and was hard to obtain. Generations of Russia poetry readers could not read her. The poet Irina Ratushinskaya, born a Soviet citizen in 1954, writes that it was not until she was twenty-four that, suddenly able to borrow some rare books for just one week, she 'read almost simultaneously ... Mandelstam, Tsvetaeva, Pasternak! They literally knocked me off my feet, physically, giving me a fever and delirium ...'¹ *The Ratcatcher* was especially harshly cut, some 265 lines being taken out of the 1965 edition to prevent Soviet readers associating the rats with the Bolsheviks. It is only since the advent of *perestroika* in 1986 and the freedom of research, criticism and publishing which it brought, that this work has at last come into its own in Russia.

Although she admired the Symbolist Blok and the Futurist Mayakovsky (whom she praised despite the general émigré hostility to everything Soviet), loved and felt close to the modernist neo-Romantic Pasternak, revered the more classical Mandelstam and Anna Akhmatova (that other celebrated Russian woman poet with whom she is sometimes fruitlessly compared), she is not, finally, like any of them. She wrote poems to, and prose about, all of these poets, and she did have something in common with most of them, sharing, for instance, the Symbolist conviction of another 'higher' dimension of being, Pasternak's belief in a universal force of inspiration (she too can be called a 'Romantic') and so much of Mayakovsky's poetic manner that she has been called a 'female Mayakovsky'. Nonetheless, her voice is unmistakably her own. While every important poet is *sui generis*, one wants to say so about Tsvetaeva with more emphasis than usual.

An emotional, but not a 'feminine', poet, she avoids all mellifluous sentimentality and instead loves, hates, lauds, castigates, laments, marvels, aspires ... with a kind of unflinching physicality, always pushing passions and stances to the point at which they will be fully revealed. Brodsky wrote (of both her verse and her prose) that 'her speech almost always begins in the highest register, at its uppermost limit, after which only descent or, at best, a plateau is conceivable. However, the

¹ Irina Ratushinskaya, *Moya rodina*, in *Poems*, Ann Arbor, 1984, p.11.

timbre of her voice was so tragic that it ensured a sensation of rising, no matter how long the sound lasted.²

Tsvetaeva's verse is rich in such features as conspicuous enjambement, abrupt self-interruption, exclamation and ellipsis, and has great rhetorical diversity. The powerful rhythms are usually the first thing to make an impact on the reader, and then the unexpected imagery and the tense, knotty complexity of much of the syntax. She makes nothing easy, but requires her reader to be her equal, whether as co-mountaineer, or a sparring partner, or simply as strenuous listener.

Most critics and readers concur in placing *The Ratcatcher* at the peak of Tsvetaeva's work. 'This dazzlingly brilliant poem', her 'magnum opus': this judgement in 1985 by Simon Karlinsky, who had introduced Tsvetaeva to western readers nineteen years earlier, has been echoed by many others. Meanwhile in Russia the well-known critic Pavel Antokolsky, almost the first to write publicly of it there, had said in 1966: 'The summit of her mature work was of course the poem *The Ratcatcher*'.³ It is now greatly praised by Russian critics.

Yet in its time it was almost ignored. Only two contemporary responses are worth quoting. The literary critic and historian D.S. Mirsky (like Tsvetaeva, a post-1917 émigré and, like her, eventually returning to Russia to his ruin) reviewed it in 1926, the year it appeared, saying it was 'not merely ... a verbal structure astounding in its richness and shapeliness, but also a serious "political" (in the widest sense) and ethical satire, perhaps destined to play a role in the growth of consciousness of all of us.'⁴ In another piece the same year, he wrote of the 'Rabelaisian vitality and inexhaustible verve' of this work, noting that just when 'all western poetry is being consistently tuned to a minor key, Russian poetry is almost for the first time ... becoming so exuberantly alive.' He found *The Ratcatcher* 'intensely Russian', the 'first really successful attempt to emancipate the language of Russian poetry from the tyranny of Greek, Latin and French syntax', and felt sure it was 'unlike anything associated with the appellation 'Russian' in the mind of the English intellectual'⁵. If he was right, its destiny may perhaps be to change the consciousness of English readers as well.

In June 1926 Boris Pasternak wrote to Tsvetaeva from Russia, where he had stayed despite the Revolution. He had received a copy of *The Ratcatcher* from her and now gave it his full and excited praise: it was written 'in pure alcohol', was 'the very baring of poetry', 'no praise is high enough for the miracle that it is.' And it seems he too felt something like a 'growth of consciousness', for he wrote that had he not read this work he would have been more at ease in his 'path of compromise.'⁶

² Joseph Brodsky, *Less Than One, Selected Essays*, Harmondsworth, 1986, p.182.

³ Pavel Antokolsky, 'Kniga Mariny Tsvetaevoy' in *Novyy mir* 4, 1966, p. 218.

⁴ D.S. Mirsky, review of *Krysolov (The Ratcatcher)*, *Volya Rossii* 6/7, 1926 pp 99-102 (reprinted in 'M. Cvetaeva, Studien und Materialien', *Wiener Slawistischer Amanach*, Sonderband 3, 1981, pp. 266-9.

⁵ D.S. Mirsky, 'Marina Tsvetaeva', *New Statesman* XXVI, no 670, 27 February 1926, pp. 611-13, reprinted in D.S. Mirsky, *Uncollected Writings on Russian Literature*, ed. G.S. Smith, Berkeley, 1989, pp. 217-21.

⁶ *Letters 1926* See 'Further Reading'

The Ratcatcher's oxymoronic subtitle, 'A lyrical satire', points to the presence of purely lyrical passages alongside bitingly satirical ones and also the fact that its mockery is directed against everything in life which is emphatically non-lyrical. For this must be the angriest celebration of music ever written.

The Ratcatcher (*Krysolov*) is the last of the three long *poemy* which Tsvetaeva published – she also published eleven shorter ones. (The Russian word *poema*

('po-ém-a') - means a long verse narrative, often divided into parts). The two earlier ones, *The Tsar-Maiden* (*Tsar-Devitsa*) of 1920 and *The Swain* (*Molodets*), 1922, are based on Russian folk legends; *The Ratcatcher* is the only one of her poetic works based on a German legend. When she began writing it, in 1925, in Prague, having left Russia in 1922, she was still working on poems for the volume *After Russia* (published Paris, 1928): her greatest lyrics and her greatest *poema* at once. Not long before this, she had finished two very fine works: 'Poem of the End' (*Poema kontsa*) and 'Poem of the Mountain' (*Poema gory*). So this was altogether a creative highpoint in her life. It was also a time of transition, of turning from shorter works to longer ones, many of them in prose. Before 1925 she had published four short plays and twelve volumes of poetry. In the 1920s and '30s, as well as more poetry, she wrote nearly fifty prose memoirs and essays, many of them brilliant pieces.

According to her daughter Ariadna, it was when Tsvetaeva visited her at her school, in 1924, in the small provincial Czech town Moravská Třebová – neat, Germanic, prosperous and comfort-loving – that she remembered the legend of the Ratcatcher of Hameln (known in England as *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*) and thought of writing a version of it which would be a satirical attack on the materialistic, unspiritual lifestyle represented by such a town. Ariadna further reports having heard her mother say that Weimar without Goethe was Hamelin Town.⁷

Her version was also to engage with the Bolshevik revolution. Living outside Russia, Tsvetaeva was free to say what she thought about that. But what she thought is not easily summarisable. Married to a dreamer from a revolutionary family, herself by temperament a rebel; always an enthusiast for heroism; once papering her adolescent bedroom with portraits of Napoleon; an admirer of all élan and aspiration: she held strongly to what is known in Russian as *bytie* – true being, in which art, creativity and vision belonged; it was the opposite of *byt* – dull, soul-destroying everyday existence.

So there was much in her that sympathised with the ardour of the early revolutionaries. In 1917-18, however, she did not hear 'the music of revolution' which was heard by, for instance, the poet Alexander Blok; instead her sympathies went to the losing side, the Whites. Her attitude to the Bolsheviks - and her inner political mood - may best be conveyed in her own account of how, before leaving

⁷ A. Efron, *Stranitsy vospominaniy*, Paris, 1979, p.148.

Moscow, she recited to Bolshevik audiences, including Red soldiers, poems she had written in praise of the White Army, and of how exhilarated she was to find them perceiving the poems as being about them, the Reds. She quotes one of her listeners: 'None of this matters. You're a revolutionary poet all the same. You've got our tempo.' As Mirsky wrote: '... though an anti-Communist, Marina Tsvetaeva is animated by a high and generous spirit of revolt that is hardly in tune with the émigré feelings.'⁸

Legend and sources

In the summer of the year 1284 the German town of Hameln was so badly overrun by rats that the Burgomaster promised a large sum of money to anyone who would remove them. A colourfully dressed wandering Piper turned up and, by playing on his pipe, lured all the rats away and drowned them in the River Weser. But the reward was refused him and he went away angry, to return – some say at noon or at seven o'clock on 26 June – dressed as a hunter and with terrible face and strange red hat. This time, playing his pipe, he lured away all the town's 130 children over the age of four, together with the Burgomaster's grownup daughter, and disappeared with them into the side of a mountain. Only two children survived: one blind and one dumb.

These are the main facts in the legend as told by the Brothers Grimm,⁹ undoubtedly one of Tsvetaeva's sources. There have been many other versions of it, with minor variations. Tsvetaeva's chief divergences from the Grimm version are these: (i) the promised reward is the hand of the Burgomaster's daughter in marriage; (ii) the Ratcatcher is huntsman-like from the beginning; (iii) the children are drowned, with no survivors.

In Russian literature there is very little about this legend. Among other German treatments of the subject, Tsvetaeva certainly knew the poem *The Ratcatcher* by Karl Simrock¹⁰ which tells the whole story, Goethe's lyric poem *The Ratcatcher*¹¹ and Heine's *The Wandering Rats*.¹² She may also have known a prose version of it in Czech which was reprinted in Prague while she was there.¹³

In Simrock's seven-stanza poem the reward is marriage to the Burgomaster's daughter, and the children are drowned, as in Tsvetaeva's; other, more interesting, similarities are that Simrock insists on a miraculous or wonderful quality in the Piper

⁸ D.S. Mirsky, 1989 (see note 5), pp. 218-19.

⁹ *The German Legends of the Brothers Grimm*, vol. I, ed. Donald Ward, London, Millington 1981 (legend no. 245).

¹⁰ Karl Simrock, 'Der Rattenfänger', c. 1830 *Ausgewählte Werke in 12 Bänden*, Leipzig, 1907, vol I, pp. 77-9.

¹¹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 'Der Rattenfänger' (1803), in e.g. *Weimarer Ausgabe*, vol.I, 1887, p. 183.

¹² Heinrich Heine, 'Die Wanderatten' (1855) in *Heines Werke in fünf Bänden*, vol.I, Berlin and Weimar, 1978, p.432.

¹³ Viktor Dyk, *Krysar a jiná prosa*, Prague, 1923; doubtless she also knew the version of the legend in *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, the German folksong collection made by Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano and reprinted many times since its first appearance in 1806.

(the word 'Wunder' is used four times), and that he makes the town council denounce music as at once frivolous and satanic. Moreover, these lines

Er blickt so wild	He looks so wildly
Und singt so mild ...	And sings so mildly ...

may have inspired her description of the Piper at the moment of the refused reward:

Lips smile.
Brows wild ...

as well as the whole semi-demonic conception of this figure.

Goethe's three-stanza poem is a cheerful song sung by the wandering player who calls himself 'Ratcatcher', 'Childcatcher' and 'Maidencatcher'. In addition to the tone of irresponsibility, these very words may echo in Tsvetaeva's 'Heartcatcher' (translated here 'catcher of hearts') and in many other compound nouns.

Heine's fourteen-quatrain poem is the closest in spirit to Tsvetaeva's *poema*. Its light-heartedness is that of a poet obedient to metrics but to nothing else, ready to express his most furious thoughts provided they fit into firm and lively verse. The opening lines -

Es gibt zwei Sorten Ratten,	There exist two sorts of rats,
Die hungrigen und satten ...	Hungry ones and fed ones ...

- are paralleled in many ways in Tsvetaeva's *Ratcatcher*, as well as in other poems of hers. For Heine, while the well-fed stay at home, the hungry wander the world, 'ganz radikal, ganz rattenkahl' (all radical, all ratty-bald - word-play similar to hers) and are out for political upheaval. All they seriously want, however, opines the poet, is food. Tsvetaeva takes up this motif in a big way, but shows how music can convert the lust for food into a desire for Heaven or for world revolution or both. While she shares Heine's contempt for food-lusters, her main message is the power of music and poetry.

Browning's *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* has in common with Tsvetaeva's work the verbal inventiveness, the focus upon sounds, and the many clever descriptions of wild movement. But it lacks the personal lyricism of Goethe's singer, the political grimness of Heine's rats and the satanic-miraculous hints given by Simrock, all of which were important to Tsvetaeva. The mood of Browning's poem is a harmless poking of fun, and it ends, most unTsvetaeva-like, with a moral teaching: Keep your promises. One Russian commentator writes: 'For the "unmasking" of the Ratcatcher, Robert Browning's common-sense and English sense of humour will be needed.'¹⁴

It seems a pity that some commentators apply the title 'The Pied Piper' to Tsvetaeva's work - in whose title, *Krysolov*, neither 'pied' nor 'piper' occurs - as it seriously confuses the question of who the main figure *is*. Certainly he is a Piper (and for simplicity I am calling him this in my Introduction, although in the text he is

¹⁴ Inessa Malinkovich, *Sud'ba starinnoy legendy*, Moscow, 1994, p. 40.

always ‘the flautist’ or ‘the flute’, only occasionally called a ‘piper’ by his detractors or, once, by himself) but, far from wearing ‘pied’ clothing, he is dressed from head to foot in green and is thus akin to a huntsman or man of the woods, not to a clown. ‘The Pied Piper’, moreover, inevitably brings Browning to mind, whereas Tsvetaeva probably did not know Browning’s poem. She derived her story, as we have seen, from German sources, where the hero is always called ‘the ratcatcher’.

Drafts of the *poema* (analysed by M.L. Bott¹⁵) show that Tsvetaeva had intended to weave another legend into it, the native Russian story of the town of Kitezh which saved itself from Tatar attack by sinking to the bottom of the lake on whose banks it stood. There it went on flourishing, and some hear its bells chiming to this day. The tale was a favourite of Symbolist poets of Tsvetaeva’s time and she would have known Rimsky-Korsakov’s opera based on it. Originally she planned a whole seventh chapter describing a life of eternal happiness under water for the children and for Greta, the Burgomaster’s daughter, married to the Piper. Though the idea was dropped, a few references to it remain, such as the title of Canto 6, ‘Children’s Paradise’ – which, without the paradise, becomes quite mocking – and the instructions to ‘bridesmaids’ to prepare for the wedding.

In her memoir ‘Mother and Music’ Tsvetaeva mentions her childhood fondness for the French children’s story *Sans famille*.¹⁶ This tells of a boy named Rémy (associated by Tsvetaeva with the sol-fa syllables do-re-mi) who is unkindly sold to a wandering musician (affirmatively named Vitalis); he comes to love him and, accompanied by monkey and dogs, wanders all over France with him playing on a harp and singing. Though deprived of security, often ill, starving or in danger, he lives a clearly enviable life – of feeling and of proximity to nature and to art. Recollection of this tale may well have contributed to the creation of the Piper figure in *The Ratcatcher*.

A great deal of Russian literature lies behind, or works within, Tsvetaeva’s *poema*. It has often been noted that she makes unusually full and vigorous use of literary tradition – quoting, evoking, and engaging in polemic with previous works. Verse satire has a long tradition in Russia; Tsvetaeva was inevitably conscious of Griboedov’s great verse-drama *Woe from Wit* (1825), Pushkin’s satirical *poemy* such as *Count Nulin*, *The Little House in Kolomna*, *The Gavriliad*, *Tsar Nikita and his Forty Daughters* (1820s) and of Nekrasov’s long poem *Who can live well in Russia?* (1870s). Her mixing of styles – the serious with the frivolous, the fantastic with the realistic – is hardly her own invention. Prose satire has flourished in Russian literature too; more than one critic has spoken of Tsvetaeva’s ‘dead souls’, implying a comparison between her Hamelin citizens and the Russian landowners in Gogol’s novel of 1842. At the time when she was writing, there was much good satirical writing in Soviet Russia and we know that, unlike most émigrés, she kept in touch with what was being written ‘over there’.

¹⁵ In the 1981 article mentioned in the paragraph below.

¹⁶ By Hector Malot, trans. into English as *Nobody’s Boy* by Florence Crewe-Jones, New York, 1916.

More particularly, as Yefim Etkind¹⁷ has shown, she uses the rhythms, sometimes the words, from well known 1920s sailors' songs, from marching songs and from Proletkult¹⁸ poems, and some passages show a close relation to contemporary poems by Vladimir Mayakovsky (1891-1930), one of the two prominent poets of her own time whose work echoes in *the Ratcatcher*. The 'I'-against-'we' discussion in Canto 5, for example, recalls Mayakovsky's defence of the 'I' and scorn for the Proletkult 'we' in part 2 of his long poem *The Fifth International*. And about Alexander Blok (1880-1921) Tsvetaeva had written a cycle of poems. Her praise for music and her sense that it meant infinitely more than performances in concert halls were akin to his. Amid the events and atmosphere of Revolution in January 1918, Blok had written an essay, *Intelligentsia and Revolution*, in which he challenged the Russian intelligentsia to 'listen to the music', saying: 'We loved these dissonances, these roars, these ringings, these unexpected transitions ... in the orchestra. But if we *really loved* them and were not just tickling our nerves in a crowded theatre hall after dinner, we must listen to and love those sounds now that they are flying forth from the world orchestra ...' 'For', he ends the essay, 'spirit is music.'

A recent study by Catherine Ciepiela¹⁹ goes further than this and argues that Tsvetaeva's Piper leading the rats joyously and mysteriously to their perdition is in fact a rewriting of the ending of Blok's famous poem *The Twelve* (finished immediately before the essay just quoted) where a phantom-like Christ figure leads twelve Red Guards into an ever thicker snowstorm. In changing Blok's 'listen to the [music of] Revolution' to 'Trust in music', and in placing at the head of the marching rats the figure that Blok felt should really be there, Tsvetaeva, so Ciepiela writes, 'embraces Blok's view of the amoral, elemental nature of poetry more fully than he does himself.'

A considerable amount of German is used in *The Ratcatcher*. Some of it gives rise to clever puns, but what is interesting for an English reader is surely the way the German words and phrases fit naturally with the surrounding text, suggesting a liking for Germany, or at least for its language, which might seem at odds with the scorn being poured on the German townsfolk.

Tsvetaeva spoke German fluently from childhood and she loved German culture, especially literature, and especially the work of Hölderlin, Goethe, Heine and Rilke. Goethe is mentioned several times in this *poema*, and his *Faust* Part I (with heroine Gretchen) may be alluded to in the name Greta. A few years after *The Ratcatcher* Tsvetaeva wrote an incisive comparison (entitled 'Two Forest Kings'²⁰) of Goethe's poem 'The Erlking' and Zhukovsky's well-known translation of it into Russian verse; her praise goes unhesitatingly to the original German poem for its

¹⁷ Yefim Etkind, 'Fleytist i krysy (poema Marina Tsvetaevoy "Krysolov" v kontekste nemetskoj narodnoy legendy i eyo literaturnykh obrabotok)' in *Marina Tsvetaeva 1892-1992*, ed. S. Yelnitskaya and Ye. Etkind, Russian School of Norwich University, Northfield, Vermont, 1992.

¹⁸ Abbreviation for Proletarian and Educational Organisations, a project for developing a distinctively proletarian literature and art begun in 1917.

¹⁹ See 'Further Reading'.

²⁰ See 'Further Reading' under 'Translations of Tsvetaeva's Prose'.

refusal to prettify or evade, for its communication of the terror of the supernatural, and for its being, finally, what she calls ‘more than art’.

At one stage Tsvetaeva planned to dedicate *The Ratcatcher* ‘To my Germany’, meaning German poetry, folktale and music. Another dedication she considered was ‘To Heinrich Heine’. Close to Rilke with her otherworldly yearning, she was similarly close to Heine with her social angers and hatreds. Elements of her *poema* are heard, for example, in Heine’s poem ‘Anno 1929’, from which she may have taken the idea of the *smell* of the burghers’ lifestyle, and that of their valuing a good digestion, as well as, perhaps, the longing to escape from their narrow world into other lands *no matter where*; these lines, especially, sound like Tsvetaeva:

O daß ich grosse Laster säh,	Oh that I might see great vices,
Verbrechen, blutig, kolossal, -	Crimes bloody and colossal, -
Nur diese satte Tugend nicht,	Just not this well-fed virtue,
Und zahlungsfähige Moral.’	This morality always ready to pay.

In love with German culture and, as she confessed, with its *Schwärmerei* (visionary enthusiasm), while hostile to its materialism and *Spießbürgertum* (bourgeois philistinism), Tsvetaeva may appear to have put into the *poema* only her hostility, but in fact her love is expressed in it as well, since the Piper himself is German. Nor is she dealing in the commonplace contrast of settled rational Germans with nomadic mystical Russians, but she sets the two kinds of Germany (and thereby indeed two kinds of human being), the bourgeois and the artistic, in tension with each other, while any contrast with Russia is evoked either marginally (the rats come from Russia) or tacitly (she, the author, is a Russian – a fact she directly comments on in the text).

Story and themes

Summary

Canto 1 (191 lines) describes the inhabitants of Hamlin; Canto 2 (173 lines) looks into their dreams; Canto 3 (346 lines) depicts their market, the irruption into it of hordes of rats (who turn into revolutionaries) and the announcement of a reward for their removal; Canto 4 (561 lines) introduces the Piper: he entices the rats and leads them away to drown in a pond, pretending it is India; in Canto 5 (567 lines) the Town Councillors make speeches against music and reduce the reward from marriage with the Burgomaster’s daughter to a papier-mâché flute-case; in Canto 6 (301 lines) the Piper lures the town’s children away and drowns them.

Canto 1: Hamlin Town

From the start the tone is ironic. These staid folk never sin and do not stay up to watch the comet (in a poem of 1923 Tsvetaeva had written: ‘for the path of comets is the poet’s path’). Caring only about food, money, rank and propriety, they have no ‘soul’ – and no music: the only references to music are to the absence of any clarinet

in the town and to ‘schumanns’ – a term of contempt. Beggars, too, are kept out of the town, and this will be recalled at the end of the last Canto when the Piper is explicitly referred to as a ‘beggar’.

At a number of places in the work the narrative (or dialogue, which soon takes over as vehicle of story-telling) is interrupted by a lyrical or satirical expatiation on a single topic: the first is here, in the form of an Ode to the Button. Buttons, descendants of the biblical fig-leaf, represent the desire to keep things contained and hidden, and are thus central to what Tsvetaeva has to say. This will be particularly explicit in Canto 5 when a flute-case is offered to a man who defines artists as haters of all wrappings.

Tsvetaeva thinks antithetically and makes this clear at the outset. There exist the satanic and the (all too) godly, the musical and the non-musical, the artist and the philistine, the naked and the overdressed, buttonless honesty and buttoned-up hypocrisy. ‘God’s children’s buttons are all done up,/Those of the goat are not.’

Canto 2: Dreams

Having got the Hamliners to bed, the poet now spies into their dreams, proving that there is no sin or excitement there either. In his rich house ‘stinking’ of cleanliness the Burgomaster and his wife dream, like everyone else, of their boring everyday life. As if unable to stop herself, the poet imagines setting all this on fire, and the red of the ‘red cockerel’ (meaning fire) suggests Moscow with its red Kremlin walls, and ‘red’ revolution. We know from Canto 1 that no one in Hamlin thinks of arson and now poetry’s easy entry into homes and dreams is likened to an invasion by fire; so poetry is allied both with revolution and with elemental danger. Greta, the Burgomaster’s daughter, is an exception to the universal deadness of the imagination. Her dream-longings, which conclude the Canto, mark the beginning of the subsidiary theme of her romance with the ratcatcher.

Canto 3: The Affliction

Rather more than a third of this canto develops the description of the town up to the arrival of the rats: its lively market, and the gossip, which comes round to Greta again. A satirical ode in praise of ‘measure’, that is of the weighed-out, calculated, buttoned-up way of living, leads up to the lines ‘... overfill your sacks /With rice, the result is rats’, at which a new mode and mood are abruptly introduced.

Like almost everything in the *poema*, the rats’ entry is narrated through sounds: their pattering, trotting, rattling, hubbub ... and through the change in the sounds of the market – instead of separate voices a general roar delivers key words: ‘Barns, stores!’, and eventually: ‘Rats! Groats!’ The rats become proletarians seizing shops, museums, offices, lawbooks and bibles, making threats and gaining power, their behaviour conveyed solely through the shocked burghers’ reports to one another on what is happening. Increasingly the focus is on language – ‘We say “Brot”, they call it “prod-“ – and we overhear White sympathisers giving in to their

enemy by trying to pronounce one of the latter's main slogans, the word 'International'. The trotskyist hope of worldwide revolution will be an underlying fantasy-theme in the next canto where the seduced rats cherish the dream of extending the Revolution to India. But in Canto 3 there is still a realistic background, as the Comintern's plan for the international spread of Communism did at first focus on Germany where 1923 marked the end of a period of revolutionary upheaval.

Tsvetaeva has no compunction about switching from a German medieval scene to the imagery, language and happenings of twentieth-century Russia and, to some extent, Germany. With the same nonchalance she switches back, at the end of the Canto, into medieval conditions, as the Town Herald strides through the streets calling out news of the infestation and of the Council's decree about a reward for anyone who gets rid of it. The inconspicuous concluding quatrain on the Piper's arrival is subtly managed: thus, the poet seems to say, may art enter ordinary life - quietly but dangerously.

Canto 4: The Abduction

No sooner mentioned than close up, a song in our ears. The Piper sings as he walks. Singing and wandering are two modes unknown to Hamliners, and the walking is emphasised no less than the singing. As the children later, the rats are transformed by being set in movement no less than by being made to listen.

They are called to leave their fixed abode and complicity with society's greed: clearly their position has changed since the previous Canto. As the crowd of individual, often unconnected, voices comes to dominate again – with little or no linking narrative – a collective picture is composed of a situation in which, as rats, they have eaten their fill and grown fat, stopped hating cats, feel their tails dropping off from inertia; while, as men, they are now the ex-revolutionaries, as prosperous as the bourgeois they once ousted. Tsvetaeva certainly has in mind not just the setting up of the Soviet state but Lenin's introduction in 1921 of the New Economic Policy (the 'NEP') as a temporary aid to the country's economic recovery. This brought the return, until 1928, of private trading and of the pre-revolutionary contrast between desperately poor and ostentatiously wealthy (not unlike Russia today). Now, under the influence of the flute, the rats shed their NEP mentality and remember old slogans and battles. In the course of showing them pulled between energy and sloth, idealism and cynicism, Tsvetaeva mocks just about all the excuses people make for doing nothing. That their eventual resumption of activity and ideals is due to the passivity of being enchanted is part of what Canto 4 is about: the paradox of art's effect. It hypnotises, even paralyses, yet also inspires and liberates. Tsvetaeva undoubtedly knew Rilke's poem 'Archaic Torso of Apollo', in which quiet contemplation of beauty leads to the realisation: 'You must change your life.' So the rats are cast into a stuporous trance which issues in tremendous aspirations and a march to the strains of a battle song.

There are several fine lyrical passages in this Canto. One is the highly wrought piece starting 'Span-of-eye', a hymn to the horizon and the ocean. Another is the gentle song to 'Hindustan'; and, shortly after that, there is the remarkable poem

beginning ‘How many years is the world?’ This goes back through millennia to the first days of creation in a way that seems to have little to do with the story - wasn’t it about fomenting socialist uprising in modern India? – but which alludes to the passage about Adam in Canto I. To be taken deep into art is to be taken back to before the original error (the eating of the apple, followed by the putting on of the fig-leaf), back to the timelessness before creation. Pasternak, who was as much a Romantic as Tsvetaeva, wrote a lot about the ecstatic shift in the artist’s consciousness whereby art originates; the rats are briefly initiated into this mystery – at the cost of their lives. Their drowning is preceded by an exchange between a sceptical ‘old rat’ - the only one not deluded (a sort of parallel to the one blind and one dumb child who survive, in the Grimms’ version - and the musician, who stops his doubts with music and promises; it seems the old rat too goes to his death.

Later, Tsvetaeva wrote that the rhythms of *The Ratcatcher* were ‘dictated by the rats’ and the whole *poema* was ‘written at the rats’ command’²¹. Certainly the rats take up a surprising amount of the *poema* and are the most complex and protean figures in it. Not only are their many varied individual voices heard, but we see them collectively going through at least the following stages: rats; Bolsheviks; NEPmen/bourgeois; listeners to music and strugglers for self-renewal; world-revolutionaries; death-inebriates. Our attitude towards them is likely to be complex too, since although most people dislike rats, and settled people dislike upheaval, these rats’ repulsiveness and these upheavers’ destructiveness are presented to us exclusively as the perception of the despised and satirised Hamliners.

Meanwhile the Piper is not so much a developing figure as a diffuse and evocative one. In Canto 4 all his speeches are headed ‘The Flute’, as if he has merged into his instrument or into the very music. In Canto 6 the children will lose sight of him altogether as he becomes a vague music ‘from sky or sea’. He is neither good nor bad – neither Pest-controller nor Murderer; in an essay Tsvetaeva declared that she respected priest and doctor, nurse and nun, far more than any poet, who acts elementally (though *nothing*, she says, would make her prefer their vocation to her own). Consonant with her theory of elementality, the Piper is a force leading to death and at the same time a singer of genius. To the Councillors, of course, he will be just a man, one they despise and fear, but even for them he partakes of many traditions. He is gypsy, clown, trickster, wandering player, beggar and holy fool; he is also hunter, Green Man, Dionysus, the diabolical unknown. When outlining her planned characters, Tsvetaeva had jotted in her notebook: ‘The Huntsman – Devil and Seducer – *Poetry*’.²² (Tsvetaeva was, of course, not afraid of the Devil, whom she claimed to have seen in her childhood.)²³ Above all, the Ratcatcher is the Artist, with an aura of the divine. Indeed God Himself is quoted, in Canto I, saying (in German) to the hiding Adam: ‘Mensch, wo bist (du)?’ *Mutatis mutandis*, this is Tsvetaeva’s own appeal throughout the work: where are you, man, among the distractions, indulgences, disguises and clutter of your life? Can’t you hear the music? Everything

²¹ M. Tsvetaeva, *Natalya Goncharova in Izbrannaya proza 1917-37 v dvukh tomakh*, New York, 1979, p.331.

²² *Stikhotvoreniya I poemy v pyati tomakh*, New York, 1980-90, Vol.3, p.374-75.

²³ See, for example, her 1935 memoir *The Devil* in *M. Tsvetaeva, A Captive Spirit, Selected Prose*, trans. J.M. King, 1994, p.188-203.

in *The Ratcatcher* radiates from this one high ambiguous value and points to the figure of the Ratcatcher who embodies it.

Canto 5: In the Town Hall

Pasternak thought Cantos 4 and 6, and the market part of Canto 3, the best; Canto 5 he liked the least: 'a tormenting chapter' taking us, he felt, away from our closeness to the Piper. It is true that the lyrical, until the very end, is absent from Canto 5. But it is surely as excellent a piece of writing as anything in the *poema*, a witty, angry, quasi-realistic piece cleverly placed between the two episodes of magical seduction. It is an exposition, and an exposure, of all the ways the unmusical think up to prevent any invasion of music into their lives. The theme is the place of art in ordinary life.

The speeches made against music are in three kinds of voice. First there is the philistine polyphony of Councillors declaring that no decent person could marry a musician – music is trivial and belongs at life's margins. Second is the voice of the Burgomaster, i.e. of political authority which has to admit its enemy's power: music is fire, Furies, wild beasts, devils, revolt.

At this point something like Tsvetaeva's own voice states – in a 'poem' of its own – that in Hamelin there is no 'I', no experience of subjectivity, while for her there is *only* the 'I':

I is an apple tree laden with fruit
To the brim ...

Strangely interrupting the dramatised narrative, this passage is her reminder that those whose opinions she is regaling us with have no conception of the reality of being.

The third voice is that of a Councillor known for his 'romanticism' and customary defence of the arts. Music, says he, insincerely, is ethereal, it is way above the ordinary mortal, and therefore cannot possibly be combined with everyday life. 'Marriage/Of Hamelin to genius would be as wrong/As a nightingale's to a cabbage'. The irony is, of course, that in Tsvetaeva's scheme of things he is quite right. The Piper cannot truly desire such a marriage, entailing as it would do a settled home and statesmanlike duties in the civic hierarchy; he can only desire to desire it (without the entailments) – after all, his passion is for the horizon. All the same, he is furious at their refusal to honour their pledge to him and his reply to the Council is Tsvetaeva's own credo. Thus the 'minstrel' (the artist) 'is the ripper of wrappers/ Off everything under the sky!' – and you should even, he says, 'Break all the flutes! It's in us/ Not in them, that sounds are sung.'

Canto 6: The Children's Paradise

On a rough draft Tsvetaeva pencilled: 'Who will wake up the alarm clock and free us from time?'²⁴ Her own dislike of mechanical time-counting was so great that she once said a major joy of her life was 'not to hear a metronome'. Into the ringing of the alarm clock that wakes a child for school floats an unprecedented sound: the flute. Two opposed significances collide, and straight away it is the flute that wins. Once again everything is told through sounds – the music, the shouts of the children as they rush after it, their separate voices, the promises the flute seems to make.

Yet its Erlking-like enticements are, strangely enough, not univocal. For one thing, the Piper interrupts his attractive offerings with occasional hints at the children's actual watery destination: 'excellent places for rowing and fishing'; 'and – a bath for you all' ... For another, still more unexpected, what he offers is emphatically divided as between girls and boys. For girls: dolls, thimbles, does, weddings, beads, passions, jewellery; for boys: guns, skittles, steeds, wars, bullets, games, flints. The distinction is particularly marked in 'Sounds for the girls and meanings for boys' ('sounds' being this poet's highest value) and still more in 'Pleasure for boys, and for girls heavy care ... /Joys for the boys, for the girls – despair': hardly designed to keep the girls following him! Why then do they follow him? In retrospect, most of what the Piper offers the children resembles in kind what they would have had if they had stayed at home, only more cunningly adapted to their taste: the materialism of toys and trinkets, and (to offer an interpretation of 'pleasure ... despair') ordinary sexual relationships. Is this, then, all that they are able to want?

It is often supposed that Tsvetaeva sees the children as especially capable of freedom, even as her kin, potential poets. A sign of this could be their great immediate joy in breaking free of school and home, so different from the rats' slow, complex response (though the fact is that the rats are being induced to leave a life they were enjoying, which is not the case with the children); and Tsvetaeva certainly made remarks outside the *poema* which show a great respect for children's honesty and sense of loyalty. Within the *poema*, however, that initial love of freedom does not noticeably continue. An analysis of the twenty-four reasons the children give, one by one, as to why they are following the Piper – very like a collection of answers to a questionnaire – shows that eight are indeed the desire for romance, adventure or freedom, but as many as twelve amount to the mere wish to follow the crowd, while the other four are various uninspired reasons such as that they have forgotten to learn their lessons. Moreover, the last words spoken by the Piper to the children: 'Don't think, just follow', while they could be kindly advice on how to listen to music, could also be read as cruelly sarcastic advice to the herd-minded. One might also ponder the almost luxuriating description of the drowning, with the water rising inch by inch over the children's heads. Over all, I think that Tsvetaeva is quite unsentimentally showing the children to be not much better than the rest of the Hamliners, even though we know they have been made that way by their parents and that their drowning is essentially a punishment of the parents.

²⁴ As note 22.

Sounds/voices

‘Of all the celebrated five senses I know only one: hearing,’ wrote Marina Tsvetaeva in a letter in 1926, and in another the same year: ‘Pasternak sees, in his poems, but I hear ...’ This theme recurs frequently in her essays. For example, in ‘*The Poet on the Critic*’ (also 1926),²⁵ writing about how she wrote poetry: ‘I obey something which sounds in me ... All my writing is careful listening.’

This emphasis on sheer hearing and on sound itself rather than upon music, say, or melody, is found frequently in *The Ratcatcher*. The very smell of the Burgomaster’s house turns into a ‘sound’, resin is said to hum, school has a humming sound, and several times where we would expect the word ‘music’ we find instead the word ‘sound’: ‘Who’d trust the dictionary, when there is sound, our priest and our lord?’ says the Piper, countering the sceptical rat; the rats drown to the affirmation ‘Seeing is dreaming.’ ‘I am’ is ‘I hear’; the Councillors mock the Piper as ‘mere sound’: the children acclaim the flute with a cry of ‘Sounds! Sounds!’

The *poema* not only distinguishes sound in this explicit way but is itself the most aural, audible, sound-based work imaginable. Even an unappreciative commentator in 1926, who found it ‘nonsensical’, admitted it was ‘extremely musical nonsense’.²⁶ Rhythms, rhymes, intonations, assonances and alliterations – all are extraordinarily prominent, and meanings often derive from words obviously chosen for their sound. Pasternak wrote of the ‘absolute, indivisible dominance of rhythm’, praising especially the ‘descriptive’ rhythms used in Canto 3: with the entry of the rats ‘the rhythm resembles what it is about – a very rare achievement. It seems to consist not of words but of rats, not of word-stresses but of grey spines.’²⁷ Everywhere, Pasternak writes, it is rhythm that ‘calls into existence thoughts, images, turns of phrase and interweavings of theme.’ The fundamental role of rhythm and the exceptionally wide variety of metres has been noted by all subsequent commentators, one of whom has calculated a 44 per cent presence of ‘logoaedic’ metres – that is, of lines which regularly repeat not just one metre (iambic, for example, or dactylic, with the usual variations) but – within one and the same line – two or more different metres.²⁸ This quite often produces a metre much favoured by Tsvetaeva, the choriamb (– **▀** **▀** –), and is seen in what the same writer has called ‘the Hamlin strophe’: a quatrain in which a line of two dactyls plus one-and-a-half trochees alternates with a line of a dactyl plus two trochees. In my English there is only, alas, an approximate reflection of it: ‘Goggle-eyed schoolboys with unkempt hair/ Shaking their fists at Potsdam’ – these lines from Canto 5 have this metre but more often my English reflects it more approximately, as in: ‘Hymen’s not meant for the lyrical poet

²⁵ Marina Tsvetaevna, *Art in the light of Conscience, Eight Essays on Poetry*, Bristol, 1984, p.51.

²⁶ Mikhail Osorgin in *Poslednie novosti*, 21 January 1926.

²⁷ Rainer Maria Rilke, Marina Tsvetaeva, Boris Pasternak, *Pisma 1926 goda*, Moscow, 1990, p.155.

²⁸ Timo Suni, *Kompozitsiya ‘Krysolova’ i mifologizm Mariny Tsvetaevoy*, Helsinki, 1996.

-/ Even a child knows this./ Sobered-up nightingales, slow and sedate,/ Aren't supposed to exist' (also from Canto 5).

Another aspect of the 'sounding' nature of *The Ratcatcher* is of course something I have already referred to: the fact that almost all of the *poema* consists of speech. Voices predominate – in monologue, in dialogue, in hubbub; in dramatic exchange or in the 'deaf' conversation Ciepiela has aptly noted; in rhetorical orations, in songs. There could scarcely be more 'heteroglossia' – to use the impressive word that has come to be accepted as a translation of Bakhtin's simple term *ravnorechie* (varied speech). Yet at the same time the author's – also multiple – voice is never absent. When others speak (which is nearly always) we invariably know their relation to the author, who holds their voices suspended in her own voice.

In addition to her controlling of all the voices with her own silent one, there are at least four different ways in which the author speaks out audibly and personally. One is as narrator or 'implied author' in the few pieces of straight narration, as at the *poema*'s opening. Another is as lyricist, writer of poems, which are either to be taken as her own, as in the passage about 'I' in Canto 5 or – as it were – the Piper's, as in 'Hindustan'. A third is as modernist writer aware of writerly devices: thus – in Canto 1 – 'Pause for a rest here, reader', followed by a dialogue *with* the reader; the expressed intention 'not to wear rhymes out for nothing' (Canto 2); and a direct reference, in Canto 5, to herself as 'author, clairvoyant of lies'. This device is employed the most nakedly at the point in Canto 5 where briefly the entire clatter of the Councillors' voices is unceremoniously shoved into another perspective with the words 'And others' ideas aren't around in crowds/Either – there's only one:/The author's ...'. The momentary total fracture of the fictional illusion reminds us that the work, and art altogether, is a pretence, like the Piper's pretence about 'India', at the same time as being deadly serious.

The fourth way in which Tsvetaeva's own voice sounds in the text is by its breaking into it as the biographical person behind the writer, making references to her own life-events or opinions. One such interruption, the interjection in the third stanza of Canto I – '*I* wouldn't touch him, even with a barge-pole!' – implies she is able to enter the fiction as one of its characters; another, 'Lord preserve me from sleeping even/ Five years on one bed ...', comes as if from a place right outside it. Then, still in Canto I, there is her perfectly eccentric, and one may well feel impermissible, allusion to her just-born son, 'my Russky'. These interruptions are made loudly and with gusto; the web of fiction is being hung as if concretely on hooks of real life.

Notes to Introduction

In writing this Introduction I have been particularly helped by works in English by Simon Karlinsky, Michael Makin and Catherine Ciepiela, for details of all of which see 'Further Reading'. I have also been helped by the following works in German: Introduction and Commentary in *Krysolov, Der Rattenfänger*, ed. and trans. and with commentaries by Marie-Luise Bott, with a glossary by Günther Wytrzens, *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach*, Sonderband 7, Vienna, 1982; also by Marie Luise Bott, 'Studien zu Marina Cvetaevas Poem "Krysolov". Rattenfänger- und Kite-Sage', *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach*, Sonderband 3, 1981, pp. 87-112; and by Günther Wytrzens, 'Eine russische dichterische Gestaltung der Sage vom Hamelner Rattenfänger', *Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Sitzungsberichte*, vol.395, pp. 5-42. Among works in Russian, those by Ye. Etkind, I. Malinkovich and T. Suni listed in the Notes above have been particularly helpful.

The Translation

I have tried to convey as much as possible of the meaning in as natural-sounding English as possible, without obscuring the original's idiosyncrasy and strength, though much has inevitably been lost. Where I could, I reproduced the metre, or at least a semblance of it, and nearly always preserved line lengths. The *poema* is rigorously rhymed and I have used rhyme virtually throughout, without giving any priority to reproducing the rhyme schemes.

I will give a few examples of typical problems encountered.

The Piper tends to speak in ternary meters, characteristically (at any rate in Canto 4) in anapaests, and some of his most lyrical words are anapaestic; an example is the word *Indostan*. But whereas in Russian each word has a single strong stress, a three-syllable word in English readily acquires two stresses; 'Hindustan' has not the same rhythm as *Indostan*. Nothing could be done about this. I merely tried to be anapaestic where I could.

Between the two opening stanzas of Canto I, which are strongly trochaic, and the fourth and fifth stanzas, which are equally strongly - almost incantatorily - dactylic, comes a vehement interruption not only semantic but also metrical (these two lines can be scanned as anapaestic with additional unstressed syllables at both ends). In English the interruption is still made but the metre has come out differently. So I hope I have given a sense of the rapid alternations of metres, even if not of the very same ones.

Russian is an inflected language and Tsvetaeva makes sharp use of the case-endings. In these lines in Canto 3 (repeated from Canto I) -

*Gorod gryadok,
Gammeln, nraovov
Dobrykh, skladov
Polnykh ...*

which literally translate as:

Town of plant-rows
Hamlin, of morals
Good, of storehouses
Full ...

a dense cluster of genitives rests upon a pair of nominatives ('Town' and 'Hamlin'), all of it contrasting with the next thirty-two lines (the 'Ode to Measure') where there is a remarkable near-absence of genitives. In my version:

Lines of vegeta-
bles, the morals
Laudable, the
Cellars full ...

I have tried to replace the pulse and tautness of the original's pattern of endings, for which English has no equivalent, with a completely different pattern of word-ending sounds: '-bles, -als, -ble, -ull'. Compensation of this kind also occurs here in my splitting a word over a line-ending, something the poet does not do at this point but does do, inimitably, elsewhere.

All the words in the first line of the *poema* – 'Star i daven gorod Gammeln' – have English equivalents: 'Old and longstanding/is the/town Hamlin'; what cannot be found is an equivalent English form for the 'short form' of the two adjectives of the original, short forms being generally used in Russian for adjectives in the predicative position (often – and very much so in *The Ratcatcher* – suggesting more energy than the attributive long forms). Here Tsvetaeva exploits this grammatical peculiarity by employing a short form for an adjective that does not normally have one: 'daven' for 'davnii', thereby introducing a certain quaintness and a playful, faintly mocking element.

Occasionally the poet omits a word vital to the sense. 'Without your head than without your buttons,' she writes, supplying the absent word 'Better' in a most unorthodox footnote. 'Our Bible', she makes a citizen say, putting it in the accusative case but omitting the verb – I have imagined in the verb 'Gnawed'. At all such idiosyncratic omissions I have supplied the likely word.

Tsvetaeva is very prefix-conscious and will often present a concentrated variety of words all sharing one and the same prefix, as if to get to the last shred of meaning it can yield. In Cantos 3 and 4 a favoured prefix (fitting the multiple motifs both of 'excess' and of 'change') is *pere* (pronounced as in 'peregrine' but not stressed) meaning 'trans-' or 'over-'; 'translation', for instance, is *perevod*. It was extremely difficult to preserve this kind of repetition in English, not least because the English *over-* kept acquiring a stress, thus becoming *too* noticeable.

My translation is not, then, except in some lucky passages, a 'literal' one, but it does represent an attempt to make changes only where necessary (and there are many such necessities in any translation of poetry) and to convey the essence of Tsvetaeva.

Other translations

Krysolov has been translated in full into three other languages: into German by Marie-Luise Bott as *Der Rattenfänger* in 1982 (details are given above); into Italian as *Accalappiatopi: Satirica lirica* by C Graziadei, Rome 1983; and into Swedish as *Råttfångaren* by Annika Bäckström, Göteborg 1992. Excerpts from it have been translated into English by Elaine Feinstein (pp 74-80 of *Selected Poems* 1981: see 'Further Reading'). I have been helped in the rendering of problematic words and phrases at numerous places by reference to the German translation and at several places by reference to the Swedish and the Italian ones.