

## INTRODUCTION

Я камень и пламень (I am stone and flame)<sup>1</sup>

Tsvetaeva is one of the great Russian poets of the twentieth century. She is also one of the most solitary. As Joseph Brodsky said, 'Tsvetaeva stands all alone in Russian literature, very, very much off by herself.'<sup>2</sup> Many have sought to say what it is in her work that is incomparable. One commentator finds her style 'classical, terse, quick, elliptical: *on a tightrope*';<sup>3</sup> another sees in it 'all feelings strained, bared to the root';<sup>4</sup> a third – 'the charm of a lavish generosity, openness, readiness to take everything to its furthest limit';<sup>5</sup> a fourth sums up her spirit as 'incandescent'.<sup>6</sup> All note tension and energy, 'existence on the edge',<sup>7</sup> an unusually impassioned intelligence. In talking of her 1927 verse-drama *Phaedra*, in particular, it is hard to avoid the over-used word 'intensity'.

This book presents the first English translation of Tsvetaeva's *Phaedra*, as well as three of her 'long poems',<sup>8</sup> two written that same year, one a year earlier. The poems are related to the drama in impulse and aspiration, and all four works were created in close biographical and emotional connection with her correspondence with Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) and Boris Pasternak (1890-1960). Altogether the 1920s were for Tsvetaeva a time not only of poetic inspiration and creation but also of inspired letter-writing, especially to those two other poets, with both of whom she was in love – at a distance: she had left Russia and now lived in Paris, Pasternak had stayed in Moscow after the Revolution, and Rilke was living in Switzerland. Her feelings for both of them were indirectly expressed in her creative work.

The decade of the 1920s saw the creation of cycle after cycle of lyric poems,<sup>9</sup> as well as three uniquely successful long poems in folk idiom<sup>10</sup> and a series of other long poems which have received general admiration. 'Poem of the Mountain' and 'Poem of the End' were written in 1924, published 1926 (the latter shaking Pasternak to the core – 'What a diabolically great artist you are, Marina!'<sup>11</sup> – and making him rethink his idea of genius); 1926 also brought publication of 'The Ratcatcher', written a year earlier, a work in which a contemporary critic noted 'Rabelaisian vitality and inexhaustible verve'<sup>12</sup> and which, sixty years later, was still being described as a 'dazzlingly brilliant poem: her magnum opus';<sup>13</sup> then in 1926-7 came the three poems which are presented in this book, 'Attempt at a Room', 'New Year's Letter' and 'Poem of the Air' (published 1928, '28 and '30). Equally talented as a prose writer, Tsvetaeva wrote numerous literary and autobiographical essays, most of the best of them in the 1930s. This is prose in which the voice of a poet can always be heard, instinctively avoiding cliché, interrogating language for its rhythms, sounds, connotations and etymologies, pushing it to produce more than its obvious aesthetic and semantic meanings.

Does her strong focus on the 'word as such' make Tsvetaeva a 'modernist' writer? She certainly lived and worked in the so-called modernist period and she was close, in innovative spirit, in genius, and to some extent biographically, to the best of the Russian poets sometimes classified as 'modernist': Mayakovsky, Mandelstam, Akhmatova, Pasternak. Her recurrent motif of ascent may link her to Mandelstam's 'Acmeist' declaration that 'we do not fly, we ascend only those towers

<sup>1</sup> М. Цветаева, Б. Пастернак, Души начинают видеть. Письма 1922-36 годов. [M. Tsvetaeva, B. Pasternak, Souls Begin to See. Letters 1922-1936. Hereafter 'Letters'], p. 184.

<sup>2</sup> Brodsky, p. 191.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Rudman, *Diverse Voices: Essays on Poets and Poetry*, Brownsville, Ore, 1993; p. 225. My italics – A.L.

<sup>4</sup> Irma Kudrova. *Prostory Mariny Tsvetaevoy. Poeziya, proza, lichnost'* [The spaces of Marina Tsvetaeva. Poetry, prose, personality], St Petersburg, 2003, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Fazil Iskander. Quoted in Kudrova, Put' komet. Zhizn' Mariny Tsvetaevoy [The Path of Comets. The Life of Marina Tsvetaeva], St Petersburg, 2002, p. 744.

<sup>6</sup> Todorov, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. Brodsky, p. 188.

<sup>8</sup> A long, narrative or discursive, poem is in Russian *poéma* (3 syllables, plural *poémy*); I translate this as 'long poem'.

<sup>9</sup> Versty (Mileposts), 1922; *Razluka* (Parting). 1922; *Stikhi k Bloku* (Poems to Blok), 1922; *Psikheya* (Psyche), 1923; *Remeslo* (Craft), 1923; *Posle Rossii* (After Russia), 1928.

<sup>10</sup> *Tsar'-devitsa* (The Tsar-Maiden), 1922; *Pereulochki* (Sidestreets), 1922; *Mólodets* (The Swain), 1924.

<sup>11</sup> *Letters*, p. 149.

<sup>12</sup> D.S. Mirsky in *New Statesman* XXVI, 27.2.1926; reprinted in Mirsky, *Uncollected Writings on Russian Literature*, Berkeley CA, 1989, pp. 217-21.

<sup>13</sup> Karlinsky, pp. 146 & 180.

which we ourselves are able to build'.<sup>14</sup> But her difference from her contemporaries is greater than her similarity (as can indeed be said of each of them in relation to the others). She might seem to belong to the age through the remarkability of language itself in her work: the unusual foregrounding of rhythm, the verbal solidity and the sense that words might, if brilliantly handled, lead to the revelation of something unprecedented. Yet many features of 'modernism', such as a deliberate break with cultural tradition and rejection of history, do not seem to apply to Tsvetaeva; and the stylistic fragmentations and dislocations associated with it seem to me to have, in her case, little to do with the spirit of the age and everything to do with her own individual way of thinking. Tsvetaeva joined no group or movement and did not go in for experimenting or any kind of programmatic innovation. As for *Phaedra*, one could indeed point out that this work contains radical overturning of some traditions, for example the characters of the Nurse and of Phaedra, yet it also quietly follows many others, such as the basic story and many aspects of structure and dialogue. A deliberate stylistic dislocation may be felt in the juxtaposing of princely speech with folkloric diction, yet there Tsvetaeva may have been following what she knew of classical Greek tragedy, in which such mixing of levels is frequently found.<sup>15</sup> Her *Phaedra* is as recognisable and moving an example of tragic drama as any tragedies known to us, in particular the great previous treatments of the 'Phaedra' legend: the *Hippolytus* of Euripides, Seneca's *Phaedra* and Racine's *Phèdre*.

'Every character – a torch of flame': I found myself thinking these words when I finished reading Tsvetaeva's *Phaedra* for the first time, and I continue to find a flame-like quality throughout it. The young huntsmen of scene one are fiery in their worship of Artemis, as is Hippolytus in his attachment to his misandrous mother; Phaedra is, explicitly, inflamed with love; her Nurse becomes kindled by the same flame; a servant, describing battle, expresses an inner heat of his own; Hippolytus's ardent hatred of secrecy is fanned by Phaedra's revelation of the single, too burning, secret he wants left unrevealed; even the two messengers are people of warmth; behind the cold, bull-bearing sea that destroys his son rages the hot anger of Theseus; the Nurse's confession is a last flaring up of emotional fire before the drama comes to an abruptly cooled conclusion.

Why is fiery intensity of feeling so highly valued that a whole drama is filled with it? Probably because, at least for Tsvetaeva, it is the best thing in our life and a unique means of gaining knowledge. A note she made in 1921 shows her identifying a high point of feeling with a 'correct seeing' of the world: rapture, or exaltation, as a condition for grasping what is true. 'Only at the peak of exaltation', she wrote, 'does a human being see the world correctly. God created the world in exaltation [ . . . ] a human being who is *not* in a state of exaltation cannot have a correct vision of things.'<sup>16</sup> The word I am translating as 'exaltation' is *vostorg*, often translated 'rapture'. To feel enraptured, rapt, seized, possessed, and to feel exalted, lifted up emotionally, raised on high by great longing or striving – these were, for Tsvetaeva, ways of describing similar experiences. When she wrote about poetic creation, she spoke of being possessed – ravished or enraptured. 'The condition of creation is a condition of entrancement. Until you begin – *obsession*, until you finish – *possession*'<sup>17</sup> (she uses French words here). The word *vostorg* in the 1921 note could just as well be rendered as 'rapture', yet both the accompanying 'peak' (*vershina*) and the word '*vostorg*' itself also suggest an ascent, of climbing or being carried up to a height. The strength of the erotic, as well as the anti-erotic, feeling that fills this drama is related to that exaltation which the poet guessed was God's feeling in creating the world, and which she relates to human 'seeing correctly'. There is nothing sentimental in her conception of intense feeling. It is the conception not of an indulgence but of a force.

The three long poems included in the present book resemble the play through the value given to a high peak of feeling, and in two of them the central image is that of an ascent. 'Poem of the Air' narrates a deliberate movement into

<sup>14</sup> Osip Mandelstam, 'Utro Akmeizma' (The Morning of Acmeism), 1913, first published 1919. Mandel'shtam, *Sochineniya v dvukh tomakh*, II, ed. Averintsev and Nerler, Moscow, 1990, pp. 141-45.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Makin writes convincingly about Tsvetaeva's closeness to classical tragedy. Makin, pp. 290-93.

<sup>16</sup> *M. Ušemaeva. Neizdannoe. Svodnye tetradi* [Unpublished material. Collated Notebooks] edited by E.B. Korkina and I.D. Shevelenko. Moscow, 1997.

<sup>17</sup> *Navazhdenie* is translated 'entrancement' in ALC, p. 172.

something unimaginably high, leaving behind house and garden, earth altogether, and finally all traces of air. 'New Year's Letter' addresses someone who has already reached an unimaginably high place not even bounded by the concept of a god but having terrace upon terrace of gods: 'Must be more than one god there, and higher /up, another?' The concern with upward movement in these poems is not due to the sheer excitement of it, let alone to the pleasure of being above the rest of the world. It has all the force of discovering what is real.

Tsvetaeva is less known as a dramatist than as a poet. While still in Moscow, however, in 1918-19, she composed nine verse-dramas, dedicated to individual actors of the Vakhtangov theatre,<sup>18</sup> with which she was then enthralled. None was performed but six are extant<sup>19</sup> – short, stylised, Romantic pieces set in the 16th-18th centuries. In 1923, after leaving Russia, she again turned to writing drama, this time finding her subjects in classical Greek myth, and working very fast: she was already thinking out a detailed plan for *Phaedra* while composing the play which preceded it, *Ariadne*. She wrote *Phaedra* between September 1926 and December 1927, spending a period of between five and eleven weeks on each of its four scenes. It was conceived as the second part of a dramatic trilogy of which the over-all title, 'Theseus', supplanted an original title, 'The Rage of Aphrodite'. The three parts were to be 'Ariadne' (about Theseus as a young man), 'Phaedra' (with Theseus in middle age) and 'Helen' (his old age). The third was never written, and Tsvetaeva wrote no more plays.

There are several allusions in *Phaedra* to the legend on which *Ariadne* is based – the story of how the hero Theseus slays the Minotaur, marries the Cretan princess Ariadne and yields her to the god Dionysus. This more conventionally classical drama, with formal choruses and with gods appearing in person on the stage, contains some very fine verse and great lyrical moments, but is far less powerful than *Phaedra*, which is pruned of gods, formal choruses and intricacies of plot down to an essential clash of feelings and world-views.

#### *The legend of Phaedra and Hippolytus*

**Phaedra**,<sup>20</sup> daughter of King Minos and Pasiphaë, and wife of king **Theseus** of Athens, falls in love with her husband's son (by the Amazon Queen **Antiope**) **Hippolytus**, who hates women, cultivates chastity and spends his time hunting in the forest and worshipping chaste **Artemis** – goddess of, *inter alia*, hunting and the moon. Phaedra falls ill from her illicit and secret desire, but her **Nurse** gets her to confess it to her, and persuades her to write Hippolytus a love-letter, Theseus being away on a journey. Phaedra takes this advice, is rejected by Hippolytus, and commits suicide. Theseus returns to find his wife dead, either with a note in her hand accusing Hippolytus of raping her, or with the Nurse making this accusation; believing it, he calls on the sea-god **Poseidon** to destroy his son. News soon comes that, as Hippolytus was driving off in his chariot, a huge bull came out of the sea and his terrified horses dragged him to a ghastly death.

#### *Related narratives relevant to Tsvetaeva's drama*

Although known as the son of **Aegeus**, king of Athens, Theseus had the right to regard Poseidon, god of the sea, as his father, too, and to call on him for help. This was because the bed of his mother, Aethra (daughter of Pittheus, king of Troezen), had been visited during the same night by both Aegeus and Poseidon. Theseus grew up in Troezen (a city-state not far from Athens), was reunited with Aegeus and performed many valiant deeds, especially the killing of the Minotaur.

The Minotaur – half-man, half-bull – was born to **Pasiphaë** after she fell in love with a bull and contrived to copulate with it by concealing herself in the wooden replica of a cow. King Minos, her husband, imprisoned her monstrous offspring in a labyrinth in his palace at Cnossus, and compelled the Athenians to send seven girls and seven youths, every

<sup>18</sup> Evgenii Vakhtangov: famous director of the 'Third Studio' at the Moscow Art Theatre in the 1910s.

<sup>19</sup> *Chervonnyy valet* (The Knave of Hearts), *Metel'* (Snowstorm), *Fortuna, Kamennyi angel* (The Stone Angel), *Priklyuchenie* (An Adventure), *Feniks* (Phoenix).

<sup>20</sup> Names in bold face are of characters who appear, or are mentioned, in Tsvetaeva's drama.

ninth year, to Crete to be devoured by it. On the third occasion of this horrible feasting, young Theseus nobly joined the group of youths to be sacrificed (or, in another version, was one of those chosen by lot). He killed the Minotaur and got out of the labyrinth by following a magic thread given him by **Ariadne** (daughter of Minos and Pasiphaë) who had fallen in love with him. He married Ariadne but left her on the island of Dia, later named Naxos, birthplace of the god Dionysus/Bacchus; the god married her. Some say he forced Theseus to give her up.

One episode in Theseus's life was his abduction of the Queen of the Amazons, Antiope (also known as Hippolyta), though some versions say she willingly joined his ship after his visit to her country. In any case, improbably enough, she fell in love with him and their union produced a son, Hippolytus. Improbably, because the Amazons, a female-only nation of warriors who each burned off one breast so as to use their weapons more easily, were known for their hatred of men. The Amazons waged war on the Athenians for abducting their queen, and Antiope died fighting at Theseus's side in the battle against her own people. But another version of the story is that she survived that battle and, when Theseus married Phaedra, she burst in, fully armed, on his wedding festivities, intending to massacre the guests; so Theseus was compelled to kill her.

After marrying Phaedra, Theseus sent his bastard infant son Hippolytus to Troezen, where Pittheus adopted him as heir to the Troezen throne. Here Hippolytus built a temple to the virginal Artemis, thereby enraging the goddess of erotic love, **Aphrodite**, who, to punish him, caused his stepmother, Phaedra, to fall in love with him.

#### *Tsvetaeva's version of the legend*

SCENE ONE: — Hippolytus's young huntsmen-friends chant of the 'absolute happiness' of their life in the forest, their worship of Artemis and total rejection of women, marriage, family and domesticity. They are loved by the gods, who admire youth and adventure. Artemis they see as virginal, vegetational, stone-hearted, a speeding vision always just out of sight; and Hippolytus they praise as her closest friend, the boldest of huntsmen, the most free from sexual bonds.

They drink and feast after a successful hunt. Hippolytus does not join the feast because of a disturbing dream in which he is visited by the one woman he loves, his mother, Antiope. Adorer of a goddess whom only trees are permitted to behold naked, he sees the dream-mother open her shroud to reveal breast and wound. What is it he tries in vain to grasp amid the 'silence's utter thunder'— the breast? the wound? his origin? some essence of femaleness? Much of the drama's action has to do with keeping and revealing secrets. Artemis's concealment of herself from the young hunters is a welcome secrecy to them, while Hippolytus's dream of the near-naked maternal body is a secret he does wish to grasp, even though in the dream his mother lifts her finger to her lips as if to prevent enquiry.

His friends remind him what life is really about: not female mysteries but wine, laughter, youth, sport, men without women. At this moment Phaedra appears, lost in the forest, and sees Hippolytus for the first time.

SCENE TWO: — In the palace Phaedra lies ill and unconscious, that one glimpse of Hippolytus having inflamed her with desire for him. She raves of the myrtle tree (symbol of love), and of thundering horse-hooves and heavy fruit in a tree – omens of Hippolytus's death and of her own. Her maidservants are bewildered. Her Nurse (once wetnurse, now servant and companion) recalls how she journeyed with her from Athens to Troezen, and how Phaedra, seeing the dense forests there, rushed headlong into them (unwittingly betraying, we may think, an affinity with the huntsmen, whose opening cry 'O thickets!' could be hers, too) – to emerge from the forest, later, strangely 'changed'. When Phaedra wakes, the Nurse recounts the unhappy fates of Pasiphaë and Ariadne, and with much persistence gets her to confess she is unhappy as Theseus's third wife, strongly agreeing that she ought indeed to be unhappy: 'Phaedra, they mated you with a spider!'

Practically all of scene two consists in the gradual uncovering of secrets. Phaedra's is revealed in two stages – first that she is in love with someone other than her husband; then that her beloved is her husband's son. But the Nurse, too, has a secret and, while persuading Phaedra to speak out, she reveals it, again in two stages. First comes her belief that she has a

special elemental closeness to Phaedra. Then comes her hope that she herself, a servant deprived of any love-life, will vicariously enjoy Phaedra's love-making with Hippolytus. Her powerfully released language of desire sweeps away Phaedra's horrified objections to planning an immediate meeting with Hippolytus 'in the woods'. As the Nurse's rhetoric intensifies, Phaedra weakens and is persuaded to write Hippolytus a letter.

SCENE THREE: — After the preceding scene's absorption in the longings of two women, one young and one old, this shorter scene opens with a greatly contrasting but no less profoundly emotional dialogue of two men – one young, one old. An unnamed servant describes to the eager Hippolytus how his mother died at his father's side in the battle against her own people, the Amazons. The detail of how the arc of her bow resembles her missing breast must recall Hippolytus's dream in the previous scene, so the account of the battle here is like a second dream of the mother.

Just as the Nurse worked hard to get Phaedra to speak of her love, now the servant tries hard to persuade Hippolytus to give up his insistence on chastity. Sexual love, he claims, is like a baby's suckling: to neither does resistance last long. This coincides with the Nurse's unexpected arrival, in which the same two motifs (sex and milk) are combined, for she enters repeating her conviction about the universal power of milk, at the same time handing to Hippolytus the love letter from Phaedra. Seeing the inscription, 'secret', he smashes the clay tablet and utters a soliloquy against everything secretive, maintaining that the only things that should be hidden are monsters and lechery. 'Except for lechery' – these words turn out to be the kernel of the matter, for Phaedra now enters, 'her finger to her lips' (like the mother in the dream), at once keeping her secret and ready to reveal it. In the ensuing dialogue, the high point of this play, queen speaks to prince, woman to woman-hater, stepmother to stepson, eros to anti-eros, a person utterly entranced and loving to one who is sober and hostile. Tsvetaeva jotted in her notebook that she meant Phaedra to be '*beyond* transgression', 'a young woman madly in love, deeply understandable', who '*speaks as if in her sleep*, therefore not hearing his exclamations; then she comes to her senses, slain by his answer.'<sup>21</sup> As Hippolytus reached out to his dream-mother but met only smoke and steam, now his stepmother reaches out to him and meets only rejection.

SCENE FOUR:<sup>22</sup> — Phaedra has hanged herself from the myrtle tree. The grieving Nurse resolves to save at least Phaedra's honour by telling Theseus that in his absence she was persecuted by the lustful behaviour of his son. Returning, Theseus is told the false tale and calls on the sea-god Poseidon to make good his long-ago promise by destroying Hippolytus. A messenger brings news of Hippolytus's death: a great bull from the sea maddened his horses, which dragged him to his death. The young huntsmen from scene one reappear, to mourn him. The maidens, however, refuse to lament Phaedra's death and instead speak of her courage, advising all women boldly to seek their desire.

This scene is again largely built on the revelation of secrets. A servant bringing the fragments of the tablet (the love-letter) marks the beginning of an 'openness' (as if in honour of Hippolytus's scene three monologue): Phaedra's guilt is revealed and the Nurse reveals her own role in what has happened. Theseus, now accepting the truth, does not attend to the 'stupid old woman'. Instead he makes a reconciliatory speech: we are mere tools in the hands of the gods, who fight their own battles through us – thus 'a poor woman's love for a poor young child / is Aphrodite's hatred of me.' He states that Phaedra and Hippolytus should be buried (uncomfortably, one may imagine) in a single grave.

### *Characters*

Tsvetaeva's Phaedra is presented as wholly innocent. It is clear she is possessed by an elemental force she cannot reject, yet also clear that she would not have acted on her desire but for the urgings of the Nurse. She is presented as young, not at all as someone approaching middle age. She has no children (although the traditional legend gives her two) and she makes no speeches of wisdom. She is said to go running like an adolescent into the forests of Troezen, and she is timid.

<sup>21</sup> Notebook, quoted in *Собрание сочинений в семи томах* [Collected Works in Seven Volumes], edited by Anna Saakyants and Lev Mnuhkin. Ellis Lak, Moscow, 1994. Vol. 3, p. 807. Tsvetaeva's italics.

<sup>22</sup> A fifth scene, to be called 'Horses' and with emphasis on Hippolytus, was planned but was not written.

When starting to speak to Hippolytus, in scene three, she could be a shy schoolgirl confessing to her teacher a helpless adoration.

Some details recall the Phèdre of Racine. The semi-delirious 'Full-gallop you'll go flying past. / Down to you I shall lean from the bough' (scene two) recalls the earlier Phèdre's 'Dieux! Que ne suis-je assise à l'ombre des forêts! Quand pourrai-je, au travers d'une noble poussière, Suivre de l'œil un char fuyant dans la carrière?'<sup>23</sup> But Racine's heroine is a mature, queenly woman who speaks of her children, is aware of royal politics, is shocked by her own guilty passion and is able to be cruel – making Hippolytus's life miserable with her pretence of hating him, agreeing that Theseus be told the lie about his son, and blaming Oenone (her 'Nurse') for the consequent disaster. Tsvetaeva's Phaedra has no previous acquaintance with Hippolytus and there is no trace of hate in her love for him; she obeys and trusts her Nurse after her one cry of 'Bawd!' Of course she plays no part in telling the lie to Theseus – it is told after her death. Nor does Tsvetaeva invent any equivalent to Aricie, with whom Racine's Hippolyte, no longer committed to chastity, is in love – unthinkable for Tsvetaeva's 'Ippolit'. Racine's Phèdre is jealous of Aricie; Tsvetaeva's is jealous of no one and blames no one.

Hippolytus, too, seems very young in this drama. Where Racine gives him the rationality and urbane manners of someone older, Tsvetaeva shows him surrounded by bold young hunters, festive drinkers, despisers of urban proprieties; his home is a 'lair'. As if to a youth, older men give him advice (servants in scenes one and three), none of which he heeds. Polite at first to the visiting stepmother-queen, when she challenges his deepest convictions his retort is blurted and barbaric.

Further, while Phaedra is always presented in dialogue, Hippolytus is characterised mainly through four monologues, which variously point to paradoxes. His last long speech in scene three, for example, praises 'openness' at the very moment when he is about to destroy an important letter which he refuses to open. He attacks secrecy, but keeps secret from himself the whole nature of the erotic. Tsvetaeva has created a new, more complex and interesting version of Hippolytus.

The Nurse, traditionally an important minor character, is here even more important. In scene two she speaks well over three times more lines than Phaedra does. If Phaedra is possessed by passionate love and Hippolytus by the determination to avoid it, the Nurse is – or becomes – fixated on the thought of the erotic as such. When she finds out that Phaedra's illness is due to love, she begins speaking of an 'ancestral woe', a 'certain power' which once 'hurtled down' from above and without which humans would not exist. At the very end of the drama she virtually identifies herself with that power: 'Flog, but know, / in this place / I'm the gods.' Between those two moments she evolves from benevolent servant into a person obsessed with a bodily relationship (of infant and wetnurse) which has strong sexual implications. To the revelation that Phaedra is in love with her own stepson she responds with sheer satisfaction – the antithesis of her response in Euripides, Seneca and Racine. She immediately plans a rendezvous in the woods, just as if she herself were going to it: 'lips to lips! – Today! At once!' In her increasingly sensual language there is even an element of the vampiric. This becomes quasi-explicit when she says: 'I'm feeding on your youth, as once – sweet hours! – you used to feed on mine.' After which she becomes temporarily incoherent, as if she, too, is crazed with desire.

Two years before she started writing *Phaedra*, Tsvetaeva wrote the long poem 'Mólodets' (the only long work she dedicated to Pasternak). Usually translated as 'The Swain', it is based on the Russian folk tale 'The Vampire'.<sup>24</sup> The peasant girl Marusia falls in love with a strange young man she meets at a village dance, and does not reject him even when she comes upon him eating a corpse in a church. So as not to lose him, she sacrifices to him her parents, her brother and, finally, herself – upon all of whom he *feeds*. A significant alteration Tsvetaeva made to the folk story is that in her version the vampire, associated with the element of fire, is not evil; he tries to save his victims. If Marusia would say openly what she saw in the church, she and her family would be free of him, and he begs her to do so; but she is possessed by love and

<sup>23</sup> 'Ye gods! Would that I were seated in the shade of forests! When may I, through a noble dust, watch the full-speed flight of a chariot?' Racine, *Phèdre* (act 1, scene 3).

<sup>24</sup> Tora Lane's *Rendering the Sublime, A Reading of Marina Tsvetaeva's Fairy-Tale Poem 'The Swain'*. Stockholm, 2009 (in which the Russian text of this tale is provided) describes and discusses the folk-language used in the long poem, 'Mólodets'.

refuses to say it. Neither is the Nurse in *Phaedra* evil, despite all the wrong she does and dreams of. Another connecting-point with *Phaedra* is that 'The Swain' is written in the diction of folk poetry and folk tales; similarly Phaedra's Nurse often speaks in a folkish dialect (see 'Rhythms' below).

### Comparisons

Tsvetaeva once claimed that the source for her planned dramatic trilogy was the popular 19th-century account of classical myths by Gustav Schwab, but she also stated that its real sources were within herself. She knew Euripides, probably Seneca and certainly Racine. All the same she presents the mythical characters very much in her own way. Here are some brief comparisons, scene by scene, with earlier Phaedra-dramas.

*Scene 1.* No deity is represented in Tsvetaeva's drama, whereas Euripides starts with Aphrodite announcing her plan to punish Hippolytus for scorning her, and ends with Artemis blaming Aphrodite for all that has gone wrong. The huntsmen speak as a sort of chorus, but there is no regular classical Chorus here such as in Euripides and Seneca. The opening of Tsvetaeva's drama slightly resembles that of Seneca's: there, too, is a hunting scene with hills, thickets, boars and praise of Diana (the Greek Artemis), though with Hippolytus allocating tasks and territories to his fellow huntsmen. In Euripides, too, near the beginning, the huntsmen offer praise to Artemis. But Hippolytus's dream and Phaedra's chancing upon him in the forest are Tsvetaeva's additions.

*Scene 2.* The lovesick Phaedra's illness and confusion, and her Nurse's and maidservants' bewilderment, are traditional subject matter; similarly, the to-and-fro dialogue, in which the Nurse gradually discovers who Phaedra is in love with, has counterparts in Euripides, Seneca and Racine. But the 'haunted third-wife' motif, greatly played on by Tsvetaeva's persuasive Nurse, is new, and both the Nurse's lactal philosophy and her involvement in Phaedra's erotic life are also Tsvetaeva's innovation. Euripides has his sympathetic Nurse declare: 'What you want / is not fine words, but the man!' <sup>25</sup> but there is no sign that she might want the same thing. Racine's Oenone stresses that she has given up her own life to attend Phèdre ('Mon pays, mes enfants, pour vous j'ai tout quitté') <sup>26</sup> and is so attached to Phèdre that she kills herself when she is rejected; but her feelings spring from devotion and self-sacrifice. The vicarious-erotic motif is unique to Tsvetaeva.

*Scene 3.* The servant here may be seen as something of a *confidant*, like Racine's Théràmène. But Hippolytus's speeches about Antiope's death and his own childlessness are additions to the traditional treatment of the legend. However, his speech in praise of 'openness' resembles the one Euripides's Hippolytus makes (to the Nurse) about a pure world without women; it also resembles the one in Seneca about honesty and a wholesome woodland life.

There are big differences in the ways Hippolytus learns of Phaedra's love. In Euripides, the Nurse tells him, with the eavesdropping Phaedra crying 'I am destroyed for ever!' <sup>27</sup> In Seneca, while the Nurse is trying to persuade him to give up his vow of chastity, Phaedra enters, swooning, and, being gathered up in his filially unsuspecting arms, shocks him by declaring her love. In Racine's drama, Phèdre, talking to Hippolyte, lets the confession slip out inadvertently. Only in Tsvetaeva's does Phaedra herself intentionally declare her love to Hippolytus, hoping to win him over. Something like Phaedra's narrative of the history of her love also occurs in Euripides, Seneca and Racine, but (once again) it is only in Tsvetaeva's version that Phaedra tells it directly to her beloved.

*Scene 4.* Though with different emphases, this final scene largely follows the classical legend. Phaedra's suicide, Theseus's return, his ready belief in the false tale (here told by the Nurse, not by Phaedra), his curse upon his son, the messenger's detailed account of Hippolytus's death, the final revealing of the truth and Theseus's concluding speech – all these elements are present in Euripides, Seneca and Racine. Tsvetaeva's Nurse's speeches and actions here, however, have no counterpart in the earlier dramas.

<sup>25</sup> Euripides (tr. Grene), p. 183.

<sup>26</sup> 'For you I left everything - my country, my children.' Racine, *Phèdre* (act 1, scene 3).

<sup>27</sup> Euripides, p. 186.

The description of Hippolytus's death is very much a set-piece in these early Phaedra dramas, the details being the same in them all, as well as in the account by Ovid. But Tsvetaeva's version of it is remarkable for being very much more concise, while as vivid and harrowing. Its brevity leaves room for the greater sadness about Phaedra.

Tsvetaeva's play ends differently from the preceding ones. Euripides's Hippolytus, on whom his attention has been more focussed than on Phaedra, is brought back terribly wounded and forgives his lamenting father with his dying breath. Seneca's is brought back, too, as a mangled corpse, and Theseus utters words of reconciliation. Racine has Phèdre die of poison in the presence of her husband, whose final short speech, after an unforgiving word about her 'action si noire', is of grief and guilt towards his son. Tsvetaeva alone concludes the drama, if somewhat mechanically, with general forgiveness and submission to the will of the gods.

Another earlier treatment of the legend which deserves mention is the 1864 dramatic fragment 'Phaedra' by Algernon Charles Swinburne. Tsvetaeva did not read English and may not have known Swinburne's work, despite his being for a while Pasternak's favourite English poet. This seven-page dialogue consists mainly of speeches by Phaedra who, with Hippolytus's sword in her hand, demands that he kill her – a wish uttered also in the dramas of Racine and Seneca, but radically transmuted by Tsvetaeva into a proposal that the two of them should die together. Swinburne has some images similar to Tsvetaeva's, as in his fine line 'The bright writing of my name is black', which resembles the Russian Phaedra's mentioning her own name, implying its meaning of 'bright'. 'My name is Phaedra', she says in scene two, a phrase I have translated as 'My name means shining'. Swinburne's love-language includes both 'feeding on' the beloved (Tsvetaeva's Nurse's language) and being 'burnt' by love (her Phaedra's):

Thou art my son, I am thy father's wife,  
I ache toward thee with a bridal blood,  
The pulse is heavy in all my married veins,  
My whole face beats, I will feed full of thee,  
My body is empty of ease, I will be fed,  
I am burnt to the bone with love . . . .<sup>28</sup>

The passionateness in Swinburne's lines is very like that in Tsvetaeva's, but the demanding, even commanding, figure he creates has little in common with the tender youthfulness of Tsvetaeva's Phaedra.

### *Rhythms*

While working on scene three of *Phaedra*, Tsvetaeva told Pasternak how vital its rhythms were to her: ' . . . nothing depends on me. It is all a matter of the rhythm I shall fall into. My lines are carried by the rhythm, as my words are by the voice into which I fall. As soon as I'm in the wrong rhythm (and what is the *right* one? all I know is – not *this* one!),<sup>29</sup> everything is over, three lines a day, not just winglessness – pawlessness. In a word, one minute it carries me, the next I am crawling.'<sup>30</sup> A year previously, Pasternak found in *The Ratcatcher*, her 'lyrical satire' of 1925, 'the absolute and undivided supremacy of rhythm'.<sup>31</sup> Can something similar be said of *Phaedra*? It is a highly aural drama, written in energetic, inventive, provocative verse tensely controlled by rhymes and rhythms. New metrical patterns are introduced, one after another, to be repeated with great consistency as well as great flexibility. Strict forms unite with a natural freedom. It is

<sup>28</sup> Swinburne, pp. 27-33.

<sup>29</sup> A similar moment is described in the essay 'Art in the Light of Conscience', ALC, p. 173.

<sup>30</sup> *Letters*, p. 374.

<sup>31</sup> *Letters*, p. 249.



interesting that two prominent émigré writers who, upon the publication of *Phaedra* in 1928, fiercely criticised it for what they saw as its unacceptable mixture of styles, also wrote of its extraordinarily 'enchanted' use of rhythm.<sup>32</sup>

I have not reflected the poet's use of rhyme in my translation as it would have caused too much distortion of meaning. (On rhyme, see 'Translating *Phaedra*.') But I have reproduced the original's line-lengths and tried to approximate its predominant metres. Below, I hope to give an idea of the unusualness and brilliance of Tsvetaeva's verse to readers who have only this translation to go by. The Nurse's style of speaking is most interesting of all, while being, alas, the most untranslatable.

Many lines are very short – dimetric or trimetric; none longer than tetrameter. The commonest foot is the trochee (/ x). Often one senses a regular beat of / x / x / x / x, perhaps suggestive of the heavy heartbeat of *Phaedra* delirious, or of the heartbeats of all the characters, driven as they are by emotion and doom, or perhaps of the fatal horse-hooves *Phaedra* hears in her sleep. Also typical are amphibrach (x / x) choriamb (/ x x /), dactyl (/ x x) – metres which, with the trochee, are the most common in Russian folk poems. Lines combining two or more specific metres ('logaoedic' lines)<sup>33</sup> or able to be scanned in more than one way, often occur as well. The opening line: '*O záros!*' '*O zov!*' – echoed in the translation as 'O thickets! O cry!' – scans best as amphibrach-plus-iambus (x / x + x /) but identical arrangements of stresses elsewhere scan better as iambus-plus-anapaest (x / + x x /) or as monosyllable-plus-choriamb (x + / x x /). These three scansion possibilities occur, in the original, throughout the first sixty lines of scene four (Nurse's lament and resolve), where despite their amazing variety each one of the sixty can be charted as: x / x x /

This metrical pattern is used for sixteen or so lines in the huntsmen's opening choruses, where occasionally my English lines repeat it, as in the opening line quoted above and line two of stanza nine: '*Prokhláda. Privál*', 'A coolness. A halt'.

For rhythm, the most noteworthy scene is the second. *Phaedra*'s way of speaking is vividly distinguished from that of Nurse and maids. She speaks mainly in trochaic tetrameters while the servants use a looser style, echoing traditional Russian folk poems with their irregular stress-patterns and their many lines ending in a dactyl or even hyperdactyl (three unstressed syllables): this has the effect of a slipping into a kind of singing or muttering. Nurse and maids are further distinguished from *Phaedra* in using archaic and folkloric words and many folk-style word-contractions and expansions: Tsvetaeva knew Russian folk poetry well and was expert at creating variants of it. According to Brodsky, 'of the entire pleiad of great twentieth-century Russian poets, with the exception of Nikolai Klyuev, Tsvetaeva stands closest to folklore.'<sup>34</sup> The poet Vladislav Khodasevich,<sup>35</sup> though often critical of her work (as he was, in fact, of *Phaedra*), expressed unqualified admiration for her imitation of Russian folk-verse in 'The Swain'.<sup>36</sup> The way she is at home in the folkloric can be seen in the diction she creates for *Phaedra*'s Nurse.

All this is thoroughly daunting to the translator! Easier to render are the quoting of apparent proverbs, such as: 'know the illness – know the balm', and the habit of counting things in threes, as in 'I've scoured three hills' or of using three verbs for one ('we'll hide it, bury it, trample it').

But the most striking feature of the Nurse's speech is an idiosyncratic four-line metrical figure which contributes to revealing a witch-like dimension in her personality. This 'four-line chant', as I shall call it, is used twenty-seven times, and only by the Nurse, except when *Phaedra*'s short interruptions continue it. It first appears in scene two at the line 'All that suckling and all that feeding you', and it scans as follows: first line – / x / x x / x / x x; second line the same); third drops

<sup>32</sup> Vladislav Khodasevich in the journal 'Vozrozhdenie', 27.9.1928, and Georgiy Adamovich in 'Poslednie novosti', 4.10.1928. [Khodasevich even opined that a wonderful work of art could be produced by encoding and re-playing all the drama's rhythms without any of its meanings.]

<sup>33</sup> See G.S. Smith, 'Logaoedic Metres in the Lyric Poetry of Marina Tsvetayeva' in *Slavonic and East European Review*, 132, July 1975.

<sup>34</sup> Brodsky, p. 192.

<sup>35</sup> Vladislav Khodasevich, 'Zametki o stikhakh. Marina Tsvetaeva, "Molodets"'. *Poslednie novosti*, Paris, 11.6.1925, reprinted in *Pered zerkalom*, Moscow, 2002.

<sup>36</sup> See note 23.

the two final non-stresses) – / x / x x / x /; fourth is suddenly short – / x / x /. My translation sometimes gets close to this.

Here are three consecutive four-line chants from the Nurse's speech in scene two about Phaedra's unlucky lot in being a third wife. The first two quatrains are an approximation to the original's pattern, the last one shows it exactly.

Phaedra, they mated you with a spider!  
Take revenge on him, give up make-believe,  
you're not guilty in any way.  
Into your husband's house

you came, a late-coming wife, the third of them.  
Two wives met with the new young wife at the  
threshold, two wives not of this earth  
led the young one in.

'Here', they said to her, 'live, enjoy yourself',  
took the younger one's hands and guided her.  
Phaedra, all of your nights and days  
pass beneath their shade.

The long speech which contains these quatrains mentions a number of uncanny phenomena – ghosts, curses, the evil eye (serpents' eyes), a bewitched bed. And yet it is, above all, the Nurse's language, her use of verbal rhythms and especially of the incantatory four-liner, that make for a sinister effect. It seems that, while lamenting another's curse, she herself lays a curse upon Phaedra.

Meanwhile Phaedra, who at one point could say 'Old woman, how you prattle on!' falls under the spell of these strange metres and of the Nurse's witch-like repetitions. Examples of the latter: '*Znáyu, chúyu, vízhu, slýshu*' (I know, I sense, I see, I hear), and, towards the end of scene two: '*Skróem, vróem, vtópchem styd*' (We'll hide, we'll bury, we'll trample shame – translated as 'bury and hide and trample the shame'). The poet thoroughly exploits the repetitive endings of Russian verbs and the language's ability to do without personal pronouns, all of which reinforces the effect of a powerful enchantment. All these examples, moreover, are strongly trochaic, a mode which English with its unavoidable monosyllables (I, you, we, a, the) tends to weaken into iambs.

There is a significant difference between the language of Theseus and that of the Nurse, who both cause the death of one they love. Upright Theseus, to destroy his son, eloquently calls upon the god of the sea, using heroic-sounding archaisms, while the now half-crazily chanting Nurse calls up uncanny forces lurking in demotic speech. Phaedra's death is not her intention, but her three lines closing scene two imply that death isn't too high a price for what she has in mind.

Laurel-walnut-almond!  
Upon a goodly tree  
no shame to hang yourself!

When she comes to the fore in the final scene, the contrast with Theseus is strongly marked. Except for one marvellous speech in her former half-dactylic folk-style, she is reduced, now blaming herself for everything, to a stuttering two-stress line:

Bull and bough.  
Corpse and corpse.  
Work of these hands,  
work of these lips.  
...

Theseus, by contrast, speaks in stately tetrameters as he shifts all responsibility onto the gods:

Hippolytus' horses and Phaedra's bough aren't  
old woman's intrigues, they're ancient knockings  
of fate. Can human beings shift mountains?  
In different form, and in different fashion,  
still the same guilt is being punished.  
New lightning, old thundercloud.

*Poetry in the correspondence with Pasternak and Rilke*

Although Tsvetaeva had met Pasternak in Moscow, it was only after her emigration, when it was practically impossible for them to meet, that they discovered each other as poets and as persons. In 1922-23 her love for Pasternak was all-consuming, as was her disappointment when he returned to Moscow from a visit to Berlin, thereby giving up any chance of their meeting. This disappointment led her to write, in 1923, ten very powerful poems addressed to him.<sup>37</sup> 'Non-meetings' are a theme central to two long poems, 'Attempt at a Room' and 'New Year's Letter', and they are echoed in Phaedra's virtual non-meeting with Hippolytus. Through Pasternak, Tsvetaeva became acquainted with Rilke; her subsequent correspondence with him during 1926 was as impassioned and sincere as that with Pasternak. Indeed, the urgency with which, in many of her letters, she expressed her thoughts about poetry, and about both Pasternak and Rilke as poets, is germane to the general atmosphere of *Phaedra*, albeit the play is directly concerned with erotic love rather than with art.

The strange and difficult poem, 'Attempt at a Room', written in June 1926, belongs to the complex relationship she had with the two poets whom she loved but could not meet. It sets out to construct – or, in some wilful and exalted way, to *be* – a room, a four-walled space in which two poets' minds can meet for a non-bodily yet blissful version of a lovers' meeting. The poem shares with *Phaedra* this theme of an attempt to bring about a perfect, almost otherworldly, meeting with someone loved and intangible. The quasi-physical constructing of the room is described, off and on, throughout the poem and when, in the end the room collapses, there paradoxically remain the 210 lines of the metrically highly regular, thus very noticeably *constructed*, literary work, with its unspoken idea that *it* is the intended room, somehow a real opportunity for meeting. At first the poet notionally invited to the room of the poem was Pasternak. At Rilke's death, however, it was re-dedicated to Rilke, despite its references to Pasternak's youthful piano-playing and to two dreams, one of them one a dream Pasternak had had and told her of, the other a dream which, in an earlier poem, she imagines him having about her. In January 1927 she wrote to Pasternak: 'Shuddering, I realised that the poem about the two of us, "Attempt at a Room", is not about us but about . . .'<sup>38</sup> Her sentence is unfinished.

Letters exchanged between Tsvetaeva and Pasternak in the early 1920s show how close they felt they were, temperamentally and creatively. In one of his very first letters, in 1922, the statement, 'I know you love – to put it briefly – poetry, no less passionately than I do',<sup>39</sup> led to an exquisitely fine (if, for others, rather difficult to follow) explanation of what poetry meant to him. Two years later, as much in love with her as she was with him, he started a letter with: 'Marina, my golden friend, my amazing supernaturally kindred destiny, my smoky early-morning soul, Marina . . .'<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile, Marina was writing drafts of her new poems on the very pages which held drafts of her letters to Pasternak. She told him about this: 'Letters to you I always write into my notebook, at speed, as the rough drafts of poems. Only, they don't become a fair copy: two rough drafts, one for you, one for me. You and poems [ . . . ] are for me inseparable. I don't need to come out of the poems in order to write to you, I write in you.'<sup>41</sup> And yet by 1926 Pasternak was already undergoing a change that was taking him away from her – away from lyric poetry and towards what he called 'historicism', a commitment to understanding the pains and concerns of the Soviet age and to doing something responsible in relation to them, starting with the composition of deliberately non-esoteric narrative poems on contemporary subjects. The shock and sorrow of realising that he was moving into something which they no longer shared, and which she could not admire, had a remarkable effect on her writing of *Phaedra* – it gave her a kind of tragic energy, rather as his failure to meet up with her in 1923 had spurred her to compose a cycle of brilliant poems. She wrote to him, that August, that she was correcting Part One of her dramatic trilogy

<sup>37</sup> Under the title 'Provodá' (Wires) i.e. telegraph wires, suggesting the similar word 'próvody' (a seeing-off). These poems are translated by M. Naydan in *After Russia*: see first part of *SFurther Reading*.

<sup>38</sup> *Letters*, p. 282.

<sup>39</sup> *Letters*, p. 17.

<sup>40</sup> *Letters*, p. 93.

<sup>41</sup> *Letters*, p. 168.

and hoping to start on Part Two (meaning *Phaedra*): 'Now that I have such grief – you – I shall write well. Hippolytus will be not merely loved but loved-to-excess'.<sup>42</sup> The rest of this letter is full of her grief over Pasternak, and in subsequent letters she tried hard to persuade him to turn back to his original source of inspiration, writing again in August 1926:

You are a lyric poet, Boris, such as the world has never before seen nor God created [. . .] Abandon plot, plot is beneath you [. . .] Don't have events. *Being* is eventless [. . .] You, when you write – you place the poem on the paper, in an instant, a single gesture, no first or last line. That's wholly what you are. You are entire, like an explosion. [. . .] Nothing will ever console me for the loss of you. . .<sup>43</sup>

Some six months later she still wrote in similar vein: 'Dear Boris, you are obviously, heroically, on the wrong path.'<sup>44</sup> At one point she thought he might be joining the Communist Party, 'the one thing that would separate us forever.'<sup>45</sup> Pasternak (who was far from joining the Party) countered with sadness, diffidence and pangs of hope for the revival of his former lyrical self, but also with such statements as: 'you underestimate certain serious aspects of me . . .' and 'I cannot possibly describe the moral hell and anguish in which I am seething here . . . I am suffocating in a sophistry which causes all genuine thoughts to disintegrate.'<sup>46</sup> The word 'history' had a different meaning for each of them. Tsvetaeva, in France, could say: 'For you there is history, for me – epic. One can master history, but one ENTERS epic like walking into a field of rye.'<sup>47</sup> But Pasternak, in Soviet Russia, felt that his response to the 'history' going on in his own time and place had to be a huge effort of mastering a new, plain, altruistic style. This change in him would eventually lead to the writing of what he called his 'novel in prose', *Doctor Zhivago*, begun five years after Tsvetaeva's death, and who knows whether he was recalling her lovely image of walking into a field of rye when, for the last line of the *Zhivago* poem 'Hamlet' he quoted the popular saying, 'Living a life is not walking across a field.'

Rilke, too, was an influence on her work, and, like Pasternak, a great spur to it. Not knowing how ill he was, she had been writing to him for some five months and had received six long, delighted letters from him, as well an Elegy addressed to her when, after a period of silence, she had the shock of learning that he had died, at the very end of 1926. His death, far from putting a stop to her side of the correspondence, led to its renewal: she now became so engrossed in writing to him that her work on *Phaedra* was interrupted for five months. But she wrote to him now in new ways: after one short, normal-looking letter, in German, dated December 31st,<sup>48</sup> there came a long piece of Russian prose entitled 'Your Death',<sup>49</sup> then the two long poems of which translations are offered in the present volume. She mentioned the first of these to Pasternak in the very sentence in which she told him she had been writing *Phaedra*: 'I have been writing Part Two since the Autumn, but have broken it off with a letter to Rilke which I finished only yesterday (in anguish)'.<sup>50</sup> This 'letter' was the long poem 'New Year's Letter' of February 1927, which in part develops motifs from the December 31st letter. In it she wishes Rilke a Happy New Year in the new place he now inhabits, imagines his journey to it, asks him what it is like, with other questions flowing from her at once buoyant and melancholy metaphysics. Despite lamenting that nothing ever came of their relationship, she puts forward her idea of poetry as a 'third thing' uniting life and death – an idea which recalls 'Attempt at a Room' with its wholly serious conception that a poem could be a place to meet in.

A little later in 1927 came the much longer 'Poem of the Air'. Spurred into being by Charles Lindbergh's solo flight across the Atlantic in May of that year, it mainly describes an imagined journey (guided apparently by an unnamed, ghostly Rilke), not across the sea but upward through seven ever sparser levels of air, to an ultimate, yet uncompleted, ecstatic condition. Of this work Tsvetaeva wrote to Pasternak in June: 'I am now writing something utterly lonely, isolating; I am

<sup>42</sup> *Letters*, p. 266.

<sup>43</sup> *Letters*, pp. 264-66.

<sup>44</sup> *Letters*, p. 318.

<sup>45</sup> *Letters*, p. 267.

<sup>46</sup> *Letters*, pp. 264 & 323 .

<sup>47</sup> *Letters*, p. 380.

<sup>48</sup> A translation of this by Walter Arndt can be found in *Letters 1926*, p. 267.

<sup>49</sup> *M. Ušemaeva. Izbrannaya proza v dvukh tomakh* [Selected prose in two volumes], edited by Alexander Sumerkin, with preface by Joseph Brodsky. New York, 1979. [Includes 'Tvoya smert', pp. 251-267, for a translation of which, by Jamey Gambrell, see *Letters 1926*.]

<sup>50</sup> *Letters*, p. 286.

terribly carried away'; and at the end of the same letter: 'Boris, I am writing something which will make your skin shiver. This work is the beginning of my solitude'.<sup>51</sup>

Scene three of *Phaedra* was begun two or three weeks after the completion of 'the skin-shivering 'Poem of the Air'; still, that is, in the aftermath of grief over Rilke and the related desire to rise to a higher level where inspired minds may meet. Although 'Poem of the Air' goes far beyond desire for a lover and seems to end in the positive solitude mentioned in her letters, it might be said that the bodily love which Phaedra offers to Hippolytus but which swerves, at almost the last moment of her speech, upward (as it were) into a desire for eternal union with him in something like Heaven ('where no stepmothers, no stepsons . . .') resembles the longing which informs the whole of 'Poem of the Air'.

With similar focus on eternity, she told Pasternak, a while after this: 'I want to be with you for an hour which would last forever.'<sup>52</sup> No such hour ever came. Their correspondence lost warmth and closeness, and when they did at last meet, in 1935, it was in the most unfavourable circumstances imaginable: Pasternak, ill with depression and neurasthenia, had been commanded to leave his sanatorium and travel to Paris to take part in the Second International Congress of Writers in Defence of Culture. His meetings with Tsvetaeva there were deeply disappointing to them both. Their few encounters between her return to the Soviet Union in 1939 and her suicide in 1941 seem scarcely connected with the extraordinary epistolary intimacy they had enjoyed for more than ten years.

In August 1927, while still trying to persuade Pasternak not to abandon his lyric genius, Tsvetaeva was writing the third scene of *Phaedra* with its great description of Antiope in battle. Although about fighting, this speech could well be seen as offering an analogy for the absorption and rapture of the creative process.

Taking aim, not just with eye and  
elbow, but with every pulsing  
vein, aiming her whole, aimed  
body, equal of men – no, equal  
of gods (her never-used-up quiver  
fuller than a horn of plenty),  
radiant under the foe's arrows,  
there she stood, afraid of nothing.

Again and again Tsvetaeva found words to express the supreme happiness of absorption in creation. In finding them she revealed unforeseen splendours of language. In the 1920s some of her critics found her style awkward or obscure, but others besides Pasternak already felt her power,<sup>53</sup> and since that time her fame has grown immensely: she is now loved and admired by large numbers of readers, both in Russia and in other countries. A Russian scholar said that whenever she came abroad to give readings of Tsvetaeva's poetry (in the 1990s and 2000s) she was astonished by the enthusiasm of her foreign audiences: 'Where do these burning eyes come from, in every town that I visit? Why do I see them again and again at my lectures?'<sup>54</sup> It is evident that, even in translation, what is able to come across is not just the poet's own passions and insights but, far more, that which she knew she shared with Rilke and with Pasternak: the passionate and insightful work with language, the pulsing veins of it, the fearlessness and the radiance.

---

<sup>51</sup> *Letters*, p. 349.

<sup>52</sup> *Letters*, p. 404.

<sup>53</sup> e.g. Dmitri Svyatopolk-Mirsky (1890-1939), Mark Slonim (1894-1976), Vladislav Khodasevich (1886-1939).

<sup>54</sup> Irma Kudrova (see note 4), p.10.