

*From a letter written in a café to a friend (c.2000?)*

I spent all the early years of my intellectual life reading, and writing about, the work of Pasternak and, in the moments away from that, the writings of Rilke and Tsvetaeva.

All three poets - three friends, with enormous loves between them - were ecstatics. Almost any line of Pasternak's lyric verse stirred the ecstatic in me, often into immediate rapture. He changed the world. Ever since I saw and heard his line 'Byl mak, kak obmorok, glubok' (The poppy was deep as a swoon), every poppy I've seen has seemed to swoon.

Tsvetaeva had no such influence. Whatever I may have said, and still may say, I cannot *not* feel her voice to be, most often, her own private inner shout; she presses something upon the world, does not have the stance of *receiving* from it. It's the rhetoric of reception that is so compelling in Pasternak. But in Tsvetaeva - what a grip upon language! Her alliterations, etymologies, rhythms (never mind if they're shouted), her bending and lathing [ever turning] words and phrases into the shapes she wanted - through all this work she took a strong hold of me.

While Rilke - well, since my student days I knew that he possessed intuitions into precisely the metaphysical secrets I needed to grasp - or was it that he possessed words for intuitions I already speechlessly had? "Angels

wouldn't hear me if I shouted out to them, or if they did they'd destroy me (they'd hear so fiercely!)" - therefore no calling to angels, but drop back to this human reality, *where we are not at home*.

Pasternak was mainly celebration, Rilke mainly lamentation, and both such powerful poets that the riches of their yes and no lasted me for decades. Meanwhile Tsvetaeva's grappling and wrestling, pushing and pulling, at the world and at language, her joys and griefs - so much less shareable (because they were *hers*) - repeatedly put me off, yet I came back repeatedly to push and pull, myself, at her very words: she is the poet I most translate. I am not fighting *her* fights, but the fight with her speech makes the sinew grow with which I conduct my own combats.

Crazily, no doubt, I often felt I should like to run fast and far, many miles, in fields, up and down hills, wading through rivers, as an act of sheer thanksgiving to poetry and to these three great writers of it. And not only for their poems but also for the amazing poetic prose, 'poets' prose', which each of them also wrote: word shouldering word in Tsvetaeva's arguing and declaring; words streaming together in Pasternak's dreaming chase after 'life' and music; the courteous rendez-vous of Rilke's measured words on levels of feeling and knowing we had never guessed at.

Suddenly I switched away from all of that to - Platonov.