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Introduction

The major watershed in Marina Tsvetaeva’s life may well have been reached, not with the Bolshevik revolution of October 1917, but when she and her daughter Alya took an overnight train from Moscow to Riga on May 11th 1922. From there they proceeded to Berlin, to be reunited with Sergey Efron, husband and father. Tsvetaeva had not set eyes on him since a clandestine meeting in post-revolutionary Moscow in January 1918. That train journey marked the beginning of 17 years of exile from the Soviet Union, first of all in villages close to Prague, with a brief period in the city itself, after which, at the start of December 1925, the family moved to Paris together with an infant son, George, born in February of that year.

In retrospect, rather than escaping from a trap, or gaining access to the wider world beyond, Tsvetaeva would appear to have entered a cul-de-sac when she left Russia, a cone-shaped funnel whose walls were to shrink progressively around her till living there became impossible. The impression of suffocation, of the available options getting more and more restricted, is inescapable. In 1939, Tsvetaeva and her son, now an adolescent, followed in the tracks of her husband and daughter to the Soviet Union, where the poet was to take her own life in August 1941.

In the longer term, exile led Tsvetaeva back to the very things she had sought to escape from in the first place. Unless, that is, one takes the far simpler view that, as Tsvetaeva herself claimed in a letter to Olga Kolbasina-Chernova:

I left Russia to be with Seryozha. Without me he may wither away—out of sheer inability to live.

(February 26th 1925)

And indeed, when sifting carefully through her archive before returning to Russia, Tsvetaeva added a note that once again, like a dog, she would be following in the footsteps of her husband.

*
She initially considered calling what proved to be her last published collection *Umysly*, which translates as ‘secret intentions’, only a step away from ‘hidden agendas’. The title she eventually settled on, *After Russia*, corresponds to the bare facts, as she carefully pointed out:

A publisher has turned up for my last book of poems (1922 to 1925), most of them written in the Czech lands. (The Czech lands minus the first two months in Berlin.) The publisher really loves my poems and wants them to be there. The book (ONLY FOR YOU!) is called “AFTER RUSSIA”—what do you think? I hear a lot of things in that name. First of all—nothing to hear in this—the simple truth: it was all—I mean the poems—written after Russia. Secondly – man does not live from Russia alone. Thirdly—Russia in me, not me in Russia (what Seryozha said, leaving for the Don. NB! For us Russia meant Moscow.) Fourthly: the next stage after Russia—where?—more or less the Kingdom of Heaven!

But generally the name is restrained and exact.

Not a word to anyone about the book (it comes out in the autumn!)—THEY’LL BRING BAD LUCK. I tell no-one about it here.

(to Anna Teškova, [April 26th] 1927)

Note the implication that Russia can only be succeeded by a move to another dimension, to somewhere that is nowhere, as if other terrestrial locations did not merit consideration. The publisher Tsvetaeva had found, a Russian businessman and philanthropist named Joseph Puterman, proved to be a mixed blessing. He put her through the humiliating process of circulating among friends a list on which subscribers were required to enter their names, with a commitment to buy the book when it eventually came out. Due to a series of delays it appeared only in 1928 and was not a success. Simon Karlinsky has described how dusty copies could still be seen in bookstore back rooms in Paris and New York in the 1950s.
After Russia
(1928)

First (Little) Notebook

Inventing does not make a liar of the poet: a lie flies in the face of reason and conscience, whereas it is reasonable for the poetical imagination to show things as they could and ought to be.

TREDYAKOVSKY
SAMPLER
Such words have their own time. 
From places ears can’t hear, 
life taps out key by key 
its overriding laws.

From shoulders, perhaps, that 
a forehead has pushed through. 
Or from a ray, perhaps, 
not visible by day.

Dust on a pointless string—
move onto a bed sheet. 
A tribute to one’s fear, 
a tribute to one’s dust.

A time for passionate autocracy, for mumbled prayers, a time for landless brotherhoods, orphaned worlds.

June 11th
Ferocious vale,  
love crossed by fate.  
Hands: light and salt.  
Lips: blood and pitch.

Thunder from a left breast  
a forehead overheard.  
Who loved you in this way—  
forehead beating on stone?

No more of scheming, no more fabrication!  
Sometimes a skylark, sometimes honeysuckle,  
sometimes splashed from cupped hands, together with  
whatever’s wild in me, what makes no sound,  
all the rainbows of tears unrestrained,  
me sneaking close, or prattling ceaselessly...

Life! Life, my darling!  
And oh, so greedy!  
Remember the pressure  
on the right shoulder.

Chirping through darkness...  
I’m up with the birds!  
Joy of my entry  
in your chronicle.

*June 12th*
The days will be so paltry, laboursome, 
the fitful impulse towards her so laboured, 
that you’ll forget the comradely trochees 
your masculine girlfriend composed for you.

When she was stern, the hurtful gift that made, 
her fleeting bashfulness that hid a fire, 
that impact without wires for which the name 
is—being far away.

Everything ancient, except “give” and “mine”, 
everything jealous, except here on earth, 
everything faithful—but in deadly combat 
with a Thomas’s doubts.

My pamperling! Our fathers’ grey hairs knew: 
don’t take this refugee beneath your roof! 
Hail to you from the left-breasted forging 
of endings without needless complications!

It could be that, when chattering, accounting 
tire you of the eternal feminine, 
you will recall my hand that made no claims, 
my sleeve that was so similar to a man’s, 

my lips not calculating future costs, 
the rights I made no move to exercise, 
my eyes on which the eyelids never closed, 
investigating: light.

*June 15th*
Night-time whisperings: a hand scattering silk on every side. 
Night-time whisperings: lips moving softly over silk.

Total of jealousies throughout the day—
the flash of everything antique—jaws clench—
in a rustle the quarrel calmed…

Leaf on the pane...
Piping of the first birds.
—So pure!—A sigh.
Not that.—It’s gone.
She’s gone.
And shoulders flinch.

Nothing.
No point.
The end.
Like not.

Piercing this vanity of vanities, a sword: the dawn.

_June 17th_
Get yourself trustworthy girlfriends
whose wonders can’t be counted up.
I know Venus means handiwork;
an artisan, I know my trade.

From lofty rites that strike you dumb
to souls utterly trampled on,
the whole of that divine gamut
from breathing you to—breathe no more!

June 18th
You know the law:
you can’t rule here!
But later, in
the Polity

of Friends, a sky
that’s empty, sheer
and masculine—
gold all around—

a world where rivers flow
upstream, there, on the bank,
your phantom hand can grasp
another phantom hand…

Faint crackling of a spark,
answering detonations.
(Hands clasping hide how un-
trustworthy hands can be!)

Simultaneous plash
of garments flat as swords—
in a heaven where males
are gods, males celebrate!

As if being teenagers
made equals of us all,
where dawns are limitless
and fresh, where games leave skin

sunburnt—in a dry wind,
hail, dispassionate souls!
In a sky of Tarpeian
cliffs, of Spartan friends!

June 20th
When, God, one day upon
this life of mine descend
peacefulness of grey hair,
peacefulness of the heights.

When, in the ancient calm
of those first streaks of blue,
a broad shoulder [emerges] that can
carry the whole of life.

Only you, God, alone [know],
not any one of you,
how from soft, lumpy beds
I soared into the blue.

How, under lips’ assault,
dreaming—I hearkened—grass...
(here, in a world of arts,
they say I deal in words.)

How I sickened at lies—
quit-rent for carthorses,
how my last ounce of strength
set a tree quivering…

_________

First—quiver—of a tree,
first—cooing—of a dove.
(But was it not you, Pride, that
trembled, you that cooed,
Faith?)

        Bring yourself up short,
sharp arrow script of light!
The sky’s such a blank space
in lovers’ secret code!
Were it not for the dawn—
tinkling, cheeping, a leaf,
vainest of vanities,
without this, then life might

have been…

    No rays, a lash
on loving bodies’ honey-
suckle. Such a block,
the sky, to reckless plunder!

Day breaks. Hooves drag burdens
down roads.—She starts up.—Leaves.
Wild, noiseless tremor of
a shoulder that remembers.

Concealment… Morning poured
as from a pail. Whitewash.
In the annals of ribs,
the sky’s such a blank space!

*June 22nd-23rd*