Also by Marina Tsvetaeva
in Christopher Whyte's translation

Moscow in the Plague Year (Archipelago, New York)
Marina Tsvetaeva

Milestones

translated from the Russian
by
Christopher Whyte

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Introduction

This collection is a lyrical diary from the final year of Tsarist Russia, before the twin revolutions of February and October 1917 transformed the country beyond all hope of recognition, and irrevocably. A young woman of 23 grapples with motherhood and marriage, with love, sex and friendship, with the traditions of the Orthodox church and her own instinctive polytheism, with the literary environment where she is reaching maturity and, last but not least, with the dimensions of her talent.

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Marina Tsvetaeva offered Yury Ivask this account of her background in a letter dated May 12th 1934:

Generally speaking, make no mistake, there’s not much in me that’s Russian (NB! something everyone gets wrong in the heat of the moment), even my blood is—excessively—mixed: my maternal grandfather (Alexander Davidovich Meyn)—was a Baltic German, with some Serbian blood, my grandmother (born Bernatskaya) was pure Polish, I have nothing Russian on my mother’s side, and on my father’s side—everything. That’s how I came out: either not one bit, or everything. Even in spiritual terms, I’m a halfblood.

When Maria Meyn, who was a gifted pianist, married Ivan Tsvetaev, he was a man of 45, a widower with a son and daughter, still very much in love with his first wife. The son of an obscure country priest, he rose to become Professor of Art Theory and History at Moscow University, and was the moving spirit behind the foundation of the Alexander III Museum of Fine Arts (renamed the Pushkin Museum after the revolution). 21 years his junior, Tsvetaeva’s mother had given her heart to a married man her father forbade her to frequent. It was a marriage of duty. She
became her husband’s eager helpmate in work on the museum, travelling to the Ural Mountains with him to choose marble for the pillars of its façade. Marina claimed to have been treated with a harshness which their mother spared her younger sister Anastasiya (Asya). Their mother, who suffered from tuberculosis, took both daughters to Nervi by Genoa in Liguria, to Lausanne and to the Black Forest, where it was hoped the milder climate could arrest the progress of her disease. Unexpected relief from the prospect of spending Easter Sunday confined to their hated pension in Freiburg was provided by a surprise visit to Rainer Maria Rilke’s friend and patron, Marie von Thurn und Taxis, dedicatee of the Duino Elegies.

Before her death in 1906, Tsvetaeva’s mother arranged for her daughters not to receive their inheritance till they were 40, in case their radical sympathies should lead them to hand the funds over to a revolutionary cause. They were unable to touch the money before it disappeared in 1917. That there were darker notes to family life in the house at Three Ponds Lane in Moscow is clear from two deliberately mysterious references in Tsvetaeva’s correspondence with Boris Pasternak. The first comes in a letter dated November 1st 1927:

By the way, some time I’ll tell you about my childhood, something happened which no-one knows about, not my mother on her deathbed, something Asya will never get to know.

And the second in a letter dated March 4th 1928:

Change of subject. If you are to grasp me at a different level, the right one for me, I would have to tell you things which it is not possible to write down, I am too much of a coward, my hand doesn’t dare. My hand lacking courage – hand? my tongue – has ruined my life. Due to the impossibility of saying.

But inside I howled and shouted (it howled and shouted) from the first minute. Boris, try to understand:
all my life, at a given moment, I find myself neither free nor tethered, a woman and not a woman, not some
one’s and not anyone’s, having lost the place in spite of all my
precision… Of course there are ugly words, and here the
formal method would offer great help. The most
important thing: I see it all with wondrous clarity: a
doctor of genius bending over a patient for whom there is
no hope (what, in fact, I said about Proust).

What proved impossible to say, what the ‘ugly words’ would have defined, we shall probably never know. The extreme hypothesis, some form of sexual abuse, might explain Tsvetaeva’s erratic emotional and sexual behaviour in adult life, along with the difficulty she experienced in achieving any adequate form of relationship stability. There are rumours of two suicide attempts in adolescence, one of them planned to take place in the theatre during a performance by the actress Sarah Bernhardt, and foiled by the pistol failing to go off. Aged 15, she wrote to her friend Yury Yurkievich that only the prospect of revolution could reconcile her to staying alive.

Tsvetaeva’s first book of poems, *Evening Album*, was published at her own expense in 1910. It brought her the attention of poet and painter Maksimilian Voloshin, who accepted paying guests in the house at Koktebel in Crimea where he lived with his mother. This became the centre of a colony of artists and writers, and it was on the beach there that Tsvetaeva glimpsed, in the summer of 1911, an astonishingly handsome, tall yet frail young man. She challenged him to choose a pebble for her from those on the strand, and claimed his choice confirmed her decision to marry him. Sergey Yakovlevich Efron was of part-Jewish origin. Both his parents had a history of revolutionary activism. His mother at one point belonged to an extremist terrorist organisation called the Maximalists. Living in exile in Paris, she came home one day in January 1910 to find her son Constantine had hanged himself, and immediately did the same. One of Tsvetaeva’s last concerns, before leaving Paris to return to the Soviet Union in June 1939, was to put in order the grave in the Montparnasse
cemetery of the woman who, if she had known her, would have been her mother-in-law. The photograph she took of the slab, with the projected, outline shadow of Tsvetaeva’s hat and head, survives.

Her father’s initial opposition having been overcome (‘A conversation repeated down the centuries!’, she commented to Voloshin) she and Efron were married in January 1912, and set off on a honeymoon which took them via various locations on the Italian peninsula as far as Sicily. Their first daughter Ariadne (Alya) was born in September 1912. Tsvetaeva’s father died the following August.

It is hard to conceive of the degree of liberty Tsvetaeva enjoyed in the years following her mother’s death. She and her sister were in the habit of reciting her poems in unison, in singsong voices, until asked to stop because audiences found it so distracting. Their mother had insisted the girls should grow up speaking French and German as well as Russian. While still a teenager, Tsvetaeva read Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra* – she is said to have recited Pushkin to a nanny when aged 6 – but reserved her fervour for more questionable figures, such as Marie Bashkirtseva and Edmond Rostand. Aged 16, she journeyed on her own to spend a summer in Paris. Heartbroken when her French instructress failed to reciprocate a passionate attachment, she rented a room in the Rue Napoleon solely because of the name. Years afterwards, in a letter to Aleksandr Bakhrakh dated January 10th 1924, she would recall how

> Often, wrapped in thought, I went into the opposite doorway, and the concierge, with a smile, would say: *Mademoiselle se trompe souvent de porte.* (Thus perhaps, by chance, will I end up in Heaven instead of Hell!)

Tsvetaeva clearly saw her commitment to the chronically ineffectual, artistically inclined, tuberculotic Efron as a lifelong one. This did not, however, exclude a protracted series of extramarital involvements, impassioned even when denied physical realisation, which marked her existence, and fuelled her
poetry, at least as far as 1924. The first may well have concerned her husband’s elder brother Pyotr, who was in exile from 1907 to 1913 and died from tuberculosis in Moscow in summer 1914. Among the most clamorous was a relationship with the poet Sophia Parnok (accented on the second syllable), seven years her senior, which began in the autumn of 1915 and lasted for nearly a year and a half.

* 

The start of 1916 found the two women in St Petersburg, renamed Petrograd since the onset of hostilities with Germany. Tsvetaeva could not get over the fact that people in the northern capital never seemed to sleep, or the sheer quantity of poetry that was recited, also by herself. She met practically everyone of note in the literary world, with the sole exception of Anna Akhmatova. Having left an ailing Parnok to go out and hear Mikhail Kuzmin recite his poems, she returned to find the woman who took her place in Parnok’s life sitting on the bed. Kuzmin had read in the home of the Kannegisers, whose son Leonid would later assassinate the Soviet Chief of Police Uritsky, in revenge for the killing by the Cheka of his own male lover. *Milestones* contains just one poem addressed to Parnok, ‘You could have been my mother in those days’, immediately followed by an abject, coded request to return to Efron’s side, ‘I came to you at dead of night’.

In St Petersburg Tsvetaeva also made the acquaintance of the young Osip Mandelstam. He went to Moscow so frequently during the spring that a friend jokingly enquired whether he had taken a job with the railway company. If there can be no doubting the profound impression his work made upon her, Tsvetaeva’s attitude to Mandelstam was indulgent, even condescending, corroborated by a comic account of a disastrous visit in a letter to one of Sergey’s sisters dated June 12th 1916:

The day was taken up with him complaining about fate, while we comforted and praised him, with eating and with news of the literary world. In the evening—
actually, it was night—he somehow quietened down, lay on the deer’s hide and started being unpleasant. Finally tiring of him, Asya and I left him to his own devices and sat down in the far corner of the room—Mavry Aleksandrovich, Asya and me. Asya started telling the story of Corinne in her own words, while we guffawed like mad. Then we proposed Mandelstam should eat something. He jumped up, as if someone had bitten him: ‘What’s this then! I can’t eat all day long! I’m going out of my mind! Why did I come here? I’ve had enough! I want to leave right now! I’ve really had enough!’

They were in Aleksandrovskoye, where Tsvetaeva first read Akhmatova in depth, and wrote a miraculous sequence of poems which Akhmatova was said to have carried around in her handbag for years, in Tsvetaeva’s tattered handwritten copy. There she also wrote ‘The sun’s bleached pale. The clouds are low. Behind’, one of very few poems where she refers to the disastrous war being fought against German and Austro-Hungarian forces far to the west, to which fresh troops were being transported by train.

Under the effect of Tsvetaeva’s infatuation with the poet Tikhon Churilin, Efron, then a student at Moscow University, applied to join up as a volunteer in March. His year was called up the following month and, having been declared medically fit, he was assigned to the ensigns’ academy. Bureaucratic delays meant he was required to present himself every five days without receiving clear directions as to where to go. His health worsened. Dreaming of a quiet life on an estate outside Moscow, he left with his sister for a sanatorium in the Caucasus in August. Only in January of the following year would he finally set off for Nizhny Novgorod. Meanwhile Tsvetaeva was translating a novel by Anna de Noailles which began serial publication in Northern Notebooks in September.

In Moscow, on May 3rd 1941, not quite four months before she committed suicide, Tsvetaeva made annotations in a copy of Milestones giving the names of the individuals behind
specific items. ‘Silver doves, scattering, soar in the evening sky...’, ‘Never stop making up’ and ‘Not autumn yet. No giddy wind’ were addressed to Churilin, who had already spent several years in a mental asylum, and is described by Simon Karlinsky as ‘an authentic surrealist before such a category was invented’. Tsvetaeva considered him the best poet of the war, and told Pasternak, in a letter dated February 14th 1923, that when they met

I got the feeling: I can swear to his future – he ruined it! Beyond hope! He tortured his genius, tearing the feathers from its wings.

Mandelstam is the addressee of the poems from ‘No-one went off with anything!’ as far as ‘What can it be disarms me so?’, as well as of the first three ‘Poems to Moscow’. It would seem reasonable to add the fifth – concerning which Tsvetaeva observed in February 1939 that there had in fact been no rejection, she merely decided it would sound better like this – as well as ‘Ruined by a woman. Look’ and ‘The strangest malady took hold of him’. Beneath ‘They gave me hands to stretch towards everyone’, which follows immediately after the ‘Poems to Akhmatova’, Tsvetaeva wrote:

All the poems from here until the end of the book – and many later on – were written for Nikodim Plutser-Sarna, of whom I may say, now a life has gone by, that he dared to love me, dared to love that troubling phenomenon – me.

Plutser-Sarna was an economist who spoke Russian with a pronounced Polish accent. Tsvetaeva’s letters to him have been partially reconstructed from her notebooks. In autumn 1918 she told him that

A woman, if she is a human being, needs a man as a luxury – very, very occasionally. Books, her home, caring for her children, the joy they give her, solitary
walks, painful moments, moments of ecstasy – what has all of this to do with men?

Besides men, a woman has two unbounded seas: what matters in her life, and her own soul.

Transcribing the annotation into her notebook for the year 1941, Tsvetaeva added ‘plus quite a few before’ to ‘and many later on’. Plutser-Sarna inspired the figure of the Protestant divine in ‘Daniel’, who meets his end due to witchcraft practised by the baffling, red-haired young woman who is his companion. During the years of appalling hardship and crushing poverty subsequent to the Bolshevik Revolution, in the period known as War Communism, he and his wife Tatyana offered sterling support to Tsvetaeva, whose husband was fighting far from Moscow in the counter-revolutionary forces. Tatyana is probably the addressee of a haunting, uncollected lyric dated September 8th, 1916, which begins

A time will come, rival of mine, when I’ll pay you a visit on a moonlit night, while frogs can be heard wailing from the pond, and pity drives women out of their minds.

When contact with Yurkevich was resumed in summer 1916, looking back to their earlier friendship, Tsvetaeva observed (letter dated July 21st):

How miserable I was then! A tragic childhood and a blessed youth.

And she summed her present condition up as follows:

And I want lightness, freedom, understanding—not to hold anyone back and for no-one to hold me back! My whole life long I’ve been in love with my own soul, with the city where I live, with a tree at the end of the road – with the air. And I feel infinitely happy.
At this stage at least, the balance was overwhelmingly positive.

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The poems with which *Milestones* opens are not explicitly autobiographical. Tsvetaeva introduces motifs from folklore and fairy-tale, preferring liminal settings such as the porch of a house, or the banks of a lake. Her heroine appears alone, significantly tossing into the stormy waters the ring she has been wearing. Its meanings are not specified, but must include commitment and submission to the law. Birds in general, and swans in particular, evoke escape towards utter freedom, innocence and, through the implicit link with quills and the production of text, poetry itself. Religious settings and motifs are integrated into a vision which has little connection to Christianity or orthodox religious teaching. Tsvetaeva is drawn instinctively to derelicts and social outcasts, as in ‘Snow takes more than a day to melt’. Her development of this sympathy is marked by two elements. One could be described as verbal masochism, a vein of self-castigation palpable in most of her mature production. And so, in a prayer on behalf of Tsvetaeva’s daughter to a Madonna who is very much the focus of women’s solidarity and spirituality:

Keep her safe from gorgeous language,  
so people won’t take her for  
a bird of prey, a witch, like me.

On the other hand, the female outcasts whose voice she assumes, proclaiming their promiscuity to the four winds, revelling in their insubordination where morality and convention are concerned, represent an oneiric dream of a life of unbridled sensuality and freedom, which Tsvetaeva’s Calvinist conscience would inevitably step in to prevent her from leading. One of the Mandelstam poems reads like a grimmer version of Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’. There can be no doubt that poetic inspiration induces a privileged state of trance which sets whoever it affects apart from the world of everyday. Echoes of Zeus and Ganymede, however,
intervene in the ‘bird with golden eyes’ which is ‘busy honing its sharp beak’, and which seems to be getting ready to turn the chosen one into a prey, a victim. The immediately preceding poem, again with a male protagonist, insists that the very fact he possesses a gift will make a target of the poet. Despite his kinship to the eagles, he is fated to meet a violent end on the scaffold.

‘Checking the girls, so in the jug the kvass’ is an exquisite evocation of old Russia, in the spirit of the painter Ryabushkin’s colourful and forceful representations of peasant life. Three poems couched in a form of free verse culminate in a celebration of two notorious outcasts whose doings formed the material of Pushkin’s play *Boris Godunov*, and of the opera Modest Mussorgsky drew from it. Tsvetaeva makes no attempt to whitewash the Polish princess Marina Mnishek, her namesake. Nor does she conceal the admiration which she feels. Mnishek married the pretender to the throne, who insisted he was Dimitry, son of Ivan the Terrible. After a reign of only ten months, he was murdered. Claiming he had miraculously survived, Mnishek produced a second husband and pretender, then died in prison after attempting to proclaim the first man’s son as heir. At this point the Romanov dynasty assumed control of Russia. For Tsvetaeva, this woman is the ‘lodestar to my tempests’, with familiar allegations of black magic and spells.

Looking back across a distance of two decades, Tsvetaeva perceived the significance of her poems about pre-revolutionary Moscow. In a letter dated January 25th 1937 she told Ivask:

> Yes, in 1916 I was the first to speak thus of Moscow. (And, so far, the last, it would seem). It makes me happy and proud, for that was Moscow of the last hour and time. *A farewell. “…the Georgian Virgin’s heart / gleams in a pure gold frame.”* And will burn—eternally. Those lines were prophetic. *Read them over* and don’t forget the *dates*.

She had an especially strong identification with the poem which closes the sequence, somehow emblematic of herself:
That’s one of my favourite poems, the most *mine*. Actually, I could have written ‘praised’, or ‘repeated’, but no - ‘engaged in dispute’! They were contending for my soul, which *everyone* and *no-one* got. (All *gods* and not one *church!*)

At the outset, the ‘Poems about Moscow’ are coloured by Tsvetaeva’s near-romance with Mandelstam. Then fascination with bells pealing from the city steeples, with the nuns, beggars, pilgrims, quack-doctors and convicts who account for so much of its population, takes over. Her invitation to the priest to stuff her mouth with earth shows a characteristic tendency to self-denigration. The fourth poem, however, intones a powerful posthumous address from a noblewoman named Marina, who has at last supplanted the Madonna in one of the city’s numerous shrines.

Poems where assumed voices articulate a range of defiant, outcast, stigmatised or even criminal positions are frequent. It would be erroneous to project the boasts of promiscuity (‘Not a day but I turn up at the font!’) back onto the poet, attractive as the sarcastic scoffing when ‘the Virgin with Three Hands’ rejects conventional feminine roles undoubtedly is. Tsvetaeva’s speakers warn us repeatedly to beware of having dealings with them (‘devils will turn up to haul me off’, ‘I never slept alone’, ‘At night I didn’t keep away/ from places that were cursed’). On the roads to which the title of the collection presumably refers, princes and princesses rub shoulders with cripples and criminals, victims of a shared fate which still leaves room for love and sex. It is tempting to interpret the market stallholder in ‘Roll up! Roll up! Roll up!’ as the poet Tsvetaeva, hoping to interest readers in the dubious wares she is hawking.

The cycles addressed to Aleksandr Blok and to Anna Akhmatova are public poems, no less than the ‘Poems about Moscow’. Thanks to a cunning, utterly serious gambit, by expressing esteem and conferring praise, Tsvetaeva with a single move takes her place alongside those of her contemporaries for whom she had the most regard. The achievement which these
poems constitute serves to underline the value of her praise. There is no trace of complaisance, no sentimentalism or self-indulgence. A note of danger underpins both cycles, symptomatic of Tsvetaeva’s willingness to take risks in her writing, a failure or even absence of the crucial instinct for self-preservation. So the resonance of Blok’s name is likened to ‘a trigger clicking at the temple’, and the abasement when she falls to her knees before ‘the undisputed ruler of my soul’ is echoed in the sadistic imagery of the last poem but one. The Akhmatova cycle takes the assumption of intimacy that bit too far. Akhmatova is a ‘black sorceress! Oppressor of serfs!’ Her consummate skill as poet ‘throttles me,/ a tightening belt’. Tsvetaeva compares their relationship to a sentenced prisoner and the guard accompanying him on his journey to Siberia.

Blok was the most outstanding Symbolist poet of Russia’s pre-revolutionary Silver Age. From a privileged background, his marriage to the woman he repeatedly idealised in his poetry may never have been consummated. One of his most famous lyrics depicts a prostitute emerging from the smoke of a departing train into a cheap station buffet. Often considered to have predicted the upheavals of 1917 in an almost supernatural fashion, Avril Pyman relates how he commented to Korney Chukovsky, months before his death in 1921, that ‘She’s gulped me down at last, that filthy, grunting, own-mother of mine Russia, like a sow her piglet’. An epic sequence celebrating a squad of twelve Red guards, like the twelve apostles, ends ambiguously with the image of Christ accompanying them in their riotous frolicks. Tsvetaeva portrays Blok as prophet, priest and sacrificial victim, all rolled into one. The third poem in the cycle, as Robin Kimball points out, skilfully recasts a prayer from the Orthodox Vespers by Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem.

Akhmatova was famous for love lyrics placed on the lips of a wistful, melancholic, at times victimised speaker, characterised by a gravity of moral witness which would stand her in great stead when, under Stalin and after the Second World War, she strove to articulate an entire nation’s experience of totalitarianism and, in Poem without a Hero, offered her own idiosyncratic, riveting
and haunting recollection of the pre-revolutionary years in St Petersburg. In both cycles, Tsvetaeva performs the extraordinary feat of reproducing the tonality and mood of another poet, while at the same time coming up with texts that are unmistakably her own.

At the end of the second of two readings which Blok gave in Moscow, on May 9th and 14th 1920, Tsvetaeva instructed her daughter Alya to place an envelope containing a manuscript copy of these poems in the poet’s hands. After his death, Tsvetaeva got this account of what happened subsequently, from the woman she firmly believed to have borne his son, Nadezhda Aleksandrovna Nolle-Kogan:

After each appearance he would receive, that same evening, heaps of letters—from women, of course. And I would always read them to him, I opened them myself, he made no objection. (And I was so jealous! Jealous of each single one!) He just looked on and smiled. That’s how it went that evening. ‘Now, where shall I begin?’ Him: ‘Start anywhere.’ And he handed me one—it turned out to be yours—in a pale blue envelope. I opened it and started reading, but your handwriting is so particular, it was easy to start off with, then… And they were poems, I wasn’t expecting that… With great seriousness, he took the pages out of my hands:

‘No, I must read these myself.’

He read in silence—for a long time—then such a long drawn out smile.

He smiled so rarely, when the end came—never.

Tsvetaeva published a separate book of Poems to Blok in 1922, including a further group written after he had died.

In 1923, ten items from the second half of Milestones were gathered together as a cycle ‘Sleeplessness’ in the collection Psyche. They count among Tsvetaeva’s most evocative and elusive pieces. Not actually present upon earth, she is dreamed of by her friends, or else has long since entered the grave, ‘patient spectator
of an immense dream’. When, in a letter to Ivask dated January 25th 1937, she speaks of her pianissimo moments, one thinks of a poem like ‘Oh, how delicate and faint’:

When you talk about being deafening, you must also talk of quietness: I have certain lines so quiet no-one else has anything like them.

The figure of the prodigal returns in ‘Shedding no pointless tears’, while her debt to Decadent writing of the fin-de-siècle is palpable in ‘A thin wing from the hooded cape’. ‘God stooped, lost’, once again self-accusatory, offers a further example of Tsvetaeva’s heterodox redeployment and rephrasing of accepted religious tenets. Even after nearly two decades had passed, she herself was breathtaken at the metrical variety and virtuosity of Milestones (letter to Ivask dated April 4th 1933):

In that very year 1916, I produced absolutely frenzied lines (and metres) which make my hair stand on end today.

* 

The title of the collection presents a problem for translators. The word Tsvetaeva uses, vyorst, is an outdated measurement of distance corresponding to 1.06 kilometres, or 0.66 miles. I would be tempted to translate ‘league’, meaning the distance covered in one hour’s walking, even if this is considerably more, around 3 miles. But there are interfering secondary meanings of ‘ranking order’ or ‘conspiracy’. The Russian word can also indicate the wooden posts marking a vyorst on roads in Tsarist Russia. Simon Karlinsky translates it as Mileposts. In the end, I preferred to avoid David MacDuff’s Bon Voyages and instead follow Robin Kemball, not least for fear unsuspecting readers might conclude a new, hitherto unknown collection by Tsvetaeva has been discovered.
Generally speaking, the poems in the book have regular, if innovative metres, and are in rhyme. I decided not to rhyme the English versions because this would have forced changes in meaning which risked taking me far from the sense of the original poems. Moreover, while in Russian the completion of a rhyme can bring a sense of inevitability and rightness to what is being expressed, all too often a translator’s rhymes seem forced and arbitrary. The English language possesses a long, even dominant tradition of unrhymed verse. My concern was to devise formal constraints for each translation which, while not identical with those to be found in the original, had an analogous function. English offers the opportunity for a fruitful alternation between polysyllables—longer, more evocative, learned, even exotic words—and sequences of monosyllables which are colloquial in nuance, and respect the fundamentally analytic tendency of the modern language. I wanted Tsvetaeva’s voice to ring forth in all its disarming, disconcerting directness and therefore sought native equivalents for terms which, imported from the Russian, risked being alienating or merely picturesque. My hope was that the variety of styles and metres in the translations could go some way towards mirroring the variety of Tsvetaeva’s originals.

Tsvetaeva was fully aware of her excentric position in Russian literary life in the years before and immediately after the revolutions. A contradictory sense of being relegated to the sidelines, yet nonetheless unique and paradoxically central, emerges in a richly humorous passage from a letter to Raisa Lomonosova dated March 11th 1931:

I can remember a poster on the Moscow fences in 1920: EVENING FOR ALL POETS. ACMEISTS—SO AND SO—NEO-ACMEISTS—SO AND SO—IMAGISTS—SO AND SO, -ISTS, -ISTS, -ISTS then, at the very end, beneath a gap:

– and –
MARINA TSVETAEVA.
(Just like that – nothing around it!)
That’s how it was and will be.
With Ivask, Tsvetaeva was more uncompromising (letter of April 4th 1933):

If I have always lived outside the riverbed of culture, that may be because it flowed THROUGH ME.

Certain readers may interpret this statement as witness to an unpardonable arrogance. Yet it rings true today. The closing decades of the 20th century allowed our perspective on Russian, and indeed on European poetry, to be adjusted so that Marina Tsvetaeva could take the central place which is hers by right.

_Budapest,_
_January 2015_
Milestones

The birds of Paradise all sing,
but we're not going to be let in…
I opened the small iron box,
took out of it the tear-like gift –
a little ring with a big pearl,
with a big pearl.

As a cat might do, I crept
onto the porch, and turned my face
towards the wind. Winds blew, birds soared,
swans on the left, ravens the right…
Our paths lead us two different ways.

You’ll leave with the first clouds, your path
through quivering forests, over
burning sands.

Calling your soul out,
crying your eyes out.

While over me an owl will call,
while over me the grass will sough.

*Moscow, January 1916*
I planted a young apple tree,  
joy and mischief for a child,  
his young years in an old man’s eyes,  
a delight for the gardener.

I lured into my little room  
a turtle dove of purest white:  
the thief has nothing left to steal,  
the housewife’s days are sweeter now.

I gave a daughter to the world –  
little eyes of brightest blue,  
the same voice as a turtle dove,  
hair as brilliant as the sun.  
Young women had better beware,  
young men had better beware too.

*January 23rd 1916*
I went out to the lake. Its banks were steep, 
the water grey, churned up with falling snow. 
Roaring jaws and deafening howls 
just like from beasts.

I threw my ring away. Farewell! 
Not forged to fit this hand of mine! 
Gold, sink beneath the silvery foam, 
sink with a song.

A brilliant arc, and then a splash! 
Matched by the arc of a young swan – 
see how, alarmed, it darts up high 
in the grey light!

February 6th 1916
No-one went off with anything!
It suits me we should be apart.
Across hundreds of miles lying
between us, take this kiss from me.

I know our gifts are not alike.
I’ve never fallen dumb before.
Young Keats, what could you possibly
learn from my amateurish lines?

We meet in terrifying flight:
fledgling eagle, fly further! You
look at the sun and never blink –
is my young gaze so hard to bear?

No-one has ever watched you leave
more gently, irrevocably…
Across hundreds of years lying
between us, take this kiss from me.

*February 12th 1916*