Youthful Verses
Also by Marina Tsvetaeva in Christopher Whyte's translations

*Moscow in the Plague Year* (Archipelago)  
*Milestones* (Shearsman Books)  
*After Russia (The First Notebook)* (Shearsman Books)  
*After Russia (The Second Notebook)* (Shearsman Books)
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SAMPLER
Introduction

The poems in this collection show a youthful Marina Tsvetaeva (1892–1941) against a background of normality – if anything about this poet can be described as normal! – which must inevitably appear fragile and provisional in retrospect. The twin revolutions of 1917, war communism and near impossible living conditions in Moscow of the “plague year” 1919, then emigration, isolation and wracking poverty in the Paris years after 1925 cast an inevitable shadow back from the future.

Tsvetaeva’s father Ivan Tsvetaev (1847–1913), the son of a country priest, began his university career in Latin literature before moving to the study of antiquities, and was the founder of what became the capital city’s Pushkin Museum. From 1889 he occupied the chair of Art History and Theory at Moscow University. Her mother Maria Meyn (1868–1906), hopelessly in love with a married man and a gifted pianist, knowingly contracted in 1891 a marriage of duty to a widower with two children who was still very much in love with his first wife. Tsvetaeva described her in a letter to Vassily Rozanov dated April 8th, 1914:

Mama was an only child. Her mother, from a princely Polish family, died age 26. Grandfather dedicated his whole life to Mama, who at her mother’s death was a very small child. Her life was divided between grandfather and a Swiss governess – isolated, fantastical, frequently ill, not childlike, a life of books. Age 7 she knew all of world history and mythology, dreamt of heroes, played the piano splendidly. […]

The whole spirit of her upbringing was Germanic. Drunk on music, a colossal talent (I shall never again hear anyone play the piano and the guitar as she did!), gifted in languages, an amazing memory, a magnificent command of words, poems in Russian and in German, she also painted. […]
Her tormented soul lives on in us – but we reveal what she concealed. Her mutiny, her folly, her thirst in us reach the level of a shout.

Maria Meyn died of tuberculosis in 1906, when her daughter was still 13. The poet and her sister Anastasia (Asya), two years younger, a writer and a poet herself, subsequently enjoyed a degree of freedom which can be hard to credit across the distance of more than a century, and which became greater still after their father’s death in 1913. In summer 1909 Tsvetaeva travelled to Paris, rented rooms in the Rue Bonaparte, and was heartbroken when the woman teaching her French failed to reciprocate a passionate attachment (to Lyudmila Chirikova, November 3rd, 1922):

I lived in Paris – long ago, when I was 16, lived alone, no luxuries – it was more a dream of Paris, than Paris itself. (Like my whole life – a dream of life, not life itself!)

Go for my sake to Rue Bonaparte, that’s where I lived: 59bis. I chose my lodgings for the name of the street, for then (by the way, that will never change!) more than anyone and anything I loved Napoleon.

Rue Bonaparte – delightfully Catholic and monarchist (légitimiste!), in every building there was an antiques shop.

It would be great if you could go to live there: on the map, it’s between two squares, St Germain des Prés and St Germain l’Auxerrois, right on the Seine. – The Quartier Latin.

And, what should attract you more than anything – in each small window, an old man aged 110 and an old woman aged 99.

‘You who have not stopped dreaming yet’ recalls the Moscow house on Three Ponds Lane, given to Ivan Tsvetaev by the father of his first wife, the opera singer Varvara Dimitriyevna Ilovaysky (1858–1890), to which Marina and Asya returned in autumn
1906 after their mother’s death. An inheritance allowed Marina and Sergey to buy their own home in 1912. Their first daughter Ariadne (Alya) was born on September 5th. In 1914 the young family moved to the house on Borisoglebsky pereulok where Tsvetaeva would remain, living for a period in squalid conditions of near-absolute destitution in the attic, until her emigration from Russia in spring 1922.

When in October 1910 Tsvetaeva published privately her very first book of poems, its reviewers included Maximilian Voloshin (1877–1932), in Simon Karlinisky’s words ‘a burly, blond-bearded giant’, a ‘man of uncertain or underdeveloped sexuality, both of whose marriages were of the mariage blanc variety’, who ‘cultivated the friendship of women and poets’. It was at the boarding house in Crimea run by Voloshin and his mother, frequented by a motley, Bohemian crowd of artists and writers, that Tsvetaeva met the man who was to become her husband, Sergey Efron (1893–1941). She recalled the day a decade later, in 1921, at which point they had already been separated for more than 3 years. She was trapped in Moscow with their two daughters, while he served as an officer in the White Army opposing the Bolsheviks:

Well it was May 5th, 1911 – a sunny day – that I saw you for the first time on a bench by the sea. You were sitting next to Lilya, wearing a white shirt. Catching sight of you, I was stunned: ‘Can anyone be so beautiful? When you see someone like that it makes you ashamed to walk the earth!’

Tsvetaeva did not tire of retelling the story of how, on meeting Sergey, she asked him to bring her a pebble from the beach. The one he selected convinced her as to the rightness of her choice. To Rozanov she wrote (March 7th, 1914):

I am married and have a daughter of a year and a half – Ariadna (Alya), my husband is 20. He is unusually and nobly handsome, beautiful outside and inside. On
his father’s side his great-grandfather was a rabbi, on his mother’s— a splendid officer in the guard of Nicholas I.

In Seryozha are united—brilliantly united—two bloods: Jewish and Russian. He is brilliantly gifted, intelligent, high-minded. And his mother was a beauty and a heroine. […]

He is seriously ill, age 16 he developed tuberculosis. Now the disease is stationary, but his general state of health is considerably below the average. If only you knew what a fiery, magnanimous, profound youth he is! I tremble for him constantly. The least excitement makes him feverish, he is consumed by a thirst for everything. When we met he was 17, I 18. In 3—nearly 3—years of life together, not a single shadow. Our marriage bears so little resemblance to an ordinary marriage, that I don’t feel married at all and haven’t changed one bit—I love the same things and live in the same way as at 17.

We shall never separate. Our meeting was a miracle. I am writing this to you so you don’t think of him as a stranger. He is my closest kin for the whole of life. I could never have loved anybody else, in me there is too much melancholy and rebellion. Only next to him can I live as I do—in total freedom.

None—almost none!—of my friends is able to understand my choice. Choice? Good God, as if I had a choice!

Efron’s mother had gone into political exile due to her participation in a terrorist group called People’s Freedom. She committed suicide in 1910 on finding that her son Constantine had hanged himself in the bathroom of their Paris apartment. Tsvetaeva’s bond with Sergey was to persist, through ups and downs, for more than a quarter of a century, until and after his arrest by the KGB in October 1939.

Neither of them viewed it as precluding other, extra-marital attachments. If Efron appears never to have felt an obligation to provide his family with material support, their relationship
permitted his wife to engage in a long series of infatuations, of love affairs with and without an element of physical realisation, which nourished her writing and her poetry, and whose cessation she would lament despairingly in her letters to Pasternak of the mid 1920s. Tsvetaeva would later say that early motherhood had ruined her life, always having to lead a child by the hand. In reality, the provision of nannies in a privileged family in pre-Revolutionary Russia meant she retained extended space for her writing, her infatuations, and for interaction with an extensive social and intellectual circle.

Tsvetaeva’s mother made sure that her daughters grew up fluent in both German and French. She would appear to have treated Tsvetaeva, who was planned to be a son named Alexander, with exceptional harshness, of which the poet bore the scars throughout her adult life. It issued in an attitude to the self which can best be described as adversarial, oppositional, expressed in an unmistakable tendency to verbal masochism, to self-denunciation through the medium of poetry.

Critical orthodoxy dictates that, like the poet, we should prefer the tormented, complex poems from her last 2 years in Russia and the time of her emigration in Berlin and Prague to the lyrics which make up Youthful Verses. She wrote to Lyudmila Chirikova in the letter already quoted:

You have been of great help to me, now I shall have in my hands my earlier poems, which everybody likes. With the new ones (the utterances of a Sibyl) I would fail: no one needs them, since they are written from the other shore: from Heaven!

And yet the earlier poems contain many of her most carefully sculpted, eloquent and memorable items. A young woman depicts herself and the people and places she moves which with
a degree of vividness and frankness still capable of taking the
breath away. Dust has not settled on them.

When she writes from the Paris suburb of Meudon to her
Czech friend Anna Teškova in Prague on November 18th 1928,
Tsvetaeva’s need for this same, unpublished collection has grown
still more urgent:

The next request is very important. We are truly in
dire straits, everything goes on rent and food (horse
meat, we can’t afford any other), I only get published in
Poslednie Novosti (the newspaper), but they only accept
old poems, from 10 years back. […] Whatever happens,
someone must wrest from Mark Lvovich Slonim the
manuscript of my Youthful Verses. Me writing to him is
pointless, as he either doesn’t answer, or does nothing.
[…] If possible, do this as soon as you can. My only
earnings are the weekly poems in Poslednie Novosti.
All of Youthful Verses is unpublished, for me and for
Poslednie Novosti (where they truly love the old – i.e.
the young! me) a whole treasure store. […]

If you send me this manuscript you will save me,
it contains long poems, 40–50 lines i.e. 40–50 francs a
week: money!

The collection as a whole did not achieve publication until
1976, and even then in a version slightly different from the
author’s final intentions, corresponding to the copy of which
Victoria Schweitzer gives a detailed account. This is a typescript,
astonishingly in the new spelling introduced from February
1918, which Tsvetaeva never adopted. It is so faint that she had
to retrace words, phrases and whole verses in red ink filched
from the nationalities bureau where she worked during the
winter of 1918–19. Together with the first book of Milestones,
it was offered to Valery Bryusov for publication at Lito in 1919,
and rejected.

All the items in Youthful Verses are translated here, with
the exception of the long poem placed close to midpoint,
‘The Enchanter’, nowadays classified among Tsvetaeva’s verse narratives. Uncollected poems from the years 1913 to 1915 have been included as a supplement.

In this, her third collection, Tsvetaeva does not seem to realise that limits have been stipulated as to what a young woman like herself may register and express in her writing. For all her undoubted genius, in her love lyrics before the October Revolution Anna Akhmatova respected these, remaining more or less within the bounds of what could conventionally be regarded as “women’s poetry”. Tsvetaeva’s gender identification throughout her life was fragile and unstable. She wrote in her notebooks that

Men and women are not equally akin to me, but equally alien. It’s as easy for me to say “you women” as “you men”.

When I say “we women” there’s always an element of exaggeration, I’m entertaining myself, playing.

The lyrics of Youthful Verses emerge in a utopia where anything can be felt, anything can be said. Only gradually would the twin traumas of revolution and emigration, together with the harsh realities of magazine publication in the emigré press, bring home to Tsvetaeva that this had never been the case. Such freedom of speech constituted a transgression for which a penalty would inevitably be exacted. Reading her across the intervening decades – across the for her proverbial 100 years, after which she would at last encounter the readers and the love and understanding she lacked, and so deserved – we can exult in the directness of utterance she achieved, in the limpid, uncompromising, often confessional declarations which she formulated.

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In 1983, having given up hope of publication in Russia for her research into Tsvetaeva’s relationship with the seven years older, avowedly lesbian poet Sophia Parnok (1885–1933), Sophia
Polyakova brought her findings out in the West, with Ann Arbor Press at Michigan University. Polyakova rightly sees the sequence ‘With a Woman’ (in Russian, literally ‘The Girlfriend’) as marking a new level of maturity in Tsvetaeva’s poetry, which is sustained in the remaining poems of a chronologically ordered collection. The sequence, which Tsvetaeva originally planned to call ‘The Mistake’ or ‘A Mistake’ (like the majority of Slavonic languages, Russian possesses neither a definite nor an indefinite article), can be viewed as “queer literature” before the “queer”. It forms part of the flowering of such writing in Russia from the revolution of 1906 until some time after the twin revolutions of 1917. That also included the poetry of Mikhail Kuzmin, who in 1907 published one of Europe’s very first explicitly gay novels, Wings. If to speak of the book as “gay” is certainly an anachronism, its subtle, unapologetic presentation of male homosexuality in a positive, even proselytising light surely justifies the audacity.

The only occasion on which Tsvetaeva met Kuzmin face to face, during a visit to St Petersburg in the New Year of 1916, shortly preceded the ending of her relationship with Parnok. She describes the circumstances in a letter to Kuzmin. Dated 1921, it survives as a draft in Tsvetaeva’s notebooks. The account sets out as a conversation with an imaginary person:

’It was 1916, winter, the first time I visited Petersburg. I was friends then with the Kannegiser family (Good God, Leonid!), they showed me round Petersburg. But I’m shortsighted – it was freezing cold – and Petersburg has so many monuments – and the sleighs went so fast – everything became a blur, all that was left of Petersburg were Pushkin’s poems, and Akhmatova’s. But no, the fireplaces too – whole oak woods burning! – and white bears on the floor (a white bear in front of a fire! – amazing!) and all the young people had partings in their hair – and volumes of Pushkin in their hands, and varnished nails, and varnished heads – like black mirrors. (Varnish on top, and underneath – a n[ir]tw[ir]t!) How people love poetry there! I’ve never recited so
SAMPLER
Winged, he approached, and on
the brightness of those eyes the eyelids closed.
Creature composed of flame, you died
at the gloomiest hour.

What compensation can this world
offer in place of two slow, final tears?
He paused to think that over, while
four in the morning chimed.

Without anyone noticing,
he left, taking the most important word
with him, a word nobody heard –
your cry when facing death!

Wrenched, like your soul, from deep within,
your call was lost in a welter of sounds.
Meanwhile you sank, suffused with pink,
into the blur of dawn…

Moscow 1912

These lines are dedicated to
whoever’s going to make
the coffin where my forehead, high
and hateful, will lie bared.

Changed when there was no need for change,
a ribbon on my brow,
in the coffin my own heart
will not recognise me.

No-one will read what’s on my face:
“I’ve heard, seen everything!
I refuse, even as a corpse,
to be like all the rest!”
Clothed in pure white – a colour I’ve detested since childhood! – lying next to who knows who till the end of the world.

Look! I didn’t agree to this! It’s nothing but a trap! Whatever they let down into the earth, it won’t be me!

I know! It all burns down to ash! And my grave won’t safeguard anything I felt love for while I was alive.

Moscow, Spring 1913

You walk past just the way I would, with eyes glued to the ground. That was how I lowered mine! Passer-by, stop here!

Pick yourself a bunch of buttercups and poppies, then read my name – Marina. See how old I got to be.

Try to forget this is a grave. I won’t rise, threatening…. I, too, loved laughing far too much when it wasn’t allowed!

The blood would surge into my cheeks and each single curl bob… Passer-by, I too was *alive!* Passer-by, stop here!
Tear yourself a stalk of grass
then pick a strawberry:
only in graveyards are wild ones
as round and sweet as this.

But don’t be gloomy, standing there
with your head downcast.
Think of me light-heartedly,
and then forget the thought.

A ray of sunlight catches you,
you’re shrouded in gold motes!…
Just don’t be worried by my voice,
emerging from the ground.

Koktebel’ May 3rd 1913

The poems that I wrote so early on
I didn’t even know I was a poet,
a fountain’s spray spurting into the air,
sparks a rocket scatters,
little devils bursting through the doors
of sanctuaries filled with sleep and incense,
my poems about being young and dying –
poems nobody reads! –
tossed to one side in dusty warehouses
where no-one came for them, and no-one will,
vintage wines of incalculable worth –
my poems’ time will come!

Koktebel’, May 13th 1913
The veins of an already sunburnt hand
are filled with sunlight, not with blood.
And I’m left face to face with the great love
I bear towards this soul of mine.

I count a hundred, waiting for a cricket,
tear a blade of grass and chew…
– Strange to perceive, so powerfully and simply,
the transience of life – and mine.

May 15th 1913

Were you, proceeding beyond me towards
dubious enchantments I know nothing of,
to get even the slightest inkling how
much fire, how much life squandered uselessly,
how much heroic ardour I expend
upon a passing shadow, or a rustle,
the useless detonations which reduced
my heart to ashes, all to no avail!

Train after train speeds onwards through the night,
conveying sleep itself towards a station…
And nonetheless, I’m perfectly aware
that, even if you did, you couldn’t tell

why it is the words I utter through
the smoke of cigarettes I can’t put down
should be so harsh, how menacing and grim
the melancholy in my fair head is!

May 17th 1913
You saw me as a little boy
running past playfully
and, hearing the grim things I said
would tease me soberly:

“Naughtiness is my life, my name!
Clever people must laugh!”
You didn’t see the weariness
behind my whitened lips.

Unable to resist the draw
of two huge, moonlike eyes
you found me too young all the same,
and far too rosy-cheeked!

Melting faster than snow, but with
a core of steel – a ball
taking a running jump, to land
on the piano strings,

sand that grates against the teeth,
steel scratching upon glass…
You alone failed to detect
how menacing, sharp-tipped

my carefree words were, and my rage
a mask for tenderness –
with everything I put on show
sculpted in desperate stone!

May 29th 1913

Here I lie face down upon
the bed – seething with rage!
Why was it you could not agree
to study under me?
That very moment I’d have turned –
are you listening, student? –

into a salamander of
gold, a silver Undine.
We could have huddled on the rug
before a blazing fire –

the night, the fire, and the moon’s face…
Are you listening, student? –

No way of stopping me – my horse
loves galloping crazily! –
package on package, I’d have thrown
the past upon the fire:

old roses, books gone out of date –
Are you listening, student? –

And, when finally the heap
of ashes would subside –
my God, then what a miracle
I’d have made out of you!

An old man reborn as a youth! –
Are you listening, student? –

When, yet again, you threw yourself
into science’s trap,
I could have been seen standing there,
rubbing delighted hands

feeling you had become – immense!
Are you listening, student?

June 1st 1913
Off with you! I’ll not part my lips, since words are useless here. The tribunal where they’d pronounce me right does not exist.

Enchanting coward, darling youth, I’ll be no casualty in this battle – power isn’t what I fight for in this world.

My highborn verses do not seek any dispute with you. You may fail to see my eyes, because of others, may

resist being blinded by my fire, indifferent to my strength and to the demon inside me, your chance forever lost!

But don’t forget – an arrow-sharp judgement day will arrive, and then you’ll see two wings of flame shining above my head.

July 11th 1913