

# SHE TRANSFORMED LIFE INTO POETRY

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In Russian 20<sup>th</sup> century poetry there are five major stars, Akhmatova, Mandelshtam, Tsvetaeva, Pasternak, Brodsky.

Every one of those poets had a dramatic destiny.

Akhmatova, having lost her husband (he was shot) and her son (sent to a labour camp) lived a life of persecution. Mandelshtam died of starvation in an NKVD transit camp.

Pasternak was brutally harassed for a novel that was published abroad. Brodsky was found guilty of "work shyness" and exiled abroad.



As for Tsvetaeva, her fate was the cruellest and bitterest of all. She was the Eternal Wanderer, there was no refuge for her either in Russia or in emigration. A major poet, she was published if occasion arose and in minute editions. She was not understood by most critics. Immensely gifted, she spent her life in humiliating poverty, which shocked those who saw it. As mother and wife she lost her nearest and dearest in Stalin's jails and places of exile. At last, abandoned by everyone, ground down by misery, she took her life in the god forsaken town she had been evacuated to, acknowledging in a suicide note that her life had been a "dead end."

What was the reason? Was it the generally unhappy fate of the creative intelligentsia in Russia? It was, but that was not the only reason. There was something in Tsvetaeva's character and talent that preordained her tragic end long before [she committed suicide] in Elabuga.

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Tsvetaeva began writing verse very early. According to her mother's memories no sooner had Moussia [Marina] learnt to speak than she began to "beat out" rhymes. She wrote her first verse at the age of six.

At the age of sixteen she published, at her own expense, her first collected verse. Throughout her life she would get up early and every single day, without making any exception for daily contingencies, she would without delay sit down at her work desk. Tsvetaeva worked a great deal and with inspiration. In a not very long life of just under fifty years she produced tens of thousands of near perfect lines of verse as well as prose, plays, essays, translations and thousands of letters. There was also a poem about the slaughter of the royal family and a large collection of verse "unsuitable for import into the USSR" which were deposited in the Amsterdam Archive and irretrievably lost during the war. "*Her talent for work and inner organisation were as great as her gift for poetry*" her daughter Ariadna Efron will write in her memoirs (1).

Tsvetaeva devoted every moment of her life to the work which she called "craft", sacrificing to it not only herself but all those around her, including those closest to her. Tsvetaeva consciously laid on her ten year old daughter the care of her young brother and all the domestic chores declaring "*It is either I, my life, that is my creative life, or [my daughter] who has not yet proved herself, she is still*

*in the future, whereas I Am and will not sacrifice my poetry.*"(2)

She had her own ideas on Poetry and from a very early age was convinced that she was Chosen. Unlike many others on the subject Tsvetaeva saw art as being not second nature but as primary nature "uncreated and born before all time", for "In the beginning was the Word..." She believed that like the forces of nature true poetry lives by the very act of its creation and dies when that act is completed. There is no poetry outside the act of creation. There is no life other than poetry for its creator.

Thus the poet is "the earth that gives birth." As a person the poet may not be someone particularly significant, he is simply the channel for the elemental force of art which is made incarnate through him. This concept of the poet's mission identified Tsvetaeva not so much with her own period, which celebrated individual creative impulse, as with Antiquity, with the aesthetic conceptions of the ancient Greeks, who listened with trepidation to the prophecies uttered by the soothsayer, enthroned on the sacred tripod: it was through her that the gods spoke to mortals. This is also why her contemporaries, for the most part now deaf and unable to hear the sacred power of the Logos, could not understand her behaviour. This kind of "possession" by art is seen by many as the most banal egocentricity. Nadezhda Mandelshtam characterised Tsvetaeva's "forgetfulness of self" as "*indifference to people whom at that moment she did not need or who in some way spoilt 'the feast of feelings'.*" (3)

Therein lay the realities of "normal" life, full of conventions, of unavoidable compromises, of necessary everyday diplomacy, of the need to choose the right words and the right actions for the sake of stability and the observance of good behaviour in the community hostel. But it was also true that Tsvetaeva was completely unsuited for such a dull and well ordered life. According to her contemporaries she had no long standing friends, she was very forthright in argument, she mocked her opponents maliciously and unkindly, she spoke and wrote so openly and directly that she shocked those around her and so many people were simply afraid of entertaining any kind of relations with her.

Was that confrontational attitude to others simply "antisocial"? Apparently not, since those who knew her better spoke of completely different

traits of character: of her extreme vulnerability, of her helplessness, her shyness, the ease and informality she shewed in her contacts with people, the desire to give people presents, the total absence of envy, the ability to give away her last possessions, to listen to what the other person was saying.

So where do find the real Tsvetaeva? Probably in that harmonious world of integrity where every human virtue is significant and precious, where there is no idea of the “norm” which divides the sheep from the goats, the grain from the chaff, that ideal world in which man enters into contact with art, but which he forgets all too often in the world of the real and the practical.

However Tsvetaeva was not capable of forgetting the ideal world for the sake of the real world. She was a poet “by the grace of God”, she continually confused the “here” and the “there”, she judged reality by the ideal and was thus continually kicked and rejected by the world.

Many defined this as her ineradicable romanticism. It is true that she was brought up on the works of Edmond de Rostand, Holderlin and Heine, she fully absorbed and made her own the idea of “two worlds”, as well as that of romantic rebellion. There was also however in her life a fundamental sense of being ‘unsettled’ that she probably inherited from her family. Her parents, absorbed in their own lives, paid little attention to their children or to their upbringing in the family, which encouraged wilfulness. But above all there was a lack of love and affection for the highly gifted and unusual child. From her earliest childhood Tsvetaeva was forced to ‘create’ herself, all on her own, a process fraught with risk and danger.

The child’s only friends were books, they also became her teachers. Marina Tsvetaeva is one of the most highly educated poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She read in several languages, she was very knowledgeable in English, French, German, Czech and Ancient Classical literature. She translated many European poets [intorussian], achieving real perfection in her translation and at times surpassing the original.

Because of this for a long time Tsvetaeva’s only intellectual and spiritual world was the imagined one of literature. This shewed itself in her way of meeting people. At first she would very quickly take to them, endowing them with extraordinary traits and virtues drawn from books but hardly typical of real people. When she discovered this she

cooled just as quickly, disappointed in the person who then lost all interest for her.

That disappointment was not necessarily harmless. Occasionally it led not to disappointment but to the opposite, to hatred. Tsvetaeva was as capable of passionately falling in love as into hatred, so much so that she totally destroyed contacts and relationships that had only just been established. There were countless such cases, but Tsvetaeva never drew any lesson from her “mistakes”. This put off not only those whom she had “elevated into idols”, but many of those somewhat fearfully looking on from the side, so that gradually she created round herself if not a human vacuum then some very rarefied emptiness.

In the orbit round Tsvetaeva were all her most famous acquaintances and “loves”, in effect the crowning glory of the literature of the period. The most long lasting were her “distance” relationships, in her correspondence with Rilke, with Pasternak and Akhmatova. Rilke’s death prevented Tsvetaeva from meeting him, so that like Pushkin he remained for ever loved. Meeting with Pasternak and Akhmatova, and therefore the inevitable “disillusionment” was delayed for many years, but they could not avoid “disappointing” her.

There were also some rare exceptions, her husband Sergei Efron, life with whom was hardly idyllic, but the relationship survived several separations. A second exception apparently was her sister Assia, in whose favour was a shared childhood and similar interests. The third exception was Maximilian Voloshin, a faithful friend and the first admirer of her poetic talent. The fourth and most painful exception was her son George (Murr). According to those who knew him he was indeed a much loved child, but he inherited all his mother’s egoism and her pitiless youthful refusal ever to compromise, which is why he did not become the straw she could perhaps have clutched at in the last, bleak days of her life. “*You are a fool, Marina Ivanovna*” he said to her when they arrived in Elabuga, “*but since you have dragged me into this hole without a single penny, please see to it that you ensure that I have good living conditions.*” (4) It is hard to say how terrible his life would have been had he realised in due course the part he had played in her fate, however life enabled him to expiate his sins at 19, giving him the “*coup de grace*” in 1944, on the battle field.

Many of the love affairs Tsvetaeva is supposed to have had never existed, they were inventions. It

was her husband, Sergey Efron who gave the most exact description of this characteristic of hers. "Marina is a woman of passion... To plunge headlong into the hurricane has become a necessity for her, the very spirit of life... It is nearly always founded on self deception. A person is invented and the hurricane begins to rage..." It is also worthy of note that "... everything was entered in a book." (5)

The truth is that real life for Tsvetaeva was simply the pretext and nourishment for her poetry. Feeding her talent she turned any fact and the most insignificant impressions into poetry. Everything was wood for the fire which burned the more intensely the more it was built up. After the fire there were ashes but they were not gathered into an urn, they scattered in the wind. "Those I have loved I forget, as I forget myself, who has loved." (6) wrote Tsvetaeva in her notebook.

But if Marina herself was reborn, like Venus in the waves or the phoenix in the flames, with every new "love" and every new poem, her human relationships were with time fatally destroyed, "their trace remained only in verse." (7)

There is yet another striking, uniquely tsvetaevan characteristic. Even while consumed by fire she simultaneously abandoned herself to her passion and observed herself from the side, scrupulously noting down on paper every movement of her soul, its every anguish, subjecting her feelings to utterly cold analysis and submitting it to the merciless scalpel of the creator-surgeon, ruthlessly polishing the word, cutting any *longeurs* and inaudible murmurings so as to achieve the right sound for every note of her agonised scream. One can only wonder at this almost inhuman ability!

It is in this paradox that the price and the value of her art lie. This resplendent firework would be worthless were Tsvetaeva not so talented. And she was both uniquely and exceedingly talented. Although she is usually included among the Silver Age poets, she did not belong to any school, she was totally original and 'a law unto herself', and therefore all the more incomprehensible for the "majority" which groups everything in "isms" and only sees beauty in the commonly accepted, the standardised, the familiar. Even young, quarrelsome and radical literary groups, fraying themselves a path into art in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, were originally guilty of herd instinct and so very quickly acquired the status of fashionable and therefore of tameable, socially acceptable phenomena.

But Tsvetaeva, unlike any one else, stood forlorn like a lead soldier in the middle of a burnt out space, open to all the winds. She could not be bothered with the poets' petty quarrels, or with loud manifestos, when she needed to seize, hold and write down in time all that was born in her at every moment. All her verse was good, resonant, aphoristic, concerned with the very essence of things, and couched in rich unpredictable rhymes. The real miracle of this verse lay in its perception not only through reason but by the whole body, through inner, hidden receptors, like the beating of a heart and the sound of breathing, by those organs which are justly called the fibres of the soul. That was the great secret of her poetry, which achieved its aim as though by a magic that overwhelms the whole person.

Tsvetaeva did not invent or portray things, she literally gave birth to every verse, and the fertile instrument was her throat, which drew from every sentence, every phoneme sound of unseen colour, which carried within itself the sacred meaning of the created universe. To be able to write like that the poet needed an innate, perfect poetic pitch.

Of course, a gift of that nature needs a congenial reader-listener "Reading is above all co-creation. If the reader has no imagination, not a single book will survive" (8) Tsvetaeva used to say. But can every reader, every literary critic claim to have such ability? If he is not himself a poet the critic will only hear a weak, barely audible distant echo of the poetic music. This was Tsvetaeva's explanation for the critical reception given to her verse, and therefore she only recognised as valid the opinion of real poets. They were numerous, "the priestly servants of music" who understood and valued her work, Voloshin, Rilke, Pasternak, Akhmatova, Mandelstam, Balmont, Mayakovsky, Tarkovsky. Briussov, the Idol of the Silver Age remained both jealous and indifferent to her verse.

However of all the poets it was Pasternak and Brodsky, particularly the latter, who heard most sensitively what was most sacred in her verse, the ancient, quintessential heart of any verse, born since time immemorial in the depths of folklore.

She lived in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, she thought in 20<sup>th</sup> century terms, but Tsvetaeva was at the same time the thousand year old, primeval Mother of poetry, who had the gift of giving expression in her verse to the pagan, pre-ethical magic of the word, who could weep over and give praise to death and birth, to triumph and tragedy, the very foundations

of the essence of human destiny. This is the source and the significance of Tsvetaeva's constant self-immolation and eternal rebirth, of her hymn of celebration over the funeral pyre.

Tsvetaeva had no time for political battles, for the conventions of everyday life, for her own children, when she was daily shaken by that magic, ancient fever. She was the midwife and the poet grieving, weeping throughout human history.

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However, "souls live in apartments": apart from heavenly food poets have to eat earthly food and fend for themselves, finding necessary points of interaction with everyday life and people. And this interaction sooner or later leads to perennial human problems: love and indifference, good and evil, forgiveness and retribution. Are poets in the real world justified by their "supra worldly" status? Are they subject to human justice? What is the significance of art and its place in the world?

What no one can take away from Tsvetaeva is the integrity of her thinking. She saw these problems with absolute clarity and tried to find answers.

Art, as she saw it, was governed by laws not really compatible with the morality of an earthly world. If "the artist is the moral that gives birth" then it gives birth to everything, it transforms itself indiscriminately into everything, whether it be good or evil. But as art possesses a force of attraction for people, it can lead them into temptation. This leads to a dilemma: should art be 'good', in other words speak only of what is 'good', or should it be truthful, and speak of everything, including evil? Tsvetaeva gives this answer: "*In certain cases artistic creation is an atrophy of conscience. I will go further and say that it is a necessary atrophy of conscience, that moral gap without which art cannot be. To be good (that is not to lead the weak of this world into temptation) art would have to give up a good half of itself. The only way in which art can be good is not to be.*" (9) In addition if the poet is to be faithful to truth in art he cannot worship only the one god, the poet has to worship many gods. He cannot choose the one truth and forget all the others. The main truth in art is concern for oneself, for one's own completeness, for perfection. The high truth in life is genuine concern for people.

Tsvetaeva knows perfectly well what is better and higher than art, the help of a nurse in sickness or the consolation brought by the priest.

"*It is more important to be human because that is needed more.*" (10) She also understands that she is probably without one of the most important human virtues, the ability to love. "*In my life more than people I have loved the sun, a tree, a monument. They never got in my way because they did not answer back.*" (11) Maybe that is why she seeks refuge in art, fully aware that art is temptation, above all for the artist, and temptation bought at the price of great sacrifice, "the passion of inebriation", "the deep sleep of conscience", "oblivion", so that in the end the poet is the "slave of art" "*... the most vital, and as so often happens precisely because of this vitality the object most deprived of spiritual vitality.*" (12)

But at the same time "*in full clarity of mind and memory*" Tsvetaeva states that knowing that this is so "*she would not change her work for any other.*" "*The more I know the less I create. That is why there is no forgiveness for me. It is only those like me who will have to answer at the Last Judgment of conscience. But if there is a Last Judgment of the word, there I am innocent.*" (13)

She does not try to find an alibi for herself, she admits her sin.

That is what she has to answer for. While waiting for the Last Judgment of conscience poet and art have since time immemorial been judged by plain human justice. In Plato's words Antiquity has already delivered its verdict: there is no place for poetry in the ideal state.

However if the poet's only concern is the fire consuming him and his conscience which he sacrifices to the truth of art, the world in which he lives and to which he brings the destructive force of his poetry, then the world **IS** concerned. Every state, more than that, every **rationally organised community hostel** seeks to eject, and even destroy the Poet for their aims, mission and truth are incompatible.

How significant this was for even the youthful, seventeen year old poet is clear from the memoirs of her sister Assia, where she describes Tsvetaeva's first attempt at suicide. That however was a presentiment of her eventual fate. Youth proved stronger, her verse sought to break through and the executioner's hand was stayed.

The happiest years of her life turned out to be the years before the revolution, when her verse found publishers, she met her husband and her daughters were born. However the better and the



more Tsvetaeva wrote, the less she was reviewed, the harder her life became. It was as though an invisible hammer, in revenge for every new poem, beat down on her head, trying to break her and “bring her down to earth.” These travails were endless, the death of her father, her husband’s departure for the White Army, several months of work for the Peoples’ Commissariat (Narkomnatz) after which Tsvetaeva promised herself “never to serve anyone again”, the death of her daughter Irina “from emaciation and misery” in an orphanage, emigration, constant wandering from one European city to another, the critics’ lack of understanding, constant lack of money, the unspoken hostility of the Russian emigration in Paris, her husband’s membership of the “Union for the return to the motherland”, his part in a sinister killing organised by the NKVD, her daughter’s and husband’s departure for the USSR and her own forced return at the insistence of her son.

While all this was taking place she wrote unceasingly, though she was rarely published. On returning to Russia she understood that “over there they did not publish me, here they will not let me write.!” And indeed the collected verse being prepared for publication by the state publishing company (Goslitizdat) was ‘spiked’ (withdrawn) after a critical review. “So many lines, now in the past! I do not write anything down. I have finished with this.” (14) notes Tsvetaeva in her diary for 1940. But this no longer has any importance. Her sister, her husband and her daughter are all in prison. She is not given a flat in Moscow and has to take refuge where she can. All round her are confused people who avoid her like a leper. She is equally frightened of everyone and of everything, the telephone, a taxi, bugging, betrayal. And the climax, the war, the panic stricken evacuation to Elabuga, near Kazan,

with her son Murr, her unsuccessful attempts to rent a room and find a job as dishwasher.

The “rationally organised community hostel” had finally achieved its revenge on the rebellious poet and had driven her into a corner. It was no longer possible to continue living by her art, but to live otherwise she neither could nor wanted to. Having understood this there was only one solution, not to be. She said it several times shortly before her death, “I do not want to die, I want not to be.” (15)

**PS**

“According to the evidence of a highly placed official of the Ministry of Security of the RF, who did not wish to give his name, the Tsvetaeva Archive includes a document which testifies that a CHEKA official went to see Marina Tsvetaeva literally a day before her death. That same official stated that both the exchange and its content were consciously thought out in such a way that the great poet had to take one single decision — to commit suicide” (16).

“Her grave was unmarked, there was no cross or any other sign. In due course the grave sank and apparently there was no one to repair it. Instead of a mound there was a small dip. We forgot that there was a grave there and we threw old besoms and other rubbish into it” (17).

In 1991, on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Marina Tsvetaeva, to the surprise of many Orthodox and to the joy of her admirers, with the blessing of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Alexis II, a Panikhida (Memorial Service) was served in the church of the Ascension of Our Lord for the repose of the soul of the servant of God Marina...



Марина, Чл. Секретаря КЗВ.

Всё равно же восторг (в начале её, не в конце) я чувствую  
 Всё равно же восторг. Человек, безразличный к своему  
 как кота и краба в мировой культуре, в мире  
 человека я не вижу. Краб — не краб, и кот не кот  
 не кот. Всё равно же восторг и радость у нас, у русских —  
 всё же. Всё равно же, Радужная, всё же у нас не боится  
 я же чувствую, но всё равно же человек: жалею, что живу

*BRING ME WHAT OTHERS DON'T REQUIRE...*

*Bring me what others don't require.  
All Must burn upon my fire!  
I entice life, I entice Death,  
Simple gifts to my fire's breath.*

*The flames love fragile substances:  
Last year's brushwood, garlands, sentences...  
Food like that makes the flames soar!  
Purer than ash you'll rise once more!*

*A Phoenix, only in fire I sing!  
To my life bring succour, buttressing!  
I burn up tall, and I burn up quite,  
And may the night for you be light.*

*Bonfire of ice, fountain of flame!  
Aloft I bear my lofty frame,  
Aloft I bear my lofty name:  
Interlocutor and Inheritor!*

[2 September 1918]  
(Translated by David Mc Duff)

*Что другим не нужно — несите мне:  
Все должно сгореть на моем огне!  
Я и жизнь маню, я и смерть маню  
В легкий дар моему огню.*

*Пламень любит легкие вещества:  
Прошлогодний хворост — венки — слова...  
Пламень пышет с подобной пищи!  
Вы ж восстанете — пепла чище!*

*Птица — Феникс я, только в огне пою!  
Поддержите высокую жизнь мою!  
Высоко горю и горю до тла,  
И да будет вам ночь светла.*

*Ледяной костер, огневой фонтан!  
Высоко несу свой высокий стан,  
Высоко несу свой высокий сан -  
Собеседницы и Наследницы!*

2 сентября 1918

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