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The Poem of the End by Marina Tsvetaeva

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The Language of the End and the Language of the World in The Poem of the End by Marina Tsvetaeva

Abstract

This article presents a reading of the 1924 long poema, *The Poem of the End* by Marina Tsvetaeva. The reading focuses on Tsvetaeva's development of the theme and notion of "the end" in the farewell scenes that make up the poem and that take place as a lyrical dialogue between the male, lyrical "you" and the female lyrical "I." I show that the poet employs a method of bracketing common sense ideas of the end, represented by the "you," in a phenomenological reduction, by opposing them to the very consequences of this end for the lyrical I. The lyrical I not only grieves, but loses her means of attaining an inner life, and therefore she disintegrates, dismembers, just as her language.

The consequence is a radical modernist break in *The Poem of the End* with lyrical language and meter, because here she breaks with the idea that language, or a better language, will offer a birthplace of a higher self. Poetic language, as we learn from Tsvetaeva, offers only a home in the words if it bespeaks the utter homelessness of the inner self being disintegrated or dismembered.

Keywords

exile poetry, Heidegger, Marina Tsvetaeva, modernism, phenomenology, *Poem of the End*

When Marina Tsvetaeva writes *The Poem of the End* in 1924, she is living in exile in Prague. She has experienced the end of the old regime with the Russian Revolution, and then, with her migration, the end of her life in Russia. By reverse, she has also felt the implications of the allegedly “new” life in Soviet Russia, and of her personal “new” exilic life in Europe. Although these ends and beginnings are highly present in her sensibility at the time, they form first and foremost a referential and thematic background to the lyrical treatment of the acute end of *The Poem of the End*; the end of a love story. Konstantin Rodsevich, who had been her lover for some months in the autumn of 1923, ended their affair at the turn of the year. In the beginning of 1924, Tsvetaeva wrote two longer poems: first, *The Poem of the Mountain* in which she grieves the end of their love, and second, *The Poem of the End* in which she instead rises against this very end as well as the grief after it. By this very personal revolt, she also profoundly criticizes the belief in the productivity of endings and beginnings in love, life, society, exile, and literature. The ending of the love story comes out as an almost perfect parallel to, or perhaps as a personal consequence of the ending of the old regime—in the sense that both the Revolution and the separation meant the end of a world, of a place of meaning. More so, both endings, as Tsvetaeva will suggest to us, resulted from a myth or utopia of the possibility of replacing the old world with a new one. Now, Tsvetaeva faces the ending as an expulsion from the common places of meaning without the possibility of a transition to the new. She takes us into a human movement without anywhere to go, and into a lyrical writing without a direction. There she tries to reach a language to bespeak her suffering in a world that has become all but too excited by the idea of the end as a promise of new beginnings.

In an intense modernistic lyrical diction, Tsvetaeva brings out a critique on how the scheme of ending and beginning, which is the scheme of modernity *par excellence*, places life in exile from itself. She shows us how this scheme works both in a conservative way—preserving the idea that there positively *was* a world that could be ended, and as an impulse for the avant-garde—promising the possible birth of new meanings and new mornings. Although Tsvetaeva shares a certain revolutionary or poetic discontent with conventional meanings, she shows at the same time in her treatment of language, that meaning in as well life as language can

neither be ended, nor invented. Meaning is always already present in language, but it is not equal to the conventional use of words. Therefore, her way of heeding that meaning often brings form and expression to burst, or “break off.”¹ Her way of working through poetic language by showing the limits of conventional meanings in their incapacity to contain her experience, can be likened to a phenomenological reduction. She brackets conventional meaning by fleshing out the implication of words, and by illustrating how poetic language offers a dwelling place for an experience beyond these conventions, precisely by bringing out to the full how “language speaks” (Heidegger 1975: 188). At stake in *The Poem of the End* is, as mentioned, the very notion of the end, in its conventional use, and in the meaning that it has in her poetic treatment of her experience. In her modernist diction in the poem, language and verse are constantly on the verge of breaking down in face of the pain of saying the meaning of the end as the end of meaning and therefore of facing the impossibility of a new beginning.

In her refusal to accept the end in *The Poem of the End*, Tsvetaeva ultimately comes to lyrical terms with the end of their love story by showing that ending means placing life in exile—with nowhere to go. Life is neither in what *was*, nor in the prospect of what will be, “neither before, nor after,” as she writes in the poem. Life is only in the being together of love and meaning, and therefore, after the end life itself is in the outside, life is an *exurb*, a non-place or a ghetto, a place “that cannot be lived.” We follow Tsvetaeva in the poem as she realizes through poetic language that when love and meaning end, she not only loses her home as a place in the world, but also herself as a home or a place in a self and in a body. She loses her means of attaining the inner, and therefore she disintegrates, dismembers, just as her language does. However, in the discovery of this lack, language will offer her a home. The consequence is a radical modernist break in *The Poem of the End* with lyrical language and meter, because here she breaks with the idea that language, or a better language, will offer a birthplace of a higher self. Poetic language, as we learn from Tsvetaeva, offers only a home in the words if it bespeaks this utter homelessness of the inner self being disintegrated or dismembered.

¹ I am here referring to Martin Heidegger’s article “The Nature of Language” in *On the Way to Language* (1971). Heidegger makes a close reading of Stefan Georg’s poem *Das Wort*, and starts with the final line “Kein Wort sei wo das Wort gebricht” (Where words break off no thing may be). The “break off” of language as a starting point for a phenomenological reduction is a method that well applies to Tsvetaeva’s investigations of language as a dwelling place for a different experience of the world, as I will show further ahead.

The Poem of the End to The Poem of the Mountain

The *Poem of the Mountain* and *The Poem of the End* constitute a diptych. In a letter to her close friend “in the craft,” Boris Pasternak, she called the first *poema*, *The Poem of the Mountain*, the male poem of the two (Tsvetaeva 2004: 218). Masculinity stands for the attempt to embrace the male logic of Rodsevich’s speech, his eaglelike position, as she writes in *The Poem of the End*. In the *Poem of the Mountain* her coming to terms, or coming to words, with the grief (in Russian, *góre*) after this ending is portrayed from her position on the poetic mountain (*gorá*) of Smichovski, where she lived. The pun on syllables, *góre-gorá* is typical for Tsvetaeva, who in her poetry constantly tries out words with relation to all levels of meaning—metaphorical, symbolic, folkloric, literal, and often to the point of their morphology.² And in *The Poem of the Mountain* she brings the two words together so that only the emphasis separates them in graphic form and expression: *góre goré*. With grief in nominative and mountain in dative, the expression means: grief to the mountain. Now, in *The Poem of the Mountain* this grief is something the poet seems to be able to come to terms with, or even to overcome, while stating that memory gives her a focal point, a perspective and an intonation from which to deal with this end, in other words a mountain from which to overlook the loss; she states: “Yet, in base and dense / life (life as it is) / I cannot see you with another / The revenge of memory” (“No, zato, v nishchei i tesnoi/ Zhizni: “zhizni kak ona est’—/ Ia ne vizhu tebia sovmestno/ Ni s odnoi: —pamiati mest’!”) (1973: 167). The revenge of memory is the vantage point of the poet, and she seems in *The Poem of the Mountain* to be able to “get on top” of the sorrow.

I will not go into a deeper comparison of the two poems, but the *Poem of the Mountain* serves well as a ground image, against which the radicalness of the second poem becomes clearer.³ Tsvetaeva begun writing *The Poem of the End* on the very day she finished *The Poem of the Mountain*, and in the same letter to Pasternak, she called this second the “feminine” poem. The reason is that she here develops her grief as a revolt against the end, against the possibility of grief and against the notion of “life as it is,” as she wrote in *The Poem of the Mountain*. Tomas Venclova

² Several studies have been written on Tsvetaeva’s linguistic explorations in general, for example, see Liudmila Zubova (1999).

³ In his comparison of the references to myths and to the bible in the two poems, Venclova omits, however, the very motivation for this end to sacral writing, as well as Tsvetaeva’s radical refusal of “this most Christian world” in the poem. In order to uncover the way that Tsvetaeva comes to this end, we must look deeper down into her revolt against Rodsevich’s language of the end, and her revolt against a Christian language, which in the way that it folds and implicates the world has come to exclude poetry from life (Venclova 1997: 141–67).

convincingly showed that *The Poem of the Mountain* centers on references to the Old Testament and ends as a metaphysical transcendence from earthly love to lyrical heights, whereas *The Poem of the End* is construed with reference to the New Testament as a *Via Crucis* that ends with “the end to writing,” (konets Pisaniia) meaning also the end to sacral writing. However, *The Poem of the End* also comprises a considerable critique of “this most Christian world,” as she calls it in the poem. The “end to sacral writing” is but one aspect of Tsvetaeva’s break away from the tradition of lyrical poetry and its escape into a strong lyrical perspective, which stems from a metaphysical tradition. Indeed, as much as she in *The Poem of the End* rises against Rodsevich’s ending of their love, she departs from the central idea of *The Poem of the Mountain* that she can find a perspective in hindsight. In the *Poem of the End* she will use the same grammatical construction of dative and nominal as in *góre goré*, and here it is to state that she has overcome the end—that there is an end to the end—*kontsu-konets*. However, this overcoming is a kind of undercoming—or coming through—in the loss after the end, almost as the triumph of the loss. For *The Poem of the End* can be read as a kind of correction to the monumentality of the mountain poem, perhaps its appendix—just as Kant’s *Analytic of the Sublime*. The parallel to the sublime is not a coincidence—the correction of *The Poem of the End* to *The Poem of the Mountain* lies in the loss of a position from which to grieve, a deeper involvement in the abysmal night. In *The Poem of the End*, Tsvetaeva directs all the power of her lyrical mastery not only to underscore the notion of a productivity of the end, that this end could result in something new, but also, and this is perhaps the more radical and critical moment—to question into the conditions for a world obsessed by productivity and progressivity, while portraying the way that the lyrical perspective of *The Poem of the Mountain*, and really any claim to a strong lyrical perspective, goes under.

The Beginning of the End

The *poema* is a specific lyrical genre in the tradition of Russian poetry that Tsvetaeva much appreciated. The *poema* consists of several lyrical poems, and this allowed her to develop a story or a theme. In this *poema*, Tsvetaeva develops the theme of the end as she tells the story of their ending. It is construed as a lyrical dialogue between the “lyrical I” of Tsvetaeva and the “lyrical you” of Rodsevich, and it recounts the stages of the ending scenes—from agreeing on a meeting to the final goodbye. The parting is structured as an intense and ferocious lyrical walk on the bridges and embankments of Prague over one evening. The bridges and embankment on which the two departing lovers are walking are as floating as the river, and poetry as the steady home of the world and a source for appeasing meaning cannot be retrieved in the immense flow

of tears. The air breathes of endings and deaths, and the river reminds her of of *Lethe* in several respects: first, he is ending their common world, their love, their life, and second, in this *poema* Tsvetaeva also approaches the end of the world in the sense of approaching a language that finds no relief from this end.

The first scene and the first poem is ominous and full of premonitions of what is to come during the evening walk:

В небе, ржавее жести,
Перст столба.
Встал на назначенном месте,
Как судьба. (1973: 168)⁴

In the sky, rustier than tin,
Is a lamppost like a finger.
He rose at the appointed place,
Like fate. (1998: 51)

The moment of the first poem is the moment of time, the moment of fate, the moment when “death can’t wait” (1998: 51) / *Smert’ ne zhdet* (1973: 168) as she writes in the second line of the second stanza. The first poem consists of strophes with four lines, alternating the dactylic trimeter and iambic endings of the uneven lines with trochaic dimeter of the even lines. The short rhyme endings form an abundance of stresses in the meter, and not rarely a peonic clash of stresses that enhances the opposition between the two speakers. The alternation both emphasizes the presence of time, and creates a perfect ground for the dialogue, where the first speaker—which we often can identify with Tsvetaeva, seeks contact in the lengthier dactylic form, and the second speaker, often the male other, cuts her off with the short laconic trochaic form. The rhythm thus brings out how he constantly separates himself in forms of singularity—a life, a home, an aim—from her attempts to approach him. He is full of determinations and destinations, and she is the movement into the non- or indeterminate, (and sees love as such), while he is the face of the composed, of good behavior, of courage, he is also denying the negativity of the moment—denying that this is an end. From his point of view, the end seems but ripe with continuations of other things, of new beginnings.

As she goes through the stages of their farewell, Tsvetaeva tries to come to terms with the way that her lover ends their common roads, and it is precisely by invoking his language and his terms that she also is able to undo his terms and conditions for ending; that is, that she is able to

⁴ V nebe, rzhavee zhesti, / Perst stolba. / Vstal na naznachennom meste, / Kak sud’ba.

undo his language of ending. Tsvetaeva's undoing of the lover's terms for ending here can be likened to Heidegger's insistence on bracketing the way that we are always already implied in, folded, or appropriated in language. Language, as Heidegger writes in his reading of Stefan George's *Das Wort* in "The Nature of Language," must "break off" from the ordinary relationship between word and thing, in order to make the world appear through the word (1971: 163). Just as the philosopher insists, Tsvetaeva undoes Rodsevich's *logos* or reason, by bringing us to an experience of language and of how language speaks in its implications. She brackets Rodsevich's ending by showing how this ending really speaks, really appears in her inner life. She does so by ferociously dismissing the way that his language of the end implies in her reaction this scheme of endings and beginnings. Throughout the poem, the language of Rodsevich resonates and implodes in her lyrical speech that examines, seeks, and doubts its meaning. She explores the limits of his logic in its true meaning in her world—and here ending does not come to mean end—but a dissolution, a disintegration, a life falling apart, or falling away from the world.

This moment of the end, as the moment of death, presents itself as a moment of gathering, in the sense of a moment of looking back to a past and completed story. Tsvetaeva emphasizes that this is a moment of exaggeration, it is the "Exaggeration of life / In the moment of death":

(Преувеличенность жизни
В смертный час.)

То, что вчера — по пояс,
Вдруг — до звезд.
(Преувеличенно, то есть:
Во весь — рост.) (1973: 169)⁵

(The exaggeration of life,
In the final hour.)

What yesterday was waist-high,
Suddenly reaches the stars.
(Exaggerated, that is:
To its full height.) (1998: 53)

This exaggeration of life in the face of death is in this first poem written in brackets. The bracketing of the phrases is not simply rhythmical. It also tells us in this lyrical dialogue what is not present as a thought lin-

⁵ (Preuvelichennost' zhizni / V smertnyi chas.) / To chto vchera—po poias, / Vdrug—do zvezd. / (Preuvelichenno, to est': / Vo ves' rost.)

gering in the background, as a thought that cannot be outspoken. Here in the first poem, it is the lyrical you who dictates the poem, and its other is not receptive for the life that he makes claim to, for life in its fullest. He is heading “home”:

Мысленно: милый, милый.
— Час? Седьмой.
В кинематограф, или? —
Взрыв: Домой! (1973: 169)⁶

Thinking: darling, darling.
“The time?” “Seven.”
“To the movies, or?”
Exclaiming: “Home!” (1998: 53)⁷

Tsvetaeva constructs the dialogue without any indications of the interlocutor. She leaves it to the reader to interpret on the basis of the form and logic of the language, or in the way that the other person is apostrophized. The lyrical I “thinks”: “darling, darling,” which in Russian is rendered in the male form: *milyi*. Then there is a short, almost anonymous exchange of words, which leads to the question that we only in its logic and address can attribute to her: “To the movies, or?” / “V kinematograf, ili?”, and his, equally, anonymous dismissal: “Exclaiming: ‘Home!’” / “Vzryv: Domoi!” His exclamation is even more anonymous in Russian, because it is given not as a verb, that is, as the action of an interlocutor, but in the form of the noun *vzryv* (explosion). In his constant move away from her, the notion of a separate home comes as the logical end of the first poem, because it is the logical end of his language of the end—the logical end of his understanding of separation.

His language, the language of the end, is characterized by separation, differentiation, property, and measures. His is the world where something that positively has been, can cease to be, and therefore also become replaced by something else. His is the perspective of the Roman eagle, as she writes. Her perspective is from within, and her language is as if also from within—from within the potential meaning of the words that he uses. Her voice is lyrical, reading and interpreting the surroundings, faces, sounds, bodies—inner and outer perceptions. At the beginning of the poem, his diction determines the lyrical speech, and she appears as a surface of lyrical reflection often bracketed in his speech. Gradually, as the end becomes more and more unquestionable, the world also becomes

⁶ Myslenno: milyi, milyi. / —Chas? Sed'moi. / V kinematograf, ili? / —Vzryv: Domoi!

⁷ A better translation of the Russian original “Vzryv: Domoi!” would be “An explosion: Home!”

more and more unreadable—through her loss of a perspective in tears. However, as she at the same time undoes his folding or bracketing of her, she becomes more and more certain of the meanings of her dis-perspective and of her own diction, and her voice becomes more dominant towards the end of the poem.

Homes

Now, as his intention to depart for his home ends the first poem, there is a pause until the second poem, marking the difficulty for her to swallow this—to integrate his idea of a separate home into her lyrical speech. The tone of the second poem is consequently that of intimidation of the lyrical I, who asks—how could you, and how can you speak of a home? As she says, there can be no home, but that of the night, and a homeless and roadless being together:

Мой брат по беспутству,
Мой зноб и зной,
Так из дому рвутся,
Как ты — домой! (1973: 169)⁸

My brother in sin,
My fever and fervor.
They dream of running away,
The way you dream of home. (1998: 53)

The Russian word for sin is the same as roadlessness, *bespustvo*. In Russian, the first phrase in the first strophe “Moi brat po besputstvu” does not only mean “My brother in sin,” but also—my brother in roadlessness. Further, in a chiasitic figure, she turns around the meaning of home. As she states—people head away from home, as you (that is, Rodsevich) head home. What happens by parallel is that she also turns the idea of the end around—ending is not to come home (to make an end to an external relation and then return to what really is), but it is to be thrown out of the becoming of what cannot ever be in the day, in the separate home. Thus, as a consequence of the way that his ending excludes her from their common home in the night, her world begins to crumble in the third and fourth poems, which are lyrical monologues, and she writes that she now only “holds on to the water” (“Vody derzhus’ / kak tolcshi plotnoi”) (1973: 170). The night is not a comforting home, a place of rest and recovery—because recovery would mean the possibility of the productivity of

⁸ Moi brat po besputstvu, / Moi znob i znoid, / Tak iz domu rvutsia, / Kak ty—domoi!

the end—but that poem/song is too simple, as she says. For the lyrical I, being at home in the world really means to leave home and go out into the night:

Конем, рванувшим коновязь —
Ввысь — и веревка в прах.
— Но никакого дома ведь!
— Есть, в десяти шагах:

Дом на горе. — Не выше ли?
— Дом на верху горы.
Окно под самой крышею.
— «*Не от одной зари*

Горящее» — Так сызнава
Жизнь? — Простота поэм!
Дом, это значит: из дому
В ночь.

(О, кому повем

Печаль мою, беду мою,
Жуть, зеленее льда?..)
— Вы слишком много думали.
— Задумчивое: — Да. (1973: 170)⁹

Like a horse jerking at its tether—
Up!—and the rope’s in shreds.
“But we have no home!”
Ah, but we do. Ten paces away.

The house on the mountain. “Not higher up?”
The house at the top of the mountain,
The window under the roof.”
“*Burning not only with the light*

Of dawn?” “So we start over again?”
“The simplicity of poems!”
Home means: out of the house
And into the night.

⁹ Konem, rvanuvshim konoviaz’— / Vys’—i verevka v prakh. / —No nikakogo doma ved’! / Est’, v desiati shagakh: / Dom na gore.—Ne vyshе li? / Dom na verkhу gory. / Okno pod samoi krysheiu. / —“Ne ot odnoi zari/ Goriashchee”—Tak syznova / Zhizn?—Prostota poem! Dom, eto znachit: iz domu / V noch’. (O komu povem/ Pechal’ moiu, bedu moiu, / Zhut’, zelenee l’da?..) / —Vy slishkom dumali. / —Zadumchivoe:—Da.

My sorrow, my grief,
Horror, greener than ice?..)
You've been thinking too much."
Pensively: "Yes." (1998: 53–55)

I have quoted this rather long sequence of the poem because it is here that Tsvetaeva breaks with *The Poem of the Mountain* and breaks away from the idea of a lyrical perspective that can transcend or overcome the world. The idea that home is at the top of the mountain capturing the first lights of the new day is now refuted as the "simplicity of poems." Instead, she asserts that home must mean "out of the house [or out of home] / And into the night." This conclusion, which is not so uncharacteristic of Tsvetaeva's early romanticism, is nevertheless a turning point in the poem, in her grief, and really perhaps also in her entire poetry. She reaches the terms or realization of the modernist loss of lyrical orientation that perhaps always was present in her language. Lyrical language no longer guarantees a stronghold, and the poet is not someone who can resist the world, but only bring out and thus attain the experience of the loss of the world on his skin in a more powerful and meaningful way because she attains being in language. She comes to a night where there is really nothing at all to hold on to, and in a fantastic lyrical stream, she writes how she holds on to this water as the blind to the wall, or as the madman to the borders of the roof.¹⁰

He does not recognize this notion of home and of night, although these are the amorous loci *par excellence*, and she comes all the more to sense the expulsion of her night in her loneliness. When he now from his perspective of the "eagle, overlooking the vicinities," asks her—is this your home? She answers that this night, and her home, is the home in the heart, and that this is the home of literature:

(Орлом озирая местность):
— Помилуйте, это — дом?
— Дом в сердце моем. — Словесность! (1973: 172)¹¹

¹⁰ In her reading of Tsvetaeva's poetry and poetics, H el ene Cixous devotes much attention to *The Poem of the End*. She makes an interesting connection to the thought of Heidegger in that she asserts that similarly to Heidegger, Tsvetaeva sees the task of the poet as showing that "Risk is the another word for life." "Following Heidegger, we can say that being is without shelter (*sans abri*), without protection, but salvation is precisely in this risk" (Cixous 1991: 113). The statement points to a kinship in their thought, although it overemphasizes the equality between risk and life or risk and being as a fact in Heidegger's thought.

¹¹ (Orlom oziraia mestnost'): / —Pomilujte, eto—dom? / —Dom v serdtse moem. —Slovesnost'!

The Language of the End and the Language of the World...

(He surveys the scene like an eagle)

“You call this *home*?

“My home is in my heart”—“Literature!” (1998: 59)

In a phrase preceding Heidegger’s statement in *Letters on Humanism* and thematized again in *On the Way to Language* that “Language is the house of being” (Heidegger 1971: 71), Tsvetaeva asserts with the lyrical I that “My home is in my heart”—Literature!”¹² In this night, where there is no other access to the world, language becomes her dwelling place, because of the way that it at the same time is a non-place, or a pre-place to the framing of conventional meaning. And Tsvetaeva literally stages this home of literature for the house of being. In looking for meaning in this “house in her heart, which is language,” when the rest of the world, due to endings, is falling apart, she turns every phrase, gesture, word and morpheme around to find how they include and exclude the world. Literature thus becomes the home for her nocturnal homeless roaming.

The End of Inner Life

When Tsvetaeva moves into the night, and into the complete loss of anything to hold on to, she not only moves away from the idea of a lyrical diction that will transcend the world, but also from the idea of a lyrical subject that remains intact vis-à-vis the experience of the world. As mentioned, Thomas Venclova insisted that Tsvetaeva in *The Poem of the End* reaches the end of sacral writing (“konets Pisaniia”). This is really a consequence of the breakdown in the poem of the very idea that has been present for several ages in Western lyrical poetry and that became highly prominent in Symbolism: the transcendence of the lyrical subject into a metaphysical realm. More so, Tsvetaeva shows this end of sacral writing to be the very consequence of the idea of sacral writing, that is, she shows how the idea of a transcendent writing has entered a dead end. The breakdown of the lyrical perspective is parallel to the breakdown of the lyrical subject, and of its inner life and its soul. The only thing that remains is a sensitivity and sensuality fumbling for a sense and for something to sense:

¹² There is an ambiguity in the Russian original of this line that is lost in the translation. It is possible to read the word “slovesnost” as belonging to either the lyrical I or the lyrical you. In “slovesnost” one can also hear the word “slovo” (“word”) as an allusion to the lyrical you saying “those are only words.” Yet, in either case, Tsvetaeva invites us to read the line as it stands, and it confirms a central idea in the poem, that her home can be found nowhere, but in literature.

Гнезжусь: тепло,
Ребро — потому и льну так.
Ни до, ни по:
Прозрения промежуток!

Ни рук, ни ног.
Всей костью и всем упором:
Жив только бок,
О смежный теснюсь которым.

Вся жизнь — в боку!
Он — ухо и он же — эхо. (1973: 178)¹³

I nestle. It's warm.
Adam's rib—that's why I cling.
Neither *before*, nor *after*:
An interval of insight.

No arms, no legs.
All bone and pushing.
Only my side is alive.
Pressing against you.

All my life is in that side.
It's an ear and its an echo. (1998: 71–73)

Here in this night, this heart, and this language, what is left of the subject is a kind of bare or naked lifeworld with bare and naked bodies, but they are devoid of life, devoid of a becoming, and also with a body falling apart. As she writes, only the side of her body is alive and feels. This side has no “before and no after,” it is “an ear and an echo.” In this interval, *she* is not life and not a soul, but a body trying to reach for her sense of life in her very sensual feeling of life:

Я не более чем животное,
Кем-то раненное в живот.

Жжет... Как будто бы душу сдернули
С кожей! Паром в дыру ушла
Пресловутая ересь вздорная,
Именуемая душа.

¹³ Gnezzhus': teplo, / Rebro—potomu i l'nu tak. / Ni do, ni po: / Prozreniia pro-mezhutok! / Ni ruk, ni nog. / Vsei kost' iiu i vsem uporom: / Zhiv tol'ko bok, / O smezhnyi tesnius' kotorym. / Vsia zhizn'—v boku! / On ukho i on zhe ekho.

Христианская немочь бледная!
Пар! Припарками обложить!
Да ее никогда и не было!
Было тело, хотело жить,

Жить не хочет. (1973: 180)¹⁴

I am no better than a beast,
Wounded in the gut.

It burns...

As if my soul were torn
Away with the skin. Like a stream through a hole,
It vanished, that notorious silly heresy
Called the soul.

That Cristian anemia!
Steam! (Cover it with a poultice!)
There never was any such thing!

Only a body which wanted to live,
And no longer wants to. (1998: 75–77)

Tsvetaeva takes us into a phenomenology of the senses, and she breaks with an age old tradition of thinking the soul and the subject that stems from Aristotle and is germane to Christianity. She turns away from Aristotle's thought that the soul is the mover of itself as something separate from the body and nevertheless placed in the body.¹⁵ Thus, she refutes the idea of a form of inner life that is something in itself, not only as the ground for Christian metaphysical tradition, but also for the understanding of the lyrical subject. The lyrical I, after this ending of their love, is not left as a subject or as a soul. The lyrical I and its inner I live in the exposure to the other, and when this other refuses her, she *is* no longer. She is in a state of burning, which is emphasized by the abundance of the letter *zh* in *zhiz'n*

¹⁴ Ia ne bolee chem zhitovnoe, / Kem-to ranenoe v zhitov. / Zhzhet... Kak budto by dushu sdernuli / S kozhei! Paron v dyru ushla / Preslovutaia eres' vzdornaia, / Imenuemaia dusha. / Khristianskaia nemoch' blednaia! Par! Priparkami oblozhit'! Da ee nikogda i ne bylo! Bylo telo, khotelo zhit', / Zhit' ne khochet.

¹⁵ In "Book II" of *On the Soul*, Aristotle writes: "The soul is the cause or source of the living body. The terms cause and source have many senses. But the soul is the cause of its body alike in all three senses which we explicitly recognize. It is (a) the source or origin of movement, it is (b) the end, it is (c) the essence of the whole living body" (1952: 21).

(life), *zhivot* (stomach) and *zhzhët* (burns) as well as the broken line. She is as if emptied, or, rather, “hollow,” and she can but hold on to the bits and pieces of burning bodily sensitivity that remain. Thus, Tsvetaeva works her way into a phenomenology of the sexuality of the sexes in this poem, where Rodsevich represents male stability, force, dryness and she; female softness and humidity. The one cannot live without the other here, because without him there is no stability to hold on to in her bodily experience.

He is not simply the access to her inner life (as something capable to move itself)—only through him can inner life be, and therefore, when he ends their love, he also ends her inner life. It is thus that she can disclose the “sublingual, sacred” secret that she as a woman at the moment of this end is no more than an animal, hurt in the stomach, which actually also could be translated as an animal, hurt in what animates it. The words for animal (*zhivotnoe*) and stomach/gut (*zhivot*) are, as you hear, very similar in Russian. The word *zhivot* however, not only denotes the abdomen or the womb, that is the place where new life is formed, but in old Russian *zhivot* was also a synonym to life. Here is someone, who is not hurt as a soul, but who is hurt in life and as a life. Thus Tsvetaeva is telling us that now, that is, after this end, there is no one in her left who can live, and therefore she does no more want to live: “There was a body, it wanted to live / and it does not want it anymore” / “Bylo telo, khotelo zhit’ / zhit’ ne khochet.”

The Meaning of Separation

After these poems, Tsvetaeva has reached the utter point of the breakdown of lyrical orientation vis-à-vis the ending of their love, and from here she develops the poem in different forms of asking into the meanings of separation, of life and of man. Now her lyrical I is strong—it has found its way to undoing his ending, because it has found a language to bespeak her own loss as the subject that he assumes her to be.

When the second part of the tenth poem begins in bewilderment—saying that she has not really understood, not really remembered correctly, this is first and foremost a rhetorical way of bracketing his language:

Не доvspomnivши, не doponjavши,
Точно с праздника уведены...
— Наша улица! — Уже не наша... —
Сколько раз по ней!.. — Уже не мы... — (1973: 182)¹⁶

¹⁶ Ne dosvpomnivshi, ne doponjavshi, / Tochno s prazdnika uvedeny... / —Nasha ulitsa! —Uzhe ne nashi... — / Skol’ko raz po nei!.. —Uzhe ne my...

Half-remembered, half-grasped,
As if taken too soon from a party...
“Our street!” “No longer ours...”
“How many times we...” “No longer we...” (1998: 79)

The prefix *do* that Tsvetaeva likes to play upon means to come to the end, come to the right place, arrive. In an essay, she writes that in her poetry, “I cry, leap, roll my way to meaning” (*dokrikivaius’ doskakivaius’ dokativuaius’ do smysla*) (2004: 240). Here, however, this *do* is negated. Here she seems to suggest that she cannot arrive, on the contrary, that she is taken away from coming to meaning by the implications of his language. This is, however, a concealed statement about his language—stating that it constantly leads away from the implications of language—constantly distracts, disjoins. The streets that they are walking are no longer theirs, they are no longer them, because they cannot be them in his language. He, as always, in reply, asserts that the sun will rise again tomorrow, that is, that it does not matter if they are they or not, because they can always be replaced:

— Завтра с западу встанет солнце!
— С Иеговой порвет Давид!
— Что мы делаем? — Расстаемся.
— Ничего мне не говорит. (1973: 182)¹⁷

“Tomorrow the sun will rise in the West!”
“David will break with Jehovah!”
“What are we doing?” Separating.”
“That word means nothing to me.” (1998: 81)

The idea of a new day as well as the idea of separation mean nothing to Tsvetaeva. This absurd world set apart is, however, the world as it is conjured in Rodsevich’s language of ending. In a furious line of argument, she can therefore unfold to us the way that the word separation in Russian, *rasstavanie*, is built on the idea of different entities; on setting apart; in other words, on the idea of humans not having their being in common:

Сверхбессмысленнейшее слово:
Рас — стаемся. — Один из ста?
Просто слово в четыре слога,
За которыми пустота. (1973: 182)¹⁸

¹⁷ —Zavtra s zapadu vstanet solntse! / —S iegovoi porvet David! / —Chto my delaem? —Rasstaemsia. / Nichego mne ne govorit

¹⁸ Sverkhbessmysleneishee slovo: / Ras—staemsia. —Odin iz sta?/ Prosto slovo v chetyre sloga, / Za kotorymi pustota.

The overmeaningless word:
We separate.—As one on a rate?
No more than a word with four syllables
After which comes emptiness. (author's own translation)¹⁹

As mentioned above, it is characteristic of Tsvetaeva's intonation to explore kinship between words on the level of morphemes to bring out an incredible intensity of sound, and an excess of meaning. Thus, she can also suggest several layers on the level of syllables and morphemes, and undercut the conventional meaning of words. In the word separation (*rasstavanie*), Tsvetaeva hears the word *raz* (one time) and the genitive of hundred (*sto-sta*), and concludes that separation means that she could be one out of a hundred. The potential meanings of the syllables thus implode in the word, only to undo or shed doubt on common meaning. In the verb *rasstavat'sia* she hears no meaning in the morphemes, and therefore concludes that there is only emptiness behind. So she asks, in a rather cheeky tone, in what language the word *rasstavat'sia* actually could mean something, because Russian is the language of meaning at stake here. And she concludes that separation must be a word made up as the progressive words of the avant-garde:

Расставание — просто школы
Хлебникова соловьиный стон,
Лебединый... (1973: 182)²⁰

Separation: it's like Khlebnikov's
Nightingale moans,
Swanlike...(1998: 81)

Here we can also hear a certain critique against the progressivity of the Russian avant-garde. In contrast to her method of bringing out meanings that are already potentially at hand in common words, the Russian futurist Chlebnikov fused different words or morphemes to form new words in a translational language.

Later, she stops the stream, and the meter is broken in the question that she asks herself—how could it become thus? And what does it really mean to separate? “Separation” has to be, for Tsvetaeva, the world falling apart. Separation is the conclusion that overthrows everything, precisely because it means apart:

¹⁹ I have chosen to translate the whole stanza here rather than provide the published translation in order to better convey the play with meaning that I discuss in the coming paragraph.

²⁰ *Rasstavanie*—*prosto shkoly / Khlebnikova solov'inyi ston, / Lebedinyi.*

The Language of the End and the Language of the World...

Опрокидывающий довод:
Расставаться — ведь это врозь,

Мы же — сросшиися... (1973: 183)²¹

This overpowering argument:
Separation means a-part,

We, who had grown to be as one... (1998: 83)

The final line is separated in the poem stylistically and logically. It breaks the ferocious lyrical stream of lines aimed at undoing the terms for an understanding of separation, and it has no ending neither in sound, nor in punctuation, Tsvetaeva concludes “We who had grown to be as one...” “—*my zhe srosshiesia*.” The word *srosshiesia* is the perfective participle of the word *rasti*, to grow—it is a status, something that has become, but this status is the very movement of growing together. The Russian word for growth—*rost*—stands in contrast to the word for part—and for counting one—*raz* in *vroz'*. That makes the contrast of the form of the words even stronger—the one-syllable and mute *vroz'* contrasts the long and as if never ending *srosshiesia*. The mute “a-part” contrasts the growth together. They are something, a growth, which in being can have no end in the sense of a ceasing to be, because ending would be to undo the way that it *was* a growth.

Life as Exurb

We now understand that because there is no longer any common growth, Tsvetaeva has reached a final position of the positionless, where life is really the exurb of life. The ending is the ending to inner life, and therefore also to a being inside of life. As she has realized this by bringing it out in the words of the poem, in the subsequent poems, we are therefore already entering the locus of the after, and she now begins to ask what this tells us about love and life as such. Indeed, ending their love places life in the outskirts—in the outside, in what is beyond. The basic theme of the eleventh poem is set by the continuous repetition of the word *zagorod* with its emphasis on the suffix *za*, beyond, trans, outside:

²¹ Oprokidyvaiushchii dovod: / Rasstavat'sia—ved' eto vroz', / My zhe srosshiesia...

Разом проигрывать —
Чище нет!
Загород, пригород:
Дням конец.
Негам (читай — камням),
Дням, и домам, и нам.

Дачи пустующие! Как мать
Старую — так же чту их.
Это ведь действие — пустовать:
Полое не пустует.

(Дачи, пустующие на треть,
Лучше бы вам сгореть!) (1973: 183)²²

Losing everything at once—
There's nothing neater.
Suburbs, outskirts:
End to our days.

End to our joys (read “burdens”),
The days, houses and us.

Empty dachas: I revere them
As I would an aged mother.
This is an action, after all,—to vacate:
What's empty cannot be emptied.²³

(Dachas, one-third empty,
You'd do better to burn!) (1998: 83)

The lyrical intonation is dictated by the many exclamations, and by the alternation between the long dactylic endings and the short and harsh beat of the trochaic lines. From here on, Tsvetaeva comes to develop the theme of hollow being, preceding T. S. Eliot's famous poem “The Hollow Men” (1925) also thematizing the end of the world. She is not someone who is empty, as the verb *pustovat'* implies, and she refuses to be half-inside in a half-empty life. *Polyi* in Tsvetaeva's vocabulary as she is here developing it, means something or someone that has a potential for full-

²² Razom proigrivat'— / Chishche net! / Zagorod, prigorod: / Dniam konets. / Negam (chitai—kamniam), / Dniam, i domam, i nam, / Dachi pustuiushchie na tret', / Luchshe by nam sgoret'!

²³ A more correct translation of this line would be: “What's hollow cannot be emptied.”

ness, but that this potential is not actualized. She is hollow, because there is an inner life, a fullness, which can no longer be, and there is no half inner life, or half-fullness. Therefore, what he has done, in a parallel to ending a life, is that he has ended her inner life, and she asks him not to tremble when he uses the knife. What he is cutting up is not a body, or a life, but the link, the joint or stitch that holds this life together:

Только не вздрагивать,
Рану вскрыв.
Зáгород, зáгород,
Швам разрыв!

Ибо — без лишних слов
Пышных — любовь есть шов.

Шов, а не перевязь, шов — не щит.
— О, не проси защиты! —
Шов, коим мертвый к земле пришит,
Коим к тебе пришита. (1973: 183)²⁴

Just don't wince,
When the wound is open.
To the outskirts, way out of town,
To rip out the stitches.

For, to say it plainly, simply:
Love is a seam.

A seam, not a sling; a stitch, not a shield.
Oh, don't ask to be shielded!
The stitch by which the dead are sewn to the earth,
By which I'm stitched to you. (1998: 83)

Love is a joint that keeps her on earth like the force of gravity. It is the joint of exposure to the other that makes the experience of the inner possible. This joint is broken by separation, which leads the human out into the outskirts of life. Tsvetaeva thus brings out a paradox that is kin to the thought in existential philosophy understanding the ex- of existence as exile.²⁵ At least she points at a double-edged exile of existence. There is an

²⁴ Tol'ko ne vzdragivat', / Ranu vskryv. / Zágorod, zágorod, / Shvam razryv! / Ibo—bez lishnykh slov / Pyshnykh—liubov' est' shov. / Shov, a ne pereviaz', shov—ne shchit. / —O, ne prosí zashchity!— / Shov, koim mertvyi k zemle prishit, / Koim ia k tebie prishita.

²⁵ See Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback's discussion of Heidegger's notion of in-being with relation to exile in "Exile and Existential Disorientation" (2014: 100–104).

exile of life without love. In this exile there is no inner life. On the other hand, life in love is being in life, being in the world, but this love is immediately or at the same time a form of exit from exile into a being-together, into a world, and from the ordinary form of exile:

Жизнь есть пригород. —
За́ городом строй!

Эх, проигранное
Дело, господа!
Всё-то — пригороды!
Где же города?! (1973: 185)²⁶

Life is an exurb:
Build it way out of town.

Ahh, the game's lost,
Ladies and gentlemen!
Suburbs everywhere!
Where are the real cities? (1998: 87)

Tsvetaeva's outskirts are not the utter limits made city, that is, inhabited suburbs, but what lies outside of the city. Life is outside of the city in the sense that it lies outside of a common dwelling, outside of the built world. The built world is the stuffed world, but there is no hollowness and no fullness, no exposure and no inner life as Tsvetaeva understands them. The outskirts are on the other hand the place of movement, of life, of growing and of the inner, and the idea to build, settle, or establish something in the outskirts is doomed to fail. The place cannot be built, because life in itself cannot be inhabited as a continuous resting place. This is what leads Tsvetaeva to the conclusion, that "life is the place that cannot be lived":

За городом! Понимаешь? За́!
Вне! Перешед вал!
Жизнь — это место, где жить нельзя:
Ев — рейский квартал...

Так не достойнее ль вó сто крат
Стать Вечным Жидом?
Ибо для каждого, кто не гад,
Ев — рейский погром —

Жизнь. Только выкрестами жива! (1973: 185)

²⁶ Zhizn' est' prigorod. / Za gorodom stroi! / Ekh, proigrannoe/ Delo, gospoda! / Vse-to—prigorody! / Gde zhe goroda?!

Out of town! You understand? Outside!
Out! We've breached the walls.
Life is a place where you cannot live:
The Jewish quarter...

Wouldn't it be a hundred times better
To become a Wandering Jew?
For anyone not scum,
Life is a pogrom. (1998: 87)

The exclamations are now abounding, and Tsvetaeva is really writing out the paradox of life as a non-place in the outskirts that cannot be built and not be lived to the fullest. Hélène Cixous suggested that: "One could imagine—although this is also a phantasm—that the Jews would be the keepers of a certain memory in which they would live since there is no other place for them in the world" (1991: 131). Indeed, in the poem, Tsvetaeva develops the Jewish theme of exodus and of expulsion from living in the towns of several countries of Europe, and who therefore were refrained to living outside of the city gates or in ghettos. She, however, confirms it not as a memory, but as her own eternal and real existential condition as a poet. If we listen to language, we will understand that inside cannot be lived in an individually inhabited way.

The End of the End

At the end of the poem of the end, Tsvetaeva has in her specific sense come to terms with this end, or come to a language in which she can say the meaning of the end in the way that ending for her undoes meaning, undoes life. In reaching her meaning of this separation, her own non-position, she can in a last movement of the poem also reach the lyrical you of the poem and touch him so that he begins to cry. This cry that sets the theme to the two final poems, becomes for her a grace, because it means that they are together again in a becoming. This togetherness is now not that of making love, but of shedding tears, and she concludes the poem:

[...] ибо совместный
Плач — больше, чем сон!

И в полые волны
Мглы — сгорблен и равн —
Бесследно — безмолвно —
Как тонет корабль. (1973: 187)²⁷

²⁷ [...] ibo sovmestnyi / Plach—bol'she, chem son! / —I v polye volny / Mgly—sgorblen i ravn— / Bessledno—bezmolvno— / Kak tonet korabl'.

Tora Lane

For our weeping together,
Surpasses sleep.

So, into the hollow waves,
Of darkness—hunched over—
Without a sound, without a trace,
As a ship sinks. (1998: 91–92)

Tsvetaeva's ending to their love is not "an end" but the way that the ship goes to the ground—"Without a sound, without a trace" / "Bessledno, bezmolvno." This is only because the whole world is stirred up in the "hollow waves of the storm" / "polye mgly," in their tears without any meaning but for them. Perhaps, one could say that Tsvetaeva could reach an end to the end, when the world could be world, or at least, when her lover—in the end—no longer was the Roman eagle with the perspective of ending and beginning, but a co-cryer, with the ability to be exposed to the other.

Concluding Words

What Tsvetaeva seems to suggest to us, in her reading of the unreadability of the end, is that we should understand the end and the world as two incompatibles. The language of the world relates to commonality, in-being, meaning, whereas the language of the end is the eagle-like position of being apart, of exclusion. Tsvetaeva's being together is that of common growth, of common becoming, and this is for her the movement of the word and of the world, because it is the movement of life. Therefore, she seems to suggest that we are living in a world that thinks movement as endings and new beginnings, but this is a world which cannot be (cannot become) in being, because it sets life, growth, and the sense of the inner into exile.

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