Max Popelysh-Rosochinsky

**Marina Tsvetaeva: What Does It Take to Be a Swan?**

*Introduction and Stage-Setting*

Critics tend to agree that Marina Tsvetaeva rejects the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917. They differ in their explanation of why she does this. The most widespread interpretation is biographical: Tsvetaeva’s husband Sergey Efron was a White Army officer. This interpretation is treated as a master-key that opens many doors at once. Tsvetaeva identifies with the White Movement, likes the Tsar, hates the Revolution, and writes *The Demesne of the Swans*—all because her husband was an officer in the White Army. The biographical explanation is not necessarily wrong. Yet it is underdetermined. It might well capture Tsvetaeva’s motivation, but it does not explain the poetic choices Tsvetaeva makes in her rejection of the Revolution.

The biographical interpretations may also focus on Tsvetaeva’s character and provide illuminating observations about the types of people or figures that tend to attract Tsvetaeva, provoke her admiration and, in some cases, intense passion. For example, in her book *Marina Tsvetaeva: the Double Beat of Heaven and Hell*, Lily Feiler suggests that Tsvetaeva rejects the Revolution because of her Romantic tendency to sympathize with the persecuted. If Tsvetaeva does have such a tendency, it remains to be explained what underlies it. There are some attractive options: Tsvetaeva’s gender, motherhood, religious beliefs. All of these factors could shape Tsvetaeva’s poetics. However, we are hard pressed to find such an explanation in Feiler’s book. The biographical interpretations help us...

---

1 Her attitude to the February Revolution may be a lot more positive.
understand the content of Tsvetaeva’s beliefs, desires and preferences better, but they do not take us even half-way in understanding Tsvetaeva the Poet.

In this paper, I hope to make progress in the direction of understanding Tsvetaeva’s poetics. I focus my analysis on The Demesne of the Swans, a cycle of poems in which Tsvetaeva glorifies the plight of the White Guards, who fought against the Bolshevik Reds in the Civil War of 1918-1922. In this paper, I argue that Tsvetaeva’s poetic choices of intonation, metaphors, and topoi in these poems are guided by a set of aristocratic values. This thesis may be taken to imply that Tsvetaeva’s lyrical hero favors the old-world monarchic order. However, the lyrical narrator’s attitude to the individual monarchs is a lot less straightforward. At least five of Tsvetaeva’s poems are outright indictments of the Russian monarchs, notably, of Peter the Great and of Nicholas II.

Since this paper is part of a larger project, I will briefly sketch out where I want to take it. In the second part of my paper, I intend to argue that Tsvetaeva’s seemingly ambiguous position towards monarchy involves a conceptually coherent view of political power. Tsvetaeva’s poetic response to the event of the Revolution helps bring this view into focus by emphasizing the role that aristocratic virtues play in her justification of political order. In the absence of such virtues, even the most structurally perfect political order is corrupted through the indiscriminate use of political power. Finally, I will argue that Tsvetaeva’s view of political power shapes her view of what it means to be a poet in an Iron Age of revolutionary chaos and violence: she must be the voice of disappearing aristocratic conscience, which alone can be the saving grace of the brave new world borne by the event of the Revolution.

2 The thesis does not sound controversial, but surprisingly few critics have paid attention to the role of aristocratic sympathies in shaping Tsvetaeva’s poetics.
The Aristocratic Markers in Tsvetaeva’s Poems

Tsvetaeva’s cycle of poems *The Demesne of the Swans* is a swan song – proverbially, the song that a swan sings before it dies. In this case, the swan is not Tsvetaeva, and the death is not her own. The subject matter of the poems is rather the gradual dissolution of the White Army, which Tsvetaeva likens to a wedge of swans, grouped into a distinctly military formation, and the takeover of this army by a chaotic, disorganized and massive flock of the Red masses, likened to the bloodthirsty ravens. The first poem of the cycle is dated January 18th 1918 while the last one is written on New Year’s Eve in 1920. This period of time roughly corresponds to the major operations of the White Army - from the peak of the Civil War to the defense of Perekop launched by the White Army commandment in November 1920. By the time Tsvetaeva finishes the cycle of poems, the destiny of the whole White Movement is clear -- the last poems are written after the defeat of the White Forces and their subsequent evacuation from the Crimea in November.

The poem that opens the cycle is full of foreboding. The lyrical narrator addresses the warrior in the past tense, as if his life has already come to an end. The narrator’s description of the warrior evokes the medieval imagery of knights and saints. The narrator tells that the warrior has inscribed her name “Marina” on his dirk. This is a distinctly

---

3 The cycle *Lebedinyj Stan* was never published in Russia or abroad during Tsvetaeva’s lifetime. It is known that Tsvetaeva planned to publish the cycle as a separate book in Berlin, in the publishing house “Ogon’ki” owned by A.G. Levenson. The upcoming publication of Lebedinyj Stan was announced in the periodical “Volia Rossii” [1, January 9, 1922]. However, instead of *Lebedinyj Stan* Tsvetaeva publishes another poetry cycle written at around the same time -- “Stikhi k Bloku”.

chivalrous gesture, which suggests that the addressee of the poem (Sergei Efron) serves not only the fatherland (‘Отчизна’), as a soldier of the White Army, but also his lady, as a chivalrous knight. Moreover, we learn that the warrior is not a common soldier – only those who were in the rank of an officer were allowed to wear “kortik” in the pre-revolutionary tsarist army.

Just as the dirk is an object of military pride, so is the inscription of her name on the dirk a source of pride for the narrator. She treasures her special place in a life as magnificent as that of the warrior (“Была я первой и единой / В твоей великолепной жизни”). The sense of magnificence is further confirmed when the narrator remembers the night of his departure: “Я помню ночь и лик пресветлый / в аду солдатского вагона”. The superrelative has a strong religious connotation - it usually describes a saint's face on the icons.

Finally, as in those pictures where a new picture emerges when we refocus our eyes, we are meant to see an image of a departing swan. The warrior’s loyalty to his partner, the splendor of his life, the light emanating from his demeanor in the descending darkness – all of these characteristics suggest an analogy between the addressee and the swan. Stan, we should remember, is not just a patrol unit or a military camp, but also a word for “posture”. The stan of the departing swan is upright, noble, splendid, and saintly. The beautiful swan is about to engage in a feat of self-sacrifice in order to protect the most important things: his fatherland and his beloved. The willingness to honor these things is a measure of a man and an ultimate test of virtue.

Similar descriptions of characteristically aristocratic posture and demeanor pepper the cycle. In the second line of her poem addressed to Moscow, she says that Moscow did
not bend under the pressure of False Dmitry (“не согнула плеч”), and in the second stanza, when describing the religious outrages of Peter the Great, she describes Moscow as talking back to the Tsar (Ты отвечала Русскому Царю). As the lyrical narrator recounts multiple violations of the integrity of the city, she seems to suggest that its survival depends on maintaining an aristocratic posture even through the most grievous events.

Likewise, in a poem dedicated to the memory of Alexander Stakhovich, the lyrical narrator tries to convey the dignity of this nobleman’s descent into the grave by mentioning his confident footsteps and upright posture (“Барским шагом — распрямляя плечи — / Ты сошел в могилу, русский барин!”). In a different poem to Stakhovich, she marvels at how he maintains his proud posture regardless of the drudgery of the work he has to do. Importantly, the posture she has in mind here is not necessarily his physical demeanor. He is actually bent over as he is working, but despite this, his back is proud (“Дугой согбен, всё ж — гордая спина!”). This signals that the narrator is referring to an internal integrity and psychological immunity from the humiliating living conditions brought about by war and revolutionary instability. Just as importantly, he remains a master of himself, and needs no overseer to do his work, unlike the irrational “slaves”, who dissolve into disorder the moment when they are no longer under someone’s direct control (“Не окриком, — всё той же барской блажью / Тебе работа задана”).

In a poem addressed to Balmont, the narrator talks of affirming freedom by means of the whole posture (“Утверждаем всей осанкой: Луковица — и свобода”). Their thin and upright postures are evidence that they are starving and eating nothing but onions because they cannot stoop to steal (“Ничего не можем даром / Взять — скорее гору
Apparently, for the narrator it is more difficult to imagine violating the integrity of their own natures than to violate laws of nature itself.

It is this integrity which the narrator bears as a mark of special distinction from the Lord in front of the common people. Her gait and posture are that of a proud aristocrat (“Поступью сановнически-гордой / Прохожу сквозь строй простонародья / На груди — ценою в три угодья — / Господем пожалованный орден”). This virtuous integrity, which she is suffering to maintain in the difficult times, merit her “a mark of Magnificence and Distinction” (“Страстный знак Величья и Отличья”), an honor of Lion and Sun (“Орден Льва и Солнца”). Let us remember that Lion is a symbol frequently used in Medieval heraldry. It is a symbol of valiance and courage, the distinctly aristocratic virtues. On the other hand, since Plato’s allegory of the Cave, Sun is a symbol of truth. The narrator envisions being awarded for her courage, valiance, and truthfulness — but her actual prize is a maple leaf that stuck to her breast.

Perhaps most strikingly, in a poem which reads as a lyrical argument for the narrator’s own suitability for the position of the White officer in the deadly days of October (“В Октябрьские смертные дни”), the lyrical narrator appeals to her distinctly upright and honorable demeanor (“Есть в стане моем — офицерская прямость, / Есть в ребрах моих — офицерская честь”). Her gait is confident and straight (“как будто когда-то прикладом и стально / Мне выправили этот шаг”), and the broadness of her soldiers (“Раскинутых плеч широта”) makes her fit for an military bag, and once again, evokes an image of a noble swan spreading its wings. In fact, the whole poem can be read as a song of a swan longing for a flight, for a chance to put all of her professed virtues to a test.
Tsvetaeva explicitly establishes a metonymical connection between the uprightness of posture and that of character in a poem about the difficult and wonderful luxury of loyalty in the times of “squares” ("Трудно и чудно — верность до гроба! / Царская роскошь — в век площадей"). There she says that the people of the days past had enduring and strong souls, and enduring strong ribs ("Стойкие души, стойкие ребра"). This provides the strongest reason to suppose that whenever the narrator talks about posture, her intention is to indirectly describe the “soul” of its bearer. In everyday speech, we too use the metaphors of “standing upright”, “not bending”, “not stooping”, and “facing head-on” to convey an idea of valiance, moral endurance, nobility and honor. Further evidence comes from a poem in which the narrator describes herself and her daughter as “free, unfashionable, and noble in body and soul ("свободные, немодные, / Душой и телом — благородные"). The bearing of one’s body corresponds to the bearing of one’s soul.

Tsvetaeva’s narrator frequently appeals to an aristocratic nature, which evokes similar discussions in Ancient Greek philosophy, notably, in Aristotle’s discussion of natural slaves and their counterparts, the virtuous men. For example, in her striking indictment of the poor men who have finally gained some power and are using it to pillage, plunder, and kill, the narrator predicts that as these ill-born slaves will cut up their noble enemies’ bodies, they will see what they are made of ("Распродавая нас всех на мясо, / Раб худородный увидит — Расу: / Черная кость — белую кость"). Just as the words “blue blood”, the term “white bone” refers to aristocracy. But the contrast with the black bone of the commoners is indicative of the narrator’s attitude to them: they are corrupt,
decomposing corpses of men, unable to stand upright because of the fragility of their natures.

_Tsvetaeva’s Portrayal of the Red Army_

In Tsvetaeva’s poetics, the Red Army might as well be called the Black Army, since it’s an army of _chern’t_, motivating by the possibility of looting and eager to desert when times are tough. Their already black fragile backbones are further blackened by their crimes and disloyalties. In a different poem, the narrator tells us about the “deserters and unloyal wives” loudly feasting over the ashes of the burning cities (“Над пепелищами — рев застольный / Беглых солдат и неверных жен”). If not black, they are the color of ashes and sand, as we learn in a different poem (“И проходят — цвета пепла и песка — Революционные войска”). They sweep over the country in a faceless nameless formation, ingloriously and dishonorably (“Нет лиц у них и нет имен”). The fact that they have no songs (“Песен нету!”) signals the narrator’s concern that they have no ideals, no understanding of what they are doing, and most importantly, no voice. They are zombies, slaves who unreflectively follow their masters’ commands.

But of course, the masses do have an ideal: that ideal is liberty, arguably, a French or possibly German import. Tsvetaeva’s narrator conveys the concern that the masses pervert everything they touch in a poem that metaphorically represents their understanding of this ideal. For the French aristocrats and Russian Royalty liberty signifies a beautiful, pure and strict ideal (“Свобода! — Прекрасная Дама / Маркизов и русских князей”). The origin of liberty lies in the temple: it is either a goddess or a priestess (“Из строгого, стройного храма / Ты вышла”). However, for the military and the soldiers, liberty is a
prostitute clinging to their breast, wholly at their disposal as they make their terrible contracts (“Свершается страшная спевка, —… / — Свобода! — Гулящая девка / На шалой солдатской груди!”). This evokes the imagery of the sacrilegious rape of the priestesses during wars (the Iliad is a prime epic example of this); the soldiers take something holy and sacred – either woman or concept – violate it and corrupt it, transforming it into something profane but useful to satisfy the vicious needs of the victors.

In a poem about massive debauchery provoked by robbing of the prince’s wine chamber, the narrator briefly adopts a perspective of the looting soldiers: now that the tsar is gone, and we are drinking the wine of his princelings, we feel that the world belongs to us (“Мир — наш!”). The poem ends with a mention of a “funny story” about two people drowning in the wine. This indicates that the narrator does not think that the masses know how to use the goods and power they get to their advantage. Once they get access to power, they squander it and harm themselves and those whom they should be protecting. The masses are drunk on wine, but they are also drunk on blood. Tsvetaeva’s poem may be seen as a larger metaphor of power: power and the ability to shed blood are intoxicating. They cause degradation and corruption in those who engage in these activities. The masses cannot save themselves. Only the presence of a good virtuous leader can. That, or a grace of god.

In one of the final poems in the book, Tsvetaeva’s narrator prays to Tsar and God (in that order) on behalf of Stenka Razin, a seventeenth-century Cossack marauder who led an uprising against Tsar’s nobility. Stenka Razin stands for all the “small, weak, ignorant, sinful, wild people” (“малым —/ Слабым — глупым — грешным — шалым”) sucked into the “terrible void” (“В страшную воронку втянутым”) by means of flattery and
deception ("Обольщенным и обманутым"). The narrator begs to spare the villain “for the sake of the holiday”, which is reminiscent of the proverbial Judaic holiday custom, according to which the people were allowed to choose one criminal whose life would be spared by the Roman magistrate (tellingly, they did not choose Jesus). The poem is dated with the first anniversary of October Revolution. One may initially think that Sten’ka Razin stands for the White Guard. But all of Tsvetaeva’s metaphors go against this reading: the Whites are already fighting on the side of God and Tsar, so they should certainly be spared; the Reds are the ones whom Tsvetaeva’s narrator often portrays as ignorant, weak, and small, prey to flattery and deception. They do not deserve forgiveness, so the narrator begs for mercy.