

“PITY” AS A NATIONAL-HISTORICAL CATEGORY IN TSVETAEVA’S POETRY

MARIA BOROVIKOVA

In 1923, Tsvetaeva’s collection *The Craft* (“Ремесло”) was published in Berlin. Its appearance was greeted by a series of on the whole positive reviews, among which was also a critical article by Georgy Ivanov. Ivanov is not Tsvetaeva’s most benevolent critic. Thus, in this article he writes the following about her: “Tsvetaeva’s poems have a thousand defects — they are verbose, rambling, and often meaningless” [Цветаева в критике: 119]. Nonetheless, he also finds in this collection traces of genuine poetry: “Among her countless half-poems, half-sobbings, and whisperings, are many excellent stanzas. Fully realized poems are far fewer. But these few are beautiful (p. 24, for example)” [Ibid.].

What was the poem that so charmed the exigent critic? On p. 24, which is indicated in the Ivanov’s review, between the cycle “Marina” and the poem “To the Memory of T. Skryabina”, appears a text without a title — “How they flare up — with what brushwood...”:

Как разгораются — каким валежником!
На площадях ночных — святыни кровные!
Пред самозванческим указом Нежности —
Что наши доблести и родословные!

С какой торжественною постепенностью
Спадают выспренные обветшалости!
О наши прадедовы драгоценности
Под самозванческим ударом Жалости!

А проще: лоб склонивши в глубь ладонную,
В сознаныи низости и неизбежности —
Вниз по отлогому — по неуклонному —
Неумолимому наклону Нежности...

Май 1921

[Цветаева: II, 23–24]

We will attempt to reconstruct later what it was about this particular poem, out of the whole many-page collection, that attracted G. Ivanov. What draws our attention in it is first and foremost the singular use of two graphically emphasized concepts that are central to the poem — “Tenderness” (*nezhnost’*) and “Pity” (*zhalost’*).

“Tenderness” and “pity” represent a sufficiently stable pairing in Russian poetry — thanks to their phonetic similarity and to their belonging to the same semantic field in the language, connected first and foremost with the expression of feelings of love. This context is also close to the subject matter of the text by Tsvetaeva that we are examining here, although the theme of love is only one part of the elaborate metaphor that is unfolded in this poem. Its second part is represented by a conquering, military rhetoric, the use of which in a love-related discourse is likewise quite traditional¹ (it is represented here not directly but periphrastically — the burning of sacred objects in city squares, the rejection of pedigrees, the loss of “great-grandfathers’ treasures”). In this text, however, what draws our attention is the specificity of the historical parallels — not customary for such metaphors — as we are presented not with an abstract act of military aggression, but with a reference to the history of the Time of Troubles.

This period in Russian history occupies a special place in Tsvetaeva’s poetic historiography, and by 1921 Tsvetaeva had already turned to it several times, using it to mythologize the image of her poetic persona (the motivation for the historical parallel arose from the coincidence of Tsvetaeva’s name with that of Marina Mnishek, see for example: [Рудик: 123–131]). However, the present text unfolds this theme in a new manner, while “tenderness” and “pity” acquire a new symbolic meaning in it, becoming promoted into what might be called laws of historical development.

Let us attempt to trace the origins of the use of these words in Tsvetaeva’s poetry.

This poem from the collection *The Craft* was written in May 1921, when Tsvetaeva was occupied with the problem of publishing another one of her collection, *Milestones I*, which contained poems written in 1916². It is on the pages of this book that the theme of pity first appears in Tsvetaeva’s poetry in a somewhat different sense from its common usage (although the lexeme itself

¹ Compare, for example, Tsvetaeva’s own poem from 1914: “What was this? — Whose victory? — // Who was defeated?” [Цветаева: I, 217].

² After its publication was denied at the end of 1919, Tsvetaeva kept the manuscript until she was able to send it to Gosizdat, which published it only in 1922. This collection is the subject of a dissertation by I. Rudik [Рудик]. Consequently, by 1921, all of these text together constituted for Tsvetaeva an as yet unfinished subject.

had been used by her earlier). This happens for the first time in a poem dated March 4, 1916 and dedicated to Tikhon Churilin:

Не сегодня-завтра растает снег
Ты лежишь один под огромной шубой.
Пожалеть тебя, у тебя навек пересохла губы [Цветаева: I, 256].

The theme of pity in this poem appears quite organic when it is applied to the lyrical subject whose image arises from the creatively transformed facts of Churilin's biography, the main themes of his poetry, and his symbolic portrait. Anastasia Tsvetaeva described him later in her memoirs in the following way: "Black-haired and not dark, but burnt. His [eyes] inside the rings of his dark swollen eyelids..." [Цветаева А.: 256]. All of this together becomes transfigured into a kind of "myth of Churilin", at the center of which arises an almost ideal object of pity. The image of the "burnt" man, which Anastasia Tsvetaeva reproduces in her memoirs, also appears in her sister's poem, quoted above. His eyes are "Two charred rings from last summer", and the importance of this theme is additionally sustained by a literary allusion, namely, an echo of A. Blok's poem "How difficult it is to walk among people / And to pretend to be not dead", which has an epigraph from Fet ("There a man burned")—compare Tsvetaeva's: "You tread heavily and drink with difficulty / And the passer-by hurries from you".

In this way, the theme of pity appears in this text as a (pseudo-)natural reaction to a certain deficiency in the lyrical subject (cf. in the next poem that Tsvetaeva dedicated to Churilin, the latter is called "pitiful", in other words, the characteristics of the lyrical subject of Churilin's own poetry are projected onto him), but by all appearances it is also supported by a phonetic assonance: "zhech"/"zhalost" (to burn/pity) or "zhalkiy"/"zharkiy" (pitiful/hot) — Tsvetaeva plays with the latter assonance explicitly in the next text dedicated to Churilin: "my pitiful [zhalobniy] raven-chick... Rigid [zhestkaya], greedy [zhadnaya], hot [zharkaya] hue" ("Doves sailing onwards, silvery, bewildered..." [Цветаева: I, 256]).

This is the first semantically loaded mention of "pity" in Tsvetaeva's poems, and although thus far the word remains quite within the bounds of common usage, we should note this Fet-Blok context, on the one hand, and the conjunction of pity and burning, on the other, as important points for our later discussion.

The meaning-forming impulse, produced by the mythologization of the image of her contemporary poet, turned out to be stronger than Tsvetaeva's interest in the poet himself. And the next few months witness an expansion of this theme beyond the bounds of the nominal corpus of "Churilin" texts and the

love-and-illness narrative. The theme systematically comes to encompass martial subject matter and acquires a historical resonance. This happens in the poem “White sun and low, low clouds...” (July 3, 1916), about which A. A. Saakyan already noted that it constitutes a kind of “retort” to Blok’s poem “The Petrograd sky grew turbid with rain...” [Саакянц].

Blok’s poem was written as a response to the beginning of the First World War, first published in the newspaper *Russkoye slovo* in 1914, and reprinted in 1915 in the collection *War in Russian Poetry*. It got sympathetic reviews from critics, who unanimously saw poem’s central meaning in its final lines. One of them, for example, quoting the ending of the poem in his article, wrote the following:

A mystic of Romanticism and individualism, a direct descendant of Novalis, this poet has spoken the most beautiful, valuable, and sincere word about the present day, a word that will endure forever. This word is his poem “To War”. And it is sincere, valuable, beautiful because he alone took a true position, separated himself from ongoing events, did not aspire to the role of prophet, accuser, or leader. As a man with an aristocratic intimate soul, he simply understood that even now he must be alone, on the mountaintop, and he said in lyrical contemplation, seeing off those who are going there:

Нет, нам не было грустно, нам не было жаль,
 Несмотря на дождливую даль.
 Это — ясная, твердая, верная сталь,
 И нужна ли ей наша печаль?

Here, there is no pity, no resolution, no summons — here, there is only contemplation, born in the soul of a poet whenever the distant waves of events rush by him — it matters not whether the events be great or small... [Леви́дов: 803].

While quite precisely reproducing the thematic structure of Blok’s poem (the rainy landscape, the train departing for the front, the singing soldiers on it, and a lyrical subject who keenly feels the scene he observes and contemplates war as a whole), Tsvetaeva treats the topic of the poet’s compassion for what is taking place — and more broadly, of the poet’s relation to reality — in the opposite manner:

Нет, умереть! Никогда не родиться бы лучше,
 Чем этот жалобный, жалостный, каторжный вой
 О чернобровых красавицах. — Ох, и поют же
 Нынче солдаты! О, Господи, Боже ты мой! [Цветаева: I, 310].

The author of the review quoted above, Mikhail Levidov, in our view quite precisely connects the “pitiless” position of the observer in the war poem “Peters-

burg sky...” with the author’s entire creative vision. In the same year, Blok’s poem “Artist” (1914) was published in the almanac *Sirin* [Сирин]; in this poem, the idea about the insurmountability of the borders between the world of the artist and reality is expressed with programmatic clarity:

В жаркое лето и в зиму метельную,
В дни ваших свадеб, торжеств, похорон,
Жду, чтоб спугнул мою скуку смертельную
Легкий, доселе не слышанный звон. <... >

Длятся часы, мировое несущие.
Ширятся звуки, движенье и свет.
Прошлое страстно глядится в грядущее.
Нет настоящего. Жалкого — нет.

И, наконец, у предела зачатия
Новой души, неизведанных сил, —
Душу сражает, как громом, проклятие:
Творческий разум осилил — убил.

И замыкаю я в клетку холодную
Легкую, добрую птицу свободную,
Птицу, хотевшую смерть унести,
Птицу, летевшую душу спасти. <... > [Блок: III, 101–102].

In this text, the theme of “absence of pity”, detachment, appears once more, this time unequivocally associated with the creative act—it signals that the poet is approaching the state of being “at the threshold of conception”, behind which lies the idea of the irreconcilability of art and life.

This is a programmatic text of Blok’s, and its key ideas were likewise formulated by the poet in two articles, which were widely discussed in the press. Among those who responded to it was D. Merezhkovsky, contrasting Blok’s position with a religious one³.

We will not venture to specify how well Tsvetaeva was acquainted with the details of this discussion, but the problems touched on by her in “White sun and low, low clouds...” were not yet exhausted and demanded further development. Less than a month later, she returned to this topic once again, in a poem which subsequently entered into the cycle “Insomnia”:

Сегодня ночью я одна в ночи —
Бессонная, бездомная черница! —

³ See the notes to the third volume of A. Blok’s collected works for more detail [Блок: III, 802–805].

Сегодня ночью у меня ключи
 От всех ворот единственной столицы!
 Бессонница меня толкнула в путь.
 — О, как же ты прекрасен, тусклый Кремль мой! —
 Сегодня ночью я целую в грудь
 Всю круглую воюющую землю!
 Вздыхаются не волосы — а мех,
 И душный ветер прямо в душу дует.
 Сегодня ночью я жалею всех, —
 Кого жалеют и кого целуют.
 1 августа 1916 [Цветаева: I, 284].

In this text, the historical background of war is also present (“Tonight I kiss on the chest / The whole round warring earth!”), but it has shifted to the periphery, and what remains in the center is the symbolic description of the creative process. It is evoked by traditional metaphors for inspiration — night, insomnia, and keys⁴ — but the center of Tsvetaeva’s auto-metadescription of creative tension becomes “pity.” It is undoubtedly connected with the *Theotokos* myth, which Tsvetaeva systematically developed in the poems of 1916 (above all, the “Poems on Moscow”), and in which in the Russian Orthodox tradition the themes of intercession and mercy occupy a central place⁵.

However, we must point out another subtext of importance to us in this poem, which is contained in its first stanza:

Сегодня ночью я одна в ночи —
 Бессонная, бездомная черница! —
 Сегодня ночью у меня ключи
 От всех ворот единственной столицы!

Among Tsvetaeva’s poems from 1916, a separate lyrical subject is constituted by texts addressed to Osip Mandelstam. In these, in their turn, a special place is occupied by the theme of the Time of Troubles — it is specifically in these poems that Tsvetaeva, playing on the coincidence of her name with the name of Marina Mnishek, first develops the historical analogy into a full-fledged lyri-

⁴ See our article on Tsvetaeva’s cycle “Insomnia” [Боровикова] for more detail.

⁵ Undoubtedly, such an ideological construction (compassion as the foundation of creativity) was to a certain extent determined by the development of philosophical and religious thought during the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries (the problems of compassion and pity lay at the center of the ethical conceptions of Schopenhauer, Vladimir Solovyov, Nikolai Berdyaev, and others), and by the Symbolists’ reception of these ideas. However, the question of the concrete connections between Tsvetaeva’s views and contemporary ethical conceptions must be the subject of a separate study.

cal subject, which will subsequently be taken up by Mandelstam as well. The first poem on this topic was written by her on March 30, 1916. In it, Marina Mnishkek appears as a sorceress or practitioner of black magic who has the key to a “black casket”:

Крест золотой скинула,
 Черный ларец сдвинула,
 Маслом святым клаюч
 Масленный — легко движется.
 Черную свою книжищу
 Вынула чернокнижница.
 Знать, уже делать нечего,
 Отошел от ее от плечика
 Ангел, — пошел несть
 Господу злую весть:
 — Злые, Господи, вести!
 Загубил ее вор — прелестник! [Цветаева: I, 267]

Note, too, that the image of Marina Mnishkek here does not function in isolation: the cause of her “doom” (that is, her turn to black magic) is an impostor, a “thief-charming”. We would venture to suppose that the image of the “black sorceress” with the keys “to all the gates of the only capital” in “Tonight I am alone in the night...” (a poem written only four months later) represents a blending of the sorcerer and “invader” of the capital, the “thief” Dmitry, and the black sorceress Marina, while the historical parallel with the Time of Troubles becomes the code, as it were, of a higher creative transformation.

It is precisely this topic that will subsequently be developed in the poem “How they flare up...”, which was discussed at the beginning of this article. Let us examine certain factors that may have influenced the development of this topic.

On April 26, 1921, Tsvetaeva wrote a letter to Anna Akhmatova in which she thanked her for “another happiness in my life” [Цветаева: VI, 200] — the collection *Plantain* [*Podorozhnik*]. Tsvetaeva quotes several poems included in the book, and among these she places special emphasis on the poem “You — apostate...” (“Ты — отступник”): “And this sudden — wildly arising — *visually* wild ‘Yaroslavets’. — What *Rus’!*” [Ibid.: 201].

Ты — отступник: за остров зеленый
 Отдал, отдал родную страну,
 Наши песни, и наши иконы,
 И над озером тихим сосну.

Для чего ты, лихой ярославец,
 Коль еще не лишился ума,
 Загляделся на рыжих красавиц
 И на пышные эти дома?

Так теперь и кошунствуй, и чванься,
 Православную душу губи,
 В королевской столице останься
 И свободу свою полюби.

Для чего ж ты приходишь и стонешь
 Под высоким окошком моим?
 Знаешь сам, ты и в море не тонешь,
 И в смертельном бою невредим.

Да, не страшны ни море, ни битвы
 Тем, кто сам потерял благодать.
 Оттого-то во время молитвы

Попросил ты тебя вспоминать [Ахматова: 316].

This poem has a real-life addressee — Boris Anrep, who had been sent for work to England — but we do not know whether Tsvetaeva knew this (it may be supposed that she did not). Outside of this biographical subtext, the poem acquires a duality and may be easily read within the framework of the impostor topos: the subject is an apostate, who has “given up his native country” for a “kingdom” with “opulent houses” and “red-haired beauties” (which simultaneously suggests the beauty Marina Mnishek and the color of Otrepyev’s hair). As proof of our hypothesis that *Plantain* served as an inspiration for the development of Tsvetaeva’s “impostor” topos, we should note the fact that on the day after writing the letter to Akhmatova, April 27 (Old Style), Tsvetaeva began a cycle dedicated to Marina Mnishek (“Marina”). The cycle contains four poems — four “scenarios” on the historical subject, in each of which the heroine appears in a new role with respect to the impostor. Tsvetaeva’s notebooks from this period contain the following comment about her work on the cycle:

Another question: what was Marina Mnishek looking for?.. Power, undoubtedly, but what kind? Legitimate or illegitimate? If the former, then she owes her fame to a misunderstanding and is not worthy of her fabulous fate. It would have been easier for her to have been born a crown princess or a boyar’s daughter and to have wed some Russian czar. With sorrow I think that she was looking for the former, but if I were writing it... [Цветаева 1997: 27].

The cycle “Marina” in fact constitutes an inventory of the various possible motives that might have guided Marina Mnishek.

The poem “How they flare up...” was written immediately after this cycle, but evidently it went beyond the bounds of a “fantasia on a historical topic”, touching on more universal problems, and apparently for this reason it was not included in the cycle by Tsvetaeva. By contrast with the poems included in the cycle, it is full of references to her own earlier poetry. All of them refer predominantly to three texts, which were written almost at the same time as the “Churilin” poems (in which the theme of “pity” began to take shape), but which had a different addressee — Osip Mandelstam. These were mainly the texts “You throw back your head...”, “Whence such tenderness...”, and “Past night towers...” They are echoed — literally — by almost every word of this poem. Without attempting to list them all, I will demonstrate the density of these echoes.

“Brushwood” is a lexeme used only twice in Tsvetaeva’s poetry outside the text being analyzed here — in the poem “You throw back your head” (“And through what thorny brushwood / Your laurel verst...”); “flare up” — this lexeme also appears in Tsvetaeva’s poetry only one other time, in another text of the “Mandelstam corpus” — “Past night towers...”: “My mouth is flammable”. The same poem contains city squares in the night (“Past night towers / City squares rush us. / Oh, how fearful in the night / Is the roar of young soldiers!”), and fires on these squares, in which “blood ties and sacred objects” burn, which are echoed in the next strophe by “great-grandfathers’ treasures”: “Iverskaya burns ‘like a little casket’” (in this line the Iverskaya chapel appears simultaneously as a sacred object and as a treasure). “Ceremonial gradualness” calls to mind the “ceremonial foreigners”, who “slowly release smoke” (“You throw back your head...”). The heightened intertextuality additionally complicates the structure of the poem, but the central meaning of the dialogue becomes the question of the loss of *grace*, which was posed in Akhmatova’s poem. Such is the cost of the ability to resist the “sea” and “battles”, and to “remain unharmed in mortal combat”. However, by contrast with Akhmatova, who places in the center the question of God’s grace, Tsvetaeva takes the theme outside the religious framework, replacing the higher power to which one must submit with a nature that historically opposes the present.

Tsvetaeva remained true to this position in later years as well. These same problems were be addressed by her in the essay “Art in the Light of Conscience” (1932), in which she, discussing moral law in art, wrote: “Find me a poet without a Pugachev! without an impostor! without a Corsican! — inside. A poet might only not have enough strength (resources) for a Pugachev” [Цветаева: V, 367].

Translated by Ilya Bernstein

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