

A Childhood Beyond the Noise of Time – Matriarchy and Patriarchy in the Modernist Description of Childhood

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In his book *The Battle for Childhood*, A. Wachtel dates the origin of a specifically Russian conception of childhood back to the publication of Tolstoy's *Childhood* in 1852 (1990: 2). Wachtel subsequently devotes the main part of his book to an investigation of what he calls "the myths of Russian gentry childhood." According to Wachtel, the pseudoauto-biographies of Tolstoy and Aksakov served as patterns or models through which the Russian gentry in the course of a couple of generations were to recapitulate and understand their childhood.¹ Literature thus contributed to the establishment of a number of childhood "myths" that made childhood appear as a golden age common to all members of the Russian gentry – a paradisiacal myth that had political implications as well, legitimating as it were the social and political preeminence of this class (1990: 202–203).

Leaving aside the aspect of gender, Wachtel still seems to feel obliged to comment upon the topic in his book. Thus he declares that he has found no particular difference between texts written by men and texts written by women within this tradition, and that women and men adhere to the

¹ Concluding his study, Wachtel refers to the phenomenon of mythologization as discussed by R. Barthes (Wachtel 1990: 201-202).

same myths and refer to similar kinds of experiences (1990:226). To scholars with a specific interest in questions of gender, this statement has seemed somewhat provocative. In her article, "Engaging Sexual Demons in Marina Tsvetaeva's 'Devil': the Body and the Genesis of the Woman Poet," P. Chester draws attention to Tsvetaeva's childhood stories and suggests that Tsvetaeva's family chronicle could be read as a negative or antithetical version of the boyhoods described by Tolstoy and Aksakov (1994: 1025). Tsvetaeva has moved the Eden of childhood from the hayfields of Tolstoy's Russia to a female domestic interior and made the cast of characters in her anti-Eden entirely female. Concluding her reading of "The Devil" Chester observes the "powerful ambivalence toward the female body" displayed in these texts, and notes that Tsvetaeva "creates a myth of God the Mother who must be defied in order to sustain life" (1994: 1045).

In this paper, I attempt to explain the differences found by Chester between Tsvetaeva's and Tolstoy's/Aksakov's descriptions of childhood as a result of Tsvetaeva's maintaining a specific modernist concept of childhood – a concept that in Wachtel's book is represented by A. Bely and according to Wachtel belongs to a different paradigm than the works of Tolstoy and Aksakov, historically and socially as well as aesthetically (Wachtel 1990: 153). The aim of this presentation is not, however, to substitute a traditional opposition between realism and modernism for Chester's feminine-masculine labels. Rather, my aim is to make Tsvetaeva's feminized version of the Paradise myth appear in the light of modernism as a whole. By emphasizing that some of the most antagonizing and seminal differences between artists and currents within this movement found their expression in the descriptions of childhood and were articulated in terms of femininity and masculinity, I would like to suggest that the "male" counterpart to Tsvetaeva's

feminized Eden of childhood is to be found within, rather than outside of, the modernist framework.

As Wachtel shows in his book, Bely's early pseudo-autobiographical prose *Kotik Letayev* and *The Baptized Chinaman* provided Russian culture with a totally new model of childhood; Wachtel also distinguishes two basic ideas, or modernist myths, that have played a significant role in later Russian literary descriptions of childhood (1990: 175–176). Above all, it was Bely's demonstration of how the child constructs the world as well as his own self through the acquisition of language that came to be normative; Bely provided a view of the child as genuinely creative, making the experience of the child analogous to that of the adult writer in his artistic work.

But along with the writers mentioned by Wachtel – Mandelstam, Pasternak, Nabokov and Bunin – for whom this modernist view of the child as creator has played a significant role, the name of Tsvetaeva can be included. With her memories from childhood written in the 1930's, Tsvetaeva places herself in an exemplary manner among the ranks of modernist writers to whom the child, as Wachtel puts it, is the “father” of the writer. In “The Devil” – a central piece of her family chronicle – the child and the narrator-poet are even referred to as an inseparable unit. Here, Tsvetaeva makes the poetical turn of mind an innate quality and equates her literary activity as an adult with the games she used to play as a child:

А – может быть /.../ отрожденная поэтава сопоставительная – противопоставительная – страсть – и склад, та же игра, в которую я в детстве так любила играть: черного и белого не покупайте, да и нет не говорите, только наоборот: только да – нет, черное – белое, я – все, Бог – Черт. (Tsvetaeva 1994 V: 43)

Tsvetaeva in this story refers to her passion for antithetical turns, while Bely in his work emphasizes the synthesizing

ability of the child. However, the above quotation could be compared to how Bely in *Why I Became a Symbolist* sees himself as innately a Symbolist:

НИКАК НЕ СТАЛ, НИКОГДА не становился, но всегда БЫЛ символистом /.../ в играх четырехлетнего ребенка позднее осознанный символизм восприятий был внутренней данностью детского сознания. (Belyj 1994: 418)

Bely's interest in childhood was apparently also motivated by his view of the consciousness of the child as being closely related to pre-existing worlds (Belyj 1994: 419). Aptly supported by Freud's and Steiner's ideas about the repetition of the phylogenesis in the ontogenesis, Bely seems to have located the paradisiacal state of V. Ivanov's myth-creating word – which Ivanov found in a distant historical past – in childhood. Although this “anthroposophical myth” is dismissed by Wachtel as the less productive of the two modernist myths of childhood, Tsvetaeva's memories could be read as partly adhering to this aspect of Bely's concept of childhood as well. In “Poets with History and Poets without History,” an essay dating back to July 1933 – roughly when she initiated her own childhood project – Tsvetaeva situates childhood in a prehistorical, mythical dimension and makes it the source of all lyrical poetry:

Так Пастернак, как всякий ребенок и всякий лирик, не мог не вернуться к своему детству. К мифу своего детства, завершившемуся историей. (Cvetaeva 1994 V: 423)

Bely's concept of childhood, however, did not go unchallenged in the 1920's. Apparently, Mandelstam, in his *The Noise of Time* from 1925, was eager to polemicize with the view of childhood promoted in *Kotik Letayev*. A principal task of Mandelstam's seems to have been to call into question the epistemology that served as the basis for Bely's Symbolism

and that lay behind his concept of childhood (Isenberg 1986: 51–53, Benchich 1997: 132). To clarify this controversy, I will give a brief account of the features in Bely's concept of childhood that seem to have served as the main targets of Mandelstam's criticism.

Of central concern to the second generation of Symbolists was the idea of anamnesis. This seems to have been due to an indebtedness to the Socratic doctrine of recollection, to the influence of German and English literary Romanticism, as well as to the thoughts of Rudolf Steiner. In his lecture, "The Ancient Terror," V. Ivanov even referred to the memory of the eternal – "предвечная память" – as the source of all individual, artistic creativity (Ivanov 1909: 394). Choosing as an epigraph to his *Kotik Letayev* a quotation from Tolstoy's *War and Peace* in which Natasha Rostova reflects on the idea of prenatal memories, Bely also demonstrates his interest in this question:

– Знаешь, я думаю, – сказала Наташа шепотом... – что когда вспоминаешь, вспоминаешь, все вспоминаешь, до того вспоминаешься, что помнишь то, что было еще прежде, чем я была на свете... (Belyj 1990 I: 293)

Inspired by the theories of Steiner, and as if following in the tradition of Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," Bely in his book makes the memories of young Kotik serve as testimony to an existence preceding the child's appearance in the physical world:

– д о – т е л е с н а я жизнь одним краем своим обнажена... в факте памяти. (Belyj 1990: 299)

Consequently, Bely ends up his childhood intimations with an exalted assertion of a future resurrection:

Во Христе умираем, чтоб в Духе воскреснуть. (Belyj 1990 I: 443)

Steiner, in his lectures, also referred to the experience of the eternal as some kind of spiritual hearing, or a dwelling in a sea of tones (Wachtel 1990: 157). In a similar way, Bely in *Kotik Letayev* stresses the musicality of these early memories:

Память о памяти – такова; она – ритм; она – музыка
сферы, страны –

– где я был до
рождения!

(Belyj 1990 I: 347)

In further accordance with anthroposophical thought, Bely even presents childhood as a repetition of earlier stages in the history of mankind, and in the extreme as a variation upon the cosmic development as a whole (Elsworth 1983: 121, Aleksandrov 1985: 156, Wachtel 1990: 161). When he, together with his protagonist, descends into childhood, aiming to reach his ancient memory, the journey is thus equal to a descent into the history of mankind. In this context it is especially important to note that the mythical, primordial state of this cosmogony carries a distinctive feminine character:

... изрывалось сознание в мифах ужасной праматери ...
(Belyj 1990 I: 298)

At this point Bely also refers to the female spirits spoken of in Part II of Goethe's *Faust*:

В нас миры – морей: “Матерей”; и бушуют они красно-
яркими сворами бредов ...

Мое детское тело есть бред “матерей” ... (Belyj 1990 I: 298)

In the book *On the Watershed of Two Centuries*, in which he refers to Kotik Letaev's experiences as his own, Bely even compares a certain period of early childhood to the matriarchy that supposedly had prevailed in the Cretan culture:

Я бы сравнил этот период с древним периодом критской культуры (до вторжения дорян; и – культ матриархата мне ведом /.../ няня в очках мне и мать, и храмовая богиня ... (Belyj: 1989: 181–182)

In his memories of childhood Bely apparently attempted to describe a primeval state of humanity according to the theories introduced by the German legal historian, J. J. Bachofen. In his work *Das Mutterrecht* from 1861, Bachofen claimed to have found evidence, mainly in literary sources, proving that cultures with a matriarchal rule had once existed in ancient Greece and among some primitive tribes in Africa and America. With his book, Bachofen challenged the pre-dominant view of patriarchy as the sole structure seen in human societies and attempted to formulate a theory of social evolution that he regarded as generally valid. According to his evolutionary scheme, a chaotic promiscuity prevailed from the beginning. This chaos was succeeded by a gynocracy, a social structure of a matriarchal nature, which was only at a third stage of development replaced by patriarchal structures (Bamberger 1974: 263–264).

In Ivanov's lecture "The Ancient Terror," mentioned above, we also find reference to Bachhofen; with the reservation that these theories are impossible to prove scientifically, Ivanov pays tribute to Bachofen's visionary work ("безсмертные работы Бахофена обогатили науку не гипотезою, а прочным открытием", Ivanov 1971: 415). As Ivanov puts it, in a presentation basically benevolent towards women, patriarchy was installed as a protest and as defense against the capricious cruelty that had prevailed during matriarchal rule,

a cruelty from which men suffered most. He therefore regards the structures of modern society as an attempt by the male part of the collective to come to terms with Fate itself – the actual object of the *terror antiquus*, i.e. death – a Fate which historically was bestowed with a female face.² Tsvetaeva, in her memories of the poet M. Voloshin, also testifies to the interest among the Symbolists in this specific social structure:

Макс с мифом был связан и через коктебельскую землю – киммерийскую, родину амазонок. Недаром его вечная мечта о матриархате. Вот, со слов очевидца, разговор в 1920 году, накануне разгрома Крыма. Феодосийский обыватель: “М.А., вы, который все знаете, чем же все это кончится?” Макс, спокойно: “Матриархатом.” Феодосиец, испуганно: “Как?” Макс невозмутимо: “Просто, вместо патриарха будет матриарх.” Шутка, конечно /.../ но /.../ не случайная шутка. О женском владычестве слышала от Макса еще в 1911 году. До всяких германских и гражданских войн. (Cvetaeva 1994 IV:195)

With reference to the above context, Kotik Letaev’s fear of an imagined old woman – “старуха” – could be regarded as a direct offspring from Bely’s Symbolist world view. This is all the more plausible as the story ends up with the young Kotik’s vision of his own crucifixion – an execution carried out by women alone:

... то придвинется стая женщин с крестом: положит на стол; и меня на столе, пригвоздит ко кресту. (Belyj 1990 I: 441)

Opposing the apocalyptic and gynocentric world view of the Symbolists, in which Bely’s concept of childhood obviously has its origin, Mandelstam published his memories from childhood – *The Noise of Time*. Already by his choice of title,

² The title of Ivanov’s lecture refers to a painting by L. Bakst, “*Terror Antiquus*” from 1908 – an apocalyptic vision of thunder and earthquakes, with an antique goddess in the foreground.

he seems to be eager to emphasize that this is a childhood bound up with time and history, rather than with a transcendental memory of the eternal. The noise of time in Mandelstam's memories thus appears almost as a counterpart to the chaotic sound of the eternal – “пой вечности” – in *Kotik Letayev*. According to Mandelstam, Bely in his introspective prose had simply continued in the psychological manner of the 19th Century tradition and did not differ much from Tolstoy and Aksakov (Mandel'shtam 1990: 280). In *The Noise of Time* Mandelstam declares that this is a tradition he dissociates himself from:

Никогда я не мог понять Толстых и Аксаковых, Багровых внуков, влюбленных в семейственные архивы с эпическими домашними воспоминаньями. (Mandel'shtam 1990: 41)

As a consequence, Mandelstam denounces all personal memories – a modern writer needs no memory at all, he states. His memory serves not to recapitulate, retain or preserve, but to push away the past:

Повторяю – память моя не любовна, а враждебна, и работает она не над воспроизведением, а над отстранением прошлого. Разночинцу не нужна память, ему достаточно рассказать о книгах, которые он прочел, – и биография готова. (Mandel'shtam 1990: 41)

In his attitude towards memory and the past, Mandelstam thus takes a position that is the very opposite of Bely's. The language that he claims to need for his work has nothing to do with the “babble” of childhood, which in Bely's case was connected to memories of the sound of the eternal. Mandelstam's hero, on the contrary, acquires his language by listening to the noise of the current century:

Надо мной и многими современниками тяготеет косноязычье рожденья. Мы учились не говорить, а лепетать – и лишь прислушиваясь к нарастающему шуму века и выбел-

енные пеной его гребня, мы обрели язык. (Mandel'shtam 1990: 41–42)

Relating in direct speech the words of the positivist Boris Sinani, Mandelstam further seems to demonstrate his scepticism towards the idea of prenatal memories as proof of immortality:

“Что такое? Помню я, что было до рожденья? Ничего не помню, ничего не было. Ну и после смерти ничего не будет.” (Mandel'shtam 1990: 37)

The Sinani family, whose home is said to have carried the imprint of a rational aesthetics (“Эстетика разума”), stands in this passage in glaring contrast to a certain Natasha – “некая Наташа – нелепое и милое создание”:

Наташа была по очереди эсдечкой, эсеркой, православной, католичкой, эллинисткой, теософкой с разными перебоями. (Mandel'shtam 1990: 38)

This ridiculous female apparently embodies the thoughts that inspired Bely when he wrote his *Kotik Letayev*. As the ultimate consequence of his advocacy of a rational and time-bound aesthetics, Mandelstam demonstrates his partiality for the patriarchal origin of literature and culture, as taught by his teacher V.V. Gippius:

В литературе он ценил патриархальное, отцовское начало культуры. Как хорошо, что вместо лампадного жреческого огня я успел полюбить рыжий огонек литературной (В.В.Г.) злости.

Власть оценок В.В. длится надо мной и посейчас. Большое, с ним совершенное, путешествие по патриархату русской литературы от “Новикова с Радищевым” до Коневца раннего символизма так и осталось единственным. Потом только *почитывал*. (Mandel'shtam 1990: 48)

Early Russian Symbolism is included here in the patriarchal line of culture. Mandelstam, however, refuses to take into account what follows after Konevskoy – i.e. the second generation of Symbolists and its heirs.

In *The Noise of Time* Mandelstam thus makes a clean sweep of the most central components of Bely's concept of childhood and his view of the language and experiences of children as being kindred to that of the artist. He stresses the patriarchal character of history and culture, putting the androcentric tradition of cultural history against the Symbolists' gynocentric dream of eternity. Furthermore, Mandelstam makes his male "raznochinet" a representative of literary evil – "литературная злость." Dressed in furs, this Dostoevsky-like figure reads vaguely as a male counterpart to the Masochian, fur-coated and powerful kind of woman frequently met in Symbolist poetry and which came to be closely related to the apocalyptic expectations of this literary movement (Hansen-Löve 1989: 383).³ This brute, male beast of history, who seems so eager to take his revenge, finally appears as an illustration of literature and of the word itself at the end of the chapter "В не по чину барственном шубе" (Mandel'shtam 1990: 43–49).

Tsvetaeva read *The Noise of Time* in 1926 and was much more upset about it than any emigree critic. Although Mandelstam in his book appears as something of a turncoat, most reviewers decided to overlook this, considering the political situation in the Soviet Union and the poetic talent he displays in these texts. Tsvetaeva, however, immediately wrote a furious answer to Mandelstam, "My Answer to Osip Mandelstam," which she tried to publish without success. A rough version of this text has recently been included in her collected works, and it reflects quite a harsh and unique reaction to Mandelstam's book (Cvetaeva 1994 IV: 305–316).

³ Comp. this theme as discussed in: A. Etkind, *Содом и психия*, Москва 1996, pp. 43–44.

Tsvetaeva in the main refers to the chapter "Feodosya," which diverges from the rest of the book in containing memories not from childhood, but from Mandelstam's visit to the Crimea during the civil war. What seems to have made Tsvetaeva especially upset was the cowardness that Mandelstam, in her view, displayed in his prose. Not only was he making himself a Bolshevik in hindsight – but he did this at other people's expense; in scornful words, he recounts a visit to one of the members of the Volunteer Army and further exposes this Tsygalsky, who also was a poet and a friend of Voloshin's, to danger by referring to him by name. Tsvetaeva was outraged by the way in which Mandelstam ironically turned this poet and soldier into a "няня с бармами закона" – a nurse with the epaulets of statute – ridiculing his masculinity as well as his spirit of self-sacrifice. Possibly, she read this as a hint to the notion of female lawgivers and Voloshin's preferences of matriarchy. To this ironic portrait and its foreshadowings in the chapters on childhood Tsvetaeva seems to have been especially sensitive. A close friend of Voloshin's, she was also the wife of a former soldier of the Volunteer Army, the sacrificing spirit of which she had made an integral part of her poetics in the early twenties (Shvejcer 1995: 89). Furthermore, a Symbolist-like notion of sacrifice and martyrdom seems to have been of central importance to her "exchange of gifts" with Mandelstam himself in 1916 (Freidin 1987: 120–123). Promoting the ethics of supreme sacrifice as the governing poetic principle of prose, Tsvetaeva thus concludes that Mandelstam has failed as a prose-writer. She even gives him slightly sadistic traits:

Впрочем, с кровью у Мандельштама вообще подозрительно, после 37 года (см. Пушкина) и кровь и стихи журчат иначе. Журчащая кровь. Нет ли в этом – жути? Забывая, что журчит, удовлетворяясь – как. (Cvetaeva 1994 V: 309)

Instead of fighting against all kinds of oppression at the risk of his own life and with a rifle in his hand, Mandelstam with his “hostile memory” and rational aesthetics has brought about a shabby and mean tribute to the authorities, according to Tsvetaeva. To listen to the noise of time, in this case, becomes synonymous with running the errands of power.

Tsvetaeva’s text remained unpublished during her life. In her essays and memories written after 1926, there are however several signs of a hidden polemic with Mandelstam and his *The Noise of Time*. In the essay “Natalya Goncharova: Her Life and Art” we find, for instance, lines that can be read as directed toward Mandelstam and his hostility to all memories of a personal nature:

Есть ли у художника личная биография, кроме той, в ремесле? И, если есть, важна ли она? Важно ли то, из чего? И – из того ли – то? /.../
Есть факты – наши современники. Есть – наши предшественники, факты до нас. /.../ Предки. Предшественники, предтечи. Их и нужно слушать. (Cvetaeva 1994 IV: 78–79)

It also seems symptomatic that Tsvetaeva’s first childhood memories appear in “The Story of a Dedication” – the “true” story of her meetings with Mandelstam, pondering the conscious falsification of history and the burning of personal papers as opposed to the artistic recreation of past events (Cvetaeva 1994 IV:130–158).

With reference to the context described above, Tsvetaeva’s turning to the family archives in the thirties and her way of recalling childhood through a femininized version of the myth of Eden, with a God the Mother at its center, can be read as a demonstrative defense of the myth-creative aspirations of the Symbolists. The feminine thematics and the domestic interior in Tsvetaeva’s childhood memories form a sharp contrast to the “noise” of the patriarchal history in favour of which Mandelstam sacrificed his family archive and all private memories in *The Noise of Time*. Tsvetaeva’s step

into the mythical world of childhood seems for her to have meant a return to childhood as the paradisiacal source of creativity, a step which owing to the stories "The Devil" and "Khlystovki" carries a distinct scent of heresy and sectarianism – i.e. a rejection of the common standards and rituals of society. This can in fact also be seen as a very conscious step out of history – with Mandelstam's childhood-story as a negative point of departure – motivated by a wish to defend herself and her art against a more and more politicized and hostile environment. Support for such an interpretation can be found in one of Tsvetaeva's poems from 1934 – a poem that alludes in a straightforward manner to Mandelstam's *The Noise of Time* as well as to his poem "The Age":

О поэте не подумал
Век – и мне не до него.
Бог с ним, с громом. Бог с ним, с шумом
Времени не моего!

Если не веку не до предков –
Не до правнуков мне: стад.
Век мой – яд мой, век мой – вред мой,
Век мой – враг мой, век мой – ад.
(Cvetaeva 1994 II: 319)

The story of childhood thus appears to be the genre in which the central questions of the modernist movement are brought to a head and in which the principal differences between Russian modernist writers – in political, aesthetic and philosophical matters – are most explicitly reflected. Within this genre, the discussions of the relation between the world and the word, culture and memory, artist and society, dating back to the crisis of Symbolism in 1910, seem to have continued – even as late as in the mid 1930's. The feminine

features so characteristic of Tsvetaeva's childhood texts are clearly influenced by these discussions and become much more comprehensible within this context.

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