

## Gender and Identification in Marina Tsvetaeva's Poetry

*Renata Ingbrant*  
*Stockholm University*

*(The present paper is a part of an on-going study of gender and identity in the poetry of Marina Tsvetaeva and Anna Swierszczynska)*

The study of women and their creativity is a quite new and therefore still challenging area within the field of Russian studies. A great deal has been done to rediscover, reexamine and revalue works of those Russian women writers who have for some reasons been lost to modern readers. A diversity of theoretical approaches has been employed in this research and the field of Women's studies is constantly expanding. Particularly interesting in gender studies is the examination of gender-marked categories and gender roles in Russian women writers. This approach emphasizes the invaluable role that the women poets of the Silver Age played in defining a space for women's voices within the literary tradition. In the present paper, inspired by this recent research, I wish to look into gender relations and their effect on the poetic voice in one of Tsvetaeva's love poems. I will also try to incorporate some aspects of modern psychoanalysis in the discussion of gender in Tsvetaeva's poem "Письмо" ("A letter").

By the turn of the century many Russian women poets, including Marina Tsvetaeva, were concerned with what we

nowadays call "gender issues." Zinaida Hippis, Poliksena Solov'eva "Allegro," Sofia Parnok, Marina Tsvetaeva and others began to pursue freedom to perform gender in ways that might not be normative in society. Why was the question of gender so important for them?

As many critics point out, the tradition that formed during the Silver Age was still dominated by male poets.<sup>1</sup> However, the most prominent women authors of the period were sufficiently independent and unconventional to stem the current of the new poetic streams that had sprung up at that time and to write in their own, unique female voice. The perpetuated exclusion of women from the literary tradition implied the exclusion of women from the position of lyric subject. That is why women poets who came to voice during the Russian Silver Age, faced the task of not only finding and defining their space within the literary tradition to which they now got greater access, but also exploring the different new ways to define their poetic personalities. To achieve poetic independence, serious female poets had to censor or even "kill" elements of their work or persona that seemed too embarrassingly gendered in order to claim full social and literary value.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, they had to reestablish the female literary tradition within the already existing male tradition and transform both female and male ancestry into sources of identity and authority helping to determine their own identity and destiny as poets.

The following poem — a part of the cycle *Комедьянт* (*A comedian*), published in 1919 and dedicated to the actor and director Yury Zavadsky — deviates from the normative tradition in Russian love poetry where a man had always been present as a lyric subject and a woman — only as an addressee. The roles are reversed here but the poet chooses to use masculine gender (which in literary tradition is said to

---

<sup>1</sup> See Chester & Forrester (1996:107)

<sup>2</sup> See Forrester (1996:22)

be the ungendered and the unmarked one) with the exception of two words “единая” (the only one-FEM) and “тыща” (of many thousands-FEM). The interesting thing about the poem is that the female poet seems to write about love through a persona whose ambiguous character may be the result of the poet’s attitude towards the conventions of the given literary tradition. The poem, playful and rather elusive in its manner from the very first line, is thus a parody not only of a certain genre but also of a conventional use of gender in love poetry.

Ваш нежный рот — сплошное целование...	Your tender mouth — sheer kissing...
— И это всё, и я совсем как нищий.	— And that is all, and I am quite a beggar.
Кто я теперь? — Единая? —	Who am I now? — The only one? —
Нет, тыща!	No, of many thousands!
Завоеватель? — Нет, завоеваньё!	A conqueror? — No, a conquest!

Любовь ли это — или любованье,	Is that love — or admiration,
Пера причуда — иль	The fancy of a pen — or an initial
первопричина, Томление ли по	cause,
ангельскому чину —	Yearning for an angelic rang
Иль чуточку притворства — по	Or just some affectation — by
призванью...	vocation...

— Души печаль, очей очарованье,	— The sorrow of the soul, the enchantment of the eyes,
Пера ли росчерк — ах! — не всё равно ли,	A stroke of the pen — oh! — what does it matter,
Как назовут сие уста — доколе	How they will call these lips — as long as
Ваш нежный рот — сплошное целование!	Your tender mouth — sheer kissing!

The voice of the speaker in the poem is both rather aggressive (masculine) and playful (feminine) in its straightforward attitude towards the addressee. The speaker is aware of the fact that according to the poetic tradition, one can deal with the subject (that is *fascination with the lips*) in two ways: with an elaborated eloquence of an elevated style, which also

implies following a certain convention; or by deconstructing and decentering the conventional style by calling its proper manner and vocabulary into question. To choose the first mode means to speak out from the position that traditionally has been reserved for men; to choose the other, means to accept the way of expression one preferably connects with feminine voice and charm.<sup>3</sup> The lyric subject rejects the first mode of expression and consequently even the traditional position of an addressee (“Единая? – Нет тыща!”) and the male position of the one who has the initiative (“Завоеватель? – Нет завоевань!”). With to all appearances feminine elusiveness, the speaker decides instead to succumb to a pure sensual pleasure that the quite innovative (and inconceivable in the traditional poetry) play of words “нежный”(tender) and “рот”(mouth) gives her.

In Tsvetaeva's case, the role is often related to a certain theatricality of her poetic expression which can be understood as an intertext of the cited personae. When she adopts a role, she usually adopts its intertext with all its dressing up as well. Since the performance of e.g. a male role may also imply its imitation, I assume that the final rejection of a role by Tsvetaeva means that the role is treated by her as a mask and therefore cannot but be refused as something foreign to her true self, which at the same time is indicative of the strangeness of the intertext. Nevertheless, even a female role may be considered by the author as false.

While reading Tsvetaeva, the throughout impression is that she, like many other literary artists, commits herself to a search for stability and unity of being. Her works exemplify thus the typical longing for wholeness and harmony, for androgyny, and a struggle to reintegrate the masculine and the feminine opposites within the work of art. In many of her poems, Tsvetaeva seeks the answer to the questions concerned with the matter of being: “What is my true self?”

---

<sup>3</sup> For irony as a specifically feminine mode, see Spacks (1976)

and "How to be the true self?" Like the Lacanian "I," the lyric "I" in Tsvetaeva's poems models itself upon a series of identifications in order to gain a sense of wholeness and ideal completeness.

Numerous scholars has taken on the task of investigating female and male roles in the works of Marina Tsvetaeva. The ground-breaking study on the poet's view on this matter has already been done by Antonina Filonova Gove in her article, "The Feminine Stereotype and Beyond: Role Conflict and Resolution in the Poetics of M. Tsvetaeva." Some other critics have pursued her leads since the essay appeared in 1977, for instance Anya Kroth in her essay on the androgyny as an exemplary feature of Tsvetaeva's poetic vision, but also Barbara Heldt, Laura Durland Weeks and others.

In the above mentioned article, Antonina Filonova Gove studies the process of rejecting certain characteristics of the feminine role through poetry. According to her, Tsvetaeva does it either *explicitly* (as often is the case in her early works of the juvenile period) or *implicitly* (in her subsequent writing). The mature period shows Tsvetaeva's interest in the roles of heroic women or women not limited by the feminine gender. The roles are most often historical or taken from literature, mythology or folklore. In the following (and final) period, the poet explores the theme of equality between a man and a woman or imagines herself as a disembodied poetic voice. Gove comes to the conclusion that Tsvetaeva develops universal images of the self - images that transcend the realm of social issues. In the following analysis I would like to examine the process in which the self or – using the Lacanian term – the speaking subject transcends itself within the given text.

*According to Lacan, all processes of linguistic expression and interpretation, driven by desire for a lost and unachievable object,*

*move incessantly along a chain of unstable signifiers without any possibility of coming to rest on a fixed signified, or presence.*

For Lacan, it is language that places the subject in the chain of words which binds it to one gender or another – without language there is neither gender nor gender-oriented desire, but the forces of the unconscious can subvert that definition. Once inserted into language the subject becomes at once “discordant” with it:

There is nothing in the unconscious which accords with the body. The unconscious is discordant. The unconscious is that which, by speaking, determines the subject as being, but as being to be crossed through with that metonymy by which I support desire, in so far as it is endlessly impossible to speak as such.<sup>4</sup>

In numerous poems, Tsvetaeva’s lyric subject is hidden, disguised or tries different roles within one text to reject them ultimately, as it happens in most cases. Typical for these poems is the division of the “I” into two roles: the rejected and the accepted one.

Marina Tsvetaeva’s poem “Письмо” (“A Letter”) exemplarily illustrates such a division. Furthermore it exemplifies what Catriona Kelly, discussing certain themes that occur in Tsvetaeva’s poetry, calls “a process of pairing and differentiation” of oppositions in order to make them dissolve or explode.<sup>5</sup> In my analysis the process of pairing and differentiation concerns the search for identity and gender that the lyric subject undertakes – a process in which the meaning of what is chosen is determined by what is not.

The poem was written during the summer 1923 when an intensive letter-romance evolved between Tsvetaeva (in

---

<sup>4</sup> See Lacan (1975) in Mitchell and Rose (1982:165)

<sup>5</sup> See Kelly (1994:312)

Prague) and Aleksander Bachrach (in Berlin). The theme of the poem is *waiting for a letter*.

**Письмо**

Так писем не ждут,  
 Так ждут — письма.  
 Тряпичный лоскут,  
 Вокруг тесьма  
 Из клея. Внутри — словцо.  
 И счастье. — И это — всё.

Так счастья не ждут,  
 Так ждут — конца:  
 Солдатский салют  
 И в грудь — свинца  
 Три дольки. В глазах красно.  
 И только. — И это — всё.

Не счастья — стара!  
 Цвет — ветер сдул!  
 Квадрата двора  
 И чёрных дул.

(Квадрата письма:  
 Чернил и чар!)  
 Для смертного сна  
 Никто не стар!

Квадрата письма.

**A letter**

So they do not expect letters,  
 So they wait for one letter.  
 A ragged scrap,  
 Circled by a sticky tape.  
 Inside — a scribble.  
 And happiness. — And that is  
 all.

So they do not expect  
 happiness.  
 So they expect — the end.  
 A soldiery salute  
 And in the breast — three  
 slugs  
 Of lead. Everything goes red in  
 front of the eyes.  
 And just that. — That is all.  
 Not happiness — I'm old!  
 The colour — the wind blew it  
 away!  
 A square of a courtyard  
 And black muzzles.  
 (A square of a letter:  
 Of ink and sorcery!)  
 When it comes to the last sleep,  
 No one is old!

A square of a letter.

First of all we have to observe that the lyric subject is thoroughly hidden and, if it was not for the adjective “стара” (old-FEM) in the third stanza (and Tsvetaeva’s signature in

the end), we would not even be able to say for sure that the lyric subject is a woman. Within the first two lines a relationship of parallelism is established between what Yury Lotman calls *the object-member* and *the model-member*<sup>6</sup> (where the model situation, *waiting for X*, constitutes a paradigm for all the subsequent parallelisms). The everyday situation — *waiting for ordinary letters* — is ascribed to others and rejected, whereas the lyric subject prefers to identify herself with Romantic heroines (let us say — Tatjana) and their waiting for one letter, which in this context must be recognised as the letter from the beloved. Already in the beginning there is the typical pairing and differentiation of two concepts within two lines.

The pairing and differentiation goes on in the second stanza as well, and the same happens on a higher level, that is between the first and the second stanza. In the second stanza an analogous parallelism is established: the former word "счастье" (happiness) is replaced by the word "конец" (the end) and, at the same time, the former role of the Romantic heroine is rejected and replaced by another. In this case, it happens to be a male role of a convict (for execution by a firing squad has traditionally been reserved for men only, perhaps except for women-revolutionists who, as revolutionists, have taken on a male role).

In the following stanzas (third and fourth), the Romantic role, which Tsvetaeva ascribes to younger women, is rejected more explicitly. In general usage there seems to be no preference for one term in a pairing such as "old/young," but in a contextual framework, the roles ascribed to an old woman and the ones associated with a young woman have different connotations.

An old woman is a woman no longer limited by the feminine gender. Marina Tsvetaeva was undoubtedly aware of the fact, and so was Simone de Beauvoir. In her book *The*

---

<sup>6</sup> See Lotman (1976:89)



*Second Sex*, de Beauvoir describes the period of the menopause as a positive phenomenon in an ageing woman's life: "she is no longer the prey of overwhelming forces; she is herself, she and her body are one. It is sometimes said that women of a certain age constitute 'a third sex'; and, in truth, while they are not males, they are no longer females."<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, an old woman is considered apart from her appearance: she is no longer judged, respected and desired through her looks. No longer an erotic object, experienced and freed from her biological chains, an ageing woman eventually becomes a person.

The approach of death frees the lyric subject from all concern for the future and therefore she finds the second role (of a man awaiting the death) more appropriate for her. The theme of death, which is implied in the words "квадрата" (a square) and "чёрных" (black) in the third stanza, is evident in the metaphor "смертного сна" (the last sleep) in the fourth stanza. At that point the whole situation becomes universal. The third role — the role of a human being awaiting the death is common to both men and women, young and old ("Для смертного сна никто не стар"/"When it comes to the last sleep, no one is old"). Furthermore, here I observe the "pairing and differentiation" between the first part of the poem (the first two stanzas) and the second (the last three stanzas), as between the conventional and universal.

The last line "квадрата письма" ("a square of a letter") presents us with the total dissolution of the lyric subject.

In other words: most often the roles appear too confined for the lyric subject and therefore are preemptorily repudiated. The stratagems often used by Tsvetaeva in order to transcend the limits of a feminine role are: either taking on a male role, or taking on other nonconventional identity. The perpetual borrowing and fitting on the different literary "garbs" is analogous to Tsvetaeva's overall tendency to

---

<sup>7</sup> See de Beauvoir (1997:63)

search for the right expression within a poem in a manner that Mikhail Gasparov calls "нанизывание ассоциаций по сходству" ("stringing the associations by their likeness"), "бесконечный поиск выражения для невыразимого" ("the endless search for the expression of the unexpressible").<sup>8</sup> Eventually, the application of this poetic manner to the lyric subject can lead to the dissolution of the "I."

Pairing and differentiation of certain concepts, structures etc. is considered to be a distinctive feature of literature in general. In his *Analysis of the Poetic Text*, Yuri Lotman claims on the other hand that "elements which in general language text appear to be unconnected, belonging to different structures, turn out to be compared or contrasted in the poetic text."<sup>9</sup> According to Lotman this semiotic, structure-forming principle of the contrastive comparison of elements, this "coupling" of episodes, is universal in poetry and other verbal art: it gives the text its artistic significance. In Tsvetaeva the same principle is often used to the utmost in a very intense and often explosive process of comparing and contrasting. In order to identify and define its significance, but at the same time to explore its expressiveness, the original concept is put through a *commutation test* in a series of paradigmatic transformations. The author substitutes one signifier for another (producing metaphors) or shifts from one thing to another (producing a metonym). The new expressions often have a more specific and condensed meaning and defamiliarizing capacity. However, at the same time, the lyric subject in the poem "Письмо" chooses a role of a convict rather than that of a Romantic heroine, the universal rather than the conventional, death rather than life and happiness. In this way the tension between the paired *contrasts* is resolved for what the poet most likely chooses is

---

<sup>8</sup> See Gasparov (1995:311)

<sup>9</sup> See Lotman (1976:33)

the unmarked, neutral and therefore seemingly transparent.

Like any linguistic element, the lyric "I" in the discussed poem has a pervading inclination to define itself (or any concept) through negation or negative relation to other elements. It exists and acquires its significance only through difference. The psychoanalytical structural approach centres on the workings of the text as psyche, based on the theory that the unconscious is structured like a language. In this context one can thus assume that the endless chain of displacement in the quest for meaning that Tsvetaeva's lyric subject undertakes is caused by what Lacan calls *inalienable split*, or *difference*, that inhabits the self.

*According to Lacan, the final healing of the split subject or the recapturing of the lost unity is attained only through death.*

... – so	they	wait for	letters
	<i>ordinary people</i>		
	<i>Romantic heroines</i>		<i>one letter</i>
			<i>happiness</i>
	<i>convicts</i>		<i>the end</i>
	<i>old women</i>	<i>a square of courtyard and</i>	<i>muzzles</i>
		<i>(a square of a letter: ink and sorcery )</i>	
	<i>all human beings</i>		<i>the last sleep</i>
			<b>death -- ?</b>

... — **так ждут писем** — *письма* — *счастья* — *конца* — *квадрата двора и чёрных дул* — (*квадрата письма: чернил и чар!*) — *смертного сна* — **смерти** — ?

\*\*\*

## PRIMARY SOURCES

Цветаева, Марина И. *Письмо* (vol.3:91) and *Ваш нежный рот...* (vol.2:244) in Sumerkina A. and Schweitzer, V. *Стихотворения и поэмы*. New York: Russica Publishers, Inc.: 1982.

## SECONDARY SOURCES

de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. (1949) London: Vintage, 1997.

Chester, Pamela & Forrester, Sibelan (ed.). *Engendering Slavic Literatures*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.

Forrester, Sibelan. "Reading for a Self: Self-Definition and Female Ancestry in Three Russian Poems." *The Russian Review* 55:1 (1996): 21-36.

Гаспаров, М.Л. *Избранные статьи*. Москва: Новое литературное обозрение, 1995.

Gove, Antonina Filonov. "The Feminine Stereotype and Beyond: Role Conflict and Resolution in the Poetics of Marina Tsvetaeva." *Slavic Review* 36 (1977): 231-255.

Heldt, Barbara. *Terrible Perfection: Women and Russian Literature*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.

Kelly, Catriona. *A History of Russian Women's Writing 1820-1992*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994.

Kroth, Anya M. "Androgyny as an Exemplary Feature of Marina Tsvetaeva's Dichotomous Poetic Vision." *Slavic Review* 38(4) (1979): 563-582.

Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits*. Paris: Seuil, 1966.

Lotman, Yury. *Analysis of the Poetic Text*. (1972) Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1976.

Mitchell, Juliet and Rose, Jacqueline. *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*. London: Macmillan, 1982.

Spacks, Patricia M. *The Female Imagination. A Literary and Psychological Investigation of Women's Writing*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1976.

Weeks, Laura Durland. *The Search for the Self: The Poetic Persona of M. Tsvetaeva*. Diss. Stanford Univ., 1985.

