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Psychiatry in literature

The Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva (26 September 1892 to 31 August 1941): attachment, politics and suicide

George Ikkos 

There are clouds – about us
and domes – about us:
over the whole of Moscow
so many hands are needed!
I lift you up like a
sapling, my best burden: for
to me you are weightless
(from ‘Verses about Moscow’, 1916)

Tsvetaeva was of Baltic German heritage and was one of the quartet of greatest poets in Russia’s ‘Silver Age’ at the turn of the 20th century. She was born in Moscow, then former capital and city of cloisters and markets. The sounds of Moscow church bells and images of ice, snow and gold-crowned cupolas recur in her compositions.

Tsvetaeva’s emotionally distant father Ivan Tsvetaev (1847–1913) was Professor of Fine Art and founder of the later named Pushkin Museum. During his marriage to Tsvetaeva’s mother Maria Mein (1868–1906), he continued mourning his first wife. Mein was an outstanding pianist who had been jilted by her true love and abandoned her concert career to marry and look after Tsvetaev’s children and have Marina and Anastasia (1894–1993) with him. Tsvetaeva’s British editor Elaine Feinstein describes Mein as a woman of ‘bitter intensity’ who projected unfulfilled ambitions demanding long hours of music practice yet shared with Marina a passion for language games. After 4 years of tuberculosis, which took her and the children to Italy, Switzerland and Germany, she died when Marina was 14. ‘With a mother like her, I had only one choice: to become a poet’ Tsvetaeva wrote. She confessed writing poetry was ‘obeying an unknown necessity, you set fire to the house or push your friend down the mountain top’. In 1912 she married poet Sergei Efron (1893–1941), with whom she had Ariadna (1912), Irina (1917) and Giorgy (1924). They were separated for 5 years after Sergei volunteered for the Czarist White Army during the Civil War (1917–1922). In the ensuing Moscow famine, she was accused of neglecting her children and Irina died in a state orphanage. She did not attend the funeral.

Feinstein writes of Tsvetaeva’s unworldliness, obstinacy and tough physicality. American biographer Simon Karlinsky comments that compulsive infatuation became her main way of relating. She had multiple affairs with men and women. They dropped her, complaining she did not relate to them for who they were. Tsvetaeva wrote ‘With me everything is conflagration ... I engage in ten relationships at a time (fine “relationships” these!) ... But I cannot tolerate the slightest turning away from me. I HURT, do you understand?’ Also: ‘I can’t stand causing pain and I can’t help causing it’. In ‘Poem of the End’ (1924) she wrote ‘I am no more than an animal/that someone stabbed in the stomach’. Relationships with her children, especially son, and the exiled communities in Prague and Paris where she lived between 1925 and 1939, were poor. She frequently threatened suicide: ‘I opened my veins. Unstoppably/life spurts with no remedy’ (‘I opened my veins’, 1934).

Incredibly courageous artistic integrity drove Tsvetaeva to read publicly her poem about the White Army (‘Swans’ Encampment’, 1917–1921) in Bolshevik-controlled Moscow (and get away with it); then, amidst anti-Soviet émigré cycles in Paris, to write in favour of communist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893–1930) (and be ostracised). Ferociously intelligent, she was a fine essayist and her ‘Poet and Time’ is a beautiful and impassioned meditation on poetry and politics and on time, timeliness and eternity. In the perilous times she lived, the family returned to Russia, after Efron, who unbeknown to her had turned Soviet spy, was accused of conspiring to murder and had to flee. In the harrowing *The Death of a Poet*, Russian literary editor Irma Kudrova delves into state archives to document what followed. Accused of spying for France, Ariadna ‘confessed’, was sent to a labour camp and returned years later but Efron bravely stood his ground against KGB torturers, became psychotic, was sent for psychiatric treatment, was returned to the torture chambers and was executed. In 1941, Tsvetaeva, fleeing the advancing Nazi army with her son, arrived in the Tartar Republic’s capital Yeluba, where, rejected by locals, abandoned in her pleas for help by fellow writers and following a heated argument with Giorgy, she was found by him hanged in their temporary accommodation.

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