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EMBODIED WORDS: GENDER IN CVETAeva's READING OF PUŠKIN

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In the Puškin texts of Marina Cvetaeva and, indeed, throughout her work, gender has an importance that has been little acknowledged or narrowly understood.¹ Cvetaeva perceived the world as a place where men have the power to establish the meaning of things, yet in her poems and essays she seeks to invest the lives of women with creativity and authority. Her writings affirm that both women's and men's bodies can inspire and substantiate poetic speech.² Insights into the specific relationship between women and writing are embedded in the autobiographical digressions that are scattered throughout Cvetaeva's Puškin texts. Cvetaeva's narratives of self-representation and her representations of bodies yield a more precise sense of the power that Cvetaeva attained in words while paradoxically analyzing the grounds for women's silence.

Cvetaeva's "Puškin texts" include the following: "Stixi k Puškinu" ("Poems to Puškin," 1931); two late essays about Puškin, "Moj Puškin" ("My Puškin," 1937) and "Puškin i Pugačev" ("Puškin and Pugačev," 1937); and an essay with lengthy passages about Puškin's wife, "Natal'ja Gončarova" (1929).³ Several recent scholars have summarized Cvetaeva's analysis of and identification with Puškin quite capably, noting the originality, linguistic force, and polemical tones of Cvetaeva's Puškin texts (Budagov; Golicyna; Švejcer, "'Pamjatnik Puškinu'"; Švejcer, *Byt i byt'e*, 391–401; Karlinsky, "Pasternak, Puškin i okean"; and Scotto). More than her contemporaries, with the exception of Majakovskij, Cvetaeva fought the emerging cult of Puškin; she explicitly, and implicitly by means of her idiosyncratic approach to Puškin, argues against the creation of an official, canonical Puškin.⁴

Readers of Cvetaeva's Puškin texts have often noted her attention to both the rebellions of Puškin's characters and the resistances enacted by Puškin as a writer, but only one scholar has seen that these are also figures for the resisting woman writer (Vowles). That Cvetaeva was a woman writing about the central male writer in Russia's overwhelmingly male literary tradition requires explicit acknowledgment. Scholars of English literature have shown how struggle with one's precursors enables self-assertion for modern poets (Bloom); the remarkable thing about Cvetaeva as a reader of Puškin is that, rather than competing with him for primacy or feeling diminished by his greatness, she imagines Puškin as her ally against the many hostile forces in the world who would derogate her as well as him.⁵

Cvetaeva's Puškin texts comprise a body of work that afford unusual glimpses into the workings of gender in her literary imagination. She indicates that women and men read Puškin differently in the first stanza of her "Stixi k Puškinu" (1931): Puškin is "bile to men, delight to women,"⁶ thus someone perceived quite oppositely depending upon the gender of the perceiver. This line is part of Cvetaeva's project of defining Puškin's reputation as not reducible to a single epithet (hence the poem's first line: "Scourge of the gendarmes, god of students"). But her point is more than the notion that the name "Puškin" means different things to different people. The quoted lines depend upon metonymies based on authority and gender: in one line of verse, Cvetaeva divides Puškin's reverent students from the gendarmes, creating both the sense that Puškin was read politically and the assertion that his works were of considerable social importance; the other line invokes Puškin's sexuality and implies that the reading of Puškin to be performed in Cvetaeva's poem will take that evocation of physical desire into account. The project of Cvetaeva's Puškin texts is to connect the first line, dependent on public authority and adoring study, with the differences of gender and sexuality evoked in the second.⁷

Cvetaeva's writings about Puškin were concentrated in the final decade of her creative life, a time when she lived in extreme isolation near Paris and experienced desperate poverty and emotional pressures that made writing itself difficult. Others have observed that an autobiography is written in these essays, and it is difficult not to see that the impetus toward writing about Puškin is for Cvetaeva inextricably bound to the process of recollecting her childhood.⁸ Yet the self-reference that will concern me represents the time of writing the Puškin texts (the late 1930s), rather than the childhood memories Cvetaeva recalls.⁹ This distinction is more than one of temporality, for it transforms Cvetaeva's habit of representing herself from the closed-off, knowable tale of a lived past to an open-ended fragment of the present. The sense of the writing subject that emerges is of a woman facing nearly overwhelming impediments to creative work.

During the period of her emigration (1922–1939) and particularly during the years in France (1925–1939), Cvetaeva lived with obstacles to her writing that can scarcely be exaggerated and were grounded in her fragmented lives as Russian émigré poet and wife/mother. The difficulties of writing in emigration included the obvious problem of writing at some distance from the literary culture that had fostered her talent, as well as alienation from Russian émigré culture, which Cvetaeva suffered first because she refused to endorse others' condemnations of Soviet Russia, later because of her husband's association with the Soviet secret police. Simon Karlinsky has suggested that her heavy domestic burdens followed inevitably from her husband's illnesses, and Cvetaeva herself seems never to have reproached Sergej Ėfron for not sharing the responsibilities of providing for their family.¹⁰ Yet by the end of the Czechoslovakia years and with increasing intensity during the years in Vanves, Meudon, Clamart, and Paris, Marina Cvetaeva not only had to earn money to feed and clothe herself and her family, but she had as well to buy and prepare the food, clean the house, educate her children, seek paid public readings and frequent personal loans, and somehow find time and space to write the poetry and prose that could produce revenue. All of this is painfully chronicled in Cvetaeva's letters. I begin with a few citations from her years in Všenory, not in order to diminish the claim that her circumstances worsened later, but to show her frame of mind even in a comparatively kinder time and place.

Life, what have I seen of it except slop buckets and trash bins? How can I, being of sound mind, love life? (1924; NP, 89)

A worker goes to a bar after work, and rightly so. I am a worker without a bar, an eternal factory. (1924; NP, 104–105)

I move between the stove (water for the wash) and the desk, like a sleepwalker, like a pendulum that thinks. This winter has been the most muffled of my life, as if I were buried in snow. (1925; NP, 113)

It's now more difficult for me than ever before: my daughter is in school, I am alone with my little boy, with the housekeeping, the evenings, writing, worries about my husband—that is, alone with my two hands. (1930; NP, 406)

You cannot imagine the poverty in which I live. I have no means to earn a living except my writing. My husband is sick and cannot work. My daughter earns *5 francs a day* on her knitted hats, and on this the four of us (I have a son, Georgij, who is 8) live—that is, we are simply slowly dying of hunger. (1933; PI, 212)¹¹

As for myself: since I rake out and keep heated three stoves, do the washing for three, do everything—go to the market, cook, wash dishes, etc.—I am the servant for everything and for everyone—I write little, in bits and pieces, lately—verses. In the spring it will be easier: I'll be rid of all the coal and ashes [. . .] (1935; PT, 131)

[. . .] there are four of us, but one set of hands—mine. (1936; PI, 230)¹²

Cvetaeva perceived, at least on occasion, that this situation was not separable from the social roles that she as a woman was expected to fulfill. She wrote in 1930:

Sometimes I think that a life like this, with my ceaseless labor, is nonetheless undeserved. It has killed me, my fortitude, my unyielding pride, as if I were all powerful: lifting, casting things off, carrying, *bearing*. If I were like all the women of my circle (NB! do I even have a circle?!), then people would be doing everything for me and I would be watching. The woman would watch, and the writer would write. (PT, 85)

Cvetaeva separates herself from other women of her “circle,” but that is because she imagines that they lead the ideal lives of women for whom domestic chores are performed by others. The final sentence still asserts an opposition between women and writers in Cvetaeva’s imagination of herself; this opposition will reemerge in her Puškin essays, where she reformulates the problem (how can women write?) still more sharply.

A second point about Cvetaeva’s material circumstances during the years of the Puškin texts needs to be noted. Her circle of friends, indeed the people who both filled her imagination and sustained her financially, was increasingly composed of women. Though Cvetaeva maintained friendships and love affairs with several men during the years in emigration,¹³ many of these connections to men seem episodic when compared to the emotional richness of Cvetaeva’s attachments to women like Anna Teskova, Ol’ga Černova-Kol’basina, Salomeja Andronikova-Gal’pern, and Vera (Muromceva) Bunina.¹⁴

Again, Cvetaeva’s letters provide frank testimony. In a letter asking Anna Teskova to arrange for her next public reading, Cvetaeva writes:

[. . .] in general, an evening under the sign of *women* is needed [. . .] — On women’s role in the arrangements. On women’s hands. I believe in them, I know them. [. . .] Women live by means of sympathy. Besides, in our particular case, women take pride in their own, joining in and attaching themselves. People often laugh at women’s journals. To me they are dearer than men’s journals with their political back-biting and gossip [. . .]. (1929; PT, 80)

In 1931, Cvetaeva notes that only women help her, in 1932 that a recent reading of hers was attended mostly by women (PT, 90 and 101).¹⁵

A still more pointed sense that Cvetaeva’s world was increasingly made up of other women, not all of them positive figures, emerges in one of her Puškin essays, “Moj Puškin.” Here, recollections of childhood show a world almost entirely populated by women like Cvetaeva’s nanny, teacher, and nearly all the family’s visitors. Cvetaeva, for example, recalls narrating Puškin’s *Cygany* (*The Gypsies*) to her nanny and the nanny’s female visitor; she associates the first volumes of Puškin’s writings that she sees with the room of Valerija, her half-sister; she defies a teacher, Nadežda Brjusova, and her mother by adamantly preferring *Evgenij Onegin* to the Puškin folktales deemed more appropriate to a child’s tastes. Most powerful of all these women is Cvetaeva’s mother, in some ways a negative figure in the essay (disapproving, denying, showing indifference), and yet one with whom Cvetaeva identifies in a signal passage. Cvetaeva has begun by recalling

how her mother, like Tat'jana in *Evgenij Onegin*, was married to an older man and made to forsake a man whom she loved.

When my grandfather, A. D. Mein, made her choose between her beloved and himself, she chose—my father, and not her beloved [. . .]. Tat'jana had an influence not only on my whole life, but on the very fact of my existence: were there no Tat'jana in Puškin, there would be no me.

Because *this* is the way that women read poets, and not any other. (IP 2, 262–263)

Women, Cvetaeva concludes, read in a way that affects their lives, allowing literature a powerful role in their crucial choices and in the ways that those choices take on meaning.

Thus, when Cvetaeva reads her own past and when she reads Puškin in “Moj Puškin,” she does so as a woman, to use her terms.¹⁶ She sees her childhood and the literary texts of the past as capable of explaining the future. Put differently, her memories provide ample opportunity for Cvetaeva to reflect upon the conditions under which she writes. It is Cvetaeva's theory of “reading like a woman” that brings an autobiography of the present into her Puškin essays.

When Cvetaeva takes as an example another famous passage from *Evgenij Onegin* (Evgenij's speech to Tat'jana in the garden), she foresees her own life-long pride and independence. She writes a sequence of staccato sentences that turn memories of the past into insight about the writer's present.

A lesson in courage. A lesson in pride. A lesson in loyalty. A lesson in fate. A lesson in solitude. (IP 2, 262)

It is that last move to solitude that gives one pause, not only because it is palpably a reference to Cvetaeva's state of mind in 1937, but also because a strange loneliness does indeed pervade the thickly populated childhood memories of “Moj Puškin.” Every recollection of the essay is told as if the moments ought to have been shared: ideas are framed in conversation, each discovery is before an audience, travel is with her family, even reading was part of an exploration of a shared heritage. Yet the audiences are frequently uncomprehending, the responses from mother or teacher critical, the feelings that Cvetaeva remembers at odds with those of people she loved. The impression of separateness despite family intimacies is very much like what Mark Slonim, for example, observed about Cvetaeva's relations with her husband and children (Slonim, 374–377).

The solitude within “Moj Puškin” leads to Cvetaeva's final pages in the essay about the theme of parting in Puškin, as exemplified in his famous poem “K morju” (“To the Sea”). Distance from a beloved landscape, as in “K morju,” merges with the threat of distance from one's ability to write (the conjunction depends on Cvetaeva's childhood confusion and adult punning on “stixija” and “stixi”). The obstacle to writing, strange as it seems

turns out to be desire. At one point, when Cvetaeva tries to articulate what it is about the journey to the sea that has so aroused her emotions, she lists all her (women) travel companions—Asja, Valerija, the governess Marija Genrixovna, the maid Ariša—and she asks what it is that she wanted from them. She can come up with nothing tangible. Cvetaeva concludes that, for all her desire, she could not say, or name, anything (IP 2, 276). Near the end of the essays, there is a scene where written language rescues Cvetaeva from impossible desires. She writes:

The sea is blue—and salty.

And suddenly, turning my back to it, I write on the cliff with a broken-off piece of the cliff:

Farewell, free element!

The verses are long, and I started as high up as my arm could reach, but the verses, I know from experience, are so long that there is no cliff that's big enough, and another one just as smooth is not to be found nearby, and so I keep making my letters smaller and smaller, I crowd and crowd the lines, the last ones are completely miniscule, and I know that any minute now a wave will come and not let me write to the end, and I won't get what I desire—what desire?—oh, to the sea!—but does that mean I have no desire? well, in any case, even *without* any desire, I have to write to the end, *before* the wave, write *all of it before* the wave, and the wave is already coming, and just then I manage to sign:

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—and everything is washed away, as if licked away by a tongue, and everything is wet again, and the slate is clean, it's black again, like *that* granite. . . (IP 2, 278)¹⁷

This sublime act of inscription, an extraordinary closure for “Moj Puškin,” can be read as an allegory for the situation in which Cvetaeva found herself in 1937. The act of writing a line of verse in a space where the letters will not fit, the attempt to write faster in order to finish before a wave erases the letters, the rush of emotions causing her to wonder what desire moved her to write in the first place, the repeated determination to write even when she has forgotten her desires, the sight of it all being washed away—this tight sequence enacts precisely the pressures on the mature Cvetaeva not to write and the possibility of having to watch her work disappear before her eyes.

It is in the companion essay to “Moj Puškin,” “Puškin i Pugačev,” that Cvetaeva's images and exclamations show the underside of this identification as a woman. In a stunning reversal, Cvetaeva allies herself with a violently masculine character. Once again, she brings her childhood self into the argument, now in order to explain why the only magical character in Puškin's novella *Kapitanskaja dočka* (*The Captain's Daughter*, 1836) is the rebel leader Pugačev. She is comparing Pugačev to Catherine II:

The contrast between Pugačev's blackness and her whiteness, between his liveliness and her self-importance, his cheerful kindness and her condescendingness, his peasant ways and her ladylike ways—all of this could not but turn a child's heart away from her. (IP 2, 291)

The contrast between black and white can be found throughout much of Cvetaeva's writings about Puškin; she begins “Moj Puškin” with the image

of black figures dueling in a field of snow, *i.e.*, Naumov's often reproduced painting of Puškin's duel with D'Anthès; she also recalls the black monument of Puškin on Tverskoj Boulevard in Moscow. In the first of her "Stixi k Puškinu" Cvetaeva denounces efforts to translate Puškin's dark defiance into pallid monumentality and there, as elsewhere, she makes clear that one source of her association of Puškin with the color black is his African heritage. In *Kapitanskaja dočka*, the locus of black imagery against a white backdrop is the first appearance of Pugačev, a dark spot in the snowstorm. She asserts her own connection, by the act of writing, with that blackness, in a memorably telescoped line from the essay, "My business is to look endlessly at the thing that looms black in the snowstorm" (IP 2, 292).

By contrast, there is Catherine the Great's whiteness, her blankness, her representation as a nothing, an empty space, a sign of lack. In this she is linked to the only other female character in Puškin's novella about whom Cvetaeva writes, Maša Mironova, the Captain's daughter.

Maša is the blank space of very first love, Catherine is the blank space of every author's non-love. . . (IP 2, 292)

Cvetaeva has inferred Puškin's negative attitude toward Catherine the Great to legitimate her own, and a sustained reading of Puškin's works could well support this implicit claim.¹⁸ Yet the intensity with which she expresses her dislike of Catherine is less an explication of Puškin than Cvetaeva's own fantasy of dethroning the Empress. She writes, in a complex but lucid chain of figures:

Against the fiery background of Pugačev—the fires, lootings, snowstorms, nomad tents, feasts—this one, in her nightcap and quilted coat, on a little bench among all the little bridges and leaves,¹⁹ she seemed to me a huge white fish, whitefish. And even unsalted. (The basic trait of Catherine is her astonishing blandness. Not a single significant, not a single word of her own remained after her—except for the successful inscription on the Falconet monument, that is, a signature. Only *phrases*. The Catherine II of the French letters and mediocre comedies, as a person, is a model of mediocrity.) (IP 2, 291)

I take the crux of this passage to be Cvetaeva's explication of Catherine's lack of savor as a form of linguistic inadequacy.

To understand that linkage, one might recall the ways that Cvetaeva shows her love for linguistic magic. In the first pages of "Puškin i Pugačev," for example, Cvetaeva begins her rhapsody about Pugačev by investing him with the magic of language. The single word "vožatyj" ("guide"), the epithet that first refers to Pugačev in Puškin's novella and the word by which Cvetaeva wishes to name the whole novel, is for Cvetaeva sufficient signal of the fullness of Pugačev's presence in *Kapitanskaja dočka*. "Vožatyj" is one of those physically magic words whose magic inheres in their sound alone. Such words, Cvetaeva says, have a capacity to signify and to evoke emotion even before they are spoken ("words that before they are *spoken*, already signify words that have significance and sense unto themselves" IP 2, 280).

By comparison, the words associated with Catherine are striking for their absence of any meaning at all. The reason that Cvetaeva gives for Catherine's "astonishing blandness" is that she left behind no words of her own, none save a single and, as it turns out, quite problematic, signature (the signature on Falconet's monument of Peter the Great, the Bronze Horseman, which was executed during Catherine's reign). The relation of "Catherine" to Russia's most famous woman ruler inverts the way that "vožatyj" names Ėmel'jan Pugačev, Russia's most famous peasant rebel. Born Sophie Friederike Auguste von Anhalt-Zerbst, Catherine was renamed when she married. What results is neither the surname of the father, which would have given her a gendered mark of origin, nor a married name marking her as her husband's property, nor even an echo of her original given name which would have differentiated her among her siblings. The signature, which, as one scholar has written, is normally a metaphor of unproblematic paternity (Miller, 50), comes to reveal how this ruler lacks authority. The title Catherine II signifies solely the power of the state; given the preference that Puškin and Cvetaeva shared for pretenders over legitimate rulers, her power cannot but be false.

Like Puškin in *Kapitanskaja dočka*, Cvetaeva in "Puškin i Pugačev" turns Catherine II into the novella's genuine pretender. Cvetaeva literally lowers Catherine's historical and personal status when she claims that Catherine's single surviving utterance is a signature, for Cvetaeva first says that Catherine is known by an inscription ("nadpis'") and only then corrects herself to call this a signature (podpis'). The move from "nadpis'" to "podpis'" converts a "writing over" to a "writing below," an elevation to a fall. Even without this play on prefixes, Cvetaeva has made her point: Catherine's lack of a verbal legacy means Catherine's lack.

To say that what women lack defines them is to travel a path explored in many of Freud's writings and embellished by recent followers of Jacques Lacan. The Freudian observation may now sound crude (that nothing makes such a difference for the "configuration of femininity" as the "lack of a penis"; Freud, 117), but it has enabled Lacan and feminists using his theories to see the marginalization of women in a social order that obsessively focuses on "the signification of the phallus."²⁰ Among Lacan's one-time followers, Luce Irigaray has explored how women's troubled access to social power has made women's access to language equally problematic.²¹

The threat of silence is, I want to suggest, what is at the heart of Cvetaeva's repudiation of Catherine the Great. The phrase with which Cvetaeva had joined Catherine to Maša Mironova, an important phrase because it links the novella's two women as women, was "blank space" ("pustoe mesto"). That phrase recurs in the third of Cvetaeva's three Puškin essays, the earlier "Natal'ja Gončarova." This essay, whose ostensible subject is the Russian émigré artist Natal'ja Sergeevna Gončarova, digresses richly into

the life of Natal'ja Nikolaevna Gončarova, later Puškina, still later Lanskaia, and it is to Natal'ja Nikolaevna that the "blank space" refers.

Natal'ja Gončarova is *simply* the fateful woman, that blank space to which one is drawn, around which all forces and passions collide. (IP 2, 301)

Unlike Catherine the Great, whom Cvetaeva found physically repulsive ("it would even be repulsive to sit next to her on the little bench" IP 2, 291), Natal'ja Gončarova is repeatedly referred to as beautiful; like nearly everyone who has written about Puškin's wife and widow, Cvetaeva enigmatically intones this fact as if it explained Natal'ja Nikolaevna's entire being.²² Cvetaeva willingly details her physical presence with unusual particularity.

Yet, as with Catherine the Great, Natal'ja Nikolaevna's speechlessness emerges as significant.

What was Gončarova according to the testimony of her contemporaries? A beauty. [. . .] Silent. If there were words, they were empty. Wordless to an amazing degree. Everyone remarks on her smile, carriage, eyes, shoulders, even her ears—no one remarks on her speech. (IP 1, 302)

Once again, the woman's silence merits Cvetaeva's implicit criticism, as well as the reiteration that the wordless beauty is a blank space, a nobody.

And apart from Puškin, D'Anthès, Lanskoj? In and of herself? She did not exist. Natal'ja Nikolaevna is totally contained in the day-to-day biography, in the facts (it's a different matter, what kind of facts), as was Helen of Troy in the battle of the Greeks and the Trojans. Helen of Troy, apart from the involuntarily caused events that she suffered simply does not exist. A blank space between the palms of hands enfolded in action. Separate them, and you get air. (IP 1, 304)

The comparison to Helen of Troy, which Cvetaeva repeats in the essay, suggests that she and Natal'ja Gončarova were both women whose fatal beauty led to the deaths of men that were definitive for their cultures. Cvetaeva thus compares Natal'ja Gončarova to Helen of Troy in a way that condemns her. When she compares her to Puškin, the same thing occurs. Stressing Gončarova's emptiness or lack, Cvetaeva writes of the "attraction of a genius, of a genius's overfullness, toward the empty space." She continues: "He wanted a nothing because he himself was everything" (IP 1, 301).

As in all of her writings about Puškin, Cvetaeva to some extent identifies with him in this passage. If one accepts Lacan's analysis of how the codings of sex in language have guaranteed an imagination of women as lacking authority, then it is hardly surprising that Cvetaeva, as a writer, asserts her connection to a man of nearly boundless verbal authority. Thus, as in the play on prefixes quoted above and in many other passages, Cvetaeva frequently displays verbal pyrotechnics in precisely those instances when she writes about women's silence.

The same paradox is at work throughout the essay on “Natal’ja Gončarova” as Cvetaeva moves between characterizations of an important woman artist and a woman known only as Puškin’s wife. Cvetaeva distinguishes the artist Natal’ja Sergeevna Gončarova from the non-biography of Puškin’s wife by giving her a “purely masculine biography” (IP 1, 304). Gončarova’s achievements as a painter, sculptor, and designer earn her a status equal to that of Puškin. As Cvetaeva lauds Gončarova’s immense capacity for work, she also compares her to Puškin.

Work—that is the fate of Natal’ja Gončarova, a fate that Puškin would not allow (whom? or what?) to replace, to take the place of, the other Gončarova. (IP 1, 316)

Cvetaeva also claims that Natal’ja Gončarova resembles not the great aunt from whom she was descended and after whom she was named, Puškin’s wife, but Puškin himself (IP 1, 326), as if the artist’s only genealogy involved (male) artists. Similarly, Cvetaeva stresses that Gončarova’s husband, Mixail Larionov, was an influence on her, though she asserts that they are of equal importance as artists (IP 1, 328). Cvetaeva even acknowledges self-consciously that the name of Mixail Larionov has been repeated several times in the essay.

This apparent resolution of gender conflict in Cvetaeva’s Puškin prose, that women are silent and, when they speak (or are productive as artists) they can be identified with men, is disrupted in the essay “Natal’ja Gončarova” as early as its epigraph, taken from the verse of Karolina Pavlova. Nor does the genealogy exclude women fully; a lovely interlude recalls Natal’ja Gončarova’s grandmother as she stayed in her swing, moving back and forth, to avoid marriage. Other details and digressions turn on the fact that Natal’ja Sergeevna Gončarova was a woman. In one scene, Cvetaeva feigns a quotation from an observer of Gončarova’s talents, who is delineating Gončarova from among contemporaries like Larionov or D’jagilev: “The most famous of these leading artists is a woman—her name is Natal’ja Gončarova” (IP 1, 322). A few pages later, Cvetaeva recounts an anecdote about Gončarova’s visit to a university church in Salamanca. During a monk’s guided tour, when he passionately explains that no woman’s foot has ever stepped upon the sacred pulpit of their church, the visitors turn their heads to regard the pulpit and see, to their horror, that Natal’ja Gončarova is standing on the sacred pulpit, listening attentively (IP 1, 326).

Cvetaeva manages, as well, to exhibit strong sympathy for the “other” Natal’ja Gončarova, for example, when she comments on Puškin’s having given names to their children: “at that moment all of my sympathy was with her; the mother’s right, having brought them into the world, to be present in their names, too” (IP 1 300).²³ Cvetaeva’s compassion for Natal’ja Nikolaevna Gončarova extends to an extraordinary insight into how much Puškin’s wife was deprived of any sense of her own life. She notes:

Her non-participation in their birth, non-participation in their naming—one has to think, her non-participation in their conception. (IP 1, 300)²⁴

Cvetaeva's last observation in this triad, that Natal'ja Nikolaevna did not even participate in the conception of her children, conceals in its abstract language a shattering thought—that this woman, whose sexuality has been thought to define her entire being, lived her marriage to Puškin with her sexuality denied her.

So much has been written about the dualism of body and soul, of "byt" and "byt'e" in Cvetaeva (Elnickaja, Knapp, Vitins, and Švejcer, *Byt i byt'e*), that it may seem at first that denial of the body would have been perfectly acceptable to Cvetaeva, whose more ethereal, spiritual needs are always given precedence. Yet it is precisely in the realm of female sexuality that this dualism loses its force to govern Cvetaeva's thinking, for the physical attributes and psychic desires of a woman's body appear often and powerfully in her texts. Examples from "Natal'ja Gončarova" could be extended (both from descriptions of Natal'ja Nikolaevna and from presentations of the sculpture by Natal'ja Sergeevna), but I want instead to turn to Cvetaeva's poetry, in part to show just how far-reaching are the themes explored here. I will look at one mythic poem ("Sivilla" ["The Sybil"], 1922), one personal lyric ("Pod šal'ju" ["Under the shawl"], 1924), and one Puškin poem (the fourth in the cycle "Stixi k Puškinu"). Together they show how the body of the woman and the body of the poet can be represented in the same images.

In "Sivilla," Cvetaeva invokes the Greek myth of the ageless and bodiless Sybil, whose entire being is her voice.²⁵ As an archetypal figure for the poet, the Sybil as Cvetaeva represents her does not, precisely, enact a denial of the body (as noted by Gove, 248–250); the traces of the body not only emerge vividly in "Sivilla," but their gendered contours are seen as well. The images of a specifically feminine sexuality are striking, both the violent entry into and exit from the Sybil's body in the first part of the poem and the metaphors of enclosure found in the second part ("Your body is the cave of your Voice" SP 3, 25). In the third and final part of the poem, the Sybil speaks to an infant, invoking both the materiality of birth (its blood and sweat) and her capacity as a woman to support life ("Cling to my breast, Infant" SP 3, 25). The body that becomes the cave of the Sybil's voice, then, has retained imagistically its feminine attributes; the Sybil speaks the physical memories of sexual connection, childbirth, and lactation even as she represents the verbal authority of the poet.

In "Pod šal'ju," Cvetaeva writes further into this conjunction of the female body's capacities to give life and to speak oracular truths. Her questions to a generic "woman" form a riddle of pregnancy. Here are the first two and final stanzas:

Запечатленный, как рот оракула—
 Рот твой, гадавший многим.
 Женщина, что от дозору спрятала
 Меж языком и небом?

Уж не глазами, а в вечность дырами
 Очи, котлом ведерным!
 Женщина, яму какую вырыла
 И заложила дерном?
 [. . .]
 Точно усопшую вопрошаю,
 Душу, к корням пригубившую. . .
 Женщина, что у тебя под шалью?
 —Будущее! (SP 3, 110)²⁶

In “Pod šal’ju,” Cvetaeva merges the female body, invoked quite concretely, with the act of creating poetry, as, for example, when she asks what the woman hides between the tongue and the roof of her mouth, as if the child/the future were in her mouth. In “Pod šal’ju,” as in “Sivilla,” the female sexual self can become a metaphor for poetic creation by means of child-birth images, which Cvetaeva would have learned from the Romantic poetic tradition that she loved so well. Rather than imaging poetry as progeny, Cvetaeva reverses tenor and vehicle to transform pregnancy into the telling of the future. Her use of female generativity as a metaphor for literary creativity departs from the opposition between mothering and writing noted by scholars of Western women’s writing (Johnson, Suleiman).²⁷ Cvetaeva shows no inclination here to reject women’s role as giver of life in order to take on the role of bearing words.

In “Pod šal’ju,” Cvetaeva writes of the body’s cavities, the mouth, pitted eyes, the metaphorical “rut” of the womb, as if she were exploring not just what is under the woman’s shawl but what is under the shawl of her skin. She turns the woman’s body inside out, imagining not the physical object of the woman upon whom others would gaze, but sights that the social eye cannot see. Cvetaeva has found a way to bring the body of a woman into her text that prevents her from becoming an object, but there are important questions raised by this move to invoke the body by imaging its insides.

In her “Stixi k Puškinu,” Cvetaeva brings Puškin’s body into the text in a comparable way. The passage that I am about to quote exists in a complicated context, which should at least be summarized. Cvetaeva has already represented Puškin’s physicality in the text, both with references to his sexual vibrancy and with remarks about the Moscow Puškin monument. These two gestures are inseparable, as they are in “Moj Puškin,” when Cvetaeva draws Puškin into the narrative of *Kamennyj gost’* (*The Stone Guest*, 1830),

imagining him as the statue who comes to visit as an incongruous Com-mendatore. Thus it is important that, when Cvetaeva draws the materiality of Puškin's body into "Stixi k Puškinu," in the fourth poem in the cycle, she does so in a way that puts aside this vocabulary of sexual desire. As in "Pod šal'ju," there are hints that this is a lifeless body (in "Pod šal'ju," the last stanza quoted above; in "Stixi k Puškinu," the references to the athleticism of the dead body laid out).

Yet Cvetaeva brings Puškin's body into these poems to convey the energy and will to freedom with which Puškin combats Russian inertness. In the muscles and veins of Puškin's body, Cvetaeva reads the conflicting tale of Puškin's life, using images of imprisonment, domination, and resistance.

И арестанта,
 Что на канате
 Собственных жил
 Из каземата—
 Соколом взмыл!
 [. . .]
 Кто-то, на фуру
 Несший: «Атлета
 Мускулатура,
 А не поэта!» (SP 3, 154–155)²⁸

By bringing the body of the male poet into her poems to him, both in this section and in the references to Puškin's sexuality, Cvetaeva has treated him as she did the notion of the woman poet, turning the body inside out. As in "Pod šal'ju," she has peeled back the skin of Puškin's body to reveal his musculature. She has given a body to the name that most powerfully symbolizes the power to write poetry in Russian. As in "Moj Puškin," Cvetaeva's Puškin was not just the treasured words of his poems, nor even the legends surrounding his life. He stood as proof that the physical sense of lived experience could course through the veins of poetry.

In a poem of 1934, Cvetaeva joins the flow of verse to that of blood. As these metaphors suggest, her poetry performs in its verbal recombinations and dense sounds an embodiment of the words she uses. Just as Cvetaeva can divide words in a verse line into separated syllables as a way to make language perform the acts of separation she writes about (for example, in *Poëma konca* [*Poem of the End*] or the poem to Pasternak, "Ras-stojanie: versty, mili" ["Dis-tance: versts, miles"]), so here, when Cvetaeva describes the unstoppable rush of blood and rain, her words penetrate one another and the verse lines overflow.

Вскрыл жилы: неостановимо,
 Невосстановимо хлещет жизнь.
 Подставляйте миски и тарелки!
 Всякая тарелка будет—мелкой,
 Миска—плоской.
 Через край—и мимо—
 В земле черную, питать тростник.
 Невозвратно, неостановимо,
 Невосстановимо хлещет стих. (SP 3, 174)²⁹

I have quoted this poem in part because it expresses so aptly the tonality of Cvetaeva's last decade in Europe, both a violent articulation of the poet's pain and an uncompromising unwillingness to stop the flow. In this stance Cvetaeva quite resembles Puškin as she has portrayed him, motivated by resistance and courage and conviction.

Thus the poem's violence and the images of the veins pouring out their blood. Cvetaeva reverses the notion of poems as children; rather than giving life, giving up life is what is equated with writing verse. The line of verse becomes blood on the page, yet this poem is not so much suicidal as it is an inscription of how all writing, for Cvetaeva, was like death. Here one has the other side of the feminine empowerment that is, without question, written into Cvetaeva's Puškin texts. Cvetaeva confronts the obstacles to women's writing and finds strategies to imagine the writing woman, but she does not transform this victory into cause for celebration. Given her sense of the tragedy of Puškin's life, and given the difficulties of Cvetaeva's own life during the decade of her Puškin texts, one would be willfully distorting the story of their production to read here too profound an affirmation. Within two years of the last Puškin essays, Cvetaeva would follow her family to the Soviet Union (1939); within two more years, she would have died, a suicide in Elabuga (1941). Cvetaeva lived to prove that the future really could be hidden beneath the shawl of women's writing, that embodied words told oracles both true and tragic.³⁰

NOTES

- 1 Gove has done ground-breaking work on Cvetaeva's views of women, but few have pursued her leads in the ten years since her essay appeared. Some important new thoughts have been offered in Heldt and King, limited largely by the scope of their respective projects (Heldt discusses mostly women's prose autobiographies; King is writing a book review).
- 2 In my reading of the nexus between writing and the body, I will depend upon the theories of French feminists and, more fundamentally, upon the concern for a "materialist" approach to the physical world of written texts and the representation of the body in literature advanced by Elaine Scarry.

- 3 Among Cvetaeva's other texts to or about Puškin, the most important are "Iskusstvo pri svete sovesti" (1932), an essay centered on Cvetaeva's reading of Puškin's play "Pir vo vremja čumy"; two poems about Natal'ja Gončarova, "Ščastie ili grust'—" (1916) and "Psixēja" (1920); and an early poem in which Cvetaeva imagines meeting Puškin, "Vstreča s Puškinym" (1913). These, together with a very few other excerpts from Cvetaeva's prose, are included in recent Soviet editions of Cvetaeva's *Moj Puškin*.
- 4 For a good survey of writings about Puškin in emigration, see the first chapter of Scotto.
- 5 Feminist revisions of Bloom have been so influential as to require note; Gilbert and Gubar have considered the impact of masculine predecessors on women writing in English. On a smaller scale, Homans in *Women Writers and Poetic Identity* treats the same subject with great subtlety.
- 6 The poem begins "Бич жандармов, бог студентов/ Желчь мужей, услада жен" (SP 3, 148).
- 7 In *Bearing the Word*, Homans noted that citing or re-interpreting male texts was one of four literary practices that permitted women writers to "bear the word" (29–33). While Cvetaeva's situation as a Russian writer, in exile, in the early twentieth century, and largely a poet, differs substantially from the concrete circumstances of the writers whom Homans studies, the matrix of motherhood, male language, and female subordination continues to work in Cvetaeva's world.
- 8 For a description of the Puškin essays as autobiographical, see Heldt, 98–102. In *Byt i byt'e Mariny Cvetaevoj*, Viktorija Švejcer offers a rich discussion of the essays' intertwining investigations of childhood with the meaning of poetry (65, 391–401).
- 9 In an essay about Cvetaeva's last years in Europe, Irma Kudrova has also suggested that the Puškin essays make reference to the time of their writing. Cvetaeva lauds Pugačev's overwhelming charms, charms that let one look beyond his villainy. Kudrova suggests that Cvetaeva is also writing about her own blindness to her husband. The essay details Sergej Ėfron's NKVD associations and carefully assesses how much Cvetaeva knew about these activities; see her "Poslednie gody čužbiny," 219.
- 10 Karlinsky wavers in the credence that he puts in Cvetaeva's complaints about material hardships; at one point he stresses her tendency to mythologize everything, including the sense of isolation and deprivation (133–134 and 173–178).
- 11 In a letter of 1934, Cvetaeva compares herself to Katerina Ivanovna Marmeladova, the woman driven mad by her poverty in Dostoevskij's *Prestuplenie i nakazanie* (PI, 216).
- 12 In a letter to Boris Pasternak of 1935, Cvetaeva offers a telling juxtaposition. In one paragraph she describes herself as never without a child in hand; in the next, she remarks that Robert Schumann forgot that he had children. See Cvetaeva, "Pis'ma M. Cvetaevoj," 198.
- 13 As chronicled by various memoirists and biographers; see Kudrova, "Dom na gore," Karlinsky, and Slonim. Cvetaeva's deep attachment to Boris Pasternak bears special mention.
- 14 The importance of friendships with women in Cvetaeva's life might be seen as an instance of what Adrienne Rich has called a "lesbian continuum," designating a range of affective relationships that are perceived by the women involved as central to their lives. Cvetaeva's sexual relationships with Sof'ja Parnok would thus become one point on the continuum.
- 15 In his memoir of Cvetaeva, Mark Slonim has disputed her claim that only women helped her and offered himself, D. Svjatopolk-Mirskij, and V. I. Lebedev as instances of men who provided financial and other support (Slonim, 382). Without considering whether or not men helped Cvetaeva as much as women, Viktorija Švejcer reviews the poverty of Cvetaeva's life in Paris and her sources of help; she stresses the importance of Salomeja Andronikova-Gal'pern (in *Byt i byt'e Mariny Cvetaevoj*, 415–417). What matters, in the end, is not whether individual men came to Cvetaeva's rescue on occasion or even on frequent occasion, but whether she perceived her support as coming principally from women.

- 16 In her reading of *Car'-devica* (1920), Anya Kroth has noted that "the poet [. . .] divides the *reading public* into men and women" (577). I cite this observation to support the notion that Cvetaeva conceived of differences in the ways that men and women read, and thus to advance the idea that Cvetaeva advocated and herself exercised the capacity to read as a woman, though in all fairness it should be added that Anya Kroth's approach to Cvetaeva's "androgyny" is explicitly non-feminist.
- 17 Compare the exalted enthusiasm for sea-cliff inscriptions in a letter to Vološin of 1911 (Cvetaeva, "Pis'ma M. Cvetaevoj M. Vološinu," 238), as opposed to the hostility toward the sea found often in the later letters to Anna Teskova. Catherine Ciepiela has helped to clarify this point for me.
- 18 For a good account of Puškin's comments about Catherine II, see Jakobson. Puškin scholars have long noted his preference in *Kapitanskaja dočka* for the rebel Pugačev over Catherine (Blagoj, Lotman). In his historical writings, Puškin's comments about Catherine were not favorable. In his "Notes on Eighteenth-Century Russian History" (1822), he noted that "if to rule means to know the weakness of the human soul and how to use it, then on these grounds Catherine merits the amazement of posterity" (Puškin, *Polnoe sobranie sočinenij* 8, 91); in a diary entry of 1834, Puškin wrote that "the end of her reign was revolting" (8, 39).
- 19 Cvetaeva's description here—the nightcap, the quilted coat, the leaves and bridges—is taken from Puškin's descriptions in *Kapitanskaja dočka*, where he depends on a 1791 painting by Borovikovskij showing the Empress informally seated in her garden. Puškin knew an 1827 engraving from the painting; see Gillel'son and Mušina, 164–167.
- 20 This is the title of one of Lacan's most influential essays. The territory that I map out here has been surveyed by many others. A feminist perspective on the transition from Freud to Lacan can be found in the first chapter of Jane Gallop's *The Daughter's Seduction*.
- 21 See, in particular, the essays entitled "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine" and "When Our Lips Speak Together" in Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One*.
- 22 Cvetaeva's reading was based largely on Ščegolev's *Duël' i smert' Puškina* and Veresaev's *Puškin v žizni*. Ščegolev's outright hostility to Natal'ja Nikolaevna has been corrected by Obodovskaja and Dement'ev in *Natal'ja Nikolaevna Puškina*; they have the advantage of Ščegolev (and Cvetaeva) in access to documents discovered only in the last decade, principally Natal'ja Nikolaevna's letters to her brother.
- 23 Cvetaeva's involvement in naming two of her three children has been recorded in several places and, for both Ariadna Sergeevna (Al'ja) and Georgij Sergeevič (Mur), Cvetaeva was in conflict with her husband. Cvetaeva's comments about the name Ariadna are quoted in Saakjanc, 43–44; her succumbing to Ėfron's preference for Georgij over Boris is chronicled in many of her letters (for example, NP 129, 132, 139).
- 24 Unlike the contempt with which Cvetaeva regards Catherine II in her "Puškin i Pugačev" essay, Cvetaeva's kindness toward Natal'ja Gončarova suggests an incipient awareness of the pain and frustration felt by anyone consigned to life as a "blank space." Such generosity moves far beyond the black and white clarity of Cvetaeva's later essay, and it can be read as an instance of Cvetaeva's reading "like a woman" (recall her comment about wanting women to come to her public reading, cited above: "Women live by means of sympathy").
- 25 Olga Peters Hasty has given an excellent formal analysis of this poem, along with much relevant biographical and literary-historical information.
- 26 The poem would translate literally as follows: "Sealed, like the mouth of an oracle, Your mouth, which has foretold to many, Woman, what have you hidden from view Between your tongue and the roof of your mouth? Your eyes, like cauldrons, are not really eyes, but holes into eternity? Woman, what kind of rut did you dig And then plant with grass?"

- [. . .] It's like asking a sleeping Soul that has tasted of (medicinal) roots. . . Woman, what do you have under your shawl? — The future!"
- 27 The topic of motherhood as it is represented in Cvetaeva's writings deserves an entire essay. One awaits Lily Feiler's psycho-biography of Cvetaeva, mentioned by Karlinsky as in progress, for the necessary foundation for such a reading.
- 28 The quoted lines translate as follows: "The muscles of a gymnast And prisoner Who, on the rope Of his own veins Made it out of the casemate Like a falcon! [. . .] Someone, on a stretcher Borne: "An athlete's Musculature, Not a poet's."
- 29 The poem translates literally as: "Opened veins: unstoping, Unceasing life pours out, Put the basins and bowls in place! Every bowl will be too small, Every basin too shallow. Over the edge—and through it—In black earth to nourish the reed. Not turning back, unstoping, Unceasing the verse pours out." In a fragment which she excised from the "Stixi k Puškinu," Cvetaeva grotesquely images the process by which poetry would be created from Puškin's dead body.
- Не обрeкать на полседний мрак,
Полную глухонeмoсть—
Тeлa, oбкарнaннoгo и тaк
Нoжницaми—в пoэмaх. (SP 3, 219)
- In literal translation: "One should not doom to the last darkness, To complete deaf-muteness, The body that has already been cut up By scissors and turned into poems."
- 30 I very much appreciate the comments about this essay offered by many people, including Catherine Ciepiela, Jane Costlow, Judith Vowles, Peter Scotto, *SEEJ*'s anonymous readers, and two audiences who heard it in earlier versions (at the 1987 AATSEEL meetings in San Francisco and at the Stanford University Humanities Center in 1988). My research has been generously supported by a Social Science Research Council grant for post-doctoral work in Soviet studies, a National Endowment for the Humanities grant for college teachers, and an Amherst College faculty research grant.

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