
Alyssa W. Dinega. *A Russian Psyche: The Poetic Mind of Marina Tsvetaeva*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2001. 285p.

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Although earlier critical studies by Simon Karlinsky and Viktoria Schweitzer first introduced anglophone readers to Marina Tsvetaeva, it has been only since the 1990s that critical curiosity about this major Russian poet has exploded. Beginning with several conferences marking the centenary of her birth in 1892, scholars of both Slavic and gender studies, as well as poets such as Joseph Brodsky, have addressed Tsvetaeva's unique fusion of *ars* and *bios*, reality and myth, Russian and classical traditions, transgression and tradition. Alyssa Dinega's *A Russian Psyche: The Poetic Mind of Marina Tsvetaeva* is an important addition to this expanding body of criticism, and she proves herself up to the challenge of deciphering critical questions of authority, gender, inspiration, and poetic practice in her deeply felt, beautifully written, and convincingly argued monograph.

In *A Russian Psyche*, Dinega poses several simple yet fundamental questions, including: "What does it mean for a woman to be a great poet, an inspired poet, a tragic poet, a poet of genius?" (4) and "[what was the nature of] the axiomatic conflict . . . between [Tsvetaeva's] gender and her poetry?" (27). The alterity of the female poetic genius and the place of one of western poetry's central myths—that of the (traditionally female) muse—constitute the core of her examination of Tsvetaeva's dialogue with poetic rivals and contemporaries. In Dinega's reading, Tsvetaeva's entire poetic trajectory constituted a search for an inspirational myth that would unify the dichotomies rending her psychological and poetic being. The book's organization is chronological, with individual chapters devoted to Tsvetaeva's poetic responses to Blok and Akhmatova, Pasternak, Rilke, and finally to Nikolai Gronskii and Anatolii Shteiger, lesser poets generation younger than Tsvetaeva. *A Russian Psyche* begins with brief analyses of several of Tsvetaeva's early lyric poems, and the last chapter devotes considerable attention to the autobiographical and theoretical essays (in particular "Art in the Light of Conscience") that dominated Tsvetaeva's writings in the decade before her death in 1941. However, the heart of Dinega's argument lies in her close readings of several of the poet's lyrical cycles and *poemy*, for it is here that Tsvetaeva's psychic evolution and mythopoetic project lie. Through these long or thematically linked poems, as well as through the text that was Tsvetaeva's life, Dinega capably tracks her subject's lifelong quest to break out of the "feminine" and into the "poetic" by creating a series of male muse figures. The focus of the book's first chapter is

Tsvetaeva's attempt to establish an identity independent of both Blok and Akhmatova by escaping into "the potent wake of poetry incarnate" (29), which culminates in the powerful 1921 *poema*, "On a Red Steed." This is followed by a brilliant analysis of "Wires," written during Tsvetaeva's passionate epistolary affair with Pasternak in 1923, that is equally grounded in biographical fact and mythological framework. Dinega sensitively ties Tsvetaeva's multi-faceted and transgressive appropriation of the Psyche and Cupid myth to her struggle with the conflicting demands that body and spirit make specifically on the female poet. The passionate ambivalence and resulting creative shock evident in several major works ("Attempt at a Room," "New Year's Letter," "Poem of the Air") generated by Tsvetaeva's brief, but again intense correspondence with Rainer Maria Rilke just before his death in December 1926 are illuminated in chapter three. In a final chapter, forebodingly subtitled "The End of the Line," Dinega gives a balanced and sympathetic analysis of the final ruptures between life and art, and of Tsvetaeva's ensuing acceptance of poetry's inability to transcend life's entrapments, including gender. Faced with a return to a totalitarian regime, no audience for her writings, and extremely difficult personal decisions, Tsvetaeva nevertheless emerges as a heroic, if tragic figure, given to maximalist solutions but responsible for her choices.

Dinega writes with considerable authority, nuance, and discernible pleasure about her subject's development into a poet with a coherent artistic and philosophical vision, one whose thought, while complex and often paradoxical and idiosyncratic, is consistent over her lifetime. Tsvetaeva's poetry is the epitome of intertextuality and Dinega is very good at extricating her subject's dialogues—overt and covert—with various literary interlocutors from Pushkin to Mayakovsky. Her translations of Tsvetaeva's verse are attentive to nuance and language, including the interplay of polyglotism in the case of Tsvetaeva and Rilke. Moreover, she is a scholar who engages eagerly with previous scholarship, acknowledging, challenging and correcting earlier readings of these and other poems with uncommon intellectual vigor and clarity. Dinega's interpretations present an optimal balance between close reading and broader cultural and ethical analysis—and in this she mirrors Tsvetaeva's own passions.

My one criticism of this otherwise excellent study is that while gender is central to Dinega's considerations of Tsvetaeva's struggle with her poetic identity, she does not engage as actively with the rich body of gender theory that clearly informs her analysis. Thus, while in many instances in *A Russian Psyche* Dinega conducts spirited dialogues with Tsvetaeva scholars and biographers such as Schweitzer, Hasty, and Feiler, she applies feminist and gender scholarship much

more narrowly. She touches only briefly on the role of gender for a poet such as Akhmatova, and leaves unexplored the implications of Tsvetaeva's liaison with the poet Sophie Parnok for her quest for an appropriate muse. A study that opens with the statement that "in envisioning herself as the energetic, degendered herald of poetry, she not only finds a way to surpass her femininity and enter the ranks of great poets, but she ingeniously repositions herself at the very forefront of creative endeavor" (23) raises expectations that current gender theory will play a larger role. On the other hand, few scholars bring to their endeavor the mix of talent as both reader and writer, rapport with her subject, and critical distance that we see in *A Russian Psyche*. Dinega has made a significant contribution to Tsvetaeva, Slavic, and gender studies. ✱