

ON WOMEN AND POETS: GENDER IN CVETAeva'S COMMEMORATIONS OF BRJUSOV AND VOLOŠIN

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Abstract

This article is devoted to an important but understudied aspect of the creative self-affirmations that Tsvetaeva accomplishes in her essays dedicated to other poets, namely her rethinking of gender and how it relates to poetry. The focus here is specifically on how Tsvetaeva cultivates these ideas in 'Geroi truda' and 'Zhivoe o zhivom' – essays Tsvetaeva dedicated to Valerij Briusov and Maksimilian Voloshin respectively. Skillfully negotiating between the imperative to champion the woman's cause on the one hand and what was to her the distasteful feminist separatism on the other, Cvetaeva promotes a natural affiliation of women and poetry that contravenes popular assessments of women poets as aberrations. Not content to be a poetess on a male stage, she seeks to dismantle extant norms and to reconceptualize gender in order to reconstitute the tradition. Ultimately she effects a radical realignment of poetry and gender so as to privilege not only the woman poet, but all women – whether or not they write.

Keywords: *Marina Tsvetaeva; Briusov; Voloshin; Women Poets; Gender*

[...] учиться можно не только на *стихах* поэта.
(Marina Cvetaeva, 'Geroj truda')

I. The essays that Cvetaeva writes in memoriam to poets who were important to her insist on the vibrant distinctiveness both of her subjects and of

her own subjectivity that reanimates them. Whether about Valerij Brjusov, Andrej Belyj, Maksimilian Vološin, Michail Kuzmin, or Rainer Maria Rilke, such essays are devoted not to capture or portraiture, but to the poet in action – both as a creative entity and a manifestation of that transpersonal poetic force by which he is subsumed. These are commemorations in which Cvetaeva documents also her own poetic identity.¹ She initiates her reader into a unique perceptual domain by demonstrating how she, the authoring poet, reads the poet she commemorates. Importantly, these essays also look ahead to the creative self that will remain after her own death, for Cvetaeva, like so many writers before her, invests her homage to others with meaningful, oblique self-presentations and definitions of her art. The authoring self is painstakingly crafted within the space of the dynamic relationship she enters into with the memorialized poet and manifests itself in her expressly poetic ability to write him into being. With these essays Cvetaeva challenges the poetic tradition's marginalization of women. She proclaims herself a poet first and foremost, and yet firmly redraws gender lines to the advantage of women.

This article is devoted to an important but understudied aspect of the creative self-affirmations that Cvetaeva accomplishes in the course of writing about other poets, namely her rethinking of gender and how it relates to poetry. Here I will focus exclusively on its specific manifestation in the essays that Cvetaeva dedicated to Brjusov and Vološin – two poets who wielded undisputed authority at the time of her literary debut and who were important to Cvetaeva's own development.² Although Cvetaeva insisted that gender was not the defining characteristic of a poet, the fact that she was a woman was a vital part of her own poetic identity. As in most of her prose essays, so too in 'Geroj truda' ('A Hero of Labor', 1925) and 'Živoe o živom' ('The Living about the Living', 1932) Cvetaeva responds – both implicitly and explicitly – to issues that bear on the reception of women poets.

Cvetaeva had ample opportunity to observe that for all the interest in women's creativity that was espoused by established male poets of her time, the feminine continued to be defined by men, while the writing woman still tended to be objectified and relegated to the status of "poetesses". Skillfully negotiating between the imperative to champion the woman's cause on the one hand and what was to her the distasteful feminist separatism on the other, Cvetaeva works to promote a natural affiliation of women and poetry that contravenes popular assessments of women poets as aberrations. In so doing, she seeks not simply to authorize herself within the extant tradition, but to radically alter the views on women that prevail in it, thus transforming the tradition itself. More broadly, Cvetaeva insists on the poet's individual responsibility to actively resist limiting conventional norms – an imperative that extends beyond questions of gender to all boundaries and restrictions.

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