

THE POETRY OF POVERTY: ‘POÈMA LESTNICY’ BY MARINA CVETAEVA

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Abstract

The article presents a reading of Marina Tsvetaeva’s ‘Poema lestnitsy’ (1926) as a critique of the reifying ontology of modern society. The back staircase of the poor becomes the locus of a burning lyrical revolt by the elemental nature of things against their objectifying use. I argue that the poem’s social and lyrical pathos was inspired by Vladimir Maiakovskii’s ‘Oblako v shtanakh’ (1914-1915), but that the theme may also be related to a Modernist ontological debate. The poem presents a metapoetic image of the elemental, non-reifiable poetic world and its resistance to commodification.

Keywords: *Marina Tsvetaeva*; ‘*Poema lestnitsy*’; *Maiakovskii*; *Sublime*; *Heidegger*

‘Poèma lestnicy’ (‘The Poem of the Staircase’) is one of Cvetaeva’s most outspoken critiques of society, though the motivation for the critique is neither social nor political, but poetic. The poem is, in Simon Karlinsky’s view, “philosophical and satirical” (1966: 217) and thematizes through poetry the perception of things through the existential condition of materially deprived people. It is set amongst the very poor who inhabit a “black” back staircase (“черная лестница”), represented as a world of social reality that is unstable and constantly in flux, existing only through manual labour and immediate desires. It is the critical locus of people and things suffering from extreme reification, that is from being turned into objects or things (*res*); the poor

people who inhabit the staircase only know each other and themselves as things to be owned. This world of moral and social depravity is but an avant-cour to the demonic darkness of the poetic night, darker than the dark filth of the poor. When the movements on the staircase cease in the dark of night, things, and people as things, yearn to protest by breaking out of the prevailing order. The result is a complex, dramatic, and elemental lyrical revolt of things and people against the ways they are apprehended, drawing on the romantic fairy-tale world of Hoffmann and Andersen, where things come to life during the night. Cvetaeva asks where in this modern world life *can* be found, and suggests it is only in elemental fire “which protects against things” (“страхующий от вещей”; 1983: 267).¹

The theme of the poem is surely anchored in the poverty Cvetaeva suffered during her exile in France, but at the heart of the poem there is also a philosophical discussion of how the modern world, with its various forms of reification, has excluded poetry as the locus of non-reifiable elemental life. Her argument can be illuminated in the context of wider discussions of “the thing” in Modernism, ranging from the Marxist critique of reification and commodification, with its echoes in Soviet and German avant-garde art and literature, to the search for a different means of apprehending objects in Impressionism and Cubism, to the ontological discussions of the time. It is likely that Rilke, with his *Dingdichtung*, constituted an important source of inspiration (Brodsky 1983). The poem was originally conceived in January 1926, and Cvetaeva returned to it in July that year, just as her correspondence with Rilke began to intensify. However, Brodsky commits a misreading when, in order to confirm the kinship between Cvetaeva’s poem and Rilke’s poetry, she cites a letter to Pasternak in which Cvetaeva wrote: “‘The Staircase’ was the last poem I wrote as a means of liberating myself from focusing on *him* [Rilke – T.L.] [my translation – T.L.]” (“‘Лестница’ – последняя, чтоб высвободиться от сосредоточения на *нем*”; 1995: 269).² The poet claims that the poem was an attempt to distance herself from Rilke,³ but in its social theme and poetic fiery manner it displays a much greater kinship with a radically different poet, Vladimir Majakovskij.⁴

Besides an abundance of textual and metaphorical echoes, ‘Poëma lestnicy’ has many striking parallels with Majakovskij’s ‘Oblako v štanach’ (‘A Cloud in Trousers’, 1914-1915). Both offer a ferocious anti-bourgeois challenge to a dead and reifying apprehension of people, the body, and language from the position of lyrical fire.⁵ Cvetaeva’s staircase, which contains but few elements of Majakovskij’s “staircase” versification technique, can nevertheless be seen as a poetic answer to the revolutionary poet and his form of writing. What Cvetaeva seems to say to Majakovskij, in a spirit of kindred social pathos, is that the explosive, rebellious force of poetry that she heralds comes “not from Marx, but the Devil”.

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