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Review Of "Marina Tsvetaeva: The Double Beat Of Heaven And Hell" By L. Feiler

Sibelan E.S. Forrester

Swarthmore College, sforres1@swarthmore.edu

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Review

Author(s): Sibelan Forrester

Review by: Sibelan Forrester

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together the central arguments emerge with particular force. Overlap between essays is never obtusive or redundant. Rather, a complex set of artistic trends is analyzed from different angles to arrive at a cogent and three-dimensional picture.

Alongside of the central themes identified in Paperno's introduction, other common threads add to the interest of the collection. In particular, there is a wealth of material relevant to the study of gender in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian intellectual movements, especially perceptions of the role of women within the Modernist paradigm of "life-creation." The Modernist writers adopting Pygmalion as an ideal resembled the nineteenth-century radical Realists who "usually took women as the objects of their human-transformation projects" (Masing-Delic, 59). As Solov'ev wrote in "The Meaning of Love" ("Smysl' liubvi"): "the [male] human being must create and form his female supplement" ("chelovek dolzhen tvorit' i sozdat' svoe zhenskoe dopolnenie," cited from V. P. Shestakov, ed., *Russkii Eros, ili Filosofii liubvi v Rossii* [Moscow, 1991, 58]). The resonances between the Solov'evian theory of sexual love and the story of Pygmalion in this regard—the contrasting roles of man and woman in metaphysical "life-creation"—though quite marked, are not emphasized anywhere in the volume. However, almost every chapter touches upon such questions, whether explicitly or implicitly.

Creating Life provides a fresh and extremely fertile approach. The authors cover an amazing amount of ground succinctly, inevitably leaving open areas for further investigation. Although the volume is not an exhaustive account of all the outgrowths of Russian Modernism or "life creation" (and doesn't claim to be), it gives the reader a context for a better understanding of many individuals and movements mentioned only in passing or not at all. To take just one name not mentioned in the volume, the discussion about "overcoming procreation" as part of a total transformation of life sheds light on the work of Platonov.

Examples could be multiplied, for the authors of *Creating Life* have done a superlative job in describing basic persistent assumptions and approaches which cut across ideological and artistic camps. Of course, the "Modernism" of the book's title doesn't embrace such an important movement as Acmeism, which rejected Symbolism's utopian demands that art transform life. (However, Grossman's chapter throws into relief Briusov's dissenting position within the Symbolist movement.) Since the broader historical sections of the volume emphasize patterns of continuity from the nineteenth century to the 1920s and 1930s, perhaps such a countertrend should have been accounted for, in passing, within this larger picture. This also would have been useful for the benefit of the wider readership this book deserves.

No one with any interest in Silver Age or early Soviet period literature should pass this book up. It is also highly recommended for those more familiar with Modernism in Western Europe and looking for insight into its Russian varieties.

Nancy Lynn Cooper, Lexington, Kentucky

Lily Feiler. *Marina Tsvetaeva: The Double Beat of Heaven and Hell*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1994. 299 pp., \$34.95 (cloth).

Here at last is Lily Feiler's long-awaited psychobiography of Tsvetaeva. *Marina Tsvetaeva: The Double Beat of Heaven and Hell* is well-written and pleasurable to read, a book to suggest for students or colleagues who like poets but are not entirely conversant with Russian literature. Feiler cites mostly Tsvetaeva herself, but she provides enough of a bibliography that her readers will be able to find their way to denser and more detailed volumes if they need them. Scholars too will want to take Feiler's arguments into account, especially since Tsvetaeva wrote repeatedly and explicitly about her basic woundedness and the centrality of her relation-

ship with her mother. Feiler gives some very compelling interpretations of Tsvetaeva's writing and behavior, as when she compares a passage from the poet's mother's diary to the poet's explanation of the failure of her mother's first romance (7–10).

This book's biggest service is arguably to make Tsvetaeva's life and personality more accessible to English-language readers, who might be looking precisely for a life story or psychological profile, someone to compare to such "suicide poets" as Anne Sexton or Sylvia Plath. With its sultry cover design and helpfully interpolated surveys of history and politics in different periods, the book is friendly to educated readers outside the field and so broadens the literature on an increasingly popular poet. Besides the energy and elegance of her style, Feiler taps sources that Slavists often neglect, quoting articles by American poets alongside the specialized work of academic scholars. Feiler is a writer even more than she is a scholar, and her book has something to teach all of us who wish to enlarge the audience for the writers we love.

As befits a psychobiography, this one reads poetry for clues to the life rather than examining how personal psychology or cultural archetypes structure the poems. We gain more insight into Tsvetaeva's life than into her writing, which is after all, to steal a phrase from Maiakovsky, what makes her interesting. Although Tsvetaeva's lasting reverence for and detailed records of her own dreams makes her a tempting analysis, Feiler does not address the complexities of studying a person who is so self-aware and auto-analytical herself. At times, Feiler addresses Tsvetaeva's letters, notebooks and autobiographical prose as factual evidence, though many scholars (like the poet's sister and the poet herself) have argued that she tended to embroider and improve the raw material of life. The book's structure demands that even when psychological evidence runs thin the life story must continue in a coherent and readable manner; therefore, many parts of the book are cogent, synthesized and updated retellings of material that has already emerged in the many fine critical biographies of Tsvetaeva in several languages over the last ten or fifteen years. This may make the work less original, but the genre requires it—along with occasional oversimplification of data for the sake of clarity or drama. Thicker footnotes or more reference to relevant recent works by specialists on Tsvetaeva would clutter the book and perhaps detract from its power as a narrative.

Although Feiler's introduction briefly outlines her approach to psychology (relying on Freud and a few more recent theorists), her own position and assumptions are largely unstated. Among other things, this means that her criteria of normality remain implicit and reproduce some biases of Freudian psychoanalysis, ideas of psychological health that depend on conservative models of maternity and femininity. It seems quite likely that Tsvetaeva herself held such views, but should scholars therefore judge her on that basis? Feiler uses her simplified and updated version of Freudian theory subtly and flexibly, but it sometimes limits her project, subsuming everything to a few central explanations. The repeated idea of the mother's presence at the heart of the poet's creative energy and personal misery is well-argued, but no psychological parameters are questioned or stretched; Tsvetaeva remains the object of study from a set perspective rather than a case study which might invite reevaluation of the theory. A psychoanalyst's interest in pathology makes problematic behaviors and events more attractive than any evidence that the poet lived an ordinary life as a decent individual. "Her damaged psyche is most obvious and destructive in her many love affairs" (5): at times only the author's dignity and taste keep her examinations of affairs and infatuations from slipping into melodrama and sensationalism. By all accounts Tsvetaeva was a difficult personality, but Feiler creditably manages to strike a balance between hero-worship and justification, on the one hand, and harping criticism of Tsvetaeva as wife, mother, and human being on the other—both positions have been applied unhelpfully to the poet in the past.

If this psychobiography sounds like an unusual approach to a poet, even a poet whose

writing so often sprang from her erotic life and childhood traumas, we should recall the treatment of tragic American poets in many a scholarly biography: an almost Romantic (or Symbolist?) obsession with the poetic personality leads to fascination with life stories, affairs, divorces and suicides, and lives and personalities become all but art works in their own right, illustrated by fragments of poems. Feiler is not likely to be accused of an outdated attitude towards Tsvetaeva by readers ignorant of Russian literature or culture. With such cross-cultural appeal, the book should make quite an impact. Many readers in the United States—and elsewhere—want to understand poets just the way Feiler has presented Tsvetaeva.

Several minor errors of chronology, dating, and fact have made it into the text of *Marina Tsvetaeva: The Double Beat of Heaven and Hell*, along with some reproduction of errors in the translations cited, and so the book cannot always be relied on as a source of information. But no one would read it for the dry facts, and given the large literature on Tsvetaeva, no one needs to. Feiler has produced an impressive and memorable work, a significant contribution both to scholarly debate and to further interest in the life and (let us hope) work of this fascinating poet.

Sibelan Forrester, Swarthmore College

Danièle Roth-Souton. *Vladimir Nabokov: l'enchantement de l'exil*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1994. 255 pp. (paper)

Classificateurs may be nonplused by this book, which is as unclassifiable as Nabokov's own work is "unpigeonholeable." Roth-Souton is aware of her study's peculiar nature and notes in the first sentence of her introduction that "Cette étude sur Vladimir Nabokov est biographique dans l'exacte mesure où son œuvre *Autres rivages* [*Speak, Memory*] est autobiographique" (7). Neither biography nor textual criticism in the commonly understood senses of these terms, *Vladimir Nabokov: l'enchantement de l'exil* is rather a sustained investigation of "l'osmose de l'être et de l'art" (12) and tells not the story of Nabokov's life but "l'histoire de son style" (7).

The point of departure for the book is exile, here taken in its broadest sense: loss of one's homeland and mother tongue, and also the self-imposed exile from one's surroundings and one's forebears, a separateness perfected by Nabokov and manifested as an almost legendary aloofness. According to Roth-Souton, it is exile, or *étrangeté*, that serves as the origin of what she calls "une économie poétique du manque," a poetic economy of loss that she argues is the basis of Nabokov's fiction. Although Roth-Souton does not mention it, her claim does seem to correspond with Nabokov's own definition of art (as beauty plus pity—pity because beauty must always die) in which loss figures as an integral part.

Other scholars have commented on the impact of Nabokov's expatriation on his fiction. Probably this sterile line of inquiry can be obviated by simply taking Nabokov's own statement at face value: had he not been forced into exile, he never would have written the books he did. Roth-Souton avoids the dreariness of unfounded speculation by expanding the concept of exile and by drawing support for her arguments from fiction spanning the length of Nabokov's career. She shifts her attention away from exile in its simplest sense and concentrates on self-imposed exile. Nabokov's decision not to learn German while living in Berlin for nearly two decades, his habitation of a long series of rented rooms and houses in preference to a permanent domicile while in America, his consistent refusal to praise literary predecessors and contemporaries, his insistence on carefully pre-prepared answers to interviewers' questions—a practice calculated to maintain the gulf between author and audience, even his habit as a schoolboy of interlarding his Russian compositions with French and English phrases served to