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Daphne's Tremor: Tsvetaeva and the Feminine in Classical Myth and Statuary

Sibelan Forrester

АРИАДНА

О том, что смертных
Дев—любили божества,
Ведаешь?
(Касаясь лавра)
Сия листва
Всё еще трепещет Дафны
Трепетом...

ARIADNE

Do you know that
Mortal maidens were loved
By divinities?
(Touching the laurel)
This foliage
Still trembles with Daphne's
Tremor...

With these words, Marina Tsvetaeva's Ariadne, explaining to Theseus that she must not leave Crete with him, cites the dangers of gods' love for "mortal maidens."¹ Through the laurel leaves she claims a direct, physical link with the Greek myth of Daphne and Apollo, bringing the myth, worn by retelling, onto the level of her most intimate personal life—her body, which touches the laurel and which desires Theseus. The nymph Daphne ran from the god Apollo, who was trying to rape her, and turned into a laurel tree in order to escape him. Though the god's lust was frustrated, he quickly consoled himself and announced that the leaves of the laurel tree would henceforth symbolize poetry and heroism in general. The story of god and nymph clearly serves to teach the dangers of sexual contact across the boundaries of fate, but its function is more than didactic. In Tsvetaeva's retelling, the leaves Ariadne touches remain intimate with Daphne's body despite their lofty and abstracted poetic symbolism: the story offers an allegory of women's relationship to representation.

¹ Marina Tsvetaeva, *Ariadna*, in *Teatr* (Moscow: "Iskusstvo," 1988), 266. As first published in 1926 the play was entitled *Theseus* (*Tezei*); Tsvetaeva changed the title in 1940 while correcting the published version after returning to the USSR. *Ariadna* was the first of a projected trilogy of plays based on the life of the Athenian hero Theseus, to be called *Theseus* or *The Wrath of Aphrodite*; the second play, *Phaedra* (*Fedra*), was written in 1927 and published in 1928. The third play, *Helen*, was never written, perhaps because of the criticism *Fedra* met.

Ariadne was a favorite character—Tsvetaeva named her first daughter, born in 1912, Ariadna (a Russified form of Ariadne), despite her husband's fondness for simple and properly Russian names.

The punch of Ariadne's (and Tsvetaeva's) assertion that the laurel still trembles with Daphne's tremor is clear when compared to a more traditional and perhaps more masculine reading of the scene. Roberto Calasso comments on the same encounter: "Apollo doesn't manage to possess the nymph, and maybe he doesn't even want to. What he is looking for in the nymph is the crown of laurel left in his hand as her body dissolves: he wants representation."² According to Calasso, the golden god of poetry is thus primarily concerned not with sex, and even though sex may launch him in pursuit of a reluctant nymph, he can immediately shift his desire to a transcendent level once her metamorphosis frustrates it. Apollo's true and overriding desire is for artistic representation, especially verbal representation. This reading, however, writes out and "dissolves" the body of the nymph entirely: she has been killed into art, into wood or marble, and into fine language that silences her as effectively as her metamorphosis into a tree. Tsvetaeva, in contrast with Calasso, foregrounds the female body's continuing links with the laurel of the poet's crown, even while she uses Ariadne's own story, like many other famous love stories, as a pretext for reworking her own concerns as a poet. If the laurel figures the poet's achievement in representing something through the means of language, dis-embodiment while changing its form, what then is the remaining trace of the female body in the work of a poet who is a woman herself? In Tsvetaeva's poetic works, the tremor and trace of the female body remain in her use of the gendered resources of the Russian language, and the poetic body she creates is gendered as her own.

Tsvetaeva's poetic world tends to combine mythological and other narratives into a set of underlying allegories of the poetic process in which gender and body continually recur. What can a woman legitimately channel into poetry, what do the special resources of the Russian language mean for her poetry, and what happens to the life and body of a woman who writes seriously? The poet often portrays her own creative experience as direct and not always freely chosen contact with a god, one who can ruin her chances for ordinary earthly happiness. In the narratives of Greek mythology, tremendously influential in the Neoromantic Russian Silver Age milieu when Tsvetaeva began to write, the story of Daphne reveals that it is the god of poetry, Apollo, who turns the women he desires into inanimate objects, much like the splendid, exemplary statues that Greek culture left to later generations.

Roberto Calasso, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, trans. Tim Parks (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 148.

The Frozen Bodies of Classical Antiquity

"Po pravde skazat', ia ne ochen' liubliu skul'pturu" (To tell the truth, I am not very fond of sculpture). Based on her own writings and the recollections of her friends and family, this is just what we would expect Marina Tsvetaeva to say. She was generally indifferent to the plastic arts despite, or perhaps precisely because of, considerable exposure to sculpture throughout her childhood, as her father Ivan Tsvetaev worked to assemble the collection of copies of classical statuary that initiated what is now the Pushkin Museum of Representative Arts in Moscow. Statues seemed to appeal to Tsvetaeva in her childhood mainly as embodiments of mythological narratives, through their linguistic aspects rather than the forms or appearance of the statues themselves. At the same time, her mature autobiographical writing offers one case in which a woman's body, like Daphne's, preserves its liveliness even after transformation into sculpture: in spite of her general preferences, a statue of a certain kind can be an influential element in Tsvetaeva's poetic life, can be "read" almost like a text for all the crucial details of the story it illustrates. This statue ties her exploration and development of the poet's relationship to artistic representation, the place of the heterosexual romance in mythologies of creation, and the processes and results of literary canonization.

"Charlottenburg," from which I drew the statement of Tsvetaeva's indifference to statues, is a short prose piece written in French in 1936, describing the visit of fifteen-year-old Tsvetaeva and her younger sister to a German warehouse of casts of statues, some of which her father would acquire for the museum.³ To reward the girls for their cheerfulness in walking through the heat of the day in heavy dresses and black stockings, their father promises to let them each choose two statues for their own. Tsvetaeva begins to search, commenting, "Po pravde skazat', ia ne ochen' liubliu skul'pturu... No—delat' nechego. Postaraemsia khotia by napast' na chto-nibud' ne slishkom statuinoe" (To tell the truth, I don't like sculpture much... But there's nothing I can do. Let's try at least to run across something not too statue-like) (339). Her search goes slowly, "Potomu, chto khochu chego-to ochen' svoego, ne vybrannogo, a poliublennogo s pervogo vzgliada, *prednachertannogo*" (Because I want something very much *my own*, not chosen, but beloved at first sight, *predestined*) (339). Tsvetaeva's personal and generational attitude towards the sculptural relics of traditional culture fires this desire to find something *her own*, an

³ "Charlottenburg," in Marina Tsvetaeva, *Izbrannaia proza v dvukh tomakh* (New York: Russica, 1979), 2: 338–41. The story was originally written in French; the Russica edition's translation into Russian is by Tsvetaeva's daughter, Ariadna Efron. Here and throughout this article all translations into English are my own unless otherwise noted; they strive to reproduce as much as possible the semantics and connotations of the original.

element of her own destiny in this warehouse of copies, rather than something to represent the greatness and normative status of Greek art and culture. (The latter would express the attitude of Ivan Tsvetaev, and of the warehouse's director,⁴ who praises the girls' choice of statues with the compliment, "One can see that you are the daughters of your father!") The future poet wants a personal relation to the statue she selects, and a statue that lacks a personal relation holds no interest for her. At the same time, Tsvetaeva is always interested in what Greek mythology might offer to her own creative agenda. Certain kinds of value might survive even in a copy of a copy; Greek poetry and rhetoric, after all, form the source for the highest status European literature, especially for poetry.

И—вот она! Вот—отброшенная к плечу голова, скручённые мукой брови, не рот, а—крик. Живое лицо меж всех этих бездушных красот! // Кто она?—Не знаю. Знаю одно—*моя!*

And—there she is! There—the head thrown towards one shoulder, the brows twisted in torment, not a mouth—a scream. A living face among all these soulless [inanimate] beauties! // Who is she?—I don't know. I [only] know one thing—[she is] *mine!* (340).

Delighted at her success, the heroine chooses the next statue she sees, to make up the necessary two. The director of the warehouse then reveals that her love at first sight is an Amazon, which Tsvetaeva takes to mean the Amazon whose story she knows best, Penthesileia, "Vozliublennyi vrag Akhillesa, ubitaia im i im oplakannaia" (The beloved enemy of Achilles, killed by him and by him mourned),⁵ although the text she supplies to identify the story does not name the Amazon, citing her only through her killer, Achilles.

The lasting importance of the statue of the Amazon we meet in the story "Charlottenburg" emerges in the memoirs of Tsvetaeva's sister, and

⁴ Iudif Kagan notes that Tsvetaeva shared her generation's scorn for copies of original sculpture in spite of her father's achievements. Iu. M. Kagan, "Marina Tsvetaeva i ee otets," in *Marina Tsvetaeva: Put' i vremia. Vystavka k 100-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia 1892-1992* (Moscow: GALART, 1992), 26.

⁵ Tsvetaeva assumes that this statue must be Penthesileia, though Greek statues survive depicting the Amazons who came to fight Athens (the Amazonomachy) after Theseus abducted their queen, Antiope or Hippolyta. Hippolyta's abduction figures just as well for the clash of the lesbian or presexual life of Tsvetaeva's Amazons with patriarchy or heterosexuality, represented by Achilles despite his own gender-checked past.

In "Lettre a l'Amazone," Tsvetaeva refers to this couple as "Achilles and the Amazon," once again eliding Penthesileia's name, stressing her representative identity as an Amazon rather than her individuality ("Pis'mo Amazonke," trans. K. Azadovskii, *Zvezda* 2 [1990]: 184).

especially of her daughter, Ariadna Èfron. Identified there as "biust ranenoi Amazonki" (bust of a wounded Amazon), it was still in Tsvetaeva's apartment when she and her daughter left Moscow in 1922; Èfron indicates that it was left behind only because it was too big and heavy to fit into their limited baggage. Her comments echo Tsvetaeva's insistence in "Charlottenburg" that the Amazon is wholly unlike the "soulless beauties" around her: for Èfron, the bust in Moscow is one of the things "chto i veshchami-to ne nazovesh'—nastol'ko oni—dukh" (that you wouldn't even call things, so much are they—spirit).⁶ This bust formed part of Tsvetaeva's poetic decor for more than a decade in Moscow, and its lasting presence in her personal poetic mythology is commemorated as late as the 1936 story about its acquisition.

Calling this wounded and presumably dying woman an Amazon underlines the statue's distinct difference from the statues around her: the Amazon, whether attacking Athens or fighting on behalf of Troy, represents an outsider for (male) Greek culture in terms of gender as well as of culture. Page Du Bois argues in *Centaurs and Amazons* that the Greek myth of the Amazons, by postulating an alien (barbarian) society comprised solely of women and hostile to men, represented an extremity of femininity not as a defective variant of masculinity (coded minus to men's plus), but rather as something entirely different from masculinity.⁷ This sense of radical otherness is likewise supported by the presentation of Amazons in the Russian *Primary Chronicle*, also presumably taken from Greek sources, which stresses the Amazons' sexual conduct.⁸ Whatever the Amazons' historical reality, Tsvetaeva is attracted by the depiction of women as belonging to a different tribe or even race from the tribe of men.

The encounter with the statue is love at first sight, as Tsvetaeva calls her "moia liubov' s pervogo vzgliada" (my love from the first glance). The common cliché stands out here, again, because it is out of harmony with her other writing, which most often minimizes the importance of the visual to privilege the evidence of the speaker's other senses, especially hearing, over sight. Love at first sight depends on the viewer's immediate interpretation of outward appearance, and in "Charlottenburg" the first visual impression of the young beholder is confirmed when the statue's identity turns out to suit her personal philosophy. Here appearance is

⁶ Ariadna Èfron, *O Marine Tsvetaevoi. Vospominaniia docheri* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1989), 107.

⁷ Page du Bois, *Centaurs and Amazons. Women and the Pre-History of the Great Chain of Being* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1982). As du Bois points out, although the image of femininity as defective masculinity is widely associated with Freudian theory in the 20th century, it was already present and influential many centuries earlier, in the writings of Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle.

⁸ See *Povesti drevnei Rusi XI-XII veka* (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1983), 29-30.

able to indicate inner or higher meaning. The statue is an exception to the usual Classical depiction of women as "soulless beauties," for her face is alive with pain; her exceptional validity as content rather than mere representation appears in the brief but effective phrase, "not a mouth—a scream." In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry questions the possibility of speaking pain, either one's own or someone else's, despite persistent historical and cultural links between pain and representation.⁹ Tsvetaeva's reading of the Amazon statue works in a way to underline the intermediacy and primacy of this body, claiming that for her the face of the wounded woman really *is* the scream provoked by the pain itself, not a mere representation of pain. Moreover, she attributes all the power of that pained face to the face's reality, responding directly to the statue as if it were the woman it represents, with whom one could fall in love, rather than distancing herself from the pain and the woman represented to evaluate the talents or experiences of the artist who made it (who is, perhaps incidentally, never identified in the story). Tsvetaeva always values voice, so the scream can efface and replace the mouth that issues it, as if a woman's mouth in pain is not a mouth at all, given that it is not the calm, inviting smile of a conventionally beautiful statue. And it is this pained and unbeautiful face, in her reading, that paradoxically awoke Achilles's tardy love and regret.

Tsvetaeva associates the mythical culture and society of the Amazons both with girlhood, when good society strictly limits a girl's contact with men before she is considered ready for marriage, and with lesbian sexuality, a subculture that both excludes and threatens men. More than one of the poems she wrote during her love relationship with Sophia Parnok, who later became the author of the first significant body of lesbian poetry in Russian literature,¹⁰ describes her first encounter with Parnok in similar terms: besides Parnok's amazonian appearance, her combination of adult feminine and youthful masculine traits and her "helmet" of reddish hair, the poems show the first sight of her convincing Tsvetaeva's speaker that she loves and must love this woman—"Not even knowing [your] name!"¹¹ However, Tsvetaeva's much later (1934) prose "Letter to

⁹ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

¹⁰ On Parnok's relationship with Tsvetaeva, see Sof'ia Poliakova, *Zakatnye ony dni: Tsvetaeva i Parnok* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1983) and Diana Burgin, *Sophia Parnok: The Life and Work of Russia's Sappho* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1994).

¹¹ In "Ty prokhodish' svoei dorogoi," ninth in the seventeen-poem cycle *Podruga* (*Stikhotvoreniia i poëmy*, 1: 182). The poem is dated 14 January 1915, several months after Tsvetaeva first met Parnok, but its second stanza recreates the power of that encounter with compelling rhythm:

an Amazon," her only extended meditation on the topic of lesbian love, argues that for "normal" women a lesbian affair will always end because of their natural desire for children.¹² Given this set of opinions in the other contexts where Amazons are mentioned, the encounter of Penthesileia with Achilles can be read as an Amazon's collision with adult heterosexuality. Penthesileia has lived all her life in a society that rejects men except for breeding purposes, but her ultimate confrontation with Achilles draws her outside that system and into death, as he both kills and falls in love with her. What Penthesileia's feelings might have been we do not learn; they seem to be as secret as her own name in the story "Charlottenburg."

In some important ways, Penthesileia's encounter with Achilles re-plays the myth (which Tsvetaeva evidently accepted) in which Sappho, the Lesbian poet par excellence, leapt into the sea out of unrequited love for the youth Phaon. In this story, heterosexual desire destroys the poet where even the most powerful lesbian desire merely turned her greener than grass. The mythical version of the poet's death turns the speaker, Sappho, into the spoken, the creator into made object.¹³ So too Penthesileia, whom Tsvetaeva reads through the lenses of Heinrich von Kleist and Gustav Schwab:¹⁴ Achilles does not recognize her or care much who she is until she is dying from the wounds he has inflicted, but then he falls in love with her.¹⁵ The author of the statue in Charlottenburg is

Сердце сразу сказала: «Милая!»
 Всё тебе—наугад—простила я.
 Ничего не знав,—даже имени!
 О, люби меня, о, люби меня!

[My] heart immediately said, "Dear one!" / I forgave you—at a guess—for everything, / Knowing nothing—not even [your] name! / Oh, love me, oh, love me!

¹² Diana Burgin has given an excellent analysis of homophobia and gynephilia in Tsvetaeva's "Lettre." I thank her for graciously sending me a copy of her unpublished paper, read at the AATSEEL conference in Toronto, 1993.

¹³ For an extensive treatment of literary constructions of Sappho, see Joan de Jean, *Fictions of Sappho, 1546–1937* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

¹⁴ Heinrich von Kleist, *Penthesileia* (1808); the prominence of Penthesileia's own name as Kleist's title may motivate Tsvetaeva *not* to use the personal name in her story, so as not to make the identification too obvious and easy for the reader (a typical concern). Gustav Schwab, *Die schönsten Sagen des klassischen Altertums*, first edition 1837, ran through several more editions in the 19th century. Tsvetaeva's claim to have used Schwab as her main source for Greek myths and epic must be treated with some suspicion, as Rose Dufoy and other scholars have noted.

¹⁵ Barbara Walker interprets this "love" as a ritual rape of the Amazon's corpse in order to render it powerless; *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 25.

dual: the anonymous sculptor, but also Achilles himself, who caused the Amazon's pain and death and then felt love or at least lust for her wounded beauty. That romantic moment of wounding, recognition, love and death is captured in the statue Tsvetaeva chooses—although I want to stress once again that, as the story presents it, she learns the identity of the statue only AFTER herself feeling love at first sight.

The story presents the poet as a fifteen-year-old girl on the edge of sexual maturity, whose instinctive choice of emblems will guide both her fate as a human woman and the formation of her poetic maturity, as the statue presides like a goddess or mentor over the decor of the room where she writes her poems. The young future poet's choice of statue reveals an artist's problem: you fall in love with the beautiful and very Other being as you are killing it and turning it into a work of art, not necessarily in that order. Scarry notes a "conflation of wounding and creating" reaching back at least to Mosaic law,¹⁶ a confusion that centers on the nature and fate of the being who is depicted in inanimate form. Elizabeth Bronfen, in her *Over Her Dead Body*, insists on maintaining the connection between a wounded or dead woman in a work of art and the body of a real, (once) living woman—be that the biographical character on whom a literary depiction is based, or the female reader or viewer of the art work. Artistic attention to the "most' poetic topic" of a sick or wounded woman means creating that woman as such, wounding her just as do the male characters in some of the stories Bronfen cites.¹⁷ Here, too, Tsvetaeva's presentation of her own poetic world is shaped by patriarchal conventions: it is the Amazon's suffering as she is dying that makes her reveal her feminine pain and vulnerability, makes her lovable to Achilles—and, we must presume, to Tsvetaeva as well. For the unsophisticated but passionate viewer Tsvetaeva describes, the mythological tale (via Kleist's play, Schwab's retelling, or some translation of Homer's *Iliad*) is conflated with the empathetic attraction to a real woman's suffering body, represented in a three-dimensional realistic sculpture, though significantly in the truncated form of a bust; the fifteen-year-old girl occupies at the same time the position of the suffering woman (the killed) and of Achilles (the lover and also the killer). The adult Tsvetaeva, writing in 1936, can also take on the position of the sculptor, knowing how an artist transforms the person who lies at the origin of a work of art into a sign, making the beautiful Muse powerless and obedient. In that context, the attraction of the statue of the wounded Amazon may be largely that she is *not* frozen into beauty: her pain is clearly visible in the sculpture, giving her the unique distinction of preserving *voice*, a scream rather than a

¹⁶ Scarry, 207.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 59.

mouth, sound not wholly reduced to silence. In her, as it were, we see the female body in the process of being turned into art, her powerful Amazon background and warlike inheritance from her father Ares giving her the strength to hold out just long enough that her pain is not erased, only made incoherent, as she turns into a statue that will never again be able to move or shift but must hold that pain forever. A woman's selection of this piece of classical mythology as something very much her own implies awareness that turning someone else into a work of art is a risky and violent business.¹⁸ If a woman takes on the creative role of poet, creating new beings in language, is she then at greater risk herself of becoming a statue? Will she, like Daphne, face the choice of sexual use by the male rulers of poetry or escape, but at the price of transformation into a beautiful silence? If she is the one who should properly be in the statue's place, what threats will her Muses hold for her?

The second statue in the story "Charlottenburg," chosen as an afterthought and barely mentioned, turns out to be none other than Aspasia, consort of Pericles, whose house in Athens was a cultural center something like a salon, visited by all the thinkers of the day—and even by the otherwise secluded Athenian matrons. She was reputed to be the teacher of Socrates, and her intellectual activity might be as much a challenge to the social order of her time (or—to later centuries' version of that social order) as Penthesileia's fight against the Greeks on behalf of Troy. Aspasia's brief appearance sets up a kind of sliding scale of female daring; the young Tsvetaeva's initial selection of Penthesileia as "something very much her own" enables her effortlessly to choose a second statue whose life story, though not evident in the seamless and perhaps "soulless" beauty of her face, is closer to what Tsvetaeva herself could and would achieve. In light of the presentation of the practical burdens of her family life during her years of emigration in Western Europe, many of them dating from the years around "Charlottenburg's" composition, it is

¹⁸ The risk reflects the fact that many well-known Classical myths show a male figure (Phaon, Achilles, Apollo) who freezes or kills a female figure (Sappho, Penthesileia, Daphne), turning her into a myth or a beautiful piece of representation. This is curious, since in human experience it is women who give birth to fully-formed human beings, having first given them shape in utero. The roughly parallel threat that women present to men in Greek myths is often tearing the men apart (Pentheus, Actaeon, Orpheus are famous examples), often castrating them in so doing, unmaking them as a body or creative artist (in Orpheus's case—both), and thus undoing embodiment and representation.

A female figure who does freeze men into stone, Medusa, must be prevented from doing so, decapitated by a hero who uses a bright shield as a mirror to view her as a harmless—representation. Since the horse of poetic inspiration whom Tsvetaeva often mentions, Pegasus, reputedly sprang from Medusa's blood, this story appears to be an occulted part of the Greek mythological narrative of poetry.

tempting to read the carefree, careless afterthought of Aspasia as the poet's eventual assumption of a more cultured, and more constricting, feminine role as dutiful wife and mother.

Aspasia's appearance in a story where every detail is significant limits the power of the problematic figure of Penthesileia. Even as the young Tsvetaeva chooses the one statue whose unbeautiful appearance and unfeminine life story are unlike all the others, the statue chosen as an afterthought will weigh on the poet's life as well. Aspasia (or, rather, the image of Aspasia inherited by patriarchal western culture) combines her intellectual gifts and accomplishments with a more ordinary female fate as "consort" and mother of a son. The temptations of that ordinariness include both love from a man who has not mortally wounded one first, and also the son she bears to Pericles, the cradle whose captivity Tsvetaeva had celebrated in the last stanza of her early poem "In the Luxembourg Garden":¹⁹

Я женщин люблю, что в бою не робели,
Умевших и шпагу держать, и копьё,—
Но знаю, что только в плену колыбели
Обычное—женское—счастье мое!

I love women who were not timid in battle,/ Able to wield both
rapier and spear —/ But I know that only in the captivity of the
cradle/ Is my ordinary—female/feminine—happiness!

Even the smooth, anapestic rhythm of the poem, one of the best in Tsvetaeva's first book, suggests how easy it is for the girl who loves Amazons to slide into acceptance of the "ordinary" female fate of cradles and captivity. The still juvenile poem adopts the typical sentimental or erotic use of a word like *plen* [captivity], which in any other context would be strongly negative, and which contrasts troublingly with the heroic portrayal of the Amazons the speaker claims to love. As Antonina Gove shows in her important article on female roles in Tsvetaeva's poetry,²⁰ this is only one of many places where Tsvetaeva's writing celebrates traditional female fate rather than denying or avoiding it. "In the Luxembourg Garden" casts an instructive light on the final lines of the third part in the play *Ariadne*: after powerfully arguing that she cannot and will not accompany Theseus, since leaving with him would mean ruin for both of them, Ariadne is interrupted by the chorus of youths and maidens whom

¹⁹ From Tsvetaeva's first book of poems, published in 1910, *Vechernii al'bom*; in *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, 1: 11. The poem was probably written during her visit to Paris in 1908, when she was almost sixteen years old.

²⁰ Antonina Filonov Gove, "The Feminine Stereotype and Beyond: Role Conflict and Resolution in the Poetics of Marina Tsvetaeva," *Slavic Review* 36 (1977): 231-55.

Theseus has saved from the Minotaur; one crucial stanza concentrates on the happy future of the maidens:

Ставь ветрила,
Кормчий! К югу!
Грех искуплен!
Камень снят!
Буду милой
И супругой
И баюкать буду чад!²¹

Put up the sails,/ Helmsman! Southward!/ The sin is redeemed!/
The stone is removed!/ I will be beloved/ And a wife/ And I will
rock children to sleep!

Only after hearing this chorus, which reminds her that she is a mortal woman in a society that defines her role in terms of family and husband, does Ariadne suddenly give way to Theseus's argument, insisting once again that he be true to her, and finally tell him her name. Though she knows her fate as Aphrodite's favorite, which if we recall Sappho suggests poetic election, the temptation of an ordinary woman's fate is too much for her to resist—it is this that undoes her, rather than any of Theseus's arguments or his power and status as the future ruler of Athens. What the play never illustrates is the secret that the god Bacchus himself uses to convince Theseus to break his vow of fidelity in the fourth part of the play: Ariadne is undone for her own good. The frustration of her earthly desires tragically and fundamentally transforms her body and senses, but in exchange she gains immortality analogous to Theseus's afterlife in poem and myth. The values of the Amazon continually challenge those of the afterthought—at a high cost to the human poet.

The distrust and fear of statues that emerge in much of Tsvetaeva's other writing may be the flip side of the seduction of objectification—the pleasure of becoming a work of art, or an enshrined artist whose surviving opus, her or his own beautiful and preserved body,²² is further incarnated in the kind of memorial statue that autocrats love to raise in honor of themselves as well as for great poets like Pushkin. The statue signifies a troubling multiplicity of tributes: to the person whose body it represents, to the sculptor whose mastery it proves, and to the nation or ruler who commissioned it. The statue of a tsar, common in the cities of Russia before the Revolution, gives continuing embodiment to temporal rule, le-

²¹ *Teatr*, 268.

²² This equation is familiar in everyday locutions as well: "A Leonardo," meaning a work of art by Leonardo; "I am reading Pushkin," if I am reading Pushkin's poetry (not his body or fingerprints).

gitimizing the heirs of the ruler depicted as much as the series of royal graves Tsvetaeva points to in her native city of Moscow.²³ Tsvetaeva's awareness of what statues do to women in particular is expanded and applied in her uneasiness about statues of poets. Visual representation of a being whose whole effort and effect is (or should be) verbal inevitably conflicts not only with the physical body of the poet, but also with the body that remains in texts. The royal or popular erection of a statue to a famous poet may cover an attempt to appropriate and domesticate those texts, robbing them of their power to criticize and transform the social order, stealing the poet's power of language in order to serve the problematic discourses of power and beauty.

In literature earlier writings and writers may take on the same threatening, perhaps Bloomian normative position as surviving classical sculpture, and the writer her or himself cannot escape a tangle of love and monumentalization at the hands of admirers, enemies, and the reading public. Tsvetaeva indignantly criticized one outstanding example of this perversion: Russians' slavish adoration of a Pushkin they barely knew—either during his life, or as a large and varied collection of texts after his death. His death in the famous duel, according to Tsvetaeva and many of his other admirers, was at least largely the responsibility of the "poet-killer" tsar, "father" and representative of the Russian people, but also the responsibility of the Russian people who went on to erect statues to Pushkin, practically to deify him after his death, largely in ignorance of his biography and writings. So long as she agreed that Pushkin was a great and exemplary poet, she herself was threatened by the same fate of murder and monumentalization—as a poet, not only as a woman.

Conclusion

In many ways, Tsvetaeva uses social stereotypes of gender consciously, as a convenient shorthand to describe her own poetic work to correspondents, to personify the landscape or content of her poems,²⁴ or to specify her own identity as a poet and the nature of her family relationships.²⁵ Strongly aware of the tensions between social reality and symbolic ideal, she still uses the former as source and material for the latter. Russian literature and culture's long-standing treatment of gender as a bipolar continuum, with "male" and "female" diametrically opposed and "neuter" a properly "middle" no-man's-land between, requires a typical attitude

²³ In her 1916 poem to Blok "U menia v Moskve kupola goriat," ("With me in Moscow the cupolas are burning"), in *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, 1: 229.

²⁴ See the letter to Pasternak dated 26 May 1926, in *Neizdannye pis'ma* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1972), 298.

²⁵ See her letter to Iurii Ivask, dated May 1934, in which she mentions her mother's desire for a son to name Aleksandr, in *Russian Literary Archives*, 220.

towards each extreme of the opposition. The prominent semioticians V. Vs. Ivanov and V. N. Toporov, whose monumental survey of the "modeling systems" in Slavic culture was written several decades after Tsvetaeva's death, indicate something of the cultural climate which formed her view of gender, the same Russian cultural matrix. Their book *Slavic Linguistic Modeling Systems* notes that female gender, with "female" and "feminine" conflated in the single word "zhenskii," is consistently associated with negative concepts, even to the extent of a marked inconsistency in the assignment of modeling categories to the "feminine" pole.²⁶ Ivanov and Toporov do not stretch beyond their own project to question the possible self-interest, in their own work and in their many scholarly and other sources, of making the "masculine" pole of any and every gendered opposition the primary and "unmarked" term. I would argue that any person who asserts that (masculine) "dry" is invariably primary and unmarked in relation to (feminine) "wet" has not read the many world mythologies where creation emerges out of some watery abyss, and doubtless never spent nine months in amniotic fluid followed by two or three years in often damp diapers. The telling way that the "feminine" term of each opposition shifts its characteristics from one set of oppositions to the next indicates that femininity serves merely as the necessary background and opposite to whatever qualities the scholarly representatives of masculinity wish to appropriate for themselves.

Femininity is similarly unstable in Tsvetaeva's presentation of her own gender and behavior: first she resides at home, not in the wide world, next she flees to the crossroads, rejecting the patriarchal world of churchyard and sexual continence by defiantly welcoming its punishment. Simon Karlinsky's attention to the role of gender and gender conventions in Tsvetaeva initiated discussion of this issue at a high level of sophistication.²⁷ Tsvetaeva's treatments of gender and gender stereotypes, especially in her theatrical experiments, are rich: the figure of the Amazon flickers behind her play *Fedra* and the lyric poems spoken by Phaedra, as a cultural and even physical attempt (the severed breast) to complicate or evade gender as it is constructed by patriarchal societies. Tsvetaeva uses narratives from Classical Greek mythology both as traditional ways of understanding what goes on in the inspiration and writing of poetry, and as a high-status ground for a folkloric and mythic reworking of questions of artistic representation. Confronting myths that embody such an association in the bodies of female characters (Daphne, Ariadne, Penthesilea and others), she illustrates and questions the way women and femininity,

²⁶ V. Vs. Ivanov and V. N. Toporov, *Slavianskie iazykovye modeliruiushchie sistemy (Drevnii period)* (Moscow: Nauka, 1965).

²⁷ Simon Karlinsky, *Marina Cvetaeva: Her Life and Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).

in the myths and literatures of Western societies, emerge as cultural products rather than cultural producers, while never seeming to underestimate the danger that all this implies to herself. Like the scream formed by the mouth of the Amazon's statue, and the tremulous remainder of Daphne in laurel leaves, the signs of gender in Tsvetaeva's writing function as signs both of pain and of embedded life.

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