Not Quite In The Name Of The Lord: A Biblical Subtext In Marina Tsvetaeva's Opus

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One of Marina Cvetaeva’s contributions to Russian literature is the exceptional depth of her approach to words; she explores both the phonetic connections between linguistic units and their extensive historical, literary, and religious associations, bringing a nearly Futurist verbal inventiveness to the more traditional poetic exploitation of cultural subtexts. Personal names are no exception to this rule. Other poets’ names initiate and structure her addresses to them—she structures poetic meaning around the clicking, splashing or trigger-cocking sound of Blok (SiP I:227), the ecstatic “Ax” of Axmatova (SiP I:232) and the runbling “Èr” of Èrenburg (SiP II:160). Her own name, Marina, repeatedly provokes poetic treatments of its etymology and associations. Cvetaeva exploits her own name’s poetic and mythological significance, bringing into play both its etymological and its historical and literary planes of meaning.

Another significant level of naming works to illuminate Cvetaeva’s speaking selves through names that are not strictly speaking her own. This study will explore two examples, the names Ivan and Marija (equivalent to the English John and Mary), and their function in Cvetaeva’s writing. These names have tremendous resonance in Russian culture, as indeed in all Christian traditions: they spring from and refer back to central figures in the Gospels. Using them lets the poet claim creative power within Russian cultural and poetic traditions which insist on strictly polarized genders and value female silence. Gospel names cast their light onto other literary and historical figures who bear them, initiating patterns of relationship and furthering the poet’s exploration of far-reaching identities. Finally, “Ivan” and “Marija” are also the names of Cvetaeva’s parents, Ivan Vladimirovič Cvetaev and Marija Aleksandrovna Mejn. Therefore her poetic treatment of these two names plumbs her personal, family heritage while it works to define and refine her relationship to the fundamental narrative of Western patriarchal culture and religion.
Until the forced secularization of Soviet society, the Russian Orthodox Church was not only the official religion but a dominant source of the nation’s cultural ambiance. Most Russian personal names referred to Christian saints, and so any act of naming evoked this background—if only by omission. Distribution of saints over the church calendar guaranteed each personal name a temporal association as well, a place in the sacred series of annually recurring holidays. The saint’s day or name day was a more important annual event than the birthday, pointing to the saint’s special protection or guidance of a child and privileging this relationship over actual birth in the flesh. Indeed, Russian literary portrayals of baptism stressed the determining influence of the name on the new child. Cvetaeva displayed a lasting interest in the lives and life stories of her ancestors, and the original models of her parents’ names, “Ivan” and “Marija,” indicated ways that her heritage could fit into the eternally recurring formative story of poetic suffering and creation. Following these names to the saints at the origins of Christianity, Cvetaeva uses the Gospel drama to understand the fate and activity of the poet. This appropriation of the original bearers of her parents’ names displays Cvetaeva’s peculiar attitude towards religious language and tradition: on the one hand it is subtle, respectful and deeply familiar with Biblical and liturgical texts, while on the other hand it can easily be considered heretical. Her tendency to subordinate everything to poetry and the poetic process, on the other hand, is almost exegetical.

The Gospels are one common root of all Western literary cultures; but they have a special importance in traditions which, like Russia’s, acquired literacy along with Christianity. The Gospels were the first texts translated into the newly codified language of Old Church Slavic, and so they initiated Slavic and Russian writing, just as they themselves tell in abbreviated form the origin of the world itself out of language. As primary vehicles of literacy, the Gospels made the survival of poetry and human speech through written language possible, and ritual retelling of the Gospel story in church liturgy kept both the story and the Church Slavic language fresh in the minds of generations of church-goers. Even the pre-Christian deities of Greece and Rome, who reached Russia largely through Western European literature, appear in the works of eighteenth-century Russian poets in a nimbus of stylistically elevated Church Slavic vocabulary. Some aristocratic Russian men learned Latin and Greek, but classical languages were not prerequisite for participation in government or in Russian poetic culture either, and so played a much less important role than in Western Europe. In fin-de-siècle Russia, the most crucial languages for aspiring poets were still French and German. Russian women had ample opportunity to hear Church Slavic in church, and upper-class women learned French and other Western European languages as part of their smattering of marriageable accomplishments. This
relative parity of linguistic preparation may in part explain why Russian
women poets met with greater success than women poets in Western
Europe (Gilbert and Gubar, 546–547),9 whereas women “dominated” the
19th century prose novel in America, Britain and France (Heldt, 1–9,
esp. 1 and 3). Female names in the Gospels might well attract a woman
poet’s special attention: since Russian Symbolism emphasized the poet’s
priestly function, female figures in this most canonical piece of literature
offered an entry into symbolic language, a way of approaching the Word.
This discussion begins with the name Ivan (or its archaic form, Ioann)
because the father’s name legally and customarily determines the second of
a Russian’s three names.10 Among peasants, moreover, the patronymic
could replace the first name in respect for an aging or respected addressee.
The patronymic is fixed before the child is born according to the name of
the father, carrying it on into the next generation and varying only with the
child’s sex.11 Thus Ivan/Ioann is both the name of Cvetaeva’s father and the
easily recognizable root of her own second name, Ivanova. The female
form of any patronymic is both a man’s name with a feminine ending and a
woman’s name with a masculine core; it conveys two genders at once,
modeling an ambiguous transformation from masculine to feminine with
the proper suffix. In Cvetaeva’s poetry, the root of her patronymic plays a
significant role in naming and deciphering the speaker: it establishes her
access to all the significance of the name Ivan/Ioann. This personal entitle-
ment appears in the second stanza of the poem “Krasnoju kist’ju” (SiP
I:219), ninth and last of the 1916 cycle “Stixi o Moskve.”

Спорили сотни
Колодилов.
День был субботний—
Иоанн Богослов.

Cvetaeva identifies the day she was born by naming that day’s saint in the
Orthodox church calendar, giving the traditional form Ioann.12 Though she
frequently refers to church holidays in dating her poems, she less often
brings these days into the body of her poems to specify the birthday not of a
poem, but of a person—in this case, the most important one in her poetic
universe, the poet herself. Ioann Bogoslov and Blagoves’chen’e, the Annun-
ciation (SiP I:209, 210), do penetrate within the bodies of poetic texts, and
the significance of the dates contributes to poetic exploration of their
speaker’s destiny as woman and poet—issues that mark the 1916 poetry
collected in Věrsty I as a whole. In “Krasnoju kist’ju,” Ioann Bogoslov
works both as the saint of the speaker’s birthday and, recalling her pa-
tronymic, as the saint of a second, additional name day, conveying the
burden or protection of a special fate under the dual auspices of language
and divinity. The fortunate coincidence that this saint’s name also appears in her patronymic solidifies her claim on the name Ivan/Ioann.

This presentation portends serious things for the poet, as the omens of her birth suggest a special devotion to language. The title “theologian” is calqued in the Russian Bogoslov, while roots “God” and “word” suggest God’s word, words about God, or a God who is also the Word. John the Theologian is traditionally credited with authorship of the Fourth Gospel as well as of Revelation, and this makes him a powerful source of legitimacy as a writer. The Fourth Gospel, according to Ioann, begins with the famous “Iskoni bê slovo,” insistently identifying Christ as God’s Word and the Word as the source of creation: it places particular stress on the connection of language to creation and divinity. In modern Russian translation, the first verses of the Fourth Gospel read “V nacale bylo Slovo, i Slovo bylo u Boga, i Slovo bylo Bog./Ono bylo v načale u Boga” (Ioann 1:1, 2). This vision of creation’s origin in the work links the poet’s activity with God’s and encourages the poet to understand her position and production in terms of God’s own.

Ioann is set apart even in the select company of the twelve apostles as the one Jesus loved best; Ioann 19:25, 26 shows Jesus on the cross offering John to His mother as a replacement for Himself: “Iisus, uvidev Mater’ i učenika tut stojasčego, kotorogo ljubil, govorit Materi Svoej: Ženo! se, syn Tvoj./Potom govorit učeniku: se, Mater’ tvoja! I s ètogo vremenii učenik sej vzjal Ee k sebe.” This sonship or brotherliness by adoption allows Ioann, a mere mortal, to assume the place of God’s mother’s son, or at least to become her step-son. Thus, alliance with Ioann through patronymic, date of birth and a particular linguistic creativity allows Cvetaeva to be what she failed to be at birth (IP II:172): a son to Marija—both Bogorodica Marija and Marija Aleksandrovna Mejn. The Gospel scene cements a familial connection between two beings who bear God’s Word and so are closest to It: the woman who conceived and gave birth to the Child, the Word incarnate, and the man who recorded and propagated the adult Christ’s biography and utterances, leaving an undying textual body. The originary power of the Gospel story shapes the poet’s identity and inheritance and reveals the implications of the poet’s activity: the poet as mediator of language and the Word’s most beloved follower moves closer to God the Creator. If the poet is both Marija and Ivan, she also takes on the role of parent to herself in bearing the word. The self created in her poetry is also a poet and so a poetic parent as well, creating a potentially infinite regression. The poet, both as elevated scribe or prophet and as sacrificial victim, is an imitator of both Ioann and Christ. This reading, especially in its problematic insertion of a mortal poet into the Gospel narrative, is consonant with Cvetaeva’s syncretic, unorthodox, (neo-)Romantic image of the poet as a mediator between heaven and earth, divinity and humanity through language. The
most ethereal kind of inheritance is still grounded in Marija’s motherhood: Christ Himself commands his beloved mortal disciple, His own son in the spirit, to assume His place as son and religious teacher, fixing the relationship between Ioann and Marija through His own authoritative words: they are now son and Mother.

To be sure, the Apostles of the canonical Christian Gospels are all men, and a poet who uses consistently female language in her writing makes a problematic claim by choosing Ioann Bogoslov as a key to her poetic fate. If indeed Cvetaeva defines her own poetic essence by means of her patronymic, including activities that her culture has gendered as masculine, then this would seem to indicate a desire to assume the name and status of her own father, to be a man and thus an heir in patrilineal society. At the same time, however, Cvetaeva’s poetic image of Ioann includes “feminine” elements which make him at best an ambiguously masculine figure. In the cycle “Ioann,” written in 1917 and first published in the 1923 book Psixeja, the speaking self becomes identified with Ioann through a complex shifting of gender and point of view. While the cycle can be and has been read as love poetry, like so many of Cvetaeva’s love poems of the Revolutionary period it also questions the poet’s relationship to divinity. The prayers of the lover are ultimately addressed to God, and a woman’s relationship to the man she loves transmutes into Ioann’s relationship to Christ. The first of the cycle’s four poems, “Tol’ko živite!—Ja uronila ruki” (SiP II:19) shows a mysterious mutual listening between God and the speaker, who is like “molodaja burja” (“a young storm”), elemental and grammatically feminine. Ioann appears in the second poem, “Zapax pšeničnogo zlaka” (“The scent of wheat grain,” SiP II:33), arising out of the addressee’s thoughts in reaction to the speaker’s tears. Her desperate tears (“budu otčajanno plakat’”) may at first seem stereotypically feminine, but since Ioann himself wept on Christ’s chest (at the Last Supper, asking Christ who would betray him, Ioann 13:23 and 25), the speaker’s grief shifts to a higher, less individual register. Her addressee may be about to leave her, but he is himself in mortal danger; according to the paradigm he leaves her not because his love has cooled, but to fulfill his higher destiny. The cycle’s third poem does not name Ioann, but clearly shows a masculine presence in the third person singular (SiP II:33).
Christ and Ioann echo in the Gospel references: “Celoveku nado—syna” recalls the frequently repeated “Syn Čelovečeskij.” Ioann leans on Christ’s chest, again, and “syn edinorodnyj” reduplicates Christ’s identity as God’s only-begotten son, making John’s relationship with Christ parallel here to that of Christ with God. Just as God needs a Son, Who is both divine and human, the incarnate Christ needs a son who will both live on earth as a mortal being and strive to transcend mortality. The curly head of the figure of “odin,” in line eight, matches Cvetaeva’s frequent depiction of herself in poems of the late 1910’s and early 1920’s (Weeks, 26, 36), but now the gender has tipped in favor of the masculine. The poem insists on a son, repeating the word four times in twelve lines; a daughter (even a daughter of Ivan) can fulfill this role only if she becomes a son herself (Ivask, 220). Finally, the poetic power of night, when all but the poets sleep and dream, is silent over the waters as at the origins of the world in Genesis, when all creation awaits the inspiring word of the spirit of God.

The last poem of the cycle names Christ and Ioann explicitly and distances them further from the speaker into an icon-like pose, with Ioann’s hair falling onto Christ’s chest as he embraces Him.  

Встречались ли в поцелуе  
Их жалобные уста?  
Иоанна кудри, как струи  
Спадают на грудь Христа.  
Умильтельное бессилье!  
Блаженная пустота!  
Иоанна руки, как крылья,  
Висят по плечам Христа.

Both Ioann and Christ appear only in the genitive case, and the action (such as it is) is performed by Ioann’s hair and arms. His arms are like wings, recalling the wings of an angel and the metaphorical wings of poets. Over the course of the cycle’s four poems the speaker moves from first-person presence to third-person description, and from femininity, through a figure whose masculine gender is clear in the grammar, to a man whose long hair gives him one “feminine” attribute that Cvetaeva herself lacked. The ambiguous development of Ioann in the poem suggests that Cvetaeva, always interested in heresies, might have encountered the gnostic tradition that Christ’s true favorite was not John but Mary Magdalene, the original “dearly beloved” (Walker, 613) and in that reading a female
The fact that in Biblical times, as for much of Russian history, long hair did not signify femininity points also to temporal shifts in the categories used to define and structure polarized genders.

Cvetaeva sent Rilke a copy of her book Psixeja in 1926, and in the explanatory notes written on the margins of the cycle “Ioann” she describes John as long-haired, with his neck showing, but otherwise faceless: “Wenn Johann mit Jesus ist hat er kein Gesicht, nur den Nacken mit den langen Haaren seh ich” (Ingold, 365). In her letters to Rilke as well as in her marginal notes, Cvetaeva refers and defers to Rilke’s own poetic treatment of Ioann and Christ. The cycle “Ioann” seeks parentage from a beloved mentor, a relationship of inheritance rather than erotic contact, and Cvetaeva stresses this cycle among the other poems in Psixeja by appending a more extensive explanatory note—as if she hopes to become Ioann to Rilke’s Maria. This possible relationship links the two poets across gender through their middle names, complementing her awareness of the emergence of her first name, Marina, from the womb of “Rainer Maria Rilke” as a partial anagram of his full name. In her first letter to Rilke, dated 9 May 1926, she praises his richness as a “mother’s son” (Pis’ma, 87), as if to align his “matronymic” middle name with her own patronymic and grant herself the correspondingly rich status of a “father’s daughter.” Her epistolary shaping of her relationship to Rilke and her depictions of the poet to himself cross, and sometimes double-cross gender boundaries. Cvetaeva constructs the contact she desires with Rilke as that of woman to man or man to woman, though she insists that it is not mere earthly heterosexual passion (Pis’ma, 191–193). (By contrast, Cvetaeva’s contestive writing of her relationship with Anna Axmatova makes it appear in “Stixi k Axmatovoj” and elsewhere as woman to woman or man to man, preserving in both cases their sameness in gender.) When in her second letter to Rilke (May 12, 1926) Cvetaeva identifies Rilke himself with Ioann, she makes it clear that he is a different, higher and less human kind of Ioann, who has dared to love God the Father (Pis’ma, 92) rather than the warmer and more human Christ.

A different connection between Rilke and Ioann occurs in the 1927 prose piece “Tvoja smert” (IP, I:267). Here, after describing the deaths that immediately preceded and followed Rilke’s death, Cvetaeva binds together the deceased Frenchwoman Jeanne Robert and the Russian boy Vanja by revealing that their names are the same, “Ioanna i Ioann,” framing Rilke in a way that returns him to Cvetaeva and her version of the significance of poetic activity. If Rilke is a Christ figure (Cvetaeva reads his death from leukemia as a purifying transfusion of his blood into the world, IP I:266–267), then Ioann should be nearby at his death. (In this tableau, Ioanna and Ioann provide a John for each gender, and Marija remains internal as the poet’s middle name, Maria, watches him fade and die, giving way to
Marina, the observer and interpreter of the poet’s demise who will later
strive to contact and resurrect him in poetic language.)

The earliest appearance of Ioann in Cvetaeva’s poetry shows that the
Gospel figure is already a point of comparison or contrast for other im-
portant cultural archetypes. In the 1914 poéma, “Čarodej,” the two Cvetaeva
sisters Marina and Asja tell an older friend about their lives (SiP I:157):

Как жизнь уже давным-давно нам—
Сукно игорное:—vivat!
За Иоанном—в рай, за доном
Жуаном—в ад.

Cvetaeva already interprets Ioann and Don Juan as diametrical opposites,
two choices that face the sisters but also, in the context of her first poéma,
delineate possible fates of a poet. Her use of the form “Żuan” suggests its
provenance through Blok (“§agi Komandora”), Puškin (the “don-żuanskij
spisok” more than the serious and poetic Don Guan of his “Kammenyj
gost’”), and Byron. Ioann is an apostle and theologian, a man who records
Christ’s own words both before and after death and thus preserves the
incarnate body as Word, while Don Żuan’s story can be read as a perverted
urge to write down every important word and thereby preserve every com-
ponent of some art or history from loss:24 his infamous list records the
number of women with whom he has had sexual intercourse, turning their
names and bodies from Words into mere ciphers. Don Żuan appears sev-
eral times in Cvetaeva’s poetry in 1917, both as addressee (SiP II:40, 193–
4) and paired with another operatic and literary character, Carmen (SiP
II:194). Don Żuan logically confronts Carmen as another famously faith-
less Spanish literary lover; at the same time, Carmen provides a nicely
opaque cover for Marija, the parallel of Don Żuan’s inverted instance of
Ioann. “Karmen” in Russian is an exotic, indeclinable foreign name with
all the charm of gypsy wildness—until one recalls that her full name is
Maria del Carmen.25 She is named for one hypostasis of Bogorodica, just as
Don Żuan bears the name of a saint. Thus once again Ioann is accompa-
nied by Marija and even, in a slightly later poem, by an inverted parody of
Christ, the Prince of Darkness opposing the Prince of Light (SiP II:199–
200). The fourth poem of the 1917 cycle “Knjaz’ T’my” (SiP:200–1) pres-
ents an argument between the Princes of Light and Darkness, their proxim-
ity recalling Cvetaeva’s childhood torment, the obsessive blasphemous
repetition of “Bog-Čert” (“Čert,” IP II:160–1) and her related love for all
manner of opposite extremes.

Another significant poetic figure in Cvetaeva emerges from a “feminiza-
tion,” so to speak, of Ioann into a persona who is an attractive model for a
female poet. That is Joan of Arc, in Russian Ioanna d’Ark, the speaker of the 1917 poem “Ruan” (SiP II:216) and of the variant 1918 poems “Svincovyy poldens’ derevenskij” and “Vot: slyshitsya—a slov ne slyshy” (SiP II:230, 307). Like both Ioann and Marija, Ioanna d’Ark moves in a mediating position: she hears voices which other do not hear and translates their words into action, and she fights not on her own behalf but rather for Charles VII, heir to the throne of France. Besides Cvetaeva’s poetry, Ioanna d’Ark appears in sections of the article “Poët o kritike” that touch on the author’s experience of poetic inspiration. Discussing the proper place of physical and historical realia in poetry, Cvetaeva states: “V poëme ob Ioanne d’Ark, naprimer:/ Protokol—ix./ Kostër—moj” (IP I:230). Cvetaeva never wrote a long poëma about Ioanna d’Ark, but she evidently valued the possibility. The next section of the article, subtitled “KOGO JA SLUŠAJUS’,” opens with the epigraph “J’entends des voix, disait-elle, qui me commandent.” The quotation in French makes it clear that the poet is citing Jeanne d’Arc herself. The extent of the writer’s identification with the recently canonized saint, however, lurks in the sinister meaning of the phrase “Kostër—moj” if it is taken out of context. Ioanna d’Ark combines the virginity of Marija (prototype of a woman who bears the Word) with a saint’s martyrdom in imitation of Christ, and so she allows the poet both to bear the word and to imitate the Word herself. She listens to holy voices, like Ioann Bogoslov; Cvetaeva cites her to illustrate the origins of poetic inspiration. Here, as in Cvetaeva’s writings to and about Rilke, her patronymic moves close to the Marian significance of Cvetaeva’s mother’s first name, Marija, to which I now turn.

Cvetaeva’s first name, Marina, resembles Marija in its phonetics and etymology. Her poetic use of the name Marina has been analyzed extensively by Olga Hasty, Jerzy Faryno (“Iz Zametok”), and others; these studies illuminate in particular Cvetaeva’s references to the historical and literary character Marina Mniszek and the association of “Marina” with the element of water, especially the sea. There is no Marina, however, in the Gospel drama that resonates in Cvetaeva’s poetry, and even lighting a big candle in memory of her patron anti-saint Marina Mniszek in 1916 (SiP I:214) cannot integrate Mniszek into orthodox religion. However, her mother’s name Marija sounds very like “Marina,” and by writing repeatedly that she is just like her mother Cvetaeva asserts a right to speak through this name as well.

Three maternal generations in the poet’s family—her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother—bore the name Marija; Cvetaeva points this out in a letter to Anna Tesková (110) about that line’s genius for unhappy love. Cvetaeva’s childhood nicknames, “Musja” and “Marusja,” are frequently used as diminutive forms of the name Marija; in her poëma “Mòlodec” the poet gives the name Marusja to the heroine, with whom she
identifies closely (*Pis'ma*, 107). In the short autobiographical prose work “Xlystovki,” one of the flagellant women, teasing the child Musja that they will steal her from her parents, tells her, “Višni s nami budeš brat’, Mašej tebja budem zvat’” (IP II:149). The child is powerfully tempted by the idea of joining these women in their fruitful garden, perhaps indeed because the name “Maša,” as the most frequent diminutive for Marija, would allow her to bear the Word and to become a significant figure in the religious community, like the unorthodox Bogorodica also depicted in “Xlystovki” (IP II:146–147).

Marina, then, shares crucial traits with other women named Marija, and the poet insists energetically on almost complete identity with her mother: “Moja mat’ umerla v moëm nynešnem vozraste. Uznaju, vo vsèm krome čužix pros’b, eë v sebe, v każdom dvizhenii duši i ruki. [. . . ]—esli by ja byla kniga, vse stroki by sovpadali” (SiP I:344). Much of Cvetaeva’s autobiographical prose plays on the child Marina’s desire to be at once both herself and her mother—if she became a musician, her mother could satisfy her artistic ambitions and perhaps even go on living through her. A first name, after all, is the only way to bind together the fate and genealogy of mothers and daughters in a system of naming that is otherwise under rigid patriarchal control; Cvetaeva insists on a mother’s right to name her own children (IP I:300). Her mother gave her a name so much like her own that it underlines the troubling game of identity and difference she would play out with her daughter. As Cvetaeva describes it to Teskova, the link between great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother confers their fate of unhappy love on the poet herself.29 It is as if the name Marina differs from Marija only enough for the poet to escape the fate of premature death and artistic frustration, particularly associated with the Virgin’s legacy of purity and submission because that maternal line is Polish and Roman Catholic. The Virgin Mary is the most prominent woman in Christianity, but her silence and obedience recall Cvetaeva’s mother’s stymied musical career more than the poet’s powerful voice and linguistic mastery. Cvetaeva’s negative portrayal of women’s silence has been discussed with great subtlety by Stephanie Sandler (145–148); the poet must find ways to complicate or transform Marija’s traditional silence before it can contribute to her half-transcendent, half-abject view of the poet.30

Marija Aleksandrovna Mejn also activates the issue of gender as presented in Cvetaeva’s autobiographical writing. Marija’s daughter cannot be the Word herself, even though her mother shares the name of the Virgin Mary (Forrester, 237). Gender bars Marija’s girl-child from claiming identity as the Word just as definitely as it bars her from the prized and predestined name of Aleksandr; at best, perhaps, she can aspire to become the ambiguously-gendered step-child Ioann, who writes down the words of God’s Word. As we have seen, Cvetaeva’s version of Ioann includes femi-
nine elements of behavior and identity. At the same time, the daughter's ability to identify with her mother and at the same time be a completely different individual is embodied in the name Marina, so similar to Marija, as if it were a mutation of Marija or an amalgam of Marija and Ivan/Ioann, her parents' names.

Unlike Akhmatova in *Requiem* (Axmatova, 162, 164), Cvetaeva never openly assumes the role of Marija Bogorodica; instead, the poetic speaker addresses Her with prayer in the 1916 poem “Kanun Blagovesčen’ja” (SiP I:210–211). Cvetaeva acquires the mediating function of Marija Bogorodica through the persona of another, less intimidatingly perfect Marija. Marija Madgalina, Mary Magdalene, is traditionally considered a sexually promiscuous woman, originally more like the figures of Marina Mniszek or Carmen than like Bogorodica Marija; her human sins free her of the burden of silence and perfect obedience to patriarchal theology that has made Marija Bogorodica an ambiguous model at best for women who are gifted with language (Homans, 22–31). The first name Marija is not mentioned in the 1923 cycle “Magdalina” (SiP III:94–96); it is replaced by “Magdalina” in a slippage of names not unusual in Cvetaeva.31 As I mentioned earlier, Gnostic traditions held that Mary Magdalene was really Christ's favorite disciple. Magdalina rhymes with Cvetaeva's lyrical creature, Marina, also a partial anagram of Marija Magdalina. The original textual identity of Mary Magdalene differs from book to book even in the synoptic Gospels, but she may attract Cvetaeva in part because Christ cast seven demons out of her (Mark 16:9), and seven is Cvetaeva's favorite (magic) number (*Pisma*, 93).

Cvetaeva's portrayal of Magdalina draws in most of the traits attributed to her in Christian culture: sins of a sexual nature if not outright prostitution, demonic possession, and the scene of washing Christ's feet in precious ointment and wiping them with her hair. Jerzy Faryno's *Mifologizm i teologizm Cvetaevoj* gives a detailed and illuminating study of the cycle, showing to what extent its deep structure actually reflects orthodox theology despite its seemingly heretical stress on sensuality and references to unorthodox myth. The first poem in the cycle allows the speaking “I” to detail how she would behave if she were “odna iz tex,” one of the women who followed Christ. Her “odna iz tex,” choosing to be the woman most in need of salvation, becomes the most beloved, moving from one extreme to the other. Magdalina in Cvetaeva's presentation is Christ's opposite, an outsider and a feminine Other who is embarrassingly, transgressively generous with her tears, oils and emotion. The second poem in the cycle pictures the encounter of Magdalina and Christ and for the first time in the cycle cites Christ's own words. A combination of male and female elements, Magdalina's liquidity and Christ's dryness, proves to be as necessary for spiritual fruitfulness as for earthly agriculture. The third and last poem presents the Word's response: Marija has touched and softened Christ, and
His authoritative pronouncement of gratitude and approval justifies both Magdalina’s contact with the Word and the poet’s temerity in speaking from the point of view of Christ Himself. Just as the cycle “Ioann” moves gradually from a feminine figure through weeping to a somewhat feminized Ioann, Cvetaeva approaches Christ gradually and takes Him as her speaker only once He has been softened and bent by contact with Magdalina.

The cycle can end on no higher note than the Word’s own testimony: without Magdalina, things would not have come to pass as they were meant to. Magdalina touches Christ with her tears and hair, just as Ioann does in the earlier cycle. In parallel to Marija Bogorodica, who gave birth to Christ, Magdalina is the first one to see the resurrected Word, and in her hands the tomb and grave-wrappings become a second womb that gives birth into eternity—she carries out what Irma Kudrova identifies as the poet’s project of “voskrešenie,” resurrection, like Ioann who records Christ’s words. Although Ioann and Bogorodica Marija might be classifiable according to rigid gender categories (he mediates the Word as abstract language, whereas She mediates the Word with the concrete physicality of birth), Magdalina brings both figures together and shows that their ways of mediating between divinity and mortality are not diametrically opposed but largely overlapping. Beside Magdalina’s contact with Christ, the tears and hair of Ioann in Cvetaeva’s poetic depiction are properly seen as both physical and transcendent, linguistic contacts. As Joseph Brodsky points out, this cycle provoked a significant response from Boris Pasternak, mov-
ing him to take the gender switching one step further and speak as Magdalina to a Christ associated with Cvetaeva.

The Gospel women who share the name Marija enjoy a privileged access to divinity, and Cvetaeva shows sympathy towards anyone who was not lucky enough to receive the name. The unfinished "Otryvki iz Marfy" (SiP 1990, 658–659), dated in 1936, examines the relationship between the sisters Marfa and Marija described in Luke 10:38–42. Its descriptions of Marfa’s immersion in earthly chores and concerns strongly recalls Cvetaeva’s complaints about her domestic obligations in emigration: “... Vsé-to myla i varila ... / Grajzno Marfoj byt’, Mariej—/ Chisto. ...” This Marija’s special attraction and access to Christ parallels the pull of poetic inspiration, but Marfa should not be blamed for her concern about dinner at the proper time; the poet, obliged to run the household and to earn enough with her articles to feed her family, could not surrender herself to the call of verses that she knew no one would publish, even when not writing them made her life unbearably prosaic.

Creating herself as a poet, Cvetaeva must juggle the roles of a woman (whose culture offers her Mary, obedient bearer of the Word, as a model), an imposter (Marina, so close in sound to Marija but in Russian culture a witch rather than an ideal for emulation), and the poet as follower and imitator of Christ (Ioann, the favorite apostle whose name fits her birthdate and patronymic). The complexity and gender ambiguity in this bouquet of names reflects the dilemma of a woman writing poetry in a tradition that credits men with its greatest achievements, and where her own names mark her inescapably with gender, locating her within patriarchy in a way that her own reverence for language can only intensify. Still, the interplay of the names Marija and Ioann enables Marina to establish a productive relationship to her failed potential identity as a son, Aleksandr. As a footnote to the importance of Cvetaeva’s parents’ names, I will briefly examine the place of her grandfather’s name, Aleksandr, in her writing. Although, of course, the name does not come from Gospel, Cvetaeva’s quasi-evangelic reading of the fates of Puškin and Blok syncretically apposes its role to her use of the Gospel names Marija and Ioann, which likewise are at once hers and not hers.

Cvetaeva’s autobiographical prose states that her female gender disappointed her mother’s hopes of naming the first-born baby after its grandfather, Aleksandr Mejn (IP:172). She could not be the boy who had lived in her mother’s imagination for nine months, Aleksandr Ivanović Cvetaev.32 Her mother chose not to use the feminine name Aleksandra and “pitied” the baby girl, sparing her the name Tat’jana (IP II:263). The crucial failure (from the mother’s point of view) of being born female also excludes the child from the clerical tradition of her father’s family: her gender negates
the inheritability of priesthood even more decisively than her father’s rise into the professorial élite.

In a wider poetic universe, Cvetaeva’s gender and name bar her from the Christ-like role she ascribes to her favorite Aleksandrs, Blok and Puškin, despite her unrealized identity with them—one which Cvetaeva continued to claim in her writing (Ivask 220; Neizdannye pis’ma, 442). Hélène Cixous argues that Cvetaeva’s poetry springs from two augural signs: that she should have had the same name as Puškin, and that Puškin was shot in the stomach. Cixous incorrectly equates the stomach with the womb, assuming that Russian uses the same word for both as French does (ventre); however, her error points to a deeper truth in the etymology of život, which in Russian retains the residual archaic meaning of “life.” Thus Cixous declared Puškin Cvetaeva’s poetic parent: “Actually Tsvetaeva was born out of the womb of Pushkin—the woman womb of Pushkin. Although he is an Aleksandr, he is also a woman, and the whole story of Pushkin as it is created here is going to be woven with mother, music, the womb, and stomach and the first poems” (Cixous 16–17). Like Christ on the cross, Puškin permanently resides on the wall of Cvetaeva’s mother’s room in Naumov’s depiction of his duel. He is always dying, as Cvetaeva says in her “Cvetnik.” “Puškin (sobiratel’noe) budet umirat’ stol’ko raz, skol’ko ego budut ljubit’. V. každom ljubjaščem—zanovo. I v kadom ljubjaščem—večno” (IP I:247). Read through Cvetaeva’s mother’s name, Marija Aleksandrovna, the child’s female sex amounts to both failure to be the Word and failure to be a Puškin, and only Puškin’s martyrdom provides an opening in which she can become a poet herself. By locating various phonetic backgrounds from which MARINA emerges (in her parents’ names, “Marija Magdalina,” or Rilke’s full name), Cvetaeva can suggest that Aleksandr was not meant to emerge from her parents’ union, that her own birth was an even more desirable and predetermined outcome than the birth of a son.

Barred from the nams Aleksandr and its powerful significance in Russian poetry, Cvetaeva appropriates and explores the other names available to her. Her parents’ names draw on theological tradition as well as literary motifs to position her as a poet at the very heart of the poetic mystery. The powerful Biblical references also define her audience and their relation to her work: if the poet is an apostle as well, then her audience will be damned if it does not listen. The complex of divine approval and earthly condemnation is peculiarly appropriate to a poet who positions herself as an unorthodox apostle; in the Gospels, Christ warns his followers that they will be persecuted for his sake. By assuming the position of apostle and martyr, Cvetaeva can turn much of the sting of criticism or willful ignorance of her work into a backhanded endorsement of her poetic qualifications, due to
be justly rewarded after her death. Far from rejecting the Bible to create a female speaking self, Cvetaeva inserts herself into it in unconventional ways, seeking divine approval for her poetic identity. A forceful assertion of worshipful respect for a poet such as Blok (SiP I:227–231) downplays her own poetic aspirations and positions her speaker as a mediator of the Word rather than as the Word Himself. To the extent that she presents all poets as mediators and imitators of Christ, all come to share the same “feminine” relationship to language. The Romantic privileging of inspiration as a way to describe and understand the poet’s relationship to the ideal language and reality from which poetry was “translated” renders all poets marginal figures and makes their positions as perilous as that of a woman writer whose mother wanted a boy, and whose culture prefers male and masculine poets. In the end, Ioann and Marija prove to be equally suitable figures for the poet’s approach to the Word: both mediate, and so repeat and reincarnate, God’s Word. The highly authoritative male figure shares the more “feminine” model of poetic creativity typical for Cvetaeva; her version of the Romantic concept of poetic inspiration, especially in “Poēt o kritike” and “Iskusstvo pri svete sovesti,” emphasizes the poet’s role as listener and “translator” of the otherworldly voice of inspiration. In return for this mediation, the Word rewards poets with language. Writing herself by name into the role of mediator grants Cvetaeva her own eternally recurring poet’s body—poetic texts themselves.

NOTES

1 In all three cases, examination of the name’s phonetic properties takes place in the first poem of an extended cycle, serving as a starting point for the cycle’s development.

2 Even her last name contains the sounds of “Car’-Devica,” heroine of the eponymous 1920 poema.

3 One English equivalent of the Russian imja is “Christian name,” which also points to the church’s role in naming. The impulse to name children after favorite saints did not vanish under Soviet rule; three examples of new nomenclature were “Vilen,” “Vladlen,” and “Ninel’.”

4 Preferring birth in the spirit to birth in the flesh, linguistic to corporal relationships, the preeminence of the saint’s day echoes the preeminence of abstract and logocentric values over a child’s physical and emotional bonds with its mother. For all her unorthodoxy, Cvetaeva often congratulates her correspondents on their name days.

5 Compare the prescient wail of the baby Akakij Akakievic in Gogol’s story “Sinel’,” as well as Cvetaeva’s verse examination of the sacraments in the poet’s life, “Krestiny” (SiP III:121–122).

were an integral part of every Russian’s life before the 1917 Revolution, and the strong
presence of heresy in Cvetaeva’s work. Interest in heresy and knowledge of Orthodox
religion intertwine in Cvetaeva’s work, which may depart from church dogma but re-
mains related to it.

7 The first surviving manuscript from East Slavic territory is the Ostromir Gospel, dated in
1056–57.

8 In fact, until the twentieth century knowledge of Greek and/or Latin was more typical of
Russians educated in religious seminaries, which since they were open to members of the
lower classes were not bastions of aristocratic educational privilege. Cvetaeva points this
out in her “U pervoj babki—četyre syna”: “Čaj, ne barčata—seminaristy!” (SiP, II:271).

9 I do not mean to suggest that a woman writer in Russia would enjoy unproblematic access
to Church Slavic vocabulary. Wendy Rosslyn shows that it was considered a man’s prov-
ince in early nineteenth century Russia, where Anna Bunina was criticized for using too
many Slavonicisms in her translations of Blair’s sermons. I thank Dr. Rosslyn for making
her unpublished work on Bunina available to me.

Moreover, even excellent knowledge of classical languages did not guarantee serious
attention to a woman poet in Western Europe; Elizabeth Barrett took advantage of her
ailments and the family tutors to learn Greek, but her scholarly work was soon forgotten.
Her poetic achievements too were written out of the canon within a few generations
(Spender, 214–215).

10 The trinity of the Russian name did not escape Cvetaeva’s notice. In “Vol’nyj proezd,”
lying that her name is “Ciperovič, Mal’vina Ivanovna,” the narrator comments, “Iz vsej
troičnosti ucelel odin Ivan, no Ivan ne vydast!” (IP, I: 45).

11 In this traditional naming system, the father is ever-present; the name of the father is
imposed once a child reaches an age to be addressed formally, by imja-otčestvo.

12 Cvetaeva’s autobiographical prose attributes this labeling of the day to her mother: “No
ty, ty, kotoroj na Ioanna Bogoslova šest’ let stuknulo!” (“Mat’ i muzyka,” IP II:187).

13 The Gospel according to John was the first of the Gospels translated into OCS, by St.
Cyril/ Constantine the Philosopher; it was prefaced with a discussion linking the Slavs
with “slovo” and “slava.” Thus the fourth Gospel marks the birth of the Slavs as Chris-
tians, and their baptism as a race, with the word (slovo) and glory (slava) which St. Cyril
links to their ethnic name (Lencek, 19).

14 Ioann’s position as a kind of stepson resonates with Cvetaeva’s treatment of the poet’s
status elsewhere. The third poem of her 1921 “Stixi k Bloku,” “A nad ravninoj” (SiP,
II:48), ends with the line “Pasynok k Materi v dom.—Amin.” Another example is the
poem “Čto že mne dlat’, slepcu i pasynku” (SiP, III: 68).

Erotic tensions between stepmothers and stepsons in some of Cvetaeva’s works, most
clearly in “Car’-Devica” and “Fedra,” have been widely remarked.

15 The first of the four poems is dated June 20, 1917; the other three, as a unit, are dated
June 22–27, 1917.

Cvetaeva describes Psixeja to Jurij Ivask as “edinstvennaja iz moix knig-sbornik, t. e.
sostavlena mnoj po primete čistogo i daze ženskogo lirizma (romantzma) . . .” (Ivask,
220). This “pure and even feminine lyricism (romanticism)” underlines the androgynous
elements of the cycle “Ioann.”

16 Cvetaeva comments on her poem “Ja—stranica tvoemu peru,” “. . . vse moi takie stixi,
vse voobšče takie stixi obraščeny k Bogu” (“Istorija odnogo posvjaščenija,” IP I:346).

17 Weeks (41) interprets “Vstrečal’si li v pocelue” as “the sensual image of a man and a
woman kissing with her hands resting on his shoulders” which “is magically transformed
into the image of Christ and his beloved disciple,” adding a note, “Remember, ‘John’ in
this tableau is Cvetaeva.”

18 Wings frequently symbolize poetic activity and inspiration; they appear in connection
with Blok ("Ne prolamannoe rebro—/ Perelomannoe krylo," SiP II:48) and Cvetaeva herself ("Krylatyx ženščin ne ljudi!" SiP I:245).

19 I have no proof that Cvetaeva knew this, but, given her interest in heresies, if she had come upon such information she would not have forgotten it.

20 Tsvetaeva’s correspondence with Rilke is illuminated in detail in Olga Hasty’s forthcoming study, which I read in manuscript under the title “Marina Tsvetaeva’s Orphic Journeys in the Worlds of the Word.”

21 Below her inscription on the copy of Stixi k Bloku she sent to Rilke, Cvetaeva asks parenthetically whether he has noticed that her name is a shorter form of his (Piš’ma 89).

22 Though the poëma “Na krasnom kone” contrasts Cvetaeva’s masculine Genij with a feminine figure like the Muse of Axmatova, the poets themselves remain alike in gender in her work. In the sixth poem of the 1916 cycle “Stixi k Axmatovoj,” the speaker says, “Ja—ostrožnik,/ Ty—konvojnyj,” making the self and addressee into masculine figures (SiP I:235).

The name Anna draws Axmatova to the periphery of Cvetaeva’s explorations of Gospel naming, as Anna is the mother of Marija Bogorodica. If, as I argue elsewhere, certain poems in the cycle “Stixi k Axmatovoj” place their speaker in a daughter’s relationship to Axmatova, then names let the speaker pretend to the position of Marija, who not only has the right to bear the Word but is fated and chosen to do so. Such a daughter-to-mother relationship makes all Axmatova’s poetic achievement serve to prepare the way for Cvetaeva herself: emerging from the poetic womb of Axmatova, Cvetaeva justifies and overshadows her predecessor.

In a further permutation, the ninth poem of the cycle “Stixi k Axmatovoj” begins with the words “Zlatoustoj Anne” (SiP, I: 236), recalling the more familiar epithet Ioann Zlatoust, John Chrysostom, the 4th-century church father renowned in Orthodox Christendom. “Golden-mouthed Anna” thus obliquely acquires the position of a father of the church. However, Cvetaeva is associated with Ioann Bogoslov; both women write or speak as “Ioanny” by virtue of their concern with the Word, and thus interact as man to man. Ioann Bogoslov, favorite apostle and author of Biblical texts, stands closer to the source of the Word than even Ioann Zlatoust. This Johannine subtext validates both women as poets, but again makes Axmatova’s importance tellingly less then Cvetaeva’s own. The apostle is closer to the source of the Word, the church elder more distant and derivative.

Cvetaeva may have known the significance of Axmatova’s own birthday—“V noč’ moego roždenija spravljalas’ i spravljaetsja drevnjaja Ivanova noč’—23 ijunja (Midsummer Night)” (Axmatova, 6–7). In any case, aligning herself and Axmatova with exemplary male mediators of the Word suggests that Cvetaeva strove not to eject Axmatova from her prominence in Russian poetry, but rather to create a comparable place for herself.

23 El’nickaja (49) cites this transition from the names used in the body of the piece, Mlle Jeanne Robert and Vanja, to Ioanna and Ioann as an example of Cvetaeva’s mythologizing activity.

24 If Don Juan’s driven sexual life resembles the poet’s urge to write, and especially the recurring fear that each completed poem will be the last one, this may explain why so many poets, including Cvetaeva, have treated him with sympathy.

25 Until the present century, Spanish women were almost all named Maria, and the particular attribute or shrine of Maria for which they were named became the distinguishing feature. I thank Fernando Arrojo for confirming this information.

The similar sound of the names Marija and Marina has been explained by an etymology linking them both to the sea, salt or bitterness (Walker, 584).
Cvetaeva indicates that as a child she already knew the etymological significance of her first name ("Xlystovki," IP II:149), again, because her mother points it out to her.

Cvetaeva does, however, treat Mniszek’s first name as if she were the saint of her baptism and name day:

Во славу грешу
Царским грехом гордыни.
Славное имя твое
Славно носу (SiP I:214).

In the same letter (Tesková, 110), Cvetaeva says she is the last in her female line, since her daughter Ariadna is like a sister to Sergej Efрон’s sisters. At the same time, Ariadna Sergeevna’s nickname Alja, used at home and in Cvetaeva’s poetry, echoes Cvetaeva’s grandfather and the non-existent son Aleksandr, since it is a frequent diminutive for Aleksandra.

Olga Hasty shows that one way to do this is to integrate her virginity and motherhood of language into the figure of the Sibyl.

This transfer recalls Cvetaeva’s describing Blok’s surname as “imja” in “Imja tvoë—ptica v ruke” (SiP I:227).

The name Marija tends to remain unspoken in Russian prayers, as in Cvetaeva’s “Канун Благовещения” (SiP I:210–211), suggesting subordination of Mary’s personal identity to her role and function as mother, but also her association with Godhead, whose name must not be pronounced.

In addition to this name’s gender, its sound is strikingly different, every part “closed” with a masculine consonantal ending rather than the “open” -a of the feminine names Marina Ivanovna Cvetaeva. Until 1918 the consonantal endings of most masculine names in the nominative case were even more “closed,” visually, by the hard sign of the old orthography.

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