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POÈMA VS. CYCLE IN CVETAEVA'S DEFINITION OF LYRIC VERSE

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As the *poème* moved away from a narrative structure towards a composition of increasingly discrete, varied, and disjunct units, it appeared to come close to or even to overlap with the lyric cycle consisting of autonomous poems.¹ Such apparent similarity between the genres can be found among Cvetaeva's works and has led to the observation that a number of works she designates as *poëmy* seem equally capable of supporting the appellation of cycle.² To succumb to the temptation of erasing the boundaries between these two elusive genres in the context of Cvetaeva's works is, however, to overlook the radical difference between them established by the poet.

It is the purpose of this article to provide a background for the discussion of the question of genre in Marina Cvetaeva's lyric cycles and *poëmy* from the larger perspective of her definition of lyric verse. For Cvetaeva genre was never a matter of arbitrary convention, but rather the reflection of an artistic necessity to which she ascribed profound meaning. For this reason formal categories and poetic significance are inextricably related in her works. For the purposes of this discussion I intend to use the one to throw light on the other, rather than to select a single and limiting vantage point. For Cvetaeva the poetic cycle demonstrates the same relationship of parts to whole that in her view lies at the heart of lyric verse. It is specifically within this relationship that we find the characteristics that set the cycle apart from the *poème*.

Cvetaeva sharply separates the *poème* from lyric poetry, classifying it as operating by dramatically different laws having more in common with novels or even articles. According to Cvetaeva, this difference stems primarily from the absence in the *poème* of the lyrical poem's demand, even after closure, for the continuation of that larger, interrupted poetic gesture that points beyond the individual poem. The *poème* can join often highly diverse parts into a complex whole, but does not extend beyond its own boundaries as does the lyric poem. She describes this in a letter to Boris Pasternak of 11 February 1923:

Лирические стихи/то, что называют/—отдельные мгновения *одного* движения: движение в прерывности. Помните в детстве вертящиеся калейдоскопы? Или у Вас такого не было? Тот же жест, но чуть продвинутый: скажем рука. Вправо, чуть правой, еще чуть и т.д. Когда вертишь—двигается. Лирика—это линия пунктиром, издалека—целая, черная, а взглядысь: сплошь прерывности между [пропуск] точками—безвоздушное пространство: смерть. И Вы от стиха до стиха умираете./Оттого “последность”—каждого стиха!/
 В книге/роман ли, поэма, *даже* статья!/этого нет, там свои законы.
 (Neizdannye pis'ma, 278-79)

For Cvetaeva, not only do all poems and poets taken together comprise poetry, but also each individual poem is perceived as a reflection of the whole of poetry. The participation of discrete units that preserve their identity in the context of a larger whole is for Cvetaeva the hallmark distinguishing lyric poetry from all other literary forms. Her position—far from denying significance to the individual poem in the face of the greater phenomenon of poetry—presents a very special relationship of part to whole, ascribing equal importance to each, for although every poem participates in a larger whole, it remains nonetheless complete in itself. Indeed, it is this very completeness (*zaveršennost'*) that enables it to reflect the larger whole.

Cvetaeva's view that the whole is found in each of its parts extends to the entire hierarchy of poetic units. In the essay “Iskusstvo pri svete sovesti” she explains:

Единственная цель произведения искусства во время его совершения—это завершение его, и даже не его в целом, а каждой отдельной частицы, каждой молекулы. Даже оно само, как целое, отступает перед осуществлением этой молекулы, вернее: каждая молекула является этим целым, цель его всюду на протяжении всего его—всеместно, всеприсутственно, и оно как целое—самоцель. (*Proza*, 1:388)

Each element is complete in itself yet simultaneously a fragment of a larger whole which it encapsulates.

The view Cvetaeva expresses here can be seen not only as representative of much twentieth-century art, but as characteristic of the philosophical implications of modern science as well. In the conclusion of *The Foundations of Metaphysics in Science*, a detailed investigation of twentieth-century thought in the physical and biological sciences, Errol Harris summarizes an essential insight of contemporary scientific reflection in the following passage, quoted here because of its dramatic resemblance to Cvetaeva's account of poetry:

Every process is the process of realization of a whole, and [. . .] the totality being generated is immanent in each successive phase. [. . .] Moreover, each phase is a phase of a particular process, only by virtue of the fact that it is a stage in the unfolding of a particular whole. If it were otherwise the process would be something quite different. Its special character consists in its being the progressive unfolding of just that totality which gives it its special character. The whole is thus immanent in the part so characterized, and this immanence of the whole in the part gives the part the status of a specific manifestation of the general principal of order.[. . .]

This is the essential character of a system—a scale of forms progressively realizing a structural principle. (465)

The relationship of parts to whole outlined here elucidates a central aspect of Cvetaeva's vision. Cvetaeva maintains that the interpenetration of part and whole informs every level of lyric poetry, from the interaction of parts or phases creating one poem to the totality of lyric verse. Each part entails the whole in which it participates. "Ibo poèzija," as Cvetaeva writes in "Èpos i lirika sovremennoj Rossii," "ne drobítsja ni v poètax, ni na poètov, ona vo vsech svoix javlenijax—odna, odno, v každom vsja" (*Proza*, 2:7).

As Cvetaeva's definition of lyric poetry evolved, chronology assumed increasing significance. Cvetaeva became convinced that the relationship of parts to whole found in lyric poetry could be revealed only through the temporal ordering of parts. Opposing vehemently the notion of measured time, which can function only to divide, to fragment, Cvetaeva concentrated on the uninterrupted flow of time that permitted the recognition of the unfolding and development of that immense, unbroken process of lyric verse she postulated. It is to this end that the poetic context created by a chronological arrangement of poems came to dictate the organization of Cvetaeva's poetry collections.³

"Ne v prave sudit' poèta tot, kto ne čital každoj ego stroki. Tvorčestvo—preemstvennost' i postepenost'. Ja v 1915 g. ob"jasnjaju sebja v 1925 g. Xronologija—ključ k ponimaniju," Cvetaeva writes in her 1926 essay "Poèt o kritike," (*Proza*, 1:223). This view informs the chronology found in most of her poetry collections, which become essentially poetic diaries of both her life and her artistic development. On the very next page of the essay "Poèt o kritike," Cvetaeva reiterates this insistence on chronology, explaining it further: "Itak, xronologija—ključ k ponimaniju . . . Otdel'nogo postupka net, est' svjaz' ix: pervyj i vse posledujuščie. Dannyj čas—itog vsech predšestvujuščix i istok vsech buduščix," (*Proza*, 1:224). Lest this insistence on chronology appear surprising, if not altogether contradictory, on the part of a poet who in so much of her work proclaimed war on the measurement of time and on the restrictions of temporality, it is necessary to understand that its source lies in an attempt to transpose the dialectical relation of whole and part into the realm of temporal phenomena.

Cvetaeva elaborates her position in a letter to Jurij Ivask, dated 4 June 1934, in which she replies to her correspondant's questioning of the prominence she ascribed to chronology:

Во мне все сосуществовало, создано было с самого начала: с самого двухлетия и рождения и до-рождения, с самого замысла матери, хотевшей, решившей сына Александра/оттого я вышла поэт, а не поэтесса./ Поэтому Вы правы, хронология не подходит, но она все же—дорожный посох. (Ivask, 220)

Because it is linear by nature, chronology is in itself insufficient to reflect Cvetaeva's view of poetry as a complete, predetermined, and pre-existing

phenomenon based on simultaneity rather than linearity. A seeming paradox lies in the use of sequence in the service of nonlinearity. That this paradox is but an apparent one is suggested in her reply to Ivask. Cvetaeva emphasizes chronology not because she considers poetry sequential by nature, but because sequence embeds the all-at-once of eternity, much as in the organic realm the mature tree is contained within the seed, but can emerge only through a series of successive but continuous stages. This complex view of chronology provides Cvetaeva with the means of establishing a context that reveals the inevitability of the development subsequent to an initial poetic impulse. Cvetaeva's belief that each poem points directly and necessarily to the ones that follow it, that each poem is dictated by those preceding it, emphasizes the link she perceives as existing among all her lyric poems. The context created by their chronological arrangement is that of the greater phenomenon of poetry itself. Chronology, in other words, permits poetry to determine its own context.

Cvetaeva's attitude toward poetic cycles is shaped by her definition of lyric verse and the central function played within it by chronological context. Poems comprising her cycles are with few exceptions arranged chronologically. Indeed, many cycles are made up of poems that were written in succession. In a letter to Teskova of 24 November 1933, Cvetaeva wrote: "Ja ne mogu ograničit'sja odnim stixom—oni u menja sem'jami, ciklami, vrode voronki i daže vodovorota v kotoryj ja *popadaju*" (*Pis'ma*, 105). The surrender to a poetic force described here is evident already in much of her work written earlier and informs Cvetaeva's increasing reluctance to rearrange the order of the poems appearing within her collections. By the time she composed her last collection *Posle Rossii* (1922-25, publ. 1928), Cvetaeva not only dated her poems, but scrupulously footnoted the few instances of deviation from a strictly chronological ordering. Each of these deviations occurs in connection with cycle formation and is accounted for with the following explanation: "Stixotvorenje pereneseno sjuda iz buduščego, po vnutrennoj prinadležnosti," (*Stixotvorenija*, 3:25 and 35). As is evident from this note, the formation of such cycles inevitably entails moving one or more poems back to join with earlier ones and never the other way around. Although the chronology of *Posle Rossii* is disrupted, within the cycle itself it is preserved.

Such reorderings are exceptional. Of the twenty cycles appearing in *Posle Rossii*, there are only two such instances. The poem "Sivilla—mladencu," written 17 May 1923, is transposed to complete the *Sivilla* cycle which opens with two untitled poems dated 5 and 6 August 1922. Similarly, the *Derev'ja* cycle, which opens with seven poems dating from the autumn of 1922, is completed by two written in May of the following year. While the poems joined in these (and other) cycles are unified by a shared theme, thematic considerations are in themselves insufficient to override the preeminence of the context chronology creates within a collection. This is clearly demon-

strated by the absence from *Posle Rossii* of thematically oriented cycles such as could have been formed for example from poems based on the themes of Ophelia and Hamlet or Orpheus and Eurydice.⁴ Reordering can be warranted only by “vnutrenjaja prinadležnost’,” a far broader and more complex set of criteria that includes dramatic development, tempo, the interaction of rhythmic and acoustic structures, and the interrelation of motifs and images that present either a unified vision or a variety of perspectives on one central concern.

While this type of cycle formation represents a break in the chronology of a collection, it is not in fact a break with the broader concept of poetic wholeness that informs it. The unity that exists among the individual poems remains unimpaired by the intervening time, as the initial gesture of the poems that open the cycle entails inevitable completion with the later poems. An examination of “vnutrenjaja prinadležnost’,” noted by Cvetaeva as a phenomenon which overrides the otherwise pervasive chronology of *Posle Rossii*, underscores the fact that in Cvetaeva’s view there is essentially no difference between the poetic laws governing a collection of lyric verse and a cycle that appears within such a collection. The established link of the cycle and the individual poems comprising it with the other poems in a collection enables both the cycle and the individual poems to point beyond themselves.

In a letter written to Boris Pasternak in mid-July 1927, in which Cvetaeva discusses *Posle Rossii* as her farewell to lyric poetry, it is the fragmentary nature of lyric verse that she stresses, opposing it by means of this characteristic to the *poèma*. By fragmentary, it will be noted, she means not the absence of completion or closure, but the expectation of continuation characteristic in her view of each lyric poem.

Я устала разрываться, разбиваться на куски Озириса. Каждая книга стихов—книга расставаний и разрываний, с перстом Фомы в рану между одним стихом и другим. Кто же из нас не проставил конечную черту без западания сердца: а дальше? Между поэмой и поэмой промежутки реже, от раза до разу рана зарастает. Большие вещи—вспомни Шмидта—stable fixe, лирика разовое, дневное, вроде грабежа со взломом счастливого часа. (“Pis’ma,” 196)

Cvetaeva regards the intervals between lyric poems as wounds—tears in that organic whole that they comprise. Each completion of a poem creates at the same time a gap, a wound which must be healed by the opening of the following poem. In that “death,” that “airless expanse” between them is the tension of doubt and fear, but also of expectation of continued growth and development. Its closure is temporary, for the lyric poem points inevitably beyond itself, foreshadowing a future reopening, the source of its dynamic “instability.”

By contrast, the “stable” (as Cvetaeva designates it) *poèma* appears as a closed entity which does not indicate that larger context a lyric poem insists

on, drawing instead the diverse components of which it is comprised towards its own center. Cvetaeva considers the boundaries of the *poèma* to be fixed, as is reflected in the fact that she published most of her *poèmy* individually in journals or as separate books.⁵ The parts comprising the *poèma* surrender their discreteness to it, and neither these parts nor the *poèma* itself participate in the complex interrelationships into which lyric poems enter. *Poèmy* appear as stones around which the stream of Cvetaeva's lyric verse flows.

In order to illustrate more explicitly the distinction Cvetaeva made between the cycle and the *poèma* and to demonstrate the degree to which these genres are contextually determined, it is helpful to consider Cvetaeva's book *Psixexja* (1923). *Psixexja* is an exception among Cvetaeva's poetry collections, an exception that may better help us to understand the rule. It is her only book of verse after *Iz dvux knig* (1913) that is not made up of the interspersed individual poems and poetic cycles in a predominantly chronological order.

To form *Psixexja* Cvetaeva eliminated the titles of the individual poems, grouping them instead under cycle headings. The ten cycles she includes in the collection range from three to eleven poems in length, while the dates of the poems that comprise them extend from a single day (such as the three-poem *Brat'ja* cycle) to a span of five years (as in the case of the eleven-poem *Bessonnica* cycle). (Fifty-two of the seventy-six poems comprising *Psixexja* appeared also in other collections in their contextually "natural setting.") In the midst of the ten lyric cycles Cvetaeva set her *poèma* *Na krasnom kone*. She concluded the collection with a group of twenty poems written by her daughter Alja.

A consideration of Cvetaeva's own remarks regarding this unique departure from the norm provides a dramatic example of the significance she ascribed to the context that arises from a chronological arrangement of poems.⁶ In a letter to Jurij Ivask of 4 April 1933, in which Cvetaeva writes about *Psixexja*, she stresses:

—Очень важное. Психехя совершенно не важна для уяснения моего поэтического пути, ибо единственная из моих книг—не этап, а сборник составленный по приметам явной романтики, даже романтической темы. (Ivask, 209)

The importance with which Cvetaeva endowed the distinctiveness of this collection is evident from the fact that in another letter to Ivask written nearly a full year later, she continued to insist, "Psixexja edinstvennaja iz moix knig—sbornik, t.e. sostavlenna mnoj po primete čistogo i daže ženskogo lirizma (romantizma)—iz raznyx knig. Ona—ne etap, a itog" (Ivask, 220). It would be interesting to examine what Cvetaeva means by "čistyj i daže ženskij lirizm." For this discussion, however, it is the designation of *Psixexja* as an *itog*—a sum, a total, a result—rather than an *ètap*—a stage, a

halting place or station, a separate part of something, a separate moment in the development or unfolding of a process or activity—that is of primary interest. Because in forming and arranging the works comprising *Psixexja* she determined the context herself, Cvetaeva felt that she had created a closed form, had given the *result* rather than the *process*. Her emphasis on the word *raznyx* in the letter to Ivask suggests that the uniqueness of this collection stems not only from the fact that it is assembled from poems that appeared elsewhere, but that these poems are isolated from diverse stages of her artistic development. Only a chronological ordering permits an emphasis on the poetic process, since it takes the focus away from the completion of an individual poem or cycle and directs it instead toward the perpetual becoming of poetry.

However dramatic or remarkable the context she created in *Psixexja*, Cvetaeva described the collection in retrospect as an artificial isolation of poems which no longer participate in a complex and dynamic whole, but present only one of its aspects.

Просто—Гржебин в Москве 1921 г. заказал небольшую книжку. Я и составила Психею, выбрала ее из огромного неизд. материала 1916-1921 гг. Выделила данную, эту, такую себя./ Из меня, вообще, можно было бы выделить по крайней мере семь поэтов, не говоря о прозаиках, родах прозы, от сушайшей мысли до ярчайшего живописания. Поэтому-то я так и трудна—как целое, для охвата и осознания. А ключ прост. Просто поверить, просто понять—чудо./

Принять / . . . / (Ivask, 220)

Psixexja, in Cvetaeva's view, is an aggregate, but not a whole. The demand for completion coupled with the insistence on a larger whole beyond that completion can be fulfilled only by the demonstration of process.

A consideration of what bearing this attitude has on the individual works comprising *Psixexja* reveals the role context plays in the determination of genre. In this collection the features that distinguish a cycle from a *poëma* are blurred by means of the exceptional context Cvetaeva creates.

Psixexja, it will be recalled, is comprised of cycles in the midst of which Cvetaeva includes a slightly abbreviated version of the *poëma Na krasnom kone*. This centrally located *poëma* makes inevitable a comparison of the two genres which in this collection would be virtually indistinguishable were it not for Cvetaeva's designations. Here we observe that as individual poems are removed from the "natural setting" of the context of their origin, their participation in the unfolding process of lyric verse is subsumed by their allegiance to the cycles they form. In this situation the discreteness of the poems is also weakened, as Cvetaeva underscores by removing their individual titles. Cycles thus formed become similarly isolated from that larger poetic whole described by Cvetaeva. The result is an emphasis on the discreteness of the cycle and an intensification of its boundaries. In short, these cycles come to resemble *poëmy*, just as the poems comprising them

become like the sections making up a *poèma*. Conversely this comparison emphasizes the discreteness of the individual sections that a *poèma* holds together. The juxtaposition of these two genres helps to bring into relief Cvetaeva's artistic formulation of the distinction between them.

By way of summarizing the major difference in Cvetaeva's view between the lyric cycle and the *poèma*, it is helpful to draw the distinction which Stankiewicz makes in "Centripetal and Centrifugal Structures in Poetry." Although Stankiewicz does not differentiate between the lyric cycle and the *poèma* in his discussion, the two trends that he distinguishes in poetic works are highly appropriate to illustrate Cvetaeva's characterization of the unique type of wholeness accomplished in lyric poetry as opposed to other literary forms and specifically the *poèma*. While sharing many common formal characteristics, the lyric cycle and the *poèma* differ in the type of relationship of part to whole on which they rely precisely by virtue of the centrifugal nature of the former and the centripetal nature of the latter. The lyric poem, however closed its form, simultaneously points outward to the poems preceding it and those following it and assumes the role of a (completed) fragment. The emphasis is on the part which reflects a greater whole and is unique to lyric poetry. This outward movement is reversed in the centripetal *poèma*, which pulls the diverse parts that comprise it together into a completed whole. The emphasis here is on that closed whole that draws together its various parts.

It can be observed that the *poèma* complements the lyric cycle, accomplishing in the small what poetry as a totality is able to achieve in a larger context—uniting even the most disparate units into a complex whole. The lyric poem and the *poèma* in Cvetaeva's art demonstrate from two different vantage points the overriding quality of poetry: from the perspective of lyric verse—its transcendence of division, from the perspective of the *poèma*—its unification of diverse parts.

NOTES

- 1 For a brief, but highly informative discussion of this problem, see Sapagov's "Liričeskij cikl i liričeskaja poèma v tvorčestve A. Bloka." Crucial to this issue is Markov's path-breaking "K voprosu o granicax dekadansa v russkoj poèzii (i o liričeskoj poème)," which contributes to an understanding of the evolution of the genre.
- 2 In "Poèma vs. Cycle: The Question of Genre in Marina Cvetaeva," a paper delivered at the annual meeting of AATSEEL in Chicago in December 1982, for example, Michael Naydan argued that Cvetaeva's *Poèma gory* should be regarded a cycle, not a *poèma*.
- 3 Cvetaeva does not date the poems comprising her early collections *Večernij al'bom* (1910), *Volšebnyj fonar'* (1912), and *Iz dvux knig* (1913). However, with *Junošeskie stixi* (1913-16; constituted as a separate collection, but not published as such in Cvetaeva's lifetime), she begins to date her poems and to arrange them with increasing concern for preserving their order of composition. With the exception of *Psixija* (1923), Cvetaeva's subsequent collections are arranged along chronological lines.

- 4 It is telling to observe by way of example that Cvetaeva chose not to alter the chronology to form a Hamlet cycle in *Posle Rossii*, although in *Zapiski nabljudatelja* (1924, no. 1) she published the poems "Gamletom—peretjanutym—natugo" (28 Feb. 1923), "Ofelija—v zaščitu korolevy" (28 Feb. 1923), and "Dialog Gamleta s sovest'ju" (5 June 1923) under the heading "Gamlet."
- 5 Only four out of Cvetaeva's twelve collections of verse included *poëmy*. Of the six (seven if we count the unfinished *Egoruska*) Cvetaeva wrote in time to incorporate into one of her collections, only three were in fact included in books of lyric poetry. *Čarodej* (1914) was to appear in *Junošeskie stixi* (publ. 1976). The *poëma Na krasnom kone* (1921) appears both at the end of *Razluka* (1922) and in the middle of *Psixexja*, while the *poëma Pereuločki* (1922) concludes *Remeslo* (1923). Here I am conservatively counting only the *poëmy* written by 1925, the last year of verse represented in *Posle Rossii*. By 1928, the year of publication of this volume, Cvetaeva had written five more.
- 6 The only other collection at all comparable to *Psixexja* is *Stixi k Bloku*. This slender book consists of twenty-one poems written over a period of five years (1916-21) and arranged into three cycles. Nine of these poems appeared also in other collections. Unlike *Psixexja*, however, the poems of *Stixi k Bloku* are with but one exception arranged chronologically and all revolve around one subject—Aleksandr Blok.

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