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OLGA PETERS HASTY

Reading Suicide: Tsvetaeva on Esenin and Maiakovskii

Мне кажется, смерть художника не следует выключать из цепи его творческих достижений, а рассматривать как последнее заключительное звено.

Osip Mandel'shtam

The death of a poet is a theme Marina Tsvetaeva addressed frequently both in poetry and in prose. The list of poets whose deaths underwent Tsvetaeva's artistic scrutiny is varied and includes Aleksandr Pushkin, Aleksandr Blok, Sergei Esenin, Rainer Maria Rilke, Vladimir Maiakovskii, Maksimilian Voloshin, Andrei Belyi, and Nikolai Gronskii. A number of notable lyric cycles and some of Tsvetaeva's finest prose essays emerged as homage to deceased poets. The function of these works extends beyond commemoration and entails the elaboration of Tsvetaeva's definition of lyric poetry and her exploration of poetic responsibility.

Tsvetaeva's concern with the death of a poet is in part an extension of her denial of a strict separation between a poet's life and his art—not in the narrow biographical sense, but in the fact of the dedication of both to *bytie*. "Poetu vseгда pora i vseгда rano umirat'," she observes in "Zhivoe o zhivom," an essay dedicated to the memory of Voloshin.¹ The dichotomy in this assertion encapsulates Tsvetaeva's widely recognized distinction between *byt* and *bytie*. It suggests the enmity of the mundane to the poetic and the need for the poet's struggle against the tyranny of that *byt*, which often plays an accountable role in the poet's death.

Death, in Tsvetaeva's view, removes the poet from the restrictions and limitations of the mundane. Yet whatever perspective is afforded by eternity, the incontrovertible fact remains that a poet who has died can write no more verse. Here we arrive at the focal point of the significance of the death of a poet, a significance that emerges in light of Tsvetaeva's definition of lyric verse as *process* that unfolds with the emergence of each individual poem.² In what it reveals of the larger poetic process, each poem reshapes the meaning of the poems that precede it. The death of a poet ends this unfolding. The gradual emergence of meaning through the process revealed by individual poems and the constant readjustment of meaning the process demands gives way to the synchrony of a fixed body of works.

This termination thus becomes a completion. Inasmuch as this completion is effected by the poet's death, his poems come to be read as leading toward it and foreshadowing it, even as the death itself affects retroactively the reading of those poems. The poet's death is thereby incorporated into the context of his art and demands interpretation. The poet's volition entailed in the act of suicide dramatically intensifies the link Tsvetaeva perceives between the poet's works and his death and throws into sharper relief the question of poetic responsibility.

In the sixth poem of her cycle *Maiakovskomu* Tsvetaeva juxtaposes the suicides of Esenin and Maiakovskii and creates a dialogue between the two. The poetics simultaneously shape, express, and demonstrate her conclusions.

Sergei Esenin hanged himself on 28 December 1925, after penning his famous farewell poem "Do svidan'ia, drug moi, do svidan'ia" in his own blood. Although his suicide was shock-

1. Marina Tsvetaeva, *Izbrannaia proza*, 2 vols. (New York: Russica, 1979) 2:27. Tsvetaeva's prose will be cited according to this edition.

2. I have dealt with this definition in "Poema vs. Cycle in Tsvetaeva's Definition of Lyric Verse," *Slavic and East European Journal* 32, no. 3 (1988), and "Time and Process in Marina Tsvetaeva's Definition of Lyric Verse," in *Time and Process (The Study of Time VII)* (International Universities Press, forthcoming). Each poem is understood to evolve out of those preceding it and to shape those that follow.

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ing and theatrical, critics and commentators found in his verse no dearth of material for retrospective proof of its inevitability. Images of death appeared frequently already in Esenin's early verse and increased in volume and intensity in the latter years of his brief life as death came to be associated with the poet's fear of losing his poetic abilities. Indeed, this fear served as a widely accepted explanation for Esenin's suicide.

Tsvetaeva's initial response to Esenin's suicide was brief. Four lines written in January 1926 are all that materialized of the *poema Pamiati Sergeia Esenina* she had thought to write.

ПАМЯТИ СЕРГЕЯ ЕСЕНИНА
 . . . И не жалость — мало жил,
 И не горечь — мало дал, —
 Много жил — кто в наши жил
 Дни, все дал — кто песню дал.³

Placing Esenin above censure in this brief in memoriam, Tsvetaeva responds to critics who gave more attention to what his suicide would prevent him from achieving than to what he had in fact accomplished. She bases her poem on Esenin's realization of a metaphoric equation of poetry and life's blood. To this end she deploys the ambiguity of the word *zhil*, which in its first two appearances in the poem can be read as either the past tense of *zhit'* or as the genitive plural of *zhila*. The first line, most commonly understood as, "and it is not a pity that he did not live long enough," can at the same time be read "and it is not a pity that he did not have enough veins," which is to say, that more veins would have supplied him with more blood for writing more poetry. Similarly, she asserts in line 3 that Esenin has indeed lived a great deal ["Mnogo zhil"] and simultaneously suggests that he did in fact have many veins, that is, that he accomplished a great deal in his lifetime. Tsvetaeva presents Esenin's suicide as a transformation of the figurative equation of life and poetry into a literal manifestation. Her use of the dual meaning of *zhil* describes and, more importantly, demonstrates the link of life, blood, and poetry that Esenin's final poem and his suicide create.⁴

Some four and a half years later Tsvetaeva confronted another suicide that commanded greater attention: Maiakovskii shot himself fatally through the heart on 14 April 1930. Tsvetaeva's initial response to his death appeared in the seven-poem cycle *Maiakovskomu*, written in Savoy in August of that year. The cycle includes homage, admiration, and polemics and is devoted primarily to a defense of Maiakovskii. (Attempts to arrive at an understanding and formulation of the reasons behind the two suicides are to be found later in prose in the 1932 essays "Poet i vremia," "Iskusstvo pri svete sovesti," and "Epos i lirika sovremennoi Rossii (Vladimir Maiakovskii i Boris Pasternak).")

The effect of Maiakovskii's suicide on the reading of his poetry demanded careful attention inasmuch as the act appeared to fly in the teeth of what he had proclaimed in his verse. In her cycle Tsvetaeva emphasizes the absence of incongruity in the poet's life and work and his death. She seeks to counter and to forestall misreadings of the suicide that would lead to misreadings of Maiakovskii's poetry.

The cycle opens with the infant being given the name "Volodimir," which predetermines his power over the surrounding world, and concludes with Tsvetaeva's evocation of the Russian Orthodox prayer for the dead, altered to suit Maiakovskii: "Upokoi, Gosподи, dushu usopshego vraga tvoego" (3:142). Within this frame Tsvetaeva encloses five poems in which details from Maiakovskii's life and works are interwoven to create a matrix of praise and defense that emphasizes Maiakovskii's integrity. Tsvetaeva's homage is frequently couched in Maiakovskiiian dic-

3. Marina Tsvetaeva, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, 5 vols. (New York: Russica, 1983) 3:136. Tsvetaeva's poetry will be cited according to this edition.

4. The association of blood, sacrifice, and poetry is an important one in Tsvetaeva's explorations of the role of the poet. Thus, for example, in "Tvoia smert'" (1927) she describes Rilke's death: "Istek khoroshei krov'iu dlia spaseniia nashei, durnoi. Prosto—perelil v nas svoiu krov'" (1:266). In the poem "Vskryla zhily: neostanovimo" (1934) Tsvetaeva equates life, gushing blood, and poetry.

tion, yet Tsvetaeva is very much present and does not refrain from interjecting her own disagreements with the poet she refers to in one poem as “Vrag ty moi rodnoi!” (3: 142). Tsvetaeva also uses this arena to reiterate her antagonism to the mundane where the poet is misunderstood and undervalued. She huris reproaches of indifference and hostility to the poet left and right.

The sixth poem of the cycle—a dialogue between Esenin and Maiakovskii in the afterlife—marks the climax of Tsvetaeva’s defense of Maiakovskii. The problem of reconciling Maiakovskii’s writings and his death is thrown into high relief in light of Maiakovskii’s vehement response to Sergei Esenin’s suicide, the condemnation of which he expressed in no uncertain terms in numerous public appearances, in the *poema Sergeiu Eseninu*, and in the essay “Kak delat’ stikhi” that discusses the writing of this *poema*. Tsvetaeva engages this embarrassing context in her poem to champion Maiakovskii further.

A brief consideration of Maiakovskii’s response to Esenin’s death helps in understanding Tsvetaeva’s position. In *Sergeiu Eseninu* Maiakovskii sharply criticizes Esenin and denies any significance to the suicide and the responses it engendered. He scoffingly depicts the dross of stale funeral speeches, dedications, and “poetic” analyses spawned by Esenin’s death. Interwoven with this criticism is Maiakovskii’s insistence on active participation in the improvement of life as a far preferable alternative to Esenin’s solution.

As Maiakovskii subsequently wrote in “Kak delat’ stikhi,” it was not Esenin’s suicide, but his suicide poem that necessitated this refutation:

Конец Есенина огорчил, огорчил обыкновенно, по-человечески. Но сразу этот конец показался совершенно естественным и логичным. Я узнал об этом ночью, огорчение, должно быть, так бы и осталось огорчением, должно быть, и подраसेялось бы к утру, но утром газеты принесли предсмертные строки:

В этой жизни умирать не ново,

Но и жить, конечно, не новей.

После этих строк смерть Есенина стала литературным фактом.

Сразу стало ясно, скольких колеблющихся этот сильный стих, именно — стих, подведет под петлю и револьвер.

И никакими, никакими газетными анализами и статьями этот стих не аннулируешь.

С этим стихом можно и надо бороться стихом и *только стихом*.⁵

Maiakovskii perceived the link Esenin created between poetry and death as extremely dangerous. His primary goal was to diffuse it (12.97).

Целевая установка: обдуманно парализовать действие последних есенинских стихов, сделать есенинский конец неинтересным, выставить вместо легкой красоты смерти другую красоту, так как все силы нужны рабочему человечеству для начатой революции, и оно, несмотря на тяжесть пути, на тяжелые контрасты нэпа, требует, чтобы мы славили радость жизни, веселье труднейшего марша в коммунизм.

To this end Maiakovskii set out to neutralize and transform the conclusion of Esenin’s suicide poem by insistently stressing the first of these lines while emphatically negating the second. He calls on the poet to use the power of his verse to combat negative elements—something Maiakovskii himself is exemplifying in his writing of *Sergeiu Eseninu*. A series of gradual acoustic and thematic alterations leads to Maiakovskii’s conclusion that emphasizes the unheroic nature of Esenin’s suicide with a transformation of the last lines of his suicide poem (7: 107):

В этой жизни
помереть не трудно.
Сделать жизнь
значительно трудней.

5. Vladimir Maiakovskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 13 vols. (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1959) 12:95–96. All citations of Maiakovskii’s works are from this edition.

Highly critical as it is, *Sergeiu Esenin* is also a poetic expression of grief, loss, and respect. Indeed the very significance Maiakovskii ascribed to Esenin's final poem can be regarded as homage. The "literary fact" of the suicide, however, can be read, according to Maiakovskii, only as poetic weakness. A great champion of energy—be it poetic or electrical—Maiakovskii saw in Esenin's self-destructive alcoholic binges and ultimately in his suicide a terrible waste of energy desperately needed for the building of a new revolutionary life and art. The suicide is a culmination of what Maiakovskii perceived as Esenin's default on his responsibility to forge a new life.

Clearly discernible in Maiakovskii's criticism of Esenin is a statement of his own artistic platform that serves as a dynamic counterexample to Esenin's defeatism. His own suicide is drawn inevitably into the context of this response to Esenin's death. The relation between the poet's words and his deed appeared strained, and among the many responses to Maiakovskii's death (most of which were much like those he had ridiculed in *Sergeiu Esenin*) is a great deal of criticism.

Tsvetaeva could not brook this criticism. In the dialogue she creates between Esenin and Maiakovskii she sets forth her reading of the two deaths. Unlike Esenin's act of resignation, Maiakovskii's suicide is interpreted as a characteristically dynamic, rebellious gesture. In her juxtaposition of the two poets Tsvetaeva demonstrates that their suicides have little in common but their shared signifier.

Taking her cue from Maiakovskii's lines in *Sergeiu Esenin*, "Tiazhelo / i neumestno / razvodit' misterii" (7: 102), Tsvetaeva creates a very unmystical other world in which she portrays Esenin and Maiakovskii unchanged in temperament and ideals. The two poets exchange friendly banter on the subject of their suicides. Maiakovskii describes the literary scene he has left behind in the Soviet Union, while Esenin fills him in on the poetic situation in the afterlife, and, having concluded that nothing is new in either realm, the two poets resolve to take action (3: 146–148).

Зерна огненного цвета
Брошу на ладонь,
Чтоб предстал он в бездне света
Красный как огонь.

Советским вельможей,
При полном Синоде . . .
— Здорово, Сережа!
— Здорово, Володя!

Умаялся? — Малость.
— По общим? — По личным.
— Стрелялось? — Привычно.
— Горелось? — Отлично.

— Так стало-быть *пожил*?
— Пасс в нек'тором роде.
. . . Негоже, Сережа!
. . . Негоже, Володя!

А помнишь, как матом
Во весь свой эстрадный
Басище — меня-то
Обкладывал? — Ладно

Уж . . . — Вот-те и шлюпка
Любовная лодка!
Ужель из-за юбки?
— Хужей из-за водки.

Опухшая рожа.
С тех пор и на взводе?

Негоже, Сережа.
— Негоже, Володя.

А впрочем — не бритва —
Сработано чисто.
Так стало-быть бита
Картишка? — Сочится.

— Приложь подорожник.
— Хорош и коллодий.
Приложим, Сережа?
— Приложим, Володя.

А что на Рассее-
На матушке? — То есть
Где? — В Эсэсэсере
Что нового? — Строят.

Родители — рдят,
Вредители — точут,
Издатели — водят,
Писатели — строчут.

Мост новый заложен,
Да смыт половодьем.
Все то же, Сережа!
— Все то же, Володя.

А певчая стая?
— Народ, знаешь, тертый!
Нам лавры сплетая,
У нас, как у мертвых,

Прут. Старую Росту
Да завтрашним лаком.
Да не обойдешься
С одним Пастернаком.

Хошь, руку приложим
На ихнем безводье?
Приложим, Сережа?
— Приложим, Володя!

Еще тебе кланяется . . .
— А что добрый
Наш Льсан Алексаныч?
— Вон — ангелом! — Федор

Кузьмич? — На канале:
По красные щеки
Пошел. — Гумилев Николай?
— На Востоке.

(В кровавой рогоже,
На полной подводе . . .)
— Все то же, Сережа!
— Все то же, Володя!

А коли все то же,
Володя, мил-друг мой —
Вновь руки наложим,
Володя, хоть рук — и —

Нет.
 — Хотя и нету
 Сережа, мил-брат мой,
 Под царство и это
 Подложим гранату!
 И на растворенном
 Нами Восходе —
 Заложим, Сережа!
 — Заложим, Володя!

Tsvetaeva bases her characterization of Esenin on the last two lines of his suicide poem and presents a Maiakovskii consistent with his transformation of those lines. These two texts provide the underpinning for Tsvetaeva's poem, but other references can be noted, among which are Maiakovskii's essay "Kak delat' stikhi" and his *poemy Iubileinoe, Oblako v shtanakh*, and *Chelovek* (especially the chapter "Maiakovskii v nebe"). Maiakovskii's suicide note, his oxymoronic attempt to depoeticize his own death, is also alluded to.

In writing of Esenin and Maiakovskii, Tsvetaeva proceeds toward the conclusion that the two suicides are only apparently similar. To this end she demonstrates in her poem the complexity, fluidity, and indeterminacy of our linguistic sign system, thereby garnering support for her conclusion that for Esenin and Maiakovskii the signifier "suicide" carries different meanings. In maintaining this position Tsvetaeva brings an entire panoply of artistic possibilities to bear on her argument. Their source is the no-man's-(but all poets')-land between signifier and signified—a space in which innumerable potentialities for the production of meaning reside in the fullness of acoustic and semantic associations. The interaction of the referential and acoustic presents a fantastic matrix from which the poem is made.

The poet can focus initially on acoustic properties to create associations among semantically unrelated words. As the meanings rejoin the words it becomes evident that acoustically motivated associations can lead to semantic discovery—to revelation of meaning accomplished by following the sound of the word. This "khozhdenie po slukhu," as Tsvetaeva describes it (1:396), lies at the heart of her definition of lyric poetry. (It plays a central role also in Maiakovskii's creative process as is exemplified in his poems and described specifically in "Kak delat' stikhi.") Thus in stanza 8 of Tsvetaeva's poem Esenin and Maiakovskii want to staunch the bleeding of their wounds with remedies that are paronomastically linked with their own names. Serezha picks *podorozhnik* while Volodia selects *kollodii*. Esenin suggests a folk remedy, while Maiakovskii opts for a highly flammable solution. In the images of these acoustically motivated choices of remedy Tsvetaeva is able to reflect Esenin's orientation toward the past and traditional rural values and to concentrate Maiakovskii's modernity and personal and artistic volatility and to recall at the same time the explosive imagery that appears so frequently in his works.

The process of selecting a signifier from among those referring to a given signified is also a revealing one. In referring to his country in stanza 9 as "Rasseia-matushka," Esenin again demonstrates his sympathy with Russia's past, just as Maiakovskii's inability to understand this reference, "To est' gde?" suggests his own orientation toward the future of the Communist state.

Since any word selected by the poet can have a broad range of meanings, the poet must move in the direction of excluding meanings. Yet even as he or she does this, new possibilities open, for the meanings that are not selected need not be completely effaced. They can participate in the poem at another level to enhance the semantic texture or to create systems of meaning that lie below the surface of the text. Thus, for example, in *Sergeiu Eseninu* Maiakovskii describes the alarming number of suicides that were triggered by Esenin's death and suicide poem with the lines: "Nad soboiu / Chut' ne vzvod / raspravu uchini!" (7:102). Immediate context dictates that *vzvod* is here to be understood as *platoon*, Maiakovskii suggesting the large number of would-be fighters for communism who are committing suicide. At the same time *vzvod* also evokes the phrase *byt' na vzvode*—to be drunk. This association is suggested by the immediately

preceding reference to Esenin's alcoholism and reinforces it. In the poem under discussion, Tsvetaeva selects this particular designation—*byt' na vzvode*—from the many possible signifiers the Russian language richly provides for the state of inebriation. “S tekhn por i na vzvode?” she has Maiakovskii ask Esenin. The choice made by Tsvetaeva echoes the diction of Maiakovskii's *poema* to Esenin and suggests her agreement with his characterization. At the same time it provides an acoustic link to Maiakovskii's given name (*vzvode-Volodia*), a link that in turn suggests the means of death he himself selected inasmuch as the phrase “*byt' na boevom vzvode*” refers to a cocked gun.

A poet can use either acoustic or semantic clues or a combination of both to trigger associations that evoke words that participate in the poem without actually being stated. We find an interesting example of this in stanza 7 where Esenin remarks, “*Tak stalo-byt' bita / kartishka?*” This phrase, which indicates something drawn to an unsuccessful conclusion, reminds Maiakovskii of his insistence that suicide is not a valid solution and is particularly appropriate here in view of the fact that he was an avid card player. Moreover, the image of card playing together with the word *britva* that appears just before it in the same stanza suggest the verb *rezat'sia* as in “*rezat'sia v karty.*”⁶ In the context of the discussion of the poets' fatal wounds, *rezat'sia* simultaneously evokes the image of Esenin slashing his wrists. *Kollodii*, the remedy Maiakovskii selects in the following stanza, intensifies the image of the cards by its acoustic proximity to *koloda*, a deck of cards, as does *obkladyval* of stanza 4.

Tsvetaeva uses a similar interplay of semantic and acoustic associations to suggest another detail connected with Maiakovskii's death. Her juxtaposition of drunkenness with a series of words linked with or suggesting water evokes *Vodop'iani pereulok*, the street on which Lili Brik's apartment was located—a biographical detail that Maiakovskii had transformed into “literary fact” in *Pro eto* and *Piatyi internatsional*. Thus words and meanings that do not appear on the surface of the text function in it, creating and intensifying its references.

The complexity of the possibilities just outlined is enormous and it may well be that choices entailed in these situations are made intuitively by the poet. Nevertheless, an attempt to understand why one particular option is chosen over another can lead to the discovery of the larger intent of the poem. The argument in the sixth poem of *Maiakovskomu* can be understood in this light, for in it Tsvetaeva draws particular attention to the selection of signifiers and signifieds in her characterization of Esenin and Maiakovskii.

In “*Kak delat' stikhi*” Maiakovskii describes the prominence in his creative process of a principal word or words around which others rally (12: 100–101). In Tsvetaeva's poem the rallying points are the protagonists' names, which are paranomastically highlighted throughout the poem. *Volodia* and *Serezha* are at the center of the work and draw two series of words into the poem: *Volodia: na vzvode, kollodii, vodiati, polovod'e, bezvod'e, povode, voskhode;* and *Serezha: negozhe, rozha, podorozhnik, to-zhe, rogozha, rastvorozhennom*, and a verbal chain based on the verb *lozhit'*, which, as will be demonstrated, is central to the development of the poem.

Having noted that the names *Volodia* and *Serezha* create an acoustic framework for the poem, we must consider why Tsvetaeva chose the familiar form of the first names from among the possible designations for the two poets. The explanation that *Volodia* and *Serezha* fit the tone of friendly banter in the poem, that they suggest the camaraderie of the two poets meeting in the afterlife, is appropriate but not exhaustive. Inconsequential as this particular choice of designation may appear on the surface, at a deeper level it functions as a statement of Tsvetaeva's discord with Maiakovskii. The polemical function of *Serezha* and *Volodia* becomes apparent in light of a passage from “*Kak delat' stikhi*,” in which Maiakovskii criticizes poems dedicated to Esenin after his suicide and deplores the frequent and, in his opinion, uncalled for use of Esenin's

6. This phrase appears in connection with Maiakovskii's death in the essay “*Epos i lirika sovremennoi Rossii*,” where Tsvetaeva writes, “*mog pokonchit' s soboi iz za chastnoi ljubvi tak zhe prosto, kak togda rezalsia v karty*” (2:22).

given name. “Vvedenie semeistvennogo slova ‘Serezha’ srazu razryvaet sotsial’nyi zâkaz i metod oformleniia” (12:96). Tsvetaeva chooses to use the familiar form of the poets’ first names and to emphasize this choice paronomastically precisely in order to indicate that she too is breaking with the “sotsial’nyi zakaz” Maiakovskii describes in his essay. Her poem is a response not to a “social demand,” but to a personally perceived poetic one—the same demand that prompted her to defend Maiakovskii in hostile émigré circles that myopically equated her praise of a poet with the praise of a regime.

If the “social demand” Maiakovskii perceived was neutralization of Esenin’s suicide poem, the “poetic demand” to which Tsvetaeva responds can be described as the attempt to prevent his suicide from negating his writings. To accomplish this Tsvetaeva sought to establish and underscore the differences between Esenin’s and Maiakovskii’s suicides. On the surface of the poem she differentiates very little between the two poets. Indeed, she chooses not to employ some obvious formal means, such as line and stanza division, to separate them. Their speeches flow into each other and they speak in a similar tone, repeat each other’s words and seem to agree throughout the poem except in their choice of remedies and of what to call Russia (and even this difference is resolved as Esenin adjusts his designation).

Tsvetaeva’s differentiation of Esenin and Maiakovskii lies at a deeper level, where it emerges that the agreement between the poets is only apparent. Here we arrive at the heart of Tsvetaeva’s strategy. Esenin and Maiakovskii use the same series of verbs and appear to agree with each other. Yet each is in fact misunderstanding what the other intends, as in his decoding process he selects meanings of the words other than those intended by the speaker. The meanings each chooses from among the possibilities, together with the associations the various signifiers lead him to make, reveal that Esenin is the poet who capitulates to his surroundings and Maiakovskii is the poet determined to alter his.

Tsvetaeva portrays Esenin and Maiakovskii by means of a demonstration of the way in which Serezha and Volodia read signs, indicating thereby how they themselves are to be read. She accomplishes this by means of a verbal chain that is acoustically linked to the name *Serezha*. This chain is a series of verbs based on *lozhit’* from which the action of the poem develops, as we observe Maiakovskii transform a root that means “to place in a horizontal position” into an uprising.

The series begins in stanza 8 where Esenin suggests that Maiakovskii place ribwort against his wound: “prilozh’ podorozhnik.” Maiakovskii responds with his suggestion of the explosive collision and adds, “Prilozhim, Serezha?” Maiakovskii’s shift to first person plural and the question mark provide the first clues (which are consequently confirmed) that for Volodia another meaning of *prilozhit’* is beginning to emerge: “napravit’ deistvie chego-libo na chto-libo, primenit’” (as in “prilozhit’ sily”).⁷ Esenin responds by repeating, “Prilozhim.” He is, as it emerges however, echoing the word in its first meaning, “to apply directly onto” and this apparent agreement becomes the first step of the misunderstanding that Tsvetaeva develops between the two poets. (It is telling that at this point Maiakovskii, whose thoughts have already raced ahead, fails to understand Esenin’s query, “A chto na Rassee / na matushke?” and forces him to rephrase the question as, “V Esesesere / Chto novogo?”)

In Maiakovskii’s reply to the question of what is new in the Soviet Union, “Most novyi zalozhen,” we encounter *lozhit’* with a new prefix that gives it a meaning that coincides with the semantic field of Maiakovskii’s decoding of *prilozhit’* in stanza 8. Of the eight possible meanings of the verb *zalozhit’*, Maiakovskii, as the context here dictates, intends “Nachat’ postroiuku chego libo; polozhit’ osnovanie chemu-libo” (as in “zalozhit’ dom, pamiatnik”). Inasmuch as Maiakovskii is using the word *most* figuratively, the broader meaning “dat’ nachalo, osnovanie” is also appropriate here.

7. *Slovar’ russkogo iazyka*, 4 vols. (Moscow: Akademiia nauk, 1959) 3:573–574. This work is the source of cited definitions.

Maiakovskii concludes that nothing has changed (“vse to-zhe”) and suggests to Esenin: “Khosh’ ruku prilozhim / Na ikhnem bezvod’e?” The intensity with which he invests his suggestion is emphasized by his repetition of the verb as he seeks to draw Esenin into his plan: “Prilozhim, Serezha?” Esenin appears moved by Maiakovskii’s enthusiasm and energetically echoes, “Prilozhim, Volodia!” What started out as the application of ribwort and collodion in stanza 8 becomes in stanza 14 an agreement to take part in Soviet Russian letters.

The discussion of the state of literary affairs turns now to the other world in which Esenin and Maiakovskii find themselves and which Esenin can describe to the newcomer. Here too nothing has changed and heaven, like the Soviet Union, is described as the same old thing. “Vse to-zhe, Serezha! / —Vse to-zhe, Volodia,” the two poets once again conclude. In this situation of “Vse to-zhe” in both worlds, Esenin finds, as we see from his response, a reinforcement and justification of the indifference he expresses in his suicide poem (“V etoi zhizni umirat’ ne novo, / No i zhit’ konechno ne novi”). In Tsvetaeva’s poem, his solution in the afterlife is the same one he chose on earth: “A koli vse to-zhe, / Volodia, mil drug moi— / Vnov’ ruki nalozhim,” he suggests to Maiakovskii. Here Esenin has in mind “nalozhit’ na sebia ruki”—to commit suicide. The observation, “khot’ ruk i net,” recalls the line from Esenin’s suicide poem, “Do svidan’ia bez ruki i slova.” Moreover, it permits Tsvetaeva to point out in a humorous tone the distinction between the literal and the figurative possibilities of language—specifically the word for *hand* in the expressions *prilozhit’ ruku* and *nalozhit’ ruku*.

At Maiakovskii’s echo of Esenin’s words, “Khot’ i netu,” the difference between the two poets emerges more forcefully, for these words remind the reader of Maiakovskii’s poetic refusal to accept any excuse for inactivity—specifically the lines from *Oblako v shtanakh* (1: 193–194):

Вьните, гулящие, руки из брюк —
берите камень, нож или бомбу,
а если у которого нету рук —
пришел что бы бился лбом бы.

Maiakovskii’s response reveals that he has misunderstood Esenin, for he takes “Nalozhit’ ruku” to mean “zavladet’, podchinit’ svoemu vliianiiu.” He agrees and continues his own train of thought without realizing that it differs from Esenin’s: “Pod tsarstvo i eto / Podlozhim granatu.” Maiakovskii’s cure for all ills is an explosive one. This destruction is to serve as the source of a new beginning (3: 148):

И на растворенном
Нами Восходе —
Заложим, Сережа!
Заложим, Володя!

Context suggests that just as in the line “Most novyi zalozhen,” so here too *zalozhen* is to be read as meaning “nachat’ postroiku chego-libo; polozhit’ osnovanie chemu-libo” or as “dat’ nachalo, osnovanie chemu-libo.” At the same time, however, because of the proximity of *podlozhit’ granatu* another meaning of *zalozhit’* is apparent—“polozhit’, pomestit’ kuda-libo s kakoi-libo tsel’iu” as in “zalozhit’ minu.” In the coincidence of these antithetical uses of *zalozhit’*—to plant destruction and to lay a foundation—we find an encapsulation of Maiakovskii’s insistence on the destruction of existing norms as necessary to the creation of something new.

Esenin appears to agree as he echoes the word *zalozhim*, but it is by no means certain that he embraces both of its aspects as does his energetic interlocutor. Given the development of the conversation, Esenin could be thinking of *zalozhit’* only in connection with destruction, a decoding that would serve as a reaffirmation of his suicide.

In her poem Tsvetaeva demonstrates that the choices entailed in the production of meaning delineate the individuality of speaker and decoder alike. The dialogue of the poem underscores that the same sign carries different meanings for Esenin and Maiakovskii and proves Tsvetaeva’s assertion that their suicides are also different in meaning.

This argument is foreshadowed and highlighted by the epigraph of the poem, a slightly misquoted quatrain from the fifth chapter of Andrei Belyi's *Peterburg*.⁸ With these lines Tsvetaeva suggests that she is going to shed light on Maiakovskii. She implies that she will provide the *bezdna sveta*—which becomes *tot svet* in her poem—that will reveal him to the reader. The flaming red is emblematic of the intensity of Maiakovskii the Communist. The section of the novel from which these lines are taken is charged with the fear of the impending detonation of a bomb and is thus thematically linked with the explosion of the stagnant other world Maiakovskii plans at the end of Tsvetaeva's poem. More importantly, Tsvetaeva's reference to Belyi at the opening of her poem underscores her strategy. Her defense of Maiakovskii is based on a demonstration of the fluidity in the relationship between signifiers and signifieds augmented by acoustic possibilities. In this Belyi is a strong ally. The plot of *Peterburg* emerges out of sound that draws meaning toward itself. Throughout the novel Belyi underscores the space between sign and referent and sports with kaleidoscopically shifting signifiers and signifieds that are subjected to constant regrouping. Tsvetaeva's choice of epigraph is motivated by a similarity not only of theme, but, more importantly, also of poetics.

Together with her personal reading of the two poets' suicides, Tsvetaeva also suggests in her poem the context in which they are to be considered. This context is again shaped by a series of words whose connections function beneath the surface of the text. Maiakovskii's prompting of Esenin in stanza 14, "Khosh' ruku prilozhim / Na ikhnem bezvod'e?" depicts the aridity of the literary situation he is describing. At the same time it echoes acoustically the *polovod'em* of stanza 11 while semantically opposed to it. The resolution and real significance of this seeming contradiction of excess water ("Da smyt polovod'em," 11:2) and the lack of it ("Na ikhnem bezvod'e?" 14:2) is made clear by the third element of this acoustic chain. *Polovod'e* is acoustically linked also with "na polnoi podvode" of stanza 17 where Tsvetaeva refers to Nikolai Gumilev's bloody execution and burial in a mass grave ("v kroavoi rogozhe"). This paronomastic network suggests a link between the flood (*polovod'e*) in stanza 11 and of blood. We are thus led to understand that the foundation of a new literary beginning has been swept away by a flood of blood—the deaths of its poets. Even Boris Pasternak, the surviving poet, cannot rectify this barrenness.

This reading is reinforced by the fact that the poem's two protagonists are dead and by the references to Blok, Fedor Sologub, and Gumilev in stanzas 15–18. Tsvetaeva's interpretation of these poets' deaths and her motivations for including them in this poem are too complex to develop here. Broadly speaking the distinction between the deaths of the poets who did not commit suicide and the two who did is eroded. The impossibility of a poet's survival serves, if not as an excuse, certainly as an explanation of the inevitability and "timeliness" of Esenin's and Maiakovskii's "untimely" ends. For all their differences, which Tsvetaeva is at such pains to demonstrate, Esenin's and Maiakovskii's suicides come together in the larger context of the "generation that squandered its poets."

In this larger context Tsvetaeva explores the causes of the suicides. She included further analyses of the deaths of Esenin and Maiakovskii in her own exploration of a poet's responsibility to art and to the demands of the times—the three essays written in 1932: "Poet i vremia," "Iskusstvo pri svete sovesti," and "Epos i lirika sovremennoi Rossii." Ultimately she sees in the suicides a reflection of Esenin's and Maiakovskii's understanding of the poetic task.

In this context Tsvetaeva seeks the reasons for their suicides within the poets themselves rather than in their social, political, or literary surroundings. In "Poet i vremia" she asserts that

8. The correct version is in Andrei Belyi, *Peterburg* (Moscow: Nauka, 1981), 218:

Краски огненного цвета
 Брошу на ладонь,
 Чтоб предстал он в бездне света
 Красный как огонь.

Esenin's shortcoming lies not in failure to respond in a positive way to the demands of his time as Maiakovskii interpreted it but in his acceptance of those demands as valid for poetry. Esenin failed to recognize that he *was* his own time, that in his poetry he created his time. According to Tsvetaeva, his death was the result of his admitting nonpoetic criteria into his understanding of what poetry should entail. Among these nonpoetic elements was politics. Tsvetaeva arrived, not surprisingly, at a highly negative assessment of its role and also blamed its intrusion into poetry for Esenin's death (1:375–376).

Yet Tsvetaeva's strong personal antipathy to politics and her conviction that it could not mix with poetry did not blind her to the monumental exception she perceived in Maiakovskii: "Poet Revoliutsii . . . i revoliutsionnyi poet—raznitsa. Slilos' tol'ko raz v Maiakovskom. Bol'she silos', ibo eshche i revoliutsioner—poet. Posemu on chudo nashikh dnei, ikh garmonicheskii maksimum" (1:374–375). This unique coincidence of essentially incompatible elements is ultimately tragic. The struggle between comrade and poet led to the dramatic conflict that was the source of Maiakovskii's strength and dynamism but was also the cause of his suicide. In "Epos i lirika sovremennoi Rossii" she describes (2:23):

Самоубийство Маяковского, в другом моем смысловом контексте встающее, как убийство поэтом — гражданина, из данного моего контекста встает расправой с поэтом — бойца. Самоубийство Маяковского было первым ударом по живому телу, это тело — первым живым упором его удару, а все вместе — его первым делом. Маяковский уложил себя, как врага.

The other context to which Tsvetaeva refers here is the essay "Iskusstvo pri svete sovesti" where she describes the struggle as one of man against poet from which the poet emerges victorious (1:405–406):

Двенадцать лет подряд человек Маяковский убивал в себе Маяковского-поэта, на тринадцатый поэт встал и человека убил.

Если в этой жизни самоубийство, оно не там, где его видят, и длилось оно не спуск курка, а двенадцать лет жизни.

Никакой державный цензор так не расправлялся с Пушкиным, как Владимир Маяковский с самим собой.

Если есть в этой жизни самоубийство, оно не одно, их два, и оба не самоубийства, ибо первое — подвиг, второе — праздник. Превозможение природы и прославление природы.

Прожил, как человек, и умер, как поэт.

Esenin's erroneous assessment of the role of his responsibilities makes him a passive victim of circumstances. His suicide is thus seen as the result of an insufficiency of confidence in himself and of faith in his poetry. Maiakovskii's suicide is regarded as another manifestation of the volatility and energy that shape his poems. It is a forceful gesture dictated not by external pressures but by an inner necessity. We recall that in poem six of the *Maiakovskomu* cycle *negozhe* rhymes with *Serezha* and not with *Volodia*. Tsvetaeva's poems are a public defense of Esenin and Maiakovskii; her prose is a poet's examination of the significance of the suicides to an understanding of the essential function of poetry and the poet.

Tsvetaeva's own suicide followed eleven years after Maiakovskii's and underscores the gravity of her exploration of these two deaths. That poetry is a matter of life and death in the broad sense that Tsvetaeva creates in her definition of the poet's *bytie*, is reflected in and supported by the vital earnestness of each and every detail of a poem, by the import of each and every decision made in the course of writing. Whether to live or to die is included among these decisions and a genuine understanding of the death of a poet can be arrived at only from the perspective of artistic necessity Tsvetaeva presents in her reading and not the perspective of the mundane world.