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**Bypassing Death: The Last Poems of Nikolai Gumilev,
Nikolai Otsup, Marina Tsvetaeva and Anna Akhmatova**

Iurii Kazarin, the compiler and editor of the forthcoming anthology of Russian last poems, has included into his book one hundred poems written in the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. Kazarin's anthology comprises 12 eighteenth-century poets; 38 nineteenth-century poets; and 50 twentieth-century poets. According to Kazarin's preliminary study, it is possible to detect a certain paradigm out of the selected texts that can be characterised both as the pivotal representation of poetic persona of each individual poet and of the collective self of the Russian poet.¹ Kazarin's anthology illustrates very well that all Russian poets of significance, in anticipation of their death, tend to write poems that can be defined as their last words. Such poems immortalise the poet's self-fashioned image, influenced by the eschatological tradition of Russian poetry and shaped by the specifics of the Russian language. In Khazarin's view, the last poem is a phenomenon that can be defined in general terms as a combination of linguistic, cultural, spiritual and existential factors. The last poem is usually double-edged: it marks the end of poet's physical existence and it also points to the poet's immortality. In these last texts, the poet aspires to transfer his physical body, his voice, his entire personality in a finalised manner, as if he becomes one with the elements and with the poetic speech itself. As Khazarin aptly suggests, 'his poems contain almost the entire self of the poet [. . .] and most importantly his word, idea, his suffering as a martyr in the face of silence; his experiences of horror of life and of sweetness of love; his courage and his helpless opposition to a crowd, the state and vulgarity; his faith and despair; his metaphysical intuition and his naïve approach to everyday life.'² In the absence of a coherent study of the poetics of closure in Russian poetry, which could have helped us understand how Russian poems and poets end, it appears that Khazarin's anthology is a

¹ Kazarin, Yurii. 'Antologija "Poslednee stikhotvorenie" (18–20 vv. russkoi poezii)', *Ural'skaia nov'* 15, 2003; available electronically at <http://magazines.russ.ru/urnov/200315/kazar.html> (accessed 10/03/2003).

² Ibid.

first attempt to identify a new eschatological paradigm in Russian poetry that entwines in intense manner the individualistic and metatextual qualities of poets' efforts to inscribe their physical bodies into the texts they write at the end of their lives.

What follows here is a discussion of some poems written by four Russian modernists at the end of their lives: Gumilev, Otsup, Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva. This discussion will be juxtaposed to a brief survey of the death of these poets as literary fact; so it will be possible to compare the poets' self-representations with the images produced by their contemporaries and disciples. It appears from my preliminary research of this topic that all of the poets discussed here experienced a premonition of death that made them aware of a need to create last poems in which they could reflect on their poetic career as a whole, promoting thereby a carefully controlled self-image moulded for the mass consumption of future readers. While it is not always entirely possible to recover all the contextual details that inspired the poets to write their last words, it is clear that the texts considered here reveal unresolved tension between literary and non-literary discourses. As Barbara Smith, the author of the book *Poetic Closure*, reminds us, a poem should be seen as an imitation of utterance, since it is ahistorical in comparison with utterance spoken by someone, sometime, somewhere, to someone else. 'Every utterance,' explains Barbara Smith, 'occurs within a specific context of circumstances and motives. When a poem occurs, however, it is unmoored from such a context, isolated from the circumstances and motives that might have occasioned it.'³ In this respect, it might be possible to speculate that, in addition to specific non-literary contexts, last poems are also triggered by literary reasons. It appears that most last poems are written by poets when they start to realise that they have already expressed everything they wanted to convey. It is not coincidental, for example, that 12 months prior to her death — on 31 August 1940 — Marina Tsvetaeva wrote to Vera Merkur'eva as follows: 'I have written everything I wanted to write. Of course, I could

³ Smith Herrstein, Barbara. *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End*, (Chicago, London, The University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 15.

write a few more works but I could easily give it a miss.’ (*‘Ia svoe napisala. Mogla by, konechno, eshche, no svobodno mogu ne.’*⁴)

Bearing in mind Barbara Smith’s comment that ‘the poem, *as an utterance*, had no initial historical occurrence’ and ‘it is, was, and always will be the script for its own performance’ since ‘it “occurs” only when it is enacted’,⁵ it is possible to conclude that the tradition of saying farewell to poetry appears to produce a certain set of rules of re-enactment that stems from the works of Derzhavin, Pushkin, and Tiutchev who laid the foundations for a metaphysical tradition in modern Russian poetry. In other words, in the case of Russian modernists, our sense of the appropriateness of a poet’s conclusion at a particular point of his career, or in a particular manner, arises from our familiarity with a certain kind of poetic utterance and convention that corresponds to our sense of closure. As Barbara Smith observes, in spite of the fact that stylistic pluralism is more characteristic of twentieth-century poetry, many modern poems continue to exhibit traditional formal and thematic structures.⁶ In fact, some critics writing on British poetry of the post-war period have suggested that modern poets try ‘to bring back into the currency of language the precision, the snap, the gravity, the decisive, clinching finality which have been lost since the late Augustan age.’⁷ At the same time, as Barbara Smith indicates, one should not overlook the tendency in much modern poetry toward anti-closure or weak-closure. Smith explains that this trend to establish poetic realism is based on certain conceptions of poetry and art that value ‘the “natural” or the illusion of naturalness while disdaining the artful, the obviously conventional or artificial’.⁸ In this respect Pushkin’s desire to present his poetry to future generations as non-materialistic monument (*‘pamiatnik nerukotvornyi’*) in his 1836 poem ‘The Monument’ (*Pamiatnik*) might be perceived as an expression of closure. It was seen by

⁴ Tsvetaeva, Marina. *Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh*, volume 2, (Moscow, Khudozhestvennaia literature, 1988), p. 543.

⁵ Smith, op. cit., p. 17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

⁷ Press, John. ‘Trends in British Poetry Since the Second World War’, *Rule and Energy* (London, 1963), pp. 45–46; quoted in Smith, op. cit., p. 237.

⁸ Smith, op. cit., p. 238.

Russian modernist poets as part of the canon that needs to be redefined or surpassed in their own works.

Thus, one of the last poems written by Gumilev in July–August 1921 states: ‘*A ia uzhe stoiu v sadu inoi zemli, / Sredi krovavykh roz i vlazhnykh lilii, / I povestvuet mne gekzametrom Virgiliti / O vysshei radosti zemli.*’⁹ By comparison with Pushkin’s self-representation in the poem ‘*Pamiatnik*’ located in St. Petersburg, in the poem ‘*A ia uzhe stoiu . . .*’ Gumilev does not self-fashion himself in the clothes of a Russian national poet. In accordance with the Acmeist world-view, he presents himself as a participant in world culture. Gumilev uses the present tense form of the verb ‘povestvovat’ (to narrate) in order to immortalise his dialogue with Virgil as a continuous discourse. Gumilev’s poem illustrates the retrospective overtones that are embedded in Acmeist poetics. As Renate Lachmann points out, ‘In Acmeist retrospective projections, the present exists only as the past and the present of the future.’¹⁰ In her analysis of Russian Acmeist texts Lachmann emphasises the importance of such elements as a profound joy of recurrence, a yearning for a world culture, a post-historic consciousness and ‘the nostalgia for that which is incomplete, for the not-yet-realised, for eternal imperfection, and for a being before history.’¹¹ In this respect, the would-be poetic interaction between Gumilev and Virgil, conveyed in one of Gumilev’s last poems, testifies to the existence of the poetics of closure. As Barbara Smith puts it, ‘a structure appears “closed” when it is experienced as integral: coherent, complete, and stable.’¹² The lyric persona in Gumilev’s poem ‘*A ia uzhe stoiu . . .*’ experiences a double-framing: he talks to his future readers and at the same time he locates himself in a beautiful garden where he listens to Virgil. At the same time Gumilev’s Virgil functions as both actor and audience, because he responds to his own performance of the poem that he executes in accordance with his own interpretations of the written text. It is in-

⁹ Gumilev, N. *Stikhi. Pis'ma o russkoi poezii*, (Moscow, Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1989), p. 314.

¹⁰ Lachmann, Renate. *Memory and Literature: Intertextuality in Russian Modernism*, translated by Roy Sellars and Anthony Wall, (Minneapolis/London, University of Minnesota Press, 1997) p. 238.

¹¹ Loc cit.

¹² Smith, op. cit., p. 2.

treresting that Gumilev mentions hexameter as the meter of Virgil's poem, linking it to the act of performance: indeed, one cannot respond to the meter of a poem without hearing it performed, either by another reader or by oneself. In other words, one of Gumilev's last poems brings to the fore the metaphor that entwines poems and performance. It also implies that when we read a poem we respond to the very process of our own performance. The experience of this process is determined by the structure of the poem. By using Virgil as an embodiment of the principle of the living word that Gumilev was teaching to his students in the early 1920s, Gumilev wants to remind his future readers that they will be engaged in a steady process of readjustment and retrospective patterning.

In this respect it is appropriate to mention here Georgii Adamovich, whose poems published in the 1922 collection of verse *Chistilishche* (Purgatory), resonate well with Gumilev's late poetry and feature images of a dying poet. In 1922 Adamovich published his second collection of poetry *Chistilishche* that conveys the poet's loneliness and suffering in post-revolutionary Russia. It incorporates allusions to European and Russian classical literature. The lyric persona constructs his subjectivity in a historical context, and speaks of despair and suicide. In the poem '*Kogda v predsmertnoi nezhnosti slabeia . . .*' (When growing weaker in the tender state before death) the poet imagines himself as the dying Orpheus, beheaded on the banks of the Neva river in Petrograd. The poem raises an important ethical question about the moral aspects of writing at the time of the Red Terror: '*Tam, na sude, — chto ia otvechu Bogu, / Kogda nastanet moi chered?*' ('What shall I say to God/ at the Last Judgement when my turn comes?')¹³ In the poem '*Prokhodit zhizn*' (Life Slips Away) Adamovich uses Pushkin's tragic death as a blueprint for his own destiny, suggesting that in Russia there is no salvation for a poet: '*I mne on zaveshchal: tot blesk krovavyi i muchen'e*' ('And I've inherited from him / The bloody shine and suffering.').¹⁴ Adamovich's *Chistilishche* is written in the style of a last collection of verse oriented towards fellow poets and misplaced intellectuals, who would easily recognise the painful experiences associated with the

¹³ Adamovich, Georgii. *Stikhi, proza, perevody* (St. Petersburg, Aleteia, 1999), p. 159.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 176

sense of loss, dehumanisation and suffering that are manifested in the collection. The title also evokes Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Adamovich introduces an ethical dimension into his aesthetics, suggesting that poets are expected to pay with their lives for the poetic gift they possess. Undoubtedly, Adamovich's collection of poetry evokes the image of Gumilev himself, who suffered death at the hands of the Bolsheviks. Adamovich moulds the identity of the Russian modernist poet in the terms expressed in Mikhail Bakhtin's article 'Art and responsibility' (*Iskusstvo i otvetstvennost'*), that states: 'I have to pay with my life for everything I have experienced in my art, so everything that I experienced and understood could be re-enacted in real life. Yet the responsibility is closely linked to the sense of guilt. Both art and life should be made responsible for each other and should feel guilty toward each other. A poet should remember that his poetry is responsible for the vulgarity of everyday life; and in his private life an ordinary human being should know that his lack of high standards and self-criticism are responsible for the fact that art does not result in anything.'¹⁵

Gumilev's death in August 1921 was almost instantly transformed into a literary fact. It inspired many of Gumilev's disciples and close friends to commemorate him in various poems and memoirs. Almost fifty years after Gumilev's death emerged a legend about Gumilev's last poem, written allegedly by Gumilev in prison shortly before his execution. It was published for the first time in 1970 by Nikita Struve in the 98th issue of the Russian émigré philosophical journal *Vestnik Russkogo Khristianskogo Dvizheniia*, and reproduced in Zaitsev's essay, published on 25 September 1971 in Paris, in the prominent émigré newspaper *Russkaia mysl'* (Russian Thought). Zaitsev's essay was reproduced in his book of memoirs *Dni* (Days), which was widely known in émigré circles, and became available to post-Soviet readership in 1995. Gumilev's alleged poem 'V chas vechernii, v chas zakata . . .' contains three six-line stanzas, and is written from the point of a view of a prisoner awaiting his execution in the St Peter and Paul Fortress. Several poetic masks found in Gumilev's poetry are reinforced here: the lyric persona presents himself as a sailor, poet and soldier who for freedom and his beliefs would die like a true martyr. The last stanza brings to

¹⁵ Bakhtin, M. M. 'Iskusstvo i otvetstvennost'', *Estetika slovesnogo tvorchestva*, (Moscow, Iskusstvo, 1979) pp. 5–7, p. 5.

the fore the image of a dying poet who has to pay with his own life for his gift: ‘*Za stikhi i za otvagu, / Za sonety i za shpagu. / Znaiu, strogii gorod moi? V chas vechernii, v chas zakata / Karavelloiu krylatoi / Otvezet menia domoi*’.¹⁶ Zaitsev responds with enthusiasm to the information depicting Gumilev’s last days, thus: ‘I am not surprised by the fact that he read Homer. Yet the reference to the New Testament seems to me not very compatible with his self-fashioned image of a sailor, poet and soldier. It means, however, that somehow he was inclined subconsciously towards a religious world-view. In the last stern moment of his life Gumilev encountered Jesus Christ, whose image he earlier tried to suppress in his heart.’¹⁷ Both Struve and Zaitsev identify Gumilev’s idea of home-returning, in the concluding lines of the poem (*‘karavelloiu krylatoi / Otvezet menia domoi’*), as the image of the eternal home created by God. Zaitsev’s response to Gumilev’s alleged last poem is highly emotional, suggesting that Zaitsev was possessed by this poem: ‘This poem follows me everywhere. It contains some sort of obsession. I do not possess this poem, it possesses me.’ (*‘ne ia ego vladelets; ono mnoi vladeet’*)¹⁸ Zaitsev’s responses to Gumilev’s alleged last poem were written three months before his own death on 28 January 1972. Zaitsev felt close to Gumilev, especially because the Nietzschean and Christian overtones of Gumilev’s writings had a considerable impact on Zaitsev’s world-view. Gumilev’s alleged last poem has recently been reproduced on some Russian websites, in the Russian media, and canonised in the CD produced in 2003 by the Russian song-writer Nikoklai Iakimov under the title ‘*Moi Gumilev*’ (My Gumilev).¹⁹ Mikhail Elzon, a prominent contemporary Russian Gumilev scholar, suggests that the poem ‘*V chas vechernii, v chas zakata . . .*’ is likely to have been penned in October 1937 by Gumilev’s disciple Sergei Adamovich Kolbas’ev, who was arrested in April 1937. He was expecting to be executed in October 1937.

¹⁶ The poem is quoted from: Khelemskii, Iakov. ‘Chelovechnost’ — ne tol’ko glub’ i vys’ . . .’, *Pervoe sentiabria*, 18 September 2002. Available electronically at: <http://lit.1september.ru/2002/18/9/htm> (accessed 11/5/2003).

¹⁷ Quoted from Khelemskii’s article, *ibid*.

¹⁸ *Ibid*.

¹⁹ The information about this CD is available electronically at the site: http://price.elizov.com/index.php?part=music_rus&good=14210282 (accessed 11/11/2003).

However, the execution order was not carried out and Kolbas'ev was sent to a Gulag prison in the North-East of Russia, where he died in 1938.²⁰ In spite of the fact that the poem 'V chas vechernii, v chas zakata . . .' is not included in any of collection of Gumilev's poetry, it continues to exist in the Russian cultural memory as the last poem written by Gumilev.

Clearly, the last poems written by Gumilev in 1921 — such as 'Na dalekoi zvezde Venere . . .' and 'A ia uzhe stoiu . . .' — are concerned with otherworldly themes and with the immortality of the poetic speech, overshadowing thereby the early self-representations of the poet as hero and wanderer. They entwine poetic speech and myth in the act of displacement from the contemporary historical epoch from which the poet emerged. Yet, in the popular cultural memory, the overpowering image of Gumilev as martyr and counter-revolutionary continues to live on. In the words of A. Miroshkin, Gumilev's death as a literary fact exists due to the collective act of myth-making undertaken by the poet's contemporaries: 'In the popular imagination of Gumilev's contemporaries his poetry and his literary behaviour merged to the extent that his poems were used as illustrations to his own life, and his biography echoed his poetic statements.'²¹ Miroshkin's conclusion exemplifies Aleksandr Potebnia's understanding of aesthetic communication, according to which the aesthetic sign is a construct constituted both by the production of meaning and by the subsequent acts of reception. Potebnia also points out that some semantic potential becomes lost, and concludes that the aesthetic communication alternates between storing and erasing experiences.

The trans-individual power of memory is also thematised in one of Tsvetaeva's last poems, written on 6 March 1941: 'Vse povtoriaiu pervyi stikh . . .' (I keep repeating the first verse . . .). It uses lines from Arsenii Tarkovskii's poem 'Stol nakryl na shesterykh . . .' (I laid the table for six persons . . .). In spite of strong autobiographical overtones embedded in this poem, Tsvetaeva's poem might be also seen as a con-

²⁰ El'zon, M. D. 'O geroe stikhotvorennia "V chas vechernii, v chas zakata . . ."', *Russkaia literatura* 4, 2000, St. Petersburg, Nauka, pp. 150–153.

²¹ Miroshkin, A. V. 'Smert' N. S. Gumileva kak literaturnyi fakt: Chast' vtoraiia', available electronically at the site: <http://www.gumilev.ru/main.phtml?aid=5000841> (accessed 11/11/2003).

structed dialogue with a contemporary Soviet poet preoccupied with the act of erasure and forgetting. Tsvetaeva ascribes her addressee with the qualities of the aesthetic outlook alien to her own, since he appears to worship contemporary issues, coherent patterns and objects of everyday life as fetish. Indeed, in 1940 Tarkovsky was elected to the Union of Soviet Writers. In the 1920s and 1930s Tarkovsky was a close friend of Dziga Vertov and other members of the group 'Kinoki', who thought Arsenii Tarkovsky had the potential to become a film-maker.²² Tarkovsky's early poetry displays a strong bond with the visual arts, and is ascribed with the qualities of closure that are best conveyed in spatial forms. Thus, the term 'closure' is often applied by psychologists to a quality of visually-perceived forms, spatial structures which exhibit relatively clear, logically presented, and uninterrupted shapes and patterns.²³ Tsvetaeva's poem 'Vse povtoriaiu pervyi stikh . . .' incorporates Tarkovsky's poem and redefines it radically. The scene conveyed in Tarkovsky's poem can be visualised as expression of a closure since it presents a symmetrical and stable scene depicting six people sitting at a table. Tsvetaeva's text encompasses Tarkovsky's poem as part of double-framing: it is inserted into her text as a painting, or immobile artefact, that has to be destroyed, brought back to life and actualised in the act of reading. She accuses her addressee of the act of forgetting the true functions of poetry, and appeals to him to resist the destruction of cultural experience. Tsvetaeva uses the number 'seven' as an allusion to magical powers of poetry and a reference to the lyre with seven strings used in ancient times to perform poetic texts. More importantly, however, she refers to herself as the seventh guest, who comes uninvited to somebody else's party and accuses her host of forgetfulness 'Kak mog ty pozabyt' chislo? Kak mog ty oshibit'sia v schete?';²⁴ The image of the seventh guest evokes David, the singer of sweet songs in ancient Israel, who appears in the shape of a spirit as seventh guest during Succoth, the Jewish autumn thanksgiving festival commemorating the sheltering in the wilderness. The lyric persona of Tsvetaeva's last poem also ap-

²² Deich, Evgeniia. 'Shtriki', in: Tarkovskaia, M. *Ia zhil kogda-to: Vospominaniia o poete Arsenii Tarkovskom*, (Tomsk, 'Vodolei, 1999) pp. 22–31, p. 24.

²³ Smith, op. cit., p. 2.

²⁴ Tsvetaeva, Marina. *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, (Leningrad, Sovetskii pisatel', 1990) p. 443.

pears to be rebellious and breaks the silence, spills water over the table and breaks a glass, thereby enabling the dead objects to come to life and blood and tears to flow. Tsvetaeva's lyric persona describes herself both as Death who attends a wedding feast and Life who attends the Last Supper: 'Kak smert' na svadebnyi obed / Ia zhizn', prishedshaia na uzhin'. This self-representation recalls the image of Mnemosyne, the muse of memory, described by Mandelshtam thus: 'The mask of oblivion slips from her slight, fragile face, her features come into a view; memory triumphs even at the price of death! To die is to remember, to remember is to die . . . To remember at all costs! To conquer oblivion even at the price of death: that is Scriabin's motto, that is the heroic aspiration of his art!'²⁵ Mandelshtam views Christianity as Hellenism impregnated with death, and the Christian world as an organism, a living body. He calls on his contemporaries to comprehend that the world is renewed through death and at the same time 'to struggle against the barbarism of our new life which is flourishing'.²⁶ Mandelshtam's words encapsulate the essence of Tsvetaeva's revolt against the barbarism of 1930s Soviet culture so aptly inscribed into her last poem. As a Russian modernist poet whose career was shaped by European modernism and by pre-1917 cultural values, Tsvetaeva in her last poem presents herself as the last poet of the modernist mould, whose life and art are inseparable from each other.

Tsvetaeva's poem performs an act of remembering that relies on intertextuality and her participation in the texts of other poets: it encompasses several subtexts, including references to the poems of Derzhavin, Pushkin and Tiutchev. Tsvetaeva's identification of speech with the flow of water resembles the water imagery used in several of Derzhavin's odes; the theme of feast that commemorates a dead person resembles Derzhavin's 1799 ode 'Na smert' kniazia Meshcherskogo'. Most importantly, however, Tsvetaeva's self-representation of herself as a person who sits by the corner of the table conceals a self-reference to her émigré poems of the 1930s, written before her return to Russia.

²⁵ Mandelstam, Osip. 'Pushkin and Scriabin: Fragments', *The Collected Critical Prose and Letters*, edited by Jane Gary Harris, translated from the Russian by Jane Gary Harris and Constance Link, (London, Collins Harvill, 1991), pp. 90–95, pp. 93–94.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Thus, in her 1935 poem ‘Zhizni s kraiu . . .’, Tsvetaeva proclaims her advantage over those contemporaries who identify themselves with the images of modernity linked to technological advancement. At the same time she complained thus to her friends about her marginal position as émigré poet: ‘I’m tired of living in the margins of life and literature.’²⁷ This statement echoes Tsvetaeva’s words in the the concluding lines of the last poem ‘Ty stol nakryvshii na shest’ dush, menia ne posadivshii s kraiu . . .’. The allusion to the precarious location by the corner of the table, or by the border that divides different worlds, strongly resembles Tiutchev’s poem ‘Bessonnitsa’ (Insomnia) written in 1829. In this poem, Tiutchev inscribes his premonition of death and refers to his life as a ghost standing by the abyss: ‘I nasha zhizn’ stoit pred nami, / Kak prizrak na kraiu zemli.’²⁸ Tsvetaeva’s image of a feast portrayed in her last poem also reminds us of Tiutchev’s poem ‘Na iubilei kniazia Petra Andreevicha Viazemskogo’, written at the beginning of March 1861, in which Tiutchev celebrates such Russian canonical poets as Zhukovskii, Pushkin and Karamzin, who exist as immortalised interlocutors in Tiutchev’s poetry: ‘Tak verim my, nezrimymi gostiami / Teper’ oni, pokinuv gornii mir, / Sochuvstvenno vitaiut mezhdu nami / I osviashaiut etot pir.’²⁹ Tsvetaeva’s last poem might be seen as an extension of the list of canonical authors featured in Tiutchev’s text, since the poem added her to the list of immortalised Russian poets who influence the Russian poetry of the future.

Just as in Gumilev’s case, Tsvetaeva’s death on 31 August 1941 shattered the literary community in the Soviet Union and abroad. Her death was transformed into a literary fact. The most remarkable responses to Tsvetaeva’s suicide can be found in the memoirs and poetry of Pasternak, Tarkovsky, Adamovich, Akhmatova, Lidiia Chukovskaia, Mariia Belkina and Zinaida Shakhovskaia. Yet, all of the literary attempts to canonise Tsvetaeva as martyr or a haunting ghost from the past fail to link her to another outcast of Russian literary history —

²⁷ Rodionova, Galina. ‘V Provanse v predvoennye gody’, in: Mnukhin, Lev Abramovich and Turchinskii, Lev Mikhailovich. *Vospominaniia o Marine Tsvetaevoi*, (Moscow, Sovetskii pisatel’, 1992) pp. 413–423, p. 422.

²⁸ Tiutchev, F. I. *Stikhotvoreniia*, (Moscow/Leningrad, Sovetskii pisatel’, 1962), p. 119.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 312–314, p. 313.

Nadezhda Durova — who was also buried in Elabuga. At the end of both their lives Durova and Tsvetaeva found themselves displaced from the Russian mainland and from the main stream of Russian literary life. The most emotionally charged response to Tsvetaeva's death can be found in the poems of Boris Pasternak, who started an elegy on Tsvetaeva's death in the winter of 1942. An unfinished poetic fragment by Pasternak during this time depicts Tsvetaeva as Pushkin's Queen of Spades, who continues to haunt Pasternak: 'Ty b v saniakh pereekhala Kamu / V chas naletchikov i gromil. / Pred toboi, kak pred Pikovoi Damoi, / Ia b ot uzhasa led prolomil.'³⁰ Pasternak's imagined encounter with Tsvetaeva after her death, as described in this poem, testifies to the presence of madness both in his work and in the modern world. Tsvetaeva's death forces Pasternak to seek answers to questions that invite an ethical re-evaluation of the modern world to which he belongs and which terrifies him. In his book *Madness and Civilisation* Michel Foucault talks about madness as one of the discourses that modern art shares with the modern world. Foucault states, for example, that 'by the madness which interrupts it, a work of art opens a void, a moment of silence, a question without answer, provokes a breach without reconciliation where the world is forced to question itself.'³¹ In Pasternak's poem, Tsvetaeva is compared to the Queen of Spades because, to Pasternak and other poets associated with Tsvetaeva, her suicide symbolises the act of madness that instigates a moment of silence and opens a void. Pasternak's portrayal of the sense of horror triggered by the vision of Tsvetaeva's dead body is akin to Foucault's understanding of madness in a modern world. Thus, for example, Foucault states: 'Henceforth, and through the mediation of madness, it is the world that becomes culpable (for the first time in the Western world) in relation to the work of art; it is now arraigned by the work of art, obliged to order itself by its language, compelled by it to a task of recognition, or repa-

³⁰ Pasternak, Boris. *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy v dvukh tomakh* (Leningrad, Biblioteka poeta, 1990), Vol. 2, pp. 37–38.

³¹ Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, translated from the French by Richard Howard, (New York, Vintage Books, 1988), p. 288.

ration, to the task of restoring reason *from* that unreason and *to* that unreason.³²

The restoration of reason in a work of art was thematised in the last poem written by Nikolai Otsup on 27 December 1958, one day before his actual death. Nikolai Avdeevich Otsup (1894–1958), a prolific émigré poet, critic, translator and memoirist, is well-known as friend and biographer of Nikolai Gumilev (1896–1921). Otsup wrote highly original poetry and, as an editor of the émigré journal *Chisla* (Numbers, 1930–1934) and as a lecturer in Russian literature in the 1950s at the Paris Sorbonne's École Normale Supérieure, played a pivotal role in promoting Russian literature in France. Otsup's poetry blends Italian, French and Russian traditions very successfully, revolving around religious and philosophical themes. Otsup's monumental narrative poem *Dnevnik v stikhakh* (Diary in Verse, 1950) is one of the longest poems in Russian literature. In the 1940s–1950s Otsup advocated the principle of individualism based on the Christian model 'ora et labora' (pray and work) as an alternative to communism. According to Gleb Petrovich Struve's assessment of Otsup's poetic achievements, Otsup as an author of lyric poetry will be more appreciated in the years to come than his famous contemporary Georgii Vladimirovich Ivanov (1984–1958), whose notorious nihilist behaviour can be defined as *épater les bourgeois* (shock the bourgeois).³³

Otsup's book *Literaturnye ocherki* contains a detailed analysis of Gumilev's life and poetry based on Otsup's Ph.D. thesis. It is the first critical biography of Gumilev that highlights the links between Gumilev's poetry and French modernism; analyses Gumilev's relationship with Akhmatova; and brings to the fore some romantic overtones in Gumilev's presentation of masculinity. It also contains Otsup's tribute to Blok, an article on Mikhail Aleksandrovich Sholokhov and a philosophical essay 'Personalism kak iavlenie literaturny' (Personalism as Literary Fact). The latter surveys the construction of individuality in various modernist texts and endows literature with moral and Christian values. Otsup's literary output embodies the Petersburg poetical tradition, with its main emphasis on the preservation of Russian European

³² Ibid.

³³ Struve, Gleb. *Russkaia literatura v izgnanii*, (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1984), p. 326.

cultural values. In his writings in exile Otsup presents himself as true representative of the Silver age of Russian culture. His poetry and fiction blend major Russian modernist tenets, including a total devotion to craftsmanship seen as part of religious experience and spiritual awakening. It is not coincidental that, in his Introduction to Otsup's collection of poetry *Zhizn' i smert'*, André Mazon, a prominent French Slavist and translator, underlines the extraordinary link between Otsup's words and deeds, emphasising the 'rare qualities of his spirit' and 'the nobility and high stature of his work'.³⁴ In 1957–58 he published in France the poetry of Gumilev and Fedor Ivanovich Tiutchev; and in 1958 he published a religious narrative play *Tri tsaria* (Three Kings). It portrays King David and touches upon biblical themes that revolve around the idea of faith and spiritual strength. Otsup died prematurely from a heart attack on 28 December 1958 in Paris.

In his last poem 'Da budet tak. Ne moi zhe eto dom!' (Let it be. It is not my house after all!) Otsup expressed his premonition of death and praised love as an important creative and moral force. In his last poem Otsup accepts the end of his life as a return to God and ascribes his lyrical persona with the quality of a prophet. Otsup's last poem is addressed to God, the Creator who will ensure the poet's immortality: 'Da budet tak. Ne moi zhe eto dom! / Iz tela nikhushchego zhizn' Ty vynesh'. / V smirenii stoiu pered kontsom, / No znaiu, chto sebia ty ne otnimesh' [. . .]'.³⁵ The lyric persona of Otsup's poem sees his act of dying as a transition from the locus of Russian poetry, where he situated himself for the major part of his life, and the paradise, the space of eternal divinity: 'No medlil Ty, chtob ia i serdtsem ponial: / Otechestvo ne Tsarskoe Selo, /A blagodenstvie Tvoe v Sione.'³⁶ The paraphrase of the line 'Otechestvo nam Tsarskoe selo' from Pushkin's 1825 poem '19 Oktiabria' (19 October) suggests that the lyric persona of Otsup's last poem situates himself in the space of Pushkin's text that replaces his forever-lost homeland. In his last poem Otsup proclaims, however,

³⁴ Mazon, André, 'Mort Du Poete Nikolas Otsoupe', *Zhizn' i smert'*: *Stikhi*, 2 volumes (Paris: Imprimerie Coopérative Étoile, 1961) Volume 1, pp. vii–viii, p. viii.

³⁵ Otsup, Nikolai. *Okean vremeni: Stikhotvoreniia, dnevnik v stikhakh, stat'i i vospominaniia o pisateliakh* (St. Petersburg, Logos, 1993), pp. 179–180.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

that his service to Russian poetry qualifies him for divinity: 'Kto psalmopevtstu-greshniku rovnia / V umen'e pet' i sile pokaian'ia? / No pered smert'iu est' i u menia / Svidetel'stvo pochetnogo izbran'ia.'³⁷ As with Tsvetaeva, in his last poem Otsup models himself on Israel's King David, a musician traditionally held to be the author of the Psalms.³⁸ Otsup's vision of the death of an artist corresponds to Mandelshtam's belief that 'the death of an artist should not be excluded from the chain of his creative achievements, but should be viewed as its final, closing link.'³⁹

Finally, the last poems of Akhmatova, written in 1964–65, also illustrate Akhmatova's efforts to create an image of herself that could be immortalised as final. In a short fragment of just two lines, Akhmatova expresses anxiety towards her posthumous fame thus: 'Molites' na noch', chtoby vam / Vdrug ne prosnut'sia znamenitym.'⁴⁰ Another Akhmatova poem of the 1960s — 'Pust' dazhe vyleta mne net . . .' — stands out as an especially interesting reflection on her identity as a Russian female poet. It reads: 'Pust' dazhe vyleta mne net / Iz stai lebedinoi . . . / Uvy, liricheskii poet / Obiazan byt' muzhchinoi, / Inache vse poidet vverkh dnom / Do chasa raststavan'ia — / I sad ne sad, I dom — ne dom, / Svidan'e — ne svidan'e.'⁴¹ Akhmatova's poem refers to the list of modernist poets who belong to the canon as a flock of swans, alluding thereby to Gumilev's definition of Innokenty Annensky as the last swan of Tsarskoe selo.

The poem might be seen as a self-parodic portrayal of herself as a female poet, one still regarded by many as an anomaly. Akhmatova suggests that the female poetic persona relies on hysterical discourse that destabilises the established rules and patterns. At the same time, Akhmatova's poem is ambivalent in its suggestiveness that Akhmatova, representative of the modernist canon in Russian poetry, talks about

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Hall, James. *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, (London, John Murray, 1974), p. 92.

³⁹ Mandelshtam, op. cit., p. 90.

⁴⁰ Akhmatova, Anna. 'Nesobrannnye stikhotvoreniia, 1957–1965', *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvoreniï*, edited and with an Introduction by Roberta Reeder, vol. 2, (Somerville, MA, Zephyr Press, 1990), p. 740.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 734.

herself as living monument who should stop writing love poetry, in order not to spoil her own reputation as martyr and poet-hero. More importantly, however, it appears that Akhmatova muses on her own captivity in the realm of Russian twentieth-century poetry: she wishes to abandon her role as Russian national poet in order to escape a heavy burden that is ascribed to this role. She wishes to escape into a realm of private life and private discourses. At the same time this appears to be impossible to her due to the realisation that her own individuality was expanded to the dimension of a national symbol. Osip Mandelshtam described the death of Pushkin and Scriabin in the similar vein: 'They served as an example of a collective Russian death, they died a *full* death, as some people live full lives, for in dying their individuality expanded to the dimensions of a national symbol. And the sun-heart of the dying main remained forever at the zenith of suffering and glory.'⁴²

Susan Amert, in her study of the late poetry of Akhmatova, suggests that for 'Akhmatova, displacement and homelessness are the universal conditions of life in the Real Twentieth Century,' in which 'poetry represents the sole refuge, the only source of comfort'.⁴³ The poems discussed in this paper offer a significant modification to Amert's proposition. They testify to the agony experienced by the established Russian modernist poets at the end of their lives. This agony stems from the realisation that madness became contemporary with the work of art. All of the poets considered here seem to have realised the paradox, which Foucault explains in the following terms: 'The world that thought to measure and justify madness through psychology must justify itself before madness, since in its struggles and agonies it measures itself by the excess of works like those of Nietzsche, of Van Gogh, of Artaud.'⁴⁴ In other words, the last poems of Russian modernist poets might be seen as a manifestation of their belief that creativity preserves sanity: when there is a work of art that is being written and re-enacted, madness becomes displaced. By writing their last poems the way they did, the modernist poets turned the tables on the age of Reason that displaced them in the firstplace.

⁴² Mandelshtam, op. cit., p. 90.

⁴³ Amert, Susan. *In a Shattered Mirror: The Later Poetry of Anna Akhmatova*, (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 195.

⁴⁴ Foucault, op. cit., p. 289.