

Marina Tsvetkova

Marina Tsvetaeva and Germany. A life long romance

One of the greatest Russian poets of the 20th century – Marina Tsvetaeva used to point out how much the German language and culture had influenced her. She first found herself in Germany in 1904 when she was 12. The places she knew well and loved dearly were Freiburg, Dresden, Berlin and their suburbs (Loschwitz, Weisser Hirsch, Scharlottenburg). The main work summing up all Tsvetaeva's impressions of contact with the country (real as well as imaginary) is the essay "Germany", a fundamentally revised and expanded version of a diary extract of 1919 published in 1925. In the essay Tsvetaeva presents Germany as the land of music and poetry, a poet in every dreaming office clerk and eccentric, each uplifted into ecstasy by Spirit. Tsvetaeva argues that the Germans are not philistines but rebels who manage to bend the daily round to submission by entirely submitting to it.

In the essay Tsvetaeva also dwells upon the topic of Germany's responsibility for the outbreak of World War I. She points out that when people are gathered together they become first a flock and then a pack, which makes them brutes. She suggests separating "the quality Germany" (the individuals) and the mass. After the beginning of World War II the poet changes her attitude. The poetic cycle "To Czechia" shows that she is extremely ashamed of her beloved country and frustrated by the behaviour of its people. This frustration could well be one of the reasons why she committed suicide in 1941.

Marina Tsvetaeva is an outstanding Russian poet of the so called "Silver Age" (a literary period that lasted in Russia from the end of the 19-th to the beginning of the 20-th century and was marked by a bright constellation of poets like Alexandr Blok, Boris Pasternak, Anna Akhmatova, Osip Mandelstam and many others). Tsvetaeva's work was prohibited in Soviet Russia and only with the beginning of Thaw in the 1960-s did her poetry begin to reach its readers in her homeland.

Interest in Tsvetaeva in the West arose in the 1950-s and was first and foremost the result of her tragic life which fitted so well into an image of a martyr of the communist regime. Only after some time did the centre of interest shift to her work. Germany and France were countries where Tsvetaeva started to be published earlier than in her birthplace because of the huge number of Russian emigrants there. Later Tsvetaeva was translated into German by Elke Erb, Richard Pietraß, Svetlana Geier, Elke and Fritz Mierau, Natalja Gontscharowa, Ilma Rakusa and Erich Ahrndt. Interestingly three of the publishing houses that printed Tsvetaeva's poetry in translation were located in Leipzig.

The poet had German blood, her mother née Maria Alexandrovna Meyn being half-Polish, half-German. Tsvetaeva was brought up by a German nanny and used to point out that her first languages were both Russian and German. As a teenager she wrote poems in German as well as in Russian and was widely using German words and quotations in her diaries and letters all her life, feeling it impossible to express some of her ideas in Russian.

Tsvetaeva first found herself in Germany in 1904 when she was 12. Her mother came to Schwarzwald to be treated for consumption in a sanatorium. In Autumn the young poet and her younger sister Asja entered a catholic boarding school in Freiburg, where they stayed for two years. Later in her essay "Germany" Tsvetaeva wrote: "How much I loved – with longing I loved, galley-west loved – Schwarzwald. Corn-coloured valleys, resonant, menacing-homelike forests – not mentioning the village with inscriptions on tavern plates: "Zum Adler", "Zum Löven" <...>." ¹ (Цветаева 1997, 4, 136)

After her mother's death in 1906 Tsvetaeva from time to time visited Germany with her father, Professor Ivan Tsvetaev, who went there to order copies of ancient statues for the Pushkin

¹ All the translations from Marina Tsvetaeva, except for translation of poem 8 from the cycle *To Czechia*, made by Angela Livingstone, are the property of the author of the article.

Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow of which he was the initiator and founder. During these visits Tsvetaeva was exploring Dresden, Berlin and their suburbs (Loschwitz, Weisser Hirsch, Scharlottenburg...). Reminiscences of these visits can be found in the essay *Father and His Museum*, part 1, *Scharlottenburg* (Цветаева 1997, 5, 170-173), where Tsvetaeva depicts an endless Gipsabgüßerei – a storehouse of plaster copies of marble originals. She and Asja (both in their teens) used to roam there as in some enchanted wood – no wonder Germany and Ancient Greece became so closely connected in Tsvetaeva’s mind.

The main work summing up all Tsvetaeva’s infant and adolescent impressions of contacts with Germany (real as well as imaginary) is the essay “Germany”, quoted earlier. Initially it was an extract from Tsvetaeva’s diary of 1919 fundamentally revised and expanded before being published in 1925 in Berlin (!) As diary prose the text doesn’t claim to be objective. On the contrary, from the opening lines it is stressed that the image of Germany created in the essay will be totally subjective and extremely intimate: “My passion, my homeland, the cradle of my soul” (Цветаева 1997, 4, 131), - that is how the author defines Germany in the opening lines. This declaration of love sounds like provocative bearing in mind that it was written shortly after the end of the First world war when anti-German attitudes predominated in Russia.

Tsvetaeva however insists on her trust in the bright future of the country she admires so much. In her essay one can find the following imaginary dialogue:

- What do you love in Germany?
- Goethe and the Rhine.
- Well, and the contemporary Germany?
- Passionately.
- How do you mean, in spite of...
- Not in spite of – not seeing!
- Are you blind?
- Sighted.
- Are you deaf?
- Absolute hearing.
- What do you see, then?
- Goethe’s forehead over millennia.
- What do you hear, then?
- Roll of the Rhine through millennia.
- But you are speaking about the past!
- About the future! (Цветаева 1997, 4, 138)

Summing up this controversy is Tsvetaeva’s conclusion, (separated from the previous and the following text with gaps so that it acquires a special emphasis): “Goethe and the Rhine *haven’t been accomplished yet* (italicized by Tsvetaeva). I can’t express it more precisely.” (Цветаева 1997, 4, 138)

For Tsvetaeva Germany is the country of freedom, where the laws of social life don’t violate individuality but cherish it. She writes that when in her teens she used to wear her hair short and smoked (both meant as a slap in the face to public morality) not a single person in Germany admonished her for misbehaviour, “let (her) be”. Tsvetaeva praises the Germans for their ability to esteem those who are out of the common run. She calls Germany “the country where the law (of community) not just accepts an exception: it reveres it.” (Цветаева 1997, 4, 131) According to Tsvetaeva this respect for individuality, this attitude towards the unconventional is because in Germany “in every office clerk a poet slumbers <...> in every tailor a fiddler can wake up.” (Цветаева 1997, 4, 131)

She recollects an office clerk whom she and her sister Asja met in Italy where her mother was under treatment in a sanatorium. His name was Reinhardt Röver, he was only eighteen, fatally ill

with tuberculosis and eventually died. He liked to spend time with Tsvetaeva's family "...attracted by his German music and my Russian mother" (who was a very good musician) "to the music of his sacred Bach <...> he would teach Asja and I immortality of soul. A piece of paper over a petrol lamp: paper shrinks, smoulders, the hand holding it lets it go and... "Die Seele fliegt!". The piece of paper has gone." (Цветаева 1997, 4, 132)

Tsvetaeva tends to see in this episode an example of a peculiar combination of philosophical and poetical attitude typical of a German mind, however common it may be.

"From my Röver to the universal Novalis there is just one sigh. "Die Seele fliegt!" – even Novalis didn't say more. No one ever said more. Here you can find Plato and knight August von Platen, here you can find the whole lot, and *except this there is nothing*." (Цветаева 1997, 4, 133)

In general in the essay Germany is represented as the country of poets and musicians.

"When people ask; who is your favourite poet, - writes Tsvetaeva, - I choke and then throw out at once a dozen German names" (Цветаева 1997, 4, 137). In her other works she specifies: August von Platen, Henrich Heine, Novalis, Holderlin and above all Goethe (whom she calls "the God").

Germany is depicted by Tsvetaeva not only as the country of poets but as the country whose people are poetically minded, people who are able to dream, to go into ecstasies. She fails to find a proper word for this quality in her native language and uses a German word *schwärmen*: "My perpetual *schwärmen*. In Germany it is taken for granted, in Germany the whole of myself is taken for granted, a white crow among white crows. In Germany I am ordinary, just *anyone*." (Цветаева 1997, 4, 140)

As for music, Tsvetaeva literally equates music to Germany: "Music I definitely sense as Germany (like amorousness as France, melancholy as Russia). There exists such a country – music. Its citizens are the Germans." (Цветаева 1997, 4, 134)

The reason for such equation of music with Germany is deeply rooted in Tsvetaeva's childhood. Tsvetaeva's first word (as she recollects in her essay *Mother and music*) (Цветаева 1997, 5, 11) was *scale*, she had an amazingly extensible hand and a powerful touch. Her mother (a pupil of the famous Rubinstein who passionately wished to be a musician but had to give up her career when she married Ivan Tsvetaev) wanted her daughter to realize her ambitions: she started to teach her to play the piano when she was less than five years old.

Mother – flooded us with music. (From this Music, turned to Lyric poetry, we have never swum out into the daylight). Mother submerged us like a flood. <...> Mother flooded us with all the bitterness of her unrealized calling, her unfulfilled life, with music flooded us like with blood, the blood of the second birth. I can say that I was born not in Leibens, but in die Music hinein. (Цветаева 1997, 5, 20)

Little Marina was introduced into the world of Bach, Beethoven and Schumann that merged in her imagination with the books read to her and her sister by their mother. The most profound impression was left by Uland's *Undina* (read in the original), as well as by the love songs which both mother and Valeria (Ivan Tsvetaev's daughter from his first marriage) sang together in German in the evenings, together with German folk songs sung by her nanny Augusta Ivanovna. "From my mother I inherited Music, Romanticism and Germany. Just – Music. All myself", – confessed Tsvetaeva later (Цветаева 1997, 4, 135). Thus she combined together music, Germany, knighthood and poetry into an all-embracing universality peculiar to Romanticism and announced that union to be the very core of her individuality.

Speaking about Marina's childhood one cannot ignore the fact that Germany also appeared to be a birthplace of the Devil ("his baronial birthplace" (Цветаева 1997, 5, 40), who was an

important character in her childish dreams and had many faces and names.² One of these faces was German. It came into Tsvetaeva's life through her German nanny who taught her to play a card game called Der Schwarze Peter, the point of which was to get rid of the knave of spades who was the only unpaired (thus, unique in Marina's view) card in the pack.

In Tsvetaeva's essay Germany is also a country of curious personalities.

She gives some individual portraits, like that of the host of a small Gasthaus "Zum Engel" in Schwarzwald, whom she remembers pointing at a portrait of Napoleon with the exclamation: "Das war ein Kerl!" and after a pause that showed his complete satisfaction: "Der hat's der Welt auf die Wand gemahlt, was *wollen* heist!" (Цветаева 1997, 4, 136)

It is also Die blinde Mathilde who came to her boarding school in Schwarzwald every Sunday and all the girls in turn had to write letters as dictated by her. To thank the girls Die blinde Mathilde sat at the piano and sang to the German girls "Ich kenn ein Kätzlein wunderschön" and to Marina and Asja "Der rothe Sarafan". The question that troubles Tsvetaeva is to whom were all these numerous letters addressed: "The one who will answer this question will write a novel." (Цветаева 1997, 4, 136)

Germany is a country of eccentrics. – "Land der Sonderlinge". That is how I would call the book that I would write (in German). Sonderlich. Wunderlich (Peculiar. Miraculous)." She continues: "Oh, I have seen them! Naturmenschen (people of nature) with chevelures of red men, clergymen, who went mad about Baccus, clergymen's wives, who went mad about chiromancy, respectable old ladies every evening after supper holding counsel with their deceased friend (husband) – and other old ladies – Märchen frau, fairy tale tellers by vocation and by craft, craftswomen of fairy tale. Fairy tale as a craft, and as a craft that nourishes. – Appreciate the country. Oh, I have seen them! I know them! Tell somebody else about the sanity and dullness of the Germans! It is a country of mad people who became ecstatic about the nous – spirit. (Цветаева 1997, 4, 139)

In this praise of spirit Tsvetaeva sees Germany as an heir to ancient Greece, its continuation. And she states that as she doesn't know Greek she can accept "the ambrosia, the nectar" of this ancient knowledge only from the German hands.

Tsvetaeva argues with the widely spread belief that the Germans are Philistines:

No, they are not – they are citizens: Bürger, from Burg: citadel. The Germans are bonds of Spirit. Bourgeois, citizen, for the Germans – indivisibly – Bürger. For the notion of Philistinism, belonging to petty bourgeoisie, plain prefix Klein is used: Klein- Bürgerlich <...>. Is it possible, that there is no special word for the main quality of the German nation? Think it over. (Цветаева 1997, 4, 140)

Tsvetaeva also cannot agree with the widely spread belief that the Germans are slaves of the daily round.

In Germany I'm attracted by orderliness (that is plainness) of the outward life, what we do not and never will have in Russia. The daily round they have bent to submission by entirely submitting to it. <...> Not a single German lives this life, however dutiful his body may be. Dutifulness of German bodies you mistake for slavery of German souls. There is no soul more free, soul more rebellious, soul more lordly. They are brothers to the Russians, but they are wiser (older?) than us. Struggle is completely transferred from the marketplace of the daily round to the heights of spirit. They need nothing here. Hence – submission. Self-restriction *here* for unbounded *raj there*. They don't have barricades, but they have systems of philosophy, blowing up the World, and poems, creating it anew. (Цветаева 1997, 4, 140)

As an example she mentions Holderlin who for 30 years was playing a soundless clavecin and Novalis who spent most of his life "behind the bars" of the bank where he worked. Neither suffered in their state. They didn't notice their prison, as they were spiritually free.

² Tsvetaeva dwells upon her "relationship" with the Devil in an essay "The Devil". (Цветаева 1997, 5, 32-57)

Another example of how daily duty is “poeticized” by the Germans could be found in an episode devoted to Reinhardt Röver (mentioned earlier), whom Tsvetaeva calls “an exemplary office clerk and no less exemplary dying man: thermometer, thiocol, departure home at the sunset.” (Цветаева 1997, 4, 132) When in Italy with their sick mother the sisters had an album where all the guests – most of them people ill with consumption – were supposed to leave a note. Röver wrote in French: “Tout passé, tout casse, tout lasse... Excepté la satisfaction d’avoir fait son devoir”. (Цветаева 1997, 4, 132)

Apart from a trip into the German mind Tsvetaeva undertakes a fascinating excursus into the German language as the reflection of national mentality. In her native language Tsvetaeva has no equal in her ability to sense the underlying connection of paronymous words helping to emphasize the notions that are of paramount importance for the nation speaking the language. In the case of Germany the rows of related words she dwells upon are:

1. **Edelstein, Edeltricht, Edelmann, Edelwein, Edelmuth, Edelblut**³ – bound together with an idea of nobility; Tsvetaeva praised nobility above all. She tended to treat it in a somewhat medieval sense meaning not just pedigree but chivalry first and foremost. It is interesting to note that in trying to describe the atmosphere of her parents’ home she wrote with pride that it was: “not bourgeois, not of “intelligentsia” but chivalrous” (Цветаева 1997, 4, 210)

2. **Urkraft, Urquelle, Urkunde, Urzeit, Urnaht** – united by the preposition “Ur” – ancient, primitive, combining a concept of eternity with a concept of primordial chaos. Hence all the German philosophical theories “blowing up the World” and poetry “creating it anew”.

Tsvetaeva’s passion for primary forces manifested itself in her admiration of epic songs. In one of the questionnaires she filled in she named the German *Nibelungenlied*, the Ancient Greek *Iliad* and the Russian *The Lay of Igor’s Raid* (mentioned in this very order) “the books I’ll be burnt with”. (Цветаева 1997, 4, 210)

To **Edel** and **Ur** Tsvetaeva adds a paradoxical pair of concepts represented by the words **Leichtblut** (which she suggests should be interpreted not as “lightmindedness”, but as “leghtbloodedness”) and **Uebermuth** (meaning, according to Tsvetaeva, “superfluity, abundance, overflow”). The two add to chivalry and primordial forces the idea of lightness combined with might – the essential qualities of the human soul (remember the image of the burning paper flying up over the flame): “The most important thing that it [the combination of lightmindedness and overflow] doesn’t exclude anything, either sacrifice, or death, – however light sacrifice, flying death.” (Цветаева 1997, 4, 139)

Tsvetaeva claims that the words **Leichtblut** and **Uebermuth** – very much give the essence of herself, “out of the suspicious “lightmindedness” as well as out of the heavy “abundance of vitality”.” (Цветаева 1997, 4, 139)

Interestingly, speaking about the Germans in her essay Tsvetaeva, tries to avoid the common translation of the Russian language word “немцы” that literally means “mute”. The term had originated as a name for all foreigners and only later became associated with the Germans, who appeared to be the most numerous foreigners in the country in the 18-th century. Tsvetaeva prefers the word “германцы”, whose meaning is “people living in Germany”. The word is normally used with the addition of “old” and being used alone sounds quite novel for a Russian ear. Probably Tsvetaeva’s reason for coining her own word was to refer to the glorious past of the nation as well as to help the readers to view the Germans from a new perspective by destroying stereotypes.

³The spelling of the German words is given as Tsvetaeva wrote them. The old-fashioned spelling is however conceptual in her case. That was the way her mother (whose influence was crucial in Tsvetaeva’s reception of Germany) wrote. Maria Alexandrovna refused to accept the new orthography that shows that subconsciously she mythologized and poeticized the country and this attitude was taken over by Tsvetaeva.

Comparing the three countries she loved most of all: France, Russia and Germany, Tsvetaeva writes: “France is light for me, Russia – heavy. Germany is perfect. Germany is a tree, an oak, heilige Eiche (Goethe! Zeus!). Germany is my precise outward form, Germany is my flesh: her rivers (Ströme!) are my hands, her groves (Heine!) are my hair, she is all mine and I am all - hers!” (Цветаева 1997, 4, 138)

Tsvetaeva sums up: “There are many souls in me. But the main soul is German”. In the original version in her diary she adds to it “There (in Germany) I would like to die and there I will - for sure – be born next time.” (Цветаева 1997, 4, 137)

The essay concludes with a long passage devoted to speculation about Germany and war, inevitable after the First World War when it was written. As in the dialogue about Germany’s future, it is posed in the form of an argument with an imaginary opponent (who could well be Tsvetaeva’s alter ego):

– Well, what do you think of the war then?

– As for the war – it is like this: not Alexandr Blok with Reiner Maria Rilke but a machine gun with a machine gun. Not Alexandr Scriabin with Richard Wagner but a dreadnought with a dreadnought. Had Blok been killed I would have mourned over Blok (the best of Russia), had Rilke been killed I would have mourned over Rilke (the best of Germany) and none of the victories, either ours or theirs, would have consoled me. (Цветаева 1997, 4, 141)

Tsvetaeva distinguishes not between the people and the government, as is normally done when speaking about wars and their reasons, but between individuals and the mass, a flock:

“– Well, and what would you say about atrocities committed by the German?

– But I was speaking about a qualitative Germany, not about the quantitative one.” (Цветаева 1997, 4, 141) In this phrase Tsvetaeva gives a formula for her opinion of how brutality comes into being. The idea was based on her reflections over not only the First World War but the Russian Revolution as well: “When they gather people together, deprive them of their individuality, they become first a flock and then a pack.” (Цветаева 1997, 4, 141)

Tsvetaeva considers also an idea widely discussed at that time that the Germans promoted the Bolsheviks and sponsored Lenin and the Revolution: ““The Germans gave us the Bolsheviks.” “The Germans sent Lenin to us in a sealed train.”” (note that here she uses a different punctuation – inverted commas instead of dashes – as she quotes what people say, not presents her inner voice; the technique helps her to distance herself from the rumours she doubts). Tsvetaeva continues:

I am not an expert in diplomatic gifts, but even if it is true, – to be honest – if we were they and if we hit upon it wouldn’t we do that? The train bringing Lenin to Russia, isn’t it the same Trojan Horse? Politics is notorious loathsome <...> And whether this loathsome is German or Russian – I don’t differentiate. And no one can. Like the International is evil, evil is international. (Цветаева 1997, 4, 142)

On December 1st 1914 Tsvetaeva wrote a poem “To Germany” where she pours out her feelings just at the outbreak of the First World War. A word-for-word translation of it is as follows:

You are badgered by the whole world,
and your enemies are countless.
How will I abandon you,
how will I betray you.
And where will I take common sense:
“eye for eye, tooth for tooth”, -
Germany is my folly!
Germany is my love!
How could I reject you,

My Vaterland that I love so much... (Цветаева 1990, 223)

Then the poet enumerates what is dear to her in Germany and it appears to be amazingly in tune with what she writes in her essay later: she mentions Kant (who embodies the notion of philosophy), Goethe (as the highest embodiment of poetry) and Freiburg (the place of her teenage memories). The poem ends with a fairy tale image of Lorelei:

There is no more enchanting or wiser
place than you, fragrant land,
where Lorelei combs her hair
over the eternal Rhine (Цветаева 1990, 223)

However in the late 30s Tsvetaeva's attitude changes dramatically. In 1938-1939 she writes a cycle of poems *To Czechia*. Czechia was a special place for the poet – she lived there with her family as an emigrant from August 1922 till October 1925 and in spite of the fact that they had a rather hard time there Tsvetaeva grew fond of the country and its people. The cycle originated as a response to the Nazi invasion of Czechia in 1939 and the preceding events. The cycle also contains a poem “To Germany” that opens with the following words in a word-for-word translation:

O maid with cheeks most rubicund
among the green hills –
Germany!
<...>
What a disgrace!

You've pocketed half of the map,
An astral soul!
In ancient times you
dimmed us with fairy- tales,
nowadays you rushed at us with tanks. (Цветаева 1988, 347)

In this extract one can see how the things Tsvetaeva so much loved and praised in Germany so much came into conflict with the historical events she was witnessing. In the poem she qualifies the behaviour of the country (which she treats like a human being: “O maid with cheeks most rubicund / Among the green hills”) as madness: “Oh, mummy / Of megalomania! / You will burn out! / Germany! / What you are doing is mad!”.

The shock was so strong that Tsvetaeva was not able to reconcile the Germany of her dreams and the reality. And it may well be that it was one of the reasons why, when back in Russia she committed suicide in August 1941 shortly after Hitler had attacked the Soviet Union. In poem 8 from the Czech cycle she writes:

O black and blackest hill
Eclipsing all the world!
It's time – to return
My ticket to the Lord.

I now refuse to be.
In a bedlam of non-selves
I – refuse to live.
With city –centre wolves

I refuse to howl.

<...>

There's only one reply

To your mad world: I refuse.⁴ (Ливингстоун., 404-405)

It is evident that in this poem of 1939 Tsvetaeva uses the images, developed and explained in her essay *Germany* in 1919: *Non-selves – unmen* (in the translation by Catriona Kelly – which is what Tsvetaeva literally says in the original) which provokes a parallel with reflection on quantity and quality; *city-centre wolves – wolves of public squares* (in translation by Alyssa Dinega) and *to howl* together creating the image similar to her description of a flock that could turn into a pack.

All these images, however, merge with the images, peculiar to the cycle, connected with the idea of the world that went mad (Bedlam, mad) and represent a totally new attitude to Germany causing a clash between the former admiration and the current denial.

Conclusion:

Summing up it should be noted that for Tsvetaeva love of Germany was a lifelong romance. She romanticized the country, and her personal experience derived from visits to Germany merged with her childhood impressions and the play of poetic fancy. So we should not forget that we are dealing with a highly personal and poetic view. Tsvetaeva's Germany appears to be a country of:

- music,
- nobility and chivalry,
- ancient times (a direct heir of ancient Greece),
- philosophers,
- poets,
- demonic forces,
- fairy tale,
- Romanticism,
- eccentrics and curious personalities,
- free spirits, who manage to bend the daily round to submission by entirely submitting to it.

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⁴ Translated by Angela Livingstone.

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