

Title: The Art of Understanding a Poet in the Age of Exile: Alfred Bem and Marina Tsvetaeva (1920s-1930s)

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Among the Russian exiles of the first-wave emigration it would be hardly possible to find another poet of such brilliance and significance who would also be so tragically unrecognized by their contemporaries as Marina Tsvetaeva (1892-1941). Posthumous fame, both in the East and the West, eventually came to Tsvetaeva much later. However, in the 1920s-1930s, during the height of her literary creativity, “émigré critics of the time failed to understand its unparalleled originality” (Slonim). During these years of poverty and isolation in Berlin, Prague and Paris, Tsvetaeva was broadly ignored by the émigré critics partially as a result of her absolute poetical un-fitness into the Adamovich’s “Parisian Note” as well as her famously independent character.

The only place in Europe, where Tsvetaeva’s enormous talent was admirably appreciated during her life time was the Prague school of verse, or so-called *Skit Poetov*. This was established in 1922, and led by the eminent émigré literary scholar and critic Alfred Ludvigovich Bem (1886-1945), whose critical legacy has hardly been introduced to American slavists and is not yet available in English. It is essential to note that one of the very first “guest evenings” at *Skit Poetov* on November 20, 1922 was devoted to Tsvetaeva, and for the remainder of the 1930s, her poetry was a constant inspiration for literary debates in Bem’s *Skit*.

Alfred Bem’s early predictions of Tsvetaeva’s future significance for Russian literature, as disseminated in the émigré press, his personal correspondence, and public lectures, have not yet been adequately explored. In this paper I will focus primarily on the specific nature of Bem’s critical attitude towards Tsvetaeva as a poet and a prose writer in exile. By examining the forms, effects, and boundaries of émigré critical discourse towards Tsvetaeva’s poetry in the early stages of its public recognition, I will define the subjective and objective factors which endow Bem with a special sense of critical intuition towards Tsvetaeva’s innovative poetics understood by him as a natural continuation of the Russian literary tradition. I will demonstrate how Bem’s “method of microscopic observations” applied to his permanent research interest involving inter-textual connections between works of Pushkin, Gogol, and Dostoevsky, combined with his theoretical views on poetry reflected in his enigmatic leadership of *Skit Poetov*, played a significant role in his understanding and acceptance of Tsvetaeva’s artistic gift.

References

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