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Displacing the Departed: Tsvetaeva's Elegiac Refashioning of Mayakovsky

In discussing Tsvetaeva's cycle "To Mayakovsky" (1930), Schweitzer notes a significant difference between this elegiac cycle and the elegy Tsvetaeva wrote on Rilke's death four years earlier. In the poems to Mayakovsky, Schweitzer remarks, "any sense of loss is muted by... a fiercely combative tone" (292). One can, in fact, distinguish two types of elegy in Tsvetaeva's work. The first, demonstrated in the Rilke elegy, serves "not only as a means for an author to express his sentiments occasioned by a loss, but also as a pretext for... speculations on the phenomenon of death per se" (Brodsky, 195). The second, used in "To Mayakovsky," echoes Lermontov's "On the Death of the Poet," "linking living and dead in a great line of [poets] who define themselves in opposition to... the world of philistines" (France, 10-11). Just as Mayakovsky did in his elegy to Esenin, Tsvetaeva uses her poems to both lionize Mayakovsky and rebuke his critics.

Yet, as I will show, Tsvetaeva takes a confrontational stance toward the departed poet as well, criticizing Mayakovsky and repositioning the frames of myth surrounding him. By transforming images that Mayakovsky himself had manipulated to cultivate his personal myth (Boym, 118-190 passim), Tsvetaeva presents the revolutionary poet in frames drawn from her own poetic mythology, frames which later inform her essay on Mayakovsky and Pasternak. Moreover, Tsvetaeva achieves this by beating Mayakovsky at his own poetic game. She usurps his diction (see Karlinsky, 129-130) and incorporates multiple discursive modes, reflecting the "clash of discourses" Boym finds in Mayakovsky's work (150). In this way, Tsvetaeva does poetic battle with Mayakovsky, both transfiguring his myth and enhancing her own.

Boym. *Death in Quotation Marks*.

Brodsky. *Less Than One*.

France. "An Etna among Foothills."

Karlinsky. *Marina Tsvetaeva: Her Life and Art*.

Schweitzer. *Tsvetaeva*.