Abstract:

Marina Tsvetaeva is not commonly considered a bilingual poet. Yet her French self-translation of the fairy-tale poem Mólodets surpasses by far in length Vladimir Nabokov’s or Joseph Brodsky’s self-translated poetry. Tsvetaeva took a bold approach to a language that she considered problematic for poetic expression. In a letter to Rainer Maria Rilke on July 6, 1926, she called French an “ungrateful language for poets,” an “almost impossible language.” To make matters worse, Mólodets presents daunting challenges to a translator, such as the virtuosity of its rhythm, rhymes and word play, the use of archaic, folk, and Church Slavonic elements as well as Tsvetaeva’s own idiosyncratic neologisms, elliptic compression, and omission of verbs. Almost miraculously, many of these features are preserved in the French translation, which retains the hallmarks of Tsvetaeva’s personal style.

This paper has three goals. First, I will survey the specific challenges that Mólodets presents to a translator and evaluate Tsvetaeva’s solutions. Second, I will consider Tsvetaeva’s self-translation as a form of self-exegesis. The French version sometimes makes explicit what is unspoken or only hinted at in Russian. In that sense, it can be used as an interpretive tool to arrive at a better understanding of the Russian original. Third, I will explore the metatextual dimension of Tsvetaeva’s self-translation. In rewriting the poem in a different language seven years after its original composition, Tsvetaeva added a layer of self-awareness and self-reflection. In particular, I will demonstrate that Tsvetaeva, while reworking her poem in French, became more attentive to issues of gender and of her own exilic condition as a Russian living in France.