

## SURPASSING ACMEISM? – THE LOST KEY TO CVETAeva'S 'POEM OF THE AIR'

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Written almost seventy years ago, 'Poem of the Air' ('Poëma vozducha') remains the least understood of all Cvetaeva's writings and the most avoided subject in Cvetaeva scholarship. In Simon Karlinsky's words, "together with 'Sidestreets', 'Poem of the Air' is Tsvetaeva's most arcane and impenetrable long poem, and a key in the folk poem which has enabled us to unlock 'Sidestreets' is in this case missing" (1985: 200). According to Viktoria Schweitzer, it is "one of her most important, most complex and metaphysical works, a poem that aspires like 'New Year's Greeting' toward another world" (1992: 356). Michael Makin labels it together with 'An Attempt at a Room' as the "most complex of Tsvetaeva's long poems" (1993: 300). The most courageous exertion towards interpreting Cvetaeva's text has been undertaken by Michail Gasparov, who cautiously defines his essay, in Cvetaeva's spirit, as an attempt of interpretation (1995: 259-274). Gasparov's analysis, however, sheds only very little light on the content and symbolism of the poem, suggesting that the main theme of 'Poem of the Air' may be defined as death and ascent. Gasparov centres his discussion around the parallel between poet and pilot, prompted by the fact that Cvetaeva specified the time of her work as "during the days of Lindbergh". In fact the Lindbergh who made the solo flight from America to France has very little to do with the discourse on creativity and immortality offered by Cvetaeva. It is more usual for Cvetaeva to use literary sources of inspiration or historical events from the past, since she herself strongly denounces contemporaneity (proclaiming, for example, in her 'Praise to Time', that she is bypassing her own time).

The number of biblical and literary allusions in 'Poem of the Air' do point in a different direction, prompting readers to look for the key, in Karlinsky's words, to unlock this multi-layered text. As Elena Korkina explains in her notes, the initial plan of 'Poem of the Air' was associated with Rilke, since Cvetaeva's first sketches appeared after her long poem dedicated to Rilke, 'The New Year Greeting' ('Primečanija'; Cvetaeva 1990: 756). Cvetaeva's work on 'Poem of the Air' was interrupted, however, by the finishing of her book *After Russia* and by the play *Phaedra*. If we are to believe the link with Rilke, it remains puzzling to observe no direct references to Rilke either as a poet or a person, although we can assume that the character who provides spiritual guidance to the heroine in the poem is modelled on Rilke.

Cvetaeva's work is often approached from the viewpoint of either feminist or intertextual analysis. The complexity of 'Poem of the Air' requires, in my view, a more balanced approach. This paper attempts to unite both the feminist and intertextual ways of interpretation, in order to provide a fuller picture of the symbolism, imagery and language which Cvetaeva brings into play in 'Poem of the Air'.

One of the leads in the search for the lost key can be found when looking beyond the immediate factual background of the text to the intertextual links of 'Poem of the Air'. Thus, for example, Cvetaeva's work on this text coincides with her toil on *Phaedra*, in which her treatment of the ancient heroine owes much to Mandel'stam's image of Phaedra that was partially conveyed in his translation from Racine. Furthermore, it is important to bear in mind that shortly before Cvetaeva embarked on writing 'Poem of the Air' she wrote a very passionate essay on Mandel'stam's prose which destroys him as a prose writer, yet with the same vigour it praises him as a poet. In both works Cvetaeva refers to the same passages in Mandel'stam's collection of poems *Tristia* ("Moj otvet Osipu Mandel'stamu", Elnitsky & Etkind 1992: 249-263). It is beyond this paper to discuss the severity of Cvetaeva's attacks on Mandel'stam's book *Noise of the Time*, apart from noting that Cvetaeva's criticism is ideological and stylistic in nature.

On several occasions Cvetaeva's vision of Mandel'stam as a big and famous poet prevails.<sup>1</sup> Her final verdict is that "Mandel'stam as a prose writer betrays Mandel'stam as a poet"; but despite all the caustic accusations, Cvetaeva proclaims divinity in Mandel'stam's poetic word (Elnitsky & Etkind 1992: 259, 262). Cvetaeva's references to Mandel'stam's poems include "Let's go to Tsarskoe Selo...", "Above the yellowness of the government buildings...", "Among the voices of the female choir...", "Not believing in the miracle of resurrection...", "Oh, this air intoxicated with weirdness...", 'Tortoise' and 'Dombey and Son'. Cvetaeva's presentation of these poems in her essay on Mandel'stam strongly links them to Russian architecture, as if Cvetaeva's understanding of Acmeism derives directly from Mandel'stam's article 'Morning of Acmeism'. As Mandel'stam states, "Acmeism is for those who, inspired

by the spirit of building, do not like cowards renounce their own gravity, but joyously accept it in order to arouse and exploit the powers architecturally sleeping within" (1991: 62). Although the title of Cvetaeva's 'Poem of the Air' appears to suggest empty space, it is far from being free of images associated with architecture.

The ending of Cvetaeva's poem alludes to a Gothic cathedral, and in a metonymic way is based on the substitution of the human spirit and Logos with the images of spire and cathedral:

[...] Из лука выстрелом –  
 Ввысь! Не в царство душ –  
 В полное владычество  
 Лба. Предел? – Осиль:  
 В час, когда готический  
 Храм нагонит шпиль  
 Собственный [...]  
 (Cvetaeva 1990: 584)

([...] As a shot from the arch –  
 Upwards! Not into the kingdom of souls –  
 But into the complete domain  
 Of the forehead. Is it a limit? – Try to find out:  
 When the Gothic spire  
 Would catch up with its own  
 Meaning [...])

Here Cvetaeva's language strongly resembles Mandel'stam's statements from 'Morning of Acmeism', especially where he makes links between new linguistic tools in Acmeist texts and Gothic architecture. As Mandel'stam claims, Acmeists "introduce a Gothic element into the relationship of words, just as Sebastian Bach established it in music" (1991: 62). Cvetaeva's vision of the dynamic potential hidden in Gothic building matches Mandel'stam's suggestion that "Acmeists raise [...] mysterious Tyutchevian stone and make it the foundation stone of their own building [...] as if the stone thirsted after another existence" and "revealed its own dynamic potential hidden within itself" (*ibid.*). Finally, it is not difficult to recognize Cvetaeva's image of the spire in the vision suggested by Mandel'stam. Thus he invites his fellow-poets to face a challenge:

To build means to conquer emptiness, to hypnotize space. The handsome arrow of the Gothic belltower rages because its function is to stab the sky, to reproach it for its emptiness. (Mandel'stam 1991: 63)

Running in the vein of Mandel'shtam's discourse, Cvetaeva's poem is all about conquering emptiness and ascending while building a cathedral of words.

Initially she intended to write this poem in memory of Rilke, so we might assume that she perceives her friend's spirit as residing in the heavens. In one of her letters to Rilke's secretary Cvetaeva talks about her image of Rilke's grave placed in the sky:

[...] еще пылает во мне – яркое пламя! – высоко вздымаясь до его гроба. Его гроба, что высоко в небесах. На гробницу Наполеона смотрят вниз, на гробницу Рильке смотрят ввысь.  
(Azadovskij 1992: 190)

([...] I still have a strong flame within myself – it reaches his coffin. His coffin that is high up in the sky. We look down to Napoleon's grave, but we look up to see Rilke's.)

Other allusions to Mandel'shtam point to the close link of the poem with Mandel'shtam's book *Tristia* which is permeated with the theme of separation and melancholy. This suggests the theme of separation from Rilke and reaching to him as the most possible thematic core for Cvetaeva's poem. However, she herself defines her melancholy in a more philosophical way. Cvetaeva's letter to Pasternak, written upon the completion of 'Poem of the Air', discloses that this poem marks the beginning of Cvetaeva's solitude through which she achieves a new state of being. Cvetaeva defines this new phase as the beginning of her solitude, suggesting that by writing 'Poem of the Air' she displaces herself (1990: 757). In Cvetaeva's poem this new state of being is conveyed not only as transfiguration but also as ascending a tower, carefully crafted with the help of verbal tools and constructions. The principle of verbal building appears to be consistent with Mandel'shtam's pronouncement in 'Morning of Acmeism' that "we cannot fly, we can ascend only those towers which we build ourselves" (1991: 64). Mandel'shtam's own books, *Stone* and *Tristia*, juxtapose the being of "I" with an empty world, offering a model of verbal building which fills the emptiness. However, the architectural images in these books are subordinated to Catholic and Orthodox themes, and occasionally Mandel'shtam goes as far as abandoning the distinction between the St Sophia cathedral in Constantinople and St Peter's in Rome. The emptiness is often presented in Mandel'shtam's work as voiceless dough and is associated with bread Sophias (as, for example, in "And everything finds its own place..."). The theme of air is also important in his poetry and is usually juxtaposed to the image of night which acts not only as a time of creation but as a creative force of its own. The theme of creativity and the theme of acquiring divine wisdom through the mystical link with Sophia, the symbol of wisdom in the Eastern Christian tradition, often merge and substitute for one another in the work of

Acmeists. Some examples can be found in Achmatova's early poetry, especially in such poems as "And in the Cathedral of Divine Wisdom in Kiev..." and "The gates are open widely...".

In Solov'ev's philosophy Sophia was perceived as a world of archetypal images and as a symbol associated with the Annunciation. Timenčik's analysis of Achmatova's poems relating to the image of Sophia (Timenčik 1981: 297-318) demonstrates its dependence on Pavel Florenskij's work *The Column and the Assertion of Truth*. Florenskij's book provides a lengthy interpretation of the Sophia image and its depiction in various Russian cathedrals. According to Timenčik, this book was widely discussed in Acmeist circles in 1915, and it would be no exaggeration to suggest that it had an impact on Cvetaeva's work too. In 1915-1916 she befriended several Acmeist poets, including Mandel'stam. Cvetaeva's involvement with them inspired her to write a cycle about Moscow architecture ('Poems about Moscow'). Some of the poems from the collection *Versty* form a poetic dialogue with Mandel'stam. Cvetaeva's preoccupation with architecture does not extend to her work written after 1916. Its reappearance in 'Poem of the Air' suggests, therefore, a reassessment by Cvetaeva of Mandel'stam's views on Hellenism and Christianity in relation to the links between architecture and poetry. As will be discussed further, 'Poem of the Air' contains allusions to the poetry of Mandel'stam and Achmatova. But, first of all, it is important to discuss the resemblance of the introduction of 'Poem of the Air' to the tenth chapter of Florenskij's book. This chapter is titled 'Sophia', and it speaks of the author's awakening to the mystical existence of Sophia. It starts with a description of lonely evenings in an isolated house and the author's longing for the spiritual truth. He experiences strange visits from a spirit who impatiently knocks on the front gate but disappears:

Что это? Кто стучался в ворота? [...] Прислушиваюсь... опять стук. "Сейчас! сейчас отворю". Спускаюсь к калитке по ослизшей лесенке. И опять молчание. Потом – снова стук. [...] Сколько раз выхаживал я на стуки, сколько раз открывал калитку, и [...] только ветер входил гостем со мною.  
(Florenskij 1989: 320)

(What was that? Who was knocking on the gate? [...] I am listening... There is a knock again. "Wait, I'll open it!" I am going down to open the gate. "Who is it?" Silence. Then – another knock. [...] How many times would I go out because of the knocks, how many times would I open the gate, and [...] no one but the wind would enter my house as a guest.)

Cvetaeva's 'Poem of the Air' is centred on the same imagery related to the motif of waiting for a special guest. Sound and visual imagery strongly resemble Florenskij's description of lonely evenings spent in preparation for an

encounter with the mystical. Thus, for example, Cvetaeva refers to an unknown guest whose appearance is anticipated by those waiting for a mystical message or messenger from another realm of being:

[...] Дверь явно затихла,  
 Как дверь, за которой гость.  
 [...]
   
 Был полон покоя,  
 Как гость, за которым зов  
 [...]
   
 Как гость, за которым знак  
 Хозяйки – всей тьмы знак! –  
 Та молния поверх слуг!  
 Живой или призрак –  
 Как гость, за которым стук  
 Сплошной [...]
   
 (Cvetaeva 1990: 575)

([...] The door became undoubtedly quiet,  
 As the door with the guest behind it.  
 [...]
   
 It was full of tranquillity,  
 As the guest followed by the call  
 [...]
   
 As the guest followed by the sign  
 Of the hostess – the sign of all the darkness! –  
 The lightning above the servants!  
 Whether someone alive or someone a ghost –  
 As the guest followed by the knock  
 Which resounds for ever [...])

The mystic connotation of the introduction to the ‘Poem of the Air’ is reinforced by Cvetaeva’s allusion to the Optin Monastery in the Kaluga region. The image of the open door at the end of the introduction is double-edged. On the one hand, it reminds us of some of Achmatova’s poems where gates are featured. Thus, for example, Achmatova’s poem “The Muse went away along the autumn road...”, written in 1915, compares sunrise to gates which separate the lyric heroine from the land of purity and spirituality, the homeland of the poetic muse. On the other hand, Cvetaeva’s open door suggests a struggle with darkness (“mrak”): “The handle jumped into my hand / The darkness stepped back.” This struggle is similar to Mandel’štam’s principle of conquering space. Cvetaeva’s reference to monks and wise men in the Optin monastery also brings to mind their vision of Sophia as the embodiment of the divine word. In other words, Cvetaeva’s poem from the beginning suggests the discourse on creativity. According to Florenskij’s study, the translation of Sophia from

Greek into Russian as “the highest wisdom” is misleading because in its original form it has a connotation associated with creativity. In Florenskij’s view, it should be translated as “female artist” (“zižditel’nica”, “masterica”, “chudožnica”). Furthermore, Florenskij traces this word to Greek and Sanskrit, meaning “carpenter, craftsman” (1989: 752). Such an interpretation makes clearer Cvetaeva’s imagery in the very first line of the poem, in which she compares her first line to the first nail in would-be creation. So the analogy between verbal and wooden craftsmanship is highlighted. It is repeated further when Cvetaeva refers to the birch cut by the axe and to the splintered chest. In Florenskij’s discourse on Sophia the noise of the three birch trees is contrasted to the noise of the rustling metal roof. In Cvetaeva’s text the imagery linked to wood gives way eventually to imagery of stone and metal. This is linked to the idea of the predominance of sound over the visual perception of Logos.

Bearing in mind the depiction of the Sophia in Russian iconography, we could approach Cvetaeva’s portrayal of the seven cosmic spheres before arrival in the other realm of being as an extension of the Sophia image to verbal connotations. The seven spheres in ‘Poem of the Air’ might correspond, therefore, to the seven towers on which the foundation of Sophia’s kingdom rests. As Timenčik’s article states, Sophia’s cathedral in Kiev also has an image of a staircase with seven steps. Each step represents different saints and prophets. Gasparov’s analysis of the spiritual journey of the lyric heroine in Cvetaeva’s poem points to the existence of seven spheres forming a ladder or a tower which the heroine ascends. In fact at the beginning of the poem right after the introduction Cvetaeva suggests the staircase as a way of ascending into the divinity of the night: “Staircase – just like any staircase. / Hour – just like any hour, in the night. / [...] someone was allowing me to follow the steps / Into the complete divinity of the night.” Cvetaeva’s image of ascent can be divided into seven semantic units. Gasparov describes them as follows: the first sphere (air) is dense, the second one is moist, the third one is empty, the fourth one is filter-like, the fifth one is sound, the sixth sphere is spasmodic, and the seventh one is ground, firmness (“tverd”) (1995: 272). Cvetaeva’s vision of Sophia as an ideal state of being, as a source of limitless creativity, attained through ascent, is archetypal in nature, too.

Cvetaeva’s encounter with the guest, presumably Rilke’s spirit, matches Florenskij’s understanding of touching upon Sophia’s existence through love and friendship. In his words, Sophia reveals herself in the friendship “when a loving partner experiences prior to a spiritual deed the disappearances of self-identity, of self-boundaries”. Florenskij defines such friendship as going out of yourself and establishing yourself in another person, the object of one’s love; and, in his view, this process gives a birth to “Thy”, creating the right environment for discovering the Truth (1985: 392). The second part of ‘Poem of the Air’ gives an example of such a spiritual union in which the lyric heroine loses the physical boundaries of her own identity. Here are some examples: “We, but

there is one step”; “Just a step of two people – It is not my spirit. Not yet”; “I am fully heard. I am not sounding as me anymore”. Cvetaeva’s poem suggests full absorption into the cyclone of creativity.

The first step to a merger of two individuals/creators is seen by Cvetaeva as a rhyme, as a merger of similar sounds. It is as if she approaches birth into the new state of being through complete rhyming. The violent image of the woman’s chest being crushed by soldiers’ boots leads to inner conflict. Cvetaeva’s work often deals with a creator who wants to resist elements in order to be on top of them; the same may be said about her love poetry in general. Even her relationship with Rilke was not as ideal as she wished it to be. As Anna Tavis’s article on Rilke and Cvetaeva states:

For all of her ambitious attempts to seduce Rilke by her word alone, Tsvetaeva’s possessiveness, her strategy of exclusion, her carnal metaphors of coupling poets clashed with Rilke’s most fundamental beliefs and the nature of Russian spirit. A Russian for Rilke was a self-sacrificing, observant, patient, and pious human type. His ideal woman was an unpossessive lover.

(‘Tsvetaeva Through Rilke’s Eyes’; Elnitsky & Etkind 1992: 14)

Although Cvetaeva’s possessiveness knew no boundary even with Rilke, she believed deeply that Rilke was the right person to absorb her as an individual. In one of her last letters to Rilke, Cvetaeva wrote: “Rainer, another reason I want to come to you is the new Me, the one who can arise only with you, in you. [...] I want to sleep with you, fall asleep and sleep. [...] Listen, so you know: in Rainerland I alone represent Russia” (Pasternak et al. 1985: 196-197). Cvetaeva’s obsession with sleeping with Rilke, or perceiving Rilke as her sleep, is echoed throughout the whole ‘Poem of the Air’. She even addresses Rilke as her lover, suggesting that it does not matter who sees whom in the sleep, since they both experience the same ecstasy identified in the text as breathing together. The erotic imagery of the poem is entwined with the theme of creativity, and the principles of masculine and feminine are discussed in terms of air and earth images.

The feminine imagery is featured as ground, represented as a prone woman whose chest is crushed by soldiers’ boots; and as ground lying beneath a lightboat; and on some occasions as a field of Russian rye, penetrated aggressively by wind. The masculine is conveyed in images of air and wind (new land – air), or lung. There are also examples of an aggressiveness ascribed to the lyric heroine resisting absorption by air and describing herself as fighting Heracles or as an air-fighter (“vozduchobor”).

The subsequent merger of the two elements, seen in the poem as two creative forces, produces a loud noise which is compared to the sound of David’s lyre, and the merger after that produces an unexpected rupture of all

boundaries through the death of individual egos. Cvetaeva calls such rebirth through death as a lesson in swimming in air, playing on the meaning of the Russian word for flying, “vozduchoplavan’e”. As Cvetaeva’s poem suggests, the final act of creativity is achieved through the disintegration of both female and male bodies. In the case of the male body, it is described as a pilot’s unsuccessful attempt to do a loop, and as a result he drowns with hardly any trace. The images of the male corpse floating in the river evokes Cvetaeva’s early poem about Orpheus (“The head and the lyre were floating...”). As Catriona Kelly argues, Cvetaeva’s poem about Orpheus “averts the power of the male body by reducing it from a (threatening) whole to vulnerable, feminized pieces. [...] The allusions in the poem transform the adult male into a dependent child, floating in the ‘crib’ of the billows and swaddled in the ‘bedclothes’ of the water” (1994: 306). In ‘Poem of the Air’ Cvetaeva goes further in reducing the male’s body to the image of a helpless fish: “Why does Hermes need wings? Gills would suit him better.” Cvetaeva’s vision of the female body becomes dismissive, too. It shifts from the image of the water nymph to the negation of the female body as a scarecrow. Both the transcending of sexuality and the overcoming of gender are perceived by the author as necessary in the attempt to reach eternal creativity.

The next step in the attempt to return to pure divinity, to God’s word, lies through the merging of all cultural archetypes and the disintegration into polyphony. Cvetaeva’s negation of language barriers is achieved through a filter or type of linguistic purgatory. The ascendance of two spirits is presented as an attempt to pass through the cathedral ceiling, surrounded by the loud music of trumpets, and the overpowering sound of a people’s choir which is presented as multi-mouthed national memory. The physical presence of the cathedral is suggested in Cvetaeva’s line about the mighty sound dawning on the spirits as a palette of the skies, a singing chest, or the back of the lyre-tortoise. The latter image is a borrowing from Mandel’stam’s poem ‘Tortoise’, to which Cvetaeva refers in her article ‘My reply to Osip Mandel’stam’. Mandel’stam’s poem visualizes the would-be lyre as a sleeping tortoise:

Нерасторопна черепаха-лира,  
 Едва-едва беспалая ползет,  
 Лежит себе на солнышке Эпира,  
 Тихонько грея золотой живот.  
 [...]
 Кто спящую ее перевернет?  
 (Mandel’stam 1973: 112)

(The tortoise-lyre is slow,  
 Fingerless, it’s struggling to crawl;  
 It is enjoying sunbathing in Epirus,

Slowly warming up its golden tummy.  
 [...]
   
Who would turn round this sleepy head?)

The allusion to Mandel'shtam's poem plays an important role in 'Poem of the Air', since it refers to Hermes who made the first lyre from a tortoise shell. Mandel'shtam's poem also contains a few references to Sappho's poems, which describe songs and dances, performed at a wedding ritual. At this point of 'Poem of the Air' Cvetaeva reduces the language of the two poetic forces to the sound of the lyre, aspiring to be simple and pure. Cvetaeva brings together both German letters ("heilige Sieben"), which symbolize Rilke's native language, and Russian ("sem' – v osnove liry"), but the union of languages experiences destruction since letters in the poem appear to be "bodies" of divine sounds. The slogan which Cvetaeva proclaims towards the end is to become the pure spirit and to live letters to the temporal boundaries to which they belong. Cvetaeva's poem establishes the victory of sound over the physical appearance of words. However, her sound imagery is of divine nature and linked to religious architecture and the visual representation of the language of angels. The lyric heroine of the poem acts as Sophia herself; she is both a sacred word and a creating force. The most prominent phonetic unit of the poem is associated with the simple act of breathing out, conveyed in Russian as "vzдох". There is an abundance of words with the sounds "v" and "z" in the poem: "vozduch", "vzдох", "vzryd", "nizov", "skvoz", "razve", "v zasuchu", "zvuk", etc. The act of breathing out suggested by the word "sigh" is contrasted to the act of absorption represented by the word "ground" (in its Russian version a translation from the Latin phrase "terra firma"), which is associated in Cvetaeva's poem with such words as "creature" and "creation". All these words are seen by Cvetaeva as etymologically linked to the act of creativity through the use of paronomasia ("tverd" – "tvar" – "tvorenie"). Here the semantic link lies through the perception of the firm ground as a material for creation, as clay, for example. Furthermore, the creative and even manipulative function of the feminine principle, which is phonetically and semantically linked by Cvetaeva to Sophia the creator, is reinforced in the poem by grammatical means. Cvetaeva's usage of the instrumental case in the poem (for example, "soprotivleniem", "toboj", "vystrelom", "prostranstvom", etc.) – there are sixty-four examples – becomes the most prominent mark of the work.

Cvetaeva's initial plan for the poem features a Parisian landscape. Her itinerary leads the would-be characters of the poem, she and Rilke, to a terrace with a view over the whole city. Taking account of the poem's final reference to a Gothic cathedral, it may not be far fetched to suggest that Cvetaeva is referring to Notre Dame as the cradle of creativity for the two poets. Cvetaeva uses this landscape as an argument with Mandel'shtam, who perceives Notre Dame as physical embodiment of Adam whose rib is used for the creation of

Eve. Mandel'stam sees the structural heaviness of the cathedral as ribs which could be used for creation:

Но чем внимательней, твердыня Notre Dame,  
Я изучал твои чудовищные ребра,  
Тем чаще думал я: из тяжести недоброй  
И я когда-нибудь прекрасное создам.  
(Mandel'stam 1973: 75)

(The more I looked at you, the terra firma Notre Dame,  
Studying your terrifying ribs,  
The more I thought, "From this unpleasant heaviness  
I'll create beauty one day".)

The end of 'Poem of the Air' transfers in a metonymic way to Rilke the association of the male creator with the cathedral, presenting him as a Gothic cathedral with a spire. Cvetaeva's perception of Rilke as "all German" is substituted in the text by alluding to perhaps the finest German Gothic cathedral (Freiburg) as the embodiment of Rilke's spirit.<sup>2</sup> However, Cvetaeva, the female author of the text, destroys this image by beheading it: the Gothic cathedral loses its spire in the same manner as Orpheus was dismembered by the Maenads.

Female authority and creativity prevail in the last lines of the poem through allusion to the spheric, spireless cathedral of St Sophia at Constantinople which is dedicated to holy wisdom (hagia sophia). Mandel'stam's poem 'Hagia Sophia' suggests that the dome of this everlasting marvel is chained to the skies (1974: 74). The last lines of 'Poem of the Air' about the spire catching up with the highest meaning may be seen as an act of the disintegration of the spire leaving the cathedral linked directly to the skies. In the introduction Cvetaeva reverses the archetypal situation of Adam creating a woman out of his rib by depicting a woman giving birth to a spirit/male companion from her back. The door through which the guest entered the house, portrayed at the beginning of the poem, is a metonymic depiction of a female's back sensing the strong presence of a spirit at the back. In Russian iconography Sophia, the visual embodiment of holy wisdom, is always featured with enormous wings on her back. As Florenskij comments, the wings are a sign of Sophia's link with the highest world (1989: 374). Cvetaeva's manifestation of aspiration towards the higher world is reflected in her title, 'Poem of the Air', since air and wind are associated with purity and the Holy Spirit in Christian tradition. It also contains an anagram which can be read as "the call of the spirit" ("zov ducha"). Such a reading is implied by the introductory part in which the image of the mysterious guest representing the call from far away ("gost', za kotorym zov") is strongly pronounced.

'Poem of the Air' challenges Mandel'stam's vision of reasoning as a Gothic element and uses verbal constructions as a means of exiting from the narrator's body. The parallel suggested by Mandel'stam between architectural monument and the poet's own physicality is exploited by Cvetaeva in a manifestation of female power. The Gothic spire, which at the end of the poem symbolizes masculine creativity, is depicted by Cvetaeva as aspiring towards the feminine manifestation of divinity. The image of the forehead substitutes for the spherical dome of the Sophia, the symbol of feminine creativity. As Cvetaeva puts it, the spirit of the male creator aspires not towards the kingdom of the soul but towards the domain of the forehead, the highest cosmos ("v polnoe vладыčestvo lba"). Cvetaeva places the Gothic element of the male divine word within the all-embracing, spheric domain of femininity. Such an attempt was previously undertaken by Nadežda Pavlovič, who portrayed the dead body of Blok with St Sophia on his chest (1922: 28).

Cvetaeva goes further by constructing a view of her own body as a cathedral. As Cvetaeva states in her letter to Pasternak, by writing 'Poem of the Air' she is moving out of form, escaping from her own body (1990: 757). The reference to the forehead can also be read as the physical presence of the dead poet (Rilke) in Cvetaeva's thoughts. The evolution of the dead spirit, portrayed by Cvetaeva as the transformation of "creature" ("tvar") into creation ("tvo-renie"), matches Florenskij's interpretation of Divine Wisdom as an active element, as a creative force of its own kind. Cvetaeva reinstates this view of feminine creativity by presenting the Gothic cathedral as being sucked by space ("prostranstvom vsosannyj špil' ronjaet chram"). The usage of the grammatical form of the passive participle deprives masculine creativity of power over the last word. The act of breathing in (sucking) is contrasted, therefore, to the masculine act of breathing out associated in the poem with male creativity. In relation to Acmeist poetics, Cvetaeva's 'Poem of the Air' is a perfect example of constructing psychophysiological imagery.

In Jane Harris's words, "Acmeism strictly opposed abstract otherworldly or mystical subject matter, and concentrated instead on the objects of divine or human creation; people, places, monuments, things of beauty visible, tangible, and physiological" ('Notes', Mandel'stam 1991: 583). In this sense, 'Poem of the Air' may be defined as an Acmeist text, since it translates the intangible language of mystery and divinity into the language of the concrete and visible. There is no air as such in the poem: its space is filled with physicality, where everything is rationalized and explained in terms of visual imagery.

Cvetaeva's poem also reinstates the feminine principle of creativity, which was otherwise suppressed in Russian religious and poetic traditions. It has close links with the poetry of Achmatova featuring images of Sophia. In Timenčik's view, Achmatova develops the vision of Sophia of Florenskij and Solov'ev as a source of divine memory that preserves everything and beyond which there is death and madness (1981: 316). Cvetaeva's poem about Mos-

cow, 'On the Eve of Annunciation', refers to Hagia Sophia Cathedral in relation to the Cathedral of Annunciation in Moscow. In Russian culture at the beginning of the twentieth century Sophia was associated with the Annunciation, and this link in relation to 'Poem of the Air' is important because Cvetaeva's representation of Self is modelled on Sophia, the feminine creative symbol which deeply influenced Russian culture. Cvetaeva goes further and inscribes her body in the text using religious imagery, in the same manner as she compared Achmatova's voice to a dark cupola in her 1916 poem "By the thin-wired fence...". This poem has been analysed brilliantly from the feminist standpoint by Sibelian Forrester (1992: 232-246).

In 'Poem of the Air' Cvetaeva rewrites her early text and presents her own voice, released from her body after a series of transformations and deaths, as a cupola visually represented by a forehead. This analogy was adopted by Cvetaeva from ecclesiastical terminology, describing a dome as a head. From the feminist perspective, domes and cupolas often represent the womb in women's texts. However, Cvetaeva's 'Poem of the Air' resists such an interpretation. If we are to bear in mind that in the Orthodox tradition the church represents the microcosm of the world, then Cvetaeva's text makes Sophia the centrepoint of the world, as a source of eternal and creative memory. This idea is constructed in the text from the opposition of the male and female principles of creativity: the male imagery is linked to the act of breathing out (which corresponds to creating something new) and female creativity is associated with the act of breathing in (which corresponds to preserving cultural values and their memory). The analogy between the breathing of air and the process of creation was very prominent in Mandel'stam's poetry, and given the attacks Cvetaeva made on Mandel'stam's prose prior to writing 'Poem of the Air' we can see that her dialogue with him continued in 1927. As a female author, Cvetaeva establishes her superiority by promoting her own female experience at the expense of male-authored text – text which 'Poem of the Air' appropriates as a beheaded Gothic cathedral.

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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For example: "Don't you think he was embarrassed in front of you, big poet Osip Mandel'stam?", "I had to point out to you such awkward mistakes because you, a big poet, were stricter to this lesser known poet than to yourself"; "Why should we reject his book? Because his collection of poems *Stone* outweighs his prose work *The Noise of Time*, because Mandel'stam as a poet precedes Mandel'stam as a prose writer".

- <sup>2</sup> Freiburg Cathedral was built between 1250 and 1320, and it owes its fame to the delicately traceried spire which soars to a height of 377 feet. Cvetaeva in her teens attended a school in Freiburg.

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