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The Lyrical Subject as a Poet in the Works of M. Cvetaeva, B. Pasternak, and R.M. Rilke

The human and poetic relationship between Marina Cvetaeva, Boris Pasternak and Rainer Maria Rilke has been one of the most challenging and fascinating issues of Slavic and comparative literature studies for several decades. Many books and essays have been written on the various aspects of this topic¹, but it seems to be one of those inexhaustible themes on which scholars will continue to focus their attention for a long time to come.

Before proceeding further, let us briefly recall some basic moments of their relationship. Reaching its peak in the Twenties, when the three writers exchanged letters and poems, their dialogue actually began in the previous decade. The symbolic significance of Pasternak's first and only meeting with Rilke as a child, which he describes at the beginning of *Oxrannaja gramota*², clearly hints at the fundamental meaning of the former's readings of *Mir zur Feier*, *Das Stunden-Buch* and *Das Buch von Bilder*, and at the importance of their impact on the formation of Pasternak's unique poetic manner in the years marked

¹ The bibliography on this theme is very extensive. For the best, most recent and detailed account of Cvetaeva and Pasternak's human and poetic relationship see Ciepiela 2006. For other contributions see Raevskaja-X'juz 1971, Taubman 1972, Ajzenštejn 2000 (a critical discussion of this monograph can be found in Gevorkjan 2012: 449-455), Baevskij 2004, El'nickaja 2000, Pasternak 2002, Thomson 1989, Taubman 1991, Shleyfer-Lavine 2011, Gasparov 1990, Polivanov 1992, Šmaina-Velikanova 2011, Nešumova 2006. For various approaches to Pasternak and Rilke see Šilhánková Di Simplicio 1990, Pavlova 2009, Gronicka 1952, Livingstone 1979, Livingstone 1983, Azadovskij 1993, Barnes 1972, Bušman 1962, Röhling 1963, Röhling 1972, Roll 1991, Salys 1996, Struve 1979, Tchertkov 1979, Gyöngyösi 2010, Rayfield 1990, Volić-Hellbusch 1998, Bobrik 2011, Gessen 1991, Miller-Budnickaja 1932 (still interesting despite the obvious ideological distortions). On Rilke and Cvetaeva (probably the most studied segment of the "triangle") see Hasty 1996 (the largest work on the subject), Admoni 1992, Brodsky 1979, Brodsky 1983, Brodsky 1986, Lehmann 1999, Lehmann 2000, Rakuša 1981, Tavis 1993, Ingold 1979, Lane 2006, Schäfer 1996, Grzywacz 1998, Todorov 2006. On the letter exchange(s) and on the triangle in general see Azadovskij 1990, Hepp 2000, O'Connor 1993, Philippot-Reniers 1989, Kacis 2005, Brodskij 1996, Ajzenštejn 1997, Zaslavsky 2009. In addition to these specific studies, all major publications on the three poets (especially works on both Russians, but also the several monographs on "Rilke and Russia") contain discussions on their mutual relationships.

² Pasternak 2003-2005, III: 148-149.

by the “crisis” of Russian Symbolism³. As far as Cvetaeva is concerned, who already knew Rilke at least from the period of the October revolution,⁴ her work between 1922 and 1927 is hugely indebted to her interaction with both poets. Rilke’s epistolary acquaintance with Cvetaeva has left some important traces on his work, notably his *Elegie an Marina Zwetajewa-Efron*. The exchange of letters between Cvetaeva and Pasternak lasted until 1936, ten years after the so-called “triangle” between the three poets had come to an end.

The aim of the present article is to offer a contribution to the comparative study of their poetic works through the prism of the image of the poet which is respectively depicted in each of them⁵. A shared feature of the poetry of Cvetaeva, Pasternak and Rilke is a high degree of poetological or metapoetic reflection⁶. This can manifest itself both directly, at the thematic level of the “lyric inquiry” into the figure of the poet, and indirectly, through the characteristics of the lyrical subject⁷ around which the poem is built. It can be argued that the lyrical subject of most of the poems of the three writers, explicitly in Cvetaeva’s *Poety*, or implicitly in Rilke’s *Neue Gedichte*, identifies himself (herself?)⁸ as a poet. The study of the lyrical subject’s relation to the poetic world⁹ into which he/she is plunged, namely his/her acceptance of refusal, can be extremely useful in a comparative approach to different authors. It is quite evident that an analysis of this kind presupposes the idea of a certain degree of homogeneity and unity among the various stages of a writer’s oeuvre¹⁰. Some of the most reliable critical works on Cvetaeva¹¹, Pasternak¹² and Rilke¹³ confirm the

³ See Aucouturier 1963: 34, Barnes 1972: 61 and Šilhánková Di Simplicio 1990.

⁴ See her 1919 prose *O Germanii* (Cvetaeva 1994, IV.2: 141) “Был бы убит Блок – оплакивала бы Блока (лучшую Россию), был бы убит Рильке – оплакивала бы Рильке (лучшую Германию), и никакая победа, наша ли, их ли, не утешила бы”.

⁵ See Erlich 1959, Sedakova 1992 and Launay 2007.

⁶ See Zielinsky 1974, Zielinsky 1975 and Steiner 1971. For a scientific definition of poetological lyric see Pott 2004: 10-22.

⁷ For a critical consideration of the concept of lyrical subject (*lyrisches Ich*) see Fuchs 2009: 19-55. On Pasternak’s lyrical subject see Užarević 1990.

⁸ The lyrical subjects of the three poets share a common gender attitude, in which the masculine and the feminine elements tend to merge, overcoming the contrast between activity and passivity. We will conventionally refer to Cvetaeva’s lyrical subject as “she”, and to Rilke’s and Pasternak’s as “he”, paying special attention to some highly problematic cases. See *infra* for a brief discussion of the gender issue and bibliographical references.

⁹ The term “poetic world” is here used to mean the reality described or evoked by a poem. It can include a concrete situation, nature, history and culture. The more or less concrete location of the lyrical subject is central to it. See Burghardt 2013: 165 and Walisch 2012: 69-89.

¹⁰ It should be remarked that the earliest production of both Rilke and Cvetaeva seems to be less representative in this regard, and for this reason it is not considered in the present study.

¹¹ See El’nickaja 1990.

¹² See Fateeva 2003.

¹³ See Eckel 1994 and Löwenstein 2003.

validity of this basic requirement. The risk of extreme generalisation which such a method involves is well understood, but the heuristic possibilities of a broad look at the entire corpus of the works of the three poets seem quite promising.

Though the image of the poet¹⁴ in the poetry and prose of both the Russians and Rilke (whose national and cultural backgrounds frustrate any attempt to find a clear definition) is a frequent subject of research¹⁵, a comparative study seems to be missing. We will start by anticipating the general results of the analysis. As regards their respective interactions with the poetic worlds of which they are part, the lyrical subjects of Pasternak and Rilke share common traits¹⁶. Cvetaeva's lyrical subject shows a different relation to reality, which is particularly opposed to Pasternak's¹⁷.

As to the author of *Doktor Živago*, it is a commonplace of criticism that the lyrical subject of his poems from *Sestra moja – žizn'* up to the last poems shows (or strives to maintain) a symbiotic relationship with the surrounding world. His early collections display the image of a poet who is enthusiastically part of his natural and historical environment. The hectic exchange between subject and object, man and nature (what Cvetaeva called a "downpour of light" in her review) points to the supreme harmony which unifies the living world in its diversity. The subtitle *Leto 1917* suggests in *Sestra moja – žizn'* the idea of a joyful overlapping of nature and history, united by the heady cheerfulness of their metamorphic character. In the light of these considerations, *Vtoroe roždenie* might seem to belong to a completely different poetic existential model, but this is only partially true. The balance between the subject and reality, which was earlier an *a priori*, is now to be painfully reacquired, but its validity and possibility are indisputable.

Similar conclusions can be drawn in the context of Rilke's work. The whole of his poetry is to be read as the tale of the subject's endeavours to understand and master reality. As in the case of Pasternak, significant differences can be traced by comparing Rilke's books of poetry, or even the different parts that constitute them. So, the 1899 *Buch vom mönchischen Leben* strongly contrasts with the two following parts of *Das Stunden-Buch*. In it the "symbioticness" and contiguity of the subject (the artist) and his interlocutor (his art) remove the necessity of having to deal with an external reality, while in *Das Buch von der Pilgerschaft* and *Das Buch von der Armut und vom Tode* the outside world appears to

¹⁴ For an introduction to the image of the poet in Russian literature see Städtke 1996: 3-38 and Burkhart 1971.

¹⁵ On Cvetaeva see Eberspächer 1987, Hasty 1996 and Pavlovskaja 2003; on Rilke see Rehm 1950 and Höhler 1979; on Pasternak see Erlich 1959 and Gorelik 2011.

¹⁶ See Pavlova 2009: 110.

¹⁷ See Volić-Hellbusch 1998: 38: "Literarisch stehen Pasternak und Cvetaeva in gegensätzlichen Positionen. Während die Poesie von Marina Cvetaeva als sehr gefühlsbetont und 'weiblich' bezeichnet wird, ist die Poesie von Pasternak distanziert, objektiviert und nüchtern." The Serbian scholar thoroughly grasps the opposite character of Pasternak's and Cvetaeva's poetry, but fails to express it in satisfying terms, using unconvincing and unfitting categories, such as "femininity" and "sentimentality".

the lyrical subject, in both a threatening and a stimulating manner. At the core of Rilke's next books, *Das Buch der Bilder* and *Neue Gedichte*, is an indirect representation of the subject's way of dealing with reality. One could once again speak of a symbiotic relationship: the subject is in need of the things of the world as a source of inspiration, while the things need the artist to reach immortality. As to the mature phase of Rilke's poetry, with special reference to *Sonette an Orpheus*, its main tenet is the subject's understanding of the eternal metamorphosis of the living, in order to comprehend the meaning of his own presence in the universe and the sublime necessity of death.

One more substantial element of differentiation in Rilke's and Pasternak's poetry is to be found in the subject's response to history. The Russian poet's subject can only partially abstract himself from the historical, objective passing of time, which constantly appears to be an essential part of his conscience, at times thoroughly in harmony with the eternity of nature. On the contrary, Rilke's subject tends to escape the constrictions of temporal belonging, though "die Maschine" is a significant part of the imagery of *Sonette an Orpheus*.

Nevertheless, it can be argued that both poets' lyrical subjects perceive themselves as partakers of universal reality in its totality¹⁸. If compared with Rilke's and Pasternak's, the mature poet of Cvetaeva (i.e. her lyrical subject) shows contrasting features. She denies the positive value of the existent, concrete reality, striving to achieve by means of poetry a higher and purer world, free from the fetters of *byt*. When Cvetaeva accepts history, she cannot help turning it into myth, as she does in *Lebedinyj stan*¹⁹. Cvetaeva's "escape from earth"²⁰ and the despair of the poet of the cycle *Poety*, a prisoner in a world whose values he²¹ cannot share, signify the subject's need for a self-sufficient, autotelic dimension. Her poetry often substitutes everyday rationality with a purely poetic logic based on assonance and paronomasia²². Moreover, her insistence on the supremacy of the ear over the eye²³ is realized in her poetry by means of the frequent thematization of the refusal of what can be

¹⁸ S. Roll has convincingly argued that the mature Rilke and Pasternak share the same ideas as to the poet's stance to the metamorphosis of all things. She also noticed Pasternak's more "rational" character, with particular reference to his late poetry and prose. See Roll 1991: 18-22.

¹⁹ In a letter to Pasternak of 1926, she reproached him for his excessive reliance on historical sources. She then added: "Ты в слово современный вкладываешь все, что я во вневременный." Cvetaeva, Pasternak 2004: 220.

²⁰ Vitins 1977.

²¹ The lyrical subject of *Poety* always refers to himself using masculine pronouns and clearly represents himself as a man.

²² In this regard, echoes of Cvetaeva's poetry can be found in her prose and letters, thus establishing an interesting point of contact between the two distinct levels of the author and the lyrical subject. In one of her last letters to Pasternak (1935) she wrote: "Странная вещь: что ты меня не любишь – мне все равно, а вот – только вспомню твои <о>ахо>зы – и слезы." Cvetaeva, Pasternak 2004: 555. Her denial of contemporaneity is wonderfully rendered by the rhyme *kolxozy/slězy*, which transfers the logic of poetry into the prose text of the letter.

²³ A recurrent theme in her prose. See e.g. *Iskusstvo pri svete sovesti*.

seen²⁴. The distance of her lyrical subject's attitude from Pasternak's and Rilke's is not difficult to grasp. Cvetaeva's poetry pursues the discovery through poetic language of *another* world ("Поэта – далеко заводит речь"²⁵), in which the subject can break free from the tethers of everyday life²⁶.

The attitude of Cvetaeva's lyrical subject and the cognitive function she assigns to poetic language are the utter opposite of Pasternak's. While the former yearns for an utterly new, different, personal dimension, the latter remains firmly in *this* world. Pasternak's metonymies, metaphors and synaesthesiae are intended to bring out previously unknown features of the things of earth, showing unexpected connections between them, particularly between the human and the natural spheres. Through poetry the human being can fully understand his/her own role in the universe. Allegiance to reality even allows him or her to enjoy a positive acceptance of death, which is much more problematically dealt with by Cvetaeva and Rilke.

A glance at their poetic treatment of death can help better clarify the stance of Pasternak's and Rilke's lyrical subjects in relation to reality in its entirety. In general it can be affirmed that for both of them poetry is a tool of "preparation for death", which actually means its overcoming, as clearly stated by Jurij Živago. However, there is quite a striking difference in the way this similar overcoming can be obtained. In the figure of the physician and poet Živago, who can be seen as the crowning achievement of Pasternak's lifelong representation of the poet in his poetry, the clear mythical substrate of his personality and his deeds²⁷ is dissolved (one might say *aufgehoben*) in the utterly human, earthbound character of his story. His being a poet is the natural continuation of his life among his fellow human beings, amidst the only seemingly incomprehensible challenges of history. Though the most productive moment in his poetic career coincides with his isolation period in Varykino, Živago is profoundly rooted in his time²⁸ and definitely not an ascetic man. Love, nature, the sense of belonging to mankind and art as the supreme realization

²⁴ The best examples of this Cvetaevian "topos" is *Poema vozduxa*.

²⁵ Cvetaeva 1990: 334.

²⁶ This does not mean that in Cvetaeva's poetry visible reality is not represented. It is, but either it is subordinate to the lyrical subject, or its validity is denied. Things and space are relevant not for themselves, but only in relation to the subject, which is the absolute center of Cvetaeva's poetic world. On spatiality in Cvetaeva, see Burghardt 2013. Eberspächer 1987: 20-26 maintains that the "Diktat der Dinge" in Cvetaeva's poetry puts it on the same level as Rilke's late *oeuvre*. This is only partially true. The symbiotic balance between the subject and external reality in Rilke cannot be compared to Cvetaeva's extreme concentration on the lyrical subject. On Cvetaeva's "concreteness" see Brodsky 1986: 211.

²⁷ For an interesting and recent discussion of the mythical implant of *Doktor Živago* see Gister 2012. A first discussion of Pasternak's mythologism is to be found in Baevskij 1993. See also Vogt 1997: 136-212.

²⁸ "Взрослый мужчина должен, стиснув зубы, разделять судьбу родного края. Помоему, это очевидность." Pasternak 2003-2005, IV: 169.

of human talent are inseparable and essential elements of his (Christian) path towards immortality, that is to say acceptance of death.

On the contrary, in Rilke's late poetry immortality seems to be a privilege of mythical, divine figures. The lyrical subject of *Sonette an Orpheus* strongly needs to identify himself with Orpheus's model in order to believe that the human world is not meaningless and death is not the denial of life. The mixed divine and human nature of Orpheus perfectly fits the lyrical subject's need for self-identification. Orpheus's experiences are a demonstration of the eternal and metamorphic character of life, including both mankind and the things of earth. It is through evoking his model that the subject can have complete "faith" in the meaningfulness of existence, which otherwise would be called into question. In this respect, *Sonette an Orpheus* represent an enormously important evolution in Rilke's *oeuvre*²⁹, clearly marking the passage from the alternation of certainty and despair of the *Duineser Elegien* towards a newly gained balance³⁰.

The understanding of existence in its entirety of life and death is thus a victory that Pasternak's and Rilke's lyrical subjects manage to achieve in two different ways: by a total acceptance of his own humanity³¹ in Pasternak's poetry, and by a conscious identification with a reassuring mythical model in Rilke's poetry. Having underlined this important difference, we can nonetheless affirm that they both strive to include death in the circle of life.

In the light of these considerations, Cvetaeva's lyrical subject seems to confirm her otherness. She considers the universe as perverted and oppressive, and her aim is to overcome life, not death. The latter is actually ambiguously perceived. A distinction has to be made between the imagined death of others, and her own. The death of another person, especially of a poet, is a traumatic event which must be overcome and possibly forgotten, since it appears to deny the natural laws of how life *should* be. The best example of this trend is Cvetaeva's treatment of Rilke's death in *Novogodnee*. It is described as something that cannot have happened and must be overcome through poetry, re-establishing and re-enhancing the contact with the (dead) person. Moreover, the poetic word manages to bring the lyrical subject closer to her interlocutor at a more profound level than ear-

²⁹ See Engel 2004: 405.

³⁰ Orpheus might represent the evolution of other fundamental mythological figures in Rilke's "lyrical thought", such as the Tod-Gebärer from *Das Buch von der Armut und vom Tode*, who with his unsettling and androgynous nature manages to unify life and death. In comparison with him and with the not less disquieting Angel of the *Duineser Elegien*, Orpheus' stands out for his being the quintessence of the poet, and a man and a god at the same time. Scholars have only recently accepted the "autonomous" character of *Sonette* in comparison with the much more in-depth studied (and praised) *Elegien*.

³¹ As already mentioned, this does not mean a denial of the profound mythical structure of Pasternak's poetic world, but the recognition that his lyrical hero has completely understood and absorbed his own mythical models. This gives him the possibility to act freely as a human being, since the cultural tradition to which he belongs enables him to overcome futility and death.

lier, during “life”³². Since Rilke-Orpheus *is* poetry, he cannot be dead. The new dimension he has entered is nothing but poetry itself (“С НОВЫМ ЗВУКОМ, ЭХО! / С НОВЫМ ЭХОМ, ЗВУК!”)³³, just like Rilke himself³⁴. As to the lyrical subject’s envisaged death, it is evoked as an escape from earth in the double vertical dimension of heaven (*Poema vozduxa*) and the underworld (*Balkon, Evridika – Orfeju*). Death is the victory over gravity, over the shackles which trap the poet in the triviality of *byt*.

Rilke’s and Cvetaeva’s concepts of death are different, but they both share the necessity of reference to mythical figures. The Russian poet’s mythological imagery includes traditional classical and biblical names, but its more striking and personal element is Cvetaeva’s own mythopoiesis, which raises fellow poets, such as Blok, Rilke and Pasternak, to the heights of divinity. Thus, myth can act as a catalyst towards the conceptual core in both writers’ poetry: the equation of life and death in Rilke’s poems, the definition of the Poet as an unearthly figure by Cvetaeva. Let us once again better clarify Rilke’s and Cvetaeva’s poets/lyrical subjects’ rather different positions. The former, identifying himself with an Orphic figure, is endowed (or strives to be)³⁵ with the ability of unifying the contrasts between the two realms, an ability tragically precluded to the shortsighted eye of humans. The centrality of the figure of the Poet as the subject of Rilke’s poetry reveals itself as the answer to an utterly human and universal need: the will to overcome fear of death and the consequent lack of meaning of existence. Cvetaeva’s subject, on the contrary, seems to respond to a more specific necessity of her creator. She represents the chance of abandoning concrete existence in favour of autonomous being in the pure realm of the poetic word. Rilke’s “Gesang ist Dasein”³⁶ has very little in common with the subject reaching her own meaning (“В час, когда готический / Шпиль нагонит смысл / Собственный...”) at the end of *Poema vozduxa*³⁷. An all-human perspective, aimed at reaffirming the validity of human life, is opposed to an exclusively personal attitude of a subject who seeks (in vain) to annihilate the human in herself and attain poetic askesis. The Cvetaevian Eurydice’s conscious refusal to follow Orpheus back to the earth (*Evridika – Orfeju*) is a clear example of this dominant, but clearly not exclusive trend in Cvetaeva’s poetic mind.

This implies a different relation of Rilke’s and Cvetaeva’s subjects to things (*Dinge*). In Rilke’s mature poetry the subject aspires to a pure link to things (*Bezug*), freed from desire,

³² See Brodsky 1986: 195-267.

³³ Cvetaeva 1990: 573.

³⁴ So, the poem-letter can reach him (in heaven?) just as real letters could reach him in Switzerland before death in the previous months. Death does not exist. If it does, it is transcended by poetry into poetry.

³⁵ The problem of the identification of the lyrical subject of the *Sonette* with Orpheus remains open. The subject clearly pursues it, but cannot reach a definite fusion of his own nature with Orpheus’s. See Gerok-Reiter 1996: 154.

³⁶ Rilke 1996, II: 242.

³⁷ Cvetaeva 1990: 584.

possession and dependence. Poetry is the place where the conflict between the external and the internal, the visible and the invisible is superseded in the synthesis of the *Weltinnenraum*. Cvetaeva's subject utopically aims at a complete independence from any external reality, but constantly has to become aware of the tragic impossibility of such a desire. Once again, Cvetaeva's distance from Pasternak is evident, as is Rilke's relative proximity to him.

The only part of reality to which Cvetaeva's subject feels akin is nature (*Derev'ja, Stol*). Her fidelity to nature seems almost paradoxical in the context of the refusal of the visible and concrete which dominates in Cvetaeva's poetry of the twenties. It might be seen as an element of the romantic mind which informs her general poetic *Weltanschauung*, which at the same time leads her lyrical subject to reject materiality and pursue sublimation. It is actually a form of escape from humanity. Nature's eternal metamorphosis is central to Rilke's and Pasternak's poetic worlds. They are both based on the fusion of the human subject with the natural dimension. Nature and man compenetrates each other and may thus become metaphorically/metonymically indistinguishable. Examples of this basic trend of their poetry are to be found in Rilke's *Buch vom mönchischen Leben*, *Sonette an Orpheus* and Pasternak's *Sestra moja – žizn'*. However, the subject's union with nature has a different conceptual basis in Rilke and Pasternak. For the former, it is the result of the endeavours of the poetic path, the guarantee of the subject's successful attitude to the surrounding world. This may happen in different phases of Rilke's work: in the early *Buch vom mönchischen Leben*, where the Russian monk's communion with his own art world is often expressed through his identification with a tree, as well as in the late *Sonette*, where Orpheus is defined as "a tree rising in the ear". In Rilke's poetry communion with nature is not a premise, but the fruit of self-enhancement through art. In Pasternak's oeuvre, fusion with nature is a *conditio sine qua non* of creativity. The poet would not be a poet if he were not already able to merge with nature. This can help once again clarify Rilke's and Pasternak's different mythical paradigms. While the former's subject has eventually to resort to a mythical mediator to achieve definite harmony with everything (including nature), the latter's has already incorporated myth in himself, which is an assimilated, non-autonomous element of his relation to the world and nature³⁸. There might be some-

³⁸ This might explain Pasternak's refusal of Rilke's late poetry, in particular of the "closed system" of the *Sonette*, almost entirely based on the reference to Orpheus's "reassuring" mythical figure. Pasternak found the "open" *Elegien* more suitable to his own poetic mind, possibly since they are not built on a well-defined mythical-mythological pillar. The Angel's distance and hostility to the lyrical subject clearly denies the possibility of an identification with him, endowing the subject with a higher degree of autonomy and freedom in his gaze into the intricate patterns of reality. See Cvetaeva, Pasternak 2008: 132-133: "Я получил из Германии его "Sonette an Orpheus", [...] Меня она глубоко взволновала теми именно особенностями, в силу которых она поэтически невероятно для Рильке бледна. [...] Прежде всего поразило, что с человеком, в совершенно другие, нежели мы, условия, делается то же самое, что и с нами. В этом сказалось общность эпохи и её невымышленная, непреодоленная трудность. В этой книжке он (местами) ввязывается в разговор с духом времени (машина, война, аэроплан и пр.), рассуждает, поучает, оправдывается. Тяжёлые, дидактические эпизоды."

thing of Schiller's distinction between naive (Pasternak) and sentimental (Rilke)³⁹ poetry between them.

One more vantage point from which similarities and differences of the three poets' lyrical subjects can be studied is the relation between poet and man in the definition of the ontological nature of the lyrical subject. Is there an ontological distinction between the poet and mankind? We can again presuppose a certain degree of proximity between Rilke and Pasternak and their distance from Cvetaeva's model.

In many of Cvetaeva's poems the lyrical subject openly declares her otherness. The most striking and best-known example is the third poem of the triptych *Poety*: "Что же мне делать, слепцу и пасынку, / В мире где каждый и отч и зряч, / [...] / Что же мне делать, певцу и первенцу, / В мире, где найчернейший – сер! / Где вдохновенье хранят, как в термосе! / С этой безмерностью / В мире мер?"⁴⁰ The whole of Cvetaeva's "escape from earth" is based on the refusal of purely human peculiarities: corporeality, imperfection, heaviness, mortality. The dematerialization of the subject in *Poema vozduха* and, implicitly, *S morja* stands for her desire to become pure sound, abandoning any human feature. In later poems from the thirties the subject reacquires human characteristics, but the rift between her own sphere of existence as a poet and the rest of humanity is nonetheless frequently underlined. The poet's being seems to be incompatible with participation in the common activities of mankind. The only form of communion Cvetaeva's lyrical subject actively looks for is communion with another poet, but this bliss is denied to her: "Не суждено, чтоб сильный с сильным / соединились в мире сём"⁴¹.

Nevertheless, the apparent univocal character of this issue is questioned by *Tvoja smert'*, a prose work⁴² Cvetaeva wrote in February 1927, some weeks after Rilke's death. Classifiable as a blend of narrative, letter and essay⁴³, *Tvoja smert'*⁴⁴ is an important part of Cvetaeva's epitaph literature⁴⁵. Its most striking feature is its utter contrast with *Novogodnee*, the poem for Rilke she symbolically finished writing on the fortieth day after Rilke's passing. The first sentence of the text shows the sheer human character of Rilke's death, which sharply distinguishes the conceptual architecture of this prose piece from the poem: "Каждая смерть, даже из самого ряда выхождения выходящая, – о твоей говорю, Райнер, неизменно оказывается в ряду других смертей, между последней до и первой после." However, in *Novogodnee* death is denied and substituted by Rilke's ascent to the realm of the pure word

³⁹ See Löwenstein 2003: 165.

⁴⁰ Cvetaeva 1990: 334.

⁴¹ The *Dvoe* cycle is inspired by Cvetaeva's correspondence with Pasternak.

⁴² J. Brodsky has noted the complementary character of poetry and prose in Cvetaeva's heritage. See Brodsky 1986: 176-194.

⁴³ See Hasty 1993.

⁴⁴ Cvetaeva 1994-1997, v.1: 186-205.

⁴⁵ A German scholar considers the epitaph as the central element of Cvetaeva's oeuvre. See Bott 1984.

(“Райнер, радуешься новым рифмам? / Ибо правильно толкуя слово, / Рифма – что – как нѐ – целых ряд новых / Рифм – смерть?”). The word “death” itself, which in the poem is directly pronounced only once, is part of the title of the prose work. Although towards the end of the text the narrator expresses the inconsistency of Rilke’s death and the equation life-death, it is quite obvious that Rilke’s death is treated here as a real, earthly, human fact. Moreover, the text is the account of two other deaths (an old Frenchwoman and a little Russian boy) and is movingly concrete, simple, utterly human. Before starting the actual tale, Cvetaeva⁴⁶ writes: “Так, Райнер, ты породил меня со всеми, тебя потерявшими, как я, в ответ, породила тебя со всеми, когда-либо мною потерянными, и ближе всех – с двумя. / Как по волнам несѐт нас смерть по холмам могил – в Жизнь”. In his death Rilke is not only a poet, but a man as well. The same can be said about Cvetaeva herself and/or her self-representation in *Tvoja smert’*. While in *Novogodnee* the lyrical subject is substantially as detached from her human environment as Rilke is, Cvetaeva represents herself in *Tvoja smert’* as part of the social dimension to which she belongs.

As to Pasternak, the human character of his lyrical subject is rather evident. The poet’s experience is generally depicted as the experience of a man who is able to fully understand the harmony between himself, in the totality of his body and mind, and the universe, in its combination of nature and history⁴⁷. Throughout his poetry, Pasternak strives to avoid an image of the poet as a superior, semi-divine being, set apart from the rest of mankind. In his conception the poet is nothing but a man with an extremely developed sensory receptivity, who is able to understand and fix what he has seen through language. However, the unavoidable ambiguity of such a concept is undeniable: the poet is a man, but an enormously gifted one. Pasternak’s famous denial of Romanticism⁴⁸ involves his rejection of the mythicized image of the poet of many of his contemporaries, such as Majakovskij and Esenin. This highly problematic stance seems to become even more complex towards the end of the twenties, when increasing ideological pressure on the part of the Soviet literary establishment is clearly reflected in Pasternak’s poetry⁴⁹. By imposing on Soviet literati the myth of the writer at the service of the people, contemporary culture pushes Pasternak to

⁴⁶ *Tvoja smert’* actually tempts its reader to identify the narrator, its implied author and Cvetaeva. J. Brodsky has written that “Tsvetaeva the poet was identical to Tsvetaeva the person; between word and deed, between art and existence, there was neither a comma nor even a dash: Tsvetaeva used an equals sign” (Brodsky 1986: 219-220). His words should be taken with a certain degree of caution, but here they perfectly correspond to the autobiographical character of *Tvoja smert’* (which obviously presupposes an artistic reinterpretation of the raw life material).

⁴⁷ See the first lines of the well-known poem *Složa vėsła* from *Sestra moja – žizn’*: “Лодка колотится в сонной груди, / Ивы нависли, целуют в ключицы, / В лотки, в уключины – о погоды, / Это ведь может со всяким случиться! // Этим ведь в песне тешатся все.” Pasternak 2003-2005, I: 127.

⁴⁸ See Djurčinov 1979.

⁴⁹ See Erlich 1959: 334: “The obtrusive theme of modern Russian poetry – that of the poet’s tragic destiny – had finally caught up with Boris Pasternak.”

accept a higher degree of exceptionalism in his conception of the poet. Even if he does not turn into a prophet or a messianic figure, Pasternak's poet from *Vtoroe roždenie* onwards is actually an extraordinary man conscious of his responsibility towards his fellow men and towards truth, in accordance with the traditional moral authority of the writer in the East Slavic tradition. This new trend is well exemplified by *O znal by ja, čto tak byvaet* from *Vtoroe roždenie*. The poet's distinctiveness is not the result of divine illumination, but of his own desire to understand reality. The same conceptual framework supports Pasternak's great novel. Živago is both a poet and a man. "Каждый рождается Фаустом, чтобы всё обнять, всё испытать, всё выразить"⁵⁰. Unlike Cvetaeva's lyrical subject, Živago's poetic talent does not clash with his sincere belonging to mankind. The Faustian metaphor can also be found in a private letter of Pasternak to his German friend R. Schweizer: "Поэт, это Фауст современного общества, единственный ещё уцелевший индивидуалист в эпоху масс"⁵¹. There is no contradiction between the two quotations. The poet is a man not afraid of his own natural, inborn talent and individuality.

As with Cvetaeva, the coherent image of the poet developed in the poetry and prose of Pasternak is complicated by the figure of Rilke. Though Rilke is not as present in Pasternak's oeuvre as he is in Cvetaeva's, some passages of his prose work show a no less idealized image of the author of the Prague-born poet. In the letter to Rilke which Pasternak conceived as a preface to *Oxran'naja gramota* and as an answer to Rilke's 1926 letter, when his addressee was already dead, he wrote: "В первый раз мне пришло в голову, что Вы – человек и я мог бы написать Вам, какую нечеловеческую роль Вы сыграли в моём существовании"⁵². Taking into account that this letter was not published and that the brief sketch of Rilke in Pasternak's 1956 second (and more sober) autobiography lacks any idealization, one might infer that Pasternak intentionally chose to restrain his own glorification of Rilke, trying to coherently stick to his "realistic" conception of the poet as a more or less common man.

Rilke's lyrical subject shows more complex traits in this regard. He generally tends to establish a direct connection with his "interlocutors", as in the case of *Das Buch vom mönchischen Leben* and *Sonette an Orpheus* (they both stand for poetry itself), as well as to the "things" (*Dinge*) to which he dedicates himself in *Neue Gedichte*. In *Das Buch vom mönchischen Leben* the dialogue/monologue between the subject and God (i.e. art) almost completely precludes the intrusion of the outside world. The subject's human features are strongly attenuated. In *Neue Gedichte* his corporeality is implicitly reduced to the eye, unfailingly capturing the quintessential traits of the object on which he is focusing. Apart from the *Ding*, which can obviously be a human being, the external, social dimension of humanity seems not to have any influence on the lyrical subject. He is free and autonomous. The other side of the subject's artistic isolation is depicted in *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids*

⁵⁰ Pasternak 2003-2005, IV: 233.

⁵¹ Quoted in Kopelev 1979: 510.

⁵² Pasternak 2003-2005, IV: 283.

Brigge, Rilke's only novel: the poet's exclusive devotion to things (to art) causes his inability to interact with other men and women. The absence of a positive relation with existence in its totality may lead the subject to madness and artistic sterility. Hence the recognition of the need to recognize the human in himself. The completion of *Duineser Elegien* and the writing of *Sonette* in 1922 represent a fundamental shift in this regard. The ten elegies place the "poetic reflection" of their lyrical subject in a broader, all-human context: their inherent metapoetic thought is part of a more general "poetische Analyse der condition humaine"⁵³. Malte's self-analysis was already a description of contemporary society and its social and psychological mechanisms, but his perspective seems to be much more personal and idiosyncratic. The frequent use of the first person plural in the elegies stands for both the poet and mankind, who both face the (apparent) absurdity of life. However, the poet's supremacy lies in his ability to perceive the cosmos behind the despairing semblance of chaos. This privilege of the poetic mind will be fully shown and developed in *Sonette an Orpheus*. Nevertheless, as we have already seen, the impossibility for the lyrical subject to fully identify himself with the mythical god-poet-man causes him to be too human for a god, and too divine for a man. The hypothesis of a certain similarity between Rilke's and Pasternak's lyrical subjects and their opposition to Cvetaeva's is once again confirmed.

As already mentioned above⁵⁴, a common feature of the three poets' lyrical subjects is the rejection of a neat distinction between masculinity and femininity⁵⁵. The three poets tend to show an androgynous attitude in which the active, wilful element is indistinguishably blended with the (more or less) passive ability to incorporate the *stimuli* of nature and the poetic Word. Rilke's subject in the early *Buch vom mönchischen Leben* clearly shows both masculine and feminine traits: "Da neigt sich die Stunde und rührt mich an / mit klarem, metallenen Schlag: / mir zittern die Sinne. Ich fühle, ich kann – / und ich fasse den plastischen Tag"⁵⁶. The identification of will and receptivity remains a fundamental trait of Rilke's artistic thought⁵⁷ up to *Sonette an Orpheus*. Ciepiela has argued that the Pasternakian subject's stressed femininity⁵⁸ is to be linked to Blok's and Rilke's models. She

⁵³ Rilke 1996, II: 612-614.

⁵⁴ See note 8.

⁵⁵ Several critics have studied Cvetaeva, Pasternak and Rilke by analyzing gender issues in their lives and works. See especially Ciepiela 2006, Shleyfer-Lavine 2011, Dinega 2001 and Tavis 1993.

⁵⁶ Rilke 1996, I: 157.

⁵⁷ See Rilke's negative judgment of the writer R. Dehmel's exclusively masculine attitude in a 1903 letter to F.X. Kappus (Rilke 1996, IV: 521-522): "Da ist keine ganz reife und reine Geschlechtswelt, einem die nicht menschlich genug, die nur männlich ist, Brunst ist, Rausch und Ruhelosigkeit [...]. Weil er nur als Mann liebt, nicht als Mensch, darum ist in seiner Geschlechtsempfindung etwas Enges, scheinbar Wildes, Gehässiges, Zeitliches, Unewiges, das seine Kunst verringert und sie zweideutig und zweifelhaft macht".

⁵⁸ See Pasternak's letter to Cvetaeva of July 11, 1926 (Cvetaeva, Pasternak 2004: 257): "Ты меня представляешь проще и лучше, чем я на самом деле. Во мне пропасть женских черт. Я

has also shown the perfect fusion of masculine and feminine traits in the lyrical subject of *Sestra moja – žizn*⁵⁹. As to Cvetaeva, it should be underlined that her mature lyrical subject's gender attitude reflects the poet's struggle to elevate her own work above the limited possibilities of the tradition of *ženskaja poezija*, which Brjusov had strongly supported in the second decade of the century in order to keep it separated from authentic poetry, i.e. poetry written by men⁶⁰. Her androgynous subject unceasingly (but not always successfully) strives to overcome gender distinctions and limitations⁶¹.

The common approach to gender of the three poets and their lyrical subjects should not divert attention from the significant differences between them that have been outlined above. Cvetaeva's lyrical subject manifests differences from those of Rilke and Pasternak which critics have often overlooked or underestimated. This has to be considered as a key point in any discussion of their impassioned poetic relationship.

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чересчур много сторон знаю в том, что называют страдательностью. [...] Целый, действительный мир, т.е. действительность сведена мною [...] именно к этой страдательности, и в романе у меня героиня, а не герой – не случайно”.

⁵⁹ See Ciepiela 2006: 45-51 and 76-80.

⁶⁰ See Ševelenko 2002: 64-74.

⁶¹ See Boym 1991: 296: “The woman poet wants to kill the traditional feminine heroin in herself as an act of self-defence so that this heroine will not in turn be able to kill the poet in her”. See also Kroth 1979, Filonov Gove 1977 and Hasty 2013.

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Abstract

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The Lyrical Subject as a Poet in the Works of M. Cvetaeva, B. Pasternak, and R.M. Rilke

The author discusses the image of the poet in Marina Cvetaeva's, Boris Pasternak's and Rainer Maria Rilke's production. A shared feature of their poetry is the clear identification of the lyrical subject with a poet. Though critical studies on the three poets have clarified many aspects of their human and literary encounter, a comparative approach to their lyrical subjects is still missing. The analysis shows a high degree of similarity between Pasternak's and Rilke's subjects, while Cvetaeva's seems to be rather distinct from them. This study is divided into two main parts. The first focuses on the lyrical subject's relation to reality, while the second delves into the very ontological nature of the subject, analysing the possibility of his/her comparticipation to mankind or his/her inborn difference from it.

Keywords

Cvetaeva; Pasternak; Lyrical Subject.