


A TRIBUTE TO JOSEPH CONRAD AND ALEKSANDR GRIN IN ANASTASIA TSVETAeva'S POEM "TWINS"

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Abstract: Anastasia Tsvetayeva was a Russian writer, poet and memoirist. She started to write earlier than her younger sister Marina Tsvetayeva. Although Anastasia Tsvetaeva published several stories in the 1910s, she was not a representative of any leading literary association or group. She worked as a teacher of English, and a librarian in the Moscow Museum of Fine Arts. She also translated literary and philosophical works from French, English and German. Living in Moscow, Tsvetaeva was not fundamentally involved in politics, giving time and energy to creative work. However, the religious nature of her works made her unreliable in the eyes of the official authorities. She was arrested twice. During the second arrest in 1937, all her writings were confiscated and destroyed by NKVD. On the far-fetched charge Tsvetaeva was sent to Siberia. While in the camp, at the age of forty-one, Tsvetaeva started writing poems, first in English, and then in Russian. Her only book of poetry *Moi edinstvennyy sbornik (My Only Collection)* was published posthumously in 1995. Tsvetaeva wrote about twelve poems in English. Seven of them – “Maturity,” “Twins,” “My Fate,” “A Dream,” “To Raya,” “A portrait attempt” and “To Thomas Carlyle” – are included in her collection of poems.

Tsvetaeva's four-page poem “Twins,” which was also translated by the author into Russian, praises Joseph Conrad's novella *Typhoon* (1902) and Aleksandr Grin's adventure novel *Scarlet Sails (Алые паруса)* (1923). Except the fact that both writers had Polish ancestors, they were fascinated by the beauty and mightiness of the ocean. Life at sea, perceived as the embodiment of freedom, is something both Conrad and Grin longed for. The sea also occupies a central place in *Typhoon* and *Scarlet Sails*. The characters in both stories also struggle with adversities of fate and water – one of the most powerful elements of nature.

Keywords: Anastasia Tsvetayeva, Joseph Conrad, Aleksandr Grin, life at sea, fate, freedom

Anastasia Ivanovna Tsvetayeva (1894-1993) was a Russian writer, poet and memoirist. She started writing earlier than her younger sister Marina Tsvetayeva (1892-1941). Although Anastasia Tsvetaeva published several stories in the 1910s, she was not a representative of any leading literary association or group. She worked as a teacher of English and a librarian in the Moscow Museum of Fine Arts. Tsvetaeva also translated literary and philosophical works from French, English and German. Living in Moscow, she was not fundamentally involved in politics, giving time and energy to creative work. However, the religious nature of her works made her unreli-

able in the eyes of the official authorities. She was arrested twice. During the second arrest in 1937, all her writings were confiscated and destroyed by NKVD. On the far-fetched charge Tsvetaeva was sent to Siberia. Deep religiosity and inflexible spirit helped her to withstand the ordeal. While in the settlement, she wrote a diary *My Siberia* («Моя Сибирь» published in 1988), imbued with love for people and nature. It contains stories about the hardship of camp life and exile during the Gulag period. While in the camp, at the age of forty-one, Tsvetaeva started writing poems, first in English, and then in Russian. All her poems were written in the camp until the year 1943, when she was informed about the death of her sister Marina who had died two years earlier. Tsvetaeva's poems written in English contain similar themes to her poems written in Russian, i.e. they express a search for spiritual values and a sense of estrangement from Soviet reality. Tsvetaeva may have chosen to write them in English, because she was allowed to use paper for lessons with a daughter of one of the engineers working in the Far East near her camp, and she pretended to use her poems for her classes. Her only book of poetry «Мой единственный сборник» (*Moi edinstvenny sbornik, My Only Collection*) was published posthumously in 1995. Tsvetaeva wrote about twelve poems in English. Seven of them – “Maturity,” “Twins,” “My Fate,” “A Dream,” “To Raya,” “A portrait attempt” and “To Thomas Carlyle” – are included in her collection of poems.

Tsvetaeva's four-page poem “Twins,” which was also translated by the author into Russian, is dedicated to Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) and Aleksandr Stepanovich Grinevsky (1880-1932), known by his penname Aleksandr Grin, who was a Russian writer of Polish origin. His father Stefan Hryniewski (Russianized as Stefan Grinevsky) was a Pole, deported to Russia after the Polish January Uprising of 1863; and his mother Anna Lyapkova was a Russian nurse. In 1896 Grinevsky went to Odessa and lived the life of a vagabond. He worked as a sailor, gold miner, construction worker, but often found himself without a job and sustained himself by begging and thanks to money sent to him by his father. Viktor Borisov writes that Grin appreciated Conrad. He also gives examples of a Russian literary critic Vadim Kovsky and a Russian writer Konstantin Paustovsky, who both pointed out to Conrad's, as well as Edgar Poe's, Richard Stephenson's, Jack London's and Rudyard Kipling's influence on Grin's development as a writer.¹

Tsvetaeva's poem praises Conrad's novella *Typhoon* (1902) and Grin's adventure novel *Scarlet Sails* (*Алые паруса*, 1923). Except the fact that both writers had Polish ancestors, they were fascinated by the beauty and mightiness of the ocean. Life at sea, perceived as the embodiment of freedom, is something both Conrad and Grin longed for. Grin's imagination sometimes brings to life characters who struggle alone with adversities of fate and the element of nature, reminiscent of characters created by Conrad. The sea also occupies a central place in *Typhoon* and *Scarlet Sails*.

Tsvetaeva explains the history of the poem “Twins” in her novel *Amor* written in the camp. The novel, which contains many autobiographical overtones, introduces a fictional character named Nika. The author explains that Nika was punished by one

¹ Виктор Борисов, *Джозеф Конрад в России* (Москва: Н.п., 1997), p. 78.

of the camp managers for refusing to be his mistress, and was "sent to the laundry." While washing the inmates' clothes during one shift, Nika started composing "in English a poem 'Twins' about Aleksandr Grin and Joseph Conrad."²

In her poem Tsvetaeva introduces Conrad, "a Polish sailor" who "came to England's shore," and "left it never more."³ She praises his tale *Typhoon* about a tropical cyclone in the Pacific Ocean which features a courageous captain who refuses to find an alternative course for his steamer *Nan Shan* to avoid the typhoon. The tale's prime interest is, as Conrad mentioned in the Author's Note, "not the bad weather but the extraordinary complication brought into the ship's life at a moment of exceptional stress by the human element below her deck."⁴ However, Conrad confines the scope of the tale to the hero's capacity to react, which is limited. Captain MacWhirr had "just enough imagination to carry him through each successive day, and no more."⁵

[h]e had never been given a glimpse of immeasurable strength and of immoderate wrath. [...] Captain MacWhirr had sailed over the surface of the oceans as some men go skimming over the years of existence to sink gently into a placid grave, ignorant of life to the last, without ever having been made to see all it may contain of perfidy, of violence, and of terror. There are on sea and land such men thus fortunate – or thus disdained by destiny or by the sea.⁶

This lack of imagination and experience which made him ignore the advice on "stormy strategy in Captain Wilson's book," led him to make a wrong decision and take the *Nan-Shan* straight through the typhoon, and needlessly endanger the ship and the men on her. But, despite his stubbornness Captain MacWhirr has qualities which enable him to emerge from his ordeal as a heroic figure. He is honest, courageous, humane and just. The stubbornness that limits him in matters of difficult choice, is the very same quality that, during the stress of the typhoon, makes him such a strong, rock-like presence who manages to win the dangerous battle with the indifferent sea. "On a bright sunshiny day, with the breeze chasing her smoke far ahead, the *Nan-Shan* came into Fu-Chau."⁷

Tsvetaeva praises Conrad's "glorious" style, which is concrete and powerful. The poem starts with an intensely visualized description of some warning signals of an approaching typhoon, which is a threat to the ship: "The night is pitch dark. No stars and no moon, / The prenatal chaos is raging / The sounds of the coming Typhoon

² Анастасия Ивановна Цветаева, *Автор: роман* (Елабуга: Елабужский государственный историко-архитектурный и художественный музей-заповедник, 2009), p. 363. "Ника, за отказ сожительствоать с начальником штаба колонны – послана в прачечную. [...] Из 75 штук белья по норме [...] вырабатывает в день 55 штук. Но целиком уйти в этот пот – не выходит. Остается остаток души, парящий над грязным бельем – и Ника пишет в воздухе по-английски поэму «Близнецы» о Джозефе Конраде и Александре Грине."

³ Анастасия Ивановна Цветаева, *Мой единственный сборник* (Елабуга: Елабужский государственный историко-архитектурный и художественный музей-заповедник, 2009), p. 135.

⁴ Joseph Conrad, *Typhoon and Other Stories* (New York: Doubleday, 1925), p. vii.

⁵ Conrad, *Typhoon and Other Stories*, p. 4.

⁶ Conrad, *Typhoon and Other Stories*, pp. 18-19.

⁷ Conrad, *Typhoon and Other Stories*, p. 91.

afar.”⁸ “Waves like mountains” driven by powerful winds, slam into the ship. Sailors are wounded, “half-dead and washed down.”⁹ Conrad’s captain knows that the worst place for a ship to find herself is in the eye of a hurricane, but even if it may seem that there is “no future. No hope. It is death,” exhausted, “[b]lind and beaten by waves,” Conrad’s captain will fight to “the last of his breath, / Or he’ll master the Pacific Ocean.”¹⁰

Many of the tale’s main sources belong to Conrad’s own past sea life. In the “Author’s Note” he comments that MacWhirr “is the product of twenty years of life.”¹¹ Tsvetaeva’s poem employs a powerful image of Conrad – a bird-like soul – that could overcome dire circumstances of life and attain a different identity in a new space and in a new language: “Joseph Conrad, God bless thy unfathomable tales / And England, thy second land / Will be heir of thy books, while thy soul soars and sails / Over sea storms and desert sands.”¹² In her poem, Tsvetaeva calls Grin Conrad’s brother in “spirit and pen” whose style “as if carved on precious stone / Is lifting its magic wand.”¹³

Grin’s own experiences and many unfulfilled dreams become, in his stories, the narrative material of an imaginary world full of exoticism and symbolic imagery; a fantastic utopia and a surreal concrete. In his works, Grin, like Conrad, does not glorify life on the sea. He also presents the whole truth about the difficulties of being a sailor. Both writers are sure that the sea teaches humility, a quality that has a great influence on a person’s spiritual development. Another thing that Grin, like Conrad, wants to convey to his readers in *Scarlet Sails* is that one should never lose hope even if the situation seems desperate. Grin tries to convince people that strong fate has immense power, which is essential in making people’s wishes fulfilled. He urges them to be like little Assol – the “maiden awaiting the sails”¹⁴ who, against all odds, was waiting on the shore of Kaperna for her prince on a ship with scarlet sails, and believed that her dream will come through, and, finally, one day the miracle happened:

You say, overlooking, the book – “it is bad!
Pink sails! What for? What a nonsense!
Pour child! She is simply and hopelessly mad
And the author – no brain and no conscience

And while you are getting so proud and so right
The sun is beginning to sink –
And you see in the dusk – what to do with your pride?
the sails on the sea pink
She is standing alone in the darkening shore

⁸ Цветаева, *Мой единственный сборник*, p. 135.

⁹ Цветаева, *Мой единственный сборник*.

¹⁰ Цветаева, *Мой единственный сборник*.

¹¹ Conrad, *Typhoon and Other Stories*, p. viii.

¹² Цветаева, *Мой единственный сборник*, p. 135.

¹³ Цветаева, *Мой единственный сборник*, p. 136.

¹⁴ Цветаева, *Мой единственный сборник*.

Her arms in the air like wings
Captain Grey! It is he! Oh the "how" and "more"–
Of the incomprehensible things.¹⁵

The figure of Captain Grey, in many aspects, resembles Grin himself. Both were fascinated by the sea and longing for true love. Captain Grey, from his childhood days, feels a strong passion for the sea. As a child, he read maritime books, and when he was fifteen, he left home to become a sailor. Life on a ship proved to be harder than he expected. He faced many hardships, but he was determined to make his dream come true and he did not give up. Grey fulfilled his dream, and became a captain. But he had a feeling that something important was lacking in his life. It was love. Grey gave Assol a new and better life, but in return he also achieved a gift of a kind loving wife.

In the last part of the poem, the lyric heroine presents herself as a cosmopolitan writer, and calls Conrad and Grin her "brothers twins."¹⁶ This metaphor shows that Tsvetaeva feels connected emotionally with Conrad and Grin, and with their lot and separation from homeland. The lyrical subject asks them:

What d'you tell me of illness, of age and of toil,
Of being-well almost old
Of unbearable burdens, of exile on a soil
So far from my own. Of cold
That makes freeze, and of heat
That just fuses one's bones
Of maddening brain fag, of death
In hospitals: nightmares and sobbings and moans
– My sails their breeze is my breath.¹⁷

The poem evokes a fairy tale mood as if the poet wanted to escape to Wonderland for a while. It includes some key elements that make a fairy tale. Fairy tales evoke wonder. This elementary wonder, which is a vital part of a true fairy tale, is also present in Tsvetaeva's poem.

She evokes images from her childhood:

These was a land
– Oh once upon a time –
There I was born. On silver sand
There stood a house. To rhyme

I have it but with "Paradise,"
...I was drowned in lilac shades
– I can't forget it Make me wise,
Say: all that, earthly fades –

I see us travel round the world

¹⁵ Цветаева, *Мой единственный сборник*.

¹⁶ Цветаева, *Мой единственный сборник*, p. 137.

¹⁷ Цветаева, *Мой единственный сборник*, pp. 136-137.

We are as free as cloud and bird. Isn't it a guarantee –
– Oh warm my hands, oh make me wise.¹⁸

The poet makes use of symbolic images of life, of psyche and, like in fairy tales, is able to travel from one country to another, from one culture to another culture. The poem also holds good for human nature, despite all the differences. In fairy tales the hero needs to face a challenge. The obstacle might be a destination the character must reach, like in the case of Conrad's captain; or the main character may need to find true love, like Assol and captain Grey. Tsvetaeva also compared Conrad's life to a "fairy story," and the sea to a "fairy town."¹⁹ To make her writing more vivid and powerful Tsvetaeva makes an extensive use of figurative language. Using appropriate metaphors and similes the poet appeals directly to the senses of her readers, sharpening their imaginations to comprehend what is being communicated to them. The poet expresses her dreams and longings and relates her feelings to Conrad's and Grin's personal experiences. She envisions them "as a free cloud and bird."²⁰ The lyrical subject celebrates each new day and worships life, which she calls "paradise."²¹ She is not scared of "death – dear end" and says "Farewell [...] to her]cherished earth."²²

I've been a faithful friend to thee,
And an eternal foe,
Now let us part in harmony,
For it is time to go –²³

Life is unpredictable, but as Tsvetaeva convinces her readers, one should not become discouraged by that fact and resign from living out dreams and wishes. In a fairy tale mood, she presents a series of clear pictures to illustrate the idea that even limitless terrors have a limit, and there is something in the universe more mystical than darkness – that is a threat stronger than cold water – a strong enemy which can take life away; stronger than fear – "mad exhaustion" – exhaustion which is so overwhelming that a person might feel helpless. The author implies that although grey skies and "the stormy sea" are a threat, they will be calmed down by Mother Nature.²⁴ The moral learnt through this allegory is that even if life is full of obstacles, and we are exposed to significant dangers and hardships, it is possible to overcome them.

¹⁸ Цветаева, *Мой единственный сборник*, p. 137.

¹⁹ Цветаева, *Мой единственный сборник*, p. 135.

²⁰ Цветаева, *Мой единственный сборник*, p. 137.

²¹ Цветаева, *Мой единственный сборник*.

²² Цветаева, *Мой единственный сборник*.

²³ Цветаева, *Мой единственный сборник*.

²⁴ Цветаева, *Мой единственный сборник*, p. 138.

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