The Bilingual Muse

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MARINA IVANOVNA TSVETAEVA (1892–1941), one of the greatest of Russia’s modern poets, was also the most productive Russian poetic self-translator of the twentieth century. The Russian-to-French translation of her fairy-tale poem Mólodets (usually referred to in English as The Swain), with its length of 2,146 verse lines, far surpasses the dimensions of Vladimir Nabokov’s or Joseph Brodsky’s later self-translated poetry.1 Aside from the sheer volume of her translated verses, Tsvetaeva deserves attention for the boldness of her approach to writing in a non-native idiom. As Efim Etkind put it in his introduction to the French edition of Mólodets, “never before, in any European literature, had a poet dared to take such liberties with a foreign language.”2 In a talk at the 1992 Tsvetaeva colloquium in Paris, Etkind went even further, calling Tsvetaeva “a unique case in the history of world literature.” As he explained, “it would be difficult to find another poet who wrote with so much brilliance and energy in a language other than her own, while at the same time continuing to write in her own language.”3

Aside from the self-translation of Mólodets, Tsvetaeva also wrote several French prose narratives in the 1930s; she experimented with writing poetry directly in French; and, in the final years and months of her life, she translated multiple poems by Alexander Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov from Russian into French verse. Most of Tsvateva’s French writings remained unpublished during her lifetime and have only come to light relatively recently. Despite the enthusiasm expressed by Etkind and other scholars, Tsvetaeva did not succeed in publishing her French poetry, and to this day she has failed to gain recognition as a French-language poet. Unlike Nabokov and Brodsky, who have earned a distinct, if controversial, reputation within the ranks of Anglophone poetry, Tsvetaeva is perceived as a monolingual Russian poet (even though, as we will see, she herself rejected this label). For reasons that remain to be explored, her French oeuvre has been largely ignored. The fact that she ended up returning to the Soviet Union from her western European exile reinforced the narrative of a potentially cosmopolitan writer who, in spite of a trilingual upbringing and many years of residence abroad,
nevertheless opted to remain within the fold of Russian culture. In reality, as the example of Mólodets shows, Tsvetaeva was more than willing to cross the boundaries of her native language when the opportunity presented itself.

FROM MÓLODETS TO LE GARS

Tsvetaeva’s status as a bilingual poet is intimately linked to the fairy-tale poem Mólodets. Written in 1922 and published in 1924 in Prague, it is one of several long narrative poems that Tsvetaeva based on folkloric sources. The plot derives from “Upyr’” (“The Vampire”), one of the more gruesome stories in Aleksandr Afanasiev’s classic nineteenth-century collection of Russian fairy tales. Tsvetaeva’s poem preserves the basic outline of its source, but it significantly expands it and gives it a radical new meaning. The heroine, a village girl named Marusia, falls in love with a handsome stranger who turns out to be a vampire. She fails to denounce him, which leads to the deaths of several family members and finally her own demise when the vampire kills her in a graphic consummation scene. Marusia is buried on a crossroad, where she becomes incarnated in a red flower. In the second half of the story, a nobleman discovers the flower and takes it to his castle. The flower metamorphoses into a beautiful woman, and the nobleman ends up marrying her. They live together for five years and have a son. One day, after the nobleman’s guests at a dinner party upbraid him for having an unbaptized spouse, he forces her to go to church with him, where the vampire confronts her again. In Afanasiev’s tale, the vampire kills the husband and son, but Marusia, on the advice of her grandmother, manages to destroy her tormentor by sprinkling him with holy water. She is able to resurrect her spouse and child, and they live happily ever after. Tsvetaeva’s version ends very differently: when the vampire calls out to Marusia at the church service, she abandons her husband and child to reunite with him and fly off “into the blue fire.”

Tsvetaeva’s poem follows the plot of the fairy tale relatively closely (except for the ending), but it becomes clear that she subjects it to a fundamental reinterpretation. Her version is not the tale of an innocent victim who eventually manages to vanquish her persecutor, but a story of fatal, passionate love and all-consuming obsession. As Tsvetaeva later explained in her 1926 essay “Poet o kritike” (“A Poet on Criticism”): “Marusia loved the vampire. This is why she would not name him and kept losing, one after another, her mother, her brother, her life. Passion and crime, passion and sacrifice. Such was my task when I started working on ‘Mólodets.’” In more recent years, the romance between a female teenager and a vampire has become popularized in Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight novels and their blockbuster film adaptation. But while in the Twilight story the relationship is facilitated by the
male hero’s “vegetarianism,” Tsvetaeva’s vampire behaves as ruthlessly and bloodthirstily as one would expect of such a creature. The scene in which he deflowers and kills Marusia combines aggressive sexuality with ritual murder. Perversely, one gains the impression that the female heroine is attracted not in spite of, but rather because of his ferocious, bloodthirsty nature, which stands in stark contrast to the “bourgeois” conventionality of her upbringing and later married life.

The extremism of Tsvetaeva’s plot is matched by what Michael Makin has called the poem’s “textual violence.” The language of Mólodets is as provocative as its content. In keeping with the fairy-tale source, there is a strong folkloric influence—in fact, several passages from Afanasiev’s tale are incorporated verbatim. But Tsvetaeva’s language is not simply a folkloric stylization. Rather, she uses folk and archaic layers of Russian to create a modernist idiom of her own. Her use of nonstandard forms and neologisms comes close to the verbal experiments of the Russian futurists, even though she never crosses the boundary into pure “trans-sense” language. Sound and rhythm assume a major significance. In addition to the end rhymes, a multitude of internal rhymes, assonances, and alliterations lend the text an intensely musical, incantatory quality. The stirring polymetric rhythm, characterized by a folksy dance quality, creates an effect that is similar to the blend of Russian folkloric tunes with avant-garde modernism in the ballet scores of Igor Stravinsky, as Simon Karlinsey has pointed out.

Mólodets received mixed reviews in the Russian émigré press. While some critics were baffled by its content and style, Vladislav Khodasevich, the greatest poet of the Russian emigration after Tsvetaeva, praised the poem’s rich vocabulary and Tsvetaeva’s ability to capture what he considered the genuine spirit of Russian folklore. As he put it: “A folk song is to a significant degree a joyful or plaintive wail—it contains elements of the tongue-twister and pun, of purest sound play; one always hears echoes of spells and incantations, of faith in the magic power of the word; it is always in part hysterical, turning into crying or laughter, and in part ‘beyond sense’ [zaumna].” Tsvetaeva herself considered Mólodets a work of central importance, as we can see from the fact that she kept coming back to it in her later critical essays and letters. She mentioned it repeatedly in her correspondence with Boris Pasternak, who became the poem’s dedicatee. On February 14, 1923, she wrote to Pasternak: “I just finished a long poem (one has to call it something, after all!)—not a poem, but an obsession [navazhdenie], and it was not I that finished it, but it finished me.” In subsequent letters, Tsvetaeva stressed the autobiographical significance of Mólodets, claiming a kinship between herself and the female protagonist Marusia. She also made special efforts to have the poem translated. The British poet and novelist Alec Brown created an
In 1929, Tsvetaeva made the acquaintance of the prominent Russian avant-garde painter Natalia Goncharova, who offered to do a series of illustrations for Mólodets. This gave Tsvetaeva the hope to publish her poem in France. Since no other translator was available, she decided to translate it herself. As she later explained in an interview published in the Paris émigré newspaper Vozrozhdenie: “I never thought that I would take up such a task. It happened almost accidentally: Natalia Goncharova, who knew the thing in Russian, made illustrations and regretted that there was no French text. So I began—because of the illustrations, and then I myself got carried away [sama volveklas].”

Tsvetaeva’s biographer Simon Karlinsky claims, somewhat misleadingly, that the self-translation of Mólodets obliged Tsvetaeva to learn French versification, and that, “dissatisfied with the results, she decided to write a new French poem, ‘Gars,’ based on ‘The Swain.’” It is true that in her Vozrozhdenie interview, Tsvetaeva states that she “attempted to translate” the poem, but ended up “writing it anew around the same core [sterzhen’].” This does not mean, however, that Tsvetaeva considered Le Gars a self-standing poem only loosely based on its Russian source text. To the contrary: she regarded the French version to be a bona fide transposition of the Russian original that strove to preserve its most essential features. Moreover, Tsvetaeva was not unfamiliar with French versification, but the task that she set for herself in her translation, as we will see, was to achieve a sort of synthesis between French and Russian prosody. In a letter written in 1930, Tsvetaeva commented as follows on her progress in translating Mólodets: “The thing is going well. I could now write a theory of verse translation, which comes down to a transposition, a change of key while preserving the foundation. Not only with other words, but with other images. In short, a thing in another language has to be written anew. Which only the author can do.”

The translation turned out to be significantly more labor-intensive than the composition of the original Russian text. While it took Tsvetaeva three months to write the original Mólodets, she spent eight months on the French version. There is no indication that she was dissatisfied with the result—to the contrary, she was proud of her achievement. The utter lack of success of Le Gars with the French public was therefore all the greater a disappointment to her. Tsvetaeva’s reading of the poem at a Paris literary salon turned out to be a fiasco. As we know from the memoirs of E. A. Izvol’skaia, the audience reacted with “deadly silence.” Tentative plans to publish the poem in the journals Commerce and Nouvelle Revue Française came to nothing. As
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Tsvetaeva reported in a 1931 letter: “About the French Mólodets there is only one refrain: ‘Too new, unusual, outside of any tradition, not even surrealism’ (NB! God save me from the latter!). Nobody wants to courir le risque.” Only two brief excerpts of Le Gars appeared in print during Tsvetaeva’s lifetime. The first chapter of the poem came out in 1930 in the journal France et Monde, and a short excerpt from the final chapter, under the title “La Neige” (“The Snow”), was included in a 1935 Anthologie de la littérature soviétique (sic!) edited by George Reavey and Marc Slonim. The manuscript of Le Gars remained dormant in Tsvetaeva’s Moscow archive for many decades. It was finally published in France in the early 1990s, half a century after Tsvetaeva’s death. A decade later Le Gars also appeared in Russia. A 2003 edition of Mólodets published in St. Petersburg includes the French text with a literal Russian translation printed en face, while a 2005 bilingual Moscow edition presents Tsvetaeva’s Russian and French versions on facing pages. Both of these editions also include Natalia Goncharova’s illustrations. These publications hardly established a reputation for Tsvetaeva as a bilingual poet, however. Even among Tsvetaeva specialists, Le Gars has thus far received only minimal attention.

“DICHTEN IST NACHDICHTEN”: TSVETAEVA’S VIEWS ON POETRY AND TRANSLATION

Before engaging in a discussion of Le Gars, it will be useful to consider Tsvetaeva’s linguistic abilities and her general attitude toward translingual poetry and translation. Tsvetaeva had an excellent command of two languages other than her native Russian. To say that her French and German were “near native” would be an understatement. In both languages she was not only a fluent speaker, but also an original stylist. As the example of Le Gars demonstrates, her knowledge of French also included archaic and non-standard layers of the language. Tsvetaeva’s facility with languages goes back to her early childhood. Even though she came from a less exalted class background than Vladimir Nabokov, just like him, she would have been able to claim that she grew up as a “perfectly normal trilingual child.” In her autobiographical sketch of 1940 she wrote: “First languages: German and Russian, by age seven— French.” At her Moscow childhood home there was no Russian nanny, but a series of German and French governesses. Like Wassily Kandinsky, Tsvetaeva had a Baltic German grandparent, the businessman and publisher Aleksandr Danilovich Meyn, who was her favorite relative and recited German poetry to her during visits. Tsvetaeva’s half-German, half-Polish mother introduced her children to German and French rather than Russian literature. From age ten to thirteen, Tsvetaeva lived abroad
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to accompany her mother, who tried unsuccessfully to cure her tuberculosis in various European sanatoriums. Tsvetaeva attended a French-language boarding school in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1903–04, and a German boarding school in Freiburg, Germany, in 1904–05. The latter experience turned her into a lifelong Germanophile (at least until the Nazi takeover of Czechoslovakia in 1939). At age sixteen, Tsvetaeva traveled alone to Paris to attend a summer course in medieval French literature at the Sorbonne.

In a questionnaire forwarded to her by Boris Pasternak for a planned dictionary of twentieth-century writers by the Soviet Academy of Arts and Sciences, Tsvetaeva indicated that, as a child and adolescent, she wrote poems not only in Russian, but also in German and French.26 The same claim is repeated in the autobiographical sketch of 1940, where she writes that she composed French poems in Lausanne and German poems in Freiburg.27 None of these texts seems to have survived, but it becomes clear that the idea and practice of writing poetry in a non-native language was certainly not alien to Tsvetaeva. She later furnished a theoretical and philosophical justification for translingual poetry in her correspondence with Rainer Maria Rilke during the summer of 1926. On July 6, 1926, she wrote to Rilke (in German):

Goethe says somewhere that one can never achieve anything of significance in a foreign language—and that has always rung false to me. . . . Writing poetry is in itself translating, from the mother tongue into another. Whether French or German should make no difference. No language is the mother tongue. Writing poetry is rewriting it \[Dichten ist nachdichten\]. That’s why I am puzzled when people talk of French or Russian, etc., poets. A poet may write in French; he cannot be a French poet. That’s ludicrous.

I am not a Russian poet and am always astonished to be taken for one and looked upon in this light. The reason one becomes a poet (if it were even possible to become one, if one were not one before all else!) is to avoid being French, Russian, etc., in order to be everything.28

“Nachdichten” is the German term for composing a poetic translation in such a way that the translated text passes muster as a valid work of poetry in the target language. As Tsvetavea herself observed in her 1929 essay “A Few of Rainer Maria Rilke’s Letters”: “How much better the Germans put it—\[nachdichten\]! Following in the poet’s footsteps, to lay again the path he has already laid. Let nach mean follow, but dichten always has new meaning. Nachdichten—laying anew a path, all traces of which are instantaneously grown over.”29 Writing poetry, for Tsvetaeva, was akin to translation in a double sense. It means translating from the ordinary language used in daily life into a poetic idiom, but it also involves a translation from the spiritual into a material, linguistic realm. For her, contrary to popular assumptions,
poetry is in principle always translatable. She explained this thought in a letter to the French poet Paul Valéry in 1937 (in French):

One says that Pushkin cannot be translated. Why? Every poem is a translation from the spiritual into the material, from feelings and thoughts into words. If one has been able to do it once by translating the interior world into external signs (which comes close to a miracle), why should one not be able to express one system of signs via another? This is much simpler: in the translation from one language into another, the material is rendered by the material, the word by the word, which is always possible.30

One may object that the logic behind this statement is somewhat dubious. If we follow Tsvetaeva’s argument, a successful translation of Pushkin would entail the intuition of the spiritual “interior world” behind the Russian words and its recasting into another language, which seems more complex than a horizontal transposition between equivalent external signs. How can the external form be separated from the spiritual content if they are both extensions of each other?31 Whatever its validity, though, Tsvetaeva’s belief in the fundamental translatability of poetry certainly facilitated her own self-translation of Mólodets.

Tsvetaeva’s opinion that “no language is the mother tongue” does not mean that the choice of a particular idiom had no significance for her and that she considered all languages as essentially interchangeable when it came to writing poetry. In her letters to Rilke, Tsvetaeva also offers observations about how Russian, German, and French differ from each other as vehicles of poetic expression. She establishes a personal hierarchy, in which the top position is occupied by what she refers to as the “language of angels,” the immaterial essence of the spirit of poetry. According to Tsvetaeva, German comes closest to this ideal language, followed by Russian, while French occupies the third and last position. Commenting on the poems that Rilke composed in French, she writes to him that French is an “ungrateful language for poets—that’s of course why you wrote in it. Almost impossible language!”32

Tsvetaeva’s seemingly counterintuitive decision to translate her poem into French, aside from purely pragmatic reasons, was thus determined by the particular challenge that the language presented to her as a poet. The incentive consisted precisely in overcoming a seemingly insurmountable obstacle. Like Rilke, she chose French not because it was easy, but because it was difficult. The idea of French as a problematic vehicle for writing poetry betrays Tsvetaeva’s German romantic roots and prejudices. Seen from that perspective, the alleged Cartesian rationality and clarity of the French language turns into an obstacle for the expression of the spiritual and the
ineffable. In her letter to Rilke, Tsvetaeva draws a contrast between German as a language of dynamic eternal becoming and French as an idiom of static finiteness, calling German an “infinite promise” ("unendliche Versprechung") and French a “gift once and for all” ("endgültige Gabe"). Seen from a romantic point of view, the neoclassicist straitjacket in which the French language has been dressed up since the seventeenth century may have had a deleterious effect on poetic creativity, but Tsvetaeva was surely aware of the aesthetic revolution initiated by the French symbolists. However, her own solution to overcome the perceived poetic poverty of French was not to imitate French symbolism (which had itself become a cliché by the time she wrote *Le Gars*), but to go back to more ancient, pre-classicist layers of the French language.

**THE CHALLENGE OF TRANSLATING MÓLODETS**

Even for someone who believed in the essential translatability of poetry, as Tsvetaeva did, the difficulties in translating a text like *Mólodets* are daunting. Aside from the virtuosity of its rhythm, rhymes, and wordplay, there is the issue of nonstandard language, as manifested by the presence of archaic, folk, and Church Slavonic elements alongside Tsvetaeva’s own idiosyncratic style, which is characterized by neologisms, elliptic compression, and the frequent absence of verbs. The challenges that Tsvetaeva faced can be broken down into three rough categories: linguistic features of the original Russian text that can in principle be reproduced in French; formal characteristics such as meter, rhyme, and alliteration that require substantial creative rewriting; and elements of the Russian original that elude translation altogether. In what follows, I will address each category in turn.

In order to reproduce the nonstandard language of *Mólodets* with its archaic and folk connotations, Tsvetaeva resorted to the premodern vocabulary of the sixteenth and fifteenth centuries found in the works of a François Rabelais or François Villon. Thus we find archaic locutions like “onque” (75) instead of the modern French “jamais,” “nenni” for “non” (37, 80), “ru” for “ruisseau” (54, 55), “choir” for “tomber” (36), “jà” for “déjà” (119), “oyez” for “écoutez” (105), and diminutive forms like “pommelettes” (26), “pauvrette” (29), “oiselet” (34), “seurettes” (46), and “enfantelet” (47) that do not exist in modern standard French. An interesting case is the word “rouble,” which in modern French denotes the Russian currency, but which in ancient French meant something like a shovel. The expression “Sonnez, roubles!” (117) could thus be read as an example of double coding, meaning either “Resound, shovels!” or “Resound, rubles!” In comparison with the linguistic inventiveness of the Russian text, there are fewer outright neologisms in the
French text, however. Most of the vocabulary in *Le Gars* can be found in specialized French dictionaries, with only a few exceptions that seem to be Tsvetaeva’s own coinages.\(^{35}\)

Tsvetaeva’s archaic style pertains not only to vocabulary, but to grammar and syntax as well. For example, she uses the *passé simple* in direct speech, as in “Pourquoi cassâtes la branche / brûlâtes l’arbuste?” (103; “Why did you break the branch, burn the shrub?”), which in modern usage would require the *passé composé* (“Pourquoi avez-vous cassé / brûlé,” etc.). A very characteristic syntactic feature of Tsvetaeva’s style, both in Russian and French, is the omission of personal pronouns with conjugated verbs. The repeated formula with which Marusia brushes off her mother’s cry for help, “sliu—ne slyshu, matushka” (“[I] sleep and do not hear, mother”) becomes in French “Mère, dors / et n’endends rien” (49). The phrase sounds more jarring in French because, unlike in Russian, the verbal ending does not allow for a definitive identification of the speaker (“dors” and “entends” could be either first- or second-person singular). Likewise, the frequent omission of articles creates an alien effect in French that could perhaps be interpreted as a “foreignizing” element pointing to the Russian source, but more likely is meant to evoke an archaic or folkloric style.

Tsvetaeva’s French manuscript contains a few suggested corrections inserted by Robert Vivier, a professor at the University of Liège whom she had asked for advice. Mostly, Vivier proposed to amend the text by inserting missing articles and pronouns. For example, he changed “plus ne puis” (“I can’t anymore”) to “je n’en peux plus.” As Efim Etkind correctly notes, however, the locution “plus ne puis” would have been perfectly normal in fifteenth- or sixteenth-century French.\(^{36}\) Tsvetaeva ended up accepting very few of Vivier’s proposed emendations, which shows that her use of nonstandard language was a deliberate strategy that she was unwilling to alter.

Another idiosyncratic feature of Tsvetaeva’s Russian is a nominal style characterized by the frequent omission of verbs. In principle, this effect can be reproduced in French as well, even though it comes across as somewhat less natural, given that verbless locutions are not as common in French as they are in Russian. In his review of *Mólodets*, Dmitrii Sviatopolk-Mirskii praised the language of Tsvetaeva’s poem for its “Russian ‘verblessness’” (“russkaia ‘bezglagol’nost’”).\(^{37}\) An example of this technique can be found in the stanza describing Marusia’s dance in the nobleman’s palace after she has metamorphosed from a flower back into human shape:

Вплавь. Вскачь.  
Всё— в раз!  
Пляс. Плач.  
Плач. Пляс. (v. 1052–55)
Gliding in. Jumping up.
All—in one!
Dance. Cry.
Cry. Dance.

The French version preserves the nominal style of the Russian original:

Jeux d’eau.
Jeux d’air.
Pleurs. Sauts.
Sauts. Pleurs. (78)

Water games.
Air games.
Cries. Jumps.
Jumps. Cries.

As can be seen, semantic accuracy was the least concern for Tsvetaeva when she translated her poem into French. What she preserves in the present case is not the literal meaning, but the pounding staccato rhythm created by the piling up of stressed monosyllabics. Both in Russian and French, the stanza consists entirely of such words, even though the French version lacks the sonic uniformity created in Russian by the “v” and “pl”-alliterations and the preponderance of stressed “a.” Clearly, sound effects were a primary concern for Tsvetaeva. If in the above example, the French version seems sonically poorer, there are many other cases where Tsvetaeva creates sound effects in French that have no equivalent in the Russian original. This includes alliterations (e.g., “Tresses traînent, bottes butent,” 75), or even spoonerisms (“Le tien sonne, / et le sien—tonne,” 27).

Rhymes play an extremely important role in Tsvetaeva’s poetics. Both in Russian and in French, they turn up not only at the end of the verse line, but internally as well. Here, for example, is a description of the nobleman in his steam bath after having brought the red flower to his palace:

Да по притолкам—в дымá,
Да по тутолкам—в чаны . . .
И не надо мне вина!
И не надо мне жены! (v. 888–91)

Along the lintels—into the smoke!
Along the tutolki38—into the tubs . . .
And I do not need wine!
And I do not need a wife!
In French, the nobleman addresses the flower directly:

M’es Dame, m’es daim,
M’es flamme, m’es bain,
M’es femme, m’es vin . . .

—Hein? (72)

To me you are dame, deer,
flame, bath,
wife, wine . . .

—Huh?

With its lineup of identical rhymes in two parallel vertical rows (Dame-flamme-femme; daim-bain-vin-Hein) and the identical beginning of each verse line, the French translation is even more tightly and uniformly structured than the Russian original.

Rhyme does not only fulfill an ornamental, mnemonic, or euphonic function in Mólodets; it also assumes an important structural and semantic role. There are several passages where a word is left out at the end of a stanza, but has to be mentally reinserted by the reader according to the rhyme scheme. The taboo word “upyr’” (vampire), for example, is never uttered in the text, but is implied in the passage where Marusia’s brother cries out to her in the middle of the night:

Лют брачный твой пир,
Жених твой у— (v. 369–70)

Your wedding feast is dire,
Your bridegroom a vam—

The interrupted utterance indicates that the brother is killed at the very moment when he is about to name and expose his murderer. The French text functions in the same way, prompting the reader to insert the word “sang” (blood):

Sache bien qui prends,
Un suceur de . . . (42)

Know well whom you are marrying,
A sucker of . . .

It goes without saying that the preservation of such effects is incompatible with a literal translation. In Tsvetaeva’s approach, the rendition of structural and formal features trumps semantic accuracy.
Remarkably, this formal faithfulness pertains to meter as well. Theoreticians of verse would maintain that an equimetrical translation between Russian and French is impossible, given that the two languages use different systems of versification: syllabotonic in Russian, syllabic in French. However, Tsvetaeva simply chose to ignore this fact. The polymetric twists and turns of the Russian original are replicated in the French translation. This can be seen, for example, in the description of the nobleman’s palace:

Впрочем— Богу ли соврём?—
Столб как столб и дом как дом:
С башнями, с банями:
Нашего барина. (v. 872–75)

By the way— why lie to God?—
A column and a house like any other:
With towers, with baths:
Of our nobleman.

The first two lines are written in four-foot trochees (a predominant meter in Mólodets) before the stanza unexpectedly switches to two-foot dactyls in lines 3 and 4. In French, the text shifts from trochees to amphibrachs if we read it “à la russe,” so to speak, by emphasizing the stressed syllables in accordance with the trochaic and dactylic meter and by counting the silent “e muet” as a full syllable (as is indeed the norm in French poetic scansion):

Pic sur pic et bloc sur bloc.
— A qui fillette ce roc
De marbre?
— Pardine!
A notre barine. (71)

Peak above peak and block above block.
— To whom, girl, [belongs] this rock
Of marble?
— Goodness!
To our nobleman.

Remarkably, the French translation retains not a single word of the original stanza aside from the closing “barin” (nobleman). Instead of the semantics, Tsvetaeva attempts to replicate the form of the Russian original as closely as possible. Aside from the metrical shift in mid-stanza, this includes the paired masculine and dactylic rhymes. Since, strictly speaking, no dactylic endings exist in French, the latter are replaced by feminine rhymes,
but the sonic structure of “Pardine-barine” nevertheless suggest a trisyllabic rhyme. The rhythm of the second line in Russian with its repetition of the monosyllabic words “stolb” (column) and “dom” (house) finds an exact equivalent in the first line of the French stanza, which repeats the words “pic” and “bloc.” Furthermore, the alliteration “bashniami—baniami—barina” is echoed by the repetition of the “ar”-sound in “marbre—Pardine—barine.”

As we can see, Tsvetaeva displays considerable ingenuity in replicating the formal characteristics of the Russian original in French. Of course, not everything can be preserved in translation. The different nature of the two languages makes it impossible to reproduce some key features of Mólodets. As already mentioned, the dactylic rhymes cannot really be replicated in French, given that all French words are accented either on the last or on the penultimate syllable (in the case of an ending on “e muet”). Some key grammatical elements of the Russian text are also impervious to translation. This includes the instrumental case, which can express, often simultaneously, the means of a performed action, a comparison, or a transformation. In her linguistic analysis of Tsvetaeva’s style, the Russian scholar Liudmila Zubova calls the syncretic use of the instrumental case the “grammatical dominant” of Mólodets.40 This technique is on display, for example, in the following series of free-floating nouns:

Шаром-жаром-
Жигом-граем . . .
Барин, барин, барин, барин! . . . (v. 1311–13)

Ball-fire-
Burn-croak . . .
Nobleman, nobleman, nobleman, nobleman! . . .

“Sharom” (simply translated as “ball” here) could mean “with a ball,” “as a ball,” “like a ball,” or “turning into a ball.” It is impossible to replicate this effect in French (or English). Tsvetaeva’s French version of this passage preserves neither the form nor content of the Russian original, but creates an entirely new text, in which the narrator utters a more explicit warning to the nobleman:

Heureux sont les bègues—ont temps
De p-p-prendre leur temps.

Heureux surtout les muets:
Un mot ne revient jamais.

Ne le sauras que trop tôt,
Vantard! nigaud de nigaud! (89)
Happy are the stammerers—they have the time
To t-t-take their time.

Happy above all the mute ones:
A word never comes back.

You will find out only too soon,
Boaster! Dummy of dummies!

The final chapter of the poem with its inserted liturgical quotes in Church Slavonic presents another unsolvable conundrum for a French translator. Tsvetaeva uses some archaic vocabulary in her rendering of these passages, such as “agnel” instead of “agneau” (lamb) as well as her nonstandard syntax discussed above, but the difference between the (low) folkloric and (high) Church Slavonic layers in the Russian text is lost in French. A possible solution might have been to render the liturgical quotes in Latin, but this would have created its own problems, given that Latin is less intelligible to a French reader that Church Slavonic is to a Russian. By the same token, Tsvetaeva made no attempt to preserve allusions to a specifically Russian religious context, such as when Marusia is denounced as “dvuperstnaia” (two-fingered), a reference to the way in which the Old Believers make the sign of the cross. Such passages are simply omitted in the French translation.

Overall, then, the French self-translation of Mólodets differs significantly from the Russian original. The literal meaning of the text can alter dramatically between the two versions. At the same time, however, Tsvetaeva manages to preserve the form and nature of the poem astonishingly well. Her personal, idiosyncratic style carries over from Russian into French. Anybody familiar with Tsvetaeva’s Russian poetry will find that Le Gars sounds very much like a poem by Tsvetaeva. In some passages, one could argue that the French version seems even more “Tsvetaevan” than the Russian original. Here, for example, is the scene describing Marusia’s brother calling for help in the middle of the night:

Спит двор, спит и дом,
Спит дым над бугром,
Спит пес, спит и гусь:
—Марусь, а Марусь! (v. 353–56)

The yard sleeps, and the house sleeps,
The smoke sleeps above the hill,
The dog sleeps, and the goose sleeps:
—Marusia, hey, Marusia!
Chapter Three

Nul bruit—tout dort.
Cour, four, coeur, corps.
Dors, dard, dors, fleur!
—Soeur! Soeur! Soeur! Soeur! (42)

No noise—everything sleeps.
Yard, oven, heart, body.
Sleep, sting, sleep, flower!
—Sister! Sister! Sister! Sister!

In the French version, the stanza becomes a sequence of phonically connected monosyllabic words, a signature feature of Tsvetaeva's poetic style. As will be shown below, “coeur,” “corps,” “dard,” “fleur,” and “soeur” create a network of semantic links with other key passages in Le Gars. The last line, with its fourfold repetition of the word “soeur,” resembles the “Barin, barin, barin, barin!” line quoted earlier. The French text reaches a level of intensity here that surpasses the parallel passage in the Russian original, elevating Tsvetaeva's plaintive wail to an all-consuming fever pitch.

SELF-TRANSLATION AS SELF-EXEGESIS

Molodets is not an “easy” text. Its idiosyncratic language and form create an impediment to smooth reading, and the action remains at times rather obscure. The French translation, by comparison, is somewhat more reader-friendly. Even though it is also written in a nonstandard, disruptive language, there are fewer outright neologisms and ungrammaticalities. In addition, Tsvetaeva includes some signposts that provide guidance to the reader. In the Russian text, it is often difficult to determine who the speaker is, as the text shifts abruptly between various voices, which can belong either to one of the fictional characters or to the narrator. In the French version, the speaker of an utterance is usually (though not always) indicated in the manner of a play. There are other ways in which the French text is more explicit and straightforward. For example, the first chapter features a dance scene in which various body parts (braids, breasts, cheeks) are described in the form of a riddle, but not named. In the French translation there is no guessing game, since the solution to the riddle is revealed from the start (“Oh les tresses,” “Oh les seins,” “Oh les joues,” 26–27). This observation can be generalized. The French version sometimes makes explicit what is unspoken or only hinted at in Russian. In that sense, the self-translation can also be used as an interpretive tool to arrive at a better understanding of the Russian original.
As far as the plot is concerned, the French version often provides more details and explanations, even though the translation is overall somewhat shorter than the original (2,146 lines in French vs. 2,227 in Russian). There are entire added passages in French that help to clarify the action. The crucial scene where Marusia discovers that her beloved is a vampire is adorned with dramatic detail in the French version:

A la vitre traîtresse
Son front perlant presse.

Et du haut de son perchoir
— Vierge! Vierge! Vais-je choir? —

Que vois-je? A moi, Vierge!
Un bière, trois cierges . . .

Le voilà, mon cher,
Le voilà mon fort,
Ha-gard, l’œil vert,
Qui croque un . . . (36)

Against the treacherous glass
She presses her forehead with beats of sweat.

And from the height of her perch
— Virgin! Virgin! Will I fall? —

What do I see? Virgin, help me!
A coffin, three candles . . .

Here he is, my beloved,
Here he is, my strong one,
Cra-zed, green-eyed,
Chomping on a . . .

The missing word suggested by the rhyme scheme is “mort” (dead person). In Russian, this entire scene is compressed into two laconic lines. The truncated word “upo-” has to be extended to “upokoinika” (the accusative case of “corpse”):

Стоит наш знакомец-то,
Грызет упо — (v. 249–50)

There stands our acquaintance,
Chomping on a co . . .
The scene where the vampire kills Marusia’s brother is also adorned with details that are missing in Russian:

Sur mon coeur—gros poids!
Sur mon cou—dix doigts!
Me suce! me boit!
C’en est fait de moi! (42)

On my heart—a heavy weight!
On my throat—ten fingers!
[He] sucks me! [he] drinks me!
I am done with!

This stanza, which is entirely absent in Russian, identifies the character as a “western European” vampire who kills his victims by drinking their blood (Slavic vampires eat dead bodies, as seen in the church scene quoted above).41

The romance between Marusia and the vampire is fleshed out more explicitly in the French version of the poem. After the scene at the church, Marusia runs home, where she is interrogated by her mother. In French (and only in French), the mother wants to know whether she loves the young man, to which Marusia answers with “De coeur!” (“With my whole heart!” 38). Later, the vampire implores Marusia to save herself by naming him, referring to himself as an “âme damnée / mais qui t’aimait” (“A cursed soul / but who loved you,” 47). In the Russian poem, the word “love” is never uttered between Marusia and the vampire.42 In her extratextual exegesis of the poem included in the article “Poet o kritike,” Tsvetaeva stressed the love between the two main protagonists, and she reinforces this point in her French self-translation. To make matters even clearer, the preface to the French translation begins with the words: “This is the story of a young human who preferred losing her family, herself, and her soul to losing her love” (129).

Efim Etkind has argued that Marusia’s sacrifice becomes more radical in the French translation: in French, she is ready not only to give up her life, but even her immortal soul for the sake of her İover.43 Such a reading is not incompatible with the Russian text either, though. When the vampire implores Marusia to save her soul, she replies “Na koi mne dusha?” (v. 589–90; “What do I need a soul for?”). A bit later she adds that “hell” is “paradise” as long she remains in the company of her beloved (v. 601–3). All of these passages are translated more or less literally into French. In addition, the French version contains a sentence describing Marusia as “une âme qui se damne” (“a soul condemning herself,” 54), and the vampire utters the warning “Ame perds et rien ne gagnes!” (“[You] are losing [your] soul and gaining
nothing!” 55). What we are seeing in the French translation is not so much an alteration and radicalization of the plot, as Etkind argues, as a clarification. Tsvetaeva sharpens the message of the poem with added details that can only be found in the French version.

The courtship between Marusia and the vampire 44 develops around four key scenes: their first dance, the marriage proposal, the consummation of the relationship, which leads to Marusia’s physical death, and their final reunion. In each case, the French translation adds some significant components. In Russian, the first dance is rendered in a striking series of alliterating verbs and nouns:

Прядает, прыщет,
Притопот, присвист.
Пышечка!— Пищи!
Пришепот, прищелк. (v. 102–5)

[He] jumps, gushes,
Stamping down, whistling.
Cutie!— Squeak!
Whisper, click.

In French, this becomes:

Feu qui saute, feu qui souffle,
Feu qui fauche, feu qui siffle.

LE GARS:  Feu— suis,
Faim— ai,
Feu— suis,
Cendres— serai! (29)

Fire that jumps, fire that blows,
Fire that mows, fire that whistles.

THE SWAIN: Fire— am,
Hungry— am,
Fire— am,
Ashes— will be!

The hissing sound, a sonic leitmotif of the vampire throughout the poem, is realized both in the Russian and French text. The Russian “pr”-alliteration is replaced by alternating “f” and “s” sounds in French, which underline the impression of hissing and whistling. At the same time, the French version
draws an explicit connection between the vampire and the element of fire, and it adds an explanatory monologue, which highlights both the fiery, predatory nature of the character and hints at his longing for self-annihilation.

At the end of the first chapter, the vampire proposes to Marusia with the following quatrain:

Сердь моя руса,
Спелая рожь—
Сердце, Маруся,
Замуж пойдешь? (v. 167–70)

My blond mid-heart,
Ripe rye—
Heart, Marusia,
Will you get married?

In the French version this becomes:

Maroussia, ma fleur,
Maroussia, mon fruit,
Maroussia, ma soeur,
Me veux-tu pour mari? (31)

Marusia, my flower,
Marusia, my fruit,
Marusia, my sister,
Do you want me as your husband?

The prevalent “s”-“m”-“r” sound pattern of the Russian text, a permutation of the consonants contained in Marusia’s name, becomes in French a flow of “m”-alliterations, with the final word, “mari” (husband), echoing the beginning of the word “Marusia.” In both the Russian and French texts, the vampire refers to his beloved with plant and agricultural imagery, but the French rhyming words carry a more significant semantic charge. “Fleur” anticipates Marusia’s later symbolic and literal transformation into a flower. “Fruit” repeats an earlier statement made by the vampire, who told Marusia “c’est toi le fruit” (“you are the fruit,” 30), creating an allusion to the forbidden fruit in Genesis 1:3 (in the Russian text, Marusia refers to herself as a “red fruit” [“alyi plod’] at the beginning of chapter 2, v. 176). “Soeur” (sister) hints at a “family resemblance” between Marusia and the vampire. The female heroine is herself endowed with qualities that make her an equal and willing partner of her male suitor. The word “soeur” is all the more surprising...
here since the expected rhyme with “fleur” could easily have been “coeur” (heart), which would have been an obvious solution for rendering the “serd’” and “serdtse” of the Russian original. The identical rhymes “coeur”-“fleur”-“soeur” (together with “peur” [fear]) form the structural backbone in the French version of the consummation scene, to which we turn next.

In the physical union with her lover, Marusia becomes the metaphorical “flower” announced by the “fleur”-rhyme in the French proposal scene. The image of a flower and an insect conveys the conflation of lovemaking with vampiric bloodsucking. The symbol of the sting combines the action of the insect (a bumblebee in Russian, a hornet in French) with phallic connotations, while at the same time evoking the proverbial “sting of death” evoked in 1 Corinthians 15:55:

— Час да наш,
Ад мой ал!
К самой чашечке
Припал.

— Конец твоим рудам!
Гудом, гудом, гудом!

— Конец твоим алым!
Жалом, жалом, жалом!

— Ай — жаль?
— Злей — жаль!
С днём пей!
Ай, шмель!

Во — весь
Свой — хмель
Пей, шмель!

Ай, шмель! (v. 685–700)

The hour is ours,
My hell is red!
To the very cup
He pressed himself.

— An end to your blood!
Buzzing, buzzing, buzzing!

— An end to your red!
With the sting, the sting, the sting!

95
— Ai!— does it hurt?
— Fiercer— sting!
Drink from the ground!
Ai, bumblebee!

In— all
Your— drunkenness
Drink, bumblebee!

Ai, bumblebee!

Droit au coeur
Dard très long.
Fille— fleur.
Gars— frelon.

Frère et soeur?
Non— et oui.
Dard et fleur,
Elle et lui.

— Hôtesse! Nourisse!
Suce, suce, suce!
— Ma fraîche! Ma grasse!
Glace, glace, glace.

— Te
fais-
je
mal?

— Dieu
te
fit tel.

— Te
fais-
je peur?

— Dieu
me
fit
fleur (57– 58)

Straight into the heart
Very long sting.
Girl – flower.
Guy – hornet.
Brother and sister?
No – and yes.
Sting and flower,
She and he.

— Hostess! Nurse!⁴⁶
Suck, suck, suck.
— My fresh one! My fat one!
Ice, ice, ice.

— Do
I
hurt
you?

— God
made
you so.

— Do
I scare
you?

— God
made
me
a flower

The Russian and the French texts emphasize different semantic connotations. While the Russian version foregrounds the metaphor of the cup and of drinking, the French version focuses on the sting image. The rhymes and monosyllabic words in French create a clear link with the proposal scene, as well as with Marusia’s brother’s earlier cry for help (“Dors, dard, dors, fleur! / —Soeur! Soeur! Soeur! Soeur!”). At the same time, the French version contains information that is unavailable in the Russian original. We are again reminded that Marusia and the vampire are potentially related to each other, as the question of whether they are brother and sister is first denied and then affirmed. Nothing of the sort ever happens in the Russian text. Moreover, in a passage arranged in the manner of a Russian modernist stolbik, which breaks up the verse line into a vertical column of monosyllabic words,⁴⁷ Marusia affirms that the vampire’s actions and her relationship with him are God’s will. A similar statement of metaphysical justification is lacking in the Russian text.

The poem ends with the final reunion of the two protagonists at the church service and their flight up into the sky. This scene is also rendered differently in Russian and French:
Chapter Three

Та — ввысь,
Тот — вблизь:
Свились,
Взвились:
Зной — в зной,
Хлынь — хлынь!
До — мой
В огнь синь. (v. 2220–27)

She — up,
He — close:
Winding together,
Soaring up:
Heat — in heat,
Surge — surge!
Ho-me
Into the blue fire.

Un coeur
Un corps
Accord
Essor
Unis
Étreints
Au ciel
Sans fin. (125)

A heart
A body
Accord
Rise
United
In hugs
To the sky [or heaven]
Without end.

The French translation reproduces the rhythmic structure of the Russian original with two syllables per line, but it is written in a more transparent language than the Russian text, which contains neologisms ("khlyn’", derived from the verb "khlynut’" [to surge]) and archaisms (the monosyllabic "ogn’")
instead of the common “ogon’” [fire], and “sin’” instead of “sinii” [blue]). The penultimate line in Russian features another typical device of Tsvetaeva’s poetics. The word “domoi” (home) is broken down with a dash into individual syllables, which each assume a semantic significance of their own. Rewritten as “do-moi,” the word becomes a combination of the preposition “do” (toward) with the possessive pronoun “moi” (mine). Tsvetaeva uses the same technique a few lines earlier in the French text, where the vampire addresses Marusia as “Ma-rie!” combining the possessive pronoun “ma” with the imperative “rie!” (laugh!).

Overall, the French ending makes a different impression than the original Russian conclusion. Rather than with a dramatic movement into the fire, the poem ends with an almost placid statement of harmony and unity. Significantly, the word “ciel” has a double meaning, denoting both “sky” and “heaven.” The pairing of “coeur” and “corps” harkens back to an earlier utterance made by Marusia at the beginning of chapter 2. When her mother asks her: “Le sais-tu d’où il sort?” (“Do you know where he comes from?”), she responds with “Un seul coeur, un seul corps!” (“A single heart, a single body!”) 33). The corresponding Russian dialogue is “A skazal tebe iz ch’ikh?” — “Odno serdte — na dvoikh!” (v. 180–81; “And did he tell you from whose [family]?” — “One heart — for two!”). Tsvetaeva takes advantage of the similar sound of the words “coeur” and “corps,” which form a phonemic minimal pair in French, to emphasize the unity between her two principal characters and to create linkages between individual passages in the poem that do not exist in Russian. The harmonious “happy ending,” which seems more evident in the French than in the Russian version, is also supported by extratextual comments that Tsvetaeva made about her poem. In the same letter to Boris Pasternak where she identified Marusia as her alter ego, Tsvetaeva wrote: “I breathed a sigh of relief when the poem was done, happy for Marusya—for myself. What are they going to do in fire-blue? Fly around in it forever? Nothing satanic.” 48

Tsvetaeva took care to preserve in her translation a crucial formal feature of her poem: both in Russian and in French, the text begins and ends with the same word. In Russian, the first line of the poem is “Sin’ da sgin’— krai sela” (“Blue, and be gone—edge of the village”). In French, the poem opens with the lines “Fin de terre, / Fin de ciel, / Fin de village” (“Edge [or ‘end’] of the earth / edge of the sky / edge of the village”). “Sin’” and “fin” reoccur as the final words in the Russian and French version, respectively. Not only do the two words play the same structural role in the text, they even have a similar phonetic shape. The French self-translation helps to elucidate the meaning of “sin’” in the original text. It becomes evident that the color blue denotes the infinity from which the story emerges and into which it flows back, ending in the romantic eternal flight that Tsvetaeva described in her letter to Pasternak.
Chapter Three

The French version not only helps to clarify the plot of the poem, it also reinforces the implicit symbolic links built into the Russian text. In her analysis of *Molodets*, the German scholar Christiane Hauschild has noted the prominent role of religious imagery, in particular the blasphemous connection between the consummation scene and the ritual of Holy Communion. As she points out, Marusia’s sexual encounter with the vampire, who ends up killing her by drinking her blood, draws an implicit parallel with the Eucharist. In Tsvetaeva’s poem the scene turns into a literal, cannibalistic consumption of blood, in which Marusia offers herself to the vampire as the sacramental “cup.”

Earlier in the text, while he is interrogating Marusia, the vampire refers to his activity of eating corpses in the church as a “tainoe delo” (“secret act,” v. 637), echoing the Orthodox terminology for the Eucharist, “tainodeistvie.” In the French translation of this passage, this connection is made much more explicit by mentioning bread and wine:

| LE GARS: |
| — Fille, pèse bien: |
| Le sais-tu quel pain |
| (Fais-le bien, ton choix) |
| Mange, quel vin bois? (56) |

| THE SWAIN: |
| Girl, ponder it well: |
| Do you know what bread |
| (Make your choice well) |
| [I] eat, what wine [I] drink? |

The French version is also more explicit with regard to color symbolism. As the Russian scholar N. M. Gerasimova has shown, the dichotomy between red and white forms the dominant color contrast in the poem. In many instances this effect is merely implied in the Russian text, whereas in the French translation it becomes affirmatively marked with the adjectives “rouge” (red) and “blanc” (white). Thus, the lines “Vkrug berezniki—koster” (“Around the birch tree—a bonfire,” v. 98) and “Vkrug chasovenki—pozhar!” (“Around the chapel—a conflagration!” v. 101) become “Brasier rouge, bouleau blanc” (“red blaze, white birch”) and “Brasier rouge, clocher blanc” (“red blaze, white steeple,” 28). The word “rouge” dominates in the French version from the very beginning. Marusia is introduced with the line “Ses joues sont rouges, sa bouche est rouge” (“Her cheeks are red, her mouth is red,” 25). The corresponding Russian line “Doch’ Marusia rumianista” (“The daughter Marusia is ruddy,” v. 8) displays a more subdued and less sensual redness, while at the same time creating a paronomastic pun with
the name Marusia. The double mentioning of the adjective “rouge” in the French version creates a strong link between Marusia and the vampire, who is introduced as a “Gars en chemise rouge,” “Chemise rouge comme feu” (“A young man in a red shirt,” “A red shirt like fire,” 26).

The color red appears in various guises in the Russian text. This includes the adjectives “rumianyi” (ruddy) and “alyi” (crimson) aside from the standard “krasnyi” (red). The latter word can also mean “beautiful” in Russian folk language. Tsvetaeva consciously plays with this double meaning. In calling Marusia a “krasnaia devitsa” she is not simply using a folkloric cliché for “beautiful girl,” but is also pointing to the inherent “redness” that links her to her male partner. In French this same effect is impossible to achieve, of course. More often than not, when facing the choice of translating “krasnyi” with either “beautiful” or “red,” Tsvetaeva chose the latter option. For example, the vampire’s boast that he trades in “krasnym tovarom” (“precious merchandise,” v. 161) becomes in French “C’est du rouge que je vends” (31), suggesting that he is trading in red wine. In this sense, the French version creates an anticipation of the later Eucharistic symbolism. The word “sang” (blood) also occurs more frequently in the French version than in the original Russian. At the dance, the vampire addresses Marusia with the words “Tvoi malinovyi naliv— / Sudi, devka, podelis!” (“Your raspberry sap— / lend, girl, share!” v. 124–25). In French this becomes a much more literal “En est-tu riche de sang rouge! / Cède-m’en à ton amoureux!” (“You are rich in red blood! Give [some of] it to me, your beloved!”). Overall, “rouge” is the most frequently used adjective in the French text. This coloration is reflected in Tsvetaeva’s statement at the end of her preface to the French translation: “Et voici, enfin, la Russie, rouge d’un autre rouge que celui de ses drapeaux d’aujourd’hui” (“And here, finally, is Russia, red from a different red than the one of her present-day banners,” 130).

**LE GARS AS METATEXT**

Until now, we have focused mainly on the ways in which the French translation of *Mólodets* replicates or reinforces certain key aspects of the Russian original despite dramatic deviations in wording and imagery. Nevertheless, it goes without saying that *Le Gars* is not identical with its source text (no translation is). In writing her poem anew seven years after its original composition, Tsvetaeva could not help becoming aware of how she herself, and therefore also her relation to the original text, had changed over time. Christiane Hauschild has argued that *Mólodets* contains a metatextual dimension, inasmuch as the title word refers both to the (nameless) male protagonist of the story and to the fairy-tale poem itself. If the figure of Marusia is a
self-portrait of Tsvetaeva, her obsessive relationship with the male protagonist mirrors the author’s attitude to her own poetic work. This metatextual awareness increased in the process of self-translation, given that the author-translator was now facing a text that was both intimately familiar and yet “other.” If Le Gars differs in a significant way from the original Môlodets, it is perhaps precisely in this added self-awareness and self-reflection.

A major shift between the Russian and French incarnations of the poem concerns the way in which the story is framed. Both versions are divided into two parts with five chapters each, but the individual chapter headings vary substantially. While the two principal parts of the poem have no title in Russian, they are called “La Danseuse” (“The Dancer”) and “La Dormeuse” (“The Sleeper”) in French. We might consider this as yet another example of the more explicit and “reader-friendly” nature of the French version, which provides signposts that are absent in the Russian original. However, it is also worth emphasizing that these added titles, using the feminine form, foreground Marusia as the central character of the story. In doing so, the two titles create a contrast to what seems to be implied by the poem’s principal title, Môlodets, which emphasizes the male hero.

An analysis of the chapter headings reveals a similar shift away from “male dominance.” In the Russian original, the female protagonist is banished from all the titles. As Christiane Hauschild has noted, this creates an inherent contradiction between the chapter headings, which foreground the male character as the main hero, and the fact that the story is presented from the point of view of the female protagonist. The title of the opening chapter, “Môlodets,” reinforces this effect by simply repeating the title of the poem. In the French version, the contradiction disappears, or is at least significantly attenuated. While the main title, Le Gars, still highlights the male protagonist, the chapter titles correct this impression. In Russian, they refer mainly to the three male characters (the vampire, the nobleman, and the son) and to spatial parameters denoting a liminal experience (ladder, gate, and threshold). In French, the female protagonist is named in three of the titles (“Soeur et frère,” “Mère et fille,” “L’Épousée”). In the latter case, she replaces the son, who provided the chapter heading in the Russian version. The male protagonist also drops from the title of the first chapter. In short, while the chapter titles of the Russian version omit any mention of the female heroine, the French titles turn her into a central focus of attention, emphasizing her two main hypostases as “dancer” and “sleeper” and embedding her into a network of familial relations as “sister,” “daughter,” and “spouse.”

It appears that Tsvetaeva, while reworking her poem in French, became more attentive to issues of gender. The figure of Marusia not only serves as a self-portrait, but gains additional weight as a specifically female character. A telling detail in the French version reinforces this impression. The nobleman,
after discovering that the red flower that he brought to his palace has turned into a woman, engages in a protracted physical struggle with her to prevent her from assuming her previous shape as a flower. In the French text, we find the following passage (which has no equivalent in Russian):

Combattante
Surhumaine!
En démente
Se démène.

Amazon?
Ballerine?
En démon
Le domine. (80)

Superhuman
Fighter!
Madly
Struggles.

Amazon?
Ballerina?
As a demon
She dominates him.

Tsvetaeva had always been fascinated by female fighters. As Simon Karlinsky points out in his biography, commenting on Tsvetaeva’s poetry written at age seventeen and eighteen, “the most attractive role of all for Tsvetaeva, then and later, was that of an Amazon, a role she had in her grasp and voluntarily relinquished.” The word “Amazon,” introduced with a question mark as a possible hypostasis of the female protagonist, was to resurface in Tsvetaeva’s 1933 essay on lesbian love written in French, “Lettre à l’Amazon.” Tsvetaeva argues there that lesbian love, as beautiful and rewarding as it may be, is ultimately doomed because of the more powerful maternal instinct (which was also the reason, according to Karlinsky, why Tsvetaeva relinquished her own role as an Amazon). In that sense, the plot of Mólođets offers a scenario of compensatory wish fulfillment. Marusia abandons her son and husband in pursuit of her passion, something that Tsvetaeva herself, despite numerous affairs, never was able or willing to do. The word “Amazon,” inserted into the French text, but missing in Russian, provides a hint of what might have been. Other signposts in the French translation mark the struggle between Marusia and the nobleman as a manifestation of a more generalized gender conflict:
Chapter Three

Homme veut.
Femme hait:
Gagne – perd. (81)

Man wants.
Woman hates:
Gains – loses.

This stark, almost schematic statement, which presents the conflicting aspirations of the two genders as a sort of zero-sum game, has no equivalent anywhere in the Russian text.

Aside from the author’s becoming more self-conscious as a woman, the reworking of the poem in French also seems to have made Tsvetaeva more aware of her Russian identity. Interestingly, the French version contains numerous allusions to Russia that are absent in the Russian original. The vampire refers to “saintly Russia” (47), he tells Marusia that she should be buried “a hundred versts from the temple . . . in the vast land, the Russian land” (60), snow is called “Russia’s manna” (68), Marusia has “Russian braids” (76), the nobleman’s valet asks him reproachfully “Are you Russian?” (92), the nobleman’s guests abuse him with “Russian curses” (96), and the nobleman boasts about his spouse that “[she is] mine—Russian” (105). In addition, there are other clichéd “Russian” elements that exist only in the French text: Marusia’s mother orders “a liter of eau de vie” (i.e., vodka) for the brother’s funeral (43), the wind is blowing “in the steppe” (46), Marusia’s grave is haunted by wolves (60), and midnight is personified as a “tsarina” (73 and 74).

A possible explanation for these additions may be that Tsvetaeva, in transplanting the poem from a Russian to a French linguistic medium, was trying to compensate for the loss in “Russianness” by asserting it discursively. As Etkind has noted, the language of the Russian version is intimately rooted in Russian folklore, whereas the French version displays more of a “neutral” folkloric style that cannot be located in a specific national tradition. If Tsvetaeva wanted to signal to her French readers the “Russian” nature of her poem, she had to do it by other means. Interestingly, as Anna Lushenkova Foscolo has observed, the Ukrainian word “khata” (hut), a non-Russian element in the original Russian text, becomes a Russian “izba” in the French translation, thus preserving the foreignness of the word but recasting it in a Russian key. In addition, it is important to note that the heroine herself is intimately connected to a personification of Russia. The very name “Marusia” contains the root “Rus’.” That this phonic similarity is no accident becomes clear in the nobleman’s exclamation “Moia Rus’-to!” (“Russia is mine!” v. 1983) when he is on his way to church. In uttering these words, the nobleman unwittingly comes close to pronouncing Marusia’s name, which is unknown.
to him. 58 The name “Marusia” also contains the hair color “rusyi” (dark blond). This connection becomes evident when the vampire addresses her in the proposal scene as “Serd’ moi rusa” (rhyming with “Serdts, Marusia”).

These connotations work somewhat differently in French. The name “Maroussia” can be linked with the color “rousse” (red-haired) as well as with “russe” (Russian), a similarity exploited in the tongue-twisting juxtaposition “rousses russes tresses” (“red Russian braids,” 76). To be sure, in spite of the phonic similarity, “roux/rousse” is not the same color as “rusyi” (dark blond). One could argue that the French “roux” works even better than the Russian “rusyi” in the color symbolism of the poem, since it associates the female character more explicitly with the theme of “redness.” If Tsvetaeva persisted in seeing the female heroine of her poem as a self-portrait, the “Maroussia” of the French version gains additional poignancy as a rebellious “redhead” and as a “Russian” living in an alien environment, as Tsvetaeva herself did in her French exile.

Finally, coming back to the metatextual dimension, the French version contains some clues that underline a deeper layer of meaning in the poem: Marusia’s (and Tsvetaeva’s) “obsession” is ultimately about poetic creation, with the vampire assuming the gender-bending role of a male muse to a female poet. 59 As Sibelan Forrester has pointed out, “the plot lets [Tsvetaeva] work out her own concern with the poet’s devotion to a cause above and beyond a stereotypical female fate.” 60 As frequently happens in the process of self-translation, the rewriting of the text takes on features of a self-commentary. The most extensive part of the Russian original omitted from the French version is an episode in the final chapter, where the nobleman engages in inquiries about the owner of the land and buildings that they pass on the way to church. In the French text, the sixty-six lines of this passage are replaced by just three:

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Choses tardent,
Art abrège:
Neige – barbe – barbe – neige . . . (117)
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Things are getting late,
Art abridges:
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Read as a metacommentary on Tsvetaeva’s own activity as self-translator, these words indicate that the retardation of the plot brought about by the original Russian episode now seems superfluous to her. She therefore takes the liberty to “abridge” the text in her capacity as the “artist” behind it, compressing the whole omitted episode into a minimalist, repetitious line.
An even more obvious intrusion of the author-translator into the text occurs in the description of the nobleman's palace at the beginning of chapter 2 of part 2:

Qu’est-ce que ce monument
Porté par douze géants?
Barbaresque, surhumain,
Déluge marmoréen?

Rien qu’à le dire si haut
Chevilles me font défaut.
Malaise des cîmes
(Connu à qui rime). (71)

What is this monument
Carried by twelve giants?
Barbarian, superhuman,
Deluge of marble?

Just by naming it so high
My ankles give in.
Dizzy spell of the mountaintops
(Known to those who rhyme).

Through her French translation, Tsvetaeva speaks here as a poet to fellow poets. Those “who rhyme” will be able to connect to the feeling of vertigo induced by her poetic creation. Significantly, no comparable wording exists in the Russian original. The feeling described here is entirely an effect of self-translation: it expresses the dizziness caused by the reencounter with one’s own “monument” and the daunting task of having to write it again, anew, in a different language.

TSVETAeva—a French Poet Manqué?

There is evidence that French became an increasingly dominant language for Tsvetaeva in the final decade of her life. Her notebooks from 1932–33 are almost entirely written in French. Aside from the self-translation of Mólodets, she also experimented with writing poetry directly in French. Her notebooks contain the drafts of three French poems, which were composed around 1927, that is, two years before she translated Mólodets. Written in a very different, much “smoother” style than Le Gars, these poems betray the influence of French symbolism in their attempt to create an atmosphere
of refined musicality. They also show, incidentally, that Tsvetaeva was well acquainted with the technique of French syllabic versification.\(^63\) The abundance of variants and the drawing up of columns with possible rhyme words testify to a serious effort, but Tsvetaeva did not produce a final version or make any effort to have these poems published.

If writing poetry directly in French remained a marginal activity, translating poetry into French took on a much greater significance during the final years of Tsvetaeva’s life. In June 1936 she began to translate the poems of Pushkin, hoping that the upcoming centennial of his death in 1937 would provide her with opportunities for publishing her translations.\(^64\) Aside from the pleasure of re-creating some of her favorite Russian poems in French, Tsvetaeva was also motivated by the desire to finally give the French public the “right” kind of translation of the Russian national poet. Pushkin had been translated into French before, but mainly into prose and free verse. By contrast, as Tsvetaeva asserted in a letter to Iurii Ivask, her version was written “in verses, of course, and correct verses” (“stikhami, konechno, i pravil’nymi stikhami”).\(^65\) As with \textit{Le Gars}, however, her efforts to publish her translations of Pushkin met with little success. Only three of them appeared during her lifetime.\(^66\) The rest were published decades after her death. Thus far, a total of eleven poems by Pushkin in Tsvetaeva’s translation have appeared in print.\(^67\)

Tsvetaeva’s translations of Lermontov all date from the final period of her life after her return to the Soviet Union in 1939. As with Pushkin, they were originally prompted by upcoming anniversaries. In August 1939, the Soviet French-language journal \textit{Revue de Moscou} commissioned three translations on the occasion of Lermontov’s 125th birthday in October. Two of them did appear in the October issue of that year, but without any credit given to Tsvetaeva as the translator. In April 1941, the year of the centennial of Lermontov’s death (and the year of Tsvetaeva’s own death), the journal \textit{Internatsional’naia literatura} approached Tsvetaeva with a request for additional French translations of Lermontov. She did send them ten poems, of which the editors selected three, but publication was halted because of the German invasion of the Soviet Union. Like her other French-language poems, Tsvetaeva’s Lermontov translations languished for decades in the Russian State Literature Archive. An incomplete version of ten poems by Lermontov in Tsvetaeva’s translation appeared in France in 1986.\(^68\) A complete bilingual edition, containing twelve poems as well as a facsimile reproduction of Tsvetaeva’s drafts, came out in Moscow in 2014.\(^69\)

Tsvetaeva’s translations of Pushkin and Lermontov are more “faithful” than her self-translation of \textit{Mólodets}. There are no large-scale deviations from the original such as added or left-out stanzas. At the same time, Tsvetaeva does take semantic liberties in an effort to preserve formal and
structural features. This includes not only the rhyme scheme, but also, as in Mólodets, an attempt to reproduce the Russian meter within the system of syllabic French verse.70 As far as the selection of poems is concerned, Tsvetaeva clearly gravitated toward texts that she identified with on a personal level. The result is a remarkable fusion of Pushkin’s and Lermontov’s poetics with her own. These are not “imitations” in the manner of Robert Lowell’s free English renditions of Mandelstam or Pasternak. While Lowell was unscrupulous in transforming and appropriating the poets that he translated, Tsvetaeva respected the integrity of Pushkin and Lermontov, but she made them resonate with her own poetic voice.71

Many of the poems by Pushkin that Tsvetaeva selected for translation concern the theme of the poet, his art, and his fate. With Lermontov, whom she translated after her return to the Soviet Union, the predominant focus of the selection is a premonition of death. Clearly, Tsvetaeva understood this somber theme as a comment on her own situation. This can be seen in her rendition of Lermontov’s famous 1841 poem “Vykhozhu odin ia na dorogu” (“Lonely I walk out unto the road”). Here is the third stanza in Lermontov’s original and in Tsvetaeva’s translation:

Уж не жду от жизни ничего я,
И не жаль мне прошлого ничуть;
Я ищу свободы и покоя!
Я б хотел забыться и заснуть!

I am not expecting anything anymore from life,
And I don’t regret the past in any way;
I seek freedom and rest!
I would like to forget myself and fall asleep!

Dans ce rude sein plus rien ne vibre,
Rien — ni avenir, ni souvenir.
Je voudrais finir tranquille et libre, —
Ah! m’évanouir — mourir — dormir!72

In this rough breast nothing vibrates anymore,
Nothing — neither future, nor memory.
I would like to finish quiet and free—
Ah! to faint — to die — to sleep!

As is frequently the case with Tsvetaeva, the translation takes the content of the original to a more extreme level while trying to preserve or amplify its aesthetic qualities. In the present example, we can point to the sono-
rous richness of the assonances “rude sein plus rien” and the profuse internal rhymes (avenir, souvenir, m’évanourir, mourir, dormir). At the same time, the idea of impending death emerges more clearly and categorically in French. The verb “to die” (“mourir”) is directly named in the fourth line, and is anticipated with “finish” (“finir”) in line 3. “To faint” (“m’évanourir”) seems more ominous than the peaceful falling asleep evoked in Lermontov’s poem. Rather than having no more expectations and no regrets, the speaker in Tsvetaeva’s version is already internally dead, with no thoughts of the future and no memory of the past. This “nihilist” quality is expressed in the prominently repeated word “nothing” (“rien”).

In the notebook where she copied Lermontov’s poem together with the draft of the French translation, Tsvetaeva underlined the words “svo - body” and “pokoia” (“freedom” and “rest”) and wrote in the margins “NB! Ia!” (“Nota bene: I!”). Aside from this gloss, the autobiographical significance of the poem also becomes visible in Tsvetaeva’s lexical choices. The word “sein” (breast), while theoretically applicable to both genders, usually refers to the female anatomy. “Ce rude sein,” then, could point to Tsvetaeva’s own aging body (the word “sein” is also repeated in the following stanza). Furthermore, the adjectives “tranquille” and “libre” are not marked for gender, which makes the speaker of the stanza potentially feminine. Lermontov’s poem was written not long before the poet’s death in 1841. In translating this text a hundred years later, shortly before her own suicide on August 31, 1941, Tsvetaeva not only engaged in a dialogue with a beloved poetic predecessor, she also made a poignant statement about herself.

Given her evident abilities in writing French verse, why did Tsvetaeva not compose more poems in French (or in German, for that matter, which she considered a language more suitable for poetry than even her native Russian)? In her study of bilingual Russian writers of the First Emigration, Elizabeth Beaujour calls Tsvetaeva a “particularly interesting case: a poet who could have become a real bilingual—perhaps even a trilingual—writer, but who ultimately rejected bilingual practice although she did not believe that poetry was ‘national.’” Beaujour adds that “Tsvetaeva’s resistance to writing in French was ferocious and emotional.” This is certainly an overstatement. Tsvetaeva’s decision to self-translate Mólođets into French may initially have been prompted by purely external and accidental circumstances rather than a desire to write in French, but she did get “carried away” while working on the project. Her French version of Mólođets, as well as her subsequent translations of Pushkin and Lermontov, show not only an unquestionable ability to write French poetry, but also an emotional engagement. Beaujour argues that the typical trajectory of bilingual writers usually goes through several stages, beginning with self-translation, and leading via a “major translation project” from the first into the second language (Nabokov’s English version
Chapter Three

of *Eugene Onegin* being a prominent example) and then to balanced bilingual writing. If we apply this scheme to Tsvetaeva’s career, her translations of Pushkin’s and Lermontov’s poetry could be seen as fulfilling the function of the “major translation project” following the initial self-translation. What is missing, evidently, is the subsequent unfolding of a mature bilingual oeuvre.

According to Beaujour, what ultimately made Tsvetaeva cling to her Russian *Muttersprache* was her maternal instinct. While she may not have regarded Russian as her “mother tongue” in the spiritual sense of the word, “it was the language in which she was a mother; and, of all Tsvetaeva’s passions, none was stronger than the maternal one.” In order to prevent her son from growing up as a Frenchman, she agreed to return with him to the motherland—with fatal consequences for all involved. Of course, with Tsvetaeva’s life tragically cut short, we do not know what might have been. It is certainly remarkable that, even after her return to a Russian-speaking environment, Tsvetaeva still expended considerable efforts to translate Russian poetry into French. Michael Makin has even speculated that Tsvetaeva “was becoming increasingly unhappy with Russian as a poetic medium” and that her French oeuvre “expresses her alienation from her native tongue”—an alienation that may hardly have been remedied by moving from her French exile to Stalin’s Russia.

To characterize Tsvetaeva’s French writings as a “failure,” because she was allegedly unable to realize her creative designs outside her native tongue, strikes me as misguided. Still, how can we explain Tsvetaeva’s utter lack of success with the French reading public? Part of the problem was certainly her inability or unwillingness to fit into any recognizable pattern or tradition. To an audience accustomed to free verse and prose poetry, rhymed and metrical translations appeared freakish and artificial. Furthermore, a reader attuned to syllabic verse cannot be expected to appreciate the subtleties of syllabotonic prosody, which may come across as monotonous to a French ear. The eminent émigré critic Vladimir Weidle, who had a solid understanding of both Russian and French versification, described his reaction to Tsvetaeva’s translations of Pushkin as follows: “Tsvetaeva unwittingly exchanged French with Russian metrics. For a Russian ear these translations are superb, but as soon as I mentally switched to the French system, I noticed myself that for the French they will not sound good.” Significantly, the few positive appreciations of Tsvetaeva’s French translations all have come from Russian native speakers (or, in the case of Jean-Claude Lanne, a French Slavist with a good command of Russian). The British-born scholar Robin Kemball, who undertook a detailed metrical analysis of Tsvetaeva’s translations of Pushkin, demurred on the question of their quality, which he felt could be judged adequately only by a French native speaker (even
though Kemball was a professor at the University of Lausanne and had an impeccable oral and written command of French).

Perhaps the secret for appreciating Tsvetaeva's French translations of Pushkin and Lermontov and her self-translation of Mólodets is that one has to read them together with the Russian originals. In other words, contrary to Kemball's opinion, the ideal reader and judge of Tsvetaeva's translations may not necessarily be a French native speaker, but someone familiar with both versions of the text. Whether such a person is a native speaker of French or Russian (or yet a third language) is less important than the ability to read and understand both linguistic incarnations of the poem. Only a bilingual receptor can fully appreciate Tsvetaeva's achievement. Perhaps it was this “stereoscopic” effect created by parallel texts in two different languages that made Tsvetaeva a fertile translator and self-translator, but impeded her writing of self-standing poetry in French. As we have seen, Tsvetaeva defined the essence of poetry as translation. It is not surprising, then, that she realized her ideal of transnational and translingual poetry first and foremost as a self-translator.

It is evident that Tsvetaeva had no intention of becoming a “French poet” (she explicitly rejected such mononational labels, as we have seen). Rather, her double self-portrait as Marusia/Maroussia in Russian and French illustrates a translingual metamorphosis evoked symbolically in the fairy-tale heroine's shape-shifting between woman and flower. By stepping out of her native idiom, Tsvetaeva came closer to her proclaimed ideal of being a universal poet outside the confines of a nationally or monolingually defined literature. At the same time, by retaining some key elements of Russian prosody such as syllabotonic verse and a discursively stated “Russianness,” her French self-translation paradoxically reasserted her Russian roots. Le Gars thus exists in a hybrid transnational domain that cannot be associated unequivocally with either Russian or French poetry.

Whether an audience for such writing exists in the real world is a different question, of course. There is certainly something utopian about Tsvetaeva's maximalist bio-aesthetic agenda propelling her to crash through the boundaries of national belonging in the same way that she broke through all sexual, political, linguistic, and even grammatical barriers. Tsvetaeva's lack of recognition as a French-language poet may to a significant degree be explainable by the fact that she created for herself an ideal readership so attenuated as to be “not of this world.”