

Rhyme and Life

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Translated by Gabriella Bedetti

Poetry turns everything into life. It is that form of life that turns everything into language. It does not come to us unless language itself has become a form of life. That is why it is so unquiet. For it does not cease to work on us. To be the dream of which we are the sleep. A listening, an awakening that passes through us, the rhythm that knows us and that we do not know. It is the organization in language of what has always been said to escape language: life, the movement no word is supposed to be able to say. And in effect words do not say it. That is why poetry is a meaning of time more than the meaning of words. Even when its course is ample, it is contained in what passes from us through words. It does not have the time of glaciers and ferns. It tells about a time of life. Through everything that it names. Even its haste transforms. Since it is a listening that compels a listening.

But traditionally poetry suffers from the effect of the separation between the order of language and the order or disorder of life. It is that the order in which the thought of language is found is an order against chaos. The fabulous is not found in chaos. It is found in order. A mythic thought about language is charged with the maintaining of order. Thus there is an impassable barrier between poetry in terms of life and language in terms of the forms of poetry. Its meters and its rhymes. This is what we have to think about. Through and for poetry, language, life. Against sentimental poetizations of poetry and of life. As much as against formalizations.

If forms of language have a meaning for life, poetry shows and hides this at the same time. That poetry should have passed, so frequently that one has seen a universal principle in it—although incorrectly, only recently has one come to know this—through a metrics, an ordinance, an ordination of language, this is not what could bring meters and rhymes nearer to the meaning of life. Since this principle did not even bring them nearer the meaning of words. Was not in itself a principle of meaning. To the original separation between language and life was added the separation between the reason for language and the formalization of poetry. Doubly cutting poetry, from language and from life. Locking poetry in the forms of poetry, doubly deprived of meaning. The paradox of the procedure is that the most formalist is what appears to be the least formalist. This is meaning. After having beaten measure out with their feet, poets counted on their fingers. And the rhyming dictionaries are drawers of syllables comparable to those one uses to play with the letters of words.

A deep-rooted notion, which passes for the nature of things, opposes language to life, like the abstract generic to the concrete particular, words—which do not bark and which one does not eat—to things and to the living. In that way, language is placed in a schema that opposes life to death. On the side of death. And if it is not of death, it is of the dead. A sort of tomb, cenotaph, memorial. Making the proof through language itself: the old Greek pun *sôma*—*sêma*. It showed a physical equivalence between the body, *sôma*, and the sign, *sêma*, at the same time, tomb. The sarcophagus of voice. Which was in life. This entire mortuary anthropology of language continues to be called together to mortally oppose the letter—the one which kills or which is dead—to the spirit that is living. This radical cut not only passes between language and life but also exists at the interior of language. The convention of rhymes redoubles the conventionalism of the sign—this deputy of things. What separates the sign and life separates rhyme and reason. In columns of two line up the rational and the irrational, the discontinuous and the continuous, prose and poetry. The effects in the chain of dualism.

But poetry is a fault in the sign. The sign does everything to hide it, to ignore it. It does not cease to reappear. For it belongs, like life, to the irrational continuous. It is in the words, but it is not the words. What one can hear through the significance, the way of signifying is confused

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neither with meaning nor with signification. The side of the body and of life, which bursts out elementarily. Hence the internal cut of sign, which is constitutive of it, between a signifier and a signified, a cut that creates the unlimited force of the sign and the empire of the signified, its transcendence of languages, which is that of reason, and with which philosophy is bound up, accomplice, beneficiary—this break situates at the same time the possibility of poetry and its incomprehension. For the sign. Its famous relegation. Politics against rhyme.

Poetry is intolerable to the sign, to its reason, which is technical reason and reason of the state. Which is why it lives in the ghetto of the signifier. Being of the body that arrives at the sign, of life that makes it lose meaning. According to the sociology of the sign, the effect of whose theory is the dualism of the individual and the social, poetry is of the private that blows up the model of sign. Overwhelms it as the subject overwhelms the individual. Makes the state of decomposition appear where the sociology and the politics of the sign find themselves, as much as its theory of language. No, the signs [*signes*] do not understand the swans [*cygnes*]. All the attempts at recuperation to which one attends will not prevent the sign from being overwhelmed by life.

Poetry makes this critique of the sign which puts language back into life. The weakest and most hunted, whose compensatory adulation is but the corollary of misreading, poetry turns this misreading on traditional theory, which is that of language as a whole. Since this misreading is that of the empirical. And holds on to the double exclusion that creates the internal solidarity of the sign: that of poetry outside of ordinary language, that of language outside of life, also ordinary.

If Monsieur Jourdain's master of philosophy reminds us that one does not speak in rhymes, in order to answer him it is necessary to accept certain detours. Because the apparently simple and natural oppositions are precisely nothing more here than the effects of theory.

Rhyme and metrics, associated with poetry, take hold—if one seeks to understand the one through the other—through poetry. Not poetry through rhyme and metrics. Because this last hold is what constitutes traditional theory, where the reciprocal heterogeneity of form and meaning renders rhyme stripped of meaning. Rhyme-residue.

Now, it is through unrhymed, unmetred modernity that one can best understand rhyme. The reason for its relation to poetry. And for the transformations of this relation.

Understanding rhyme assumes that one stops opposing poetry to ordinary language. For the same reason that it is necessary to stop opposing language to life. Not that poetry would be the language of life. Only poetization, this imitation, sticks to such discourses. But, if language does not take place except through and between subjects, language is in life. And so is poetry. Being one of the languages of language.

It is not enough to invoke music and dance (nor then this poor substitute—memorization technique) to understand the feet and rhymes of poetry. If these cadences are an origin, they cannot reduce themselves to survivals. A condition completed for centuries. That rhymed poetry would repeat to our day. An origin is not the meaning, much less the whole meaning, even if it is a part of it.

If everything in language is the play of meaning, which is necessarily so, since nothing that is in language can fail to have an effect on meaning, then not only do rhymes have meaning, and meters, but also each consonant, each vowel, all the seen and heard materiality of words that contributes to meaning. That organizes it. The effect being in this organization, not in any of the terms separately. Rhythm is this organization that creates meaning. Passing through prosody. And, in the spoken, through the body. The body social as much as individual, historical as much as biological. Where everything passes that the formalism of the sign rejected outside of meaning as a residue. Stripped of meaning because it denied its meaning. This organization does not cease for an instant in all of language. That is why poetry is ordinary. The only discourses that exempt themselves to the maximum: those of technique, science, the dictionary.

One does not have to draw from far off to bring poetry and life nearer together, because poetry is one of the languages of life as it is one of the languages of language. But it is a well-ordered organization. In this respect rhyme—whose etymology as well as functioning condenses and symbolizes all metrics—leads one no doubt to hear in language a very ancient cosmology. Rhyme is not only an echo from word to word, but in addition the echo of an echo that is its model. Arrangement for arrangement, the order of language, being an order in language, evokes and mimes a cosmic order. In realizing itself, rhyme achieves it, corresponds with it, is tuned to it. Perhaps, from afar, it acted on it. But in any case, rhyme and meter were praise. An indirect theology. A making as much as a meaning. This meaning not coming across except through such a making. Even if, precisely, it was not more than its echo. The response. Medieval poetics stated it clearly. Shelley knew it and said it again. Then the rhymes know it for all those who have forgotten it.

But poetry itself has ended by forgetting the meaning of its forms. When it began to imitate itself for form, it ceased to have a meaning. What one said in the eighteenth century, reputedly an apoetical century. Where to the metamorphoses of prose there was a corresponding academism of verse. Then poetry sought a justification for itself. It found life. Through which poetry became a critique of poetry, a critique of verse and of rhyme, in the last century. Looking for new reasons for itself, it looked for other forms. The forgetting of the meaning of ancient forms pushed it toward the form of its meaning. Its historicity, without which

it is no more than an imitation. Its historicity is its whole constraint. Before it alone, poetry must be answerable. Historicity has transformed rhyme, as it has transformed poetry's tie to itself and to the world. Today, the cosmos is the subject and its history.

From whence a new tie between rhyme and reason, rhyme and language, rhyme and life. None of these terms comes off with its ancient traditional meaning. That is the consequence of this history. Would one misread this metamorphosis, one would not only show that one does not understand anything of poetry, but also that in clinging to a reason whose disastrous balance sheet one denies, one is deaf to language, being one of those abstractors of life whose ideas have stopped, while poetry, language, life do not stop.

Outwardly, the transformations of poetry include an abandonment of rhyme. A rupture with traditions. Rather, however, and according to a cultural plurality that vanguard militancies have simplified, these transformations have accomplished a stripping of the process. And not only in Vladimir Maïakovski's pun-rhyme. It is hasty to state that free verse in France and elsewhere has renounced rhymes and recurring rhythms. What we called metrics when we opposed verse to prose. As if poetry were verse and prose were ordinary speech. Poetry rhymed because the lines rhymed.

Modernity is not so much the end of the road for rhyme as the coming to an end of certain notions about rhyme, prose, language. Only according to one traditional vision is traditional rhyme dead. But poetry's task has not changed: to discover itself. Its rhymes and what rhymes—it is poetry's task to discover. To imitate the manner in which poets of the past had understood and heard rhymes is nothing. But one continues to listen to them as to Mozart. They are present to us. It is we, in remaking them, who would not be present.

One no longer practices, if not for those who drone poetry, the "terrible concert for asses' ears," as Paul Eluard wrote in *Premières vues anciennes*.¹ But the drums and violins that he opposed to "one must speak a musical thought" only caricaturized it because they had come from it. Codified for such a long time, they form a cultural music of sorts. It must be added that the place where the concert of asses brays the most, where rhyme walks the streets, is advertising. The echo immediately substantiates. In it is revealed the always fresh magic, which was not an archaism except in the fictions of reason.

Codification, the cultural—that is what poetry has distanced itself from. Not in all moments either, as one knows. In times of collective urgency, historicity, came to rhyme once again. But more generally, it is not the disappearance of rhyme that marks modern poetry. A disap-

1. Paul Eluard, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Marcelle Dumas and Lucien Scheler, 2 vols. (Paris, 1968), 1:540.

pearance that would be comparable to the disappearance of punctuation, which at one time visualizes a mental theater, at another time a primacy of rhythm, a liberation of orality.

If modernity consisted in such a rupture with rhyme, it would be a rupture with the very listening of language, evoked by Baudelaire in his prefatory projects to *Les Fleurs du mal*: "That is why every poet, who does not know exactly how much each word includes rhymes, is incapable of expressing any idea whatever."² The symbolist moment practiced a prosody where the saturation of rhyme made of this very saturation a second prosody of its ideas on music. It brought the echo to an excess that was a calling and a listening. Expressionism and futurisms as well as Paul Claudel have made consonantal poetry. Modern poetry has generalized, diffused rhyme to the entire mass of saying and said. The disappearance of rhyme at the end of a line is a passage toward the rediscovery of rhyme. For poetry and for all language. The rediscovery, without awareness, of a meaning and a reason. In short, pure rhyme, free from standard couplings whose list is kept in dictionaries. It is not rhyme that has come to an end, but a convention.

Rhyme is coextensive with language as a whole. A specific way of signifying consists in showing this: poetry. Figure of language, by appearing only if it renders this listening generalized. By which it realizes a state of significance indefinitely being born. A prosodic, rhythmic semantics. Which overwhelms the sign through the body, includes vision in the listening, the hearing that passes under the words or through the words but is not in any word. Psychoanalysis recognized a small part of what poetry makes one hear when it is this listening.

Poetry is not poetry unless it invents or discovers new rhymes. In that manner it transforms reason. Each new rhyme modifies reason. Near or distant rhymes, flagrant or muted scandals, latent scenes of language.

One of the ways to break with routine is to exacerbate it. To push rhythm to a tension so that it suppresses the intervals—Gerard Manley Hopkins' sprung rhythm—the writing of speech, the intensity of bodily speech. To push rhyme to invade or to interrupt the word. And the line. To dramatize the doggerel. To identify counting rhyme and destiny. Rhymes so close to one another that they interpenetrate. Answers so close to questions that language no longer has the time to catch your breath. Haste as poetry and as poetics. Elsewhere, in other forms of life, in more harmonious, less dissonant times, poetry was able to take another course. But poetry does not have the choice of its rhymes. One knows that it does not occur except when there is no choice.

Order was therefore the first rhyme, the first principle of rhyme. Metrical poetry responded to the world. Then it responded to itself.

2. Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1955–), 1:915.

Then some poets became aware that it always repeated the same thing. Still the old one who rambles.

Violence became a rhyme, a principle of rhyme. A reason. Those who turned rhyme into the reason for poetry knew what they were saying. Right down to their academism. To the point of no longer understanding the tragic of rhyme and its humor in *les Grands Rhétoriciens* [school of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century poets]. The loss of poetry's meaning measures itself against this self-confident opposition between rhyme and reason. But it is not only a matter of keeping what the words want to say, it is a matter of reinventing what they say. That is what does achieve and always has achieved poetry, the thought of poetry, the poetry of thought.

Play at etymology as you choose. True and false, drawn from Germanic *rim* or from Greek *rhythmos*, it tells you the same truth. That it organizes what creates itself out of its own undoing. Which it brings together again. The coupling is nothing more than a particular case of it, which in our culture has hidden the remainder from us. Rhyme accumulates. It hoards. It beats the words and turns over the one that you are waiting for, the one that you do not think of. In the two cases you have lost.

Because it cheats. It shows you one word in another word. The truth of one word in the truth of another. It participates in *paranomasia*, the Greek term for pun. What only its restrictive identification to a final position of the line masked. Rhyme cheats the way destiny would cheat if it played cards. Because it would know ahead of time. Rhyme knows ahead of time. It is this relation in the words that knows of them and before them not what you want them to say, but what they say about you. What they show about you.

Because rhyme is a principle of listening. The listening of language passes and passes again through rhyme. Whose figures are in rather larger number than the metrical codification allows to be seen. The wavering listening of analysts is quite a rediscovery of this, an approximate mode. It is not surprising that analysts like puns so much, and turn them, as some have, into the disorder of spoonerism. They have rediscovered a bit of rhyme, and they indefinitely begin this scene again, with the intoxication of renewing what they retain precisely for a reason. But they turn it into a repetition.

The distance between the rise [*la lève*] and the fall, the start and its return, turns rhymes into rhythm. What one calls prose—strange singular, one should say *proses* [*les proses*] as one says *lines* [*les vers*]¹—is nothing but another fashion of memory, another rhythm of the responses of language to itself.

This plurality of the fashions of rhyme situates the difference, which seems ostensible, irreducible, between poetry and prose. And there are some poetries that can have links as different with certain fixations and conventions of rhyme as verse is from prose. Some closer to their prose

than to our poetry. Their confrontation is one of the passages of modernity. Where poetry and translation also cross one through the other.

French poetry has turned away in its invention from its recognized forms. It has broken them down in order to rediscover itself. Saturated with its past, it has turned it against itself. Through some notorious foreigners, it has finished undoing the national alexandrine. This supposedly achieved perfection, that is to say this ruin, takes on the bearing of the flag each time a fool raises it. Immediately crushed by the historical monument. This misfortune only comes to the deaf. Or in moments when one is deaf. To those who do not hear that one does not write an alexandrine with impunity, whether it be deliberate or not. Because cultural form is so strong there that one is then written by tradition. More than one inscribes oneself in it or writes oneself in it.

Rhythmically, there is something of the irreversible. There is not even anything but that. Modernity is not a simple snag in metrics. A bad moment for the traditionalists to live through. Then time in its wisdom will put things back in order. It really seems, after as much as a century of nonmetrical or otherwise metrical poetry that the alexandrine, with the final rhyme, is a thing of the completed past. Accomplished. Perhaps the forms of poetry do not live except in the unaccomplishment.

If one asks why such a perfected form could no longer serve, when so many poets made of it each time another thing, each time their thing, and why now—since there are already a good number of poems. The answer is in the tie between rhyme and life. The alexandrine was a tie to the world. It is that tie that is over. Because this world is also over. To pretend to go on with it, or not to hear that it no longer answers to anything because it responds to some past, to write alexandrines now is, in more than what is said, to say a taking over, a concord [*accordailles*], a harmony—not only a verbal but also a social metrics. An agreement of the social, the distant echo of an agreement with the cosmic. Happily one continues to enjoy it [*d'en jouir*]. Or to play with it [*d'en jouer*]. As one listens to ancient music, as one views painting again that remains painting. But one can no longer compose it. Not any more than one paints in the past. Those of the moderns who have kept the alexandrine have placed themselves in beauty furnished in advance—and already Gérard de Nerval was ironic about “beautiful” verse, and Victor Hugo said: “I do not like verse, I like poetry.”³ The neoclassical. Or derision, bravado. The style of 1880. Ancient metrics is a lost craft.

Apart from those who take the history of poetry for poetry, poets have taken risks. Guillaume Apollinaire, Pierre Reverdy are emblematic heroes of that adventure. Of poetic atheism. Against free verse, the traditionalists have not known what to invent to protect themselves from

3. Victor Hugo, *Le Tas de pierres III, Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Jean Massin, 18 vols. (Paris, 1967–70), 6:1146.

formlessness [*l'informe*]. Thus showing that rhyme and meter were for them the reason for poetry. All the more opposed to reason. And being wrong about form because they were wrong about meaning. Leaving the prose poem to the prose of the world, they concentrated their polemic on free verse. Their arguments, unchanged for a hundred years, on the contradiction between the terms *verse* and *free* have not seen that it is the poem and poetry that are free. Poetry is indifferent to calculations, since it can as easily favor them with its presence as desert them. One does not trap it with figures. One does not check its account. It is poetry that plays. Not you. As to those hiding behind machines, it laughs. I have seen it.

The nostalgia for ancient forms thus belongs to the order of the private. Of opinion, of sentiment. Not of the historicity of poetry. That each new craft creates its own academism is something else. But the practice of poetry, and the idea of poetry, as a whole, have distanced themselves from classical verse, even in serial production—the scribbling of groups.

Translating has followed. In the confused tie between translating and writing, a tie jumbled by the reference of the translator to the concepts of language and of knowing rather than to the one of discourse and its poetics. The traditional discordance between translation and the poem is that of a passivity against an activity. The whole aestheticized, moralized into faithfulness and transparence. Meaning, against rhyme and life. But it is in keeping together rhyme and life that translating becomes writing.

The paroxysm of their contradiction, the extreme of the difficulty, can paradoxically constitute the meeting of poetry and poetics. Because this tension prescribes poetics. It shows that the knowledges of language end there. By themselves these are so enclosed in the sign that not only do they not see its limits but take their ignorance for the totality of the text. They make of their deficiency a self-complacency.

This paroxysm occurs above all when a poetry in one language proceeds according to another idea of poetry, another relation to its past, another tie between rhyme and convention. Between rhyme and life. Translating then finds itself in an apparently insoluble contradiction. This is particularly the case in the difference between French poetry and Russian poetry. Translation is constrained to show this difference or to occult it. It is unstable in both cases. The traditions and their lack of connection bring this situation to an exemplary state.

Modern Russian poetry continues to rhyme the rhyme-convention. It is written more or less metrically. To translate it according to the character of modern French poetry is to transpose the continuous into the discontinuous. To preserve its rhymes, to metrically count its syllables—this is to take versification for poetry, a past for a present. To make imitations, the neo-. But to write it as free verse is to break its organizational principle, its language, its tie to its own nineteenth century.

The reciprocal is practiced otherwise. The Russian translators place rhymes where line endings did not have any, a metrics where the French poet no longer counted. To make it sound poetic. Surrealist French poetry, when it is translated, is reconstituted according to a sort of anamorphosis that attempts to correct its decadence. One cannot miss one another more.

This failure has a history. It seems that one cannot anticipate it outside of the asymmetrical ties between Russian and French poetry. Cultural asymmetry. One speaks French in *War and Peace*. But not Russian in Honoré de Balzac or Émile Zola. Yet this sense of history does not suffice.

The myths of language and of literature play their part in it. They jumble the relation between rhyme and life the same way they jumble the relation between popular and erudite poetry. Between the practice of poetry and the thought of poetry.

The practice and the invention of poetry do not preserve anything from the myths of language that form the basis of notions about the genius of languages and that interfere with poetry. Marina Tsvetaïeva, who nevertheless wrote in French in a genuine writing, believed the common cliché (but which has its history) that French—this is what she wrote to Rilke—is “very far from this poetic language,” “mother” tongue of the poet, to which German would be “much closer.” She said this about French poems by Rilke. An anteriority, a transcendence of poetry over languages corresponds for her to the genius of languages:

To write poems is already to translate from one's mother tongue into another; it is of little importance whether it be a question of French or German. No language is a mother tongue. To write poems is to write from after. That is why I do not understand when one speaks of French or Russian poets, etc. A poet can write in French, he cannot be a French poet.⁴

It is true that, leaving the contradiction just as it is, she adds: “Nevertheless, each language has something which belongs to it exclusively, which makes it what *it is*.” Unchanged since Mme de Staël, the comparison between German and French leads her to present German as

more profound than French, fuller, more expansive, more *somber*. French: a clock without resonance; German: a resonance more than a clock (its strokes). German, the reader transposes it without ceasing, to infinity; French is there. German—*becomes*, French *is*.

4. Marina Tsvetaïeva to Rainer Maria Rilke, letter of 6 July 1926, in Rilke, Boris Pasternak, and Tsvetaïeva, *Correspondance à trois, Été 1926*, trans. Lily Denis, Philippe Jaccottet, and Eve Malleret (Paris, 1983), p. 211; hereafter abbreviated C.

An ungrateful language for the poet, that is exactly why you have chosen it. An almost impossible language! [C, p. 211]

A third contradiction follows: the French in the French poems of Rilke would be German in reality: "You (*Vergers* [orchards]), you write in German—you write yourself, you, the poet." So much is French coldness itself, and a metaphor for poetical language that in speaking about a German poet that she finds cold, she says: "Platen writes in French" (C, p. 211). Still, the practice of poetry says nothing of the sort. Does not speak through clichés. And the French poem by Tsvetaïeva, "La neige," is a true poem by Tsvetaïeva. Her entire poetics is there. Or should one say that it speaks Russian?

The cut that separates rhyme and life, rhyme and history, as much as popular poetry and erudite poetry, a cut always particular to a language-culture—it is not in Spain what it is in France—deals severely particularly with the representation currently given of Russian poetry. A consensus as ahistorical as it is imperturbable leads it to begin in the eighteenth century. Again the verse of Mikhail Lomonosov is borrowed from the German. All epic poetry (the *bylinas*) and the popular song, remarkable medieval forms because they neutralize the opposition between prose and verse, everything is put away in folklore. Yet Aleksandr Pushkin did not make this cut. Nor did Nikolai Nekrassov, Feodor Tioutchev, Aleksandr Blok, or Maïakovski. A comparable cliché—which does not have the same effects—attributes this inaugural role to François Villon. Again Villon is isolated, and French poetry does not begin from the point of view of school until the sixteenth century. These ideological mannequins show very well that a strategy presides at this pseudohistory of poetry.

To the youth-of-Russian-poetry cliché corresponds the cliché about its being open. Against the closure that French poetry would show. Which from the sixteenth century, however, has successively been a mixing (not counting antiquity) with Italy and Spain, England and Germany, then the Far East. . . . But not Russia. As for Russian poetry, it has Germanized more than Frenchified. After the plurality of reception for Pushkin, for Innokentij Annenski and Valerij Brioussov turned toward Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, Stéphane Mallarmé—there have been the duos from Tioutchev to Friedrich Schelling, Afanasij Fet to Arthur Schopenhauer, Alexius Tolstoï to Heinrich Heine. The only vector in the opposite direction has been René Ghil. And there is the entire self-repetition of Russian poetry.

There is no French equivalent for the poetic mark of Russia on Rilke. But Rilke was able to read Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov in Russian. He wrote some poems in Russian.⁵ In the other direction, Rilke's effect on Boris Pasternak or Tsvetaïeva does have some French analogues.

5. See "Présentation," C, pp. 19, 24.

From Prosper Mérimée to André Gide, it is the Russian short story and novel that crossed over. Not poetry.

Conversely, when Maïakovski came to Paris, he was interested in painters, not poets. It is true that he did not know French. But Tsvetaïeva lived around Paris from 1925 to 1939, as a Russian isolated from Russians and even more from French poets.

French poetic vanguards do not bear the trace of a single living Russian poet in their journals. In *Sic* (January 1916–December 1919) appeared Sergey Diaghilev, Michel Larionov, Nalaria Gontcharova, Modest Moussorgski, Igor Stravinski. . . . Dance, painting, sculpture. Not one poet. In *Nord-Sud*, nothing. In the 1923 tract *Erutarétil*, Lermontov.⁶ In the "Liquidation" issue of *Littérature* (no. 18, March 1921), the only Russians are Dostoïevski, Tolstoi, Lenin, Trotski; Marc Chagall and Stravinski. The only one well noted: Dostoïevski. Not one Russian work is mentioned in *Littérature* (March 1919–August 1919; March 1922–June 1924). Not one poet in *La Révolution surréaliste* from 1924 to 1929. Nor in *Minotaure* from 1933 to 1939. Only Maïakovski appeared with a few poems in *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* (no. 1, July 1930), and this is on the occasion of the polemics raised by his suicide. A few cursory mentions of Maksim Gorki and Ilya Ehrenburg do not count at all. At the end of 1931, in the tract *Lisez . . . ne lisez pas*, on the side of "Read": Maïakovski.

On the corpse of Maïakovski, what is said of "Russian émigrées" sufficiently situates the nontie with the only Russian Parisian poet that the surrealists would have been able to know, to recognize, Tsvetaïeva. She does not seem to have met them either. She was able to read them. They did not understand Russian. In 1918 Eluard had started to translate Blok with Gala. This did not go very far. Only Elsa Triolet could not ignore Tsvetaïeva. Who had had some poems published by Gallimard in 1935 in the *Anthologie de la littérature soviétique (1918–1934)*. Among them was "La neige," no doubt written by her directly in French.⁷

But also she and the surrealists were separated by more than a political ideology. Rhyme and life separated them. The household and poverty, on one side. The bibliophiles, art collectors, and sellers of autographs, on the other. And a poetics that everything opposes. A poetics of rhythm, from prosody to metaphor and syntax, in Tsvetaïeva. In the surrealists the image and its theory masking the thought of rhythm. Almost a single key, that of syntax through the noun and complement of the noun, to open the lock of all metaphors.

This nontie does not prejudge the possibilities. The delay of the bottle at sea. Noncontemporaneity is no doubt the minimal condition of a tie from poetry to poetry. Today those who are nearest to Western

6. *Tracts surréalistes et déclarations collectives, 1922–1969*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1980), 1:12.

7. She herself says in response to a 1926 questionnaire that she has written some poems in French and in German (C, pp. 74, 141).

poetics in Russian are non-Russian: Gennadij Aïgui, Olžas Souleïmenov. In French everything happens as though poetry did not have a need for this tie. And ignored it. It invented, it exported. Like impressionism in painting. It is only in the last twenty or thirty years, often much less, that Russian poetry has been translated. And it is not enough that it is translated. It is also necessary that such translation does not stop at an information without voice. To this point, the lucky find [*trouvaille*] in French has never gone through Russian. And when one did start to hear Khlebnikov, the effect seemed to have already been taken from James Joyce or Henri Michaux.

Tsvetaïeva does not really begin to speak in French until forty-five years after her death.⁸ It is true that even in Russian her diffusion is quite recent.⁹ She is still in part ignored. But she is not unrecognized.

From the customary opposition between rhyme and life, between Russian rhyme and symbolist rhyme, then to the diffusion of rhyme in significance, and the clash of Russian and French traditions, Tsvetaïeva is, with Maïakovski, perhaps the only one to leave. Even more than Maïakovski. For she pushed excess to a point so intolerable that Maïakovski, who has, however, the tragic sense of *les Grands Rhétoriciens*, appears a humorist next to her. Because she brought the traditional poetic dealings to a dizziness that wins the whole discourse. Rhyme eats the words. Far from a liberation of tradition by rejection, this is an overflow of tradition through excess.

Eve Malleret knew how, was able to translate this violence.¹⁰ Violence of rhyme because it is violence that makes rhyme. As significance brings and carries away meaning. That is why her translation is a writing. The proof of what one must call, without completely understanding what one is saying, an affinity. A recognition and a creation of the self in an other. Through which this poetry attains a presence, that is to say, a future.

The way she has translated Tsvetaïeva, Malleret has known how to recognize her better than anyone so far: by placing herself at the point where rhyme and life are only one. Illustrated, for example, by her observation about Tsvetaïeva who, from her exile onward, no longer lived in anything but suburbs. By which she gives all its value to a motif in the poems. She holds poetry and the subject together, the parabola of an existence dedicated to the suburbs of life.

8. After a translation by Elsa Triolet, unrhymed and conventional like her presentation of the suicide: "Tsvétaeva could not bear the misfortune that was sweeping her country" (*Marina Tsvétaeva*, trans. Triolet [Paris, 1968], pp. 9–10).

9. "It is not until the second half of the 1950s that she has begun to infiltrate surreptitiously and in jolts into the Samdizat and the press" (Lidia Tchoukovskaïa, "L'avant-mort de Marina Tsvetaïeva," trans. Malleret, *Passé Présent* 3 [1984]: 131). A Soviet edition of her selected works in two volumes appeared in 1984.

10. Tsvetaïeva, *Le Poème de la montagne, Le Poème de la Fin, poema gory, poema konca*, ed. and trans. Malleret (Lausanne, 1984); and Tsvetaïeva, *Tentative de jalousie et autres poèmes*, ed. and trans. Malleret (Paris, 1986).

Recognizing rhythm's central place in Tsvetaïeva's poetics permits Malleret to not redo the mystified readings that she denounces—these effects of sign, from its poetics to its politics.

The poetics of Tsvetaïeva and of the translation, bound to the same attitude, one through the other resolve the paroxysm of rhyme and the difficulty of translating. Tension is the song. The tune carries the words. When one separates them, nothing more than words cross over—the decoys of meaning.

By pushing rhyme to the utmost limit—where in short lines, short words, very charged with consonants, it often becomes almost all the saying and the said, in certain passages almost a single continuous-discontinuous rhyme—Tsvetaïeva brings rhyme itself to its statute of allegory. And violence in language.

Through rhyme, language participates in the cry. It leads one to hear that rhyme is not only a response. But through language's echo of itself comes another echo, of something inarticulated, below meaning, and which has, however, never ceased to speak of itself through all rhymes, *amours—toujours* [loves—always], *ténèbres—funèbres* [darkness—mournful], *ombre—sombre* [shadow—somber]: that rhyme—state of being born or state of dying, but indefinitely being reborn—is something of the order of the cry. No doubt one could hear it in certain moments under meaning and even under significance in the spoken of the conversation, as one hears it in some dreams or in some games of language for oneself or for others. But poetry leads one to hear it more than elsewhere. Which turns it not into an opposite or a shift of ordinary language, but into its very figure. It is when poetry draws all its rhymes from ordinary language that it becomes its truth and its fable.

Maïakovski's pun-rhyme was able to reactivate the poetic principle of punning. On the side of significance against the sign. Like the proverb. Both undergoing the same social effect of the rejection at the classical age, age of reason and of the state. The pun declares that something is rotten in the state of the sign. Its incongruity, also an unveiling of the signifier and of its force, participates far away from the cry. Even if it is by laughing. But Hamlet's puns contain no laughter.

Tsvetaïeva's rhyme is not a pun. It tends directly to the cry. Pasternak compared Tsvetaïeva to Marceline Desbordes-Valmore (*C*, p. 64). Elsewhere, in connection with "Krysolov" ("The Rat-catcher"), he connects her language to *zaoum*, the other side of reason, with the "rage of rhyme in revolt against itself" (*C*, p. 188). Tsvetaïeva herself said, "Through too much crying, bounding, rolling, I arrive at *meaning*" (*C*, p. 208).

Her poetics of the cry is a poetics of orality. By the side of meaning. In one notebook (26 September 1940):

My difficulty (in writing poems and perhaps for others in understanding them) is in the impossibility of my problem with words (that is to say thoughts), for example, to speak a lament: a—a—a.

With words, thoughts to speak a sound. So that in the ears there remains only a—a—a. Why do I have such problems?¹¹

Nadejda Mandelstam, when remembering Tsvetaïeva, evoked her "voice, astonishingly similar to the poems."¹² Her poems were written "for the voice" (C, p. 144). She sometimes uses spoken instead of written forms. For example, in "Mólodets" ("The Jolly Fellow"): *što* in place of *čto*.¹³ The cutting of words into little pieces, frequent in her poetry, participates in the cry. Thus in "Poem of the End, 7," the word *poslédnij*, "last," is cut *po-slédnij*—"For the la-ast time." One critic wrote: "The unity of her discourse is not the sentence, not even the word, but the *syllable*."¹⁴ Violence touches the word. Tsvetaïeva to Pasternak: "Minimal divisions of the word exist. It is of them, I think, that 'The Jolly Fellow' is composed" (C, p. 125). Whether one calls it futurist or expressionist, vague cultural terms, violence is an oralization of language.

Rhyme is a cry because it cries a truth. Tsvetaïeva makes *žizn'*, "life," rhyme with *lživo*, "with lie": *Žizn', ty často rífmúeš s: lživo*—"Life, often you rhyme with lie." Which she immediately follows with (in the same way Eluard after "La terre est bleue comme une orange" ["The earth is blue like an orange"]) wrote "Not an error words do not lie"¹⁵ the line *Bezošibočen pévčij slux*, "Without lie the sound of the song."¹⁶ This extraction of truth makes an etymology of paranomasia, in order to make words say more than they do say. Out of a rhetoric, Tsvetaïeva makes a writing.

In prose as in verse. Thus, in "Art in the Light of Conscience," the immediate bringing together *iskússtvo-iskús*,¹⁷ "art-test," where *iskús*, aged word, designating the test of the novitiate, alludes to a priesthood. The whole included in the signifier itself. This is a thought through rhyme, from rhyme to rhyme. In "Rain of Light," her 1922 article on Pasternak, she passes from *byt*, "ordinary life," to *byk*, "bull," to *dub*, "oak." In her June 1941 notebook, one two-word sentence condenses, like a proverb: "*Doživát'—dožóvyvat'*,"¹⁸ which Malleret translates, or rather rewrites: "Il

11. Quoted in *Tsvetaeva, A Pictorial Biography*, ed. Ellendea Proffer, trans. J. Marin King (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1980), p. 35.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

13. Tsvetaïeva, *Stixotvorenija i poemy v 5 tomakh* [Collected Poetry in Five Volumes], 5 vols. (New York, 1980–83), 4:143.

14. Vladimir Orlov, in his introduction to Tsvetaïeva, *Izbrannyje proizvedenija* [Selected Works] (Moscow and Leningrad, 1965), p. 45.

15. Eluard, *L'amour la poésie, Oeuvres complètes*, 1:232.

16. Orlov, introduction to *Izbrannyje proizvedenija*, p. 43.

17. Tsvetaïeva, *Izbrannaja proza v dvukh tomakh 1917–1937* [Selected Prose in Two Volumes 1917–1937], ed. Alexander Sumerkin, 2 vols. (New York, 1979), 1:395.

18. Quoted in *Tsvetaeva, A Pictorial Biography*, p. 35. *Doživát'*, imperfective of *dožit'*, "survive," "to live until"; *dožóvyvat'*, imperfective of *doževát'*, "to finish chewing," which is *ževát'*, but *ževát'*, familiar word, also says "to do something with boredom, to be everlastingly repeating the same thing"—and evokes *živát'*, frequentative of *žit'*, "to live."

faut marcher jusqu'au bout—mâcher jusqu'au bout [One must walk to the end—chew to the end].¹⁹ The same writing in Tsvetaïeva, whatever the language may be. In German, in her letters to Rilke: *Augenblick—Augenblitz* [instant—eyeflash] (C, p. 103). In French, in “La neige.”

Rhyme becomes eventually subject as well as material for the poem:

<i>Lba—i lba.</i>	Front et front.	Front and front
<i>Tvoj—vperiod</i>	Le tien touche	Yours touches
<i>Lob. Gruba</i>	Presque. Affront—	Almost. Affront—
<i>Rifma: rot.</i>	Rime: bouche.	Rhyme: mouth. ²⁰

and toward the end of “Letter from the New Year”:

*Ráiner, rádueššja nóvym rífмам?
Ibo právil'no tolkúja slóvo
Rífma—čto—kak ne—tsélyj rjad nóvyx
Rífм—Smert'?*
Nékuda: jazýk izúčen.

Rainer, des rimes nouvelles—content?
En effet, comprendre correctement
Le terme *rime*—qu'est-ce d'autre hors
Plein de rimes nouvelles—la Mort?
Car pas d'issue: la langue est épuisée.

Rainer, some new rhymes—happy?
In effect, to understand correctly
The term, *rhyme*—what other is there besides
Full of new rhymes—Death?
For no exit: language is worn out.²¹

Tsvetaïeva is a figure of poetry where rhyme and life have joined themselves together in a single material of language.

This situates a famous sentence by Tsvetaïeva where she contrasts herself to the poetry specialists—“My own specialty is life.” She is the first to recognize, in herself, “this frequency of the word: life” (C, p. 124). But she has also written in the litany of her poverty, after she says that she has no clothes, no room, no time to write: “I do not love life as such, for me it does not begin to signify, that is to say to take on a meaning and a weight—except transformed, that is to say in art.”²² There

19. Quoted in Tchoukovskaïa, “L'avant-mort de Marina Tsvetaïeva,” p. 137.

20. “*Popytka komnaty*—Attempt of Room,” trans. Malleret, *Stixotvorenija i poemy*, 4:258.

21. “*Novogódnije*—Letter from the New Year,” trans. Malleret, *Stixotvorenija i poemy*, 4:277.

22. Tsvetaïeva, letter of 30 Dec. 1925, *Pis'ma k A. Teskovoju* [Letters to A. Teskova], ed. Vadim Morkovin (1969; Jerusalem, 1982), p. 37.

is the "frequency of the word: life," and there is: "In general, I suffer from an atrophy of the present" (*C*, p. 193). The words that surround poetry often say something else than what they point at: "soul," "feeling." They are themselves already allegorical.

It is in connection with the book by Pasternak, *My Sister, Life*, that Tsvetaïeva had written this sentence on life. In connection with poetry. Presupposing that poetry resolves in itself and through itself the common antinomy of living [*vivre*] and of the book [*livre*], true everywhere else. But where life, *žizn'*, was distinguished from *byt*, "ordinary life," as much as from aestheticism. About Pasternak, she wrote, "He is human—*durch*."²³

Rhyme-rhythm appears as a form of life. What astonishes is not the solidarity between rhyme and life. What astonishes is the astonishment that this solidarity engenders, and which comes from the dominant point of view: it is from the sign that one looks at the poem.

If, instead of looking at the empirical across the cultural grid of the sign, one attempts to recognize the empirical in the ways of signifying, the empirical in the poem, one does not operate a mechanical inversion, one does not look at the sign starting from the poem, but the critique of the sign permits one to rediscover the major banality that for us turns life into forms of language, and language into forms of life.

The current antinomy is pursued and maintained at the same time by Tsvetaïeva's sentence in her 1922 article. She opposes a technicality to an essence. In *My Sister, Life*,

Verse is the formula of its essence. . . . Where there can be a superiority of 'form' over 'content,' or of content over form is where essence has never even spent a night. . . . On the demonstrable riches of Pasternak's poetry (rhythm, meter, etc.), others will speak in their time—and surely—with an attention not less than mine on the indemonstrable riches. / That is the job of poetry specialists. My own specialty is life.²⁴

That in her terms is the essence of *My Sister, Life*. Poetry and life in an indistinction anterior to their separation that nevertheless passes through the technicality of language.

Rhyme-life makes a listening out of life. This is the continuity of Blok and Verlaine, explicitly in the value of *sound*: "The creation-word [*slóvo-tvórtčestvo*], like all creation, is nothing but a walk to the trace of popular and natural sound. A walk to sound. *And everything else is only literature.*"²⁵ That this sound is something more than the phonic matter

23. *Svetovoj liven'* ["Rain of Light"] (1922), *Izbrannaja proza*, 1:142.

24. "Eto delo spetsialistov poezii. Moja že spetsial'nost'—*Zizn'*," *Izbrannaja proza*, 1:136.

25. In "Iskusstvo pri svete sovesti" ["Art in the Light of Conscience"] (1932), *Izbrannaja proza*, 1:396; hereafter abbreviated "I." The italicized sentence is in French in the text.

of words, and something else, near the tune hummed by Apollinaire or Blok's "music," appears in what she adds further on:

This sound is not allegorical, even though it is not physical. It is not physical to such an extent that in general you do not hear any word, and if you do hear you do not understand, as if half asleep. Physical sound either sleeps or does not carry, covered by another sound. / I do not hear words, but a kind of song in the head without noise, a kind of sonorous line from the allusion to order, but to pursue that now would take too long—it is all a world apart, and to speak of it is all a task apart. But I am convinced that here as in everything there is a law. ["I," p. 402]

The relation between rhyme and life carries poetry away from aesthetics. It makes poetry pass to a world other than the one of the sign, where aesthetics has its discourse. Rhyme is an ethic. Which is illustrated in: "Blok's cruel word on Akhmatova's debuts: Akhmatova writes poems as if a man is looking at her, and one should write them as if God sees you" ("I," p. 394). The article "Art in the Light of Conscience" ends on Maïakovski's suicide: "Twelve years running the man Maïakovski killed in himself the poet Maïakovski, but in the thirteenth year the poet rose and killed the man" ("I," p. 406). Poetry, for Tsvetaïeva, forbids all politics other than of poetry itself, all parties other than the party of rhyme—of life.

This is what, eternal beginners of life and poetry, we can perhaps better than before begin to understand and to do. What Marina Tsvetaïeva brings us, as a Russian, to French poetry. Or rather, to poetry, to the idea that one has of it, and to the practice that one has of it, whatever the language may be.

But the multiplicity, the integration of languages and of forms of life from everywhere, as Karlheinz Stockhausen evokes it for kinds of contemporary music, this circulation of poetics assumes a recognition of the signifiers that itself passes through a poetic circulation from language to language. There was certainly no poetry before Babel. But, in language, rhyme and life have the same future.