



Cambridge Studies in Russian Literature

Marina Tsvetaeva

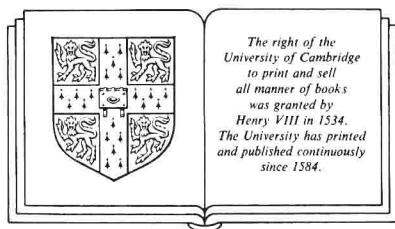
The woman, her world,
and her poetry

Simon Karlinsky

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Foreword

As a belated graduate student, after getting an M.A. in 1961, I decided I wanted to do a doctoral thesis on Marina Tsvetaeva. I had admired her verse and prose for a number of years. Since so little was known about her then, I thought it a good idea to investigate her biography and to establish the corpus of her writings. Few Slavacists in America would have agreed at that time that Tsvetaeva's poetry was worth a dissertation. Professor Gleb Struve of the University of California, Berkeley, was one of those few. With his encouragement and under his kind and patient direction, I completed the dissertation in 1964. A book based on it and bearing the same title, *Marina Tsvetaeva. Her Life and Art*, was published by the University of California Press in September 1966.

I had found so much information on Tsvetaeva, so many little pieces of fact that needed to be recorded, that I may have overdone comprehensiveness a bit and turned the results into something like a bouillabaisse. There was a biography, necessarily sketchy in some areas; a study of the poet's language and versification; a survey of all the genres that she practiced; and a great deal of annotations that recorded everything written about Tsvetaeva that I could find. My aim was to assert her reputation, record her circumstances and lay up the supplies for those who would study her after me.

Now, twenty years later, I have written a second, very different book about Marina Tsvetaeva. There is no need to assert Tsvetaeva's reputation today: she is an internationally famous poet, with figures of the stature of John Bayley, Susan Sontag and Joseph Brodsky writing about her in *The Times Literary Supplement* and *The New York Review of Books*. Her language and versification have been studied with great subtlety by G.S. Smith, Robin Kemball, Günther Wytrzens and a slew of linguists in the Soviet Union. Tsvetaeva's verse has been translated brilliantly into French by the late Eve Malleret; into English by Elaine Feinstein, Robin Kemball and Joseph Brodsky; her prose and verse into Italian by

Serena Vitale (who accompanies her translations by some of the most wonderful essays about Tsvetaeva ever written) and Pietro Zveteremich; into German by Ilma Rakusa, Felix Philipp Ingold and Marie-Luise Bott. In addition to these able scholars and poets, Tsvetaeva's recent reputation has also drawn to her a few translators into English and German who do not understand her elliptical style, miss her use of idioms and have nevertheless published their renditions of her prose and verse, often to considerable critical acclaim.

But fortunately the good outnumbers the bad. There have been imaginative studies of Tsvetaeva in Polish by Jerzy Faryno and Zbigniew Maciejewski. In the English-speaking countries, there are the doctoral dissertations of Ieva Vitins, Margaret Troupin Babby, Olga Peters Hasty and Michael Makin. There is also a detailed biography by Maria Razumovsky in German and in Russian and the as yet unpublished one by Irma Kudrova, which, judging from the one chapter I've seen and the overall quality of this critic's work, is sure to be superb. Lily Feiler is preparing a psychobiography of Tsvetaeva, chapters of which I have cited in my book. All this and more has happened since my 1966 book.

The present study is not addressed primarily to a scholarly audience. My task this time round, therefore, was simply to introduce Tsvetaeva, rather than to amass every fact about her that can be found or to do an in-depth study of her poetry. I wanted to tell the story of her life, with the inclusion of all the factual materials that have come to light in the past twenty years, to place this life in its historical context, and to give an overview of her *œuvre* and of the criticism about it.

Many aspects of Tsvetaeva's biography were inaccessible or unknown when I was writing my dissertation in 1962–4. There were no bibliographies, no collections of critical articles, no minimally complete editions of her poetry. What she did and wrote in 1914–16 (the collection *Juvenilia*, the long poem 'The Enchanter' and the relationship with Sophia Parnok) was shrouded in a mist. The correspondence with Rilke and Pasternak was not available. The period after Tsvetaeva's return to the Soviet Union in 1939 was a near-total blank. These and many other lacunae have now been filled through publications that have appeared in the last two decades.

Marina Tsvetaeva often said that she did not belong in her time.

In her poem 'Homesickness' ('Toska po rodine'), she asserted that while her fellow man may belong in the twentieth century, she herself came from a time before there were centuries. And yet, it would be hard to think of any other poet whose life was so constantly affected by historical events. She was born during the famine of 1892, which is the key to much in subsequent Russian history. Tsvetaeva's views and sensibility were shaped by the revolutions of 1905 and 1917 and her art grew out of the creative ferment of the period between those revolutions.

The October Revolution and the ensuing civil war are a major theme in Tsvetaeva's life and her poetry. With a million other Russians, she experienced the post-revolutionary exile in the 1920s. She was repeatedly caught in the battles between various factions of the emigration. She returned to the Soviet Union in the wake of the Great Terror and she died, at the age of forty-eight, during World War II. All these developments need to be understood if one is to explain Marina Tsvetaeva's fate. I have made a particular effort to outline in detail the historical and cultural background of her life and writings. This is an area in which my 1966 book was particularly deficient because at that time I myself did not know enough about the February and October revolutions and the composition of the post-revolutionary emigration. I am aware that some of the historical issues I felt compelled to emphasize (viz., the democratic nature of the revolutions of 1905 and February 1917, as opposed to the totalitarian October Revolution, or my insistence that the Russian emigration of the 1920s and 30s was mostly liberal, rather than monarchist or pro-fascist) are extremely unpopular with some Western readers today. From past experience I know that making such points can elicit disbelief or anger from critics. But this is what decades of close study of the periods in question have shown me. Everything about Marina Tsvetaeva's experiences further confirms these conclusions.

This book could not have been written without the research and publications of the scholars whose work is enumerated in the Appendix on Sources at the end. I met many of them at the memorable Tsvetaeva Symposium, organized by Robin Kemball and held in Lausanne in the summer of 1982, and have admired the depth of their dedication to Tsvetaeva. Those who helped me by supplying unpublished materials or copies of their own publications are thanked individually when the sources for each chapter are

listed. Serena Vitale and Viktoria Schweitzer have been especially kind in this respect and deserve additional gratitude. Closer to home, I want to thank Peter Carleton for help with editing and my colleague and neighbour Olga Raevsky Hughes for sharing her research with me. Robert P. Hughes, Hugh McLean and G. S. Smith read various portions of the manuscript and offered valuable suggestions.

Back in 1926, when Tsvetaeva was alive and at the peak of her genius, Dmitry Sviatopolk-Mirsky wrote that a book about her was needed and this book ought to be written with pride and rejoicing. Contemplating her fate four decades after her death, however, is likely to arouse humility and sadness. But if we consider her ultimate triumph, her 'victory over time and gravity,' as she once put it, we can indeed feel pride for her and rejoicing for all those who can now partake of the living waters of her imperishable poetry.

SIMON KARLINSKY

Fall of 1984

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The house on Three Pond Lane

In the village of Talitsy near the city of Shuya in Vladimir Province of Central Russia, there lived in the middle of the nineteenth century a poor village priest named Vladimir Tsvetaev. The name Tsvetaev is derived from an odd imperative form of a verb which means 'to blossom' and it seems to have occurred only among hereditary provincial clergy. Marina Tsvetaeva once described her father's side of the family as an 'uninterrupted and uninteruptible clan: a primeval one,' and half-seriously suggested that its origins might be traced to the legendary epic hero Ilya of Murom, supposedly a native of the region around Vladimir.

Father Vladimir was one of those impoverished village clerics whose mode of life differed little from that of the surrounding peasantry to whose spiritual needs he ministered. He plowed his own land, threshed grain, and mowed hay until the end of his days. He enjoyed great esteem among his parishioners and his moral authority and prestige were so great that his advice was often sought by the city folk from the neighbouring towns. Not much is known of Father Vladimir's wife Ekaterina, who bore him four sons and who died when she was thirty-five. But we do have a handsome tribute in verse to her endurance and stamina, written by a granddaughter she never saw:

My first grandmother had four sons.
She had four sons, one wooden candle,
A sheepskin blanket, a bag of hemp.
She had four sons and her own two hands.

(The wooden candle, *luchina*, a splinter of wood dipped in slow-burning oil, was the cheapest form of indoor lighting in peasant huts, familiar from its evocations in Pushkin and other poets.)

The economic conditions under which Vladimir and Ekaterina Tsvetaev had to raise their sons can be further illustrated by the recollection of one of them, the poet's father, that he never had

shoes of his own until the age of twelve. If Marina Tsvetaeva valued Nikolai Leskov's novel *Cathedral Folk* (1874) higher than any of the acclaimed masterpieces by Tolstoy or Dostoevsky, it may well have been because she saw a parallel between that novel's protagonists, a provincial village priest and his wife, and her paternal grandparents.

Of the four Tsvetaev sons, the eldest, Piotr, followed in his father's footsteps and inherited his parish in Talitsy. The other three became educators. Feodor, the second son, was a provincial school administrator, while the youngest one, Dmitry (1852–1920), was a professor of history. He taught at the University of Warsaw and was known for his reactionary politics and his anti-Semitism. Tsvetaeva's memoir about Andrei Bely, 'A Captive Spirit,' contains a dipped-in-acid portrait of her uncle Dmitry's wife, Elizaveta.

The third Tsvetaev brother, Ivan Vladimirovich (1847–1913), became passionately interested in Latin and in classical philology while attending the divinity school in Shuya. He eventually found his way to the University of St Petersburg, where he became the protégé of the famed philologist and ethnographer Izmail Sreznevsky, under whose direction he specialized in the study of ancient Italic dialects. For his dissertation on the language of the Oscans, a pre-Roman Italic nationality, Ivan Tsvetaev made an extensive sojourn in Italy, which inspired him to branch out into his other field of study, ancient sculpture.

From 1877 on, Ivan Tsvetaev settled in Moscow, where he was appointed at the university, first as Professor of Roman Literature and later to the chair of the theory and history of the arts. At Moscow University he became close friends with the well-known and ultra-conservative historian Dmitry Ilovaisky (1832–1920), the author, among other works, of the history primer for children used in most Russian schools at the end of the nineteenth century. Ilovaisky's beautiful daughter Varvara (1858–1890) was a gifted singer who had studied voice in Italy. When she returned to Moscow, she formed a romantic attachment her family judged unsuitable.

Accordingly, her father resolved to marry Varvara to his colleague Professor Tsvetaev, an arrangement to which she consented even though she could not reciprocate her husband's love and went on loving the man she was forced to give up. In 1882 a daughter, Valeria, was born and in 1890 Varvara Tsvetaeva died while giving

birth to her son Andrei. One year after her death, Ivan Vladimirovich married her friend, the twenty-one year old Maria Alexandrovna Meyn (1868–1906), the half-Polish daughter of a wealthy Baltic German businessman and publisher.

On her father's side of the family, apart from her grandmother Ekaterina, Marina Tsvetaeva could trace her descent only through the men. But on her mother's side, it was the matrilineal succession that fascinated her. Her maternal grandmother was a Polish noblewoman, Maria Bernacka, and *her* mother was Countess Maria Leduchowska. The poet was thus descended, on her mother's side, from three generations of Marias, all of whom were Polish and aristocratic and all of whom died before the age of forty. This circumstance gave rise, in her poetry, to the myth of her Polish roots, 'Polish pride,' and a possible personal connection with one of her favourite historical personages, Marina Mnishek (Maryna Mniszchówna, ca. 1587–1614), whom most people remember from either Pushkin's or Musorgsky's *Boris Godunov*.

The second marriage of Professor Tsvetaev followed the pattern of his first one in an uncanny manner. Again the bride was a musician – this time a pianist who, after one single concert appearance was not allowed by her father to play in public. Again the bride was in love with another man. The man she loved was married and, although divorce was possible, her father considered it a sin. 'When my grandfather Alexander Meyn made her choose between the loved one and himself,' wrote Tsvetaeva, who had access to some of her mother's earlier diaries, 'she chose her father, and afterwards, she chose what was the most difficult: a widower with two children, still in love with his late wife.' Maria Meyn's own rationale for accepting Ivan Tsvetaev's proposal was that she was a friend of his first wife and that their children needed a mother.

This turned out to be a miscalculation. Her stepdaughter Valeria never did forgive her father's second wife for what she saw as usurpation of her mother's position and for becoming the mistress of the Tsvetaev family home at Three Pond Lane (*Trekhprudnyi pereulok*), No. 8. The house, which was a part of Varvara Ilovaïskaya's dowry, was technically the property not of Professor Tsvetaev, but of Varvara's children, Valeria and Andrei. This was where Marina Tsvetaeva was born on September 26 (or, according to the Gregorian calendar now in use, October 9), 1892. Till the end of her life, she continued to prefer the old Julian calendar, which

was in use in Russia when she came into the world. Two years later, in 1894, came the birth of her younger sister Anastasia, usually called Asya and still alive as these lines are being written.

The year Marina Tsvetaeva was born, 1892, was a fateful year in the history of Russia. Because of the disastrous crop failure in the previous year, there was a widespread famine in the provinces adjacent to the Volga. Though not as calamitous as the famine in the reign of Boris Godunov in 1601–3, and not to be compared to the starvation in the post-revolutionary period or during the collectivization of the early 1930s, it was the worst such instance within the memory of the people at the time. It shook Russian society from the stagnation and apathy that had come to typify it at the end of the 1880s.

The wide-ranging and by and large effective famine-relief work, in which a number of notable personalities took part, served notice of the extent to which the intelligentsia could engage in meaningful social action independently of the tsar's government. Vladimir Korolenko, the most politically engaged writer of the time, participated in famine fighting and published a book about it. Anton Chekhov dropped all literary activity and plunged into an organized campaign to prevent the farmers from slaughtering their horses for food, which would leave no draft power for next spring's plowing. When the famine was followed the next summer by a cholera epidemic, Chekhov volunteered his services as a medical inspector.

Leo Tolstoy, who no longer considered himself a writer at this time, but rather a leader of a religious sect, and his followers, the Tolstoyans, organized a string of soup kitchens and collected money for the famine victims. In February 1892, a young law student Sergei Diaghilev and his cousin Dmitry Filosofov (with whom in a few years Diaghilev would start the epochal journal *The World of Art*) came to Tolstoy's house in Moscow to offer their donation and to discuss ethical and moral problems. In a somewhat different vein, the young revolutionary Vladimir Ulianov, who as Lenin would become the founder of the Soviet system, launched a campaign to discredit and to sabotage the work of the famine-relief organizations, because his view was that the more peasants starved to death, the greater the likelihood of a revolution.

According to the historian Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, the shock of the 1892 famine was what led to the formation of the opposition

political parties which were to bring about the revolutions of 1905 and 1917 (and were also to be important in Marina Tsvetaeva's personal and literary life): the liberal, middle-of-the-road Constitutional Democrats; the Socialist Revolutionaries, who continued the earlier populist tradition of Russian radicalism; and the Marxist party of Social Democrats, one of whose factions, the Bolsheviks, would eventually take over the country and exterminate all the other dissident parties and the libertarian outlook most of them represented.

In literature, too, 1892 was a watershed year. The great age of the Russian novel, which lasted from the 1860s to 1880s, was also a time of catastrophic decline of Russian poetry. A succession of utilitarian-minded positivist critics who dominated the literary scene after the 1860s tolerated poetry only if it contained social criticism or preached a simplistic moral. Language, style and craftsmanship were in a state of decay. Nineteenth-century poets who meant so much to Tsvetaeva and to those who came after her generation – Yevgeny Baratynsky, Afanasy Fet and Karolina Pavlova, for instance – were reviled and despised as empty-headed songbirds. The favourite poets of the 1880s were the maudlin poetaster Semion Nadson, hailed as the new incarnation of Pushkin merely because he wrote of the evils of exploitation and oppression; Alexei Apukhtin, author of flashy salon lyrics and a friend of Tchaikovsky, who set his poems to music; and Modest Musorgsky's friend Arseny Golenishchev-Kutuzov, whose verse wedded the most banal clichés to the most hackneyed rhymes that existed. The fact that Musorgsky could seriously consider Golenishchev-Kutuzov a poet of magnitude comparable to Pushkin's or Lermontov's testifies to the depths to which the understanding of poetry had plunged.

There were, it is true, two enormously attractive presences on the literary scene of the 1880s: Anton Chekhov and the philosopher-poet Vladimir Soloviov. Each one represented in his own sphere (Chekhov in the secular and realistic one and Soloviov in the spiritual and mystical) the breadth of outlook, universality and tolerance of other viewpoints that were not usual in Russian culture. But their impact would not be felt until the beginning of the twentieth century. In the first years of the 1890s, Chekhov had every reason to complain in his letters about the provinciality to which Russian literature and art had been reduced.

In 1892, Dmitry Merezhkovsky gave a public lecture 'On the

Causes of the Decline of Contemporary Russian Literature and on Its New Trends.' As spelled out in this lecture, later included in a collection of Merezhkovsky's essays, the causes were the compulsory adherence to radical utilitarian dogma, the ban on metaphysics and the disregard for artistic quality. One year later, Merezhkovsky's wife, the poet Zinaida Gippius, published in a major literary journal her poem 'Song,' the concluding line of which, 'What I need does not exist in this world,' created a considerable stir. This was the first of her authentically Symbolist poems, in which Gippius extended the boundaries of the usual nineteenth-century Russian meters and popularized accentual verse and assonance rhymes, later to be developed and perfected by such poets as Blok, Akhmatova and Mayakovsky.

Merezhkovsky's lecture and Gippius's poems were the early harbingers of the literary and artistic revival that came to be known as Russian Symbolism. Within two or three years, this trend was joined by such other important poets of the first Symbolist generation as Valery Briusov, Konstantin Balmont and Feodor Sologub (the second Symbolist generation, which included Viacheslav Ivanov, Alexander Blok and Andrei Bely, made its appearance in the early years of the twentieth century).

By the time Sergei Diaghilev, Dmitry Filosofov and the artists of their circle were ready to launch their journal *The World of Art* in 1898, there existed a group of major poets who had successfully revived the art of writing good verse and a group of important metaphysical philosophers, descended from Vladimir Soloviev's example. All of them were anxious to make common cause with Diaghilev in his efforts to liberate literature and the arts from the 'narrow prison of ideology and prejudice' (as Nikolai Gumiliov put it) to which they had been confined since the 1860s.

The spectacular explosion of artistic creativity that resulted from this alliance affected all aspects of cultural life in the early twentieth-century Russia. Its liberated and liberating influence was wide-ranging. Yet there were some areas where this influence did not penetrate. It was not felt, for example, in the academic families where Andrei Bely and, a decade later, Marina Tsvetaeva were growing up. Nor did it affect, as Tsvetaeva was to learn to her grief, the cultural attitudes of the leading figures of the liberal and radical opposition parties. But the world in which this poet was to develop, live, and create, began to take its poli-

tical and artistic shape, as I have tried to show, the very year she was born.

We have at our disposal three primary sources on the childhood years of Marina Tsvetaeva: her early poetry, her sister's memoirs and her own autobiographical essays. All three are to be considered with caution as factual evidence. In the first category are the poems Tsvetaeva wrote between the ages of sixteen and nineteen and which were included in her first two published collections, *The Evening Album* and *The Magic Lantern*. Now, except for her plays and narrative poems written on subjects taken from folklore or historical sources and her philosophical and literary essays, all of Tsvetaeva's poetry and prose are personal confessions, where autobiographical elements are a basic component. But in the poems about her childhood in her first two collections, the reflections of actual experiences (and they are certainly numerous) are subordinated to the central myth that informs these two books: the myth of childhood as a magical region, an Eden from which one is expelled after growing up.

The resultant idealized depiction appears even more unreal when one remembers that the little child, who in some of these poems yearns for her mother and for the safety of the nursery, is at the same time a young woman of eighteen or nineteen who obstinately resists entering the world of adults. As biographical material, then, these early poems are of interest only as evidence of how the poet incorporated her actual experiences into the mythology of childhood that is expounded in those two early books.

Extreme idealization of the past is also a handicap with our second main source on the poet's childhood, the *Memoirs (Vospominaniia)* by her sister, Anastasia Tsvetaeva. Serialized in the 1960s in the journal *Novyi Mir* and published in book form in three different editions (1971, 1974 and 1983), these memoirs have become a great favourite with Soviet readers and a standard reference for Tsvetaeva scholars. Anastasia Tsvetaeva wrote her recollections during the seventh and eighth decades of her life, a life filled with hardship and privations, including an arrest on trumped-up charges and seventeen years spent in GULag camps and internal exile in remote regions of Siberia.

The rehabilitation and the eventual popularity of Marina Tsvetaeva's writings in the Soviet Union in recent decades pro-

pelled her surviving sister into a position of considerable literary eminence and gave her the access to publishing houses and the reading public that had been eluding her since she began her writing career at the age of twenty-two. In her gratitude, Anastasia Tsvetaeva has sought to minimize all conflict that was a part of her own and her sister's lives, either within the family or with the Soviet regime (Marina's conflicts with the émigré community in Paris are, of course, given extensive play). Therefore, while these memoirs are an inexhaustible storehouse of factual information on Tsvetaeva's life and an indispensable commentary on her early poetry, they need to be approached with wariness. Irma Kudrova and Viktoria Schweitzer, two devoted and knowledgeable Tsvetaeva scholars, were quite right to challenge in print the factual accuracy of these memoirs and to question Anastasia Tsvetaeva's depiction of her own and their mother's relationship with the young Marina. (See Appendix for the sources cited in this and subsequent chapters.)

There remains the remarkable series of the poet's own recollections about her earliest years, which she wrote during the 1930s, when, as Irma Kudrova put it, 'she distinctly understood the catastrophe that occurred in her interrelationship with the world' and 'insistently sought and found in the distant land of her childhood the seeds that later germinated and grew into the tragic realization [of being a] person who is disconnected from her time and her society.' Tsvetaeva's personal and literary memoirs are not always models of objectivity and reliability. We now know that she rearranged things, omitted some events she did not care to remember and was on occasion guilty of plain forgetfulness. But her memoirs are almost recklessly candid and, unlike her sister, she was incapable of falsifying her past experiences and attitudes in order to make them more acceptable within the notions of propriety or political correctness held by a later age.

Throughout the decade of the 1930s, Tsvetaeva felt compelled to return in her prose to the period between her earliest childhood memories and the departure of her family for Italy in 1902 because of her mother's illness, that is, to the first ten years of her life. Her memoiristic essays 'Women of the Flagellant Sect' ('Khlystovki'), 1934; 'The Devil' ('Chort'), 'My Mother's Fairy Tale' ('Skazka materi') and 'My Mother and Music' ('Mat' i muzyka'), all three published in 1935; and 'My Pushkin' ('Moi Pushkin'), 1937, are all

devoted to that period. 'The Ivy-Clad Tower' ('Bashnia v pliushe') of 1933 deals with a slightly later period when Marina was twelve and her younger sister ten. In addition, two other prose pieces from the same period, 'Natalia Goncharova,' 1929, and the memoir on Osip Mandelstam, 'Story of a Dedication' ('Istoriia odnogo posviashcheniia'), 1930, contain important episodes about little Marina's situation within her family (in fact, the writing of these two pieces might have suggested to the poet the memoir sequence enumerated above, which then followed).

Had Tsvetaeva been as popular and highly valued in her lifetime as she is now, her childhood memoirs would have been collected into a separate book soon after their publication in various periodicals, a book that would find its rightful place next to such earlier classics of the genre as Tolstoy's *Childhood* and *Adolescence* and Maxim Gorky's *Childhood*. The penetration into the psychology of a very young child is equal to the very finest fictional treatments of similar material to be found in Russian literature, such as Chekhov's 'Grisha' and 'The Cook's Wedding' and Andrei Bely's autobiographical novel *Kotik Letaev*. Anastasia Tsvetaeva has objected that little Marina could not have possibly felt about herself and other members of the family the way she described it in those memoirs. But neither Anastasia, nor anyone else can deny that this was how Tsvetaeva, the grown-up woman and the mature poet of the 1930s, *remembered* her childhood. Memoir after memoir, year after year, a consistent picture emerges, supported also by the poet's evocations of her childhood in letters to such friends as Vera Bunina and Boris Pasternak.

The picture presented in the memoirs is not entirely unhappy. We read of the leisurely life of the Tsvetaev family and their retainers in their house, with its dove-grey, dove-filled yard, the house of which the sixteen-year-old Marina was later to write:

Our marvellous, our wonderful house in Three Pond Lane
Which is now turning into verse.

We read of the summers at their *dacha* in the picturesque town of Tarusa on the river Oka. We meet the frequently changing governesses, among them the Baltic German Augusta Ivanovna and the somewhat flashy Parisienne named Alphonsine Dijon. Marina had no traditional Russian nanny (*niania*), but there was one for little Asya. This nanny was quite the opposite of Pushkin's