

## An Evaluation of the Works of Marya Zaturenska

Marya Zaturenska's Threshold and Hearth, her first book, very tentative, very problematic, was followed by the usual "long silence" in which, evidently, the poet subjected herself to an intenser discipline in the art of poetry. Cold Morning Sky, published in 1938, while continuing many of the themes and motifs characteristic of the earlier volume, represents a definite advance on the poetic front. What was suggested in the first book is expressed explicitly in the second. There is evolution, but there is no revolution. By 1938, Miss Zaturenska evidently felt that, like a young Milton, she had completed the period of her poetic incubation and was ready for the eagle flight-- in this case the flight of a dove--"Spinets, harps, and guitars a welcome sing/ Welcome O exiled dove, to lands destroyed by famine/ Where cruel wrath profaned your gentle white/ Recall the romantic paradise, the demure, summer land/ Where idyllic fountains streamed in milk, wine, honey/ On silky air, the mild wind, and your wings sounding/.. The naked Venus greets you in the garden/ And on her marble lings (O dove!) your shadow lingers." Miss Zaturenska has attained, by this time, the stature of a distinct personality. She has defined her poetic ground, however precarious--"Fantasies in the brain, restlessness in the heart/ Desire for the unattainable the pure romantic longing/ Ruined towers in the air, a yearning toward the sea/ For its deep death, so cool, and languorous/ These are the favorite symptoms written down..." The favorite symptoms include not a few golden classic heavens, antique marbles, impeccable Gods,

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May-time bosoms, pastoral days, heroic years, altars to love, banished tombs—"The vision obsolete and Greek," "The obscured pathos of forgotten things," "The Greek, the natural feet of dawn." In antithesis to this neo-classic, pastoral world, there is the romantic threat upon the static and secure—strange forebodings, revelations, new-found fears, the intangible pursued, Gothic terrors, angels, barbaric mountains, "The unearthly bliss, the lunar light/ The phantom on the burning stair." At times, the Greek Hebrew or Gothic worlds combine into one harmonious order, as when the angels sing in Pythagorean strains of music—"And lift their passionate heads bronze gold on the glittering sky/ Till the white glory of motion uplifts them they are done/ Poised in the steep, deep, dark on the emblazoned stair." More characteristic, however, is the tension between extremes. Miss Zaturenska gropes through "The Gothic terror in suspended air." Again, "Have we not seen the sun crawl from the rose/ Have we not seen the shadowy sisters glide?/ Fatal and wan on cherished garden walks/ Whose was that sudden cry? that burning chill?/ What halts our footsteps? and what stilled our talks?/ What shadow stalks us, run wherever we will?" What she seeks most of all, evidently, is serenity, poise, completion in a world where blossoms are not stunted and ladies, perhaps immovable as the stone Eros, wear garlands in their hair—"That which is lost is found, the tenuous beauty snared,/ The fine, the golden note caught and repeated:/ Oh, how it rings on the ear, wild-sweet, round and completed." Marya heralds, in fact, the Augustan day, timeless, irrevocable, perfect—with the additional charm that a diminished William Blake is skulking somewhere at the borderland. "Let the lion have his hour/ Let the evil beasts devour/ Leaf and vine and fruit and flower/ Theirs the night but yours the time/ Known to the Ver-

gillian rhyme/ When the ancient world, distressed,/ Found peace in an infant's breast." Again, "Dissolve the mist, dissolve the impious fear/ That mars the tide, profanes the patient trees/ Discolors the transparent atmosphere/ Until I wade in terror to my knees." Marya is like an eighteenth century minor poet who feels, stirring within his breast, the prescience of romanticism—a poet who, in a Popian world, is half in love with Spencer—"As if a lover half afraid/ Ran to embrace a wavering golden shade." The twentieth century, in such an atmosphere of individual solitude, is almost missing. "Deride, deride the shrieking auto horns/ That blare through city windows, traffic lights/ Red, green, green, red through window screens/ And the harsh voices rising from the city/ Without reverence, and without pity." Edith Sitwell combines, more daringly, the pastoral world of lily-white shepherdesses with the incongruous aspects of modernity. "The Listening Landscape," published in 1941, shows that little has happened to Marya in the brief period of two or three years. There is no new ground. Grass is still her garland. She is still a watcher in the sacred wood. Her poems are still written with the background of the ~~harpsichord~~ harpsichord—and there is still "antiquity's dream for younger eyes," and there are "unfading temples," though earth rocks the base of the ideal, and though Marya herself has explored the supernatural realms of German ~~folklore~~ fairy stories and German romanticism (possibly). "How she recalled the untroubled days! wept for the quiet garden,/ And in the embrace of the sun longed for the tranquil moon/ Till the scorched body dissolved in blazing air,/ Faded in the golden arms; as a storm scatters a flower—/ Her spirit fled and she became a sea/ Of silver leaves that grieved upon a tree." Again, "...in that world/ Only the life-sized portraits on the wall/

Glowed in fantastic life forever clutching roses"—as if the classic world, as Marya understands it, had become itself a Gothic nightmare. There was One who sat in the room forever writing letters. Again, in a world which has become haunted imperceptibly by a white dress, "There on his death bed, kneeling at the bed's foot, he trembling saw, / The image of the Mother-Goddess, enormous, archaic, cruel, / Overpowering the universe, creating her own inexorable law, / Molded of stone, but her fire and ice flooded the room like a pool." This is the angel music from a demon's throat—a theme suggested, however, by the two earlier volumes. In spite of some despair, or perhaps because of it, "Men turn again to music, sun, and dance / The burning roses on the classic ground," according to a poem addressed to Ruth Pitter. Marya's is still the Latin heaven, the royalist affiliation. The stars still sing, though perhaps their song is elegiac—though not for the universe, according to the poem addressed to Edwin J. Stringham. Whatever landscape there is, Marya, a mystic, will rest at her soul's center—watch her reflection in the mirror or the pool, though she may at times abandon old loyalties or change habits—"Not the Grecian nymph archaic, white / Dreaming at the fountain's source, / But nymphs by Fragonard, rose-draped and small, waxed flowers on young hair, Crisped and curled..." For all the chaos, there is a system iron-bound by classic unity.

I have described above, I think, the general characteristics of Marya's highly generalized world. On subsidiary themes and questions, I shall comment more briefly. One of the chief of these is the theme of oblivion—again, in antithesis to the quest for certitude, like Keats' "Ode to the Nightingale" in opposition to the "Ode on the Grecian Urn." Marya experiences moments of oblivion suggesting the awful end, when the world shall not always be restored to its own size. There is, however, the possibility of cyclic

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returnings on a vaster scale—"Let the old world fall away/ As the great  
beasts leave their prey;/ Let the dogs and cats destroy/ That which they  
cannot enjoy./ New as life and death and sleep/ Shall the cyclic rivers  
creep,/ Briging learning, art and thought/ New again to be renewed,/   
Revived, restored, and still unlight,/ The intangible pursued." Again,  
in a poem written in memory of D. H. Lawrence—"No, let us drown in music  
and resign/ Our hearts, our souls, our loves, to the wide waters,/ Follow-  
ing the song the leaves the strong will weak..." She describes maidens who  
throw their wreaths away and wade in starlight, young men who lift their  
voices through the dew-damp sedge—all in honor of D. H. Lawrence evidently,  
though what are they doing on this macabre picnic? "Our little deaths are  
swallowed by the sun/ Our aspirations, longing and alarms/ Are drawn into  
sleep's vast felicity..." At times, the classic world is abandoned altogether  
in favor of "Wide seas unknown to your geography"—but not for long—Marya  
"hides for fear behind old marble/ The armless Venus, eyeless Jove/ The  
Apollo of the shattered lyre/ The little battered god of love..."

A second theme is the Narcissistic enterprise. Marya is always seek-  
ing her own amazing image or that which equates with it, perhaps the image  
of the dove, perhaps of the doll, who "sits and preens/ In infinitesimal and  
waxen dreams." It is no exaggeration to say that the quest is always for  
self which shall not be mixed with hallucination and supernal flowers.  
The dream of death invades, however, the dream of life. "All night she sang  
like an expiring swan/ That floats with joyous pain into the rising dawn."  
Again, "Forgo the moons and waters of the mind:/ Today is all that you shall  
find." Again, "Salvage my days that scattered flow/ Like phantoms on a mov-  
ing stair." Again, "Separate, distinct, divided, parted, meeting ever/

What the eye loses, let the heart recover." The desire is everywhere to escape from time and fluctuation—"Unfaithful time whose one fidelity/ Is to the laws of change, unchanging, changing..." The individual must be salvaged, though perhaps denuded of all but his classic bias—"So Time shall for a little while restore/ Our mother Venus and her little son/ When the long age of violence is done/ And each man seeks a lover or a friend." Marya expects, in fact, a golden age, when winter winds shall no longer bite. Her attitude is that of "The homeless who are passionate for home,/ The human tear that moves Olympian gods,/ And that sad backward look beyond recall,—!" She cannot understand why the brutal rider lived to wear Caesar's chaplet on his head. Her concept of the universe, like her concept of happiness, is archaic—"The inexorable working of the divine law/ On which the central core of fire must turn/ Around the mysterious globe/ In which we live and strive for a divine/ ~~Intelligible wholeness~~ Intelligible wholeness a deep purity/ To lose ourselves as in some mother sea." When the universe has ~~xxx~~ gone through various catastrophes, in all of which Maria is involved, we will come back to the auroral charm, the cool mirrors of the laughing eyes, the dreams half-dreamed in infancy, the listening landscape. Greek, Hebrew, Christian, the counter-earth which is heaven—"Shadow of earth! Reflecting the sea's ebb, the sky's mirror/ The airy scroll, the never-finished tale."

With the quest for certitude and for self is the quest for childhood. There are poems about children and poems in which Marya wishes to be a child. Perhaps it is because "A porcelian world so long the child-endear'd"—and "From that light world of ~~xxx~~ tears and smiling dreams/ We draw our thoughts as from the living streams." Marya clings to a belief in a country where the rivers flow with milk and honey. Not only does she yearn for the in-

nocence of childhood but for those children never born who "Haunt us in visions of eternity/ Perceptive, delicate, and cold." Other children, those of an island, are her spirit's roots, the flower, the stem—"Islanded in the sun, then disappear,/ Since one brief season is their only year/ Lost as the wildrose in the long grass,/ Their half-seen images through watery glass." The vision of childhood in the ageing world so soon decays, so soon fades—for we are wafted far from the island of children. However, the angel of childhood may gleam into the maturing soul—this child is, like Wordsworth's, nearer to heaven than the adult. The envoy to Aurora may bring, in fact, lightness of heart—"perceiving beauty always/ See in the gradually dimming earth the rose and ivory gaze/ With which she first garnered enriched your days/ Bring her your ~~precious~~ gold, the treasury, the dearest toy.../ Tremble as if upon an invisible thread/ Dancing between the living and the dead/ Yellow skirts festooned with roses, her golden slippers flying/ Toward formal terraces of joy," etc. There is also a child in crystal—he who enclosed in glass, exudes his beauty like a field of flowers. The image of the Christ child appears in the cleft between two savage mountains.

Marya Zaturenska, a Russian Jew, has been a student of the Church Fathers, the ~~Catholic~~ Catholic saints, the Catholic sages. Judging from her poetry alone, one might think her a Catholic convert, the feminine version of Coventry Patmore. She fears—though she is in private life a communist—the communist onslaught. She exhibits those characteristics which Miss Evelyn Underhill, in her various studies of the subject, shows to be typical of all mystics, whatever their individual differences. Not all, for example, seek refuge in the classic world, though this is by no means a solution unusual among such temperaments. The classic bias is, after all, a

part of Christianity. "We must," says Plato in the Timaeus, "make a distinction of the two great forms of being, and ask, 'What is that which Is and has no Becoming, and what is that which is always Becoming and never Is?'" This is a perennial demand of human nature. Maria turns from unrest to rest. She looks upon the real as static rather than dynamic—as if the goal of the universe were a rose garden (perhaps a shadow of the rose gardens at Yaddo.) People in agreement with her will appreciate her search for unity in diversity, stillness in strife, and frozen formalism. Question—is her writing to be considered as an interesting psychological document—or as poetry, the enduring art?

There are not many poets who have achieved lasting distinction through the employment of cliches. While Marya is skilled in the manipulations of conventional verse forms—and skilled enough even to deviate slightly from these—on the language level, as perhaps on the meaning level, her poems fail in originality. Perhaps she feels the glory and wonder of the speech she employs—perhaps for her the cliches are discoveries. For the sake of the record, however, I shall list a number of these cliches, these customary word ~~combinations~~ combinations. They are not obvious, of course. No one can doubt Maria's sincerity, no one can doubt her subtlety. Finally, however, the effect of stereotyped language patterns is negative, an aspect of interior decay. A dictionary of Marya's cliches or customary word combinations, the general statements rather than the particular, would include the following, arranged according to poems. Midsummer Noon—sweet air, rich midsummer spell, clear intensity, sparkling shadows, glimmering canopy of trees, exquisite oblivion, desperate fear, dwindling shadow, natural quiet, ripening wheat. Lullaby, blackening skies, strong thirst, ancient

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 world, ancient peace, great release, strange beasts, great beasts, bitter  
 sea. Rare Joy, artless glance, withered heart, glazed eyeballs, tropic birds,  
 early freshness, troubled years, beauty weeping within her bower, first gray  
 hair, golden tresses, time's dimming afterglow, perpetual summer, quick  
 harmony of love. Water and Shadow, green and silver water, limpid light,  
 savage mountains, grandeur and mystery, liquid laughter, children's eyes  
 in laughter, the sun-sheen gold in the air, golden streamers. In Song,  
The Countersign, songs of sirens, secret danger, wild sea, wide  
 waters, summer's heat—and, in fact, the entire texture. Images in Lake  
Water, the trees bowed with graceful supplication in lake water, glimmering  
 lights, enduring dream, mirrored silence, reflected face. The Lunar Tides,  
 the dangerous moon, the vampire moon, dim waters, cloudy spectres on the  
 window pane, the living glory of the sun, golden motion. Landscape, Fruit, and  
Flowers, perpetual summer, miniature scene, arid hours, heroic dead, summer's  
 eternal garland, peace and contentment smiling, gleaming marble, desperate  
 men. Voyage, antique marble, golden apples, dreaming ships that swan-like  
 float, ghostly boats. The Return, sorrowing angels, perfect climate,  
 love-lorn maidens, peaceful mind, lonely traveller, horror's pit, pink cherry  
 blossoms, cruel wrath, idyllic fountains, mild wind, white fingers, marble  
 limbs. Interview in Midsummer, the deep woods and the birdsong which was  
 oversweet and over long, the river tumbling through stoneways, the long ferns  
 dipped in dew, the genial sun, the liquid golden air, the cobweb lace, the  
 singing trees, the slim and sweeping willow, ancient sadness dark and still,  
 silenced wood, the sun's strong gold.

The great difficulty then seems to be the language level. Edith Sitwell,  
 whom I have previously mentioned, and Ruth Pitter at her best, attain, through  
 greater complications of thought, a greater complication of language. Maria  
 by comparison anorphous, undefined, and tentative—her poems will show what  
 the well-bred lady poetess was thinking of in 1938-1941—and it will doubtless  
 be found that she is not too different from the well-bred lady poetess  
 in other ages.