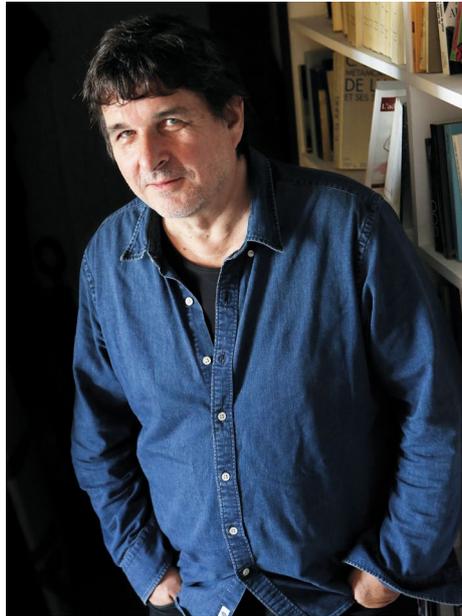


Uncertain Manifesto 7: Emily Dickinson, Marina Tsvetaeva. Immense Poetry

Frédéric Pajak
Graphic Essay
French



What do Emily Dickinson and Marina Tsvetaeva have in common? Not a century; not a country, but the sheer inability to take the easy path in their art. They are both also tireless in their efforts to “reinvent it, each one in her own fashion”. In this volume of *Uncertain Manifesto*, Frédéric Pajak tries out different forms, part novel, part poetry, to give us two stories of two exceptional lives on the fringes of society. He writes that he can only hope to scratch the surface: Marina Tsvetaeva, he says, “can only elude me”, and Emily Dickinson “can only elude me more”.

“In reality she is not writing for anyone, not even for herself: she is addressing Eternity, an Eternity which she calls out to, whose presence she senses, and which responds to her through the flowers, the bees or even just the falling night.”

Title

Manifeste incertain 7. Emily Dickinson, Marina Tsvetaeva. L'immense poésie

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Christine Bonnard-Legrand
christine.bonnardlegrand@libella.fr

Author

Frédéric Pajak is a Swiss French writer, graphic artist and editor. His works combine both prose and drawings to create his own unique prize-winning genre. Following *L'Étrange Beauté du monde* (*The World's Strange Beauty*) and *En souvenir du monde* (*In Memory of the World*), the new edition of *L'Immense Solitude* (*Immense Solitude*) and the first seven volumes of *Manifeste incertain* (the first one translated into English as *Uncertain Manifesto*), Éditions Noir sur Blanc continues its publication of the works of Frédéric Pajak. He won the Médicis Essay Prize 2014 for *Manifeste incertain 3*, as well as a Swiss Literature Award in 2015; in 2019 he won the Prix Goncourt for Biography for *Manifeste incertain 7*.

Photo: Louise Oligny

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Excerpt translated by Romy Fursland

Marina Tsvetaeva is carried away by the capricious and opportunist winds of the thirties, those years in which Europe's fate is played out, or rather continues to be played out, as if the inter-war years were nothing but a hyphen between two episodes that both form part of the same brutal process; as if the so-called 'lull', foolishly nicknamed 'The Roaring Twenties', was nothing but the next stage in the carving-up of the world between rival nations. The whole of the twentieth century was one long, bitter struggle for the global triumph of capitalism, so presciently foreseen by its avowed enemy Karl Marx, and despite the attempts at a state communism which was quickly corrupted. The liberty of humankind – which inspires so many delusions, such haggling, vengeance and persecution – beginning with its advocates, be they fanatical militants or credulous intellectuals; this liberty has never found a society worthy of it. The frenzy of



commerce has stripped it bare, made its vague desires for emancipation, social justice and democracy seem laughable, reduced them to gasps for oxygen during a heart attack, a sort of hiccup that serves to delude the defeated: that is to say, everyone.

Marina's fate, tragic as it is, is merely a drop in the ocean of the misery suffered during the first half of the twentieth century. Her life would signify nothing, absolutely nothing, from a historical point of view were it not for the fact that her words defied the catastrophes of the age. Whether composed in poems or in prose, written in indelible ink, they have stood the test of time. On closer inspection, there is an awareness of history in these words that only the inspiration of a poet or a Dionysian philosopher is capable of drawing out. This calls for melancholy, and a good deal of it, because nothing else can communicate so vividly the relentlessness of passing time, that feeling of the irremediable and of the unjust, which resembles the secret of humankind's misery, such as expressed in these verses by Hugo von Hofmannsthal:

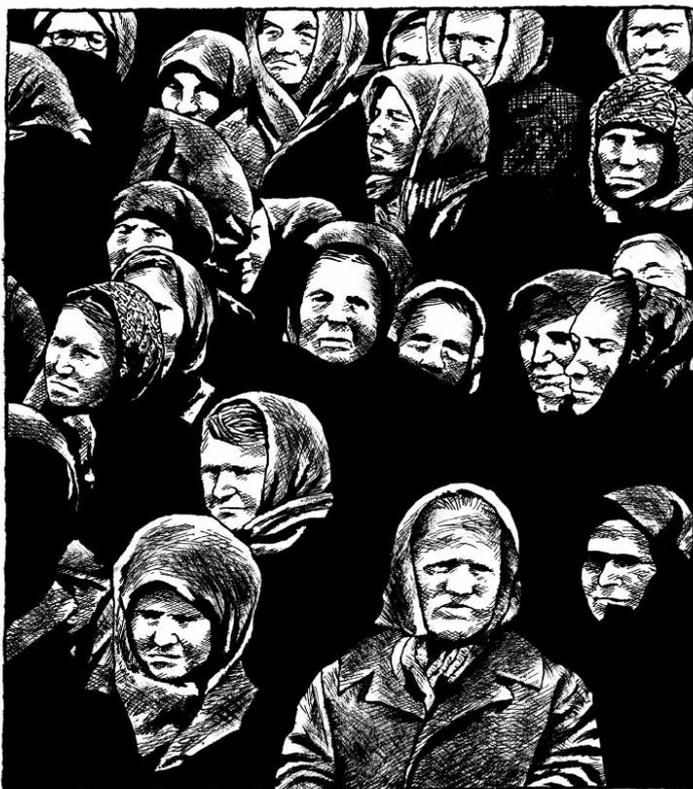
*Oh, how is it possible to live like this
And for everything to be as if nothing was real?
Nothing real but the passing of monotonous time...*

And if Carson McCullers had to finish off that thought, she would say:

*"Time, immortal fool, moves through the universe
screaming."*

Time passes, and time is history, history which fades away or is written down. That is the point at which the victors carve their names into it, desperate – oh, what vanity! – to be remembered. History, manipulated and adulterated by the victors, works to obscure – even obliterate – the enigma of time. At the moment when time passes, is it already the past? Is that its *raison d'être* – or its fate? Does it pass in order to become past, erased? Does time feel sorry for time?

History seeks to halt history, to trap it in an eternal present tense. But in vain: history passes, and nothing is left of it but dates, events, proper names eager for importance. It is never anything more than a series of



stories broken up into pieces, anecdotes that strain every sinew not to be forgotten. Not that the stories of the grand narrative of History are futile: nothing is superfluous in the memory of humankind. But they are inevitably biased, partial, because they establish themselves at the expense of the stories of the little people, of minor events and, ultimately, of lesser memories.

In telling Marina's story, I have neglected many episodes without meaning to – because Marina eludes me at every turn. Nevertheless, I have studied her fate as closely as possible, and tried to judge it in the light of the excesses of her era, letting each clarify the other. And even though her fate is indeed inseparable from history, it sheds an unsuspected light on it: one of pain and courage, like a jewel of memory.

As for Emily Dickinson, all I have done is describe her life. She eludes me even more. She would like to erase herself from history, but history resides in countless details, in the lives of individuals. Emily tells us more about the world, its mysteries and its dramas than any commemoration of some futile battle.

Magnificent evening, imbued with a suave, intoxicating melancholy: the hot breath of time passing.

Moscow, 18 May. – Friday, the end of the day. I'm suffocating. The city has expelled me from my body. I am liquid. The city tires me and the Muscovites tire with me. Exhausted, wrung-out, they drag themselves back to their cages hollowed out of their tall un-ivory towers, absurd rows of dominoes, clustered around the edges of the city and even further away, all the way to nowhere.

The city no longer fits me. It's like a pair of pyjamas that's too big for me. I float, I swim, I die in these monstrous pyjama bottoms. I sweat, in the heat of this mischievous May that's pretending to be summer. I am dead. Everyone is dead. Roll on tomorrow.