Boundary Issues in Three Twentieth-Century Russian Poets (Mandelstam, Aronzon, Shvarts)

Citation

Redko, Philip Leon. 2019. Boundary Issues in Three Twentieth-Century Russian Poets (Mandelstam, Aronzon, Shvarts). Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, Graduate School of Arts & Sciences.

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Boundary Issues in Three Twentieth-Century Russian Poets
(Mandelstam, Aronzon, Shvarts)

A dissertation presented

by

Philip Leon Redko

to

The Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures

in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the subject of
Slavic Languages and Literatures

Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts

December 2018

Dissertation Advisor: Professor Stephanie Sandler   Philip Leon Redko

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Abstract

This dissertation examines works by three twentieth-century Russian poets in which the construction, dismantling, crossing, and blurring of boundaries plays an important role. Boundaries are understood in a variety of ways—as personal, political, and formal constructs— and all three poets engage with boundaries in situations where their poetry indirectly comments on itself as poetry. Their engagement with boundaries calls attention to issues of poetic creation and reception, and dramatizes processes and relations that would otherwise remain wholly implicit, such as the writing process, the circulation of texts, ideas, and images, and the formation and deformation of traditions. Close readings of individual poems focus on poetic and cultural exchange, encounters with various forms of alterity, negotiations between abstract and material aspects of poetic language, and the relationship between poetic tradition and historical reality. Chapter One traces Osip Mandelstam's conceptions of the poetic image across three groups of poems written in late 1933 and early 1934; Mandelstam valorizes images that are dynamic, fleeting, and oblique, and shows how these kinds of images resist deformation when a poet's work becomes part of the cultural landscape. Chapter Two looks at framing devices and interartistic discourse in the poetry of Leonid Aronzon, and shows how Aronzon draws on both classic and marginalized strands of the Russian poetic tradition to create a homespun personal canon meant for a small audience of friends. Chapter Three compares two works by Elena Shvarts, in which the protagonists engage in forms of creativity outside of or adjacent to artistic

production; these extraliterary creative practices are marked by intensive engagement with notions of selfhood, authority, and responsibility, and touch on the question of the poet's exceptionalism, as well as the relationship between creative genius and power. All three poets wrote from the margins of the Soviet literary establishment; by playing with boundaries, their work questions and resists dominant cultural paradigms, and explores strategies for wresting something from power, evading it, or even assuming its mantle.

Contents

<u>Acknowledgments</u>

INTRODUCTION

Virtual Borders as Sites of Mediation, Exchange, and Potential in Russian Poetry

> The eye drops, weighted, through the lines
> the burin made, the lines that move apart
> like ripples above sand,
> dispersing storms, God's spreading fingerprint,
> and painfully, finally, that ignite
> in watery, prismatic white-and-blue.
>
> – Elizabeth Bishop

In her poem "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance," Elizabeth Bishop takes a familiar household object, an illustrated family bible, and uses it as a portal for imaginary travel.[1] By contemplating the bible's engravings, the poem's speaker accesses a seemingly random sequence of travel memories. This imaginary journey takes place at the intersection of memory, fantasy, history, and belief, and ends with Bishop calling the seeming stability and orderliness of these mental categories into question. The lines quoted above describe the moment of access: the "weighted" eye drops through the etched surface of the print into an intermediary space where the materiality of the contemplated object coexists with the visionary journeys it will inspire – albeit in embryonic form. The direction these journeys will take is foreshadowed with metaphor: the etched lines are compared to a desert landscape, then to turbulent weather, and finally to "God's spreading fingerprint." But the decisive moment comes right after, when the lines "ignite." Here, Bishop emphasizes the affinity between imaginative access and pain, as the speaker's discomfort and anticipation are uncannily echoed by the repetition of adverbial endings: "painfully, finally."

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[1] Elizabeth Bishop, "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance," in *The Complete Poems, 1927-1979* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 57.

The engraving in the poem, or rather, the transitional space the engraving opens into, functions as a virtual border. This border is a little like a line dividing distinct states from one another (and is in fact made up of lines), but it is also a lot like a zone. Unlike the borderline, which restricts and delineates, creating opposable binaries and facilitating regimentation and hierarchization (while also, perhaps usefully, setting up limits), the border zone is ambiguous and fluctuating. However uneasily, it supports multiple possibilities and an overlay of states. The virtual border zone in Bishop's poem is a transitional space where the ambiguities of personal and collective experience are brought into play and made vivid but not explicit. Even as it opens out into memory and other alternative realities, it never stops being a tangible, material artifact. Bishop dwells at length on the tactile side of this virtual experience, where hand and eye work in concert with each other and with imagination: "Open the book," she writes in the poem's final section, adding in parentheses: "The gilt rubs off the edges / of the pages and pollinates the fingertips."

In its creation of a border zone that is fantastic and palpable at the same time, "Over 2,000 Illustrations" resembles an earlier poem by Bishop called "The Map" (1934). There, an overlay of times, places, and mental states is conjured by an ordinary map, which comes to life as though animated by the speaker's constant questioning. "Names of seashore towns run out to sea" and "names of cities cross the neighboring mountains," as though excited by an overflow of emotion; shorelines "investigate the sea"; and Norway, imagined as an anxious hare, "runs south in agitation."[2] We are used to thinking of maps as static representations, but Bishop shows them to be dynamic, full of tension and uncertainty, vibrating with potential movement, displacement, and negotiation. Bishop's speaker doesn't just behold the map, she touches it, with hand as well

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[2] Elizabeth Bishop, "The Map," in *The Complete Poems*, 3.

as mind: "We can stroke these lovely bays, / Under a glass as if they were expected to blossom," she writes. The map seems to come alive to the language of touch, an appreciation of texture and thickness: "These peninsulas take the water between thumb and finger / Like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods." Contemplation is where the visual and tactile join forces, imbuing the contemplated object with emotion as well as other kinds of resonances: moral, aesthetic, and political. The map's ambiguities, and the delicacy and liveliness of its borders, emerge out of the same resonances. Even with a two-dimensional, schematic representation such as this map, everything is transitional and provisional, capable of revealing things about the world that history cannot. Bishop's map both depicts the animation and fluidity that exists between seemingly static, bounded territories, and is itself a virtual border, a transitional space mediating between the speaker's inner world and the world at large. It also makes an implicit metapoetic gesture toward the poem as text, suggesting that it too is a border zone, a fluid and complex overlay of intentions and states, somewhere between reality and artifice.

The creation of such borders in poems, and the kinds of encounters, exchanges, and mediations that take place there, is the subject of this dissertation. In both poems by Bishop, the virtual border is mediated by an object, an illustrated surface, and object poems can be excellent examples of how in-between spaces are created and how they function.[3] In this dissertation, however, I will look at other types of poems where virtual borders are brought into being; these include translations and poems "after" other poets; heteronymous poems; and poems that dramatize their own making. These spaces tend to be sites of imaginative overlay, self-reflexivity, and irony. Moreover, they are sites where various kinds of alterity are brought into

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[3] For a study of object poems, including the function of transitional spaces in such poems, see Melissa Feuerstein, "Object Poems," Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 2006.

focus, and where the relation between self and other, and the notion of difference itself, are foregrounded. Some functions of these border zones can seem contradictory. As liminal spaces, they are sites of experimentation, hybridity, and cross-fertilization, but they are also exclusion zones, boundaries that mark the end, as much as the beginning, of possibility. Still, even as boundaries these zones can be highly productive; in a striking paradox, the limitations drawn by these virtual borders can also be liberating – artistically, existentially, and politically.

In *Another Freedom*, Svetlana Boym writes about the "concern for boundaries" that is a necessary condition of personal, political, and artistic freedom. "But how do we understand a boundary," she asks, "as a barrier or a contact zone, as a limit point or a horizon from which the world can be reimagined? Which boundaries are more important? Boundaries between cultures or between the individual and the state? Between private and public or within the self?"[4] The two conceptions of boundary introduced in this series of questions—as a line of demarcation and a zone of exchange and redefinition—are central to my argument. In all the poems I will look at, the constraints not only of form but of all the forces and horizons surrounding poetry are also what make them exciting and surprising, what get them moving and keep them at a pleasurable distance from the reader. On the one hand, virtual borders allow for cultural and linguistic interpenetration and a blurring of lines between binaries; on the other, they reinforce limits, which can themselves prove productive. They also function as checkpoints in the circulation of texts, ideas, and cultural forms. In addition, these borders are sites of potentiality: they raise questions and possibilities, and bring things into existence provisionally. They are zones of suggestion, rather than clear-cut definition.

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[4] Svetlana Boym, *Another Freedom: The Alternative History of an Idea* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 4.

According to Boym, such boundaries, which have the capacity to both constrain and liberate, are best navigated adventurously:

> The experience of freedom is akin to adventure: it explores new borders but never erases or transcends them. [...] Thus the relationships between inside and outside, foreign and native, center and periphery, core and everyday practice are constantly reframed. [...] Adventure opens up porous spaces of border zones, thresholds, bridges, and doors. It is not about experiences of the sublime but of the liminal that expand our potentialities.[5]

Throughout this dissertation we will see poets treading adventurously across and around border zones, reframing, inverting, and destabilizing binaries such as inside/outside, domestic/foreign, and reality/artifice. I argue that poetry that engages virtual borders does so in ways that combine the border as theme (like the map or bible in Bishop's poems) and the border as an element of poetic form. As we shall see, these zones—which Boym figures geopolitically—have analogs in both urban geography and poetic form. In the cityscape, this analog can be found in what theorists of architecture and urban design call in-between spaces, such as side streets, courtyards, and back doors.[6] In poetry, these urban in-between spaces are often associated with adventurous movement and personal and imaginative freedom. In poetic form, the analogs to border zones are occurrences where attention to form is heightened, such as line and stanza breaks, allusion and intertextuality, and the metapoetic line between the fictive space of the poem and the lived space of writing and reading. These analogous sites have something in common: they exhibit a restlessness, a preference for tentativeness and double vision. Of all the arts, poetry, an art form that gravitates toward half-statements, ambiguities, deferrals, and evasions, is particularly well-suited to such explorations.

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[5] Ibid., 5-6.

[6] See, for instance, Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001); Jan Gehl, *Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space*, trans. Jo Koch (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1987); and the essays collected in Karen A. Franck and Quentin Stevens, eds., *Loose Space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2007).

These borders have something in common with Giuliana Bruno's notion of the surface. Bruno proposes her conception of surface as an alternative to the notion of image, emphasizing the surface's materiality: "Understood as the material configuration of the relation between subjects and with objects, the surface is also viewed as a site of mediation and projection."[7] Bruno's conception of the surface is related to the border as explored in this dissertation, but for Bruno, the surface is a film – and in fact she develops her ideas about surfaces as intermediary sites on the basis of cinema. The kind of materiality she examines, then, is that of film, of flat image. According to Bruno, image is (counterintuitively) impure, and these impurities manifest as tactile emanations – "envelopes, textures, traces, and even stains."[8] It is thus related to, but not quite the same as, what I will be looking at, since I am primarily interested in poetic language and poetic space, not visual images. However, I agree with Bruno when, referring to Deleuze, she writes that her idea of surface is "a philosophy of becoming that is capable of rendering the transformation of matter and the movement of the mind as interrelated phenomena."[9]

Elizabeth Grosz has written about the in-between as the space from which all material existence proceeds:

> The in-between is a strange space, not unlike the choric space that Plato, in the *Timaeus*, posed as the condition of all material existence. For Plato, chora is that which, lacking any substance or identity of its own, falls in between the ideal and the material; it is the receptacle or nurse that brings matter into being, without being material; it nurtures the idea into its material form, without being ideal.[10]

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[7] Giuliana Bruno, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 3.

[8] Ibid., 5.

[9] Ibid., 15.

[10] Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 90.

In Grosz's formulation, the in-between is both material and ideal, never entirely one or the other. The kinds of spaces I'm interested in (like those in Bishop's poems) are thus choric spaces, connecting spaces of potential and becoming. Grosz also writes: "The space of the in-between is the locus for social, cultural, and natural transformations: it is not simply a convenient space for movements and realignments but in fact is the only place—the place around identities, between identities—where becoming, openness to futurity, outstrips the conservational impetus to retain cohesion and unity."[11] Finally, referring to Henri Bergson as one of the first to give serious thought to the in-between in the modern era, she writes: "Instead of conceiving of relations between fixed identities, between entities or things that are only externally bound, the in-between is the only space of movement, of development or becoming: the in-between defines the space of a certain virtuality, a potential that always threatens to disrupt the operations of the identities that constitute it."[12] In-between municipal and architectural spaces lend themselves to ways of thinking, moving, and imagining that defy logic; they can arrange themselves into uncanny topographies with shifting borders and collapsible distances – something Deleuze and Guattari noted in their analysis of architectural spaces in Kafka's writing.[13]

In the following chapters, I will analyze works by three twentieth-century Russian poets: Osip Mandelstam (1891-1938), Leonid Aronzon (1939-1970), and Elena Shvarts (1948-2010). I argue that these three poets constructed virtual poetic borders in order to dramatize the otherwise

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[11] Ibid., 91.

[12] Ibid., 92.

[13] "And, in fact, if it is true that each block-segment has an opening or a door onto the line of the hallway – one that is usually quite far from the door or the opening of the following block – it is also true that all the blocks have back doors that are contiguous. This is the most striking topography in Kafka's work, and it isn't only a 'mental' topography: two diametrically opposed points bizarrely reveal themselves to be in contact." Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature,* trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 73.

implicit relations of poetry to the mind, to the reader (and literary establishment), and to tradition. My dissertation therefore focuses on moments of self-conscious or self-reflexive play, and on instances where poetry seems to stand out into the region of metapoetic concerns: the process of writing (and of poetic thinking independent of writing); the circulation of texts, ideas, and images; the formation (and deformation) of traditions. I have chosen these three poets because the creation and crossing of such borders is crucial to their poetics, and also because, for all three, the in-between was a way to bridge aesthetic concerns and historical realities, to speak to their positions as marginalized, unsanctioned (in Mandelstam's case endangered) authors while appearing to be engaged in something completely beside the point, e.g., translating Renaissance sonnets (Mandelstam), experimenting with typography (Aronzon), or speaking as a nun with mystical powers (Shvarts). All three poets, it should be noted, wrote from the periphery of literary history in their time (though they were marginalized in different ways), yet were deeply versed in tradition and thought a good deal about their place in it. This is why so much of their border-creation and border-crossing takes place in the context of tradition, which can itself serve many purposes: to show history repeating, to sanction what the contemporary establishment will not, to serve as raw material for a personal canon, to act as both a source of authority in the absence of credible authority, and as a challenge to the usurpers at the helm of a discredited literary establishment. Although the works I will look at may seem unconcerned with the realities of their time and place (falconry? indoor gardens? nuns riding dragons?), closer inspection reveals that even their eclecticism served an important historical function, by creating alternative traditions that could substitute for, or even repair (at least in an imaginary way), a literary tradition fractured by top-down control. Chronologically, the works I look at span a difficult period in Russian literary history, from the consolidation of statewide creative control in

the 1930s, to the first relaxations of this control in the 1950s and 60s, to the emergence of a

parallel, unsanctioned literary establishment that lasted until the Soviet Union's disintegration.

As we shall see, a fraught relationship to power is at the very heart of all three poets' work, as

are strategies for wresting something from power, evading it, or even assuming its mantle.

In part, the creation and functioning of virtual borders in these three poets' work is about

the exercise of creative power to escape, challenge, or mirror other forms of power. In analyzing

their poems, I am interested in how virtual borders relate to poetic and cultural exchange,

encounters with various forms of alterity, questions of metapoetics and self-reflexive play,

negotiations between the abstract and material aspects of poetic language and imagery, and the

relationship between poetic tradition and historical reality. With Mandelstam, I will look at three

groups of poems written in late 1933-early 1934: a cycle of eight-line poems called the *Octets*

(*Vos'mistishiia*), translations of four sonnets by Petrarch, and a loose cycle written on the death

of Andrei Bely. Drawing on Mandelstam's long essay about the *Divine Comedy*, "Conversation

about Dante" (*Razgovor o Dante*), also written in 1933, and on the ideas of Russian Formalist

critics (the poet's contemporaries and interlocutors), I will show how Mandelstam developed a

conception of the poetic image that allowed him to comment obliquely on the creation,

circulation, and appropriation of poetry in three different, but overlapping, contexts: "poems

about cognition" (as Mandelstam himself characterized the Octets), erotic poems (the Petrarch

translations), and elegies for a great poet (the Bely cycle). In the *Octets*, geographical space and

historical time are effaced to the point of abstraction, and the focus shifts onto the space and time

of poetry itself. In the Petrarch sonnets, translation becomes a strategy for staging encounters

between geographically and historically distant cultures, creating a hybrid poetics that reroutes

these cultural distances via the Russian poetic tradition. And in the Bely cycle, Mandelstam

imagines the process (slow, almost glacial, but inevitable) by which a dead poet is bound to a culture that is ambivalent about poetry—if not inimical to it—even as it vaunts its admiration. In all three groups of poems, Mandelstam valorizes the dynamism, mutability, and evasiveness of what he calls "poetic material," treating classic figures (such as the poet, the beloved, and the crowd) as test cases for radical experiments in ensuring the vitality (and, by extension, the survival) of poetry in the face of an emerging cultural freeze.

Aronzon, a key figure in unofficial Soviet poetry of the 1950s and 60s, wrote dreamy, introspective poems that strike many who first encounter them as haphazard and amateurish; or, at the other extreme, so marvelous that little can be said about them. The bafflement inspired by his poetry has kept him on the margins of the Russian poetic canon, despite his almost saint-like status among the underground poets of the 1970s and 80s. Many of the poems he wrote after 1963, particularly his sonnets, call attention to their form and to the process of their own construction as material objects. These poems bring the reader into an enclosed, resonant space, a dream-world apparently unconcerned with history or everyday reality. With their limited lexicon and disorienting (sometimes deceptive) simplicity, and through their use of self-similarity, reflection, and mise-en-abyme, these poems seem to open inward onto a *locus amoenus* – a space apart from history. And yet, as I hope to show, by drawing attention to their artificial construction, these poems playfully engage the reader at the border between poetic and metapoetic spaces, a strategy Aronzon developed through experiments with typescript, visual poetry, and multiples – the materials of homegrown poetic composition and circulation outside the Soviet publishing industry. Aronzon's metapoetic play is foregrounded through his use of framing devices and facilitated by interartistic discourse – juxtapositions and crossings among poetry, visual art, and music. I argue that the unique reading experience afforded by Aronzon's

poems—and the aura of perplexity surrounding them—stem both from these metapoetic and interartistic border-crossings and from the way Aronzon situates himself within the Russian poetic tradition. Indeed, Aronzon's movement among different art forms, and his use of self-reflexive irony and slow, resistant language, are important aspects of his engagement with tradition. In his poetry, Aronzon draws on both venerable and marginalized or forgotten strands of Russian poetry—from the baroque to the Golden Age, from classic poets to graphomaniacs—to create a personal canon, a homespun alternative to the official Soviet curriculum. Aronzon created this personal canon for himself and a small circle of friends and acquaintances, and yet—through metapoetic and interartistic play—his poetry comments on the very processes of poetic composition and circulation, and on notions of poetic success and failure. Aronzon's idea of artistic tradition is intentionally minor, even as it overturns the very categories of major and minor art.

Shvarts, part of the generation of underground Leningrad poets who idolized Aronzon, wrote poems in a wide range of genres and voices, including some whose authorship she attributed to historical or fictional personae. Much of her poetry and prose deals with creativity, both as a means to an end (making art), and as an end in itself; even as a means, however, creativity can serve a variety of ends besides artistic production. I will focus on two works by Shvarts that examine numerous modes of creativity, most of which play out in a transitional space between art and life. My argument also looks at the complex relationship these transitional modes of creativity have to power; indeed, in Shvarts's work power itself is a polysemous term, referring (by turns or simultaneously) to political might, everyday coercion, and the driving force behind creative activity. I will consider Shvarts's thoughts on the uses and abuses of power, and its relation to in-between modes of creativity, first in her 2010 biography of the Italian poet and

statesman Gabriele D'Annunzio, then in her heteronymous poetic cycle "The Works and Days of Lavinia, a Nun of the Order of the Circumcision of the Heart" (*Trudy i dni Lavinii, monakhini iz ordena Obrezaniia Serdtsa*, 1984). Both are works of layered mediation; for the D'Annunzio book, Shvarts assumes the role of an unbiased biographer, treading a fine line between admiration for his poetic brilliance and daring, and censure of his narcissism and cruelty. *Works and Days* is even more complexly mediated: the poems are ostensibly written by a nun at a monastery whose geographical coordinates are blurred; they are "found" by fellow nun, who adds a poem of her own to the sheaf before sending it to a (fictional) psychiatrist – who acts as the purported editor and publisher of the volume (he too appends an introductory note).

In the biography, Shvarts shows how D'Annunzio moved gradually from purely artistic production to a new form of political creativity that ended in dictatorship. For Shvarts, D'Annunzio's entire life—his love affairs, military exploits, and political career—grew out of the same impulse as his poetry. I hope to show that this conception of D'Annunzio's creativity as an all-encompassing force that moves between literary and extraliterary modes draws on fin-de-siècle notions of life-creation (*zhiznetvorchestvo*), and that Shvarts imagines her subject's creative development in terms of ever-widening circles of power and charisma. Meanwhile, in the Lavinia cycle Shvarts explores a different model of in-between creativity, one that is more concerned with private experience, healing, and consolation as modes of creative activity. Yet even here, creativity is inseparable from power, and in the poems written in her name, Lavinia meditates on creative power as a source of both beauty and injustice.

For all three poets, creating and moving between virtual borders provides a way to explore the nuances and limits of self-knowledge and self-definition: coming to know oneself as a free individual, and at the same time as a Soviet citizen – a sometimes uncomfortable or

conflicting dual identification. In most of the poems I will look at, the process of self-knowledge is foregrounded, while conclusions and firm definitions are deferred. The encounters and processes that occur at these borders overlay, and sometimes even erase, bounded markers of identity in order to bring about new, hybrid forms of culture and selfhood. Both encountering and imagining Otherness has always been crucial to Russian self-definition, but the political apparatus has tended to coopt these encounters and imaginings in efforts to consolidate national identity and further national interests. The poets in this dissertation, on the other hand, find inventive ways to dodge such state-serving paradigms. In so doing, they offer an alternative to both the meaning of selfhood and of Russianness.[14]

My focus is on the historical period from the consolidation of power under Stalin until the end of Stagnation (1933-1984), a period that spans both high and late Soviet cultures. This was a time when distinctly Soviet cultural forms became fixed, and when the USSR's political and cultural missions, both at home and on the world stage, took definite shape.[15] It is during periods like these, when cultural forms appear most stable, that ambiguous, alternative, superfluous, and experimental works of art gain urgent political significance – even (perhaps especially) when these aesthetically divergent works seem apolitical. Also important, particularly

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[14] The poet's uneasy position as both a participant in (and even contributor to) national narratives and simultaneously a marginal figure within these narratives is certainly not unique to the Soviet period, and poetry has used virtual border-crossing as a way to comment on the paradoxes of this position across cultures and historical periods. However, between the 1930s and 1980s the problem of the poet's dual identification became especially acute, in large part because of the rift between the official literary establishment and poets working outside of this establishment. All three poets in this dissertation were working at the margins of Soviet culture, and yet the idea of a continuous poetic tradition was extremely important to them.

[15] For an account of Soviet cultural consolidation in the 1930s as a project of lateral and diachronic appropriation, see Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931-1941* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). Clark is particularly attuned to the role of literature, and literary translation, in this process. For the 1960s as the period that saw both the consolidation of "High Sovietness" as a coherent complex of cultural forms, and the proliferation of contradictions and anxieties in connection with this consolidation, see Petr Vail' and Aleksandr Genis, *60-e: Mir sovetskogo cheloveka* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1988).

in the late Soviet context, is the idea of the social parasite or loafer as a positive figure, someone whose exclusion from the official workday frees them up for an "other" existence, whose forms of life are projected onto, but distinct from, the Soviet everyday as conceived by the state.[16] Furthermore, the three poets in this dissertation reveal the foreign layers contained within the Russian language, in loan words, calques, and transplanted syntactic patterns. They also experiment with making Russian sound strange, decentering it from a "native" ideal, often by following foreign models of prosody, using a naïve or primitivist poetics, or playing with the sensations and intensities their poems convey. In fact, I argue that poetic intensities and other metapoetic formal attributes (e.g., sensations of rising and falling, intentionally weak or tedious passages, lines that astonish, lend themselves to memorization, or are quickly forgotten, etc.), are crucial to how Russian poets and critics have understood Russian poetry's formation in relation to foreign models. Here, the intersection of poetry and rhetoric is useful as well. This way of thinking about poetry is close to the eighteenth century, and part of my argument is that the twentieth century, and especially the "high" Soviet period, had a lot in common with the eighteenth as far as ideas about the functions of poetry, its role in shaping national identity, and its extensive engagement with foreign material.[17]

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[16] On social parasitism as both a legal concept and ethos, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Social Parasites: How Tramps, Idle Youth, and Busy Entrepreneurs Impeded the Soviet March to Communism," *Cahiers du Monde russe*, Vol. 47, No. 1/2 (2006), 377-408; and Tat'iana Lastovka, "Tuneiadstvo v SSSR (1961-1991): iuridicheskaia teoriia i sotsial'naia praktika," *Antropologicheskii forum*, No. 14 (2011), 212-229. Incidentally, a parallel can be drawn between the unofficial Leningrad poets of the 1970s and 80s and the aesthetic and philosophical program of the New York City hip-hop collective the Wu-Tang Clan. Wu-Tang's tracks often reference stairwells and other labyrinthine, half-hidden urban spaces, and overlay East Asian mythology and geography onto the urban grid of New York. Moreover, their musical production is influenced by Kung-Fu movies, additionally mediated through stilted American dubbing.

[17] This affinity between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly in terms of their poetries' respective "orientations" [*ustanovki*] toward extra-literary series, was noted by the Formalist critic Yurii Tynianov. See, for instance, "The Ode as an Oratorical Genre" ["Oda kak oratorskii zhanr"] in *Poetika. Istoriia literatury. Kino,* ed. A Chudakov, M. Chudakova, and E. Toddes (Moscow: Nauka, 1977), 227-52.

It's also important to note that the poets I look at worked outside, or on the fringes, of official policies whose purpose was to regulate interactions between the domestic and foreign, and to shape Russian conceptions of both "exotic" Soviet territories and distant foreign lands. Such an official project wasn't unique to Soviet policy; Russia has always tried to regulate such interactions and conceptions, at least since the rise of Muscovy in the sixteenth century. But the poets in this dissertation (and many others who aren't here) engaged with foreign material and conceived of Soviet lands and the entire map of the world and the USSR in it, in ways that mostly diverged from the official paradigm. Along the way, they drew on a range of cultural sources in order to create a highly syncretic and personal vision of Russianness in the Soviet period, and of the Soviet Union's place in world culture.

A key aspect of my argument is that these three poets combine the visual and tactile in their construction of virtual borders. By emphasizing the materiality of their vision, figuring cognitive and imaginative movement in terms of physical sensation, they conjure an image of poetic space that is at once abstract and tangible; moreover, this image of poetic space suggests that poems are not hermetically sealed, "well-wrought" objects of contemplation, but mutable, porous zones whose intrusions on the reader's sensibility convey their own physical reality, the fact that they, too, are bodies undergoing change in the world. The immediacy of poetic language as felt experience locates not just the creative, but even the institutional mechanisms of poetry— its circulation, appropriation, marginalization, and erasure—in the body, projecting metapoetic drama as visceral experience. At the same time, by representing vision, memory, and desire through embodied sensation, they perform the incarnation of language (which ties in to a theological current in Russian philology), and make the self—a self that is at once physical and spiritual—both an important nexus in the world-maps they draw and a circumscribed but porous

cosmographical space in its own right. Many of these poems play out along these thresholds between self and other – whether a "you" or "it," some notion of the divine, or simply an unknowable beyond. These movements emphasize spaces that are cross-cultural, fluid, and phantasmagoric. They dismantle traditional zones, boundaries, notions, and histories, and in their place chart new itineraries that are fleeting, provisional, and aspirational; itineraries that correspond to what Svetlana Boym calls a "third way."[18]

The rest of the introduction is devoted to three topics where these questions of virtual borders—and the imaginary geographies, encounters and overlays between the foreign and the domestic, collapsing and ballooning of distances, and liminal and decentered ways of being that happen at these borders—are foregrounded: translation, topography, and touch. This will allow me to embed the theoretical orientations of my study while drawing on the three poets as examples, thus introducing their ways of writing and thinking without laying out a separate (potentially tedious) theoretical framework. I'll begin with translation, a practice that stages encounters between languages and cultures, and also activates latent potentialities within target languages. Translation, moreover, can be understood as movement not just between languages, but between other cultural forms as well. From there I'll turn to topography, asking how the representation of place gives rise to notions of limit, and how such liminal sites can occur throughout real and imaginary spaces, not just at their periphery. I will pay particular attention to the relationship between topography and selfhood, and show how these poets drew on a multiplicity of topological models, from cosmography to urban geography, from the pastoral

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[18] Borrowing Viktor Shklovsky's idea of the knight's move, Boym describes the third way as the path of the "off-modern," that which "involves exploration of the side alleys and lateral potentialities of the project of critical modernity. In other words, it opens into the 'modernity of what if' rather than simply modernization as it is." *Another Freedom*, 9.

locus amoenus to the world stage. Finally, with touch, I will look at the material dimension of virtual borders in poetry and think about the haptic as a meaningful mode of engagement within a virtual space, a way of keeping things visceral in a world of appearances and abstractions.

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Translation

I am interested in translation not just as a literary practice but as a topos and an attitude: a highly charged space simultaneously between and within languages and cultures, a way of relating to foreign material, and, in particular, a way of estranging and expanding one's relation to one's "native" traditions. In this sense, translation is characterized primarily by disjunction and distance. Furthermore, translated literary texts have a unique relationship to their target language. For one thing, translations (at least those that aren't just trying to be as smooth as possible) tend to sound and feel unlike works originally written in the target language. The writing is distanced from its own language, unsettled from it. As such, translation resembles mise-en-abyme: it doesn't so much express something directly as it embodies a gesture. For Walter Benjamin, this gesture is directed at a process: the restoration of a single "true" language whose final form exists only in a messianic future: "Not only does the intention of a translation address or differ from that of a literary work—namely a language as a whole, taking an individual work in an alien language as a point of departure—but it is also qualitatively different altogether. The intention of the poet is spontaneous, primary, manifest; that of the translator is derivative, ultimate, ideational. For the great motif of integrating many tongues into one true

language informs his work."[19] Benjamin sees the alienation of one's own language and culture as crucial to the translator's work; in "The Task of the Translator" he quotes Rudolf Pannwitz, who distinguishes between the work of timid translators and what he believes an ideal translation should do in terms of an openness to foreign influence: "The basic error of the translator is that it preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. Particularly when translating from a language very remote from his own he must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where work, image, and tone converge. He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language."[20]

There are many ways translation can expand and deepen the translator's language; often, it involves going back in time through linguistic and cultural layers, finding equivalents that touch tangentially, another feature of translation noted by Benjamin. Mandelstam's translations of Petrarch feature precisely this kind of tangential contact between translation and original. Translations also have a unique function vis-à-vis the development of the target language, something that comes across not just in the history of the language, but in the translation itself. Mandelstam's Petrarch translations don't just transplant Petrarch into Russian; they reveal hidden layers of the Russian language itself, and arrange those layers into previously unthought-of relations. And in Shvarts's quasi-translations, the distancing, estrangement, and gestural quality of translation are foregrounded as devices and exploited for aesthetic purposes – to add

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[19] Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 259.

[20] Ibid., p. 81. Paul de Man identified alienation as a key component of the translator's work according to Benjamin, noting that "this alienation is at its strongest in our relation to our own original language." Paul de Man, "'Conclusions' Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator' Messenger Lecture, Cornell University, March 4, 1983," *Yale French Studies*, No. 69 (1985), 37.

layers of mediation to the text, and remove it from any definitive sphere of authorship. This, in turn, allows Shvarts to take creative risks that wouldn't otherwise be available to her.

In Russia, translation has always played a singularly important role in linguistic, cultural, and political development. During the medieval period, cultural forms such as church architecture and religious iconography were adapted from Byzantine models in a process that had analogs in the political sphere (the doctrine of *translatio imperii* by which earthly power and divine mandate were symbolically translated from the Byzantine Empire to Kievan Rus' and later Muscovy), and in the development of the literary language (through the translation of the Greek Septuagint, which is still seen by many Russian authors as embodying the highest ideals of literary translation).[21] Translation continued to serve an important function in the modern period; in the eighteenth century, following Peter the Great's large-scale Westernizing reforms, there was a massive translation boom, particularly of poetry. As poets translated foreign works into Russian, they adapted a variety of literary forms that would become canonical for Russian poetry, and experimented with poetic language, stanzaic structure, and meter to determine the direction Russian poetry would take. Though early on, the culture with the greatest influence on Russian literature was French (and the Classics, which Russians primarily absorbed through the French), over time Russian culture became increasingly syncretic, even as many authors sought to define a distinctively Russian aesthetic through their work. Poetry in particular proved a key site where foreign influence was both sought out and contested. The eighteenth-century ode,

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[21] See, among others, the contemporary Russian poet Ol'ga Sedakova, "Iskusstvo perevoda. Neskol'ko zamechanii. Lektsiia, prochitannaia v Britanskom Muzee," in Ol'ga Sedakova, *Chetyre toma: stikhi, perevody, poetica, moralia* (Moscow: Universitet Dmitriia Pozharskogo, 2010), Vol. 2, 16-31. For an overview of cultural translation in medieval Rus', see Dimitri Stremoukhoff, "Moscow the Third Rome: Sources of the Doctrine," *Speculum* 28 (1953), 84-101. On *translatio imperii* as a cultural and political principle in eighteenth-century Russia, see Stephen L. Baehr, "From History to National Myth: *Translatio imperii* in Eighteenth-Century Russia," *The Russian Review*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (January 1978), 1-13.

nineteenth-century elegy and poetic "song," and fin-de-siècle Symbolist lyric (to give three important examples) were products of complex and sometimes hostile negotiations between a desire to imitate foreign models and a competing desire to forge a natively Russian poetic tradition.

In fact, the question of foreign influence on Russian poetry was even more complicated than this summary might suggest. In his study of nineteenth-century Russian poet Fyodor Tiutchev and Tiutchev's German contemporary, Heinrich Heine, the Formalist critic Yuri Tynianov argued that foreign influence on a national literature is often mediated in complex ways by extant (and sometimes latent) traditions within that national literature. Analyzing Tiutchev's translations of Heine's *Lieder*, Tynianov concludes that Tiutchev adapted Heine's Romantic verse by rerouting it through eighteenth-century Russian poetry, particularly the work of Gavrila Derzhavin: "foreign material thus provided Tyutchev with a pretext, an occasion for creating works which, in terms of the Russian tradition, can be traced back to the eighteenth century."[22] In this view, translation is not so much a direct exchange among contemporaries as an enrichment of culture from within, using foreign material as a pretext or catalyst for the revival and transformation of ideas, trends, and styles that were already present in the target language's historical-linguistic substrate, and their expression in new, culturally hybrid forms. Tynianov sums up Tiutchev's triangular relationship to contemporary European Romanticism and the Russian eighteenth century as follows: "[M]any of [Tiutchev's] poems seem like illustrations of, or even polemical speeches on, various key issues of romanticism. But it is precisely in relation to Derzhavin that Tyutchev—a successor of Derzhavin, a protégé of Raich,

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[22] Yuri Tynianov, "Tiutchev and Heine," in *Permanent Evolution*, ed. and trans. Ainsley Morse and Philip Redko (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, forthcoming).

and a student of Merzlyakov—emerges as the heir to the eighteenth century philosophical and political ode and intimate lyric poem."[23] In some ways, this view is comparable to Benjamin's ideas about translation's role in the enrichment of a target language, but Tynianov is not interested in Ur-languages or messianic time; his aim—here as elsewhere—is to show how literary history is not one continuous line, and how the routes between literary cultures are often circuitous and oblique.[24]

In the 1920s and 30s, the Soviet government embarked on a massive statewide translation project. In scope, this project—headed by Maxim Gorky—resembled the wholesale appropriation of Western cultural templates that took place in the early eighteenth century, but its aims were different. As Maria Khotimsky has argued, "[c]reating an image of a progressive state concerned with mass education and questions of world culture became part of the ideological agenda of the Bolshevik government."[25] The World Literature Publishing House (*Vsemirnaia literatura*) was meant to reflect Soviet ideals of internationalism, to be inclusive and comprehensive in a way that American culture, for instance, was not, and at the same time to emphasize the universal values shared by all the world's peoples. This project also had strong imperialist undertones, and the literatures of Soviet ethnic minorities were among the first works to be translated into Russian. While on the face of it, this project was meant to foster

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[23] Ibid.

[24] The circuitousness of movement within and between cultures is also a theme taken up by Viktor Shklovsky in *The Knight's Move* [Khod konia]; Svetlana Boym extrapolates from Shklovsky's conception of the knight's move as a "third way" of moving through cultural and historical reality when she writes: "Oblique, diagonal, and zigzag moves reveal the play of human freedom vis-à-vis political teleologies and ideologies that follow suprahuman laws of the invisible hand of the market or of the march of progress. As we veer off the beaten track of dominant constructions of history, we have to proceed laterally, not literally, and discover the missed opportunities and roads not taken." Svetlana Boym, "The Off-Modern Mirror," in *e-flux* #19 (October 2010), online at https://www.e-flux.com/journal/19/67475/the-off-modern-mirror/. Last accessed November 28, 2018.

[25] Maria Khotimsky, "World Literature, Soviet Style: A Forgotten Episode in the History of the Idea." *Ab Imperio*, 3/2013, 125.

"brotherhood among the peoples," it had more sinister consequences as well. As Khotimsky explains: "This policy prompted a heavy investment in literature and translation, which were heralded as means of advancing local cultures, but in fact it helped establish the hegemony of the Russian language, and introduced even greater official control over literature and the arts."[26] At the same time, the Soviet school of translation associated with the World Literature Publishing House emphasized accessibility and a kind of generalized "lyricism," resulting in a house style that many translators found creatively restrictive. To quote Khotimsky: "Soviet translators often tended to alter strange poetic material in order to make it sound familiar to Russian readers...The years of censorship control that limited access to new developments in Western literature, along with persistent cultivation of a specific poetic style, did result in a certain immunity to innovation and a resistance to poetic forms untypical for the Russian literary tradition (such as free verse, minimalism, or visual poetry)."[27] Furthermore, as Ilya Kukulin points out, the translation industry in the USSR had a system of filters in place that regulated what entered Soviet public consciousness, and in what form. One goal of this system was to block European modernist traditions in Soviet cultural spaces; whatever modernist impulses did make it through were re-signified in the spirit of collectivization, progressivism, and pseudo-realism.[28]

It was at the height of the *Vsemirnaia literatura* translation project that Mandelstam wrote the *Octets*, Petrarch translations, and poems for Bely. His own feelings about the project were mixed; despite his reputation as one of the leading poets in Russia, his involvement in the

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[26] Khotimsky, "A Remedy for Solitude: Russian Poet-Translators in the Soviet and Post-Soviet Eras," Ph.D. Dissertation, Harvard University, 2011, 161-2.

[27] Ibid., 94.

[28] Ilya Kukulin, "Rol' stikhotvornogo perevoda v tvorchestve russkikh poetov 1990-2000-kh godov," in *Poesia Russa da Puškin a Brodskij. E Ora?* Ed. Claudia Scandura. Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi Roma, 29-30 settembre 2011 (Rome: Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2012), 157.

project was limited. He viewed the project's lofty aims with skepticism; with their methodical exhaustiveness and onerous stylistic oversight, they differed sharply from his own views on world culture and the role of translation within it. Mandelstam's ironic attitude toward the official Soviet conception of World Literature can be seen in a short poem satirizing the project, which he penned in the same months he wrote the two cycles.[29]

After a period of cultural isolationism in the 1930s-50s, the Khrushchev era saw a relaxation of censorship, and literary works (and other cultural products) were able to move more freely in and out of the Soviet Union, especially via translation. Writers who grew up during this period, including Aronzon and, to a lesser extent, Shvarts, had unprecedented access to foreign books, periodicals, and records, which circulated privately among friends and acquaintances. Exposure to these works was instrumental in shaping these writers' own texts. Khotimsky sums up the influence of translated foreign material on poets: "The change towards first-hand experience of the foreign text and readiness to internalize foreign poetic styles marked the paradigmatic shift in the ways younger poets approached translation. Such early experience of translation made poets more receptive to different poetic systems, and opened untapped possibilities for literary learning and experimentation."[30]

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[29] The poem is called "Tatary, Uzbeki, i Nentsy" [Tatars, Uzbeks, and Nenetses]. I quote it here in its entirety:

Татары, узбеки и ненцы,	Tatars, Uzbeks and Nenetses
И весь украинский народ,	and the whole Ukrainian people
И даже приволжские немцы	and even the Germans on the Volga
К себе переводчиков ждут.	are waiting for their translators.
И, может быть, в эту минуту	And perhaps at this moment
Меня на турецкий язык	some Japanese is translating me
Японец какой переводит	into the Turkish language
И прямо мне в душу проник.	and has penetrated into my very soul.

Translation by R. H. Morrison, in *Poems from Mandelstam* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990), 97.

[30] "A Remedy for Solitude," 214-5.

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Khotimsky makes a strong case for translation as a critical force in the literary life of any era, and in the overall development of national literatures – especially in Russia, where translation has always been at the center, rather than the periphery, of literary activity. But translation can also be thought of figuratively, as a process constitutive of all literature, not only works rendered from one language into another. According to this line of thought, translation's movements across linguistic and cultural borders is generalized to include exchanges and other forms of mediation across more abstract boundaries than the geographical. Here, the notion of foreignness is broadened to cover other kinds of alterity, such as the divine, the animal, and the inhuman. Such abstruse topics as the sources of artistic creation, the role of self-distancing in creativity, and the material dimensions of language, can be conceived within the framework of translation as topos, in addition to its value as a practice. Considered as topos, translation has provided a number of thinkers with the figures they need to express ideas they see as essential to all literature, and especially to poetry.

Many of these ideas hinge on estrangement, which these thinkers see as a fundamental property, or effect, of literature, something crucial to writing and reading as free creative acts.[31] Deleuze and Guattari, for instance, describe what they call the "minorization" of language, a process by which a zone of estrangement is delimited from within one's native speech. Deleuze characterizes the minorization of language as follows:

> What they ["great" writers] do, rather, is invent a minor use of the major language within which they express themselves entirely; they minorize this language, much as in music, where the minor mode refers to dynamic combinations in perpetual disequilibrium. They are great writers by virtue of this minorization: they make the language take flight, they

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[31] These authors use estrangement in various senses, but Viktor Shklovsky's concept of *ostranenie*—sometimes translated as "defamiliarization"—is a particularly useful reference point. With its connotations of spatial estrangement (pushing aside), Shklovsky's concept refers to a technique by which literature challenges the "automatization" of language in order to force readers out of their usual habits of perception and thought. See Viktor Shklovsky, "Art, as Device," trans. and introduced by Alexandra Berlina, *Poetics Today*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (September 2015), 151-74.

send it racing along a witch's line, ceaselessly placing it in a state of disequilibrium, making it bifurcate and vary in each of its terms, following an incessant modulation. This exceeds the possibilities of speech and attains the power of the language, or even of language in its entirety. This means that a great writer is always like a foreigner in the language in which he expresses himself, even if this is his native tongue. At the limit, he draws his strength from a mute and unknown minority that belongs only to him. He is a foreigner in his own language: he does not mix another language with his own language, he carves out a nonpreexistent foreign language within his own language. He makes the language itself scream, stutter, stammer, or murmur.[32]

For Deleuze, a minor use of language is by its very nature political, especially when the text appears to be free of overtly political themes. More often than not, the overtly political gravitates too much toward the signifying functions of language – which Deleuze and Guattari see as complicit in the tyranny of most modern forms of life. Only the minor is truly revolutionary; a minor utilization constructed within a major language allows the writer to "make use of the polylingualism of one's own language...to oppose the oppressed quality of this language to its oppressive quality, to find points of nonculture or underdevelopment, linguistic Third World zones by which a language can escape, an animal enter into things, an assemblage comes into play."[33]

Deleuze singles out the creative "stutterer" as a type especially well-suited to the minor utilization of language. By stuttering, Deleuze means using language without concern for "the flow of speech," but, rather, with close attention to the very "process of language." This use of language is inclusive and reflexive (by which he means that, faced with a selection among similar terms, it is open to including many; and that it tends to circle back on itself in combining these terms, rather than "progressing"). This "stuttering" type of usage creates sound

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[32] Gilles Deleuze, "He Stuttered," in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 109-110.

[33] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature,* trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 27.

orchestrations and other formal elements that are not ornamental "affectations of speech," but rather the very "affect of language"; it thus "puts language in perpetual disequilibrium," which in turn allows creative language to be produced. For Deleuze, creative stuttering can come in many forms, but all of them are oriented toward the limits of language, away from the contractual functions of syntax and signification and toward a kind of affective performance, a "pure dance of words" that correlates "the tension in language and the limit of language."[34]

Anna Glazova has also written about translation as a site of intensive creative activity both between and within languages. Her examples are Mandelstam and Paul Celan; Celan translated several of Mandelstam's poems, and in this act Glazova sees an exemplary instance of poetic dialogue as Mandelstam himself would have understood it. As Glazova notes, the two poets' conception of poetic dialogue was a "means to define one's individual language and, within it, one's poetic existence in relation to time." This definition is achieved by means of "the articulation of individuation through, in and by an other's language." Linguistic and temporal difference work in concert to ground the poet's experience in both language and time, bringing about the poet's presence as a function of alterity. Though the stakes in this exchange are real, it is a dialogue across virtual borders; moreover, the conversation partners whose presence is sought are not flesh-and-blood poets or even images of poets but virtual actors, each one a nexus of linguistic and temporal coordinates. Or, as Glazova puts it: "What Celan identifies as his conversation partner is, thus, not so much the persona of a particular poet but rather the non-synthetic whole of the poet's individual language with all its phonetic, semantic, syntactic and

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[34] "He Stuttered," 111-112.

also intertextual nuances, and its time, which distinguishes this individuality within the totality of poetry."[35]

Glazova also notes that Mandelstam had a broad understanding of translation: "Without explicitly stating this, Mandelstam describes the poetic tradition as translation, if translation means transference of an intention towards language."[36] For Mandelstam (and, later, Celan), poetry lives in the transitory zone between intention and language, or, for translations understood in the narrow sense, between languages and times, as well as between authors. As Glazova writes: "The question of a translation's authorship cannot be univocally answered but it is impossible to deny that translation, in the strict sense, belongs neither to the body of work of the author nor to that of the translator. The transitory status of language in translation propels Celan to respond to Mandelstam by translating his poems."[37] By directing his intention toward the "most foreign" in Mandelstam's poetry—that which "escapes attention, possesses no fixed meaning that may be decoded and manifests itself in a movement of translation from darkness to darkness, from 'you' to 'you'"—Celan emphasizes the transitional nature not only of translation but of poetry in general. In this movement "from darkness to darkness," between terms, languages, and authors, the very "medium of translatability" becomes visible.[38]

The poets I look at in this dissertation were not all translators, and none of them translated extensively. But all three worked in ways that foregrounded translation as trope, as a creative mode intrinsic to all poetry. Furthermore, all three poets entertained philosophies of

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[35] Anna Glazova, "Counter-quotation: The Defiance of Poetic Tradition in Paul Celan and Osip Mandelstam," Ph.D. Dissertation, Northwestern University, 2008, 124-5.

[36] Ibid., 134-5.

[37] Ibid., 135.

[38] Ibid., 137.

cultural exchange that in some ways coincided with mainstream Soviet attitudes and policies, and at the same time took a completely idiosyncratic approach. Mandelstam's Petrarch translations, for instance, were written at the height of the *Vsemirnaia literatura* project, at a time when Mandelstam clearly had translation (in its mandated Soviet forms) on the mind, but the versions he produced would certainly have been rejected by the World Literature Publishing House. These works decenter notions of the foreign and native in ways that activate numerous latent potentialities. The *Octets*, in particular, can be seen as partial translations whose quotation marks have all been blown away; in this, they are even more radical than the Petrarch sonnets. Aronzon did not produce his own translations, but he was deeply influenced by foreign cultures; he loved jazz and foreign literature, and these influences entered his work obliquely, as he made his native Russian strange and intensive in ways that contrast interestingly with Joseph Brodsky, who incorporated foreign material into his work in more transparent ways. Moreover, the prevalence of interartistic discourse in Aronzon's work can also be framed in terms of translation – between art forms, rather than languages. (Aronzon's use of painterly language and imagery in his poetry is an example of this kind of translation.) Finally, Shvarts's pseudo-translations are actually literary mystifications. In these ostensibly derivative works without an original, the process of translation as an exchange between definite terms is effaced, yet "the medium of translatability" remains palpable. Furthermore, the two works by Shvarts I will examine feature numerous instances of translation between creative modes – artistic, religious, and political. In the Lavinia cycle, for example, Shvarts draws on the language and tropes of poetic inspiration to describe mystical sacrifices and the performance of a miracle; and in the D'Annunzio biography, the Romantic conception of poetic improvisation is translated into the context of a political rally.

Thus, translation, understood both as transference between languages and cultures, and more generally as transference between parallel modes, is crucial to all three poets in this dissertation.

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Topography

In thinking about place and the representation of place in poetry, I have chosen the broad term *topography* because I want to cover as many synchronic and diachronic coordinates as possible; geographical, yes, but also historical, theological, philosophical, and even rhetorical. There is a sense in which all writing is topographical; for instance, intertextuality and rhetoric can be conceptualized spatially, as maps of cultural embeddedness and affect respectively.[39] We see this spatial orientation in the very language of rhetoric: one moves or is moved by certain kinds of writing; persuasion is the art of inclining others to your viewpoint; tropes are turns; metaphor is a kind of transfer; and translation is a crossing.[40] Imagination, too, can be represented spatially, as both territory and a means of conveyance through it.[41] For Boym,

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[39] For a still influential discussion of writing as topography, see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1987); for instance: "Writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come." (p. 52.)

[40] Let's look at two words with both geographical and rhetorical meanings, "tropic" and "transport": In geography, the tropics are both parallels of latitude and the zone between these parallels, and are associated with a kind of excess – excessive heat, and also "luxuriant growth." Derived from its astronomical and geographical meanings is another meaning of a tropic – a "turning point; a limit, a boundary; an extreme" – a meaning that is now obsolete. In rhetoric, the tropic refers to the figurative use of language, an imaginative turning (the turn is a discontinuous movement; figurative language such as metaphor emphasizes the disjunction between its terms). Moreover, the turn can be either toward or away, an engagement or a flight. "Transport" can mean carrying or conveyance, and suggests border crossing; in classical rhetoric, it was a synonym for metaphor, and also meant the "transference of a word to a different meaning." With emotion, transport refers to the state "of being 'carried out of oneself'... [into] mental exaltation, rapture, ecstasy." Transport can also denote banishment and exile; sending someone, such as a convict, to a liminal zone to serve out their sentence. Coercion is a common thread in these definitions of "transport." Whether geographical or emotional, transport is something that happens to you, that takes you, either up to a border or across it. (All quotations from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, online at http://www.oed.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/Entry/205016?rskey=396wn1&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid. Last accessed 6/13/18.)

[41] As Svetlana Boym writes in *Another Freedom*, "[Imagination] devises all kinds of 'transports' through metaphors (which derives from the Greek *metaphorein*, to transport), similes, anamorphoses, allegories, and symbols.

imagination moves between distant zones, "bridg[ing] not only spatial but also temporal discontinuities."[42] Far from projecting a neat and orderly alternate universe, imagination calls attention to the messiness of its own efforts, the palimpsests, disruptions, and discontinuities in its fictional "map." It is also capable of bringing alternative realities to life; timelines, geographies, cultures, and dialects which "could have been" or "might become," and which imagination elevates to the status of reality. Imagination can thus have a subversive function vis-a-vis those in power with an interest in creating and maintaining a certain idea of culture. The three poets in this dissertation imagined alternatives to mainstream culture: in his poems of the 1930s, Mandelstam tried to express a Soviet aesthetic that veered sharply from the prescriptions of Socialist Realism. Aronzon's poetry can seem escapist, a fantasy world where the streets of Leningrad open up onto paradisal gardens, a far cry from the socially engaged poetry of the literary establishment and many samizdat poets. Nevertheless, these poems express – however indirectly – the anxieties of an entire generation; the authorial and readerly anxieties of a culture where manuscripts can be extremely perishable and their circulation unpredictable; and the deeply repressed anxieties of a generation who grew up in the shadow of the Second World War and the Leningrad Blockade.

I am particularly interested in the topography of limits. Central to my argument is the idea that topographical limits—whether imagined as outer bounds or fault lines running through a space—are sites of the most intensive and productive tension and activity. The special significance of liminal spaces has for centuries played an important role in Russian geographical

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Imagination entertains the hypothetical, moves through leaps, lapses, and ellipses and engages in double vision. Only through imagination does one have the freedom to picture otherwise, of thinking 'what if' and not only 'what is'. [...] Imagination is not entirely free of cultural common places but is not bound by the borders of a single system of coordinates; it is heteronymous and moves from one country to another without visa restrictions" (p. 27).

[42] Ibid.

representations. In early modern Russian cosmography, special attention was paid to the periphery, which denoted the boundaries of empire, sites of conflict, and thresholds of fascination and possibility. Moreover, Russian cosmographers saw their country's geographical role as a connective one: "the tsardom lay proudly between points on the globe; it linked vastly different lands and peoples; and it contained within its purview a heterogeneous assortment of peoples, faiths, tongues and cultures."[43] These early maps overlaid geography with history, allegory, and fantasy, functioning as a kind of private theater through which one could contemplate the totality of human endeavor in miniature.

Maps are therefore more than just an index; they are an interface, inviting an overlay of memory, imagination, and desire onto the still image, and this both animates the material basis of the map and brings in a human perspective, an avatar. The contemplation of a map becomes an adventure, experienced as a flickering between material and virtual realities. Old historical affinities come to light: Venice can share a border with St. Petersburg (as in Shvarts), or ancient Greece find its echo in modern Crimea (as in Mandelstam). Alternate histories can unfold; bifurcated timelines coexist. Borders themselves—and the idea of contiguity they represent— turn intricate or disjointed. Geography can open out onto intellectual and spiritual topographies. Dante's hell is not just a moral map, but a political one, and similarly, the topographies in these three Russian poets project an idea of Russia that echoes, but also sharply differs from, official historical and geopolitical narratives.

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[43] Valerie A. Kivelson, "'Between All Parts of the Universe': Russian Cosmographies and Imperial Strategies in Early Modern Siberia and Ukraine," *Imago Mundi* Vol. 60, Part 2 (2008), 166-7. With their overlay of texts, illustrations, and geographical bodies, these maps served as virtual portals; exploring the atlas, the reader used a combination of sight and touch, and was guided by an ethos exemplified in the atlas's allegorical framework.

I am also interested in more abstract conceptions of geographical space, such as coordinates, terrestrial and celestial axes, cardinal directions, elevations, and other measures that can be used to either pinpoint space or cross from one zone to another. Deleuze, for instance, frequently invokes lines of flight as a means of escape from the tyranny of signification. We can compare this to Boym's idea of a third way. Both thinkers idealize oblique and evasive movement; both gravitate toward corridors, cellars, side streets, and other liminal architectural spaces. Both reject Cartesian space as an illusory projection of absolute freedom; and constraint, disjunction, and liminality are of great importance to both thinkers.

Then there is Celan, who uses abstract topographical figures to illuminate linkages between poets and cultures, and who ascribes enormous significance to the liminal. Describing Celan's thoughts about a line from Mandelstam ("uslyshat' os' zemnuiu, os' zemnuiu" [to hear the earth's axis, the earth's axis], from "Vooruzhennyi zren'em uzkikh os" [Equipped with the eyesight of narrow wasps]), Anna Glazova notes that "[t]he poet's wish to hear the rotation of the earth's axis is the wish to tune his own existence to a limitless harmony with the existence of the planet. This wish brings the poet to the extreme limit of poetic expression. Poetry, for Mandelstam and for Celan, is an art depicting the 'tiltedness', the asymmetry of earthly existence."[44] And in his "Meridian" speech, Celan uses the meridian as a figure for the poetic encounter as a form of travel: "I find what connects and leads, like the poem, to an encounter. I find something—like language—immaterial, yet terrestrial, something circular that returns to itself across both poles while—cheerfully—even crossing the tropics: I find...a *meridian*."[45] In

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[44] Glazova, 201.

[45] Paul Celan, *The Meridian: Final Version–Drafts–Materials*, ed. Bernhard Böschenstein and Heino Schmull with assistance from Michael Schwarzkopf and Christiane Wittkop; trans. Pierre Joris (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 12.

his notes on poetry, Celan speaks of the life of a poem in terms of perihelions, erosions, and re-routings. As he writes: "The poem is the detour from you to you; it is the route. It is also the route of language to itself, its becoming visible and mortal."[46]

Starting in the 1920s, Mandelstam's poetry combined natural and literary topological features, combinations that recur and form a kind of imaginary cosmography in his work. This cosmography is elemental, but the elements have unusual properties: the sky, for instance, is associated with death; it corresponds to heaven, but is also positivist in its hardness, which Mandelstam literalizes. Earth, by contrast, is spacious, unbounded. Air is net-like, adhesive. As for slate, rock, and steam, these are all highly allusive elements, and Mandelstam's poems of the 1920s and 30s often seem as though they are set in a place that is constructed out of intertexts, writing materials, and natural elements in a peculiar kind of harmony.[47] Mandelstam was also interested in correspondences between spatial and mental topographies; in the poetic groupings I will look at, Mandelstam uses Dante's cosmography as a model for spatializing poetry as an intermediary, dynamic zone where images form and disperse without lingering. By contrast, Aronzon's topography is constructed from Escheresque or allegorical figures. The key places in his poetry are the *locus amoenus* and the *hortus conclusus*, classical and medieval topoi that are imaginary and at the same time densely allusive. This is in keeping with Aronzon's highly self-reflexive poetics, where the poem often gestures at its own coming into being, and the interplay or boundary between poetic space and the metapoetic space of the writer and reader, becomes fertile ground for imaginative play. Aronzon's gardens, parks, and landscapes—pastoral settings traditionally associated with ekphrastic writing, intertextuality, and meditations on the nature of

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[46] Ibid., 113.

[47] Indeed, a work such as Omry Ronen's *An Approach to Mandelstam* can be seen as an atlas to Mandelstam's intertextual topography.

poetry and poetic tradition—are also perfectly suited to Aronzon's experiments with interartistic discourse, and with fashioning a personal poetic canon without hierarchies. Finally, in Shvarts, numerous topographical features, such as the four cardinal directions (to which Shvarts adds a mystical fifth) and the classical elements—each one associated with a habitat as well—are bound up in corporeal and spiritual regions. These, in turn, are mapped onto a cosmic topography. The blurring or erasure of the body's limits into the topography of the cosmos is in line with Shvarts's overall tendency in her poems to slip out from under categories even as she names and constructs them; and how she favors the mercurial, flowing, and transforming — though this flowing and changing does come up against walls, sharp edges, and other boundaries (including the body). Shvarts's idea of Russia, too, is porous, and she tends to imagine Russian culture as something not just expansive but inclusive; something that can accommodate Catholic as well as Orthodox saints, angels and demons together with "lamas and Buddhas," and talking animals. While she mentions Russian place names in some poems, in many others—including *The Works and Days of Lavinia*—the setting is neither Russian nor not Russian, but somewhere other and in between, "where Permian woods and Thuringian Forest are interwoven."[48] The mystical, inclusive topography of the Lavinia cycle makes a striking contrast with the historical topography of the D'Annunzio biography. There, Shvarts's detailed descriptions of geographic regions and political systems conjure up an image of early twentieth-century Europe as a world stage, a space waiting to be transfigured by a poet who believed poetic power was transferable to all spheres of human activity, that it could literally shape history.

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Touch

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[48] Shvarts, Elena. *Sochineniia Eleny Shvarts* (St. Petersburg: Pushkinskii Fond, 2002-), Vol. 2, 168.

One thing that interests me is how poets emphasize the physicality of virtual borders—between different languages and cultures, poem and reader, material and idea—as though, for all their abstraction, they were particularly dense and tactile. Virtual borders aren't unique to poetry, but they function differently in poetry than in other art forms, and I believe a consideration of the tactile dimension of language, and of poetic language in particular, is important for understanding what distinguishes poetry from other artforms in terms of how virtual boundaries are constructed, and what kinds of encounters and exchanges take place there. Furthermore, the singular status of poetic language in the Russian tradition, with its theological emphasis on the corporeality of the Word (*Logos*), makes the Russian context an especially interesting one for thinking about the physicality of virtual borders.

This physicality manifests itself in a variety of poetic figures, formal features, and even in individual word choices. These words and figures aren't always overtly related to the senses, but they produce a sensory response in the reader; and I want to figure out how they do this by setting the poems next to theories about the relationship between writing and sense perception – especially the so-called lower senses, such as touch. I also want to understand the poets' own conceptions of poetic material, or of poetry as material; this is a particular concern of Chapter One, where I pay close attention to Mandelstam's ideas about poetic material, which he expressed in essay form. I hope to articulate what it is that makes poetic language feel textured and responsive to forces acting on it. These forces can produce sensations of tension, torsion, piercing, splitting, and wrenching in the virtual space between reader and poem (it's hard to say if these sensations occur in the poem or the reader, or both). Sometimes these sensations are like proof of the vitality of poetic language; other times proof of its precision, or its ability to enact the very thing it describes. Another possibility is that these poets tend to figure words as

instruments—tools, weapons, or simply transmitters of aesthetic sensation—and at the same time as the receptive material in which these sensations are inscribed; as Irina Paperno puts it, "words themselves become both sharp instruments and vulnerable flesh."[49]

For Susan Stewart, poetry acts on our imaginations primarily through sensory figures; the experience of reading is coded into the poem by formal means, which convey private sensation through measured language: "As poetry establishes rhythms into measures, as it forms the coincidence of rhymes into patterns of expectation and surprise, sensations internal to individual persons are carried over into context-independent forms of tension and release. This is not simply a making public of private sensations: it also gives form to the chaos, and even pain of such private sensations for those persons who bear them."[50] Stewart emphasizes the primacy of touch among the senses, even though it has typically been relegated to the bottom of the sensory hierarchy. The kind of poetic apprehension I am interested in here, and that Stewart talks about at length, is one that combines synesthesia and kinesthesia, in which both the sound of words and the poet's vision are communicated through figures of touch. Drawing on thinkers from Aristotle (who noted a parallelism between what is acute or grave to the ear and sharp or blunt to the touch) to Ernest G. Schachtel (for whom touch was unique among the senses in that it was both autocentric and allocentric), Stewart notes that "[l]yric poetry in particular, as the expression and record of the image of the first-person speaker across and through historical and cultural contexts, provides us with a form on the boundary among sense impressions, somatic memory, individuation of agency, and social context."[51] Of all the senses, touch is the most active at

[49] Irina Paperno, "O prirode poeticheskogo slova: Bogoslovskie istochniki spora Mandel'shtama s simvolizmom," *Literaturnoe obozrenie,* no. 1 (1991), 36.

[50] Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 152.

[51] Ibid., 41.

borders, since it is through touch that linkage across borders comes closest to seeming immediate. At the same time, borders are the most intensively mediated of spaces – and it is this incongruous double awareness of immediacy and mediation that makes them so interesting, evoking, as they do, the interplay of identification and distancing that takes place at such borders. This paradox is similar to the paradox that has asymmetrical terms seem reciprocal; for instance, the apparent reciprocity between reader and text. In such instances the illusion of reciprocity is quite powerful: "All touch traverses the boundary between interiority and externality and reciprocally returns to the agent of touching. Touch, like dizziness, is a threshold activity – subjectivity and objectivity come quite close to each other."[52] Touch itself, like the zones in which it is evoked, is intermediate.

This intermediacy has also been theorized through the linking of touch and sight, the lowest and highest senses in the traditional hierarchy. Maurice Merleau-Ponty has written about this linking of the tactile and visible as an interpenetration, conceived as an exchange along an indefinite border or an intertwining of inside and outside – each sense always-already present in the other as a material growth or cut: "We must habituate ourselves to think that every visible is cut out in the tangible, every tactile being in some manner promised to visibility, and that there is encroachment, infringement, not only between the touched and the touching, but also between the tangible and the visible, which is encrusted in it, as, conversely, the tangible itself is not a nothingness of visibility, is not without visual existence."[53] Jennifer Fisher, on the other hand, sees the visual and haptic as having distinct functions that join forces in the perception of art: "While the visual gives trajectories – sightlines – between the viewer and the surfaces of art, the

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[52] Ibid., 178.

[53] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Intertwining – The Chiasm," in *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, ed. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 396.

haptic defines the affective charge – the felt dimensionality – of a spatial context."[54] According to this view, touch is the vehicle for affect; combined with sight, it gives an illusion of depth to two-dimensional surfaces.

For Deleuze and Guattari, the difference between the optic and haptic has to do with both engaging of affect and closing of distance, the optic standing for long-range and the haptic for close-range vision. Looking at art involves haptic vision; moreover, mimesis—the correspondence of represented objects to reality—is not some well-formed product of trompe l'oeil-like illusion, but a fleeting, visceral sensation evoked by the very materials of art: "If resemblance haunts the work of art, it is because sensation refers only to its material: it is the percept or the affect of the material itself, the smile of oil, the gesture of fired clay, the thrust of metal, the crouch of Romanesque stone, and the ascent of Gothic stone. The material is so varied in each case...that it is difficult to say where in fact the material ends and sensation begins."[55] Abbie Garrington, too, sees the haptic as a site of interconnection between affective and cognitive terms, but she applies this idea to reading rather than visual art or architecture. Garrington argues that while reading, the entire body of the reader is activated as a tactile field, and that modernist literature in particular tends to figure reading within its texts as a coded tactile act. In the course of reading, this field expands to cover the entire room in which one reads, so that the reader can return to her room after the adventures of the imagination as to "a second skin."[56] For Garrington, reading is thus a multi-level interface, with not one but several virtual borders expanding and contracting in a concentric arrangement.

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[54] Jennifer Fisher, "Relational Sense: Towards a Haptic Aesthetics," *Parachute* 87, Jul-Sep 1997, 6.

[55] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 166.

[56] Abbie Garrington, *Haptic Modernism: Touch and the Tactile in Modernist Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 150.

Mikhail Iampolski sees the relationship between vision and touch somewhat differently. In his view, which draws on ideas from the Russian Formalists, poetic language is made visible through formal shifts—*sdvigi*—in the text itself: "In order to make linguistic form itself visible, i.e., to emphasize its somatically perceptible, "*external*" (to use Gustav Shpet's expression) formal elements, it must be, in the opinion of the Opoyaz group, subjected to deformation caused, according to Tynianov, by the 'density of the poetic series'."[57] Iampolski goes on to contrast two types of somatic engagement with poetic texts: one is grasping, domineering, and associated with cognition and the acquisition of knowledge; the other (suggested by Emmanuel Levinas) is gentle, caressing, an expression not of cognition but of the "pure experience of encounter."[58] These represent two ways of interfacing with the world, and with the written word; from them, we can also derive two corresponding types of poetics: one that is gripping, astonishing, and cognitively intricate; the other light, drawing attention to surface not as something to be penetrated but to be slid along. We can see something of the first type of poetics in Mandelstam and Shvarts; while the second type is more characteristic of Aronzon.

But how exactly does language—and in particular the language of poetry—convey touch? In *The Material of Poetry: Sketches for a Philosophical Poetics*, Gerald Bruns argues that words are not "ideal objects" but "made of sounds, letters...but also bits and pieces of other words, morphemes, phonemes, and homophones that are embedded historically in heterogeneous contexts of usage."[59] For Bruns, the materiality of language is determined by its use over time,

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[57] Mikhail Iampolskii, "Poetika kasaniia," in Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, *Opisanie* (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'skii tsentr "Gumanitarnaia akademiia," 2000), 357.

[58] Ibid, 364.

[59] Gerald Bruns, *The Material of Poetry: Sketches for a Philosophical Poetics* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 83.

and language as material is above all heterogeneous, even on the level of morphology. Thickened by history words grow heavy, their weight distributed unevenly across their components; this weighty material is thus not just a solid mass but a substance with multiple internal calibrations, one that can be "mold[ed] precisely." This malleability of language—a consequence of the weight time grows in it—is what allows words to "connect with things."[60]

Bruns's attention to language as both a textural and temporal substance—one whose weight and density are determined in relation to time—is echoed by Anna Glazova, a poet and scholar who has written incisively about the affinities between Mandelstam and Paul Celan, especially with regard to their views on poetic language and temporality. As Glazova points out, Mandelstam saw in Dante an emphasis on the substantive—the noun—even, and perhaps especially, in the latter's use of verbs: "Remarkable is, however, Mandelstam's recognition that the emphasis on the verb forms by Dante brings to the foreground not so much the verbs but, on the contrary, substantives and substances, namely 'textiles, sails, scholastics, meteorology, engineering, municipalities, artisans and craftsmen, a list that could be continued ad infinitum'."[61] For Celan, Mandelstam's observation about Dante was equally true of Mandelstam's own poetry. Especially in the poems of the 1930s, verbs and other markers of temporality are thickened, made palpable, by Mandelstam's handling of substantives as substances; as Glazova puts it: "The gravity of the noun makes the time forms in Mandelstam's poetry manifest in their thickened plasticity. This retardation of time marks Mandelstam not so much as a poet of presence but of the present tense and the density of this tense."[62] Moreover, the

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[60] Ibid.

[61] Glazova, 126. Glazova quotes Mandelstam's *Conversation about Dante*.

[62] Ibid.

very substances Mandelstam favors in foregrounding the density of the present are the same one

he lists for Dante: textiles, geological formations, meteorological phenomena, and urban spaces.

Other theorists have argued that the materiality of language can best be understood as an

effect of the physicality of writing materials.[63] Cinema and media scholar Vivian Sobchack, for

instance, sees thought as constituted by the instruments of its expression: "Our carnal use of

particular and material writing instruments informs and contributes to the structure of our

thought and its concrete expression."[64] Sobchack's observation resonates with all three poets in

this dissertation; not only is the content of their writing informed by the instruments of writing,

but the very landscapes they create often seem suspended between ideal regions of thought and

fantasy, on the one hand, and a material environment invoking the very act of writing. We can

see this, for instance, in Mandelstam's use of slate and chalk—the instruments with which

Derzhavin wrote a poetic fragment shortly before his death—as components of the landscape in

his "Slate Ode," a work that engages with Derzhavin and the entire 18th century odic tradition.[65]

It's also apparent in Aronzon's playful use of typography and hand-drawn visual poetry; as

Bruns has argued, poems that foreground typography (in the materially specific sense of poems

written on a typewriter) use its elements as an adhesive, which can even substitute for grammar

as a way of making language cohere: typography, in Bruns's words, "replaces syntax; it holds

words together by, paradoxically, setting them apart."[66] Finally, Shvarts frequently thematizes

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[63] All three poets were writing before the advent of the computer. Shvarts eventually used one, but continued to compose her poems in longhand.

[64] Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 111.

[65] Mandelstam preferred to compose in his head, yet in both his theoretical works and poems, he figures poetic composition in material terms, locating composition both in the body (in the movement of feet, for instance, or of lips, or as cycles of breath) and in an abstract space which he makes tangible with textile metaphors.

[66] Bruns, 69.

writing as a physical, even visceral act, with the process of inscription echoed in the body as an incision or wounding. Pain, as an indicator and effect of the materiality of poetic language, is a recurring theme for both Shvarts and Mandelstam. As Deleuze and Guattari have argued (in reference to Kafka), pain in literature (and related sensations such as tension or torsion) can connote the moving of language away from its representational function and "toward its extremities or its limits."[67]

In Russia, the relationship between language and touch is further complicated by the Orthodox doctrine of the corporeality of the *Logos*. The influence of this doctrine goes far beyond religion; it is the basis for the unique relationship between theology and philology that sets apart Russian philosophy of language, particularly in the 19th and early 20th centuries. As Thomas Seifrid has shown, 19th century Russian thinkers, in particular Aleksandr Potebnia, fused German Romantic ideas about language with Russian "notions about the self whose origins lie in patristic teachings on Christology and Trinitarianism."[68] For example, Potebnia transplanted Alexander von Humboldt's organic metaphor of the articulatory process as "a bodying forth of something arising internally, in the spirit, into the outward, material realm"[69] onto the Russian context, with its strong tradition in Orthodox theology; this hybrid of German Romanticism and Orthodox thought profoundly influenced poets of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including Andrei Bely and Mandelstam, and this influence can be seen in Aronzon and Shvarts as well. The idea that the creative word is language incarnated, or that poorly or thoughtlessly used language could harden, crystallize, or die (an image from Bely), can be traced back directly

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[67] Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, 23.

[68] Thomas Seifrid, *The Word Made Self: Russian Writings on Language, 1860-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 4.

[69] Ibid., 17.

to the Russian appropriation of German Romantic thought; similarly, Seifrid observes, "the *telos* of poetry lies in a psychological experience of palpability."[70] Mandelstam's notion of the poetic *logos* as autonomous, living language, his emphasis on the "word's interiority" and the contingency of verbal meanings ("its inherence only in dialogue between interlocutors") are also Potebnian, and ultimately Humboldtian in origin.[71] Irina Paperno, too, has also shown how the "cross-fertilization between poetry and theology was characteristic of Russian culture in general in the early 20th century," and how Mandelstam's conception of a "Hellenized" Russian *logos* fused "the Christian myth of incarnation...with a Humboldtian sense of language as activity or *energeia* ('active flesh')."[72]

Texture and physical sensation play a significant role in how things are depicted in Mandelstam's poems, and also in how we experience reading them. One way this comes across is through word choice and sound orchestration: Mandelstam worked by ear, and the consonants and vowels are arranged in a way that calls attention to the surface of the language. At the same time, Mandelstam excelled at placing words in a line of verse in ways that emphasized particular (often unexpected) semantic shadings, shadings that often come across viscerally. Mandelstam also uses figures of force, such as torsion and tautness, to stand for aspects of poetic creation. In Aronzon, touch is felt through the way he figures the poem as a construction. The constructive aspect of poetry, and the thingness of poems (which he compares to woodworking projects, etc.). Aronzon also plays on degrees of materiality; for instance, in the two identical sonnets, we move between the interior of the poem, the poem as an abstract object, and its exterior, its aspect as a

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[70] Ibid., 72.

[71] Ibid., 75-6.

[72] Paperno, 32.

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typescript, as a reproducible, material product. And in Shvarts, touch is very important as well. Her poetry is very visceral. And pain has a particular significance, often a positive one. Pain represents access. Sometimes pain marks the boundary between body and spirit, and sometimes it is associated with birth – this can be the birth of a baby, or the birth of the spirit. Shvarts can often be found at the border between body and not-body, a border that tends to be porous or fluctuating, in the process of dissolving or being reconstituted. For Shvarts, touch (and pain) is connected to both frustration and relief.

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Thus, translation, topography, and touch suggest three interrelated models for thinking about boundaries in poetry. In the chapters that follow, I will consider what virtual borders mean for Mandelstam, Aronzon, and Shvarts, emphasizing their usefulness as sites of linguistic, cultural, and interpersonal mediation, as spaces where poets can inscribe themselves into tradition, or reimagine it altogether, as zones of overlay, where physical, cultural, and political bodies are inscribed onto a single surface. With each poet, I will focus on different kinds of virtual borders and crossings: In Mandelstam's case, the poetic image allows the poet to comment on literary process itself, to bridge distant eras, and to indirectly propose strategies for poetry's survival. For Aronzon, poetry is made up of shifting frames of reference, allowing the poet to move easily between poetic and metapoetic levels and among different art forms, and to create a personal poetic tradition with the same homemade feel as his own typewritten and visual poems. And Shvarts explores creativity not limited to artistic production; in her work, the border between art and life is effaced, making room for hybrid roles that throw the poet's vexed relationship to life and power into sharp relief. After analyzing the role of virtual borders in Mandelstam's Dante-inspired poetic sequences, Aronzon's self-reflexive poems, and Shvarts's

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works about in-between creativity, I will conclude by comparing the three poets, and the ways

they create and handle boundaries, side by side.

CHAPTER ONE

Elusive Nearness: Love, Death, and the Human Image in Mandelstam's Poems of 1933-34

> Сегодня – ангел, завтра – червь могильный,
> А послезавтра только очертанье...

This chapter focuses on three human figures in poems written by Osip Mandelstam between November 1933 and February 1934: the poet, the beloved, and the crowd.[73] I argue that these figures are best understood in relation to Mandelstam's conception of the image. By the 1930s, Mandelstam, who was interested in both the history of science and the newest scientific theories, conceived of the image in largely material terms.[74] An image had physical properties: it could harden, grow "sclerotic" and fixed, or it could dissolve into something fluid, diffuse, and multivalent. Poets had some control over this, but ultimately the fate of an image depended on the sometimes symbiotic, sometimes uneasy relationship between poet and public – a relationship that only took off in earnest after a poet's death. This is why the most crucial image is of the poet himself, and also why there is no real question of agency here. A poet cannot be a custodian of his or her own image (of any of their images); at some point they will have to let go.

Mandelstam developed his conception of the image along two fronts. One front was polemical, a rejection of the image as conceived by the Symbolists, especially Aleksandr Blok. For Mandelstam, however, Blok and the Symbolists are just a starting point; at times he seems to castigate entire centuries of European civilization for vulgarizing poetic images, turning them

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[73] Epigraph: "Today an angel, tomorrow a grave-worm, / The day after tomorrow a mere outline..." Osip Mandel'shtam, "There are women kindred to the damp earth" [Est' zhenshchiny syroi zemle rodnye], *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvorenii*, ed. A. G. Mets (Saint Petersburg: Gumanitarnoe agentstvo "Akademicheskii proekt," 1995), 288. Subsequent citations from this edition will appear in-text as *PSS* followed by the page number. Here and in the other chapters, translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

[74] On the influence of contemporary science on Mandelstam's poetry, see Alexander Spektor, "The Science of Poetry: Poetic Process as Evolution in Mandel'shtam's 'Conversation about Dante'," *Slavic Review*, Vol. 73, No. 3 (Fall 2014), 471-93.

from something mutable and vital into a grab bag of kitschy ready-mades touted as high culture

(the nineteenth century takes much of the blame here).[75] As the epitome of this vulgarization of

the image, Mandelstam points to the engravings of Gustave Doré.

At the same time, he was interested in working out a positive definition of the image, and

in "Conversation about Dante"—his major prose work of the 1930s—he attempts just that,

developing a conception of the image that was influenced by his readings in Italian poetry, as

well as interactions with the Formalist circle of critics. His argument is by no means systematic,

which makes his conception of the image quite difficult to pin down – surely no accident. He

takes a playful approach, sometimes discussing image and imagery explicitly, other times

coming at it obliquely in relation to what he calls "poetic material" – the very substance of

poetry as it exists in the mind of the poet, to be reanimated later in the mind of the reader.[76] A

further complication is that the Russian word *obraz* does not quite correspond to the word

"image" as used in the Western European tradition;[77] for his part, Mandelstam draws on both

Western and Russian ideas about image to develop his own, idiosyncratic conception. In

"Conversation about Dante," Mandelstam suggests that the ideal image is dynamic, fleeting,

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[75] Mandelstam's critique of readymade images echoes Iurii Tynianov's invective against deluxe illustrated books, and against illustration as a representational approach more generally, in his 1922 short article "Illustrations" [*Illiustratsii*], collected in Iu. N. Tynianov, *Poetika. Istoriia literatury. Kino.* (Moscow: Nauka, 1977), 310-18. This volume is hereinafter cited as *PILK*.

[76] He also puns on the semantic echoes between *obraz* and related words, such as *obraznost'* (which can mean "imagery," or simply indicate the vivid, visual quality of a representation); *izobrazhenie* (representation); *obrazets* (sample or example); and *obrazovanie* (education or formation) as well as the related word *obrazovannost'* (level of education; also, in a characteristically Mandelstamian pun, the degree to which something has been formed). Mandelstam uses *obrazovat'sia* (to take form) in a similarly punning way, for instance when discussing how later European musical instruments developed from earlier ones – a discussion he frames in terms of image.

[77] Like "word" [*slovo*], "image" [*obraz*] has a somewhat different status in Russia than in the rest of the European tradition because of its relation to Orthodox theology. *Obraz* originally denoted a religious icon – a representation that, for believers, also functions as a portal to the spiritual idea or entity being represented. Unlike "image," which more often than not hints at the illusory or phantasmagoric nature of representation, *obraz*, taken with its Orthodox connotations, stresses the legitimacy of (certain kinds of) representation, their claim to reality – even to incarnation.

oblique, indeterminate, metamorphic, multidirectional, visual in some ways but not others, diffuse but not vague, and finally, that it only comes alive in performance. These last two points are crucial – Mandelstam repeatedly stresses that the ideal image (his model is the Dantean image) should be impossible to visualize head-on, in isolation from its continual becoming and transformation, but that it nevertheless grows extraordinarily vivid in the mind in the process of change. Thus, even though (or precisely because) it is diffuse and indeterminate, the image must be approached with both scientific precision and a certain openness to theatricality.

I have chosen to focus on human figures because they serve as a test case for Mandelstam's conception of the image. In Mandelstam's poetry of this period the integrity we associate with the human likeness enters into a fascinating tension with his notions about the mutability and indeterminacy of images as such. Furthermore, the figures I will look at—poet, beloved, and crowd—are classic poetic tropes, and I argue that Mandelstam treats their importance to the European tradition as a metapoetic device. Reading the poems of this period together (along with their variants) brings into focus a set of metapoetic concerns about the work images do, their lives and afterlives both on and off the page. Furthermore, these three human figures are not totally distinct from one another in Mandelstam's thinking. Just as their images have features in common, the fates of the poet (especially the dead poet), the beloved (especially the distant beloved), and the crowd are intertwined, and part of the drama of reading these poems together is seeing how one human figure shades into another, and how the erotic language around the distant beloved and the civic language around the dead poet seem to spring from a common impulse. As I hope to show, the indeterminacy of the Mandelstamian image of the 1930s has personal significance: as well as mourning the dead (an old flame in the Petrarch translations, a great poet of a vanished era in the Bely cycle), these poems reflect the poet's

concern about his place in the Russian poetic tradition, and his fate (literary and personal) in an increasingly hostile cultural milieu and political climate.[78]

Along with "Conversation about Dante," I will concentrate on three groups of poems written consecutively (and with some overlap) around the turn of 1934: the eleven 8-line poems known as the *Octets* [*Vos'mistishiia*], the four translations from Petrarch, and the loose cycle of poems written on the death of Andrei Bely. Reading these works in (roughly) chronological order, I will trace how the figures of the poet, beloved, and crowd change and overlap alongside Mandelstam's constantly shifting nexus of themes, motifs, key words, and allusions.[79] After seeing how the human image is treated in the *Octets*—highly compressed and elliptical poems whose sketch-like, experimental quality foregrounds their metapoetic orientation—I will turn to the Petrarch sonnets and Bely poems, where Mandelstam gives us his own take on two classic poetic figures: the Fair Lady (*Prekrasnaia dama*) and the Dead Poet. The longest section of this chapter is devoted to the Petrarch sonnets, both because they are highly mediated and because their eroticism has a metapoetic dimension. There are several mediating factors here: they are

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[78] By the 1930s, Mandelstam was increasingly moving to the periphery of Soviet literary life. With the implementation of Stalin's cultural program, he often found himself at odds with the new Soviet cultural elite, and was even falsely accused of plagiarism in 1928. His feelings about the vulgarity of the literary establishment are expressed in "Fourth Prose" [*Chetvertaia proza*] and "Torrents of hackwork" [*Potoki khaltury*]. For more on Mandelstam's relationship to the Soviet cultural establishment, see Clarence Brown's introductory note to Osip Mandelstam, "Fourth Prose," trans. Clarence Brown, *The Hudson Review,* Vol. 23, No. 1 (Spring 1970), 49-52; and Clare Cavanagh, *Osip Mandelstam and the Modernist Creation of Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 201-10.

[79] The interrelationship among Mandelstam's key words, motifs, and allusions, both within each poem and across his entire output, is the basis of much classic scholarship on the poet, which conceived of this nexus in terms of context ("a set of texts which contain the same or similar image") and subtext ("an already existing text [or texts] reflected in a new one"). See Iu. I. Levin, D.M. Segal, R.D. Timenchik, V.N. Toporov, and T.V. Tsiv'ian, "Russkaia semanticheskaia poetika kak potentsial'naia kul'turnaia paradigma," *Russian Literature*, 7-8 (1974), 47-82; Kiril Taranovsky, *Essays on Mandel'stam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976; and Omry Ronen, *An Approach to Mandel'štam* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1983). The above-quoted definitions of context and subtext come from Taranovsky, *Essays on Mandel'stam*, 18. An overview of Mandelstam's poetics of the 30s can be found in Iu. Levin, "Zametki o poezii O. Mandel'shtama tridtsatykh godov. I," *Slavica Hierosolymitana*, 3 (1978), 110-73.

sonnets, one of the most classical of poetic forms, and one that orients these poems in relation to

the very source of the European poetic tradition, as well as to Russian literature of the late

nineteenth through early twentieth centuries, especially Symbolist poetry; they are ostensibly

translations, which acts as a productive limit on Mandelstam's powers of invention; and they

create complex images of the poet and beloved by triangulating these classic figures from

Petrarch to Mandelstam via their Symbolist incarnations. In these sonnets, Mandelstam's

unorthodoxy as a translator makes these various levels of mediation stand out more palpably.

Meanwhile, the eroticism of the Petrarch translations allows Mandelstam to emphasize the

physicality of the poetic image and of poetic material, and also provides him with a context for

expressing his metapoetic ideas and concerns (e.g., the accessibility or fate of the image) in

erotic terms, e.g., protectiveness, jealousy, vacillation, and delayed gratification. In the Petrarch

translations, Mandelstam uses the volatile relationship between anxious speaker and distant

beloved as the basis for an erotics of suspension, multiplication, and circulation – an ambiguous

erotics that puns on similarities between the writing life and affairs of the heart.

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Mandelstam's Conception of the Image in "Conversation about Dante"

Mandelstam wrote "Conversation about Dante" in the spring and summer of 1933, in the

popular resort town of Koktebel. It is generally read as both a highly personal response to the

great Italian poet and an indirect statement about his own poetics.[80] It is also, to some extent, a

collaborative project: Andrei Bely was staying in Koktebel at the time, and several of

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[80] For a detailed discussion of "Conversation about Dante," see Jennifer Baines, *Mandelstam: The Later Poetry* (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976). See also the issue of *Slavic Review* featuring several articles about Mandelstam's text: Vol. 73, No. 3 (Fall 2014).

Mandelstam's ideas for the essay were inspired by his conversations with the eminent Symbolist. Furthermore, Mandelstam had been in dialogue with the OPOYAZ group of Formalist critics throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and their influence is readily apparent in the Dante essay. On one level, "Conversation" is an attempt to formulate some observations about Dante's poetics on the basis of numerous examples from the *Divine Comedy*, with particular emphasis on Dante's use of poetic form and language. Mandelstam focuses on the poem's effects on the reader, its metapoetic structure, and its status as a major source of the European poetic tradition. This last point comes with a fair share of ambivalence; Mandelstam bristles at the side effects of Dante's canonization, and dismisses a great deal of European poetry as born out of a sad misunderstanding of Dante's poetics (the dismissal is tacit, not fulminating, and takes special aim at the Parnassian poets who were so important to Mandelstam in his youth). And yet, Mandelstam too sees Dante as the greatest poet of them all, and is keenly aware of a double influence flowing from the Italian master, on the European tradition as a whole, and on the Russian tradition specifically – two strands whose relationship to one another is complex.

On another level, "Conversation" treats poetry in general: what it is, what it's made of, its relationship to other artforms, the task of the poet, and the role of the reader. Here, Mandelstam puts forward his most elaborate account of the nature and uses of poetic material, the very stuff of poetry. It is also where he discusses his conception of the image (though his discussion can at times be cryptic and disjointed). Like many of his other prose works, "Conversation" shows Mandelstam defining his poetics against those of Symbolism, criticizing the movement where he got his start while simultaneously (perhaps inadvertently) paying homage to it.[81] In this case,

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[81] Leonid Pinskii, for example, argues that the impetus for "Conversation about Dante" was a polemic with Symbolism's emphasis on the dual nature of reality, and on poetic language's subordination to the "higher reality"

Mandelstam was particularly rankled by the image of Dante that was "immortalized" by Blok; in Part IV of "Conversation," he quotes the famous closing lines of Blok's "Ravenna" (1909)—"Dante's shade with its aquiline profile / Sings to me of the New Life [Ten' Danta s profilem orlinym / O Novoi Zhizni mne poet]—as a prime example of the abuse of a poet's image after his death, the result of allowing false images, distorted by the culture at large, to accrue around the poetry itself – poetry that even someone of Blok's stature has forgotten how to read. Mandelstam describes this process in a passage that simultaneously puts the blame on European culture as a whole, and—by naming Blok and invoking such loaded words as "mysticism" [*mistika*] and "mysterious" [*tainstvennyi*]—Russian Symbolism in particular:

> По мере того как Дант все более и более становился не по плечу и публике следующих поколений и самим художникам, его обволакивали все большей и большей таинственностью...Пышно развернулся невежественный культ дантовской мистики, лишенный, как и само понятие мистики, всякого конкретного содержания. Появился «таинственный» Дант французских гравюр, состоящий из капюшона, орлиного носа и чем-то промышляющий на скалах.[82]

> [In succeeding generations, as Dante moved further and further beyond the reach of the public and even of the artists themselves, he became shrouded in ever greater mystery...An ignorant cult of Dantean mysticism was elaborately developed, devoid, like the very concept of mysticism, of any concrete substance. There also appeared the "mysterious" Dante of the French engravings, consisting of a monk's hood, an aquiline nose, and his hunt for something among the mountain crags.[83]]

Mandelstam doesn't just reject the mysterious, mystical Dante of the Russian Symbolists (and French engravers); he rejects the very idea of the poet's image as a readymade. The "aquiline

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of the mystical plane. L. I. Pinskii, archival notes, quoted in O. E. Mandel'shtam, *Slovo i kul'tura* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1987), 295.

[82] Osip Mandel'shtam, "Razgovor o Dante," in O. E. Mandel'shtam, *Slovo i kul'tura* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1987), 122. Subsequent quotations from this work will appear in-text as *RD*, followed by the page number.

[83] Osip Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," trans. Jane Gary Harris and Constance Link, in Peter S. Hawkins and Rachel Jacoff, *The Poets' Dante* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 56. Translation slightly modified.

profile" comes up several more times in the "Conversation" as the epitome of what a poetic image should not be; namely, "sclerotic"[84] (fixed into a kind of readymade that any writer can just pull out of a poetic grab bag) and patently, statically visual. The concept of visuality (and what makes something visual in an interesting versus a "sclerotic" way) is a tricky one; Mandelstam gives Doré's engravings as examples of bad visuality that did serious damage in promoting tenacious misconceptions about Dante and the *Divine Comedy*. (The figure of the engraver will resurface in the poems for Andrei Bely, which are, among other things, meditations on the fate of the poet's image after his death.)

Mandelstam's polemic in "Conversation about Dante" is not just with poets and engravers, but with the very means of representation—representation understood as both a creative and interpretative tool—that European culture developed over the centuries. His criticisms and appeals are leveled at poets, artists, critics, and readers – anyone who values or participates in culture. In fact, when Mandelstam talks about image, he doesn't just mean poetic imagery—the narrow preserve of poets—but something further-reaching, and not bounded by individual texts. Indeed, he draws no sharp distinction between poetic images and cultural commonplaces—shared ideas about something or someone (e.g. Dante) that circulate according to their own dynamic laws—and he pays particularly close attention to how images move from poetry into cultural consciousness and back again.[85] Mandelstam sums up the problem with representation as follows: "We describe the very thing that cannot be described, namely, nature's

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[84] The word "sclerotic" comes up in "Conversation about Dante" in reference to the Odysseus episode in *Inferno*; Odysseus, a figure who sometimes appears in Mandelstam's poetry as a kind of heroic stand-in, "despises sclerosis with every convolution of his brain." Ibid., 66.

[85] On figures of reading and the reader in Mandelstam's writing of the 1930s, see Nancy Pollak, *Mandelstam the Reader* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); and Jacob Emery, "Keeping Time: Reading and Writing in 'Conversation about Dante'," *Slavic Review* 73 (3), 2014, 494-513.

text at a standstill, and we have unlearned how to describe the one thing which, by its structure, yields to poetic representation, namely impulses, intentions and the amplitudes of fluctuation" [My opisyvaem kak raz to, chego nel'zia opisat', to est' ostanovlennyi tekst prirody, i razuchilis' opisyvat' to edinstvennoe, chto po strukture svoei poddaetsia poeticheskomu izobrazheniiu, to est' poryvy, nameren'ia i amplitudnye kolebaniia] (*RD* 143).[86] For Mandelstam, good writing (and good reading) does not happen by representing "nature's arrested text" (this can only yield sclerotic images and bad misreadings) but from the paradoxical representation of "impulses, intentions and amplitudes of fluctuation." In other words, the true structure of both reality and art is composed of dynamic energies in the process of becoming, not fixed and engravable "scenes."[87] Thus, in the "Conversation," Mandelstam develops his dynamic conception of the image in relation to more general ideas about poetic material and poetic utterance, as well as in dialogue with Formalist theories of poetry's relationship to culture.

"Conversation about Dante" begins with a definition of poetic speech as a "hybrid process" (*skreshchennyi protsess*), a crossing of two soundings: "the first of these is the modulation we hear and sense in the very instruments [*orudiia*] of poetic speech as they emerge during its spontaneous flow [*na khodu v ee poryve*]; the second sounding is the speech itself, i.e. the intonational and phonological work performed by these instruments."[88] In the very first sentence of his essay, Mandelstam introduces several important terms: the figures of

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[86] "Conversation about Dante," 82-3. Translation slightly modified.

[87] This idea contains an implicit critique of ekphrastic writing, which attempts to represent the visual in language. Mandelstam's ideas about the limits and pitfalls of ekphrasis can be contrasted with Aronzon's very different notion of ekphrasis; see Chapter Two of this dissertation.

[88] Ibid., 40. Translation slightly modified. The original reads: "первое из этих звучаний — это слышимое и ощущаемое нами изменение самих орудий поэтической речи, возникающих на ходу в ее порыве; второе звучание есть собственно речь, то есть интонационная и фонетическая работа, выполняемая упомянутыми орудиями" (*RD* 108).

skreshchenie (crossing or hybridity) and *orudiia* (instruments, weapons, equipment); the image

of the *poryv*, which Harris and Link translate as "flow," and Jennifer Baines as "impulse" or

"élan";[89] and the idea (still implicit here, though it will be stated plainly in the next paragraph)

that poetic speech depends on performance. Each of Mandelstam's key terms is polysemous:

"instrument" [*orudie*], for instance, is never clearly defined, but is undoubtedly metapoetical –

pertaining not to the poem itself (or to literal "instruments" [organs] of speech), but to

differential transformations in the poetic impulse during the process of the poem's articulation. It

is a figure of change based on intention, direction, pointedness, and speed, and Mandelstam uses

the term in forms that nearly always suggest weaponization.[90] At the same time, Mandelstam is

careful to emphasize that what we sense when we read poetry is not so much the instruments

themselves as the changes they undergo. "Crossing" [*skreshchenie*], whose primary meaning

comes from genetics, is also visually evocative; the figure's chiasmic shape hints at the

continuity of the two "soundings" beyond the point at which they intersect, and even suggests

that the crossing—like chiasmus itself—is two-directional.[91] In this figure, the point of

intersection can be read as a kind of abstract cursor signifying the manifestation of poetry at the

junction of two constantly flowing streams. Hybridity, the scientific connotation of *skreshchenie*,

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[89] Baines, 79.

[90] Mandelstam's usage is based on existing definitions of *orudie* including "tool," "implement," "instrument," "weapon," and "everything mediating between an agent of action and the action"; also its definitions from biology—parts of an organism that fulfill specific functions—as well as a meaning with moral overtones: the means, wiles, or mechanisms of offense and defense. Definitions from Dahl's dictionary: V. I. Dal', *Tolkovyi slovar' zhivogo velikorusskogo iazyka* (Saint Petersburg: Tip. M. O. Vol'fa, 1881), Vol. 2, 715.

[91] Giorgio Agamben sees a similar chiasmic crossing of two modes (language and comprehension) in Dante's description of his poetics in the *Convivio*, as well as in his use of the word *noda* (node or knot – the Russian equivalent *uzel* appears in Mandelstam's poetry of the 1930s) in Canto XXIV of *Purgatorio*, and extrapolates from this a definition of poetry as such: "In a decisive exchange, it is as if, having met each other, each of the two movements then followed the other's tracks, such that language found itself back in the end to language, and comprehension to comprehension. This inverted chaism—this and nothing else—is what we call poetry." Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 41.

is likewise crucial to Mandelstam's poetics of the 1930s. In the poems I will look at, languages, genres, images, and even individual poets are merged, and the borders between them erased, creating strange hybrids.

It should be noted that, of the two "soundings" described by Mandelstam, only the second has a literal, acoustical dimension; the first "sounding"—"the modulation we hear and sense in the very instruments of poetic speech as they emerge during its spontaneous flow"—is figurative. In "Conversation," Mandelstam goes on to connect the literal, acoustical sounding to body, breath, lips, and tongue, drawing on his interest in contemporary phonological theory. Meanwhile, the mute, figurative "sounding" is connected to the abstract notion of poetic material; it, too, is dynamic and visceral, but its locus is the mind. At the same time, both in "Conversation" and in Mandelstam's poems of this period, these two "soundings" are not separated out; rather, somatic and cognitive figures of poetic utterance are intertwined (as in the marvelous figure of the conductor's baton at the end of Part VI). In this chapter, my focus is on the paradoxical mute sounding, the "modulation...in the very instruments of poetic speech." Phonology is, of course, crucial to poetry, but (as Mandelstam argues) without the modulation of instruments and the spontaneous impulse, there is no poetry; or to use Mandelstam's suggestive metaphor, "the sheets have not been rumpled...poetry, so to speak, has not spent the night."[92]

This brings us to the performative nature of poetic speech. According to Mandelstam, poetic speech changes as it goes along, an extemporaneous process. Performativity is Mandelstam's take on mimesis: rather than reflect nature, poetry acts it out. Crucially, for Mandelstam, the performance of poetry is not quite the same as reading aloud; rather, it is the

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[92] "Conversation about Dante," 40. "*Ne nochevat'*" (literally "not to spend the night") is a colloquial phrase meaning "was never there"; Mandelstam puns on the literal meaning with the (erotic) image of rumpled bedsheets.

animation (or reanimation) of poetic material in the mind of the poet or the reader, a mental process that nevertheless partakes of the corporeal (we can recall that Mandelstam paced while composing, and argued that poetry's abstract modulations were often visible in the reader's face). In the final paragraph of "Conversation," Mandelstam makes even more explicit the connection between poetic material as something fundamentally inaudible and invisible, and its existence only in performance: "Poetic material does not have a voice. It does not paint with bright colors, nor does it explain itself in words. It is devoid of form just as it is devoid of content for the simple reason that it exists only in performance. The finished poem is no more than a calligraphic byproduct, the inevitable result of the impulse to perform."[93] The last sentence makes plain Mandelstam's ambivalence about the finished poem on the page. The written text is merely a "calligraphic byproduct."[94]

At the end of section 6, Mandelstam explains why he chose Dante as his subject:

Дант выбран темой настоящего разговора не потому, чтобы я предлагал сосредоточить на нем внимание в порядке учебы у классиков и усадить его за своеобразным кирпотинским табльдотом вместе с Шекспиром и Львом Толстым, — но потому, что он самый большой и неоспоримый хозяин обратимой и обращающейся поэтической материи, самый ранний и в то же время самый сильный химический дирижер существующей только в наплывах и волнах, только в подъемах и лавированьях поэтической композиции. (*RD* 137)

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[93] Ibid., 92. Translation slightly modified. The original reads: "Поэтическая материя не имеет голоса. Она не пишет красками и не изъясняется словами. Она не имеет формы точно так же, как лишена содержания, по той простой причине, что она существует лишь в исполнении. Готовая вещь есть не что иное, как каллиграфический продукт, неизбежно остающийся в результате исполнительского порыва" (*RD* 151)

[94] Several passages in "Conversation about Dante" privilege the "living," unfinished poem in the mind over the written artifact that can only come alive in performance. This is also a theme of the *Octets*; for example in the poem that begins "When, having destroyed the rough sketch" [*Kogda, unichtozhev nabrosok*]. For Mandelstam, paper is where poetry turns into literature. Unlike Leonid Aronzon, whose poems frequently evoke their graphic origins and for whom the physical act of writing was an essential aspect of poetic composition, Mandelstam's poems locate the body and mind as the only legitimate sites of creative authorship; that same poem from the *Octets* evokes the interior of the mind where the poem hangs, enjoying its most legitimate existence after the "sketches" [*nabroski*] have been destroyed. Other poems, and several passages in "Conversation about Dante," also name the mouth, hands, and feet as essential to poetic creation.

[Dante was chosen as the subject of this conversation not because I wanted to focus attention on him as a means to learning from the classics and to seat him alongside Shakespeare and Lev Tolstoy...but because he is the greatest, the unrivaled master of convertible, transmutable[95] poetic material, the earliest and simultaneously the most powerful chemical conductor {*dirizher*} of poetic composition that exists only in swells and waves, only in hoistings and maneuverings {*tol'ko v pod''emakh i lavirovan'iakh*}].[96]

This passage names several key attributes of poetic material as Mandelstam understood it: its convertibility and transmutability; its existence as dynamic impulses and waves (elsewhere Mandelstam talks about impulses [*poryvy*]—not words or even forms—as the basic building blocks of poetic speech);[97] and its obliqueness and elusiveness, to which Mandelstam alludes, here and elsewhere, through figures of sailing. To this we can add another attribute named earlier, instrumentality (*orudiinost'*, also denoting the capacity to be turned into a weapon). Taken together (and indeed there is a fair amount of overlap among them), these attributes of poetic material convey an idea of poetry as highly dynamic, multidirectional (both in the sense of moving in more than one direction, and being directed at more than one object or audience), mutable, and fluctuating. This dynamism, in turn, sheds light on Mandelstam's conception of the image.

Before turning to this conception, I should note that in the late 1920s and early 1930s, Mandelstam's ideas about the relationship between writing and image, and between poetry and culture, were heavily influenced by Russian Formalist critics, particularly Tynianov. As Evgeny Toddes has argued, "Conversation" reflects a shift in Mandelstam's thinking about the "word" (a

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[95] *Obratimoi* and *obrashchaiushcheisia*: both words connote convertibility, reversibility, transmutability, and directedness.

[96] "Conversation about Dante," 74-5. Translation slightly modified.

[97] "In talking about Dante it is more appropriate to bear in mind the creation of impulses [*poryvoobrazovanie*] than the creation of forms; impulses pertaining to textiles, sailing, scholasticism, meteorology, engineering, municipal concerns, handicrafts and industry, as well as other things; the list could be extended to infinity." Ibid., 93.

metonym for literary language) in relation to culture; from seeing them, earlier in his career, as running essentially in parallel, Mandelstam came to think of them as antagonists, a view roughly analogous to Tynianov's conception of literary evolution. Commenting on Mandelstam's view of culture's ossifying effects on poetry, Toddes notes: "That which in Tynianov's system can be called the diminishment of literary dynamism...corresponds, in Mandelstam, to the 'word' reduced and assimilated by 'culture'."[98] There is also a parallel in the main conceptual moves made by "Conversation" and Tynianov's 1924 study, *The Problem of Verse Language* [*Problema stikhotvornogo iazyka*]: the rejection of "readymade meaning" (and "images" as conveyors of meaning), and an emphasis on meaning as it arises at any given point in a verse construction.[99] Even Mandelstam and Tynianov's views on the fate of canonical literary works— the idea that works of literature solidify into monuments in direct proportion to their difficulty— are remarkably similar.[100] These striking similarities (as well as the fact that Mandelstam was known to have followed the discussions of the OPOYAZ group closely, and to have corresponded with its members), suggest that Mandelstam's ideas in "Conversation" are deeply indebted to Formalist theories.[101] At the same time, Mandelstam puts a highly personal twist on his intellectual collaboration; for instance, in "Conversation" he often enacts the ideas being discussed using rhythm and metaphor, embodying abstract ideas in tactile language in a way that

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[98] E. A. Toddes, "Mandel'shtam i opoiazovskaia filologiia," in M. O. Chudakova, ed., *Tynianovskii sbornik: Vtorye Tynianovskie chteniia: Sbornik statei* (Riga: "Zinatne", 1986), 94.

[99] Ibid., 86.

[100] Ibid., 90.

[101] There are other similarities as well, including the notion that poetic speech should proceed obliquely, as well as the implicit polemic in both Mandelstam and the Formalists with turn-of-the-century acoustic philology; in Mandelstam, this polemic is reflected in the abstracting of "poetic material" from sound (Ibid., 86-7).

is comparable to what Shklovsky or Tynianov do in their own theoretical work, yet is much more intense and elliptical.

From the beginning, Mandelstam stresses that manufactured images, easy to visualize and reproduce, are antithetical to Dante's conception of poetry – and thus to his own. At one point, he describes such pernicious, dime-a-dozen images as "ready-made nails" waiting to be "hammered in." Against this vulgar conception, Mandelstam proposes a different idea of image, which he figures as "signal waves of meaning" that "vanish, having completed their work; the more potent they are, the more yielding, and the less inclined to linger."[102] Elsewhere in the "Conversation," Mandelstam writes how poetic material should melt immediately upon being perceived, enriching the "flow" of poetic speech by its constant disappearance. A "good" image should give way as soon as it comes into view, slipping between meanings just as it starts to lose its "primogeniture," as Mandelstam puts it (*RD* 114); the "bad" image is one that lingers, fixed by the engraver, and circulates in that same unchanging form in the cultural milieu.

Perhaps the most illuminating statements of Mandelstam's conception of the image come in the passages where he discusses Dantean simile and metaphor. According to Mandelstam, a Dantean simile is never purely descriptive or representational; rather, its task is to give provisional shape to the "internal image of a structure" [*vnutrennii obraz struktury*]. Dante's "thinking through imagery" [*obraznoe myshlenie*, a phrase Mandelstam uses ironically[103]] harnesses the convertibility [*obratimost'*] of poetic material in order to generate images that

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[102] Ibid., 41.

[103] Recall Viktor Shklovsky's "Art as Device," which opens with a takedown of the commonplace, "art is thinking through images" [iskusstvo – eto myshlenie obrazami]. See Viktor Shklovsky, "Art, as Device," trans. and introduced by Alexandra Berlina, *Poetics Today*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (September 2015), 151-74.

constantly grow out of one another.[104] Mandelstam compares this restless metamorphic process to a series of aircraft constructing and launching other aircraft mid-flight, each one racing to launch its successor before it is destroyed; moreover—and Mandelstam emphasizes this—the process of construction, launching, and self-obliteration is the very thing keeping these airplanes (or the cumulative meta-airplane described by this process) moving. This passage, which enacts the very cognitive evasiveness it figures, paints the good image as something incredibly vivid and complex, yet unimaginable in stasis; creation, propulsion, and destruction—not verisimilitude or integrity—are what make it run. Indeed, for Mandelstam, Dante did not sit placidly at the head of the European canon, but was a radical poet, who "by his very nature shakes up meaning and destroys the integrity of the image."[105] The modern poet closest to him, according to Mandelstam, was Rimbaud; the Parnassians, purveyors of sclerotic images, were furthest.

In another, related passage, Mandelstam terms Dante's metaphors "Heraclitean" in reference to the Greek philosopher, meaning that they are constantly in flux. Mandelstam provides an example of a Heraclitean metaphor in the *Divine Comedy*, and will use Heraclitean metaphors himself—though on a smaller scale than Dante—in some of the poems I will look at here. In theory, the main feature of the Heraclitean metaphor is that it is presented in such a way that nothing is left of it. In practice, such a metaphor contains multiple terms, confusing or

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[104] *Obratimost'*, a key attribute of poetic material according to Mandelstam, has several important connotations: mutability, reversibility, and directedness. Mandelstam draws on all these connotations without really explaining them, but reversibility could refer to the wavelike energetic state of poetic material, the fact that images never fully "stand out" from it but die back into it almost as soon as they emerge. Yet another connotation is the rhetorical turn (*oborot*), the figurative turning of tropes. As for directedness, in the passage where Mandelstam discusses Odysseus, he writes that the Greek hero's speech is "turned toward [*obratima*] the war of the Greeks and Persians as well as toward Columbus's discovery of America, the bold experiments of Paracelsus, and the world empire of Charles V" ("Conversation about Dante," 67).

[105] Ibid., 63.

obscuring the relationship between tenor and vehicle, and inspiring awe in the reader without

leaving anything concrete in his or her mind. They are far-reaching and vivid, but ultimately

elusive.[106]

The emphasis throughout "Conversation about Dante" on elusiveness, evasion, and

obliqueness has several implications, including political ones. Just as the poetic image can be

aimed in multiple directions at once, it can also elude on multiple fronts: bad readers, the

misguided engraver, "cultural formation" (to use Mandelstam's derisive term), and political

authorities. As Elena Glazov-Corrigan has noted, by the 1930s Mandelstam saw obliqueness as

necessary to poetry's very survival: "In contrast to Maiakovsky, who had proclaimed that the

survival of poetry resides in its ability to meet the contemporary reader face to face,

Mandel'shtam found himself insisting that poetry's survival could only reside in its obliqueness

and in its ability both to outmaneuver the reader and at the same time to present him with a

ringing inner life, drawing the reader into the familiar nuances of home and yet escaping, and

thus provoking the reader to pursuit."[107] The survival of poetry (and the poet) has a political

dimension too, especially in the context of the early 1930s. In "Conversation about Dante,"

Mandelstam draws an implicit analogy between the dangerous political situation in Dante's time

and his own, suggesting that aversion to direct statement might also stem from fear. This in turn

relates to Mandelstam's counterintuitive ideas about attainment or possession in poetry, which he

expresses in the following paradox: Reading should be an unending labor; the more successful

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[106] According to Iurii Levin, the Heraclitean metaphor as Mandelstam understands it is characterized by its diffuseness, and by the fact that it completely eludes rational understanding and paraphrase; as Levin puts it, "the semantic elements involved in its production do not result in a static hierarchy." Iu. Levin, "Zametki k 'Razgovoru o Dante' O. Mandel'shtama," *International Journal of Slavic Linguistics and Poetics*, Mouton, Vol. 15 (January 1, 1972), 196.

[107] Elena Glazov-Corrigan, *Mandel'shtam's Poetics: A Challenge to Postmodernism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 60.

the reading (and poem), the further it takes us from the goal. The good poem, and the good

image, avoid being possessed by the reader, and the good reader is one who accepts this

elusiveness. In the rest of this chapter, I will trace these features of poetic material—elusiveness,

indeterminacy, mutability, and the rest—as they appear in relation to the human image, first on a

smaller scale in the *Octets* and then, coalescing around the figures of the Fair Lady and the Dead

Poet, in the Petrarch sonnets and poems for Andrei Bely.

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The *Octets* as Experiments on Poetic Material

Most of the eight-line poems known as the *Octets* [*Vos'mistishiia*] were composed in

November 1933, though they were not grouped together under one title, or even written down,

until January 1934.[108] In February, Mandelstam added another poem to the *Octets*, consisting of

eight cancelled lines from the poems to Bely; he then immediately remembered another eight

cancelled lines from "Lamarck" [*Lamark*, written in May 1932) and included them with the

Octets as well.[109] Mandelstam continued adding poems to the group until July 1935; among the

last was a doublet of an existing poem, "I love it when the weave appears" [*Liubliu poiavlenie

tkani*], featuring a different second quatrain. This doublet now opens the group.

The *Octets* have an unfinished, experimental quality about them. According to Nadezhda

Mandelstam, Osip Emilievich thought of the initial November group as fragments of an

unsuccessful long poem, trial pieces that didn't pan out. Nevertheless, he kept working on them

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[108] According to Nadezhda Mandelstam, Osip "was opposed to grouping together and writing down the octets...All the same, the octets were first written down in January 1934." Nadezhda Mandel'shtam, *Kniga tret'ia* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1987), 187-9. Details about the *Octets'* composition are taken from this source.

[109] Ibid, 187.

and eventually started reading them to acquaintances.[110] Their sketchiness, the impression they

give of a work in progress, is preserved in the poems as a formal and thematic element. The word

opyt [experiment, attempt, experience] occurs several times; *nabrosok* [sketch] comes up as well.

The idea that these poems are sketches for an unrealized larger work is echoed by one of the

group's main themes: the movement from fullest (unrealized) potential to the beginning of

concreteness and form, suggesting a crossing of one limit and a movement toward others.[111] The

limitations that come with formal expression are explored on a structural level as well, and the

different formal limits within each poem (the breaks after each line and quatrain, and the special

significance accorded to first and last lines) are made especially palpable. Many of the *Octets*

appear to be set in an intermediary space between impulse and expression, which links them to

ideas in "Conversation about Dante"; in particular, to Mandelstam's conception of poetic

material as constituted by impulses and amplitudes, and his view of the finished poem as a relic

of these initial energies, rather than their crowning perfection.

There are numerous recurring themes in the *Octets*, but despite attempts by several

scholars to reconstruct a linear thematic development, it seems they are best understood as being

interrelated not as a sequence but—more multivalently—as a group.[112] Nadezhda Mandelstam

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[110] Ibid.

[111] The fact that Mandelstam was reluctant to write down the *Octets* (as Nadezhda Mandelstam notes) is interesting in light of the poem's metapoetic engagement with the movement from potential to form; it is as if the poet wanted to hold them as long as possible in the mind, without letting them take definite, material form. I am grateful to Stephanie Sandler for this insight.

[112] Mikhail Gasparov, for example, proposes a sequence in an article devoted to the *Octets*. See M. L. Gasparov, "Vos'mistishiia Mandel'shtama," in M. Z. Vorob'eva et al., *Smert' i bessmertie poeta. Materialy mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii, posviashchennoi 60-letiiu so dnia gibeli O.E. Mandel'shtama (Moskva, 28-29 dekabria 1998 g.)* (Moscow: Mandel'shtamovskoe obshchestvo, Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi gumanitarnyi universitet, 2001), 47-54. Various editions of Mandelstam's collected works, such as the 1995 Biblioteka poeta edition, follow different sequencings. Nadezhda Mandelstam suggested a possible order herself, but only tentatively, and without accounting for all the poems.

insisted that they were not a cycle, but a *podborka* – a gathering. Moreover, though the poems are alike in having eight lines, some of them differ metrically from the amphibrachic trimeter of most of the group, another sign that they were not a regularly planned cycle. At the same time, there are clear echoes among the different poems – thematic, lexical, and phonetic. One of the main themes is a metapoetic one, the composition of poetry, and taken together the *Octets* comprise a kind of metapoem, which can be read in more than one order and direction. It can thus be seen as a tentative solution (or gesture toward a solution) to a problem that fascinated Mandelstam throughout the 30s: how to bring written poetry—with its unavoidable emphasis on sequencing, shaping, and finishing—closer to the ideal of an energetic, multivalent, and ongoing poetic process. (Another solution, which we shall see in the Petrarch sonnets, is to keep drafts and variant lines in play.)

Mandelstam experiments with grammatical forms in these poems as well; of the different parts of speech, he emphasizes substantives, often using noun forms (some of them coinages) of verbs and adjectives. This emphasis on substantives creates temporal disorientation and concentrates the reader's attention on the material dimension of verbal action. The effect is of being in a highly condensed environment, akin to the geological strata or "nebulous acoustic bag" that Mandelstam uses as spatial figures to describe certain scenes in the *Inferno*. Another feature of the *Octets* is an engagement with some of the more philosophical motifs of nineteenth-century Russian poetry, such as the inexpressible, the unknowable, and the limits of cognition – themes that hearken back to Tiutchev and Zhukovsky in particular. In keeping with these classic motifs of Russian lyric poetry, Mandelstam also makes liberal use of words with heavily marked meanings in the Russian poetic tradition. To give just four examples: *lepet* [babble], *t'ma* [darkness], *edinyi* [one, or sole], and *nedostizhimoe* [(the) unattainable]. While they do have

context-dependent meanings within the poems, words like these cannot help but allude to the Russian canon, and their significance as "Russian poetry words" overshadows their literal meanings, which in any case are usually quite vague. Thus, the *Octets* to some extent continue (in oblique form) Mandelstam's engagement with the Russian poetic tradition, which is treated more overtly in the cycle "Verses about Russian Poetry" [*Stikhi o russkoi poezii*] and in individual poems about Tiutchev and Batyushkov (all from 1932).

As for what the *Octets* are about, Mandelstam offered only that they deal with "cognition" [*poznanie*],[113] while Mikhail Gasparov notes that they are generally considered some of Mandelstam's most obscure works.[114] Nevertheless, certain themes do stand out. Several of the poems deal explicitly or implicitly with space, specifically space in poetry as a function of, or container for, poetic material.[115] This theme is taken up from the outset: in the doublet poems that open the group—and which share a first quatrain—poetic space appears as a fabric-like surface, marked by folds, pleats, tensions, and ripples:

> Люблю появление ткани,
> Когда после двух или трёх,
> А то четырёх задыханий
> Прийдёт выпрямительный вздох. (*PSS* 227)

> [I love when the weave appears, / When after two or three / Or sometimes four short breaths, / The rectifying deep breath comes.[116]]

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[113] *Kniga treti'ia*, 188.

[114] "Vos'mistishiia Mandel'shtama," 47.

[115] In "Conversation about Dante," Mandelstam notes that in the *Divine Comedy*, "space exists only insofar as it is a receptacle [*vlagalishche*] for amplitudes" (81). With the word *vlagalishche*, which can mean sheath (in botany) or vagina, Mandelstam configures the relationship between receptive poetic space and fluctuating poetic material in simultaneously biological and anatomical (sexual) terms.

[116] Here I follow Nancy Pollak in translating *vypriamitel'nyi* as "rectifying," so as to capture both its spatial and ethical connotations. See *Mandelstam the Reader*, 47.

In this quatrain, the speaker describes the onset of inspiration in both spatial and bodily terms; the appearance of the weave (Mandelstam tends to use textile motifs to spatialize cognitive processes) coincides with a change in the speaker's breathing, from short breaths or gasps [*zadykhaniia*] to a long deep sigh [*vzdokh*]. These two coinciding events figure the speaker as partly abstract (with the mind as the locus of poetry) and partly physical (with the body as that locus). Moreover, breath—as a current that circulates both within and around the poet—serves as a link between the abstract, interior space and the breathing human image. Another link between these two perspectives is the adjective *vypriamitel'nyi* [rectifying]. It suggests the relief—mental and physical—that arrives with the long breath, as well as a change in the speaker's posture, as though he were bent and is now straightening. *Vypriamitel'nyi* has an ethical connotation as well, signaling the arrival of creative freedom described by the speaker in the second stanzas of both doublets.[117] Interestingly, the motif of straightening will return in the Bely poems, but its value

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[117] The second quatrain of the first version (chronologically the second to be written) reads:

И дугами парусных гонок
Зеленые формы чертя,
Играет пространство спросонок —
Не знавшее люльки дитя. (*PSS* 227)

[And sketching green forms / Like the arcs of regattas, / Nature plays half-asleep – / A child who has never known a cradle.]

The second quatrain of the second version (chronologically the first to be written) reads:

И как хорошо мне и тяжко,
Когда приближается миг,
И вдруг дуговая растяжка
Звучит в бормотаньях моих. (*PSS* 227)

[And I feel so good and so heavy / When the moment approaches, / And suddenly a bowlike tension / Sounds in my mutterings.]

there will be more ambivalent.[118] Attention to the breath is also echoed by the quatrain's sounds: the consonant *kh*, with its suggestion of labored breathing is repeated four times in lines 2-3, then cuts out until the very end of line 4, where it opens onto the stanzaic break and sounds somehow freer, less constrained.[119] The work of breathing in this poem is usually read in metapoetic terms; as Nadezhda Mandelstam points out, Osip Emilievich's process of composition typically included several false starts (she calls them *nabroski*), resembling "short asthmatic wheezes," which would suddenly resolve themselves in a single deep breath – signaling that the poem had taken off.[120]

The textile motif in these two poems goes back to an idea in "Conversation about Dante," where Mandelstam turns a bit of word play (on *tkachestvo* [weaving] and *kachestvo* [quality]) into a crucial aesthetic affinity: "For Dante, the greatest intensity of material nature as a substance defined by color is found in textiles. And weaving is the occupation closest to qualitativeness, to quality."[121] The textile motif recurs throughout the group as a literalization of the abstract concept of poetic material. It is also a way to figure poetic material in terms of physical sensation, especially since *tkan'* can also denote biological tissue.[122] The folds, torsions,

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[118] Gasparov has noted that words and motifs can change value easily in Mandelstam's later poetry; as he puts it, Mandelstam frequently changed the meanings and valences of terms "on the go" (*na khodu*), sometimes toggling between opposites. M. L. Gasparov, *Grazhdanskaia lirika 1937 goda* (Moscow: RGGU, 1996), 65.

[119] The recurring consonant *kh* could also recall the "hoarse ochre" [*khriplaia okhra*] of the opening poem in the *Armenia* group (*PSS* 187). The *Octets* contain several known allusions to the writings of the Armenia period; for example, the "bowlike [or "arcing"] tension" [*dugovaia rastiazhka*] of the second doublet (the first to appear chronologically) has been connected to a phrase from "Journey to Armenia" regarding a scientific theory of Alexander Gurwitsch's about the force field surrounding an embryo, "a kind of rough sketch of a living creature." See "'Vos'mistishiia' Mandel'shtama," 53.

[120] *Kniga tret'ia*, 189.

[121] "Conversation about Dante," 86-7.

[122] Figures of weaving can be found in Formalist writing as well (e.g., *tkan' povestvovaniia* [the fabric of narrative] in Shklovsky – see his "About Pil'niak" [O Pil'niake], *Lef*, Vol. 3, No. 7 [1923]); or Tynianov, in "Interlude": "The theme [of Pasternak's poetry] is inextricable; it exists in the spongy tissue, the coarse texture of the verse. (This coarse, spongy quality is a marker of young tissue; old age is as smooth as a billiard ball.)" Yuri Tynianov,

and tautness that mark the semi-abstract textile attest to the presence of impulses and energies

acting on it; by focusing on the moving textures of the material surface, we are made to feel

these energies. In the quatrain quoted above, for instance, the connection between textile (and

tissue) and breathing locates the impulses of poetic speech in the body while maintaining a

certain degree of abstraction.[123]

I will now look at three of the *Octets* more closely. I have chosen them because they

develop three different classic human figures—the dead woman, the crowd, and the dead poet—

in interesting ways, emphasizing the ambiguity and indeterminacy of the human image in

relation to poetic material. In particular, I am interested in how these poems highlight the

capacity of human figures to signify in multiple directions at once, and to remain suspended

between definite meanings, values, and states – including life and death. In "O butterfly, O

Muslim woman" [*O babochka, o musul'manka*] the addressee is a poetic hybrid, a butterfly-

woman in whom life and death are entwined, and who grows bigger and more threatening the

more human images she is compared to. "Schubert on the water and Mozart in his avian din" [*I*

Shubert na vode, i Motsart v ptich'em game] is about the ambivalent relationship between the

artist and the crowd [*tolpa*], a relationship that is figured in terms of two contrasting kinds of

human image. Finally, the slightly later octet "Having overcome nature's roteness" [*Preodolev*

zatverzhennost' prirody] is a taste of things to come. It features a highly diffuse and abstract poet

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Permanent Evolution: Collected Essays on Literature, Theory and Film, trans. and ed. Ainsley Morse and Philip
Redko (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2019), 161. These correspondences are further evidence that
Mandelstam's ideas and metaphors in "Conversation about Dante" were shaped by his discussions with Formalist
authors.

[123] Another aspect of this metapoetic theme is that the poet privileges suspension over attainment: In "When, having
destroyed the rough sketch" [*Kogda, unichtozhiv nabrosok, PSS* 228], the speaker lingers on the poem in his mind,
Mandelstam uses the metonym *period*, both a poetic phrasal unit from classical rhetoric and an allusion to
mathematical periodicity, and then ironically dismisses the paper, which stands in the same relation to the poem in
the mind as the empty sky to a cupola.

figure who is (mostly) separate from the speaker and completely hybridized with a rocky

landscape in which he appears both dead and not dead. This octet also touches on metapoetic

themes through intertexts with an octet Mandelstam wrote years earlier and forgot, as well as a

poem by Pushkin. While all three octets can be read as experiments on poetic material as

Mandelstam conceived it, they are also quite explicitly about death, though in different ways and

to different degrees.

In "O butterfly, O Muslim woman," Mandelstam develops one aspect of the textile theme

from "Conversation about Dante"—the oriental motif—in relation to a butterfly, a complex

figure in whom life and death are united, who is simultaneously humanlike and phantasmal:

> О бабочка, о мусульманка,
> В разрезанном саване вся —
> Жизняночка и умиранка,
> Такая большая – сия!
>
> С большими усами кусава
> Ушла с головою в бурнус.
> О, флагом развернутый саван, —
> Сложи свои крылья — боюсь! (*PSS* 227)
>
> [O butterfly, O Muslim woman, / All in a cut shroud – / Living one, dying one, / So big –
> so as you are! // The biter with large whiskers / Went head-first into her burnoose. / O
> shroud spread out like a flag – / Fold your wings – I'm frightened!][124]

The butterfly has several meanings for Mandelstam; Nadezhda Mandelstam sees it as an symbol

of life that "leaves no trace behind," life lived in the instant of its occurrence.[125] Gasparov,

meanwhile, reads this poem as a portrait of a butterfly in the process of becoming; the usual

relation between life and death is destabilized since the caterpillar must figuratively "die" before

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[124] This translation borrows words and phrases (specifically in lines 3 and 4) from Eugene Ostashevsky's translation, published in "three by Mandelstam, for Oya Ataman," *absent magazine*, Issue 1 (December 2006), online at http://absentmag.org/issue01/ostashevsky.html. Last accessed November 10, 2018.

[125] *Kniga tret'ia*, 190.

it can be reborn.[126] In "Conversation about Dante," the butterfly appears in answer to the question "what is Dantean erudition?" as a symbol of the cultural hybridity that Dante (and Mandelstam) considered ideal.[127] There is also something elegiac about the butterfly: the faint eroticism of her slashed garment, her existence on the border of death, always against the backdrop of her shroud, suggest that she is a symbolic substitute for a dead woman. Indeed, her apparition, and the fear she inspires in the speaker, make her seem more like a ghost or reanimated corpse than a living creature.[128] At the same time, death is entwined with life, both in the evocation of the butterfly's life cycle and through the tender names (both of them neologisms) by which the speaker addresses her: *zhiznianochka* [living one] and *umiranka* [dying one]. The first name, ending in the same diminutive suffix as *babochka* [butterfly], sounds like a term of endearment, something one would call a young girl; the second, which rhymes with *musul'manka*, is more grown up, and, through the suffix *-ka*, suggests an adult female identity or affiliation – political, religious, sexual, or professional.

In both quatrains, the butterfly's presence is enacted rhetorically, with apostrophes. This makes her seem more present than figures in the other *Octets*; the "O" circumscribes her being, makes her image cohere; at the same time, the "O" also calls attention to itself as a poetic

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[126] "'Vos'mistishiia' Mandel'shtama," 52.

[127] Mandelstam compares Aristotle to a "terrycloth butterfly" bordered with Averroes' "Arabian fringe." The two philosophers—teacher and student, originator and commentator—appear on the surface of a single wing. "Conversation about Dante," 45.

[128] The butterfly was also a vital image for the poet Velimir Khlebnikov, whose career Mandelstam had followed closely, and who died over a decade before this poem was written. Tynianov even referred to the butterfly as Khlebnikov's poetic self-image (in "On Khlebnikov" [O Khlebnikove], first published as a preface to Velimir Khlebnikov, *Sobranie proizvedenii*, vol. 1 [Leningrad, 1928], 19-30). In Khlebnikov's 1921 poem "For me, a butterfly, having flown in..." [Mne, babochke, zaletevshei], the speaker calls himself a butterfly beating against the window of a person – a very different image of hybridity than what we see in Mandelstam's octet, yet one that Mandelstam may well have had in mind. Thus, this poem addressing a butterfly may obliquely address two dead figures as well – an unspecified woman, and the great Futurist poet.

utterance par excellence, gesturing not only to the butterfly, but to poetry as such.[129] (The *o*, as well as the *a* sound that fills the first quatrain, give this octet a more open sound than most of the others: here vowels, not consonants, stand out.) At the same time, the butterfly is described in highly figurative and suggestive terms. *Musul'manka* (Muslim woman) in particular is semantically and phonetically multivalent; it hints paronomastically at muslin and *musor* [garbage], two images of beautiful debris from Mandelstam's description of a wild rose in one of the Armenia poems.[130] It also introduces an Oriental theme, echoed by the burnoose in line 6. In "Conversation about Dante," Mandelstam discusses the Oriental theme as an aspect of the textile theme, in the passage devoted to the Geryon episode of *Inferno*.[131] In the octet, the Oriental and textile themes are connected as well; the textile theme is invoked through the cerement [*savan* – note that a *savan* is not just a shroud but an embroidered garment], a metaphor for both the torn cocoon and the butterfly's wings, which spread out "like a flag." The butterfly can thus be read as a gentle travesty of Dante's Geryon, although unlike Geryon the butterfly must be white (like a cerement). Comparing Dante's great mythical beast, however distantly, with a butterfly (albeit

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[129] Recently, Witold Sadowski has linked apostrophe to archaic Greek religious practices, where it not only signified a turn to the addressee (the meaning of apostrophe that has come down to us today), but simultaneously invoked a higher power. According to Sadowski, this ritual subtext suggests that the apostrophic "O" always addresses not just the immediate addressee but what Bakhtin calls the "superaddressee" as well – the divine, language as such, or some other higher instantiation. The metapoetic significance of apostrophe can also be seen in how, over the centuries, the "O" has become an international lexeme associated with poetry across borders, unaffiliated with any one national language. Witold Sadowski, "Krótka historia 'O!'," *Pamiętnik Literacki* CIX, z. 3 (2018), 125-43.

[130] The line, "rosy garbage – muslin – Solomon's petal" [розовый мусор – муслин – лепесток соломоновый] comes from the poem "Bundle your hand in a shawl and into the wreathed wild rose" [*Ruku platkom obmotai i v ventsenosnyi shipovnik*, *PSS* 189]; it too is about an encounter with a wild, half-personified living thing whose existence is fragile and fleeting.

[131] "In Canto 17 of the Inferno there is a monster of conveyances by the name of Geryon, something on the order of a super-tank equipped with wings...Here the subject is the color of Geryon's skin. His back, chest and sides are variously colored, ornamented with small knots and shields. Dante explains that neither the Turkish nor Tartar weavers ever used brighter colors for their carpets. The textile brilliance of this comparison is blinding, but the commercial perspectives of textiles revealed in it are completely unexpected." "Conversation about Dante," 58. Translation slightly modified.

a big one!) also leads to a playful inversion of magnitudes. Mandelstam uses the rhetoric of the

sublime (apostrophe, somewhat archaic diction [*siia*], a sense of awe) to describe a tiny creature,

which grows preternaturally large before his eyes, as though transformed by his words. So large,

in fact, that it robs him of speech: in both quatrains, the use of dashes to signal the disruption of

speech, the exclamation marks, and the awed, slightly meaningless *siia*, suggest that the speaker

is overwhelmed by feeling.[132] In the second quatrain, the butterfly, or rather its previous

incarnation as a caterpillar, even becomes threatening; it's a biter (*kusava* – a neologism

combining the verb *kusat'sia* [to bite] and *krasava* [a beautiful woman]). The big whiskers may

also be a veiled allusion to Stalin;[133] this, together with the flag metaphor in line 7, adds a

political dimension to the stanza. The introduction of political subtexts in the second stanza

corresponds to a move from mostly feminine grammatical forms (six words in the first quatrain

have feminine endings) to a mix of feminine and masculine forms in the second. The poem's

(subtle) move towards politics and masculinity (or gender hybridity) echoes a change in the

speaker's affect, from awe to fear. The obscure, threatening authority figure in stanza two is just

one of several semantic layers encoded, by means of the multidirectionality (*obratimost'*) of

poetic material, in the classic image of the butterfly, itself a composite of cloth and tissue, living

and dying.

The next octet I will look at is about the relationship between the artist (or rather the

image of the artist) and the crowd:

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[132] Being robbed of speech by feeling is a mark of the sublime as well; see Neil Hertz, *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

[133] Mandelstam had written the Stalin epigram a month earlier; that poem contains the lines "Kto svistit, kto miauchit, kto khnychet, / On odin lish' babachit i tychet" [Some whistle, others meow, others whimper, / He alone browbeats and prods], *PSS* 226.

И Шуберт на воде, и Моцарт в птичьем гаме,
И Гёте, свищущий на вьющейся тропе,
И Гамлет, мысливший пугливыми шагами,
Считали пульс толпы и верили толпе.

Быть может, прежде губ уже родился шопот
И в бездревесности кружилися листы,
И те, кому мы посвящаем опыт,
До опыта приобрели черты. (*PSS* 229)

[Schubert on the water, and Mozart in his birdlike din, / And Goethe, whistling down a winding path, / And Hamlet, thinking in time to his fearful footsteps, / Took the crowd's pulse and believed the crowd. // Perhaps the whisper was born before there were lips / And leaves had whirled in the treelessness, / And those to whom we dedicate experience / Formed features prior to experience.]

The first quatrain names three artists and one artistic creation (Hamlet); and in fact they all, to some degree, live more in the minds of the public than as biographical figures. Hamlet is of the same order as Schubert, Mozart, and Goethe because all four have become cultural commonplaces, and this gives them a kind of ontological parity.[134] Indeed, in this octet the more unconventionally drawn figure is the crowd (*tolpa*); the images of the artists, while delightfully drawn, are just a touch too familiar. The epigrammatic environments in which Mandelstam places them are evocative of how they have been perceived in European culture: Schubert is associated with water music (e.g., his Lied "Auf dem Wasser zu singen" and famous Trout Quintet); Mozart is birdlike in his "effortless" musical genius, and associated with the bird imagery in his popular opera *The Magic Flute* (*gam* [din] manifests literally through its echoes in "Gamlet" and "shagami," and also puns on *gamma* [musical scale]); Goethe was a legendary

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[134] Hamlet could also be an allusion to Blok, who identified with the Shakespeare character all his life, played him in amateur productions, and wrote poems in his voice.

hiker; and fearful pacing is the quintessence of Hamlet (and, perhaps, Blok),[135] especially to a

general public still used to Romantic interpretations of Shakespeare. Furthermore, each of these

environments is based on periodicity or countable rhythm: water, birdsong, musical scales,

whistling (sound moves in waves), the winding trail, and Hamlet's footsteps all evoke either

fluctuation or rhythm or both. This periodicity in the artist figures' environments is also

connected to the pulse of the crowd, which the artist figures listen to.

Mandelstam depicts the relationship between artist and crowd in ambivalent terms;

there's nothing to suggest derision or hard feelings, but the verb "trusted" [*verit'*] in line 4

nevertheless reads as double-edged. Both Nadezhda Mandelstam and Mikhail Gasparov see the

relationship between artist and crowd in this poem as symbiotic: the crowd spurs the artist to

creative work and is then enriched by the fruits of this work. In their view, the poet's utterances

are impossible if they did not first exist in the consciousness of the crowd.[136] At the same time, it

is not at all clear whether the artists' trust in the crowd is rewarded here. In large part, this

ambiguity has to do with the enigmas of the second quatrain, which shows a very different

environment than what we saw in the first. This second environment is strange, abstract, and

depicted via absence (treelessness, a state prior to lips). There is a suggestion of paper in the

word *listy* [leaves] in line 6, as well as a whisper with an uncertain relationship to language.

The whisper [*shopot*] and circling leaves [*listy*] contrast with the periodicity in the first

quatrain; they are inchoate and circular, rather than rhythmic and wave-like; there is no

animating pulse here, but something closer to a primordial incoherence. At the same time, the *sh*

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[135] See, for instance, Blok's poem "The Commander's Footsteps" [*Shagi komandora*], completed in 1912. Blok's poem evokes both Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and Pushkin's *The Stone Guest* (Kammenyi gost'). Aleksandr Blok, *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvorenii v dvukh tomakh* (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1946), Vol. 3, 80-81.

[136] *Kniga tret'ia*, 191; and "Vos'mistishiia Mandel'shtama," 51.

in *shopot* sends us back the first quatrain, whose dense sound orchestration is primarily built around this voiceless fricative (in line 2, the repetition of *shch* also evokes wind, obliquely echoing the treeless scene in line 6). The second quatrain's primordial scenes suggest a reversal of time, or at least a confusion of temporal categories. Into this strange landscape, Mandelstam places a different kind of human image, a sharp contrast to the brightly defined artist figures of stanza 1.

The last two lines are particularly enigmatic, the result of a last-minute metrical change, and of Mandelstam playing on the multiple meanings of several key words. The metrical change is from iambic hexameter to pentameter; this reduction loses the strong caesura that allowed for symmetry and balance between the halves of all the previous lines. It also ties in to the theme of counting; in this context the break in the poem's rhythm seems charged with metapoetic significance. As for the polysemous words, the most important is *te*, an ambiguous designation that seems to refer to the *tolpa* from stanza 1, but leaves other interpretations open as well (Mandelstam will use demonstrative pronouns to ambiguous effect in the Petrarch sonnets as well). *Posviashchat'* (dedicate) and *opyt* (experience) are likewise polysemous; in this context, *te* could refer to the *tolpa* as the public (as in reading public), *tolpa* as the people (as in nation), someone close to the poet or artist (a dedicatee), or even the muses – playing on the sacral meaning of "dedicate" in classical literature. *Te* could also refer to a sympathetic future reader, the hoped-for interlocutor Mandelstam discusses elsewhere.[137] Unlike the picturesque figures in the first quatrain, *te* are defined only by the general word *cherty* [features]; moreover the

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[137] "On the Conversation Partner" [*O sobesednike*]. O. E. Mandel'shtam, *Sobranie sochinenii v 4 tomakh* (Moscow: Art-Biznes-Tsentr, 1993), vol. 1, 182-7. On the ideal reader as an interlocutor in Mandelstam, see Anna Glazova, "Poetry of Bringing about Presence: Paul Celan Translates Osip Mandelstam," *MLN* Vol. 123, No. 5 (2009), 1108-1126.

demonstrative pronoun has an estranging effect on their image. There is an ambiguous contrast between the (unnamed) features of *te* in the last quatrain and the brightly drawn features of the artist-figures in the first, a contrast that hints at the origin of, and even responsibility for, those latter, vivid features. The other pronoun in stanza 2—the personal pronoun *my* [we]—is also odd; of the ten other octets, only "V igol'chatykh chumnykh bokalakh" uses the first person plural in this way. The meaning of this "we" is unclear – does it refer to artists, experimenters, or people in general? (It depends on the different meanings of *opyt* – a work of art, any kind of intellectual labor, scientific experiment, or just experience.)

There is also a curious parallel between the verbs in lines 7-8, one that seems to have a bearing on the relationship between the "we" [*my*] and the ambiguous "those" [*te*]. The verb associated with *te*, *priobresti* [to come by, obtain], contains a religious echo in the root, which evokes *obriad* [rite], a word Mandelstam uses in other poems of the 1930s, such as "I will perform a smoky rite" [Ispolniu dymchatyi obriad, *PSS* 249]. "Dedicate" [*posviashchiat'*], as noted above, also has a sacral meaning. In fact, both verbs (*priobresti* and *posviashchiat'*) contain other verbs in their stems, verbs with religious, Church Slavonic associations—*sviatit'* and *obresti*. The unmarked, secular verbs used by Mandelstam simply add a prefix to the religious root, but Mandelstam keeps both religious and secular meanings in play, suggesting that there are both civic and ritual aspects to the relationship between artist and crowd. Thus, in this octet, Mandelstam questions this relationship by juxtaposing two very different poetic environments; the first is brightly defined and allusive, the second primordial and inchoate, marked by spatial, temporal, grammatical, and even lexical ambiguities.

Lastly, I want to look at a slightly later octet, one that originally grew out of the Bely poems:

Преодолев затверженность природы,
Голуботвердый глаз проник в ее закон,
В земной коре юродствуют породы,
И как руда из груди рвется стон.

И тянется глухой недоразвиток,
Как бы дорогой, согнутою в рог, —
Понять пространства внутренний избыток
И лепестка и купола залог. (*PSS* 228)

[Having overcome nature's roteness, / The bluehard eye grasped its law, / Strata act holy foolish in the earth's crust, / And a groan tears from the breast like ore. // And the deaf, underdeveloped one drags ahead, / As though down a road bent into a horn, / To understand the inner surplus of space / And the pledge of petal and cupola.]

This poem can be read as a response to Andrei Bely's death, especially if we keep in mind its origin as part of the Bely cycle, but it is a disorienting response, one that radically defamiliarizes the classic elegiac trope of the dead poet who nevertheless enjoys some kind of posthumous existence.[138] Here, the diffuse, dead/alive poet figure—with his disembodied bluehard eye (a metonym for Bely, who had striking blue eyes), holy foolishness (*iurod* is another of Mandelstam's Bely words), and the breast uttering its "tearing" ore-like cry—is hybridized with a landscape of rock, evoking the geological theme Mandelstam explores at some length in "Conversation about Dante."[139] There, Mandelstam describes the interior of rock formations as

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[138] Here and with the Bely cycle, I use "elegy" and "elegiac" to mean a set of conventions around poems dealing with death and mourning; e.g., listing the dead person's qualities, involving nature in the mourning process, or enacting a compensatory move to mitigate the sting of death (for example, the creative renewal of the speaker, or the apotheosis of the dead person). These conventions in poems dealing with death have been around since antiquity, and play a role in all European poetic traditions; however, they became associated with the *genre* of elegy primarily in the English tradition. In the Russian poetic tradition, as in the French, the elegy developed in imitation of the classical genre based on elegiac couplets; moreover, Russian elegies, like those of antiquity, can deal with a broader range of themes than just death and mourning. On the English elegy, see Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985). On the Russian elegy, see Vadim Vatsuro, *Lirika pushkinskoi pory: elegicheskaia shkola* (Saint Petersburg: Nauka, 1994).

[139] E.g., "The structure of the Dantean monologue, built on a system of organ stops [*na organnoi registrovke*], can be well understood by making use of an analogy with rock strata whose purity has been destroyed by the intrusion of foreign bodies. Granular admixtures and veins of lava indicate a single upheaval [*sdvig*] or catastrophe as the common source of the formation [*formoobrazovaniia*]" ("Conversation about Dante," 52). Also: "The interior of

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dynamic spaces, shifting and transforming rather than solid. Here, the image, especially in the

first quatrain, is of being inside telluric strata filled with veins of ore/blood, where the only sound

is a prolonged groan and the sense of time is severely distorted. Moreover, in this environment

the strata behave like holy fools [*iurodstvuiut*], figuring geological transformation as a dynamic,

and markedly human, performance. There are other words that refer simultaneously to the dead

poet figure and the landscape: the noun *zatverzhennost'*—a coinage derived from the verb

zatverdit' [to learn by rote]—combines the idea of memorization with a suggestion of hardening

[*tverdet'*] and of the firmament [*tverd'*], hybridizing memory itself (an essential attribute of the

living poet) with earth and sky. *Poroda* [geological strata, or veins of precious ore] can also refer

to a human "type" (the morpheme *rod* [pertaining to birth, kindred, or genus] is coded into both

this word and *iurodstvovat'*); while *ruda* in line 4 denotes ore, but is also an archaic word for

blood. Even *ston* [groan], a pure expression of feeling with connotations of mourning and

physical pain, is metaphorically linked to ore. Together, the play on etymologies (*poroda, rod*)

and images (the groaning, the attempt to tear free from a confined space) suggest the process of

birth. Thus, as in "O butterfly, O Muslim woman," Mandelstam layers birth and death metaphors

to evoke an indeterminate state, in this case one where a dead poet is still capable of utterance.

Presiding over this quatrain is a human-like figure who is radically de-personified, his most

human qualities (blood, memory, expressiveness) transposed onto the interior of a geological

landscape.

Things get even more complicated in the second quatrain. Here, Mandelstam continues to

experiment with the non-binary living/dead figure of the poet, while also adding a metapoetic

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mineral rock, the Aladdin-like space concealed within, the lantern-like, lamp-like, chandelier-like suspension of
piscine rooms deposited within, is the best key to understanding the coloration of the Commedia." (Ibid., 88)

dimension to the octet through intertextuality with an octet written much earlier (in a draft of the poem "Lamarck"), as well as a celebrated poem by Pushkin.

Mandelstam experiments with the living/dead figure of the poet through his use of polysemous words, specifically *nedorazvitok* (a bizarre noun derived from the adjective *nedorazvityi* [underdeveloped]); *tianut'sia* [to drag on, be stretched, make a laborious attempt]; the ambiguous instrumental case of *doroga* [road]; and the two puzzling nouns that end lines 7 and 8 – *izbytok* and *zalog*. *Nedorazvitok*, a Mandelstamian coinage, suggests both a person and thing. It is both an animate substitute for the poet figure in the first stanza, who in the second stanza appears deaf (*glukhoi* – perhaps a euphemism for "dead") and stretched out across the earth, and an inanimate object (unfinished or underdeveloped), curved as though into the shape of a ram's horn. (This shape also suggests an ear or cochlea, thanks to its association with deafness in the previous line.) The verb *tianut'sia* is also ambiguous; it can refer to human striving (and indeed seems to be paired with the infinitive *poniat'* [to understand] in line 7), but also strongly connotes physical stretching. The instrumental noun *dorogoi* in line 6 raises a question: is this the instrumental of simile (in which case the *nedorazvitok* is being compared to the curved road) or of means (in which case it is dragging itself down the road)? Both options are in play, allowing us to imagine an animate/inanimate body that is simultaneously stretched out on (or in) the ground, and walking upon it. The same images (the *nedorazvitok*, the curved road, the striving connoted by *tianut'sia*) can also be read as a birth. *Nedorazvitok* suggests something not-yet-born (a baby in the womb), or simply not-yet fully created (like a still-gestating work of art). The linking of creative work and human birth is a classic poetic trope—a way for poetry to talk about its own coming into being—which Mandelstam defamiliarizes with the geological

setting, and by making the "underdeveloped one's" vitality uncertain.[140] The two prefixed nouns

in the last two lines—*izbytok* and *zalog*—are polysemous as well. *Izbytok*, with its current

meaning of abundance or surplus, is, etymologically speaking, a remainder, or even something

that survives. *Zalog* (pledge, as in a surety or, figuratively, a token of love) is a Pushkinian word

denoting both a proof of something and a substitution in value: the "pledge" acts as a legal (or

figurative) substitute, taking on the value of the thing it represents.[141] In these lines, the

etymological linking of surplus and survival, and the idea of a pledge taking on the value of

something from nature (whether a leaf or a cupola), enable a metapoetic reading, where the poem

is at once a surfeit (something in excess of nature), a means of survival beyond death, and a

token in which the value of something (or someone) has been preserved.

Finally, this octet has a further metapoetic dimension through its intertexts with both an

earlier octet by Mandelstam, and to Pushkin's poem "Remembrance" [*Vospominanie*]. "The

sixth sense's tiny appendage" [*Shestogo chuvstva krokhotnyi pridatok*], the octet that serves as

this one's distant doublet, was originally composed in 1932 for the poem "Lamarck." The two

octets share phonetic echoes: the rhymes in the second quatrain of the Bely octet are very close

to those in the first quatrain of the Lamarck octet (*pridatok/stvorchatok* and *glazok/govorok*).

There are other affinities as well: *nedorazvitok* relates to the motifs of lower order organisms in

the Lamarck octet, such as the parietal eye [*temennoi glazok*] of lizards; also, both grasping the

inner law of nature and descending into the earth recall themes from the poem "Lamarck," which

reimagines Dante's journey into Hell as a journey down the evolutionary ladder with the great

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[140] In this ambiguity, as well the very word *nedorazvitok*, Mandelstam echoes Evgeny Baratynsky's 1835 poem "The Still-born Child" [*Nedonosok*].

[141] See the entry for "zalog" in *Slovar' iazyka Pushkina*, ed. V. V. Vinogradov (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo inostrannykh i natsional'nykh slovarei, 1957), Vol. 2, 60-61.

French naturalist as the speaker's Virgil. The connections to Pushkin's poem are striking as well: along with the evocation of mortality (*smertnyi den'*) in line 1 and the emphasis on soundlessness (*umolknet, nemye*) in lines 1-2, Pushkin's poem, like all the *Octets*, is about the interval (or gap) between imagining (which Pushkin figures as reading) and writing. The written poem is finished before our attention turns to it; what takes place in the head (which is what most of that poem, and most of the *Octets*, are about) is separated from the written text by an ineffable gap. "The...underdeveloped one drags itself" [*Tianetsia...nedorazvitok*] in the Bely octet evokes several lines in Pushkin's poem: "Then for me in the stillness of the night / The wasting, watchful hours drag on their course" ["dlia menia vlachatsia v tishine / Chasy tomitel'nogo bden'ia," lines 5-6]; and "Memory before my wakeful eyes / With noiseless hand unwinds her lengthy scroll" ["Vospominanie bezmolvno predo mnoi / Svoi dlinnyi razvivaet svitok," lines 11-12]. The evocation is strengthened by the rhymes, both phonetic and visual, between *svitok* and *nedorazvitok*. Pushkin's poem even contains the word *izbytok*, in the lines "Dreams seethe; and fretful infelicities / Are swarming in my over-burdened soul" ["v ume, podavlennom toskoi, / Tesnitsia tiazhkikh dum izbytok," lines 9-10].[142] Pushkin's poem, like Mandelstam's octet (and the Bely cycle from which it was extracted), is about mourning—specifically mourning for one's own life—and the connection between this kind of mourning and poetic creation.

The *Octets* are meditations on poetry, self-reflexive explorations of, and experiments on, poetic space and material. In the poems I have discussed, Mandelstam conducts these explorations and experiments by taking advantage of poetic material's fundamental attributes, as he identifies them in "Conversation about Dante": its transmutability, its elusiveness, and its

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[142] Translations by Maurice Baring, from "Remembrance, By Alexander Pushkin," *The Los Angeles Times*, March 21, 1999, online at http://articles.latimes.com/1999/mar/21/books/bk-19930. Last accessed November 27, 2018.

capacity to be oriented in multiple directions at once. In "O butterfly, O Muslim woman," the diminutive butterfly addressee becomes an enormous screen on which different materials (garments, tissue, a flag), states (living, dying, rebirth) and people (a woman, a poet, a tyrant) are projected simultaneously, overwhelming the speaker who had wanted to apostrophize it. In "Schubert on the water, and Mozart in his avian din," a trusting relationship between poet and crowd, portrayed in a sequence of cultural commonplaces about great artists and their creations, gives way to a more obscure and ambiguous relationship, whose indeterminacy is reflected in the primordial environment and in grammatical and lexical polysemy. Finally, in "Having overcome nature's roteness," a poet figure, at once dead and not-dead, is hybridized with a geological landscape, and poetic creation itself is figured as a process that suggests geological formation, difficult birth (and stillbirth), and the transference and preservation of value. In all three poems, Mandelstam radically defamiliarizes common poetic tropes in order to emphasize process, dynamism, and multivalence, to keep his images (human images in particular) fluid and hard to pin down, rather than static or illustrative. If in the *Octets*, Mandelstam explores the nuances and limits of poetic representation in forms that emphasize potential over finished form, in the Petrarch translations he will examine the same nuances and limits in the context of a polished and highly conventional genre – and through the additional mediating layer of translation.

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Transformations of the Beloved's Image in the Petrarch Translations

The transition from the *Octets*, with their unfinished, elliptical quality, to the Petrarch translations—written in one of the most perfected and polished of all forms—is remarkable. Oddly enough, this transition in Mandelstam's writing life has a historical parallel that ties it to

Dante's era: the enlargement of the octave—itself a venerable form favored by troubadours[143]—by two tercets to make the sonnet, a hybrid form that, at least in Western Europe, came to occupy a singularly important place among lyric genres.[144] To what extent Mandelstam registered this coincidence is impossible to say, but it is interesting that in his Petrarch translations the two basic parts of the sonnet—octave and sestet—are treated in markedly different ways, sometimes as though they were taken from two different poems and fused together; the seams in Mandelstam's sonnets are visible, and the *volta* is more of a radical break than a turn. I would even suggest that Mandelstam treats the two tercets as snippets of terza rima, the form of the *Divine Comedy*, in their striking use of metaphor (these metaphors are sometimes like miniature versions of the Heraclitean metaphors Mandelstam describes in "Conversation about Dante"), their rhetorical strategies, and their intense compression, all of which differ sharply from what Mandelstam does in the octaves. Another difference between the octaves and sestets is their relative difficulty, the amount of cognitive resistance they offer. In the octaves, Mandelstam describes spaces, feelings, and their interpenetration in ways that aren't hard to visualize; these mental "landscapes" emerge gradually and are wonderfully sensual – sound, color, and physical sensation merge in a relatively coherent picture. The octaves also do their traditional job of building the sonnet's argument. The sestets are much harder to visualize. They use mixed metaphors that flow into each other quickly and suddenly. The meanings and sense impressions associated with these half-realized metaphors are fleeting; while sensuous and striking at every

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[143] "The octave is the stanza of the first rank in Occitan poetry...roughly a third of all extant O[ld] F[rench] lyrics are set in one form or another of octave." Roland Greene et al., *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 969.

[144] This is not to say that the sonnet displaced the octave—which continued to play a vital role in European poetry, in the works of Torquato Tasso, Ariosto, and Byron, among others—only that it built on the existing form. Furthermore, in the modern period the octave became a building block for epic (or simply narrative) poetry, while the sonnet remained a quintessentially lyric form.

point, they don't paint a cumulative picture.[145] There is also a difference in sound orchestration between the octaves and sestets: the octaves are more euphonious and songlike, while the sestets are more acoustically congested, and abound in consonant clusters.[146] To complicate matters, at numerous points the sound orchestration also mimics the sounds of the Italian originals – through interlinguistic puns, an abundance of polysyllabic words with dactylic or even hyperdactylic endings (which approximate the rhythm of syllabic verse), lines that begin with trochaic inversions, and exclusively feminine rhymes.[147]

Mandelstam worked on the sonnets between December 1933 and January 1934. The sonnets he chose (in the order he translated them in) are numbers 301, 311, 164, and 319, all from Petrarch's *Rime Sparse*; although certain lines in the translations allude to sonnets located near the ones he chose in standard Italian editions of Petrarch. He revised the translations extensively (much more than he usually did with poems of this length); Irina Semenko has shown how successive revisions vacillate between fidelity to the originals and radical semantic

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[145] This fleeting, hard-to-picture quality of the metaphors in the sestets also aligns them with the 18th century Russian ode. On the fleetingness of sense and imagery in the ode, see Iurii Tynianov, "Oda kak oratorskii zhanr" [The Ode as an Oratorical Genre], in *PILK*, 227-52, especially sections 3 and 4.

[146] To some extent, these differences correspond to different genres within the Russian poetic tradition: the mellifluous octaves evoke the soft, sweet style of 18th/early 19th century Russian poetry in the tradition of Sumarokov and Zhukovsky, the Russian elegy and song. The dense, resistant sounds of the sestets correspond to the odic line of Russian poetry that goes back to Lomonosov and Derzhavin, and was partly revived (in shorter, more "lyrical" forms) by the *Lyubomudry* and Tiutchev. For a discussion of these two "schools" and their rivalry, see "Oda kak oratorskii zhanr."

[147] Irina Semenko, "Mandel'shtam – perevodchik Petrarki," *Voprosy literatury* No. 10 (1970), 153-69; and Tomas Venclova, "Viacheslav Ivanov i Osip Mandel'shtam – perevodchiki Petrarki (Na primere soneta CCCXI)," online at http://silver-age.info/vyacheslav-ivanov-i-osip-mandelshtam-perevodchiki-petrarki/0/). Last accessed 7/27/18. Venclova notes that on the level of sound, Mandelstam does not "Italianize," i.e. he does not attempt to soften the Russian as Batyushkov had done in his own translations of Petrarch. Batyushkov had lamented the "barbarisms" of the Russian language, but felt that they could be mitigated by opening Russian verse to the salutary influence of Italian poetry – primarily through translation. Mandelstam doesn't just allow barbarisms into his Russian – he "saturates" his translations with consonant clusters and other phonic groups that had so pained Batyushkov's ear. Venclova interprets this amplified barbarity as a higher act of fidelity on Mandelstam's part – his aim was not to imitate the sounds of Petrarch's Italian (although, as Semenko points out, in several places he does just that) but to emulate the way Petrarch activates the whole gamut of his native language's "phonetic resources"; to sound out Russian the way Petrarch sounded out Italian.

departures.[148] Indeed, the poems' status as translations is contested; Mandelstam himself seemed to have wavered between thinking of them as translations and original works. Mandelstam was spurred to translate Petrarch by a conviction that in existing Russian translations of Petrarch, the poet's voice—indeed his image—had been debased; merely reproducing Petrarch's sonnets trope for trope had turned the "illicit passion of a monk" into something lawyer-like and bombastic.[149] In his own translations, as Venclova observes, "Mandelstam attempts to reconstruct (and even intensify) the impression that Petrarch—a challenging and innovative poet from a transitional era—would have made on his own contemporaries."[150] The sonnets' intermediary status— neither translations nor wholly original works—suggests that here, translation is as much a metapoetic conceit as a category marker, a formal embodiment of the cultural and linguistic crossings explored in the poems.

What ultimately knits the parts of each sonnet together is the figure of the beloved. This figure—most likely inspired by Olga Vaksel', a woman Mandelstam had been in love with in the 1920s and who took her own life in 1932—is not quite the Laura of Petrarch's originals; nor is she Blok's Fair Lady [*Prekrasnaia dama*], although she alludes to both the Renaissance Italian and fin-de-siècle Russian incarnations of that trope. Petrarch's Laura is as much a conventional poetic figure as a flesh-and-blood woman; her image is drawn from Occitan and late medieval Italian tropes that figure metapoetic discourse (poets talking about their art in their poems) in the

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[148] Semenko, "Mandel'shtam – perevodchik Petrarki." Among other arguments that Mandelstam thought of his Petrarch sonnets as poems "after" Petrarch rather than direct translations are the epigraphs from the Italian that Mandelstam put before each translation.

[149] Mandelstam's observations on existing Petrarch translations were made to Semen Lipkin; S. Lipkin, *"Ugl', pylaiushchii ognem--": vospominaniia o Mandel'shtame: stikhi, stat'i, perepiska* (Moscow: Izdatel'skii tsentr Rossiiskii gos. universiteta, 2008), 223.

[150] Venclova, "Viacheslav Ivanov i Osip Mandel'shtam."

language of courtly love.[151] The fin-de-siècle Fair Lady, as I will discuss below, is a reimagining

of the Renaissance beloved; however, the Fair Lady trope foregrounds her uncertain ontological

status, dwelling on the possibility that she is a specter or projection. In his translations,

Mandelstam draws on both the metapoetic orientation of Petrarch's Laura, and on the uncertain

ontological status of Blok's Fair Lady, and pushes these ideas to their respective limits. For one

thing, Mandelstam's beloved is not fully personified; on the contrary, her humanity is largely

distanced and effaced. She also appears to be both dead and undead, and her death and continued

posthumous existence as a phantom or projection are at these sonnets' paradoxical heart. Even in

this semi-abstracted, indeterminate form—as if she were not just an ideal, but an ideal taken to

the very limit of representability—her image dominates the poems. As a figure who both belongs

to the poet—is, in fact, part of him—and at the same time is constantly slipping away from him,

the beloved functions as a focal point for an erotics of poetry (one that is indebted to medieval

and Renaissance models of courtly love). One aspect of this erotics is a desire not to let the

beloved (or the poem) go, figured metapoetically as a potential image taking on form without

becoming fully formed (an intermediary state that belongs fully to the poet and that the poet

holds onto as long as he can). We have already seen this aspect, to some extent, in the *Octets*: It

is the diffuse, not-fully-personified image, the image that hasn't yet assumed coherent human

form, and that is hybridized with nature, space, and the *topoi* of poetry laid bare. Here, the poet

gets to dwell in potential, not quite letting images or ideas crystallize (an idea that recalls

Mandelstam's early poems inspired by Tiutchev, such as "*Silentium*"). The other,

complementary aspect of this erotics is conceiving of the poetic image (and beloved) as

something that must, inevitably, assume a final form, and that the poet must eventually release

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[151] Agamben, *The End of the Poem*, 31-32.

into the world, where it will circulate beyond his control – even among the public, the *tolpa*, who

threaten to misuse her. These metapoetic concerns correspond to the overtly erotic feelings of

jealousy and protectiveness the speaker hints at throughout the sonnets, feelings that are strange

in poems about a dead woman but that make sense in reference to her cherished image. Behind

this erotic anxiety is a fear about how the poet himself will be misused after his death – a fear at

the front of Mandelstam's mind following the death of the Russian poet Andrei Bely in January

1934, and in light of his own uncertain position amid the growing threat of repressions.[152]

By proposing his own take on the classic trope of the dead beloved, Mandelstam enters

into conversation not just with the Renaissance Italian poets, but with the Symbolists as well

(especially Blok), for whom the Fair Lady was a crucial figure, one who bridged the "real" and

"more real" worlds with which Symbolism was preoccupied. In Blok's cycle, the speaker

addresses the beloved directly and the vacillations of their relationship, which give the book its

structure, are based on distance.[153] These vacillations also reveal the paradoxes inherent in the

figure of the Fair Lady, her uncertain ontological status: is she a flesh-and-blood woman or a

phantasmal eidolon; sacred or profane? Viacheslav Ivanov describes these paradoxes in terms of

a proliferation of binaries and a simultaneous fusion (or confusion) of irreconcilables: "To her

Paladin, the Fair Lady [*Prekrasnaia Dama*] appeared in a dream as a 'cardboard bride'. The

image of the longed-for Woman began doubling and fusing with the phenomenal [*iavlennyi*]

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[152] The Stalin epigram ("My zhyvem, pod soboiiu ne chuia strany") was written just a month before the Petrarch translations, and the problems of living and writing under tyranny are explored (somewhat obliquely) in "Conversation about Dante."

[153] As Jonathan Stone puts it: "The poems hover around the book's heroine and are interlinked with one another through their relative proximity to her. By relying on the oscillating nearness and distance of the poet's object as a gauge of the reader's progress throughout this work, Blok binds his *Stikhi o Prekrasnoi Dame* to a structure that reflects the chaotic Dionysian side of Russian Symbolism." Jonathan Stone, "Aleksandr Blok and the Rise of Biographical Symbolism," *SEEJ* 5:44 (Winter 2010), 635.

image of a wanton."[154] Mandelstam's take on the Fair Lady is different, though it pays homage to Blok's. For one thing, Mandelstam's Fair Lady is never transcendent; even when the sonnets seem to invoke her soul, it is somehow concretized, along with the sky where it resides (the hard sky topos will return in the Voronezh poems). Also unlike Blok, whose poems frequently invoke the transfiguration of the world, Mandelstam avoids redemptive narratives, or brings up their possibility only to question it.

A more complete picture of the sonnets only emerges when the final versions are read side by side with the variants and drafts. Here, we can see how Mandelstam experimented with different degrees of personification or concretization, and where we find alternate words whose echoes would remain, uncannily, in their eventual substitutes. For Mandelstam, especially by the 1930s, variants were no less legitimate than "final" versions. Some worked as standalone poems or doublets, but even variant lines or words are treated not as cancelations but as prior stages in a poem's life. In "Conversation about Dante" Mandelstam writes about the stadial work reflected in successive drafts, drawing an analogy with a sculptor's progress. But, he points out, while a finished sculpture leaves few traces of its journey to form, the preservation of drafts *is* possible in poetry, where the journey from first impulse to final version is not one from lesser to greater authoritativeness, but a continuum, each stage foregrounding certain aspects while downplaying others. This in itself constitutes a vital metapoetic narrative. "As a rule," writes Irina Semenko, "his variants are not just a new reworking [*obrabotka*] of a previous text – they constitute the ongoing elaboration [*razrabotka*] of new ideas, a forward motion, a grasping after new

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[154] Viacheslav Ivanov, "Zavety Simvolizma," in V. I. Ivanov, *Sobranie sochinenii* (Brussels: Foyer Oriental Chrétien, 1971-87), Vol. 2, 599.

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motifs."[155] In the following close readings, I will build on Semenko's groundbreaking work

reconstructing Mandelstam's drafts in order to tease out his changing conception of the human

image, especially as it applies to the figures of the beloved and the poet. Throughout this section,

rather than treating Mandelstam's final versions as perfect and self-sufficient texts, I will

examine them alongside the drafts and alternate lines as "meta" poems unfolding in multiple

directions while retaining traces of canceled words and ideas.[156]

«Речка, распухшая от слез соленых…»[157]

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[155] Irina Semenko, *Poetika pozdnego Mandel'shtama: Ot chernovykh redaktsii k okonchtel'nomu tekstu* (Rome: Carucci, 1986), 97.

[156] This is in keeping with Gasparov's observation that Mandelstam's poems of the 1930s are palimpsests, in which a reader can follow the turns in the poet's thought diachronically. Since Mandelstam preferred words and ideas to accrue meanings, rather than having new meanings displace old ones, the poem ends up being layered with different phases of Mandelstam's thought, with the old only partially erased (*Grazhdanskaia lirika*, 65). It also bears out Semenko's observation that the energy of each poem's beginnings is preserved in the final draft. The final version is dynamic, not stilled, with all the variants integrated into it, even the discarded ones. *Poetika pozdnego Mandel'shtama*, 36.

[157] I include Petrarch's originals here for readers who wish to compare Mandelstam's versions to the Italian. For excellent analyses of all four of Mandelstam's poems as translations, see Semenko, "Mandel'shtam – perevodchik Petrarki." "Rechka, raspukhshaia ot slez solenykh" is a translation of Petrarch's sonnet CCCI, "Valle che de' lamenti miei se' piena." Petrarch's originals taken from Francesco Petrarca, *Canzoniere* (Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1996), 1180:

Valle che de'lamenti miei se' piena,	Oh, valley echoing with my laments,
fiume che spesso del mio pianger cresci,	and river, often swelling from my tears,
fere selvestre, vaghi augelli, et pesci,	beasts of the woods, wandering birds, and fish
che l'una et l'altra verde riva affrena,	that live between these verdant riverbanks,
aria de' miei sospir' calda et serena,	air warmed and clearing from my constant sighs,
dolce sentier che sì' amaro rïesci,	sweet path that has become so bitter to me,
colle che mi piacesti, or, mi rincresci,	hill that I loved and now have come to hate
ov'anchor per usanza Amor mi mena:	where Love still leads me, as he used to do:
ben riconosco in voi l'usate forme,	I recognize you in your well-known forms,
non, lasso, in me, che da si lieta vita	but not, alas, myself, since I've become
son fatto albergo d'infinita doglia.	one who was glad and now is plunged in grief.
Quinci vedea'l mio bene; et per queste orme	I used to see my love, and I've returned
torno a yedere ond' al ciel nuda è gita,	to see the place where, naked, she passed on
lasciando in terra la sua bella spoglia.	to Heaven as she shed her lovely vesture.

Translation by David Young. From *The Poetry of Petrarch*, trans. and with an introduction by David Young (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 214.

Речка, распухшая от слез соленых,
Лесные птахи рассказать могли бы,
Чуткие звери и немые рыбы,
В двух берегах зажатые зеленых;

Дол, полный клятв и шопотов каленых,
Тропинок промуравленных изгибы,
Силой любви затверженные глыбы
И трещины земли на трудных склонах –

Незыблемое зыблется на месте,
И зыблюсь я. Как бы внутри гранита,
Зернится скорбь в гнезде былых веселий,

Где я ищу следов красы и чести,
Исчезнувшей, как сокол после мыта,
Оставив тело в земляной постели. (*PSS* 231)

[Little river swollen with salty tears, / The forest birds might have told it, / The keen beasts and mute fish / Wedged between two green banks; // Vale full of oaths and heated whispers, / Tortuous paths glazed to the core, / Rocks sealed to memory by force of love, / And fractures in the earth on the tough slopes – // The unwavering wavers in place / And I waver. As though within granite / Sorrow granulates in a nest of past joys, // Where I look for traces of beauty and honor / That vanished, like a falcon who swooped up, / Leaving a body in an earthen bed.]

The quatrains describe a landscape permeated by emotions—sorrow in the first quatrain, but also passionate love in the second—one where the poet's mind and the external world interpenetrate. The imagery in the first quatrain hybridizes natural phenomena with expressions of human feeling: the stream is swollen with tears, and the fish are wedged [*zazhatye*] between the river's green banks, in a phrase that evokes clenched fists. This hybridizing of landscape and emotion continues in the second quatrain, where the bucolic stream and forest give way to a rocky, superheated valley.[158] Here, the heat is associated with lovers' oaths and whispers

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[158] As Semenko notes, "the spiritual cataclysm is figured as a 'geological' cataclysm; the two are equivalent." "Mandel'shtam – perevodchik Petrarki," 157.

(transfigurations of the poet's breath, though not explicitly connected to the speaker's body), and the rocks themselves seem to have been formed by the power of love; *zatverzhennyi* means "learnt by rote," but Mandelstam puns on the root *tverd* to suggest an analogy between the repetitiousness of love (through which the beloved's image is etched into the lover's heart) and the solidification of geological features. Motifs of heat and hardness occur throughout this stanza; for example, the winding paths are glazed (*promuravlennye*). This adjective echoes *zamurovan* [immured], a word that appears in an earlier version of the first tercet; both words suggest a hardening of what should be fluid, a sealing of what should be porous. For the speaker, sorrow hardens and seals what should flow freely.

The differences between the quatrains and tercets are quite stark: The quatrains more or less translate images or ideas from Petrarch's original—a river, animals, a hilly landscape—while the tercets use Dantean imagery, or rather, Mandelstam's interpretations of Dantean ideas, such as the geological theme, or the motif of falconry. It's also significant that, while the quatrains deal with easily identifiable emotions, expressions of sorrow—tears, sighs, and imprecations—are distanced from the poetic "I," and it is unclear whether they stem from the poet. By contrast, in the tercets the "I" appears explicitly, but the emotional tenor of the lines becomes almost indecipherable, as sorrow and joy, past and present, and love and death are configured in a highly non-linear, non-causal fashion. On a formal level, the quatrains use exclusively end-stopped lines, while most of the lines in the tercets are enjambed, recreating the "overflowing" [*perelivaiushchiisia*] effect that Mandelstam noted in Dante's terza rima.[159] This effect is heightened by the way the tercets figure the speaker's emotions using a single complex metaphor, with multiple tenors and vehicles, whose precise relation to one another is impossible

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[159] "Conversation about Dante," 55.

to determine, and that therefore resist hierarchization (the implication that tenor is closer to what is "really" meant, and vehicle more distant). Thus, Mandelstam's metaphors in the tercets resemble the "Heraclitean metaphors" Mandelstam himself identifies in Dante's poetry.[160] At the same time, there are important points of similarity between the octave and sestet: The geological theme reappears in the granite metaphor; the animals are recalled by the falcon; process itself (swelling, wedging, whispering, contorting, and memorizing) is abstracted in the motif of wavering [*zybletsia*]; and eros (oaths and whispers, the force of love) is concretized in the image of a bed – which is also a grave.

Mandelstam extensively reworked the second quatrain and tercets, and in the drafts we can follow his thinking through the poem's themes. For instance, the poem's eroticism is much more blatant in the drafts; the final version retains traces, in individual words such as "swollen" [*raspukhshaia*] and "bends" [*izgiby*], "oaths and whispers" [*kliatvy i shopoty*], and of course the bed [*postel'*], which has pride of place as the poem's final word. In an earlier version of the second quatrain, the imagery is quite different:

> Возду́х медвежий, полог стрел каленых
> Уже не тот. Мучительнее дыбы
> Прелестный холм. Уже не те изгибы
> Тропинка вьет на тех же самых склонах.[161]

> [The ursine aër, the canopy of red-hot arrows / Is not what it was. More agonizing than the rack / Is the splendid hill. No longer the same / The bends the path follows down unchanged slopes.]

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[160] "Sometimes Dante is able to describe a phenomenon so that not the slightest trace of it remains. To do this he uses a device which I would like to call the Heraclitean metaphor; it so strongly emphasizes the fluidity of the phenomenon and cancels it out with such a flourish, that direct contemplation, after the metaphor has completed its work, is essentially left with nothing to sustain it." "Conversation about Dante," 64.

[161] In a slightly later variant, "*prelestnyi kholm*" [splendid hill] is changed to "*pod''em i spusk*" [rise and fall]. Text of variants is taken from Semenko, *Poetika pozdnego Mandel'shtama*, 68-96.

The first word, vozdúkh (with the stress marked on the second syllable in Mandelstam's draft),

refers not to air (though the connotation is unavoidable) but to an aër, a covering used during the

consecration of the Eucharist in Orthodox services. It symbolizes two garments: the swaddling

clothes of Christ's Nativity, and the shroud of his burial.[162] This double-reference to birth and

death is a recurring motif in these sonnets, as it was in the *Octets* (recall the cocoon-cerement in

"O butterfly, O Muslim woman"). As an intimate garment, the *vozdúkh*—especially when taken

together with the *polog* [canopy] in the same line—suggests the image of a bed (or cradle, or

grave – all resting places). In the very next line, this hinted-at, metaphoric bed transforms into a

torture rack [*dyba*], which evokes the torment of grief at the beloved's death, while

simultaneously alluding to a common motif of erotic poetry – the agonizing vicissitudes of love.

In this context, the adjective *medvezhyi* [ursine] is highly suggestive, and tactile to boot,

connoting animal warmth and closeness. In a subsequent revision, this word was changed to

medviannyi (literally "smelling of honey"), widening the semantic field of erotic associations

Mandelstam brought to bear on the religious term *vozdúkh.*

       Comparing these drafts to the final version, we can observe how Mandelstam links the

image of a medieval canopied bed to an Orthodox liturgical rite (and with it, to Christ's birth and

death), and then partly hides these linkages, coding them, half-effaced, into the poet's emotional

landscape. In fact, the very twists and turns of the landscape, which in the final version are

somehow suggestive (though we can't quite say why), turn out to have sexually evocative

precedents in the drafts; in the agonizing rack of the first version, and then the "rise and fall"

[*pod''em i spusk*] of a subsequent revision. This last phrase—which Mandelstam changed to the

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[162] Andrew J. Shipman, "Aër," in Charles G. Herbermann et al., eds., *The Catholic Encyclopedia: An International Work of Reference on the Constitution, Doctrine, Discipline, and History of the Catholic Church* (New York: The Encyclopedia Press, 1913), Vol. 1, 174.

explicitly topographical "splendid hill" [*prelestnyi kholm*]—suggests an emotional, as well as spatial, fluctuation. Taking the different versions of this stanza together, we see not the expected binaries of landscape and emotion, or spiritual and physical worlds, or even joyous past and miserable present, but a complex set of metaphors where the lovers' bed, the poet's soul, and the suggestive landscape are completely entangled – along with memory, mourning, and pleasure.[163]

In the final version of the tercets, the hardening we saw in the quatrains is reversed. Suddenly everything wavers and flows:

> Незыблемое зыблется на месте,
> И зыблюсь я. Как бы внутри гранита,
> Зернится скорбь в гнезде былых веселий,
>
> Где я ищу следов красы и чести,
> Исчезнувшей, как сокол после мыта,
> Оставив тело в земляной постели.
>
> [The unwavering wavers in place / And I waver. As though within granite / Sorrow granulates in a nest of past joys // Where I seek traces of beauty and honor / That vanished, like a falcon who swooped up, / Leaving a body in an earthen bed.]

The unshakable [*nezyblemoe*] vibrates in place, and the speaker, whose "I" appears for the first time in line 10, vibrates with it. The substantive and verb forms, which share the stem *zyb* (rock, oscillate), recall Mandelstam's interest in physics and his habit of visualizing concepts from physics on abstract yet tangible surfaces – we saw similar images of crinkling and oscillating space in the *Octets*. When "byloi" [past, bygone] appears in the third line of the tercet, it echoes three of the four sounds in *zybl*, the aforementioned stem with its labial mutation. Everything in the tercets is in the process of becoming, and Mandelstam conveys this through what we might

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[163] This blurring of binaries, at least temporal ones, has been described in more general terms by Semenko: "The boundary between past and present, so marked in Petrarch, is blurred [*razmyta*]. Mandelstam conveys the intensity of his sorrow for the past, experiencing it as though it were the present. "Mandel'shtam – perevodchik Petrarki," 167

call a Heraclitean metaphor in miniature. The terms of the metaphor are (intentionally) difficult

to parse, but there is an interconnection among sorrow growing within bygone joys, falconry

(and the falcon's nest, another variant on the "bed" motif), the formation of geological strata and

mineral inclusions, and the evanescence of the soul after death. Just as the tenors and vehicles of

the metaphor are jumbled, so there is a jumbling in time frames. It is more or less clear from

context what is in the past (love, joy, beauty, honor) and what is in the present (sorrow, traces,

death), but the legibility of these time frames has been obfuscated.[164] This deliberate confusion

of time frames, and the fact that they grow harder to follow in successive drafts, suggests that

Mandelstam wanted to suppress the traditional structure of poetic lament, even as he drew on its

(sometimes clearly outdated) language, e.g., "past joys" [*bylye veseliia*]. In earlier variants of the

tercets, Mandelstam hints at the nakedness of the beloved—her soul, rather—now that it has shed

its covering [*obolochka*] and dissolved into the sky:

> Я здесь ищу следов красы и чести
> Что сбросив легкий плащик, нежный кокон
> Без оболочки в небе потонула.

> [Here I seek traces of beauty and honor / Which, having thrown off its light cloak, its
> delicate cocoon, / Drowned in the sky without its covering.]

In this variant, whose central image of the soul throwing off its covering is closer to Petrarch's

original, the beloved doesn't appear fully human; instead, she is abstracted into "beauty and

honor" [*krasa* and *chest'*, both feminine nouns]. In a move that simultaneously connotes

lovemaking, death, and metamorphosis, Mandelstam has this semi-abstract image throw off her

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[164] Interestingly, the logic of the tercets is easier to follow in earlier drafts, where, for instance, the speaker compares himself to a tower with arrowslits in the middle of a landscape; or a later variant, which reads "Весь кругозор волнуется на месте / И лишь во мне незыблемей гранита / Зернится скорбь. Веселье обмануло" [The whole horizon agitates in place / And only in me, less wavering the granite, / Does sorrow granulate. Joy deceived me].

cloak, her "delicate cocoon," figuring the soul leaving the body as a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis – but playfully, as though undressing.[165]

We have seen how Mandelstam treats the image of the poet-lover in this sonnet: he is present in the quatrains as exhalations and tears that are distanced from his body and "I," and his feelings interpenetrate with the hard, steep, and fractured landscape. Then, in the tercets, we have seen how the poet's complex emotions are conveyed obliquely through a dense Heraclitean metaphor that combines geology, falconry, and the wavering of phenomena. We have also seen how, in the drafts of the translation, this complex of emotions is given a deeper erotic dimension, and how traces of this eroticism remain as uncanny echoes in the final version. The image of the beloved is even more diffused, even harder to see concretely. She is almost entirely absent from the final version of the quatrains, and in the drafts her presence is hinted at through erotic imagery such as the suggestive ursine (or honey-scented) aër and the red-hot arrows of the bed canopy. She is indirectly evoked even in the final version by the suggestive bends and formations of the rocky landscape. In the tercets, she is hinted at figuratively, as the vanished, de-personified beauty and honor sought by the speaker. In the final version, we also see her body [*telo*] in its grave (metaphorically described as an "earthen bed" [*zemlianaia postel'*]), though this body is estranged from anything recognizably human, and is in fact compared implicitly to a falcon's quarry. In the drafts we see just a bit more of her; the figurative "beauty and honor" is slightly more personified here, though at the same time it (she) is compared to a butterfly, playfully throwing off her cloak or cocoon and drowning in the sky.

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[165] The word *obolochka* [covering, envelope] occurs in "Conversation about Dante," in a passage where Mandelstam describes the inverted relationship between form and content in Dante's poetry: "There is not just one form in Dante, but a multitude of forms. One is squeezed out of another and only by convention can one be inserted into another...that is, he considers form as the thing which is squeezed out, not as that which serves as a covering [*obolochka*]." "Conversation about Dante," 53.

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Thus, in this sonnet, the coherent image of the beloved as a person, either living or dead, is almost totally effaced. Mandelstam seems to have worked hard, across successive drafts, to achieve this effacement. One reason he may have done so is to keep the image of the beloved in a state of potential. Keeping her from crystallizing into a recognizable likeness may have been a strategy for preventing her from turning into a poetic commonplace, a sclerotic image. By keeping her suspended in a state of semi-abstraction (corresponding, we recall from the *Octets*, to a state of unexpressed potential), Mandelstam could protect her from the culture at large, always eager to appropriate poetic images and turn them into vulgar illustrations. Mandelstam's aesthetic experiment in these sonnets may also have been motivated by a wish to mourn Olga Vaksel' in verse without calling attention to her biographical original, to ensure privacy for his grief by hiding it in plain sight, in a translation of a timeless classic. Turning to the other sonnets, I will focus on the implications of Mandelstam's abstraction of the beloved's image, his experiment in pushing the figure of the beloved to the limits of representability – both in terms of mourning, and in terms of poetry's ambivalent, sometimes antagonistic, relationship to culture.

«Как соловей, сиротствующий, славит…»[166]

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[166] This poem is a translation of Petrarch's sonnet CCCXI (See *Canzoniere*, 1206):

Quel rosignuol, che si soave piagne	That nightingale who weeps so tenderly,
forse suoi figli, o sua cara consorte,	lamenting for his children or his mate,
di dolcezza empie il cielo et le campagne	fills all the sky and fields with dulcet sweetness
con tante note sì pietose et scorte,	in many notes and trills, grieving and skillful,
et tutta notte par che m'accompagne,	and through the night he keeps me company
et mi rammente la mia dura sorte:	and helps me to recall my bitter fate:
ch'altrl che me non ò di ch'i' mi lagne,	for I have no one but myself to blame
che 'n dee non credev' io regnasse Morte.	for not believing Death could rule a goddess.
O che lieve è inganar chi s'assecura!	How easy to deceive one who's too sanguine!
Que' duo bei lumi assai piu che 'l sol chiarl	That pair of lights was brighter than the sun:
chi pensu mai veder far terra oscura?	who ever thought to see them dark on earth?
Or cognosco io che mia fera ventura	I start to understand what my harsh fate
vuol che vivendo et lagrimando impari	is trying to teach me, as I live in tears:
come nulla qua giu diletta et dura.	nothing on earth that pleases can endure (Young, 219).

Как соловей, сиротствующий, славит
Своих пернатых близких ночью синей
И деревенское молчанье плавит
По-над холмами или в котловине,

И всю-то ночь щекочет и муравит
И провожает он, один отныне, -
Меня, меня! Силки и сети ставит
И нудит помнить смертный пот богини!

О радужная оболочка страха!
Эфир очей, глядевших в глубь эфира,
Взяла земля в слепую люльку праха, -

Исполнилось твое желанье, пряха,
И, плачучи, твержу: вся прелесть мира
Ресничного недолговечней взмаха. (*PSS* 231-32)

[As a nightingale, in his orphanhood, praises / His feathered near and dear ones in the blue night, / And dissolves the rural silence / along the hills or in the hollow, // And all night, he tickles and burrows / And accompanies, alone henceforth, - / Me, me! He sets snares and nets / And nags me to recall a goddess's mortal sweat! // O iridescent sheath of fear! / Ether of eyes, that had gazed deep into ether, / {Which} earth took into its blind cradle of dust, - / Your wish has been fulfilled, spinstress, / And weeping, I repeat: all the world's splendor / Is briefer than the sweep of an eyelash.]

In the first two quatrains of this sonnet, a translation of Petrarch's "Quel rosignuol che sì soave piagne," Mandelstam develops the familiar poetic image of a nightingale. Then, in the tercets (or, rather, two lines before, in line 7), there is a radical shift: the lyrical bird disappears, its place taken by a defamiliarized image of the beloved. This shift is accompanied by complex metaphors that bring sex and death into one fold, and combine classical allusions (e.g., a goddess, the Fates[167]) with biblical moralizing about the vanity and evanescence of earthly existence. The

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[167] The "spinstress" in line 11 alludes to Clotho, the Fate who spun the threads of people's lives.

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drafts reveal that Mandelstam tinkered with most of the poem; some lines in particular (such as 10 and 11) were reworked extensively.

Of the four sonnets translated by Mandelstam, this one has received the most scholarly attention.[168] I will therefore limit myself to restating some of those scholars' more pertinent observations, and exploring Mandelstam's treatment of the images of the poet and beloved in both the final version and the drafts. Here, as in "Rechka," there are important thematic divisions between the octave and sestet; for instance, in their orientation toward different kinds of sense perception. As Tomas Venclova has noted, the octaves focus on the sense of hearing, as the speaker listens to and describes the nightingale's song. The sestet switches to the sense of sight, but rather than describing what the speaker sees, it develops vision itself—and the eye as the organ of vision—as a complex motif: the iris, blindness, weeping, and eyelashes are worked into startling metaphors relating to the speaker's emotions and memory of his dead beloved.[169] Meanwhile, in the quatrains, as Semenko points out, the nightingale's song is imbued with "sensuous concreteness and energetic expressiveness"; Mandelstam achieves this in part by reintroducing the motif of intense heat from the "Rechka" sonnet. Here, the bird's song "smelts" [*plavit*] the bucolic silence as if it were a substance, and tickles the speaker as he listens.[170] The verbs for the tactile sensation provoked in the listener by the bird are *shchekotat'* [tickle] and *muravit'*; the second verb, literally meaning "to enamel," and related to *promuravlennyi* [glazed] from "Rechka," is used here as a neologism whose meaning is indeterminate but colored by its

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[168] In addition to passages in Semenko's article and book, there is Venclova's study cited earlier in this chapter; Donata Mureddu's "Mandel'štam and Petrarch," *Scando-Slavica* Vol. 26, No. 1 (1980), 53-84; and a more recent analysis by Tom Dolack, "Mandelstam's Petrarch Translations and His Humanist Archaeology," *Annali d'Italianistica*, Vol. 26 (2008), 187-201.

[169] Venclova, "Viacheslav Ivanov i Osip Mandel'shtam."

[170] Semenko, "Mandel'shtam – perevodchik Petrarki," 160.

proximity to "schekochet" (tickles), and its resemblance to both *murashki* (goosebumps) and *murava* (a folkloric word for grass).

In the final version of the second quatrain, the speaker describes how the nightingale's song sets traps for him, coercing him into remembering his beloved – symbolized here by the "goddess's mortal sweat": "Silki i seti stavit / I nudit pomnit' smertnyi pot bogini!" [He sets snares and nets / And nags me to recall a goddess's mortal sweat!]. This is the most concrete image of the beloved in the whole sonnet. She appears as a memory that is also a trap set by soundplay – the alliteration in "silki i seti stavit" represents the insistent song, echoing the repetitious s's in the poem's first line ("Kak solovei, sirotsvuiushii, slavit" [As the nightingale, in its orphanhood, praises]). The memory that is evoked—of the "goddess's mortal sweat"—is highly suggestive. "Mortal sweat" again links sex and death (and indirectly suggests bedsheets), and the paradox of attributing this to a goddess reflects Mandelstam's ambivalence toward notions of immortality, in particular the immortality bestowed by art.[171] *Nudit'* [coerce, nag] as Semenko points out, is a phonetic echo of "nuda" [naked] in the Italian original;[172] together with the image of the goddess, and of nets and snares in the previous line, this veiled nudity may also allude to the myth of Aphrodite and Ares caught in Hephaestus's net – yet another variation on the bed motif.

The tercets paint a somewhat different picture:

О, радужная оболочка страха!
Эфир очей, глядевших в глубь эфира,
Взяла земля в слепую люльку праха, –

Исполнилось твое желанье, пряха,

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[171] In an earlier draft, the theme of the poet as one capable of immortalizing his beloved was more explicit; in the final version, it remains only in hints, such as the image of the goddess, and the verb *slavit'* [praise, bestow fame upon] in line 1.

[172] *Poetika pozdnego Mandel'shtama*, 81.

И, плачучи, твержу: вся прелесть мира
Ресничного недолговечней взмаха. (*PSS* 231)

[O iridescent covering of fear! / Ether of eyes that gazed deep into ether, / Earth took into its blind cradle of dust, – // Your wish has come true, spinstress, / And, weeping, I repeat: all the world's splendor / Is briefer than the sweep of an eyelash.]

In the first tercet, the whole scope of the visible world is condensed into an iris (the word *obolochka*, literally a membrane or covering, was used for the beloved's discarded body in a draft of the previous sonnet). The speaker then gives the visible world a temporal dimension, declaring that all its splendor [*vsia prelest'*] is briefer than the blink of an eye. The phrase *prelest' mira* also carries a biblical, moralizing connotation, emphasizing the falsehood of the visible world contrasted with the celestial realm – Mandelstam will return to this idea in the final sonnet.[173]

Throughout the sestet, the beloved is only hinted at, in diffuse and cryptic terms: she appears as the disembodied "ether of eyes," which had gazed into the ether of the sky, only to be taken by earth into its blind cradle of dust; and, more tenuously, as the metaphorical eyelash used to illustrate the moral in the last line.[174] The image of ether staring into ether (Venclova observes that by bookending the line, *efir* iconically represents the beloved's two eyes)[175] gives the impression of faintness, of layered transparencies, and sets up a spatial game: the eyes that had gazed up at the sky ("deep into ether") are taken under the earth. The blind cradle of dust (a metaphor for a grave) picks up the bed motif and the theme of birth entwined with death, and

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[173] This moralizing connotation is deepened by the etymological connection between *prelest'* [splendor] and *lest'* [flattery, hypocrisy]. In Russian translations of the Bible, *prelest'* denotes a diabolical instrument of temptation.

[174] The eyelash was previously used in a poem written for Olga Vaksel' in 1925, "Life fell, like the evening star" [*Zhizn' upala, kak zarnitsa*] *PSS* 354-5; and it will return in the poems for Andrei Bely.

[175] Venclova, "Viacheslav Ivanov i Osip Mandel'shtam."

sounds the biblical theme as well, with its echo of "dust unto dust" (reimagined as "ether unto dust"). In earlier drafts, the beloved was evoked more conventionally, for instance in the alternate line "siian'e glaz, gliadevshikh v glub' efira" [the brightness of eyes gazing deep into ether]. In the final version, however, she is almost invisible – ether reflecting ether.

There is a similar, though less extreme, diffuseness and effacement in the image of the poet-lover, whose representation changed drastically between the drafts and final version. Petrarch's original develops the classic trope of the poet as a singer who lives only to extol the distant beloved, singing compulsively (like a nightingale) to keep her memory alive. In early drafts of his translation, Mandelstam stays relatively close to this idea: the nightingale accompanies the poet toward his destiny ("i provozhaet on k moei sud'bine"), which is to bestow immortality on the dead beloved. In this earlier version, the poet insists on the uniqueness of his role in turning the beloved's death into song: "I – I alone – I am he who will render in sound / That death has found a refuge in a goddess" [Ia – tol'ko ia – ia tot, kto v zvuk postavit, / Chto smert' nashla pribezhishche v bogine]. Here, Mandelstam compares the beloved to both a goddess and, paradoxically, a refuge for death. This last metaphor reverses the idea of death as a refuge for a harried soul, and even casts death as a rival – no longer is the beloved a refuge to the speaker alone. In the final version, the number of first-person pronouns is reduced to two, and they are put in the accusative case ("Me, me! He sets snares and nets / And nags me to recall a goddess's mortal sweat!" [Menia, menia! Silki i seti stavit / I nudit pomnit' smertnyi pot bogini!]). The accusative "me, me!" is introduced abruptly, after a dash in line 6 that marks a break in the sonnet's argument, and in the bucolic mood of the poem's beginning. Instead of the self-aggrandizing "I – I alone – I am he" of the drafts, we get a plaintive "me, me!" who compares himself to a hunter's quarry, a reversal of the usual power dynamic between man and

bird. The verb *provozhat'* [accompany] occurs in both the drafts and the final version, but its connotations change: where in the drafts, the bird had accompanied the poet on his triumphant path toward immortality (both for himself and his beloved), in the final version the bird's song is figured as a route set with traps, constantly reminding the speaker of her absence and renewing his anguish. Moreover, this latter accompaniment does not suggest the camaraderie of the drafts (where poet and bird sing their way to immortality side by side); rather the speaker is "alone henceforth" (*odin otnyne*), despite the nightingale's accompaniment. In the final version, the poet's ability to immortalize his beloved through art, and thereby gain some compensation for her loss (both for himself and, as he claims in the drafts, for her), is muted.[176] Traces of the poet's compensatory power remain—in the verb *slavit'* [praise, extoll] and the image of the goddess in line 8—but they no longer pertain to him. Indeed, in the final version the nightingale is not a companion to the poet but almost a rival: he and he alone gets to "praise" his near and dear ones. (We know they are dead because the bird is an orphan, a fact conveyed through the rare participle *sirotstvuiushchii*). The nightingale alone gets to transfigure the memory of his dead loved ones with his art, and "melt the rural silence" with his song. The poet is denied the ability to turn death into art. Moreover, it is the nightingale's song that reminds the poet of his own "near one's" death, and this recurring memory is not a pretext for poetry, but a scourge. In the sestet, the poet finds in his beloved's death only an age-old moral: that earthly existence is deceptive and brief, "briefer than the sweep of an eyelash." This single eyelash is all he manages to preserve of Olga Vaksel' in this poem.

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[176] On the trope of art as compensation for a loved one's loss, see Sacks, *The English Elegy*, 1-37. Sacks's argument draws on the English elegiac tradition, but the compensatory trope is common to poetry about death and mourning in many European traditions, including the Russian (where this trope appears, for example, in the Horatian genre of "poetry as monument").

Yet even in the despairing final tercet, the sonnet manages to find some compensation for the beloved's death, if only by echoing a classic Russian poem. Line 13, "And, weeping, I repeat: all the world's splendor" [*I, plachuchi, tverzhu: vsia prelest' mira*], alludes to Lermontov's famous 1839 poem "Prayer" [*Molitva*], which contains the words *tverzhu* (I repeat) in the first quatrain, *prelest'* (splendor) in the second, and *plachetsia* (an impersonal form of the verb "to weep") in the third. (There are only three quatrains in all.) Lermontov's poem is also about a trying moment in the speaker's life; however, by repeating the words of a prayer from memory, he discovers that they have a "blessed power" and "divine splendor" that ease his burden and fill him with lightness. In the final version of the nightingale sonnet, Mandelstam mutes poetry's power to compensate for the death of a loved one, even as he hints at poetry's power to ease suffering by alluding to Lermontov's "Prayer" at the very moment when he bewails life's vanity and brevity.

«Когда уснет земля и жар отпышет…»[177]

Когда уснет земля и жар отпышет,
А на душе зверей покой лебяжий,

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[177] This poem is a translation of Petrarch's sonnet CLXIV (*Canzoniere*, 755):

Or che 'l ciel et la terra e' l vento tace	Now that the heavens, earth, and winds are silent,
et le fere e gli augelli il sonno alfrena,	and sleep restrains the birds and wild beasts,
Notte il carro stellato in giro mena	night drives her starry chariot overhead,
et nel suo letto il mar senz' onda giace,	and in its heavy bed the sea lies waveless.
vegghio, penso, ardo, piango; et chi mi sface	I am awake; I burn, think, weep; and she,
sempre m'è innanzi per mia dolce pena:	sweet pain who ruins me, is always there
guerra è 'l mio stato, d'ira et di duol piena,	before my eyes; I am at war, I'm wounded;
et sol di lei pensando ò qualche pace.	thinking of her is all the help I get.
Cosi sol d'una chiara fonte viva	Thus, from one clear and living fountain
move 'l dolce et l'amaro ond'io mi pasco;	come both the sweet and bitter in my life;
una man sola mi risana et punge;	one single hand can pierce me and then heal me,
e perchè 'l mio martir non giunga a riva,	and since my suffering has no end in sight,
mille volte il dì moro et mille nasco,	I die a thousand times a day and then
taut o da la salute mi a son lunge.	I am reborn, still distant from true health (Young, 131).

Ходит по кругу ночь с горящей пряжей,
И мощь воды морской зефир колышет, -

Чую, горю, рвусь, плачу - и не слышит,
В неудержимой близости все та же:
Це́лую ночь, це́лую ночь на страже
И вся как есть далеким счастьем дышит.

Хоть ключ один - вода разноречива,
Полужестка, полусладка. Ужели
Одна и та же милая двулична...

Тысячу раз на дню, себе на диво,
Я должен умереть на самом деле
И воскресаю так же сверхобычно. (*PSS* 231)

[When earth falls asleep and the heat dies down, / And the animals feel a swanlike calm, / Night goes around with her burning yarn, / And a zephyr lulls the seawater's strength, - // I sense, burn, strive, and sob – she doesn't hear, / Unchanging in the elusive nearness: / All night, all night I am vigilant / While she exudes a distant joy. // Though the spring is one, the water is contradictory, / Half-hard, half-sweet. Can it be / That one and the same darling is two-faced... // A thousand times a day, to my amazement, / I must die in point of fact / And rise again just as preternaturally.]

This sonnet, a translation of Petrarch's "Or che'l ciel e la terra e'l vento tace," begins with a description of the calm that settles at night, when the earth falls asleep and the heat of the day dies down. As the animals sleep (in line 2), their souls feel "a swanlike calm" [*pokoi lebiazhii*]; the adjective conjures up *pukh lebiazhii* (swan's-down), bringing an image of beds and bedding into this sonnet as well. Lines 3 and 4 develop the theme of nocturnal calm on a planetary scale: Night, personified as a woman holding "burning yarn" walks in a circle, evoking a Renaissance celestial globe, or an armillary sphere (in an earlier variant, night "plays with the yarn of its constellations"); and a zephyr (a light or west wind) lulls the ocean's power. Even in this quatrain of calm and sleep, there is a faint allusion to death. The verb *otpykhat'* is a neologism denoting the cessation of heat, but *pykhat'* [to give off heat] can also be used figuratively, as in

pyshet zdorov'em (radiates health). Thus, the extinguishing of the day's heat etymologically recalls the extinguishing of a living body's glow.

"Otpyshet" rhymes down the octave with three other verbs in the third-person singular; the last of these, "dyshit" [breathes], features similar punning on literal and figurative meanings. *Dyshat'* is literally to breath, but *dyshat' schast'em* is to exude joy. Here, the pun is on the beloved's dual aspects: as a once-living woman (*dyshat'* as breathing), and as an apparition (*dyshat'* as exuding, a meaning that emphasizes appearance). The pun is cruel; the beloved in the second quatrain seems so close that the speaker is compelled to reach out to her (burning, striving, sobbing: a litany of first-person verbs enacting the speaker's attempts to approach, grasp, or at least be heard by, his beloved's image), but she merely exudes "distant joy" – this is not a breathing, responsive person, but a shimmering eidolon. Her nearness is elusive [*neuderzhymi* – literally, it cannot be restrained, held], fixed at an immutable distance from the speaker. This image of the beloved as an apparition, a phantasm that allures and eludes, hearkens back to Blok's Fair Lady, as does the play on proximity and distance in this quatrain. The motifs of distance and changelessness even recall specific lines from Blok's cycle, e.g., "You are distant, now as before" [*Ty daleka, kak prezhde, tak i nyne*].[178] The beloved's indebtedness to the canonical Fair Lady (both in her Russian and late medieval incarnations) is even clearer in one of this sonnet's variants, where she is described as *gnevlivaia* (wrathful or spiteful), one of the Lady's many contradictory attributes. The phantasmal nature of the beloved's image in this quatrain is also suggested grammatically: both verbs associated with her ("ne slyshit," "dyshit") appear without personal pronouns, and her gender can only be inferred from the demonstrative pronouns *ta* and *vsia* in the phrases "vse ta zhe" (always the same, unchanging) and "vsia kak

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[178] The first line of a poem dated 11 August 1901. Blok, *Polnoe sobranie*, Vol. 1, 117.

est'" (lit. "all as [she] is"). This grammatical distancing complements an overarching contrast in the octave, between images of closeness and touch in the first quatrain (the swan's-down on the animals' souls, night holding the constellations as she walks, the breeze lulling [literally "rocking"] the sea), and images of unbridgeable separation in the second, where all the speaker's efforts to unite with his beloved's image are rebuffed in the "elusive nearness."

As the drafts show, Mandelstam vacillated between "nearness" [*blizost'*] and "remoteness" [*otdalenie*] for line 6; his choice in the final version, "elusive nearness" [*neuderzhymaia blizost'*], makes the beloved's apparition seem tantalizingly close, while commenting incidentally on the elusiveness of the present in general, the fact that life slips through one's fingers. (The "nearness" where the beloved's image stands in line 6 also contrasts with the "distant joy" she exudes in line 8.) And yet Mandelstam finds humor in this idea, too: in line 7, "tséluiu noch', tséluiu noch'" [all night, all night] is, except for the stress mark, identical to "tselúiu noch'" (I kiss the night), a phrase that also happens to fit the iambic meter. The kiss he wants to give his beloved, but can't, lands (indirectly) on the night.

In the tercets, Mandelstam again changes course; now he compares his beloved to a spring [*kliuch*] whose waters are contradictory [*raznorechivyi*]:

Хоть ключ один, вода разноречива —
Полужестка, полусладка, — Ужели
Одна и та же милая двулична...

Тысячу раз на дню, себе на диво,
Я должен умереть на самом деле
И воскресаю так же сверхобычно

[Though the spring is one, the water is contradictory – / Half-hard, half-sweet, – Can it be / That one and the same darling is two-faced... // A thousand times a day, to my amazement, / I must die in point of fact / And rise again just as preternaturally]

Here, the beloved's image appears not as an untouchable phantom, but as a complex and ambiguous metaphor. Moreover, while the octave hints strongly at the beloved's death, in the tercets there is a suggestion that she is alive, but inconstant, and it is the speaker who dies, "a thousand times a day." The metaphor in line 9—where the beloved is compared to a single spring with contradictory waters—plays on an analogy between water and language: the spring (*kliuch*) refers both to the source of a stream, and to a linguistic origin, whose metaphorical "water" is *raznorechivyi* – literally contradictory, and etymologically suggestive of linguistic diversity. The punning on water and language carries over to line 10, where the contradictory water is called "half-hard, half-sweet." *Zhestkii*, in "poluzhestka," can refer to hard water, but it is also related to *zhestokii*, cruel; the beloved is half-cruel, half-sweet, Mandelstam's take on Petrarch's "sweet and bitter" ('l dolce et l'amaro) in the original. In lines 10-11, the speaker accuses the beloved of inconstancy more explicitly: can one darling be two-faced, he asks? This reference to a living but fickle beloved seems to contradict the image of a dead, phantasmic beloved in the octave. In fact, both possibilities are tied to the Fair Lady trope, and it is this trope that allows Mandelstam to bring a dead woman back, first as a joyous but untouchable apparition, then as a living but capricious (and duplicitous) body of water. Even the word *dvulichnyi* (two-faced) hearkens back to the Fair Lady, whom the Symbolists conceived in terms of binaries (cruel/kind, sacred/profane, real/phenomenal) and mingling irreconcilables (Mandelstam's "contradictory water").[179] The Fair Lady trope is what makes the beloved's suspension between life and death possible, and what allows her image to equivocate, to waver between reasons for her tantalizing unattainability (inconstancy or death), and to assume more

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[179] See Viacheslav Ivanov's previously cited quote (p. 43) from "The Testaments of Symbolism."

than one form for her fleeting nature: intangible image and flowing water. Either way, one thing is clear: the speaker can never possess her again as he would like.

Mandelstam's punning on water and language in this tercet has a metapoetic dimension as well, recalling ideas about language that the poet explored in other works of the 1930s. Mandelstam was particularly interested in the idea that any poet's native tongue concealed a multiplicity of foreign languages; in "Conversation about Dante," for instance, he compares poetic material to a carpet made of rivers, diverse waters that flow together and yet "do not mix...but remain multicolored."[180] And in "Ariosto" [Ariost], written in May 1933, he compares Ariosto's poetry to a "senseless language, a salty-sweet language, / And the splendid twin-kernels of thronging sounds," adding that he is "afraid to open the bivalve pearl with a knife" [Iazyk bessmyslennyi, iazyk soleno-sladkii / I zvukov staknutykh prelestnye dvoichatki... / Boius' raskryt' nozhom dvustvorchatyi zhemchug (*PSS* 222)]. "Ariosto" ends with Mandelstam imagining an ideal future, a new era when he and the Italian poet can pour their two waters ("your azure and our black sea region" [tvoiu lazur' i nashe chernomor'e]) into one "wide, fraternal blue expanse" [shirokoe i bratskoe lazor'e] – an image that evokes a capacious and mixed (*lazor'e* combines the sounds of "lazur'" and "chernomor'e") world culture, and, like "Kogda zemlia usnet," draws an analogy between water and language. In "Ariosto," as in the sonnet, everything about language is doubled: it is "salty-sweet," its sounds are "double-kernels"; the poet's Italian is a "bivalve pearl," one that Mandelstam fears to open with a knife – a metaphor for the poet's trepidation before a foreign poet's language, a relation that surely brings to mind translation. In the sonnet, Mandelstam returns to the analogy of water as language, this time in the context of an actual translation. Water here is a two-faced metaphor,

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[180] "Conversation about Dante," 42.

standing both for the faithless beloved, and the Italian original – where both the template of the poetic beloved, and the metaphor comparing her to water, originate. It is to this original that the translator comes in trepidation, with his symbolic knife, to pry open the original's "bivalve pearl." This will allow him to mourn his flesh-and-blood beloved by preserving her image in a translation of a poem from the very source of the European lyric tradition. In this context, "two-faced" can even be interpreted literally – the beloved in Mandelstam's translation is both Olga and Laura.

In the final tercet, the speaker takes the burden of death upon himself, stating that, to his own amazement, he must die a thousand times a day, only to rise again each and every time. These small deaths have an erotic connotation, well-known from Troubadour poetry. In Petrarch's original, the speaker's thousand deaths are connected to the beloved's inconstancy: he wishes only to die completely (or achieve ultimate bliss), so that his suffering at her hands can end, but she, by keeping him at arm's length, prevents him from reaching his "haven" (death, or erotic fulfillment). She alone can both hurt and heal him, so every day he dies and is reborn a thousand times. In Mandelstam's translation, these logical connections are blurred; instead, his daily deaths are like the taking on of an obligation. His resurrection (actually, the countless resurrections he must endure each day) is likewise ambivalent, even though it ends the poem on an image of rebirth (and a nod to the miraculous with *sverkhobychno*). He is suspended between life and death, just as the beloved's image was in the second quatrain. In both cases, someone is brought back: the beloved returns as an ungraspable image, forever caught, joyously, in the elusive nearness; the speaker is returned to his suffering from a small, daily death, one of thousands. Both "resurrections" are false; the beloved returns to haunt the speaker with her unchanging joy, but he will never touch her. The speaker returns from death "in point of fact,"

but the sheer quantity of these deaths and rebirths makes them exhausting, even tedious; the value of resurrection for the speaker is debased. (This debasement is reflected in the intentionally weak and unlyrical "na samom dele" and "sverkhobychno" of the last tercet.) The irony of his thousand daily resurrections is that resurrection "in point of fact" is the one thing he wishes he could give his beloved. Resurrection keeps holding out its promise in the last line, but the beloved will never return as anything but an image (or several images).

«Промчались дни мои – как бы оленей…»[181]

Промчались дни мои - как бы оленей
Косящий бег. Срок счастья был короче,
Чем взмах ресницы. Из последней мочи
Я в горсть зажал лишь пепел наслаждений.

По милости надменных обольщений
Ночует сердце в склепе скромной ночи,
К земле бескостной жмется. Средоточий
Знакомых ищет - сладостных сплетений.

Но то, что в ней едва существовало,
Днесь, вырвавшись наверх, в очаг лазури,
Пленять и ранить может как бывало.

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[181] This poem is a translation of Petrarch's sonnet CCCXIX (See *Canzoniere*, 1229):

I dì miei più leggier' che nesun cervo	Swifter than any deer my days have fled
fuggir come ombra, et non vider più bene	like shadows, and what good I've seen has been
ch'un batter d'occhio, et poche hore serene,	less than an eye blink, just a few clear hours
ch'amare et dolci ne la mente servo.	kept sweet and bitter in my memory.
Misero mondo, instabile et protervo,	Oh, world of misery, unstable and severe,
del tutto è cieco chi 'n te pon sua spene:	whoever trusts you must be wholly blind;
che 'n te mifu 'l cor tolto, et or sel tene	in you my heart was lost; the one who holds it
tal ch'è già terra, et non giunge osso a nervo.	has turned from flesh and blood to empty dust.
Ma la forma miglior, che vive anchora,	And yet her better form is still alive
et vivrà sempre, su ne l'alto cielo,	and will live, always, in the highest Heaven;
di sue bellezze ognor più m'innamora;	it makes me love her beauty more and more,
et vo, sol in pensar, cangiando il pelo,	and as I go around with graying hair
qual ella è oggi, e 'n qual parte dimora,	all I can think about is what she's like
qual a vedere il suo leggiadro velo.	and what it meant to see her lovely veil (Young, 223).

И я догадываюсь, брови хмуря:
Как хороша? К какой толпе пристала?
Как там клубится легких складок буря? (*PSS* 352-53)

[My days raced by, like a deer's / Mowing run. Joy's duration was shorter / Than the sweep of an eyelash. With the last of my strength / I grasped only the ashes of pleasure. // By the grace of haughty seductions, / The heart rests in the crypt of modest night, / Presses itself to the boneless earth. It seeks / Familiar focal points – voluptuous entanglements. // But that which barely existed inside it, / Today, shooting up into the azure hearth, / Can captivate and wound, as it once did. // And it dawns on me as I furrow my brow: / How is she pretty? What crowd has she latched onto? / How does the storm of delicate pleats billow there?]

The theme of the beloved's inconstancy and death as equally valid possibilities (or mutual alibis) is taken up in the fourth sonnet as well—a translation of Petrarch's "I di miei piu leggier che nessun cervo"—where the mourner's lament crosses with a jealous lover's complaint. Two versions of this sonnet exist, written out on separate autograph pages. Both autographs contain variants in the octaves, while the tercets in the two versions are identical and seem not to have been reworked. The differences between the octaves are so great that Semenko believes the two versions should be considered separate poems, which Mandelstam likely considered equally authoritative.[182] The first version exists as a clean copy dated January 4th, 1934, with emendations subsequently added by Mandelstam. The second version is dated January 8; the autograph bears a note: "Completed following news of B. N. Bugaev's death."[183] (Boris Bugaev is better known to his readers by his pen name, Andrei Bely.) In this section I will consider both versions, but will focus on the second, January 8 version, where I argue that Bely's death added a new charge and dimension to Mandelstam's treatment of both the figures of the beloved and the poet-speaker. In the later version, we see the first indication of how Mandelstam

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[182] *Poetika pozdnego Mandel'shtama*, 82-3.

[183] Ibid., 83, n.1.

will subsequently develop these figures in the Bely cycle. Here, Mandelstam begins conflating the figure of the beloved with that of the poet, who is himself a composite figure, a crossing of Mandelstam and Bely, not to mention the original author, Petrarch, as well as Dante. Drawing on the complex figure of the beloved developed in the previous three sonnets—with her blurring of distinctions between life and death, presence and absence, physical body and projection, person and trope—Mandelstam reconfigures the speaker's relationship to her in order to take up another classic topos: the death of the poet and the fate of the poetic image once it falls into the hands of the crowd [*tolpa*].

The two versions begin with the same simile – the speaker's life has rushed by like a deer (or herd of them). In Petrarch and the Petrarchan tradition, the deer symbolizes the erotic quarry (e.g., Thomas Wyatt's "Whoso list to hunt, I know where is an hind").[184] Mandelstam's translation preserves an echo of this symbolism, while introducing a stronger association with death: its gallop is described as "mowing" [*kosiashchii*]. (Mowing in classical European poetry , like reaping in popular culture, is a conventional metaphor for death.) After this simile, the two versions go different ways. The version of January 4 develops a theme of moisture: "Smeshannaia vlaga / Struitsia v zhilakh" [A mingled moisture / Courses in the veins] (lines 3-4); "Kipit nadezhdy braga" [Hope's brew simmers] (line 6); "kak pena v pene" [like foam within foam, an alternate ending for line 4]. The January 4 version also contains a personified image of "wicked beauty" [*zlaia krasa*] in the second quatrain, forcing "those who are born blind" [*sleporozhdennye*] to their knees. Beauty (*krasa*) could refer to the beloved, or it could refer to all beauty – of eros, of art, of the entire visible world, which, as we recall from "As the

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[184] In Sir Thomas Wyatt, *Selected Poems*, ed. Hardiman Scott (New York: Routledge, 2003), 21. Also online at https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45593/whoso-list-to-hunt-i-know-where-is-an-hind. Last accessed November 15, 2018.

nightingale," is both fleeting and morally suspect. Revising both versions of "My days raced by,"

Mandelstam experimented with degrees of abstraction for the image of the beloved in the second

quatrain (in another variant, she is indicated only by the demonstrative pronoun *ta*, and in yet

another by the abstract nouns *liubov' i tiaga* [love and pull]); these feminine designations have

mostly been removed from the final variant of the second version—the one inspired by Bely's

death—where they are replaced by an image of earth.

In the later version (of January 8, quoted in its entirety at the start of this section), the

final variant of the second quatrain reads:

> По милости надменных обольщений
> Ночует сердце в склепе скромной ночи,
> К земле бескостной жмется. Средоточий
> Знакомых ищет, сладостных сплетений.

> [By the grace of haughty seductions / The heart rests in the crypt of modest night, /
> Presses itself to the boneless earth. It seeks / Familiar focal points – voluptuous
> entanglements.]

Here, the heart seems to be a metonym for the speaker; in all earlier variants it referred to the

beloved. The scene is night, which is figured as a crypt, a resting place for the dead. Yet even

here—as in the other sonnets—Mandelstam conflates mourning and erotic love: line 5 ("by the

grace of haughty seductions") explains the heart's presence in the crypt in the ambiguous

language of courtly love, while lines 7-8 ("[the heart] presses itself to the boneless earth. It seeks

/ Familiar focal points – voluptuous entanglements") contain a disturbing and tender image that

simultaneously suggests sexual consummation and futile yearning – the heart seeking "familiar

focal points – voluptuous entanglements" in the earth (where the beloved's body is laid to rest) is

not likely to find them. In the phrase "familiar focal points [*sredotochiia*]," the noun is an

abstract substitute for the beloved's heart; Mandelstam even alludes to the substitution (an actual

substitution between drafts) with the paronomastic echoes between *serdtse* and *sredotochiia*. The dynamic tension between hardness and softness in line 7 is acted out by consonants as well, especially the voiced/unvoiced pair *t* and *d*, and the expressive sound play between *zh*, *ch*, and *z*. In line 8, the adjective-noun pair *sladostnye spleteniia* [voluptuous entanglements] enact their entanglement with the braiding of initial consonants. This sensuous sound orchestration belies the unattainability of these longed-for entanglements (though this unattainability also makes the need for a pleasurable sonic echo most acute). Another way to read this paradoxical quatrain is in light of a new theme Mandelstam was developing during these weeks: the incomplete death, a liminal state where the body continues to have some degree of agency or consciousness even after decay (see, for instance, "Ne muchnistoi babochkoiu beloi" [Not as a floury white butterfly, 1935], Mandelstam's self-elegizing poem about an aviation disaster and the commemoration of its victims).

Each of these images developed out of variants from both versions of the sonnet, and the most striking transformations seem to have occurred after Mandelstam learned about Bely's death. A variant of lines 7-8 in the January 8 (Bely) version reads:

А сердце где? Его любовь и тяга
В жирной земле без нежных разветвлений.

[And where is the heart? Its love and pull / Are in the oily earth without tender branchings.]

Both *zhirnyi* [lit. fatty, rich] and *razvetvleniia* [branchings] are words from the orbit of the Bely cycle, where they will resurface after being discarded from this sonnet. Here, *zhirnyi*, modifying *zemlia* [earth], refers to the earth's enrichment through decomposition. In the same two lines, Mandelstam develops a phonetic echo between *razvetvlenie* (branching) and *spletenie* (entanglement), which always remain in the same rhyming position across all the different

variants. The palpable materiality of *spletenie* in the final version is helped along by its partly suppressed echo with the word for branching.

Yet another variant of the second quatrain brings back the rainbow imagery from the nightingale sonnet. Here, line 5 reads "O semitsvetnyi mir lzhivykh iavlenii!" [O seven-hued world of false apparitions!]. The "seven-hued world" recalls the phrases *raduzhnaia obolochka strakha* [iridescent covering (or "iris") of fear] and *prelest' mira* [the world's splendor] from "As the nightingale," and these phrases' moralizing overtones. The version where this line appears also contains the most concrete image of the dead beloved ("ta, k kotoroi tiaga, / Ch'i struny sukhozhilii tleiut v tlene" [The one, to whom there is pull, / Whose strings of tendons rot in the decay], as well as a genre-conforming lament "Pechal' zhirna i umiran'e nago!" [Sorrow is unctuous and dying is naked!"], with its allusion to the phrase "pechal' zhirna teche" ["thick sadness flowed"] from the *Igor Tale*.[185] Simultaneously directed at the figure of the beloved, the poet-speaker, and the dead poet (Bely), this entire sonnet can be read as a three-way elegy – for the beloved, for Bely, and for the poet himself (after all, the poem opens with him complaining that life has run its course).

The tercets, which were left unchanged throughout the revision process, read as follows:

Но то, что в ней едва существовало,
Днесь, вырвавшись наверх, в очаг лазури,
Пленять и ранить может, как бывало.

И я догадываюсь, брови хмуря:
Как хороша? к какой толпе пристала?
Как там клубится легких складок буря?

[But that which barely existed inside it, / Today, shooting up into the azure hearth, / Can captivate and wound, as it once did. // And it dawns on me as I furrow my brow: / How is she good? What crowd has she latched onto? / How does the storm of delicate pleats billow there?]

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[185] *Slovo o polku Igoreve* (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1967), 49.

In line 9, the referent for "v nei" [in her] depends on which version of the second quatrain precedes it; in most versions it refers to a more or less abstracted image of the beloved, but in the final version it can only refer to earth [*zemlia*], metonymically connected to the beloved as her final resting place. The rest of the tercet describes what seems to be the beloved's soul, although the conventional trope is defamiliarized. The ambiguity of these lines is heightened by the double meaning of *edva*, which can denote a temporal relation ("just now") or a degree of magnitude ("hardly"); the meaning can either be how recently the beloved has been laid to rest, or about her cruelty – how little feeling she had for the speaker (echoes of the Fair Lady theme). The latter meaning is emphasized by the image of the soul-like abstraction "captivating and wounding, as it once did." This beloved is a different kind of projection; she resides in the sky, is semi-abstract, and, unlike the joyous, unchanging phantom in "Kogda zemlia usnet," she can wound the speaker. The sky here, compared to an "azure hearth" [*ochag lazuri* – the first word can mean hearth or focal point], picks up the theme of the sky as a locus of death (which we see as early as "Concert at a Railway Station" [Kontsert na vokzale] *PSS* 163), and which will be developed further in Mandelstam's last poems, where the sky will become not just a site but a source of death.[186] *Lazur'* is another word that comes to be associated specifically with Bely; Bely's first collection of poetry was titled *Gold in Azure* [Zoloto v lazuri], and Mandelstam uses the word *lazur'* in the Bely cycle to evoke the dead poet.[187] Combined with the conventional trope of the soul taking its place in heaven is a metapoetic idea: that after death, the beloved's

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[186] On the connection between the death-bringing sky and the threat of air war, see Gasparov, *Grazhdanskaia lirika*, 30.

[187] E.g., "как жирны и синеглазы / Стрекозы смерти, как лазурь черна" [how fat and blue-eyed / Are the dragonflies of death, how black is the azure], from "10 Ianvaria 1934" [10 January 1934], *PSS* 235. In Mandelstam, *lazur'* is also associated with the Italian Renaissance through the use of lapis lazuli in painting.

image, once cherished by the poet, escapes the poet altogether and takes its place in a different order. In this context, Mandelstam's insistence on abstracting the beloved's image can be seen as a protective gesture – keeping her safe from careless misreadings.

The beloved, however, does not fancy herself vulnerable and in need of protection. On the contrary, in this sonnet, as in the last one, there are strong suggestions that she is unfaithful to the poet-speaker, that she is eager to move in new crowds. This idea is developed in the final tercet; here, the loaded word *tolpa* [crowd] alludes to the classic trope of the poet and the crowd. The crowd in such poems is an indeterminate entity, not quite the reading public, nor the people at large, but also a bit of both; it is never the poet's select readership, and so the *tolpa*'s familiarity with the poet and his cherished images is typically mediated through the commonplaces of cultural mythmaking. Thus, the last two lines of the poem simultaneously evoke heaven, where the *tolpa* refers to angels and happy souls, and metapoetic themes of readership and the afterlives of poetic images.

The ambiguity in these last lines isn't primarily negative or pessimistic. The poem ends with an abstract space that wavers like a material surface, reminiscent of space in the *Octets*. It could be a space associated with poetry as it comes alive in the poet's (or reader's) mind, or it could be an abstract symbol of physical pages (the storm of pleats is a little like the whirling leaves/pages [*listy*] from the "Mozart" octet), or even an image of angels in white dancing in a lapis-blue heaven (as in a Renaissance painting). Along with pages, and the space of poetic composition (two metapoetic motifs), this polysemous surface also evokes the gowns of a heavenly host, the dresses of living women (an entirely female *tolpa* drawing the beloved away from the speaker), and even Laura's veil from Petrarch's original.[188] In these final lines, the

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[188] "il suo leggiadro velo."

image of the beloved leaves the speaker to become part of a larger cultural imagination that both enjoys and distorts such images. She is separated from the poet not only because she is dead, but also because her image belongs to the world now.

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Images of the Poet and Crowd in the Poems for Andrei Bely

In some ways, the Bely poems—which Mandelstam began as soon as he finished the Petrarch sonnets—continue the same classical impulse that animates the sonnets. As ostensible translations of the most classic of love poets, the sonnets allowed Mandelstam to investigate tropes that might, in "original" poems, have seemed too bound up in tradition, a step backward toward the self-conscious posturing of the Symbolists. Moreover, Mandelstam conducted these investigations on a metapoetic level, as he did in the *Octets*. The Bely poems aren't mediated by translation, but they, too, are examples of a classic genre: the elegy to a dead poet. As with the sonnets, Mandelstam wrote numerous alternate lines and stanzas for the Bely group, and in fact these poems are less a fixed cycle than a collection of variations on a set of themes, no one variant more important or authoritative than any other. Many of these variations orbit around the slightly longer "10 January 1934" [10 Ianvaria 1934], a poem that comes closest to the stately, traditional elegiac form (many of the quatrains mix hexameter and pentameter, though not in a fixed pattern), and the only one with a title. At the same time, the impulse to isolate 8-line segments returns. Here, rather than mediating through Petrarch, Mandelstam mediates through Bely's work, and his own, developing new images of the poet and crowd, and—by putting them in an ambivalent relationship—sounding an old theme of Russian poetry that had, by the early 30s, become relevant again. In the Bely poems, Mandelstam develops these human figures

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metapoetically, by writing about different kinds of images, from engravings to death masks to the mobile "mask" of the living poet's face, in order to comment on the changes that occur as the poet's image is assimilated by the nation. To conclude this chapter, I will look at the figures of the dead poet and the crowd in the Bely cycle as a second test case for Mandelstam's changing conception of the human image.

The stakes here are different than in the sonnets. There, Mandelstam mourned a beloved by inscribing her memory into a defamiliarized, unsettled, and hybrid archetype, blurring distinctions within the beloved's image (between life and death, Laura and Olga, etc.), but preserving the distinction between speaker and erotic object: the mourner/spurned lover and the mourned/inconstant beloved. Bely's death struck Mandelstam as a different kind of archetype; he viewed it as one instance of a collective death, and saw himself as part of an aggregate image of the dead poet as well. The Bely poems take on this theme of collective mourning, as the distinction between the mourner and the mourned falls away. From this sense of self-mourning as collective mourning come the mass death poems of 1935-37, such as "Not as a floury white butterfly" [*Ne muchnistoi babochkuiu beloi*] and the "Verses to an Unknown Soldier" [*Stikhi neizvestnomu soldatu*]; as well as the poems about his own death and uncanny afterlife, including "I lost my way in the sky – what shall I do?" [*Zabludilsia ia v nebe – chto delat'?*].[189]

We can see this merging of Bely and Mandelstam throughout the Bely poems; indeed, Mandelstam's emotional identification with Bely's death is imagined as a mutual death.[190] One

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[189] For an insightful analysis of this last poem (including comments on its relation to Dante and the humanist tradition), see Andrew Kahn, Mark Lipovetsky, Irina Reyfman, and Stephanie Sandler, *A History of Russian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 752-6.

[190] Mandelstam's feelings about Bely were complicated; he revered him as the author of *Petersburg*, but found much about his work irritating. In many ways, Mandelstam saw Bely as a holdover from Symbolism's heyday; this is evident, for instance, in Mandelstam's review of Bely's *Notes of an Oddball* [Zapiski chudaka], which appeared in 1922. Nor was Bely eager to associate with the Mandelstams. Nevertheless, they met and conversed several times in Koktebel in the summer of 1933. There is even evidence that after this meeting their relationship became more

way Mandelstam achieves this merging is by putting the Bely poems in a complex intertextual relationship with both Bely's works and Mandelstam's own previous work. This is apparent on both the larger, structural level of the Bely cycle, and in individual allusions within the text of each poem. Mandelstam's conception of the poems as a group of themes and variations, and his view of the entire cycle in musical terms, as a kind of oratorio or requiem, can be seen as an homage to Bely's use of musical structures in his writing (e.g., the latter's prose "Symphonies"). The very motif of identifying with another's death as a way of preparing for one's own occurs in a number of Bely's own poems. Mandelstam also borrows several images from Bely for his cycle, such as the dragonfly and the strange black azure that gets mentioned several times in the poems. The cycle also contains allusions to Bely's novel *Petersburg* and to his memoir *The Beginning of the Century* [*Nachalo veka*], among other works.

Mandelstam balances out this identification with rhetorical distance. For example, there is a slightly distant relationship between the "I" and the poet figure, as though the speaker were standing apart from the poet, even though the speaker too is a poet, or at least one aspect of the aggregate, archetypal "poet." Nor is the merging of identities limited to Mandelstam and Bely; Dante, Petrarch, Goethe, and Pushkin are all present. All share images, motifs, and words; all shade into one another on a metapoetic level. The Bely poems thus enlarge a theme of the sonnets, particularly the fourth sonnet: the poet's fate after death, the fate of his likeness and of the images he created. The Bely poems are obscure, even for Mandelstam; here, as in the

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admiring, and that Mandelstam's estimation of Bely continued to grow even after his deportation to the camps. See Andrew Kahn, "Andrei Bely, Dante, and 'Golubye glaza i goriashchaia lobnaia kost': Mandel'shtam's Later Poetics and the Image of the *Raznochinets*," *Russian Review,* Vol. 53 (January 1994), 22-35. Despite their occasionally strained relationship, Bely—known for his creative and intellectual infectiousness—proved an important influence on Mandelstam during their brief acquaintance. They were known to have discussed Dante together, and to have shared a fascination with the relationship between art and the natural sciences. Bely influenced Mandelstam's thinking about the physical properties and energetics of moving bodies, and the effects of this influence can be seen in "Conversation about Dante," as well as the poems of late 1933/early 1934.

Petrarch sonnets, obscurity and obliqueness can be read as a precaution, a way of evading the authoritativeness of interpretation and with it, the stultifying, ossifying effects of cultural formation. In the Petrarch sonnets, this evasiveness was framed in terms taken from the classical repertoire of erotic verse: jealousy, pursuit and rebuff, possessiveness, protectiveness, vacillation. In the Bely poems, the central organizing trope is not the dead or inconstant beloved, but two equally classic themes: the death of the poet, and the poet and the crowd [*poet i tolpa*]. In place of erotic motifs we have communal and civic ones, and the speaker's ambivalence is directed not at a love interest, but at an imagined readership – the people, the nation. In this context, a theme that is sounded only faintly in the Petrarch sonnets—the gradual ossification or erasure of the human image—comes to the fore in the Bely poems, where it is connected to the idea of the poet belonging to the people, and the appropriation and transformation of the poet's image by the people after his death.

In their obliqueness and evasiveness, and in their ambivalence toward the public, the Bely poems are cautious but not mistrustful; they even contain images of joy, pleasure, and peace. (Similarly, the Petrarch sonnets weave love and pleasure in with death and mourning.) They neither glorify the poet nor denigrate the crowd; in his relationship to the public, Mandelstam saw himself as neither a mouthpiece of the *vox popoli* nor their antagonist, but—as Mikhail Gasparov has noted—a *raznochinets*.[191] While the poems are occasionally apprehensive, they refuse to treat the *tolpa* with rancor or malice; unlike, say, Lermontov's "Death of the Poet" [*Smert' poeta*] – perhaps the most iconic treatment of the *poet i tolpa* theme in Russian literature.

The poem that opens the cycle, "Blue eyes and burning bone of the forehead" [*Golubye glaza i goriachaia lobnaia kost'*], dated 10-11 January 1934, is written in highly allusive,

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[191] Mikhail Gasparov, "Grazhdanskaia lirika," 18.

semantically indeterminate couplets – rhyming, and in anapestic pentameter. The lines are

strikingly long (uncommonly so for Russian poetry). The length of the lines permits each couplet

to express a complete—though obscure—idea; as in elegiac couplets, each can stand alone, but

also combines thematically with the rest. Though at first it is addressed to a "you"—the figure of

the dead poet—the pronouns start to vary in later couplets, some of which use "we" (e.g., "The

straightness [or "frankness"] of our speech" [*priamizna nashei rechi*]; while in others the speaker

abandons direct address altogether and instead expresses himself aphoristically ("Often [a word]

is written as execution, but correctly read as song, / Perhaps simplicity is an illness vulnerable to

death" [Chasto pishetsia kazn', a chitaetsia pravil'no – pesn', / Mozhet byt, prostota – uiazvimaia

smert'iu bolezn'?]. From the beginning, the poem invokes the relationship between the poet and

the people:

> На тебя надевали тиару — юрода колпак,
> Бирюзовый учитель, мучитель, властитель, дурак!

> [They put a tiara on your head, the holy fool's cap, / Turquoise teacher, tormenter,
> sovereign, buffoon!]

The figure of the holy fool [*iurod*] is closely associated with Bely – Mandelstam uses it for the

hybrid figure of the poet-as-geological-strata in the octet that broke off from the Bely cycle

("Having overcome nature's roteness"). Here, it is used to cast Bely as a Christ figure, though

Mandelstam immediately turns this association on its head with a litany of contradictory epithets,

some complementary ("teacher" – high praise in the context of "Conversation about Dante"),

others less so ("buffoon!"). The litany continues in the following couplets; many of the epithets

Mandelstam directs at Bely align the latter with Dante, or at least Dante as Mandelstam imagined

him in the "Conversation" – and therefore with Mandelstam himself. To wit, Mandelstam calls

Bely a "gatherer of space" [*sobiratel' prostranstva*], a fledgling who has passed his exams

[*ekzameny sdavshii ptenets*], and a little student [*studentik*]. But the Christ-like image from the

third couplet is disturbing in its ambivalence toward both Bely and the public that "crowned"

him. In fact, it recalls a similar crowning scene in Lermontov's "Death of the Poet":

> И, прежний сняв венок, – они венец терновый,
> Увитый лаврами, надели на него,
> Но иглы тайные сурово
> Язвили славное чело.[192]

> [And taking off the former wreath, they put a crown of thorns, / Twined with laurel, on
> his head, / But the hidden needles harshly / Mocked his glorious brow.]

(This, in turn, foreshadows an image from Mandelstam's 1937 poem "I lost my way in the sky,"

with its line "Don't put it on me, don't put / The sharply-caressing laurel on my temples" [Ne

kladite zhe mne, ne kladite / Ostrolaskovyi lavr na viski]). Unlike Lermontov's poem, which

blames the public for Pushkin's death, Mandelstam sees the relationship between poet and crowd

more ambiguously.

This relationship is at the center of the last four couplets, which figure the poet's

posthumous fate in metapoetic terms, as the fate of his image:

> Как стрекозы садятся, не чуя воды, в камыши,
> Налетели на мертвого жирные карандаши.

> На коленях держали для славных потомков листы,
> Рисовали, просили прощенья у каждой черты.

> Меж тобой и страной ледяная рождается связь —
> Так лежи, молодей и лежи, бесконечно прямясь.

> Да не спросят тебя молодые, грядущие те,
> Каково тебе там в пустоте, в чистоте, сироте...

[192] M. Iu. Lermontov, "Smert' poeta," in *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvorenii v 2-kh tomakh* (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1989), Vol. 2, 7-9.

[As dragonflies land, without sensing the water, in bullrushes, / Oily pencils have swarmed upon the dead man. // They held pages on their knees for the glorious descendants, / And sat drawing, asking forgiveness from each feature. // Between you and the nation an icy bond is born – / Lie there, then, grow younger and lie there, endlessly straightening out. // So that those young ones, those future ones won't ask you / How it is for you, an orphan, there in the emptiness, the cleanness...]

Some of these images seem apprehensive about the future of the poet's image; the "oily pencils" [*zhirnye karandashi*] swarm menacingly around the poet's corpse, as though eager to scavenge.[193] But in the next couplet, they transform into draftsmen, trying to capture the dead man's likeness for posterity, and at the same time begging each feature for forgiveness. The draftsmen, recurring figures in these poems, are charged with ambivalence from their first appearance. Here, they seem aware that they can't do justice to the poet's likeness, but they keep drawing anyway, because that is what the future (and the "glorious descendants" who populate it) demands of them. The image of the poet's likeness being drawn by ambivalent draftsmen transitions, in the next couplet, to an "icy bond" forming between poet and nation. It's a chilling image; the immutability of the bond suggests deformation – the permanent loss of the mutability and "directedness" [*obratimost'*] that Mandelstam associates with poetic material. The speaker's exhortation to the dead poet to "grow younger" [*molodei*] could also relate to the gradual effacement of the living image after death, its loss of features and transformation into an outline. (Unlike the *Octets*, where straightening ["rectifying"] had a positive connotation, here it is more ambiguous and perhaps implies a loss as well – the loss of curvature that for Mandelstam

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[193] The line "Fet's oily pencil" [*Feta zhirnyi karandash*] is from "Give Tiutchev a dragonfly" [*Daite Tiutchevu strekozu*], *PSS* 221. Here, the epithet puns on Fet's last name. The oily pencils also evoke a line from the Stalin epigram: "His fat fingers are oily [or "fat"] as worms" [*Ego tolstye pal'tsy, kak chervi, zhirny*], *PSS* 226. *Zhirnyi* (greasy, unctuous) also occurs in a draft of the fourth Petrarch sonnet—as discussed above—where it is associated with decay and the earth.

signified a lost poetic evasiveness and complexity.)[194] In the last couplet, the phrase "in the emptiness, the cleanness" [*v pustote, v chistote*] figures the poet's death—especially as time goes on—as a blankness (or whiteness, punning on Bely's pseudonym), akin to a blank page – where nothing has been written/drawn, or perhaps where prior features have been erased. This blankness is one of the oblique page motifs in Mandelstam's poetry of these months, like the whirling leaves [*listy*] in the Mozart octet, and the billowing pleats [*skladki*] in the fourth Petrarch sonnet. The passage of time, and the arrival of future generations, leads to the poet's erasure – precisely because the poet is bound to those generations by an "icy bond."

In other poems from the Bely cycle, Mandelstam contrasts two different types of visual artist: the engraver [*graver* or *graviroval'shchik*] and the draftsman [*risolval'shchik*]. They appear, for instance, in the final two quatrains of "10 January 1934," standing in the midst of the *tolpa*:

> А посреди толпы стоял гравировальщик,
> Готовясь перенесть на истинную медь
> То, что обугливший бумагу рисовальщик
> Лишь крохоборствуя успел запечатлеть.
>
> Как будто я повис на собственных ресницах,
> И созревающий и тянущийся весь, —
> Доколе не сорвусь, разыгрываю в лицах
> Единственное, что мы знаем днесь...

[And in the midst of the crowd stood the engraver, / Preparing to transfer onto genuine copper / That which the draftsman, smudging his page with charcoal, / Only managed to depict by splitting hairs. // As though I dangled by my own eyelashes, / And ripening there, growing more stretched by the minute, – / Before I am torn off, I act out, playing every role, / The only thing we know here and now...]

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[194] *Priamizna* could also refer to Bely's own aesthetic, his geometrifying vision.

The precise nature of the contrast between engraver and draftsman is vague; the engraver is associated with pompous language, and the adjective *istinnaia* [genuine] should give readers pause. We remember, too, that in "Conversation about Dante" Mandelstam derided Gustave Doré, engraver of the *Divine Comedy*, for bestowing on Dante the infamous "aquiline profile." The figure of the draftsman, with his smudged paper and funny combination of haste and scrupulousness, is much more likeable; yet he too contributes to the process by which the poet's image gradually becomes degraded and fixed in the public's mind. One likeness may seem preferable to the other, but both are part of a continuum, and while both are responsible, neither is accountable or guilty – they are merely figures for an inevitable cultural process.

In fact, these two stanzas show us three kinds of likeness. There is the engraving, with its connotations of officialdom and disingenuousness ("genuine copper"), and the hurried sketch, well-meaning but also compromised.[195] Contrasted with both of these is the image of another poet, the speaker in the final stanza, now speaking in the first person. In his figure, the draftsman's haste is turned into an existential piece of theater: He compares himself to both a ripening fruit and his own teardrop threatening to fall at any moment (falling here is associated with death), who has only this indefinite length of time in which to "act out" the only thing anyone knows "here and now." In these lines, the poet's actions are figured as playacting: the phrase *razygryvat' v litsakh* [literally "doing impressions"] conjures up an image of living masks that change so fast they flicker. (These living masks are also linked to the image of a death mask, which, as Andrew Kahn notes, is the final mask that appears in the cycle).[196] This third likeness,

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[195] The infinitive *zapechatlet'* contains the root *pechat'* (a seal), a concealed image of officialdom—and fixity—in the portrait of a street artist. *Pechat'* also recalls another line from Lermontov – "And there is a seal upon his lips" [*I na ustakh ego pechat'*], referring to the silenced mouth of the dead poet.

[196] "Andrei Bely, Dante..." 23.

then, is of the poet's image as performance; not as a sketch on paper (whether smudged or official [*gerbovaia*]), and certainly not as some bronze monument. This combination of urgency and performativity recalls Mandelstam's vision of ideal reading in "Conversation about Dante," where the poem (and the image of the poet) lives only in performance, not on the dead page. At the same time, Mandelstam does not condemn the engraver or the sketch artist; in another variant, the engraver is even described, somewhat affectionately, as *zadumchivyi* [pensive]. Ultimately, even the poet can only take an impression of life, and the common fate of all impressions—like all memories—is to attenuate.[197] Mandelstam encapsulates this bittersweet thought in lines from one of the poems he wrote for Natalia Shtempel' in Voronezh:

> Сегодня — ангел, завтра — червь могильный,
> А послезавтра только очертанье...
>
> [Today – an angel, tomorrow – a grave-worm, / And the day after tomorrow a mere outline...]

Mandelstam's treatment of the poetic image in the Bely poems (particularly the image of the poet) also reflects a more immediate concern than "devouring eternity." As Andrew Kahn points out, a theme that runs through the Bely cycle is the anticipation of calamity, stemming from Mandelstam's hostile relationship with the "inimical literary culture of Soviet Russia" and, even more urgently, the "uncanny foreboding" that followed his decision to share the Stalin epigram with friends and acquaintances.[198] The relationship between poet and crowd is colored by these associations, in the ironic phrase "glorious descendants" [*slavnye potomki*], for instance, the image of the "icy bond" [*ledianaia sviaz'*], and the "emptiness...cleanness"

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[197] The idea that even the poet's so-called immortality is provisional, and that whatever is preserved "through the sounds of the lyre and trumpet" will nevertheless be devoured by eternity, hearkens back to Derzhavin's poem "The river of time in its rush" [*Reka vremen v svoem stremlen'i*], a crucial text for Mandelstam in the 1920s and 30s.

[198] "Andrei Bely, Dante...", 34.

[*pustota...chistota*] to which the poet is consigned – a negative space that signifies both purity (the image of the poet cannot be touched there by the "glorious descendants") and erasure (or as Kahn calls it, "pathetic neglect").[199] Recalling the obliqueness and evasiveness which—Mandelstam claimed in "Conversation about Dante"—were not just important attributes of poetic material, but survival strategies as well, the images of straightening in the Bely cycle convey a latent threat. In a treacherous age, the poet who wishes to be a humanist and *raznochinets* shoots straight at his own peril.

In his poems of 1933-34, Mandelstam experimented with the human image to work out, in poetic practice, a conception of poetic material that he had been developing in dialogue with the Formalist circle, and which he articulated as a kind of theory-in-action in "Conversation about Dante." Poetic material is dynamic, metamorphic, multidirectional, and evasive; drawing on these attributes, Mandelstam created human images that were layered, allusive, and ambiguous, and that took aim at multiple addressees. These images could be suspended among possibilities, states, and identities, and also functioned as self-conscious poetic figures. They could enact, in the drama of their appearance and transformation in verse, the poet's metapoetic concerns about image as such – its nature, origin, and fate. In the *Octets*, with their elliptical, unfinished quality, this metapoetic dimension is at its most explicit, as the very setting of the poems is figured as poetic material – a fabric-like surface on which energies play, and in which human images are particularly charged with metapoetic significance. In the Petrarch sonnets, Mandelstam mediates his experiments with the human image through translation, by inscribing these images within poems from the source of the European lyric tradition, and routing them through various iterations of the "poet" and "beloved" from that tradition. Here, Mandelstam

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[199] Ibid.

develops the figure of the beloved in relation to the poet in the double context of eroticism and mourning. As an emanation of poetic material, the Petrarchan beloved (in Mandelstam's translations) is suspended between life and death, and between identities. The drama of the Petrarch translations lies not only in the beloved's own ambiguity, but in the uncertainty over her image's fate: what will happen when she no longer belongs to the poet (even as an image) and becomes part of the cultural landscape? Finally, in the Bely poems, these concerns are transposed onto a civic context, as Mandelstam mourns the death of a poet by mourning all poets. Here, a meditation on the posthumous fate of the poet's image expresses the uneasy relationship between poets and their national traditions. In the Bely poems, mourning as a private affair codified in venerable verse (what we saw in the Petrarch sonnets) gives way to a public performance of elegy, one fraught with threats and insinuations. The threat of oblivion, or of being misrepresented by a vulgar cultural establishment, is limned by a more immediate threat of danger: in the literary milieu of the 1930s, the living proceeded by convolution, while the dead straightened out endlessly.

CHAPTER TWO

You Come to Bed Through Landscapes: Aporia, Framing, and the Sister Arts in Aronzon

> Так и не предпочесть мне: творчество или
> нетворчество, трезвость или нетрезвость,
> мудрость или не она.

     Leonid Aronzon's (1939-1970) reputation is changing.[200] For years considered a cult poet, a poet's poet on the fringes of the canon (for better or worse), Aronzon is increasingly seen as a key figure in the earliest phase of Leningrad unofficial culture, between the first relaxations of censorship and creative control during the Khrushchev Thaw, and the heyday of uncensored [*nepodtsenzurnyi*] artistic production in the 1970s and 80s. Little known in his lifetime, Aronzon became a legendary figure after his death, his poems shared among friends or studied in unofficial seminars, and his importance to the next generation of "andegraund" poets is well attested. In some ways, it is the importance of a patron saint or talisman; encountering Aronzon for the first time (always in the company of, or thanks to, others in the know) is often described as an initiation; hence the cult status. Even today, the aura of Aronzon's biographical legend continues to loom over his poetry, despite its wider availability and the increase in scholarly attention it has received. The earliness of his death, the fact that it was a suicide (or tragic accident), and its apparent prefiguring in Aronzon's last poems all helped the legend along. Also helpful was Aronzon's perceived rivalry with Joseph Brodsky, his coeval and, at one point, friend; this rivalry suggested itself both in how uncannily similar the two poets were in their

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[200] Epigraph: "I still don't know which to prefer: creativity or uncreativity, sobriety or unsobriety, wisdom or not it." Quotation from the short prose piece "Razmyshleniia ot desiatoi nochi sentiabria" ["Reflections from the Tenth Night of September"], in Leonid Aronzon, *Sobranie proizvedenii v dvukh tomakh* (Saint Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Ivana Limbakha, 2006), Vol. 2, 124. Subsequent citations will appear in-text as *SP* followed by volume and page number.

youth, and the striking ways their poetries and destinies later diverged.[201] Gentleness, purity,

childlike naiveté, a vatic intimacy with paradise, a freeing rather than mastering (i.e.,

Brodskyesque) poetics – these attributes came to define Aronzon for the Second Culture of

underground writers and artists that flourished in Leningrad in the 70s and 80s.[202] A figure of

hope, sincerity, and moral (almost holy-foolish) intensity, he was simultaneously an alternative, a

rebuke, and an antidote, not just to platitudinous official literature, but to the posturing and one-

upmanship that characterized literary life in the Second Culture as well.

    A striking feature of the writing about Aronzon, particularly writing that came out of the

Second Culture, is its focus (overt or implied) on the inadequacy of standard critical discourse in

responding to Aronzon's poetry. This is reflected in the difficulty many writers have talking

about him, their frequent recourse to misty, metaphorical paeans, a feature of numerous

appreciations and reminiscences. It is also problematized explicitly by authors wishing to

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[201] See, for instance, Viktor Krivulin, "Leonid Aronzon – sopernik Iosifa Brodskogo," in *Okhota na mamonta* (Saint Petersburg: Blits, 1998), 152-8. These authors use Brodsky and Aronzon's rivalry to frame an analogy between the two poets' contrasting poetics and their diverging destinies: expansive, logorrheic Brodksy, who left the USSR for international fame and the Nobel Prize, versus gentler, self-reflexive, lexically circumscribed Aronzon, a lifelong Leningrader who died young and remained a quintessential poet's poet. Brodsky influence on late Soviet and post-Soviet poetry was immeasurable; at the same time, a number of 70s and 80s *nepodtsenzurnyi* poets held up Aronzon as a rebuke to Brodsky, or as Krivulin put it, "Aronzon's obscurity is nothing other than the shadow of Brodsky's fame." (Krivulin, 154). At the same time, there is plenty to indicate that in the 60s the two poets did think of each other as rivals; in any case, Aronzon certainly measured himself against Brodsky, to judge by the diaries of Aronzon's wife, Rita Purishinskaia. (Rita Purishinskaia, papers, private collection.)

[202] The terms "Second Culture" and "Underground" (or "Andegraund") are used, often interchangeably, to refer to a number of loosely affiliated literary and artistic circles active in Leningrad (analogous groups existed in Moscow) in the 1960s-80s, whose work circulated in samizdat or was passed among friends and acquaintances, and was therefore not subject to censorship (some contemporary scholars, such as Ilya Kukulin, prefer the term *nepodtsenzurnaia literatura* [literature not-subject-to-censorship] as a handle for this phenomenon). These groups emerged during Krushchev's Thaw, in its atmosphere of relaxed strictures, but writers in the "Second Culture" did not come to see themselves as a fully-fledged countercultural movement until the 1970s. Aronzon lived and wrote before there was a sharp distinction between official and unofficial cultures. On "Second Culture," "Andegraund," and *Nepodtsenzurnaia literatura*, see Petr Kazarnovskii, ed., *Vtoraia kul'tura: Neofitsial'naia poeziia Leningrada v 1970-80-e gody: Materialy mezhdunarodnoi konferentsii* (St. Petersburg: Rostok, 2013). On "liberating" vs. "masterful" poetics, see "'Ego intonatsiia byla ne vlastnoi, a naoborot – osvobozhdaiushchei': Polina Barskova i Il'ia Kukui o poezii Leonida Aronzona," online at http://www.colta.ru/articles/literature/18049. Last accessed August 27, 2018.

understand or communicate Aronzon's uniqueness. There is a tendency in such writing to focus not on the poetics themselves, but on the effect of reading Aronzon.[203] His poetry has been called trance-like, hymn-like, and luminous, and several contemporaries have noted its closeness to prayer, the proof on offer that these poems were written from the border between this world and the next.[204] These appreciations place particular emphasis on first encounters with his poetry, which are typically represented as moments of astonishment – and silence.[205]

This silence takes many forms. In a published conversation between Ilya Kukuj and Polina Barskova, Barskova, a poet, notes that while reading Aronzon was an eye-opening experience for her and other young poets in the 1980s, it was also clear that he could not be imitated or followed; that, in a sense, his poetry foreclosed poetic response. Meanwhile Kukuj, a leading Aronzon scholar who co-edited the standard two-volume edition of his work, expresses doubt over whether the mechanics of his poetry can be talked about at all, or at the least whether it can be subjected to any sort of standard literary analysis. Describing Aronzon's aura or holistic effect is one thing, but focusing on the nitty gritty of his poetics threatens to obscure the forest for the trees.[206] There have been quite a few articles, especially in recent years, devoted to the nitty gritty of Aronzon's poetry, many of them collected in a special issue of the *Wiener*

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[203] Studying the effects of reading a poet like Aronzon can be a productive way into his or her poetry. It can, in addition, reveal a lot about a poet's reception, and changes in that reception over time, not just in reputation but in perceived difficulty as well. My aim in this chapter is not to oppose the effect of reading Aronzon to some objective notion of his poetics, but rather to try to deepen our understanding of this effect by shedding some light on its formal basis in the poems.

[204] See, for example, V. Nikitin, "Leonid Aronzon: Poeziia transa i pryzhok v transtsendentnoe (nabroski k stat'e)," *Chasy*, No. 58 (1985), 223-30; as well as reminiscences collected in Konstantin Kuzminsky and Gregory Kovalev, eds., *The Blue Lagoon Anthology of Modern Russian Poetry*, Vol. 4A (Newtonville, Mass.: Oriental Research Partners, 1983).

[205] This emphasis on first encounters implies, perhaps, that a first reading is somehow sufficient with Aronzon, or in any case that rereading, and gradual familiarity, is valorized differently with Aronzon than with other poets.

[206] "'Ego intonatsiia...'"

Slawistischer Almanach, but for the most part the idea that Aronzon is an absolutely unique poet, one whose work silences normative critical discourse and generally causes perplexity and a grasping for adequate language of response, has persisted.

While some continue to claim that Aronzon's work resists critical reading, I aim to demonstrate some of the many pathways toward such reading that the poems open. I focus particularly on self-conscious poetic devices, on the role of visual arts and music in the work of incorporating thoughts about poetry into the poems, and on the framing devices that make these moves among art forms possible. I argue that by moving among art forms, Aronzon calls attention to metapoetic borders and relations—especially among the poet, the poems, and the reader—and that Aronzon's play with frames dramatizes these relations. Thus, many of Aronzon's poems perform their own coming into being, as well as their anticipated circulation and reception among readers. Aronzon's interartistic, metapoetic play, together with the utterly idiosyncratic way his poetry situates itself within the Russian poetic tradition, helps account both for the unique reading experience afforded by the poems, and for the aura of bafflement and wonder surrounding them.

The rest of the chapter is organized as follows: First, I will describe the various metapoetic figures used in Aronzon's poetry, with particular emphasis on aporia, and provide examples from his work that illustrate these figures in action. I will also show how Aronzon's poetry generates a particular kind of resistance, best understood by way of Viktor Shklovsky's term *zatrudnennost'* (which Alexandra Berlina translates as both "complication" and "deceleration"),[207] and by way of Aronzon's engagement with marginalized poetic traditions.

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[207] Viktor Shklovsky, "Art, as Device," trans. and introduced by Alexandra Berlina, *Poetics Today*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (September 2015), 151-74.

Then, I will look at the connection between Aronzon's metapoetic figures and his use of interartistic discourse—including painterliness, ekphrasis, ideograms, musical forms, and the *ut pictura poesis* tradition—and show how movement among art forms facilitates Aronzon's play with metapoetic frames. The second half of the chapter will focus on close readings of poems that emphasize different aspects of Aronzon's play with frames, art forms, and traditions. First, I will look at visual poems, which use drawing and typescript to highlight their own materiality as well as the often disjunctive relationship between text and image. Then I will consider two poems (both set in defamiliarized pastoral landscapes) in which poetic coming-into-being and circulation are dramatized most vividly. Finally, I will turn to several poems that engage explicitly with poets and poetic traditions of the past. Here, I argue that Aronzon situated himself within tradition in a highly idiosyncratic way, and that a crucial aspect of his poetics is the way he cherry-picked strands of the Russian tradition, both canonical and marginalized, and combined them into a decidedly homespun personal canon – echoing the homemade aesthetics of much of his own poetry.

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Silence, Aporia, and Resistance

One of the most important elements in Aronzon's work is silence, and we might pause to study its presence in the poetry as a way into the larger questions to which I am about to turn. The use of silence is related to both the aporia that surrounds Aronzon's work and the quasi-religious mystique of some of his poetry. There are many kinds of silence in Aronzon's poems, and he excels at making silences palpable and at accentuating the subtle differences between, say, the pauses after a caesura (which Aronzon often exaggerates), and those after enjambment, tautology, apostrophe, exclamation, and refrain. Aronzon also creates distortion within and

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around words—a sense of stretching or moving through a resistant medium—by placing them against the grain of the meter, or by using lots of oblique declensions; this results in a different kind of silence, a pause *within* sounded speech. He also shows that silence can completely surround a poem. In "Morning" [*Utro, SP* I, 108], for example, Aronzon uses repetition, exclamation points, and ternary meter to build a particularly resonant silence that lingers long after the poem is done. In several poems, Aronzon invokes silence directly (either as *molchanie* [silence] or *pauzy* [pauses or musical rests]), naming it as a feature of the environment or as material for poetry: "Sobranie pauz. Osen'" [A gathering of pauses. Autumn] sets the scene in one poem (*SP* I, 72); another apostrophizes its archaic addressee as "dshcher' pauz oseni, stroi tela / kotoroi – pirshestvo krasy" [daughter of autumn's pauses, whose body's build / is beauty's banquet] (*SP* I, 73). In the last example, "pauz" is placed in the iambic line in a way that stretches its enunciation (owing to the spondee in the first foot and the archaic "dshcher'," a one-syllable word that takes a long time to pronounce), resulting in a sounded pause within the rhythm. A third poem, titled "Pauzy," forgoes language altogether; the "text" is made up of x's and blank spaces, evoking a purely visual rhythm (*SP* I, 69). In all these examples, "pauzy" function as units of silence, or "organized silence" [*oformlennoe molchanie*], as the editors of the Limbakh edition put it (*SP* I, 419). Then there is a sonnet that treats silence as the very material of poetry. The first quatrain reads:

> Есть между всем молчание. Одно.
> Молчание одно, другое, третье.
> Полно молчаний, каждое оно –
> есть матерьял для стихотворной сети. (*SP* I, 173).

> [There is silence between everything. A single one. / One silence, a second, a third. / Loads of silences, and each one / is material for a poetic net.]

Here, the solemnity of the opening statement ("est' mezhdu vsem molchanie. Odno.") is undercut in the following line ("molchanie odno, drugoe, tret'e"), where the silence we presumed

to be monolithic and singular proliferates, divides, and each of these now plural silences is declared potential material for a poem (or "poetic net," as Aronzon figures it). This move from solemnity to irony is facilitated, in part, through punctuation; the first two words of line 2 simply repeat the last two from line 1, but with the periods (and the pauses they create) removed. Throughout the octave, the letter *o* repeats like an icon of the framed silence Aronzon describes ("molchanie teper' obramleno, / ono – iacheika nevoda v sonete" [the silence is now framed, / it is the mesh in the sonnet's dragnet]).[208] The "I" does not appear in this sonnet; instead, the second quatrain uses the imperative, turning the poem into an instruction manual for fishers of souls (since souls are what these "poetic nets" catch). The most desirable nets, according to the poem's conclusion, are those in which there is nothing *but* mesh ["odna iacheika"]; i.e., nothing but framed silence.[209] From ironic proliferation, the sonnet loops back in the end to an ideal oneness.

In much of his poetry, Aronzon uses hesitation, doubt, and bewilderment—the stuff of aporia—similarly to how he uses silence: as devices and, simultaneously, as self-conscious themes. Before looking at how these devices function in the poems, a brief definition of aporia is in order. An aporia is a performance of hesitation, impasse, or inability to resolve a dilemma, move forward or even speak. In classical rhetoric, it is defined as a "pragmatic figure of speech that states the author's pretended inability to speak competently about a certain topic."[210] The

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[208] "Mesh" [*iacheika*] refers to the empty spaces between the cords of a net, a single (framed) unit of reticulated space.

[209] The image of an ideal poem as a net consisting of a single great mesh is, perhaps, a key intertext for Elena Shvarts's epigraph (which she wrote herself) to the poem "I was born with a smooth palm" [*Ia rodilas' s ladon'iu gladkoi*], *Sochineniia Eleny Shvarts* (Saint Petersburg: Pushkinskii Fond, 2002), Vol. 1, 110]. In her epigraph, Shvarts imagines herself escaping all the nets woven for her by destiny.

[210] Definition in Thomas O. Sloane, ed., *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 28-9.

Encyclopedia of Rhetoric notes that aporia is often used to indicate "affected modesty," and also

points out its relation to the sublime: "If the object of the text surpasses the possibilities of

language, aporia is used to emphasize its greatness."[211] The *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry*

and Poetics emphasizes that "aporia allows a speaker to hesitate on both sides of a question" and

invokes Plato, who "describes the experience of aporia as paralysis or numbness (*Meno*) –

although in rhetorical practice this uncertainty is often feigned."[212] The idea that aporia

represents a *feigned* doubt or impasse becomes vexed in the hands of deconstructionist theorists

such as Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man. For Derrida, an aporia is any instance where rhetoric

works against itself, revealing logical impasses that can have far-reaching social and

psychological implications. Intentionality is beside the point here; Derrida treats aporias as

points of entry into the logic of such ingrained social practices as mourning and hospitality, in an

attempt to show that "the condition of their possibility is also, and at once, the condition of their

impossibility."[213] Moreover, as Derrida notes, an aporia is not a problem to be solved, not "a

failure or a simple paralysis, the sterile negativity of the impasse," but something that is

productive precisely in its inescapable oscillation among possibilities: "When someone suggests

to you a solution for escaping an impasse, you can be almost sure that he is ceasing to

understand."[214] De Man connects the deconstructionist notion of aporia as something to be

uncovered in a text or social practice (as opposed to a suavely controlled rhetorical device) more

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[211] Ibid.

[212] *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 60-61.

[213] Jack Reynolds, "Possible and Impossible, Self and Other, and The Reversibility of Merleau-Ponty and Derrida," *Philosophy Today*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (Spring 2004), 35.

[214] Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 32.

explicitly to literature. In *Allegories of Reading*, he proposes a succinct definition of aporia as that which "persists in performing what it has shown to be impossible to do."[215]

In Aronzon's poetry, aporias enjoy an uncertain status, gesturing simultaneously toward the paradoxical sophistication of a successful poetics of failure, and toward actual failure, or at the very least, inadequacy. The rhetoric of failure is the source of many important figures in Aronzon's poetry, figures that straddle the line between the literary and extraliterary, and thus create some of the metapoetic frames that Aronzon plays with – by obscuring them, or conversely, making them too visible; by zooming in or out; by nesting frames within frames; or by drawing attention to their construction and dismantling. This self-conscious play with frames often takes place in sonnets (which make up a significant proportion of Aronzon's work), because sonnets naturally draw attention to their own form. The constraints of that form, such as the volta after the eighth line or the pressing need to wrap it up by line fourteen—constraints that poets will often use as foils for their virtuosity—are, on the contrary, exaggerated by Aronzon, and thus become fertile ground for metapoetic play.

In the sonnet that begins "The weather – rain" [*Pogoda – dozhd'*] for example, this play results in a vacillation between two irreconcilable aspects of the speaker—the poetic "I" and what Boris Tomashevsky calls the "biographical legend"—and an uncertainty over whether or not the poem is successful.[216] This vacillation hinges on the poem's numerous expressions of

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[215] Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 275.

[216] Tomashevsky conceived of an author's "biographical legend" as an idea of the author generated by his or her own works, a kind of ideal biography that both facilitates the creation of new works (as fulfillments of the legend), and orients readers vis-à-vis the author. See Boris Tomashevsky, "Literature and Biography," in Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska, *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views* (Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1978), 255-270.

doubt and hesitation; indeed, self-doubt is the prevailing mood in this sonnet, which takes on the

venerable trope of the poem as a moment's monument only to ironize it:

> Погода – дождь. Взираю на свечу,
> которой нет. Не знаю состоянья,
> в котором оказаться я хочу,
> но и скончаться нет во мне желанья.
>
> Сплошное «нет». Как будто бы к врачу
> пришел я показать свое страданье
> и вместо аааааа я нееееееет ему мычу,
> и нету сил мне оборвать мычанье.
>
> Но мы способны смастерить сонет,
> сбить доски строчек гвоздиками рифмы.
> На этот труд два полчаса убив, мы
>
> не просчитались: гроб есть и скелет.
> Убитый час мы помещаем в гроб
> и, прежде чем закрыть, целуем в лоб. (*SP* I, 147)

> [The weather – rain. I gaze upon a candle / which isn't there. I don't know what state / I'd like to end up in, / but I don't feel like snuffing it either. // Sheer "no." As though I've come / to the doctor to show him my suffering / and instead of aaaaaaa I bellow nooooooo at him, / and lack the strength to stop my bellowing. // But I {lit. "we"} know how to cobble together a sonnet, / hammer boards of {verse} lines to each other with nails of rhyme. / After killing two half-hours with this labor, we // didn't bungle it: here's a coffin and a skeleton. / We put the murdered hour in the coffin / and kiss its forehead before shutting the lid.]

Here, the sestet and octave are connected by the theme of impasse. No matter what he does, the

speaker cannot get past his mental block, or overcome the "sheer no" [*sploshnoe 'net'*] that

prevents him from getting anywhere, and even keeps him from imagining what that somewhere

might be. Yet even as it bemoans this creative blockage, the poem enacts its own construction

and completion. This imbues the tentative compensatory idea in the sestet—that creative

blockage can be overcome through mastery[217]—with heavy irony, though without really

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[217] *Smasterit'* in line 9 denotes routine workmanship and only distantly suggests brilliant execution.

invalidating it. One way to read this sonnet is as a metapoetic drama, full of authorial choices that contrast ironically with the speaker's pathological inability to choose. The speaker, who in the first line-and-a-half gazes at a candle that isn't there, can also be read as the poet writing a line and immediately rejecting the image he has just invented – an authorial rejection underscored by its placement after an abrupt enjambment. Rather than discard the line and abandon the poem then and there, the poet chooses to keep negation in play, to make negation itself the subject of the poem. This does not solve the problem of self-doubt, however, and the second quatrain, with its dreamlike metaphors of exposure and helplessness before the doctor (a figure whose role is to prompt sound), not only amplifies the speaker's doubt, but extends his aporia to language itself: at the doctor's, he tries to say "aaaaaa" (what one normally says when the doctor approaches with a tongue depressor, but also, as the first letter of the alphabet, a metonym for language itself) but can only say, or rather moo, "*neeeeeeet*" [noooo]. Language, which the poet relies on to express himself, has been reduced to a single cow-like, interminable sound – and a signifier of negation to boot.

The only way to break negation's spell is to cut it short, and the speaker seems unable to do that. Luckily, the sonnet form can, by providing Aronzon with a volta at just the right moment. As a result, the sestet reads as a complete departure from the octave, a self-reflexive allegory about how poetry is nothing more than a way of killing time, but at least providing time's corpse with a coffin – itself a metaphor for the rectangular shape of the finished poem. The themes of the octave are uncertainty about one's destination and the inability to get going, but in the sestet the speaker concludes that if he doesn't know how to wrap things up, the sonnet will do the work for him, simply by virtue of its form. Indeed, the end of the poem seems to write itself, and yet the implication is that poetry is a big waste of time. On some level, the

sonnet, especially in the sestet, is an elegy for the time it took to write the poem, but Aronzon

unsettles the standard trope of poetry as a "moment's monument." Normally, we would expect

some sort of compensation, along the lines of how the finished poem is an apotheosis of the time

sacrificed to its writing. But in Aronzon's hands, the relationship between time and the poem is

uncomfortably close, as though each line were exactly equivalent to the unit of time it took to

write. Because the sestet is so single-mindedly focused on its own manifestation, there isn't

enough breathing room for a compensatory move. Aronzon does something similar in the sestet

of another sonnet, titled "Forgotten Sonnet" [*Zabytyi sonet*]:

> Ещё шесть строк, ещё которых нет,
> я из добытия перетащу в сонет,
> не ведая, увы, зачем нам эта мука (*SP* I, 162)

> [Another six lines that don't exist yet / I'll drag from preexistence into the sonnet, / not
> knowing, alas, what this torment is for.]

In this tercet, the lack of breathing room caused by the speaker's point blank, myopic attention to

the poem's creation, is even more striking.[218] Both here and in "Pogoda-dozhd'," Aronzon

emphasizes the materiality of poetic lines; they can be hammered together, or literally dragged

from pre-existence into the sonnet. This focus on materiality, coupled with an exaggerated or

myopic attention to form, is a common feature of Aronzon's poetry, and one that puts Aronzon's

personal twist on a long tradition. In Russian poetry, the device of writing about writing while

writing goes back to Pushkin, one of Aronzon's favorite poets. It happens in *Eugene Onegin*, and

is even more conspicuous in "The Little House in Kolomna" [*Domik v Kolomne*], a poem full of

self-conscious digressions about the stanza form Pushkin chose for the poem – the octave. In one

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[218] We can compare these lines to Moscow poet Dmitry Prigov's (1940-2007) later poem "I'm already exhausted from line one" [*Ia ustal uzhe na pervoi strochke*], from the cycle "Laws of literature and art" [*Zakony literatury i iskusstva*], which takes the conceit of a poem single-mindedly reporting on its own reluctant creation to still greater extremes. See Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov, *Napisannoe s 1975 po 1989* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 1997), 97.

memorable instance, Pushkin even talks about dragging lines to the end of the stanza, in language quite similar to Aronzon's: "Somehow or other I'll drag this octave / to its conclusion. Shame on a Russian poet!" [Koi kak uzh do kontsa oktavu etu / Ia dotianu. Styd russkomu poetu!].[219]

The uncertainty around doubt—whether it functions as a device or reflects actual hesitation on the part of the poet—is further exacerbated by several facts that also walk a line between biography and art: Aronzon's struggles with actual self-doubt, his flirtations with graphomania, and his complicated relationship to poetic mastery. His wife Rita Purishinskaia's diaries reveal Aronzon's frequent mood swings between self-doubt and vindication; apparently Brodsky, still a friend in the early 1960s, inspired many of these feelings of inadequacy.[220] Actual doubt creeps into the margins of Aronzon's manuscripts as well: he often wrote "ne nado" [better not] and "v drian'" [rubbish] when he was dissatisfied with a line.[221] Among his later poems is one titled "Bezdarnye stishki, napisannye ot iznemozheniia" [Talentless doggerel written out of exhaustion].[222] As for graphomania, Aronzon was interested in it not just as a vital

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[219] In Pushkin, such self-conscious, metapoetic play typically occurs in the context of narrative poems, while in Aronzon, these instances of "laying bare the device" almost always occur in lyric forms. Moreover, Pushkin's tone is generally chattiest when he is being metapoetic, so that the self-conscious moments feel digressive, in contrast to Aronzon, who makes metapoetic play the sole focus of the tercets.

[220] See for instance the entry dated December 16, 1965, in Margarita (Rita) Purishinskaya's diaries.

[221] The strange-sounding phrase "v drian'" (as opposed to just "drian'") suggests that Aronzon had a folder labeled "rubbish" [*drian'*], where he would keep poems he thought weren't working, without throwing them away. (I am grateful to Daria Khitrova for pointing this out.)

[222] Some writers view Aronzon's self-doubt in terms of a general sense of hopelessness that existed among unofficial writers in the late 50s-60s. As Viktoria Andreeva argues, "underground poet" wasn't an identity that would have been available to Aronzon the way it was to poets in the 70s and 80s (Viktoria Andreeva, "Introduction," in Leonid Aronzon, *Smert' babochki = Death of a Butterfly*, trans. Richard McKane [S.l.:Gnosis Press, 1998]). Aronzon was respected by later generations for publishing almost nothing, but in fact he did have ambitions to be published, even in the official press, and the thwarting of these ambitions was painful to him. Moreover, Aronzon's writing was not supported by an extensive network of samizdat, such as appeared in the 1970s; nor did he enjoy the validation that came with belonging to a fully-fledged counterculture ("Vmesto predisloviia," 17).

and ever-present (though extremely marginalized) phenomenon in Russian poetry, but as a potential source of usable badness, badness that, paradoxically, turns out to be good. Ainsley Morse argues that Aronzon used graphomania as a device, just as Aronzon's hero Velimir Khlebnikov may have done,[223] and according to his friend Vladimir Erl', Aronzon was genuinely fond of graphomaniac poets.[224] For instance, he loved with "tender irony" (Ilya Kukulin's phrase)[225] the graphomaniac poet Afanasii Anaevskii (1788-1866), who sometimes stumbled on delightful and even highly original lines in spite of himself (or perhaps precisely because of his total ineptitude by nineteenth-century standards). Thus, when it comes to the idea that talent should be manifest and undeniable in an artist's works—an idea deeply engrained in Russian discourse about creativity—Aronzon leaves the door open to doubt. What makes poems or poets good or bad? What difference can we really point to between a radical innovator's originality and that of a graphomaniac?

On the whole, Aronzon's poetry has an ambiguous relationship to mastery. With Mandelstam, say, or Brodsky, the poetry is, on some level, geared to induce submission in the reader.[226] Even when the poems themselves are difficult or obscure, there is a level on which

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[223] Ainsley Morse, *Word Play: Unofficial Poetry and Children's Literature in the Soviet Union* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, forthcoming), 231. For intentional badness as a device in Khlebnikov, see Aleksandr Zholkovskii, "Grafomanstvo kak priem," online at http://ka2.ru/nauka/limonov.html. Last accessed August 26, 2018.

[224] By graphomania, I mean a phenomenon specific to Russia that has been around since at least the 18th century. The notion of graphomania links notions of amateur writing ("dilettantism"), bad writing, and pathological compulsion. The graphomaniac poet can't help writing reams of bad verse, and often feels compelled to share it with others. Graphomania has played an important, if underacknowledged role in Russian literary history; authors identified as graphomaniacs were marginalized by the literary establishment, yet often interacted with it and, as Yuri Tynianov has shown, played a significant role in the development of nineteenth-century poetry. See Iurii Tynianov, "O literaturnoi evoliutsii," in *PILK*, 270-81.

[225] Ilya Kukulin, "Nepoznannyi kontrkul'turshchik," in *NLO*, No. 104 (2010), online at http://magazines.russ.ru/nlo/2010/104/ku38-pr.html. Last accessed August 28, 2018.

[226] There are, of course, important differences between the cognitive resistance offered by Mandelstam and Brodsky. Brodsky always remains intelligible, even if his syntax needs to be untangled first, while Mandelstam (especially in

they aim to minimize the reader's resistance. Reading a poem by Mandelstam or Brodsky is like tuning to a channel where, no matter how head-scratchingly complex the actual material, its transmission flows at a rate, and with a power, that seems independent of the reader's ability to grasp all the nuances, or even understand a single word. This powerful illusion, so crucial to the way such poetry relates to the real world—especially in matters of reception, e.g. how it circulates or influences, or how it does or does not enter the canon—is absent from Aronzon's work, at least from 1964 onward. The cognitive resistance of a poem by Mandelstam or Brodsky can make us pause or start over, and each reading will inevitably be different, but ultimately the transmission of the poem will remain unaffected, and reentering the poem we will be carried by this transmission to the same endpoint. In addition to the occasional self-deflation, self-deprecation, and self-effacement that crops up in his poetry, and the near-absence of flaunting, swaggering, and exulting (except in erotic matters), Aronzon problematizes the relationship between poem and reader by generating a resistance in the poetic transmission itself. This resistance, which is palpable, provides a kind of textural background for Aronzon's play with metapoetic frames, and Aronzon achieves it primarily by using classical forms, meters, syntax, vocabulary, and themes—familiar to the point of being trite—in ways that make them *slightly* labored, incongruous, or otherwise strange.

Poetic resistance has been usefully theorized by a number of scholars; James Longenbach, for instance, defines resistance in terms of obscurity and cognitive difficulty, even as he argues that resistance can destabilize a regime of knowing or apprehending (by showing how poems undermine the conclusions they seem to be moving towards).[227] Melissa Feuerstein

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the 1920s and 30s) can at times approach something close to Khlebnikovian *zaum'*. With both poets, however, intelligibility (and difficulties relating to intelligibility) does not get in the way of the poetry's transmission.

[227] James Longenbach, *The Resistance to Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

sees poetry's resistance as a challenge to the "notion that understanding involves movement—physical or psychological—from a position of exteriority to an accessible interiority where meaning resides," a challenge that lets poetry "function as a space between...paired entities" like interiority/exteriority or access/occlusion.[228] Resisting goal-oriented or binary configurations of poetic encounter is certainly part of what Aronzon does (and he sometimes does it through an ironic overemphasis on the poem as an image of movement, for instance). At the same time, Aronzon's resistance can also be understood through the Russian word *zatrudnennost'*, which connotes a perceptual and cognitive slowing, a hinderance rather than a deflection or concealment. A closely associated term is *zatormozhennost'* – movement with the brakes on. Viktor Shklovsky introduces "the device of the complication of form" (*priem zatrudnennoi formy*) in the same article as the more famous term *ostranenie* (defamiliarization), "Art as Device." The two devices are linked; as Shklovsky writes: "The goal of art is to create the sensation of seeing, and not merely recognizing, things; the device of art is the 'estrangement' of things and the complication of the form, which increases the duration and complexity of perception, as the process of perception is, in art, an end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is the means to live through the making of a thing; what has been made does not matter in art.*"[229] The two devices, *ostranenie* and *zatrudnennost'*, work in parallel: both are mechanisms that go beyond goal-oriented, purely cognitive figures of reading poetry. Shklovsky argues forcefully that both techniques for creating difficulty have a visual as well as a material side. He also states

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[228] Melissa Feuerstein, "For Want of a Door: Poetry's Resistant Interiors," *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (2012), 207-8.

[229] "Целью искусства является дать ощущение вещи, как видение, а не как узнавание; приемом искусства является прием „остранения" вещей и прием затрудненной формы, увеличивающий трудность и долготу восприятия, так как воспринимательный процесс в искусстве самоцелен и должен быть продлен; *искусство есть способ пережить деланье вещи, а сделанное в искусстве не важно.*" "Art, as Device," 162. Emphasis in original.

that decelerated perception is how one prolongs the experience of "liv[ing] through the making of a thing" – his formulation for the audience's encounter with a work of art. This has direct bearing on Aronzon, whose poetry resists the reader by drawing on visual categories and prolonging the reading experience, and often takes "living through the making of a thing" as an explicit theme. Crucially, Shklovsky also discusses *zatrudnennost'* with reference to Pushkin. Though in the twentieth century people saw Pushkin as a model of lyric clarity, "for [his] contemporaries...Pushkin's style was unexpectedly difficult...in its ordinariness [*trivial'nost'*]. [...] Pushkin used the vernacular as a device to arrest attention."[230] Aronzon's poetry has been resistant to his contemporaries, and continues to be resistant (though perhaps increasingly less so) in a way that resembles Shklovsky's conclusions about Pushkin. Its difficulty lies not in obscurity but in an "arresting," "braking," or "decelerating" of readerly attention by means of a deceptive or excessive simplicity.[231]

We saw some of this resistance in Aronzon's use of silence, but it also extends to his use of meter, grammar, and sound orchestration. Unlike Brodsky, whose chief metrical innovation was his trademark loose dolnik, Aronzon uses classical syllabo-tonic meters, but unsettles them by flirting with canonically impermissible stresses and using plenty of words with ambiguous stress values (especially function words).[232] His use of slant rhymes, antigrammatical rhymes, and enjambment, while very different from Brodsky's, is no less innovative; to give just two

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[230] Для современников Пушкина...стиль [его], по своей (тогдашней) тривиальности, являлся для них неожиданно трудным. Ibid., 172.

[231] Aronzon revered Pushkin (indeed, the entire Pleiade), and it is likely that he saw in the Golden Age poet a model for creating and subverting readers' expectations through self-conscious literary play, irony, and a paradoxical resistant simplicity.

[232] Aronzon's metrical innovations within a classical framework can be compared to those of Pushkin in the late 1820s and early 30s. On Pushkin's meter, see Iurii Tynianov, "O kompozitsii..."

examples from a single poem, Aronzon rhymes *solntse* with *solomkoi* and *shar* with *sharf*.[233] To

take an example from grammar, Aronzon sometimes uses consecutive genitives in ways that

sound archaic and traditional, but also come across as excessive and semantically disorienting.[234]

Another classic, archaic-sounding technique that Aronzon uses to generate resistance is

inversion; for instance, in the lines "glukhoi toski tiazhelyi med / v stikhov oformilsia kristally"

[the heavy honey of muffled longing / has into crystals of verses organized], a relatively benign

inversion in the first line is followed by a pointedly archaic second line. Here, the impression of

a profound metaphor hits us before the actual content of that metaphor, which comes at us

askew.[235] Yet another technique of resistance is elongation. We saw an example in how Aronzon

uses the organizing pressure of poetic meter to slow down the word *pauz*; elsewhere, he treats

elongation as a formal device while also describing it; for instance, in the lines "Borzaia,

prodolzhaia zaitsa, / byla protiazhnee au!'" [The borzoi continuing the hare / was more drawn

out than {the sound} 'au!']. Here, the drawn out syllables in "au!"—their sounding primed by

the sustained repetition of the vowel *a* in the lead-up, and extended on the *u* side by an

exclamation point—echo the bizarre image of a borzoi as the continuation of a hare.[236] This

image of a chase also contains a pun: the borzoi [*borzaia*] literally bears down on (and

overtakes!) the beginning of the word for hare [*zaiats*]. The verb *prodolzhat'* substitutes for the

expected hunting verb; it is then re-sounded by the adjective of protraction, *protiazhnyi*, in the

next line (a word which itself appears in an elongated comparative form). In the following

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[233] From "Est' svetlyi polden' i razdol'e l'da," *SP*, I 61.

[234] E.g., "зачем из *трупов душ* букетами цветут / такие мысли" [Why do such thoughts bloom / from the *corpses of souls*]. From "Zabytyi sonet" [Forgotten Sonnet], *SP* I, 162. Emphasis is mine.

[235] Lines quoted from "Slava" [Glory], *SP* I, 144.

[236] Note that the last four syllables of the second line are all vowels. In the Russian context, "au!" is how people call out when they are looking for one another – while hunting in the woods, for instance.

quatrain, the speaker joins in the chase, not as the nominative subject *ia*, but as the accusative

object *menia*, a passive self that gives chase by allowing itself to be stretched out: "Krasivyi beg

lesnoi pogoni / menia vytiagival v dogon" [The beautiful sprint of a sylvan chase / stretched me

out in pursuit].[237]

Aronzon also generates resistance in poems by playing with parts of speech: participles,

gerunds, short adjectives, and conspicuously oblique noun declensions. This grammatical

zatrudnennost' is on display in the following four-line poem written in early 1966:

> Я выгнув мысль висеть подковой
> живое всё одену словом
> и дав учить вам наизусть
> сам в кресле дельты развалюсь. (*SP* I, 97)

> [Having bent thought so that it hangs like a horseshoe, I / will dress all that lives in the
> word, / and having given it to you to memorize, / I will fall apart in the armchair of a
> delta.]

The poem begins with "I" [*ia*], so we expect a verb to follow. Instead, we get the adverbial

participle *vygnuv*; the contortion denoted by this word is enacted by the unexpected and

"hindered" adverbial form. Grammatically, the two rhyming couplets are patterned in parallel: an

unusual combination of adverbial participle and infinitive in the first line followed by a

perfective first-person verb in the second.[238] Both couplets also feature nouns in marked

declensions: "horseshoe" and "word" in the first couplet are in the instrumental; while line 4 has

a prepositional noun ("armchair") followed by one in the genitive ("delta"). The strange image in

the last line appears to show the speaker in the process of dynamic disintegration, although the

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[237] Lines quoted from *SP* I, 103.

[238] This parallel mimics the symmetry of a horseshoe, and indeed the short poem, with its longer first and fourth
lines, resembles a horseshoe.

meaning of "chair of a delta" [*kresla del'ty*] remains unclear.[239] Also striking is the image in line 1, of a thought bent out of the speaker so that it hangs like a horseshoe. This image is accompanied by acoustic elongation, through the sounding of consecutive *ы*'s. Meanwhile the declaration, in line 2, that the speaker will "dress *zhivoe vse* with the word," comes with its own uncertainty: is *zhivoe vse* an inversion (is the speaker claiming he will dress "all that lives" in the word) or does *zhivoe* indeed modify *vse* (i.e., is he claiming he will dress the "living everything" in the word)? An inversion makes more sense from a semantic point of view, but the other, weirder possibility is more tempting – and is in keeping with Aronzon's habit of treating pronouns as full-fledged nouns, as if *vse* had the substantive specificity of *nebo* (sky) or *derevo* (tree).[240]

The resistance generated by these strange or hindered expressions of classical forms suggests a "proud nonchalance" with regard to mastery,[241] an appropriate stance for a poem about poetic pride.[242] Thus, even though Aronzon's metrical, grammatical, and acoustic

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[239] "Delta" probably refers to a river delta, conjuring up silt, fecundity, and ramification, which evocatively color the speaker's decomposition. It could even refer to Delta Airlines, in operation since 1929, though it's hard to be sure whether Aronzon would have made this association.

[240] For a study of pronouns in Aronzon, specifically the second-person pronoun *ty* and its variant *Ty*, see Natalia Azarova, "Mestoimennaia poetika Leonida Aronzona," in *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach*, 62 (2008), 165-79.

[241] I am grateful to Daria Khitrova for suggesting this extremely apt formulation.

[242] It is also reminiscent of Pushkin, particularly in lines from "The Prosaist and the Poet" [*Prozaik i poet*], where Pushkin's speaker, like Aronzon's, treats thought as material that can be worked into a useful object:

> О чем, прозаик, ты хлопочешь?
> Давай мне мысль какую хочешь:
> Ее с конца я завострю,
> Летучей рифмой оперю,
> Взложу на тетиву тугую,
> Послушный лук согну в дугу,
> А там пошлю наудалую,
> И горе нашему врагу!

> [Prosaist, why do you toil? / Give me any kind of thought – / I'll sharpen its end, / I'll feather it with flying rhyme, / Put it on the taut bowstring, / Bend the willing bow into an arc, / And then release it recklessly, / And woe betide our enemy!]

experiments are, on some level, obviously masterful, they also suggest indifference to the whole notion of poetic mastery. The resulting ambivalence toward mastery in Aronzon's poetry has not gone unnoticed. Aronzon's friend Aleksandr Al'tshuler, for instance, writes that Aronzon's poetry has no "tochka opory" [foothold].[243] This observation suggests a disorienting smoothness or omnipresence to the poems. The sense that something about Aronzon's poetry is too close up, too ubiquitous—that it doesn't allow for the proper distance in the relation between reader and poem—is echoed by a theme in one of Aronzon's last poems, the first quatrain of which reads:

> Боже мой, как всё красиво!
> Всякий раз, как никогда.
> Нет в прекрасном перерыва.
> Отвернуться б, но куда? (*SP* I, 213)[244]

> [God, how beautiful everything is! / It's like the first time, every time. / There's no break in the beautiful. / I'd turn away, but where would I look?]

Here, beauty is presented as something from which the speaker, for better or worse, has no respite. The quatrain, which begins with a rapturous and disarmingly guileless exclamation, ends on an ambivalent note that could be read as gentle awe or muffled panic – the speaker doesn't know where to turn to behold something other than beauty. Beauty is a smooth, continuous presence, without breaks [*pereryvy*], raising the possibility that it can be overwhelming. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Ilya Kukuj singles out these lines as an example of Aronzon's poetry

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[243] Aleksandr Al'tshuler, "Zametki o tvorchestve L. Aronzona," *Mitin zhurnal*, No. 27 (1989), 270.

[244] The second half of the poem reads:

> Оттого, что он речной,
> ветер трепетный прохладен.
> Никакого мира сзади —
> всё, что есть, — передо мной.

> [Because it is fluvial, / the trembling wind is cool. / There is no world behind me – / all that exists – lies ahead.]

about which nothing can be said.[245] Kukuj writes that the first two lines mirror the catharsis of the reader encountering them; I would add that the next two lines mirror the reader's disorientation, his or her inability to get a purchase on the text – leading to the kinds of aporias Kukuj himself admits to feeling before Aronzon's poetry.[246]

But what is this purchase, this *tochka opory*, that Aronzon's poetry supposedly lacks? One possibility is that it refers to the coordinates by which a reader normally orients herself vis-à-vis poems. "Net tochki opory" could then refer to the collapsing of these coordinates, and with it a violation of the implicit contract between masterful poet and submissive reader. Even though this negligence toward the poet-reader contract is itself a performance (and a masterful one at that), the reader vacillates between appreciating Aronzon's ingenuity and taking the performance of non-mastery at face value. Another interpretation of "tochka opory" is that this attribute, or rather the lack thereof, contrasts with the idea of *acme*—honed craft—that we find in Mandelstam's poetics. Where Mandelstam's poetry is studded with points of affective purchase, which we feel as particularly keen or acute moments (evidence of the poet's mastery), Aronzon's is smooth. It gives no purchase, there are no acute moments, no visceral proof of mastery. Smoothness, then, is not a matter of verbal texture (as we have seen, Aronzon's poetry is highly textured). Instead, it is something more like the affect of mastery's lack.

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[245] "В самом деле, ну что́ можно — и, главное, зачем — сказать о строках «Боже мой, как все красиво! Всякий раз как никогда...»? Эти слова вполне приложимы к классическому катарсису, который испытываешь при каждой новой встрече с Аронзоном. «Всякий раз как никогда» — а тут я со своими грязными лапами..." "Ego intonatsiia..."

[246] Kukuj's admission makes plain how helpless the scholar (who talks about poetry for a living) can feel before such poetry, and implicitly contrasts the scholar's helplessness with the pleasure of the ordinary reader (or the pleasure of any reader in the moment of reading, as opposed to the perplexity of the scholar trying to say something meaningful about the text).

A useful way to conceptualize Aronzon's collapsing of the coordinates between reader and poem is through metapoetic frames. The disorienting closeness and omnipresence we experience when reading the poems comes from Aronzon making the frame, which normally circumscribes poetry and separates it from the reader's world, hard to see.[247] The choice of frames as a way to think about Aronzon's metapoetic figuration is not arbitrary; frames are mentioned explicitly in several poems, and Aronzon even includes drawings of frames in his visual poetry. Even when frames and framing aren't mentioned explicitly, a lot of the poems feature variations on the frame in the form of enclosures—gardens, rooms, coffins, and the insides of nets, for example—reinforcing the analogy between frames as material objects and framing as a literary device.

Meanwhile, the critic Valerii Shubinskii sees in Aronzon's ambivalence toward mastery a lesson from an OBERIU poet: Aleksandr Vvedensky's dictum "uvazhai bednost' iazyka" [respect the poverty of language].[248] As Shubinskii writes: "Poverty, in this case, does not just mean a restricted lexicon, but a rejection of lexical arrogance."[249] Unlike the Futurists, who

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[247] In the case of the two short poems quoted above, it also arises from the sense that the poems are under-constructed (in part because of their brevity). We expect a four-line poem to have an epigrammatic sharpness, which is lacking (or deliberately blunted) in Aronzon's poems. There is also their disarming spontaneity (noted by Kukuj), the fact that they seem like actual exclamations rather than constructed texts. The reader's disorientation also stems from the poems' closeness to living speech – in their spontaneity, lexicon, and tone (if not always their syntax). Knowing that a poem is separate from living speech is part of what gives readers a *tochka opory*, the feeling of a clear demarcation between the two. This disorienting closeness to, and even border-crossing between, poetic speech and what Tynianov called extraliterary speech is also characteristic of Pushkin; indeed, it is one of the main sources of his *zatrudnennost'*.

[248] Aronzon probably read Vvedensky, whose work was virtually unknown at the time, under the mentorship of Vladimir Al'fonsov—a specialist in the (then) politically suspect OBERIU poets—during his student years at the Leningrad State Pedagogical Institute. There is textual evidence that, at the very least, Aronzon was familiar with Vvedensky's "Elegiia" (*SP* I, 448). On Aronzon's education, see Petr Kazarnovskii and Il'ia Kukui, "Vmesto predisloviia," *SP* I, 7-20; and Vladimir Erl', "Neskol'ko slov o Leonide Aronzone," in *Vestnik novoi literatury*, No. 3 (1991) 214-226.

[249] Valerii Shubinskii, "Leonid Aronzon," in *Istoriia Leningradskoi nepodtsenzurnoi literatury* (St. Petersburg: DEAN, 2000), 89.

knowingly destroyed a linguistic hierarchy they tacitly acknowledged, the OBERIU poets

disregarded the hierarchy altogether, treating all of language without condescension. Aronzon's

speakers seem similarly unaware of linguistic and discursive hierarchies, even as the poems

range freely among stylistic registers, from a pseudo-archaic diction to a deliberately outmoded

nineteenth century register (good enough for toasts, Shubinskii notes, but not for poetry) to the

speech of Aronzon's own time and place. In the same essay, Shubinskii considers the extent to

which Aronzon's poetry is ironic, and lands on the following formulation: "Tekst chut'-chut'

zakavychen" [the text is barely quoted].[250] This observation relates not only to Aronzon's

slightly estranged use of outmoded registers, but more generally to the way he constructs his

lyric persona as a "pochti-litso" (almost-persona), simultaneously ironic and sincere, calling

attention to poetry's artificiality while also fully inhabiting it – a deeply Pushkinian stance.

Circling back to "Pogoda – dozhd'," we see that Aronzon draws on forms of aporia that

would be familiar to both classical rhetoricians and deconstructionist critics. As a classical

rhetorical figure, aporia is on display in the speaker's insistence that he lacks the willpower and

ability to proceed, or even to end it all by committing suicide; and it is strikingly evident when

he loses his ability to speak in the second quatrain. (Indeed, aporia in this poem is more of an

ambience than any one occurrence.) However, in the juxtaposition of the octave (with its

performance of incapacitation) and sestet (with its conceit of the self-finishing sonnet), the

poem's frame of reference changes and another, meta narrative emerges, one in which the poem

"persists in performing what it has shown to be impossible to do." With its flickering between

poetic and metapoetic levels—and the speaker's own flickering between poetic "I" and

biographical legend—the sonnet demonstrates what de Man calls "the irrevocable occurrence of

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[250] Ibid.

at least two mutually exclusive readings,"[251] one in which the poem is a success, the other in which it is a failure. In fact, the poem succeeds precisely by failing, and vice versa. Aronzon's use of aporia as a figure that allows him to unsettle, or jar, or in some cases simply remove the frame between the poetic and metapoetic can go a long way toward explaining why hesitation and doubt have so persistently osmosed from his poetry to his reception. It also helps explain why so many readers—from fans like Polina Barskova, who said that reading Aronzon can feel like watching two tortoises have sex (you feel privileged to witness it, but also kind of want to look away), to detractors, such as the visitor who took umbrage at the lines "zady prekrasnye kobyl, / na koi ia smotrel chasami" [the splendid rumps of mares / I gazed upon for hours on end"][252]—have found themselves at a loss for words before his poetry, or simply uncomfortable discussing it. And this is true not only of aporia, but of all figures that facilitate play with frames, including paradox, quotation, and (as we shall soon see) ekphrasis. These are figures that occur as topoi within poems while self-reflexively acknowledging their performativity and artifice, calling attention to the liminal space where fiction seems to stand a little outside of itself.

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Framing and Interartistic Discourse

Aronzon's self-conscious play with frames tends to occur in situations where attention is being drawn to art – not just the artifice of poetry, but painting and music as well, and especially to the intersections and interactions among these "sister arts."[253] Aronzon's poetry abounds in

[251] Ibid., 72.

[252] An occurrence described in Rita Purishinskaia's diary. The lines are from the poem "Ia i prirodu razliubil" [I have even fallen out of love with nature].

[253] The phrase "sister arts" was coined by Alexander Pope, in part 3 of his *Essay on Criticism*.

descriptions of scenes that are not paintings, per se, but that use painterly language or that find poetic approximations and equivalents for painting. Moreover, words taken directly from visual art, such as *risovat'* [to draw or paint], are occasionally used as figures of writing. Other material figures, though not overtly painterly or sculptural, are nevertheless art-adjacent: the nets (for catching souls) from "There is a silence between everything" and the metaphorical wooden object that proves to be a poem-coffin in "The weather – rain" call attention to themselves as made objects, as well as figures for poetry, and the construction of these objects is on full display in the poems. A similar workmanlike materiality is conveyed by the verb "to drag over" [*peretashchit'*] in the phrase "six more lines...I will drag from preexistence into the sonnet" [eshche shest' strok...ia iz nebytiia peretashchu v sonet]. Aronzon takes this idea of art-adjacent material figures relating to poetry to one possible extreme in a poem titled "Empty Sonnet [*Pustoi sonet* (*PS* I, 182-3)], whose text is written out in a square spiral around a blank center – in other words, the poem is shaped like an empty frame.

Music, too, features prominently in Aronzon's poetry, often in combination with painterly scenes. References to music-making occur in pastoral settings (as is traditional), though not necessarily as the gentle piping of classic pastoral poems. Aronzon also uses musical terms and forms, or at least appropriates their names and guiding principles for his own uses. Finally, as we have already seen, Aronzon frequently uses sound, rhythm, pause (or rest), and silence in ways that bring language-specific material (words, rhetoric, intonation) and musicality into one fold.

Movement among art forms facilitates self-conscious play with framing devices because both are concerned with limits. To appreciate why this is, it helps to think of it in the context of the *ut pictura poesis* tradition, which has been comparing and contrasting poetry and the visual

arts to various ends for millennia. Though sometimes presented as an ongoing argument for the

relative superiority of one artform over another, this tradition has primarily been concerned with

delimiting the province of each art form, exploring the possibilities available to it, and

determining how it acts on the mind of the perceiver – for instance, if and how poetry generates

images in the reader's mind; or whether we narrativize paintings when we view them.[254] As a

broad set of ideas about intersections among art forms, the *ut pictura poesis* tradition is

concerned with limits, and is particularly attuned to situations where artforms are in tension with

one another; e.g., when one artform will use another to approach its own limits.[255] What tends to

be foregrounded in such situations is both the irreconcilable boundary between, say, visuality

and rhetoric, and the impulse to cross or dissolve this boundary anyway. It is not surprising, then,

that interartistic discourse is so often the site of silence, paradox, and aporia; in its attempt not

just to describe, but to go beyond the limits of description toward a transcendent interartistic

representation, such discourse constitutes a prime example of "persisting in doing what it has

shown to be impossible to do."[256]

    In poetry, a common form of interartistic discourse is ekphrasis, a sustained attempt to

paint a scene in the reader's mind with language, primarily using visual imagery (although other

senses, especially touch and proprioception, can also be invoked).[257] Ekphrastic poetry draws

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[254] More recently, Elaine Scarry has written about how verbal art produces a kind of visual response in the reader's mind in *Dreaming by the Book* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999), a book that makes use of cognitive science as much as philosophy and aesthetic theory.

[255] On *Ut pictura poesis* generally, see Henryk Markiewicz, "Ut Pictura Poesis...A History of the Topos and the Problem," *New Literary History* Vol. 18, No. 3 (Spring 1987), 535-58.

[256] A frequently used example in scholarship about interartistic discourse and the limits of representation is Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," a poem that is full of paradoxes and aporias, and in which silence plays a vital role, especially at moments when the poem talks about sound (e.g., music).

[257] I use ekphrasis in the broad sense of a "detailed description of an image, primarily visual" (*Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*), rather than in the more specialized sense of a description of a work of visual art. Some scholars, such as James Heffernan, insist on drawing a distinction between these two senses, reserving

much of its power from what James Heffernan calls a "friction" between "fixed forms of graphic representation and the narrative thrust of words."[258] Heffernan also points out the metapoetic possibilities inherent in "representational friction"; in an analysis of the famous "Shield of Achilles" ekphrasis in the *Iliad*, he notes how "these variously subtle and ambiguous instances of representational friction suggest that the mind of Homer...is continuously engaged in meditating, sometimes playfully, on the complexities of representation itself: on the startling oppositions and equally startling convergences between the media of visual representation and their referents."[259] Even in the twentieth century, as Michael Davidson points out, ekphrasis continued to play an important role in poetry, although its orientation shifted somewhat; now, poetic language in "painterly poems" tended to "question its ability to 'paint' rhetorically," even as it persisted in describing things by painterly means. "Rather than signing its own artisanal self-sufficiency," he writes, "the painterly poem questions its own materiality while displaying the odd, limnal space of the painting."[260] Davidson, who has in mind New York School poets like John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara, concludes that mid-century "painter" poems tend to inscribe themselves into traditions while simultaneously interrogating them. Ekphrasis in such poems therefore involves an "undoing of hierarchical relationships between text and context, author and reader...painting

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"ekphrasis" for the specialized definition and using "pictorialism" to talk about descriptions that "generate in language effects similar to those created by pictures." (James Heffernan, "Ekphrasis and Representation," *New Literary History* Vol. 22, No. 2 [Spring 1991], 200.) However, the distinction is not clear cut; classical landscape descriptions, for instance, tend to use metaphors of artifice (e.g., enameling or gilding) to fix or frame nature, while descriptions of artworks will use tropes of animation to dissolve stasis and loosen the frames.

[258] "Ekphrasis and Representation," 30.

[259] James Heffernan, *The Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 20.

[260] Michael Davidson, "Ekphrasis and the Postmodern Painter Poem," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. 42, No. 1 (1983), 69.

and poem."[261] Davidson also notes that this undoing of hierarchies has important implications for how mid-century painterly poems relate to their implied readers, formulating this relation in terms of containment and openness: "Poetry is not the closing off of communication through formal strategies of containment," he writes, "but an attempt to open a dialogue with others."[262] While the Russian context differs from the American one Davidson describes (for one thing, top-down aesthetic control during the Soviet period ensured the persistence of overtly traditional forms and genres, including classical ekphrasis, even in unofficial poetry), in Aronzon, as we have seen, "formal strategies of containment" are one of the key organizing principles of the poetry. However, their goal is not to close the poem off from the reader but, paradoxically, to draw attention to the containers themselves as provisional, porous, and liable to be moved or dismantled. Interartistic discourse in Aronzon's poetry brings into intimate (yet irreconcilable) proximity not just painting and language, or music and language, but poem and reader as well.

There is also plenty of evidence that the arts played an important role in Aronzon's life. Contemporary accounts describe him as a connoisseur not only of poetry but of visual art and music as well. He painted and did a lot of drawing, often in conjunction with his poetry. These drawings appear on the same pages as the poems, as illustrations, doodles (in the tradition of Pushkin's graphic marginalia), or visual elements integrated into a kind of poem-picture, where text and image are arranged in ways that unsettle the distinction between them. Aronzon also collected art, buying work by the great painter Evgeny Mikhnov-Voitenko (1932-1988), a good friend of Aronzon's in the 60s (Aronzon and Mikhnov-Voitenko dedicated several works to each other). In a poem from 1970, the speaker describes his home to a *glupets*, an imbecile who

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[261] Ibid., 77.

[262] Ibid., 77-8.

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declined an invitation to visit him. There are canvases on the walls, paintings by Mikhnov "worthy of Florence or the Louvre"; Bach playing in recordings by Glenn Gould and Pablo Casals, and friends reciting poems by Dante and Khlebnikov (*PS* I, 211). "Khoziain doma tozhe stikhotvorets" [The host also writes poetry], notes the speaker, with matter-of-fact modesty.

An atmosphere of playful refinement and interartistic confluence imbues Aronzon's poetry as well. There is a strong visual quality to his poems; borrowing a term from Michael Davidson, we can think of this a "painterly" poetics, one that "activates strategies of composition equivalent to but not dependent on...painting."[263] Aronzon rarely describes works of art outright, but even when he describes living scenes, he uses painterly language that calls attention to what Heffernan calls the "oppositions and...convergences between the media of visual representation and their referents."[264] In "Polden'" [Noon], for example, Aronzon conveys the impression of a daylight scene by dividing it into simple forms, giving them color, heft, and texture by way of simile.[265] We see this painterliness clearly in lines 6-9, for example:

> День, как разломленный на дольки
> тяжелокожий апельсин,
> прохладой оживлял без сил
> сидящих вдоль кустов старух. (*SP* I, 66)

> [The day, like a thick-skinned orange / broken into segments, / refreshed with coolness the exhausted / elderly women seated beside the bushes.]

Here, the simile comparing the day to an orange imparts rich color, impasto-like thickness, and division into painterly planes (the orange slices) to the idea of "day" (the division of the orange

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[263] Ibid., 72.

[264] *Museum of Words*, 20.

[265] "Noon" begins with the speaker watching children play in a park, observing that he is unable to fathom their being.

also corresponds to the way noon divides the day into equal halves). The expressive verbal adjective *razlomlennyi* and assonant *o* in line 1 provide a sense of material solidity, as does the adjective *tiazhelokozhyi* (more *o*'s) in line 2. A few lines later, Aronzon again describes a living object—a very young girl—in painterly terms:

> Грудь девочки была плоска,
> на ней два матовых соска,
> как колпачки, лепились к коже. (*SP* I, 66.)

[The girl's chest was flat; / on it, two matte nipples, / clung to the skin like little caps.]

Though Aronzon is describing a living scene, rather than a painting, his language is imbued with a textural, painterly visuality. The girl's body, like the day itself, is divided into painterly passages, and the different parts have volume, plasticity, and texture: a "flat" chest (flatness here, which relates to her young age, emphasizes the planar quality of the image), and two "matte" nipples that "stick" to her skin like tiny caps. Here, as elsewhere, both the visuality of Aronzon's descriptions and the language he uses are disarmingly simple, and the effect of moving between painterly visuality and living referents is estranging, situating the reader directly on the vacillating border between painting and reality.

Many—in fact most—of Aronzon's poems contain such "painterly" descriptions of landscapes, interiors, and people, descriptions which blur the line between living and drawn reality; in fact, no fewer than five words for "landscape" (or painterly view) occur regularly in his poetry: *plener*, *landshaft*, *peizazh*, *kartina*, and *vid*. It should be noted that these words never explicitly refer to paintings; nor are they simply painterly metaphors for living landscapes.[266] For

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[266] Human figures, too, are described in painterly terms: the face appears as a *lik* (a term closely associated with Orthodox iconography); and the beautiful woman is, more often than not, a nude. The nude is sometimes (though not always) identified as the poet's wife, Rita Purishinskaia, whom he married in 1958. Almost everyone writing about Aronzon in the 70s or 80s emphasizes the importance of Rita to his life and work. (See, for instance, Elena Shvarts, "Russkaia poeziia kak hortus clausus," *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach*, No. 62 (2008), 47-56.) What these

example, when Aronzon writes "you come to bed through landscapes" [skvoz' peizazhy v postel'

ty idesh' (*SP* I, 172)], the referent of "landscapes" remains indeterminate, neither seamlessly

integrated into poetic space nor clearly demarcated from it. The "you" on its way to bed seems to

move through spaces that are simultaneously embedded in and discontinuous from one another.

Perhaps this is because the word "landscapes" [*peizazhy*] functions not like an ordinary linguistic

signifier, but like something closer to an emblem, which signifies differently than ordinary

language.[267] This, too, is a way that Aronzon plays on the border between the linguistic and the

visual. Aronzon's habit of using ordinary language emblematically has been noted by Vladimir

Erl', who calls such instances in Aronzon's poetry "hieroglyphs" (e.g., when Erl' writes that the

line "there are young skies in the sky" [v nebe molodye nebesa] is a "squared hieroglyph").[268] In

the eighteenth century, Diderot and Rousseau contemplated the potential of hieroglyphic or

emblematic signs to expand the possibilities of poetry, by giving poets and readers access to

meanings that lay beyond the usual channels of linguistic signification. Both writers, moreover,

conceived of these alternative modes of representation in terms that blended visual and linguistic

(and, in Diderot's case, musical) categories.[269]

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later writers found most incredible was Aronzon's monogamy. For Vladimir Erl'— who was friends with Aronzon until a mutual falling out in the mid-1960s—the poet's fidelity to his wife was baffling given prevailing mores, a sign of his almost childlike simplicity. ("Neskol'ko slov.")

[267] The tradition of emblem poetry was especially popular during the Renaissance and Baroque, when it was spurred by a renewed interest in Egyptian hieroglyphs. Poets writing emblem poems sought to bridge the border between the linguistic and visual by treating visual signs as "cohesive graphic unit[s]" whose complex or ineffable referents could be appreciated without the mediation of language, bypassing the usual channels of signification. In the Baroque period, "the emblematic" came to be seen more as a "cast of mind" than a strictly visual depiction ("Emblem," in *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 401-2). Aronzon uses both overtly visual emblems in his poetry and "emblematic thinking" more generally. Indeed, I argue that words like *plener* and *peizazh* function emblematically, which is why their referents are at once obscure (on a cognitive level) and visually evocative.

[268] Erl', "Neskol'ko slov."

[269] See Denis Diderot, *Lettre sur les sourds et muets*, 1751, online at https://books.google.com/books?id=Q3sHAAAAQAAJ; and Jean Jacques Rousseau, "Essay on the Origins of Languages," in *Essay on the Origin of Languages and Writings Related to Music*, trans. and ed. John T. Scott (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2000), 289-332. As Downing Thomas has pointed out, "in [Diderot's idea of

I would argue that, in addition to certain marked words like *peizazh* and *plener*, Aronzon also tends to use capitalization emblematically (when a whole word is capitalized, not just the first letter). For instance, the poem "I thank you for snow" [*Blagodariu Tebia za sneg*, *SP* I, 202] contains the lines "Before me is not a bush, but a shrine, / a shrine of Your BUSH IN THE SNOW" [Peredo mnoi ne kust, a khram, / khram Tvoego KUSTA V SNEGU]. By capitalizing the phrase "BUSH IN THE SNOW" in its entirety, Aronzon presents it as an iconic unit. It continues to refer to a bush covered in snow, but the use of capitals ensures that its visual iconicity at least as important as its semantic referentiality. This emphasis on the visual imbues the referent (the bush in the snow) with an aura of ineffability (evoking Moses' encounter with the burning bush in Exodus), and creates an emblematic dimension that both enriches the work of language in these lines (the bush is being elevated to the status of a shrine, after all), and gently resists language's typical modes of referentiality.

Aronzon's painterly poetics are on full display in a poem titled "1x10," which uses a classical trope of landscape description—the list—in the context of the landscape's liquefaction, as though the entire scene were made of paint:

> благовонной вязкой лавой
> вниз текут цветы и травы,
> мчатся вниз потоки роз:
> маков, клеверов, ромашек, -
> испаряя рой букашек:
> слепней, бабочек, стрекоз. (*SP* I, 161)

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the] poetic hieroglyph, the fragmented elements of discourse are unified into a dense and powerful language. The result of 'un esprit qui en meut et vivifie toutes les syllabes' [a spirit which stirs and enlivens every syllable], the hieroglyph surges from conventional language, forming a collection of synergistic representations, a series pf superimposed 'paintings' of thought." Downing Thomas, "Musicology and Hieroglyphics: Questions of Representation in Diderot," *The Eighteenth Century*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Spring 1994) 68-9.

[like sweet-smelling, viscous lava / flowers and herbs flow downward, / torrents of roses rush downward: / of poppies, clovers, and daisies, – / vaporizing a swarm of bugs: / of gadflies, butterflies, dragonflies.]

In this image, the lava metaphor turns the landscape of flowers and grasses into a kind of painted surface that flows downward, vaporizing a variety of insects. *Ispariat'* also means "to sublimate"; the flowing pastoral surface is also like a chemist, extracting the essence of each insect. The adjective *viazkii*, used to describe the lava's viscosity, calls to mind the texture of liquid paint, as does the verb *tech'* in line 2. Moreover, both the lava-like flowers, and the insects they vaporize (or sublimate), are presented in rhyming lists that perfectly fill out their respective lines (the two rhymes in the enclosed quatrain match an insect to a flower). This image raises another important point: the relationship between painterliness in Aronzon and genres traditionally associated with the landscape poem, including the pastoral, and a sub-genre of the pastoral – the garden poem.

Across European poetic traditions, gardens are represented as a *locus amoenus*, a "pleasant place"; they can provide a retreat from the bustle of daily life, opening a space for philosophical reflection, religious contemplation, or amorous play; they can also provide a retreat from time and history. In the twinned mythologies of the Classical tradition and Christianity, the garden simultaneously represents the Golden Age and Eden; and the *hortus conclusus*—the enclosed garden—has special connotations relating to the Virgin Mary, which allow the walled garden to be read as a microcosm of the universe or as a paradise on earth. In Russian poetry, especially in traditions tied to Petersburg/Leningrad, gardens call up a range of associations: the eighteenth-century paradise myth, Pushkin's Tsarskoe Selo, Akhmatova's Tsarskoe Selo, and, in the late Soviet context especially, courtyards and other in-between green spaces that are hidden in plain sight. As idyllic spaces within cities, gardens also allude to the pastoral; in fact, garden

or park poems emphasize the intertextuality and veiled sophistication that is a constant throughout the pastoral genre.

The garden poem became an important genre in the seventeenth century, when the European fad for gardening really took off. This had an almost instantaneous impact on the arts, including poetry, since by then, as James Heffernan points out, "landscape was not a natural phenomenon but a cultural one, something jointly created by the triangulated arts of painting, poetry, and landscape gardening."[270] In a study of Andrew Marvell's garden poems, Joan Faust (citing James Grantham Turner) notes that "[t]he new view of landscape in the 17th century was used 'as a means of expressing the grand creative power of the eye itself' and offered to Marvell and his contemporaries the new experience of 'seeing the world as a landscape,' a significant development in capturing the pastoral mode."[271] But there is also a separate, Slavic tradition of garden poetry, one that can be traced back to the moralizing verse of Simeon Polotsky.[272] This tradition also locates gardens at the intersection of landscape and rhetoric, but differently than the Western tradition. Dmitrii Likhachev points out that the Russian tradition draws directly on the Baroque idea that gardens and texts have reciprocal moral and aesthetic aims.[273] Thus, gardens can be read as texts, with everything from the layout to the types of flowers to the

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[270] Quoted in Joan Faust, "Blurring the Boundaries: Ut pictura poesis and Marvell's Liminal Mower," *Studies in Philology* Vol. 104, No. 4 (2007), 531-2.

[271] Ibid.

[272] There is also a moralizing pastoral tradition in Western art, which is connected to the "Et in Arcadia Ego" motif. We see this motif in Baroque paintings, which show shepherds in a bucolic setting gathered around a tomb bearing the Latin inscription, whose words are ostensibly spoken by Death itself. This motif is also interesting for the ways it combines visual and textual elements in a single work of art. Much of its significance comes from the way text and image interact, while drawing attention to each other's limits. See Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), especially chapter 7, "*Et in Arcadia Ego*: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition."

[273] D.S. Likhachev, Poeziia sadov: K semantike sadovo-parkovykh stilei. Sad kak tekst (Moskva: Soglasie, 1998).

sculptural decorative elements conveying symbolic meaning; conversely, texts can be read as gardens (e.g., seventeenth- and eighteenth-century grammar textbooks that were organized around garden metaphors; or poetic anthologies presented as gardens of verse).

Aronzon's use of interartistic discourse, especially in its traditional settings (pastoral landscapes, parks, and gardens) is tied to the paradoxes and aporias of his poetry: the uncertainty and self-deprecation of his poetic persona, his self-fashioning as a minor poet, and his love of small forms (he left several *poemy* unfinished or deliberately stunted, and excelled at the genre of prologues to *poemy* that were left unwritten). Aronzon has a four-line epigram where he quips:

> Как стихотворец я неплох
> всё оттого, что, слава Богу,
> хоть мало я пишу стихов,
> но среди них прекрасных много! (*SP* I, 158)

> [As a versifier I'm not bad / and that's because, thank God, / although I don't write many poems, / there are a lot of beautiful ones among those I do!]

Here, Aronzon plays with admitting inferiority while simultaneously asserting his distinction as a poet – in lines reminiscent of Batyushkov, who used the trope of poetic modesty and garden imagery in his own work, and, like Aronzon, drew an analogy between small poetic forms and the garden as cultivated nature. This is more than false modesty; it is a cultivated persona, one that is in many ways a perfect fit for the literary and artistic culture of private apartments and tiny audiences of friends and rivals in the nascent years of the Leningrad Second Culture.[274]

The rest of the chapter will focus on close readings of poems where we can observe how interartistic discourse facilitates movement between framing devices, dramatizing the metapoetic

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[274] Aronzon's loved ones, especially Rita and Aleksandr Al'tshuler (whom he met at university), appear often in Aronzon's poetry, as addressees, dedicatees, recurring characters, and occasionally in speaking roles. Al'tshuler and another friend, Vladimir Erl', appear most often in Aronzon's humorous or occasional verse, elements of a *kruzhkovaia poetika* [poetics of the intimate circle] self-consciously modeled on the in-jokes and friendly epistles of the Pushkin Pleiad. Rita, meanwhile, is by far the most important erotic addressee in her husband's poetry (though not quite the only one).

concerns of each poem. First, I will look at a selection of Aronzon's visual poems, where the intersection of poetry and visual art becomes a material, as well as thematic, concern. Then, I will compare two poems (both variations on the pastoral mode) that take markedly different approaches to problems of framing and self-reflexive play: a longer park poem titled "Epistle Sent to an Infirmary" [*Poslanie v lechebnitsu*], and a garden sonnet (actually a pair of sonnets) titled "Two Identical Sonnets" [*Dva odinakovykh soneta*]. Here, the contrast between forms— open-ended in "Epistle," clearly demarcated in the sonnets—is crucial in determining how these works handle interartistic themes and metapoetic frames, in particular how they relate the movement of poetry to the metapoetic events of writing and reading. Finally, by looking at Aronzon's relationship to poets of the past, I hope to show how he situated himself within the Russian poetic tradition by creating a highly idiosyncratic, homemade tradition of his own. Aronzon's personal tradition combines canonical and marginalized strands in ways that unsettle received hierarchies, such as those that divide canonical from non-canonical writers, visual from non-visual poetry, and professional from amateur creativity, and provides the poet and his friends with an alternative to the official Soviet canon.

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Text and Image in Aronzon's Visual Poetry

Aronzon's visual poetry builds on combinations of visual, acoustical, and conceptual elements, frequently playing on their juxtaposition. Sometimes he arranges these elements so that meaning and appearance play against one another; for example, he might insert a word in Roman font into a Cyrillic text (e.g., "rite"), and it will take the reader a second to realize that he has not switched languages, only alphabets: he does not have any reference to ritual or ceremony in

mind, but rather he is presenting "rite" as a transliteration of the name Rita in the dative case (and with the first letter uncapitalized). Aronzon sometimes illustrated his poems; more accurately, he created visual compositions in which poems and drawings were mutually embedded. The proximity, indeed the entanglement, of text and illustration changes the way each component signifies; in some cases, the cross-echoes between visual and textual components are as important as each individual part. Aronzon often produced more than one version of an illustrated poem, experimenting with different visual contexts and arrangements of text and image, and in most cases dramatically altering the nuances of the embedded poem. The poem "It's unhappy somehow in Petersburg" [*Neschastno kak-to v Peterburge*], from November or December 1969, exists in three hand-drawn versions. One features the poem written out in block letters under a semi-abstract cityscape, which appears to show either shadowy human figures on streets, or shadowy chimneys on roofs, as well as a lamp post (or very strange tree) in the middle, all under an overcast sky (Fig. 1). In another version, the poem is inscribed in a spiral onto the folded wings of a large, realistic beetle (Fig. 2). A third drawing, now lost, depicted a living room with a frame hanging on the wall; the poem was inscribed in the frame.[275] The two extant drawings are reproduced in the appendix; here, I include a transcription of the text:

> Несчастно как-то в Петербурге.
> Посмотришь в небо - где оно?
> Лишь лета нежилой каркас
> гостит в пустом моем лорнете.
> Полулежу. Полулечу.
> Кто там полулетит навстречу?
> Друг другу в приоткрытый рот,
> кивком раскланявшись, влетаем.
> Нет, даже ангела пером
> нельзя писать в такую пору:

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[275] On the different versions of the poem, including the lost version, see the editors' notes in *SP* I, 475, especially n. 34.

"Деревья заперты на ключ,
но листьев, листьев шум откуда?"

[It's unhappy somehow in Petersburg. / You look at the sky – where is it? / Only summer's lifeless frame / lodges in my empty lorgnette. / I half-lie, half-fly. / Who is that half-flying toward me? / Into each other's open mouths / we fly, with a nod of greeting. / No, not even with an angel's quill / can one write at a time like this. / "The trees are all locked up – / but the leaves, the leaves – whence comes their sound?"]

The poem expresses an unspecified malaise in the tradition of "spleen" poems; in the first line, the speaker intones: "neschastno kak-to v Peterburge" [It's unhappy somehow in Petersburg]. Three variants for the first word exist among different typewritten versions, all close in meaning, though by no means equivalent: *pechal'no* (sad), *surovo* (harsh or severe), and *trevozhno* (disquieting) (*SP* I, 475). Written in early winter, the poem looks back on summer and comes up with absence; indeed, the poem is full of absences, negations, and thwarted attempts. The speaker looks at the sky but can't find it ("gde ono?"); summer's *karkas* (a frame construction for a building or an armature for a sculpture, which also puns on the English word for corpse) is deserted. *Nezhiloi*, meaning uninhabited or uninhabitable, puns on lifelessness as well. The play on simultaneous presence and absence carries over to the next line, where the lorgnette in which summer's uninhabited frame "lodges" is empty. In the second stanza, the speaker's indecisiveness comes to the fore in the line "I half-lie, half-fly" [polulezhu, polulechu], as though he can't choose between bed and air, laziness and soaring. In the second quatrain, we get a second impossible figure: the speaker encounters an unidentified oncoming entity, and the two give a slight bow and fly into each other's mouths. This action's impossible symmetry makes doubles out of the speaker and the other. Here, the impossible figure has a cartoonish, Escheresque quality, a pronounced visuality. The third quatrain begins with an emphatic refusal: "No, not even with an angel's quill / can one write at a time like this" [net, dazhe angela perom / nel'zia pisat' v takuiu poru], an expression of

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aporia that is ironic, since he has written most of the poem already, and in this instance expresses

the impossibility of writing through writing. The poem concludes with an apparent non sequitur, a

citation from a nonexistent (or lost) text; a self-quotation. Aronzon quotes himself in numerous

poems, but here he draws attention to the fact by using quotation marks. The quoted text seems to

be about another impossibility: the sound of leaves in winter ("The trees are all locked up – / but

the leaves, the leaves – whence comes their sound?" [derevia zaperty na kliuch / no list'ev, list'ev

shum otkuda?). The reference to a season (cryptic though it is) locates us at a specific time of

year; however, the abrupt transition to quoted text, and the quotation marks themselves, undo the

orienting work of the seasonal reference. The quote is not necessarily motivated (as something

present in the cityscape, or remembered); its relation to the "main" text of the poem is closer to

montage. There is another kind of quotation happening in the poem as well, in its allusiveness to

nineteenth-century discourse and imagery. The indeterminate spleen-like mood is just one such

allusion; others are the toponym "Petersburg," the lorgnette, the double, the slight bows, the quill,

and the "noise of leaves" [*shum list'ev*] in the last line. Pushkin is evoked not just with the phrase

shum list'ev, but also with the abrupt question that ends the poem – a Pushkinian move recalling

the last line of "Autumn" [*Osen'*]). The text's evocation of the nineteenth century, together with

the overt quotation in the last two lines, represent two different degrees of authorial distancing,

two ways of framing authorial speech.

The ideas of distancing and impossibility (or difficulty seeing) in the text of the poem are

taken up in the two illustrated versions as well, both of which re-frame the poem. In both

versions, the relation of text to image is one of juxtaposition or montage; the reader is invited to

look for similarities or echoes, but there is just as much non sequitur and inscrutability. In figure

1 (the cityscape), the image at first seems to sit on top of the text, slightly less separate than an

illustration. However, the poem is written out in the same ink as the drawing, making the boundary between text and image uncertain. The exclusive use of block letters calls attention to the text's appearance and marks it as an art object –stemming from the artist's hand, and yet distanced from "normal" handwriting. In this context, the inkblot and correction over the very first word are also significant. The inkblot (suggesting the negligence of an elementary school student) is left in, "spoiling" the clean copy; furthermore, the correction is written in cursive, contrasting with the block letters of the rest of the poem. This too is a kind of re-framing: the cursive signifies a greater degree of intimacy or immediacy, and the inkblot offers proof of the poet-artist's hand that feels different from the rest of the (also handmade) visual composition. The metafiction of these ostensibly accidental elements is that we are getting a peek at the "real" process of composition.

The relationship between the illustrated cityscape and the visual descriptions in the text is ambiguous as well. For one thing, the picture is inscrutable: we recognize an overcast sky (and the sky is mentioned in the poem, although there it is both present and absent), but very little else is clear, and what we can make out barely corresponds to the imagery in the poem (aside from the common starting point of a dismal urban landscape). Are those people, chimneys, stylized, bare trees, or something else? Is that a lamp-post or a tree? Are we on ground level or at the roofline? To some extent, the inscrutability of the drawing echoes the inscrutability of the images in the poem, but there are also important differences, not just in what is being obscurely represented, but how. The images in the poem are a little gaudy and over-the-top: a lorgnette, a metaphorical frame structure, and the Escheresque doubles. Meanwhile, the drawing is shadowy and angular, the picture plane flattened into abstraction. The relation between text and drawing is

ambiguous, and this ambiguity plays on the same metapoetic frame as the lettering and inkblot, and, to some extent, the levels of quotation within the poem.

In the version in figure 2 (the beetle), the bug itself frames the poem. Here, it is the text, rather than the illustration, that is (almost) illegible; the drawing of the beetle is detailed and realistic. Rather than being written out line by line, the text spirals inward, and looking closely we see that Aronzon ran out of space before the last line. The beetle as a carrier of the poem is a strange choice; the text, about urban malaise, seems incongruous on the wings of a living creature. Maybe the beetle is an allusion – not to the nineteenth century, but to Zabolotsky, whose forest pastorals of the 1940s and 50s are full of (often musical) bugs. Flight is another possible correspondence between image and text: the poem is written on the beetle's wings, and the speaker "half-flies" in the poem. It is also worth noting that the poem is not written directly onto the wings, but onto a blank space, a conspicuous (though divided) whiteness in the shape of wings. This space was left intentionally blank for the poem; it is a writerly space that is only partially integrated into the picture-space, an interruption in the visual representation. At the same time, the unusual scale of the visual composition—tiny text within a giant beetle—suggests that the speaker's feelings, which loom large in the version on the left, are kind of insignificant here. The naturalistic bug will return to nature, and the speaker's words of indecisiveness and woe will all but disappear. This version is closer to the tradition of pattern poetry, especially during the Baroque period, when poems with framed or embedded drawings (or poems that treated text as a visual element) were quite popular. The wing shape was one of the

recommended forms for Baroque pattern poetry, and there is a long tradition of wing-shaped

poems going back to the *Greek Anthology*.[276]

We see different kinds of framing and juxtaposition in the two illustrated versions of the

poem below (fig. 3 and 4), which were both included in the 1969 handmade collection *Ave:*

Zimnii urozhai 1969 goda [Ave: Winter harvest of 1969].

Что за чудные пленэры:
и озера, и луга,
и холмы, и берега –
на тебе, моя Венера,
когда ты лежишь нага!

[What marvelous plein-airs: / lakes, and meadows, / and hills, and shores – / are upon
you, my Venus, / when you lie naked!]

We get some insight into the origin of the poem (and the park illustration in figure 3) from a note

Aronzon wrote on a library catalog card in 1968 (See *SP* I, 490). The note was written in the

Summer Garden in Leningrad; Aronzon describes the scene, mentioning children and the pond

with its grassy banks. Seeing this landscape prompts Aronzon to action: "The need arose to

perfect it: On the breasts (hills) of my Venus / what marvelous plein-airs / what marvelous

places" [Voznikla neobkhodimost' eto zavirshit': Na grudi (kholmakh) moei Venery / chto za

chudnye plenery / chto za chudnye mesta]. Thus, the genesis of the poem lay in the impulse to

perfect a real landscape through verse (the neologism *zavirshit'* puns on perfecting [*zavershit'*]

and verses [*virshi*]).

The poem is a single delighted and astonished exclamation at seeing a kind of mise-en-

abyme of painterly images: landscapes (*plenery*) and natural features (lakes, meadows, hills,

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[276] On the history of pattern poetry, including its proliferation during the 17th century, its marginalization after the Enlightenment, and its return in modernist experimentation, see Dick Higgins, *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).

shores) within (actually on top of) a nude recumbent Venus (the words with the strongest art historical associations, *plenery* and *Venera*, rhyme). It is a strange image: the plural landscapes, described as "marvelous" (*chudnye*, a Pushkinian adjective), and the plural features listed during the speaker's direct address, are "on" the addressee ("na tebe"). This construction suggests either that the landscapes are being projected onto the nude Venus, or that she is wearing them – in either case, they cover the surface of her body. The overall image is based on a contradiction, a visual impossibility: the addressee's nudity is declared (exclaimed!) and at the same time covered up by landscapes; similarly, the natural features listed in lines 2 and 3 are made harder to see by their superimposition onto a naked body. This is, of course, different from the overtly metaphorical relation between landscape and body in Aronzon's note on the library card, where the Venus's breasts *are* hills.

At first glance, the picture in figure 3 seems to reproduce what Aronzon saw that day in the Summer Garden: a pond with grassy banks, and some human figures (apparently sitting cross-legged), at least one of whom might be a child. But the closer you look at the figures, the more bizarre they start to look. Are they bald men? Children? Buddhas? There is an unfinished, sculptural quality to them; furthermore, they are lit from the front, so that we only see their backs, which are in deep shadow. The text of the poem is written out, line by line, on what at first glance appear to be newspapers held by the figures. If we look closely, however, they don't seem to be holding the pages at all, and the pages themselves look less and less like newspapers, and more like indeterminate page-like spaces, frames for the text (a little like the beetle's wings in the previous example, though in this case the frames are inert). The separation of the poem's lines—the fact that they are spread out across the illustration—is also significant; we have to move through illustrated space in order to get from line to line, jumping from frame to frame.

The relation between the drawing and the images in the poem is also ambiguous: where the poem lists plural features, the illustration is just one landscape containing one pond. Nor is there a nude: in fact, the erotic rapture of the poem is completely incongruous in this setting, especially in the invisible hands of these strange Buddha-like figures.

If this version juxtaposes drawn landscapes with ekphrastic ones by embedding snippets of text into an image—so that we have to read the poem left to right, as the eye moves over the drawing—the version in figure 4 takes a completely different approach. Here, the poem is inscribed as a single whole into an emblematic device, turning the poem into a motto. The device is made up of four shields, one in front of the other (Aronzon uses shading to create a raised effect), with the poem in the foremost—lightest and fanciest—shield. Framed this way, the text appears as something beyond illustration, something dignified and ineffable. It resembles the use of mottos in European painting, where a shield or scroll is both embedded in, and slightly apart from, the rest of the painting's represented reality. In this case, the ineffable—that which cannot be represented directly—is the landscape (*plenery*, a term popularized by the Barbizon School, yet here taking on an indefinite meaning as a pictorial unit that is both embedded in and separate from the fictional space of the poem) and the precise way they relate to the nude Venus. In this version, where there is no visual representation of a landscape, Aronzon seems to be arguing for the self-sufficiency of poetry, its independence from illustration; and yet Aronzon frames this idea using a picture. True, the picture represents an idea (an emblematic device) rather than something out of nature; yet it too is drawn, and a little crudely at that. It has an imperfect, homemade look that softens the seriousness connoted by the device it depicts.

The four images discussed above are examples of visual compositions that combine text and drawing, but Aronzon also created visual poetry using purely textual elements, either

handwritten or typed. Such poems, especially the typewritten ones, are reminiscent of early-20th century typographical experiments, and even more so of postwar concrete poetry (though it is unclear whether Aronzon was likely to have been acquainted with concrete poetry).[277] As Ilya Kukulin has pointed out, Aronzon's typewritten visual poems don't just hearken back to Dadaism and early Soviet agitprop, but also reflect on the emerging situation of samizdat, turning the material constraints of non-professional literary production (something we saw in the homemade aesthetic of his handwritten and illustrated poems) into aesthetic choices,[278] as in the poem "Atel'e bluz" (fig. 5).

In the first line, the phrase "atel'e bluz" (a transliteration of "atelier blues") is typed three times across. The other lines feature graphic variations on the words *otel'* [hotel], and *kholl* [hall], as well as the two words from line 1. The page has been manipulated so that each word seems to have a shadow. This is not as straightforward as moving the page slightly and retyping the same words; sometimes the shadow letter is a different grapheme altogether (a soft sign under an л, for example). The distances between letters and shadows vary, so that sometimes they're right on top of each other and look bolded, or blurred in a different way. (The distance between words also varies, creating gaps in the text) The overall effect is of depth, movement, and slight disorientation, as though one were drunk. Aronzon uses numerous foreign words pertaining to jazz and blues, a nod to the popularity of these musical forms in the Soviet

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[277] Aronzon's use of typography and graphic space resembles postwar concrete as described by Mary Ellen Solt or Gerald Bruns. Solt discusses the importance of the "ideogram" for concrete poets in Europe and the Americas, as a semantic unit that relates visual poetry to "a process of concretion that begins with attempts to depict reality by means of the calligraphic or typographic word image and ends with complex structural combinations of words into ideograms." (Mary Ellen Solt, "Typography and the Visual Concrete Poem," *Visible Language*, Vol. 6 [1972], 116.) Solt's notion of typographic and other visual elements as "ideograms" is comparable to Aronzon's emblematic use of various units of poetic production, from individual lexemes and words, to typescript, drawing, and even entire poems (as in "Two Identical Sonnets").

[278] "Nepoznannyi kontrkul'turshchik."

underground in the 60s. At the same time, *bluz* has a more ambiguous status. "Blues," the musical genre, is normally transliterated in Russian with a soft *ю* (and it appears this way a few times in the text). *блуз*, with a hard *y*, is the genitive plural of *блуза* [blouse]; the graphic text denotes "of blouses," even as the context makes us think of music. Other parts of the poem emphasize acoustic over graphic elements: *bluuuuuuuuuz* in the second to last line clearly asks to be sounded. On the whole, the poem raises questions about the relationship between visuality and sound: for example, how do we hear the blurring or shadowing effect when we read the text to ourselves? In this way, sound and visuality interact to make a shifting "graphic voice" (Michael Davidson's term) which is only partly voiced, and which also seems to possess depth, to bridge the reader's space and the space of the poem differently than typescript usually does.

In *Ghostlier Demarcations*, Michael Davidson writes about the effect typewriters and other writing technologies had on 20th century poetry. He sees in the intersection of their technological and human affects a "personist character," which is "dependent on their ephemerality, their fatal investment in time."[279] This "personist character" was present in the material products of these technologies even before their obsolescence. Looking at a typewritten and hand-corrected page by George Oppen, Davidson concludes that "the typescript page provides us with the 'graphic voice' out of which [his] theme emerges."[280] Graphic voice is a provocative and useful term; as we shall continue to see with Aronzon, machine typed poetry often showcases its voiced and material aspects, without resolving into a single, coherent projection of authorial presence. These aspects of voice have contrasting relations to silence, measure, and change. Graphic materiality therefore moves us to think about the very nature of

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[279] Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material Word* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 28.

[280] Ibid., 75.

voice in poetry – how much of it comes through our eyes, how much through an inner sounding, and at what point exactly it makes itself heard.[281] Davidson also notes the immediacy that was "materialized via forms of photomechanical reproduction and printing."[282] Immediacy is certainly part of Aronzon's typewritten aesthetic, but, as he demonstrates not just in explicitly visual poems but in all his typewritten manuscript pages, distancing, deferral, and alienation are important elements of this aesthetic as well.

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Metapoetic Play and the Strange Pastoral

Next, I want to turn to two (or three, depending on your count) poems in which Aronzon plays explicitly with metapoetic frames, though in strikingly different ways. The poems, "Epistle sent to an infirmary" [Poslanie v lechebnitsu, 1964] and "Two identical sonnets" [Dva odinakhovykh soneta, 1969], are comparable in several respects: while not visual poems per se, they nevertheless call attention to their visual layout and their status as material objects.[283] The poems also are also similar in that both contain versions of a pastoral setting (a park in "Poslanie," a garden in the sonnets); both are directed toward an intimate addressee (a hospitalized acquaintance in "Poslanie," the poet's wife in the sonnets); and both feature shifting frames of reference. This play with frames is deictic in nature: the poems insistently draw

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[281] On the neuroscience of reading, considered at various points in its historical development, see Stanislas Dehaene, *Reading in the Brain: The Science and Evolution of a Human Invention* (New York: Viking, 2009).

[282] Ibid., 198.

[283] I will be looking at reproductions of the original typescripts, mostly in variants considered authoritative by the editors of the Limbakh edition, in order to convey the importance of their material aura; for ease of reading, see transcriptions in the appendix. Reproductions are taken from an electronic edition compiled and maintained by Ilya Kukuj through the "Novaia kamera khraneniia" web portal, online at http://www.newkamera.de/aronson/fx/oglavlenie.html. Last accessed September 20, 2018.

attention to their own form; to what Jonathan Culler calls the "temporality of writing"—the "set of all moments at which writing can say 'now'"[284]— and to the border between the poems' fictional spaces and the metafictional reality in which these texts are written, circulated, and read. In each of the two poems, these interconnected aspects—the pastoral setting with its art-historical allusions and painterly discourse, the direct address, and the deictic play with frames—work together so that the poem unfolds on multiple levels simultaneously. At the same time, the two poems go about these things very differently, and it is the differences—in structure, authorial approach, and effect on the reader—that I want to focus on here.

Most scholars consider "Epistle Sent to an Infirmary" a turning point in Aronzon's poetry, a convenient boundary separating his writing into two distinct phases;[285] moreover, scholarship tends to focus on Aronzon's work written after "Poslanie," i.e., from 1964 onward. According to this view, his previous poetry, while by no means immature, is more beholden to OBERIU influences, more imitative, and closer in style to Brodsky's work of the same period.[286] "Poslanie," then, marks Aronzon's poetic departure from Brodsky as well as a personal watershed, though curiously, this departure occurs in a poem that, according to Vladimir Erl', was written in response to a work of Brodsky's – "Ty poskachesh' vo mrake" [You will gallop in the dark, 1962]. Both are written in ternary meter; both contain ambiguous human figures moving through strange, shifting landscapes; and both feature an "I" and "you" in an unstable grammatical relationship. According to Vladimir Erl', Aronzon wrote "Epistle" for a friend who was committed to a psychiatric ward (whether he was mentally ill is unclear – committing

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[284] Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 149.

[285] See, for instance, *SP* 63-4; and Shvarts, "Russkaia poeziia kak hortus clausus," 48.

[286] "Vmesto predisloviia."

unofficial writers as punishment or as refuge from anticipated persecution was a fairly

widespread practice in the 1960s).[287] It is worth noting that Brodsky himself was committed for

psychiatric evaluation at two different facilities in 1963-64, although we cannot say for certain

whether this had any bearing on Aronzon's poem.

Compared to Aronzon's previous poems, "Epistle" (fig. 6) does seem like a radical

stylistic departure: the lines are uncharacteristically long, and there is a repetitiveness and

circularity to the structure that aren't found in his previous poems. Furthermore, compared to

Aronzon's previous (and most of his subsequent) poetry, the form of "Poslanie" is much more

open-ended. The line lengths vary, and the structure is not stanzaic, but made up of rhymed

couplets, which means that there is no structurally imposed endpoint. This absence of arbitrary

structural divisions and limits—something on which Aronzon usually depends to give shape to

his thoughts and arguments—is closely tied to the poem's spatial disorientation, its circular

movement, and its moments of telescoping and zooming in. The poem's formal amorphousness

seems to both create space and make its delimitation impossible, and is thus crucial to the kind of

metapoetic play Aronzon engages with here. As it unfolds, it becomes a study in paradox:

moving forward while persistently returning to the site of its origin; or framing fictional

landscapes only to dismantle those frames and reveal the artifice of those landscapes, the poem

gestures simultaneously toward the possibilities and limits of poetic speech:

Послание в лечебницу

В пасмурном парке рисуй на песке моё имя, как при свече,
и доживи до лета, чтобы сплетать венки, которые унесёт ручей.
Вот он петляет вдоль мелколесья, рисуя имя мое на песке,

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[287] On this practice, and especially its intersections with literature, see Rebecca Reich, *State of Madness: Psychiatry, Literature, and Dissent After Stalin* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2018). Aronzon's poem was published in the samizdat journal *Fioretti* under a slightly different title: "Poslanie v sumasshedshii dom" [Epistle sent to an insane asylum]. At the same time, the addressee is also reminiscent of Ophelia – because of the landscape, with its stream and branch, the strange movement, the allusions to mental illness, and the presence of looming death. This poem was written in 1964, the year Grigori Kozintsev's popular film adaptation of *Hamlet* was released.

словно высохшей веткой, которую ты держишь сейчас в руке.
Высокая здесь трава, и лежат зеркалами спокойных небыстрых небес
голубые озера, качая удвоенный лес,
и вибрируют сонно папиросные крылья стрекоз голубых,
ты идешь вдоль ручья и роняешь цветы, смотришь радужных рыб.
Медоносны цветы, и ручей пишет имя моё,
образуя ландшафты: то мелкую заводь, то плёс.
Да, мы здесь пролежим, сквозь меня прорастает, ты слышишь, трава,
я, пришитый к земле, вижу сонных стрекоз, слышу только слова:
"Может быть, что лесничество тусклых озёр нашей жизни итог,
стрекотанье стрекоз, самолет, тихий плес и сплетенье цветов,
то пространство души, на котором холмы и озера, вот кони бегут,
и кончается лес, и, роняя цветы, ты идешь вдоль ручья по сырому песку.
Вслед тебе дуют флейты, рой бабочек, жизнь тебе вслед,
провожая тебя, все зовут, ты идешь вдоль ручья, никого с тобой нет!"
Ровный свет надо всем, твой портрет вижу в раме окна,
вижу кто-то гоним, кто-то должен до ужина день свой прошедший догнать,
и пройти в зеркала кто-то должен, иначе зачем
мое имя, как ты, мелколесьем петляя, рисует случайный, небыстрый и мутный ручей,
и читает его пролетающий мимо озер в знойный день самолет.
Может быть, что ручей – не ручей, только имя мое.
Так смотри на траву, по утрам, когда тянется медленный пар,
рядом свет фонарей, зданий свет, и вокруг твой безлиственный парк,
где ты высохшей веткой рисуешь случайный, небыстрый и мутный ручей,
что уносит венки медоносных цветов, и сидят на плече
мотыльки камыша, и полно здесь стрекоз голубых.
Ты идешь вдоль воды и роняешь цветы, смотришь радужных рыб,
и срывается с нотных листов от руки мной набросанный дождь,
ты рисуешь ручей, вдоль которого после идешь и идешь.

[Epistle Sent to an Infirmary // In a gloomy park draw my name in the sand, as though by candlelight, / and survive till summer, in order to plait wreathes, which the stream will carry away. / See how it winds beside the shrubbery, drawing my name in the sand, / as though with a dried up branch, which you hold in your hand right now / The grass here is tall, and the blue lakes lie like mirrors of the calm / slow skies, rocking the doubled woods, / and the cigarette-like wings of blue dragonflies vibrate drowsily, / you walk beside the stream and scatter flowers, gaze at iridescent fish. / The flowers are full of nectar, and the stream writes my name, / forming landscapes: a small creek, a pool. / Yes, we will lie here for a while, grass is growing through me, can you hear it, / sewn to the ground, I see drowsy dragonflies, hear only words: / "Perhaps the stewardship {lit. forestry} of dim lakes is what our life comes down to, / the buzz of dragonflies, an airplane, a quiet pool, and the plaiting of flowers, / {are} the landscape of the soul, where there are hills and lakes, see how horses run, / and the woods end, and, scattering flowers, you walk along the stream, across damp sand. / You are followed by the noise of flutes, a swarm of butterflies, life pursues you, / accompanying you, everyone calls out, you walk along the stream, no one is with you!" / A steady light over everything, I see your portrait framed by a window, / see someone driven forth, someone must catch up with the spent day before supper, / and someone must pass through mirrors, otherwise why / does the incidental, slow, and murky stream draw my name, like you, winding beside shrubbery, / and {why does} the airplane flying over the lakes on this sweltering day read it. / Perhaps the stream is not a stream, only my name. / So look at the grass, every morning, while the slow steam rises, / by the light of streetlamps, the light of buildings, and your leafless park all around, / where, with a dried up branch, you draw an incidental, slow, and murky stream, / which carries away wreathes of flowers filled with nectar, and on your shoulder there sit / the moths of bulrushes, and there are many blue dragonflies here. / You walk beside the water scattering flowers, gazing at iridescent fish, / and rain, sketched by my hand, tears free of the sheet music, / you draw the stream, along which you then walk and walk.]

The poem describes several landscapes that seem to grow out of one another, or to be nested inside one another. This mise-en-abyme is made more disorienting by the presence of an unspecified "you," who both draws these landscapes and inhabits them. There's also an "I," an equally difficult to pin down character who sometimes appears in the same landscape as the addressee, other times figures as the addressee's drawing (or at least his name does) or drops out of the poem altogether. As the poem continues, changes in the scope and appearance of the landscape—and in the relationship between landscape, speaker, and addressee—are mirrored by changes in the seasons, the weather, and the mood (both emotional and grammatical). Other figures crowd in along the edges but are ultimately left out of the poem's spotlight. Familiar landmarks, concretized as natural features (*ruchei*, *les*, *pesok*) and bucolic activities—some typical (e.g., strewing flowers), others less so (gazing at psychedelic fish)—recur again and again, until it's unclear whether this is ekphrastic description—a landscape being brought to life before our eyes—or simply the act of naming for its own sake (or for some magical, incantatory purpose). This focus on naming is borne out by the poem's grammar: most of the nouns are in the nominative and accusative cases. Moreover, because of the insistent naming of natural features and human activities, the emerging landscape never finishes emerging, never coheres. Its dimensions and bounds, the whole lay of the land, remain indefinite. The poem conjures up a canonical pastoral setting that comes into view strangely—as though we can see it being inscribed, erased, and started over—a looping or zigzagging movement where the device is laid bare, so that the space of the poem perpetually reconstitutes itself in the process of its utterance. Reading, we sense that the contours of this incantatory, endlessly looping and changing utterance *are* the contours of the landscape, and that this is precisely why it never fully emerges or coheres.

The poem begins in a gloomy park (a variation on the pastoral *locus amoenus* in a minor key) with an imperative to draw to speaker's name in the sand. Over the next three lines, the scene expands in time and space: from the gloomy park we get to summer and a stream (the second imperative, *dozhivi*, suggests that the addressee may not live to see another season); and from there to a brush forest [*melkoles'ie*]. Once invoked, these fragments of nature are brought over from the future to the present tense through the deictic particle *vot*. Now it is the stream, rather than the addressee, who writes the speaker's name, although in the very next line the figure of writing is tied back to the addressee through simile ("slovno vysokhshei vetkoi" [as though with a dried-up branch]). Self-conscious allusions to artifice include the lakes, which are compared to mirrors; the dragonflies' wings, which are compared to cigarette paper (the adjective *papirosnyi* literally connotes papyrus, a metonym for paper in general); and the trippy, iridescent (*raduzhnye*) fish. In lines 9-10, the stream again draws the speaker's name, but this time the drawing of a name "creates landscapes" [*landshafty*]. This is the first time the poem explicitly suggests that inscription and description, the writing of a name and the appearance of a landscape, are entwined.

After line 12, where the speaker imagines he hears words being spoken, quotation marks set off an embedded fragment. However, the quoted text barely differs in tone or content from the main text, and in other versions (such as the one printed in the Limbakh edition), the quotation marks are missing, so that we cannot tell whether what follows is quoted speech, and if so, where the quotation ends. In the version analyzed here, the quotation marks explicitly introduce a second speaker, who suggests that this landscape (the "landscape [lit. space] of the soul") is all there is, that there is no outside world ("mozhet byt', chto lesnichestvo tusklykh ozer nashei zhizni itog"). This is followed by the poem's most traditional evocation of the pastoral

genre, with mentions of horses, a bucolic crowd suggested by the sound of flutes, a swarm of butterflies, and life itself – all following the addressee and calling out to him. At the end of the same line, however, the addressee is inexplicably alone again ("nikogo s toboi net"), walking along a stream that, as both a feature of the landscape and an index or stand-in for the two human figures (speaker and addressee), disappears and resurfaces throughout the poem.

In the last quarter of the poem, the scene takes on a more urban character: rising steam, lamplight, buildings, and a leafless park (the season has changed again). These shifts between bucolic and urban markers suggest that the poem's landscape refers to a different kind of enclosed park – the fenced-off, green area surrounding a psychiatric hospital. This raises the possibility that the endless pastoral loop in which the human figure seems caught alludes to forced confinement. (The sense of confinement in the poem is paradoxically reinforced by its open-ended form; a sonnet's fixed line count is also a way out, precisely what this poem lacks.) The last three lines of the poem include a metaphor comparing rain to musical notes "torn from pages." The speaker holds this rain of notes in his hand, making more explicit the idea of the speaker as a demiurge, who creates the scene of the poem as he goes along— literally—in the "temporality of writing." Not only is there an explicit connection between graphic signs (albeit musical, rather than linguistic) and the poem's shifts between setting and self-conscious inscription, but signification is tied to the speaker's body, and expressed in terms of authorship, handwriting.

The poem's final line epigrammatically reframes the relationship between metafictional and fictional worlds: "you draw the stream, along which you then walk and walk" [ty risuesh' ruchei, vdol' kotorogo posle idesh' i idesh']. It is an impossible figure, a moebius strip inscribing fictional and metafictional realities onto a surface that is both single and double. The

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last words of the poem, an imperfective verb of motion repeated twice (*idesh' i idesh'*), raises the possibility that, although the poem must end, the situation it describes could go on forever. The poem began with a landscape that seemed to exist prior to the addressee who drew it, but by the final lines, we cannot tell which came first – the human figure or the setting. After reading, we are left with an impression of zigzagging, recurring movement, of interlocking and interpenetrating landscapes and perspectives that constantly call attention to their own emergence out of an indeterminate zone between fictional and metafictional realities. There is a sense, too, that the text of the poem is tied explicitly to the metapoetic site of its own creation, that we are watching the poem waver at the point of its coming into being without fully committing to existence. Aronzon achieves these effects through language (particularly his insistent use of deixis and naming), interartistic discourse (drawing, writing, and musicmaking as analogous and interconnected modes of expression), and an aporia of boundaries that lays bare the indeterminacy of all fictional landscapes. At the same time, this indeterminacy and disorientation are also motivated by the title, and by the fact that Aronzon wrote this poem for a friend who had been hospitalized or committed for psychiatric evaluation. Thus, the poem's gestures toward altered or non-normative states of mind, its themes of solitude and confinement within a looping space, and its overlapping yet ultimately irreconcilable levels of reality, hint at the various biographical situations implied by the title: convalescence, real or alleged mental illness, and incarceration.

In stark contrast to "Poslanie v lechebnitsu," the 1968 poem(s) "Dva odinakovykh soneta" [Two identical sonnets] is written in a confining form, yet here too Aronzon subverts the idea of poems as closed spaces. He does this on several fronts, the most striking (visually as well as conceptually) being the doubling of the poem and its reproduction on facing pages (fig. 7):

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<u>Два одинаковых сонета</u>

Любовь моя, спи, золотко моё,
вся кожею атласною одета.
Мне кажется, что мы встречались где-то:
мне так знаком сосок твой и бельё.

О, как к лицу! о, как тебе! о, как идёт!
весь этот день, весь этот Бах, всё тело это!
и этот день, и этот Бах, и самолёт,
летящий там, летящий здесь, летящий где-то!

И в этот сад, и в этот Бах, и в этот миг
усни, любовь моя, усни, не укрываясь:
и лик и зад, и зад и пах, и пах и лик --
пусть всё уснёт, пусть всё уснёт, моя живая!

Не приближаясь ни на йоту, ни на шаг,
отдайся мне во всех садах и падежах!

[Two Identical Sonnets // Sleep, my love, my golden one, / dressed head to toe in satin skin. / It seems we've already met somewhere: / your nipple and underthings are so familiar. // O, how fetching! O, how it suits! O, {how} you! / this whole day, this whole Bach, this whole body! / and this day, and this Bach, and the airplane / flying there, flying here, flying somewhere! // And in this garden, and in this Bach, and in this instant / sleep, my love, sleep, without covering yourself: / face and bottom, bottom and crotch, crotch and face – / let it all sleep, let it all sleep, my living one! // Without coming an iota, or a single step, closer, / give yourself to me in all gardens and {grammatical} cases!]

The first thing we notice—after the fact that the two poems do indeed seem identical—is the way they look on the page, the visual aura of typescript. A typewritten page such as this would have looked less antiquated to a reader in the 1970s and 1980s; nevertheless, as a print work that was obviously not set by a professional, it announces itself as a work of unofficial literature. While writers in the late Soviet period turned to typewritten, privately circulated manuscripts out of necessity, some writers took advantage of samizdat's material elements to create a particular aesthetic. The pages above are reproduced from a pamphlet titled *Sonety* [Sonnets, 1969], consisting of 12 handbound folio leaves printed on one side only. This is not quite samizdat, as it was never part of any semi-institutional system of production and circulation. It was made for a small audience of friends, although the typed format and relative cleanness of the copy also hint

at (or in any case, don't foreclose) the possibility of wider circulation. It is an intermediary object, amateur but authoritative; obviously handmade but using 20th century technology. The paper is thin; even in the reproduction we can faintly see the text on the next page. The typescript itself shows material traces of its making: the same graphemes that signal participation in contemporary print culture bear witness to their author's physical involvement – in the small differences resulting from the pressure of the typewriter strikers, the spacing, and the layout. The material aura arising from the combination of human and technological making is also the source of some of the differences between the two "identical" sonnets. Human error accounts for most of the others: the last word of the poem is written *падежах* on the left, *падеэжах* on the right; line 12 ends in an exclamation point on the right, while on the left it is unpunctuated. (It is also possible that these differences were intentional.)[288] These material gestures toward literary circulation in a privately printed poem are echoed by figures of uniqueness and multiplicity within the poem, and by the poem's doubling.

The poem itself (a tricky phrase, as Aronzon's conceit problematizes the very idea of a "poem itself" untethered to its material manifestations) is part lullaby, part erotic hymn. As a sonnet, it sounds quite strange. The first quatrain is sonnet-like enough: a tender invitation from the speaker to the beloved to sleep, followed by a risqué bit of musing, all in an iambic pentameter stanza featuring an enclosed rhyme. But the next two quatrains switch from pentameter to hexameter, and introduce a strong sense of seriality to most of the lines. The

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[288] Doubt over whether these errors are intentional is another Aronzonian aporia. On the one hand, mistakes were more common in samizdat, due to its amateurish means of production; on the other hand, the authoritative use of the (doubled) sonnet form seems to point to error as self-conscious play around a poetics of authenticity. Aronzon experimented with different formats for these poems, some of them handwritten. In one autograph copy the second sonnet appears upside-down on the lower half of the page, like the images on a playing card. There is also a recorded version that differs slightly from the *Sonety* version; because the recording was made later, the editors of the Limbakh edition consider it the most authoritative version. In the Limbakh edition, there are no visible discrepancies between the two sonnets. See *SP* 180-81.

second quatrain, for instance, is made up entirely of serial repetitions: the three apostrophes in line 5, the two sets of three parallel deictic phrases in lines 6-7, and the three identical present participles (*letiashchii* [flying]) in line 8. The third quatrain also has two lines divided into three parallel phrases (lines 9 and 11); line 10, by contrast, has a strong caesura dividing it into two equal halves (both starting with the imperative "usni" [sleep]).[289] Line 12 has a strong caesura after the second foot, dividing the line into two unequal parts, each starting with a third person imperative ("pust' vse usnet" [may everything fall asleep]), but there is also a weaker caesura after the fourth foot. This weak caesura heightens the surprise of the delightfully odd phrase "na tom divane" [on that couch], which the reader would never expect to see rhyming with "ne ukryvaias'" [without covering up]. The final couplet breaks with the seriality of the middle quatrains, but as a paradoxical epigram (in the style of Aronzon's standalone *duplety*) it is no less strange.

Although it uses direct address throughout, the sonnet is essentially voyeuristic: the speaker is watching his beloved either sleeping or half-asleep, and the use of direct address is meant to bring this still picture to life before our eyes. But the poem's rhetoric, particularly in the serially repetitive quatrains, obstructs the view, even as it attempts to describe this view with its insistent deictic phrases. This sonnet thus puts the rhetorical basis of poetry in tension with its ekphrastic potential. As we have seen, a sometimes complementary, sometimes fraught relationship between visuality and rhetoric is present in much of Aronzon's poetry. In this sonnet, Aronzon not only plays on the tension between ekphrasis and rhetoric, but, more

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[289] The repetition of the verb for "sleep" (*spat'*) it various forms recalls Brodsky's "Great Elegy for John Donne" [*Bol'shaia elegiia Dzhonu Donnu*], though the contrast between Brodsky's solemnity and Aronzon's playfulness suggests that Aronzon's intentions here are at least partly parodic (in relation to Brodsky, in any case).

generally, on all the tensions inherent in gazing at an image, especially between the eye's desire to encompass or possess what it sees, and the permanent distance between eye and object.

Some of the beloved's physical features can be made out in the first quatrain; the direct address of "liubov' moia" [my love] and the imperative "spi" [sleep] situate her in relation to the speaker – he[290] speaks (and watches), she sleeps. We get a sense of their relative proximity to one another based on prior knowledge of how somnolent women typically appear vis-á-vis the male gaze in lyric poems and European paintings.[291] There are even hints of color in lines 1 and 4: the speaker calls the addressee *zolotko*, a term of endearment with gold at its root, and mentions her *bel'e* [underthings], a word that also suggests whiteness. Line 2, "vsia kozheiu atlasnoiu odeta" [dressed head to toe in satin skin], suggests the addressee's corporeality and (because of the implicit skeleton over which the skin is upholstered) mortality. It is also a strange line; the locution is both excessive and absurd, a pleonasm that cancels itself out – one undresses down to their skin, but how can one be dressed in skin? The sense is that Aronzon uses the instrumental for both "skin" and "satin" to stretch the line so that it fits the meter, just as the beloved's skin is stretched over her living frame.

The poem also develops a persistent rhyme between *eto* (the neuter demonstrative pronoun) and *gde-to* (the indefinite pronoun). On the whole, Aronzon uses a striking number of pronouns in this poem, which makes the absence of either a first- or second-person singular pronoun all the more unusual. The rhyme between demonstrative and indefinite pronouns echoes the contrast between the poem's here-and-now—which Aronzon indicates so insistently that we

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[290] Actually, nothing in the poem indicates that the speaker is grammatically male. I use "he" "him" and "his" for expediency.

[291] Such gendering of gaze vs. object is a feature of ekphrastic writing more generally; Heffernan notes that the contest between the arts (language vs. visuality) has been represented along gendered lines since Homer, with a male narrator attempting to talk about a silent female or feminized image. *Museum of Words*, 1.

can barely make it out—and an elsewhere that is mentioned (the plane flying "somewhere"; the couch "over there") but ultimately excluded from the scene. Ironically, this elsewhere (distant enough to give our imaginations some wiggle room) is easier to imagine than the disorientingly close here-and-now.

The second quatrain begins with three rapturous apostrophes. Apostrophes typically assert their objects' presence, but here their tripling and the fact that Aronzon uses one of the "O!'s" to break up a phrase (*kak tebe idet*) have a disruptive effect, as though the rhetoric were tripping over its own function – in this case, presencing.[292] We might expect this phrase to refer to the undergarments, but in lines 6-9 the speaker expands the list of everything that looks good on the beloved to include the day, the music of Bach, the mysterious garden in line 9, and an airplane whose flying is invoked three times – "here," "there," and "somewhere." The three forms of the pronoun *ves'* which encompass the day, the Bach, and the beloved's body are made rhetorically proximate through the demonstrative *eto*, and yet these speech acts don't make the picture more visible; if anything, they make it harder to see. There is also something strange about the repetition of "i etot den', i etot Bakh" in line 7, as though the speaker were now pointing at a second day and Bach. The plane at the end of line 7 is rhetorically tripled, but

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[292] Aronzon discusses apostrophe head-on in the poem "The soul takes up no space" [*Dusha ne zanimaet mesta, SP* I, 152-3] Here, he compares the apostrophic "O" to condensed emptiness, foregrounding the contradictory relation between presence and absence inherent in the trope:

> О ты,
> моя душа, к которой обращенье
> я начинаю с «О!»,
> О, О,
> которое само
> есть лёгкой пустоты сгущенье!

> [O you, / my soul, my address to whom / I start with "O!", / O, O, / which itself / is a condensation of light emptiness!]

See also Witold Sadowski, "Krótka historia 'O!'," which discusses uses of the apostrophic "O" other than presencing.

whether it refers to three different planes is impossible to say: it could be one plane invoked

three times as it comes from afar, flies overhead, and passes out of earshot.

In line 9, we learn that the poem has been set in a garden all along, although the presence

of a couch in line 12 suggests that the setting is a hybrid garden-apartment. In a diary entry,

Aronzon wrote that when they moved into a new apartment, the previous tenants had left a "half-

forgotten garden" in one corner – an odd little domesticated garden which appears in other

poems as well. The word *mig* [instant] in line 9 tightens the deictic focus of the poem around a

particular instant, one that contrasts with the poem's expansiveness, in space, time, and spoken

rhythm. The three physical attributes named in line 11, *lik* [countenance]*, zad* [behind]*, and pakh*

[crotch] are likewise unusual. Each stands out in a different way: *lik* is archaic and solemn; *zad* is

taken from a much lower, off-color register; and *pakh* resembles *sosok* – oddly specific and out

of place in a lyric poem. Though the three body parts are taken from contrasting registers, they

are all monosyllabic, and each word occupies a stressed position in the hexameter line. Since

each word is repeated twice, the six nouns fill out the line. The body parts' doubling is

significant as well, in light of the multiplication happening in and around this poem. Spatially,

the lines about the beloved's body contrast with the single vantage point we saw in the first

quatrain, as though now we were looking a body over from all sides. The third person

imperatives in line 12 are unusual, especially since the pronoun they use is *vse*, treating the

beloved as a collection of separate things. Grammatically, *vse* aims to encompass or unite, but

here it is rubbed the wrong way, disarticulating the body it professes to gather up.

The poem's final couplet is concise and epigrammatic. The pairing of the negated present

participle *priblizhaias'* [coming closer] with the imperative *otdaisia* [give yourself] is

paradoxical – how can you give yourself to someone without approaching? "Na iotu" is an

idiomatic expression, but Aronzon also plays with the literal meaning of *iota*—the proverbial

smallest letter in the alphabet—activating its literal, graphemic meaning by stating that he wants

the beloved to surrender to him in "all gardens and [grammatical] cases." It is as if the speaker

wants her to stay suspended in both the fictional space in which the poem is set, and the lexical

space where the poem becomes text. Moreover, both spaces are emphatically plural: Aronzon

leaves us with an image of endless multiplication and proliferation. This is significant, both in

light of the poem's doubling, and because of how cases are used throughout the poem. We have

seen the way Aronzon uses the instrumental to echo the stretching of skin, and the nominative

(*lik, zad, pakh, sosos, Bakh, samolet,* etc.) to assert the thingness of every object he invokes with

a demonstrative pronoun (even as he destabilizes this very thingness through multiplication). In

the last line, he uses the prepositional plural to simulate a lover's sigh: *akh* is uttered twice, the

second time ending the poem. Aronzon uses all the cases in this sonnet except one, the genitive,

perhaps because the genitive is associated with possession. But, as we saw, the idea of

possession is complicated in this poem; the speaker desires it, but at a constant, paradoxical

distance. A final thought about grammatical cases: the word *padezh* is etymologically related to

falling (*padat'*), and in the context of this sonnet, it suggests a fall from grace, from a paradise

symbolized by a persistently repeated nominative; as well as erotic idioms involving figurative

falling, such as "falling into an embrace" [*padat' v ob''iatiia*], or the archaic sense of *padenie* as

loss of virginity.

Turning back now to the doubling of the entire text, we can say that it mirrors the motifs

of doubling and tripling that occur throughout the poem. Moreover, this metapoetic doubling

forestalls the end of the poem, and with it the extinction of the charmed moment it describes. The

title is also ironic: it claims to present "two identical sonnets," but they're not really identical

because one is on the right, the other on the left; one gets read first, the other second. Even as we read the first one, the fact that there is a second one hangs in the background, influencing our reading. Thus, Aronzon both emphasizes and challenges the uniqueness of this poem, and of poems in general, just as—on the poem's fictional level—he emphasizes and challenges the uniqueness of the moment he describes. Perhaps the doubling of the sonnet is also a veiled, tongue-in-cheek comment on publication in an age when literature has bifurcated into official and unofficial channels. A poet who is published officially is guaranteed a certain print run, sending his poems into the world in a prearranged number of copies. Aronzon is denied this certainty, but compensates for it by writing a poem that's already in duplicate from conception. Another way to read the doubling of the sonnet is as a critical comment on reading itself as (failed) possession. When there is only one of every poem, the act of reading, and especially of reading to completion, can be figured in terms of ownership and consumption. Here, however, you finish reading only to find that the poem has slipped out onto the facing page. In some sense, then, Aronzon's poetic experiment echoes that of Mandelstam in the Petrarch translations, and the erotic paradox that drives Aronzon's identical sonnets resembles that of the Petrarch translations: possessing the beloved by keeping her at a distance.

We can pause to compare Aronzon's identical sonnets with Mandelstam's Petrarch sonnets. Both are erotic poems that use figures of distancing and presencing, and both play on themes of evasion and possession as they unfold in a metapoetic as well as a poetic dimension. And yet their approaches are starkly different. Thinking back to Polina Barskova's characterization of Aronzon's poetics as "freeing" (as opposed to "mastering"), we can note that Mandelstam's sonnets, in their implicit concerns about the circulation of poetic images, take a possessive stance. Indeed, those poems are presided over by a figure of the poet as a jealous

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lover, anxious to keep his creations from being debased by contact with the world. Aronzon's concerns over poetic circulation are similar, but his solution is radically different; rather than protecting his poem, the act of doubling it can be seen as a performance of giving it away. Both poets are anxious to unsettle received notions of poetic authority, but while Mandelstam's aim is to unsettle the authority of the finished, written product—the poem-as-artifact—Aronzon wants to turn the entire apparatus by which poetry relates to the world on its head.

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Aronzon and the Russian Poetic Tradition

I want to end by considering Aronzon's relationship to the literary past more explicitly. As we have seen throughout this chapter, Aronzon's poetics draw heavily on both literary and painterly traditions and conventions. Particularly important to Aronzon is the Baroque (his love of Bach, his use of emblematic language and visual poems); the Russian Golden Age (Pushkin is a constant presence); and the early twentieth century, especially Khlebnikov and the OBERIU poets. In this final section, after looking at two poems that situate themselves in relation to Aronzon's poetic heroes, I want to suggest that Aronzon turns to the past not just to contemplate his own place in it, but to create his own literary canon from scratch, one that destabilizes received hierarchies by combining the classic and the marginalized. Aronzon's creation of an idiosyncratic and homemade personal tradition draws on all the strands of his poetics which I have identified—its visuality, materiality, metapoetic orientation, peculiar resistance, and allusiveness. I will start with a sonnet dedicated to the "soul and corpse" of Nikolai Zabolotsky (1903-58). Here, the pastoral setting—or a version of it associated with Zabolotsky's post-WWII poems—becomes a contested space that only a deserving poet (defined in the poem as one who

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writes effortlessly) can create and inhabit. As to whether the speaker is deserving, the answer is contradictory and inconclusive, as the conceit straddles the line between envious appreciation of the master's gifts and self-inscription within the master's tradition. Then, I will consider Aronzon's relationship to the nineteenth century, and to Pushkin in particular, by looking at a sonnet whose setting is a mise-en-abyme of frames, in which the speaker vacillates between dream (and dream within a dream) and waking, and between an allusive space furnished as an allegory of the 19th century and the poet's own Leningrad apartment.

Aronzon's interest in Zabolotsky goes back at least to his university years. At the A. I. Herzen Leningrad State Pedagogical Institute he wrote his thesis on "Man and Nature in the Poetry of Nikolai Zabolotsky" under Vladimir Alfonsov.[293] Aronzon seems to have been familiar with both Zabolotsky's post-WWII poems, which were widely available in the mid-twentieth century, and his then harder-to-find OBERIU poetry. Zabolotsky's influence on Aronzon can be seen at every stage of his career. It comes across in the latter's depictions of nature, especially animals, his earthy pastoral settings, and his tone, which—as Ainsley Morse has pointed out—is that of a "naïve, vulnerable lyric subject."[294] Only one of Aronzon's poems, a sonnet from May 1968, is written explicitly in Zabolotsky's honor;[295] it is at once a tribute, an elegy, a celebration, and an occasion for merciless self-deprecation (fig. 8):

Сонет душе и трупу Н. Заболоцкого

Есть легкий дар, как будто во второй
счастливый раз он повторяет опыт.
(Легки и гибки образные тропы
высоких рек, что подняты горой!)

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[293] Kazarnovskii and Kukui, "Vmesto predisloviia," *SP* I, 7-20.

[294] *Word Play*, 216.

[295] For another reading of this poem, and on Aronzon's relationship to Zabolotsky more generally, see Igor' Loshchilov, "O stikhotvorenii Leonida Aronzona 'Sonet dushe i trupu N. Zabolotskogo," *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach* 62 (2008), 195-225.

Однако мне отпущен дар другой:
подчас стихи — изнеможенья шепот,
и нету сил зарифмовать Европу,
не говоря уже, чтоб справиться с игрой.

Увы, всегда постыден будет труд:
где, хорошея, розаны цветут,
где, озвучив дыханием свирели

своих кларнетов, барабанов, труб,
все музицируют — растения и звери,
корнями душ разваливая труп!

<div align="center">май, вечер</div>

[Sonnet to the soul and corpse of N. Zabolotsky // There's an effortless gift, as though he were repeating / an experiment for a second, felicitous time. / (Effortless and pliant are the imagistic tropes / of the high rivers, lifted up by the hill!) // But I have been granted a different {sort of} gift: / poems, occasionally – the whisper of exhaustion, / and I don't have the strength to rhyme Europe, / not to mention master the game. // Alas, effort will always be shameful: / where, growing prettier, rosebushes bloom, / where, sounding, with breath, the reeds // of their clarinets, drums, and trumpets, / everyone makes music – plants and animals, / breaking down the corpse with the roots of {their} souls! // may, evening]

Like many of Aronzon's poems, this one is structured around self-doubt. The gist of the octave is that, unlike Zabolotsky, who was blessed with the ability to compose with ease, as though it were second nature to him, Aronzon must struggle to make art. It is an admission of inferiority before one's master – a common enough gesture in elegiac poetry. But in most poems that begin with a gesture of humility or even self-abnegation, the gesture belies a latent assertion of one's own mastery, perhaps even a not-so-secretly cherished belief in one's superiority to the dead master. In Aronzon's sonnet, the self-deprecation is more blatant, and the compensatory counter-move harder to find. Nevertheless, while Aronzon shies away from assertions of mastery, his claim to inferiority is not entirely convincing. One reason for this is the elegance with which he describes both Zabolotsky's superiority in the first quatrain, and the humorous way he performs his clumsiness as an inferior poet in the second. Throughout, Aronzon minimizes his poetic "I": in the octave, the speaker mentions himself only once, in the dative

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case, while in the sestet he erases himself altogether from a scene of which Zabolotsky himself might have been proud. This minimization and, ultimately, erasure of the self is both a more honest show of humility than insisting on one's ineptness in the first-person singular, and, paradoxically, a masterful way to unobtrusively match the formal elements of the poem to its theme of self-abnegation. In the aforementioned "Forgotten Sonnet" [*Zabytyi sonet*], which was written earlier the same day and dated "May, daytime" [*Mai, den'*] (so that it makes a doublet with the Zabolotsky sonnet), the speaker bemoans his existence and work in the first-person singular throughout (this is the poem where the speaker describes dragging six more lines from preexistence into the sonnet). In the evening poem, which deals with many of the same themes, the poet seems to have now mastered the game, even as he outwardly denies any mastery.

In the first quatrain, Aronzon describes Zabolotsky's gift as being so natural that it's as if he were blessed with the chance to *repeat* his effort, successfully, even if it's his first try. The word *opyt* is apt, given Zabolotsky's lifelong interest in science, and the prevalence of botanical and zoological imagery in much of his poetry. The idea of repeated effort dovetails with the metapoetic conceit of the two doublet sonnets (indicated by the timestamp at the bottom): namely, that the Zabolotsky (evening) sonnet represents a second attempt. The parenthetical image in lines 2-4 gives us our first glimpse of the world Aronzon will take up fully in the sestet, a landscape full of rivers "lifted up" by a mountain. This landscape is a figure for Zabolotsky's gift – Aronzon's poetic master makes images that flow with ease because they are lifted by the mountain of his talent. The phrase "obraznye tropy" in line 3 is ambiguous, denoting either picturesque paths (which in this case would be a metaphor for the rivers in line 4), or the poetic tropes that Zabolotsky deploys with ease.

In the second quatrain, the speaker describes the very different, feeble gift that he has been dealt. Poems come rarely, and when they do, it is in the form of "iznemozhden'ia shepot" – a whisper of exhaustion. (It isn't clear whether the extra "d" in "iznemozhden'ia" is a typo, or perhaps if Aronzon is embedding a pun on "day" inside the word for exhaustion.)[296] The lines "i netu sil zarifmovat' Evropu / ne govoria uzhe, chtob spravit'sia s igroi" recall the line in "The weather – rain'": "i vmesto aaaaaaa ia neeeeeeet emu mychu." Interestingly, "Evropu" is not in quotes, as though the speaker wanted to "rhyme" the actual continent, rather than the word. (It's worth noting that certain off-color rhymes for "Evropu" do spring to mind immediately, and would for any Russian reader; the idea that the speaker is too exhausted to think of any other rhyme is quite funny.)[297]

In the sestet the speaker is completely effaced, and the setting is transposed to a beautiful, Zabolotskian landscape where, in a strange version of elegiac apotheosis, the master's corpse (rather than his soul, as we might expect) gives off the life-force that sustains the living, music-making souls; though, given the poem's title, we can assume that it is Zabolotsky's soul presiding over his own body's fruitful decomposition. Here, Aronzon writes, the kind of effort he has to put into his work would always be shameful, yet the speaker himself is absent – the place exists without him, and without the anxieties that run through the octave. This *locus amoenus*, to which Aronzon has forbidden himself entry, is paradoxically his own creation, and comes to life in his own poem. Such is Zabolotsky's gift that even in death, as the (nameless) corpse of the last line, he continues to give life to the world he created – a paradise which breathes life into Aronzon's own poetry, even as Aronzon denies himself a place in it.

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[296] The editors of the Limbakh edition correct the word to *iznemozhen'ia* (*SP* I, 163).

[297] Aronzon's rhyming woes in this poem are related to a tradition going back to Boileau, a form of poetic self-deprecation based explicitly on an inability to rhyme.

As we have seen, the nineteenth century has a special place in Aronzon's poetics. He uses its outmoded diction, its standard poetic forms, its props (e.g., lorgnettes), and its conventional poetic language, but in ways that Shubinskii characterized as "barely quoted text" and "half irony." We have also seen how Aronzon's use of canonical forms extends to enjambment, caesura, rhyme, parallelism, and chiasmus, and how Aronzon's use of these rhetorical devices tends to be mannered, sometimes excessively so. On the whole, the nineteenth-century figures in Aronzon's poetry as a vague idea, an intentional cliché: old-fashioned, a little trite, emotionally vague, and closely circumscribed by convention. This relation isn't really about emulation; it cultivates the fustiness of a golden age seen in retrospect, rather than trying to make it new. At the same time, there are a few nineteenth-century poets who are alluded to specifically in Aronzon's poetry, and whose evocation complicates this generalized relation; these include Fyodor Tyutchev, Afanasy Fet, Evgeny Baratynsky, and Aleksandr Pushkin. Pushkin is a particularly important presence (as we have seen). Aronzon's indebtedness to Pushkin comes across in his preference for small forms, especially his attempts to write compact *poemy*; his habit of writing prologues to poems (sometimes without writing the actual poems); and—perhaps most importantly—the way he combines colloquial, living speech with classic poetic forms and techniques.

Some of Aronzon's poems are even about Pushkin; for example, the 1968 poem "A. S. Pushkin," which imagines a bright white landscape—"a field of snow. Sunsnow" [pole snega. Solntsesneg]—the snow unmarked except by one interminable trail made by a cart, which is suddenly interrupted by Pushkin galloping by on a horse, "to the *plein air* of his elegies" [na plener svoikh elegii] (*SP* I, 148). The setting has a certain allegorical significance, in the resemblance of the snowy landscape to paper, the possibility that the "endless trail of a cart"

[beskonechnyi sled telegi] symbolizes Aronzon's modest plodding through art (though there is no "I" in the poem, or even an actual cart, just its trail),[298] and the odd assertion in the poem's last lines that there would have been no movement of any kind in this scene—no wind and no ringing river—if Pushkin hadn't passed through. In other poems, Pushkin's presence is more veiled; in a 1968 sonnet that starts "V chasy bessonitsy," for instance, Pushkin appears only fleetingly, in an obscure reference, and as part of the general nineteenth-century mood and décor:

> В часы бессонницы люблю я в кресле спать
> и видеть сон неотличимый
> от тех картин что наяву мне зримы,
> и, просыпаясь, видеть сон опять:
>
> старинное бюро, свеча, кровать,
> тяжелый стол, и двери, и за ними
> в пустом гробу лежит старуха вини -
> я к ней иду, чтоб в лоб поцеловать.
>
> Однако ночь творит полураспад.
> В углу валяется забытый кем-то сад,
> томя сознанье, падает паук,
>
> свет из окна приобретает шорох,
> лицо жены моей повернуто на юг,
> и всё - в печали, нет уже которой.
>
> [In hours of insomnia I like to sleep in an armchair / and see a dream indistinguishable / from the views {lit. pictures} I see when I am awake, / and, waking, see the same dream again: // an antique {writing} bureau, a candle, a bed, / a heavy table, and doors, and behind them / in an empty coffin lies the old woman of spades – / I approach her, to kiss her on the forehead. // But the night half-decays. / In a corner lies someone's half-forgotten garden, / losing consciousness, a spider falls, // light from the window acquires a rustle, / my wife's face is turned toward the south, / and everything is filled with a sadness that is no longer there.]

Here, the nineteenth century furnishes the poem (literally and figuratively) with elegiac material, including the objects that decorate the room – a room which is presented as a painterly interior, a *kartina*. This poem is not a pastiche, like some of Aronzon's early pseudo-nineteenth-century

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[298] These same elements—the snowy field, the trace of a cart, and the reference to elegies—also recall the scene of Pushkin's fatal duel. I am grateful to Stephanie Sandler for pointing this out.

poems (e.g., "Iz XIX veka" [From the 19th Century]," which contains lines such as: "Blesnet li dal'niaia zarnitsa / vo mrake severnykh lesov" [Or when the distant evening star flashes / in the darkness of northern woods"); nevertheless, it is full of nineteenth-century allusions and language. As an insomnia poem, this sonnet belongs to a venerable genre in Russian poetry, one that typically blurs the boundary between wakefulness and dream, and between sharpened perception and imagination – perhaps the most explicit antecedent here is Pushkin's "Stikhi, sochinennye noch'iu vo vremia bessonnitsy" [Lines Composed at Night During Insomnia]. Aronzon's poem is structured around several nested frames of consciousness—the speaker's, the spider's, the wife's—whose disjunctive arrangement contrasts with the final tercet's movement toward unity, represented by the dawn that gradually strengthens and brings everything in the room into focus under a single light and mood. The collection of objects in the second quatrain (*biuro*, *svecha*, *krovat', stol, dveri* [writing desk, candle, bed, table, doors]) point to another source for this poem: Pushkin's "Queen of Spades." Aronzon's emphasis on the visual echoes Pushkin's theme of voyeurism, and the old woman in the coffin has been identified as the countess from that story – she is, after all, "starukha vini" ("vini" is another word for "piki" [spades]).[299] The intended kiss on the forehead in line 7 conflates two moments from Pushkin's story: the scene where Hermann approaches the countess's body during her funeral, and an earlier scene where he rewards Liza's unwitting betrayal of her benefactress with a kiss on the forehead. The poem's last line has the ring of an ending, and there seems to be a unity or coherence that has been achieved after the disorientation in the preceding stanzas. At the same time, this sense of coherence is belied by this line's separation of language and tone, the

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[299] In Pushkin's story, the countess suffers from insomnia, and spends her sleepless nights sitting in an armchair, just as Aronzon has his speaker do.

disjunction between the rhetoric of elegy and the mood of elegy. The idea that something no longer exists is constitutionally elegiac, and "*pechal'*" [sadness or melancholy] is the quintessential elegiac mood, but the phrase "vse – v pechali, net uzhe kotoroi" [everything is filled with a sadness that is no longer there] is a paradox. The line sounds sad, but what it actually says is that sadness is absent. This last line, incidentally, recalls another line from Pushkin: "pechal' moia svetla" [my sorrow is lucid] from the poem "Na kholmakh Gruzii" [Upon the Hills of Georgia], a favorite of Aronzon's. These unsettling mise-en-abymes of consciousness are echoed by the poem's setting – a domestic interior, whose dimensions, including the number of rooms, seem to shift throughout the poem. In the first quatrain, it appears to be a single room, but in the second the speaker alludes to a second room, which bizarrely contains a coffin, and in the sestet the second room disappears altogether in the "poluraspad" [half-decay] that accompanies the sonnet's turn. Just as bizarrely, the sestet alludes to a garden located in the corner of the room, as though the interior/exterior binary were reversed.[300] This forgotten garden locates us in the poet's Leningrad apartment, as does the presence of the speaker's wife. Thus, the move from octave to sestet shifts the frame from an intertextual nineteenth-century space to the poet's home.

These nested frames (of consciousness, setting, and intertextuality), the paradoxical final line, and the fact that all the verbs in the poem are imperfective, suggest an insurmountable aporia, an ongoing condition that never resolves. There is no waking into a truer reality, the intended kiss is never delivered, the spider falls but never lands, and the wife's face is always turned away. Even the "half-decay" [*poluraspad*] (the word, which refers to the rate of decay in

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[300] The presence of a garden in the corner of the room could also allude to the garden reflected in the *triumo* [pier glass] in Pasternak's poem "The Mirror" [*Zerkalo*]. I am grateful to Stephanie Sandler for pointing this out.

an element's half-life, is borrowed from a poem by Stanislav Krasovitskii)[301] is paradoxically both accomplished and not accomplished (it's a half-decay after all). Despite these aporias, the poem does reflect an overall temporal move from night to morning, accompanied by a slow diffusion of light and mood; however, this dawning (and becoming) never transitions decisively into day (and arrival). This overall temporal move is echoed by a corresponding spatial move from disorientation (dream and waking life are indistinguishable) to orientation (the corner and window mark the boundaries of the room; the word "south" orients the whole scene in a specific direction). Indeed, a logically motivated reading of the poem is that it takes us through several states of mind between evening and morning, states which correspond neatly to the divisions of the sonnet: half-asleep in the first quatrain; dreaming in the second; waking but disoriented in the first tercet; awake in the second tercet.

In a diary entry for March 31, 1968, Aronzon mentions picking up a volume of the nineteenth-century poet Afanasy Fet, and being surprised by the uncanny similarity between Fet's poetry and his own – and indeed, he quotes a few lines from Fet that do sound remarkably Aronzonian.[302] He then quotes a couplet from Byron that is also to his liking; followed by a couplet from the nineteenth-century graphomaniac poet A. E. Anaevskii, in which he hears a foretaste (*predvoskhishchenie*) of Marc Chagall and Velimir Khlebnikov.[303] The way Aronzon talks about these three quotations—the resemblances to himself he hears in them, the connections he draws between Anaevskii and Khlebnikov (and Chagall!)—suggests that these

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[301] From Krasovitskii's poem "Asters" [*Astry*], a favorite of Aronzon's. See *SP* I, 456.

[302] "Tiazhelo v nochnoi tishi / vynosit' tosku dushi" [It's hard to endure the soul's longing / in the darkness of night]. The opening lines of a poem dated 15 September, 1892. Quoted in *SP* II, 111.

[303] The lines he quotes are from Byron's *Parisina* (in Vil'gel'm Levik's translation): "i pala na tsvety rosa / i zvezdy vskhodiat v nebesa" ["Each flower the dews have lightly wet, / And in the sky the stars are met"].

fragmentary resemblances and correspondences were another way for Aronzon to think about tradition, and his place in it. Aronzon situates himself in the Russian tradition (and, as the reference to Byron suggests, in the European canon more generally) by creating a tradition of his own, one that combines canonical and marginalized strands: classic poets and graphomaniacs, Pushkin's Pleiade and Aronzon's circle of friends, itself a kind of pleiade. Aronzon's emphasis throughout his work on the visual, and his experiments with visual poetry, suggest that the tradition of visual poetry was also an important strand in Aronzon's personal canon. In this canon, hierarchies are dismantled, conventional relations are unsettled, and the border between visual art, music, and poetry is blurred. Moreover, Aronzon's personal canon collapses historical time: when Aronzon openly quotes Pushkin's line "pechal' moia svetla" (my sadness is lucid) in one of his poems, Pushkin really does start to sound a lot like Aronzon. This, in effect, makes Pushkin or Byron (in a fin-de-siècle translation) or Anaevskii seem like contemporaries – each other's and Aronzon's. In the context of late Soviet culture, where Russia's violently disrupted literary tradition was presented in school curricula and by publishers of literary classics as something abiding and continuous, Aronzon's personal canon (made for himself and small circle of friends) was a happy substitute for what was missing in the official culture. It's a canon that is half-ironic, inclusive, and unsystematic, homespun but at the same time erudite and refined – much like Aronzon's poetry.

CHAPTER THREE

The Monster in the Tower: Creativity Between Life and Art in Two Works By Elena Shvarts

Все висело на волоске и грозило
превратиться в фарс.

In my last chapter, I will look at representations of creativity in the work of the Russian poet Elena Shvarts (1948-2010).[304] In particular, I am interested in forms or modes of creativity that fall somewhere between life and art. Shvarts's work abounds in instances of in-between creativity, creativity that does not lead to artistic production, but that nevertheless partakes of the tools and resources of art, and shares in art's concerns. As I hope to show, these instances of in-between creativity are marked by intensive engagement with questions of selfhood, authority (and authorization), and responsibility. Shvarts, whose poetry and prose frequently explores liminal states and marginal figures, sensed an affinity between different intense forms of existence. In particular, her work develops parallels between religious and artistic callings, though it also deals with madness, tyranny, and other forms of life that are marginal or excessive – and also exceptional. At the same time, Shvarts is more ambivalent when it comes to the idea of the poet's exceptionalism. On the one hand, as Aleksandr Skidan has argued, Shvarts "saw the figure of the poet in a Romantic key, as someone exceptional, endowed with a singular (prophetic) gift and, consequently, with a singular status."[305] On the other hand, Shvarts had reservations about what this singularity implied; the kind of life it permitted the poet to lead, and what it offered the poet as far as moral license. In the two works I will look at here—Shvarts's

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[304] Epigraph: "Everything hung by a thread and threatened to turn into a farce." Elena Shvarts, *Gabriele D'Annuntsio: Krylatyi tsiklop (Putevoditel' po zhizni Gabriele D'Annuntsio)* (Sankt-Peterburg: Vita Nova, 2010), 350.

[305] Aleksandr Skidan, "Summa poetiki," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, No. 60 (2003), online at http://magazines.russ.ru/nlo/2003/60/skidan.html. Last accessed October 30, 2018.

2010 biography of the Italian poet Gabriele D'Annunzio, and her 1984 poetic cycle written in the voice of a nun named Lavinia—Shvarts considers the nature and implications of poetic calling in relation to two creative figures who blur the line between their artistic work and other modes of creativity, including their attempts to transfigure life itself.

Shvarts also wrote poems that deal explicitly with poetry (rather than in-between creativity). In one such poem, "Imitation of Boileau" [*Podrazhenie Bualo*, 1970], she writes that the poet "is an eye, – you'll later learn, – / tied, for one moment, to divinity. // A ripped-out eye – on a bloody string, / enclosing for an instant the pain and glory of the world" [Poet est' glaz, - uznaesh' ty potom, - / mgnoven'e sviazannyi s revushchim Bozhestvom. // Glaz vydrannyi – na nitochke krovavoi, / na mig vmestivshii mira bol' i slavu].[306] Shvarts's grisly and sublime metaphor for the poet's vocation expresses a numbrer of motifs important to her conception of art and the artist: privileged access to divinity; a notion of the momentary that is eschatological and marked by an almost unbearable intensity; and the linking of visionary ability with pain and bloodletting. The last line contains a characteristic pun on the word *slava* (glory, fame), alluding to the poet's desire for recognition (an earlier line reads "The poet thinks much of himself, and can't get enough praise" [Poet soboi liubim, do pokhvaly on zhaden]), while referring explicitly to the glory of the world, and of the "roaring divinity" to which the poet has privileged access. This conception of the poet can be seen as a template for other modes of creativity explored in Shvarts's writing, modes that are not explicitly tied to artistic production but that set up similar relations between the creative subject, the world, and the divine.

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[306] Elena Shvarts, *Sochineniia Eleny Shvarts* (St. Petersburg: Pushkinskii fond, 2002-), Vol. 1, 40. Subsequent quotations from Shvarts's collected works will appear in-text as *SES* followed by volume and page numbers.

In Shvarts's poetry, the romance of extreme experience is balanced by a sharp eye for realia, by attention to the sensuous specifics of worldly existence, and by quicksilver changes in thinking and tone. In her poems of ecstatic self-annihilation, for instance, dissolution tends to snag on embodiment, as if it were a reminder of humanity. In more general terms, the pull of the inhuman—toward annihilation, toward cruelty, toward an irrevocable loosening of restraints or a succumbing to emotional immensity—can be overpowering, but in Shvarts's work something usually pulls the speaker back from the brink: an acute reminder of the body's frailty; a mundane detail; and above all, irony. Irony allows not just for sudden and subtle shifts of perspective, but also shifts in scale and investment, and Shvarts's speakers use it both to escape the overwhelming and to contain it in the language and structure of the poem. As Stephanie Sandler writes: "In Shvarts's poetic world, irony reigns, and there is rarely any emotion so powerful that the poet cannot split herself off from it and calmly watch it turn itself into language."[307]

One way Shvarts uses irony is as a means of distancing her lyric heroes from notions of the self (as well as text and audience).[308] In fact, the more extreme the subject matter, the more dangerous the flirtation with the inhuman or unendurable, the more this distancing comes into play. And at one extreme of self-distancing, where Shvarts writes about, or wears the mask of, another person altogether, is also where she undertakes her most sustained explorations of the poet's exceptionalism, and its relationship to power and cruelty. Perhaps this is because

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[307] Stephanie Sandler, "Scared into Selfhood: The Poetry of Inna Lisnianskaia, Elena Shvarts, Ol'ga Sedakova," *Slavic Review*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (Autumn 2001), 483. Susan Stewart has written about the "long tradition" linking intense experiences, especially painful ones, to poetic mastery; i.e., the poet's ability to contain intensity in form. To illustrate her point, Steward quotes Wordsworth, who wrote in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that "more pathetic situations and sentiments, that is, those which have a greater proportion of pain connected with them, may be endured in metrical composition, especially in rhyme, than in prose." (Quoted in Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002], 46.)

[308] See Stephanie Sandler, "Elena Shvarts and the Distances of Self-Disclosure," in Arnold B. McMillin, ed., *Reconstructing the Canon: Russian Writing in the 1980s* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 2000), 95-6.

"extending the distances between self, text, and audience" allows her to explore these extremes more overtly as fictions;[309] or because she doesn't have to take responsibility for her lyric hero's extravagance, or the bent of their genius, in the same way as if she were writing in the first person as "Elena Shvarts."

In this chapter, I look at two very different works by Shvarts that deal with the poet's exceptionalism, two works in which she plays with distancing and masks to explore the nature and implications of a poet's calling, framing her findings as highly mediated parables of danger and temptation. One is her biography of the Italian poet Gabriele D'Annunzio, written during her final illness and published posthumously in 2010. Here, Shvarts wears the mask of a mostly impartial biographer in order to talk, at length, about a poet other than herself. Her subject is one of the most celebrated and loathed poets of all time, a man who lived by the Romantic credo that the genius should be excused from moral obligation, and who was widely admired for it – perhaps nowhere more so than in prerevolutionary Russia. Shvarts was fascinated by D'Annunzio, and her biography of the poet, commissioned by the Vita Nova publishing house for their *Zhizneopisaniia* [biography] series, is by far her longest published work. In him, Shvarts sees a baffling and irreducible figure, a poet of undeniable genius, capable of great loyalty, courage, and generosity, but also of great callousness and cruelty. Moreover, as Shvarts repeatedly notes, D'Annunzio was no hypocrite: he embraced the cruel side of his nature, viewing it as an essential aspect of his identity as a Poet (with a capital P). While she almost never judges D'Annunzio explicitly, Shvarts dwells extensively on both his cruelty toward the people he loved, and his more philosophical cruelty toward humanity as a whole; his conviction, for example, that ten thousand ordinary lives were not worth a single work of art. Shvarts

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[309] Ibid.

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describes D'Annunzio's cruelty with subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) irony, and

occasionally connects it to the self-indulgence and pompousness of much of his creative output,

while maintaining that his best works—such as the poetic cycle *Laudi del cielo, del mare, della

terra e degli eroi*—are unqualified masterpieces.

The other work I look at is Shvarts's longest poetic cycle, *The Works and Days of

Lavinia, A Nun of the Order of the Circumcision of the Heart (From Christmas to Easter)* [*Trudy

i dni Lavinii, monakhini iz ordena Obrezaniia Serdtsa (Ot Rozhdestva do Paskhi)*]. This book-

length cycle, or "fragmentary novel" as Darra Goldstein has called it, is one of several

pseudonymous cycles Shvarts wrote in the late 1970s and early 1980s (*Lavinia* was written in

1984 and published abroad, by Ardis, in 1987).[310] Here, she speaks in the voice of a fictional

character, a mystic and nun, who writes intense, visionary poetry but is denied—and to some

extent denies herself—the calling of a poet. Shvarts's Lavinia is carried to extremes of

imagination and creativity by two similar but ultimately irreconcilable vocations, and she pays

for this (at least according to the cycle's framing device) with her sanity, maybe even her life. In

some ways, Lavinia and D'Annunzio are similar: D'Annunzio's aesthetic decadence, his

penchant for mystical, religious, and erotic language, his understanding of himself as partaking

of both the monstrous and divine, and his grandiose way of figuring inspiration can all be found

in Lavinia's (and Shvarts's) poems as well. Both Lavinia and D'Annunzio are eclectic and

densely allusive poets, and there is a certain gaudiness to both. There are also striking

correspondences in their stories: both are obsessed with, and try to imitate, prophets and saints,

especially St. Francis; both conceive of life as if it were theater; both believe in a life force that

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[310] Darra Goldstein, "The Heartfelt Poetry of Elena Shvarts," in Helena Goscilo, ed, *Fruits of Her Plume: Essays on Contemporary Russian Women's Culture* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1993), 239.

ebbs and flows, and is at its strongest when it approaches death; both end up founding new communities – a city-state in D'Annunzio's case, a hermitage in Lavinia's. But there are also crucial differences between the two characters: D'Annunzio believed fervently in providence, destiny, and the myth of himself, beliefs Shvarts acknowledges by structuring her biography in mythic stages (titles of parts include "The Flight of Icarus" and "The Labyrinth of Daedalus"). In her own poetry, Shvarts is ambivalent about destiny (see, for example, "I was born with a smooth palm" [Ia rodilas' s ladon'iu gladkoi], *SES* I, 110), and her self-mythologizing tends to avoid coherent narrative, to "hold in suspension the story of a writing, thinking self."[311] With Lavinia, Shvarts takes the effacing of destiny and autobiography even further, by suspending not just her biography but her calling as a poet as well. Shvarts's D'Annunzio is decisive and determined, her Lavinia is hesitant and conflicted; D'Annunzio lives for personal triumphs, Lavinia constantly faces failure (which, however, brings its own kind of grace); D'Annunzio is obsessed with power, and relishes his ability to transfix an audience, first as a poet, later as a war hero and dictator; Lavinia looks askance at military might, coercion, self-aggrandizement, and even her own charisma.

Considered together, these two works provide a contrast in their respective hero's relationship to their gift, and how that, in turn, informs their attitude toward power and cruelty. The notion of poetic calling is central to the identity of both characters: D'Annunzio's uncontested calling as a Great Poet legitimizes his cruel and tyrannical impulses, and paves the way for all his other roles and masks (poet-prophet, poet-warrior, exile, statesman, dictator). Lavinia's calling is contested, but this has a curious effect, allowing her to live suspended among possibilities, and in this suspended state to assume numerous roles, often simultaneously; to play

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[311] "Elena Shvarts and the Distances of Self-Disclosure," 81-3.

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out her life with unsettled faith, upended hierarchies, and indeterminate values – a comparable but ultimately very different kind of theater from D'Annunzio's. Furthermore, contrasting Lavinia with D'Annunzio makes it clear just how important the question of poetic calling is to Lavinia – a question that Shvarts intentionally obscures both within the cycle and in the framing devices that package it for us. In examining the relationship between creativity and power—and the way this relationship is expressed through masks, emotional intensity, and irony—I want to stress Shvarts's subtlety, her preference for ambiguity and suspension over judgement or inference. Ultimately, Shvarts mostly refrains from judging D'Annunzio, except through irony; and in the Lavinia cycle, the implications of these relations (among genius, power, and cruelty) are merely suggested, through allusion, register, symbolism, and poetic form, as well as through the juxtaposition of the poems themselves with the cycle's framing devices. In the Lavinia cycle especially, the temptations and dangers that come with poetic calling are almost never articulated openly (in large part, I argue, because Lavinia's calling is contested); but simply by drawing connections and playing with masks, Shvarts opens up new perspectives on the well-worn notion of the poet's exceptionalism.

In both works I look at, the hero practices forms of creativity that are adjacent to artistic practice, or transcend it, or aim to expand the notion of what counts as art. Shvarts presents every aspect of D'Annunzio's life, from his love affairs to his military exploits and dictatorship of Fiume, as creative acts. Sometimes these acts inspire his literary work directly (his affairs), other times their relationship to verbal art is more complicated (his rousing political speeches), and still other times they transcend language altogether (his exploits as a pilot, which he described as pure poetry). Lavinia too performs creative acts that are not, strictly speaking, artistic, but that she figures using language and tropes drawn from Romantic notions of creative genius. Among

other things, she performs (or attempts to perform) miracles, experiences religious ecstasies, heals and comforts those around her, and practices mystical forms of self-sacrifice. I argue that both D'Annunzio and Lavinia's in-between creative acts can be understood vis-à-vis the fin-de-siècle notion of life-creation (*zhiznetvorchestvo*), a "merging of writing and life practice" that was sought as an ideal by many writers and philosophers in early twentieth-century Russia, particularly in the context of utopian projects.[312] The fin-de-siècle plays an important role in Shvarts's poetics, and as a self-consciously belated manifestation of Romanticism it informs her work on many levels. Shvarts's conceptions of creativity and artistic vocation, and even the symbolism association with creative experience (e.g., mystical wounding), are drawn from fin-de-siècle poetry. Shvarts was also deeply influenced by folk religion, the source of the mystics, sectarians, minor saints, demons, and talking animals who populate the Lavinia cycle (and sometimes appear in Shvarts's other poetry as well). Even as Shvarts weaves Romantic and folk religious strands together in her work, the latter serve as an important counterpoint to the former, changing the valence of Romantic notions, including the artist's visionary power and exceptional status. Indeed, the influence of folk religion and other spiritual models (including medieval women's mysticism) is part of what makes Lavinia and D'Annunzio so different. D'Annunzio, lacking deep religious feeling (according to Shvarts) approaches forms of religious experience (such as the popular fin-de-siècle cult of St. Francis) as yet another pose or mask; while for Lavinia, religious feeling is both a parallel to creative experience and a valuable other perspective, one that allows her to meditate on the nature and implications of creative power.

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[312] Olga Matich, *Erotic Utopia: The Decadent Imagination in Russia's Fin de Siècle* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 6.

Before turning to the two works, a brief discussion of life-creation (*zhiznetvorchestvo*) in the context of early twentieth-century artistic and philosophical movements is in order. Irina Paperno traces life-creation to Romantic ideas about the interrelationship of art and life, with art seen as a "force capable of, and destined for, the 'creation of life' (*tvorchestvo zhizni*), while 'life' was viewed as an object of artistic creation or as a creative act"; the lives of many early 20th century artists, she points out, were "self-conscious in a way suggesting deliberate aesthetic organization of behavior."[313] The practice of life-creation drew on a variety of philosophical and religious sources, both Western European and homegrown, to conceive a "new man" (the practitioner of life-creation), who was "an amalgam of the Pauline 'new man', Chernyshevskian 'new man', and Nietzschean superman."[314] The synthesis of Nietzscheanism and New Testament symbolism proved particularly significant for Shvarts, who uses a similar hybrid religious-philosophical model of creativity for Lavinia, even as she treats D'Annunzio's pure (though vulgarized) Nietzscheanism with skepticism. Paperno concludes that the "deliberate aesthetic organization of behavior" practiced by many Russian modernists "was a part of a general utopian project of total reorganization and divinization of the world and man, starting with human personality, interpersonal relations, and the human body."[315] The religious aspect of life-creation was very important; as Paperno notes, Andrei Bely argued that all artistic creation was ultimately religious in nature, drawing on Vladimir Solov'ev's notion of theurgy as a model for creative activity in general. In Bely's words, "creativity, carried to its conclusion, directly turns into

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[313] Irina Paperno, "Introduction," in Irina Paperno and Joan Delaney Grossman, *Creating Life: The Aesthetic Utopia of Russian Modernism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 1-2.

[314] Ibid., 5.

[315] Ibid., 7.

religious creativity – theurgy."[316] As a model of creative activity, theurgy, while framed as an invocation or even imitation of divine creative power, also flirted with blasphemous, promethean notions of the artist's rivalry with the divine – a risky, double-edged relation to the divine that appealed to Shvarts's own conception of artistic vocation. Another important aspect of Symbolist life-creation was the privileging of life as a canvas over material creations. Valery Briusov, for example, argued that the poet "creates by embodying his inner self," thereby turning the artist him- or herself entirely into art. As Briusov succinctly put it, "let the poet create not his books, but his life."[317]

Life is a complex and loaded term in Shvarts's work. D'Annunzio, Shvarts writes, saw the entirety of his life as an artistic endeavor; though he always considered himself a poet first and foremost, he eventually came to see heroic military and political leadership as aesthetic callings as well, "poetry" that was, in some ways, of a higher order than poems in books. For D'Annunzio, part of heroism's appeal was that it maximized life's creative potential, and even affected the course of history, without leaving a material trace. This view of intermediary creativity combines the Romantic notion that "life as a whole, without any 'residue', can be transformed into art," and the Decadent view that privileged "experience itself" over "the fruit of experience."[318] Lavinia sees the relationship between creativity and life a little differently. Indeed, her conception of life is closer to that of the early Russian Symbolists, for whom treating life itself as a creative act was only part of the equation. As Paperno argues, "[In Russian

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[316] Quoted in Irina Paperno, "The Meaning of Art: Symbolist Theories," in Paperno and Grossman, *Creating Life*, 16-17.

[317] Ibid., 20.

[318] On life without residue, see Ibid., 22. On experience versus the "fruit of experience" see "Decadence," in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 338.

Symbolist thought], 'Life-creation' in daily life means much more than organizing life aesthetically, as if it were a literary text. [...] For a Symbolist, only life created by art, that is, life as a product of the incarnation of the spirit, was 'the living life' (Bely, using Dostoevsky's phrase)...Concrete attempts at an aesthetic organization of personal life had far-reaching mystical implications. Transformed through art, life was capable of becoming 'life eternal'."[319] If Shvarts's D'Annunzio sees life as a canvas or stage for an ultimate form of creativity, one that blends art and heroism, Lavinia's practice of intermediary creativity is closer to Russian Symbolism, to Life-creation as theorized by Bely, Briusov, and Viacheslav Ivanov, which emphasized a crucial bond between creativity and divinity, and proposed self-abnegation or even self-erasure as a model for the relationship between creativity and selfhood. In the Symbolist model, Life-creation was not an expansion of the self through ever-widening rings of charismatic influence (rings that eventually took D'Annunzio onto the world historical stage), but a paradoxical minimization of the self, coupled with an ambiguous relationship to the divine.

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Shvarts's D'Annunzio: Poet-Seducer, Poet-Soldier, Poet-Prince

Although Shvarts had always been fascinated by D'Annunzio, he was not her first choice for a biographical subject.[320] Nevertheless, she devoted herself to researching and writing in spite of worsening health, drawing on numerous primary and secondary sources to create a portrait that is at once scholarly and literary – an effect she achieves by combining factual evidence with

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[319] Paperno, "The Meaning of Art," 23.

[320] Thomas Epstein, email to Ainsley Morse, July 24, 2018. Shvarts's first choice for a biographical subject, which Vita Nova did not approve, was Elena Guro. It should be noted that Shvarts wrote the D'Annunzio book primarily for the income. She had been supported financially by her mother throughout her life, and took on a variety of projects to support herself after her mother's death in 1998.

restrained flights of fantasy, and by carefully modulating her narrative tone. At almost 500 pages, the finished book—provocatively subtitled *The Winged Cyclops* [*Krylatyi tsiklop*]—is something of an anomaly for Shvarts, who had always shown a preference for small forms. The book is divided into seven sprawling sections, corresponding to various stages in the poet's life (childhood, early renown, exile, war, etc.), and given titles that echo the poet's personal myth. This is the first indication that Shvarts has no interest in deflating her subject's myth; instead, her approach is to combine myth and fact as often as possible, and to various effects – sometimes grand, other times devastatingly ironic. Each section is further subdivided into chapters, nearly all of which start with epigraphs from D'Annunzio's prose works, in particular his final book, the quasi-mystical memoir titled *Il Libro segreto* [The Secret Book]. Shvarts's biography is further augmented by reproductions of manuscript pages, as well as numerous photographs – of the poet's lovers and acquaintances, houses where he lived, and of the man himself at various points in his life. Shvarts felt that including these illustrations was very important, and provided all of them to the publisher herself.[321]

The biography is mostly written in a clear expository style, combining fact and anecdote, and making frequent use of quotations, especially from D'Annunzio's contemporaries – witnesses to his larger-than-life story. The overarching narrative is broken up by digressions: these include assessments of individual works by the poet; portraits of lovers, friends, and important historical figures who crossed paths with him; meditations on the Italian landscape, language, and theater; and, most strikingly, short passages in italics, vignettes where Shvarts switches to a more lyrical style and allows overt speculation and personal feelings into her

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[321] Tat'iana Vol'tskaia, "O knige Eleny Shvarts 'Krylatyi tsiklop'," Interview with Dmitrii Volchek, Natal'ia Del'giado, and Aleksei Dmitrenko, *Kul'turnyi dnevnik*, 24 June 2010, online at https://www.svoboda.org/a/2081475.html. Last accessed 11/6/2018.

account. Here, her irony, which is a near-constant presence throughout the book, comes closest to outright judgment, as in the following little narrative, where she contrasts D'Annunzio's fretting over the fate of his beloved borzois during the deprivations of World War I with a larger picture of the war's human toll: "*Шестьдесят борзых: Больше всего Д'Аннунцио заботила судьба несчастных борзых. Он боялся, что придется уничтожить их всех, чтобы спасти от мук голода. Их гибель представлялась ему в виде грандиозной гекатомбы, достойной эпохи, когда в жертву приносились миллионы лучших молодых людей Европы.*"[322] [The sixty borzois: Above all, D'Annunzio was preoccupied with the fate of his poor borzois. He feared he would have to put them all down in order to save them from the torments of hunger. He imagined their death as a grandiose hecatomb, one worthy of the age, at a time when millions of Europe's best young men were being brought to the slaughter.]

The book's subtitle, *Krylatyi tsiklop*, distills into an epithet the Italian poet's contradictory nature; his simultaneous lyrical refinement and monstrousness. (The image of D'Annunzio as a cyclops can be traced back to the poet himself; it comes from the prose work *Notturno*, written while he was recovering from the loss of an eye during World War I.) "Krylatyi" suggests someone or something inspired, but with more than a touch of irony, and this odd hybrid creature—a cyclops supported by delicate (the adjective has a connotation of delicacy) wings—is almost a caricature.

One of Shvarts's models for the biography is Pushkin, whose *History of Pugachev* [*Istoriia Pugacheva*, 1834] served as a paradigm of a scholarly work researched and written by a poet, one whose subject also happened to be a charismatic, arguably villainous leader. Like Pushkin's *History of Pugachev*, Shvarts's biography opens with a long geographic description—

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[322] *Gabriele D'Annuntsio*, 277. Italics in the original.

of Abruzzo, the Italian poet's birthplace—before refocusing on its human subject. The first part, titled "The Opening of the Shell" [Otkrytie rakoviny], describes D'Annunzio's childhood, focusing on a crucial aspect of the poet's mythology: the personal details and events that, in retrospect, could be considered auguries of his future greatness. Shvarts notes that from a very young age, D'Annunzio sensed that he had been singled out for an extraordinary fate: "Early on, he sensed that he was in possession of a singular gift, and a singular destiny."[323] The most important of these auguries from the poet's childhood was a deep cut he received while pulling a dangerous stunt. Shvarts devotes several pages to the story and its implications, treating it as a spiritual initiation (which is how D'Annunzio himself saw it), a prefiguring of his future poetic calling. Shvarts describes the moment the young D'Annunzio sees his wounded hand in ecstatic, almost mystical terms, linking the sight of blood to an awareness of a secret relation between creativity and mortal danger – a leitmotif that runs through the Italian poet's life, and that is present in the Lavinia cycle as well: "Зрелище крови из своей порезанной руки (ребенок впервые осознал, что внутри него течет красная, соленая жидкость) – все это причиняло ему «острый спазм ужаса», которого он боялся и жаждал всю жизнь, считая, что это ощущение и лежит в основе всякого творчества и вдохновения" [The spectacle [zrelishche] of blood pouring from his sliced-up hand (the child first became aware that there was a red, salty liquid flowing inside him) – all this filled him with a "sharp spasm of terror," which he would fear and crave for the rest of his life, believing that this sensation lay at the heart of all creative work and inspiration].[324]

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[323] Ibid., 18.

[324] Ibid., 20.

In her autobiographical essays, particularly those collected in "The Visible Side of Life"

[*Vidimaia storona zhizni*], Shvarts creates her own "mythology of origin";[325] and there are

striking similarities between her stories of poetic initiation and D'Annunzio's. Both think of key

events in their childhoods as having mystical significance; both erase distinctions between fact,

memory, and imagination; both focus on intimations of powerful, mysterious forces surrounding

the child, forces which will shape them as adults and as poets.[326] But where D'Annunzio's

mythology of origin is organized into a coherent narrative of predestination, Shvarts's

autobiographical anecdotes are intentionally disorganized; one story simply follows another

(though not, we sense, in chronological order), without narrative shape or hierarchy. Moreover,

while D'Annunzio's self-mythologizing is dead serious, Shvarts's is frequently imbued with

irony. In one very short anecdote, titled "Red" [Krasnoe], Shvarts recounts a frightening

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[325] Stephanie Sandler, "On Grief and Reason, On Poetry and Film: Elena Shvarts, Joseph Brodsky, Andrei Tarkovsky," *The Russian Review* 66 (October 2007), 654.

[326] In Shvarts's 1986 poem "Kindergarten Thirty Years Later" [*Detskii sad cherez tridtsat' let*, *SES* I, 234-5], Shvarts recalls realizing that everyone carries blood in them after seeing her own for the first time. This is one of many memories and allusions threaded into a ravaged industrial landscape where the speaker went to school:

Здесь я увидела первый снег
И узнала, что носит кровь в себе человек,
Когда пальчик иглою мне врач окровянил.
Ах, за что же, Господи, так меня ранил?

[Here I saw my first snow / And learned that man carried blood inside / When the doctor bloodied my finger with a needle. / Ah Lord, why did you wound me so?]

Here, a routine inoculation becomes a ritual bloodletting, a wound received from God. "Detskii sad" obliquely touches on the overlap between poetic vocation and the biblical (and Pushkinian) language of prophetic calling, with the line "And because here You said 'Play'" [I za to, chto zdes' Ty skazal: igrai]. The following lines ("I za to, chto oduvanchik na mogilakh rvala / I chestno veseloi, schastlivoi byla"), where the speaker imagines herself as a little girl picking dandelions off of graves, recalls Hölderlin's lines about picking flowers as a boy in "Da ich ein Knabe war," as well as the image of God as a boy beheading thistles in Goethe's "Prometheus." Like Goethe's poem, Shvarts's ends with a scornful last-minute challenge directed at God: "O give me, for that, Your own power / to curse You and my childhood" [O dai mne za eto Tvoiu zhe vlast / Tebia, i detstvo svoe prokliast]. In the Lavinia cycle, the speaker uses childhood pathos differently: childhood memories (the few that are there) are archetypal, like those in a Saint's Life, but the language and moods of childhood are everywhere. Both in "Detskii sad" and in the D'Annunzio book, Shvarts locates mystical wounding in childhood, suggesting that childhood plays a part in the scenes of wounding and sacrifice in the Lavinia poems as well, as a topos or way of being rather than a subject. D'Annunzio's wound was also in his finger.

encounter with a rooster, who chases her as if it wanted to scratch her eyes out. Panicked, she falls and scrapes her knee, "becoming red myself, like everything that's dangerous" (*SES* III, 173). But before the connection she intuits between her own blood, the redness of the world (and of the rooster who terrorizes her), and the constant presence of danger can assume mythic proportions, Shvarts shifts her tone and attention, ending her story with a dry note about the rooster who "circles [her] a couple of times triumphantly and leaves." Such charming ironic deflation is typical of Shvarts's writing in general. Her willingness to shift stylistically from the sublime to the wry and parodic at a moment's notice makes her self-mythologizing (and her explorations of ecstasies, agonies, terrors, etc.) quite different from D'Annunzio's, despite the themes and concerns they have in common.

In talking about D'Annunzio, Shvarts also uses these tonal and stylistic shifts as a way to address the worst aspects of her subject—his cruelty, despotism, and narcissism—without condemning him outright. In the sections about the poet's youth, D'Annunzio's cruelty serves as a portent, no less significant than his mystical initiation. For instance, Shvarts writes about the "psychological experiments" (D'Annunzio's phrase) the budding poet would conduct on himself and others as a child, just because he was curious to see what would happen.[327] Moments like these prefigure the poet's subsequent treatment of those closest to him, especially women. To give just one striking example, Shvarts recounts an episode in the love affair between D'Annunzio and the great Italian actress Eleanora Duse, involving a hedge maze near Cairo:

> Дузе и Д'Аннунцио вместе вошли в эти переплетения живой изгороди, но вскоре он отстал, выбрался из этой путаницы зарослей и издали, сквозь просветы в листьях, с блокнотом в руках наблюдал за актрисой, которая сначала спокойна искала выход, потом беспомощно металась, царапаясь в кровь о колючие кусты, кричала, рыдала, и в конце концов в бессильных слезах упала на землю. Тогда только возлюбленный поспешил ей на помощь.

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[327] *Gabriele D'Annuntsio*, 23.

Together, Duse and D'Annunzio entered these intertwined living hedgerows, but soon he fell behind, found his way out of this tangle of thickets, and, from afar, through gaps in the leaves and with notebook in hand, observed the actress as she looked for the exit, calmly at first; then dashing to and fro, scratching herself on the spiny bushes until she bled, screaming, weeping, and finally falling to the ground in tears of helplessness. Only then did her beloved rush to her aid.[328]

In her account, Shvarts's neutral narrative style begins to show emotional strain as the clauses pile up, and by the end it barely belies her horror at D'Annunzio's cruelty (the pointed irony of the word *vozliublennyi* ["her beloved"] is about as close to disgust as Shvarts gets in this volume). Shvarts uses a similar approach to convey her subject's narcissism. By simply but relentlessly presenting detail after detail from his life, she arrives (when the subject calls for it) at a cumulative effect of incredulity, distaste, even something close to anger, without shifting her tone too far from deadpan. Occasionally, the book can read like a satire; for instance, Shvarts recalls an episode when D'Annunzio's friend makes him swear on a stack of blank paper that he won't kill himself (despite the poet's fervent wish to do so) until he has released his potential book from those empty pages, like a statue from a block of marble.[329] Such anecdotes also suggest (again, without stating it outright) that D'Annunzio's behavior, egregious as it may seem to us, was encouraged and validated in his own time, not just by his friends, but by the entire era – or at least by its cultural elites, eager to give genius carte blanche and see what would happen. The satirical strain in Shvarts's narrative, which the author allows to develop but only at a distance, comes from the ironic discrepancy between how D'Annunzio was perceived in his own time and how he appears to readers who know how the twentieth century turned out. To further

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[328] Ibid., 161.

[329] Ibid., 109.

complicate matters, when Shvarts does weigh in explicitly, it is to show that on some occasions, and particularly in some poems, the Italian's poet's sublimity really does hold up.

Another way that Shvarts emphasizes her subject's recklessness with power, without casting aside the biographer's mask of impartiality, is by tracing the long-term effects D'Annunzio had on the many lives that he touched, even after their paths diverged. This includes both individuals (family, friends, lovers), and people en masse (e.g., the 600,000 Italian soldiers who died in World War I, a war that Italy joined, in large part, at the poet's urging, according to Shvarts). Shvarts sees the basis of all D'Annunzio's relationships in his legendary charisma. The same power underlies both his seductive charm and his ability to hold entire crowds—even entire nations—in thrall. Shvarts dwells on the poet's charisma at length, but her digressions (especially the ones about D'Annunzios ex-lovers) can also be read as strategies of resistance; to take an *otstuplenie*[330] away from D'Annunzio is to break with his spell – even the spell a charismatic subject can cast on his biographer. In these digressions, which read like biographies in miniature, Shvarts goes into detail about the effect that knowing the Italian poet had on women after he parted ways with them. These digressions reveal D'Annunzio at his worst. We are left with the impression that the poet ruined as many lives as he touched; his ex-lovers struggled with self-determination and mental health, and even tended to give up their careers – sometimes brilliant ones, as with the pianist Luisa Baccara.

A notable exception to this pattern is Eleanora Duse, who emerges as a kind of heroine of Shvarts's book – a figure no less brilliant, and far more admirable, than the poet. Shvarts reveres Duse as an artist, but they have another thread in common as well: Duse's parents were itinerant

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[330] Literally "digression." Shvarts subtitles her digressions about various secondary characters "Otstuplenie v storonu..." [Digression on...].

actors, and she spent her entire childhood in the theater; Shvarts's mother, Dina, was head of the

literature department at the Bolshoi Drama Theater in Leningrad, and instrumental to the

theater's success. The young Shvarts spent much of her own childhood in theaters, both in her

home city and on tour. Shvarts's portrait of Duse provides a striking contrast to that of

D'Annunzio. Duse, as Shvarts points out, was a great artist in her own right, but unlike

D'Annunzio, she cared deeply about others, and tried to help people whenever and however she

could; during World War I, for instance, she performed in plays on the front, volunteered as a

nurse, and wrote letters for wounded soldiers.[331] Shvarts also points to contrasts between the

poet's and actress's approaches to art: Duse disappeared into her roles, dissolving her ego in the

characters she played, while D'Annunzio's poetic personae were aggrandized versions of the

biographical man. Duse lived for her public and saw no meaning in art without them, while

D'Annunzio viewed his public with suspicion, sometimes openly despising them.

     For Shvarts, a vital thread that runs through all of D'Annunzio's actions, one that she

sees as crucial to understanding his entire persona, is theatricality; and indeed, a passion for

theater and masks is probably the deepest affinity between the biographer and her subject. For

both Shvarts and D'Annunzio, theatricality was a useful way to conceive of self-presentation and

personal relationships, and was equally applicable to personal, creative, and political arenas.

Moreover, while rooted in play, theatricality as both Shvarts and D'Annunzio conceive of it is

anything but innocuous. In his early poetry, as Shvarts points out, D'Annunzio used masks to

purely aesthetic ends; for instance, in the lyric heroes he created, some of them for books

published under pseudonyms. Later in life, not content with exploring poetic masks, D'Annunzio

began to conceive of theater in ever-grander terms. In middle age, he became obsessed with

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[331] Ibid, 323.

Ancient Greek theater, and tried (mostly unsuccessfully) to adapt its principles to contemporary Italian drama. He dreamed of a theater that would serve a vital role in the social and political life of the people, and through which he could mold popular sentiment (he idolized Wagner and Nietzsche). D'Annunzio's turn to politics, as Shvarts argues, stemmed from the same passion for theatricality that informed his dramaturgy; moreover, the goal in both cases (as in most of his personal relationships) was the marriage of aesthetic sensibility and power. As she points out, it was no coincidence that D'Annunzio launched his political career simultaneously with his first forays into theater: "The theater seemed like a more effective instrument of influence over the masses than speeches in parliament."[332] D'Annunzio's dictatorship of Fiume, for which he is widely remembered today and which serves as the climax of Shvarts's book, is presented as the culmination of both his theatrical ambition and his obsession with power: it was here that the poet hit upon the type of speechifying, the self-presentation, the vocabulary of gestures, and the symbolic paraphernalia that would be copied by Mussolini and Hitler.

Shvarts devotes many pages to D'Annunzio's aesthetic sensibility, and lingers on the connections between his aesthetic and political ambitions. To many contemporaries, D'Annunzio's turn to politics seemed inexplicable. His poetry, particularly his early poetry, gave him the reputation of a decadent aesthete, someone who believed in art for art's sake and was therefore completely uninterested in politics – and indeed D'Annunzio's disdain for the general public and for what he saw as the crudeness and dirtiness of political machinations, come across clearly in Shvarts's account. For this very reason, D'Annunzio's turn to politics is one of the most crucial plotlines in the narrative. In Shvarts's telling, it is a very gradual turn, as D'Annunzio, tentatively at first, overcomes his initial distaste to discover—to his own

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[332] Ibid., 147.

amazement and delight—that political power could serve as the culmination of his lifelong

fascination with his own charisma, his vaguely Nietzschean views on society and talent, and

even his Romantic notion that life (or at least a hero's or poet's life) should be lived at an

extreme, if not fatal, intensity. But he would have to create the form of political power that

would best serve his needs, and this creative act was (to his mind) his ultimate triumph of life

theater, a perfect union of art and power. Shvarts portrays nearly all of D'Annunzio's roles and

actions (including his treatment of women, his warmongering, his aristocratic and saintly poses,

his time as a pilot, and his dictatorship) as a kind of life theater, a form of Life-creation

[*zhiznetvorchestvo*] that resembles, but is not identical to, the Symbolist model. Many of his

most ardent early admirers (among them several giants of twentieth-century literature) were

repelled by D'Annunzio after his turn to politics, but Shvarts's narrative presents the aesthete

and authoritarian as two interrelated aspects of a fairly consistent personality, and treats the

dictatorship at Fiume as an aesthetic production, as much as a political one.

Somewhere around the climax of her narrative, in the section devoted to Fiume, Shvarts

quotes a passage from D'Annunzio's memoirs, in which he describes the moment he perfected—

following years of gradual improvement—the art of the political speech. In his telling, the key to

perfecting this art lay in improvisation:[333] treating the speech not as something to be memorized

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[333] In Romantic poetics, improvisation can serve as proof of prophetic talent, indicating that the poet is an instrument in the grip of divine powers. As Wiktor Weintraub has argued, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, improvisation shifted from a very specific, minor sub-genre of poetry—viewed more as a mechanical skill than an art form—to a mark of genius (Wiktor Weintraub, "The Problem of Improvisation in Romantic Literature," *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 16 [Jan. 1, 1964], 119-37). Adam Mickiewicz, by all accounts a phenomenal improviser (and whose improvisations were typically on the theme of Poland's national destiny), was at the center of this shift. Improvisation became a crucial aspect of Mickiewicz's self-mythologizing; as Bożena Shallcross writes: "The success of any improvisation depended entirely on the persuasive ability of the improvisator. In this regard, as borne out in other descriptions, the audience recognized Mickiewicz's genius immediately and was moved by his combination of kinetic energy, sense of theater, and overwhelming personality" (Bożena Shallcross, "'Wondrous Fire': Adam Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* and the Romantic Improvisation," *East European Politics and Societies*, Vol. 9, No. 3 [September 1995], 525).

from a sheet of paper (not merely as a performance) but as an extempore creative act, in which the audience itself was the material. In the scene where D'Annunzio stands before the people of Fiume, the crowd is presented as a "faceless human mass," simmering and bubbling up "like molten material." Speaking to this malleable audience, the poet feels an "irrepressible power rising in [his] breast," senses an "effulgence growing between [his] teeth and tongue," and starts to shout (shouting plays an important role in the context of creative speech in the Lavinia cycle as well).[334] Here, in the context of a political speech (one that clearly anticipates the speeches of fascist dictators), we can see clearly D'Annunzio's conception of the relationship between art and power. In addition to the theatricality of emerging from behind curtains to stand before a crowd, modulating his voice, and so on, Shvarts also notes that D'Annunzio used the tools of his poetic craft to sway the crowd, even if this occasionally made his speeches incomprehensible to his audience. His speeches were peppered with obscure mythological and literary allusions, he used complex metaphors and other poetic devices, and relied on the sheer power of rhythm and rhyme to draw the crowd in like an incantation. Despite their intense and often obscure lyricism, his speeches always succeeded in bending the will of the people his way – the performance of power was far more important than the speeches' actual content, which few of his followers actually understood.

Even here, though, Shvarts does not condemn D'Annunzio; she even points out his relative benevolence as a dictator; for instance, in his refusal to imprison or execute wrongdoers, even traitors. She writes at length about the constitution of Fiume, written by the poet himself. This extraordinary document reflects D'Annunzio's aesthetic elitism (in the provision, for instance, that people of superior talent, and poets in particular, would make up the ruling class),

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[334] *Gabriele D'Annuntsio*, 359.

but also tries to do away with alienation of labor, to provide a space where everyone could live and work to the best of their abilities. Shvarts also notes that Fiume prefigured not just various fascist movements (ideologically as well as aesthetically) but—in its emphasis on free love and on a particular kind of public social performance—the countercultural movements of the 60s as well.

In her discussion of D'Annunzio's charismatic speeches, Shvarts stops short of accusing D'Annunzio outright of abusing the poet's privilege, but she does offer a brief digression about Nikolai Gumilev, who idolized the Italian poet and dreamed of being anointed a poet-prophet, just like the Italian, someone "whom the people entrusted with their fate, and who would prophesy [*veshchat'*] in the name of nature itself."[335] Then, in parentheses, Shvarts offers the briefest of explanations about the relationship between the poet's creative power and his or her social role : "This is why [the poet] is trusted in the first place: the poet is always the voice of terrible and mysterious powers." In this aside, Shvarts appears to hint at a grave recklessness on D'Annunzio's part, while also shifting agency from the poet to the mysterious powers; hovering between accusing D'Annunzio of abusing the trust of the people, and exculpating him by presenting the "mysterious powers" who spoke through him as an alibi.

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Art and Power Seen Askance: Shvarts's Lavinia

In D'Annunzio, Shvarts sees someone whose exalted sense of his poetic calling, combined with a penchant for Life-creation (of a kind) determined the roles he would play throughout his life—poet, prophet, lothario, soldier, statesman, and dictator—and justified (both

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[335] Ibid., 288.

in his own mind and for the culture that validated him) his chauvinism, his pseudo-Nietzschean views on society, power, and genius, his borderline fascism, and his cruelty. Shvarts is fascinated by D'Annunzio's extravagant personality, his erudition and idealism, his complete devotion to art, and his ability to change masks with ease, but she also sees something insidious in the roles he played, and is appalled by the suffering and violence they sometimes led to. As a biographer she mostly suspends judgement, while letting occasional moments of admiration or censure through. At the same time, she shows her ambivalence toward her subject's ideas and actions through her use of irony, and by drawing implicit connections between his aesthetic sensibility and his treatment of others. Shvarts also suggests that D'Annunzio was reckless with his poetic gifts, and with the power they both bestowed and legitimized.

Shvarts's portrait of D'Annunzio is so absorbing, in part, because of the affinities between the two poets; Shvarts herself does not shy away from cruelty, aloofness, or grandeur in her work, and her intensity and theatricality are more than a match for D'Annunzio's. Unlike the Italian poet, however, Shvarts examines the implications of poetic calling, rather than just using it as a means to various ends; she is particularly interested in tracing the connections between creative power, coercion, and cruelty. She does this by creating distance between self and text, even at moments of greatest lyric intensity. As a result, her exploration of the intersection of poetic calling and power is given its most sustained treatment in her pseudonymous works—the poetic cycles she wrote in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the voices of fictional personae—in part because the conceit of fictional authorship allowed for even greater degrees of irony and distance. Actually, these personae are not quite pseudonyms, since Shvarts doesn't hide behind them, and takes credit for them. Nor are they quite heteronyms in the tradition of Fernando Pessoa or Søren Kierkegaard. Unlike those two, whose heteronyms function as alternate

unmediated selves, no more or less fictional than their flesh-and-blood authors, Shvarts is candid

about the fiction and theatricality of her invented personae. As she describes it in an

"explanatory" note included with a volume of these poetic cycles, the one thing these works have

in common is "their greasepaint, their speaking from behind a mask, their disguised (or reborn)

author."[336] According to Shvarts, this theatricality allows for greater freedom of play within the

work, and the distance they put between author and speaker can give the author new perspectives

onto herself. As she writes, "it's so refreshing once in a while to get as far from oneself as

possible, so that one can return all the more faithfully."[337] Shvarts's choice of theatrical language

reflects her lifelong interest in theater, and highlights the theater's paradoxical ability to lead to

self-knowledge through estrangement. At the same time, the ostensible authors of these

pseudonymous works are not just masks for Shvarts but fictional characters in their own right.[338]

Shvarts grouped five of these cycles together in one volume, titled *Mundus Imaginalis*

(published by EZRO in 1996); the longest are "Cynthia" [Kinfiia], a group of poems ostensibly

written by "the heroine of Propertius's elegies," as Shvarts calls her, and a short collection by a

fictional Estonian poet named Arno Tsart. Theatricality, play with masks, and distancing

techniques are common threads in these works. The Cynthia poems are purported translations of

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[336] "Neobiazatel'nye poiasneniia," in *Mundus Imaginalis: Kniga otvetvlenii* (SPb: EZRO, 1996), online at http://www.vavilon.ru/texts/shvarts1-6.html. Last accessed October 21, 2018. Note that *neobiazatel'nyi* can mean "optional," "unnecessary," and "unreliable." Shvarts suggests that her "explanation" should be taken with a grain of salt (if at all).

[337] Ibid.

[338] Thus, another important verse tradition that has bearing on Shvarts's pseudonymous cycles, and on the Lavinia cycle in particular, is the Russian verse narrative. As opposed to narrative poetry (such as the *Bronze Horseman*), verse narrative is typically a cycle with the outline of a semi-coherent plot, and is made up of lyric poems – the "Poems of Yuri Zhivago" are a prime example. In the early twenty-first century, this narrative impulse in lyric poetry is carried on by Maria Stepanova.

texts that have not come down to us, while the works of Arno Tsart are distanced from their real-life author both through their fictional persona and their use of nested framing devices. As Shvarts explains (also in the "Neobiazatel'nye poiasneniia"), the fictional Tsart was so smitten with a shape-shifting woman-fox, whom he read about it a Chinese book (a fiction within a fiction) that he wrote his poems in her voice. The "Works of Arno Tsart" are thus written in the voice of a female poet (Shvarts) posing as a male poet (Tsart) posing as a sorceress (the shapeshifter, who appears in most of the poems in her fox guise). But the longest and, for Shvarts, most important of these theatrical cycles is the *Works and Days of Lavinia*, published in a separate volume by Ardis in 1987. This is a group of 78 poems ostensibly written (or possibly dictated) by a mystically-inclined nun between Christmas and Easter; along with additional materials that function as framing devices – a set of epigraphs, a preface by a fictional male editor, and a poem by Lavinia's fictional friend, another nun from the same religious order. The Order of the Circumcision of the Heart, also an invention of Shvarts's, is highly syncretic – "ecumenical," according to the fictional editor, although it draws on Buddhism as well as Orthodoxy and Catholicism, and the cycle also includes references to Jewish, Islamic, and pagan cultures. It's not easy to reconstruct the Order's precepts based on Lavinia's highly personal and lyrical account, but her own interpretation combines traditional Christian and Buddhist virtues with views that any church would find heretical. In Lavinia's theology, God is distant, cruel, and demanding; Jesus appears only fleetingly; and all the emphasis is on a marvelously (and sometimes terrifyingly) present cosmology of saints, spirits, sacred animals, and demons, many of whom roam the monastery grounds.

Lavinia is a poet—the proof is right in front of us—but this fact is played down throughout the cycle, both by the speaker and everyone around her, especially the editor who

authorizes the publication of the book and mediates between Lavinia and the reader. Moreover, the very traits that presumably stem from her poetic gift (eccentricity bordering on madness, recalcitrance, pride, visionary imagination) also inform her idiosyncratic approach to religion, and may have something to do with why she is chastised, threatened, and ultimately excluded by her sisters in faith. Yet despite, or perhaps because of, the overlap between her religious and poetic callings, they remain irreconcilable. Taken out of their monastic context, Lavinia's spirituality, transgressions and all, can be reframed in terms of Romantic or Symbolist visionary poetics. Indeed, Lavinia is a poet in the mold of a Romantic poet-prophet or a Symbolist seer; a major difference from these models is that she has no nation, no guiding sense of destiny, and no audience. Although she talks about herself and her imagination in language associated with Romantic notions of poetic genius, she does not think of herself as particularly worthy, or even really as a poet. Her explicit vocation is nun, and much of the cycle revolves around her efforts to be a better nun.

This contrast in their sense of vocation is what makes Shvarts's Lavinia such a compelling counterpoint to Shvarts's D'Annunzio. Both are gifted visionary poets, who revel in excess and can't seem to help themselves; but while D'Annunzio indulges his ego and is fully aware of his power, shaping a destiny for himself that he treats as his birthright, Lavinia is suspended between her genius for poetry and her monastic vocation – she senses her power, too, but is much more ambivalent about it. More than anything, she sees herself as an eternal student, constantly struggling not to fall behind, mostly failing, and living under constant threat of expulsion. At the same time, unlike D'Annunzio, whom Shvarts depicts, in part, as a cautionary tale against the excesses of narcissistic self-indulgence, Lavinia is both a wild rebel and a kind, caring soul. And while Lavinia's poetry mirrors that of Shvarts, the two figures are very

different: Shvarts was firmly convinced of her poetic vocation from a young age, and never lacked for an audience or praise. Ultimately, both Lavinia and D'Annunzio suffer unenviable fates; but perhaps by donning Lavinia's tragic mask, the mask of a poet who can't live as one, Shvarts comes to a clearer understanding of the poet's vocation, its pleasures, dangers, and temptations, and therefore of herself. And something similar can be said of Shvarts's final theatrical experiment of looking through D'Annunzio's eyes, the eyes of a poet who says yes to everything, gives in to every temptation, crosses every limit, and—all the while imagining himself to be a kind of modern-day Dante or Goethe—helps usher in an age of authoritarianism and terror.

Shvarts draws on several traditions for the Lavinia poems, which can be roughly divided into religious and secular; and these traditions combine to inform the conflicting aspects of Lavinia's lyric persona, her often simultaneous resemblance to a medieval mystic and a *poète maudit*. Religious influences include Orthodox and Catholic folk traditions, saints' lives (*vitae*), iconographic depictions, and medieval mystical literature; secular influences include Rimbaud and Verlaine, Greek myth, and the Russian Symbolists. Like Lavinia's own conflicting vocations and spiritual affiliations, these sets of influences overlap, but also represent polar opposites: one sacred, the other profane.

Of all its sacred influences, mystical literature, in particular, seems to inform the structure and themes of Shvarts's cycle. There are numerous similarities between the Lavinia cycle and the books produced by medieval female mystics, such as those of Mechthild of Magdeburg, Angela of Foligno, and Marguerite Porete. As Barbara Newman has argued, a common theme in medieval mystical literature produced by women is self-annihilation. But as Newman also argues, "a soul's desire for annihilation is on some level deeply opposed to a desire for

authorship, which can preserve the trace of an individual self for all time."[339] The tradition of female mysticism thus offers Shvarts an alternative model of charismatic leadership, one where exceptional visionary gifts coexist paradoxically with extreme humility. A common genre of medieval mystical books is the visionary liturgical commentary, which recalled or transcribed (sometimes by amanuenses overhearing an ecstatic episode) revelations, dreams, and memories as they occurred over the course of the liturgical year[340] – similarly to how Shvarts structures the Lavinia cycle. (D'Annunzio's last book, *Il libro segreto*, from which Shvarts quotes at length in her biography, is also framed as a quasi-mystical confession.) Examining how female mystics reconciled their stated desire for self-annihilation (conceived as an ecstatic act of ultimate humility before God) with authorship (with its suggestion of self-aggrandizement), Newman notes several practices, such as leaving out the author's name, communal authorship, and the justification that the book is authored solely for the benefit of others.[341] Of the three mystics Newman considers, Angela of Foligno resembles Lavinia most closely; as Newman describes it, "[Angela's] way of enacting divine love is flamboyantly shocking. Imitating Saint Francis, she strips herself naked before a crucifix; ostentatiously if gradually sheds her considerable wealth; grows so fervent in her love of God that whenever someone speaks of him, she screams; and during a pilgrimage to Assisi, collapses at the portal of the church, shouting with inarticulate cries." And: "She [Angela] may strike a modern reader as spiritually bipolar, veering between ecstatic union and crushing despair, utter certainty of God's favor and lacerating doubt."[342]

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[339] Barbara Newman, "Annihilation and Authorship: Three Women Mystics of the 1290s," *Speculum* Vol. 91, No. 3 (July 2016), 591.

[340] Ibid., 597.

[341] Ibid., 599-604.

[342] Here and above, Ibid., 607.

Another theme of Angela's book is vacillation between pride at being considered a saint, and at her special access to the divine, and mortification at this same pride, and at the profound sinfulness it implies. Summing up the paradox of medieval female mystical writing, she asks: "How can an annihilated soul, who has vanished into the Godhead where she was before she was created, seek the permanence of a literary monument?"[343]

In the Lavinia cycle, the sacred mystical tradition has its counterpoint in Symbolist poetics, in particular the figures of the *poète maudit* and the theurge. According to the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics,* the *poète maudit* reflects "the widening gulf in 19th century France between the gifted poet and the public on whom his survival might depend." The accursed poet always exists in relation to a society that rejects him; this late-Romantic idea suggests that poets "are envied and hated for their superior qualities by society and its rulers who fear the truths they tell. Thereafter, a sick, impoverished, or dissolute poet of significant but generally unrecognized talent came to be seen in these terms as doubly victimized by a hostile and insentient society."[344] The image of the poet as a visionary outcast is the flipside of the Promethean poet-prophet: both construct secular identities (in relation to the public, or even to society at large) out of a sense of spiritual calling, chosenness, and access to irrational (or divine) forces. Both sacred and secular, in this case, partake of the visionary; both negotiate between the

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[343] Ibid., 628. Medieval mysticism is also a gendered field, with male and female mystics drawing on different tropes and models. Here, I focus on the female tropes of medieval mysticism, which, as Amy Hollywood has noted, is based on specific markers of women's alterity, understood as "tied to nature, materiality, and the realm of immanence and at the same time viewed as other than, hence in a certain sense transcendent to, men. Women's alterity is therefore marked both by negation and excess" (Amy M. Hollywood, "Beauvoir, Irigaray, and the Mystical," *Hypatia*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (November 1994), 158-9). This gendered conception of alterity, with its oxymoronic concurrence of immanence and transcendence, negation and excess, is worth considering in Lavinia's case.

[344] *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1051.

exhilarating knowledge of the self's exceptionalism, on the one hand, and abasement and rejection on the other.

Lavinia also embodies both positive and negative attributes of two early Russian Symbolist models of the poet: the poet-as-degenerate and the poet-as-theurge. Lavinia's supposed madness plays into the former model; as Olga Matich points out, the fin-de-siècle saw "the emergence of an important cultural discourse...that entwined artistic decadence and the pseudoscientific theory of degeneration," and as a result, "early modernism was imbricated with contemporary medical investigations of declining mental and physical health."[345] Thus, when the unnamed editor presents Lavinia's poetry as illustrative of her psychopathology, this not only alludes (archly, perhaps) to Freudian notions of literary criticism, but also to the early modernist discourse that saw "disturbed" or "degenerate" poetry as a medically useful reflection or even symptom of the poet-patient's health. The main proponent of the theory of degeneration, Max Nordau, was well known in fin-de-siècle Russia, where his theories were popularized by Boris Glinsky. Glinsky argued that Symbolist poets were pathological subjects, whose writings were "the patrimony of psychiatric literature" and could be used to accurately diagnose their authors with various forms of degenerative illness.[346] As the fictional editor's preface makes clear, early twentieth-century theories of the interweaving of aesthetic and psychopathological discourses are important to Shvarts's presentation of Lavinia, at least on the level of the collection's frames.

In contrast to the image of the poet-as-degenerate, the poet-as-theurge was a model for valorizing the poet's creative power while minimizing the importance of selfhood. One of the most important intertexts for the Lavinia cycle is Viacheslav Ivanov's monumental collection

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[345] Matich, *Erotic Utopia*, 11.

[346] Ibid., 15.

Cor ardens, first published in its entirety in 1912. Like the Lavinia poems, *Cor ardens* frames autobiography as mystical experience, and focuses on the paradoxes of the poet's unique status in the world. On the one hand, Ivanov, as Michael Wachtel points out, "attributed to the artist special abilities of perception" that allowed him or her special access to the divine will.[347] This is applicable not just to the Lavinia cycle but to Shvarts's conception of the poet's vocation in general – recall her characterization in "Imitation of Boileau" of the poet as a ripped-out eye tied, for a moment, to a "roaring divinity." On the other hand, Ivanov also de-emphasized the artist's subjective will, arguing that the artist's theurgic vocation necessitated the recognition of an objective truth, which in turn "left no room for the subjective will of the individual artist."[348] This, too, can be seen in Shvarts's conception of the poet, especially in the Lavinia cycle, where, as we shall see, Lavinia's relationship to the self is one of non-attachment. Ivanov, like Bely and Briusov, was drawn to the theory and practice of Life-creation, at least in the period when *Cor ardens* was being written. Ivanov's experiments in Life-creation informed his idea that art was "inextricably linked to all aspects of human endeavor," and his belief in the necessity for the artist to transcend the purely aesthetic in the service of transforming life itself.[349] In addition to this general view on the relationship between art and life, there are also strikingly specific correspondences between *Cor ardens* and the Lavinia poems: their mystical, symbolic language, their agricultural imagery and sun imagery, their tropes of drunkenness, their liquid imagery (intense life imagined as flowing liquid), their shared notion of symbolic wounding (including analogies to crucifixion), and their overall syncretism – especially the way both works layer

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[347] Michael Wachtel, "Viacheslav Ivanov: From Aesthetic Theory to Biographical Practice," in Paperno, *Creating Life*, 153.

[348] Ibid.

[349] Ibid., 152.

mythological and biblical allusions, often in one and the same image. As Wachtel argues, "Ivanov thought in terms of homologies, relying on similarities between myths that were separated both temporally and spatially. This desire to connect disparate traditions is nowhere so evident as in *Cor ardens*."[350] As we shall see, this kind of layering and wide-reaching syncretism is at the very core of the Lavinia cycle, which draws on numerous religious traditions, including sectarian ones, and combines them, often in single images, with classical allusions, also drawn from multiple sources (epic, lyric, dramatic). Thus, the framework, allusiveness, and conception of poetic vocation in the Lavinia cycle owes a great deal to the Russian Symbolists, including Bely and Briusov, but is perhaps most indebted to the Ivanov of *Cor ardens*.

Turning back to the Lavinia cycle, I will first consider its overall structure, including its framing devices, major characters, themes, and lyric plot, and then look at several poems closely. The title, "Works and Days" [trudy i dni], is an allusion to Hesiod's didactic poem. The word *trudy* is a marked choice to describe someone's creative output (though not at all unusual for philosophy or science). These are not the "Poems" of Lavinia; not "Sochineniia" [lit. "compositions"] (the word used for the "Works of Arno Tsart") or "Knigi" ["books"] (which is how Shvarts, imitating Latin convention, divides Cynthia's poems), but *Trudy*. The word has multiple connotations, including everyday labor (such as the work done in a monastery), and academic or theological work. It is much more unusual to encounter it for poetry, although it was occasionally used in this sense in the nineteenth century. Though it is an usual word to describe poetic output, *trudy* also encompasses more kinds of output, more kinds of creativity: coupled with "days" [*dni*], it could refer not just (or perhaps not at all) to Lavinia's poetry, but also to her

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[350] Michael Wachtel, "Goethe and Novalis in the Life and Work of Viacheslav Ivanov," Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1990, 84.

other works – her miracles, sacrifices, mystical tasks (such as those described in "The Abbess's lessons" [*Uroki abbatisy*]), and acts of heroism and consolation. At the same time, the allusion to Hesiod, one of the earliest poets in the Western tradition, is a counterpoint to this distancing from the literary. Lavinia's cycle imitates a foundational poetic text—in its title, its structuring around a calendar, and its movements between work (spiritual and physical), mythology, and pious reflection—even as it is presented as an eccentrically titled, questionably authorized (i.e., authorized by an intervening editor, not the author), para-literary "selected works."

The title is part of the work's outermost frame – the collection itself, which is presented as a found document, sent to an editor by one of Lavinia's fellow nuns and published, not as poetry, but as a psychiatric case study.[351] We know nothing about how Lavinia composed the poems, whether she wrote them herself or dictated them. Perhaps the "sister" mentioned in the editor's foreword transcribed them.[352] (Curiously, the only time Lavinia refers explicitly to her poetry, it's to say that she "speaks" her verses.) Nor do we know who ordered the poems within the cycle – was it Lavinia herself, her fellow nun, or the editor? The ordering of the poems emphasizes numerous threads and connections among them, so it is tempting to think of Lavinia as the one who gave the cycle its structure, but this is far from certain. Finally, we don't know to what extent the sister, or the editor, changed the poems.

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[351] It's possible that this frame alludes to Velimir Khlebnikov, who avoided military conscription by checking himself into the Kharkov Provincial Psychiatric Hospital. As part of his psychiatric evaluation, he was asked by the doctor, V. Ia. Anfimov, to write several poems. Anfimov, who was interested in the link between creativity and pathology and subscribed to the contemporary theory of degeneration, diagnosed Khlebnikov with psychosis, but also acknowledged that the poet was exceptionally gifted and could be of great use to Soviet society. See V. Ia. Anfimov, "K voprosu o psikhopatologii tvorchestva: V. Khlebnikov v 1919 godu," online at http://hlebnikov.lit-info.ru/hlebnikov/about/anfimov.htm. Last accessed November 23, 2018.

[352] This anonymous sister could be Serafima, a friend of Lavinia's who is herself prone to mystical ecstasies; after all, the sister's introductory poem mentions St. Seraphim of Sarov – could this be the author coding her name into the text?

The second frame is the epigraphs, of which there are ten. To some extent, this frame counteracts the downplaying of Lavinia as a poet we see in the other frames: the superabundance of epigraphs (including quotes from Shvarts's contemporaries) performatively legitimizes what follows as the work of a real poet. Many of these epigraphs are taken from other poets' work, and some—such as the quote from Sedakova's cycle "Stanzas in the Manner of Alexander Pope" [*Stansy v manere Aleksandra Popa*]—touch on the difference between the poet and everyone else: "The poet is one who wants / what everyone wants to want" [Poet est' tot, kto khochet to, / chto vse khotiat khotet']. These lines, which open a poem dedicated to Shvarts, "First Stanzas" [*Stansy pervye*], state this difference as one in degree of nearness to desire, rather than to truth or power. Yet this difference too seems fundamental, especially in light of the meditations on desire that follow in the poem.[353] Shvarts's gathering of epigraphs contrasts with the third frame, the preface from a male psychiatrist, who won't call Lavinia a poet, marginalizing her with psychiatric discourse, pigeonholing her as a curiosity. The editor presents Lavinia's cycle as something that would be of interest chiefly to students of psychiatry, not of literature. He describes Lavinia's poetry with psychiatric jargon, as a "spontaneous eruption of the unconscious," and Lavinia herself is presented as a "contemporary consciousness," unable to cope with her own psychic "eruptions." While allowing that she is courageous (or defiant), and that she is a fascinating personality, the editor also pegs her work, and the flights of imagination in it, as *prichudlivye* – whimsical. While the editor's preface marginalizes Lavinia by presenting her poetry as a "special interest" case, it also reflects his doubts as to whether the publication would be interesting to readers; hence the justifications. His decision to go ahead with the publication can even be interpreted as a small act of courage. Indeed, the editor's psychiatric

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[353] Ol'ga Sedakova, "Stansy pervye," in *Stikhi* (Moscow: En Ef K'iu/Tu Print, 2001), 275.

discourse could serve as a kind of alibi, authorizing the publication (albeit through oblique channels) of radical poetry that would otherwise never have found a willing publisher. The editor's preface thus reflects the aforementioned "imbrication" of literary decadence with psychopathological discourse, not just in the early twentieth century but in the 1950s and 1960s as well, which witnessed a return to the tradition of pathologizing creativity. It also hints at the difficulty of direct statement and direct publication in Shvarts's own time. With this frame, Shvarts suggests that Lavinia's radical poems can only be published as psychiatric curiosities; in this view, the editor is not condescending at all, but a courageous figure who finds a clever way to package experimental art, giving it free passage into the tightly controlled world of published Soviet literature. A final irony is that the cycle's publication, at least in Shvarts's native country, is itself a fantastical conceit; these poems wouldn't be published in Russia until the 2000s.

The final frame is the sister's letter – the work of another poet-nun. The main theme of this verse letter is that both Lavinia and the monastery are exceptional, yet also universal; the convent is separate but also the whole world; and Lavinia is unique, but also a kind of Everywoman. Lavinia herself is of indeterminate age and appearance; from context we can infer that she is neither young nor old, neither beautiful nor ugly. In the letter from her sister, we read that she was "like a candle in a pit" (kak svechka v iame); that she had a single white hair growing out of her right shoulder; that she was both clever and foolish; that she was "like a ball...[that] would roll through the gardens at night"; and that she had shining eyes and smiling lips. In other words, she is both like anyone (and everyone), and unique.[354]

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[354] Lavinia's name comes from Virgil's *Aeneid*; she is the daughter of King Latinus, Aeneas's wife, and the original forebear of the Romans. In the *Aeneid*, her hair catches fire during a sacrifice in Book 7, and this is interpreted as an omen foretelling glory for Lavinia, but also war for her descendants. Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub. Co, 2005), 164.

The cycle is set in the period of the liturgical year between Christmas and Easter, a period that includes Carnival, Lent, and Holy Week, and that coincides with the gradual ending of winter and arrival of spring. It also reflects a movement from birth to death to resurrection, which has direct bearing on Lavinia's story. (Moreover, the two holidays, Christmas and Easter, are each of prime importance to Catholic and Orthodox Christians, respectively, playing into the ecumenism of Lavinia's Order.) As Sarah Clovis Bishop has pointed out, there are few time markers in the cycle, though there are more of them as the season approaches Easter.[355] Still, these references to time do exist throughout: one poem is a "dark Christmas song"; several poems in the middle mention Lent and the fast; and Easter—and spring—comes up numerous toward the end. This time of year is particularly fraught for someone in spiritual crisis, like Lavinia. It is a time for self-purification, submission to a higher authority.

The cycle itself doesn't have a coherent plot; instead, poems that describe Lavinia's dreams, visions and ecstasies (often matter-of-factly) are interspersed with memories of a pre-monastic life, mystical journeys, tasks, and interactions with other characters – some human (abbess, other nuns), others not (an apple tree, her guardian angel, whose relationship with her forms one of the main plotlines in the cycle). The guardian angel first appears to her in the form of a wolf in poem 7, falling into her life through a "prorub'" (lit. an ice-hole) in space. Later in the cycle, he transforms into a lion. Though he defends her steadfastly against demons, toward the end of the cycle Lavinia sends the lion away. He will return only in the last poem, to free Lavinia from her spiritual captivity after her expulsion from the monastery, and help her found her own hermitage. Other characters, such as her sister-nuns, abbess, and medic, also seem to

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[355] Sarah Clovis Bishop, "Harmonious Disharmony: Elena Shvarts's 'Trudy i dni Lavinii, monakhini iz ordena obrezaniia serdtsa'," *SEEJ*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (Summer 2012), 223.

exist in a world permeated with mysticism, and to possess miraculous, magical powers. In the last poem of the cycle, titled "Hermitage" [Skit], Lavinia is driven out of the monastery for good. She suffers for a while in what seems like a pit in the earth with a grate over it, until she is saved by her guardian Lion (an allusion to the Book of Daniel?). She founds her own hermitage, where she builds a hollow cross, climbs inside it, and stands there as "ages pass." Since this presumably happens around (or even on) Easter, Lavinia is imitating the crucified Christ. (The act of standing for "ages" also recalls the stylites, such as Simeon, who spent years standing on a pillar.) Is she dead? Immortal? Has she lost her mind, as the editor claims? We can't say for certain. Lavinia ends the cycle on a paradoxical note: "A living, standing tomb, / I fly before God alone" [Zhivoi i vstavsheiu mogiloi / Lechu pred Bogom odinoko] (*SES* II, 221).

Now I will consider five poems from the cycle in depth, beginning with "The Circumcision of the Heart" [Obrezanie serdtsa], which uses the language of poetic inspiration without mentioning poetry. I will then compare this poem to "When I speak verses" [Kogda ia stikhi govoriu], a poem about inspiration – and the only poem in the cycle that deals explicitly with the poet's power. Then, I will look at "Quest for the Fleece" [Za runom], in which a heroic quest is presented on an intimate scale, and myths about power and cruelty are reimagined as narratives of comfort and healing. Fourthly, I will read "At a Task" [Za rabotoi], in which a sister's resentful complaints lead to a philosophical meditation on giftedness and selfhood. Finally, I will turn to "The Resurrection of Tabitha by the Apostle Peter and an Attempt at Imitation" [Voskreshenie apostolom Petrom Tavify i popytka podrazhaniia]; here, a saint's miracle and Lavinia's failed imitation are presented as a lofty tragedy and its parody, leading to a new perspective on the relationship between glory (religious and artistic) and cruelty. In all these poems, I will focus on ways that Shvarts (through Lavinia's mask) keeps Lavinia's poetic calling

in suspension, and uses this suspension to examine the relationship among different modes of creativity, power, and cruelty – but only obliquely, through layered allusions and shifts in tone and register.

In both "The Circumcision of the Heart" and "When I speak verses" (which comes several pages later in the cycle), an intense experience is presented as both self-sacrifice and theater; the setting is both an altar and a stage. The crucial difference between them is that "When I speak verses" is explicitly about poetry, while "Circumcision of the Heart" is about an intense symbolic experience figured as a visceral event, using tropes and ideas drawn from a Romantic vocabulary of poetic inspiration. The indeterminacy of this event and its language, their association with both poetry and not-poetry, is typical of the Lavinia cycle, and reflects the suspension of Lavinia's poetic calling. In "The Circumcision of the Heart," Lavinia addresses God directly, as she prepares to offer Him the "bloody sacrifice" He requires:

<u>Обрезание сердца</u>

Значит, хочешь от меня
Жертвы кровавой.
На, возьми – живую кровь,
Плоть, любовь и славу.

Нет, не крайнюю плоть –
Даже если б была – это мало –
А себя заколоть
И швырнуть Тебе в небо.

Хоть совсем не голубица –
Захриплю я голубицей.
Миг еще пылает Жизнь,
Плещет, пляшет и струится.

Думала я – Ангел схватит
В миг последний лезвиё,
Но Тебе желанна жертва –
Сердца алое зерно. (*SES* II, 179-80)

[Circumcision of the Heart // So, You want from me / A *bloody* sacrifice. / Here, take it – {my} living blood, / Flesh, love and glory {or "fame"}. // No, not a foreskin – / Even if I had one – it wouldn't be enough – / But {for me to} slaughter myself / And fling {myself} to You in the sky. // Though I'm hardly a dove – / I'll start wheezing like a dove. / For one more moment, Life burns, / splashes, dances and flows. // I thought an Angel would grab / The blade at the last moment, / But You require a sacrifice – / The heart's scarlet seed.]

The poem is filled with linguistic equivalents of dramatic gestures, which makes the poem feel like a prayer gone awry; Lavinia addresses God, but the addressee remains invisible. It opens with a gesture of realization: whatever the speaker had offered God before was obviously not enough; He requires a "bloody sacrifice" from her ("bloody" [*krovavaia*] is emphasized through inversion, as if her mistake lay in thinking a bloodless sacrifice [e.g., the Eucharist] would suffice). So, in lines 3-4 she offers up the bloody sacrifice with another dramatic gesture: "Here, take it" [Na, voz'mi]. What she is offering is not the foreskin required by the Old Testament covenant, but something else – her own interpretation of Paul's injunction that circumcision should be "that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter."[356] Lavinia's interpretation is both literal and figurative. She offers Him her blood and flesh, and in the next quatrain she (again theatrically) inflates the offering to include her whole self, "slaughtered" [lit. "stabbed"] like a lamb and "flung" into the sky. At the same time, she offers up her "love and glory" [*liubov' i slava*], two ambiguous words with both sacred and profane meanings – *slava* can denote God's glory as well as worldly fame. The languages of poetic ambition and religious devotion overlap.

The moment of sacrifice is imagined as the killing of a dove (alluding to both a Temple sacrifice [korban] and the Holy Spirit); more precisely, it is imagined as the performance of such a death. Lavinia promises to play the dove, to impersonate it, although she is well aware that she is not one ("I'm hardly a dove"). *Zakhripet'*, the sound made by a dying dove, is a substitute for

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[356] Romans 2:29.

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human speech. In "Two Poems about Inspiration," Lavinia will "cry out" [*golosit'*] like a rooster. There, the animal sound is an explicit metaphor for the poet's not-quite-human, vatic speech; here, the speaker's "wheezing" is also liminal speech, though associated not with poetry but with the border between life and death. This border is figured as a "moment" [*mig*], a word that occurs twice in the poem, with different meanings. The first time, in line 11, it refers to an intense, expansive moment, when Life (capitalized in the poem) burns hottest because it is on the verge of death. Lavinia uses four verbs—burning, splashing, dancing, and flowing—with Life as their grammatical subject, verbs that emphasize movement, play, and transformation; and all of which are drawn from a Romantic vocabulary. Moreover, starting with this stanza, the meter settles into regular trochaic tetrameter, suggesting that the flowing intensity of this moment is excessive (overflowing) yet also has a regulating effect. The special conception of life in these lines—life as pure intensity, not just as biological functioning or everyday experience—are also familiar from Romanticism and its offshoots; indeed, it reached its apogee in D'Annunzio's life philosophy, as we saw earlier.

In the fourth quatrain, there is a shift in the timeframe; Lavinia is no longer speaking in the future tense, imagining how she will "wheeze" on the altar, or in the present tense of lines 11-12, as her life flares up and transforms at the moment of sacrifice. Now we are in the past, the deed done, the moment [*mig*] over. Here, in lines 13-16, Lavinia compares the sacrifice which has just taken place to the Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22). There, an angel stops Abraham at the last minute, and the story ends in a substitution – a ram for the boy. Here, the hoped-for intercession is imagined in more extreme terms (the angel would not just stop the killing but "grab...the blade"), but the anticipated intercession never comes; Lavinia's God is insistent and merciless. The word *mig* recurs in line 14, but here it suggests not an expansive moment on the

cusp of death, but a hypothetical moment that never comes, a betrayed redemption. In this scenario, Lavinia, who wields the blade against herself, plays both Abraham and Isaac. The *lezvie* (blade), with its stress on the final soft o (*lezvi[io]*), as opposed to the more standard *lezvi[e]*, sounds colloquial. Lavinia's combination of religious intensity with the folksiness of trochaic tetrameter and non-standard pronunciation, aligns this poem with Russian sectarian traditions (e.g., the khlysty, mentioned in the sister-nun's introductory poem), rather than mainstream Orthodoxy. The last line refers back to the "circumcision of the heart," but "scarlet seed" [aloe zerno] is a strange metaphor for a heart. It is as though cutting the heart will make it fertile; it is implied that something new will grow from Lavinia's sacrifice – though what exactly is not specified. It could be faith or grace or another religious virtue, or it could be a poem. Though the stakes are high, the poem ends on a minuscule scale with the image of a heart as a single crimson seed. The seed suggests that from Lavinia's self-annihilation, something could grow. It alludes to John 12:24: "Verily, verily I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." The biblical verse is part of the Parable of the Grain of Wheat, which is interpreted as an allegory of resurrection and the sacrifice of ego. The next verse reads "He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal"; this parable will turn up again as a subtext in "At a task," where the speaker renounces her attachment to life in order to comfort her friend. In "Circumcision of the Heart," the allusion to this parable also recalls Viacheslav Ivanov's use of the same allusion, in the four-line poem "Samoiskanie." In this poem, made up of two elegiac distichs, Ivanov calls the parable's central idea of finding oneself by losing one's self a natural law, then a human law, and finally a poet's law.[357] The heart imagery in "Circumcision of the

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[357] Ищет себя, умирая, зерно — и находит, утратив:
Вот твой, Природа, закон! вот твой завет, Человек!..

Heart," however, recalls Ivanov's collection *Cor ardens* (indeed, the whole scenario of mystical

wounding/transfiguration through an encounter with a celestial authority figure is reminiscent of

Ivanov's collection), where the heart is imbued with both religious and literary allegorical

symbolism.[358] Indeed, the sun imagery in Ivanov's book seems to inform the sun imagery in

Lavinia's cycle: e.g., the painfully radiant Christ in "The Abbess's Lessons" [*Uroki abbatisy*]

(*SES* II, 174), and the sun as a bearded, crowned figure in "Quest for the Fleece." The image of

the heart as a scarlet seed in "Circumcision of the Heart" draws on the Parable of the Seed in the

Gospel of John, and in Ivanov's poetry, to affirm that self-abnegation (including self-sacrifice) is

the true path to fulfillment. The speaker's bloody sacrifice of her heart to God conceals a

promise of restoration and self-attainment, a move similar to the Orthodox monastic practice of

kenosis in imitation of Jesus's self-emptying before God.

The kind of intense, all-encompassing experience described in this poem—one that is not

explicitly related to inspiration but whose language draws on romantic topoi of creativity—

occurs in several other poems in the cycle as well. In "Circumcision of the Heart," the moment

before the blade falls is placed in a rich symbolic context, combining allusions to both Old and

New Testaments with the Romantic notion of spiritual wounding as a starting point for

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Музыке темной внемлет Поэт — и не знает покоя,
Слыша ясней и ясней звук предреченных речей.

[Dying, the grain seeks itself – and, lost, finds itself: / This is your law, Nature! This is your testament, Man!.. / The Poet listens to dark music – and knows no peace, / Hearing, clearer and clearer, the sound of speeches foretold."

[358] For instance, in Ivanov poem "Covenant of the Sun" [*Zavet solntsa*], the sun proclaims its covenant to the speaker's heart-as-sun, extolling the way the speaker's heart labors at their shared "luminous exploit" [*svetlyi podvig*]. The sun then commands the heart to make peace with its slow wounding by adopting the sun's own unselfish attitude, mildness, and "healing-mighty" [*tselitel'no-moguchii*] ways. Finally, the sun commands the heart to imitate it by crucifying itself and wearing a crown of thorns, drawing a three-way metaphor among Christ's crown of thorns, the sun's corona, and the crown worn by an "annointed tsar." Viacheslav Ivanov, "Covenant of the Heart" [*Zavet solntsa*], in *Sobranie sochinenii v 4 tomakh* (Brussels: Foyer Oriental Chrétien, 1974), Vol. 3, 233-4.

creativity.[359] Other poems about an intense, inspiration-adjacent experience include "Without Inspiration or Effort" [Bez vdokhnoven'ia i truda], which is explicitly *not* about inspiration, even though it draws clearly on poetry about inspiration, especially Tsvetaeva's "I opened my veins" [Vskryla zhily]. Here, Lavinia imagines herself as a joyous fish dancing on her tail, in water that spills from her own mind.[360] She describes her mind as being "without feeling or thought," just "living, passionately icy / Water" pouring from her eyes, ears, and mouth. Unlike Tsvetaeva's poem, which equates the outpouring of lifeblood (and the excess of life at such an ecstatic moment) with poetry, Lavinia's poem states explicitly says that neither inspiration nor labor were involved. Rather, this is ecstasy for its own sake; although, ironically, we are still left with the poem, an ostensible record of a moment that should have left no trace.

"The Circumcision of the Heart" is remarkably similar to another poem in the cycle, "When I speak verses" [Kogda ia stikhi govoriu], the first of two poems grouped together under the title "Two Poems about Inspiration" [Dva stikhotvoreniia o vdokhnovenii].[361] Here, however, Lavinia explicitly describes herself in the act of poetic composition:

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[359] This point is made by Dunja Popovic: "In addition to fulfilling religious functions, the ritual wounding and bodily self-sacrifice or self-opening in *Trudy i dni Lavinii* also serve as a source of specifically poetic power and creativity. In equating the state of poetic inspiration with the idea of a religiously transcendent state in this way, Shvarts revisits a Romantic model of the poet as seeker of truth." See Popovic, "Symbolic Injury and Embodied Mysticism in Elena Shvarts's 'Trudy i dni Lavinii'," *SEEJ*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Winter 2007), 769.

[360] Lavinia's dancing in "Without Inspiration or Effort" is also reminiscent of sectarian rituals including ecstatic dancing (*radeniia*); and the title seems to hint at Pushkin's line "without divinity, without inspiration" (*bez bozhestva, bez vdokhnoven'ia*), from the poem "To ***" [K ***], though perhaps it alludes not to the poem but to Aleksandr Blok's essay that takes Pushkin's line as its title. See Blok, "'Bez bozhestva, bez vdokhnoven'ia'. Tsekh akmeistov," online at https://omiliya.org/article/bez-bozhestva-bez-vdokhnovenya-tsekh-akmeistov-a-blok. Last accessed November 23, 2018.

[361] The second of the "Two poems about inspiration" is quite different in structure and imagery, figuring inspiration more obscurely, as an unusual celestial event in the night sky, a threatening approach of blood (whether within the body or not is hard to say), and a maritime scene – as Pushkin does in "Autumn" [Osen'] and Tsvetaeva does in a number of poems, including "Some are made of stone, others of clay" [Kto sozdan iz kamnia, kto sozdan iz gliny]), complete with foam and a frigate bird:

Когда белое Солнце восходит Луной
(На Луне живут Заяц и духи) –

Когда я стихи говорю
В келье – в пустыню ночи
Слетается целое воинство
И образует Ухо.
Я перед ними кочет
Жертвенный. Голошу.
Мелькают, бледные, садятся ближе,
Подобны торопливому ножу.
Средь них – как в облаке – себя я вижу,
Им жизнь дика, я жизнию дышу.
И думаю – за что ж мне эта сила?
Мне, жалкой, а не светлым им?
Да потому же – что цветок из ила,
Из жертвы кровяной – молитвы дым. (*SES* II, 195)

[When I speak verses / In my cell, in the wilderness of night, / A whole host descends / And forms an Ear. / Before them, I am a sacrificial / Rooster. I shout. / They flicker, the pale ones, and seat themselves closer, / They resemble a hasty knife. / Among them, as in a cloud, I see myself, / To them, life is alien, while I exude {lit. breathe} life. / And I think: why did this power fall to me? / Me, pitiful me, not luminous them? / Why, for the very reason that a flower grows from slime, / [or] the smoke of prayer from a bloody sacrifice.]

Крови темный прибой
Подползать начинает глухо.
Пена морская тогда на губах,
Мечется ум фрегатом – совсем плох.
"Где же я? В Луне? корабле? волнах?
Где же я?" – по слогам повторяет Бог. (*SES* II, 195)

[When a white Sun rises like a Moon / (The Rabbit and spirits live on the Moon) – / A dark groundswell of blood / Starts crawling closer in a hush. / Then there is spume on the lips, / The intellect tosses like a frigate bird – it is on its last legs. / "Where am I? In the moon? On a ship? In the waves? / Where am I" – repeats God, word for word.]

The quotation in the last two lines can't be attributed to either to the speaker or to God; the speaker's question ("where am I?") and God's response are presented outside any order, temporal or hierarchical (imagine God asking "where am I?"). Moreover, we might expect from God an answer, not an echo. There are also some ways this poem makes sense as a companion poem to "When I speak verses"; both portray inspiration as both a power and a weakening ("the intellect tosses like a frigate bird – it is on its last legs"); both include images of a threatening encroachment on the speaker; both poems simultaneously draw and complicate a distinction between exteriority and interiority, between spiritual forces and self. Here, however, the movement between exterior and interior, between divinity and self, is more elliptical than in "When I speak verses." "When I speak verses," a poem with a clear, if mysterious, opposition between human poet and angelic audience, ends with explicit analogies between poetry and flowers growing from slime, or smoke rising from sacrifice; "When a white Sun rises like a Moon," a far more disorienting poem, presents its figures of inspiration not as analogies but as quickly changing scenes, and as a merging of sensory and emotional experiences, legends (the Chinese rabbit in the moon, a suggestion of supernatural transformation, even witchcraft) and allusions (Pushkin's and Tsvetaeva's marine imagery), and even day and night.

The poem is fourteen lines long, the length of a sonnet – a self-consciously literary form. But, Shvarts being Shvarts, this is no ordinary sonnet; in fact the rhyme scheme is that of an upside-down Petrarchan sonnet. The sestet comes first, with its unusual mirroring rhymes (abccba), followed by two regular, alternatingly rhymed quatrains. Furthermore, there is an overall similarity to the rhymes, which suggests several different ways to break the poem into sections. The first rhyme in the poem (*govoriu*) is repeated (not exactly, but in various near-rhymes), not just in line 6 (*goloshu*), but also in lines 8 and 10 (*nozhu* and *dyshu*). This suggests lines 10-11 as a natural division, and indeed the first ten lines are about the speaker's performance, and the last four are about her thoughts. In fact, the dominant rhyme in those first ten lines—describing a poetic performance—comes from the first singular verb form, which occurs five times. When Lavinia's thoughts turn inward in the last four lines, and she begins to think explicitly about her power, there is a corresponding distancing from subjecthood; she attributes the power to herself in the dative case (*mne*), and consequently the *y/ю* rhyme disappears. At the same time, the sestet/octave division is also strong, especially since the last 8 rhymes feature the same interwoven vowels (и/ы) and consonants (ж). There is also a striking rhythmic division between these two parts; the lines in the sestet are three beats long, while the two quatrains are in regular iambic pentameter.

The poem describes poetic inspiration in terms that combine theatrical performance with ritual sacrifice. Lavinia doesn't write her poems, she "speaks" them before an assembled audience of heavenly beings, a "host" [*voinstvo*, whose disposition to violence is suggested by the martial term], as the monastic cell becomes an intimate theater (she also compares night to "wilderness" [or "desert"], the traditional setting for saintly visions and temptations). This militant-angelic audience "forms an Ear," but they are not merely passive listeners; they are also

the instrument of her slaughter – indeed, they resemble a "hasty knife," while she, the performer, imagines herself as a sacrificial rooster. She "shouts" [*golosit'*], a verb that, with its root in voice [*golos*], connotes a range of non-verbal soundings, especially in the context of ritual (e.g., lamentation). It also evokes vatic speech, itself on the border between the verbal and non-verbal. ("Goloshu" rhymes with both "govoriu" and "dyshu," suggesting that for her, this vatic sounding is akin to both speaking and breathing.)

Already in the first eight lines there are a number of similarities between this poem and "The Circumcision of the Heart": an encounter with a divine force, a bloody sacrifice, vatic speech suggested through human-animal hybrid sounds, a knife. In the last six lines, Lavinia sees herself in her audience's midst—in an out-of-body experience, a moment of literal ecstasy—and notices that while she "exudes life" (life is figured as breath, making it almost visible), it is alien to her audience. Life, as something associated exclusively with intense, or even fatal experience, is an important notion in the previous poem as well, but here it is explicitly connected to poetry: the person speaking verses also breathes life. In fact, it is speaking verses that puts Lavinia at risk in the first place, that brings her life to this sharp and dangerous point. The paradox of this moment is that her audience, figured as the instrument of her slaughter, is also pale and flickering; she is the one with power. This makes little sense to her: why was she, a piteous, sinful mortal, given this power instead of the luminous angels? Then she stumbles on the answer, which she expresses with two analogies: first she compares herself (profane, earthly, messy) to slime, and poetry to a flower; then she compares the poem to the "smoke of prayer" and herself to a "bloody sacrifice." These metaphors also allude explicitly to Akhmatova's poem "I have no use for odic legions" [*Mne ni k chemu odicheskie rati*], with their lines "If you only knew out of what trash / Poems grew, shamelessly, / Like yellow dandelions by a fence, / Like burdock and

cocklebur" [Kogda b vy znali, iz kakogo sora / Rastut stikhi, ne vedaia styda, / Kak zheltyi oduvanchik u zabora, / Kak lopukhi i lebeda].[362] Her power is something she must bear, so that something beautiful and pleasing (to God? to angels?) can grow from the bloody mess of selfhood. These two images of growth from self-sacrifice echo the last line of "Circumcision of the Heart," where the bloody heart is figured as a seed.

Lavinia thus acknowledges her charisma in this poem, while conceiving of her power negatively. Her power allows her to captivate an audience, but it also victimizes her. Her conception of her own charisma, and of the kind of theater poetry is, is both comparable and different from what Shvarts relates about D'Annunzio's ideas. D'Annunzio, in Shvarts's telling, envisioned theater as an act of domination, by which the playwright of genius could mold the *polis* in his own image – a proto-fascist reimagining (and perversion) of Ancient Greek theater. Indeed, D'Annunzio's political career, culminating in his dictatorship of Fiume, grew out of his interest in theater's manipulative possibilities. Like D'Annunzio, Lavinia sees herself as the only one with power in this scenario; and, like him, she figures this power as an abundance, almost an excess, of life (while denying life to the audience). But Lavinia's conception of the dynamics of theater is far more ambiguous than D'Annunzio's. For one thing, in her theater, the audience participates intimately in a violent rite; and their role is contradictory – they are the Ear,[363] the knife, and (in line 9) the cloud that surrounds the poet (like a cloud of glory). Moreover, Lavinia's performance is rooted in self-estrangement; and, as in "The Circumcision of the Heart," she wears multiple masks: nun, desert hermit, rooster. There are even possible allusions to both the myth of Orpheus and to the *Odyssey* in the portrayal of the heavenly host. Lavinia

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[362] Anna Akhmatova, *Tainy remesla* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1986), 11.

[363] Reminiscent, perhaps, of the "enormous ear" of the universe in the last lines of Mayakovsky's "A Cloud in Trousers" [Oblako v shtanakh]; the ear in Mayakovsky's work is deaf.

among the spirits is reminiscent of Odysseus among the shades of the underworld, who gather around spilled blood while the hero stands very much alive in their midst; the same scene also recalls Orpheus performing in Hades.

Lavinia's habit of speaking through multiple overlaid masks can also be seen in "Quest for the Fleece" [Za runom], a poem from the part of the cycle set in early spring. Here, as, to some extent, in "When I speak verses," the masks serve to both evoke notions of power and heroism, and unsettle them:

За руном

В руке зажата змейка ночи,
И сжаты челюсти мои,
Слезы дымятся паром.
Седло накину на хребет дракона,
И мы несемся с ним
За солнечной травкой – туда,
Где Солнца бушует корона.

В своей постели голубой,
Земля, ты головокружишься,
Вид серый, жалкий и больной,
Но исцелишься.

Мой перелет тебе помог,
Дай пятку из-под одеяла,
Из бороды у Солнца клок
Я травки огненной нарвала. (*SES* II, 188)

[Quest for the Fleece // In my hand I clutch the snake of night, / And my jaws are clenched, / The tears fume like smoke. / I'll throw a saddle over the back of a dragon, / And we're off / On our quest for solar grass – to the place / Where the Sun's corona rages. // In your blue bed, / Earth, {you lie,} your head spinning, / Grey, wretched, and sick, / But you'll recover. // My flight helped you, / Give me your heel from under the blanket, / I picked from the beard of the Sun / A tuft of fiery grass.]

The fifteen lines of the poem are divided into a stanza of seven lines, and two quatrains. The 7-line stanza has a number of inexact rhymes, faint echoes really (*nochi/moi*, *parom/nim*); the only perfect rhyme links lines 4 and 7: *drakona* [dragon] and *korona* [corona or crown], which are

also the two words with the strongest mythic associations. The poem is about an adventure, a voyage to the sun, where Lavinia picks "solar grass" with which she heals the earth – which is "grey, wretched, and sick," presumably because it is late winter/early spring. This epic adventure takes up all of fifteen lines, and has a sweetness and intimacy to it that belie the mythic proportions of Lavinia's quest and achievement. This play with magnitudes is a feature of the cycle as a whole, but here it is especially striking: night, figured as a "zmeika" (little snake), fits in the palm of her hand; the sun's flares are not only figured as grass, but the word for grass is in the diminutive (*travka*); earth appears as a piteous creature, sick in bed; and the whole journey seems to be over in a matter of moments. And yet the characters involved (sun, earth, night) are cosmic, and Lavinia's quest (in spite of her language and tone) is grandiose: she is doing nothing less than saving the world. (Already there is an inversion of what we saw with Shvarts's D'Annunzio, whose grandiose rhetoric usually exceeded its occasion.)

The poem draws on numerous myths for its characters and themes; first and foremost, the myth of the Golden Fleece, which is alluded to explicitly in the title. In the myth, Jason needs the Fleece in order to legitimize his rule; it is a symbol of power and authority. Here, the fleece's equivalent—the "tuft of fiery grass"—is medicine; Lavinia wants it not for herself but to help another; indeed, to help the whole world. In the myth, the quest for the Fleece has dire consequences; Jason uses the sorceress-princess Medea's help to obtain the Fleece, only to abandon her with their children, whom she kills in a frenzy. Lavinia's poem recalls various elements of the myth, such as the serpent (who guards the Fleece), and the dragon (whose teeth Jason must sow in order to obtain the Fleece),[364] and the speaker's relationship to the earth

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[364] Shvarts alludes to sowing dragon's teeth in "Kindergarten Thirty Years Later" as well; there, she has in mind Cadmus, who sowed dragon's teeth to have them sprout into warriors.

suggests a mother and child. Here, however, Lavinia herself plays both Jason and Medea (a talented healer in the myth, and a granddaughter of the sun god Helios). Lavinia's "flight" (*perelet*) also recalls the myths of Icarus and Phaethon, who both perished for flying too close to the sun, although Lavinia manages to survive even after touching the sun's surface. As in the Phaethon myth (as told by Ovid), the sun is a kind of royal father figure (with his beard and crown). Lavinia thus casts herself both as the attentive mother to a sick earth and the rebellious child of a royal sun.

There is a strong sense in this poem of a pagan ritual related to the seasons, a kind of Rite of Spring: the earth suffers toward the end of winter, and Lavinia takes it upon herself to come to the rescue. At the same time, Shvarts draws on Euripides' dramatic version of the Medea myth at several points. The beginning of the poem, where the speaker steels her resolve before her flight, alludes to the climax of Euripides' play, where Medea is about to kill her children (a moment that has since been represented in a number of paintings). And the flight itself, on the back of a dragon, recalls the moment after the killing, when Medea reappears onstage with the bodies of her children, in a chariot drawn by dragons. Indeed, the language in the opening of the poem—Lavinia "clutches" the snake of night; her "jaws are clenched"; her "tears fume"—has an emotional intensity straight out of Greek tragedy, one that seems at odds with the playful account of her voyage and its gentle aftermath. Indeed, the poem begins in a tragic register before shifting into a kind of mock-epic once the "solar grass" [*solnechnaia travka*] is mentioned. This contrast in tone and intensity is reflected by the rhythm; the first 7 lines, about Lavinia's preparation and liftoff—is full of metrical shifts, and only in the two quatrains (when Lavinia is already on her way, and looks back for a view of Earth) does the meter settle into regular iambs.

The poem thus hints at tragedy – and at the cruelty of the Medea myth, which comes about as a direct consequence of Jason's desire for power. And yet Lavinia is anything but cruel, and undertakes her journey with the opposite of hubris. She wears the masks of Jason and Medea, but unlike those two her goal is to save, not to rule or destroy – the worst that she inflicts on anyone is pulling a bit of hair out of the sun's beard and tickling the Earth with it, for the latter's own good. Lavinia does indeed save the world, but she doesn't do it through, or for the sake of, force.

A longer poem, titled "At a Task" [Za rabotoi], also starts with cruelty and injustice, and ends in kindness and restitution; a feat Lavinia pulls off by layering together a personal theology out of bits and pieces from the Old and New Testaments, her own fantasy, and a marvelous discovery of comfort in the vanity of human striving and self-love. Rather than a theatrical monologue, this poem takes the form of a conversation between Lavinia and another nun, Frosya, as they sit making baskets toward evening:

<u>За работой</u>

Мне призналась сестра – бородатая Фрося:
«Вот ты видишь, что я некрасива, как грех,
Бородавка под носом – с грецкий орех,
Бороденка щетинится грубым покосом.
Даже бабушка, мать не любили меня.
И в кого я уродом таким уродилась?
Я взывала бы к Богу, молилась,
Но Богу – как ты думаешь – тоже ведь я не нужна?
Вот когда б красоту принесла и швырнула
На алтарь как овцу –
Так другое бы дело...»
Мы корзинки плели. «Ты б отдохнула, –
Скоро в церковь, и прутья к концу».
Мы на службу пошли. На закате
Фиолетово церковь нежна.
Полно, полно, сестра, тебе плакать,
И ты тоже Богу нужна.
Ты молись так: «Боже, Царь!

Если б дал Ты мне шелк, и парчу, и злато,
Я бы все принесла на алтарь,
Но Ты дал мне сермяжку и жабу –
Вот я все, что могу, отдала.
Ты зачти, как вдове ее лепту....»
Отшатнулась она от меня,
Дико вскрикнула, как эпилептик:
«И сама ты не больно красива
И не очень-то молода.
Я-то думала – ты мне подруга,
А ты жабою назвала!»
Зарыдала она, побежала
И рыдала в весенних кустах.
Я за ней: «Ах, прости! Ты прекрасна!
Ей-же-ей – на закате, в слезах!
Я завидую тебе,
Бороды твоей кресту,
Я б с тобою поменялась –
Не держусь за свое «я».
Что такое «я»? Фонтан
В океане. Бульк – и сгинул – мириады.
А мы мучимся, горим,
Будто запертые ады».
Так я долго бормотала –
Слезы вытерла она и сказала только – «Ах!»
«Я клянусь, что ты прекрасна
с лентой бороды, в слезах!
Ну прости, в последний раз!»
Колокола длинный бас.
И пошли мы с нею мирно
В церковь, что ждала уж нас,
Как купца Багдад иль Смирна. (*SES* II, 203-4)

[At a Task // My sister, bearded Frosya, confessed to me: / "You see that I'm ugly as sin, / A wart under my nose, big as a walnut, / A little beard bristling like a stubble field. / Not even my grandmother or mother could love me. / I don't even know where I get it from! / I'd beseech God and pray, / But do you think God has any use for me either? / Now, if I had brought my beauty and flung it / On the altar, like a lamb, – / That would have been a different matter..." / We were making baskets. "You should take a rest, / We have to go to church soon, and we're almost out of reeds anyway." / We headed to service. The church / looked mild, purple in the sunset. / "Dry your tears, sister, no need for that, / God needs you too. / Here's how you should pray: 'Heavenly father, King! / If You'd given me silk, and brocade, and gold, / I'd have brought it all to the altar, / But You gave me sackcloth and a toad – / So I've given you all that I could. / Won't you reckon it, as you did the widow's mite?..'" / She recoiled from me / With a wild cry, like an epileptic: / "You're not much to look at either, / Or young, for that matter. / Here I

thought you were my friend, / And you called me a toad!" / She burst into tears, and ran off / To weep in the springtime bushes. / I went after her: "Ah, forgive me! You're beautiful! / I swear – at sunset, with your tearstained face! / I envy you, / The cross of your beard, / I'd {happily} change places with you – / I'm not wedded to my 'I'. / What's an 'I'? A fountain / In an ocean. One gurgle – and it's gone – myriads. / And yet we suffer, we burn, / Like pent up hells." / I murmured like this for a long time – / She dried her tears and merely said "Ach!" / "I swear you're beautiful / With your beard like a ribbon, your tearstained face! / Won't you forgive me, please?" / The long bass of the bells. / And we headed peacefully / To church, which awaited us {expectantly} / As Baghdad or Smyrna awaits a merchant.]

Both Frosya's complaints and Lavinia's responses allude to several biblical sources at once—the Story of the Widow's Mite, the Parable of the Talents, and the story of Cain and Abel—and the parallels they draw among these sources suggest that the unequal distribution of beauty and wealth are an injustice—a divine injustice—a cruelty in the cosmic order that can provoke cruelty in the fortunate and the deprived alike. Frosya is resentful about being born unattractive, so unattractive in fact that not even her mother or grandmother could bring themselves to love her – indeed, not even God has any use for her. Her name, Euphrosyne (Greek for "of a good mind," the Russian calque is *blagomysliashchaia*), alludes both to a female saint who joined a monastery by donning male attire (Frosya has a small beard that is mentioned several times throughout the poem), and—ironically—to one of the Graces, the personification of Mirth. As she complains, Frosya's litany turns into an argument: Her ugliness is offensive to God not in and of itself, but because it made it easier for her to give up a worldly life. Had she been beautiful, her sacrifice in joining the Order would have been far greater, and therefore pleasing to God:

> Вот когда б красоту принесла и швырнула
> На алтарь, как овцу, --
> Так другое бы дело…

> [Now, if I had brought my beauty and flung it / On the altar, like a lamb, – / That would have been a different matter...]

Frosya's language here echoes Lavinia's performance of self-sacrifice in "The Circumcision of the Heart," down to the ostentatious verb *shvyrnut'* [fling]. The lamb in Frosya's simile (she would fling her beauty on the altar like a lamb) contrasts with the figurative language she uses to describe her ugliness: the wart under her nose is as big as a walnut; her beard like an uneven stubble field [*grubyi pokos*]. These agricultural metaphors align Frosya with Cain, whose offering of produce did not please God. Beauty, on the other hand, is like a lamb; it is Abel's offering, which did please God. The fact that the two women are making baskets is also significant: baskets hold goods, including offerings. By implicitly comparing her resentment to Cain's, Frosya draws a dangerous, even blasphemous parallel: that story, which begins with God's seemingly arbitrary and cruel preference for one offering over another, ends in even worse cruelty: murder, an attempted cover-up, and a terrible curse that follows Cain's descendants through all their generations. Moreover, Lavinia and Frosya are spiritual sisters, so Frosya's implicit analogy carries the weight of a threat, albeit an indirect one.

The analogy Frosya draws between beauty and bounty is kept up throughout the poem, with variations in how this bounty is figured. When Lavinia first tries to comfort Frosya, to convince her that God needs her offering as much as anyone's, she substitutes merchandise (and a toad) for agricultural goods, and alludes to a different biblical story, the Widow's Mite:

> Ты молись так: Боже, Царь!
> Если б дал Ты мне шелк, и парчу, и злато,
> Я бы все принесла на алтарь,
> Но Ты дал мне сермяжку и жабу –
> Вот я все, что могу, отдала.
> Ты зачти, как вдове ее лепту…

> [Here's how you should pray: 'Heavenly father, King! / If You'd given me silk, and brocade, and gold, / I'd have brought it all to the altar, / But You gave me sackcloth and a toad – / So I've given you all that I could. / Won't you reckon it, as you did the widow's mite?..']

In Jesus's teachings, a poor widow who gives a single mite to the Temple treasury makes a greater contribution than all the wealthy worshippers who give large sums, because they "gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in what she had to live on, everything she had."[365] Similarly, Lavinia implies, Frosya's ugliness is worth at least as much to God as her beauty would have been. In this analogy, Lavinia compares beauty to silks, brocade, and gold; while ugliness is poor merchandise: sackcloth and a toad. Frosya is not only unconvinced by Lavinia's counterargument, she is offended – and it's the toad she seizes on as she bursts into tears: "Here I thought you were my friend, / And you called me a toad!" Frosya's vanity here is surprising; apparently her lament over her ugliness had been calculated to coax a vigorous denial from her friend. Lavinia first attempt at consolation fails because she makes it about Frosya and her ugliness, taking this ugliness as a given and trying to make the most of it – unconvincingly, too; for why would God want sackcloth and a toad when he could have brocade and gold?

Lavinia follows the weeping Frosya into the bushes and makes a second attempt to console her:

> Ах, прости! Ты прекрасна!
> Ей-же-ей – на закате, в слезах!
> Я завидую тебе,
> Бороды твоей кресту,
> Я б с тобою поменялась –
> Не держусь за свое «я».
> Что такое «я»? Фонтан
> В океане. Бульк – и сгинул – мириады.
> А мы мучимся, горим,
> Будто запертые ады.
>
> [Ah, forgive me! You're beautiful! / I swear – at sunset, with your tearstained face! / I envy you, / The cross of your beard, / I'd {happily} change places with you – / I'm not wedded to my 'I'. / What's an 'I'? A fountain / In an ocean. One gurgle – and it's gone – myriads. / And yet we suffer, we burn, / Like pent up hells.]

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[365] Mark 12:44.

Lavinia's second speech is made up of two parts. First, she tells Frosya that she is beautiful after

all; not only that, but she is most beautiful in tears – at what would seem to be her ugliest.

Lavinia envies her, even wishes that they could change places. The confession of envy is

important; Lavinia is suggesting that Frosya's appearance, her beauty-in-ugliness, is valuable,

something to be desired, the more precious offering. She also compares Frosya's beard to a

cross, a symbolic burden, as though Frosya's appearance were in itself an *Imitatio Christi*, one

that Frosya didn't even have to work for – a gift.[366]

The second part of Lavinia's speech is about her view of selfhood. Lavinia explains that

she is not attached to her "I," comparing it to a "fountain in an ocean" – a small measure of water

(water that, the metaphor suggests, is agitated and beautiful, like a fountain) disappearing into a

vast body of water. A whole human life, with all its striving and suffering, can be summed up as

a *bul'k*—an onomatopoeia for the sound a single bubble makes—although we imagine that our

suffering makes us vast, as though each of us were a whole hell unto themselves. Moreover, our

brief lives play out together, at once—myriads in one ocean—while we feel that each of us is

"locked" – Lavinia's metaphor for the solipsism to which striving ("burning") and suffering

incline us. It is a statement of humility, and of the vanity of life, yet we know that Lavinia herself

is a "pent up hell," who suffers and burns; she can't help it. At the same time, we also know that

she doesn't set much store by her "I"; putting on different masks with ease, and striving eagerly

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[366] Frosya's beard (and the link between her beard and a cross) seems to refer to the Catholic folk legend of Saint Wilgefortis. Wilgefortis was pledged by her father to a man she loathed; she prayed to God to make her ugly so she could remain unmarried, and God gave her a beard. Her enraged father had her crucified for this. Wilgefortis is represented as a crucified woman with a (usually) small beard, a popular female variant of *Imitatio Christi* in communities where she is venerated. She is the patron saint of women who wish to be "disencumbered" (Uncumber is one of the names by which she is known), particularly from abusive spouses. Lavinia's standing crucifixion in "Hermitage" [*Skit*], the last poem in the cycle, may also allude to this legend. See Michael Ott, "Wilgefortis," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 15 (New York: Appleton Company, 1912), online at http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15622a.htm. Last accessed November 23, 2018. I am grateful to Aleksandra Kremer for calling my attention to the legend of St. Wilgefortis.

toward dissolution, toward mystical union. Now Lavinia's words comfort Frosya, who wipes her tears, ready to forgive her friend. The poem ends with a final mercantile simile: the church as a trading city, a "Baghdad or Smyrna," eagerly awaiting the two nuns, who are like merchants bearing valuable goods they wish to unload. Thus, a poem that starts by addressing an injustice of the cosmic order—the fact that some have more than others—ends in a redistribution of wealth through kindness. The comforting of Frosya allows the poem to end in peace and plenty, with both sisters metaphorically laden with the riches they thought had been denied them. The poem's emotional progression is also reflected in its meter; the poem begins in anapests, then switches to trochees as the conflict between the two sisters melts away.

With its metaphors and biblical allusions, the poem draws explicit parallels between beauty and money, but it suggests a further analogy between those two and talent – although this further analogy is ambiguous. Frosya and Lavinia discuss the (violent) sacrifice of beauty in the same terms Lavinia uses—in both "Circumcision of the Heart" and, especially, "When I speak verses"—to describe offering up her poetic self, including the "power" [sila] which both defines and threatens her. Moreover, in the New Testament, the Story of the Widow's Mite makes a kind of diptych with the Parable of the Talents, whose lesson is that the greater one's talent, the more one owes God – and in Lavinia's case, as we know from previous poems, she owes God everything. Throughout the exchange between the two nuns, we are aware that for Lavinia, the concept of giftedness has a different meaning; and that when Lavinia talks about "suffering [and] burning," it means something different to her than it does for Frosya. If Lavinia had been beautiful, then her first argument, that one should sacrifice whatever beauty they have, great or small, might have convinced Frosya; however, as Frosya is quick to point out, Lavinia is not all that beautiful herself. She is, however, blessed with imagination and talent. Her second attempt

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to comfort Frosya succeeds because it is about herself, how she doesn't set much store by her "I," even though she is extravagantly gifted in her own right. Her willingness to switch places with Frosya, and her awareness of her own insignificance, is given weight by her giftedness; in this, she truly resembles a wealthy person giving everything away.

In one of the later poems in the cycle, "The Resurrection of Tabitha by the Apostle Peter and an Attempt at Imitation" [Voskreshenie apostolom Petrom Tavify i popytka podrazhaniia], Lavinia once more conflates her poetic and religious callings—dangerously, at that—by attempting a resurrection, with unfortunate results. In this poem, one of two ballads in the cycle, Shvarts (and perhaps Lavinia herself, though it's hard to accurately attribute the ironies of this poem) plays on both the religious and literary senses of imitation; Lavinia's failed attempt at a miracle is figured (by shifts in language, register, and tone) as a failed attempt at rewriting, and at the same time a triumph of empathy and imagination:

<u>Воскрешение апостолом Петром Тавифы и попытка подражания</u>

«Ты, Петр, слышал?
Тавифа наша умерла.
Так хорошо она пряла,
И вот – не дышит».

Она – как точка, девы – кру́гом,
И Петр среди ее подруг
Глядит на корни своих рук
С испугом.

Он сомневался:
«Природы чин! Я не могу!»
А огненный язык в мозгу
Лизался.

«Ты можешь! – Сила распевала. –
Ну, в первый и последний раз!»
Он поднял руки и потряс,
С них Жизнь упала.

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Как пред рассветом неба склянь,
Он белый был, как после тифа,
Он прокричал: «Тавифа, встань!
О, встань, Тавифа!»

«Тавифа, встань», – он прошептал.
О, благодати холод, милость!
По векам трепет пробежал,
Глаза испуганно открылись.

И дева вновь живет. Жива.
Но уж она не вышивала,
И никого не узнавала,
И улыбалась на слова.

Ее слезами моют, жгут
И нежно гладят. Всё без толку.
Такие долго не живут.
Да ведь и Лазарь жил недолго.

...Я это видела в мечтанье
В дали отчетливо-туманной,
Когда на службе мы стояли.
Покойника мы отпевали.
Скаталось время в дымный шар,
      В шар фимиамный.

И в дерзновенье и пыланье
К покойнику я подошла,
Руками я над ним трясла,
Ему крича: «О, встань! О!»

Тень пробежала по глазам,
И кончик уса задрожал,
Но он не захотел. Он сам!
И, потемнев еще, лежал.

«Сошла с ума! Вон, вон скорей!
Сошла с ума! Мешает пенью!»
И вытолкали из дверей.
Что ж, хорошо – оно к смиренью.

Он сам не захотел! Он сам!
Он дернулся, как от иголки,
И вытянулся – лучше там.
Из света в тьму? И ненадолго? (*SES* II, 213-5)

[The Resurrection of Tabitha by the Apostle Peter and an Attempt at Imitation // "Peter, have you heard? / Our Tabitha has died. / She always spun {wool} so well, / And see – she's breathed her last." // She is like a point, the maidens – a circle, / And Peter, standing among her girlfriends / Stares at the roots of his hands / In fear. // He doubted himself: / "The natural order! I cannot!" / But the fiery tongue in his brain / Licked. // "You can!" sang the Power, / "But for the first and last time!" / He raised his arms and shook them, / And Life fell from them. // He was as white as the glass of the sky before dawn, / As someone who's had typhus, / He shouted: "Tabitha, arise! / O, arise, Tabitha!" // "Tabitha, arise," he whispered. / O, the chill of grace, the mercy! / A tremor passed over her eyelids, / Her frightened eyes opened. // And so the maiden lived again. Was alive. / But she didn't embroider anymore, / Or recognize anyone, / And she {merely} smiled when spoken to. // {Her friends} washed her, burned her with tears, / And stroked her softly. Nothing helped. / Her kind is not long for this world. / After all, even Lazarus didn't live long. // ...I saw this in a daydream / In the clear-cut, hazy distance, / When we were praying at a funeral. / We were singing a service for a dead man. / Time rolled into a smoky ball, / A ball of incense. // And seized with daring and ardor / I went up to the dead man / And shook my arms over him, / Shouting "O, arise! O!" // A shadow passed over his eyes, / And the tip of his mustache trembled, / But he didn't want to. It was him! / And, turning a shade darker, he lay there. // "She's lost her mind! Get out! Quickly! / She's lost her mind! She's interfering with the singing!" And they pushed me out the door. / Well, let it be a lesson in humility. // He didn't want to! It was him! / He flinched, as though before a needle. / And stretched out {more comfortably} – it's better over there. / Leave light for darkness? And not for long either?]

Lavinia imitates various saints and prophets throughout the cycle. Imitation is a central precept

of Christianity, and in the Orthodox tradition in particular, accounts of saints' lives depict each

saint as imitating a series of worthy predecessors, all of them harking back to Christ (if not

further back to exemplary Old Testament figures). Lavinia does something similar, but her

imitations always have an irreverent or outright blasphemous twist: In the poem "Leviathan"

[Leviafan], she casts herself as Jonah, but unlike the biblical prophet she goes willingly into the

belly of the whale, in order to help save the poor creature from death.[367] The whale, in turn, tells

her that she is better than Jonah, before ejecting her in a spume of bloody seawater. Other holy

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[367] The leviathan is, bizarrely, stranded in the woods, "among pines, aspens and mosquitoes, / his blue, powerful bulk [*tusha*] rippling"; an image that, especially because of *tusha* [bulk, carcass], recalls lines from Rimbaud's "Drunken Boat": "J'ai vu fermenter les marais énormes, nasses / Oú pourrit dans les joncs tout un Léviathan!"

figures she imitates include St. Francis and St. Seraphim (who, like Lavinia in the last poem of the cycle, accepted honey from a bear).

The poem is divided into two unequal parts, which are separated by ellipses and a deviation from the ballad form (the first stanza of the second part has six lines instead of four). The first part, as we learn in the deviant stanza, is Lavinia's daydream, something she imagines while singing at a funeral service. In the daydream, Lavinia sees an event described in the Acts of the Apostles: the resurrection of Tabitha by Peter. In Acts, this story takes up only seven verses; Tabitha, a disciple of Christ "devoted to good works and acts of charity" dies, Peter is sent for; he prays over the body, Tabitha arises, and Peter calls everyone back into the room to witness the miracle.[368] Lavinia's version is more elaborate. The Bible doesn't specify Tabitha's age, but her companions are widows; Lavinia's Tabitha is a maiden, as are her friends. The poem begins with quoted speech: a chorus of girls complaining to Peter that Tabitha is dead. The one detail we learn about her life is that she was good at spinning wool. The next quatrain sets the scene; the dead girl and her friends are described as a geometric abstraction, a point at the center of a circle. The Bible says nothing about Peter's emotional state, only that he prayed before performing the miracle. In Lavinia's version, Peter is full of fear and doubt, though it is unclear whether what he fears is failure or simply the enormity of what he is about to do. He is reassured – not by God, but by an ambiguous Power (*Sila*), whose assurances are figured as a "fiery tongue" licking his brain. *Sila* is associated with both divine and chthonic forces in the cycle, and as we know from "When I speak verses," Lavinia associates it with creative power as well. The "fiery tongue" that licks Peter's brain has a satanic seductiveness; it seems to be tempting him, rather than providing divine encouragement (the fact that it sings [*raspevat'*] aligns it more with

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[368] Acts 9:36-41.

creative inspiration than God's word). In other poems in the cycle, Lavinia implicitly associates temptation with earthly fame – and it's not entirely clear whether Peter performs the miracle for God's glory or his own.

The resurrection scene that follows is highly theatrical: Peter lifts his arms and shakes them; he grows pale; he shouts; he whispers. The miracle works; Tabitha opens her eyes. But her resurrection is framed in terms of a contrast between two forms of life; "life," as we recall, is a loaded word in the Lavinia cycle:

> И дева вновь живет. Жива.
> Но уж она не вышивала,
> И никого не узнавала,
> И улыбалась на слова.

> [And so the maiden lived again. Was alive. / But she didn't embroider anymore, / Or recognize anyone, / And she {merely} smiled when spoken to.]

The resurrected Tabitha is technically alive, but—unlike Lavinia herself in "When I speak verses"—she doesn't "exude life." Hers is not a full or intense life, but a kind of bare life, a life in name only. Shvarts drive the contrast home by repeating "zhivet. Zhiva," ironically emphasizing the word's rudimentary dictionary meaning. What's more, this quatrain states that Tabitha no longer embroidered; she stopped doing the thing she was good at. For Lavinia, this loss must have made Tabitha's renewed existence particularly bleak. Shortly after, Tabitha dies again, but it was to be expected; after all, Lazarus (the original on which Peter's miracle is based), didn't live long either. It isn't clear, then, whether Peter's miracle is a success or a failure, at least from the perspective of someone who values intensity and fullness in life. Peter pulls off the miracle; the glory belongs to him (and the ambiguous Power). At the same time, he didn't really help anyone by his action: Tabitha's friends are left in tears, and Tabitha herself is

reduced to a state no different from dementia. Peter's miracle is, ultimately, a selfish creative act, utterly lacking in empathy; as, by implication, was Jesus's resurrection of Lazarus.

By contrast with this first section, which plays out like a tragedy in miniature, the second section is a farce, one that combines the language of romantic poetry with colloquial diction in a parody of Peter's act. The shift in register is signaled immediately after the ellipses, by rhyming couplets that sound like something out of Pushkin – though whether a fairy tale or a high-minded poem about inspiration is hard to say:

> …Я это видела в мечтанье
> В дали отчетливо-туманной,
> Когда на службе мы стояли.
> Покойника мы отпевали.

> [...I saw this in a daydream / In the clear-cut, hazy distance, / When we were praying at a funeral. / We were singing a service for a dead man.]

Several nouns (*mechtan'e, dal'*), as well as the oxymoronic "clear-cut, hazy distance," are either versions of, or taken directly from, nineteenth-century poetic commonplaces of inspiration. Indeed, after "time rolls into a smoky ball"—constrictions such as this often signal the onset of inspiration in nineteenth-century poems—Lavinia is "seized by daring [derznoven'e] and ardor [pylan'e]" (two more nineteenth-century inspiration words), as though she were on the verge of a creative act, squarely in the romantic tradition. In the heat of romantic daring, Lavinia approaches the corpse and attempts to imitate Peter's creative act:

> Руками я над ним трясла,
> Ему крича: «О, встань! О!»

> Тень пробежала по глазам,
> И кончик уса задрожал,
> Но он не захотел. Он сам!
> И, потемнев еще, лежал.

[I shook my arms over him, / Shouting "O, arise! O!" // A shadow passed over his eyes, / And the tip of his mustache trembled, / But he didn't want to. It was him! / And, turning a shade darker, he lay there.]

The contrast between Peter's original and Lavinia's imitation couldn't be clearer: Peter doubts, Lavinia dares; he is afraid; she is ardent; his brain is licked by a fiery tongue, she feels time roll into ball of incense; his raising and shaking of arms is portentous and perfective ("On podnial ruki i potrias"), hers is imperfective, and expressed in a lower, folksier poetic register ("Rukami ia nad nim triasla"). And Lavinia's "O, vstan'! O!" (which rhymes delightfully with "pylan'e") is ridiculous compared to Peter's thrice-repeated entreaties. There is also a contrast between two parallel moments, both involving the dead person's eyes. In Peter's version, we have the high-register "po vekam trepet probezhal" ["a tremor passed over her eyelids"]; in Lavinia's, the lower-register "ten' probezhala po glazam" ["a shadow passed over his eyes"]. Unlike Tabitha, Lavinia's dead man doesn't open his eyes; instead, the "tip of his mustache tremble[s]." Indignant at her failure, Lavinia quickly blames it on the dead man, suggesting that he won't rise again just to spite her – indeed, he impertinently turns a shade darker, more dead.

At this point, another chorus appears: now it is made up of angry worshippers, who drive Lavinia away, clearly horrified by what they perceive as her insanity. They are angry, also, because Lavinia's behavior threatens to disrupt the ritual taking place: the singing (*otpevanie*) of the choir is meant to release the soul from the body and return it to God. Lavinia behavior is blasphemous not just for its pretentions to Christ-like and apostolic powers, but also for the way it tries to undo an important Orthodox rite. At first, Lavinia claims to take it the whole experience as a lesson in humility. However, the real moral of the story comes out in the last stanza, where Lavinia gets one more word in:

Он сам не захотел! Он сам.
Он дернулся, как от иголки.

И вытянулся – лучше там.
Из света в тьму? И ненадолго?

[He didn't want to! It was him! / He flinched, as though before a needle. / And stretched out {more comfortably} – it's better over there. / Leave light for darkness? And not for long either?]

It isn't that Lavinia fails as a miracle-worker; it's that her guy knows better than Tabitha; knows that he's better off dead – in the light of the afterlife, and not in the darkness of a half-life such as the one Tabitha and Lazarus endured after their resurrections. Lavinia's guy recoils from her power, as if it were a needle – an instrument of torture posing as a cure.[369] What started as a rash attempt at imitation, an inspired failure, leads to a more compassionate result than what Peter got by succeeding. In this interpretation, the lofty tone of Peter's section, with its high-flown rhetoric and ringing success, belies the horror of Tabitha's suffering, the suffering of her friends (who were, after all, cheated); the pointless glory of a cruel miracle. Lavinia's farcical imitation not only stops short of such cruelty, she even helps the dead man come to terms with his situation; indeed, he "stretches out," sensing that he is "better off" where he is. The constant parallels drawn within the poem between miracle-working and creativity (where Peter and Lavinia are both figured, in analogous but contrasting language, as artists, of a sort, though their medium is not poetry but rather life itself) have their own implications. By posing as a failed imitator, but one who arrives at a more compassionate result through her failure, Lavinia once again draws power, cruelty, and authority into uneasy proximity with notions of poetic calling and creative triumph. There is no real stance here, only an unsettling suggestiveness; Lavinia (and Peter, in her telling) treat resurrection as an act of literal life-creation.

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[369] A doctor's needle becomes an ambiguous instrument in "Kindergarten Thirty Years Later" as well, inflicting the speaker with a traumatic revelation.

<u>Conclusion</u>

The title of this chapter, "The Monster in the Tower," is taken from poem 37 of the Lavinia cycle, "The Monster" [Chudishche, *SES* II, 190-1]. Here, Lavinia compares herself to both a city for sprites and angels ("I am a city, and a square, and a marketplace, / And a space where peripatetic spirits / Can stroll in peace and quiet, / And a theater for angels, and a garden" [Ia – gorod, i ploshchad', i rynok, / I mesto dlia tikhikh progulok / Dlia peripatetikov-dukhov, / I angel'skii teatr i sad]), and to a monster (*chudishche*, with its root in *chudo*, suggests biblical and mythological monsters, miracles, and prodigies). These are not two separate metaphors, but aspects of a divided self: The monster is being held in a tower in the middle of the city, where she spends her days watching the sky and listening to the "strange talk" of the passersby. One day, an enemy—identified as the "Demon of Temptation" [*Demon Soblazna*] lays siege to the city, demanding only that the inhabitants hand over the monster. A fierce battle follows, but when the dust settles the monster is still safe in the tower, and the city is once more at peace.

Why a city? Why a monster? The city is a common Baroque metaphor for the body besieged by sin (in Simeon Polotsky's allegorical poems, for instance). When the city is at peace, the monster seems to play a vital role in its existence – though we never learn what that role is. But the monster is also a threat to peace; as long as she's there, the enemy will keep coming back, blaring trumpets – an instrument that alludes to the Siege of Jericho, the Book of Revelation, and the Roman goddess Fama. Is it better for the monster to stay in the tower, her "hands and feet / held down by bricks," watching and listening? What would happen to the "I"— the divided "I" Lavinia uses throughout the poem—if the monster were taken, freed? If Shvarts's D'Annunzio is a winged cyclops, a blinded monster with poetic wings, then Lavinia is a captive

prodigy in the citadel of herself, kept—perhaps against her will—at a peculiar distance from both the life of that citadel and from power, which is figured as a demonic army of temptation, threatening and destructive, even as it indirectly holds out the possibility of fame. (We might recall the double-edged omen delivered to Virgil's Lavinia – the progenitor of a martial power that will bring both unending strife and eternal glory.) In "The Monster," both the ambiguous internal relation of the divided self, and the relation of self to power, are spatialized, even given geographic and historical proportions – the citadel is located in the middle of a great empire, and the alternating depictions of war and peace (the siege depicted in the poem seems to be just one of many) are twinned allegories of urban life, recalling Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *Allegory of Good and Bad Government*. Lavinia as monster seems to be the creative heart of Lavinia as citadel, crucial to its survival yet estranged from its existence – its patterns of life, even its language. The monster's captivity can be interpreted as yet another intermediary creative act; as a creative subject, the monster's only role is to remain captive, to listen, to look. At the same time, the besieging army seems to represent worldly temptation, including fame – the rewards of a creative genius who does not go unrecognized. Lavinia as monster seems to have no will of her own; her role is entirely passive, receptive (listening, lying flat, gazing); but Lavinia as citadel actively chooses to reject Temptation's demands, to choose a peculiar relation to creativity over earthly fame.

In Shvarts's oeuvre, Gabriele D'Annunzio and Lavinia occupy similar positions as literary creations. Both are poets, yet their creative activity goes far beyond poetry, or indeed any kind of artistic practice; their creativity takes life itself as its material. As I have argued in this chapter, the intermediary modes of creativity practiced by both D'Annunzio and Lavinia can be contextualized within fin-de-siècle practices of Life-creation; furthermore, this context helps us

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understand the crucial differences between D'Annunzio and Lavinia as creators. These differences have to do primarily with each artist's conception of the self, as well as the relations they see among creativity, life, and power. While Shvarts's D'Annunzio, inspired by a vulgarized form of Nietzscheanism, understands creativity as a way for the charismatic self to expand through ever-widening rings of power—power over individuals (especially women), over audiences, and eventually over nations—Lavinia practices forms of Life-creation closer to the conception of the Russian Symbolists, especially Andrei Bely and Viacheslav Ivanov, for whom the creative transfiguration of life was not an act of domination, but rather of self-estrangement and self-abnegation. D'Annunzio's conception of Life-creation is atheist and egotistical; Lavinia's (following the Symbolists) stems from an ambiguous relationship to divinity (sometimes submissive, sometimes rebellious or even competitive), and the renunciation—even the performative sacrifice—of ego. The in-between modes of creativity practiced by both D'Annunzio and Lavinia are further mediated by Shvarts's authorial choices. D'Annunzio, a historical figure, is presented through the lens of a fascinated but ironic biographer, whose blending of primary materials with imaginative digressions turns her historical subject into a semi-fictional creation. Conversely, Lavinia, a fictional poet, is presented as a real figure, separate from Shvarts; and Lavinia's poetry is further mediated by various framing devices, which present her work within a complex setting of artistic, psychopathological, and religious discourses. A further level of mediation comes from each figure's relationship to their vocation. D'Annunzio's uncontested poetic calling becomes a kind of authorization to treat everything— and everyone—around him as material for his art, and to blur the boundaries between artistic production, human relationships, and even political rule. Lavinia's contested calling makes fame and glory distant prospects, but allows for a much more nuanced exploration of the various

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modes of creativity available to her, and provides her with the necessary distance to look askance

not just at her own power, but at power more generally – earthly and divine.

CONCLUSION

Shvarts's use of the sonnet form in *The Works and Days of Lavinia* is surprising; we might even miss it if we're not counting lines. The sonnet is the last form we would expect Shvarts to use; after all, Shvarts's poetry is known for irregularity, sudden changes in meter, and unguessable line counts. Her poetry is all about intensity, irony, and transformation, about submitting to constraints only to take a sharp turn out of them at the last moment. Indeed, she is much more likely to write a poem of thirteen or fifteen lines, just as she sometimes seems to throw an extra line into a poem, if only to keep it from being divisible into quatrains, or to add even more distance between two already-distant rhymes. The sonnet seems like too cultivated a form for a poet like Shvarts. True, the sonnet in *Works and Days* is arguably not meant to be a sonnet at all; it's narrow at the top, and even when it seems to settle into iambic pentameter, a single tetrameter line throws us for a loop. Still, the fact that it's fourteen lines long seems like proof enough; if we consider, too, that this single fourteen-line poem also happens to be the only poem in the cycle where Lavinia talks about herself as a poet, it starts to seem less like a coincidence.

In the introduction to her 1995 collection *Mother Love*, a book made up entirely of sonnets that mostly deviate from the strict rules of the form, Rita Dove describes that form as a "*heile Welt*, an intact world where everything is in sync, from the stars down to the tiniest mite on a blade of grass." Readying the reader for her departures from the classic form, she continues: "If the 'true' sonnet reflects the music of the spheres, it then follows that any variation from the strictly Petrarchan or Shakespearean forms represents a world gone awry. Or does it? Can't form also be a talisman against disintegration? The sonnet defends itself against the vicissitudes of

fortune by its charmed structure, its beautiful bubble. All the while, though, chaos is lurking outside the gate."[370]

Dove's description of the sonnet form as a "charmed structure" seems to resonate with the goings-on in Shvarts's tapered, upside-down sonnet. The speaker—Lavinia—summons the forces of her own destruction (the angelic host that inches toward her like a knife), but the verses she speaks also seem to imbue her with life; she looks at herself from the outside, surrounded by pale angelic beings, and is struck by how alive she looks. Perhaps it is not surprising that Shvarts puts this poetic form—one quite alien to her own way of inhabiting poetry—in Lavinia's hands. As we saw in "The Monster," chaos (or glory – in Lavinia's world it can be hard to tell them apart) doesn't just lurk outside the citadel of her existence, it lays siege to it. For Lavinia, whose identity is constantly in flux, and who spends most of the cycle distanced from her calling as poet, the talisman of the sonnet arrives at just the right time, that dangerous moment where she admits to speaking verses in her cell at night.

The other two poets in this dissertation also use the sonnet form—indeed, their sonnets are the focus of their respective chapters—but to very different effect. Mandelstam's first collection, *Stone* [*Kamen'*], features quite a few sonnets, but the form is much rarer in his later poetry. As with Lavinia's one upside-down sonnet, Mandelstam's return to the form in the 1930s is surprising, and it seems appropriate that he would only take up the sonnet again in the context of translation, when the question of who is speaking (the same question we face in all the Lavinia poems) becomes complicated. For the Petrarch sonnets, Mandelstam hit upon several strategies for self-estrangement: he uses a stylized Italianate line and dense, almost odic language to cross the two cultures and create a hybrid poetic language, a *lazor'e* (like the confluence of Italian

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[370] Rita Dove, *Mother Love: Poems* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 1.

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azure and Russian Black Sea he promises in "Ariosto"). In the same sonnets, Mandelstam also finds a way to speak through Petrarch, recasting himself as "The Poet"—in his two classic aspects as both lover and mourner—a collective, archetypal identification he takes even further in the elegies for Bely. Aronzon was less guarded about using the sonnet form; in fact he had many uses for sonnets – as containers, frames, even as an exit strategy, a guarantee that the poem would release the speaker after fourteen lines. Aronzon uses the sonnet form to enact his own version of Pushkinian Romantic irony, performing the poem's creation and, in the last lines, calling attention to its completion in a gesture of letting go and returning to life – except in "Two Identical Sonnets," where he falls right back into the same poem.

The way each of these three poets handles the sonnet form speaks to the larger question of their relationship to tradition. All three poets saw tradition as something artists could make for themselves, not something to be received meekly. Mandelstam's idiosyncratic "creation of tradition" has been described at length (by Clare Cavanagh and Omry Ronen, among others), and in the poems of 1933-34, he collapses historical and geographical distances by bringing Petrarch, Dante, and Bely (and also Goethe, Batyushkov, and Ariosto, among others) into a single charmed circle, taking advantage of poetry's *obratimost'*—its transmutability and multidirectionality—to take aim at the entire European tradition simultaneously. Aronzon's tradition-making reflects a writing life spent outside of the official literary establishment – an establishment that closely followed a received narrative for how tradition was meant to look, and which books should go into the canon. Excluded from institutional literary life, Aronzon practiced small forms, and created a homely pantheon where revered poets like Pushkin and Khlebnikov rubbed shoulders with his own friends and contemporaries, such as Stanislav Krasovitsky and Aleksandr Al'tshuler. This is in keeping with Aronzon's poetics of the intimate

circle, as is his self-reflexive irony and the homespun aesthetic of his visual poems and typewritten "sheaves." Tradition, for Aronzon, had to be intimate; it's as if he could only be himself if he and tradition resembled one another. Shvarts, too, created her own tradition, one that had room for more than the official canon allowed. Her alternative tradition emphasized mystical and folk elements, side by side with classics of Latin, Romantic and Decadent poetry – along with many other strands, Russian and non-Russian, secular and religious, elegant and bizarre.

In tracing how each of the three poets in this dissertation created, dismantled, and crossed virtual borders, one other common theme that emerged has to do with the possibility of publication, of not just receiving (or remaking), but entering the Russian tradition – or at least making it into the hands of readers. At one point or other, all three poets make veiled comments about publication; Mandelstam's Petrarch translations take up the theme of poetry's circulation obliquely, and in the Bely cycle he writes quite openly, though with obvious ambivalence, about the process by which a poet is "bound" to his native tradition. Many of Aronzon's poems touch on the metapoetic theme of a poem's transmission from poet to reader, and "Two Identical Sonnets" turns the question of reproduction and dissemination into a game. Shvarts packages the Lavinia cycle in an entire apparatus, including a preface from a fictional psychiatrist and a letter of introduction (in verse) from a friend of the author. These layers of mediation allow Shvarts to comment—indirectly, of course—on the impossibility of mainstream publication in her native country (and on the intersection of literary and psychiatric discourses, one that could be fraught with danger for the Soviet writer), while simultaneously alluding to several literary conventions, including the found narrative and the mad poet. Shvarts's cycle may be set in an imaginary land without political borders (just as Mandelstam's sonnets are), but they nevertheless find a way to

speak indirectly to the reality of writing from the margins of Soviet literary culture – by creating
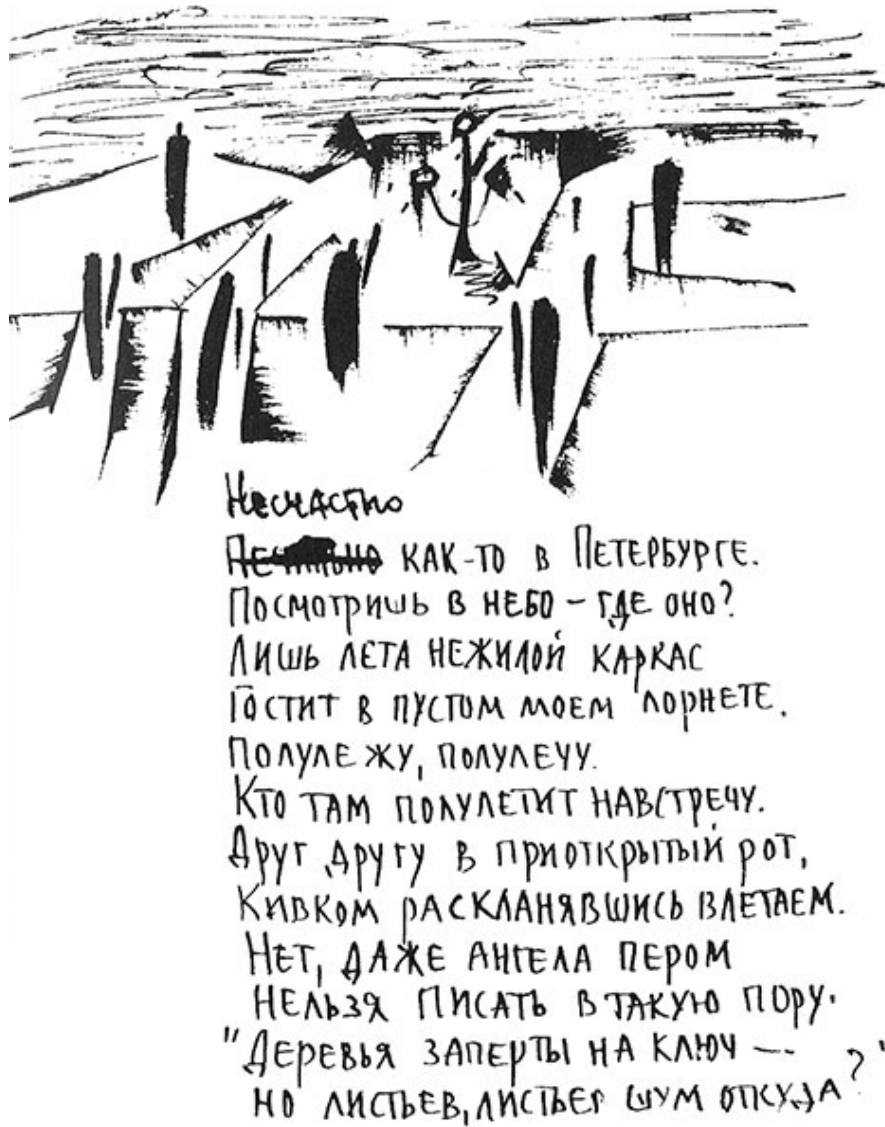
borders of a different kind.

APPENDIX: Aronzon's visual poems and typescripts

НЕСЧАСТНО

~~ПЕЧАЛЬНО~~ КАК-ТО В ПЕТЕРБУРГЕ.
ПОСМОТРИШЬ В НЕБО — ГДЕ ОНО?
ЛИШЬ ЛЕТА НЕЖИЛОЙ КАРКАС
ГОСТИТ В ПУСТОМ МОЕМ ЛОРНЕТЕ.
ПОЛУЛЕЖУ, ПОЛУЛЕЧУ.
КТО ТАМ ПОЛУЛЕТИТ НАВСТРЕЧУ.
ДРУГ ДРУГУ В ПРИОТКРЫТЫЙ РОТ,
КИВКОМ РАСКЛАНЯВШИСЬ ВЛЕТАЕМ.
НЕТ, ДАЖЕ АНГЕЛА ПЕРОМ
НЕЛЬЗЯ ПИСАТЬ В ТАКУЮ ПОРУ.
"ДЕРЕВЬЯ ЗАПЕРТЫ НА КЛЮЧ —
НО ЛИСТЬЕВ, ЛИСТЬЕВ ШУМ ОТКУДА?'

Figure 1. Volume 1, page 199, Leonid Aronzon, *Sobranie proizvedenii v dvukh tomakh.* St. Petersburg: Izdate'lstvo Ivana Limbakha, 2006.
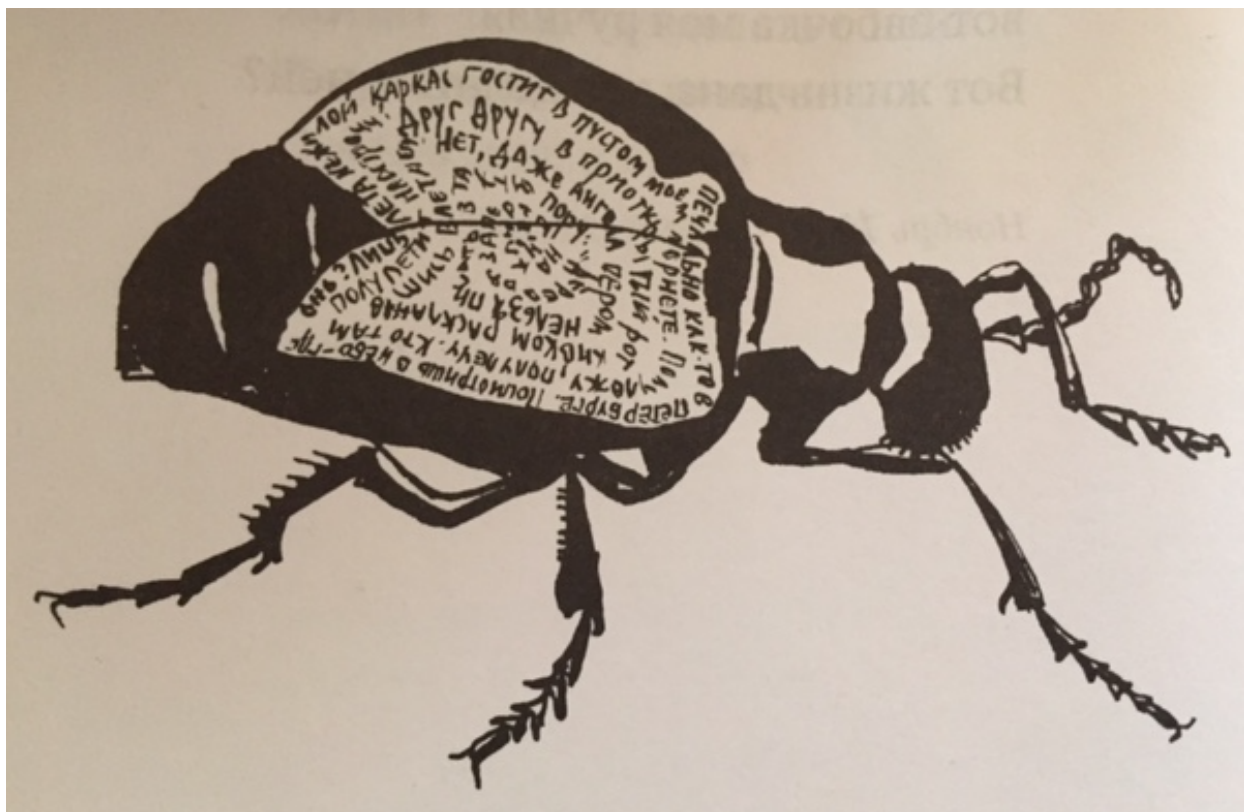
Figure 2. Volume 1, page 198, Leonid Aronzon, *Sobranie proizvedenii*.
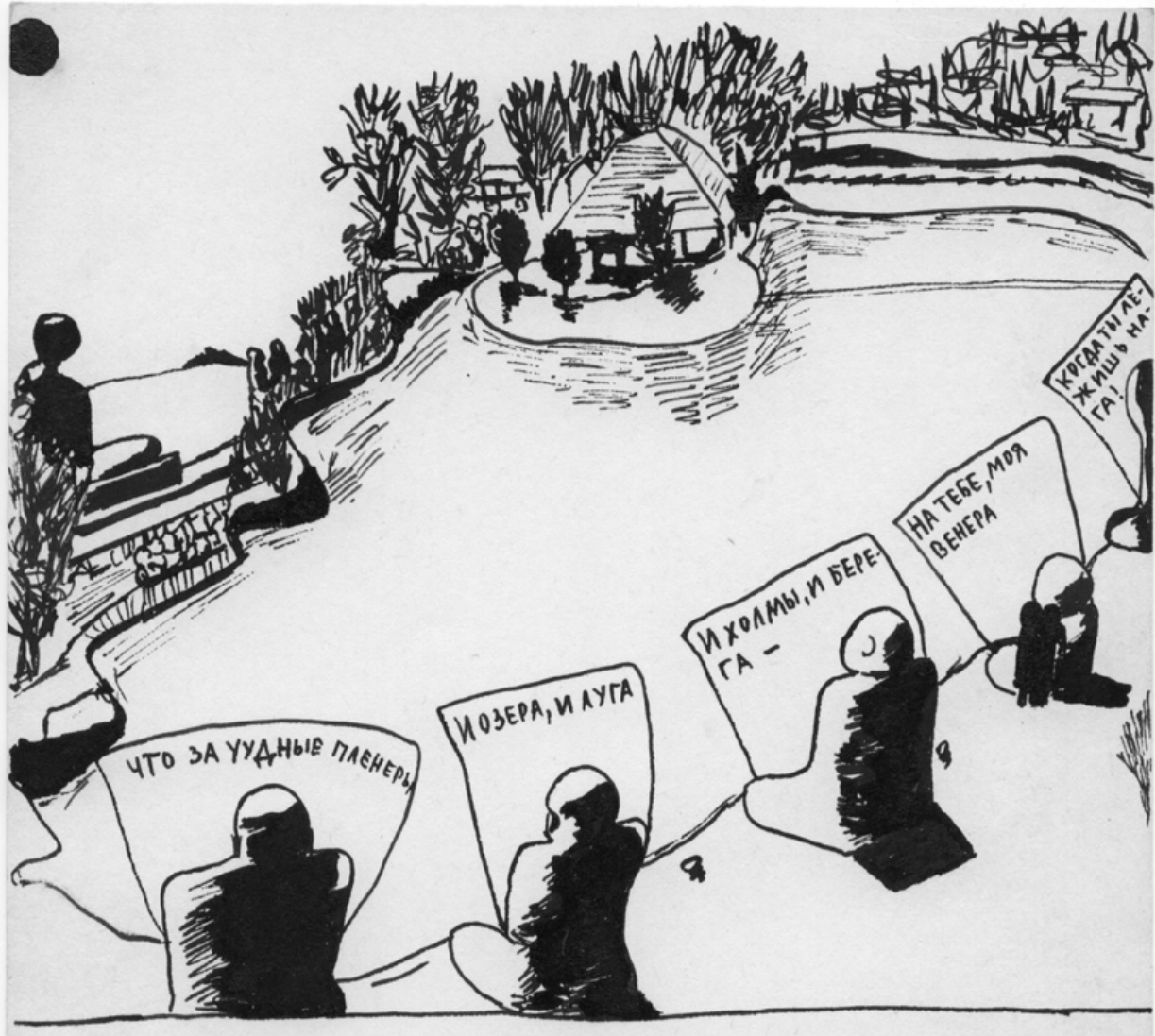
Figure 3. Volume 1, plate 6, Leonid Aronzon, *Sobranie proizvedenii.*

Figure 4. Volume 1, plate 9, Leonid Aronzon, *Sobranie proizvedenii.*

Figure 5. Volume 1, page 91, Leonid Aronzon, *Sobranie proizvedenii.*

ПОСЛАНИЕ В ЛЕЧЕБНИЦУ

В пасмурном парке рисуй на песке мое имя,как при свече,

и доживи до лета,чтобы сплетать венки,которые унесет ручей,

вот он петляет вдоль мелколесья,рисуя имя мое на песке,

словно высохшей веткой,которую ты держишь сейчас в руке.

~~Механики~~ Высока здесь трава,и лежат зеркалами спокойных небыстрых небес

голубые озера,качая удвоенный лес,

и вибрируют сонно папиросные крылья стрекоз голубых,

ты идешь вдоль ручья и роняешь цветы,смотришь радужных рыб.

Медоносны цветы,и ручей пишет имя мое,

образуя ландшафты:то мелкую заводь,то плес.

Да,мы здесь пролежим,сквозь меня проростает,ты слышишь,трава,

я,пришитый к земле,вижу сонных стрекоз,слышу только слова:

"Может быть,что лесничество тусклых озер нашей жизни итог,

стрекотанье стрекоз,самолет,тихий плес и сплетенье цветов,

то пространство души,на котором холмы и озера,вот кони бегут,

и кончается лес,и,роняя цветы,ты идешь вдоль ручья по сырому песку.

Вслед тебе дуют флейты,рой бабочек,жизнь тебе вслед,

провожая тебя,ты идешь вдоль ручья,никого с тобой нет,"

Ровный свет надо всем,твой портрет вижу в раме окна,

вижу кто-то гоним,кто-то должен до ужина день свой прошедший догнать,

и пройти в зеркала кто-то должен,иначе зачем

мое имя,как ты,мелколесьем петляя,рисует случайный,небыстрый и мутный

ручей,

и читает его пролетающий мимо озер в знойный день самолет,

может быть,что ручей - не ручей,только имя мое.

Так смотри на траву по утрам,когда тянется медленный пар,

рядом свет фонарей,зданий свет,и вокруг твой безлиственный парк,

где ты высохшей веткой рисуешь случайный небыстрый и мутный ручей,

что уносит венки медоносных цветов,и сидят на плече

мотыльки камыша,и полно здесь стрекоз голубых,

ты идешь вдоль ручья и роняешь цветы,смотришь радужных рыб.

И срывается с нотных листов,от руки мной набросанный дождь,

ты рисуешь ручей,вдоль которого после идешь и идешь.

1964 год

Figure 6. "Poslanie v lechebnitsu" 1964 typewritten manuscript. Aronzon papers. Universität Bremen. Published and annotated by Il'ia Kukui. Frankfurt: Novaia kamera khranenia, 2010. http://www.newkamera.de/aronson/fx/35.html.

Figure 7. "Dva odinakovykh soneta" undated typewritten manuscript. Aronzon papers. Universität Bremen. Published and annotated by Il'ia Kukui. Frankfurt: Novaia kamera khranenia, 2010. http://www.newkamera.de/aronson/fx/61.html.

СОНЕТ ДУШЕ И ТРУПУ Н.ЗАБОЛОЦКОГО

Есть легкий дар,как будто во второй
счастливый раз он повторяет опыт.
(Легки и гибки образные тропы
высоких рек,что подняты горой!)

Однако мне отпущен дар другой:
подчас стихи – изнеможденья шепот,
и нету сил зарифмовать Европу,
не говоря уже,чтоб справиться с игрой.

Увы,всегда постылен будет труд,
где,тяжелея,розаны цветут,
где,озвучив дыханием свирели

своих кларнетов,барабанов,труб,
все музицируют – растения и звери,
корнями душ разваливая труп!

                                    май,вечер

Figure 8. "Sonet dushe i trupu N. Zabolotskogo" typewritten manuscript dated "May, evening" ("mai, vecher"). Aronzon papers. Universität Bremen. Published and annotated by Il'ia Kukui. Frankfurt: Novaia kamera khranenia, 2010. http://www.newkamera.de/aronson/fx/50.html.

В часы бессоницы люблю я в кресле спать
и видеть сон, не отличимый
от тех картин, что наяву мной зримы,
и, просыпаясь, видеть сон опять:

старинное бюро, свеча, кровать,
тяжелый стол, и двери, и за ними
в пустом гробу лежит старуха вини —
я к ней иду, чтоб в лоб поцеловать.

Однако ночь творит полураспад:
в углу валяется забытый кем-то сад,
томя сознанье, падает паук,

свет из окна приобретает шорох,
лицо жены моей повернуто на юг,
и все — в печали, нет уже которой.

Figure 9. "V chasy bessonitsy liubliu ia v kresle spat'" undated typewritten manuscript. Aronzon papers. Universität Bremen. Published and annotated by Il'ia Kukui. Frankfurt: Novaia kamera khranenia, 2010. http://www.newkamera.de/aronson/fx/19.html

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