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Epic Afterlives: Baudelaire and Tsvetaeva

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Abstract

Epic Afterlives: Baudelaire and Tsvetaeva
By Ariel Ross

“Epic Afterlives: Baudelaire and Tsvetaeva” takes as its starting point the repetition within the history of classical epic poetry of the hero’s journey to the underworld, asking how this scene functions in each poem in which it appears, and how it functions within the poetic tradition. I argue that each poetic representation of the underworld, which necessarily involves a conception of the afterlife, works within the poem to fulfill simultaneous wishes to revive and revisit the past, and to gain knowledge of the future. The Introduction to “Epic Afterlives” examines the poetic constructions of the topographies and temporalities of underworld and afterlife in the *Odyssey*, in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, and in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, drawing on the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and the works of Walter Benjamin, focusing particularly on those moments when it seems that “past, present and future are strung together,” as Freud says, “on the thread of the wish that runs through them.” The dissertation argues that, following the violent advent of modernity which renders the epic an essentially “dead” form, the wishes, desires, or drives that once found expression in those epic underworlds live out linguistic afterlives, however fragmentary or phantasmal, in other literary forms, and in particular in lyric poetry. The following chapters consider the poetry of Charles Baudelaire as it confronts a “change in the structure of experience” in 19th century Paris which makes it increasingly difficult for the poet to imagine any kind of afterlife at all, and the poetry of Marina Tsvetaeva, who responded to the terrible difficulties of life in, or in exile from, Soviet Russia by envisioning, with ever-increasing detail, a refuge for herself and for all poets in an “other-world.”

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Introduction

“On the thread of the wish”: Creating Epic Afterlives

The Afterlife of Poetry

It has become a commonplace, especially in the last two centuries, to claim that epic poetry, as a literary form, is dead. What is intended by this claim, on the most basic level, is that it is no longer a popular form – that a long narrative poem expressing some notion of heroism no longer causes a great stir, draws a large audience, or is in sympathy with common experience. It means neither that such poems *can* no longer be written, nor that they *are* no longer written. However, unlike the wild proliferation and wide popularity of, for example, the novel or the memoir, it is rare these days to come across a work of literature which meets the simultaneous criteria of “epic” and “poetic,” and unheard of for such a work to achieve any broad success. It is unclear, however, what if anything is *literally* meant in common usage by the claim that epic poetry – or any literary form – is dead. On the whole, such a claim is justified by way of a metaphor with organic life and death, a metaphor set in motion from the very beginnings of literary theory. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle postulates that epic poetry, insofar as its subject is “a single action, whole and complete [...] will thus resemble a living organism in all its unity” (105). Many of those who eventually herald the death of epic poetry most loudly pile on the metaphors, often staging the demise of the epic “organism” according to its own scenes – explicitly, covertly, or perhaps unconsciously. Mikhail Bakhtin, who calls epic a “congealed and half-moribund genre” (3), does so in an essay in which he represents the novel as a form so full of life that it is capable of reviving, temporarily, any other form with which it comes into contact, much as Odysseus revives the faded shades of old

heroes for the brief time he spends in Hades. Harold Bloom claims that, “for many a Bard of Sensibility, Milton was [...] the Covering Cherub blocking a new voice from entering the Poet’s Paradise” (35). However, in an age when the death not only of print culture but even of the humanities is beginning to be prophesied or already proclaimed, it may be instructive for those of us still vitally engaged with and dependent (or hoping to be dependent) for our livings on the life of the written word, the life of literature, the life of the humanities, to inquire into what it may mean, in an entirely *un*-metaphorical way, for a literary form to die, and also how it may, again *un*-metaphorically, find an afterlife. This dissertation looks to epic poetry itself, which almost without fail incorporates a conception of an afterlife into its representations of life, to indicate the mode of its own afterlife.

It is in language itself, in its concrete poetic usage, that we find this afterlife – and this cannot be surprising, that the afterlife of poetry should also be poetry, but in another form. In the so-called “modern” age which, more than any other, is credited, by means of its urban crowds, printing presses, commercialization and commodification of art, with destroying the conditions of possibility of epic poetry – in this modern age, in the works of the essential poet of modernity, Charles Baudelaire, we find a reflection of the fragmentation and decay of poetic language.¹ That is to say, we find fragments of epic poetry lodged in Baudelaire’s lyrics, which do not only reveal the catastrophe that has taken place in language to fragment it so, but also allow us to see that this catastrophe is a repetition – that it was already constitutive of the tradition of epic poetry from Homer to

¹ Dominique Combe expresses a similar view of Baudelaire’s relation, and the relation of modern lyric poetry more generally, to epic:

De la même manière que, selon la thèse célèbre de l’*Esthétique* de Hegel reprise par Lukacs, le roman serait l’ « épopée bourgeoise moderne », la poésie, désormais assimilée au genre lyrique, recueillerait en quelque sorte les « restes » dispersés de l’ancienne épopée. (26)

Milton. In repeating this traditional repetition, Baudelaire marks a stage of the afterlife of the epic tradition. Later, in the works of Marina Tsvetaeva, both in her remarkable translation of Baudelaire's "Le Voyage" and in her own poetry and prose, known for the percussive power it exerts on the Russian language, we find myths, poems, sentences and words broken down into pieces and re-articulated in order to inject them with new life. In both poets, both in their ways living and working on the outside of established and accepted trends within the literature of their times, we find a return to grounds from which classical epic traditionally rose, to discover how poetry can survive and live on in hostile conditions; the answer, often, is that new poetry must wrench whatever it can from the remains of the old and re-purpose it, however violently.

To attribute life and afterlife to poetry without doing so metaphorically requires us to reflect on how we define "life"; Walter Benjamin offers precisely such a reflection in his essay on "The Task of the Translator," in which he investigates the relation between a literary work and its translations:

Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original—not so much from its life as from its afterlife [Überleben]. For a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life [Fortlebens]. The idea of life and afterlife [Leben und Fortleben] in works of art should be regarded with an entirely unmetaphorical objectivity. Even in times of narrowly prejudiced thought, there was an inkling that

life was not limited to organic corporeality. But it cannot be a matter of extending its dominion under the feeble scepter of the soul [...]. The concept of life is given its due only if everything that has a history of its own, and is not merely the setting for history, is credited with life. [...] And indeed, isn't the afterlife of works of art far easier to recognize than that of living creatures? The history of the great works of art tells us about their descent from prior models, their realization in the age of the artist, and what in principle should be their eternal afterlife in succeeding generations. (*SW* I.254-255)

The words which are both translated here as “afterlife” are, in the German, “Überleben” and “Fortleben” – both of which incline more to meanings of “survival” and “continued life,” rather than life *after* death, as we would generally understand by “*afterlife*.” With these words Benjamin shifts the emphasis away from consideration of the “death” of a work of art; while death is easier to recognize in “living creatures,” the “stage of continued life” is easier to recognize in the history of works of art. If the concept of life is separated from natural, organic definitions, or from speculations about “the soul,” then we can consider works of art to live “in the age of the artist” and to survive and achieve a continued life, after the passing of this age. It is not only translations which partake of the continued life of literary works; the history of a work includes not only its “descent from prior models,” but also its ascension to the status of model for later works.

While a translation of a literary work may take part in, and in part constitute, that work's afterlife, another literary work can “tell” of its “descent from prior models.” That is, it can actually represent and comment on the part it plays in the afterlife of these prior

models. It is through this ability, at least to a certain extent, that epic poetry sustained itself as a tradition. As a literary genre which contains relatively few representatives in relation to the duration of its history, and in which generally there are produced only a very small number (sometimes only one, sometimes none) in any given age, culture, or language, its identity is constituted by the ways in which each new poem declares its “descent.” This can be done in many ways: in the choice of characters (Virgil’s choice of a Homeric figure as the hero of his poem), in the repetition of tropes (the invocation of the muse), in the stylistic traits of the language (the use of epithets, or epic simile) or its versification, or even in the actual translation of phrases from a previous poem². Again, while a translation marks a stage of the continued life of the work it translates, a literary work may take part in the afterlives of multiple prior works. And again, in a tradition such as that of epic poetry which contains relatively few representatives – as opposed to, for example, the novel – it is more nearly possible for a work to relate itself and comment on its relation to its entire tradition. As, with the passage of time, the tradition grows, this allusive function of epic poetic language becomes more concentrated; both Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost* can be seen to be high points of this tendency.

This ability of one text to serve – and examine its status – as afterlife for multiple other texts at once finds its most explicit and complete realization in the scene of the underworld (and its elaborations). It is no accident that the hero’s journey to the underworld is a canonical episode within the epic tradition, given that it actually performs a canonizing function *for* the tradition. The entire episode, its presence within a text (whether an epic poem *per se* or not), already signals that text’s connection to epic

² See Chapter 1 for a discussion of Dante’s translation of Virgil’s “*veteris flammae*.”

poetry. Within the scene, however, in the possibility it offers for representation in the same “place” and in complete simultaneity any figure from the history of literature, we may find the shades of dead poets alongside the shades of the heroes they created, acting out scenes which mimic the ones they previously staged, and described in language which echoes or translates their own. We may think of the poetic scene of the underworld as a mosaic: from the broad perspective it appears as one picture, one complete narrative, but from a more focused perspective it is a collection of fragments from the most diverse sources – from prior works of art each of which arose out of a particular time, place, culture, language. The context of its origins is imprinted on the work of art, and the imprint of this context achieves an afterlife along with the work; in “The Storyteller; Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” and later in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” Benjamin writes of how “traces of the storyteller cling to a story the way the handprints of the potter cling to a clay vessel” (*SW* III.149). Homeric epic, insofar as it is already a monumentalization of the bardic tradition (and thus, according to Benjamin, one of the forms that arises directly out of the art of storytelling), is itself a mosaic containing fragments which bear the traces of many singers, and it is in the scene of Odysseus’ journey to the shores of the underworld that the epics can be seen to address this fact most directly.³ Every later underworld scene re-fragments and re-arranges this mosaic, kaleidoscopically creating a new complete picture with old (and also new) pieces, and also creating new relations between these pieces and, synecdochally, the whole texts which they represent, as well as new relations between the contextual traces within each textual fragment. The underworld scene can thus be seen to be conservative, insofar as it

³ See pages 16-20 below for a discussion of book XI of the *Odyssey* in this regard.

preserves past texts and contributes to their afterlife, but also destructive, insofar as what it preserves is the fragmentation of these texts.

While in the following pages of this Introduction we will examine underworld scenes from the established epic tradition (from the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, and the *Divine Comedy*) to see in more concrete detail how they function as and shape the afterlives of their prior models, the chapters of the dissertation are concerned with a different issue. In both the “Storyteller” and “Motifs” essays Benjamin is directly concerned with the disappearance of certain literary forms and cultural practices – particularly with the loss of the ability to tell a story, to communicate one’s personal experience in language. He sees this fragmentation of narrative, or else the fragmentation of experience such that it can no longer be conveyed in the form of a narrative, as having been imprinted and preserved in Baudelaire’s poetry. In the dissertation, then, I examine how, in the absence of the narrative which imposed a totalizing image on epic representations of the underworld, fragments of this scene are still incorporated and find a continued life in the language of these two poets – Baudelaire and, later, Tsvetaeva – for both of whose poetry the fragmentation of language was already a constitutive characteristic.

The Underworld of Poetry

The underworld is a fantasy, and its main perpetrators have been works of literature. Thanks to the advances of science, we can be perfectly certain, now, that there is no physical realm under the earth’s surface where a person could go to visit the shades of the dead. To claim that there is involves contravention of physical facts – i.e., a metaphysical, theological, or magical fantasy. Who that has lost a loved one has not

fantasized about the existence of a place and time in which it would be possible to see and speak to that person again – *for real*, not just by consulting some inner voice or intuition. While the idea of the afterlife offers comfort in the form of a hope that when a person dies they do not entirely cease to exist, that when *we* die our consciousness will not be extinguished, the idea of the underworld holds out the possibility that *in life* we could go to a place where we could meet the dead again. The idea of heaven is far less promising in this regard, as it is hard to imagine how we would get *up* there, but the underworld is in the earth, below us – we can imagine walking to it. “The road to Avernus,” as Virgil says, “is easy.”

But that is, as we have said, a fantasy – the imagined fulfillment of a wish which cannot be fulfilled in the reality of the present. Just as we could argue that the fantasy of the underworld has been described in the most detail within the realm of epic poetry, so we could also argue that no one has told us more about wishes and wish-fulfillment than Sigmund Freud. In “Creative Writers and Day-dreaming” Freud writes: “We may lay it down that a happy person never phantasies, only an unsatisfied one. The motive forces of phantasies are unsatisfied wishes, and every single phantasy is the fulfilment [sic] of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality” (*SE* 9:146). The fantasy of a descent to the underworld is extremely easy to interpret according to this formula: the fact that we can no longer meet and speak with those who have died is the “unsatisfying reality”; to correct it, we fantasize about a place where we *can* do this. The wish to speak with the dead again finds its fulfillment (as do all wishes) wherever it can, but as it is not a wish that can ever be fulfilled in reality, it is expressed primarily in fantasy, in literature, and in dreams.

Though Freud does not address this particular fantasy or literary theme in “Creative Writers and Day-dreaming,” he writes at length in *The Interpretation of Dreams* about the meaning of dreams about dead people, particularly in his analyses of the famous “burning child” dream.⁴ Freud describes the dream briefly before beginning his interpretation, which continues intermittently over the course of almost seventy pages:

The preliminaries to this model dream were as follows. A father had been watching beside his child’s sick-bed for days and nights on end. After the child had died, he went into the next room to lie down, but left the door open so that he could see from his bedroom into the room in which his child’s body was laid out, with tall candles standing around it. An old man had been engaged to keep watch over it, and sat beside the body murmuring prayers. After a few hours’ sleep, the father had a dream that *his child was standing beside his bed, caught him by the arm, and whispered to him reproachfully: ‘Father, don’t you see I’m burning?’* He woke up, noticed a bright glare of light from the next room, hurried into it

⁴Freud openly states that this dream was not recounted to him by the person who dreamt it, but that it was told to him “by a woman patient who had herself heard it in a lecture on dreams,” and then “proceeded to ‘re-dream’ it”; “its actual source,” Freud says, “is unknown to me” (SE V:509). His own repetitive account of this dream seems to fulfill a certain wish for Freud, insofar as it allows him to introduce a second function of the dream: “the operation of the wish to continue sleeping” (SE V.571). This idea of Freud’s, and its relation to the dream of the burning child has been explored most extensively by Jacques Lacan, in his eleventh Seminar, on *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* (in “Tuché et automaton,” pp. 53-62), and by Cathy Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (in Ch. 5, “Traumatic Awakenings (Freud, Lacan, and the Ethics of Memory),” in which she responds both to Freud’s account of the dream and Lacan’s interpretation of it). Both Lacan and Caruth consider the dream in terms of its relation to Freud’s later thoughts about the force of traumatic repetition, a train of thought that is certainly relevant to the concerns of this dissertation. Walter Benjamin has already applied Freud’s thoughts about trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to his analysis of Baudelaire’s poetry in the “Motifs” essay, and while I am not aware of any work which explicitly applies trauma theory to Tsvetaeva’s work, Lily Feiler has made a step toward this in her analysis of Tsvetaeva’s life and work according to recent psychoanalytic theory in *Marina Tsvetaeva: The Double Beat of Heaven and Hell*.

and found that the old watchman had dropped off to sleep and that the wrappings and one of the arms of his beloved child's dead body had been burned by a lighted candle that had fallen on them. (*SE V:509*)

All the essential elements of the poetic scene of the underworld are present in this dream, in an extremely condensed form. The child who has died only hours before is, in the dream, able to speak to his father again; Freud interprets this detail as a wish-fulfillment: "The dream was preferred to a waking reflection because it was able to show the child as once more alive" (*SE V.510*). At the same time, in the dream the child appears to speak prophetically, reproaching his father "can't you see I'm burning?", after which the father wakes to find his child in fact burning. It is a convention of the epic underworlds that the shades there are prophetic, and also that dreams originate in the underworld⁵, divided into those that will come true and those that will not. Freud, devoted scientist that he is, naturally gives no credence to the belief that dreams may be prophetic, explaining the father's dream of his burning child, "The glare of light shone through the open door into the sleeping man's eyes and led him to the conclusion which he would have arrived at if he had been awake, namely that a candle had fallen over and set something alight in the neighbourhood of the body," and adding that, "the words spoken by the child must have been made up of words which he had actually spoken in his lifetime and which were connected with important events in the father's mind" (*SE V.509-510*). Thus words spoken in the past, perhaps even on different occasions ("I'm burning," and "Father, don't you see") combine with a present circumstances (the child's death, the glare of the light on the sleeper's eyes) and seem to give knowledge of the future (that the child is in

⁵ See Chapter 2, pages 145-150, for a discussion of the underworld and the so-called "Gates of Dream."

fact burning) – but all of these act together to fulfill a wish: that the child may be alive again, if only for a moment.

Having already implicitly dismissed the possibility that dreams may be prophetic with regard to the dream of the burning child, Freud returns to this issue in the very last page and paragraph of *The Interpretation of Dreams*:

And the value of dreams for giving us knowledge of the future? There is of course no question of that. It would be truer to say instead that they give us knowledge of the past. For dreams are derived from the past in every sense. Nevertheless the ancient belief that dreams foretell the future is not wholly devoid of truth. By picturing our wishes as fulfilled, dreams are after all leading us into the future. But this future, which the dreamer pictures as the present, has been moulded by his indestructible wish into a perfect likeness of the past. (*SE V.621*)

This model of the dream as a kernel of past, present and future, in which a wished-for future is represented in the present tense but “moulded [...] into a perfect likeness of the past,” is reprised in “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming” with regard to the fantasy:

The relation of a phantasy to time is in general very important. We may say that it hovers, as it were, between three times—the three moments of time which our ideation involves. Mental work is linked to some current impression, some provoking occasion in the present which has been able to arouse one of the subject’s major wishes. From there it harks back to a memory of an earlier experience (usually an infantile one) in which this wish was fulfilled; and it now creates a situation relating to the future

which represents a fulfilment of the wish. What it thus creates is a day-dream or phantasy, which carries about it traces of its origin from the occasion which provoked it and from the memory. Thus past, present and future are strung together, as it were, on the thread of the wish that runs through them. (*SE* 9, 148)

It is according to this model that we will examine, in the following pages, the literary fantasy of the underworld as it appears in book 10 of the *Odyssey*, book 6 of the *Aeneid*, and in the *Divine Comedy* (the entirety of which can, essentially, be read as an underworld scene), arguing that, beyond any wishes of a poem's hero, in the underworld *poetic* wishes find expression. In the epic underworlds the poetry of the past appears in various guises and is given the space to speak again, generally in order to prophesy, directly or indirectly, the future glory of the present poem. As they do so, however, these spectral apparitions of poetic tradition are often subject to violent transformations or mutilations at the hands of the poet – beyond the very fact that, insofar as they are appearing in the underworld, they are presumed or proclaimed to have passed from life into their afterlives. One result of the wish to make past poetry speak in order to announce the future immortality of a “living poem” is the possibility thus opened, that in the future this once-living poem will be put to the same use to which it now puts others, thus leading to a future which is molded in the likeness of the past.

But let us remain for a moment with the question of *how* the poetry of the past is made to speak in the poetry of the present. We have proposed above that the *literal* (i.e., un-metaphorical) afterlife of a literary work consists in the incorporation of its language, in a fragmentary manner, into the language of a new literary work, whether in the form of

translation, quotation, or otherwise reproduction of its particular linguistic/stylistic characteristics. We have said also that an epic poem, especially in the representation of the underworld, makes use of material from past poetry in a way similar to the way dreams make use of material from the dreamer's past and present experience, drawing – again in a fragmentary manner – from widely diverse sources in the service of the “indestructible wish.” A relevant difference between a dream and a literary work, however, is Freud's insistence that the dream-work “does not think, calculate or judge in any way at all; it restricts itself to giving things a new form” (*SE* V.507). In taking material from the dreamer's experience to make the dream, the dream-work operates according to its functions of distortion, displacement, condensation, etc., but cannot be said to do so in any way that resembles conscious, waking thought. The dream-work is not rational or logical, and it is not creative. This last point is emphasized in Freud's discussion of speeches made in dreams:

For the dream-work cannot actually *create* speeches. However much speeches and conversations, whether reasonable or unreasonable in themselves, may figure in dreams, analysis invariably proves that all that the dream has done is to extract from the dream thoughts fragments of speech which have really been made or heard. It deals with these fragments in the most arbitrary fashion. Not only does it drag them out of their context and cut them into pieces, incorporating some portions and rejecting others, but it often puts them together in a new order, so that a speech which appears in a dream to be a connected whole turns out in analysis to be composed of three or four detached fragments. In producing

this new version, a dream will often abandon the meaning that the words originally had in the dream-thoughts and give them a fresh one. If we look closely into a speech that occurs in a dream, we shall find that it consists on the one hand of relatively clear and compact portions and on the other hand of portions which serve as connecting matter and have probably been filled in at a later stage, just as, in reading, we fill in any letters or syllables that may have been accidentally omitted. Thus speeches in dreams have a structure similar to that of *brecchia*, in which largish blocks of various kinds of stone are cemented together by a binding medium. (*SE* V.418-419)

We may remark, to begin with, that Freud's image of the "brecchia" of dream-speech – made up of "fragments of speech which have really been made or heard," but re-ordered, often given a "fresh" meaning, and "cemented together" by "portions which serve as connecting matter" – bears a significant resemblance to the image of the mosaic we proposed as a means of understanding how the underworld scene in epic poetry deals with past poetic material – but there is an important distinction to make. The dream, and, within the dream, any dream-speech, is constructed by the "dream-work," which "does not think," which "cannot actually *create* speeches" – but the poetic underworld is constructed, *created*, by a poet or by poets who, we would tend to assume, *do* think. Should this seeming similarity of two processes which are presumed to operate in radically opposing manners, but in order to arrive at seemingly similar products and, we have proposed, with a similar driving force – desire, the wish – cause us to question what

it means to “think” such that the dream-work *cannot* be said to do so, and/or cause us to question what it means to make a poem?

Jean-François Lyotard writes, of the action of desire in relation to language within the dream-work: “The dream is not the language of desire, but its work. Freud, however, makes the opposition even more dramatic [...] by claiming that the work of desire is the result of manhandling a text. Desire does not speak; it does violence to the order of utterance” (19). We have already attributed to epic underworlds a similar tendency to “manhandle” texts – texts, precisely – according to the workings of desire, in the service of wish-fulfillment. But again, the “violence” that poems may do to the “order of utterance” of past poems we have, implicitly, attributed to a poet – to one who *speaks* as well as (and not only by way of) doing violence to speech. Where does this leave us? On the one hand, we have the “dream-work” which supposedly “manhandles text” without thinking, but is given by Freud so many abilities – to “extract” fragments of speech from all that has ever been heard or said by the dreamer, to “cut them in pieces, incorporating some portions and rejecting others,” to arrange them “in a new order,” to abandon an original meaning and replace it with another, and to fill in any gaps with “connecting matter” – that we begin to wonder how far it really differs from the conscious thought that constructs waking speeches.⁶ Is not *any* speech constitutively fragmentary, constructed out of the reservoir of what has previously been heard or read?⁷ Why, then,

⁶ In this line of questioning we are, in must be noted, *not* following Lyotard, who thoroughly maintains Freud’s insistence that the dream-work “does not think.”

⁷ This question is influenced by considerations of Jacques Derrida’s elaboration, in “Signature, Event, Context,” of the concept of “citationality” or “iterability,” the susceptibility of any “mark” or “sign” to be cut off entirely from its context – which stands as important counterpoint or even a stumbling block to our claim (following Benjamin) that textual fragments retain the imprint of their “original” contexts, as well as to Freud’s general claims to be able to trace speeches in dreams to the context or contexts in which, in waking life, they were spoken or heard.

is conscious thought attributed to the composure of one kind of speech, but not another? On the other hand, we begin to wonder how much any poet – any writer – can be said to be consciously in control of how he or she makes use of the material provided by past literature. Though it is evident that certain poets entertain the fantasy that they are masters of the past, drawing at will from its vast literary reserves, we must assume that certain alchemical processes are effected, by the mixing of so many sources within the medium of language, which were not only unintended by the poet, but even go unnoticed.

These are certainly questions which literary theory has asked before in many contexts, and they are questions which, if we were to seek satisfying answers, would take us extremely far afield, and perhaps lead to a certain vanishing point of the argument of this dissertation. However, my hope is that in the textual analyses that follow these questions will continue to resonate, deepening the implications of readings which are maintained, here, in a sort of brief exemplarity, but which fully deserve more extended treatment. With no further ado, then, let us descend into the underworlds...

Odyssey 11 – Erebus

There is no difficulty in determining what wishes are fulfilled for Odysseus in the underworld – he is able to hear from the shade of the famous Theban prophet, Tiresias, what obstacles lie in the way of his homecoming, and how he can overcome them, and he is able to speak to the ghost of his mother and hear news of his home and family from her. But our concern here is not what the underworld does for Odysseus, but what it does for the *Odyssey*. Only from an outside perspective is the journey to the underworld a fantasy; for Odysseus, who is fantastical himself, it is real. Our focus, then, must be not

on those underworldly encounters which engage with Odysseus' personal past, but rather those which engage with the *Odyssey's* linguistic past. These fall into two categories: the confrontation of the *Odyssey* with the *Iliad*, and the confrontation of the *Odyssey* with the tradition of mythic/heroic song. The *Iliad*, as a monumental portrayal of the male-dominated world of war, is fittingly represented by the shades of Agamemnon and Achilles, the *Iliad's* greatest king and its greatest hero, whose personal enmity is one of the strongest forces shaping its narrative. On the other hand, the reservoir of pre-existing mythic material, which nourished and gave birth to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, appears with equal propriety as a procession of famous women, who are most especially famous for the famous sons they bore. In book XI the *Odyssey* asserts a mastery of these two major sources through their spectral representatives, by exerting control over how or whether they are allowed to speak.

Between lines 225 and 330 of book XI, Odysseus interviews a procession of women, "who had been the wives and daughters of great men" [*hossai aristēon alokhoi esan ēde thugatres*]⁸; already in this description the women are valorized according to their relation to men. Odysseus maintains this phallo-centrism (there really is no other word for it), imposing an order on what is initially a "throng" of women by drawing the "long sword from beside [his] stout thigh" and thus forcing them to approach one by one the sacrificial blood which, when they have drunk it, will allow them to remember their past and tell Odysseus their stories. They tell of their relations with gods and great men, and of the heroic (male) children born of these liaisons. Or so Odysseus leads us to believe; we must remember that book XI is part of Odysseus' extended relation of his

⁸ In *Studies in Odyssey 11*, Odysseus Tsagarakis presents a comprehensive treatment of the so-called "Catalogue of Women" in book XI, of the criticism surrounding it (it has often been argued that the Catalogue of Women was a later interpolation into the *Odyssey*), and of book XI in general.

travels to his hosts in the Phaeacian court, and while he directly quotes the speeches of all the other shades he claims to have met in Erebus, he reports the stories of the procession of women by way of indirect speech. While the fact that the underworld scene is entirely placed within Odysseus' story leaves it open to speculations about its credibility (Odysseus is a master liar), his control over *what* he tells and *how* he tells it is especially emphasized here by the fact that he does not let these dead women speak for themselves. The singer of the *Odyssey* makes it clear that when it comes to the song's heroic ancestry, he is in control of the 'bloodline,' ordering and unifying it, not overwhelmed by its "throng." Odysseus drives this point home by cutting off his story before all the women have (not) had their say: "But I could not tell you all the wives and daughters of heroes I saw. It would take all night" (228-230).⁹ We shall see later how Virgil allows a daughter of one of these very women take revenge on her heroic husband, and even makes Odysseus an accomplice to this brutality.

When Odysseus is eventually persuaded by the Phaeacians to take up his story again, he moves on to "other things more pitiable still, the woes of [his] comrades who died after the war, who escaped the Trojans and their battle-cry but died on their return through a woman's evil" (381-384). Chief among these "pitiable" comrades is Agamemnon, who was once the greatest of kings but who perished ignominiously, wallowing like a pig in his own blood and that of his men, at the hands of his unfaithful and vengeful wife, Clytemnestra. Thus did all the glory of having won the greatest war in history disappear in an instant, because of an inglorious death. Next to speak to Odysseus

⁹ *Odyssey* quotations are from Stanley Lombardo's translation, except in a few instances when I have been called to dwell on the Greek in more depth, or alter Lombardo's translation to make a specific point about the language. However, I cite book and line numbers from the Greek rather than the translation, to make reference to the original simpler. My source for the Greek text has been the 1919 Loeb Classical Library edition, edited by Capps, Page and Rouse.

is the ghost of Achilles, who, as opposed to Agamemnon, died with all the glory that, according to the values of the *Iliad*, was possible to a man; Odysseus says as much to him:

“But no man, Achilles,
Has ever been as blessed as you, or ever will be.
While you were alive the army honored you
Like a god, and now that you are here
You rule the dead with might. You should not
Lament your death at all, Achilles.” (482-486)

In Odysseus’ flattery of Achilles, the *Odyssey* pays lip-service to its great predecessor, and to the high valuation there of death in battle, as the most glorious that a warrior could expect. But if Odysseus speaks for the *Iliad*, a condemnation of its values is placed in the mouth of its greatest hero, as Achilles responds:

“Don’t try to sell me on death, Odysseus.
I’d rather be a hired hand back up on earth,
Slaving away for some poor dirt farmer,
Than lord it over all these breathless dead.” (488-491)

In the end what eases the sorrow of Achilles’ shade is the news Odysseus passes on of his son’s greatness. Thus the *Odyssey* seems to honor the *Iliad*, while making its own heroes devalue their glory, deriving their true greatness from the greatness of their children – i.e., deriving the greatness of the *Iliad* from its having given rise to the *Odyssey*. Agamemnon and Achilles are even introduced in the underworld with the very same epithets which also introduced them in the opening lines of the *Iliad*: Agamemnon is

referred to as “king of men” [*anax andrōn*], and the line which signals Achilles’ approach, “there came up the spirit of Peleus’ son Achilles” [*ēlthe d’ epi psukhe Pēlēiadeō Akhilēos*] overtly echoes the famous first line of the *Iliad*, “Sing, muse, the wrath of Peleus’ son Achilles” [*Mēnin aeide, thea, Pēlēiadeō Akhilēos*]. With these ghostly echoes the *Odyssey* turns against the *Iliad* not only its heroes but its very language, to declare the glory of the new poem.

Aeneid 6 – Avernus

If it is a challenge to directly attribute the fulfillment of wishes to *Odyssey* book XI, because it is difficult to know who to attribute them to – as we are writing of a poem that is attributed to the name of Homer by convention but is no longer generally believed to have been the work of one man – with the *Aeneid* it is easier. We know who Virgil was, and what were his main reasons for composing his great poem: to glorify Rome and its history, to create a great national mythology which would be for the Roman people the equivalent of the Homeric poems for the Greeks, to derive the mythic origins of Rome from the greatest son of the Trojan race, thus creating a simultaneous link and opposition to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and the Greek people. Nowhere are these intentions more apparent than in book VI, when Aeneas descends with the Cumaean Sibyl into the groves of Avernus, past Tartarus and into Elysium, where his father’s shade shows him a procession of his future descendents.

Before this remarkable event, however, Aeneas’ attention is drawn to the mutilated shade of a former comrade-in-arms, Priam’s son Deiphobus. Having taken Helen as a wife after the death of Paris (Menelaus briefly alludes to this in book IV of the

Odyssey), Deïphobus died in the fall of Troy, and his ghost presents Aeneas with a terrible sight:

And here Aeneas saw Deïphobus,
 Son of Priam, his whole body mangled
 And his face cruelly mutilated, shredded,
 And both hands gone. His ears had been torn
 From the sides of his head, and his nostrils lopped
 With a shameful wound. Aeneas scarcely
 Recognized him as he trembled, struggling
 To hide his brutal disfigurement. (VI:494-499)

When questioned about his fate by Aeneas, Deïphobus tells of Helen's deception of the Trojans, and how she led Menelaus and Ulysses (Odysseus) into his bed-chamber to attack him while he was sleeping, exclaiming over his wounds, "She left these memorials!" (*illa haec monimenta reliquit*] (512). This brief encounter works in many ways. First, it presents a figure – a sort of memorial – from the Homeric poems, appearing "cruelly mutilated" in the space of the *Aeneid*. Were Deïphobus an Achaean, Virgil's violence against Homer would be fully in the open; as it is, because he is Trojan, this violence is masked and even made to seem to be rather the violence of the Greeks. It is not enough, however, to turn the figures of two great Achaean heroes, Menelaus and Ulysses, to the purpose of working the "brutal disfigurement" of a disguised representative of their own glory; involving Helen in the affair, Virgil lets loose the "wives and daughters of great men" to take revenge, through her, on a representative of the culture that passed women from man to man and derived their worth from their

fathers and husbands. One of the women Odysseus is said to have spoken to in Hades is Leda, mother (by Zeus and/or Tyndareus) of the twins Castor and Polydeuces, who *are* mentioned in her story as Odysseus reports it, and mother of Helen, who *isn't*. Thus the most famous wife and daughter of Greek mythology enlists the help, precisely, of Odysseus and the phallic sword he used to keep her mother in line, to enact an excessive symbolic castration of her husband: having already removed all the weapons from his house as well as the sword from under his pillow, Helen lets in Menelaus and Ulysses, who cut off Deiphobus' nose, his ears, and both of his hands.

The complications of this scene, in which Virgil essentially makes Homeric epic brutalize itself while his hands remain clean, are only a foretaste of how he deals with the history of his own people. When he arrives in the fields of Elysium Aeneas finds his father, Anchises, “reviewing as a proud father the souls of his descendants yet to be born into the light, contemplating their destinies, their great deeds to come” (680-683); the procession of souls which father and son survey together completely overturns the conception of the afterlife as evidenced in the *Odyssey* while making use of similar images. Odysseus encounters shades who, though they retain the shape and appearance of their living bodies, have lost any memory of their lives, and they are restored their memories only by approaching and sipping from the pool of sacrificial blood Odysseus has spilled. Aeneas, on the other hand, is struck by the sight of “nations of souls, innumerable” which crowd the banks of the river of Lethe and “in [its] ripples [...] sip the waters of forgetfulness and oblivion” (714-715). Anchises explains that these are “souls owed another body by fate,” but that souls arrive in the underworld still conditioned by many “corporeal taints,” and only after a thousand years of purification are they left

clean; they are then called to Lethe, “so that they return to the vaulted world with no memory and may begin again to desire rebirth in a human body” (749-751). In the *Odyssey* Achilles, once restored his memories of life, affirmed that he would choose life in any form over lordship over the dead – and yet in Homer there is no conception of resurrection; in the *Aeneid*, in which the afterlife *is* in fact only a span of time between one life and the next, both Aeneas and Anchises make it clear that the desire to return to the world would be conceivable only on the basis of a complete erasure of any memories of life there. It is on the canvas of such an erased past that the “future” of Rome unfurls before Aeneas, as the newly obliterated souls take on the forms of their lives to come and parade before their living forefather. It is in this parade of souls that Virgil explicitly traces the ancestry of the Roman emperors back to the Trojan hero, and through him, to the gods (Aeneas is the son of Aphrodite). He is creating this mythic history, however, over an existing history which he cannot hope to erase or suppress with his own inventions. Though the poet presents his own past, distorted by the wish to mythologize it, to Aeneas as the glorious form of his future, the perversity and deathliness of this endeavor shows through in Aeneas’ response to the vision, as he asks Anchises, “Oh father, is it indeed possible for some souls to go from this place to the upper world to return for a second time to their heavy bodies? What sorrowful misery is this *desire* for the light?”¹⁰ [*‘o pater, ane aliquas ad caelum hinc ire putandum est / sublimis animas iterumque ad tarda reverti / corpora? quae lucis miseris tam dira cupido?’*] (719-722, emphasis added). The conflicted nature of the poetic task weighs most heavily on the final figure in the procession, a youth of whom Aeneas remarks “the shadow of death enshrouds his head.” This is the future-ghost of Marcellus, the nephew and son-in-law of

¹⁰ My translation.

Caesar Augustus,¹¹ who died young; still in the realm of the dead and centuries before his birth, the cleansed soul that has taken on the form of Marcellus-to-be already bears the marks of his future death, and Anchises honors him: “You will be Marcellus! Let me strew armfuls of lilies and scatter purple blossoms, hollow rites to honor my descendant’s shade” [*tu Marcellus eris. manibus date lilia plenis / purpureos spargam flores animamque nepotis / his saltem accumulem donis, et fungar inani / munere*] (883-886).

The Divine Comedy – Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso

In the *Divine Comedy* Dante marshals a reservoir of pre-existing material from poetry, mythology, history and religion, but this is *such* a vast reservoir, and of such profound sources, that he cannot hope to fully master it. Dante’s mode of creating meaning is highly kaleidoscopic, or constellational – in each canto, each level of the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, he selects a handful of figures to appear together and creates lines of dynamic between them, both in their original sources and as he recasts them. This kaleidoscopic technique is heightened in its linguistic aspect when, in *Purgatorio*, Dante reveals the sins which are suffered, and the virtues celebrated, in each terrace, through quotations or citations from an array of sources. In these instances the original context of the quotation is always significant to Dante’s usage of it, and often leads to unexpected undertones of interpretation of crucial moments in the poem.

A brief example can be found in canto XXX of *Purgatorio*: when Beatrice finally appears to the pilgrim, her arrival is heralded by an echo of Anchises’ words about the young fated Marcellus, “*Manibus, oh, date lilia plenis!*” Virgil’s lament for a future ruler who died young is turned by Dante into a phrase of celebration and praise, which both

¹¹ Under whose rule Virgil composed the *Aeneid*.

declares the fateful significance of the figure of Beatrice in poetry and reminds of her own early departure from life. Recalling the fact, however, that Marcellus only “appeared” as the imprint of a future already past, upon the form of a recycled soul, in the depths of the underworld, raises questions about the function of Beatrice in the *Commedia*. Is the elaborate production of her appearance in *Purgatorio* perhaps predicated on the erasure or suppression of a past, even her own past? We will consider this possibility again in Chapter 1, and investigate the workings and suppression, or sublimation, of desire in Dante’s portrayal of Beatrice.

Desire creates curious bedfellows in *Purgatorio*’s canto XXV, in which the pilgrim climbs to the seventh and final terrace of the mountain of Purgatory, where the virtue of chastity is celebrated, and its corresponding sin is punished. The souls in this terrace walk “through the fire” [per la fiamma] and sing the praises of chastity from within “the heart of the great burning” [nel seno / al grande ardore] (*Purgatorio* XXV.121-122).¹² As in previous terraces, the souls cry out examples of the virtue they aspire to; here they first “cried aloud: ‘*Virum non cognosco*’” [gridavano alto: “*Virum non cognosco*”] and then “ ‘Diana kept to the woods and chased Helice forth, who had felt the poison of Venus’ ” [“Al bosco / si tenne Diana, ed Elice caccionne / che di Venere avea sentito il tòsco”] (128-132). The first exclamation is biblical, from the Gospel of Luke: Mary has just been told by the angel Gabriel that, having found favor with God, she will conceive and bear a child, and responds, “How shall this happen, since *I do not know man?* [Quomodo fiet istud, quoniam *virum non cognosco*] (Luke I:34,

¹² All quotations of Dante are from Charles S. Singleton’s 1970 translation with accompanying volumes of commentary, unless otherwise noted. However, rather than citing the page numbers from the translation, I will cite passages according to the book (*Inferno*, *Purgatorio* or *Paradiso*), and canto and line numbers, to make reference to the original simpler. If citing Singleton’s commentary, on the other hand, I will give volume and page numbers.

emphasis added). The second example is not a direct quotation, but the summary of a story which is meant to praise the goddess Diana for her devotion to chastity – but ends with the negative example of the nymph Helice, who was cast from Diana’s company because she “felt the poison of Venus.” We will not concern ourselves with the immediate incongruity of placing a biblical fragment alongside reference to a pagan myth – otherwise we would have to call into question the entire premises of Dante’s project. But let us pursue the myth of Diana and Helice, since it is not quite so well known as the story of Mary, and because we may see that the “poison of Venus” has the power to be transmitted from poor Helice to chaste Diana, to immaculate Mary, and perhaps even beyond.

The myth of Helice, known more often as Callisto, is derived from many sources both Greek and Roman, including Hesiod, Pausanias, Virgil and Statius, and was even the subject of a lost drama of Aeschylus, but receives its most complete (extant) unfolding in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Ovid introduces the “country nymph” with this description:

She was no girl to spin soft skeins of wool
 Or vary her hair style; a buckle held
 Her dress, a plain white band her straggling hair.
 She carried a light spear—sometimes a bow—
 Diana’s warrior; none so high as she
 In Dian’s favour on the mountain slopes
 Of Maenalus; but favourites soon fall. (36-36)

This warrior-girl falls from favor because, having caught the eye of Jove while sleeping in a forest glade, she is approached by the father of the gods who takes “Diana’s form” and in this form proceeds to seduction. Upon realizing the intentions of the god/goddess, the nymph fights, but the father of gods is “victorious.” Her pregnancy (gods never fail to be fertile) eventually revealed to Diana when the nymphs all bathe together, the goddess banishes the former favorite from her company, insisting that Helice shall not “stain [her] stream.” When Helice has given birth to a son, Arcas, Juno (Jove’s wife) takes revenge for her husband’s infidelity by turning the girl into a bear, and she lives as such for many years, “but kept her woman’s heart,” until she finally encounters her son again:

Arcas was now sixteen,

His mother lost, her fate, her name unknown.

One day, out hunting in the forest glades

Of Erymanthus, as he placed his nets,

He chanced to meet her; seeing him as she stopped

Stock still, seeming to recognize his face.

He shrank away; those eyes, unmoving, fixed

For ever on his own, froze the boy’s heart

With nameless fear, and as she moved towards him

He aimed his javelin to strike her dead.

The Almighty stayed his hand and swept away

Both son and mother—with the threatened crime—

Whirled in a wind together through the void,

And set in the sky as neighbouring stars. (39)

While this astral transformation seems intended to repair the brutal transformation Helice had formerly suffered, it in fact immortalizes it – Helice becomes the constellation Ursa Major, the Great Bear; her son becomes Ursa Minor. Jove thus underlines the punishment imposed on the girl for his own trespasses, freezing the violated Helice eternally in the moment in which her life is threatened by her own son. To add final insult to the injury which she perceives to be a reward, Juno requests of the god Ocean: “debar from your green deeps / That seven-fold star that at the price of shame / Was set in heaven, nor let that prostitute / Your waters’ pure integrity pollute” (40), echoing Diana’s original banishment – and so the constellation of the bear is never allowed to bathe in the waters of the world, for fear of “staining” and “polluting” them with the loss of her chastity. And yet Helice would be quite as justified as Mary in protesting “*virum non cognosco*,” since she indeed never knew a man, but rather a god, and did not even know that god in the form of a man, but rather in the form of a goddess. In this act of “knowledge” – or non-knowledge – Diana’s own celebrated chastity is stained, but this is nothing to the effects of noting the parallels between the sad story of Helice, and the story of Mary.

Two virgin girls who, never having “known a man,” conceive and bear a son by the Father of gods, God the Father, both of whom are eventually immortalized with their sons in the heavens. Though the intervening details in the stories are divergent, the strong similarities cannot help but cause us to question Dante’s praise of one for her chastity, and castigation of the other for her lack thereof. On the one hand, we can argue that Helice was in fact raped, that she did not become unchaste by choice, and did not deserve any of her punishments, even those which were not intended as such. On the other hand, it would be the height of blasphemy to make a similar argument about Mary, and we can

hardly claim that Dante, however idiosyncratic in his theology, meant to make such imputations on the intentions of God the Father, or on the reputation of the Virgin Mother. Thus, despite Dante's (and the Bible's) every attempt to banish any of the workings of desire from the conception of Christ (and Mary, for that matter), through the story of Helice the "poison of Venus" seeps through – and its contamination does not stop with Mary.

Early in the *Vita Nuova* Dante relates a dream in which he sees "the figure of a lord of terrible aspect to such as should gaze upon him," who says "*Ego dominus tuus*" ["I am thy master"]: "In his arms it seemed to me that a person was sleeping, covered only with a blood-coloured cloth" (6). Dante recognizes this sleeping, naked figure as "the lady of the salutation" – i.e., Beatrice. This dream becomes the source for the first poem in the collection, which comes to serve (according to the poet) as his entry into the community of Florentine poets, and as such is the beginning of the massive poetic monument that Dante will build to the glorification of Beatrice, who he installs decisively in Heaven, among the stars. According to Dante's interpretation, the "lord" in the dream is "Love"; in the dream, Love wakes the sleeping lady and forces her to eat the poet's heart. This act of violation of the love object by Love itself (Eros, desire, the wish – whatever we may call this indestructible force) remains at the heart of Dante's poetry all along its way, and the figure of Beatrice, in the very praise that is heaped upon her, in the very fact that the poet invents new modes of poetry devoted *entirely* to praising her, is not only, like the poet, subject to Love, but becomes subject to the workings of the poet's own desire.

New Wishes, Modern Afterlives

With the rise of the age that effectively drives all of epic poetry, and not only certain representatives of the genre, into its afterlife, comes what Benjamin calls a “change in the structure of experience,” and perhaps most especially a change in the way that desire is experienced. Wishes still find expression in fantasies, in dreams, and in literature, but the modes of expression, and the conceptions of what it would mean to fulfill a wish, have been radically changed. Freud’s description of the relation of a fantasy (or a dream) to time – as the linking of past, present and future on the thread of a wish – which we have applied to analyses of the representation of the underworld in the epic tradition, must be affected by a different experience of temporality in the modern world. In the “Motifs” essay Benjamin writes:

The earlier in life one makes a wish, the greater one’s chances that it will be fulfilled. The further a wish reaches out in time, the greater the hopes for its fulfillment. But it is experience [*Erfahrung*]¹³ that accompanies one to the far reaches of time, that fills and articulates time. Thus, a wish fulfilled is the crowning of experience. In folk symbolism, distance in space can take the place of distance in time; that is why the shooting star, which plunges into infinite space, has become the symbol of a fulfilled wish. The ivory ball that rolls into the *next* compartment, the *next* card that lies on top, are the very antithesis of the falling star. The instant in which a shooting star flashes before human eyes consists of the sort of time that Joubert has described with his customary assurance. “Time,” he says, “is

¹³ The word Benjamin uses for the kind of experience that has, in Baudelaire’s time, been almost entirely replaced by “isolated” or “lived experience” [*Erlebnis*] which is particularly hostile to the production of poetry.

found even in eternity; but it is not earthly, worldly time.... It does not destroy; it merely completes.” It is the antithesis of time in hell, which is the province of those who are not allowed to complete anything they have started.” (SW IV.331)

In the following chapters I consider both Charles Baudelaire and Marina Tsvetaeva as poets who are able, as Benjamin says of Baudelaire, to find a way to make modern experience fertile for poetry, sometimes working against the forces of modernization, but sometimes utilizing them to produce, within poetry, the shock of the *new*. I argue that the works of both poets are profoundly motivated by desire, but also comment profoundly on the ways that desire and its modes of seeking fulfillment have been diverted, distorted and broken by the broken times. In this way they each provide an afterlife to the epic tradition insofar as it used the scene of the underworld to represent the fulfillment of poetic wishes. However, we do not find in either Baudelaire’s or Tsvetaeva’s work a sustained narrative in which the underworld can appear; rather, we find their poetry shot through with slivers, or fragments, of souvenirs of the past, hallucinations of the future, intimations of eternal time, and vivid experiences of infernal time – and between these slivers we find the constant connecting thread: the wish to find a way to live, and to find a way, in life, to be a poet.

In Chapter 1, “Reading the Disaster: Homer, Dante and Baudelaire,” I dwell on the figure of “la Circé tyrannique” in the poem “Le Voyage” insofar as, in her traditional proximity to the underworld, Circe imposes (or fails to impose) through her presence in its final poem a narrative structure on Baudelaire’s entire collection. I argue that Circe – and, by association, the figure of femininity in *Les Fleurs du mal* – functions as a drug,

simultaneously sating and stimulating desire which is, in the end, revealed to be desire not for any particular object, but desire for the *new*. I consider the mediation of Baudelaire's Homeric reference by Dante's radical re-writing of Odysseus' life and death in Canto XXVI of the *Inferno*, a mediation that introduces into the Odyssean adventure the workings of that "ancient flame," Desire, which leads the hero off-course and brings him to his death, far from home, on the shores of the underworld. By association with Dante, who considered himself fated by the stars to be a poet, I argue that in "Le Voyage" we see Baudelaire, who professes throughout his poetry a hatred for the stars, seeking a new way of writing poetry in the midst of the disasters of modernity.

Chapter 2, "Reading the Blank: Poe and Baudelaire," considers the cartographic drives of epic poetry, and the tendency to locate the underworld, as an opening onto the "Unknown," within the map's blank space. I argue that Baudelaire, confronted with a mapped world in which there were no more blank spaces, and consequently an atrophy even of the concept of the underworld, turned to Edgar Allan Poe for instruction as to how to construct these blank spaces within the map of his poetry. Following a reading of the figure of the "maelstrom" in Poe's works, insofar as it functions as a purveyor of novelty and the unknown, culminating in an analysis of the enigmatic end of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, I argue that in *Les Fleurs du mal*, and particularly in the *Tableaux parisiens* (made possible by "Le Voyage"), Baudelaire describes a landscape in which a maelstrom can open in any doorway, and an underworld intrude on life from any arcade.

Chapter 3, "Writing the Wires: Tsvetaeva, Pasternak and Rilke," examines Marina Tsvetaeva's transformation of the epic underworld into an other-world which she

imagines as the native home of the poet. Following a consideration of Tsvetaeva's 1940 translation of "Le Voyage" into Russian, in which the shadow of death falls over every vision of paradise, I examine Tsvetaeva's conception of death as a kind of translation, and beyond that as a space for an idealized meeting between poets. I continue with readings of poetry Tsvetaeva directs and dedicates to fellow-poets Boris Pasternak and Rainer Maria Rilke, in which she forges a space for a meeting with each of them in the realm of language, but at the expense of any meetings with them in life.

In Chapter 4, "Writing the Truth: Tsvetaeva's Other-world," I conclude these reflections with an extended analysis of Tsvetaeva's 1936 essay, "Otherworldly Evening," in the context of a consideration of the problems posed by the reliance, in much of Tsvetaeva scholarship, on a biographical approach to her work. In the essay, which marks the death of the poet Mikhail Kuzmin, Tsvetaeva relates her memories of a poetic gathering on the eve of 1917, but in so doing she can be seen to mythologize the lives and deaths of her fellow poets, and her own life and death, and the life and death of the "old" Russia, as much as she memorializes them, erasing or eliding details as she immortalizes poetic archetypes.

Chapter 1

Reading the Disaster: Homer, Dante and Baudelaire

quisque suos patimur manis.

Virgil, *Aeneid* VI.743

Mais la Mort, que nous ne consultons pas sur nos projets et à qui nous ne pouvons pas demander son acquiescement, la Mort, qui nous laisse rêver de bonheur et de renommée et qui ne dit ni oui ni non, sort brusquement de son embuscade, et balaye d'un coup d'aile nos plans, nos rêves et les architectures idéales où nous abritons en pensée la gloire de nos derniers jours !

Baudelaire, *Les Paradis Artificiels*

According to the prevailing understanding of Charles Baudelaire's "Le Voyage," the concluding poem of the 1861 edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, the primary literary source for the poem would be *Les Fleurs du mal* itself. The longest poem of the collection, "Le Voyage," redeploys many of its most significant themes, and even echoes the famous conclusion of "Au Lecteur" – "Hypocrite reader, – my double, – my brother!" [Hypocrite lecteur, - mon semblable, - mon frère!] ¹⁴ – exchanging, as addressee, the reader for "Dieu" – "O my double, o my master, I curse you!" [O mon semblable, ô mon maître, je te maudis!] (*OC* I:133). Richard Burton, in a study of the three months in 1859 that

¹⁴ All translations of Baudelaire into English are my own; a complete translation of "Le Voyage" follows the chapters as Appendix 1.

Baudelaire spent living with his mother at Honfleur, which he calls “by far the most intensive and most prolific period in a literary career, which, to say the least, was not conspicuously marked by speed or fecundity of creation,” refers to “Le Voyage” as “an immense recapitulatory poem” (7). Jacques Dupont, in his editorial introduction to a 1991 Flammarion edition of the *Fleurs*, goes further along this line, elaborating both on what it is that “Le Voyage” recapitulates, and what we should take away from it:

The lesson of the *Voyage*, moralistic in its manner as was the prologue *Au lecteur*, appears, in its ample recapitulation of many of the essential themes of Baudelairean poetry - such as the desire for escape, exoticism, love, alcohol and opium, ennui, sin - as if in a more somber color, even though one finds there the fetish-words that are “the Unknown” and “the new,” and despite this paradoxically disabused desire to embark “upon the sea of Darkness/ With the happy heart of a young passenger.”¹⁵

[La leçon du *Voyage*, moraliste à sa manière comme l’était le prologue *Au lecteur*, apparaît, dans son ample récapitulation de bien des thèmes essentiels de la poésie baudelairienne, tels le désir d’évasion, l’exoticisme, l’amour, l’alcool et l’opium, l’ennui, le péché, comme d’une couleur plus sombre, même si l’on y retrouve ces mots-fétiches que sont l’«Inconnu» et le «nouveau», et en dépit de ce désir paradoxalement désabusé d’embarquer «sur la mer des Ténèbres/ Avec le cœur joyeux d’un jeune passager».] (27)

In referring back to “Au lecteur” both through citation and by echoing its moralistic tone, “Le Voyage” seems to serve as evidence for Baudelaire’s well-known claim, in a letter to

¹⁵ My translation.

Alfred de Vigny, that *Les Fleurs du mal* had “a beginning and an end”¹⁶ (C II:196). Similarly, its survey of what are considered to be essentially “Baudelairean” poetic themes, and the prominence of such “fetish-words” as “le nouveau” and “l’Inconnu,” might lead us to believe that “Le Voyage” was composed precisely to give support to that other infamous claim made by Jules Barbey d’Aurevilly in defense of the 1857 edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, that the collection had a “secret architecture, a plan calculated by the poet” [une architecture secrète, un plan calculé par le poète] (109). However, to consider “Le Voyage” primarily as a recapitulatory poem, a summary of and frame for the body of the *Fleurs*, would facilitate a potentially misleading view of the collection, and the place of “Le Voyage” within it. The structural position of the poem within the collection causes it to be read as a conclusion, an epilogue to match “Au lecteur” as prologue, but its chronological position in the history of composition of all of the poems in the collection yields a different perspective. While “Le Voyage,” composed in the early months of 1859, does look back at all of the poems collected in the ill-fated 1857 edition of the *Fleurs*, it precedes some of the greatest and most well-known of the poems added to the 1861 edition; among these are “La Chevelure” and many of the poems of the *Tableaux parisiens*, including “Le Cygne,” “Les Petites Vieilles,” and “Les Sept Vieillards.” Thus “Le Voyage” can be seen to rehearse the final structure and content of the *Fleurs* as much as it recapitulates its original themes and images.

¹⁶ This passage is worth including in its entirety, as Baudelaire’s own retrospective attempt to introduce the *Fleur* to a new reader, and one whose good opinion he desires:

The only praise I solicit for this book is that it be recognized that it is not a pure album and that it has a beginning and an end. All the new poems have been made in order to be adapted to the singular frame that I have chosen.

[Le seul éloge que je sollicite pour ce livre est qu’on reconnaisse qu’il n’est pas un pur album et qu’il a un commencement et une fin. Tous les poèmes nouveaux ont été faits pour être adaptés au cadre singulier que j’avais choisi.] (C II :196)

Insofar as “Le Voyage” looks back at the 1857 collection, it reveals the poet as a reader of his own work; insofar as “Le Voyage” looks forward to the new *Fleurs*, it shows us the poet as a writer, once again capable of creative work. And while the promise of catching sight of Charles Baudelaire in the act of writing, perhaps especially in the act of writing the monumental poems of the *Tableaux parisiens*, is deliciously alluring, we can reach it only at the end of a slideshow of scenes of Baudelaire reading. In fact, “Le Voyage” reveals itself to be a poem, perhaps above all, about reading; in it Baudelaire reads his own poetic history, indeed, but in the context of a reading of a much longer poetic history. The poem bears, and effaces, the marks of at least three massive literary influences: Homer’s *Odyssey*, Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*, and a number of works by Edgar Allan Poe, but in particular his *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. Naming the works in this order we rely only on their chronology of composition, and make no claims about the relative importance of each text to Baudelaire, or to “Le Voyage.” However, it happens that to consider Baudelaire’s reading of each of these texts in order will, in fact, lead us on a readerly journey through literary history to a point where we will be able to understand better *how* Baudelaire is also reading the past of *Les Fleurs du Mal* within “Le Voyage,” and beginning to read, and write, its future.

In the present chapter we will uncover the marks that the *Odyssey* and *Divine Comedy* have made on “Le Voyage” in the figure of “la Circé tyrannique,” and a particular narrative structure that, through Circe, begins to haunt the poem, and even the collection itself. This structure is the hero’s journey to the underworld, a theme which we find expressed in book XI of the *Odyssey* and expanded in Dante’s *Inferno* (and also extended into a journey through new realms of the afterlife), and through it the nature of

heroism presupposed by each text is revealed. Odysseus is a hero in the original sense of the word, by virtue of his identity: he fought with the other Greeks on the Trojan battlefields; Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon gives, as the first meaning of ἥρωες, "a hero, in Homer used of the Greeks before Troy, then of warriors generally" (355). After the end of the Trojan war, the only thing left for the Greek heroes to do in order to cement their status as glorious warriors was to return home to spread the news of this glory, and it is in the interest of making his return that Odysseus travels to the mouth of the underworld. He meets there with the shade of Tiresias, the blind seer of Thebes, who details for him the events that will lead to his homecoming – a homecoming which we know, from the beginning of the poem, Odysseus is *fated* to make. Thus in the *Odyssey* the journey to the underworld is instrumental in allowing Odysseus to achieve his fate, but does not make any change in this fate – it simply shows him the way to manifest all the glory that is already his, because he is a hero. The pilgrim of *The Divine Comedy* is *not*, in any original sense of the word, a hero; he acknowledges as much in canto II of the *Inferno*, when he asks Virgil, his guide through the underworld: "But I, why do I come there? And who allows it? / I am not Aeneas, I am not Paul; / of this neither I nor others think me worthy" [Ma io, perché venirvi? o chi 'l concede? / Io non Enëa, io non Paulo sono; / me degno a ciò né io né altri 'l crede] (*Inferno* II:31-33). Whereas Odysseus' journey to the underworld made possible his fated homecoming, and Aeneas' journey to the underworld helped him to achieve his fate (according to Dante) to be "father of glorious Rome and of her empire" (*Inferno* II:20-21) and Paul was "caught up into paradise" (II Corinthians, 12:2-4) so that he might (again, according to Dante) "bring thence confirmation of that faith which is the beginning of the way to salvation"

(*Inferno* II:29-30) the pilgrim cannot see that any such great outcome would follow from his own tour through the “immortal world.” He cannot see himself as a hero fighting in a battle, whether this is the physical battle Aeneas must undertake to found his new city, or the spiritual battle Paul wages for the souls of those who may be saved by his ‘confirmation of faith.’ A transformation of heroism has occurred: what we learn, as the pilgrim also learns it, is that the journey must be made for the sake of his own soul, his own salvation. For this reason, it is necessary for him both to make a descent in hell, as Aeneas (and Odysseus) did, *and* to make an ascent into heaven, as Paul did – only the full experience will achieve the necessary result. A change in himself must be effected, which will take him out of the “dark wood” [selva oscura] in which the poem began, and set him back upon “the straight road” [la diritta via] (*Inferno* I:2-3). Dante’s transformation of heroism goes even further: in the overt identification between pilgrim and poet, it becomes clear that the real journey is the one made in poetry. In this sense, the journey is fated, as Dante expresses many times over his belief that he was born under stars which destined him to be a poet.

Some of Dante’s alterations of the definition of heroism carry over into the world of *Les Fleurs du mal* – the transferral of the battlefield from the physical to the moral plane, and the identification of hero and poet. However, Baudelaire’s poetry evidences a fracture in the notion of the poet-hero, and a confusion of the relation of the hero to fate, whether handed down from the gods, or written in the stars. The fracture and confusion are evident in the space between the first two poems of the collection – “Au lecteur” and “Bénédiction.” In the former, Baudelaire’s introductory address to the reader of his book, he insistently uses the first person plural, and if this were not enough to establish the

identification between poet and reader, he ends by naming the “Hypocrite reader” his “double” and “brother.” Poet and reader make a journey together: “Each day we descend towards Hell by a step, / Without horror, across stinking darkness” [Chaque jour vers l’Enfer nous descendons d’un pas, / Sans horreur, à travers des ténèbres qui puent] (*OC I:5*). There is nothing heroic about this journey, not even the lack of horror; every hero who has made the descent into hell, from Odysseus to Dante’s pilgrim, has evinced extreme horror at the sight and experience. The poet and reader of *Les Fleurs du mal*, however, are not living heroes but living dead – their brains peopled by Demons, sucking in a river of Death at every breath. They belong in hell even while they live, and they are above all characterized by the greatest of their vices: “Ennui,” which takes away all horror, even in the face of the most horrible things – “At will it makes a debris of the earth / And swallows the world with a yawn” [Il ferait volontiers de la terre un débris / Et dans un bâillement avalerait le monde] (*OC I:6*). The closest thing there is to a force of fate in the poem is “the Devil who holds the strings that twitch us” [le Diable qui tient les fils qui nous remuent] (*OC I:5*).

“Bénédictio” so completely reverses the story told in “Au lecteur” that it would seem to take place in another world, if it were not clear from the first stanza that it is the same world: “Bénédictio” is the story of the appearance of “Le Poète” in “ce monde ennuyé.” However, this ‘Poet’ is no brother to the reader or to anyone – from the moment of his birth he is repudiated and tormented by all around him, he is a castaway and exile from human fraternity. At the same time, he is “under the invisible tutelage of an Angel” [sous la tutelle invisible d’un Ange], and despite all around him, who descend to the dirtiest of tricks to try to get a rise out of him, the Poet envisions his life as an ascent:

“Towards Heaven, where his eye sees a splendid throne, / The serene Poet lifts his pious arms” [Vers le Ciel, où son œil voit un trône splendide, / Le Poète serein lève ses bras pieux] (*OC* I:7-8). The last five stanzas consist of the Poet’s address to “Dieu,” expressing his faith that he is given “suffering / As a divine remedy for our impurities” [la souffrance / Comme un divin remède à nos impuretés], and that a “mystical crown” [couronne mystique] (*OC* I:9) waits for him at the end of time.

The shadow of this divided Poet hangs over *Les Fleurs du mal* – on one side, poet and reader descend “towards Hell,” brothers in sin, on the other side, the Poet ascends “towards Heaven,” unique in his God-given burden. We must wait for “Le Voyage” (and for Baudelaire’s first readers, this was a years-long wait) to obscure the image of this divided shadow, even if it does so only by plunging us into a deeper darkness. Returning, as we have said, to the “we” of “Au lecteur,” in “Le Voyage” poet and reader make a common attempt to escape “ce monde ennuyé,” ending with a movement which can no longer be established as descent or ascent, a plunge “to the depths, of Heaven or Hell, what does it matter? / To the depths of the Unknown to find the *new!*” [au fond du gouffre, Enfer or Ciel, qu’importe? / Au fond de l’Inconnu pour trouver du *nouveau!*] (*OC* I:134). It remains to be seen whether this constitutes a resolution of the Poet’s status as hero or hypocrite, fated for Heaven or bound to Hell, singular exile or one of the crowd, or whether it fractures the figure of the Poet-hero even more profoundly.

“La Circé tyrannique”:

Reading the *pharmakon féminin* in “Le Voyage” and the *Odyssey*

One morning we depart, heads on fire

Hearts full of rancor and bitter desire,
And we go, following the rhythm of waves,
Lulling our infinity on the finite seas:

Some, happy to flee a frightful fatherland;
Others, the horror of their cradles, and still others,
Astrologers drowned in a woman's eyes,
Tyrannical Circe of dangerous perfumes.

So as not to be changed to beasts, they get drunk
On space and light and blazing skies;
The gnawing ice, the baking suns,
Slowly efface the mark of kisses.

[Un matin nous partons, le cerveau plein de flamme,
Le cœur gros de rancune et de désirs amers,
Et nous allons, suivant le rythme de la lame,
Berçant notre infini sur le fini des mers:

Les uns, joyeux de fuir une patrie infâme;
D'autres, l'horreur de leur berceaux, et quelques-uns,
Astrologues noyés dans les yeux d'une femme,
La Circé tyrannique aux dangereux parfums.

Pour n'être pas changés en bêtes, ils s'enivrent
 D'espace et de lumière et de cieux embrasés;
 La glace qui les mord, les soleils qui les cuivrent,
 Effacent lentement la marque des baisers.] (*OC I* :129-130)

In these three early stanzas of “Le Voyage” (we will save the first stanza for consideration in Chapter 2, “Reading the Blank: Poe and Baudelaire”) Baudelaire presents us with a picture of ourselves, as he sees us – he writes here in the third person plural which he also used in “Au lecteur.” In this picture we have a common condition – we are on fire and full of desire – and we set out together, “un matin,” upon a common journey. We do not yet seek anything, we only go – “Nous allons” – simply following “the rhythm of waves,” lulling the infinity of our desires upon the sea which rocks within its shores. But while “we” are not yet in search, we are in flight, though each of us flees his own personal past. Some escape from a “fatherland,” others run from their cradles, and still others tear themselves away from the eyes and the embraces of a woman. These last escapees receive unique description: they are “astrologers drowned in a woman’s eyes” [Astrologues noyés dans les yeux d’une femme] and the woman is not any woman, she is “Tyrannical Circe of dangerous perfumes” [La Circé tyrannique aux dangereux parfums]. Here, of course, Baudelaire makes reference to the *Odyssey*, and to the goddess, Circe, who appears in book X when Odysseus and the crew of his last remaining ship land on the shore of her island, having just escaped from the giant man-eating Laestrygonians who destroyed the rest of Odysseus’ ships, and devoured his companions. In this well-known episode from the *Odyssey*, which we learn of from Odysseus himself

as he recounts his travels to the Phaeacians, Circe lures half of Odysseus' men into her house and transforms them into swine by means of "insidious drugs" and a magic wand. Odysseus goes in search of them, but is protected from her spells and potions by an herb given to him by Hermes; he is able to convince the goddess to change the beasts back to men, and wins her hospitality and eventual help when they set out again. Baudelaire strengthens the reference to Circe and the *Odyssey* in the next stanza – "we" depart "so as not to be changed to beasts" [pour n'être pas changés en bêtes] choosing the intoxication of space and light over that of a woman's "dangerous perfumes," and courting the marks of the voyage, to efface the marks of kisses.

But how similar is Baudelaire's "Circé tyrannique" to the Circe of the *Odyssey*? Odysseus and his men wash up on the shores of Aeaea already well-worn and worn-out adventurers, having encountered many obstacles and lost many of their company on the way back from Troy. Their constant desire, above all, is to *return* home, and at one point they come so close as to see "men tending the beacon-fires" on the shores of Ithaca; nevertheless, for one reason and another, they cannot reach their *patris*, their "fatherland." After her initial attempt to imbrute Odysseus along with his men, Circe turns hospitable, anointing the swine-men with "another drug" [*pharmakon allo*] which counteracts the first, "baneful," drug [*pharmakon oulomenon*] and acts both to return them to their human form and make them appear even younger and handsomer than they were before. She then proceeds to fête them for a year with food and sweet wine, promising to them that she will "restore the spirit [they] had when [they] left [their] own native land, [their] rugged Ithaca" (*Odyssey* 10:461-3); Odysseus she takes as a lover. When at the end of this year the sea-voyagers turn their thoughts and desires once again

to Ithaca, Circe sends them first on “another journey” [*allein hodon*] to the house of Hades and Persephone, to consult the shade of Theban Tiresias as to how to achieve a homecoming. When they return from Hades to Circe’s island, she generously sets them on their way, detailing to Odysseus the dangers that still lie between himself and Ithaca, which include the Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis, and the temptingly well-fed cattle of Helios on the isle of Thrinacia. Thus it appears that after her first encounter with Odysseus and his men – which in the minds of many has come to stand for her entire interaction with them – the Circe of the *Odyssey* is not “tyrannical” at all, but helpful, welcoming, and wise. Odysseus and his crew do not flee from her; rather, she willingly and generously sends them on their way – toward their fatherland, not away from an “infamous fatherland” [*patrie infâme*].

Shall we conclude, then, that Baudelaire is intending to create a contrast with the *Odyssey*, referencing the episode with Circe only in order to turn all of its associations topsy-turvy? Richard Burton would seem to reach this conclusion, writing,

The Circe of the nineteenth century is no daughter of the Sun and Sea but an all-too-human woman, and ... stand[s] in precisely the sort of caricatural mimetic relationship that will provide ‘Le Cygne’ with its underlying structure and theme. Far from constituting a modern ‘epic,’ ‘Le Voyage’ in fact challenges the teleological assumptions that underpin the mythological universe and might, indeed, be regarded as an anti-*Odyssey*.

(73)

While it may indeed be correct that in “Le Voyage” Baudelaire poses a challenge to the “teleological assumptions” of the Homeric world, to the figure of “Ithaca at the beginning

and end of time” (Burton 73), we would propose that the relation between “Le Voyage” and the *Odyssey* cannot simply reduce to a juxtaposition of *Odyssey* to anti-*Odyssey*, nor can “Le Voyage” be considered as an ‘anti-epic’ any more than as a ‘modern epic,’ whatever that might be. Burton affirms that, “ ‘Le Voyage’ deploys a wide range of mythical, historical and literary allusion designed to endow the poem with vast temporal and spatial resonances,” but that against this resonant background Baudelaire creates “an ironic contrapuntal effect” intended “to *contrast*, in particular, Odysseus’ voyage of initiation and discovery through a mythologically significant universe charged with sacred density with modern man’s journey toward nothingness in a ‘one-dimensional’ world that has been deserted by gods and goddesses, myths and magic” (72-73). For Burton, the goddess Circe of the *Odyssey* and the “Circé tyrannique” of “Le Voyage” appear mainly as representatives of these two worlds, with the particular context of the episode of Circe in the *Odyssey* holding no great significance for our understanding of the presence of Circe in “Le Voyage.” Again, we will argue that the figure of the Odyssean Circe, both in the details of her own episode and in the structural position that that episode holds in the *Odyssey*, becomes in “Le Voyage” something far more complicated than an ‘anti-Circe,’ an “all-too-human woman,” or even a “mimetic” caricature.

As we have already noted, Circe’s magical power to transform men into beasts through the concoction of “baneful potions” is often made to represent her entire character – she, with her potions, is one of the many figures Odysseus and his men encounter who threaten to make them forget the way home, or forget their desire for home. This is in fact the greatest obstacle to homecoming, greater by far than the wrath of Poseidon; the Lotus-eaters and the Sirens are linked to Circe through the common danger

they pose, the danger of oblivion. To eat the Lotus, to hear the Siren song – these things will take away all thought of and desire for home, even from the most weary and homesick warrior, and in the world of the *Odyssey* a man with no desire for home is no better than a cow or a pig. It has been sufficiently remarked that Baudelaire makes this very connection between Circe, the Lotus-eaters and the Sirens in “Le Voyage”; for example, Pierre Brunel, in *Baudelaire, antique et moderne*, in a chapter devoted to the figure of Circe in “Le Voyage,”¹⁷ writes:

An Odyssean cycle opens with the mariners (Ulysses and his companions) desirous to flee [...] “la Circé tyrannique aux dangereux parfums”. The perfumes take the place of the *pharmaka* in the network of baudelairean sensations and the imagination that is linked to it.

The cycle must close upon the voice of the Sirens, [...] and is associated with the temptation offered by the Lotus-eaters. They are presented as

[...] les voix charmantes et funèbres

Qui chantent: «Par ici! vous qui voulez manger

Le Lotus parfumé»¹⁸

[Un cycle odysseén s’ouvre avec des marins (Ulysse et ses compagnons) désireux de fuir [...] «la Circé tyrannique aux dangereux parfums». Les parfums tiennent lieu de *pharmaka* dans le réseau des sensations baudelairiennes et l’imaginaire qui lui est lié.

¹⁷ Brunel also treats the figure of Circe in “Le Voyage,” as well as the significance of the concept of “*nekya*” for Baudelaire’s poetry, in *Baudelaire et le “puits des magies”: six essais sur Baudelaire et la poésie moderne*.

¹⁸ Here and in the following pages I have done my own translations from Brunel’s book, *Baudelaire ancien et moderne*, of which there is no published English translation.

Le cycle devrait se refermer sur les voix des Sirènes, [...] et associées à la tentation offerte par les Lotophages. Elles sont présentées comme

[...] les voix charmantes et funèbres

Qui chantent: «Par ici! vous qui voulez manger

Le Lotus parfumé»] (39)

In the lines Brunel quotes from the seventh section of “Le Voyage” the “charming and deadly” song of the Sirens becomes a Lotus-monger’s song, and the “perfumed Lotus” retains the scent of Circe’s “dangerous perfumes.” It is no wonder, in light of this “Odyssean cycle,” that Brunel emphasizes Circe’s potions, already associated with her “dangerous perfumes” and the “perfumed Lotus,” as representing her power to make men forget and so turn them to beasts; he includes under the category of “potions” the “sweet wine” Circe offers to Odysseus and his men after she has given up her evil designs with regard to them. He describes the encounter of “the first group of men” with Circe, “The sorceress deceived them and possessed them to drink a potion, “having mixed cheese, barley and green honey into her Pramnian wine” and added drugs (*pharmaka*) to it” [La magicienne les a trompés et possédés en leur ayant fait absorber un mélange, «ayant battu dans son vin de Pramnos du fromage, de la farine et du miel vert» et y ayant ajoutés des drogues (*pharmaka*)] (Brunel 34), and concludes from this that,

Thus there is already wine in that which is only a dangerous imitation of a *kukêon* [mixed drink], that potion which, in the *Iliad* (XI, 638-640), is brewed to return strength to the warriors. Circe’s *pharmaka*, also obtained by mixture, take away strength in place of conferring it and, like the

honey-fruits of the Lotus-eaters, make men forget their native land and the objective of return ... Odysseus, protected by the *moly*, the antidote which Hermes, the god of the golden wand, gives him, avoids the effects of Circe's deadly potion, but does not refuse the honeyed wine poured for him by one of the four nymphs who are Circe's companions ... Thus Circe the sorceress may have two modes of action: transformation into animals, by means of *pharmaka*; intoxication by means of wine. The baudelairean voyagers want to avoid the first danger and take refuge in intoxication, but an enlarged and generalized intoxication, in conformity with the order of *Spleen du Paris*, «Enivrez-vous!»

[Il y a donc déjà du vin dans ce qui n'est qu'une dangereuse imitation du *kukêon*, ce mélange qui, dans l'*Iliade* (XI, 638-640) est censé redonner la force aux guerriers. Les *pharmaka* de Circé, obtenus eux aussi par mélange, enlèvent la force au lieu de la conférer et, comme les fruits de miel des Lotophages (IX, 94), ils font oublier la terre natale et l'objectif du retour. ... Ulysse, protégé par le *molu*, l'antidote que lui donne Hermès, le dieu à la baguette d'or, évitera les effets des funestes mélanges de Circé, mais ne refusera pas le vin au goût de miel que lui verse l'une des quatre nymphes compagnes de Circé, la troisième. ... Il peut donc y avoir deux modes d'action de Circé la magicienne: la transformation en animal, par les *pharmaka*; l'ivresse par l'*oïnos*. Les voyageurs baudelairiens veulent éviter le premier danger et se réfugient dans l'ivresse, mais une ivresse élargie, généralisée, conformément au mot d'ordre du *Spleen du Paris*,

«Enivrez-vous!»] (34)

Following on this formulation, Brunel seems to conclude that the “voyageurs baudelairiens” never actually depart from Circe’s influence: though they may escape from her bestial potions, they in turn plunge into the intoxication “Of space and light and blazing heavens.” When at last they call upon Captain Death, “Pour us out your poison so it may comfort us!” [Verse-nous ton poison pour qu’il nous reconforte!] (*OC I* :134), Brunel adds, “At the end of the “Voyage,” tyrannical Circe is surrounded with the perfume of death. She is become Death itself, the Baudelaire Death” [À la fin du «Voyage», la Circé tyrannique est entourée du parfum de la mort. Elle est devenue la Mort même, la Mort Baudelaire¹⁹] (40). To support the association of Circe and her potions with the figure of Death, Brunel reminds us of poor Elpenor, Odysseus’ youngest shipmate who, on the night before the sailors set off for their ‘other journey,’ climbs drunkenly up to sleep on the roof of Circe’s house and in the morning falls off and breaks his neck – thus reaching the shores of Hades even more swiftly than Odysseus in his sleek ship.

However, this focus on Elpenor, and on the rest of Odysseus’ companions who spend a year drinking Circe’s wine, is misleading, and liable to make us forget something: that the *Odyssey* is the *Odyssey*, i.e., the story of *Odysseus* and *his* return home. Why, in the end, should we care what his shipmates do, except insofar as their actions have an effect on his homecoming?²⁰ If it weren’t for the fact that they are needed

¹⁹ Brunel is referencing, with this phrase, John E. Jackson’s *La Mort Baudelaire. Essai sur « Les Fleurs du Mal »*, the insights of which regarding the centrality of a consciousness of death for Baudelaire’s poetics have also made their way into these pages.

²⁰ This is more or less a point made by Erich Auerbach in the chapter entitled “Odysseus’ Scar” from *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, and while I do not entirely agree with Auerbach’s arguments on the whole, in this case the point is valid and somewhat inescapable.

to man his ship and thus carry along his narrative, they might as well have stayed to graze with the Lotus-eaters, or wallow in Circe's sties, or beach on the Sirens' skeleton-strewn shores. Nothing but death waits for them beyond Circe's isle: first they sail to Hades and then as if, in some classical *Final Destination* scenario, Death is anxious to have them back, six are eaten by Scylla and the rest doom themselves to be sucked down by Charybdis, because they disobey orders and gorge on the cattle of the Sun. For Odysseus' men, it is a world of 'eat and/or be eaten' – they are already beasts, Circe's potions notwithstanding. Only Odysseus is a man, and only Odysseus' journey is of interest.

The "we" of "Le Voyage" does not correspond, either by analogy or by contrast, with the plurality of Odysseus and his companions, who do not share the same fate. If anything, "we" are *all* Odysseus, or all in contrast to Odysseus; "Le Voyage" is "our" voyage, as the *Odyssey* is the voyage of Odysseus. Thus to understand what "La Circé tyrannique aux dangereux parfums" means to "us," we must understand what Circe means to Odysseus. In general, the threats to Odysseus on his journey are not the same as the threats to his men; while all can be said to be in danger of forgetting their desire for home – becoming beasts – this danger takes different forms for Odysseus than for his comrades. He is never tempted by the Lotus-eaters, is protected from Circe's spells by Hermes' counsel and counter-spells, and protected from the Sirens by Circe's advice. Nevertheless, he lingers for so long on Circe's island that his men finally stage an intervention:

But when a year had passed, and the seasons turned,
 And the moons waned and the long days were done,
 My trusty crew called me out and said:

‘Good god, man, at long last remember your home,
 If it is heaven’s will for you to be saved
 And return to your house and your own native land.
 (*Odyssey* X.469-474)

What is it that holds Odysseus here when even his men have sated their desire for meat and wine, and must arouse in *him* the desire for home? Baudelaire shows us the way: it is Circe herself, with her “parfums dangereux” – her perfumes standing in this case not as an analogue for the potions in the Homeric episode, but as an index to the place of a woman’s perfume in *Les Fleurs du mal*. We could cite any number of poems to describe this perfumed place; in the original collection there are, for example, “Parfum exotique,” “Sed non satiata,” “Le serpent qui danse,” “Le Balcon,” “Le Chat” – in which the poet makes direct reference to “un dangereux parfum” – indeed most of the poems considered to be addressed to or in some manner inspired by Jeanne Duval. In their evocation of a perfume which mixes equal parts of remembrance and oblivion, which intoxicates and transports the poet to some distant land, all of these poems prefigure the great “La Chevelure,” which post-dates “Le Voyage” in its composition, though only by several months. In “La Chevelure” the poet apostrophizes:

O fleece, foaming just over the shoulders!
 O curls! O perfume laden with cool indifference!
 Ecstasy! This evening to people the dark alcove
 With the memories sleeping in this head of hair,
 I want to shake it in the air like a handkerchief!

Languorous Asia and burning Africa,
 A whole world distant, absent, almost dead,
 Lives in your depths, aromatic forest!
 As other spirits sail upon music,
 Mine, o my love! swims in your perfume.

[O toison, moutonnant jusque sur l'encolure!
 O boucles! O parfum chargé de nonchaloir!
 Extase! Pour peupler ce soir l'alcôve obscure
 Des souvenirs dormant dans cette chevelure,
 Je la veux agiter dans l'air comme un mouchoir!

La langoureuse Asie et la brûlante Afrique,
 Tout un monde lointain, absent, presque défunt,
 Vit dans tes profondeurs, forêt aromatique!
 Comme d'autres esprits voguent sur la musique,
 Le mien, ô mon amour! nage sur ton parfum.] (*OC I :26*)

The associative link between intoxicating perfume and a woman's hair is forged so strongly in this poem as to justify reading a lock of this hair into every poem in which Baudelaire mentions perfume. In that case, we may also be justified in claiming that "La Circé tyrannique aux dangereux parfums" is in fact a condensation of two Homeric goddesses – both Circe with her wines and potions, and Calypso, the nymph who retains Odysseus on her island for nine years; both goddesses are regularly endowed with the

epithet “fair-tressed” [*euplokamos*].²¹

It is feminine intoxication, that *pharmakon gunaikeion*, which is truly the most powerful. Are we speaking here of the *Odyssey* or of *Les Fleurs du mal*? Both, certainly. In the *Odyssey* women are both purveyors of *pharmaka* and *pharmaka* themselves, and their effects are various. Circe’s *pharmakon oulomenon* gives men “the heads, and voice, and bristles, and shape of swine, but their minds remain unchanged even as before” (*Odyssey* XI:) On the other hand, the more subtle *pharmakon* she offers Odysseus, protected from the obvious one by Hermes’ *pharmakon esthlon*, does not change his human form, but steals away from his mind the desire for home. (Her proposition to Odysseus, “let us mingle in bed and in love so that we may come to trust one another”²² [*ophra migente / eunei kai philoteiti pepoithomen alleiloisin*] (*Odyssey* XI:334-335), makes use of the verb *mignumi* of which the first meaning is “to mix, mix up, mingle, properly of liquids.”) And yet again, Circe finally offers “food and wine,” promising to restore to Odysseus and his men to “restore the spirit [they] had when [they] left [their] own native land, [their] rugged Ithaca”— in other words, she intends to return them to the state of the “jeune passager” Baudelaire describes in the beginning *and* end of “Le Voyage,” who departs “un matin” with a “cerveau plein de flamme” and “cœur joyeux.” Next up on the list of poisonous women, the Sirens offer, in “honeyed-voices” [*meligeirun*] a song of knowledge so tempting that no man would willingly resist; Odysseus and his men are protected only by the “honey-sweet beeswax” [*keiron melieidea*] that Odysseus smears in the sailors’ ears, and by a bit of bondage advised by

²¹ Elissa Marder has also pointed out a possible reference here to Medea, who is linked to the image of the “fleece” through her marriage to Jason and the (terrible) assistance she gives him in obtaining the Golden Fleece, and is linked by blood to Circe, her aunt.

²² My translation.

Circe. Calypso, finally, does not offer Odysseus anything but herself – she, like Circe, is a “fair-tressed, dread goddess of human speech” [*euplokamos, deinei theos audeiessa*] but keeps him from home for nine years (though, it is true, her intoxications eventually wear off).²³ How shall we class these different *pharmaka gunaikeia*, some of which are “baneful,” even poisonous, others of which are apparently healing and restorative, some which work on a man’s mind, others on his body?

No one has diagnosed this situation more incisively than Jacques Derrida, and though he writes as – shall we call him a patron? – of a competing pharmacy, his words *may* apply to Homer’s pharmacy as well:

This *pharmakon*, this “medicine,” this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison, already introduces itself into the body of the discourse with all its ambivalence. This charm, this spellbinding virtue, this power of fascination, can be – alternately or simultaneously – beneficent or maleficent. [...] Operating through seduction, the *pharmakon* makes one stray from one’s general, natural, habitual paths and laws.²⁴ (70)

[Ce *pharmakon*, cette «médecine», ce philtre, à la fois remède et poison, s’introduit déjà dans le corps du discours avec tout son ambivalence. Ce charme, cette vertu de fascination, cette puissance d’envoûtement peuvent être – tour à tour ou simultanément – bénéfiques et maléfiques. [...]

Opérant par séduction, le *pharmakon* fait sortir des voies et des lois générales, naturelles ou habituelles.] (87)

²³ See Brunel, *Baudelaire et le “puits des magies”*, 112-113, for a discussion of “Circé *euplokamos*” in relation to “La Chevelure.”

²⁴ English quotations from Barbara Johnson’s translation of Derrida’s *La dissémination* – I will cite page numbers from this translation, *Dissemination*, after the English, as well as page number for the original after the French.

In “Plato’s Pharmacy” Derrida reads the *pharmakon* as a figure, particularly in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, for writing – insofar as writing (as opposed to speech) is seductive and dangerous, useful and baneful, healing and hurtful – “alternately or simultaneously” – “la douceur qui fascine et le plaisir qui tue.” This fact should serve as a warning for us, for it is a slippery business to try to read figures of writing into Homer, bringing to the surface all the treacherous issues of how and when oral tradition made a transition into writing, all the questions of whether either of the Homeric epics bears traces of its transcription. To truly enter into these difficulties would take us very far afield; let us, for now, simply mark them with a sign – “Caution”; we shall stand by this sign and peer down the road, but not take it. We shall note Derrida’s observation that while Socrates begins the *Phaedrus* “by sending myths off” in favor of self-examination and self-knowledge, he interrupts this myth-dismissal twice in the dialogue, and that “Both of these myths arise, moreover, in the opening of the question about the status of writing” (68). We shall note, on the other side, that in Homer storytelling functions as a kind of *pharmakon*, both creating pain and relieving it, arousing desire and assuaging it, awakening memory and putting it to sleep. And this note calls to mind a passage from book 4 of the *Odyssey* which should be the inscription over the door of Homer’s Pharmacy; the context is Telemachus’ visit to Menelaus and Helen in Sparta, when Menelaus’ recollections of Odysseus bring the entire company to tears:

But Helen, child of Zeus, had other ideas.

She threw a drug [*pharmakon*] into the wine bowl

That they were drinking from, a drug

That stilled all pain [*nepenthes*] quieted all anger

And brought forgetfulness of every ill.
Whoever drank wine laced with this drug
Would not be sad or shed a tear that day,
Not even if his own mother and father
Should lie there dead, or if someone killed
His brother, or son, before his eyes.
Helen had gotten this potent, cunning drug [*pharmaka metioenta, esthla*]
From Polydamna, the wife of Thon,
A woman in Egypt, where the land
Proliferates with all sorts of drugs,
Many beneficial, many poisonous [*pharmaka, polla men esthla
memigmene polla de lugra*].
Men there know more about medicines
Than any other people on earth,
For they are the race of Paeon, the Healer.
When she had slipped the drug into the wine,
Helen ordered another round to be poured,
And then she turned to the company and said [*muthoisin*]:
“Menelaus, son of Atreus in the line of Zeus,
And you sons of noble fathers, it is true
That Zeus gives easy lives to some of us
And hard lives to others—he can do anything, after all—
But you should sit now in the hall and feast

And entertain yourselves by telling stories [*muthois terpeste*].”

(*Odyssey* IV:219-239)

Lest we think that Helen speaks and acts only for herself in this moment, when she simultaneously offers a *pharmakon* which is supposedly healing [*esthlon*], but which would steal from a man all human feeling, and proposes that Menelaus, Telemachus, and all those gathered “sons of noble fathers” should “entertain [themselves] by telling stories,” we should pay close attention to the tales told. While Helen spins a tale of cunning Odysseus and a clever disguise, her own perspicacity in seeing through this disguise, and yet her faithfulness to the Achaians because she does not betray him to the Trojans, Menelaus counters with another anecdote, overtly designed to re-highlight Odysseus’ cunning, but including a pointed rejoinder to Helen. He recalls the time that the Achaeans spent sitting in the wooden horse within the walls of Troy, when Helen came, “lured on” by “some god who favored the Trojans,” and called out to each of the Argives in turn in the voices of their wives; only Odysseus resists this tempting voice and keeps the peace inside the horse.

Helen is every woman; she speaks with a dangerous voice which is both that of the wife calling her husband home, and the Siren luring him from it. She represents the comfort of hearth and home, and the temptation of the exotic goddess. Her *pharmaka* are cunning, like Odysseus (the storyteller), and cunning like her own story, which is designed to mix just the right amount of forgetfulness into memory. In the *Odyssey* men make a treacherous journey with women waiting at every port to seduce them from the way, turn them into beasts – whether this means growing snouts and bristles, but with minds and memories intact, or keeping their noble human form, but losing any sense of

self. Women, with their fragrant tresses, enchanting voices, and cunning stories, give men the food that nourishes their souls, but also sometimes eat them for lunch.²⁵ The men, like all junkies everywhere, want this and do not want it, need it and reject it, seek it and flee it.

Looking beyond the scope of “Le Voyage,” *Les Fleurs du mal* is all-too-well-known for displaying an extensive pharmacy of its own, both intoxicating philters which promise to render “The universe less hideous and the moments less heavy” [L’univers moins hideux et les instants moins lourds] (*OC* I:25) and noxious brews producing only spleen and ennui, such as the “dark chill” [froid ténébreux] that Pluviose pours “from his urn in great floods” [de son urne à grands flots] (*OC* I:72) in “Spleen (I).”²⁶ For the most part, these *pharmaka* are not separated into good and bad with regard to their origins, or healing and harmful with regard to their effects – the potential is always present for both, as Baudelaire expresses with extreme clarity in the opening stanzas of “Hymne à la Beauté”:

Do you come from deep heaven or out of the abyss,
O Beauty? your regard, infernal and divine,
Confusedly pours out benefit and crime,
And for that one might compare you to wine.

²⁵ Let us not forget that Scylla and Charybdis are also women.

²⁶ In *Convolute D* of the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin notes, obviously with Baudelaire at least partly in mind (the passage is sandwiched between two references to the weather in Baudelaire’s poetry),

The mere *narcotizing* effect which cosmic forces have on a shallow and brittle personality is attested in the relation of such a person to one of the highest and most genial manifestations of these forces: the weather. Nothing is more characteristic that that precisely this most intimate and mysterious affair, the working of the weather on humans, should have become the theme of their emptiest chatter. Nothing bores the ordinary man more than the cosmos. Hence, for him, the deepest connection between weather and boredom. (101-102)

In your eye you contain the sunset and sunrise;
 You spread your perfume like a stormy night;
 Your kisses are a philter and your mouth an amphora
 Which makes the hero weak and the child courageous.

[Viens-tu du ciel profond ou sors-tu de l'abîme,
 O Beauté? ton regard, infernal et divin,
 Verse confusément le bienfait et le crime,
 Et l'on peut pour cela te comparer au vin.

Tu contiens dans ton œil le couchant et l'aurore;
 Tu répands des parfums comme un soir orageux;
 Tes baisers sont un philtre et ta bouche une amphore
 Qui font le héros lâche et l'enfant courageux.] (OC I :24)

It is not simply a question of grammar that Beauty is addressed here as a woman – the *pharmakon féminin* is the strongest one on the shelf in Baudelaire's pharmacy. Taking a survey of the complete collection, including the banned poems from the 1857 edition, we find women catalogued according to the pharmacological effects of their various parts: the hair exudes perfume, and for this Baudelaire calls the bearer of this fleece “the oasis where I dream, and the gourd / From which I drink the wine of memory in long gulps” [l'oasis où je rêve, et la gourde / Où je hume à longs traits le vin de souvenir]; he prefers to opium “The elixir of your mouth, where love stalks” [L'élixir de ta bouche, où l'amour se pavane], “the terrible prodigy / Of your gnawing saliva” [le terrible prodige / De ta

salive qui mord]; “le Léthé” flows in her kisses; her eyes “are the cistern where my ennuis drink” [sont la citerne où boivent mes ennuis], poisonous “lakes where my soul trembles and sees itself backwards” [lacs où mon âme tremble et se voit à l’envers]; from her eyes flow tears which, like those of Andromache in “Le Cygne,” quicken his “fertile memory” [mémoire fertile]. All of these womanly parts are ambivalent, sour and sweet, sometimes fertilizing the poet’s memory, sometimes satisfying his desire to forget and to sleep – “to sleep rather than to live! / In a sleep as sweet as death” [dormir plutôt que vivre! / Dans un sommeil aussi doux que la mort].

It is from this entire constellation of feminine *pharmaka*, both Homeric and Baudelairean, condensed and distilled in the figure of “La Circé tyrannique aux dangereux parfums,” that the voyagers turn away, and flee. So as not to be beasts burdened by lust, so as not to sleep the “sommeil de brute,” so as to escape the intoxication of all feminine charms, they depart, and flee – but it is a false departure. The voyagers flee from the suffocating cradle of childhood – to the cradle of the sea, flee from a “patrie infâme” only to take harbor in some strange land as infamous as the fatherland, the marks of kisses are erased only by the fresh marks of gnawing ice and baking sun. They exchange the burning embrace of a woman for the embrace of “blazing skies” and forswear the intoxication of a woman’s eyes only to throw themselves into the intoxication of “space and light.” There is nothing new under the sun, and what we flee in the past is just what we will find in the future.

It is a fate we might have read in the eyes of the woman; those who flee “La Circé tyrannique” are “Astrologers drowned in a woman’s eyes” [Astrologues noyés dans les yeux d’une femme]. In an analysis of another poem, Elissa Marder remarks that,

“Although the stars are explicitly named in the poem, they are not to be found in the heavenly vault. They have fallen from the sky and taken up residence in the eyes of a woman” (30). A similar disaster has occurred in “Le Voyage”: the stars have not precisely fallen, not yet, but we cannot see them *in the sky* – in particular, we cannot *read* them in the sky. We see only a reflection of a reflection – the sea reflects the stars, and the woman’s eyes reflect the reflection of the stars in the sea. We try to read this reflected reflection – because we are “astrologers” – but instead we drown, in “an alluringly reflective sky” [dans un ciel au reflet alléchant]. The return home that Odysseus seeks, and which is written in his stars, has been transformed, in “Le Voyage,” into an eternal return of the always-the-same; in the end there is no difference between Aeaëa and Ithaca, between Circe and Penelope; the Odysseus of the nineteenth-century, upon returning home, will immediately find that the desire to depart is alight in him again.

Walter Benjamin reveals to us this ghost of return haunting any supposed departure or arrival in the references with which he begins and ends his “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century, Exposé of 1939.”²⁷ He opens with a quotation from Maxime Du Camp, that seasoned traveller whose notions of Progress “Le Voyage” is presumed to critique through its dedication to him: “History is like Janus: it has two faces. Whether it looks at the past or at the present, it sees the same things” (14). Perhaps it is not the part of history to look at the future; that is left to the astrologers. Thus the “Exposé” ends with the astrological treatise of an old revolutionary, Auguste Blanqui – and yet he can read nothing new in the stars. In the *Résumé* of his *L’Eternité par les astres*, of which Benjamin offers a composite quotation, Blanqui proclaims:

²⁷ The second version of what Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, in the Translator’s Foreword to the English translation of Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project* [*Das Passagen-Werk*], call a “documentary synopsis, of the main lines of *The Arcades Project*” (x).

Every star, whatever it might be, exists in infinite number in time and space, not only in one of its aspects, but as it is at each second of its existence, from birth to death [...]

The earth is one of these stars. Every human being is thus eternal in every second of his or her existence. What I write at this moment in a cell of the Fort du Taureau I have written and shall write throughout all eternity, at a table, with a pen, in these clothes, in circumstances just like these. And thus it is for everyone [...] The number of our doubles is infinite in time and space. One cannot in good conscience demand anything more. These doubles exist in flesh and bone, indeed in trousers and jackets, in crinoline and chignon. They are by no means phantoms, they are actuality eternalized.

Here, nonetheless, lies a great drawback : there is no progress. Alas ! no, these are common reeditions, repetitions. Thus are the models of past worlds, thus are those of future worlds. [...]

Essentially, it is melancholy, this eternity of man via the stars, and even more sad is this sequestration of brother-worlds by the inexorable barrier of space. So many identical populations which exist without ever the suspicion of their mutual existence! So be it. It has been discovered finally in the 19th century. But who would want to believe it?

And then, to this moment, the past represented, for us, barbarism,

and the future signified progress, science, happiness. Illusions!²⁸

[Tout astre, quel qu'il soit, existe donc en nombre infini dans le temps et l'espace, non pas seulement sous l'un de ses aspects, mais tel qu'il se trouve à chacune des secondes de sa durée, depuis la naissance jusqu'à la mort. [...]

La terre est l'un de ces astres. Tout être humain est donc éternel dans chacune des secondes de son existence. Ce que j'écris en ce moment dans un cachot du fort du Taureau, je l'ai écrit et je l'écrirai pendant l'éternité, sur une table, avec une plume, sous des habits, dans des circonstances toutes semblables. Ainsi de chacun. [...] Le nombre de nos sosies est infini dans le temps et dans l'espace. En conscience, on ne peut guère exiger davantage. Ces sosies sont en chair et en os, voir en pantalon et paletot, en crinoline et en chignon. Ce ne sont point là des fantômes, c'est de l'actualité éternisée.

Voici néanmoins un grand défaut: il n'y a pas progrès. Hélas! non, ce sont des rééditions vulgaires, des redites. Tels les exemplaires des mondes passés, tels ceux des mondes futurs. [...]

Au fond, elle est mélancolique cette éternité de l'homme par les astres et plus tristes encore cette séquestration des mondes-frères par l'inexorable barrière de l'espace. Tant de populations identiques qui passent sans avoir soupçonné leur mutuelle existence! Si, bien. On la découvre enfin au XIXe siècle. Mais qui voudra y croire?

²⁸ Here and in the following pages I have done my own translation from the French of the original, rather than a quoting Eiland and McLaughlin's translation of Benjamin's quotation; in this passage I have quoted Blanqui a bit differently than Benjamin does.

Et puis, jusqu'ici, le passé pour nous représentait la barbarie, et
l'avenir signifiait progrès, science, bonheur. Illusions!] (339-343)

The echoes between “Le Voyage” and *L’Eternité par les astres* are profound. When in section III a naive crowd begs the voyagers, “To liven up the ennui of our prisons, / Pass your memories with their framing horizons / Over our minds, stretched like screens” [Faites, pour égayer l’ennui de nos prisons, / Passer sur nos esprits, tendus comme une toile, / Vos souvenirs avec leur cadres d’horizons] (*OC I*:131) and the voyagers eventually respond, “ ‘Everywhere, without seeking, we have seen, / From the height to the base of the fatal ladder, / The stultifying spectacle of immortal sin’ ” [“Nous avons vu partout, et sans l’avoir cherché, / Du haut jusques en bas de l’échelle fatale, / Le spectacle ennuyeux de l’immortel péché”] (*OC I*:132), we can hear Blanqui intone his own repetition of this ‘vérité’: “Always and everywhere in the terrestrial arena, the same drama, the same setting, on the same narrow stage—a noisy humanity infatuated with its own grandeur, believing itself to be the universe and living in its prison as if in an immensity” [Toujours et partout, dans le camp terrestre, le même drame, le même décor, sur la même scène étroite, une humanité bruyante, infatuée de sa grandeur, se croyant l’univers et vivant dans sa prison comme dans une immensité”] (343-344). Baudelaire’s voyagers (in this case the yet eager and ardent voyagers) are on the lookout for “ ‘Love...glory...happiness’ ” [“Amour...gloire...bonheur”] just as Blanqui sees humanity rest on the future its hopes for “progress, science, happiness” [progrès, science, bonheur] – all of these are dismissed as “Illusions!” In this loss of the future *as future* we become, indeed, melancholic. We will never and cannot know what we have lost in a future which is no longer to-come since it has always already come and gone. But can it really be the loss of a future of scientific or

social progress that occasions this melancholia? Blanqui styles himself not a philosopher, not an astrologer, his work “neither revelation, nor prophecy, but a simple deductions from spectral analysis and the cosmogony of Laplace” [ni révélation, ni prophète, mais une simple déduction de l’analyse spectrale et de la cosmogonie de Laplace] (342). There is something lost *here*. While he purports to have reached a “mathematical conclusion” that promises to everyone “not only immortality, but eternity” [non pas seulement l’immortalité, mais l’éternité], and resigns himself to the belief that “One cannot in good conscience demand anything more,” he forgets, or turns away, from the fact that throughout history people have, in good and in bad conscience, required, demanded, but perhaps above all hoped for something more – for immortality, precisely. In this book which, as Benjamin says, “presents the idea of the eternal return ten years before *Zarathustra*” (25), Blanqui postulates birth, life, and death – of men as of stars – as events which have repeated, and do repeat, and will repeat. We are eternally mortal, and thus never immortal. After death there is and will be another birth, another life, another death – but no afterlife. What is lost in this mathematical deduction of eternity is any hope of what we might call metaphysical, or spiritual progress.

Is this the fate that causes us to drown in Circe’s starry eyes? Where are we headed, when we leave her behind? Let us recall that when Odysseus first set sail from Circe’s isle, it was on a mission to the underworld, where he came face to face with a host of immortal shades, and was told by the shade of Tiresias about his own – *his own*, singular – death in the future, after which he could expect to make a return voyage to take up *his own immortality* in the house of Hades. But what of the voyagers who flee from “La Circé tyrannique”? Certainly we see them pursue one paradise after another – Icaria, Eldorado,

America – one as illusory as the next. When at last they find themselves overcome by Time, and yet still hope and cry out “En avant!”, appealing to Death as the captain who will be able to carry them somewhere *new*, is this any different? There are certainly readers of Baudelaire who would like to believe that it is – that in the end of “Le Voyage” we encounter Baudelaire at an apex of ethical spirituality. In *Baudelaire in 1859* Richard Burton directs us to this very moment, when, “dramatically, an entirely new emotion – *hope* – enters the poem and, as it does so, undermines the superstructure of despair erected in part VI and revolutionizes – no other word will do – the whole vision of life with which, at its close, the reader of *Les Fleurs du mal* is left” (88). Clearly the revolutionized vision Burton sees here is worlds away from Blanqui’s “resignation without hope,” which Benjamin calls “the last word of the great revolutionary.” Burton goes on to paint a picture of these “hopeful” voyagers, with whom he fully identifies the poet:

As they set sail [for Death], the travellers are inwardly afire, unafraid, wholly and willingly committed to the onward journey [...] and their parting ‘Enfer ou Ciel, qu’importe?’ not at all the cry of nihilistic defiance it is sometimes taken for, but an affirmation of life whatever it may bring, a triumph for the lyricist’s passionate espousal of life over the moralist’s horrified recoil from it. (89)

However, Burton is not entirely correct in his claim that hope is “an entirely new emotion” when it appears in section VII; already in section II, when the voice of despair is first heard in the poem, we read of the “singular fortune” according to which “Man, whose hope never tires, / Always runs like a fool to find peace” [l’Homme, dont jamais *l’esperance* n’est lasse, / Pour trouver le repos court toujours comme un fou!] (OC I:130).

What keeps us from the conclusion that this flight into death is any less foolish, in spite, or perhaps *because*, of its hopefulness? Yet, Edward K. Kaplan maintains a similar belief in this outburst of a passion for life at the end of “Le Voyage,” in an essay included in the *Cambridge Companion to Baudelaire* entitled “Baudelairean ethics.” With an understanding of Baudelaire’s “literary and critical works” as “motivated by a passionate ethical commitment,” which he “disguised” with “ethical irony,” Kaplan writes,

The ambiguous ending of ‘Le Voyage,’ the collection’s grand finale, provides a decisive test of ethical irony. Its several journeys rehearse the breakdown of all illusions, while the last two stanzas force us to face life’s ambiguity [...] Is ‘death’ here literally suicide or the acceptance of our finite condition? We can interpret the ending as implying two contradictory solutions: either suicide or a heroic embrace of chance. Interpreted in terms of its ethical affirmations, ‘Le Voyage’ confirms that death has been integrated into a courageous passion for living, beyond good and evil: ‘Plunge to the depths of Heaven or Hell, / To fathom the unknown and find the *new!*’” (94)

In the emphasis both Burton and Kaplan place on the cry, “Enfer ou Ciel, qu’importe!”, whether it expresses “nihilistic defiance” or “an affirmation of life,” a suicidal plunge or “heroic embrace of chance,” what is forgotten – and almost entirely elided in the translation Kaplan uses – is the very point that Heaven or Hell *do not matter*. The promised land, the one we hope for *after* life, is “le *nouveau*.” Having found only the ever-same in life, “Yesterday, tomorrow, forever,” the final paradise is the one that will show us something we have never seen before. Benjamin, however, reads the figure of

novelty in Baudelaire and elsewhere as, always, the harbinger of the always-the-same:

In the end, Blanqui views novelty as an attribute of all that is under sentence of damnation. Likewise in *Ciel et enfer*, a vaudeville piece that slightly predates the book; in this piece the torments of hell figure as the latest novelty of all time, as “pains eternal and always new.” The people of the nineteenth century, whom Blanqui addresses as if they were apparitions, are natives of this region. (26)

From the moment Baudelaire’s voyagers depart from Circe, we know that they are on their way towards Death. We never see them arrive within the space of the poem, but at the same time all we see them do is arrive at the same place they left, again and again. While it may not matter to them whether they *end up* in Heaven or Hell, the fact is that they will not *end up* anywhere – by virtue of the fact that they are in search of “the new,” they are already in hell, undead, never having arrived at Death. It was all there, in Circe’s eyes, to read: while Blanqui reads in the stars, mediated by “spectral analysis and the cosmogony of Laplace,” that Humanity will, has already, achieved “eternity,” Baudelaire reads in the stars, mediated by Homer’s wine-dark sea, a reflection of “our image” – “an oasis of horror in a desert of ennui” [an oasis d’horreur dans un desert d’ennui].

From Her to Eternity:

The disaster between La Divina Commedia and Les Fleurs du mal

The *Odyssey* is not the only text mediating Baudelaire’s reading of our fortune in “Le Voyage,” and even Baudelaire’s reading of Homer is mediated. The divergences between the episode of Odysseus’ encounter with Circe in the *Odyssey*, and the

voyageurs' flight from "la Circé tyrannique" in "Le Voyage" are almost perfectly compensated if we consider that Baudelaire is not directly referencing Homer, but rather the transformation of this Homeric episode performed by Dante Alighieri in Canto 26 of the *Inferno*. Moreover, to say that Baudelaire is reading Dante's reading of Homer cannot be entirely precise, as Dante's understanding of Homeric epic is entirely mediated, by Virgil's *Aeneid* and other texts; thus, Baudelaire displays in "Le Voyage" his reading of Homer as read by Virgil as read by Dante, calling up the shades of three master-poets to be his guides, or else to go beyond them.

The history of comparisons between *Les Fleurs du Mal* and *The Divine Comedy* is as long as the history of the *Fleurs* itself. A useful review of the critical comparisons between Baudelaire and Dante, beginning with a critical notice by Edouard Thierry in *Le Moniteur Universel* only weeks after the appearance of the *Fleurs* in 1857, is provided by J.S. Patty in his 1956 article, "Baudelaire's Knowledge and Use of Dante." Tracing the train of numerous comparisons through the hundred years between the publication of the *Fleurs* and that of his own article, Patty yet concludes that there has been "surprisingly little effort at variation" from the earliest remarks concerning Baudelaire's debt to Dante, and that "it yet remains to discover the hard core of the Dante-Baudelaire relationship" (602). He sets himself the task of assembling, as a foundation for future research, "the factual details and reasonable conjectures" which will allow us to answer the questions: "what did Baudelaire know of Dante directly, and in what form did he know him? to what extent did he assimilate ideas and images from the *Divine Comedy* or other works of Dante?" (602). After an investigation of ten pages, Patty feels confident to make the following conclusions:

A decent regard for logic and for historical realities obliges us to recognize the following limits to Baudelaire's knowledge and use of Dante:

Baudelaire read some portions of the *Divine Comedy*, but probably no more than the *Inferno*; he seems to have known Dante only in French translation, more especially in Fiorentino's version; he quoted nearly fifty lines of this translation in the *Salon de 1846*; he made some half-dozen brief allusions to Dante which reveal no unusual admiration or knowledge of the Florentine poet; it is possible but by no means demonstrable that there are some relatively insignificant reminiscences of Dante in *Les fleurs du mal*; finally, and most importantly, one passage of " Femmes damnées: Delphine et Hippolyte " seems to have been markedly influenced by the fifth canto of the *Inferno* and indicates that Baudelaire was at times a sensitive and discerning reader of Dante - a conclusion that need not surprise any serious student of Baudelaire. But the dominant reality is that the facts and conjectures above represent a strangely small legacy from one great writer to a kindred-spirit and a fellow-poet. Thus the effort to see in Baudelaire a "modern Dante" appears to be misguided and uninformed.

(610-11)

In the years following Patty's article, critical remarks upon the "Baudelaire-Dante relationship," particularly as they relate to our present investigation into "Le Voyage," follow two trends. On the one hand, there is an ongoing scholarly conversation which does indeed build on and consistently refer back to Patty's work, but estimates that Baudelaire's familiarity with Dante was somewhat more extensive than Patty has

concluded. Mark Musa and John Porter Houston consider Baudelaire's possible knowledge of *La Vita Nuova* and the evidence of its influence on the poem "La Béatrice." A. Abou Ghanam follows up on this article with a study of the three poems from the *Fleurs* which at one time bore titles linking them to the figure of Beatrice – "De profundis clamavi," "Le Vampire," and "La Béatrice" – finding possible sources of inspiration for these poems in the *Commedia* as well as the *Vita Nuova*. Bernard Delmay and Maria Carmela Lori have provided perhaps the most comprehensive survey both of the "valeurs dantesques" in Baudelaire's work, and of the critical work that has been done to link the two poets. Both Ghanam and Delmay and Lori call our attention to the fact that at one time the provisional title of the collection which would eventually be *Les Fleurs du mal* was *Les Limbes – Limbos* – and that Baudelaire published several groups of poems in journals bearing this title to announce the projected book.

On the other hand, critical readings focusing on "Le Voyage" do tend to call attention to canto XXVI of the *Inferno* as a possible source of inspiration, either for section I of the poem – in which Circe is named – in particular, or for the tone of the poem more generally. Mario Richter, in his *Lecture Intégrale* of *Les Fleurs du mal*, proposes that, according to the grammar of stanzas three and four of "Le Voyage," "we are thus authorized in thinking that not only woman, but also the fatherland and the family may change our *voyageurs* into beasts"²⁹ [nous sommes alors autorisés à penser que non seulement la femme, mais aussi la patrie et la famille peuvent changer nos voyageurs en bêtes], and following on this he concludes that,

For the rest, this has the air of being confirmed by the celebrated speech which Dante's Ulysses – placed by him in Hell – , just after having

²⁹ My translation from the French.

departed from Circe, makes to his companions at the moment when, with them, he is heading out to sea beyond Hercules' columns: "Fatti non foste a viver come bruti...": as "brutis," which is to say, precisely, as *beasts*."

[Du reste, cela a l'air d'être confirmé par le célèbre discours que l'Ulysse de Dante – mis par lui en Enfer –, justement après s'être éloigné de Circé, fait à ses compagnons au moment où, avec eux, il s'est avancé sur la mer au delà des colonnes d'Hercule : « Fatti non foste a viver come bruti... » : comme des « brutis », c'est à dire, précisément, comme des *bêtes*. »]

(1594-1595)

Pierre Brunel, while his focus is on the Homeric reference and other possible sources for "Le Voyage" (such as Tennyson's *Ulysses*), is in agreement with this reading, alluding to: "a return to Homer with an important intermediary link, canto XXVI of Dante's *Inferno*. Dante's Ulysses flees the coast of Gaeta, the traditional country of Circe since the *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*" [un retour à Homère avec un maillon intermédiaire important, le chant XXVI de l'*Inferno* de Dante. L'Ulysse dantesque fuyait la côte de Gaète, traditionnel pays de Circé depuis l'*Énéide* et *Les Métamorphoses* d'Ovide] (29). These two quotations represent the entirety of the attention Richter and Brunel give to this question – the possible allusion to the *Inferno* and Ulysses in the figure of "la Circé tyrannique" is noted, but not analyzed. Delmay and Lori, in reviewing "the places where there appears, in Baudelaire's poetry or thought, a reminiscence (we do not say: an objective influence) of dantean images or turns"³⁰ ["Des endroits où s'aperçoit, dans la poésie ou dans la pensée de Baudelaire, une reminiscence (nous ne disons pas : une influence objective) d'images ou de tours dantesques"], find such a

³⁰ My translation from the French.

“reminiscence” in the “episode of Ulysses,”

...where the rebellion manifests as the challenge the hero poses to the limits of received knowledge, a trait which made Dante the herald of Humanism and the Italian Renaissance; we rediscover the spirit of this Ulysses in “L’Homme et la Mer” and, on the metaphysical side, in the second to last and the last parts of ‘Le Voyage.’

[...où la rébellion se manifeste par le défi que le héros a lancé aux bornes d’une connaissance reçue, trait qui fait de Dante le héraut de l’Humanisme et de la Renaissance italienne ; nous retrouvons l’esprit de cet Ulysse dans *l’Homme et la Mer* et, du côté métaphysique, dans l’avant dernière et la dernière partie du *Voyage*.] (453)

While the authors do offer a degree of interpretation of such a ‘tour dantesque’ in “Le Voyage,” they do not attempt to claim that Dante is an “objective influence” in the poem, nor do they refer specifically to the presence of Circe in this context. We can say then with a degree of certainty that those readers of Baudelaire who have been interested in evaluating Dante’s importance as a source of inspiration for *Les Fleurs du mal*, have not alit upon the figure of Circe in “Le Voyage” as representing a reference to the tale of Ulysses in the *Inferno*, and that those readers of “Le Voyage” who have made this connection have not taken it up as an object for extended consideration. Without any pretense, then, at a rigorous commentary on *Inferno* XXVI (which would be as unnecessary as it would be impossible, given that it has attracted more critical attention than almost any other canto of the *Commedia*³¹), we will attempt to remedy this lacuna.

³¹ A helpful resource for reviewing the literature on canto 26 is Anthony K. Cassel’s “Ulisseana: A Bibliography of Dante’s Ulysses to 1981.” *Italian Culture*, 1981; 3:23-45.

Let us begin by casting our eyes over the events of the canto, lingering on those details which seem most relevant in its relation to the *Odyssey*, and to “Le Voyage.”

Having just finished describing the seventh bolgia of the eighth circle of hell, in which thieves are punished, and where he has encountered several Florentines suffering gruesomely, Dante begins canto XXVI with a bitter apostrophe to his birth-city: “Rejoice, O Florence, since you are so great / that over sea and land you beat your wings, / and your name is spread through Hell!” [Godi, Fiorenza, poi che se’ sì grande / che per mare e per terra batti l’ali, / e per lo ’nferno tuo nome si spande!] (1-3)³². He ends this address with a seeming wish for the hastened destruction of the city: “And if it were already come, it would not be too soon. / Would it were come, since indeed it must! / for it will weigh the more on me, the more I age” [E se già fosse, non saria per tempo. / Così foss’ ei, da che pur esser dee! / ché più mi graverà, com’ più m’attempo] (10-12). This sadly ironic address has the effect, among others, of calling the reader’s attention to the situation of Dante the poet – the distance, both physical and spiritual, between himself and his native city, and the burden of advancing age. We return, then, to Dante the pilgrim, with his guide, as they climb to where they can see into the eighth bolgia, which holds those souls who were guilty, in life, of fraudulent counsel – deceit by means of speech (all of the eighth circle is devoted to deceit). Before we are given a glimpse of what they see there, however, the poet recalls us to his side, reining us in with the confession that he is, presently, reining himself in:

I sorrowed then, and sorrow now again

when I turn my mind to what I saw,

³² As the majority of Dante quotations in this section are from *Inferno* canto XXVI, I will cite these only by line numbers for the duration of the section; quotations from other cantos or cantica will continue to be cited by name and canto number.

and I curb my genius more than I am wont,
 that it not run where virtue does not guide;
 so that, if a kindly star or something better
 has granted me the good, I may not grudge myself that gift.

[Allor mi dolsi, e ora mi ridoglio
 quando drizzo la mente a ciò ch'io vidi,
 e più lo 'ngegno affreno ch'i' non soglio,
 perché non corra che virtù nol guidi;
 sì che, se stella bona o miglior cosa
 m'ha dato 'l ben, ch'io stessi nol m'invidi.] (19-24)

Only a cursory acquaintance with Dante is required to know that he believes himself born under stars which destined him to be a poet. This gift from the stars, or from “something better” – i.e., that which gives the stars their power to give gifts to men – is one the poet highly values, and he is borne along on the course of the *Commedia* by his “ingegno.”

But if “genius” is the star-given poetic bark which keeps him afloat in the sea of language, “virtue” is the guiding star; if the poet reminds himself now to keep his eye on that star, and not allow himself to be carried away by “ingegno,” it must be because he is about to embark on a subject which tempts him to spread all of his poetic sails.

Indeed, when we read the following description of his sight of the eighth bolgia, which takes the form of what we must be tempted to call an epic simile, it is hard to believe that his “ingegno” is not in full sail:

As many as the fireflies the peasant,
 while resting on a hillside in the season

when he who lights the world least hides his face,

just when the fly gives way to the mosquito,
sees glimmering below, down in the valley,
there where perhaps he gathers grapes and tills:

so many were the flames that glittered in
the eighth bolgia, as I perceived as soon
as I had come to where one sees the bottom.

And as he who was avenged by bears
saw Elijah's chariot as it departed,
when the horses rose erect to heaven,

and he could not so follow it with his eyes,
except to see the flame alone in its ascent,
just like a little cloud that climbs on high:

so, through the gullet of that ditch each moves,
for not one displays its theft,
and each flame steals away a sinner.

[Quante 'l villan ch'al poggio si riposa,
nel tempo che colui che 'l mondo schiara
la faccia sua a noi tien meno ascosa,

come la mosca cede a la zanzara,
vede lucciole giù per la vallea,
forse colà dov' e' vendemmia e ara:

di tante fiamme tutta risplendea

l'ottava bolgia, sì com' io m'accorsi
tosto che fui là 've 'l fondo pareo.

E qual colui che se vengìo con li orsi
vide 'l carro d'Elia al dipartire,
quando i cavalli al cielo erti levorsi,
che nol potea sì con le occhi seguire,
ch'el vedesse altro che la fiamma sola,
sì come nuvoletta, in sù salire:
tal si move ciascuna per la gola
del fosso, ché nessuna mostra 'l furto,
e ogni fiamma un peccatore invola.] (25-42)

In his stunning reflections on the Dante's verse in "Conversation about Dante" [Разговор о Данте] Osip Mandelstam challenges the reader of this passage: "If you do not feel dizzy from this miraculous ascent, worthy of the organ of Sebastian Bach, then try to show what is here the second and what the first member of the comparison. What is compared with what? Where is the primary and where the secondary, clarifying element?" (127). Indeed the language, with its alternation between visual descent and ascent, with its complicated quantifications, temporal qualifications, and allusive identifications, with its dancing clouds of fireflies and flaming horse-drawn chariot-clouds, does induce readerly vertigo. We must take this to be one of the poet's intentions, as he returns us to the pilgrim with a description of his own vertigo: "I was standing on the bridge, having risen up to see, / so that if I had not laid hold of a rock / I should have fallen below without a push" [Io stava sovra 'l ponte a veder surto, / sì che s'io non

avessi un ronchion preso, / caduto sarei giù sanz' esser urto] (43-45). There follows an exchange between Virgil and Dante in which the former explains that the flames contain spirits, and the latter avers that he had already suspected as much; he goes on to ask: “ ‘who is in that fire which comes so divided / at its top, that it seems to rise from the pyre / where Eteocles was laid with his brother?’ ” [“chi è 'n quel foco che vien sì diviso / di sopra, che par surger de la pira / dov' Eteòcle col fratel fu miso?”] (52-54). Virgil tells that the split flame contains Ulysses and Diomedes, identifying them by several stories of their wicked counsel, which reference both his own *Aeneid* and the *Achilleid* of Statius. Thus Dante here already emphasizes his mediated knowledge of these Homeric figures, but also includes details for which he seems to have no precedent; for example, with regard to the punishment of Ulysses and Diomedes together, Singleton remarks in his commentary, “Virgil describes these events in the *Aeneid* (II, 13-290), but he makes no mention of Diomedes in connection with the strategy of the horse. Evidently Dante understood that Diomedes was involved with Ulysses in this as in the other events to which the shade of Ulysses now refers” (Vol.1 Part 2, 457).

To continue – in, for Dante, relatively formal language, the pilgrim prays that he be allowed to wait for the approach of the “horned flame” [fiamma cornuta] in order to speak with it, concluding, “ ‘you see how with desire I bend toward it!’ ” [“vedi che del disio ver' lei mi piego!”] (69). So begins the parallel between Dante and Ulysses: the pilgrim is ‘bent’ toward the ancient hero like a flame bent by the wind – in this case the wind of “desire,” recalling those spirits in canto V who are ever buffeted by the “infernal hurricane” [bufera infernal] because they allowed their reason to be bent by and subjected to desire. Virgil’s response, equally formal, acts as both approbation and corrective: he

accepts Dante's prayer as deserving of "much praise," but urges the pilgrim to " 'restrain his tongue' " ["fa che la tua lingua si sostegna"] (72), leaving him to do the talking. Virgil gives an explicit reason that he should act here as mediator and translator of Dante's desire: " 'perhaps, since they were Greek, they would be disdainful of your words' " ["perch' e' fuor greci, forse del tuo detto"] (75). Commentators have also proposed several implicit meanings: that Virgil speaks in place of Dante because "it is true that the author made their acquaintance through Virgil" (Benvenuto, quoted by Singleton, Vol. 1, Part 2 459); that Virgil, "poet of ancient Rome," is closer to the pagan heroes than Dante, a modern Italian and Christian; that "Virgil's injunction accentuates the poetic distancing of the story to be told by Ulysses, helping to raise it to the loftiness associated with tragedy" (Singleton, Vol.1, Part 2 459). However, we can discern another possible reading. The *desire* of the pilgrim to speak with Ulysses, emphasized by his leaning toward the flame, is the very reason that he *should not* speak. We remember from earlier in the canto his dangerous inclination toward the sight of the bolgia, just after the poet had alerted us to the fact that he was restraining his "ingegno" in this episode. Thus Virgil acts here as the restraint, shielding his protégé from a too-great temptation, preventing over-identification between the Greek hero and the Italian poet.

Speaking even more formally, (though in Italian, making somewhat clear that it is not precisely the *language* that Ulysses would disdain³³), Virgil asks the question to

³³ This remains a question: what language is spoken in Dante's afterlife? With the notable exception of the shade of the medieval Provençal poet Arnaut Daniel, who the pilgrim encounters in Purgatorio XXVI (we may be justified in thinking that a contrast is drawn between Arnaut and Ulysses given their placement in corresponding cantos of the two books), and whose speech is given in his "mother tongue" [parlar materno], Italian and the occasional Latin phrase are the only languages in the *Commedia*, though Dante introduces numerous characters for whom Italian was not their native language. Are we meant to assume that they speak in their own language, and the pilgrim simply understands them (and the poet translates for them)? The issue becomes more complicated the further one dwells on it.

which Dante desires the answer:

“ ‘O you who are two within one fire,
 if I deserved of you while I lived,
 if I deserved of you much or little
 when in the world I wrote the lofty lines,
 move not; but let the one of you tell
 where he went, lost, to die.’ ”

[“O voi che siete due dentro ad un foco,
 s’io meritai di voi mentre ch’io vissi,
 s’io meritai di voi assai o poco
 quando nel mondo le alti versi scrissi,
 non vi movete; ma l’un di voi dica
 dove, per lui, perduto a morir gissi.”] (79-84)

We might wonder why the pilgrim’s curiosity turns on this particular point – the circumstances and location of the death of Ulysses – but it seems the reason is in the answer returned to him, which cements the parallel between himself and Ulysses. Even before the Greek shade begins to speak, the description of his manner of speaking leads us to this identification:

The greater horn of the ancient flame
 began to wag, murmuring,
 like one that is beaten by a wind;
 then carrying to and fro its tip,
 as if it were a tongue that spoke,

it flung forth a voice and said:

[Lo maggior corno de la fiamma antica
cominciò a crollarsi mormorando,
pur come quella cui vento affatica;
indi la cima qua e là menando,
come fosse la lingua che parlasse,
gittò coce di fuori e disse:] (85-90)

The poet's reference to the cloaked shade of Ulysses as "la fiamma antica," while it seems a simple enough description – Singleton glosses the phrase: "the adjective too serves to distance and remove to a focus of great antiquity the action to be narrated" (Vol. 1, Part 2 459-460) – in fact forms a link to scenes in both the *Purgatorio* and the *Aeneid*, and provides the reader with a map for following Ulysses' voyage. First, the "ancient flame" recalls us to book IV of the *Aeneid* in which Dido, having been sparked to love for Aeneas by Venus and Cupid, confesses to her sister that, against all her vows of loyalty to her dead husband, "I recognize the traces of the ancient flame"³⁴ [agnosco veteris vestigia flammae] (*Aeneid* IV:23). The traces of the flame Dido acknowledges here are fanned, over the course of book IV, into the blazing pyre that consumes her. Ulysses is, then, immediately associated with the queen of Carthage and her limitless, destructive desire. He is, on the other hand, also associated with Dante and his love for Beatrice: in canto XXX of the *Purgatorio*, which sees both the long-anticipated appearance of Beatrice, and the unexpected disappearance of Virgil, the same "ancient flame" is kindled. Following the description of the still-veiled Beatrice, who is "clothed in the color of living flame" [vestita di color di fiamma viva], the pilgrim desires to express his emotions to his guide

³⁴ My translation from the original; I have used the Latin text of the *Aeneid* edited by R. D. Williams.

and mentor:

As soon as on my sight smote
 the lofty virtue that had already pierced me
 before I was out of my boyhood,
 I turned to the left with the confidence
 of a little child that runs to his mother
 when he is frightened or in distress
 to say to Virgil: “not a drop
 of blood is left in me that does not tremble:
*I recognize the signs of the ancient flame.”*³⁵

[Tosto che ne la vista mi percosse
 l’alta virtù che già m’avea trafitto
 prima ch’io fuor di puerizia fosse,
 volsimi a la sinistra col respitto
 col quale il fantolin corre a la mamma
 quando ha paura o quando elli è afflito,
 per dicere a Virgilio: “Men che dramma
 di sangue m’è rimaso che non tremi:
conosco i segni de l’antica fiamma.”] (*Purgatorio* XXX.28-48)

It is with this very turn to Virgil, with an almost word-for-word translation of Dido’s phrase, that the pilgrim discovers that the ancient poet, “Virgilio dolcissimo patre,” has gone. Singleton does remark on this citation, noting that “one of Virgil’s own verses

³⁵ Emphasis added.

becomes a verse of this farewell to him” (Vol. 2, Part 2 740-741); however, he accounts for the “antiquity of Dante’s ‘flame’” as a reference to the fact that his love for Beatrice dates back to his first vision of her, in childhood, as recounted in the *Vita Nuova*. This chaste interpretation, lacking any comment on the implications of the poet’s association of himself with Dido, and completely eliding the association with Ulysses, faithfully follows Dante in his relentless religious allegorization of his relationship with Beatrice (and this is entirely typical of Singleton). However, it fails to indicate Dante’s cognizance of the proximity of this love to the extremely dangerous and destructive desire that characterizes both Dido and Ulysses – at least as Ulysses is depicted *by Dante*.

To return to the description of Ulysses’ flame: Dante writes that the flame begins to “sway and tremble” back and forth, “like one that is beaten by a wind” [pur come quella cui vento affatica] (87), recalling the pilgrim, only 20 lines earlier, bent with desire toward the flame, which we have already associated with the violent winds of desire in canto V. So Ulysses is again related to destructive desire; we should not forget that Dido herself is among those punished in the first circle, described as “she who slew herself for love, / and broke faith to the ashes of Sychaeus” [colei che s’ancise amorosa, / e ruppe fede al cener di Sicheo] (*Inferno* V:61-62). Finally, the movement of the flame is described as similar to that made by “a tongue that spoke” [la lingua che parlasse] (89), just as the tongue of flame does indeed send forth a voice. This speaking tongue reminds us of the pilgrim who, on Virgil’s advice, is holding his own tongue. The two tongues are opposed – one speaks, the other does not – in such a way that it seems as though the one can *only* speak if the other is silent, or perhaps as though the one has given over speech entirely to the other. Because Dante cannot speak *to* Ulysses, Ulysses speaks *for* Dante in

a way that other figures in the *Commedia* do not. Let us see, then, what he says:

<p>“When</p> <p>I departed from Circe, who had detained me more than a year there near Gaeta, before Aeneas had so named it, neither fondness for my son, nor reverence for my aged father, nor the due love which would have made Penelope glad, could conquer in me the longing that I had to gain experience of the world and of human vice and value; but I put forth on the deep open sea with one vessel only, and with that small company which had not deserted me. One shore and the other I saw as far as Spain, as far as Morocco, and the island of Sardinia, and the others which that sea bathes round. I and my companions were old and slow when we came to that narrow outlet where Hercules set up his markers, that men should not pass beyond; on the right hand I left Seville, on the other I had already left Ceuta. ‘O brothers,’ I said, ‘who through a hundred thousand dangers have reached the west,</p>	<p>[“Quando</p> <p>mi diparti’ da Circe, che sottrasse me più d’un anno là presso a Gaeta, prima che sì Enea la nomasse, né dolcezza di figlio, né la pieta del vecchio padre, né’l debito amore lo qual dovea Penelopè far lieta, vincer potero dentro a me l’ardore ch’i’ ebbi a divenir del mondo esperto e de li vizi umani e del valore; ma misi me per l’alto mare aperto sol con un legno e con quella compagna picciola da la qual non fui disertò. L’un lito e l’altro vidi infin la Spagna, fin nel Morrocco, e l’isola d’i Sardi, e l’altre che quel mare intorno bagna. Io e’ compagni eravam vecchi e tardi Quando venimmo a quella foce stretta dov’ Ercule segnò li suoi reguardi acció che l’uom più non si metta; da la man destra mi lasciai Sibilia, da l’altra già m’avea lasciata Setta. ‘O frati,’ dissi, ‘che per cento milia perigli siete giunti a l’occidente,</p>
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to this so brief vigil
of our senses that remains to us,
choose not to deny experience,
following the sun, of the world without people.

Consider your origin:

you were not made to live as brutes,
but to pursue virtue and knowledge.’

I made my companions so keen,
with this little speech, for the voyage
that then I could hardly have held them back;
and turning our stern to the morning,
we made of our oars wings for the mad flight,
always gaining on the left.

The night now saw the other pole
and all its stars, and ours so low
that it did not rise from the ocean floor.

Five times the light beneath the moon
had been rekindled and as many quenched,
since we had entered on the *high pass*,
when there appeared to us a mountain, dark
in the distance, and to me it seemed the highest
that I had ever seen.

We rejoiced, but soon our joy turned to grief,
for from the new land a whirlwind rose
and struck the forepart of the ship.

a questa tanto picciola vigilia
d’i nostri sensi ch’è del rimanente
non vogliate negar l’esperienza,
di retro al sol, del mondo senza gente.

Considerate la vostra semenza:

fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza.’

Li miei compagni fec’ io sì aguti,
con questa orazion picciola, al cammino,
che a pena poscia li avrei ritenuti;
e volta nostra poppa nel mattino,
de’ remi facemmo ali al folle volo,
sempre acquistando dal lato mancino.

Tutte le stelle già de l’altro polo
vedea la notte, e’l nostro tanto basso,
che non surgea fuor del marin suolo.

Cinque volte raccesso e tante casso
lo lume era di sotto da la luna,
poi che ’ntrati eravam ne l’alto passo,
quando n’apparve una montagna, bruna
per la distanza, e parvemi alta tanto
quanto veduta non avea alcuna.

Noi ci allegrammo, e tosto tornò in pianto;
ché de la nova terra un turbo nacque
e percosse del legno il primo canto.

<p>Three times it whirled her round with all the waters; and the fourth time it lifted the stern aloft and plunged the prow below, as pleased</p> <p>Another,</p>	<p>Tre volte il fè girar con tutte l'acque; a la quarta levar la poppa in suso e la prora ire in giù, com' altrui piacque, infin che 'l mar fu sopra noi richiuso.]</p> <p>(90-142)</p>
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till the sea closed over us.

Let us note from the very beginning that Dante's Ulysses begins his story with his departure from Circe – thus Dante departs from the *Odyssey* at the same point from which Baudelaire also departs. And make no mistake, this is an extreme departure from the *Odyssey*. Homer's Odysseus certainly does not leave Circe's isle on a search for knowledge which ends with death. That is, he does set off in search of the knowledge of how to return home, and this does actually lead him to the land of the dead – but he returns from Death *and* returns home, to his son, his “aged father,” and Penelope. There is no precedent, in Homer or elsewhere, for the story as Ulysses tells it in the *Inferno*. Singleton hedges a bit on this point, citing descriptions of the character of Ulysses from both Cicero and Horace which emphasize the desire for knowledge that Dante's Ulysses displays; in the end, however, he acknowledges, “The source of Dante's account of the death of Ulysses [...] is unknown” (Vol. 1, Part 2 456). This statement still seems to assume, however, that there *is* a source, though unknown. David Thompson, in a study devoted entirely to the appearances of the figure of Ulysses in the *Commedia*, goes further, claiming,

Aside from the list of sins that landed Ulysses in Hell, and a few details of his story (e.g., his having stayed with Circe), Dante has invented the entire account of Ulysses [...] And he has invented these episodes not to fill gaps

in the story as known to himself and his Greekless contemporaries, but in direct opposition to a perfectly clear tradition.

From Dares and Dictys, or from the extensive literary texts dependent upon them, Dante could easily have learned about Ulysses' return to Ithaca and how he died there. And these were not the only obvious sources of information. Classical texts cast considerable light upon Ulysses' fate, but if we consider these sources too vague, we need only turn to the various mythographers. Hyginus, for example, gives us the several stages of Ulysses' homeward voyage, step by step. [...]

I think we can safely assume that if Dante was the least bit curious about Ulysses, he may be expected to have found his way to one or another of these sources. Without laboring the point unduly, I should like to suggest that Benvenuto de Imola was right when he asserted: "But whatever may be said, I cannot be persuaded to believe that Dante was ignorant of what even schoolboys know; so I say that rather the author devised this on purpose." Dante was so interested in Ulysses that he first made a special point of including him, and then changed the accepted story in a radical fashion. But for what purpose? What had Ulysses to do with Dante, and Dante with Ulysses? (49-50)

If we are convinced, at the very least, that Dante was *capable* of discovering, from multiple sources in a "perfectly clear tradition," the story of Odysseus according to the *Odyssey*, as well as the additional mythology that grew up around it, then we must ask, with Thompson, what the purpose was of his 'invention.' The answer must lie in the

differences of Dante's story from the existing tradition, the most obvious and radical of which is Ulysses' decision, upon leaving Circe, to ignore all the claims of family and home, and instead submit to the "longing" [l'ardore] to "gain experience of the world and of human vice and value." By the same token, the value of Baudelaire's use of Dante's reinvention of Ulysses – which we *recognize* by the similarities, most particularly the same decision to turn away from home and family – must lie in his own reinventions, in his differences from Dante.

Three stories begin at the same point: departure from Circe. Odysseus, in the *Odyssey*, follows the well-known itinerary: from Circe's isle to the shores of Hades, a return to Circe, then an eventual, though extremely indirect and difficult, return to Ithaca and his family. Ulysses, according to the story he tells from the depths of the *Inferno* and from out of his cloak of flames, veers wildly off course between Circe and Hades; instead of following the Odyssean trajectory, he traverses the Mediterranean from shore to shore, sees everything the world of men has to offer, and then sails beyond the bounds of this world in order to gain experience "of the world without people." The mountain that rises before him is, we later learn, the mountain of Purgatory; thus his entire journey consists of a prolongation of the distance from Circe to the shores of the land of the dead. Dante's Christian remapping of the pagan afterlife makes it possible for Ulysses to simultaneously arrive and not arrive at the endpoint of this prolonged voyage: the story ends with his failure to arrive at Purgatory and, we infer, his arrival in Hell. Perhaps even expecting to find himself in Paradise, Ulysses instead finds himself in eternal torment. Baudelaire's *voyageurs* follow a similar route. Having departed from Circe, they are driven across the sea, from port to port, seeing much of the vice of man, but apparently

not much of value. While on the one hand the voyage from Circe to Death seems to exactly mirror that of Dante's Ulysses, we can also see that this itinerary repeats in miniature, with Death offering only one of many imagined paradises:

Singular fortune, its end displaced,
 And, having no part, perhaps has no place!
 And Man, whose hope never tires,
 Always runs like a fool to find peace!

Our soul's a three-master seeking its Icaria;
 A voice rings from the bridge: "Open your eyes!"
 A voice from the topmast, ardent and mad, cries:
 "Love...glory...happiness!" Hell! it's a reef!

Every isle signaled by the watchman
 Is an Eldorado promised by Destiny;
 Imagination erects its fantasy,
 But finds only a sandbar in the light of day.

[Singulière fortune où le but se déplace,
 Et n'étant nulle part, peut être n'importe où !
 Où l'Homme, dont jamais l'espérance n'est lasse,
 Pour trouver le repos court toujours comme un fou !

Notre âme est un trois-mâts cherchant son Icarie ;
 Une voix retentit sur le pont : « Ouvre l'œil ! »
 Une voix de la hune, ardente et folle, crie :
 « Amour...gloire...bonheur ! » Enfer ! c'est un écueil !

Chaque îlot signalé par l'homme de vigie
 Est un Eldorado promis par le Destin ;
 L'Imagination qui dresse son orgie
 Ne trouve qu'un récif aux clartés du matin.] (*OC I:130*)

This constant voyager, “ardente et folle,” is made in the image of Ulysses, with his “ardore” for experience, propelling him on what he himself identifies as a “mad flight” [folle volo]. Every island appearing on the horizon promises to fulfill every hope, every desire, but when we approach, “Enfer! c'est un écueil!” How many ways we can read this exclamation! As a curse, simply: “Oh Hell! it's a reef!” As a lament that what we mistook for a paradise is in fact only a reef. Or as a plain statement: Hell is this, a reef. Hell is the obstacle – every obstacle – that keeps us from ever arriving at “Amour...gloire...bonheur!”; Hell is *where* we arrive when we expected to arrive at “un Eldorado promis par le Destin”; Hell is the reef that cracks our ship and plunges us into the sea. Hell is a reef, and a reef is Hell. And though the *voyageurs* do not approach Death until the close of the poem, they seem to have already seen everything that the land of the dead has to offer: “From the height to the base of the fatal ladder, / The stultifying spectacle of immortal sin” [“Du haut jusques en bas de l'échelle fatale, / Le spectacle ennuyeux de l'immortel peché”] (*OC I:132*).

It is the voyage of the Dantean pilgrim that seems to depart from the model of departure from Circe towards Hell which characterized Odysseus', Ulysses', and the *voyageurs* voyages – he does not name a “Circe” to depart from, and he does not end his journey in Hell, but continues on through Purgatory and Paradise, ending his voyage having achieved exactly what he sought. Still, there are recognizable parallels which reveal figures along Dante’s journey in a new light. If we are looking for a counterpart to Circe, there are several possibilities. First, as Circe seems to stand for a certain way of life in “Le Voyage,” in the *Commedia* the reverse may be true: a certain way of life stands in for the figure of Circe. In particular, the way of life that leads the pilgrim to the “selva oscura” in which he finds himself in the opening of the *Inferno*, having lost “la diritta via.” Thus his choice to follow Virgil would represent the departure from this life, a return to the right path, by way of a tour – or detour – through the afterlife. This would liken the pilgrim to Odysseus, who leaves Circe behind to return to his rightful duties as son, father, and husband. Circe might also be seen to be a more specific figure – that of the “donna pietosa” of the *Vita Nuova*, who for a time makes Dante forget his love and his sorrow for Beatrice, and who he later claims was actually an allegorical representation of his turn, for a time, away from religion and toward philosophy. In *Purgatorio* XIX the pilgrim has a dream of a woman who grows beautiful in his sight, and sings to him that she is the siren who diverted Ulysses from his “cammin” (*Purgatorio* XIX:19-24). Having already identified Circe with the Sirens, as both offering a tempting mixture of knowledge and oblivion, we could say that the pilgrim is like Ulysses in this way, that he desires knowledge so passionately that this desire is dangerous, because it makes him forget about more important things, and that he must turn from the pursuit of knowledge

to the pursuit of salvation.

Both of these views are perfectly consistent with the familiar understanding of Dante, both poet and pilgrim. A final possibility, however, which brings the *Commedia* into closer proximity to “Le Voyage” and *Les Fleurs du mal* more generally, adds a new dimension to this familiar picture. We might read Beatrice as a figure for Circe; Dante ‘departs’ from Beatrice in the sense that she is his point of departure in his relentless mythologizing and allegorizing of his own life, beginning with his first vision of her as recounted in the *Vita Nuova*. She is the point of departure for his “new life,” and also the point of departure for his “dolce stil novo” – that “sweet new style” of poetry which makes praise of her its only object. Beatrice is the point of departure for the *Divina Commedia*, as it is her directive which sends Dante following Virgil through the *Inferno*, just as Circe was the one who directed Odysseus to Hades. The figure of Beatrice in Dante’s poetry obscures, even eclipses the view we might have had of the “real” details of his life, including his own wife and children. This same figure of Beatrice *in poetry* also obscures the view we, and perhaps Dante, might have had of the details of *her* life. From the opening of the *Vita Nuova* to the close of the *Divina Commedia*, we can see this perpetual motion – away from Beatrice as a living woman, away from Bice Portinari of Florence who married another man and died young, away from a woman with a physical body subject to mortality and decay (the dream-siren of *Purgatorio* is revealed to have a stinking, decaying wound in her “ventre”), but perhaps above all away from a woman with a body capable of arousing desire. But Dante does not only depart from Beatrice, he is also always in hopes of arriving at Beatrice. Dante must traverse Beatrice the woman in order to arrive at Beatrice the allegorical figure, must turn away from but also traverse

sexual desire on the way to a desire for God. But desire is desire, always the same. So the poet must turn, and turn again as he strives to perfect his desire, always turning away from one object, toward “the new,” but always feeling a stirring inside him of “la fiamma antica.”³⁶

Desire is at the root of “Le Voyage.” The seed of this desire is sown in the child, “enamored of maps and stamps” [amoureux de cartes et d’estampes], and for a brief lamp-lit time it seems possible that this desire may find satisfaction – “The universe is equal to his vast appetite” [L’Univers et égal à son vaste appétit] (*OC* I:129). On the morning we depart, we are “plein de flamme” (like flaming Ulysses), but our desire has already turned bitter – already become infinite, we can no longer expect to find surcease on the bounded seas, or within any horizon. On the course of the voyage we place many objects ahead of us and *hope* that one of them will bring peace, but as each new object turns old and one by one all the objects of desire are stripped away, desire itself rises up again and reveals itself more pure, more powerful. In their travel-report the *voyageurs* testify to this incessant growth of desire, such that it outgrows all of its objects:

The richest cities, the greatest landscapes,
 Never contained the mysterious attraction
 Of those made by chance in the clouds.
 And desire always rendered us anxious!

— Enjoyment gives strength to desire.

Desire, old tree manured with pleasure,

³⁶ For any insight at all about Dante, and particularly about the role of desire in the *Commedia*, I am deeply indebted to Professor Giuliana Carugati, a remarkable Dante scholar, with whom I had the privilege of reading his works over the course of a semester at Emory University.

While your bark thickens and grows,
Your branches want to see the sun up close!

Will you grow forever, great tree, more hardy
Than the cypress?

[Les plus riches cités, les plus grands paysages,
Jamais ne contenaient l'attrait mystérieux
De ceux que le hasard fait avec les nuages.
Et toujours le désir nous rendait soucieux !

— La jouissance ajoute au désir de la force.
Désir, vieil arbre à qui le plaisir sert d'engrais,
Cependant que grossit et durcit ton écorce,
Tes branches veulent voir le soleil de plus près !

Grandiras-tu toujours, grand arbre plus vivace
Que le cyprès ?]³⁷ (OC I :131-132)

This “vieil arbre,” which germinated in infancy and took root in youth, grows stronger

³⁷ A passage from “Un mangeur d’opium” seems to have a particular resonance with this image of the tree of desire: In describing the love-object of the opium-eater’s youth, lost and presumed dead, but who reappears to him in “les mondes d’opium”, he writes, “Quant au *mangeur d’opium*, les douleurs de l’enfance ont jeté en lui des racines profondes qui deviendront arbres, et ces arbres jetteront sur tous les objets de la vie leur ombrage funèbre.” Only a few lines later, the “*mangeur d’opium*” refers to himself as “L’Oreste”, and his lost love as “son Electre” (OC I:462-463) – recalling the spectral appearance at the end of section VII of ‘Le Voyage’, who calls out “ “Pour rafraîchir ton cœur nage vers ton Électre!”.”

with every moment of pleasure and “jouissance”; thus in propelling ourselves toward new pleasures, new sights, new knowledge in hopes of *quenching* our desire, we only ensure that we never will. Baudelaire’s tree is connected by the roots to that other old, ancient tree which brought knowledge, sex and death into the world, and linked them together forever in a constellation of desire.

When sex and knowledge are no longer viable objects of desire, when we have departed from Circe, and our “désirs amers” have only led us to “amer savoir, celui qu’on tire du voyage,” then only one destination remains, and so “We will embark on the sea of Darkness / With the happy heart of a young passenger” [“Nous nous embarquerons sur la mer des Ténèbres / Avec le cœur joyeux d’un jeune passager”] (*OC* I:133). And what will we see? One answer, though it may not be entirely correct by reason of disaster, seems to be inevitable: we will see the stars. When Ulysses ventures beyond the pillars of Hercules he eventually comes to where all the familiar stars of his own hemisphere “[do] not rise from the ocean floor” [non surgea fuor del marin suolo], and he sees only new and unknown stars – until a whirlwind³⁸ from the shores of Purgatory strikes “the forepart of the ship” [del legno il primo canto]³⁹ of his ship, and he sinks into the sea with the stars. Dante famously ends each *cantica* of the *Commedia* with the stars; he emerges from the *Inferno*, following Virgil, by a “hidden road” [cammino ascoso],

and caring not for any rest

we climbed up, he first and I second,

so far that through a round opening I saw

³⁸ Again, an association of Ulysses’ downfall with his desire, as this whirlwind recalls that in *Inferno* canto V.

³⁹ Another parallel between Ulysses and Dante – Dante, whose poetic bark carries him, through 100 cantos, to the height of Paradise; Ulysses, whose ship is struck upon the “primo canto” because he proceeds by the wrong path.

some of the beautiful things that Heaven bears.

And thence we issued forth to see again the stars.

[e sanza cura aver d'alcun riposo,

salimmo sù, el primo e io secondo,

tanto ch'i' vidi de le cose belle

che porta 'l cil, per un pertugio tondo.

E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle.] (*Inferno* XXXIV:135-139)

Having completed his ascent of *Purgatorio* and bathed in the river Lethe which brings oblivion of all sin, he finally drinks of the river Eunoe, which restores the memory of good deeds⁴⁰:

I came forth from the most holy waves

renovated even as new trees

renewed with new foliage,

pure and ready to rise to the stars.

[Io ritornai da la santissima onda

rifatto sì come piante novelle

rinovellate di novella fronda,

puro e disposto a salire a le stelle.] (*Purgatorio* XXXIII:142-145)

Finally, having risen with the aid of Beatrice through all the spheres of *Paradiso*, he receives a vision of the holy trinity as “three circles / of three colors and one magnitude”

⁴⁰ The single source of these two rivers, one offering forgetfulness, the other restoring memory, must remind us irresistibly of the *pharmakon*; it is appropriate, in light of our previous discussion of the “*pharmakon* féminin,” that it is a woman, Matelda, who brings the pilgrim to both rivers.

[tre giri / di tre colori e d'una contenenza], then of "our image" [la nostra effige] as if painted within this circle. He desires to see "how the image conformed to the circle and how it has its place therein" [come si convenne / l' imago al cerchio e come vi s'indova]; while his own faculty of sight is not sufficient to this vision, it is granted to him:

Here power failed the lofty fantasy;
but already my desire and my *will* were revolved,
like a wheel that is evenly moved,
by the Love which moves the sun and the other stars.

[A l'alta fantasia qui mancò possa;
ma già volgeva il mio disio e' l *velle*,
sì come rota ch'igualmente è mossa,

l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle.] (*Paradiso* XXXIII:142-145)

The stars, which partake of the circular motion of all heavenly bodies, are perfectly representative of the peace that derives from a desire and will aligned entirely with divine love. As undercurrents to all these stellar reflections we find the necessity of descent for the sake of ascent, and the proximity of renovation to return. The pilgrim descends into the Inferno so that he may ascend to Purgatory. He descends into and is cleansed in the rivers, so that he may ascend to Paradise. Likewise the stars descend into the sea and rise again renewed. Every day the sun's light erases them from the heavenly vault, and every night their constellations are drawn again as before. Always the same, and always new.

If we want to characterize the function of the stars in "Le Voyage," we need only make a small change to this formulation. They are always the same, always new, and thus

never new. Dante's stars have fallen, and continue to fall, and every vision of the stars in "Le Voyage" reveals this fall. Also in every vision of the stars the fate of the *voyageurs* can be read, a fate which they share with the stars. In fact, the stars appear first – and perhaps *only* appear – in the act of reading them. As we have already seen, the *voyageurs* are, in one guise, "astrologues noyés dans les yeux d'une femme, / La Circé tyrannique aux dangereux parfums." As we have also seen, these "astrologues" only read the stars in translation: their light reflected in the sea, the sea reflected in a woman's eyes. Drowned astrologers read drowned stars. These drowned, drunken readers reappear in section III, speaking with the voices of those who have not yet travelled, questioning those who have:

Astonishing voyagers! what noble stories
 We read in your eyes, profound as the seas!
 Show us your rich memory-chests,
 These marvelous jewels, made of ethers and stars!

We want to voyage without wind or sails!
 To liven up the ennui of our prisons,
 Pass your memories with their framing horizons
 Over our minds, stretched like screens.

Say, what have you seen?

[Étonnants voyageurs ! quelles nobles histoires

Nous lisons dans vos yeux profonds comme les mers !
 Montrez-nous les écrins de vos riches mémoires,
 Ces bijoux merveilleux, fait d'astres et d'éthers !

Nous voulons voyager sans vapeur et sans voile !
 Faites, pour égayer l'ennui de nos prisons,
 Passer sur nos esprits, tendus comme une toile,
 Vos souvenirs avec leurs cadres d'horizons.

Dites, qu'avez vous vu ?] (*OC I*:131)

This eager audience, who will later be addressed as “cerveaux enfantins,” represent a return to childhood; with their voracious appetite for “all that comes from afar” [tout ce que vient de loin], they recall “l'enfant” of the opening stanza, who is “enamored of maps and stamps” [amoureux de cartes et d'estampes]. As audience they look, listen and read, reading “noble stories” in the eyes of the *voyageurs*, which are “profound as the seas.” They wish to see the jewels contained in the memory-chests sunk in those profound eyes – jewels “made of ethers and stars.” Thus again we encounter a doubly mediated act of astrology: these new, childish “astrologers” read the sunken stars in the eyes of the *voyageurs*. At the same time, they make of themselves the medium of memory, desiring a slideshow of “souvenirs” to be projected upon the screens of their own minds – a moving show of picture-memories to help them forget “the ennui of [their] prisons.”

In response to the final, simple demand: “Say, what have you seen?”, the *voyageurs* respond with a list which, given its first term, makes them sound for a moment

as if they are echoing Dante. However, their account almost immediately veers off-course, and they plunge wildly into un-Dantean territory:

“We have seen stars
 And waves; we have also seen sands;
 And despite shocks and unforeseen disasters,
 We have often been bored, like you are here.

The glory of the sun on the violet sea,
 The glory of cities in the setting sun,
 Alit in our hearts an uneasy ardor
 To plunge into an alluringly reflective sky.”

[« Nous avons vu des astres
 Et des flots ; nous avons vu des sables aussi ;
 Et, malgré les chocs et d'imprévus désastres,
 Nous nous sommes souvent ennuyés, comme ici.

La gloire du soleil sur la mer violette,
 La gloire des cités dans le soleil couchant,
 Allumaient dans nos cœurs une ardeur inquiète
 De plonger dans un ciel au reflet alléchant. »] (*OC I:131*)

As the stars become only one term in a list which describes the visions of voyage with remarkable flatness, it becomes clear why the “imprévus désastres” should be unforeseen:

disaster can never be foreseen, because it implies *and is* our absolute loss of the ability to foresee it. “Des astres” appear here in rhyme with “désastres,” almost identical with “désastres” – differentiated only by blank space. “*Night; white sleepless night – such is the disaster:*” writes Maurice Blanchot, “*the night lacking darkness, but brightened by no light*” (2); it is a description not simply of a night sky with no stars, but the erasure of the difference between dark and light that is the entire constitution of a star-filled sky. Many of the dream visions Baudelaire describes in *Les Fleurs du mal* take place in such a night, under such a blank sky; in “Rêve Parisien” the poet dreams (it poses no contradiction to Blanchot’s qualification that the night is “sleepless” to speak of dreams – Baudelaire often dreams, but seems never to sleep) a silent, empty city “Of metal, of marble and of water” [Du métal, du marbre et de l’eau] (OC I:101), and banishes both stars and sun from its sky in what can only be interpreted as desire for disaster. They are unnecessary, because “these prodigies [...] shine with a personal fire” [ces prodiges [...] brillèrent d’un feu personnel] (OC I:102). The counterpart to this “terrible landscape” flashes up at the moment of waking: though the clock is striking noon, the sky pours down only “ténèbres,” and nevertheless the poet can see every horrible detail of his “taudis” because his eyes are “full of flame” [plein de flamme] (OC I:103). On both sides – dreaming and waking – we see a night which is not night, a day which is not day; the differences between night and day are erased. With no heavenly bodies to mark these differences there is an erasure of the passage of time, countered by an assertion of the passage of time – by the sounding of the clock – creating an eternal “durée” which may be either paradisaical or infernal. But in a heavenly vault which is neither dark nor light, it is impossible to tell whether the sky has swallowed the stars, or the stars have overwhelmed

the sky. Stars can appear only by virtue of the blank space that separates and differentiates them – the loss of this space is the disaster. The blank space is what allows us to read, what makes astrology possible. The loss of this space is the disaster of reading, and the disaster of writing. Blanchot writes, as if in description of what has passed (in the past) between the *Commedia* and “Le Voyage”:

If disaster means being separated from the star (if it means the decline which characterizes disorientation when the link with fortune from on high is cut), then it indicates a fall beneath disastrous necessity. [...] The disaster is not of capital importance. Perhaps it renders death vain. It does not superimpose itself upon dying’s scope for withdrawal, filling in the void. Dying sometimes gives us (wrongly, no doubt), not the feeling of abandoning ourselves to the disaster, but the feeling that if we were to die, we would escape it. Whence the illusion that suicide liberates (but consciousness of the illusion does not dissipate it or allow us to avoid it.) The disaster, whose blackness should be attenuated – through emphasis – exposes us to a certain idea of passivity. We are passive with respect to the disaster, but the disaster is perhaps passivity, and thus past, always past, even in the past, out of date. (2-3)

There has been a disaster. We have been separated from the stars, both unchained from them – a liberation, and cut off from them – a disorientation. We are cut off from the “link with fortune from on high” – that same high fortune that sent Dante (and Aeneas, and Odysseus – but *not* Ulysses) a-voyaging. Whether it is because we can no longer read this fortune in the stars, or because the stars no longer write it, we cannot tell. Whether

the “decline” Blanchot refers to is a fall of the stars, or a fall of Man, again, we cannot tell. We do not cease to *try* to read our fortune or some reflection of it – in a woman’s eyes, or in the sea, or both. We would even wish to submit ourselves to it entirely; of all *voyageurs*, the “vrais voyageurs” are those who identify themselves entirely with the voyage: “They never stray from their fate” [De leur fatalité jamais ils ne s’écartent]. But this submission, this passivity, cannot change the fact that the fortune they follow is a “Singular fortune, its end displaced, / And, having no part, perhaps has no place!” [Singulière fortune où le but se déplace, / Et, n’étant nulle part, peut être n’importe où!]. Submission can become a passion, a desire, a drive, ruling our actions and even our dreams. In a bitter re-envisioning of Dante’s “circling spheres” – his cosmos moved entirely by the submission of matter, will and desire to Divine Love – the *voyageurs* exclaim:

Horror! we mimic the top and ball
 In their waltz and bounce; even in our sleep
 Curiosity torments and rolls us around,
 Like a cruel Angel whipping on the suns.

[Nous imitons, horreur! la toupie et la boule
 Dans leur valse et leurs bonds; même dans nos sommeils
 La Curiosité nous tourmente et nous roule,
 Comme un Ange cruel qui fouette les soleils.] (OC I:130)

Whipped along by Curiosity, the fortune we follow is, at last, nothing better than “chance” – which has, it is true, a “mysterious attraction” of its own. As Dante sees the

stars, and they move him with a desire to ascend into them, a desire which the light of the sun allows him to fulfill,⁴¹ so the *voyageurs* see the stars and the sun, and these visions alight in them an “ardeur inquiète / De plonger dans un ciel au reflet alléchant” – but whether this is an ascent into heaven following Dante, or a plunge into the sea following Ulysses, we cannot tell. Because the sea reflects the heavens.

The poem’s end returns us, again, to the beginning. After all we have seen of the world, when we now see it entirely “through memory’s eyes,” and the brief vigil of our senses comes to a close, we are *still* able to “hope and cry: Onward!” We make a new departure as if it were the first, embarking “on the sea of Darkness / With the happy heart of a young passenger” [sur la mer des Ténèbres / Avec le cœur joyeux d’un jeune passager]. The two final stanzas which make up section VIII consist entirely of an apostrophe to Death:

Oh Death, old captain, it’s time! up anchor!

This country bores us, oh Death! Let’s be off!

If the sky and the sea are as black as ink,

Our hearts, as you know, are filled with light!

Pour us out your poison so it may comfort us!

Our heads are burning, we want to plunge

To the depths, of Heaven or Hell, what does it matter?

To the depths of the Unknown to find the *new*!

[O Mort, vieux capitaine, il est temps ! levons l’ancre !

⁴¹ In *Purgatorio*, upward motion is only possible during the day, when the sun is shining.

Ce pays nous ennuie, ô Mort ! Appareillons !
 Se le ciel et la mer sont noirs comme de l'encre,
 Nous cœurs que tu connais sont remplis de rayons !

Verse-nous ton poison pour qu'il nous reconforte !
 Nous voulons, tant ce feu nous brûle le cerveau,
 Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe ?

Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du *nouveau* !] (OC I :134)

Ablaze with exclamation marks, this address to Death repaints the picture of the Ulyssean *voyageur* burning for discovery – the entire world and all of life has been reduced to a source of ennui. (Recall “Au Lecteur” and the “delicate monster” which is there designated as the ugliest of all our vices – “Il ferait volontiers de la terre un débris / Et dans un bâillement avalerait le monde.”) Disaster is now complete – no stars appear either in the sky or the sea, which are both “as black as ink” [noirs comme de l'encre]. This ink-spill image reminds us that if the stars are gone, there can be no reading – whether because the blackness of blank space has blotted out the stars, or because the blackness of ink-blot have covered the page. At the same time, we have absorbed all the light and fire of the stars into ourselves, and it burns us inwardly while illuminating nothing.⁴² To put out this fire, we *desire* the poison (Circe's potion?) and the plunge. It

⁴² There is a strong link in these lines to “Obsession,” in which the poet cries”
 How you would please me, oh night! without these stars
 Whose light speaks a familiar language!
 For I seek the empty, and the black, and the bare!

But the darkneses are themselves the canvases
 Where, springing from my eye by the thousands,
 There live vanished beings with familiar regards.

does not matter whether this plunge is into Heaven or Hell, the black sky or the black sea, because we cannot tell the difference, in which case there *is* no difference. And because we cannot read the absent stars, whatever we plunge into is necessarily “Unknown.” All that remains to be seen is *the new* – but will we be able to see it? Is it still possible for the reader to believe in *the new*, at the end of “Le Voyage”? Blanchot writes of “the illusion that suicide liberates,” adding parenthetically that “consciousness of the illusion does not dissipate it or allow us to avoid it.” Throughout the poem the *voyageurs* have displayed an intermittent consciousness of the many illusions of liberation which, indeed, has not dissipated them. The question remains, however: is every plunge into death a suicidal plunge? Perhaps the *voyageurs* have no chance of discovering anything new, in life or in death – but perhaps it is, finally, the *poet* who seeks. Perhaps we read, here, a plunge into literary death – into the Underworld – in order to find something *new* not in life, but in poetry.

“les fleurs nouvelles que je rêve”:

Reading and marketing novelty

One need only flip through the pages of Baudelaire’s collected correspondence to obtain a sufficiently vivid picture of the difficulties of being a poet in nineteenth-century Paris. Perpetual debt forced him into a legion of unhappy situations, not the least of

[Comme tu me plairais, ô nuit ! sans ces étoiles
Dont la lumière parle un langage connu !
Car je cherche le vide, et le noir, et le nu !

Mais les ténèbres sont elles-mêmes des toiles
Où vivent, jaillissant de mon œil par milliers,
Des êtres disparus aux regards familiers.] (OC I :75-76)

which was being constantly under the necessity of marketing the products of his pen – past, present and future. Many dates see multiple letters to family, friends, acquaintances, even strangers, asking for small or large sums of money to settle one account or another; Baudelaire often complains in letters to his mother that so much of his time and energy is expended in these humiliating exertions that he has nothing left for his work. Unwilling to ask for money for nothing, however, the poet promises whatever he has to promise – his completed works, if there are any, but if not, then his works-in-progress or, in the end, projects of which he has only dreamt. For example, in a letter dated “Noël. 1861” to Arsène Houssaye, who was at the time the director of *L’Artiste* and *La Presse*, Baudelaire begins by requesting that Houssaye may “find a few moments to read over this specimen of prose poems which I send you” [trouvez quelques instants pour parcourir ce spécimen de poèmes en prose que je vous envoie], announcing that “I am making a long attempt of this species, and I have the intention of dedicating it to you” [Je fais une longue tentative de cette espèce, et j’ai l’intention de vous la dédier] (C II:207). Several paragraphs later, he comes to what we may assume was his real point:

I will ask you at the same time to pay me for the part already *done*, or the totality *done*; for the sudden and coincident fall of the *Fantaisiste* and the *Européenne* has thrown me into complete poverty; but as it is a holiday; as you may be put out; and at any rate it is not permitted to fall on people unexpectedly like this, and finally because I would like to bring together the immediate satisfaction of my needs with all your own ease, - in the absence of any money, I would ask you for a written word promising me the insertion of the poems; in such conditions, there is a friend’s purse

which is always open to me.

[Je vous demanderai en même temps de me payer la partie déjà *faite*, ou la totalité *faite* ; car la chute soudaine et coïncident de la *Fantaisiste* et de l'*Européenne* m'a mis sur la paille ; mais comme c'est jour de l'an ; comme vous serez peut-être gêné ; que d'ailleurs il n'est pas permis de tomber ainsi sur les gens à l'improviste, et qu'enfin je voudrais accorder la satisfaction immédiate de mon besoin avec toutes vos aises, - à défaut d'argent, je vous demanderai un mot d'écrit me promettant l'insertion des poèmes ; dans ces conditions-là, j'ai une bourse d'ami qui m'est toujours ouverte.] (C II:207-208)

While twenty of Baudelaire's prose poems were published in *La Presse* in August of 1862, along with the promised dedication to Houssaye, and other groupings of them came out in other journals in later years, they were only published as a complete collection years after his death. Thus whether Houssaye did nor did not, in response to this particular letter, pay him for any portion of his prose poems, done or undone, is essentially irrelevant – we see Baudelaire here in the position of advertising and even hoping to profit on his dreams, as he writes, “I have dreamt about my prose poems for many years” [Il y a plusieurs années que je rêve à mes poèmes en prose]. The benefit, from an advertising standpoint, of selling works before they had been completed, or even before they were begun, was that when and if they did appear, they would truly be “new” – at least for a day. The drawback: being already in debt to the future.

There is no doubt that Baudelaire knew the value of novelty, a value on which he hoped to capitalize in issuing a new edition of *Les Fleurs du mal*. Hoping, of course, to

make money on the re-edition of the previously censored collection, published this time without the six poems which had been deemed objectionable, the poet was clearly aware that the attention of its potential audience must be directed to what in it was new. He expresses as much already in December of 1859 (the second edition did not appear until February of 1861) in a letter to his publisher and faithful friend, Auguste Poulet-Malassis,

When we come to the *Fleurs*, I would like everything possible to be done to draw the eyes to this new edition, thus we will do as Hugo; on the eve of the day it goes on sale, it is necessary that *all the journals* where we have connections should each cite a morsel chosen from among the previously unpublished pieces.

[Quand nous serons aux *Fleurs*, je veux qu'il soit fait tout ce qui est possible pour attirer les yeux sur cette nouvelle édition, ainsi nous ferons comme Hugo ; la veille du jour de la mise en vente, il faut que *tous les journaux* où nous avons des liaisons citent chacun un morceau choisi parmi les inédits.] (C 1:635)

However, when it came to the poems in question, particularly the newest of the new – i.e., the new poems in the new section, the *Tableaux parisiens* – the value of their novelty in the realm of advertising was in danger of being eclipsed by their novelty in the realm of poetry. Baudelaire attempted – and achieved – something so actually new with these poems, (and with the prose poems, which appear as a continuation of the project of the *Tableaux*), that he had good reason to fear that they would strike his readers as *too* new. To moderate the hazards of this extreme novelty, to control the “frisson du nouveau” which Victor Hugo predicted would be caused in a Parisian audience by the *Tableaux*,

the poet must have sought means to cushion the new with the familiar, to retrospectively build into the collection that purported “architecture secrète” which would make a nervous reader feel more secure. This was not a skill he could have learned from the ancient poets, who were not burdened by the concerns of marketing their poetry to a general public. On the other hand, no one could have been more qualified to instruct Baudelaire in the skill of building a framework for a text’s public reception into the text itself than his American double, Edgar Allan Poe.

Chapter 2

Reading the Blank: Poe and Baudelaire

Le poète jouit de cet incomparable privilège, qu’il peut à sa guise

être lui-même et autrui. Comme ces âmes errantes qui cherchent
un corps, il entre, quand il veut, dans le personnage de chacun.

Pour lui seul, tout est vacant...

Baudelaire, "Les Foules"

Baudelaire a fait plus. Je tiens qu'il a choisi de mourir –
d'appeler la mort dans son corps et de vivre sous sa menace –
pour mieux saisir dans sa poésie la nuée aperçue aux limites de
la parole. Mort, déjà mort, déjà celui qui est mort dans un ici et
un maintenant, Baudelaire n'a plus besoin de décrire un ici et un
maintenant. Ils sont en eux, et sa parole les porte.

Yves Bonnefoy, *L'Improbable*

In the previous chapter we considered the "we," the plurality of *voyageurs* who begin to speak in the second stanza of "Le Voyage." However, the poem begins before the "we," with "l'enfant" – with a lamp-lit scene of a child bent over "maps and stamps" [de cartes et d'estampes] (*OC* I:129). "Le Voyage" presents us with Baudelaire's vision of childhood, and his understanding of what it means to grow up – what the child loses, or what is lost with the child. The loss comes early – between the third and fourth lines of the poem, and what is lost, in part, is a vision of "the world" [le monde] as "great" [grand]. The world "l'enfant" imagines, while poring over "maps and stamps...in the light of lamps" is "vast," "great," perhaps even infinite. The world that appears "through memory's eyes" [aux yeux du souvenir] has nothing imaginary about it – to age is to experience the attrition of imagination simultaneous with the expansion of knowledge –

of experience – so that the remembered world, while it may be as ephemeral as the imagined world, is “small” and “finite.” The loss is not precisely in the world, which does not literally contract. Nor is the loss in the child, who is born with a “vast appetite” which, if anything, grows with age. What is lost is a particular way of seeing the world – a fantasy, a vision, a vision of a future in which everything is to come, and everything is Unknown. This vision is replaced by another – a vision of the past in which nothing is to come, and nothing is Unknown. Baudelaire does not judge that the vision of old age is true, while that of childhood is false, or vice versa; both may be illusions – the illusion of a future, the illusion of a past. Regardless, they are all there is to see.

The circle closes over the “maps and stamps”: the souvenirs of a voyage which has reduced the world to something seen only “through memory’s eyes” become, for the child, magical tokens signaling the perfect equivalence between “the universe” and “his vast appetite.” We cannot help but attribute this miraculous equivalence to the fact that, still in the 19th century, despite all Progress, there were blank spaces on the maps, unmapped and “Unknown” areas into which the imagination could plunge with all its ardor. We might go further, however, and say that for the child, in any age, the entire map is composed of blank space, safely enclosed in the circle of lamp-light. If the blank spaces on the map represent the Unknown – that which has yet to be mapped except insofar as it borders on and is framed by what *has* been mapped – for “l’enfant” every place on the map is equally Unknown and so equally blank insofar as it offers itself to imagination. Children stare at maps and sound out the words which may be names of cities, or rivers, or countries. Children look at the name and dot representing their own city, and try to imagine that dot containing all the streets and buildings and trees and

crowds that they see every day, and their own home, with their own room inside it, and inside the room they themselves, sitting and looking at the map – and then they look at the dot of a city across the world and try to imagine what streets and buildings and trees and crowds they might see every day if their own home and room and table and lamp were there, and not here. And then they imagine traveling here or there, tracing out the route with a finger all the way to that far-off and mysterious destination, whether Hong Kong, Madagascar, or Where the Wild Things Are. The names themselves are magical, conjuring up an entire world; “Le Voyage” contains a litany of such magical names – “Icarie,” “Eldorado,” “Amérique,” “Capoue,” “la Chine,” “la mer des Ténèbres,” “Enfer,” “Ciel” – in which no distinction is made between those which designate a “real” place and those which derive from myth, fable, imagination. The *voyageurs* of “Le Voyage,” whose itinerary consists of an endless succession of nameless places where they see only what they already know, are haunted by the child’s map which is such a dense concentration of alluring Unknowns that it is in essence entirely blank – and the more blank, the more “grand,” the more capable of exciting and satisfying the child’s “vast appetite.” For every “grown-up” *voyageur*, however, one space remains blank – that space which is alternately labeled “Enfer” or “Ciel” – and it confounds any mapped itinerary by presenting itself as the destination, no matter in what direction we travel, but also provides one final frame for all the imagination with which we once peopled the entire map. Thus in the address to “Mort” in section VIII of “Le Voyage” we hear a final outburst of the voice of the child (which has made repeated returns throughout the poem) articulating a desire for death as the last outpost of the Unknown.

“Plonger au fond du gouffre”:

Poetic maps of the Unknown

There is scarcely an *Odyssey* published these days without a map of the areas traversed by Odysseus. For example, Stanley Lombardo’s 2000 translation contains a map entitled “Homeric Geography” that shows the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas, with all the ports, islands, cities, mountains, etc, and also an inset of Troy with its two rivers and neighboring cities. On the following page we find a rendering of the possible layout of “The Palace of Odysseus,” complete with a “Dung Heap” across the road (viii-xi). Robert Fagles’ 1996 translation provides the reader with three maps, of “Mainland Greece,” “The Peloponnese,” and “The Aegean and Asia Minor” (with Troy inset) (68-73). Of course, given that these maps seem intended to allow the reader to map out Odysseus’ itinerary, they are relatively useless; aside from Troy and Ithaca as beginning and end points, most of Odysseus’ stops along the way are unplottable. It is necessary to read the poem to appreciate how much of Odysseus’ wanderings take place within the blank spaces of the Unknown, and this geographic Unknown can only be mapped in language, only visited in Imagination. However, this lack of susceptibility to cartography does not prevent the poet from describing the journeys to these various unknown destinations with enough detail as to make it seem possible to arrive at them – at least, relatively possible given that it seems entirely impossible that Odysseus should, finally, arrive at Ithaca. For example, Circe’s directions from Aeaea to the shores of Hades are simple enough, in particular because the journey apparently requires no navigation:

“Son of Laertes in the line of Zeus,

My wily Odysseus – do not worry about

A pilot to guide your ship. Just set up the mast,
 Spread the white sail, and sit yourself down.
 The North Wind's breath will bear her onwards.
 But when your ship crosses the stream of Ocean
 You will see a shelving shore and Persephone's groves,
 Tall poplars and willows that drop their fruit.
 Beach your ship there by Ocean's deep eddies,
 And go yourself to the dank house of Hades.
 There into Acheron flow Pyriphlegethon
 And Cocytus, a branch of the water of Styx.
 And there is a rock where the two roaring rivers
 Flow into one. At that spot, hero, gather yourself
 And do as I say." (*Odyssey* X:504-516)

Simple, right? Now, if only we knew how to get to Circe! The fact is that Odysseus and his men crossed into the space of the Unknown many episodes back, and in order to set a course for the Underworld following Circe's instructions we would first have to know how to follow them from Cythera – the last known location Odysseus mentions – to the land of the Lotus-eaters, then the island of the Cyclopes, the floating island of Aeolia, then to Lamus, "the lofty city of Telepylus in the land of the Laestrygonians," and from thence to Aeaëa – not to mention that this itinerary does not take account of the many times that Odysseus is blown off course, and that he does not *intend* to arrive at any of these destinations. Thus in the *Odyssey* the Underworld, that Unknown of Unknowns, is deeply mapped around with blank space. One receives the impression that any known

location on the map of “Homeric Geography” could be the jumping-off point for a plunge into the Unknown.

By the time Virgil returns, in the *Aeneid*, to the childhood of literature that is Homeric poetry, there is no blank space left on the map of the Mediterranean region in which to hide the Unknown. Aeneas’ entire itinerary can be plotted according to known points – the map included in Lombardo’s 2005 translation bears the title “The Wanderings of Aeneas”, and the main feature is a bold line inscribing these wanderings on the map (6-7). The poet does mention in passing several of the Homeric Unknowns, and even roughly situates them with regard to the given geography – Circe’s isle is somewhere off the coast of Latium between Caieta and Laurentum, Scylla and Charybdis are precisely placed in the Strait of Messina between Sicily and the southwestern tip of Italy, and the Sirens are somewhere in the middle of the Tyrrhenian Sea.⁴³ However, Aeneas avoids all of these Homeric menaces and, rather than ignore the geographical knowledge of his own time, Virgil chooses to map over – or under – a contemporary map of Greece and Italy with a heavy sediment of his own myth. The mythic plot thickens as Aeneas approaches his descent into the Underworld, as the poet pretends to discover beneath all the names of the surrounding areas that these names pay tribute to lost friends of the Trojan hero. There is Cape Palinurus (known today as Cape Palinuro), named for Aeneas’ pilot, another drowned astrologer, “who while reckoning their course from Libya

⁴³ That is, the Sirens *were* somewhere in the middle of the Tyrrhenian sea, but now are no more:

The fleet sailed on safely without alarm,
As Neptune had promised, and now approached
The cliffs of the Sirens, formerly perilous
And white with men’s bones but now just rocks
Roaring and echoing in the ceaseless surf... (*Aeneid* V:862-866)

One wonders when this disappearance of the Sirens took place, given that, as David Thompson points out in a rather mind-blowing aside, Odysseus and Aeneas were wandering around the Mediterranean at the same time.

by the stars had fallen from the stern into the waves.” The first of the Trojans to reach Italy, Palinurus washes up on its shores still alive, but becomes “easy prey for a band of marauders”; while the Sibyl denies his ghost’s request to be carried across the river Styx with herself and Aeneas, she promises him:

“The neighboring peoples, in cities far and wide,
 Will be driven by portents to appease your bones,
 Will build a tomb, and to the tomb will tender
 Solemn offerings, and forever the place
 Will be called Palinurus.” (*Aeneid* VI.378-381)

There is also Misenum (now Miseno), named for Misenus, once the companion of Hector, who is supposedly drowned by Triton out of jealousy for his trumpeting skill with a conch-shell while Aeneas is consulting with the Sibyl at Cumae. He is given all the proper funeral rites, and “Aeneas, in an act of piety, heaped above Misenus a huge burial mound – with the hero’s arms, horn, and oar – beneath a soaring hill that is still called Misenus and will bear that name throughout the ages” (*Aeneid* VI.232-235).

Finally, there is Caieta (now the Gulf and city of Gaeta), which honors the name of Aeneas’ nurse; Virgil addresses her:

You too Caieta, nurse of Aeneas,
 Have by your death given eternal fame
 To our shores. Still your resting place
 Is honored, and if bones can lie in glory
 So lie yours beneath your name
 In great Hesperia. (*Aeneid* VII.1-4)

As these three accounts surround Aeneas' descent into Erebus – two coming before, one after – it seems that rather than wrap the Underworld around with Unknowns, as Homer did, Virgil has chosen to situate it in the midst of known locations which he then underlays with mythic and funereal significance. Even the land of the dead itself lies beneath a known location: it is entered by way of a cave on the shores of Lake Avernus. In the account of his descent, Virgil makes Aeneas the discoverer of realms of the Underworld far beyond what Odysseus saw. The *Aeneid* provides a poetic map of death that includes the “huge whirlpool” of Acheron, the “lagoons of Cocytus,” the “Fields of Lamentation” where the shade of Dido wanders, the walled city of Dis ruled by “Cretan Rhadamanthus,” the “pit of Tartarus itself, plunging down into darkness twice as deep as Olympus is high,” and finally the fields of Elysium and the shores of the river Lethe – where ancient souls are cleansed of all memories in preparation for a real return to childhood.

Virgil's developments in the Underworld lay the foundations for Dante's infernal topography, which is so intricate that it defies any attempt to map it (although Singleton's commentary provides us with multiple diagrams, details, and cross-sections). Dante, of course, takes us far beyond the underworld, as the pilgrim plumbs the depths of the Inferno, comes out the other side, and ascends through Purgatory and Paradise. Not content to add wings to the house of Hades, however, Dante even remaps the narratives of ancient epic, referring, as he does so, to the tradition's revisionary cartographic tendencies. As we have already seen, he changes the course of the *Odyssey*, turning Ulysses away from home and directly into the realm of the Unknown on a voyage of discovery. The flaming shade of the Greek hero begins his story with a nod to Virgil's

mythic geography:

“When

I departed from Circe, who had detained me
 more than a year there near Gaeta,
 before Aeneas had so named it,
 neither fondness for my son, nor reverence
 for my aged father, nor the due love
 which would have made Penelope glad,
 could conquer in me the longing
 that I had to gain experience of the world...”

(*Inferno* XXVI.90-98)

In this brief but extremely hard-working passage, Ulysses establishes his temporal priority with regard to Aeneas, while also confirming Virgil’s location of Circe’s isle and acknowledging the mythic origins of Italian geography; at the same time Dante brings Virgil’s map up to date, making Caieta into Gaeta. Not to mention the fact that he completely contradicts Homer, sending Ulysses on a brand-new Odyssey. Ulysses’ “folle volo,” his attempt to reach the shores of Purgatory by ship, while still alive, an attempt which ends in a whirlwind and his ship’s plunge into a whirlpool, is twice alluded to later in the *Divina Commedia*. In the first canto of *Purgatorio*, the pilgrim emerges again into the light at the foot of the great mountain, and goes with Virgil down to the water’s edge to be cleansed of all traces of the “aura morta”:

Then we came to that desert shore,
 that never saw any man navigate its waters

who afterward had experience [esperto] of return.

There, as it pleased another, [com' altrui piacque], he girded me.

(*Purgatorio* I.128-133)

The poet reminds us here of Ulysses, whose journey in search of experience [esperto] *did* lead him to navigate the waters the pilgrim now regards, but did not allow him any return. The pilgrim, who *has* reached the “desert shore” while still alive, and will return, is girded there “as it pleased another” [com' altrui piacque], just as it pleased another (*Inferno* XXVI.141) to send Ulysses into the depths. Later, from the height of the sphere of the fixed stars in Paradise, the pilgrim will look down and see the entirety of “Ulysses’ mad course” [il varco folle d’Ulisse] (*Paradiso* XXVII.82-83). Integrated into this totalizing view is the poet’s implicit condemnation of any attempt to achieve knowledge of divine things in a way other than the way he has done so – through poetry.

At the end of the same canto, Beatrice delivers a lesson to the pilgrim concerning “cupidigia,” a worldly force which, though it is semantically relate to “avarice” as a desire for money, has a broader meaning in origin and in its usage throughout the *Divine Comedy*, and functions as a boundless desire or longing for all the things of the world. Certainly though its etymological link to Cupid, the god of love, it embraces a desire for the flesh (*Purgatorio* XXXII.152), but only as one of the many objects which will *not* satisfy this desire, a force which will *not* lead men to God. In all of these aspects it resembles the *désir* of “Le Voyage,” and Beatrice’s speech concerning the evils of “cupidigia,” like “Le Voyage,” presents a picture of the transformation of child into man:

“Oh cupidity, who do so plunge mortals
in your depths, that none has power

to lift his eyes from your waves!

The will blossoms well in men,
 but the continual rain turns
 the sound plums into blighted fruit.

Faith and innocence are found
 only in little children; then each
 flies away before the cheeks are covered.

One, so long as he lisps, keeps the fasts,
 who afterward, when his tongue is free,
 devours any food through any month;
 and one, while he lisps, loves and listens to
 his mother, who, when his speech is full,
 longs to see her buried.

Thus the white skin turns black
 at the first sight of the fair daughter
 of him that brings morning and leaves evening.”

[“Oh cupidigia, che i mortali affonde
 sì sotto te, che nessuno ha podere
 di trarre li occhi fuor de le tue onde!

Ben fiorisce ne li uomini il volere;
 ma la pioggia continüa converte
 in bozzacchioni le sosine vere.

Fede e innocenza son reperte
 solo ne' parvoletti; poi ciascuna
 pria fugge che le guance sian coperte.
 Tale, balbuzièndo ancor, digiuna,
 che poi divora, con la lingua sciolta,
 qualunque cibo per qualunque luna;
 e tal, balbuzièndo, ama e ascolta
 la madre sua, che, con loquela intera,
 disìa poi di vederla sepolta.
 Così si fa la pelle bianca nera
 nel primo aspetto de la bella figlia
 di quel ch'apporta mane e lascia sera.”]

(*Paradiso* XXVII.121-138)

Beatrice does not stint in examples to illustrate her point that each mortal in particular, and humankind in general, are made and thus begin well, but soon turn bad through the influence of the force of “cupidigia.” The blossom of the will which grows into a bloated and blighted fruit is an image thoroughly appropriate to *Les Fleurs du mal*, recalling poems such as “L’Ennemi.” More fruitful, however, for comparison with “Le Voyage,” is the image of the little child. As in the opening of “Le Voyage” two kinds of vision are opposed – the child’s vision of the world “à la clarté des lampes” and the vision of the world “aux yeux du souvenir” – so here Beatrice opposes two types of non-vision. The child is characterized by “faith and innocence” – innocence as a lack of knowledge, and faith, as defined by Aquinas, as a “certainty without knowledge” – the child sees and

knows nothing, and believes. Once the adult is overcome by “cupidigia,” then “none has power to lift his eyes from [its] waves”; elsewhere in the *Commedia* we find reference to “cieca cupidigia” – “blind cupidity” (*Inferno* XII.49).⁴⁴ Between two blindnesses there is one vision: “the first sight of the fair daughter of him that brings morning and leaves evening.” With this vision we come around again to our point of departure: Circe, the daughter of the Sun. Circe, who turns men into beasts, who turned Odysseus’ eyes away from home, who turned Dante’s Ulysses away from Ithaca and toward his ruin. Clearly she inherited from her father the ability to give a killer tan, since the moment the child sees her, the white skin of his innocence becomes black, steeped in sin.⁴⁵ The sight of Circe is both illuminating and blinding: she robs the child of his faithful lack of vision and replaces it with her own image, as she appears in the person of all worldly objects of desire which blind us to the only worthy object.

How lucky for Dante, then, we must conclude, that the end of *his* childhood was marked by his first sight of Beatrice, setting him on the path, with a few digressions, toward immortal salvation, and away from mortal desires. In the *Vita Nuova* Dante marks this turn in his life – the beginning of his “new life” – with the poem which occasions his official entry into the community of poems; thus it is as much a linguistic (and specifically poetic) event as it is a spiritual event. Beatrice also distinguishes the transition from childhood to manhood as it takes place in language: the state of childhood

⁴⁴ Can we help but think that this is also a reference to the belief that, to put it in rather clichéd terms, “love is blind”?

⁴⁵ The image of the white skin becoming black attaches itself to a number of other images: there are multiple references to color-change within the same canto, but these are all from white to red, symbolizing the modest shame that Beatrice and the other souls feel over the state of the Church on earth; there are the sea and sky of the end of “Le Voyage” which are “noirs comme de l’encre,” and the other figures of disaster we have uncovered in the *Fleurs*; looking forward, there are the natives at the end of Poe’s *Narrative of the life of Arthur Gordon Pym*, who are black even to their teeth, and the mysterious appearance at the end of the narrative of a figure “of the perfect whiteness of snow” (an opposition which has been theorized as an allegory of race, among other possible interpretations).

is characterized by the state of speech – the child is a child (innocent, faithful) “while he lisps” [balbuziando]. It is “when his tongue is free” [con la lingua sciolta] and “when his speech is full” [con loquela intera] that the child turns away from his faith and its practices, and desires the death of the mother he loved. But if language can lead us toward Hell, it can also, as we have already remarked concerning Dante, lead us toward Heaven: if a child is born to be a poet, and his imagination thrills not just to maps but to those maps which are poems, then it is entirely appropriate that his eventual voyage, in whatever direction, should be made in poetry.

If we can divine, in Dante, a movement from child to man, whether in language or otherwise, it is possible that in Baudelaire’s world there is no growing up – unless it is the growth of desire. The child is already characterized by his “vast appetite,” which could be a synonym for Dante’s “cupidigia,” and this remains constant over the course of “Le Voyage.” An associated word in Baudelaire’s lexicon is “curiosité,” which appears in “Le Voyage” as a tormenter, a “cruel Angel” – but as such it is also a form of fate; Baudelaire expresses this very thought in *The Painter of Modern Life* [*Le Peintre de la vie moderne*]:

It is to this profound and joyous curiosity that we must attribute the fixed and animally ecstatic eye of children before the *new*, whatever it may be, face or landscape [...] One of my friends told me one day that when he was very small, he used to help his father bathe, and that he would contemplate, in a stupor mixed with delights, the muscles of his arms, the gradations in the color of his skin from pink to yellow, and the bluish network of veins. The tableau of the outward appearances of life already penetrated him with respect and possessed his mind. Already he was

obsessed with form and possessed by it. Predestination was manifest precociously at the end of his nose. The *damnation* was done. Need I say that today this child is a celebrated painter?

[C'est à cette curiosité profonde et joyeuse qu'il faut attribuer l'œil fixe et animallement extatique des enfants devant le *nouveau*, quel qu'il soit, visage ou paysage [...] Un de mes amis me disait un jour qu'étant fort petit, il assistait à la toilette de son père, et qu'alors il contemplait, avec une stupeur mêlée de délices, les muscles des bras, les dégradations de couleurs de la peau nuancée de rose et de jaune, et le réseau bleuâtre des veines. Le tableau de la vie extérieure le pénétrait déjà de respect et s'emparait de son cerveau. Déjà la forme l'obsédait et le possédait. La prédestination montrait précocement le bout de son nez. La *damnation* était faite. Ai-je besoin de dire que cet enfant est aujourd'hui un peintre célèbre ?] (*OC II:690-691*)

The “curiosity” of the child, which leads to a fixed, obsessive gaze at whatever is “at the end of his nose,” but particularly whatever is “*new*,” figures as “predestination” and even “*damnation*.” For one child it is “maps and stamps” – and this child is damned to be a restless *voyageur*, for another child it is the details of color and movement of the human form – and this child is damned to be a painter. But what is it that damns a child to be a poet? Following Baudelaire’s formulations in *The Painter of Modern Life*, we might say that the poet – Baudelaire in fact refers to “le génie,” which can be the genius as much of painting, which he is explicitly addressing, as of poetry – is one who can, by choice, return to the state of “l’enfance.” “The child,” he writes, “sees everything as *novelty*”

[L'enfant voit tout en *nouveauté*], and “genius is nothing but *childhood re-found* at will, childhood endowed now, in order to express itself, with strong organs and an analytic mind which permits it to order the sum of material involuntarily amassed” [le génie n’est que l’*enfance retrouvée* à volonté, l’*enfance* douée maintenant, pour s’exprimer, d’organes virils et de l’esprit analytique qui lui permet d’ordonner la somme de matériaux involontairement amassée] (*OC* II:690). On one side this appears to be an incredible gift; it is what the *voyageurs* constantly hope for – the ability to see the world “en *nouveauté*.” In plunging into childhood the poet, every time, may plunge into a *new* “predestination”; however, this is also a new “*damnation*.” The poet is the one who is blessed with “the incomparable privilege, that he may be, according to his fancy, himself and others” [cet incomparable privilège, qu’il peut à sa guise être lui-même et autrui], and “like those errant souls who seek a body, he enters, when he likes, into each character” [Comme ces âmes errantes qui cherchent un corps, il entre, quand il veut, dans le personnage de chacun]. “For him alone,” the poet says, “everything is vacant” [Pour lui seul, tout est vacant] (*OC* I :291); for the poet the mass of humanity is a map composed of an infinity of blank, “vacant” spaces, into any of which he can plunge at will, and while each plunge returns him to the child’s vision of “tout en *nouveauté*,” it also damns him anew to the damnation of whatever “other” he has entered into – a welcome damnation, because it is *new*, but a damnation just the same, a whole crowd of damnations.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ The opening passage of “Crowds” [Les Foules], the prose poem we have been quoting, also links this affinity of the poet for crowds with the desire for voyage which is born over the “maps and stamps,” It is not given to everyone to be able to bathe in the masses: to take pleasure in the crowd is an art; and he alone can do it, at the expense of mankind, into whom, in his cradle, a fairy breathed the taste for disguise and mask, the hatred of home and the passion for voyage.

It is no wonder that Baudelaire ascribes to “l’enfance” a proximity to illness, likening it to the state of convalescence which is both the emergence from illness and, in all possibility, the likelihood of a return to it. “Inspiration,” he affirms, “has a certain rapport with *congestion*,” and “nothing more resembles what is called inspiration, than the joy with which the child absorbs form and color” [l’inspiration a quelque rapport avec la *congestion* [...] Rien ne ressemble plus à ce qu’on appelle l’inspiration, que la joie avec laquelle l’enfant absorbe la forme et la couleur] (*OC I*:690). In the context of this elaboration of the relationship of childhood, and the childish state of poetic inspiration in the face of the novelty of the crowd, to convalescence, Baudelaire makes recourse to Poe for the illustration of his point:

Do you remember that tableau (truly, it is a tableau!) written by the most powerful pen of the age, and which is entitled *The Man of the Crowd*? Behind the window of a café, a convalescent, contemplating the crowd with pleasure, mixes himself, in thought, with all the thoughts which toss and turn around him. Recently returned from the shadows of death, with delight he breathes in all the germs and all the emanations of life; as he had been at the point of forgetting everything, he remembers and ardently

[Il n’est pas donné à chacun de prendre un bain de multitude : jouir de la foule est un art ; et celui-là seul peut faire, aux dépens du genre humain, une ribote de vitalité, à qui une fée a insufflé dans son berceau le goût du travestissement et du masque, la haine du domicile et la passion du voyage.] (*OC I*:291)

In this poem it becomes clear that the pleasure to be derived from plunging into the crowd is an addictive pleasure, and thus also a painful and destructive pleasure – the “multitude” is a *pharmakon*; Walter Benjamin expresses the same conclusions in *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*:

Jules Laforgue said that Baudelaire was the first to speak of Paris “as someone condemned to live in the capital day after day.” He might have said that Baudelaire was also the first to speak of the opiate that afforded relief to men so condemned, and only to them. The crowd is not only the newest asylum of outlaws; it is also the latest narcotic for people who have been abandoned. (*SW* 4:31)

wants to remember everything. Finally, he hurls himself across the crowd in search of an unknown whose glimpsed physiognomy has, in the blink of an eye, fascinated him. Curiosity has become a fatal, irresistible passion! [Vous souvenez-vous d'un tableau (en vérité, c'est un tableau !) écrit par la plus puissante plume de cette époque, et qui a pour titre *L'Homme des foules* ? Derrière la vitre d'un café, un convalescent, contemplant la foule avec jouissance, se mêle, par la pensée, à toutes les pensées qui s'agitent autour de lui. Revenu récemment des ombres de la mort, il aspire avec délices tous les germes et tous les effluves de la vie ; comme il a été sur le point de tout oublier, il se souvient et veut avec ardeur se souvenir de tout. Finalement, il se précipite à travers cette foule à la recherche d'un inconnu dont la physionomie entrevue l'a, en un clin d'œil, fasciné. La curiosité est devenue une passion fatale, irrésistible !] (*OC* II:689-690)

Poe's language in *The Man of the Crowd* draws him closer to Baudelaire's point of view than Baudelaire has even indicated; the narrator (the convalescent) describes his state while sitting, "about the closing in of an evening in autumn [...] at the large bow window of the D— Coffe-House in London" as "one of those happy moods which are so precisely the converse of *ennui*—moods of the *keenest appetancy*, when the film from the mental vision departs," and when, "as the darkness came on," he begins to observe through the window the "two dense and continuous tides of population [...] rushing past the door," he confesses that "the tumultuous sea of human heads filled me [...] with a delicious *novelty of emotion*" (*SWP* 232-233, emphasis added). The moment when the narrator begins to be "absorbed in contemplation" of the crowds outside the coffee-house window is precisely

the moment that “the lamps were well lighted,” and for this convalescent-narrator the space of the street-lamp-light become the equivalent of the space of the lamp-light for Baudelaire’s “enfant,” “amoureux de cartes et d’estampes.” The space of lamp-light through which the crowds pass becomes a frame to the “tableau,” allowing the narrator to make minute observations of “the innumerable varieties of figure, dress, air, gait, visage, and expression of countenance,” and to divide and classify the people he sees according to their physiognomies. As this space becomes more and more clearly defined, the narrator fancies that his faculties of observation become more and more acute:

As the night deepened, so deepened to me the interest of the scene; for not only did the general character of the crowd materially alter [...] but the rays of the gas-lamps, feeble at first in their struggle with the dying day, had now at length gained ascendancy, and threw over every thing a fitful and garish lustre. [...] The wild effects of the light enchained me to an examination of individual faces; and although the rapidity with which the world of light flitted before the window, prevented me from casting more than a glance upon each visage, still it seemed that, in my then peculiar mental state, I could frequently read, even in that interval of a glance, the history of long years. (*SW* 235)

It is only when the deepest contrast is drawn between the dark of the night and the “garish lustre” of the streetlamps that the narrator makes it clear that for him the space of the lamp-light is a space of reading – a reading which happens in the blink of an eye, and is felt to be more incisive, the more instantaneous it is. For the narrator it is a *novel* experience, a new kind of reading; in Walter Benjamin’s response to the story in its

relation to Baudelaire's poetry he shows us what this new reading replaces:

Poe, in the course of his story, lets darkness fall. He lingers over the city by gaslight. The appearance of the street as an *intérieur* in which the phantasmagoria of the flâneur is concentrated is hard to separate from the gas lighting. The first gas lamps burned in the arcades. [...] Under Napoleon III, the number of gas lamps in Paris grew rapidly. This way of increasing safety in the city made the crowds feel at home in the open streets even at night, and removed the starry sky from the ambiance of the big city more effectively than tall buildings had ever done. "I draw the curtain over the sun; now it has been put to bed, as is proper. Henceforth I shall see no other light but that of the gas flame." The moon and stars are no longer worth mentioning. (*SW* Vol.4 28)

The 'increased safety' in the city streets (whether these are the streets of London or Paris) represented by the gas street-lamps parallels the safety of the map-loving child inside his room, "à la clarté des lampes," and Benjamin emphasizes that the gas lamps turn the street into an "*intérieur*," an alcove or enclosure, and do this precisely because they remove "the starry sky from the ambiance of the big city." Following the particularly urban disaster which is the erasure of the "starry sky" by the "ascendancy" of the street lamps, and thus following the end of our ability (or desire) to read any fate for ourselves in the sphere of the stars, the sphere of the lamp-light becomes a new space of reading, and whatever happens to pass through its blank becomes that which engages our curiosity and consequently fixes our damnation – or, in the case of the poet, his infinite possibilities for damnation as he flits in and out of every passer-by in a "sainte

prostitution de l'âme" (*OC* I:291).

In "The Man of the Crowd," however, the possibility of reading is framed by an assertion of the impossibility of reading, and arrival at this impasse is the circuitous but also somehow direct result of the fateful curiosity that inspired the narrator to his act of reading in the first place. Poe begins the story, "It was well said of a certain German book that "*er lasst sich nicht lesen*"—it does not permit itself to be read" (*SWP* 232). That which inspires the narrator to leave his window-seat and, as Baudelaire says, 'hurl himself across the crowd,' is a particular "countenance," of which he notes, "I well remember that my first thought, upon beholding it, was that Retzch, had he viewed it, would have greatly preferred it to his own pictural incarnations of the fiend" (*SWP* 235-236). His fascination with this fiendish face causes him to make a night- and day-long pursuit of the "decrepid old man" to whom it belongs, surreptitiously following him as he desperately pursues the crowds through the city streets with no "apparent object" but to be constantly among them. When, finally, the narrator grows "wearied unto death" and can stand to follow this "singular being" no longer, he for the first time plants himself "fully in front of the wanderer, [gazing] at him steadfastly in the face," but his former powers to read "the history of long years" in a passing face are stymied:

He noticed me not, but resumed his solemn walk, while I, ceasing to follow, remained absorbed in contemplation. "This old man," I said at length, "is the type and the genius of true crime. He refuses to be alone. *He is the man of the crowd.* It will be in vain to follow; for I shall learn no more of him, nor of his deeds. The worst heart of the world is a grosser book than the 'Hortulus Animae,' and perhaps it is but one of the great

mercies of God that ‘*er lasst sich nicht lesen.*’ (SWP 238-239)

For the most avid and ardent reader, it is that which cannot be read, which absolutely “does not permit itself to be read,” which most strongly excites the desire to read, because it most strongly evokes the sense of “novelty.” In the close of the preceding chapter we postulated that the plunge into the “Unknown” in search of “the *new*” which we read at the end of “Le Voyage” might be the poet’s plunge – in search of a new kind of poetry, a new poetic language. We will pursue the argument in the end of this chapter that this pursuit of poetic novelty resulted in the new section of *Les Fleurs du mal*, the “Tableaux parisiens.” In order to offer such an experience of novelty to his readers, however, Baudelaire had to learn how to build a certain impossibility of reading – a truly blank space – into his language, and no better teacher of such an unknown architecture could be found than Edgar Allan Poe.

Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Gordon Pym, and the Maelström of the Unknown

It cannot be left without comment that to refer to the works of Edgar Allan Poe in the context of a discussion of the tradition of epic poetry is an unexpected, if not an outright perverse thing to do – unless the discussion concerns the decline or decay of the form. In his posthumously published lecture, “The Poetic Principle,” Poe famously questions the taste for epic poetry: “If, at any time, any very long poem *were* popular in reality, which I doubt, it is at least clear that no very long poem will ever be popular again” (72).

Defining poetry by its effect, Poe comments, “I need scarcely observe that a poem deserves its title only inasmuch as it excites, by elevating the soul” (71), and it is this definition of poetry that justifies his “somewhat peculiar principle,” that “a long poem

does not exist,” indeed, that “the phrase ‘a long poem,’ is simply a flat contradiction in terms” (71). Himself a master of the short work, both in poetry and in prose, Poe did make one foray into long fiction with *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, but certainly never wrote a long poem – that is, unless we know how to read his cosmological treatise, *Eureka*, as what it claims in its subtitle to be: “A Prose Poem.” Surely it would be asking too much of the reader’s credulity to claim that Poe took to heart the dictum we have attributed to Dante, that knowledge of the heavens is only properly attainable through poetry. Enough, perhaps, to point out that Poe did not have a problem with the material of epic poetry, but with what he considered to be the pretense that it could be bound together into a unified whole. He expresses admiration for those passages in *Paradise Lost* which he considers to be “true poetry,” the proper appreciation of which must be marred and even nullified, in his estimation, by the fact that each is inevitably followed by “a passage of platitude which no critical prejudgement can force us to admire” (71), and that we are supposed to swallow all of this together. With regard to the *Iliad*, as the model of an epic poem, Poe purports to have “at least very good reason for believing it intended as a series of lyrics” (72), in which case his quibble would not be with the poet (or poets) whose work is represented in the *Iliad*, but with the epic editor who bound these lyrics up in a bundle, and sent them out into the world to inspire other poets to imitation. What Poe has in common, however, with this hypothetical editor, and also with the “epic” poets we have considered is that he knows how to make use of the material of past traditions.

With all of antiquity before him like a vast burial ground whose contents, in varying states of decomposition, have been unearthed by some great cataclysm, Poe is by

no means averse to picking through the remains, and availing himself of what he finds, whether this is an obscure passage from some old philosopher which he turns to canny epigraph, or an oft-repeated theme of ancient narrative which he resets in a novel manner. Such is the theme of the voyage to death, the repetition of which in the epic tradition has been our object of consideration. Paul John Eakin, in “Poe’s Sense of an Ending,” elaborates on what he calls a “Lazarus plot” which he finds represented across Poe’s body of work, in such diverse texts as “Ligeia,” “A Descent into the Maelström,” “The Colloquy of Monos and Una,” “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, and the *Marginalia*, to name only a few. The elements of this plot are “a movement of approach and entry” into a state which approximates death, or into the state of death itself, impelled by a “thirst to know,” and not simply to know, but to “know all,” even “to survive in order to know all,” which survival necessitates “a movement of withdrawal and return” (2-3). The result of these movements would be “an accurate mortal record of ‘posthumous consciousness’,” “a rare and privileged anticipation of the soul’s destination *outré-tombe*” (2). What differentiates among this collection of texts is whether or not the subject *does* achieve the knowledge which was sought – although there may be no great difference for the reader. In Poe’s angelic dialogues – “The Colloquy of Monos and Una,” “The Conversation of Eiros with Charmion” – he presents souls who have attained the knowledge which comes with death, the knowledge *of* death, as each of these dialogues unfolds in some posthumous time. On the other side, a tale such as “A Descent into the Maelström” communicates the story of one who has made the approach to death, has seen and felt the abyss open beneath him, but has not in fact died – has, rather, returned to tell a tale which is lacking

the final knowledge. Indeed, we might say that in all of these texts, Poe lingers on the passage, the long or short period of time leading just up to the very brink of the dissolution of consciousness which is also the consummation of consciousness; an element of mystery, of the Unknown, is systematically preserved.

Death, as an event, is not necessarily coincident with this Unknown – it appears at times that death is the passage, rather than the destination. Monos tells Una of his “passage through the dark Valley and Shadow,” which begins with his fall into “a breathless and motionless torpor [...] termed *Death* by those who stood around” (*SWP* 283), and ends (as does the tale) with the final complete dissolution of the body and utter departure of the “sense of being” – what remains to be told is how he has come to be in colloquy with Una, or she with him. “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” seems to narrate the other side of this passage, such as it appears to “those who stood around” the deathbed, and were able to hear the tongue of a dying/dead body testify to the movement from life into death until, with the final and horribly rapid decay of this corpse, the tongue can tell no more. There are limits to how fully such an approach to and entry into death can be brought into language – these limits are indicated by an intimation, in many cases, that the subject has developed a new sense. Monos recalls that, at first, “The senses were unusually active, although eccentrically so – assuming often each other’s functions at random”; later, as the body approaches decay, “from the wreck and the chaos of the usual senses, there appeared to have arisen within me a sixth, all perfect [...] there seemed to have sprung up in the brain, *that* of which no words could convey to the merely human intelligence even an indistinct conception [...] this idea – this sixth sense, upspringing from the ashes of the rest, was the first obvious and certain step of the intemporal soul

upon the threshold of the temporal eternity” (*SWP* 284-285).

The narrator of “Ms. Found in a Bottle” expresses a similar notion in the notes he composes while speeding along on a decaying ship to what he trusts will be certain death:

A feeling, for which I have no name, has taken possession of my soul – a sensation which will admit of no analysis, to which the lessons of bygone time are inadequate, and for which I fear futurity itself will offer me no key. To a mind constituted like my own, the latter consideration is an evil. I shall never – I know that I shall never – be satisfied with regard to the nature of my conceptions. Yet it is not wonderful that these conceptions are indefinite, since they have their origin in sources so utterly novel. A new sense – a new entity is added to my soul. (*SWP* 112)

If we could use Poe’s body of work to create a map of human experience, it is clear that this map would contain one particular blank space, subject to repeated approach. The object of an extreme “thirst to know,” but impervious to human knowledge because it is “so utterly novel” that our five senses are not adapted to receive any perception of it, the imminence of this space of the Unknown would be signaled by the development of a new sense, for which we have no language – for which all the lessons of human experience, past and future, will be constitutively “inadequate.” This blank space might be called death, but it might also be figured as a return to childhood, even to infancy – hence the loss of language; “*Monos and Una*” begins with this exchange:

Una. “Born again?”

Monos. Yes, fair and most beloved *Una*, “born again.” These were the words upon whose mystical meaning I had so long pondered, rejecting

the explanations of the priesthood, until Death himself resolved for me the secret.

(*SWP 279*)

While it cannot be doubted that all of these texts influenced Baudelaire's thought – he translated most of them – it is also obvious which of them must have been in the forefront of his mind when he was composing “Le Voyage”: “A Descent into the Maelström,” “Ms. Found in a Bottle,” and *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, the three works in which Poe maps this approach to the Unknown upon the topography of a sea voyage, and which for that reason also have strong connections to the epic poems we have previously considered. In these three texts Poe repeatedly stages an experiment concerning the possibility of eliciting a surviving manuscript or narrative from one who has been sucked into the “maelström.” In each case the solution – if such it can be called – to this problem is presented in a framing narrative. Within the frame, we find the story of the approach or descent itself – either the account of the survivor, or the surviving account, or, in the case of *Pym*, some amalgam of the two.

“A Descent into the Maelström” is, to begin with, narrated by an unnamed person who has been led to the summit of the mountain of “Helseggen, the Cloudy” in the Lofoden Islands by an “old man,”⁴⁷ so that this (also unnamed) old man may tell him the story of “an event such as never happened before to mortal man – or at least such as no man ever survived to tell of” (*SWP 266-267*). The necessity for the ascent to this height is the view it affords of the opening of the maelström – or, more properly, the “Moskoe-ström” – itself in the sea far below, a view which acts as an illustration for the story.

⁴⁷ We might see a parallel here to “The Man of the Crowd” – the young narrator led by the old man to he can receive a vision of something that cannot really be seen.

Already within this framing narrative we find links to the epic tradition on the one hand, and “Le Voyage” on the other. The old sailor’s proposal to tell of “an event such as never happened before to mortal man – or at least such as no man ever survived to tell of” recalls Dante’s reflection, in the opening of *Purgatorio*, upon arriving at “that desert shore, / that never saw any man navigate its waters/ who afterwards had experience of return.” As the narrator and his guide gaze at the “wide expanse of ocean” before the whirlpool opens, the narrator notes that its “waters wore so *inky* a hue as to bring at once to my mind the Nubian geographer’s account of the *Mare Tenebrarum*” (SWP 267). The so-called “Nubian geographer” is al Idrisi, who used to call the Atlantic Ocean the “Mare Tenebrarum” – “Sea of Darkness” – and it is a term Poe often uses.⁴⁸ The narrator also refers to another geographer, Jonas Ramus, who he claims has given some account of the “Moskoe-ström”; the text in question is Ramus’ 1702 *Ulysses et Otinus Unus & idem sive Disquisitio & Historica Geographica*, in which he postulates that this very maelström, along with the rocky islands surrounding it, are in fact Scylla and Charybdis of the *Odyssey* (SWP 269, n6). It seems rather incredible that Odysseus and his crew could have been blown so far off course as to find themselves off the coast of Norway – but then, is it any more incredible than any of the adventures in the *Odyssey*, or else Dante’s reinterpretation, in which Ulysses sets off into the Atlantic – i.e., the Mare Tenebrarum? Poe thus references the tendency to remap the epic narrative, while at the same time calling the credibility of the whole enterprise into question – but only in order to simultaneously assert the truth of his own incredible tale – as the narrator remarks, “The

⁴⁸ Notably in the opening of *Eureka*, in which a ‘letter from the future’ is said to have been found floating on the Mare Tenebrarum. Clearly Baudelaire followed Poe in a curiosity over this sea: we recall section VII of “Le Voyage,” in which “Nous nous embarquerons sur la mer des Ténèbres,” which is “noir comme de l’encre.”

attempts to account for this phenomenon – some of which, I remember, seemed to me sufficiently plausible in perusal – now wore a very different and unsatisfactory aspect” (SWP 270). In particular, the narrator evinces doubt over the sufficiency of Ramus’ reasonings with regard to the causes of the maelström:

The ordinary accounts of this vortex had by no means prepared me for what I saw. That of Jonas Ramus, which is perhaps the most circumstantial of any, cannot impart the faintest conception either of the magnificence, or of the horror of the scene – or of the wild bewildering sense of *the novel* which confounds the beholder. (SWP 269)

Even if the narrator is overwhelmed with that “sense of *the novel*” with which the narrator of “Ms. Found in a Bottle” is also struck, as his own maelström opens before him, he is not as close to it as the sailor who begins to narrate his own tale of being sucked into and spit out of the Moskoe-ström. At the same time, as readers we are distanced from this novelty, doubly distanced by the two narrators, triply distanced if we consider Poe to be another mediator of this novelty.

This is precisely the predicament Baudelaire’s *voyageurs* find themselves in – always in search of the *novelty* they have read about, but always distanced from it *because* of reading. In Poe the “horror” and the “sense of *the novel*” appear together, unified in one impression; in Baudelaire this unity has disintegrated – we always seek one, and always, “aujourd’hui, hier, demain, toujours” find the other. The drive, however, remains the same. The *voyageurs* are driven by “Curiosité”; the sailor-narrator relates that, after realizing he could not escape the pull of the maelström, “After a while I became possessed with the keenest curiosity about the whirl itself. I positively felt a *wish*

to explore its depths, even at the sacrifice I was going to make; and my principal grief was that I should never be able to tell my old companions on shore about the mysteries I should see” (*SWP* 275). Baudelaire, in his translation of the tale, transforms “*wish*” into “*désir*,” preparing the way for the driving force of “*désir*” in “*Le Voyage*.” Now, the sailor does in fact return to tell his tale to his “old companions” (though they do not believe it), but does not reach the depths of the maelström, so his story lacks the final knowledge – i.e., the “posthumous” knowledge.

The narrator/author of “*Ms. Found in a Bottle*” does – or at least we assume that he does – take the final plunge, although in order for the narrative to survive, it must also remain lacking. Midway through the manuscript, its author reflects on its existence, and its fate:

I shall from time to time continue this journal. It is true that I may not find an opportunity of transmitting it to the world, but I will not fail to make the endeavour. At the last moment I will enclose the MS. in a bottle, and cast it within the sea. (*SWP* 112)

In the “*Descent*,” the sailor abandons his ship, and so survives bearing a story with no end; in the “*Ms.*,” the voyager keeps to the ship but casts the story overboard – again, it reaches its reader with no end. These two fates seem to mirror the two fates of Odysseus/Ulysses: in the *Odyssey*, Odysseus abandons his ship when it is finally sucked down into Charybdis, and survives to tell his tale; in the *Divine Comedy* Ulysses keeps to his ship and is sucked down into the sea – in this case the tongue of flame is the bottle bearing the message which allows Ulysses’ story of his death to survive. The “*Ms.*” is, as well, studded with details which will already be familiar: the narrator insistently attempts

to determine his location in relation to known geography, while at the same time asserting that his experience must be unprecedented; the narrator's ship eventually enters a realm in which both sea and sky are completely dark; the narrator experiences the development of a "new sense"; the ship upon which the narrator eventually, by accident, finds himself, is crewed by sailors who are oblivious to him, and are "imbued with the spirit of Eld." In a description of his first encounter with one of these sailors, the narrator says, "His manner was a wild mixture of the peevishness of second childhood, and the solemn dignity of a god" (*SWP* 112). The ship is strewn about with "decayed charts of navigation" and "mathematical instruments of the most quaint and obsolete construction," and as if in mockery of the progress of the science of navigation, the ship, which is as singular and antique in its appearance as its crew, speeds on through "the most appalling hell of water which it can enter into the mind of man to imagine" toward some abyss, with no help from any map or instrument. In their "second childhood," the crew abandon themselves utterly to the voyage they seem to have been on for a *very* long time. Of the captain, the narrator writes, "His grey hairs are records of the past, and his greyer eyes are Sybils of the future" (*SWP* 114). Like the decayed maps, the captain is an unreadable record of the past, which is entombed in his hair, and an equally illegible record of the future, as the narrator cannot read any fate in his eyes – like Sybils, the knowledge they hold is sown in the whirlwind. As testament to his unreadable destiny, the narrator recounts an extremely curious event:

An incident has occurred which has given me new room for meditation.

Are such things the operation of ungoverned Chance? I had ventured upon deck and thrown myself down, without attracting any notice, among a pile

of ratlin-stuff and old sails, in the bottom of the yawl. While musing on the singularity of my fate, I unwittingly daubed with a tar-brush the edges of a neatly-folded studding-sail which lay near me on a barrel. The studding-sail is now bent upon the ship, and the thoughtless touches of the brush are spread out into the word DISCOVERY. (*SWP* 112)

Clearly such an unlikely occurrence would seem designed by fate, even while it also conveys the opposite message – that “DISCOVERY” comes only as a consequence of “unwitting” and “thoughtless” actions – indeed, by “Chance.” Put in the terms of “Le Voyage”: we cannot find “le nouveau” by seeking it, however much we muse on the singularity of our fate, however ardently we embrace our “singulière fortune.”

In the final entry of the “Ms.,” the ancient sailors are seen to express “more of the eagerness of hope than of the apathy of despair,” as they approach and finally arrive where the current has brought them: “a gigantic amphitheatre, the summit of whose walls is lost in the darkness and the distance” (*SWP* 115). The narrator has left only a few moments, a few lines more, and then “we are plunging madly within the grasp of the whirlpool – and amid a roaring, and bellowing, and thundering of ocean and of tempest, the ship is quivering, oh God! and – going down” (*SWP* 115). The cry of the whirlpool, its “roaring, and bellowing, and thundering” cry, is echoed in “A Descent into the Maelström,” in which the narrator first tells that he “became aware of a loud and increasing sound, like the moaning of a vast herd of buffaloes upon an American prairie” (*SWP* 268) – this before the maelström forms – and then, after it has opened its mouth, it emits “an appalling voice, half shriek, half roar, such as not even the mighty cataract of Niagara ever lifts up in its agony to Heaven” (*SWP* 269). He goes on to quote the

aforementioned Ramus, who tells of whales being caught in the whirl – “ ‘then it is impossible to describe their howlings and bellowings in their fruitless struggles to disengage themselves’ ” – and even of one ill-starred bear who, “ ‘attempting to swim from Lofoden to Moskoe, was caught by the stream and borne down, while he roared terribly, so as to be heard on shore’ ” (*SWP* 269-270). The sailor-narrator, finally, describes the sound he hears as his boat enters the whirling surf of the maelström as “a kind of shrill shriek – such a sound as you might imagine given out by the waste-pipes of many thousand steam-vessels, letting off their steam all together” (*SWP* 274). This is a cry echoed not only across Poe’s landscapes, but which has rolled from age to age, rising up from out of the very mouths of the earth.

In a study of the two Gates of Dream in book VI of the *Aeneid*, Ernest Leslie Highbarger presents what I would argue is a genealogy of the roar issuing from the mouth of the maelström. After Aeneas has finished his tour of the Underworld, he leaves by one of these gates:

There are two gates of Sleep/Dream. One, they say
 Is horn, and offers easy exit for true shades.
 The other is finished with glimmering ivory,
 But through it the spirits send false dreams
 To the world above. Anchises escorted his son
 As he talked, then sent him with the Sibyl
 Through the gate of Ivory.
 [Sunt geminae Somni portae, quarum altera fertur
 cornea, qua veris facilis datur exitus umbris,

altera candenti perfecta nitens elephanto,
 sed falsa ad caelum mittunt insomnia manes.
 his ibi tum natum Anchises unaque Sibyllam
 prosequitur dictis portaque emittit eburna.]
 (*Aeneid* VI:893-898)

As Highbarger observes, Virgil clearly seems to be following Homer in his description of these two gates, as in book XIX of the *Odyssey* Penelope advises Odysseus that,

“There are two gates for dreams to drift through,
 One made of horn and the other of ivory.
 Dreams that pass through the gate of ivory
 Are deceptive dreams and will not come true,
 But when someone has a dream that has passed
 Through the gate of polished horn, that dream
 Will come true.”
 (*Odyssey* XIX.562-567)

Between these two passages is formed an association of the Gates of Sleep, or Dream, with the gates of the Underworld, as well as an association of what passes through them – dreams with “shades.” Adding several other probable sources for Virgil’s passage, including Plato, Highbarger performs a significant act of grammatical archeology:

It is highly important for the interpretation of the Vergilian passage that Homer, Plato, and other writers describe the Gate of Horn(s) in the plural, while the Gate of Ivory is presented in the singular. [...] in the Roman poets the plural noun has disappeared and an adjective in the singular

(*cornea*) is substituted. This practice has obscured the origin of the concept [...]. (2)

Highbarger devotes several chapters to illuminating the origins of the concept of the two gates, one the Gate of Horns, the other the Gate of Ivory, claiming that its ultimate origin is in “Egyptian and Mesopotamian religious belief” regarding the “Gates of the Sky” – the eastern and western “Gates of the Sun.” In Egyptian religion we see the beginning of “the concept of the Nether World,” and the belief that its entrance was in the West. Citing multiple associations in early Egyptian religion between the sun and the image of a cow or bull, Highbarger details the “easy and natural step to regard the entrance to the West, or the realm of the dead, as through the horns of this sky-bull” – hence the “Gate of *Horns*” (15). After outlining the transmission of this constellation of figures to the Greek world, and its integration into Homer and later Greek writers, Highbarger gives an account of the “vision of Er” as it is told in the final book of Plato’s *Republic*.

As a fitting end to the longest of the Platonic dialogues, perhaps we should suspect this myth to be a *pharmakon*, suspect that Plato piles on the weight of eternal judgment to make us forget the unanswered question of human justice. Still, this story stands as a significant entry in the history of journeys to the land of the dead – even though Socrates starts off by opposing it to such stories:

It is not, let me tell you, said I, the tale to Alcinous told that I shall unfold, but the tale of a warrior bold, Er, the son of Armenius, by race a Pamphylian. He once upon a time was slain in battle, and when the corpses were taken up on the tenth day already decayed, was found intact, and having been brought home, at the moment of his funeral, on the

twelfth day as he lay upon the pyre, revived, and after coming to life related what, he said, he had seen in the world beyond.

(Republic X: 614b-c)

Er provides a detailed topography of the journey he makes with a “great company” of shades to a “mysterious region” where judgment is passed on the souls of the dead; in this place there are “two openings side by side in the earth” and “above and over against them in the heaven two others.” According to their sentences, the just “journey to the right and upward through the heaven,” while the unjust “take the road to the left and downward.” Later Er sees souls descending from the left-hand hole in the heavens, and others rising “full of squalor and dust” from the right-hand hole in the ground. These souls greet each other and tell of their thousand-year journeys, in which the unjust were punished tenfold for their wrongs, and just souls were equally rewarded. Finally, those who have been punished tell of the moment when, as they were preparing to leave through the “mouth” of the cavern, several souls appeared who in life were tyrants, or “of private station [...] who had committed great crimes”:

“And when these supposed that at last they were about to go up and out, the mouth would not receive them, but it bellowed when any one of the incurably wicked or of those who had not completed their punishment tried to come up. And thereupon,” he said, “savage men of fiery aspect who stood by and took note of the voice laid hold on them and bore them away. But Ardiaeus and others they bound hand and foot and head and flung down and flayed them and dragged them by the wayside, carding them on thorns and signifying to those who from time to time passed by

for what cause they were borne away, and that they were to be hurled into Tartarus.” (*Republic* X:615e-616a)

As many as the details are of this entire myth which would resonate with the *Aeneid* and, beyond, with the *Divine Comedy*, let us linger with the “roar” of the “mouth” of the earth, so that we may return to Poe, and thence to Baudelaire. Highbarger translates this slightly differently, saying rather that the mouth “bellowed”:

The verb here used (μυκᾶομαι) is mostly employed to describe the bellowing or lowing of cattle, particularly of bulls; or, of the groaning of ponderous doors on their sockets. It appears significant, too, that in all cases where Vergil employs the Latin equivalent (*mugire*), he uses it exclusively of cattle, except once of the blare of trumpets, once of the dreadful rumbling sound made by the earth underneath at the approach of Hecate, and once of Apollo’s shrine at Delphi, which was chthonic. (64)

Clearly along the course of its evolution the Gate of Horns became more strongly associated with sound – the sound of horns, or the bellowing sound of the cattle who bear the horns, or the groan of a heavy gate – and less associated with the image of the horns which may have been its origin.

Poe follows in this tradition, giving the roar of this whirlpool-gate at times a particularly American tone, in his mention of “the moaning of a vast herd of buffaloes” and the agonized shriek of “the mighty cataract of Niagara,” or else a particularly marine character, with the howls of whales and the roars of swimming bears, or a particularly modern tenor, with his “many thousand steam-vessels, letting off their steam all together.” If we were to attempt a general statement about the nature of the sounds

associated with the Gate of Horns, both as Poe inflects them, and in their earlier intonations, it would be most apt to say that they are inhuman. They are the roars, howls and bellows of animals, or the shrieks issuing from mouths without tongues – the mouth of the cavern in Plato, the mouth of the Delphic cavern in Virgil, the opening mouth of a gate, the mouth of a trumpet or steam-whistle, the mouth of a maelström. Or, if we can be allowed to extend the web of associations, they are voices issuing directly from the tongue itself, whether this is the “swollen and blackened tongue” of M. Valdemar, which gives life to a voice that seems to come “from a vast distance, or from some deep cavern within the earth” (*SWP* 413), or the murmuring tongue of flame that is the shade of Ulysses. Perhaps it seems farfetched to bring in these two examples, but we must remember that the Gate of Horns is one of the openings to the Underworld, a place where communication with the dead is possible. For Poe, this gate can open in any mouth, and this communication can issue from any tongue. Not that we can necessarily seek the gate – it may open unexpectedly, or in a place we can only reach accidentally, or it may open and close, so that we find ourselves in the situation of the sailor-narrator of “A Descent into the Maelström,” who is one moment in its mouth, and not long after is “on the surface of the ocean [...] above the spot where the pool of the Moskoe-ström *had been*” (*SWP* 278).

What issues from this moving mouth, in Poe’s works and elsewhere, in addition to its roars, is a procession of prophetic glimpses, otherworldly shadows, souls who have been cleansed of their passage through some Underworld, and the occasional mortal who is allowed to bring his report back to the mortal world – what Eakin calls “an accurate mortal record of ‘posthumous consciousness’.” Such a one is Arthur Gordon Pym, the

narrator (one of them) of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. That the *Narrative* does not, in point of fact, contain *this* part of the report – the “record of ‘posthumous consciousness’” – except insofar as it contains the blank space where the report *should have been*, is not only not a stumbling block for our argument, it is precisely the point. While this blank space may seem to constitute a lack in Poe’s only novel, even to be the source of its failure *qua* novel, it is almost too easy to see that the entire narrative, including its elaborate narrative framework, issues from this yawning mouth of the Unknown, and that it is all precisely constructed to preserve this space in its blankness.

It is rather ironic, given Poe’s contemptuous dismissal of the “epic intention,” and his near certainty that the *Iliad* was not composed as a unified whole, that *Pym*, his only piece of writing which is epic at least in length, should be often criticized for lacking either narrative or thematic unity. In “The Quest of Arthur Gordon Pym,” Grace Farrell briefly reviews the criticism on this front, citing Joseph V. Ridgely and Iola H. Haverstick’s “Chartless Voyage: The Many Narratives of Arthur Gordon Pym,” as the most systematic argument for the lack of unity in *Pym*, as they conclude, “No amount of straining can bring all of its disparate elements into a consistent interpretation” (80). Farrell herself does not entirely disagree with this pronouncement, which is supported by evidence that *Pym* was composed in haste, in stages, and when Poe was under financial constraint, but she does counter that “such evidence *does not preclude* the existence of a structural principle underlying the successive stages of the story” (23, emphasis added). The equivocation in this faint praise is followed up with more of the same: “even under extreme pressure and in great haste this master story-teller was *attempting* to explore, in fictive form, a phenomenon fundamental to his human experience” (23, emphasis added).

In particular, she claims,

Arthur Gordon Pym revitalizes an archetype found throughout religious mythology, the descent into Hell, and utilizes the structure of a sea voyage, a familiar post-Jungian image of the collective unconscious, to voyage into the recesses of the human psyche and to journey backward in time to the origins of creation. *Pym* is a two-pronged dream quest into the unknown where the terror of the universe and of man's confrontation with primal nature is reawakened. [...] The archetype for the descent into Hell in pagan mythology assumes the form of a journey *by the dead* to Hades. In Christian documents, especially in the Gospel of Nicodemus, a parallel may be discovered in the descent of Christ into Hell. *Pym* combines the two, pagan and Christian elements, to create a structure for his quest. (23-24)

This argument, perhaps due to its reliance on "post-Jungian" theories of "the collective unconscious," eventually draws Farrell into seeming contradictions, or oversights. On the one hand, she makes reference to images in "Homer, Virgil and Dante" as "vestiges" of a "primitive belief" in "some sort of water barrier which must be crossed before a *mortal* is permitted entry into the world of spirit" (26); on the other hand she repeatedly insists that Pym makes the "descent into Hell" as *one of the dead*. The island of Tsalal, where Pym arrives near the end of his voyage, Farrell says is "easily recognized as an imaginative portrayal of Hell," from its "unusual warmth" to the "total blackness of the island and of its inhabitants" (29-30). Such a total association of Tsalal with Hell, in conjunction with the thesis that the theme of the descent into Hell constitutes the novel's structure, leads

directly to the conclusion that, “the mythical structure of an enchanted descent of the dead into Hades finds its completion on the island” (30). This conclusion, in turn, necessitates a general lack of interpretation of the events following Pym’s escape from the island – his voyage into the “wide and desolate Antarctic Ocean,” his entry into “a region of novelty and wonder” characterized by a strange appearance on the horizon which eventually seems to be “a limitless cataract, rolling silently into the sea from some immense and far-distant rampart in the heaven,” and famously concluded with the plunge “into the embraces of the cataract,” where “a shrouded human figure” with skin as white as snow rises up before him – at which point Pym’s narrative breaks off abruptly. While Farrell does make several stabs at fitting this end into her structure, involving immersion in milk as a means of effecting disenchantment in order to return from Hell, on the whole her most decisive statement is this: “The fragmentary ending of *Pym* has produced much speculation as to its relationship to the rest of the work” (30). This serves for the end of the narrative; as for the appended editorial note, which alludes to the death of Pym as if it is well-known, refers to “Mr. Poe” as “The gentleman whose name is mentioned in the preface,” and laments the loss of “the few remaining chapters which were to have completed [Pym’s] narrative” – Farrell makes no comment at all. The blank space into which both Pym and the supposed conclusion to his story have fallen – for we are told that the last chapters “have been irrecoverably lost through the accident by which he perished himself” – we are only made aware of by this note, and so certainly it deserves some degree of attention.

Eakin does pay the attention due to this note in the concluding pages of “Poe’s Sense of an Ending,” reading the narrative and its frame in relation to his conception of

the “Lazarus Plot.” “So completely realized is Poe’s pretense that Arthur Gordon Pym’s narrative is incomplete,” he writes, “that many unreflecting readers have been content to assume that Poe’s story is unfinished as well, that Poe had more work to do and that he left that work undone. [...] Given Poe’s strategies for ending his tales, however, there is every indication that *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* is a completed fiction” (14-15). While acknowledging the prevailing critical opinion that the editorial “Note” is to be rejected as a means of interpreting the narrative, Eakin allows on the other hand that “the upshot of the editorial note is an argument in favor of narrative design” (17). It is unclear whose argument he thinks this is, but given that he refers to what Poe does in the note without making reference to the fact that “Poe” is mentioned in the note as “The gentleman whose name is mentioned in the preface” – i.e., someone other than the person who is writing – we shall conclude that he thinks it is Poe’s argument, that Poe uses the note to give the reader a key for decoding “the shape of Pym’s experience.” The shape Eakin discerns, in particular from the beginning of the note which in an “elaborate sleight-of-hand” establishes Pym as both dead and not dead – as he survived the mysterious event at the end of his narrative, but later died in some other mysterious accident – is “a systematic exploration of every imaginable form of human extremity” (18). Reading the character of Pym, who “identifies himself at the outset as the melancholy man whose imaginative life is consecrated to visions of death and disaster,” Eakin concludes that “This central fact of Pym’s character governs the design of Poe’s fiction; the hero and his author collaborate to act it out at the expense of narrative itself, for no single story can suffice but rather a seemingly endless series of tales that constitute a tale without an end” (18).

If Pym is indeed a “hero,” as Eakin calls him, he is a singular sort of hero, even in Poe’s body of work. The beginning of the novel constitutes one of Poe’s only depictions of childhood,⁴⁹ and if we hold in mind Baudelaire’s image of “l’enfant” as one whose appetite corresponds precisely with the world as he imagines it, then Pym never leaves childhood, no matter how far his voyages take him. The first chapter of *Pym* narrates the young protagonist’s meeting and subsequent intimate friendship with a certain Augustus Barnard, the son of a sea captain. Pym is at this time sixteen, and while such an age may not be regarded precisely as childhood, in Pym’s description of his friendship with Augustus he appears in the image of Baudelaire’s ‘enfant’:

He had been on a whaling voyage with his father in the John Donaldson, and was always talking to me of his adventures in the South Pacific Ocean. I used frequently to go home with him, and remain all day, and sometimes all night. We occupied the same bed, and he would be sure to keep me awake until almost light, telling me stories of the natives of the Island of Tinian, and other places he had visited in his travels. At last I could not help being interested in what he said, and by degrees I felt the greatest desire to go to sea. (*SWP* 434)

For Pym, his friend’s stories take the place of the “maps and stamps,” keeping him up all night and awakening “his vast appetite.” He and Augustus make trials at being sea-voyagers, habitually taking Pym’s sailboat, the “Ariel,” out on “some of the maddest freaks in the world,” one of which he recounts “by way of introduction to a longer and more momentous narrative” (*SWP* 434). This story in itself ranks alongside “Ms. Found

⁴⁹ The other notable example is in “William Wilson” – a story which Baudelaire, by the by, found extremely interesting and about which he wrote extensively in “Poe, sa vie et ses œuvres”; he seems convinced that it is highly autobiographical in its details.

in a Bottle” and “A Descent into the Maelström” as a miraculously surviving account of an approach to death.

One evening after a party which leaves Pym and Augustus “not a little intoxicated,” Pym is induced by his friend to “go out on a frolic with the boat,” and even immediately comes around to thinking that this plan is “one of the most delightful and most reasonable things in the world” (*SWP* 434). This “most delightful and most reasonable” excursion turns speedily wrong when, after they have already made their way rather far out to sea and a gathering storm is evident, it becomes clear to Pym that Augustus is “drunk—bestly drunk.” His friend (who has considerably more knowledge than he of how to manage a boat) rendered “thoroughly insensible,” Pym is thrown into an ‘extremity of terror.’ With no hope of steering the boat back to shore himself, he makes what arrangements he can for them both to weather the storm, and resolves “to bear whatever might happen with all the fortitude in my power.” Disaster follows directly:

Hardly had I come to this resolution, when, suddenly, a loud and long scream or yell, as if from the throats of a thousand demons, seemed to pervade the whole atmosphere around and above the boat. Never while I live shall I forget the intense agony of terror I experienced at that moment. My hair stood erect on my head—I felt the blood congealing in my veins—my heart ceased utterly to beat, and without having once raised my eyes to learn the source of my alarm, I tumbled headlong and insensible upon the body of my fallen companion. (*SWP* 436-437)

Pym’s narrative resumes only when he awakens to find himself “in the cabin of a large

whaling-ship (the Penguin) bound to Nantucket,” and he is in the debt of the crew of this ship both for his life, and for the tale of how they saved it. Needless to say, he had a miraculous escape, and he tells us that the “shouts of warning” of those members of the crew who saw his boat just before their own ship collided with it were the sounds which “so terribly alarmed” him.

If we may be excused a brief flight of fancy, let us imagine that, instead, this terrible sound issued up from the Gate of Horn(s), as Pym approached within a few steps of his own death. (The nature of his injury – when the whaling ship crashes over his own boat, Pym is caught on the bottom of the ship by a ‘timber-bolt’ which actually passes through the back of his neck – is such that a fatal outcome would be far less surprising than his survival.) While Pym escapes with his life this time, let us imagine that something else escapes through the Gate – what Virgil calls a “true shade,” or, per Homer, a dream that “will come true.” As it happens, at the beginning of the very next chapter Pym himself gives a detailed description of the kind of life he dreams about, and the continued novel bears witness to the truth of his dreams:

In no affairs of mere prejudice, pro or con, do we deduce inferences with entire certainty even from the most simple data. It might be supposed that a catastrophe such as I have just related would have effectually cooled my incipient passion for the sea. On the contrary, I never experienced a more ardent longing for the wild adventures incident to the life of a navigator than within a week after our miraculous deliverance. This short period proved amply long enough to erase from my memory the shadows, and bring out in vivid light all the pleasurable exciting points of colour, all the

picturesqueness of the late perilous accident. My conversations with Augustus grew daily more frequent and more intensely full of interest. He had a manner of relating his stories of the ocean (more than one half of which I now suspect to have been sheer fabrications) well adapted to have weight with one of my enthusiastic temperament, and somewhat gloomy, although glowing imagination. It is strange, too, that he most strongly enlisted my feelings in behalf of the life of a seaman, when he depicted his more terrible moments of suffering and despair. For the bright side of the painting I had a limited sympathy. My visions were of shipwreck and famine; of death or captivity among barbarian hordes; of a lifetime dragged out in sorrow and tears, upon some gray and desolate rock, in an ocean unapproachable and unknown. Such visions or desires—for they amounted to desires—are common, I have since been assured, to the whole numerous race of the melancholy among men—*at the time of which I speak I regarded them only as prophetic glimpses of a destiny which I felt myself in a measure bound to fulfil*. Augustus thoroughly entered into my state of mind. It is probable, indeed, that our intimate communion had resulted in a partial interchange of character. (*SWP* 440-441, emphasis added)

Though Pym does look back at his terrible adventure through the eyes of memory, his memory is sufficiently imaginative to repaint the picture, to “erase...the shadows, and bring out in vivid light all the pleasurable exciting points of colour.” Despite painting the past in glowing colors, Pym acknowledges that he paints the future with a much more

somber, but no less attractive, palette, that his “incipient passion for the sea” is most strongly roused by stories of “suffering and despair,” and that “[f]or the bright side of the painting I had a limited sympathy.” The scenes of Pym’s visions of his future include “shipwreck and famine,” “death or captivity among barbarian hordes,” and “a lifetime dragged out in sorrow and tears, upon some gray and desolate rock, in an ocean unapproachable and unknown.” Pym retrospectively identifies these visions as “desires,” but notes that “at the time of which I speak I regarded them only as prophetic glimpses of a destiny which I felt myself in a measure bound to fulfil.” Whether we regard Pym’s visions as “desires,” which would have the power to dictate the shape of his dreams, or as “prophetic glimpses” of his future life, they do in fact determine the events of his future with striking accuracy as the novel unfolds. For Arthur Gordon Pym – and this may justify our consideration of him as a perpetual child – the world as he experiences it is precisely “equal to his vast appetite.”

Pym envisions “shipwreck”; the brig he eventually stows away on (the *Grampus*) with the help of Augustus is first thrown into relative chaos by a mutiny among the crew, and then all but destroyed by various accidents which cause it to lose all of its masts and its rudder and fill it so completely with water that it can scarcely stay afloat. Pym dreams of “famine”; the four sailors left alive on the wreck of the *Grampus* – Pym, Augustus, Dirk Peters (the “line manager” on the ship, and “son of an Indian squaw of the tribe of Upsarokas,” who comes to replace Augustus as Pym’s loyal companion in adventure), and Richard Parker (one of the mutineers, who surrenders to Pym, Augustus and Peters – the other mutineers are killed) – float helplessly for almost a month with only the food they can recover from diving into the water-logged depths of the ship. After several

weeks they resort to cannibalism: after drawing lots, Parker (who proposed the plan in the first place) is the unlucky one – he surrenders his life and is eaten. This does not save Augustus, who dies not long afterwards. Pym and Peters are saved, finally, by a British schooner called the *Jane Guy*. Pym imagines “death or captivity among barbarian hordes”; the *Jane Guy* pursues a voyage of exploration into the Antarctic Ocean, and discovers an island with an initially friendly native population of “savages” who end by massacring the entire crew of the ship – only Pym and Peters escape with their lives, and Pym concludes that “from everything I could see of these wretches, they appeared to be the most wicked, hypocritical, vindictive, bloodthirsty, and altogether fiendish race of men upon the face of the globe”⁵⁰ (*SWP*, 556). Finally, Pym desires “a lifetime dragged out in sorrow and tears, upon some gray and desolate rock, in an ocean unapproachable and unknown.” It is actually impossible to say whether or not this part of Pym’s dream comes true *for him*, but on the other hand we might say that it comes true *for us* – that is, for the readers, as the novel leaves Pym in a realm which is “unapproachable and unknown” to us. But to understand how this happens, we must turn to a consideration of the novel’s frame.

The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym was published as a novel in July of 1838, but this was not the first introduction of Pym to the American public. In January and February of 1837 Poe published two installments of Pym’s story in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, of which he was then the editor. The first installment comprised what is now the first chapter and the first three paragraphs of the second chapter; the second installment contained the remainder of Chapter II, all of Chapter III, and roughly half of

⁵⁰ This episode is a significant source (and no doubt deservedly) of the ongoing conversation concerning Poe’s views of race, to which some of the main contributors have been Sidney Kaplan, Harold Beaver, John Carlos Rowe, and Terence Whalen.

Chapter IV. The end of this installment left our hero in rather dire straits, having been nearly entombed alive in the hull of a ship suffering, unbeknownst to him, from a brutal mutiny aboveboard. When, a year and a half later, readers were presented with the novel bringing them up to date with the adventures of Mr. Pym, it was prefaced with a letter from Pym himself which narrativized this very publication history, and was concluded with a “Note” alluding to “the late sudden and distressing death of Mr. Pym” (an event not included in Pym’s narrative, for obvious reasons). Rather than describing this death, the unnamed “author” of the note presumes that its “circumstances” are “already well known to the public through the medium of the daily press.” As Poe modeled *Pym* on the popular genre of travel literature, or adventure narrative (which contained both works of fiction and non-fiction), the prefatory letter and appended note seem designed to add to the novel’s verisimilitude, to make claims for the real existence of Arthur Gordon Pym and the truth of his narrative. In point of fact, they constitute a commentary on verisimilitude, and the expectations of a reading public. In the Preface, “Pym” writes of his return to the United States at the end of his journeys, and his chance meeting with “several gentlemen in Richmond, Va.,” including a “Mr. Poe, lately editor of the Southern Literary Messenger, a monthly magazine, published by Mr. Thomas W. White” (SWP 432). These gentlemen encourage Pym to “give [his] narrative to the public,” but he is initially reluctant to do so due to concerns over its potential reception: “One consideration that deterred me was, that, having kept no journal during a greater portion of the time in which I was absent, I feared I should not be able to write, from mere memory, a statement so minute and connected as to have the *appearance* of that truth it would really possess” (SWP 432). Pym, in the person of the *voyageur* returned home to

an audience hungry for tales of voyage, fears that his tale will not *seem* true because, since he was not writing down every event as it occurred, he may not be able to produce all the details to give the impression of a unified and continuous narrative.⁵¹ To put it another way, because he is hesitant to invent details to supplement his memories, he worries that his tale will lack the appearance of truth. To complicate the situation further:

Another reason was, that the incidents to be narrated were of a nature so positively marvellous, that, unsupported as my assertions must necessarily be (except by the evidence of a single individual, and he a half-breed Indian), I could only hope for belief among my family, and those of my friends who have had reason, through life, to put faith in my veracity—the probability being that the public at large would regard what I should put forth as merely an impudent and ingenious fiction. (*SWP* 432)

In this case – with regard to the events to be narrated – Pym cannot even hope that they will *appear* to be true, however he should write about them, as they are “of a nature so positively marvellous.” Thus despite his earlier fear that the narrative should seem disjointed and lacking in detail, he also fears that it would seem “impudent and ingenious” – he will not invent details to enhance the “*appearance of truth*,” and fears that the actual facts will *appear* so fantastic that they will seem to be invented! He finally names “a distrust in my own abilities as a writer” as a ‘principal cause’ for keeping his stories to himself.

Mr. Poe, it seems, was among the most encouraging and persistent of Pym’s

⁵¹ Critics have not hesitated to point out discrepancies in the narrative regarding dates, places, and the timing of events – it is undecided whether these were intentionally created by Poe to enhance the verisimilitude, or whether they were in fact mistakes Poe made and never corrected because he was rushed in preparing *Pym* for publication.

acquaintances, and argued that the causes of Pym's concern regarding his narrative's believability would in fact enhance said believability:

He strongly advised me, among others, to prepare at once a full account of what I had seen and undergone, and trust to the shrewdness and common sense of the public—insisting, with great plausibility, that however roughly, as regards mere authorship, my book should be got up, its very uncouthness, if there were any, would give it all the better chance of being received as truth. (*SWP* 432)

This back and forth, however, comes to nothing, as Pym relates that, “I did not make up my mind to do as he suggested.” Mr. Poe, then, who it seems is determined that the public should receive Mr. Pym's story by whatever means, makes yet another suggestion:

He afterward proposed (finding that I would not stir in the matter) that I should allow him to draw up, in his own words, a narrative of the earlier portion of my adventures, from facts afforded by myself, publishing it in the *Southern Messenger* *under the garb of fiction*. To this, perceiving no objection, I consented, stipulating only that my real name should be retained. (*SWP* 432)

Hence the man who would not publish his story as non-fiction for fear it would be taken for fiction has no objection to it being published “*under the garb of fiction*,” and yet insists that his own “real name” be included (as hero, if not author) in this marvellous and yet true tale masquerading as a fiction, based on his own “facts” but penned by another. The result, we are told, is the two installments of the narrative published in the *Messenger*. The audience has itself to thank, Pym continues, for the subsequent

publication of the entire narrative, as the response to the articles appearing under “the name of Mr. Poe” was sufficient to convince “Mr. Pym” to take up the pen:

The manner in which this *ruse* was received has induced me at length to undertake a regular compilation and publication of the adventures in question; for I found that, in spite of the air of fable which had been so ingeniously thrown around that portion of my statement which appeared in the Messenger (without altering or distorting a single fact), the public were still not at all disposed to receive it as a fable, and several letters were sent to Mr. P.’s address distinctly expressing a conviction to the contrary. I thence concluded that the facts of my narrative would prove of such a nature as to carry with them sufficient evidence of their own authenticity, and that I had consequently little to fear on the score of popular incredulity. (*SWP* 433)

Let us try to summarize this situation: Pym initially refuses to write and publish his narrative out of fear that its lack of “minute” detail and its marvellous subject-matter will hinder any belief in it as *true*; Pym agrees to allow “Mr. Poe” to write and publish part of his narrative, without altering any of the facts and retaining his “real name”, but throwing about it the “*garb of fiction*” simply by affixing the name of Poe to it as author; after the audience sees through this “*ruse*” and expresses certainty in its truth despite its *appearance* of fiction, Pym’s fears are alleviated, and he determines to write and publish the rest of the narrative himself, doing away with the mask of “Mr. Poe.” This is the situation with Mr. Pym, and it is hard enough to summarize; how much harder, then, to see through the mask of Pym and try to discover the situation with “Mr. Poe”; indeed, we

find it extremely difficult to delineate with any precision the space between “Pym” and “Poe.” It is, supposedly, “Poe” who opens the novel with the statement, “My name is Arthur Gordon Pym,”⁵² writing as if “Arthur Gordon Pym” is a made-up character; “Pym” later takes up the narrative voice and asserts his own reality – but of course this all continues to be a ruse perpetuated by Mr. Poe. “Pym” ends his Preface with an assertion of the difference between himself and “Poe,” in writing if not in reality: “Even to those readers who have not seen the Messenger, it will be unnecessary to point out where his [“Poe’s”] portion ends and my own commences; the difference in point of style will be readily perceived” (SWP 433). *This* reader, nevertheless, must beg to differ – the difference between “Poe” and “Pym” is *not* “readily perceived,” as the style of writing seems to bridge seamlessly over the space between the end of the second *Messenger* installment, and the narrative’s resumption in the novel. “Pym’s” assertion of a space of difference between himself and “Poe” where none appears is countered by the novel’s conclusion, when both “Pym” and “Poe” disappear into the space between the abrupt end of the narrative and the concluding Note.

In *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* Poe brings his *reader* closer to the maelström than perhaps anywhere else in his fiction. In other works he may bring either narrator or protagonist closer to the mouth of the Unknown that is the maelström; Pym, as far as we know, gets at least as close to it as the old sailor of “A Descent into the Maelström,” and perhaps as close as the “author” of “Ms. Found in a Bottle.” The final entry in the travel log which takes up the last three pages of the narrative proper takes

⁵² A phrase which would seem to echo the famous first line of *Moby-Dick*, “Call me Ishmael,” and thus to cast *Pym* as a parody or else more serious imitation of Melville’s monster-work, were it not for the fact that *Pym* predates the publication of *Moby-Dick* by more than a decade. The interplay between these two lines is fascinating in terms of how each affects how the reader relates to the narrator.

Pym to the very brink of the Unknown:

March 22: The darkness had materially increased, relieved only by the glare of the water thrown back from the white curtain before us. Many gigantic and pallidly white birds flew continuously now from beyond the veil, and their scream was the eternal *Tekeli-li!* as they retreated from our vision. Hereupon Nu-Nu stirred in the bottom of the boat; but upon touching him we found his spirit departed. And now we rushed into the embraces of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us. But there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow. (*SWP* 560)

Were this the novel's end, its readers would be left at a remove from the maelström, our approach to it mediated, as it was in Poe's other stories, by the narrator's experience of it, and its integration into the language of a continuous narrative. In *Pym*, however, the real maelström is not the "chasm" which opens up before Pym at the end of the narrative, but rather the blank space that opens up before *us* between the narrative and its frame. The narrative leaves Pym at the edge of an abyss, with no idea how he will survive. Did we not have the Preface, we would not know that he had survived at all – thus the Preface leaves us with the knowledge that he did survive and return home, but without any knowledge of *how*. The Note goes even further, informing us that, despite his survival of whatever catastrophe ended the narrative, Pym has since perished. Assuming "our" knowledge of the "circumstances connected with the late sudden and distressing death of Mr. Pym" (at this point the audience becomes a character in Poe's fiction – we are forced

to play the role of someone ‘in-the-know’), the author of the Note relates, “It is feared that the few remaining chapters which were to have completed [Pym’s] narrative, and which were retained by him, while the above were in type, for the purpose of revision, have been irrevocably lost through the accident by which he perished himself.” We are left in a very curious position: we do not know how Pym died, precisely because we are presumed to *already* be in possession of this knowledge, and we do not know how he survived, because he died!

We are left in a curious position – and left *curious*, our desire to know most strongly awakened, and with a sense that the consummation of our curiosity is hanging just before us. The Note’s author indeed works to heighten this sense, following up the “fear” that the end of the manuscript is irretrievably lost with a host of hopes that it may in fact not be, first speculating that the suspected loss of the last chapters along with Pym himself “may prove not to be the case,” and promising that “the papers, if ultimately found, will be given to the public.” He then has recourse to the hope of learning the full story from Pym’s companion: “Peters, from whom some information might be expected, is still alive, and a resident of Illinois, but cannot be met with at the present. He may hereafter be found, and will, no doubt, afford material for a conclusion of Mr. Pym’s account.” Finally, the “writer of this appendix” proffers a linguistic analysis of some mysterious geographical features Pym encountered on the island of the murderous savages, which seems to give vague directions for interpreting the entire narrative as an opposition between dark and light, or black and white. While the attempt to map the most mysterious events of the narrative in terms of language tends in this case to obscure rather than illuminate, or as the writer of the Note says, to “open a wide field for

speculation and exciting conjecture,”⁵³ the attempt is made both because “the facts in relation to *all* the figures are most singular,” and “the more especially as the facts in question have, beyond doubt, escaped the attention of Mr. Poe.” In an amusing turn of events, “Mr. Poe” ends by being the last person from whom any enlightenment can be expected, concerning the strange geo-linguistic figures, or the conclusion of Pym’s narrative – he has ‘no comment’:

The gentleman whose name is mentioned in the preface, and who, from a statement there made, might be supposed able to fill the vacuum, has declined the task—this for satisfactory reasons connected with the general inaccuracy of the details afforded him, and his disbelief in the entire truth of the latter portions of the narration. (*SWP* 561)

We might wonder if ever an author has gone so far in the attempt to create a (fictional) “vacuum” only in order to decline (by way of another fictional voice) to fill it, or worked so hard to establish his (fictional) text’s verisimilitude, possibly even to the point of intentionally weaving inaccuracies into it, only in order to assert (again, from behind the veil of a fiction) his own *disbelief* in the narrative and dissatisfaction over its inaccuracies.

It is hard to imagine Poe, with his wild and fertile imagination, unable to think of an ending for *Pym* – unable to imagine what Pym saw “beyond the veil.” No, we must conclude that the vacuum, the blank space, *is* the intended ending – that Poe applied his imagination in all its fertility to preserving this space in its blankness, despite whatever attempts might be made to map the unknown and unspeakable within language, to cover

⁵³ Critical commentary on *Pym* has both followed up on this lead, and generally dismissed it as a red herring, which we must assume to have been Poe’s intention.

the blank white page with the ink of interpretation, to write and thence to read the Unknown. Through identifying with his reader, absenting himself from the position of author and instead putting himself in the position of the rational critic who is frustrated by inaccuracies and determined in disbelief, Poe also learned how to manipulate the desires of the reader – desires which are ultimately contradictory. The reader desires, on the one hand, to *know* everything, to map over *every* blank space. The reader desires, on the other hand, to return to that moment in childhood when “L’Univers est égal à son vaste appétit.” Making use of the very architecture of the novel, Poe constructs a blank and unreadable space between author and narrator, between the first published installments and the revised and reframed novel, between the narrative and its frame; implicating the reader’s desire for adventure stories into Pym’s desire for adventure, he brings both Pym and his readers up to the raggedy edge of this abyss, leaving us with no choice but to plunge, with all our imagination and all our desire, into the Unknown.

The Novelty of the “Tableaux parisiens”

In March of 1852, less than a year after discovering the work of Edgar Allan Poe, Baudelaire wrote to his mother, “I have found an American author who has excited in me an incredible sympathy, and I have written two articles on his life and his works” [J’ai trouvé un auteur américain qui a excité en moi une incroyable sympathie, et j’ai écrit deux articles sur sa vie et ses ouvrages] (C I:191). Baudelaire is referring to the publication, in two parts, of his *Edgar Poe, sa vie et ses ouvrages*, which is part biography and part literary criticism. If Baudelaire was not quite the first French reader of Poe, he was in many ways more than a reader of Poe – he devoted a lion’s share of his

time and energy to translating Poe's works into French and, as he intimates to his mother, felt that the "American author" was in many ways his double, even his brother. In 1856, directly following the appearance of *Histoires extraordinaires*, his first volume of translations of Poe's tales, Baudelaire writes to Charles Sainte-Beuve, surely hoping for some good publicity, concerning this publication, "It *must* be, that is to say I desire that *Edgar Poe*, who is not a big deal in America, should become a great man for France" [*Il faut, c'est-à-dire je désire qu'Edgar Poe, qui n'est pas grand-chose en Amérique, devienne un grand homme pour la France*] (C I:343). Not long after this, he makes the first mention in his correspondence of a plan to translate *Arthur Gordon Pym*; this translation appeared first in installments in *Le Moniteur* between February and April of 1857 under the title *Le Relation d'Arthur Gordon Pym*, and then was published in novel form by Michel Levy as *Aventures d'Arthur Gordon Pym* in May of 1858. That these dates of publication embrace the June 1857 appearance of the first edition of *Les Fleurs du mal*, that the publication history of Baudelaire's translation of *Pym* mimics to a degree its original publication by Poe (first in installments, then as a novel), that the publication history of *Les Fleurs du mal* also to a certain extent follows this pattern – these are interesting details even if we cannot draw remarkable insights from them. More interesting, perhaps, is the fact that neither Poe's novel nor Baudelaire's translation of it achieved a great deal of popular success. Baudelaire's early volumes of translations of Poe's stories – *Histoires Extraordinaires* in March of 1856 and *Nouvelles Histoires Extraordinaires* in March of 1857 – had to a certain extent succeeded in making Poe, as Baudelaire desired, "un grand homme pour la France," the first volume rather more than the second, but *Pym*, advertised by its publisher (Michel Levy had also published the two

earlier volumes) as the “Dernière Histoire Extraordinaire,” did little for Poe’s French reputation. In his notes to Baudelaire’s collected translations of Poe’s oeuvre, Yves Florenne remarks:

If the success of the *Nouvelles Histoires Extraordinaires* had fallen off from that of the first ones, *Arthur Gordon Pym* marks the beginning of a fall which would accelerate with the following two volumes. Even friends such as Asselineua, write very mitigated reviews. Sainte-Beuve writes nothing at all, – not one critic of the first rank. A sole exception: Barbey D’Aurevilly; but this was to put rudely “in his place” – at least that which he assigned to him – along with his book, Poe all complete: “He was born a poet (...) he will never be but a curiosity.”

[Si le succès des *Nouvelles Histoires Extraordinaires* avait été en retrait sur celui des premières, *Arthur Gordon Pym* marquent le commencement d’une chute qui s’accéléra avec les deux volumes suivants. Même les amis comme Asselineau, écrivent des comptes-rendus très mitigés. Sainte-Beuve n’écrit rien du tout, – ni aucun critique de premier rang. Une seule exception : Barbey D’Aurevilly ; mais ce fut pour remettre rudement « à sa place » - celle du moins qu’il lui assignait – avec son livre, Poe tout entier : « Il était né poète (...) il ne sera qu’une chose curieuse »] (*BOC* II:1422).

If we have succeeded in demonstrating that Poe, in *Pym* as in his stories, can be seen to anticipate and manipulate the desire of his readers for an encounter with the Unknown, and a strong sensation of *novelty*, nevertheless *Pym* at least left American and French

readers alike unsatisfied in these desires – or perhaps too satisfied. Some of the more striking idiosyncrasies of the novel, as for example the bewildering interplay between the narrative and its prefaces and conclusions, which we have interpreted as deliberate attempts to create for the reader the experience of novelty that the narrators of “Ms. Found in a Bottle” and “A Descent into the Maelström” describe at the sight of the maelström, were taken by many readers as the result of over-hasty composition and editing, lapses in attention to detail, failures to pay heed to the laws of the genre of adventure-narrative, or simply failures of imagination. Such views are reproduced by the narrator of Jules Verne’s *Le Sphinx des Glaces*, an extremely idiosyncratic work in its own right, which purports to be a sort of corrective sequel to *Pym*, and sets Poe’s record straight in many cases, dutifully recounting details of the navigation records of Pym’s voyage only to exclaim, “Edgar Poe, on en conviendra, est là en pleine fantaisie,” and ending a chapter which re-narrates Poe’s novel with the conclusion regarding *Pym*’s conclusion:

Such is this bizarre novel, brought forth by the super-human genius of the greatest poet of the New World. This is how it concludes... or rather how it does not conclude. In my opinion, out of an inability to imagine a dénouement for such extraordinary adventures, we understand that Edgar Poe has interrupted the recital of them with the “sudden and deplorable” death of his hero, all the while letting us hope that if ever the two or three missing chapters are found, they will be delivered to the public.

[Tel est ce bizarre roman, enfanté par le génie ultra-humain du plus grand poète du Nouveau Monde. C’est ainsi qu’il se termine... ou plutôt qu’il ne

se termine pas. A mon avis, dans l'impuissance d'imaginer un dénouement à de si extraordinaires aventures, on comprend qu'Edgar Poe ait interrompu leur récit par la mort « soudaine et déplorable de son héros », tout en laissant espérer que si l'on retrouve jamais les deux ou trois chapitres qui manquent, ils seront livrés au public.] (86)

It is hard to say whether Verne, who eventually rewrites Pym's *Narrative* as told by Poe quite as radically as Dante rewrites Odysseus' *Odyssey* as told by Homer, presenting readers with the knowledge of how Pym, lost, came to die, displays in his novel a complete misunderstanding of what Poe intended in *Pym*, or rather a profound understanding as well as a response by way of creative reproduction. It is unclear also whether Baudelaire had complete faith in Poe when it came to *Pym*, or did not rather suspect his beloved "auteur américain" of certain oversights or mistaken inventions; Florenne recounts:

To the ardor he devoted to his translation, and the concern he gave it, was added his zeal for documenting it: Asselineau reports that he ran around taverns in search of English sailors in order to make them explain navigational terms, manoeuvres, etc. He confided to his friend that he meant to be irreproachable in the eyes of those readers who would read it, "while following along on the map!" Asselineau was reproached for having laughed. He did not know that Baudelaire was proceeding to such minute verifications that, finding Poe flagrantly in error (with regard to orientation, notably) he had set him straight, without saying a word about

it.⁵⁴

[A l'ardeur qu'il mettait à sa traduction, aux soins qu'il lui donnait s'ajoutait son zèle à se documenter : Asselineau rapporte qu'il courait les tavernes à la recherche des marins anglais pour se faire expliquer les termes de navigations, manœuvres, etc. Il confiait à son ami qu'il entendait être irréprochable aux yeux des lecteurs qui le liraient, « en suivant sur la carte » ! Asselineau s'est reproché d'avoir sourit. Il ne savait pas que Baudelaire procédait à des vérifications si minutieuses que, prenant Poe en flagrant délit d'erreur (sur l'orientation, notamment) il l'avait rectifié, sans rien en dire. (*BOC* 1421-1422)

Whether this evidences a resistance on Baudelaire's part to the holes in the *Narrative*, or whether it is instead a testament to a desire to write over the smaller holes in order to make the larger one – i.e., the lack of conclusion to the narrative following the “déplorable désastre” on the isle of Tsalal – more apparent, again, we cannot say with any certainty. On the other hand, the image of Baudelaire *imagining* his audience eagerly reading Pym's narrative of his voyage while attempting to trace its course “sur la carte” seems to have become lodged in “Le Voyage,” where the gaping space between “carte” and “voyage” is as evident as in *Pym*.

Given the confused and lukewarm-to-cold reception of *Pym* on both sides of the Atlantic, and certainly following the violent and heated reaction to *Les Fleurs du mal* in its first publication, Baudelaire was amply justified in an anxiety over republishing the collection, and particularly over its new additions. In a letter to Jean Morel of May 1859,

⁵⁴ Asselineau may laugh, but *Le Sphinx des Glaces* makes it clear that Baudelaire found one such reader in Verne, and also that even Baudelaire's most “minute verifications” and silent rectifications did not efface Poe's “errors.”

accompanying an early draft of “Les Sept Vieillards” for consideration for publication in the *Revue française*, Baudelaire expresses his own fear concerning these verses:

... for all I think of them is that the pain they have cost me proves absolutely nothing with regard to their quality; this is the first of a new series I want to attempt, and I do fear that I have simply succeeded in going beyond the limits assigned to Poetry.

[... car tout ce que j’en pense est que la peine qu’ils m’ont coutée ne prouve absolument rien quant à leurs qualité ; c’est le premier numéro d’une nouvelle série que je veux tenter, et je crains bien d’avoir simplement réussi à dépasser les limites assignées à la Poésie.] (C I:583)

The series Baudelaire refers to is the trio of poems eventually included in the *Tableaux parisiens* all of which are dedicated to Victor Hugo: “Les Sept Vieillards,” “Les Petites Vieilles” and “Le Cygne.” Attempting something *new* in these works, the poet enters into the realm of the Unknown, and with such an attempt there is always the danger of going beyond designated limits. In these three poems more than in any others, he maps the mundane and the mythic topography of Paris which is also so frequently evoked in *Le Spleen de Paris*. The *Tableaux parisiens* itself is, within the 1861 edition of the *Fleurs*, a concentration of *nouveauté*; while eight of the eighteen poems in the *Tableaux* were included in the 1857 edition, the section itself is new, as are the other ten poems, which include the three mentioned above. Of these last Victor Hugo (whose protective patronage Baudelaire had sought through his dedications) predicted that they would create “un frisson du nouveau” in the general public.

It is this very novelty – the novelty of the *Tableaux parisiens* and within this the

more profound novelty of the “nouvelle série” – which alerts us to the fact that these three poems constitute the Underworld of *Les Fleurs du mal*. Having left Paris to stay with his mother in Honfleur, escaping for a while the city’s siren-song and extensive pharmacy, its labyrinthine streets and ruined arcades, Baudelaire returned himself to a state of childhood in which he was able to see “tout en nouveauté,” but with the “strong organs and an analytic mind” which would also allow him to express this novel vision. The long gaze into the history of poetry, including his own, that is “Le Voyage” points him, Circe-like, to a discovery: that the Unknown he (along with all *voyageurs* – or all readers) seeks can be found in the very heart of the known, that a maelström of blank space may open up even in those grounds that have been most thoroughly mapped and remapped. Such a ground is the city of Paris, both in its actual topography, and insofar as it has mapped itself into the poet’s imaginative expanse. In *Convolute C* of *The Arcades Project* Benjamin writes:

Few things in the history of humanity are as well known to us as the history of Paris. Tens of thousands of volumes are dedicated solely to the investigation of this tiny spot on the earth’s surface. Authentic guides to the antiquities of the old Roman city—Lutetia Parisorum—appear as early as the sixteenth century. The catalogue of the imperial library, printed during the reign of Napoleon III, contains nearly a hundred pages under the rubric “Paris,” and this collection is far from complete. Many of the main thoroughfares have their own special literature, and we possess written accounts of thousands of the most inconspicuous houses. In a beautiful turn of phrase, Hugo von Hofmannsthal called <this city> “a

landscape built of pure life.” (82-83)

We cannot consider Hofmannsthal’s description of Paris to be entirely sufficient, unless we include in the definition of “pure life” the afterlife, appearing as it does in Baudelaire as a palimpsest of fragments of the past and fantasies of the future, setting the scene for innumerable encounters between “spectre” and “passant” and opening countless mouths onto the Unknown. In place of the sea-voyage to the underworld we see in Homer and Virgil, which still lingers in parts of Dante and is reimagined by Poe as an approach to and descent into the maelström, Baudelaire imagines the Underworld as accessible from and intruding upon the modern urban landscape, afterlife overtaking life, life interpenetrated with death, “modernity,” as Elissa Marder writes, reading Benjamin, “petrified by antiquity” (76).

The ocean which led Odysseus, Aeneas and Ulysses to the Underworld, and carried Pym and Baudelaire’s *voyageurs* on their rather more end-less quests, is not entirely absent from the Paris of the *Tableaux*, however; it is replaced by the heaving, surging, roaring crowd – the French “foules” linguistically links crowds to ocean waves. Already in “The Man of the Crowd” Poe referenced the “dense and continuous tides of population,” and Baudelaire repeatedly reprises and enhances this image, and emphasizes the capacity of the crowd to bring one to the brink of “le gouffre,” “l’abîme,” “le tourbillon” – i.e., the maelström. In “Les Sept Vieillards” the poet, “roidissant [ses] nerfs comme un héros” for the terrible feat of stepping outside in the morning, observes that “dans la triste rue / Les maisons, dont la brume allongeait la hauteur, / Simulaient les deux quais d’une rivière accrue.” In “L’Homme des Foules,” his translation of “The Man of the Crowd,” the narrator finally leaves “l’inconnu” he has followed so faithfully in the

midst of the “tourbillon de la rue,” “tourbillon” being the same word Baudelaire uses to translate, in both “Ms. Found in a Bottle” and “A Descent into the Maelström” the word “whirlpool,” thus introducing a maelström even where Poe had not (explicitly) written one. We might even hear the roaring of “la rue assourdissante” in “A une passante” as an echo of the roar issuing from the Gates of Horn(s)/the maelström, as the sea of the crowd parts to reveal for the blink of an eye a certain “fugitive beauté,” and then closes around her again. As Benjamin writes in “Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” “In *Tableaux parisiens*, the secret presence of a crowd is demonstrable almost everywhere...The masses were an agitated veil, and Baudelaire views Paris through this veil” (*SW* 4:323); “secret” is the key word in this passage, which is a revision and simplification of another passage from the earlier “Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire”:

...in Baudelaire the big city almost never finds expression through a direct presentation of its inhabitants. The directness and harshness with which Shelley captured London through the depiction of its people could not benefit Baudelaire’s Paris.

Hell is a city much like London,
 A populous and smoky city;
 There are all sorts of people undone,
 And there is little or no fun done;
 Small justice shown, and still less pity.

For the flâneur, there is a veil over this picture. This veil is formed by the masses; it billows “in the twisting folds of the old metropolises.” Because of it, horrors have an enchanting effect upon him. Only when this veil

tears and reveals to the flâneur “one of the populous squares...which are empty during street fighting” does he, too, get an undistorted view of the big city. (*SW* 4:34)

It is the crowd which offers to the poet the possibility to plunge “dans le personnage de chacun” and so return to the state of infancy which is so close to inspiration, to be “soudainement renaître”⁵⁵ by the gaze of a passing woman whose eye is a “ciel livide” and who might have been his paradise, but also to be overtaken seven times by “sept monstres hideux” whose “cortège infernal” forces him to seek again the safety of his room, but leaves him entirely undone, tossed on an endless sea:

Exasperated as a drunk seeing double,
I went back in, closed my door, stricken,
Sick and shivering, with troubled and fevered mind,
Wounded by the mystery and absurdity!

Vainly my reason tried to take the helm;
The frolicking tempest foiled its efforts,
And my soul danced, danced, an old barge
Without masts, on a monstrous sea without shores.

[Exaspéré comme un ivrogne qui voit double,
Je rentrai, je fermai ma porte, épouvanté,
Malade et morfondu, l'esprit fiévreux et trouble,
Blessé par le mystère et par l'absurdité!

⁵⁵ “A une passante” (*OC* I:93)

Vainement ma raison voulait prendre la barre;
 La tempête en jouant déroutait ses efforts,
 Et mon âme dansait, dansait, vieille gabarre
 Sans mâts, sur une mer monstrueuse et sans bords.] (*OC I*:88)

Having plunged into “l’Inconnu pour trouver du *nouveau*” at the end of “Le Voyage,” not caring whether this “gouffre” may be “Enfer ou Ciel,” in the *nouveauté* of the *Tableaux parisiens* poet and reader discover *both* “Enfer” and “Ciel” as they are tossed up out of the sea of the crowd, or flit through the flickering light of the gas lamps, and are swallowed again in the dark. And while on the one hand it would seem to be entirely possible to read Baudelaire’s *Tableaux* of Paris while following along “sur la carte,” tracing, for example, the itinerary of “Le Cygne” as the poet traverses “le nouveau Carrousel” and arrives “devant ce Louvre,” the very fact that the encounters which alternately promise him Heaven and damn him to Hell are “chance” encounters on a street where the poet may have wandered unintentionally, fleeting encounters with faces he will never see again unless it is “dans l’éternité,” renders these “tableaux” unplottable, unreadable spaces within the frame of the “cité pleine de rêves.”

Chapter 3

Writing the Wires: Tsvetaeva, Pasternak and Rilke

Hell is too small and heaven is too small:

They are already dying for you.

After such a brother, alas, onto the pyre –

Is that really done? It is not the place

Of a sister, but of a glowing passion!

Under the burial mound with a brother...

Is it done?...

– “He was mine and still is! Even rotting!”

– This is the order of the grave!!!

Tsvetaeva, “Sister,”

May 11, 1923

It was so visible how all living things desire more than their daily meal, how the bird, too, has its feast, and the beast.

Holderlin, *Hyperion*

In a letter dated January 22, 1929, to her Czech friend Anna Teskova, Marina Tsvetaeva presents what amounts to a theory of translation (she was engaged at the time in translating Rainer Maria Rilke’s “Letters to a Young Poet” into Russian), and equally a theory of the afterlife:

I am also convinced, that when I die – he [Rilke] will come to me. *He will translate me* into that world, as I now *translate* him (by hand) into Russian. Only thus do I understand – translation.

[Убеждена ещё что когда буду умирать – за мной придет. *Переведет* на тот свет, как я сейчас *перевожу* его (за руку) на русский язык.

Только так понимаю – перевод.] (SS VI:375)

On the one hand, Tsvetaeva expresses certainty that at the moment of her death Rilke (already two years dead, with whom Tsvetaeva carried on an intense correspondence in the last year of his life, but never met in the flesh) will “translate” her – literally “take [her] across” – from this world (life) into “that.” Rilke will be the one to greet her upon arrival, and the one to introduce her into the afterlife, which is thus imagined as a different language. On the other hand, Tsvetaeva translates Rilke, “by (the) hand,” into her own language, envisioning this as a linguistic afterlife into which *she* can introduce *him*.

This brief formulation contains the germ of all the themes we will explore in this chapter and the next in relation to Tsvetaeva and her work. First, there is the apprehension that the death of a poet will be the occasion for a meeting between poets. Second, the mirror image of this meeting-in-death: the implication of death and the afterlife (“that world” [тот свет]) in every meeting of poets in life. Then, there is Tsvetaeva’s belief that an ideal meeting of poets is a meeting between languages, a meeting *in language*. A consequence, only very delicately implied here, but expressed many times over in Tsvetaeva’s poetry, prose, and letters, is the imposition of a rule of

non-meeting between herself and her most beloved poets in life, for the sake of an otherworldly meeting. For example, in an early letter to Boris Pasternak she writes,

I don't love meetings in life: bumping heads. Two walls. You can't penetrate that way. A meeting should be an arch: then the meeting is – *above*. Heads thrown back!

[Я не люблю встреч в жизни: сшибаются лбом. Две стены. Так не проникнешь. Встреча должна быть аркой: тогда встреча – *над*. – Закинутые лбы!] (*DNV* 25)

Tsvetaeva works through these themes, centering on the place of the poet in this world and in “that world,” throughout her writing life, in the lyric poetry of her early career,⁵⁶ the longer poems to which she often turns in the 1920s,⁵⁷ and in the prose works composed largely in the 1930s.⁵⁸ To follow the course of this evolution of Tsvetaeva's creative output is to see it as an arc, or arch, in itself, tracing a temporal curve in which she turns from poetry to prose in order to re-turn to examine her childhood and youth, and especially her own sense that from her earliest years she was fated to be a poet – indeed that she was already, as a child, a poet. To this end – tracing the life of the Poet in the world – Tsvetaeva draws on a reservoir of mythology which she turns to her own purposes with startling freedom. In her manner of reinterpreting mythology, as in the material of many of the myths themselves, she links herself to the age and poetic practice

⁵⁶ Especially in the collections *Milestones* [Версты, 1921], *Craft* [Ремесло, 1923], and *After Russia* [После России, published in 1928 but containing lyrics from 1922-1925].

⁵⁷ Representative examples include *On a Red Steed* [На красном коне, 1921], *From the sea* [С моря, 1926], *Attempt at a room* [Попытка комнаты, 1926], *Poem of the staircase* [Поэма лестницы, 1926], *New Year's Greeting* [Новогоднее, 1927], and *Poem of the Air* [Поэма воздуха, 1927].

⁵⁸ Including *Hero of Labor* [Герой труда, 1925], *History of a Dedication* [История одного посвящения, composed in 1931 but unpublished in Tsvetaeva's lifetime], *A Living Word about the Living* [Живое о живом, 1932], *A Captive Soul* [Пленный дух, 1934], *Otherworldly Evening* [Нездешний вечер, 1936], and the great *My Pushkin* [Мой Пушкин, 1937].

which preceded and surrounded the emergence of epic poetry as the ocean surrounds an island; the myths Tsvetaeva calls on most often are those which have no canonical version, and of which her own retelling is one of a tradition of many previous retellings. At the same time she links herself to her own age, and creates a contemporary other-world in place of the mythic underworld, especially through images of the technology of her time – airplanes and trains instead of ships, telegrams instead of godly or angelic messengers.

Those which prove most fertile for her work are the myths in which the hero or heroine mediates between this world and the other – for example, Ariadne, lover of Theseus but beloved of Bacchus/Dionysus, or Psyche, beloved of Eros, who makes a journey to the underworld for love of him.⁵⁹ Particularly fertile is the myth of Orpheus; while other mythic figures may be identified *with* the poet, Orpheus is already identified *as* the Poet, the first poet, the force of poetry which exists in life and carries over into the next life.⁶⁰ The co-presence of poet and myth in one figure is determinative for Tsvetaeva's poetic worldview: for her, every great poet who lives or has lived is essentially mythic, and this includes herself. As such, the details of the lives of poets, as well as the details of her own life, are as fully available for creative reinterpretation as are the ancient myths. Alongside Ariadne, Phaedra, the Cumaean Sybil, Psyche, Eurydice and Orpheus (among others) stand Pushkin, Goethe, Rostand, Blok, Akhmatova, Rilke and Pasternak (among others). Tsvetaeva imagines herself as, or in relation to, all of these – the queen of the other-world gathering all the souls of beloved poets to herself. In her

⁵⁹ For treatment of the Psyche theme in Tsvetaeva's work see Alyssa Dinega, *A Russian Psyche*.

⁶⁰ For treatment of the Orpheus myth in Tsvetaeva's work, see Olga Hasty, *Tsvetaeva's Orphic Journeys in the Worlds of the Word*.

own writing she figures alternately as an individual mythic character, or as the sea of myth out of which each character arises, transformed by its immersion in this sea.

In the following chapters we will examine the myth of the Poet's relation to "that world," the other-world – Tsvetaeva's interpretation of what we have seen as the hero's or poet-hero's descent to the underworld in the epic tradition – as its structure is imposed on Tsvetaeva's life and works, and particularly played out in her relations with other poets. In this chapter we will develop further the concept of poetic translation in relation to the "other-world" through an examination of Tsvetaeva's late translation of Baudelaire's "Le Voyage." Next we will consider Tsvetaeva's mainly epistolary relationship with Boris Pasternak and some of the poetry which came out of it, particularly the cycle "Wires" [Провода, 1923] from *After Russia* [После России], and end with a brief consideration of Tsvetaeva's entirely epistolary relationship with Rilke, and the poem-letter she composed on the occasion of his death, "New Year's Greeting" [Новогоднее, 1927].

In Chapter 4 we will turn to a problem that every scholar and writer concerned with Tsvetaeva's life and work, from strict biographer to strict literary critic and everything in between, seems bound to address, and which bears directly on a study of Tsvetaeva's mythologizing: the problem of the biographical referentiality of Tsvetaeva's poetry and prose, which encompasses questions of the proper place of biographical information in a study of her poetry, as well as questions of the relation between 'truth' and 'fiction' in those of her prose works which are generally considered to be autobiographical. We will use Tsvetaeva's 1936 essay "Otherworldly Evening" [Нездешний вечер], composed on the occasion of the death of the poet Mikhail Kuzmin,

as a case study for the relation between mythology and autobiography in Tsvetaeva's writings. The essay, which acts as a memorial to Kuzmin and to the many great poets of her generation who, as she hyperbolically but also truthfully writes, "all died," translates a particular historical evening into an other-world in which it can be understood only according to the poetry and myth with which Tsvetaeva's writing is saturated.

Tsvetaeva and "Le Voyage"

In 1940, the year before her death, Marina Tsvetaeva translated Charles Baudelaire's "Le Voyage" into Russian. On the surface, there is nothing particularly remarkable about this fact. Tsvetaeva frequently worked on and published translations both from Russian into other languages and from other languages into Russian. Poets whose works she translated include Shakespeare, Pushkin, Lermontov, Rostand, and Rilke. She translated both for love and for money; in the later years of her life translations were often a surer source of income than publishing her own works, and many of her translations date from after her return to Soviet Russia in 1939. Tsvetaeva intended her translation of "Le Voyage," which she titles "Sailing" [Плавание], for publication in the journal *International Literature* [Интернациональная литература], in which she published other translations in 1940; in *The Intersection of Fates* [Скращение судеб] Maria Belkina quotes a passage from Tsvetaeva's journal from October 3, 1940: " 'NB! My Baudelaire has to be postponed and will appear only in the January issue – a pity' " ["NB! Мой Бодлер появится только в январской книге придется отложить – жаль"] (135). Belkina also indicates that Tsvetaeva began work on the translation in June of 1940, and that although she did not work on it consistently throughout the following months, was still engaged

with it in the fall of that year and in November had produced as many as twelve versions. Despite all this, the translation was *not* published in January, or in Tsvetaeva's lifetime – indeed, it first appeared in a collection of translations of Baudelaire's lyric poetry into Russian only in 1965. This is also not particularly remarkable; Tsvetaeva herself was not in favor with the literary powers in the Soviet Union, and paid translation work was not easy to come by for any writers at the time – it is possible that Tsvetaeva engaged in the translation of “Le Voyage” with only a vague promise that she might be compensated for it. What *is* rather remarkable is the choice of Baudelaire, and the choice of “Le Voyage” – remarkable both with regard to the place and time, and with regard to Tsvetaeva's own poetry and poetic taste.

Baudelaire's work was already quite well-known in Russia; his works started to appear in Russian translation more than a decade before his death, and at least four complete translations each of both *Les Fleurs du mal* and *Le Spleen de Paris* were published before Tsvetaeva was even twenty. Adrian Wanner has extensively documented the history of Baudelaire's translation into Russian and the influence of his writings and thought on Russian poetry, including his obvious influence on Russian symbolism, but also much less well-known facts of the interest he held for various acmeists, formalists, and futurist poets, and the details of the first Russian edition of his poetry, “prepared by a convicted terrorist of the People's Will Party, while he was in a Siberian labor camp” (2).⁶¹ Summing up Baudelaire's multifaceted Russian presence, Wanner writes:

⁶¹ P.F. Yakubovich, a revolutionary poet in the late nineteenth century, then an active revolutionary, who was sentenced in 1884 to eighteen years of forced labor; he discovered Baudelaire in 1879, and immediately began to translate his poetry into Russian, but most of his translations were done while he was imprisoned. He died in 1911.

[...] perhaps the most striking feature in the Russian response to Baudelaire is the surprisingly various images of the French poet. Baudelaire was seen in turn as a social critic, decadent, symbolist, revolutionary, reactionary, aestheticist, pornographer, nihilist and religious prophet. [...] Baudelaire appealed to members of both the “progressive” and the “decadent” camp. As do the changing colors of litmus paper, Baudelaire’s metamorphoses indicate the character of the milieu in which he was immersed. (2)

For the symbolists, above all, both in the First and Second Wave, Baudelaire was regarded as a predecessor and poetic ancestor,⁶² and there are few Russian poets associated with the symbolist movement who did not translate a poem or two of Baudelaire’s at some point.⁶³ Tsvetaeva, however, was not a symbolist – indeed, she persistently is *not* identifiable with any of the poetic movements of her time in Russia – though at various times in her life she was acquainted with or even quite close to a number of the symbolist poets.⁶⁴ At the same time, she regarded it as anathema to do something that had been done before,⁶⁵ and by 1940 Baudelaire had definitely been done in Russia.

⁶² Although he did not especially admire Baudelaire himself, Andrei Bely wrote in his essay “Sharl’ Bodler,” “Two patriarchs of the ‘symbolist movement’ engraved with their whole life and work the postulates of the new art in the literature of the second half of the nineteenth century; these patriarchs are Baudelaire and Nietzsche”.

⁶³ See Peterson, *A History of Russian Symbolism*, pp. 22, 47, 69, 117; Wanner, pp. 62, 78, 151.

⁶⁴ Tsvetaeva devoted a cycle of poems to Alexander Blok (*SP* I:227-231), became good friends with Konstantin Balmont when they were both living in Paris in the 1930s, and for a time she struck up a friendship with Andrei Bely while she was living in Berlin 1922.

⁶⁵ At the age of seventeen she passionately engaged in translating Rostand’s *L’Aiglon*, only to give up on her work when she discovered that a Russian translation already existed (Feinstein 44).

Even were this not the case, there is no documentary evidence (other than the translation) to suggest that Tsvetaeva admired Baudelaire,⁶⁶ despite the fact that her official entry into the world of Russian poetry at the age of seventeen was facilitated by a friendship with the poet and translator Ellis (pseudonym of Lev Lvovich Kobylinsky), who Wanner calls “perhaps the most fanatic Baudelairean of all time” (127), and despite the fact that she lived for the majority of her seventeen years abroad in Paris, and could easily have empathized with Baudelaire’s expressions of alienation from the city where she herself was a literal exile. Her plunge into Baudelaire – and a decision to translate “Le Voyage,” Baudelaire’s longest poem, cannot be regarded other than as a plunge, and into icy water at that – is all the more striking, then, for its unexpectedness. On the other hand, Tsvetaeva was never one to do anything half-heartedly, and from this perspective it is far more characteristic of her to throw herself fully into a huge and possibly thankless project than to dabble with only lukewarm enthusiasm. There can be no doubt that she poured all of her incredible poetic talent into “Sailing,” which far surpasses any previous Russian translations of “Le Voyage,” both in its fidelity to the original and its quality as a poem in its own right; Wanner asserts that “Marina Tsvetayeva’s rendering of ‘Le Voyage’ ... has made this poem perhaps Baudelaire’s most popular work in Russia today” (5). Given her obvious expenditure of energy and emotion on this translation – an expenditure which, as we will see, she no longer felt justified in devoting to her own poetry – it is tempting to try to understand Tsvetaeva’s choice of this particular poem to translate in terms of the circumstances of her life at the time in the expectation that the translated poem may be autobiographical in the unique way that Tsvetaeva’s original

⁶⁶ We may be able to infer something from that fact that Baudelaire seemed to have been one of Georgy Efron’s favorite poets (Belkina), and that Ariadna Efron also engaged in translating a number of poems from the *Fleurs du mal*.

poetry is autobiographical. To be specific: it is tempting to apprehend, in Tsvetaeva's translation of a poem which is so often read as ending with a "suicidal plunge," an intimation of her own suicide.

On the 18th of June, 1939, Tsvetaeva returned to the Soviet Union with her son, Georgy (Mur); her husband, Sergei Efron, and daughter Ariadna had already returned in 1937. Although it is difficult to find a word for this move other than "return," it is still not entirely appropriate. In the seventeen years since her emigration, Tsvetaeva's home country changed far more than she did. The Russia of her youth – a country where poetry was valued, even necessary, a country she spent much of the '30s conjuring in her autobiographical prose⁶⁷ – was her own vision of paradise. She often describes her emigration as a move into a society where poetry is not necessary, and thus she herself is also not necessary, even if she can make herself useful in other ways. Although she continued to write and publish poetry and indeed reached her poetic maturity while abroad, she struggled to find an appreciative audience for it. For many years Boris Pasternak, who had never left Russia, seemed to be the only reader capable of following her on her poetic path, and despite the atrophy of their correspondence in later years, this fact may have encouraged her to think that, whatever hardships she might face in returning to Soviet Russia, her poetry might yet be heard and understood. The reality was quite the opposite. The voices of her brothers and sisters in poetry were silenced, either by death (Osip Mandelstam had died already in 1938, although this was not yet known for certain), or by fear (Akhmatova published her first poetic collection in years, *From Six Books* [Из шести книг], but could not safely include her best work of the last decades

⁶⁷ Although we will question later to what extent Tsvetaeva's prose can be considered 'autobiographical' in a conventional sense, she herself considered it to be such, writing in 1940, "All of my prose is autobiographical" ["Вся моя проза – автобиографическая"] (SS V:8).

– Tsvetaeva, knowing nothing of, for example, Akhmatova’s “Requiem” [«Реквием»], judged this collection to be “old, weak”). Many former friends were afraid to visit Tsvetaeva; because of Sergei’s mysterious connections with the NKVD, and the stigma of her own emigration, it was considered dangerous to show support of her – even Pasternak was initially afraid to see her (Schweitzer 350). Only months after her arrival with Mur, who had never lived in Russia, both Ariadna and Sergei were arrested – Ariadna on the 27th of August and Sergei on the 10th of October. Tsvetaeva never saw either of them again.⁶⁸ The following two years were a constant struggle to find a place to live and a means of income. At the same time, Tsvetaeva still sought an audience for her poetry, although in such a demanding manner that she may have ended by losing the interest of some who would have been sympathetic. She often read her 1927 “Poem of the Air” [Поэма воздуха] as a kind of test for her listeners, a poem so extremely dense and abstract that it seems nearly all of them failed the test, even Akhmatova, in whom Tsvetaeva might have been expected to find an equal.⁶⁹ There was no possibility of publishing any of her own poetry; instead she worked on translations from German, Polish, Czech, Bulgarian – living on whatever money she could get from the “Litfond.”⁷⁰ In her workbook, between the pages of these translations, Tsvetaeva kept a sporadic journal; here, in an entry dated October 24, 1940, she opposes her own poetry to her translations:

⁶⁸ Sergei Efron was executed on October 16, 1941, less than two months after Tsvetaeva’s suicide; Ariadna Efron was released from prison in 1947 but re-arrested in 1949 and remained in a labor camp in Turukhansk until her rehabilitation in 1955; she died in 1975 in Tarusa.

⁶⁹ Tsvetaeva and Akhmatova met – for the first time! – in Moscow in 1941.

⁷⁰ The Literary Fund which collected dues from its members in order to provide aid to writers while they were engaged in original work or translations for publication.

I know, that poetry is – good, and to someone – necessary (maybe even – like bread). But – it doesn't come out, I will translate, I will shut the mouth of whoever says: why don't you write, because time – is one, and small, and to write to myself in a notebook - Luxe⁷¹. Because they pay for translations, and for my own – nothing. At least I tried.

[Я знаю, что стихи – хорошие и кому-то – нужные (может быть даже – как хлеб). Ну – не выйдет, буду переводить, зажму рот тем, которые говорят: почему Вы не пишете, потому что время – одно, и его мало, и писать себе в тетрадку – Luxe. Потому что за переводы платят, а за свое – нет. По крайней мере постаралась.] (SS IV:612)

Less than a year after this 'note to self,' having relocated from Moscow to the small town of Elabuga following the German attack on the Soviet Union in June of 1941, Tsvetaeva could not try anymore, either for herself or her family: on the 31st of August, 1941, she hung herself in the entryway of the rented room she shared with Mur. Another passage from her notebook testifies to the fact that this act, though it was certainly precipitated by the change in circumstances, was not unpremeditated:

About myself. Everyone considers me masculine. I know of no-one more *timid* than myself. I am afraid of everything. Of eyes, of the dark, of footsteps,⁷² but more than anything – of myself, my own head, so loyally devoted to me in my notebook and so murderous to me in life. No-one sees – no-one knows, – that for a year already (approximately) I've been looking for – a hook, but there aren't any, because there is electricity

⁷¹ In French in the original.

⁷² All fragmentary references to the surveillance imposed on poets in the Soviet Union.

everywhere. No “chandeliers.”⁷³ For a *year* I’ve been trying on – death. Everything is – ugly – and – horrible. To swallow – vile, to jump – my hostility, my *inborn* repulsion by water. I don’t want to be frightening (posthumously), and it seems to me that I am already – posthumously – afraid of myself. I don’t want – *to die*, I want to *not be*. Nonsense. As long as I am *needed*... but, God, how small I am, and can do *nothing*!

To live – to chew – to the end.

Bitter wormwood –

So many lines, which have passed by. I write nothing down. With this – it is finished.

[О себе. Меня все считают мужественной. Я не знаю человека *робче* себя. Боюсь всего. Глаз, черноты, шага, а больше всего – себя, своей головы, так преданно мне служившей в тетради и так убивающей меня в жизни. Никто не видит – не знает, – что я год уже (приблизительно) ищу глазами – крюк, но их нет, потому что везде электричество. Никаких «люстр». Я *год* примеряю – смерть. Всё – уродливо – и – страшно. Проглотить – мерзость, прыгнуть – враждебность, *исконная* отвратительность воды. Я не хочу пугать (посмертно), мне кажется, что я себя уже – посмертно – боюсь. Я не хочу – умереть, я хочу *не быть*. Вздор. Пока я *нужна*... но, Господи, как я мала, как я *ничего* не могу!

Доживать – дожёвывать.

Горкую полынь.

⁷³ Tsvetaeva transliterates the French word for chandeliers, “lustres.”

Сколько строк, миновавших! Ничего не записываю. С этим –
кончено.] (SS IV:610)

Between the pages of her translations, her work (however economically motivated) to translate the work of other poets by hand into a linguistic afterlife, Tsvetaeva perpetually contemplates the moment when she would, by (her own) hand be translated out of this entire world where (her own) poetry is no longer necessary to anyone.

Considering Tsvetaeva's translation of "Le Voyage" in this context, we might say that the future ghost of her suicide insistently haunts her rendering of Baudelaire's poem. Or, to speak more generally and less hypothetically, we can say decisively that the figure of Death plays a much larger role in Tsvetaeva's translation than in the original. While "Le Voyage" plays out under the sign of death (it is the concluding poem in the concluding section of *Les Fleurs du mal*, entitled *La Mort*), and certainly displays a multitude of scenes of torture, misery, horror, and ennui, it is not until the end of the poem that Death appears *in propria persona* – implicitly in section VII with references to the "mer de Ténèbres" and the 'specters' of "Pylades" and "Électre," and explicitly with the opening of section VIII and its address to "Mort, vieux capitaine." The effect of this within the poem is that "Mort" figures only as the way to one of many imagined paradises, a mirage in a long procession of mirages, and perhaps not the last. Thus death loses its singularity – its poison, like others, promises the intoxication of *new* visions, but it is more than likely that this promise is illusory. What is real for the Baudelairean *voyageurs* is not any of the particular destinations they desire to reach, but the persistence of desire. In "Sailing" the specter of death appears already in the first section of the poem, and returns so consistently that we can discern a structure opposed to Baudelaire's:

for Tsvetaeva's "sailors" [ПЛОВЦЫ], every mirage is haunted by shades, and Death stands behind every illusory image of paradise, as perhaps the one and only true object of desire. Even in the moment which was our point of departure in analyzing "Le Voyage" in Chapter 1 – the departure from Circe's island – we find a hint of this preeminence of death in "Sailing":

What pushes us on our way? Some – hatred of the fatherland,
 Others – the boredom of the hearth, still others – in the shades
 Of Circean lashes having lived out half their lives, -
 A hope to stand out the remaining days.
 [Что нас толкает в путь? Тех – ненависть к отчизне,
 Тех – скука очага, еще иных – в тени
 Цирцеиных ресниц оставивших полжизни, –
 Надежда отстоять оставшиеся дни.] (*SP* III:239)

Departing from Baudelaire's "astrologues noyés dans les yeux d'une femme / La Circé tyrannique aux dangereux parfums," Tsvetaeva creates a somewhat simpler image: some of her "sailors" depart after having remained half their lives, living half-lives "in the shades of Circean lashes." "Тени," the word translated here as "shades," has the same multiplicity of meanings as in English – while "shade" is the shadow in which we take shelter from the sun, "shades" are a synonym for "ghosts" or "specters." If Baudelaire's *voyageurs* read their fate of fatelessness in Circe's eyes – that they are doomed to desire forever and never arrive at the desired destination – then Tsvetaeva's "sailors" learn their fate from the shades in Circe's lashes: there is no need for them to journey to the underworld – this intimate encounter is already a *nekyia*.

Continuing to compare stanzas of Baudelaire's original with the same stanzas in Tsvetaeva's translation, we continue to see the primacy of a consciousness of death in the Russian. While Baudelaire's "vrais voyageurs" are those who, "sans savoir pourquoi, disent toujours: "Allons!"", Tsvetaeva defines the "true sailors" [истые пловцы] as those who "even in the hour of death still repeat: forward!" [даже в смертный час еще твердят: вперед!]. In section II Baudelaire describes the "singulière fortune" according to which "l'Homme, dont jamais l'espérance n'est lasse, / Pour trouver le repos court toujours comme un fou"; Tsvetaeva, almost entirely abandoning Baudelaire's intent, writes of the "strange game" [странная игра] in which "man chases after shades, / After ghosts of boats on the ghostly water..." [человек охотится за тенью, / За призраком ладьи на призрачной воде...]. Tsvetaeva's "sailors" sail through "mountains and chasms and hydras from the sea's hell" [гор и бездни и гидр морского ада]. Given this constant proximity of death throughout "Sailing," the meaning of "the *new*," that final object of desire offered at the end of the poem, must change. A highly charged concept in Baudelaire's poetic landscape translates into a differently but no less highly charged concept in Tsvetaeva's.

Following in great part Walter Benjamin's readings of Baudelaire's poetry as an impression and expression of the capitalist culture of the nineteenth century, we have understood this final striving toward 'le nouveau' in "Le Voyage" as a sign of its ever-present other, the 'ever-the-same'; when novelty takes on a market value independent of any use value, then Death becomes desirable simply because it has been stamped with the label, '*nouveau*.' At the same time, we concluded that beyond the illusory novelty-as-commodity might stand the poet's desire to find a new kind of poetry – a desire that bore

real fruit in the *Tableaux parisiens* and the prose poems of *Le Spleen de Paris*. Thus we affirmed that for Baudelaire the concept of novelty might have some real value beyond advertisement, but acknowledged that for him poetry was inescapably bound up with the commodity economy. Reflected back on the notion of Death displayed in “Le Voyage,” this half-new novelty makes the “vieux capitaine” who promises it into a sales-clerk as well, marketing something that anyone can have as something unique and just for *us*. At the same time, his explorations of the stratifications of death in life and life in death, particularly in the urban landscape, create something genuinely new in Baudelaire’s poetry after “Le Voyage.”

Much as for Baudelaire, an understanding of Tsvetaeva’s conception of death as expressed in “Sailing” hinges on an appraisal of the value of “the *new*” – новое – for her, and her poetry. As we have already observed, in Tsvetaeva’s translation the figure of Death seems to hover behind every earthly object of desire, and render every earthly paradise phantasmal. From this perspective, novelty would seem to have little earthly, but great unearthly, even other-worldly, value. According to the schematics of what we might call Tsvetaeva’s poetic metaphysics, in which she is strikingly consistent from very early in her career, it is from the unearthly, or the other-worldly, that poetry issues. Indeed, she considers poetry-writing to be a form of translation from the otherworld, which is “all-lingual” [всё-язычен], into one of the many worldly languages.⁷⁴ As we began with the observation that Tsvetaeva thinks of death as a kind of translation and imagines her own death as the translation of herself by another poet (Rilke) into an all-lingual afterlife, so now we assert that for Tsvetaeva the act of writing a poem – the birth of the poem – is also an act of translation – but as such it is perhaps as much a death as it is a birth. The

⁷⁴ See pages 60-68 below.

poet acts as the mediator in both cases, translating the poem from the other-world into this one, and translating the fellow-poet from this world into that. To translate is to render something unto its afterlife, which is both a death with regard to one life, and a birth with regard to another. But where does novelty enter into this schema? If it is in the other-world that we find “the *new*” in its absolute sense, then we can conclude that that which issues from the other-world – poetry – carries with it a trace, a translation, of this absolute “new.” The market value of novelty in this world would be conferred by its relation to the absolute value of “the *new*” in the other-world. The poet, in his or her privileged role as translator to or from the other-world (and we shall see much more of this later in this chapter and in the next) is thus a purveyor of novelty both in its earthly and other-worldly forms. We are left with the remarkable conclusions that “Death,” in “Sailing,” is both a translator and a poet, and that, for Tsvetaeva, a meeting between poets (who are translators) – whether this meeting is physical, epistolary, or oneiric – amounts to a birth (for both), a death (for both), an encounter with something *new* which is simultaneously startlingly familiar, and an act of co-translation, in which something is gained and something is, necessarily, lost.

It is in the context of this formula that we will proceed to consider, in the remainder of this chapter, Tsvetaeva’s encounters with fellow-poets Boris Pasternak and Rainer Maria Rilke: her relationship with Pasternak characterized at first (by her own description) by a resistance to anything “new” (i.e., a resistance to each other), and then by a tricky epistolary and poetic dance in which each desires, and fears, the other as death; her relationship with Rilke marked by his impending, and then actual death, an event which gives Tsvetaeva’s poetry the wings to accompany and congratulate him on

his ascent into his “new world.” After Rilke’s death, in the *poéma* “New Year’s Greeting,” Tsvetaeva ventured further into the other-world than she ever had before, and in her subsequent prose pieces, so many of which are devoted to tracing her childhood birth into the world of poetry, and to marking the worldly deaths of her fellow poets – i.e., the moments of translation – it seems evident that she never came all the way back – that she felt far more at home among the dead than among the living. In her haunted translation of “Le Voyage” into Russian, as in her long-contemplated act of self-translation, we see the final worldly steps on a path Tsvetaeva chose for herself from the beginning – a path leading to a meeting between poets in a world where translation would no longer be necessary, and poetry would be – beyond questions of necessity – the only language, the only food.

“Lyrical wires”: Poems to Pasternak

In her first letter to Boris Pasternak, dated July 29, 1922, and her first essay about Pasternak – “Downpour of Light” [Световой ливень], written in the same month but following her first reading of Pasternak’s *My Sister – Life* [Сестра моя – жизнь] – Tsvetaeva creates an identification between herself and Pasternak around their mutual desire for “nothing new.” In “Downpour of Light” Tsvetaeva openly acknowledges her only “nodding acquaintance” with Pasternak when she lived in Russia, and her previous ignorance regarding his poetry:

With Pasternak himself I have only a nodding acquaintance: three or four brief meetings. – And almost silent, *since I never want anything new.*

[С самим Пастернаком я знакома почти что шапочно: три-четыре беглых встречи. – И почти безмолвных, *ибо никогда ничего нового не хочу.*] (*SS V:232*, emphasis added)

Tsvetaeva thus attributes her previous *non*-friendship with Pasternak to a negative desire, and resistance to anything “new” – literally, “never nothing new I don’t want” (Russian grammar warmly embraces double or even triple negatives). With her emigration in May of 1922, her non-knowledge of Pasternak was cemented (he remained living in Moscow), until she received a letter from him on July 14, telling of his discovery of her 1922 collection, *Mileposts* [*Версты*], in which he begs Tsvetaeva’s pardon for his own previous resistance to her poetry:

A month ago I could have reached you with a hundred steps, and “Mileposts” already existed ... You don’t buy books, because it is possible to buy them!! So forgive me, forgive me.

[Месяц назад я мог достать Вас со ста шагов, и существовали уже «Версты» ... Книги не покупаешь потому, что ее можно купить!! Итак простите, простите.] (*DNV 12*)

Pasternak goes even further than expressing an aversion to novelty, instead attributing his non-knowledge of Tsvetaeva to a discomfort even with availability, and the fact that poetry, whether new or old, can be *bought* at all – but these are related emotions.

Tsvetaeva doesn’t value novelty – or values it negatively – and Pasternak resists the economy in place which puts a value on novelty. Tsvetaeva clearly recognizes the sympathy between herself and Pasternak on this point: in the first of her two responses to this letter (the first being the letter to Pasternak, *before* she has read *My Sister - Life*, the

second “Downpour of Light,” *after* she has read it) Tsvetaeva translates his statement into her own terms in the context of a relation of her memory of their first meeting:

Sometime (In 1918, in the spring) I sat next to you at dinner at the Tseitlins. You said: “I want to write a big novel: with love, with a heroine – like Balzac.” And I thought: “How good. How true. How beyond pride. – Poet.”

Then I invited you: “I would be pleased, if” – You didn’t come, *because you never want anything new in life.*

[Когда-то (в 1918 г., весной) мы с вами сидели рядом за ужином у Цейтлинов. Вы сказали: «Я хочу написать большой роман: с любовью, с героиней – как Бальзак». И я подумала: «Как хорошо. Как точно. Как вне самолюбия. – Поэт».

Потом я Вас пригласила: «Буду рада, если» - Вы не пришли, *потому что ничего нового в жизни не хочется.*] (DNV 14, emphasis added)

Tsvetaeva characterizes what it is that each recognizes in the other, and brings about an identification between them, with one word: “Poet.” Their friendship – their love, as each in some way will eventually profess it to be – is founded on the recognition of each by the other as “Poet.” And not only this, but the recognition of each by the other as an equal, a poet of equal voice. For this very reason each is, for the other, something “new”; Tsvetaeva will later write: “Pasternak! You are the first poet that I – in life – have seen. You are the first poet, in whose tomorrow I believe, as in my own” [Пастернак! Вы первый поэт, которого я – за жизни – вижу. Вы первый поэт, в чей завтрашний день

я верю, как в свой] (*DNV* 33). In the end their equality in poetry causes each poet to violently embrace their connection at times, and at other times to resist it just as violently – for the sake of “life.” Both already have full and difficult lives: Tsvetaeva has a husband and a daughter (and eventually a son), Pasternak has a new wife and a son on the way – and this is only in the beginning. Both already struggle with finding the time and space for poetry in life – sometimes the poetry suffers from this struggle, and sometimes life suffers. It is clear to both, however they may not acknowledge it to the other, that life – life in *this* world – is not big enough to hold two such poets together. Thus they embrace (and this is a truth that Tsvetaeva, in particular, expresses more openly in verse than in letters) each other in the future, on the “завтрашний день,” in “that world,” and in letters and poetry, which belong to “that world,” but they resist each other in life. Indeed they often seem to work in spite of themselves to prevent a meeting in person which would be certain to be either less than anticipated, or else too much.

To examine all of the poetry that passes between Tsvetaeva and Pasternak, or even just the poetry on Tsvetaeva’s side addressed to or inspired by Pasternak, would be a monumental undertaking, and far beyond the purview of this chapter. The relationship and the poetry have already received a measure of excellent critical attention;⁷⁵ here we will focus only on one cycle of poems, “Wires” [Провода], from Tsvetaeva’s collection *After Russia*, as the cycle exemplifies the pattern of non-meeting, and particularly on the lyric “Eurydice – to Orpheus” [Эвридика – Орфею] as it both interrupts and interprets this cycle. The context of the composition of the poems is almost essential to an appreciation of them, but it is not difficult to narrate. In the very beginning of their correspondence, Pasternak announced to Tsvetaeva that he was planning a trip to Berlin

⁷⁵ In particular in Catherine Ciepiela’s *The Same Solitude* (2006).

to visit his parents, and expressed a hope of seeing Tsvetaeva there as well. Tsvetaeva encouraged this visit – her first letter to him ends “I wait for your books and for you” [Жду Вашей книги и Вас] (*DNV* 16) – and expected that she would still be in Berlin for his visit: “I am in Berlin for a while, I wanted to go to Prague, but daily life there is very hard” [Я в Берлине надолго, хотела ехать в Прагу, но там очень трудна внешняя жизнь] (*DNV* 16). However, only two days after the date of this letter, Tsvetaeva did indeed leave Berlin for Prague to live with her husband. Thus when Pasternak arrived in August, Tsvetaeva was gone.⁷⁶ They exchanged several letters in the following months, but on Pasternak’s side there were extended silences, and on Tsvetaeva’s a tendency toward obscurity or equivocation with regard to her feelings. In one and the same letter she implies that she meets him in her dreams, states outright that she dislikes physical meetings, and ends by proposing a hypothetical trip to Berlin precisely for the sake of such a meeting. In the end this meeting does not take place – by the time Pasternak clearly states that he would like to see Tsvetaeva, it is (apparently) too late for her to obtain a visa to make the trip. Instead she arranges to see him off through poetry.

Pasternak announces the date of his departure as March 18, although he did not in fact leave until several days later. Before the eighteenth Tsvetaeva sends him a group of poems she had written in the month of February (“February of 1923 in my life – is yours.

⁷⁶ In her *Страницы былого* (translated in English as *No Love Without Poetry*), a memoir of the years after their emigration, Ariadna Efron writes of this hasty move:

Her departure from Berlin on the eve of Pasternak’s arrival there had something in common with the nymph’s flight from Apollo, something mythological and otherworldly—even if the decision and act itself made doubtless sense [...]

But perhaps it was a (no less mythological) escape with an already acknowledged, an already proven treasure in hand—an appropriation, an abduction, an unwillingness to share with everyone else in the vacuum surrounding the little tables of the Pragerdiele, her fear of prying eyes, her need to get out of sight, so typical of Marina in her quest for and attachment to the *secret* of possessing any treasure, be it a book, a piece of the natural world, a letter or a human soul... In the realm of immaterial values Marina was a grand claim staker who tolerated neither co-owners nor collaborators. (106)

Do what you want with them” [Февраль 1923 г. в моей жизни – Ваш. Делайте с ним что хотите] (*DNV* 48)), with instructions to read one, “Emigrant” [Эмигрант], while he is still in Berlin, and the others “only in the coach, when the train starts” [только в вагоне, когда поезд тронется] (*DNV* 53). This is her first intended accompaniment to Pasternak’s departure and journey. The second is “Wires,” a cycle of ten (or eleven) poems Tsvetaeva composes in order to follow alongside Pasternak’s departure, like the telegraph poles running alongside the train tracks.⁷⁷ The first four poems are composed on March 17, 18, 19 and 20 – one for every day of (what she believes to be) the train-ride from Berlin to Moscow. After this there is a time lapse – the poems pick up again on March 25, and the last poem of the cycle is dated April 11. What happened between March 20 and 25? Two things. First, Tsvetaeva received a letter from Pasternak explaining the main reason for his departure from Berlin: his wife was pregnant and wanted to return to Russia; she was also evidently jealous of the place Tsvetaeva had come to occupy in her husband’s thoughts. For the sake of her health and happiness, Pasternak ends this letter to and, for a time, his correspondence with Tsvetaeva by way of the following:

I’m not done with the letter. Another request, already expressed to you once. Don’t think about me or about an answer, they will convey themselves. I can’t read your poems until Moscow. For the time being I won’t write from Moscow, - if you have written letters, don’t send them.

[Письма не кончил. Опять просьба, уже раз высказанная Вам. Не думайте обо мне и об ответе, они придут сами собой. Стихов до

⁷⁷ See Appendix 2 below for full translation of the cycle. The cycle appears between pages 56 and 64 of *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, V I – in the remainder of the section I will not cite page numbers for passages from “Wires.”

Москвы читать не смогу. Пока не напишу из Москвы, - письма, если бы написали, не посылайте.] (*DNV* 64)

So he imposes a silence that lasts, at least on his side, until the beginning of 1924. Second, Tsvetaeva composes “Eurydice – to Orpheus” (*SP* III:56), dated March 23, which stands both inside and outside of “Wires.” When, after the resumption of their correspondence, she sends the cycle to Pasternak in the spring of 1924 (along with a number of other poems which are “directly to” him), she includes “Eurydice – to Orpheus” in the cycle in the place where it fits chronologically, but when she publishes all of the poems in 1928 in *After Russia*, she lifts the poem out of the cycle and places it directly before instead. We will consider this poem first, then, as it sets the key for the humming of the cycle’s “lyrical wires,” but also reconsider it in its chronological place within the cycle as it constitutes one event in a very specific development from beginning to end.

The poem re-imagines the famous tale of Orpheus’ descent into Hades to retrieve the shade of his wife, Eurydice, who died after she was bitten by a snake. The general mythic consensus is that Orpheus, through the enchanting power of his music – voice and lyre – was able to persuade the gods of the underworld to let Eurydice return to life. He was told to make his way back out of Hades, trusting that Eurydice followed him – at the threshold of the light his patience failed and he looked back, only to see his wife for the last time as she disappeared.⁷⁸ Tsvetaeva gives voice, in her own poem, to Eurydice, who takes the situation into her own hands (only metaphorically, as “You see, I’ve no hands”

⁷⁸ The two most famous classical versions of the myth come from Virgil’s *Georgics* and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Vying with both of these for influence on Tsvetaeva’s interpretation of the myth is Rilke’s “Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes.”; we will note the points at which Rilke’s poem has evidently left a mark on Tsvetaeva’s imagination as they occur.

[Ни рук ведь]) and informs Orpheus: “You can’t concern me, you see! I will not follow!” [Ведь не растревожишь же! Не повлекуся!]. Olga Nasty has performed a careful reading of the poem’s structure, illustrating how Tsvetaeva “recreates the collision of two mutually exclusive perceptual realms in the confrontation of Eurydice and Orpheus in the underworld” through use of “disruptive caesuras and unexpected enjambments” (47). These occur most dramatically in the third and fourth stanzas, which Nasty interprets as the height of Eurydice’s confusion over Orpheus’ appearance, alive and embodied, in the demesne of the disembodied dead, where she fears he is not authorized to be: “Oh, does not Orpheus exceed, / His authority, descending into Hades?” [О, не превышение ли полномочий / Орфей, нисходящий в Аид?]. The fact that this doubt is phrased as a question, the only question in the poem, allows us to entertain the possibility that it might be answered either in the positive or the negative. Eurydice asks, perhaps, out of the confusion that Nasty reads in her halting and broken speech. By the poem’s end, however, she has resolved this confusion decisively enough to issue the statement: “Orpheus should not come down to Eurydice / Nor brothers disturb their sisters” [Не надо Орфею сходить к Эвридика / И братьям тревожить сестер].

While this might seem to be an affirmative answer to the question – i.e., ‘Orpheus should not come down to Eurydice, because in so doing he exceeds his authority’ – it is not necessarily so. While Eurydice opposes herself to Orpheus – “For in this phantasmal house/ The phantom is – you, the living, and reality is – / Me, the dead...” [Ибо в призрачном доме / сем – призрак *ты*, сущий, а явь – / Я, мертвая...] – as “dead” to “living” and, unexpectedly, “reality” to “phantom,” it is clear that this opposition only holds “in this phantasmal house.” The reason she should not follow him is that in his own

world he would be real, and she would be the phantom. Which is not to say that she could not follow him, that she does not have “links to the land” in which he dwells. They are, however, all in the past – “lips and cheeks,” “hands,” and “woman’s passion” were once hers, but are now exchanged for her present “ample cut / of immortality” [просторный покрой / Бессмертья]. For Orpheus and Eurydice, there is now no land in which they can both be real – to be together, one must be a phantom. Nevertheless, Orpheus has links to the “phantasmal house” as well. On the one hand, he has the link that all mortals have – it is his future home. On the other hand – and this is where Tsvetaeva’s conception of the nature of poetry makes its mark – Orpheus is linked by kinship to the land of the dead. The very myth Tsvetaeva rewrites here underwrites this interpretation. Because, according to myth, Orpheus was a poet, and went down into Hades, so it is possible – and within his authority – for Orpheus to go down to Hades, and the poet is eternally identified as one who is able to cross these borders. Seeing this descent through Eurydice’s ‘eyes’ does not change the fact that Orpheus is Orpheus, which is to say a poet, and it is through his descent that Tsvetaeva derives her own kinship to the underworld – which puts her in the position, in this poem, of taking up the lyre of Orpheus in order to sing with the voice of Eurydice. Thus it is that the final line, “Nor brothers disturb sisters” [И братьям тревожить сестер], is polyphonic: while Eurydice’s voice says ‘You should not disturb me,’ and ‘I am not your wife, but your sister,’ she also acknowledges Orpheus as her brother – her kin – and does so in poetry, thus making herself *his* kin, his sister, his equal – becoming a poet (becoming Orpheus) herself. If Orpheus’ descent into the land of the dead establishes the poet’s hereditary link to this land, Eurydice’s earned existence in this realm (“All settled up – all the blood roses”

[Уплочено же – всеми розами крови], “All settled up – recall my cries!” [Уплочено же – вспомяни мои крики!]) establishes her as a poet. In life they were, or might have been, husband and wife – happily, with family and an everyday life; separated and, eventually, united in death, they are brother and sister, and poets.

It is impossible not to hear the resonances of this tale with the story between Pasternak and Tsvetaeva. Pasternak crosses borders – from Russia to Germany, and back – in part in order to achieve a meeting with Tsvetaeva, but she eludes this meeting and sends him back, unsatisfied, to Russia and the call of the duties of his life – his wife and child. She herself remains in the emigration/exile which gives rise to the poetry of *After Russia*. This title is particularly appropriate – as Eurydice’s presence in the afterlife allows her to become a poet, so Tsvetaeva collects the lyric poetry she writes after leaving her life in Russia under the sign of the death that, in many ways, her emigration was for her. At the same time – exactly the same time – it is also true that Tsvetaeva leaves Russia and remains abroad (and avoids a physical meeting with Pasternak) out of loyalty to her own family, to the demands of her own life. And, again out of loyalty to her own family, she finally returns to Russia in 1939 – an act which all signs seem to indicate she was well aware might be a death sentence. As Alyssa Dinega writes (reading the poems relating to Pasternak’s departure according to the structure of the myth of Eros and Psyche, rather than Orpheus and Eurydice),

Russia, according to [Tsvetaeva’s] logic, is now equated simultaneously with Hades and with Eros’s Olympian heights [tot-svet] – for Russia is both the dark, enigmatic hell that she knew during the Revolutionary years, and the lost paradise of her childhood. (101)

Likewise her own return to Russia, while Tsvetaeva might have entertained slim hopes that it would be a return to that “paradise of her childhood” (which she had already spent years revisiting in her prose), was clearly more like a return to the “dark, enigmatic hell,” perhaps even more hellish than before. As we switch from myth to myth, then, we can read these various events – Tsvetaeva’s emigration from Russia, Pasternak’s departure from and later return to Russia, Tsvetaeva’s final return to Russia – as movements from life to death, from death to life, from life to life, from death to death.

Certainly at various points in Tsvetaeva’s career one myth or another is dominant; however, (and we make this claim to a certain extent against the arguments of two excellent works of recent criticism: Hasty’s *Tsvetaeva’s Orphic Journeys in the Worlds of the Word* and Dinega’s *A Russian Psyche*), no one myth is dominant for her entire career. Rather – and we can see this in miniature in “Wires” and the poems surrounding it – she plays on all the strings, and tunes and retunes them (“A female tuner of strings – I will tune / This one too” [Строительница струн – приструню / И эту] (*SP* III:84)), now drawing out the notes of one and muffling another (“Longer – longer – longer – longer! / This is – the right pedal ... Softer – softer – softer – softer: / This is – the left pedal” [Дольше – дольше – дольше – дольше! / Это – правая педаль ... Глуше – глуше – глуше – глуше: / Это – левая педаль] (*SP* III:69)), but never letting any one of them die away completely. In the poems from *After Russia* composed in February, March and April alone (the months preceding and following Pasternak’s departure) we can see Tsvetaeva explicitly mobilize the myths or stories of Antony and Cleopatra, Hamlet and Ophelia, Phaedra and Hippolytus, Eurydice and Orpheus, Eros and Psyche, and Ariadne and Theseus. Not one is enough – none are enough; in the second poem of “Wires” she

exclaims, “I’m afraid, that all Racine and all Shakespeare / Is too small for such sorrow!” [Боюсь, что мало для такой беды / Всего Расина и всего Шекспира!]. It is in playing all the stretched strings and wires, sometimes breaking the strings or burning through the wires, that Tsvetaeva is able to sing the distance between two poets, with a poetry that contains both the music and the breakdown, the telegraphic message and its failure.

It will not go unnoticed that all of the mythical models named above are examples of pairs of lovers, and all lovers separated by something – in all cases, eventually, by death. Later, in “My Pushkin” [Мой Пушкин], Tsvetaeva will face this fact, and its consequences for her life, head on, in a myth of her first understanding of love, brought on by her first encounter with that Russian literary/mythic couple, Tatyana and Onegin, of Pushkin’s *Evgeny Onegin*:

I fell in love not with Onegin, but with Onegin and Tatyana (and, perhaps, with Tatyana a little bit more), with both of them together, with love. And there is not one thing that I have written since, in which I have not fallen in love at the same time with two together (with her – a little bit more), not with the two, but with their love. With love. [...]

This my first love scene predestined all of my later ones, all of my passion for unhappy, nonreciprocal, impossible love. From that moment I didn’t want to be happy and with that I fated myself – to *non-love*.

[Я не в Онегина влюбилась, а в Онегина и Татьяну (и, может быть, в Татьяну немножко больше), в них обоих вместе, в любовь. И ни одной своей ващи я потом не писала, не влюбившись]

одновременно в двух (в нее – немножко больше), не в них двух, а в их любовь. В любовь. [...]

Эта первая моя любовная сцена предопределила все мои последующие, всю страсть во мне несчастной, невзаимной, невозможной любви. Я с той самой минуты не захотела быть счастливой и этим себя на *нелюбовь* – обрекла.] (SS V:71)

The list of couples above seems to bear witness to the truth of this story – each relationship is uniquely “unhappy” or “impossible,” all are essentially doomed, and half are characterized by “nonreciprocal” “*non-love*” of the kind with which Tsvetaeva falls in love in the case of Tatyana and Onegin. A different note sounds, however, when we pluck the lyrical wire stretched between Tsvetaeva and Pasternak. Certainly there are real obstacles between them, to prevent them from enjoying a “life” together; at the same time, each of them makes numerous deliberate choices to maintain these obstacles and even to multiply them – for the sake, on both sides, of a maintenance of the stability of “life,” but also, at least on Tsvetaeva’s side, for the sake of her poetry. She tacitly acknowledges this fact through the epigraph she chooses for “Wires” in *After Russia* – a passage from Friedrich Hölderlin’s *Hyperion*:

The heart’s wave would not foam up so beautifully and become spirit, if the ancient, mute rock, fate, did not stand opposed to it.

[Des Herzens Woge Schäumte nicht so schön empor, und würde Geist, wenn nicht der alte stumme Fels, das Schicksal, ihr entgegenstände.]

(55)⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Michael M. Naydan, translator of *After Russia* into English, cites this as an “inexact quote” from *Hyperion*. In fact, although this is not an unlikely claim, given that Tsvetaeva does often quote other texts

Holderlin's novel in letters has left many traces on Tsvetaeva's side of her poetic correspondence with Pasternak (and, later, with Rilke) particularly in the theme of the hero's divided loyalty – to his friend and fellow-soldier, Alabanda, and to the female object of his desires, Diotima. Tsvetaeva's letters and poems seem to give evidence that she casts herself in the role of the hero, Hyperion, with Pasternak alternately serving as lover and brother/fellow-poet. In the novel Hyperion chooses to fight alongside Alabanda and leave Diotima, the indirect consequence of which is her death. In Tsvetaeva's citation of this novel we can see her complete awareness that in choosing Pasternak as her brother-poet, she is essentially killing off the life they might have had together as lovers; we can see this more clearly still if we look at the passage from *Hyperion* in its slightly broader context:

What is it, then, that man wants so much? I often asked; what is the meaning of the infinity in his breast? Infinity? Where is it? Who has perceived it? He wants more than he is capable of! that might be true! O! you have experienced it often enough. And it is necessary as it is. What gives strength its sweet rapturous feeling is that it does not pour out as it will; precisely this creates the beautiful dreams of immortality and all the lovely and colossal phantoms that enchant man a thousand times over, this creates for man his Elysium and his gods, that the line of his life does not run straight, that he does not travel toward his destination like an arrow and that an alien power throws itself in the way of this fleeing creature.

rather inexactly and probably from memory (for example, the quotation from Vasilii Trediakovskiy that is the epigraph to the First Notebook of *After Russia*), her quotation of Hölderlin appears to be perfectly exact.

The heart's wave would not foam up so beautifully and become spirit,
if the ancient, mute rock, fate, did not stand opposed to it.

But the impulse in our own breast dies nonetheless, and with it our
gods and their heaven.

The fire flares up in joyful forms from the dark cradle where it slept,
and its flame rises and falls and breaks apart and joyfully entwines around
itself again until its matter is consumed, now it smokes and struggles and
expires; what remains is ash.

So it is with us. That is the core of all that the wise tell us in
frightening, enticing mysteries. (55-56)

This passage transposes the essential theme of “Le Voyage” into a slightly different key, rendering man’s superabundance of desire – that “he wants more than he is capable of” – as the very source of those “beautiful dreams of immortality and all the lovely and colossal phantoms that enchant man a thousand times over,” which so tempted and so plagued Baudelaire’s *voyageurs*. The “ancient, mute rock, fate” is the counterpart to the “écueil” which was “Enfer” in “Le Voyage.” In Tsvetaeva’s scheme (and, with some interpretation, Holderlin’s as well) it is the obstacles posed to the “heart’s wave” by “fate” – that is, by events in life which are out of our control – which cause the wave of desire to ‘foam up’ into something ‘beautiful’ – to become poetry, which exists on a higher plane. Recognizing her poetry – and, she believes, Pasternak’s as well – as the froth of the breaking wave of desire, and choosing poetry over an attempt to satisfy her desire, over the course of “Wires” Tsvetaeva shows herself taking control of the obstacles initially posed by fate, and choosing to preserve them for the sake of the resultant poetry.

At the same time, to combat the end that Holderlin foretells, that “the impulse in our breast dies nonetheless,” that “the fire flames up in joyful forms” only until “its matter is consumed,” at which point it “expires” leaving only ash, the poems of “Wires” also show her enthusiastically stoking the flames of desire, vigorously stirring the embers, burying and hiding away the dying sparks and, finally, proudly displaying the miracle-bird born from the ashes. The fire cannot joyfully flame up without *both* the consuming sparks and the physical matter to consume, just as the wave does not foam up without *both* the force of the wave and the unmoving obstacle – likewise poetry does not come into existence without *both* the living force of excessive desire and the facts of daily life that stand in its way.

In the first poem of “Wires” Tsvetaeva introduces the titular motif of telegraph wires which serves her so richly through the cycle. Here they are called “a line of singing pilings, / Propping up the Empyrean” [Вереницею певчих свай / Подпирающих Эмпирей], “the alley of sighs” [аллею / Вдохов], “a race-course/ For heaven-dwellers” [скаковую площадь / Небожителей] and “riggings over seas of fields” [снасти над морем нив]. Behind all of these images is the connective constant – that we are dealing with a communication system. As “singing pilings” the telegraph poles, like the pilings of a bridge, become the supports for a passage which is a transition and a translation – a crossing over from one side to another. “Propping up” not only wires but “the Empyrean,” these “singing pilings” facilitate the existence of something higher than themselves, and higher than that which props *them* up – i.e., the earth. In attributing the “singing” to the “pilings,” rather than to the wires, the poet inserts herself into the metaphoric structure: she and her addressee are a pair of these “singing pilings,” and the

wires which measure the distance between them are the lines of poetry which that distance brings into being – poetry, which they hold up above the rest of the world, including themselves. Without one or the other of this pair of “pilings” the poetry would fall flat. While the poetry is in the wires, it is silent (to the earth) – one sigh in the “alley of sighs” – and it is only heard when the pilings sing – one or the other or both of them. Tsvetaeva already establishes here an image of equality between poets, and poetic co-creation: while in this case it is she who ‘sends,’ the poem cannot come into being if he does not hold up his end. Also in the image of the “*line* of singing pilings” a procession, community, or even network of poets is evoked; what passes from one to another may pass through many others, or be passed on from the past, or toward the future. The verses that seem to be travelling through the wires from Tsvetaeva to Pasternak may in fact be only passing through Tsvetaeva from some other time or place, from some other poet, or from many poets in many different ages and places – their voices having been preserved in quiet vibrations until the moment when they emerge, perhaps by chance, in her singing. We may even ask if it is indeed correct that she is the one sending the message of the poem; since she is “singing,” perhaps it was he who set the wires in motion, and she acts here as the receiver and transcriber – or translator – of their sighs.

It can only complicate the matter that at any point along this line the communication may fail, that the message may become transformed or garbled as in a child’s game of “telephone”; the poetry internalizes an anxiety over this eventuality, and a representation of it: “Along the alley / Of sighs – wire to post – / A telegraphic: I lo – o – ove...” [По аллею / Вдохов – проволокой к столбу – / Телеграфное: лю—ю—блю...]. Giving a new meaning to the word “telegraphic” – literally, “distance-written” –

in its passage from “wire to post” the poet’s profession of love is broken up, drawn out by the distance it must travel – drawn out into song. Catherine Ciepiela observes that “Tsvetaeva later spoke of being influenced by the way song lyrics appear on musical scores, the words elongated to fit the musical phrasing” (109).⁸⁰ At the same time, in its lyrical prolongation the expression of love loses its object. Who is it that the speaker loves? Does it still matter?

With the evocation of vocal music comes a reminder that the “alley of sighs” is also the throat, the vocal cords the wires that mediate between inner emotion and outer expression, and that there may be obstacles to this passage as well. The poem’s message encompasses and is constituted by these: “Do you hear? This is the last breakdown/ Of a torn throat: fo – or – give...” [Слышишь? Это последний срыв / Глотки сорванной: про—о—стите...]. A whole chorus of voices come to back the poet up – all the abandoned women of mythology whose final cries have remained silent in the wires because there was no one to receive them. Raising her sorrowful words into the realm of poetry, “Higher, higher,” suddenly “they mingled / In Ariadne’s: re – e – turn, // Turn back!” [Выше, выше – и сли—дись / В Ариаднино: ве—ер—нись] – Ariadne, left alone by Theseus to die on the isle of Naxos. Along with the poet’s own “telegraphic: fare – thee - well...” sing all the “farewells of steel / Wires – the withdrawals // Of Hades’ voices...” [проводами стальных / Проводов – голоса Аида // Удаляющиеся...], and in her “dying cry/ Of insistent passions” [В предсмертном крике / Упирающихся страстей] is the whistle of “Eurydice’s breath” [Дуновение Эвридики]. While these mythic models help the poet get her message across, adding their voices to hers in order to amplify and clarify her song, they also threaten to overwhelm her: “In this chorus –

⁸⁰ The reference is to the 1935 essay, “Mother and Music” [Мать и музыка] (SS V:10-31).

will you / Make it out?” [В сем хоре – сей / Различаешь?]. She cannot master the song at such a pitch or determine what will come out at the other end; in fact the last words are Eurydice’s, and they are incomplete: “Through embankments – and – ditches / Eurydice’s: a – a – las, / Don’t lea– ” [Через насыпи – и – рвы / Эвридикино: у—у—вы, // Не у—]. It is the “singing pilings” (the telegraph poles, the singers, the poets, the *human* poets) which complicate the system, trying to translate the “goodbyes of steel wires” into “a printed blank.” It is “simpler with wires” – simpler when the poetry stays in its elevated realm; when an attempt is made to translate it into earthly language, the language is found to be already determined. Other poets have been there and laid down tracks, and it is impossible to jump the tracks completely. Tsvetaeva’s characteristic punctuating dashes appear rather more representative in this context – standing in for the wires, for the space between one printed word and the next, within which the poem is suspended on the potentiality of the breath, still silent in the “alley of sighs.”

The cycle’s next poem continues to stage the poet’s struggle to fit her “heart” into a language which is, on the one hand, too measured (by “lines and rhymes”) for her “sorrows,” and, on the other hand, too predetermined in its expressions (by “all Racine and all Shakespeare”). She performs an equation, the logic of which is decisively poetic and *not* mathematical, designed to figure out the relation between individual and general loss – and to find her own place in this economy. Beginning with the situation of the death of an individual which is mourned by many, the poem’s speaker distances herself from this situation by placing the descriptions of it in quotation marks, though she does not seem to be directly quoting anyone. Given the immediately previous reference to Racine and Shakespeare, the comment that, “ ‘Everyone cried, and if blood hurts...’ ”

[“Всè плакали, и если кровь болит...”] is almost certainly a reference to Phaedra and her burning blood; only ten days earlier Tsvetaeva had composed Phaedra’s poetic “Complaint,” which begins, “Hippolytus! Hippolytus! It hurts! / Sings... Heated cheeks...” [Ипполит! Ипполит! Болит! / Опаляет... В жару ланиты...] (SS III:54). Likewise, the second “quotation” is almost certainly a reference to Eurydice and her death after being bitten by a snake while walking through a field.⁸¹ In this second instance, the lost love is clearly Eurydice (putting Tsvetaeva, again, in the Orphic position), but in the first case we cannot entirely determine whether “everyone cried” for Hippolytus or for Phaedra – her blood, and his blood, hurt them both – killed them both. The next lines seem to obviate this confusion: “But there was one – for Phaedra – Hippolytus! / Ariadne’s cry – for Theseus alone!” [Но был один – у Федры – Ипполит! / Плачь Ариадны – об одном Тезее!]. Opposing the general grief of “everyone cried” to the individual grief of Phaedra for Hippolytus, of Ariadne for Theseus, makes it clear that the ‘lost’ one is Hippolytus, in whom Phaedra lost everyone because for her there was only one, as for Ariadne there was only one. Exchanging the example of Eurydice (and Orpheus) for that of Ariadne and Theseus introduces another element of specificity into this equation. We began with a loss for which “everyone cried” – the death of Eurydice, the death of Hippolytus (or Phaedra). We move to a loss which, for one individual, is the loss of everything and everyone – Phaedra’s loss of Hippolytus and Ariadne’s loss of Theseus – but this is no longer entirely synonymous with death. Hippolytus does die, but Phaedra lost him long before (or never had him) in his rejection of her passion, her love, and indeed her death precedes his. Ariadne, as well, loses Theseus through his own

⁸¹ Ovid is the authority for this version of the story; in Virgil Eurydice is bitten by a snake while being chased by the shepherd, Aristaeus.

abandonment of her; these are losses which would not be losses if it were possible to choose who we burn for, if we could always love the ones we're with. Ariadne loses Theseus, cries only for Theseus; Phaedra (her sister) is married to Theseus but loves and burns only for Hippolytus (his son). Only the gods can account for taste. In the alignment of the two examples we can see also that the death has migrated – Phaedra dies out of longing for Hippolytus, and Ariadne out of longing for Theseus. This is a love – and a grief – from which you die. It is with *these* expressions of love and loss that the poet must struggle in order to individuate her own expression of “Torment,” which is so great that it cannot fit into any previous “lines and rhymes.” The poet of “Wires” is only one in a host of Phaedras and Ariadnes who have mourned their losses in famous words, and she fears that she is “lost in the count.” The only way she can manage to make herself heard over the chorus, to make her “one” stand out from “everyone,” is in an expression of high hyperbole: “Yes, for I confirm, lost in the count, / That in you I lose all those / Who sometime and somewhere *never were!*” [Да, ибо утверждаю, в счете сбившись, / Что я в тебе утрачиваю всех / Когда-либо и где-либо небывших!]. With this the poet does not simply display, as Jane Taubman suggests, that “her loss is particularly keen, for she has lost not a friend whose potential was explored, but one whom she had only begun to know” (191); she is, as in the rest of the poem, making a specifically literary pronouncement. It is not enough for her to identify with Phaedra’s individual sorrow, or Ariadne’s, nor is it enough for her to be one voice – even if a new voice – in the chorus of abandoned, un-loved women of poetry. All that will suffice is for her to identify with the whole chorus at once, with “all Racine and all Shakespeare,” to take the whole weight of these ages and pages of grief into her own heart and language. In this monumental act of

identification she loses all of the losses – in her own loss she loses Hippolytus, Theseus, Orpheus (and Eurydice) and “all those / Who sometime and somewhere *never were*” – i.e., all those who ever were, and were lost, *in literature*.

In keeping with the logic of hyperbole, the poet goes on to identify with the earth itself which bears the weight of such sorrow: “Since Naxos is in me – my own bones! / Since my own blood under the skin – is Styx!” [Раз Наксосом мне – собственная кость! / Раз собственная кровь под кожей – Стиксом!]. Here begins (essentially, although it was intimated at earlier points in the first poem) a language of the body which runs alongside the language of the voice: the poet has expanded her voice to absorb all the voices of mythic mourners (or – perhaps more appropriately – melancholics), and her body now becomes coextensive with the island that suffered Ariadne’s abandonment and death, her veins flowing with the black river which eternally separates the living from the dead. A flurry of exclamations of immeasurable despair follow: “Futility! Inside me! Everywhere! having closed / My eyes: without bottom! without day!” [Тщета! во мне она! Везде! закрыв / Глаза: без дна она! без дня!], and lead directly to a realization: in this complex and highly literary equation designed to reveal the depths of the poet’s sorrow, the equality between the two poets, the two “singing pilings” of the first poem, has disappeared. While on her side the poet can say, “in you I lose all those / Who sometime and somewhere *never were*,” for his part she concludes, “I am not Ariadne and not.../ A loss!” [Не Ариадна я и не... / – Утрата!]. In addition, in her titanic self-expansion the poet has literally lost her beloved – lost him within her own expanse: she made herself into the very earth, but now doesn’t know where in the earth to find him: “Oh over what seas and cities / To seek you? (Unseen – by unseeing!)” [О по каким

морям и городам / Тебя искать? (Незримого – незрячей!)). It is no longer she, but he who is “lost in the count” – in her own desperate self-multiplication. With this realization she comes back to herself, and back to the telegraph poles, in a moment which contains the sadness of self-deflation, but also the comfort of return to a modicum, however small, of certainty: “I entrust my goodbyes to the wires, / And against a telegraph pole – I cry” [Я прово́ды вверяю проводáм, / И в телеграфный столб упершись – плачу].

Parenthetically titled “(Paths)” [(Пути)], the cycle’s third poem picks up the thread of this return to the metaphors of communication modes, but only in order to discard every mode one by one: “Having picked through and thrown away everything, / (In particular – a semaphore!)” [Всё перебрав и всё отбросив, / (В особенности – семафор!)]. As she throws “everything” away, however, the poet throws it *at* her addressee, each metaphor alone sounding a note or a chord, but altogether creating “The wildest of dissonances: / Of schools, of thaws...” [Дичайшей из разноголосиц / Школ, Оттепелей...]. The metaphor of the semaphore alone is a “whole chorus” in itself. A predecessor of the electrical telegraph system which consists of posts and wires, the “semaphore telegraph” or “optical telegraph” system was instituted in France at the end of the 18th century and used most famously by Napoleon Bonaparte, who used to travel with a portable semaphore (a fact that Tsvetaeva, thanks to her early love of all things Napoleon, would be sure to have known). Semaphore networks built on similar principles also appeared at around the same time in Britain, Spain and Sweden, and later in Canada and the United States, and many of these were in use through the middle of the 19th century. In essence, the semaphore system consists of lines or networks of stations, each manned by semaphore operators and readers who are in charge of manipulating some

kind of structure to transmit a coded message to the next station along the line. The structure itself may take a number of forms, but in general consists of a large central post with various arms extending from it whose positions may be changed by the operators, and to which lamps and shutters may be affixed. The positions of these moving arms along with different configurations of lighted lamps, or opened and closed shutters, correspond to elements of a code to which the semaphore operators are privy; by means of this system secure messages could be transmitted across great distances with relative speed in comparison to earlier forms of tele-communication, and it is easy to imagine the strategic benefits of such a system for a military commander such as Napoleon, waging war on multiple fronts. (One thinks of the kingdom that was lost for the sake of a horseshoe nail, or some other such triviality which prevented the conveyance of a necessary message.) While this is what is most commonly intended by “semaphore,” the term extends itself generously, allowing itself to mean any method of ‘carrying signs’ across a distance, from heliography to smoke signals. The flag-signalling system, used primarily in the navy to visually transmit messages from ship to shore, or ship to ship, is also called a semaphore system (it replaced shutter semaphores in maritime use), and operates on similar principles: a person holds differently colored and patterned flags in his or her hands, and moves his or her arms in predetermined ways – the flags along with the motions correspond to elements of a code. Tsvetaeva clearly evokes this system as well, in the poem’s second stanza: “Sleeves like flags / Thrown out... / – Without shame! –” [Рукава как стяги / Выбрасывая... / – Без стыда!].⁸² These two semaphore systems,

⁸² While Ciepiela has with complete validity identified this image as partaking of an “opera metaphor” initiated in the first poem, according to which the “lyric speaker sings in a tragic opera...backed by a chorus, which includes not only Ariadne and Eurydice but all “the voices of Hades”” (109), it does so

in their commonalities, indicate something of what Tsvetaeva is trying to do with her poetry. First, both systems operate as extensions of the human body and its ability to convey meaning visually through movement. Clearly, having lamented the narrowness of language in relation to her heart in the previous poem, the poet is resorting to more physical means of expression. Both systems of semaphore exaggerate the movements of the human body in order to make them more visible, and *legible*, at greater distances; the flag-signalling (also called “wig-wagging”) does so more obviously, but the semaphore structure with its moving arms still mimics the same human form, with arms thrown wide. In the issue of legibility we return to a key point: even in her recourse to the language of the body, and its technological extensions, the poet does not and cannot do away with language – the original system devised to carry signs across the distance between one person and another. Any semaphore technology would be useless without the preset code which allows the message to be encoded and decoded, sent and received – thus we always come back to language, to a “printed blank.” Do we ever even escape language at all? Once again we see Tsvetaeva engage with the fact of translation; messages may be translated in and out of any number of codes and media, all of which have their merits and their limits, but always remain in the atmosphere of languages, of language.

Still, it is possible to conceive of a language, a system of signs, known only to a few – known, even, only to two, who alone are able to send and receive messages by its means. The simplest of semaphore systems – the simplest of telegraph systems as well – requires at least two stations but, in essence, no more. Having already imagined herself

perhaps only insofar as the exaggerated and stylized movements of the opera singer are imagined as a particular kind of semaphore system.

and her addressee as two “singing pilings” in a telegraph system, but evidenced anxiety over whether he will hear her *own* voice within the wires which carry so many other voices as well, the poet now tests out a new (though older, more archaic) possibility – she will make her poetry into a semaphoric code that only he can read. The epigraph she chooses for the “Second Notebook” of *After Russia*, a passage from Montaigne’s *Essais* speaks to this choice to single out *one* reader:

Remember that man who, when he was asked why he took so many pains over an art which could only ever come to the attention of a very few people, -

“A few is enough for me,” he responded. “One is enough for me. Not one is enough for me.”

[Souviennet vous de celui à qui, comme on demandoit à quoi faire il se peinoit en un art qui ne pouvoit venir à la cognoissance de guère des gens, -

“J’en ay assez de peu”, répondit-il. “J’en ay assez d’un. J’en ay assez de pas un.”]⁸³

In this we can hear Tsvetaeva’s insatiable desire for an audience, a desire no audience could satisfy – “Not one is enough for me” – in simultaneous harmony and discord with her love of a secret, held together only with one – “One is enough for me.” Ariadna Efron has indeed suggested that her mother’s poetry became less legible for a general audience when she began to write *towards* another poet of her caliber:

⁸³ Tsvetaeva quotes Montaigne in the original; the same passage, from the essay entitled “On Solitude” [De la solitude], updated into modern French reads as follows:

Souviennet-vous de celui, à qui comme on demandait à quoi faire il se peinoit si fort en un art qui ne pouvoit venir à la connaissance de guère de gens, «J’en ai assez de peu, répondit-il, j’en ai assez d’un, j’en ai assez de pas un » (401-402)

The then intensifying complexity of her poetic language—intelligible, nowadays [...] to a “mass” readership but difficult of comprehension for the “select” reader of the 1920s—is also in part explained by Marina’s orientation toward Pasternak: this was a speech comprehensible to two and encoded for all others! After all, those who have just acquired the basics of arithmetic cannot immediately expect to be able to decipher calculus...

(109)

Ciepiela points out that, while Tsvetaeva had “reproduced aspects of other poets’ voices” at other times, and now ‘adopts’ some “features of [Pasternak’s] poetics,” “borrows his lexicon, his convoluted syntax, and his predilection for finite verbs,” it is unique in this case that “her ventriloquizing of Pasternak occurs in the context of already present similarities” – that “Tsvetaeva’s poetics resembled Pasternak’s in major respects, particularly in their strong reliance on intonation and syntactic parallelism” (93). This two-person language sings in wires that are higher than telegraph wires – “Telegraph pole? Could anything shorter / Be chosen?” [Столб телеграфный! Можно ль кратче / Избрать?] – in “lyrical wires” [лирические провода] which merge with the “heavenly vault” [свод небесный] so that every movement passing through the air and across the sky, from the semaphoric waving arms and flags to the passing dawns – “зори,” which is both sunrise and sunset – is a sign carried from poet to poet, from lover to beloved. Beyond “semaphore,” beyond the “telegraph pole” and “telegrams (simple and urgent/ Stamps of constancy!)” [телеграмм (простых и срочных / Штампованностей постоятств!)] – beyond, that is, any mode of communication under outside control – and “through epochs of evil ages / Embankments of lies” [Чрез лихолетие эпохи, / Лжей

насыпи] in their own language – “the spring overflow of drainpipes and the wires of space” [Весною стоков водосточных / И проволокою прочтранств]⁸⁴ – Tsvetaeva makes her claim on Pasternak: “As long as there is the vault of the sky, / As long as there are dawns toward the borders / For so long I clearly and everywhere / And interminably bind you” [доколе свод небесный / Доколе зори к рубежу – / Столь явственно и повсеместно / И длительно тебя вяжу]. The “sky,” that “Transmitter of immutable feelings, / Tangible news of lips” [Чувств непреложный передатчик, / Уст осязаемая весть], transmitter of the coded semaphoric language which belongs only to two, replaces telegraph wires as a medium of communication, but acts as wires which bind the two poets inescapably together. Through these “wires of space” the poet projects, “Without shame!” her “unpublished sighs” [неизданные вздохи] and “unfaithful passion” [неистовая страсть], with a chorus behind her made up of human constructions of communication which all somewhat resemble her: a semaphore with wide waving arms, a wig-wagger with flapping flags, a telegraph pole with its extended arms, and even the stretched riggings of a ship on its “quiet Atlantic way.”

With the fourth poem of “Wires” we approach the break in the cycle that is marked by “Eurydice – to Orpheus,” and in more than one way it appears that Tsvetaeva already knows what Pasternak will say to her in the letter which precipitates the break. Two things in particular the poem seems to anticipate: Pasternak’s request that she not write to him in Moscow, and his revelation that his wife is expecting a child. The poem begins a response to both points that will continue throughout the cycle, not excluding “Eurydice – to Orpheus.” After her wild testing of the range of the choruses of media and

⁸⁴ A phrase which recalls Tsvetaeva’s assessments of the prevalence of water imagery in Pasternak’s *My Sister, Life*.

mythology in the previous poems, here the poet begins with an immediate expression of awareness that each member of the chorus has its own inherent limits. The “Telegraph poles” are declared to be an “Autocratic suburb” [Самовластная слобода] – thus acknowledged to function according to *their own* rules, but still according to rules. Likewise poetry, the “autocratic suburb” of everyday language, may not follow conventional linguistic rules – poets hold, as we all know, a “poetic license” – may not even follow conventional poetic rules, but even in breaking them poetry is governed and conditioned by the rules of “Meter and measure.” Flying high above this autocratic suburb, however, the poet imagines a language that is born directly from the body, leaping over all the rules: “A cry – from the womb and to the wind!” [Крик – из чрева и на ветер!]. Pure overflow, excess, or discharge, this embodied language is like the “whistle” of a train – the only part of it that is not bound to follow tracks. As such it can be destructive – “This is my heart, a magnetic / Spark – it tears up meter” [Это сердце мою, искрою / Магнетической – рвет метр] – but also productive: the discharge of excess, unruly energy allows the metered and measured actions and motions to continue. Is what we are reading, then, this discharge? Is the poetry Tsvetaeva’s way of letting off steam, so that she can continue to follow the rules of living in the world? But how could this be? – if we have understood this discharge as precisely that which *escapes* poetry’s “autocratic suburb,” which is higher by far than its “telegraph poles”? Perhaps, then, we are reading poetry which is made *possible* by the discharge of the body’s desire, which would not fit into its dimensions (the dimensions of the body, or of the poetry). However, though this excess of energy may be lost to the economy which transforms desire into poetry, still it wings its way to the beloved:

Shh... But if suddenly (are there
 Wires and posts everywhere?) tipping
 Your head you understand: these
 Hard words – are only the cry

Of a nightingale, having lost its path:
 – Without my beloved the world is empty! –
 Having fallen in lo – ove with the Lyre of your arms,
 And the Layla of your lips!

[Тсс... А ежели вдруг (всюду же
 Провода и столбы?) лоб
 Заломивши поймешь: трудные
 Слова сии – лишь вопль

Соловьиный, с пути сбившийся:
 – Без любимого мир пуст! –
 В Лиру рук твоих влю—бившийся,
 И в Леилу твоих уст!]

Lost, but also escaping, from the artificial rules of “wires and poles,” the “hard words” which reach the beloved will be understood by him, the poet is certain, as a natural phenomenon – the song of a nightingale that cannot help but sing. While it is without words, the nightingale’s song remains also in the realm of the overflow or discharge – but

the poet (whether lover, or beloved) cannot help but translate the song into language, and into the meter and measure of poetry: “Without my beloved the world is empty!” [Без любимого мир пуст!]. Thus even the discharged energy comes to be bound. The poem ends with another translation of the song into poetic – this time mytho-poetic – terms: with reference to the “Lyre of your arms” the beloved is figured as the poet (Orpheus, in this case⁸⁵), while with reference to “the Layla of your lips” the *lover* is figured as the poet.⁸⁶ Even more than this – the “Lyre” of the beloved’s arms may be both the Lyre held by the arms – i.e., the lover has fallen in love with poetry as represented by the Lyre – and also the arms themselves, as they stand for the body, the desire of and for which gave rise to the poetry. The “Layla” of “lips” is even more clearly a representative of the desired and desiring body – the lips may inspire poetry, but also speak it.

It is this very body which, with its desire, has disappeared, if we consider “Eurydice – to Orpheus” insofar as it fits into the cycle chronologically. Though the sidelong reference to Orpheus at the end of the fourth poem of “Wires”⁸⁷ leads into “Eurydice – to Orpheus” thematically, there is a world of difference between the love expressed in that poem, which is a love of heart and arms and lips, and the ‘marriage’ of

⁸⁵ A reference to Rilke’s “Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes,” in which Orpheus is described as “no longer conscious of the delicate lyre / Which had grown into his left arm, like a slip / Of roses grafted onto an olive tree.”

⁸⁶ A reference to the traditional Arabic tale of Layla and Majnun.

⁸⁷ A reference which is strengthened by the image of the nightingale, who makes an appearance in the tale of Orpheus from Virgil’s 4th *Georgic*: after Orpheus has lost Eurydice to her second death, he sits by the river, weeping and singing:

...entranced,

The wild beasts listened; entranced, the oak trees moved
 Closer to hear the song, which was like that
 Of the nightingale, in the shade of a poplar tree,
 In mourning for her children who were taken,
 As yet unfledged, by a herdsman, hard of heart,
 Who had happened upon her nest—she weeps all night
 And over and over repeats her lamentation
 And fills the listening air with her sad complaint. (181)

“Eurydice – to Orpheus” which has done away with “lips” and “cheeks,” “hands” and “passion.” Here, from the first lines, marriage is associated with death; in this detail Tsvetaeva follows Ovid’s version of the myth more closely than that of Virgil. In the *Metamorphoses* Ovid places Eurydice’s death directly after her marriage to Orpheus, and the marriage ceremony itself seems to portend such an eventuality:

Thence Hymen came, in saffron mantle clad,
 At Orpheus’ summons through the boundless sky
 To Thessaly, but vain the summons proved.
 True he was present, but no hallowed words
 He brought nor happy smiles nor lucky sign;
 Even the torch he held sputtered throughout
 With smarting smoke, and caught no living flame
 For all his brandishing. The ill-starred rite
 Led to a grimmer end. The new-wed bride,
 Roaming with her gay Naiads through the grass,
 Fell dying when a serpent struck her heel. (225)

Tsvetaeva goes even further than Ovid, making marriage and death simultaneous and synonymous, as Eurydice begins her address to Orpheus: “For those who have finally married away the last shreds / Of the shroud (no lips or cheeks!...)” [Для тех, отживших последние клочья / Покрова (ни уст, ни ланит!...)]. The death shroud, which covers the decaying dead body, is here also the bridal veil, which covers the bride’s (supposedly) virgin body, *and* the body itself, which the soul throws off in death. The metaphor continues into the next stanza, in which the “bed of beds” is equally the

marriage bed and the death bed – both of which are built upon a lie (in her reference to those who “on the bed of beds [...] have lain together the great lie of face-to-face” [На ложе из лож / Сложившим великую ложь лицезренья] Tsvetaeva plays on the similarity between the Russian words *ложе* – an archaic word for “bed” – and *ложь* – “lie”; “Сложившим,” a participial form of the verb *сложить*, which is both “to lie together” (in the conjugal sense) and “to put together” (in the constructive sense) also contains the same root) – this is the lie of “face-to-face,” the lie of appearances, the lie of the body itself. “For those” such as Eurydice, which means on the surface “for those” who have made themselves at home in death, but also means, as we have already established, for poets – who do not ‘live’ in their bodies, because they are those who “look *in*” [Внутр зрящим] – “for those” the “face-to-face” meeting, whether on the marriage bed, the death bed, or in the phantasmal house of the dead, is a wound, a “knife” [ножь]. Eurydice has made an economic exchange: “All settled up – all the blood-roses / For this ample cut / Of immortality” [Уплочено же – всеми розами крови / За этот просторный покрой / Бессмертья]. She pays, with the bed which is either marriage or death bed, with the “blood-roses” which stain its sheets in either case, for a bed where she can find “rest” [покой] – the bed of “forgetfulness” [Беспмятности] spread with the “ample” sheets of “immortality.”

Let us be clear, here, even if the poet is obscure: Tsvetaeva associates, throughout the poem, not simply marriage, but sex, with death. She thus establishes, through the known fact of Eurydice’s death, another fact – that Eurydice and Orpheus consummated their marriage. (On this point Virgil and Ovid are, unsurprisingly, silent.) Eurydice’s payments for her peace – “all settled up – all the blood-roses” and “all settled up – recall

my cries” – evoke equally the pain (and pleasure) of the sexual act. Pain and pleasure, however, belong to the mortal body, and “Bit into immortality by a snake / Woman’s passion ends” [С бессмертья змеиным укусом / Кончается женская страсть]. With the end of passion comes a change of relationship between those who now meet over “this last amplitude” [Этот последний простор]: Orpheus and Eurydice are no longer husband and wife, but now brother and sister, although according to our interpretation it was the very act which made them husband and wife, which also made them brother and sister.

Eurydice’s poetic resignation of her “woman’s passion” for Orpheus and her command that he should “Forget this and go” [Ты это забудь и остав] seem on the surface to be entirely out of tune with the opening stanzas of the fifth poem of “Wires,” composed two days after “Eurydice – to Orpheus,” in which the poet vows, “Wherever you may be – I will overtake you, / I will suffer through – and return you” [Где бы ты ни был – тебя настигну, / Выстрадаю – и верну назад], and commands her beloved, “Suffer over me!” [Перестрадай же меня!].⁸⁸ If anything, in the continuation of “Wires” the poet seems initially to have become even more determined upon seeking and finding her beloved, and against the second poem in which she despaired of ever finding him, she is now fantastically self-confident in her discerning abilities. Eurydice and Orpheus have not passed, however, without leaving traces behind. In her determination to “suffer through – and return you,” the poet picks up the melody to which Eurydice’s song was the counterpoint: she becomes Orpheus, still set on finding and rescuing his wife from death. In the repeated declarations of heroic intention, ending with, “On the thorns / I will bloody my lips and return you from the deathbed,” the now-Orphic poet appears not to

⁸⁸ Both verb forms – “Выстрадаю”, and “Перестрадай” – are derived from страсть – passion.

have heard or understood Eurydice. At this point comes a thrice-repeated command to “Give up!” [Сдайся!]. “Give up” because “After all this is no fairy tale” [Вед это совсем не сказка] and “Give up” because “Not one yet has saved himself / From the chaser without arms: // Through breathing” [Еще ни один не спасся / От настигающего без рук: // Через дыхание...]. This last we read in two ways: that no one has ever come through death alive, and that no one yet has saved himself or herself – or another – from death by means of poetry (an interpretation justified by the ubiquitous association in Tsvetaeva’s work between breath and poetry). There follows, however, a description of a kind of death which is not entirely deathly, a sleep-like death or a death-like sleep, a stasis: “Breasts soared up, / Eyelids do not see, mica – around lips...” [Перси взмыли, / Веки не видят, вокруг уст – слюда...]. This image is indicative of a general shift in the constellation of citations of “Wires”: beginning with this poem, Tsvetaeva begins to move away from the classical, mythical, and tragic figures of Ariadne, Phaedra, Orpheus and Eurydice, and towards, on the one hand, the material of folk-lore and fairy-tale⁸⁹ and, on the other hand, Biblical material – and this last most strongly. Indeed, it is a movement initiated by “Eurydice – to Orpheus,” and precisely in Eurydice’s statement that, with death, “Woman’s passion ends.”

“Страсть,” the word with which Tsvetaeva indicates Eurydice’s physical pain and pleasure, which we have translated here as “passion,” is the same word which names the end of Christ’s mortal life – “Страсти Христовы,” the Passion of Christ. According to Christian exegetical tradition (especially the Apostle’s Creed), in the period of time between the death of Christ and his resurrection, he descended into Hell and brought back

⁸⁹ In particular the tales of Sleeping Beauty and Snow White, which both feature a heroine who falls into a period of prolonged, death-like sleep, which only the beloved can end; Tsvetaeva plays, as usual, all of the roles.

with him the souls of Adam and Eve, among others – an exploit commonly known as the “Harrowing of Hell.” Transforming Orpheus’ descent into Christ’s, the poet is empowered to transpose her own endeavors into a redemptive key; Orpheus failed in his attempt to bring Eurydice out of Hades, but Christ is successful in opening the doors of Hell. The poet, for her part, is motivated by love to “return [her beloved] from the deathbed” [верну с одра], but this same love can also empower her to “return alone” [вернусь одна], by her own choice. Passionate love gives way to patient love, and the remaining poems of the cycle express the poet’s resignation to wait for the right moment, with, it is true, varying degrees of actual patience, but a godlike certainty that in the fullness of time she and her beloved will be united:

Like a woman sage – I will fool

Samuel – and return alone:

For another is with you, and on the day

Of judgement we do not compete...

I circle and outlast.

I am and will be and will mine out

Your soul – as she mines out your lips,⁹⁰

The one who puts lips to rest...

[Как прозоливица – Самуила

Выморочу – и вернусь одна:

⁹⁰ There is another Rilkean echo here: “Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes” begins, “That was the deep uncanny mine of souls. / Like veins of silver ore, they silently / moved through its massive darkness” – with Orpheus acting as the ‘miner of souls.’

Ибо другая с тобой, и в судный

День не тягаются...

Вьюсь и длюсь.

Есть я и буду я и добуду

Душу – как губы добудет уст-

Упокойтелица...]

Setting her sights on an eventual union of souls – beyond “the day of judgement” – requires renunciation of any hope for a union of bodies, however; in the following poem “the hour, when I don’t see arms” [Час, когда не вижу рук] is also the hour when “Souls begin to see” [Души начинают видеть], and in the ninth poem of the cycle the poet expresses her faith in the one who “knows, whose / Palm – and into whose, who – and with whom” [он знает, чью / Ладонь – и в чью, кого – и с кем]. Still, it is not without pain and suffering – the same passion – that physical passion is given up: as Eurydice was ushered into immortality with a “snake’s bite,” “blood-roses,” and “cries,” the poet suffers the overcoming and disintegration (even decay) of her body as the soul’s expressions struggle to burst forth from it. In the seventh poem, at the hour of the beloved’s departure, in trying to bid an impossible farewell the poet is overcome by “tears – bigger than eyes” [слезы – больше глаз] and “waves – bigger than hand” [взмахи – больше рук], and testifies that “Speech lost sounds, / A wrist lost fingers” [Звуки растеряла речь / Пальцы растеряла пясть]. This patiently impatient period of simultaneous physical longing, physical stasis (“I will wait for you (eyes – on the ground,

/ Teeth in lips. Stupor. Stone)” [Буду ждать тебя (в землю – взглядь, / Зубы в губы. Столбняк. Булыжник)], and physical disintegration corresponds, in the terms of the new Christian schematic imposed over the Orphic scene, to the period between Christ’s death and his resurrection – but for the poet this is her entire life. She is doomed, as is her beloved, “To serve – uninterruptedly – forever, / And to live – for life – with no bliss! [...] In the archive, in the Elysium of cripples” [Служить – безвыездно – навек, / И жить – пожизненно – без нег! [...] В архив, в Элизиум калек]. From the moment she gives up any claim to “lips” until the moment when she will make her claim upon the soul, the poet and her beloved are bound in a living hell, “Slaves – slaves – slaves – slaves” [Рабы – рабы – рабы – рабы].

And yet there *is* a promise of something beyond this infernal life; Tsvetaeva ends the eighth poem of the cycle, in which, mantra-like, she repeatedly invokes the patience/passion which is both pain and pleasure (“Patiently, as one knaws hands” [Терпеливо, как руки гложут], “Patiently, as one stretches out bliss” [Терпеливо, как негу длят]) with a fantasy of the patiently-awaited end:

Scrape of the sledge runners, answering scrape

Of the door: the racket of taiga winds.

Descent of the highest decree:

– Change of kingdom and entry of the grandee.

And home:

Into the unearthly –

But mine.

[Скрип полозьев, ответный скрип

Двери: рокот ветров таёжных.

Высочайший пришел рескрипт:

– Смена царства и въезд вельможе.

И домой:

В неземной –

Да мой.]

Without a doubt, the “unearthly” kingdom is the true home of the poet, of all poets, and thus the natural site for the union of poets; also without a doubt, this kingdom is inaccessible in life. Except, perhaps, through glimpses, and only by way of certain paths. Tsvetaeva begins a letter to Pasternak (the same in which she states, “I don’t love meetings in life”) with an intimation of these paths:

My favorite mode of communication – otherworldly: a dream: to see in a dream.

Second – correspondence. A letter, like a certain mode of otherworldly communication, is less perfect than a dream, but follows the same laws.

[Мой любимый вид общения – потустороний: сон: видеть во сне.

А второе – переписка. Письмо, как некий вид потустороннего общения, менее совершенное, нежели сон, но законы те же.] (*DNV* 23)

Both of these modes of communication are already evoked in “Wires” among all the others. In the ninth poem the poet imagines that if she and her beloved “sleep” separately, they may be brought together:⁹¹

Spring brings sleep. Let’s sleep.
 Though separately, still it yields: sleep
 Brings together all incompleteness.
 Perhaps we will see each other in sleep.

[Весна наводит сон. Уснем.
 Хоть врозь, а все ж сдается: всё
 Разрозненности сводит сон.
 Авось увидимся во сне.]

As they are transcriptions of dreams, the poems also stand in for letters – the letters Tsvetaeva is *not* sending to Pasternak. But insofar as dreams and letters are “other-worldly,” they are by nature already poetic; for Tsvetaeva poetry is the native language of the other-world. To meet in poetry then, is an even higher form of communication, a higher form of correspondence or dream, and the closest thing to the eventual otherworldly meeting of souls which can be achieved in *this* world; every poem of “Wires” is, as we have seen, a poetic fantasy of the other-worldly union of poet-lovers.

⁹¹ This is one of Tsvetaeva’s favorite poetic themes, developed especially in the long poems which are ambivalently directed to Pasternak and to Rilke, including “From the Sea” [С моря] and “Attempt at a Room” [Попытка комнаты].

What does it mean, though, to meet in poetry? Throughout “Wires” Tsvetaeva has imagined her language as a direct line to one addressee, springing straight from her body and reaching all the way to his ears, no matter what technological intermediaries and poetic meters, measures, and predecessors may re-route, interrupt and stamp it with their forms. Telegraph wires, semaphore stations and wandering nightingales have been imagined as so many strings of Orpheus’ lyre, and the complicated melodies, harmonies and discords the poet has played upon them have all been orchestrated toward the goal of a meeting between two *poets* – in place of a missed meeting between two people. Within this poetic choir, singing with all of “Hades’ voices,” and often breaking into cacophony, the figure of Orpheus descending to “disturb” Eurydice with his music plays a part which is far from simple. On the one hand, Eurydice asserts that for those who have exchanged the body’s mortal life for the soul’s immortality, “the meeting is a blade” – a blade even for one, *precisely* for one who has no body to suffer its wound. To call upon a ghost with all the passion of the body is inappropriate, and for this reason “Orpheus should not come down to Eurydice.” At the same time, Orpheus did, and does, and always will have “come down to Eurydice,” sought the meeting which was inappropriate, impossible, and painful, and in so doing he established, establishes, and always will have established the poet’s power over and kinship with death and the dead. As Tsvetaeva will write later, addressing the ghost of Rilke, “We have blood-ties with that world” – “blood ties” descending from Orpheus (from his descent), from whom (and from which) all poets descend. As Rilke so famously wrote – a line which Tsvetaeva pointedly takes note of – “Once and for all / It’s Orpheus if it sings”; Tsvetaeva’s own addition to this formulation, in a letter to a still-living Rilke: “If it dies, among poets.” The meeting between Orpheus

and Eurydice both must not, and must, take place, over the sheets of the marriage bed or the death bed (which is the same bed), within the “ample cut” of immortality or on the white sheets of a notebook. The unmet meeting of poets is a meeting of voices, voices which are carried by and born from bodies, but in Tsvetaeva these bodies always appear fragmented and incomplete, manifesting *only* what is necessary to create the poem – telegraph poles and wires, lung cavity and vocal cords or, finally, womb and umbilical cord.

Out of the relations Tsvetaeva establishes, in “Eurydice – to Orpheus,” between marriage and death, between the pains of death and the pleasures (and pains) of sex, a seed is sown which grows through all the patience of the cycle’s remainder until, in the final poem, it springs forth – “a living child: / Song!” [живое чадо: / Песнь!]. With this revelation Tsvetaeva directly responds to Pasternak’s own revelation, in the letter with which he ends their correspondence, that his wife is expecting a child – a communication which he prefaces with the declaration that, in his marriage, he chose to avoid “poetry and catastrophe” [«стихов и катастроф»] so as to give life “not to phantoms, *but living children*” [не призраком, *но живым детям*] (DNV 63). Pasternak, so Tsvetaeva understands, has chosen life and “living children,” but she, like Eurydice, chooses death, which is to say, poetry. Thus she relegates him, by his own choice, to “others – in rosy heaps / Of breasts... In the hypothetical fractions / Of weeks...” [С другими – в розовые груды / Грудей... В гадателные дробы / Недель...] – to the temporality and spatiality of pink, pregnant domesticity. But Eurydice, having known passion, also goes pregnant into death (like Rilke’s Eurydike, who is “deep within herself, like a woman heavy with child [...] filled with her vast death”), and likewise Orpheus, having known death, returns into

life pregnant with his own (and her own) death. While Pasternak claims to have made his choice for the sake of the “living child” he can father, Tsvetaeva offers this: that both he and she can be father and mother, that both can fertilize, carry, and give birth to “living children.” She promises him: “But I will be in you / A treasure chest of likenesses / Picked up – in the sand, on the gravel / By chance – overheard / In the wind, along the tracks... / In all the breadless outposts where youth roamed” [А я тебе пребуду / Сокровищницею подобий // По случаю – в песках, на щебнях / Подобранных, – в ветрах, на шпалах / Подслушанных... Вдоль всех бесхлебных / Застав, где молодость шаталась] – in which verses he is imagined as pregnant with her, and she in turn pregnant with a multitude of poetic embryos. Both are thus *imagined* as capable of giving birth to children by each other, but also of giving birth *to* each other, and each will be born and reborn already pregnant with new “likenesses.” “This shawl,” the poet asks, “do you know it? With a chill / Wrapped tightly around, hotter than hell / Ripped open...” [Шаль, узнаешь ее? Простудой / Запахнутую, жарче ада / Распахнутую...]. In the chill of their missed meeting and Pasternak’s request that she no longer address *him*, Tsvetaeva wraps the shawl of her language – their shared language – around herself and “looks *in*,” and all the boundless sorrow she seems, throughout “Wires,” to be sending out into the world (building, like Rilke’s Orpheus, “a world of Lament” [eine Welt aus Klage]) she is in fact sending through her own internal wires, vibrating along all her veins and feeding that “miracle / Of the depths” [чудо / Недр] which grows and warms her from the inside until, “hotter than hell” language is “ripped open” – and “Song” emerges, itself a “living child.” In closing the cycle the poet presents it (the cycle) as a “firstborn” [первенец] which is “more / Than all firstborns and all Rachels...” [пуще / Всех

первенцев и всех Рахилей...]. With this she overcomes even herself, putting the otherworldly firstborn that is “Song” before any worldly child, but also before the mother and wife – not the first, fertile wife (Leah), but the beloved, promised wife, Rachel – i.e., the poet. *All* “the most authentic sediment of womb-depths” [Недр достовернейшую гущу], a category which includes any flesh and blood children born by any flesh and blood women (not excluding herself) the poet vows to “overcome with imaginations” [мнимостями пересилю]. “Phantoms” [призраки] these “imagination” children may be, but in the “phantasmal house” [в призрачном доме] which is the native home of all poets, it is they who are “reality” [явь].

We began our consideration of the poetic encounter between Tsvetaeva and Pasternak with a reference to their mutual resistance to this encounter, as a resistance to anything “new.” Initially, in Tsvetaeva’s formulations of this resistance, she presents it as resistance both to any worldly encounter beyond that of passing acquaintance, and to any encounter with the poetry of the other. Appropriately, each makes a first significant impression on the other through poetry, and though this does lead to a desire to meet in person, the resistance to this meeting under the auspices of “the great lie of face-to-face” is maintained on both sides – and thus all the desire is diverted and translated into the realm of poetry. For Tsvetaeva this results in an incredible lyrical outpouring, of which “Wires” stands out as her most extended and comprehensive address directly to her “brother-poet.” (It is no interpretive stretch, by the way, to read this cycle as addressed to Pasternak; when the two poets do resume their correspondence, Tsvetaeva almost immediately sends him “Wires” along with a number of other poems from the same period, all of which she later includes in *After Russia*, telling him, “Of the poetry I have

sent only that which is addressed to you without mediation, point-blank. Otherwise I would have to send the whole book!” [Из стихов посылала только те, что непосредственно к Вам, в упор. Иначе пришлось бы переписывать всю книгу!] (DNV 90), and prefaces “Wires” with a dedication to Pasternak.) Though these meetings-in-poetry are openly acknowledged to be fantasies, imaginations, illusions, and phantoms, they are not the *objects* of desire but rather the *products* of diverted or obstructed desire (of sublimation, to put it in Freudian terms) and, as such, may be illusory or phantasmal in this world, but are fully alive in “that world,” the otherworld, the (as we will see in reading Tsvetaeva’s “New Year’s Greeting” to Rilke) *new world*.

“New Year’s Greeting”: *An open letter to poetry*

It is Pasternak who initiates the correspondence between Tsvetaeva and Rilke, following his receipt of Rilke’s response to a letter from his father,⁹² in which he (Rilke) tells of having recently encountered and admired Pasternak’s poetry. To Pasternak the knowledge that Rilke is aware of him as a poet is profoundly affecting; he confesses to Rilke: “I am indebted to you for the fundamental cast of my character, the nature of my intellectual being. They are your creations [...] The sense of fateful tension, of the presence of the incredible, of impossibility surmounted, which penetrates me as I write to you cannot be reached by verbal expression” (L 64). Augmenting Pasternak’s “sense of fateful tension” is the fact of his having read for the first time, on the same day that he received Rilke’s letter, Tsvetaeva’s “Poem of the End,” which causes an “inner upheaval.” The coincidence of these “two accidents” prompts in Pasternak a desire to

⁹² Pasternak’s father, Leonid Osipovich, was a prominent painter in Russia before moving with his family to Germany in 1921, and met Rilke for the first time in Russia in 1899.

connect Rilke with Tsvetaeva directly, and he expresses this desire to Rilke; describing Tsvetaeva to him as a “born poet” and one who “may be considered, just like myself, as a part of your own poetic history, outreach, and effect”:

I dare to wish—oh, please, please, forgive me this audacity and what must seem an imposition—I would wish, I would dare wish, that for her part she might experience something akin to the joy that welled in me thanks to you. I am imagining what one of your books, perhaps the *Duino Elegies*, which title I know only by hearsay, would mean to her, with an inscription by you. Do, please, pardon me! For in the refracted light of this deep and broad fortuity, in the blindness of this joyful state, may I fancy that this refraction is truth, that my request can be fulfilled and be of some use? To whom, for what? That I could not say. Perhaps to the poet, who is contained in the work and who goes through the courses of time by different names. (*L* 66-67)

It is in the name of this “poet” that Rilke, immediately upon receiving Pasternak’s letter, writes to Tsvetaeva in Paris, and sends her copies of his *Duino Elegies* and *Sonnets to Orpheus*; he inscribes the former:

For Marina Ivanovna Tsvetayeva
 We touch each other. How? With wings that beat,
 With very distance touch each other’s ken.
One poet only lives, and now and then
 Who bore him, and who bears him now, will meet.
 (*L* 105)

With this he affirms Pasternak's conception of "the poet, who is contained in the work and who goes through the courses of time by many names"; for Tsvetaeva, however, "Rainer Maria Rilke" is more than one of the "many names" that "the poet" has borne:

Rainer Maria Rilke!

May I hail you like this? You, poetry incarnate, must know, after all, that your very name—is a poem. [...] Your name does not rhyme with our time—stems from earlier or later—has always been. [...] You are not my dearest poet ("dearest"—a level), you are a phenomenon of nature, which cannot be mine and which one does not so much love as undergo, or (still too little) the fifth element incarnate: poetry itself or (still too little) that whence poetry comes to be and which is greater than it (you).

(*L* 105-106)

Across all of these emotionally charged passages the impression emerges that both Pasternak and Tsvetaeva consider themselves to be, already, derived from Rilke's afterlife, "part of [his] own poetic history, outreach, and effect," and that to correspond with him is not like corresponding with another poet (not even like the correspondence between the two of them), but like corresponding with "poetry itself," receiving letters from outside of time and space. The fact of Rilke's living existence in the world is almost unbelievable; less than a year before Tsvetaeva had apparently passed on the (erroneous) news to Pasternak⁹³ that Rilke was dead, and Leonid Pasternak's initial letter to Rilke in December of 1925 is written on the occasion of his having discovered to his surprise and joy that the poet was still alive, telling him, "At the time of our revolution, cut off from

⁹³ This letter has not survived, though Pasternak response to it on August 16, 1925, is collected in *Души начинают видеть* (121-126).

Europe and the world of culture, in the nightmarish conditions of our Russian life we—that is, my family and I—bitterly mourned your death, rumors of which had reached our ears” (L 46). Approximately one year after this letter Pasternak’s friends are forced to mourn his death again – for this year, then, he writes as one who has returned from death, but not quite enough to do away with the distance between himself and the world. His language is infused with an awareness that he is no longer living in his own time, that though he may be united with Pasternak and Tsvetaeva through their shared burden, that “*one* poet,” *they* are those “who bear him now,” while is now the one “who bore him.”

Pasternak and Tsvetaeva respond differently to their sudden contact with “poetry itself”: after his initial letter, Pasternak feels that he is incapable of addressing Rilke again, but Tsvetaeva vaults headlong into the correspondence, trying by any means to lessen the distance between herself and her idol, not by bringing him closer to herself, but bringing herself closer to him. For example, she writes to Rilke in German (in which she was more capable than she represents herself to be) rather than in Russian (Rilke admits that his comfort with the language has diminished) or in French (though he tells her that he is “*just as* familiar with French as with German”), and gives her reasons for this choice: “I might have said all of this to you more clearly in Russian, but I don’t want to give you the trouble of reading your way into it, I would rather take the trouble of writing my way into it” (L 107); “I wonder if you understand me, given my bad German? French I write more fluently; that’s why I don’t want to write to you in French. From me to you nothing should flow. Fly, yes! And failing that, better to halt and stumble” (L 115). It is clear that Tsvetaeva is deeply concerned with the proper way to approach Rilke, and that this is entirely a question of language. She would like to close the gap between them, but

without requiring him to exert himself, thus she writes in German so as not to give him any trouble; she does not want to address him too boldly, too “fluently,” and so she writes in German, choosing to translate the motive impulse of her thoughts into a language in which she is aware they may “halt and stumble.” Rilke responds to this last query with an affirmation that Tsvetaeva has, indeed, succeeded in translating *herself*:

Your German—no, it doesn’t “stumble,” it just takes heavier steps now and then, like the steps of one who is going down a stone staircase with stairs of unequal height and cannot estimate as he comes down when his foot is going to come to rest, right now or suddenly further down than he thought. What strength is in you, poet, to achieve your intent even in this language, and be accurate and yourself. *Your* gait ringing on the steps, your tone, *you*. Your lightness, your controlled, bestowed weight. (L127)

It is already a step-by-step approach to death, this self-translation into the language in which she is the least fluent, but which is, for Tsvetaeva *as a poet*, more ‘natural’ because it is the language of that “phenomenon of nature,” “poetry incarnate.” In “New Year’s Greeting” Tsvetaeva parenthetically remarks, “Though German’s more natural to me than Russian, angelic is more natural than all” [«пусть русского родней немецкий / Мне, всех ангельский родней!»]⁹⁴. The “natural” [“родной”, which is “natural,” “native,” “home,” (as in “home-town”) and “related by blood”] “angelic” language is very present to Tsvetaeva in her correspondence with Rilke – it hangs over their letters to each other

⁹⁴ In Russian the word for “German,” “немецкий,” is derived from the verb “неметь” – “to become dumb” (i.e., speechless) or “to become numb” – without saying it explicitly, Tsvetaeva implies that to speak or write in German is to approach the mute, soundless “angelic” language, while growing numb to the language of this world.

like a cloud. Having read Rilke's collection of French verse, *Vergers*, Tsvetaeva writes to him:

Writing poetry is in itself translating, from the mother tongue into another, whether French or German should make no difference. No language is the mother tongue. Writing poetry is rewriting it. [...] A poet may write in French but he cannot be a French poet. [...] The reason one becomes a poet (if it were even possible to *become* one, if one *were* not one before all else!) is to avoid being French, Russian, etc., in order to be everything. Or: one is a poet because one is not French. Nationality—segregation and enclosure. Orpheus bursts nationality, or he extends it to such breadth and width that everyone (bygone and being) is included! (*L* 221)

In her elaboration of this concept of the “mother” or “native tongue,” which is a negation or explosive expansion of the attribution of “nationality” to poetry, and which, for Tsvetaeva, is the reason a poet is a poet, Tsvetaeva begins to intimate that for her death (and life) only mean something in language. The ‘national’ border Orpheus breaks is, above all, that between life and death; translation bridges this borderline. Viewing death as a translation from the realm of national languages into the “mother tongue,” Tsvetaeva regards Rilke's decision to write in French at the end of his life as already a symptom of his impending translation, expressing this view to Pasternak after Rilke's death:

About him. His last book was in French: Verger [sic]. He was weary of his native tongue [...] He was weary of his all-powerfulness, he wanted an apprenticeship, so he seized upon the language least congenial to a poet—French (*poésie*)—and again he could do it, was doing it, was suddenly

weariness again. The trouble, it seems, lay not in the German language but in the human language. Desire for the French language turned out to be desire for the angelic language, for the other-worldly language. In Verger he utters the angelic language.⁹⁵

[О нем. Последняя его книга была французская, Verger. Он устал от языка своего рождения. [...] Он устал от всемогущества, захотел ученичества, схватился за неблагодарнейший для поэта из языков – французский («proésie») – опять смог, еще раз смог, сразу устал. Дело оказалось не в немецком, а в человеческом. Жажда французского оказалась жаждой ангельского, тусветного. Книжкой Verger он проговорился на ангельском языке.] (*DNV* 278)

Rilke's proximity to the "other-worldly language" appears as a symptom of his correspondence as well as his poetry; he ends a long excursus on what he feels to be a growing "discord" between his soul and his body: "All this about *me*, dear Marina, pardon me! And pardon also the opposite, if all of a sudden I should turn uncommunicative – which ought not to keep you from writing to *me*" (*L* 127). Thus the interruptions of his letters caused by his advancing illness figure as mute intrusions of the "language of angels" into his own (but not his own) already half-mute language, and Tsvetaeva follows him as he distances himself from life; having received Rilke's warning that he may "turn uncommunicative," Tsvetaeva immediately writes to Pasternak: "Boris! My isolation from life becomes even more irreparable. I keep moving, I have resettled, carrying with me all my passion, all my savings, not as a shade – bloodless, but carrying

⁹⁵ For the most part I follow the translation of this passage from *Letters: 1926*, but I have altered a few details.

so much of it, that I would intoxicate and poison all of Hades. Oh, how it would talk its head off, my Hades!” [«Борис! Мой отрыв от жизни становится всё непоправимей. Я переселяюсь, переселилась, унося с собой всю страсть, всю нерастрату не тенью – обескровленной, а столько ее унося, что напоила⁹⁶ б и опоила бы весь Аид. О, у меня бы он заговорил, Аид!»] (DNV 205). Imagining herself rather as Odysseus than Orpheus (a rare moment for Tsvetaeva), she sees herself venturing into the underworld and feeding the souls on her own blood (her “passion”) so generously and excessively that “Hades” would begin to “talk its head off,” and thus her silence in life, her “isolation” from it *because* she has saved up her passion so faithfully, becomes a positive clamor of voices in the other-world. In the same way, Rilke’s actual death, when it comes, figures in his correspondence with Tsvetaeva as only another interruption on his side – which does not keep her from writing to *him*, but does occasion a change in her language – into Russian, and into poetry.

“Happy New year – world/light – edge/realm – haven!”⁹⁷ [С НОВЫМ ГОДОМ – СВЕТОМ – КРАЕМ – КРОВОМ!] – so begins Tsvetaeva’s “first letter” [первое письмо] in his “new place” [на новом месте], and she explicitly comments on her new mode of address:

Not to be forgotten, my friend,

The following: that if Russian

⁹⁶ There is a discrepancy between the 2004 *Души начинают видеть* and the 1994 *Собрание сочинений в семи томах* (two volumes of which are comprised of Tsvetaeva’s correspondence), edited by Lev Mnukhin, over this word: DNV gives “напоила бы” – “I would water,” “make drunk” or even “impregnate”; SS gives, instead, “надоила бы” – “to obtain milk.” I have followed DNV and thus translated “напоила бы” as “I would intoxicate,” for the sake of the felicitous similarity to the intoxicating and poisonous women of *Les Fleurs du mal*, but the other possibility is equally interesting, playing up the deadly maternal figure in Tsvetaeva’s poetry instead; Ciepiela has followed this line of interpretation, reading “надоила бы” instead of “напоила бы,” although she cites DNV as the source for this (187).

⁹⁷ Both the words *светь* and *край* have strong double meanings which are relevant to the meaning of the line, so I have rendered them both rather than choosing one.

Characters come instead of German ones –
 That's not because now, as they say,
 Anything goes, and the dead (poor) man eats anything –
 Not batting an eye! – but because *that* world,
 Ours, – in Novodevichy, at thirteen
 I understood: is not a- but all-lingual.

[Не позабыть бы, друг мой,
 Следующего: что если буквы
 Русские пошли взамен немецких –
 То не потому что нынче, дескать,
 Всё сойдет, что мертвый (нищий) всё съест –
 Не сморгнет! – а потому что *тот* свет,
 Наш, – тринадцати, в Новодевичьем
 Поняла: не без- а все-язычен.] (*SP* IV:274)

For Tsvetaeva to begin to write to Rilke in Russian is far more than a simple replacement of German letters with Russian – if Tsvetaeva descends, with the occasional heavy step, in German, in Russian she soars. Having sent some of her simplest poetry to Rilke in life, she was disappointed to learn that it was hard for him to read – “New Year’s Greeting” is, by contrast, on a level with any of her most challenging and ambitious experiments in and upon the Russian language. For Rilke the man it would have been difficult, but “in the dead Rilke,” Joseph Brodsky writes, “Tsvetaeva found what every poet seeks: the supreme listener” (199). That Rilke’s death, in Tsvetaeva’s conception, makes it possible

for him to read her poetry is, in a way, a great gift, for *Rilke* the poet endowed with “all-lingual” fluency is the best possible addressee for her poems that Tsvetaeva could ever imagine.

Rilke’s change in state, however, is not simply a border-crossing into a realm where, among other new conditions, there is a new language – for Tsvetaeva “life” and “death” are conditioned *by* language, conditions *of* language, habits of speech of which the general understanding, while customary, is not necessary; “New Year’s Greeting” re-derives the meanings of life and death by way of poetry. Brodsky observes that “throughout the entire poem Tsvetaeva never once uses the phrase ‘your death’,” that “she avoids it even when the line allows it” (223). She even calls direct attention to her avoidance of it, explaining to her addressee:

Shall I tell you, what I did when I found out about...?

Sssh... I slipped. Out of habit.

For a long time I’ve put life and death in quotes,

Like empty-rumored gossip.

[Рассказать, что сделала узнав про...?

Тсс... Оговорилаь. По привычке.

Жизнь и смерть давно беру в кавычки,

Как заведомо-пустые сплёты.] (*SP IV:273*)

Indeed, she dramatizes this practice within the poem, transcribing the conversation in which she “found out,” and in which she is asked – and refuses – to write an “essay” about this ‘news.’ The details of Rilke’s death – the where and when – belong “In the

News and the Days” [В Новостях и в Днях]; they are already old news, fit only for the newspapers, and gossip at the New Year’s party which the poet’s interlocutor invites her to. Tsvetaeva would rather spend her New Year’s Eve celebrating Rilke’s new life – or new death – with him alone, asking him about what happened *next*. “How was the ride,” she asks, and “Your surroundings, Rainer, how do you feel?” Writing to her “friend” from his “yesterday’s...homeland,” which is now for him “already one out of the stars,” again in her very habits of speech she seeks to distance herself from *this* world, to replace in language the mundane with the heavenly:

I pronounce life and death with a footnote,
 Starred (the night, for which I’m hoping:
 Instead of the cerebral hemisphere –
 The astral!)

[Жизнь и смерть произношу со сноской,
 Звездочкою (ночь, которой чаю:
 Вместо мозгового полушарья –
 Звездное!)] (SP IV:274)

In repeating her pronunciations of “life and death,” each time “with a footnote, / Starred,” the poet attempts to reproduce in her language the “astral” hemisphere which is now Rilke’s outlook (in which she herself scarcely appears); by writing “a page consisting solely of footnotes to Rilke – that is, stars” (Brodsky, 229), she seeks to exchange her own perspective for his.

For both poets, then, the death of one does not *occasion*, but *means only* (though this is no small matter) a change of language for both, which is a return to the “native” language for both, and an enrichment of the poetic possibilities of language for both. Tsvetaeva returns to Russian, the language of *her* poetry, with a confidence that now her highest heights will not be too high for her “supreme listener”; Rilke’s returns to “*that world*,” with which all poets have “blood ties,” and which is “all-lingual” – opening to him the poetic reservoirs of every language at once, and all together. Death, then, is an implicit and urgent command to write, although the poet expresses uncertainly over how to respond to it: “What can I do in the new-year’s noise / With this internal rhyme: Rainer – *umer*⁹⁸” [Что мне делать в новогоднем шуме / С этой внутренней рифмой: Райнер – умер] (*SP IV:275*). When Rilke’s death is finally stated plainly, it appears not as an historical fact or event in the world, but as a new rhyme, an “internal rhyme” which has not yet fully been internalized into the structure or meter of Tsvetaeva’s poetry. It is a rhyming couplet only insofar as it is a two-word poem – “Райнер – умер” – echoing in the poet’s head but undissolved in the current of her verse, and it is as if the fact of the rhyme requires a new consideration both of the meaning of the verb – “to die” – and of the meaning of the name – “Rainer” – as if the name had always been destined for the rhyme.⁹⁹ So much for herself – but what about him? “The only question Tsvetaeva asks here in earnest,” Brodsky asserts, “i.e., whose answer is not known to her,”¹⁰⁰ is the

⁹⁸ This is a rhyme only in Russian, which is why I have transliterated “*умер*” – “died” rather than translating it.

⁹⁹ Tsvetaeva repeatedly referenced the idea that certain names rhymed “in *that world*,” in the poem “*Двое*” she calls Homer “blind” for not realizing that “Achilles” and “Helen” were two such names (in Russian the names are more harmonious), and for separating them in life – according to certain myths Helen and Achilles were married in the afterlife.

¹⁰⁰ A rather remarkable assertion, considering that it implies the claim that Tsvetaeva knows the answer, for example, to the question, “Isn’t God – a *growing* baobab tree?”

following: “How are you writing in the new place?” [Как пишется на новом месте?]. It is inconceivable that he does *not* write, because “if *you’re* there – poetry *is there*: you yourself are – / Poetry!” [*есть ты – есть стих*: сам и есть ты – / Стих!]. However, for Tsvetaeva the very stance of the writing body is so intimately bound to the act of writing, that her imagination fails in the attempt to conceive of writing without this body, and this stance:

How are you writing in that good dwelling
With no desk for the elbow, no forehead for the hand
(Cupped hand).

[Как пишется в хорошей жисти
Без стола для локтя, лба для кисти
(Горсти).] (*SP IV:277*)

We can so clearly see the poet, elbow on her desk, forehead resting in her cupped hand, writing these very lines and trying to work out with them how they could be written in any other way. Her only solution is to turn her attention away from the writing hand to the sounding voice, which is more compatible with the “booming place, the sonorous place / Like Aeolus’ empty tower” which she has already envisioned as Rilke’s new “haven”:

Rainer, are you happy with the new rhymes?
For properly interpreting the word
Rhyme – what – if not – a whole new row
Of rhymes – is Death?

Nowhere to go: the language learned.

A whole row of new meanings and new

Harmonies.

[Райнер, радуешься новым рифмам?

Ибо правильно толкуя слово

Рифма – что – как не – целый ряд новых

Рифм – Смерть?

Некуда: язык изучен.

Целый ряд значений и созвучий

Новых.] (*SP IV:277*)

The death of a poet means this: that a language has been learned, mastered, and outgrown – the death came precisely at the time when the poet had need of a “whole row of new rhymes.” So Tsvetaeva congratulates Rilke on his “New sound-tracing” [С новым звуконачертанием], knowing that her own poetic lexicon has been enriched and expanded by the new “internal rhyme” that his death has given her – and in doing so has brought her one rhyme, one step, closer to her own “Death.” It must have been in this spirit that she wrote, in February of 1941 – the second to last poem of which there is any record, before her death:

Time to take off the amber,

Time to exchange the language,¹⁰¹

Time to put out the lamp,

¹⁰¹ “Словарь” is the dictionary, glossary, vocabulary – the complete collection of words [слова] in a language.

Over the door...

[Пора снимать янтарь,

Пора менять словарь,

Пора гасить фонарь,

Надверный...] (*SP* III:212)

Chapter 4:

“Otherworldly Evening” and the problem of autobiography in Tsvetaeva

Tsvetaeva’s voice had the sound of something unfamiliar and frightening to the Russian ear: the unacceptability of the world.

It was not the reaction of a revolutionary or a progressive demanding changes for the better, nor was it the conservatism or snobbery of an aristocrat who remembers better days. On the level of content, it was a question of the tragedy of existence in general, par excellence, outside a temporal context. On the plane of sound, it was a matter of the voice striving in the only direction possible for it: upward.

Joseph Brodsky, “Footnote to a Poem”

The Life and Lies of Marina Tsvetaeva

There is a striking conundrum in Tsvetaeva scholarship (in which category I include, which is not perhaps an obvious gesture, both biographical and literary critical works): that her writings are affirmed to be the best source of biographical information, while at the same time the known facts of her life are used as the primary interpretive source for her writings, and particularly her poetry (perhaps because of its complexity). This situation can be easily demonstrated with a selection of passages from critical and biographical works which represent two prevalent attitudes. Let us turn, first, to a passage from the beginning of Simon Karlinsky’s *Marina Tsvetaeva: Her Life and Art*; Karlinsky, who was almost entirely responsible for introducing Tsvetaeva to an English-speaking

audience with the former work (based on his dissertation) and his later *Marina Tsvetaeva: The Woman, her World, and her Poetry*, is consistently credited in the acknowledgements of critical studies in English of Tsvetaeva's work, as a sort of godfather of Tsvetaeva scholarship:

It would have been unwise to attempt a biography of Cvetaeva without access to so much of the material that is not available in the West, had she herself not told us so much about her life. The view of the world reflected in the writings of Marina Cvetaeva is one of the most personal ever recorded in literature. Except for her ethical-philosophical essays, the autobiographical element played a major role in everything Cvetaeva wrote. A considerable portion of her prose works belongs to the autobiographical genre: personal memoirs, reminiscences, extracts from her diaries. Less personal prose pieces, such as her memoirs about other writers [...] often contain autobiographical digressions, at times supported by precisely dated quotations from Cvetaeva's unpublished diaries.

The lyric poetry of Cvetaeva is collected into volumes which are at the same time chronological journals of her emotional and intellectual day-to-day life. This is why Cvetaeva found it necessary to add explanatory notes whenever, for thematic reasons, she dislodged a poem from its strict chronological sequence [...] The collections of verse published by Cvetaeva between 1910 and 1928 [...] constitute an uninterrupted lyrical diary of her experiences and emotions between 1908 and 1925. The biographical material in the lyrical poems of Cvetaeva

appears at times in cryptic and veiled form, yet the comparison of many of these poems with some of the recently published Cvetaeva letters [...] and with some of her prose pieces [...] shows to what extent her poetry contains factual material.

[...] In view of this wealth of factual material in Cvetaeva's own writings, the following biographical essay will be based primarily on her own testimony, drawing on other available sources to fill in gaps and to describe periods in her life for which she left no written record. (8-9)

Karlinsky makes his main point – i.e., that “the autobiographical element played a major role in everything Cvetaeva wrote”¹⁰² – in a number of ways. Beyond those of her prose works which seem to need no justification for classing them within the “autobiographical genre,” Karlinsky particularly refers to Tsvetaeva's collected lyric poetry as “chronological journals of her emotional and intellectual day-to-day life” and “an uninterrupted lyrical diary of her experiences and emotions.” Thus he declares Tsvetaeva's “testimony” as the primary source for his “biographical essay,” using her “autobiographical” prose pieces but also her lyric poetry, though acknowledging that in the poems the “biographical material [...] appears at times in cryptic and veiled form.” Still, in comparison with Tsvetaeva's prose and letters (which are evidently presumed to offer their biographical material in a less “cryptic and veiled form”) Karlinsky purports to be able to show “to what extent her poetry contains factual material.”

An anecdote Karlinsky relates almost thirty years later, at a conference celebrating Tsvetaeva's centennial, illustrates to what extent the “factual material”

¹⁰² While Karlinsky excludes Tsvetaeva's “ethical-philosophical essays” from this formulation, I would in fact argue that essays such as “The Poet in Time” and “Art in the Light of Conscience” can be interpreted autobiographically as easily as much of Tsvetaeva's other work.

contained in Tsvetaeva's poetry was truly necessary in order to compose a satisfactory biographical essay:

With regard to the problematic biography of Marina Tsvetaeva, I encountered difficulty when I started work on my dissertation about her life and art in 1961. Immediately it became clear that it would be necessary to establish the year of her birth. The ranks of available sources at the time, including the Great Soviet Encyclopedia of 1957 and Fyodor Stepun's introductory essay in a New York edition of Tsvetaeva's prose from 1953, all asserted that she was born in 1894. In other, earlier publications the year was given as 1892. I struggled over this problem of the year of her birth for around four months. The calendar and Tsvetaeva's poems came to my aid. In two poems it is said that she was born in the night between Saturday and Sunday, and moreover that the Saturday was the day of John the Evangelist, that is, the 26 of September by the old calendar (the 9th of October by the new) [...] The calendar clarified that the day of John the Evangelist fell on a Saturday in 1892 (but in 1894 it was celebrated on a weekday). (15-16)¹⁰³

This tale, obviously appropriate to the occasion as the conference was gathered to celebrate the 100 year anniversary of Tsvetaeva's birth, is also especially significant in light of the question of biography considering that the date of birth is one of those first facts without which a biographer is likely to be rather at sea. Indeed it is a valuable piece of detective work. Still, we must ask, with all due respect for Professor Karlinsky and all he did for Tsvetaeva's legacy: why should either poetry or calendar be believed? Clearly

¹⁰³ My translation from the Russian.

Tsvetaeva placed a certain importance on the date she names in the poems as that of her birth – an importance beyond the simple fact of it, or why would she have written two poems in which this date figures? There is no doubt that Tsvetaeva habitually altered facts (an alteration beyond ‘encryption’ or ‘enveiling,’ and which is much closer to what would be called lying) for the sake of poetic felicity. If the “night between Saturday and Sunday,” immediately following the day of John the Evangelist, had a special meaning for Tsvetaeva, she would be perfectly capable of seizing on this day as the “true” day of her birth – true with a higher truth than that of facts and dates; it is Tsvetaeva herself who writes “the date on the calendar lies...”. None of this is intended to cast actual doubt on Karlinsky’s research, or even on the date he (and subsequently all contemporary scholars) names as that of Tsvetaeva’s birth. Rather, I would simply like to trouble the assumption that Tsvetaeva is the best, most reliable source for “factual material” about her own life – perhaps even less about her own life than the lives of others. To trust her poetry to convey biographical information, even if in a “cryptic and veiled form,” seems immediately problematic, and calling this poetry a “journal” or “diary” does not obviate the problem – people have, I believe been known to lie even in journals or diaries. Poetry is one thing, then, but other of Tsvetaeva’s writings – particularly her “autobiographical” prose pieces and her letters – are apparently another. It is in comparison with her prose and letters that Karlinsky claims to be able to discover “to what extent her poetry contains factual material,” clearly with the understanding that in these sources the factual material is less “cryptic and veiled,” or not at all, and thus capable of decoding or unveiling the poetry. While at some, even at many, points this understanding may be justified, it is not necessarily so, as Tsvetaeva was just as free with her alteration of facts

in her prose and letters as in her poetry. One example is particularly fitting here: in an early letter to Rilke, dated “Ascension Day 1926,” Tsvetaeva casually subtracts at least two years from the ages of all members of her family (excepting her son, Mur, as this would have taken him back before his conception): “Children, in the plural? Darling, I had to smile. Children – that word stretches (two or seven?). Two, darling, a twelve-year-old girl and a one-year-old boy [...] My husband – a volunteer soldier all his young life, barely thirty-one years old (I am turning thirty-one in September)” (121). Generously rejuvenating her family for whatever reasons of her own, Tsvetaeva here presents the year of her birth (if my math is correct) as 1895. This circumstance, that Tsvetaeva’s writings – the continuum of all her writings – can be seen as the source of clarification and the source of obfuscation over the very same biographical facts, even the most basic, and that no genre of text immediately earns itself more trust than another, is perfectly representative of the place of autobiography in Tsvetaeva’s oeuvre.

Beginning with Karlinsky we can see an evolution in how critics in the West have treated the relationship between Tsvetaeva’s biography and her writings, which is driven mainly by the gradual availability of sources of information about Tsvetaeva’s life other than her prose and poetry. During the Second World War and later the Cold War, information about Tsvetaeva was available almost solely from her literary works, so many of which had been published in Europe, and from those of her friends or acquaintances abroad who were still living; Karlinsky’s 1964 dissertation, which formed the basis of *Marina Tsvetaeva: Her Life and Art*, draws mainly from these sources, and thus it is more than clear why in this work he relies heavily on Tsvetaeva’s poetry and prose for biographical information. Although in the early 1960s, when it became safer for

Russian intellectuals to speak publicly about the past, some of Tsvetaeva's contemporaries, including Pasternak, began to praise her work and discuss her life, it was not until 1965 that a generous edition of her poetry was published, annotated by Ariadna Efron. Efron began to publish some of her mother's correspondence in 1969, and published her own memoirs in 1973 and 1975, and Anastasia Tsvetaeva published her memories of her childhood with Marina in 1966. With the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1985 a great deal more information became available to all readers, scholars, and biographers; Karlinsky's second critical biography of Tsvetaeva, published in 1986, responds to this watershed, as do Viktoria Schweitzer's 1988 *Byt i byt'ie Mariny Tsvetaevoi* and Jane Taubman's 1989 *A Life Through Poetry: Marina Tsvetaeva's Lyric Poetry*. Given this timeline of availability of Tsvetaeva's writings, versus information about her life, we can identify three distinct stages in the treatment of the relationship between her biography and her writings: 1) in the absence of other sources, her poetry and prose are used to illuminate her biography – Karlinsky is the obvious pioneer here; 2) as more biographical information becomes available from outside sources, it begins to be clear that Tsvetaeva is not strictly "truthful" when it comes to representing her life in her art, and studies begin to focus on parsing out the difference between life and art, and examining Tsvetaeva's "mytho-poetics" – Taubman's work is a forerunner in this area; 3) with a wealth now of literary and biographical sources, more detailed works of literary criticism begin to appear, dealing with the extremely complex functioning of myth in Tsvetaeva's art and life – Olga Hasty's 1996 *Tsvetaeva's Orphic Journeys in the Worlds of the Word* and Alyssa Dinega's 2001 *A Russian Psyche* stand out in this field.

We can see this progression more clearly in passages from some of these works, and see also that no matter when they are writing, every biographer and critic of Tsvetaeva is bound to take up the question of whether and how to illuminate Tsvetaeva's biography through reference to her writings, or whether and how to use the details of Tsvetaeva's biography as a source of illumination for her writings – especially her poetry. Taubman writes:

This book will study the most important aspect of Tsvetaeva's work, her lyric poems [...] and attempt to "read" them (in most of the contemporary senses of that verb) as a continuously unfolding, self-referential diary. Though it must inevitably sort out the internal and external events of Tsvetaeva's life as it studies their transformation into poetry, it is not a literary biography [...] I will treat other aspects of Tsvetaeva's work (her prose, long narrative poems, verse dramas, and letters) only as they serve to illuminate the lyric diary. We must not forget that we will be using biography, when necessary, to illuminate some very difficult and complex poetry, not the other way around, and that it is Tsvetaeva's transformation of her life into art which makes that life of interest. (2-3)

Picking up on Karlinsky's concept of the "lyrical diary," Taubman proposes neither to write a literary biography (she defers to Viktoria Schweitzer's "monumental" *Byt i byt'ie Mariny Tsvetaevoi* as having already achieved this) nor to provide a "comprehensive overview of [Tsvetaeva's] entire oeuvre" (she credits Karlinsky for having done so in his two books), but she openly admits that her book will be concerned with Tsvetaeva's biography and her literature, particularly her lyric poetry. The biography will take a

subordinate role to the literature, however, and much of that literature as well will be subordinated to the role of illuminating the “lyric diary.” Taubman states that Tsvetaeva, in her lyric poetry, ‘transformed’ her “life into art” and – perhaps the most fascinating statement of her critical precepts – that “it is Tsvetaeva’s transformation of her life into art which makes that life of interest.”

It is important to understand how Taubman understands this “transformation” of “life into art.” She states that “a centrally important dichotomy in Tsvetaeva’s work is the opposition of “illusion.” or rather “imagination,” to “reality,” and that “Tsvetaeva distinctly preferred imagination.” Citing two passages as “programmatic statements” for Tsvetaeva’s “transformation of everyday reality by her poetic imagination,” Taubman proposes to examine “the importance of mythmaking in Tsvetaeva’s poetry and biography” (4). The first “programmatic statement” is a passage from Vassily Trediakovsky’s essay “An Opinion of the Origin of Poetry and Verse in General” [“Мнение о начале поезий и стихов,” 1749), which Tsvetaeva took as an epigraph to *After Russia*:

From the fact that the poet is a creator, it does not follow that he is a liar: a lie is a word against reason and conscience, but a thing poetically imagined is, according to reason, such as a thing could and should be.

[От сего, что поэт есть творитель не наследует, что он лживец: ложь есть слово против разума и совести, но поэтическое вымышление бывает по разуму так, как вещь могла и долженствовала быть.] (*SP* III:9)

The second “programmatic statement” is a few lines of a poem from Tsvetaeva’s (unpublished in her lifetime) *Poems of Youth* [Юношские стихи]:

And how can I
 Not lie, – since my voice is softer, –
 When I lie...
 [И как могу
 Не лгать, – раз голос мой нежнее, –
 Когда я лгу...] (*SP* I:189)

Taubman applies the rules, as she understands them, of these “programmatic statements” throughout *A Life Through Poetry* in order to explain the appearance within the “lyric diary” of certain “tender lies” – i.e., instances when the autobiographical “testimony” of the poetry does not corroborate the biographical facts of Tsvetaeva’s life as presented by other sources. But let us note from the start that the two “statements” seem to indicate contradictory programs. The poem, as Taubman interprets it, associates the lying voice, which is “softer” (gentler, more tender – hence the “tender lie”), with the poetic voice, and so associates poetry with lies. Thus when Tsvetaeva’s poetry, read autobiographically as journal or diary, seems to substitute “illusion” for “reality,” Taubman would (and does) identify this as a “tender lie.” Trediakovsky’s formulation, however, directly opposes this definition of poetry as the “art of lies,” as he says quite clearly: “From the fact that a poet is a creator, it does not follow that he is a liar.” While some poets may be liars, and some poems may be lies, it does not follow from the definition of “poet” as “creator” (and a poet is, from an etymological standpoint, precisely a creator, a maker) that a poet is a liar, or that poems lie. And despite

Taubman's qualification of Tsvetaeva's "lies" as "tender," the term carries a weight of negative connotation – a lie is 'wrong,' both factually and morally or, as Trediakovsky puts it, "a word/speech against reason and conscience." Poetic speech, poetic words, or "a thing poetically imagined," is, on the contrary, both "according to reason" and "how a thing could and should be" – a poem is 'right.'

Then again, in identifying only certain details of Tsvetaeva's poetry as "tender lies" – those details which seem to falsify her autobiography, given the assumption in the first place that the poetry can be read autobiographically – Taubman excludes the rest of the poetry from this label. Its truth value, however, is still only determined in relation to "reality," the facts, the real truth, which was also what caused the "lies" to be so labeled. Thus in spite of her intention to make Tsvetaeva's poetry her main concern, and use biographical details only insofar as they illuminate the poetry, Taubman is still performing the task Karlinsky believed was possible with regard to Tsvetaeva – that of determining "to what extent her poetry contains factual material." But this entire business of measuring and separating truth from "lies" within Tsvetaeva's poetry in relation to the presumed truth of biographical facts, whether it is for the sake of illuminating her biography or for the sake of illuminating her poetry, seems entirely un-Tsvetaevan. Whether regarding poetry as lies or as truth, Tsvetaeva would go further in both directions – superlatives are her preferred means of measurement. In the same poem from which Taubman takes her idea of the "tender lies" (if we follow Taubman in her understanding of this poem as a commentary on poetry) Tsvetaeva claims, "I am the virtuoso of virtuosos / In the art of lying" [Я виртуоз из виртуозов / В искусстве лжи]; the grand boastfulness of this claim defies any potential attempt to analyze the art

of such a virtuoso and determine “to what extent [it] contains factual material.” On the other side, in her essay “History of a Dedication,” Tsvetaeva comes to the defense of fellow poet Osip Mandelstam, and her own history with him, by giving the “true story” of the events that stood behind his 1916 poem, “And not believing in the miracle of the resurrection...” [Не веря воскресенья чуду...] in response to a published account¹⁰⁴ of the events which inspired the poem which is, in her estimation, a complete fabrication. Still, she ends this essay with a reflection on the value of such an enterprise:

I don't know if, in general, poems need word-for-word translations in terms of the everyday: who – when – where – with whom – in what circumstances – and so on, like the grammar-school game that everyone knows. The poems grind up life and throw it off, and then from the remaining residue, after which he crawls almost on his knees, the biographer endeavors to reconstitute the past. For what? To bring the living poet closer to us. Yes but after all doesn't he know, that the poet in poetry – is living, in essence – is distant?

[Не знаю, нужны ли вообще бытовые подстрочники к стихам: кто – когда – где – с кем – при каких обстоятельствах – и т. д., как во всем известной гимназической игре. Стихи быт перемололи и отбросили, и вот из уцелевших отсевков, за которыми ползает вроде как на коленках, биограф тщится воссоздать бывшее. К чему? Приблизить к нам живого поэта. Да разве он не знает, что поэт в стихах – живой, по существу – далекий?] (SS IV:157)

¹⁰⁴ Though she does not name the author of this account in her essay, it is known to have been the poet Georgy Ivanov.

Not a very congenial message to send to her own would-be biographers, even though Tsvetaeva does go on to grant that the biographer has a “right” to the “official report” [протокол] and that given this right one thing only is incumbent upon him: “that the report should be exactly the official report” – i.e., that it should be right. For this reason only does Tsvetaeva take on the task of biographer for Mandelstam, and word-for-word translator of his poem “in terms of the everyday”: in order to defend the poem from “that translation” with “her own translation,” to give the facts about “what was.” Clearly, then, Tsvetaeva has no problem with the practice of separating truth from lies within the work of biography – indeed, she regards it as the duty of those who can tell the truth to do so, in order to defend against lies. Within the work of poetry, however, questions of truth and lies never even arise; in her recollection of the summer of 1916, when Mandelstam visited her in “the town of Alexandrov in the province of Vladimir,” and her account of events which registered in Mandelstam’s poem, Tsvetaeva never thinks to ask whether Mandelstam has falsified these events in his verses, whether life has been reported truthfully by poetry. To measure poetry by the yardstick of biography, for which the qualifications of “true” and “false” have a vital meaning, would be not simply inappropriate but somehow unthinkable, impossible – the two realms (poetry and biography) are incommensurate. Tsvetaeva evokes the predicament of the poet who, as a poet, is in essence distant from the world of the everyday – the realm of biography – at the end of the third poem in the cycle “Poets” from *After Russia*: “What should I do, singer and firstborn, / In the world, where the blackest – is grey! / Where they preserve inspiration, like in a thermos! / With this immeasurability / In the world of measures?”

[Что же мне делать, певцу и первенцу, / В мире, где наичернейший – сер! / Где вдохновенье хранят, как в термосе! / С этой безмерностью / В мире мер?] (*SP* III:68)

To stop here, however, would still be to stop short. The incommensurability of poetry with everyday life, or poetry with biography, cannot be an excuse to simply regard and treat the two realms as separate. In her life and in her art – and in the contradictions and incommensurabilities between her life and her art – Tsvetaeva passionately embraced contradiction and incommensurability. The same poem from which Taubman derives her concept of “tender lies” begins,

Madness – and prudence,
 Disgrace – and honor,
 Everything that leads to thought,
 There is too much of everything

In me. – All hard passions
 Were rolled up into one! –
 Thus in my hair – all the colors
 Wage war!

[Безумье – и благоразумье,
 Позор – и честь,
 Всё, что наводит на раздумье,
 Всё слишком есть –

Во мне. – Все каторжные страсти

Свились в одну! –

Так в волосах моих – все масти

Ведут войну!] (*SP I:189*)

This celebration of contradiction has been consistently recognized in criticism. Taubman writes that “[Tsvetaeva’s] world-view has often been described as dualistic, more recently as ‘dichotomous’” (3), citing Anya M. Kroth with regard to the latter view,

Tsvetaeva’s various antithetical notions do not belong to distinct realms, hermetically sealed and mutually exclusive, but, on the contrary, are related and represent opposite sides of one and the same phenomenon. (Kroth 19)

Olga Hasty couches a similar argument in the more detailed terms of the relation of Tsvetaeva’s poetry to Romanticism,

Marina Tsvetaeva’s emotionally charged, contentious, and seemingly contradictory writings have focused critical attention on several qualities that are regarded in the twentieth century as the negative heritage of Romanticism. These qualities coalesce in a single image: the irrational, willful, unrestrained, and excessively emotional poet dependent on intense passion for creative productivity. Yet such a representation slights the Romantics’ lucid, systematic thinking and habit of careful observation, of which Tsvetaeva was also an heir and avid student. The dynamic systems of process and, specifically, the Hegelian dialectic that typify poetic and

philosophical inquiry of the Romantics are powerful forces that shape her artistic speculations and practice.

Compelled by a dialectic of generative contraries, Tsvetaeva attacks the phenomenal world of sense and mere appearance and yet insists that without sensuous incarnation poetry cannot exist. She sets out to subvert the conventional significance of perceived objects in order to expand the domain of sensibility. Her demand is for nothing less than the coincidence of all opposites, and it falls to the poet to enable such coincidences, indeed to comprise them herself: «Меня можно вести только на контрастах, то есть, на всеприсутствии всего» [I can be led only on contrasts, that is, on the all-presence of everything]. (xiii)

What Hasty begins to hint at here (and continues to develop later) is a phenomenon which infinitely complicates the work of any biographer or literary scholar approaching Tsvetaeva and her work: that Tsvetaeva strove to transform her “life into art” in more than one way – through her writing, obviously (both poetry and prose), but also through attempting to ‘comprise in herself’ the “dialectic of generative contraries” that fuelled her writing. This is a point Alyssa Dinega also takes as a starting proposition:

It has often been observed that Tsvetaeva is the consummate poet of antithesis: life versus death, body versus soul, human versus poet, ephemerality versus eternity. These, among a host of other dichotomies inherited from German Romanticism and Russian Symbolism, inform her world-view and shape her poetic universe. The psychologically and poetically complex dialectic of love versus loneliness [...] is yet one more

such antithesis. Through her relationships with her various poetic contemporaries, Tsvetaeva struggles to reconcile singularity with mutuality, poetic inspiration with human companionship. [...] This dialectic between loneliness and love quite possibly lies at the root of all the others, inasmuch as it provides the impetus throughout Tsvetaeva's life for her constant reevaluation of her stance as a poet with respect both to humanity and to Poetry as a whole – and, therefore, continual inspiration for and obligation toward her poems. (3)

In her language it is clear that Dinega constantly works to make her argument account for Tsvetaeva's poetry and, in a certain way, her biography or, to put it another way, her way of writing and her way of living – we see it in the phrases such as “inform her world-view and shape her poetic experience,” “the psychologically and poetically complex dialectic” and “her stance as a poet with respect both to humanity and to Poetry as a whole.” The fact emerges that Tsvetaeva applied the same rules to living as to writing, that her life was as much a poetic testing-ground as was her notebook. Those events in the poet's life which would generally be the demesne of the biographer must be regarded, as Dinega says, “as the raw material and the by-products of her creativity” (8). Raw material *and* by-products, not separately, but often simultaneously, which is to say that a particular event can be seen as having provided material for a creative – poetic – work, but also as having resulted from the imposition of a created – poetic – structure upon life. Life and art intermingle to such an extent that, as Dinega writes, “it remains unclear what finally serves what: the poetry the life or the life the poetry” (8).

This circulating economy appears most clearly in Tsvetaeva's romantic relationships, or her relationships with contemporary poets – which are almost always romantic to some degree. Taubman references “the importance of mythmaking in Tsvetaeva's poetry and biography”; Hasty, focusing on the numerous appearances of some version of the Orpheus myth in Tsvetaeva's oeuvre, writes that, “In following connections that the Orpheus myth suggests to Tsvetaeva, we must learn to move freely through Greek myth, Western literature, and biographical detail”; Dinega states that “Tsvetaeva requires participation in an archetype, in which the participants are no longer fully independent actors, indifferent to one another, but are bonded by certain mythical relations.” Tsvetaeva ‘required’ this, on the one hand, from people around her, people she loved, and particularly poets she loved. Such mythmaking within the realm of everyday life was a practice as destructive as it was creative, and it is obvious from Tsvetaeva's own language in describing the poems' relation to life – they “grind up” [перемололи] life and “throw it off” [отбросили] – that she was perfectly aware of it. Such mythmaking within the realm of love offered the potential for explosive creativity, but also for equally explosive explosions; as Taubman says, “the transformation of everyday reality by [Tsvetaeva's] poetic imagination [...] often had a disastrous effect on the human relationships which were its most frequent subject. Tsvetaeva acted as if her reality were the operative one, and few, even of her brother poets, understood what she was doing” (4). Dinega essentially devotes her entire book to examining this practice and its products, in particular “Tsvetaeva's mytho-poetic negotiations with other poets of her time,” her assertion being that “through her orchestrated dialogues with her fellow poets – in a simultaneously artistic and emotional arena – [Tsvetaeva] will establish her

entitlement to her own place in the poetic brotherhood, while forging even newer versions of the myth of her own poetic genius” (27). If we can even understand what it means to make or create myths or poems out of life, and then to live as if these myth-poems are the “operative reality,” then we must see that a poet who does this requires also from us (whoever we are) that we ‘participate in an archetype.’ For a life such as this – and a poetry such as this – the tasks of biographer and literary scholar, though they may (or may not) be contradictory, will be bound together vitally. To write about Tsvetaeva we must become like mythic figures ourselves, two both things at once, not trying to separate our study any more than its subject – or not trying to synthesize our study any more than its subject.

Death in the throat: The myth of Tsvetaeva’s suicide

“Death is terrible only for the body. The soul does not think of it.

Therefore, in suicide, the body – is the sole hero,” she wrote.

“The heroism of the soul – to live, the heroism of the body – to die.”

[«Смерть страшна только телу. Душа её не мыслит. Поэтому, в самоубийстве, тело – единственный герой», писала она.

«Героизм души – жить, героизм тела – умереть.»]

Maria Belkina, *Скращение судеб*

Of all other events in the life of Marina Tsvetaeva, one has been most heavily burdened with mythic weight: her death. To be precise: her suicide. Perhaps suicide

always opens itself to the kind of imaginative speculations that so easily lead to mythologizing. A self-willed death imposes a structure of interpretation upon the facts of the life that led to it such that for those left with the work of interpreting, this life appears as a coded message which always means the same thing; what remains necessarily unknown is how it means. In the case of Tsvetaeva, who, as we have seen, already saw and actively worked to create mythological patterns within her life, it must be regarded as inevitable that her suicide would draw mythological interpretations like a magnet. The story of Tsvetaeva's last days is told over and over with different inflection according to the interests of the storyteller. It becomes the story of the death of a woman, or of a mother, or of a wife, or of an emigrée returned home to alienation – but always in combination as the story of a woman-poet, a mother-poet, a wife-poet, an emigrée-poet, an alienated poet. It is a tale of victimization or of martyrdom, of despair or self-sacrifice, of madness or self-mastery. Several works are devoted almost entirely to accounting for Tsvetaeva's suicide through a presentation of the events in her life leading up to it.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, too many accounts of Tsvetaeva's suicide exist – too many for them all to be based on facts. Out of the tide of interpretations that has risen around the solid fact of the suicide certain details emerge which seem to be unauthorized, unconfirmed by any witness, unattached to any evidence – the “truth” of which seems to derive rather from how felicitously they fit into the story according to its particular themes – from how much it seems that they “could or should be” true. The overwhelming impression from all sides, however, is that the end of the life of Marina Tsvetaeva was “tragic,” and this end rules the life to make it fall into the lines of tragedy as well.

¹⁰⁵ Irma Kudrova's *Гибель Марины Цветаевой* (1995); Maria Belkina's *Скращение судеб* (1999).

Viktoria Schweitzer begins her biography of the poet¹⁰⁶ with an account of her own (Schweitzer's) journey to the site of Tsvetaeva's death:

For years I had wanted to go to Elabuga, the town in which Tsvetaeva had spent her last days, to look at the town itself, the cemetery in which she is buried, and perhaps see people who knew her there. In the autumn of 1966, twenty-five years after her tragic end, my desire became overpowering, and I decided to retrace her steps... (1)

Later in the narration of her compulsive repetition of Tsvetaeva's final movements (couldn't biography be regarded as a sort of repetition compulsion, but with regard to the life of another?) Schweitzer refers to Tsvetaeva as "a homeless and lonely woman with a tragic life behind her and a hopeless future before her" (1). The tragedy of Tsvetaeva's life shades easily into the tragedy of Russia at the time, and in particular the many tragedies of Russian artists at the time. Maria Razumovsky claims that, given her extraordinary talent combined with the hardships she suffered in common with "the entire Russian population of her generation...Tsvetaeva has thus become a symbol of the fate of her generation and of a tragedy that in many cases was systematically and intentionally overlooked and deliberately suppressed" (1). Karlinsky, in the same vein, writes, "Exile, neglect, persecution, and suicide have been the fate of Russian poets after the Revolution, but perhaps only Marina Cvetaeva has experienced all of these. Her personal and literary biography exemplify the fate of Russian poets of her epoch" (7). Irma Kudrova follows

¹⁰⁶ The Russian title is *Быть и бытё Марины Цветаевой*, which roughly translates as *The Life and Way of Life of Marina Tsvetaeva*, but "бытё" is not very translatable, having connotations of spiritual life, the part of life that is opposed to everyday life. Probably for this reason, the English translation of the biography is simply entitled *Tsvetaeva*.

Karlinsky in referring to Tsvetaeva's end as 'fateful' – a fate woven by the conflicting threads of her time and place and her vocation:

It was Tsvetaeva's fate to absorb the tragic tension of our age even more powerfully, because she was a poet; that is, someone who is shaken by the elements (of nature and time) more strongly than anyone else. According to the same natural law by which the tallest tree attracts lightning during a storm, Marina Tsvetaeva perished during her country's darkest hour. (9)

Other scholars cast Tsvetaeva's life and death in terms of more specific tragedies or tragic myths. Ellendea Proffer resorts to what she calls a "mythological cliché":

Tsvetaeva's suicide ("I have been searching for a hook...") echoes down the corridors of Russian cultural history for many reasons, not least because it is associated with the terror, truly a time of civic suicide in her country. The mythological cliché we use to describe such situations is always that of Saturn, especially as painted by Goya. Stalin did finally devour the children of the Revolution, the children of the socialist idea, but long before that, as illustrated in painful detail in this book¹⁰⁷, he destroyed their souls. (Proffer, in Kudrova, 5)

While this capacious (and therefore perhaps indeed clichéd) myth accounts for Tsvetaeva's death only in terms of its broader political and historical content, and does not allow for any agency on her part – she was 'devoured' and 'destroyed' – other mythological interpretations place her suicide rather in the context of her own poetry, and thus attempt to account for this event as an actively crafted and even artistic act. Olga

¹⁰⁷ *The Death of a Poet; The Last Days of Marina Tsvetaeva*, the English translation of Irma Kudrova's Гибель М. Ц., for which Proffer wrote the Introduction.

Hasty, who traces the thread of the Orpheus myth, one aspect of which is an ever-repeated confrontation with the threat of death, throughout Tsvetaeva's poetry, sees an attraction to and even longing for death apparent in Tsvetaeva's later poetry and prose:

As Tsvetaeva moves toward her own death, she represents the Apollonian gift of song as an onerous burden. The lyrics «Разговор с гением» [Conversation with a Genius] and «Есть счастливицы и счастливыцы» [There are Fortunate Men and Women] plead for escape no longer from the limitations of the mundane and from her human form, but rather from the inexorable poetic imperative. In these poems the human side of the divinely bestowed bard comes to the fore, and the very antinomies that generate poetry now indicate the fated tragedy of the poet's end. (xvi)

Even here, while Tsvetaeva is seen as “moving toward her death,” it is only as if under an “onerous burden,” ‘pleading for escape’ from “the inexorable poetic imperative.” The death of Orpheus, however, was at the hands of others, and though destructive forces in her world certainly contributed to Tsvetaeva's death, in the end it was the work of her own hands.

Alyssa Dinega, who argues that the myth of Psyche “encapsulates the fundamental paradoxes of Tsvetaeva's talent” more completely than that of Orpheus, because it accounts for problems of gender and sexuality in her poetry more fully, deals even more explicitly with the question of agency in Tsvetaeva's death, and with the relation between her death and her poetry:

The overt tragedy of Tsvetaeva's life notwithstanding, failure in her undertaking is not by any means a foregone conclusion; the sheer

brilliance and abundance of her literary output denies any claim that she does, in fact, fail. Nor does she ever settle into the comfortable morass of victimhood, for she insists everywhere on her complete freedom, which implies her complete responsibility for the events of her life (thus, she never casts her poetic and personal struggles as the fault of men, society, poverty, history, Facism, Stalinism, etc., even when the objective facts might seem to argue otherwise.) She is almost obsessed with presenting herself as the sole creator of her own destiny [...] Even Tsvetaeva's suicide is not unambiguously tragic. Rather, when viewed as her final poetic act, her suicide seems in itself a fittingly brilliant, albeit deeply disturbing, culmination of her poetic path – her final statement in the dialectic between ethics and aesthetics that has engrossed her throughout her creative lifetime. Although it may represent her final exclusion from the masculine poetic domain, at the same time it also enacts her final entry into a unified poetic space where the soul floats freely, unimpeded by gender difference.

Tsvetaeva loved reading poets' lives forward into their deaths, discerning in the death a symbolic continuation of the poetic personality. Rather than the death's casting a long shadow backward over the poet's creative legacy, in a sense the opposite effect occurred: the poetry wrote the biography. (7-8)

There follows the passage previously quoted¹⁰⁸ in which Dinega proposes considering biographical facts of Tsvetaeva's life "as the raw material and by-products of her creativity," and states that these facts, including her suicide, "are important to this inquiry only to the extent that they shape and, in turn, are shaped by her writing" (8).

Too many issues are at stake in this passage, which acts a sort of "programmatic statement" for Dinega's work, to immediately agree or disagree with it. Let us first consider the proposition that "even Tsvetaeva's suicide is not unambiguously tragic" – which may mean either that it may or may not be tragic (and thus may be simply not tragic), or that it is ambiguously tragic (and thus certainly tragic, but in an ambiguous, mysterious manner). This proposition acknowledges the prevailing sense (of which we have seen ample evidence) that Tsvetaeva's suicide was tragic (and that her life was equally so) and does not go so far as to disagree with it, but attempts to influence the perception of it by viewing it as a "poetic act," in addition to or even instead of viewing it as an act in the world of "men, society, poverty, history, Fascism, Stalinism, etc.". Surely there is no intention here to oppose "tragic" to "poetic," or to claim that if Tsvetaeva's suicide is viewed as a "poetic act," it will no longer appear "tragic." Perhaps this is the meaning of "not unambiguously tragic": that a death which is "not unambiguously tragic" is so because it is tragic in a poetic manner. We might wonder how all of the biographers and literary scholars who refer to the 'tragedy' of Tsvetaeva's end are using the term – whether in the common, colloquial sense of "extremely sad," or in the precise (and original) poetic sense. Disregarding the potential contradiction of saying that a certain act is "not unambiguously tragic" precisely because it is poetically tragic – and disregarding this especially since we are extrapolating statements which Dinega does not make – we

¹⁰⁸ See p. 14 above.

must still question the appropriateness of the myth of Psyche for understanding a death that is, in any way, tragic.

Psyche's story is "not unambiguously tragic" in the sense that it is, in fact, not really tragic at all, except perhaps by way of long interpretive stretches. Indeed, in the two literary versions which were most likely known to Tsvetaeva – the long digression within Lucius Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*, and La Fontaine's *Les Amours de Psyche et Cupidon*¹⁰⁹ - the myth is, or appears in the context of, a comedy or satire. Tsvetaeva was also certainly acquainted with the Greek philosophical tradition of interpretation of the myth of Psyche as an allegory of the soul's movement toward freedom from the body, in relation to which "tragedy" has even less significance. In general, Psyche almost does not die – though she does, living, venture into the Underworld – but drifts in an ambiguous manner into immortality, where she enjoys the fruits of her previous labors: an eternal union with Eros, and a daughter, Pleasure. It may be due to this complete incongruity between the details of the Psyche myth and the dictates of tragedy that Dinega does not refer to Psyche at all in her references to Tsvetaeva's suicide, despite her assertions that "the poetry writes the biography" and that "the Psyche myth is not a phase but a summation of [Tsvetaeva's] poetics." At the close of her book, Dinega returns again to this moment, and to the ambiguity surrounding the poet's death:

It is impossible to say, in the final analysis, whether Tsvetaeva's death should be read as the capitulation of poetic inspiration to the dark tyranny of nothingness, or, on the contrary, as the triumph of the poet's creative will over the limitations of earthly being. In other words, it is impossible to say whether Tsvetaeva's death kills her muse, or the other

¹⁰⁹ See Dinega, 248n1

way around. The only possible answer to this question is that it has no answer; Tsvetaeva's suicide is, in any case, immensely overdetermined [...]

Tsvetaeva's greatest tragedy is not, after all, her suicide per se, but the fact that even that heroic final act (heroic – because necessitated by the whole shape and development of her poetics and life) fails, ultimately, to resolve the insuperable divide between the lonely, needy, shy, remorseful woman and the raging poet beset by a demonic muse. Death cannot mend this divide, any more than life can; it can simply cancel out the offending terms, erase the parameters. There is no exit for Tsvetaeva, even in death; the perpetual machine of impossibility goes on grinding around in circles into eternity. Her last bid for entry into a higher heaven, her last attempt to escape the vicious cycle of desire and loneliness, is, at the same time, her last betrayal of those she loves and who need her most: her husband, daughter and sister, all in prison and awaiting her food packages – and, most of all, her unruly and unhappy teenage son. (224-225)

One almost shrinks away, at the statement that “Tsvetaeva's suicide is [...] immensely overdetermined,” from offering any further commentary or interpretation to add to this overdetermination. Almost... but what is overdetermined calls out for interpretation.

Whether in a dream, or a story, or a life, those moments when the knots of meaning seem to have been tied the most tightly and artfully are the very moments our desire might be to take a knife and slice right down to the very “truth,” and yet this desire will almost certainly lead us to tie knots over knots instead – and in the knotting is the art, if there is

an art to biography, or literary criticism, or their intermixture. We may do violence either way – in the cutting or the knotting – but Tsvetaeva herself did not hesitate to do such violence, to herself or to others, in her own art, or in her life for the sake of her art.

In these pages I have attempted, and will attempt, to follow the threads of Tsvetaeva's life and her literature to feel for those places where the threads have become most inextricably knotted together – to try to discern the patterns indicated by the resulting fabric. In the details of her suicide – both concrete and unsubstantiated – a strong pattern emerges which conforms both to the forms of tragedy (in the poetic sense) and to the requirements of heroism (in the tragic sense). As Dinega puts it, Tsvetaeva's suicide was "heroic – because necessitated by the whole shape and development of her poetics and her life." In short, Tsvetaeva appears as a tragic heroine (precisely a heroine, as we shall see), under the sway of forces some of which she herself set in motion, but which had grown past her ability to stop them. She is caught between desire and duty, pride and shame, love and despair, and her death, as Dinega aptly observes, perpetuates the conflicts she struggled with in her life and her poetry, rather than resolving them. It might have seemed incumbent upon her to live for her son, and indeed he did not live for many years after her death, but it is also clear from the notes she left to him and to others that she felt she was dying for him: "I hope that Mur will live and study. With me he would be done for"; "I beg you, take in Mur in Chistopol – simply take him in as a son – and see that he studies. I can't do anything more for him and I'll only kill him." Even Mur himself testifies to an understanding that his mother acted in the only way possible to her; Maria Razumovsky cites his correspondence at the time:

In a long letter to his aunt, Lilya Efron, Mur wrote: ‘She spoke to me many times about her intention of killing herself, as the best decision she could make. I fully understand and excuse her.’ He also wrote to his friend Sezeman: ‘The most that I can say in this regard is that she acted correctly: she had sufficient grounds and this was the best way out of the situation, and I fully approve of her action.’ (297)

One more small and apparently authorless story¹¹⁰ brings Tsvetaeva’s own association of her death with the realm of mythic tragedy to the forefront:

Someone (who, but Mur, could have told this to me?) repeated her words: “I’ll hang myself after all, like my Phaedra.” And she repeated this phrase all the time.

[Кто-то (кто, кроме Мура, мог это сказать мне?) повторил ее слово: «Я все равно повешусь, как моя Федра». И она все твердила эту фразу.] (Lossky 271)

Phaedra, who in the mysterious absence of her husband came to fear even the light of day, who struggled desperately under the dual constraints of desire and duty, who suffered and sickened from her silence but equally was terrified of the possible consequences of her speech, and who conceived of suicide as the only choice left to her, both for herself and her family – Phaedra was a figure long close to Tsvetaeva’s heart, and one of the mythic identities she returned to most often. Tsvetaeva, in constant anxiety and ignorance over the fate of her husband and her daughter after their arrests in 1939, in

¹¹⁰ Veronique Lossky cites this as a “рассказ” in *Марина Цветаева в жизни*, but its source is peculiarly encoded.

constant fear for (and of) herself and her son,¹¹¹ especially after the beginning of the German attack on the Soviet Union in June of 1941, tormented by her inability to write poetry any more,¹¹² but afraid that what she had written in the past, or might write in the future, had already been or would be dangerous as their poetry had already been fatal to so many among her contemporaries and former friends – it is easy to see that in contemplating her own death¹¹³ she would think again of Phaedra, her Phaedra.

Tsvetaeva's Phaedra appears most openly at two points in her work: in a pair of lyrics from *After Russia* entitled "Phaedra 1. Complaint" [Федра 1. Жалоба] and "Phaedra 2. Epistle" [Федра 2. Послание], composed in March of 1923¹¹⁴, and in the play *Phaedra* [Федра], Tsvetaeva's final attempt at drama¹¹⁵, dated 1927 though certainly conceived in thought years before. We will not venture into an analysis of the poetry here, but only note the details of Tsvetaeva's possession of the myth. Tsvetaeva's Phaedra is as voluble as her two most famous predecessors (from Sophocles' *Hippolytus* and Racine's *Phedre*) are eventually induced to be, but she addresses her speech more directly to Hippolytus – her step-son and the object of her desire – than do previous Phaedras, making her arguments herself rather than, as in Sophocles and Racine, reluctantly allowing another to make them for her. In this she renders herself more guilty of her inevitable end and of his, but also somewhat more innocent by virtue of extreme honesty. For the Phaedra of *After Russia* not to speak, not even to give way to "the moaning of tender lips," would be utterly impossible. What is more, she longs for

¹¹¹ "Everyone thinks that I am brave..."

¹¹² "So many lines have passed by! I have written none of them down. With this it is all over!"

¹¹³ "No one sees, no one knows, that for a year already (approximately) my eyes have been searching for a hook [...] I have been trying on death for a year."

¹¹⁴ Only days before the composition of the cycle "Wires," which is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

¹¹⁵ *Phaedra* was the second in Tsvetaeva's intended cycle of three tragedies focusing on Theseus; the first, *Ariadne*, was composed in 1924.

conversation; with her last words, the Phaedra of Tsvetaeva's drama pleads with Hippolytus to speak to her, "A word! At least one word!" For the Tsvetaeva-as-Phaedra we are imagining, the silencing of her poetic voice would be like suffocation, and the disappearance of any poetic community and communion would be like starvation. And Tsvetaeva's Phaedra, like Sophocles' (though not Racine's) hangs herself, offstage, out of sight.

In this death Tsvetaeva's Phaedra and Tsvetaeva herself conform to the conventions of the deaths of women in classical tragedy. Nicole Loraux has addressed the subject of these conventions in her *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman* [*Façons tragiques de tuer une femme*]¹¹⁶, in which Phaedra appears as one instance of a rule derived from careful attention to the fates of female characters in all the extant Greek tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides – the rule that "Women in tragedy died violently" (3). Two basic categories of violent death emerge: "the sacrifice of a virgin" and "the suicide of wives" (ix). Phaedra's death falls obviously into the second category, and Loraux presents what was the prevailing opinion on suicide in the literature and philosophy at the time, and particularly the manner of suicide chosen by Phaedra (both Sophocles' Phaedra and Tsvetaeva's):

Suicide, then, could be a tragic death chosen under the weight of necessity by those on whom fell "the intolerable pain of a misfortune from which there is no way out."¹¹⁷ But in tragedy itself it was mainly a woman's death. There was one form of suicide – an already despised form of death – that was more disgraceful and associated more than any other with

¹¹⁶ All following quotations will be from the published 1987 English translation by Anthony Forster.

¹¹⁷ The reference is to Plato's *Laws*.

irremediable dishonor. This was hanging, a hideous death, or more exactly a “formless” death (aschemon), the extreme of defilement that one inflicted on oneself only in the utmost shame. It also turns out – but is it just chance? – that hanging is a woman’s way of death: Jocasta, Phaedra, Leda, Antigone ended in this way ... (9)

Though this may have been the prevailing, the conventional opinion, that suicide was both a shameful and a woman’s death, and that hanging as well was both the most shameful manner of suicide and a manner of suicide – within the realm of tragedy – belonging only to women, Loraux skillfully demonstrates how the tragedies complicate these conventions, revealing how women make choices about death and thus snatch control over their ends, however violently. “In this violence,” she writes, “a woman mastered her death [...] It was a death that belonged to her totally” (3). Beyond the mastery and possession of death represented by a woman’s suicide, the choice of a means of suicide allowed a woman either to step out of the conventions of her gender, or to embrace them. While the death of men in tragedy, including the uncommon instances of the suicide of men, “obeys this firm rule, that a man must die by a man’s hand, by the sword and with blood spilt” (Loraux 12), there is revealed to be a choice open to women: “the rope or the sword.”¹¹⁸ Though the expressions of this choice may seem to evince

¹¹⁸ Though I will not comment on it here, I cannot help thinking in this context of a moment from *Otherworldly Evening* when Tsvetaeva recounts her meeting with the poet Mikhail Kuzmin, and her first words to him:

—And I at fifteen read your “Buried with a sword—not a spade—Manon Lescaut!” I even didn’t read it, my sort-of-fiancé spoke it to me by heart, to whom I then did not get married, precisely because he was—a spade: and a spade-beard, and in general...
 Kuzmin, frightened:
 —Be-eard? A bearded fiancé?
 I, recognizing that I am frightening him:
 —A spadish square, a frame, and in the frame shamelessly-honest blue eyes. Yes. And when I found out from him, that there are those, who are buried with a sword—“And I by a

only desperation – “The rope or the sword – in brief, death at any price, whatever the method. That is the way manlike women, who would in general prefer the sword, reason in a desperate situation” (Loraux 15) – it is, nonetheless, a choice; at the moment of death it is possible for a woman to be a ‘manlike woman’ who would prefer to die, as a man does, by the sword, or to be a ‘womanlike woman’ and hang herself. Loraux even elaborates on the rope insofar as it figures as, or is derived from, female accoutrement:

Hanging was a woman’s death. As practiced by women, it could lead to endless variations, because women and young girls contrived to substitute for the customary rope those adornments with which they decked themselves and which were also the emblems of their sex, as Antigone strangled herself with her knotted veil. (10)¹¹⁹

All of this leads to the conclusion that while men, as represented in tragedy, may be more free in life, woman are more free in death, particularly with regard to conforming to or straying from the conventions of their gender:

spade—never!”... And what a ravishing challenge, to all of the old world—to all of that age—the formula: “Buried with a sword—not a spade—Manon Lescaut!” And wasn’t it all written for the sake of that line?

—Like all poetry—for the sake of the last line.

—Which comes first.

—Oh, you know that too!

¹¹⁹ In Tsvetaeva’s case a heartbreaking variant to this observation (which is no less heartbreaking for the likelihood that it is entirely untrue, but issues rather from someone’s sense of what, as Tsvetaeva (quoting Trediakovsky) says, “*could or should*” have been according to the laws of her own poetry) comes in the form of another of those unauthorized, third- or fourth-hand stories, cited by Maria Razumovsky:

Various stories still circulate about Tsvetayeva’s last days in Moscow. For example, Slonim heard the following from Paustovsky when he was in Rome in the autumn of 1965:

Pasternak went to help her pack. He brought her a piece of rope to tie around her...suitcase, he praised its strength and joked that it would be strong enough for anything, you could even hang yourself with it. He later learnt that Tsvetayeva had hanged herself with this rope and for a long time he could not forgive himself for making what he called his “fatal joke”. (293)

It suffices only to note that in Tsvetaeva’s Phaedra poetry the figure of Hippolytus was always associated with Pasternak in order to see how poetically appropriate this ‘circulated story’ is to her ‘tragedy’.

A man never hangs himself, even when he has thought of doing so; a man who kills himself does it in a manly way.¹²⁰ For a woman, however, there is an alternative. She can seek a womanly way of ending her life, by the noose, or she can steal a man's death by seizing the sword. Is this a matter of identification, of personal coherence in her character within the play? Perhaps. The imbalance is nonetheless obvious, proving, if proof were needed, that the genre of tragedy can easily create and control a confusion of categories, and also knows the limits it cannot cross. To put it another way, the woman in tragedy is more entitled to play the man in her death than the man is to assume any aspect of woman's conduct, even in his manner of death. For women there is liberty in tragedy—liberty in death. (Loraux 16-17)

The liberty of a woman in death is the liberty of women in poetic tragedy – i.e., in drama, in the ability to play a role. As much as a woman may “play the man in her death,” it is assumed that in seeking “a womanly way of ending her life” she would also be “playing” the woman. Thus Tsvetaeva exercises her liberty to play the woman in her death¹²¹ but,

¹²⁰ Tsvetaeva can be seen to trouble these conventions in “Otherworldly Evening,” and the associations she creates are in fact borne out in life. For example, in the essay she makes (or rather, places in the mouth of another) a visual comparison between herself and the (male) poet Sergei Esenin, couched in an intimation of homosexuality which echoes the suppressed representation of her own relationship of Sofia Parnok (see note 32 below). This very moment is recalled by Nina Berberova in writing about the news of Tsvetaeva's death:

A rumour has spread that Tsvetayeva hanged herself in Moscow on 11 August. [...] Re-reading recently her prose I came across a passage where she writes how from the back someone once mistook her for Yesenin. [In fact it is the opposite – someone mistakes Esenin for Tsvetaeva.] And how I can see them before me: hanging and swaying in nooses, both of them fair-haired. He is on the left, she on the right, but the hooks and the ropes are identical, and they both have flaxen hair, cut in a bowl shape. (Cited in Razumovsky, 302)

Berberova is referring to the fact that Esenin hung himself in 1925.

¹²¹ It would be interesting, though there is not space for it here, to put this formulation into conversation with Dinega's (previously quoted) conception of Tsvetaeva's suicide as a “poetic act”: “Although it may

above all, in the very fact that she can be understood to be playing – to be acting according to the poetic forms of tragedy but above all according to the forms of her own poetry – she exercises her liberty, still, to play the poet.

There is a paradox here: to hang is to suffocate, to cut off the breath, and to cut off the breath is to cut off the voice, and without a voice a poet is not a poet – how, then, can a poet be said to act as a poet in cutting off her (or his? – is this possible according to the tragic formulation, since men never hang?) voice? Is not the silencing of the voice death to the poet? To complicate the question even further, Loraux asserts that a woman, whether she dies by the sword or the rope, whether she inflicts her death “‘herself upon herself’” or has it “‘inflicted upon her’” (4), always dies “‘by the throat, and only by the throat’” (52). For Loraux, which is to say in Greek tragedy, the throat is representative of the woman’s beauty, and thus “‘death lurks in the throats of women, hidden in their beauty, which the texts never evoke more freely than at the precise moment when their lives are threatened and in the balance’” (52-53). For Tsvetaeva, in her poetry, death lurks in the throats of poets, because to speak may be dangerous and even fatal, and because not to speak is always, for a poet as a poet, fatal. Though she did not entirely cease to write poetry after her return to the Soviet Union, and several excellent poems date from those two years, the sum of them weighs little in the balance with her remarkable output in almost any other two years of her writing life; it would not be inappropriate to claim, then, that Tsvetaeva had already begun to die, in the throat, as a poet, years before she actualized this spiritual suffocation. “‘So many lines have passed by!’”, she wrote in her notebook, “‘I have written none of them down. With this it is all over!’” In the end the very

represent her final *exclusion from the masculine poetic domain*, at the same time it also enacts her final entry into a unified poetic space where the soul floats freely, *unimpeded by gender difference*” (7, emphasis added).

reason that rumor has swirled so violently, and factually unsubstantiated mythology flourished so wildly, around Tsvetaeva's suicide – the very reason that it has become so “immensely overdetermined” – is that Tsvetaeva herself, the writer of the “lyrical diary” which was such a rich source of biographical material (however encoded) for other periods of her life, had for the most part ceased to write. And yet in the staging of her own death, in her retreat into silence and seclusion to end her life (“Undoubtedly,” writes Loraux, “it is this reluctance to die in public that marks the limit of the invention of femininity in tragedy” (x)), in the fulfillment of her certainty that she would ‘hang herself after all, like her Phaedra,’ there remain traces of the mythic forms which the poet had always imposed so rigorously upon her life and her art.

One more thought, by way resolution to the paradox of a poet acting as a poet by ceasing to speak: We have noted in passing Tsvetaeva's belief that all poetry is written “for the sake of the last line,” “which comes first.” This last line which is the end of the poet's voice and breath is also conceived of as the beginning, and we can imagine how carefully the voice is modulated throughout the entire poem in calculation of how to render the last line most expressively, and the artistry with which breaths are taken, held and saved in order to suffice perfectly for that last line – but perhaps for no more. At the same time, Tsvetaeva expressed often in her poetry her love of the moment when the voice breaks, and breaks precisely because it is at its absolute limit of expression, or of breath. In *After Russia* she sings the praises of “A voice of a girl or boy: / On the very edge. / The only one in a thousand / And already it's breaking,” and ends “I swear by God's gifts: / By my living soul! / Your vocal breakdown / Is dearer to me than any heights!” Several poems later, in the cycle “Wires,” in which telegraph wires come to

stand for vocal cords, she calls out, “Do you hear? This is the last breakdown / Of a torn throat: fo – or – give...”; the broken “fo – or – give...” could equally be translated as “fa – are – well...”. With the last words through a torn throat the broken voice of the poet begs forgiveness, and bids farewell – for the sake of this the last breath has been saved for the moment when the poetry has ended.

In the following pages we will move away from the literal end of Marina Tsvetaeva’s life and poetry, and the meagre biographical facts of her suicide which have since become so embroidered over with imagination and invention precisely because she herself left them unadorned with any inventions of her own – and move back to a text which exemplifies her creative intermingling of biography, autobiography, mythology, poetry, citation, imagination and invention, in which she fully exercises her poetic, and womanly, liberties. In the essay “Otherworldly Evening,” composed and published in 1936 on the occasion of the death of the poet Mikhail Kuzmin, Tsvetaeva gives herself over to the consideration of the poet’s “vocal breakdown” – how it is that poets cease to speak – but she does so in the context of a recollection of her own entry into the community of poets and entry into poetic conversation, thus framing the temporal events of the breakdown of the poetic voice, and death of the poet, in an eternal and unbreakable unity of poets across all time and all silences, in the “other-world.”

***“Praise be to you, Plague”*: Tsvetaeva’s construction of an “Otherworldly Evening”**

On March 1 of 1936, the poet Mikhail Alexeevich Kuzmin died of complications from a persistent lung condition, in a hospital in what was then Leningrad. In July of the

same year Marina Tsvetaeva published an essay in issue #61 of the Paris-based journal *Contemporary Notes* [Современные записки] entitled “Otherworldly Evening” [Нездешний вечер], dedicated to her recollections of her one meeting with Kuzmin, in St. Petersburg at the opening of the year 1916—“the last year of the old world.”¹²² Based on its publication date this essay deserves to be considered alongside other prose pieces Tsvetaeva composed in the ‘30s, which fall mainly into two categories: her memories of contemporaries, generally poets, on the occasion of their deaths, or reflections on her life in Russia before the revolution. While according to content “Otherworldly Evening” fits naturally with these other prose works—partaking to an extent of both categories—nevertheless the history of its interpretation, and especially of its placement in the rest of Tsvetaeva’s body of work, has been confused. This is largely due to the fact that although the essay was published in 1936, Tsvetaeva claims within it that the majority of the text consists of a letter she wrote to Kuzmin in 1921. As late as 1980 the original of this letter had not surfaced, and critics had no reason not to take this claim at face value. In the Introduction to *Marina Tsvetaeva; A Captive Soul: Selected Prose*, J. Marin King divides Tsvetaeva’s prose output into three periods, and writes of “Otherworldly Evening,”

Of the prose translations in the present volume only “An Otherworldly Evening” displays some of the hallmarks of the early style. The work was published in 1936, but it was based on, perhaps even copied largely verbatim from a letter written in 1921 to the poet Mikhail Kuzmin, and that letter, in turn, may well have been based on notes in journals made during her visit to Petersburg when she met Kuzmin for the first time.

(16)

¹²² i.e., the last year before the revolutions of 1917, which ended the long reign of the Tsars in Russia.

Here King's reliance on the veracity of Tsvetaeva's claim to have based the essay on her letter to Kuzmin leads to a focus on the style of "Otherworldly Evening," in an attempt to link it to Tsvetaeva's early prose¹²³; the essay's content, unfortunately, remains unexamined. The interpretive situation changes soon afterwards, however. In 1988, Jane Taubman sets the record straight on certain accounts: "In [Otherworldly Evening], [Tsvetaeva] claims her description of the evening is simply copied from a letter she wrote Kuzmin in 1921. But that letter has recently come to light. The texts [...] provide a glimpse of Tsvetaeva's "tenderly lying," as she transforms "reality" into art" (67). Having exposed the gap between letter and essay, Taubman devotes a brief chapter to teasing out Tsvetaeva's 'tender lies'—i.e., the changes her story undergoes from letter to essay—but here, at least, her focus is on discovering as much as possible about the 'reality' of the experience behind both letter and essay. To do the essay justice as a creative work, however, it is necessary to shift the emphasis away from what it may (or may not) tell us about Tsvetaeva's 'real' life towards examining it as a work of art.

In fact, "Otherworldly Evening" is an intensely and intricately crafted piece of prose, revealing its central concern in every aspect of the writing—style, theme, structure, intertexts—and thus to grasp this central concern fully it must be examined from all sides—from the perspective of stylistics, thematics, structure, and intertextuality. This central concern is the meeting of poets, across all boundaries—of time, place, class, race, gender, sexuality—and in the face of all historical obstacles.

From the very beginning, the title of the essay points us to Tsvetaeva's understanding of how, where, and why this meeting of poets exists. The title refers, first,

¹²³ For example, "October on a Train" [Октябрь в вагоне] or "Free Passage" [Вольный проезд], although neither of these are included among the essays translated in *A Captive Soul*.

to the meeting between Tsvetaeva and a multitude of poets previously unknown to her, including Mikhail Kuzmin, on one evening “in the beginning of January of 1916” in Petersburg. The bulk of the essay is devoted to narrating the events of this evening. Next, the title refers to Tsvetaeva’s second and final ‘meeting’ with Kuzmin—a meeting with his poetry, not his person: in 1921 she discovers his book of poems *Otherworldly Evenings* [Нездешние вечера], in the Writer’s Bookshop in Moscow, is struck by the poems she is able to read there (particularly by her sense that they are hers, or that they echo exactly what she herself has thought, written, or intended to write), but is unable to purchase the book. Upon leaving she immediately writes a letter to Kuzmin—the very letter of 1921 which she claims has served as the original for the essay. Thus Tsvetaeva’s title “pays tribute,” as Taubman writes, “to Kuzmin’s collection.” Taubman goes on to claim that “the word ‘otherworldly,’ literally ‘not-of-here,’ emphasizes [Tsvetaeva’s] Moscow viewpoint” (66-67). This is an interesting possibility—Tsvetaeva certainly does oppose Moscow to Petersburg in the essay—but it overlooks the delicate commentary that “Otherworldly Evening” offers on its own title: Tsvetaeva carefully aligns the qualifications “here” [здесь] and “not here” [не здесь] with certain figures and events in the essay, but nowhere does she refer to Moscow as “here” or “of-here” [здешний] or Petersburg particularly as “not here” or “not-of-here” [нездешний]. Were the essay in fact derived wholly or even principally from the letter, written while Tsvetaeva was still in Moscow (she emigrated in May of 1922), it might be logical to assume that by “here” she meant “Moscow.” However, the most pointed oppositions between what is, or what happens “here” or “not here” come in the opening and closing passages of the essay, neither of which were included in the letter. Given that in 1936, when the actual essay

was composed, Tsvetaeva was living in Paris, we could as well conclude that “not-of-here” refers to Petersburg or Russia in general as opposed to Paris, France, or even all of Europe – but the essay does not lend any particular support to this conclusion either, and indeed we can really understand what Tsvetaeva intended by her title only by considering those passages in which she does draw such clear oppositions between “here” and “not here.”

Tsvetaeva begins “Otherworldly Evening” with a narration of her entry into a building which she rather vaguely identifies as either “the house of ‘Northern Notes’ ”—the journal which first published her poetry for a Petersburg audience, and whose editors had invited her for this visit to the city—or the home of the Kannegisers, the Petersburg family who were also in part her hosts during this visit. This confusion of place was perhaps intended, as Tsvetaeva—or “Marina,” as, to avoid simple conflation of author with the “I” of the essay, we shall refer to the narrating persona—establishes from the beginning a strong sense of disorientation associated with her entry into this building, whatever it may be:

Over Petersburg stood a blizzard. Precisely—stood: like a whirling top—or a whirling child—or a fire. A white force—carried away.

It carried away from memory and street and house and carried me to—placed me and left me—right in the middle of a hall—of train-station-, ballroom-, museum-, dream-dimensions.

So, from blizzard to hall, from the white wasteland of the
blizzard—to the yellow wasteland of the hall, without intervening
instances of hallways or introductory suggestions of servants.¹²⁴

The blizzard that has gripped Petersburg (Marina refers at several key points throughout the essay to its continual presence) is, according to her characterizations, simultaneously motionless and in constant motion. It ‘stands’ in one place—“over Petersburg”—but constantly moves in place, and this motion acts to ‘carry away’ all points of reference within the city, and also to carry away Marina herself (she is introduced grammatically—as an object, not a subject—only by the action of the blizzard) from the city, depositing her directly in the hall of this building without any sort of conventional transition. The “white wasteland” of the world she leaves behind is already a world made strange, but the “yellow wasteland” in which she finds herself is stranger—she continues:

And there, from the end of the hall, distant—like through the
wrong end of binoculars, huge—like through the right end—all imaginary
binocular-eyes—eyes.

Over Petersburg stood a blizzard and in that blizzard—motionless
like two planets—stood eyes.

According to what understanding can planets, which partake of constant continual motion, be said to be “motionless”? A profound shift in perspective is necessitated, in consequence of which we look through both ends of the binoculars at once, and planets remain fixed while everything else moves around them. These eyes ‘stand’ in the same way that the blizzard is said to stand—motionless and in constant motion, and as the

¹²⁴ All quotations from “Otherworldly Evening” are from my own translation, which can be read in full in Appendix C below. The original can be found in *Марина Цветаева: Собрание сочинений в семи томах* (IV:281-292); I will quote the Russian in brackets only in order to make a particular point about it.

unmoving motion of the blizzard carries away all points of reference in the city, the unmoving motion of the eyes steals away all points of reference in general, utterly reorienting the mode of perception of whoever is confronted with the eyes—which might be one way of conceiving of the work of the poet.

These eyes, indeed, belong to a poet: Mikhail Kuzmin. Immediately upon Marina’s perception of the eyes that ‘stand,’ they cease to stand and begin to approach her, and her meeting with Kuzmin ensues:

From that end of the hall—motionless like two planets—toward me came eyes.

The eyes were—*here*.

In front of me stood—Kuzmin.

But the voice was *not here*. The voice did not precisely keep up with the eyes. The voice was still coming from that end of the room—and of life,—or, maybe, I, absorbed by the eyes, was not keeping up?—the first feeling from this voice: with me is speaking a man—across a river, and I, like in a dream, all the same I hear, like in a dream—because it is necessary—all the same I hear.¹²⁵

It is clear from this passage that the transition from one space to another with which the essay began may have begun with the beginning of the essay, but it has not yet been fully completed. Marina is able to see the eyes of the poet, however disorienting, and state that, in relation to her, “The eyes were—here” [Глаза были – здесь]. A body accompanies these eyes, but only as an accessory or vehicle—it is the eyes that are remarkable, and the

¹²⁵ Emphasis added.

eyes are “here.” The voice, separate from body and eyes, “was not here” [Но голос не был здесь]. Although Marina is able to hear the voice, “like in a dream, because it is necessary,” she still has the sense that either the voice has not reached her, or she has not reached it. Kuzmin speaks with her “across a river,” and the speeches they exchange consist of the recognition by each of the other as a poet—which is exactly what is needed to complete the process of transition into the realm of the voice.¹²⁶

With his first words to Marina, Kuzmin hails her as a poet:

“...We all read your poems in “Northern Notes”... It was such a pleasure. When you see a new name, you think: more poems, always poems, the verbal exposition of feelings. And for the most part—not my own [other, foreign]. And the words—not my own. And all of a sudden, from the first line—mine, a force. “I know the truth! All former truths—make way!”... And we all felt that—all of us.”

This speech attributed to Kuzmin, in the “not-of-here” voice of “all of us,” makes it clear that the meeting as imagined by Tsvetaeva follows the rules of dreams in more ways than one: it represents a fulfillment of a wish, rather than an historically accurate report. As Taubman points out, “Kuzmin might well have seen an autograph copy of the poem (written only three months earlier) but he certainly could not have read it in Northern Notes, for it appeared there in No. 7/8 for 1916, that is, no earlier than July. [...] “I know the truth!” like the other 1915 poems Tsvetaeva read that evening, is a poem which could justly have won her the approval of that sophisticated Petersburg crowd” (70). Indeed, the 1921 letter to Kuzmin contains little description of her meeting with Kuzmin, and she

¹²⁶ The moment of recognition of a poet by a poet is a repeated trope in Tsvetaeva’s work; we have already seen her establish an identification with Pasternak over her (apparently upon her first meeting with him) recognition of him as a poet (see Chapter 3, p. 200).

claims, “What we said, I don’t remember” [Что говорило – не помню] (*SS VI:209*). Thus, in 1936 the meeting scene and Kuzmin’s created speech fulfill a number of wishes for Tsvetaeva. She is able to speak here with a man whose voice is coming “from that end of the hall—and of life”—that is, a man with whom it is no longer possible to speak on this side of life, because he is on the other side of any one of the many rivers associated with the mythic afterlife—Ocean, Styx, Acheron, Phlegethon, Lethe. And in his “not-of-here” speech Kuzmin fulfills Marina’s wish to be recognized by him as a poet, through ‘his’ affirmation that her own poetic voice (in a poem that Tsvetaeva with a mature judgment can approve as worthy of this affirmation) was recognized by him, and “all of us,” as familiar and akin. In other words, Marina’s voice is affirmed to be “not-of-here” as well, and thus she completes her entry into this not-of-here, otherworldly evening.¹²⁷

Kuzmin’s recognition of the poetic voice of the young Marina as somehow ‘his own,’ in this first meeting, is echoed by her recognition of his poetic voice as also her own, in their second meeting—that is, her discovery of his collection *Otherworldly Evenings* in the Moscow Writer’s Bookshop, the “meeting” that prompts her letter to him in 1921. She describes this encounter toward the close of the essay, after she has already finished her description of the 1916 evening:

I never saw Kuzmin again. But I had one more meeting with him.

Here is the end of my letter to him, in June of 1921, a letter, written to myself in a notebook in the heat of the moment and for that reason still surviving. (The first half of the letter—the written portrait to him of our meeting, just read through by the reader.)

¹²⁷ This would rather disagree with Taubman’s estimation (see p. 296 above) that “otherworldly” refers to Tsvetaeva’s “Moscow viewpoint”—her foreignness—among the gathered Petersburg poets.

... “I go into the Writers’ Bookshop, the one weak source of my living. Timidly, to the cashier: “You don’t know, how my little books are doing?” (I write out poems by hand, I sew them together in little notebooks and sell them. Among us this is called—overcoming Gutenberg.) While she is inquiring, I, *pour me donner une contenance*, leaf through the books on the counter. Kuzmin. “Otherworldly Evenings.” I open it: a spear in the heart—George! White George! My George, about whom I have already been writing for two months—his life. Jealousy and joy, a double blade, I read—the joy increases, I finish—the dragon of envy is pierced, nailed. My meeting rises up out of the depths of memory.

I open up further: Pushkin—my Pushkin, what I am always saying about him—I. And, third—Goethe, my Goethe, my, from sixteen years old, Goethe—old! secret!—the one about whom I always say, judging the present: “Before the face of Goethe...”

I read through only these three poems. I left, carrying pain, joy, ecstasy—everything, except the little book, which I could not buy, because none of my own had sold. And the feeling: —at least there are still such poems...

What still remains for me to say to You, except:

—You are so close to me, so akin...¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Aside from a few small additions—the fancy of ‘overcoming Gutenberg,’ the pierced dragon of envy—this passage is very similar to the end of the 1921 letter. It is in Tsvetaeva’s claim that “[t]he first half of the letter—[is] the written portrait to him of our meeting, just read through by the reader” that she ‘tenderly lies,’ if we can even name this lie as tender at all. Beyond a significant difference in length—the letter is roughly 1500 words, the essay almost 4500—the essay differs drastically from the letter in tone, emphasis, detail, and in general does not tell anything like the same overall story.

Of the only three poems Tsvetaeva is able to read in Kuzmin's collection, which contains 50 short lyrics as well as the 10-page "cantata" ('St. George'), she recognizes the subjects of all of them as already hers, even (precisely) from childhood: my George, my Pushkin,¹²⁹ my Goethe. This is no experience of authorly bitterness—a sense that her ground has already been covered—and it is certainly not a complaint of some sort of mystical plagiarism. Although the "dragon of envy" does raise its head at the approach of "White George," it is "pierced" and "nailed" by this same George in the end, and in its place rises the memory of the otherworldly evening. Tsvetaeva is left grateful that "at least there are still such poems," and she takes leave of Kuzmin by quoting to him a line of his own poem, which she has already claimed that he read in their first meeting: "You are so close to me, so akin..." [Вы так близкий мне, так родной], which is itself already an expression of poetic kinship.¹³⁰ The economic restrictions of this second meeting—despite her attempts to overcome Gutenberg, Tsvetaeva cannot overcome the simple rules of economic exchange, and thus cannot buy Kuzmin's book, because no one has bought hers—serve to emphasize her ideal of the absolutely free exchange between poets that took place in the other-world of that 1916 evening in Petersburg.

While in this passage Tsvetaeva's recognition of Kuzmin's poetic voice mirrors Kuzmin's recognition and acceptance of her as a poet in the first scene, the passage directly following this one—which ends the essay—mirrors the transition we saw Tsvetaeva undergo, from the world "here" to the world "not-of-here." The following passage intimates not only her transition, but the transition of all the poets implicated in that evening, into an even more otherworldly world:

¹²⁹ In 1937 Tsvetaeva wrote her famous essay, "My Pushkin" [Мой Пушкин], in which she narrates her earliest familiarity with the figure of Pushkin and with his poetry.

¹³⁰ From Kuzmin's 1915 lyric, "Среди ночных и долгих бдений..."

I have called this thing “Otherworldly Evening.”

The beginning of January of 1916, the beginning of the last year of the old world. The height of the war. Dark forces.

We sat and read poetry. The last poetry on the last fur rugs by the last fires. By no one the whole evening was pronounced the word front, nor was pronounced—though in such close physical proximity—the name Rasputin.

Even tomorrow Seryozha and Lyonya ended life, already the day after tomorrow Sophia Isaakovna Chatskina was wandering around Moscow, like a shade seeking shelter, and ended—she, for whom all fires were not enough, by the ghostly Moscow hearths.

Tomorrow Akhmatova lost everything, Gumilyov—life.

But today the evening was ours!

Feast in the time of the Plague? Yes. But there they feasted—on wine and roses, and we—incorporeally, miraculously, like pure souls—already shades of Hades—on words: on the sound of words and the living blood of feelings.

Do I repent it? No. The single duty of man on earth—the truth of every being. I would in that evening, truly, hand laid on my heart, have given up all Petersburg and all of Moscow for that “so resembles...blessedness” of Kuzmin, and that same blessedness would have given up for the “so resembles”... Some sell their souls—for rosy cheeks, others sell their souls—for heavenly sounds.

And—everyone paid. Seryozha and Lyonya—with life,
 Gumilyov—with life, Esenin—with life, Kuzmin, Akhmatova, I—lifelong
 imprisonment in ourselves, in that fortress—more faithful than Petro-
 Pavlovsk.

And however we conquered the days and evenings here, and
 however each in our way—all-historically or without a sound—we, the
 participants in that not-of-here evening, died—the last sound from our lips
 was and will be:

И звуков небес заменить не могли

Ей скучные песни земли.

The transition detailed here can be characterized in several ways: as a transition from the “old world” to a new world, from freedom to “lifelong imprisonment” in oneself, from life to death, from “today” to “tomorrow,” and from “here” to not here—or is it rather from “not-of-here” to “here?” To begin with, we find the otherworldly, not-of-here evening contrasted with the “days and evenings here.” While the otherworldly evening is surrounded by “dark forces” which eventually work the destruction of each of its participants (even the absent ones, as Akhmatova and Gumilyov), it shuts out those forces of history and maintains itself in a “today” belonging only to the poets. Nothing intrudes on their feast of words and feelings—not the war (at this point, in 1916, the first World War, but also the germinating seeds of the Russian Civil war), not the decay of the “old world” (signified by the name of Rasputin, and his association with the decline of the Russian imperial family), and not the blizzard raging outside. While “tomorrow” or “the day after tomorrow” life ends, “today the evening was ours!”

In a strange confusion of tenses, Tsvetaeva writes of both “today” and “tomorrow” in the past tense. While the use of the past tense in itself is not unexpected, as the entire essay is composed of reminiscences, it is certainly unconventional in a phrase like “tomorrow Seryozha and Lyonya ended life.” What can it mean to separate “today” from the present tense, or “tomorrow” from the future? Perhaps it means something similar to what is meant when, in the opening passage of the essay, Tsvetaeva claims that “the eyes were here,” or the “the voice was not here.” In both cases we have linguistic markers of time and place which are typically associated with the present tense instead associated with a particular event in the past. The final line of the essay gives us an invaluable key to interpreting this conundrum, although it involves an even stranger grammatical construction itself: “And however we conquered the days and evenings here, and however each in our way—all-historically or without a sound—we, the participants in that not-of-here evening, died—the last sound from our lips was and will be...”

It is in the world here, the world of days and evenings and the passage of time in general, that the events of history are played out. War, and most particularly death, characterize this world, allowing Tsvetaeva to write “we...died” and include herself in that “we,” because the world of “here” not only witnesses but requires the death of the poet—whether yesterday, tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow, death is a foregone conclusion. On that “not-of-here evening,” however, these poets were—are—gathered together in an eternal “today,” which would be no less “today” were it a thousand years past. And despite the fact that after “today” the poets are separated, and all eventually meet their death on some “tomorrow,” they are again gathered together in the moment of death by an affirmation of the eternal today of poetry: “And the boring songs of earth

could not replace / For her the sounds of heaven” [И звуков небес заменить не могли/ Ей скучные песни земли]. This quotation of the last two lines of Mikhail Lermontov’s famous poem, “Angel” [Ангел], begins to point us, as we will see below, to Tsvetaeva’s conception of a true community of poets.

The intention of Tsvetaeva’s play with tenses in these opening and closing passages appears more clearly in the body of the essay. While in the first few pages, as Tsvetaeva digresses into descriptions of her hosts for the evening—Sergei and Leonid Kannegiser, whom she calls Seryozha and Lyonya—and of the other poets present—notably Sergei Esenin—she switches back and forth between past and present progressive tense. However, upon the gathering together of all the guests for the purpose of reciting poetry—which is the very purpose of the evening—Tsvetaeva writes almost exclusively in present tense, and the exceptions to this rule reveal a fully conceived pattern. She begins:

I sit in that yellow desert—perhaps, from Seryozha’s camels—hall
and I read poems, —not read—I recite them by heart. I started to read
from a notebook only when I stopped knowing them by heart, and I
stopped knowing them, when I stopped reciting them, and I stopped
reciting them—when they stopped asking, and they stopped asking in
1922—my emigration from Russia. From a world, where my poems were
necessary to someone, like bread, I found myself in a world, where
poems—were not necessary to anyone, neither my poems, nor poems in
general, were necessary—like dessert: if dessert is—necessary, —to
anyone...

As previously established, Tsvetaeva refers to the events of the evening in the present tense, as though they are happening to her “today,” but reverts to past tense to narrate any following history.¹³¹ She describes her poetic recitation (including the full texts of two of her poems in the essay) in the present tense, as well as the response to it, which she sums up thus: “I read all of my poetry from 1915—and still it is too little, and still—they want more.” Next she gives some account of the other poets who read that night:

Then—everyone reads. Esenin reads Marfa Posadnitsa, which was accepted by Gorky to the “Chronicle” and prohibited by the censor. I remember grey-blue clouds, light-blue and black—of the people’s anger. —“How the Moscow tsar—in bloody revelry—sold his soul—to the Antichrist”... I listen with all the roots of my hair. Did this cherubim, this Milchgesicht, really write that operatic “Open up! Open up!” —this one really wrote—felt—that? (With Esenin I never ceased to marvel over that.) [...]

Osip Mandelstam, camel’s-eyes half-closed, intones:

Let’s go to Tsa-arskoe Se-elo,

Free, cheerful, and drunk

Uhlans smile there,

Jumping up into their strong saddles.

¹³¹ In this case, “today” is associated with the oral recitation of poetry which the poet knows by heart, and although Tsvetaeva continues throughout the essay to refer to poets “reading” their poems, I would argue the corrective she offers in the above passage applies to the other poets as well—that they do not in fact “read” but recite. Thus the end of the evening entails an end, even a death, of oral poetry. That is, at least for Tsvetaeva, who leaves Russia and finds herself in a world where poems are “not necessary to anyone,” and so she stops remembering them, and is forced to write them down. For poets such as Mandelstam and Akhmatova, however, who did not emigrate, it becomes increasingly dangerous to commit any poems to writing, for fear that they will become incriminating documentary evidence. Thus the poems can be entrusted *only* to memory for preservation—the poet’s own memory, and the memories of the most faithful friends.

The censor changed his “drunk” to “zealous,” because in Tsarskoe
Selo there are no drunk Uhlans—only zealous!

The past tense intrudes here with Tsvetaeva’s reflections on the fate of the poems she heard—a fate characterized by intrusion: the intrusion of the “censor” into the realm of poetry. While the censors referred to here are the Tsar’s censors, as both poems—Esenin’s “Marfa Posadnitsa” and Mandelstam’s “Tsarskoe Selo”—are highly critical of the waste, absurdity, and obsolescence of the Imperial court of Nicholas II, nevertheless they foreshadow the more violent censors at work in the USSR at the time of the essay’s composition in 1936. Intimations of the fate of the poets gathered on that evening also occasion passages in the past tense, and for the most part these are separated from the main text in some way, with ellipses, parentheses, or line breaks. For example, when young Marina announces to the assembly that it is time for her to leave, Kuzmin responds, “ ‘What fo-or? It’s nice here. It’s very nice here. For all of us—it’s long since time to leave’ . ” The older Tsvetaeva ominously reflects, “(O how soon afterward we—all left. Into that same blizzard, so threateningly and faithfully watching over us...)”

The narration of the evening’s events ends, necessarily, with Tsvetaeva’s description of her own departure—she is the first to leave, and so she leaves the entire company behind, still gathered together. In fact, they are gathered around the piano, because Kuzmin has promised to sing something. The promise of the song is offered to Marina as a temptation to stay, but she staunchly declares that she must go in order to fulfill another promise to a friend,¹³² and that she must go before Kuzmin sings, because

¹³² Although in the essay Tsvetaeva says that this “friend” is Sophia Isaakovna Chatskina, publisher of the journal *Northern Notes*, who had invited her to make the trip to Petersburg, it is clear in the letter that the friend was actually the poet Sophia Parnok, Tsvetaeva’s lover, who had travelled with her from Moscow but refused to come out because of a headache. In addressing Kuzmin, whose homosexuality was well-

“after all would it be possible to leave after the first song? I simply couldn’t leave then—never. And so I’m leaving now.” And so she tells us, “The last thing that I remember—last turn of the head—Kuzmin, already approaching the piano.” Although in leaving before the song Marina thinks to escape staying eternally, at the same time through leaving that promise unfulfilled, the song always to be sung, and the group all still assembled, Tsvetaeva assures that in her essay this evening will remain always about to become—and thus always with the potential to become—eternal, and immortal. This promise of immortality through the always-to-be-fulfilled promise of song is, however, counterbalanced by the passage directly following, which constitutes the strongest assertion of mortality yet to appear in the essay:

And all of them died, died, died...

The brothers died: Seryozha and Lyonya, the friends died: Lyonya and Esenin, my dear editors of the Northern Notes died, Sofia Isaakovna and Yakov Lvovich, later than the others, in Warsaw – the “Lord” died, and now Kuzmin died.

The rest are – shades.

[И все они умерли, умерли, умерли...

Умерли братья: Серёжа и Лёня, умерли друзья: Лёня и Есенин, умерли мои дорогие редакторы «Северных Записок», София Исааковна и Яков Львович, умер позже всех, в Варшаве, - Лорд, и теперь умер Кузмин.

known, personally, Tsvetaeva does not hesitate to allude to her relationship with Parnok, but in “Otherworldly Evening” she removes any direct reference to it, replacing one friend with another to explain why she could not stay to hear Kuzmin’s song. Still, the theme of homosexuality lingers in Tsvetaeva’s representation of the friendship between Lyonya Kannegiser and Sergei Esenin.

Остальные – тени.]

Clearly the “of-here,” historical world, of which one properly speaks and writes in the past tense, is characterized by its opposition to the community of poetry—it censors poets, it starves and freezes and persecutes poets—and by death—in this world, the poet eventually and inevitably “died.” On the other hand, the “not-of-here” world, represented by the “not-of-here evening,” is, not precisely beyond life or death, but constructed upon life and death by means of poetry.

Tsvetaeva builds this otherworld out of a multitude of overt literary citations and quotations and covert literary allusions. In this construction work she is highly “creative,” in Trediakovsky’s sense; she might as truly be said to practice mis-quotation and mis-citation. When it comes to referencing the work of another author, Tsvetaeva does not follow any conventional rules of faithfulness to that work; she is faithful to what she perceives to be a higher authority. While the Trediakovsky epigraph is almost systematically used to explain away Tsvetaeva’s habitual altering of historical facts in her writing, it is rarely if ever discussed in relation to her equally habitual practice of creative literary quotation and citation. The remainder of this section will map out Tsvetaeva’s multiple literary references within “Otherworldly Evening,” in order to manifest an image of the landscape which, all together, they designate.

Let us begin again, then, at the end, or one of the ends—Marina’s departure from the scene of the otherworldly evening, despite the promise of a song which would have bound here there eternally. We are given a freeze-frame image, with her “last turn of the head,” of “Kuzmin, already approaching the piano.” This entire scene constitutes a

mirror-reversal, in several respects, of the myth of Orpheus' descent to the underworld to retrieve Eurydice, which we have already seen Tsvetaeva reconstruct so decisively in "Eurydice – to Orpheus." Tsvetaeva's evocation of aspects of the Orpheus myth in "Otherworldly Evening" is clear, though she changes the details of each aspect, to give it rather a different meaning. Kuzmin appears as a double of Orpheus, his promised song attributed the power of binding his listeners to him. The general plea that Marina stay to hear his song would also seem to correspond to Orpheus' plea that Eurydice be allowed to leave with him. However, where Orpheus leaves the underworld, and Eurydice ultimately must stay, the Orphic Kuzmin stays in the other-world, and Marina departs (a departure she nevertheless regrets later) in resistance of the temptation of his song. It is her glance backward – "last turn of the head" – which fixes him eternally in the moment of parting, on the verge of song. By means of her identification with Kuzmin through their common status as "poet," Tsvetaeva also places herself in the role of Orpheus here, leaving the immortal other-world behind and thus separating herself not only from Kuzmin, but from all of those who she immediately afterwards identifies as having died, or as being "shades" [тени].¹³³ In "Euridice – to Orpheus," Tsvetaeva, in the voice of Eurydice, had already reproached Orpheus for descending to trouble her, addressing him not as her husband but as a brother, and proclaiming, "For in this phantasmal house / The phantom is – you, the living, and reality is – / Me, the dead." To apply this interpretation of the Orpheus story to "Otherworldly Evening" would lead us to conclude that for

¹³³ Virgil's evocation of the scene of Orpheus' descent to Erebus bears a marked similarity to Odysseus' similar descent in *Odyssey* XI, but whereas in the *Odyssey* the dead flock around Odysseus attracted by the sacrificial blood he spills, Orpheus draws "the flittering shades" because they are "spellbound by his music." This opposition anticipates Tsvetaeva's merging of the two scenes when, on the last page of "Otherworldly Evening," she writes that the participants in that evening feasted "incorporeally, miraculously, like pure souls—already shades of Hades—on words: on the sound of words and the living blood of feelings."

Tsvetaeva the timeless other-world constituted by the brotherhood of poets is more real than the outside world of historical life, and that existence “there” is preferable to life/death “here.”

The world evoked by Tsvetaeva’s Orphic glance, in which a relationship between poets is less like a marriage than a relation between siblings, can also be glimpsed in the poem Tsvetaeva claims Kuzmin recited that night – a poem she both quotes part of and later references twice in the end of the essay. In response to her insistent plea that he read something before she leaves, Kuzmin replies, “ ‘I will read—the most recent’.” Tsvetaeva quotes only eight of the thirty-two lines of this poem, and those inexactly, although the inexactness in this case seems most likely the result of having only her memory to consult at the time of the essay’s composition:

(The beginning about mirrors. Then:)

You are so close to me, so akin,
 That it’s as if you are not beloved.
 It must be, that seraphim
 Are this cold – one to another – in paradise.

And I freely breathe again.
 I – as in childhood – believe in essences.
 It may be ... this is not love...
 But it so...

(immeasurable pause and – mit Nachdruck of the whole being!)

– resembles –

(almost without voice)

...blessedness...

[...] The unforgettable emphasis on resembles and so, that itself precisely so resembles...blessedness! Only children speak like that: I so want it! Like that from the whole soul – and breast. Like that unbearably-defenselessly and bare and even more bleeding among all—who are clothed and armored.

Here the classical underworld of the Orphic allusion, a world where distinctions are not made between the blessed and the damned, and which is not by any means a heavenly afterlife, is exchanged for an intimation of a more paradisaic realm, the abode of seraphim and domain of blessedness. Even if Kuzmin's poem does not necessarily indicate a poetic relationship, Tsvetaeva makes it clear that this is how she understands it, when after describing her discovery and recognition of Kuzmin's poems in 1921 she quotes again the line "you are so close to me, so akin...". For her the bond between poets is indeed one of kin-ship and familiarity, which is like and unlike love, allows free breath (thus free communication), is open and vulnerable "as in childhood," and, above all, "resembles" blessedness.

It is precisely this resemblance, and the emphasis placed on it by Kuzmin's not-here voice, that Tsvetaeva refers to again in the end of the essay, through which she makes another indirect literary reference:

Do I repent it? No. The single duty of man on earth—the truth of every being. I would in that evening, truly, hand laid on my heart, have given up all Petersburg and all of Moscow for that "so resembles..."

blessedness” of Kuzmin, and that same blessedness would have given up for the “so resembles”... Some sell their souls—for rosy cheeks, others sell their souls—for heavenly sounds.

A clear hierarchy is set up in which all of this world “here” – Moscow, Petersburg or Paris – Tsvetaeva would give up for the world evoked by the “heavenly sounds” of Kuzmin’s poetry, and would even give up “blessedness” itself—already an otherworldly world—for the sound, that “unforgettable emphasis,” of the “so resembles.” While Kuzmin’s poem celebrates a heaven of sorts, the “heavenly sounds” of the poem itself inspire Tsvetaeva to contemplate selling her soul—or perhaps rather to affirm that she already has sold her soul—for the one evening devoted to these sounds. In true Faustian fashion, the chance at eternal blessedness is given up for the sake of a moment—an eternal “today”¹³⁴—of complete happiness, and Tsvetaeva asserts that “everyone paid” for their participation in the otherworldly poetic evening.¹³⁵ However, in Goethe’s *Faust* the continually striving hero is rewarded for his striving by receiving blessedness after all, even though in the moment of his death he finally experiences the one moment of true happiness for the sake of which he gave over the right to his soul to Mephistopheles. Thus even though all of the poets are said to pay, in this life, for their “heavenly sounds,” and many of them pay “with life” itself, still there is a hope that they may be rewarded in another life with a reunion of their community.

¹³⁴ In forging the details of their bargain, Faust promises to Mephistopheles,
 If I ever say to the passing moment – “Stay, thou art so fair!” then mayst thou cast me into chains; then will I readily perish; then may the death-bell toll; then art thou free from thy service. The clock may stand, the index-hand may fall: be time a thing no more for me! (58)

In referring to the “otherworldly evening” strictly in the present tense, Tsvetaeva in a sense continually entreats the “swift moment” to “tarry a while” – for which, as she affirms herself, she pays a price.

¹³⁵ Like Eurydice of “Eurydice – to Orpheus,” who pays for immortality with her “blood-roses” and her “cries”; they all pay for death, with death, or pay for life with life, or pay for life with death...all of these formulations are valid.

The simultaneous danger and promise inherent in this gathering for the sake of poetry can be found also in Tsvetaeva's allusion, in the same passage, to Alexander Pushkin's 'little tragedy,' "A Feast in the Time of Plague" [Пир во время Чумы]:

Feast in the time of the Plague? Yes. But there they feasted—on wine and roses, and we—incorporeally, miraculously, like pure souls—already shades of Hades—on words: on the sound of words and the living blood of feelings.

The threads of literary influence in this passage are not easy to unweave, brief though it may be. "Feast in the Time of Plague," composed by Pushkin in the fall of 1830 along with three other short dramatic works, which are generally referred to together as the 'little tragedies,' is not an entirely original work. Rather, it is relatively free translation of part of Act 1, Scene IV of *The City of the Plague*, a three-act tragedy published in 1816 by the Scottish writer John Wilson. The drama of Wilson's play is, as the title suggests, set against the backdrop of a city beset by a plague; the scene Pushkin chose to translate as "Feast in the Time of Plague" is a somewhat disconnected episode in which we see a group of men and women gathered together to feast in the middle of a street which is abandoned by all but the death-cart rumbling through. These revelers present a ghastly merriment in contrast to the pious sorrow of the main characters, toasting rather than grieving the loss of a former companion. The scene is characterized by two songs, one a "shepherd's lay most touching in simplicity," in thick Scottish dialect, sung by the character "Mary Gray," who laments the fact that she ever left her country home to come to the city, the other a "song on the Plague," sung by "Walsingham," the "Master of Revels," who tells the group "I made the words last night / After we parted: a strange

rhyming-fit / Fell on me; 'twas the first time in my life" (50). Both songs take "the plague" as their subject, the first mournfully narrating the effects of a plague upon a rural town, the second treating the idea of the plague rather more philosophically; it is difficult to sum up the theme of either song without going into much greater detail, as they are both over sixty lines, and not written very simply. Although Pushkin as a rule translates Wilson's mannered verse into straightforward and unaffected language, he follows the general meaning of most of the dialogue; however, in translating the two songs he diverges wildly, essentially composing new songs in place of Wilson's. Both of Pushkin's songs are notably shorter than Wilson's counterparts, and both are much more pointed in theme. Mary Gray's "plaintive song" is sung in the voice of a young girl who begs her lover not to kiss her lips after she is dead, but to go away and save himself from the plague that has destroyed their town and will destroy her as well. Walsingham's "song on the plague" becomes a "Hymn in honor of the plague" [Гимн в честь чумы], and is, to a certain extent, an answer to the first song:

Гимн в честь чумы

Когда могущая Зима,
 Как бодрый вождь, ведет сама
 На нас косматые дружины
 Своих морозов и снегов, —
 Навстречу ей трещат каминь,
 И весел зимний жар пиров.

Царица грозная, Чума
 Теперь идет на нас сама

Hymn in Honor of the Plague

When mighty winter
 Like a bright chief, herself leads
 Upon us the shaggy troops
 Of her own frosts and snows,—
 Fireplaces crackle to meet her
 And cheerful is the winter warmth of feasts.

The dread Tsaritsa, Plague,
 Now comes upon us herself

И льстится жатвою богатой;	And is flattered with a wealthy harvest;
И к нам в окошко день и ночь	And on our window day and night
Стучит могильною лопатой....	She raps with a graveyard shovel...
Что делать нам? и чем помочь?	What can we do? And how can we help?
Как от проказницы Зимы,	As from the mischievous winter,
Запремся также от Чумы!	Let's lock ourselves away from the Plague!
Зажжем огни, нальем бокалы,	Let's light the fires, empty the goblets;
Утопим весело умы	Let's merrily drown our wits
И, заварив пиры да балы,	And, having prepared the feast and the ball,
Восславим царствие Чумы.	Let's praise the kingdom of the Plague!
Есть упоение в бою,	There's intoxication in battle,
И бездны мрачной на краю,	And on the edge of the somber abyss,
И в разъяренном океане,	And in the raging ocean,
Средь грозных волн и бурной тьмы,	Amidst dread waves and stormy shadows,
И в аравийском урагане,	And in the Arabian hurricane,
И в дуновении Чумы.	And in the breath of the Plague.
Все, все, что гибелью грозит,	Everything, everything that threatens ruin,
Для сердца смертного таит	Harbors for the mortal heart
Неизъяснимы наслажденья —	An inexplicable delight—
Бессмертья, может быть, залог!	The promise, it may be, of immortality!
И счастлив тот, кто среди волненья	And happy is he, who amidst this agitation
Их обрести и ведать мог.	Is able to find and chase after it.

Итак, — хвала тебе, Чума,	And so—praise be to you, Plague!
Нам не страшна могилы тьма,	No horror for us in the shadow of the grave,
Нас не смутит твое призванье!	Your mission does not trouble us!
Бокалы пеним дружно мы	Together we froth the goblets,
И девы-розы пьем дыханье, —	And drink the breath of the Rose-Maids—
Быть может... полное Чумы!	Full—it may be—of the Plague!) ¹³⁶

(180-181)

This ‘hymn’ provides the very rationale for the existence of a feast in plague-time, in its assertion that there is “intoxication” even “in the breath of the Plague,” and furthermore that “the mortal heart” can find “the promise, it may be, of immortality” in “everything that threatens ruin.” It is tempting to read this as the central idea of the entire work, but Pushkin is too subtle to allow us to sum up his little tragedy so neatly. Nevertheless it is the most strikingly expressed thought in the work, and it is certainly what leads Tsvetaeva to make reference to the scene in “Otherworldly Evening.”

While Pushkin rewrites Wilson’s songs for the sake of giving his own work greater unity and also a heightened tension within itself, Tsvetaeva reinterprets Pushkin’s play around the question of song, for the sake of emphasizing her own particular point. Tsvetaeva’s claim about “Feast in the Time of Plague” that “there they feasted—on wine and roses” is not especially accurate; certainly the band of revelers are drinking, but their drink is never specified as wine, nor indeed is there any indication that they are dining on roses. Rather, the songs seem to provide their essential sustenance, to sustain and bolster their gathering, as Walsingham first entreats, “Sing us, Mary, something sad / That we may then more madly still / To mirth return” (168). However, this fact would not suit the

¹³⁶ My translation.

opposition Tsvetaeva wants to draw when she continues, “and we—incorporeally, miraculously, like pure souls—already shades of Hades—on words: on the sound of words and the living blood of feelings.” Clearly she means to emphasize the importance of “words,” “the sound of words,” to her gathering by de-emphasizing the importance of the songs in Pushkin’s play, and it is true that the revelers do not gather for the sake of song, but in order to distract themselves from the plague, whereas for Tsvetaeva the song is the higher and indeed only purpose of the “otherworldly evening.” On the other hand, her reference to “wine and roses” is not arbitrary, nor does it overlook the songs—it is in fact an interpretation of the last three lines of the “hymn in honor of the Plague” composed and sung by Walsingham, who exhorts his audience, “Together we froth the goblets, / And drink the breath of the rose-maids— / Full—it may be—of the Plague!” [Бокалы пеним дружно мы / И девы-розы пьем дыханье, — / Быть может... полное Чумы!] (181). Where Walsingham refers to the wine as “rose-maids,” for Tsvetaeva this becomes “wine and roses,” but the inference—that in drinking the “breath” of the “rose-maids” (an act linked to the forbidden kiss of the first song, which would transmit the plague) the infection and “intoxication” of the plague are both fully embraced—carries over into Tsvetaeva’s text. She recognizes the mortal danger threatening this evening (in her constant reminders of the “blizzard, so threateningly and faithfully watching over us,” she points us to the comparison Walsingham draws between “mighty winter” and “the dread Tsaritsa, Plague,” who raps on the windows “with a graveyard-shovel”) and boldly asserts that all of the participants in that evening embraced and ‘drank the breath’ of that danger, precisely in pursuit of its “promise...of immortality.” The feast of sounds renders the feasters “pure souls—already shades of Hades,” which is to say that their poetry,

while perhaps it kills them, also places them beyond death. There is a hint of this in a line from “Feast in the Time of Plague” which Pushkin either intentionally or unintentionally, but certainly fortuitously, mistranslates. The scene begins with the proposal, by a character called only “Young Man,” of a toast to a fellow reveler who has died; in Wilson’s text the “Young Man” says of this missing friend, “Well I deem / The grave did never silence with its dust / A tongue more eloquent” (44). Pushkin renders this “Although that tongue of beautiful speech / Has not yet fallen silent in the grave”¹³⁷ [Хотя красноречивейший язык / Не умолкал еще во прахе гроба] (175). While Wilson simply means for the “Young Man” to claim that the tongue of his friend was the most eloquent ever to be silenced by the grave, Pushkin denies the ability of the grave to silence a tongue of such wondrous eloquence. Tsvetaeva, for her part, believes that a wondrous eloquence of the tongue – a “not-of-here” voice – may both lead to death as a direct consequence, and also open up a world in which death has no meaning.

This world is indicated at the very close of the essay, when Tsvetaeva asserts the re-membrance of the otherworldly evening through the unity of all of its members in the moment of death:

And however we conquered the days and evenings here, and
however each in our way—all-historically or without a sound—we, the
participants in that not-of-here evening, died—the last sound from our lips
was and will be:

И звуков небес заменить не могли

Ей скучные песни земли.

¹³⁷ My translation.

The unsilenced lips of the poets, still moving even in death – which is already dismissed as past – move together in speaking the last lines of the poem “Angel” [Ангел], written by Mikhail Yurevich Lermontov in 1831 at the age of 17. In 1941, marking the centennial of Lermontov’s death, Vladimir Nabokov wrote of this poem that “Russian critics have, not inadequately, described [it] as coming straight from paradise; indeed, it contains a pure and truly heavenly melody brought unbroken to earth” (31). This description is ‘not inadequate’ particularly because it describes the very subject of the poem: the possibility of a poem or song which would come “straight from paradise.”

Through the midnight heaven the angel flew,
 And a soft song he sang;
 And the moon, and the stars, and the clusters of clouds
 Harkened to his sacred song.

He sang of the blessedness of sinless souls
 Under canopies of paradisaal gardens;
 He sang of great God, and his praise
 Was unfeigned and genuine.

In his arms he carried a young soul
 Bound for the world of sorrows and tears,
 And in the young soul the sound of his song
 Remained—without worlds, but alive.

And long did it/she languish in the world,
 Full of miraculous desires;
 And the sounds of heaven could never be replaced
 For her by the tiresome songs of earth.

Summarizing the generally accepted interpretation of this “heavenly melody” in the context of the rest of Lermontov’s work, Pamela Davidson writes,

Lermontov’s vision of the human condition was fundamentally divided. In his verse man is presented as a split, dual creature; his soul binds him irrevocably to the world of the spiritual, while through his bodily existence he remains rooted in the domain of the material. As the spiritual realm is his true home, in this earthly world he can never be more than a prisoner or exile [...] The creative impulse originates in the divine. However, as in Lermontov’s general view of the human condition, this ideal source and level is impossible to achieve. Art may have its roots in the upper realm, but it is forced to take form in a material way which is imperfect [...] The artist is therefore a fallen angel, whose deepest intuitions and aspirations are formed in a paradise from which he is irretrievably exiled. (176-178)

Tsvetaeva’s understanding of “Angel,” insofar it can be divined from her use of it in “Otherworldly Evening,” though it would roughly coincide with this one, differs on a few points. Davidson’s conception of the “artist” as a “fallen angel” seems more influenced by a reading of Lermontov’s long poem “Demon” than of “Angel”; Tsvetaeva would be more likely to see the “young soul,” once it/she is languishing in the world haunted by the irreplaceable “sounds of heaven,” as representing the figure of the artist—of the poet,

in particular. Davidson may certainly be correct to claim that for Lermontov the “ideal source” for the “creative impulse” is “impossible to achieve” in this world, leaving the artist a permanent exile from his true home. And certainly Tsvetaeva considers the poet to be an “otherworldly,” “not-of-here” being; however, for the author of “Otherworldly Evening” it seems possible that the other-world, the poet’s true home, can be reached, occasionally, in this world – in those moments when poets come together to hear the echo of the “sounds of heaven” from each other.

This other-world, which as we have seen is located in close literary proximity to the afterlife – whether it be classical, infernal, or paradisaical – is also a kind of pre-life, the abode of every “young soul” before she is sent to “the world of sorrows and tears.” For this reason Tsvetaeva’s otherworldly evening cannot be simply situated in historical time, but remains as a promise outside of time, referred to through a hybrid faculty of memory, intuition and prophecy, and its native tongue is poetry. Thus whenever one poet addresses another, this other-world is invoked. It is at this point we must recall that Tsvetaeva frames her essay as, essentially, a letter to Kuzmin – a letter from one poet to another. Although, as Taubman has amply demonstrated, the essay is not the letter addressed and sent to Kuzmin in 1921, it is still a letter – not just to Kuzmin (who has already returned to the other-world), but an open letter to the entire brotherhood of poets. In her “Otherworldly Evening” Tsvetaeva perfects her letter, making of it, and of the “real” historical evening, what they “could and should be.” In opposition to the deathly work of the censor, which seeks to silence the poet’s voice – killing “without a sound” – Tsvetaeva works to evoke and immortalize a world which is founded on the possibility of free exchange between poets. To this end she makes free with all sources and resources –

the text of her original letter, her memories of the historical evening, the poetry of the poets who participated in it, and a reservoir of references to a very long literary history – but all in the service of poetic creation. To all of the poets of her time, and of any time, who feel themselves to be exiled, excluded, silenced, Tsvetaeva addresses her letter, to tell them that they can find a permanent home and homeland in her other-world, which exists because and as long as one poet can address another and be understood.

Appendix 1

Translation of “Le Voyage”

Charles Baudelaire

For Maxime Du Camp

I

For the child enamored of maps and stamps,
The universe is equal to his vast appetite.
Ah! how great the world is in the light of lamps!
Through memory’s eyes, how small!

One morning we depart, heads on fire,
Hearts full of rancor and bitter desire,
And we go, following the rhythm of waves,
Lulling our infinity on the finite seas:

Some, happy to flee a frightful fatherland;
Others, the horror of their cradles, and still others,
Astrologers drowned in a woman’s eyes,
Tyrannical Circe of dangerous perfumes.

So as not to be changed to beasts, they get drunk
On space and light and blazing skies;
The knawing ice, the baking suns,
Slowly efface the mark of kisses.

But the true voyagers are those alone who depart
 To depart; hearts light, like balloons,
 They never stray from their fate,
 And without knowing why, say always: Let's go!

Those whose desires are cloud-formed,
 And who dream, like a conscript of the cannon,
 Of vast, changing, unknown pleasures,
 With names unthought by men!

II

Horror! We mimic the top and ball
 In their waltz and bounce; even in our sleep
 Curiosity torments and rolls us around,
 Like a cruel Angel whipping on the suns.

Singular fortune, its end displaced,
 And, having no part, perhaps has no place!
 And Man, whose hope never tires,
 Always runs like a fool to find peace!

Our soul's a three-master seeking its Icaria;
 A voice rings from the bridge: "Open your eyes!"
 A voice from the topmast, ardent and mad, cries:

“Love...glory...happiness!” Hell! it’s a reef!

Every isle signaled by the watchman
 Is an Eldorado promised by Destiny;
 Imagination erects its fantasy,
 But finds only a sandbar in the light of day.

Oh the poor lover of chimeric countries!
 Should we chain him up, throw him overboard,
 This drunken sailor, inventor of Americas
 Whose mirage embitters the abyss?

So the old vagabond, trudging in mud,
 Dreams with his nose in the air of shining paradises;
 His ensorcelled eye discovers a Capua
 There where the candle lights up a hovel.

III

Astonishing voyagers! what noble stories
 We read in your eyes, profound as the seas!
 Show us your rich memory-chests,
 These marvelous jewels, made of ethers and stars!

We want to voyage without wind or sails!
 To liven up the ennui of our prisons,

Pass your memories with their framing horizons
Over our minds, stretched like screens.

Say, what have you seen?

IV

“We have seen stars
And waves; we have also seen sands;
And despite shocks and unforeseen disasters,
We have often been bored, like you are here.

The glory of the sun on the violet sea,
The glory of cities in the setting sun,
Alit in our hearts an uneasy ardor
To plunge into an alluringly reflective sky.

The richest cities, the greatest landscapes,
Never contained the mysterious attraction
Of those made by chance in the clouds.
And desire always rendered us anxious.

– Enjoyment gives strength to desire.
Desire, old tree manured with pleasure,
While your bark thickens and grows,
Your branches want to see the sun up close!

Will you grow forever, great tree, more hardy
 Than the cypress? – Nevertheless, we have gathered
 With care certain sketches for your voracious album,
 Brothers who find beautiful all that comes from afar!

We have saluted trunked idols;
 Thrones starred with luminous jewels
 And palaces worked with fairylike pomp
 Would be a ruinous dream for your bankers.

We've seen costumes which intoxicate the eyes;
 Women whose teeth and nails are stained,
 And clever jugglers in the serpent's embrace."

V

And next, what next?

VI

“Oh you infants!

Not to forget the capital thing,
 Everywhere, without seeking, we have seen
 From the height to the base of the fatal ladder,

The stultifying spectacle of immortal sin:

Woman, a vile slave, prideful and stupid,
Adoring herself unsmiling, loving herself undisgusted;
Man, a greedy tyrant, coarse, hard and grasping,
Slave of a slave, gutter in the sewer;

The happy executioner, the sobbing martyr;
The feast seasoned and scented with blood;
The poison of power unmanning the despot,
And the people enamored of the stupefying whip;

Many religions, the doubles of ours,
All scaling the sky; Sanctity,
Like a layabout wallowing in a feather-bed,
Seeking pleasure in nails and horse-hair;

Humanity chatters, drunk on its genius,
And, as foolish now as it once was,
Crying to God, in its wild agony:
“Oh my double, oh my master, I curse you!”

And the least sots, bold lovers of madness,
Fleeing the great herd parked by Destiny,
And taking their refuge in opiate immensity!
– Such is the eternal bulletin of the globe entire!

VII

What bitter knowledge we take from the voyage!
The world, monotone and small, today,
Yesterday, tomorrow, forever, shows us our image:
An oasis of horror in a desert of ennui!

Should I stay or should I go? Stay, if you can;
Go, if you must. One runs, another hides away
To trick that vigilant and deadly enemy,
Time! Alas! there are such restless runners

As the wandering Jew and the apostles,
For whom nothing suffices, wagon or ship,
To flee that infamous gladiator; there are others
Who know how to kill it in their cradles.

When at last it puts its foot on our neck,
We can hope and cry: Onward!
Just as once we set out for China,
Eyes fixed on the swell and hair in the wind,

We will embark on the sea of Darkness
With the happy heart of a young passenger.
Do you hear those charming, deadly voices

Which sing: “Over here! you who want to eat

The perfumed Lotus! here we harvest

The miraculous fruits your heart hungers for;

Come intoxicate yourself in the strange sweetness

Of this endless afternoon” ?

We divine the specter of familiar tones;

Over there our Pylades stretch arms to us.

“To refresh you heart, swim to your Electra!”

Says the one whose knees we used to kiss.

VII

Oh Death, old captain, it’s time! up anchor!

This country bores us, oh Death! Let’s be off!

If the sky and the sea are black as ink,

Our hearts, as you know, are filled with light!

Pour us out your poison so it may comfort us!

Our heads are burning, we want to plunge

To the depths, of Heaven or Hell, what does it matter?

To the depths of the Unknown to find the *new!*

Appendix 2

Translation of “Wires”

Marina Tsvetaeva

“Eurydice – to Orpheus”

For those who have finally married away the last shreds

Of the shroud (no lips or cheeks!...)

Oh, does not Orpheus exceed his authority,

Descending into Hades?

For those who have finally released their last links

To the land... On the bed of beds,

For those who have lain together the great lie of face-to-face,

For those who look *in* – the meeting is a blade.

All settled up – all the blood-roses

For this ample cut

Of immortality...

Lover all the way up the river

Of Lethe – I need the rest

Of forgetfulness... For in this phantasmal house

The phantom is – you, the living, and reality is –

Me, the dead... What can I say to you except:

– “Forget this and go!”

You can't concern me, you see! I will not follow!

You see, I have no hands! No lips to press

On lips! Bit into immortality by a snake,

Woman's passion ends.

All settled up – recall my cries! –

For this last amplitude.

Orpheus should not come down to Eurydice

Nor brothers disturb their sisters.

23 march

“Wires”

1.

In a line of singing pilings,

Propping up the Empyrean,

I send you my share

Of allotted dust.

Along the alley

Of sighs – wire to post –

A telegraphic: I lo – o – ove...

I beg... (a printed blank

Won't hold it! Simpler with wires!)

These are – pilings, on them Atlas

Lowered a racecourse

For heaven-dwellers...

Along the pilings

A telegraphic: fare – thee – well...

Do you hear? This is the last breakdown

Of a torn throat: fo – or – give...

These are – riggings over seas of fields,

The quiet Atlantic way:

Higher, higher – and they min – gled

In Ariadne's: re – e – turn,

Turn back!... From free hospitals

The plaintive: I won't leave!

These are – the farewells of steel

Wires – the withdrawals

Of Hades' voices... Invoking

Distance: sor – ry...

Be sorry! (In this chorus – will you

Make it out?) In the dying cry

Of insistent passions –

Eurydice's breath:

Through embankments and ditches

Eurydice's: a – a – las,

Don't lea –

17 march

2.

To tell you... but no, squeezed

Into rows and rhymes... The heart – is wider!

I'm afraid, that all Racine and all Shakespeare

Is too small for such sorrow!

“Everyone cried, and if blood hurts...

Everyone cried, and if in the roses – are snakes”...

But there was one – for Phaedra – Hippolytus!

Ariadne's cry – for Theseus alone!

Torment! No shores, no landmarks!

Yes, for I confirm, lost in the count,

That in you I lose all those

Who sometime and somewhere *never were!*

What expectations – when impregnated

Throughout – all the air got used to you!

Since Naxos is in me – my own bones!

Since my own blood under the skin – is Styx!

Futility! Inside me! Everywhere! having closed
 My eyes: without bottom! without day! And the date
 On the calendar lies...

As you are – a Break,

I am not Ariadne and not...

– a Loss!

Oh over what seas and cities
 To seek you? (Unseen – by unseeing!)
 I entrust my goodbyes to the wires,
 And against a telegraph pole – I cry.
 18 march

3.

(Paths)

Having picked through and thrown away everything,
 (In particular – a semaphore!)
 The wildest of dissonances:
 Of schools, of thaws... (the whole chorus

For help!) Sleeves like flags

Thrown out...

– Without shame! –

Lyrical wires

Of my high tension hum!

Telegraph pole! Could anything shorter
 Be chosen? As long as there is sky –
 Transmitter of immutable feelings,
 Tangible news of lips...

Know, that as long as there is the vault of the sky,
 As long as there is dawn toward the borders
 For so long I clearly and everywhere
 And interminably bind you.

Through epochs of evil ages,
 Embankments of lies – from rigging to rigging –
 My unpublished sighs,
 My unfaithful passion...

Beyond telegrams (simple and urgent
 Stamps of constancy!)
 By way of the spring overflow of drainpipes
 And the wires of space.

19 march

4.

Autocratic suburb!
 Telegraph poles!

Of my – highflying – desires,
 A cry – from the womb and to the wind!
 This is my heart, a magnetic
 Spark – it tears up meter.

– “Meter and measure?” But the fourth
 Di – mension takes revenge! – Race
 Above the metric – the dead –
 The lying certificates – a whistle!

Shh... But if suddenly (are there
 Wires and poles everywhere?) tipping
 Your head you understand: these
 Hard words – are only the cry

Of a nightingale, having fallen from its path:
 – Without my beloved the world is empty! –
 Having fallen in lo – ove with the Lyre of your arms,
 And the Layla of your lips!

20 march

5.

Not a black scribe! In the white book
 Of Don distances I sharpened my eyes!
 Wherever you may be – I will overtake you,
 I'll suffer through – and return you.

For from my pride, as from a cedar,
 I view the world: ships sail,
 Flames roam... I will turn up
 The sea's depths – and return you from the seabed

Suffer over me! I am everywhere:
 Dawns and ores I am, bread and breath,
 I am and I will be, and will mine out
 Your lips – as God mines out the soul:

Through breathing – in your hoarse hour,
 Through hedges of archangelic
 Judgement! – On the thorns
 I will bloody my lips and return you from the deathbed!

Give up! After all this is no fairy tale!
 – Give up! – The arrow, having described a circle...
 – Give up! – Not one yet has saved himself
 From the chaser without arms:

Through breathing... (Breasts soared up,
 Eyelids do not see, mica – around lips...)
 Like a woman sage – I will fool
 Samuel – and return alone:

For another is with you, and on the day
 Of judgement we do not compete...

I circle and outlast.

I am and I will be and will mine out
 Your soul – as she mines out your lips,

The one who puts lips to rest...

25 March

6.

The hour, when up above kings

And gifts travel to each other.

(The hour, when I walk down from the mountain):

Mountains begin to know.

Intentions crowded together in a circle.

Fates moved: not to betray!

(The hour, when I do not see arms)

Souls begin to see.

25 march

7.

In the hour, when my dear brother

Passed by the last elm

(Of waves, standing in a row),
 There were tears, bigger than eyes.

In the hour, when my dear friend
 Rounded the last cape
 (Of mental sighs: return!)
 There were waves – bigger than hands.

Just like arms – reaching after – from the shoulder!
 Just like lips reaching after – to enchant!
 Speech lost sounds,
 A wrist lost fingers.

In the hour when my dear guest...
 – Lord, look at us! –
 There were tears bigger than human
 Eyes and Atlantic
 Stars...
 26 march

8.

Patiently, as one crushes stone,
 Patiently, as one waits for death,
 Patiently, as news ripens,
 Patiently, as one cherishes revenge –

I will wait for you (fingers braided –
 Thus the consort waits for the Queen)
 Patiently, as one waits for rhymes,
 Patiently, as one gnaws hands.

I will wait for you (eyes – on the ground,
 Teeth in lips. Stupor. Stone.)
 Patiently, as one stretches out bliss,
 Patiently, as one strings beads.

Scrape of the sledge runners, answering scrape
 Of the door: the racket of taiga winds.
 The highest decree descended:
 – Change of kingdom and entry of the grandee.

And home:
 Into the unearthly –
 But mine.
 27 march

9.

Spring brings sleep. Let's sleep.
 Though separately, still it yields: sleep
 Brings together all incompleteness.
 Perhaps we will see each other in sleep.

All-seeing, he knows, whose
Palm – and into whose, who – and with whom.
To whom I entrust my grief,
To whom I confided my grief

Everlasting (a child, not knowing
Its father and not expecting
The end!) Oh, the grief
Of those who cry without a shoulder!

About this, which with memory falls
From the finger, and like a pebble from a bridge...
About this, that places are taken,
About this, that hearts are rented

To serve – uninterruptedly – forever,
And to live – for life – with no bliss!
Oh alive – scarcely standing! From dawn! –
In the archive, in the Elysium of cripples.

About this, that you and I are quieter
Than grass, iron, woe, water...
About this, that a seamstress stitches:
Slaves – slaves – slaves – slaves.
5 april

10.

With others – in rosy heaps

Of breasts... In the hypothetical fractions

Of weeks...

But I will be in you

A treasure chest of likenesses

Picked up – in the sand, on the gravel

By chance – overheard

In the wind, along the tracks...

In all the breadless outposts where youth roamed.

This shawl, do you know it? With a chill

Wrapped tightly around, hotter than hell

Ripped open...

Know, that the miracle

Of the depths – under the skirt, is a living child:

Song! With this firstborn, which is more

Than all firstborns and all Rachels...

– The most authentic sediment of the womb-depths

I will overcome with imaginations!

11 april

Appendix 3

Translation of “Otherworldly Evening”

Marina Tsvetaeva

Over Petersburg stood a blizzard. That is—stood: like a whirling top—or a whirling child—or a fire. A white force—carried away.

It carried away from memory and street and house, and carried me—placed me and left me—right in the middle of a hall—of train-station-, ballroom-, museum-, dream-dimensions.

So, from blizzard to hall, from the white wasteland of the blizzard—to the yellow wasteland of the hall, without intervening instances of entranceways and introductory suggestions of servants.

And there, from the end of the hall, distant—like through the wrong end of binoculars, huge—like through the right end—all imaginary binocular-eyes—eyes.

Over Petersburg stood a blizzard and in that blizzard—motionless like two planets—stood eyes.

Stood? No, came. Bewitched, I don't notice, that their accompanying body had started moving, and I realize this only by a terrible pain in my eyes, as if the entire binoculars are driven into my eye-sockets, rim to rim.

From that end of the hall—motionless like two planets—toward me came eyes.

The eyes were—here.

In front of me stood—Kuzmin.

Eyes—and nothing more. Eyes—and everything remaining. This remainder was not much: almost nothing.

But the voice was not here. The voice did not precisely keep up with the eyes, the voice was still coming from that end of the room—and of life,—or, maybe, I, absorbed by the eyes, was not keeping up? —the first feeling from this voice: with me is speaking a man—across a river, and I, like in a dream, all the same I hear, like in a dream—because it is necessary—all the same I hear.

... We all read your poems in “Northern Notes”... It was such a pleasure. When you see a new name, you think: more poems, always poems, the verbal exposition of feelings. And for the most part—not my own [other, foreign]. And the words—not my own. And all of a sudden, from the first line—mine, a force. “I know the truth! All former truths—make way!”... And we all felt that—all of us.

—And I at fifteen read your “Buried with a sword—not a spade—Manon Lescaut!” I even didn’t read it, my sort-of-fiancé spoke it to me by heart, to whom I then did not get married, precisely because he was—a spade: and a spade-beard, and in general...

Kuzmin, frightened:

—Be-eard? A bearded fiancé?

I, recognizing that I am frightening him:

—A spadish square, a frame, and in the frame shamelessly-honest blue eyes. Yes. And when I found out from him, that there are those, who are buried with a sword—“And I by a spade—never!”... And what a ravishing challenge, to all of the old world—to all of that age—the formula: “Buried with a sword—not a spade—Manon Lescaut!” And wasn’t it all written for the sake of that line?

—Like all poetry—for the sake of the last line.

—Which comes first.

—Oh, you know that too!

There were legends about Kuzmin in Moscow. There are legends about every poet, and they are made up entirely of the same envy and malice. The refrain to the word Kuzmin was “affected, colored [made up, stained].”

There was not affectedness: there was the natural elegance of a foreign [an other] person, the personal [peculiar] elegance of a skeleton (after all even a skeleton is unequal to another skeleton, not only souls!), there was the flying-away tea-drinking little finger—just so in the 18th century did Lafayette, the liberator of America, hold his chocolate cup, just so in the Conciergerie did the most steadfast poet, André Chenier, drink from his tin mug—there were, besides the personal elegance of a skeleton—physical tradition, physical vestiges, “affectation” [“manneredness”]—of birth.

There was—a Sèvres teacup.

There was in Petersburg in the 20th century—a Frenchman from Martinique—from the 18th century. About that color [make-up]. Color—there was. Even, lasting, dark-brown, a Moor’s, a mulatto’s, the Lord God’s. Only there was no “colored,” but—smeared, and even—steeped: whether in the hellish coffee of lyric insomnia, or in the nutty infusion of all fairy-tales, or in hereditary foreign blood—I don’t know. I know only, that more even and more brown, more brown—and more even—and more natural—I have never seen paint on a *face*. Except on the face of our chocolate house on Three-Ponds.

But from this coffee, gypsy grease, suntan, there came toward me another natural radiance: silver. His suit was silver, there was a surrounding of dream-weightless and dream-free motion—silver, sleeves, out of which gypsy hands—silver. But maybe—the sleeves were silver (simple gray is boring)—because of the gypsy hands? But maybe—because of silver Petersburg—silver? In all events—in two colors, in two paints—nut-brown and silver—and there was no third. But there was something—rings. Not on the finger, or if there were—I don’t remember and I’m not talking about them, and not in the ears—although if joined to this face they

would be as if soldered—they were—in the hair. From the smooth, small, precious head, from ear to temple, two combings of hair, pressed against the temples in half-rings, almost rings—like those of Carmen or Tuchkov the 4th, or like a man caught in a storm.

So he lit a cigarette, and his nut-brown face with its raspberry snake smile—like through a blue veil... (But somewhere a veil—a smokescreen. January of 1916. War.)

Dropping his head on the slender spine of the divan and naturally, like a doe, showing off... But suddenly the end of the beautiful reclining.

—You, you will forgive me... I saw someone here the whole time—and I can't see him—can't see anymore—he was just here—I saw him—but now...

Disappearance of an apparition [a vision].

—How did you like Mikhail Alexeevich?—to me—my young host, more exactly,—one of my young hosts, because there are—two of them: Seryozha and Lyonya. Lyonya—is a poet, Seryozha—a traveller, and I make friends with Seryozha. Lyonya—is poetic, Seryozha—not, and I make friends with Seryozha. I tell Seryozha about my little daughter, left behind in Moscow (first separation) and who I, like the merchant in the fairy tale, promised to bring red boots, and he tells me—about his camels of the desert. For me Lyonya is too fragile, tender—a flower. An old volume of “The Bronze Horseman” he holds in his hand—like a flower, having lightly put aside his hand—itself, like a flower. What can one do with such hands?

In spite of this, I evidently don't please Lyonya—he is always comparing me, my simplicity and straightforwardness, according to Akhmatovian (then!) sharpness—and everything does not get on, but Seryozha does not compare me to anything—and everything gets on, that is got on—he and me—from the first minute: over his desert and my daughter, over the most beloved.

My Moscow speech clearly must physically irritate Lyonya: —*spasibo—ladno* [—thanks—okay]—such, that he invariably notes: “A true Muscovite!”—so that it already begins to

irritate me and it already forces this Moscovness—to intensify, so that with Lyonya—smooth-headed, precise, chiseled—I, (curled in parentheses), with my “*pushe*” and “*gushe*” []—am a bit like a Moscow coachman. Right now Seryozha and I have gone into his father’s office and we’re talking there.

—How do you like Kuzmin?

—Couldn’t be better. Couldn’t be simpler.

—Well, for Kuzmin that is—a rare compliment...

I am sitting on the skin of a white bear, he is standing.

—Ah, and so you’re here? —a weighty elderly voice. The father of Seryozha and Lyonya, a well-known builder of renowned battleships—tall, important, ironical, gentle, irresistible—who to myself I call—the lord.

—Why do poets and poetesses always sit on the floor? Is it really comfortable? It seems to me, in an armchair is much nicer...

—Much closer to the fire. And to the bear.

—But the bear—is white, and your skirt—is dark: you will be all hairy.

—If you don’t like it, that I sit on the floor, then I can sit in a chair! —and I, already in a hard voice and already with hot eyes from nearness to tears (Seryozha, reproachfully: “Ah, Papa!...”).

—What’s wrong with you! What’s wrong with you! I am very happy, if you like it—so much... (Pause.) And everyone walks on this skin...

—*Crime de lèse-majesté!* Same as walking on lilies.

—When you have sufficiently expressed your sympathy to him, we are going into the sitting room and you will read for us. Esenin very much wants to see you—he has only just arrived. And do you know, what happened just now? But it is a bit...familiar. You won’t get angry?

I fearfully keep quiet.

—Don't be defensive, it's simply—a funny thing that happened. I just now returned home, went into the sitting room and saw: on the banquette—in the middle of the room—you and Lyonya, embracing each other.

I:

—Wha-a-at?

He, imperturbably:

—Yes, embracing one another by the shoulders and bringing your heads together: the back of Lyonya's black head, and your light, curly one. The more I have seen of poets—and poetesses—after all, to confess, I have been astonished...

I:

—That was Esenin!

—Yes, it was Esenin, which I found out, having gone around the banquette. The backs of your heads are exactly the same.

—Yes, but Esenin is in a blue shirt, and I...

—That, to confess, I did not discern, because except for the hair and arms nothing else was visible.

Lyonya. Esenin. Indissoluble, unquenchable [inexhaustible, unable to be poured out] friends. In their person [face], in their so strikingly-different persons there came together, mingled two races, two classes, two worlds. There came together—across everything and everyone—poets.

Lyonya would go to Esenin in the country, in Petersburg Esenin was never away from Lyonya. So I saw their two heads together—on the sitting room banquette, in a good boyish embrace, suddenly turning the banquette into a school bench... (In my mind I slowly go around it:) Lyonya's black-headed satin, Esenin's dense curls, tufts, Esenin's cornflower-blue eyes,

Lyonya's hazel almonds. Pleasing, when opposed—and so close. Satisfaction, as from a rare and full rhyme.

Afterwards there remained of Lyonya a small book of poems—such simple ones, that my heart contracted: how I had never understood this aesthete, how this appearance—I had believed.

I sit in that yellow *desert* hall—perhaps, from Seryozha's camels—and I read poems, — not read—I recite them by heart. I started to read from a notebook only when I stopped knowing them by heart, and I stopped knowing them, when I stopped reciting them, and I stopped reciting them—when they stopped asking, and they stopped asking in 1922—my emigration from Russia. From a world, where my poems were necessary to someone, like bread, I found myself in a world, where poems—were not necessary to anyone, neither my poems, nor poems in general, were necessary—like dessert: if dessert is—necessary, —to anyone...

I read in the first place my own fighting Germany:

You were given over by the world to persecution,

And there is no measure of your enemies.

But how, then, can *I* abandon you?

But how, then, can *I* betray you?

And where will I take the prudence:

“For an eye – an eye, blood – for blood?”

Germany, my madness!

Germany, my love!

But how then can I reject you,

My so-persecuted Vaterland,
Where still through Königsberg
Walks narrow-faced Kant.

Where fostering a new Faust
In another forgotten town –
Geheimrat Goethe along the alley
Walks with a sprig in his hand.

But how then can I reject you,
My German star,
When to love halfway
I have not learned, when

In ecstasy from your songs
I don't hear the lieutenant's spurs,
When St. George is sacred to me
In Freiburg, on the Schwabentor,

When I am not stifled by malice
For the Kaiser with the flying moustache, –
When, in love to the grave,
I swear allegiance, Germany, to you.

Nothing more magical, more wise
Than you, fragrant country,

Where, over the eternal Rhine,
The Lorelei – combs her golden curls.

These verses to Germany—my first answer to the war. In Moscow these poems had no success, had the opposite of success. But here, —I feel—they reach their mark, the singular goal of all verses—the heart. Here is the most serious of the responses—

—Magical, wise—yes, I only would not say—fragrant: *fragrant* is—Italy, Sicily...

—But—the lindens? But—the fir trees of the Schwartzwald? O Tannenbaum, o Tannenbaum! And the whole Harz region, because Harz is—resin. And the word Harz, in which there is already the crackle of pines in the sun...

—Bravo, bravo, M.I., that's what's called—defense!

I read also:

I know the truth! All former truths – make way!

It's not necessary for people to struggle with people on earth!

Look: it's evening! Look: already it's soon night!

For what – poets, lovers, commanders?

Already evening is spreading, already the ground is in dew,

Already soon the starry blizzard will freeze in the heavens,

And we will all sleep soon under the ground,

Who haven't let each other sleep on earth.

I read all of my poetry from 1915, —and it is still too little, and still—they want more. I feel clearly, that I am reading with the face of Moscow and that this face—I am not smearing with mud, that I am raising it to the level of the face—of Akhmatova. Akhmatova! —The word is spoken. With all of my being I feel the tense—inescapable—with each of my lines—comparison

of us (and in each—a setting off against): not only Akhmatova and I, but Petersburg poetry and Moscow poetry, Petersburg and Moscow. But, if certain Akhmatova supporters are listening to me *against me*, still I myself am not reading against Akhmatova, but—to Akhmatova. I am reading—as if Akhmatova were in the room, only Akhmatova. I am reading for the absent Akhmatova. For me my success is necessary, as a direct wire to Akhmatova. And if in the given moment I want to show Moscow in myself—in the best possible way, then it is not in order for it to conquer—Petersburg, but in order to make a gift—of that Moscow—to Petersburg. To make a gift to Akhmatova of that Moscow in myself, in my own love, to bow down—before Akhmatova. To bow down to her like the very Hill of Bows, with the most unbowed of heads on the summit.

And I did that, in June of 1916, with the simple words:

In my musical city cupolas flame,
 And the wandering blind man praises the Blessed Savior,
 And I give to you my own city of bells
 —Akhmatova! —and my own heart in addition.

To say everything: for the poems about Moscow that followed my Petersburg visit I am indebted to Akhmatova, to my love for her, to my wish to give her something more eternal than love, to give that, which is more eternal than love. If I were able to give her—the Kremlin, I probably would not have written those poems. So some competition, in some sense, with Akhmatova—I had, but not “to do better” than her, but—in the best possible way, and this best possible way—to lay at her feet. Competition? Enthusiasm. I know, that later in 1916-17 Akhmatova never parted with my handwritten poems to her, and carried them for so long in a handbag, that only creases and cracks remained. This story of Osip Mandelstam—is one of my greatest happinesses in life.

Then—everyone reads. Esenin reads Marfa Posadnitsa, which was accepted by Gorky to the “Chronicle” and prohibited by the censor. I remember grey-blue clouds, light-blue and black—of the people’s anger. —“How the Moscow tsar—in bloody revelry—sold his soul—to the Antichrist”... I listen with all the roots of my hair. Did this cherubim, this *Milchgesicht*, really

write that operatic “Open up! Open up!” —*this one* really wrote—felt—*that*? (With Esenin I never ceased to marvel over that.) Then ditties to an accordion in a speech almost like peas pouring out of a basket:

Play, play, accordion mine!

Today the quiet dawn,

Today the quiet dawn, —

Listens to my dear.

Osip Mandelstam, camel’s-eyes half-closed, intoned:

Let’s go to Tsa-arskoe Se-elo,

Free, cheerful, and drunk

Uhlans smile there,

Jumping up into their strong saddles.

The censor changed his “drunk” to “zealous,” because in Tsarskoe Selo there are no drunk Uhlans—only zealous!

The critic Grigorii Landau reads his aphorisms. And another critic, who is named Laursab Nikolaevich. I remember of those who read also Konstantin Landau for his categorical statement about me, later—to Akhmatova. Akhmatova—“What is she like?”—“Oh, remarkable!” Akhmatova, impatiently: “But can one fall in love with her?” “Impossible not to fall in love.” (Those who understand my love for Akhmatova—will understand.)

Lyonya, Ivanov, Otsup, Ivnev read, and it seems—Gordetskii. Many—I have forgotten. But I know, that all of Petersburg read, except for Akhmatova, who was in the Crimea, and Gumilyov—at war.

All Petersburg read and *one* Moscow.

...And the blizzard immovably rages outside the huge windows. And time flies. And to me it seems time to go home, because my most dear hostess is ill, the editor of “Northern Notes,”

who is bringing me out into the world: first to the world of the pages of journals (the first one in which I was published), and now—to the world of these chandeliers and faces.

Sophia Isaakovna Chatskina and Yakov Lvovich Saker, who were so fond of my poems, so fond of me and treated me as kin, who gave me three volumes of Afanasyev's tales and two red foxes (one—lying in a circle, the other—standing: I didn't want an honorarium)—and the perfume *Jasmine de Corse*—to honor my love for the Corsican, —who conveyed me around the islands in Petersburg, to the gypsies in Moscow, who celebrated every minute of our time together...

Sophia Isaakovna Chatskina and Yakov Lvovich Saker, thank you for the holiday—I had few of them.

The house of “Northern Notes” was an extraordinary house: a continuous otherworldly evening. Walls of books, with dark-blue strips of wallpaper just perceptible along the tops, precisely as if carved out of the night sky, white bears on the floor, fires day and night, and day and night poems, especially—“night.” Two in the morning. A call on the telephone: “Not too late to come over?”—“Of course not! We're just now reading poems.” This “just now” was—always.

So I am hurrying to her, to Sophia Isaakovna, who, probably, is waiting for me with impatience—to hear about my (and this is also her) success.

—Mikhail Alexeevich! I beg you—read for a while now! Or else it's time for me—to leave.

Melodiously:

—For whe-ere?

I explain.

He, not listening:

—What fo-or? It's nice here. It's very nice here. For all of us—it's long since time to leave.

(Oh how soon afterward we—all left. Into that same blizzard, so threateningly and faithfully watching over us...)

I continue to plead.

He:

—I will read—the most recent.

(The beginning about mirrors. Then:)

You are so close to me, so akin,
 That it's as if you are not beloved.
 It must be, that seraphim
 Are this cold – one to another – in paradise.

And freely I breathe again.

I – *as in childhood* – believe in essences.

It may be... this is not love...

But it so...

(immeasurable pause and—mit Nachdruck of the whole being!)

– *resembles* –

(almost without voice)

...blessedness...

The poem, properly, finishes here, but as in life, there is a second farewell:

And your dark-blue notebook
 With poems...it was all – like new!
 And so I understood that – to suffer –
 It means – to love another.

The unforgettable emphasis on *resembles* and on *so*, that itself precisely *so resembles*...blessedness! Only children speak like that: I *so* want it! Like that from the whole

soul—and breast. Like that unbearably-defenselessly and bare and even more bleeding among all—who are clothed and armored.

Kuzmin’s song I did not wait for, I left, true to my promise. Now—I regret it. (I regretted it already then, I regretted it while I was leaving, regretted it while I was going out—and when I arrived—and when I got in. All the more so because my sick friend, not having waited for me, that is not believing in my promise, which I kept—was sleeping peacefully, and the sacrifice, like all of them, was for nothing.)

Everyone:

—But Mikhail Alexeevich is going to read more.

I, firmly:

—But I promised!

—But Mikhail Alexeevich, maybe, is going to sing!

I, pitifully:

—But I promised!

My dear friend Seryozha appears. Kuzmin himself approaches, whose presence all evening continuously every minute without let-up on myself, like a definite pressure, I felt.

—But stay a bit, you’ve been here such a short time! (And the last innocent irresistible argument:) Maybe, I am going to sing.

(The whisper and agitation of voices, like rye in the wind: “Going to sing...going to sing...going to sing...”)

—But after all would it be possible to leave after the first song? I simply couldn’t leave then—never. And so—I’m leaving now.

—But how firm you are!—in delight and a bit disparagingly—says Kuzmin.

—Ein Mann—ein Wort!

—But you are after all—Frau!

—No! Mensch! Mensch! Mensch!

The last thing that I remember—last turn of the head—Kuzmin, already approaching the piano.

And all of them died, died, died...

The brothers died: Seryozha and Lyonya, the friends died: Lyonya and Esenin, my dear editors of the “Northern Notes” died, Sophia Isaakovna and Yakov Lvovich, and later than all the rest, in Warsaw, the lord died, and now Kuzmin died.

The rest are—shades.

I never saw Kuzmin again. But I had one more meeting with him.

Here is the end of my letter to him, in June of 1921, a letter, written to myself in a notebook in the heat of the moment and for that reason still surviving. (The first half of the letter—the written portrait to him of our meeting, just read through by the reader.)

... “I go into the Writers’ Bookshop, the one weak source of my living. Timidly, to the cashier: “You don’t know, how my little books are doing?” (I write out poems by hand, I sew them together in little notebooks and sell them. Among us this is called—overcoming Gutenberg.) While she is inquiring, I, *pour me donner une contenance*, leaf through the books on the counter. Kuzmin. “Otherworldly Evenings.” I open it: a spear in the heart—George! White George! *My* George, about whom I have already been writing for two months—his life. Jealousy and joy, a double blade, I read—the joy increases, I finish—the dragon of envy is pierced, nailed. My meeting rises up out of the depths of memory.

I open up further: Pushkin—*my* Pushkin, what I am always saying about him—I. And, third—Goethe, *my* Goethe, my, from sixteen years old, Goethe—old! secret!—the one about whom I always say, judging the present: “Before the face of Goethe...”

I read through only these three poems. I left, carrying pain, joy, ecstasy—everything, except the little book, which I could not buy, because none of my own had sold. And the feeling:—at least there are still such poems...

What still remains for me to say to You, except:

—You are so close to me, so akin...

The outward reason, dear Mikhail Alexeevich, for this letter of mine—greetings, conveyed to me by Mr. Volkov.

And then—those eyes:

Two glows! – no, mirrors!

No – two wounds!

Two volcanic mouths,

Two black circles

Charred – out of the ice of a mirror,

From the sidewalk slabs

Across a thousand-verst hall

– They breathe – polar!

Terrible! Flame and dark!

Two black holes.

Sleepless little boys – just so –

In the hospital: – Mama! –

Fear and reproach, ah and amen...

A majestic wave –

Over strong sheets –

Two black glories.

So know then, that rivers – go back!

That stones – remember!
 That already again then, again
 In immense lights
 Rise up – two suns, two mouths,
 No – two diamonds –
 Subterranean abysses of the mirror:
 Two deathly eyes..

(Written down and sent off to him in June of 1921 with the letter.)

I have called this thing “Not-of-here Evening.”

The beginning of January of 1916, the beginning of the last year of the old world. The height of the war. Dark forces.

We sat and read poetry. The last poetry on the last fur rugs by the last fires. By no one the whole evening was pronounced the word front, nor was pronounced—though in such close physical proximity—the name Rasputin.

Even tomorrow Seryozha and Lyonya ended life, already the day after tomorrow Sophia Isaakovna Chatskina was wandering around Moscow, like a shade seeking shelter, and ended—she, for whom all fires were not enough, by the ghostly Moscow hearths.

Tomorrow Akhmatova lost everything, Gumilyov—life.

But today the evening was ours!

Feast in the time of the Plague? *Yes*. But there they feasted—on wine and roses, and we—incorporeally, miraculously, like pure souls—already shades of Hades—on words: on the sound of words and the living blood of feelings.

Do I repent it? No. The single duty of man on earth—the truth of every being. I would in that evening, truly, hand laid on my heart, have given up all Petersburg and all of Moscow for that “so resembles... blessedness” of Kuzmin, and that same blessedness would have given up for

the “*so resembles*”... Some sell their souls—for rosy cheeks, others sell their souls—for heavenly sounds.

And—everyone paid. Seryozha and Lyonya—with life, Gumilyov—with life, Esenin—with life, Kuzmin, Akhmatova, I—lifelong imprisonment in ourselves, in that fortress—more faithful than Petro-Pavlovsk.

And however we conquered the days and evenings *here*, and however each in our way—all-historically or without a sound—we, the participants in that not-of-here evening, died—the last sound from our lips was and will be:

И звуков небес заменить не могли

Ей скучные песни земли.

List of Abbreviations

- BOC* Charles Baudelaire: *Oeuvres Complètes*.
- C* *Correspondance de Baudelaire*.
- DNV* *Dushi nachinaiut videt'*; *Pis'ma 1922-1936 godov*.
- L* *Letters: Summer 1926*
- OC* *Oeuvres complètes*.
- SE* *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*
- SP* *Stikhotvorenia i poemy v pyati tomakh*
- SS* *Sobranie sochinenii v semi tomakh*
- SW* *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*
- SWP* *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*

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