Through the Lens of Loss: Marina Tsvetaeva's Elegiac Photo-Poetics

Molly Thomasy Blasing

> The photograph is always more than an image: it is the site of a gap, a sublime breach between the sensible and the intelligible, between copy and reality, between a memory and a hope.
>
> —Giorgio Agamben, "Judgment Day"

In February 1935 the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva (1892–1941) sent a letter from Paris, where she was living in emigration, to her longtime friend and correspondent in Prague, Anna Teskova.[1] Included in the letter was a single black-and-white photograph, on the back of which Tsvetaeva penned the following inscription: "A portion of N. Gronskii's room. A small cabinet for books—among them are my books as well. . . . We photographed his whole room this way—in sections."[2] The photograph enclosed in the letter was taken by Tsvetaeva in early December 1934, approximately two weeks after the 25-year-old Nikolai Pavlovich Gronskii had died after falling under a subway car in the Paris Métro. Gronskii had been an aspiring poet whom Tsvetaeva had befriended, mentored, and corresponded with in the late 1920s.[3] Several

This project was supported by a Fulbright Program grant sponsored by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the United States Department of State and administered by the Institute of International Education. I am indebted to Elena Mikhailovna Kallo, who first guided my thinking about the intersection of Russian poetry and photography. I also wish to thank the staff of the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), the Tsvetaeva House Museum, and the Pasternak family for allowing me access to the archival materials they keep. I would like to offer special thanks to the editors at *Slavic Review* and the anonymous reviewers for their thorough and insightful comments on the manuscript. I have benefited from the support of many friends and colleagues, and I am especially grateful to the following individuals who read and discussed the essay with me at various stages: Keith Blasing, Alyssa Dinega Gillespie, Irina Shevelenko, Stephanie Sandler, David Bethea, Erik McDonald, Michael Launer, Alexandra Smith, Emily Klenin, and Erika Wolf.

1. Tsvetaeva left the Soviet Union in 1922; she spent a short time in Berlin, then three years in Prague. She lived in Paris and its suburbs from 1925 until 1939, the year she returned to the Soviet Union.

2. Marina Tsvetaeva to Anna Teskova, 18 February 1935, in Marina Tsvetaeva, *Spasibo za dolguiu pamiat' liubvi . . . : Pis'ma k Anne Teskovoi 1922–1939* (Moscow, 2009), 254. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

3. The correspondence between Tsvetaeva and Gronskii, as well as related poems and essays, has been published as Marina Tsvetaeva and Nikolai Gronskii, *Neskol'ko udarov serdtsa: Pis'ma 1928–1933 godov,* ed. Iu. I. Brodovskaia and E. B. Korkina (Moscow, 2004).

years after their correspondence had ceased, news of Gronskii's sudden death came as a terrible shock to the elder poet, a sorrow "pure and sharp like a diamond," as she wrote to Teskova.[4] In the wake of this tragedy, Tsvetaeva made several efforts to memorialize Gronskii and his artistic contributions to émigré Russian poetry. In her articles "Posmertnyi podarok" (A Posthumous Gift) and "Poet-al'pinist" (The Poet-Mountaineer) Tsvetaeva argued that Gronskii possessed a rare and previously unrecognized poetic gift. Tsvetaeva's most significant elegiac offering to Gronskii, however, came in the form of a cycle of poems titled *Nadgrobie*, which can be translated as "epigraph" or "tombstone." Scholars examining Tsvetaeva's poetic response to Gronskii's death in *Nadgrobie* have focused attention primarily on its connections to Gavriil Derzhavin, especially the echoes of his "Na smert' kniazia Meshcherskogo" (On the Death of Prince Meshcherskii) in Tsvetaeva's poems to Gronskii.[5] The present study contributes to scholarship on this and other works by Tsvetaeva by engaging another key element that shaped their composition: Tsvetaeva's encounters with the photographic.

While the connection to Derzhavin is certainly an important subtext for the *Nadgrobie* cycle, Tsvetaeva's keen interest in photography—which was greatly intensified by her friendship with Gronskii—played a central role in both the composition of this cycle and her larger body of poetry on elegiac themes. Close examination of the series of photographs of Gronskii's room—images that appear here in print for the first time—reveals that Tsvetaeva's elegies to Gronskii, in photograph and verse, are united by a common desire to seek a connection with the world beyond the grave. These photographs and the poems to which they correspond are not, however, the only example of the intersection of photographic seeing and elegiac writing in Tsvetaeva's creative world. Rather, they represent part of a larger pattern in which the poet's life and works repeatedly intersect with photographs and photography at moments of grief and loss. Tsvetaeva interacted with photography in a variety of ways, but what unites each instance is the photograph's potential to connect the physical world to the spiritual world and to serve as a metaphysical bridge that draws together the world of the living and the realm of the dead. By bringing together a variety of interrelated examples of Tsvetaeva's encounters with photography, this essay explores the degree to which her conception of the metaphysical power of the photographic image is related to the goals of her poetic practice.

On Photography, Literature, and Image as Memento Mori

Before examining the details of Tsvetaeva's interest in photography, it is useful to consider the larger theoretical context that informs my approach to the

4. Tsvetaeva to Teskova, 21 November 1934, in Tsvetaeva, *Spasibo za dolguiu pamiat' liubvi . . .*, 248.

5. See Anna Lisa Crone and Alexandra Smith, "Cheating Death: Derzhavin and Tsvetaeva on the Immortality of the Poet," *Slavic Almanac: The South African Year Book for Slavic, Central and East European Studies* 3, nos. 3–4 (1995): 1–30; Tamara Fokht, "Derzhavinskaia perefraza v poezii M. Tsvetaevoi," *Studia Russica Budapestinensia* 2–3 (1995): 231–36; Iuri Lotman, "M. I. Tsvetaeva. 'Naprasno glazom kak gvozdem . . .,'" *O poetakh i poezii: Analiz poeticheskogo tektsa* (St. Petersburg, 1996); Alyssa Dinega, *A Russian Psyche: The Poetic Mind of Marina Tsvetaeva* (Madison, 2001).

https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.73.1.0001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

question of photography's influence on twentieth-century poetic writing in general and Tsvetaeva's photo-poetics in particular. The twentieth century witnessed the creation of a number of literary masterpieces in which printed photographs are incorporated into the fabric of a written text in a way that transcends their conventional role as illustrations. Perhaps most notable among these are Andre Breton's *Nadja* (1928), Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* (1967), and works by W. G. Sebald, such as *The Emigrants* (1996) and *Austerlitz* (2001). In these generic hybrids, combining novel and memoir, the full integration of text and photographic image serves to engage problems of historical documentation and human memory, emphasizes the works' elegiac themes, and raises complex questions about the relative objectivity of both first-person narratives and photographic snapshots. In each of these texts the use of photographic material is part of a very public performance and is a carefully crafted literary device. The authors themselves archive, select, and caption these images, weaving them into the frameworks of their narratives, reinforcing (or distorting) biographical memory through carefully constructed juxtapositions of text and photographic image.[6]

More difficult to grasp, however, is the extent to which photography in the modern age has shaped literary texts in places where photographs do not serve as illustrations or where photography is not the obvious subject or theme of the work. Marina Tsvetaeva's poetry serves as a compelling example of the unspoken, underlying influence of photography on literary texts. Nowhere in her entire corpus of poetry do we find the words *photograph* or *photography, photographer, snapshot,* or *flashbulb,* and yet Tsvetaeva's encounters with photography shaped her poetic writing—her elegiac poetry in particular—in important ways.[7]

By the time Tsvetaeva came of age in the first quarter of the twentieth century, photographic technology had undergone a series of technological advancements, leading to the introduction of the handheld camera, which freed the photographer from the need to carry a tripod and made cameras more accessible to the masses.[8] As a result of the democratizing forces that shaped photographic practice across Europe, lyric poetry and photography in the twentieth century came to share common artistic and aesthetic goals: each medium seeks to capture human experience, bear witness to history, expose truths by means of unusual framings and formulations, and—in contrast to cinema and prose—hold the mind in a space of contemplation, freeing it from narrative's tendency toward resolution and closure.[9]

6. On the relationship between text and image in these works, see Maya Barzilai, "On Exposure: Photography and Uncanny Memory in W.G. Sebald's *Die Ausgewanderten* and *Austerlitz*," in Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh, eds., *W. G. Sebald: History, Memory, Trauma* (New York, 2006), 205–18; Laurence Petit, "Speak, Photographs?: Visual Transparency and Verbal Opacity in Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*," *Nabokov Online Journal* 3 (2009): n.p.; Marja Warehime, "Photography, Time and the Surrealist Sensibility," in Marsha Bryant, ed., *Photo-Textualities: Reading Photographs and Literature* (Newark 1996), 43–56.

7. I. Iu. Beliakova et al., eds., *Slovar' poeticheskogo iazyka Mariny Tsvetaevoi,* 4 volumes (Moscow, 1996–2004).

8. See Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present* (New York, 1982), 129.

9. The notion that poetry and photography represent spaces that "provide respite from plot's pull" was articulated by Melissa S. Feuerstein in her course syllabus for "Po-

https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.73.1.0001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

For Tsvetaeva, photographs give rise to poetry in places where the images the poet encounters represent a palpable form of personal loss. Investigating the underlying connections between photographs and poetic texts in her creative works reveals an affinity with something that modern theorists of photography—Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, Giorgio Agamben, and others—have noted time and again: the intimate relationship between photography and death. Recall, for example, the Victorian-era practice of photographing the deceased, particularly infants and young children, as a way of retaining a tangible memento and mitigating a painful loss.[10] But a number of thinkers have also described the way that photographs function as "an imperious sign of my future death," as Barthes has it.[11] He writes, "By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future. . . . In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder . . . *over a catastrophe which has already occurred.* Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe."[12] Barthes's highly personal writings in *Camera Lucida* on the notional links between photography and mortality echo Sontag's seminal work *On Photography,* which also draws attention to the photograph as a kind of harbinger of death. Sontag writes, "Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art. Most subjects photographed are, just by virtue of being photographed, touched with pathos. . . . All photographs are *memento mori.* To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt."[13] Elsewhere Sontag describes the indexical nature of the photograph as "a trace, something stenciled directly off the real."[14] She takes this notion further to draw an additional link between photography and death when she likens the photographic image to a death mask, a comparison also made elsewhere by André Bazin and Jean-Luc Nancy.[15]

Walter Benjamin's various writings on *the aura* vis-à-vis photography also suggest that the medium is intrinsically linked with death.[16] Benjamin

---

ems and Photographs," a freshman seminar at Harvard in 2008. See also Melissa S. Feuerstein, "Object Poems" (PhD diss, Harvard University, 2006). On the concept of the "poetry of witness," see Czesław Miłosz, *The Witness of Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983); Carolyn Forché, *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness* (New York, 1993).

10. On postmortem photography and its legacy, see Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995); Audrey Linkman, *Photography and Death* (London, 2011).

11. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography,* trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1981), 97.

12. Ibid., 96. Emphasis in the original.

13. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York, 1977), 15.

14. Ibid., 154.

15. See André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in Alan Trachtenberg, ed., *Classic Essays on Photography,* (New Haven, Conn., 1980), 237–44. In addition, Jean-Luc Nancy's musings on the connections between photography and the ancient practice of making death masks are explored in Louis Kaplan, "Photograph/Death Mask: Jean-Luc Nancy's Recasting of the Photographic Image," *Journal of Visual Culture 9,* no. 1 (2010): 45–62.

16. Most readers will recall Benjamin's writing on the problems arising from modern mechanical reproduction and its stripping of the aura from a work of visual art. In fact,

defines the aura as, in part, "the apparition of a distance"; thus, the photograph's aura preserves a trace of something that has been lost (in time, or in death), since viewing a photograph always reveals a tension between presence and absence.[17] In describing David Octavius Hill's famous photograph of a Newhaven fishwife, for instance, Benjamin notes that in the subject's gaze "something strange remains . . . , something that is not to be silenced, something demanding the name of the person who had lived then, who even now is still real and will never entirely perish into art."[18] The photograph's physical existence as an artifact of something that once was makes it an object of enduring presence, despite the fact that the precise moment of the subject's gaze can never be resurrected. The image's exigency—the demand for the name of the photographed subject—is precisely what links the world of the living with that of the deceased.[19]

The intersection of photography and poetry for Tsvetaeva also invariably occurs at the crossroads of life and death. At each intersection, a photograph inspires poetic writing because the picture offers a means to bridge the divide between presence and absence, between the world of the living and the world beyond. The images come to the poet primarily as the stilled gestures or artifacts of individuals who have already departed—or are soon to depart—this world.

Tsvetaeva and the Visual

The suggestion that photography influenced and shaped Tsvetaeva's poetic world in important ways may come as something of a surprise to those who contend that aural sensibilities reign supreme in her hierarchy of perceptual modes. Indeed, in considering the larger question of optics in Tsvetaeva's poetic world, we should take into account that vision was not the most prized of the poet's five senses. Olga Peters Hasty has discussed Tsvetaeva's prefer-

his writing on photography is quite nuanced, and he allows for the presence of aura in photography, especially in its early forms such as the daguerreotype. For a full discussion of some of the paradoxes present in Benjamin's definition of the aura vis-à-vis photography, see Carolin Duttlinger, "Imaginary Encounters: Walter Benjamin and the Aura of Photography," *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 79–101.

17. Benjamin first defined the aura this way in his "Little History of Photography," in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), 2:518.

18. Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," in Trachtenberg, ed., *Classic Essays on Photography*, 202. See also Eduardo Cadava's *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History* (Princeton, 1997), a scholarly exploration of the way Benjamin employs the language of photography to formulate his conception of history.

19. For more on the exigency of the photographic image, see Giorgio Agamben's essay "Judgment Day," in Giorgio Agamben, *Profinations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York, 2007), 23–28. Agamben concentrates primarily on the relationship between gesture and photography, invoking Louis Daguerre's famous early photograph *Boulevard du Temple* (1838) as an ideal visualization of the Last Judgment: an ordinary gesture captured by the camera becomes a touchstone that "collects and condenses in itself the meaning of an entire existence." Agamben, 24. For Agamben, photography engenders a cycle of loss and return in that it "grasps the real that is always in the process of being lost, in order to render it possible once again." Ibid., 27.

https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.73.1.0001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ence for the aural over the visual and the poet's reduced interest in the visual arts. Hasty cites the following passages from Tsvetaeva's letters to Aleksandr Bakhrakh and D. A. Shakhovskoi, respectively, which demonstrate the primacy of the voice and aural perception over the visual world: "Somewhere in my notes I have: 'A poet should not have a "face," he should have a *voice*, his voice is his face.' ('Face' here refers to *what*, the voice is *how*.)"[20] And later, "In general of all the notorious five senses I know only one: hearing. As for the rest—it is as if they don't exist and—it scarcely matters whether they do!"[21] Hasty argues that the visual for Tsvetaeva is equated with shallow, surface details, "align[ing] it with that mundane obtuseness against which the poet struggles."[22] She deftly distills the hazards Tsvetaeva perceived in succumbing to the temptations of the visual world, as found in the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, in which the fateful backward glance "underscore[s] the tragic consequences of refusal to accept aural attestation without recourse to visual verification."[23] In the same vein, we can also recall Tsvetaeva's well-known characterization of the difference between her poetic method and that of Boris Pasternak: "In poetry Pasternak sees, whereas I hear [*Pasternak v stikhax vidit, a ia slyshu*]."[24] There is a temptation in the scholarly treatment of Tsvetaeva to take the poet at her word and thus dismiss the visual world as an insignificant factor in the process of her poetic creation. But what emerges in examining Tsvetaeva's keen interest in photography—a medium that depends on visual perception—is a set of principles very much in line with other aspects of her elegiac writing. This, in turn, makes a case for examining more closely visuality's role in her thinking and writing more broadly.[25]

For a fuller understanding of the role of vision and optics in Tsvetaeva's poetic world, consider, for example, an excerpt from her writings that suggests a more nuanced approach to the visual than is demonstrated in the quotes above: "For the poet, the most frightening, most malicious (and most esteemed!) enemy is the visible. It is an enemy that the poet overcomes only by way of cognition. To enslave the visible [*vidimoe*] in the service of the invisible [*nezrimoe*]—that is the life of the poet. . . . to translate the invisible into the visible."[26] In this passage from her essay "Poet o kritike" (The Poet on

20. Marina Tsvetaeva to Aleksandr Bakhrakh, 30 June 1923, in Aleksandr Bakhrakh, "Pis'ma Mariny Tvetaevoi," *Mosty* 5 (1960): 306. Emphasis in the original. Quoted in Olga Peters Hasty, *Tsvetaeva's Orphic Journeys in the Worlds of the Word* (Evanston, 1996), 108. Translation by Hasty.

21. Marina Tsvetaeva to D. A. Shakhovskoi, 30 December 1925, in Marina Tsvetaeva, *Neizdannye pis'ma*, ed. G. P. Struve and N. A. Struve (Paris, 1972), 350. In Hasty, *Tsvetaeva's Orphic Journeys*, 108. Translation by Hasty.

22. Hasty, 108–9.

23. Ibid., 109.

24. Tsvetaeva to Teskova, February 1918, in Tsvetaeva, *Spasibo za dolguiu pamiat' liubvi . . .*, 109.

25. Stephanie Sandler makes a similar argument about the importance of visual perception in Tsvetaeva's essays on Aleksandr Pushkin and especially in "Natal'ia Goncharova." See Stephanie Sandler, *Commemorating Pushkin: Russia's Myth of a National Poet* (Stanford, 2004), 214–65.

26. Marina Tsvetaeva, *Sobranie sochinenii v semi tomakh*, 7 vols. (Moscow, 2007; hereafter *SS*), 5:248. The essay "Poet o kritike" was first published in *Blagonamerennyi*, no. 2 (Brussels, 1926).

https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.73.1.0001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Criticism), Tsvetaeva suggests that the purpose of poetry is not to sidestep the visual world but rather to engage the visual in order to illuminate the invisible, spiritual world. Her method of doing so involves the construction of a metaphysical form of seeing, one that is mediated through the poetic word—and, as I will show, the camera lens—as a way of transcending ordinary human vision.

Tsvetaeva often spoke of her own nearsightedness, the physical condition that prevented her from seeing objects at a distance clearly. She apparently refused to wear glasses to correct her vision, leading fellow émigré Ariadna Chernova-Sosinskaia to observe astutely that Tsvetaeva's desire to remain within her own blurred world was her way of shielding herself from the "world of ruthless optics [*mir besposhchadnoi optiki*]."[27] At the same time, this visual impairment inspired a metaphysical power of vision that, in her poetic imagination, enabled her to transcend physical space and temporal boundaries. This principle of transcendent vision can be seen, for example, in the following reminiscence, penned in her notebook, in which she describes the poet Mikhail Kuz'min's expressive eyes, as she perceived them during a reading he gave in 1916:

> There were a lot of people. I don't remember anyone. I remember only K[uz]min—his eyes.
> Listener: It looks like he has brown eyes, yes?
> —It seems to me, they're black. Marvelous. Two black suns. No, two craters—smoking. They were so enormous that I, despite my horrible nearsightedness, could see them from 100 versts away, so wonderful that even now (I'll transport myself to the future—fifty years later—and tell my grandchildren)—I can see them.[28]

We witness here Tsvetaeva's metaphysics of vision, which enables the poetic (Kuz'min's verse) to merge with the optical (his and her eyes) in such a way as to transcend space and time (across a 100-verst distance, and fifty years into the future). The very same notion of transcendent, metaphysical vision informs Tsvetaeva's encounters with photography: for her, the photographic lens knows no spatial or temporal boundaries. Photographs engender intimate encounters with a variety of individuals—her deceased grandmother, Rainer Maria Rilke, the late Gronskii—from whom she is separated by insurmountable distances or death. The camera lens, as we will see, also works for Tsvetaeva as a personal memento mori; a pair of photographic self-portraits taken by Tsvetaeva's camera serve to prefigure the poet's own death.

Photograph as Family Spirit

Tsvetaeva's first use of the photographic image in conjunction with the poetic word as a means to commune with the past and the world beyond the grave is found in her 1914 poem "Babushke" (To Grandmother). Her sister Anastasiia

27. Ariadna Chernova-Sosinskaia, "V odnom dome 'na Smikhove,'" in L. Mnukhin and L. Turchinskii, eds., *Marina Tsvetaeva v vospominaniiakh sovremennikov,* vol. 2, *Gody emigratsii* (Moscow, 2002), 82.

28. Marina Tsvetaeva, *Neizdannoe: Svodnye tetradi,* comp. and ed. E. B. Korkina and I. D. Shevelenko (Moscow, 1997), 34.

https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.73.1.0001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Tsvetaeva's memoirs contextualize one particular family photograph that inspired this poem—a portrait of the sisters' maternal grandmother:

> The daguerreotype from which the enlargement was made showed her at a time when she was pregnant with our mother. . . . And through everything, above everything, was her heavy gaze, directed off to the side, past us, into the distance. A weighty gaze, like sadness itself, like—could it be?—the anticipation of death. She died leaving behind a newborn daughter. Her gaze, like a wing, extended out over our early adolescence (we lost our mother at eleven and thirteen years, respectively). It was the very kind of wing that creates both poets and wanderers.[29]

The portrait of the young Mariia Mein became for Marina and Anastasiia both a stand-in for a living grandmother and a reminder of her untimely death following the birth of a child not long after the photograph was taken. Indeed, Tsvetaeva's poem subtly takes note of how the figure seems to hang in this balance between life and death:

> Сколько возможностей вы унесли?
> И невозможностей—сколько?—
> В ненасытимую прорву земли,
> Двадцатилетняя полька![30]

> How many possibilities have you carried off,
> And impossibilities—how many?
> Into the insatiable pit of the earth,
> [You], a twenty-year-old Polish girl!

In this lyric we find the first indications that in Tsvetaeva's poetic world photographs can function as a kind of medium for communication with the world beyond. Throughout the poem the speaker poses a series of questions in search of the source of her own fiery passions and rebellious spirit. Tsvetaeva draws her inspiration from visual cues in her grandmother's photograph, which hung prominently in her parents' bedroom in the family home (see figure 1).

The narrative focus begins with the portrait's external details—sleeves, lips, hands, and "tendrils of hair" (*lokony v vide spirali*)—in the first two stanzas, then shifts in the third stanza to her grandmother's more internal characteristics. This shift at the poem's midpoint is prompted by the gaze of the speaker meeting that of the figure in the portrait ("Dark, severe, exacting gaze. / A look ready to defend itself"). Wholly aware that the figure in the photograph met an early death, Tsvetaeva uses the penultimate stanza to reflect on a life cut short: "How many possibilities have you carried off, / And impossibilities—how many?" But in the last stanza the speaker concludes with a final question that fully supports the notion that photographs, especially those of dead relatives, invite us to ponder the living spirit that resides therein—what, as noted earlier, Benjamin refers to as the aura: "—Бабушка! Этот жестокий мятеж / В сердце моём—не от Вас ли? [Grandmother! This brutal rebellion / In my heart—does it not come from you?]" Tsvetaeva's nar-

29. Anastasiia Tsvetaeva, *Vospominaniia v dvukh tomakh*, 2 vols. (Moscow, 2008), 1:41–42.

30. *SS* 1:215.

https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.73.1.0001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 1. Anastasiia Tsvetaeva, Sergei Efron, and Marina Tsvetaeva in the family home on Three Ponds Lane. The large photographic portrait of M. L. (Bernatskaia) Mein hangs on the wall in the upper left corner of the photograph. Image courtesy of the Tsvetaeva House Museum in Moscow.

rative persona senses that the rebellious streak in her Polish ancestor lives on, not only in the details of the portrait, but also in her own fiery spirit.[31]

Photographs in Tsvetaeva's family, as her daughter Ariadna Efron remembers, were associated as much with the spirit world as the material world. In her memoirs recounting the family's preparations to emigrate, Efron describes a set of stereoscopic photographs depicting scenes from her parents' early years in Moscow and the Crimea; she conceives of these items from her family's past under the heading of "things that you can't really call 'things' because they are so much a *spirit* [*veshchi, chto i veshchami ne nazovesh', nastol'ko oni—dukh*]."[32] While many of Tsvetaeva's personal photographs have been lost,

31. Another example of a family photograph finding its way into poetry is layered intertexually in Tsvetaeva's first long poem *Charodei* (The Enchanter, 1914) about the literary critic and family friend Ellis (L. L. Kobylinskii). Anna Saakiants details how the photograph of Tsvetaeva's mother in her casket which hung in Ivan Tsvetaev's office in the Three Ponds Lane house is figured in Ellis's 1914 book of poems *Argo* in the poem "V rai" (In Heaven); the image is in turn referenced in Tsvetaeva's long poem to Ellis. See Anna Saakiants, *Zhizn' Tsvetaevoi: Bessmertnaia ptitsa—feniks* (Moscow, 2000), 62–64.

32. Ariadna Efron, *O Marine Tsvetaevoi: Vospominaniia docheri* (Moscow, 1989), 107. Emphasis added.

https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.73.1.0001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

among those that remain in various archives and collections are two sets of snapshots that inspired her poetic writing because of their deep connection to the spirit of another person: one set was sent to her by Rilke, and the other is the series taken by Tsvetaeva of Gronskii's room not long after his death.[33] The same association of photographic images with the human spirit suggested by Ariadna Efron, and the photograph's status as a memento mori, is integral to the interrelation of photographic image and poetic text in Tsvetaeva's writings about Rilke and Gronskii.

Photograph as Meeting: Tsvetaeva and Rilke in 1926

The epistolary exchange between Tsvetaeva, Rilke, and Pasternak in the summer of 1926 is remarkable for the way the letters traverse linguistic and geographical boundaries and illuminate the struggles of three creative individuals at a time of tremendous uncertainty for each of them. The exchange was initiated by Pasternak's father, the painter Leonid Pasternak, in the form of a congratulatory message to his old acquaintance, the German poet Rilke, on the occasion of latter's fiftieth birthday. Rilke's delayed but enthusiastic response—and his praise of Boris Pasternak's poetry, which he had read in French translation—led the elder Pasternak to convey the letter to his son, who took up the correspondence and brought Tsvetaeva into the conversation. Evident in these letters is Tsvetaeva and Pasternak's deification of Rilke, a figure who had had been elevated to the status of all-powerful muse for the younger poets. Rilke, who had spent time in Russia in his younger years, felt a nostalgic admiration for his Russian counterparts, but he was also alienated by their extreme flights of fancy and the intensity of their desire to make a pilgrimage to meet him. These fantasies were sharply at odds with his physical condition, as he struggled with leukemia in a Swiss sanatorium. Benjamin Paloff has noted that what was perhaps most problematic about the contact between these individuals was that "the Muse [Rilke], like nostalgia, is supposed to exist for the Poet, but also beyond his grasp; direct communion is not supposed to be possible."[34] Yet for a brief period this communion did exist—in the letters that traversed the distances separating Rilke's Swiss sanatorium, Pasternak's Moscow, and Tsvetaeva's émigré world in Paris. And while Tsvetaeva and Pasternak's visit with Rilke in the physical world was not destined to take place (Rilke died at the end of 1926), the exchanges in these letters engendered a variety of metaphysical encounters. The poets shared space together in their dreams, poetry, and letters, and—in the case of Rilke and

33. In the introduction to Anna Saakiants and Lev Mnukhin, eds., *Marina Tsvetaeva: Fotoletopis' zhizni poeta* (Moscow, 2000), Saakiants and Mnukhin describe the surviving Tsvetaeva iconography as "unfortunately, scant." Saakiants and Mnukhin, 4. Many family photos were lost or destroyed following Anastasiia Tsvetaeva's 1937 arrest, and very few originals remain. The Rilke photos are part of the Pasternak Family Archive, and the Gronskii photos are housed at the RGALI.

34. Benjamin Paloff, review of *Letters: Summer 1926*, 2nd ed., by Boris Pasternak, Marina Tsvetaeva, and Rainer Maria Rilke, ed. Yevgeny Pasternak, Yelena Pasternak, and Konstantin M. Azadovsky, trans. Margaret Wettlin, Walter Arndt, and Jamey Gambrell, *The Slavic and East European Journal* 47, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 121.

Tsvetaeva—the photographic lens became instrumental in facilitating a kind of spiritual rendezvous.[35]

While several scholars have examined the brief, highly charged correspondence of the summer of 1926, little attention has been paid to the selection of photographs the poets sent to one another.[36] These images played a central role in shaping the trajectory of the correspondence, the themes explored therein, and even the poetic texts resulting in part from the exchange. In particular, the photographs that Rilke and Tsvetaeva exchanged during this period established them as kindred spirits, bound by their shared artistic vision and poetic vocation. The way the two interacted with and interpreted the photographs they exchanged—and the way photographs function as a substitute for meeting in the physical world—is part of what unites them as poets possessing a common conception of the metaphysics of the photographic image.

Rilke's impression, expressed in his initial letters, that the poets had missed an opportunity to meet in person resonated with a central theme in Tsvetaeva's artistic world—meetings and "non-meetings" or "missed meetings" (*razminoveniia*) between poetic souls.[37] Tsvetaeva had written about this theme in relation to Aleksandr Blok and Pasternak, and now here was Rilke also lamenting that the chance had passed them by. He had been in Paris but left in August 1925; Tsvetaeva arrived from Prague just a few months later, in November of the same year. Rilke wrote to Tsvetaeva, "Why, I must

35. On the theme of meetings in dreams, see in particular Catherine Ciepiela's thorough analysis of Tsvetaeva's *poema* "S moria" (From the Sea, May 1926), which features an imagined mutual dreamscape meeting with Pasternak. Catherine Ciepiela, *The Same Solitude: Boris Pasternak and Marina Tsvetaeva* (Ithaca, 2006), 178–87. The poema concludes with a transformation of facial features into ecstatic imagery that moves beyond the world of visual encounters:

Вплоть, а не тесно,	Side by side, but not crowded.
Огнь, а не дымно.	A fire, but no smoke.
Ведь не совместный	For this isn't dreaming together
Сон, а взаимный:	But mutual dreaming:
В Боге, друг в друге.	In God, each in the other
Нос, думал? Мыс!	A nose, you thought? A promontory!
Брови? Нет, дуги,	Eyebrows? No, rainbows,
Выходы из—	Exoduses from—
Зримости.	Seen-ness.

Ciepiela, 187. Translation by Ciepiela.

36. See, for example, Hasty, *Tsvetaeva's Orphic Journeys*, 134–223; Dinega, *A Russian Psyche*, 129–177; Irina Shevelenko, *Literaturnyi put' Tsvetaevoi* (Moscow, 2002), 339–47; Svetlana Boym, *Death in Quotation Marks: Cultural Myths of the Modern Poet* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), 224–29; Ciepiela, *The Same Solitude*, 143–48, 158–60, 191–93; and the texts and commentaries to the English and Russian volumes Boris Pasternak, Marina Tsvetayeva, Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters: Summer 1926*, ed. Yevgeny Pasternak, Yelena Pasternak, and Konstantin M. Azadovsky, trans. Margaret Wettlin and Walter Arndt (San Diego, Calif., 1985) and Rainer Mariia Ril'ke, Boris Pasternak, Marina Tsvetaeva, *Pis'ma 1926 goda* (Moscow, 1990). For information on Rilke's experiences and travels in Russia, see Anna A. Tavis, *Rilke's Russia: A Cultural Encounter* (Evanston, 1994).

37. As Ciepiela has noted, this word was coined by Tsvetaeva to describe instances of missed meetings. See Ciepiela, 82.

https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.73.1.0001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

wonder now, why was it not vouchsafed me to meet you, Marina Ivanovna Tsvetaeva? After Boris Pasternak's letter I must believe that such a meeting would have resulted in the deepest, innermost joy for both of us. Will we ever have a second chance to do this?!"[38] In response to these regrets about the lost opportunity to meet in person, Tsvetaeva was inspired to send a surrogate in the form of her photographic image. In her third letter to Rilke she included a passport picture of herself. In the letter she promised to send a better photograph, a portrait taken in Paris at the studio of the well-known Russian-born photographer Petr Shumov, who famously had photographed Auguste Rodin and his sculptures, along with the most prominent members of the Russian émigré community in Paris.[39] In the same letter, Tsvetaeva does not hesitate to ask for Rilke's photograph in return: "Here is my photograph—from my passport—I am brighter and younger. A better one will follow, taken quite recently, in Paris. It was taken by Shumov, the one who photographed your great friend's work. . . . I was embarrassed to ask whether or not he had taken your photograph. I wouldn't have dared to order a copy for myself. (You have no doubt already noticed that I'm asking you—straightforward and without any shyness—for your photograph.)"[40] We can speculate that Tsvetaeva was contemplating whether she and Rilke had, at different times, shared the same physical space in Shumov's studio, "meeting," at least in the metaphysical sense, refracted in the lens of Shumov's camera.[41] Rilke replied that Shumov had not taken his picture, a missed opportunity that amounted to yet another "non-meeting" (*razminovenie*) in Tsvetaeva's fragmented world.

In the same letter, Rilke goes on to explain that he was hesitant to send Tsvetaeva his photograph. While he planned to do so in the near future, it is clear that her gazing upon his picture was nearly tantamount to meeting in person, and he was uncomfortable with the "haphazard" nature of the passport picture: "What keeps me from sending you my passport picture is not vanity but actually an awareness of just how haphazard this instantaneous snapshot really is. But I've placed mine next to yours: let's get used to this first in pictures, all right?"[42] Tsvetaeva was likely to have been intrigued by

38. Rainer Maria Rilke to Marina Tsvetaeva, 3 May 1926, in Pasternak, Tsvetaeva, Rilke, *Letters,* 80.

39. See Petr Ivanovich Shumov, *Russkii parizhanin: Fotografii Petra Shumova*, comp. Pierre Serge Choumoff (Moscow, 2000).

40. Tsvetaeva to Rilke, dated "Ascension Day 1926," in Pasternak, Tsvetaeva, Rilke, *Letters,* 95. Rilke was close to Rodin and wrote a monograph on the sculptor (*Auguste Rodin,* 1903) that was illustrated with Shumov's photographs.

41. It is important to note that Tsvetaeva bends the truth somewhat in the letter to Rilke quoted above. While she had several portraits taken at Shumov's studio in Paris in 1925, Shumov himself was not present at the time; the photos were taken by her friend Vladimir Sosinskii, who was working for Shumov. What is important here—and this is evidenced by Tsvetaeva's exuberant letters of thanks to Shumov for the portraits—is not that Shumov took the photo but that her portrait was taken by Shumov's camera. Tsvetaeva's letters of thanks to Shumov are reproduced in Shumov, *Russkii parizhanin,* 6–7. Further evidence of Tsvetaeva's lack of direct familiarity with Shumov is the fact that the postcard she sent him from London on 24 March 1926 is addressed in error to "Aleksandre" rather than "Pierre" (Petr Ivanovich) Chumoff, and begins "Dorogoi Aleksandr Ivanovich!"

42. Rilke to Tsvetaeva, 17 May 1926, in Pasternak, Tsvetaeva, Rilke, *Letters,* 100.

the idea that the poets would get acquainted by means of their photographs placed next to one another on a desk. She had taken note of a parallel situation, in which her author photograph was published on the same page as Pasternak's in the July 1926 issue of *Versty* that featured her *Poema gory* (Poem of the Mountain) and an excerpt from Pasternak's narrative poem *Deviat'sot piatyi god* (The Year 1905).[43] She viewed their portraits and poems occupying the same space as a means of connecting their artistic spirits in both image and word. In fact, much of Tsvetaeva's creative orientation toward her fellow poets at this time centered on the search for just such a means to connect on a spiritual level with those from whom she was separated by tremendous distances.

Photographs once again enabled the communion of poetic souls when, following a months-long pause in Rilke's letters, the German poet renewed the correspondence by sending Tsvetaeva a short note along with a gift: an envelope containing eight photographs—five labeled on the reverse in his own hand—of himself and his surroundings at the Château de Muzot, as well as his poem "Elegy for Marina Tsvetaeva-Efron." Moved by this offering in both photographs and in verse, Tsvetaeva interpreted the meaning of the images in a way that resonated with their earlier exchange and the connection forged by their common vision of photography's capabilities. In one of the photographs she saw an anticipation of parting, which Alyssa Dinega Gillespie has ascribed to Tsvetaeva's growing awareness of Rilke's deteriorating health:[44] "Those dear pictures of you. Do you know what you look like in the big one? Standing in wait and suddenly hailed. And the other, smaller one—that is a parting. One on the point of departure who casts a last glance—seemingly a cursory one . . . over his garden, as one might over a page of writing before it is dispatched."[45] (See figures 2 and 3.)

The implication that Tsvetaeva viewed in these photographs a premonition of Rilke's death is very much in line with Barthes's vision of photographs as denoting "death in a future tense" or Sontag's discussion of the photograph as a memento mori. In addition, the above quotation can also be read in connection with Tsvetaeva's *Popytka komnaty* (Attempt at a Room, May–June 1926), a work that also builds on the notion of metaphysical paths to spiritual communion. The text of this intensely complex *poema* represents the culmination of a prominent theme in Tsvetaeva's poetry: the denial of physical space and the poet's liberation from it. In a letter to Pasternak dated 9 February 1927, not long after Rilke's death on 29 December 1926, Tsvetaeva explains the circumstances surrounding the poema's composition. Her insight is that its primary message stems from the fact that she knew on some level that she and Rilke were not fated to meet face to face, but that they were destined to meet "*in another way*," that is, in the metaphysical realm: "A curious switch

43. Tsvetaeva: "Versty *vyshli. Potemkin chetverostishiiami. V kontse primechaniia. Nashi portrety na odnoi stranitse.* [*Versts* is out. A venerable Potemkin made of quatrains. Commentary at the end. Our portraits share the same page.]" Marina Tsvetaeva and Boris Pasternak, *"Dushi nachinaiut videt'": Pis'ma 1922–1936 goda,* ed. E. B. Korkina and I. D. Shevelenko (Moscow, 2004), 255.

44. Dinega, 136.

45. Tsvetaeva to Rilke, 14 June 1926, in Pasternak, Tsvetaeva, Rilke, *Letters,* 143.

https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.73.1.0001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 2. Rilke at the Château de Muzot. Image courtesy of the Pasternak Family Archive.

Figure 3. Rainer Maria Rilke at the Château de Muzot. Image courtesy of the Pasternak Family Archive.

occurred: the poem was written during a time when I was intensely focused on him, but the poem was directed—consciously and by my own will—to you. But it turns out—so little about him!—to be about him—now (*after* the 29th of December). In other words, it was a premonition, an insight. I simply told him, a living being—whom I *did plan to meet!*—how we did not meet, how we met *in another way.*"[46] This search for a way to connect spiritually with those she could not access physically is at the center of Tsvetaeva's encounters with photographs and is precisely what links her understanding of the power of photography to the goals of her poetic practice. This idea extends not only to the connections between uniting with Rilke through the photographic lens and the composition of *Popytka komnaty* but also her elegy to Rilke, *Novogodnee* (New Year's Greetings, February 1927), which further builds on her metaphysical approach to vision and optics.

In *Novogodnee* Tsvetaeva sends her final letter to Rilke, a New Year's greeting to his poetic soul, which now occupies a place high above the earth. Vision and optics are a central organizing principle in the poema (Rilke is the *oko,* the all-seeing eye), and Tsvetaeva speaks of a liminal "third space"—a place

46. Tsvetaeva to Pasternak, 9 February 1927, in *SS* 6:269. Emphasis in the original.

https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.73.1.0001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of neither death nor life—where she and Rilke will, in body and spirit, toast the New Year.[47] The following key lines demonstrate Tsvetaeva's rejection of both life and death as such and her illumination of a third space that joins this world with the world beyond:

Что мне делать в новогоднем шуме
С этой внутреннею рифмой: Райнер—умер.
Если ты, такое око смерклось,
Значит, жизнь не жизнь есть, смерть не смерть есть.
Значит—тмится, допойму при встрече!—
Нет ни жизни, нет ни смерти,—третье,
Новое.[48]

What am I to do in this New Year's noise
With this internal rhyme: Rainer—died.
If you, such an eye, has dimmed,
It means that life is not life and death is not death.
It means—it's darkening, I'll understand it all when we meet!—
There is neither life nor death—rather, a third thing,
Something new.

In this text, the quest for meeting "in another way" is fulfilled not in heaven or on earth but in this "third space," where poetic souls can come together, even when separated by death. With the "dimming" of Rilke's embodied eye (*oko smerklos'*) and the "darkening" of the surrounding space (*tmitsia*), physical seeing recedes, and from the binary division of life and death emerges a space not unlike the metaphysical realm of Shumov's camera lens or the meeting place created by the two photographic portraits placed next to one another in Rilke's home. For Tsvetaeva, the photographic image, like the poetic word, creates the potential to transcend fixed boundaries of space and time, especially the separation inherent in death.[49]

47. Another reference to optical connections unifying space and time comes in a letter dated 28 July 1926 in which Rilke uses the metaphor of the telescope lens to describe the circumstances of Tsvetaeva's fortuitous entrance into his life in the form of her first letter: "But you, Marina, I did not find with the free-ranging naked eye; Boris placed the telescope and focused my gaze on you . . . in my eyes, directed upward, first there was just space and then suddenly you appeared in my field of vision, pure and strong, in the focus of the rays of your first letter." Rilke to Tsvetaeva, 28 July 1926, in Pasternak, Tsvetaeva, Rilke, *Letters,* 194.

48. *SS* 3:134.

49. Another photograph as elegiac image-object plays a role in Tsvetaeva's farewell to Prague. In several letters to Anna Teskova in 1938 and 1939 Tsvetaeva makes impassioned pleas for Teskova to send her a photographic image of the statue of the knight Bruncvik on the Charles Bridge in Prague that she admired and wrote about when she lived there in 1922–25. She is clear that a drawing or painting will not suffice; the image must be a photograph ("*fotografiiu,* ne snimok s kartiny!!!"). Tsvetaeva to Teskova, 24 October 1938, in Tsvetaeva, *Spasibo za dolguiu pamiat' liubvi . . .*, 347. It is the photograph's indexical nature, the fact that the image bears witness to a particular time and place from which it was derived, that enables the poet to connect spiritually to Prague and all that it represents. For more on the photograph of the Prague knight, see Molly Thomasy Blasing, *Writing with Light: Photo-Poetic Encounters in Tsvetaeva, Pasternak, and Brodsky* (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin–Madison, expected 2014), chap. 1.

https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.73.1.0001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Reflections of Self and Soul: Daguerreotype as Metaphor and Image-Object

Another text whose analysis is enhanced by a fuller understanding of Tsvetaeva's interest in photography is her 1931 lyric "Dom" ("Iz-pod nakhmurennykh brovei"). Tsvetaeva's interest in the photographic medium reached its greatest intensity in the late 1920s and early 1930s, a fact that compels our reexamination of the photographic metaphor that appears in the poem's final lines. The conclusion of the poem equates the old, dilapidated house of the poem's title with a "Girlish daguerreotype / Of my soul" (*Devicheskii dagerrotip / Dushi moei*).[50]

Scholars have remarked on the metamorphosis in this poem of the image of the home into a kind of self-portrait of the soul.[51] What further enhances our reading, however, is an awareness that Tsvetaeva's knowledge of the physical properties of certain photographic image-objects, such as the daguerreotype, plays a central role in the construction of the visual and temporal layers that define this text. The visual metaphor of the daguerreotype is more than a wistful harkening back to an earlier era; instead, this image provides us with a key organizational principle for the overall design of the poem. The lyric itself is constructed as if the speaker is looking at a daguerreotype, seeing at once her own facial features reflected in and superimposed on an image of an old house, a vision of the self within an image from a childhood memory:

Из-под нахмуренных бровей
Дом—будто юности моей
День, будто молодость моя
Меня встречает:—Здравствуй, я![52]

Out from under scowling brows
A house—as if from my youth
A day, as if my childhood,
Meets me: Well, hello, it's me!

A fuller understanding of the physical properties of a daguerreotype elucidates the source of the multilayered visual images in this poem. Oliver Wendell Holmes famously called the daguerreotype "a mirror with a memory" because of its distinct reflective properties.[53] As Adam Frank points out in his article on photography in the poetic world of Emily Dickinson, daguerreotypes were printed on polished, silvered metal plates, a highly reflective surface: "Unlike paper prints, daguerreotypes are excellent mirrors, which makes the image difficult to see as light reflects off different parts of the surface. Remarkably, when you look at a daguerreotype you are almost always

50. *SS* 2:296

51. See, e.g., Dinega, 270n28; N. G. Datskevich and M. L. Gasparov, "Tema doma v poezii Mariny Tsvetaevoi," *Zdes' i teper'*, no. 2 (1992): 121.

52. *SS* 2:295.

53. Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph," *Atlantic Monthly*, 1 June 1859, at www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1859/06/the-stereoscope-and-the-stereograph/303361/ (last accessed 11 November 2013).

seeing a reflection of your face or eyes: your mirror image is the ground for the portrait's figure."[54] The speaker in Tsvetaeva's poem goes on to interweave the image of her forehead under the hood of a raincoat with the ivy that grows on the roof of the old house; as *pliashch* (raincoat) merges phonetically with *pliushch* (ivy), the visual imagery is also layered into a single plane.[55] Later, the forehead becomes the archway of her father's museum, while her eyes are reflected in the thick green glass of the windowpanes.

Though newer photographic forms had replaced daguerreotypes well before Tsvetaeva was born, the poet had first-hand knowledge of the daguerreotype's physical properties; such photographic image-objects were found in the family home, for instance.[56] Though there is no single artifact, no particular daguerreotype of a house that we can identify as the source of this poem, the conjured, metaphorical image of the daguerreotype surface allows the speaker to view herself within a visual and temporal palimpsest. She envisions two images at once: her current self—the reflection of her brows, forehead, and eyes—superimposed on an image that represents her soul in a previous incarnation—the childhood home captured on the surface of the plate. The poem creates a kind of double exposure that permits her to examine her present émigré self in the same plane as the remembered self of her youth.[57] The photographic image continues to operate as a medium for the communion of souls, but in this instance the mechanism is a metaphorical daguerreotype whose mirrored surface reflects the poet's own self, her soul, in its present and past incarnations.

As with other photo-poetic encounters in Tsvetaeva's oeuvre, this lyric also operates as a space of mourning.[58] The speaker of "Dom" grieves the loss of her childhood and her former life in Russia. The poem speaks of a home not unlike her childhood haunts (the house on Three Ponds Lane or at Tarusa). Amid these memories are thoughts about the end of the poet's life, which the speaker predicts will be played out far from the childhood home yet still accompanied by lyric poetry: "От улицы вдали / Я за стихами кончу дни— /

54. Adam Frank, "Emily Dickinson and Photography," *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 10, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 7.

55. See also Tsvetaeva's layering of a photographic image and the natural world in her poem inspired by a photograph of Anatolii Shteiger framed by the Alps, the first text in her 1936 *Stikhi sirote* (Poems to an Orphan): "Ледяная тиара гор— / Только бренному лику—рамка. / Я сегодня плющу—пробор / Провела на граните замка. [The icy tiara of mountains– / Is just a frame for this fleeting face. / Today I parted the ivy / On the granite of the castle.]" *SS* 2:337. See also Shevelenko, 432.

56. For a description of family daguerreotypes in the Tsvetaeva home, see A. Tsvetaeva, *Vospominaniia*, 1:42.

57. Vladislav Khodasevich also makes use of the photographic double exposure trope in his *Sorrentinskie fotografii* (Sorrento Photographs, 1926), which juxtaposes the author's émigré present with a previous life in St. Petersburg/Petrograd. For more on this work, see Margarita Nafpaktitis, "Multiple Exposures of the Photographic Motif in Vladislav Khodasevich's 'Sorrentinskie Fotografii,'" *The Slavic and East European Journal* 52, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 389–413.

58. See also Khodasevich's long blank verse poem of the same name (*Dom*, 1919), which also treats the image of an abandoned home, a vacant space that houses specters of the past.

Как за ветвями бузины [From a distant street / I'll end my days behind my poems / As if behind the branches of an elderberry tree]."[59]

Photography after Loss: Nikolai Gronskii and *Nadgrobie*

If Tsvetaeva's photographic practices prior to the early 1930s were limited to distributing and describing photographs taken by others, her friendship with the young aspiring poet Nikolai Pavlovich Gronskii (1909–1934) is one that kindled in her a deeper interest in photography and prompted her for the first time to begin to look through the camera lens and take her own photographs.[60] Tsvetaeva described the somewhat unlikely friendship (she was twice his eighteen years when they met) as being founded on an exchange of knowledge and talents.[61] Certainly, Tsvetaeva's greatest gifts to the young Gronskii were lessons in poetic expression; she acted as both poetic mother and muse.[62] Among the skills Gronskii taught Tsvetaeva in return was the art of taking photographs. Their shared interest in photography, and its role in Tsvetaeva's composition of the *Nadgrobie* cycle, provides further evidence of the role that photographic seeing played in Tsvetaeva's personal and poetic attempts to overcome the separation between the living and the dead.

Years before his death, as his friendship with Tsvetaeva was just beginning, it was Gronskii who taught the elder poet how to use a camera. In one of her very first letters to her protégé, dated 2 April 1928, Tsvetaeva made the following request: "I really would like for you to teach me to take photographs. Sergei Iakovlevich is busy now until very late at night and I wouldn't dare to

59. *SS* 2:295.

60. Tsvetaeva's habit of sending photographs of herself, her children, and her travels to friends, family, and other correspondents is, of course, extremely commonplace. Nonetheless, for Tsvetaeva there may have been particular literary antecedents associated with this practice. For instance, Tsvetaeva read each and every volume of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*); she read the first volume, *Du côté de chez Swann* (*Swann's Way*), in 1928. Proust's work is full of photographic motifs and exchanges of photographs between characters. For a detailed examination of the theme of photography in Proust's life and works, see Brassaï, *Proust in the Power of Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (Chicago, 2001); Thomas Baldwin, "Photography and Painting in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*," in Natasha Grigorian, Thomas Baldwin, and Margaret Rigaud-Drayton, eds., *Text and Image in Modern European Culture* (West Lafayette, 2012), 76–87; and Áine Larkin, "Photography in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*," in Grigorian, Baldwin, and Rigaud-Drayton, eds., *Text and Image*, 88–100. For more on Tsvetaeva and Proust, see Shevelenko, 352–55.

61. "My companion [N. P. Gronskii] is an eighteen-year-old well-bred pup who teaches me everything he learned in high school (oh, there's so much!). And I teach him all I get from my notebook. After all, writing is not something you learn by just living your life. We trade schools. Except that I am self-taught. But both of us are excellent hikers [*otlichnye khodoki*]." Tsvetaeva to Teskova, 10 April 1928, in Tsvetaeva, *Spasibo za dolguiu pamiat' liubvi . . .*, 115.

62. Both Svetlana El'nitskaia and Alyssa Dinega Gillespie have analyzed the alternation of nurturing and erotic imagery in Tsvetaeva's poem to Gronskii "Iunoshe v usta" (Into the Mouth of the Youth). See Svetlana El'nitskaia, "'Sto ikh, Igr i mod!' Stikhi Tsvetaevoi N. Gronskomu, 1928 g. Chast' pervaia," *Stat'i o Marine Tsvetaevoi* (Moscow, 2004), 109–30; Dinega, 182–85.

bother him with the camera, especially at one o'clock in the morning! And Mur is growing. And the film plates are loaded. Come as soon as you can. . . . We'll discuss Pasternak's prose . . . and taking photographs."[63] There is evidence that Tsvetaeva became an active amateur photographer at this time, thanks to Gronskii's instruction. In a letter to Sergei Efron dated 19 September 1928 Tsvetaeva exclaims, "I was born a photographer! [*Ia rozhdena fotografom!*]," and describes staying up all night developing her latest photographs.[64] At a time when Tsvetaeva was encountering an increasingly hostile publishing environment, it seems that photography—taking, developing, and distributing amateur photographs of people and places dear to her—became an alternate outlet for her creative energies.

Until now, scholars writing on Tsvetaeva's reaction to Gronskii's death have not had available to them a series of photographs that were taken by Tsvetaeva of Gronskii's empty room in the first days of December 1934, approximately two weeks after his death.[65] Viewing the images alongside their corresponding text, *Nadgrobie*, especially its first poem, we sense in both the photographs and poems that Tsvetaeva is searching for a trace of her dear friend; but Gronskii's soul is elusive, and the kind of meeting she had with Rilke in *Novogodnee* is not destined to repeat itself here.

One photograph depicts Gronskii's writing desk still covered with books (see figure 4), a picture not unlike the photograph Rilke had sent of his desk in 1926 (see figure 5). In the foreground of the image of Gronskii's desk, in the lower right corner of the photograph, we see part of a bed frame that is slightly out of focus. Attached to the desk is a lamp, and a chair stands on the floor behind the desk. The focal points of this photograph, the writing desk and chair, correspond to the abandoned table and chair in the first stanza of the cycle's opening poem:

«Иду на несколько минут . . . »
В работе (хаосом зовут
Бездельники) оставив стол,
Отставив стул—куда ушел?[66]

"I'm going out for a minute . . ."
Leaving the table deep in work
(What the lazy call chaos)
Leaving the chair—where have you gone?

63. Tsvetaeva to Gronskii, 2 April 1928, in Tsvetaeva and Gronskii, *Neskol'ko udarov serdtsa*, 10. Sergei Iakovlevich (Efron) was Tsvetaeva's husband; "Mur" was the nickname of Tsvetaeva's son, Georgii.

64. Tsvetaeva to Sergei Efron, 9 September 1928, in Marina Tsvetaeva, *Neizdannoe: Sem'ia; Istoriia v pis'makh*, ed. E. B. Korkina (Moscow, 1999), 337–38.

65. The photographs are located in RGALI, fond (f.) 1190-2-256. Gillespie has noted that the cycle of poems was written *after* the fortieth day following Gronskii's passing. See Dinega, 187. The photographs, however, were taken within the forty-day period during which, according to Orthodox belief, the soul still inhabits the earth. This fact is important because the central theme of *Nadgrobie* is the search for the soul of the departed among his earthly possessions.

66. Tsvetaeva, in Tsvetaeva and Gronskii, *Neskol'ko udarov serdtsa*, 206.

Figure 4. Nikolai Gronskii's writing desk. Image courtesy of the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI) 1190-2-256, no. 9.

Figure 5. Rilke's writing desk. Inscribed on the reverse, *Cabinet de travail (Muzot)* [Office (Muzot)]. Image courtesy of the Pasternak Family Archive.

https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.73.1.0001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This poem, written 3 January 1935, begins with the voice of the deceased poet. We are meant to understand this line as the last words spoken by Gronskii as he set out for the Pasteur station of the Paris Métro, where an accident on the subway platform would take his life. If we read this stanza in the context of the photograph, the abandoned writing desk and chair become the point of departure in a search for a way to reconnect with the poet's soul.[67] Though Tsvetaeva resurrects Gronskii's lost voice in the lines of her text, it is the absence of the body that is central in this work. While the locus of poetic creation (the writing desk) remains—its physical presence reinforced by the tangible photographic prints—the lyric speaker struggles to make sense of the sudden loss of the living being to whom the abandoned belongings metonymically refer.

The second stanza works to reinforce the motif of a vain search for the poetic soul in the earthly realm—in this case, the city of Paris. The rejection of immortality that we find throughout the text begins here with the speaker's incredulous reaction to the absence not just of the body but seemingly the poet's soul as well:

Опрашиваю весь Париж.
Ведь в сказках лишь да в красках лишь
Возносятся на небеса!
Твоя душа—куда ушла?[68]

I ask around all of Paris,
For it's only in fairytales and in pigments
That they ascend to the heavens!
Your soul—where has it gone?

The speaker claims that it is only "in fairytales" (*v skazkakh*) and "in pigments" (*v kraskakh*)—a reference to icon painting—that the dead are raised to the heavens.[69] The implication is that Tsvetaeva's search for the poet's soul comes up empty, and faith in the afterlife seems illusory. Another photograph from the series may in fact have prompted the reference to icon painting in

67. In an article on Tsvetaeva's elegiac mode in this cycle and Derzhavin's in his "Na smert' kniazia Meshcherskogo," Tamara Fokht sees a connection between these lines and Derzhavin's "*Gde stol byl iastv, tam grob stoit* [Where a feast was once spread, there a coffin lies]," which she argues are united by the theme of an "interrupted feast" (*prervannoe zastol'e*), with Gronskii's as a "creative feast" (*tvorcheskoe zastol'e*). Fokht, 234. See also Tsvetaeva's 1933 cycle of five poems *Table* (Stol), a paean to the writing desk:

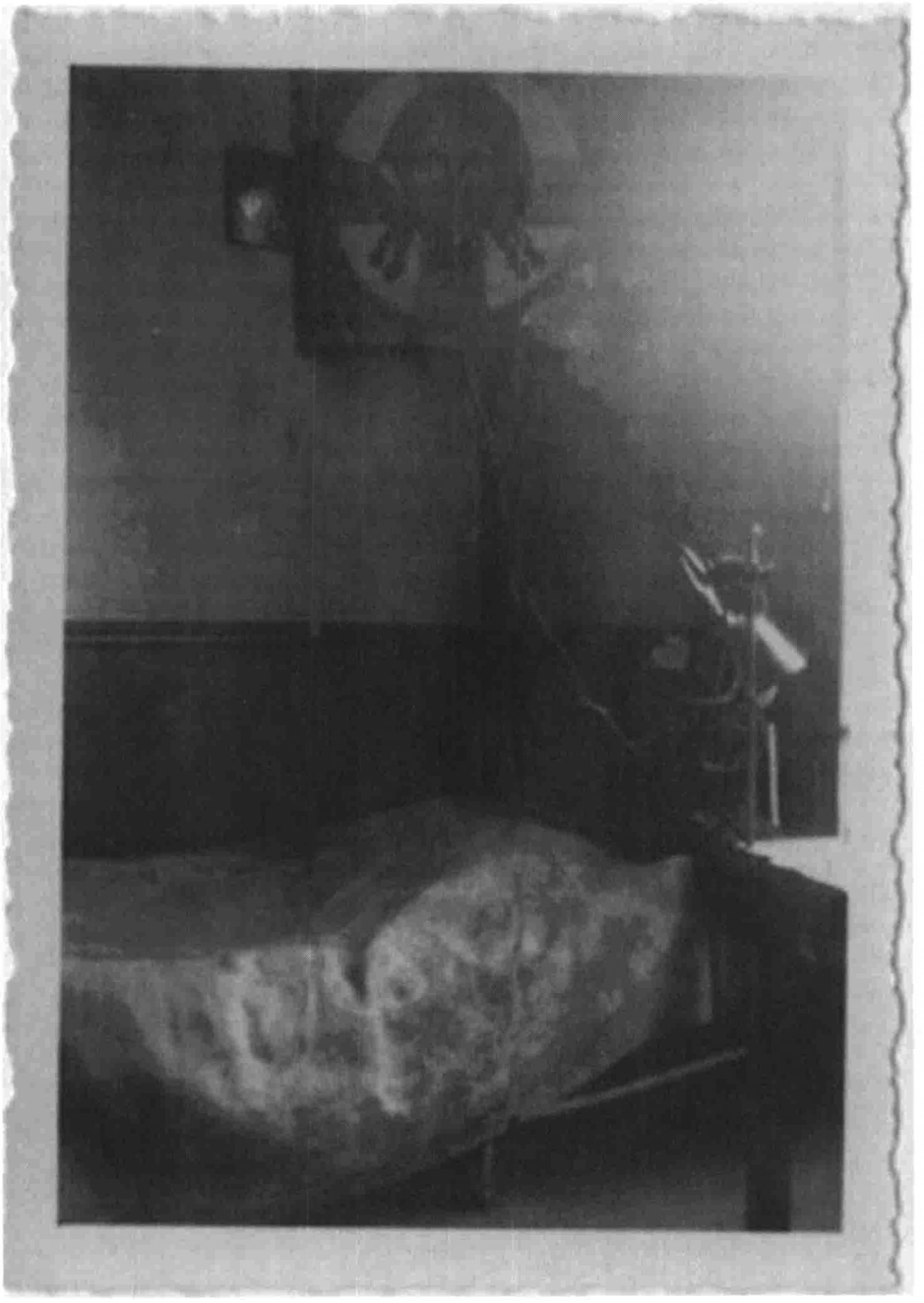
Мой письменный верный стол!	My faithful writing desk!
Спасибо за то, что шел .	Thank you for coming along
Со мною по всем путям. .	With me on all these paths.
Меня охранял—как храм.	You watch over me—like a temple.

SS 2:309. For more on Derzhavin's influence on Gronskii and Tsvetaeva, see Crone and Smith, "Cheating Death."

68. Tsvetaeva, in Tsvetaeva and Gronskii, *Neskol'ko udarov serdtsa*, 206.

69. *Kraski* here are not simply "paints" but a reference to icons, as in the title of a work by Evgenii Trubetskoi on Russian icon painting, *Umozrenie v kraskakh: Vopros o smysle zhizni v drevnerusskoi religioznoi zhivopisi* (Moscow, 1916), which Tsvetaeva may very well have been familiar with. I am grateful to Irina Shevelenko for bringing this fact to my attention.

https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.73.1.0001 Published online by Cambridge University Press



RGALI 1190-2-256, no.11.

these lines. The set includes a snapshot of an icon—the *spas nerukotvornyi* (Savior Not-Made-by-Hand)—which hangs above Gronskii's empty bed and was apparently painted by the young man's artist mother, Natal'ia Gronskaia (see figure 6).

It is worth considering the ontological link between this particular icon,

https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.73.1.0001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the spas nerukotvornyi, and the photographic snapshot. The Savior Not-Made-by-Hand icon is based on an image of Christ that was transferred directly onto the cloth used to wipe his face.[70] The photographic snapshot, an image taken directly from life and developed by mechanical and chemical means, is also, in a sense, nerukotvornyi (not made by hands). Yet, despite the symbolism of the icon in the photograph, Tsvetaeva's lines repeatedly reject the promise of an afterlife in heaven, instead seeking out a trace of the departed in fixed images of the objects that remain on this earth. Ultimately, the lifeless objects in the photographs fail to offer the desired consolation, and the poet concludes that the soul can only be preserved in the memories of the living.

The third stanza of the poem also has a direct photographic analog; Tsvetaeva directs her gaze—and her camera lens—at a cabinet full of books:

В шкафу—двустворчатом, как храм,
Гляди: все книги по местам.
В строке—все буквы налицо.
Твое лицо—куда ушло?[71]

In the cabinet—double-doored like a cathedral,
Look: all the books are in their place.
In the line of verse—all letters are visible.
Your face—where has it gone?

Several of Tsvetaeva's photographs feature a large, two-paneled cabinet that stands against the wall near the desk (see figure 7). In one of the snapshots, the cabinet has been opened, "like a cathedral" (*kak khram*), revealing shelves full of books (see figure 8). It was this image that Tsvetaeva sent to Teskova, and we learn from that letter, which I quote at the opening of this article, that Tsvetaeva's books were among those housed in this cabinet-cathedral. Within the text of the corresponding poem, the rhyming of *nalitso* (visible, immanent) and *tvoe litso* (your face) further reinforces the paradox of the absence of body with the presence of the poet's surrogates: his books of poetry.

The poem's final stanza, three simple questions in one, further emphasizes the absence of the body:

Твое лицо,
Твое тепло,
Твое плечо—
Куда ушло?[72]

Your face,
Your warmth,
Your shoulder—
Where has it gone?

70. There are two versions of the legend of the *Acheiropoieton*, the image of the Savior "not made by hand." In Eastern Orthodox Christianity this figure is called the *Mandylion*, and its origin is considered to be the Image of Edessa, a holy relic sent in a letter from Jesus to King Abgar of Edessa. In Roman Catholicism, the icon's origin is traced to the Veil of Veronica, which was imprinted while Jesus was on the road to Calvary. A. M. Lidov, "Sviatoi mandilion: Istoriia relikvii," in L. M. Evseeva, A. Lidov, and N. Chugreeva, eds., *Spas nerukotvornyi v russkoi ikone* (Moscow, 2005), 12–39.

71. Tsvetaeva, in Tsvetaeva and Gronskii, *Neskol'ko udarov serdtsa*, 206.

72. Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.73.1.0001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

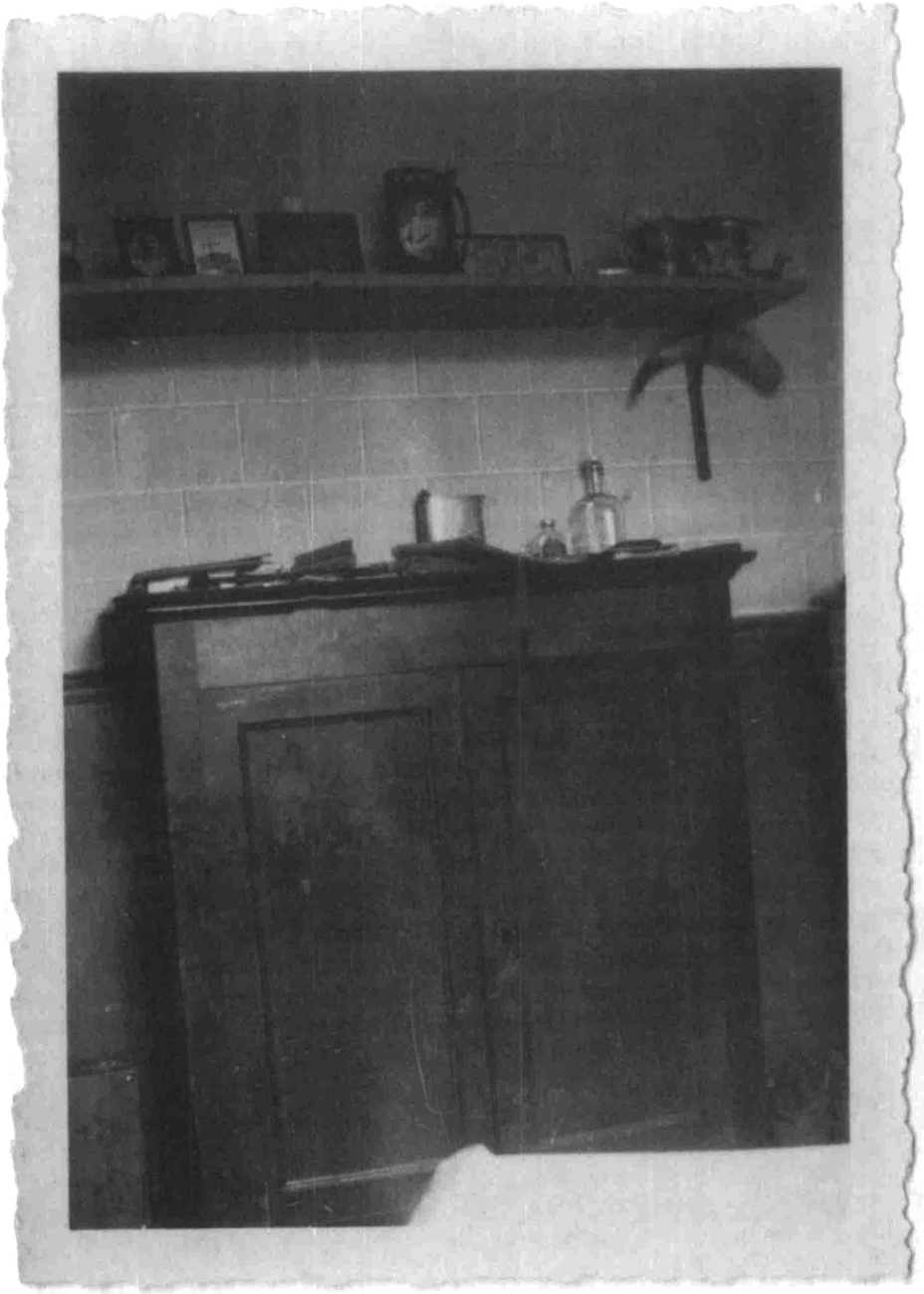


Figure 7. Gronskii's cabinet. RGALI 1190-2-256, no. 6.

https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.73.1.0001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 8. The same cabinet, opened "like a cathedral" (*kak khram*). RGALI 1190-2-256, no. 3.

The lack of human figures in the photographs reinforces the poet's persistent questioning and her emphasis on the absence of the body. Indeed, what differentiates the Gronskii elegy and corresponding photographs from the photo-poetic representations of Rilke, Tsvetaeva's grandmother, or even her de facto self-portrait in the 1931 lyric "Dom" is the camera lens's failure to provide a "living" image of Gronskii with which Tsvetaeva could have accessed his soul.

Though the snapshots capture neither Gronskii's body nor his soul, the corporeal imagery of this final stanza—the face, shoulder, and bodily warmth—nevertheless finds representation in Tsvetaeva's photographic study of the apartment, but only through surrogate objects. Invoked in the picture of his empty bed, above which hangs the icon discussed earlier, is the absence of warmth from the young man's body (see figure 6). His face is represented in the two busts that sit on the mantle, both created by his mother, a well-known sculptor in the Russian émigré community in Paris (see figure 9). Despite these likenesses of Gronskii, a disappointed Tsvetaeva wrote to Teskova that Natal'ia Gronskaia decided against creating a death mask of her son: "His mother is now making a large sculpture of his face. She didn't make a death mask, however, because there were *slight* scars. *I* would have taken a mask. Now she regrets it."[73]

It is worth noting that the expression "to make a death mask" (*snimat'*/

73. Tsvetaeva to Teskova, 23 April 1935, in Tsvetaeva, *Spasibo za dolguiu pamiat' liubvi . . .*, 265. Emphasis in the original.

https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.73.1.0001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

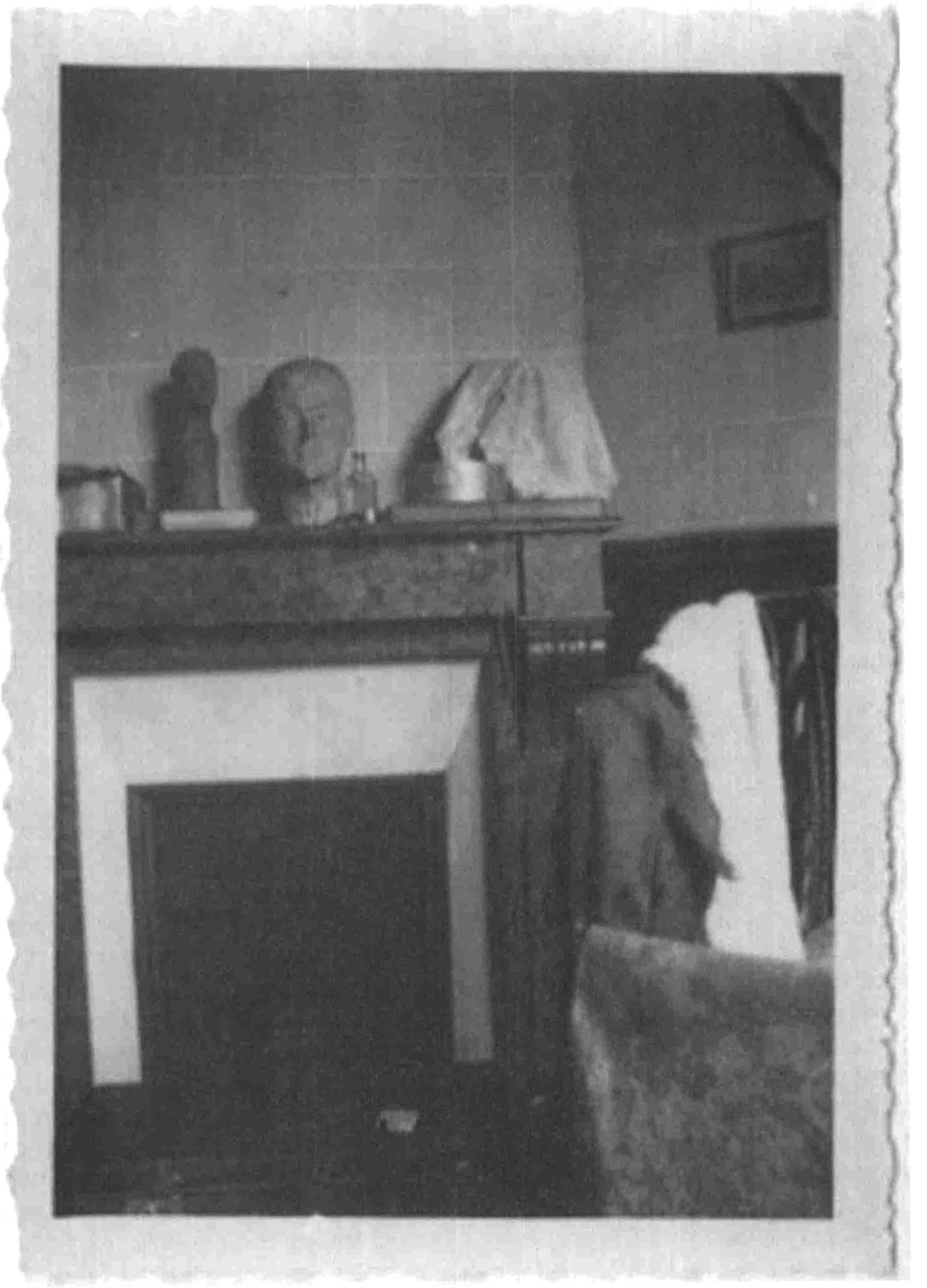


Figure 9. Two busts of Gronskii sculpted by Natal′ia Gronskaia. RGALI 1190-2-256, no. 10

https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.73.1.0001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sniat' masku) in Russian uses the same verb as "to photograph" (*snimat'*/*sniat'*), a linguistic coincidence that may not have been lost on the poet-photographer Tsvetaeva. As noted in the introduction to this article, several important theorists of photography, including Sontag, Bazin, and Nancy, have drawn important connections between the photograph and the death mask. Bazin's "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," for instance, suggests the following: "There is room . . . for a study of the psychology of the lesser plastic arts, the molding of death masks, for example, which likewise involves a certain automatic process. One might consider photography in this sense as a molding, the taking of an impression, by the manipulation of light."[74] While all of these media—the posthumous sculpture of her late friend, the non-existent death mask, and the photographs of his room—might theoretically represent similar ways of attempting (and ultimately failing) to hold on to the image of the dead, Tsvetaeva's poem nevertheless suggests that there is little comfort to be found in the cold, sculpted face of the young Gronskii, just as there is little consolation in the notion of resurrection suggested by the Orthodox icon. One possible way of thinking about Tsvetaeva's photographs of Gronskii's room is, then, as the near equivalent of a death mask: an attempt by the living to overcome or deny death by preserving something of the body of the deceased. However, this does not explain why Tsvetaeva bothered to take pictures of Gronskii's rooms and belongings when she certainly had access to earlier photographs of the man himself.

Another potential context for positioning these photographs historically is the practice of domestic interior photography. Sarah Anne Carter's study of this tradition in an American context, "Picturing Rooms: Interior Photography 1870–1900," argues that "at the most basic level, interior photographs transformed rooms and homes into a legible series of representations."[75] Carter draws on philosopher Gaston Bachelard's theory of home, as outlined in his *Poetics of Space*: "A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability."[76] Interior photography was practiced in Russia as well, and Tsvetaeva was intimately familiar with it since her own family hired a photographer to document the interior and exterior of their home in late 1911. Tsvetaeva's mother had died in 1906, and Marina and her sister Anastasiia were to marry in 1912; the session with the photographer, recounted in Anastasiia's diary, took place on the eve of their departure from the family home to begin their new married lives elsewhere: "We have invited a photographer and are taking pictures of the house, moving from bottom to top, all the rooms; the camera's lens is capturing these random objects so that the rooms will always and forever appear just the way we are used to seeing them. . . . How will our home look on paper? How will we look at it? And how, many years in the future, will we cast our gaze on it when we are all sepa-

74. Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in Trachtenberg, ed., *Classic Essays on Photography*, 244.

75. Sarah Anne Carter, "Picturing Rooms: Interior Photography 1870–1900," *History of Photography* 34, no. 3 (August 2010): 255.

76. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston, Mass., 1969), 17, quoted in Carter, "Picturing Rooms," 255.

https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.73.1.0001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

rated from one another?"[77] Judging from Anastasiia's account and Marina Tsvetaeva's own writings, the act of creating tangible images of a stable space accompanies an experience of loss: loss of the family home, anticipation of the loss of a meeting with Rilke, and the loss of Gronskii. The photographs become tangible, readable memory-spaces to take with her into the future.

Another way to read the images has to do not with preserving an image of loss but rather with trying to capture the image of some living remnant. We might suggest that Tsvetaeva is seeking a way to connect to the ghost of her friend in the afterlife, a practice not unlike late nineteenth-century spirit photography.[78] In developing these photographs by hand the poet may have hoped to see some evidence of Gronskii's spirit appear to her through the medium of photography. The absence of visible evidence of his living spirit in the photographic prints contributes to the rejection of an afterlife that is found throughout the poems to Gronskii.

In the second poem of the *Nadgrobie* cycle, Tsvetaeva's search for Gronskii's soul becomes increasingly futile, as the poem's speaker—through optical motifs that recall Tsvetaeva's *Novogodnee* and *Poema vozdukha* (Poem of the Air, 1927)—delves deep into the earth and circles the heavens above yet finds no trace of Gronskii, either in body or soul. The final stanza of this second poem, however, seems to house the answer to the otherwise empty search. The speaker concludes in the final lines that if the young poet lives on in any form, it is within those who have cherished him and his verse:

И если где-нибудь ты есть—
Так—в нас. И лучшая вам честь,
Ушедшие—презреть раскол:
Совсем ушел. Со всем—ушел.[79]

And if you exist anywhere at all—
It's within us. And the best way to honor you,
You departed ones—is to disparage the split:
He's gone completely. He's taken everything.

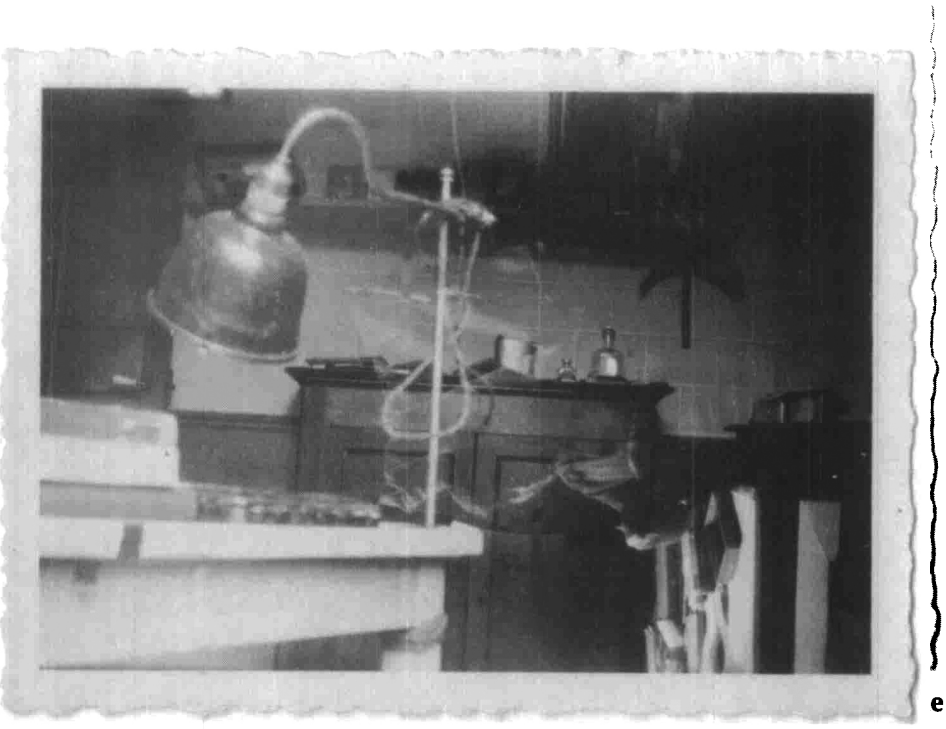
In an essay devoted to Tsvetaeva's *Novogodnee*, "About One Poem" (*Ob odnom stikhotvorenii*), Joseph Brodsky famously asserted that a poet writing an elegy on the death of a fellow poet inevitably creates a kind of self-elegy, a "self-portrait," meditating on his or her own death.[80] In the final lines above, Tsvetaeva broadens the elegiac referent, shifting from addressing a singular "you" (*ty*) to addressing the plural "departed ones" (*ushedshie*). These ushedshie can refer to creative personalities, other poets, or even Tsvetaeva's own poetic soul, which would one day depart this earth. She suggests here that all poets should be honored in the same way after death; though the deceased have departed this world completely, we must reject the notion that nothing of them remains. What remains is what exists inside us: the memory of the departed and the verses they leave behind.

77. A. Tsvetaeva, *Vospominaniia*, 1:733–34.

78. For more on the practice of spirit photography, see Clément Chéroux et al., eds., *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult* (New Haven, 2005).

79. Tsvetaeva, in Tsvetaeva and Gronskii, *Neskol'ko udarov serdtsa*, 207.

80. Iosef Brodskii, *Brodskii o Tsvetaevoi* (Moscow, 1997), 78.



negative via double exposure. RGALI 1190-2-256, no. 3.

A haunting final photograph from the series reveals that Tsvetaeva's visual study of the things Gronskii left behind, as seen through the camera lens, also takes the form of self-elegy. It seems that Tsvetaeva tried to rectify the lack of a human presence in the images by being photographed herself, framed by Gronskii's abandoned possessions. Documenting her own presence in this space—first in the form of her books on the shelf and later in full body—is her final effort to harness the power of the photograph to capture the magnitude of her personal loss and ground her memories in a very tangible form. The image is made all the more powerful by a failure to advance the film; the photograph is thus transposed into the liminal space of double exposure. A portrait of Tsvetaeva sitting at Gronskii's desk (shot from the same angle as the photograph of Rilke's desk) is fixed on the same negative as a close-up shot of the desk lamp, in ninety-degree rotation (see figures 10–12).

It is unknown whether this ghostly double exposure was intentional on Tsvetaeva's part. It may well have occurred as the result of her simply neglecting to advance the film before handing the camera to the other person in the room who took the second shot (most likely Gronskii's father). Aside from sending the image of the cabinet to Teskova, Tsvetaeva makes no mention of these photographs in her surviving letters or diaries.[81] Central to our reading of this haunting double-exposed image must, therefore, be the very

81. The photographs were preserved and given to RGALI by Anastasiia Tsvetaeva, who included a handwritten note detailing precisely when and where they were taken.

https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.73.1.0001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

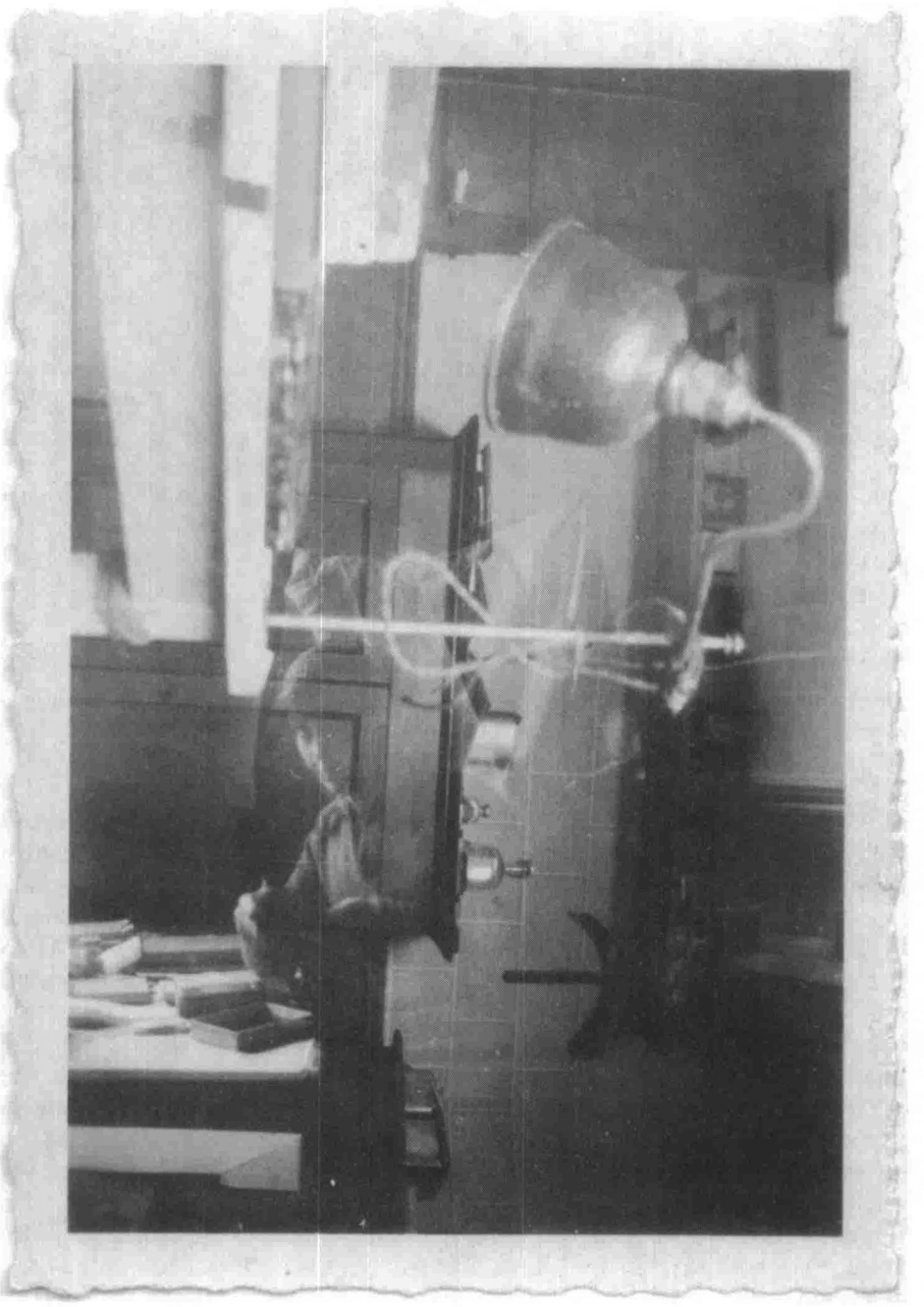


Figure 11. Same image as figure 10, rotated ninety degrees.

https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.73.1.0001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 12. Detail of figure 11, with close-up portrait of Tsvetaeva.

fact of its preservation: Tsvetaeva valued it at a time when double exposure was still considered by many to be an amateur error, although the technique was beginning to be practiced by avant-garde and surrealist artists.[82] The effect of this photograph, part of what makes it stand out from the rest, is that it serves to connect the architecture of space with the realm of the spirit. The other photographs in the series effectively circumscribe the physical space of Gronskii's creative activities in their panoramic study of the room, even as the poems they inspire erect a distinctly non-physical monument to the enduring power of poetry in the *exegi monumentum* tradition of Derzhavin and Pushkin by way of Horace. But the double-exposed photograph, with its two distinct axes, draws the viewer into another dimension, one that connects the space of the room with the spiritual communion of poet and reader. In the photograph,

82. See, for example, Rosalind Krauss, Jane Livingston, and Dawn Ades, eds., *L'Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism* (New York, 1985) and Vladimir Birgus, ed., *Czech Photographic Avant-Garde, 1918–1948* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002).

https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.73.1.0001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Tsvetaeva sits at Gronskii's writing table and holds in her hands a small book, perhaps a volume of his poetry, as if to say, "This is what truly remains."

Burying the Dead, Burying the Self

It is all the more striking that Tsvetaeva herself becomes a part of the metaphorical monument she erects for Gronskii in both her poems and her photographic cycle because she will repeat this motif several years later, again with the help of the camera. On the eve of her return to the Soviet Union in 1939, Tsvetaeva used her last francs to place an actual *nadgrobnaia plita* (a tombstone nameplate) in Paris's Montparnasse Cemetery on the grave of her husband's parents and brother, who had also met a tragic end approximately thirty years earlier.[83] After a series of setbacks, Tsvetaeva finally managed to place a marker on the grave; she then took a series of photographs of the gravesite to send to other members of the Efron family. When we compare the photographs to the letters she wrote about her struggles to pay tribute to the deceased, the act of burying the dead emerges as a haunting form of self-elegy.

In a letter dated 15 June 1938 Tsvetaeva asks for assistance in determining how Cyrillic letters on a Russian grave in the French cemetery should look. Having access to very little money at the time, Tsvetaeva was only able to inscribe the first and last names of the deceased; patronymics and birth and death dates would have been prohibitively expensive.[84] Tsvetaeva jokingly remarks in the letter to Vladimir Sosinskii that, given her poor sense of direction, she would be at such a loss trying to navigate the cemetery plots that she would likely end up finding *herself* buried there among the graves (*samopokhoronius'*). Shrouded in black humor, this remark reveals the link in Tsvetaeva's consciousness between burying the dead and burying the self:

> In addition, I don't know—and there isn't time to verify . . . whether all the letters are the same size, or are there capital and lowercase letters, for example
> Iakov—or IAKOV.

83. Sergei Efron's father, Iakov Konstantinovich Efron, died from illness in Paris emigration in 1909. Shortly thereafter, in 1910, his youngest son Konstantin committed suicide. When his mother, Elizaveta Durnovo-Efron, discovered her son had killed himself, she hanged herself the same day.

84. The nameplate was salvaged by German Tsvetaeva scholar Marie-Louise Bott just before the grave was apparently scheduled to be dismantled due to the expiration of funds for the plot. It is now housed in the Tsvetaeva House Museum in Moscow. The inscription reads:

ЗДѢСЬ ПОКОЯТСЯ	HERE ARE BURIED
ЯКОВЪ ЭФРОНЪ	IAKOV EFRON
ЕЛИЗАВЕТА ЕФРОНЪ-ДУРНОВО	ELIZAVETA EFRON-DURNOVO
И СЫНЪ ИХ	AND THEIR SON
КОНСТАНТИНЪ	KONSTANTIN

For more on the history and dramatic fate of this nameplate, see M. L. Bott, "Pamiati Mikhaila Leonidovicha Gasparova: Peredacha nadgrobnoi plity Efronov v Dom-muzei Mariny Tsvetaevoi," in I. Iu. Beliakova, ed., *Liki Mariny Tsvetaevoi: XIII mezhdunarodnaia nauchno-tematicheskaia konferenstiia (9–12 oktiabria 2005 goda); Sbornik dokladov* (Moscow, 2006), 581–90.

https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.73.1.0001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

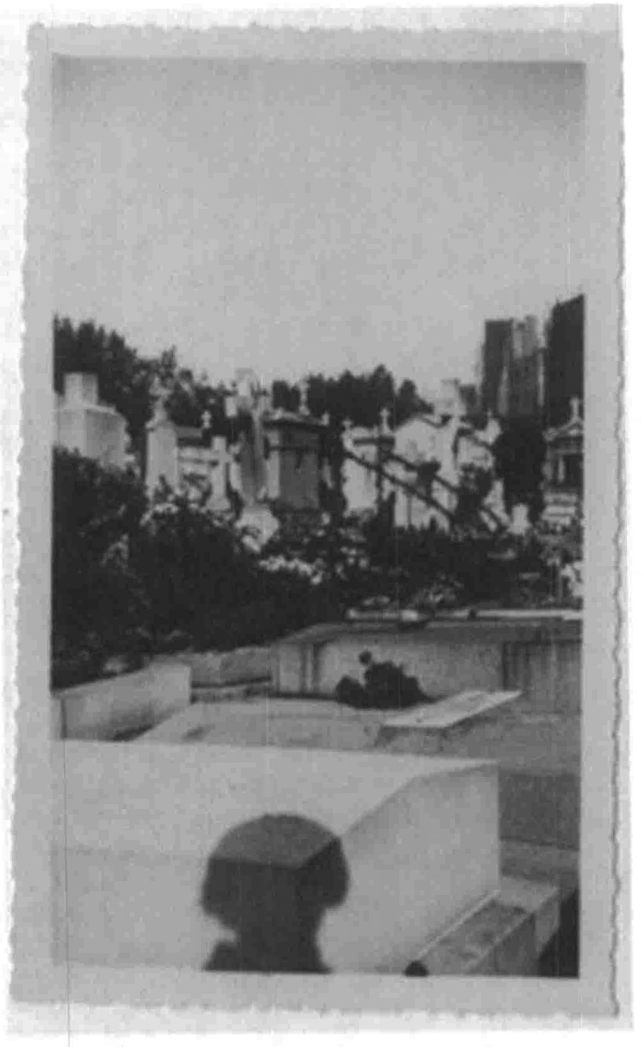


Figure 13. Tsvetaeva's shadow on a gravestone in Montparnasse Cemetery, 1938. The Efron family grave lies in the next row with the nameplate across it and a bundle of myrtle placed there by Tsvetaeva. RGALI 1190-1-52, no. 1.

> Perhaps you know? There are only a few Russian graves at Montparnasse and besides, with my terrible sense of direction, if I were to crawl around there, I'd simply never make my way out. I would end up burying myself [*sama–pokhoronius'*]: I'll self-bury [*samopokhoronius'*].[85]

Though the family grave was very modest, Tsvetaeva carefully photographed the tombstone and sent the prints to other family members (see figures 13).[86]

85. Marina Tsvetaeva to Vladimir Sosinskii, 15 June 1938, in *SS* 7:91.

86. See, for example, Tsvetaeva's letter to Sergei Efron's sister, Elizaveta Iakovlevna Efron, dated 7 February 1939, in which she comments on the grave and the enclosed images. Tsvetaeva, *Neizdannoe: Sem'ia*, 384.

https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.73.1.0001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 14. The inscription on the reverse of the image in figure 13: "2 novembre, Jour des Morts ~ 1938. Cimetiere Montparnasse [2 November, the Day of the Dead ~ 1938. Montparnasse Cemetery]." RGALI 1190-1-52, no. 1, reverse.

In one of these photographs we find yet another example of how Tsvetaeva used the camera to create a memorial to the dead and the self simultaneously, as she did when she photographed herself in her series of photographs of Nikolai Gronskii's room. In this later snapshot, she captures the image of her own shadow on the tombstone in the foreground and inscribes the following on the reverse of the photo: "2 novembre, Jour des Morts ~ 1938. Cimetiere Montparnasse [2 November, the Day of the Dead ~ 1938. Montparnasse Cemetery]" (see figure 14). By recording the act of burying the dead in such a way as to capture her own image in the same frame, Tsvetaeva attests to the fact that she has fulfilled her goal of honoring the dead, while also perhaps projecting an awareness of her own mortality.[87]

As so many theorists of photography have suggested, photographic images can take on a new and higher significance in the absence of the original subject. Agamben characterizes this phenomenon in the following way: "In the supreme instant, man, each man, is given over forever to his smallest, most everyday gesture. And yet, thanks to the photographic lens, that gesture is now charged with the weight of an entire life."[88] The small, everyday gestures we encounter in the photographs that Marina Tsvetaeva created and contemplated indeed carry with them heavy burdens—in her case, they are the burdens of love and loss. Reconstructing Tsvetaeva's relationship with

87. Tsvetaeva wrote a number of early poems in which she meditates on her own death and imagines encounters with her alter ego in a posthumous time and place. These include "Idesh′ na menia pokhozhii . . ." (1913), "Nastanet den′—pechal′nyi govoriat! . . ." (1916), and "Tebe—cherez sto let" (1919). While we should not assume that thoughts of death were necessarily at the forefront of Tsvetaeva's mind at this time, readers who are not familiar with her biography should be aware that the poet committed suicide in 1941.

88. Agamben, "Judgment Day," in *Profinations*, 24.

https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.73.1.0001 Published online by Cambridge University Press

photography complicates claims that the visual world was of secondary importance in her creative process. As we have seen, photography was an essential part of Tsvetaeva's everyday experience in the world, and this mediated form of vision intertwines with her process of poetic creation. Both poems and photographs function as means of refracting and reflecting the physical and emotional spaces of mourning. The black-and-white images Tsvetaeva encountered and created prompted the poet to reflect on the nature of self and spirit, inscribing experiences of loss into the space of the snapshot and the lines of a poem, such that the subjects of these texts could be recalled, reread, and re-experienced in and across time and space.