

On Grief and Reason, On Poetry and Film: Elena Shvarts, Joseph Brodsky, Andrei Tarkovsky

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The title “On Grief and Reason” comes from a lecture Joseph Brodsky delivered on the American poet Robert Frost, whom he described as terrifying, as distinct from tragic. The terror Brodsky had in mind and the terror all people confront is that of loss. Many theorists of the psyche tell us that a sense of loss is a precondition to language and to selfhood: only where there is loss can there be this gain, and a mighty compensation it is. Without separation there is no self, they insist, and without these two there is no access to language. A child must separate from the mother in order to grow. This view has been particularly advanced by object relations psychoanalysts.¹ A Lacanian approach to loss would agree on this point, translating it into entrance into the symbolic order which comes with the advent of language. This development is marked by what Jacques Lacan calls lost access to the real.² Both of these approaches are helpful when we consider self-representation in literary texts: the dependence on language brings the adventures of insight that Lacan would celebrate but also fresh deprivations, and the objects that create a text’s metaphors or anchor its implicit narrative are similarly vehicles for identification and difference.

Theorists of mental process and of identity formation, then, bind loss to psychic development and in artistic texts dependent on language, the loss can never be only a source of lament. Artistic accounts of grief may exude a productive uncertainty about

¹See D. W. Winnicott, “The Mirror-Role of Mother and Family in Child Development,” in his *The Family and Individual Development* (London, 1964), 130–38; and “The Use of an Object and Relating through Identifications,” and “Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self,” both in Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London, 1971), 101–11 and 140–52, respectively. For an account of the importance of Winnicott’s thought see Adam Phillips, *Winnicott* (Cambridge, MA, 1988).

²Jacques Lacan, “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,” in *Ecrits* (New York, 1977), 30–113. Useful commentaries include Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton, 1995), 24–34, on the symbolic and the real; and Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *Lacan: The Absolute Master*, trans. Douglas Brick (Stanford, 1991), 123–96.

whether loss creates a sense of self, or destroys it, but rarely do they grieve the advent of language. Much in the elegiac tradition affirms a sense of self even as it explores the poet's losses, and the poet who comes to mourn is often one who has found a new language for writing, as Peter Sacks, writing in *The English Elegy*, has influentially shown.³ Particularly in post-nineteenth century poetry, however, the element of self-creation can be more unstable and bring little sense of consolation.⁴ Modern poems often seem to go to the very edge of language's capacities to know. But the drama of loss and gain remains at the center of such elegies, and compensatory gestures abound even when they do not satisfy. In this essay, I ask how poems use the limits of language in order to explore unlimited grief. I also want to address a further uncertainty, one that returns us to Brodsky's idea of grief and reason: there are widely different views as to whether loss permits the mind to know its own thoughts and emotions more lucidly, or whether it closes down all mental work. Is grief a process of mind that requires or deforms logical, self-conscious thinking? How much of the experience of loss and recovery does any given poem face with lucid self-awareness? In asking about the limits of what can be known linguistically, might poems nonetheless seek to explore the philosophical meanings of death?

These questions bring together two otherwise different but equally significant Russian poets of the self, Joseph Brodsky and Elena Shvarts. Both have written movingly about the loss of the mother, although Shvarts's melancholy will seem more searingly emotional than the metaphysical pain of Brodsky. Both poets also lost their fathers and here, too, their responses look different: Brodsky left a short but significant elegy about his father, whereas Shvarts almost never refers to her father's absence from her life. The asymmetry of reactions, of mother compared to father, is more vividly worked out in Andrei Tarkovsky's film *The Mirror* (*Zerkalo*, 1975). The film provides an apt counterweight to the discussion of these two poetic examples and it allows for a comparison of the ways in which poems and films explore loss. Film, especially as conceived by Tarkovsky, demands that we consider the compensations of visual scene and performed music to any verbal account of loss or absence.⁵ I turn to film, then, both for its own representation of grief, and for its ability to clarify how poems work through the losses and gains of grief. Films can explore the revelations of seen and heard experiences with little linguistic mediation, and so a final benefit of the turn to film is a chance to ask more precisely whether it is only the advent of language that loss

³Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore, 1985).

⁴Modern elegists are more melancholic, more prone to anger and ambivalence, argues Jahan Ramazani, *The Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago, 1994). One can ask whether nineteenth- and twentieth-century lyrics are so clearly divided, however. There is a powerful exception in the nineteenth-century Russian tradition, one who not coincidentally had a major influence on Brodsky: Evgenii Baratynskii. See, for example, such meditative elegies as "Desolation" ("Zapustenie," 1836), a favorite of Brodsky's, and also a poem that conjures the shade of the father from a landscape associated with him, in E. A. Baratynskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (St. Petersburg, 2000), 114–16 (given in an untitled later variant).

⁵Equally interesting in this regard would be Aleksandr Sokurov's two films about the death of a parent: *The Second Circle* (*Krug vtoroi*, 1990) and *Mother and Son* (*Mat' i syn*, 1997). I chose Tarkovsky's film because his work enabled that of Sokurov, as Sokurov would readily acknowledge (he dedicated his first film, *One Man's Lonely Voice* [*Odinokii golos cheloveka*, completed in 1978], to Tarkovsky), and because the broken narrative in *The Mirror* is actually closer to the narrative logic of poetry than is Sokurov's work. Also pertinent would be Sokurov's film about Tarkovsky, made as his teacher was dying (*Moscow Elegy* [*Moskovskaia elegiia*, 1986–87]).

enables. Might less language enable more thought? Here, however, we also need to think about language itself less literally. The advent of film language—a form of communication in which words may play passingly small roles—will emerge as the compensation for loss in *The Mirror*, and it is striking how insistently the film will work both with and against the expressive powers of words.

My argument, then, compares artistic mode and genre (film vs. poetry, narrative vs. lyric) along the way, but it will focus on the interplay between loss and gain in the reasoning process that we call mourning. I am also juxtaposing poetry to film because I believe that poetry is done no favors by always viewing it in isolation from other art forms; this is a separation poetry has suffered more than has narrative or even the visual arts. Particularly with regard to Russian poetry, a powerful aesthetic hierarchy and a great tradition of philological and formal criticism have pushed us to read poems as if their crucial context were other poems. We will benefit greatly as readers if we also allow ourselves the luxury of other contexts. I hope to offer some gain, then, to balance my decision to write about fewer poems here—the creation of a cinematic context for reading poetry, particularly the way in which poems and films explore psychic phenomena.

Poems and films converge, in fact, in surprising ways. Some poems seek to resemble films: since the advent of cinema, lyric and narrative poems have often shown a tendency toward sequencing and imagery that is rightly called cinematic.⁶ And some poems thematize their turn to film—to cite only two early instances, recall Osip Mandel'shtam's "The Motion Picture Theater" ("Kinomatograf," 1913) and "Charlie Chaplin" ("Charli Chaplin," 1937).⁷ Film, by comparison, seems less like poetry: we tend to think of film as closer to narrative literature, and mostly we are right to do so. The first films were based on classics of narrative fiction, and popular films hold viewers' attention with their twists and turns of plot. But experimental film has long resisted narrative closure and drawn on the linguistic experiments of poetry.⁸ Tarkovsky's films have often been called poetic, particularly *The Mirror*, which includes four poems by his father, Arsenii Tarkovskii. The judgment that a film is poetic usually means that the story-line has been displaced by an emphasis on mood or atmosphere, and here, too, *The Mirror* nearly fits the requirements: its fragmentary narrative of childhood is dispersed into a parallel tale about contemporary family life, and it relies on visual fantasy, repetition, hazy suggestion, and powerful music to complement and to amplify the charged emotions it presents. This film tells its story with associative chains of imagery substituting for causal links, and its temporal progressions are multiple. *The Mirror* will reveal its attitudes toward loss when it retreats from language toward sights and sounds possible only in film. I begin, though, with aesthetic material that is all about words, the poetry of Elena Shvarts.

⁶For a good study of the turn to cinematic devices and allusions in American poetry, see Laurence Goldstein, *The American Poet at the Movies: A Critical History* (Ann Arbor, 1994).

⁷Osip Mandel'shtam, *Stikhotvoreniia: Proza* (Moscow, 2001), 43–44, 257–58. For an excellent reading of the Charlie Chaplin poem, alongside another late poem that mentions Chaplin, see Clare Cavanagh, *Osip Mandelstam and the Modernist Creation of Tradition* (Princeton, 1995), 286–303.

⁸The history of experimental and avant-garde film is well documented. See, for example, P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943–2000*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 2002), particularly its analysis of the "lyrical film" work of Stan Brakhage and Bruce Baillie (pp. 155–88).

ELENA SHVARTS AND THE STEADY GAZE AT GRIEF

Elena Shvarts had been writing prolifically for many years when she faced the challenges of her mother's illness and decline. Her work, which had gloriously absorbed a startling range of themes, topics, images, characters, and events, suddenly grew fixed on a single tale, the tale of loss. For about four years, from 1998 to about 2002, her poems were nearly all shaped by her mother's death. *Solo on a White-Hot Trumpet* (*Solo na raskalennoi trube*, 1998), her tenth book of poetry, consists almost entirely of these elegies, and its poems that seem to be about other topics are also subtly infused with grief. In her next book of new poems, *Wild Writing of the Recent Past* (*Dikopis' poslednego vremeni*, 2001), she turned to new themes, but the poetry of mourning persisted. We have, then, many poems that grieve over Shvarts's mother: forty-seven poems in *Solo*, twenty-two in *Wild Writing*, by my count.⁹ That large number, and the richness and delicacy of Shvarts's writing, means that I cannot do justice to the material here, but I can give some sense of how the poetics of mourning works in this poetry, and I will concentrate on the poems of *Solo*.

Dina Shvarts died of cancer in April 1998. She is never named in *Solo on a White-Hot Trumpet* and the details of her illness and death are not recounted. The intense nature of the loss is well expressed in the book's title, and its poems all become a kind of music played solo on a white-hot trumpet. Shvarts had enjoyed an extremely close relationship with her mother, who had been her principal means of financial and emotional support.¹⁰ Dina Shvarts, a woman of the theater, gently tolerated her daughter's unconventional life and believed in her destiny as a poet.

The poems written in her mother's memory are at times more measured than the work for which Shvarts is famous: this is a poet who mesmerized illicitly gathered crowds in the old Soviet Union with her poems about religious ecstasy, sexual violence, and historical trauma.¹¹ The poems of grief can be gentle and meditative, yet they can quickly veer off toward the scalding pain of loss. Some of the poems are very short, which intensifies their effect. In the poem that opens *Solo on a White-Hot Trumpet*, "A Minor Ode on Hopelessness" ("Malen'kaia oda k beznadezhnosti"), Shvarts invokes the suffering of Christ in Gethsemane, and her grief seems a form of martyrdom. These tales of religious travail recur in the volume: biblical sites are frequent topoi, and imagined journeys to distant places, particularly to Israel, seem only to bring the poet closer to her pain. In "A Minor Ode on Hopelessness,"

⁹Elena Shvarts, *Solo na raskalennoi trube: Novye stikhotvoreniia* (St. Petersburg, 1998); idem, *Dikopis' poslednego vremeni: Novaia kniga stikhotvoreniia* (St. Petersburg, 2001). Shvarts has since published a further volume of poems, *Trost' skoropista* (St. Petersburg, 2004), and has yet another in press as of this writing. These poems largely turn to other themes but retain the intensity of the poems of mourning and the earlier work.

¹⁰Dina Shvarts's memoirs have now been published, edited by her daughter, *Dnevnik i zametki* (St. Petersburg, 2001). They bear out her sustained support for her daughter's vocation, albeit with little understanding of the nature of her achievement as a poet.

¹¹See, for example, "Elegy on an X-Ray of My Skull" ("Elegiia na rentgenovskii snimok moego cherepa," 1973); "Remembrance of Strange Hospitality" ("Vospominanie o strannom ugoshchenii," 1976); "An Englishman Roasted in Moscow" ("Zharenyi anglichanin v Moskve," 1989), and the poems in "The Works and Days of Lavinia, a Nun in the Order of the Circumcision of the Heart" ("Trudy i dni Lavinii, monakhini iz ordena obrezaniia serdtsa," 1984), all in Elena Shvarts, *Sochineniia*, 2 vols. (St. Petersburg, 2002), 1:28–30, 54, 192–95, and 2:165–221.

the poet asks rhetorically whether pain has taken up the space of her soul. She feels an agony that she compares to what happens in the womb when the fetus acquires a face.

Младенцы в чревесах тоскуют	Babies in the womb feel anguish
О том, что перешли границу	That they have crossed a boundary
Непоправимо, невозвратно –	Beyond all repair or return
Когда у них склубились лица. ¹²	Once their faces swirl into shape.

That is a startling image, one in which despair about death provokes a fantasy of new, if violently conceived, life. Shvarts would seem, then, to associate this terrible loss with the acquisition of identity, as psychological theorists tell us to expect. Perhaps this association explains the presence of poems in *Solo on a White-Hot Trumpet* that offer images of a child forming in the womb and images of childbirth and infancy, rare motifs for Shvarts.¹³

This psychological turn is itself examined carefully by the poet, however, and challenged, which is another way to say that she *reasons* her way through her *grief*. In one untitled poem that begins “Reason quickly jumps” (“Razum prygaet bystro”), these two terms are opposed: reason jumps away as speedily as a little mouse, while grief paces watchfully around the mouse and the poet, a silent black cat. Here it is in full:

Разум прыгает быстро
В разверстое в звезды окошко.
Куда ты, ум мой, мышонок?
Сторожит нас печальная черная кошка.

О разум мой, малютка! Не пытайся!
Завесу темную тебе не превозмочь.
Ты погулял — и в норку — прочь.
Там крошка времени и корочка пространства,
Огрызок памяти — вот и грызи всю ночь.¹⁴

Reason quickly jumps
Through the small open window up to the stars.
Where are you going, my mind, little mouse?
A sad black cat is guarding us.

O reason, my little one! Don't even try!
You will never make it past the veil of darkness.
You strolled around, now go off to your little burrow.
A crumb of time and a crust of space are there,
A bitten end of memory — so here, gnaw on this all night.

These lines recall earlier poems by Shvarts in which an animal embodies the poet's feelings (for example, “I was born with smooth palms” [“Ia rodilas' s ladon'iu gladkoi,” 1981], or

¹²Shvarts, “Malen'kaia oda k beznadezhnosti,” *Solo na raskalennoi trube*, 7.

¹³In one poem, the poet looks into a mirror and sees “seventy children./ A crowd of shades, shining, melting, wandering off” (*sem'desiat detei, / Tolpa tenei, blestia, taias', kochuet*) (ibid., 8). Other poems have images of the insemination of the soul (“Myshlenie ne prichiniaet boli [K sozhaleniiu],” p. 9); a miraculous birth that yields an old man, the double of God (“Vsegda naidutsia podlee podlykh,” p. 40); a pregnant heart (“Nishchaia mne govorit,” p. 55); a star with thunder in its womb (“Vestnik,” p. 59), to name just a few.

¹⁴Shvarts, “Razum prygaet bistro,” *Solo na raskalennoi trube*, 24.

“When hungry demons hurtled after me” [“Kogda za mnoiu demony golodnye pomchalis’,” 1982]).¹⁵ Here, however, rather than animals pursuing the poet, she is their silent observer, watching as they move around, eat bits of food, and flee from human view. The escaping mouse is her own mind, departing from her as a suggestion that she has been deserted by her senses. If the cat has scared the mouse, as we suspect, then the poem tells us that reason flees sadness. The mouse silently eats away at the crumbs of memory, reason consuming the sensory data that would help the poet reestablish some connection to her world.

In its form, the poem is a little awkward, showing less the grace of a black cat than the indecision of a fleeing mouse. In nine lines—an odd number, we notice, but an oddity that often marks out the length of Shvarts’s poems—rhyme is present when meter and form are irregular, and vice versa: all four lines in stanza one conclude with echoing words, and “okoshko” and “koshka” rhyme exactly; the second stanza spills over into five lines, three of them rhyming and the other two not. The second stanza is perfectly iambic while the first is metrically varied.

Formally, we might say, the compensatory strategies work. That is an important thing to note in a poem about loss. The last section of *Solo* bears the English title “Sorrow,” and it seems in some poems that grief is the only part of the poet that feels alive, so numbed is she by her pain. Loss is not self-creating, then, for this poet, despite her images of babies forming in the womb. In one poem in that last section, the poet images her unwillingness to let go of her grief as a fascination with fire, writing in “Funeral Candle” (“Pominal’naia svecha”),

Я так люблю огонь,
Что я его целую,
Тянусь к нему рукой
И мою в нем лицо.¹⁶

I love the flame so much
That I kiss it,
Stretch out my hand to it
And wash my face in it.

The appearance of the face, as in other poems in the volume, signals the poet’s act of self-creation, but in its proximity to the consuming fire, the face seems more surely a marker of vulnerability, if not harm. In the poem’s second stanza, in fact, the speaker’s hair, then eyelashes, catch fire. The lit flame of that poem in its brightness contrasts to the darkness mentioned at the end of the poem, darkness that expresses the depth of loss, and a darkness that the poet finds within herself:

Трепщет огонек,
Но только тьма во мне.

The little flame trembles
but in me there is only darkness.

Shvarts has said she bears darkness in the pun of her last name—it means *black* in German—but she has also insisted that the dark is mitigated by the ray of light in her first name, Elena (from the Greek, Helene, literally a torch). In *Solo*, Shvarts writes often of stars, including a shooting comet; the stars suggest bright light against a dark sky but also the ways in which darkness can encroach on even the brightest light.

¹⁵On these two poems see Stephanie Sandler, “Elena Shvarts and the Distances of Self-Disclosure,” in *Reconstructing the Canon: Russian Writing in the 1980s*, ed. Arnold McMillin (Amsterdam, 2000), 79–105.

¹⁶Shvarts, “Pominal’naia svecha,” *Dikopis’ poslednego vremeni*, 6. The poem appears as well in *Solo na raskelannoi trube*, 53.

One of those astral poems is “Smoky Stars” (“Dymnye zvezdy”). It may be based on a pun, stars of the theater, and it takes the poet into a world of different darkness, one where the lights are dimmed so that drama may proceed. In this case, the drama is of her childhood, a dreamed world of terror and revelation:

Дымные звезды
 Все небо южное дымится,
 Как будто бы в партере курят
 И пепел сыплют прямо в море.
 Чьи пальцы держат папиросу?
 Как будто в недвижимом сне
 Я поднялась тогда на гору
 И руку к небу протянула,
 Чтобы у ближней прикурить
 И, может быть, лицо заметить.
 Но, как палач, садист в застенке,
 Она свой свет так повернула,
 Прижав к зрачку, что тут же разум
 Вниз бросился в ночное море.¹⁷

Smoky stars
 The whole of the southern sky is making smoke,
 As if they're smoking in the parterre
 And dropping their ashes straight into the sea.
 Whose fingers hold the Russian cigarette?
 As if in a motionless dream,
 I rose to the top of a mountain
 And I reached my hand out to the heavens
 In order to share a smoke with one who was close at hand
 And, just maybe, to observe her face.
 But – like an executioner, like a sadist in the torture chamber –
 She turned away her light, pressed close
 The pupil of her eye, so that reason then and there
 Threw itself down into the sea of night.

Shvarts writes here with (for her) unusually regular form, iambic tetrameter, but because there is no rhyme, no stanzaic division, and an odd number of lines (thirteen), the poem feels anything but regular or predictable. Its images are surprising, too, particularly the unnamed feminine thing or being encountered in the middle of the poem: part star, part human spirit, she has a face that cannot be seen and a light coming from eyes she has the power to shut tight. This frustration is repeated in other poems in *Solo*, including “Funeral Candle,” where the poet thinks that the flame is trying to whisper words to her. The ghost who will not make contact with the living is also the mother who will not come to her child's rescue, and that can account for the excessive violence of the way this “executioner” and sadistic torturer turns away her face and her light. The reference to the theater in this poem can also be read as a sign that the poet has entered the mother's domain.

¹⁷Shvarts, “Dymnye zvezdy,” *Solo na raskalennoi trube*, 44.

A still more expressive description of the mother occurs in one of a series of prose anecdotes, “The Visible Side of Life” (“Vidimaia storona zhizni,” 2000), that Shvarts began writing at the time of her mother’s death.¹⁸ They recount scenes of childhood mischief and bold misadventure. These short narratives often let Shvarts retrace her first steps as a poet, and in many ways these narratives do the work of self-creation that the poems can only verge on. Shvarts creates a mythology of origin where the poet is born from a child of deep curiosities, exaggerated fears, but also fearless utterances. Her mother looms large in many of these tales, offering guidance, discipline, laughter, and love. Several scenes are set in the theaters where her mother worked or the towns they visited when the theater was on tour, but the most dramatic encounters are private. One such story, “The Horror of Transformation” (“Uzhas preobrazheniia”), could only have been recorded and shared, I suspect, by a poet who had been working hard to understand her own grief. I offer it as a tale in which maternal danger and salvation appear together.

Once, Mama began to tell me the story of Peter the Great. She got pretty carried away and began to imitate him, letting her eyes grow round and fierce, waving her arms. She jumped up to show me how tall he was. Sitting in the corner of the couch, I listened with enormous interest to tales of how he built a city and ships. The story was coming to a close when she said that he had killed his son, Tsarevich Aleksei. I was shocked: “What do you mean, killed?” “Like this!” she said, and reached out toward me with ominous hands: “He strangled him.” She stretched and stretched her implacable hands toward my throat, and suddenly it was as if she had changed from my sweet, beautiful mama into a merciless monster. At that moment the thought crossed my mind that everything to this point had been false, that here and now began the real. Now the horrible end would commence, everything good in the world had pretended to be good, had only feigned goodness. Scared, I howled in unprecedented horror, the likes of which has never been repeated since. Laughing, she comforted me, but I couldn’t calm down for a long time (*ne mogla priiti v sebia*). I couldn’t forget the terror of this instantaneous transformation, and now I would always suspect that the genuine face of the world was cruel, smiling, and that of a tsar.¹⁹

We need no further signal that this moment is identity-forming for the poet than her use of the word “real” (*nastoiashchee*), also a Lacanian term for an entire realm of experience to which language has no access—recall that the coming of language indeed takes the developing child out of the real and into the symbolic. In his reading of Lacan, Slavoj Žižek significantly described encounters with the real as traumatic, monstrous.²⁰

¹⁸Shvarts, “Vidimaia storona zhizni,” *Zvezda*, 2000, no. 7. These anecdotes later were expanded and published in book form, *Vidimaia storona zhizni* (St. Petersburg, 2003).

¹⁹Shvarts, “Uzhas preobrazheniia,” *Vidimaia storona zhizni*, 11–12. Shvarts also included in this collection a short tale about her father, whom she never met. Interestingly enough, she emphasizes the way in which she was conceived (the story is called “A Love Child” [“Ditia liubvi”]). See also the short statement much later in the book, “Uzhas rozhdeniia” (*Vidimaia storona zhizni*, 44–46, 291).

²⁰For a succinct definition of the real in Žižek see Sarah Kay, *Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, England, 2003), 168. In Žižek’s own work see *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London, 1989); and, more accessibly, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA, 1991), 1–66.

For Shvarts, the trauma is a vision of the mother as monster. This memory conflates mother with tsar, laughter with cruelty, entertainment and education with murderous rage. The terror confronts transformation, a key word in Shvarts's poetic vocabulary. One of her signature poems, "Animal Flower" ("Zver'-tsvetok," 1978), records the poet's grotesque transformation, when dead, into matter that is neither animal nor flower.²¹ In this prose passage, however, she externalizes the source for her terror-stricken imagination. Tales told by the mother supply her with all possible horror, and, worse, they momentarily turn the teller into a monster.

Significantly, Shvarts does not press the point that her mother *is* a monster (as we find, by comparison, in Sylvia Plath's poems about her father).²² Her grief does not turn to anger, the emotion that Ramazani predicted for modern and postmodern elegies that refuse consolation. Ramazani found a comparable exception in a beautiful poem by the American poet Amy Clampitt, "A Procession at Candlemas": the poet circumscribes her anger, he writes, in order to "more forcefully cherish, esteem and remythologize the mother."²³ It is that sense of cherishing that also lingers for Shvarts. Her earlier work abounded in explosive emotional scenes, but, when writing about her mother, she contemplates loss almost quietly. She gnaws at grief, like the cats and rats of her poems, and the underlying question is whether the grief also eats away at her, or whether it offers her secret nourishment and hope. The answer to that question long eluded her, which is one reason why the poems of mourning continued to appear for several years.

In one of them, incidentally another in which a cat silently and expressively eats, the poet observes that it is strange that there is no news from the dead. In losing her mother, she asks not only whether she has lost her mind, as one poem had worried, but also whether the mind must weaken if the grief is to weaken. This poem ends with the claim that the mind's flame is dying down, like leaves falling in autumn.

Ум догорает, как листва
По осени. Конец всему?
И мне, и горю моему.²⁴

The mind's fire dies out, like leaves
In autumn. Is this the end of everything?
Of me, and of my grief.

The mind darkens at the end of "Funeral Candle" as well, as in the end of "Smoky Stars," where reason is thrown into a sea of darkness. Grief keeps the mind alive, Shvarts has concluded, and, as in so many nocturnal poems, the poet has learned to prize darkness for

²¹Shvarts, "Zver'-tsvetok," *Sochineniia* 1:96.

²²Sylvia Plath, *Ariel* (New York, 1966), 49–51. On Sylvia Plath's work see, in particular, Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge, MA, 1992). Rose has continued to meditate on Plath and other poets in *On Not Being Able to Sleep* (London, 2003), a book that has much to say about psychoanalysis and poetry more generally. I think that the similarities between Plath and Shvarts are largely superficial (and still less is Shvarts like Sharon Olds, a contemporary poet whose angry poetry on her father's death might also come to mind). That it is a father's death, grieved in aggressive tones, brings Olds closer to Plath than to Shvarts. A more rewarding comparison would be to the restrained, formal poems of Mona van Duyn, who died in 2004. Shvarts's implicit self-description recalls van Duyn's poem "The Creation." See van Duyn, *Merciful Disguises: Published and Unpublished Poems* (New York, 1982), 99–102, particularly the poem's ending.

²³Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 323. For the poem see Amy Clampitt, *The Kingfisher* (New York, 1983), 22–28.

²⁴Shvarts, "Ot mertvykh net vestei, a stranno...", *Dikopis' poslednego vremeni*, 25.

its promise of creative work.²⁵ The dead keep silent in Shvarts's poems so that grief and questioning may keep the mind alive.²⁶

JOSEPH BRODSKY AND THE FABRIC OF LOSS

In the poetry of Joseph Brodsky, his response to his parents' death was as radically contained as Shvarts's poetry about her mother's death was expansive. Brodsky was one of the greatest elegists of modern Russian poetry, an admirer, in fact, of Thomas Hardy.²⁷ Hardy was expansive in his grief, as Shvarts would later be: he was well known for his elegies for his dead wife and the author of dozens of poems in memory of others.²⁸ But Brodsky's response to the death of his parents, who died in quick succession (his mother, Mariia Vol'pert, in 1983; his father, Aleksandr Brodskii, in 1984), was succinct. In prose, he memorialized their lives in the essay "Less than One." There is one poem written in memory of his father, and one in memory of his mother. The latter is untitled in the Russian, but named "In Memoriam" in English.

Мысль о тебе удаляется, как разжалованная прислуга,
нет! как платформа с вывеской «Вырица» или «Тарту».
Но надвигаются лица, не знающие друг друга,
местности, нанесенные точно вчера на карту,
и заполняют вакуум. Видимо, никому из
нас не сделаться памятником. Видимо, в наших венах
недостаточно извести. «В нашей семье, — волнуясь,
ты бы вставила, — не было ни военных,
ни великих мыслителей». Правильно: невским струям
отражение еще одной вещи невыносимо.
Где там матери и ее кастрюлям
уцелеть в перспективе, удлиняемой жизнью сына!
То-то же снег, этот мрамор для бедных, за неимением тела
тает, ссылаясь на неспособность клеток —
то есть извилин! — вспомнить, как ты хотела,
пудря щеку, выглядеть напоследок.
Остается, затылок от взгляда прикрыв руками,
бормотать на ходу «умерла, умерла», покуда
города рвут сырую сетчатку из грубой ткани,
дребезжа, как сдаваемая посуда.²⁹

²⁵See the evocative account of what she calls the privations of darkness in Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago, 2002), 1–17.

²⁶See Melissa Feuerstein's excellent "The Object Poem" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2007), which argues that holding on to lost objects and persons structures the mental work of many modern lyric poems.

²⁷Joseph Brodsky, "Wooing the Inanimate: Four Poems by Thomas Hardy," in his *On Grief and Reason: Essays* (New York, 1995), 312–75.

²⁸On Brodsky's elegies to John Donne, T. S. Eliot, and W. H. Auden, see Valentina Polukhina, *Joseph Brodsky: A Poet for Our Time* (Cambridge, England, 1989), 72–101. The elegies also play an important role in David Bethea, *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile* (Princeton, 1994), and the poems on Donne and Auden are discussed extensively.

²⁹Iosif Brodskii, *Sochineniia Iosifa Brodskogo*, 7 vols. to date (St. Petersburg, 1988–), 4:26.

In Memoriam

The thought of you is receding like a chambermaid given notice.
 No! like a railway platform, with block-lettered DVINSK or TATRAS.
 But odd faces loom in, shivering and enormous,
 also terrains, only yesterday entered into the atlas,
 thus filling up the vacuum. None of us was well suited
 for the status of statues. Probably our blood vessels
 lacked in hardening lime. "Our family," you'd have put it,
 "gave the world no generals, or—count our blessings—
 great philosophers." Just as well, though: the Neva's surface
 can't afford yet another reflection, brimming with mediogres.
 What can remain of a mother with all her saucepans
 in the perspective daily extended by her son's progress?
 That's why the snow, this poor man's marble, devoid of muscle power,
 melts, blaming empty brain cells for their not so clever
 locks, for their failure to keep the fashion in which you, by putting powder
 on your cheek, had meant to look forever.
 What is left is to shield the skull, with raised arms, against idle glances,
 and the throat, with the lips' nonstop "She has died, she has died," while endless
 cities rip the retinal sacs with lances
 clanging loud like returning empties.³⁰

1987

The poem begins with a thought, an idea (*mysl'*) which the poet tries to hold, but the thought recedes, and its disappearance begins an allegory of the disappearance of the mother.³¹ But much in the poem depends on the contrast of movement with stasis, of bodies that travel through space with those hardened into statues; it is the son whose movement threatens to create absence, rather than the mother. He looks back on a separation from his mother that long pre-dated her death.³² Or, to be specific, the separation determines the angle of vision, the way in which the world is seen and known: "the perspective daily extended by her son's progress" (*v perspektive, udlinaemoi zhizn'iu syna*). That comment, emphasized in the Russian text by an exclamation point, in the English by a question mark, tells us that the son's progress causes the thought to recede as surely as the train leaves behind a platform sign. The son in exile from a landscape that is obviously Leningrad suffers a reduced capacity to hold the thought in mind, to hold it still like a statue, to be the philosopher or commanding general who could enact such a firm stop on motion.

By writing a poem which tries to fix that thought, Brodsky asks whether the poet can reason his way through the grief that is also this poem's subject. Grief registers most powerfully in the searing pain of the last image, "endless cities" that "rip the retinal sacs

³⁰Brodsky, "In Memoriam," *Collected Poems in English* (New York, 2000), 341.

³¹Willem G. Weststeijn reads the poem's beginning differently, suggesting that "the thought of 'you' does not disappear at all ... the death of the 'you,' the mother, has created a vacuum, which has gradually been filled with persons and places, with which the speaker does not have any close relationship" (see his "The Thought of You is Going Away..." in *The Art of a Poem*, ed. Lev Loseff and Valentina Polukhina [Houndmills, 1999], 181).

³²This point is also made in Efim Kurganov, "Brodskii i iskusstvo elegii," in *Iosif Brodskii: Tvorchestvo, lichnost', sud'ba* (St. Petersburg, 1998), 166–85; see esp. 171.

with lances.” The exiled poet points to his wanderings through cities that are poised to injure, but what we notice more in this line is the injury to sight itself. Brodsky takes us inside the body for this image, and the retina joins with the poem’s other physiological references, to blood vessels, muscle power, brain cells, and the skull, to suggest a voyage past the cover of bodily exteriority. In imagining what goes on inside the body, the poet opposes the images of surface and reflection, of snow and marble that had seemed at first to constitute the thought receding from view. The bodily details, though, more than showing how people are mortal and subject to decay, are also meant to evoke the site of thinking, to list for us the elements of the self that are charged with the business of thought creation and retention. How striking, then, is their vulnerability: blood vessels lacking in lime, muscle power that is missing, retinas sliced by what they see. The poet’s imaginative faculties are at risk, he tells us, as is his ability to reason. The risk is measured by the vulnerability of the body, which returns the poet to death, to the mother’s death. “She has died, she has died,” intones the poet, in what seems like reported speech, a shift in a poem which so strongly emphasizes visual imagery and which also, as if symmetrically, quotes the words of the mother.

Formally, the poem offers the perfection of its structure as the ideal compensation for the loss of the mother. We recognize Brodsky’s signature enjambments and initiation of new sentences halfway through the poetic line; these formal features give even this mournful poem great energy and dynamism. The long *dol’nik* lines organized by rhyme are typical of Brodsky’s mature verse, and especially well done. Brodsky’s love of nongrammatical rhyme and his talent in pairing words of different lengths both shine here: the rhymes *nikomu iz/ volnuias’* and *nevynosimo/zhizn’iu syna* are especially fine. The latter pairing asks whether the son finds life bearable, and whether he can stand to think about that question. Recall that the word “unbearable” (*nevynosimo*) in the Russian version refers to the Neva, to its ability to reflect statues to the gaze of a beholder. The world of objects is at once too full in this poem and, of course, painfully empty, a vacuum filled in by points on a map or by the faces seen in new cities, and by a clang of empty bottles in the last line that recasts the pots and pans of the mother’s domestic life into an act of exchange performed by a helpless son who mumbles his poetic lines as he walks. The poem asks whether the body itself is an object (as does the poem in memory of his father, which will wonder what is left of the dead father—the memory of his voice or the ash of his remains?).³³ And he asks whether the eye is measured by what it cannot behold or by the coarse fabric of ligaments and tissue.

The crossing of textile imagery with the visual memory of a family scene recurs in “August Rain” (“Dozhd’ v avguste”), written two years later, in 1988. It differs in setting, but it repeats the emotional work of “In Memoriam,” seeking now to hold on to an image of both parents. “August Rain” compares the rain seen outside a window (where? we are not told, but we suspect the United States) with a domestic scene remembered from the poet’s life in Leningrad. The poem’s images draw inside and outside together by means of a cloak, a fur coat, and the sound of a sewing machine, all associated with the rainy landscape. One of Brodsky’s most famous poems, his “Elegy for John Donne” (“Bol’shaia elegiia

³³Brodskii, *Sochineniia* 4:69 I discuss this poem below.

Dzhonu Donnu,” 1963), memorably stitched together a landscape scene in the mind.³⁴ At its end, the poet’s hope comes of a faith that all might be rejoined by a healing needle.

Man’s garment gapes with holes. It can be torn,
by him who will, at this edge or at that.
It falls to shreds and is made whole again.
Once more it’s rent. And only the far sky,
in darkness, brings the healing needle home.
Sleep, John Donne, sleep. Sleep soundly, do not fret
your soul. As for your coat, it’s torn; all limp
it hangs. But see, there from the clouds will shine
that Star which made your world endure till now.³⁵

In “August Rain,” the poet finds such faith difficult. Here he moves from the outside world inward, changing the ascending movement of the “Elegy for John Donne” and reducing its scope at the same time. The sewing imagery is more ambivalent, and, as a metonymy for creativity, it is complemented by references to writing and manuscripts.

Дождь в августе
Среди бела дня начинает стремглав смеркаться, и
кучовое пальто норовит обернуться шубой
с неземного плеча. Под напором дождя акация
становится слишком шумной.
Не иголка, не нитка, но нечто бесспорно швейное,
фирмы Зингер почти с примесью ржавой лейки,
слышиться в этом стрекоте; и герань обнажает шейные
позвонки белошвейки.

Как семейно шуршанье дождя! как хорошо заштопаны
им прорехи в пейзаже изношенном, будь то выпас
или междудеревье, околица, лужа – чтоб они
зрению не дали выпасть
из пространства. Дождь! двигатель близорукости,
летописец вне кельи, жадный до пищи постной,
непещряющий суглинок, точно перо без рукописи,
клинописью и оспой.

Повернуться спиной к окну и увидеть шинель с погонами
на коричневой вешалке, черную куртку на спинке кресла,
бахрому желтой скатерти, что, совладав с законами
тяготенья, воскресла
и накрыла обеденный стол, за которым втроем за ужином
мы сидим поздно вечером, и ты говоришь сонливым,
совершенно моим, но дальностью лет приглушенным
голосом: «Ну и ливень».³⁶
осень 1988

³⁴Weststeijn rightly links the torn fabric mentioned earlier in “Elegy for John Donne” as an apt point of comparison to the ripped fabric of the retina at the end of “In Memoriam” (“The Thought of You,” 187–88). For the elegy see Brodskii, *Sochineniia* 1:231–35; and Joseph Brodsky, *Selected Poems*, trans. George Kline (New York, 1973), 39–45.

³⁵I quote the fine translation from Brodsky, *Selected Poems*, 45.

³⁶Brodskii, “Dozhd' v avguste,” *Sochineniia* 4:42.

August Rain

In broad daylight it starts to get dark with breathless
 speed, and a cumulus cloak grows into an uneasy
 fur coat off some astral back. An acacia, under the pressure
 of rain, becomes too noisy.
 Neither thread nor needle, but something to do with sewing,
 almost Singer-made, mixed with a rusty cistern's
 spurt, is heard in this chirr, and a geranium bares the sinewed
 vertebrae of a seamstress.

How familial is the rustling of rain! how well it darns and stitches
 rents in a worn-out landscape, be that a pasture,
 alleyway, puddles, tree-intervals – to foil one's eyesight, which is
 capable of departure
 from its range. Rain! vehicle of nearsightedness,
 a scribe without his cell, greedy for Lenten fare,
 mottling the loamy parchment with his cuneiform brand of silence,
 with his smallpox care.

To turn away from the window! to behold a greatcoat with epaulets
 on the brown varnished rack, a red fox on the chair, neglected,
 the fringe of a yellow cloth which, having mastered the shibboleths
 of gravity, has resurrected
 itself and covered the table where late at night, a threesome,
 we sit for supper, and you say in your drowsy, quiet
 – almost my own but muted by years' vast distance –
 baritone: What a climate.³⁷

1988

The crucial stanza is the one in the middle: it effects the transition from outside in, making possible the exclamatory turn away from the window. This stanza opens with its own exclamation, "How familial is the rustling of rain!" (*Kak semeino shurshan'e dozhdia!*). The landscape has the feel of familiarity, it is well-worn like a coat, and the imagery of sewing offers its most direct suggestion of a stitching-together, in effect a kind of darning or mending. Rain does the work of repairing a torn world, but since the rain also reminds one of family, of all that is lost, the offer of consolation is ironic. Brodsky reiterates that irony when he switches the metaphor to eyesight, without the violent injury that ended "In Memoriam" but still presented as a place of vulnerability, as a capacity that can fall out of the space it is meant to see: the sewing together helps prevent vision from falling away (*chtob oni / zren'iu ne dali vypast' / iz prostranstva*). The lineation also almost falls away from sight, and rain is called the "vehicle of nearsightedness" (*dvigatel' blizorukosti*). In that naming, the poet creates another irony. Rain enables the visual memory of parents seated around a table even as it blurs vision.

As if seeking clarification, the poet switches to the more secure metaphor of writing. A chronicler who represents a holier backwards glance is seen outside his safely dry dwelling (exposed to the rain, his own body inscribes the loamy landscape as a pen—he becomes the pen, the land substitutes for the missing paper or parchment), and his writing is represented

³⁷Brodsky, "August Rain," *Collected Poems in English*, 385.

as textured, the incision of cuneiform writing or the roughening of a pock-marked surface. Land marked by rain is still the underlying metaphor here, and as an ambivalent figure for writing it suggests both impermanence, if we emphasize the way water can wash away markings in mud, and something more lasting, if we think of cuneiform writing cut into clay, or pock marks that permanently scar a face.

When the poet turns to look inside the room, we know he is turning homeward for comfort. The textile images return, now fully realized as clothing, the father's military greatcoat and the mother's felt cloak (in Brodsky's English version it is made of red fox). One is reminded of a passage at the end of Paul de Man's essay "Autobiography as De-Facement" where he describes figurative language, the language of metaphor as being "like the body, which is like its garments, the veil of the soul as the garment is the sheltering veil of the body."³⁸ Clothing functions as a figure of visibility, a sign that language can show something to the world. It is remarkable in Brodsky how that "something" can be internal bodily organs, as in "In Memoriam," or something so markedly external as clothing, outer clothing at that. The contrast of inside with outside is more spatial in "August Rain," but it is again a form of equivalence, a greater sufficiency than can be found in the imagery of "In Memoriam," perhaps because the blur of vision or what will be the muffled echo of a sound in the final stanza registers not an error or a gap but a presence that is rewarding despite its imperfection. It is all sight and sound in this poem, we might say, and the result is an act of self-creation that is nearly entirely positive. As the poet and scholar Susan Stewart has put it, "We love voices as we love eyes—as vessels of that presence we call the soul."³⁹ Brodsky's poem ends with such an act of love, of self-creation as the re-creation of his parents' world, not as a place that is lost, but as one that can be fully recovered in the imagination.

In that final image of a voice, then, this poem completes the act of "self-restoration" de Man would teach us to expect from an "autobiographical moment" but it is a moment that de Man urges us to greet with suspicion; the coat he describes, it bears recalling, becomes the poisoned coat of Nessus. In Brodsky's poem, the poet is safe from such harm: for him, language is never privative, on the contrary, it is tremendously powerful. The empowered, remembering self is vouchsafed when the word "we" appears in the last three lines of "August Rain." That unified first-person plural breaks into a "you" who speaks, but who speaks in "my" voice, and, while the gesture of giving voice to remembered parents recalls "In Memoriam" (and the poem in memory of Brodsky's father, which is entirely about voice), here even more self-consciously a voice resounds in the poet's mind as his own.⁴⁰ The words spoken are remarkably calm and accepting, the untranslatable "nu" suggesting an intimacy of observation between parent and child. The rain has worked restoratively on the poet's psyche, as rain works on the world. The beauty of "August Rain" is in its nostalgic fantasy of re-seeing the domestic scene of his parents' evening life, which makes it resemble the essay "In a Room and a Half," in fact. It is a tender counterpoint

³⁸Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement," in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, 1984), 80.

³⁹Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, 107.

⁴⁰In the English translation of this poem, Brodsky specified a baritone voice for the spoken words, narrowing the range of meanings heard in the original Russian.

to “In Memoriam,” where the irony and pain of the past overcome any temptation to feel nostalgia.⁴¹ Its sense of loss, as a result, is muted (or hushed, like the voice heard in the final line), so that, rather than eyes lanced by pain, vision is kept as nearsightedness, and kept from falling out of range. The act of mourning, we might say, has been replaced by an act of self-creation, one that overcomes several forms of obstacle or difficulty to seem, at least for the moment, genuine.

ANDREI TARKOVSKY AND THE RHYTHMS OF CONTEMPLATING LOSS

A different transformation, although one that is equal parts aesthetics and psychology, happens in Andrei Tarkovsky’s film *The Mirror*, which tells several stories of family life. It recalls life in the countryside in the 1930s and 1940s, where a mother (Mariia) provides for two young children (Alesha and Marina); the father is noticeably absent. We also see an urban encounter at the printing house where Mariia works: she fears she has allowed a vulgar misprint into an edition of Stalin’s writings. There are contemporary (1970s) scenes in an urban apartment: the boy from the countryside is grown (Alesha has become Aleksei), and with his own son (Ignat) and an ex-wife (Natal’ia). The film cuts between these time frames, interspersing documentary footage that expands on the themes of fear and comfort, loss and safety, death and salvation. Tarkovsky merges the time frames in several ways, principally by having one actress, Margarita Terekhova, play both Mariia (the mother in the 1930s and 1940s) and Natal’ia (the ex-wife in the 1970s); she is incredibly beautiful, and her face often fills the screen. A single child actor plays both Alesha and Ignat. Aleksei, by comparison, is not seen on camera, and an actor who plays his father, Oleg Iankovskii, appears only fleetingly and without speaking. His recollections are heard as voice-over, read by the actor Innokentii Smoktunovskii, who also “speaks” Aleksei’s lines in an off-camera voice in scenes when Aleksei and Natal’ia talk. In addition to these actors, two other presences are tremendously important in *The Mirror*: we hear Arsenii Tarkovskii (1932–86), the director’s father, read four of his poems, and we see Mariia Vishniakova, his mother, in a number of scenes in the film. She is mostly silent and contemplative (in one shot we see a photograph of her, in another she is a reflection in a mirrored landscape). In the important final scenes of the film, she walks purposefully through fields and woods, taking her children home as the camera moves with equal dynamism. By including his father’s poems, and by filming his mother, the director brings his family within camera range. The tale of a quarreling divorced couple and their confused son, as well as its interpolated narrative about the mother rearing her children alone, come from the director’s own family history. The mirror of the title is held up to Tarkovsky, and in that sense it is a lyrical work. Like the best of modernist and postmodernist poetry, what the mirrors reflect back to the subject is a distortion, an act of substitution rather than reflection, and also an

⁴¹The complexities of Brodsky’s fight against the virus of nostalgia, as she calls it, are well discussed in Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York, 2001), 285–307. Her comment that Brodsky “reenacts a ritual of leaving home” is especially apt when one recalls the thought ever receding in “In Memoriam” (p. 288).

exploration of experiences that predate the subject's coming to consciousness. Trying to find that story, to rescue it from oblivion, is *The Mirror's* project.⁴²

Yet it would be a mistake to think that the source of grief in this film is only lost access to the self. Indeed, it could be argued that the film seeks such a self initially through a quest for words. The sequence seen before the title credits roll, where a young boy is cured of his stutter, dramatizes that quest and creates the illusion that, when the boy speaks out clearly, he enables the beginning of the film. Principally what has been lost is the father, obliquely recovered in the film by the poetry of Arsenii Tarkovskii and here too, what is recovered is language. Arsenii Tarkovskii might be described as a nearly lost poet himself, since he was part of a generation of poets who did not conform to the requirement to create civic and patriotic literature in the Soviet period.⁴³ In *The Mirror*, Tarkovsky the filmmaker rescues his father's poetry, bringing it to an audience who had barely begun to hear the poems (before the 1960s Tarkovsky made his living as a translator).⁴⁴ But the presence of the father's poetry also fills a vacuum created by the father's physical absence (compare the vacuum variously filled in Brodsky's poem "In Memoriam"). And the mother's visual presence in the film, as young and old, as actual mother and lovely actress, also counters that loss of the father. *The Mirror*, in its earliest version, was almost entirely about the mother, in fact, and it was prompted, the filmmaker has said, by a stubborn belief that she could not die.⁴⁵ The revelation of the mother's beauty also compensates for the fear that she will be lost, as well as compensating for the loss of the father.

Viewers get a first glimpse of the actress who plays the mother in the opening scene, which is also where the absence of the father quickly becomes apparent. It is one of the many visually compelling landscapes in Tarkovsky's work, a striking contrast of vast expanses and tight focus on botanical details. There is enormous visual pleasure here, an early gift meant to balance the losses that *The Mirror* will go on to recount. Nature herself seems the source of this beauty, particularly when the wind pushes through the field in the scene's final long shot. The mother, too, offers up her beauty to the camera, barely hiding her own story of loss. Close-up shots of her beautiful face will be seen in several later scenes (fig. 1). We learn from an intruding man that she has no husband, and we learn in the narrator's first words that the sight of an arriving male figure has only one import, whether it will be that husband/ father. The director will show the effects of the absent

⁴²The project of recovery is potentially infinite, but Tarkovsky realizes its endlessness in his own work by returning to these themes and topics, often in less overtly autobiographical ways. An example would be the interpolated memories in the beginning of *Nostalgia* (1983).

⁴³Arsenii Tarkovskii preferred instead a more personal and philosophical vehicle of self-exploration (in this he resembled Semen Lipkin and David Samoilov). G. S. Smith characterized the group as a middle generation who, despite considerable odds, survived the Stalin years. See Smith, "Russian Poetry Since 1945," in *Routledge Companion to Russian Literature* (New York, 2001), 200.

⁴⁴Tarkovskii, *Pered snegom* (Moscow, 1962); idem, *Zemle – zemnoe* (Moscow, 1966); idem, *Vestnik* (Moscow, 1969).

⁴⁵"I cannot reconcile myself to the thought that my mother will ever die. I will protest and shout that she is immortal. I want to convince others of her individuality and uniqueness. The internal premise from which I started was my desire to analyse her character in such a way as to prove her immortality" (cited in Maya Turovskaya, *Tarkovsky: Cinema as Poetry*, trans. Natasha Ward [London, 1989], 61).

father on his children, and he will reveal that the mother herself is sad beyond words at this loss.

The spectacle of a burning house, in the scene that follows this one, is an image familiar from other Tarkovsky films. The fire aestheticizes destruction, but it suggests as well the vulnerability of domestic space to ruin, the loss of all the lovely objects that in themselves emblemize and transform loss.⁴⁶ The mother who sits wistfully on a fence, while weakly spurning the flirtatious advances of the dour-faced doctor, has no barrier to protect her from the terrifying world. Her vulnerability also emerges in the film's first poem, "First Encounters" ("Pervye svidaniia"), a long and lovely account of an erotic encounter that works on the poet's psyche like an encounter with a muse. It is all very beautiful until we get to the poem's last line, when the comparison of fate to a madman with a razor shatters the idyllic tone that opens *The Mirror*. The mother, whose sadness seemed inexplicable to the passing doctor, weeps, as she will cry again in the film's last scene, foreseeing the injuries fate has in store for her.



FIG. 1 *The Mirror (Zerkalo)*, dir. Andrei Tarkovsky, 1974, Mosfil'm.

The doctor, perhaps because he is so well played by a favorite Tarkovsky actor, Anatolii Solonitsyn, perhaps because the digression he offers on plant life and existential loneliness

⁴⁶Compare the comments of Richard Stamelman, writing about elegiac poetry: "Thus, we try to overcome loss by naming it. ... We invent objects, icons, talismans, memories, and phantasms to mediate the loss. ... That lost object or being ... becomes part of the lack that loss establishes; it is swallowed up by the 'hole in the real,' as Jacques Lacan calls it, the gaping void, which death, exile, and loss create." The phrase "hole in the real" comes from Lacan, "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*," *Yale French Studies* 55-56 (1977): 37. For Stamelman see his *Lost Beyond Telling: Representations of Death and Absence in Modern French Poetry* (Ithaca, 1990), 4-5. And this is the same "real" that Žižek writes about so extensively, although for him there is not so much a "hole in the real" as a sense that the real is itself a hole.

seems an expression of Tarkovsky's own views, stands in for the missing father. We may read the mother's stern reaction to him as a sample of how she treated the father. She is none too gentle with her children, in fact, scolding them before she permits them to go off and stare at a house on fire, and in another scene she treats her son disdainfully, as Natal'ia will treat Ignat.⁴⁷ Tarkovsky recreates his mother as a beautiful but not especially giving or warm presence, and he has said that he wanted the actress Margarita Terekhova to exude a capacity "to enchant and to repel."⁴⁸ She is terrifying in one dream scene, where her washed hair covers her face and her fingers drip down as if part of a spidery web. Tarkovsky's failure to idealize this woman whom he so powerfully loves has its own ambivalences, then, which may remind us of Shvarts's attitude to her mother. What is different is the split in attention between father and mother, and the asymmetries between what is visibly seen and what is heard but only off-camera.

In no usual way, then, can we say that this film grieves for the filmmaker's parents, but their distance or absence is mulled over, becoming a subject for thought in the full range of cinema's capacity to explore how a mind works. Loss is also transmuted into other plot elements in *The Mirror*: Aleksei learns that his mother's old friend Liza has died, for example, and he will himself be gravely ill at the film's end. The middle sequence of boys training for battle, with references to the Leningrad blockade and with spliced-in documentary footage from World War II, evokes the possibility of violent death, as do images of a mushroom cloud from a nuclear blast, or the corpse of Adolf Hitler (dead, he symbolizes self-destruction, even as his legacy will be wholesale destruction of others). Loss hovers at the edges of many scenes in *The Mirror*, balanced by Tarkovsky's search for the fullness of recovered experience. He fills the screen with images of remembered pleasure and vulnerability, most evocatively in pictures of sleeping, dreaming, or barely awake children, their beds draped by lovely curtains and lacy fabrics that seek to shield them from harm or pain (fig. 2). Even the scenes showing danger, for example, those of the boys training for war, expand into beautiful Breughel-like landscape art, and Tarkovsky's camera always finds people, objects, shades of light, and forms of plant life on which to linger. These objects seem less ready to disappear or fade than those of Brodsky's poem "In Memoriam," more in fact like the domestic space of "August Rain." The changing rhythms of the camera movement intensify this gaze, perhaps nowhere more arrestingly than in the final sequence of the movie.

This last scene, unlike every other sequence in *The Mirror*, has little narrative value: no revelatory childhood or adult experience is shown, no historical event suggested. It functions as does the ending of *Andrei Rublev* (first screened 1968), where Tarkovsky slowly moves the camera across the surface of Rublev's icons, sending the audience out of the theater with a vividly colored image imprinted on their minds. The ending of

⁴⁷Maya Turovskaya, however, finds the mother figure much closer to an ideal, acknowledging her "difficult personality and her hard life" but finding in the final scene the "idealized image of a mother's love" (*Tarkovsky*, 68, 69). Beginning with the first scene, Vida Johnson and Graham Petrie find her an ambiguous figure in *The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky: A Visual Fugue* (Bloomington, 1994), 117. Their discussion of the film productively traces many ambiguities, and emphasizes the spirit of reconciliation with past injuries, an emphasis I share here.

⁴⁸Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair (London, 1986), 108.

The Mirror is less pictorial, and more divided. The camera draws in two temporalities, and two actresses play the mother young and old. The younger Mariia's tears seem best explained, in fact, by the glimpse of her stern aged self, walking with determination at the far end of the vast field. The cross-cutting between these two versions of the mother is balanced rhythmically by Tarkovsky's choice of music. It is from the opening chorus of Bach's *St. John Passion* (1724 version), which praises God's greatness and asks that He show majesty in the deep sadness of the tale of the Crucifixion.⁴⁹ Like Bach, Tarkovsky will offer aesthetic compensation for the tale of woe.

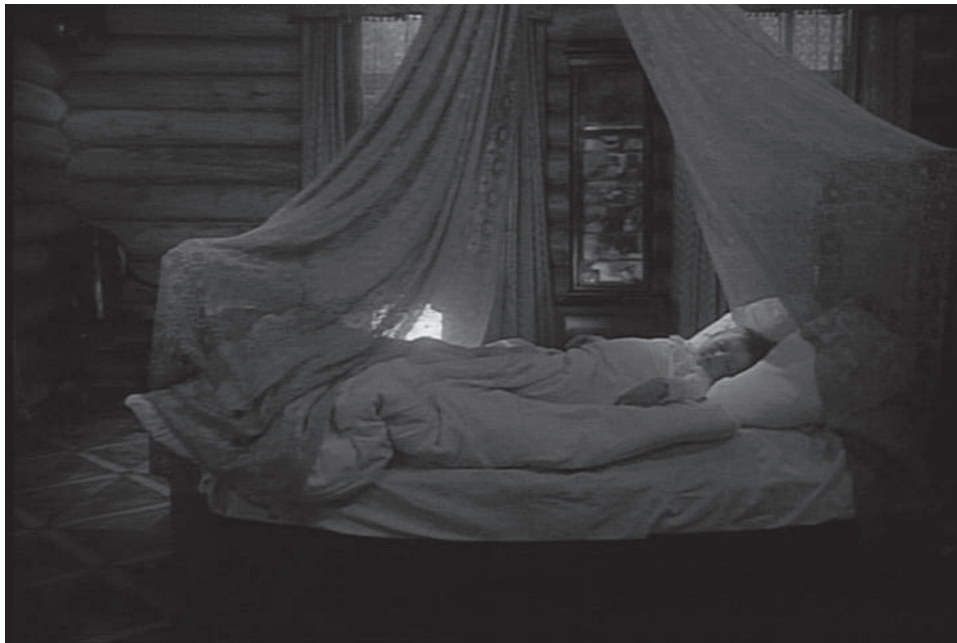


FIG. 2 *The Mirror (Zerkalo)*, dir. Andrei Tarkovsky, 1974, Mosfil'm.

The film asks how the mind works its way through loss, not whether the mind can encompass grief. *The Mirror* answers in several ways. First, it suggests that all thought is memory, that new experience matters only when it is felt as a form of repetition. In the scene where the young Ignat thinks he has seen his mother drop her possessions onto the floor, for example, he is “remembering” something that happened to the young Alesha, in the earring scene; the historical footage is also meant as a form of retrospection. That backward glance, for poets, is associated with Orpheus and Eurydice, mythic figures who are brought into *The Mirror* in another of Arsenii Tarkovskii's poems, the poem that is heard just after the earring scene. In the film, the backward glance is also a downward glance, a search for what is underneath, typically represented by the camera's movement

⁴⁹In English translation, the opening words are: “Lord, thou our master, whose repute/ In every land majestic is!/ Show us through this thy passion/ That thou, the very Son of God,/ In every age,/ E'en in the midst of deepest woe,/ Art magnified become!” (as translated by Z. Philip Ambrose, <http://www.uvm.edu/~classics/faculty/bach/>; last accessed June 14, 2007).

downward: Tarkovsky loved no camera angle more than that which drops down to focus on the earth, and we see a shot that leads to the contemplation of objects floating in dark water, framed as if they were in a picture, in the final sequence (fig. 3). These things are ambivalent emblems of loss, discarded yet preserved for the film's visual presentation, and they can only be retrieved by that downward glance of the camera. What is suggested, then, is that the mind burrows in search of meaning when it contemplates loss.



FIG. 3 *The Mirror* (*Zerkalo*), dir. Andrei Tarkovsky, 1974, Mosfil'm.

A second model of how the mind deals with grief is more difficult to represent spatially. It comes from Bach's music, from its emphasis on counterpoint and fugue. Tarkovsky said in 1974, the year in which *The Mirror* was made, that Bach's *St. John Passion* was his favorite piece of music.⁵⁰ It is not a choice based on aesthetic perfection—musicologists regard Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* as superior—but perhaps Tarkovsky was taken with the "aura of incompleteness" that surrounds the *St. John Passion*, as Christoph Wolff has put it.⁵¹ Tarkovsky also uses a very brief segment from *St. Matthew Passion* as well as other baroque music in *The Mirror*, and I suspect that it is the contrapuntal conversation of these musical fugues that fascinated him. Thinking occurs in this film in the give and take of the fugue, thought encountering its opposite, diverging into plausible alternatives, retreating into counterargument, always moving, dynamic, elaborating, amending. Thought is itself ambivalent, then, it is the way the mind turns over opposing emotions and lets itself

⁵⁰Andrei Tarkovsky, *Time Within Time: The Diaries 1970–1986*, trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair (Calcutta, 1991), 89.

⁵¹Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (New York, 2000), 295.

experience them despite their incompatibility.⁵² Thinking proceeds polyphonically, if we return to the musical metaphor: one idea emerges in conversation with another, and thought proceeds cinematically, one visual or aural element or camera angle or camera moment counterpointed with another. Thinking also occurs, we cannot fail to notice, where verbal language nearly retreats: in that final long scene, there are few words.⁵³ The lyrics from Bach work as counterpoint to the seen landscape and people, not as narrative explanation. The film can offer no stronger statement of the power of cinema to go where language alone, even the language of poetry—the language of the father—cannot take us.

WHAT POEMS AND FILMS CAN, AND CANNOT, DO

The heard music in film can be replicated in poetry no more easily than can film's visible sights that etch their imagery in the mind. Poetry's rhythms are of course their own music, and the ability of poems to leave us hearing the alliterations, rhymes, and sound echoes of words and phrases can be extraordinary. Still, what poems cannot do when they lie before a reader on the page is make the poet's voice resound in all its personality and specificity. Perhaps no poet was more aware of this than Brodsky, and the particular musicality of his reading voice when he did perform his poems in public may itself be a dramatic rendering of the distance between printed word and spoken language. That gap is brought to consciousness—it is something the mind turns to as if to try to make sense of it—in the poem Brodsky wrote about his father's death, and for that reason this poem makes a fitting conclusion to this essay.⁵⁴

Памяти отца: Австралия
Ты ожил, снилось мне, и уехал
в Австралию. Голос с трехкратным эхом
окликал и жаловался на климат
и обои: квартиру никак не снимут,
жалко, не в центре, а около океана,
третий этаж без лифта, зато есть ванна,
пухнут ноги, «А тапочки я оставил» —
прозвучавшее внятно и деловито.

⁵²This notion of ambivalence has been productively explored by psychoanalysts, from Bleuler and Freud to Abraham. See J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, eds., *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York, 1973), 26–29.

⁵³The one line of actor's dialogue spoken is the husband's question, "Which do you want more, a boy or a girl?" It is meant to signal to the audience that the young Mariia (or is it Natal'ia? we cannot know) is pregnant, and her response—tears—shows the complexity of what awaits her. Compare this gently sad reference to new life to the more disturbed images of pregnancy and birth in Shvarts's *Solo on a White-Hot Trumpet*.

⁵⁴Were this essay not already so long, I would end as well with one last poem by Shvarts: "Sorrow" (*Solo na raskalennoi trube*, 54). It goes in the exact opposite direction of Brodsky's invocation of voice, toward silent ekphrasis. The poet includes a note to the reader that she has taken her title, including its reliance on an English word, from Van Gogh's drawing of the same name. Her poem, in the context of this essay, could be read as a statement about still drawing (as opposed to film's pictures in motion). Her poem is entirely about the tears she imagines that Van Gogh's hunched-over figure is crying.

И внезапно в трубке завывло «Аделаида! Аделаида!»,
загремело, захлопало, точно ставень
бился о стенку, готовый сорваться с петель.
Все-таки это лучше, чем мягкий пепел
крематория в банке, ее залога —
эти обрывки голоса, монолога
и попытки прикинуться нелюдимом
в первый раз с той поры, как ты обернулся дымом.⁵⁵
1989

In Memory of My Father: Australia
You arose—I dreamt so last night—and left for
Australia. The voice, with a triple echo,
ebbed and flowed, complaining about climate,
grime, that the deal with the flat is stymied,
pity it's not downtown, though near the ocean,
no elevator but the bathtub's indeed an option,
ankles keep swelling. "Looks like I've lost my slippers"
came through rapt yet clear via satellite.
And at once the receiver burst into howling, "*Adelaide! Adelaide!*" —
into rattling and crackling, as if a shutter,
ripped off its hinges, were pounding the wall with inhuman power.
Still, better this than the silky powder
canned by the crematorium, than the voucher —
better these snatches of voice, this patchwork
monologue of a recluse trying to play a genie
for the first time since you formed a cloud above a chimney.⁵⁶
1989

After the high poetic imagery of Tarkovsky's *The Mirror*, and after the lovely Brodsky poem "August Rain," the prosaic premise of this poem, its comfortable turn to house slippers, telephone static, and even its easy reference to crematorium smoke feels like a remarkable lowering of tone. Brodsky was famous for a willingness to mix high and low, usually in terms of diction, yet here he seems instead to say more simply that the most lofty subject, the mental recognition that one's father has died, comes to consciousness (from the unconscious, from a dream, we note) in utterly prosaic terms. Rather than Shvarts's surprise that the dead do not answer her call, Brodsky gives us a telephone call, one from an illogically great geographical distance that is frustratingly interrupted. (And in that frustration he is, in fact, quite close to Shvarts's futile attempts to see the face of her mother or hear her voice.) The voice that intrudes announces the place, showing us that Brodsky has chosen this place both for the rhyme of "Adelaida" and "delovito" and because Australia stands at the furthest terrestrial point he can imagine. The conversation is at first summarized in the poem—daily details, finding an apartment—and the sound is unclear, muffled by echoes.

⁵⁵Brodskii, *Sochineniia* 4:69.

⁵⁶Brodsky, *Collected Poems in English*, 360.

A single sentence is uttered in direct speech by the father, and with perfect clarity: “Looks like I’ve lost my slippers.” A detail from daily life, quite literally a prosaic rendering of loss itself (like Bishop’s “One Art,” in fact, where losing keys is a prelude to losing it all).⁵⁷

Leaving something behind is not quite the same thing as loss. It can in fact be the opposite, the gesture of transmission that allows preservation and retention by someone else. Brodsky’s poems often close with memorable and resonant last lines—and this one does. But they just as often hide their most complex and revelatory sentiments along the way, as in the remarkable middle stanza of “August Rain.” In “In Memory of My Father: Australia,” that one word, “ostavil,” comes up against the ambivalences of loss and recovery, of thinking and feeling that define elegies for mother or father whether they are in poetry or in film.

Brodsky wrote in the essay on Robert Frost that “grief and reason ... while poison to each other, are language’s most efficient fuel.” He adds that grief and reason are also “poetry’s indelible ink. ... Yet the more one dips into it, the more it brims with this black essence of existence, and the more one’s mind, like one’s fingers, gets soiled by this liquid. For the more there is of grief, the more there is of reason.”⁵⁸ In their different ways, Shvarts, Tarkovsky, and Brodsky test the premise that more grief brings more reason, and they also test the capacity of modes of aesthetic expression—words (rhymed and unrhymed), music, sights, sounds, film—to light the paths in which reason sees its truths, and its doubts. Their aesthetic successes, which are considerable, reason through to its conclusion the psychological insight that loss creates a self. The poems and films created by loss are not themselves invulnerable, however, and Shvarts, Brodsky, and Tarkovsky leave us with their most startling psychological truths when they refuse to idealize the parents they have lost. The works of art that hold them in memory are offered as imperfect vessels of recollected moments, but vessels to be prized nonetheless.

⁵⁷Elizabeth Bishop, “One Art,” *The Complete Poems 1927–1979* (New York, 1983), 178.

⁵⁸Joseph Brodsky, “On Grief and Reason,” *On Grief and Reason*, 260.

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