

Introduction

Marina Tsvetaeva and Sophia Parnok were both Russian poets living during the first half of the twentieth century. Tsvetaeva is considered one of the most prominent poets of the Silver Age, and is recognized for her innovative and complex style. Parnok is far less well-known, by Russians and scholars alike, and the process of re-establishing her as a figure in Russian literary history began just thirty years ago, with the work of scholars that will be discussed below. What connects these two women is the affair they conducted from 1914 to 1916, and the poetry they wrote chronicling it. This paper endeavors to examine the poetry of Tsvetaeva and Parnok in the context of that relationship, and also to consider how their poetry and thought on queerness evolved afterwards.

The theme of Tsvetaeva and Parnok's relationship, particularly from the perspective of what Tsvetaeva wrote in her *Подруга* [Girlfriend] cycle, has been treated in a number of studies to date. However, there are three main works which examine both this specific relationship in detail, and the queer sexualities of Tsvetaeva and Parnok throughout their entire lives. Sophia Polyakova is credited both with the re-discovery and rehabilitation of Parnok as a poet worth studying, and of being the first to publish work on the relationship between her and Tsvetaeva. Using poetic analysis and archival research, her book *Незакатные оны дни: Цветаева и Парнок* [*Those Unfading Days: Tsvetaeva and Parnok*] puts together a cohesive story about events within the relationship, considering both the experience of the two women as well as that of their social circle. The two major works that address this topic in English both draw heavily from Polyakova. Simon Karlinsky's 1985 book *Marina Tsvetaeva: The Woman, her World, and her Poetry* is a comprehensive biography. As a gay scholar himself, Karlinsky is attuned to the ways Tsvetaeva's queer sexuality manifested throughout her life, both before and after her

relationship with Parnok. Similarly, Diana Burgin's 1994 biography *Sophia Parnok: The Life and Work of Russia's Sappho*, draws from the Polyakova work mentioned above, but its main goal is to provide a comprehensive English-language look at Parnok's life as a whole, and analyze the relationship between her queer sexuality and her writing.¹

This thesis adds to existing through close readings of the poetry produced during Tsvetaeva and Parnok's relationship from more contemporary perspectives of gender study, and by focusing on how each woman "coped" with her queer sexuality through poetry or other means, to greater or lesser success. Chapter one "Queer Evolution: Social Stigma and Biography," looks at Tsvetaeva and Parnok primarily through the lens of others. Since this project was more focused than either the Burgin or Karlinsky biographies, I could pursue and analyze in much greater detail several sources they only mention in passing, such as Tatyana Kvanina's memoir about Tsvetaeva *Так было* [That's How It Was]. The second chapter "Охотник или добыча: Queer Experience in the Poetry of Tsvetaeva and Parnok," consists of close readings both of poems that Parnok and Tsvetaeva wrote on the topic of their relationship as well as of works from much later in each of their lives. Of particular note in this respect is a close reading of one poem, "Газель," [Ghazals] which is not examined in any of these other texts. I approach all these works with the goal of examining internalized homophobia or the lack thereof in Tsvetaeva's and Parnok's works. Finally, in the afterword, this work considers how the situation of queer women poets in Russia today differs from the time in which Parnok and Tsvetaeva were writing. For this portion, I draw on interviews conducted with two contemporary queer women poets via e-mail. It should be noted that all translations within the text are my own. A full appendix of poems examined in detail within the text can be found at the end of the thesis.

¹ The most recent biography of Parnok is Elena Romanova's 2005 *Опыт творческой биографии Софии Парнок: "Мне одной предназначенный путь..."*, [An Attempt at a Creative Biography of Parnok: "To Me Alone the Way Is Destined..."] but given the small scope of this project, I was unable to take it under consideration.

Queer Evolution: Social Stigma and Biography

At the time Sophia Parnok and Marina Tsvetaeva were living, queer women “did not exist” in Russia, legally, medically, or otherwise. While acts of sodomy were punishable under tsarist law, homosexual acts between women were ignored or assumed not to occur. These facts did not change after the 1917 revolution, and perhaps became more true during the earlier years of the Soviet Union when the only place queer women did make a rare appearance—as a voguish form of deviancy and voluptuousness in literature—was also cycled out of circulation, less because of its supposed depravity than because such content did nothing to further Soviet goals. Yet queer women in Russia very much did exist, though on the margins, within small groups of closely-knit, mostly upper-class women. Russia’s beloved short story writer, Chekhov, wrote in response to a letter about the lesbian activities of St. Petersburg actresses that the idea of such women: “makes me nauseous as if I’d eaten a rotten sardine” (Burgin 4). However, he was also convinced that “Moscow doesn’t have [lesbians],” a statement which the very lives of Tsvetaeva and Parnok easily refutes, albeit a few decades later. Given such a world, where one’s love was alternately fetishized, thought to be non-existent, or considered disgusting, how might two poets trying to write about these issues react? How did Parnok and Tsvetaeva remain closeted or come out in a society where the closet effectively did not exist?

Biographies and studies of both Parnok and Tsvetaeva’s work during this period have often noted that Parnok was the more openly queer woman of the two of them. In his book *Marina Tsvetaeva: The Woman, her World, and her Poetry* Karlinsky describes her as “aggressively lesbian” (51) and “a female Don Juan” (54). By contrast, Diana Burgin describes Parnok as being much more sexually mature and ready for the relationship than the childish and capricious Tsvetaeva in *Sophia Parnok: The Life and Work of Russia’s Sappho*. Regardless of

the connotations attached to her perhaps more concretely formed sexuality by biographers, it is evident that Parnok and Tsvetaeva were at different stages in coming to terms with their attraction to women. As a result, it should not come as a surprise that the two poets were poetically focused on and interested in different aspects of this attraction. Parnok's poetry before their relationship had been heavily influenced by the opinions of her ex-husband Vladimir Volkenshtein, a friend whom she married out of convenience and quickly divorced when the marriage began to fail. During this time she barely wrote at all, and the only poems Volkenshtein regarded as good were, like his own, heavily allegorical. Thus, to a certain extent, the poetry written during Tsvetaeva and Parnok's time together was for both of them part of a process of discovery. Parnok was rediscovering what Burgin calls her "lesbian muse," and actively looking at ways to write about her attraction within the confines of Russian grammar and Russian social stigma. Tsvetaeva on the other hand, was heavily invested in figuring out this new experience for herself, treating her *Подруга* cycle almost as a poetic diary in which she works out her feelings on a type of relationship about which she had previously only dreamed.

Parnok and Tsvetaeva's biographies make clear that even if a woman's same-sex attractions manifested themselves repeatedly in a physical, public form, they were more often than not ignored. Both women displayed same-sex attraction in youth, which apparently went unnoticed. Parnok wrote numerous poems chronicling both her high-school crushes and more serious relationships. A summer love affair that occurred during a family vacation to the Crimea when she was sixteen occupied her juvenile poetry for more than a year afterward, and, as she began to explore poetically the crushes she was developing on her peers, Parnok also began to write love poetry to the actresses and female characters she encountered in the operas of her

hometown of Taganrog.² Occasionally, she tempered these quite frank explorations of her same-sex attractions with poems written from the perspective of a male alter ego, as can be seen in her juvenile poems “Portrait of Ilchka Rediktin,” and “Correspondences.” Ilchka Rediktin is attracted to the same young woman as Parnok was at the time, and descriptions from “Correspondences” seem to come from her own romantic experiences (Burgin 31-3). Evidently her father perceived his daughters’ crushes and intense friendships as normal—at least until she began to turn down the marriage proposals of her male friends (Burgin 37). It was not her attraction to women that triggered his suspicions then, but rather the absence of her attraction to men.

Similarly, Tsvetaeva describes a bisexual experience she has at age six in her 1937 essay *Мой Пушкин* [My Pushkin]. When asked what she liked best from a series of opera scenes at a holiday show, she repeats “Tatyana and Onegin,” although her mother beleaguers her and tries to get her to admit that she really preferred Pushkin’s *Русалка* [The Water Maiden] because it was a fairy tale. Finally her mother concludes that the young Tsvetaeva *как дура—шести лет—влюбилась в Онегина!* [like a fool—at six years old—had fallen in love with Onegin!]. To which the grown-up Tsvetaeva rebuts:

Мать ошибалась. Я не в Онегина влюбилась, а в Онегина и в Татьяну (и, может быть, в Татьяну немножко больше), в них вместе, в любовь.
(Tsvetaeva 2014, 1133-34)

Mother was mistaken. I had fallen in love not with Onegin, but with Onegin and Tatyana (and maybe, with Tatyana a little more), with them together, with love.

Although her daughter repeats the names of both the hero and the heroine in response to the question, her mother refuses to acknowledge that Tsvetaeva could also have fallen in love with Tatyana. The idea does not even seem to have crossed her mind; she dropped Tatyana from

² Ironically, the same hometown as the lesbian-repulsed Anton Chekhov.

Tsvetaeva's response almost without thinking about it, or perhaps assumed that Tsvetaeva was imagining herself in Tatyana's place.

All of this is to say that in the early twentieth century in Russia, getting yourself marked as a gay woman was *hard*: such a category did not exist outside the realm of literature. In the Western world today, parents are often hyperaware of supposed "signals" even from an early age—a daughter who plays with trucks, a son who plays with dolls, a teenager who spends an awful lot of time with that one friend of theirs—all of these are considered signs of a child who is or will soon blossom into someone with same-sex attractions. Of course these assumptions are as ridiculous today as at any point in history, but when Parnok and Tsvetaeva were growing up in Russia, the concept of a daughter turning out to be queer never even entered a parent's thoughts.

Same-sex attraction in women was also treated differently by the law and society. As Laurie Essig notes in her 1999 book *Queer in Russia*, during tsarist times, "[m]en who desired other men became criminals because they were citizens; women were treated as less than full legal subjects, weaker and therefore more susceptible...to perverse desires" (4). In the rare cases that women who desired women did come under the scrutiny of society, the measures taken were corrective rather than punitive.

Anti-sodomy laws were done away with in the wake of the 1917 Revolution—along with everything else in the legal code. The Bolsheviks viewed homosexuality as a symptom of the sick bourgeois society they had just overturned, and initially they sought out cures for perpetrators rather than imprisonment. Gay men were encouraged to marry women in spite of their inclinations (Essig 5), or to check themselves into mental institutions. The assumption was that Soviet society, in its infinite perfection, would ensure that no more queer people would be "created," and the government would need only to deal with the holdovers from tsarist times.

However, as the Soviet Union was built and its ideology became more solidified, it became clear that homosexuality not only was not going to go away, but that, as a form of non-procreative sex, it could in no way be assimilated into Soviet society (Essig 5). As a result, “homosexual acts were treasonous” in the Soviet Union, because they indicated both a refusal to propagate the next generation of the proletariat and a refusal to engage as a healthy member of society. In the individualist West, same-sex desire was the problem of a single person. In the Soviet Union, particularly under Stalin, even the most private acts were political, and same-sex desire was viewed as a direct defiance of the government (Essig 5).

As a result of both the attitudes of pre- and post-Revolutionary governments and societies, the queer sexualities of historical figures have been effectively erased. The way history has treated both Parnok and Tsvetaeva is a prominent example of this problem. Parnok is known primarily because she was an openly gay woman, and, as of today at least, that part of her identity cannot be severed from her poetry and status as a historical figure. The idea is furthered by the few Parnok scholars there are—Diana Burgin’s biography of her features the subtitle “The Life and Work of Russia’s Sappho” and one of the main arguments Burgin makes in the book is that Parnok required her aforementioned “lesbian muse,” or the passion of being in love with another woman, in order to write her best poetry. None of these surmises about Parnok are necessarily untrue, but what would the opposite situation look like? The image of a male poet writing love poems to women is so ubiquitous that it is difficult to imagine an analogous subtitle. Lesbianism is sufficiently exotic in culture—Russian or otherwise—that the analogy between Parnok and Sappho would only be interpreted one way; although both of them wrote poetry that merits admiration regardless of its subject matter, the brand of “lesbian poet” is what sticks. With

“straight” poets the reverse is true: heterosexuality is “normal,” so such poets are known for the merits of their craft or other individual features.

Perhaps the most interesting effect of this erasure is that it had relatively little effect on Parnok’s life at all, and, to a certain extent, may have helped her. Having done the “work” to get herself marked as a gay woman, Parnok was pretty much left alone. She continued to be invited to poetry readings, attend parties, and have friends, regardless of the fact that she maintained relationships and lived with other women until her death in 1933. As far as we know, no one called for her arrest or forced entry into a mental institution. Her trouble publishing work after 1928, when the Soviet Union was more solidly established, may have had less to do with her content being perceived as scandalous, and more to do with the fact that it did not meet the then-evolving standards of what would be codified as Socialist Realism in the year after her death. As the experiences of many poets of Parnok’s age and generation attest, such difficulties would have been present regardless of whether or not she was a queer woman. It is very possible that Parnok’s poems concerning nature or her love for Russia would also have not passed the censor, and based on the work she left behind, she never succumbed to writing the political, pro-Soviet verses which would have enabled her to be published as much as she would have liked.

Despite these struggles with publishing, Parnok lived a life far less fraught than many of the more well-known Russian poets of the period. After Tsvetaeva, she lived with two more women, and maintained a two-year affair right up until her death. Although not all of these long-term relationships ended happily—the woman who came after Tsvetaeva, Lyudmilla Erarskaya, eventually became seriously mentally ill—Parnok’s relationships never came to an end because of a misunderstanding about sexuality. Even her lifelong battle with Grave’s disease, an autoimmune disorder that affects the thyroid, did not stop her from experiencing life to its fullest.

Although going out became more and more difficult for her as she aged, she successfully courted many women from the comfort of her bedroom. At the beginning of her relationship with Tsvetaeva, Parnok was convinced that she would never publish, but she put out five collections in a little more than ten years before she was forced to turn to translation as her primary means of income. In addition, she spent several years writing the libretto for her friend Alexander Spendiarov's opera, which was greeted with much critical acclaim. Perhaps most importantly, though, Parnok died in the presence of two women she loved dearly, and her funeral was well-attended by friends and family. History may have forgotten her for several decades afterward, but her life after Tsvetaeva was anything but a tragedy—despite the fears she expressed poetically during their relationship, at the end of her life she was a published poet, well-loved, and well-cared for.

While Parnok is frequently only seen through the lens of her same-sex attractions, the relationships with and attractions to women Tsvetaeva sustained throughout her life remain very much in the background of biography. The fact that both her *Подпыза* cycle and information about these relationships was unknown until eight years before the fall of the Soviet Union can in part be attributed to the work Tsvetaeva's daughter, Ariadne Efron, did to rehabilitate her mother's image after suicide. This work primarily involved covering up Tsvetaeva's often out-of-line political views, and promoting her as a good Soviet poet rather than the proud wife of a White Army officer. Her mother's attractions to women and what she wrote about them were likely viewed as just another of many embarrassments for Ariadne. However, even as Tsvetaeva was pursuing these relationships, the people around her do not seem to have viewed them as "real," and took them seriously only insofar as they affected her other relationships, particularly her marriage to Sergei Efron. Her two-year relationship with Parnok was frequently seen as some

kind of “spell”—she had been seduced by Parnok, the “true” lesbian, and would eventually come to her senses. An example of this type of thinking can be seen in a letter from Yelena Voloshina, the mother of her friend and fellow poet Maksimilian Voloshin and a mother figure to Tsvetaeva, to a friend:

Знаю, что [Сергей Ефрон] опять собирается в санаторию, но думаю, что он опять раздумает. Вот относительно Марины страшновато: там дело пошло совсем всерьёз. Она куда-то с Соней уезжала на несколько дней, держала это в большом секрете... Это все меня и Лилю очень смущает и тревожит, но мы не в силах разрушить эти чары.

(Polyakova 47)

I know that [Sergei Efron] is again planning to go to the sanitarium, but I think that he'll change his mind again. I'm frightened about Marina: the whole thing has gotten quite serious. She went somewhere with Sonya for several days, and kept it a big secret... All this confuses and alarms Lilya and me very much, but we do not have the power to break these spells.

The implication is that Tsvetaeva is somehow bewitched, and not in total control of her own actions. In addition, there seems to be a suggestion that only her husband would have the ability to get her back into line. Voloshina believes that she and Sergei Efron's sister are *не в силах* to change Tsvetaeva's mind, and at the beginning of the letter she seems to imply that Efron will rush back from the sanitarium to reclaim his wife as soon as he finds out what has been going on in his absence. Efron's reaction to his wife's affair with another woman poet appears to have been lost to the ages. It is doubtful that he did not care, but either he was too preoccupied with his own health problems and his service at the front in World War I (Burgin 129), or felt too powerless to oppose his strong-willed wife.

Additionally, the story that Tsvetaeva and Parnok's social group built up about their relationship was simply not correct: in fact, the reverse was true. Although Parnok was certainly more experienced than Tsvetaeva in romantic and sexual matters between women, she was not the one who initiated the relationship. Tsvetaeva courted Parnok for most of a month,

disregarding her own marriage and child as well as the fact that Sophia Parnok was living with another woman, Iraida Albrecht. This exoneration of Tsvetaeva from the “blame” of the relationship continued later in her life as well as with various men who sought her attentions.

Mandelstam first met Tsvetaeva when she was still in a relationship with Parnok, when the two of them were spending the summer at Koktebel'³ with Parnok's sister and Tsvetaeva's sister-in-law and daughter. He quickly developed a crush on Tsvetaeva, and, as a result, became incredibly jealous of Parnok. In a childish attempt to ingratiate himself with Tsvetaeva, he praised everything she produced while criticizing everything written by Parnok. The bias of his judgments was made very clear when the rest of the visitors to Koktebel' read several Parnok poems aloud and told him they were the latest by Tsvetaeva. He immediately went into raptures about their quality, and got very angry when informed of the trick (Burgin 126).

Mandelstam did form a friendship with Tsvetaeva several months later, after her final break-up with Parnok. He clearly wanted this friendship to become a romance, but, according to Karlinsky's account, Tsvetaeva was puzzled by his physical attraction to her, and was far more interested in discussing poetry and showing the Petersburg native her city of Moscow. Ultimately, despite her marriage to Efron, Mandelstam met her as “a lesbian,” but was apparently more than willing to overlook this. Whatever hatred and discomfort he had on this issue he shifted onto Parnok, following the third-party view which seems to have been held by most and dismissed above as erroneous—that as the older woman and “real” lesbian, Parnok was a seducer and responsible for initiating the relationship. Regardless of how Mandelstam may have felt about same-sex attraction in general, it is clear that he did not consider Tsvetaeva to be

³ Tsvetaeva and Voloshin struck up a friendship after his positive review of her first book and he played a mentor role for the early stages of her poetic development. As a result, she spent many summers at Koktebel', a villa in the Crimea which Voloshin and his mother ran as a sort of retreat for writers and artists. Parnok was not the only figure with whom Tsvetaeva conducted a romance there: Koktebel' is also where she first met her husband (Karlinsky 34-37).

a “real” lesbian, or, alternately, that he believed himself capable of converting her, a view that he likely supported with the fact that she had a husband.

Pasternak acted similarly upon finding out that Tsvetaeva had previously had a relationship with another woman. Unlike Mandelstam, he discovered this information years after he and Tsvetaeva had become acquainted, after she used her relationship with Parnok as an explanation for why Pasternak should help her former lover publish poems so that she would not starve after her penultimate poetry collection, *Музыка* [*Music*, 1926] was ignored by the press. Pasternak refuses to help Parnok in any way, claiming that he has never gotten along with her, and perhaps also acting out of jealousy, even though he is clearly no longer competing with her for Tsvetaeva’s attentions. This can be seen in the letter below, from May 19, 1926:

По той же причине не отзываюсь на письмо о Парнок. Ей мне сделать нечего, потому что никакой никогда мы каши с ней не варили, да еще вдобавок письмо застало меня в новой ссоре с ней: накануне я вышел из «Узла», отчасти из-за нее. Писать же о двадцатилетней Марине в этом обрамлении и с данными, которые ты на меня обрушила, мог бы только св. Себастьян. Я боюсь и коситься на эту банку, заряженную болью, ревностью, ревом и страданием за тебя, хотя бы краем одного плеча полуобнажающуюся хоть в прошлом столетии. Попало ни в чем не повинным. Я письмо получил на лестнице, отправляясь в Известия, где не был четыре года...В трамвае прочел письмо и стихи (если это — банка, то анод и катод, и вся музыка, и весь ад, и весь секрет, конечно, в них: Зачем тебе, зачем / моя душа спартанского ребенка). И вот таким, от тебя и за тебя, влетел я в редакцию, хотя и своего достаточно было. Они не знали, куда от меня деваться. Единственное, похожее на человеческую мысль, что они сказали, было: поэт в редакции это как слон в посудной лавке.

(Pasternak 199-200)

For that same reason I am not responding to your letter about Parnok. I can do nothing for her, because we have never agreed on anything, and, additionally, your letter has found me in a new quarrel with her: yesterday I left “The Knot”⁴ in part because of her. Only St. Sebastian could write about the twenty-year-old Marina within the framework and using the information that you’ve dumped on

⁴ “The Knot” or “Uzla,” was a poetry collective whose goal was to publish inexpensive editions of members’ poetry in seasonal series using a fee each of them paid per year to cover printing costs. Parnok was one of the founding members, and the operations of the group was one of her main occupations in 1926.

me. I am afraid to even look askance at this jar,⁵ charged with pain, jealousy, with roaring and suffering for you, even if you partially bared only a little part of your shoulder only as recently as the last century. This has happened to people who haven't done anything wrong. I received the letter on the stairs, on my way to *Izvestia*, where I hadn't been in four years... In the tram I read the letter and the poems (if this is the jar, then the anode and cathode, and all the music, and all the hell, and the whole secret, is of course in these lines: "Why, why do you need/My Spartan child's soul"). And in this mood, because of you and for you, I flew into the editor's office, although I had enough problems of my own. They didn't know how to get rid of me. The only thing that they said that resembled human thought was: a poet in the editor's office is like an elephant in a china shop.

Pasternak's reaction to the revelation that Tsvetaeva's past included sexual encounters with other women, could easily have been to break off his relationship with her. Yet, evidently the idea that Tsvetaeva could be even partially culpable for the affair does not cross his mind. While this assumption likely is based in part on the same thought process which appears to be present in Mandelstam's pursuit of Tsvetaeva, it is also facilitated by details like the particular poem she sent to Pasternak as evidence of her relationship with Parnok, which will be examined further in the following chapter. For the present it should suffice to say that of all the *Подпыза* poems, she chose to send him one that expressed her bitterness in the relationship, rather than one of the many which express her joy. It also seems possible that Tsvetaeva's description of the relationship was especially biased, which seems to be evidenced by Pasternak's reference to her being like Saint Sebastian because she blames herself, despite the fact that her description of the relationship has apparently led Pasternak to believe that *Parnok* is to blame. This line suggests that Tsvetaeva wrote a version of the story which made her seem innocent and then blamed herself to elicit further sympathy from Pasternak. Alternately, Tsvetaeva may have actually blamed herself, and Pasternak refused to take her story at face value because of his dislike and jealousy of Parnok, or his refusal to believe that a woman he was attracted to could also be

⁵ Pasternak seems to be referring to a Leyden jar, or primitive battery, which serves here as a metaphor for Tsvetaeva's intense emotions.

attracted to other women. The unavailability of Tsvetaeva's original letter makes it impossible to know which of these interpretations is correct, but both of them support the fact that Russian society did not take lesbian relationships seriously, and that for someone as insecure as Tsvetaeva, it was likely easier to convince herself that her relationship with Parnok was not genuine than try to defend it.

Tsvetaeva struggled with her sexual identity throughout her life, but, at least privately, she had moments when she was proud of and even bragged about her identity as a bisexual woman. In a journal entry from June 9, 1921 (after both her failed relationship with Parnok and her failed relationship with Sophia Holliday, the woman she attempted to take up with after her break-up with Parnok, and whose memory she cherished and preserved in her 1938 autobiographical novella *Повесть о Сонечке* [The Story of Sonechka]) Tsvetaeva states:

Любить только женщин (женщине) или только мужчин (мужчине), заведомо исключая обычное обратное—какая жуть! А только женщин (мужчине) или только мужчин (женщине), заведомо исключая необычное родное—какая скука!

(Polyakova 102)

To love only women (for a woman) or only men (for a man), deliberately excluding the usual opposite—how dreadful! And only women (for a man) or only men (for a woman), deliberately excluding the unusual same—how boring!

This journal entry shows that, even though her past relationships with women had been unsuccessful, Tsvetaeva still considered attraction to women to be as much a part of her sexual identity as her attraction to men. At the same time, however, she often made attempts to exonerate herself from her past relationships with women, and *especially* from her relationship with Parnok, which may have been the case in the letter she sent to Pasternak that is explored above. It seems strange that Tsvetaeva might try to characterize her former lover negatively to Pasternak while trying to get him to help Parnok, but she may have been motivated by a desire to

downplay the seriousness of the relationship or that her involvement in it was very much voluntary. After all, Pasternak was a man she was romantically involved with, albeit from afar, and she probably did not want to jeopardize that relationship over events that occurred more than a decade ago. Tsvetaeva more directly expresses her negative feelings about lesbian relationships in “Letter to the Amazon,” an essay in which she argues that a lesbian lifestyle is unsustainable and unnatural. This text will also be examined in chapter two.

In addition, Tsvetaeva seems to have had no idea how to facilitate a relationship between herself and another woman, which resulted in her making unfortunate and sometimes disturbing mistakes. In her relationship with Parnok, Tsvetaeva had guidance. Although she was uncomfortable with their physical love, and clearly felt lost when it came to understanding what exactly she was doing, she did not need to know because she was with someone who had experience conducting a same-sex relationship in that particular social context. When Tsvetaeva was left to her own devices, it is clear that she had learned very little about how to handle a relationship with a woman, or that what she took away was not ultimately useful, at least in part because the context in which these relationships transpired was fundamentally changed.

Perhaps the best example of Tsvetaeva’s “relationship illiteracy” can be found in Nina Berberova’s 1966 memoir *Кыrcue moü* [*The Italics Are Mine*]. She and Tsvetaeva were both part of the literary émigré community, along with figures like Roman Jakobson and Vladislav Khodasevich, and for the most part seem to have been friends. However, Berberova apparently looked down on Tsvetaeva and discusses at great length how warranted her suicide was, marking it as a result of her insistence that she was different from everyone else and not able to be understood. At the very end of this description of Tsvetaeva Berberova describes the following incident, which occurs during an early evening conversation:

Мы сидим долгие часы, пьем чай, который я кипячу на маленькой спиртовке, едим ветчину, сыр и булки, разложенные на бумажках. Все, что говорит Цветаева, мне интересно, в ней для меня сквозит смесь мудрости и каприза, я пью ее речь, но в ней, в этой речи, почти всегда есть чуждый мне, режущий меня больной надлом, восхитительный, любопытный, умный, но какой-то нервный, неуравновешенный, чем-то опасный для наших дальнейших отношений, будто сейчас нам еще весело летать по волнам и порогам, но в следующую минуту мы обе можем столкнуться и ушибиться, и я это чувствую, а она, видимо, нет. Она, вероятно, думает, что со мной можно в будущем либо дружить, либо поссориться. Внезапно в комнате гаснет свет - это она выдернула вилку из штепселя, в темноте на диване она нападает на меня, щекочет, обнимает. Я вскакиваю, не сдержав крика. Свет зажигается. Эти игры мне совсем, совсем не по душе.

(Berberova 242)

We sit for a long time, drink tea, which I boil on a little spirit lamp, eat ham, cheese, and rolls, laid out on sheets of paper. Everything that Tsvetaeva says interests me, for me she is a mixture of wisdom and capriciousness, I drink in her speech, but in it, in this speech, there is almost always something alien to me, a sick rupture that cuts me, fascinating, provocative, clever, but somehow high-strung, unbalanced, somehow dangerous for our further relationship, as if we were now happy to fly over waves and rapids, but in the next minute we both could collide and hurt ourselves, and I feel this, and she, evidently, does not. She probably thinks that in the future it will be possible to either be friends with me or for us to quarrel. Suddenly in the room the light goes off—she has pulled the plug from the socket, and in the darkness she falls on me on the couch, tickles me, embraces me. I jump up, not having been able to contain my cry. The light goes back on. These games are not at all, not at all to my liking.

It is worth noting that Simon Karlinsky refers to this incident as “an unmistakable lesbian pass.”

And although the words “unmistakable” and “lesbian” fit this incident very well, “pass” typically implies something slightly more innocent—a flirtatious touch, or perhaps a direct invitation. The above passage rather implies attempted sexual assault. The sentence which follows the scene is “After that, Roman Jakobson came over for dinner,” which seems to imply that Tsvetaeva stopped after Berberova’s cry. What is more unclear is the extent to which Tsvetaeva’s action was a relatively honest mistake. Berberova’s account of their conversation suggests that Tsvetaeva was flirting with her the entire time, but that Berberova was trying her best to remain

non-responsive to that element of the conversation, what she calls *больной надлом*, the thing which Berberova believes can cause their conversation to end in a harmful collision, which it, in fact, does. Either Tsvetaeva misread Berberova entirely or decided to ignore her negative reaction, a detail which simply cannot be known. As is shown repeatedly in Karlinsky's biography, Tsvetaeva frequently seems to have been too caught up in her own attractions to notice whether or not they were returned. Regardless, it is difficult to imagine Parnok, with her poise and experience, ending up in an analogous sexual misunderstanding. Clearly this "pass" was at least in part spurred on by the fact that Tsvetaeva lived an incredibly lonely life, which is shown both by the way she conducted her relationships and by her own complaints about said loneliness in letters to friends.

This loneliness did not end when she left Prague for Paris in 1925, or even when she moved back to Moscow in 1939. In her memoir *Так было*, Tatyana Kvanina discusses the extent to which Tsvetaeva cleaved herself to her and her husband upon the poet's return to Russia. The need for the friendship of this couple which Tsvetaeva expressed at the time bewildered them both. If she stopped by, she stopped by for an extent of time that seemed strange even to usually guest-loving Russians, and she frequently sent long, sometimes dramatic letters to both Kvanina and her husband. Kvanina's discussion of the relationship she had with Tsvetaeva reveals some of the same issues we have seen in her relationship with Parnok and her "pass" at Berberova: she had very little idea what she was doing not just when it came to romantic relationships, but also when it came to friendship. She dominated conversations, and as can be seen from the following quote, seems to have treated Kvanina primarily as a sounding board, someone to whom she could recount her thoughts and memories for hours on end:

Когда я бывала одна, говорила больше, как правило, Марина Ивановна. Я слушала. Видела: Марине Ивановне надо выговориться (я понимала, что

отсюда и ее письма к нам, особенно те, которые передавались мне прямо в руки).

(Kvanina 197)

When I was alone, Marina Tsvetaeva, as a rule, talked more. I listened. I saw that Marina Tsvetaeva needed to talk herself out (I understood that it was out of this need that her letters to us emerged, especially those which she delivered straight into my hands).

Although she spent an entire year with Kvanina as her closest friend, visiting or writing her letters on what seems to have been close to a daily basis, Tsvetaeva was apparently unable to remember the most basic facts about her friend, forgetting, for instance, her profession, but recalling seemingly inconsequential details:

Не интересовали по-настоящему Марину Ивановну семейная, деловая и пр. стороны и нашей жизни. Она довольно долго не могла запомнить, что я преподаватель русского языка и русской литературы, а не немецкого языка и немецкой литературы и т.п. и т.д. . . . И ведь, не запоминая, казалось бы, главного в нашей с Николаем Яковлевичем жизни, Марина Ивановна помнила, что я когда-то погладила дерево, что плохо ориентируюсь в переходах метро, что боюсь ездить в лифте («Таня! Я Вас еще нежно люблю за то, что боитесь лифта, что была мне вчера, как подарок, как дар в руки»-- из письма от 17 ноября 1940 года). М. Цветаеву привлекали в людях какие-то ей одной понятные черты.

(Kvanina 200)

Marina Ivanovna was not really interested in the family, business, etc. sides of our life. She quite often could not recall that I was a teacher of Russian language and literature, and not German language and literature, etc., etc. . . . And indeed, not remembering, it would seem, what was the most important in my life with Nikolai Yakovlevich, Marina Ivanovna remembered that I had once stroked a tree, that I was bad at navigating metro passageways, that I was afraid of riding in elevators (“Tanya! I still love you tenderly for being afraid of the elevator, that was given to me yesterday, like a present, like a gift in the hand”—from a letter on November 17, 1940). M. Tsvetaeva was attracted to people by various traits understandable to her alone.

To a modern-day reader it is quite evident—particularly in light of the letters Kvanina includes from her in the memoir—that Tsvetaeva was attracted to her. Kvanina seems primarily puzzled by these letters. Desperate sounding notes from Tsvetaeva that discuss how much she

wishes she and Kvanina were neighbors or exhorting her friend to call her inspire only confusion. Kvanina repeats over and over in the memoir that she does not understand what it is about her that makes her so interesting to Tsvetaeva, which is perhaps even further exacerbated by the fact that, externally, Tsvetaeva did not seem to actually be interested in any aspect of Kvanina's life. Tsvetaeva's gifting of the manuscript of *Повесть о Сонечке* to Kvanina and her husband and her telling Kvanina that she *во многом похожа на Сонечку, но только на повзрослевшую Сонечку* [greatly resembled Sonechka, only a grown-up Sonechka] were not treated as the romantic gestures they were surely meant to be, and instead only confused Kvanina more. Either that or the young woman was incapable of accepting any connotations of same-sex romance. The Soviet mental space she occupied did not contain such concepts or even the language to describe them, and if Kvanina had at any point understood the nature of Tsvetaeva's feelings for her, she would likely have been far too frightened to acknowledge them, especially given the fact that the Great Purges had ended only a year before.

Despite her persistent efforts, Tsvetaeva, at least at some point, seems to have understood that any kind of romance with Kvanina was an impossible dream. In a long letter from November 17, 1940, Tsvetaeva talks at length about another young woman poet who she had recently run into and had lunch with. None of this would be strange except for her insistence that she “felt nothing” for this woman despite them objectively having a lot in common, and that all her feelings are for Kvanina instead:

Таня, у меня с той вчерашней гостьей общие корни, и мы одного возраста, и она тоже пишет стихи, и—Таня, я к ней ничего не почувствовала, а к Вам—с первого раза—все.

(Kvanina 199)

Tanya, yesterday's guest and I have the same roots, and we are the same age, and she also writes poetry, and—Tanya, I felt nothing for her, and for you—from the first moment—I felt everything.

Yet Tsvetaeva is perhaps not as naïve about the situation as Kvanina's memoir sometimes makes her appear. She seems to have been well aware that Kvanina was incapable of recognizing anything romantic in her words, and probably never would. Statements like "*Вы мне нужны как хлеб...Нет, мыслю—как воздух,*" [I need you like bread... No, I think—like air] from later on in this same letter, which seem to so clearly indicate Tsvetaeva's infatuation, likely were treated by Kvanina as words of friendship. Perhaps Kvanina assumed such sentiments were a function of Tsvetaeva being a poet. The letter continues with the following statement:

Но об этом у нас разговор еще впереди. А, может быть, его никогда не будет—не удастся, не задастся—быть. Если бы у меня с Вами был какой-нибудь долгий—час—на воле, в большом густом саду (были у меня такие сады!)—этот разговор бы был невольно, неизбежно, силой вещей, силой всех деревьев сада, а так, в четырех стенах, на каких-то этажах...

Здесь на такое нет ни времени, ни места.

(Kvanina 199)

But our conversation about this is still ahead. And maybe it will never happen—will not succeed, will not work out. If you and I had some kind of long hour at liberty, in a big dense garden (I once had such gardens!)—this conversation would take place involuntarily, inevitably, by the force of things, by the force of all the trees in the garden, but the way things are now, within four walls, on some kind of apartment floors...

Here there is neither a time, nor a place for such a thing.

We can assume that the conversation Tsvetaeva is speaking about would be one in which she more directly stated her love and physical attraction to Kvanina. (Though who knows what else she could have said; Tsvetaeva tells Kvanina she loves her in multiple letters). And although she describes the ideal circumstances under which this conversation would occur, in a beautiful garden full of trees, she seems to recognize that this place and the moment for this conversation do not exist in the Soviet world. The gardens she recalls from her childhood home in pre-Revolutionary Russia are contrasted with the ubiquitous communal apartments which remain a

symbol of Soviet living conditions even today. In a world where there was often barely enough space to live in, the conversation Tsvetaeva wanted to have simply could not fit.

Soviet society simply pretended that same-sex attraction did not exist, and as a result, for most people it, in fact, did not. Although action was taken when queer people checked themselves into mental institutions, Soviet society seems to have designed itself in such a way that this kind of “abnormality” was only fathomable to those who were experiencing it. In America in the 1940s the closet was enforced because revealing same sex attractions meant losing the respect of those around you, or being forcibly admitted to a mental hospital. In the Soviet Union it appears that the closet did not really exist at all, because the country was in such deep denial about such attractions existing. After all, they were anathema to the Soviet project, so how could they even arise among good Soviet citizens? As can be seen in Laurie Essig’s book, the only people who really seemed to be aware of such things were the people experiencing these kind of attractions and medical professionals—the only information available about treatment and diagnosis were in manuals circulated within specific institutions. This sort of society is definitely in contrast to that in which Tsvetaeva conducted her affair with Parnok, or even with Sofia Holliday in the immediate aftermath of the 1917 revolutions. Even if same-sex attraction in the early part of the twentieth century was most often fetishized and misunderstood, at least there was an awareness of these issues in high society circles. In the world of Tatyana Kvanina, none of these signals appear to have registered at all. The conversation which Tsvetaeva imagines is impossible not just in Moscow, but also in the Soviet space of Kvanina’s mind. Even if the two of them were to leave the Soviet Union, same-sex attraction would likely still be alien, completely unfathomable.

Having examined Tsvetaeva and Parnok as queer women both during their relationship and outside of it from a biographical point of view, the next chapter will endeavor to do the same through the lens of their poetry. Looking at their poems directly will give insight into how Parnok and Tsvetaeva viewed both themselves and their same-sex partners.

Охотник или добыча: Queer Experience in the Poetry of Tsvetaeva and Parnok

Both Tsvetaeva and Parnok produced a significant amount of poetry chronicling their relationship. In absence of more direct accounts of what transpired between them, such as diary entries or letters,⁶ their creative work is the best source for determining what they struggled with and how they viewed themselves as partners, among other things. Although even autobiographical poetry is to a certain extent, fictional, it frequently portrays emotions more honestly than correspondence or memoir; this is particularly true in the case of Tsvetaeva's *Подруга* cycle, because she never intended it to be published, or perhaps even seen, by anyone else. Examining the poetry Tsvetaeva and Parnok produced at this point in their lives gives us a biographical point of departure for comparing their earlier poetry, in which they explore their respective identities as poets and queer women, to their later works, in which these themes were either expanded on or partially suppressed.

As has been noted in the previous chapter, Parnok and Tsvetaeva were at very different places when it came to their identities as queer women. Although she was conscious of her attraction to women, Tsvetaeva had never been in a relationship with a woman until her pursuit of Parnok, and likely began the relationship at least in part to consummate and explore these attractions. Parnok, on the other hand, had experienced a number of romances with women, including one with Nadezhda Polyakova⁷ which lasted from June 1902 to the early part of 1907. Although most of her relationships were short-term, she frequently lived with her partners, and was not conducting any of these romances on the sly: she was “out.” This vast gap in experiences is visible in the very different interests the two women display when treating the topic of their

⁶ Such accounts may exist, but have not been published. It was not possible during the research phase for this thesis to visit either the Tsvetaeva or Parnok archives in Moscow, and so conclusions that could be reached by studying primary documents will have to be left for further stages of the project.

⁷ I have been unable to determine whether or not Sophia Polyakova and Nadezhda Polyakova were related.

relationship in poetry. As one might expect, Tsvetaeva is concerned with “fitting in”—finding the role she wants to play in the relationship and embodying it to the highest degree. By contrast, Parnok is more directly interested in her craft. She is rediscovering how to write genuinely about love for other women after years of writing (under the influence of her ex-husband, Volkenshtein) the type of allegorical poetry she thought would get her published.

The second poem in the *Подруга* cycle is considered to be Tsvetaeva’s poetic reaction to her first sexual experience with Parnok, which was, consequently, also her first sexual experience with a woman. In it she considers for the first time that she has no context to help her understand this relationship, despite having set it in motion. This idea can be seen in the following stanza, and the last two lines of the poem:

Кто был охотник? –Кто—добыча?
Все дьявольски-наоборот!
Что понял, длительно мурлыча,
Сибирский кот?

Who was the hunter? –Who, the prey?
Everything so devilishly topsy-turvy!
What did the Siberian cat understand,
Constantly purring?

[...]

[...]

Так и не знаю: победила ль?
Побеждена ль?

Even now I don’t know: did I conquer?
Was I conquered?

At the time of her relationship with Parnok, Tsvetaeva was already a wife and mother. Her poetry about her husband rarely seems concerned with what sexual role she is playing in their relationship, likely because it was a given. Models for heterosexual relationships—and even heterosexual sex—were everywhere, whereas information as basic as what lesbian sex might look like was absent from society and culture. Even if Tsvetaeva may have had access to artistic works like Gustave Courbet’s *Le Sommeil* (1866), an image of two naked women in bed provides no more information than the fact that women can be naked in bed together. Descriptions of lesbianism in literature rarely described anything more explicit than intense kissing. And as a result, Tsvetaeva likely went into this first sexual encounter with no information other than what

she had gained from her experience with her husband. And the questions she takes away can be boiled down to asking how *this* sexual experience lines up with ones she has had before, or perhaps more naively: “Who was the man?”

It seems reasonable to assume that in her marriage Tsvetaeva thought of Sergei Efron as the *охотник* and herself as the *добыча*. There is a certain irony in this interpretation given that most biographical accounts suggest that Tsvetaeva was the initiator of their courtship, as well as the one who hastened to turn it into something more permanent, but nevertheless Russian society saw them as a normal couple inhabiting the correct roles, and they likely saw themselves that way as well, or at least were invested in retaining that positive third-party view of themselves. Although her life sometimes reads as one radical, over-the-top action after the other, Tsvetaeva seems to still have been limited by the standard set of gender roles, which she overlaid over the world and her own actions. For example, when she and her family were living as émigrés abroad in Czechoslovakia, she insisted on doing all household chores, despite her inexperience (resulting from her pre-Revolution upper-class status) and the fact that this work perpetually interfered with her poetry. Her correspondence with friends shows that she despised housework, but at the same time she sincerely believed that “it looks ugly” for a man to “do woman’s work” (Karlinsky 132) and refused to ask her husband for help.

What is strange about this adherence to standards is that, in many ways, Tsvetaeva still defied the traditional gender roles in which she often claimed to participate and with which she largely seems to agree. Regardless of how she viewed the situations internally, any third party observer would state that Tsvetaeva was the *охотник* in most of her relationships, whether they were platonic, romantic, or her signature mixture of both. No one could say exactly what went on between them sexually, but even with Parnok, Tsvetaeva was the active pursuer and initiator of

the relationship, taking action to seduce Parnok away from Iraida Albrecht. However, her same-sex relationship with Parnok does seem to have brought to her attention that her actions did not always conform to standard gender roles, most likely because, in a partnership consisting of two women, the roles are not pre-set. It is easy to assume you act as a woman should in heterosexual situations. In a sexual encounter between two women, the question of who is acting the part of the woman, who is the “conquered” is immediately subverted. Answering the question requires an assumption that sexual roles are not inherent to a given gender, but are rather created and performed, which is one of the foundations of modern-day gender theory.⁸

Подруга 2 is made up primarily of questions, which could be interpreted as a sign of Tsvetaeva’s sexual inexperience. However, what is most interesting about *Подруга 2* is not that it exposes Tsvetaeva as a neophyte in sexual matters, but that it is ambiguous. Tsvetaeva sets up a series of opposing roles, but gives no indication as to which one she wishes to inhabit. Would she rather *победить* or be *побеждена*? She does not even establish the “norm,” writing that the experience was *дьявольский-наоборот*, without giving the reader a starting point. That Tsvetaeva is able to identify and think critically about sexual roles without assigning herself one is noteworthy—it is perhaps more productive to view her as someone musing on new options that have opened up than an ingénue who does not properly understand the mechanics of sex. We can see the former in later sections of *Подруга* as well: Tsvetaeva tries on a number of roles for size, both for herself and Parnok. However, this need for there to be set roles in the relationship suggests a deeply internalized biphobia⁹ on Tsvetaeva’s part. She seems to believe that, if she

⁸ For more information on this concept, see Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990).

⁹ Biphobia as distinct from homophobia describes stigma against those who identify as bisexual or whose sex practices could be described as bisexual. This stigma often focuses on the “impossibility” of such a dual sexuality, claiming that the person in question is either gay or straight and just “messing around” with whichever sex would make them fall outside those rigid categories. This idea is also frequently associated with bisexual people being seen as sexually promiscuous to a degree that is socially unacceptable. Internalized biphobia often involves the denial and suppression of one sexual polarity by the person in question.

can typify their relationship, find literary and historical precedents, she is also somehow legitimizing it.

This roleplay however, is characteristic of Tsvetaeva's personality even outside of romantic matters. She considered the Polish noblewoman Marina Mnisek her "historical alter ego" (Burgin 124) and seems to have been trying on for size the devoted love of German romantic poet Bettina von Arnim for Karoline von Guenderode (this relationship gained a female cult following in Russia around this time) before even beginning a relationship with another woman (Burgin 102, 122). Neither was Parnok the only love in Tsvetaeva's life that inspired role assignment—the number of poems in which she turns Sergei Efron into a fairy-tale hero, a paragon for the White Army, are also numerous.¹⁰ What is unique about the poetic role-play in *Подруга* is that, for the first time, Tsvetaeva seems to be critically engaged in determining how *she* fits into the relationship—which role she is supposed to, or wants to play.

What is attractive to Tsvetaeva in Parnok is her androgyny, or more accurately, that she is a fusion of both womanly and boyish qualities. In *Подруга* 9, Tsvetaeva describes the moment she first saw her. She writes that Parnok's voice is attractive because it has *чуть хрипотцой цыганскою* [a bit of gypsy huskiness], and discusses Parnok's androgynous traits in the following stanza:

В каждой жилке и в каждой косточке	In every vein and every little bone
В форме каждого злого пальчика, --	In the form of each of your wicked fingers,--
Нежность женщины, дерзость мальчика.	Is the tenderness of a woman, audacity of a boy.

A similar idea is shown in the epithet which concludes the poem. The concept of Parnok's facial features resembling Beethoven's is repeated from *Подруга* 8:

Незнакомка с челом Бетховена!	Stranger with Beethoven's brow!
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¹⁰ See for example the three cycles of poems she composed while he was at the front in 1921: "Разлука" [Separation], "Георгий" [St. George], and "Благая весть" [Good Tidings].

In all these lines, Tsvetaeva remarks on the fact that Parnok is a woman but has masculine qualities—a husky voice, a forehead like Beethoven. Most notable perhaps is Tsvetaeva’s description of Parnok as both *женщина* and *мальчик*, which seems to be a very intentional subversion of the expected *мужчина*. Tsvetaeva thinks of what is “male” in Parnok as being younger, more innocent, than what is “female” in her. *Подруга* 10 which is a narrative poem describing essentially the same event, the party at which they first met, mixes gender roles. The beginning of the poem pays marked attention to the how the two women are dressed, a stereotypically feminine focus:

Мы были: я—в пышном платье
Из чуть золотого фая,
Вы—в вязаной черной куртке
С крылатым воротником.

We were: I in a splendid dress
Of golden silk,
You—in a knitted black jacket
With a winged collar.

There is a sense in which the obsessive eye for detail throughout this poem feels like a “missed connection” ad in a newspaper, a requiem for a moment before the speaker knew things would (at least for awhile) work out, and stanzas like the above especially emphasize this mood. The next stanza features Parnok characterized as being outside the social norms of gender—her face is *без малейшей краски* [without the least bit of makeup] (another rather “feminine” detail for the speaker to notice), and the stanza after that contains a description of her androgyny quite similar to that found in *Подруга* 9:

И лоб Ваш властолюбивый,
Под тяжестью рыжей каски,
Не женщина и не мальчик,—
Но что-то сильнее меня!

And your powerloving brow
Under the heaviness of your redhaired helmet,
Not a woman and not a boy,
But something stronger than me!

The *что-то сильнее меня* seems to suggest that Tsvetaeva is conceiving of the relationship in heterosexual terms, with Parnok not being especially different from a man the speaker might pursue. Yet as the poem goes on it becomes clear that Tsvetaeva is thinking of this encounter not

as a woman pursuing a woman, or a woman pursuing a man, but as *a man pursuing another man*.

When Parnok and Tsvetaeva are introduced by an unnamed *кто-то*, this individual says:

«Знакомтесь же, господа».

“Get acquainted, gentlemen.”

Admittedly this is said *в шутливом тоне* [in a joking tone], but the tension between the speaker and the addressee throughout the poem seems to imply that whether or not the “someone” means the statement as a joke, it strikes the speaker as accurate. We might expect that the speaker would consider Parnok a *господин* given the description of her that immediately precedes this section, but the implication is that the introducer is referring to both of them as gentlemen, and that the speaker/Tsvetaeva is wholly unperturbed by this comparison. The speaker’s plea to Parnok in the penultimate stanza cinches the idea that Tsvetaeva conceives of this as an encounter between two “men”:

Я помню—над синей вазой—
Как звякнули наши рюмки.
"О, будьте моим Орестом!",
И я Вам дала цветок.

I remember—above the blue vase—
How we clinked our glasses.
“O, be my Orestes!”
And I gave you a flower.

Orestes was well-known in ancient Greek mythology for his intense friendship with his cousin, Pylades. The relationship between them was considered in the ancient Greek literary tradition to have been homoerotic if not openly homosexual, and the rhetorician Lucian held them up as the apotheosis of homoerotic friendship in his dialogue “Erotes.” Thus the fact that the speaker/Tsvetaeva asks Parnok to “be [her] Orestes” suggests that she wants a similar homoerotic friendship, and also that, perhaps because she has no other model to hold this experience up to, she is thinking along the lines of traditional Greek notions of love between two men (Burgin 104). Yet, at the same time, the gestures which follow this statement in the poem are markedly effeminate. The speaker/Tsvetaeva offers Parnok a flower, and, in response, Parnok takes a handkerchief out her purse and apparently on purpose, drops it. The way in which

Tsvetaeva recreates this scene poetically exposes the extent to which her attraction to Parnok transcended her preconceived notions of gender and romance.

Although she casts herself in a male role often throughout the cycle, Tsvetaeva rarely goes so far as to simply call herself a boy, and skirts the issue by identifying herself with specific historical and fictional characters. *Подруга 5* describes an incident where she sees Parnok and another woman sledding and ends as follows:

Ваш маленький Кай замерз,
О Снежная Королева.

Your little Kai has frozen,
O Snow Queen.

This set of characters perhaps best represents the dynamic Tsvetaeva perceived between herself and Parnok. The comparison of Parnok to the villainous Snow Queen of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale about a little girl who must save her best friend Kai from the Snow Queen's power, is clearly meant to be a bitter remark about how "cold" she is, but is much more interesting in that Tsvetaeva has chosen to take the metaphor further and has aligned herself with the little boy Kai from the story as well. Although we have seen the word *мальчик* associated with Parnok as well, her "woman-ness" as well as her "adult-ness" seem to have more credence in the system Tsvetaeva has set up. She is never a boy without an additional feminine qualifier, such as *женщина*. Parnok can act like a little boy at times, but Tsvetaeva *is* a little boy, having answered the questions she laid out in *Подруга 2* by stating that her role is to be a sort of page to a more powerful, female figure (Burgin 105-6).

Tsvetaeva's insistence on inhabiting the role of a child recalls the ancient Greek notion of *paidierastia*, a word which carries a very negative connotation in the present day,¹¹ but during the classical Greek period described a socially acceptable practice by which a younger, teenaged boy had a sexual relationship with an older, experienced man. The younger partner gained knowledge

¹¹ The Russian words *недепаст* [pederast] and the derived slang term *нудеп* are frequently used as homophobic slurs (Essig 115).

and experience (this was for him, to a certain extent, an ongoing initiation ritual), and the older one the opportunity to have a relationship with someone young and beautiful. The fact that Tsvetaeva's father was a specialist on Greek and Roman culture, together with her reference to Orestes in *Подруга* 10, makes it reasonable to assume she was aware of this historical practice, and perhaps used it as a blueprint for her own experience, lacking any other same-sex model. This idea is further corroborated by the fact that many of the *Подруга* poems are tinted with bitterness about Parnok's age, perhaps stemming from a sense of exploitation on Tsvetaeva's part. *Подруга* 4 ends on this note:

—Я Вашей юностью была,
Которая проходит мимо.

--I was your youth,
Passing you by.

Similarly, the second half of *Подруга* 14 poses the question of what a thirty-year-old woman would want with the soul of the child Tsvetaeva sees in herself:

Есть женщины. —Их волосы, как шлем,
Их веер пахнет гибельно и тонко.
Им тридцать лет. —Зачем тебе, зачем
Моя душа спартанского ребенка?

There are women. —Their hair, like a helmet
Their fan smells deadly and delicate.
They are thirty. —Why, why do you need
My Spartan child's soul?

Diana Burgin makes the argument that Tsvetaeva's insistence on remaining childish was the insurmountable obstacle in the relationship between her and Parnok, and that her refusal to be more mature sexually was what ended things. Burgin describes Tsvetaeva's "spoiled-child hostility" and states that the younger woman "simply could not come to terms with the adult sexuality Parnok aroused in her and satisfied" (122). This author is more inclined to think the break occurred as a result of miscommunication over fidelity. Parnok was annoyed by Tsvetaeva's inability to choose between her and Sergei Efron, and Tsvetaeva seems to have viewed Parnok's list of past lovers as a symbol of how replaceable she was. However, Tsvetaeva certainly struggled a great deal with this new experience of sexuality, which is evident simply

from the drastic shifts in tone that occur over and over in the *Подруга* cycle. There are as many poems in which she is ecstatic about the relationship as there are in which she is bitter. In addition, the cycle contradicts itself at several points. *Подруга* 5 depicts Tsvetaeva's controlled jealousy at Parnok's other romantic interests, but *Подруга* 11 expresses complete acceptance of the inability of either of them to fully commit to monogamy, and seems to suggest that the ability to love many at once is preferable to loving only one.

However, Tsvetaeva's interest in remaining child-like however, may have as much to do with her poetic persona as her romantic/sexual one. Despite only being twenty-two at the beginning of their relationship, she already had three collections of poems to her name, all of which included childhood and childhood nostalgia as a central theme. Reviews of her first book, *Вечерный альбом* [*Evening Album*] (1910), generally celebrated this aspect of her work, finding it refreshing and interesting in a poetry world dominated by the ideas of men. Her second and third books, however, received somewhat cooler reviews (Karlinsky 38), seeming to find Tsvetaeva's insistence on once again poetically revisiting childhood to be a sign that she was unable to be a dynamic poet, regardless of how innovative she might be in other arenas, such as in form. In his review of her first book, Briusov expressed distaste at the fact that the poems were "all a bit insipid" and were too full of "saccharine emotionality" (Karlinsky 34). In Nikolai Gumilev's review, he calls Tsvetaeva "inherently talented, inherently original," and celebrates what is "new" in the book, such as her "intimacy of tone," and the "delight in the trivia of everyday life" (Karlinsky 33-4). However, one can imagine that the immature features of Tsvetaeva's poetry, which he claimed were unimportant ("It does not matter that...the epigraph is taken from Rostand, and the word "mama" is almost never absent from its pages. All this only suggests the young age of the poetess"), began to stand out more when they remained in her

poetry long after she was a sixteen-year old girl (Karlinsky 33). Thus, Tsvetaeva's conception of herself seems to have been challenged on all fronts—she could no longer play the romantic roles or use the same poetic personas on which she had built her work. Her clinging to the role of *мальчик* in these poems seems to be a temporary compromise, a way of trying out new options for moving into the adult world in a series of poems she had no intention of publishing.

Parnok seems to have been aware of Tsvetaeva playing the role of a boy child to a certain extent, and perhaps even to have participated in encouraging it,¹² but there are a number of things that occupy Tsvetaeva in regards to this identity that do not seem to concern Parnok at all. Parnok is not interested in subverting gender identity in her poems—in calling herself or Tsvetaeva by male nouns, or choosing to describe their actions as being in any way masculine. The most marked contrast between Tsvetaeva's "boyish" poems and Parnok's work on their relationship can be found in her poem #59,¹³ in which Tsvetaeva is tenderly identified as the opposite: a little girl. There is an element of role-play in this poem because the first line is taken from a fragment of Sappho in which she addresses her own younger lover, but where Tsvetaeva's role-play in poems seems intended to justify the piece through literary or historical precedent, Parnok seems to be thinking about how little has changed in all that time, that the way a woman loves a woman in 1915 is not at all different from how a woman loved a woman in 600 BC:

«Девочкой маленькой ты мне предстала неловкою»

“Like an ungraceful little girl you appeared before me”

The line is the epigraph, first line of the poem, and the last line of each of the three stanzas. The speaker describes the line as piercing her *стрелой* [like an arrow], because it is so

¹² See the final lines of *Подруга* 7.

¹³ The numbering of Parnok's poems is taken from the *Собрание стихотворение* [*Collected Poems*] edited by Sophia Polyakova.

full of truth. Ultimately this poem seems to be a contemplation of how romantic affection and maternal tenderness intersect in Parnok's feelings for the addressee. The following line from the first stanza suggests that she is unable to settle on one feeling or the other, alternating between feeling as though the addressee is her daughter and being attracted to her as a lover in rapid succession:

Нежностью матери страсть в бешеном сердце сменя

Passion trading places with a mother's tenderness in my frantic heart

This poem was both one of the most lauded and also the most controversial of Parnok's first collection because it so openly describes an affectionate relationship between two women, one of whom was significantly younger. Yet, at the same time, the view of people who tried to downplay these homosexual implications—claiming that the poem described a tender friendship or mentorship between Parnok and Tsvetaeva and nothing more—is also perhaps understandable in light of this piece, which simply absents sex from the relationship. The conceit of the poem is that the speaker is admiring the addressee as she sleeps, and while this is an action performed by mothers and lovers alike, the speaker's concerns are with the little girl's face and hair, rather than more sexualized parts of the body. The poem's tone is also difficult to read because the power dynamic shifts a number of times. The second stanza suggests that the speaker is being strung along—a kiss is mentioned that is avoided *уловкою* [by way a trick], and the addressee is pleased with the speaker *как обновкою* [like with a new thing] and other material goods. The speaker is more of an accessory, a plaything, than a beloved. Yet the first line of the third stanza turns the dynamic in the opposite direction, describing how the addressee becomes totally malleable, is like “soft gold” under the “blow of love.” And towards the end, the shift turns the power back over to the addressee, thanking her simply for existing in the speaker's life. In this

poem and in others where Parnok also develops the concept of Tsvetaeva as child, she is a spoiled, capricious one. While parts of Tsvetaeva's *Подруга* cycle express bitterness when considering Parnok's age, that she was an "old" woman (though her "age" might be more a result of her progressing Grave's disease, which frequently kept her homebound), Parnok is exasperated that, despite her poetic genius, Tsvetaeva lacks experience and maturity in relationships.

In Parnok's *Сонет* [Sonnet] from May of 1915, the first stanza describes the addressee as being a tomboy, a little girl who would rather watch the boys at their games than play with her dolls:

Следила ты за играми мальчишек,
Улыбчивую куклу отклоня.
Из колыбели прямо на коня
Неистовства тебя стремил излишек.

You followed the games of little boys,
Having renounced the smiling doll.
From the cradle straight to the steed
A surplus of rage directed you.

As has been discussed previously, Tsvetaeva clearly takes pleasure in inhabiting the role of tomboy, and it is equally clear that Parnok does not find this particular trait endearing. Parnok appears to attribute the same *властолюбивые вспышки* [power-loving flashes] which made her so energetic in childhood as the cause of Tsvetaeva's coldness towards her now, noting that she means very little to her lover in the end, and also invokes the historical alter egos mentioned previously in this chapter, Bettina Arnim and Marina Mnizsek. In the next stanza Parnok readily admits that she does not match up to Tsvetaeva in any way, and that she likely never will:

Гляжу на пепел и огонь кудрей
На руки, королевских рук щедрей,—
И красок нету на моей палитре!

I look on the cinder and fire of her curls
At her hand, more generous than a queen's,—
And there are no paints at all on my palette!

The direct reference to visual arts certainly suggests that Parnok feels primarily inferior to Tsvetaeva as a poet (she lacks the colors Tsvetaeva has), but we also know that she was very much aware of the age gap between them and did not perceive herself as being especially

beautiful. Parnok is simply Parnok—she has no historical alter ego; she is not a flame who will go down in history (or so she clearly thinks). At the same time, however, the speaker seems relatively unbothered by this status. There may be no colors on her palette, but she also does not have the negative qualities ascribed to the addressee earlier in the poem. She does not have whatever it takes to be Tsvetaeva’s wild counterpart, her Goethe or her False Dmitri, but she also appears to be unconcerned with living up to such a role, and in the final stanza simply wonders where Tsvetaeva will be going next, and who her counterparts will be, if they even exist:

Ты, проходящая к своей судьбе!	You, who are advancing towards your fate!
Где всходит солнце, равное тебе?	Where is a sun rising, that is equal to you?
Где Гете твой и где твой Лже-Димитрий?	Where is your Goethe? Your False Dimitri?

In many ways this poem sounds like Parnok’s swan-song: that she has given up on her poetic career and is unable to do much else other than watch younger, more talented poets succeed.

However, Parnok’s greatest work was still yet to come, and this very poem would end up being published in her first collection, called simply *Смуха* [*Poems*], at the end of that year.

Parnok’s poetic interest lay not in roles, but rather in reexamining, as a mature woman, what a lesbian love poem can look like in the Russian language and in rejuvenating her craft as a whole. Unlike the poetic prodigy Tsvetaeva, Parnok had been published only once in a magazine, and, free from the expectations of her ex-husband, she no longer felt the need to suppress content. Knowing that the themes on which she wanted to publish would be viewed as controversial, it is no surprise that her work during this time is highly focused on the problems of gender created by the Russian grammatical system; it takes work and skill to leave ambiguous the sex of the speaker or their addressee. Yet the latter is exactly what Parnok takes pleasure in doing throughout these poems, taking steps to keep the information that the relationship is between two women from the reader only to coyly reveal it at the last moment. Or, alternately, in

her poem *Газелы* [Ghazals], the gender of the beloved is disguised by directing the poem's attention to another feminine noun:

Утишительница боли - твоя рука,
Белотелый цвет магнолий - твоя рука.

Pain's quieter—your hand,
Whitebodied shade of magnolia—your hand.

Зимним полднем постучалась ко мне любовь,
И держала мех соболий твоя рука.

Love knocks in the midday of winter,
And holding a sable fur—your hand.

Ах, как бабочка, на стебле руки моей
Погостила миг - не боле - твоя рука!

Ah, like a butterfly, touched down on the stem of
My hand for a moment—no longer—your hand!

Но зажгла, что притушили враги и я,
И чего не побороли, твоя рука:

And what my enemies and I extinguished,
And what we didn't conquer was set on fire by
your hand:

Всю неистовую нежность зажгла во мне,
О, царица своеволий, твоя рука!

All the fiery tenderness within me was set aflame,
O, empress of self-wills, by your hand!

Прямо на сердце легла мне (я не ропщу:
Сердце это не твое ли!) - твоя рука.

Straightaway laid on my heart (I won't complain:
Isn't this heart yours?)—your hand.

The poem addresses the beloved's hand instead of the beloved directly, and thus avoids gendering them. Yet the word *рука* is feminine, and, as a result, all the elements of grammar which would normally gender the romantic interest, past-tense verbs, adjectives, etc., also appear as feminine. No Russian reader, particularly one in the 1910s, could point to this poem as “gay” or scandalous, but, for a reader in the know, the references seem obvious, and even meant to mock the possibly disapproving eye. The poem is clearly addressed to a beloved person, but a reader's desire to know this person's gender is consistently thwarted. The line which begins *O, царица* does suggest that the beloved is female, but on further examination this figure seems to be more or less figurative—she has control over the wills of the world, and it seems unlikely that she would stoop to be the speaker's lover. Alternately, this characterization falls in line with how Tsvetaeva is described in *Сонет*, since a tsarina is perhaps the figure most representative of a spoiled, but powerful, little girl. Even so, the tsarina's role in the poem is oblique enough that an

early twentieth-century reader would both have to be familiar with Parnok's work and attuned to grammar to detect connotations of lesbianism—an idea which is supported both by the lack of controversial criticism on this poem, and the fact that it has not come under scrutiny by other Parnok scholars.

Tsvetaeva seems to have been uninterested in these types of grammatical tricks, or at the very least, grew bored of them quickly. She toys with the concept briefly in the first poem written in the *Подруга* cycle. The addressee is consistently characterized as *вы*, the formal second person address in Russian, so all declensions and conjugations appear in the plural. However, in the very last line Tsvetaeva reveals the following about this love interest:

За эту ироническую прелесть,	For this ironic charm,
Что Вы—не он.	That you—are not he.

Russian's lack of articles makes the last line of this poem ambiguous—Tsvetaeva could be revealing that the addressee is female, or simply referring to a specific “he,” perhaps a lover from the past. On the surface it might appear unusual that Tsvetaeva's poetry is less concerned with the gendering of speaker and addressee than Parnok because Tsvetaeva was much more interested in, and conflicted over, the fact that their relationship was same-sex. However, her interest in androgyny and ambiguities like the one above also make her poetry more universal, relatable for both men and women. For Parnok, being with a woman was neither something new, nor something she had a need to question. After her disastrous marriage with Volkenshtein, she seems to have understood that if she was going to be involved romantically with another person, that person was going to be a woman. As a result, her interest in teasing out these ideas poetically might have felt to her repetitive or unnecessary. However, it is likely that this wordplay had more to do with her work than her own feelings about her sexuality. As mentioned before, Tsvetaeva's *Подруга* cycle was never intended for publication, and in fact remained

unpublished until Sophia Polyakova's book on the relationship, *Незакатные оны дни: Цветаева и Парнок*, published by Ardis in 1979.¹⁴ Parnok seems to have realized during the course of her and Tsvetaeva's relationship that her poetry was still worthwhile, that her ex-husband and his literary politics had been holding her back from opportunities for publication more so than her own supposed limitations. The interest in and playing with the gender requirements of Russian grammar must have been to a certain extent a marketing strategy, a way of saying what she wanted to say without coming on too strongly and thus jeopardizing a poem's ability to be published. This is also probably a reason why her poems seem to stay away from topics such as sex or descriptions of the lover's body.

Parnok's one poem from this period that does address the sexual aspect of her and Tsvetaeva's relationship also takes an alternate route. *Алкеевы строфы* [Alcaic Strophes], jealously addresses Tsvetaeva's husband Sergei Efron rather than Tsvetaeva herself. Perhaps because the relationship was coming to an end, in this poem Parnok "lets loose," and writes much more openly and bitterly. At first the piece almost seems to be a love poem to Efron, going into great detail about his beautiful appearance and using high register Russian, such as the word *лик* [countenance]:

Два синих солнца под бахромой ресниц,
И курди темнотруйным вихрем,
Лавра славней, нежный лик венчают.

Two blue suns under an eyelash fringe,
And curls like a flowing black whirlwind,
More glorious than laurels, they wreath your
gentle face.

She even calls him *Адонис сам* [Adonis himself], but then reveals that this man is not her lover or even someone she admires, but is her *предшественник* [predecessor]. Sergei Efron may have been the one to start drinking the goblet of Tsvetaeva (*Ты начал кубок, ныне врученный мне*),

¹⁴ This title is from Tsvetaeva's poem: «В оны дни ты мне была, как мать...» [In those days you were like a mother to me...] dated April 26, 1916, which can be read as Tsvetaeva/the speaker looking back on her relationship with Parnok. This work is not examined in the present study, but it will be a topic of analysis in further research.

but Parnok's poem asserts that whatever impression he may have made on her does not matter, because:

Не ты, о юный, расколдовал ее.	Not you, o youth, broke her spell.
Дивясь на пламень этих любовных уст,	Marveling at the flame of that loving mouth
О, первый, не твое рениво,—	It is not your name that will be jealous, o first one--
Имя мое помянет любовник.	My name will linger on the lover's lips.

We can assume that the bitter note of this poem comes from the fact that the relationship was coming to an end, and that not only was Tsvetaeva thinking of leaving Parnok, but of returning to her husband. Although the speaker of the poem is “pressing herself to the lips of her beloved woman,” she clearly does not expect her to stay, and is already thinking ahead to the lovers that will follow for this *любимая* [beloved]. The description of his beauty that takes up the first stanza may to a certain extent be self-denigration; by the time this poem was composed Parnok's Grave's disease had already taken a serious toll on her appearance and lifestyle, and she was older than Sergei Efron by eight years. What she is unable to make up for in beauty however, she makes up for in sexual fire, and she taunts Efron by pointing out that any lover who takes pleasure in Tsvetaeva's newfound passion and experience will have Parnok to thank rather than him. Although it is not stated directly in the poem, we might assume that Parnok is deriving the most *schadenfreude* from the fact that Efron will be forced to think of her during his own romantic encounters with Tsvetaeva.¹⁵

¹⁵ This poem is also the only evidence that backs up Karlinsky and Burgin's assertions that Tsvetaeva had never orgasmed before her relationship with Parnok. Both of the biographers say almost the same thing: “[Tsvetaeva] had apparently never experienced real passion or been capable of orgasm” (Burgin 105) and “[Tsvetaeva's] affair with Sophia Parnok awakened her sensuality and gave her the kind of erotic fulfillment that she did not get [...] from her marriage with Sergei Efron” (Karlinsky 52). The primary source material for both of them was Sophia Polyakova's book, which makes no such claim. In email correspondence, Burgin admits that this idea about Tsvetaeva's sex life is a surmise, and is only able to cite Алкеевы строфы as evidence (Burgin, “Question About Tsvetaeva”). The line [не] ты, о юный, расколдовал ее certainly suggests that this conclusion is correct, but it is worth restating that this poem was written during a break-up, and it is definitely possible that Parnok is exaggerating out of bitterness. Taking at face value a poem that evaluates a rival in love's sexual prowess seems incredibly naïve. Although there is plenty of circumstantial evidence that can be used in support of this surmise—Tsvetaeva's marriage was certainly unhappy, basic statistics about the rate of female orgasm in lesbian relationships versus heterosexual ones (Garcia et al, 2645), the fact that female orgasm was of even less concern in the 1910s than it is now—there is nothing

Perhaps the most efficient way to examine Tsvetaeva and Parnok's relative poetic approaches to their relationship is to compare *Подруга 7* and Parnok's poem #9, both of which describe an impromptu visit to a market and monastery in the city of Rostov. Here, Parnok's reserve in describing romantic events is at its strongest; the first stanza follows a basic abcabc rhyme scheme and simply describes the atmosphere and contents of the monastery. It is not even until the second stanza that the speaker and her addressee are brought in:

Ах, от смерти моей уведи меня,
Ты, чьи руки загорелы и свежи,
Ты, что мимо прошла, раззадоря!
Не в твоём ли отчаянном имени
Ветер всех буревых побережий,
О, Марина, соименница моря!

Ah, lead me away from death,
You, whose hands are tan and fresh,
You, arousing whatever you go past!
Is it not the wind of all stormy shores
In your despairing name,
O Marina, namesister of the sea.

Although the poem definitely identifies the addressee as Marina, the fact that their relationship is romantic is barely even hinted at. As in some of Parnok's other poems, the dynamic invoked appears to be between someone young and old, with the speaker hoping that this wilder, younger woman will lead her away from instead of towards death. This also reflects a significant difference in how Parnok and Tsvetaeva interpret this venture. For Tsvetaeva it is clearly all fun and games; for instance *Подруга 7* describes in detail how she ate six waffles, that Parnok is so taken by an icon Tsvetaeva promises to steal it for her, and even includes a depiction of their loud sex back at the monastery hostel:

Как в монастырскую гостиницу
-- Гул колокольный и закат --
Блаженные, как именинницы,
Мы грянули, как полк солдат.

How in the monastery hostel
--the bell-ringing roar of sunset--
Blissful, like birthday girls,
We thundered, like a troop of soldiers.

The only place where the concerns of the two poems seem to overlap is in this stanza, in which Tsvetaeva teases Parnok about her age:

definitive enough to make this supposition a fact. At best we can say that it is likely Tsvetaeva had never orgasmed before her romance with Parnok.

than a *любовница*, especially in a poem that is otherwise so biased towards the feminine—even the eagle in the fifth line is specifically marked as an “eagle-hen,”¹⁶ rather than the more standard *орел*. Perhaps Parnok is taking a stance on certain gendered Russian nouns of profession in the same way poets like Tsvetaeva and Akhmatova actively rejected the word *поэтесса*, finding it to be demeaning, but in this case is highlighting the equal merits of all lovers.

Most significant in Parnok’s mature work however, is her frank discussion of queer sex practices, in particular cunnilingus, making herself far more clear than even Tsvetaeva did in her privately written *Подруга* cycle. This sort of frankness in poetry was not unheard of in Europe and in the United States (consider the work of Djuna Barnes or poems like Gertrude Stein’s “Lifting Belly,” which was actually written while Parnok and Tsvetaeva were together); but in Russia this openness about sex between women was completely new. In the same way that Stein frequently uses euphemisms to describe cunnilingus and orgasm (“lifting belly,” “having a cow”),¹⁷ Parnok signals her references with the word *людоед*. The word is almost universally translated as “cannibal,” but in Russian its morphemes break down to mean simply “person-eater,” and it is therefore easily appropriated for other purposes. We can see the word at work in the somewhat amusing eight-line poem below (#241), which uses images of eating to convey a blatantly sexual message:

Моя любовь! Мой демон шалый!
Ты так костлява, что, пожалуй,
Позавтракав тобой в обед,
Сломал бы зубы людоед.

My beloved! My tricky demon!
You’re so bony, that if you please
A cannibal eating you for luncheon,
Would break his teeth while he was crunchin’.

Но я не той породы грубой
(К тому ж я несколько беззуба),
А потому, не тебе,

But I am not from such a rude breed
(And anyways a little toothless),
So therefore, without being an annoyance

¹⁶ This is also possibly a reference to the *испуганная орлица* in Pushkin’s famous 1826 poem *Пророк*.

¹⁷ It should be noted that Stein’s phrases were employed as a way to deconstruct language rather than a means of concealing references to gay sex.

Губами буду есть тебя!

I'll eat you with my lips.

Although Parnok does not equate herself with the cannibal that appears in the first stanza, she suggests that what they do is related, and that she is able to provide the better deal in this particular situation. There are many ways in which this poem reads as a clever joke, which is also a tribute to how Parnok has grown as both a poet and a person since her relationship with Tsvetaeva. Where she was humble and looked to Tsvetaeva as her poetic better in *Сонет*, here she somehow manages to be self-effacing (by referring to her lack of teeth¹⁸), and to promote herself as an excellent lover simultaneously. The poem seduces by charm, rather than by compliment—Parnok boasts of her own skill far more than she compliments Vedenyeva.

The differences that appear both in Parnok and Tsvetaeva's work and in their comfort with their sexuality only widened after their separation and as time passed. As one might expect from the role-obsessed poems Tsvetaeva produced for the *Подруга* cycle, roles also comprise a large part of the homophobic backlash she expresses outwardly in her 1932 essay "Lettre á l'Amazone" [Letter to the Amazon]. The essay takes the format of a response letter to the 1920 book of the famed Parisian salon madame and open lesbian Natalie Clifford Barney *Pensées d'une Amazone* [Thoughts of an Amazon]. Among other political themes, the book comments on historical accounts of homosexuality and uses them as a justification for lesbian love. Tsvetaeva has relatively little to say in regards to critiquing the actual content of Barney's work (saying cryptically that there is "only one" gap in it); she instead latches onto the fact that Barney has failed to consider the desire of all women, in particular young women, to have a child (noting that the "nonmaternal" exist but are of course, rare exceptions among women), and runs off with it in a completely different direction. Tsvetaeva imagines that all lesbian relationships take place between an older woman and a younger woman, and that these two "types" ultimately have

¹⁸ Grave's disease causes dry mouth, which advances tooth decay much quicker than in the average person.

conflicting desires within relationships. For a modern reader (and perhaps even an especially open-minded and discerning one at the time) such a vast generalization is clearly a fallacy. Polyakova notes that the relationship in the essay seems quite similar to Tsvetaeva and Parnok (49-50), and scholars have since surmised that this work is an open letter to Parnok as much as, if not more so, than it is to Natalie Barney. It echoes many moments already found in the *Подпись* cycle (Burgin 115). Although Parnok is not mentioned by name, the details that shape what Tsvetaeva wants us to see as the “average” lesbian couple are much more reminiscent of her 1914-16 relationship than anything else. She seems to have barely taken the experience of other queer women into account at all; what Tsvetaeva thinks of as the “normal case” with women is too specific to fit her generalization of lesbians, let alone women as a whole, and is clearly simply a description of how she felt:

“I consider the normal case...a young woman who is wary of man and drawn toward woman and wants a child. She who between the man ([...] the [...] enemy) and the *repressive* beloved, ends up choosing the enemy.”
(Tsvetaeva 2013, 126)

The situation Tsvetaeva outlines in the essay is the following: the normal case she describes above (herself) is a young woman who, being uninterested in men, will eventually come to love another woman. This woman, according to Tsvetaeva’s strange reasoning, will inevitably be older. The older woman is able to sustain herself solely on love for the younger woman, a love which as Tsvetaeva describes it, is not just sexual or romantic but also maternal: “The older one, she does not need a child, she can be mother to her love.” The younger woman however, desperately wants a child of her own. And because she is in love with the older woman she will conceive the desire to have a child by this woman, a biological impossibility much more acute than it is now. Since such a thing can never happen, a wedge will be driven between

the couple, and the younger woman will eventually leave the older for the detested man, “the enemy,” in order to get the child she so desperately needs, which is “inevitably a son” (Tsvetaeva 2013, 123, 130).

It is worth noting from the first that there are a number of elements in the scenario Tsvetaeva describes that are at odds with her experience, or seem to drastically mix timelines. She had been married to Sergei Efron for two years when her relationship with Parnok began, and pursued him enthusiastically, so it seems strange for her to describe average women, a group that clearly includes herself, as repulsed by men. Perhaps she is generalizing more specific problems—as has already been discussed, Tsvetaeva seems to have been unfulfilled in her marriage, and the description of men as “indifferent” and “enemy” in this essay may be more about men being unwilling to take the time to consider sex from a woman’s perspective or treating women’s emotions as serious rather than as some kind of misogyny inherent to all women. It is also reasonable to surmise that Tsvetaeva’s deep and faithful love for her husband was perhaps more directed at her romanticized view of what he represented—a man, a soldier, the intelligentsia, the White Army—than at him as a person; this seems especially true given what an underwhelming figure he seems to be in comparison not just to his wife, but to almost all the other figures whom she pursued or was pursued by romantically throughout her life. The desperate need for a child that shapes Tsvetaeva’s whole argument also seems strange in light of the fact that she already had her first daughter, Ariadne (with whom she got pregnant immediately after her marriage to Efron), when she met Parnok. In her memoirs, Ariadne even recalls visiting Parnok’s apartment with her mother as a child and playing with Parnok’s pet monkey:

...У мамы есть знакомая, Соня Парнок—она тоже пишет стихи, и мы с мамой иногда ходим к ней в гости. Мама читает стихи Соне, Соня читает

стихи маме, и я сижу на стуле и жду, когда мне покажут обезьянку. Потому что у Сони Парнок есть настоящая живая обезьянка, которая сидит в другой комнате на цепочке.

(Polyakova 50)

...Mama has an acquaintance, Sophia Parnok—she also writes poems, and Mama and I sometimes go to visit her. Mama reads poems to Sonya, Sonya reads poems to Mama, and I sit on a chair and wait for them to show me the monkey. Because Sophia Parnok has a real live monkey who sits in the other room on a chain.

These details show that the vague, generalized version of her relationship with Parnok in this essay is whitewashed: Tsvetaeva depicts the character that stands in for her as being much more virginal and inexperienced than she was in reality. The strangest inaccuracy that appears in the essay is Tsvetaeva's assertion that the children who result from these failed relationships between women are always sons because "nature, impatient to make her rights known, [is] loathe to linger on the detour of a girl" (*Amazon* 130). She did in fact become pregnant right after her final break with Parnok (which Burgin suggests was meant to be a sort of passive-aggressive revenge (143)), but with her second daughter, Irina. Her son Georgy would not be born for another eight years, after Tsvetaeva had left the country and emphatically put Parnok behind her (he was in fact born in the wake of a different break-up, this one with a man, former military officer Konstantin Boleslavovich Rodzevich). Again, Tsvetaeva has clearly based these events on her own experience but taken a great deal of "poetic" license—she seems to think that debasing reality with archetypes will strengthen her argument.

Tsvetaeva is less concerned with strictly enforced gender in regards to the roles she sets out, but the same stigmas are there. The younger woman is depicted as "normal," having the healthy, womanly desire to have a child (even if that desire also involves having a child with another woman). The older woman, Parnok, is somehow deviant because she does not have this desire for a child, or has funneled this desire into relationships with other women. The older

woman reads as predatory because she constantly has to replace her young woman, as they all inevitably leave her to have children. Tsvetaeva, though, goes out of her way to defend the older woman as not being predatory, disdaining the idea that she is “a bird of prey” or “even a vampire,” and instead describing her as “a severe and noble being whose only crime is to foresee [that the younger woman will leave]” (Tsvetaeva 2013, 129). However, the younger women are not gay, do “not belong to the tribe, or are it only for a short while” (Tsvetaeva 2013, 133). Their attraction to this older woman is not enough to mark them as sexually deviant, perhaps because Tsvetaeva assumes that, after the younger woman has settled down with a husband and a child, she will never desire this type of relationship with a woman ever again. This idea appears especially hypocritical given that Tsvetaeva remained attracted to other women, and even made advances on them, for the rest of her life, as has been shown in the first chapter. The story this essay tells seems to be her way of reconciling her own cognitive dissonance, especially given how frequently it contradicts itself—she describes lesbian relationships as perfect entities and at the same time denounces them as unnatural. The way Tsvetaeva has constructed the scenario in the essay often aligns more with the homophobic, third-party descriptions of her relationship with Parnok than those in the *Ποδρῶνα* cycle.

Despite all this, though, there are many ways in which the statements Tsvetaeva makes in the essay are quite radical. Most surprising is the section in which she debunks each of the arguments people might raise for why same-sex relationships are “wrong.” What people think does not matter to her. She finds the idea that one type of romance is more unethical than another absurd because “by simply loving another with that sensual love, I betray the One who died on the cross of the other love for me and for my neighbor,” and she thinks that the law means nothing as long “as thousands of young men are driven to kill each other and are blessed for

doing so” (Tsvetaeva 2013, 128-129). The only argument which she finds to be insurmountable is, of course, that of nature, which goes back to the desire for a child, which she believes will overcome any same-sex romance between two women, regardless of how strong it may be. Yet at the same time Tsvetaeva seems incredibly bitter about this idea, which she seems to consider a fact of nature. She refers to love between women as “a perfect entity” with maternal desire being the only breach in it. “[Resisting] the temptation of a man” is far from impossible, and Tsvetaeva almost seems to dismiss the idea of attraction to men as anything but baby-providers out of course. The child is “the only assailable point...that which saves the cause of man. And of humanity” (Tsvetaeva 2013, 127).

In conclusion, the two women used very different means to describe and handle their queer experiences. Although she was more chaste and less direct in her descriptions of romance love, Parnok found freedom in writing about the love between two women, even if she had to use every conceivable grammatical trick to do so. By contrast, Tsvetaeva’s poetry focuses on asking questions and finding precedents for same-sex love so she can determine how best to proceed. Looking at their poetry in terms of how much it displays or does not display internalized homophobia shows the two of them on opposite trajectories. Parnok’s poetry may have started out much more reserved than Tsvetaeva’s, but her ability to accept a romantic relationship between two women at face value allowed her to progress further and write more freely on this theme. By the end of her life Parnok was writing quite frankly about topics like cunnilingus, and had even abandoned her former grammatical gender-bending. Instead, her love poems simply contain speakers and addressees that are both female, without caveats, disguises, or explanations. Tsvetaeva on the other hand, remained hung up on the idea of roles in same-sex relationships for the rest of her life, and her more honest *Подпыза* cycle would, as she struggled to exonerate

herself, devolve into the stereotypes of same-sex relationships in “Letter to the Amazon.”

However, there is significant memoir evidence that the woman speaking in the essay is not one who is “reformed” from non-normative attraction in any sense, but one grappling with deeply ingrained biphobia. Tsvetaeva reached great heights of genius in a number of arenas, but coming to terms with her bisexuality, poetically or otherwise, can now be evaluated as one of her failures. By contrast, Parnok seems to have died a woman unperturbed by her attraction to other women. Her avoidance of internalized homophobia, especially later in life, might be attributed to her poetry. Parnok is at her best when writing about love between women, however sexual, romantic, or platonic that love may be. With her art so bound to her sexuality, and poetry something so native to her being, Parnok seems to have been more capable of accepting who she was and ignoring the stigma and invisibility placed on her by both Russian and Soviet society.

Afterword

Tsvetaeva and Parnok's relationship transpired almost exactly one hundred years ago. In that time Russia has changed more as a nation than most countries do in three or four centuries. It became the Soviet Union, then Russia again, its borders expanded and then contracted, and both as a result of imperialism and of immigration, its population continues to grow more and more diverse. These immense geopolitical changes are indisputable, but what is less certain is the extent to which Russian culture has changed in the past hundred years. Of specific concern to this project is how attitudes towards sexuality in Russia have evolved, if at all. As was noted early on in this thesis, tsarist anti-sodomy laws were overturned in the wake of the 1917 Revolution, but once the 1933 law against sex between men was instated, it remained in effect until sixty years later when President Yeltsin signed a bill eliminating it (Essig 13). Laws against lesbianism have never been a part of the legal code, and same-sex attraction in women was always treated as a mental health issue rather than a criminal one. Although the 1993 elimination of the anti-sodomy law and the 1999 declassification of homosexuality as a mental illness perhaps initially made it seem like the post-Soviet state would be a friendlier place for queer-identified people, the 2013 anti-gay propaganda law suggests that, under the Putin regime, the discourse has shifted back in the opposite direction. Gay sex may not be illegal, but showing support for non-traditional relationships is, and the vague language of the law allows for it to be interpreted as strictly or as loosely as prosecutors like.

Russian queer culture began to develop a more solid presence in the early 1990s, and is in many ways not analogous to the development of Western queer culture at all. Relationships between women tended to be conducted in a way quite similar to the scenario Tsvetaeva describes in "Letter to the Amazon." Age was not a factor, but couples were broken down as

being a *лесбиянка/натуралка* [lesbian/natural woman] pair. This distinction can be compared to the butch/femme culture of America in the 1950s, but was even more strict and extreme. The *натуралка*, who would correspond to the younger woman in Tsvetaeva's essay, was considered a straight woman. Despite being in a relationship with another woman, nothing the *натуралка* did was sexually deviant because to her the *лесбиянка* might as well be a man. She was "innocent," despite the fact that (with the rare exception of cases where the *лесбиянка* had undergone a sex-change operation) this "straight" woman was aware that her *лесбиянка* partner was at least, biologically, a woman. In addition, what went on between these couples sexually probably would not have stood up to any kind of standard of normalcy at the time, but regardless, only the *лесбиянка* was considered to have a deviant identity in these relationships. In contrast to the feminine *натуралка*, the *лесбиянка* both dressed and acted like a man, and in some cases thought of themselves as being a man. Some of these women were even issued new documents describing them as male—this "cure" for deviant sexuality was far more common than sex change operations during Soviet times. Medically as well as socially, little or no differentiation was made between a woman who desires other women and a transman. The line between them was completely blurred, which reinforced the strictness of the *лесбиянка* role. If you were a woman who actively desired other women than you were much more man than woman, and regardless of how you may have felt about your identity, you were expected to dress and play that part (Essig 77-79).

In order to determine how the experience of a queer woman poet in Russia today might differ or not from the experience of Parnok and Tsvetaeva, or from the queer culture of twenty years ago, I developed a set of interview questions which I sent out to contemporary poets chosen from Russia's only lesbian poetry anthology to date *Ле Лю Ли : Книга лесбийской*

любовной лирики [Le Liu Li: The Book of Lesbian Love Lyrics]. The questions cover not only the poets' professional interests, but also topics like identity, publishing history, and the existence and usefulness of various "communities" within Russia today. I was able to conduct three interviews with four poets over e-mail, two of which are discussed in this afterword.¹⁹ This work has only just begun, and I hope to conduct many more interviews in the future.

The interviews covered here are with Sveta Litvak and Snezhana Ra, both poets who have been in print multiple times. Litvak has several books to her name and has been publishing since the eighties. She describes herself as a very *разнообразный* [multifaceted] poet, wearing both the hats of avant-gardism and traditionalism in her work. Snezhana Ra is a little younger, and while Litvak primarily describes her poetic interests in terms of formal elements, Ra focuses on content, saying her poetry is:

...о сложности гендерной самоидентификации в современном мире, о бисексуальности человеческой природы, о том, что на самом деле единственное желание любого живого существа – любить и быть любимым.

...about the difficulty of self-defining gender in the modern world, about the bisexuality of human nature, and about what is really the single cherished wish of any living creature—to love and be loved.

Ra strongly identifies as bisexual, and Litvak says she has had romantic experiences with women and that lesbian themes occur in both her poetry and prose, but considers herself to be heterosexual, saying: "*по большей части я отдаю предпочтение мужчинам* [for the most part, I prefer men]."

Given the implications of the 2013 anti-gay propaganda law, I was particularly interested in learning whether poets were having trouble publishing, either in the past or currently. Both

¹⁹ The third interview was filled out by a couple recommended to me by Sveta Litvak. The two women said themselves that they *мало подходят* the criteria set out by my questions, and their answers were either so short or so vague that it was not worth including them here.

Litvak and Ra claimed that at no point had lesbian content kept poems from achieving publication in Russia, or kept the two of them from achieving success as poets. Litvak says that she has had far more problems publishing poems that contained *ненормативной лексики* [non-normative language, i.e. profanity], then ones that depict non-normative relationships. Ra also says that she has never encountered censorship based on politics and ideology in Russia, in regards to erotic themes or obscene language, and furthermore says that the idea that there are strict restrictions on creativity and expression is *очень сильно преувеличена* [very much exaggerated]. In this sense then, publishing on queer themes in Russia today does not seem especially different from how it was during Parnok and Tsvetaeva's time, and in fact, seems more possible. After all, it was only the institutionalization of Socialist Realism that halted Parnok's publishing, and nothing comparable to that strict standard is present in Russia today. The fact that Tsvetaeva never published *Подруга* is most likely a comment on her own internalized biphobia; it is very possible she would have been able to publish the work, but that would have meant marking herself and her poetry in a way she likely did not want to be marked.

Both Ra and Litvak say that there is an LGBT community in Russia, but are not interested in being part of those circles. Ra specifically says that she is not interested in these groups because she does not want to communicate with and befriend people solely based on *сексуальный признак* [a sexual badge]. She finds that trying to write poetry purely on the grounds of sexual orientation is “stupid and dangerous” because it is rarely able to move beyond the theme of being LGBT, and she calls what results from this thinking *какая-то гетто-поэзия* [some kind of ghetto-poetry]. She also says that, in her experience, the best work on lesbian themes is produced by women with more “traditional” orientations—that is, bisexual, or primarily preferring male partners. At the same time however, both she and Litvak have a very

positive attitude towards the Festival of Lesbian Love Lyrics (FLLL), which was organized by Nastya Denisova and Nadya Diaghileva twice in 2007 and then again in 2008 before it became too difficult to organize events in the face of homophobic hostility. The *Ля Лю Лу* anthology mentioned earlier was published in the wake of the second festival, and the thirty writers featured in it all had poems read at the festival. Ra lives in Bulgaria and, since she sent in poems to be read at the festival, she is unable to comment on the atmosphere of the event. However, she praises the anthology, calling it a worthwhile selection of poems, despite her earlier statement that there are few works of “gay” poetry that are especially meaningful for literature. In the same way, though Litvak states that the idea of a gay group does not interest her, it is evident that she very much enjoyed both her experiences with FLLL, and says that she thinks there needs to be a place for such events because they present opportunities both for research and socializing.

Although it is difficult to know what the future may bring for the queer poets of Russia, right now it seems that there has primarily been improvement since Parnok and Tsvetaeva were living. Russia may lag behind in its treatment of queer people, but there are plenty of Russians thinking just as seriously about issues of gender and sexuality as are people elsewhere, in more “enlightened” countries. Snezhana Ra’s idea that essentializing art based on sexuality is both limiting and a slippery slope is similar to conversations that are currently happening in Western scholarship. Perhaps the best things that have happened in the decades since Parnok and Tsvetaeva’s relationship are the most simple. The world has become a more open place, and, as a result, people are more open-minded. So even if Sveta Litvak claims that homosexuality was brought to Russia from the West, a view that would be considered offensive in America, that does not mean she is not open to the experience, or to going to a festival organized around queerness. And both women have opinions on Parnok and Tsvetaeva, which suggests that their

poetry and their relationship still has meaning for the women poets of today. Litvak never warmed up to Tsvetaeva, but finds Parnok's work intriguing. Ra's opinion is the exact opposite: she thinks Tsvetaeva is a poetic genius, but that Parnok is incredibly mediocre, though does note that she has a "curious" biography. The queer women poets in Russia today have access to other queer poets, whether through foremothers like Parnok and Tsvetaeva, the internet, or through social networks in Moscow, St. Petersburg, or other cities. Whether or not Snezhana Ra or Sveta Litvak want to identify themselves as part of a community, those networks exist, and hopefully will be allowed to grow stronger in the future.

Газелы

Утишительница боли—твоя рука,
Белотелый цвет магнолий—твоя рука.

Зимним полднем постучалась ко мне любовь,
И держала мех соболий твоя рука.

Ах, как бабочка, на стебле руки моей
Погостила миг—не боле—твоя рука!

Но зажгла, что притушили враги и я,
И чего не побороли, твоя рука:

Всю неистовую нежность зажгла во мне,
О, царица своеволий, твоя рука!

Прямо на сердце легла мне (я не ропщу:
Сердце это не твое ли!)—твоя рука.

Ghazals

Pain's quieter—your hand,
Whitebodied color of magnolia—your hand.

Love knocked on my door at wintery midday,
And holding a sable fur—your hand.

Ah, like a butterfly, touched down on the stem of
My hand for a moment—no longer—your hand!

And what my enemies and I extinguished,
And what we didn't conquer was set on fire by your hand:

All the fiery tenderness within me was set aflame,
O, empress of self-wills, by your hand!

Straightaway laid on my heart (I won't complain:
Isn't this heart yours?)—your hand.

#59

*Девочкой маленькой
ты мне предстала неловкою.
Сафо*

“Девочкой маленькой ты мне предстала неловкою”—
Ах, одностишья стрелой Сафо пронзила меня!
Ночью задумалась я над курчавой головкою,
Нежностью матери страсть в бешеном сердце
сменя,—
“Девочкой маленькой ты мне престала неловкою”.

Вспомнилось, как поцелуй отстранила уловкою,
Всмонились эти глаза с невероятным зрачком...
В дом мой вступила ты, счастлива мной, как
обновкою:
Поясом, пригоршней бус или цветным башмачком—
“Девочкой маленькой ты мне предстала неловкою.”

Но под ударом любви ты—что золото ковкое!
Я наклонилась к лицу, бледному в страстной тени,
Где словно смерть провела снеговою пуховкою...
Благодарю и за что, сладостная, что в те дни
“Девочкой маленькой ты мне предстала неловкою”.

#59

*Like an ungraceful little girl
you appeared before me.
Sappho*

“Like an ungraceful little girl you appeared before me”—
Ah, one line of Sappho pierced me like an arrow!
At night I mused over your curly little head,
Passion trading places with a mother’s tenderness in my
frantic heart,—
“Like an ungraceful little girl you appeared before me”—

It came to me, how you avoided a kiss by a trick,
I recalled those eyes with an impossible pupil...
Into my house you stepped, happy with me, as with a new
toy:
As with a belt, a fistful of beads, or colorful sandals—
“Like an ungraceful little girl you appeared before me”—

But you under the blow of love—what soft gold!
I bent towards your face, pale in passionate shadows,
Where it was as if death had rubbed a snowy puff...
I thank you even for that, sweet one, that in those days
“Like an ungraceful little girl you appeared before me.”

Алкеевы строфы

И впрямь прекрасен, юноша стройный, ты:
Два синих солнца под бахромой ресниц,
И кудри, темнотруйным вихрем,
Лавра славней, нежный лик венчают.

Адонис сам предшественник юный мой!
Ты начал кубок, ныне врученный мне,—
К устам любимой приникая,
Мыслью себя веселю печальной:

Не ты, о юный, расколдовал её.
Дивясь на пламень этих любовных уст,
О, первый, не твое ревниво,—
Имя моё помянет любовник.

Alcaic Strophes

And indeed you, slender youth, are lovely:
Two blue suns under an eyelash fringe,
And curls like a flowing black whirlwind,
More glorious than laurels, they wreath your gentle face.

Adonis himself is my young forebear!
You started the goblet, which today was handed over to me,—
Pressing myself to the beloved's lips,
I cheer myself with one sad thought:

Not you, o youth, broke her spell.
Marveling at the flame of that loving mouth,
It is not your name that will be jealous, o first one,—
My name will linger on the lover's lips.

Сонет

Следила ты за играми мальчишек,
Улыбчивую куклу отклоня.
Из колыбели прямо на коня
Неистовства тебя стремил излишек.

Года прошли, властолюбивных вспышек
Своею тенью злой не затемня
В душе твоей—как мало ей меня,
Бетиина Арним и Марна Мнишек!

Гляжу на пепел и огонь кудрей,
На руки, корлевских рук щедрей,—
И красок нету на моей палитре!

Ты проходящая к своей судьбе!
Где всходит солнце, равное тебе?
Где Гете твой и где твой Лже Димитрий?

Sonnet

You followed the games of little boys,
Having renounced the smiling doll.
From the cradle straight to the steed
A surplus of rage directed you.

The years passed, without having darkened with
Wicked shadows any of the power-loving flashes
In your soul—how little of me there is for it,
Bettina Arnim and Marina Mniszek!

I look on the cinder and fire of her curls
At her hand, more generous than a queen's,—
And there are no paints on my palette!

You, who are advancing towards your fate!
Where is a sun rising, that is equal to you?
Where is your Goethe? Your False Dimitri?

#241

Моя любовь! Мой демон шалый!
Ты так костлява, что, пожалуй
Позавтраква тобой в обед,
Сломал бы зубы людоед.

Но я не той породы грубой,
(К тому ж я несколько беззуба),
А потому, не теребя,
Губами буду есть тебя!

#241

My beloved! My tricky demon!
You're so bony, that if you please
A cannibal eating you for luncheon
Would break his teeth while he was crunchin'.

But I am not from such a rude breed,
(And anyways a little toothless),
So therefore, without being an annoyance,
I will eat you with my lips.

#244

Вижу: ты выходишь из трамвая—
 вся любимая,
Ветер веет, сердцу навевая—
 вся любимая!
Взгляда от тебя не отрываю—
 вся любимая!
И откуда ты взялась такая—
 вся любимая?
Ты—орлица с ледников Кавказа, —
 где и в зной зима,
Ты, неся сладчайшую заразу, —
 не больна сама,
Ты, любовнику туманя разум, —
 не сойдешь с ума,
Все пять чувств ты опьяняешь сразу, —
 вся любимая!

#244

I see you descending from the trolley—
 utterly beloved,
The wind blows, wafting to the heart—
 utterly beloved,
I do not tear away my gaze from you—
 utterly beloved!
And where have you come from like that—
 utterly beloved?
You are an eagle from the glaciers of the Caucasus,
 where even in heat it's winter,
You, carrying the sweetest infection,—
 and not sick yourself,
You, fogging up your lover's reason,—
 won't lose your mind,
You intoxicate all five senses at once—
 utterly beloved!

#9

Смотрят снова глазами незрячими
Матерь Божья и Спаситель-Младенец.
Пахнет ладаном, маслом и воском.
Церковь тихими полниться плачами.
Тают свечи у юных смиренниц
В кулачке окоченелом и жестком.

Ах, от смерти моей уведи меня,
Ты, чьи руки загорелы и свежи,
Ты, что мимо прошла, раззадоря!
Не в твоём ли отчаянном имени
Ветер всех буревых побережий,
О, Марина, соименница моря!

#9

They look anew with sightless eyes
Mother of God and the Savior-Child.
It smells of incense, oil, and wax.
The church fills up with quiet weeping.
The candles melt by the young meek woman
In the numb and stiff little fist.

Ah, lead me away from my death,
You, whose hands are tan and fresh,
You, arousing whatever you go past!
Is it not the wind of all stormy shores
In your despairing name,
O, Marina, name-sister of the sea!

Подруга 1

Вы счастливы? -- Не скажете! Едва ли!
И лучше -- пусть!
Вы слишком многих, мнится, целовали,
Отсюда грусть.

Всех героинь шекспировских трагедий
Я вижу в Вас.
Вас, юная трагическая леди,
Никто не спас!

Вы так устали повторять любовный
Речитатив!
Чугунный обод на руке бескровной-
Красноречив!

Я Вас люблю. -- Как грозная туча
Над Вами -- грех --
За то, что Вы язвительны и жгучи
И лучше всех,

За то, что мы, что наши жизни -- разные
Во тьме дорог,
За Ваши вдохновенные соблазны
И темный рок,

За то, что Вам, мой демон крутолобый,
Скажу прости,
За то, что Вас -- хоть разорвись над гробом!
Уж не спасти!

За эту дрожь, за то-что -- неужели
Мне снится сон? --
За эту ироническую прелесть,
Что Вы -- не он.

Girlfriend 1

Are you happy? --You don't say! Hardly at all!
Oh, so it's better now? Sure, fine!
Too many, it seems, are those you kissed;
This is where my sadness comes from.

I see within you all the heroines
Of Shakespeare's tragedies.
You, tragic young lady,
No one saved.

You are so tired of repeating loving
Pitter-patter!
A cast-iron bracelet on your bloodless hand—
It's eloquent!

I love you. --I'm like a thunder cloud
Above you—a sin—
For the fact that you are cutting and burning
And best-looking of all,

For the fact that we, that our lives, are different
In the shadow of the roads,
For your inspired temptations
And dark fate,

For the fact that to you, my steep-foreheaded demon,
I say "forgive me,"
For the fact that even standing above your tomb
It's impossible to save you!

For this trembling, for the fact that—am I
Really dreaming?—
For this ironic charm,
That you—are not a he.

Подруга 2

Под лаской плюшевого пледа
Вчерашний вызываю сон.
Что это было? -- Чья победа? --
Кто побежден?

Все передумываю снова,
Всем перемучиваюсь вновь.
В том, для чего не знаю слова,
Была ль любовь?

Кто был охотник? -- Кто -- добыча?
Все дьявольски-наоборот!
Что понял, длительно мурлыча,
Сибирский кот?

В том поединке своеволий
Кто, в чьей руке был только мяч?
Чье сердце -- Ваше ли, мое ли
Летело вскачь?

И все-таки -- что ж это было?
Чего так хочется и жаль?
Так и не знаю: победила ль?
Побеждена ль?

Girlfriend 2

Under the plush rug's caress
I summon yesterday's dream.
What was it? --Whose conquest?—
Who was conquered?

I reconsider everything again,
Am tortured by everything anew.
In that, for which I don't know the word,
Was there love?

Who was the hunter? --Who, the prey?
Everything so devilishly topsy-turvy!
What did the Siberian cat understand,
Constantly purring?

In that self-willed duel
Which of us was being played with like a ball?
Whose heart—was it yours, or mine
That flew at a gallop?

And all the same—what *was* that?
What I so want and regret?
Even now I don't know: did I conquer?
Was I conquered?

Подруга 4

Вам одеваться было лень,
И было лень вставать из кресел.
-- А каждый Ваш грядущий день
Моим весельем был бы весел.

Особенно смущало Вас
Идти так поздно в ночь и холод.
-- А каждый Ваш грядущий час
Моим весельем был бы молод.

Вы это сделали без зла,
Невинно и непоправимо.
-- Я Вашей юностью была,
Которая проходит мимо.

Girlfriend 4

You didn't feel like getting dressed,
And didn't feel like getting up from your chair.
--And each of your future days
Would be made happy by my happiness.

It especially embarrassed you
To go out so late into the night and cold.
--And each of your future hours
Would be made young by my happiness.

You did this without malice,
Innocently and irreparably.
--I was your youth,
Passing you by.

Подруга 5

Сегодня, часу в восьмом,
Стремглав по Большой Лубянке,
Как пуля, как снежный ком,
Куда-то промчались санки.

Уже прозвеневший смех...
Я так и застыла взглядом:
Волос рыжеватый мех,
И кто-то высокий -- рядом!

Вы были уже с другой,
С ней путь открывали санный,
С желанной и дорогой, --
Сильнее, чем я -- желанной.

-- Oh, je n'en puis plus, j'etouffe-
Вы крикнули во весь голос,
Размашисто запахнув
На ней меховую полость.

Мир -- весел и вечер лих!
Из муфты летят покупки...
Так мчались Вы в снежный вихрь,
Взор к взору и шубка к шубке.

И был жесточайший бунт,
И снег осыпался бело.
Я около двух секунд --
Не более -- вслед глядела.

И гладила длинный ворс
На шубке своей -- без гнева.
Ваш маленький Кай замерз,
О Снежная Королева.

Girlfriend 5

Today, at about the stroke of eight,
Headlong down Bolshaya Lubyanka,
Like a bullet, like a snowball,
A sled flew past, headed somewhere.

Already laughter has rung out...
I managed to freeze with a glance
An auburn fur of hair,
And someone tall—beside you!

You were already with another,
Had cleared the sledding road with her,
With the desired and dear one,--
Desired more than I am.

Oh, I can't anymore, I'm suffocating—
You cried at the top of your lungs,
Carelessly tossing
Your fur coat upon her.

The world is cheerful and the evening bold!
Purchases fly from the muff...
That is how you dashed into the snowstorm,
Glance to glance and coat to coat.

And it was the cruelest revolt,
And the snow fell down white.
About two seconds—
No longer—I looked after them.

And smoothed the long hairs
On my coat—without rage.
Your little Kai has frozen,
O Snow Queen.

Подруга 7

Как весело сиял снежинками
Ваш -- серый, мой -- соболий мех,
Как по рождественскому рынку мы
Искали ленты ярче всех.

Как розовыми и несладкими
Я вафлями объелась -- шесть!
Как всеми рыжими лошадками
Я умилялась в Вашу честь.

Как рыжие поддевки-парусом,
Божась, сбывали нам тряпье,
Как на чудных московских барышень
Дивилось глупое бабье.

Как в час, когда народ расходится,
Мы нехотя вошли в собор,
Как на старинной Богородице
Вы приостановили взор.

Как этот лик с очами хмурыми
Был благостен и изможден
В киоте с круглыми амурами
Елисаветинских времен.

Как руку Вы мою оставили,
Сказав: "О, я ее хочу!"
С какою бережностью вставили
В подсвечник -- желтую свечу...

-- О, светская, с кольцом опаловым
Рука! -- О, вся моя напасть! --
Как я икону обещала Вам
Сегодня ночью же украсть!

Как в монастырскую гостиницу
-- Гул колокольный и закат --
Блаженные, как именинницы,
Мы грянули, как полк солдат.

Как я Вам -- хорошеть до старости --
Клялась -- и просыпала соль,
Как трижды мне -- Вы были в ярости!
Червонный выходил король.

Как голову мою сжимали Вы,
Лаская каждый завиток,
Как Вашей брошечки эмалевой
Мне губы холодил цветок.

Girlfriend 7

How cheerfully with snowflakes shone
Your coat—grey, mine—a sable fur,
How in the Christmas market we
Looked for the brightest ribbons of all.

How I wolfed down
Pink and savory waffles—six!
How my heart melted over all the little red horses
In your honor.

How a redhaired peasant woman in sail-like clothes
Swearing to God, sold us rags,
How the silly old wives wondered at
The strange Moscow ladies.

How in the hour, when people disperse
We reluctantly entered the cathedral,
How your glance stopped
On the old Blessed Virgin.

How that face with gloomy eyes
Was serene and worn
In the icon case with round cupid's
From the time of Elizabeth.

How you stopped my hand,
Saying: "Oh, I want her!"
With what care did you place
In the candlestick—a yellow candle...

--O worldly hand with an opal
Ring! --O, all my bad luck!
How I promised you I'd steal
The icon this very night!

How in the monastery hostel
--The bell-ringing roar of sunset--
Blissful, like birthday girls,
We thundered, like a troop of soldiers.

How I swore to you to get prettier
Until old age—and spilled salt,
How three times—you were furious!
I was dealt the King of Hearts.

How you squeezed my head
Fondling each curl,
How the flower of your enamel brooch
Chilled my lips.

Как я по Вашим узким пальчикам
Водила сонною щекой,
Как Вы меня дразнили мальчиком,
Как я Вам нравилась такой...

How I drew your narrow finger
across my sleepy cheek,
How you called me a boy,
How you liked me that way...

Подруга 9

Ты проходишь своей дорогою,
Руки твоей я не трогаю.
Но тоска во мне -- слишком вечная,
Чтоб была ты мне -- первой встречною.

Сердце сразу сказала: "Милая!"
Все тебе -- наугад -- простила я,
Ничего не знав, -- даже имени! --
О, люби меня, о, люби меня!

Вижу я по губам -- извилиной,
По надменности их усиленной,
По тяжелым надбровным выступам:
Это сердце берется -- приступом!

Платье -- шелковым черным панцирем,
Голос с чуть хрипотцой цыганскою,
Все в тебе мне до боли нравится, --
Даже то, что ты не красавица!

Красота, не увянешь за лето!
Не цветок -- стебелек из стали ты,
Злее злого, острее острого
Увезенный -- с какого острова?

Опахалом чудишь, иль тросточкой, --
В каждой жилке и в каждой косточке,
В форме каждого злого пальчика, --
Нежность женщины, дерзость мальчика.

Все усмешки стихом парируя,
Открываю тебе и миру я
Все, что нам в тебе уготовано,
Незнакомка с челом Бетховена!

Girlfriend 9

You walk along your road,
I do not touch your hand.
But the despair in me—it's too eternal,
That you were to me—a stranger.

The heart immediately said: "Darling!"
I forgave you everything—at random,
Knowing nothing—even your name!—
O love me, o love me!

I can see by your lips—by their curve,
By their intensified haughtiness,
By the heavy ridge of your brow:
That the heart is being taken by storm!

Your dress is like black silk armor,
Your voice with a bit of gypsy huskiness,
Everything in you I like so much it hurts—
Even that you're not a beauty.

Beauty, you won't droop during summer!
No bloom—you stalk of steel,
Wickedder than wicked, sharper than sharp
Taken from what island?

You look strangest with a fan, or a walking stick—
In every vein and every little bone,
In the form of each of your wicked fingers,
Is the tenderness of a woman, audacity of a boy.

Parrying all sneers with poetry,
I open up both to you and the world
All, that is prepared for us in you,
Stranger with Beethoven's brow!

Подруга 10

Могу ли не вспомнить я
Тот запах White-Rose и чая,
И севрские фигурки
Над пышащим камельком...

Мы были: я -- в пышном платье
Из чуть золотого фая,
Вы -- в вязаной черной куртке
С крылатым воротником.

Я помню, с каким вошли Вы
Лицом -- без малейшей краски,
Как встали, кусая пальчик,
Чуть голову наклоня.

И лоб Ваш властолюбивый,
Под тяжестью рыжей каски,
Не женщина и не мальчик, --
Но что-то сильнее меня!

Движением беспричинным
Я встала, нас окружили.
И кто-то в шутовском тоне:
"Знакомьтесь же, господа".

И руку движеньем длинным
Вы в руку мою вложили,
И нежно в моей ладони
Помедлил осколок льда.

С каким-то, глядевшим косо,
Уже предвкушая стычку, --
Я полулежала в кресле,
Вертя на руке кольцо.

Вы вынули папиросу,
И я поднесла Вам спичку,
Не зная, что делать, если
Вы взглянете мне в лицо.

Я помню -- над синей вазой --
Как звякнули наши рюмки.
"О, будьте моим Орестом!",
И я Вам дала цветок.

Girlfriend 10

How can I not recall
That smell of White Rose and tea,
And the Sevres figures
Above the blazing fireplace...

We were: I in a splendid dress
Of golden silk,
You—in a knitted black jacket
With a winged collar.

I remember, with what face you
Entered—without the slightest trace of make-up,
How you stood, biting a finger,
Barely tilting your head.

And your powerloving brow
Under the heaviness of your redhaired helmet,
Not a woman and not a boy,
But something stronger than me!

With a gratuitous motion
I stood up, they surrounded us.
And someone in a joking tone:
"Get acquainted, gentlemen."

And you laid your hand in mine
With a long motion,
And it tenderly lingered in my palm
Like a shard of ice.

With some man, looking askance,
Already anticipating the confrontation,--
I reclined in the chair,
Spinning a ring on my finger.

You took out a cigarette,
And I brought a match up to it,
Not knowing what I would do, if
You were to look me in the face.

I remember—above the blue vases—
How we clinked our glasses.
"Oh, be my Orestes!"
And I gave you a flower.

С зарницею сероглазой
Из замшевой черной сумки
Вы вынули длинным жестом
И выронили-платок.

With grey-eyed lightning²⁰
From your suede black purse,
You took out in a long gesture
And dropped—a handkerchief.

²⁰ In some versions of the manuscript this line is “Смеясь—над моей ли фразой?” or “Laughing...was it at something I said?”

Подруга 14

Есть имена, как душные цветы,
И взгляды есть, как пляшущее пламя...
Есть темные извилистые рты
С глубокими и влажными углами.

Есть женщины. -- Их волосы, как шлем,
Их веер пахнет гибельно и тонко.
Им тридцать лет. -- Зачем тебе, зачем
Моя душа спартанского ребенка?

Girlfriend 14

There are names like stifling flowers
And gazes like a dancing flame...
There are dark sinuous mouths
With deep damp corners.

There are women. --Their hair, like a helmet,
Their fan smells deadly and delicate.
They are thirty. --Why, why do you need
My Spartan child's soul?

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