Double-Exposure: Picturing the Self in Russian Émigré Culture

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2019

ABSTRACT

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Double exposure has often been used as a metaphor for the condition of emigration: of being between two places simultaneously, of layering the memory of one place onto another. To extend the metaphor of double exposure, this study turns to the medium of photography itself to explore how it functions within Russian émigré narratives of the self. I examine how Vladimir Nabokov, Joseph Brodsky, Gary Shteyngart, and the visual artist Ilya Kabakov use photographs in their autobiographical works—from literary memoirs to art installations—as a device for representing the divided self in emigration. "Double exposure" works as a flexible concept in this dissertation: as a metaphor for exilic double consciousness; for the autobiographical tension between multiple selves; and as a model for the composite structure of these texts that join together word and image.

Bringing together photography and autobiography in this study, I explore how the "objective" medium of photography offers these authors a version of the self as visual object to be used creatively within their own self-representations. Self-representation, after all, involves the transformation of one's own subjectivity into an object of investigation. And the objectivity of the photograph cannot be divorced from the subjective experience of looking at and interpreting the sense data that the image supplies. The photograph's uneasy relationship between objectivity and subjectivity makes it a rich source for autobiographical practices of self-creation and self-investigation. The photographs and their textual mediation work as visual metonyms that stand in for the larger project of self-representation; they picture the act of picturing the self.

This dissertation charts the critical ambivalence to family photographs in these works, how they stage a back-and-forth between an affective or nostalgic attitude to images and a sharp awareness of the limits or dangers of such an attitude. The subjects of this dissertation reveal a divided attitude to the visual medium, both attracted and repelled by the promise of photographs. The divided attitude to photographs in these works, I argue, stems in part from a crisis in vision. From the semiotic appraisal of photographs to the disciplinary and propagandistic abuses of photography, to see the photograph as an uncomplicated restoration of the past is no longer possible by the second half of the twentieth century (if, indeed, it ever was). And yet, it is the very losses of the twentieth century that make urgent the need to collect and preserve the fragments that remain. These authors exhibit an ambivalence about how photographs preserve the past and what kind of information they provide us with, about how these images represent the self (and the family), and finally about how this form of representation compares with the written word. Each of my four chapters examines a different modality of this ambivalent approach to photographs as they intersect with narrating the self: Nabokov's agonistic contest between photography and his visual memory; Brodsky's resignation to the modern photographic condition that ruptures the continuity of memory and experience; Shteyngart's divided reading of the self from a hyphenated Russian-American perspective; and Kabakov's ironically sincere recuperation of an affective response after postmodernism.

Considering photos as both indexical documents that provide evidence but also as indeterminate images that demand interpretation, I read the photographs as an integral component of self-construction in these works, rather than as transparent illustrations of the self. These photographs offer a productive site for representing the divided self in emigration, the experience of trauma, and the convergence of personal and social history.

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List of Abbreviations

LF	*Little Failure* (2014) by Gary Shteyngart
LTO	*Less than One* (1986) by Joseph Brodsky
OGR	*On Grief and Reason* (1995) by Joseph Brodsky
SM	*Speak, Memory* (1966) by Vladimir Nabokov
W	*Watermark* (1989) by Joseph Brodsky

List of Illustrations

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to many people for their support in the writing of this dissertation. First and foremost, I am indebted to Liza Knapp, whom I have been lucky to have as a mentor since my years as an undergraduate. She has been a constant source of intellectual guidance and a singularly inspiring teacher. I am grateful to Valentina Izmirlieva, who has been unwavering in her support of my work, while always pushing me, from the beginning of graduate school. I would also like to thank Boris Gasparov for his generous and insightful feedback. Katherine Reischl and Marianne Hirsch offered incisive comments at the defense, helping me to glimpse what the next stage of this work might look like.

I thank Tanya Chebotareva for inviting me to work as an archival assistant cataloguing the Lev Loseff Papers at the Bakhmeteff Archive at the Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Columbia. This experience proved invaluable as I began work on my Brodsky chapter. I also wish to thank the staff at the New York Public Library's Berg Collection and the Beinecke Library for their help in my archival research. I am especially grateful to the Nabokov estate for permission to print excerpts from correspondence and manuscript drafts by Vladimir Nabokov. Copyright ©1965, 1966 by Vladimir Nabokov, used by permission of the Wylie Agency LLC.

I have been fortunate enough to work on this project at two institutions, Columbia and UC Berkeley, where I have greatly benefitted from conversations with my students, peers, and fellow colleagues. At Columbia, I could not have asked for a better cohort than Holly Myers, Bradley Gorski, and Inna Kapilevich, from whom I've learned so much; their friendship has made all the difference. Life in Morningside Heights was made immeasurably richer by Molly Rose Avila, Mie Mortensen, Ben Lussier, Riley Ossorgin, Brendan and Becca Nieubuurt, and Jude Webre. At Berkeley, I am grateful to the members of the Nabokov Working Group,

especially Eric Naiman and Anna Muza, for their thoughtful feedback on a version of my Nabokov chapter. Thomas Dyne and Dominick Lawton have been the ideal officemates, providing both relief from writing and motivation to carry on. Weekly writing sessions with Simona Schneider have been indispensable.

Finally, I wish to thank my family, especially my parents, Barbara Miller and Peter Jensen, and my brother Luke. Their love and support have made everything possible. I'm glad that I listened to my parents when they suggested I read Chekhov and Tolstoy. Their love of the arts continually inspires me. Above all, I thank Edward Tyerman, my constant companion, whose laughter, music, and curiosity make it all worthwhile.

Introduction
Double Exposure: Narrating the Self in Emigration

In 1926, the Russian émigré poet Vladislav Khodasevich begins his poem about exile "Sorrento Photographs" (*Sorrentinskie fotografii*) with a double-exposed photograph.[1] The scatterbrained photographer (*fotograf-rotozei*) forgets to advance the film, thus superimposing an image of two friends on a picnic alongside a goat in Capri onto an image of a friend atop a steamship departing from a bay. In the poem, this double exposure is experienced as a happy accident of the camera. The lyric narrator takes pleasure in the surprising juxtaposition of these two scenes:

> Хоть я и не люблю козляток
> (Ни итальянских пикников) –
> Двух совместившихся миров
> Мне полюбился отпечаток:
> В себе виденья затая,
> Так протекает жизнь моя.
>
> Though I don't love baby goats
> (or Italian picnics) –
> The imprint of two superimposed worlds
> Caught my fancy:
> Concealing within itself an apparition,
> So flows my life.[2]

The double exposure produces a visual equivalent of the poetic device that Viktor Shklovsky would call *ostranenie* or estrangement, as theorized in his 1917 article "Art as Device" (*Iskusstvo kak priëm*). Neither goats nor picnics on their own produce delight, but once these quotidian images are placed in an unexpected context, they yield aesthetic delight. This collision of two

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[1] Khodasevich had been living with Maxim Gorky in Sorrento from September 1924–April 1925.

[2] V. F. Khodasevich, *Sobranie stikhov: v dvukh tomakh*, ed. Iurii Kolker, vol. 2 (Paris: La Presse Libre, 1983), 27.

worlds can be achieved through the photographic medium, but also through the lived experience of displacement. Exile itself makes the everyday strange. Indeed, as Svetlana Boym has noted, it was the experience of exile after the 1917 Revolution that proved to be a fertile testing ground for the Russian Formalists' abstract theories of estrangement.[3] In Khodasevich's poem, the photo becomes the metaphor of choice for the estranged experience of exile; his current existence in Italy plays out against the background of Russia, as if in stereoscope.[4]

It has become a commonplace to see Khodasevich's double-exposed photograph as a fitting emblem for the exilic condition. Greta Slobin, for example, takes up Khodasevich's trope of the double-exposed photograph in her analysis of émigré writers such as Teffi (Nadezhda Aleksandrovna Lokhvitskaya), Ivan Bunin, and Vladimir Nabokov as a metaphor for the bilingualism and split consciousness that mark their work. She primarily explores "double exposure" as a narrative device for representing the everyday experience of exile in a foreign city against the memory of the familiar one.[5] Life in emigration, after all, is often conceived of as a peculiar condition of being between two places simultaneously, of layering the memory of one place onto another. Michael Seidel begins his book *Exile and the Narrative Imagination* with the claim that "an exile is someone who inhabits one place and remembers or projects the reality of

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[3] Svetlana Boym, "Estrangement as a Lifestyle: Shklovsky and Brodsky," *Poetics Today* 17, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 511–30, https://doi.org/10.2307/1773211.

[4] For more on the significance of photography in Khodasevich's poem, see Margarita Nafpaktitis, "Multiple Exposures of the Photographic Motif in Vladislav Khodasevich's 'Sorrentinskie Fotografii,'" *The Slavic and East European Journal* 52, no. 3 (2008): 389–413.

[5] Greta Slobin, *Russians Abroad: Literary and Cultural Politics of Diaspora (1919-1939)* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 78. She notes, for example, how in Nabokov's *Dar* (*The Gift*, 1937), Fyodor's memory of Russia is spectrally projected onto the cityscape of Berlin. Slobin, 86–88.

another."[6] Seidel dwells on the "aesthetic gain" of the creative writer in exile; separation from one's homeland sharpens the imagination.[7] Boym neatly summarizes these ideas when she writes that "the photographic double exposure exemplifies the exile's double consciousness."[8]

Edward Said, who cautions against idealizing exile in his essay "Reflections on Exile," does admit that there are positive gains to the exilic condition, such as seeing the world in a new fashion. "For an exile," Said writes, "habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally."[9] The Russian émigré writer Vladimir Nabokov, one of the figures of this dissertation, felt that the rupture of emigration gave him a "syncopal kick" that he privileged above the "anesthetic destinies" of remaining in the same place—a boring prospect characterized by a "primitive absence of perspective" (*SM* 250). This contrapuntal vision or "syncopal kick" of the émigré finds expression in the double-exposed photograph. On the other hand, David Bethea, in his study of the poet Joseph Brodsky (another figure in this dissertation), encourages us to not lose sight of the adverse effects of this "dual vision," noting that "more often than not exile has had a disabling and crippling function precisely because the dual vision which is its essence has been not liberating but oppressive, a kind of linguistic death sentence."[10] Brodsky himself was reticent

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[6] Michael Seidel, *Exile and the Narrative Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), ix.

[7] Seidel, x.

[8] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 296.

[9] Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 186.

[10] David Bethea, *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 39. For a consideration of the creative potentials of bilingualism in exile, see

about romanticizing the position of the writer in exile.[11] Indeed, not all manage to translate the disorienting perspective of emigration into an aesthetic object.

In the chapters that follow, this dissertation asks what happens when Russian émigré authors dislocated from home attempt to narrate the self through the use of visual and verbal means. Concerned less with double exposure as a narrative device for representing the émigré's experience of double consciousness, I turn to the medium of photography itself to explore how it functions within émigré narratives of the self.[12] I examine how Vladimir Nabokov, Joseph Brodsky, Gary Shteyngart, and the visual artist Ilya Kabakov use photographs in their autobiographical works—from literary memoirs to art installations—as a device for representing the divided self in emigration and the traumas of the twentieth century.[13] This dissertation

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Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour, *Alien Tongues: Bilingual Russian Writers of the "First" Emigration* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989). Galya Diment likewise suggests that "literary bilingualism is one of the most fascinating developments of literature in exile." Galya Diment, "English as Sanctuary: Nabokov's and Brodsky's Autobiographical Writings," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 37, no. 3 (1993): 347, https://doi.org/10.2307/309281.

[11] See Brodsky's essay "The Condition We Call Exile," in *On Grief and Reason* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1995).

[12] For more on the relationship between photography and literature in the Russian canon, see Katherine M. H. Reischl, *Photographic Literacy: Cameras in the Hands of Russian Authors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018); Stephen C. Hutchings, *Russian Literary Culture in the Camera Age: The Word as Image* (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2004); Molly Thomasy Blasing, "Through the Lens of Loss: Marina Tsvetaeva's Elegiac Photo-Poetics," *Slavic Review* 73, no. 1 (2014): 1–35, https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.73.1.0001.

[13] Although they belong to different "waves" of emigration, these figures all spent some part of time in emigration in America in the second half of the twentieth century. For an overview of the history of Russian emigration, see John Glad, *Russia Abroad: Writers, History, Politics* (Tenafly, NJ: Hermitage & Birchbark Press, 1999). For a cultural history of the first-wave, see Marc Raeff, *Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration, 1919-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). For more on Russian Berlin, see Boris I. Nicolaevsky et al., eds., *Russkii Berlin 1921-1923: po materialam arkhiva B.I. Nikolaevskogo v Guverovskom institute*, Literaturnoe nasledstvo russkoi ėmigratsii (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1983). For studies on Russian émigrés in Paris, see Leonid Livak, *How It Was Done in Paris: Russian Émigré Literature and French Modernism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003); Leonid Livak, *Russian*

extends the trope of the double-exposed photograph to consider it as model for the genre of self-narration. Given the retrospective nature of the autobiographical genre, the narratorial subject takes up her own past self as an object of study. The narrating "I" shapes, interprets, and constructs a narrative in which past and present self are imbricated. Multiple selves are layered within the narration, offering a textual variant of the visual double-exposed photograph. In addition, I take up the concept of double exposure to consider the hybrid nature of these texts which draw together verbal narrative and photographic images. The images in these works are not secondary to the text nor do they serve a purely illustrative function; they are part of the very fabric of the work. These works not only incorporate photographs, but actively interrogate their position within the work itself. Distinct from Khodasevich's delight, the figures considered here display a more ambiguous relationship to photography. At times agonistic, at other times mutually reinforcing, the relationship between word and image takes center stage in these works. "Double exposure" thus works as a flexible concept in this dissertation: as a metaphor for exilic double consciousness and bilingualism; the autobiographical tension between multiple selves; and as a model for the composite structure of these texts that join together word and image.

Bringing together photography and autobiography in this study, I explore how the "objective" medium of photography offers these authors a version of the self as visual object to be used creatively within their own self-representations.[14] Self-representation, after all, involves

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Émigrés in the Intellectual and Literary Life of Interwar France: A Bibliographic Essay (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010). For more on the third-wave, see Olga Matich and Michael Henry Heim, eds., *The Third Wave: Russian Literature in Emigration* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1984). For a study of contemporary Russian émigré writers, see Adrian Wanner, *Out of Russia: Fictions of a New Translingual Diaspora* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011).

[14] Katherine Reischl's book takes up a related subject but with a focus on pre-revolutionary and Soviet "author-photographers," who "demonstrate how an authorial subject under creative duress

the transformation of one's own subjectivity into an object of investigation. And the objectivity of the photograph cannot be divorced from the subjective experience of looking at and interpreting the sense data that the image supplies. The photograph's uneasy relationship between objectivity and subjectivity makes it a rich source for autobiographical practices of self-creation and self-investigation. The photographs and their textual mediation work as visual metonyms that stand in for the larger project of self-representation; they picture the act of picturing the self.

Given that autobiography and photography were both highly politicized forms in the Soviet Union, what does it mean for émigré authors to take up these forms?[15] How do they revive and subvert these forms? While the four figures of this dissertation belong to different epochs of emigration and represent different aesthetic sensibilities, each exhibits an ambivalence about how photographs preserve the past and what kind of information they provide us with, about how these images represent the self (and the family), and finally about how this form of representation compares with the written word.

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can reassert his own framing of an individual subjectivity through the hybrid intersections of text and image." Reischl, *Photographic Literacy*, 11.

[15] The role of diaries and autobiographies as powerful forms that shaped Soviet subjectivity have recently been explored by Igal Halfin and Jochen Hellbeck. Igal Halfin, *Terror in My Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). In his work on autobiographies and the "Communist hermeneutics of the soul," Halfin argues that narratives of the self—in the form of autobiographies, confessions, and self-criticism—were a crucial part not only of representing the New Soviet subject, but of actively forging it. The form of autobiography was prescribed: the eschatological narrative of Communism was the roadmap for an individual's own journey towards the light. For more on photography as a propagandistic tool, see Margarita Tupitsyn, *The Soviet Photograph, 1924–1937* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

Nabokov, in his autobiography *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (1966), describes his flight from Russia after the Revolution and his years spent in Cambridge, Berlin, and Paris; the text concludes at the moment of his family's second exodus, this time to America, as they narrowly escape German-occupied France in May 1940. Known as a highly visual writer, Nabokov reworks his autobiography and includes photographs for the first time during a period when he is actively shaping his authorial persona through visual media and paratextual elements. The photographs in *Speak, Memory* are an integral part of Nabokov's authorial self-fashioning. Just 20 years later, Brodsky's autobiographical essay "In a Room and a Half" (1986) meditates on his forced exile in 1972 and on how his expulsion from the Soviet Union prevented him from seeing his parents in Leningrad again as they were dying. Writing during a period steeped in photography theory, Brodsky does not include actual photographs in the essay, but photography emerges as one of the dominant metaphors for the discontinuities of memory. Shteyngart brings us into the age of social media with its new potentials for self-fashioning, but with his recent memoir *Little Failure* (2014) Shteyngart turns to the family archive of photos to examine his childhood in Leningrad and emigration to New York. This leads him to reflect on his family's experience of the Holodomor (the Great Famine in Ukraine, 1932–33), the Second World War, and the Gulag, as well as the collapse of the Soviet Union, in order to consider how these events influence his hyphenated identity as a Russian-American.[16] The visual artist Kabakov, known for

[16] Hyphenated identity refers to the immigrant-American identity. While the idea of the "hyphenated American" has been used as a derogatory category (othering one as not truly "American" or as unassimilable), at other times it has been embraced as a positive marker of multiculturalism and hybrid identities. For an overview on this issue, see Dominika Baran, "Hyphenated Identity," in *Language in Immigrant America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). For more on Shteyngart's hyphenated identity, see Wanner, *Out of Russia*; Yelena Furman, "Hybrid Selves, Hybrid Texts: Embracing the Hyphen in Russian-American Fiction," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 55, no. 1 (2011): 19–37.

his conceptualist works that interrogate and play with authorship, turns to an autobiographical mode after emigration. Creating installations and paintings that tell a narrative of the self through photographs and text, as well as several installations that present his mother's self-narrative, Kabakov reflects on the traumas of the Soviet experience.

As Walter Benjamin suggests in "The Storyteller," death is the event that gives a life its "transmissible form" and thus this final ending is also the "sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell."[17] The end is what makes meaning, what allows us to understand a novelistic character's life or indeed the narrative itself. Of course, a self-narrative will always necessarily be deprived of such an ending, for the story of one's own life cannot be narrated from the privileged position of death. As I contend in this dissertation, emigration—although not a literal death—provides an ending *within* these self-narratives that retroactively determines the meaning of what came before. It is the sense of an ending that prompts these self-narratives, retrospective in nature, to look back on the past. For Nabokov, the rupture of emigration was made irrevocable by the revolution and the regime change. And although Brodsky was writing while the Soviet Union still existed, Shteyngart and Kabakov are both working after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In these narratives, the end of the Soviet Union stands as the event that confers meaning back onto the Soviet experience. And on a personal scale, the death of the parent haunts many of these texts but also generates and "sanctions" these stories. Various "endings" and deaths become entangled in these narratives. The personal narrative is inextricable from the larger historical narrative. The photographs, in turn, offer a way of mediating, exploring, accentuating those endings. In a moment of profound transition, these photographic objects enable continuity

[17] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 94.

(or at least, the illusion of continuity), by offering access to a past that is irretrievable and yet preserved.

The protagonists of this study all reveal an undecided attitude to the visual medium, both attracted and repelled by the promise of photographs. Their works pose a simple question: what is to be done with photographs in the second half of the twentieth century? What space do photographs hold in these works composed after the lessons of semiotics (and, with the exception of Nabokov's text, after poststructuralism) have revealed that the photograph offers no more privileged access to reality than other forms of representation, just more adept in the practice of visual deception? Or with the knowledge that photographs are, by and large, ordinary and unexceptional, simply part of a social practice? In his sociological study of photography, Pierre Bourdieu shows how photographs, and family photographs in particular, are implicitly shaped by societal norms. The practice of photography is highly structured: "There is nothing more regulated and conventional than photographic practice," he suggests, for people "obey implicit canons" of composition and subject matter when deciding what and how to photograph.[18]

What happens when the everyday image is no longer transfigured through an estranged perspective as in Khodasevich's double exposure, but remains banal, quotidian, just another family album photograph? Or when the photograph no longer necessarily holds the promise of connecting us with the past or resurrecting a lost loved one? And yet, most of the figures here find that photographs nonetheless exert some pull over them. There is a tension in these works

[18] Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art* (Cambridge, England: Polity, 1990), 7. For an ethnographic approach to amateur photography in America as a social form of visual communication, see Richard Chalfen, *Snapshot Versions of Life* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987).

between a suspicion about the limits of photographic representation and an imperative to preserve the traces of the past.

The chapters of this dissertation examine the various modalities of this ambivalent approach to photographs as they intersect with narrating the self in emigration: Nabokov's agonistic contest between photography and the visual word; Brodsky's resigned acceptance of the modern photographic condition that ruptures the continuity of memory and experience; Shteyngart's hyphenated suspension between two readings of the self from a Russian-American perspective; and Kabakov's ironically sincere recuperation of an affective response after postmodernism. This ambivalence thus takes different forms in these works. At times, it surfaces with an ordinary photo from a family album unexceptional in its appearance but arresting for its revelation of the past. At other times, this ambivalence emerges around photographs that pale in comparison with memory and fail to resurrect the past. Or we encounter multiple readings of a single photograph that waver between irony and sincerity, between past and present selves, or between a "Russian" reading and an "American" one. In each case, this ambivalence invites us to consider the tension between an intellectual awareness of the limitations of photos and the affective power of photos. We will explore the trajectory that these modalities trace, moving us from modernism to postmodernism, and finally to the "new sincerity" after postmodernism.[19]

Nabokov makes no secret of his disdain for the mechanical medium that fails to achieve what human memory can. He vaunts his own memory in opposition to the photographs included

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[19] "New Sincerity," often seen as a reaction to postmodernism, has been ascendant in Anglophone and Russian spheres since the 1980s. It trades ironic detachment for a renewed emotional sincerity. For more on sincerity in Russian culture, see Ellen Rutten, *Sincerity after Communism: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017). In the Anglo-American context, see Adam Kelly, "The New Sincerity," in *Postmodern/Postwar and after: Rethinking American Literature*, ed. Jason Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek, and Daniel Worden (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016).

in *Speak, Memory*. And yet, the photos also prove to be an important and essential part of marketing the book, of maintaining and promoting his authorial image. We find him caught between the market demands of self-fashioning and the aesthetic imperative to preserve the auratic quality of his memory-text. He resolves this tension by attempting to reclaim authorship over these images. Brodsky also finds photos to be lacking, much like Nabokov. But rather than pitching photography *against* memory, he sees them in collusion. For Brodsky, both memory and photography are hopelessly fragmented, lacking in temporal continuity. Despite the failures of memory, however, Brodsky repeatedly turns to photos as traces of what remains. Brodsky's essay articulates a resignation to the modern photographic condition, as these images are better than nothing and yet wholly not enough.

While Shteyngart, like Brodsky, acknowledges that we should be suspicious of photos, as they are manipulable and deceptive, he ultimately devotes a great deal of narrative space to considering photographs within his memoir. Shteyngart delves into the family archive of photographs and engages in a kind of hyphenated reading: torn between an ironic reading of these images from an American perspective and an affective one from a Russian perspective. Ultimately, he insists on a connection with his Russian heritage that has been figured as tenuous or illegitimate given his young age at emigration. And Kabakov, the preeminent Russian postmodernist conceptual artist, shocks us as he too falls under the sway of the affective pull of photos of his mother, despite knowing all too well the constructed nature of photographic images.

The photographs in these works become a productive site in Russian émigré culture of the second half of the twentieth century — a site for representing the divided self in emigration, the experience of trauma, and the convergence of personal and social history. The placement,

framing, and textual mediation of the images within these narratives will guide our attention. Our focus will be on how these authors make use of images as a space for critical reflection on the past, on the narratives they spin out of them, and on how they press them into service to narrate the self.[20]

The Constructed Trace: Theories of Photography

The ambivalent attitude to photographs that we will observe in these works cuts along similar lines to the critical divide that runs throughout the history of photography: between seeing photographs as evidentiary documents due to the indexical trace and seeing them as constructed images that are no more reliable than any other form of representation.

Since its inception, photography has been seen as an exemplary method of objectively depicting nature. Mary Warner Marien suggests that before the invention of photography there existed what she refers to as the "idea of photography" in the Western cultural imagination: "the yearning in Western culture for a means of representation free from omission, distortion, style, murky subjectivity, or outside interference."[21] The camera obscura and the camera lucida offered more precise ways of copying from nature, but still required the skill of an artist's hand. The

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[20] I am influenced here by Marianne Hirsch's theory of looking at family photographs. Hirsch suggests that the family album is an instrument of what she calls "the familial gaze," which "situates human subjects in the ideology, the mythology, of the family as institution and projects a screen of familial myths between camera and subject." The "familial look," on the other hand, is "mediated by the familial gaze" but it is subjective, mutual, and specific (11). Hirsch argues that family photographs and the narratives that surround them can reveal the structures of the familial gaze and looks. Family photographs thus become a way of studying these visual relations through which the subject is constituted and constitutes herself. Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[21] Mary Warner Marien, *Photography and Its Critics: A Cultural History, 1839-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 5.

pervasive desire for an ever more objective way of representing the world, Marien suggests, is borne out by the fact that so many people were working toward fixing images by means of light at the same time: Thomas Wedgwood, William Henry Fox Talbot, and Sir John F. W. Herschel in England; Joseph Nicéphore Niépce and Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre in France. We cannot speak of a single inventor of photography; through their collective and individual experimentation, methods for impressing an image on light-sensitive material, preserving it, and reproducing it were eventually achieved.[22]

Early practitioners and critics of photography emphasized the objectivity of the camera apparatus, its ability to record the impression of light on paper without the intervention of the artist's hand. Daguerre declared his images to be "spontaneous reproductions" of nature: the apparatus "is not merely an instrument which serves to draw Nature; on the contrary it is a chemical and physical process which gives her the power to reproduce herself."[23] The title of William Henry Fox Talbot's book of "sun-pictures" *The Pencil of Nature* (1844) also advanced the idea that it was nature herself who created these images, rather than the artist.[24]

As such, photography has been seen as an objective ideal in its verisimilitude and to have strong referential power. To use Charles S. Peirce's system of signs, the photograph is both icon

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[22] For more on the history of photography, see Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982). For monographs on the history of photography in Russia and the Soviet Union, see David Elliott, ed., *Photography in Russia 1840-1940* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992); Elena Valentinovna Barkhatova, *Russkaia svetopis': pervyi vek fotoiskusstva: 1839-1914* (Sankt-Peterburg: Liki Rossii, 2009); Tupitsyn, *The Soviet Photograph, 1924–1937*.

[23] Alan Trachtenberg, ed., *Classic Essays on Photography* (New Haven, CT: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 11, 13.

[24] In 1841, Fox Talbot had invented the calotype process (*kalos* means beautiful in Greek), which created a photographic negative that was strong enough that allowed for multiple copies to be produced. It is with the calotype process that the photograph becomes reproducible.

and index.[25] Not only does the photograph iconically resemble the photographed object, but because of the photochemical process the image has been thought of as a causal trace of the referent. In André Bazin's "Ontology of the Photographic Image" we find the classic argument that sutures together image and object. Bazin argued that photography surpassed painting in its referential ability, as it enjoys a certain "credibility" due to the mechanical apparatus of the camera and the photochemical process; "our obsession with realism" is finally satisfied with photography not because of the "result achieved but in the way of achieving it."[26] Thus in a photograph, he writes, "we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually *re*-presented, set before us, that is to say, in time and space."[27] He goes on to say emphatically that "the photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it *is* the model."[28]

In his final text on photography, *Camera Lucida* (*La Chambre claire* 1980), Roland Barthes also articulates a physical, indexical connection between the photographed subject and

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[25] "Photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that they are in certain respects exactly like the objects they represent. But this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature. In that aspect, then, they belong to the second class of signs, those by physical connection." Charles S. Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs," in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 106.

[26] André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What Is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 12.

[27] Bazin, 13–14. Italics in the original.

[28] Bazin, 14. Italics in the original.

the photograph. "It is as if the Photograph always carries its referent with itself," he writes, imagining the image and the model to be as if "glued together, limb by limb."[29] According to Barthes, the photograph constitutes "an emanation of the referent" which produces "radiations" from the "real body" of the referent that was there, and these rays of light "ultimately touch me, who am here."[30] For Barthes, the referential power of the photograph—the unshakeable affirmation that «ça a été» (this-has-been)—is the *noeme* or essence of the medium.[31]

A semiotic appraisal of photography would caution, however, that such images are just as constructed as any other system of signs. Barthes's earlier structuralist analysis of the photograph, as put forward in "The Photographic Message" (1961), splits the photograph into two levels of signification: denotation and connotation. This, says Barthes, is the "photographic paradox."[32] On the one hand, the "special status" of photography lies in its pure denotation: it is "a message without a code."[33] Nonetheless, the photograph is also a culturally coded message (connotation), which makes the photo legible as a system of signification. Barthes thus both insists on the force of the indexical trace of reality (the uncoded part of the photograph—what he would later call the photograph's "punctum") but also on its rhetorical power as a coded message

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[29] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 5–6.

[30] Barthes, 80.

[31] Barthes had already focused on this denotative "*having-been-there*" aspect of photography prior to writing *Camera Lucida*, in his essay "Rhetoric of the Image." Roland Barthes, *Image–Music–Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 44.

[32] Barthes, 19.

[33] Barthes, 17.

that can be analyzed. What is unique about the photograph—as opposed to other forms of representation—is that its coded message "develops on the basis of a message *without a code*."[34]

Although the image is constructed and can be decoded semiotically like any other form of representation, the indexical claim of the photograph seems to set it apart. The index is one of the defining features theorists have turned to in order to argue for the photograph's distinction from other forms of representation.[35] And it is the power of indexical presence that makes photography compelling for many of the figures considered in this dissertation.

However, other critics have brought into question just how privileged or legitimate photography's claim to indexicality or referentiality truly is. In his work on aesthetics, Nelson Goodman reminds us that the system of linear perspective for realistic depiction is conventional and culturally constructed, and that the highly "realist" depiction we find in photography is no exception.[36] Arguing against Ernst Gombrich and others who view linear perspective (a method for depicting the illusion of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional plane) as simply the

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[34] Barthes, 19.

[35] The index is also the element of the photograph that has interested many contemporary visual artists. It is this uncoded indexical certificate of bodily or physical presence that, according to art theorist Rosalind Krauss, serves as the unifying thread of the disparate artworks of the 1970s art scene, such as installation pieces, conceptual art, and earthworks, as well as video, performance, and body art. The idea of the photograph as index becomes a model for abstract art (a lineage she traces from Marcel Duchamp's readymades), as these works operate on a "pure installation of presence by means of the index." Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America," *October* 3 (1977): 80, https://doi.org/10.2307/778437. Krauss describes the index as resulting from "the natural world that imprints itself on the photographic emulsion and subsequently on the photographic print. This quality of transfer or trace gives to the photograph its documentary status, its undeniable veracity." Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America. Part 2," *October* 4 (1977): 59, https://doi.org/10.2307/778480.

[36] Goodman writes: "Pictures in perspective, like any others, have to be read; and the ability to read has to be acquired." Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1968), 15.

geometrically correct way to transcribe the way objects appear,[37] Goodman suggests that perspective is pure convention by dismantling the idea that it accords with the laws of optics and geometry.[38] The vision of the world that photography creates is a no less constructed form of representation. The way we have learned to read photographs is culturally constructed; Goodman notes ethnographic accounts of how those who have never before seen a photograph do not instinctively or naturally recognize them as images of the "real," but rather need to learn how to read and decipher them.[39]

We need only consider the history of the camera apparatus to see why photographic images, like a painting that employs orthogonal lines or foreshortening to create the illusion of depth and perspective, must be learned how to be read. As the art historian Joel Snyder reminds us, the camera is not a "natural machine" that magically delivers up the world as it really is; the camera was invented as a tool and was developed over time in accordance with such conventional principles and schemata as linear perspective "to aid painters and draughtsmen in the production of certain kinds of pictures."[40] In addition, Snyder repudiates the oft-cited idea

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[37] Linear perspective was first theorized by Leon Battista Alberti in *De pictura* (1435). In his book *Art and Illusion*, Gombrich argues that perspective, the geometrical technique of pictorial representation, is the objectively correct way of representing reality. E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960).

[38] To illustrate his point, Goodman uses the example of how railroad tracks running into the distance are drawn so that they are converging whereas telephone poles that extend upward are drawn in parallel, even though geometry would dictate that they too should be drawn as converging. Thus, he concludes that "the artist who wants to produce a spatial representation that the present-day Western eye will accept as faithful must defy 'the laws of geometry.'" Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 16.

[39] Goodman cites ethnographer Melville J. Herskovits who describes this as a common occurrence in cultures where photography is an alien form of representation. Goodman, 15n15.

[40] Joel Snyder, "Picturing Vision," *Critical Inquiry* 6, no. 3 (1980): 510–11. See also Joel Snyder and Neil Walsh Allen, "Photography, Vision, and Representation," *Critical Inquiry* 2, no. 1

that the photographic image is produced through the direct "impression" of the object onto the surface, noting that this is a false premise for indexicality: "Objects are not active in the photographic process, rather it is light that effects a change in the photosensitive medium."[41]

Nonetheless, even with this knowledge that light alone is responsible for the image or that it is just another two-dimensional image with no more purchase on the truth than any other form of representation, this is not how we tend to relate to photographs. Although the belief in the photograph's special status—the causal link to the referent—has fallen out of favor among critics, Mitchell has asked why this "naïve" view nonetheless remains so intractable. Returning us to Barthes's division of the photograph into the denotative and the connotative, Mitchell suggests that "one connotation always present in the photograph is that it is a pure denotation." One of the coded meanings of the photograph that we "read" in the image—and what irreducibly separates it from other forms of representation—is its denotative "uncoded" aspect. As a result, "the photograph is 'read' *as if it were* the trace of an event."[42]

Like Mitchell, Corey Creekmur has also expressed reservations about how those who "respond to photographs as evidence of the actuality of the objects they represent" are cast as

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(1975): 149. They note that the technology the camera grew out of—the camera obscura with a lens—had been used for over 200 years prior to the experiments of Daguerre and others to capture the image; the design of the camera over this time had thus evolved in accordance with the way artists used the device to aid them in their work.

[41] Snyder, "Picturing Vision," 508. In an earlier article, Joel Snyder and Neil Walsh Allen make a similar point that the commonly held notion that the object photographed produces the image is not entirely accurate: it is the light and light alone reflecting off the object that creates the photograph, not the object itself. They also take issue with the idea of the object imprinting its image onto the light-sensitive material, reminding us that "an image is simply not a property which things naturally possess in addition to possessing size and weight. The image is a crafted, not a natural, thing." Snyder and Allen, "Photography, Vision, and Representation," 151.

[42] W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 284.

"(ideological) dupes."[43] He wonders: "Might the realist belief in photographic truth be at times a conscious, even if desperate, fantasy of the sort acknowledged by disavowal: 'I know [a photograph doesn't guarantee a pre-photographic referent], but…?'"[44] Creekmur thus leaves aside the question of the indexical status of photographs and investigates "*how* photographs are emotionally consumed."[45] He writes, "I believe a photograph of a lost loved one might have the affective power to make even a semiotician, who knows better, weep."[46] This divided response cuts along the same lines as Barthes's dual system in analyzing the photograph: connotation and denotation, as well as his later division of the photograph into *studium* (the information of the photograph) and *punctum* (the uncoded detail of the photograph that pierces the viewer). It is this divided response—between a semiotic awareness of photographs as constructed and an affective response to the indexical certificate of presence—that we will see in the works considered in this dissertation.

The critical, divided, uncertain attitude to photos we see in these works fits in with what Martin Jay has seen as the "anti-ocular" turn in Western thought, especially in France, in the twentieth century. He contends that twentieth-century Western discourse betrays "a profound suspicion of vision and its hegemonic role in the modern era,"[47] tracing this ocular-skepticism

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[43] Corey K. Creekmur, "Lost Objects: Photography, Fiction, and Mourning," in *Photo-Textualities: Reading Photographs and Literature*, ed. Marsha Bryant (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1995), 75.

[44] Creekmur, 75. Brackets in original.

[45] Creekmur, 75.

[46] Creekmur, 75.

[47] Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 14.

back to the nineteenth century, when the previous "hegemonic scopic regime" of Cartesian perspectivalism had already begun to shift in large part because technological innovations, such as the invention of photography, changed the way we see.[48] Photography—as well as other optical technologies, such as the diorama, the stereoscope, chronophotography, and finally cinema—offered an unprecedented realist vision of the world, but simultaneously inaugurated great doubt in our ability to see. The practice of retouching photographs and spirit photography illuminated how susceptible we are to being tricked by illusory visions. Moreover, these optical devices offered a challenge to the naked eye, revealing details that could otherwise not be discerned, thus making clear the limits of vision. As with the paradigmatic example of Eadweard Muybridge's stop-action photographs of a galloping horse (1878), what we see is not always what actually is.

Thus by the beginning of the twentieth century these new ways of seeing had led to a peculiar paradox: a profusion of ever more realistic depictions of the visible world, and yet a deepening distrust in vision. No longer could the veracity of vision be trusted. Indeed, one of the lessons of the twentieth century must be how easily we can be fooled by such documents—from the Nazi propaganda film at the Theresienstadt concentration camp to the erasure of victims of Stalin's Purges from photographs. The manipulation of photography by totalitarian regimes, such as Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia, furthers this crisis in representation—in what it is we think a photograph can do, what we take it to *be*.

Put simply, what is to be done with photographs not only after the lessons of poststructuralism and semiotics, but also after the manipulation of images in authoritarian governments? At the end of his memoir, Nabokov caustically describes his acquaintance with a

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[48] Jay, 113.

German student "whose hobby was capital punishment" during his period of emigration in Berlin (*SM* 278). Assiduous in his pursuit of public executions, the student (a humanities PhD student, no less) derived pleasure from capturing on film spectacles of death and torture. Nabokov imagines his delight now showing "the absolutely *wunderbar* pictures he took during Hitler's reign" (*SM* 279). Nabokov presents photography as a medium compromised by its association with authoritarian violence. Brodsky, on the other hand, turns his photographic fragments of memory into a kind of protest—he sees the preservation of his memory as acting against the interests of the Soviet state. Shteyngart and Kabakov both use photos to interrogate the end of the Soviet Union and the legacy of the Soviet experience, albeit from different perspectives and with different claims on that experience. A divided attitude to the photographic medium marks these works, caught between a suspicion about the evidentiary aspect of photographs and a need to preserve the trace fragments of the past given the century's scale of loss.

Autobiography and Photography

> "A photograph is a reduction of the endless and unmanageable world to a little rectangle. A photograph is our measure of the world. A photograph is also a memory. Remembering means reducing the world to little rectangles. Arranging the little rectangles in an album is autobiography. Between these two genres, the family album and autobiography, there is undoubtedly a connection: the album is a material autobiography, autobiography is a verbal album."[49]
>
> Dubravka Ugrešić, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*

As Ugrešić suggests, "there is undoubtedly a connection" between autobiography and the family photograph album. Indeed, the genres of autobiography and photography both have in common the fact that they claim to represent a real-life referent. Similar questions about the

[49] Dubravka Ugrešić, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (New York: New Directions, 1999), 27.

referentiality of the photograph also irk the study of autobiography and self-narration. Just as the claim for photography's "special status" that separates it from other forms of visual representation has been the subject of debate, so too has the claim that autobiography is generically distinct from a first-person fictional narrative, such as *David Copperfield*, rested on autobiography's special claim to referentiality. Does the autobiography refer to a real-world subject, or does it actively create a subject? Does a coherent self write her own autobiography, or it is through the act of writing that the self is created?

Philippe Lejeune defines autobiography as a "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality."[50] How can we know the narrator, protagonist, and author share the same identity? To whom does the pronoun "I" refer in these first-person narratives? Lejeune acknowledges that there is little *within* the text that enables a reader to distinguish an autobiography from a fictional first-person narrative. Rather, we must turn to extra-textual markers, such as the author's name on the title page, to verify the coincidence of author and narrator. Thus, Lejeune claims that part of what defines autobiography is contractual: there is an autobiographical pact made between author and reader. The pact indicates that the author, narrator, and protagonist of the narrative are all the same person and that the autobiography references this subject.[51] That the subject tries to tell the truth of his life as he understands it is, for Lejeune, the "referential pact" that the author enters into in good faith. This pact can be

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[50] Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin, trans. Katherine M. Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 4.

[51] For Lejeune, biography and autobiography (unlike fiction) "are *referential* texts: exactly like scientific or historical discourse, they claim to provide information about a 'reality' exterior to the text, and so to submit to a test of *verification*" Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 22.

"badly kept" and result in a wholly inaccurate depiction, but nonetheless the autobiography will remain distinct from fiction. "Even if the story is, historically, completely false, it will be on the order of the *lie* (which is an 'autobiographical' category) and not of fiction."[52]

Such a claim should sound familiar. Lejeune's insistence on autobiography's enduring *reference* to a real-world person even in the face of an account that does not *resemble* the subject in many ways rehearses Bazin's claim that a photograph, no matter how distorted, still refers to the subject. (A claim that Snyder and others, as we saw, categorically refute.) The photographic image of the author within a self-narrative would seem to support Lejeune's autobiographical pact that insists on the unity of author, narrator, and protagonist and on the narrative's ability to refer to the world beyond the text, as the photograph seems to indexically "point" to the author.

Theorists of the autobiographical act have since debated the referential claim of the genre. The idea of the autobiographical author as a sovereign coherent subject who can set forth the story of her life has been challenged by post-structuralist theory that proclaimed the death of the author. Barthes's "The Death of the Author" (1967) and Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?" (1969) exhorted readers to disregard the author and to focus on the text. [53] The author was dethroned as the sole authority governing the meaning of the text.[54] Such a move is

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[52] Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, 17.

[53] Svetlana Boym has questioned whether "the death of the author" is an appropriate framework for Russian works of the twentieth century, given the reality of the literal death of so many authors under the Soviet regime. Svetlana Boym, *Death in Quotation Marks: Cultural Myths of the Modern Poet* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

[54] As Seán Burke points out, Barthes's account of the death of the author in this essay is predicated on conceiving of the author as highly authorial. His conception of what an author is harks back to a particular brand of authorship that is more in keeping with a 19th century sensibility, which figures the author as a God-like figure. Burke notes that this is the concept of the author that Barthes's argument rests on, however it ignores the contemporary status of the author in the twentieth century after Russian Formalism, which sought to concentrate on the text and not the author, or American New Criticism's formalist approach that spoke about the

underwritten by the idea (as found in linguistics, semiotics, as well as psychoanalysis) that subjects both use and are used by language. As Emile Benveniste writes, "It is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a *subject*."[55] Thus in an article positing the "end" of autobiography, Michael Sprinker notes that, if we accept the idea that "the self is constituted by a discourse that it never completely masters," how can we claim the author of an autobiography to be in control of the text she produces?[56] Judith Butler, in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, approaches a similar question but from the standpoint of how this affects our ethical relationship to and responsibility for others. Butler argues that the subject is opaque to herself because she is fundamentally formed in relation to another and that this formation is in many ways "irrecoverable" to the conscious mind.[57] Furthermore, she points to how the "terms" or language we have at our disposal to narrate ourselves are already social and so are chosen but not fully chosen freely.[58] Thus, the "subject's self-crafting" unfolds "in relation to an imposed set of norms." The self is "produced by a world, even as one must produce oneself in some way."[59] Essentially, Butler argues that a large part of what constitutes the self is not produced by the self

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intentional fallacy. See Chapter One in *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992).

[55] Émile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1971), 224.

[56] James Olney, ed., *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 342.

[57] Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 20.

[58] Butler, 21–26.

[59] Butler, 19.

nor is it consciously accessible to or retrievable by the subject, and so as relational beings this opacity in our self-knowledge means that we can never give a full account of the self.

In his 1979 essay "Autobiography as Defacement," Paul de Man points to how the account we give of the self is determined by language, by genre, and by the structures of narrative we are given to make meaning out of our lives. He suggests that "the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium."[60] De Man suggests that the act of writing *produces* the self, rather than documents it.[61] The form of the autobiographical narrative prescribes how the author will portray herself, and the desire for an apt metaphor or a poetic coincidence introduces fiction into the work.[62] He thus argues that autobiography is a mode of reading rather than a referential

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[60] Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement," in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 69.

[61] We would be remiss not to note the irony of de Man's argument, given the role that his own biography would go on to play in the reception of his work posthumously. As Seán Burke notes in the prologue to his classic study that deconstructs the poststructuralist theory of the death of the author, when de Man's biography came to haunt him after his literal death, those on either side of the debate invoked his biography as an attempt to expiate or condemn his work. Either critics understood his later work to be a kind of oblique confession written out of a desire to distance himself from his previous collaborationist texts or they saw it as a continuation of his earlier work and his collaborationist opinions. Although de Man had argued for the removal of the author from the work, his own biography then came to be central to many interpretations of his work. Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author*.

[62] Paul John Eakin has also put forward the idea that fiction is a necessary part of any autobiographical act. He writes that autobiography is "both an art of memory and an art of imagination" and that many autobiographers see fiction as "a central feature" of the "truth they propose to tell," "an ineluctable fact of the life of consciousness." Eakin demonstrates that self-invention, however, does not occur only when writing the autobiography, but in lived experience. Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 7.

genre, as we are caught up "*within* an undecidable situation" between autobiography and fiction when we read.[63]

It is striking, though, that de Man introduces the seeds of doubt about the referential status of autobiography by comparing it with photography: "But are we so certain that autobiography depends on reference, as a photograph depends on its subject or a (realistic) picture on its model?"[64] De Man holds up photography as an exemplar of referentiality that autobiography can only aspire to. However, as we have already explored in this introduction, photography's referential force is perhaps less certain than de Man suggests.

How, then, are we to understand the status of the photograph within an autobiographical work? Does it secure the referential claim of the narrative by visually pointing to the autobiographical subject? Or does the instability of photographic signification and its disputed evidentiary claim simply retrace similar fault lines that mark the autobiographical project?

Linda Haverty Rugg and Timothy Dow Adams have both taken up these questions in their explorations of the relationship between photography and autobiography. In *Picturing Ourselves*, Rugg notes that photographs within autobiographies both "disrupt the singularity of the autobiographical pact by pointing to a plurality of selves" but also give physical expression to the idea of "the embodied subject."[65] If the autobiographical narrative works to posit a continuous, fully integrated subject, then the inclusion of photographs from different life periods

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[63] de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement," 70. While de Man suggests that autobiography is less a genre than a mode of reading, Elizabeth Bruss argues that autobiography as a form is best understood as a speech act. Elizabeth W. Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

[64] de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement," 69.

[65] Haverty-Rugg, *Picturing Ourselves*, 13.

can work to undermine this stance. At the same time, these photographs also seem to reinforce the textual narrative's reference to the physical body out in the world. For, if we set aside the critique of photography as a constructed form of representation like any other, the everyday use of photographs as a form of identification (passports, driver's license, ID cards) also seems to operate within autobiography as proof of the author's identity.

In addition to the question of referentiality that both these forms pose, Rugg notes that the autobiographical imperative to take up one's former self as the object of study is also played out when we look at photographs of ourselves, an experience that offers a glimpse of the self as other.[66] As Barthes writes, the photo is "the advent of myself as other."[67] The photograph offers a way of seeing myself in a way that otherwise I never can. For Susan Sontag, this edges on a kind of symbolic violence: "To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed."[68] And yet, to see this *only* as a form of violence leaves out the fact that we are relational beings, forged in connection with others, and that we are always being seen by others in ways we cannot fully know. The photograph dramatizes this scene, as an other's vision of us becomes externalized as an object that we too can tangibly grasp. And so, while photography might commit a kind of symbolic violence as Sontag suggests, it can also aid us in our attempt to understand the self. The experience of seeing the self as other through photographs becomes part of how these authors navigate the challenge of narrating the

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[66] Linda Haverty Rugg, *Picturing Ourselves: Photography and Autobiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 5.

[67] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 12.

[68] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 14.

self. The nexus of photography and narration in these works puts forward a vision of the self as something to be constructed but also as already constructed through the very objects, photos, and narratives we have at our disposal to understand the self.

Considering photographs as indexical documents that seem to provide evidence but also as highly indeterminate images that tell alternative narratives and demand interpretation, I read the photographs as an integral component of self-construction in these works, rather than as transparent illustrations of the self. Guided by the idea that the archive actively produces knowledge, rather than being a mere repository of meaning, I approach the inclusion and arrangement of photographs within these works as a key element of self-construction.[69] In navigating the family archive of photographs as well as in arranging, selecting, and captioning the photos within their text or installation, these authors produce a new archive of photos that tells a particular narrative of the self and of the family, rather than merely presenting this material. Indeed, this is the very principle of autobiography—by selecting and arranging parts of one's life into a particular narrative form a version of the self is produced.

Word and Image

Bringing together photography and autobiography, these works demand to be read both verbally and visually. In my consideration of the interart nature of these works, I am guided by W. J. T. Mitchell's extensive work on the relationship between the visual and the verbal.[70]

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[69] Derrida notes that the structure of the archive inevitably determines what can be archived and how it is archived, thus shaping and producing the historical record. He writes, "archivization produces as much as it records the event." Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 17.

[70] By "interart," I refer to the tradition of comparison between art forms. Horace's analogy "Ut pictura poesis" (as is painting so is poetry) serves as the classic formulation motivating this comparison. A full bibliography of interart studies (or even just word-and-image studies) would

Mitchell intervenes in the interdisciplinary study of literature and the visual arts to suggest that we should move beyond what he calls the "Sister Arts" method of criticism which compares one art form with another from a given period (pairing a cubist painting, for example, with a poem by Ezra Pound). Instead, Mitchell suggests we should engage with the "image/text problem" by considering the relationship between the visual and verbal *within* a given work. Such an approach lends itself most obviously to analyzing composite works that combine text and image (illustrated books, photographic essays, comic strips, as well as the synthetic forms of theater and cinema), but Mitchell goes so far as to say that *all* works negotiate this tension between image and text:

> The image/text problem is not just something constructed 'between' the arts, the media, or different forms of representation, but an unavoidable issue *within* the individual arts and media. In short, all arts are 'composite' arts (both text and image); all media are mixed media, combining different codes, discursive conventions, channels, sensory and cognitive modes.[71]

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be extensive, but see James A. W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Wendy Steiner, *The Colors of Rhetoric: Problems in the Relation between Modern Literature and Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Molly Brunson, *Russian Realisms: Literature and Painting, 1840–1890* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2016); Andreas Huyssen, *Miniature Metropolis: Literature in an Age of Photography and Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); François Brunet, *Photography and Literature* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009); Jefferson Hunter, *Image and Word: The Interaction of Twentieth-Century Photographs and Texts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987); Karen Beckman and Liliane Weissberg, eds., *On Writing with Photography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

[71] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 94–95. One of his fundamental examples for this claim that there is no such thing as a purely visual or purely verbal work comes from a consideration of the medium of writing. "Viewed from either side, from the standpoint of the visual or the verbal, the medium of *writing* deconstructs the possibility of a pure image or pure text, along with the opposition between the 'literal' (letters) and the 'figurative' (pictures) on which it depends. Writing, in its physical, graphic form, is an inseparable suturing of the visual and verbal, the 'imagetext' incarnate" (95).

When considering a work as a composite imagetext, Mitchell encourages us to look at its specific "image-text structure" to consider what determines the particular kind of relationship between the visual and verbal in this work.[72] Elsewhere, Mitchell contends that the relationship between text and image should be understood "as a social and historical one."[73] What, Mitchell asks, are the ideological underpinnings that structure how the boundary between word and image is figured. Thus the debates over the relative merits of the arts, or *paragone* ("comparison"), that animated theoretical discussions during the Renaissance (and beyond) should be historicized, rather than taken as absolute definitions of what a given form can and should do. Put simply, what are the forces (social, historical, aesthetic) that shape the presentation of word and image in a given work or in a theoretical tract on aesthetics?

And so, when Nabokov stages a highly agonistic encounter between the word and the photographic image in *Speak, Memory*, we will consider how the boundary drawn between these two forms is neither neutral nor natural, but is instead indicative of a suspicion of the mechanical medium and an aesthetic valorization of the human capacity for memory indebted to Henri Bergson's philosophy of duration. Moreover, we will examine how the division of labor between word and image as articulated in the memoir intersects with a desire for authorial control on the one hand and the creation of an authorial persona on the other. While Nabokov sharply differentiates between the verbal and the photographic, in Brodsky's autobiographical essay "In a Room and a Half" the two are drawn into an uneasy alliance. Brodsky's essay—which proffers up descriptions of photographs but withholds the actual images—aligns the limitations of

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[72] As he writes, "The relative value, location, and the very *identity* of 'the verbal' and 'the visual' is exactly what is in question." Mitchell, 90.

[73] W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 157.

memory with the fragmentary quality of photographs. I suggest that, formally, we can see the textual narrative as remediated through the newer medium of photography, as it unfolds in photographic fragments that accentuate the discontinuities of memory and experience.[74] As I argue, this relationship between word and image in Brodsky's essay is postmodern in its privileging of spatial forms that emphasize discontinuity and rupture, as opposed to the temporal continuity of duration. While in Shteyngart's work the relationship between word and image is more harmonious, each illuminating the other, in Kabakov's installations word and image are often presented as discordant, thus raising questions about the relationship between representation and reality in general.

Outline of Chapters

In the first half of this dissertation, I consider photography and the problem of visual memory in Nabokov and Brodsky's work. I explore how both authors disparage photography, which I suggest can be traced back to Bergson's concept of duration (*durée*) and his critique of the photographic snapshot.[75] While both Nabokov and Brodsky's engage in a similar critique of

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[74] Here I am influenced by Andreas Huyssen's use of Marshall McLuhan's concept of "remediation," the process by which a new form like film or photography remediates the older form of the novel. Huyssen describes a process of "remediation in reverse," in which the emergence of a new medium (such as photography) influences an older form (such as literature), in his account of the modernist miniature in German literature of the early 20th century. Huyssen, *Miniature Metropolis*.

[75] Lev Loseff notes that Brodsky and his generation eagerly read "prerevolutionary editions of Nietzsche, Bergson, Freud." Lev Loseff, *Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 33. Nabokov cited Bergson as one of his "top favorites" when he was in Western Europe from the ages of 20 to 40. Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), 43. For more on Nabokov and Bergson, see Leona Toker, "Nabokov and Bergson," in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Vladimir E. Alexandrov (New York: Garland, 1995); Michael Glynn, *Vladimir Nabokov: Bergsonian and Russian Formalist Influences in His Novels* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Marijeta Bozovic, "Bergson

photography, as we will see they interpret memory's relationship to the photographic medium quite differently.

In his theory of duration, first put forward in *Time and Free Will* (1889), Bergson argues that inner experience is in a constant state of flux, ever changing and flowing between states, and thus cannot be quantified, measured, or divided. We encounter difficulties in thinking duration, however, because of the constraints of language, the homogenized time of the clock, and other aspects of social life that lead us to fragment, abstract, and spatialize the multiplicity and heterogeneity of temporal duration. In the final chapter of *Creative Evolution* (*L'Évolution créatice*, 1907), Bergson describes this false consciousness through an extended discussion of what he calls the "cinematographical character of our knowledge."[76] Instead of perceiving the flow of becoming, we abstract this perpetual process of change and break it down into discrete states; the cinematograph, he suggests, offers a metaphor for the mind's false perception of duration. If we wanted to portray a "living picture" of a marching band on screen, we might take a series of photographs of the soldiers and then project these images through a cinematograph at rapid succession. While this may give the impression of movement, Bergson contends that such a method fails to truly animate the images: "with immobility set beside immobility, even endlessly, we could never make movement."[77] This mechanical form of perception is akin to our vision of reality. Bergson writes:

> Instead of attaching ourselves to the inner becoming of things, we place ourselves outside them in order to recompose their becoming artificially. We take snapshots, as it were, of the passing reality, and, as these are characteristic of the reality, we have only to string

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and The Texture of Time," in *Nabokov's Canon: From Onegin to Ada* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2016).

[76] Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1998), 306.

[77] Bergson, 305.

> them on a becoming, abstract, uniform and invisible, situated at the back of the apparatus of knowledge, in order to imitate what there is that is characteristic in this becoming itself.[78]

The cinematograph can never escape the fact that its illusory moving picture is produced through static still images that fragment and abstract true movement. This cinematographic trick is emblematic of the way our mind encounters difficulties in thinking duration. However, for Bergson, it is art that can overcome this "cinematographic" cast of mind. Art brings us closest to intuiting the true nature of things, to experiencing pure duration. In his essay on laughter, Bergson suggests that "between nature and ourselves, nay, between ourselves and our own consciousness a veil is interposed: a veil that is dense and opaque for the common herd,—thin, almost transparent, for the artist and the poet."[79] The artist can creatively intuit the flow of duration and perceive the "inner life of things."[80]

Bergson's thought accords with Nabokov's modernist belief in art's ability to break through the "veil" of habituated perception and discern the inner reality of things through their form. And like Bergson, Nabokov too finds fault with the photograph: its flat and static representation lacks movement, color, and the subtle vibration of the inner existence of things. Nabokov contrasts this photographic mode of representation with his rich visual memory, which allows him to vividly paint a vision of the past that he then steps back into, escaping the "prison of time" (*SM* 20). Chapter One examines how the inclusion of photographs in the third version of Nabokov's autobiography, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* stages an agonistic

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[78] Bergson, 306.

[79] Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (London: Dodo Press, 2007), 74.

[80] Bergson, 76.

encounter between the photographic medium and the visual word. Nabokov, I suggest, treats these photographs as an incursion into his territory as a visual writer but also a necessary part of his social capital. After all, Nabokov is known as a highly visual writer who claimed a high level of control over meaning in his texts. However, the photographs pose a potential stumbling block for the visual writer's investment in control, both because he is not the author of the images and because of the indeterminacy of meaning in photographs. In Chapter One, we will see how Nabokov seeks to position himself as the photographs' true author, with the ability to fix their meaning, through the captions. He does so by disparaging the photographs, denying their ability to represent accurately, accentuating their falsity, ultimately in order to position his own visual memory as superior. For Nabokov, as for Bergson, the photograph lacks the vitality and movement of temporal duration. It is through the written word — his captions — that Nabokov attempts to reanimate these images, injecting time and movement into them.

Nabokov's agonistic approach to the photographs within his autobiography is attenuated by the presence of two snapshots taken by his wife Véra. The divisive encounter between photo and caption that characterizes the other photographs now transforms into a positive relationship, as word and image mutually reinforce each other. This example of artistic coproduction between Nabokov and Véra approaches a more dialogic model of authorship. Véra's photographs open up memory, rather than foreclose it.

In Chapter Two, I explore how Brodsky critiques photography along similar lines in his essay "In a Room and a Half." Like Nabokov, Brodsky bemoans photographs as fragmented, lacking movement and continuity. They offer a false representation of our lived experience of duration. However, while Nabokov contrasts the photographic medium's inferior preservation of the past with the transfigurative power of his visual memory to regain lost time, Brodsky

conceives of memory as all too photographic. In Brodsky's essay, memory ruptures continuity and preserves only an arbitrary assortment of details. In stark contrast with Nabokov's memory that preserves the past as an "exquisite simulacrum—the beauty of intangible property" (*SM* 40), Brodsky sees memory as "an ally of oblivion, […] an ally of death" (*LTO* 492). Memory fragments experience like the camera does; he reproaches the "missing frames" of memory that disrupts the "film" of lived experience. Brodsky's conception of memory in this essay thus draws on Bergson's idea of the cinematographic mind that falsely perceives temporal duration: his memory operates photographically, spatializes time, fragments continuous experience—but ultimately Brodsky casts doubt on the very possibility of duration. The artist's ability to lift the "dense and opaque" veil to reveal the true nature of things and to be in tune with duration is denied. He writes that "the conviction that we are somehow remembering the whole thing in a blanket fashion […] is groundless" (*LTO* 489). The possibility of intuiting the temporal flow of a continuous durational experience no longer seems attainable. There are no Nabokovian (or Proustian) moments of time regained through art. Instead, for Brodsky the visual aspect of memory ties it to the principles of space rather than time, leading to fragmentation rather than unity. I explore theories of spatial memory, such as the ancient art of memory as well as Bachelard's poetics of space which view space as the repository of memory. In Brodsky's thought, space is typically figured as the lesser category when compared with time. Infinite and indivisible, time triumphs over space, which obeys the logic of reduction. "If there is an infinite aspect to space," Brodsky writes, "it is not its expansion but its reduction" (*LTO* 452). In this chapter, I argue that in Brodsky's essay the fragmentation of the photographic mode coincides with a spatial, rather than temporal, conception of memory, thus giving expression to the

postmodern condition of rupture. The limits of photography become a metaphor for the discontinuities of memory and modern experience, compounded by the experience of exile.

In these two chapters, exile—the physical separation from the past, their homeland, and their parents—proves to test these writers' mnemonic faculties to restore or recuperate lost time. How they respond to this challenge diverges, and it is here that we see a difference in their poetics as well as their own conception of the phenomenology of memory.

The second half of the dissertation focuses on the tension between postmodern skepticism about the limits of photographs, on the one hand, and the affective power of family photographs, on the other. This tension rehearses the divided critical approach to photographs explored earlier: between the semiotic reading of the photograph as constructed and the "naïve" belief in indexical presence, between coded *studium* and the uncoded *punctum*. I identify this affective turn with what has been called the "New Sincerity" after postmodernism, which witnesses a return to authenticity, sincerity, and emotional honesty as opposed to the cool, detached, playfully ironic distance of postmodernism. In these chapters, I explore how Shteyngart and Kabakov revive an emotional response to family photographs that allows for a sincere engagement with the past, despite drawing our attention simultaneously to the very aspects of photography that frustrate such a response: the banality and ubiquity of the family photo album; the socially-conditioned nature of such images; the way photographs lie.

Chapter Three identifies "double exposure" as a mode of reading photographs in Shteyngart's memoir *Little Failure*. Shteyngart engages in a dual reading of photographs, balancing the estranged perspective of an American looking back ironically at his Soviet childhood in Leningrad and the attempt to recuperate the sincerity of his experience as a child. In a dramatic shift from his previous work that trades in exaggerated, stereotypical, ironic

representations of "Russianness" for a Western reader, Shteyngart here risks a more nuanced and emotionally vulnerable reflection on his hyphenated Soviet-Jewish-American identity. In navigating the family archive of photographs, Shteyngart creates a web of associations that connect his own traumatic experiences with the cataclysmic events of the 20th century. It is through an exploration of the passage of these intergenerational traumas that Shteyngart makes the case most emphatically for his Russian cultural identity.

In Chapter Four, I trace a constellation of family photographs across several art installations and paintings by Kabakov: *Mother and Son* (1990), *Labyrinth: My Mother's Album* (1990), *On the Roof* (1996), and *They are Looking* (2010). While Kabakov is known for his conceptualist works that play with the category of the author, often inventing personae and attributing his pieces to them, these installations and paintings illuminate a counternarrative of self-representation in Kabakov's oeuvre. Like Shteyngart, Kabakov delves into the family archive in these pieces, incorporating photographs by his uncle, his mother's diary, and hundreds of family photographs of him and his wife Emilia. Many of these same objects recur across the installations and paintings, and I argue that when analyzed collectively these works attempt to reckon with the legacy of the Soviet experience through personal history. All too aware of the photograph's manipulability and the prescribed forms of self-narrative, Kabakov exposes the falsity of official narratives by bringing to light the alternative narratives housed within the family archive—but, in the process, he also undoes the veracity of his own narratives. For, at the same time, Kabakov's self-representation exposes the ubiquity of such family photographs, often thwarting the viewer's ability to make easy correspondences between the documents of the past and the reality they supposedly represent.

The figures in this dissertation explore how the ubiquitous family photograph can move beyond an unreflective nostalgia for the past. They find themselves caught between a naïve realist belief in what the photograph represents and a critical awareness of the limits of its representational capacity. The ambivalent or critical attitude to photographs in these works opens up questions about memory, trauma, and the relationship between self and other. This dissertation suggests that the photographs are an integral part of these autobiographical works, as the tensions inherent within any autobiographical work between self and other, subjective and objective perspectives, and the referential and the fictional are brought to the fore through another medium. The moments in which another form of representation enters the text throw into relief the very process of picturing the self. At times, they vividly present the moment of reading oneself, of encountering the self as other. They seem to aid in the struggle to give a full account of ourselves that is, as Butler argues, ultimately inaccessible to us. At other moments, they are seen as unruly intrusions, presenting counter-narratives to the author's vision. The main contention of this dissertation is that if we ignore the photographs within these texts, we risk missing how these texts articulate the limits and possibilities of representation in creating a narrative of the self through the relationship between word and image. It is precisely in these interart moments, as narrative and photographic image collide, that we can glimpse a heightened awareness of the project of picturing the self.

Chapter One
Authorizing the Image: Photography in Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*

> "Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of 'posing,' I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image. […] In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art."
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> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (1980)[1]

Vladimir Nabokov knew how to pose himself in front of the camera, to transform himself into an image for an audience. When *Life* magazine contacted Nabokov in 1951 about the possibility of doing a profile on him and butterfly hunting, Nabokov gave detailed instructions on how he should be photographed:

> Some fascinating photos might be also taken of me, a burly but agile man, stalking a rarity or sweeping it into my net from a flowerhead, or capturing it in midair. There is a special professional twist of the wrist immediately after the butterfly has been netted which is quite fetching. Then you could show my finger and thumb delicately pinching the thorax of a netted butterfly through the gauze of the netbag. And of course the successive stages of preparing the insect on a setting board have never yet been shown the way I would like them to be shown. All this might create a sensation in scientific and nature-lover circles besides being pleasing to the eye of a layman. I must stress the fact that the whole project as you see it has never been attempted before.[2]

Emphasizing the originality of the photographic series and foreseeing the "sensation" it will cause, Nabokov playfully directs the photographer on which details should be captured—the delicate twist of his wrist, his thumb and finger—noting the best angles to display the artistry of

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[1] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 10–13.

[2] Vladimir Nabokov, *Vladimir Nabokov: Selected Letters, 1940-1977*, ed. Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), 114–15.

the lepidopterist. The letter testifies to his understanding of the power of photographic images and his acute sense of how to present himself before the camera to create an effect.[3] It is also exemplary of his desire to exercise artistic control over his authorial image.

Maintaining control over his authorial image becomes of central importance in his autobiography, a key site in Nabokov's project of fashioning and representing the self. Some intimation of how troublous but also fecund this project was for Nabokov is offered in the fact that he wrote and rewrote the autobiography over the span of three decades. Like its author's migratory path, the autobiography had its own circuitous and multilingual journey. In 1936, Nabokov published a short essay in French, "Mademoiselle O," which would later become part of the memoir. After emigrating to America in 1940, he began to publish autobiographical essays in English. In 1951, these essays took the shape of *Conclusive Evidence*. In 1954, Nabokov translated his memoir into Russian and expanded it, giving it the title *Drugie berega* (*Other Shores*). To conclude this exercise in autobiographical self-translation, in 1966 he published *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. As he put it, this version was a "re-Englishing of a Russian re-version of what had been an English re-telling of Russian memories in the first place" (*SM* 12). He intended to write a second volume of memoirs (possible titles included *Speak On, Memory* and *Speak, America*), but it never materialized.

No autobiography is ever complete—for the final event that concludes the life cannot be narrated—but Nabokov it would seem rejected the idea of placing a final end point on his self-narrative. Indeed, Nabokov addressed the difficulties of self-representation in the unpublished

[3] Although this particular project never came to fruition, *Life* did later do a profile on Nabokov entitled "The Master of Versatility: Vladimir Nabokov: Lolita, Languages, Lepidoptera," November 20, 1964. Photographs of Nabokov hunting butterflies were taken by Jean Schlemmer. Another shot shows Nabokov sitting in front of a chessboard, framed by the pieces.

final chapter of *Conclusive Evidence*. Nabokov had originally considered publishing an additional chapter to bookend the memoir, "'Chapter Sixteen' or 'On *Conclusive Evidence*,'" in which he poses as the book's reviewer. In this capacity, he writes about the limits of self-representation:

> But one is inclined to think that his true purpose here is to project himself, or at least his most treasured self, into the picture he paints. One is reminded of those problems of 'objectivity' that the philosophy of science brings up. An observer makes a detailed picture of the whole universe but when he has finished he realizes that it still lacks something: his own self. So he puts himself in it too. But again a 'self' remains outside and so forth, in an endless sequence of projections, like those advertisements which depict a girl holding a picture of herself holding a picture of herself holding a picture that only coarse printing prevents one's eye from making out.[4]

One of the fundamental problems of self-representation is occupying both the subject and object position. The impossibility of achieving a complete and objective view of the self—pace Montaigne's claim to have "painted myself complete and in all my nakedness" in his autobiographical essays—results in an mise-en-abîme. Duncan White notes that it is the "materiality" of the printing that "sets the final limit" of the recursive image.[5] Nabokov faults the literal ink and pigment for making difficult the task. It is the very means of representation itself that ensures that the depiction of the self will always fall short.

It is striking that here Nabokov likens the difficulties of representing the self to a *visual* self-portrait, rather than a textual one. For in addition to the verbal metamorphoses of the self across the various editions, Nabokov eventually introduced a new visual component into the text. When Nabokov published the third version of his autobiography, *Speak, Memory: An*

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[4] Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Everyman's Library, 1999), 254. Chapter Sixteen is included as an appendix to the memoir in this edition.

[5] Duncan White, *Nabokov and His Books: Between Late Modernism and the Literary Marketplace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 14.

Autobiography Revisited (1966), he included photographs in the text for the first time. Nabokov, of course, is known as a visual writer. He insisted that he thought "in images," not words.[6] He drew maps and diagrams to help university students properly visualize works of literature.[7] He likened his writing process to that of a painter, and he has been called "a painter with words."[8] He even described writing a memoir in visual terms: the "good memoirist" discerns "the right spot on his canvas for placing the right patch of remembered color."[9] The "bad memoirist," on the other hand, "re-touches his past, and the result is a blue-tinted or pink-shaded photograph taken by a stranger to console sentimental bereavement."[10] Nabokov here draws familiar battle lines between painting and photography, but it is the characterization of the bad memoirist not only as a photographer, but as a *stranger* that should give us pause. For despite the avowed visuality of his work, Nabokov did not create any of the photographic images that illustrate his autobiography.

This might seem like a trivial detail. Indeed, most critics have treated the photographs in *Speak, Memory* as uncomplicated illustrations that supplement Nabokov's visual imagination.

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[6] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 14.

[7] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 156–57.

[8] Gerard de Vries and D. Barton Johnson, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Painting* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 20. For the importance of painting in Nabokov's oeuvre, see also Gavriel Shapiro, *The Sublime Artist's Studio: Nabokov and Painting* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009).

[9] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 186. Here we might detect an echo of Bergson's description of the artist, who perceives the individuality of things rather than their generalized form, in his essay on laughter. Bergson writes: "What the artist fixes on his canvas is something he has seen at a certain spot, on a certain day, at a certain hour, with a colouring that will never be seen again." Bergson, *Laughter*, 79.

[10] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 186.

Maria Malikova, for example, ascribes little significance to the way Nabokov wields photographs in the text. She suggests that Nabokov exhibited an "amazing blindness in regards to the art of photography," which led to the "inclusion of photographs in *Speak, Memory* apparently without a conscious aesthetic plan, but just as a clear illustration to the text, a tribute to the reader's expectations."[11] John Burt Foster Jr. takes a similar approach, writing that the photographs and images in the text "are simply a more literal variant of the text's repeated attempts to visualize the past."[12] But when we consider how Nabokov cultivated the posture of a highly controlling author, the issue of these foreign elements embedded in his text comes into sharper focus. After all, in his works patterns and puzzles remind the reader of the author's hand, suggesting firm control over the text's meaning. And beyond the text, he availed himself of forewords, indexes, book covers, annotations, commentaries, and interviews to craft this commanding and demanding authorial persona.[13] He was "the perfect dictator," his characters "galley slaves."[14]

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[11] Maria Malikova, "Nabokov's Photo-Biography," trans. Alexander Ponomariov, *Nabokov Online Journal* 8 (2014).

[12] John Burt Foster, *Nabokov's Art of Memory and European Modernism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), 182. For an insightful reading of the photographs in *Speak, Memory* see the Conclusion of Katherine Reischl's recent book on author-photographers. Reischl suggests that "photographic illustration is both transformed by the hand of the author and transformative for the author himself." Reischl, *Photographic Literacy*, 207.

[13] For more on Nabokov's use of paratextual elements to shape his authorial persona, see White, *Nabokov and His Books*; Nicholas O. Warner, "The Footnote as Literary Genre: Nabokov's Commentaries to Lermontov and Puškin," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 30, no. 2 (1986): 167–82, https://doi.org/10.2307/307594; Rebecca Stanton, "Talking Back to Nabokov: A Commentary on a Commentary," *Ulbandus Review* 10 (2007): 212–21; Jacqueline Hamrit, *Authorship in Nabokov's Prefaces* (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).

[14] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 69.

More importantly, for our purposes, Nabokov often looked to the visual as a means of asserting greater control over his verbal art. Nabokov repeatedly compared his writing with painting. When asked in an interview about his writing process, Nabokov answers that he does not proceed chronologically, but rather "I just fill in the gaps of the picture, of this jigsaw puzzle which is quite clear in my mind, picking out a piece here and a piece there and filling out part of the sky and part of the landscape and part of the—I don't know, carousing hunters."[15] Or, from another interview: "Since this entire structure, dimly illumined in one's mind, can be compared to a painting, and since you do not have to work gradually from left to right for its proper perception, I may direct my flashlight at any part or particle of the picture when setting it down in writing."[16] These interviews, in which Nabokov envisions himself as a painter or visual writer, emphasize his ability to create a unified picture that has no ending or beginning. But as much as these passages describe his process as a writer, they also address his relationship with the reader. For within Nabokov's repeated comparison of visual art with verbal art rests the question of artistic control.

In the essay "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," Nabokov compares his writing with painting. He suggests that the principle of contiguity, or "sequence" as he puts it, that determines narrative prose exists only because "words have to be written one after the other on consecutive pages, just as the reader's mind must have time to go through the book, at least the first time he reads it." However, Nabokov contends that the form of the novel and the experience of reading do not accord with the author's artistic vision since "no time element and no space element had ruled the initial vision." If only books could be read like paintings, Nabokov muses,

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[15] Nabokov, 16–17.

[16] Nabokov, 32.

then we could do away with "the bother of working from left to right" and "the absurdity of beginnings and ends."[17] Nabokov here subscribes to the notion, which we can trace back to G. E. Lessing's *Laocoön* (1766), that paintings are spatial and atemporal; that they can be perceived as a unity all at once, unlike a narrative that unfolds over time.[18] While this binary has been called into question by contemporary critics, nonetheless it is revealing what Nabokov thinks images can do.[19] He determines that a narrative in the form of a painting "would be the ideal way of appreciating a novel, for thus the author saw it at the moment of its conception."[20] Part of the appeal of the visual arts for Nabokov would seem to be the fantasy of communicating to the viewer exactly what the artist envisioned, as he conceived it. Although the validity of such a claim is suspect, Nabokov seems to suggest that a painting would offer greater control over the reception and interpretation of his works, as the reader would share more precisely in the author's vision.

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[17] Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 379–80.

[18] Conall Cash takes up this idea in an article on the function of photography and painting in *Pale Fire*. Cash argues that the images in *Pale Fire* do not behave in the way Nabokov suggests they do in his lecture; instead, the static images are swept up in the temporality of the unfolding narrative and our understanding of these images changes as we read and, as Nabokov prescribes, re-read. Cash Conall, "Picturing Memory, Puncturing Vision: Vladimir Nabokov's Pale Fire," in *Goalkeeper: The Nabokov Almanac*, ed. Yuri Leving (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2010).

[19] For a critique of Lessing's argument, see Mitchell, *Iconology*. The art historian Norman Bryson also undercuts the notion of images as atemporal by drawing attention to the physiology of the eye's saccadic movements, noting that "in actual experience, looking at an image is a radically temporal process, which changes from moment to moment. If we think of the saccadic movements of the eye, what vision experiences is an image distributed across discontinuous leaps. Each act of looking attends to a different area of the image and discloses a partial view, as vision transits through the image in endless stops and starts." Norman Bryson, "Intertextuality and Visual Poetics," *Style* 22, no. 2 (1988): 184.

[20] Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, 379–80.

To not have created the images in his own autobiography, then, seems to unsettle Nabokov's vaunted position as the preeminent visual author, in control over the text and its reception. The photographs "taken by a stranger" introduce other voices, or rather, other visions. Critically, these images offer an external representation of the author, not a form of self-representation fashioned by Nabokov.

Not only do the photographs introduce a competing authorial vision into Nabokov's text, but photographs, as a medium, frustrate the kind of control Nabokov sought to exert over the interpretation of his works. Unlike paintings, photography has often been seen as an authorless artform. As André Bazin writes:

> For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent. For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man. […] All the arts are based on the presence of man, only photography derives an advantage from his absence.[21]

The photograph introduces contingency.[22] Whatever happens to be there at that moment becomes impressed on the photographic record, where one detail does not necessarily have more weight than another. Moreover, as Jefferson Hunter notes, photographs resist the possibility of a "singular, authoritative, stable meaning."[23] For although photographs, due to the photochemical process, offer an index of reality and are thus readily taken as confirmation of an event, they are

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[21] Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," 13.

[22] For more on contingency in photographs, see Linda Connor et al., "Notes from the Field: Contingency," *The Art Bulletin* 94, no. 3 (2012): 344–61. In this collection, Peter Geimer writes that "photographers are only partly aware of what they are doing, and the aesthetic or epistemic value of their pictures often depends precisely on this blind spot. Much about a photograph is calculable, foreseeable, and leaves open the potential for formal intervention. However, there is also a dimension of the unforeseen. A photograph is, in this respect, also an *occurrence*: something in the image *occurs* or something *falls into* the image" (351).

[23] Hunter, *Image and Word*, 15.

also highly ambiguous images; a single moment unmoored from its place in time and space becomes subject to multiple interpretations depending on context, caption, and editing. While verbal texts are undoubtedly open to multiple interpretations just as visual images are, Nabokov endeavors to present his own verbal texts as closed systems that foreclose the possibility of unauthorized interpretations.[24] Taking up the question of whether they actually are closed systems is beyond the scope of this chapter; relevant for our purposes is merely the *performance* of positing such control. He positions himself as the creator of an entire universe, where everything is set in motion at his behest, where meaning resides in his hands.[25]

Thus, the photos pose a potential stumbling block for Nabokov's investment in control: both because he is not the author of the images and because of the indeterminacy of meaning in photographic images. The photographs, created by others, seem to be an element of the material book that threatens to elude his authorial grip. Speaking in such terms of an author's control over a text and its reception will no doubt set some teeth on edge. Only a couple of years after *Speak, Memory*'s publication, Jacques Derrida exposed the instability of language, while Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault pronounced the death of the author, demonstrating that meaning cannot be fixed in the way that Nabokov desires it to be. To be clear, my claim is not that

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[24] Indeed, Nabokov involved himself in the burgeoning scholarship on his works, guiding critics such as Carl Proffer, Alfred Appel, and Andrew Field toward "correct" interpretations. Julian W. Connolly asks whether Nabokov's works are "closed systems" whose puzzles are designed to lead to a single correct answer and determines that "the fact that Nabokov was so careful in planting clues as well as false leads indicates that he might have wished his readers to arrive at what he would regard as a "correct" interpretation." Julian W. Connolly, "The Challenge of Interpreting and Decoding Nabokov: Strategies and Suggestions," *Cycnos* 24, no. 1 (2007).

[25] He describes the "real writer" as "the fellow who sends planets spinning and models a man asleep and eagerly tampers with the sleeper's rib, that kind of author has no given values at his disposal: he must create them himself." Vladimir Nabokov, "Good Readers and Good Writers," in *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 2.

Nabokov lost control over his text once photographs were included; he never actually enjoyed such control. Instead, my argument attends to how the presentation of the photographs within the text stages the threat of such a loss—and overcomes it.

Indeed, the precarious position of the author haunts Nabokov's work from this period. Duncan White has recently shown how, even before such pronouncements about the death of the author, Nabokov had already experienced the limits of his authorial control through his encounters with the American literary marketplace and the book as a material commodity. White suggests that the realization of this loss in turn "animates the very fictions themselves, in which manuscripts are revised, redacted, misread, purloined, and posthumously published."[26] We might think of *Pale Fire* (1962), in which Nabokov dramatizes the dangers of the double author, as Charles Kinbote attempts to gain purchase on John Shade's poem through his commentary. But who is Nabokov in relation to the photographs in his autobiography: commentator or author?

I would suggest that Nabokov positions himself not as a commentator, who merely describes the photograph or provides information about it. Instead, he attempts to authorize the photographs through the captions. Captions offer a way of managing the indeterminacy of meaning in a photograph. The caption's power derives from its ability to appear natural, much like the photograph itself. The caption purports merely to describe what is already depicted in the photo. However, in his essay "The Photographic Message" (1961), Roland Barthes alerts us to the fact that the caption "appears to duplicate the image" and yet the inscription can invent "an entirely new signified which is retroactively projected into the image, so much so as to appear

[26] White, *Nabokov and His Books*, 14.

denoted there."[27] In other words, the captions give Nabokov creative license to place his own narratives onto the images, in effect re-authoring the photographs.

It would not be the first time that Nabokov attempted to re-author another's work. His translation and commentary of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*,[28] the annotations to his translation of Lermontov's *Hero of Our Time*,[29] his lectures on Cervantes' *Don Quixote*:[30] all these offer examples of Nabokov asserting his own authorial voice while occupying the role of commentator or explicator of a text. We can even consider the images he created for the books he taught in American universities as falling under this general rubric. Nabokov advocated drawing maps and diagrams for his students so that they could properly visualize the novelistic worlds of Flaubert, Tolstoy, Joyce, and others.

> In my academic days I endeavored to provide students of literature with exact information about details, about such combinations of details as yield the sensual spark without which a book is dead. […] in order to enjoy Tolstoy's art the good reader must wish to visualize, for instance, the arrangement of a railway carriage on the Moscow-Petersburg night train as it was a hundred years ago. Here diagrams are most helpful. […] instructors should prepare maps of Dublin with Bloom's and Stephen's intertwining itineraries clearly traced. Without a visual perception of the larch labyrinth in *Mansfield Park* that novel loses some of its stereographic charm, and unless the façade of Dr.

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[27] Barthes, *Image–Music–Text*, 26–27. Barthes describes how photographs communicate two messages: one message is without a code (denotative) and the other with (connotative). The denotative appears natural, it serves as evidence. The connotative is the rhetoric of the image.

[28] Nicolas O. Warner argues that Nabokov's annotated translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* is be more "authorial" than "editorial." Warner, "The Footnote as Literary Genre," 178.

[29] Stanton, "Talking Back to Nabokov."

[30] Duncan White notes that Nabokov was interested in the false Quixote plot in the second part of *Don Quixote*. In his lectures, Nabokov promoted the theory that Cervantes himself had written the apocryphal *Quixote* published by Alonso Fernández de Avellanda, a metafictional device that Nabokov would go on to use in *Pale Fire*, as White points out. In his lecture, Nabokov takes the liberty of proposing a scene that Cervantes should have written: a fight between the real and false Don Quixote. For more on Nabokov's lectures on *Quixote*, see White, *Nabokov and His Books*, 15–21.

> Jekyll's house is distinctly reconstructed in the student's mind, the enjoyment of Stevenson's story cannot be perfect.[31]

Nabokov figures these illustrations as integral parts of the book, without which something is lost. Nothing less than the fate of the book is at stake: the diagrams illustrate details that "yield the sensual spark without which a book is dead."[32] These maps and diagrams present another example of Nabokov's attempt to co-author his admired texts, this time through images. If he creates images to assert a degree of authorship over another's text, then he creates captions to re-author photos taken by others in his own text.

Through the captions in his autobiography, Nabokov seeks to position himself as the photographs' true author, with the ability to fix their meaning. He does so by disparaging the photographs, denying their ability to represent accurately, accentuating their falsity, ultimately in order to position his own visual memory as superior. Nabokov's verbal art emerges as capacious enough to subsume or assimilate the visual within it. In her article on photographs in *Speak, Memory*, Laurence Petit has suggested that the photographs in the text function to foreground how Nabokov's verbal acrobatics triumph over the visual images; the verbal is figured as denser than the visual. Petit argues that, in the captions, Nabokov prizes the written word's "capacity to be opaque and misleading, and thus to obscure rather than clarify the meaning of the photographic image."[33] While agreeing with the idea that Nabokov engages in something like a

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[31] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 156–57. Looking back on his teaching career, he also said "My best reward comes from those former students of mine who ten or fifteen years later write to me to say that they now understand what I wanted of them when I taught them to visualize Emma Bovary's mistranslated hairdo or the arrangement of rooms in the Samsa household." Quoted in Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, xxiv.

[32] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 157.

[33] Laurence Petit, "Speak, Photographs? Visual Transparency and Verbal Opacity in Nabokov's Speak, Memory," *Nabokov Online Journal* 3 (2009).

paragone, or comparison between two art forms, by setting the photos and captions in opposition, I would argue that the photos are anything but transparent; images seldom are. I read Nabokov's textual inscriptions less as an effort to obscure the meaning of the image, than as an attempt to gain control over their meaning. It is a struggle for authorship.

And yet, as I will show, this assertion of total authorial control over the images is attenuated by the inclusion of two snapshots of Nabokov taken by his wife Véra. If it is the figure of the "stranger" taking tinted photographs of the past that defines the bad memoirist, then it is fitting that Véra's photos operate differently in the text. The agonistic encounter between photo and caption that characterizes the other photographs transforms into a positive relationship, as word and image mutually reinforce each other. This example of artistic collaboration between Nabokov and Véra approaches a more dialogic or co-creative model of authorship.

Nabokov and Photography

Nabokov's general attitude to photographs could be characterized as less than enthusiastic. In his 1937 lecture "Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible" (Pouchkine, ou le vrai et le vraisemblable), Nabokov remarks on the absence of a photographic record for Pushkin. Pushkin died in 1837, just two years prior to Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre's presentation of his invention to the French Academy of Sciences in 1839. "Imagine," Nabokov writes, "if Pushkin had lived another two or three years we would have had his photograph."[34] Nabokov's injunction

[34] The lecture, delivered in French, was subsequently published in *Nouvelle revue française* (March 1, 1937). All quotations here are from the translation by Dmitri Nabokov, "Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible," *New York Review of Books*, March 31, 1988.

to "imagine" at first seems to suggest that the existence of such an image might be desired.[35] Having a photograph of Pushkin could bring us closer to the poet. After all, photographs have long been considered traces of their referent, with the power to make present what is absent. For example, The French writer Honoré de Balzac, a contemporary of Pushkin, believed the photograph to be a physical trace of the subject to such an extent that he feared the body was made up of spectral layers, with each Daguerreotype removing a layer.[36] While Balzac's fear of the photograph stripping away bodily layers is unfounded, the conception of the photograph as an indexical link to its referent has remained a common place in photographic theory. André Bazin urged that in a photograph we must "accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually *re*-presented, set before us, that is to say, in time and space. Photography enjoys a certain transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction."[37] A photograph of Pushkin, then, could serve as a medium of contact with the great poet.

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[35] Andrei Bitov's 1987 story "Pushkin's Photograph" (*Fotografiia Pushkina*) plays with this desire to have a photograph of Pushkin. A philologist from the year 2099 travels back in time in an attempt to snap a photograph of Pushkin. He fails in his endeavor, and Pushkin's visage remains enigmatic.

[36] According to the photographer Felix Nadar, in his memoir. Félix Nadar, *When I Was a Photographer*, trans. Eduardo Cadava and Liana Theodoratou (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 4.

[37] Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," 13–14. The causal connection between the photographed subject and the photograph has been elaborated on by many critics. Roland Barthes also insists on the physical connection between the photographed subject and the photograph: "The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here." Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 80–81. Art theorist Rosalind Krauss has noted the causal connection between a body and a photograph of that body, suggesting that the photograph provides a trace of that person's presence much like fingerprints or footprints do. Krauss writes that a photograph "is a photochemically processed trace causally connected to that thing in the world to which it refers in a manner parallel to that of fingerprints or footprints or the rings of water that cold glasses leave on tables." Rosalind Krauss, "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism," *October* 19 (1981): 26, https://doi.org/10.2307/778652.

Instead, though, Nabokov celebrates that Pushkin did *not* live to have his photograph taken. "Just one more step and he would have emerged from the night, rich in nuance and filled with picturesque implications, wherein he resides, to stride firmly into the wan daylight that is now a whole century old."[38] Such a step, according to Nabokov, would diminish the complexity of Pushkin's image. Nabokov privileges the rich darkness of painting over the weak daylight of photography. The association of Pushkin with the dark of night, however, reverses the familiar image of the poet as the "sun of Russian poetry" (*solntse russkoi poezii*) and the general connection of Pushkin with light.[39] More important, though, is the characterization of painting as more nuanced and suggestive than photography.

Nabokov goes on to say that photography inaugurated a new "visual era" that transformed portraiture. The genre of photographic portraiture is "so familiar to our present-day sensibilities that latter nineteenth-century celebrities assume the appearance of distant relatives—shabbily dressed, all in black as though they were in mourning for the iridescent life of yesteryear, invariably relegated to corners of somber, melancholy rooms, against a background of dust-laden drapery." Despite photography's status as a new technology, Nabokov characterizes its products as dusty and mournful. Moreover, the conventions of the genre have rendered people indistinguishable from one another, in a manner that disrupts established hierarchies — "celebrities" look like one's relatives. The potential loss of the author's elevated

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[38] Vladimir Nabokov, "Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible," trans. Dmitri Nabokov, NYRB March 31, 1988.

[39] Stephanie Sandler, *Commemorating Pushkin: Russia's Myth of a National Poet*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 10. The idea of Pushkin inhabiting the night could be a reference to the fact that Pushkin was buried secretly at night. Pushkin's burial at night informed Osip Mandelstam's image of the "night sun" (*nochnoe solntse*) in his poem "V Peterburge my soidemsia snova…" (1920) and his essay "Pushkin and Scriabin" (1919–25).

status unsettles Nabokov. He notes that, in addition to Pushkin, Byron and Goethe were not subjected to this new brand of portraiture. The implication is that those writers who were not photographed remain original, while those who follow appear more conventional or undifferentiated.[40]

He sees it as a "stroke of luck for our imagination" that Pushkin "has never had to wear that heavy fabric with its grotesque folds, that funeral clothing of our grandparents, with a little black cravat devoured by the mandibles of a stiff collar." As a result, "Pushkin has not aged." Since a photograph of Pushkin does not exist, the imagination is free to create a subjective portrait of the poet.

In an earlier essay "Les Écrivains et l'époque," published in the June 1931 issue of the French monthly *Le Mois*, Nabokov wonders what the twenty-first century will make of the current epoch. We think, he writes, that we have found a way to permanently preserve time with technologies such as photography and film and that, as a result, future generations will have a clear and accurate image of the age. However, he dismisses this idea:

> La méthode cinématographie contemporaine qui, à nos yeux, semble nous donner l'image parfaitement exacte de la vie sera probablement si différente de la méthode qu'emploieront nos arrière-petits-neveux, que l'impression qu'ils se feront du mouvement de notre époque (tremblotement blafard d'un coin de rue grouillant de véhicules à jamais disparus) sera faussée par le style même de la photographie, par cet air vieillot et gauche que prennent à nos yeux des gravures représentant les événements d'un siècle passé. En d'autres mots, nos descendants n'auront pas la sensation directe de la réalité.

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[40] Nabokov expresses disdain for photography here because the conventions of portraiture make everyone look the same. To some extent, this is consonant with his objection to Freud; according to Nabokov, Freudian analysis converts all singular, specific details to general patterns. For more on Nabokov and Freud, see Jenefer Shute, "Nabokov and Freud," in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Vladimir E. Alexandrov (New York: Garland, 1995); Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy, "King, Queen, Sui-Mate: Nabokov's Defense against Freud's 'Uncanny,'" *Intertexts*, no. 1–2 (2008): 7–24.

> The contemporary cinematographic method that, to our eyes, seems to give us a perfectly precise image of life will probably be so different from the method that will be used by our great-grandnephews, that the impression that they will form of movement in our epoch (pale trembling of a street corner swarming with vehicles that have disappeared forever) will be distorted by the very style of the photograph, by that old-fashioned and awkward air that, to our eyes, engravings representing the events of the past century acquire. In other words, our descendants will not have the direct sensation of reality.[41]

With advances in technology, images of a previous epoch acquire a certain antiquated look that inaccurately ages the subjects. What looks to be an accurate depiction of reality to someone in the present will look quaint and old-fashioned to someone in the future. This helps us to understand what Nabokov means when he says that "Pushkin hasn't aged" because his image hasn't been fixed in a photograph. In this essay, Nabokov suggests that only those who live in a certain age can truly experience it. He writes that neither the historian of his own time or a previous period can tell us much about the actual experience of reality. "Tout ce que nous pouvons dire de notre siècle est toujours plutôt art que science" (All that we can say about our century is always more art than science). Although images might preserve traces of that reality, the way we perceive that reality is distorted (faussée) by the medium's representational capabilities. Like the images of Pushkin, what we see is not "true" reality, but something plausible.

We might wonder, then, why Nabokov included photographs in the third version of his autobiography. The inclusion of photographs of the author could be seen as bending to the conventions of the genre. Photographs, after all, are often mobilized in autobiography to refer to

[41] Vladimir Nabokov, "Les Écrivains et l'époque," *Le Mois: Synthèse de l'activité mondiale* (June–July 1931), 137. My translation.

the autobiographical subject.[42] In this particular case, the need to distinguish this edition from its predecessors might have further motivated the inclusion of photos. Indeed, the publishers worried that the book would not attract enough readers, given that a previous English version was already in circulation. Nabokov countered: "The new material alone, with the photographs, would make quite a presentable book, so that you are not right in stressing the selling problems—if the book is properly launched: It should be made clear to the prospective buyer that at least one third (if not more) of it is new."[43] The inclusion of photos reflects Nabokov's understanding of the literary marketplace; they will help to sell the book.

Indeed, the sudden inclusion of photographs in the autobiography comes at a decisive moment in Nabokov's career. The version of the autobiography with photographs (1966) was the only one to be published after the critically and financially successful *Lolita* (French publication, 1955; US publication, 1958), Stanley Kubrick's controversial film of *Lolita* (1962), the publication of his English translation of his Russian novels, and the public feud with Edmund Wilson over Nabokov's *Eugene Onegin* translation (1964).[44] This succession of *causes célèbres* transformed Nabokov's status as an author. *Lolita* secured Nabokov's position as an American author, the film brought Nabokov into popular culture, while the translation and erudite

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[42] For more on the relationship between photography and autobiography, see Timothy Dow Adams, *Light Writing and Life Writing: Photography in Autobiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). Rugg, *Picturing Ourselves*.

[43] Letter from Vladimir Nabokov to Walter Minton (March 26, 1966), Vladimir Nabokov Papers, The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

[44] Wilson criticized Nabokov's literal translation of *Eugene Onegin* and commentary in the article "The Strange Case of Pushkin and Nabokov, *New York Review of Books* July 15, 1985. Nabokov fired back in a letter to the editor, published in the August 26, 1965 edition of the *NYRB*.

commentary to Pushkin's novel in verse figured Nabokov as the inheritor of pre-revolutionary Russian literature.[45] The third version also comes in the wake of Nabokov's first television interviews.[46] As Brian Boyd notes, Nabokov's career had changed dramatically within a mere decade: "by the second half of the 1960s he was often acclaimed the greatest writer alive, the standard against which other writers should be measured, the one certain choice for a Nobel Prize."[47] Simply put, at the time of writing the third version of his autobiography, Nabokov has more symbolic capital than he did when he released *Conclusive Evidence* in 1951.

In fact, when finishing the manuscript for *Conclusive Evidence*, Nabokov had sought advice from *The New Yorker* editor Katharine White about how to garner some publicity:

> May I ask you for a piece of very confidential advice. I am determined to make some money with the book and think of enlisting the services of a good press agent—I wonder if you could assist me in finding out where and how one finds such people? Or perhaps you would advise me against any such move? All my previous books have been such dismal financial flops in this country that I don't trust the pure fate of unaided books any more.[48]

Ultimately, despite disinterested claims of art for art's sake, Nabokov proved adept at maneuvering the American publishing industry, understanding that to sell books it helps to sell

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[45] For more on Nabokov's English-language career, see Neil Cornwell, "From Sirin to Nabokov: The Transition to English," in *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov*, ed. Julian W. Connolly (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 151–169. For more on how Nabokov used the *Onegin* commentary to create a transnational canon and secure his own position within it, see Marijeta Bozovic, *Nabokov's Canon: From Onegin to Ada* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016).

[46] Nabokov gave his first television interview after the US publication of *Lolita* on November 26, 1958. For a list of Nabokov's interviews, see Dieter E. Zimmer, "Vladimir Nabokov: The Interviews," http://www.d-e-zimmer.de/HTML/NABinterviews.htm.

[47] Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), 518.

[48] *Selected Letters*, 96.

the author.[49] He built up an industry of literary criticism around his own work, and he made his stamp of "authorization" on critical studies of his works and biographies of him something valuable. As I will argue, his captions also serve to "authenticate" the images.

Thus, the photographs in the text should be read in the context of his rise to fame, as Nabokov becomes a household name and his image proliferates. But with the proliferation of his image comes the need to reassert control over this medium that, on the one hand, can help to project his authorial persona and secure his growing readership but that also threatens to slip beyond his control. The photos are thus something of a double-edged sword for Nabokov, as they both promote his authorial image and contribute to his loss of control over it.

When Nabokov assures his publisher in a letter that the inclusion of photographs would help to sell the book, he tellingly associates the photos with other paratextual elements that he typically uses to assert his authorial persona. He writes that he had not only substantially revised and expanded the English text, but had also included some new additional elements: "fifteen photographic illustrations (members of the family, the Nabokovs' St. Petersburg house, and a rare butterfly I discovered); also a rather detailed index, copious captions—and one of those big nasty forewords that some readers seem to like."[50] Nabokov here aligns the photographs and captions with the index and foreword, both of which are familiar devices that Nabokov uses to play games with his reader, to encourage certain readings of the text, and to establish his authorial control. For example, several critics have shown how a game of cross-referencing in

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[49] For more on Nabokov and the publishing industry, see Yuri Leving and Frederick H. White, *Marketing Literature and Posthumous Legacies: The Symbolic Capital of Leonid Andreev and Vladimir Nabokov* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013).

[50] Letter from Vladimir Nabokov to Walter Minton (March 7, 1966), Vladimir Nabokov Papers, The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

Speak, Memory's index illuminates the connection between different themes in the text.[51] And in his forewords, which he began to affix to his novels after penning the afterword to *Lolita*, Nabokov would offer clues and set traps for his reader. As Brian Boyd writes, "His forewords formed part of the irascible and arrogant Nabokov persona, in part a game, a parody, a running joke."[52] I read the photographs and their "copious captions" in a similar vein, as a medium he can harness to fashion his authorial image and to assert his control over the work's reception.

Indeed, the drafts for *Speak, Memory* show that, as his work on the manuscript progresses, Nabokov includes more photographs and begins to extend the captions. At first, the captions are perfunctory: they detail who is in the picture; when and where it was taken. But in successive drafts he expands them, making them more detailed. He recognizes their potential for guiding our interpretation of the photographs. Nabokov often attempts to determine the meaning of these images through the captions. The captions impose onto the photographs the kinds of patterns that mark Nabokov's literary work. Like the foreword and the index, the photograph captions demand to be read as fundamental elements of the text.

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[51] Brian Boyd has called this "thoroughly Nabokovian index […] a master key to unlock the book's themes." Boyd, *American Years*, 507. For other discussions of the index, see Foster, *Nabokov's Art of Memory and European Modernism*, 29–31; Dabney Stuart, "The Novelist's Composure Speak, Memory as Fiction," *Modern Language Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1975): 177–92, https://doi.org/10.1215/00267929-36-2-177; Michael Nieto Garcia, "Nabokov's Index Puzzle: Life and Art Transcendent in Speak, Memory," *Nabokov Studies* 13, no. 1 (2015 2014): 167–91, https://doi.org/10.1353/nab.2014.0007.

[52] Boyd, *American Years*, 476–77. John Pilling also discusses the foreword to *Speak, Memory* in John Pilling, "A Tremulous Prism: Nabokov's Speak, Memory," in *Autobiographical Statements in Twentieth-Century Russian Literature*, ed. Jane Gary Harris, Studies of the Harriman Institute (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 155–159. More recently, Duncan White has analyzed the forewords in general as a paratextual element Nabokov used to assert his authorial control. White, *Nabokov and His Books*, 149–155.

In fact, the significance of photographs and their captions is taken up at the beginning of the foreword to the revised version of *Speak, Memory*. Nabokov describes an instance of misrecognition of his photographic image. A photograph of Nabokov had recently appeared in Gisèle Freund's book of photographs *James Joyce in Paris: His Final Years* (1965). The photograph (not included in *Speak, Memory*) features Nabokov with the editorial board of the French journal *Mesures* gathered around a garden table as they gaze, presumably, at a copy of the journal (fig. 1). The photograph, Nabokov informs us in the foreword, was taken after the publication of Nabokov's essay-memoir "Mademoiselle O" in the April 1936 issue of *Mesures* (*SM* 9). However, the caption in Freund's book mistakes Nabokov for another writer, Jacques Audiberti.[53] As Nabokov writes in the preface, "I am wrongly identified […] as 'Audiberti'" (*SM* 9).[54]

Figure 1. Nabokov with *Mesures* editorial board. Photo Gisèle Freund/IMEC/Fonds MCC.

[53] Jacques Audiberti (1899–1965) was a French playwright, poet, and novelist.

[54] It is understandable why Nabokov is not recognizable: in the photograph his face is cast in shadow as he looks down at something in his hand. Brian Boyd conjectures that it "must surely be a butterfly" in his hand. There is no reason why it "must" be a butterfly that has caught Nabokov's attention. In fact, it seems rather unlikely. But the manner in which Boyd reads this photograph of the author attests to the influence of Nabokov's crafted image of himself as writer/lepidopterist. Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 437.

Freund, the celebrated German-born French photographer, was renowned for her photographic portraits of writers, such as James Joyce and Samuel Beckett. For there to be a Freund photograph of Nabokov that confuses him with the French writer Jacques Audiberti implicitly denies him entry to the pantheon of great twentieth-century writers.[55] It suggests that he is not as recognizable an icon as these writers, an offense that Nabokov attempts to correct. He might have been erased from the photograph by Freund's caption, but the foreword now reinstates him. Indeed, Nabokov goes so far as to suggest not only that he was present, but that the photograph "commemorates" the publication of *his* essay "Mademoiselle O" (*SM* 9). Nabokov places himself at the center of the photograph's signification.

But the matter does not end there. Nabokov, too, misreads the photograph. He dates the photograph to April 1936, which would coincide with the publication of "Mademoiselle O" in *Mesures*. However, Freund's caption clearly dates the photograph to the *following* year, April 1937.[56] Is this just a careless error on Nabokov's part? What was happening in April 1937?

That month, Nabokov sold his story "The Outrage" to *Mesures* for the May issue. In a letter dated April 15, 1937 to his wife, Véra, Nabokov details how he sold the story and then lunched with the editorial group. He even comments on the photographic event in question: "After lunch there was something on the order of a meeting of the *Mesures* editorial board, and a lady photographer took fifteen shots of us."[57] He describes how he was "much 'feted' and was in

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[55] Katherine Reischl connects this scene of photographic misrecognition with the existential plight of "the displaced émigré who is unseen, unrecognized, who must ask, 'what if I did not exist?'" in Nabokov's fiction. Reischl, *Photographic Literacy*, 205.

[56] Gisèle Freund, *James Joyce in Paris: His Final Years* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965).

[57] Nabokov, *Selected Letters*, 23.

great form" at the lunch and had "total success with '*The Outrage*.'"[58] His previous letters to Véra attest to the long process of trying to get this story published. Ultimately, however, the story never appeared in the journal.[59]

Whether Nabokov intentionally alters the date in *Speak, Memory* to allow the photograph to signify the commemoration of his publication of "Mademoiselle O"—rather than have it stand as a harbinger of the failed publication of "The Outrage"—is unclear. Brian Boyd notes that, despite Nabokov's exacting precision, eye for detail, and firm authorial control, "dates are a common source of error in Nabokov."[60] And yet, while working on his translation and commentary for *Eugene Onegin*, Nabokov himself raises the idea that such errors might be intentional: "Even obvious misprints should be treated gingerly; after all, they may be supposed to have been left uncorrected by the author."[61] This is, after all, the man who insisted in his study of Gogol (1943) that facts can be imagined.[62]

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[58] Nabokov, 22–23.

[59] Boyd, *Russian Years*, 437.

[60] In the chapter, "Even Homais Nods: Nabokov's Fallibility," Boyd highlights the fact that Nabokov inaccurately dates his grandfather's birth, his father's graduation, and other such details. Brian Boyd, *Stalking Nabokov: Selected Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 300.

[61] Quoted in Boyd, 299.

[62] He writes that Gogol had "lost the gift of imagining facts and believed that facts may exist by themselves." Quoted in Galya Diment, "Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Autobiography," in *Nabokov and His Fictions: New Perspectives*, ed. Julian W. Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 51note6. And on Nabokov's art of memory, John Burt Foster, Jr. wrote that Nabokov believed "that artifice is an unavoidable part of remembering and counts as much as fact." John Burt Foster, Jr., "Nabokov before Proust: The Paradox of Anticipatory Memory," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 33, no. 1 (1989): 80, https://doi.org/10.2307/308385.

If imagination is as important as fact, then I am inclined to call Nabokov's treatment of the photograph an imaginative error—one that helps to establish the "thematic designs" and patterns of life that Nabokov held to be "the true purpose of autobiography" (27).[63] His description of the photograph in the foreword links the image to the autobiography, as "Mademoiselle O" was its first published chapter. The chapter is, as Nabokov calls it, the "cornerstone" of the entire autobiography (*SM* 11). Thus, with Nabokov's amended caption in the foreword, the Freund photograph comes to serve as a tableau of the whole project's genesis, complete with initial readership. By transforming the context, Nabokov attempts to reclaim authorial control over the photograph from Freund and fit the image to his own artistic pattern. The treatment of the Freund photo presages the way in which the other photographs will be dealt with. The Freund photo illustrates how Nabokov wrests control away from the photographers and positions himself as the true author, even if it means inventing facts to create the artistic pattern.

Nevertheless, whichever way you turn it—Freund's misreading of Nabokov; Nabokov's misreading the occasion—this photograph alerts the reader to the fact that photographs can be, indeed are liable to be, misread. Nabokov prefaces his autobiography by revealing to his readers that the meaning of a photograph can be manipulated by words alone. This recognition of the photographic image's instability—that they are not "conclusive evidence" despite their indexical quality—leads Nabokov to position himself as the authority in relation to the photographs. The autobiographical genre invests him with this authority; he is the one who can set the record

[63] My contention that photographic misreadings can be seen as more than just careless errors is influenced by Margaret Olin's illuminating discussion of Roland Barthes' misreading of the James VanDerZee photograph in *Camera Lucida*. Margaret Olin, *Touching Photographs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 51–69.

straight. And yet, Nabokov's error betrays the fact that he too is vulnerable to misreading these documents. Indeed, despite Nabokov's attempts to control the image through his text, the admission that a caption can alter one's interpretation of a photograph opens the door for the reader to question Nabokov's own seemingly authoritative annotations of the photographs. As Susan Sontag writes, "even an entirely accurate caption is only one interpretation, necessarily a limiting one, of the photograph to which it is attached."[64] His interpretation of the image is only one among many.

Visual Memory and Photography in *Speak, Memory*

Like the maps and diagrams Nabokov created for his literature students, a map of his family's estates leads us into the autobiography. Rather than use a pre-existing map, Nabokov drew the map himself (1965). Unlike the photographic images, the map offers an instance of an image that he created himself. The map illuminates how Nabokov asserts his authorial vision through images.

The map pictures the Vyra, Rozhestvenno, and Batovo estates, located to the south of St. Petersburg. Although Nabokov insists on the utmost precision in visualizing, for example, Dr. Jekyll's house, the map of the Nabokov estates is far from an objective depiction of space. The sketch of the *Parnassius mnemosyne* butterfly encourages us to read the map as a subjective representation of Nabokov's home. The image of the butterfly functions as a kind of artist's signature.[65] Freighted with significance in the lepidopterist's oeuvre, the butterfly conjures up the

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[64] Sontag, *On Photography*, 109.

[65] He describes in the autobiography how he hunted this butterfly in Vyra, on the banks of the Oredezh river (*SM* 210).

themes of memory, migration, and metamorphosis that will run throughout the text.[66] Moreover, butterflies come to be associated with the deception that Nabokov prizes in art. In Chapter Six, Nabokov describes how he found in nature "an artistic perfection usually associated with man-wrought things," citing a species of butterfly that bears remarkable resemblance to a leaf, complete with "markings mimicking grub-bored holes," as "a form of magic, […] a game of intricate enchantment and deception" (*SM* 124–25).[67] The presence of the butterfly invites us to read the map beyond its utilitarian purpose, and instead as an artistic image.

Like the butterfly masquerading as a leaf, the map is deceptive. The traditional compass points have been inverted: South is at the top; North at the bottom.[68] The purpose of the map is not utility; it literally disorientates you. Through this sleight of hand, he estranges our perspective. Nabokov exercises creative license over the spatial representation of the family's estates.[69] The transformation of the landscape asserts his ownership over this place that he has,

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[66] Siggy Frank writes, "Unsteady, flighty and ephemeral, butterflies in Nabokov's work encapsulate the inherent instability of the self in fiction and life. They come into existence through a remarkable transformation from wingless caterpillar into soaring butterfly, and they survive by mimicking something or someone else. With their capacity for enchanting metamorphoses and deceptive imitation, butterflies are suggestive of the essentially theatrical nature of identity." Siggy Frank, *Nabokov's Theatrical Imagination* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 192. John Burt Foster Jr. suggests that "Nabokov's pursuit of these elusive but vivid creatures would seem to parallel the retrieval of mnemonic images, while their colorful wings could be viewed as an emblem of colored hearing." Foster, *Nabokov's Art of Memory and European Modernism*, 183.

[67] He is here describing the *Kallima paralekta* butterfly, whose underside resembles a dead leaf.

[68] On August 22, 1966 Nabokov first writes to his publisher Minton about including the map in the text, "I am enclosing with the proofs a sketch map I have made of the Nabokovs' lands in the St. Petersburg region. […] The south (at the top) and the north (at the bottom) should remain where I put them." Letter from Vladimir Nabokov to Walter Minton (August 22, 1966), Vladimir Nabokov Papers, The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

[69] Incidentally, Brian Boyd has pointed out that the map is full of inaccuracies. He writes, "Nabokov's map of the Vyra region in the endpapers of the revised *Speak, Memory* is thoroughly

physically, lost. The inversion of the map seems to concede that he cannot return by a regular route. His return can only take place in a creative realm.[70] We are encouraged to see this as imagined geography, one that only he can grant us access to. As a paratextual element, the map works as the entry point into the imaginative landscape of Nabokov's memory. It is as if we just need to follow the butterfly, and then we too can enter this world with Nabokov, the "passportless spy," as our guide (*SM* 99).[71]

Indeed, the idea of stepping into a painting appears explicitly later in the text. Inspired by a fairy tale in which a "small boy stepped out of his bed into a picture," Nabokov describes how, as a child, he "imagined the motion of climbing into" an aquarelle painting of a forest "and plunging into that enchanted beechwood" (*SM* 86). And, sure enough, by the chapter's end we see Nabokov strolling through a beech forest with his drawing teacher Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, a member of the artistic movement *Mir iskusstva*, who taught Nabokov about the "precision of linear expression," a technique that has helped him with the "camera-lucida needs of literary composition" (*SM* 92). It is this action of stepping into a painting, which seems to offer the possibility of escaping the "prison of time" (*SM* 20), that Nabokov so adeptly performs time and again in his memoir.[72] He vividly paints Mademoiselle O's arrival in Russia so as to place

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muddled. What looks like a small tributary coming past the Batovo estate is in fact the Oredezh itself; the river labeled 'Oredezh' running past the Rozhdestveno estate is actually the Gryazno, a very short-lived little stream; and when the Oredezh passes the Vyra estate it does not continue west and away from Siverskaya but turns to flow east toward the town." Boyd, *Stalking Nabokov*, 299–300.

[70] For more on Nabokov's imagined returns through memory and art, see Svetlana Boym, "Vladimir Nabokov's False Passport," in *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 259–83.

[71] Nabokov insists that "The writer's art is his real passport." *Strong Opinions*, 63.

[72] John Pilling makes a similar claim that this fairy tale "describes what Nabokov is doing in *Speak, Memory*, stepping as he is into a picture of prerevolutionary Russia and plunging into a

himself within the scene, a move that Dabney Stuart notes is "similar to stepping into the painting of the beech forest."[73] He has the ability to cheat time through his painterly recreation of the past through memory.

But while optical technologies abound as metaphors for the workings of his visual memory—from microscopes and telescopes to magic lanterns—the actual photos included within the autobiography do not seem to offer the same possibility of stepping into these images. As we will see, Nabokov routinely derides photographs as false, as less vivid than his own painterly vision as a writer. For example, Nabokov dismisses his mother's treasured collection of photographs in exile as inferior to her memory. Emphasizing the fragility of the photographs, he writes that "the dim little photographs in crumbling frames" were in "a soapbox covered with green cloth." Their frames are crumbling; the images have faded; they are housed in a makeshift soapbox. And although they are precious to her, Nabokov deems them unnecessary: "She did not really need them, for nothing had been lost. As a company of travelling players carry with them everywhere, while they still remember their lines, a windy heath, a misty castle, an enchanted island, so she had with her all that her soul had stored" (*SM* 49–50).[74] Photographs, it would seem, are not needed as a memory aid. Her memory, and his, is powerful enough on its own. Indeed, it was his mother who enjoined young Nabokov to commit to memory the details of their surroundings («вот запомни», she instructs him) which allows him, as he puts it, to "inherit[…]

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time that the power of art has filled with fairy-tale enchantment." Pilling, "A Tremulous Prism: Nabokov's Speak, Memory," 162.

[73] Stuart, "The Novelist's Composure Speak, Memory as Fiction," 183.

[74] And, similarly, he says in an interview that he will "never go back [to Russia], for the simple reason that all the Russia I need is always with me: literature, language, and my own Russian childhood." *Strong Opinions*, 9–10.

an exquisite simulacrum—the beauty of intangible property, unreal estate—and this proved a splendid training for the endurance of later losses" (*SM* 40).

And, in a similar fashion, he disparagingly compares the vivid reality of his son Dmitri on the beach to its black-and-white representation in a photograph: "There our child kneeled motionless to be photographed in a quivering haze of sun against the scintillation of the sea, which is a milky blur in the snapshots we have preserved but was, in life, silvery blue, with great patches of purple-blue farther out" (*SM* 308). The photograph fails to capture the true colors of the scene as Nabokov remembers it.

But perhaps the best emblem to exemplify the contest between Nabokov's visual writing and photography is the "penholder with a tiny peephole of crystal in its ornamental part," a souvenir from his time in Biarritz with Colette, one of his childhood romances (*SM* 151). Looking through the crystal produces a "miraculous photographic view," the recollection of which allows him to recover the forgotten name of Colette's dog. Here it is not incidental that the *pen*, or verbal art, creates this "photographic view," making an argument for how his own verbal art assimilates the visual. Actual photographic illustrations will not be necessary, it would seem, for he creates far greater pictures with his pen.

Nabokov provocatively dismisses many of the photographs as staged and, thus, inaccurate representations of reality or as less vivid than his memory. If we consider the description for a photograph of his family on their estate Vyra in August 1908, we can see how he disparages the posed photographs. The photograph was taken "between my father's return from prison and his departure on the following day, with my mother, for Stresa" (*SM* 140). The photograph captures a brief moment when father and son are reunited. Earlier in the memoir,

Nabokov describes the day of his father's joyful return to the family after his three-month imprisonment in great detail:

> It is when I recall that particular day that I see with the utmost clarity the sun-spangled river; the bridge, the dazzling tin of a can left by a fisherman on its wooden railing; the linden-treed hill with its rosy-red church and marble mausoleum where my mother's dead reposed; the dusty road to the village; the strip of short, pastel-green grass, with bald patches of sandy soil, between the road and the lilac bushes behind which walleyed, mossy log cabins stood in a rickety row; the stone building of the new schoolhouse near the wooden old one; and, as we swiftly drove by, the little black dog with very white teeth that dashed out from among the cottages at a terrific pace but in absolute silence, saving his voice for the brief outburst he would enjoy when his muted spurt would at last bring him close to the speeding carriage. (*SM* 30)

The language of the passage emphasizes the idea that he can see these environs again, while the paratactic syntax captures the restless movement of an eye alighting on the surroundings, transformed by the speed of the carriage careening towards the long-awaited return of a beloved parent. Distinct from the caption to the photograph, in this passage we are in the realm of the proto-cinematic with the ceaselessly unfolding view as seen from the window of the moving carriage.[75] This passage attempts to recreate through art the experience of Bergsonian duration. But the photograph does not elicit the same flood of visual memories. What is missing from the photograph, crucially, is movement. The photograph seems to foreclose any possibility of seeing beyond the frame, of opening up a world that has since disappeared, of allowing us to regain lost time.

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[75] Nabokov's cinematic syntax in this passage calls to mind one of the features Nabokov saw to be distinctive about Gustave Flaubert's style: his use of the semicolon to accumulate visual impressions. He links this punctuation technique with what he terms Flaubert's "unfolding method." This method entails the "successive development of visual details, one thing after another thing, with an accumulation of this or that emotion." When discussing this "unfolding method" in a passage from *Madame Bovary*, Nabokov suggests the effect is cinematic: "A camera seems to be moving along and taking us to Yonville through a gradually revealed unfolded landscape." Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, 171–72.

Perhaps this is because in the caption, Nabokov stresses how the photograph is posed and, therefore, false. The image is remarkable for the network of linkages among the family members: the grandmother holds Nabokov's two sisters; Nabokov's hand rests on his sister Olga's knee, while his aunt's hand "supports" him in turn; his brother Sergei's arm is intertwined with his aunt's arm. Only the parents are set apart, both from each other and the rest of the family. Nabokov, however, jests that the family's dog is actually "photophobic" and points out that his "paternal grandmother is holding, in a decorative but precarious cluster, my two little sisters whom she never held in real life" (*SM* 140). According to Nabokov, the posture adopted by his grandmother propagates a false image of her relationship with her grandchildren, as it does not reflect her attitude toward them in "real life." Indeed, it is possible that her loving pose is dictated by nothing other than the mechanics of sitting for a photograph. No stranger to artifice, Nabokov nonetheless finds fault with the posed aspect of the photograph. The photographic medium mechanically creates a mimetic reproduction of reality, but without the "game of intricate enchantment and deception" that he finds in nature's "mysteries of mimicry" (*SM* 125). The photograph lacks the magic of transformation as the illusion gives way (the "tangle of twigs and leaves" suddenly revealing a disguised bird (*SM* 298); the ship's funnel emerging from the jumbled skyline (*SM* 310)), but in the caption Nabokov performs the act of revealing what is hidden from the reader's eye.

There is one small detail in the background that Nabokov draws our attention to. Amidst the description of his family members in the photograph, Nabokov casually remarks, "The round thing on the tree trunk is an archery target" (*SM* 140). Although he does not accord it much significance, he nonetheless highlights this chance detail that might otherwise go unnoted. In Nabokov's literary work, archery and its appurtenances are often associated with time. Ardis,

arrow in Greek, would be the name of the Veens' lost paradise in Nabokov's next work, *Ada, or Ardor* (1969). In *Ada*, the arrow recalls Zeno's paradox of the flying arrow and, moreover, Henri Bergson's refutation of Zeno's paradox.[76]

The paradox of the flying arrow suggests that the arrow is motionless at each moment, as it can occupy only one position at a time in its trajectory toward the target. And, thus, if it is constantly motionless, the flying arrow is not moving. Bergson, however, refutes this paradox by saying that we must conceive of the trajectory as an indivisible whole: "To suppose that the moving body *is* at a point of its course is to cut the course in two by a snip of the scissors at this point, and to substitute two trajectories for the single trajectory which we were first considering."[77]

Zeno's paradox of the motionless arrow offers a metaphor for the photograph. It is a symbol of arrested motion, suspended in time and space, much like a photograph. Indeed, Bergson himself makes the link between the arrow and photography. Bergson introduces the paradox of the arrow after turning to the snapshot and cinema to describe our experience of duration. For Bergson, time and duration are immeasurable— space is a "discrete multiplicity," whereas time is a "virtual multiplicity"—which leads him to argue against the tendency to spatialize time. In conceiving of time, he argues, we divide time into identical units and place them in succession, which is something we can do with space. We think that, in so doing, we are measuring duration, when actually we are treating time as we would space. Time cannot be broken down into discernable units, no matter how small, for there would always be a gap between these intervals. Instead, time is pure duration. "Duration," Bergson explains, "properly

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[76] See Bozovic, "Bergson and The Texture of Time."

[77] Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 309.

so called has no moments which are identical or external to one another, being essentially heterogeneous, continuous, and with no analogy to number."[78] Our inner life is pure duration; the states of being are perpetually in motion, perpetually in a state of becoming and cannot be broken up into discrete identical units, as they permeate one another. These inner states cannot be measured or quantified.

However, we attempt to distinguish, to categorize, to make sense of this unordered inner state. We want to impose order where there is none. It is an abstraction of the mind, one which photography supports, as it seems to spatialize time, setting certain moments apart. To exemplify his point about the process of becoming, Bergson looks to photography and cinema. If we wanted to depict a regiment marching, we might take a succession of photographs to capture their movement at various stages. However, Bergson notes that "however much we might look at them, we should never see them animated: with immobility set beside immobility, even endlessly, we could never make movement."[79] The apparatus of the film camera can give the illusion of movement by projecting these images so rapidly, but this illusion of movement is analogous to how we fail to attach "ourselves to the inner becoming of things" and instead "place ourselves outside them in order to recompose their becoming artificially."[80] Just as we make the mistake of spatializing time, so too do photographs set time apart. The way we spatialize time so that we perceive moments in succession is similar to film, where the images succeed each other rapidly and we think we are perceiving movement, but of course this is just a trick of the eye. I

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[78] Henri Bergson, *Key Writings*, ed. Keith Pearson and John Mullarkey (New York: Continuum, 2002), 68.

[79] Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 305.

[80] Bergson, 306.

would suggest that Nabokov's critique of photographs is informed by Bergson's treatment of photographs as they relate to duration. The staged photographs, thus, fall short because of the absence of movement and duration. This experience of what Nabokov called "the pure element of time"—that "radiant and mobile medium"—is what he tries to capture in the memoir writ large and what he attempts to restore in the photographs through the captions by introducing movement and the passage of time beyond the singular, static moment captured by the image (*SM* 21).

In the singular moment captured by this photograph, his father has not yet left for a holiday in Stresa; he is eternally home on the Vyra estate, which is not yet lost to the Bolsheviks. And yet, according to Bergson's refutation of the paradox, the arrow *will* reach the end of its trajectory—a trajectory that expels Nabokov from the gardens of Vyra and lands him in America. If we play into the kind of reading that Nabokov often encourages in his readers—following details to discover some hidden pattern or meaning—then the mention of the archery target conjures up these resonances. While the posed photo had previously been derided as false, this detail functions as an authorial stamp, similar to the butterfly in the prefatory map that Nabokov drew.

Nabokov also derides other photographs as false. The caption for a photograph of Nabokov, his siblings, and their dog taken in Yalta accentuates the falsity of photographic representation. Nabokov points out how his brother Sergei is "unfortunately disfigured by flaws in the picture" (*SM* 214). The photograph, for all its purported indexicality, fails to capture Sergei as he was. In what sense does the photograph disfigure Sergei? Perhaps Nabokov means the effect of Sergei's rimless pince-nez, which creates a line across the bridge of his nose. However, the emphasis on his "disfigurement" is perhaps an instance of reading the photograph

retrospectively, with the knowledge of the future violence that would be inflicted upon Sergei. Sergei met a tragic end, as Nabokov briefly mentions towards the end of the autobiography. Unlike Nabokov, Sergei did not escape Europe during World War II. He was arrested and died in 1945 in the Nazi concentration camp of Neuengamme. It is as if Nabokov reads this photograph *through* Sergei's death, as if it predicts what would later come to pass.

Or, perhaps it is simply meant to draw our attention to the photograph's inaccurate depiction of reality. In an earlier draft, a holograph manuscript of the captions, Nabokov initially notes that the photograph also distorts his sister's image, but then crosses out this detail. "~~She~~ [Elena] ~~and Sergey are disfigured by flaws in the picture.~~ Flaws in the picture disfigure Sergey." He also goes on to elaborate that "The photographer, an old Tatar, seems to have been a great retoucher of noses—even that of the dog is not spared."[81] The ability to retouch photographs further reinforces the unreliability of the medium. The caption drafts attest to how Nabokov was trying out different methods for pointing out the failures of the photograph to capture the siblings as he remembers them. The effect is a competition between the photographic medium and Nabokov's prose. The caption silences the photos as inexpressive images.

However, we should note that in a letter dated April 4, 1932, to Véra, Nabokov describes a reunion with his mother, sisters, and brother Kirill in Prague. He writes, "In a couple of days, Seryozha may come, and then all of us together will have our picture taken in exactly the same poses as one of our Yalta photographs. Boxy [the dog], too."[82] This photograph of the siblings

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[81] [Speak, Memory], Notes for Illustrations, Holograph draft, unsigned and undated, Vladimir Nabokov Papers, The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

[82] Vladimir Nabokov, *Letters to Véra*, ed. and trans. Brian Boyd and Olga Voronina (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 171.

with their dog refers to the one described above. To recreate the photograph "in exactly the same poses" is a way of marking time, a means of commemoration. It suggests that this photograph, despite the supposed distortions, was perhaps more valuable to Nabokov than the caption in *Speak, Memory* admits.

The caption for the photograph of the Nabokov house in Petersburg offers another example of how Nabokov asserts authorship over the photographs. Always one for staging an agonistic encounter, Nabokov does not miss the opportunity to pit word against image in this caption that takes up almost as much space on the page as the photograph:

> This photograph, taken in 1955 by an obliging American tourist, shows the Nabokov house, of pink granite with frescoes and other Italianate ornaments, in St. Petersburg, now Leningrad, 47, Morskaya, now Hertzen Street. Alexander Ivanovich Hertzen (1812–1870) was a famous liberal (whom this commemoration by a police state would hardly have gratified) as well as the talented author of *Bïloe i Dumï* (translatable as 'Bygones and Meditations'), one of my father's favorite books. My room was on the third floor, above the oriel. The lindens lining the street did not exist. Those green upstarts now hide the second-floor east-corner window of the room where I was born. After nationalization the house accommodated the Danish mission, and later, a school of architecture. The little sedan at the curb belongs presumably to the photographer. (*SM* 18)

If we compare the final version of the caption with an earlier draft of the manuscript, we see that Nabokov significantly expanded the caption:

> The Nabokov's house of pink granite, with frescoes, in St. Petersburg. (47, Morskaya street, now Hertzen str.) The author's room was in the middle of the third floor, above the oriel. He was born in the corner room of the second floor, far right (hidden by the lindens). The house is at present a School of Architecture. Photograph taken in 1955.[83]

The draft version is more perfunctory than the final version. The final version admits more of the quiddities of Nabokov's authorial voice. He shifts into first-person. He adds in the digression about Herzen and his memoir *Byloe i dumy* (usually "translatable" as *My Past and Thoughts*, not

[83] [Speak, Memory], Notes for Illustrations, Holograph draft, unsigned and undated, Vladimir Nabokov Papers, The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

Bygones and Meditations), perhaps in an effort to link his own work with this famous memoir, also written in exile. He reveals that the lindens "did not exist" when he lived there. Svetlana Boym notes that what is important in this photograph for Nabokov is "not in what is represented, but in what remains invisible."[84] The focus on the lindens that were not there during his childhood creates the effect—verbally—of a double-exposed photograph. The ghostly house of his memory shows through the house that we see. The revisions to the caption insist on his authorship, with his ability to provide a fuller verbal portrait of the house than the photograph alone could hope to achieve.

This photograph of the family home corresponds with the home movie filmed just shortly before Nabokov was born. *Speak, Memory* begins with a description of the "panic" the "young chronophobiac" experiences watching this film: "He saw a world that was practically unchanged—the same house, the same people—and then realized that he did not exist there at all and that nobody mourned his absence" (*SM* 19). While the film documents the house before his birth, the photograph documents it well after his departure. Both create an uncanny effect of the familiar house made strange by his absence. Nabokov's experience of watching the film reminds us that photographs and films can be read not only for what they show and preserve, but also for what they leave out, what remains beyond the frame. What he perceives in both the photograph and the film is less evidence of presence, than of absence. He wants us to visualize it exactly as it was, similar to how he made the diagrams for his students. He positions himself as the ultimate authority because he is endowed with memory. He knows the house and its history better than

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[84] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 264.

the photographer. Indeed, how could an American tourist visualize the house better than Nabokov?

What is curious, though, about attributing the photograph to a seemingly random American tourist is that the photographer was, in fact, a friend of Nabokov's sister.[85] The mention of the American tourist, "the little sedan at the curb," and the 1955 date work together to bring to mind Nabokov's novel *Lolita* (1955). Like the match theme that develops in *Speak, Memory*, there seems to be some artistic pleasure in the coincidence that at the moment a displaced Russian is writing an America road novel, an American is driving around Russia and snapping photographs of the Nabokov house. Attributing the photograph to "an obliging American tourist" allows him to gesture beyond the photograph and create resonances with his own artistic work. It is another case of Nabokov inventing facts to fit the aesthetic scheme of his authorial world.

In marked contrast to these photographs that Nabokov finds some fault with, he also includes within the text a photograph of himself that offers a suitable authorial portrait. The image pictures Nabokov writing at his desk. The extensive caption guides our reading of the photograph, pointing out elements to be noted:

> My wife took, unnoticed, this picture, unposed, of me in the act of writing a novel in our hotel room. The hotel is the Établissement Thermal at Le Boulou, in the East Pyrenees. The date (discernible on the captured calendar) is February 27, 1929. The novel, *Zashchita Luzhina* (*The Luzhin Defense*), deals with the defense invented by an insane chess player. Note the pat pattern of the tablecloth. A half-empty package of Gauloises cigarettes can be made out between the ink bottle and an overfull ashtray. Family photos are propped against the four volumes of Dahl's Russian dictionary. The end of my robust, dark-brown penholder (a beloved tool of young oak that I used during all my twenty years of literary labors in Europe and may rediscover yet in one of the trunks stored at

[85] When he received the photograph from his sister Elena Sikorski, Nabokov wrote in a letter dated September 6, 1958 "Thank you very much for the heartwrenching pictures. The lindens, of course, were not there, and everything is greyer than the painting of memory, but still very detailed and recognizable." Quoted in Boym, 264.

> Dean's, Ithaca, N.Y.) is already well chewed. My writing hand partly conceals a stack of setting boards. […] Seldom does a casual snapshot compendiate a life so precisely. (257)

The photograph's caption trains the reader to associate certain symbols with Nabokov: pens, the setting boards for butterflies, chess, dictionaries, and so on. If in the *Onegin* commentary "we become Nabokov reading Pushkin" (according to Clarence Brown), then with this caption we become Nabokov reading Nabokov.[86] This photograph gives us an opportunity to see how Nabokov reads himself, a performance of his experience of looking at himself. Nabokov draws our attention to the "pat pattern of the tablecloth," and indeed the image is brimming with patterns. The tablecloth naturally calls to mind Nabokov's love of chess, but the wallpaper and his diamond-patterned sweater further enhance the texture of the photograph. The visual effect is that of the author as if mimetically blending into his densely patterned surroundings, performing an act of mimicry like the butterflies he draws artistic inspiration from. This would seem to be the authorized icon of Nabokov.

It is a classic shot: the writer at his desk, so absorbed in his work that he does not notice the photographer (or so he would have us believe). What the caption does, though, is make this generic photograph specific. That is, it takes a photograph that could, quite broadly, signify "writer at desk." In the Pushkin lecture, mentioned above, Nabokov worries that everyone looks the same in photographs; he dislikes the generic quality of photographs.[87] This caption returns specificity to the image by situating it within a unique context. As Nabokov emphasizes, the

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[86] Clarence Brown, "Nabokov's Pushkin and Nabokov's Nabokov," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 8, no. 2 (1967): 292, https://doi.org/10.2307/1207106.

[87] Nabokov's dislike of the generic quality of photographs relates to his disdain for generalities. As Leland de la Durantaye writes, Nabokov believed in "the inviolability of the particular, and what he professed to loathe above all else in art and life was the loose-fitting generality." Leland de la Durantaye, "The Pattern of Cruelty and the Cruelty of Pattern in Vladimir Nabokov," *The Cambridge Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (2006): 326.

photograph was taken on February 27, 1929 while he was writing *The Luzhin Defense* (*Zashchita Luzhina*). Nabokov's third novel, it was first published in 1929–30 in the leading Paris-based Russian émigré journal *Sovremennye zapiski*. It garnered much acclaim and brought the young writer attention from the literary center of Russia Abroad.[88] Thus, the mention of this novel links this photograph to the moment just before Sirin-Nabokov's career was launched, similar to how he linked the Freund photograph in the foreword with the "Mademoiselle O" chapter. Moreover, Nabokov's English language translation of *The Defense* had just been published by Putnam in 1964.

And yet, simultaneously, his caption manages to transform this incidental photograph, taken at a single point in time, into a photograph that summarizes his entire career. Through the caption, the photograph's indexical quality is not delimited to this specific point in time and space. Significantly, it is the pen, Nabokov's chief tool, that transcends temporal boundaries: "The end of my robust, dark-brown penholder (a beloved tool of young oak that I used during all my twenty years of literary labors in Europe and may rediscover yet in one of the trunks stored at Dean's, Ithaca, N.Y.) is already well chewed." This proleptic aside about the penholder anticipates the rest of his career in Europe and his second emigration, to America. Nabokov, of course, does "not believe in time" (139), and the verbal caption transfigures this photograph into an eternal image of the author. As he puts it, the photograph "compendiates" his life, thus providing a densely patterned visual analogue to the entire autobiography.

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[88] Nina Berberova wrote in glowing terms about the discovery of the new writer Sirin in 1929: "A great Russian writer, like a phoenix, was born from the fire and ashes of revolution and exile. Our existence from now on acquired a meaning. All my generation were justified. We were saved." Quoted in Stephen Jan Parker, "Critical Reception," in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Vladimir E. Alexandrov (New York: Garland, 1995), 68.

Nabokov calls this image a "casual snapshot," differentiating it from the portraits taken by professional photographers that are also included in the text. Those photographs, as we have seen, are routinely derided as false because they are posed. For Nabokov, the snapshot reveals more about its subject than a staged studio portrait does. In the second paragraph of the caption, Nabokov offers a mocking contrast to his author photograph when he recalls the staged portrait of a tram conductor-cum-poet:

> Many years ago, in St. Petersburg, I remember being amused by the Collected Poems of a tram conductor, and especially by his picture, in uniform, sturdily booted, with a pair of new rubbers on the floor beside him and his father's war medals on the photographer's console near which the author stood at attention. Wise conductor, farseeing photographer! (*SM* 257)

By picturing the poet in uniform and showcasing his father's medals, this photograph mechanically tries to achieve what is done—supposedly—without artifice in the snapshot of Nabokov at the desk. The caption emphasizes the superior artistry of the snapshot that has skillfully captured the details metonymically associated with the writer.

And it is here we must turn to the figure behind the camera: Nabokov's wife Véra. Véra occupies a peculiar position in the autobiography. On the one hand, the autobiography is dedicated to her and the narrative addresses her as "you," establishing her as the intended reader. On the other, she is scarcely named in the book and little detail is given about her. Often portrayed as highly private, Véra once said that her husband "had the decency to keep me out of his books."[89] And yet, she is all over his books: as the muse, dedicatee, reader, copyist, and correspondent with publishers. Elizabeth Bruss, in her chapter on *Speak, Memory*, writes that Vera's "presence is marked only by a pronoun" (you) in the autobiography, but this is to ignore

[89] Boyd, *Stalking Nabokov*, 32.

the two snapshots taken by Véra and the photograph of her.[90] The photographs are, arguably, the most overt presence of Véra in any of his texts, while the privilege of the photographer's position behind the camera allows her to remain unseen. The photographs incorporate Vera's artistic vision into her husband's work and offer an opportunity for collaboration between the two. And a successful collaboration at that. Her role as his ideal reader seems to enable her to "read" Nabokov correctly here, to capture him not as he happens to be but to discern his true aspect.[91] She alone is able to author the true image of her husband.

The second snapshot taken by Véra follows on the next page. It pictures Nabokov and his son Dmitri in front of their boarding house in Mentone, in 1937. Like the snapshot of Nabokov at his desk, this image is accompanied by an extended caption:

> A snapshot taken by my wife of our three-year-old son Dmitri (born May 10, 1934) standing with me in front of our boardinghouse, Les Hesperides, in Mentone, at the beginning of December 1937. We looked it up twenty-two years later. Nothing had changed, except the management and the porch furniture. There is always, of course, the natural thrill of retrieved time; beyond that, however, I get no special kick out of revisiting old émigré haunts in those incidental countries. The winter mosquitoes, I remember, were terrible. Hardly had I extinguished the light in my room than it would come, that ominous whine whose unhurried, doleful, and wary rhythm contrasted so oddly with the actual mad speed of the satanic insect's gyrations. One waited for the touch in the dark, one freed a cautious arm from under the bedclothes—and mightily slapped one's own ear, whose sudden hum mingled with that of the receding mosquito. But then, next morning, how eagerly one reached for a butterfly net upon locating one's replete tormentor—a thick dark little bar on the white of the ceiling! (*SM* 256–57)

Connecting the two images are the appearance of winged insects, emblematic perhaps of their own rootless existence: the "rare Pugs" that they capture in the first snapshot and the more prosaic mosquitoes in the second. Svetlana Boym reads the winter mosquitoes as a corrective to

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[90] Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts*, 160.

[91] In an interview with Robert Hughes, Nabokov described Vera as his ideal reader: "She [Véra] and I are my best audience. I should say my main audience." Quoted in Robert Golla, ed., *Conversations with Vladimir Nabokov* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017), 99.

any elegiac or nostalgic impulses in recollecting these émigré lodgings.[92] And yet, the mention of mosquitoes, if we are keeping track of such things, refers us back to Nabokov's first poetic creation, after which his mother passed him a small mirror "so that I might see the smear of blood on my cheekbone where at some indeterminable time I had crushed a gorged mosquito by the unconscious act of propping my cheek on my fist" (*SM* 227). Leaving aside the significance of the mosquitoes and the bloodmark (Vivian Bloodmark, after all, is an anagram of the author's name), I would suggest that what is remarkable about this snapshot is that it prompts any recollection at all. In the captions to both of Véra's snapshots, Nabokov uses the phrase "I remember," a common refrain in the rest of the text but largely absent in the other photo captions. These two snapshots give rise to more lyrical reminiscences than any of the other photographs in the text. Nabokov's treatment of these two photographs sharply diverges from his other captions. He does not reprove the photos for their faults or antagonize them, as he did with so many of the others. Instead, they inspire his memory; the images work in conjunction with his verbal art. Véra's snapshots are an extension of her work with him as secretary, reader, dedicatee, addressee—they are another way in which they can co-author something.[93]

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[92] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 265.

[93] Indeed, in her biography of Véra, Stacy Schiff notes that the pair collaborated on the final chapter of the autobiography. Nabokov asked Vera to write her memories of Dmitri's childhood before he wrote that chapter of the autobiography. Some of the details from Véra's account worked their way into the text. Schiff quotes from the impressions that Véra wrote for her husband about standing on a railroad bridge near Nestorstrasse with Dmitri: "my feet hurting with the cold, my hands only kept from going numb by holding his in my right, then in my left (that incredible amount of heat his big baby body generated!)" In *Speak, Memory* this passage becomes "and the fervency of his faith kept him glowing, and kept *you* warm too, since all you had to do to prevent your delicate fingers from freezing was to hold one of his hands alternately in your right and left, switching every minute or so, and marveling at the incredible amount of heat generated by a big baby's body." Quoted in Stacy Schiff, *Vera (Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov)* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 76.

Nabokov once remarked on the veiled presence of Véra in his works: "Most of my works have been dedicated to my wife and her picture has often been reproduced by some mysterious means of reflected color in the inner mirrors of my books."[94] Nabokov reproduces an actual photograph of Véra in the autobiography, in addition to the photographs taken by Véra. But instead of a personal snapshot of Véra, it is a standard document of identity: the final image in the autobiography is a reproduction of Véra and Dmitri's Nansen passport.[95] While Nabokov claimed that "The writer's art is his real passport,"[96] the image of the passport insists on the historical reality of the Nabokovs' escape to America. They were granted exit visas in mid-May of 1940, just as Germany had invaded France, where they were living. As the final image of the book, the passport is an emblem of the next chapter of their life.

In the caption to the image, Nabokov briefly comments on the circumstances of the passport, and then gestures beyond the caption to the last chapter of the book: "A Nansen passport picture taken in Paris in April 1940, of the author's wife, Véra, and son Dmitri, aged five. A few weeks later, in May, the last chapter of our European period was to end as it ends in this book" (*SM* 294). Except for the dedication and the index, it is the only time Véra is named in the autobiography. Moreover, centered at the bottom of the passport page is her signature: Véra Nabokoff. The signature, of course, performs a bureaucratic function as it validates the document of identity. But removed from its legal context and seen as an artistic image within the

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[94] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 191.

[95] In the manuscript draft, there is a note from Nabokov that the photograph of the Nansen passport should come last. It is clear that he was in control of how the photographs should be ordered in the book. [Speak, Memory] Notes for Illustrations, Holograph draft, unsigned and undated, Vladimir Nabokov Papers, The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

[96] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 63.

autobiography, the prominent signature begins to look more like the signature of an artist. Commenting on the central role Véra played in the production of Nabokov's literary works, Alfred Appel suggested that "the monument called 'Nabokov' (his collected work) is really a variegated work of two, that if he had indeed been a sculptor she would have written her name at the base, in very tiny print so that no one could have read it."[97] And indeed, her name is inscribed in the final image of the autobiography.

I would suggest that Véra's signature in this image speaks to her hidden authorship, showing her hand in making this book. Together with the signed passport photo, the two snapshots that Véra took put forward the idea that she is a co-producer of the work.[98] Although Nabokov is not the author of any of the photos in the autobiography, his wife is. The snapshots taken by Véra instantiate her participation in the creation of the literary work.[99]

In the original edition, on the reverse side of the passport image that bears Vera's signature, Nabokov presents photographs of two specimens of the butterfly he discovered in the southeast of France, near the village Moulinet, Alpes Maritimes, in 1938: *Plebejus (Lysandra) cormion* Nabokov. The organization of these photographs side by side invites the reader to draw a comparison between the two sets of images. If we see the passport photo as a veiled admission of Vera's authorship, then the butterfly photo pairs nicely with it as the image in the text that most forcefully puts forward Nabokov's own artistic signature. We might even say that this is the one photographic image that he did create.

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[97] Quoted in Schiff, *Vera (Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov)*, 374.

[98] In 1965, Nabokov said of Véra, "She is my collaborator. We work together in the warmest and most candid friendship." Quoted in Schiff, 297.

[99] Here we might think of the relationship between Van and Ada Veen in *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969), as Van's manuscript is edited and annotated by both of them.

Indeed, the practices of taking photographs and collecting butterflies bear certain similarities, as both involve capturing a live object, preserving it, making it still. The parallel between collecting butterflies and taking photographs has been suggested by Roland Barthes: "When we define the photograph as a motionless image, this does not mean only that the figures it represents do not move; it means they do not emerge, do not leave: they are anesthetized and fastened down, like butterflies."[100] This idea establishes some correspondence between Nabokov the lepidopterist and the photographer.

Earlier in the memoir, Nabokov describes his childhood "longing to describe a new species" of butterfly (*SM* 123). He sees it as akin to poetic creation. Of these butterflies, he writes in the caption: "It may not rank high enough to deserve a name, but whatever it be—a new species in the making, a striking sport, or a chance cross—it remains a great and delightful rarity" (*SM* 274). He makes much of the fact that they are appearing as photographs for the first time here, thus noting the originality of the image; despite the image's reproducible capacity, it is figured here as singular. Thus, including this image of the butterfly is akin to including an image of his own creation, unlike the other photographs in the text created by others that he has attempted to "authorize."

Pictured are photographs of the holotype and paratype of the butterfly. A holotype is the single specimen that serves as the representative of a new species. However, it is not uncommon for other specimens to be collected as well to create the description of a new species. The paratype serves as an additional specimen of the species. The paratype can be of vital importance if the holotype is ever lost or destroyed. There is, then, something pleasingly Nabokovian about the inclusion of both the holotype and the paratype, as it invokes the trope of the double. We

[100] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 57.

might even go so far as to say that Nabokov, with his avowed affinity for the migratory and metamorphosing aspect of butterflies, finds an analogy in the holotype and paratype to his own literary career as divided between Sirin and Nabokov. The image becomes an oblique self-portrait.

Conclusion

If we return to the image of the "bad memoirist" as a stranger taking photographs, we see how Nabokov tries to transform those posed photographs taken by strangers into images that are "Nabokovian" through his textual mediation. Although he is not the photographer of these images, he positions himself as their author, in control of setting their meaning. He points to the photograph's referential failures, claiming that the posed photographs only approximate or, worse, distort the subjects. Through this staged back and forth between the word and image in his textual inscriptions, he vaunts his memory as superior to the images. Véra's snapshots, however, recast this struggle between authors competing for the last word in a more benevolent light. While the captions to photos taken by other people tend to be antagonistic, highlighting the flaws and inaccuracies in their depiction, the captions to the photographs taken by Véra are his most poetic. Her visual images inspire his verbal descriptions; they work together. Nonetheless, Nabokov claims the ability to control how much the photograph reveals through his captions. The question, though, is whether the photographs resist these readings, whether they speak back.

Chapter Two
Missing Frames: The Limits of Photographic Memory in Brodsky's 'In a Room and a Half'

"To *picture* is not to *remember*."
Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (1896)[1]

"The Photograph does not call up the past (nothing Proustian in a photograph)."
Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (1980)[2]

Introduction

Brodsky often claimed that he did not experience exile as a qualitative break or rupture in his life. In a 1976 letter to his friend and fellow poet Lev Loseff, who was himself in the process of emigrating, Brodsky wrote "in the end, any country, any place is simply a continuation of space and changes, as such, don't actually take place."[3] This became a phrase that he would often repeat: every country is just a continuation of space.[4] For example, in his 1977 lecture "Language as Otherland," he addressed the question of exile and its effects on language. He suggested that "exile is bearable in terms of writing. For any country is but a continuation of space. All these ravings of a writer being cut out of his roots, deprived of his soil, are drivel."

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[1] Henri Bergson, *Henri Bergson: Key Writings*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson and John Ó Maoilearca (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 153.

[2] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 82.

[3] «В конце концов, любая страна, любое место есть всего лишь продолжение пространства, и перемены, как таковой, на самом деле не происходит». My translation. Lev Loseff Papers, Bakhmeteff Archive of Russian and East European History and Culture, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University (unprocessed).

[4] For example, in an interview with Eva Burch and David Chin in 1979, Brodsky said that he tried not to see exile as a "big deal" because "basically every country is just a continuation of space." Joseph Brodsky and Cynthia L. Haven, *Joseph Brodsky: Conversations* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 65.

Brodsky repeatedly insisted that exile had not affected him; that what matters was whether he could continue to write.

However, in his essay "In a Room and a Half," Brodsky describes space not as continuous, but as all too fragmented and reduced. The very title of the essay attests to the reduction of space, which is then bodied forth in the text's fragmentary structure. The essay begins in a manner that defies his usual stance on exile as a non-event, that every country is but a "continuation of space." Now, he writes, he stands "on the Atlantic seaboard" and "there is a great deal of water" that creates a "real chasm" separating him from Leningrad (*LTO* 448).[5] The Atlantic becomes a Stygian boundary between him and his deceased parents and the world he left behind. The vast expanse of the world has been fractured by exile and death. There are borders that one simply cannot cross.

And yet, the essay seems to try to bridge this gap. The essay attempts to place us back *in* the room and a half of Brodsky's childhood. In the drafts of the essay, Brodsky changes the title from "The Room and a Half" to "In a Room and a Half."[6] That small preposition accomplishes quite a lot: it situates us in that faraway place. Like Nabokov slipping back into the past through the art of memory, Brodsky also attempts to return once again to the lost space of his childhood home by conjuring it up in vivid detail. Brodsky figures his memory as highly visual, or more precisely, as photographic. However, while Nabokov vaunts the power of his visual memory that

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[5] In these lines, we might hear an echo of Czesław Miłosz's poem "Elegy for N.N." (1962). Written in exile in Berkeley, the poem begins "Tell me if it is too far for you. / You could have run over the small waves of the Baltic / and past the fields of Denmark, past a beech wood / could have turned toward the ocean, and there, very soon / Labrador, white at this season." A line from the same poem stands as the epigraph to the collection of essays *Less Than One*: "And the heart doesn't die when one thinks it should."

[6] Joseph Brodsky Papers GEN MSS 613, Box 81, Folder 1983. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

allows him to travel as a "passportless spy" back to the Russia of his childhood, Brodsky's essay increasingly reckons with the *failures* of memory.

As we saw in Chapter One, Nabokov critiques photography by setting it in opposition to his own superior visual memory. Brodsky also launches an attack on photography; however, unlike Nabokov, he does so not in order to demonstrate his unassailable memory by comparison. The limits of photographs instead provide an apt visual metaphor for the failures of memory in Brodsky's essay. In Brodsky's essay there are bright spots of memory that seem to preserve faultlessly some scene of the past, so much so that he is transported back to that moment. However, those are but a few vivid frames, unloosed from the whole, deprived of temporal continuity. There are too many "missing frames" in memory, as Brodsky puts it (*LTO* 492). The distinction that Nabokov draws between a lesser photographic recall of the past and a deeper memory that engages all the senses collapses in Brodsky's notion of memory as visual but not visionary: it is flat, random, lacking in continuity. It is, in short, photographic—unable to conjure up the past in a Proustian scene of resurrection and recovery, as Barthes remarks in the epigraph to this chapter.

This chapter traces the way in which Brodsky's writing on photography disavows photography's ability to ameliorate the loss of past time and space. Brodsky instead deplores photography as a spatial medium of fragmentation and reduction, one that disrupts temporal continuity. Brodsky takes up this idea of the photograph as a fragmented spatial image that does not preserve duration and presses it into service as a metaphor for memory's lack of continuity. This chapter examines the implications of such a photographic model of memory that foregrounds spatial discontinuity and fragmentation.

Brodsky's interest in photography stems in part from the fact that his father, Aleksandr Ivanovich, was a professional photographer. Brodsky's father taught him how to use a camera and, on a few occasions, Brodsky picked up work as a photographer.[7] Lev Loseff, in his biography of Brodsky, suggests that Brodsky's poetic eye was trained by the viewfinder of the Leica.[8] In addition, I would emphasize that Brodsky's use of photography as a metaphor for memory springs from the intellectual milieu in which Brodsky wrote the essay, a moment that witnessed a veritable flowering of theoretical writings about photography. By the time Brodsky writes "In a Room and a Half," Sontag's series of essays on photography had been published in the *New York Review of Books* (*NYRB*),[9] Barthes's *Camera Lucida* had appeared in English in 1981, and the pages of the *NYRB* (where Brodsky was a frequent contributor) regularly featured essays on photography's practitioners and theorists.[10] Given this context, this chapter offers a serious appraisal of the significance of photography within Brodsky's thought, focusing primarily on his essay "In a Room and a Half." Although this essay is not as explicitly about

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[7] Loseff, *Joseph Brodsky*, 10.

[8] Loseff writes that Brodsky's "verse is clearly written by a man with a trained eye, and much of that training may have come by looking through the viewfinder of a Leica." Loseff, 10.

[9] From 1973 to 1977, Sontag published a series of essays on photography that would later be collected in the book *On Photography*: "Photography," October 18, 1973 ("In Plato's Cave" in *OP*); "Freak Show," November 15, 1973 ("America, Seen Through Photographs, Darkly" in *OP*); "Shooting America," April 18, 1974 ("Melancholy Subjects"); "Photography: The Beauty Treatment," November 28, 1974 ("The Heroism of Vision"); "Photography in Search of Itself," January 20, 1977 ("Photographic Evangels"); and "Photography Unlimited," June 23, 1977 ("The Image-World").

[10] For example, On December 17, 1981, a review by Clive James ("That Old Black and White Magic") of the recently published English translation of *Camera Lucida* (among other some 24 other books on photography) was printed in *NYRB*. In that same issue, Brodsky's poem "The Berlin Wall Tune" also appeared. What I am suggesting, in other words, is that Brodsky would likely have been familiar with, if not *Camera Lucida* itself, then at least the reviews that detailed Barthes's final work.

photography as *Camera Lucida*, nonetheless we will see how the resurgence of interest in photography during this period is refracted in Brodsky's essay.

Like Barthes, Brodsky brings together the loss of his parents with a consideration of the photograph's (in)ability to restore such loss. Although actual photographs are not included in the essay, Brodsky explores the photographic condition of memory. Akin to the way objects are impressed on the photographic plate, so too, Brodsky suggests, are perceptions imprinted onto our retina. These photographic traces preserved in memory entail the continued survival of the other even after death in our memory. However, the photographic aspect of memory also renders these impressions discontinuous and fragmentary. In this essay, photography becomes a way of thinking about the limits of memory and of elegy, as Brodsky foregrounds the inability to resurrect the past fully in visual or verbal form. Thus, Brodsky practices what Jahan Ramazani has suggested is characteristic of the elegy in the 20th century—an "immersion" in loss rather than its "transcendence or redemption."[11] This insistence on loss that stands unredeemed distinguishes Brodsky from Nabokov who, like Proust, offers a paradigm of time regained through memory and art. Rather than Bergsonian temporal continuity, Brodsky explores the postmodern condition of rupture through an assemblage of spatially discontinuous elements: the fragmentation of architectural space, photographic snapshots, and gaps in memory.

The Method of Loci: Architecture and Spatial Memory

[11] Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 4.

When Brodsky taught poetry at colleges in America, one of the writing prompts he gave students asked them to write a poem about a room, an ekphrastic exercise that calls to mind his own essay about a domestic space, "In a Room and a Half."

> Concern yourself with any aspect(s) of this room, but mainly with its geometry: try to establish a connection between how you feel yourself in this room (secure, a bit uncomfortable, cozy, strange) and its rectangular regularity or irregularity. Concentrate on the notion of enclosure, and try to animate the available furniture (chairs, for instance, always look like skeletons of some creatures we don't encounter in flesh). Your room can be a real one or imagined; the main thing to remember though is that being in a room is such a universal experience that to say something novel about is [sic] bound to be difficult: mere description won't do.[12]

He emphasizes that the poem should capture the "geometry" of the interior, with all its irregularities. The spatial form of the room here produces not only the poem's content but inspires its very form. The shape of the room should inform the poem's structure: "your room itself has a definite shape to which your lines should correspond." Indeed, Brodsky's own poems have been called "architectural"[13] and, like the Acmeist poets whose legacy he inherited, he obeys architectural principles of order and proportion, taking inspiration from stone and marble, ruins and built structures. As much as he was a student of Akhmatova and Mandelstam, he also insisted that his poetics were informed by the classical architecture of Petersburg. The correspondence between architectural and poetic form that Brodsky impresses on his students (and which informs the architectonics of his own poetry) also becomes a guiding principle in his prose essay "In a Room and a Half."

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[12] Lev Loseff Papers, Bakhmeteff Archive of Russian and East European History and Culture, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University (unprocessed).

[13] For example, the poet Elena Shvarts said in an interview that Brodsky introduced her to the idea of poetry's "kinship with architecture" and that his poems are like "a complex building." Valentina Polukhina, *Brodsky Through the Eyes of His Contemporaries* (Academic Studies Press, 2008), 263.

One of the defining features of the space he details in the essay is its architectural irregularity: the room and a half. In the opening line of the essay, Brodsky wonders whether such a term "makes any sense in English" (*LTO* 477). He explains that each person was allotted 9 square meters of space but, because of the irregular shape of their room, they received an extra 13 meters resulting in "a total of 40 meters" (*LTO* 452). The Russian word that remains unspoken here is *poltora*, which more literally means "two minus a half" (coming from the words *polovina* and *vtoroi*) rather than "one and a half." In Russian, this spatial unit simultaneously accentuates both excess and absence, as the half room is additional space but one that lacks wholeness. In this respect, the title of the essay echoes the title of the essay collection: *Less than One*. This theme of lack speaks to the experience of emigration, of occupying the space in between two places, as well as the loss of his parents which haunts this essay. By noting the lack of an English idiom for the room and a half, Brodsky emphasizes the particularity of this space, but he also signals that translation is at work on two levels in this essay: from Russian into English, and from the visual medium of architecture into the verbal medium of prose. The result, Brodsky seems to suggest, will be imperfect, incomplete, less than whole.[14]

This particular configuration of space, born of the communal apartment, already bears meaning in the Russian context as a productive and prevalent metaphor for social relations and the Soviet experience. As Svetlana Boym writes, "If there had been such a thing as a Soviet cultural unconscious, it would have been structured like a communal apartment—with flimsy

[14] Svetlana Boym notes that "Brodsky loves the titles that contain a 'one' that is not one, that is more or less than a statistical or bureaucratic unit of identity and space." She suggests that his English-language prose makes use of a language "that is not one," as it is marked by "cultural and linguistic untranslatables." Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 294–95.

partitions between public and private, between control and intoxication."[15] As we will see in Chapter Four, many of Kabakov's works make productive use of the communal apartment as a storehouse for memory, but in a more explicitly spatialized way through the total installation.

Brodsky describes how the enfilade of rooms in the Muruzi house, built in the Moorish style in 1903, was broken up into separate rooms. "After the Revolution," he writes, "in accordance with the policy of 'densening up' the bourgeoisie, the enfilade was cut up into pieces, with one family per room. Walls were erected between the rooms—at first of plywood. Subsequently, over the years, boards, brick, and stucco would promote these partitions to the status of architectural norm" (*LTO* 452). One of the paradoxes of this transformation of the space as part of the communalization process is that the architectural principle of the original enfilade structure actually *encourages* communal life within the household.[16] Thus, we can note the irony that the design of the enfilade style—which is born of the idea that we are social creatures, forged in relation to others—is then divided into discrete parts of the "communal apartment" in which one now strives to carve out a private corner to find refuge. As Svetlana Boym notes, in a communal apartment "the minimum of privacy is not even a room but a corner in a room, a

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[15] Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 123. Irina Paperno also notes that many memoirs about the Soviet experience use the communal apartment as a guiding metaphor for their texts. Irina Paperno, *Stories of the Soviet Experience: Memoirs, Diaries, Dreams* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), xiv.

[16] In his essay "Figures, Doors and Passages," Robin Evans discusses the shift in European architectural design from creating domestic structures that allow for the easy circulation of all members of the household—through an enfilade structure and rooms with multiple doors that leads to a less solidly differentiated division between rooms and passageways of the house—to designing interior spaces that allowed for privacy and refuge from the rest of the house (by creating rooms with only one door that leads into a passageway), beginning in the 18th century as new ideas of privacy take hold. Robin Evans, "Figures, Doors and Passages," in *Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997).

hidden space behind the partition."[17] Brodsky's essay details his attempts to manipulate the spatial configuration of the room and a half to create some semblance of privacy and separation between him and his parents. Ultimately, though, it is this separation that he seeks to overturn, desiring connection; however, the textual structure of the essay reinforces that separation through the fragmentary form. The essay consists of 45 fragments, broken down into discrete parts much like the Muruzi house was divided into the rooms of the communal apartment.

Beyond its correspondence with the formal structure of the essay, the architecture of the space guides him through the essay, as the text describes in great detail the various parts of the room and a half. The space becomes a repository of memory; by recollecting the physical space, he also recalls the memories that those spaces hold. This connection between architecture and memory is one with a long history. The poet Simonides of Ceos, commonly thought to be the inventor of mnemonics, devised a device for memory known as the method of loci, which makes explicit the relationship between architectural spaces and memory. The story goes that, during a banquet hosted by a man named Scopas, Simonides recited a poem that praised his host but also paid tribute to the gods Castor and Pollux.[18] Feeling cheated by this praise of others, Scopas refused to pay the full amount for the poem meant to honor him. Simonides was then called out of the house by two visitors. In his absence, the roof of the hall caved in and all the guests were killed—their bodies so mangled that relatives could not identify them. Aided by his memory of where each man sat at the table, though, Simonides proved able to identify them. In *On the*

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[17] Boym, *Common Places*, 150.

[18] The account of Simonides' discovery of the loci method comes from Cicero's *On the Orator*. It is discussed in Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 1–2. Svetlana Boym also turns to this famous scene in connection with the topography of a city and nostalgia. *The Future of Nostalgia*, 77.

Orator, Cicero tells Simonides' story and promotes the method of loci as an aid to memorizing speeches; he encourages the speaker to learn the interior of a space and to associate the distinct sections of a speech with a specific place in the structure.[19] By following the architecture, the speaker recalls his way through the speech. In her classic study on the art of memory, Frances Yates writes, "we have to think of the ancient orator as moving in imagination through his memory building *whilst* he is making his speech, drawing from the memorised places the images he has placed on them."[20] Such a technique, Yates notes, requires "visual impressions of almost incredible intensity."[21]

Simonides' spatialized "art of memory" resonates with the workings of memory in Brodsky's essay, not only the technique but also the event that led to its invention. Working with the ruins of the palace, Simonides reconstructs what once was through his visual memory. From the bodily remains, he resurrects the living. It is a poignant story that speaks to the experience of loss that haunts Brodsky's essay. In the essay, Brodsky seeks to rescue those rooms and people from oblivion through the spatial form and memory technique of the essay. Brodsky suggests that writing the essay and describing the space "is the only way for me to see [my parents] and our room" (*LTO* 457). Brodsky uses the topos of the eponymous room and a half to narrate his childhood memories and recollections of his parents. The structure of the space calls forth his memories. He describes in detail the 14-feet high ceiling, both the ornamental moldings on the

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[19] Cicero writes that Simonides discovered "the truth that the best aid to clearness of memory consists in orderly arrangement. He inferred that persons desiring to train this faculty must select localities, with the result that the arrangement of the localities will preserve the order of the facts." Cicero, *On the Orator: Books 1–2*, trans. E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library 348 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), 467.

[20] Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 3.

[21] Yates, 4.

walls as well as the cracks and stains. He describes the windows, the balcony, the arch between the two rooms, the various configurations of bookcases and suitcases and chests that he brought together to devise a divider between his half and his parents' room; he details his parents' beloved bed, his desk, his father's darkroom, as well as the communal kitchen and bathroom. Recalling the space in detail allows him to relive the past, to revisit that space again through a highly visual description.

The connection between domestic space and memory has been explored more recently by the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* (*La Poétique de l'Espace*, 1958), a text that Brodsky placed on his great books list that he would give to university students when teaching in America. In *Poetics of Space*, Bachelard explores the lived experience within the protective shelter of the home, paying particular attention to the imaginative and emotional life encouraged by the various corners and spaces within the house. Although Bachelard's phenomenological study of interior spaces implicitly assumes a particular type of home to be a universal experience—a comfortable, middle-class French home with attic, cellar, and staircases quite different from the architectural structure of Brodsky's *kommunalka*—his insights into the emotional power of lived spaces remain valuable. For Bachelard, as for Simonides and the practitioners of the method of loci in antiquity, it is the spatialization of memory that ensures its preservation and retrieval. He affirms that "the more securely [memories] are fixed in space, the sounder they are."[22]

Thus, according to Bachelard, many of our childhood memories are stored within the physical structures of the home. And, vice versa, "the house we were born in is physically

[22] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Orion Press, 1964), 9.

inscribed in us."[23] It is "thanks to the house," he writes, that "a great many of our memories are housed, and if the house is a bit elaborate, if it has a cellar and a garret, nooks and corridors, our memories have refuges that are all the more clearly delineated."[24] In his essay, Brodsky draws attention to the ornamental flourishes of the Moorish architecture, the odd spaces and corners of the room and a half, and the communal corridor as spaces that elicit strong memories. The unique architectural features become a storage space for memory.

Consider, for example, Brodsky's detailed description of their ten-foot-high chest of drawers as his family's "joined, collective subconscious" (*LTO* 459). Brimming with letters, cameras, dishes, linen, tools, clothes, the chest becomes a psychologically rich space invested with their memories. Indeed, Bachelard devotes an entire chapter in his study to "Drawers, Chests and Wardrobes," which he views as "veritable organs of the secret psychological life."[25] Bachelard begins the chapter with a discussion of Bergson's "derogatory" use of the "drawer" metaphor for memory in his works.[26] While Bergson, he writes, dismisses the idea that memory functions like "a wardrobe of recollections," Bachelard favors the notion of the wardrobe as an intimate space in which memories are stored.[27] Brodsky here takes a Bachelardian, rather than Bergsonian, approach to the chest of drawers, figuring them as the storehouse of memory. The objects within the chest, he writes, "were part of my parents' consciousness, tokens of memory: of places and of times by and large preceding me; of their common and separate past, of their

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[23] Bachelard, 14.

[24] Bachelard, 8.

[25] Bachelard, 78.

[26] Bachelard, 74.

[27] Bachelard, 75–79.

own youth and childhood, of a different era, almost of a different century" and finally "of their freedom" (*LTO* 459). Freedom, one of the paramount concerns in the essay, is preserved not only through these objects but through his recollection of these objects. He affirms that he can give his parents "a margin of freedom," a freedom that was taken away from them by the Soviet government, by recalling these memories and preserving them in writing (*LTO* 460).

For Bachelard, the strength of spatial memory can lead to the recovery of the past; he writes, "To inhabit oneirically the house we were born in means more than to inhabit it in memory; it means living in this house that is gone."[28] This utopian hope of inhabiting once more the lost home through the art of memory recalls Nabokov's memoir and his inheritance of "intangible property, unreal estate" thanks to mnemosyne. In Brodsky's essay, the verbal reconstruction of the room and a half would seem to promise this recovery of the past. However, such a technique ultimately proves impossible for Brodsky. It is this spatial aspect of memory that is problematic in Brodsky's essay, because space obeys a reductive logic. Brodsky suggests that space is defined by the principle of reduction: "if there is an infinite aspect to space, it is not its expansion but its reduction. If only because the reduction of space, oddly enough, is always more coherent. […] Expanses have only a broad gesture" (*LTO* 452).

The architectural art of memory that Brodsky explores in this essay finds an analogue in another visual medium: photography.[29] For if space is treated as fragmented, ever reducing into

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[28] Bachelard, 16.

[29] The connection between architecture and photography is further encouraged by the fact that, when the essay was originally published in the *New York Review of Books*, the photographs included to illustrate the text were all of architectural sites: the Muruzi building where Brodsky grew up and the Cathedral of the Savior of Her Imperial Majesty's Transfiguration Battalion, as seen from the apartment balcony. This balcony was also the place where Brodsky's father took a photograph of his son each year on his birthday. "The way other people mark the growth of their children with pencil notches on the kitchen wall, every year on my birthday my father took me out to our balcony and photographed me there" (*LTO* 489). The balcony where the yearly photo

smaller parts, then the photograph, another fragmented vision of space, becomes another medium that represents the reductive quality of memory. If the ancients saw architecture as a storehouse of memory, in Brodsky's essay it is photography that becomes the metaphor *par excellence* for conceptualizing the workings of memory. But whereas the loci technique of antiquity promises the faultless cultivation of memory by attaching an idea to a physical place, Brodsky's photographic model of memory speaks to the inevitable limitations and gaps of memory. As we will see, the photographic, for Brodsky, emphasizes the failures of memory.

Photographic Memory

The essay presents memory in markedly visual terms. Brodsky repeatedly says that he can "see" himself back in the scenes that he describes, and photography increasingly becomes a metaphor for the workings of memory (*LTO* 456). Early in the essay, Brodsky draws attention to his ability to perfectly visualize his parents and himself back in the room and a half. He recalls his mother in detail, picturing her "most frequently in the kitchen, in her apron, face reddened and eyeglasses a bit steamy, shooing me away from the stove as I try to fish this or that item from the burner. Her upper lip glistens with sweat; her short, cropped, dyed-red but otherwise gray hair curls disorderedly" (*LTO* 456). Slipping into the present tense, Brodsky zooms in on a few vivid visual details: her glasses, her upper lip, her curls in disarray. While this fairly banal domestic scene is itself unexceptional—the son bothering the mother as she prepares dinner, then sitting at the table with the father—Brodsky nonetheless marvels at the fact that he can see this

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took place thus becomes a marker of time's passage: in the physical structure, in the photos of Brodsky there, and now in the photographs of the balcony itself. Architecture, photography, and memory become triangulated at the site of the balcony.

scene so clearly. "How is it possible," he muses, "that I see myself in this scene? And yet, I do; as clearly as I see them" (*LTO* 456).

While in an earlier draft, he tentatively questions the veracity of this vision, asking "Do I see myself in this scene? Yes, I do; as clearly as I see them," Brodsky ultimately changes the question to: "How is it possible that I see myself in this scene?"[30] A minor change, perhaps. And yet the phrasing changes the tenor of the question about memory. He shifts from asking merely whether he truly sees himself in this scene to wondering *how it is possible* that he *does* see himself in that scene. How is it possible, essentially, that his memory is able to transport him back to that domestic scene? As we will see, photography becomes the dominant metaphor to explain such a border crossing.

This link between photography and memory becomes more explicit later in the essay, when he recalls the evening of his father's unexpected return from World War II. His father and his friend Captain F.M. enter the apartment and display the gifts they have brought home. "I remember one dark cold November evening in 1948," he begins. Brodsky narrates the scene in the present progressive, as if he were re-living it. "I remember the doorbell ringing and my mother and I rushing to the dimly lit landing," as his father and colleague are "carrying three huge crates." And then a little later "Captain F.M. and I are sitting at the table, while my father unpacks the crates," his mother is "clasping her hands and exclaiming," and the captain is "winking at me as to a grownup" (*LTO* 464). The scene plays on the familiar trope of unexpected homecomings, exemplified in Ilya Repin's painting "They Did Not Expect Him" (*Ne zhdali*,

[30] Joseph Brodsky Papers GEN MSS 613, Box 81, Folder 1983. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

1884–88).[31] Despite the typicality of such a scene, Brodsky accentuates the clarity with which his memory operates, despite the passage of time: "Now I am exactly the age my father was that November evening: I am forty-five, and again I see the scene with an unnatural, high-resolution-lens clarity, although all its participants save me are dead" (*LTO* 464). This layering of time—as he is now the same age that his father was then—seems to heighten the power of memory to place him back within this scene. The strength of his memory lies in the fact that it is able to defy the natural order, to cheat death; all the others are dead, he notes, and yet they seem reanimated through his vivid recollection. It might seem, then, that photographic memory offers a palliative for the exilic condition in which one is split between two places, or more generally for the fundamental divide between past and present. Photography, and visual memory, would seem to offer a means of suturing the gap between different places and times.

As the drafts of the essay demonstrate, Brodsky increasingly relied on the language of photography as a metaphor for memory. In an earlier version, Brodsky writes that he sees "the scene with almost supernatural clarity."[32] In the final version, though, he changes it to "an *unnatural, high-resolution-lens* clarity" (italics mine). In effect, he shifts the vocabulary from superstition to science, from magic to photography in order to explain his ability to visualize this remembered scene. So clear is his vision of this scene that he seems almost projected back into it; he says that now he is able to correct his behavior as a child; at the time, he failed to wink back at his father's colleague, but now he claims, "I see [the scene] so well that I can wink back at Captain F.M" (*LTO* 464). The "mesmerizing clarity" of his memory allows him to step back

[31] I am grateful to Boris Gasparov for pointing out this connection.

[32] Joseph Brodsky Papers GEN MSS 613, Box 81, Folder 1983. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

into this scene, in a manner not unlike Nabokov's ability to step back into the image of the past that he so vividly paints (*LTO* 464–65). But if Nabokov's memory of the past is painterly, then Brodsky's is decidedly photographic. He suggests that he is able to remember so vividly "because you are a son of a photographer and your memory simply develops a film. Shot with your own two eyes, almost forty years ago. That's why you couldn't wink back then" (*LTO* 465). A passive recorder, unable to "wink back" at his father's friend, his camera eye documents the evening which now, forty years on, he can experience again through the "high-resolution lens" of memory.

Memory, in this scene, is associated with the technology of cameras: he recalls the scene as if through a lens and his memory is faultlessly preserved like a roll of film. Svetlana Boym has noted that photography works as a "metaphor for memory" in Brodsky's essay; however, she leaves unexplored how precisely this metaphor works and what it reveals about Brodsky's conception of both memory and photography.[33] Brodsky's essay engages less with actual photographs than with conceiving of memory as photographic, of the experience of vision *as if* the human eye were the objective camera eye. What are the implications of likening the eye to the camera lens, of memory to the photographic plate?

While the essay begins with a more optimistic portrait of memory—a kind of memory akin to Nabokov's visual memory with the power to transcend time and space—this attitude quickly gives way to a more critical appraisal of memory. Ultimately, Brodsky deplores memory precisely *because* of what he considers to be its photographic quality. The "film" of the past that his memory developed, despite its clarity, is found to be profoundly lacking.

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[33] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 296.

Since its inception, photography has been seen as an aide-mémoire because of its strong referential power, but also as an apt metaphor for the workings of memory itself; as Oliver Wendell Holmes put it in 1859, the daguerreotype was a "mirror with a memory."[34] The impression of objects on light-sensitive paper becomes an analogy for the recording of sensory impressions on the brain.[35] Photography belongs to a long lineage of visual metaphors for conceptualizing memory. In Plato's dialogue *Theaetetus*, Socrates compares memory with a wax tablet upon which our memories are inscribed. The quality of wax may differ within each of us, accounting for one's propensity to forget or another's to retain memory well, but our thoughts and memories are imprinted in the wax:

> We may look upon it, then, as a gift of Memory, the mother of the Muses. We make impressions upon this of everything we wish to remember among the things we have seen or heard or thought of ourselves; we hold the wax under our perceptions and thoughts and take a stamp from them, in the way in which we take the imprints of signet rings. Whatever is impressed upon the wax we remember and know so long as the image remains in the wax; whatever is obliterated or cannot be impressed, we forget and do not know. (191d)[36]

In Plato's *Philebus*, Socrates offers yet another metaphor for the workings of memory, this time one that brings together words and images. The soul, he claims, is like "a book" (38e) upon which a scribe writes words while a painter "provides illustrations to his words in the soul"

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[34] Trachtenberg, *Classic Essays on Photography*, 74.

[35] For an overview of the use of photography as a metaphor for memory, see Douwe Draaisma, *Metaphors of Memory: A History of Ideas about the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 119–134.

[36] Plato, "Theaetetus," in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, trans. M. J. Levett (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub, 1997), 212.

(39b).[37] The parallels between the impressions made in the wax tablet or the inscriptions within the book of the soul and the indexical trace imprinted in the photograph are clear.

But if Plato's wax tablet model of memory endows the subject with agency over which memories should be imprinted upon the wax ("we make impressions […] of everything we wish to remember" and "we hold the wax under our perceptions"), the photographic model of memory instead emphasizes the idea of a *passive* recording of sense data onto the mind. Indeed, Freud takes up the trope of the unconscious mind operating like a camera to explain the workings of trauma, as we shall explore more in Chapter Three. If the avant-garde hailed the aesthetic potential of the objective mechanical apparatus that could record beyond what the human eye could perceive (consider surrealist André Breton's praise of the camera as a "blind instrument"[38] or Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov's theory of the "kino-eye"[39]), others have shuddered at the camera's revelation of our own contingency as a perceiving subject.[40]

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[37] Plato, "Philebus," in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, trans. Dorothea Frede (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub, 1997), 427–28.

[38] André Breton, "Max Ernst," in *Beyond Painting: And Other Writings by the Artist and His Friends*, ed. Robert Motherwell (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1948), 177. For more on Surrealism's fascination with the automatism of photography, see Krauss, "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism."

[39] In 1923, Vertov argues cinema should no longer "copy the work of our eye," for the camera's kino-eye is "more perfect than the human eye." He writes: "I am kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it." Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O'Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 15–17.

[40] In her article "L'Imparfait de l'Objectif: The Imperfect of the Object Glass," Ann Banfield gives an account of how the photograph records sense-data in the absence of a perceiving subject, thus revealing the contingency of the subject. This is experienced as a startling, almost traumatic, shock in Proust's *A la recherche* and Barthes' *Camera Lucida*. Ann Banfield, "L'Imparfait de l'Objectif: The Imperfect of the Object Glass," *Camera Obscura* 8, no. 24 (1990): 64–87, https://doi.org/10.1215/02705346-8-3_24-64.

Thus, when Brodsky likens his eye to the camera eye, his memory to light-sensitive film, he expresses both the visual clarity of his memory but also its impersonal mechanical quality. It is this mechanical aspect of the photographic model of the mind that troubles Brodsky in this essay. For memory to operate like the camera apparatus implies the absence of the embodied position of the perceiving subject; as Ann Banfield notes, the camera offers a "subjective but subjectless" perspective.[41] We witness this erasure of the perceiving subject when Brodsky suggests that he "couldn't wink back" during the scene of his father's arrival home from the war, for it was as if he were turned into a mechanical apparatus impassively recording the scene. In Brodsky's conception of the photographic model of the mind, memory operates mechanically and thus randomly, impersonally; it fails to capture the perceiving subject's experience of temporal duration.

As we saw in Chapter One, Bergson also turns to photography as a metaphor for the mind's false perception of the durational process of becoming. Bergson's *durée réelle* or pure duration offers a conception of time and inner experience that is in a constant state of flux, ever changing and flowing between states, that cannot be quantified, measured, or divided.[42] Bergson admits that in our daily lives "we find it extraordinarily difficult to think of duration in its original purity."[43] We (falsely) bring our inner experience of duration together with the external marking of time, the regulated time of the clock which consists of homogeneous measurable

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[41] Banfield, 77.

[42] Bergson first puts forward his concept of duration in *Time and Free Will* (1889). Duration, the continual process of becoming and changing, is to be conceived of as "succession without distinction," a "mutual penetration, an interconnexion and organization of elements, each one of which represents the whole, and cannot be distinguished or isolated from it except by abstract thought." Bergson, *Henri Bergson: Key Writings*, 73.

[43] Bergson, 76.

units of time. Thus, according to Bergson, we fall into the habit of spatializing the inner experience of duration:

> We introduce [space] unwittingly into our feeling of pure succession; we set our states of consciousness side by side in such a way as to perceive them simultaneously, no longer in one another, but alongside one another; in a word, we project time into space, we express duration in terms of extensity, and succession thus takes the form of a continuous line or a chain, the parts of which touch without penetrating one another.[44]

Such a spatialization of time thus fragments the ceaseless continuity of duration. It is this spatialization of time into discrete fragments that corresponds with the camera. Just as the cinematographic apparatus gives the illusion of movement as it unfolds a series of immobile photographs, so too does the mind habitually fragment the process of movement:

> Instead of attaching ourselves to the inner becoming of things, we place ourselves outside them in order to recompose their becoming artificially. We take snapshots, as it were, of the passing reality, and, as these are characteristic of the reality, we have only to string them on a becoming, abstract, uniform and invisible, situated at the back of the apparatus of knowledge, in order to imitate what there is that is characteristic in this becoming itself.[45]

Bergson's theory attempts to overturn this "cinematographical method" of perception in order to return us to intuiting the constant inner movement of becoming.[46] The "snapshot" is thus linked with our perceptual misapprehension of duration which fragments continuous experience as it would space into immobile units.[47]

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[44] Bergson, 73.

[45] Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 306.

[46] Bergson, 307.

[47] Martin Jay, in his study of the rise of "antiocular" thought in 20th-century French theory, includes Bergson as one of the first Western philosophers to distrust sight. Jay's study suggests that this doubt in vision was in part inaugurated by optical inventions like the camera, which paradoxically offered a highly realist vision of the world, but also made people aware of the limits of our own vision, of how susceptible we are to being tricked by illusory visions. See

Following Bergson, Brodsky envisions a model of the mind that operates like the camera, fragmenting temporal experience into discrete spatialized images. Brodsky's critique of memory firmly rests on the contention that it lacks continuity and produces mere fragments. He writes:

> What memory has in common with art is the knack for selection, the taste for detail. Complimentary though this observation may seem to art (that of prose in particular), to memory it should appear insulting. The insult, however, is well deserved. Memory contains precisely details, not the whole picture; highlights, if you will, not the entire show. (*LTO* 489)

The passage of time has rent asunder the continuity of memory, leaving behind only shards. It is as if a "time bomb" had gone off in the room and a half, far more destructive than a "neutron bomb," he claims, for time "splinters even one's memory" (*LTO* 496). Now his memories of his parents are only "fragments, details" (*LTO* 492). It is this quality of memory—sharply visual and yet discontinuous—that finds an analogy in the photographic medium. In fragment 37, Brodsky writes that he sees his parents' faces "with great clarity, in the variety of their expressions—but these are fragments also: moments, instances. These are better than photographs with their unbearable laughter, and yet they are as scattered" (*LTO* 492).[48] While here memory comes out just slightly ahead of snapshots, both exhibit similar tendencies. Brodsky expresses frustration with the way memory and photographs fragment, reduce, and flatten real life. Indeed, at the end of this short fragment, he once again likens the mind to the impersonal mechanical camera: "One

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Chapter Three, "The Crisis of the Ancien Scopic Regime: From the Impressionists to Bergson" in Jay, *Downcast Eyes*.

[48] This phrase about the "unbearable laughter" of photographs is one that Brodsky would return to. He makes a similar statement in his essay in memory of the poet Stephen Spender: "Ah, this unbearable snapshot laughter! That's what one is left with—with these arrested instants stolen from life" (*OGR* 466). He also notes in the Spender essay that as he is writing this passage he is looking at this photograph, as if it were needed for inspiration, and yet it proves not to be enough.

shouldn't expect so much from memory; one shouldn't expect a film shot in the dark to develop new images. Of course not. Still, one can reproach a film shot in the daylight of one's life for missing frames" (*LTO* 492). Memory, for Brodsky, is akin to a collection of photographic fragments, rather than a continuous, unblemished film record. It is a film stripped of movement, transformed into isolated static images.

By conceiving of memory as if it were a camera that operates independent of the subject, Brodsky expresses a divide in the self between the perceiving subject and the mechanical device of memory that records and stores impressions at random. This divide is similar to the distinction Bergson makes between the "fundamental self" that experiences a fluid succession of states and the "superficial ego" that experiences clearly delineated states that are quantifiable.[49] While our internal experience of duration involves an unending succession of states that mutually interpenetrate, we also engage with the outside world, and in so doing we project our internal experience onto the external objects that surround us.[50] By externalizing our inner state of duration, we create two selves. Our fundamental self becomes obscured, as we lose our

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[49] Bergson, *Henri Bergson: Key Writings*, 86–88. In *Time and Free Will*, Bergson admits that this split is necessary for social functioning: "As the self thus refracted, and thereby broken to pieces, is much better adapted to the requirements of social life in general and language in particular, consciousness prefers it, and gradually loses sight of the fundamental self." Bergson, 88.

[50] Bergson writes: "We confuse the feeling itself, which is in a perpetual state of becoming, with its permanent external object, and especially with the word which expresses this object. In the same way as the fleeting duration of our ego is fixed by its projection in homogeneous space, our constantly changing impressions, wrapping themselves round the external object which is their cause, take on its definite outlines and its immobility." Bergson, *Henri Bergson: Key Writings*, 89.

connection with our inner states "except in the homogeneous medium in which we have set their image."[51]

Bergson's shallow self that projects time into space and endows external objects with the inner experience of duration returns us to the spatialized memory systems of Simonides' method of loci and Bachelard's poetics of space. But what Bergson disparages, the classical art of memory actively encourages. For Bachelard or Simonides, the projection of memory onto external objects is to be cultivated, for it is through the spatialization of our impressions that we can preserve our memory. As we recall, Bachelard explicitly engages with Bergson's concept of duration, but in order to insist that memory is best preserved precisely when we store it away in physical space. For Bachelard, "space contains compressed time" and it is space that we remember.[52] He thus suggests that space is more important than time in recovering the past:

> Memory—what a strange thing it is!—does not record concrete duration, in the Bergsonian sense of the word. We are unable to relive duration that has been destroyed. We can only think of it, in the line of an abstract time that is deprived of all thickness. The finest specimens of fossilized duration concretized as a result of long sojourn, are to be found in and through space.[53]

In accord with Bachelard's spatial art of memory, Brodsky presents memory as spatial—from the essay's emphasis on the space of the room and a half as a repository of memory to the idea that memory works like the photographic apparatus that produces spatial images of time. And yet

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[51] Bergson, 93.

[52] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 8.

[53] Bachelard, 9. Bachelard's image of "fossilized duration" calls to mind his contemporary André Bazin, who claimed that cinema gives us "change mummified," for he suggests that the photographic image is similar to how "bodies of insects are preserved intact, out of the distant past, in amber" Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," 14–15.

Brodsky also shares Bergson's critique of how such spatialization introduces fragmentation and betrays the "qualitative multiplicity" of temporal duration.

In his frustration with memory as photographically fragmented in "In a Room and a Half," Brodsky accedes that perhaps he is asking too much of memory: "I fully realize how absurd the grounds of my resistance are: these fragments' lack of continuum" (*LTO* 492). He goes on to say in the next fragment (38) that this desire for continuity goes against the laws of nature: "Presumably the whole point is that there should be no continuum: of anything. That failures of memory are but a proof of a living organism's subordination to the laws of nature. No life is meant to be preserved. Unless one is a pharaoh, one doesn't aspire to become a mummy" (*LTO* 493).[54] Brodsky's photographic model of memory longs for but ultimately disavows the possibility of the indivisible temporal flow of Bergsonian duration that would preserve all the details of a life. The formal structure of the essay follows this principle of reduction and fragmentation: it consists of short, non-chronological fragments. This fragmented narrative structure is the verbal equivalent of his visual memory, and of photographs. Even though Brodsky resists the reduction of space, both in memory and photography, he cannot help but succumb to a fragmented narrative structure. Ultimately, Brodsky reconciles himself to the idea that nothing can be preserved completely, that fragmentation is inevitable.

In Brodsky's essay it is the infinitely reductive quality of space that confirms memory to be spatial, rather than temporal. Brodsky attributes the fragmented state of memory to what he calls the "economy of space"—for who could have room enough to save all the fragments of a

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[54] The mention of preservation and mummification again recalls Bazin's essay "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in which he describes the impulse to preserve a subject through representation as the "mummy complex" of the plastic arts, the apogee of which is the photographic representation of the subject. André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 9.

life (*LTO* 492). As mentioned earlier, in this essay Brodsky suggests that "if there is an infinite aspect to space, it is not its expansion but its reduction" (*LTO* 452). The essay thus makes a connection between the reduction of space and the fragmentation of memory, reinforcing the idea of memory as a spatial medium (à la Bachelard) that thus finds commonality with the photographic medium. Brodsky links this fragmentary quality of memory to photographs, because of their propensity for reducing and flattening space, of preserving one moment over another. As Susan Sontag writes in *On Photography*, "A photograph is only a fragment, and with the passage of time its moorings become unstuck."[55]

In accordance with Brodsky's premise that memory obeys the laws of space, which can be infinitely reduced, then memory is always under threat of being broken down into smaller and smaller photographic fragments. For Brodsky, the categories of space and time are charged with meaning, and so it is not insignificant that memory is critiqued as primarily spatial in the essay. In Brodsky's work, the category of time is often valorized over space. In the poem "Lullaby of Cape Cod" (*Kolybel'naia Treskovogo mysa*, 1975) the cod's "soft song" reminds us that:

> Time is far greater than space. Space is a thing.
> Whereas time is, in essence, the thought, the conscious dream
> of a thing. And life itself is a variety
> of time […]
>
> Время больше пространства. Пространство — вещь.
> Время же, в сущности, мысль о вещи.
> Жизнь — форма времени […][56]

[55] Sontag, *On Photography*, 71.

[56] Joseph Brodsky, *Chast' rechi: stikhotvoreniia 1972-1976* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1977), 106. Joseph Brodsky, *Collected Poems in English*, ed. Ann Kjellberg (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 124. English translation by Anthony Hecht.

His essay "Flight from Byzantium" (1985) also draws a sharp contrast between time and space. In the essay, Brodsky claims that the "East" is overly invested in the ornamental, decorative, visual; he thus categorizes it as a purely spatial realm, as opposed to the "West" which is temporal (*LTO* 433). Such a distinction is no doubt specious. Brodsky admits that such a position will provoke ire from those who actually study Eastern civilizations ("Oh, I foresee objections!"), but nonetheless he persists to reprise his dichotomy between space and time: "space to me is, indeed, both lesser and less dear than time. Not because it is lesser but because it is a thing, while time is an idea about a thing. In choosing between a thing and an idea, the latter is always to be preferred, say I" (*LTO* 435). Or, we can consider *Watermark*, Brodsky's book-length essay on Venice, which offers several meditations on the difference between space and time. In that essay, time (as if often the case in Brodsky's work) is coupled with water. He writes: "I always adhered to the idea that God is time" and thus that "if the Spirit of God moved upon the face of water," as in the opening of Genesis, then "the water was bound to reflect it. Hence my sentiment for water, for its folds, wrinkles, and ripples, and—as I am a Northerner—for its grayness. I simply think that water is the image of time" (*W* 42–43). Brodsky opposes the architecture of the city with the "anarchy of water that spurns the notion of shape" to assert that in Venice, more so than anywhere else, space is more aware of "its inferiority to time" and thus it responds "with the only property time doesn't possess: with beauty" (*W* 44). The infinite, unbounded, and indivisible nature of water—ceaseless in its movement, in a constant state of change—thus embodies Bergsonian temporal duration, whereas space, that lesser thing, is visual, aesthetic, and immobile.

The figuration of memory as spatial rather than temporal in "In a Room and a Half" links with his discussion of space and time more generally. If we have an overriding concern with

space in this essay, as opposed to time, it is because time itself—along with memory—has become spatialized. We are betrayed, as he says, by memory that does not preserve the duration of temporal flow, but rather spatializes it, turning our experience into a lesser object. Thus, the idea of continuous temporal duration is held in tension with fragmentary spatial memory in the essay. "In a Room and a Half" clearly presents a spatialized model of memory, through his detailed recollection of his Leningrad home and the memories stored within. And yet he also rails against the limits of a spatialized memory system, which inevitably fragments, and longs for an experience of duration that allows for continuity. Brodsky's essay, though, suggests that this Bergsonian fundamental self who experiences the ceaseless continuity of duration is inaccessible, and that all we are left with now is the fragmented self with a spatialized, photographic memory. Although in the essay Brodsky aspires to a Bergsonian concept of duration, he ultimately rejects it as an unattainable fantasy, finding it nearly impossible to escape the spatialization of memory and time. Brodsky writes, contra Bergson, that "the conviction that we are somehow remembering the whole thing in a blanket fashion, the very conviction that allows the species to go on with its life, is groundless" (*LTO* 489).

As we saw in Chapter One, Nabokov's critique of the photograph is also indebted to Bergson's concept of duration. For Nabokov, as for Bergson, the photograph lacks the vitality and movement of temporal duration. However, while Nabokov *does* subscribe to the idea that he is able to access the inner experience of duration through the art of memory, Brodsky does not vaunt his memory in such a manner. The opposition that Bergson sets up between a false photographic perception of the world and the experience of pure duration collapses in Brodsky's vision of memory as decidedly spatial and photographic. The essay presents memory and perception as photographic, with no recourse to the continuous experience that Bergson insists is

there, if only we manage to intuit it. While for Bergson, it is the artist who can break through habituated perception and creatively intuit the flow of duration to perceive the "inner life of things"[57] (the paradigmatic example of this being Proust's *mémoire involontaire*), Brodsky offers a collage of photographic fragments that do not transcend their flatness. Brodsky's essay suggests that there is no longer, it would seem, the possibility of Bergsonian continuity. After all, the twentieth century is the century of fragmentation, rupture. Michel Foucault, in "Of Other Spaces," contended that in the twentieth century, an era "of space," spatial concerns should take precedence over the temporal: "We are in the age of the simultaneous, of juxtaposition, the near and the far, the side by side and the scattered."[58] And the photograph becomes the art form *par excellence* for representing the fragmentation or atomization of modern society, which the experience of exilic discontinuity is part and parcel of.

Indeed, Walter Benjamin critiqued Bergson's philosophy of duration for not recognizing the specific historical circumstances in which it developed. In his essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (1939), Benjamin historicizes Bergson's concepts of memory and duration in *Matière et mémoire*, a move that Bergson himself was not interested in ("he rejects any historical determination of memory").[59] For Benjamin, Bergson's philosophy is inextricably linked with its historical conditions, as it "evolved" in response to "the inhospitable, blinding age of big-scale

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[57] In his essay on laughter, Bergson suggests that "between nature and ourselves, nay, between ourselves and our own consciousness a veil is interposed: a veil that is dense and opaque for the common herd,—thin, almost transparent, for the artist and the poet." Bergson, *Laughter*, 74–76.

[58] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Leach (New York: Routledge, 1997), 330.

[59] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 157. Brodsky included *Illuminations* on his great books list that he would give to students. Lev Loseff Papers, Bakhmeteff Archive of Russian and East European History and Culture, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University (unprocessed).

industrialism."[60] The shocks of modernity and industrialization transformed our experience of time—and it is this, in Benjamin's view, that leads Bergson to develop his philosophy of memory and experience. For Benjamin, Bergson is implicitly responding to modern society's sudden transformation of time into a visible, tangible, spatial medium.[61] Bergson's philosophy is an attempt to defy the very fragmentation of time and experience that Benjamin sees as typical of modernity. In Benjamin's reading, Bergson's philosophy is engaged in the work of mourning, as it attempts to restore a kind of continuity that has been lost. Brodsky too is mourning this loss. And while "In a Room and a Half" appeals to this promise of continuity, it ultimately inscribes the experience of fragmentation as a fundamental condition into the very form and content of the essay, pointing to the impossibility of overcoming it in the post-war moment.[62]

In this respect, the form of Brodsky's essay displays an affinity with Benjamin's own autobiographical writings. In *Berlin Chronicle*, the unfinished autobiographical piece Benjamin began writing in 1932, he distinguishes his own recollections—nonchronological short fragments—from autobiography proper along the dividing line between space and time:

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[60] Benjamin, 157.

[61] For more on this transformation of time, see Mary Ann Doane's discussion of how the spread of pocket watches and railroad schedules towards the end of the nineteenth century led to an increased rationalization and uniformity of time. Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 4–6.

[62] We should note that this dynamic between continuity and rupture also relates to Brodsky's cultural position as part of the "generation after," who sought to rectify the disruption of cultural continuity in the wake of cataclysmic events such as the Holocaust or Stalin's Purges. This generation "aspired precisely to the re-creation of the effect of culture's continuity," as he puts it in his Nobel Lecture "Uncommon Visage" (*OGR* 55–56). "The fact that not everything got interrupted, at least not in Russia, can be credited in no small degree to my generation, and I am no less proud of belonging to it than I am of standing here today. And the fact that I am standing here today is a recognition of the services that generation has rendered to culture; recalling a phrase from Mandelstam, I would add, to world culture" (*OGR* 55).

> Reminiscences, even extensive ones, do not always amount to an autobiography. And these quite certainly do not, even for the Berlin years that I am exclusively concerned with here. For autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life. Here, I am talking of a space, of moments and discontinuities.[63]

In a 1978 essay in the *New York Review of Books*, Sontag reviewed the recently published *Reflections* (a collection of Walter Benjamin's essays in English that contained *Berlin Chronicle*), in which she discusses Benjamin's autobiographical piece extensively (as well as the companion piece *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, which remained untranslated in English at that point).[64] Referring to the passage just quoted above, Sontag observes that "Benjamin, the translator of Proust, wrote fragments of an opus that could be called *A la Recherche des espaces perdues*. Memory, the staging of the past, turns the flow of events into tableaux. Benjamin is not trying to recover his past, but to understand it: to condense it into its spatial forms, its premonitory structures."[65] This turn to spatial fragments as opposed to temporal duration in Benjamin's autobiographical writings could just as well describe the essay that Brodsky would later write. In both autobiographical works, memory is characterized not by Proustian time (or Bergsonian duration) but rather by spatial fragments and *dis*continuity—perhaps because both were writing from the position of exile to create an archive of spaces that were on the brink of disappearing.

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[63] Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 28.

[64] Sontag's review, entitled "The Last Intellectual," was published in the *New York Review of Books*'s 15th anniversary issue on October 12, 1978. Brodsky's poem "Lithuanian Divertissement" also appeared in this same issue of the magazine, which suggests that Brodsky would likely have read Sontag's review.

[65] Susan Sontag, "The Last Intellectual," *New York Review of Books*, October 12, 1978.

In the approach to memory that Bergson, Proust, and Nabokov shared, voluntary visual memory (often coded as photographic) is placed in opposition to the depths of involuntary memory. In Sontag's reading of Proust, she highlights the inadequacy of photographs and a strictly visual memory:

> Whenever Proust mentions photographs, he does so disparagingly: as a synonym for a shallow, too exclusively visual, merely voluntary relation to the past, whose yield is insignificant compared with the deep discoveries to be made by responding to cues given by all the senses—the technique he called 'involuntary memory.' One can't imagine the Overture to *Swann's Way* ending with the narrator's coming across a snapshot of the parish church at Combray and the savoring of *that* visual crumb, instead of the taste of the humble madeleine dipped in tea, making an entire part of his past spring into view.[66]

In Brodsky's essay, however, it would seem that there is only the limited visual kind of memory. There is no Proustian (or Nabokovian) moment of *mémoire involontaire* which witnesses the transfiguration of an ordinary material object redeemed through the aesthetic treasures it yields. Instead, his memory is characterized by disjointed visual images. Consider his recollection of their first telephone number, a fragment of the past that he admits "is of no use to me now" (*LTO* 495). Or the "longish, stainless-steel key" that he suddenly recalls, but that does not unlock a metaphorical door to the past: "I don't understand why I recall it now, for that place doesn't exist" (*LTO* 496). Why he recalls "the wrinkles on my father's forehead" or his mother's "reddish, slightly inflamed left cheek" similarly remains a mystery (*LTO* 496). Or if we return to the earlier scene in which he visualizes with "high-resolution-lens clarity" his father's return from the war, we notice that he poses the question here as well about the purpose of such vision: "why this clarity, what is it for?" (*LTO* 464). What is the point of preserving such a vivid recollection of this scene? He searches for an answer: "Is there, in these winks over the space of

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[66] Sontag, *On Photography*, 164. Brodsky quotes from this section of the essay for an epigraph to the essay "Guide to a Renamed City": "To possess the world in the form of images is, precisely, to reexperience the unreality and remoteness of the real."

nearly forty years, some meaning, some significance that eludes me?" (*LTO* 464). He tests out various theories, but the question remains unanswered. These moments suggest a typology of memory in which the fragments of the past are gathered together at random, with no discernible profit, unlike the redemptive logic of involuntary memory. The chance objects that his memory throws up to the surface (the keys, their first telephone number) do not afford the retrieval of lost time, unlike the cup of tea and the scalloped little cake. They remain, intractably, everyday objects—visualized with photographic clarity but converted into nothing more remarkable than their simple thingness.

Brodsky thus emphasizes the pointlessness of our memory, with its camera-like mechanical preservation of odd details. Memory is part of what should allow him timelessness (or continuity), but instead he experiences only the spatial quality of memory, ever reducing and ever betraying him. "Memory" he writes, "betrays everybody, especially those whom we knew best. It is an ally of oblivion, it is an ally of death." Even though his memories exhibit "great clarity," he finds unacceptable the fact that they are only fragments. As such, it proves to be impossible to "reconstruct anybody" solely from memory (*LTO* 492).

While the fragments of memory offer little consolation for the gravity of loss, Brodsky also suggests in his other memorial and elegiac works that it is through another's memories that the survival of the deceased is at least partially ensured.[67] "People are what we remember about them," he writes in his 1995 memorial essay for Stephen Spender.

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[67] In an article on the philosophical underpinnings of Brodsky's elegiac verse, Aaron Beaver connects this imperative to remember in Brodsky's poetic work with Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of being in-itself and for-itself. Beaver writes that "Because time and nothingness are functions of human consciousness, then for the past to be at all depends on its perspective being extended in the life of *someone's* present being." Therefore, memory is the only way to preserve someone's life. Aaron Beaver, "Lyricism and Philosophy in Brodsky's Elegiac Verse," *Slavic Review* 67, no. 3 (2008): 601, https://doi.org/10.2307/27652941.

> What we call life is in the end a patchwork of someone else's recollections. With death, it gets unstitched, and one ends up with random, disjointed fragments. With shards, or, if you will, with snapshots. Filled with their unbearable smiles. Which are unbearable because they are one-dimensional. I should know; after all, I am a photographer's son. And I may even suggest a link between picture-taking and verse-writing—well, insofar as the fragments are black-and-white. Or insofar as writing means retention. Yet one can't pretend that what one beholds goes beyond its blank reverse side. (*OGR* 480)

Death unravels continuity. Memory and art can try to repair this loss, but it remains insuperable. Brodsky here establishes a connection between his father's métier of photography and his own poetry, a connection we will further explore later in this chapter. Both forms capture a single ephemeral moment with the aim to retain or preserve their subject, and yet both forms—in their flat, black-and-white representation—fall short of restoring fully what has been lost.[68] Or consider Brodsky's eulogy for Carl Proffer from 1985, the same year he is writing "In a Room and a Half." Speaking of the imperative to remember, Brodsky suggests that "those who are gone have left a certain part of themselves with you, for you to keep, and you have to carry on because you have to carry them on. […] For practically everybody you happen to rub your shoulders with for some time, leaves an imprint on your retinae, not to speak of your psyche. The stronger the individual was, the deeper his imprint sinks."[69] Brodsky again offers a vision of the mind operating like the camera apparatus. Imprinted on the retina, the other survives in the form of a trace preserved in the photographic plate of memory, thus giving an ontological charge to memory. This is why the stakes of memory are so high. Even if duration is not preserved, even if full recovery of the past is impossible, the trace remains.

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[68] For more on the connections between photography and Brodsky's own poetry, see Molly Thomasy Blasing, "Writing with Light: Photo-Poetic Encounters in Tsvetaeva, Pasternak and Brodsky" (PhD diss., 2014).

[69] Lev Loseff Papers, Bakhmeteff Archive of Russian and East European History and Culture, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University (unprocessed).

These works affirm the importance of preserving these chance remembrances even though they do not offer the full consolation of time regained. In his essay for his parents, he does so not in the hope of resurrecting the past but as a form of protest: "I simply think that natural laws denying continuum to anyone in concert with (or in the guise of) deficient memory serve the interests of the state" (*LTO* 494). He commits himself to recalling these fragments not in order to transfigure them into something higher, but simply to preserve these chance details as proof of their existence—a move that attempts to restore his parents' freedom.

"Two pictures of my parents": A New Photographic Fragment

After the essay was first published in the *New York Review of Books* in February 1986, Brodsky revised the essay for his collection of essays *Less Than One*, which was published by Farrar, Strauss and Giroux later that year, in the spring. Brodsky introduced a new fragment and placed it in the penultimate position of the essay. What is notable is that, despite his expression of deep frustration with photography and its reductive principle, the new fragment added to the essay describes two photographs of his parents:

> There are two pictures of my parents taken in their youth, in their twenties: He, on the deck of a steamer: a smiling, carefree face, a smokestack in the background; she, on a footboard of a railroad carriage, demurely waving her kid-gloved hand, the buttons on the train conductor's tunic behind. (*LTO* 500)

A photograph of his father (fig. 2) from Brodsky's archive of photographs fits the description and is presumably the photograph Brodsky had in mind. (I have yet to locate the one he describes of his mother.) Given Brodsky's strong critique of photography in this essay, why then include a description of these two photographs? What does this inclusion reveal about the status of photography in the essay?

Figure 2. Photograph of Joseph Brodsky's father. Joseph Brodsky Papers, GEN MSS 613, Box 154, Folder 3449, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

It is perhaps surprising that the new fragment focuses on photographs of the parents, given that Brodsky feared reducing his parents to a singular, all-encompassing image. As he writes in the essay, "At times, I begin to suspect my mind of trying to produce a cumulative, generalized image of my parents: a sign, a formula, a recognizable sketch; of trying to make me settle for these" (*LTO* 492). There is an ethical concern in the essay that photographs, real and imagined, would further reduce his parents, strip them of their complexity and individuality. They would become a symbol of his parents, rather than individuals with their subjectivity intact. Following Sontag's logic that a photograph takes part "in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability,"[70] to include photographs of his parents would further their absence or death, rather than resurrect them through this visual form. It would be to participate in their death. He attempts to offer a different kind of elegy in memory of his parents.

What then are we to make of the essay's later inclusion of an ekphrastic description of two photographs of Brodsky's parents? The description of the two photos are not on the order of the famous Winter Garden photo where Barthes "finds" his mother. There is no discussion of a

[70] Sontag, *On Photography*, 15.

punctum that pierces him, no sudden recuperation of the past through a faded two-dimensional image. Nor is the absence of the actual photographs within the text analogous to Barthes withholding the Winter Garden photograph of his mother. Perhaps it is not even right to speak of the *absence* of these photographs in this text, for they are not pointedly concealed. Barthes, unlike Brodsky, overtly refuses to reveal the crucial photograph—"the only photograph which assuredly existed for me" and from which he decides to "derive" the essence of photography—in order to preserve its punctum. Indeed, just before introducing the Winter Garden photograph, Barthes begins to outline a rather curious program for looking at photographs that advocates *not* looking ("in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes"), thus laying the groundwork for our ability to best *see* the mother's photograph without actually *looking* it. It is with the Winter Garden photograph of his mother as a young girl that Barthes "rediscovered her."[71] He recognizes her finally not as he knew her—it is not a mimetic recognition based on resemblance—but on a deeper level; in his words, this photo (unlike the others) preserves her image not in a merely "analogical" form but in an "essential" form.[72] Unlike in the quotation that serves as epigraph to this chapter, the Winter Garden photograph *does* produce in Barthes a Proustian experience of involuntary memory: "For once, photography gave me a sentiment as certain as remembrance, just as Proust experienced it one day when, leaning over to take off his boots, there suddenly came to him his grandmother's true face, 'whose living reality I was experiencing for the first time, in an involuntary and complete memory.'"[73]

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[71] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 69.

[72] Barthes, 70–71.

[73] Barthes, 70.

There are no such photographic epiphanies in Brodsky's essay. The images of his parents, like the other photographic fragments of memory evoked in the text, do not contain a punctive element. There is no magical moment of "finding" his parents through photographs as there is for Barthes. There is no Proustian moment of *mémoire involontaire* (or Nabokovian moment of voluntary memory) that witnesses the transfiguration of an ordinary material object redeemed through the aesthetic treasures it yields. There is no hope here in recovering the riches of past time through the spatial image. Instead, all that remains are the photographic fragments of memory. There can be no photographs in the text, then, not because they are too precious (too punctive) and must be preserved from the gaze of others, but because they are so *ordinary*.

Ordinary as the two photos of the parents may be, they differ in significant ways from the other photographic images mentioned in the rest of the essay. These images are not subjected to the kind of criticism that the other photos and photographic fragments of memory receive. In contrast with the portrait he has painted of them in their old age in the essay, these images offer a vision of his parents as young and "carefree." These images come from a time before Brodsky was born, even before his parents knew each other. Like the Winter Garden photograph, they reveal an image of his parents before he knew them. By focusing on these images of them that predate his existence, these photographs open up a space that activates his *imagination* (rather than memory) and invites him to meditate on this "as-yet-unharmed" moment captured on film that precipitates the eventual losses they would sustain.[74] On the one hand, these photographs

[74] I borrow this phrase "as-yet-unharmed" from Stephen Cheeke's work on photographic ekphrases in poetry. In an analysis of Philip Larkin's poem "MCMXIV" (1960) that describes a photograph of men queuing up to enlist in the British army in 1914, Cheeke suggests that the poem's emphasis on the "innocence" of this scene ("Never such innocence again") is bound up with what he calls the "as-yet-unharmed" quality that the photograph endows to this scene. Looking back at this photograph from the vantage point of 1960, the poem locates an innocent moment that is shot through with the awareness of what was to come for these soldiers. Stephen

give access to a present moment within the past when the youthful parents still have their future ahead of them, with a number of possible opportunities and paths still open to them. These photographs—of his parents as individuals, with their lives ahead of them, poised on these vehicles of motion that seem to promise the freedom of mobility—restore to them their individuality, their freedom. The photograph becomes a space in which alternative futures are not yet foreclosed and can still be imagined. (A future in which they are not yet destined to die as "slaves.") And yet, the drama of the photograph comes from the retrospective position of the beholder in the present who cannot uncouple the picture of their innocence in the *now* of the past from their eventual fate. Such knowledge colors the photograph, endowing it with an elegiac quality as the photographs seem to proleptically anticipate future losses.

Now that his parents are dead, Brodsky writes, he is all that is left of them—he is the "sum" of his parents (*LTO* 500). Which, as he says, is yet another reduction: of two people into one. If the essay expresses anxiety about the reduction of memory and the reduction of his parents into him, then these photos offer a corrective. Crucially, these photographs restore a vision of his parents in which they are not reduced to or dependent on his own consciousness. Ann Banfield's article on the epistemological consequences of the photograph's perspective of the external world independent of a perceiving subject is useful here, especially as it allows us to see how Brodsky's reaction to this fact greatly differs from Barthes's (and Proust's). Banfield writes that the photograph affirms the presence of what Bertrand Russell calls *sensibilia*: objects that are metaphysically the same as sense-data (the information about objects given to the senses) but in the absence of a mind present to perceive them. The photograph thus gives us "a

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Cheeke, "Photography and Elegy," in *Writing for Art: The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 151.

perspective unoccupied by any subject," a vision of the world that is "subjective yet subjectless."[75] The photographic record proves the existence of the external world in the absence of a perceiving subject, thus offering a way out of Berkeleyan idealism, but in so doing the photograph also startles us by revealing our superfluity.

Banfield shows how Barthes is confronted with just such a realization in the famous scene where he finds the Winter Garden photograph of his mother. By "preserving the sensibilia of no living percipient, the photograph records the contingency of the subject as such," and in this moment the observer encounters his own death (not only the premonitory death of the referent) inscribed in the field of the photograph.[76] Jolting us out of a solipsistic vision of the world, "the photograph makes clear that it is the continued existence of things outside the mind which is disturbing to the individual and not their non-existence."[77] Building on Banfield's argument about the contingency of the perceiving subject, Dora Zhang offers a similar account of photographic vision as "traumatic" in Proust's *Recherche*.[78] Returning home unannounced, Proust's narrator glimpses as if through a photographic lens his beloved grandmother, unaware of his presence. This vision of her shocks him. Zhang argues that in this moment he discovers a simple but uneasy fact: "Just as the material world depends on no mind, he realizes with horror

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[75] Banfield, "L'Imparfait de l'Objectif," 76–77.

[76] Banfield, 78.

[77] Banfield, 79.

[78] Dora Zhang, "A Lens for an Eye: Proust and Photography," *Representations* 118, no. 1 (2012): 103–125. Zhang writes that this scene of photographic vision "turns out to be traumatic not because it reveals to us the future *non*existence of things, but, rather because it reveals their *continued* existence in our absence" (104).

that his being is in no way necessary for hers. The beloved is suddenly shown to have an independent existence for which we are completely irrelevant."[79]

Perceiving a beloved parent or grandparent and realizing suddenly that your presence is not necessary for the other's existence proves to be profoundly disturbing for Proust and Barthes, but not, I would emphasize, for Brodsky. If the passage out of solipsism is painful in Proust and Barthes, in Brodsky it takes on a more positive valence. Writing of the photos taken before his parents had met, he notes: "Neither of them is as yet aware of the other's existence; neither of them, of course, is me" (*LTO* 500). None of them is aware of the others (one is even yet to be born), but the photographs taken prior to his existence do not cause alarm about his own superfluity. Instead, they help to repair the "solipsistic feat" he is forced to perform by imagining them as existing now only as part of him (*LTO* 500). "Should I settle for the contents of my skull as what's left of them on earth?" he asks (*LTO* 500). Such a prospect involves yet another reduction: "their shrinkage to the size of my, lesser than their, soul" (*LTO* 500). But these two photos reveal that their existence was not always contingent on his perception or memory, which enables him to restore, however briefly, proof of their existence as individuals separate from him. Contrary to how similar moments are figured in *Camera Lucida* or the *Recherche*, here the photos' affirmation of the parents' independent existence offers a welcome corrective to the solipsistic position that would collapse them into his memory. The photograph's refutation of solipsism that shocks Barthes (seeing his own death prophesied), comforts Brodsky.[80]

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[79] Zhang, 104.

[80] The effort to move beyond solipsism in this essay is connected more generally, I would suggest, with how Brodsky strives for a non-egocentric perspective in his elegies. As he writes in his essay on Tsvetaeva, every "on the death of" poem is akin to a "self-portrait" because the author also "mourns—directly, obliquely, often unwittingly—himself" (*LTO* 195). The elegy's focus on the mourning poet rather than the mourned is a "shortcoming" of the genre (*LTO* 196). Aaron Beaver thus suggests that Brodsky's elegies engage with the problem of "how to retain the

The inclusion of the new fragment that offers a description of these two photographs after the initial publication of the essay speaks to the divided attitude to photographs in the text, as Brodsky both disparages photographs but also cannot help but turn to them. Intellectually he knows they fail him, and yet photographs still exercise an affective power over him. Although they may reduce their subjects by transforming them into objects, they can also move us beyond solipsism as we glimpse a vision of the other as distinct from our mind. They are not enough to reconstruct what has been lost, but they are what remains. The fragments preserved are hopeless in their ability to literally resurrect those who have passed, but to fail to preserve these trace fragments would be tantamount to what Bazin calls a "second spiritual death."[81] Thus, Brodsky suggests that he preserves these traces of his parents—fractured and fragmented as they inevitably are—as a form of protest against a system that would deny them their humanity.

In this essay, photography represents both the vividness of presence and the pain of absence. It both seems to suture the gap, but also to accentuate that gap. Which makes it a particularly effective metaphor for the experience of loss, a universal experience no doubt, but heightened by the experience of emigration. The irretrievability of home for the émigré, the impossibility of return, the break in continuity (what Nabokov would call the "syncopal kick") encourages a fragmentary presentation, it necessitates a photographic style. Thus, photography becomes the metaphor *par excellence* for the experience of emigration and loss. In Brodsky's

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lyricism of the elegy but control the lyric ego." Beaver, "Lyricism and Philosophy in Brodsky's Elegiac Verse," 591–92. Ian K. Lilly also notes the avoidance of using a first-person subject, characteristic of Brodsky's detached tone, in his centenary poem for Akhmatova. Ian K. Lilly, "The Metrical Context of Brodsky's Centenary Poem for Axmatova," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 37, no. 2 (1993): 212, https://doi.org/10.2307/309215.

[81] Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," 10.

essay there is a conflicted struggle against, but ultimate acquiescence to, photography and to the condition of exile that disrupts continuity.

Conclusion: Time, Photography, Poetry

While we have seen that Brodsky is critical of the photograph's propensity to flatten, reduce, and fragment the continuity of experience into a purely spatial form, unable to capture the passage of time, in this concluding section I would like to turn our attention to the essay's investigation of the *act* of taking photographs (rather than photographs as material objects). Indeed, we will see how the process of taking photographs restores a sense of temporal duration as well as creative agency.

Svetlana Boym and Sanna Turoma have both noted Brodsky's disdain for the practice of photography because of its association with tourism and its promotion of an inauthentic experience.[82] Boym writes that Brodsky is "critical of the photographic quick fix (the formula of contemporary tourism)."[83] As Brodsky himself writes in "After a Journey," his essay about a trip to Brazil in which he failed to truly "travel" and was instead merely a tourist: "There is something revolting in all this drifting along the surface, a camera in your hands, with no particular goal in mind" (*OGR* 69). Or in his essay "A Place as Good as Any," which imagines a

[82] Sanna Turoma argues that Brodsky's travel essays respond to the postmodern tourist condition. She notes that in these essays (in particular "A Place as Good as Any") Brodsky critiques the endless visual reproductions of popular tourist sites as they "have engulfed the original sight" leaving behind in our memory only "images of reproductions, signs of signs with a fleeting referent." She suggests that Brodsky's thinking on contemporary tourist culture is in keeping with Jean Baudrillard's concept of the simulacrum, and that he longs (belatedly) for an authentic experience of travel to make contact with history. Sanna Turoma, *Brodsky Abroad: Empire, Tourism, Nostalgia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 57.

[83] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 296.

nightmarish "composite city" (*OGR* 43) made up of ubiquitous tourist sites, he declares that taking pictures, like shopping, is one of the preeminent ways of "sparing one's subconscious an alien reality" (*OGR* 40). Snapping photos is part and parcel of the tourist condition, in which one does not actually *see* or experience the foreign landscape but rather commodifies and consumes it. The connection Brodsky draws between tourism and photography is no doubt influenced by Sontag's writing on the topic in *On Photography*, in which she observes the way the Kodak aids and abets the acquisitive modality of tourism. ("It seems positively unnatural to travel for pleasure without taking a camera along. Photographs will offer indisputable evidence that the trip was made, that the program was carried out, that fun was had. Photographs document sequences of consumption carried on outside the view of family, friends, neighbors").[84] So it is perhaps surprising that we will see how in "In a Room and a Half" the process of taking photographs is figured as a creative act, revalorized as an exercise of freedom. Specifically, it is his father's photographic practice that opens up an alternative approach to photography, one that invites us to see it as analogous to Brodsky's own poetic work.

Brodsky's father, Aleksandr Ivanovich, was a photographer; his darkroom was housed in Brodsky's part of the room. He says that his father "took the best pictures I've seen in print of the city under siege" (*LTO* 462). When Brodsky was a boy, his father worked in the Naval Museum's photography department. In 1950, Brodsky's father was demobilized; he eventually found work as a photojournalist for the newspaper of Leningrad branch of the Merchant Marine (*LTO* 471). Working in the Leningrad harbor, he was always on the go "among ships, sailors, captains, cranes, cargo" in search of a story. "In the background, there was always a rippled zinc sheet of water, masts, the black metal bulk of a stern with a few white first or last letters of the

[84] Sontag, *On Photography*, 9.

ship's home port" (*LTO* 471). It is his father's propensity for photographing water that introduces the notion of expansive freedom and time into the art of photography—an art that, as we have seen, otherwise is figured as spatial and reductive.

As we recall, in Brodsky's oeuvre, water is connected with time and the infinite. In his essay on Leningrad, "A Guide to a Renamed City," Brodsky articulates an idea that he would often repeat—that water is "a condensed form of time" (*LTO* 77).[85] Brodsky links his predilection for water to his native Leningrad, with its canals and rivers. In "Flight from Byzantium," he writes that as a "child of the Baltic," he is unable to "rid himself of the old sensation that this rolling, non-stop, lapping substance itself is time, or that this is what time would look like had it been condensed or photographed" (*LTO* 441).

In "Room and a Half," Brodsky describes how his father shared his love of water: "He liked to be near the water, he adored the sea. In that country, this is the closest one gets to freedom. Even looking at it is sometimes enough, and he looked at it, and photographed it, for most of his life" (*LTO* 471). Brodsky suggests here that the sea—its vast, open space; its connection with time—offers an intimation of freedom. The sea, and water in general, becomes a metaphor for the fluidity of time, resistant to the reductive principle of atomization or spatialization. It offers an endless horizon, the promise of escape. In contrast to the other places in Brodsky's work where the photographic act is disparaged, here it is dignified as his father

[85] In *Watermark*, Brodsky writes "I simply think that water is the image of time" (42–43). In "Flight from Byzantium," he writes that the water of the Bosporus and the Sea of Marmara is "the color of time itself" (*LTO* 441). David Bethea notes that "Water, beginning with the Neva, would always be an essential element in Brodsky's native idiom, its Stevensian 'ghostlier demarcations' setting off thoughts on time, origins, death, and eternity." David M. Bethea, *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 18.

attains a modicum of freedom by photographing the sea.[86] This focus on his father's *freedom* through photography is significant because, in the essay, Brodsky talks at length about how his parents were deprived of their freedom, that they were "born free" but died as "slaves" (*LTO* 479). He sees their death then as the "ultimate insult, the ultimate irreversible stealing of their freedom" (*LTO* 479).

Indeed, he employs water imagery to describe their lack of freedom when he quotes Akhmatova's lines from *Northern Elegies* to express their interrupted lives:

> Just like a river,
> I was deflected by my stalwart era.
> They swapped my life: into a different valley,
> past different landscapes, it went rolling on.
> And I don't know my banks or where they are. (*LTO* 482)

This of course could also apply to Brodsky's own life in emigration as he "switched Empires" (as he puts it in "Lullaby of Cape Cod"). In his discussion of these lines as they relate to his parents' fate, he again relies on the trope of the reduction of space. Their diverted stream has been "reduced and misdirected" which led to a "reduction of options" for their lives. Their freedom under the Soviet regime was circumscribed. The sea that his father looks at and photographs is, then, some way of communing with or reclaiming that potential of unbounded freedom, a way of returning back to his original source.

Water *flows*; it has the continuum that photographs, fragments of space and time, do not have. They are fixed, immobile. Indeed, water for Brodsky is filmic rather than photographic. Brodsky's description of the canals in Petersburg emphasizes how the water reproduces the city by reflecting it. The surface of the water offers mimetic reproduction like a film. "Reflected

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[86] Molly Thomasy Blasing also notes the relationship between water, photography, and freedom in this passage. Blasing, "Writing with Light: Photo-Poetic Encounters in Tsvetaeva, Pasternak and Brodsky," 226.

every second by thousands of square feet of running silver amalgam, it's as if the city were constantly being filmed by its river, which discharges its footage into the Gulf of Finland, which, on a sunny day, looks like a depository of these blinding images" (*LTO* 77). By likening the Neva's reflective surface to "silver amalgam," Brodsky conjures up the Daguerreotype process, which produces images of silver amalgam on polished silver-plated sheets of copper,[87] thus marking the water's mimetic reflections as photographic. However, these photographic images are infused with time, movement, and duration, making them more *filmic* than photographic. Water, the medium of time, offers the durational ideal that photographic memory fails to live up to.[88] And by taking photographs of it, his father produces these images of "condensed time" that offer him a kind of inner freedom.

The other form of condensed time for Brodsky is, of course, language. "Prosody," he claims in an essay on Akhmatova (1982), is "simply a repository of time within language" (*LTO* 52). Akhmatova's poems will therefore survive no matter what "because they are charged with time." In "To Please a Shadow," Brodsky's essay for W. H. Auden, the subject of time and language again comes to the fore. He describes reading Auden's elegy for Yeats and being struck by the lines:

> Time that is intolerant
> Of the brave and innocent,
> And indifferent in a week
> To a beautiful physique,

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[87] For a summary of the Daguerreotype process, see Newhall, *The History of Photography*, 18.

[88] Blasing also looks to this passage in "A Guide to a Renamed City." She suggests, however, that "water operates as a kind of developing solution for memory," as she sees the water not only reflecting his memory but even metaphorically "developing" it. However, I would emphasize that this passage is less connected with memory as it is with articulating another medium that can capture and express time. Blasing, "Writing with Light: Photo-Poetic Encounters in Tsvetaeva, Pasternak and Brodsky," 231–32.

> Worships language and forgives
> Everyone by whom it lives;
> Pardons cowardice, conceit,
> Lays its honours at their feet.

Struck by the assertion that "Time…worships language," Brodsky expounds on the relationship between the two categories:

> If time worships language, it means that language is greater, or older, than time, which is, in its turn, older and greater than space. That was how I was taught, and I indeed felt that way. So if time—which is synonymous with, nay, even absorbs deity—worships language, where then does language come from? For the gift is always smaller than the giver. And then isn't language a repository of time? And isn't this why time worships it? And isn't a song, or a poem, or indeed a speech itself, with its caesuras, pauses, spondees, and so forth, a game language plays to restructure time? (*LTO* 363)

Language is thus both greater than time and a medium of time. It transcends time and embodies time. By giving linguistic form to his memories of his parents, fragmented as they are, they too become "charged with time." Writing the essay—writing these spatial mnemonic fragments *into language*—becomes a way of preserving them *in time*, and of granting them freedom. "I write this in English," Brodsky explains, "because I want to grant them a margin of freedom" (*LTO* 460).[89]

What I would like to suggest is that we can see a parallel between how Brodsky condenses time through poetic language, while his father does so through his photographs of the sea. It is through this relationship with time that he recuperates his freedom. While Brodsky might critique photos as material objects in this essay (and others), the act of taking photos emerges as a creative one that offers a degree of freedom. It is an artistic act akin to Brodsky's *poesis*. Despite the objectivity of the mechanical apparatus, photography does affirm the subjective vision of the photographer; from the choice of subject matter to the composition of the

[89] For more on Brodsky's use of English to give his parents freedom, see Diment, "English as Sanctuary."

shot, peering through the viewfinder offers a private and individual mode of expression. Ultimately it valorizes your singular perspective and documents your presence. It is the individual freedom of expression that the practice of photography offers which sets it apart from the reductive principle of photographic images. Photography affirms the singularity of your vision and, in this way, it is akin to writing poetry; both are fragments, capturing ephemeral moments of time.[90]

Indeed, we recall that Brodsky makes this comparison between his father's métier of photography and his own poetry in a memorial essay for Stephen Spender. "I am a photographer's son," he declares, "and I may even suggest a link between picture-taking and verse-writing—well, insofar as the fragments are black-and-white. Or insofar as writing means retention. Yet one can't pretend that what one beholds goes beyond its blank reverse side" (*OGR* 480).[91] Brodsky emphasizes how both poetry and photography attempt to preserve, and yet are ultimately inadequate in restoring fully that which they seek to retain. In this regard, photography finds common ground with elegy in particular, as both attest to life's essential transience while trying to overcome it through the permanence of the form.[92] As Sontag writes, "photography is

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[90] Boym contrasts the father's image-making work (through photos) and the son's (through language): "The passage has the punctuated rhythm of pictures being snapped, yet the father takes his pictures quickly, while the poet-son lets them develop slowly, in the darkroom of memory." Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 296.

[91] Brodsky's emphasis on the one-dimensional aspect of photographs in this passage recalls Barthes's admission near the end of *Camera Lucida*: "I must therefore submit to this law: I cannot penetrate, cannot reach into the Photograph. I can only sweep it with my glance, like a smooth surface. The Photograph is *flat*, platitudinous in the true sense of the word, that is what I must acknowledge." Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 106.

[92] For works on the significance of ekphrastic descriptions of photographs within elegies, see Andrew D. Miller, *Poetry, Photography, Ekphrasis: Lyrical Representations of Photographs from the 19th Century to the Present* (Oxford University Press, 2015); Cheeke, "Photography and Elegy." For an overview of the elegiac aspect of photography (rather than an interart comparison between poetic elegies and photography), see Josh Ellenbogen, "On Photographic

an elegiac art" and "all photographs are *memento mori*."[93] The photograph arrests a single moment from the flow of time, a testament to what was and now is no more, thus offering a foretaste of the final end—at the same time, it seems to vanquish death through the immortal preservation of the subject.[94] André Bazin famously connected the modern scientific technology of photography with the "primordial" religious practice of mummification (as both respond to the human desire to preserve life through representation), claiming that photography "embalms time, rescuing it from its proper corruption."[95] By saving the subject from a "second spiritual death," the photograph performs a memorial function similar to the elegy.[96] In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes places the revelation of the subject's mortality at the center of each photograph; time is the photograph's "second punctum" that foretells death. When looking at a photograph of Lewis Payne shortly before he was condemned to death, Barthes realizes that the young man whose presence the image seems to affirm "*is going to die*. I read at the same time: *This will be* and *this has been*; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake. By giving me the

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Elegy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Elegy*, ed. Karen Weisman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[93] Sontag, *On Photography*, 15.

[94] The perceived connection between death and photography was perhaps encouraged by the popularity of spirit photography or the practice of post-mortem photographs as a way to memorialize the dead in the nineteenth century. For more on spirit photography, see Clément Chéroux et al., *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Tom Gunning, "Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations: Spirit Photography, Magic Theater, Trick Films, and Photography's Uncanny," in *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video*, ed. Patrice Petro (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Marien, *Photography and Its Critics*, 75–76.

[95] Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," 14.

[96] Bazin, 10.

absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future."[97] This strange temporality of photographs both foretells death and seems to forestall it.

Like the photograph, the poetic elegy mourns the loss of the dead even as it provides a metonymic substitute in place of that absence. And yet, in his memorial essay for Spender, Brodsky notes the inadequacy of these two forms; although they seem to restore what has been lost, we are ever reminded of the "blank reverse side" that throws into relief the limits of the elegiac promise. In his elegiac works, including his memorial essays, Brodsky repeatedly exposes the failures of memory and mourning, thus resisting a poetics of consolation. This is in keeping with Jahan Ramazani's account of the elegiac genre's transformation in the 20th century.[98] The modern elegy, according to Ramazani, challenges the genre's conventions by foregrounding "anti-elegiac" elements, such as the "anti-consolatory and anti-encomiastic."[99] If traditional elegies hinge on the translation of "grief into consolation" over the course of the poem as the deceased is transfigured into an object that takes on new life and makes recompense for loss, then modern elegies "refuse such orthodox consolations as the rebirth of the dead in nature,

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[97] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 96. Already in 1931 Benjamin had expressed the existence of something like Barthes's punctum when he spoke of his feeling of "unruly desire," when beholding David Octavius Hill's photograph of the Newhaven fishwife, "to know what her name was, the woman who was alive there, who even now is still real." For he writes that "seared" into the photograph is the "tiny spark of contingency, the here and now," which leads us to search for the "inconspicuous place where, within the suchness of that long-past minute, the future nests still today." Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 277–78.

[98] For an overview of the anti-elegy in modern poetry, see also R. Clifton Spargo, "The Contemporary Anti-Elegy," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*, ed. Karen Weisman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[99] Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 2.

in God, or in poetry itself."[100] The psychic work of mourning that the elegy often charts is now left incomplete, unresolved.

At this point, we might briefly consider the two elegies that Brodsky wrote for his parents: "Pamiati ottsa: Avstraliia" (In Memory of My Father: Australia, 1989) and "Mysl' o tebe udaliaetsia…" (The thought of you is receding…, 1987). In "Pamiati ottsa," the father comes back to life (*ozhil*) in the dream, however his sudden removal to Australia and the patchy phone conversation that ensues only further underscores his fundamental absence.[101] Aaron Beaver notes that Brodsky here defies the generic convention in elegy of recalling past moments from when the deceased was alive.[102] Instead of revisiting memories and thus resurrecting the past within the space of the elegy, Brodsky centers the elegy on an appearance of his father in a dream. Thus Beaver argues that, for Brodsky, the past is cast as irretrievable as opposed to traditional elegies which figure the past as "lost but retrievable, accessible through the memory of the elegist."[103] As Beaver notes, Brodsky incorporates the elegiac tropes of apostrophe (the elegist's address to the dead) and eidolopoeia (speech attributed to the deceased) but in a deflated key: they speak over the phone with a bad connection, as the father complains about the weather, wallpaper, and the difficulties of renting his apartment. The final lines of the elegy insist on the

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[100] Ramazani, 3–4.

[101] Joseph Brodsky, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, ed. Lev Loseff, vol. 2 (Sankt-Peterburg: Lenizdat, 2017), 160.

[102] Irena Grudzinska-Gross notes that Brodsky also confounds the traditional elegiac form by decentering himself, as typically more emphasis is placed on the lyric subject and his experience of mourning than on the deceased. However, in this elegy (and the elegy for his mother) "it is the mother and father who are subjects of these poems, and not the grieving son—'you' is here more alive than 'I.'" Irena Grudzińska-Gross, *Czeslaw Milosz and Joseph Brodsky: Fellowship of Poets* (Yale University Press, 2009), 31.

[103] Beaver, "Lyricism and Philosophy in Brodsky's Elegiac Verse," 593.

physical reality of the father's irreversible loss, as we are pulled away from the dream and back to the "miagkii pepel / krematoriia v banke" (the soft ash / in the crematorium's can).[104]

A similar anti-elegiac strain figures in Brodsky's elegy for his mother. Contra Horace's "Exegi monumentum" or Pushkin's "Ia pamiatnik sebe vozdvig nerukotvornyi" (I have erected a monument to myself not built by hands), the lyric subject pronounces the failure to create a lasting memorial to the mother: "Vidimo, nikomu iz / nas ne sdelat'sia pamiatnikom. Vidimo, v nashikh venakh / nedostatochno izvesti" (Apparently, none of us / will be made into a monument. Apparently, in our veins / there is not enough limestone).[105] If the elegy itself typically works as a memorial that hopes to repair, in part, what has been lost, such a possibility is foreclosed in Brodsky's elegy for his mother. Rather than gathering together memories of his mother to ensure the continuation of her life even after death, the poet instead dwells on the impossibility of keeping his memory of her whole and complete as new visions intervene and take her place: new faces, places, and reflections in the Neva "zapolniaiut vakuum" (fill in the vacuum). The final lines of the poem locate the site of memory on the poet's retina:

> Остается, затылок от взгляда прикрыв руками,
> бормотать на ходу "умерла, умерла", покуда

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[104] Brodsky, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, 2:160. Here we might think of one of Brodsky's earlier poems "Evreiskoe kladbishche okolo Leningrada" (Jewish Cemetery near Leningrad, 1958) as another anti-consolatory elegiac poem that focuses on the deterioration of matter rather than on the renewal of life. In opposition to the Christian idea of the grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies and brings forth much fruit (John 12:24), we learn that "И не сеяли хлеба. / Никогда не сеяли хлеба. / Просто сами ложились / в холодную землю, как зерна. / И навек засыпали" (They did not sow grain. / They never sowed grain. / They simply lay themselves down / into the cold earth, like seeds. / And forever went to sleep). Instead, he emphasizes at the end of this stanza that they achieve calm (успокоение) "в виде распада материи" (in the form of decaying matter), thus drawing attention only to the decomposition of matter rather than what flowers after death. The poem mourns the dead in the graveyard but without any hope of resurrection or transcendence through the work of the poem. Joseph Brodsky, *Sochineniia Iosifa Brodskogo*, ed. Gennadii Komarov, vol. 1 (Sankt-Peterburg: Pushkinskii fond, 1997), 20.

[105] Joseph Brodsky, *Uraniia* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis Publishers, 1987), 189. My translation.

> города рвут сырую сетчатку из грубой ткани,
> дребезжа, как сдаваемая посуда.
>
> All that remains, having covered the back of your head from glances with your arms,
> is to mumble on the way "she has died, she has died," while
> cities rip the raw retina of coarse fabric,
> clattering, like dishes being returned.[106]

The ruptures in memory are thus figured here as violence done to the eye. This ocular metaphor connects to the network of images in "In a Room and a Half" that likewise imagine the fragmentation of memory to be connected with the photographic eye. Even by the poem's end, there is little consolation for the speaker, as he is reduced to simply repeating the hard fact of death to himself: "umerla, umerla" (she has died, she has died).[107] Such an emphasis on loss is typical of the modern elegy, according to Ramazani, which does not attempt "transcendence or redemption of loss but immersion in it."[108] There is nothing that can transform this loss, even if this is the traditional function of the elegy.

This non-redemptive and anti-consolatory approach to mourning informs not only Brodsky's elegies for his parents, but also his prose essay about them. "In a Room and a Half" similarly dwells on the limits of memory and leaves incomplete the work of mourning. There are no Proustian moments of involuntary memory that witness the transfiguration of an ordinary object as it conjures up the past. The memories that are recalled in the essay, photographic in their fragmentary flatness, do not comfort or revive the dead.

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[106] Brodsky, 189. My translation.

[107] Because there is no pronoun, this phrase could also be translated as an address to the mother: "you have died, you have died."

[108] Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 4.

Elegy and photography meet in the tombstone of Brodsky's parents. Carved into their joint gravestone is a photographic likeness of Brodsky's mother, Maria Volpert (fig. 3).[109] Since the late nineteenth century, it has been common practice in Russia to include a photographic etching or a photograph encased in glass on the tombstone as a memorial to the deceased.[110] The Russian practice of etching a photographic image on gravestones seems to confirm what we have known all along about photography's intimate connection with death. The photo-epitaph on the tombstone offers a ghostly image of Brodsky's mother that seems to evoke her presence while ultimately marking her absence. In his essay for his parents, Brodsky offers a different kind of elegy to the photo-epitaph that meditates on the very limits of the elegiac form, centered on a critique of memory as photographic.

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[109] In Brodsky's archive, there are several photographs of the grave, likely sent to him by friends; Brodsky, of course, was unable to return to Russia neither to see them while they were alive, nor to visit their grave.

[110] The Russian practice of including a photographic image of the deceased on the gravestone was noted by John Berger in his essay "In a Moscow Cemetery." He writes that "on some of the headstones there were sepia oval photos behind glass." John Berger, *The Sense of Sight* (Knopf Doubleday, 2011), 123. In an article on the shifting rites of the dead in Russia over the course of the twentieth century, Catherine Merridale observes that the practice of engraving a photographic likeness of the deceased onto the gravestone became popular in Russia towards the end of the nineteenth century as stonemasonry became less expensive. Merridale speculates that this practice could be related to the icon tradition. Catherine Merridale, "Revolution among the Dead: Cemeteries in Twentieth-Century Russia," *Mortality* 8, no. 2 (May 2003): 178, https://doi.org/10.1080/1357627031000087415. In her article on the iconography of the mafia gravestones of post-Soviet Russia, Olga Matich notes the appearance of life-size photographs etched into the tombstones (as opposed to the smaller oval photographic etching typically found). For Matich, these photographic etchings function to reconstitute the mangled body of the mobster as whole, offering an image of the "resurrected mafioso radiating physical and economic power" (83). Matich also notes that "the photographic image at the gravesite can be said to reify the identification of photography with death" (103). "Mobster Gravestones in 1990s Russia," *Global Crime* 7, no. 1 (February 1, 2006): 79–104, https://doi.org/10.1080/17440570600650158.

Figure 3. Photograph of Joseph Brodsky's mother's grave. Joseph Brodsky Papers, GEN MSS 613, Box 154, Folder 3452, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

Underlying this anti-elegiac stance in Brodsky's work is an ethical obligation to the dead. Brodsky himself connects ethics with elegy in his essay on Akhmatova when he suggests that "death is a good litmus test for a poet's ethics." He notes that "the 'in memoriam" genre is frequently used to exercise self-pity or for metaphysical trips that denote the subconscious superiority of survivor over victim" (*LTO* 50). Refusing to exalt the poet at the expense of the dead, Brodsky voices an anxiety about what Ramazani calls the "economic problem of mourning," which witnesses real loss transformed into "aesthetic gain."[111] Thus, in memorializing the dead, one must expose the necessary limits of such an attempt. Moreover, an anti-elegiac ethics can be seen as issuing a protest against any system—whether aesthetic or political—that would try to make sense of or justify such loss.[112]

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[111] Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 6–7.

[112] In a chapter on the anti-elegiac form in contemporary poetry, Spargo also suggests an "ethical posture" in the anti-elegiac treatment of loss, connecting the "politics of mourning" with the "politics of dissent" that seeks to disrupt the status quo. "In dramatizing the temporality of mourning, anti-elegy arises as a species of ethical complaint, turning against the history of consolation precisely so as to find fault with the strategies of commemoration the poet-mourner inherits as normative in her society, accusing successful acts of mourning and the mourners who achieve them of happy complicity with the status quo." Spargo, "The Contemporary Anti-Elegy," 417.

Such a stance is articulated in the final fragment of "In a Room and a Half," but it is Brodsky's father-photographer who advances it. Brodsky recollects a walk he and his father once took in the Summer Garden when Brodsky was about 20 years old. His father stops to take some photographs. It is a scene full of life: a brass band is playing, the statues are dappled with sunlight filtered through the trees, children are running around. The locale in which they find themselves—with the marble statues—could be the setting of one of Brodsky's poems. Against this vibrant backdrop, however, they find themselves discussing the horrors of the twentieth century. Brodsky asks his father whether he thinks the Nazi concentration camps were worse than the Gulag. His father replies: "As for myself, I'd rather be burned at the stake at once than die a slow death and discover a meaning in the process." "Then," Brodsky closes the essay, "he proceeded to snap pictures" (*LTO* 501).

The scene startles in its juxtaposition of the grim conversation with the bright, lively park, an effect enhanced by the abrupt shift from the father's response to then taking photographs. This scene offers a photographic coda to the essay's concern with the freedom that art and memory can provide, a concern that Brodsky increasingly turns to in the final pages of the essay as he laments that his parents died as "slaves," despite having been born free. Hope for a better future, he says, was all they had left. In the final section, though, Brodsky writes that he "would like to think that they didn't allow themselves to build up their hopes too high" about the possibility of attaining freedom once again (*LTO* 501), and it is this sentiment that prompts this recollection about his father. In this passage, it would seem that his father does not have any illusions, no false sense of hope. The father's stated preference to die all at once, even such a terrible death, rather than slowly try to make meaning out of the state of "slavery" they were reduced to entails a strong indictment of the Soviet system. Moreover, the father's final words

suggest that there is no consolation for the losses endured, that such suffering cannot be transfigured or redeemed through knowledge gained. It is not a triumphant ending that finds recompense in loss or suffering, but rather dwells in the absence of such meaning that would make whole.

Although such a position refuses to find easy closure through a poetics of consolation, it does not ultimately advocate hopelessness or resignation in the face of such senseless suffering. The father's reach for the camera involves an engagement with the world, a move that goes some way towards recuperating the photographic quality of memory that Brodsky mourns. On the one hand, taking photos after such a statement suggests that nothing more can be said in the face of such tragedies: that there is nothing to gain from such suffering. Nonetheless, the choice to *preserve* the present moment by taking a photo seems somehow affirmative: here we are among the living. To photograph is to capture the world as you see it in that moment, so that it endures beyond your own time. Taking photographs at this moment suggests a will to persevere and the imperative to bear witness.[113] Like any other art form, photography must negotiate the line between aestheticizing (and thus profiting from or participating in) another's suffering and bearing witness to another's suffering—and here the father's warning about the impulse to extract meaning from suffering (as if it would then justify or redeem such loss) is then balanced with the need to document and preserve. As Brodsky notes earlier in the essay, his father bore

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[113] In a 1973 interview with Anne-Marie Brumm, after a brief discussion of Brodsky's early poem "The Jewish Cemetery near Leningrad" (*Evreiskoe kladbishche okolo Leningrada*), Brumm asks Brodsky: "Over and over again in your poetry, you seem to be saying be steadfast, persevere, stand alone. Is this your basic philosophy?" He affirms this idea and elaborates: "I would call it a philosophy of endurance—of the possibility of endurance. It's very simple. When you have some bad situation, there are two ways to deal with it—just to give up or to try to stand it. Well, in some sense, I prefer to stand it as far as I can." Brodsky and Haven, *Joseph Brodsky*, 17. I would suggest that the ending of the essay also speaks to this philosophy: of enduring suffering but without necessarily figuring that endurance as redemptive.

witness through his photography; he documented Leningrad during the siege, taking "the best pictures I've seen in print of the city under siege" (*LTO* 462). This act of taking photos, much like Brodsky's choice to write the essay, insists on the expression of an individual perspective in the face of a system that would deny you it.

In the father's hands, the camera offers a way of quietly resisting this "slow death" that robs you of your freedom. The ending of the essay reinstates the potential power of the photographic fragment as a subjective vision of the world, even as it notes the limitations of such a form. Although throughout the essay Brodsky critiques photos as material objects for their fragmented and reductive qualities, the *process* of taking photographs is seen as an artistic act of freedom, akin to his own poetic work.

Chapter Three
Navigating the Family Archive of Photos in Shteyngart's *Little Failure*

Introduction

Gracing the front cover of Gary Shteyngart's memoir *Little Failure* (2014) is a black-and-white photograph of the author as a young boy in 1974. Against the curtain backdrop of the photography studio, he sits in a child-sized model of a 1950s Studebaker car. His doleful eyes and serious expression seem out of keeping with the scene. The memoir's title marches across the cover in a thick green font that seems to announce his status, even here, as a "little failure" or *failurchka*, his mother's name for him. On the back cover, the adult Shteyngart looks out at his prospective reader with a resigned air: his palm cradles his stubbled chin as a faint smile plays across his lips. The juxtaposition of these two photographs on the book jacket captures the tension inherent in any autobiographical work between multiple selves. How are we to reconcile these two figures? How does one become the other? How does Igor become Gary? How, for that matter, do we get from "little failure" to "bestselling author"?

While charting a multiplicity of identities is a mainstay of the autobiographical genre—as authors take us through the changes they undergo across time—the divided self is foregrounded in Shteyngart's memoir. The experience of emigration amplifies his sense of a multiplicity of selves. Indeed, in his memoir, Shteyngart jokes that as a boy he is diagnosed with "Dissociative Identity Disorder," suggesting that he has at least four identities (*LF* 144). After changing his name from the Russian Igor to the American Gary and the shift from speaking Russian to English, he feels his identity has become divided. The diptych on the memoir's cover visually expresses the multiple identities that Shteyngart explores as part of his hyphenated identity as a Russian-American writer. Linda Haverty Rugg has observed that the inclusion of photographs within autobiographies "disrupt the singularity of the autobiographical pact by pointing to a

plurality of selves" but also give expression to "the embodied subject" of the author.[1] Shteyngart makes use of the photographs in his memoir to give expression to these multiple selves, as a way of representing his experience of the rupture of emigration, but also in service of reconciling these identities into a single whole. As we will see, this attempt to reconcile his different identities is fraught, as it engages questions about how he relates to this Russian heritage and how his perspective on his childhood has changed after emigration.

This leads to what I call the "double exposure" of photographs in the memoir, as Shteyngart's readings of these childhood photographs balance the adult's retrospective, estranged vision with an attempt to recuperate the sincere, authentic experience of the child within the frame. He now looks at these images of childhood, like the one on the front cover, both in a mocking way but also with a kind of sincerity. Part of reclaiming his Russianness in a non-ironic way involves a deeper look at his familial history which will be mediated, in part, by the family archive of photos. A chance encounter with an ordinary photograph of a landmark from his childhood in Leningrad reveals a traumatic event in his past. In his search for the source of this trauma, Shteyngart critically engages with the narratives contained within the archive of family photographs. This excavation of his family's history becomes entangled with the traumas and catastrophes of the Soviet experience. As I will argue, at stake in these photographic readings is a reconciliation of his hyphenated identities, as well as an attempt to reclaim his contested Russian cultural identity. It is through the medium of photography, with its preservation of the indexical trace, that Shteyngart works through his inheritance of the past.

[1] Rugg, *Picturing Ourselves*, 13.

Hyphenated Identities: Between Irony and Sincerity

Shteyngart emigrated from Leningrad with his family in 1979, at the age of 7, during the third wave of emigration. In 1971–72, the Soviet Union began to allow some people to emigrate, inaugurating the third wave which was primarily made up of Soviet Jews. Between 1970 and 1988, approximately 290,000 Russian-speaking Jews emigrated from the Soviet Union, leaving for Israel and North America.[2] Svetlana Boym has written about the third wave, when the possibility of return was foreclosed, as qualitatively different from the fourth wave of emigration, after perestroika, where you could come and go as you please, saying that they "were uniquely unsentimental; theirs was an old-fashioned exile without return."[3] And yet, soon enough those who emigrated during the third wave *were* able to return, if they chose, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. By the time Shteyngart reached young adulthood, the Soviet Union had dissolved. Unlike Nabokov or Brodsky before him, Shteyngart has been able to return to Russia and does so yearly. As Yelena Furman notes, the increasingly transnational nature of the world transforms the immigrant experience and the ability to move between places, "greatly contribut[ing] to the internal freedom of movement between and among their different identities."[4]

Although the collapse of the Soviet Union has changed the terms of the Russian diaspora by allowing for more movement and the possibility of return, it nonetheless makes final and irreversible the expulsion from that place. To adapt the title of Alexei Yurchak's book, the Soviet

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[2] Zvi Y. Gitelman, ed., *The New Jewish Diaspora: Russian-Speaking Immigrants in the United States, Israel, and Germany* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 5.

[3] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 328–29.

[4] Furman, "Hybrid Selves, Hybrid Texts," 25.

Union was forever, until it was no more. Adrian Wanner notes that the dissolution of the Soviet Union "precludes any kind of literal return to the 'home country'" and thus complicates Shteyngart's relationship to home.[5] It is a reverse situation of what happened to Nabokov: he left Russia and it became the Soviet Union; Shteyngart left the Soviet Union and it became Russia. By the time Shteyngart emerged as a writer (his first novel, *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*, was published in 2002), the Soviet Union was a thing of the past. An anecdote in Shteyngart's memoir summarizes the strange disappearance of his homeland: when Shteyngart tells a young interviewer that he is from the Soviet Union, the dazed interviewer asks "And, like, what *is* that?" (*LF* 70). Shteyngart considers the question: "What *is* the Soviet Union? Or, more accurately, what *was* it? This is not an outlandish question. That particular nation passed away more than twenty years ago, a millennium in our speedy times" (*LF* 70). The end of the Soviet Union concretizes the premature end experienced in emigration, and it stands as the event that confers meaning back onto the Soviet experience. This double loss of home motivates, in part, Shteyngart's retrospective look at his childhood before and after emigration in an effort to reconcile these multiple identities and to make sense of the loss of home.

This loss is further complicated by the fact that, as Wanner reminds us, the Soviet Union "never was a real home in the first place given the discriminatory practices directed against the Jewish minority."[6] Although the Soviet Union was officially opposed to anti-Semitism, anti-Jewish policies and sentiment persisted, especially under Stalin. Because of Soviet nationalities

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[5] Wanner, *Out of Russia*, 10.

[6] Wanner, 10. As Larissa Remennick writes in her book on Soviet Jews in diaspora, "since the end of World War II Soviet Jews were subjected to covert institutional policies of exclusion from higher education and prestigious careers and lived in the shadow of anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli media campaigns, augmented by everyday social anti-Semitism." Larissa Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Identity, Integration, and Conflict* (Transaction Publishers, 2013), 3.

policy, Jews were perceived as an ethnic "other" in Soviet Russia, as decidedly not Russian. One's Jewish nationality would be stamped on the fifth line of an internal passport and in school rosters. Yuri Slezkine writes that once "Jewish" was seen as a nationality, Soviet Jews became "an ethnic diaspora potentially loyal to a hostile foreign state." In the context of the Cold War and the recently established state of Israel in 1948, they were "presumed to be beholden to an external homeland and thus congenitally and irredeemably alien."[7] Beginning in 1948, the campaign against the "rootless cosmopolitan" (*bezrodnyi kosmopolit*), a coded reference to Jews, led to the discrimination against Soviet Jews, as they were barred from university, fired from work, and dismissed from the Komsomol.[8] On August 12, 1952, the Night of the Murdered Poets, 13 former members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, five of whom were prominent Yiddish writers, were executed in the Lubyanka.[9] The "rootless cosmopolitan" campaign culminated in the so-called The Doctor's Plot, orchestrated by Mikhail Riumin, which

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[7] Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 206.

[8] As Yuri Slezkine writes, during this period "being Jewish became a crime: those who claimed a separate Yiddish culture were 'bourgeois nationalists'; those who identified with Russian culture were 'rootless cosmopolitans.'" Slezkine, 206.

[9] The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC) was founded in 1942 in response to Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. The committee, led by the popular actor Solomon Mikhoels, aimed to organize financial and political support for the Soviet Union from the West. During the war, the Yiddish newspaper *Eynikayt* (Unity) was established and Jews were able to write and speak openly about Jewish suffering in the war, as well as to celebrate Jewish culture and endorse Zionist aspirations. However, with the start of the Cold War and the beginning of the campaign against rootless cosmopolitanism, the JAC fell under suspicion for its international connections, especially its links with Jewish organizations in America. The JAC was disbanded in November 1948. Mikhoels was assassinated in Minsk in January 1948; 15 members of the JAC began to be arrested in 1948 and 13 of them were executed in 1952. For more on the JAC trial and the Night of the Murdered Poets, see Joshua Rubenstein and Vladimir Pavlovich Naumov, eds., *Stalin's Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

"uncovered" a group of primarily Jewish doctors accused of attempting to kill Soviet leaders. It was only with the death of Stalin in 1953 that the plot was abandoned.

Later, after the Israeli victory in the Six-Day War in 1967, the USSR cut diplomatic relations with Israel and anti-Zionist campaigns increased. Zionism was attacked as racist, nationalist, anti-communist, and colonialist, and thus enabled anti-Semitic rhetoric to flourish during this period. Indeed, it was after Israel's victory in the Six-Day War and the increase in anti-Semitism that Soviet Jews began to emigrate to Israel. However, in August 1972 a "diploma tax" was imposed on those who wanted to emigrate to combat the perceived "brain drain," the exorbitant fee acting as a strong deterrent against emigration. In October 1972, U.S. Senator Henry Jackson began to draft legislation that would become the Jackson–Vanik amendment to the U.S. Trade Act of 1974, which put pressure on the Soviet Union to allow Jews to emigrate from the Soviet Union. In exchange for normal trade relations with the United States, the amendment required the Soviet Union, as a non-market economy, to comply with free-emigration requirements.[10]

Although it was their identity as Jews that had defined them in the Soviet Union and had enabled them to emigrate, in America and Israel their Jewish identity was redefined. Coming from an atheist society that persecuted Judaic practices, most Soviet Jews were secular. Ultimately, Wanner writes, "they were seen as not Jewish 'enough,' or even as not Jewish at all, by their fellow Jews in their host countries."[11] And so while in Soviet Russia the Jewish population was not considered Russian, in America Soviet Jews were received not as Jews but as Russians. In the popular imagination, the Soviet Union was thought of as synonymous with

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[10] Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*, 353–358.

[11] Wanner, *Out of Russia*, 6.

Russia and since most Soviet Jews spoke Russian and identified with Russian culture, they were now considered Russian in way they had not before. Writing about the paradox of Shteyngart's tripartite identity as a Soviet Jew who grew up in America, Wanner notes that "Soviet Jews only became 'Russians' after they left Russia."[12] Lara Vapnyar, another Soviet-Jewish-American writer of Shteyngart's generation, notes this irony of identity; while in the Soviet Union she had always been identified as a Jew and never Russian, but "in the United States, I was finally granted the identity I had been denied my whole life. Here I became a Russian."[13]

And yet, Shteyngart is not seen as fully Russian—Russian in a cultural sense—by fellow Russians. In part, because he left as a child aged 7, in part because he writes in English, in part because his novels mock post-Soviet Russia. Even fellow Soviet émigrés question Shteyngart's Russianness. For instance, the Leningrad-born writer Mikhail Iossel, who emigrated to North America in 1986 at the age of 30, ironically suggests that he wishes he too "were a Soviet émigré child" like Shteyngart and his peers. Although just a child, he would already have

> keen insights and inner conflict and geo-psychological torment; already, even by the age of seven or eleven, having retained enough memories and insights into the ugliness of the Soviet totalitarian system to last me the rest of my literary life, feeling suspended between two worlds, as it were, the worlds of Russia and America, America and Russia, forever, and forever wondering as to who I am, in fact, who I am more of—Russian or American, American or Russian?[14]

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[12] Wanner, 6.

[13] Lara Vapnyar, "The Writer as Tour Guide," in *The Writer Uprooted: Contemporary Jewish Exile Literature*, ed. Alvin H. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 105. She goes on to say that it was only by becoming a writer that she was able to bring these three identities together.

[14] Quoted in Val Vinokur, "The Russians Came!," Boston Review, November 13, 2014, http://bostonreview.net/books-ideas/val-vinokur-the-russians-came.

Iossel here denies Shteyngart and other contemporary Russian-American writers the authenticity of their "hyphenated" experience because they emigrated when they were still children.[15] He suggests that they should "stop wringing [their] figurative hands" over their identity. "There is no need to negotiate any complicated paths between the two supposedly severed halves of your lives, your past and your present. Your lifeline has never been interrupted." They are, according to Iossel, indisputably American.

It seems curious to discredit the validity of what he dismissively calls their "geo-psychological torment" simply because they were children when they emigrated, given that most psychoanalytic theories—from Freud's Oedipal complex to D. W. Winnicott's good-enough parenting and Melanie Klein's good breast—revolve around the everyday traumatic experiences of childhood. Leaving that aside, he comes down hard on the idea that they are not Russian, but rather fully American. Yelena Furman invokes the binary opposition of *svoi/chuzhoi* (our own/other) to explain this type of refusal to acknowledge someone like Shteyngart's Russianness. She argues that this binary "renders those who emigrate automatically foreign—not ours—in the Russian national consciousness," but that "the immigrants themselves fundamentally challenge such either/or thinking by asserting the continued existence of their Russian identities in diaspora."[16] As we will see, this *svoi/chuzhoi* binary generates the "doubly

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[15] Shteyngart's debut novel inaugurated a slew of other narratives about the Russian-American immigrant experience by authors such as Lara Vapnyar, Anya Ulinich, David Bezmozgis, and others. Adrian Wanner has written about this generation of writers who emigrated in the third and fourth waves and wrote of their hyphenated experiences in their adopted tongues. Wanner, *Out of Russia*. For more on this explosion of Russian-American immigrant literature, see: Alexandra Tatarsky, "Land of Plenty? The Russian-Jewish-American-Post-Soviet-Immigrant-New York Novel," The Calvert Journal, April 20, 2015, https://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/3967/land-of-plenty-russian-jewish-american-post-soviet-immigrant-novel.

[16] Furman, "Hybrid Selves, Hybrid Texts," 33–34.

exposed" photographic readings in Shteyngart's memoir, which ultimately gives way to an attempt to reconcile or collapse this distinction.

Nonetheless, Iossel urges those who emigrated as children to accept their identity as Americans and to give up their "somewhat artificial and manufactured" torment over their identity. He even invokes Nabokov and Brodsky as comparisons, pointing to them as exemplary émigrés who did not worry over their identity. Although Shteyngart belongs to the third wave of emigration, like Brodsky who was forced into exile in 1972, his situation differs significantly. Whereas Brodsky was already an established poet in Russian at the time of his emigration, Shteyngart was just a child. And while Brodsky, like Nabokov, began to write in English when he came to America, Shteyngart has only ever written in English despite being bilingual. Undoubtedly, Shteyngart's experience of emigration differs greatly from Nabokov's and Brodsky's. Indeed, one could argue that it is precisely because Nabokov and Brodsky emigrated at an older age, with established literary careers, that they felt that their identity was not ambiguous. Both Nabokov and Brodsky are able to discuss their "hyphenated" identities not as a struggle, but more as a proud mark of cosmopolitanism.[17] Nabokov's answer to questions of his identity was to flaunt his transnational upbringing: "I am an American writer, born in Russia and educated in England where I studied French literature, before spending fifteen years in Germany."[18] Brodsky would reply that he was "a Russian poet, an English essayist—and, of

[17] The term "cosmopolitan" traces its roots to Diogenes of Sinope, who claimed he was a *cosmopolitēs* or citizen of the world.

[18] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 26?

course, an American citizen."[19] Iossel's comments valorize the cosmopolitan émigré writer but dismiss the immigrant writer who claims to wrestle with a hybrid or hyphenated identity.[20]

While Iossel upbraids Shteyngart and his peers for publicizing their "inner torment" about their identities, he ultimately contributes to this very confusion of identity by denying them any connection to Russia or their Russian cultural heritage and insisting that they are all Americans. Shteyngart and his fellow writers are always seen as the Other: as Jews in the Soviet Union, Russians in America, and Americans in post-Soviet Russia (and émigré circles).[21]

In his memoir, Shteyngart explores how his confused identity relates to his writing. He describes a story he once wrote in college that attempts to pay tribute to his great-uncle who was sentenced to 10 years in a labor camp. His teacher praises the story, but when he shows it to his

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[19] Quoted in Alexandra Berlina, *Brodsky Translating Brodsky: Poetry in Self-Translation* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 3. David Bethea has called Brodsky "one of the most cosmopolitan poets in the history of Russian poetry" and argues that his poetry is defined by his "triangular vision," which incorporates Western and Russian sources with Brodsky in between. Bethea, *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile*, 49.

[20] Yasha Klots has argued, in his article on the representation of New York in contemporary Russian-American immigrant fiction, that such authors as Shteyngart have "broken away from the Russian literary tradition, including that of third-wave émigré writers, and gone far enough to enter the wider corpus of pan-immigrant city narratives, whose authors come from various cultures and whose backgrounds are blurred in the 'melting pot' of New York." He suggests that these writers belong less to the specifically Russian émigré literary tradition, and more generally to narratives about immigrants in America broadly defined. Yasha Klots, "The Ultimate City: New York in Russian Immigrant Narratives," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 55, no. 1 (2011): 54.

[21] Because of these multiple identities, we run into trouble when trying to find a proper term for writers such as Shteyngart: while the appellation "Russian American" is the most common and concise, it leaves out their identity as Jewish and could be misleading about ethnicity. Yelena Furman suggests that "Russian-American writers can thus be accurately, if not succinctly, defined as Russian-speaking Jewish emigrants from the (former) Soviet Union, citizens of the United States/Canada, and producers of English-language texts on Russian-related themes, most notably the experience of immigration and the hybrid cultural and linguistic selves this experience engenders." Yelena Furman, "Hybridizing the Canon: Russian-American Writers in Dialogue with Russian Literature," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 58, no. 3 (September 2016): 206.

mother she feels he has misrepresented it: "That's not how it happened," she tells him with a sigh (*LF* 280). This painful charge of inaccuracy recalls for him his experience at Hebrew school when he arrived in America: "There, I was ridiculed for being an inauthentic American, and now I am being charged with being an inauthentic Russian. I do not yet understand that this very paradox is the true subject of so-called immigrant fiction" (*LF* 280). Shteyngart's works explore what it is to be seen as American by Russians and Russian by Americans, and the effort to carve out some third term that fits.[22] Indeed, in his essay "The New Two-Way Street," he affirms a positive transnational, cosmopolitan identity for himself, writing that he does not "need to choose a single, exclusive identity" because as "global citizens of an increasingly borderless world" he and others like him are "equally at home (and equally homeless) in both cultures."[23]

In his previous work, Shteyngart has been seen as exploiting his hyphenated identity, positioning himself well in a literary marketplace hungry for immigrant literature in an increasing effort to represent a diversity of voices.[24] And yet, his works complicate this multicultural imperative by exposing and mocking those very forces that made him successful in

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[22] My use of the phrase "third term" is similar to Yelena Furman's use of the postcolonial term "third space," as theorized by Homi Bhabha, to describe the hybridity of these writers' identities and their literary works. Furman, "Hybrid Selves, Hybrid Texts."

[23] Gary Shteyngart, "The New Two-Way Street," in *Reinventing the Melting Pot: The New Immigrants and What It Means To Be American*, ed. Tamar Jacoby (Basic Books, 2004), 290.

[24] Geoff Hamilton, in his monograph on Gary Shteyngart, suggests that his literary success in indebted to the American narrative of self-betterment: "Part of his appeal in the contemporary marketplace no doubt has to do with his alignment with an enduringly alluring narrative of national success, for Shteyngart's story is in an important sense a retelling of the great American myth: a plucky ascent from nothing or very little to great professional and material achievement, a marvelous transformation undertaken in defiance of limiting origins and made possible by committed individual effort." Geoff Hamilton, *Understanding Gary Shteyngart* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2017), 97.

the literary marketplace.[25] Natalie Friedman writes that his first novel "capitalizes on the American desire for Eastern Bloc authenticity," but that it also exposes this desire by offering "a cynical look at the American craze for Eastern Europe in the early 1990s, shortly after the collapse of the Berlin Wall" and the "fascination with post-Communist Eastern Europe, as hundreds of young Americans flocked to Eastern capitals once closed to them, in search of a sentimental ideal."[26] Adrian Wanner also sees what he calls Shteyngart's "immigrant chic" to be "a (self-)ironic performance that allows him to capitalize on his Russianness while at the same time mocking the multiculturalist assumptions that have been fueling his popularity."[27] He gains from, while at the same time exposing, the fetishization of Eastern Europe.

Beyond his novels, Shteyngart has fashioned an authorial persona in which he knowingly performs "Russianness" for an Anglo-American audience.[28] As we explored in the case of Nabokov, autobiography and photography, because of their referential status as well as their ability to be manipulated, allow authors to fashion an authorial self. Like Nabokov, Shteyngart

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[25] For an analysis of how Shteyngart dismantles the false promises of cultural tolerance and multiculturalism in his novel *Absurdistan*, see Steven S. Lee, "'Borat,' Multiculturalism, 'Mnogonatsional'nost'','' *Slavic Review* 67, no. 1 (2008): 19–34, https://doi.org/10.2307/27652764.

[26] Natalie Friedman, "Nostalgia, Nationhood, and the New Immigrant Narrative: Gary Shteyngart's The Russian Debutante's Handbook and the Post-Soviet Experience," *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 5 (Fall 2004): 83.

[27] Wanner, *Out of Russia*, 17.

[28] Geoff Hamilton has remarked on Shteyngart's performative self-fashioning as Russian: "A curious irony of Shteyngart's self-constructions as a Russian, which become increasingly self-conscious in *Absurdistan* and in his author interviews after the publication of that novel, is that he has seemingly had to play, and play up, the role of Russian to Americans in order to become a successful author, whereas as a child he had to act the role of an American, leaving behind obvious markers of his Russianness in order to be accepted by his young peers." Hamilton, *Understanding Gary Shteyngart*, 12.

harnesses the power of photographs to craft and sell his authorial identity. The difference between Nabokov's high modernist and Shteyngart's postmodern attitudes, however, is how the latter blatantly reveals this game of commodification and makes it the object of open satire shared with the reader. Social media has multiplied the possibilities for self-fashioning, as anyone can cultivate a particular narrative of their life for mass public consumption through visual and verbal means. As Shteyngart put it in an essay he wrote for *The New Yorker* about testing the (now defunct) technology product Google Glass, he became "a curator" of his life "rather than a participant."[29] Shteyngart is no stranger to self-fashioning; he is adept at using social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, as well as para-textual elements such as author photographs, book trailers with celebrities such as James Franco, and even his ubiquitous blurbs on others' works to cultivate his comic, self-mocking literary persona.[30] He has made use of such elements to cultivate his multiple selves—at times to play up his Russianness, at others to play up his identity as New Yorker.

The author photo for his debut novel *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*, for example, brazenly plays on his Russian identity. The image pictures him in a thick winter coat with a fur-lined collar, with a bear cub in tow on a leash, thus metonymically telegraphing "Russianness." Adrian Wanner sees the image as "an emblematic illustration of Shteyngart's self-lampooning"

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[29] Gary Shteyngart, "O.K., Glass," *The New Yorker*, August 5, 2013, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/08/05/o-k-glass.

[30] Geoff Hamilton estimates that Shteyngart has written blurbs for over two hundred books. There is even a short documentary entitled *Shteyngart Blurbs*. Hamilton points to the "canniness of having one's name appear on the covers of numerous books by other writers, for such visibility contributes to an impression of the author's centrality to the current literary marketplace and the commodities circulating there." Hamilton, *Understanding Gary Shteyngart*, 99.

in which Shteyngart preempts any charge that he might be exploiting his identity in the literary marketplace by ironically broadcasting a stereotypical Russian figure:

> His implicit response to the charge of playing a 'professional immigrant game' is not to deny it, but to point out that all literature is a game of identities. […] In a world where all identity is performative and 'invented,' the distinction between authentic and inauthentic Russianness has become in itself meaningless. After all, it seems pointless to accuse a writer of engaging in clichés if the clever manipulation of clichés is exactly his point.[31]

Indeed, his awkward smile in the photo cuts both ways: the smile is part of the character posing and showing off his bear cub, but it is also a knowing smile to the reader that he is in on the joke.

While Shteyngart has long exploited the potentials of photographic self-fashioning to play up his multiple identities, one of the contentions of this chapter is that *Little Failure* represents a new stage in that endeavor. In the past, his authorial self-fashioning pointedly mocked his multiple selves by performing the American idea of Russianness. However, the cover of *Little Failure*—and the text within—is different because he is no longer *playing at* an idea of representing Russianness. These images are sincere, even if presented for an ironic effect. By incorporating photographs of young Igor in his Soviet attire that were taken in earnest, the memoir attempts to recuperate a more authentic expression of his Russian identity than the version performed with a wink and a bear cub.

We can see this shift in Shteyngart's career as part of the larger trend of "New Sincerity" in contemporary literature in reaction to postmodernist irony. In the Anglo-American context, it is often linked with David Foster Wallace's essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" (1993), which is taken as an unofficial manifesto for this new style of literature that returns to authenticity, sincerity, and emotional honesty as opposed to maintaining a cool,

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[31] Wanner, *Out of Russia*, 133.

detached, ironic distance.[32] Wallace closes his essay by addressing this yet-to-come band of "anti-rebels" who will shock us by risking sincerity; they will be "the ones willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the 'Oh how *banal*.' To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity."[33] As we will see in the next chapter, the visual artist Ilya Kabakov's turn to self-representation in his installations and recent paintings also exhibits an unexpected interest in sincerity, kept in tension with the lessons of conceptualism and poststructuralism. Likewise, in *Little Failure* Shteyngart still maintains a balance between the cynical satirical irony that his work is known for and this new attempt at emotional authenticity.

Affect, Index, Trauma: The Chesme Church Photograph

Early in the memoir, Shteyngart takes up the question of whether a straightforward, emotional relationship to photos is still possible. Is it not naïve to be duped by the photograph's image? He admits the potential pitfalls of using photographs within his narrative: "One is cautioned by the better critics never to write about photographs. They are an easy substitute for prose, a hackneyed shortcut, and, besides, they lie like all images do" (*LF* 87). Shteyngart here valorizes the word over the image. He suggests that images are deceptively simple, that they lack the rigor or depth of narrative. Photographs have become ubiquitous and trite, even. He invokes the idea that photographs lie and deceive, despite their indexical aspect. After all, poststructuralism has taught us that photographic images are just as constructed as other signs,

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[32] David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (London: Abacus, 2011). For more on New Sincerity in the Anglo-American context, see Kelly, "The New Sincerity."

[33] Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," 81.

that they do not give us a privileged or objective slice of the world. In other words, we should know better than to take them as evidence. However, we will see how Shteyngart encounters photographs that seem to leave him no choice *but* to have an emotional reaction.

Directly after this cautionary word, Shteyngart goes on to describe a photograph of him and his parents from their time in Italy, en route to America: "So what am I to make of the photo of my small family—Mama and Papa and me between them—sitting on a worsted blanket in a chipped, dingy apartment in Ostia, a seaside suburb of Rome?" (*LF* 87). He describes their poses in the photograph: his father has his arm around his mother, with young Igor sitting between them; all three are smiling. He emphasizes the love and happiness that they exude in the photograph. Despite acknowledging that photographs can lie, he takes this photograph to represent their genuine happiness during this time: "This photo is the first indication I have of all three of us together happy, ecstatic, as a family. If I may go so far, it is the first anecdotal evidence I have that joy is possible and that a family can love each other with as much abandon as it can muster" (*LF* 87–88). Shteyngart retracts the idea that photos deceive to take the snapshot as "evidence" of family happiness. Despite knowing that photographs are coded, he consciously disavows that stance in favor of a naïve reading of the image that allows for an emotional response.[34] As Corey Creekmur writes, "I believe a photograph of a lost loved one

[34] See W. J. T. Mitchell's "The Photographic Essay: Four Case Studies" for a discussion of this "naïve" view that has fallen out of favor among critics: that "photographs have a special causal and structural relationship with the reality they represent." He asks why this "naïve" view nonetheless remains so intractable, ultimately to suggest that "photography both is and is not a language," in other words that it is both coded and uncoded, borrowing Roland Barthes' terms from his essay "The Photographic Message." Mitchell posits that the image's denotation and connotation are coextensive, which leads to the naïve view, as "one connotation always present in the photograph is that it is a pure denotation." Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 282–85.

might have the affective power to make even a semiotician, who knows better, weep."[35] We might detect something of the New Sincerity in Shteyngart's relationship to these photographs, as he rejects the detached, unaffected postmodern approach for a newfound emotional sincerity. And there is perhaps some "risk," as Wallace suggests, in attempting to express how such photos engender a sentimental response.

As we will see, images prove to be an integral part of the memoir. In the end, these images are not an "easy substitute for prose," which suggests one mode of representation supplanting the other. Rather, word and image work in concert with each other. The photographs do not provide shortcuts, but demand narration, explanation, investigation. They invite revelations.

Indeed, a photograph sets *Little Failure* in motion. The memoir begins with an account of how Shteyngart suffered a series of panic attacks, each set off by the image of the Chesme Church in Petersburg's Moskovsky District, where he and his family used to live. The first attack occurs during a lunch-hour visit to the Strand bookstore. At this point in his life, Shteyngart is at work on his first novel, drinking heavily, and "full of vile, unanalyzed […] rage" (*LF* 14–15). At the bookstore, he begins to peruse the coffee table book *St. Petersburg: Architecture of the Tsars*. Looking at the familiar haunts from his Leningrad childhood, he experiences "the vulgar nostalgia, the *poshlost'* Nabokov so despised" (*LF* 7), until he turns to page 90 and confronts a photograph of the Chesme Church. It is this image that leads him "back to the uncomfortable place" (*LF* 6). The photograph of the church sends him into an inexplicable panic attack.

Memories surrounding the church flood back to him, but he cannot piece together what induces this panic attack. His memories are seemingly happy ones. He recalls how, at age five,

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[35] Creekmur, "Lost Objects: Photography, Fiction, and Mourning," 75.

he and his father visited the nearby church, which had been transformed into a naval museum during the Soviet period. In these memories, he pictures his "preimmigrant father" as "childish and bright," full of love for him. He recalls that he and his father had launched a toy helicopter outside the church. "This must be the happiest day of my life," he writes (*LF* 17). So how does it follow that this image of the church now inspires such panic in him?

Shteyngart then recounts how, in 1999, during his first visit back to Petersburg since emigrating, he suffered another attack while in the vicinity of the church. He was in the middle of trying to secure a stamp for his exit visa—a protracted process that leads him back to the neighborhood of his youth—when the attack occurs. Shteyngart writes that, at the time, to make sense of this episode, he saw it as "an off-shoot of my parents' fear twenty years ago: the fear of being refused permission to emigrate, of becoming what was then called a *refusenik* (a designation that brought with it a kind of jobless state-sanctioned purgatory). Part of me believed that I would not be allowed to leave Russia" (*LF* 17). Indeed, in a 2002 profile of the author in the *New York Times Magazine*, Shteyngart was quoted as saying "I get terrible panic attacks sometimes. […] In St. Petersburg, it was the worst. One day when I was there, I realized that my visa was missing a stamp. I had a meltdown: sweating, racing heart, everything. I was convinced that they weren't going to let me go home."[36] In *Little Failure*, though, he writes that he now understands that the attack "wasn't about the visa stamp, the bribe, the refusenik status, any of it" because what he can't stop thinking about is the Chesme Church (*LF* 17), even though it is unclear what occurred there. He repeats several times the question: "What happened at the

[36] Daniel Zalewski, "From Russia With Tsoris," *The New York Times*, June 2, 2002, http://www.nytimes.com/2002/06/02/magazine/from-russia-with-tsoris.html.

Chesme Church twenty-two years ago?" (*LF* 18). This question, unanswered for now, hovers over the rest of the memoir.

The inability to find an answer, to locate the source of his panic attacks, leads to a breakdown in language as the narrative briefly devolves into a list of fragmented memories: "Father. Helicopter. Church. Mother," and so on (*LF* 17). As he later writes, his memory of his early years "is attuned, vibrant, and frighteningly perfect" and that "there are no gaps. Except for one" (*LF* 46). The memoir is structured around this lacuna.

The question concerning the source of these attacks remains unanswered until the memoir's final chapter, when he returns to Petersburg with his parents in 2011. Although Shteyngart first returned to Russia in 1999 and has since been back almost every other year, this is the first time he has returned with his parents (*LF* 323). The reason for this collective trip is the fact that he is about to start writing his memoir (*LF* 324). He writes that they are only making this trip because he has asked them to accompany him. He understands that his parents "have traveled to a country they don't particularly want to remember" (*LF* 325).

As they walk around their former neighborhood, they visit their old apartment building and then pass by the Chesme Church. He and his father enter the church, and his father brings up the story of how they used to fly a toy helicopter around the church. But it is only after they leave the church that his father reveals the incident that has led to his panic attacks:

> "one day when we were walking down this street after launching our helicopter by the church, we were going back to our house and you started to behave rascally [*ty nachal shalit'*]. You were still trying to launch the helicopter on the street and there were so many people around. I told you once, twice, you didn't listen, then I swung my fist and you got it in the nose. And the blood began to flow." (*LF* 343)

And while this is not an isolated incident of physical violence between father and son, as the memoir details, it would seem that this episode made a more lasting mark, as it were, on

Shteyngart. The memoir is structured in such a way that, revealed only at the end, the traumatic source of his attacks is unknown throughout the narrative. Although narrating from the vantage point of having access to this information, Shteyngart structures the memoir so as to recreate the experience of not knowing.

This inability to recall the source of his panic attacks accords with the theory of trauma as unspeakable or unrepresentable. Indeed, Shteyngart, who has been in analysis since 1999, seems to rely on psychoanalytic paradigms as a way of understanding the self and structuring his self-narrative (the memoir, after all, is dedicated to his parents and his psychoanalyst).[37] Because the subject dissociates during the moment of unexpected or sudden violence, the mind does not properly process the traumatic event; the unprocessed memory can return later, leaving the subject to try to make sense of it. Freud pioneered modern trauma theory as soldiers came back shell-shocked after World War I. In theorizing what he calls "traumatic neurosis," Freud conceived of trauma as a wound inflicted on the mind rather than the body, as an unexpected "breach of the protective barrier" of the brain.[38] In these soldiers, Freud saw a compulsion to repeat unpleasurable events. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), he investigated the compulsion to repeat and how this seemed at odds with his previous theory of the pleasure principle, regulated by the reality principle, which has people seeking out pleasure and avoiding things that are unpleasurable. He sees the compulsion to repeat as coming from the repressed

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[37] In the memoir, he describes how he begins to see a psychoanalyst 4 times a week. He acknowledges that "it is fashionable now to discredit psychoanalysis. The couch. The four or five days a week of narcissistic brooding." But, he says, "it saves my life" (*LF* 311–12).

[38] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, trans. John Reddick (New York: Penguin, 2003), 70.

unconscious, which wants to unleash and find release, while the ego resists this release to block whatever displeasure would come "if the repressed part of the psyche were to break free."[39]

Freud turns to Tasso's epic poem *La Gerusalemme liberate* to offer an example of this compulsion to repeat. In the poem, the hero Tancred accidentally kills his beloved Clorinda, who is in disguise. He then strikes at a tree; blood flows and Clorinda's voice speaks out from the wound. Her spirit had entered the tree, and she reproves him for wounding her again.[40] In her book *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth takes up Freud's reading of this episode in order to emphasize the unknowable aspect of trauma. Caruth writes that because Clorinda's death was "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly," Tancred is unable to fully comprehend it and is thus doomed to repeat. In her reading, she highlights the voice of Clorinda that bears witness to the event of which Tancred himself has no knowledge. Thus, she writes, "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on."[41]

Shteyngart expresses the unknowability of his trauma when he writes that at the source of his attacks there is "something" he "cannot articulate" (*LF* 344). The event then is something inaccessible to him, something he cannot narrate, despite its centrality to his experience. He must rely on his father to reveal the event that he himself partially knows but cannot remember.

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[39] Freud, 58.

[40] Freud, 60–61.

[41] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 3–4.

Within the narrative, however, the photograph that triggers the panic attack can stand in *visually* for the unspeakable traumatic event. It offers a way of representing the traumatic episode that cannot be fully known (and thus inaccessible and inexpressible in words), where the image of the church becomes a visual metonym for the episode. While trauma is often figured as unspeakable, the photograph offers an alternative narrative means for representing trauma. The photograph of the Chesme Church offers a visual representation of an event that is un-narratable because it was not fully assimilated. Appropriately, the photograph of the church is not included in the text; this notional photograph represents the trauma as both present and absent, known and unknown. It is a photograph that speaks but we don't know what of.

Indeed, it is particularly fitting that a *photograph* represents or "remembers" the traumatic episode that Shteyngart cannot. Various thinkers have elaborated on the idea of a connection between the camera and the unconscious mind, perhaps most famously in Benjamin's formulation of the camera's "optical unconscious."[42] Freud, for example, suggests that trauma is akin to the photographic process; just as the unconscious mind registers the imprint of the traumatic episode, so too does the light-sensitive paper record impressions of the photographed event. These records of an event can be latent for an extended period of time—either in the form of the photographic negative or the unconscious memory—and only later get "exposed" or come

[42] The phrase comes from his 1931 essay "Little History of Photography." Referring to Eadweard Muybridge's experiments with chronophotography, which revealed the exact movements of how a horse actually gallops or how a woman descends the stairs, Benjamin notes that photography brings to light the minute visual details that the human eye, and human consciousness, cannot perceive. Like the unconscious mind, the camera records sense impressions that bypass waking consciousness. Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," 278.

to light.[43][44] The temporal delay of *Nachträglichkeit* is inherent in traumatic memory. In her study of photography and trauma, Margaret Iversen highlights the mechanical aspect of photography: despite the presence of a human operating the apparatus, the image recorded by the camera is independent of a human consciousness creating it—much like how the traumatic memory is recorded unconsciously.[45] The photograph thus works as a metaphor for the way trauma is recorded (as if mechanically) and remains unknown or unprocessed until later.

As these theorists reveal, photography and trauma share key aspects such as the indexical mark, an absence of consciousness at the moment of imprint, and the latency of the "development" of the image or memory. In the case of Shteyngart's memoir, the blow that he sustains from his father is analogous to the image imprinted on the film. Given that photographs are conceptually linked with trauma, it is fitting that it is a photograph that plays a key role in bringing the source of his trauma to light. The photo remembers what he cannot.

While these theorists note the connection between the way a traumatic episode is registered by the unconscious mind and the way something is imprinted on the camera's light-sensitive material, Roland Barthes articulates how looking at a photograph might be related to

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[43] In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud writes about experiences in childhood that, because the child is unequipped to understand them, cannot be processed. To clarify what he means, Freud offers the photograph as a metaphor for the concept: "the process may be compared to a photograph, which can be developed and made into a picture after a short or long interval." Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Knopf, 1939), 199.

[44] Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* ('deferred action' in James Strachey's translation or 'après-coup' in Jean Laplanche's work) describes the process by which something is registered but only understood or activated at a later date.

[45] Iversen writes, "Just as photography, to some extent, bypasses artistic intention and convention, so also the traumatic event bypasses consciousness. Both involve an indelible impression of something generated outside." Margaret Iversen, *Photography, Trace, and Trauma* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), 1.

trauma as well. Barthes's theory thus offers us a way of conceptualizing Shteyngart's experience of *seeing* this photograph as traumatic. In *Camera Lucida* (1980), Barthes aims to determine the ontology of the photograph, but to discover this, he also charts its phenomenology: what is the experience of looking at a photograph? He introduces the idea of the *punctum*: the subjective element of the photograph that animates the viewer. The photo's *punctum* pierces, punctures, bruises, and wounds; it is "that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)."[46] If Freud and others theorized trauma ("wound" in Greek) as a wound inflicted on the mind,[47] then Barthes extends this to consider the affective power of photographs as essentially traumatic.

Barthes' punctum yields further similarities to trauma in the way that it eludes language ("What I can name cannot really prick me. The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance"[48]), as well as the idea that there is a latent aspect to the punctum. The chance detail recorded by the camera is only later processed by the spectator as the *punctum*.[49] For it is the gaze of the spectator that constitutes the *punctum*: the *punctum* "is what I add to the photograph

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[46] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 27.

[47] As Ruth Leys notes, "The term trauma acquired a more psychological meaning when it was employed by J. M. Charcot, Pierre Janet, Alfred Binet, Morton Prince, Josef Breuer, Sigmund Freud, and other turn-of-the century figures to describe the wounding of the mind brought about by sudden, unexpected, emotional shock." Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 3–4.

[48] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 51.

[49] Indeed, Barthes goes so far as to say that we can best perceive the *punctum*, paradoxically, by looking away from the photograph, allowing the punctum to arise later of its own accord. Barthes says that it is often in retrospect, without the image in front of us, that we can best discern the punctum. "I may know better a photograph I remember than a photograph I am looking at […] in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes." Barthes, 53.

and *what is nonetheless already there*."[50] The *punctum* needs the viewer to be activated, and, as a result, the *punctum* will be different for each viewer.

Barthes' discussion of the punctum re-focuses our understanding of the relationship between photography and trauma. He follows the idea that the photograph can act as a metaphor for the unconscious mind that archives the trauma when he talks about the punctum as the unintended detail that the photograph unconsciously records — but he expands this to consider the spectator's affective relationship to the photograph. The photograph *itself* can pierce the viewer in a manner akin to how traumatic episodes are figured. In Barthes' text it is not so much the photograph itself that works as a metaphor for trauma; rather, the experience of looking at a photo (and feeling the "tiny shock" of the *punctum*) is analogous to the moment of trauma, where the event is too much to absorb and must be understood over time.[51]

These metaphors of bodily injury to describe the spectator's relation to photographs become realized in Shteyngart's experience of looking at the photograph and suffering a physical attack. But the punctum of the photograph, like the source of the attack, remains unknown until later when the father reveals what happened at the Chesme Church. The photo seems to offer him insight into his past and his self, but it remains fundamentally unknowable.

Structurally, the episode where Shteyngart looks at the photograph of the church begins the narrative and, I would suggest, also serves as a catalyst for the narrative. The unknowable traumatic event, made representable within the narrative through the photograph, generates the memoir. It motivates the look back to his childhood and emigration to understand this episode, to discover the source of his attacks.

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[50] Barthes, 55.

[51] Barthes, 49.

In so doing, Shteyngart situates this individual event of physical violence between father and son within a wider context. Indeed, the moment when Shteyngart learns from his father "what happened" at the Chesme Church, he also learns of his own father's past trauma. As they walk around the city, Gary's father leads them to the Mariinskaya Municipal Hospital. His father discloses that he spent time there as a mental patient when he was twenty-three years old. After suffering some type of seizure, he was diagnosed with "soldering of the vessels in the brain" (a false diagnosis) and institutionalized. As he describes it to Gary, "they performed terrible experiments on me, and I almost died" (*LF* 331). He was given bromine to prevent erections. Another one of the "treatments" he received as a patient to "'unsolder' the blood vessels" in his brain involved inserting a needle into his spine to inject oxygen into it. He suffered from anxiety and depression upon his release. As Shteyngart writes, "He comes out a wreck, scared of taking the tram, afraid of leaving his room. The middle half of his twenties are a wasteland of depression and anxiety" (*LF* 332). This is a major revelation for Gary, one that allows him to connect his father's traumatic experience in the mental ward with his own. By attempting to understand himself, he needs to reckon with his parents' experiences. His father's experience, told to Gary in an offhand manner on a walk, is an example of the wider phenomenon of Soviet abuse of psychiatry. The father's personal narrative thus becomes symbolic of a larger cultural trauma, one that is then passed across generations.

Ultimately, the episode at the Chesme Church becomes a story not merely of a bloody nose, but of the Holodomor in Ukraine, Stalin's Purges, World War II and the Siege of Leningrad, and Soviet psychiatric wards, as well as emigration and the collapse of the Soviet Union. This process of recovering the etiology of his trauma, which becomes imbricated with the traumas of the Soviet experience and the long 20th century, is mediated by the family archive of

photographs. At stake in this is reclaiming his Russian identity, an identity that has perhaps been seen as tenuous, given the fact he emigrated as a child. In the memoir, he makes a case for how he has been shaped, knowingly and unknowingly, by these larger cultural forces, and thus stages an attempt at making sense of his Russian/Soviet inheritance.

The Divided Self: Humor and Mourning

While the absent photograph of the Chesme Church triggers a traumatic memory and sends Shteyngart into panic attacks, the other photographs included in the memoir seem, perhaps, more benign. Like the photo on the cover, Shteyngart includes many images from his childhood and treats them in a humorous manner. He gets comedic mileage out of presenting the "Soviet" aspects of his childhood—his love of cosmonauts and Lenin, for example—to an American audience.

If, as noted earlier, in the promotional material for his earlier works Shteyngart fashions an image of the self that both exploits and mocks the stereotypical image of "Russianness" in the American imagination (the fur coat, the bear), we also see a humorous attitude in his treatment of photographs of himself as a child in Leningrad in *Little Failure*. However, in these documents of his childhood he presents himself as "authentically" Russian. He is no longer consciously *performing* Russianness. Instead, his engagement with these photographs becomes part of the memoir's larger project of acknowledging that he *does* belong to this culture. If those promotional pictures of Shteyngart bedecked in fur were, as Wanner puts it, a "self-ironic performance of identity," then these photographs become a key site in working through and sincerely reclaiming this aspect of his identity. *Little Failure* evinces more of a sincere approach

to his Russian identity. And while humor still plays a role in this process, it is utilized now in a different way from before.

Shteyngart addresses the role of humor in the memoir, differentiating it from how he mobilized it in his other works. He writes, "On so many occasions in my novels I have approached a certain truth only to turn away from it, only to point my finger and laugh at it and then scurry back to safety. In this book, I promised myself I would not point the finger. My laughter would be intermittent. There would be no safety" (*LF* 318). Shteyngart identifies laughter with security—a means of keeping safe distance from those things that are painful. Indeed, we see him receive a lesson in the uses of humor soon after he comes to America. Teased mercilessly at school, Shteyngart learns that laughter can be used as a defense mechanism. He notices how his teacher Ms. S manages a situation one day where the children mock her. Shteyngart is "worried that she will cry, but instead she laughs." He emphasizes, "*She has laughed at herself and emerged unscathed!*" — a revelation for the young boy (*LF* 149). Humor becomes a survival technique. He establishes ownership of the situation by laughing at it; his behavior would no longer appear shameful or wrong if only he laughs at it first. However, in *Little Failure*, he claims he will not use humor to turn away as a defense against fully engaging with what is painful.[52]

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[52] In this way, the memoir does signal a shift from his previous work. In an interview, Shteyngart notes that he sees this memoir as inaugurating a new phase in his career: "In a sense, writing this memoir was my attempt to clear the palate a little bit. Because after this, the fourth book — the three books before have had immigrant, Russian Jewish immigrant protagonists. Time to move on, maybe do a character who is not a Russian Jewish male." Daniel D'Addario, "Gary Shteyngart: 'I've Left Russia. I'm Just Trying to Save Brooklyn,'" Salon, accessed July 18, 2017, http://www.salon.com/2014/01/11/gary_shteyngart_i%e2%80%99ve_left_russia_i%e2%80%99m_just_trying_to_save_brooklyn/.

And yet, I would suggest, it is precisely his use of humor that affords Shteyngart the ability to ultimately look further and *not* retreat. How might humor allow us to look further? In "Epic and Novel," Mikhail Bakhtin suggests that laughter forces us into a proximal relationship with the comedic object. He writes that laughter "destroys […] distance."

> As a distanced image a subject cannot be comical; to be made comical, it must be brought close. Everything that makes us laugh is close at hand, all comical creativity works in a zone of maximal proximity. Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it. Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it.[53]

Bakhtin proposes here a vision of laughter as radical intimacy with an object. It is grotesque in its closeness; the vulnerable body (for the object takes on a distinctly bodily form in Bakhtin's account) is turned open, undone by the skillfully prying hands of laughter. Thus, we see how humor actually forces an almost uncomfortably close relationship with the object. And if we return to Shteyngart's description of his new use of humor, we see that the main shift he notes is staying with the object of laughter, rather than retreating "back to safety." Once the object has been figuratively disemboweled by laughter, the challenge is then to sit with the object—exposed and broken—*after* the laughter subsides. As Bakhtin writes, laughter allows "for an absolutely free investigation" of the object. From the intimate vantage point that laughter affords, Shteyngart is then able to delve deeper into his exploration of these photographs.

As we will see, this is the pattern that unfolds in Shteyngart's treatment of his childhood images. The photos of his younger self often get read twice. A humorous caption mocking his

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[53] Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 23.

former self first introduces the image, but then a second reading—one that admits a more serious emotional response to the photo—follows later in the text, often to consider the wider context of the photograph. The humorous moment enables him to approach the image, to transform and defang the object through laughter, and thus offer him the opportunity to inspect the photo more deeply later. The comic gives way to the sincere.

This relationship to the photographs—both humorous and sincere—becomes a way of mourning what he lost in emigration. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's remark that comedy is the "inner side of mourning," Alexander Etkind has suggested that humor can be a crucial "marker of difference" that allows the mourner to represent the past without reliving it.[54] With Bakhtin's theory of laugher in mind, we can see how humor makes possible this proximate relationship with the painful object as part of the mourning process. By turning the painful object into a source of laughter, Shteyngart transforms it and establishes a new relationship with it.[55]

What, then, is Shteyngart mourning the loss of? In this narrative, mourning is bound up with the conception and representation of the self. Judith Butler has written about how mourning the loss of someone throws the relationship to one's own self into flux, since we are formed in relation to the other. When I lose someone, she writes, "then I not only mourn the loss, but I

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[54] Alexander Etkind, *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 21.

[55] In Freud's theory of mourning, "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), he argues that successful mourning leads the mourner to detach from the lost object, so that the ego is free to form attachments to a new, living object. Freud's detachment theory has since been developed to reconsider the kinds of object relations at work in the mourning process. Rather than detaching fully from the lost object, the successful mourner goes through "a process of inner transformation of both self and object images," which allows a continued internal relationship with the lost object. John E. Baker, "Mourning and the Transformation of Object Relations: Evidence for the Persistence of Internal Attachments," *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 18, no. 1 (2001): 56–57.

become inscrutable to myself. Who 'am' I, without you? When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do."[56] Mourning is thus not only grief for the loss of the other, but also the loss of some part of ourselves. It frustrates the sense of self, as we find ourselves unmoored from a relationship with the other that defined who we are. In Shteyngart's case, it is less the mourning of a particular person, and more the loss of his own identity before emigration.

Shteyngart's childhood photos figure within the text as the site where his troubled relationship to his childhood is thrown into relief. His relationship to his childhood memories is complicated by the experience of emigration, by the revelation of information about his family's experience within the Soviet system, and by the collapse of the Soviet Union which ironically makes a physical return to Russia possible for this émigré but a return to his homeland, to the Leningrad of his youth, impossible. We can see the double reading of the photos as an attempt to come to terms with what they represent, especially the version of his former self that they present.

Before we can turn to those photographs, though, let us consider the series of events during emigration that lead Shteyngart to abruptly re-evaluate his experience in the Soviet Union and, more crucially, his sense of self. In the memoir, Shteyngart describes his childhood in Leningrad as a fairly happy one, and a fairly typical one. Growing up around Moskovsky Square, Shteyngart idolizes the nearby statue of Lenin and longs for the day when he can join the Komsomol. However, when his family emigrates while he is still just a child, his happy childhood memories become re-coded as false. The rupture of emigration influences the way he

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[56] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), 22.

retrospectively narrates his childhood memories in Russia. Those memories have been touched and transformed by the future moment of emigration. When narrating events from his Soviet childhood, there is a tension between the narrating "I" of the present and the narrated "I" of his childhood. This tension is undoubtedly present in any autobiographical account, given the retrospective nature of the genre. The narrating "I" possesses more knowledge as well as a sense of trajectory that informs how that "I" retrospectively interprets and constructs a narrative of the self.[57] I would suggest, though, that the divide between the narrated "I" and the narrating "I" is compounded in this narrative (even more so than for the other authors considered in this dissertation) because the moment of emigration was experienced as a traumatic event that significantly revised his childhood memories and sense of self. Thus, when narrating his past experience, he often ironically cuts through his youthful sincerity by incorporating his adult perspective of the present moment. (And yet, as I will show, this distanced ironic pose will ultimately give way to a more nuanced investigation of the child's perspective.)

When he describes a vacation he and his family took to Crimea, for example, he balances his childhood love for the Soviet Union with his contemporary knowledge: "I, militant worshipper of the Red Army, red Pioneer neckties, just about anything bloody red, am not allowed to know yet what my father knows, namely that everything I hold dear is untrue" (*LF* 14). The temporality of this sentence — "I am not allowed to know *yet*" — evokes this double perspective as he narrates from within the present of the past but with future knowledge. His sincere childhood love of these staples of Soviet life is shot through with the ultimate revelation

[57] For an overview of the narrating "I" and narrated "I" in autobiographical theory, see Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 71–78.

that "everything I hold dear is untrue." This double perspective on his former self constitutes one of the animating forces of his readings of the childhood photographs.

He sees his memories from that summer in Crimea as "cue cards for an enormous stage set that has long evaporated along with the rest of the Soviet Union. Did any of this really happen? I sometimes ask myself. Did Junior Comrade Igor Shteyngart ever really huff and puff his way across the shoreline of the Black Sea, or was that some other imaginary invalid?" (*LF* 11). He figures his memories (and the Soviet Union itself) as an elaborate stage set—theatrical, artificial, ephemeral—of yet another Potemkin Village. The country is not just lost to him through emigration, but lost entirely to history because of the eventual dissolution of the Soviet Union. Thus, even when he later "returns" to Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, his childhood home on Moscow Square in Leningrad has transformed into a post-Soviet landscape that bears the marks of global capitalism.[58] A qualitative break has transformed the landscape in his absence, and so even though he now can and does return (unlike Nabokov or Brodsky), he cannot truly return to the same country.[59]

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[58] Shteyngart details the changes to Moscow Square: there is "the Citibank branch down the street, the Ford dealership a little farther down, the ad hoc slot machines around the corner, and the intermittent fruit stand hawking bright imported oranges, ethereal red peppers, and glossy pears from a distant galaxy. One of St. Petersburg's 4.8 million McDonald's (one for each citizen) hums along at the southwest corner" (*LF* 47).

[59] In the *New York Times Magazine* profile "From Russia with Tsoris" (June 2, 2002) by Daniel Zalewski, Shteyngart shares with Zalewski several photographs from his recent trip back to Petersburg: "A large statue of Lenin towers out front. His former home, he reveals with disgust, has become an 'all-Mafiya building, with one Mercedes after another out front.'" The profile ends with the two back at Shteyngart's apartment as he looks for more photographs to share with the interviewer from his travels back to Russia and the former Soviet Union. Shteyngart shows him some of Tbilisi, saying that his trip to Georgia made a deep impression on him. He explains that "in Leningrad, too much has changed since I was a kid. There are bad sushi bars and A.T.M. machines everywhere. But in the suburbs outside Tbilisi, nothing's been built in 30 years. It's still the Soviet Union. For me, it was a wonderful trip back in time." Zalewski, "From Russia With Tsoris."

Shteyngart narrates the process of emigration as a steadily unfolding revelation that undoes his relationship with his past and his former self. He describes how, as they wait at the customs line at the airport to leave Leningrad, the customs agent rifles through their belongings, tears out pages of their books, rips up their comforter in case they are smuggling things to the West. The suspicion and gruff manner in which they are treated startles young Igor. He notes that "there is a special grace accorded to children" in the Soviet Union, where he was treated like a "little emperor." Now, however, all that has changed.

> But I am no longer a Soviet citizen, and I am no longer worth according any special childhood privileges. I do not know it, but I am a traitor. And my parents are traitors. And if a good many people got their wish we would be dealt with as traitors. (*LF* 79)

This episode thus simultaneously inaugurates a new identity for the young boy (as "traitor") and fractures his relationship with his home country. At the time, Shteyngart was unaware that they were leaving Leningrad forever, that they were immigrating to America. His father reveals to him that they are going to America only once they arrive in Vienna.

En route to America, in Italy, Shteyngart's father sits him down to explain why they, a Jewish family, are leaving the Soviet Union. This leads Shteyngart to feel that

> It was all a lie. Communism, […] Lenin, the Komsomol youth league, the Bolsheviks, the fatty ham, Channel One, the Red Army, the electric rubber smell on the metro, the polluted Soviet haze over the Stalinist contours above Moscow Square, everything we said to each other, everything we were. (*LF* 93)

This revelation challenges his sense of self. Previously, Shteyngart had identified himself in opposition to "the enemy," which is to say, America (*LF* 83). Shteyngart frequently punctuates the narrative of their emigration with the phrase "We are going to the enemy" (*LF* 83 passim), capturing the young boy's disbelief that they are going to America. But once his father reveals to him why they have left, Shteyngart is forced to reformulate his refrain: "We *are* the enemy" (*LF* 93). He writes, "I do not want to be wrong. I do not want to be a lie" (*LF* 94). In this moment, all

that he had thought to be true, stable, reliable has been abruptly upended. Within the child's imagination, animated by Cold War rivalries in which America and Russia are irreconcilably at odds with each other, he suddenly feels that what he has left behind is "a lie," that he has unwittingly been "the enemy" all along. Thus, the loss of childhood becomes compounded not only by the fact of emigration but also this revelation that what they have left behind is not what he thought it to be. And, later, the collapse of the Soviet Union solidifies this separation from his previous self. These endings transform the memories that were his, thus complicating the process of mourning the loss of everything they had left behind.

Ascending the Ladder: Father and Son

The photographs in the text play a crucial role in navigating this tenuous connection with the past. On the one hand, the photographs offer a way of bridging the gap between past and present; they provide a tangible trace of his former self. But, on the other hand, they also throw into relief how distant he is, culturally and temporally, from that past self. The meaning of his childhood photographs, of little Igor in Leningrad, has now changed for him. The loss of childhood through emigration and through the revelation of his family's history in the Soviet Union transforms his relationship to these documents of his past. The gap between himself and the child in the photos points up his hybrid identity. How is he to read these photographs? Does he read them as a Soviet Jew? As an American? How is he to manage both the experience of childhood and the adult perspective on it? He cannot look at the images without ironic distance, seeing them as comic, foreign even. But, this comic attitude is then attenuated by plunging deeper into these photos with a more serious approach that does reclaim these images as representative of his own experience.

Consider, for example, the photograph of young Igor atop a ladder that leads us in to Chapter Four. He mocks himself in the caption: "To become a cosmonaut, the author must first conquer his fear of heights on a ladder his father has built for that purpose. He must also stop wearing a sailor outfit and tights" (*LF* 45). In this photograph caption, and others, Shteyngart refers to himself in the third-person as "the author" (rather than I). By using the third-person, Shteyngart distances himself from the child in the photo. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson note in their work on autobiography, using the third-person allows the first-person narrator "to disrupt the expectation of first-person intimacy, to create a sense of self-alienation through objectification, and to open a gap between the narrating 'I' and an implicit narrating 'he' or 'she.'"[60] Moreover, Shteyngart achieves a comic effect by referring to the young child already as "the author," which invests the image with a mock solemnity.

The humor of this caption further plays on that division between selves, as we have the double perspective of the adult narrator looking at the photo from without and the photo that depicts the child experiencing it from within. The dream of becoming a cosmonaut, the sailor outfit, the tights—all these elements are childhood staples in the late Soviet period. He pokes fun at how he wears the sailor outfit, normal attire for a child growing up during this period in the Soviet Union. But now, looking back, the narrator mocks these elements as strange or foreign. This caption adopts the estranged perspective of an American (or, Russian-American) looking at the photograph, positioning it for an American readership. In other words, the caption resembles the kind of ironic performance of a Russian identity for an American audience that Wanner and others have identified in Shteyngart's earlier examples of self-fashioning (through book covers and book trailers). The difference here, I would emphasize, is that the photograph is not an

[60] Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 74.

affected performance, but rather an authentic image of his Soviet childhood that he now treats in a humorous way *as if* it were yet another stereotypical image of "Russianness."

Within the chapter, though, Shteyngart mentions the ladder in more detail. As a child, young Igor suffered severely from asthma, and so his father built him a wooden ladder that would "give the housebound patient some exercise" and also help him overcome one of his "greatest fears, the fear of heights." He describes how it is both a beloved object and "one of the scariest." He writes: "Every month I try to scale one more of the dozen bars until, dizzy and dry mouthed, I am flying as high as four feet off the ground! Just a little more effort, just a little less asthma, and I will be what every Soviet boy aged three to twenty-seven wants to become: a cosmonaut" (*LF* 55–56). He also mentions how, as a child, he genuinely enjoys wearing the sailor's outfit, "with its white tights and little shorts" (*LF* 56). While the narration in this chapter attempts to adopt the child's perspective (as he tries to recapture his childhood dream of becoming a cosmonaut), when looking back at this period in the photograph he describes it ironically in the caption.

As I have suggested, we can see this double reading (or the "double exposure") of the photograph as symptomatic of the effect of rupture at emigration as a child, which threw into doubt the reality of his childhood memories, making it difficult to experience them as authentic or genuine. The photograph depicts an event that was experienced as genuine but that now, because of temporal and cultural distance, appears humorous. Photographs help him to undertake the task of reconciling his experience then (as documented in the photographs) and his knowledge now. These childhood photographs become a site in the memoir where Shteyngart rehabilitates part of what was lost at the moment of emigration that transformed "everything we said to each other, everything we were" into a "lie."

We are returned to the ladder photograph again at a critical moment later in the memoir, during Shteyngart's trip back to Petersburg with his parents. It is on this trip that the source of Shteyngart's panic attacks is traced back to the violent encounter between him and his father outside the Chesme Church. As the three of them walk through their old neighborhood, moments before his father admits to this episode, Shteyngart's mother recalls how his father made him a ladder to help him conquer his fear of heights. At this point, Shteyngart briefly interrupts the narrative to bring us into the present moment of his writing, noting that he is looking at the photo while writing this section: "As I write this, I hold a photo of myself climbing my father's makeshift wooden ladder in our Leningrad apartment, wearing a sailor's outfit and a shit-eating grin. The photo is dated II/1978, and my mother's handwriting on the back announces: 'The famous athlete training at home'" (*LF* 342). This, of course, is the photograph included earlier in the memoir that he had mocked. The inclusion of the mother's caption offers yet another perspective on the photograph. In her caption to the photograph, she adopts a mock-serious tone about the child's fantasy of becoming a famous cosmonaut. Shteyngart's characterization of his childlike happy smile as a "shit-eating grin," on the other hand, is self-deprecating. He sees the photo retrospectively, shot through with the awareness of the alternative story that the photo tells (or conceals).

After returning us to this photograph, he resumes the narrative. They reminisce about how he used the ladder to try to master his fear of heights. Then, however, his mother introduces a new piece of information. "On the other hand," she tells her son, your father "always pushed you […] He wanted you to overcome your fear of heights but then when you got to the top he tried to push you off" (*LF* 342). Shteyngart is surprised by this: "*Pushed me?*" he asks his mother (*LF* 342). Equally surprising for him, it would seem, is his mother's comment that she "read in

Freud that you should never do such a thing," to which Shteyngart writes incredulously "*She read in Freud?*" (*LF* 342). This conversation is then capped off when his father suddenly discloses what happened at the Chesme Church all those years ago: that he had punched the five-year-old Igor in the nose. Thus, we see how these instances of aggression are not isolated but rather part of a larger pattern of violence between father and son. Indeed, the memoir details the competitive way his father engages with him, always reminding Shteyngart that he is weak, small, and unmanly in comparison with him.

The photograph becomes a touchstone that Shteyngart repeatedly returns to, as our understanding of its meaning evolves. It begins as simply a humorous photo, but it is revealed to be more complex, to be yet another piece of the puzzle in reconstructing his childhood. The multiple readings of the photograph demonstrate how one's understanding of one's own self and history is always incomplete and dependent on others to fill in these critical gaps.[61] The photograph seems to offer evidence of the past, but it is inscrutable. The revelation that his father would push him from the top of the ladder transforms the significance of the photograph. The ladder had been a symbol of his father's love for him, as he worked hard to create the perfect ladder for his son. We had previously heard that the father "begged the workmen at his factory to carve out every sleek wooden bar" and that the ladder is "possibly the most gorgeous thing" they own (56). But the ladder also becomes a symbol of the father's aggression. In turn, the father's aggression is rooted in the violence he himself experienced. His father describes his own Oedipal power struggle with his alcoholic stepfather, which was bound up with a competition for his

[61] Here I have in mind Butler's work on self-narratives, in which she suggests that the subject is opaque to herself because she is formed in relation with another and that this formation is not entirely accessible or retrievable by us, and yet it is a fundamental part of the story we must tell about ourselves. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*.

mother's affection (he insists his mother "loved me more than him"). He "proudly" tells how he finally managed to overpower his stepfather: "I beat him! Until he bled! *Until he bled!*" (*LF* 337). In pushing young Igor from the ladder, the father both attempts to strengthen his son for survival, but also fears the inevitability of being succeeded by his own son.

The photograph that he took to represent his childhood fantasy of becoming a cosmonaut thus bears an invisible trace of his relationship with his father, a relationship that is marked by aggression, physical intimidation, and competition. Shteyngart notes, though, that as a child he also experienced his father's violence as a means of forging a *connection* between them.[62] He writes:

> When you hit the child you're making contact. You're contacting the child's skin […] but you're also saying something comforting: *I'm here*. I'm here hitting you. I will never leave you, don't you worry, because I am the Lord, thy father. And just as I was pummeled, so I shall pummel you, and you shall pummel yours forever, *ve imru Amen*. Let us say Amen. (*LF* 127)

In these ironic words of prayer, we might hear an echo of God's words to Jacob in Genesis.[63] During Jacob's dream of a ladder that reaches up to heaven, God appears and says "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac" (Genesis 28:13). He prophesies the dispersal of Jacob and his people,[64] but despite this physical exile, he offers a promise of spiritual constancy: "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (Genesis

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[62] He notes that his father has two sayings that express the idea that love is communicated through such beatings: "*Tot kto ne byot, tot ne lyubit*" (He who doesn't hit, doesn't love) and "*Byot, znachit lyubit*" (He hits, which means he loves) (*LF* 125).

[63] I am grateful to Valentina Izmirlieva for bringing this allusion to my attention.

[64] "Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south" (Genesis 28:14).

28:15–17). God's promise of presence ("I will not leave you") is ironically transmuted into the affirmation "I will never leave you" of his father's beatings. Shteyngart's understanding of his father's beatings as a form of connection takes on greater significance when we recall that, soon after the dream of the ladder, Jacob wrestles with God and is blessed with the new name of Israel (Genesis 32). This physical contest of strength between God and man seems to stand as the origin of brutality that Shteyngart claims is passed down across the generations. Shteyngart perceives this violence as his birthright, as a covenant between father and son that binds them together.

The symbol of the ladder, then, is an ambiguous one. It represents both his filial bond to his father and the repressed memory of his father's violence. In directing us back to the Biblical story of Jacob's ladder, the photograph of the ladder suggests that this relationship replays an ancient struggle. Ascending the steps of the ladder, thus, comes to work as a metaphor for negotiating his own place within the familial legacy as well as his Jewish heritage. Shteyngart finds in the seemingly innocuous photograph of the ladder a way of excavating the layers of the past that would otherwise remain inaccessible to him but that have nonetheless shaped him.

To better understand this uneasy inheritance, Shteyngart turns to the family archive of photos. Photographs, after all, can help to constitute the family. As Susan Sontag writes, photographs "supply the token presence of the dispersed relatives. A family's photograph album is generally about the extended family—and, often, is all that remains of it."[65] Marianne Hirsch suggests in her work on family photo-albums that the way we look at family photographs creates and sustains family narratives and myths.[66] These photos, thus, become a means of preserving

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[65] Sontag, *On Photography*, 9.

[66] Hirsch, *Family Frames*.

the memory of those who have been lost as well as of understanding one's place in relation to this familial history.

Shteyngart draws our attention to how such an archive of family photographs inadvertently attests to the atrocities of history. He notes that his mother has a "meticulous collection of family photos," with a filing system that includes entries such as "Uncle Simon, Wife, Murdered Children" under the subheading "World War II" (*LF* 73). To file these photographs with such captions and subheadings seems to admit no emotional reaction; it treats this photograph as soberly as any other. We see the way in which history intrudes on this collection of family photos.

Consider, for example, the inclusion of a photograph of his father's entire family in Ukraine in 1940. In the caption, after identifying his father's position within the photo, he laconically writes "Just about everyone else is going to die soon" (*LF* 25). This might remind us of what Barthes termed the second punctum that all photographs share: Time. Barthes suggests that, while photos depict what has been, they also remind us of mortality, that the subject of the photo will die. As he says, "the photograph tells me death in the future."[67] We feel the strange temporality of photographs in this image of Shteyngart's family. It preserves the living presence of these family members, and yet we know that they will — they have already — died.

Shteyngart, however, refuses to use the photograph to sentimentally meditate on mortality. Unlike with the Chesme Church photograph, he is not "pierced" by this photograph, to borrow Barthes' vocabulary, even if it is of these ancestors who will soon die. His caption undercuts the tragedy. It is not reverential. It is not touched with elegiac pathos. In fact, some critics have suggested that Shteyngart, in his other works, has been critical of the so-called

[67] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 96.

American "Holocaust industry" of suffering and memorialization.[68] Arlene Stein, for example, has suggested that Shteyngart's second novel *Absurdistan* provides "a relentless, irreverent, critique of the 'Holocaust industry' and the commodification of suffering."[69] In the caption to the photo of his Ukrainian relatives, we see how he resists this kind of memorialization. The humorous caption defies our expectations of the typical reaction to a photograph that documents a family just before its dissolution, that seems to foretell their death. I would suggest that the humor here has an estranging effect; because their death is expressed so bluntly, it becomes all the more vivid.

Indeed, the blunt, matter-of-fact tone with which he narrates this photograph communicates the fact that this kind of suffering has become all too routine. In this regard, Shteyngart here draws on a rich vein of Jewish comedy about suffering. The caption might remind us, for example, of the kind of humor at work in Sholem Aleichem's short story "Otherwise, There's Nothing New" (1907). In the story, a Jewish immigrant to America corresponds with his relative Yisrulik who is still in Europe to ask about life in the Old Country. "What can I say? There's really nothing new," Yisrulik says, "Thank God, all is well now."[70] He

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[68] The term "Holocaust Industry" was coined by Norman G. Finkelstein in his book *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering* (New York: Verso, 2003).

[69] Arlene Stein, *Reluctant Witnesses: Survivors, Their Children, and The Rise of Holocaust Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 166. Stein's book counters the idea of Holocaust fatigue, reminding us that this "Holocaust consciousness" had to be fought for and should not be so easily dismissed now. Adrian Wanner has also noted that *Absurdistan* mocks the Holocaust industry, and he suggests that the scene in *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* where the main character visits Auschwitz is also a "parody of the Holocaust commemoration cult." Wanner, *Out of Russia*, 125.

[70] Sholem Aleichem, *Some Laughter, Some Tears; Tales from the Old World and the New*, trans. Curt Leviant (New York: Putnam, 1968), 239.

goes on, though, to catalogue a litany of horrors that has recently befallen the shtetl community. There have been three pogroms, he reports, but luckily they have all survived:

> No one from our family was hurt, except Lipa, who was killed along with his two sons, and Noah and Melekh, two workers with golden hands, and poor Moishe-Hersh who was dragged down from an attic, and Perl-Dvora, who was later found dead in a cellar with her tiny infant, Reyzele, at her breast…. Including children, then, the grand total of our family's losses was seven dead.[71]

Inured to suffering and loss, Yisrulik rapidly moves from stating that "no one" in the family was hurt to recalling that, in fact, seven lives were lost. Throughout the letter, he punctuates his narrative of other tragedies with the title phrase: "Otherwise, there's nothing new." The joke, of course, is that he is right: this is nothing new. As Jeremy Dauber notes, the dark humor of the story comes from Yisrulik's "ironic resignation, borne of long traumatic experience."[72] We see what some would call the "incongruity theory" of laughter at work in this story, as the disjunction between the events being narrated and the unruffled tone with which the story is told both makes the horror of the story vivid and also makes for a comic delivery.[73] A similar incongruity between tone and content marks the way Shteyngart narrates these photos that attest

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[71] Sholem Aleichem, 240.

[72] Jeremy Dauber, *Jewish Comedy: A Serious History* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017), 34.

[73] The incongruity theory of humor suggests that a discrepancy between expectations and reality is the source of laughter. When our expectations are not met, we laugh. Aristotle, in *Rhetoric*, suggests that when a speaker sets up an expectation and then defies it, he can expect a laugh form his audience. The Scottish philosopher James Beattie was the first to use the term "incongruous" in theorizing humor. Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Søren Kierkegaard also subscribe to the idea that humor works by setting up expectations and then frustrating or violating them. For a summary of the incongruity theory, see John Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2016 Edition). https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/humor/. Last accessed December 17, 2018.

to the succession of traumatic events his family endured. It is a violence that has been normalized.

These photos become a way of understanding his father's past and also his own. The innocent photo of Igor on the ladder built by his father comes to take on new meanings over the course of the narrative. It becomes emblematic of his fraught relationship with his father, one of the central concerns of the memoir. What begins as a humorous reading of the childhood photo ultimately gives way to a more serious consideration of the violence that has marked and shaped his family.

The Worried Look: Mother and Son

Another childhood photograph of Shteyngart opens up a web of associations that bind him together with his family's history, specifically the matrilineal line. At the beginning of Chapter Two, there is a photo of Shteyngart as a young child clutching a telephone. He has a pained expression on his face. In the caption, he quips "The author is told that the breadline does not, in fact, deliver" (*LF* 19). The humor depends on the double perspective he adopts in the caption. He mixes two sensibilities: acknowledging the lived reality of standing on breadlines in the Soviet Union, while also invoking the comic archetype of the New Yorker who gets everything delivered. The breadline becomes a joke by bringing his future adult identity as a New Yorker to bear on this image from childhood.

This caption transforms this fearful, anxious image of him as a child into something he can laugh at and thus approach. Later in the chapter, however, he describes the photograph in more detail. In this discussion of the photograph, he takes seriously the fear revealed in the photo, rather than mocking it:

> There is a photograph of me at one year and ten months taken at a photo studio. Wearing a pair of children's jogging pants with their outline of a cartoon bunny on one of the front pockets, I hold a phone in my hand (the photo studio is proud to exhibit this advanced Soviet technology), and I am getting ready to bawl. The look on my face is that of a mother in 1943 who just received a fateful telegram from the front. I am scared of the photo studio. I am scared of the telephone. (*LF* 25)

He goes on to catalogue the other things he is scared of at this age: the world beyond the apartment, the snow, the cold, the heat, heights, electricity, and the list goes on. The tension between his full description of the photograph within the text and his treatment of it in the caption deserves our attention. In the caption, he treats his pained expression in a humorous manner. The joke—that he looks so terrified because he just learned that the breadline doesn't deliver—is from the perspective of a New Yorker accustomed to getting whatever he wants. He makes light of Soviet breadlines (as well as his own pain). It takes the sting out of the actual pain that young Igor did suffer, as evidenced by his fuller description of the photograph within the chapter, as he details his fear of just about everything. When, as an adult, he asks his mother why he was so afraid of everything as a child, she succinctly replies: "Because you were born a Jewish person" (*LF* 25).

His mother sees being anxious and fearful of the world as part of his Jewish identity, as his lot in life. Indeed, the fearful look on his face that he focuses on in this photograph becomes a point of connection between his childhood and his mother's. A photograph of his mother as a girl opens Chapter 5. The caption reads: "The author's mother at age eleven, with the worried adult gaze he will grow to know well" (*LF* 64). By singling out her worried expression—all too adult for a young child—he subtly establishes an association between this photo of his mother and his own photo at a young age. He describes the photograph in more detail again at the end of the chapter:

> My mother, in the first despairing bloom of youth, looking, as she would say, *ozabochena*, a combination of worried and moody and maybe lovesick, a Soviet-era bow crowning the top of her puffy, full-lipped face as if to inform us that the woods behind her do not belong to a sunny summer camp in the Catskills. It is 1956. She is eleven years old in a striped summer dress, resembling, already, a worried young Jewish adult. (73)

Once again, we can see the connection between her worried expression and his own. He mentions that she is *not* in the Catskills, which further solidifies the sense that their childhoods are potentially interchangeable, as it is only the bow in her hair—what Barthes would call part of the *studium* or the information of the photograph—that reveals she is in the Soviet Union, not in America like he was at the age of eleven.[74] The way in which Shteyngart reads this photograph of his mother, and the way he links his own childhood image to hers, is part of what Marianne Hirsch calls the "familial look."[75] Through his readings of these family photographs, Shteyngart weaves together his mother's childhood and his own. They share the same worried look, a look that both his mother and Shteyngart identify as part of their Jewish identity.

Shteyngart's description of the photograph locates us in 1956, during the period of the Thaw, which witnessed a relaxation in repression, an increase in freedom of speech, and the rehabilitation of many innocent people (often posthumously) who had been purged under Stalin. The fleeting reference to the year grounds this private familial image within a wider historical framework; the worried look on her face could be read not only as an individual image but also as related to a cultural moment in which these traumas are returning to the surface.

Indeed, he connects this photograph with another one that also speaks to larger historical events—a photograph of his mother around age four that ostensibly is only "one of several" in

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[74] Barthes writes that the studium provides us with "the very raw material of ethnological knowledge." It gives us facts about the past: teaching us, for example, how people dressed in a certain era. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 28.

[75] Hirsch, *Family Frames*.

which she looks "young and happy" (*LF* 72). But this photograph works not only as an innocent document of his mother's childhood, for he draws our attention to the fact that "its upper-right corner has been torn off, and one can discern a crescent of needle holes" (*LF* 72). This photograph, we learn, was "'sewn into the case file' (*podshyto k delu*)" of his Great-uncle Aaron, who was arrested on false suspicion of counterrevolutionary activity and sentenced to 10 years in a Siberian labor camp (*LF* 72). The photograph of Shteyngart's mother as a young girl had been sent to Aaron in Siberia and somehow made its way into his case file. Shteyngart marvels at the absurdity of the bureaucratic processes that underpinned the whole system. How, he wonders, could "the beaming face of a four-year-old" be deemed "important enough to sew into a prisoner's case file" (*LF* 73). He writes, "Perhaps the greatest unanswered question I have toward the entire Land of the Soviets is this: *Who did the sewing?*" (*LF* 73). Thus, even those ordinary photographs of childhood that seem unremarkable ultimately attest to larger historical traumas. They can be read as a cultural document of the time as well as a personal or familial image.

The fact that the photograph is literally pierced becomes symbolic of how the photo's meaning has been transformed. It is no longer just a standard image of childhood within a family album. The photograph preserves the trace of the referent as well the image's material history. Placed in a new context—the case file—the childhood photograph bears the marks and material traces of that experience. The pierced photograph becomes a vivid emblem of Hirsch's concept of "postmemory," the inherited memory of the second generation after a traumatic event, as the

mother's childhood photograph is literally marked by an event she was not witness to.[76] The punctum here is no longer merely figurative.

The family photographs within Shteyngart's text create a network, as one photo connects to another. In this case, the discussion of the photo of young Igor on the phone bears similarity to the way he describes the photos of his mother; through his "affiliative look," his reading of these photographs establishes a web of connections between their shared worried expressions and the larger historical traumas that provide the unseen background to these documents. These historical events have marked his mother and, by extension, him as well.

Moreover, if we return to Shteyngart's description of the photograph of him on the telephone, we notice that he makes a striking comparison between the look on his face and that of a mother who has just received a telegram that a loved one has died on the front in 1943. The simile yokes together disparate elements, as he makes a bold claim for commensurability not only with a mother, but one who has just suffered the loss of a beloved in war. Why make this claim for connection? Surely their experiences are worlds apart. Later in the memoir, though, we see just such a telegram, notifying his paternal grandmother of her husband's death fighting in the Siege of Leningrad:

> To Citizen Shteyngart P., NOTIFICATION, Your husband Sergeant Shteyngart Isaac Semyonovich, fighting for the Socialist Motherland, true to his military oath, evincing heroism and courage, was killed 18 February 1943. (*LF* 39)

Thus, his simile compares him not to just any woman, but more specifically his own grandmother. He establishes a connection between her experience and his. This simile that cuts across generations and gender lines is an assertion of fellow feeling. It is not incidental that he

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[76] Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

identifies with this community of bereaved women. By aligning himself with the mother who has just received word of her husband or son's death, Shteyngart envisions himself as being like those at home, not on the front lines. He is with those who mourn, those who were not literally on the battlefields, but nonetheless marked by what happened there.

The Siege of Leningrad figures as one of the defining events in his own and his family's life, but also one of the events that fundamentally shaped the city. On the trip back to Petersburg with his parents, Shteyngart writes about how the landscape of the city is still marked by the siege, how the traces of this trauma are written into the streets. He notes the "mass grave in its northeastern suburbs along with the 750,000 citizens who died of hunger and German shelling during the 871-day siege."

> Petersburg never truly recovered. It is impossible to walk down Nevsky, alone or with my parents, and not feel the oppression of history, the weight on our own family and on every family that has lived within this city's borders since 1941. CITIZENS! a preserved sign at the northern mouth of Nevsky declares, DURING ARTILLERY BOMBARDMENT THIS SIDE OF THE STREET IS THE MOST DANGEROUS. And so it is. (*LF* 328–29)

In the memoir, Shteyngart attempts to write himself into the tradition as a child of Leningrad. There is the sense that this trauma remains unburied, that it persists into the present day. Indeed, in these lines we might detect an echo of Brodsky's writings on Leningrad and the siege:

> The siege is the most tragic page in the city's history, and I think it was then that the name 'Leningrad' was finally adopted by the inhabitants who survived, almost a tribute to the dead, it's hard to argue with tombstone carvings. The city suddenly looked much older, it was as though History had finally acknowledged its existence and decided to catch up with this place in her usual morbid way by piling up bodies. Today, thirty-three years later, however repainted and stuccoed, the ceilings and facades of this unconquered city still seem to preserve the stain-like imprints of its inhabitants' last gasps and last gazes. (*LTO* 91)

The siege becomes the defining event of Leningrad's history. The very architecture and structure of the city is thought to still bear the traces of the 900-day siege. The legacy of that trauma endures.

Shteyngart explicitly ties himself to this event when he suggests that the death notification for his paternal grandfather, who died fighting in the Siege of Leningrad, marks the beginning of his own life. He writes that his "life begins" with this "much-mimeographed piece of paper" (*LF* 39). By looking back to this event and marking it as the beginning of his life—similar to how he creates an affiliative connection between himself and his grandmother in the photograph—he lays claim to being part of this tradition. He later insists that "those of us who are Russian, or Russian-American, or Russian anything, are the offspring of these battles," referring to the Siege of Leningrad (*LF* 346). It is through historical events, such as the Siege of Leningrad, that he links himself with all Russians and makes a claim for himself to be considered one of them. Judith Butler, for one, has argued against the idea that mourning is private to suggest instead that the experience of profound loss can reveal the ties between the individual and others, and thus mourning has the capacity to create a larger community of those bound together by a shared vulnerability in their grief.[77] In Shteyngart's memoir, the process of mourning those who fell in the Siege of Leningrad has the power to create community. Through an appeal to this shared experience of loss, of being fundamentally marked by this loss, Shteyngart attempts to connect himself with "every family" that has lived in the city.

If the memoir explores how his inheritance of this past is complicated by his "hyphenated" identity, since his status as Russian is always seen as tenuous, we see here how he lays claim to his Russian identity. Part of staking his claim to this past is mediated through the family archive of photographs. Through the imaginative work of reading family photographs, Shteyngart creates a web of associations and linkages that suggest continuity and connect him to his past: both his own personal history and the inherited past of his family and city. The

[77] Butler, *Precarious Life*.

humorous caption that initially introduces the photograph of young Igor on the phone soon gives way to a critical investigation into how this image fits within a larger familial narrative. The family photograph album plays a central role in helping him work through his family's history.

Conclusion: The Mourner's Kaddish

The Siege of Leningrad again plays an important role at the end of the memoir. During the trip back to Petersburg with his parents—after the revelations about the source of his panic attacks and his father's stint in a Soviet psychiatric hospital—they take a trip to the village of Feklistovo, where Shteyngart's paternal grandfather was killed during an attempt by the Red Army to break through the blockade in 1943. He is buried there in a mass grave. Shteyngart again reproduces the notification of his grandfather's death, the one he earlier said could be seen as the marker of the beginning of his own life (346). They look for his name on the lists of the dead, but do not find it.

His father asks Gary to read the Kaddish prayer for the dead. However, he forestalls this moment of prayer, as Shteyngart brings us to the present moment of writing. He says that he is looking at a photograph of his father:

> As I write this, I'm looking at a photograph of my father in his early seventies holding an umbrella in the forecourt of Versailles, his right foot raised off the ground as if he is Gene Kelly, one of my Stuyvesant sweaters billowing out above his khaki pants. He is smiling at my mother and her camera, smiling fully, with teeth, in the American manner. 'Singer in the rain,' my mother has written on a Post-it note in her careful English script. She has stuck the note above my father's dancing figure. (*LF* 348)

The description of the photograph interrupts this moment, as it introduces a moment of levity, bringing us away briefly from the field where they are. Indeed, the forecourt of Versailles feels worlds away from the soldiers' mass grave in the small village of Feklistovo. Why this photograph? On one level, there is the associative link of singing: between singing the Kaddish

and the image of his father imitating Gene Kelly singing in the rain. But more importantly, perhaps, is the fact that in this photograph his father looks decidedly American: imitating Gene Kelly, wearing a Stuyvesant High School sweatshirt, smiling fully "in the American manner," complete with a caption in English. The photograph seems to recognize that his father also has this "hyphenated" identity. It offers a different portrait of his father, perhaps one that has been obscured in the depiction of his father in the rest of the text.

It is another one of the many photographs that Shteyngart verbally describes but excludes the image from the text. It matters less what is depicted in the actual image itself and more what the photograph signifies for Shteyngart, how it acts upon him. The image here works almost like a talisman, enabling Shteyngart to narrate this difficult moment. It conjures up a semblance of the father's presence. By introducing this photograph, Shteyngart draws attention to the act of writing this final scene. While Shteyngart's father memorializes his father within the scene, Shteyngart makes us aware that he too is memorializing his own father with this memoir.

After this brief digression, he returns to the scene at Feklistovo. Before reciting the Kaddish, Shteyngart reads aloud Psalm 15, one of the psalms typically read to memorialize the dead during the funeral ceremony in the Jewish tradition. The psalm opens with the question "Lord, who should sojourn in thy tabernacle?" and goes on to list the qualities of those who are righteous enough to be admitted into the Temple.[78] It is a psalm about gaining entry into the Temple, but also into God's presence and a religious community. The psalm guarantees to those who lead a righteous life a metaphorical place within the community that you cannot be removed from. And as a eulogy for the dead, it assures the deceased's passage from this world into the

[78] Scholars suggest that this psalm was originally part of a ritual in which worshippers were initiated and admitted into the Temple. Michael David Coogan et al., eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: With the Apocrypha*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 784.

next. The psalm ends with an affirmation of belonging: "He that does those things shall never be moved" (*LF* 348). This final line with its emphasis on *movement*, which Shteyngart quotes, seems particularly poignant in this memoir about emigration. In the context of the narrative, this line takes on an added significance for his own experience of displacement, as it affirms his belonging to this place. In the face of physical displacement, instability, and movement, the psalm promises an unshakeable spiritual permanence. Despite his physical separation from his homeland, he too can "never be moved."

After reciting Psalm 15, he reads aloud the mourner's Kaddish for his grandfather. He says: "I can read the prayer, but I cannot understand it." As he chants the prayer, he finds himself "tripping over the words, mangling them, making them sound more Russian, more American, more holy" (*LF* 349). Despite not understanding the words he reads (the prayer is in Aramaic), despite "mangling" and "tripping over" them, the prayer itself is strengthened by this admixture of Russian and English pronunciation as it becomes "more holy." The recitation of the prayer offers him the opportunity to bring together his different identities into one unified whole, as the final lines of the memoir reproduce the conclusion of the prayer in his three languages: Hebrew, English, and Russian.[79]

> וְאִמְרוּ אָמֵן.
> *Ve'imru, Amen*.
> Let us say, Amen.
> И СКАЖЕМ: АМЕН! (*LF* 349)

The incorporation of these different languages suggests a reconciliation with his "hyphenated" identity. Indeed, the prayer itself is bilingual. It comprises both Aramaic and a few lines in Hebrew. The hybrid language of the prayer follows from the Jewish diaspora, as Aramaic began

[79] Although the prayer is largely in Aramaic, the final line is in Hebrew.

to replace Hebrew as the lingua franca among Jews during the period of Babylonian captivity in the 6th century BCE. Thus, the fact that this prayer, so central to the Jewish faith, is spoken in a foreign tongue seems particularly apt for this memoir about negotiating different languages in emigration. If much of the memoir has focused on the seemingly irreconcilable paradox of Shteyngart's tripartite identity, then the Kaddish offers a rare moment where those three identities are not seen as mutually exclusive or at odds with each other. By giving the final lines of the prayer in three languages, he insists on the possibility of translation among these three languages. The repetition of the same word "Amen" across these three languages proclaims a unified expression of affirmation ("so be it"). It is the only time that the text produces the Cyrillic and Hebrew alphabet rather than transliterating these words into the Latin alphabet, as if no longer forcing these scripts to have to conform. Translation but not transliteration affirms commensurability and mutual intelligibility among the three, while also allowing for difference.

The ritual of reciting the Kaddish binds the speaker together with a larger community, across space and time. Traditionally, the Kaddish can only be recited in the presence of a minyan, a quorum of ten adults. Not to be said in isolation, it is a public prayer that affirms community and continuity. Although Shteyngart does not have the correct number of people with him to say the prayer, the scene still works to inscribe him into this community. It is as if he is not alone by virtue of saying the Kaddish. (Note that he singles out the final line which prompts a collective response from the congregation: "Let us say, Amen / И скажем, амен.")

The mourner's prayer becomes an instantiation not only of his Jewish identity, but also an affirmation of his identity as a grandson of the Siege of Leningrad. And the prayer offers a means of connecting with his own father. His father tells him that he has not visited the grave before and that he feels guilty for this. He says to Shteyngart, "Oh, son, why didn't me and my

mother come here earlier? I don't know why she didn't care about these things. We could have been here a hundred times" (*LF* 348). He has not properly mourned his father before. Now, they can do it together. As one son mourns his father, his own son looks on. It offers a powerful intergenerational moment, as Shteyngart sees his father as a son as well. In fact, the significance of the son saying Kaddish for his parents is so marked that in Yiddish, the firstborn son can also be referred to as "kaddish" to represent the fact that the son is "the guarantor that there would be someone to say the prayer for his parents when they died."[80] The Kaddish prayer that closes the memoir thus offers a ritual that they can take part in together, allowing father and son to speak in unison, rather than fighting. Indeed, these final lines ("Let us say, Amen") return us to the earlier moment in the memoir when he ironically used the language of prayer to express the connection between him and his father founded on violence and abuse. Now, by speaking these words together, father and son forge a new connection based on a shared expression of loss. Rather than turning loss into anger, it is transformed into a lateral connection that unites.

Ultimately, the Kaddish prayer enables him to mourn not only the loss of his grandfather, but also those losses incurred in emigration. As we have seen, it is these losses and endings that have generated the narrative, and it is the moment of mourning them properly that allows the excavation of the past to be completed. It "sanctions" the narrative, to borrow Benjamin's phrase. The narrative has been building up to this release of mourning, and that mourning was made possible by the excavation into the familial past to understand more fully what has been lost. Writing about the "warped" manner in which the catastrophes of the Soviet experience have been mourned, Etkind cautions that "when the dead are not properly mourned, they turn into the

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[80] Hillel Halkin, *After One-Hundred-and-Twenty: Reflecting on Death, Mourning, and the Afterlife in the Jewish Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 138.

undead and cause trouble for the living."[81] When we fail to properly mourn, we cannot move on. At the climax of the memoir, many specters from the past are raised. The violent encounter between father and son that has haunted Shteyngart is revealed to originate from the father's traumatic experience in a Soviet psychiatric ward, as well as from the unmourned loss of his own father. Finally brought to the light of day, the work of mourning can begin.

As if to mark this resolution, the memoir ends with an image of his parents: a photograph of mother and father sitting across from Shteyngart (presumably), as they stare at the camera lens and at their son. This is the main relationship of the memoir distilled: the author looking at them, as they look at him, each side trying to figure out the other. It is the only photograph in the book that does not have a caption. This photo breaks the pattern of the captions serving the function of mocking the photos or making light of them. Here there is no ironic gloss on the photo. Now he does not need to hide, however briefly, behind a humorous caption. Instead, he presents it simply and without comment. And if we think that a caption typically functions to fix the meaning of the photograph, to ground it in a particular time and place, to identify the subjects within the image, then the absence of the caption here seems a refusal to do so. It leaves the photograph open, suggestive of a new stage in their relationship.

By ending the memoir not with an image of the self, but with an image of his parents, Shteyngart visually marks how much his self-narrative has been about understanding his parents as a way of understanding the self. To narrate the self has involved undertaking an effort to understand his parents and their experience, which becomes entangled with navigating the family archive. As he writes earlier in the memoir, it is "through the stories, the photographs, the archival evidence" that he has "tried to know" his parents as they were before him (*LF* 75). He

[81] Etkind, *Warped Mourning*, 16–17.

admits the impossibility of this task, which involves the way in which we remain ultimately enigmatic and unknowable to ourselves. And yet, the photographs and stories of this self-narrative speak to the imperative to try to recover something of this familial past, as a fundamental part of the story we must tell about ourselves.

In this memoir, photographs function as affective images that can re-animate past traumas, but also as archival documents that can enable reconciliation with a painful past through readings of photographs that are at times creative and humorous and at other times seek to establish affiliative links across generations. The photograph of the church sends him into a panic attack and necessitates his look back to his childhood to interrogate the events that have formed him. If the memoir begins with him trying to come up with an etiology of his own trauma, he ultimately finds that it leads back to these larger collective traumas of the twentieth century that his family endured. The photographs in the text enable him to lay claim to his heritage that has been questioned because of his "hyphenated" status as Russian-American (as we saw with Iossel). He accepts his Russian identity in a way that goes *beyond* the "immigrant chic" aspect that Wanner identifies in Shteyngart's previous novels and self-promotional material, in which he self-consciously plays at being Russian. In the memoir, and through the photographs, he tells this aspect of his life more fully, more sincerely. Through the family archive of photos, he is able to work through his relationship to his parents, family history, and his experience of emigration.

Chapter Four
Return to Sincerity: The Family Archive in Kabakov's Installations and Paintings

Early in his career, Ilya Kabakov paints *Self-Portrait* (1962), a rare example of self-representation for the unofficial artist who would become known for attributing his works to invented characters and fictional artists. The painting pictures Kabakov in a bust-length, three-quarter pose, dressed in a thick jacket. A blue pilot cap hugs his head, covering his ears. He gazes at the viewer with a serious expression. Against the muted background of dark greens, blues, and browns, the brief patches of pink on his cheeks, upper eyelids, and lips offer the only relief from this somber mood.

The Cézannesque expressionistic brushstrokes, characteristic of Kabakov's early period, show the influence of Robert Falk on his work. In 1957, after graduating from the Surikov Institute of Art in Moscow and beginning his official work as an illustrator for children's books, Kabakov began to study with the Russian painter Robert Falk (1886–1958) twice a week.[1] Falk, who had been a member of the early avant-garde group Jack of Diamonds (*Bubnovyi valet*), was heavily influenced by Cézanne and post-impressionism. Serving as a link between the historical avant-garde and the artists of the post-Stalin period, Falk was an important figure for Kabakov and other artists of his generation. As Kabakov writes, studying with Falk was like making "contact with Great Art" (*kontakt s Velikoi Zhivopis'iu*).[2] Under his influence, Kabakov's earliest works are largely post-impressionist still-lifes and landscapes.

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[1] Ilya Kabakov, *60–70-e: Zapiski o neofitsial'noi zhizni v Moskve* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2008), 15.

[2] Kabakov, 15.

Such overt self-representation is relatively singular in Kabakov's oeuvre. And yet, even here, one begins to get the sense that Kabakov constructs a portrait of the self in which he wears a mask, tries on another identity. The pilot cap seems to invoke the aesthetics of cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin. Just the previous year, on April 12, 1961, Gagarin had become the first man to go into space. The cosmonaut was one of the structuring myths of the Thaw era, and flight would become a prominent theme in Kabakov's oeuvre, most famously in his installation *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment* (1985).[3] The utopian aspirations of flight into the cosmos seem foreclosed in this painting, with the dark background suggestive of confinement. Above the pilot cap, a brief line of white paint that seems to emanate from Kabakov's head rises up, but then dips and fades away. The line introduces a vertical ascent, suggestive of the possibility of flight or escape, only to have it disappear into the darkness. Kabakov's serious expression departs from Gagarin's boyish looks, often pictured with a grin across his face. Kabakov deconstructs the heroic stance of the cosmonaut, ironically taking on the image of the New Soviet Man to expose the futility of these fantasies of flight. Even here in this early self-portrait, it would seem he is already in costume.

Indeed, on closer inspection, Kabakov's face seems to take on a mask-like quality. Thick dark strokes of paint separate his face from the blue cap. Perhaps a shadow cast by the cap, although the depth of the shadow is too exaggerated. In this painting that relies on expressionistic brushstrokes and subtle gradations of color to build up texture and definition, these dark lines are

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[3] As Slava Gerovitch notes, "The cosmonaut myth played a major role in Khrushchev's attempts to de-Stalinize Soviet society—to break up with the Stalinist past and to reconnect with the original revolutionary aspirations for a Communist utopia." Slava Gerovitch, "The Human inside a Propaganda Machine: The Public Image and Professional Identity of Soviet Cosmonauts," James T. Andrews and Asif A. Siddiqi, eds., *Into the Cosmos: Space Exploration and Soviet Culture* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011), 79.

striking. The strong line delineates his face from the rest of his head, setting it off in such a way that the face begins to resemble a mask, as if it could easily be detached. Kabakov paints this masked self-portrait during this period when he first began his official work as a children's book illustrator while also working unofficially, searching for his own artistic voice free from the demands of the State. Kabakov begins his memoir about unofficial art of the 1960s and 70s by describing the slow struggle to break free of creating work that was not "for them" (*dlia nikh*) but for himself (*dlia sebia*).[4] This self-portrait gives expression to the double life of Kabakov's artistic practice during this period. Already in this self-portrait we can sense the way in which Kabakov would go on to create characters in his work, to playfully subvert the myths underpinning Soviet society.

Soon after completing this self-portrait, though, Kabakov writes in his memoir that "somehow his interest in painting from nature was extinguished" (*kak-to i pogas interes k zhivopisi s natury*).[5] Around this time, in the winter of 1961–62, Kabakov began his series of drawings "Showers," which he considers to be the true beginning of his own artistic style.[6] Although he became a full member of the Artists' Union in 1965 and continued to work in an official capacity as an illustrator, Kabakov also developed as an unofficial artist of the Moscow Conceptualist group. From here, he turned to making his "picture-objects" (*kartiny-predmety*),

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[4] Kabakov, *60–70-e*, 11. The memoir was written in the 1980s and first published in 1999 by Weiner Slawistischer Almanach.

[5] Kabakov, 19. In the memoir Kabakov dates the portrait to 1966, however this would seem to be a typo as it disrupts the chronology of the narrative. Elsewhere, including the Catalogue Raisonné of his paintings, the date of the painting is given as 1962.

[6] Kabakov, 19–21.

such as *Cubes* (1962) and albums, such as *Ten Characters* (1972–75).[7] It would not be until later in his career, after emigration, that we would see a return to self-representation in his installations and recent paintings, which will be the focus of this chapter.

This early self-portrait thus poses a question that the rest of his work would go on to frustrate: who is Ilya Kabakov? For in most of his works, Kabakov invents various personae and creates pieces in their style. Paintings such as *The Answers of the Experimental Group* (1970–71) take on the style of ZhEK (Soviet Housing Committee) noticeboards, schedules, and other official signs. Another series of paintings, *Holiday* (1987), was presented as the work of a socialist realist hack who returns 30 years later to his commissioned paintings and decides to place colorful candy wrappers on the canvases "to renew the series, to return to it once again those qualities it once possessed."[8] Perhaps the most audacious example of Kabakov's play with fictional personages might well be the installation *An Alternative History of Art* (2008), which introduced three fictional artists, Charles Rosenthal, Ilya Kabakov, and Igor Spivak, into the canon of Russian modern art.[9] Imitating the genre of the museum retrospective, the installation presented a series of artworks attributed to these invented artists, complete with detailed biographies of the artists and art historical commentaries. By endowing a fictional artist with his own name in this installation, Kabakov literalizes the game with authorship he has played throughout his career.

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[7] Matthew Jesse Jackson, *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 62.

[8] Renate Petzinger, Emilia Kabakova, and Willem Jan Renders, eds., *Ilya Kabakov: Paintings 1957–2013: Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 1 (Wiesbaden: Museum Wiesbaden, 2008), 199.

[9] Ilya Kabakov and Emilia Kabakov, *An Alternative History of Art: Rosenthal, Kabakov, Spivak*, ed. Thomas Kellein and Björn Egging (Cleveland: Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, 2005).

Given that much of Kabakov's work involves creating works in the guise of fictional characters and artists, it has become a critical commonplace to suggest that, in fact, there is no Ilya Kabakov. For example, Boris Groys has cautioned:

> In speaking about Ilya Kabakov's art, one should first of all ask whether there is actually an artist called Ilya Kabakov. For Ilya Kabakov's installations almost always relate to the history of other artists—showing their works, telling their biographies, commenting on their artistic methods, their aspirations and their disappointments. […] Kabakov has adopted a practice that could be described as a mode of self-expropriation, whereby he attributes his own works to other, fictitious artists.[10]

Critics have interpreted this play with authorship in various ways: as an example of postmodernist play, as indebted to poststructuralism's death of the author, as a reaction to institutional structures, and as representative of Kabakov's double consciousness as both an official and unofficial artist. Groys, for example, attributes Kabakov's characteristic "pseudonymity" to the dual system of authorship that Kabakov and others found themselves within in the Soviet Union, as both official and unofficial artists.[11] These two roles offered differing conceptions of what an author is, and Groys suggests that out of this is born Kabakov's playful relationship to authorship in his works. He likens Kabakov to a "theatrical director" who "astutely choreograph[s] this drama of authorship."[12] Matthew Jesse Jackson also situates Kabakov's authorial play within the historical conditions of authorship under late socialism. He suggests that Kabakov's double identity as both a successful official and unofficial artist led him "to adopt tactics that confronted his professional labor in his unofficial practice."[13] By creating

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[10] Boris Groys, *History Becomes Form: Moscow Conceptualism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 105.

[11] Groys, 108–109.

[12] Groys, 108.

[13] Jackson, *The Experimental Group*, 86.

unofficial works that mimic the official illustrations, forms, notices (what Jackson terms Kabakov's "bureaucratic expressionism"), Kabakov interrogated his own career as an official artist.[14]

But Jackson also sees Kabakov's work (and Moscow Conceptualism in general) as a reaction to the lack of institutional structures more broadly in the Soviet Union. As Jackson notes, there was a vast difference between art production in the Soviet Union and in the West, with its international art system. While conceptualist artists in the West were engaged in institutional critique, challenging the question of what constitutes a work of art, in the Soviet Union there was an absence of these institutions, from museums, criticism, the art market, and so on. Khrushchev's reaction to the Manezh exhibit in 1962 ensured that unofficial art would largely stay underground.[15] And so, unofficial artists created their own institutional forms within their art. By attributing his art to other artists, then, Kabakov steps into the role of curator or historian.

The creation of fictional biographies is evident in the work of other unofficial artists as well. Consider, for example, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid's 1973 conceptualist installation about the (invented) 18th-century serf artist Apelles Ziablov, whom they heralded as the first abstract artist. The installation included some of Ziablov's paintings, a biography of the painter, as well as art historical writings about Ziablov. Jackson sees the installation as an attempt to position themselves not only as artists but also as curators and publicists, thus

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[14] Jackson, 91.

[15] The period leading up the 1962 Manezh Exhibit in Moscow had witnessed a slightly more open atmosphere for displaying modern art. However, when Khrushchev attended the Manezh exhibit, he shut it down. The artists displayed at Manezh who were in the Artists' Union were stripped of their Union membership. Kabakov had not been part of the exhibit, but several of his fellow unofficial artists had attended and were interrogated. Jackson, 52–53.

simulating in their own work the institutional frameworks of the museum and an international art market that existed in the West but were absent in the Soviet Union.[16]

This playful interrogation of authority and ironic appropriation of the conventions and discourse of art history is part of a larger postmodern artistic practice more generally. Postmodernism, as Jean-François Lyotard writes, shows an "incredulity toward metanarratives"[17] because the grand narratives—of history, of progress, of enlightenment—have undergone "delegitimation."[18] Mark Lipovetsky locates the beginning of postmodernism in Russia in the 1960s during the period of the Thaw, as Youth Prose and samizdat writing began to deconstruct the metadiscourse of Socialist Realism through their use of non-standard language, slang, irony, and confessional style.[19] Moscow Conceptualism and Sots-Art took up this mantle, as they ironically re-appropriated the visual language of socialist realism in order to deconstruct the prevailing myths of official society.

Despite Kabakov's postmodern practice of creating fictional characters and biographies in his work, there is a striking shift towards the autobiographical in his work after emigration. In 1987, the year he emigrated, Kabakov created *My Mother's Album*, an album based on his mother's unpublished memoir that she had written at his request. He subsequently went on to

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[16] Jackson, 126.

[17] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), xxiv.

[18] Lyotard, 37.

[19] Lipovetsky writes that "The writers of the sixties were the first to play with the Soviet myth, after decades of Socialist Realism's monopoly on culture, and hence they outlined the logic of subsequent postmodern play with myth and mythological discourses." Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos*, ed. Eliot Borenstein (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1999), 125.

make a series of installations that were also based on the mother's self-narrative and family photographs: *Mother and Son* (1990), *Labyrinth: My Mother's Album* (1990), *The Operating Room (Mother and Son)* (1994).[20] During this same period, he created another autobiographical installation entitled *On the Roof* (1996) that drew heavily on family photographs and the narratives we tell about them. More recently, since around the year 2000, Kabakov has turned back to painting after his experiments with total installation. As part of this return to painting, Kabakov has created two series of paintings— *Three Paintings with the Black Spot* (2009) and *They are Looking* (2010)—that also engage heavily with the family archive of photographs. In these paintings and installations, we see the emergence of a new kind of autobiographical voice, one no longer inventing personae to inhabit but rather speaking from the first person.

This chapter takes up the question of why Kabakov, who is known for obscuring his own identity in his works, suddenly begins to tell these narratives of the self. How are we to understand Kabakov's autobiographical turn to the family archive of diaries, letters, memoirs, and photographs in these pieces? As we will see, many of the same family photographs recur across these installations and paintings. What do we gain, then, by reading these various works together? Do these works constitute a shift from his earlier artistic practice towards a more sincere mode of expression? Or is the version of the "self" that he puts forward here just as playful and constructed as the biographies he created for his invented artists? As we will see in

[20] *Mother and Son* was part of an exhibit at the Tacoma Art Museum, June 15–September 9, 1990. It was shown again at the Jewish Museum's exhibit *From the Inside Out: Eight Contemporary Artists* in New York in 1993. *Labyrinth (My Mother's Album)* was first exhibited as part of a larger show called *He Lost His Mind, Undressed, Ran Away Naked* at the Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Gallery in New York, January 6–February 3, 1990. *The Operating Room (Mother and Son)* was initially meant for the Centre Pompidou in Paris, but the installation was not realized. It was exhibited at the Nyktaiteen Museo in Helsinki (Feb 3–April 10, 1994) and then at Museet for Samtidskunst in Oslo (October 8, 1994–January 8, 1995).

this chapter, there is a tension between sincerity and ironic play in these works. While I will argue that Kabakov does indeed begin to engage in a more sincere or open expression of the self, this self-expression is not without the knowledge of the fiction that underrides any autobiographical project.

In part, we can situate this shift in Kabakov's artistic practice as part of a larger trend of what has been called the "New Sincerity," a phenomenon in reaction to postmodernism that has been ascendant in Anglophone and Russian spheres since the 1980s.[21] Trading postmodern irony for a renewed interest in sincerity and authenticity, the New Sincerity emerged at the time of perestroika and glasnost' and offered a new appraisal of the Soviet experience and its legacy after postmodernism.[22] Beginning in 1984, the conceptualist poet Dmitri Prigov turned away from ironic detachment towards what he called "New Sincerity" (*novaia iskrennost'*). He published a series of poems in samizdat that enjoined his readers to adopt a sincere attitude. And in the years that followed, he took up the term "New Sincerity" in lectures, poetry collections,

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[21] Ellen Rutten notes that this turn to sincerity occurred at roughly the same time in America and in Russia, although entirely independent of each other. In Russia, the post-conceptualist turn to sincerity harks back to Vladimir Pomerantsev's 1953 essay "On Sincerity in Literature" ('Ob iskrennosti v literature'). This classic Thaw-era essay argued for a renewed sincerity against socialist realism in the wake of Stalin's death. Rutten, *Sincerity after Communism*. In the Anglo-American literary context, David Foster Wallace's essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" (1993) is often taken as an unofficial manifesto for this new style of literature that returns to authenticity, sincerity, and emotional honesty as opposed to maintaining a cool, detached, ironic distance. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 are also often noted as a turning point in the move away from irony and cynicism towards sincerity and authenticity. For more on New Sincerity in the Anglo-American context, see Kelly, "The New Sincerity."

[22] Mark Lipovetsky concludes his book on Russian postmodernism with some thoughts on the return to realism and to sincerity after postmodernism, suggesting that in Russian and Anglophone postmodernism "another kind of fiction is gaining ground" as writers turn anew to realism. Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction*, 242–43.

and in his poetic performances.[23] Mikhail Epstein has noted the irony that it is the postmodernist conceptual artists like Prigov who "have turned out to be most susceptible to the aesthetics of sentimentality."[24]

In some respect, this shift seems an inevitable reaction to the postmodern moment. Inverting the temporal chronology implied in the "post-" prefix, Lyotard has suggested that the postmodern is, in fact, the vanguard of the modern, rather than what follows in its wake. He writes, "A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant."[25] Much as Yuri Tynianov suggested that literary evolution is a dynamic process ("O literaturnom fakte" [On Literary Fact] 1924), Lyotard posits an ongoing dialectical struggle as each successive generation challenges what came before; it is this challenge that constitutes the postmodern and ushers in the modern. And so, just as modernism gave way to realism (albeit realism with a difference) during the interwar years,[26] so too does the ironic signature of postmodernism eventually lead to a renewed interest in sincerity. This "new" sincerity cannot look the same, of course, after postmodernism; it is inflected by it.[27]

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[23] In 1991, the poet Sergei Gandlevsky wrote an essay entitled "Razreshenie ot skorbi," which introduced a similar idea, using the term "critical sentimentalism" (*kriticheskii sentimentalizm*).

[24] Mikhail Epstein, Aleksandr Genis, and Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover, *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture* (Berghahn Books, 1999), 457.

[25] Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 79.

[26] Devin Fore, *Realism after Modernism: The Rehumanization of Art and Literature* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012).

[27] As Ellen Rutten writes, new sincerity cannot be understood "without an understanding of the paradigm to which is responds and whose lessons it incorporates: postmodernism." Rutten, *Sincerity after Communism*, 7. Mark Lipovetsky makes a similar point when he writes that it is

In her recent book *Sincerity after Communism*, Ellen Rutten argues that the 1980s era of perestroika witnessed a fascination "with the new and with sincerity" in general, as works once banned were republished and the policy of glasnost encouraged free, sincere, open expression in public.[28] As Rutten defines it, new sincerity is linked with "the discursive gesture of honest self-disclosure" and the performance of a "trope of emotional transparency."[29] I would suggest that we see a similar shift towards "sincere" expression in Kabakov's works as he engages with his mother's history.[30] In this chapter, we will see how Kabakov removes the mask of other personages and other voices to seemingly give expression to his own self-narrative and his family's.

Relevant for our understanding of Kabakov's engagement with self-narration is Rutten's concept of "curative sincerity."[31] The rhetoric of sincerity, according to Rutten, offers a

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"a movement that is clearly rooted in the realistic tradition but that just as clearly has learned from the experience of postmodern art." Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction*, 243.

[28] Rutten, *Sincerity after Communism*, 82–83.

[29] Rutten, 9.

[30] Although Kabakov has not aligned himself explicitly with the new sincerity, he did exhibit some of his work as part of the exhibition *Neo Sincerity: The Difference Between the Comic and the Cosmic is a Single Letter* at Apexart Gallery in New York in 2006. Writing about the exhibit, Rutten suggests that it "emphatically configured sincerity as a sociopolitical tool: the makers saw it as an aesthetic strategy for coping with historical traumas such as the Soviet experiment and the Holocaust." Rutten, 107. The exhibition, curated by Amei Wallach, included pieces by Kabakov and fellow Soviet conceptualist artist Alexander Melamid, as well as Art Spiegelman. The show's title "neo-sincerity" was attributed to Spiegelman himself. According to Spiegelman, neo-sincerity is "sincerity built on a thorough grounding in irony, but that allows one to actually make a statement about what one believes in." In the exhibition brochure, Wallach notes the recent shift from postmodern irony to a new sincerity. The brochure and details about the exhibition are available at http://apexart.org/exhibitions/wallach.php (accessed February 8, 2018).

[31] Rutten, 89.

therapeutic way of coming to terms with the traumas of the Soviet past. Rutten's concept of "curative sincerity" builds on Alexander Etkind's work on the "warped mourning" of late and post-Soviet society, as the traumas and terror of Soviet life were left unburied, unprocessed, and unmourned.[32] It is through this new mode of sincerity and authenticity that cultural producers can re-engage with and re-evaluate the past.

Walter Benjamin writes in "The Storyteller" that "Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell."[33] In Kabakov's autobiographical works, it is a series of endings—the final end of the Soviet epoch and the premature end in the experience of emigration, as well as the death of the mother—that "sanction" and generate these reappraisals of the past. These endings confer meaning back onto the Soviet experience. It is the sense of an ending that prompts these self-narratives, retrospective in nature, to look back on the past. The personal narrative opens a window onto the larger historical narrative.

I would suggest that Kabakov uses this sincere approach in the use of photographs as a way of reflecting on and representing the traumas of the Soviet experience. In his installations and recent paintings, Kabakov uses family photographs to critique official narratives of the Soviet past, but in turn he goes on to expose the generic quality of family photographs and the prescribed forms of self-narrative, thus frustrating our sense of what can meaningfully be done with such photographic "evidence."

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[32] Etkind, *Warped Mourning*.

[33] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 94.

The Total Installation

Kabakov first began working on installations in his studio in Moscow in 1982. In 1987, he received a grant that brought him to Graz, Austria, which marked the beginning of his work in the West. In the West, Kabakov began to work almost solely in the new medium of the "total installation," often incorporating his earlier albums and paintings into these structures. The installation is "total" in the sense that the viewer enters a fully constructed space and is immersed in the installation.

As Kabakov describes it, he began working on total installations after he left the Soviet Union as way of re-creating the context that he had lost when presenting his work among other Soviet unofficial artists. In Moscow, he had made art for an intimate circle of other unofficial artists who shared his same cultural background and reference points. After Khrushchev's unfavorable reaction to the Manezh art exhibit in 1962, unofficial art primarily took place underground in private, rather than in public. There were small exhibits that did take place in public, and while these were very significant in that they exposed unofficial artists to works by the historical avant-garde, they were short-lived and unofficial culture mainly took place behind closed doors, within the domestic space of the studios.[34] But this intimate context of displaying your work for a small coterie of artists was lost in emigration. Kabakov writes that it was only once he began creating and showing his work abroad that he understood the importance of this "context."[35] It was by creating total installations that he was able to re-situate his works within

[34] Jackson, *The Experimental Group*, 52–53.

[35] Ilya Kabakov, *Über Die "Totale" Installation / O "Total'noi" Installiatsii / On the "Total" Installation* (Ostfildern: Cantz, 1995), 267.

their specific context through creating atmospheric spaces. The total installation enabled Kabakov to create an immersive environment that conditions how viewers receive his artworks.

During this period, Kabakov created several total installations based on the memoirs of his mother, Bertha Solodukhina. In 1987, Kabakov had made an album that incorporates the text of his mother's memoirs called *My Mother's Album* (*Al'bom moei materi*). After Kabakov's emigration to the West in 1987 and the death of his mother in February 1988, Kabakov repeatedly returned to the memoirs, reshaping them in various installations. While the textual material of the mother's memoir is largely the same in these installations, the presentation of the narrative differs greatly in each piece. What is gained and lost as the installation takes on various permutations? How can we understand Kabakov's continual return to the source material of the mother's memoir? How does Kabakov write himself into the narrative through the arrangement of these installations?

My Mother's Album

Before turning to the various installations, let us first look at the album itself. The subtitle «Жизнь как оскорбление» (*Life as an insult*) ushers us into the album. Evoking Dostoevsky's early novel *Униженные и оскорблённые* (*The Humiliated and the Insulted*), this subtitle sets the tone of the album, which will look at the hardships Kabakov's mother Bertha Solodukhina endured throughout her life.

The album opens with a typewritten letter dated 1981, addressed to Brezhnev by Solodukhina, which she wrote at the age of 79. She entreats Brezhnev to allow her to exchange her private apartment (20 square meters) for a state apartment with facilities (15 square meters) because as an elderly woman she says "I don't have the strength to carry water from afar, to

carry firewood, to heat the apartment—all this is too much at this age" (я уже не в силах издалека носить воду, носить дрова, отапливать квартиру—в этом возрасте все это не по силам).[36] For two years she has requested a change of residence but has consistently been denied. Frustrated by the refusal she has met with—after having lived through so much and worked so hard in earnest—she offers an indictment of the Soviet system: "I always tried to do everything within my power for people and for the state, but in old age I am met with such callousness and offence" (Я всегда старалась сделать все мне посильное для людей и государства, а в старости встречаю такую черствость и обиду).[37] In this letter to Brezhnev, the mother speaks out directly about her suffering, demanding that something be done in recompense for her hard work. It is the voice of a woman who seems finally disillusioned with a power that she once put great store in. Accompanying the letter to Brezhnev are several sketches of Solodukhina, presumably done by Kabakov.[38] Some are yellowed with age, one has a large yellow stain on the upper left-hand corner. All studies of her face from different angles, most of these drawings show her with her face in her hands. Together with the letter, they give expression to her weariness.

However, according to Kate Fowle, the letter is a fictional one, written by Kabakov himself.[39] Here, Kabakov adopts the identity of his mother to write a fictional letter to Brezhnev. Fowle suggests that, through the letter, Kabakov "is mocking the blind conviction" of his mother

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[36] Ilya Kabakov, *My Mother's Album* (Paris: Flies France, 1995), 15.

[37] Kabakov, 17.

[38] Kabakov, 7.

[39] Kate Fowle, "On Labyrinth (My Mother's Album)," *Not Everyone Will Be Taken Into the Future* (London: Tate Publishing, 2017), 49.

and others of her generation who "believed there was always someone 'up there' who could save the situation, if you could just reach them."[40] In what way, then, does this fake letter destabilize our understanding of this narrative as entirely sincere or honest? In the pages surrounding the letter, facsimile copies of the mother's handwritten narrative are included providing a material trace of the mother's hand, as if to insist on the reliability of the text. However, by beginning the album with this invented letter in her voice, doubt is cast on the veracity of the narrative that follows.

The text of his mother's memoir proper begins with an address to Kabakov in the form of a letter, dated January 22, 1982. From her opening lines, we learn that Kabakov has asked her to write the story of her life: "Dear son! You asked me to write the story of my life. I decided to fulfill your request" (Дорогой сынок! Ты просил написать историю моей жизни. Решила исполнить твою просьбу). By adopting the form of a letter, with an addressee, the self-narrative takes on a nominally dialogic form. The son requests the mother to tell the narrative of her life, which he then responds to by shaping it and housing it within the album.[41] The album, and the installations that will follow, become a work of co-creation between mother and son. Through his mother's personal story, Kabakov offers an allegory for the Soviet experience writ large.

The narrative that follows is a harrowing one. She speaks first of her parents, how they were both orphans and were taken in by a couple who didn't have children. She describes how they suffered because, before she was born, her parents lost two of their children. In 1920, she graduates from school at the age of 18. By the time she is 20, though, both of her parents have

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[40] Kate Fowle, "On Labyrinth (My Mother's Album)," 49.

[41] Judith Butler has argued that "giving an account of oneself" is always shaped by the demand of the other to tell one's story. See Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*.

died and it becomes her responsibility to care for her other siblings. This passage of her life proves difficult; she describes a near-constant situation of not having enough money and a scarcity of food.[42] At 27, she finds herself married (unofficially) to a man whom she rented a room to. The marriage is an unhappy one. She notes that on September 30, 1933 she gave birth to a child.[43] Although the child is Ilya, she does not call him by name, nor does she acknowledge that he is the presumed addressee of the narrative. She goes on to narrate how they survive the war by being evacuated to Samarkand, how her son attends art school there and shows great aptitude for drawing, and how they eventually move to Leningrad, and then to Moscow. In 1958, she moves to Berdyansk to visit her sister Riva and remains there. Despite the fact that she is writing this account at her son's request, she does not directly refer to him in the narrative after the initial address to him at the beginning. She seems, then, to take seriously the idea that she is writing her memoir for a general audience, not just for him.

The formal structure of the narrative gives the impression that she is writing it all at once, without taking the time to shape the *fabula* into an artfully crafted *siuzhet*. There are several moments in the text where she reveals that she had previously forgotten to mention a crucial detail and so just adds it in wherever she happens to be at that point in the narrative. For example, one such moment arises when she suddenly remembers that she had omitted to note that she had earlier attempted suicide by taking pills, but failed.[44] A little later, she again interjects another detail she had forgotten to mention earlier: that she had officially married her

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[42] Kabakov, *My Mother's Album*, 86.

[43] Kabakov, 141.

[44] Kabakov, 165.

husband on the day that Ilya was born.[45] Once again, she does not go back and add in these events where they belong in the narrative's chronology. It seems remarkable that these three events—her attempted suicide, marriage, and the birth of her first child—are the ones that are supposedly "forgotten." What might ordinarily be seen as momentous events in one's life are here not granted much narrative space. Rather than crafting her life according to the principles of literary eventfulness, Solodukhina seems to accord no one moment more significance than another. She narrates the story of her life as it occurs to her, thus creating the effect of an "authentic" or unedited narrative, given spontaneously.

After she finishes recounting a retrospective narrative of her life, she continues to write about her life in the present. It is at this point that the narrative begins to make us aware of the passage of time in the process of writing the narrative, as we become aware of the temporal leaps in her narrative of the present. For example, in one paragraph she writes about how she is currently staying with her sister Riva and that she plans to "stay here for April, and in May I'll have to go back to my place. I am well taken care of. I help with what I can. I read, rest. I will be 80 years old soon." In the next paragraph she writes, "I'm 80 years old," thus signaling that time has passed. She continues:

> I'm losing my strength. I get tired quickly. I still haven't returned home. I did a little remodeling, and I think I'll go home from the first of July. Riva promised to live with me for a month. She's still sick, coughs, and complains of pain in her heart. I came home from the first of July with Riva. We lived together for July and August.[46]

In this passage, we seamlessly move from a future plan to return home on the first of July, to a retrospective account of how she went home on July 1, to locating us in the present moment of

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[45] Kabakov, 167.

[46] Kabakov, 215.

September. After this, the narrative that begins as a letter switches to the form of a diary. The diachronic form of the diary allows the passage of time to be marked, unlike the synchronic form of the letter. The first diary entry is marked as March 8, 1983. We recall that her letter was dated January 22, 1982, and so ostensibly over a year has passed since she first began the process of narrating her life. She notes that time has passed since the last section of her narrative in September: «Прошло не мало времени пока я снова взялась за биографию» (A lot of time passed before I picked up my biography again).[47] And, unlike a letter, a diary is typically without an addressee. It is a private document of one's daily life, kept for oneself. She even begins to call it her diary (*dnevnik*) and comments on those times when she lets long intervals pass in between entries.[48] Although much of her narrative at this point describes the pain she is in, making it hard for her to write, nonetheless she continues on. If Solodukhina's decision to write this memoir was initially in a letter in response to her son's request, it soon becomes apparent that she has assumed ownership of her own self-narrative.

Not only does she continue to write a narrative of the self in her diary, she notes that she recommends to a friend that she should start writing her memoirs as well: "I wrote to my friend so that she would begin to write her memoirs. She has lived a difficult life. She was arrested, served for 8 years and was repressed" (Написала своей знакомой, чтобы она занялась писать свои мемуары. Она прожила тяжелую жизнь. Была арестована, сидела 8 и была репрессирована).[49] These are the stories that need to be documented before they are lost. For, as she notes in the next breath, her generation is dying out, giving urgency to this turn to the

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[47] Kabakov, 215, 217.

[48] Kabakov, 225.

[49] Kabakov, 221.

memoir-diary form: “My friends who I met with for cups of tea for many years have died. Regina Pavlovna, Irina Andreevna. Our circle is no longer. Our guard is irretrievably leaving. Soon my turn will come. It must” (Умерли мои друзья с кем встречалась на чашке чая много лет. Регина Павловна, Ирина Андреевна. Нет теперь нашего кружка. Уходит наша гвардия безвозвратно. Скоро дойдет и мой черед. Так надо).[50] The diary becomes a necessary form for preserving the fragments of the past, of bearing witness to what she and her generation have lived through.

Kabakov’s *My Mother’s Album* emerges at the beginning of a period that saw a flood of memoir publications that reflected on the Soviet experience. In her book *Stories of the Soviet Experience*, Irina Paperno locates the beginning of this publication wave in 1988, with the publication of Nadezhda Mandelstam and Evgeniia Ginzburg’s memoirs during glasnost.[51] As Paperno writes, the memoirs of this period share a common impulse “to make private documents public as a record of the end. In this sense, all of these personal records, regardless of when they were written, belong to the present moment, when they are assembled, framed, and put into the public domain for everybody to see. This moment is the end of an epoch.”[52] And so, with his request that his mother write her life narrative and his repeated return to it in his artwork, Kabakov here participates in a wider phenomenon of making public these private narratives that document the Soviet past. This sense of the impending “end of an epoch,” further compounded by Kabakov’s emigration to the West, motivates this autobiographical imperative to record. By

[50] Kabakov, 221.

[51] Paperno, *Stories of the Soviet Experience*.

[52] Paperno, xi–xii.

creating an album out of her memoirs (rather than a fictional character), Kabakov engages in a newly sincere way with the traumatic history of the 20th century through the story of his mother.

The album thus marks a transition in his artistic style, and yet the arrangement of the narrative in the album maintains some of the ironic play of his earlier work. As in his conceptualist pieces, Kabakov here reveals the falsity of the image of reality produced by Soviet ideology. He does this not by inventing yet another personality, but instead by speaking from a more autobiographical position. In *My Mother's Album*, Kabakov juxtaposes the text of his mother's memoir with official images from magazines and newspapers of the 1950s that depict the joy and prosperity of Soviet life. Groys notes that Kabakov uses these "impersonally optimistic images" of official Soviet photography "to symbolize the impersonal social background of life."[53] He dismantles the official version of life, as depicted in the photos, to represent the actual experience of Soviet citizens. Kabakov's album refuses to create a narrative that accords with the standard Soviet narrative of the self. Much of the memoir describes the mother's difficulty finding food, work, and housing, and this story of her suffering is then pointedly juxtaposed with official images of the bright and prosperous Soviet life. For example, at one point in the memoir Solodukhina describes how both of her parents have died when she is 20 and it is her responsibility to care for her other siblings, but she doesn't make enough money and there is not enough food.[54] One of the "official" images that is paired with this section of the narrative is a family celebrating a wedding anniversary with a large meal, with everyone gathered at the table. Or when she describes how she became seriously ill from malnourishment,

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[53] Boris Groys, "Russian Photography in the Textual Context," Diane Neumaier, ed., *Beyond Memory: Soviet Nonconformist Photography and Photo-Related Works of Art* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 123.

[54] Kabakov, *My Mother's Album*, 86.

Kabakov juxtaposes this section of the text with photos of people in sanatoriums, relaxing, looking healthy, and eating.[55] The juxtaposition between text and image in these instances starkly exposes the distance between reality and its glossy representation.

Indeed, the use of blank space in Kabakov's presentation of the text and image underscores this fundamental distance: the "official" photo is pasted onto the top of the page and then about 5 inches below there is a short fragment of text of about 7–11 lines. This empty space takes up much of the page; it visually represents the wide chasm between the image of life depicted in these photos and the mother's actual lived experience. All the "official" photos have their own captions that glorify the scene depicted in the image, but the memoir text serves as an alternative caption or text that challenges this "official" text. And so, this memoir works in opposition to the official images of Soviet life; Kabakov thus reveals the gap between reality and appearances. The installation offers a critique of the official narratives about Soviet life.

It is at this point that we must acknowledge that the memoir, and especially the diary portion of the narrative, seems similar to the kinds of narrative that Kabakov had invented for the fictionalized biographies in his other albums. If those albums were exercises in boredom, what Jackson calls "total nonexperiences," then the mother's diary also flirts with the tedium of everyday life.[56] In each entry, she reiterates her daily schedule that does not seem to change. From an entry on March 13, 1983 she writes, "In the morning until 11:00 I still move around, but from 11:00 my back and spine ache so and I have to lay down. After two hours of rest I can move again. Nonetheless, I do what I can around the house. I wash dishes, sweep, dust. I can't do

[55] Kabakov, 94–100.

[56] Jackson, *The Experimental Group*, 167.

anything more than that."[57] The entry on June 1 records a similar daily routine: "I take a walk in the morning for 1-1 ½ hours. Then there's breakfast. I wash the dishes and at 11:00 I become a casualty. My spine and back begin to ache. Then during the day I lay down for 1 hour. Then I do something, I read. At 5:00 there's supper. Then I wash the dishes again. I read the paper, watch the television."[58] Another entry from June 30 tells a similar story: "It's difficult to walk. My spine and lower back ache. I rest from 11:00 to 1:00 in the afternoon. Then the more difficult things come, laundry, cleaning. It's hard for me, but at least I'm home."[59] With its investigation of boredom, repetition of meaningless actions, the barely endurable slog of days in a Beckettian key ("I can't go on. I'll go on."), the diary portion of the narrative is in keeping with the kinds of experiments in boredom that Kabakov played with in his earlier albums.

Rather than trying to resolve the question of whether the diary is authentic, I would suggest that it is precisely this indeterminacy that animates the form. It is this uncertainty that encourages us to read the diary less as a "transparent" document of the self and more as an aesthetic work. As an actual diary, it is a normal recording of the minutiae of everyday life, of an unchanging routine; but once the diary is framed and arranged in the album by someone else, it becomes an aesthetic object.[60] Placed into the context of the album, the memoir no longer

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[57] Kabakov, *My Mother's Album*, 216.

[58] Kabakov, 218.

[59] Kabakov, 219.

[60] Gerard Genette's distinction between constitutive and conditional literariness is useful here. Genette suggests that to answer the question of what makes a text literary or a work of art we need to consider two regimes: the "constitutive" and the "conditional." A text may be deemed literary in the constitutive sense because it belongs to an accepted genre of poetic literature (the sonnet, the epic, etc.), regardless of its quality. The conditional regime accounts for how texts that were not intentionally created as literary works may later come to be seen as literary or aesthetic objects when we appreciate something about their form, beyond the content of the text.

functions as a private document that would offer direct access to her interiority. Rather, it becomes an aesthetic text that foregrounds the peculiar form of the diary as genre. The *form* of the diary bears symbolic or allegorical meaning: it reveals the emptiness of experience. And as a cultural and historical document, the diary has the potential to reveal something about the time in which it was written. With its catalogue of daily chores, the diary offers a portrait of late Soviet life, drained of the utopian aspirations of reforging the self or of joyous work. The diary stands in stark contrast to the official images of Soviet life.

If the revelation of the emptiness of official narratives about Soviet culture is familiar territory for Kabakov, it is the inclusion of his mother's narrative that distinguishes this album from his previous works. In his description of the album, he explicitly addresses how the two parts of the installation work in opposition to create a "real portrait of life":

> Серия «Альбом моей матери» составлена из автобиографических записок матери художника, Бейли Солодухиной, написанных ею, когда ей было 83 года. Это подробный рассказ о детстве в дореволюционной России, о тяжелых годах в перестраивающейся после революции стране, о жизни в «Великую Сталинскую эпоху» и после нее. Это и трогательный и мучительный рассказ о жизни, полной бесконечных страданий, приходящих и исчезающих надежд. Но у «Альбома» есть и другой, параллельный ряд. В верхней части каждого листа помещены цветные фотографии: вырезки из официальных журналов 50х годов—эпохи «цветущего социализма». Все эти «картины счастья» и подписи под ними повествуют о сбывшейся мечте человечества—о построенной наконец «справедливой и прекрасной стране»… Два этих ряда—«Праздник Труда и Побед» и беспрерывные мучения реального человека—пересекаясь, создают реальный портрет жизни в России начала и середины нашего века.[61]
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> The series "My Mother's Album" consists of autobiographical notes of the artist's mother, Beila Solodukhina, written by her when she was 83 years old. It is a detailed story about childhood in pre-revolutionary Russia, about the difficult years in a country undergoing post-revolutionary reform, about life during the "Great Stalinist Era" and afterwards. It is a touching and agonizing story about a life full of endless suffering, of

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Gérard Genette, *Fiction & Diction*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993). See especially Chapter One, "Fiction and Diction."

[61] Kabakov, *My Mother's Album*, 10–11.

> appearing and disappearing hopes. But "Album" has another, parallel level. There are color photographs on the top part of each page—cut-outs from original magazines from the 1950s, the era of "flourishing socialism." All of these "pictures of happiness" and the inscriptions beneath them recount the realization of humanity's dream—the building, finally, of a "just and beautiful country"… The intersection of these two series—"Holidays of Labor and Victories" and the unending suffering of a real person—creates a realistic portrait of life in Russia during the beginning and middle of our century.[62]

He insists that we are dealing here with the life of a real person (*real'nogo cheloveka*), which differentiates this album from his other demythologizing works that engage with socialist realism. By reminding us that she is a real person, not a character, Kabakov increases the emotional power of the narrative. Moreover, this introduction to the album emphasizes the emotional quality of the narrative. The mother's autobiography is "touching" (*trogatel'nyi*), "agonizing" (*muchitel'nyi*), and "full of unending suffering" (*pol'noi beskonechnykh stradanii*). The revival of such sentimental terms is part and parcel of the "new sincerity." The adjective *trogatel'nyi* evokes the language of Sentimentalism, but also insists on the affective capability of the narrative to touch the viewer. Epstein has noted the revival of such sentimental terms in the new sincerity after postmodernism. While conceptualism traded in exposing the banality of such "lofty" concepts, "then the radical courage of postconceptualism is to be found in the way it takes up these same clichéd words and uses them in their literal meaning, which has by now split into two: into a 'dead' meaning and a 'born-again' meaning."[63] Kabakov here resurrects these clichéd terms in an effort to return to them some sincere meaning. If agony or torment (*muka*) had earlier been invoked only obliquely through the ubiquitous figure of the fly (*mukha*) in

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[62] Kabakov, 7–8. I have amended the English translation slightly.

[63] Mikhail Epstein, "The Philosophical Implications of Russian Conceptualism," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 1, no. 1 (January 2010): 459, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2009.11.008.

Kabakov's work, here the ironic play with near homophones is given over to baldly pronouncing the word itself.

In the album, Kabakov deconstructs the *false* type of sincerity that we see in the overly optimistic or utopian images of the bright Soviet life, but he replaces this with a more serious kind of sincerity that forces us to look honestly and openly at the struggles of his mother. This is the double-edged nature of sincerity that Kabakov engages in this album; as Rutten notes, sincerity was both a "myth" to be deconstructed and "a potential curative force in digesting a troubled past."[64] While Kabakov's other works have long dealt with dismantling or demythologizing the façade of a simple and sincere image of Soviet life, it is a new addition in his work to offer the underside — to offer a "touching" and authentic narrative of this kind. The mother's album becomes an oblique or indirect autobiographical piece. As I have suggested, we can understand this turn to self-narrative as part of the New Sincerity after postmodernism, a need to turn to the traumatic past of the 20th century and to reckon with the Soviet experiment.

Mother and Son

In emigration and after the death of his mother, Kabakov would repeatedly return to this material in his installations. In 1990, Kabakov returned to the material from *My Mother's Album* (1987) to create a total installation called *Mother and Son*.

In this installation, the text and images from the album *My Mother's Album* are framed and placed around the perimeter of the room. In the middle of the room, random objects—such as a bottle of pills, a crushed beer can, an empty pack of cigarettes, some thread—hang from 16 pieces of rope stretched across the room. Attached to each object is a piece of paper that has

[64] Rutten, *Sincerity after Communism*, 18–19.

fragments of speech spoken by the son to his mother. These are everyday phrases, snippets of unexceptional speech: "Could you lend me some money? I'll return it to you in a month" or "But I don't want any tea. Why are you pouring me some?!"[65] Quotidian as they may be, these phrases conjure up specific scenes of everyday life between two people. In this regard, the phrases are reminiscent of the conceptual poet Lev Rubinshtein's piece "Appearance of the Hero" (*Poiavlenie geroia*, 1986) which consists of a series of index cards, each inscribed with a conversational but strikingly idiomatic phrase that evokes a particular situation of enunciation, such as «Ты, кстати, выключил утюг?» (By the way, did you turn off the iron?) or «Не слышно? Я перезвоню» (Can't hear? I'll call back).[66] Kabakov conceives of these texts as utterances that the viewer can hear. He writes:

> These resounding utterances, belonging to a concrete person whose name, patronymic and surname are often unknown, create a special effect while reading a phrase: we hear it, but we don't see the person saying it. But the authenticity, the excerpt quality, the ordinariness of such a word creates the feeling that the person speaking is standing somewhere very close by. A substitution arises, an illusion of the existence of the one whom we don't see, but clearly hear, and hence a written text can replace the material object.[67]

The structure of this part of the installation clearly recalls *16 Ropes* (1984), another of Kabakov's installation that exhibits a similar archival tendency to arrange and "classify" the detritus of everyday life. First installed in his Moscow studio, *16 Ropes* also displays a collection of forgotten junk objects with white labels that display chance fragments of speech. However, while

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[65] Ilya Kabakov, *Ilya Kabakov: Installations 1983-2000: Catalogue Raisonné*, ed. Toni Stooss and Kunstmuseum Bern, vol. 1 (Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2003), 256.

[66] Lev Rubinshtein, *Bol'shaia kartoteka*, ed. A. R. Kurilkin (Moskva: Novoe izdatel′stvo, 2015), 356, 361.

[67] Ilya Kabakov, *Der Text Als Grundlage Des Visuellen / The Text as the Basis of Visual Expression* (Köln: Oktagon, 2000), 242.

those fragments represented a multitude of voices in *16 Ropes*, in *Mother and Son* the hanging objects represent phrases spoken only by one person: the son addressing his mother.

The installation still maintains a polyphonic quality, as the son's utterances resound with the mother's self-narrative. The mother's narrative frames the son's voice, giving shape and coherence to his diffuse and fragmented remarks. In the description of the installation, Kabakov writes that the "compositional meaning" of the piece comes from the relationship between these two voices: the son's words to the mother "filled with purely undeserved grievances and belated regrets" and "the surrounding story of her life as told by her."[68] Kabakov's self-narrative cannot be told in isolation, but rather must include two voices speaking to each other. There is something mournful about the dialogue, not only because they fail to speak directly to each other, but also because even this dialogue, imperfect as it may be, can no longer take place. As Kay Larson wrote in a review of the installation, *Mother and Son* is "a work of devotion and contrition."[69]

The somber mood of the installation is further heightened by the fact that the room is bathed in darkness, with only a single lightbulb dimly illuminating the space. In his book *On the Total Installation*, Kabakov describes the psychological effect of a semi-darkened installation. He suggests that it "encourages the emergence of a semi-awake-semi-dream state. This state, like no other, activates our recollections, flows of fantasies, associations, analogies, all arising to the surface of our historical and cultural memory."[70] Within the darkened room of *Mother and Son*, suggestive of the womb, visitors are given a flashlight which they can direct at the objects to

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[68] Kabakov, *Installations: Catalogue Raisonné*, 2003, 1:255.

[69] Kay Larson, "The Tie That Binds," *New York Magazine*, July 12, 1993.

[70] Kabakov, *On the Total Installation*, 300–301.

illuminate them. Julie H. Reiss, the Assistant Curator of the 1993 exhibit at the Jewish Museum, writes about the experience of viewing *Mother and Son*:

> The Kabakov piece, *Mother and Son*, allowed the viewer to enter the room and be surrounded by the environment that Kabakov had created. To some extent, the experience was tightly controlled by the artist. Only six people were allowed in the room at one time, and to ensure this, a guard was hired to stand near the entrance of the space. The room was almost completely dark; the only light source was a painted-over lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. Visitors were required to use a flashlight when entering the space, but only six flashlights were provided, so people had to wait for someone to come out before they could get a flashlight and go in. Once inside, the viewer had to duck under the strings of refuse and Russian and English texts strung across the room. The flashlight could be used to illuminate works on the walls as well, at the viewer's own discretion. In that respect, the viewer controlled his or her own perception of the piece.[71]

Reiss highlights the tension between Kabakov's controlled environment and the viewer's freedom within it. While Kabakov restricts the number of people allowed within the installation, the viewers are ultimately in control of which objects they will focus on. They can view the son's objects and the mother's narrative at random, out of sequence. The text of the mother's memoir is already presented in a fragmented state, broken up and placed into 42 frames, but it is further fragmented by the viewer's interaction with the space. Indeed, in the description of the installation, Kabakov calls attention to the fragmented nature of the installation's narrative. As the viewer casts his flashlight around the room, she finds only "the chance fragments of the past, a past that is now already impossible to recapture or to change."[72] This again gives the installation a mournful aspect, as we feel the fragmentary quality of memory, the inability to piece it all back together and create a coherent whole. And, all the while, a voice singing old

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[71] Julie H. Reiss, *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999), 153.

[72] Kabakov, *Installations: Catalogue Raisonné*, 2003, 1:255.

Russian romance songs can be heard in the darkness, which adds to the installation's atmosphere of melancholic longing.

By translating the mother's album into the medium of an installation, Kabakov transforms the meaning of the text. No longer is it a text to be read in a linear fashion, from beginning to end, in the form of an album. In the form of the installation, it invites the viewers to absorb the text at random, at their own discretion. The narrative now functions less as a text to be read and more as a visual to be seen. If the logic of the album hinged on the contrast between the shining images of Soviet life and the mother's memoir, the installation places greater emphasis on the relationship between mother and son. The dialogic relationship between Kabakov and Solodukhina, through the contrapuntal arrangement of their voices, takes on new importance. Within the darkened intimate space of the installation, these fragments of voices create a kind of melancholy or mournful atmosphere. The installation exhibits a more serious engagement with affect, emotion, and sentiment that we can read as part of the "curative sincerity" Rutten describes.

After exhibiting *Mother and Son* at the Jewish Museum for the museum's re-opening in 1993, Kabakov recast the installation in a different key. The new installation, *Operating Room (Mother and Son)* (1994), bears some structural similarities to *Mother and Son*. As in *Mother and Son*, the mother's memoirs line the walls. However, instead of darkness, the room is "flooded with intense, bright, even white 'operation room' light."[73] In the center of the installation, instead of the objects hanging on pieces of rope, there is a labyrinth of white tables on which many of Kabakov's previous works, including the album *Ten Characters*, are

[73] Ilya Kabakov, *Ilya Kabakov: Installations 1983-2000: Catalogue Raisonné*, ed. Toni Stooss and Kunstmuseum Bern, vol. 2 (Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2003), 28.

displayed. These works "represent everything that is going on in the author's mind."[74] Indeed, when viewed from above, the labyrinth of tables comes to resemble a cross-section of the brain. Like *Mother and Son*, this installation offers a representation of the son's consciousness. While the darkened atmosphere of the first installation suggests a dream-like exploration of the unconscious, the sterile bright light of *Operating Room* takes a more clinical approach.

Although the materials in the center have changed, the essential structure between the frame and the center remains the same. Both *Mother and Son* and *Operating Room* stage a dialogue between the mother's self-narrative and the son's expressions of the self, but this relationship is configured differently in each installation. While in *Mother and Son* the mother's memoir frames the son's fragmentary utterances within the darkened space, in *Operating Room* the memoir frames the son's artistic creations. Just as the mother's narrative is broken up into frames that surround the room, so too are Kabakov's artistic creations also in frames. The installation thus invites a comparison between the invented biographies that populate Kabakov's artistic work and the mother's autobiographical narrative.

In the description of the installation, Kabakov discusses the relationship between the frame and the center:

> Both the 'labyrinth' and the 'ring' surrounding it are portraits of the consciousness of two real people: the author, Ilya Kabakov, and his mother, B. Solodukhina. Moreover, it is as though the 'mother's consciousness' — her genuine description of her life — surrounds the 'consciousness' of the son, encloses it inside itself, and a dialogue arises between them.[75]

The mother envelops the son — the classic iconography of mother with child transformed into a non-figurative embrace. The spatial arrangement of these installations recreates what the

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[74] Kabakov, 2:29.

[75] Kabakov, 2:29.

psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott would call the "holding environment" between mother and son, in which the mother physically holds the infant. If the holding environment is "good enough"—if the mother not only meets the child's needs but also "survives" the child's aggression, anger, grief—then the child's psyche is able to develop.[76] In these installations, the mother's narrative frames or holds the son's "consciousness" (to borrow Kabakov's phrase) within the center of the installation. The mother's surrounding self-narrative not only gives shape and meaning to the son's pieces, but also enables the son to express himself. If, as we recall, the mother's memoir was demanded by the son, here he offers a response to her story. It is by shaping and arranging her narrative, placing it in connection with his own, that he attempts to express his own consciousness.

As mentioned earlier, Kabakov began his experiments with the total installation in an effort to re-create the context that he had lost in emigration: the presentation of his albums and paintings within the familiar space of his studio to a group of fellow artists who understood the social conditions that shaped his creative work. In these installations, however, the context that defines his work is recast as the fundamental relationship between mother and child. This is the relationship that structures and gives meaning to his work. In the space of the "operating room," all of his albums and artworks are reconceived as an attempt to communicate with the mother.

Labyrinth: My Mother's Album

Kabakov would again return to the autobiographical material from *My Mother's Album* to create another installation: *Labyrinth: My Mother's Album* (1990). But in this installation,

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[76] D. W. Winnicott, *The Child, the Family, and the Outside World* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 1987), 182–83.

Kabakov takes a different approach to the material. Unlike *Mother and Son* or *Operating Room*, this installation does not create a dialogue through the juxtaposition of the son's fragments of speech with the mother's narrative. We have only the mother's narrative. Nor does it pitch us into a dark room with only a flashlight to illuminate the narrative that surrounds us. Instead, the installation is constructed, as the title suggests, like a labyrinth.

The narrow corridors, low ceilings, and bad lighting evoke the halls of a communal apartment. Given that much of the mother's memoir is about the struggle to find a place to live, the location of her memoir within the space of the installation is fitting: the corridor seems to offer the possibility of finding a home. And yet, the inability to find the right door in the corridor that would allow you to enter into a living space denies us a place to rest. Moreover, the ephemerality of the installation reminds us that even the haven of the corridor will soon disappear.

On the walls hang frames that combine photographs with the text from his mother's memoirs. However, the images from official magazines that were used in *My Mother's Album* have been replaced by photographs taken by Kabakov's uncle Yu. G. Blekher (his mother's brother-in-law). The use of these photos from the family archive differs from his usual artistic practice. Kabakov has written about his use of stock photographs to create his "realistic" paintings in the style of Socialist Realism. He writes that for these paintings it was critical to use anonymous photographs, rather than personal ones:

> I would use photographs of what should be depicted in the painting. But which photographs? They had to be 'alien' to me—taken by people I don't know and depicting places and people I don't know; this was the most important thing—that I did not know any of this and *did not want to know!* Furthermore, right up until today (with the rare exception), I would always make use, one could say, of material twice removed from me: reproductions of these photographs printed in Soviet magazines of the 1950s with all their accompanying qualities: the poor quality of the print, dull colors, misalignments, hackwork in terms of coloring and editing. In other words, I required that very

> anonymous, disinterested 'product' that ostensibly everyone needs but no one in particular actually needs; this 'product' corresponded precisely to that understanding of 'reality' discussed above. […] And I would like to reiterate, or rather to clarify: in all of these cases, I used not the photograph, but the reproduction to achieve my goals, that is, a double mechanical re-creation which has already twice distorted that which exists 'in reality.'[77]

While Kabakov continued this practice by using stock photos for *My Mother's Album* and the other installations, in *Labyrinth* he replaces these stock images with personal photos. If before Kabakov had taken on the roles of curator, archivist, and art historian when putting together installations such as *Alternative History of Art* that exhibited artworks by fake artists, now he again steps into the role of curator but in order to bring together the private voices from his own family. Although the installation still presents us with biographies of other people and images created by other artists, we would be hard pressed to call this the same kind of "self-expropriation" of authorial voice that Groys sees as typical of Kabakov's oeuvre. Instead, although it is the memoir of his mother, this narrative obliquely also tells us of Kabakov's own life. Rather than his typical ironic play with clichéd images of Soviet life or with invented characters, Kabakov here speaks from a more autobiographical position. Writing about *Labyrinth*, Kate Fowle observes that "we are given a rare glimpse of Kabakov in plain sight. To embrace that this installation is devoid of actors is to be given an extraordinary window into a

[77] Ilya Kabakov, "About My Paintings," in *Ilya Kabakov: Paintings 2008–2013: Catalogue Raisonné*, ed. Emilia Kabakova and Willem Jan Renders, vol. 3 (Bielefeld: Kerber, 2013), 31. In an interview with Willem Jan Renders, Kabakov also emphasizes the importance of using anonymous images for depicting Soviet life in his paintings. Willem Jan Renders, "Whose Painting Is This?," in *Ilya Kabakov: Paintings 2008–2013: Catalogue Raisonné*, ed. Emilia Kabakova and Willem Jan Renders, vol. 3 (Bielefeld: Kerber, 2013), 25–26.

reality that underpins the artist's usual 'experiments in biography'. We are made witness to facts that have been camouflaged in a lifetime of elaborate fictions."[78]

The photographs are of the Ukrainian city Berdyansk, where Kabakov's mother lived for the last few decades of her life. These sepia-toned photos sharply diverge from the colorful and joyous representation of Soviet life in the "official" photographs. Blekher's photos are more melancholic, sentimental, and personal than the photos taken from Soviet magazines. Often of empty landscapes, these images have a quietness to them. There is a shift, then, from the album and the previous two installations that include generic images from Soviet magazines to the presentation of the memoir in *Labyrinth* where these images are replaced by the unofficial photographs taken by his uncle.

Directly underneath the fragments of text, however, are thin cutouts from Soviet postcards. The photos of official "Soviet life" that had dominated the visual field in *My Mother's Album* are now reduced to slivers. Now, priority is given to Blekher's photographs. Given their fragmentary presentation, these images of official Soviet life are no longer legible. Instead, they simply give a dash of color. Relegating these fragmented bright images to a space *beneath* the text and the other image also signals a shift in Kabakov's approach to this material. If the visual logic of *My Mother's Album* operated on the principle of radical juxtaposition, then *Labyrinth* operates on the principle of correspondence or consonance. The elements within the frame do not fight each other, rather they reinforce each other. Blekher's melancholy photographs form a unity with the mother's narrative, as opposed to the sharp divide between image and text in the album. I would suggest that we can read the interplay between text and image in this installation

[78] Kate Fowle, "On Labyrinth (My Mother's Album)," Bingham, *Not Everyone Will Be Taken Into the Future*, 50.

as part of Kabakov's increasing turn to a more sincere engagement with the Soviet past. *Labyrinth* offers a sentimental portrait of his mother's life free of Kabakov's typically playful, ironizing, demythologizing treatment of official images of socialist realism and Soviet life.

All of these fragments—Blekher's photographs, the memoir text, and the postcard cutouts—are pasted on pink wallpaper, which are in turn framed. In his installation of family photographs *On the Roof*, which we will turn to later, Kabakov also includes several of Blekher's photographs. He describes how Blekher, a professional photographer, "most of all loved to take pictures for himself—to wander around his beloved city and photograph 'selected' corners—a wonderful collection of these photographs was left by him."[79] After developing his photos, he would "glue them on colored cards, outlining each photograph with a color frame."[80] As we can see, the presentation of the photographs framed by colored paper and pasted on pieces of wallpaper in the installation seems indebted to his uncle Blekher's method. The wallpaper brings a bit of color to the dreary environment of the installation, but moreover a certain domesticity to the presentation of the memoirs that was absent from the earlier grey frames. Each frame now bears the title «воспоминания моей мамы», the title of the photograph, and then «биография мамы», all in Kabakov's handwriting. The repetition of these handwritten titles on each frame emphasizes the handmade quality, as opposed to being mass-produced. Kabakov writes that he "brought all of these elements from Moscow, including the old grayish-pink wallpaper on which all of this is glued."[81] Kabakov emphasizes the provenance of these elements to insist on their

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[79] Ilya Kabakov, *Auf Dem Dach / On the Roof* (Dusseldorf: Richter Verlag, 1997), 137.

[80] Kabakov, 137.

[81] Kabakov, *Der Text Als Grundlage Des Visuellen / The Text as the Basis of Visual Expression*, 372.

authenticity, their ability to recreate a world within the space of the museum. As opposed to the kitschy reproductions of socialist realist images or the austere, anonymous background of the grey paper, these materials evince a more intimate, emotional presentation of the narrative.

The sentimental aspect of the installation is heightened by the fact that Kabakov's voice can be heard singing old Russian romance songs. *Labyrinth* was the first installation, Kabakov notes, in which he included a "musical part."[82] And the importance of the voice in this installation, as he describes it, is to set off the boredom the viewer experiences while moving through the labyrinth. He suggests that the viewer would be "permeated with fatal boredom and not just from the content of the text, the appearance of the 'poor' images and the corridor, but from the vexation that he had wound up in such a tedious, monotonous, 'bad' installation—if it weren't for the voice and its important role in this work."[83] He suggests that the voice is important because it is first audible just when the viewer is likely to be seized by boredom, as he encounters yet another corridor. The voice grows louder as you move towards the center, and this leads the viewer on to continue walking. Reaching the center of the labyrinth, where the voice is loudest, the viewer expects to finally see the person singing; instead, the viewer is confronted with a small, empty room in disarray. And as the viewer moves away towards the exit, the voice again gradually weakens.

By structuring the installation as a labyrinth, Kabakov invokes the Greek myth of the Cretan Labyrinth created by Daedalus to house the Minotaur. As the myth goes, Theseus enters the Labyrinth to slay the Minotaur, aided by a ball of thread given to him by Ariadne to help him

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[82] Kabakov, *On the Total Installation*, 304.

[83] Kabakov, 304–305. I amended the translation slightly to use the term "images" instead of "paintings" for *kartiny*.

find his way out of the maze. By stepping into the labyrinth, we are transported to a shadowy otherworld. We move deeper into the labyrinth in order to eventually re-emerge into the light, transformed by the obstacles encountered and vanquished within. In this respect, the journey into and out of the labyrinth also works as a powerful metaphor for rebirth. Indeed, in Book 6 of Vergil's *Aeneid* an ekphrastic description of the Cretan labyrinth engraved by Daedalus on the temple doors of Cumae prepares the reader for Aeneas' imminent descent into the Underworld. The Underworld, like the mythic Labyrinth, is easy to enter, but difficult to exit: "Easy" is the way into Dis, "but to recall your steps to rise again / into the upper air: that is the labor" (VI.175–79).[84] Journeying into the depths of the labyrinth to emerge back into life thus connotes a symbolic rebirth or transformation.

The labyrinthine structure of the installation thus comes to signify the mother's journey through life, which we as spectators must retrace. However, if this mythic Labyrinth animates the installation, it is not without significant changes. At the center of the Labyrinth, we find not a Minotaur but an abandoned room littered with rubbish. The center structures the classical labyrinth, as it is here that the hero undergoes the climactic test which gives meaning to the journey. With nothing at the center of Kabakov's labyrinth, the hope for regeneration or transformation is dashed. The center has been emptied of significance. There is no ultimate center that would stabilize meaning, no center that makes sense of the mother's suffering. In short, we have moved from the epic myth to the prosaic novel. There is no beast to slay, no recognizable foe to be vanquished, just an endless string of days spent in suffering.

Indeed, part of the myth's deflation stems from the very *unreadability* of the mother's narrative in this installation. The viewer is not expected to actually read the entire narrative while

[84] Virgil, *The Aeneid of Virgil*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam Books, 2004), 135.

moving through the installation.[85] Once her memoir is placed within the frame, it is taken out of the context of the album that is read cover to cover.[86] As noted above, the darkened room in *Mother and Son* also made it difficult to "read" the narrative in its entirety. And although the structures of these two installations differ greatly, there are similar impediments to reading the narrative smoothly in *Labyrinth*. The placement of the frames within the corridor of *Labyrinth* are such that the photographic images are roughly at eye-level, but you need to stoop down or hunch over somewhat to read the text that is placed below eye-level. You must engage your body actively to try to read it. It is not an installation that you can passively take in. Or, rather, you *can*, but this would involve simply glancing at the frames and moving on. To actually "read" each frame, all 76 of them, would take hours. The viewer can either engage in the difficult process of attempting to read each frame, or speed through the corridor of the labyrinth.

And yet, while the presentation of the frames belabors the process of reading the narrative, the installation is also configured in such a way that makes it difficult for the viewer to simply disregard the frames and walk quickly through the corridor. When the installation was originally exhibited at the Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York, vertical wooden beams punctuated the corridor.[87] These beams influence the way a participant or viewer could *move* through the space; as the beams obstruct the path, the viewer has to physically step around them. By impeding the viewer's progress through the hallway, the installation forces the viewer to slow

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[85] Kabakov, however, suggests in his lectures on installations that "In general the role of the text in the installation is enormous, in particular, the total installation easily accepts texts into it, large masses of texts. The viewer in the installation actually does read." Kabakov, *On the Total Installation*, 247.

[86] Kabakov, 293.

[87] These beams were not present in the latest exhibit of the installation at the Tate Modern, allowing viewers to speed through the installation unimpeded.

down — an example of what Viktor Shklovsky called *zatrudnenie* or "making difficult." Shklovsky argued that the artistic device of *zatrudnenie* helps to de-automatize our perception of the world. In this case, the beams seem to encourage the viewer to turn back and look more closely at the frames on the corridor wall. The journey is made difficult.

Nonetheless, Kabakov acknowledges that the viewer is ultimately at liberty, according to the logic of the installation, to move around and linger longer over certain parts than others. In his description of how a viewer might move through the Labyrinth, he writes: "He immediately enters its dull gloom, and the speed of his movement depends only upon his willingness to read the text on each 'painting.' Instantaneously, the viewer understands that there won't be anything besides the paintings and that he is free to walk as quickly as he wishes along the corridor."[88]

Indeed, this is what I witnessed when *Labyrinth* was shown as part of the Kabakovs' recent exhibition "Not Everyone Will be Taken into the Future" at the Tate Modern.[89] Viewers of the installation at the Tate Modern initially attended closely to the frames, dutifully reading the text and looking at the photographs. But soon they realized, as the corridor twists and turns, that there are many more of these frames—too many for them to take in. They then moved swiftly through the installation.

Whether the viewer moves slowly or quickly through the installation, it is clear that the installation privileges form over content. We are not expected to read every word. Rather, it is about the affective or bodily experience of struggling to read the narrative when the form is so forbidding. The fragmented frames force you to slow down your reading process, as you hunch

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[88] Kabakov, *Der Text Als Grundlage Des Visuellen / The Text as the Basis of Visual Expression*, 372.

[89] The exhibit, *Ilya and Emilia Kabakov: Not Everyone Will Be Taken Into the Future*, was on view at the Tate Modern in London from October 18, 2017 to January 28, 2018.

over and strain your eyes in the dim light to read the small print, while the beams obstruct your path. The installation forces the viewer into an uncomfortable position, no matter how brief, as they make their way through the installation. To be a viewer in *Labyrinth* is to experience a physical demand on your body. In this way, the form of the installation attempts to produce in the viewer some semblance of what his mother suffered over her long life as we wander the corridor and grow tired. In this regard, the installation seems to offer something of a challenge, as the viewer can either take up this struggle or hurry out in search of the exit, trying to escape.

As we have seen, Kabakov continually returns to his mother's memoir, reworking it in different ways. The repeated return to the mother's memoir seems informed by the medium of installation art itself. Ephemeral by nature, the installation does not last. It will be taken down. The impermanence of the installation is thus challenged with each successive transformation of the piece, as it is revived in different configurations. The world of his mother has disappeared but is brought back to life briefly in the installation, although with the knowledge that it will soon again disappear.

We could also read this return in a psychoanalytic key, as a metaphor for the compulsion to repeat, as Kabakov returns to the traumatic narrative of the mother in order to master it. Indeed, with each successive revision, it is primarily *his relation to the mother's narrative* that is transformed. Sometimes it is cast as a dialogue between her life narrative and his creative works as in *Operating Room*, or his everyday utterances as in *Mother and Son*, while at other times her narrative takes center stage as his presence diminishes as in *Labyrinth*. While Kabakov demanded a self-narrative from his mother, it is in his shaping and re-shaping of it that he also provides something akin to his own expression of the self through his response to her narrative.

These installations dramatize the fact that every self-narrative negotiates the relationship between self and other.

On the Roof

The cluster of installations around Solodukhina's memoir reveal Kabakov's increased interest in using autobiographical materials. These installations presented us with a kind of oblique narrative of the self in dialogue with the mother. Kabakov's later installation *On the Roof* (1996) offers a more explicit form of self-representation, as hundreds of Kabakov's family photos are displayed and narrated. Exhibited at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, the installation creates the space of a roof. The viewer emerges onto the walkways of the "roof" among the sloping sides of the roof and windows that look into 10 different rooms. These windows are at eye-level, so viewers can easily peer into these rooms and there is a door to each that they can enter. The décor of the rooms suggests comfortable middle-class living spaces. The rooms have the appearance of being lived in; some have children's toys scattered casually around the room, others have chairs that look recently occupied. In each room, a projector displays a slideshow of family photographs onto the wall. There are several chairs assembled so that viewers can sit down and watch the slide show. A voiceover narrates the slideshow; in some rooms it is a man's voice and in other rooms a woman's voice. The slideshow in the first room shows scenes from childhood and each successive room depicts another stage of life. Each room shows about 25 photos, with 237 photographs in all.

Given that (as noted above) Kabakov typically prefers to use photographs of anonymous figures rather than of people he knows, the use of family photographs in this installation makes it singular in his oeuvre. Moreover, as Margarita Tupitsyn has noted, photography was not the

medium of choice for many unofficial artists because of the government's use of photography for mythologizing Soviet life.[90] Tupitsyn writes that unofficial artists saw photography as "a prime suspect in the success of the deceptive political apparatus," and thus dismissed its ability to offer "a potent creative realm."[91] As Ekaterina Degot points out, photography was low in the hierarchy of the arts in the Soviet Union, but that this low ranking actually signals its "extreme importance" since "the Soviet art system […] radically privileged 'non-art.'"[92] Unofficial artists displayed distrust or skepticism about this purportedly objective medium when it was known to be an organ of propaganda.[93] Tupitsyn shows how Kabakov and other artists turned to the photographic archive as a productive site. In several of his works, Kabakov delves into this archive of mythologizing photos and repurposes it in his work, revealing the images' constructed nature. This tendency, as we have already seen, structures the relationship between word and image in the album *My Mother's Album* and the installations *Mother and Son* and *Operating*

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[90] Margarita Tupitsyn, "Against the Camera, for the Photographic Archive," *Art Journal* 53, no. 2 (1994): 59, https://doi.org/10.2307/777486. However, it should be noted that photography was of vital importance to the group Collective Actions (Коллективные Действия), as it was through photography that they created an archive of their performances and happenings. And there were unofficial artists who did practice photography and incorporate it into their work, such as Igor Palmin, Boris Mikhailov, Yurii Leiderman, and Nikita Alekseev.

[91] Tupitsyn, 59.

[92] Ekaterina Degot, "The Copy is the Crime: Unofficial Art and the Appropriation of Official Photography," Neumaier, *Beyond Memory*, 107. She writes: "Museums did not collect photographs; the names of photographers whose pictures were published in newspapers were often unknown; they could join the Union of Journalists but never the Union of Artists. Photography was simply not seen as an art" (107).

[93] Indeed, as Ilya Kukulin has remarked in relation to documentary poetry of the late Soviet period, "a 'document' was perceived as something fake that by definition had nothing to do with reality and required deconstruction." Ilya Kukulin, "Documentalist Strategies in Contemporary Russian Poetry," trans. Josephine von Zitzewitz, *The Russian Review* 69, no. 4 (October 2010): 586.

Room that deconstruct photographs from Soviet magazines by juxtaposing them with his mother's harrowing memoir.

In *On the Roof* Kabakov takes a different approach to the use of photographs. Rather than mining photos from the Soviet archive, he turns to the archive of family photographs. The installation displays photographs of Kabakov and his family, as well as his wife Emilia and her family. If photography was used to mythologize life in the Soviet Union, then these personal photos from the family archive do the opposite. These photographs show the underside of the mythic vision of socialist realism. They represent the ordinary, uneventful, everyday moments that make up a life. The use of personal photographs combined with first-person narratives about the family indicates a turn to sincerity. And yet, as we will see, this more emotional engagement with the past and with memory in the first-person is nonetheless tempered with the conceptualist artist's awareness of the limits of such an endeavor.

The installation follows the pattern of displaying a photograph accompanied by a description that often begins with "This is…" (Это…). Kabakov seems to be playing with the idea of photography as a referential medium. The verbal narrative insists that these images refer to figures beyond the installation ("This is Galya"). But, over time, the endless repetition of this formula begins to deconstruct this idea. Who are these people that the photos and narration refer us to? Do they remain out of reach?

Here it might be illustrative to compare this piece with one of his paintings *Where Are They?* (1971). The canvas is framed by a light blue border on the top and bottom, although the border on the bottom is a shade darker than the blue on top. The white space between the borders is broken into five columns. All of the columns are empty, save the one on the far left. In handwritten script, the whereabouts of 27 people are asked: «Где Ефим Борисович

Теодоровский? Где Иннокентий Борисович Райский? Где Софья Алексеевна Костороженская?» and so on. We know nothing about these characters, only that they are absent. The absence of any figuration and the emptiness of the following columns strengthens the feeling of their absence. And yet, by calling these people by name, a sense of their presence is conjured up, if only to be immediately banished. The painting stimulates a desire for narrative: to know more about these people who are gone. Where have they gone and why? Does their disappearance speak to the Purges, or is this a more quotidian question about the inhabitants, say, of a communal apartment? But the ultimate lesson of the painting is simply that they are not real, they are nothing more than text painted on the canvas. They are empty signs that refer to nothing. As Mikhail Epstein writes, Conceptualism reveals "the emptiness of its own signs," as it "discloses the contingency of all concepts and refuses to ground itself in any reality."[94] While the slideshow of *On the Roof*, with its repetition of "This is…", still plays with the conceptualist idea of the elusive signifier, of reminding us that these are signs detached from their referent, the tenor of that game shifts as the question (*gde*) becomes an affirmative statement of presence (*eto*) and photographs are introduced. The photographs give an affirmation of presence, however spectral and fleeting.

With the repetition of "This is…" to narrate a succession of photographs, the installation calls to mind the conceptualist poet Lev Rubinshtein's 1995 piece "That's Me…" («Это я…»). Written on 119 index cards, the poem presents a fragmentary self-portrait through a description of photographs:

1. Это я.
2. Это тоже я.
3. И это я.
4. Это родители. Кажется, в Кисловодске. Надпись: «1952».

[94] Epstein, "The Philosophical Implications of Russian Conceptualism," 69.

5. Миша с волейбольным мячом.
6. Я с санками.

1. This is me.
2. This is also me.
3. And this is me.
4. This is my parents. In Kislovodsk, it seems. Caption: "1952".
5. Misha with a volleyball.
6. Me with a sled.[95]

In a reading of this piece, Mark Lipovetsky suggests that the photographs work to embody the dislocated voice of the "I" in the poem. While he notes that Andrei Zorin has characterized Rubinshtein's poetic world as being "populated by bodiless voices calling out in the void," in this poem Lipovetsky argues that "the device of the photographs' names gives a very concrete and, in fact, bodily significance to words that are extremely general (indeed, to pronouns)."[96] According to Lipovetsky, by attaching deictic shifters such as the pronoun "I" to photographs, the poem claims some referential power. And yet, it seems crucial that those photographs are not shown. I would suggest that, rather than the notional photos giving concrete bodily form to the pronouns, we witness the reverse process. The photos of one's self come to be seen as dependent on context to signify as the slippery pronoun "I." If anything, the "I" in this poem seems less securely connected with a physical body given the very profusion of supposed bodies found in the photographs that the poetic "I" claims to refer to.

The ninth index card—"Рынок в Уфе. Надпись: 'Рынок в Уфе. 1940 г.'" ("A market in Ufa. Caption: 'Market in Ufa. 1940.'")—neatly encapsulates how these "captions" foreground questions of representation, as it presents us with the (notional) photograph of a market in Ufa, a

[95] Rubinshtein, *Bol'shaia kartoteka*, 569. See also Rubinshtein's piece "Я здесь" (Here I am, 1994), 555–66. My translation.

[96] Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction*, 148.

textual inscription, and a recapitulation of the caption. It does something similar to Joseph Kosuth's classic conceptualist piece *One and Three Chairs* (1965) which offers a lesson in semiotics by presenting three modes of representing a chair: a full-scale photograph of a chair, a wooden chair, and an enlarged dictionary definition of a chair. In Rubinshtein's poem, the repetition of the textual signifiers reveals the emptiness of these signs.

Unlike Rubinshtein's poem, though, *On the Roof* does include actual photographs. Even though *On the Roof* still plays with the gap between the verbal description/narration and the photographs, the use of actual photographs gives a bodily presence to the disembodied voices of the speakers.

The installation, with its narrated slideshows projected in living rooms, simulates the intimate readings of his work that Kabakov would give in in his studio in Moscow. As noted earlier, unofficial culture took place in private, domestic studio spaces, not in museums and gallery spaces. Not only did Kabakov share his work with his fellow artists in studios and view the masterpieces of the Russian avant-garde in George Costakis' living room, but many of his works also explore the domestic spaces of late Soviet culture, such as his Kitchen Series (1981–82). As Jackson writes, Kabakov's installations offer a "domestication of the utopian imagination."[97] *On the Roof* is no exception, as the viewers are invited to step out of the museum space and into the domestic realm. If in *Labyrinth* we were consigned to wander the empty corridor, trying to open doors and finding that they led nowhere, then here we are invited to enter into the rooms of this family. We are privy to hearing them narrate their lives. The fifth room in this installation (the centerpiece of *On the Roof*) even recreates Kabakov's artist studio in Moscow, which further invites the comparison between this installation and the readings

[97] Jackson, *The Experimental Group*, 59.

Kabakov would give as an unofficial artist in Moscow. Indeed, Kabakov's studio was located in the attic of a building on Sretensky Boulevard. There are several photographs in the installation of Kabakov on the roof of the building; one such image pictures Kabakov with his daughter Galya, accompanied by a voice that comments: "The entire roof of that building, or rather under it, also housed artists' studios who, seeing us passing by, would invite us in and we would drop in through the window. It was really interesting, this journey from a room to the roof and then into a room again…"[98] This itinerary—travelling from room to room via the roof—describes, of course, the installation's setting "on the roof." The installation thus tells the story of this family while also recreating the spaces in which the underground world (or, perhaps more accurately, the attic world) of Moscow Conceptualism flourished.

In his description of the installation, Kabakov highlights the banality of the slideshow of family photos. As he says, this is a ritual that all families partake in, and such showings are interesting only if you have some attachment to those who are involved or pictured. The viewer can feel like an outsider watching slides of people he does not know. Kabakov's works often flirt with the banal, emptiness, and boredom. Kabakov's performances of albums such as *Ten Characters* could last up to four hours. Indeed, Kabakov once described the performances of his albums, which he began to do in the 1970s, as being similar to "a situation entirely familiar to everyone, when we arrive at someone's house and the hostess, not knowing how to occupy us, begins to show us the fat 'family' album with family photographs. 'This is our aunt, this is our brother-in-law, these are my sister's acquaintances from the institute…'"[99] Kabakov thus literalizes the correspondence between his artistic work and the family photo album in this

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[98] Kabakov, *On the Roof*, 164.

[99] Quoted in Jackson, *The Experimental Group*, 150.

installation: viewers drop into someone's room and are shown family photos while disembodied voices narrate the slides. Jackson writes that Kabakov's album performances "furnished total nonexperiences" and exposed the "invisible hollow core of Soviet […] consciousness."[100] A similar dynamic seems to be at play in this installation. Hundreds of photos are shown, each receives a brief description. The cumulative effect of these images, though, is an evocation of a lost world.

The arrangement of the installation follows the general structure of the *Bildungsroman*; as we move from room to room we progress chronologically from childhood to adulthood. The typicality of the installation's structure leads the viewer, Kabakov suggests, to potentially begin to feel that these images are somehow also about him. He writes that the viewer might eventually begin to feel that he is included in the family history unfolding in the slideshow:

> Он, зритель, то абсолютно посторонен судьбе людей внутри комнат, он 'человек с крыши' — то, с другой стороны, зайдя в любую из них, погрузившись в незатейливую 'семейную' историю, он понимает, что это и 'про него', и у него, в его жизни было то же самое, и он такой же, как 'они', такой же, как все…[101]
>
> He, the viewer, is either a complete outsider vis-à-vis the fate of the people inside the room, he is a 'person from the roof,' or on the other hand, dropping into any one of these rooms, submerging himself into an ordinary 'family' story, he understands that this is also 'about him,' and he experienced the same things in his life, and he is just the same as 'they' are, the same as everybody else…[102]

The banality of the family album opens it up to a kind of universal experience. They could be of anyone. Everyone's family album looks more or less the same. Indeed, this is the point that Pierre Bourdieu makes in his sociological study of photography (1965). Describing what he calls

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[100] Jackson, 167.

[101] Kabakov, *On the Roof*, 169.

[102] Kabakov, 13.

the "family function" of photography, Bourdieu suggests that photos of families are a means of reaffirming the cohesion of the group.[103] Moreover, the types of photographs that families, or other groups, take to affirm their connection are socially conditioned. Although photography seems to open up infinite possibilities about what could be represented, which could lead to a situation of "anarchy," Bourdieu argues that photography is in fact highly structured. "There is nothing more regulated and conventional than photographic practice," for people "obey implicit canons" of composition and subject matter when deciding what and how to photograph.[104] Kabakov's implication that his family photographs are potentially interchangeable with the viewer's thus seems to share common ground with Bourdieu's understanding of photographs, and family photographs in particular, as implicitly shaped by societal norms. To revise Tolstoy's famous phrase: all family albums, happy or unhappy, are alike.

The narratives that accompany the photographs in *On the Roof* thus function differently from the captions to photographs in Nabokov's autobiography. As we recall, Nabokov worked to authorize the captions as his singular creations—by pointing out the falsity of some of the poses that made the family look like something it wasn't, by drawing our eye to specific details, or digressing to tell stories attached with the image—in part so that they would not be the kind of generic photos you would find in anyone's album. Kabakov here takes the opposite approach. While there are spoken "captions" to each photo in the installation, and while they do tell stories

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[103] Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, 19–21. Susan Sontag would later go on to make a similar point when she observes that "Photography becomes a rite of family life just when, in the industrializing countries of Europe and America, the very institution of the family starts undergoing radical surgery. As that claustrophobic unit, the nuclear family, was being carved out of a much larger family aggregate, photography came along to memorialize, to restate symbolically, the imperiled continuity and vanishing extendedness of family life." Sontag, *On Photography*, 8–9.

[104] Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, 7.

about the images and identify the people in them, it is the sheer quantity of them and their repetitive quality that makes them all begin to blend together, giving the sense that there is perhaps nothing unique about these images at all.

In this way, *On the Roof* seems to recall the French conceptual artist Christian Boltanski's 1971 installation *Album de photos de la famille D., 1939–1964* (Photo Album of the Family D., 1939–1964).[105] The installation presented 180 photographs that were enlarged so that they were all a uniform size. They were placed in tin frames and arranged in a uniform pattern. The photos came from the family photo album of Boltanski's friend Michel Durand-Dessert, a gallery owner in Paris. Although Boltanski did not know the people pictured in the photographs, he invented a family history for them by imposing a chronology on the images and "identifying" the figures within the photos. Of the installation, Boltanski notes that "these images were only witnesses to a collective ritual. They didn't teach us anything about the Family D. … but only sent us back to our own past."[106] He makes a similar point in a 1989 interview about the installation:

> In this album you have 25 years of the life of a family. You see all the photos of a normal family album. What I wanted to say is that we all have the same kind of family album. In fact, we don't learn anything about this particular family, we learn about ourselves. When we see the little child on a beach, for example, we already know this photo. We remember our first time on the beach or the photo of our little brother.[107]

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[105] Whether Kabakov was familiar with this particular installation is unclear. However, Kabakov would have been familiar with Boltanski's work in general. The two artists both exhibited installations in 1993 as part of the re-opening of the Jewish Museum. Kabakov exhibited *Mother and Son*, while Boltanski's piece involved an "archaeological" perspective on the bat and bar mitzvah ceremony. For more details, see the catalog of the show: Susan Tumarkin Goodman, ed., *From the Inside Out: Eight Contemporary Artists* (New York: Jewish Museum, 1993).

[106] Bernhard Jussen, ed., *Signal: Christian Boltanski* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2004), 115.

[107] Irene Borger, "Christian Boltanski," Bomb Magazine, January 1, 1989, https://bombmagazine.org/articles/christian-boltanski/.

Following Bourdieu's approach, Boltanski presents these family photos not as unique representations of an individual family, but rather as part of a larger societal ritual. Boltanski's idea that we see ourselves represented or reflected in these frames is consonant with Kabakov's suggestion that the viewer of *On the Roof* comes to see the family photos as "about him."

Unlike Boltanski's installation, *On the Roof* does make use of Kabakov's own family photos. However, despite the use of these autobiographical narratives and images of the self, this installation does not claim to represent a personal or individual history but rather a collective one. Kabakov suggests that we recognize ourselves in these photos since we too have such family photos. Because cultural codes determine what we deem worthy of photographing, the photos in the family photo albums are, in some way, identical.

While critics such as André Bazin and Roland Barthes have created theories of photography founded on the idea that the essence of photography is its power to preserve a trace of a unique referent, a perennial concern in the history of photography is the photograph's tendency to make the individual homogenous, repeatable, and interchangeable. Daniel Novak, for example, has argued that the popular Victorian practice of composition photography, which treated bodies as interchangeable and anonymous, reveals that the Victorians considered photography to be "a medium with the potential to *efface* particularity and individuality."[108] Writing in the 1920s, Siegfried Kracauer stresses the typological aspect of photographic representation in his essay "Photography." Imagining a scene in which young children look at a photograph of "Grandma," he suggests that this family photograph comes to represent not the grandmother in her singularity but rather someone of her generation. While the children might

[108] Daniel Novak, *Realism, Photography, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 5.

accept that this image represents their grandmother, he writes "in reality it's any young girl in 1864."[109] Walter Benjamin's now classic essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935) articulates how the reproducibility of the image eliminates the "aura" of the original and "substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence."[110] Although they make for strange bedfellows, we might hear an echo of Benjamin's ideas in the fear Nabokov expressed in his Pushkin lecture that photography makes everyone look the same, thus refusing people their individuality. He writes that "the ambience" of photographic practices has become "so familiar to our present-day sensibilities that latter nineteenth-century celebrities assume the appearance of distant relatives—shabbily dressed, all in black as though they were in mourning for the iridescent life of yesteryear**,** invariably relegated to corners of somber, melancholy rooms, against a background of dust-laden drapery."[111] By collapsing "celebrities" and "distant relatives" into one category, Nabokov faults photography for failing to distinguish and capture individuality. The tension between seeing photos as singular and as typical is one that resurfaces throughout the history of photography, and it would seem that Kabakov takes up the idea of photographs as generic, non-particular, and reproducible. But to do this in an ostensibly autobiographical installation challenges the idea of these images as able to represent him as an individual.

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[109] Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 48.

[110] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 22.

[111] Vladimir Nabokov, "Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible," trans. Dmitri Nabokov, *New York Review of Books*, March 31, 1988.

Despite the heavy use of autobiographical material, the installation offers a generic self-portrait, or a portrait of a whole society and culture. In this way, the installation reveals the constructed nature of family photographs, as we see repeated again and again the typical shots, the typical stories and anecdotes. Similar to the typicality of the family photograph, the narratives that accompany such family albums also tend to follow (or pointedly digress from) established narrative forms. As de Man notes, other narratives give us a model of how to shape the narratives of our own life stories.[112] Much like previous photographs dictate the type of photos that people take (according to Bourdieu), established literary forms come to dictate the representation of the self.

I would suggest that the uniformity of the generic self-narrative as presented in this installation can best be understood by situating it within the context of official Soviet narratives of the self. The autobiography or life narrative was a politicized form in the Soviet Union. The trajectory of an individual life was seen as an allegory for historical progress, as individuals moved forward according to the "masterplot" of socialist realism, to use Katerina Clark's term, into a brighter future.[113] The role of diaries and autobiographies as powerful forms that shaped Soviet subjectivity have recently been explored by Igal Halfin and Jochen Hellbeck.[114] Halfin, in his work on autobiographies and the "Communist hermeneutics of the soul," argues that narratives of the self—in the form of autobiographies, confessions, and self-criticism—were a

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[112] de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement."

[113] Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

[114] Halfin, *Terror in My Soul*; Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind [Electronic Resource]*. For a cautionary word about the tendency of these approaches to create a monolithic image of a singular type of Soviet subjectivity, see Eric Naiman, "On Soviet Subjects and the Scholars Who Make Them," *The Russian Review* 60, no. 3 (2001): 307–15.

crucial part of distinguishing oneself as a true Communist. It was through giving an account of oneself that the New Soviet subject could be not only represented but actively forged. The form of that account was prescribed: the eschatological narrative of Communism was the roadmap for an individual's own journey towards the light.[115] As a result, Halfin argues that "the Communist autobiography deindividualized lives. Details could be pruned, embellished, or ignored in order to fit the author into the Communist literary conventions and write him into the Soviet order."[116]

In contrast, *On the Roof* presents a narrative of the self that is devoid of this larger overarching narrative of progress or enlightenment. The future is stalled. There is no grand narrative according to which you must structure your life. Details about this family's life simply accumulate without being shaped into a meaningful plot. And yet, at the same time that *On the Roof* disavows the "deindividualized" or standardized narrative of the self that was demanded by the Soviet state, to say that the self-narrative of the installation is not highly standardized would be inaccurate. Instead of offering the official standard line, where everything leads up to attaining political consciousness and maintaining it, *On the Roof* presents the standard narrative of the everyday: the typical life narrative of Soviet citizens.

Although the family album trope structures both Boltanski and Kabakov's installations and they seem to share an interest in deconstructing the notion of the individuality of the family, they do so in reaction to different forces, within different cultural contexts. Kabakov divorces the self-narrative from the ideological framework of Soviet self-narratives, but not in the service of writing a unique narrative that celebrates his individuality. Instead, it reaffirms the standardized narrative of the self, but simply standardized according to a different model.

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[115] Halfin, *Terror in My Soul*, 21.

[116] Halfin, 19.

Nonetheless, the installation does still reveal an emotional desire to maintain a connection with the past, to preserve the material traces that are left of his family. If photography was a politicized form and treated with suspicion by artists who knew that it could manipulate and be manipulated, then these personal family photographs seem to offer a refuge from that. Once again, it is the photographs of his mother that Kabakov narrates with an emotional sincerity unusual in his work. The eighth room of the installation is entitled "Mama" and is dedicated to photographs of her, with a narrative voiced by Kabakov. The first photos depict her as a young woman, just graduated from the gymnasium. One of these portraits is from when she was in her early twenties. The caption reads: "Mama here is so sad, so sorrowful. This is probably at 22–23, her parents had died and mama was the only one working, she had to feed and raise three sisters and a brother who were all a lot younger than she was. These were terribly hungry years after the revolution."[117] The photograph itself shows damage and is torn in the lower right-hand corner, as if the materiality of the photo itself were a metaphor for the mother's condition at the moment it was taken. The photos in the slideshow depict her at different points in her life, sometimes pictured with her son, other times with her sister Riva.

The final photograph in the room depicts her in the last years of her life: "This is the last photograph of mama, when she was already very weak and could only walk from the room to the kitchen to eat with difficulty. Aunt Riva was always near her, she always looked after her—it was hard for her to go outside, and she couldn't anymore."[118] In this photograph, she is seated at a table, with a bowl in front of her and a piece of bread in her hand. The room is dark, but light is coming through the window, illuminating part of her face. She looks directly into the camera,

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[117] Kabakov, *On the Roof*, 129.

[118] Kabakov, 140.

over the rim of her glasses. Her gaze into the camera involves Kabakov, beyond the frame. Like with the installations based on her memoirs, this image stages a dialogue or connection between mother and son.

In *My Mother's Album*, we observed that the "official" narratives' fictitious representations of life are contrasted with his mother's memoir. In *On the Roof*, we see a tension between the generic or typological aspects of family photographs that would suggest the family album (structured by socio-cultural norms and narratives) is not a unique expression of the individual family and, on the other hand, a sincere, emotionally vulnerable, and personal attempt to speak from the first-person to maintain a connection with a past that is fast disappearing.

This tension is nicely expressed in the use of the name "Tolya" for Kabakov in the installation. The female voice consistently identifies pictures of Ilya Kabakov as "Tolya." On the one hand, this name seems like an estranging device. We might wonder whether this is yet another pseudonymous alter ego for the artist. On the other hand, Tolya is the nickname Kabakov was given in childhood and is still called this by his close friends and family.[119] Thus, it also works as a marker of intimacy. The figure we see in the photographs of the installation is not the "Ilya Kabakov" of the international art market, but the Tolya known by friends, family, and fellow artists working in the attic studios of Moscow's unofficial art world. Kabakov offers pays homage to this community in the slideshow images of his Moscow studio, in turn reflecting on the benefits of having formerly been outside (and here again the peripheral position of the roof setting is critical) the globalized art market: guaranteed studio space, not subject to the capitalist art market, a coterie of engaged interlocutors. The installation stands first and foremost as a document of Kabakov's family, but also of this community of artists he left behind.

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[119] I am grateful to Matthew Jesse Jackson for confirming that Tolya is Kabakov's nickname.

On the Roof stages an investigation of the everyday. Hundreds of family photographs are shown as stories are told about them by disembodied voices. In the installation, there is an overarching life narrative in the progression from room to room, but within the rooms themselves, narrative takes a backseat to spectacle. Akin to the workings of memory, each slideshow offers a paratactic accumulation of isolated moments that appear and then just as suddenly disappear. The installation's slideshows thus follow the logic of what Tom Gunning has called the "cinema of attractions," a dominant form of early cinema.[120] Rather than narrative storytelling, the cinema of attractions emphasizes "the act of display"[121] and favors "temporal irruption" instead of "temporal development."[122] The attraction provides the spectator with "a jolt of pure presence,"[123] and visual pleasure derives from the unpredictability of the appearance and disappearance of each spectacle.[124] Gunning links early cinema's logic of appearance/disappearance with Freud's analysis of the fort/da game, in which the child gains mastery over the disturbing experience of his mother's absence (over which he has no control) by actively throwing away and then retrieving a wooden spool.[125] The alternation of presence

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[120] Gunning's term is developed from Sergei Eisenstein's 1923 essay "The Montage of Attractions" (Montazh attraktsionov).

[121] Tom Gunning, "'Now You See It, Now You Don't': The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions," *The Velvet Light Trap* 32, no. 3 (Fall 1993): 4.

[122] Gunning, 7.

[123] Gunning, 10.

[124] As Yuri Tsivian has noted, the cinema of attractions model is indebted to the pre-cinematic magic lantern slideshow, which likewise hinges on the *disappearance* of the image for visual pleasure. The magic lantern emphasizes the ephemerality of images, and it was their sudden and unpredictable disappearance from the screen that excited audiences. Yuri Tsivian, *Early Cinema in Russia and Its Cultural Reception* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 148–49.

[125] Gunning, "Now You See It, Now You Don't," 11.

and absence likewise structures Kabakov's slideshow installation, as spectators symbolically replay the experience of loss and recovery.

The optical logic of the magic lantern slideshow or the cinema of attractions in Kabakov's installation becomes a fitting metaphor for thinking about collapse, disappearance, and loss at the end of a century that witnessed so many moments of rupture. Exhibited in 1996, the installation both looks ahead to the new millennium and is inflected by the latest sudden reversal: the collapse of the Soviet Union. The interplay between presence and absence animates the installation. Although the slides are "typical" or generic images of the family, more important than the content of the images themselves is the temporal experience of their appearance and disappearance. The installation enacts, with each new slide, a brief recovery of a lost world, followed by its ghostly evaporation.

The New Baroque: Self-Portraits in Painting

I began this chapter by looking at Kabakov's early self-portrait (1962), in which Kabakov offers a sly glance at the viewer. After this self-portrait, Kabakov rejected such explicit self-representation in his art, preferring to invent characters and ascribe his works to them. As we have seen, however, Kabakov would return to self-representation through several of his installations done in emigration. He continually reworked the material of his mother's memoir, which, as I have argued, evinces a more sincere and personal engagement with the traumas of the Soviet experiment than his previous conceptualist work. And his installation *On the Roof* featured hundreds of family photographs, thus breaking with Kabakov's typical practice of using anonymous photographs of official Soviet life to instead offer a self-portrait of him and his family.

More recently, since 2000, Kabakov has increasingly turned back to painting after his experiments with total installations. The art historian and curator Karin Hellandsjø notes in a catalogue of his recent paintings that these works are distinguished from his earlier work by the fact that they are "no longer represented by another, fictitious person, a *personnage*, but signed by himself."[126] In addition to being signed by Kabakov himself, many of these recent paintings also attest to an increased interest in self-representation and the use of family photographs, a pattern that I would argue began in the installations discussed in this chapter.

For example, in his series *Three Paintings with the Black Spot* (2009), Kabakov offers self-portraits and portraits of his wife, Emilia. These three paintings are vast, dark canvases that play with a collage effect in paint. Based on photographic images of Kabakov and his wife Emilia receiving a medal, the paintings are disorienting as these images are turned sideways and are overlaid with white, black, and brown spots. The edges of the paintings on the right and left seem to resemble pieces of postcards or photographs. Robert Storr writes of these paintings as being akin to "pages from a scrapbook autobiography, on which flotsam and jetsam of various kinds have settled, epitomizing the constant flux of his existence and a long experience of making the most of meager resources."[127]

Writing about this series, Kabakov notes that they are a departure from "the modernist tradition with its interest in the surface of the painting, in flat bright light, in the contours of

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[126] Ilya Kabakov, *Ilya Kabakov: A Return to Painting, 1961–2011* (Bielefeld: Kerber, 2012), 40.

[127] Robert Storr, "Painting In Spite of Itself," in *Ilya Kabakov: Paintings 2008–2013: Catalogue Raisonné*, ed. Emilia Kabakova and Willem Jan Renders, vol. 3 (Bielefeld: Kerber, 2013), 14.

objects and their self-sufficiency."[128] Indeed, elsewhere Kabakov had previously affirmed this modernist affinity for the flat surface of the canvas. He writes that he had

> lost faith in three-dimensional, representational reality for my painting. Reality, in and of itself, has three dimensions, but when it encounters the depth of white space in my painting, it loses its spatiality. I treat it like a surface, essentially like a reproduction. As if one had affixed a piece of cloth or paper to the surface, like a curtain shrouding my white three-dimensionality. That's the best explanation for my painterly intention: a painting covering up 'the white.'[129]

In this statement on the white canvas, Kabakov affirms an artistic practice that highlights the two-dimensionality of the painting.[130] However, Kabakov now claims to revise these modernist ideas of the flatness of the picture plane in his recent paintings, with a return to the baroque and an emphasis on depth. These new canvases, he writes, "appeal to and make use of the tradition of the 16th–17th centuries, the tradition of the baroque, where what was considered to be the most important thing was the development of the depths of the painting, its spatiality and the submersed state of all the objects in the atmosphere that appear to have taken shape beyond the frame."[131] How can we understand this turn to the baroque?

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[128] Kabakov, *A Return to Painting*, 108.

[129] Kabakov, 100.

[130] Clement Greenberg famously wrote about how the avant-garde modernist painting focused on the two-dimensional flat surface of the painting in his essay "Towards a Newer Laocoon" (1940). In his argument for the purity of artistic form, Greenberg lauds the avant-garde's interest in abstraction and form. He writes that the medium of painting resists "realistic perspectival space" and that in the abstract art of the avant-garde the "picture plane itself grows shallower and shallower, flattening out and pressing together the fictive planes of depth until they meet as one upon the real and material plane which is the actual surface of the canvas." Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, ed. Francis Frascina (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 43.

[131] Kabakov, *A Return to Painting*, 108.

Kabakov notes that these paintings employ the "baroque technique of the tunnel perspective" that was used in painting ceilings by artists such as the Italian painter Giambattista Tiepolo.[132] It would seem that Kabakov has in mind the illusionistic perspectival techniques for ceiling painting of *di sotto in sù* (from below upward), which makes use of extreme foreshortening so that figures pictured on the ceiling seem to be standing above the viewer, and of *quadratura*, which gives the appearance of the ceiling opening up, a sense of depth to the ceiling in the middle. Can we say that these techniques are truly operative in Kabakov's series? Yes, we have fragmentary figures surrounding the edges of the frame, but they are hardly foreshortened. And while the centers of the paintings are dominated by an amorphous dark mass, it does not entail an opening up of the space suggestive of architectural depth. Indeed, although Kabakov avers that he is turning away from a modernist preoccupation with flat surface, the collage effect of the painting counteracts such a claim, as the spots disrupt any experience of depth as they lie flat on the picture plane. What we have here is a postmodern approach to the baroque, which still makes use of the modernist techniques of collage and pastiche, thus balancing a sense of depth with the flatness of the plane.[133]

The visual experience of beholding these various parts of the paintings is enhanced by the sheer scale of the paintings. Two of the canvases are 510 x 786 cm, while the third is 510 x 467.5 cm. Kabakov discusses the size of the painting as a factor that contributes to how the viewer of the painting will experience the depth of the painting because it is so large the viewer "cannot

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[132] Kabakov, 108.

[133] Other critics have written that in these paintings "Kabakov stages an enormous painterly event, one that references the conversion of collage into painting, one that dissolves the distanced experience of sight and takes us into an immaterial space formed from the addition and interconnection of numerous individual pictorial elements." Kabakov, 16.

take in the entire painting."[134] He suggests that the effect of the dark, vast depth of the paintings is such that "the viewer might concentrate on this effect of submersion in space and not tilt his head in the hopes of discovering who these people are and 'what they are doing here.'"[135] In other words, at this moment when he incorporates his own image into the paintings, he also suggests that he is actively discouraging the viewer from seeking him out, from focusing on his presence—tilted and sidelined—within the frame.

More important for our purposes, though, is Kabakov's recent series of four paintings *They Are Looking* (2010), which features portraits of his mother and other family members. In these paintings, Kabakov relies on family photographs (many of which also appeared in the installation *On the Roof*) to create these portraits. Ulrich Krempel notes that this series of paintings "represents a radical break in Kabakov's oeuvre" as it engages with "memory in such a personal dimension, outside the roles and fictitious personalities."[136] Krempel writes that these paintings are like "a large-scale epitaph, the evocation of an irretrievable past."[137] As Willem Jan Renders observes, "this is the first time that Kabakov paints a subject that is intimately related to his personal life, to people he loved."[138] He goes on to suggest that *these* paintings are Ilya

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[134] Kabakov, 108.

[135] Kabakov, 110.

[136] Kabakov, 26.

[137] Kabakov, 26.

[138] Renders, "Whose Painting Is This?," 26. Indeed, in an interview with Willem Jan Renders, Kabakov confirms that the use of personal photographs in these works is a unique in his oeuvre. "There are some personal photos in the dark paintings. That's a rare event. I used them also in paintings of relatives." Quoted in Renders, 26.

Kabakov's paintings, unlike his previous works that could be by anyone, that are anonymous, that are by invented characters.

The first painting, *They Are Looking. Mother, Aunt Riva, Aunt Tania*, features Kabakov's mother and his two aunts, while other figures loom in the background. Kabakov uses aerial perspective to depict the figures in the background, as they appear fainter, less distinct, ultimately merging and dissolving into the reddish-brown brushstrokes. In Krempel's words, the figures "appear from out of the shadows as if from the depths of one's own memory before being able to be identified."[139] The second, *They Are Looking. Mother, Aunt Sonia, Uncle Joseph*, features more figures. This painting also draws on several family photographs that were included in *On the Roof*. The figures, unmoored, seem to float in the realm of memory. The painting makes strong use of chiaroscuro, as some faces are shrouded in darkness, eyes are hollowed out, others with shadows falling across their cheeks. The receding planes, the encompassing shadow in the background, the aerial perspective together all imply a depth of space without describing it fully. The third and fourth paintings, unlike the first two, depict heads floating at the top of the frame as well as full figures in the foreground against a Rothko-like background of color fields of blue, green, and red.

In a description of the four paintings that comprise *They Are Looking*, Kabakov references his experience of looking at Rembrandt's paintings *The Night Watch* (1642) and *The Syndics of the Drapers' Guild* (1662) in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. He feels strongly the gaze of the men depicted in *The Syndics*, and claims that only Rembrandt achieved this effect. He feels held by their gaze. His fascination with the painting "wasn't that I was staring at these people painted 300 years ago and dressed in strange clothes," he says, "it was that they, not

[139] Kabakov, *A Return to Painting*, 27.

turning away and not saying anything, were looking directly inside of me and into my soul."[140] He says that he wanted to try to create such an effect in these paintings. Kabakov goes on to note that

> all those depicted on my paintings have died, either long ago or very recently. They are already 'there,' and I would like to convey that gaze—not the faces, nor the poses, nor the clothing—all of that is drawn rather primitively, if not to say, poorly—but I would like to convey that gaze aimed directly at me, when they have something to say to me but they cannot say it…[141]

Kabakov here emphasizes the importance of the gaze of these relatives who are deceased. The painting attempts to create a moment of communication or contact between the spectator and the figures presented, as if they are on the verge of speaking.

To achieve this effect, Kabakov claims to take inspiration from the baroque. Baroque painting introduced psychology and the sense of an emotional inner life into painting. Painters such as Rembrandt worked now to "endow the portrait with an intimation of spiritual as well as corporeal presence."[142] This, in part, seems linked with Kabakov's turn to sincerity and exploring his personal past in his work, paired with his self-described interest in the baroque as a rich source for these new paintings. The baroque then offers a model for incorporating emotion, investigations into the soul, and interiority, which is a new aspect of his painterly style.

Given the title of the series, "They Are Looking," and Kabakov's discussion of trying to achieve a Rembrandtesque gaze that transfixes the beholder, it is striking that at the center of the second painting we have a crucial instance of gazes that *fail* to meet our eye. To the left of

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[140] Ilya Kabakov, *Ilya Kabakov: Paintings 2008–2013: Catalogue Raisonné*, ed. Emilia Kabakova and Willem Jan Renders, vol. 3 (Bielefeld: Kerber, 2013), 97.

[141] Kabakov, 3:97.

[142] John Rupert Martin, *Baroque* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 13.

Kabakov and his mother, a woman in a blue dress is in profile as she looks off to the left. Behind her, a man in a hat tilts his head and gazes down. The woman in glasses also looks off to the left. And at the center of the painting, Kabakov's mother looks down at her son who sits in her lap, while he gazes off to the right. The depiction of her looking down seems to reinforce the feeling of separation, since we cannot meet her gaze. And yet, her gaze *is* trained on her son, but within the world of the painting (and the photograph that serves as a model for the painting). The centrality of these three gazes that are directed elsewhere stand in marked contrast to the fixed gaze of the other figures who stare out at us with intense concentration.

The effect of the gaze is influenced by the vast size of the canvas (284.5 x 175.2 cm). The scale of this wide painting means that the figures appear almost life-size, thus increasing the illusory sense of their actual presence beyond the picture plane. When hung on a museum wall, then, the figures would be at eye-level of the viewers. Moreover, the monumental scale of the painting lends it a certain baroque drama. While many baroque canvases play on vertical space to create a vertiginous effect that adds emotional drama to the viewer's experience of beholding the painting, Kabakov's canvas makes dramatic use of horizontal space. At a little over 9 feet wide, the canvas dominates the wall so that if you are standing in front of the center of the canvas, the canvas would seem to extend indefinitely in both directions, thus absorbing you fully within the seemingly infinite space of the painting.

A feature of Baroque painting is the use of illusion and trompe l'oeil as means of investigating infinite space as painters "dissolve the barrier imposed by the picture plane between the real space of the observer and the perspective space of the painting."[143] John Rupert Martin argues that these illusionistic practices allow the observer to become "an active

[143] Martin, 14.

participant in the spatial-psychological field" and that the point of this illusion is for the viewer to shift her mind "from material to eternal things."[144] Martin notes that one of the illusionistic tricks for exploring coextensive space is the transgression of the picture plane through the use of "emphatic gestures" as we see, for example, in Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* (which, as we recall, Kabakov mentions in connection with this series).[145] At the center of this painting that depicts a militia company, Captain Frans Banning Cocq steps forward towards the edge of the foreground and extends his hand so that it "protrudes illusionistically beyond the surface of the canvas."[146] Such a gesture suggests the continuity of space between the fictive realm of the painting and the space of the viewer. Kabakov achieves a similar effect in the second painting in *They are Looking*. At the center of the painting is the mother with young Ilya on her lap. While looking down at him, she points her finger at us, the viewer. The mother's hand reaches out towards the viewer, piercing the barrier of the picture plane and thus seeming to dissolve the boundary between real and fictive space.

The mother's pose also invokes the iconography of the seated Madonna and Child. While in many Eastern Orthodox icons the Theotokos points her hand at the child of God, in this painting the mother's hand now points out at us, the viewer of the painting. Given that the finger almost seems to break through the picture plane, as if she could reach out and touch us, the painting, like the icon, holds the promise of serving as a point of contact between two worlds.

Although Kabakov uses family photographs in the painting to stage a point of contact between him and those absent family members, we are nonetheless reminded of the distance

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[144] Martin, 14.

[145] Martin, 157.

[146] Martin, 158.

separating them and the impossibility of this meeting. At the edges of all the paintings are white panels that encroach on the figures. The use of white spaces that disrupt the painting is a typical feature of Kabakov's paintings; we can think of such works as the 1974 series *Along the Edge* or the paintings attributed to the "artists" Charles Rosenthal and Igor Spivak. In these earlier paintings, the white spaces reveal the device. They foreclose any illusionistic sense of perspectival depth, bringing us back to the inescapable fact of the two-dimensionality of the canvas.

In this series of paintings, the white panels seem to operate in a different manner. The white panels seem to *highlight* the illusion of depth, working almost as a trompe l'oeil that frames the interior scene and lends it depth. In this regard, the white panels begin to seem indebted less to Malevich than to seventeenth-century Dutch painters and their conventional use of curtains, doorways, windows, and other architectural details to frame paintings. Think, for instance, of the stone window frame as a compositional trope in Gerrit Dou's niche paintings, such as *Woman Peeling Carrot*, *The Grocer's Shop*, or *Maid at the Window*. While the difference between Dou's intricate surfaces and Kabakov's is clear, we can see the panels as a postmodern version of the frame. The white slabs of paint that align with the picture plane give the sense that *beyond* the two-dimensional surface of the canvas there exists another world. Indeed, the more we look at the white panels, the more we notice that we can see the black and grey inner edges of the panels on both the left and the right side of the painting. The perspective is thus distorted so that we see more than what would be visible if these panels were parallel to the picture plane. This gives the impression, then, that the panels are actually at an angle, almost jutting out beyond the picture and into the viewer's space. As Kabakov writes, these white panels are like a "half-broken border or wall in the foreground dividing the two worlds, not permitting

the viewer to cross the boundary, to enter into the painting."[147] If we consider how the painting will look hung on the white walls of a museum, the illusion is enhanced. As it seems that the white panels almost blend in with the museum's walls, giving the impression that we have found a jagged gap that offers an entry point to a space beyond the wall—but of course a boundary that we cannot actually traverse. Indeed, the thick white streaks of paint seem also to threaten the figures within the painting. They suggest an erasure, a painting over of the past. Here we might read the white marks as symbolic of the failures of memory, the inevitability of oblivion. Or we can see it as a historically charged comment on the persecution of these people, of the willful forgetting of the past.

Thus, we see that the white panels in this series has a more affective purpose than in his earlier works. They serve to mark the division not only between reality and representation, but also between two worlds. They suggest an insuperable gap between past and present, between the here and now and the beyond. It is not an ironic interruption of space, intended to remind us of the painterly illusion of space and depth. Instead, it serves to underscore the distance between "them" and "us" with a sincere desire to overcome that gap.

Just as we find ourselves falling into the depth of the painting, though, we are pulled out of this illusion by the line that runs down the middle of the painting. A seam divides the painting into two; the large canvas is composed of multiple panels. The fact that the line interrupts the painting over Kabakov's image, dividing his face in two, further reflects the fractured nature of this self-portrait. The seam returns us to the materiality of the painting—to the paint as paint, the canvas as canvas—again reminding us that we cannot step into this image, much less into the past or the world beyond.

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[147] Kabakov, *Paintings: Catalogue Raisonné*, 3:97.

These paintings seem to represent a real shift in Kabakov's work from his earlier paintings. They display an affective engagement with the past, mourning the loss of these family members and attempting to transcend the divide between past and present, reality and representation. Let us take a closer look, then, at who precisely are these figures that look so intently at us. The figures in the second painting borrow from several photographs that we will recognize from the family photographs in the installation *On the Roof.* As we have seen, the photograph of Kabakov on his mother's lap figures prominently at the center of the painting.

Other photographs from *On the Roof* also appear as models for the figures in the painting. The group of three figures furthest to the right in the painting come from the photograph of his mother's choir in Berdyansk.[148] The group of adults and children to the right of Kabakov's mother comes from a photo of Emilia's grandparents, her sister Rosa, and a boy named Grisha (according to the caption in *On the Roof*).[149] Kabakov thus brings together these different figures into the frame of the painting by combining multiple photographs from the family archive. Some are relatives, while others are figures Kabakov would only have known through his mother's photographs.

Most striking, though, is that the mother figures *twice* in the painting. The woman at the very bottom of the painting on the left-hand side is painted from an image of the mother with her fellow graduates from school in Mariupol in 1920. The figures surrounding her are also painted from this photograph of the gymnasium class.

In the caption to this photograph in *On the Roof*, Kabakov narrates: "Mama, when she had just finished the gymnasium, that was still before the revolution, entered the medical

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[148] Kabakov, *On the Roof*, 135.

[149] Kabakov, 148.

department along with her very close friend, that's her sitting on the floor in a black dress and mama is right above her. It was completely different time then, different faces…"[150] The mother's second appearance, this time on the margins of the painting amidst a crowd of anonymous faces, seems to complicate the narrative that Kabakov creates in his artist's statement about the series. Unmarked, she disappears in the sea of faces in the corner, recognizable only to those few who know her. She otherwise remains anonymous, just another unidentified face looming out "from there." The emotional impact of the painting comes from the idea that this is his mourning project: as he writes in the description of the painting, these are his deceased relatives and his attempt to see them again. Having her appear twice disrupts the "realism" of the image, as she could not occupy both places within the crowd. Does the depiction of her twice, as if she were two different people, challenge the idea that these are representations of unique individuals whose absence Kabakov tries to give shape to through this portrait? Or does it stand as a hidden, private detail (akin to Barthes's punctum) that intensifies the painting's affective longing for the mother?[151]

Now it would seem we are back in the realm of Kabakov's playful engagement with the archive. Even here, in this painting that seems committed to a kind of sincere or personal representation, there is a refusal to allow the painting to serve as some kind of documentary evidence or transparent expression of Kabakov's experience. Although these paintings offer a melancholy meditation on the past, they stop short of a fully sentimental approach. At the risk of

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[150] Kabakov, 128.

[151] Although Barthes withholds the Winter Garden photograph, some scholars suggest that the famous photograph *does* appear hidden in the pages of the text, unmarked and in a slightly different form, in the photograph "The Stock" (La Souche), the only photograph that comes from the author's private collection. See Margaret Olin, "Roland Barthes's 'Mistaken' Identification," in *Touching Photographs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

stating the obvious, the Kabakov's exploration of sincerity in these works is sincerity after conceptualism; this return to sincerity cannot look the same as it did before the ironic play of postmodernism. Even in this series that offers a sincere engagement with the past through his familial history, there is still the trace of ironic distancing and dissembling.

In these works—the album and the installations based on his mother's memoirs, and the installations and paintings that take family photographs as their source material—we witness a turn to the family archive. Although Kabakov is known for his deconstruction of the position of the author or artist, these works reveal a counternarrative that runs through Kabakov's late period. These works tell the story of an artist who returns again and again to the documents of his own personal experience. If his earlier conceptualist works probed the experience of Soviet consciousness from within for fellow unofficial artists, then these later works are now told from outside that position for an international art market. From this distanced, retrospective perspective, a different side of the Soviet experience comes to the fore in Kabakov's works. Composed in emigration, in the wake of his mother's death as well as the transformations of perestroika and then the collapse of the Soviet Union, these autobiographical works evoke a world that has been lost. Even as his works play with the generic quality of family photographs or with the prescribed form of autobiographical narratives, these documents nonetheless attest to the power of the private archive to tell a narrative that runs counter to the official one.

Conclusion

At the beginning of his autobiographical work *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, Walter Benjamin writes that in 1932 he realized his state of exile was likely to be permanent and that he "would soon have to bid a long, perhaps lasting farewell" to Berlin. To reckon with this separation, he decided to undergo a "process of inoculation" that ultimately takes the shape of the book in hand.

> I deliberately called to mind those images which, in exile, are most apt to waken homesickness: images of childhood. My assumption was that the feeling of longing would no more gain mastery over my spirit than a vaccine does over a healthy body. I sought to limit its effect through insight into the irretrievability—not the contingent biographical but the necessary social irretrievability—of the past.[1]

Benjamin's metaphor of inoculation figures images as an infectious agent, a synecdoche of the larger disease of nostalgia. He "deliberately" recalls these images of childhood, administering them to himself as one would a vaccine, before experiencing them involuntarily in the throes of exilic nostalgia. Immunity from, rather than indulgence in, nostalgia is the aim here. The cure does not come from preserving the past through representation (of setting down these recollections in writing and thus recuperating them), but rather from meditating on the very "irretrievability" of the past and trying to gain "insight" into it. The images offer an occasion for a critical reflection on the past, a way of writing with and against nostalgia.

In the preceding chapters, I have attempted to show how the figures of this dissertation have likewise engaged with photographs in a way that moves beyond a merely sentimental nostalgia. While Sontag's statement that "photographs actively promote nostalgia" has become

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[1] Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 37. Benjamin's metaphor of illness here connects with the 18th-century conception of nostalgia as pathology.

something of an axiom, in the works considered here photographs do more than stimulate longing for the past.[2] They emerge as a space of critique, of self-reflection, of interrogating those very nostalgic impulses that often accompany our forays into the family album. Here it is instructive to consider Svetlana Boym's distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia. In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Boym theorizes that restorative nostalgia attempts a total reconstruction of what has been lost, whereas reflective nostalgia accents the longing (*algia*) for the past, always with an awareness of the insuperable distance between past and present. It is this attention to the separation between past and present that allows for reflective nostalgia's critical distance on the lost object and its penchant for playful irony. As she writes, "longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgment or critical reflection."[3] She thus recuperates nostalgia from pure kitsch and suggests the critical capacities and aesthetic potentials of nostalgia.

However, in her chapter on Nabokov, Boym suggests that photographs are an "example of restorative nostalgia," as they deliver up the past in a seemingly perfectly preserved form, absent any "reflective longing."[4] I would challenge this claim, as I have endeavored to show in this dissertation how photographs become a crucial place for critical reflections. As in Benjamin's process of inoculation, the photographic images in these texts work as both symptom of and cure for an uncritical nostalgic longing for the past. If a "naïve" reading of the photographs sees these images as an emanation of the past, this quickly gives way to a more critical appraisal of the photograph's referential status.

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[2] Sontag, *On Photography*, 15.

[3] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 49–50.

[4] Boym, 264.

This dissertation has charted the critical ambivalence to photographs in these works, how they stage a back-and-forth between an affective or nostalgic attitude to images and a sharp awareness of the limits or dangers of such an attitude. Thus Nabokov repeatedly challenges the truth claims of the photographic medium in *Speak, Memory*. In his essay about his parents, Brodsky locates in the two-dimensional photograph a metaphor for the workings of memory in its failure to fully preserve the past. From this failing emerges an anti-elegiac stance that refuses an easy restoration of the past and foregrounds loss, rupture, and fragmentation. Shteyngart, in his memoir, discovers in the archive of family photographs a means of coming to terms with his past and his Russian cultural identity. He balances the estranged perspective of an American looking back ironically at his Soviet childhood with an attempt to make sense of the cataclysmic events of the twentieth century that marked his family's history. Kabakov uses family photographs to critique official narratives of the Soviet past in his autobiographical installations and late paintings. In turn, though, he goes on to expose the generic quality of family photographs and the prescribed forms of self-narrative, thus frustrating our sense of what can meaningfully be done with such photographic "evidence."

The divided attitude to photographs that we see in these works, I have argued, stems in part from a crisis in vision. From the semiotic appraisal of photographs to the disciplinary and propagandistic abuses of photography, to see the photograph as an uncomplicated restoration of the past is no longer possible by the second half of the twentieth century (if, indeed, it ever was). And yet, it is the very losses of the twentieth century that make urgent the need to collect and preserve the fragments that remain.

To extend these thoughts, I would like to turn briefly to the German writer W. G. Sebald whose composite works of photo-texts also wrestle with this ambivalence around photographs

and more generally the crisis of representation.[5] Indeed, Sebald has been seen as a literary child of Nabokov. Nabokov's own image haunts the pages of Sebald's *The Emigrants* in multiple forms: first a photograph of him with butterfly net in the Alps is included in the text (he bears resemblance, we are told, to Henry Selwyn); another character reads Nabokov's autobiography; and finally he appears spectrally as the "butterfly man."[6] It is no surprise that Sebald finds in Nabokov a literary forebear: both are cosmopolitan émigré writers marked by the traumas of the twentieth century; they weave patterns into their works, blend fact and fiction; their works are distinguished by a highly visual form of memory.[7]

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[5] Sebald was born during the war (1944). His father had fought in the Wehrmacht and returned home when Sebald was 3 from a French POW camp. Sebald came of age during the 1960s, a period marked by the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial and student protests in an effort to break the culture of silence that had shrouded post-war Germany. Sebald emigrated to England as a young man and taught German literature at University of East Anglia until his death in 2001. For more on photography in Sebald's work, see Adrian Daub, "Sphinxes without Secrets: W. G. Sebald's Albums and the Aesthetics of Photographic Exchange," in *On Writing with Photography*, ed. Karen Beckman and Liliane Weissberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Lisa Saltzman, "Orphans: On Émigrés and Images in W.G. Sebald's Austerlitz," in *Daguerreotypes: Fugitive Subjects, Contemporary Objects* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Lise Patt and Christel Dillbohner, eds., *Searching for Sebald: Photography After W.G. Sebald* (Los Angeles, CA: Institute Cultural Inquiry, 2007); Mark M. Anderson, "The Edge of Darkness: On W. G. Sebald," *October* 106 (Autumn 2003): 102–121.

[6] Sebald also wrote a short piece on *Speak, Memory* entitled "Dream Textures: A Brief Note on Nabokov," in *Campo Santo*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: The Modern Library, 2005), 141–149. For more on the significance of Nabokov in Sebald's work, see: Karen Jacobs, "Sebald's Apparitional Nabokov," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 60, no. 2 (June 1, 2014): 137–68, https://doi.org/10.1215/0041462X-2014-3004; Leland de la Durantaye, "The Facts of Fiction, or the Figure of Vladimir Nabokov in W. G. Sebald," *Comparative Literature Studies* 45, no. 4 (2008): 425–45; Adrian Curtin and Maxim D. Shrayer, "Netting the Butterfly Man: The Significance of Vladimir Nabokov in W. G. Sebald's The Emigrants," *Religion and the Arts* 9, no. 3 (November 1, 2005): 258–83, https://doi.org/10.1163/156852905775008868.

[7] And yet, as Marijeta Bozovic has suggested, the freedom that Nabokov seems to experience through his art of memory is foreclosed to Sebald. See the Conclusion of *Nabokov's Canon*.

In addition to providing an afterlife for Nabokov's image, Sebald's texts offer a fitting coda to the works considered here as they engage a similar conflicted attitude to photography. Sebald's use of photographs in fictional works inevitably raises questions about their status as documentary evidence, especially in the German postwar context with the awareness of the widespread manipulation of images by the Nazi regime. Consider, for example, the prominent role that the propaganda film about the Theresienstadt concentration camp plays in the novel *Austerlitz* (2001). Or the final story of *The Emigrants* (1992), which includes a newspaper photograph from 1933 of the book-burning in Würzburg that has been doctored.[8] These examples point to a crisis in vision: the inability to verify what we see plainly presented before us. However, as Mark Anderson has noted, to say that such propaganda photos are manipulated implicitly acknowledges that *all* photographs are potentially suspect, which brings us to difficult impasse: how then do we respond to Holocaust deniers who claim that the photographic evidence of the camps is a hoax?[9] There is thus a need to rely on those images as having evidential power, to bear witness to what happened. Sebald navigates this representational crisis by not including documentary images of the Holocaust, but rather images that seem to evoke the trauma and come to signify obliquely this unrepresentable past. *The Emigrants*, for example, opens with a grainy black-and-white photograph of a graveyard with an oak at the center, symbolizing life and death, nature and culture, regeneration and destruction. But the positive life force of the oak, an ancient

[8] W. G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 1997), 183–84.

[9] Anderson, "The Edge of Darkness: On W. G. Sebald," 109–110.

Germanic symbol, is also complicated by its association with German nationalism, thus raising questions about blood, lineage, and belonging that haunt the story.[10]

By introducing photographs into a fictional text without any captions, context, or attribution, Sebald also manipulates photos, making them mean something new. This is what Anderson calls the "contradictory logic" of Sebald's use of images: "every image, every 'reality scrap,' is precious and must be conserved as a memorial to what has disappeared. It can serve as a corrective to the unreliability of human memory. But also, every image lies, or is capable of lying, and must be subjected to careful scrutiny and interpretation."[11]

The two central images in "Dr Henry Selwyn," the first story in *The Emigrants*, vividly present this contradictory logic. The first is a photograph shown during a projected slideshow (although not included in the text); the slide is displayed for such an extended period of time that "the glass in the slide shattered and a dark crack fissured across the screen."[12] As if collapsing under the burden of representation, the photograph literally breaks down. This fracture of the photographic image (and its absence from the pages of the story) would seem to emblematize an anti-representational stance. However, in this story photographs also serve as a material trace of the past that cannot be erased. The end of the story presents the narrator's chance encounter with a newspaper photo about Selwyn's friend, Naegeli, who had disappeared in 1914, presumed to be dead after falling through a crevasse in the Alps. His remains had just been revealed by the

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[10] The photograph visually echoes Gustave Courbet's painting *The Oak of Vercingetorix* (1864) that appears in the collection's final story "Max Ferber." The character Max Ferber (Max Aurach in the German original) uses Courbet's painting as a model for his own painterly "exercise in destruction" when he creates a painting blackened and "overworked to the point of being unrecognizable." Sebald, *The Emigrants*, 179–80.

[11] Anderson, "The Edge of Darkness: On W. G. Sebald," 109.

[12] Sebald, *The Emigrants*, 17.

melting ice of the glacier. Like the glacier that preserved the unburied body, so too does photography offer a way to "embalm time, rescuing it from its proper corruption" as André Bazin wrote.[13] The archaeological exhumation figures as the unbidden return of the repressed, a remnant of the past that risks being lost to oblivion but returns to the surface. In defiance of time, the past here intrudes unexpectedly into the present moment. These two images are inextricably bound together in the story through the semantic association of the crack. The fissure across the screen that seems to suggest the rupture of history and the inadequacy of representation prefigures the crevasse in the glacier that Naegeli falls into, but simultaneously it is this chasm that ultimately preserves the unburied body and returns it to the surface. Thus, we see in the image of the crevasse an emblem of the double-sided nature of the photograph, as it is at once the site of oblivion, erasure, and the failure to represent but also of preservation, witness, and testimony.

Like Sebald, the authors in this dissertation also respond to moments of historical rupture, the existential experience of exile and emigration, and the weight of cultural memory. Their texts interrogate what role photography can play in understanding and making sense of the violence, trauma, and upheavals of the twentieth century. Photographs are both valuable as material traces of a past that has disappeared and highly suspect.

Unlike Sebald, however, these authors do not fold photographs into fictional texts but into autobiographical works, which opens up different questions about photography's claim to represent reality through reference to a real-world referent. The images offer pointed moments where we see the authors involved in the process of reading themselves—moments where the autobiographical project of picturing the self is vividly represented as they encounter an image

[13] Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," 14.

created by another, an image that turns them into an object, just as they are turning their own subjective experience into an object of scrutiny.

I began this dissertation with Khodasevich's poetic metaphor of double exposure. I suggested that we could understand double exposure not only as emblem for the experience of exile, but also for the doubled or divided way in which photography signifies in the works studied here. To close, I would like to turn now to an actual double exposed photograph to illustrate this tension between an affective reading of photographs and a critical or skeptical reading of the photograph as yet another constructed sign with no more purchase on the *real* than any other mode of representation (fig. 4). Although Brodsky was never allowed to return to Russia after he was forced into exile in 1972, a fortuitous case of double exposure placed him back on Pestel street in front of his home, the "room and a half" of the Muruzi house. In 1991, Brodsky's Swedish translator, Bengt Jangfeldt, shot half a roll of film in Stockholm when Brodsky and his wife Maria Sozzani were visiting Jangfeldt and his family. Soon after, Jangfeldt went to a symposium in Petersburg, where he took photographs of Brodsky's former home that he planned to send back to him in New York. When the film was developed, however, he found that somehow all the photographs had come out double exposed. As if enacting Khodasevich's poetic metaphor, the photographs of Brodsky in Stockholm had been superimposed onto the images of his former Leningrad haunts. In one of the images, Brodsky and the others are but a ghostly trace against the background of the Spaso-Preobrazhenskii Cathedral at the end of his old street. While all the others face the camera, Brodsky alone looks upwards, almost as if he were finally gazing at the balcony of the room and a half once more.

This image exemplifies photography's seemingly magical ability to give presence to absence through the indexical trace and to collapse multiple temporalities. The double-exposed

image of Brodsky in Leningrad creates a palimpsest that illustrates the experience of exile, in which one's present reality is projected onto the past, as if overcoming the boundaries of time and space. It is an image that, in its spectral transference of one space onto another, emblematizes the way photographs are caught between what Boym would call restorative and reflective nostalgia. For just as we fall into the illusion of seeing Brodsky once again in front of the cathedral, a moment later we notice the intrusion of a car and two other faces piercing through into the foreground, disrupting the sleight of hand. The double exposure flickers between overcoming the separation between these two spaces and throwing into sharp relief the very real distance between them. Ultimately, it remains just an image. No more, no less.

Figure 4. Double-exposed Brodsky, photograph by Bengt Jangfeldt. Lev Loseff Papers, Bakhmeteff Archive of Russian and East European History and Culture, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University (unprocessed).

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