

Topographical Imagination in Marina Cvetaeva's “Pis'mo”, “O Germanii”, and “Natal'ja Gončarova”

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Abstract

In a substantial number of her texts – poetry as well as prose – Marina Ivanovna Cvetaeva (1892–1941) constructs contrasting dimensionalities: one-dimensional lines, two-dimensional planes, and three-dimensional objects are set in contrast to one another. She juxtaposes squares and flat surfaces with open landscapes, towers, and cathedrals. These motives are frequently articulated through geometric imagery, yet they have thus far received little analysis or commentary in the scholarly literature. My hypothesis is that they are metaphorical ways of structuring and categorizing the world, and that they are significant across several of her writings, beginning with her debut collection *Вечерний альбомъ* (1910). In my opinion they merit closer scrutiny.

My secondary claim is that Cvetaeva's planar surfaces, on the one hand, and objects with height and depth on the other, can be read as a highly personal engagement with features of contemporary artistic movements, such as Cubism. Of particular relevance in this regard is her 1929 essay on the artist Natal'ja Sergeevna Gončarova (1881–1962).

Cvetaeva's topographical motives in research literature

Topography – especially landscape – in literary texts has throughout the history of literature served as a medium for expressing inner states. With the emergence of modern cities, cityscapes likewise became mirrors of new existential experiences and

situations, as in the German Expressionist poet Georg Heym's "Gott der Stadt" (1910), where factory chimneys, their smoke, and lights resemble an evil, flaming and angry god who rules over industrial society and devours its inhabitants at night. Although contemporaneous with the Expressionists, but not affiliated with any school, Cvetaeva's antropomorphic cityscapes bear – as I shall argue – certain affinities with this strand of modernism.

Some aspects of what we may call Cvetaeva's 'topography' have been described in the literature on her work. Alexandra Kirilcuk has convincingly elucidated the "spiritual topography" in "Поэма конца" and other texts, noting "how Tsvetaeva makes Prague into a kind of private semiosphere, a space imbued with intensely personal meaning" (Kirilcuk 2006: 196). Anja Burghardt (2013) investigates in her book the spatial compositions ("Verortung") in a number of Cvetaeva's poems, and manages to show the significance of room, place, and space in her work as "a localization and a certain form of limitation" at the same time (2013: 185) – however not discussing the specific questions and texts I will focus on. Irina A. Litvinova (2017) has shown how Cvetaeva articulates the abstract notion of "work, creativity" through spatial and other oppositions (such as empty/full, closed/open, darkness/light). Furthermore, Roman Voitekhovich reminds us that "Давно отмечено, что поэтическое пространство Цветаевой организовано преимущественно вдоль вертикальной оси." (2021: 28) Voitekhovich interprets this vertical axis as a visualization of Cvetaeva's two worlds: inner/outer, life/death – contrasts that Litvinova analyzes as constituents of the creative process in Cvetaeva's idiolect.¹

In this study I focus on the contrasts that Cvetaeva establishes by means of linear, two-dimensional, and three-dimensional imagery – a refinement of previous treatments of the broader category of "пространство" in her work. My claim is that these contrasts constitute an important field: a geometrically vizualized worldview. My secondary claim, namely the relatedness of this geometricity to the visual arts of her time, must first address a common position in Cvetaeva scholarship.

The standard view is that Cvetaeva was indifferent to the visual arts. Simon Karlinsky, in his two biographies on Cvetaeva (1966 and 1985), acknowledges the connection between modern Russian poetry and visual art in the crucial period 1895–1930, but assigns this primarily to Axmatova, Gumilëv, and Mandelštam, with Cvetaeva standing apart; she "only remotely" connects to the movements of her time.² Cvetaeva's own statements about hearing as her one and only sense apparently supports this. In her response to Boris Pasternak's request for a résumé of her life and work in April 1926 (for a planned encyclopedia of twentieth-century writers) Cvetaeva

¹ See also Orlova 1991: 340–341, and her references to vertical motion in for example "Поэма воздуха". Orlova reads Cvetaeva's "пространство" as a symbolically undefinable openness.

² The three acmeists "developed poetic styles closely patterned on the current development in the visual arts, especially Cubism, with its unexpected shifting of planes and its use of elementary shapes and primary colors." (Karlinsky 1966: 3)

writes at the end: “Любимые вещи в мире: музыка, природа, стихи, одиночество. Полное равнодушие к общественности, театру, пластическим искусствам, зрительности”³ This might be partly explained psychologically “as a way of distancing herself from her father’s work establishing the Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow” (Blasing 2017: 192, n. 4), but more importantly, given that she was indeed interested in theatre, wrote dramas, and also went to the movies (reportedly with Natal’ja Gončarova) one should be cautious about taking such categorical statements at face value.⁴ In my context, it is her *use* of figures and forms that will matter.

Major advances in understanding Cvetaeva’s complex – yet undeniably existing relationship to the visual arts, if not to specific schools, have been made by Pamela Chester (2000) and Molly Th. Blasing (2017). In her article on Cvetaeva and Gončarova, Chester seeks to identify “formal affinities between the two in terms of their representation of landscape”, and argues that they “established separate territory from their male colleagues”, which connects them to earlier women writers and artists (Chester 2000: 280). A few years earlier, Aleksandar Flaker had highlighted their shared interest in unexpected modes of expression (Šklovskij’s “остранение”) and in space: “Гончарова в понимании Цветаевой – художница открытого, но не бесконечного, пространства” (Flaker 1994: 4). Blasing’s analysis of Cvetaeva’s own photographs renews the discussion and extends it to how Cvetaeva understands and uses visual art. We may therefore now, with greater confidence, say that only under certain premises does Cvetaeva have a non-relation to the visual arts.

This does not mean, of course, that she simply adopts painters’ ways of seeing. Gertrude Stein’s well-known attempts to convert Picasso’s Cubism into textual structures provide one model;⁵ but Cvetaeva did not pursue this kind of ambition. As Blasing comments: “The extent to which Cvetaeva considered the intersection of verbal and visual art in light of Symbolism’s goal of transcendent vision or Malevič’s and Kandinsky’s experimentation with non-representational art is difficult to determine.” (Blasing 2017: 236) The “Black Square” of Kazimir Malevič (1878–1935) is quite different in its intention from Cvetaeva’s dark execution square in the poem “Письмо”, which I will discuss below.

At the same time, we can identify visual forms in Cvetaeva’s work and show their resemblances to, for example, Cubist paintings. More important, however, is to show how geometric shapes and their interactions enable her to describe certain modes of human perception and thought in a highly original way.

Topographical and geometric motifs appear in many of Cvetaeva’s poems; in the following, I will show their importance in the poem “Письмо” (1923), then turn to her

³ *Собрание сочинений в семи томах*, Том 4: *Воспоминания о современниках. Дневниковая проза*, 624 (= Цветаева 1994–1995; in the following, the Collected Works are cited as *Собр. соч.* volume number: page number).

⁴ Cvetaeva’s rejection of vision as nonpoetic has been analyzed, as Blasing recounts, by for example, Alyssa W. Dinega (2001). Cf. Blasing 2017, 192–194.

⁵ Cf. Altieri 1989, 240–247, and Lloyd 2022, 13–58.

diaries – namely the text “О Германии” (1919), and, finally discuss the essay “Наталья Гончарова (Жизнь и творчество)” (1929).

“Письмо” (1923)

“Письмо” is a poem of 21 lines – four stanzas with a final one-liner – written in Prague, dated August 11, 1923, and published in Cvetaeva’s major collection *После России* (Paris, 1928; *Собр. соч.* 2: 217). The poem’s “I” waits for a letter that never arrives. The title then can refer both to the anticipated letter, and to the poem itself, read as a letter sent to the one who does not write. The biographical context of the poem, the author’s sense of loneliness at the time of writing, is documented in her letter to A.V. Vaxrah, 27.8. 1923 (*Собр. соч.* 6), as Aleksandr Sumerkin, the editor of the five volume edition of Cvetaeva’s poetry reports (Цветаева 1983: 459).

The “I” compares this situation to long and painful waiting for the end, and even worse, to execution: “Так ждут – конца: / Солдатский салют / И в грудь – свинца / Три дольки.” Initially, the letter promises happiness: “Внутри – слово / И счастье. И это – всё.” But when the “I” has given up waiting, the letter is transfigured into death in the courtyard, bringing together the shape of the letter with the square where the soldiers stand ready to fire: “Квадрата двора / и черных дул. // (Квадрата письма: / Чернил и чар!)” And, as Renata Ingbrant suggests (1998: 55), “The last line ‘квадрата письма’ (‘a square of a letter’) presents us with the total dissolution of the lyrical subject.”⁶

Noteworthy in “Письмо” is also the unusual shape of the letter: it is squared, derived from the courtyard’s outline, which lends the character of an abstraction. The square, and by conflation, the letter, signifies isolation, unhappiness, and even lethal threat. The “I”’s fruitless longing for a letter merges with the demonized square.⁷ The square and the letter also contrast with the circular shape of the black muzzles (“дул”) firing at her,⁸ and in a way they liberate her from the constraints of the prison-like square and the letter that does not appear. Irina V. Logvinova observes that the line structure of the poem, consisting of paired iambic units (e.g. “так ждут – письма”) echoes the square’s geometry through their two stressed syllables, “ритмически образующая фигуру квадрата.” (Logvinova 2022: 49) Furthermore, she notes that the pattern of 6 + 6 + 4 + 4 + 1 lines may be read as a visualization, or repetition, of a

⁶ Renata Ingbrant’s article is also an important contribution to understanding juxtaposed gender relations in “Письмо” – the word “стапа” revealing that the “I” is a female. (Ingbrant 1998: 53)

⁷ Cf. Ieva Vitins, who, in her article “A Study of Tsvetaeva’s Elsewheres” notes that Cvetaeva’s extremely difficult life may explain her aversion to closed, horizontal spaces: “The pressure and demands of such an existence assumed in her work the shape of an enclosed space, a prison from which she sought an exit.” (Vitins 1977: 649) See also “Мои службы. Воспоминания”, notes from 1918–1919, published 1925, where Cvetaeva describes obtaining potatoes during the hunger and cold of the winter of 1919: “Сначала беснующимися коридорами, потом сопротивляющейся лестницей, – слезы или пот на лице, не знаю [...] Собственную беду везем! [...] Боюсь площадей.” (*Собр. соч.* 4: 470)

⁸ I thank the anonymous reviewer for this observation.

letter comprising two square-sized pages (the first two stanzas), then folded to fit into an envelope (the two following stanzas), with a concluding key line. (Logvinova 2022: 51)⁹ In “Письмо”, abstraction is also evident in the deviation from, or, rather, the simplification of the colours of reality. Here they are reduced, in a manner reminiscent of Suprematism, to black (the muzzles) and red (the eyes of the “I” being shot) – which the wind blows away: “Цвет – ветер сдул!”

A poetics of colours emerges as well in the essay on Natal’ja Gončarova, where Cvetaeva identifies the painter’s basic colours as black, white, brown, and red, and reflects on how colours function analogously in literature and visual art: “(В красках, как в слове, яркость, очевидно, вопрос соседства, у нас – контекста.)” (*Собр. соч.* 4: 113, cf. also Flaker 1994: 6). The parallels between the use and contrasting of colours in writing and painting are clear to Cvetaeva, and she employs colours symbolically.¹⁰ The importance of “context” points towards practices of highlighting, contrasting, juxtaposition – procedures central to Gončarova’s art and, more broadly to modernistic painting where the plane often supersedes central perspective.¹¹ But before going into depth on Cvetaeva’s essay on Gončarova, I will turn to the diary entry “О Германии”, where the symbolic charge of the square is even more pronounced.

“О Германии (Выдержки из дневника 1919 г.)” (1925)

“О Германии” was written in Moscow in 1919, and later published in the Russian émigré newspaper *ДНИ*, Berlin 13.12.1925. Cvetaeva’s relationship to the German language, culture and literature is well known – quite a few of her favourite authors were German, such as H. Heine, J.W. von Goethe, and, last but not least, R.M. Rilke. Thoroughly investigated is her and Boris Pasternak’s 1926 epistolary friendship with Rilke in the year of his death. In 1922 Cvetaeva left Russia for Berlin, where she stayed for part of the summer. From there she traveled to Prague, where she lived from 1922 to 1925. From 1925 to 1939, before the fatal return to the Soviet Union, Paris was her city.

⁹ Another instance of such confluence of geometric form, theme, and poetic structure appears in the poem “Два в квадрате” (1910; *Собр. соч.* 1: 81). Here two couples are locked in an instable ‘squared’ relation, reinforced by the poem’s ‘square-shaped’ 2x2 lines, arranged almost as a figure poem. This poem was published 1910, in her debut collection *Вечерний альбомъ*, which demonstrates that Cvetaeva already at this time used the square to visualize difficulties and dilemmas in life. – On Cvetaeva’s extensive use of numbers in structural and associative ways, see also Voitekhovich 2021.

¹⁰ “В цветовой картине мира М. Цветаевой семантика белого цвета связана с пустотой, семантика черного – с полнотой”. (Зубова 1993: 181) A note on how Gončarova “discovered” black as a colour during her stay in Spain confirms this: “[...] черный цвет, черный не как отсутствие, а как наличность. Черный как цвет и как свет.” (*Собр. соч.* 4: 113)

¹¹ Cf. Cvetaeva’s remark on this subject about Gončarova’s student years: “(Не знала тогда Гончарова, что когда-то будет возглавлять плоскостную живопись, в противовес – глубинной.)” (*Собр. соч.* 4: 95)

“О Германии” is written in a tone of passionate laudation of Germany and German culture and of Cvetaeva’s deep connectedness with the country and its language. The following passage, an imagined dialogue especially relevant in my context, is, however an example of a somewhat different approach to Germany:

Погодите, будет час, так же будете оплакивать героическую Германию, как ныне героическую разоренную Францию. Нынче – Реймский собор, завтра – Кельнский: *высоты мешают веку!* Это не ненависть германцев к галлам, галлов к германцам, это ненависть квадрата – к шпилью, плоскости – к острию, горизонтали – к вертикали. Реймский собор для меня больше рана, чем для вас: в нем *свершилась* моя Иоанна! – и, оплакивая его, оплакиваю больше, чем вы: не Иоанну, не Францию, – век костров смененный веком железобетона! (*Собр. соч.* 4: 553f.)

How can geometric or topographical phenomena possibly hate one another?¹² We must, of course, loosen our hold on realist conceptions and expectations, and instead, as Pamela Chester claims, when writing about Cubism and the art of Gončarova, concentrate on the sense that space establishes: “We must assemble a sense of space and its meaning based on the contradictory planes the artist has created. Space becomes a powerful trope, taking on symbolic and even spiritual dimensions.” (Chester 2000, 283) In “О Германии” Cvetaeva remembers the thirteenth-century Gothic cathedral of Reims. German artillery fired at it regularly throughout the First World War, from September 1914 to March 1918, destroying great parts of it. Mourning this destruction, she at the same time prophesies the fall of the “heroic Germany”. The word “heroic” sounds uncanny and problematical in many senses today – after the years of the Nazi regime and the Holocaust. It is, however, difficult to say whether Cvetaeva’s words can be read as prophecy at all; what could she possibly have foreseen of the industrialized murders and war that were to come a few years later? In any case, this passage conveys a sense of horror, which arises from the way she combines a critique of modern, horizontal concrete constructions, and the destructive power of modern warfare, with the disregard in our time for sacred, vertical architecture.

In Cvetaeva’s diary – pre-1933, one must bear in mind – war history, and future Franco-German relations are sketched in terms of a moral relationship between horizontal and vertical lines, between the two-dimensional squareness of our time and the three-dimensional architectural beauty of the famous cathedral. Architecture and geometry are used as metaphors in a somewhat bewildering, but striking way: the hatred of the time transferred to the realm of humankind’s constructions.

She continues – seemingly detached from the realities of the recently ended war – by aligning herself with Joan of Arc, who as part of her brave acts in liberating France from the English siege, helped King Charles VII to be crowned in Reims 1429 (two

¹² Cf. also this passage from Cvetaeva’s essay on Gončarova: “Ненависть крестьянского континента России к ‘месту пугу’ – океану, ненависть крестьянина к безделью.” (*Собр. соч.* 4: 106)

years before she was burned at the stake in Rouen). Cvetaeva's sorrow for the ruined cathedral is compared to her grief over modern architecture, and the century of towering flames from execution by burning is preferable to our century of flat concrete. A provocative image and comparison, indeed.

But, is it also possible to interpret the image of “Великое согласие высот” (*Собр. соч.* 4: 554) – a metaphor where harmony in the human realm joins the vertical shape of a cathedral – as sorrow for forgotten ‘higher’ ideals, which may also encompass liberty and humanism? There are signs pointing in that direction in the diary entry “Вольный проезд” (1918), from the tumultuous and chaotic times of civil war following the revolution. At a railway station, people are shouting, believing that somebody had trampled down a child, who however manages to get up again: “– Ребенка задавили! Ре – бенка! Ре – Лежащая волна – дыбом. Горизонталь – в стремительную и обезумевшую вертикаль.” (*Собр. соч.* 4: 449) As we have seen, plains, squares, and battlefields often stand in contrast to cathedrals and heights in Cvetaeva's imagery. Here, once again, the planar square is associated with violence, and the vertical edifice with hope and resurrection. This image is developed further in other texts which contain the motif of “constricted landscapes” (cf. examples in Chester 2000: 83–84) and last but not least in Cvetaeva's essay on the artist Natal'ja Gončarova.

“Наталья Гончарова (Жизнь и творчество)” (1929)

The essay was published as a feuilleton in Mark Slonim's Prague journal *Воля России*, 1929 (Nos. 5/6, 7, and 8/9). Cvetaeva met with Gončarova in 1928 at Slonim's initiative, and she visited her regularly while working on the text. As an artistic response, Gončarova prepared a series of illustrations for Cvetaeva's poem-skizka “Молодец” (first published in 1924), a work Cvetaeva herself had translated into French in 1930 but which was never published during her lifetime, because she was “dissatisfied with the result” (Karlinsky 1966: 80).¹³

Karlinsky characterizes Cvetaeva's essay as her “attempt at writing about things she knew little about and did not really love. [...] The near-sighted poet did not really care for the visual arts [...] regarded as a monograph on a painter it is without any doubt a failure.” (Karlinsky 1986: 197–198) This view has, as I already have mentioned above, become commonplace in the *цветаеведение* (cf. further Karlinsky 1966: 273–274; Slonim 1971; Саакянц 1997: 515, Schweitzer 1992: 301 [Schweitzer quoted in Blasing 2017: 191]). One must ask whether this judgement is fair. I have already noted Cvetaeva's awareness of parallels between painting and poetry, and there are other

¹³ Cf. her own words on the matter in the interview “В гостях у М.И. Цветаевой (1931)”, *Собр. соч.* 4: 626–627, referred to in Cvetaeva 2006: 32.

features of her work that argue against such a verdict – some of them to be found in the Gončarova essay.

There are many digressions in this text, seemingly irrelevant both to a conventional biography and to straightforward descriptions of paintings. However, I would argue that the essay can be read as a search for the center of Gončarova's art, for her paintings' shape, light and colour, and of common ground with Cvetaeva's own literary practice. Blasing reads the essay "as a painterly exercise in prose" (Blasing 2017: 218), and, before her, Mark Slonim – despite his remark that Cvetaeva "осталась довольно холодна" toward Gončarova's paintings – noted: "и рисунок и краски сливались у нее в некое общее впечатление, она переводила их на свой язык ритма и звуков" (Slonim 1971: 157).¹⁴ This strategy constitutes a different kind of ekphrasis: it visualizes paintings through language not primarily by description, but through an act of translation or transfer from one medium to another, which is metaphorical in its very essence.

One section that clearly stage-manages conjunctions of art and poetry is the elaborate chapter "Две Гончаровы", on Puškin and his wife Natal'ja *Nikolaevna* Puškina, née Gončarova, the great-aunt of the artist Natal'ja *Sergeevna* Gončarova (her great-grandfather was Natal'ja Nikolaevna's brother). The chapter has prompted many interpretations, for example Liza Knapp's article on how Cvetaeva employs the two Gončarovas to explore the difference between life and art (Knapp 1992). Especially interesting in my context is Cvetaeva's juxtaposition of Puškin and his wife as "voids" to each other, as empty spaces, she as a zero, a mere beauty, lacking any understanding of the poet's genius: "Натаалья Гончарова *просто* роковая женщина, то пустое место, к которому стягиваются, вокруг которого сталкиваются все силы и страсти. Смертоносное место." (*Собр. соч.* 4: 84) Puškin, on his side was attracted to her because of his own "overabundance": "тяга гения – переполненности – к пустому месту" (*Собр. соч.* 4: 85). And, in return, for her, Puškin was also a kind of empty space: "Он хотел нуль, ибо сам был – всё. И еще он хотел того всего, в котором он сам был нуль." (*Собр. соч.* 4: 85)

As Ljudmila Zubova has shown (1993), Cvetaeva uses the notion "место пустое" (with variations) in analogy with an archaic phraseologism in Church Slavonic Bible translations (e.g. Matthew 14, 13):

В евангелиях 'место пусто' – это необитаемое место вдали от города – место, где Иисус Христос проповедовал и творил чудеса [...] В славянских заговорах пустое место маркировано противоположным образом: это место, куда отсылаются болезни и несчастья, место обитания нечистой силы, место за гранью жизни, в мире мертвых. (Зубова 1993: 177)

¹⁴ Cvetaeva's attitude toward and interest in Gončarova's paintings is confirmed in the collection of letters from Cvetaeva to Gončarova (in Cvetaeva 2006), and the accompanying commentary by N.A. Gromova.

The examples Zubova highlights in Cvetaeva's writings show all these variations, and in the essay on Gončarova, the empty-space notion is equally complex: it is both a point of departure for creativity and a void, pure emptiness, with isolation as its consequence, as Puškin and his wife were for each other. There are good reasons to understand not only the chapter on Puškin and his wife – used to dramatize the contrast between the two Natal'jas – but also the digressions into the Paris cityscape as attempts to enter the world of Gončarova's creativity and art.¹⁵

To grasp Cvetaeva's literary engagement with Gončarova's painterly avant-gardism, it is necessary to reflect once more on the vocabulary of forms, squares, places, horizontal movements, towers, in short, Cvetaeva's poetic realization of geometry, which is related to, but in no way a weak response to or a mere echo of, the artist's work. At the same time, one must not forget that Cvetaeva was keenly aware of the various artistic currents of her time. She explicitly lists them in her description of Gončarova, who, Cvetaeva argues, “была в свое время, вернее, вела свое время под меняющимися флагами импрессионизма, футуризма, лучизма, кубизма, конструктивизма”. (*Собр. соч.* 4: 120)

A. Flaker observes that Cvetaeva, in her essay on Gončarova emphasizes the architectural modality of the latter's paintings, quoting a central passage from the second section: “Всё от собора: и створчатость, и вертикальность, и каменность, и кружевность.” (*Собр. соч.* 4: 125; cf. Flaker 1994: 2) The epithet “cathedrals” was applied to Gončarova's paintings by an unnamed critic in a French newspaper, a term that Cvetaeva returns to several times throughout the essay: “[...] – упрек одного критика: ‘Да это же не картины, это – соборы!’” (*Собр. соч.* 4: 70) She must also have discussed this with Gončarova herself, whom she renders: “‘Была минута, когда я могла стать архитектором.’ Этого критик, коривший ее за ‘не-картины, а соборы’, не знал. Очевидно, в каком-то смысле зодчим – стала.” (*Собр. соч.* 4: 95)

For Cvetaeva, the cathedral, with its three dimensions and its upward-striving lines, is not an “упрек” but a sign of great, liberating artistry. When she turns to Gončarova's childhood, she further develops this image of the artist as a constructor (her father was an architect). She begins with a description of the family house in the village Ladyžino (Tula Governorate), in Cvetaeva's words a run-down building, awaiting either demolition or reconstruction. The paragraph ends by linking this to Gončarova's art, her ‘trademark’, the cathedrals: “Законченные ‘соборы’ Гончаровой – нет всем недостроенным домам.” (*Собр. соч.* 4: 76) Cvetaeva finds the origin of the constructor Gončarova also in the young girl's paper garden: “У подножия тех соборов – та картонка.” (*Собр. соч.* 4: 80) The “картонка” refers to

¹⁵ Cvetaeva herself described her understanding of the paintings as “примечания к сущности, никогда бы не осуществленной, если бы не они”. Her ambition was to describe this essence from within the portrayed artist: “Мой подход к ней – изнутри человека, такой же, думаю, как у нее к картинам. Ничего от внешнего.” (Letter to A. Teskova 19.2. 1929, *Собр. соч.* 6: 376, quoted from Cvetaeva 2006: 27.)

Gončarova's childhood memories: “Вырезались из бумаги кусты, деревца и расставлялись в коробке. Четыре стенки – ограда. Законченный сад. [...] Гончаровские соборы из глубока росли!” (*Собр. соч.* 4: 76, 78) The comparison between the simple cardboard box and the sophisticated architectural structure of a cathedral establishes both a contrast and a connection between the child and the mature artist. And, through her insistence on the cathedralic nature of Gončarova's paintings, Cvetaeva succeeds in transforming the critic's negative judgement into a positive characterization within her own geometric poetics.

The first part of the essay, “Уличка”, is also of great importance. Here Cvetaeva describes her walk through narrow Parisian streets and courtyards as a passage between steep walls, like claustrophobic “prison corridors”, as in a “cage”. She tries to find her way to the artist's studio, in the verbless style typical of Cvetaeva: “Не уличка, а ущелье, а еще лучше – теснина.” (*Собр. соч.* 4: 64) Having arrived at the correct courtyard, she imagines it paved by giants: “Не люди мостили, великаны играли. Я камень, ты камень, я больше, ты еще больше, я глыбу, ты – гору.” (*Собр. соч.* 4: 66) After a while she sees light through a passage: “... – проход! Световая щель.” (*Собр. соч.* 4: 67) Finally, she reaches the stairs leading to Gončarova's “Мастерская” in 13, rue Visconti:

Если двор – великаны мостили, то лестницу они уже громоздили. Игра в кубики, здесь – кубы. [...] Следы той же игры, веселой для них, страшной для нас. (Так и большевики веселились, а мы боялись, так и большие веселятся, а дети ...) [...] Гончарова к себе идет по старым мастерам, старейшему из них – времени. (*Собр. соч.* 4: 67)

The arrival in Gončarova's studio: “Первое: свет. Второе: пространство. После всего мрака – весь свет, всей стиснутости – весь простор.” (*Собр. соч.* 4: 68)¹⁶ In Cvetaeva's perception, Gončarova's art thus leads away from narrow and inhospitable spaces, upwards into openness, into the room's third dimension, into light. Noteworthy in this context are the cubic stairs, as if Cvetaeva were viewing the Parisian courtyard through the lens of the artist's cubist paintings. She walks to Gončarova's atelier along the path she imagines the artist took to her own position: a conjunction of old masters and dynamic urbanity, and of different schools of art. With the giants introduced, Cvetaeva offers a reinterpretation of Gončarovas' art and cityscapes within what we might call her geometrical mythology.

Conclusion

This geometrical mythology recurs throughout the texts examined here: in the menacing “квадрат двора” of “Письмо”, the hateful square in “О Германии”, and in

¹⁶ Litvinova (2017: 187) uses this sentence, with its contrasts of darkness/light and narrowness/open space, to argue that emptiness in Cvetaeva's thinking is a necessary condition for creation, which the example of Puškin and his wife further confirms.

the “тюремный корридор” of the Gončarova essay where giants have constructed courtyards. These spaces, the death-zone square in “Письмо”, the square saturated with hatred in “О Германии”, and the narrow Parisian courtyards and passages, are invested with their distinctive ‘spirit of place’, a haunting *genius loci*. That *genius loci* functions not merely as a metaphor for atmosphere, but as a mask, a *prosopopeia*, a personified presence.¹⁷

This anthropomorphization of cityscape is sometimes countered by vertical elements – cathedrals and other upward lines that interrupt the planar logic – and at other times these verticals symbolize resurrection. The juxtaposition of planes and heights in Cvetaeva’s work is not merely a matter of historical period and modernity’s negative aspects (as in “О Германии”) or of intimacy versus isolation (as in “Письмо”), nor solely a conflict between death and life (as in the poem and the railway-station scene with the child). It is also a question of the conditions of creativity in a broad sense, as in the Gončarova essay. The voids are dangerous: zeros filled with fear and loneliness, ruled by personified negativity, yet not without hope, they possess a form of potentiality in their counterintuitive “полнота” (Zubova 1993: 181).

This article aims to encourage further analysis of the topographical dimensions in Cvetaeva’s œuvre, and more specifically of how stairs, squares, cubes, and empty spaces mark the limiting, and paradoxically promising, side of life, while vertical structures, open spaces without limits, and cathedrals function as zones of light and uplift that allow life and creativity to emerge from the planar domains of existence.

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¹⁷ This passage is inspired by J. Hillis Miller’s interpretation of «the genius of the sea» in Wallace Stevens’s poem «The Idea of Order at Key West» (Hillis Miller 1995: 265–267).

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