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# “SCORES FOR A PARTICULAR CHEMICAL ORCHESTRA”: THE ‘COMMEDIA’ AND THE MATTER OF SOUND IN OSIP MANDELSTAM’S ‘CONVERSATION ABOUT DANTE’

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**"SCORES FOR A PARTICULAR CHEMICAL ORCHESTRA"  
THE 'COMMEDIA' AND THE MATTER OF SOUND IN OSIP  
MANDELSTAM'S 'CONVERSATION ABOUT DANTE'**

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This paper discusses the implications of the wide-ranging use of sound in Osip Mandelstam's 1933 essay "Conversation about Dante," a landmark in the twentieth-century reception of Dante. With a special focus on the sound motives incorporated in Mandelstam's description of the *Commedia*, the *Conversation* is analyzed as a study in the receptiveness of the reader, as it is activated by the poetic speech of Dante in a call-and-response relation. At the same time, the paper explores issues of individuation, as reading through sound brings the reader back to his or her historicity and presentness, and of transformation, as the mutability of sounds brings about an experience of poetry as an ongoing metamorphosis. In this perspective, the vernacularization of poetry in the *Commedia* is conceived of by Mandelstam as the rediscovery of the aesthetical and ethical potential of our bodily, local, and contingent existence.

Keywords: Osip Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," Sound, Orality, *Commedia*

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Pick up a copy of Dante's *Commedia* and start reading a *canto* aloud. It is even better if you can learn a *canto* by heart and recite it on your own. When you read, your voice articulates Dante's poetic speech, but the reverse is also true, since Dante's poetic speech gives your voice impulse, rhythm, and shape. Hear that compound of your voice and Dante's speech, feel its vibrations in your mouth, throat, head, and body; consider how even the most abstract concepts built by Dante with his words exist, in this very moment, through your vocal expression only. Literally, it is a matter of incarnation or, to use a less religiously loaded term, of individuation through sound. In speech, there is no separation of sound and *logos*; in poetic speech, the experience of the inextricability of sound and *logos* has a profound pedagogical function, in the sense that it teaches readers how to read and live in a non-dualistic, non-separated way; in Dante's speech, finally, the mutual articulation of

sound and *logos* fully reveals to the receptive reader the infinite potential and the infinite actuality of poetry as it comes to life through the body and psyche of its reader.

This is what Osip Emilievich Mandelstam's *Conversation about Dante* teaches us by means of its metaphorical and hermeneutical insistence on sound and on its manifold manifestations (music, noise, voice, and so on). In the present essay, the *Conversation* will be discussed from a perspective not so much historical as paradigmatic, that is, as an example of a possible relation with the *Commedia* and, at the same time, with poetry as such. That relation of call-and-response between text and readers, as we will see, is profoundly generative, as it is incorporated in the reader who, in turn, produces and reproduces it in countless variants. What is unique to Mandelstam's *Conversation* is also the range of perceptions, activities, interpretations, and states of consciousness to which we have access through sound: Sound, in other words, is not mere physical sound, hence the matter of sound in poetry must not be mistaken with such performance modes as spoken poetry. What follows addresses the experience of hearing and voicing Dante not only with our mouth but with all the faculties we are endowed as human beings. If "devocalization" is the name for the separation of experience, contingency, and intersubjectivity from thought, writing, and culture,<sup>1</sup> "vocalization" should be the practice of bridging that gap by learning from poets how words become flesh and how flesh becomes words.

#### REFLECTIONS ON A LIVING METAPHOR

The nature of Mandelstam's *Conversation about Dante* is fractal: Any of its parts, if enlarged, presents the same quality of the text as a whole, with the same patterns recurring on different scales. To first approach the matter of sound and hearing in the *Conversation* it will therefore be appropriate to start with a commentary on a single sentence that works like a miniature version of the essay which contains it: "Dante's cantos are scores for a particular chemical orchestra."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This is the core of the thesis of Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, transl. Paul A. Kottman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Osip Emilievich Mandelstam, *The Complete Prose and Critical Letters*, ed. and transl. Jane Gary Harris (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1979), 427.

To begin with, we must give credit to the metaphor of canto as scores, that is, we must acknowledge that its function is not ornamental but generative, in the sense that it restructures the cognitive, affective, and experiential perspective of our relation with Dante's poem. According to the logic of living metaphors in Mandelstam's discourse,<sup>3</sup> we notice the *Commedia* is not a piece of literature pure or separate from other forms of expression. Instead, he puts the emphasis on hybridization: transforming words into music, cantos into scores, the text works only in the very process of its transcoding. If in the best philological scenario a text "in itself" does exist as a written artefact, it remains ontologically lacking until it is performed by a reader that gives a voice to its lines, no matter if aloud or silently (even in a quiet reading it is *our* voice that makes the experience of the text possible). It follows that the *Commedia* becomes real only through repetition in time, with each new performance of its text, in a particular here-and-now or presentness that is nonetheless potentially connected with other possible performances. In this condition of double historicity,<sup>4</sup> the contingency of the poem as originated at a certain moment and in a specific context is inextricably interwoven with the contingency of the reader/performer as rooted in and shaped by a different situation. The living reality of the cantos, their capacity to incarnate for a potentially infinite population of readers, is that they are in a state of unfinished transition from signs that stay mute on the page to sounds that arise and disappear; it is also the transition from one allegedly unified subject (the "author") to a multiplicity of subjects that are multiple and composite in themselves.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> On the generative power of metaphor see Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, transl. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello, SJ (London: Routledge, 2003). *La Métaphore vive*, as Ricoeur's title reads in the original, perfectly suits Mandelstam's metaphorical poetics.

<sup>4</sup> For the notion of "double historicity" in the study of medieval literature, see Paul Zumthor, *Speaking of the Middle Ages*, transl. Sarah White (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 31–34. For my use of the term "historicity" the main reference is Henri Meschonnic, *Critique du rythme. Anthropologie historique du langage* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1982); of the many facets of his definition of "historicity," see for instance what he writes at p. 360: "The historicity of poetry is not the reduction of poetry to its history. It is the movement that makes it be the permanent novelty of its language, the most threatened, the most vital. Poetry is a deadly danger to poetry, and poetry is no other than what transforms poetry." My translation.

<sup>5</sup> See Albert Russell Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), for a theoretically engaging and philologically

Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a pure text, a text in itself. Nor is there a performer in the sense of a subject separate from an object that he or she cites and recites. True, the poem/score is obviously a creation independent from its reader/performer, and yet the logic of Mandelstam's metaphor implies that only when the event of reading takes place can both poem and reader become real, together, one's existence branching off into the other's. Another implication of Mandelstam's scores/cantos metaphor is that such notions as "the voice of Dante" or "the music of the *Commedia*" are in themselves abstractions, since the poem resounds through a voice other than its own, being hybridized by the voice of *this* reader, just like a score for a violin becomes real only with *this* contingent violin, even though the existence of poem/score doesn't depend on any of its single performances.<sup>6</sup> This is the radical contingency of the text: In each performance we can hear the matrix of the non-finite series of the text's performances in history.

Poetic material does not have a voice. It does not paint with bright colors, nor does it explain itself in words. It is devoid of content for the simple reason that it exists only in performance. The finished poem is no more than a calligraphic product, the inevitable result of the impulse to perform.<sup>7</sup>

The second part of the sentence we are discussing further elaborates on the musical metaphor by explicitly connecting a text to its addressees and performers: "Dante's cantos are scores *for a particular chemical orchestra*." The image of the orchestra qualifies the reader/performer: He or she is an *I*-orchestra, a multiple, collective subject that generates a living sound which, in turn, with its vibration, surrounds the performers and audience alike. Readers will be immersed in the very soundscape they have created through their voices, and their *I* will be re-created – individual and trans-individual – by their own sound-creation. Voicing the *Commedia* is tantamount to submitting the *I*-orchestra to change and variation, both internally and externally. Such is the inherent disposition of

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sound exploration of the self-fashioning process by which the "author" Dante results from his own works.

<sup>6</sup> When in the course of the present essay a deictic is in italics, as in this sentence, I intend to emphasize the presentness of something or, more precisely, the presentness that sound gives to the existence of something or someone.

<sup>7</sup> Mandelstam, *Complete Prose*, 442.

the *Commedia* as a matrix for new readings. In rapport with the text, the author himself (Dante for the *Commedia* no less than Mandelstam for the *Conversation*) is a reader that through the text translates a bundle of impulses into sound. Present in the passage of poetry into sound is the individuation of a subject on the reader's as well as on the author's side.<sup>8</sup> Individuation is individual as much as trans-individual, populated as it is by a multiplicity of unfolding voices:

Alighieri constructed in verbal space an infinitely powerful organ and already delighted in all its conceivable stops, inflated its bellows, and roared and cooed through all its pipes.<sup>9</sup>

We now have to examine the two adjectives in Mandelstam's metaphorical construction. So far, we have had the *Commedia* as the tenor of the metaphor, and score and orchestra as a two-part vehicle establishing music as the semantic field that orients the generation of meaning in the sentence. Yet if we pay attention to how the addition of "chemical" affects this micro-system, we will notice that a new semantic field is now nested within the larger one, with an important shift that acts out the hybridization of codes triggered by the score's/canto's transition: The orchestra becomes the tenor, and chemistry the vehicle. Similar to how the literary text has been opened up to music (performance, collectivity, physicality of sound), now music itself is translated into matter. Composition, combination, and transformation of matter (Mandelstam might have had in mind the etymology of "chemical", rooted in alchemy) far exceed the proportion of human individuality and culture. These changes characterize individuation through sound as

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Meschonnic, *Critique*, 95: "In and by the text, the subject is not the individual. *The subject is the individuation*: the activity by which the social becomes the individual, and the individual can, fragmentarily, indefinitely, reach the status of subject, that can be only historical and social. The way one reaches, indefinitely, his or her mother tongue." My translation. Individuation is the process by which an entity becomes what it is. In this essay I will also use the concepts of "individuation," "individuality," and "trans-individuality" as developed by Gilbert Simondon, *L'individuation psychique et collective* (Paris: Aubier, 2007). What Simondon writes at p. 34 might well serve as a guide to read Mandelstam and Dante: "The two individuations, psychic and collective, are mutually related, they allow to define the trans-individual as a category that accounts for the systematic unity of internal individuation (psychic) and external individuation (collective)." My translation. In Dante and Mandelstam, as we will see, sound is the matter of the trans-individual made possible by poetic speech.

<sup>9</sup> Mandelstam, *Complete Prose*, 402.

one that takes places on multiple scales, from the molecular to the cosmic. This new dimension of the trans-individual nature of the orchestra replaces the author's and the reader's self as unity and measure. "We" are extended in matter as a network ("we" meaning no longer our biographical ego but our openness to venturing into the *Commedia* by sound and performance). The poem has not lost its specificity with this change of perspective; rather, it stands out as a treatise in and on metamorphosis. Any event generated through the text, from a minute turn of phrase to its sweeping architecture, is chemical in the sense that it transforms poem, writer, and reader as integral to the sonorous continuum of reality. The *Commedia* incessantly emerges from and returns to this primal polyphonic substance.

A scientific description of Dante's *Commedia*, taken as a flow, as a current, would inevitably assume the look of a treatise on metamorphoses, and would aspire to penetrate the multitudinous states of poetic matter, just as a doctor making his diagnosis listens to the multitudinous unity of the organism.<sup>10</sup>

The adjective "particular" reminds us that many "chemical orchestras" are possible, but the text/score we are dealing with in the *Conversation* is unique in configuration. The *Commedia* is what it is because of the performance it demands from its readers. Yet, just as individuation through sound can never be complete, the poem will always bear a reminder of the inarticulate, a trace of the perpetual variation of the continuum we hear in Dante's poem. On this note, Mandelstam's metaphorical braid has looped back to its first tenor, the *Commedia*, as a text calling for a specific though not univocal and fixed response.

The internal organization of Mandelstam's metaphor has showed us to what extent his reception of the *Commedia* as sound points to something compelling in practice and yet obscure in theory, something that is out of the radars of literary scholarship and yet so central to encountering the text. It is the question of how a text calls for a response. Mandelstam's claim is that no one more than Dante allowed us to hear the word becoming flesh. By hearing Dante, our consciousness is called and asked for a response. To see how Mandelstam teaches us to hear that call, we must now zoom

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 408.

out from a single sentence to a wider view of *Conversation*. The elements found so far in metaphors will guide us along the way.

#### THE DANTE-MANDELSTAM EFFECT: HISTORICITY IS MADE IN THE MOUTH

The *Conversation* was composed in the spring/summer of 1933, at the Koktebel writers' house in Crimea, where Mandelstam and his wife had moved from Moscow.<sup>11</sup> According to both Anna Akhmatova and Nadezhda Mandelstam,<sup>12</sup> the poet's familiarity with Dante dated back to the early 1930s, when he learned to read Italian and became able to approach the *Commedia* in its original language. In 1937, the Writers Publishing House in Leningrad rejected the manuscript. In 1965, an English translation of an earlier draft came out in the United States, and the full and definitive original Russian text appeared in the Soviet Union in 1967. In 1933, Mandelstam had published *Journey to Armenia* (composed in 1931), a travelogue representative of a sort of second birth of his poetics, after five years without writing verse. The difference in mode and subject between the two great prose pieces notwithstanding, *Journey to Armenia* is profoundly in step with the *Conversation*: like Armenia, Dante provided Mandelstam with an opportunity for decentering his discourse from being locked up in the discomfort of the Stalin era. At the same time, Dante proved an autobiographical mirror in which Mandelstam could see himself as an outcast and exile increasingly isolated by the Soviet intelligentsia.<sup>13</sup> After Stalin's epigram began to circulate among his

<sup>11</sup> As was his habit, Mandelstam composed the *Conversation* orally, that is, walking back and forth in a room and dictating to his wife, who was his scribe and interlocutor in the process.

<sup>12</sup> See Oleg Lekmanov, *Mandelstam*, transl. Tatiana Retivov (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2010), 126 and Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Abandoned*, transl. Max Hayward (New York: Atheneum, 1974), 88. Although quite renowned in its general outline, the history of Mandelstam's life and of the survival of his writings (unofficially preserved and collected by his wife and a few scholars) is far too intricate to be summed up here.

<sup>13</sup> So compelling is the biographical connection with Dante that it has become a *topos* in Mandelstam's reception. Nadezhda Mandelstam was the first to highlight significant correspondences between Mandelstam's life, the text of his *Conversation*, and Dante. For various takes on this correspondence see Clare Cavanagh, "The Poetics of Jewishness: Mandel'stam, Dante and the 'Honorable Calling of Jew,'" *The Slavic and East European Journal* 35, no. 3 (1991), 317–338; Seamus Heaney, "Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam," *London Review of Books*, no. 3 (1981), 3–6; Seamus Heaney, "Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet," *Irish University Review* 15, no. 1 (1985), 5–19; Gabriella Schiaffino, "L'episodio di Farinata nel *Discorso su Dante* di



acquaintances in late 1933, Mandelstam always kept in his pocket a portable copy of the *Commedia*, to make sure he would have Dante even if arrested—as it happened in May 1934.

What is the status of the *Conversation* as an interpretive text about Dante? It now holds a prominent place in the genre we may call “poets writing on poets,” and especially in its sub-genre “poets writing on Dante.” The piece became an “instant classic” in the Anglo-American world, where Mandelstam was promoted into the canon of great Western writers while his official recognition in the Soviet Union had yet to come.<sup>14</sup> The renown of the *Conversation* has been growing ever since, as evidenced by its inclusion in *The Poets’ Dante*.<sup>15</sup> Arguably the strongest advocate of the *Conversation* as a modern companion to the *Commedia* has been Seamus Heaney. He writes the following on Mandelstam in his essay “Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet:”

During the nineteen thirties, while Eliot was putting the finishing touches to his classical monument, an image of Dante as seer and repository of tradition, another poet was busy identifying Dante not with the inheritance of culture but with the processes of nature, making him a precursor of the experimental and unnerving poetry of Arthur Rimbaud rather than an heir to the Virgilian *gravitas*.<sup>16</sup>

The relevance of Heaney’s essay lies in its opposition of Eliot’s and Mandelstam’s Dante. The Irish poet’s major concern is to claim for

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Osip Mandel’shtam,” in *Dantismo russo e cornice europea. Atti dei convegni di Alghero—Gressoney (1987)*, a cura di E. Guidubaldi (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1989) vol. 1, 325–339; Remo Faccani, “Nello specchio della *Divina Commedia*,” in Osip Mandel’shtam, *Conversazione su Dante* (Genoa: Il Melangolo, 1994), 7–30; Carlo Tenuta, “Dante in Crimea. Osip Mandel’shtam e la *Divina Commedia*: poesia ed esilio in una lettura novecentesca,” *Intersezioni* 29, no. 2 (2009): 3–19.

<sup>14</sup> A detailed account of the different facets of Mandelstam’s Anglo-American reception is provided in Andrew Kahn, “Canonical Mandelstam,” in *Twentieth-Century Russian Poetry. Reinventing the Canon*, ed. Katharine Hodgson, Joanne Shelton and Alexandra Smith (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2017), 157–201. Even if in this context the *Conversation* won popularity outside the field of Slavic studies earlier than elsewhere, it must be noted that a timely Italian translation appeared in 1967, and a French one in 1977.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Hawkins and Rachel Jacoff, eds., *The Poets’ Dante* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> Heaney, “Envy,” 14. See also Heaney, “Osip and Nadhezda Mandelstam” for a more general though no less supportive take on the Mandelstams’ lives, works, and legacy. It must be noted that Heaney’s interest in Mandelstam was born under the influence of his friend Joseph Brodsky, one of the most authoritative proponents of Mandelstam’s poetry in the West.

his own relationship with Dante a composite poetic genealogy. What is at stake in Heaney's discourse is not an objectively "better" approach to Dante; the heart of the matter, instead, is to bring the reception of Dante back to the historicity of poetry as the condition of its making and reading. Each paradigm shaping poetry or its reception must be acknowledged as particular, local, contingent. On the other hand, only by virtue of this quality may a paradigm become "universal" (that is, potentially in dialogue with other *particular* poets and readers in any other time or place). It could be inferred that a major reason for Heaney to side with Mandelstam is that while the *Conversation* sees Dante as an *example*, Eliot's writings tend to depict Dante as a *universal*, transcending the historicity of both his origin and reception.<sup>17</sup> While the universal is dualistically opposed to the particular, the example is a mode that "entails a movement that goes from singularity to singularity, and, without ever leaving singularity, transforms every singular case into an *exemplar* of a general rule that can never be stated a priori."<sup>18</sup> As a result, the *Conversation* is a singularity that teaches us to see that the reception of the *Commedia* is a network of singularities (like those populating Heaney's Dantean genealogy), all taken in a call-and-response movement, generated by the *Commedia* and transmitted through incarnate sound, not just because Dante's words need to be spoken, but because the very act of opening our mouth grounds our presentness, our historicity:

What Mandelstam does [. . .] is to bring him from the pantheon back to the palate; he makes your mouth water to read him. He possesses the poem as a musician possesses a score, both as a whole structure and a sequence of delicious sounds. He transmits a phonetic excitement in the actual phonetic reality of the work and shares with us the sensation of his poet's delight turning into a sort of giddy wisdom.<sup>19</sup>

Mandelstam's Dante is an example of poetry made flesh through sound. He is inimitable not just because the unity of his cosmos and culture is irreparably lost to us but because he cannot

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<sup>17</sup> See T.S. Eliot's "Dante," written in 1929, in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), 238: "Dante's universality is not solely a personal matter. The Italian language, and especially the Italian language in Dante's age, gains much by being the product of universal Latin."

<sup>18</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, transl. Luca D'Isanto with Kevin Attell (New York: Zone Books, 2009), 22.

<sup>19</sup> Heaney, "Envies," 16–17.

be imitated as a model. His incarnate poetry could only be properly followed by an incarnate response, in the body of the reader. In other words, when the *Commedia* is performed, all the historically situated cultural materials that play a role in its composition are secondary to the feeling of being here. This does not mean this experience cannot be shared and communicated trans-individually, as we have seen by analyzing the metaphor of the orchestra. While Eliot and Pound bent to "the authority of Dante the historian, Dante the encyclopedic mind, the plunderer and harbourer of classical and medieval learning," Mandelstam's Dante "is a voluble Shakespearean figure, a woodcutter singing at his work in the dark wood of the larynx."<sup>20</sup> Such a striking metaphor is introduced by an allusion to Eliot's version of Dante and Shakespeare as alternative paradigms: Even if Shakespeare's material is "as universally human as the material of Dante," he had "no choice but to deal with it in a more local way."<sup>21</sup> Local, in Heaney's intention, means recalcitrant to being a *summa* that rises high and wide over historicity. Thanks to Mandelstam's mediation, what for Eliot is the anti-Dantean quality of Shakespeare would prove for Heaney to be the very condition of Dante's poetry. Local is the singularity of body, mouth, throat, voice, and language urged by the grounded energy of the vernacular, not by the abstract universality of Latin. Poetic sound as such is inherently vernacular in that it incarnates the unfinished individuation of speech: The poet is still at work in his larynx like a particular chemical orchestra.

My focus on Heaney's reflections on Dante and Mandelstam should serve to account for what we may call the "Mandelstam effect" or the "Dante-Mandelstam effect," by which poetry is conceived of as both response and a call for response. In *Paradiso* Dante himself has the angels speak vernacular and Adam claim the radical contingency of language.<sup>22</sup> He also has Statius call the *Aeneid* "mamma" (*Purg.* 21.97), a metaphor that locally generates the same effect. Like Dante, Statius and Mandelstam, we read as if we are hearing and speaking with our entire local body. Even before we finish articulating words, lines, stanzas, and cantos, the text wants

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 16 and 18.

<sup>21</sup> Eliot, "Dante," 241.

<sup>22</sup> On the poetics of vernacular see Kevin Brownlee, "Why the Angels Speak Italian: Dante as Vernacular Poeta in *Paradiso* XXV," *Poetics Today* 5, no. 3 (1984): 597–610.

us to voice the (re)generation of receptiveness: our readiness to say "mamma."

By following these associations suggested by poets, we inevitably end up raising this question: How does the discourse of "poets speaking on poets" augment our penetration into the *Commedia*, the understanding of which is inseparable from an immense accumulation of scholarly work? In other words, is it possible for the poet's and the scholar's response to speak to each other? Although acknowledged for its insight, a poet's response tends to be considered more as a meta-discourse on his or her own poetics than as a probing into the text being read: subjectivism, impressionism, and lack of method are the typical "flaws" that would undermine a poet's perspective since he or she does not speak a scholarly language. The *Conversation's* contribution to the understanding of the *Commedia* is anything but easy to frame in critical terms. Scholars in Slavic Studies have mostly focused on what Mandelstam says—via Dante—about his own poetics rather than on Dante as the subject of the *Conversation*.<sup>23</sup> A third option has been to place the *Conversation* in the context of the modern reception of Dante in Russian or Western literature, a vantage point that leaves the question of Dante as the ground for Mandelstam's generative conception of text and sound—and of text as sound—mostly unexplored.<sup>24</sup>

Possibly more than any other poet that has written on Dante, Mandelstam plays his game by rules other than those ordinarily accepted by scholarly criticism, and he does so by organizing his text non-linearly, by a series of reflections arranged like a network of clusters of metaphors. As we have seen, the matter of sound, too,

<sup>23</sup> In some studies, Dante is partly dismissed as more of a pretext than a real field of inquiry, as in Nikita Struve, *Ossip Mandelstam* (Paris: Institut d'études slaves, 1982), 101. Other studies that do not delve into the Dantean implications of the *Conversation* nonetheless hint at the possibility of investigating the matter, as is the case with Elena Glazov-Corrigan, *Mandel'shtam's Poetics: A Challenge to Postmodernism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 69.

<sup>24</sup> For an appraisal of Mandelstam in the light of the Russian reception of Dante in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Michele Colucci, "Note alla "Conversazione su Dante" di Mandel'stam," in *Tra Dante e Majakovskij. Saggi di letteratura comparate slavo-romanze*, a cura di R. Giuliani (Rome: Carocci, 2007), 176–185. See instead Alberto Casadei, *Dante oltre la Commedia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2013), 150, for a brief discussion of the *Conversation* as an outstanding instance of the first of the three major ways to use Dante in the twentieth century: as the forefather of modernism, avant-garde and experimentalism; as the *summa* of Western Christian culture; as a mystical visionary.

is treated metaphorically. If the *Conversation* is likely to be warded off by the established scholarly protocols, what kind of rigor can be claimed for Mandelstam's approach? Is there exactitude to his statements on sound through the *Commedia*? It is, again, an issue of response.<sup>25</sup>

The exemplary definitions proposed here are hardly intended to show off my own metaphorical capacity. Rather, I am engaged in a struggle to make [the *Commedia*] comprehensible as an entity, to graphically demonstrate that which is conceivable. Only through metaphor is it possible to find a concrete sign to represent the instinct for form creation by which Dante accumulated and poured forth his *terza rima*.<sup>26</sup>

Speaking in metaphors is necessary for Mandelstam to present the *Commedia* as an "entity." Understanding is brought about by a metaphorical production that incessantly rephrases, recasts, and re-introduces its motives within the changing network of their interrelations. Each and every metaphor is an experiment in understanding the poem as "form creation" rather than as form created.<sup>27</sup> The paradox of Mandelstam's reading, and the challenge it poses to Dantology, is to address a poem that is *in the making* in the presence of the reader. For the *Conversation*, the making of the *Commedia* demands a specific type of engagement from the reader: *in the making* should be glossed as *in the hermeneutic relation with a reader called here and now by the Dantean text*. The production of metaphors in the *Conversation* connects the in-the-making instinct or impulse of Dante's poem with both Mandelstam as reader and Mandelstam's reader. Arbitrary, idiosyncratic, or obscure as it might prove to professional critical protocols, Mandelstam's take

<sup>25</sup> See William Franke, "Professional Dantology and the Human Significance of Dante Studies," *Diacritics* 42, no. 4 (2014): 65 and 75, for some short but crucial considerations on the reluctance of Dante studies to take up the challenges posed by interpretations like Mandelstam's, in which by their method and style question the very frames of the established scholarly discourse on Dante. As an exception we could mention Giorgio Passerone, "Dante minore. Lineamenti pratici dell'infinito," *Lecture classensi* (2007): 35–56, whose reflections intersect, at some points, the discourse on sound in the present essay.

<sup>26</sup> Mandelstam, *Complete Prose*, 409. See also *ibid.*, 439: "I would answer the direct question, 'What is a Dantean metaphor?' saying, 'I don't know', because a metaphor can be defined only metaphorically, and this can be substantiated scientifically."

<sup>27</sup> See Jurij Lotman, "Sulla preistoria delle idee semiotiche contemporanee. Il concetto di testo nel *Discorso su Dante* di Mandel'stam," *Autografo* 2, 3: "non un involucro passivo nel quale viene immerso il senso che si trova fuori dalla trama del testo, ma un generatore di senso, un congegno, che non contiene ma crea il significato."

on the *Commedia* is no less than a rigorous theoretical *and* practical engagement with the poetic impulse of the source-text.

Approaching Dante like this is tantamount to an exercise in reception, or a training in receptiveness to voices: one's own (how it becomes flesh with the *Commedia*) and Dante's (how it becomes flesh with us). According to Corti, the poets-on-poets genre is driven by two key tensions: the stylistic momentum that shapes the interpretive prose, so that its form is in itself a commentary on its subject, and the energy of poetry-making as the process shared by who reads and who is read.<sup>28</sup> What the *Conversation* implies is that such tensions are neither a privilege nor a burden specific to the poet; they are also part and parcel of the reader's experience of poetry, language, and reality. In this sense, the proliferation of metaphors is Mandelstam's way to enact the "historicity of the reader" invoked by Franke as the true ground of the *Commedia*'s long-debated historical truth: "The main locus of history in the poem is not the literal sense and the mimetic surface of the narrative [. . .] but the existence of a reader who can historically appropriate a text, bringing its implications to fruition in life and in action."<sup>29</sup> What in Mandelstam might have appeared marked by the taint of subjectivism or undisciplined intuition shines here with its rigor as a response to an *entity* called *Commedia*: "Dante-protagonist as literal, historical presence in the narrative is vitally important as an image of the concrete historicity which each reader possesses or can attain."<sup>30</sup> Biographical affinities between Mandelstam and Dante only add to this relationship, but the point essential to our discussion here is that sound is the dimension through which historicity unfolds in the *Conversation*. Something non-conceptualized within this concrete experience of the text will always remain, a matter that can be neither fully cleared nor possessed by the reader. Gesturing toward this obscurity to make it perceptible, understandable, thinkable, and shareable beyond the particular limitations of one's individual experience is the poetical and theoretical effort of the

<sup>28</sup> Maria Corti, "La poesia di Dante letta da quattro poeti del Novecento," in *Nuovi metodi e fantasmi* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2001), 400.

<sup>29</sup> William Franke, *Dante's Interpretive Journey* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 160.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* Even when bordering the territory of science-fiction, Mandelstam's variations and transformations of Dante's "thinking in images" and "poetic material" vouch for the historicity of his reading. See the most renowned metaphor from the *Conversation*: the flying machine that "in full flight constructs and launches another machine," which in turns begets another machine, and so on, in *Complete Prose*, 414.

*Conversation*, its way of working toward preparing a reader for his or her reception of the *Commedia*.

What follows is an attempt to describe this effort by analyzing a few key passages where Mandelstam deals with the emergence of sound in poetry. The *Conversation* will not be examined sequentially from start to finish,<sup>31</sup> nor will its thick network of music or sound metaphors be reconstructed in its full extent; these options would require a far more extensive treatment. My objective here will be more modest and circumscribed: from selected key passages where Mandelstam investigates the matter of sound between inarticulateness and articulateness, between quasi-sound and sound, I will try to unravel a practical and theoretical notion of poetry as a response in sound. Although the text of the *Commedia* will not be in sight, it will always be there as Mandelstam's interlocutor. Arguably, the *Conversation* functions like a membrane that both veils and reveals the presence of Dante's text, which dictates its readers' responses. We may say that rather than a conversation *about* Dante it is a conversation *with* Dante.<sup>32</sup>

#### TRANSFORMATION: THE FORCE THAT THROUGH THE "COMMEDIA" DRIVES THE READER

The *Conversation* begins with a working definition of poetic discourse, a dense formulation that lays the groundwork for the subsequent reading of Dante. Abstract as it may seem, this opening reflects the way in which, according to Mandelstam, we can hear the *Commedia*—or, the other way around: the way in which the *Commedia* teaches us how to hear.

Poetic discourse is a hybrid process, one which crosses two sound modes: the first of these is the modulation we hear and sense in the prosodic instruments of poetic discourse in its spontaneous flow: the second is the discourse itself, i.e. the intonational and phonological performance of these instruments. [. . .] It is only with the severest qualifications that poetic discourse or thought may be referred to as "sounding;" for we hear in it only the crossing of two lines, one of which, taken by itself, is completely mute, while the other, abstracted from its prosodic transmutation, is totally devoid of significance and

<sup>31</sup> For an excellent sequential reading of the *Conversation*, see Glazov-Corrigan, *Mandel'shtam's Poetics*, 68–110.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Meschonnic, *Critique*, 61: "Criticism does not speak about poetry. *To speak about* is the dualism of the sign. A meaning that is paraphrased. [. . .] Criticism is the very interaction of theoretical activity and poetic activity." My translation.

interest, and is susceptible of paraphrasing, which, to my mind, is surely a sign of non-poetry.<sup>33</sup>

From the outset, Mandelstam de-naturalizes sound in poetry. In reading verse, we do not hear just an oral rendition of a predetermined chain of signifiers, separated from and yet dependent on the meaning they carry. Nor do we hear words as opposed to silence or lack of speech. Mandelstam's outline provides the basis for a non-dual conception of sound, beyond the pattern of duality that recurs over and over in sets of oppositions, dichotomies by which poetry as heard is normally qualified. For Mandelstam, sound is not merely a component of poetry; sound *makes* poetry, by the intersection of its two "modes" or "lines" that bring the *not-yet* of poetry to the moment it emerges as incarnate sound, here and now.<sup>34</sup> Mandelstam's non-dual counterpoint of two quasi-sounds, inaudible in themselves, audible only when resonating through the receptive body of a subject. We begin to fully hear sound only in the twin processes of composition and reception. An impulse toward individuation enters discourse and becomes audible as the modulation that organizes and moves speech; at the same time, the matter of sound becomes audible in itself, perceptible in its very constituents. At once we hear something through sound and we hear sound itself.<sup>35</sup>

However, we can't cut one side away from the other. This is why the poem as a translation into sound cannot be paraphrased: The extraction of an allegedly standalone meaning would restore the regime of separation between sound and meaning, with its ensuing dualisms. Nor can "pure poetry" be more than abstract ideal, since the matter of sound through which poetic discourse comes to life is not a virginal substance but one composed of all the

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<sup>33</sup> Mandelstam, *Complete Prose*, 396.

<sup>34</sup> See Glazov-Corrigan, *Mandel'shtam's Poetics*, 69: "One side of the process he calls 'impulse' (an imprecise translation of the Russian *poryv* [thrust, breath], in Greek *pneuma*), which is described as the vibration of a wave, a change, a modulation, inaudible on its own, understood only in its effect upon something, which effect is the second side of the process, and which can be described as an aggregate of quantities, in itself formless and uninspired."

<sup>35</sup> This is what Mandelstam implies when he later says, "imagine a granite monument erected in honor of granite, as if to reveal its very idea. Having grasped this, you will then be able to understand quite clearly just how form and content are related in Dante's work," in *Complete Prose*, 407. The structures of geology so often evoked in the *Conversation* can be understood as the crystallization of sound, its leaving a formal trace of its passage.



physiological, linguistic, socio-cultural, and anthropological elements sedimented in the reader/writer's memory and configured to different degrees of importance and consciousness.<sup>36</sup> There are no pure elements; sound is always the memory and transmutation of a jumbled reservoir, a heap of broken forms with an inaudible *potentia*. "One must traverse a river crammed with Chinese junks moving simultaneously in various directions—this is how the meaning of poetic discourse is created."<sup>37</sup> Unique to each subject and yet partially shared by the many, this heterogeneous stuff is what makes poetry audible as a *local* event: It emerges from *this* language with its determinations and potentialities; then all the "junks" participate in the emergence of sound by being the medium affected by *this* impulse. Hence we can think of the universality or trans-individuality of poetry as its capacity to make audible the widest range of differentiations in its local matter and impulse.<sup>38</sup> The two-fold presence of the inaudible (impulse and material) is heard only *in transformation and hybridization*, that is, not until it enters performance.

Along these lines Dante is first introduced in the *Conversation* as "master of the instruments of poetry: He is not a manufacturer of tropes. He is a strategist of transmutation and hybridization; he is least of all a poet in the "general European" sense or in the usage of cultural jargon."<sup>39</sup> By "instruments" Mandelstam means the very dimensions through which speech emerges as poetic discourse, incorporating both sound and non-sound. The author under whose name we read all the variable turns of poetic speech (literally its tropes) is not a "manufacturer" external to his matter and flow. Subject and object are two sides of the same process. Strictly speaking, no author remains on the scene after the passage

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<sup>36</sup> In this respect my view diverges from that of Glazov-Corrigan in *Mandel'shtam's Poetics*, 69, where she speaks of "a discourse as yet virginal, uninspired, and unimpregnated," a not-yet formed "*materia*." It is formless, I claim, only insofar as it is not yet re-formed by the local impulse of the reader/writer. The moment Dante writes or we read, "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita," we are giving a (new) shape not to an amorphous matter but to a geologically sedimented substance.

<sup>37</sup> Mandelstam, *Complete Prose*, 398.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Paul Zumthor, *Oral Poetry: An Introduction*, transl. Kathryn Murphy-Judy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 119: "performance is also the instance of symbolization: the integration of our corporeal relativity within the cosmic harmony signified by voice; the integration of the multiplicity of semantic changes within the unity of a presence." Of course, the notion of "harmony" must be thought of beyond any static standard.

<sup>39</sup> Mandelstam, *Complete Prose*, 397.

of poetry into performance. Thus, the notion of poetry as a cultural capital possessed, commodified, and exchanged through the figure of "the great author" is undermined and replaced by an idea of authorial activity as immanent in its matter (such an immanence is the real persistence of poetry in time). A passage from the rough drafts of the *Conversation* can further our struggle to conceptualize this strand in Mandelstam's discourse:

What is an image? An instrument in the metamorphosis of hybridized poetic discourse. We can comprehend this concept with Dante's help. However, Dante does not teach us about instruments, he has already turned and vanished. He is the actual instrument in the metamorphosis of *literary time*, in the withholding and unfolding of literary time which we have ceased to *hear*, but which we are taught, here and in the West, is the narration of so-called "cultural structures."<sup>40</sup>

"Instruments" cannot be objectified and taught. Rather, they are the field where poetic speech becomes audible, incarnate. By a reversal consistent with the dismantling of his monumental representation as an author, Dante himself is turned from master of instruments into an instrument himself, namely, from a generator of sound into an event generated by sound. Reader and writer are the *personae* embodying these functions, and Dante is the name for a Janus-figure where production and receptiveness are the systole and diastole of one and the same movement.<sup>41</sup> This is the "literary time which we have ceased to *hear*," a time of which "the narration of so-called cultural structures" is a mere simulacrum. The reference to hearing is crucial: It is in the here-and-now of performance, when sound comes alive as both permanent and impermanent, that the temporality of literature can be properly understood, not primarily as an objectification (whether an historical, social, or formal object).<sup>42</sup> At any level or scale, literature is individuation by call-and-response. Both call and response travel first and foremost through sound.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 444.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Glazov-Corrigan, *Mandel'shtam's Poetics*, for a more extensive analysis of activity and receptivity in writer and reader.

<sup>42</sup> "Our criticism tells us: distance the phenomenon and I will deal with it," in Mandelstam, *Complete Prose*, 419.

## LEGAME MUSAICO: HEARING OURSELVES HEARING DANTE

It is from this core of not-knowing or de-knowing, as demanded by *this* text, that we can respond to the *Commedia*. We, the readers, are poetry's "instruments" in the circumstances of its performance.<sup>43</sup> Hearing ourselves hearing Dante would be the condition for any kind of response to the *Commedia*, no matter its particular form or methodology. In a sense, we should hear the poem in its coming toward us, in a movement from which the double historicity of the encounter results. "It is inconceivable to read Dante's cantos without directing them toward contemporaneity. [. . .] They demand commentary in the *futurum*."<sup>44</sup> Both the poem and the response it demands would be heard together with the sonic, hybrid, local, incarnate continuum they emerge from: "The commentary (explanatory) is integral to the very structure of the *Commedia*. [. . .] The commentary derives from street talk, from rumor, from Florentine slander passing from mouth to mouth."<sup>45</sup> The sound of the *Commedia* and of the speech it generates is a modulation within the continuum of reality in its sonorous, vociferous mode of existence, where polyphony is the background noise of speech before being an orderly organization of voices. From this perspective, commentaries by scholars and poets are not separate discourses but two modalities of making sense of the same composite, multidirectional call-and-response movement. The point of origin of any discourse on poetry is what Dante called *legame musaico*.

In a passage on the impossibility of translating poetry, *Conv.* 1.7.14 reads: "nulla cosa per legame musaico armonizzata si può de la sua loquela in altra trasmutare senza rompere tutta sua dolcezza e armonia."<sup>46</sup> Whether or not Mandelstam could have read this passage, the notion of transmutation calls for our attention. The bond pertaining to both music and the Muses is the most exact description of how we can hear the "instruments" of poetry as they

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<sup>43</sup> "Insufficient respect for the poetic material which can be grasped only through performance, only through the flight of the conductor's baton – this was the reason for the universal blindness to Dante, to the greatest master and manager of this material, to the greatest conductor of European art," in *ibid.*, 440.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 420.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 441.

<sup>46</sup> A passage that should be read together with *DVE* 2.4.2, where poetry is passingly defined as "nichil aliud quam fictio rethorica musicaque poita." Mandelstam's first-hand knowledge of works by Dante other than the *Commedia* is anything but certain.

become manifest in *this* thing harmonized in *this* language. Every poem is singular, and thus untranslatable, as Dante says in that very section of his treatise, because of the role of sound that binds composite elements into a unique and local configuration. This entails that the poem as heard is always vernacular in the most radical sense of the term, no matter the language:<sup>47</sup>

E così lo volgare è più prossimo quanto è più unito, ché uno e solo è prima nella mente che alcuno altro, e ché non solamente per sé è unito, ma per accidente, in quanto è congiunto con le più prossime persone, sì come con li parenti e propri cittadini, e con la propria gente. E questo è lo volgare proprio: lo quale è non prossimo, ma massimamente prossimo a ciascuno. (*Conv.* 1.12–4–8)

Sound is the closest bond with our vernacular. Hence Dante's *legame musaico* is the event of poetry itself, where the two inaudible lines of which Mandelstam speaks (impulse and matter), meet and activate poetry's "instruments," here and now, in the contingency of this concrete *loquela* (which is *parole*, not *langue*). The *legame* operates at different scales, from the tiniest phonological components to the poem's overall architecture,<sup>48</sup> but also ties together into one relationship the writer, his readers, and all the quasi-sound that they carry with and in themselves.

The bond as is cannot survive translation into another language, as the transplant would deprive it of its sonic "instruments," thus thwarting the individuation driven by poetic speech as described by Mandelstam. And yet the bond itself is a site of transmutation: It does not change (*this* and no other is the configuration of the text) and at once it does trigger change in writer and readers alike. This is what Mandelstam teaches us: to be receptive in order to tune in our ears, body, and consciousness to the *Commedia*. It is up to us what concrete shape our response/commentary will take.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> "Those prayers are in another sort of dialect," said one day my grandmother Rosina, referring to phrases and sentences in Latin in her prayer book. She did not know Latin. From the perspective of this essay she was totally right: In step with Mandelstam and the Dante of *Par.* 26. To her, *in memoriam*, the present essay is dedicated.

<sup>48</sup> See Mandelstam, *Complete Prose*, 409 for the presentation of the entire *Commedia* as "one single unified and indivisible stanza," one crystallographic body of "thirteen thousand facets."

<sup>49</sup> As documented in John Ahern, "Singing the Book: Orality in the Reception of Dante's *Comedy*," in *Dante: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Amilcare Iannucci (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1997) 214–239, in Dante's age and soon after

## BECOMING SOUND: MATTER AND MASTER

Mandelstam's intention to investigate the *legame musaico* of the *Commedia* pervades the entire *Conversation*, even when he seems to touch on other subjects or draw from other semantic fields.<sup>50</sup> Sound is indeed incessantly pushed beyond "literal" sound and into any other domain by the principle of change and convertibility, of which Mandelstam holds the *Commedia* to be the foundational example in European culture. It follows that hearing is no longer one of the senses but the very organ for the reception of poetry in its making: its *pre-* or *trans-*sense that sustains a process of individuation through differentiation: "the thing emerges as an integral whole as a result of the simple differentiating impulse which trans-fixed it."<sup>51</sup> So the challenge in reading the *Commedia* is to tune the ear, body, and consciousness in order to *hear it raw*.<sup>52</sup> The transition from one semantic field to another in the whirling dance of the *Conversation's* interpretive metaphors serves precisely as a reminder of such an unfinished substance. This is the poetico-theoretical background against which Mandelstam metaphorically uses musical instruments and concepts in his commentary on a few unforgettable characters in the *Inferno* (Farinata, Cavalcante, Ugolino).<sup>53</sup> What Mandelstam wants the reader to take away is the capacity to hear the differentiation brought about by the impulse of Dante's text and realized only when a reader's voice takes in that very impulse. Such is the sonic force that drives individuation beyond identity:

If we could learn to hear Dante, we would hear the ripening of the clarinet and the trombone, we would hear the transformation of the

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different ways of performing/reading the poem where possible, according to the social and cultural determinants of the audience.

<sup>50</sup> As noted in Colucci, "Note," 183, geology is music's counterpart in the metaphorical economy of the *Conversation*. Corti, "La poesia," 401, briefly singles out, among the constants of the poets-reading-poets genre, "l'attenzione alla sostanza musicale della poesia e alla struttura non statica, ma dinamica del testo poetico in quanto di per sé generatore di senso." Music is not only music but a way to experience the poetic process in its entirety and complexity.

<sup>51</sup> Mandelstam, *Complete Prose*, 402.

<sup>52</sup> "Contrary to our accepted way of thinking, poetic discourse is infinitely more unfinished than so-called "conversational" speech. Being raw material is precisely what brings it into contact with performing culture", in *ibid.*, 445.

<sup>53</sup> See *ibid.*, 404–406 and 427–429: Farinata: tuba and organ; Cavalcante: oboe and clarinet; Ugolino: cello. For a treatment of Farinata in the *Conversation*, though with no mention of his musical presentation, see Schiaffino, "L'episodio".

viola into a violin and the lengthening of the valve on the French horn. And we would be able to hear the formation around the lute and the theorbo of the nebulous nucleus of the future homophonic three-part orchestra.<sup>54</sup>

The deliberate anachronism of this passage, as well as of the musical commentary on characters, puts emphasis on the historicity of the reader who has to learn to hear Dante. We should learn how to hear the genesis of our own modes of hearing/reading (our "instruments"). Ugolino sounds like a cello precisely because we are the echo-chamber to be investigated. And we must learn to hear our own individuation in the metamorphosis of sound in the *Commedia*. By listening to instruments not yet existing for Dante, we are reminded of the status of poetry in performance as something yet to be, oscillating between past and future. Furthermore, Mandelstam's emphasis on the formation/deformation of the instruments' shape and sound tells us once again that the *legame musaico* calls our changing flesh-and-blood existence. We are the material, bodily echo-chamber of the *Commedia*. What Mandelstam calls "physiology of reading" in the *Journey to Armenia* and "reflexology of speech" in the *Conversation* is none other than this receptiveness.<sup>55</sup> Here are its effects:

The inner form of the verse is inseparable from the countless changes of expression flitting across the face of the narrator who speaks and feel emotion. The art of speech distorts our face in precisely this way: it disrupts its calm, destroys its mask... When I began to study Italian and had barely familiarized myself with its phonetics and prosody, I suddenly understood that the center of gravity of my speech efforts had been moved closer to my lips, to the outer part of my mouth. The tip of the tongue suddenly turned out to have the seat of honor. The sound rushed toward the locking of the teeth. And something else that struck me was the infantile aspect of Italian phonetics, its beautiful child-like quality, its closeness to infant babbling, to some kind of eternal Dadaism.<sup>56</sup>

A radically vernacular, incarnate response to the *Commedia* as a text in performance would disfigure the "mask" of human identity and open it up to other modes and forms of being. Hearing

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<sup>54</sup> Mandelstam, *Complete Prose*, 402.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 366 and 434.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 399.

and feeling the emergence of sound from the mouth, we become aware of the micro-events taking place in our body while we breathe the transition from the inaudible to the audible, from quasi-sound into sound. Here the special rawness characteristic of poetic speech materializes in the babbling-effect that underlies Dante's verse, even his more definitive phrasings. "The mouth works,"<sup>57</sup> and there is no standard to its working. See how Mandelstam glosses his dazzling account of *Inferno* 26: "It seems to me that Dante made a careful study of all speech defects, listening closely to stutterers and lispers, to nasal twangs and inarticulate pronunciation, and that he learned much from them."<sup>58</sup> There is no standard diction just like there is no standard cultural protocol preparing us for Dante's sounding. As in Vico's *Scienza nuova*, poetry derives from variability of sound manifest in the "scilinguati", those with speech-defects.<sup>59</sup>

Babbling is the operation that sets the whole constellation of writer, reader, text, and context into "perpetual disequilibrium and bifurcation", thus constituting a "zone of continual variation"<sup>60</sup> where all the used-up materials of which speech is made are animated by the energy that a collective (i.e. trans- or sub-individual) process of individuation or formation releases in language. *This* voice is only mine or yours and yet it is not, populated as it is by any sort of presences that appear more or less unexpectedly. It all begins and ends with the achievement of a state of receptiveness, by which we actively hear the poem and its immense range of discourses and situations. See Mandelstam's commentary on the extraordinary onomatopoeias of *Inferno* 32.25–30: "Suddenly, for no apparent reason, a Slavic duck begins quacking: *Osteric, Tambernic, cric.*"<sup>61</sup> Through the receptiveness of the reader, Italian and Slavic resonate with each other, as if part of the same babbling continuum of sound made audible by the text's orchestration.

It must be noted, though, that this cannot not be an infinite play of interpretations laid open to the reader's arbitrariness. The heart of the matter, instead, is with what state or mode of

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 430.

<sup>59</sup> Giambattista Vico, *La scienza nuova*, ed. Paolo Rossi (Milan: Rizzoli, 1977), 201.

<sup>60</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, transl. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 108.

<sup>61</sup> Mandelstam, *Complete Prose*, 431.

consciousness we should respond to the entity called *Commedia* and how the poem modulates our response.

When you read Dante with all your powers and with complete conviction, when you transplant yourself completely to the field of action of the poetic material, when you join in and coordinate your own intonation with the echoes of the orchestral and thematic groups continually arising on the pocked and undulating semantic surface, [. . .] then the purely vocal, intonational, and rhythmical work is replaced by a more powerful coordinating force by the conductor's function—and the hegemony of the conductor's baton comes into its own, cutting across orchestrated space and projecting from the voice like some more complex mathematical measure out of a three-dimensional state.<sup>62</sup>

In another instance of deliberate anachronism, Mandelstam sees or hears in Dante the origin of the baton, which directs the force of individuation itself as it unfolds in sound. Its coordinating action is another way to conceptualize the *legame musaico* that gives the text its singularity. As such, the baton is “no less than a dancing chemical formula which integrates reactions perceptible to the ear,” and which “contains in itself all the elements in the orchestra.”<sup>63</sup> All the instruments directed by the conductor become sound: De-individuated, trans-individuated, they ultimately are nothing else than rhythms in the *Commedia*'s relational ontology.<sup>64</sup> “Which comes first, listening or conducting?” Mandelstam asks,<sup>65</sup> as if the impulse of poetry dissolved individual roles and the divide between passivity and activity. We are left with a flow of sound/energy to be modulated, in its incarnations, by an orchestra which is literally nobody and everybody, a shifting subject: writer, speaker, listener, scribe, commentator, scholar, flesh, air, matter, and so on, *ad infinitum*. And yet the text never disappears. It is there, dictating and coordinating the metamorphosis.<sup>66</sup> The reason for choosing Dante as the theme of the *Conversation* is indeed that he is:

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 425.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 426.

<sup>64</sup> See Passerone, “Dante minore,” 41–42 on “ritmo-relazione,” “ontologia relazionale,” and “etologia politica” of the *Commedia*. In this respect, the rhythmical must be distinguished from the metrical, as extensively argued in Meschonnic, *Critique*.

<sup>65</sup> Mandelstam, *Complete Prose*, 425.

<sup>66</sup> For a reading of the passage on the conductor's baton as a problematic statement on the authority of the poet, see Glazov-Corrigan, *Mandel'shtam's Poetics*, 103–107, and John MacKay, *Inscription and Modernity: From Wordsworth to Mandelstam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 198–200.



the greatest, the unrivalled master of transmutable and convertible poetic material, the earliest and simultaneously the most powerful chemical conductor of the poetic composition existing only in the swells and waves of the ocean, only in the raising of the sails and in the tackling.<sup>67</sup>

As readers affected by that, *we* are the ultimate matter of Dante's conduction, in the wake of Mandelstam's example. As witnessed by Lidiia Ginzburg, he really became the matter and master of sound when reading his *Conversation* to a group of scholars and writers in Leningrad, at Anna Akhmatova's place, in September 1933:

He speaks tucking up his toothless mouth, in a singing voice, with the unusually refined intonation of Russian speech. He is overwhelmed with rhythms (just as he is overwhelmed with ideas) and beautiful words. As he reads, he sways and moves his hands; he breathes with great delight in time to his words, and reminds one of a coryphaeus behind which appears the dancing choir. [. . .] He speaks in the language of his poems: inarticulately (bellowing with "that . . ." constantly intersecting his speech), and is not embarrassed to use lofty, grandiose expressions. Never misses an opportunity to sparkle wit and joke.<sup>68</sup>

Such is the joy of becoming sound.

#### STUDIUM

Mandelstam's *Conversation about Dante* is a study in receptiveness. Its main concern is not the *Commedia* in itself, whether from a historical, cultural or literary point of view; the essay, instead, entirely revolves around one major issue that for Mandelstam is no less collective than individual, no less trans-historical than contingent: How does the *Commedia* prepare us to read, hear, and voice its text and the impulses it contains? From which follows another issue: Who we are as readers? What are our potentialities, which emerge from the encounter with the text, as a response to its call? We have seen that reading the *Commedia*—when it takes place through sound, in the contingency of our bodies, and with the force of our metaphorical and metamorphic imagination—is a process that affects individuation and reveals to what extent the latter

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<sup>67</sup> Mandelstam, *Complete Prose*, 424.

<sup>68</sup> Lekmanov, *Mandelstam*, 126–127.

is also a trans-individuation unfolding from our vocalization of the text. In this sense, our receptiveness to sound and to the mastery by which Dante orchestrate its variations is a virtue the field of which is not just literature or criticism, but life itself. The *Commedia* can be therefore taken as an incomparable paradigm of all this precisely because its vocalization of word and world is both intensive and extensive, that is, it both concentrates on the tiniest phenomenon and embraces the whole universe.

The most appropriate conclusion to the present discussion of the *Conversation* would be to open the volume of the *Commedia* and read from its pages, or mumbling what we have learned by heart from it, paying attention to that call-and-response rhythm that precedes any reading protocol, and which is free from the burden of all the cultural capital accumulated in time on Dante's text. We have to read or recite, keeping in mind that it is "more appropriate to bear in mind the creation of impulses than the creation of forms."<sup>69</sup> The impulses we receive from the *Commedia* and then respond to are the force that makes the poem into a perpetual beginning in the matter of sound.

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<sup>69</sup> Mandelstam, *Complete Prose*, 442.