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Review of "Mandle: The Complete Critical Prose and Letters" by Sven Birkerts

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Mandelstam: The Complete Critical Prose and Letters. Edited by Jane Gary Harris. Translated by Jane Gary Harris and Constance Link. Ardis Publishers; Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1979. 725 pages. \$12.50 paper. *The Prose of Osip Mandelstam.* Translated by Clarence Brown. Princeton University Press; Princeton, N.J., 1965. 209 pages. \$4.95 paper. *Hope Against Hope: A Memoir.* By Nadezhda Mandelstam. Translated by Max Hayward. Atheneum; New York, 1970. 431 pages. \$6.95 paper.*

—For Joseph Brodsky

Social differences and class antagonisms pale before the division of people into friends and enemies of the word: literally, sheep and goats. I sense an almost physically unclean goat breath emanating from the enemies of the word.

—Mandelstam

The poetry of Osip Mandelstam defies successful translation. This is because he worked with his superbly developed ear and his philologist's instincts from within the Russian language. What we get, in English, is at best a kind of camera obscura rendering of a phenomenon that is densely textured, quick with allusion, and which derives its internal propulsion from the untransmissible word itself. Anyone who doubts this need only refer to one or two of Clarence Brown's close readings in his book *Mandelstam*. It would seem that any serious discussion of Mandelstam as a poet based upon translation is doomed. As for discussion

*Note: I do not say much about Mandelstam's biography. It seems futile to do so when it is documented in such detail by his wife Nadezhda Mandelstam. Still, the reader should keep a few important dates in mind. In 1933 Mandelstam writes a poem denouncing Stalin. Though the poem is not circulated except by recitation to friends, it finds its way to the secret police. He is arrested for the first time in 1934 and sent into a 3 year term of exile. Upon his return to Moscow, he finds it impossible to find work or housing. He and his wife move from place to place until, in May of 1938, he is arrested once again. He reportedly dies in a transit camp in December of the same year.

about his world view—is it not part of the very nature of lyric poetry that its idea inheres in the prosody: that you cannot detach it and lift it out the way you might lift out the backbone from a well-cooked fish? Mandelstam certainly believed this.

We are, therefore, quite fortunate that Mandelstam was a writer of prose as well, and that this prose was no mere footnote to the poetry, but its accompaniment. Here, particularly in the critical prose, we find the investigations, ideas and arguments that in many ways form a counterpart to the poetry; here, too, we can speak of something that amounts to a world view. And, unlike the poetry, the prose does lend itself to a more or less sensible transposition into English. Mandelstam himself clarifies one of the distinctions between the two modes:

The prose writer always addresses himself to a concrete audience, to the dynamic representatives of his age. Even when making prophecies, he bears his future contemporaries in mind . . . Since instruction is the central nerve of prose, the prose writer requires a pedestal. Poetry is another matter. The poet is bound only to his providential addressee. He is not compelled to tower over his age, to appear superior to society.

—*On the Addressee*, 1913 [p. 71]

This impulse to instruction, which is not the same as didacticism, is present in Mandelstam's prose. It is what allows the close paraphrase of translation to succeed. The result is that we have access to a number of important statements from Mandelstam on the nature of language, poetry, and the position of the poet with respect to his culture and time. While this is not going to bring us any closer to the poetry—for that requires understanding of a different order—it will show us more about the thoughts and predilections of the man who wrote it.

There is enough prose so that it can be, and has been, divided into two groupings. Princeton has issued the *Prose of Osip Mandelstam* (translated by Clarence Brown, 1965) and Ardis Press recently supplied us with the remaining portion under the title *Mandelstam: The Complete Critical Prose and Letters* (translated by Jane Gary Harris and Constance Link, 1979). There is no overlap in contents. In fact, the collections show decidedly different aspects of Mandelstam as a prose writer.

The *Prose* gives us the translated texts of *The Noise of Time* (1925), *Theodosia* (1925), and *The Egyptian Stamp* (1928). *The Noise of Time* is the

centerpiece of these three writings, all of which are philological in their method. The prose is poetic, deriving much of its rhythm and association from within the language. It is prose, however, and as such suffers less from translation.

Taken together, the three sections of the *Prose* provide a closely-fashioned and intimately-cluttered picture of time as it is transected by memory. There is not much of Mandelstam as persona in these pieces, for he has deliberately removed himself to the periphery, a tactic that is maddening until one grasps his purpose: that the time should enunciate itself as much as possible. Unlike most writers, he has no great interest in supplying a 'portrait of the artist as a young man.' His object is to recreate what he names in the one title: the noise of time. The technique is a careful amassing and rendering of detail. Here, for example, is a description of the premiere in St. Petersburg of Scriabin's *Prometheus*:

In the dim light of the gaslamps the many entrances of the Nobility Hall were beset by a veritable siege. Gendarmes on prancing horses, lending to the atmosphere of the square the mood of a civil disturbance, made clicking noises with their tongues and shouted as they guarded the main entry with a chain. The sprung carriages with dim lanterns slipped into the glistening circle and arranged themselves in an impressive black gypsy camp. The cabbies dared not deliver their fare right to the door; one paid them while approaching, and then they made off rapidly to escape the wrath of the police. Through the triple chains the Petersburger made his way like a feverish little trout to the marble icehole of the vestibule, whence he disappeared into the luminous frosty building, bedraped with silk and velvet. [p. 95 *Prose of O.M.*]

The prose reminds us in many places of the avid detailings of Proust, or Mandelstam's own countryman, Nabokov. All three were equally consumed by the effort to graft memory to time. What emerges from these three pieces—and this is their success—is a picture so angled that the life of the artist does not emerge in relief. All is background, or, if you will, foreground.

The *Prose* repays careful reading. The contents will no doubt be sifted and re-sifted as Mandelstam's place in world literature continues to be

reckoned. I would, however, like to focus as much as space allows on the critical prose, for it is in the essays that Mandelstam's sensibility steps forth most vigorously and contentiously.

The Ardis collection is large enough to require both hands. Even if the letters, the more ephemeral reviews, and the scholarly apparatus were to be deleted, there would still be a good heft to the book. And this is as it should be. Mandelstam was a critic and essayist of major scope. There are, by my count, at least fifteen important essays, not to mention scores of intriguing passages and fragments. From *Francois Villon*, written in 1910 when Mandelstam was 19, to *Goethe's Youth: Radiodrama*, which came in 1935, when he was 44, the contents exhibit a remarkable internal unity. From first to last he is self-assured, consistent in his beliefs, and, above all, willing to risk. These risks were both literal—for he was writing what he believed right in the teeth of Stalin's storm—and figurative, the linguistic risks required to move away from the well-tread paths.

It is one thing to discover internal unity in a scholar's quiet career, quite another to find it in the works of a man subjected to years of harassment, terrorization, exile and proscription. The biography is well-known and there is no need to re-state it here. But we must try to discover the secret of this unity. Where was it grounded, how was it achieved? In the case of Mandelstam it was, I believe, the result of an all-consuming will to organicism. His highest ideal, and this surfaces time and again in his work, was that of Hellenism: Man in natural concord with his world. It meant that he treasured above all else the free and organic development of his creative gift. In circumstances as hostile as those in the Soviet State, he was forced to sacrifice everything that belongs to an unimpeded life in order that this gift survive as it was meant to. He was at every moment paying heed to the destiny of his work, which he knew was more important than his destiny as a man. In the portrait we get from Nadezhda Mandelstam's memoirs, *Hope Against Hope* and *Hope Abandoned*, he often appears curiously passive with respect to his fate. I think that the extraordinary energy he deployed inwardly just to secure the freedom he needed partially accounts for this passivity. It may likewise explain the organic integrity of his work, which, once it is grasped, works exponentially on every part until we confront a whole that has ramified internally to far surpass its assembled parts.

The beginnings of Mandelstam's career, both as a poet and a critic, are closely allied with the movement known as Acmeism. Acmeism, briefly, was a reaction against Symbolism, which was not only the dominant poetic mode at the turn of the century, but was to a large extent an expression of the prevalent world-view of the so-called cultured elite. It was a cult of the beautiful and mysterious, a secular religiosity. There were similarities between Symbolism in Russia and pre-Raphaelitism in England. And the rise of Acmeism, as Clarence Brown points out, strongly paralleled the emergence of Imagism in England under Pound, Hulme, and Wyndham Lewis. Both movements stressed as guiding principles simplicity, clarity, and the elimination of the tone of other-worldliness. Both drew inspiration from what Henry Adams called the 'Dynamo'—the beauty and functionalism of the new turbine-powered machines. But where Futurism would emerge to celebrate the machine values to the exclusion of all else, Acmeism referred with equal fervor to the past, specifically to the purity and economy of means of Hellenic classicism.

The presiding luminaries of Acmeism included Nikolai Gumilev, Anna Akhmatova, Michael Kuzmin, and, not long after its inception, a very young Mandelstam. He was only 18 when his work began to appear in *Apollon*, the Acmeist magazine, but from the very first it embodied the values and aspirations of the movement. *Francois Villon* (1910), Mandelstam's first published essay, is striking not only for its conviction and precocity, but also for an implicit identification with its subject. It is amazing to see, in retrospect, how the echoes multiply between the career of the great criminal poet of the 15th century and the great 'criminal' poet of our own.

Mandelstam's development was, as I have stressed, organic; it was, even more particularly, concentric. He was at every point in his literary career a total sensibility. This is especially uncommon in a nineteen-year-old for it presupposes a deeply hermetic temperament. But clearly this is what Mandelstam had. Each consecutive work represents a further expression of the possibilities of the original fiber. The *Villon* essay predicates the grand exfoliation of the *Conversation About Dante* in 1933. Already compressed in its eight pages are a great many of Mandelstam's major concerns.

The piece opens with a clear sounding of the Acmeist precepts. This is accomplished by a forthright act of historical identification. In choosing to speak about Villon, Mandelstam is already setting up the Acmeist family-tree. He begins:

Astronomers can predict the precise date of a comet's return over an extensive time interval. For those familiar with Francois Villon, the appearance of Verlaine represents the same kind of astronomical miracle. [53]

Among other things, the statement utilizes what is to be one of Mandelstam's favorite tactics, the application of the terminology of the exact sciences to the phenomenon of poetry and poetic creation. The statement is important, too, because it is a kind of self-prophecy—the next such 'astronomical miracle' will be Mandelstam's own arrival. It is no use to object on scientific grounds of an insufficient time-lapse between appearances, for Mandelstam was already incorporating relativity into his thought. He already recognized that historical time had become radically compressed.

Villon turned against the hot house refinements of his time, as would Verlaine, as would Mandelstam and the other Acmeists. He brought all the energies of his verse to bear on things, and he navigated among the here and now with the quickness and cunning that characterize the thief.

Villon was exceptionally conscious of the abyss between subject and object, but he understood it as the impossibility of ownership. The moon and other such neutral 'objects' were completely excluded from his poetic usage. On the other hand, he livened up immediately whenever the discussion centered on roast duck or on eternal bliss, objects which he never quite lost hope of acquiring. [57]

Mandelstam already understood well, with his philological sense of the particular, how the life of great poetry depends upon time, and, vice versa, how time depends upon great poetry, and how it is linguistic precision that brings the two into their right relation. What he writes with regard to Villon's *Testaments* pertains closely to his own poetics.

[The *Testaments*] captivate the reader simply by the mass of precise information they communicate . . . The passing moment can thus endure the pressure of centuries and preserve itself intact, remaining the same 'here and now.' You need only to know how to extract that 'here and now' from the

soil of time without harming its roots, or it will wither and die. [58]

Thus, states Mandelstam, Villon has preserved forever the ringing Sorbonne bell that interrupted his work on the *Petit Testament* and which he promptly incorporated into a line. He touches here on what will later become a major statement: that it is only through language that one man's present can become another's, establishing thus a state of duration in which time is redeemed.

Francois Villon also introduces for the first time the architectural motif, one that Mandelstam will make much use of in his poetry and future prose. Here, deriving the character of a time from its use of certain building principles, he writes:

He who first proclaimed in architecture the dynamic equilibrium of the masses or first constructed the groined arch brilliantly expressed the psychological essence of feudalism. In the Middle Ages a man considered himself just as indispensable and just as bound to the edifice of his world as a stone in a gothic structure, bearing with dignity the pressures of his neighbors and entering the common play of forces as an inevitable stake. [59]

We find the same strategy, the derivation of an essence from a particular, that animates Spengler's attempt to write a 'morphological history of the world.' Spengler had not yet published, but we know from later citations by Mandelstam that he did eventually read *The Decline of the West*. The similarities in method are worthy of remark.

Mandelstam's statement applies not only to Acmeist poetics, the celebration of a structure for its 'dynamic equilibrium of masses,' but it also suggests something about the way in which he related himself to the social developments of his time. This was written, after all, only five years after 1905, and only eight years before 1918. Mandelstam identified closely with the original ideals of the Revolution. Nadezhda Mandelstam emphasizes this point, that he believed that his "oath to the fourth estate obliged him to come to accept the Soviet regime." This belief he sustained so long as he could, well into the Stalin era. His on-going attempts to work within the structure testify to this, as do his continuing appeals to his protector, Bukharin. It was his retrospectively

naive faith that the aberrations he witnessed were temporary and would eventually come right. His trouble came, in part, from his desire to play a part in the life of his times. It was this that rendered conspicuous the divergence between his humanist values and the values of the emerging Soviet state.

The *Morning of Acmeism*, written in 1912, but not published until 1919 (for reasons that are not clear), uses the imagery of architecture and building to clarify the Acmeist credo. Mandelstam exhorts the poet to the same 'piety before the three dimensions of space,' with the implication that this must precede any successful projection into the fourth. This piety is what he finds in Hellenic culture, and in the builders of the 'physiologically brilliant Middle Ages.' It is the capacity for reverence for things as they really are that gives to a culture its sense of proportion and nobility. The materialism is not, however, as thoroughgoing as that espoused by Marx. Mandelstam's ideas about time and culture, as we will see, render the concept of progress in history specious.

The essay is noteworthy for two of its formulations. The first is of the poet as possessor of a special capability:

The spectacle of a mathematician who, without seeming to think about it, produces the square of some ten-digit number, fills us with a certain astonishment. But too often we fail to see that the poet raises a phenomenon to its tenth power, and the modest exterior often deceives us with regard to the monstrously condensed reality contained within. [61]

Secondly, he iterates what will become an idea of great importance and one of the key articles of belief, namely, the power of the word. Here, as a preliminary, he declares that the word has a reality far deeper than its sign function.

Deaf mutes can understand each other perfectly, and railroad signals perform a very complex function without recourse to the word. Thus, if one takes the sense as the content, everything else in the word must be regarded as simple mechanical appendage that merely impedes the swift transmission of the thought. 'The word as such' was born very slowly. Gradually, one after another, all the elements of the word were drawn into the concept of form. To this day the conscious sense, the

Logos, is still taken erroneously and arbitrarily for the content. The Logos gains nothing from such an unnecessary honor. The Logos demands nothing more than to be considered on an equal footing with the other elements of the word.
[61]

Form and content, then, are inseparable. This is the first movement toward the position that Mandelstam sets forth in the major essay *On the Nature of the Word* in 1922. It is here that he develops most explicitly his ideas about language, time, and culture.

Mandelstam begins the essay by posing a question: how can literature, specifically Russian literature, lay claim to unity? History—and he is obviously talking about the Revolution—has accelerated with a geometrical ferocity. What will prevent the past from being severed entirely from the present?

Leaving the question for a moment, Mandelstam introduces the Bergsonian concept of duration. Duration can be thought of as the essence of time freed from the chain of linearly conceived units. It is what Proust, a follower of Bergson, sought along the paths of involuntary memory, and what Eliot, another adherent, meant when he wrote:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.

The passage is Bergson in a highly distilled state. Mandelstam puts it thus:

He [Bergson] is interested exclusively in the internal connection among phenomena. He liberates this connection from time and considers it independently. Phenomena thus connected to one another form, as it were, a kind of fan whose folds can be opened up in time; however, this fan may be closed up in a way intelligible to the human mind. [117]

For Mandelstam, duration is manifest in language itself. This is a central point, and it becomes more clear as the argument develops. Mandelstam

does not linger to explain anything—he moves immediately to answer the original question.

Language alone can be acknowledged as the criterion of unity for the literature of a given people, its conditional unity, all other criteria being secondary, transitory, and arbitrary. Although a language constantly undergoing changes never freezes in a particular mold even for a moment, moving from one point to another, such points being dazzlingly clear to the mind of the philologist, still, within the confines of its own changes, any given language remains a fixed quantity, a 'constant' which is internally unified. [119]

What he is saying, in other words, is that literature and, by extension, the values of a culture, exist in language, in a state of suspension that is not bound to linear time. The poet treasures language just as the archeologist treasures the place where he is digging. Only by way of the past does he manage his thrust into futurity. Over and over Mandelstam dismisses the idea that there can be progress in literature. If language is duration, then all things in language are contemporaneous. He is entirely serious when he writes:

One often hears: that is good but it belongs to yesterday. But I say: yesterday has not yet been born. It has not yet really existed. I want Ovid, Pushkin and Catullus to live once more, and I am not satisfied with the historical Ovid, Pushkin and Catullus. [113]

Mandelstam continues the essay with an explication of what he sees as the Hellenistic nature of the Russian language. That nature, he says, 'can be identified with its ontological function'—that is, that the name of the thing is equivalent with its being. The idea behind this is that languages, at their origin, were originally entirely concordant with the world they named.

Therefore, the Russian language is historical by its very nature, since in its totality it is a turbulent sea of events, a continuous incarnation and activation of rational and breathing flesh. [121]

It could not really be less ambiguous: history is literally present in the totality of the language.

There is much in these pages that carries a religious tone, a constant use of words like 'incarnation' and 'sacred,' but religion is not essential to the conception. It may or may not be adduced for the original creation of the world, but it is in no way implicit in the ontological connection between language and its objects. The Adamic overtones are inescapable (and Acmeism had for a time the second name of 'Adamism'), but in this case Adam is not naming things in God's created Eden, but on the soil of Hesiod, Homer and Pindar.

Mandelstam characterizes this Hellenism beautifully:

Hellenism is an earthenware pot, oven tongs, a milk jug, kitchen utensils, dishes; it is anything which surrounds the body. Hellenism is the warmth of the hearth experienced as something sacred; it is anything which imparts some of the external world to man . . . Hellenism is the system, in the Bergsonian sense of the term, which man unfolds around himself, like a fan of phenomena freed of their temporal dependence, phenomena subjected through the human 'I' to an inner connection. [127]

And from this very naturally follows the idea that shows in clear relief how Mandelstam, holding to his convictions, could only become increasingly estranged from the world that Stalin was trying to force into being:

Until now the social inspiration of Russian poetry has reached no further than the idea of 'citizen,' but there is a loftier principle than 'citizen,' there is the concept of 'Man.' [131]

According to Nadezhda Mandelstam, the year 1928 was the high-point of Mandelstam's public career as a writer. *The Egyptian Stamp* was published, along with *Poems*, the first collected edition of his verse. Mrs. Mandelstam suggests that a great deal was owing to the official presence of Bukharin, for he was still something of a man of culture. Still, to think of this year as being otherwise a high-point is misleading. For one thing, Mandelstam had not written poetry since 1925 and would not resume until 1930. For another, Bukharin's opposition party was to be

eradicated by Stalin that very year, and Mandelstam was to lose whatever official protection he had. The year, in fact, marked the beginning of the crack-down—witch-hunts began among ranks of party members and intelligensia alike.

The first indication of trouble, for Mandelstam, came at the very end of the year. A journalist named David Zaslavsky led a virulent press campaign against him, accusing him of plagiarizing a translation of *Til Eulenspiegel*. The fault was the publisher's—he had omitted to list the credits of other translators—and the accusation was unfounded. The whole episode was blown out of proportion. Writers such as Pasternak and Zoschenko came forth to defend Mandelstam. But nothing could prevent the change of official attitude which seemed to coincide with the incident. His public career was all but finished.

In the following year, 1929, Mandelstam wrote his famous *Fourth Prose*. The significance of this work owes less perhaps to its contents than to its symbolic status as a turning point. His wife credits it as the explosion that freed him to write poetry again. He no longer had any doubts, she states, about where he stood. *Fourth Prose* represents his decision to speak his mind and accept the consequences, and as such it is as courageous and historically-loaded a document as has ever been written. Any one of its sixteen sections would have sufficed for his arrest. It is Mandelstam's credo, his moral integrity affirmed at a time when no one dared affirm anything.

I have no manuscripts, no notebooks, no archives. I have no handwriting, for I never write. I alone in Russia work with my voice, while all around me consummate swine are writing. [317]

Think how beautiful Mother Philology once was, and how she looks today . . . How pure-blooded, how uncompromising she was then, but how mongrelized and tame she is today . . . [319]

It was all as terrifying as a child's night-mare. *Nel mezzo del'cammin di nostra vita*—midway along life's path—I was stopped in the dense Soviet forest by bandits who called themselves my judges . . . It was the first and only time in my life that Literature had need of me, and it crushed, pawed,

and squeezed me, and it was all as terrifying as a child's night-mare. [322]

My work, regardless of the form, is considered mischief, lawlessness, mere accident. But I like it that way, and I agree to my calling. I'll even sign my name with both hands. [324]

Apart from its beautiful fury and invective, *Fourth Prose* is remarkable for its stylistic acceleration. It signals the beginning of a change in his prose. What was formerly dense is now denser, and it is stenographically much quicker. More is assumed of the reader. Possibly this is because the reader had become an imaginary, future reader. The prose strides ahead in charged clusters. The remainder of Mandelstam's pieces are the closest thing we have to a truly poetic prose—not a prose that poetizes, but one that heaves great masses forward on the slightest of struts.

From now on everything he writes will be *sui generis*. To call his *Journey to Armenia* (1933) a travelogue, or his *Conversation About Dante* (1933) a piece of literary criticism is to miss the point entirely. It is equally beside the point to say that Mandelstam changed his orientation in some fundamental way. What happened was far more interesting: a wholly organic phenomenon was subjected to an arbitrary and unnatural climate. But instead of atrophy there was hypertrophy. All growth was speeded up and intensified. By the early 30's he knew what his fate would be—he just did not know when it would come. He told Akhmatova that he was prepared to die. And so he wrote as one whose breath comes too quickly. Images were piled up one hard upon the next. Progress on the page was analagous to the acrobat's progress from one flying ring to another.

This development reaches its *summa* in *Conversation About Dante*. It is there that Mandelstam writes, with reference to poetry, a passage that characterizes itself and the essay perfectly:

The quality of poetry is determined by the speed and decisiveness with which it embodies its schemes and commands in diction, the instrumentless, lexical, purely quantitative verbal matter. One must traverse the full width of a river crammed with Chinese junks moving simultaneously in various directions—this is how the meaning of poetic discourse is created. The meaning, its itinerary, cannot be reconstructed by inter-

rogating the boatmen: they will not be able to tell how and why we were skipping from junk to junk. [398]

I will pass over Mandelstam's other essays of the time, most notably the *Journey to Armenia*, in order to spend more time on the *Conversation*. Here the hypertrophic style is seen in its finest expression: not only is this one of the great documents on poetics and poetic gnosis, it is also one of the most unusual and penetrating valuations ever made about the phenomenon of Dante.

Dante was for Mandelstam the supreme poet and maker. He conferred upon him the title 'internal *raznochinets*,' thereby cementing a bond of kinship and identification, for *raznochinets*, meaning outsider/intellectual, was what he called himself. Nadezhda Mandelstam tells us that he had his Dante with him at all times from the early thirties on:

Anticipating his arrest—as I have already said, everybody we knew did this as a matter of course—M. obtained an edition of the *Divine Comedy* in small format and always had it with him in his pocket just in case he was arrested not at home but in the street. [*Hope Against Hope*, p. 228]

The one exile carried the works of the other exile as if they comprised a map—and the first of the three parts certainly did—of where he was going. Mrs. Mandelstam remarks later in her memoir that she does not believe that Mandelstam was allowed to carry his Dante with him into his final confinement.

The *Conversation About Dante* is Mandelstam's bid to free Dante from the clutches of scholars, and from his imprisonment in historical time as a classic—to release him into time itself, the realm of duration, where he belongs. Using the terminology of the modern sciences and music, contriving metaphor upon metaphor with the fervor of one who is repaying a great debt, he demonstrates that Dante's sensibility and poetic method were concerned, above all else, with process, impulse, and movement. The *Divine Comedy* is not some great static frieze, but a dazzling, kinetic thing:

If the halls of the Hermitage were suddenly to go mad, if the paintings of all the schools and great masters were suddenly to break loose from their nails, and merge with one another,

intermingle, and fill the air with a Futurist roar and an agitated frenzy of color, we would then have something resembling Dante's *Commedia*. [440]

His purpose is to show just how the *Commedia* enacts itself at once in all three tenses: he has taken hold of the very root of his own poetic conviction.

He begins by establishing that poetry is transmutation and that Dante is a 'strategist of transmutation and hybridization,' that his purpose is not narration, as we have been taught to believe, but the 'acting out in nature by means of [his] arsenal of devices.'

What is important in poetry is only the understanding which brings it about . . . The signal waves of meaning vanish, having completed their work; the more potent they are, the more yielding, and the less inclined to linger. [398]

Systematically he works to undermine the historical, static conception of Dante, and to replace it with the dynamic:

Whoever says, 'Dante is sculptural,' is influenced by the impoverished definitions of that great European. Dante's poetry partakes of all the forms of energy known to modern science. Unity of light, sound and matter form its inner nature. [400]

And then, pages later:

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 the doctor in making his diagnosis listens to the multitudinous unity of the organism. Literary criticism would then approach the method of living medicine. [408]

Once he has made his point about the absolutely dynamic character of the *Commedia*, Mandelstam begins to question the process of its composition. The magnitude of form creation astonishes him. To make sense of it he discovers a particularly rich metaphor:

We must try to imagine, therefore, how bees might have worked at the creation of this thirteen-thousand faceted form, bees endowed with the brilliant stereometric instinct, who attracted bees in greater and greater numbers as they were required. The work of these bees, constantly keeping their eye on the whole, is of varying difficulty at different stages of the process. Their cooperation expands and grows more complicated as they participate in the process of forming the combs, by means of which space virtually emerges out of itself. [409]

It is impossible to disentangle from the *Conversation* anything like a single thread of argument. For one thing, Mandelstam is at every step referring his points to specific lines and sections and developing them as much as possible with reference to the Italian language. For another, he is working symphonically, or, recalling the last passage, stereometrically. Rather than attempt a paraphrase—as if a symphonic texture could *be* paraphrased—I would like to select a handful of passages, each of which compresses and suggests more than I possibly could.

Dante's thinking in images, as is the case in all genuine poetry, exists with the aid of a peculiarity of poetic material which I propose to call its convertibility or transmutability. Only in accord with convention is the development of an image called its development. And indeed, just imagine an airplane (ignoring the technical impossibility) which in full flight constructs and launches another machine. Furthermore, in the same way, this flying machine, while fully absorbed in its own flight, still manages to assemble and launch yet a third machine. To make my proposed comparison more precise and helpful, I will add that the production and launching of these technically unthinkable new machines which are tossed off in mid-flight are not secondary or extraneous functions of the plane which is in motion, but rather comprise a most essential attribute and part of the flight itself, while assuring its feasibility and safety to no less a degree than its properly operating rudder or the regular functioning of its engine. [414]

Any given word is a bundle, and meaning sticks out of it in various directions, not aspiring toward any single official point. In pronouncing the word 'sun' we are, as it were, undertaking an enormous journey to which we are so accustomed that we travel in our sleep. What distinguishes poetry from automatic speech is that it rouses and shakes us into wakefulness in the middle of a word. Then it turns out that the word is much longer than we thought, and we remember that to speak means to be forever on the road. [407]

It is inconceivable to read Dante's cantos without directing them toward contemporaneity. They were created for that purpose. They are missiles for capturing the future. They demand commentary in the *futurum*.

For Dante time is the content of history understood as a simple synchronic act; and, vice versa, the contents of history are the joint containing of time by its associates, competitors, and co-discoverers.

Dante is an antimodernist. His contemporaneity is continuous, incalculable and inexhaustible.

That is why Odysseus's speech, as convex as the lens of a magnifying glass, may be turned toward the war of the Greeks and Persians as well as toward Columbus's discovery of America, the bold experiments of Paracelsus, and the world empire of Charles V. [420]

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 intonations with the echoes of the orchestral and thematic groups continually arising on the pocked and undulating semantic surface, when you begin to catch through the smoky-crystalline rock the sound-forms of phenocryst inserted into it, that is, additional sounds conferred on it no longer by a poetic but by a geological intelligence, then the purely vocal, intonational and rhythmical work is replaced by a more powerful coordinating force—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. [425]

Dante was chosen as the theme of this conversation not because I wanted to focus attention on him as a means to studying the classics and to seat him alongside of Shakespeare and Lev Tolstoi . . . but because he is the greatest, the unrivaled 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 tacking. [426]

I do not exaggerate when I say that virtually every passage of this 45-page piece is of comparable density and thrust. No one who works through it will ever be comfortable with a Dante who is not part-dancer, part-conductor, part-quantum-physicist.

It would be convenient to end on this high note, for the *Conversation* is above all a celebration of the word and the poetic process, but it is impossible to do so. The circumstance of Mandelstam, his tragic end, calls us back into the historical element. We must somehow raise the question of how a sensibility of this order, believing what he did, could exist in the midst of a State that savaged every impulse to individuality and freedom.

The essay *The Word and Culture*, written in 1921, shows us that Mandelstam was not blind to what was happening. Only four years after the Revolution he could write:

The separation of Culture and the State is the most significant event of our revolution. The process of secularization of the State did not stop with the separation of Church and State as the French Revolution understood it. Our social upheaval has brought about a more profound secularization. Today the State has a unique relationship to culture that is best expressed by the term tolerance. But at the same time a new type of organic inter-relationship is beginning to appear . . . The isolation of the State insofar as cultural values are concerned makes it fully dependent on culture. [113]

That relationship of ‘tolerance’ was soon to take on the prefix ‘in’—but as far as Mandelstam was concerned, the dependence remained. The only problem was that the State did not realize the fact. Later in the same essay he proclaims:

People are hungry. The State is even hungrier. But there is something still hungrier: Time. Time wants to devour the State . . . To show compassion for the State which denies the word shall be the contemporary poet’s social obligation and heroic feat. [115]

Could Mandelstam have imagined when he wrote those words the extent to which their meaning was to be tested? Could he, at the very end, have still agreed—when it was not only the word that was denied but all human dignity? His faith in his poet’s compact with Time would have had to be absolute, present to him even when he wrote these words in his last letter:

I got five years for counter-revolutionary activity by decree of the Special Tribunal. The transport left Butyrki Prison in Moscow on the 9th of September and we arrived on the 12th of October. I’m in very poor health, utterly exhausted, emaciated, and almost beyond recognition. I don’t know if there’s any sense in sending clothes, food, and money, but try just the same. I’m freezing without proper clothes. —*from the letter to his brother Alexander Emilievich, October, 1938* [573]