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Spring 1997

### Review Of "Mandel'shtam: Problema Chteniia I Ponimaniia" By I. Gurvich

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#### Recommended Citation

Sibelan E.S. Forrester. (1997). "Review Of "Mandel'shtam: Problema Chteniia I Ponimaniia" By I. Gurvich". *Slavic And East European Journal*. Volume 41, Issue 1. 161-162. DOI: 10.2307/309523  
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-russian/34>

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## American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages

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Review

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Review by: Sibelan Forrester

Source: *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Spring, 1997), pp. 161-162

Published by: American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/309523>

Accessed: 06-04-2016 19:52 UTC

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The penultimate chapter belongs to Marina Tsvetaeva. She and Rilke never met. Rilke had written to her, prompted by a letter from Boris Pasternak. Tsvetaeva roughly shouldered Pasternak aside, and what had begun as a three-way correspondence turned into a Lieblings-briefwechsel. Rilke was at the height of his fame. For Tsvetaeva, he was not “simply” a great poet, he was the Poet, he was poetry itself. She lived in what she called “Rilke-land,” an imaginary place, the garden of the muses, God’s garden where Rilke’s imaginary angels slowly spread their fierce wings. But Rilke was in the last year of his life; he had leukemia, though he did not yet know it. He had spent a good part of his life evading or getting out from under powerful women. Rilke-land was not a place in which he was willing to accommodate another flesh-and-blood person. “I want to sleep with you, Rainer,” she wrote him. His side of the correspondence stopped right there.

As much as Rilke, Tsvetaeva lived in the land of poetic imagination, yet she constantly struggled—and the failure of that struggle was the great unhappiness of her life—to inhabit it with others, to make it a “real” and palpable place. Rilke died in December, 1926. When news of his death reached Tsvetaeva, it stunned her and prompted one of her great poems, “New Year, 1927.” Rilke had some time earlier written his great elegy to her. Joseph Brodsky in an essay in *Less than One* has added his eloquent interpretation to these two poems.

Undoubtedly, Rilke was a great poet; but as an archetype or model for our own day, somehow unsatisfactory. John Berryman, whose “Nervous Songs” and “Dream Songs” were inspired at least in part by Rilke, had this to say about him in an unsent letter:

I am down on Rilke and the hieratic boys just now. I don’t deny his sensitivity and his marvelous melody . . . But it is necessary to get down into the arena and kick around . . . Take that rigmarole on solitude you quoted. Yes, it is stunning, and what is it based on? an elaborate and painfully self-satisfied *fear of life*. I like him when he was writing out of his active grief and awe, not these damned letters, these lay sermons he sprayed around Europe instead of sleeping with people like a wicked but actual man. Love affairs on paper, ugh. . . . I’ll tell you the truth: there is something nauseating about Rilke, in-human, unmanly, woman-mimicking. I don’t mean homosexual, Whitman and Auden say are quite different, and Marlowe, and one doesn’t object to them at all. Toadyish. . . . I *admit* he is a wonderful poet. Yes! yes! he is. (16 April, 1955. Unsent. John Haffenden, *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary* [London, 1980], 82–83.)

In her concluding chapter, Tavis makes a brief try at rehabilitating Rilke’s gift as prophet. It is true that he was wise, in his love for Russia, not to commit himself to any of Russia’s extreme contending political forces, but as to the resurrection of that “godly” Russia he saw in his vision, it seemed perhaps more likely to come about when Anna Tavis was writing than it does now.

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И. Гурвич. *Мандельштам: проблема чтения и понимания*. New York: Gnosis Press, 1994. 133 pp. (paper).

In this slim book, from a small press which is largely devoted to poetry, I. Gurvich takes on the problem of penetrating the characteristic “darkness” (*temnost’*) of Mandel’stam’s verse. Gurvich’s treatment of the issue is intensive rather than exhaustive; he is present throughout the book as a thoughtful guiding awareness, a *literaturoved* whose knowledge is not limited to literary scholarship.

The book's first chapters examine Blok (pretext) and Pasternak (context) to establish the background, what Mandel'stam and his contemporaries read and their views of the development of Russian poetry. Mandel'stam makes his appearance in a section subtitled "Contradiction in the extreme," as a writer whose tendency to contradict or "speak against" clarity is one of his most salient characteristics. Gurvich strives for readings that profit from erudition but are undeflected either by canonical assumptions about the poet's biography or by layers of scholarly (mis)interpretation. According to Gurvich, the problem in reading Mandel'stam is to allow for the emergence of complexity, even while the "darkness" may make some readers anxious for simple solutions.

Gurvich treats Mandel'stam's writing in roughly chronological order, for the most part ignoring sound orchestration and poetic technique in favor of meaning, connotation and denotation, examining texts that present the greatest difficulty. Treating a work's development with common-sense vocabulary (using terms such as "golos," voice, and "litso," face, or specific poetry identity), Gurvich's position is largely that of a classical Formalist, performing a literary geology of Mandel'stam's metamorphic verses. Besides the extended attention to echoes of Blok and Pasternak, Gurvich makes instructive comparisons with poets and writers from Derzhavin to Gorodetsky and Rozanov.

Including an index would have made the book more convenient to use (it has a mere three pages of notes to 130 of text); the book's bare-bones organization makes it absorbing to read but difficult to refer back to. Gurvich does not bother to review or overview the literature on the poet, most often cites colossal figures in Russian literary scholarship (Zhirmunsky, L. Ginzburg and the like), and only briefly mentions assertions by more recent scholars in order to refute or refine them. Whether or not this is entirely fair to the cited individuals (Mandel'stam's work has, after all, attracted many particularly thoughtful critics), Gurvich does provide many examples of the kind of sustained and attentive reading that contrasts best with oversimplification and singleminded code-breaking.

A few more or less polemical assertions emerge: one is that the term "Acmeist" is meaningless byproduct of the group members' sometimes polemical opposition to Symbolism and therefore should be excised from literary histories (38–9). In a similar vein, the final section on Mandel'stam's poetry about Stalin is of special interest. Gurvich reads these poems, from the famous and fatal satire of 1933 to the "Stansy" of 1937, neither as aberrations nor as self-imposed attempts by the poet to save his skin. Rather, they are organic parts of the opus of a poet who was not afraid to write from contradictory and mutually exclusive positions, to take on Stalin as both "tiran i titan" (112). While any reader has the right to classify a poet's writing according to theme or perceived quality, the poet's own choice must be honored rather than excused or ignored as politically unacceptable. Gurvich demonstrates how the poems to Stalin, written in the poet's "own voice," spring from an unfolding succession of thoughts, concerns and romantic impulses.

This is a very Russian book, part of the continuing development of the Russian poetic and intellectual tradition. Gurvich assumes that we read poetry to seek self-education and spiritual progress, and the light stylist's touch may belie the depth of the analysis. After finishing this book, I wanted to reread all of Mandel'stam at leisure—and then to find and read more of Gurvich.

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