

# The Word as Such: Nietzsche and Mandelstam's Poststructuralist Poetics

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Although the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche had a widespread influence on Russian artists and intellectuals in the early years of the twentieth century, only recently have scholars begun to examine the impact of the German philosopher on one of the most gifted Russian poets at the time, Osip Mandelstam. This is not because Mandelstam did not read Nietzsche or was not interested in his ideas, but because he did not always explicitly acknowledge Nietzsche's impact, generally avoiding direct mention of Nietzsche's name. This practice on the poet's part, however, does not obscure the fact that Nietzsche's ideas—especially those from *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*—can be located throughout Mandelstam's early essays and can clarify how his view of language anticipates features of Western theoretical discourse that emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Under Nietzsche's influence, Mandelstam's acmeist poetics diverged from Russian symbolist aesthetics in the early 1910s in order to embrace a dynamic account of language that borders on structuralist and poststructuralist thought. While the symbolists understood language as a vehicle of spiritual transcendence, Mandelstam highlighted the structural and temporal instabilities in poetic language, implying that these factors spontaneously give rise to new forms of poetic expression. Mandelstam's understanding of language—strongly reminiscent of aspects of the work of both Saussure and Derrida (although the poet had no apparent means of knowing Saussure's teaching)—is articulated not only in "Conversation about Dante," but also in his early essays "The Morning of Acmeism" (*Utro Akmeizma*) and "On the Nature of the Word" (*O Prirode Slova*). All these works feature the Nietzschean struggle between Apollo and Dionysus, unity and chaos, order and disorder. Through a fresh look at Mandelstam's early essays written in response to the symbolists and Nietzsche—whom the symbolists considered as their spiritual forerunner—I propose to demonstrate how Mandelstam arrived at a realization about language that lasted throughout his career and that became popular in the Western world in the 1960s.

Several recent studies have treated Mandelstam's poetry as a dynamic process based on Nietzsche's Apollonian and Dionysian principles as forces existing in nature, society, and the individual. Elena Glazov-Corrigan, Clare Cavanagh, and Elaine Rusinko

have presented a compelling reading of Mandelstam's struggle with tradition in search of an original poetic voice. Rusinko focuses on Mandelstam's revision of symbolist principles—which were primarily derivative of Nietzsche's fascination with Dionysus—in adherence to Nietzsche's Apollonian pole; she argues that acmeism "contributed an original interpretation of Nietzsche that emphasized the Apollonian principle over the Dionysian in style and philosophy."<sup>1</sup> This view of acmeism as an alternative to the Dionysian unruliness and madness of the symbolists has become mainstream among scholars of Russian literature from the Modernist period. The most prominent acmeist journal in the early 1900s was also evocatively titled *Apollon*, openly manifesting its affiliation not only with the Greek tradition, but also with Nietzsche's discourse on that tradition as expressed in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Consequently—owing to their call for poetry marked by clarity, simplicity, and material tangibility—acmeist poets like Nikolay Gumilev, Anna Akhmatova, Mikhail Kuzmin, and especially Mandelstam have often been perceived as renegades from Russian literary modernism.<sup>2</sup> With his definition of acmeism as "nostalgia for world culture" and his continual references to figures from the Western literary canon, Mandelstam is often classified as a defender of tradition—albeit one whose understanding of tradition is complicated by his own cultural displacement as a Russian, born in Poland to a mother raised in a traditional Jewish family and father well-versed in the secular German idealist school of philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

Looking at the problematic relationship between Mandelstam, the Russian symbolists, and Nietzsche, which unfolds in the context of Russian literary modernism, Cavanagh challenges the contention that Mandelstam was a traditionalist. She claims that the poet was motivated by a conscious struggle to replace a literary and cultural tradition that he inherited—including that of Nietzsche and the symbolists—with a culture of his own choice and making. Mandelstam, in Cavanagh's view, resembles what Harold Bloom calls "the strong poet," or a poet of the capable imagination, who is, in her words, "acutely aware that a resurrection of past values, is by necessity, a reevaluation of values, and that the past is brought to life again within the present only by way of an intense, intentional creative act."<sup>4</sup>

Glazov-Corrigan, on the other hand, links Mandelstam's later poetics to "the concerns of postmodern poetics," such as the interplay between presence and absence that was one of Jacques Derrida's main concerns.<sup>5</sup> While acknowledging Mandelstam's proximity to poststructuralist ideas, she interprets his later work primarily as a challenge to poststructuralist thought, which is, in her words, largely concerned with images that feature the "decorative, rhetorical, and the political," thus establishing a perhaps artificial divide between poets and theoreticians, or poets and their own biography or lived experience. In this sense, Glazov-Corrigan interprets Mandelstam's poetics as a proleptic alternative to poststructuralism that allows for a renewed understanding of the poet's individual creative merit.

These perceptive analyses, explicating Mandelstam's reception of Nietzsche's first book, provide the inspiration for this study, which aims to situate Mandelstam's

acmeist poetics in relation to poststructuralist discourses about language. In this sense my project is spurred by Glazov-Corrigan's perception of Mandelstam as a poststructuralist poet-theoretician, and it attempts to demonstrate how some specific instances in Mandelstam's early essays exhibit such poststructuralist tendencies, leading to a revised understanding of acmeism. Consequently, I intend to add to the understanding of Mandelstam as a precursor of the poststructuralist view of language as an active meaning-making force that is subject to structural relations and the passage of time rather than the poet's conscious or intentional control. This is an aspect of Mandelstam's work that has yet to be closely examined and that will shed light on an alternate understanding of acmeism—at least as promoted by its most prominent advocate, Mandelstam—not simply as a return to the cultural values of the past, or as a re-inscription of literary tradition into the language of modernism, but as a herald of later 20<sup>th</sup>-century theorists' attention to the essence of language as an active expressive agency, rather than a vehicle for transmitting ideas and meaning.

#### **Mandelstam's Acmeist Manifesto:**

In "The Morning of Acmeism," Mandelstam defines acmeism as appreciation for the reality of everyday existence (versus an intangible spiritual world) and the materiality of language, focusing attention on the word as an almost concrete, tangible entity, which he calls "the word as such" (*slovo kak takovoe*). The figure of the poet, in this view, appears simply as a craftsman or an architect, who uses words as building material to construct aesthetic and durable masterpieces of poetry, resembling the majesty of the Medieval Gothic cathedrals.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Mandelstam seems to adopt the bold manner of modernist manifestos in proclaiming that:

The sharp edge of Acmeism is neither the stiletto nor the sting of Decadence. Acmeism is for those who, inspired by the spirit of building, do not like cowards renounce their own gravity, but joyously accept it in order to arouse and exploit the powers architecturally sleeping within. The architect says: I build, that indicates I am right (*ya stroyu—znachit' ya prav*).<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps intentionally echoing Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* with a marked difference, the last sentence in this definition of acmeism indicates Mandelstam's emphasis on the material world. Mandelstam embraces physical existence, unlike the "cowards" who reject it in favor of mystical fantasy: this derogative epithet and Mandelstam's references to the "stiletto" implicitly criticize the Symbolists' aesthetic escapism, as well as Descartes' abstract rationalism with its severing of mind from body.

Mandelstam's definition of acmeism as the celebration of physical reality and the poet's role as a craftsman have been often perceived in a rather limited way as the poet's yearning for past cultural ideals or traditional form in poetry.<sup>8</sup> While it is certainly true that acmeism contains an element of "nostalgia for world culture," placing too much emphasis on these explicit statements may restrict our vision of Mandelstam's exceptionally sophisticated view of language and material reality. Mandelstam's emphasis on matter, however, does not commit him to viewing reality as stable and fixed: instead, it is more like a Heraclitean flux.

The acmeist world of Mandelstam is a Heraclitean world that is not only continuously changing—its very atoms or building blocks are only apparently stable and self-identical, while being subject to internal tensions, including the force of gravity.<sup>9</sup> In the above quoted segment, Mandelstam demands that acmeist poets should "joyously accept [their own gravity] in order to arouse and exploit the powers architecturally sleeping within." It is on this level of invisible but perpetually active forces that the Nietzschean struggle between Apollo and Dionysus, regularity and disarray, takes place. With this understanding of material reality as volatile and mutable, Mandelstam claims in "The Morning" that the Acmeists' highest commandment (*vysshaya zapoved' akmeizma*) is "Love the existence of the thing more than the thing itself, and your existence more than yourself." Materiality for Mandelstam is never a composite of things that we can know and describe; we can never know the "things in themselves," but, as he insists, we are highly sensitive to their existence.<sup>10</sup> This understanding of reality adds a spin to the otherwise simple definition of acmeism, and I am going to examine more closely the complications in the characterization of acmeism that result from Mandelstam's deliberation on Nietzsche, who had also recognized if not existence, then "life" as the most valuable asset or force that human beings possess.<sup>11</sup>

The recognition of the importance of language as an expressive medium, whose very materiality deserves to be examined, takes place in Mandelstam's involvement with the ideas of Nietzsche's early work. Mandelstam's endorsement of Nietzsche's Apollo and Dionysus against the Symbolists—as forces that reveal the structural dynamics and instability of the poetic text and language in general—is a gesture that prefigures the attention given to the structural aspects of language by Poststructuralist thinkers of the twentieth century.

The systematic rhetorical study of language has undoubtedly been the common thread in the work of diverse poststructuralist thinkers such as Paul de Man, Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Derrida. These thinkers have often insisted that the meaning of worlds that we create for ourselves, both public and private, are contingent upon the structural relationships and rhetorical figures within language. Allowing for a close analysis of the way language creates meanings for us, poststructuralists, thus, make us realize that our lives are constituted by stories inherent to the linguistic structures that we inherit. Instead of looking at the interpretation of what it means to be human, or what gives meaning to our existence, poststructuralists call for a rhetorical analysis of language to identify the structures that propel such questions in the first place.

Like these thinkers, Mandelstam emphasized the importance of language as an active creative medium, rather than a vehicle for transmitting information. In his essay "On the Nature of the Word" Mandelstam explicitly criticizes the symbolists for their overt emphasis on music and their underestimation of language in their understanding of poetry. Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* had established that hierarchical relationship between music and poetry, and in this sense, Mandelstam's polemic seems to implicitly

criticize Nietzsche for his initial dismissal of language as secondary to music. Ironically, Mandelstam is defending language as a medium in itself—a medium that is not a transparent tool for representing ideas or feelings—against Nietzsche, the forefather of poststructuralist thought, which considers language as a set of literary figures constitutive of our reality.

### **Nietzsche in Russian Culture**

Even in pre-communist Russia, Mandelstam seemed to be acutely aware of the limits encompassing poetic thought and expression. He was aware that these limits are not simply rules—poetic, cultural, or juridical—that demand his conformity, but unconscious allegiances to one’s poetic masters, manifesting themselves in what Harold Bloom would call anxiety of influence.<sup>12</sup> It was by addressing his anxiety of influence toward his established contemporary Vyacheslav Ivanov that Mandelstam re-visited Nietzsche to assert himself as the German thinker’s more legitimate heir.

The link between Mandelstam and Nietzsche is not surprising because discussions of the philosopher’s work—and particularly *The Birth of Tragedy*—had been prevalent in Russian literature and art in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The popularity of Nietzsche in Russia at the turn of the twentieth century became so pervasive that most leading schools of literature and art based their political agendas and artistic principles on Nietzsche’s philosophy. Despite their ideological differences, writers belonging to literary movements as diverse as symbolism, futurism, and even socialist realism—whose guardians officially banned Nietzsche’s ideas—all defended their positions using different aspects of Nietzsche’s work, attempting to be his true disciples.<sup>13</sup>

As an active participant in the intellectual life of the early years of the twentieth century, Mandelstam was familiar with such discussions and had clearly read some of Nietzsche: he explicitly refers to *Zarathustra* in a letter to his respected rival Vyacheslav Ivanov.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, most of Mandelstam’s early essays include abundant references to Apollo and Dionysus in the sense that Nietzsche attributed to them in *The Birth of Tragedy*. A key influence in Mandelstam’s reading of Nietzsche’s first book was Ivanov, who considered himself a poetic disciple of Nietzsche’s Dionysus. As Jane Garry Harris has pointed out, Mandelstam’s reception of Nietzsche was most probably filtered through two main channels: Faddei Zelinsky, who taught Nietzsche’s early work at St. Petersburg University between 1885 and 1921,<sup>15</sup> and Ivanov himself, who for most of his life was obsessed with Nietzsche’s emphasis on music in *The Birth of Tragedy*.<sup>16</sup>

### **Mandelstam’s Defense of Language over Music**

While the Russian Symbolists had sanctified Nietzsche as a prophet of the mythical power of music and poetry to convey unspeakable spiritual essences, Mandelstam focused on Nietzsche’s appeal for struggle and dissonance to show how the tensions within poetic language allow for a different understanding of poetry from the one the Symbolists had envisioned. Mandelstam’s recourse to Nietzsche, however, can scarcely be identified with precision as leading back either to specific passages from Nietzsche’s original work or to Ivanov’s reflections on the philosopher. It is clear

that Mandelstam is creating his own Nietzsche, one that challenges the works of the Symbolists, and perhaps even the early works of Nietzsche himself. Counter-intuitively, Mandelstam bases his Poststructuralist affinities not on Nietzsche’s understanding of language as a “mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and antropomorphisms”<sup>17</sup>—which is perhaps the most widely recognizable and most often anthologized statement by Nietzsche on language, prefiguring poststructuralist thought—but on a critique of Nietzsche’s early dismissal of language in *The Birth of Tragedy* as a weak derivative of music.<sup>18</sup>

Nietzsche’s Dionysus stood for the non-imagistic art of music, which allowed for an immediate expression of “the world will” (*Weltwille*)—or the drive behind all being. Poetry, on the other hand, represented by Apollo, was “dependent” on “the spirit of music,” (*Diese ganze Erörterung halt daran fest, dass die Lyrik ebenso abhängig ist vom Geiste der Musik*),<sup>19</sup> and the images and concepts associated with language were superfluous for the understanding of being. In Nietzsche’s words, the whole discussion in *The Birth of Tragedy* “insists that lyric poetry is dependent on the spirit of music just as music itself in its absolute sovereignty does not *need* the image and the concept, but merely *endures* them as accompaniments.”<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche implies here, through his own emphasis, that the images and concepts in poetry—which are made up of words, and therefore partake in the orderly Apollonian principle—have a corrupting or a parasitical effect on its music, whose power seems to be lessened as a result of its involvement with language. Nietzsche’s assumption is that poetry appears as an imitation of music rather than a verbal composition whose linguistic nature produces its own music.

Along these lines Nietzsche seems to launch an attack on language by claiming that “Language [*Sprache*] can never adequately render the cosmic symbolism of music, because music stands in symbolic relation to the primordial contradiction [*Urwiderspruch*] and primordial pain [*Urschmerz*] in the heart of the primal unity [*des Ur-Einen*] and, therefore, symbolizes a sphere which is beyond and prior to all phenomena.”<sup>21</sup> Such statements suggest that Nietzsche, at least at that point in his career, treated language as metaphysically inferior and chronologically posterior to music, much as Saussure treated writing as temporally deferred from and inferior to speech. In a letter to his sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, which appears in her introduction to *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche suggests that—despite the book’s title prophesying the importance of language—“It would even be possible to consider all *Zarathustra* as a musical composition.” As the philosopher recalls, “At all events, a very necessary condition in its [*i.e.*, *Zarathustra*’s] production was a renaissance in myself of the art of hearing.”<sup>22</sup>

Vyacheslav Ivanov was captivated by the power of music thus described and embraced Nietzsche’s understanding of language as hierarchically inferior to music. Ivanov rendered Nietzsche’s ideas in his own words, claiming that, “It was necessary that Dionysus be revealed in music (the mute art of deaf Beethoven, the greatest proclaimer of the orgiastic mysteries of the spirit) before he could be revealed in the

word.”<sup>223</sup> Ivanov, moreover, complements Nietzsche’s idea of the “world will,”<sup>224</sup> by suggesting that “the supreme testament of the artist is not to impose his own will onto the surface of things; rather, he must intuit and proclaim the hidden will of essences.”<sup>225</sup> Ivanov thus viewed poetry as an attempt to express this “hidden will of essences” manifested in a “multivoiced eternal word [which] sounds forth in nature for those who are able to hear it.” Any poetic effort to imitate that eternal word, however, is inferior to the original, and thus, poetry can never live up to its imitative task.

In an attempt to overcome the poetry of his contemporaries the symbolists, as well as Nietzsche’s condescending view of poetry and language, Mandelstam presents his poetry as a productive struggle with both of his major influences.<sup>26</sup> Mandelstam’s departure from Ivanov and Nietzsche manifests itself most explicitly in the poet’s foregrounding of the structural aspects of the word as opposed to its musical or phonetic aspects. Thus, as Mandelstam asserts, “For the Acmeists the conscious sense (*soznatel’nyi smysl*) of the word, the Logos, is just as magnificent a form (*prekrasnaya forma*) as music is for the Symbolists.”<sup>27</sup>

### **The Structural Struggle between Apollo and Dionysus**

In Mandelstam’s innovative view of language as constitutive of wrestling formal elements, Nietzsche’s Apollonian and Dionysian principles seem to be ever present. Thus, Mandelstam declares that the acmeists “introduce the Gothic element into the relationship of words (*v otnosheniya slov*), just as Sebastian Bach established it in music.”<sup>28</sup> The Gothic element, expressed not in music—which both Nietzsche and the symbolists had favored—but in “the relationship of words,” includes the continuous struggle between the formative and destructive forces, which Nietzsche associates with Apollo and Dionysus.

For Mandelstam writing poetry was analogous to erecting culturally and spiritually significant buildings, like cathedrals and monuments, such as Hagia Sophia, Notre Dame, or the Admiralty in St. Petersburg.<sup>29</sup> Mandelstam likens poetry to such monuments not because poetry rests upon an unshakeable foundation of beliefs and values, but because poetry uncovers the process of erecting such buildings, which involves a struggle with the natural elements, especially the force of gravity. This struggle, moreover, is continuously present even after the construction process is over, as the monument itself becomes an incarnation of that struggle, rather than a steadfast symbol of a robust and unshakable culture or artistic intention. “The Morning” says “Acmeism is for those who, inspired [*obuyannyi*] by the spirit of building, do not like cowards renounce their gravity [*tyazhesti*], but joyously accept it in order to arouse and exploit the powers architecturally sleeping within.”<sup>30</sup> The desire for order and stability, the espousal of architectural images, and the celebration of form all seem to coexist in the essay with an emphasis on performance, dynamics, and instability. This instability of the monument as a symbol for the poetic work takes precedence over the understanding of art as an eternal unchangeable essence, shaped by an ever-present artistic intention.

While Mandelstam often likens his poetry to a Gothic cathedral—as a sturdy architectural center of gravity and order—he concurrently underscores the dynamics

inherent in the image: “The handsome arrow of the Gothic belltower rages [*zlaya*] because its function [like that of poetry] is to stab [*ukolot’*] the sky, to reproach [*popreknut’*] it for its emptiness [*pusto*].”<sup>31</sup> These statements display what Wallace Stevens would call “a rage for order,” a paradoxical urge, which resonates with as Mandelstam’s claim that “To build means to conquer emptiness [*borot’sya s pustotoi*], to hypnotize space [*gipnotizirovat’ prostranstvo*].”<sup>32</sup> The struggle between order and disorder, stability and destruction, which is necessary to sustain the Gothic cathedral, as Mandelstam depicts it, appears as a reverberation of the struggle between Apollo and Dionysus, as expressed in Attic tragedies according to Nietzsche.

In “The Morning” Mandelstam lays an emphasis on the dynamism of his central image of a Gothic cathedral, underscoring its monstrosity by explicitly referring to the Dionysian principle in Nietzsche: “What in the thirteenth century appeared to be the logical development of the concept of the organism—the Gothic cathedral—now has the aesthetic effect of something monstrous: Notre Dame is the triumph of physiology, its Dionysian orgy [*dionisiiskii razgul*].”<sup>33</sup> In his earliest essay, “François Villon” (1910), Mandelstam launches a number of rhetorical questions emphasizing the tension between stability and instability inherent in the artistic principles of Acmeism: “But is not Gothic architecture the triumph of dynamics [*torzhestvo dinamiki*]? Or another question is raised: which is more mobile [*podvizhno*], which is more fluid [*tekuche*]—a Gothic cathedral or the ocean surge?”<sup>34</sup> Mandelstam’s explicit references to both Apollo and Dionysus, as form-making and form-destroying energies, which can be found in most of his earlier essays, testify to the poet’s engagement with the philosophy of Nietzsche—despite his disagreements with the philosopher concerning the music/language divide—in order to undermine his poetic predecessors and adversaries, the symbolists.

The builder’s impulse for order and stability—which echoes that of the poet—is forever interrupted by the impending force of gravity that subjects the building to its power, so that the building can never rest at peace, but is always the locus of the dynamic struggle of elements. The same, Mandelstam implies, counts for the poem, which once written, does not remain a coherent, finished, stable unit, but is subject to the structural and historical forces that alter it during its journey in time. This latter diachronic aspect of poetry is undeniable in Mandelstam’s later essays, such as “Conversation about Dante,” where the architectural metaphors for poetry are replaced by cosmic ones, indicating that poetry is a futuristic journey in space. Thus, Dante’s work appears as a complicated flying machine that traverses space and time, in order to achieve its meaning in a future whose horizons are constantly shifting ahead. I see this futuristic image of Mandelstam’s later view of poetry as congruent with the poet’s early architectural understanding of poetry, and I shall examine this continuity of figures later in this essay.

### **Toward Structuralism and Poststructuralism**

It is necessary to recall here Mandelstam’s claim that Acmeists “introduce the Gothic element into the relationship of words (*v otnosheniya slov*), just as Sebastian

Bach established it in music.”<sup>35</sup> The fact that the struggle between Apollo and Dionysius manifests itself in the “relationship of words” (*otnosheniya slov*) underscores Mandelstam’s understanding of language as one that prefigures structuralism and, consequently, poststructuralism. When Mandelstam defines “the word as such” (*slovo kak takovoe*) as the primary element of acmeist poetry, he focuses not on the referential aspect of language but on its structural and diachronic ones, which reveal the potential of poetry to resist the constraints of the specific meaning assigned to it at the time of its composition. In an essay titled “Nature of the Word” (*O Prirode Slova*), written ten years after “The Morning,” Mandelstam provides the most significant definition of “the word as such,” which strikes an odd resemblance with the structuralist and poststructuralist concepts of the signifier. In Mandelstam’s words:

...a word is not a thing [*ne veshch*]. Its significance is not a translation of itself. Indeed, it has never happened that anyone has christened [*krestil*] a thing, calling it by an invented name. The most appropriate and, in scientific terms, the most correct approach, is to regard the word as an image [*obraz*], that is, as a verbal representation [*slovesnoe predstavlenie*]. In this way, the question of form and content is avoided [*ustranyaetsya vopros o forme i soderzhanii*], phonetics being the form, all the rest—the content. Also avoided is the question of giving primary significance to the word as opposed to its phonetic nature. A verbal representation is a complex composite of phenomena, it is a connection, a “system” [*slozhnyi kompleks yavlenii, svyaz’, “sistema”*].<sup>36</sup>

This perplexing definition seems to elicit more questions and objections than to provide answers regarding the nature of the word. Christening a thing by calling it by an invented name, for example, is not uncommon. Yet the insight behind Mandelstam’s claim supersedes its literal meaning. It implies the structuralist understanding of language not as a system of labeling (or “christening”) things—or as a composite of form and content—but as a system in which the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and relational, as Saussure postulated it. Granted that Mandelstam’s exposition of the nature of language is very obscure and imprecise compared to that of Saussure, the structuralist trend in that exposition cannot be overlooked.

Mandelstam’s definition appears as a work in progress, as the poet shifts from one definition of the word to another: the word is not a thing but an image (*obraz*); it is not quite an image either, though, but “a verbal representation” (*slovesnoe predstavlenie*). The most insightful conclusion of this seemingly impressionistic deliberation is the definition of a verbal representation as “a complex composite of phenomena,” (*slozhnyi kompleks yavlenii*), which is also a “connection” (*svyaz’*) or a “system” (*sistema*). This idea of language as a system or a complex of “composite phenomena”—which tends to focus mainly on the “connection” or “relation” between its elements—is surprisingly similar to Saussure’s definition of language as a system of oppositions and differences, in which what matters most is precisely the relation

between the elements. There is no evidence, however, that Mandelstam had read *Course in General Linguistics*, which came out in 1916, six years before the publication of “On the Nature of the Word.” A more likely influence on Mandelstam regarding this matter is the work of the Russian formalist thinkers, Viktor Shklovsky—who formed the *OPOYAZ* group in 1916, the same year that Saussure’s book was published—and Boris Eikhenbaum, who joined the group in 1918. Mandelstam was a close friend of both, especially of Shklovsky, who helped the poet on many occasions when the latter was in trouble with the Soviet authorities.<sup>37</sup> Yet, Mandelstam’s expositions of language as a dynamic body of opposing forces predate both Eikhenbaum’s and Shklovsky’s accounts, as Mandelstam’s reflections on language appeared in his earliest essays, written in the years 1910-1913.

The much earlier essay, “The Morning,” written in 1913, is the one that launches Mandelstam’s concept of “the word as such” by not only emphasizing the relational aspect of meaning but also by providing a proleptic criticism of Saussure’s model. “The word as such” here is persistently compared to a stone as building material participating in the construction of the Gothic cathedral. Mandelstam’s first collection of poems, published in the same year as “The Morning,” was also fittingly titled *Stone (Kamen’)*, implying that the image of a stone is an extended metaphor for his poetry and for the poetic “word as such.” “The Morning” discusses “the word as such” as consisting of several formal elements, one of which Mandelstam calls “the conscious sense” (*soznatel’nyi smysl*):

“The word as such” [*slovo kak takovoe*] was born slowly. Gradually, one after another, all the elements of the word were drawn [*vyagivalis’*] into the concept of form [*ponyatie formy*]. To this day the conscious sense [*soznatel’nyi smysl’*], the Logos, is still taken erroneously and arbitrarily for the content [*oshibochno i proizvol’no pochitaetsya soderzhanie*]. The Logos gains nothing from such an unnecessary honor. The Logos demands nothing more than to be considered on an equal footing [*ravnopraviya*] with the other elements of the word... For the Acmeists the conscious sense of the word, the Logos, is just as magnificent a form as music is for the Symbolists. ...in Acmeism it [the conscious sense of the word] has for the first time assumed a dignified upright position and entered the Stone Age of its existence.<sup>38</sup>

In this deceptively simple definition, Mandelstam presents a great challenge to the traditional classification of the linguistic sign as a fixed unit consisting of form and content, or a signifier and a signified. First, the linguistic sign, which Mandelstam calls “the word as such,” is subject to historical transformations: “‘the word as such’ was born slowly (*medlenno rozhdalos’*)”; that is, the concept of the sign evolves gradually in time. This evolution, which Mandelstam commends, has granted preference to the formal elements of the sign. Yet he claims, “To this day the conscious sense, or the Logos, is still taken erroneously and arbitrarily for the content.” In this statement lies the poststructuralist insight of Mandelstam, who differentiates between the “conscious sense,” or meaning, of the sign and its content.

By distinguishing between the meaning of a word and its content, Mandelstam establishes his departure from the ideas of traditional linguists, including Saussure, who had argued that a sign has a given fixed content or signified—even though that signified was not a specific material object but a mental concept. For Mandelstam, the sign, or “the word as such” is, therefore, always already only a signifier,<sup>39</sup> or as the poet puts it, “a magnificent form” (*prekrasnaya forma*) whose meaning is not fixed but continuously determined by its context in a structure. The sign, having finally entered “The Stone Age of its existence,” becomes like a stone in a building, continuously subject to gravitational tensions and historical reconstruction. This latter historical dimension of the linguistic sign is developed by Mandelstam later in the same essay featuring an image of a rolling stone in Fyodor Tyutchev, whom the Russian Symbolists claimed as one of their greatest forefathers:

But Tyutchev’s stone, which “having rolled down the mountain, lay in the valley, torn loose itself, or loosened by a sentient hand,” is the word. The voice of matter in this unexpected fall sounds like articulate speech. Only architecture can answer this challenge. Reverently the Acmeists raise this mysterious Tyutchevian stone and make it the foundation stone of their own building.

It is as if the stone thirsted after another existence [*kak byi vozzhazhdal inogo byitiya*]. It revealed its own dynamic potential hidden within itself [*skrytuyu v nem potentsial’no sposobnost’ dinamiki*], as if it were begging admittance into the “groined arch” in order to participate in the joyous cooperative action of its fellows.<sup>40</sup>

This reference to Tyutchev’s stone from the poem “Having Rolled Down the Mountain” (*S gory skativshis’*) discloses the structural tensions inherent in acmeist poetry composed of words that develop their meaning not only synchronically—that is, in relation to other words—but also diachronically, that is, in relation to their varying historical applications. Thus, the “word as such,” as a signifier or a relational entity, is being subjected here to the structural tensions of the poem’s composition, rather than having an independent essence or being a thing in itself, which both its Russian original (*slovo kak takovoe*) and English translation may wrongly imply. Instead, “the word as such,” metaphorically represented also as a stone in Mandelstam’s poetics, appears to be a formal entity, determined not by a meaning (or a signified) that it always carries in itself, but by its structural position in relation to other similar formal entities. These entities are other words resembling stones embedded in a building, each stone identical to the others except for its position in the structure that subjects it to different gravitational and lateral tensions. If the building collapses or loses its function in society, its stones could be used as building material for new edifices, gaining new significance based on the new position they happen to occupy.

Although Mandelstam repeatedly defines acmeism as a reverence for the “word as such,” (*slovo kak takovoe*)—a designation that may wrongly suggest an inherent independent essence or meaning of the word—passages like the above one on

Tyutchev, which recur in his early essays, hint at the subversive nature of the word, making it impossible to consider the word as having an essential meaning, or existing as a thing in itself. Instead, the poetic word in Mandelstam’s account points to the dynamic process of signification that does not rely on an already given or predetermined meaning. Therefore, the Acmeist “the word as such,” akin to Saussure’s signifier, is not a word that has a designated autonomous or fixed meaning in itself. On the contrary, it is defined as a carrier of intertextual signification that cannot be abstracted from its past and future applications. And it is in this latter sense that Mandelstam’s notion of “the word as such” moves beyond the atemporal synchronic nature of Saussure’s structuralist view of language and closer to a Poststructuralist diachronic reading of language.

In discussing Tyutchev’s stone, for example, Mandelstam indicates that the symbolist poetics itself, as grounded on the poetry of Tyutchev, is already a departure from itself, as its language acts subversively to its original intention and context. In this dynamic sense, the word always provides for a dialog between poets from different historical eras, as it resembles a journey through history. As evident from passages like this, it is not the conscious will of the poet, however, that determines the outcome of the composition. Instead, such passages testify to the unconscious and inexplicable effect of “the word as such,” which underlies Mandelstam’s poetry and prose, despite his insistence at times on the conscious agency of the poet in molding culture.

Mandelstam’s choice to identify the poetic “word as such” with the image of a stone as a building material arrives surprisingly close to one of Nietzsche’s aphorisms, although there is no way of telling if Mandelstam was familiar with it. The aphorism, titled “Philosopher’s Error,” goes as follows:

The philosopher supposes that the value of his poetry lies in the whole, in the structure; but posterity finds its value in the stone which he used for building, and which is used many more times after that for building—better. Thus it finds the value in the fact that the structure can be destroyed and *nevertheless* retains value as building material.<sup>41</sup>

Building “better” in the sense of believing in progress was not the forte of either Nietzsche or Mandelstam. Yet they both believed in the power of art to overcome modern culture and its metaphysical preferences for an otherworldly reality, as manifested in religious, scientific, or utopian ideals. Nietzsche’s aphorism prophesies the demise of metaphysics as an attempt to understand the world in an ideological way, that is, through grand narratives. By using the image of a stone as a continuously recyclable building block, Nietzsche emphasizes the continuous erection and destruction of cultural outlooks and philosophical interpretations of the world. The cyclical pattern of creation and destruction implied in this passage is reminiscent of Nietzsche’s idea of eternal return, but it also carries a strong resonance with Mandelstam’s understanding of the addressee from the future, two notions which I see as intimately related to each other.

### The Eternal Recurrence and the Addressee from the Future

Nietzsche's idea of the eternal recurrence is considered probably as the philosopher's most obscure yet most captivating one. Some of the greatest followers of Nietzsche, including Martin Heidegger and Gilles Deleuze, have insisted that this sporadic and seemingly inconsistent idea forms the basis of Nietzsche's overall thought. One expression of this idea takes place in the section "On the Vision and the Riddle" from *Zarathustra*, when the prophet debates with a dwarf on the nature of eternity. It is the dwarf that ambiguously claims that "Everything straight lies. . . All truth is crooked, time itself is a circle" (*Alles Gerade lügt. . . Alle Wahrheit ist krumm, die Zeit selber ist ein Kreis*).<sup>42</sup> This postulation of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence goes hand in hand with Mandelstam's understanding of the word as a recyclable entity, whose meaning is constantly redefined by the readers of the future.

As expressed in Mandelstam's essay "On the Addressee" (*O Sobesednike* 1913), from the moment of its conception, a poem becomes a call for its future readers who may interpret it in ways radically incomprehensible to its own author. The success of the poem is entirely dependent on its unpredictable and intangible spell on a future reader, who finds it personally intriguing. Only the awareness of that unknown and unknowable future reader will help a writer compose his poems with openness toward that radically unfamiliar destination which will bring about a re-creation of the poem. Tyutchev's stone is an illustration of a word's recurrence in a new poetic framework; yet the logic of that recurrence is reversed in Mandelstam's account: the ancestor-poets do not have a conscious control over their poetic inheritance; the poem originates not in the moment of its composition but in its re-appropriation by new generations of readers demanding new articulations.

It is in this context that Tyutchev's stone—that is, his poetic voice and imagery—defies the symbolist laws that determined its structural, poetic, and ideological significance. From the time of its conception, the poetic word "thirsts" for another existence—or for another poetic context—"begging admittance into the 'groined arch' in order to participate in the joyous cooperative action of its fellows." The poetic "word as such," then, according to Mandelstam, is not a self-identical stable entity whose meaning needs to be disclosed by future readers hoping to recover an original authentic signification. Instead, the poetic word is defined as a dynamic signifier which is not tied to any particular signified, but craves to be constantly redefined—that is to eternally return, in Nietzsche's sense—by the radically different and even (maybe necessarily) unfaithful readings of future generations.

Jacques Derrida's later work—particularly his *Specters of Marx*—resorts to Nietzsche's idea of the eternal return as a way of envisioning a future that does not comply with our rational expectations. This "future to come," as Derrida calls it, seems to proceed from his concept of *différance* as "temporalization" and "spacing conjoined."<sup>43</sup> In Derrida's words from the eponymous essay, "we will designate as *différance* the movement according to which language, or any code, any system of referral in general, is constituted 'historically' as a weave of differences."<sup>44</sup> Derrida's

understanding of language as a movement that "weaves" differences seems to closely echo Mandelstam's 1930 definition of poetic discourse as "a carpet fabric [*kovrovaya tkan'*] containing a plethora of textile warps [*tekstil'nyikh osnov*]." <sup>45</sup> "It is an extremely durable carpet," Mandelstam writes, "woven out of fluid [*vlagi*]... Ornament is good precisely because it preserves traces of its origin [*sokhranyaet sledyi svoego proizkhozhdeniya*], like a piece of nature enacted [*kak razyigrannyy kusok prirody*]." <sup>46</sup> This dynamic temporal account of language presents the poem (or any text) as a fabric woven of differences that retain a trace of their origin—that is, they cannot give a full testimony of their origin or authorial intention, yet the effect of that intention is present despite our inability to fully reconstitute it.

Such a reading of Mandelstam also exacts a mention of Mikhail Bakhtin, whose book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* Mandelstam briefly refers to in "Conversation about Dante." It is hard to trace exactly how influential Bakhtin was on Mandelstam, but the parallel between their dialogic and diachronic understanding of language is very pronounced. In his book on Dostoevsky, Bakhtin reacts against the way traditional linguistics looks at language—that is as an object of study arrived at through "abstraction from various aspects of the concrete life of the word." "But precisely those aspects in the life of the word that linguistics makes abstract"—Bakhtin insists—"are for our purposes, of primary importance." Therefore, he defines his method of examining language—or "the life of the word"—not as linguistics, but as metalinguistics, whose subject are "dialogic relationships," as "language lives only in the dialogic interaction of those who make use of it." <sup>47</sup>

For Bakhtin, then, as for Mandelstam, language cannot be studied in isolation from its application in time—yet *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* was first published in 1929, sixteen years after Mandelstam's essays "The Morning of Acmeism" and "On the Addressee"; Mandelstam's "On the Nature of the Word" predates Bakhtin's book by seven years, coinciding with the first few mentions of Bakhtin's new project on Dostoevsky, which appeared in Bakhtin's correspondence and in a literary journal based in Petrograd.<sup>48</sup> While it is certain that Mandelstam had read *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* by the time he wrote "Conversation about Dante" in 1933—and was perhaps in strong agreement with Bakhtin's dialogic view of language—the chronology of Mandelstam's work indicates that the poet could not have based his linguistic model on Bakhtin's theory of language.<sup>49</sup>

### "Conversation about Dante": Poetry as a Cosmic Flight

Mandelstam's diachronic aspect of poetry is, indeed, much more fully developed in "Conversation about Dante," where poetry appears as a futuristic journey in space, without losing track of its earlier architectural manifestation. Dante appears here as "the unrivaled master of transmutable and convertible poetic material;" yet "he is least of all a poet in the 'general European' sense or in the usage of cultural jargon," as his "poetry establishes itself with astonishing independence in a new extraspatial field of action, not so much narrating as acting out in nature by means of its arsenal of devices, commonly known as tropes."<sup>50</sup> What Mandelstam clearly emphasizes here is that the

mastery of a great poet does not lie in his control over the poem's meaning, which will never appear as intact and self-contained as, perhaps, some critics from the European tradition, including the Russian symbolists, intend to see it. Instead, poetry achieves an independent agency of its own and acts according to its own ungovernable laws. Thus, twenty years after he wrote "The Morning of Acmeism," Mandelstam persists with his criticism of the symbolists, maintaining that they are victims of the "ignorant cult of Dantean mysticism," which depicted Dante as the enigmatic figure of the poetic master, "consisting of a monk's hood, an aquiline nose ... procuring of something among the mountain crags." Among the Russians, Mandelstam claims, "none other than Alexander Blok fell victim to this voluptuous ignorance on the part of the ecstatic adepts of Dante who never read him."<sup>51</sup>

The image of Dante as that mysterious poetic genius was, as Mandelstam suggests, a creation of the European tradition that obfuscated the most valuable traits of Dante's poetry—its structural dynamics. "The inner illumination of Dantean space derived from structural elements alone"—Mandelstam writes—"was of absolutely no interest to anyone."<sup>52</sup> Even as Mandelstam underscores the importance of the structural elements in Dante's poetry, he insists on differentiating between the concepts of form and structure. Targeting critics who insist on Dante's skill as sculptural, Mandelstam makes it clear that comparing Dante's poetry to a sculpture—that is, a fixed material form—is an "impoverished definition" for *The Divine Comedy*. Instead, Mandelstam insists that, "the material structure [of Dante's poetry] is infinitely more significant than its celebrated sculptural quality. "Imagine," Mandelstam writes, "a monument of granite or marble whose symbolic function is intended not to represent a horse or a rider, but to reveal the inner structure of the marble or granite itself."<sup>53</sup> This statement makes it evident that Mandelstam is interested in the metalinguistic or metapoetic quality of Dante's work, a concern that draws Mandelstam closer to both Bakhtin and poststructuralist thinkers, like Derrida.

For Mandelstam, moreover, a poem is an unstable "composition" that undergoes various metamorphoses in space and time. It is "formed not as a result of accumulated particulars, but due to the fact that one detail after another is torn away from the object, leaves it, darts out, or is chipped away from the system to go out into a new functional space or dimension."<sup>54</sup> This passage seems to provide a straightforward commentary on Mandelstam's 1913 essay "The Morning of Acmeism"—as it evokes the image of Tyutchev's fallen stone, which is about to become the cornerstone of a new structure—indicating a consistency in Mandelstam's lifelong vision of the nature of poetry. The poetic composition, furthermore, achieves its potential not at the time when all of its elements are put in place, but when these elements start detaching themselves from one system to join a different one, a process that might befit the Derridean term "de-construction."

In his tropes for poetry in "Conversation about Dante," Mandelstam shows an irresistible penchant for modern physics and astronomy. Dante's composition is not just a granite monument that honors granite itself, but a performance in time and

space; his cantos, in Mandelstam's words, are "missiles for capturing the future."<sup>55</sup> To understand how Dante's poetry works, Mandelstam compels us to imagine the flight of an airplane, which, while in full flight, constructs and launches another machine:

Furthermore, in the same way, this [second] 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.<sup>56</sup>

This remarkable metaphor of the poem as a flight in outer space reveals that for Mandelstam what was most essential about poetry is not the moment of composition, or the launching of the flight, but the duration and transformation of the flight itself, as it sheds its elements to generate new flights, which are yet integrally tied to the first one.<sup>57</sup>

In "Conversation about Dante" the scientific image of poetry as a flight that Mandelstam proposes is further followed up with an atomic image of the word as a thing that has no fixed substance but exists because of the energy that sets it in motion—which Mandelstam calls a "differentiating impulse." Mandelstam's use of the word "thing" alludes to his earlier designation "the word as such," which had (perhaps erroneously) implied that the word may be perceived as a material thing in itself, the building block of poetry, perhaps the way a stone can be the building block of monuments and cathedrals. My analysis attempted to prove that this assumption that the word is an actual objective thing, which exists in itself, is not justified. In this late essay, Mandelstam seems to come back to the same image, providing further commentary on how we shall understand "the word as such," starting with a remarkably Kantian definition and moving into a model of language that resembles quantum physics:

We do not know things themselves; on the other hand, we are highly sensitive to the facts of their existence. ... [T]he thing emerges as an integral whole as a result of the simple differentiating impulse which transfixed it. Not for one moment does it retain any identity with itself. If a physicist, having once broken down an atomic nucleus, should desire to put it back together again, he would resemble the partisans of descriptive and explanatory poetry for whom Dante represents an eternal plague and a threat.<sup>58</sup>

Mandelstam's commentary here describes the experience of reading *The Divine Comedy*, which is formed not as a result of the mechanical absorption of factual information, but as the combined effect of the interplay of information with the musical effect of the poem, along with the play that they both stir in our imagination. The experience of reading Dante's poetry, thus, cannot be contained by a biographical, historical, or psychological interpretation of the text. At the heart of this reading experience is "the

differentiating impulse,” which is perhaps the very condition for understanding (or experience) to take place. Mandelstam’s insistence on “the differentiating impulse” as the driving force propelling the “thing” to emerge as an integral whole, can be perceived as parallel to Saussure’s and Derrida’s assertions that difference—rather than sameness (or self-sameness in terms of words having essential meanings)—is what makes meaning possible. For critics who try “to explain” Dante, or who attempt to give any finality to Dante’s poem—whether by locating it in Dante’s genius, or in historical analysis—Dante, Mandelstam tells us, represents an “eternal plague” or a threat.<sup>59</sup>

Although in his later work Mandelstam seems to have resigned his strictly architectural metaphors of stones, cathedrals, and gravity, establishing a preference for metaphors of currents, textiles, and flights, the poet seems to reconcile the former and the latter sets with his emphasis on fluidity, instability, and tension. The Gothic cathedral is just as dynamic as the waters of Ganges, and the textile threads of the Nile are as subject to their origins as Tyutchev’s stone. And all—Cathedral, stone, carpet, and the Nile, as figures for poetry—are subject to the call of their forever deferred destination, which Derrida names “the future to come,” and Mandelstam—the unknown future reader. It is a never-ending journey, as Mandelstam posits it in “Conversation about Dante”:

Any given word is a bundle [*yavlyaetsya puchkom*], and meaning sticks out [*torchit*] 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 [*ogromnoe puteshestvie*] to which we are so accustomed that we travel in our sleep. What distinguishes poetry from automatic speech is that it rouses us and shakes us [*vstryakhivaet*] 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 [*vsegda nakhodit’sya v doroge*].<sup>60</sup>

This fascinating metaphor of the word as a bundle that cannot contain its meaning, but, instead, sends it in different directions, points to Derrida’s insistence on the constant deferral of meaning in space and time. For Mandelstam, too, the meaning of a sign is never self-contained or self-evident—it is, instead, continuously produced in space and time, and the task of poetry is not to teach us any particular truth about the world or about its author’s intention, but to make us aware of the nature of the word itself as that ever mobile unstable entity that continuously gains and loses its meaning based on its synchronic and diachronic relationships with other words. It makes us aware of the relative nature of our everyday language, so that even our prosaic use of it is always subject to constant tensions and transformations.

Nietzsche’s influence on Mandelstam is not as overt in the poet’s later work as it is in the early essays “The Morning of Acmeism” and “The Nature of the Word,” in particular; however, Nietzsche’s vision of the dynamic struggle between forces that shape human culture underlies Mandelstam’s lifelong work. The philosopher’s metaphor of stones as the building blocks of philosophy that constantly await the

creative transformations of their application parallels both Derrida’s and Mandelstam’s models of language. Mandelstam’s presentation of the “word as such” as “thirsting” for an existence in a different context underlies that the apparent structural unity or stasis of a poem is always undermined by the tensions between the intertextual voices, which do not simply reside in it but constitute it. The poem would not exist without these borrowed poetic images and voices that also challenge its unity and coherence. The struggle between the poem’s attempt at structural and thematic unity on the one hand, and the disruptiveness of its borrowed elements, on the other, establishes a parallel with the struggle between Apollo and Dionysus as defined by Nietzsche. In both Nietzsche and Mandelstam, moreover, this struggle is fore-grounded in exemplary poetic masterpieces that mark the naissance of a new understanding of language in Western culture—one that prefigures poststructuralist thought.

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Elaine Rusinko, “Apollonianism and Christian Art: Nietzsche’s Influence on Acmeism,” in *Nietzsche and Soviet Culture: Ally and Adversary*, ed. Bernice Rosenthal (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 84.
- <sup>2</sup> Clarence Brown claims that the Acmeists were “if one can use without pejorative sense a word that would gratify their directors, encomiasts of the *status quo*. Their ideal was the real, after all, and whether conceived of as a ‘living equilibrium’ or as a ‘great chain of being,’ it had to be conceived as a system of fixed relationships beneath the lovely mutability of experience.” Brown, *Mandelstam* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1973), 150.
- <sup>3</sup> Nadezhda Mandelstam’s claim that her husband defined Acmeism as “Nostalgia for world culture” has been widely accepted by Mandelstam scholars. See Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope* (New York: The Modern Library, 1970), 249. For Mandelstam’s cross-cultural upbringing and work, see the above reference to Gregory Freidin, *A Coat of Many Colors: Osip Mandelstam and His Mythologies of Self-Representation* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2010).
- <sup>4</sup> Clare Cavanagh, “Mandelstam, Nietzsche, and the Conscious Creation of History,” in *Nietzsche and Soviet Culture: Ally and Adversary*, ed. Bernice Rosenthal (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 339; Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973); Harold Bloom, *Figures of Capable Imagination* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976).
- <sup>5</sup> Elena Glazov-Corrigan, *Mandelstam’s Poetics* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2000), 8.
- <sup>6</sup> “The Morning” was written in 1913 and published in 1919 in the bi-monthly journal *Sirena*, edited by Vladimir Narbut; “Francois Villon” was written in 1910 and published in 1913 in the fourth issue of the Acmeist journal *Apollon*. See Jane Gary Harris, *Mandelstam: The Complete Critical Prose and Letters* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1979).
- <sup>7</sup> See *Mandelstam: The Complete Critical Prose and Letters*, ed. By Jane Gary Harris (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1979), 62. The reference to Descartes appears much more pronounced in the original Russian sentence than in the English translation since its literal translation is closer to the statement “I build—therefore, I am right.”

8 See footnote 2

9 See Mandelstam's discussion of the "Heraclitean metaphor" in "Conversation about Dante" *Mandelstam: The Complete Critical Prose and Letters*, ed. By Jane Gary Harris (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1979), 417.

10 Mandelstam, *The Complete Critical Prose*, 401.

11 In a culminating moment in Thus Spake Zarathustra, just before announcing that "man is something that must be overcome," Zarathustra proclaims his own teaching on life: "Let your love to life be love to your highest hope; and let your highest hope be the highest thought of life! Your highest thought, however, ye shall have it commanded unto you by me—and it is this: man is something that has to be surpassed." See *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Thomas Common (Blacksbug: Wilder Publications, 2009), 47.

12 Stuart Goldberg compares Mandelstam's early work to a pendulum, representing the inner struggle of Mandelstam who is torn between two poetics—the Symbolist and the Acmeist. Tracing Mandelstam's "anxiety of influence" in regard to Alexander Blok, Goldberg demonstrates how Mandelstam, as a supremely gifted poet, managed to convert his anxiety of influence into "myriad strategies for uninhabited creation" associated with "the sublime." *Mandelstam, Blok, and the Boundaries of Mythopoetic Symbolism* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2011), 216.

13 Bernice Rosenthal, *New Myth, New World: From Nietzsche to Stalinism and Nietzsche and Soviet Culture* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002).

14 Mandelstam, *The Complete Critical Prose and Letters*, ed. Jane Gary Harris (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1979), 478.

15 Clare Cavanagh, *Osip Mandelstam*, 124-28.

16 Vyacheslav Ivanov, *Selected Essays*, ed. Michael Wachtel, trans. Robert Bird, (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 2001), 178. In his essay "Nietzsche and Dionysus," Ivanov praises Nietzsche's "mission and prophetic madness" since the German philosopher "returned Dionysus to the world." Ivanov goes on celebrating Nietzsche's relevance to Symbolism, claiming that "We felt ourselves, our earth, and our sun taken up in the eddy of a universal dance... We have tasted of the universal divine wine and become dreamers. Our dormant potential for human divinity made us sigh over the tragic image of the Superman, over the resurrected Dionysus that was made incarnate in us." In his book *Russian Symbolism: A Study of Vyacheslav Ivanov and the Russian Symbolist Aesthetic* (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1970), James West points out Ivanov's fascination with Nietzsche's Dionysus and the desire for a "non-analytic" understanding of the world embraced by the Symbolists: "Ivanov, like Nietzsche, traces the birth of tragedy from a religious need in man. He tells how the tragic muse first blossomed in Dionysian art, and gives a detailed account of the birth of Greek drama from Dionysian rites... Ivanov found typically the desire for total non-analytic comprehension of the world, a longing which the modern European mind is, in his view, coming to share," p. 78.

17 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* in *Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1976), 46. Throughout my essay I am using the widely acknowledged translation of Nietzsche's work by Walter Kaufmann. I cite the original text from vol. 1 of *Friedrich Nietzsche: Werke in Drei Bänden* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1966).

18 It remains unclear whether Mandelstam was aware of the existence of Nietzsche's "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense" ("*Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinn*"), the notorious text identifying truth with metaphors, written a year after *The Birth of Tragedy*. However, it is certain that Mandelstam took a rather roundabout way of defending Nietzsche's understanding of language against Nietzsche's understanding of music—which nowadays we may recognize as a standard deconstructive gesture. Nonetheless, in defending language against music, Mandelstam's more immediate target seemed to be the Russian Symbolists, who had occupied the center of public attention regarding poetic taste, and if Mandelstam was reacting against Nietzsche, it appears much more likely that he was, in fact, reacting against the Symbolist aesthetics in order to find a way out of the confines of their particularly powerful and appealing poetics.

19 Nietzsche, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 55; *Friedrich Nietzsche: Werke in Drei Bänden*, 43.

20 Nietzsche, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 55. Author's emphasis. The exact wording in the original is as follows: "*Diese ganze Erörterung hält daran fest, daß die Lyrik ebenso abhängig ist vom Geiste der Musik, als die Musik selbst, in ihrer völligen Unumschränktheit, das Bild und den Begriff nicht braucht, sondern ihn nur neben sich erträgt*"; *Friedrich Nietzsche: Werke in Drei Bänden*. Vol. 1, 43. Nietzsche's emphasis.

21 Nietzsche, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 55; *Friedrich Nietzsche: Werke in Drei Bänden*. Vol. 1, 43-4.

22 Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. Thomas Common (New York: The Macmillan Company), xv-xvi.

23 Ivanov, *Selected Essays*, 179-80.

24 Nietzsche, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 127.

25 Ivanov, *Selected Essays*, 14.

26 Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Abandoned*, 400-408.

27 Mandelstam, *The Complete Critical Prose*, 61-2; Mandelstam, *Osip Mandelstam: Stikhotvorenia, Proza*, 503.

28 Mandelstam, *The Complete Critical Prose*, 62.

29 In his poem "The Admiralty" Mandelstam compares the monument built by Peter the Great to an "areal ship," "a yardstick for Peter's successors, teaching / that beauty is no demi-god's whim, / it's the plain carpenter's fierce rule-of-eye" (Mandelstam, *Selected Poems*, trans. Clarence Brown, 6); The Russian original reads: "*sluzha lineikoyu preemnikam Petra, / on uchit: krasota—ne prikhot' poluboga, / a khishtnyi glazomer prostogo stolyara*." Mandelstam, *Osip Mandelstam: Stikhotvorenia, Proza* (Moskva: Folio, 2001), 42.

The same dynamics of building, involving creative struggle with the elements, is evident in the poem "Notre Dame," which Mandelstam calls an "elemental labyrinth, unfathomable forest, / The Gothic soul's rational abyss" Mandelstam, *Selected Poems*, trans. James Greene, 17); In the Russian original the poem reads: "*Stikhiinyi labirint, nepostizhimyi les, / dushi goticheskoi rassudochnaya propast'*" Mandelstam, *Osip Mandelstam: Stikhotvorenia, Proza*, 38. All of my references to Mandelstam's original work are derived from this source.

30 See Mandelstam, *The Complete Critical Prose and Letters*, ed. Jane Gary Harris (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1979), 62; Mandelstam, *Osip Mandelstam: Stikhotvorenia, Proza*, 503.

31 Mandelstam, *The Complete Critical Prose and Letters*, 63; Mandelstam, *Osip Mandelstam: Stikhotvorenia, Proza*, 504.

32 Mandelstam, *The Complete Critical Prose and Letters*, 63.

33 Mandelstam, *The Complete Critical Prose and Letters*, 63.

34 Mandelstam, *The Complete Critical Prose*, 59; Mandelstam, *Osip Mandelstam: Stikhotvorenia, Proza*, 500.

35 See Mandelstam, *The Complete Critical Prose and Letters*, 62.

36 Mandelstam, *The Complete Critical Prose*, 129; Mandelstam, *Osip Mandelstam: Stikhotvorenia, Proza*, 456.

37 Both Nadezhda Mandelstam (in *Hope against Hope* and *Hope Abandoned*) and Emma Gerstein (in *Moscow Memoirs*) relate stories about Mandelstam's personal encounters with Shklovsky and Eikhensbaum. Most of their accounts, however, concern the period in the early 1930s, when Mandelstam's early essays were already written. Although the two women focus mostly on the friendship that Mandelstam shared with the two Formalist writers, occasionally they comment on Mandelstam's attitude toward Formalism as a school of thought. While Nadezhda Mandelstam suggests that her husband was critical of the Formalists as thinkers, Emma Gerstein, a good friend of the poet, indicates that in the 1930s Mandelstam was involved in theoretical debates with Eikhensbaum and was even interested in writing an article about Formalism (*Moscow Memoirs*, 39, 124).

38 Mandelstam, *The Complete Critical Prose*, 61-2; Mandelstam, *Osip Mandelstam: Stikhotvorenia, Proza*, 503.

39 From this point on, I use the terms "sign" and "signifier" interchangeably in relation to Mandelstam's work. I have chosen to keep the term "sign" for the sake of readability and style, but for Mandelstam, the meaning of the term "sign" leans strongly toward its role as a "signifier," rather than a dualistic complex of form and content, as traditionally perceived even by Saussure.

40 Mandelstam, *The Complete Critical Prose*, 62; Mandelstam, *Osip Mandelstam: Stikhotvorenia, Proza*, 504.

41 Nietzsche, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 156. Author's emphasis. The German original reads: "Der Philosoph glaubt, der Wert seiner Philosophie liege im Ganzen, im Bau: die Nachwelt findet ihn im Stein, mit dem er baute und mit dem, von da an, noch oft und besser glaubt wird: also darin, daß jener Bau zerstört werden kann und doch noch als Material Wert hat." *Friedrich Nietzsche: Werke in Drei Bänden* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1966), Vol. 1, 814.

42 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, Trans. Thomas Wayne (Agora Publishing, 2003), 120; *Friedrich Nietzsche: Werke in Drei Bänden* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1966), Vol. 2, 408.

43 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 10-12.

44 Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 10-12.

45 Mandelstam, *The Complete Critical Prose*, 398; Mandelstam, *Osip Mandelstam: Stikhotvorenia, Proza*, 558.

46 Mandelstam, *The Complete Critical Prose*, 398; author's emphasis.

47 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 181-83.

48 Jane Gary Harris, *Mandelstam: The Complete Critical Prose*, xxix.

49 In "Conversation about Dante" Mandelstam writes that "It is absolutely false to perceive Dante's poem as some extended single-line narrative or even as having but a single voice." (Mandelstam, *The Complete Critical Prose*, 406). Two pages earlier, the poet had suggested that "scandal in literature is a concept going much further back than Dostoevsky...[as] in the thirteenth century and in Dante's writings it was much more powerful." While these two references show Mandelstam's allegiance to Bakhtin, one might also get a sense of the differences between the two writers. These remarks to Bakhtin suggest that the poet agreed with Bakhtin's dialogic model of language, but they also imply that, perhaps, Mandelstam's own work—like that of Dante—had anticipated Bakhtin's exposition of the dialogic model. Mandelstam's brief references also seem to counter Bakhtin's position that poetry, or lyrical discourse, is fundamentally different from prose. Mandelstam appears to challenge Bakhtin, indicating that poetry is inherently dialogic and intertextual and perhaps, even more innately so than prose, as it temporally predates prose, or the novel, in view of the much later establishment of the novel as a genre. Mandelstam does not go as far as trace the origin of poetry back to the Ancient Greek chorus, but the implication is not unfounded, as Mandelstam sees Dante's poem as a sort of a choir of suffering voices, or "an orgy of quotations," in his words, whose drama cannot be resolved by an external force of authority or redemption (Mandelstam, *The Complete Critical Prose*, 401). This is precisely the way Nietzsche had imagined the origin of Greek tragedies before the concepts of a plot and an actor emerged out of the original incoherence, madness, and destructiveness of the voices of the chorus.

50 Mandelstam, *The Complete Critical Prose*, 427.

51 Mandelstam, *The Complete Critical Prose*, 411.

52 Mandelstam, *The Complete Critical Prose*, 411.

53 Mandelstam, *The Complete Critical Prose*, 407.

54 Mandelstam, *The Complete Critical Prose*, 401.

55 Mandelstam, *The Complete Critical Prose*, 420.

56 Mandelstam, *The Complete Critical Prose*, 414.

57 Perhaps this image of movement as consisting of heterogeneous elements that somehow belong together as an entity, is Mandelstam's way of picturing the unthinkable ways in which our consciousness works while perceiving and remembering data, as proposed by Henri Bergson in *Matter and Memory*. Mandelstam refers to Bergson on "On the Nature of the Word" to help explain his own understanding of "connection" or relationship between words (or poems) in time. Phenomena for Bergson are not temporally or causally connected to each other, Mandelstam reminds us; they are related "according to their spatial extension," forming, in Mandelstam's view, the shape of a fan that can be opened up or closed in time. This is an exceptionally valuable model, Mandelstam insists, because instead of focusing on causality, "which for so long dominated the minds of European logicians ... [Bergson] poses the problem of connection alone, purged of any admixture of metaphysics." In other words, Mandelstam's allusion to Bergson in the image of the flight is also an allusion to his essay "On the Nature of the Word," and thus

serves as a reminder that what Mandelstam himself is interested in all along is confronting an older model of language which stems from the logic of metaphysics with a purely structural or relational model of the way words or phenomena work. Mandelstam, *The Complete Critical Prose*, 118; Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Paul and W. Scott Palmer (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1911).

<sup>58</sup> Mandelstam, *The Complete Critical Prose*, 401-2.

<sup>59</sup> In his first visit to the United States in 1909, Freud famously commented to his then protégé Carl Jung, “They do not know that we are bringing them the plague.” Whether American people realized this is questionable, but what many literati in the Western World would agree on is that not Sigmund Freud, but Jacques Derrida had brought the plague to the field of literature, as he had showcased the self-destructive and self-contradictory ways in which texts establish their meaning. Perhaps the kind of plague that Mandelstam imagines Dante brought to traditional European critics was not unlike the plague that Derrida was accused of having brought, albeit half a century after Mandelstam had perceived it.

<sup>60</sup> Mandelstam, *The Complete Critical Prose*, 407; Mandelstam, *Osip Mandelstam: Stikhotvorenia, Proza*, 568-69.

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