DIFFICULT TRUTHS
IN MEMORIALIZING OSIP MANDELSTAM

by

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DIFFICULT TRUTHS
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation considers the life and art of Osip Mandelstam in the 1930s, under the aspect of a disjunction between Mandelstam’s posthumous image and the biographical evidence that emerged between 1993 and 2010. It traces this disjunction not solely to prior lack of information but also to the moral ambiguities that complicate the reception of this biographical material.

Among the chief difficulties of Mandelstam’s biography is his testimony to the OGPU, in which Mandelstam gave the names of those among his friends to whom he had recited his “Stalin Epigram.” Close analysis of the exact words of the interrogation protocols, along with memoir evidence, is used to establish that the protocols constitute digests of information elicited previously by coercion. This conjecture is supported by reading the relevant parts of Nadezhda Mandelstam’s memoirs under the aspect of the double bind—a pathogenic social situation studied by Gregory Bateson and described in structure and in its potential for inducing psychosis. Mandelstam’s composition of the
“Ode” to Stalin is considered in the light of new evidence about his exile and its effects on the poet’s state of mind.

The dissertation proceeds largely by scrutinizing the language of witnesses and their interpreters, of poets, understood as witnesses of truths available to the creative imagination, and of critics, the interpreters of poets and witnesses of the workings of poems and language. The idea of witness literature is considered in relation to the concept of textual witnesses, in the editorial sense, and to a specific instance of the latter in the marginalia of Nadezhda Mandelstam.

Because this study must find a footing in the English language while attending closely to the Russian, it makes recourse to poets and critics who wrote in English, whose judgments and sensibilities help establish a broader frame of reference for a discussion focused on Stalin’s Russia. Geoffrey Hill’s particular artistic engagement with Mandelstam is contemplated as an instance of a special kind of bearing witness—the witness of imagination.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are transliterations of the corresponding abbreviations in Russian, which appear in parentheses next to the main entry. All of them pertain to entities within the Soviet security system, named here in Russian, with the conventional translation following in parentheses.

KGB (КГБ) Комитет Государственной Безопасности (Committee for State Security)

MGB (МГБ) Министерство Государственной Безопасности (Ministry of State Security)

MVD (МВД) Министерство Внутренних Дел (Ministry of Internal Affairs)

OGPU (ОГПУ) Объединенное Главное Политическое Управление (United Central Political Bureau)

NKGB (НКГБ) Народный Комиссариат Государственной Безопасности (People’s Commissariat for State Security)

NKVD (НКВД) Народный Комиссариат Внутренних Дел (People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs)

VChK (ВЧК) Всероссийская Чрезвычайная Комиссия (All-Russian Emergency Commission)
PROLOGUE

This dissertation considers the life and art of Osip Mandelstam in the 1930s, under the aspect of a significant disjunction between Mandelstam’s posthumous image as it has been consolidated in the Russian and English letters and the biographical evidence that emerged between 1993 and 2010. It traces this disjunction not solely to prior lack of information but, more importantly, to the difficulties posed by this biographical material to critical engagement—to a thoughtful and compassionate, yet impartial, consideration of the man and the poet. In seeking to close the gap between Mandelstam’s reputation and the evidence that has been largely eluded, this dissertation addresses the unspoken feeling of duality that pervades most of the writings memorializing both Mandelstam and his widow, Nadezhda Mandelstam, who became famous in her own right as a memoirist.

Born in 1891 in Warsaw, then a part of the Russian empire, Mandelstam was to become one of Russia’s most important modernist poets. This standing could not be spoken of without reference to the constellation of extraordinary people to which he belonged—a constellation spreading beyond the boundaries of the Guild of Poets and the Acmeist group that had him as a member. At a reading he gave at the Leningrad House of Print, Mandelstam was asked to define himself and replied to his audience: “I am a friend of my friends! I am Akhmatova’s contemporary!” His friendships were not limited to other poets, and the poetic triumvirate formed in the 1930s by Mandelstam, Akhmatova, and Pasternak was set amidst a generation of artists and intellectuals that bore the tragic burden of Stalin’s rule.
The casualties of Stalin’s epoch have been memorialized in the writings of countless witnesses. The diaries of Korney Chukovsky, for instance, bear record of how a contemporary defined the epoch’s toll on his own social circle. In reading Chukovsky’s lists of names, one becomes aware that all those people, united as they might be by their shared commitment to a life in the arts and letters (the two being complementary and sometimes synonymous), are bound even more obviously by the shared tragedy as subjects of the oppressive Soviet state. Here is a sampling of Chukovsky’s diary entries:

30 March 1958

An all too familiar Russian picture: talent smothered and killed. Polezhaev, Nikolai Polevoy, Ryleev, Mikhail Mikhailov, Yesenin, Mandelstam, Stenich, Babel, Mirsky, Tsvetaeva, Mitya Bronshtein, Kvitko, Bruno Yasensky—crushed by the same boot one and all.¹

On 27 October 1958, he wrote of Pasternak:

There would be no mercy, that was clear. They were out to pillory him. They would trample him to death just as they had Zoshchenko, Mandelstam, Zabolotsky, Mirsky, and Benedikt Livshits…²

Written five years after Stalin’s death, this entry, occasioned by a recent party offensive on Pasternak, is mindful of the recent deaths of Nikolay Zabolotsky (October 14) and Mikhail Zoschenko (July 22). Death, however, is something different from the metaphorical “trampling” endured at the time by Pasternak. Likewise, there was a great distance between these deaths, or Pasternak’s plight, and the fates of Livshitz,

² Here and elsewhere, the use of ellipses in quotations reproduces that of the source.
Mandelstam, and Mirsky. Dmitry Petrovich Svyatopolk-Mirsky, or D. S. Mirsky, as he was known in the years spent in England, before returning to Russia in 1932, died a prisoner in a Siberian labor camp in 1939. Benedict Livshitz had been executed in 1938, the same year that Mandelstam died en route to the Kolyma region of Siberia. Writing twenty years later, in a country then ruled by Khruschev, Chukovsky was aware, and yet evaded his own awareness, that these people were not simply “trampled by the same boot one and all.”

11 November 1962

I stupidly agreed to talk about my memories of Mayakovsky to a Barvikha audience. When I finished, the wife of a district official (district officials, a sleepy crowd, now make up most of the population here) asked, “Why did Mayakovsky shoot himself?” I wanted to ask how come she wasn’t interested in why Yesenin hanged himself, why Tsvetaeva hanged herself, why Fadeev shot himself, why Dobychin threw himself into the Neva, why Mandelstam died, why Gumilyov was executed, why Zoshchenko was persecuted, but fortunately I restrained myself.¹

12 April 1963

The system that murdered Mandelstam, Gumilyov, Korolenko, Dobychin, Mayakovsky, Mirsky, Marina Tsvetaeva, Benedikt Livshits, and tortured Belinkov and so on and so forth could easily drive Yevtushenko to suicide.²

2 October 1963

The intelligentsia was hit particularly hard. Writers like Benedikt Livshits, Osip Mandelstam, Marina Tsvetaeva, Gumilyov, Mirsky, Kopelev, Solzhenitsyn, Dobychin, Zoshchenko, Akhmatova, Eikhler, Zabolotsky, Babel, Mikhail Koltsov, Alexander V[v]edesnky, Kharms, Vasilyeva, Bruno Yasensky, Pilnyak, Yelena Tager.³

¹ Kornei Chukovskii, Diary, 476.
² Chukovskii, Diary, 485.
³ Chukovskii, Diary, 487.
21 January 1965

...all power over writers remains in the hands of the people who did in Babel, Zoshchenko, Mayakovsky, Mandelstam, Gumilyov, Livshits, Tager, Tsvetaeva, Yasenski, Pasternak, and hundreds of others.¹

The need to record, over and over again, the names of these casualties of the regime is part of the honorable desire to preserve the memory of those whom memory itself cannot preserve. And yet, Chukovsky lacks the alertness needed for the work of memorializing by memorizing. Without the necessary stamina or else out of a habit of cautious self-restraint (“fortunately I restrained myself”), Chukovsky substitutes for active remembrance the passive voice of “talent smothered and killed,” “crushed by the same boot one and all”—these clichés as familiar-sounding as the “all too familiar Russian picture.” The invocation of familiar names brings to his mind familiar faces, and through this Chukovsky’s diary brings the reader face-to-face with the epoch and its tremendous loss. But the diary, with its tone of directness and intimacy (no writing is more intimate than writing to and for oneself), creates in the reader an illusion of shared familiarity and a real temptation to partake of Chukovsky’s complacency, evident in the weary resignation that ceases to distinguish the disturbing individual features of the lives he mourns.

Memory can never be total; it is selective of necessity, and it is editorial by definition. The choice of what to remember, or, to put it with a stronger moral accent, of

¹ Chukovskii, Diary, 502.
what one should remember, can be either reflexive or made on reflection, considered. The critical act that precedes the editorial act of memory is at odds with the forces of repression that forever strive to reconcile us to the past by blurring its most troubling features. If Chukovsky’s voice, his tone and register, sound familiar to our ears, it is because the impulse to memorialize is nearly always tempered, and hampered, by a wish to make peace even with hostile realities, to renounce the moral claims of the past by announcing that our knowledge and understanding exhaust it. This wishful thinking is contrary to the truth and must be engaged with, cautiously and compassionately, revealing a truer image of the past and its dead. This is to be done by joining a critique of the existing body of memory to an imaginative consideration, or reconsideration, of the available body of evidence.

This dissertation pursues such a goal with respect to but one face recurring in Chukovsky’s parade of faces—that of Mandelstam, a poet whose literary existence would have been jeopardized were it not for the reliable memory and memories of his wife Nadezhda and of his friends whose witness accounts frequently contradict hers. In the history of Mandelstam’s poems, particularly those that had to wait until 1973 for their first publication in Russia, textual witnesses (notebooks, manuscript and typescript matter, etc.) and people bearing witness were of equal importance.

It might seem that Mandelstam’s reputation does not warrant such a reexamination, for much has been written about the poet and the man, in both Russian and English. Mandelstam is broadly admired as the author of the “Stalin Epigram” and an emblem of the tragedy that was Russian culture under Stalin. Emblems, nevertheless, are
works of design and stylization, omitting those details that one deems superfluous or difficult to countenance, and frequently describing the latter as the former. Mandelstam’s principal biographer in Russian, Oleg Lekmanov, skirts the two principal scandals of his subject’s biography: Mandelstam’s testimony against his friends in the May 1934 interrogations by the OGPU, and his composition, in 1937, of an “Ode” in praise of Stalin. The blank denial of these embarrassments as such, excused as justifiable without doing the work of justification, has created an uneasy atmosphere saturated with superlative praise and pregnant with unspoken caveats. In English, Mandelstam has been proclaimed a “literary martyr par excellence”—the heartless praise letting on that one tires of the tired superlatives. This canonization as a martyr also acted to seal Mandelstam’s poetic excellence from the possibility of doubt. (One of the effects of such a coercion is that it stifles the work of translation.) This made Mandelstam all the more vulnerable to knowing nods at his “less than saintly behavior under interrogation.”

Mandelstam’s figurative canonization echoed his restoration to the Russian poetic “canon,” with the pretensions of unassailability on each side placing the poet’s readership in a false position.

This sense of embarrassment about the biography that taints the art of a poet, and about the art that taints the biography, is not something uniquely pertinent to

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Mandelstam. Nor is the way of disposing of the matter by denying it—and denying the denial—before it is fully present to the scrutinizing consciousness. We need only look as far as Chukovsky to find an example of an established scholar and critic (most famous, however, for his prolific versification for children) stumped by the problem he himself had brought to light in 1922, in *The Poet and the Hangman*, an essay about Nekrasov, Russia’s chief civic poet associated with the liberal left at the time. The “hangman” of the title was the autocratic politician Muravyov, to whom Nekrasov had unexpectedly dedicated a panegyric. The situation was as follows:

The Polish rebellion, for the suppression of which Muravyov was on May 1, 1863, named absolute dictator of Poland, aroused a great wave of nationalistic feeling in Russian society. The intervention of the European powers on the side of the Poles did much to further the development and reinforcement of that feeling. The hostility toward the European powers, which took firm footing in the philistine, civil-service and military circles of the time, strengthened the so-called ultra-Russian party of the Moscow-Slavophile ilk, which included such people as Metropolitan Filaret, Pogodin, Tyutchev, Leontiev and Katkov. Toward the end of 1863 Muravyov became its idol. It saw in him a Russian vityaz, a Russian bogaty, a fearless fighter for a unified autocratic Russia, a brilliant advocate of the Russian national idea, the man who had made Poland a bulwark of the Russian principles of state, Russia’s savior from the machinations of cunning Europe, which dreamed of exploiting the Polish rebellion for the humiliation of the Russian land. “Muravyov is a fine chap!” wrote the Slavophile Pogodin in 1863. “He’s hanging and shooting them left and right. May God grant him health!”

But not just his party, all of Russia, with the exception of a small number of intellectual circles, hailed Muravyov as its savior. A “patriotic syphilis,” in Herzen’s term, gradually seeped into all the juices and fibers of Russian society, and since precisely at this time the Moscow tavern vogue for after-dinner speeches, congratulatory telegrams and deputations was coming into being, Muravyov had no more begun his struggle with polonism when he was showered with such an enormous number of speeches, dispatches, addresses, deputations, prayer services, gala receptions, deafening shouts of hurrah, ringing of bells, bouquets, garlands, monograms, flags, plates, albums, congratulatory letters,
ikons (especially ikons: without end, large and small, gold and silver), that in the end these daily homages became a necessity for him.¹

In this atmosphere, Nekrasov, too, was compelled to recite an after-dinner ode to Muravyov at a big public dinner. Nekrasov’s liberal peers responded with a storm of indignant ridicule in the papers, complete with epithets of “liveried doorman,” “after-dinner singer,” and “hireling slave.” Chukovsky quoted Herzen’s feuilleton in КОЛОКОЛ (The Bell):

Bravo, Nekrasov, bravo! We must admit that we didn’t expect this from you, but still you are aware of how intimately we know your biography and how much we could have expected. Bravo, Nekrasov, bravo!

Herzen is satisfied to find the surprise performance not that surprising after all, given Nekrasov’s reputation for duality—and duplicity. In explaining this mention of “biography,” Chukovsky is yet incredulous:

A poet—and at the same time a speculator. A poet—and at the same time a wheeler and dealer. In his poems a proletarian, but in reality a magnate. He advocates feats of heroism, but he himself appropriates other people’s estates! This in essence was the only accusation brought against Nekrasov: enigmatic duplicity, two-facedness, duality. And this duality cannot be denied. It is confirmed by a multitude of facts, and if one is disproved, dozens of others will crop up to take its place. This duality was reflected even in the most trivial matters.

Someone is walking down Nevsky, for example, and sees a carriage with nails protruding, points up, from the rear footboard. The purpose of the nails is to deter small boys from [taking] rides. Seeing the nails, the pedestrian recalls one of Nekrasov’s poems:

Don’t put in your carriage sharp nails
To pierce the small boys who jump on.

And suddenly, glancing aside, he notices to his amazement that none other than Nekrasov himself is seated in the carriage with the nails and that the carriage is Nekrasov’s own, which means that Nekrasov on the one hand pounded nails into his floorboard, while on the other humanely expressing his sympathy for the children who might become impaled on them.

Nekrasov’s paean to Muravyov sealed his reputation as a traitor to Russia’s liberal and reformist political wing. “It would have been less base of Nekrasov to build a gallows for us at his own cost,” wrote one of the critics. Chukovsky rendered all this opprobrium with great vibrancy, concluding: “This is such a gross betrayal of his convictions that it seems both incomprehensible and unpardonable.” This summary judgment was followed by a surprising, or perhaps “curious,” verdict:

But it is curious: this betrayal seems such a great crime only when we scrutinize it outside of the context of the public life of the time, artificially divorcing it from the totality of social and historical phenomena. On the other hand, if one relates the whole affair as it occurred then, without isolating Nekrasov from his epoch and his environment, he immediately appears justified, if not completely, then in part. Not a single prosecutor in all of Russian society would dare accuse him, for the Russian society of the time was just as guilty as he.

This sudden conclusion arrives after an account detailing just how Nekrasov’s “prosecutors” “from his epoch and his environment” did indeed “dare accuse him.” It is hard to discern what obstacle is being avoided by this maneuver, for Chukovsky does not appear cognizant of his own maneuvering and of its abortive effect on his essay. The deception intuited by the reader is felt to be secondary to Chukovsky’s self-deception, for, having asked the question “How is this possible?”, he cannot be satisfied with anything but a satisfying answer, and so he is forced to give one that is unsatisfactory.
In considering the baffling duality of Nekrasov, Chukovsky’s own duality permitted him to be sufficiently aware of the difficulty as to seek a compromise, but not enough as to see that the compromise he has arrived was compromisingly great. Chukovsky’s duality, which arose as a defense against internal conflict—deprived him of looking with integrity upon Nekrasov’s own conflict. Tellingly, although he marshals a great deal of information about the reception of Nekrasov’s panegyric, Chukovsky does not investigate the biographical circumstances of Nekrasov’s writing of the Muravyov ode.

One might question the relevance of such biographical investigations for literary study. But the biography of a poet (in the sense of the actual circumstances of his or her life) is a source of evidence necessary for the well-founded construal of that poet’s works. In the instance of Mandelstam’s “Stalin Epigram,” the authorized text of the poem emerged from the archives of Lubyanka, the seat of the secret police, where the poem that no one dared write down at the time of its composition was set in writing in the protocol of Mandelstam’s interrogation.

To have great political courage is different from being a great poet (although at times it may prove to be necessary for poetic greatness), and biographical and political valuations cannot replace the work of criticism. At the same time, to do justice to a poet, one must do justly by the man himself, not only the poems; and the greater the poems, the more pressing the moral necessity to give the artist who created them due recognition, that is to say a full and fully humane recognition of his truth, however complicated that might be. This truth can be established to the extent that we can establish the contexts of
the artist’s life and work, judiciously giving them weight based on evidence and, where necessary, acknowledged conjecture.

In his testimony to the OGPU investigator Shivarov, Mandelstam gave the names of his friends to whom he had recited the newly-composed “Stalin Epigram”; by virtue of having become witnesses to the poem, these people became implicated in Mandelstam’s crime of “counterrevolutionary activity.” This episode in Mandelstam’s biography is considered in Chapter 1, by attending to the text of the interrogation protocols and by establishing that those protocols cannot be read as word-for-word records of interrogations as they unfolded in real time. Stylistic analysis and memoir evidence are used to show that these records are digests of information elicited previously by coercion. The fact of coercion is substantiated by reading the relevant parts of Nadezhda Mandelstam’s memoirs under the aspect of the double bind—a pathogenic social situation studied by Gregory Bateson and described in structure and in its documented potential for inducing psychosis. We know from the memoirs of his wife that in the days and weeks after his release from Lubyanka Mandelstam was psychotic. The same volume, known in English as *Hope Against Hope*, provides further evidence corroborating the reading of Mandelstam’s detention at Lubyanka as a prolonged and damaging double bind situation.

Chapter 2 is an interlude that contemplates Mandelstam prior to his arrest, along with Moscow poems and poems of the earlier years anticipating the feelings fully developed in Mandelstam’s poetry of the early 1930s. In contrast to the Moscow poems
and their preoccupation with the precariousness of life at the beginning of the decade, poems written in exile, in 1935 and later, exhibit an increasing preoccupation with Stalin.

Mandelstam’s perplexing “Ode” to Stalin is considered in Chapter 3 as part of a series of poems contemplating Stalin’s person and persona, which Mandelstam began to compose in Voronezh. This preoccupation is compared with Robert Lowell’s enduring fascination with tyrants, in order to bring into relief the feeling arrived at by both poets in the course of their imaginative engagement with the tyrannical Other—the feeling conveyed by Lowell’s maxim, “Pity the monsters.”

Exile had a profound effect on Mandelstam, largely because of his encounter with Sergey Rudakov, an ambitious textual scholar who involved Mandelstam in a consuming collaboration on a collected edition of Mandelstam’s poems. Rudakov’s influence on Mandelstam’s writing was wilful and at times intrusive. Their edition was never realized, and Rudakov was killed in the war in 1944. His widow, Lina Finkelstein, is responsible for selling, bit by bit, the vast archive containing manuscripts and typescripts prepared by Mandelstam and Rudakov, as well as diaries, notebooks, photographs, and other documents left in her keeping by Nadezhda Mandelstam. The time of the archive’s disintegration in Finkelstein’s hands is conjectured plausibly by Emma Gerstein, who has conducted a thorough analysis of the dates and the character of her various encounters with Finkelstein. Gerstein is an unparalleled reader and interrogator of Rudakov’s letters, although she was familiar only with parts of the correspondence. Meanwhile, these letters represent a nearly day-by-day account of Mandelstam’s Voronezh existence during the time when both men were exiled in that city. Given the importance of these letters, it is
striking that so little has been written about them. In English, they have appeared as part of John Crowfoot’s 1996 translation of Gerstein’s memoirs, which included a concise selection from the letters. But the scholarly volume issued by Pushkin House in 1997 makes the entirety of Rudakov’s correspondence available for a new translation, and a new selection from the letters is presented in Chapter 3. The same chapter includes a discussion of two publications of the Mandelstam dossier from the Russian state archives, and the first posthumous edition of Mandelstam’s selected poems, prepared by Nikolay Khardzhiyev in collaboration with Nadezhda Mandelstam. In considering published material containing facsimiles of archival documents from Mandelstam’s secret police files, careful attention has been given to the editors’ tone and manner of engaging with various kinds of evidence, inquiring into the assumptions and sensibilities at work. This concludes Part I of the dissertation, concerned with the sources that, regardless of the ultimate date of publication, came into existence during Mandelstam’s lifetime.

Part II of the dissertation examines writings that memorialized Mandelstam after his death. The memoirs of Nadezhda Mandelstam, the principal witness to her husband’s life and work, are sufficiently well known to be set aside. Instead, Chapter 4 examines the reception of these memoirs and the related widening of the gap between available evidence and Mandelstam’s posthumous reputation.

The use of sources in Part II is continuous with that in Part I: the memoirs of Emma Gerstein, for instance, figure in both parts. The key sources in this dissertation are Pavel Nerler’s 2010 publication of Mandelstam’s dossier from the Russian state archives, the memoirs of Emma Gerstein, the Pushkin House edition of Rudakov’s letters to his

I have refrained from adducing well-known sources such as Mandelstam’s prose and letters, guided by the same principle that was adopted by William Empson in his note to the second edition of *The Structure of Complex Words*:

> As a matter of linguistics, the convenience of following one word through a long poem is that it illustrates specially clearly, and I hope in an interesting way, processes which I claim are at work often among all sorts of words. As a matter of literary criticism, to recover one lost historical fact no doubt does sometimes throw light all round, but only from one point; I tried to avoid too much disproportion from such lighting by simply adding what other lights occurred to me upon the poem. But anyway the reader is assumed to know the normal lighting already, and to judge the difference.¹

And so, priority has been given to the materials which have not been used in a systematic and fully appreciative way.

With textual witnesses so disparate in kind, structuring a cross-examination presents an imaginative challenge. This challenge has been met in this study by organizing it around a series of figurative spaces, each of them representing a set of proprieties in approaching certain types of evidence. In each of these, we have a chance to observe an encounter of two systems: the system that is language and the system of totalitarian power. By bringing our attention to this intersection, we can secure a hold on questions of justice which arise as we consider the relations of art and biography, tragedy and memory, English and Russian.

One can see how judgment may be aided by establishing this perspective when considering a relatively new English noun: “gulag.” The OED supplies a bifurcated entry:

a. In the former Soviet Union, the name of a department of the Soviet secret police responsible between 1934 and 1955 for the administration of corrective labour camps and prisons.

1946  V. Kravchenko I Chose Freedom xxiv. 405 The Central Administration of forced labour camps—known as GULAG—was headed by the N.K.V.D. General Nedosekin... I recall vividly an interview which I arranged on Utkin’s orders with one of the top administrators of GULAG.

1968  T. P. Whitney tr. Solzhenitsyn’s First Circle p. x, All the zeks at the Mavrino sharashka belonged, though they were not at the time in hard-labor camps, to the realm of GULAG.

b. These camps and prisons collectively, both under the N.K.V.D. and subsequently; a prison camp, esp. one for political prisoners; hence transf., any place or political system in which the oppression and punishment of dissidents is institutionalized. Also in more general fig. use.

1975  T. P. Whitney tr. Solzhenitsyn’s Gulag Archipel. II. iii. xviii. 468  It was an accepted saying that everything is possible in Gulag.


1977  Washington Post 19 Apr. c1/1 He could have let Yeldell languish as chairman of the city’s Board of Appeals and Review—the bureaucratic Gulag to which the former Department of Human Resources director had been exiled.

1982  N.Y. Times 18 July iv. 18/5 It is time the public raised its voice against the immigration gulag.

Great distance is traversed along the way from “a” to “b”—by a slide. “GULAG,” which started in English, as in Russian, as an abbreviation (although not as an acronym, for it spelled out no word), became a word in the language, at first with an upper-case initial, and later without it. This orthographic change parallels the slippage towards the looser
usage applicable to a greater and greater range of outrages. If those are exaggerated, it is not because the problem of immigrant labor is not serious, but because equating immigrant laborers with the victims of the GULAG is not responsible towards the latter, in the same way that calling family “the lethal gas chamber of society” is not responsible towards the real victims of the Holocaust. The text on the back flap of *Stolen Air*, a collection of Mandelstam’s poems translated by Christian Wiman¹, ends the biography of the poet with the sentence: “He died on December 27, 1938, in the Gulag Archipelago.” The writer of the text appears unaware of the fact that the “archipelago” of Solzhenitsyn’s metaphor spanned the entire territory of the Soviet Union. This carelessness is an insult to Mandelstam, and the reader must redeem it by considering what it takes to deal justly by a poet and his memory.

Again, it might appear that much of this kind of thinking has already been done and that Mandelstam has been sufficiently memorialized by the memoirists—chiefly, by his wife Nadezhda, who has been proclaimed on those grounds one of the foremost memoirists of the century. Part II of this dissertation considers the writings of witnesses to the life of Osip Mandelstam and to Nadezhda Mandelstam’s writing of her witness account. The idea of witness literature as the emergent genre of the past century is considered in relation to examples representative of what we might call “witness literature” and yet disparate in form. Among these, the marginalia of Nadezhda Mandelstam present a little-discussed instance of bearing witness in a way that challenges

certain complacencies that came to be lodged in the notion of witness literature—as witnessed in the proceedings of the Nobel Symposium on the topic.

Because much of what is discussed in connection with Mandelstam touches, in one way or another, upon tragedy and death, one has to attend to those two things in relation to memory and literature—not because it has not been done before, but because it has been done by many, and in a way that has not been sufficiently careful in separating the secular considerations of memory’s proprieties from the theology of death.

The religious belief that life does not end in death need not be accepted in order to appreciate its motivating recognition that it is not in human nature to come to terms with its own mortality. This recognition is muted in favor of strengthening the security of the belief in the soul’s immortality—and yet, we find traces of this compassionate awareness of the human limitations that sustain religion in the Orthodox liturgical texts. The Russian poet and philologist Olga Sedakova wrote of the text of the memorial service, or *panikhida*:

An amazement at death, an amazement at its very existence, that it is even possible for a human being—is the point of departure for the panikhida. “О чудесе! что сие еже о нас бысть таинство? како сопрягомся смерти?” “O wonder! What mystery has come upon us? how did we give ourselves to decay? how did we join ourselves with death?” (samoglasny, voice 8). How did it come about that we became mortal? “I cry and I weep” of the panikhida is quite obviously referring to death itself, to the mortality of the person, to the destruction of God’s image and its beauty: “Плачу и рыдаю, егда помышляю смерть, и вижу во гробех лежашу по образу Божию созданную нашу красоту, безобразну, безславну, не имущую вида”—“I cry and I weep when I think of death and see deposed in a coffin our beauty, created in God’s image, without form, without glory, without image.” (Samoglasny, voice 8).

These words of the 8th voice of the samoglasny echo in Mandelstam’s recollection of his own resurrection by the friendship of Boris Kuzin: “Когда я спал без облика и склада, / Я дружбой был, как выстрелом, разбужен”—“When I slept without form or image, I was awakened by friendship, as if by a gunshot.” Only in light of their source, can we understand these lines and what great importance they give to Kuzin’s friendship—a friendship felt to have resurrected its recipient from the dead. But the dead can also be experienced as friends that awaken us to the duties binding the living and the dead in a single community. Geoffrey Hill’s experience of Mandelstam as a “difficult friend” is

2 In all instances of citing a text in Russian, the translations are my own, unless attributed explicitly to a different translator. In all such cases, the original text is presented, along with the translation, in the interest of transparency.
considered in Chapter 4 as a special instance of witnessing—witnessing by the power of creative imagination and no less true because of it.

Sedakova senses that this continuity is so important as to frame “death and the dead as a topic of social thought”:

We do not only mean the sense that is real for any civilization: the sense of memory—if not eternal, then unforeseeably long memory of the dead and their deeds, memory both grateful and judging: that glory without which human existence loses, to some degree, its meaning, because this glory appears to be the final realization of life. The executors of that glory in the pagan world are the poets, and it is their “sacred song” that determines, to borrow words from Hölderlin, “what will remain.”

We must note immediately that in the burial stikhiry this glory is largely put in question as “vanity” that will not survive death: “Вся суета человеческая, елика не пребывают по смерти: не пребывает богатство, ни сшествует слава: пришедшей бо смерти, вся сия потребишься…” (“All is human vanity that will

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1 Sedakova, 658-9.
not remain after death: the riches do not remain, glory does not walk together (with the dead): for with the death’s coming, all of this is destroyed.”) The threshold of the mortal and immortal (which, as we shall discuss later, coincides with the glorious and glorified) is found elsewhere. Glorious, or immortal here is not what is “great” but what is “not partaking in sin,” holy—in other words, partaking in God’s glory.

To a non-Christian, these lines suggest that secular thought can be enriched by an appreciation of the religious point of view that wishes to include the dead among those deserving and requiring compassion. At the same time, there is a paradox here that should not go unnoticed: if anything does require preservation in memory it is those features of humanity that are precious because hard to come by and vulnerable to being irrecoverably lost. And if glory is something of this world, there’s reason to distrust it, for it answers to dictates other than those of truth. At the same time, the ideals of glory and immortality suggested here are alive not only in the conventions of obituary writing, but also in the posthumous image of Mandelstam which Anna Akhmatova and Nadezhda Mandelstam sought to create. If survival in memory depends, as it does in the Orthodox tradition, on “not partaking of sin,” it was natural for Akhmatova to believe that “sin does not befit a poet:”

Впопыхах усадили его
В юбилейные пышные кресла,
И несут по цветущему вереску,
По пустыням свое торжество.
И ни в чем не повинен, - ни в этом,
Ни в другом, и ни в третьем. Поэтам
Вообще не пристали грехи.

In a hurry they sat him
In the jubilant, cushioned palanquin,
And they carry him over the flowering heather,
In his triumph they carry him over deserts.
He is not to blame—for this,
That and the other. Sin
Does not befit a poet.

Akhmatova’s “Poem without a Hero” (1940—1962) plays on the two senses of “hero”: a central figure in a narrative, as against a heroic person. Which kind of hero is absent from the poem depends on what we think of Mandelstam, whose absence is mourned by the poem. In her marginal notes on the pages of a collected edition of Mandelstam, his widow retorted to a remark that called him a hero: “What hero. Just a tragedy.” It is true that Mandelstam’s life ended in tragedy. It was made tragic—and Mandelstam was made a hero of a tragedy—by the same circumstances which made it impossible for him to be a hero. The feeling of the terrible arbitrariness of the way in which Stalin dealt with the poet engenders a wish to cleanse his reputation. When Akhmatova writes, “sin does not befit a poet,” she uses a verb that in Russian can also mean clinging. The wish to rid the reputation of a friend of these clinging accidents of biography can translate into a hasty sanctification:

In a hurry they sat him
In the jubilant, cushioned palanquin,

He is not to blame—for this,
That and the other. Sin
Does not befit a poet.

“Sin” stands in opposition to “poet,” both words being the line endings in the Russian poem, which acknowledges the dissatisfaction felt in such sanctification. Akhmatova’s
generalization corresponds to the way in which reputations of Russian poets have been tended to by writers who felt a need to counter the arbitrariness of tyranny. Darra Goldstein, in her study of Nikolay Zabolotsky, sums up the established image of the Russian poets in the 19th and 20th centuries:

The lives of Russian poets are like the lives of saints, legendary but unenviable. Too many gifted voices have been silenced; too many altered through censorship, criticism, and imprisonment. Faced with this historical injustice, scholars have set out to resurrect work which might otherwise have been lost, and now a number of poets have a broader readership than they enjoyed in their lifetimes. Some have been hailed as martyrs, others cast as prophets.1

In likening the lives of poets to the lives of saints, Goldstein invites us to consider the conventions of hagiography and their relation to the truth of experience: if the lives of saints, as a genre, contain an element of fiction, what fictions have we accepted as true with respect to our poets? But in the same passage, we hear some of the tones that we heard in Chukovsky’s diary. If the phrase “too many gifted voices have been silenced” rings true, it is because the silencing of one gifted voice would have been one too many. More germane is the question whether, in hailing a poet as a martyr, we may not be culpable of condoning the violence and suffering necessary for the creation of the martyrs we venerate with such figures of speech. Because the identity of a martyr requires an existence of its complementary, a tyrant, uses of language that do not acknowledge this run the danger of acquiescing tacitly in political oppression.

This dissertation proceeds largely by scrutinizing the language of witnesses and their interpreters (as in the case of the textual witness constituted by the Lubyanka dossier, and its editors and interpreters, Pavel Nerler and Peter B. Maggs), of poets, understood as witnesses of truths available to the creative imagination, and of critics, the interpreters of poets and witnesses of the workings of poems and language. The sentiment behind this scrutiny is distinct from Czesław Miłosz’s, in his injunction to put language and culture on trial.¹ (The call to put something on trial is admittedly not as common as exhortations to do the same with regard to someone.) A call for a trial is a form of rhetoric implying that the verdict is already known—and that it is the guilty verdict. The trial therefore is to be something of a show trial and a guilty pleasure. In order to avert the danger of indulging in self-satisfied censoriousness, the scrutiny of language must take place in the context of self-scrutiny and in truth cannot be carried out otherwise. The insight that emerges from close readings of sources is that language, if it is to serve as the medium of truth, must not be “indicted,” as Miłosz proposes, but cooperated with in a manner that is vigilant, sensitive, and searching. A relaxation of this sensibility poses a constant risk of falsifications entering our use of language.

Miłosz’s Christianity provides the grounds for his belief that the metaphor of a trial issuing in a verdict can govern our thinking about justice generally, not only justice as administered within the strictures of the legal system. Chapter 4 explores the restriction of the idea of justice that results from this misplacement of metaphor, and the

injustices inflicted on both the Mandelstams by witnesses who, in being aware of
contributing evidence for history’s judgment, saw themselves as apologists for Osip and
Nadezhda Mandelstam. Supposing that in judging, history must either sanctify or
condemn, a great many writers, including Akhmatova and Brodsky, set out to cultivate a
posthumous image of the two Mandelstams as martyrs, obscuring the difficult truths
about them for the sake of protecting their reputations from condemnation by the callous
public. This was a disservice to the memory of both the poet and his widow, founded on
condescension to the Mandelstams and the public alike. As pertinent biographical
evidence continues to emerge, the reader is bound to notice its increasingly pronounced
disjunction vis-à-vis the lofty, otherworldly posthumous image of the Mandelstams that
has been established under the influence of Akhmatova, Brodsky, and other influential
voices. And yet, the moral authority ascribed to these figures stifles the reader’s ability to
comment on this difference, and as a result, one finds oneself in the false position of
having to avert one’s eyes from a growing body of evidence—the evidence primary
documents, memoirs, letters, and marginalia—in order to accommodate the status quo.

In considering why the metaphor of judgment, with its implied version of justice
as a procedure for passing binary verdicts, has gained such a broad scope, one must
necessarily engage with the Christian belief in the total applicability of the metaphor to
all of humanity, in all of its activities. Secular thought, which inherits a language
saturated with religious metaphors, is vulnerable to adopting the same Manichaean
assumptions about the nature of morality. At the same time, ruthlessness in ridding the
language of any Christian influence might lead to a loss of a great deal of valuable
knowledge about virtue. There is, for instance, a generosity in the Christian sense of
grateful reciprocity that exists between the living and the dead and constitutes a rich and
inclusive tradition, as expressed in Sedakova’s essay:

Слава и память, с которых мы начали разговор об отношениях живых и
умерших, вернулись в новом и неожиданном образе—не как то, чего
человек заслуживает своей жизнью, а как то, чем он жив: тем, что он
изначально “образ славы” и тем, что он, если и пока он жив, помнит и
славит.¹

Glory and memory, from which we started the conversation about the relationship
of the living and the dead, have returned in a new and unexpected form—not as
something that a person deserves by one’s way of life, but as that person’s very
livelihood: that he is, from the beginning, “an image of glory” and that if and
while he lives, he remembers and praises.

These verbs, here used intransitively, signify a participation in the humanity that is the
only way of coming to terms with the passing of the past and the ephemerality of the
present. A related caveat is that remembrance must be alert to the truth of what is
remembered and praise must use language chastely and unsentimentally. Because such
remembrance and praise constitute the bonds maintaining what is called in the humanities
“the tradition,” and because this study must find a footing in the English language, it feels
appropriate to make recourse to poets and critics who wrote in English, whose judgments
and sensibilities help establish a broader frame of reference for this study focused on
Stalin’s Russia. Chapter 5 does this as it takes the discussion outside the confines of the
courtroom metaphor, into a wider space in which it situates a special kind of witness—
the witness of the artist’s imagination. In that chapter, Geoffrey Hill’s testimony about

¹ Sedakova, 675.
Mandelstam is considered under the aspect of witness literature and contrasted with the thoughts of Czesław Miłosz in Miłosz’s book *The Witness of Poetry*.

Mandelstam’s “longing for world culture” is in concert with situating his life and art in the context that reaches far beyond the boundaries of the Soviet prison state. At the same time, the multiplicity of contexts invoked in this dissertation calls for an eclectic approach that cannot be restricted to any one conventional “method.” Instead of method, it makes sense to speak of a coherent set of principles subordinated to the end of which T. S. Eliot wrote in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919):

> To divert interest from the poet to the poetry is a laudable aim: for it would conduce to a juster estimation of actual poetry, good and bad. There are many people who appreciate the expression of sincere emotion in verse, and there is a smaller number of people who can appreciate technical excellence. But very few know when there is expression of significant emotion, emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet. The emotion of art is impersonal.\(^1\)

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PART I

Chapter 1

THE INTERROGATION CHAMBER

1. It was a remark of Jacques Derrida that “if a right to a secret is not maintained, we are in a totalitarian space.”\(^1\) Paradoxically, in a totalitarian setting, it is the role of the secret police to pry into the secrets of individuals. Within the familiar range of corporeal metaphors related to state power—“arms” of government, “heads” of state, etc.—the queasy feelings and the opacity associated with the secret service garnered it, in Russia, the uneasy euphemism of “internal organs.” The shorthand and the circumlocution it stood for—“internal security organs”—had a particularly pronounced penumbra of dubiety because the organizations these expressions referred to shifted their official name many times over in the course of history. A reference volume published in 2003 and containing documents inherited from that system bears the simple title: *Lubyanka*—after the street address of the chain of entities that, between 1917 and 1960 succeeded one another under the labels of VChK, OGPU, NKVD, NKGB, MGB, MVD, and KGB.\(^2\)

Impenetrable to the eyes of a passerby, the building on Lubyanka had the

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reputation for its long views: it was a well-known joke that one could “see Siberia from the basement.” Standing opposite “Child’s World,” the country’s largest toy store, the offices on Lubyanka were also known as “Adult’s World.” Of the administrative structures contained within, the 2003 reference volume remarks:

Структура советских карательных органов ВЧК—КГБ является лучшей иллюстрацией и объяснением тех или иных изгибов и направлений репрессивной политики.1

The structure of the penal organs VChK—KGB is the best illustration and explanation of certain twists and turns of repressive policy.

All the more perplexing, then, is the chain of continuous reorganizations within this government branch:

В справочнике не исследуются причины постоянных и крупных изменений аппарата управления органами государственной безопасности и внутренних дел. Да и в самих решениях Политбюро ЦК или Совмина СССР об этом просто не говорится.

The present volume does not investigate the causes of the constant and significant changes within the administrative apparatus of state security and internal affairs. The relevant decisions of the Central Committee’s Politbureau or the Council of Ministers of the USSR simply do not venture their rationales.

The complicated metamorphoses of the “apparatus” housed in the monumental building on Moscow’s Lubyanka Street are sketched out by Peter B. Maggs in his introductory note to *The Mandelstam and “Der Nister” Files*:

During the 1930s and 1940s there were a number of reorganizations and renamings of the agencies handling state security. At the time of Mandelstam’s arrest, both ordinary and political arrestees were subject to the jurisdiction of the

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1 Лубянка, 9.
People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs, called NKVD—the acronym for Narodnyi komissariat vnutrennikh del. A division of the NKVD, the Main Administration for State Security, GUGB—Glavnoe upravlenie gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti—handled political prisoners. During World War II the state security organization achieved separate status as the People’s Commissariat of State Security, NKGB—Narodnyi komissariat gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti. Then in 1946, in an attempt to sound less revolutionary and so gain international respectability, Stalin had the ‘people’s comissariats’ renamed ‘ministries’, with the result that the ‘NK’ in each Russian acronym became an ‘M’. So the People’s Comissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) became the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) and the People’s Commissariat of State Security (NKGB) became the Ministry of State Security (MGB).¹

Maggs refers to Mandelstam’s second in the 1930s arrest which took place in 1938, at the time when the newly-formed NKVD was conducting a mass recall of people with prior exposure in the penal system. In Mandelstam’s instance, the precedent was his first arrest in 1934, made by NKVD’s predecessor, OGPU—Объединенное Государственное Политическое Управление, or the United State Political Administration—an entity founded in 1923. As a descendant of VChK, the OGPU was heir to its broad powers, including license to execute without a trial. Beginning in 1924, a special structure was instituted within the OGPU under the title of “The Special Commission”—“Особое Совещание,” abbreviated to “OCO,” a palindrome reminiscent of the Russian “ось,” “axis”—an axis uniting a pair of seeing “O”s—or “Os,” which in Russian spells either a plurality of wasps in the genitive or (dropping the soft sign, as if spelling out a Georgian accent) a single axis:

Вооруженный зреньем узких ос,
Сосущих ось земную, ось земную,
Я чую все, с чем свидеться пришлось,
И вспоминаю наизусть и всуе.

Armed with a vision of the narrow wasps,
At work upon the axis of the earth,
I sense all that I have yet seen,
Recalling everything in vain.

OSO had the power to exile and “to detain in a concentration camp for a term of up to three years.” ¹ It was OSO of the OGPU that, on 26 May 1934, sentenced Mandelstam to three years’ exile in Cherdyn—a sentence equal to clemency in the terror-bound Stalinist Russia. And yet, we know that the arrest and exile of 1934 had set the stage for the fatal events of 1938.

Lubyanka was concerned with collecting and acting on the information gathered countrywide with the help of informers—both voluntary and not quite. Consequently, for any Soviet subject, keeping a secret meant keeping it from one’s personal acquaintances, or from becoming known to the state “organs”—or both. Precautions in either instance could be identical. The one-directional flow of information assisted Lubyanka’s hold on the popular imagination and its ability to justify the fears it inspired. In the paranoid (paranoid with good reason, if one can say so) atmosphere of 1930s Moscow, almost anything one might say was subject to the pressures of two kinds of secrecy: the secret mind of the state secretly observing its subjects in their public and private existence, and the attempted secrecy on the part of the individuals, in conscious or unconscious

¹ Лубянка, 5-6.
resistance against the ambitions of the Panopticon state.

There is, then, a puzzle both in Mandelstam’s composing and in his private readings of the Stalin epigram. The dangerous poem implicated every person who became a witness to it by hearing Mandelstam read it. Writing down the words was inconceivable, and we shall see later in this chapter that Mandelstam’s Lubyanka dossier became the epigram’s best textual witness. The law that made it a crime not to report an instance of dissent allowed no neutral response to the Stalin poem.

This did not mean that any person hearing the poem would contemplate the question of whether to denounce Mandelstam as a practical dilemma: most witnesses resigned themselves to the danger that they were put in by keeping Mandelstam’s secret—soon made an open secret by his compulsive readings of the poem to an ever greater number of people. Mandelstam’s self-destructive wish that, sooner or later, the poem be registered by Lubyanka, was balanced by yet allowing chance and luck to come in the way of this discovery. One way or another, the Stalin epigram had been composed with the secret police and with Stalin himself as its intended audience—particularly if we acknowledge that the intended audience may be intended in fantasy only, or, to put it in another way, the intention itself is disavowed—or unavowed, as in “there are such things as unavowed motives.”¹ With any wish, the answer to the question whether a person truly wants something is always Yes and No, so that the question itself becomes not that of Yes or No but of the proportion of one to the other.

Anyone who believes in the occurrence of half-intentional self-injury […] will be prepared to assume that in addition to consciously intentional suicide there is such a thing as half-intentional self-destruction (self-destruction with an unconscious intention), capable of making skilful use of a threat to life and of disguising it as a chance mishap.¹

If a furious raging against one’s own integrity and one’s own life can be hidden in this way behind apparently accidental clumsiness and motor inefficiency, it is not a very large step to find it possible to transfer the same view to mistakes that seriously endanger the lives and health of other people.²

Recklessness in speech, as a subspecies of reckless actions, is subject to the same observation. The intensest wishes are laden with the greatest ambivalence, and the intensity of Mandelstam’s conflict is evidenced by his not taking the obvious sole route to keeping the poem secret—i.e., keeping it a secret from everyone. Naturally, once heard, a poem so potent would be irresistibly tempting to repeat, endangering each of its successive readers. The destructive wish is betrayed by an “entirely superfluous warning”³ remembered by Emma Gerstein, who, upon hearing the Stalin poem, was instructed not to tell it to anyone.

Like some other listeners to the epigram, Gerstein was under the impression that no one else, except Nadezhda Mandelstam, had been initiated. Gerstein, a younger friend of the Mandelstams, remembered the morning when Nadezhda “flew” into her apartment in great agitation and declared that Mandelstam had composed a dangerous poem that could not be written down and would have to be memorized by just one person in

¹ Freud, 234.
² Freud, 242.
³ Freud, 240.
addition to Nadezhda.

“Это будете вы. Мы умрем, а вы передадите его потом людям. Ося прочтет его вам, а потом вы выучите его наизусть со мной. Пока никто не должен об этом знать. Особенно Лева.”

“It will have to be you. We shall die, and you will pass the poem to the people. Osya will read it to you, and then you will memorize it with my help. No one should know about it yet. Especially not Lyova.”

“Lyova” was Lev Gumilyov, the son of Anna Akhmatova and of the senior Acmeist poet Nikolai Gumilyov, who had been executed by the Bolsheviks as early as 1921. In the class-conscious atmosphere of the Soviet state in pursuit of the “class enemy,” Gumilyov’s birthright alone was more than enough to put him in serious jeopardy.

The two women went to the Mandelstams’ apartment, where Osip himself read to Emma the Stalin verses; after the final two lines, Mandelstam exclaimed, “No, this is a bad ending! It’s got something Tsvetayevan in it. I am canceling it. It’ll hold up fine without it.” He read the poem again, ending with the line

Кому в пах, кому в лоб, кому в бровь, кому в глаз.

Hit in the groin, one, and the next, in the eye, in the forehead.

Gerstein was instructed to keep the poem an absolute secret. “I’m warning you: not a soul!” Mandelstam repeated. “Смотрите—никому. Если дойдет, меня могут… РАССТРЕЛЯТЬ!” “If this gets where it may, I’ll be…” Gerstein’s ellipsis signals the

pause before acknowledging the possibility of being “SHOT!”—a possibility felt by
Mandelstam as terrible and thrilling:

And, lifting his head with greater-than-usual pride, he returned to pacing about the
room, rising up on his toes with each pivot.

Accompanied by Nadezhda, Gerstein retreated to another room to memorize the poem,
and there the wife introduced a variant of the fifth line: “У него на дворе и собаки
жирны”—“Even dogs in his yard are fat.”

Gerstein reflected on her situation:

I thought that it was all buried very deep. Until Mandelstam’s conviction, I did
not mention this poem to a single person, and of course, I never read it to anyone.
But once, in front of me, the Mandelstams began talking about the poem, and
Nadya declared blithely that Nina Nikolayevna Green prefers another version. It
turned out, I was not the only one initiated into the secret. And I had not known
that there was some other version.

After Mandelstam’s arrest, Nadezhda mentioned Georgy Shengeli as another witness. At
the time of writing her memoir, Gerstein was aware of fourteen listeners, but her list did
not include the artist Alexander Tyshler, now known to be a witness, and so it was not

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1 Gerstein, Мемуары, 52.
complete. Both the Mandelstams’ insistences on keeping Lev Gumilyov out of the business with the epigram in order to protect him turned out to be “entirely superfluous.” Not only was he included among the hearers of the poem, but, being a true friend, he was drawn into Mandelstam’s fateful quarrel with Tolstoy; Osip and Lev competed for the love of Maria Petrovykh, and the two paid a joint visit to the poet Nikolay Klyuyev—who was by then known to be persona non grata. During the search of Mandelstam’s apartment on the night of his arrest, a temporary residence permit was found among the papers—a permit issued to Gumilyov to stay in the Mandelstams’ Moscow apartment.

One can but guess at the weight of such findings in determining the subsequent course of Gumilyov’s life. In 1933, when Osip Mandelstam composed his verses about Stalin, Gumilyov was 21 years old. In 1935 he was expelled from the university and arrested. Akhmatova’s efforts resulted in his release, but in 1938 he was arrested again and sentenced to five years’ hard labor—a sentence he served near Norilsk, a Siberian town north of the polar circle. In 1944 he joined the Red Army, and as a veteran he was later able to return to Leningrad. But in 1949 Gumilyov was arrested again and sentenced to ten years’ hard labor. After Stalin’s death, he was “rehabilitated”: without taking responsibility for anything as grave as a miscarriage of justice, the Soviet state coined a term to announce a simple undoing of what it had done before.

At the time of Mandelstam’s arrest, Gerstein did not anticipate the consequences for herself of his confiding—an incomplete confidence on his part, for he did not confide to her that he had been confiding to others as well. When Nadezhda announced that Mandelstam had named Gerstein during the interrogation, Akhmatova, who had been
present in the apartment, remarked: “Поздравляю! Теперь на вас заведено досье”—
“Congratulations! Now you, too, have a dossier.” Gerstein recalled her shock at “those sensible words,” concluding:

Если бы я могла в ту минуту охватить взглядом последующие двадцать лет, когда во всех инстанциях, отделах кадров, редакциях, квалификационных комиссиях и в Союзе писателей я слышала только одну фразу “вам отказано”, —может быть, я бы и призадумалась. Но в тот день мне было не до этого.1

If only I could survey the twenty years that followed, when in every organization, every human department of cadres, every publishing house, qualifying commissions, and in the Writers’ Union I would hear the same formula, “your application has been denied.” But that day I had other things on my mind.

The readings of the Stalin verses in Mandelstam’s immediate circle contribute to the feeling that the epigram was an occasional piece, if we understand “occasion” as an event not fixed at some point in the future but meant to happen at some time, precipitated by the poem’s coming into existence. This is consistent with Mandelstam’s histrionic personality and his need to dispel the tensions that came to dominate his life in the 1930s—to provoke a crisis, as in Daniil Kharms’s phrase, “Вокруг себя зажечь беду”—“To set trouble on fire all around me.”

This step was preceded by profound internal conflict. Boris Kuzin, a Lamarckian biologist critical of Darwin’s evolutionary theory, witnessed Mandelstam at the extremes of his constant political vacillations and at moments when Mandelstam most wished to be converted to become a fanatic of the Communist Party:

1 Gerstein, Мемуары, 55.
Особенно, по-видимому, для него был силен соблазн утверждать в нашу официальную идеологию, принять все ужасы, каким она служила ширмой, и встать в ряды активных борцов за великие идеи и за прекрасное социалистическое будущее. Впрочем, фанатской убежденности в своей правоте при этих заскоках у него не было. Всякий, кто близко и дружески с ним соприкасался, знает, до чего он был бескомпромиссен во всем, что относилось к искусству или к морали. Я не сомневаюсь, что если бы я резко разошелся с ним в этих областях, то наша дружба стала бы невозможной. Но когда он начинал свое очередное правоверное чириканье, а на это я бурно негодовал, то он не входил в полемический пыл, не отставал с жаром своих позиций, а только упрашивал согласиться с ним. — «Ну, Борис Сергеевич, ну ведь правда же это хорошо». А через день-два: «Неужели я это говорил? Чушь! Бред собачий!»

He was particularly tempted, it seems, to convert to the official ideology, to accept all the horrors, for which that ideology served as a veil, and to join the ranks of active champions of the “glorious socialist future.” But he did not have a fanatic’s certainty. Anyone who came into close and affectionate contact with him knows how uncompromising he was in everything that concerned art and morals. I have no doubt that if we had diverged sharply on one of those matters, our friendship would have become impossible. Whenever he began his orthodox chirping—and I would always put up a firm resistance when that happened—he wouldn’t mount a polemic but would only plead that I agree with him: “Boris Sergeyevich, say it—it really is good, no?” In a day or two, he would be exclaiming: “Did I really say that? Nonsense, mad dog’s ravings!”

Kuzin remembered Mandelstam’s reading to him of the Stalin epigram:

Однажды утром О.Э. прибежал ко мне один (без Н.Я.), в сильном возбуждении, но веселый. Я понял, что он написал что-то новое, чем было необходимо немедленно поделиться. Этим новым оказался стихотворение о Сталине. Я был потрясен им, и этого не требовалось выражать словами. После паузы остановления я спросил О.Э., читал ли он это еще кому-нибудь. — «Никому. Вам первому. Ну, конечно, Наденька…» Я в полном смысле умолял О.Э. обещать, что Н.Я. и я останемся единственноими, кто знает об этих стихах. В ответ последовал веселый и довольный смех, но всё же обещание никому больше эти стихи не читать О.Э. мне дал. Когда он ушел, я сразу же подумал, что немыслимо, чтобы стихи остались

неизвестными по крайней мере Евг. Як. (брату Н.Я.) и Анне Андр. при первой же ее встрече с О.Э. А Клычкову? — Нет, не сдержит он своего обещания. Слишком уж нужно

Читателя! Советчика! Врача!

Буквально дня через два или три О.Э. со сладчайшей улыбкой, точно бы он съел кусок чудного торта, сообщил мне: “Читал стихи (было понятно, какие) Борису Леонидовичу”. У меня оборвалось сердце. Конечно, Б.Л. Пастернак был вне подозрений (как и Ахматова, и Клычков), но около него всегда увивались люди (как и вокруг О.Э.), которым я очень поостерегался бы говорить что-нибудь. А самое главное—мне стало ясно, что за эти несколько дней О.Э. успел прочитать страшные стихи еще не одному своему знакомому. Конец этой истории можно было предсказать безошибочно. Даже несколько удивительно, что в надлежащее место стихи попали только через год.1

One morning, O. E. came to me alone (without N. Ya.), looking very agitated but cheerful. I understood that he had written something new that he had to share right away. This new thing turned out to be a poem about Stalin. I was jarred by it and did not need to resort to words to express it. After a pause of sheer shock I asked O. E. whether he had read it to anyone else. “Not a soul. You are the first. Well, Nadenka, of course.” I implored O. E., in the full sense of the word, to promise me that N. Ya. and myself would remain the only ones who knew. In response, there was very merry and satisfied laughter, but finally O. E. did promise me not to read the poem to anybody else. When he left, I thought immediately that it would be inconceivable at least for N. Ya.’s brother, Evg. Yak., and for Anna And[e]yeva Akhmatova] not to learn of the poem as soon as they saw O. E. And Klychkov? No, he won’t keep his promise. The need for

A Reader! An Advisor! A Physician!

was simply too great.

Literally three days or so later, O. E. announced to me with the sweetest smile, as if he had just eaten a piece of excellent cake: “I read the verses (it was obvious which verses they were) to Boris Leonidovich.” My heart sank. Of course, B. L. Pasternak was beyond suspicion (as were Akhmatova and Klychkov), but he (just as O. E.) was always surrounded by people with whom I would have been very careful in saying something. And most important—it became clear to me that over

1 Kuzin, 176-7.
those several days O. E. had to have read the poem to more than just a few of his acquaintances. The end of that story could be predicted with certainty. What is somewhat surprising is that the poem only reached its “destination” only after a whole year.

Like Kuzin, Pasternak warned Mandelstam not to read the epigram to others. Unlike Kuzin, Pasternak did not skip a beat when he heard the poem. His assessment of the danger, not only to Mandelstam but also to anyone implicated by such a reading, was instantaneous, and he stated with unequivocal clarity and firmness his wish not to participate in any way:

Выслушав антисталинское стихотворение, Пастернак сказал: “То, что вы мне прочли, не имеет никакого отношения к литературе, поэзии. Это не литературный факт, но акт самоубийства, которого я не одобряю и в котором не хочу принимать участия. Вы мне ничего не читали, я ничего не слышал и прошу вас не читать их никому другому.”

After listening to the anti-Stalin poem, Pasternak said: “What you have just read to me has no relation to literature or poetry. It is not a literary fact but a suicidal act, which I do not approve of and do not want to participate in. You did not read this to me, I heard nothing, and I ask you not to read this to anybody else.”

This may have led Mandelstam to leave him off the list of witnesses he produced when under arrest.

The emergence of the Stalin poem was an event, and its composition was a civic act whose high real-life stakes were assured by the poem’s open avowal of feelings and judgments which at that time and in that place would not be “heard at ten paces.” The fact that the epigram was recited in the heart of the Soviet penal system—the very place that

1 Aleksandr Kushner, “Это не литературный факт, а самоубийство” [“This is not a fact of literature but suicide”], Novyi Mir, 2005, No. 7.
never should have suspected its existence—and that it was set down in writing on the official blank forms, makes the set of protocols of Mandelstam’s interrogations by the OGPU (United State Political Committee) a rare kind of textual witness: in incriminating Mandelstam, they became the single reliable source of the epigram’s text.

The text of the poem is this:

Мы живем, под собою не чуя страны,
Наши речи за десять шагов не слышны,
А где хватит на полразговора,
Там припомнят кремлевского горца.
Его толстые пальцы, как черви, жирны,
И слова, как пудовые гири, верны,
Тараканы смются глазища
И сияют его голенища.

А вокруг него сброд тонкошеих вождей,
Он играет услугами полулюдей.
Кто свистит, кто мяучит, кто хнычет,
Он один лишь бабачит и тычет.
Как подкову, дарит за указом указ –
Кому в пах, кому в лоб, кому в бровь, кому в глаз.
Что ни казнь у него — то малина
И широкая грудь осетина.

We live without sensing the ground beneath our feet,
Our speeches die down at ten paces away,
And wherever there’s even a half-conversation,
The mountain man of Kremlin is always invoked.
His thick fingers are fatty as worms,
His words sure as weights of measure.
His cockroach eyes laugh,
And the tops of his high boots shine.

All around him clamor the thin-necked chieftains,
As he toys with the favors of those half-people,
And they yowl, and they whistle and moan—
He alone prods and probes and points.
He sends out his decrees like lucky horseshoes:
One gets hit in the groin, and the next in the eye, in the forehead.
Every death is a sweet little raspberry for him,
For his broad chest of an Ossetian.

The Russian text of today’s standard edition of Mandelstam’s collected works—edited by Pavel Nerler and published in 1993—replicates the wording of the poem as given by Mandelstam during his interrogations at Lubyanka in 1934. Mandelstam’s dossier contains two interrogation protocols, one recorded on the 18th of May, and the other a week later, on the 25th. In the first, the poem was written out by the interrogator or a scribe present at the questioning, and in the second, Mandelstam is on record requesting permission to write down the poem himself. This autograph is appended to the protocol. The first copy of the poem contains a substitution of the verb “припомнят”—“remember” or “mention”—for “припоминают”—a different form of the same verb. What turns on this substitution is the rhythm of the heroic line and a change of tone, from ominous (relying on the future tense) to less so (using the present). It is clear that the latter choice constitutes a transcribing error. Curiously, the error was made by the same investigator who was remembered by Nadezhda Mandelstam for his subtle command of the shades of grammar and their potential for intimidation:

При мне он сказал О.М., что для поэта полезно ощущение страха—“вы же сами мне говорили,”—оно способствует возникновению стихов, и О.М. “получит полную меру этого стимулирующего чувства”… Мы оба заметили, что Христофорыч употребил будущее время—не “получили,” а “получите.”

2 Nadezhda Mandelstam, Воспоминания [Memoirs], Moscow: Vagrius, 2006, 98.
In front of me he said to O.M. that fear is a beneficial emotion for a poet (“didn’t you say this to me yourself”), that it assists in the birth of new poems, and that O.M. would “receive a full measure of that stimulating feeling”... We both noticed that Khristoforych was using the future tense—not “you have received” but “you will receive.”

Aside from this, the two copies are consistent and provide a reliable basis for the 1993 edition. In the listing of variants, Nerler gives what he calls an “alternative text” of the poem, which duplicates without acknowledgement the text of Gleb Struve’s edition published in the United States. The wording in this earlier edition, which is the basis of most English translations of the poem, varies from the Lubyanka text in three places. The principal two variants are the substitutions of the word “eyes” for “whiskers,” and of the verb “gives” for the verb “forges,” as in the blacksmith’s forge. Neither of the editors reports the provenance of these variant readings. Nerler says nothing about Struve, and Struve says only that his text of the poem is “based on a manuscript”:

Впервые в “Мостах”, Мюнхен, кн. 10, 1963, стр. 159. У нас—по рукописи. Близкий к нашему вариант опубликован Г. Стуковым с его вступительной заметкой в газете “Русская мысль” (Париж), No. 2278, от 6 марта 1965 г., следующие разночтения:
Стр. 3—4: Только слышно кремлевского горца—
Душегубца и мужикоборца.¹

First published in Mosty [Bridges], Munich, v. 10, 1963, p. 159. Our text is based on a manuscript. A variant close to ours was published by G. Stukov with his own introduction in the Russkaya mys’ [Russian Thought] newspaper (Paris), No. 2278, 6 March 1965, the following variants:
Л. 3—4: One hears only the Kremlin highlander—
The soul-killer and peasant-slayer.

A manuscript which is very close to Struve’s text is found in the Russian State Archive of Literature and the Arts. Attributed to A. G. Pismenny, it is a handwritten page dated no earlier than 1937 or 1938—three or four years after Mandelstam’s first arrest. Reproduced below in italics are the corrections penciled above the lines of the manuscript written in pen; a penciled arrow indicates where a two-line insertion should be made:

чут
Мы живем, под собою не зная страны,

Наши речи за десять шагов не слышны,
Только слышно кремлевского горца
А где хватит на полразговорца—
душегубца и мужикоборца
Там припомнит кремлевского горца.

Его толстые пальцы, как черви, жирны,
А слова, как пудовые гири, верны.
Тараканы смеются усисча,
И сияют его голенища.

А вокруг его сброд толстокожих вождей,
Он играет услугами полулюдей.

——
Как подкова кует за указом указ—
Кому в лоб, кому в бровь, кому в пах, кому в глаз.

Что ни казнь у него—то малина
И широкая грудь осетина.

—— 1934

—— Кто бормочет, кто плачет, кто хнычет
Лишь один он бабачит и тычит

The layered text with penciled corrections suggests that the variants that entered Struve’s text, which largely coincides with Pismenny’s, originated as gaps of memory filled by some plausible words. The effect of Struve’s text is slightly less unsettling than that of
Nerler’s edition: a cockroach’s antennae might be unpleasant enough to think about, but its “laughing eyes” belong in a whole new order of the disturbing; all horseshoes come out of a forge but only some of them are “given” as gifts of good will heralding the downfall of the recipient.

Struve incorporates in his text the variant with the mustache, not the eyes, figuring in line 7, and arranges the poem as a sequence of eight couplets, instead of the two-stanza form it has in the protocol.

It is in keeping with the dramatic story of preserving Mandelstam’s posthumous verse that the version published first, in the West, was the one most reliant on the memory of Mandelstam’s friends and most vulnerable to its failings. The faithful text was imprisoned at Lubyanka for decades after the first publications in Germany, France, and the United States. The two existing editions of Mandelstam’s dossier in the Soviet penal system follow the same tradition: the American edition, prepared by Peter B. Maggs, came out first, in 1996, and only as recently as 2010 did Pavel Nerler, the editor of the Russian collected edition, publish “Слово и дело Осипа Мандельштама”—“The Word and Deed of Osip Mandelstam”—the book’s title punning on the coincidence of the Russian words for “deed” and “dossier.” Although Nerler presents the documents of the dossier as exhibits to the narrative of Mandelstam’s fatal journey through the penal system, his title suggests a consciousness of the documents as textual witnesses situated on the crux of the system that is language and the system of totalitarian terror.

The order for Mandelstam’s arrest was issued on the 16th of May and put in action on the same night. Early in the morning the following day, he was delivered to Lubyanka.
The sequence of the questioning was fairly straightforward. During the first session with the investigator, Nikolai Shivarov, Mandelstam was asked a series of basic identifying questions, admitted his authorship of the Stalin epigram, and gave its full text and a list of eight people to whom he had read it. On the 19th, the same protocol was supplemented with two further names—Maria Petrovykh and Vladimir Narbut—and a correction excluding the previously mentioned David Brodsky from the list. Mandelstam’s testimony reads:

В дополнение к предыдущим показаниям должен добавить что в числе лиц, которым я читал названное выше контрреволюционное стихотворение принадлежит и молодая поэтесса Мария Сергеевна Петровых. Петровых записала это <произ> стихотворение с голоса обещая, правда, впоследствии уничтожить.¹

In addition to my earlier testimony I must add that the list of persons, to whom I had read the above-mentioned counterrevolutionary poem, also includes the young poet Maria Sergeyevna Petrovykh. Petrovykh wrote this <work> poem down, promising, however, to destroy the copy.

On May 19, an additional paragraph was entered in the protocol:

На пятой и шестой строке слова: “литератору Бродскому Давиду <Сергеевичу> Григорьевичу” зачеркнуты по моей просьбе, как показание не соответствующее действительности, и ошибочно данное при моем вчерашнем допросе.

В дополнение к прежним своим показаниям должен сообщить, что названные выше к/р произведения я читал также и Нарбуту В. И. Выслушав это стихотворение Нарбут сказал мне: “Этого не было”—что должно было означать, что я не должен говорить кому-либо, что это произведение я ему читал.²

¹ Pavel Nerler, Слово и “дело” Осипа Мандельштама [The word and “deed” of Osip Mandelstam], Moscow: The Mandelstam Society, 2010, 45.
² Nerler, 45.
On the fifth and sixth lines, the words “David Grigoryevich Brodsky, a man of letters” are crossed out in accordance with my request as a testimony that does not correspond to reality and was made by mistake during my interrogation yesterday.

I must add to my previous testimony that I also read the above-referenced counterrevolutionary work to V.I. Narbut. After hearing the poem, Narbut said to me: “This never happened”—meaning that I was not to tell anyone that I had read that work to him.

Boris Kuzin wrote about Narbut’s standing in the hierarchy of Mandelstam’s friendships:

О.Э. дружба была необходима. Хорошие, даже близкие отношения у него были со многими. Начиная с родственников, своих и женных. Вернейшим другом-спутником была, конечно, Н.Я. Но она была жена. А друг—не что совсем иное. Из тех, кого я встречал у Мандельштамов, я не могу назвать ни одного близкого друга О.Э. Ближе других, пожалуй, был В.И. Нарбут. ¹

For O.E. friendship was a necessity. He was in warm, even close relations with many people, beginning with the relatives, his own and his wife’s. His most faithful friend and companion was, of course, N.Y. But she was his wife. A friend is something quite different. Among the people I had encountered at the Mandelstams’ apartment, I cannot name a single close friend of O.E. V.I. Narbut was probably closer to him than anybody else.

The revised list of nine people is reiterated in the protocol of May the 25th, a week after the initial deposition. Points established on the 18th are rehearsed and developed in detail on the 25th. The record of that day shows Shivarov eliciting from Mandelstam a progressive series of admissions: first, a detailed history of Mandelstam’s political views and any counterrevolutionary musings that had ever occurred to him; next, an admission of authorship of the Stalin verses and of their political malignancy; a full text of the poem is written down by Mandelstam; a numbered list of people who had listened to the poem

¹ Kuzin, 168.
is produced, followed by the details of each person’s reaction upon hearing the verses. Mandelstam omits from this report his wife’s and Akhmatova’s responses, and Shivarov pursues the line only with respect to Akhmatova. After establishing some evidence of what could be worked up as counterrevolutionary sympathies among this immediate circle, Shivarov leads Mandelstam to characterize the poem as a “widely applicable means of counterrevolutionary insurgency” that could be used “by any social group whatsoever.”

2. Black’s Law Dictionary defines “interrogation” as “the formal and systematic questioning of a person; esp., intensive questioning by the police, usu. of a person arrested for or suspected of committing a crime.” Part of this “formal and systematic” character was that the interrogation had to be documented in a protocol. Interpreting the protocols of Mandelstam’s interrogation is complicated by the suggestive ambiguity of the term “protocol” itself. The OED gives a range of meanings, implying exactitude and authority, at the one extreme, and fraudulence based on a pretence of exactitude and authority, at the other:

The original record or minutes of a transaction, negotiation, examination, etc.; esp. such a document drawn up by a notary or other recognized official, forming the legal authority for any subsequent agreement based on it; a formal or official statement of a proceeding (now chiefly hist.).

Protocols of the (Learned) Elders of Zion and variants: a fraudulent, anti-Semitic document first printed in Russia in 1901, purporting to be a report of a series of meetings held in 1897 to plan the overthrow of Christian civilization by Jews.

A special note on Russia intercedes between those two entries:
Chiefly in Russian contexts: a record made by the police of an incident or case.
1880 Times 9 Feb. 11/6 [In] St. Petersburg all vehicles which carry lamps are compelled to light their lamps simultaneously with the lighting of the street lamps. Should the coachman fail to comply with this regulation, the police draw up a ‘protocol’ of the case, which is handed to a justice of the peace.

The *OED* leaves undecided the degree of exactitude of the Russian variety of protocol. Similarly, Russian dictionaries supply a range. Tellingly, the *Popular Dictionary of Foreign Words* (“Популярный словарь иностранных слов”) defines “протокол” as “документ, содержащий запись всего происходящего на собрании, заседании, судебном процессе и т.п., напр. ~ допроса”—“a document containing a record of everything that occurs in the course of a meeting, proceeding, judicial process, etc., e.g. ~ of an interrogation” (my italics). But the *Greater Law Dictionary* gives a definition acclimated to Russia and its legal praxis, permitting a protocol to contain something like a digest of the facts previously elicited by the interrogator:

ПРОТОКОЛЫ—процессуальные документы, в которых в письменной форме фиксируются ход и результаты процессуальных действий, осуществляемых следователем, дознавателем при расследовании уголовных дел и судом - при разбирательстве уголовных и гражданских дел. П. также составляются в конституционном, арбитражном и административном процессе.

PROTOCOLS—procedural documents, fixing in written form the proceedings and results of procedures conducted by an investigator or an interrogator while investigating a criminal case or by a court in considering a criminal or a civil case. P. are also compiled as part of the constitutional and administrative due process and arbitration.

Because the protocols in Mandelstam’s file have question-and-answer form, it is easy to begin reading them with the assumption that they represent a record of an
interrogation as it actually progressed. On first reading, it appears that, a week into his investigation at Lubyanka, Mandelstam is on record accepting unresistingly every self-incriminating formula suggested by Shivarov. The record adopts the present tense lending a brisk dynamism to the narrative of his changing political convictions, which he reports compliantly, without omitting any compromising doubts that crossed his mind, even within a month. Nerler, in his commentary to the documents of the Lubyanka dossier was moved to remark incredulously that Mandelstam “sang like a nightingale” (“залился соловьем”), incriminating himself with “three basketfuls of nonsense” (“наговорил с три короба”). Putting aside the tone of those remarks, one must agree that the style of Mandelstam’s supposedly direct speech, the length of sustained testimony, the briskness of the narrative filled with political jargon and clichés are indeed incredible—that is, they make it less credible that the document could be a verbatim record of the interrogation. The reader may be cautioned against this assumption by the fact that the first protocol is dated two days after the arrest, and the second is compiled a week after, on the 25th of May. But the text of these documents itself provides sufficient basis to rule out the possibility of treating the protocols as actual transcripts.

The repetition of “depression”—“this depression” is the beginning of a series of repetitions. These deliberate repetitions, unusual in Mandelstam’s naturally varied and playful speech, forfeit spontaneity and give the effect of dutiful clarity. This command of ideological jargon is either due to Shivarov’s ghostwriting, or to Mandelstam’s striving to

1 Nerler, 34.
establish a common language with the interrogator. What the protocol does record faithfully is the hideous coercion that went into its making, for the stiltedly obliging, unnaturally jargon-laden answers that follow each question cannot be anything other than a product of substantial off-the-record preparation.

Вопрос: Признаете ли вы себя виновным в сочинении произведений контрреволюционного содержания?

Ответ: Да, я признаю себя виновным в том, что я являюсь автором контрреволюционного пасквиля против вождя коммунистической партии и советской страны. Я прошу разрешить мне отдельно записать этот пасквиль и дать его как приложение к настоящему протоколу допроса.¹

Вопрос: Как реагировали на прочтение им этого пасквиля названные вами лица?

Ответ: Кузин Б. С. отметил, что эта вещь является наиболее полнокровной из всех моих вещей, которые я ему читал за последний 1933 год. Хазин Е. Я. отметил вульгаризацию темы и неправильное толкование личности как доминанты исторического процесса. Александр Мандельштам, не высказываясь, укоризненно покачал головой. Герштейн Э. Г. похвалила стихотворение за его поэтические достоинства. Насколько я помню, развернутого обсуждения темы не было. Нарбут В. И. сказал мне: “Этого не было”—что должно было означать, что я не должен никому говорить, что я ему читал этот пасквиль. Петровых—как я сказал—записала этот пасквиль с голоса и похвалила вещь за высокие поэтические качества. Лев Гумилев—одобрил вещь неопределенно—эмоциональным выражением вроде “здорово,” но его оценка сливалась с оценкой и его матери Анны Ахматовой, в присутствии которой эта вещь ему была зачитана.²

Question: Do you acknowledge yourself guilty of composing works of counterrevolutionary content?

Answer: Yes, I acknowledge myself guilty of the fact that I am the author of a counterrevolutionary lampoon against the leader of the communist party and

¹ Nerler, 46.
² Nerler, 46-7.
Soviet state. I request permission to write down this lampoon separately, as an appendix to the present interrogation protocol.

**Question:** How did the previously named by you individuals respond to your reading of the lampoon in their presence?

**Answer:** Kuzin B. S. noted that this work is the most full-blooded of all the works that I had read to him in the last year, 1933. Khazin E. Ya. noted the vulgarization of the subject matter and the incorrect interpretation of personality as a dominant of the historic process. Aleksandr Mandelstam shook his head disapprovingly without comment. Gerstein E. G. praised the poem for its artistic qualities. If memory serves, there was no extended discussion of the topic. Narbut V. I. said to me: “This never happened,” which was meant to signify that I should not tell anyone that I had read this lampoon to him. Petrovykh—as I said—wrote down this lampoon and praised the work for its high poetic qualities. Lev Gumilyov endorsed the work by saying it was “swell” or some other indeterminate, emotive expression, but his response was not fully independent from that of his mother, Anna Akhmatova, in whose presence he had first heard the poem.

The placement of initials after the persons’ last names is a convention of official writing in Russian, but it is inconceivable as a spoken form. A disavowal of norms of spoken language would have to signal a disavowal of friendship with the people so named—or a disavowal of what one says, indicating that these unnatural sentences were uttered under duress. The content and structure of the documents further substantiates this reading. The steady progression of the interrogation from one incriminating finding to other, graver findings towards the end suggests that Shivarov had a chance to structure in his mind the information he had previously obtained.

Mandelstam’s sketch of his political autobiography begins at 1917:

Октябрьский переворот воспринимаю резко отрицательно. На советское правительство смотрю как на правительство захватчиков и это находит свое выражение в моем опубликованном в “Воле народа” стихотворении “Керенский.” В этом стихотворении обнаруживается рецидив эсеровщины:
я идеализирую Керенского, называя его птенцом Петра, а Ленина называю временщиком.

Примерно через месяц я делаю резкий поворот к советским делам и людям, что находит выражение в моем включении в работу наркомпроса по созданию новой школы.

С конца 1918 года наступает политическая депрессия, вызванная крутыми методами осуществления диктатуры пролетариата. К этому времени я переезжая в Киев, после занятия которого белыми я переезжаю в Феодосию. Здесь, в 1920 году, после ареста меня белыми предо мною встает проблема выбора: эmigration или Советская Россия и я выбираю Советскую Россию. Причем стимулом бегства из Феодосии было резкое отвращение к белогвардейщине.

My reception of the October revolution is starkly negative. I view the Soviet government as a government of usurpers and this finds an expression in my poem “Kerensky” published in The Will of the People. This poem represents a relapse into the social-revolutionary cast of mind: I idealize Kerensky, calling him the scion of Peter, and by contrast, I call Lenin an accidental favorite.

Approximately a month later I make a sharp turn towards the Soviet activities and people, and this finds an expression in my involvement in the work of Narkompros on establishing a new school.

At the end of 1918, a political depression sets in, motivated by the harsh methods of establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat. By this time I had moved to Kiev, and after it was taken by the Whites I moved to Feodosia. There, in 1920, after being arrested by the Whites, I confront the problem of choice: emigration or the Soviet Russia—and I choose the Soviet Russia. The impetus for my escape from Feodosia was, incidentally, my acute revulsion from the White Guard.

In 1927, Mandelstam’s “increasing trust in the politics of the Communist party and the Soviet government” wavered under the influence of “not very deep, but fairly ardent Trotskyist sympathies.” Faith in the communists was again restored in 1928.

1 Nerler, 46.
К 1930 году в моем политическом сознании и социальном самочувствии наступает большая депрессия. Социальной подоплекой этой депрессии является <процесс> ликвидация кулачества как класса. Мое восприятие этого процесса отражено в моем стихотворении “Холодная весна”— прилагаемое к настоящему протоколу допроса и написанное летом 1932 г. после моего возвращения из Крыма. К этому времени у меня возникает чувство социальной загнанности, которое усугубляется и обостряется рядом столкновений личного и общественно–литературного порядка.

Записано с моих слов верно и мною прочитано.

О. Мандельштам¹

In 1930 a deep depression begins in my political consciousness and social self-awareness. The social underpinnings of this depression had to do with the liquidation of kulaks as a class. My attitude towards this process is reflected in my poem “Cold Spring”—attached to the present interrogation protocol and written in the summer of 1932 after my return from the Crimea. By that time, I am already experiencing the feeling of social persecution, exacerbated by a number of confrontations of the personal and socio-literary sort.

Transcribed after my spoken testimony correctly and read by me.

O. Mandelstam

Nadezhda Mandelstam wrote that the protocols were in fact signed by Mandelstam without reading—something that even his interrogator rebuked him for in front of his wife during her visit. Nadezhda snapped back at Shivarov: “He must have trusted you.”

The memoirs of Emma Gerstein contain evidence that the protocols were a post factum summary, not a record of the interrogation as it unfolded in real time. Gerstein continued to be a stalwart and indispensable friend in Mandelstam’s exile—with full awareness of having been betrayed, and of the possibility that no alternative had been

¹ Nerler, 46.
possible for Mandelstam. Just as at first she was under the impression that no one but the
Mandelstams and herself knew the text of the Stalin epigram, she was told after
Mandelstam’s arrest that he had named her because he had to name someone, and named
her because other alternatives would have been inconceivable. The consequences for
Gerstein are mentioned in the memoir as a matter of fact:

Вскоре после описанных событий лета 1934 года меня сняли с работы в 24
часа и выдали отвратительную характеристику. Я мыкалась до 1936 года,
kогда устроилась в Литературном музее, но не на штатную, а на сделную
dоговорную работу. Как только я получила первые деньги, я поехала в
Воронеж. 1

Shortly after the already described events of the summer of 1934 I was removed
from my job with a 24-hour notice and an abominable character evaluation. I
searched for work until 1936, when I was hired by the Literary Museum, but only
as a freelancer, not a staff member. As soon as I received the first money, I set out
for Voronezh.

On this very first visit, Gerstein was asked to take Nadezhda’s place in Voronezh, to keep
Mandelstam company while his wife traveled to Moscow to conduct business. This took
the form of first demanding that Emma visit the Central Committee of the Party in
Moscow to advocate for Mandelstam, explaining to the officials that he was starving in
Voronezh without work. Gerstein could not imagine herself doing this. The Mandelstams
insisted. Nadezhda took it upon herself to play the bad cop; Osip played the opposite part;
Gerstein recalled the dialogue that took place between the three of them, summing up:

Все это означало, что Надя рвется в Москву, ее надо сменять, а с кем попало
он никак не может оставаться, ему нужен человек близкий (Рудаков все—
tаки мужчина, это не то, да и отношения в этот период между ними были

1 Gerstein, Мемуары, 63.
несколько натянутыми). О политической стороне дела, о моем положении он и думать не хотел. Тогда я наконец заговорила о его поведении на следствии, чего я себе не позволила ни разу при встречах с Надей в Москве. Но перед лицом все увеличивающихся требований Мандельштама я решила поставить в конце концов точку над “и.” Ведь уверенность в друге должна быть взаимной. Осип Эмильевич начал мне объяснять: “Вы же сами понимаете, что больше никого я назвать не мог. Не Ахматову же и Пастернака? О Кузине и думать было нечего, вы же знаете...” (Он имел в виду недавний арест Бориса Сергеевича и его поднадзорное положение.) “Ну, и Лева...”—многозначительно сказал он, играя на моем особенном отношении к Л. Гумилеву.1

All of this meant that Nadya was determined to go to Moscow, someone had to take her place, but it could not be just anyone, they needed someone who was close (Rudakov, after all, was a man and therefore not exactly the right thing, and besides, their relations were somewhat strained at that time). He did not want to think about the political side of this proposition or about my own situation. That’s when I finally brought up his conduct during the investigation, which I had not previously permitted myself to mention during my encounters with Nadya in Moscow. But in the face of Mandelstam’s increasing demands I finally decided to place a dot over the “и.” Our trust in our friends must, after all, be reciprocal. Osip Emilyevich began to explain: “But you must understand that I could not have named someone else. Could I have named Akhmatova or Pasternak? Kuzin was out of the question, you know perfectly well...” (He meant the recent arrest of Boris Sergeyevich and his under-surveillance status.) “And Lyova...” he said significantly, playing on my particular feelings for L. Gumilyov.

The striking thing here is that Mandelstam had named Emma not in place of all the other people he listed here as impossible alternatives, but among them. Pasternak was the only person, among those mentioned in this conversation as an inconceivable sacrifice, who had not been named by Mandelstam under interrogation. Akhmatova, Kuzin, and Gumilyov had not been saved by sacrificing Gerstein. They had been sacrificed together with her.

1 Gerstein, Мемуары, 65.
It is fairly sad to realize that you were chosen as a sacrifice in order to save others. I did not say that, of course, but Mandelstam sensed the awkwardness. In order to smooth it out, he brought up the interrogator, who had called me a “perfectly Soviet individual.” None of this mattered anymore. I already knew that Mandelstam’s initial intentions, no doubt agreed upon with Nadya, had come to naught. Pasternak and Akhmatova had both ended up on the list of people who heard his epigram on Stalin.

He began to tell me how frightening was his time at Lubyanka. I remember only one episode, which Osip described to me with amazing frankness: “They were taking me somewhere in an internal elevator. Several people were in it. I fell to the floor and thrashed about... And suddenly there was a voice above me, ‘Mandelstam, Mandelstam, shame on you!’ I raised my head. It was Pavlenko.”

If there was such a thing as protocol, in the other sense of the word, implying a set of conventions that must be followed in a given setting, it was certainly violated by Shivarov’s way of entertaining one of his literary friends, Pyotr Pavlenko, by letting him sit hidden in a closet at one of Mandelstam’s nighttime interrogations—a period of

1 Gerstein, Мемуары, 65.
preliminary questioning that has not been fixed on the record. Nadezhda Mandelstam remembered, corroborating Gerstein’s memories:

Еще в 34-м году до нас с Анной Андреевной дошли рассказы писателя Павленко, как он из любопытства принял приглашение своего друга-следователя, который вел дело О.М., и присутствовал, спрятавшись не то в шкафу, не то между двойными дверями, на ночном допросе. В кабинете следователя я видела несколько одинаковых дверей—их было слишком много для одной комнаты. Нам потом объяснили, что одни двери открываются в шкафы-ловушки, другие служат запасным выходом.

Павленко рассказывал, что у Мандельштама во время допроса был жалкий и растерянный вид, брюки падали—он все за них хватался, отвечал невпопад—ни одного четкого и ясного ответа, порол чушь, волновался, вертелся как карась на сковороде и тому подобное…¹

As far back as 1934, Anna Andreyevna and I heard of the writer Pavlenko’s stories about how he had accepted out of curiosity an invitation from his friend who was leading the investigation of O.M. and how he was present at a nighttime interrogation, hiding in a closet or between some double doors. I myself had seen several identical doors in the investigator’s office—there were too many doors for just one room. Later someone explained that some of the doors opened up into closets for trapping, and others served as escape doors.

Pavlenko talked about Mandelstam looking pathetic and lost during the interrogation; his pants kept falling down, and he kept pulling at them while answering the questions, always off the mark—not a single clear and distinct answer, he talked nonsense, was nervous and writhed like a fish in a frying pan, and so forth…

Pavlenko’s presence was of course left off the record as was much of the preparatory work done by Shivarov to prime Mandelstam for the sequence of well-rehearsed confessions we saw in the protocol. The crucial conclusion we arrive at by a careful reading of the protocol itself and by the fact of Pavlenko’s recollection of Mandelstam’s

¹ Mandelstam, Воспоминания, 104.
erratic behavior is this: the protocols of Mandelstam’s dossier cannot be construed as an actual record of Mandelstam’s deposition, but as a post factum digest of information elicited previously, in a manner not susceptible to being recorded word-for-word.

Although it would be hard to prove the decisive role of Mandelstam’s testimony in the lives of the people he had named, it is certain that their mention on the list became a permanent part of their dossiers. Nadezhda Mandelstam, Emma Gerstein, Anna Akhmatova, Maria Petrovykh—the women on Mandelstam’s list—avoided arrest. But three of the men named by Mandelstam were subsequently distinguished by tragedy. One of them was Lev Gumilyov, whose biography is already familiar to the reader. The other two were Mandelstam’s close friends, Vladimir Narbut and Boris Kuzin. Narbut was arrested in 1936, on the accusation of membership in a Ukrainian nationalist conspiracy. He was sentenced to five years hard labor and by the fall of 1937 found himself on the banks of Kolyma. The following spring, Narbut was shot by the special order of an NKVD troika. As for Kuzin, his arrest in 1935 was his second in three years, and it was understood that this new arrest was precipitated by Mandelstam’s testimony.

Kuzin reflected on Mandelstam’s role in his life with an impartial generosity:

В 1934 г. отправился в ссылку О.Э., а весной 1935 забрали меня. Выйдя через два с лишним года из лагеря, я списался с Мандельштамами, приехавшими тогда в Москву.¹

Я всегда считал незаконным требовать от людей героических поступков. Теми, кто способен на их совершение, мы восхищаемся. Но не герой—не то же самое, что негодяй. ²

¹ Kuzin, 177.
² Kuzin, 178.
In 1934 O. E. was sent into exile, and in the spring of 1935 it was my turn to be arrested. After more than two years in a camp, I was released and wrote to the Mandelstams, who had then moved to Moscow.

I always thought it unlawful to demand heroism from people. We admire those capable of heroism. But not to be a hero is not the same thing as to be a scoundrel.

Shivarov, who had the reputation of a literary specialist at Lubyanka, was interested in what Akhmatova had to say about the “Epigram.” The care with which he states his question is matched and exceeded in Mandelstam’s scripted reply:

Вопрос: Как реагировала Анна Ахматова при прочтении ей этого контрреволюционного пасквиля и как она его оценила?

Ответ: Со свойственной ей лаконичностью и поэтической зоркостью Анна Ахматова указала на монументально-лубочный и вырубленный характер этой вещи. Эта характеристика правильна потому, что этот гнусный, контрреволюционный, клеветнический пасквиль,—в котором сконцентрированы огромной силы социальный яд, политическая ненависть и даже презрение к изображаемому, при одновременном признании его огромной силы—обладает качествами агитационного плаката большой действенной силы.¹

Question: How did Anna Akhmatova respond when hearing this counterrevolutionary lampoon and what was her appraisal of it?

Answer: Anna Akhmatova, in her characteristically concise and poetically astute manner, pointed out the work’s resemblance to a monumental lubok and its crude character. This assessment is correct because this virulent, counterrevolutionary, slanderous lampoon—which contains tremendously potent social poison, political hatred, and even disdain for its subject, alongside the concession to his enormous power—has the qualities of a greatly potent propaganda poster.

¹ Nerler, 47.
Apparently satisfied with that answer, Shivarov moves to the final phrase of the interrogation:

Вопрос: Выражает ли ваш контрреволюционный пасквиль “Мы живем...” только ваше, Мандельштама, восприятие и отношение или он выражает восприятие и отношение определенной какой–либо социальной группы?

Ответ: Написанный мною пасквиль “Мы живем...”—документ не личного восприятия и отношения, а документ восприятия и отношения определенной социальной группы, а именно, части старой интеллигенции, считающей себя носительницей и передатчицей в наше время ценностей прежних культур. В политическом отношении эта группа извлекла из опыта различных революционных движений в прошлом привычку к искажающим современную действительность историческим аналогиям.

Вопрос: Значит ли это, что ваш пасквиль является оружием контрреволюционной борьбы только для характеризованной вами группы или он может быть использован для целей контрреволюционной борьбы иных социальных групп?

Ответ: В моем пасквиле я пошел по пути, ставшему традиционным в старой русской литературе, используя способ упрощенного показа исторической ситуации, сведя ее к противопоставлению: “страна и властелин.” Несомненно, что этим снижен уровень исторического понимания характеризованной выше группы, которой принадлежу и я, но именно поэтому достигнута та плакатная выразительность пасквиля, которая делает его широко применимым орудием контрреволюционной борьбы, которое может быть использовано любой социальной группой.1

Question: Does your counterrevolutionary lampoon “We live...” express only your own, Mandelstam’s, perception and disposition, or does it express the perceptions and dispositions of some particular social group?

Answer: The counterrevolutionary lampoon “We live...” which I have written is not a document of my personal perception and disposition but a document of the perceptions and dispositions of a particular social group, namely, that part of the old intelligentsia that considers itself the bearer and transmitter of the values which belonged to past cultures, in our own time. From the political standpoint,

1 Nerler, 47.
this group has extracted from the experience of various revolutionary movements a habit of using historical analogies that distort contemporary reality.

*Question:* Does this mean that your lampoon happens to be a weapon of counterrevolutionary insurgency only in the hands of the group you have characterized, or can it be deployed in the interests of counterrevolutionary insurgency by other social groups?

*Answer:* In my lampoon I followed the path that has become traditional in old Russian literature, using the devices of simplified exposition of the historic situation that reduce it to a contrast of the country against the ruler. Beyond doubt, this lowers the quality of the historic interpretation on the part of the previously characterized group, to which I belong, but precisely this permitted me to achieve the poster-like expressiveness of the lampoon that makes it a widely applicable means of counterrevolutionary insurgency that can be used by any social group whatsoever.

On May 25, OGPU issued a decision declaring the investigation complete and finding Mandelstam guilty of “composition and dissemination of counterrevolutionary literary works.” This conclusion was signed by Mandelstam and directed for consideration to the Special Committee (OSO), which on May 26 issued a sentence: exile in Cherdyń for three years. The dossier was to be archived.

It appears that Mandelstam’s encounter with Shivarov had implicated yet another person in the play of contested loyalties set in motion by the Stalin verses. In 1936, Nikolai Shivarov was transferred to Sverdlovsk. This was likely to be a sign of preliminary distancing from power: in December 1937 Shivarov was arrested on the charges of espionage. He was sentenced to five years hard labor. In 1940, he committed suicide at a labor camp near Vandysh—a village just south of the polar circle.
3. When the *The Guardian’s* Virginia Rounding wrote with casual opprobrium of Mandelstam’s “less than saintly behavior,” she implied that saintly behavior should—and *could*—have been expected, and that Mandelstam should not have given Shivarov a list of witnesses to the “Epigram.” Indignation about his having done so arises from the correct feeling that informing on one’s friends should not be accepted as honorable behavior. And yet, the just feeling that a wrong has been perpetrated is not sufficient to justify indignation and questions of “how could he?”—for it is perfectly clear how one might be unable to endure the pressures of interrogation. Much more difficult, if at all answerable, is the question of how one might resist such pressures. The answer to that, if any, would depend on an understanding of how pressure is exerted, as it no doubt had to be exerted in this instance. To Mandelstam, who had in 1933 defined himself as “a friend of his friends,” his surrender to Shivarov meant the loss of self in a situation where the alternative was the loss of life. This untenable situation was a species of the dilemma that stood, in actuality or potentiality, before each citizen of the totalitarian state: the choice between “going free” within a prison state, on the one hand, and being imprisoned within its penal system, on the other, left no possibility of genuine freedom. The paradoxical idea of a Christian martyr who bears witness by remaining silent arose as an answer to a similarly untenable situation that put the believer face-to-face with the choice between silence and speaking, and between death and the loss of integrity which is but another kind of death. “Taciturnity,” wrote Geoffrey Hill,

    does not have an absolute value, any more than suffering itself has or any more than the words “absolute value” have. R. W. Chambers, in his biography of More, writes of the martyr’s “great plea for the liberty of silence.” Chambers modulates
that air of expansiveness inseparable from the hallowed commonplace “freedom of speech,” words which, for citizens of democracies, lie somewhat lightly upon the tongue.¹

Physical torture was not sanctioned by Lubyanka until 1937, but if one believes in the reality of mental suffering, then one must accept that language, with its power to inflict such suffering, can be a potent instrument of coercion, and indeed torture, if torture is to include infliction of mental anguish. What makes a crucial difference in understanding the mechanism of coercion inflicted on Mandelstam is that we know and have no reason to doubt the fact that in the weeks following his release from prison Mandelstam was psychotic. This, and what went on between Shivarov and Mandelstam off the record we know from Nadezhda Mandelstam, who visited her husband in prison.

Следователь особенно интересовался тем, что послужило стимулом к их написанию. О.М. огоррил его неожиданным ответом: больше всего, сказал он, мне ненавистен фашизм… Ответ этот вырвался, очевидно, невольно, потому что О.М. не собирался исповедоваться перед следователем, но в тот момент, когда он это произнес, ему было все равно, и он махнул рукой на все… Следователь метал громы, как ему и положено, спрашивал, в чем О.М. усматривает фашизм в нашей жизни,—эту фразу он повторил и при мне на свидании, но—удивительное дело! —удовольствовался уклончивыми ответами и уточнять ничего не стал. О.М. убеждал меня, что во всем поведении следователя чувствовалась какая-то двусмысленность и что, несмотря на железный тон и угрозы, все время проскальзывала его ненависть к Сталину.²

Ягоде, как оказалось, так понравились стихи О.М., что он изволил запомнить их наизусть—ведь это он прочел их Бухарину.³

2 Mandelstam, Воспоминания, 101.
3 Mandelstam, Воспоминания, 102.
The interrogator was particularly curious about the stimulus for the composition of the verses. O.M. astounded him with his unexpected answer: more than anything, he said, he hates fascism. This answer must have escaped involuntarily, because he had no intention of behaving as if in a confessional—but at the moment he said this, he had given up on everything. The interrogator thundered, as he was supposed to, and demanded to know what about Soviet life O.M. found fascistic—he repeated that phrase during my visit—but, amazingly enough, he contented himself with a few evasive replies and did not persist. O.M. insisted that the interrogator’s behavior was pervaded by ambivalence, and, despite his threats and his metallic voice, he could not conceal his hatred of Stalin.

Yagoda, as it turned out, liked the verses so much that he deigned to memorize them. It was he, after all, who read them to Bukharin.

The circle of witnesses widened to include those implicated in the crime by their knowledge—and by the others’ knowledge of their knowledge—of the poem. From Shivarov to Yagoda to Bukharin, the poem made its way through the rungs of power.

Bukharin, once known as “the love of the Party,” was executed in 1938 as one of the key defendants in the Third Moscow Process—the last in a series of major public trials of high-ranking party officials. Another defendant in the same process was Yagoda, who became the head of the newly formed NKVD in July 1934. Yagoda was shot in prison, after a trial whose transcript preserved the following dialogue:

**Вышинский**: Скажите, предатель и изменник Ягода, неужели во всей вашей гнусной и предательской деятельности вы не испытывали никогда ни малейшего сожаления, ни малейшего раскаяния? И сейчас, когда вы отвечаете, наконец, перед пролетарским судом за все ваши подлые преступления, вы не испытываете ни малейшего сожаления о сделанном вами?

**Ягода**: Да, сожалею, очень сожалею...

**Вышинский**: Внимание, товарищи судьи. Предатель и изменник Ягода сожалеет. О чем вы сожалеете, шпион и преступник Ягода?
Ягода: Очень сожалею... Очень сожалею, что, когда я мог это сделать, я всех вас не расстрелял.

Vyshinsky: Tell us, traitor Yagoda, is it possible that in all your abominable, treacherous activities you never felt the slightest remorse, the slightest regret? And now, as you answer at last for your despicable crimes before the court of the proletariat, can it be that you do not feel any remorse for what you have done?

Yagoda: Yes, I do regret, I regret very much—

Vyshinsky: Attention, comrades justices. The traitor Yagoda feels regret. What is it that you regret, spy and criminal Yagoda?

Yagoda: I greatly regret—I greatly regret that, when I had the power to do so, I did not have you all shot.

Vyshinsky’s gambit evokes Shakespeare’s King Lear and the scene of Gloucester’s interrogation and blinding. Ushered into the room “by two or three,” Gloucester is heralded by the exclaimed “Traitor!”—before Regan commences the interrogation with the injunction,

Be simple answered, for we know the truth.

This is a contradiction that cannot be escaped simply by retorting, “Well, if you already know the truth, I shouldn’t have to answer, should I?” Gloucester’s untenable situation is made up of the contradictory injunctions to speak the truth and to speak what the interrogator claims to know as the truth, with the tertiary injunction not to question the absurdity of having to answer someone who should not need the information. Again, Gloucester is enjoined to answer but cannot put in a word edgewise through the barrage of questions:
Cornwall:
And what confederacy have you with the traitors
Late footed in the kingdom?
Regan:
To whose hands have you sent the lunatic king? Speak.

When he speaks, again Regan accuses the answerer of lying:

Gloucester:
I have a letter guessingly set down,
Which came from one that’s of a neutral heart,
And not from one opposed.
Cornwall:
Cunning.
Regan:
And false.

It would not exhaust the rhetorical situation to point out that the victim is caught in a tangle of paradoxical injunctions, or of attributions having the force of injunctions, in which he cannot do the right thing... One person conveys to the other that he should do something, and at the same time conveys on another level that he should not, or that he should do something else incompatible with it.¹

This is a description, by R. D. Laing, of the double bind situation—the situation which Shakespeare invites us to notice by having circumscribed Gloucester’s double bind in a physical bind, and by redoubling the spoken orders: “Bind fast his coky arms,” “Hard, hard,” “To this chair bind him.” What Laing’s schema outlines is a bind, but it is the double bind that we see at work in this scene. The distinguishing feature of a double bind is a tertiary injunction that prohibits the victim from commenting on the situation or questioning the questioner. This tertiary injunction is implicit in the very protocol, or

convention, of any interrogation, the interrogator by definition being the one who asks questions. Regan has to usurp the role of interrogator, and so Gloucester is bound. There is no need for such binding in the case of being interrogated by an official, for the answerer is bound by deference to the law. In this way, the legal definition of an interrogation supplies one of the provisions necessary for a double bind—the prohibition against questioning the role of the questioner. Bateson’s description of a double bind—a combination of contradictory injunctions and a tertiary prohibition of commenting on the contradiction—is important because of the predictive power of this schema in the clinical setting. The result of the prolonged confusion, frustration, and disturbance resulting from a “traumatic situation which involves a metacommunicative tangle”\(^1\) is that the victim will eventually experience “trouble in identifying and interpreting those signals which should tell the individual what sort of a message a message is.”\(^2\)

It is important that the contradictory messages must have the form of commands, be those explicit or implied: the contradiction may take the form of a simultaneous injunction to “move to the left” and “move to the right,” or “move” and “stand still,” or “forget and forgive.” It may also take the form of the cobra’s hypnotic enjoiner in Kipling’s “Riki-tikki-tavi”: “Keep very still, all you three. If you move, I strike, and if you do not move, I strike.” The characteristic effect of a double bind is of “at once

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paralyzing you and tearing you apart”; the opposite commands, if issued from a position of sufficient power, amount to a coercion capable of eroding the ego functioning.

Bateson gives an example of contradictory implied imperatives in the case of a young schizophrenic patient and his mother:

A young man who had fairly well recovered from an acute schizophrenic episode was visited in the hospital by his mother. He was glad to see her and impulsively put his arm around her shoulders, whereupon she stiffened. He withdrew his arm and she asked, “Don’t you love me any more?” He then blushed, and she said, “Dear, you must not be so easily embarrassed and afraid of your feelings.” The patient was able to stay with her only a few minutes more and following her departure he assaulted a orderly and was put in the tubs.

Obviously, this result could have been avoided if the young man had been able to say, “Mother, it is obvious that you become uncomfortable when I put my arm around you, and that you have difficulty accepting a gesture of affection from me.” However, the schizophrenic patient doesn’t have this possibility open to him. His intense dependency and training prevents him from commenting upon his mother’s communicative behaviour, though she comments on his and forces him to accept and to attempt to deal with the complicated sequence.¹

This scenario outlines a series of distortions imposed by the mother on the meanings of both her son’s and her own communications—in each instance, she reassigns the type of communication in such a way as to put her son in the wrong, i.e. to show his responses to be inappropriate, consequently presenting him as inadequate. This is done while engaging in patronizing and placating behavior simultaneously, which is in turn labeled by the mother as genuine care, contrary to her son’s accurate, albeit unconscious, assessment of her tactics as hostile and undermining. This correct assessment is barred from the son’s consciousness because “to him such an awareness would be an indictment of the other

person and therefore provoke disaster.” “Framed in such terms,” wrote W. R. D. Fairbairn in 1952,

it is better to be a sinner in a world ruled by God than to live in a world ruled by the Devil. A sinner in a world ruled by God may be bad; but there is always a certain sense of security to be derived from the fact that the world around is good—“God’s in his heaven—All’s right with the world!”; and in any case there is always a hope of redemption. In a world ruled by the Devil the individual may escape the badness of being a sinner; but he is bad because the world around him is bad. Further, he can have no sense of security and no hope of redemption. The only prospect is one of death and destruction.1

—and so the victim, unable to think ill of the parent, “sacrifices himself to maintain the sacred illusion that what his parent says makes sense.”

Bateson’s clinical and experimental observations indicated that “severe pain and maladjustment can be induced by putting a mammal in the wrong regarding its rules for making sense of an important relationship with another mammal.” The corollary generalization was that “if this pathology can be warded off or resisted, the total experience may promote creativity.”2 This benign potential of the double bind is balanced against its potential to induce psychosis and schizophrenic symptoms. This, in the light of what we know about the days and weeks after Mandelstam’s arrest, is the crucial piece of evidence for the present argument. Bateson provides a clear schema of the double bind situation, hypothesizing

2 Gregory Bateson, “Problems of Cetacean and Other Mammalian Communication,” Steps to an Ecology of Mind, 278.
that there will be a breakdown in any individual’s ability to discriminate between Logical Types whenever a double bind situation occurs. The general characteristics of this situation are the following:

(1) When the individual is involved in an intense relationship; that is, a relationship in which he feels it is vitally important that he discriminate accurately what sort of message is being communicated so that he may respond appropriately.

(2) And, the individual is caught in a situation in which the other person in the relationship is expressing two orders of message and one of these denies the other.

(3) And, the individual is unable to comment on the messages being expressed to correct his discrimination of what order of message to respond to, i.e., he cannot make a metacommunicative statement.1

This model presupposes primarily the context of intimate relationships, such as the parent-child relationship, from which one would have a very difficult time emancipating. But the description does not rule out relationships that are “intense” for reasons other than closeness, and the relationship of a prisoner to an interrogator would be marked by intensity, and intense dependency, given that the prisoner’s life—possibly life and death—as well as the future lives of any people implicated by his testimony, are determined by this relationship; in other words, a kind of perverse intimacy is established regardless—and because—of its hostile nature. What matters is that the stakes are extremely high in interpreting correctly the messages of one’s interlocutor. The second condition is just as likely to be satisfied as the third in that context, because of the asymmetry of power between the investigator and the prisoner; this asymmetry reaches gross proportions when torture or another form of coercion enters the exchange, likely

without being admitted to by the dominant party. This permits “an experience of being punished precisely for being right in one’s own view of the context,”¹ which is Bateson’s most concise definition of a double bind situation.

Nadezhda Mandelstam’s recollection of her prison visit provides a high-definition view of the technique used for eliciting fantastic confessions like Mandelstam’s. The visit meant that, for the duration of Nadezhda’s intervention in his dialogue with Shivarov, Mandelstam had another person who supported his sense of reality and would later come to his aid in reconstructing his prison experience and separating the hallucinations from the inconceivable things that nevertheless had happened to him. Nadezhda Mandelstam wrote about Shivarov’s insistence on monopolizing the metacommunicative dimension of the conversation:

Во время свидания следователь успел коснуться многих вопросов. Он преследовал при этом явную цель—внушить мне свою точку зрения на все дело в целом и на различные аспекты следствия. Я получала, так сказать, авторитетные разъяснения, как следует трактовать происшедшее.

Сосед О.М. по камере запугивал его предстоящим процессом. Он убеждал О.М., что все его близкие и знакомые уже арестованы и будут обвиняемыми на грядущем процессе. Он перебирал статьи кодекса и, так сказать, “консультировал” О.М., то есть угрожал ему обвинениями в терроре, заговоре и тому подобных вещах. Возвращаясь с ночного допроса, О.М. попадал в лапы к своему “соседу,” который не давал ему отдохнуть.²

During the visit, the investigator managed to touch on a number of questions. He was obviously pursuing the goal of forcing on me his point of view regarding the investigation in general and its various aspects. I was receiving, so to speak, authoritative clarifications as to how I should interpret what was happening.

² Mandelstam, Воспоминания, 93.
O.M.’s cellmate would frighten him by talking of the trial ahead. He insisted that all of O.M.’s friends and relatives had already been arrested and would figure as defendants at the forthcoming trial. He would cite the various statutes of the penal code, consulting O.M., so to speak, *i.e.* terrorized him by describing potential accusations of conspiracy, terrorism, etc. Each time he came back from a nighttime interrogation, O.M. landed in the grasp of his cellmate, who would not let him sleep.

The cellmate turned out to be a “nesting chicken” ("наседка")—the prison argot for someone rewarded for the mental conditioning of another prisoner. Mandelstam noticed that his cellmate had clean, neatly paired fingernails—improbable for someone who claimed to have spent several months in prison. Another time Mandelstam was brought to the cell and found it empty; a bit later, his cellmate returned, supposedly from being interrogated—and smelling of onions. After a confrontation, the man was moved from Mandelstam’s cell. The presence of another in Mandelstam’s cell was explained by Shivarov as something mandated as an antidote to the inhumanity of solitary confinement. The interrogator

заявил о гуманном запрещении одиночек и прибавил, что О.М. был в камере с другим заключенным, но “обижал своего соседа” и того пришлось перевести. “Какая заботливость!” — успел вставить О.М.¹

declared that solitary confinement was forbidden on humane grounds and added that O.M. shared his cell with another inmate, whom he would harass, so that the man had to be transferred. “What touching concern!” O.M. managed to insert.

It is clear that Shivarov spoke in a manner that did not permit interruptions to comment, which conforms to Bateson’s third requirement for a double bind situation—namely that

¹ Mandelstam, *Воспоминания*, 94.
the victim is unable to comment on the truth or falsity or the mode of the messages being exchanged. Further, Shivarov scrambles the communicative modes when he blames Mandelstam for the transfer of the cellmate. The most Mandelstam is able to say about this distortion is to make a frustrated remark which is immediately thwarted by Shivarov.

This kind of deception will provoke the patient to respond to it as a double bind situation, and his response will be “schizophrenic” in the sense that it will be indirect and the patient will be unable to comment on the fact that he feels that he is being deceived.1

Shivarov’s meddling in the dialogue between the Mandelstams—the dialogue that was the prisoner’s sole means of gaining support for his own interpretation of his experience—included maneuvers distorting the relative importance of Mandelstam himself and of the legal minutiae:

During the visit I noticed that both O.M.’s hands were bandaged around the wrists. “What happened to your hands?” I asked. O.M. just waived his hand, and the investigator delivered an intimidating tirade about how O.M. had smuggled into his cell forbidden articles, which is punishable pursuant to statute such-and-such… It turned out that O.M. had slashed his wrists, and done so with a Gillette

2 Mandelstam, Воспоминания, 95.
razor. Kuzin, who was released in 1933 after a two-month stint in prison (he was rescued by a CheKa official who loved entomology), told O.M. that in a bind like that one misses most a knife or at least a razor blade. He had even come up with a method for smuggling a razor blade in case he ever needed it: one could place it in the sole of one’s shoe. When O.M. heard about this, he convinced a cobbler he knew to hide a couple of blades in his own sole.

The high costs of any resistance to this and other assaults on Mandelstam’s sense of reality are evident from the recollections that he was not allowed to sleep, that he was fed salty food but was not given anything to drink, and that when he demanded water, he was tied up in a straightjacket. It remained unexplained what had been done to Mandelstam’s eyes. Emma Gerstein notes that after his stay at Lubyanka, Mandelstam’s eyelashes fell out and never grew back.

Nadezhda Mandelstam noted that separation anxiety serves as the foundation for all other pressure tactics:

Все это методы возможны только там, где с момента ареста у заключенного прерывается всякая связь с внешним миром: ничего кроме расписки в книге передач, он об оставленных на воле людях не знает, но ведь и передачи разрешаются далеко не всем. Первый способ действия на заключенного— это запрещение ему передач, этой последней ниточки, связывающей его с миром.

All these methods are only workable where all prisoner’s contact with the external world is terminated at the moment of arrest: of the people he left outside he sees and hears no more than a signature in the package logbook—but not every prisoner is permitted to receive packages. The first means of coercion is the ban on packages—that last thread that connects him to the world outside.

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1 Mandelstam, Воспоминания, 97.
The consequences of the two weeks spent by Mandelstam at Lubyanka conform to Bateson’s general prediction that “when a person is caught in a double bind situation, he will respond defensively in a manner similar to the schizophrenic.”

His metacommunicative system—the communications about communications—would have broken down, and he would not know what kind of message a message was. If a person said to him, ‘What would you like to do today?’ he would be unable to judge accurately by the context or by the tone of voice or gesture whether he was being condemned for what he did yesterday, or being offered a sexual invitation, or just what was meant. Given this inability to judge accurately what a person really means and an excessive concern with what is really meant, an individual might defend himself by choosing one or more of several alternatives. He might, for example, assume that behind every statement there is a concealed meaning which is detrimental to his welfare. He would then be excessively concerned with hidden meanings and determined to demonstrate that he could not be deceived.¹

This paranoid option was taken by Mandelstam in Cherdyn, where he again attempted to kill himself, by jumping from the hospital window. Aside from a fractured arm, the jump proved to be therapeutic:

Стук дятла сбросил с плеч. Прыжок—
И я в уме.

I shook the woodpecker down from my shoulders. A leap—
And I was back to being myself.

Still he continued to need the help of his wife and any available specialists in sorting out the nature of his psychotic experience, particularly to aid him in separating the delusional contents from what appeared incredible and yet had to be correctly perceived. This was the painful state of a patient who “cannot, without considerable help, discuss the

¹ Bateson, “Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia,” 211.
messages of others.” “Without being able to do that,” Bateson writes, “the human being is like any self-correcting system which has lost its governor”—or, to borrow the words of Robert Lowell, like

something simple that has lost its law.

Nadezhda Mandelstam remembered Mandelstam’s restless attempts to piece his world together in the wake of the psychotic break:

О.М. спросил, почему сейчас заболевают после нескольких дней внутренней тюрьмы, хотя раньше просиживали по много лет в крепости и выходили здоровыми. Врач только развел руками.

А вопрос, почему интеллигенты и вообще нервные и чувствительные люди так сильно реагируют на арест и часто заболевают таинственным, быстро проходящим и не оставляющим следов травматическим психозом, остается открытым...

O.M. asked why it is that now people get sick after a few days of detention, whereas before the revolution one could spend years in a fortress and come out healthy. The physician only gestured his dismay.

Why it is that members of the intelligentsia and nervous, sensitive people in general react so strongly to arrest, often developing a mysterious traumatic psychosis that passes quickly without leaving a mark—this remains an open question.

The history of Mandelstam’s psychosis reveals the potential of a good symptom to sometimes transform tragedy into comedy. An eminent psychiatrist was visiting from Moscow, and Mandelstam sought him when he learned of his presence in Voronezh.

1 Bateson, “Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia,” 211.
2 Mandelstam, Воспоминания, 147-8.


But Mandelstam’s psychosis did leave its mark. After the acute phase of his illness was behind him, he settled into a kind of homeostasis that nevertheless made him look like a different person from who he was prior to the arrest. We could again turn to memoir testimonies to support this claim, but Lubyanka files contain their own evidence, perhaps more eloquent than any writing. Intake photographs taken at each of Mandelstam’s arrest—in 1934 and in 1937—show two different people: a confident, lean Mandelstam with his arms crossed and a sharp stare directed back at the photographer in 1934, and, in 1937, a much older man, whose lusterless gaze appears resigned and weary. The much heavier body has lost its tone and strength; his facial muscles are no longer supple and mobile. One wonders, looking at the two sets of photographs—facing front and profile—whether Stalin’s famous directive to “isolate but preserve” was not in itself a self-contradictory injunction, for it could not be obeyed. By the time of his second arrest, Mandelstam’s health and sanity had been shaken.

It is true that techniques used at Lubyanka prior to 1937 are not generally

1 Mandelstam, Воспоминания, 149.
considered to constitute torture. Pavel Nerler, for instance, asserts that Mandelstam was not tortured during the 1934 investigation. Bateson’s double bind theory and its application to Mandelstam’s situation gives reason to take the opposite view and argue that what he endured was a form of torture—mental and emotional torture that led to his documented and widely known psychotic break.

The outrage felt by Nadezhda Mandelstam is justly directed at the callousness of the standards of morality and honor set by “impartial observers” like Pavlenko:

Почему мы должны быть такими храбрыми, чтобы выдерживать все ужасы тюрем и лагерей двадцатого века? С песнями валиться во рвы и общие могилы?.. Смело задыхаться в газовых камерах?.. Улыбаясь, путешествовать в телячьих вагонах?.. Вести салонные разговоры со следователями о роли страха в поэтическом творчестве?.. ¹

Why must we be so brave as to endure all the horrors of the twentieth-century prisons and camps? To sing while falling into pits and mass graves? To suffocate in gas chambers without wincing? To smile as we travel in cattle cars? To make salon conversations with investigators about the role of fear in the creative process?

For Mandelstam, the self-destruction initiated with the composition of the Stalin verses culminated in betraying his friends, and this betrayal was in turn self-destructive, profoundly damaging to his sense of integrity and his whole person. This reversal was once again reversed as a mirror reflection that Mandelstam found in the faces of Muscovites upon his return from exile in 1937.

В один из этих первых дней Осип Эмильевич стоял лицом к окну возле тахты, собираясь лечь. Вместо этого стал говорить о Москве. Она его тревожила. Чего–то он здесь не узнавал. Об ушедших и погибших друзьях

¹ Mandelstam, Воспоминания, 104-5.
он не говорил. Так все делали. У каждого такие утраты падали на дно души, и оттуда шло тайное излучение, пропитывавшее все поступки, слова, смех... Только не слезы! Такова была специфика тех лет.¹

On one of those first days Osip Emilyevich stood facing the window, next to the futon, about to go to bed. Instead of this, he began to speak about Moscow. It disturbed him. Something about it was no longer recognizable to him. He would not speak of the friends who had disappeared and died. No one did that. Such losses fell to the very bottom of every person’s soul, and from there they emitted a secret radiation that permeated all of the person’s actions, words, laughter. Anything but tears! This was the character of those times.

Mandelstam was looking for words to describe these new impressions of Muscovites who appeared poisoned by the toxic secrecy of their environment.

И люди изменились... Все какие–то,—он шевелил губами в поисках определения,—все какие–то... какие–то... ПОРУГАННЫЕ.

And the people have changed... They’re all... He moved his lips in search of an epithet. They're all... they all seem... VIOLATED.

¹ Gerstein, Мемуары, 66.
Chapter 2

UNDER THE STARS

1. Kant’s reverential juxtaposition of “the starry heavens above” and “the moral law within” attests implicitly to a relation that unites the inner world of the psychological and the outer world of phenomena. The phrase “law and order,” which in this day sounds like a tautology, bears witness to the distinction and complementarity of its parts—but not their opposition, for the moral compass, too, is in need of a true North, of its starry heavens, of an Orient to orient itself by.

The relation of the inner and the outer, however disputed by philosophers in its exact nature, has been reflected upon in figures that rely on reflection, i.e. each of the parts to the relation lending itself to being conceived as a mirror reflecting the other (but without subsuming it fully, as in a reduction). The riddle of a mind lacking in extension and yet containing the whole of space by reflecting it in the imaginary space of the imagination, has been reflected upon by the Romantics, with their interest in the opposition of microcosm and macrocosm and in the capacity of a part to stand in opposition to the whole it belongs to. The complementarity of the mind and the world it reflects upon while remaining a part of that world has been imagined as resolvable by dissolution of one of the opposites in the other—imagined by both poets and philosophers in pursuit of their distinctive aims. Poetry, too, has been conceived of as a mirror of the world of which it is a part (as against the other possibility, of being like a lamp brought close to the object of its illuminations). The complementary opposition of the inner and
the outer has likewise been conceptualized as a struggle for primacy in subsuming the other by declaring it a species of oneself. No full excursus of the range of the resultant philosophical –isms is possible in these pages, for this chapter must limit itself to the disunity of the literary imagination and the world within which it resides, imagination’s fulfillment through creation in the world and the mutual fulfillment of the world in the works of the imagination. This, with an eye single to the varied possibilities of redemption, or atonement, through the language.

Mandelstam’s *Conversation about Dante* (1933) has no interlocutor. It is a half-conversation that wishes to be a whole—a continuation of Mandelstam’s previous exhilarating conversations with Andrey Bely. The title is also in conversation with Dante’s *Convivio*. In the *Conversation*, Dante being to him the standard for all poetry, Mandelstam attributes poetry’s “sense of movement” to the actual emergence of verse out of the rhythms of walking:

Необходимо показать кусочки дантовских ритмов.

Мне не на шутку приходит в голову вопрос, сколько подметок, сколько воловых подошв, сколько сандалий износили Алигьери за время своей поэтической работы, путешествуя по козьим тропам Италии.

“*Inferno*” и в особенностности “*Purgatorio*” прославляет человеческую походку, размер и ритм шагов, ступню и ее форму. Шаг, сопряженный с дыханьем и насыщенный мыслью, Дант понимает как начало просодии. Для обозначения ходьбы он употребляет множество разнообразных и прелестных оборотов.

У Данта философия и поэзия всегда на ходу, всегда на ногах. Даже остановка — разновидность накопленного движения: площадка для
One must point out fragments of Dante’s rhythms.

I am wondering, quite in earnest, how many soles, how many calf-skin shoes, how many sandals had been worn out by Alighieri over the time of his poetic work as he traveled the goatherd paths of Italy.

The *Inferno* and especially the *Purgatorio* extol the human walk, the length and rhythm of the steps, the foot and its form. The step, connected to breath and infused with thought, is understood by Dante as the foundation of prosody. He employs a multitude of enchanting phrases to signify walking.

Dante’s philosophy and poetry are always moving, always on their feet. Even a pause is a variety movement; a ledge for restful conversation is found by alpine efforts. A foot in a verse—inhalation and exhalation—a step: a conclusion, a vigil, a syllogism.

Here, “a foot” is doing the same double duty in Russian as in English, serving both anatomy and prosody. “The *Inferno* and especially the *Purgatorio* extol the human walk, the length and rhythm of the steps, the foot and its form.”

Strolling is a form of soliloquy that can flourish into a conversation, within the tradition which offers a sense of companionship such that the friends present to the imagination are not merely imaginary:

Словно гуляка с волшебною тростью,
Батюшков нежный со мною живёт.
Он тополями шагает в замостье,
Нюхает розу и Дафну поёт.

Like a *flâneur* with his magic stick,
Sweet Batyushkov lives with me,
Walks among the *zamostye* poplars,

---

Sniffing a rose and singing of Daphne.

The carefree, pleasurable civility of la passeggiata—a custom of “walking with high-minded, often philosophical, conversation”\(^1\) that was one of Rome’s gifts to the Western civilization. Of the classical tradition linking thought with walking, Mary Beard wrote:

Rome was not the first ancient culture to link thinking and walking (Aristotle’s “Peripatetic” School is named for exactly that: *peripatein*, “walking around”). But the Romans gave rather more weight, and concentration, than the Greeks to the walking itself. You wouldn’t have caught the stereotypical Roman absent-mindedly falling into a well, like the Greek sage Thales, while wandering about, lost in his own thoughts. And when, in the second century BC, a visiting academic from Pergamum slipped into a drain at Rome and broke his leg, that must have seemed a typically Greek kind of accident.

Beard observes, in the spirit of Mandelstam’s *Conversation about Dante*:

> how and why a person walked were crucial cultural indicators in ancient Rome: ways of walking divided barbarians from Romans, and good Romans from bad. If this aspect of Roman culture has not often bulked large in modern studies of the ancient world, that is partly because […] we have chosen not to recognize it, or have even actively “translated it away.” The key Latin word is *incessus*, which literally means “gait” or “how a person moves on their feet.” It is now regularly translated as “bearing” or “demeanor”; but that removes all the sense of movement from it.

On 17 May 1934, in the immediate wake of Mandelstam’s arrest, the playwright A. K. Gladkov wrote in his diary: “Mandelstam lived somewhere not very far from me, and occasionally I would see him on Prechistensky or Nikitsky boulevard: a wise old Jew with a stick.”\(^2\) These long promenades around the boulevards of Moscow found their way into

\(^{2}\) Nerler, 37.
Mandelstam’s poetry. In a poem written in 1931, we find a self-portrait that characterizes differently Mandelstam’s bearing, his own sense of his *incessus*:

> Еще далеко мне до патриарха,  
> Еще на мне полупочтенный возраст,  
> Ещё меня ругают за глаза  
> На языке трамвайных перебранок,  
> В котором нет ни смысла, ни аза:  
> Такой-сякой! Ну что ж, я “извиняюсь,”  
> Но в глубине ничуть не изменяюсь.

I still have a ways to go before becoming  
A patriarch; my age is half-revered.  
I’m still being cursed behind my back  
In the dialect of tram-car squabbles  
Devoid of aim or sense:  
You, so-and-so! Well, I apologize,  
Without changing inwardly a bit.

Feeling himself to be of “half-revered” age—“Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita”—Mandelstam walks with the rhythms of the *Divine Comedy*, Dante’s gait animating a rhythm borrowed by Mandelstam from *terza rima*:

> Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita  
> mi ritrovai per una selva oscura  
> che la diritta via era smarrita.

Midway upon the journey of our life  
I found myself in a dark wilderness  
for I had wandered from the straight and true.¹

Far from “a wise old Jew with a stick,” the poem is a self-portrait as an errand-boy who makes his rounds through Moscow’s stranger enclaves and devouring his impressions

(and little more than these, the fresh asphalt reminding of caviar and Asti—by glistening

like caviar, by not being that):

А иногда пущусь на побегушки,
В распаренные душные подвалы,
Где чистые и честные китайцы
Хватают палочками шарики из теста,
Играют в узкие нарезанные карты
И водку пьют, как ласточки с Ян-дзы.
Люблю разъезды скворчащих трамваев,
И астраханскую ику асфальта,
Накрытого соломенной рогожей,
Напоминающей корзинку асти,

And now and then, I’ll go and run errands
In those unventilated, steamy basements
Where the tidy and honest Chinamen
Snap up with chopsticks little balls of pastry
And play their slender cards, and swallow vodka
Like swallows drinking from the Yangtze river.
I love the routes of the seething tram-cars,
And new asphalt, like Astrakhan caviar,
Covered with woven rags that remind me
Of the straw baskets full of sparkling Asti,

What starts as a carefree stroll, a walk, becomes an errand run, and here, too, invokes the

Divine Comedy with the special significance that the canto of Brunetto Latini accords to
running. In imitating Dante’s gait and in fashioning himself into an errand boy,
Mandelshtam envisions himself as an apprentice to Dante’s teacher—Brunetto Latini, who
“is younger than the pupil because he ‘runs faster’”:

Poi si rivolse, e parve di coloro
che corrono a Verona il drappo verde
per la campagna; e parve di costoro
quelli che vince, non colui che perde.
In citing these lines Mandelstam omits the mention of the prize cloth ("drappo") and attaching the color green to “the meadows outside of Verona”:

“Он отвернулся и показался мне одним из тех, которые бегают взапуски по зеленым лугам в окрестностях Вероны, и всей своей статью он напоминал о своей принадлежности к числу победителей, а не побежденных…”

“He turned away and seemed to me as one of those who race through the green meadows outside of Verona, and his whole bearing was a reminder that he was among the winners and not those who are defeated…”

But in the cycle of octets written around the same time we see “la campagna” and “il drappo verde” restored to their places:

Remember how the runners
Outside old Verona
Yet needed to unravel
Their bolts of verdant feltro.

The winner is among them,
The one who wins by running
Off—out of the canto,
With his circular arguments.

\[\text{Rationale:}
\]

1 Mandelstam, Сочинения, iii, 220.
Brunetto, the master rhetorician discovered by Dante in the Christian hell, links running with persuasion, and has the courage to run like a winner when he has already lost. Brunetto’s plight in the afterworld animates the quatrain from another poem written in 1931:

Держу пари, что я еще не умер,
И, как жокей, ручаюсь головой,
Что я еще могу набедокурить
На рысистой дорожке беговой.

I’ll wager that I haven’t died yet,
And, like a jokey, I will bet my head
That I shall yet make trouble
On the race track.

“I haven’t died yet,” in contrast to the implicitly contemplated afterworld. The relief is palpable: one is happy to be ambling about in the open air, even if returning to the apartment means waiting for arrest, trapped moth-like in a room with paper-thin walls padded with wool. “I can yet make trouble / On the race track”: here, winning is joined with rhetoric by the Russian grammar, which makes no provision for a first-person future form of the verb “победить”—“to win.” An attempt to improvise the non-existent form might yield a form like “побежу,” which sounds closer to a misshapen analog of “I shall run” rather than “I shall win.” The related lack of provision for forming the first-person future of “убеждать”—“to convince,” “to persuade”—means that a stubborn reformer of language could at best twist the verb into “убедю,” or, worse, “убежу”—the latter sounding more like “I shall run away” than “I shall persuade.” And so, “I shall yet make trouble” is as much as one is permitted to say about one’s own future.
A desire for some restoration of security, in the world and within oneself, animates the final line of the untitled Moscow poem: “Нам по пути с тобой”—“We’re going the same way”:  

И до чего хочу я разыграться,  
Разговориться, выговорить правду,  
Послать хандру к туману, к бегу, к ляду,  
Взять за руку кого-нибудь: будь ласков,  
Сказать ему: нам по пути с тобой.  

And I would want so much to shake my doldrums,  
To talk and tell, and empty out the truth,  
Send all this spleen to smoke, to hell, to Pan,  
And take somebody’s hand, and say to him:  
Be gentle—for we’re going the same way.

This reaching of the hand is reaching for companionship and reciprocity. In mimicking Dante’s *incessus*, the way the poem moves its feet, the poet walks in the company of Dante. But there is a risk in “going the same way” with Dante, to whom Mandelstam keeps imaginative company when descending into the steamy basement laundry. If Mandelstam pictures himself as an apprentice to Dante in his descent into the Inferno, then—apprenticeship being a transitive relation—in apprenticing to Dante, an apprentice to Brunetto, one runs the danger of finding oneself finish the race not in a green meadow but in hell. It is in the nature of the midway point upon life’s journey to make one wonder whether, by pressing forward, one might end up like Dante or like Brunetto. In the face of this risk, Mandelstam, like Dante, is barred from turning back by beasts of his own—beasts he called “literary curs.”
У меня нет рукописей, нет записных книжек, нет архива. У меня нет
почерка, потому что я никогда не пишу. Я один в России работаю с голоса, а
кругом густопсовая сволочь пишет.¹

I have no manuscripts, no notebooks, no archive. I have no handwriting, because I
never write. I alone in the whole of Russia do my work from voice, while all
around me the literary curs are writing away.

Curs, the low-bred or in-bred, are as often on Mandelstam’s mind, when he writes of
Moscow’s literary life, as they were on Dante’s:

Of all the insults and derogatory comparisons Dante uses on both lost souls and
evil demons, one recurs more often than others. The wrathful, according to Virgil,
are all “cani,” “dogs” (Inf. VIII:42). From then onwards, in his travel notes
through Hell, Dante echoes his master’s ancient voice. [. . . ] Angry, greedy,
savage, mad, cruel: these are the qualities that Dante seems to see in dogs and
applies to the inhabitants of Hell.²

Dante’s teacher, Brunetto Latini, noted in his Livre du Trésor that dogs loved humans
more than did any other animal in the world, and that only dogs born from the union of
bitches and wolves were wicked.

The dog, according to Brunetto Latini, is able to understand the human voice;
Isidore of Seville, in the Etymologies, explained that the dog (canis) received its
name because its own voice was like singing (canor), a term associated with the
activity of the poets, that of composing songs.

The fear, documented by Mandelstam in The Fourth Prose, was that of becoming
one of the writing “curs” who have traded song for scribbling with ink on paper. The poet
should not be a dog, but cannot help the relation—an etymological one—for, like the

¹ Mandelstam, Сочинения, iii, 171.
canine, the poet sings. And yet the “literary curs” who write in ink must be separated from the poets, and ink, although an anagram, in English, of “kin,” is not akin to the blood of “blood kin”—the warm blood, one of the defining traits a human being would have to part with one’s humanity to part with:

Роговую мантию надену,
От горячей крови откажусь,
Обрасту присосками и в пену
Океана завитком впьюсь.

I shall don a mantle of horn substance
And forsake my claim to warm blood,
Overgrow with tentacles and suckers,
Sink into the foam, like a tendril.

Ink is that “conscientious, purple” substance—“толковые, лиловые чернила”—that conspires with “police paper” (1930):

На полицейской бумаге верже
Ночь наглоталась колючих ершей —
Звезды живут, канцелярские птички,
Пишут и пишут свои рапортчики.

On the police papier vergé
Night swallows up prickly ruffes:
Stars, bird-marked in ink,
Write and write their reports, on and on.

Paper is suspect in its collusion with police ink in this poem, opening with the lines

Квартира тиха, как бумага—
Пустая без всяких затей—
И слышно, как булькает влага
По трубам внутри батарей.

The apartment is quiet as paper,
Empty, without frills.
One hears the bubbling of moisture
Inside radiator pipes.

Within the confinement of the apartment, there is a yet more pressurized confinement of hot water about to erupt. The blank walls lure the imagination towards the paranoid:

Какой-нибудь изобразитель,
Чесатель колхозного льна,
Чернила и крови смеситель
Достоин такого рожна.

Some homespun artiste,
A comber of flax on a farm,
An adulterer of blood and ink,
Is worthy of such fun.

The ink and the blood will not mix in a line that has them side-by-side with one another and with “mixer,” that word being proximate to “blood”—“крови смеситель”—in a way that gets the ear to do the work of mixing to bring to mind “кровосмеситель”—one guilty of incest, one of the taboos that in our conscience most call for atonement. And the incestuousness of mixing ink and blood: does it proceed from the kinship of one and the other, parallel to the kinship of living and writing? But writing is one of the ways of the living, or a way of living—or making a living—and yet, Mandelstam draws a sharp distinction between those who write for a living and those who live to write:

Какой-нибудь честный предатель,
Проверенный в чистках, как соль,
Жены и детей содержатель—
Такую ухлопает моль...

Some honest traitor, crystallized like salt
In the purging cauldron,
Some provider to a wife and children
Will swat down such a moth.

The “honest traitor,” seen as a law-abiding family man and a bearer of a kind of schoolboy goodness, might well be a spiritual relation of Rudolf Höss, the Commandant at Auschwitz, whose diary contains an admission of how his career evolved naturally from his relentlessly coercive upbringing:

> It was constantly impressed upon me in forceful terms that I must obey promptly the wishes and commands of my parents, teachers, and priests, and indeed of all adults, including servants, and that nothing must distract me from this duty. Whatever they said was always right. These basic principles by which I was brought up became second nature to me.

What is “second nature” is being reflected upon wistfully by that thwarted nature which becomes mere “first nature” in reference to what comes to predominate. (One might paraphrase Bulgakov: “there’s no such thing as second freshness,” and no such thing as “first nature.”) That nature was what Mandelstam was holding on to in writing “The Noise of Time”:

> А все-таки в Тенишевском были хорошие мальчики. Из того же мяса, из той же кости, что дети на портретах Серова. Маленькие аскеты, монахи в детском своем монастыре, где в тетрадках, приборах, стеклянных колбочках и немецких книжках больше духовности и внутреннего строю, чем в жизни взрослых.

There were good boys at the Tenishev School. They were made of the same flesh, the same bone as the children portrayed by Serov. Little ascetics, monks in their own, children’s, monastery—where the copybooks, instruments, glass crucibles

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2 Шум времени [The Noise of Time], Mandelstam, Сочинения, ii, 370.
and German books had more spirit and internal life and order to them than the lives of the adults.

In reaching for Bely as his imaginative interlocutor, Mandelstam was reaching for a companionship that could stave off the negative effect of the double bind. Bely’s death on January 8, 1934, was an irrecoverable loss for Mandelstam. The same month, Mandelstam attempted a portrait of Bely’s paradoxical personality:

Собиратель пространства, экзамен сдавший птенец,
Сочинитель, щегленок, студентик, студент, бубенец...

Конькобежец и первенец, веком гонимый взашей
Под морозную пыль образуемых вновь падежей.

Gatherer of space, a starling who passed the exams,
Versifier, dandy, finch, student, bell...

First-born ice-skater, blade-runner thrown out by his age
Into the frost-dust of declensions re-formed from scratch.

Bely, “Бирюзовый учитель, мучитель, властитель, дурак!”—“Turquoise mentor, tormentor, master, fool!”—“The contradictions cover such a range,” to borrow a line from another poem of letting go, Empson’s “Let it go.” When we side with a friend whose contradictions are not limited to a Manichean opposition of binaries, taking sides becomes an impossibility; instead of the choice of one side or the other, one faces a choice: which other? The seven Russian declensions fan out and multiply in a myriad frost-dust particles, into “морозную пыль” of Pushkin’s: “His collar in its beaver braiding / glitters with hoar-frost
all about.”¹ Taking sides is possible only in the provisional manner of an ice-skater pushing away from points right and left in a dialectic of repeating: “Yes, but…”

2. In the lines of William Empson’s “Courage means Running,” we discern the lineaments of courage and fear, their dismaying enmeshment:

No purpose, view,

Or song but’s weak if without the ballast of fear.
We fail to hang on those firm times that met
And knew a fear because when simply here

It does not suggest its transformation. Yet
To escape emotion (a common hope) and attain
Cold truth is essentially to get

Out by a rival emotion fear.²

Truth, as a sublimation of fear, is realized by Mandelstam in a poem of 1921 showing a presentiment of the agitations within the Moscow poems:

Умывался ночью на дворе.
Твердь сияла грубыми звездами.
Звёздный луч — как соль на топоре.
Стынет бочка с полными краями.

На замок закрыты ворота,
И земля по совести сурова.
Чище правды свежего холста
Вряд ли где отыщется основа.

Тает в бочке, словно соль, звезда,
И вода студеная чернее.
Чище смерть, солонее беда,
И земля правдивей и страшнее.

A line-by-line translation might be this:

I washed myself late at night, outside.
The firmament shone with hard stars.
A moon ray—like salt on an axe.
The barrel of water spills over and grows cold.

The gates are locked,
And the earth is harsh.
No purer foundation anywhere
Than the white truth of fresh cloth.

Like salt, a star melts in the barrel.
The water gets colder and blacker,
Death is purer, grief is saltier,
The earth is truer and fuller of terror.

George Kalogeris translated the whole twelve-line poem as twenty-five lines, much of his
text doing the work of multiplying the internal reflections in the poem, getting the tissue
of the English poem to vibrate and ripple:

As I was washing myself in the dark,
Washing outside where the ice-cold water
Kept spilling over the rim of the barrel,

The evening stars against the horizon
Glistened like salt on the blade of an axe.
As I was washing myself in the dark,

I saw the locked gate that couldn’t keep out
The menacing look of my surroundings,
Once it had entered my state of mind.

Soon the weavers will weave a new pattern
From anything they can get their hands on,
Looming there, in the near future:

No matter what fabric they happen to stitch
I don’t think the seams will ever be finer
Than a single line of honest speech.

Salt of the earth and stars of the sky
Dissolving now in the water’s reflection,
This briny water that keeps turning blacker,

Like some purer shade of appalling death—
As if our lips had already tasted
What’s steeped in the salt of worsening luck.

As I was washing myself in the dark,
Washing outside where the ice-cold water
Kept spilling over the rim of the barrel,

The earth edged closer to truth and terror.¹

The shimmering, the rippling, and the glimmering achieved so well in the English translation are at one with the rippling mood of the poem, its sustained tranquility earned by the acceptance of an anxiety-provoking truth. The stars are related to the “salt of the earth” as the earth’s movement towards terror is cradled and assured by the cosmic order. Coleridge’s poem “To William Wordsworth, Composed on the Night after his Recitation of a Poem on the Growth of an Individual Mind” (1807) shows some family resemblances to Mandelstam’s poem, for the same reasons that it is invoked by Geoffrey Hill in “Poetry as ‘Menace’ and ‘Atonement’”:

In silence listening, like a devout child,

My soul lay passive, by thy various strain
Driven as in surges now beneath the stars,
With momentary Stars of my own birth,
Fair constellated Foam, still darting off
Into the darkness; now a tranquil sea,
Outspread and bright, yet swelling to the Moon.

“The beauty of the image of ‘fair constellated foam’,” Hill writes,
does not conceal the nature of the experience which Coleridge is evoking. The
brightness is ephemeral, it moves outward from the centre into the darkness where
it is quenched or lost. But we note also that there are other stars; and, bearing in
mind the broodingly complex nature of Coleridge’s inspiration, it may be
legitimate to relate the first reference to the ‘stars’ to those of the prose gloss
(virtually a marginal prose poem) added to the 1817 edition of ‘The Ancient
Mariner’: in particular to a passage which Humphry House rightly calls ‘that one
long sentence of astounding beauty’ and which I would call an outstanding image
of the attainability of atonement:

In his loneliness and fixedness he yearneth towards the journeying Moon, and the
stars that still sojourn, yet still move onward; and every where the blue sky
belongs to them, and is their appointed rest, and their native country and their own
natural homes, which they enter unannounced, as lords that are certainly expected
and yet there is a silent joy at their arrival.¹

As early as 1908, we find in Mandelstam’s verse an interest in this metaphysical
resolution of one through the other:

Сусальным золотом горят
В лесах рождественские елки;
В кустах игрушечные волки
Глазами страшными глядят…

О, вещая моя печаль,
О, тихая моя свобода
И неживого небосвода
Всегда смеющийся хрусталь.

¹ Hill, 14.
Among the woods, the Christmas trees
Stand all afire with gold leaf;
Toy wolves with scary eyes
Look out from the shrubs…

O, my foreboding wistfulness,
O, my lowly liberty,
The inanimate firmament,
The laughter of its crystal bells.

Above and below, within and without—a theme revisited in 1909:

An ineffable sadness
Opened wide its great eyes,
the flower vase awakened,
and spilled its crystal substance.

The room is drunk
with languor—what sweet medicine;
A sovereignty so small
has swallowed up so much sleep.

Both poems use a tetrameter as a container for their variations on crystal—its shape, its sound, its ability to reflect and to laugh when it is a sky-dome, its ability to permeate space with its structure when it is a crystal vase that pours out its essence. Space, shape,
and the unity of the one thing’s containment in the other. Crystal becomes “the glass of eternity” in a poem exploring the unity of soul and body:

Дано мне тело—что мне делать с ним,
Таким единым и таким моим?

За радость тихую дышать и жить,
Кого, скажите, мне благодарить?

Я и садовник, я же и цветок,
В темнице мира я не одинок.

На стекла вечности уже легло
Мое дыхание, мое тепло.

I have a body—what am I to do
With something so whole and so my own?

Who should I thank for this small happiness,
for these twin gifts of living and of breath?

I am the gardener, and I am the flower,
In the world’s prison I am not alone.

The windows of eternity are clouded
With my breath, with my warmth.

A different realization of the unity of opposites is reflected in one of Mandelstam’s octets written during the winter preceding his arrest in the spring of 1934:

О бабочка, о мусульманка,
В разрезанном саване вся,—
Жизняночка и умиранка,
Такая большая—сия!

С большими усами кусава
Ушла с головою в бурнус.
О флагом развернутый саван,
Сложи свои крылья—боюсь!
My butterfly, my Muslim,
Dressed in your torn vestment,
Creature of life and death,
So simple and so such!

You bite on your great whiskers,
Head buried in the dress
Unfolded like a banner.
I fear—fold your wings!

The ceremonial vestment, torn by the opposite forces it holds together, is part of the ceremonial code of a fearsome religion alien to the Christianized mind and in need of some name indicative of otherness: “Muslim”—oriental in the wide embrace of its open wings, maintaining itself with Oriental grace between irreconcilable opposites—for life involves maintaining oneself between contradictions that can’t be solved by analysis; e.g., those of philosophy, which apply to all creatures, and the religious one about man being both animal and divine.¹

Yet there are two further dimensions of contradiction which man must accommodate to brace him. The first glimpse in an uncharacteristic hesitancy (“it may be . . .”), when Empson remarks that “it may be that the human mind can recognize actually incommensurable values, and that the chief human value is to stand up between them.”

The negative effect of the double bind reveals itself when the opposition of the self and the world is no longer felt as a complementarity; this loss of reciprocity gives the feeling of arbitrarines and absurdity of life:

Когда подумаешь, чем связан с миром,
То сам себе не веришь—ерунда:

¹ Empson, note to “Bacchus,” The Complete Poems, 290.
Полночный ключик от чужой квартиры,
Да гривенник серебряный в кармане,
Да целлулоид фильмы воровской.

To think what keeps you tethered to this world—
You won’t believe yourself: what trifles!
A midnight key to somebody’s apartment,
A silver rouble down in the pocket,
The celluloid of criminal films.

It is midnight, but no stars are spoken of. The feeling of being tethered takes the place of
the union and reciprocity of the self and the world that Mandelstam had reflected upon
with awed self-consciousness in his earlier poems. The self and the world no longer gaze
at one another as if wondering which one is the mirror and whether what one sees in the
other is not a reflection of oneself. The loss of reciprocity, the feeling that the world is
alien and hostile, was attributed by Dante to having “wandered from the straight and
true,” for “la diritta via era smarrita.” This breach of reciprocity between the self and the
world and of peace within the self is realized and healed in Nikolay Zabolotsky’s poem
“The Forest Lake”:

Опять мне блеснула, окована сном,
Хрустальная чаша во мраке лесном.

Сквозь битвы деревьев и волчьи сраженья,
Где пьют насекомые сок из растенья,
Где буйствуют стебли и стонут цветы,
Где хищными тварями правит природа,
Пробрался к тебе я и замер у входа,
Раздвинув руками сухие кусты.
В венце из кувшинок, в уборе осок,
В сухом ожерелье растительных дудок
Лежал целомудренной влаги кусок,
Убежище рыб и пристанище уток.
Но странно, как тихо и важно кругом!
Откуда в трущобах такое величье?
Зачем не беснуется полчище птиче,
Но спит, убаюкана сладостным сном?
Один лишь кулик на судьбу негодует
И в дудку растенья бессмысленно дует.

И озеро в тихом вечернем огне
Лежит в глубине, неподвижно сияя,
И сосны, как свечи, стоят в вышине,
Смыкаясь рядами от края до края.
Бездонная чаша прозрачной воды
Сияла и мыслила мыслью отдельной,
Так око больного в тоске беспредельной
При первом сиянье вечерней звезды,
Уже не сочувствуя телу больному,
Горит, устремленное к небу ночному.
И толпы животных и диких зверей,
Просунув сквозь елки рогатые лица,
К источнику правды, к купели своей
Склонились воды животворной напиться.

Again, it revealed itself, fettered by slumber,
The chalice of crystal hidden deep in the woods.

The carnage of wolves and the battles of trees,
Where insects drink life out of flora prostrated,
Where flowers groan in the debauchery of stems,
And nature lords over its creatures, insatiate:
I made my way through this—and froze at your gates,
Just parting the rustling brush with my hands.
In a crown of lilies, a necklace of reeds,
And wearing a vegetal vestment of sedges,
A piece of chaste moisture lay there before me,
The haven of fish and the game birds’ refuge.
But listen, how quiet and solemn it is;
Can grandeur surprise one amidst such a shambles?
Why isn’t the bird army yowling and screeching
But is instead sleeping, lulled into sweet slumber?
The snipe is alone in resenting his lot
And blows his senseless angst into a reed.

Embraced by the quiet flames of the night’s eve,
The lake lies within its own depth, still and shining,
And fir-trees, like candles, stand high up above,
Closing their ranks from one end to another.
The bottomless chalice of water so pure—
It shone, as if thinking distinctly and clearly,
The way that the eye of a despairing man,
When sighting the light of the first evening star,
No longer in sympathy with the sick body,
It burns, fixed singly upon the night sky.
And crowds of animals and feral beasts
All peered through the fir-trees, with antlered faces
Reaching towards their baptismal chalice,
And bowing to drink the life-waters of truth.

In this poem, written in 1938, sickness splits the man away from his body, making him aware of being bound to a body that he can no longer feel as his own, as himself. This is an emblem of the malaise of the soul healed by the encounter with the lake, which the poem likens to a star. The encounter takes place in startling silence; it is an encounter with silence and with the state of being silenced by a benign, forgiving force. And yet, in the background of the poem, all manner of disquieting strife is registered in such a way that before nature has its healing effect, it is shown under an aspect of violence. In this, the poem resists an unjustified pacification, protested by Empson in Gray’s *Elegy*:

> Full many a gem of purest ray serene  
>  The dark, unfathomed caves of ocean bear;  
>  Full many a flower is born to blush unseen  
>  And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

What this means, as the context makes clear, is that eighteenth-century England had no scholarship system or carrière ouverte aux talents. This is stated as pathetic, but the reader is put into a mood in which one would not try to alter it. (It is true that Gray’s society, unlike a possible machine society, was necessarily based on manual labour, but it might have used a man of special ability wherever he was born.) By comparing the social arrangement to Nature he makes it seem inevitable, which it was not, and gives it a dignity which was undeserved. Furthermore, a gem does not mind being in a cave and a flower prefers not to be
picked; we feel that the man is like the flower, as short-lived, natural, and valuable, and this tricks us into feeling that he is better off without opportunities. The sexual suggestion of blush brings in the Christian idea that virginity is good in itself, and so that any renunciation is good; this may trick us into feeling it is lucky for the poor man that society keeps him unspotted from the World. The tone of melancholy claims that the poet understands the considerations opposed to aristocracy, though he judges against them; the truism of the reflections in the churchyard, the universality and impersonality it gives to the style, claim as if by comparison that we ought to accept the injustice of society as we do the inevitability of death.¹

Zabolotsky’s poem was written during his transport to Siberia, in a closed freight car, after the completion of his investigation in the Leningrad division of the NKVD. What preceded its composition we know from Zabolotsky’s brief account published as “The Story of My Imprisonment”:

Однажды мы около трех суток почти не получали воды и, встречая Новый, 1939 год где-то около Байкала, должны были лизать черные закоптелые сосульки, наросшие на стенах вагона от наших же собственных испарений. Это новогоднее пиршество мне не удается забыть до конца жизни.²

Once we got no water for about three days, and on New Year’s Eve 1939, somewhere near Baikal, we were forced to lick the black, smoked-covered icicles that grew on the walls of the car out of the vapors we ourselves produced. Never, till the end of my life, will I be able to forget that New Year’s feast.

Although on the brink of death from thirst, Zabolotsky needed “The Forest Lake” for his spiritual survival. I do not know whether the poem was composed at the time the car was moving past Baikal—the world’s greatest fresh-water lake—but I imagine that Baikal

came to Zabolotsky who could not come to its shores himself and who found relief in the
dream-feeling that it was only “the fetters of slumber” that kept him away from the lake.
According to the poet’s son, the only serious poem composed by Zabolotsky during the
eight years of labor camps.

I recall shouting at the interrogators and threatening them. Symptoms of
hallucination became evident: on the wall and the parquet floor of the office I saw
some figures in constant motion. I remember that once I was sitting before a
whole conclave of investigators. I was no longer the least afraid of them and held
them in contempt. Before my eyes the pages of some huge imaginary book were
being turned, and I saw different illustrations on every page. Paying no attention
to anything else, I was expounding the contents of these illustrations to my
investigators. It is hard now to define the condition I was in, but I recollect
experiencing a sense of inner relief and exaltation that these people had not
succeeded in making a dishonorable man of me.

Geoffrey Hill, in “Language, Suffering, and Silence,” makes use of the example of the
16th-century Jesuit Robert Southwell, who “‘remained as dumb as a tree-stump’ under
interrogation by torture,” and the seminary-priest John Ingram who was “called a
‘monster’ of ‘strange taciturny’ by his baffled inquisitor.”¹ Neither a dumb “tree-stump”

nor a monster, Zabolotsky was supremely human in exercising his freedom of speech in a way that “baffled his inquisitors”—for it was not the kind of speech they hoped or expected to hear.

Without boasting or self-congratulation, Zabolotsky has described in his memoir a heroic behavior that could not have been expected or taken for granted in a person under similar circumstances. This resilience sprang from the same source as “The Forest Lake.” The reflective surface of the lake—the surface over depths that resist being plumbed—is an emblem of mystery, from whose depth the soul may drink the “life-giving water” of absolution and liberation: Losing one’s way in the wood is healed by making one’s way through the forest. “E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle.”—“And we came out to see, once more, the stars.”¹ The wood where the true path is lost is also the wood in which the true path can be found again, the wood that leads to the Gates of Hell and the wood above which looms the salutary peak of Mount Purgatory, mediating between the extremes of heaven and hell without setting them at one.² The poem contemplating a restoration of unity, a healing of the self, is a reflection of a healing that is not confined to the poem or to the medium of language. Nor is healing achieved by reconciling oneself to one’s situation. On the contrary, it is won not by reconciliation but by resisting the alternatives one finds oneself presented with. If the double bind is resisted, wrote Bateson “the total experience may promote creativity.”³ We see this creativity in Zabolotsky’s unforeseen

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¹ *Inferno* xxxiv, 136-9, Esolen, 360-61.
² Manguel, 18.
response to his interrogators. We see it again, manifested differently in “The Forest Lake.”

This view of poetry as resistance is different from that offered by Geoffrey Hill in “Poetry as ‘Menace’ and ‘Atonement’,” where the “at-one-ment” achieved within a poem is equated with “atonement,” a realization of some truth anchored in the divine order:

Ideally, my theme would be simple; simply this: that the technical perfecting of a poem is an act of atonement, in the radical etymological sense—an act of at-one-ment, a setting at one, a bringing into concord, a reconciling, a uniting in harmony; and that this act of atonement is described with beautiful finality by two modern poets: by W. B. Yeats when he writes in a letter of September 1935, to Dorothy Wellesley, that ‘a poem comes right with a click like a closing box’ and by T. S. Eliot in his essay of 1953, ‘The Three Voices of Poetry’:

when the words are finally arranged in the right way—or in what he comes to accept as the best arrangement he can find—[the poet] may experience a moment of exhaustion, of appeasement, of absolution, and of something very near annihilation, which is in itself indescribable.

Anyone who has experienced that moment in which a poem ‘comes right’ must, I believe, give instinctive assent to such statements.¹

“Ideally” itself appears to be an admission of difficulty—or difficulties, one such difficulty being that the equivalence of “at-one-ment” and “atonement” will not be achieved simply by refusing to recognize the work done by the hyphens that set the morphological parts of “at-one-ment” apart while holding them together—as one word that will not be at one with “atonement.” “The words of Eliot,” pointed out Christopher Ricks,

¹ Hill, 4.
are not at one with those of Yeats. It is impossible to imagine a testimony which would less fit something’s coming right with a click like a closing box than the pained protracted refusal to click of Eliot’s prose, its arriving finally at the word “indescribable.” So that when Hill concludes that anyone who has experienced that moment must give instinctive assent to such statements, the difficulty is not, as he goes on to posit, the word “instinctive” but the plural “statements.” Those of us who are not poets and have not experienced such a moment might be able to imagine a poet’s instinctive assent to one or other of the statements, but not to both. Hill’s search for at-one-ment has led him to two descriptions of “this act of atonement,” each of which has indeed a “beautiful finality” in its evocation of atonement as a finality, but the two of which are finally irreconcilable, tonally and totally.1

A prohibition against maxims is itself a maxim, an absolute. One such absolute arose from the true recognition that no atonement of words can be possible for atrocities of the magnitude seen in the past century. Adorno’s maxim, that no lyric poetry is possible after the Holocaust, contains an admission of the untenable position of literature whose responsibilities cannot be renounced only because the magnitude of the burden came to exceed the powers of language—and the corollary recommendation of a hara-kiri. Between the extremes of Adorno’s injunction of silence and of the trivial position that takes words to be only words and nothing more, there lies a passage of responsible speech, which not so much is an instrument of redemption as what must be redeemed from the shame that drives the soul to take refuge in cynicism. Yet it is not cynical to

remark on the divergence of Hill’s poetry and his criticism, and the latter’s “insufficient concession that there is not only irredeemable error but also irrecoverable loss.”

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Mandelstam’s dossier, with a commentary contextualizing its documents, was published by Pavel Nerler in 2011, under the long and flashy title Слово и “дело” Осипа Мандельштама: книга доносов, допросов и обвинительных заключений. This translates as “The word and ‘deed’ of Osip Mandelstam: a book of denunciations, interrogations, and guilty verdicts.” At present, the book is the most complete publication of relevant documents from the Russian state archives, reproduced in color facsimile, transcribed, accompanied by a narrative of events connecting the pieces of textual evidence, and supplemented by a great deal of documentary material—letters, photographs, etc.—that place Mandelstam’s encounters with the penal system in the context of his social relations.

The volume takes a perspective from which it views Mandelstam through the prism of his dossier—denoted in Russian by the word “дело,” which puns with “deed,” as against “word,” or a life of words. This initial choice of perspective—the imaginative reconstruction of the institutional point of view with regard to the poet—comes with the risk of adoption of that point of view and encouraging the reader towards a similarly detached fascination. The editor of the volume appears in some ways aware of this risk, which he was not able to avert, and in reading this exceptionally useful and creatively edited volume, one finds oneself resisting a great deal of insinuation. The tone is set in the opening paragraphs of Nerler’s introduction:
Осип Эмильевич Мандельштам был в достаточно напряженных отношениях с властями. Еще до революции за ним присматривала полиция, подозревая в нем возможное революционное бунтарство. Революционное бунтарство хотя и имело место, но никогда не носило административно-кадрового характера. Тем не менее дважды—в июле 1918 и в начале 1919 года—его устойчивые связи с левыми эсерами и их изданиями вполне могли привести его в большевистский застенок.

Этого не произошло, но тюрьма—и даже две—поджидали его в 1920 году. Первый раз в августе—в Феодосии, а второй—в сентябре, в Батуме. По иронии судьбы, его заподозрили в службе у большевиков.

В 1933 году О.М. написал стихотворение “Мы живем, под собою не чуя страны...” и еще несколько, значительно повышавших его шансы быть арестованным. ОГПУ не упустило этой возможности, и арест воспоследствовал—в мае 1934 года: но то, чем отделялся О.М. в этом случае—всего-навсего триема годами ссылки—было воспринято всеми как чудо, автором которого был лично Сталин, а адресной аудиторией—творческая интеллигенция.

В 1938 году О.М. арестовали во второй раз и вроде бы за пустяки—за нарушение паспортно-административного режима, но времена решительно переменились.

Translating this opening proves to be very tricky, beginning with the first sentence: “Osip Emilyevich Mandelstam had always been in fairly tense relations with the authorities.”

The use of Mandelstam’s full legal name invites us to set aside what we know about the poet Mandelstam and to look at his biography from the point of view of the “authorities” that issued his passport. The use of the legal name, stripped of the inflections chosen by its bearer to reflect his sense of himself and his place in the world, can depersonalize the way nakedness does. The sentence evades the question: what would it mean not to be in tense relations with “authorities,” whose principal raison d’être is to restrain individual freedoms? Nerler explains: “Еще до революции за ним присматривала полиция, подозревая в нем возможное революционное бунтарство.”—“The police kept an eye on him even prior to the revolution, suspecting in him the possibility of revolutionary
recalcitrance.” By sentence three we are drawn into what feels like a game of cat-and-mouse, since Nerler does not do enough to distinguish his own perspective from his reconstruction of the police’s point of view. This creates an atmosphere of sordid unease familiar to anyone who has experienced first-hand the “tension” of dealing with the Soviet “internal organs”—to invoke another darkly suggestive euphemism.

“Noetheless,” goes on sentence four,

twice—in July 1918 and early in 1919—his stable connections with the left Social Revolutionaries and their publications might easily have landed him in a Bolshevik prison.

This did not happen, but the jail—two encounters with it—awaited him in 1920. The first time was in August—in Feodosia, and the second—in September, in Batum. Ironically, he came under suspicions of working for the Bolsheviks.

In 1933 O.M. wrote a poem “We live without sensing the ground beneath our feet” and several others that significantly increased his chances of being arrested. OGPU did not miss this opportunity, and an arrest followed—in May 1934: but what O.M. got away with in this case—the puny three years of exile—was interpreted by everyone as a miracle, whose authorship belonged personally to Stalin and whose intended audience was the creative intelligentsia.

In 1938 O.M. was arrested for a second time and apparently for a trifle—a violation of administrative and passport regulations, but times had changed by then in a decisive manner.

The shift from Mandelstam’s full name to “O.M.” brings us back to the convention established by Nadezhda Mandelstam in her memoirs—a convention inherited by Nerler, a friend of the widow, and intimating to the reader that Nerler’s narrative continues the established canon of Mandelstamiana.

A trivial automatism is attributed to the events of 1933 and 1934 (“an arrest followed”), with Mandelstam’s “increased chances” of arrest converging with OGPU’s actual prowess and yielding, with Stalin’s intervention, a surprise result—a sentence so
light as to be comical. We do not feel entitled to any of this knowingness, first of all because we really do not know as much as we see here claimed as certain. Mandelstam’s new poems, OGPU’s reflexive response, and even the motives of Stalin’s “miracle” directive, tackled here in a brisk final clause, are mentioned with an air of casual behaviorism that makes further reflection appear ridiculous. A suppressed awareness of all this shows in the bitterly ironic epigraph to these introductory pages—a quotation from L. Martynov: “For GPU is our thoughtful biographer…”

An English abstract of the book explains Nerler’s sense of mission as an editor and commentator:

This book is dedicated to all instances of the repression of the poet, including those that did not actually take place. The book is structured chronologically as the repression developed or in the sequence of efforts to counter repression (e.g. rehabilitation). Each chapter is linked with some specific repression or a particular body that carried out a repression or rehabilitation. Each chapter includes both the author’s narrative and the documents discussed; most of the documents are published for the first time. The book is illustrated with photographs and documents from published “cases” and was written for a broad readership.¹

While it is true that many of the documents between these covers are published for the first time, some of the materials in the book had been published by Nerler himself in 2008, as part of a digital consolidation of the Mandelstam archive on the Web. Documents made available by Peter B. Maggs in The Mandelstam and “Der Nister” Files should also be remembered, because the abstract claims global validity and because

¹ Nerler, 2.
Maggs’s publication supplies the necessary contrast for bringing into relief the editorial tactics used in the *Word and Deed*.

*The Mandelstam and “Der Nister” Files* is an edition conceived as a “guided tour” of the Soviet penal system. This strikes one as an incomplete description of the editor’s motives, because both of the two dossiers chosen by the editor belong to writers. The reason for this selection is not disclosed, possibly because Maggs is uncertain as to how the literary aspect of the dossiers should affect the way the volume might be edited. And yet, Maggs’s interest in matters of translation and textual criticism is evident from the book, beginning with the introduction that cautions the reader:

> The documents certainly do not tell the truth, let alone the whole truth. They do not tell the truth, because they are based on what George Orwell called the ‘BIG LIE’—that Mandelstam and Der Nister were guilty of serious crimes. They do not tell the whole truth—they give no hint as to the real reason why the two writers were sent to labor camps. They supply neither confirmation nor refutation for various widely circulated rumors: that Mandelstam was shot; that Mandelstam lived on in the camps after the official date of his ‘death’; that Der Nister hid important unpublished manuscripts. These files contain administrative, not substantive materials. From them, we can learn much about how prisoners were processed but very little about the charges against the prisoners.¹

But this warning itself is a misstatement, for the documents in the volume bear reliable witness to the system where they originated. Document M-2, an intake card, contains the information sufficient for the NKVD and its adjacent organizations to identify any particular inmate by a combination of “vital statistics” and distinguishing marks. Mandelstam’s “Statistical Record Card” (“Form No. 1,” as marked beside the header, ¹ Maggs, 3-4.
“Administration of Northeast Corrective Labor Camps, NKVD,”) bears the date of the inmate’s arrival at the transit camp—12 October 1938, the recommended labor category (three casually linked initials of “medium physical labor”), before the last and first names and patronymic, year and place of birth (1891, Poland). The poignancy of this information gains relief when contrasted with the words of Aleksandr Dymshitz’s factitious preface to Mandelstam’s first posthumous collected edition: “Let us begin with the poet’s biography [. . .] Osip Emil’yevich Mandelstam was born in Petersburg.”

The intake questionnaire is a list of categories: Education (“highest,” which was the term for university diploma), Citizenship (“USSR”), Nationality. The last question is followed by a mark “Jew,” bearing record of the political semantics of the Russian word “национальность,” more proximate in meaning to the Anglo-American construal of “ethnicity” than of “nationality,” identified in the U.S. especially with citizenship and patriotic allegiances. In Russia, being Jewish was always understood as a matter of ethnic heritage, where religion was implicated with greater or lesser emphasis as but one of the cultural elements of the greater inheritance.

Subsequent lines indicate the inmate’s Profession, “writer and poet”—with a Work Experience of “29 y.” Line 8 is striking, because instead of the typical single-noun formula, it asks a full, although clumsily formulated question—Which languages do you know besides your native (Какие языки знаете кроме родного)—omitting the question mark. Although Mandelstam hardly spent any time in Poland, the abbreviation “рус” figures first on the list that goes on to list, also in abbreviations, French, German, Italian, and Spanish. To the right of these responses, under a box marked Place for a photograph,
one finds a list titled *Distinguishing marks*: height (“average”), build (“normal”), hair
color (“gray”), eye color (“brown”). Lines 5 and 6 bear record what, in the eyes of the
bureaucrats, really made Mandelstam stand out from a mass of the “average” and the
“normal”:

5. Nose *hooked*

6. Other features *Chest and belly are covered with hair. Bald spot on the head*

This collage of information was signed, at the bottom of the page, by Mandelstam.

What makes Maggs’s work especially valuable is the content whose apparent
poverty and lack of utility makes it unlikely to be studied or even noticed, in spite of how
vivid and memorable it is. Document M-9 did not make its way into Nerler’s *Word and
Deed*. It is a handwritten note:

Справка
3/к Менделыштам
находился на излечении
с 26/XII скончался
27/XII в 12 ч 30 м
при осмотре трупа
оказалось что на
левой руке в ниж
ней трети плеча
имеется родинка
27/XII 38 [Signature]

Maggs labeled this document “Note on time of death.” The phrase “it appeared” of the
editor’s translation does not do justice to the mix of curiosity, weariness, and resignation,
conveyed by the verb “оказалось,” written as if out of a momentary lapse into childhood:
“suddenly, it turned out.” Maggs’s full translation:
Note
Prisoner Mendel’shtam
was under treatment
since December 26 died
December 27 at 12:30
upon examination of the corpse
it appeared that on
the left arm on the lower
third of the upper arm
there is a birthmark
December 27, 1938 [illegible signature]

This hurriedly disjointed note, scribbled in a fluid hand on a piece of graph paper, may be the single most striking document in the dossier, for the same reasons that it resists translation. Even stating the simple fact that Mandelstam was in treatment (Maggs writes, “under treatment”) begins with a difficulty at the very first word of the sentence, whose subject, the poet Mandelstam (Kuzin’s self-reproach for not having recognized the poet as soon as he had introduced himself is here fully reversed by a crude misspelling of Mandelstam’s famous name), is not even referred to as “заключенный” (“prisoner”), with the small dignity of full spelling: his status is indicated by the casual camp abbreviation, “з/к,” pronounced by the names of the two Cyrillic letters, “ze-ka,” which had emancipated themselves as a pejorative noun, “ze-ka” or “zek” used by both guards and prisoners. The note is one of the instances of the noun’s entry into the language, when it was innocently and dutifully used by the staff as everyday shorthand. All the more surprising, in reference to the man designated by two letters merged by a slash, is to learn that he was “на излечение”—a phrase meaning roughly “in treatment,” whose provincial solemnity also tempts one to translate it as “taking cure,” as at a resort. The
hospital—the labor-camp world’s analog of the resort—is here tacitly acknowledged as a refuge, a place of unhurried recuperation suggested by the prefix “из,” which imparts a deliberate and thorough character to the noun “treatment.”

The word “birthmark” is the last word in the note that records the death of “z/k Mendelstam,” the misspelling of his name bearing witness to the limits of fame in a country as vast as Russia. The word “родинка” has an etymology similar to that of its English equivalent, but the Russian noun’s delicate diminutive suffix also places it in the worlds of small and endearing things, intimacies, and childhood curiosities about the body—recorded in the verses of Gandlevsky:

Так по родимому пятну
Детей искали в старию.

The way they used to search for a lost child
Back in the day, guided by a birthmark.

In bearing witness to those muted tacit emotions, this document contradicts Maggs’s generalization that “those involved in processing these prisoners appeared to have been concerned only with carrying out orders and producing bureaucratically acceptable paperwork.”

The materials in Nerler’s volume are organized in terms of two categories: that of chronology, and by distinguishing between repressive measures (arrests, detention, etc.) and “efforts to counter repression” (meaning both official “rehabilitation” and the day-to-day letter writing, phone call making, and the audiences with officials made at different times by various people, beginning with Nadezhda Mandelstam and ending with Nikolay
Bukharin). This is a well-judged and helpful schematization, for the struggle between the persecuting and the protective efforts of different people dictated the ups and downs of Mandelstam’s precarious existence in the 1930s. It is the curious nature of the words “repression” and “rehabilitation” that makes one pause. Both terms gained widespread currency in the 1950s and -60s as handouts of Khruschev’s liberalizing initiative. As such, they were embraced by the intelligentsia with uncritical gratitude. What the terms brought into the mainstream language from the legal lexicon of their origin was a sense of detachment, indirection, and euphemistic vagueness. Since the terms never shed their legal patina, their entering the colloquial suggested a broadening of scope for the legal or legalistic manner of speaking and thinking. The difficulty of finding a humane and sufficiently broad term for the mass injustices that had taken place since the revolution encouraged the acceptance of the word “repression,” together with its repression of emotion, indeed, of feeling. As for “rehabilitation,” held to be the opposite of “repression” in Nerler’s conception of the Mandelstam volume, already in 1963 one could see evidence of confusion about the meaning of the term:

The term “rehabilitation” in Soviet usage designates any restoration of rights, non-legal as well as legal. Such usage sometimes causes objections, especially on the part of Russian critics, one of whom, charged with being guilty of a “rehabilitation of decadence,” replied that “the history of literature is not jurisprudence.” But such objections are isolated cases. Reference is still made to the rehabilitation not only of dead or living personalities, but also of literary works and movements. And behind the rehabilitation of personalities and writings in the non-Russian literatures of the USSR can be sensed a general movement for
the rehabilitation of the national status of each literature which has been reduced to a provincial status.\textsuperscript{1}

Since rights subject to rehabilitation are being ascribed to both “dead and living personalities” as well as to “literary works and movements,” a delineation of what rights those might be in each of those cases is desirable. Together with “rehabilitation of the national status of each literature,” the spectrum of applications of the term becomes so broad that without some differentiation of senses the word’s descriptiveness fades to a penumbra of suggestions—one of those being the misleading suggestion that literary criticism \textit{is} something like jurisprudence.

According to the 1991 Russian federal statute 1761-1 “On the Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repressions,” political repressions are politically motivated coercive measures enacted by the state. These can include imprisonment, forced labor, forcible treatment in psychiatric institutions, exile, divestment of citizenship, limiting the rights and freedoms of persons deemed dangerous or untrustworthy based on class, social, ethnic, or religious membership, and execution. It is evident that “efforts to counter repression,” posited by Nerler as the opposite of “repressions,” cannot be a neutralizing opposite. “Rehabilitation,” proposed by Khruschev as the means of redress for victims of repressions was not, in the absolute majority of cases, any satisfactory form of redress at all. At best, it improved the situation of the living persons for whom it meant being

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released from unlawful imprisonment or forced labor. Restoring the reputations of those who were already dead, even though it was necessary, could not be in any way considered a restoration of justice.

There is a visible shift between the pre-Soviet and Soviet-time dictionary entries on “rehabilitation.” Dal’s dictionary defines the noun as “возвращение в прежнее состояние, возстановление,” “a return to the former condition, a restoration.” The entry continues with the definition of the transitive verb “реабилитировать”—“to rehabilitate”:

ним. rehabilitieren съ ср.-лат. rehabilitare, возстановить. Желая реабилитировать свое честное имя, онъ требовалъ разслѣдованія всей своей деятельности.

Germ. rehabilitieren mid-Lat. rehabilitare, to restore. Wishing to rehabilitate his good name, he demanded an investigation of all his prior activities.

The example given indicates that the rehabilitation of a person can be spoken of only figuratively, in the sense of rehabilitating that person’s reputation, or “good name.” This difference was muddled in the Soviet usage. The *Popular Dictionary of Foreign Words* [year] (“Популярный словарь иностранных слов”) defines “rehabilitation” as

1) восстановление (по суду или в административном порядке) в правах, напр. ~ незаконно репрессированных 2) восстановление добrego имени, прежней репутации, положительнй оценки кого-, чего-л., напр. ~ частной собственности
1) the restoration (in the court of law or by administrative means) in rights, for ex. ~ of the unlawfully repressed 2) the restoration of the good name, of the former reputation, of the positive appraisal of someone or something, for ex. ~ of private property
Efforts toward rehabilitation address the standing of the person concerned in the eyes of
the law, in public opinion, or in that of a specific individual or a group. The scope of
what is meant by “political repression” or by “injustice” with regard to a person can
range from the figurative (this is why one might translate Pushkin’s “Ты, Моцарт,
недостоин сам себя” as “You, Mozart, are an injustice to yourself”) to the cold-as-death
real. This means that “efforts to counter repression,” to use Nerler’s phrase, can counter
only those forms of repression that have to do with the person’s good standing and
reputation, and the gravest injustices entailed by “political repressions” have no remedy
whatsoever—and yet demand redress in some form. Given this disproportion of the
supposed opposites, it seems safer to set aside the figure of opposition altogether.

The unreality of this opposition can be extended to the opposition of justice and
injustice—an opposition that should not be construed as compensatory. But to keep close
to the edition at hand, one notices in Nerler’s narrative an awareness of the disproportion
of the forces of “repression” and “efforts to counter repression.” This disproportion is
attributed not so much to the nature of those terms and their difference of scope, as to the
imbalance of power in the totalitarian state, with nearly all of it aggregated by the
governing elite, conceived of opaquely as “the system” or “the machine.” Such an
asymmetry means that any efforts to forestall the destruction of Mandelstam made by
people within his circle could have only the character of minuscule appeals, devoid of
efficacy and desperate in their hopes for good timing, luck, and the benevolence of those
in power.
In describing what went on after Mandelstam’s arrest in May 1934, the opposition of governing elite and people concerned with Mandelstam’s life took the form of another complementary pair: Mandelstam’s coterie was engaged in what Nerler calls “хлопоты,” the slightly derisive Russian noun for the sum of all the half-futile, half-hopeful actions one might call “scrambling”; these were answered, as if from on high, by what is referred to as “Stalin’s miracle.” Nerler seems to mean literally that “Сталин подарил О.М. жизнь,” “и это—самая высшая и самая сталинская и всех сталинских премий, им когда-либо присужденных”1 (“Stalin gave O.M. the gift of life,” “and this is the highest and the most Stalin of all the Stalin prizes that he had ever awarded.”)

Одной только “труди осетина” для грузина вполне достаточно, чтобы отправить неучтивца к праотцам.

Сталпин мгновенно оценил ситуацию, а главное—“оценил” стихи, и, действительно, решил все совершенно иначе—в сущности, он помиловал дерзца-пинта за творческую удачу и за искренне понравившиеся ему стихи. Ну разве не лестно и не гордо, когда тебя так боятся, —разве не этого он как раз и добивался?

“Ассириец,” он понимал, что к вопросу о жизни и смерти можно будет при необходимости и вернуться, а пока почему бы не поиграть с пасквилянтом в кошки-мышки и в жмурки, почему бы не сотворить маленькое чудо, о котором сразу же заговорит вся Москва?

“The chest of an Ossetian” alone would have been enough, for a Georgian, to send the offender ad patres.

Stalin instantly appraised the situation and, most importantly, the poem, and actually resolved everything in a completely unexpected vein. In essence, he granted clemency to the insolent bard for the sake of his creative luck and of the poem that he liked quite sincerely. Is it not after all flattering and grand to be feared so much—is that not what he wanted all along?

1 Nerler, 38.
“The Assirian” understood that the question of life and death could be revisited if necessary, but for the time being why not play cat-and-mouse or zhmurki with the paskvilyant, why not create a little miracle that will instantly get the whole of Moscow talking?

The first of the two words of this passage that resisted translation is “жмурки”—the name of a children’s catch-me-if-you-can game played with the “catcher” blindfolded and those being caught coming very close and taunting him. The other word, “пасквилянт,” meaning the writer of a “пасквиль,” a lampoon, has a derogatory ring, which in a reconstruction of Stalin’s supposed line of thinking attributes to him a very specific petty feeling of relishing a postponed-for-the-moment revenge. This wholly speculative attribution of ugly feelings reveals more about the writer than about his subject. But the cynical knowingness of the writing uses flattery to draw the reader into joining in smug satisfaction, as if the matter of Stalin’s motive has been settled. This tactic colludes with the temptation to settle questions that will otherwise haunt us with their unsettling intimations. Beyond disclaiming such knowledge, one can say safely that power is absolute only where it is power to be arbitrary—to do what one chooses to do without any regard whatsoever to the effect it might have on any subject. This kind of behavior is most destructive to a subject crushed by such disregard. It was certainly belittling to Mandelstam, who was made to understand that his “Epigram,” and his life and death, mattered so little as to be punished or pardoned on a whim. An analysis of the workings of absolute, or near-absolute, power must be conscious of that use of arbitrariness, and of calculated appearance of arbitrariness, as instruments of terror.
In Nerler’s reconstruction of these events, Mandelstam simply got very lucky. To help the reader appreciate the degree of this luck by contrast, Nerler includes a letter from the poet Nikolay Klyuyev, sent to Klychkov. The events of Klyuyev’s arrest and sentencing parallel those of Mandelstam’s. Like Mandelstam, Klyuyev was interrogated by Shivarov. He was exiled in June 1934. Klyuyev’s prosecution was chiefly motivated by his poem “Pogorelschina,” understood to be a damning portrayal of collectivization. (The poem is titled after the survivors of a huge fire.) Klyuyev was a descendant of Old Believers, and his writings had long had the markings of the Slavonic scriptural style.

From his place of exile, he wrote a letter to Klychkov, brimming with despair of Biblical magnitude.

Дорогой мой брат и поэт, ради моей судьбы как художника и чудовищного горя, пучины несчастья, в которую я повержен, выслушай меня без борьбы самолюбия. Я сгорел на своей “Погорельщине”, как некогда сгорел мой праред протопоп Аввакум на костре пустозерском.

Я сослан в Нарым, в поселок Колпашев на верную и мучительную смерть. Она, дырявая и свирепая, стоит уже за моими плечами. Четыре месяца тюрьмы и этапов, только по отрывному календарю скоро проходящих и легких, обглодали меня до костей.

Поселок Колпашев—это бугор глины, усеянный почерневшими от бед и непогодиц избами, дотуга набитыми ссылными. Есть нечего, продуктов нет, или они до смешного дороги. У меня никаких средств к жизни, милостыню же здесь подавать некому, ибо все одинаково рыщут, как волки, в погоне за душами. Подумай об этом, брат мой, когда садишься за тарелку душного домашнего супа, пьешь чай с белым хлебом! Вспомни обо мне в этот час—о несчастном—бездомном старике—поэте, лицерезение которого заставляет содрогнуться даже причутенных к адским картинам человеческого горя спец—переселенцев.

Небо в лохмотьях, кости, налетающие с четырехверстных болот дожди, немочный ветер—это зовется здесь летом, затем свирепая 50–градусная зима, а я голый, без шапки, в чужих штанах, потому что все мое выкрали в
общей камере шалманы. Подумай, родной, как помочь моей музэ, которой выколоты провидящие очи?!

Помогите! Помогите! Услышьте хоть раз в жизни живыми ушами кровавый крик о помощи, отложив на полчаса самолюбование и борьбу самолюбий! Это не сделает вас безобразными, а напротив, украсит вас зорями небесными!

Прошу о посылке—чаю, сахару, крупу от цинги, бельских сухарей, пока у меня рвота от 4–х–месячных хлеба с водой! Умоляю об этом. Посылка может весить до 15–ти кило по новым почтовым правилам. Летним сообщением идет три недели. Прости меня за беспокойство, но это голос глубочайшего человеческого горя и отчаяния.

My dear brother and fellow poet, hear me without the struggles of vanity, for the sake of my destiny as an artist and of that monstrous sorrow and the depth of misfortune I have been thrust into. I have been burned alive at the stake of my own “Pogorelschina,” just as my forefather, Archpriest Avvakum, burned in the Pustozersk bonfire.

I have been sent to Narym, the village of Kolpashev, to meet a certain and miserable death. She, rent and vicious, already stands behind my shoulders. Four months of jail and transit look swift and easy only on a page-a-day calendar— they have gnawed me down to my bones.

Kolpashev is a mound of clay studded with lowly log houses, weathered, black from sorrows, and stuffed with exiles to the point of bursting. There’s nothing to eat, there is no produce, or else, it is laughably expensive. I have no means to survival, there isn’t anyone here to give alms, for everyone is the same in searching for grub like wolves. Think about this, my brother, when you sit down before a bowl of fragrant homemade soup, when you take your tea with white bread! Remember me in that hour—the miserable, homeless old poet whose sight alone sends shudders through special-regime exiles inured to hellish pictures of human suffering.

The sky in rags, oblique rains coming in from four-verst-wide swamps—this is what they call summer in this place. Then, a vicious 50-degree winter—and I am naked, without a hat, wearing someone else’s pants, because everything of mine has been stolen by the shalmans in the common cell. Think, my dear one—how to help my muse when her prophetic eyes have been gouged?!

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1 Nerler, 35-6.
2 Approximately 60 degrees below zero Fahrenheit.
Help me! Help me! Open your living ears, if only once in your life, to this bloody cry for help, and set aside for but half-an-hour your self-love and wrestling of vanity! This will not make you less beautiful, on the contrary, you shall be adorned with heavenly fire!

I beg you for a package—tea, sugar, grain, compote to help against scurvy, dried white bread, to help me while I am still vomiting after four months of bread and water! I implore you. The package can weigh up to 15 kilos by the new postal regulations. Transit takes three weeks in the summer. Forgive me for bothering you, but this is the voice of the deepest human sorrow and despair.

Nerler points out that the terms of Mandelstam’s exile should be seen as nothing short of a “minor miracle” given the gravity of his own literary offence. But qualifying it as “minor” is ambiguous and suggestive, as if the miracle might be of minor importance. This feeling colludes with the terrible arbitrariness at play in Stalin’s playfulness about the life and death of others.

“Хлопоты” is the title of the chapter where Nerler reports on the efforts of Mandelstam’s wife and friends to influence his fate immediately after the arrest. “Khlopoty”—a nearly untranslatable Russian noun existing only in the plural and referring to the activity of continuously appealing to a person or an organization in an effort to secure some end—potentially a hassle of indefinite duration, consisting of multiple humiliating encounters with the powers that be in the hopes of achieving something fairly straightforward. One feature of what is ordinarily called “hlopoty” is the disproportion of the bother to what one ultimately needs to accomplish. The peculiarity of the word and its relationship to the Russian actuality was elaborated by Arkadiy
Averchenko in the satirical vignette “Хлопотливая нация.”¹ The verb “хлопотать” that appears in nearly every sentence of the vignette resists translation into English. I therefore transposed it into italics, leaving it to the reader to extract its meaning from its penumbra of hopefulness, futility, and triviality.

Когда я был маленьким, совсем крошечным мальчуганом, у меня были свои собственные, иногда очень своеобразные, представления и толкования слов, слышанных от взрослых.

Слово “хлопоты” я представлял себе так: человек бегает из угла в угол, взмахивает руками, кричит и, нагибаясь, тычется носом в стулья, окна и столы.

“Это и есть хлопоты”, — думал я.

И иногда, оставшись один, я от безделья принимался хлопотать. Носился с угла в угол, бормотал часто-чего-то слова, размахивал руками и озабоченно почесывал затылок.

Пользы от этого занятия я не видел ни малейшей, и мне казалось, что вся польза и цель так и заключаются в самом процессе хлопот — в бегстве и бормотании.

С тех пор много воды утекло. Многие мои взгляды, понятия и мнения подверглись основательной переработке и кристаллизации.

Во представление о слове “хлопоты” так и осталось у меня детское. Недавно я сообщил своим друзьям, что хочу поехать на южный берег Крыма.

— Идея, — похвалили друзья. — Только ты похлопочи заранее о разрешении жить там.

— Похлопочи? Как так похлопочи?
— Очень просто. Ты писатель, а не всякому писателю удается жить в Крыму. Нужно хлопотать. Арцыбашев хлопочет, Куприн тоже хлопочет. Как же они хлопочут? — заинтересовался я.

— Да так. Как обыкновенно хлопочут.

Мне живо представилось, как Куприн и Арцыбашев суетливо бегают по берегу Крыма, бормочут, размахивают руками и тычутся носами во все углы... У меня осталось детское представление о хлопотах, и иначе я не мог себе вообразить поведение вышеназванных писателей.

— Ну что ж, — вздохнул я. — Похлопочу и я.

When I was a very little boy, I often had my own, sometimes very peculiar, ideas about words that I had heard from the adults. The word “*khlopoty*” meant to me this: a person runs from one corner of the room to another, flailing his arms, shouting, and stooping down on occasion to nudge with his nose at chairs, windows, and tables. “This is what the word ‘khlopoty’ means,” I thought. And sometimes, when left by myself, out of sheer boredom, I would begin to *khlopotat*. I would rush from corner to corner, muttering very quickly some unintelligible words, waving my arms and scratching my head with a preoccupied air. All of this had absolutely no purpose, and it seemed to me that the sole aim of this process was merely itself—the running and muttering.

Much has changed since then, and my views, ideas, and opinions endured thorough revisions and crystallized. But my idea of the word “*khlopoty*” remained forever the same that I had as a child.

Recently I told some friends that I wanted to visit the Southern shore of Crimea. “That’s an idea!” said my friends. But you better *pokhlopochi* about this in advance.”

“*Pokhloposhi?* How so, *pokhloposhi*?”

“Just like that. You’re a writer, and not every writer gets to live in Crimea. You have to *khlopotat*’. Arzybashev is doing it, and so is Kuprin.”

“And how is it that they do it?” I inquired.

“Just like that. Like everybody else.”

I had a vivid image of Kuprin and Arzybashev running madly all over the shore of Crimea, muttering, flailing their arms and sticking their noses into different corners. I have a child’s conception of *khlopoty*, and so I had no other way of imagining the behavior of the above-named writers.

“Alright,” I said. “I, too, will go ahead and *pokhlopochu*.”

Когда я шел в канцелярию ялтинского генерал-губернатора, мне казалось непонятным и странным: неужели о таком пустяке, как проживание в Крыму — нужно еще хлопотать? Я православный русский гражданин, имею прекрасный непросроченный экземпляр паспорта — и мне же еще нужно хлопотать! Стоит после этого делать честь нации и быть русским... Гораздо выгоднее и приятнее для собственного самолюбия быть французом или американцем.

As I walked to the office of the governor-general of Yalta, it seemed to me odd that a trifle like living in Crimea requires such a thing as *khlopoty*. I am an Orthodox Christian, a Russian citizen with a fine, unexpired specimen of a passport—and I have to *khlopotat*? Who cares then for the dubious honor of being a Russian. It is much more advantageous and pleasing to one’s amour-propre to be a Frenchman or an American.
That the first subject of *khlopoty* in this story is a residence permit is very much in character for the bureaucracy that inspired Averchenko’s satire. But when he asks, at the end of the story, what might be the most comprehensive image of Russia and all that it is, his answer is: a giant ant-hill of people each of whom is engaged in never-ending and senseless process of *khlopoty*—a process with no rhyme or reason, because its scope is apparently arbitrary:

Now I really am lost. A person wants to fly in an airplane. He has to *khlopotat’* about this. Several people wish to have a writers’ symposium. About this, too, they have to *khlopotat’*. Someone wants to give a lecture on radium. Again, he *khlopochet*. Ditto for buying a revolver. Alright. But what if I want to go to the theater? Why is it that, I’m being told, I don’t have to *khlopotat’* about that? I want to buy a tie! But I don’t have to *khlopotat’* about that! What if I want to *khlopat’*? Why is it that to buy a revolver I must *khlopat’* and to buy a tie I need not? And to give a lecture on radium one must *khlopat’*, but to see *The Merry Widow*, one needn’t do so? How can I tell the difference between what requires that there be *khlopoty* and what doesn’t?

And to save the life of one’s arrested husband or friend, one certainly had to *khlopat’*—with all the attendant humility, ineffectaciousness and despair, because one could not intimate an intention of exerting pressure. Again, one detects a tone of facetiousness in Nerler’s use of a diminutive form of Lev Gumilyov’s name:
квартира опустела. К оставшимся в ней Н.М. и А.А. вскоре присоединился Левушка Гумилев, но мать тут же его выставила, опасаясь за его судьбу.

the apartment became empty. N.M. and A.A. [Anna Akhmatova], who still remained there, were soon joined by Lyovushka Gumilyov, but his mother turned him out right away, out of fear for his lot.

Another diminutive is deployed against Pasternak:

Бухарину Пастернак отправляет записочку с просьбой сделать для О.М. все возможное.

Pasternak sends Bukharin a little note with a request to do everything possible for O.M.

Why this intimation of timidity, even cowardice? The answer seems to be, contrast—the contrast deployed by Mandelstam in his satire of Stalin’s state (in Robert Lowell’s translation):

They make touching and funny animal sounds.
He alone talks Russian.

The same contrast is felt in the juxtaposition of all the futile “scrambling” and “Stalin’s miracle”—the paradoxical directive to “isolate but preserve”—that came as an answer. Nerler cannot help being affected by the text of the “Stalin Epigram” and its way of distorting proportions for the sake of caricature. But the redeployment of satirical distortion in a documentary study of Mandelstam’s actual situation is out of place, for reasons of accuracy, and for those of propriety. Stalin’s intervention in Mandelstam’s process is, after all, comparable to the intervention by Nikolas I in the process of Petrashevsky’s group, of which young Fyodor Dostoyevsky was a member. The entire
group was sentenced to death by firing squad. The journals of Andrey Tarkovsky contain a reflection about why the sudden commuting of the death sentence issued to the Petrashevsky Group, which included the young Fyodor Dostoyevsky, was received by many as an insult and not as a gesture of mercy on the part of Nicholas I.

It must have been because, having gathered all of their courage, they had prepared to meet their death with dignity, which then turned out to be unnecessary. Just as the terror, the madness (Grigoryev’s, for example), and the final moral exertions to preserve one’s dignity, had gone to waste.¹

Although this spiritual exertion cannot be called a total waste, the pardon feels to be a form of psychic violence, or a form of insult. This awareness is disavowed by Nerler only to emerge in the language of his commentary—and in the design of the book, which may or may not have been influenced by the editor himself. The paperback’s cover features a collage of images bringing together primary documents, the poet’s fingerprints, an autograph of “The Stalin Epigram,” and a Mosin-Nagant rifle (standard issue for GULag guards). The title page bears three epigraphs, all of them quoting Mandelstam and ending each quotation with an ellipsis:

Все, что ты видел, забудь—
Птицу, старуху, тюрьму...

Я к смерти готов...

И меня только равный убьет...

Forget all you have seen—
The bird, the old woman, the jail...

I am ready for death...

Only an equal will kill me...

The trailing ellipses suggest that something has been omitted and left to the imagination, or, as with the final epigraph, left to the chance of the reader’s discovery. Mandelstam disliked the last line of “Wolf” (1931), “Only an equal will kill me.” He thought it “too heavy” and wanted to eliminate it completely from the text of the poem. And yet, the line persisted from one posthumous edition to another, contrary to Mandelstam’s felt need for revision.¹

The conclusion of a book is one of the more tempting occasions to indulge in platitudes. Nerler struggles with the temptation, and when he succumbs, he does so resolutely:

Бессмертие отыскало Мандельштама, но взяв с него за это непомерно высокую цену—неотвратимого самоубийства!

Иная мифологема вынесла Мандельштама и Сталина на самый гребень другого упрощения: Поэт и Тиран. Тиран-поэтомор, убивающий живое слово во плоти, и поэт-тираноборец, в конце концов якобы побеждающий его силой своей песни.

Но и это самообольщение. Потому что тут победа не за Мандельштамом и не за Пушкиным.

¹ Gerstein, Мемуары, 21.
Но Мандельштаму не до величаний: он держит свой фронт. Ибо продолжается, не кончаясь, та битва, в которой музыка и стихи едва ли не единственное противоядие от бесчеловечности.

Вот почему поэзия, как он однажды выразился, это война!1

Immortality found Mandelstam, but it charged him an inordinately high price—that of imminent suicide!

Another topos carried both Mandelstam and Stalin onto the very crest of another simplification: the Poet vs. the Tyrant. The poet-scourging tyrant, who murders Logos in the flesh, and the tyrant-wrestling poet, who in the end triumphs, supposedly, by the power of his song.

But, this, too, is merely a tempting conceit. Because neither Mandelstam nor Pushkin triumphed.

But Mandelstam does not need these titles: he holds down his frontline. For the battle goes on without an end—the battle in which music and poetry are virtually the sole antidote to inhumanity.

This is why poetry, as he once said, is war!

For all its bravado, this passage is quite helpless. Mandelstam’s words about the Soviet regime are well-suited here, too: “Завели и бросили.” The reader has been “led into the deep, and abandoned.”

2. The 1997 volume of Pushkin House’s annual almanac introduced into the Mandelstam scholarship the letters of Sergey Rudakov to his wife, Lina Finkelstein.2 A

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1 Nerler, 196.
2 Е. А. Toddes, А. Г. Metz, eds., О. Э. Мандельштам в письмах С. Б. Рудакова к жене (1935-1936) [O. E. Mandelstam in the letters of S. B. Rudakov to his wife (1935-1936)], Ежегодник Рукописного отдела Пушкинского Дома [Annual of the
selection of excerpts from the letters had been published, with analysis and commentaries, by the philologist and writer Emma Gerstein in her memoirs, and made available in English by John Crowfoot in his translation of Gerstein’s volume of essays.

The Russian bibliography on the intersection of Mandelstam and Rudakov is scant: it contains only three entries, including Gerstein’s book and the Pushkin House volume of Rudakov’s letters. The remaining entry is a publication of two drawings of Mandelstam made by Rudakov himself. At the same time, these letters are the most important source of information about Mandelstam’s life in Voronezh exile. The editors of the volume note that no other period in the poet’s life has been documented in comparable detail, because of the completeness of the correspondence and the frequency with which Rudakov was writing to Finkelstein from Voronezh, sometimes more than once a day. The exceptional value of the letters became evident immediately after E. G. Gerstein used a significant part of the letters as the basis for one of the sections of her book, “Новое о Мандельштаме” (“New evidence on Mandelstam”), published in 1968 in Paris.

In her introduction to an essay on Rudakov’s relationship with Mandelstam based on Rudakov’s letters, Gerstein wrote that even at the time of her first meeting with the couple, she was aware that Rudakov was a textual scholar who was planning a critical edition of Mandelstam’s poems and was collecting to that purpose a vast archive of Mandelstam’s papers. Rudakov’s letters abound with details of this collaboration of poet and editor, charged with contradictory mutual feelings, intensity of interest, and, as time

Manuscript Department of the Pushkin House], St Petersburg: Akademicheskiy proekt, 1997, 8-9.
goes on, increasing frustration and resentment. Although Rudakov sent specific accounts of textual work to his wife, the editors of these letters do not mention them as a source of textual information about Moscow and Voronezh poems. This may partly be explained by the general skepticism towards Rudakov inspired by his manic tone and the unrealistic scientism of his theoretical speculations. But the main reason why the textual relevance of the letters has not been appreciated or even fully evaluated is the profound disappointment that resulted from Rudakov’s ambitions, for the comprehensive archive entrusted to him by the Mandelstams (who had, for that purpose, forgone the offer made by Pushkin House to purchase the archive in 1936) was lost.

A biographical note:

Сергей Борисович Рудakov родился 8 (21) октября 1909 г. в Виннице, в семье офицера; он был правнуком адмирала Александра Ивановича Бутакова. В семье, помимо Сергея, было еще десять детей. Судьба их сложилась трагически: один из братьев покончил с собой в 1913 г. из-за невозможности жениться на любимой женщине.1

Sergey Borisovich Rudakov was born 8 (21) October 1909 in Vinnitsa, in an officer’s family; he was the great-grandson of admiral Aleksandr Ivanovich Butakov. Apart from Sergey, there were ten children in the family. Their lives took on a tragic character: one of the brothers committed suicide in 1913, being unable to marry the woman he loved.

The woman Rudakov’s brother wanted to marry was Jewish. Further into the biography, we discover that Sergey Rudakov went on to marry twice, and both of his wives were Jewish.

Two of the remaining brothers were killed in World War I.

1 Toddes, 7-8.
Четвертый, Игорь, был расстрелян вместе с отцом по приговору одной из следственных комиссий, занимавшихся расследованием деятельности офицеров царской армии (они перешли в Красную Армию одновременно с Бруслиловым), в 1921 или 1922 г. в Новониколаевске. 1

The fourth, Igor, was shot together with their father after being sentenced by one of the committees in charge of investigating the activities of the officers in the tsarist army (they had joined the Red Army at the same time as Brusilov), in 1921 or 1922, in Novonikolayevsk.

Ирина, одна из сестер Рудакова, стала женой Алексея Вагинова, старшего брата поэта Константина Вагинова. Это произошло не позже 1926 года, и “дружественные связи между двумя семьями открыли для Сергея доступ в поэтические круги, когда он был еще в школе.” На этом этапе, Рудаков начал писать стихи и наконец осмелился опубликовать их в груповой антологии “Спектр.”

20 ноября 1930 Рудаков женился на сокурснице по Институту истории искусств, Марии Самойловне Хейфец (1908—1974) и вскоре, из-за некоторых обстоятельств, был вынужден уехать в Керчь, к родителям жены. 2

20 November 1930 Rudakov married his fellow student at the Institute of Art History, Maria Samoylovna Heifetz (1908—1974), and soon, due to some circumstances, was forced to move to Kerch and live with his in-laws.

What is meant by these “circumstances” is likely to be Maria’s pregnancy:

Здесь в 1931 г. у него родилась дочь Мария. Через некоторое время Рудаков с женой и дочерью вернулся в Ленинград. […] В 1934 г. Рудаков сошёлся с подругой своей жены, Линой (Полиной) Самойловной Финкельштейн (1906—1977) и вскоре женился на ней, оставив первую семью.

1 Toddes, 8.
2 Toddes, 8.
His daughter Maria was born there in 1931. Some time after (no later than 1932), Rudakov with wife and daughter returned to Leningrad. [...] In 1934, Rudakov became close to his wife’s friend, Lina Samoylovna Finkelstein (1906-1977), and soon left his first family to marry her.

Lina Finkelstein was born in Kiev and studied music as a young woman. In the middle of the 1920s, she moved to Leningrad, where she became a specialist in scientific methodology.

Л. С. Финкельштейн продолжала свои занятия музыкой у М. В. Юдинои и, в свою очередь, давала уроки детям Б. В. Казанского и Тынянова, отчего и была вхожа в дом последнего.

После убийства С. М. Кирова Рудаков из-за своего дворянского происхождения был выслан из Ленинграда и с марта 1935 по июль 1936 г. жил в Воронеже.

L. S. Finkelstein continued her music studies with M. V. Yudina and, in turn, gave lessons to the children of B. V. Kazansky and Tynyanov, and for that reason was well-acquainted with the latter.

After the murder of S. M. Kirov, Rudakov, as a descendant of the gentry, was exiled from Leningrad and from March 1935 to July 1936 lived in Voronezh.

Emma Gerstein’s reconstruction of what happened to the Mandelstam papers in Rudakov’s possession was spurred, as she had been on numerous occasions, by a desire to correct and balance a prior account by Nadezhda Mandelstam:

В печати об этой злосчастной истории известно только из книги Надежды Мандельштам “Воспоминания” и беглых упоминаний в ее же “Второй книге.” Однако эти сообщения нуждаются в серьезных коррективах.

1 Toddes, 9.
2 Gerstein, Мемуары, 74.
In the press this unfortunate story is known only from Nadezhda Mandelstam’s book of “Memoirs” and her off-hand remarks in her own “Second Book.” But her narrative stands in need of substantial corrections.

The following excerpts amount to the portrayal that Rudakov received in Nadezhda Mandelstam’s *Hope Against Hope*:

Rudakov, the son of a Czarist general, had been expelled from Leningrad together with other people of aristocratic origin. His father and elder brothers had been shot at the beginning of the Revolution. He had been brought up by his sisters and had a normal Soviet childhood—he became a member of the Pioneers, distinguished himself in school and even got through the university. He was looking forward to a decent career when suddenly he was struck by the disaster of expulsion from Leningrad. Like many people who had lost their parents, he was anxious to get into step with the times, and he even had a theory that one should only write books that stood a chance of being published. He himself wrote elegant verse (a little under the influence of Tsvetayeva) which was popular at the time. He had chosen Voronezh as his place of exile in order to be near M. He first came there while I was in Moscow looking for translation work, and he spent about a month with M. all alone before I returned. When M. came to meet me at the station he told me that Rudakov had appeared, that he was going to write a book about poetry, and what a splendid fellow he was. After his illness M. had probably lost confidence in himself and needed a friendly listener for his new verse.

Rudakov did not try to find a proper place to live in Voronezh. He kept hoping that his wife might use her contacts with some top Soviet generals (who later perished in 1937) to get permission for him to return to Leningrad. He had a bunk in a room which he shared with a young worker named Tosha, but he came to us for all his meals. This was a relatively good period for us when we had earnings from translation, the local theater and the radio, and it was no hardship for us to feed the poor fellow. While I was in Moscow he had carefully collected all the drafts of ‘Black Earth’ [*Chernozyom*], which M. was composing then, and after my return, when M. and I began trying to remember the poems confiscated during the house search, Rudakov copied them all into a notebook for us. Overnight he copied them on drafting paper, in a rather comic copperplate hand with curlicues, and brought them along to us in the morning. He despised my spidery handwriting and complete lack of concern for the appearance of manuscripts. He thought, for instance, that it was scandalous to write with

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1 The Russian titles of *Hope Against Hope* and *Hope Abandoned*. 
ordinary ink, and insisted on using India ink. (He also drew silhouettes in India ink, and the result was no worse than those done by street artists.) He showed me his beautifully executed copies of M.’s poems and said: “This is what they’ll keep in the archives, not the messy things you and Osip Emilievich do.” We only smiled, and tried not to hurt his feelings.

We often warned Rudakov that he would do himself no good by coming to see us, but he replied with such a string of noble phrases that we could only gasp. Perhaps for this reason we were so tolerant of certain unpleasant things about him. He was, for example, very arrogant.¹

Another disagreeable feature of Rudakov was his constant grumbling. In Russia, he kept complaining, people of talent had always been ground down by life, and he would never be able to write his book. M. could not stand this kind of talk: “Why aren’t you writing now?” he asked. “If someone has anything to say, he will always manage to say it.” This made Rudakov lose his temper and, asking how he could work without money or a proper place to live, he would storm out, banging the door behind him. But in an hour or so he would come back, as though nothing had happened.²

Nadezhda Mandelstam makes no mention of Rudakov’s difficulties with getting published, due to his roots in the nobility, or of his dedication in working with Tynyanov on the Kukhelbecker edition, and how those circumstances contributed to Rudakov’s extreme frustration with his situation. When Tynyanov’s edition of Kukhelbecker appeared as No. 15 in the small-format series of the Poet’s Library in 1939, Rudakov was acknowledged in it with a laconic note: “Сбор печатных текстов Кюхельбекера производил С.Б. Рудakov”—“S.B. Rudakov collected the printed texts of the poems of Kukhelbecker.”³ This is the highest documented recognition of Rudakov’s competence as

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² Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope*, 275.
a textual scholar. But Rudakov’s ambitions reached far beyond the modest role of Tynyanov’s assistant.

To return to Nadezhda Mandelstam’s characterization,

Rudakov had a strong didactic streak in him—he liked to tell me how to copy out M.’s verse, and M. how to write it. He greeted every new poem with some theory or other from his still unwritten book, as though to ask why he hadn’t been consulted beforehand. I could see that he often got on M.s nerves, and would have liked to throw him out, but M. wouldn’t let me (“How will he eat without us?”) and everything went on as before.¹

Altogether, Rudakov was a very strange type—and we should have known better than to get on such close terms with him. I gave him original copies of all M.’s most important work, and Akhmatova let him have the whole of Gumilev’s archive, delivering it to him on a sledge.

During the war, after being wounded, Rudakov was posted to a draft office in Moscow. When one of his relatives came and pleaded to be exempted from military service because he was a Tolstoyan, Rudakov granted his request. For this he was arrested and sent to a penal battalion, where he was soon killed.²

After Rudakov’s death at the front in 1944,

Our manuscripts were left with his widow, but she did not return them to us. In 1953, meeting Akhmatova at a concert, she said that everything was intact, but six months later she told Emma Gerstein that she has been arrested herself and everything had been confiscated. Soon she was telling yet a third version: that she had been arrested and her mother had burned everything. What the truth of the matter is we just haven’t been able to find out. All we know is that she was sold some of Gumilev’s manuscripts—not directly, but through middlemen. Akhmatova is furious about it all, but there is nothing she can do. Once we got the widow to come and see Akhmatova on the pretext of trying to publish an essay by her late husband, but it was impossible to get any sense out of her. Khardzhiev had a little more luck—he was able to persuade her to let him copy out everything he needed from Rudakov’s letters. But Khardzhiev is a man of great charm and good looks who can get anything he likes. However, in Rudakov’s letters—which he wrote every day, carefully keeping numbered copies for posterity—there was

¹ Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope*, 275.
² Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope*, 276.
nothing of special interest for us. The poor boy was obviously a psychopath. The letters were full of ravings about how the whole of poetry had been present in M.’s room—I’ve forgotten whether he said “world poetry” or Russian poetry, but he was referring to M., himself and a volume of Vaginov which M. had in his room. He also wrote about how he taught M. to write poetry and explained everything to him, and expressed his horror that all the praise would go to M. and he would get no credit. He compared M. to Derzhavin—sometimes like a god and sometimes like a worm. In one of the letters he spoke of himself as M.’s heir, alleging that M. had said to him: “You are my heir, do what you see fit with my verse.” I am quoting all this from memory, since I have only seen the copies made by Khardzhiev. Reading them, Akhmatova and I understood that the theft of our archives had been part of a deliberate plan on Rudakov’s part, and that his widow was only carrying out his will by refusing to return them to us. The selling of original manuscripts—which is very profitable—was being done not only for mercenary reasons, but also in fulfillment of Rudakov’s maniac schemes. One wonders what would have happened if I had died much earlier. It is possible that Rudakov would have claimed all M.’s work as his own—though this would not have been easy, since many of the poems were circulating under the name of their rightful author.¹

Things would have been even worse if I had listened to Rudakov when he tried to persuade me (through Emma Gerstein, with whom he had become friendly) to hand over all M.’s papers to him. The reason he gave was that it was important for all the papers to be in one place. But Khardzhiev and I argued that, on the contrary, it was safer to disperse them. As a result of handing them to Rudakov, I have lost several poems altogether—nearly all the Voronezh rough drafts and many copies of Tristia in M.’s own hand.

In this whole Rudakov episode I blame not the poor fool himself, whatever he may have been aiming at, but rather those responsible for creating this ‘happy life’ of ours. If we lived like human beings rather than as hunted animals, Rudakov would have come to our house like any other visitor, and it would probably never have occurred to him to purloin M.’s papers and declare himself M.’s heir—any more than his widow would have carried on her trade in Gumilev’s letters to Akhmatova.²

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¹ Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope*, 276-7.
² Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope*, 277.
Gerstein prefaced her investigation of the Rudakov affair by stating the unfairness of this portrayal. Much of Gerstein’s study is devoted to balancing even minute aspects of Mandelstam’s portrayal of Rudakov. Of key importance are those aspects of Gerstein’s narrative that clarify the time and circumstances of the archive’s disintegration.

Emma Gerstein met the Rudakov couple in Voronezh, where she came to visit the Mandelstams in May 1936. During Emma’s stay there, Rudakov and his wife Lina visited the Mandelstams every day. In February of that year, Akhmatova had given Rudakov a portion of Gumilyov’s archive, thinking that he could make good use of it as a serious textual scholar. After Rudakov’s return from exile that summer, the couple continued their friendship with Emma, meeting whenever the Rudakovs were in Moscow or Gerstein was in Leningrad. In 1944, Rudakov was killed on the front. The same year, Lina returned to Leningrad from her Sverdlovsk evacuation. Shortly afterwards, she met Akhmatova at a concert in the Philharmonic. In the intermission, she came up to Akhmatova and whispered to her: “Все цело,” “Everything’s intact.”¹ Gerstein, too, had been notified by Lina in a letter saying, “Все в порядке,” “All is well.” Based on the date on an autographed copy of Akhmatova’s poem “In Memory of a Friend,” dedicated to Rudakov, which she had given to Lina, Gerstein concludes that Finkelstein met with Akhmatova on 8 November, 1945. At that time, it was agreed that Gumilyov’s papers would remain for the time being with Finkelstein. Akhmatova was enjoying a period of high visibility. She was quite busy, and this may have kept Finkelstein at a distance. She

¹ Gerstein, Мемуары, 76.
wrote to Gerstein on 2 March 1946, “I have not been to A.A.’s.” On 26 May, 1946 she wrote again, “I have not been to see Annushka.” On 19 July of the same year she wrote, “I’m planning to go and see her.” But less than a month later, Akhmatova’s situation changed because of Zhdanov’s new campaign against her. It is not clear whether Finkelstein had visited Akhmatova prior to 2 August, 1947, when she wrote to Gerstein: “I have not seen Annushka, but I think that in the nearest future I’ll work up the courage to go and see her.”

Late in 1947 Gerstein came to Leningrad.

I stayed at Lina Samoylovna. In our free time we spoke often and a great deal about Sergey Borisovich and about the manuscripts, which, it appeared, she was keeping like a holy relic. She did not show me Gumilyov’s letters to Akhmatova and his other autographs, but I did not think I had the right to look at them. But we did look at Mandelstam’s autographs, I held them in my hands and read them. Nevertheless, Lina Samoylovna did not show me everything, explaining that the suitcase with the manuscripts was under her mother’s bed and that she did not want to open it in front of her. She complained that her mother was a stranger to her, did not understand her fidelity to the memory of Seryozha, and kept asking that she sell his library and archive. Naturally, her mother wished secretly that Lina would get married again, but she only kept saying: “There’s never been and never will be anybody better than Seryozha.”
On her next visit, the following year, Gerstein found the two women in a state of financial strain. The late 1940s were a difficult time of tenuous respite from the hardships of the war en route to new arrests, exiles, executions of returned prisoners of war, and unemployment for the Jews. This is why Gerstein was mildly surprised when Finkelstein remarked that she was planning to purchase a coat of curly lamb, for which she would pay in installments. Gerstein dates the beginning of Lina’s sale of documents from Gumilyov’s archive to 1948, the year marked with the new coat and with Lina’s visible nervousness around Lev Gumilyov, noticed by Emma.

In the spring of 1949, Lina Samoylovna was traveling through Moscow and astounded Emma with the statement: she did not have, and never had had, Gumilyov’s papers. She had thought of another envelope as the one with Gumilyov’s papers, but it appeared that the real papers had been, without her knowledge, used up by the neighbor’s children for firecrackers, since the chest with papers had stood in the corridor of a shared apartment. Lina convinced Emma to relay the news to Akhmatova, who responded in a fearsomely quiet voice: “She could not have been mistaken. Those were folders!” And raising her voice, she repeated, “Folders! Zoya pulled them on a sled!”

Gerstein’s correspondence with Finkelstein remained cordial but slowed down. Late in 1954, Finkelstein was traveling through Moscow and came to see Gerstein. Finkelstein told her that she, Lina, had been arrested in March 1953, two days after the death of Stalin. Before Gerstein had a chance to commiserate, Finkelstein told her that

1 Gerstein, Мемуары, 79.
“MGB had confiscated all the Mandelstam manuscripts.” “She began to describe, in color, with great emotion and detail, that during the search nothing was taken, except Mandelstam’s manuscripts!” After the initial shock, Gerstein suggested that Lina file a request to have the papers returned. Finkelstein refused, saying that she was too frightened to go near the MGB building. As the two women were going to sleep, Gerstein said into the darkness, “We must tell Nadya immediately.”

I heard something nonsensical, but I soon forgot her exact phrase—until Anna Andreyevna reminded me about it, nearly five years later. “A you remember how she said to you, ‘Don’t stick your nose into what’s none of your business’?!” Da, я вспомнила, это была ее последняя реплика. Я осталась тогда в полном недоумении: зачем же она приезжала ко мне? Видимо, она не ожидала, что я отвечу на ее “признание” трезвым предложением запросить МГБ.¹

M. I. Oduyevskaya wrote to the pianist Maria Yudina on 17 June 1959: “I often see Lina Finkelstein (Anya Karpeka’s friend). She works as a librarian. Her mother has died. She is completely alone.” The letter was collected in A. M. Kuznetsov’s edition of Yudina’s correspondence. The editor’s note on the letter comments on Finkelstein’s identity: “pianist, studied with M.V. Yudina in the 1920s. We have no detailed information about

¹ Gerstein, Мемуары, 80.
her.”1 The editor appears unaware of the tragic role Finkelstein had played in the story of Mandelstam’s archive.

The preface to the Pushkin House edition of Rudakov’s letters describes the state of affairs with the Mandelstams at the time of Rudakov’s arrival:

Мандельштамы прибыли в Воронеж из Чердыни в конце июня 1934 г., и до приезда Рудакова они жили в городе уже девять месяцев. Это время было занято главным образом адаптацией к воронежской жизни и быту. К приезду Рудакова Мандельштамы уже по меньшей мере один раз переездали от одного квартирного хозяина к другому. Благодаря хлопотам московских друзей появилась возможность зарабатывать: Н. Я. Мандельштам заключила с ГИХЛом договор на перевод книги В. Маргерита “Вавилон,” О. Э. Мандельштам—с “Советским писателем” на книгу “Старый и новый Воронеж” и с ГИХЛом—на перевод произведений Мопассана. Поэту была также предоставлена возможность вести “платную литературную консультацию” при журнале “Подъем” и писать рецензии на отечественные издания. В феврале 1935 г. в редакции газеты “Коммуна” Мандельштам прочитал, для закрытой аудитории, доклад об акмеизме.2

The Mandelstams arrived in Voronezh from Cherdyn in late June 1934 and had been in town for nine months by the time of Rudakov’s arrival. Those months had been consumed mainly by adapting to life in Voronezh. By the time Rudakov appeared, the Mandelstams had moved at least once from one rented room to another. Thanks to the efforts of Moscow friends, there was now the possibility of making money: N. Y. Mandelstam had signed an agreement with GIKhL to translate V. Marguerite’s book “Babylon”; O. E. Mandelstam got the contract for a book “Voronezh Old and New” from the “Soviet Writer” and another one for a translation of Maupassan from GIKhL. He was also permitted to conduct a paid “literary consultation” under the aegis of the magazine Pod’yom and to write book reviews. In February 1935, Mandelstam gave a popular talk about Acmeism at the offices of the Kommuna paper.

2 Toddes, 9.
What follows is a selection from Rudakov’s letters to Lina Finkelstein—a correspondence that bears witness to the development of the peculiar relationship between the poet and his would-be-editor.

2 April 1935

Lika, if I hadn’t come home last night at ten minutes past one (and at half past one the lights go out), an excellent letter would have been written yesterday.

Linusya, is this clear or not? Lika—this is Mandelstam. […] I did not know that he was in Voronezh. They (he, and she, who is now in Moscow) are inviting us and Anna Andreyevna to visit the dacha (they’ll be just outside Voronezh from 20-25/IV).

In a lightless black night, leaving through the rear balcony door of the little house that stands at the edge of the railway village.

I feel amazing. The game of silence is over. One can speak, think. And I could never think without speaking. <...> We are also planning to study, together, kolkhoz architecture, etc., etc.

1 Corner brackets signal omitted text in the edition of the letters; square brackets signal my omissions, here and elsewhere.
Kit, this is the first time in my life (I am not counting Kostya Vaginov, with whom there was not very much of this) when I feel a genuine encounter with another (a man). <…> For the moment, what’s important is the scheme of the relations: we dine together, read Scherbina and Sumarokov, and his most extraordinary new poems (the pre-Voronezh ones). About my own poems, about him, about my conception with Konevsky and Gumilyov—there are arguments in which, Kitty, I feel my great strenght andrightness.

There’s no sense in deepening the arguments, on account of his nervousness and that, after 26 years in literature, he should not necessarily have to be reformed; that would even be unthinkable. I merely observe the way he thinks, the way he talks about others, the way he judges. This is a high new stage.
This is different from conversations at the European Hotel. This is life, equal and even, with all its qualities, with money, galoshes, rooms, and everything, everything human.

Above all, in all, in spite of all, here is a brilliant poet who has written “Solominka” and “Venetian life.” Not on stage, not in the dressing room. Only one thing is important here. Each person can be genuine in a certain sense for less than 24 hours a day, and this kind of closeness permits one to observe these genuine minutes that another person would not have bothered to capture. And I, in addition to everything else, see in him a profoundly unhappy person; his habits and manners are wholly understandable.

I force him to shave and to clean his boots outside.

21 April 1935

Говорю якобы о нем, а на самом деле о себе, о своем мире.

I write seemingly about him, but in reality, about myself and my world.

22 April 1935

Н. Я. пробыла в Москве около месяца (на мое счастье).

Мы с О. Э. так привыкли друг к другу (чего при ней не произошло бы в таких формах), что разговоры и обсуждение стихов—вещь непреложная и постоянная.

N. Y. was in Moscow for close to a month (my luck).

O. E. and I got so used to each other (with her this would not have been possible, not in such forms) that conversations and discussions of poetry are something inviolable and constant.

26 April 1935

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1 In the edition, “Н<адежда> Я<ковлевна>.” I have eliminated editorial brackets in instances where Rudakov uses initials.
Она осознала, что мы привыкли быть вместе, и привыкла к этому.

Он с 17-го работает над стихами (в диком темпе). Каждые пол-стиха читаются мне. А здесь […] куча моих требований, несколько ориентированных на мою стиховую поэтику, несколько объективных. Опять спор (жена боятся).

Вот одно из заключений: “Так помогал мне только Гумилев, но он был менее требователен и оставлял больше свободы—за всю жизнь это второй случай.”

She realized that we got used to each other, and she got used to the realization.

From the 17th onward, he is working on the poems (at a mad pace). Every half-verse is read to me. But here […] he has to deal with my demands, some oriented towards my poetics, some of the objective sort. Again, an argument (the wife is afraid).

Here’s one of his conclusions: “Only Gumilyov helped me this much, but he was less exacting and left more freedom—in all my life, this is the second case.”

8 May 1935

Сегодня уехала Надин. На вокзале она совсем распсиховалась и бедного Осюк извела до того, что он дрожащим голосом говорил: “Наденька, не сердись, ты ведь уезжаешь.” И потерял палочку, которая, правда, нашлась в буфете. Его жалко страшно. Он притих и варил мне и себе какао. Перепачкал руки о кастрюлю, вытер их об лоб и ходил зеброй весь вечер.

Nadine left today. At the station she flew off the handle and drove poor Osyuk into such a state that he was saying, in a trembling voice, “Nadenka, you cannot get angry, you are leaving.” He lost his walking stick, which, luckily, was found at the buffet. He was awfully pitiful. He became quiet and was making cocoa for me and for himself. He smudged his hands on the pot, wiped them on his forehead, and looked like a zebra the whole evening.

10 May 1935

Киса, страшно существенные вещи с М. […] Надин (стерва) в Москве. И он постепенно успокаивается. И опять началась чудесная полоса. <…> Сейчас опять (и это счастливое отсутствие Надины, которая, в сущности, очень
мешала)—сговоренность и сработанность, оговоренность. Опять нами говорятся нужные вещи, меня достраивающие и его перестраивающие. <...>
Еще при тебе он выкинул “Стансы.” Потом он (с Надей) уничтожил все записи “Стансов” и начатого “Чапаева.” Он говорил, что они бред, и покушался на черновики, что у меня (не догадываясь, что они скопированы). Надька называла его “моей Гоголь” (в смысле уничтожения “порочащих” записей) и радовалась. Я “Стансы” запомнить не успел. Сейчас осторожно—по строчке—косвенными вопросами вытягиваю из него их. Запоминаю и дома записываю (уже есть 32 строки из 46!). Есть 9 строк “Чапаева.” А когда у меня нащупывается текст—вижу,—он не так плох, но требует переработки в сторону удаления расхлябанности. Под мою диктовку он к вещам возвращается и закончит их, а у меня сохраняется “проклятый” первый вариант, необходимый в своей обнаженности для моей работы.

18 May 1935

Kitty, awfully important goings-on with M. […] Nadin (the wench) is in Moscow. Little by little, he is getting more calm. Again, a beautiful stretch has begun. <...> Now (thanks to the happy absence of Nadine, who, essentially, was a big obstacle)—all is agreement, concert, collaboration. Again we are making necessary things, things that complete me and remake him. <...> While you were still here, he tossed the “Stanzas.” Next, he (with Nadya) destroyed all records of the “Stanzas” and of “Chapayev,” which he had just begun. He was saying that they were nonsense and attempted to destroy the drafts that I had (not realizing that they’d been copied). Nadka called him “my Gogol” (in the sense of destroying compromising notes) and gloated. I did not have enough time to memorize the “Stanzas.” Now very cautiously—line by line—with indirect questions, I am pulling them out of him. I memorize and write them down at home (I’ve got 32 lines out of 46 by now!). I’ve got 9 lines of “Chapayev.” And as the text is becoming palpable, I see that it’s not so bad, but it requires a reworking in the direction of eliminating looseness. With my dictation, he returns to his works and he will finish them, and I’ll keep the “cursed” original version, necessary for my work in its nakedness.
которых материал был мертв. А главное—весь багаж расположил в порядке, дающем логическое и единственное целое. Черновики все у меня—когда увидишь, узнаешь, что это такое. А мне даже жутковато—ведь будут читать гениального Мандельштама, а без меня, клянусь,—были бы “Кама,” “Чернозем” (уже мною довершенный же), да куча мелочей неживых и грязноватых.

at the same time—a huge amount of work on Mandelstam. Lina, it is frightful: from cuttings and rough drafts, together with “Black Soil” and the “Kamas,” and from the variants of “Bolshevik,” we (first I, then he) made a little over 100 verses. I have reworked the “Stanzas” (the original text has been rescued, and rejected). The frightful thing is that this is no longer “advice” but real work—mine (really mine!). O. had not anticipated this, he becomes sheepish and stubborn—but, on his material, I make such refinements that he cannot refuse, I make such insertions (of a line or half-a-line), such substitutions that it becomes clear that up until then the material had been dead. Most important—I’ve arranged the whole baggage in an order that makes a logical and the sole possible whole. I have all the drafts—when you see them, you will understand what they are. I even shudder at the thought—others will read the brilliant Mandelstam, but without me, I swear, there would only be “Kama” and “Black Soil” (also completed by me) and a pile of lifeless and muddy trifles.

23 May 1935

Пишу карандашом, потому что тушь у М. Сегодня там занимались диктовкой (уже около 300 стихов!). Ах, Лика! что это? Этим я искусственно остановил, нейтрализовал разрушение новых стихов. Он весь в припоминании, Лика—чудо, что мы встретились. Сейчас он ежедневно долбит: работайте, пишите—и у меня будут новые вещи. А работа о нем будет изумительна.

I am writing in pencil because the ink is at M’s. Today we did dictation there (and have around 300 verses!). Oh, Lika! what is it? This is how I stopped, neutralized artificially, the destruction of the new poems. He is lost in remembrance. Lika, it is a miracle that we have met. Every day now he drones: “keep working, keep writing—and I will have new works.” And my work about him is going to be amazing.

24 May 1935

Депрессия.
Лежит и скулит, что написал только “Каму” и “Чернозем,” а остальное—чепуха. Цикл его гнетет, и он слабеет.

Беру бумагу и читаю ему подряд (читаю воспитательно) –после каждой вещи—“видите—хорошо, а не чепуха, и хорошо тем-то и тем-то.” Он молчит—а у него вертятся какие-то полуварианты, интересные, но к делу (цикл) не идущие. В целом—он колеблется. Говорит, что я изумительно читаю (это лучше диплома). Я так люблю, когда ценят мое чтение.

Идучи на телефон, говорю ему—“Слушайте—период ‘мне кажется, мы (т. е. я) говорить ДОЛЖНЫ’—кончен, т. е. кончен цикл открытых политических стихов. Теперь вы—вольноотпущенник, и не должны, а вольны. Последние вещи живут отдельно, а это сейчас самое главное.” Он счастлив, поняв это.

Depression.

He is lying down and whining that he’s written only “Kama” and “Black Soil,” and the rest is worthless. The cycle is oppressing him, and he is growing weak.

I pick up the sheets and read to him (read didactically), saying after each poem, “see, this is good, not worthless, and it is good because of this or of that.” He is silent, he’s got some half-variants on his mind, interesting, but unrelated to the present cycle. Overall—he hesitates. He says that I read amazingly (this is better than a diploma). I love it when my reading is appreciated.

As I leave for the telephone, I say to him, “Listen, the period of ‘It seems to me that we (that is, I) MUST speak’ is over, i. e., the cycle of openly political poems is finished. Now you are a free man, and it is not a matter of must but of may. The latest pieces live a separate life, and this is what’s most important now.” He understood, and he is happy.

26 May 1935

Посмертно—стихи все завещаны мне—его собственные слова: “Вы будете моим единственным душеприказчиком и издателем Мандельштама.” Сейчас Надин, может быть, уже привезет старые вещи из дому.

Я сочинил еще полстиха с белыми ночами в “Чапаеве.”
Posthumously, all the poems are bequeathed to me—these are his own words: “You will be my sole executor and the publisher of Mandelstam.” Now Nadine will perhaps bring the old pieces from home.

I have composed another half-verse with white nights for “Chapayev.”

29 May 1935

У М. новая стадия—он почти публично меня расхваливает, говорит о “сотрудничестве” в его вещах, диким ревом голоса выделяя в чтении строки, написанные или поправленные мной. Из-за последней редакции “Чапаева” […]—дикие споры. А в целом—это совершенно изумительно. Сейчас 1930-1933 годов—надиктовано 406 строк (а в журналах около 250, да будет диктованья еще около 150.)

M. has entered a new stage—he praises me almost publicly, talks about “collaboration” on his things, when reading, he announces lines written or corrected by me with horrific roaring. Savage arguments over the final version of “Chapayev” […]. But on the whole this is all completely amazing. Now, of 1930-1933 we have 406 lines (and there are only 250 in the magazines, and there should be around 150 more lines of dictation).

1 June 1935

Его стихи без меня уже немыслимы такими.

His poems as they are now are inconceivable without me.

15 June 1935

Надин по-дамски меня “уничтожает” и полемизирует с моей правкой его вещей.

Nadine is “annihilating” me in her female way, and engages in polemics with my corrections of his things.

18 June 1935

Мы вчера вечером надиктовали (мне) около 150 строк.
Лика, со мною заканчивалась, сегодня кончена “Баринова” (23 строки). Во время работы—Надин вмешалась (оттирая меня и смазывая мои разговоры). Он: “Надюша, мы должны побьть одни, это может только С. Б.” Она примирилась и счастлива по-своему.

Last night we dictated (to me) around 150 lines.

Lika, “Barinova” was finished in my presence (23 lines). During work, Nadine interfered (pressing me aside and smudging my conversation). He: “Nadyusha, we need to be alone, this is something that only S. B. can do.” She came to terms with it and is happy in her own way.

23 June 1935

Сцена: он лежит на диване, я лежу около.

A scene: he lies on the sofa, I lie near him.

27 June 1935

О. написал 10-стишие. О море и Стамбуле. Первый стих:

Бежит волна волны волне хребет ломая

Я в спор об идиоме: “волна волны” (что это такое?), хотя сам факт употребления одного слова троекратно в падежном изменении очень интересен, и в частности дает интереснейшее ритмическое движение здесь, раскачку. Еще несколько замечаний. Оська на дьбы. Надин рада, что спор со мной, и похваляет. Он ушел чинить сапоги и долго один бродил по городу, терзаем сомнениями. К вечеру сделано:

Бежит волна—волне хребет etc.

t.e. нарушена связь “волна волны,” а зависимость с изменением падежа дала смысловую связь между всеми тремя волнами. И натурализ, и принципиально здорово (вот где слава Хлебникову!). Сохранен чудный черновик. Вещь очень хороша. Надин во время конца доработки изгнана (“Надюша, это дело семейное, оставь нас!!?”).

O. wrote a 10-verse poem about the sea and Istanbul. The first verse:
A wave of wave a wave’s back breaking

I lunge into an argument about the idiom: “a wave of wave” (what is this?), although the fact of using the same word thrice, with a variance of declension endings, is interesting, and here in particular gives a most interesting rhythmic movement, amplification. A few more points. Oska is all up in arms. Nadine gloats that there’s an argument with me and cheers him on. He left to get his boots repaired and roamed around town alone, tormented by doubts. By evening, we have this:

A wave runs breaking the wave’s back etc.

i. e. the connection “wave of wave” has been undone, and the declension variance gave a new meaningful connection between all three waves. It is naturalistic, and great in principle (glory to Khlebnikov!). A marvelous draft is preserved. The thing is very good. Nadine has been expelled during the final stage (“Nadyusha, this is a family matter, leave us!?!”) 

Увидел в блокноте, тобою присланном, “Осенние приметы” Заболоцкого. Попросил прочесть. Я чудно прочел. Он (и Н.) охали и оживлялись. В конце он сделал умный вид и стал многословно ругать. Ругань такая—“Обращение к читателю как к идиоту, поучение (‘и мы должны понять’)—тоже Тютчев нашелся… Природа-то перечислена—тоже Гете нашелся… Это капитан Лебядкин, это не стихи… В хвост и в гриву использован формалистический прозаический прием отстранения (я поправил: ostraneniye)… Все на нездоровой основе. И стихи-то не Заболоцкого, а ваши.”

He saw in the notebook you’d sent me Zabolotsky’s “Signs of Autumn.” Asked me to read. I read wonderfully. He (and N.) oohed and livened up. At the end he put on a smart face and began to dress it down. The dressing down is of this sort: “Treating the reader like an idiot, lecturing (‘we must distinguish’)—look at this Tyutchev… Nature is done by the numbers—look at this Goethe… This is captain Lebyadkin, not poetry… The formalistic prosaic device of ostraneniye is used heads and tails (I corrected him: ostraneniye1)… Everything rests on an unhealthy foundation. And the poems are not Zabolotsky’s but your own.”

The full text of Zabolotsky’s “Autumn” is this:

1 Defamiliarization.
Когда минует день и освещение
Природа выбирает не сама,
Осенних рощ большие помещения
Стоят на воздухе, как чистые дома.
В них ястребы живут, вороны в них ночуют,
И облака вверху, как призраки, кочуют.

Осенних листьев ссохлось вещество
И землю всю устлало. В отдалении
На четырех ногах большое существо
Идет, мыча, в туманное селение.
Бык, бык! Ужели больше ты не царь?
Кленовый лист напоминает нам янтарь.

Дух Осени, дай силу мне владеть пером!
В строение воздуха - присутствие алмаза.
Бык скрылся за углом, и солнечная масса
Туманным шаром над землей висит,
И край земли, мерцая, кровенит.

Вращая круглым глазом из-под век,
Летит внизу большая птица.
В ее движенье чувствуется человек.
По крайней мере, он таится
В своем зародыше меж двух широких крыл.
Жук домик между листьев приоткрыл.

Архитектура Осени. Расположенье в ней
Воздушного пространства, рощи, речки,
Расположение животных и людей,
Когда летят по воздуху колечки
И завитушки листьев, и особый свет,-
Вот то, что выберем среди других примет.

Жук домик между листьев приоткрыл
И рожки выставив, выглядывает,
Жук разных корешков себе нарыл
И в кучку складывает,
Потом трубит в свой маленький рожок
И вновь скрывается, как маленький божок.

Но вот приходит вечер. Все, что было чистым,
Пространственным, светящимся, сухим,-
Все стало серым, неприятным, мглистым, 
Неразличимым. Ветер гонит дым, 
Вращает воздух, листья валят ворохом 
И верх земли взрывает порохом.

И вся природа начинает леденеть. 
Лист клена, словно медь, 
Звенит, ударившись о маленький сучок. 
И мы должны понять, что это есть значок, 
Который посылает нам природа, 
Вступившая в другое время года.

When the day is gone and nature 
Does not choose voluntarily its light, 
The autumn forests’ great enclosures 
Stand like clean houses in the open air. 
Hawks live inside them, crows take shelter in the night, 
And clouds, like ghosts, drift above it all.

The desiccated substance of the leaves 
Carpets the ground. In the distance 
A great being on four legs 
Walks, mooing, to the village hidden by a fog. 
Bull, bull—are you no longer King? 
The maple leaf reminds us of amber.

Fall Spirit, grant me the power 
To wield the quill. The structure of the air 
Has something of a diamond. The bull 
Has disappeared around the corner, 
And the suspended solar mass 
Shimmers and bloodies the edge of the earth.

Turning a large round eye beneath a lid, 
A great bird flies below. Its movements 
Betray a human—at the very least, 
A human can be felt in embryo 
Between its two broad wings. 
A beetle opened up his house in the leaves.

Autumn’s architecture: the placement in it 
Of forest, river, of aerial volumes, 
The placement of animal and human figures,
When arabesques and rings of leaves  
Fly through the air in that special light—  
These are the features that make up the scene.

The beetle opened up his little house  
And peeks out through the crack, with his antennae raised.  
The beetle gathers  
Different roots and stashes them in a small heap,  
He blows into his horn so daintily  
And disappears, like a little deity.

But evening comes, and all that had been dry,  
Light, voluminous, and clear,  
Becomes gray, unpleasant, murky,  
Indistinct. The wind chases  
The smoke, twirls the air, throws heaps  
Of leaves upon the ground, and explodes them.

All nature now turns to ice.  
The maple leaf has the ring of copper  
When it falls and strikes a little twig.  
We must distinguish here  
A sign that nature sends when entering  
A new time in the cycle of the year.

29 June 1935

В твой белый блокнот надиктовано больше ста пятидесяти строк, а главное: обнаружились вещи, им начисто забытые. Это дикарское бескультурье и с его, и с Н. стороны—ничто не записано. Вещи браковались и иногда дальше очумелой Н. не шли. Вещи порой первоклассные. Куча коктебельских стихов невозвратима, а эти попутан психуют из-за потери коктебельских камешков.

У Н. постепенно выветривается ко мне недоверие (точнее, нежелание пускать к черновому наследству). И, смущенная моей руганью по поводу утерянного, она даже обещала записать потихоньку то, что О. не дал сдуру. С напечатанными по журналам 1930 г.—у меня сейчас более 1000 строк. Главное то, что О. Э. стал пытаться восстановить стихи об Ариosto. И из полуразбитых обломков стало нами строиться новое стихотворение. Лика, честное слово—план (количество строф и строк в них, тематика строф, созданная по полустрочным обрывкам)—мой. Вся композиция—лицо
вещи—и она прекрасна, стройна. Кроме мелочей—последняя, заключительная строка—моя, мое центральное место (1 ½ строчки) в середине вещи. Оська смущен и … старается делать вид, что я “только помогал.” Это стало так обидно, что я чуть не плюнул и собрался все бросить и уйти. Какая-то ослиная тупость, страх за свою славу.

In your white notebook I have written down from dictation more than a hundred and fifty lines, but most important, things he had forgotten completely have surfaced. It is sheer savagery, his and N.’s, that nothing had been written down. Things were discarded and often did not make it any further than the crazed N. First-class things at times. A pile of Koktebel poems is irretrievably lost, and these parrots are obsessing over the loss of Koktebel pebbles.

N.’s distrust in me (or, unwillingness to let anyone close to the inheritance of drafts) is airing out gradually. And, embarrassed by my scolding, she promised to write down on the sly what O. stupidly would not permit her. Together with what’s been published in the 1930 periodicals, I have more than 1000 lines. The main thing is that O. E. has begun restoring the verses about Ariosto. Out of half-forgotten scraps, we began to build a new poem. Lika, word of honor, the outline (the number of stanzas and of lines within, the theme of each stanza, created on the basis of half-line scraps)—it is mine. The whole composition—the face of the thing—and it is beautiful, even. Aside from minor things, the last, concluding line is mine, mine is a central place (1 ½ lines) in the middle of the thing. Oska is flummoxed and… tries to pretend that I was “only helping.” This became so offensive that I was on the verge of saying the hell with it and leaving. He is stubborn as an ass, afraid for his fame.

2 July 1935

У них тихая драма. А я повинен в ней. Все в стихах старых. У О. есть женские вещи, не ей посвященные, а есть вещи, написанные в часы, когда она думала не о нем (их она наизусть не помнит и не любит). Воспоминание для диктовки мне тех и других привело к воскрешению запретного прошлого. Они стали заниматься мельчайшими взаимоупреками и [...] излияниями мне горя своего. [...] А стихи, к слову сказать, становятся яснее и сильнее от этого.

A quiet drama between those two, and it is my fault. It’s all because of the old poems. O. has poems dedicated to women—not her—and things written when she thought about someone else (she does not like them and does not remember them by heart). Remembering for dictation both kinds of poems resurrected the forbidden past. They began to attack one another over every minute offence [...]
and pour out their grief to me. [...] The poems, by the way, are getting clearer and stronger because of this.

21 July, morning

Там только Н.—играли в шахматы. Она говорит: “Оська ругал вас самым пышным образом всю ночь и мне не давал спать. В результате стихи переделаны. Вы огромный молодец. Без вас он бы их не доделал.” Когда О. пришел—мне поднесены варианты на 7 страницах и напечатанный на машинке окончательный текст.

N. was alone—we played chess. She says: “Oska was cursing you all night with the worst of words and would not let me sleep. As a result, the poem is reworked. You are such a boon. He would not have finished it without you.” When O. came back, I was presented with variants on 7 pages and the final text, typed up on a typewriter.

21 July, evening

Я хитро ее познакомил с программой по Оське. Она обещала: 1) дать шуточные стихи; 2) из Москвы привезти все черновики и свои о нем дневники (!); 3) все что может стихового вспомнить; 4) написать его биоканву!! по датам. Рассказала обо всех его любовях, не щадя себя (т.е. хваля их—это форма самозащиты). Говорили о нем как о младенце. Она поможет—есть пафос в ее скрытом от него участии.

Cunningly, I introduced to her my program for Oska. She promised: 1) to give me the humorous poems; 2) to bring from Moscow all the drafts and her journals about him (!); 3) to remember all that she can of his verse; 4) to write a biographical outline of his!!—day by day. She told me everything about his past loves, without sparing herself (i. e. praising them—this is a form of self-defense). We spoke about him as if he were an infant. She will help—there is pathos in her clandestine participation.

31 July 1935

Они бодры. О. весел. Там было так. Жили они в Доме крестьянинна. О. пленил партийное руководство и имел лошадей и автомобиль и разъезжал по округе верст за 60—100 с партийцами знакомиться с делом. [...] По сути, он распустил перед ними хвост и действительно пленил личным обаянием
[...] A factically this may be material for new “Chernozemov”. He says: “This is a combination of kolkhoz and sovkhoz, an entire region (Vorobyevsky)—a true Texas with a complex scheme of alternating crops. The people are weak, but they do great work—the real art, they work the way I work on the poems.”

О яслях рассказывает, о колхозниках. [...] He says: “It is a combination of kolkhoz and sovkhoz, a single region (Vorobyovsky) that is a Texas to itself, with a highly complex scheme of alternating crops. The people are weak, but they’re doing great work—the real art, they work the way I work on the poems.”

He talks about stables and workers. [...] The fact is that he, without knowing the countryside—he saw the kolkhoz and understood it. But he adds: “I keep making mistakes, I’ll say about some leader that he is a sport and should be commanding a division, and the raykom secretary will reply that so-and-so is actually a useless worker; and the same thing with some woman worker. See, how deceptive it all is!”

He daydreams, like a child, of going there again.

Днем, ходячи по комнатах, рассказывал Лиле разные популярные куски своей концепции литературной. И вдруг нашел схему (словенную), по которой Гумилев и Хлебников предель, полоса поэзии. Между ними Оська, я etc. Все, что правее Гумилева—плохая поэзия (по ступеням), что левее Хлебникова—может быть и очень хорошо, но уже только жизнь, а не литература (т.е. отдельно—мышль—академик Павлов, например, и Марр, как идея языка). Из этого—без упрощения—могут выйти корни композиции. Это не вульгарно, потому что это не цель, а вспомогательное сооружение. Тут упоительно разместить имена (буквально диаграмму...
сделать). Это для себя—а выводы будут настоящие. Интересно? Может выйти что—нибудь?

During the day, walking from room to room, I was telling Lilya some of the easier pieces of my literary conception. And suddenly came upon a scheme (arbitrary), according to which Gumilyov and Khlebnikov are the limits, the poles of poetry. Between them, there’s Oska, myself, etc. Everything to the right of Gumilyov is bad poetry (in gradations), what’s to the left of Khlebnikov may be very good but it is only life, not literature (i. e. thought, Academician Pavlov, for example, or Marr, as an idea of language). This—without simplification—may spring the roots of composition. This is not vulgar because it is not an end in itself, only a preliminary construct. It would be intoxicating to fill it out with names (literally make a diagram). This is for personal use only—but the conclusions will be real. Do you think it interesting? Will it be any use?

2 August 1935

Он: “Я опять стою у этого распутья. Меня не принимает советская действительность. Еще хорошо, что не понял сейчас. Но делать то, что мне тут дают—не могу. Я не могу так: “посмотрел и увидел”. Нельзя, как бы на корову, уставиться и писать. Я всю жизнь с этим боролся. Я не могу описывать, описывать Господь Бог может или судебный пристав. Я не писатель. Я не могу так. Зачем это ездить в Воробьевку, чтобы описывать, почему это радуж зрения начинается за одиннадцать часов ползучки. Эта сомнений, которые бодрые и без (), летчиках непонятным сделать. Но этого бы не литература. А пробиться сквозь эту толщу в завтрашний или еще какой день не могу, нет сил. [. . .] У меня полуфабрикат ужасен, я или ничего не даю, или уже нечто энергетическое. Я хотел очерком подслужиться. А сам оскандалился. Стихами—кончил стихи; рецензиями напал глупости и отсебятину; очерком—публично показал свое неумение (он его показывал в редакции, и там сказали, что плохо). Это губит все. И морально, и материально. И бросает тень сомнения на всю мою деятельность и на стихи.” И т.д., и т.д.
Kitty, this is almost a verbatim record, only abbreviated a great deal. In real life, he laments, he is near tears. But there is no madness. It’s all sober, and he has assessed this whole period. I hope that it passes. That no new madness, no suicides will follow. But by the way Nadine has suddenly got herself together, and from her descriptions of the previous episode, and even from my own observations—I see that this is serious.
Mandelstam is howling. It is not the same Osip Emilyevich (or Osya) who ate dinner with us but the genius, Ovid’s equal, the one who feels that his poetry is in shambles. I cannot even be ironic here and only call him Oska out of habit.

Rudakov capitalized the “u” in “opportunism,” possibly to highlight a Russian pun on the words “opportunity” and “youth.” Poems of this period make it evident that the last word was for Mandelstam becoming synonymous with political conformity.

23 November 1935


O. is distracted and depressed. She calls him all the time, “My child, my fool” (all the time: “Fool, do you want tea?” etc.). This is her way of being tender. Or this: O. is sitting with his feet up on the bed. N: “I’ve seen children and old people in exile, but a monkey in exile—this is a first for me.” And O. smiles to this, with an idiotic expression.

20 January 1936

У М.—какая-то тупая примиренность, приглушенность, бесхитростность. Где все бури и полемики былых месяцев? О. Э. очень постарел и осел как-то.

M is in a state of dumb resignation, he appears reconciled and simple-minded. Where did they go, all the storms and polemics of the recent months? O. E. has aged a great deal and sagged somehow.

21 January 1936, morning.

Он меня страшал своей смертью.

He threatened me with his own death.
7 February 1936

The Pushkin House wants to buy O.’s archive. He refuses, leaving it to me, for my work, but remaining the legal owner.

17 March 1936

Again, an argument about my importance.

But even his best intentions would change nothing in my situation; it is offensive to see beside me a swinish devouring of my acorns, and it is disgusting to hear the ungrateful oinks.

26 June 1936

It is a strange sense of relief, to be without Oskas. They are “known.”

8 July 1936

In the letter for Nadine’s mother—a request to give me his (O. E.’s) old photographs. This, and yesterday’s Dante, are simply marvelous achievements.
In Moscow I’ll be able to pick up the necessary papers. This, and the overall tone of the meeting, will leave behind the best, not the worst, impression.

3. Mandelstam’s composition of an ode to Stalin would have caused less public consternation if it were not for the year of its writing, 1937—the peak year in the death toll of Stalin’s regime, which coincided with the centennial of Pushkin’s death.

The poem opens tentatively, as if feeling its way around explosives:

Когда я уголь взял для высшей похвалы —
Для радости рисунка непреложной,—
Я б воздух расчертил на хитрые углы
И осторожно и тревожно.

If I were to pick up the charcoal and to praise—
To take unquestionable joy in drawing—
I would have made divisions in the air,
Drafting each angle anxiously and cautiously.

Mandelstam thought that to write an ode was necessary for his survival after returning to Moscow from exile, but the lines of the poem that comment on the composition compare the difficulty of the task to finding a fulcrum to shift the earth from its orbit:

Я б рассказал о том, кто сдвинул мира ось,

I would tell of the one who shifted the earth’s axis,

matching the imaginary feat proposed by Archimedes. In search for more flattering figures, the poem resorts to superlative praise that indeed exhausts the poet’s resources,
for it imagines the other as one’s own Other, a mirror of oneself that already possesses all
the gifts one has to offer:

И в дружбе мудрых глаз найду для близнеца,
Какого не скажу, то выраженье, близясь
К которому, к нему,— вдруг узнаешь отца
И задыхаешься, почуя мир близость.

In the friendship of wise eyes shall I find for the twin,
Whose twin I cannot say, expression, in approaching
Which, when approaching him—you recognize a father
And suffocate in sensing the world’s closeness.

The nightmarish quality of this closeness—or the claustrophobic sense of space closing
in—mirrors the nightmare of composing to save one’s life, when the form of the poem
does not suggest itself, and lines must be added again and again, in fear that one too few
might be worse than none at all. When biography is exhausted—

Он родился в горах и горечь знал тюрьмы.

He was born in the mountains and knew the bitterness of prison.

and when the Kantian forest suggests no new growth—

Лес человечества за ним поет, густея,

the poem resorts to imitation:

Он свесился с трибуны, как с горы,
В бугры голов. Должник сильнее иска,
Могучие глаза решительно добра,
Густая бровь кому-то светит близко,
И я хотел бы стрелкой указать
На твердость рта — отца речей упрямых,
Лепное, сложное, кругое веко — знать,
Работает из миллиона рамок.
Весь — откровенность, весь — признанья медь,
И зоркий слух, не терпящий сурдинки,
На всех готовых жить и умереть
Бегут, играя, хмурьи морщинки.

He rests atop the tribune’s mountain
Above the hills of heads. The debtor stronger
Than his creditors. Resolutely kind
Are those mighty eyes, the eyebrow shines,
And I would like to point out by an arrow
The firmness of the mouth—the father of stubborn speech—
The volume of the eyelid, which
Works from a million frames.
He is—sincerity, he is—confession’s brass,
His seeing ears that tolerate no falsehood,
At all those ready to live and die for him
Advance his wrinkles, playing like the waves.

Mandelstam may have been aware of Aleksandr Zharov’s poem “Lenin at the Third Convention of RKSM” (1926), and in the agony of composing an ode, he may have resorted to following the model of a poet who could write what was desired:

Не передать
Ни радости такой,
Ни клекота
Рукоплесканий жгучих…
К эстраде
Струдились мы
Тысячной толпой.
Зал грохотал
Овацией могучей.

Товарищ Ленин
Руку поднимал,
Молил пощады!..
Но “пощада”—мимо!
И, осажденный радостью, стоял
Он перед лагерем
Неумолимым…
— Скажи, Ильич,
Что делать нам с собой,
С сердцами,
Вдребезги готовыми разбиться!
В боях мы были.
Вновь готовы в бой! —
А он нахмурился
И вдруг сказал:
— Учиться!

Ильич спокоен.
Снова и опять
Слова: мораль, ...
Труддисциплина…
Знанья…
О том,
Что надо смену воспитать
В коммунистическом
соревнованье.

… Мы этих слов
Не слышали вовек…
Они сложны,
Слова простые эти.
Не знали мы,
Что может человек
Так зорко разглядеть
Пути столетья.

Простой… Родной…
Лицо… Часы… Жилет…
В руке листок.
На нем рисунок: школа…

There’s no conveying
Of such joy,
The clapping there
That burned the palms…
We pressed against
The stage
As a thousand-person crowd.
A mighty ovation
Thundered in the hall.
Comrade Lenin
Raised his hand,
Begging for mercy!
But there was no mercy!
Besieged by joy, he stood
Before the implacable
Ranks.

Tell us, Ilyich,
What to do with ourselves
And our hearts,
Ready to break for you!
We’ve been in battles,
We would fight again!
And he, he frowned
And suddenly
Said, “Learn!”

Ilyich is calm.
Again and again,
The words “morale,”
“labor,” “discipline,”
And “knowledge”…
About the need to raise our successors
In communist
Competition.

We never heard
Such words before.
They are complex,
These simple words of his.
We had not known
That a man could see
So clearly
The paths of the century.

Simple and dear.
His face. His watch. His vest.
A paper in his hand.
A school is pictured on it.
The “Ode” stands apart from a cycle of poems in which Mandelstam contemplates Stalin, privately and freely. “The Birth of A Smile” imagines the divergent potentialities of a moment that closely follows birth—a moment of near-complete latency, when the baby’s face takes on its first voluntary expression. Innocent, although not blank, the smile of the baby signals the beginning of its “uncoiling”—the development of the personality hinted at by the presence of a “snail”—consonant, in Russian, with the “smile” ("улитка," "улыбка"). The poem has three established versions, all of which were composed at the close of 1936 and in January 1937. The second and third versions embrace and expand the one preceding it, as if trying to hold together a greater number of elements discovered in the composition of the poem. The first version of the poem, composed December 9-11, reads:

Когда заулыбается дитя
С прививкою и горечи и сласти,
Концы его улыбки, не шутя,
Уходят в океанское безвластье:

И цвет и вкус пространство потеряло.
На лапы задние поднялся материк,
Улитка выползла, улитка просияла,
Как два конца их радуга связала
И бьет в глаза один атлантов миг.

When a young baby breaks into a smile
Inoculated with both bitterness and sweetness,
Those opposites, the corners of his mouth,
Point to the oceanic anarchy and freedom:

The space has faded of its taste and color.
The continent reared up on the hind paws.
The snail came out, the snail shone.
Two ends tied by a single rainbow
Assault the eyes in one Atlantic moment.
The Russian “прививка” in the second line may be resolved as either “a graft” or “an inoculation” in English. The noun’s double meaning splits as neatly as the opposition of bitterness and sweetness; the poem goes on to speak of the merging of opposites in the oceanic “безвластье”—another noun that can read differently as “anarchy” or as “powerlessness.” This play of opposites is acknowledged in a slightly later version of the poem (finished on 6 or 7 of January) where “прививкою” in the second-line becomes “развилинкой”—“a split” of bitterness and sweetness:

Когда заулыбается дитя
С развилинкой и горечи и сласти,
Концы его улыбки, не шутя,
Уходят в океанское безвластье.
Ему непобедимо хорошо,
Углами губ оно играет в славе
И радужный уже строчится шов
Для бесконечного познанья яви.

When a young baby breaks into a smile
With the split twins of bitterness and sweetness,
Those opposites, the corners of his mouth,
Point to the oceanic anarchy and freedom:
He is invincibly content
And plays in glory with his mouth-corners,
The rainbow stitches being laid
For boundless discovery of phenomena.

The third stage of the poem adopts the ending of the first version and retains the second ending in the middle of the poem. Because the rephrased ideas are not entirely new, the variations swell up, signaling the importance of seeing each newly discovered manner of seeing as an addition to and an expansion of the point of view, not as an alternative that cancels those that preceded it. The rainbow that bends over a myriad droplets is a
visible—“phenomenal”—effect of the presence of the myriad points of moisture suspended in the atmosphere. The atmosphere of the poem is that of an exercise in suspension—suspending an increasing number of possible solutions of each line, including the splitting of a line—a unit—into more than one new line. The solution of the poem is the solution of the ocean, which itself is a solution, in water, of a myriad crystallized points of substance. The anarchic ocean is the mirror of the ordered spectrum of the rainbow, and the baby is like the ocean, and like the rainbow, when its smile holds up and plays with the full spectrum of his possible futures.

This imaginative suspension is necessary in order to consider the forces already present in the oceanic solution and will lead to a dreaded resolution, as contemplated by Cavafy:

On an ebony bedstead
adorned with eagles made of coral,
Nero lies deep in sleep—quiet, unconscious, happy:
in the prime of his body’s vigour;
in the beautiful ardour of his youth.

But in the alabaster hall
that holds the ancient shrine of the Ahenobarbi,
the Lares of his house are anxious.
These minor household gods are trembling,
trying to conceal their already negligible bodies.
For they heard a terrible noise,
a deadly sound spiraling up the staircase,
iron-soled footsteps shaking the steps.
The miserable Lares, near-fainting now,
huddle in the corner of the shrine,
jostling and stumbling over each other,
one little god falling over the next,
for they knew what sort of noise it was;
they recognize, by now, the footsteps of the Furies.¹

One might think it a stretch to liken the poem about a smiling baby to other poems
that avowedly contemplate tyrants. But “The Birth of a Smile” stretches, and reaches
towards poems in its vicinity in the order of composition—for instance, one of December
10-26:

Внутри горы бездействует кумир
В покоях бережных, безбрежных и счастливых,
А с шеи каплет ожерелий жир,
Оберегая сна приливы и отливы.

Когда он мальчик был и с ним играл павлин,
Его индийской радугой кормили,
Давали молока из розовых глин
И не жалели кошенили.

Кость усыпленная завязана узлом,
Очеловечены колени, руки, плечи,
Он улыбается своим тишайшим ртом,
Он мыслит костию и чувствует челом
И вспомнить силится свой облик человечий.

Inside the mountain, the idol idle lies,
His chambers tidy, boundless, and contented,
Necklace fat dribbling from his neck,
Guarding the tides of sleep’s highs and lows.

When he played with a peacock, as a boy,
Weaned from the breast with Indian rainbows
And milk poured into reddish clay
With cochineal aplenty.

¹ Constantine P. Cavafy, *Selected Poems*, translated with an introduction by Avi Sharon,
The sleeping bone is tied into a knot,
And human are the knees, the hands, the shoulders,
He smiles with his quietly sweet mouth,
He thinks within his bones, he feels with his forehead,
And struggles to remember himself as a man.

Sleep cycles, imagined as the highs and lows of oceanic tides, contain all of the potentialities of the self even as they cycle past a wakeful, humane self-awareness.

“Cochineal,” the red commercial food coloring, was used in the food industry, particularly that arm which served the sweet mouths and sweet teeth of cake lovers. The ingredient was important enough for the red state’s economy that Boris Kuzin, an entomologist, was dispatched to Armenia with the mission of assessing the prospects for domestic carmine production from Ararat cochineal insects. This trip led to Kuzin’s encounter with Mandelstam, in 1930—the encounter that later led to Kuzin’s arrest and exile as one of the witnesses of the “Stalin Epigram” in performance. It is Kuzin’s recollection of Mandelstam’s ability to vacillate and resist a resolution of his doubts that helps one understand how Mandelstam was capable of producing the whole range of poems between the extremes of the “Epigram” and the “Stalin Ode.” At the same time, even Kuzin’s fair-mindedness reads these vacillations as something that needs to be excused—unaware that

what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.¹

“The Birth of a Smile” not only belongs to the spectrum of Stalin poems but also supplies a commentary of Mandelstam’s striving towards something like this “negative capability.” His vacillations, however, are more like self-corrections of a man prone to extremes and aware of it. This, too, is attested by the pointillistic spectrum of poems as points-of-view that represents not a balanced solution but a series of attempted solutions to the question of Mandelstam’s relation to Stalin.

A different “birth of a smile” is envisioned in Robert Lowell’s “Under the Dentist,” dramatizing the submission of the dental patient, which, the title intimates, is in some ways like being “Under the Czar.” The recumbent posture of the dental patient makes the dentist’s chair perhaps the only kind of chair that one may lie in—lie, while gagged with one’s own open mouth:

lie in English means both to say something false while knowing it to be so, and to rest or (expressive of bodily posture) to be in a prostrate or recumbent position.¹

The importance of the lie/lie pun is that it concentrates an extraordinary ranging and profound network of truth-testing situations and postures. It brings mendacity up against those situations and postures which constitute the great moments or endurances of truth: the child-bed, the love-bed, the bed of sleep and dreams, the sick-bed, the death-bed, the grave. . . . And even perhaps the modern secular counterpart to the confessional’s kneeling: the psychiatrist’s couch.²

The horizontal chair at the dentist’s may join this list of truth-testing and endurance-testing beds. This New York poem touches many of the same nerves as “The Stalin Epigram.” A fourteen-line poem, as against Mandelstam’s sixteen, it opens by

¹ Christopher Ricks, “Lies,” The Force of Poetry, 369.
² Ricks, “Lies,” 380.
establishing that one’s senses are not to be heeded: “When I say you feel, I mean you don’t.” The voice speaking uses a second-person singular, as against the first-person plural in Mandelstam’s

Мы живем, под собою не чуя страны.

We live without sensing the ground beneath our feet.

The next line of the “Epigram,”

Наш речи за десять шагов не слышны,

Our speeches die down at ten paces away,

is matched by an absence of any speech on the part of the patient in the dentist’s chair,

Bob . . . you lie quiet, be very, very good—

Lowell having never been “Bob” but unable to object to the man who is being paid to be the midwife of his smile. Semi-recumbent and gagged by his own unnaturally opened mouth, the patient is made puerile, put in the position of subordination, as to endure a lecture:

Thinking burns out nerve;
that’s why you cub professors calcify.
You got brains, why do you smoke? I stopped smoking, drinking, not pussy . . .

The professor is being lectured, on nerves and nerve—courage, with the implicit comparison of the courage it takes to endure the proximity of steel instruments to one’s nerves, and the courage and manliness it takes to stop smoking—but not “pussy.”
Do you feel the jangling in your nerves?
You will feel the city jangling in your nerves,
a professor might even hear the cosmos jangle.
You watch news, the pictures will flick and jangle.

The jangle of the dental instruments, the ongoing reminder about possible pain, “in your nerves” (“be very, very good”)—as counterpoint for the “half-conversation” in Lowell’s 1968 translation of “The Epigram,”

They make touching and funny animal sounds.
He alone talks Russian.¹

Another half-conversation, with a symbolically ominous division of labor, is recalled by Steve Katz, one of Nabokov’s students and, in his student days, an “aspiring novelist” who dared to show a manuscript to his professor. Nabokov agreed to discuss it. More precisely, “Véra was the one to do so,” writes Stacy Schiff in her biography, Véra, “from the far corner of her husband’s office.” Katz, “sunk low in Nabokov’s armchair,” would remember later: “he leaned over me like the tallest dentist in the world, and occasionally supported her presentation by a word or a phrase,”²—“His words sure as weights of measure,” we might remember. One can imagine the impossibility, for someone constrained by decorum, of replying to a distant interlocutor past the figure of one’s respected professor whose emissary is speaking across the room, or, for that matter, replying directly to one’s real interlocutor who ventriloquizes through his wife and

² Stacy Schiff, Véra (Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov), New York: The Modern Library, 2000, 177.
ignoring Mrs. Nabokov herself. Schiff does not notice Nabokov’s mastery of the double bind situation and its inherent cruelty. The playfulness with which the couple managed the situation is presented as a charming idiosyncrasy. There is no more perfect disguise for unkindness.

Among the poet-translators who gave us versions of Mandelstam in English, Lowell is remarkable because of his own deep-seated preoccupations with tyranny, the candor of his self-questioning on the matter which would not permit a premature finality of his answers to himself, which nevertheless are not at all evasive. Lowell’s 1964 collection of poems, *For the Union Dead*, contains a long poem for Caligula—the schoolchild Cal’s namesake, “Little Boots,” a once-child who sucked his thumb and left a small footprint, whose adult

> regal
> hand accepts my hand. You bend my wrist,
> and tear the tendons with your stranger’s twist . . .

This is the hand that leaves

> a clammy snail’s trail on your soggy sleeve . . .
> a hand no hand will hold . . . nose thin, thin neck—
> you wish the Romans had a single neck!

The scary massaging of the “neck” enacted by the repetition of “thin neck,” “a single neck”—that, preceded by the tightly clasped chiasmus of “nose thin, thin neck,” evolved out of the syntax of the heroic couplet: there is a terrible feeling of strangulation and suffocation in these lines that move from noting the constrained air passages of their subject to the wish that all Romans “had a single neck”—the better to be strangled by.
The main features of “Caligula” precede Lowell’s 1968 translation of Mandelstam’s “Stalin Epigram,” titled “Stalin” by Lowell and containing lines and phrases “His thick fingers are fat as worms,” “his thin-necked, drained advisors,” “he plays with them. He is happy with half-men around him,” with the touch of the happy self-forgetting of childhood play, eased by the diminishment to half-size of the full-grown advisors. “They make touching and funny animal sounds” for the ruler who might well be addressed by the lines of “Caligula”:

you betray no friend
now that no animal will share your bed.

Nine years later, these features reappear in the “Caligula” of History (1973), compacted into an unrhymed sonnet, where “your soggy sleeve” is refined to “your scarlet sleeve,” “nose thin, thin neck” becomes “bald head, thin neck,” and the exclamation mark is replaced by a sober period.

“Small thing, where are you?”—the question in the middle of the 1964 poem—was answered in its final lines with a diagnosis:

yours the lawlessness
of something simple that has lost its law,
my namesake, and the last Caligula.

This diagnosis remains unchanged in History, but the final appeal is now sounded as

my namesake, not the last Caligula.

One gets the sense that this revision does not cancel out the prior choice, even though the two final phrases are logical opposites. In one sense, there is and always will be only one
Caligula. In the other sense, there are and will be others of that kind “of something simple that has lost its law,” something no longer simple but a tangled “arabesque” of indiscernible species in the opening figure of “Stalin” in the same volume,

an arabesque, imperfect and alive,
a hundred hues of green, the darkest shades
fall short of black, the whitest leaf-back short of white.

Neither black nor white, but made menacing by making the stems that support it “creak like things of man,” echoing at once the Kantian “crooked timber” and Stalin’s well-known exploitation of the metaphor: “When you cut the forest, woodchips fly.” A bewildered question—“Stalin?”—is followed by a more specific question—

What shot him clawing up the tree of power—
millions plowed under with the crops they grew,
his intimates dying like the spider-bridegroom?

and a considered answer then emerges:

The large stomach could only chew success. What raised him
was an unusual lust to break the icon,
joke cruelly, seriously, and be himself.

What happens if we stay with the thought of Stalin as female—the female of the spider, disposing of those who were made her “intimates” by a prior, implied intimacy that presumably led to “the large stomach”? If we are in the world of Empson’s “Arachne” and of

Male spiders must not be too early slain.¹

¹ William Empson, The Complete Poems, 34.
then we must decide whether Lowell’s lines were prompted by some essential femaleness in Stalin or by something Stalinesque in Lowell’s women, for, if the former is true, Lowell’s knowledge of women illuminates the subject of the poem, and if the latter, then it contaminates the poem with the residue of an experience that does not belong there. But the “unusual lust,” or the “usual lust”—a variant that appeared in another printing—is lust all the same, perhaps usual in kind and unusual in degree—the same spontaneous and preconscious lust that unites living things malignant and benign, alive and therefore imperfect, and neither black nor white. The opposites of “usual” and “unusual” are, then, both possible, and be it one or the other, we know that the correct term is found along the axis that binds the two.

There is an openness to risk in Lowell’s avowal of some answer, in the end of each of these poems, to a question posed in the same transparent manner. Both “Caligula,” more visibly the 1964 version of the poem, and “Stalin” proceed from some first-hand experience that assists in framing the puzzle, to a statement of the puzzle, a question, and finally to a commitment to some answer. These answers we see revised by Lowell to include polar opposites of meaning: “the last Caligula” becomes “not the last Caligula” (perhaps because “last” can mean merely “the latest” instead of “final”) and Stalin’s “unusual lust” is elsewhere a “usual lust.” These uncertainties, implanted within what sounds in each instance as Lowell’s best answer in his own not at all evasive self-interrogation, indicate a greater certainty that the full answer has something to do with the relation of anomaly to norm, individuality to type, one to many.
We find in Mandelstam a similar awareness of an axis uniting opposites as possible alternatives. A poem dated February 8, 1937, written at the time when Mandelstam was preoccupied with his “Ode” to Stalin, explores and exploits one such axis:

Armed with the vision of the pointy wasps
That suck at the earth’s axis—the earth’s axis,
I sense all things that I encountered once,
Remember them by heart—a pointless praxis.

I do not draw or sing or draw across
A bow that might sing in a black timbre,
I simply cling to life and drink of it and envy
Those mighty and conniving wasps.

If only that the summer warmth,
The sting of air, bypassing death and slumber,
Would make me hear the axis of the earth,
Its somber and portentous rumble.

What is missing from this translation is the odd connection between the “wasps” and the “axis.” The two Russian words are not exactly homonymous—unless the speaker fails to
soften the final “с” of “ось”—the Russian for “axis”—pronouncing the word identically with “ос”—“wasps” in the genitive case. Imitating this peculiarity is the easiest way to mimic a heavy Georgian accent, but the one Georgian of particular interest to Mandelstam—the one’s name, Iosif, being a variant of the other’s, Osip—might once have answered to the diminutive “Osya,” or a call, “Ось!” homonymous with “ось,” “axis.” “Оська,” Nadezhda Mandelstam’s habitual nickname for her husband, was on one end of an axis that had Stalin’s “wasps” at its other end. Mandelstam devoted a number of poems to exploring the idea of Stalin as his own alter ego, and of himself as the doomed weaker twin. He cherished the opposition with its opportunities for both antagonism and unity. The precaution to take here is not to conflate these diverse potentials under the label of “identification,” since what constitutes the Stalin cycle of poems is a series of conscious experiments with sympathy and with degrees of compromise or jeopardy involved in each of the attempted attitudes.

Osip—and his Iosif; Cal—and his Caligula: the former found himself doomed and pitiable in opposition to his “mighty and conniving” alter ego; the other, across a historic distance, but also with a keen sense for needed prophylaxis, moved to “Pity the monsters.”

4. None of the poems concerned with Stalin were included in the first posthumous edition of Mandelstam, prepared by Nikolay Khardzhiev with the assistance of Nadezhda Mandelstam and published in 1973 under the aegis of “Библиотека поэта,” “Poet’s
This omission of all poems engaging recognizably with Stalin was complementary to the omission, from the biographical introduction to the volume, of Mandelstam’s persecution and death as a political prisoner. But whereas Khardzhiev’s omissions garnered no harsh criticism, the introduction, written by Aleksandr Dymshitz, was received with rancor for what was seen as compromising cynicism, even under the circumstances that made some compromises necessary and inevitable. The edition—defended, in spite of its flaws, as an achievement of ending a four-decade-long embargo on Mandelstam—became an emblem of the pervasive hypocrisies of its era. Dymshitz was notoriously memorialized in verse by Sergey Gandlevsky, in the lines of his “Elegy”:

И разом вспомнишь, как там дышится,  
Какая слышится там гамма.  
И синий с предисловьем Дымшица  
Выходит томик Мандельштама.

Как раз и молодость кончается,  
Гербарный василек в тетради.  
Кто в США, кто в Коми мается,  
Как некогда сказал Саади.

At once you will recall what it is like to breathe there,  
What sort of scales are sounded in that air.  
A blue volume of Mandelstam  
Faces the world, prefaced by Dymshitz.

My youth is nearing the end,  
A cornflower, dried up in a notebook.  
Some are exiled to USA, and some to Komi,  
As the great Saadi had once said.

The history of this edition parallels that of the first posthumous edition of Perez Markish, which came out under the same imprint of the Poet’s Library five years earlier, in 1968.¹ Like Mandelstam, Perez Markish died a victim of Stalin’s regime: on August 12, 1952, he was executed by a firing squad together with a group of writers all of whom belonged to the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. Three years later, Markish was rehabilitated, “due to a lack of criminal component.” The collected edition of his poems makes no acknowledgment, in the preface or elsewhere, of Markish’s trial and execution. His “tragic death” is mentioned without elaboration of the nature of that tragedy.

Publishing Markish’s collected edition was difficult. Once the official rehabilitation of Markish himself had been achieved, his widow, Esther Markish, set to work on the edition that could become a worthy memorial to her husband. The couple’s son, Shimon Markish, recalls his mother’s desire to “embellish” the edition with the names of the best living poets as translators of her husband’s poems from Yiddish. She was greatly disappointed when Boris Pasternak refused the invitation to contribute, promptly and unequivocally. He explained his refusal by pointing out that anyone who truly valued him would wish to foster his own poetry instead of pushing him to waste his energies on translation. Prejudice against the work of translation was common (Mandelstam’s letters contain numerous complaints of this kind). Nevertheless, Pasternak was an active translator, not only of English literature, but also of Georgian poetry, for which he relied on trots. His reliable instincts may have steered him away from engaging

with a poet who, in the preface to his own posthumous edition, was characterized lukewarmly as “an outstanding Jewish Soviet poet” who “opened a new page in the history of his people’s literature and contributed to the development of the multinational Soviet literature.”

The false internationalism of this message asks us not to forget that Markish’s importance is chiefly a national one, to his people, while Yiddish literature itself is but a minor stream destined to merge with the whole of Soviet literature. Within that whole, the Russian literature plays much the same role of the “elder brother” that the Russian Federation played with regard to the other fourteen republics under the USSR. This situation receded back to the Stalin era:

When, under Stalin, the concept of a ‘single, multi-national Soviet literature’ was implemented in the USSR—a concept supported by the authority of Gorky—the effect was to deprive all the non-Russian literatures, then and now known as “national” literatures, of their national status and to reduce them to the status of provincial literatures.¹

The special prejudice against the Jewish culture shows in the bashfulness with which Narovchatov alludes to Markish’s origins in his introduction to the edition: “Fortunately for his people, and for all of us, Soviet readers” Markish “possessed the talents of an epic poet, novelist and dramatist.” The bashfulness of hinting at “his people,” contrasted with the proud inclusiveness of “all of us, Soviet readers,” makes evident the unease about

Markish’s Jewish identity. The anti-Semitism of pogroms has been replaced by the anti-Semitism of shame and evasiveness.

Publication by the Poet’s Library was undoubtedly a tribute to Markish and his importance to Soviet literature. The series had a fine reputation, earned by maintaining high scholarly and editorial standards that made it a coveted employer for ambitious scholars like Rudakov.¹ At the same time, the series was subject to state meddling. Compromises had to be made, and the alternative to making certain omissions would have been a total and indefinite suspension of the publication. Leningrad, where the blue volumes of the Poet’s Library were published, was also the city where Joseph Brodsky was prosecuted and confined to an asylum. 1973, the year of publication of the Mandelstam edition, was the year Brodsky was expelled from the Soviet Union. Comparing the editorial boards of the Markish and Mandelstam editions, one notices that sometime between 1968 and 1973 the Poet’s Library series editor, V. N. Orlov, had lost his job. The particulars of the Orlov affair were described in the memoirs of the philologist and critic Efim Etkind. According to Etkind, Orlov was removed from office after he finished editing an anthology titled Lenin in the National Poetries of the USSR. The introduction written by Orlov contained a phrase attributing the origins of the Soviet Leniniana to “the poetry of Mayakovsky, Tikhonov, and Pasternak.” Etkind explains why this was misguided:

¹ Gerstein, Мемуары, 85.
Можно ли ставить в один ряд Маяковского, автора поэмы “Владимир Ильич Ленин,” и Пастернака, автора “Высокой болезни,” поэмы темной и сомнительной?

Все это особенно смешно еще потому, что “Высокая болезнь” Пастернака была опубликована именно Маяковским в его журнале “ЛЕФ,” в 1924 году. Поэму “Хорошо!” Маяковский подарил Пастернаку с надписью: “Борису Вол[одя] с дружбой, нежностью, любовью, уважением, товариществом, привычкой, сочувствием, восхищением, и пр. и пр. и пр.,” не думая, что через сорок лет Орлова снимут с должности руководителя “Библиотеки поэта” за то, что он позволил поставить рядом имена людей, любивших и уважавших друг друга.

Could one possibly mention in one sentence the names of Mayakovsky, the author of the poem “Vladimir Il’yich Lenin,” and Pasternak, the author of “The Noble Disease,” a dark and dubious poem?

This is especially funny because it was Mayakovsky who published Pasternak’s “The Noble Disease” in his journal LEF, in 1924. Mayakovsky presented his poem “Horosho!” to Pasternak with an inscription: “To Boris, Volodya—with friendship, tenderness, love, respect, camaraderie, attachment, sympathy, admiration, etc., etc., etc.,” not thinking that in forty years Orlov would be removed from office as the head of Poet’s Library because he dared to put side-by-side the names of two people who loved and respected one another.1

Etkind had earned his right to irony by bitter experience. In 1968, in order to save his own job, Etkind was forced to write the following letter of apology:

Уважаемые товарищи!

Зная, что 22 октября на бюро обкома состоится обсуждение вопроса, связанного с составленной мною книгой “Мастера русского стихотворного перевода” (Библиотека поэта), счиаю своим долгом заявить следующее:

Во вступительной статье к этой книге, в заключительном абзаце статьи, мною допущена неверная характеристика развития советской поэзии. Я отдаю себе отчет в том, что фраза о поэтах, которые не могли “высказать

Dear Comrades!

Knowing that on the 22 September the bureau of obkom [regional committee] is to discuss the question concerning the volume Masters of Russian Poetic Translation (Poet’s Library), which I edited, I consider it my duty to state the following:

In the final paragraph of my introduction to this book, I have permitted myself an incorrect characterization of the development of Soviet poetry. I realize that the phrase concerning poets who could not “express themselves fully in original verse” and therefore became professional translators can be seen objectively as politically erroneous. It was formulated so imprecisely and with such a degree of generalization that it might have painted a false picture of the development of Soviet literature and misinformed the reader, had the book gotten published.

I did not mean to make any far-reaching political statements. However, I realize that no matter what my intentions may have been, I have committed a gross mistake, for which I must assume complete responsibility.

After quoting this letter in his memoir, he adds another apology to his own reader:

Если я здесь, в этой книге, решаюсь привести свое постыдно компромиссное заявление, то делаю это по двум причинам: во-первых, чтобы быть честным и не идеализировать степень моей устойчивости; во-вторых, чтобы читатель осознал, до каких глубин позора, до какой рабской зависимости доведен у нас всякий человек. И в особенности литератор.

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1 Etkind, 127.
If I dare to quote my shamefully compromising letter, I do it for two reasons: first, in order to be honest and not to idealize the degree of my steadfastness; second, so that the reader may see the depths of disgrace, the slavish dependency that every person in our country has been reduced to. Especially a person of letters.

The removal of Orlov ushered in a new rhetorical vigilance. In the 1973 edition, Mandelstam is presented as one of “the first generation of Soviet poets,” whose legacy, although “ordinarily associated with Acmeism,” in fact supersedes the aims of this particular literary group.

Dymshitz’s introduction begins with a falsehood: “Let us begin with the poet’s biography […] Osip Emil’yevich Mandelstam was born in Petersburg.” Nadezhda Mandelstam worked closely with the editor, Nikolai Khardzhiev, and either of the two could have supplied the fact that Mandelstam was born in Warsaw. Supposing the error was not an error at all, but a deliberate alteration of facts, one wonders whether this was done to avoid anything that could have cast a shadow over Mandelstam—only recently a persona non grata. The poet’s education at Sorbonne and Heidelberg universities also presented a problem—something that Dymshitz made politically acceptable by remarking that Russia during those years was suffering from a “resurgence of counter-revolutionary sentiment.” Clearly, a truly revolutionary poet would do what Mandelstam did: wait it out in France and Germany.

Mandelstam’s desperate attempts to find housing for himself and his wife (these attempts varied from writing letters to officials to publicly simulating heart attacks and seizures) were presented as the poet’s idiosyncratic penchant for changing places and camping in the spare rooms of his friends’ apartments. As for the biographical blemish of
Mandelstam’s exile, it was transformed into “a brief stay in Cherdyn’-on-Kama.” The decrepit town, where Mandelstam suffered through the post-traumatic psychosis and where he nearly killed himself by leaping out of a hospital window (as described in the “Stanzas,” printed on p. 180 of Khardzhiev’s edition), was turned into a pastoral riverside destination. “After a brief stay in Cherdyn’-on-Kama, he settled in Voronezh.” The arrests were left out. Mandelstam’s death was mentioned in nebulous terms: “In 1937, Mandelstam’s creative path came to an abrupt end. The poet died early in 1938.” (Early in 1938, Mandelstam was arrested in Samatikha. He would die at the end of the year, in transit to Kolyma.) The subsequent sections of Dymshitz’s introduction focus on Mandelstam’s poetry, striving to reconcile it with dialectical materialism.

As a younger colleague of Dymshitz, Etkind did not ordinarily feel entitled to criticize his one-time supervisor. However, the morning he read the Mandelstam foreword, he came to Dymshitz’s apartment to ask him: “Why did you do it?”¹ Dymshitz’s reply was unapologetic: “I have published Mandelstam.”

One could argue that poems are more important than poets, justifying an edition that put back into circulation the previously banned poems at the cost of appending falsified editorial matter. Dymshitz could have defended his conformity by quoting Mandelstam’s own words, remembered by Emma Gerstein as part of a burlesque scene:

—Понимаете, оказывается, я не имею права жить в Москве. Мы про это ничего не знали. В Воронеже, когда мне выдали паспорт, мне ни слова не сказали про какие-то там минусы (ограничения). Сегодня утром приходит милиционер и требует моего выезда из Москвы в течение 24 часов. Надя

¹ Etkind, 390.
пошла в город... шуметь... собирать деньги... А мы с вами вот что сейчас сделаем. Мы выйдем на лестницу, и я упаду в припадке. Вы подымете крик, выбежите на улицу, будете стоять перед нашим подъездом и сывать народ: “Безобразие! Поэта выкидывают из квартиры!! Больного поэта высылают из Москвы!!” Я буду биться тут же в подъезде. В это время появится уже Надя… Ну, идем.
Я оторопела.
—Нет, я не могу,— бормотала я.
—Но почему же?—Осип начинал сердиться.—Симуляция—самый испытаный метод политической борьбы.1

“You see, it turns out that I have no right to live in Moscow. . . . This morning a militia man came and demanded that I leave Moscow in 24 hours. Nadya has gone out, to make noise and gather money. And you and I, we shall do something right now. We shall go onto the stairs, and I shall fall down and have a seizure. You’ll start screaming, run into the street in front of our building, shrieking: “This is outrageous! A poet is being evicted from his apartment!! A sick poet is being deported from Moscow!!” I’ll be convulsing within sight, on the stairs. Then Nadya will show up. . . .”
I stopped in my tracks.
“No, I can’t,” I kept repeating.
He continued to plead with me.
“But why?” Osip was beginning to get irritated. “Simulation is the most effective method of political resistance.”

The final maxim does not settle anything. One simply had to settle, in 1973, for the blue volume with correct texts of many new poems.

1 Gerstein, Мемуары, 69.
1. When we speak of justice—as against fairness, for example—the figure of speech invokes certain ways in which justice is administered in the courts of law. When Czesław Miłosz wrote of the necessity to “put culture on trial,” he did not (or perhaps he did) mean just any kind of revaluation of received ideas:

The main reproach made to culture, a reproach at first too difficult to be formulated, then finally formulated, was that it maintained a network of meanings and symbols as a façade to hide the genocide under way. By the same token, religion, philosophy, and art became suspect as accomplices in deceiving man with lofty ideas, in order to veil the truth of existence. Only the biological seemed true, and everything was reduced to a struggle within the species, and to the survival of the fittest.¹

The figure of the trial (whether intended in this way or not) implies that what the situation calls for is a verdict. It implies more than that, in the same way that a rhetorical question supplies its own answer. The urgency of the call for a trial is related to the conviction that the verdict will be: “Guilty.”

The same figure of speech animates the notion of witness literature, which inherits the sense of “witness” used by John of Patmos:

¹ Miłosz, 81.
And I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years.¹

Where in the Apocalypse of John we encounter the word “witness,” the Greek original gives us “μάρτυς,” of the same root as “martyr.” The OED contains an etymological remark made by Hobbes in 1651: “Nor is it the Death of the Witnesse, but the Testimony it self that makes the Martyr: for the word signifieth nothing else, but the man that beareth Witnesse.”

Writers who testify of their experience of injustice are seen, in the context of witness literature, as instrumental to the restoration of justice, to some form of atonement and redemption. That we associate the words “atonement” and “redemption” with the Christian view of history is a part of this rhetoric, together with the implicit Manichaeism of Christianity, for which this world contains no morally neutral forces. The corollary Christian beliefs are that justice may be restored, shall be restored, and that what ultimately restores it is the reward of those found innocent and the punishment of those who turn out guilty on the Day of Judgment. Such a totality of salvation and of condemnation, which permanently assign a person her or his place in eternity, is only possible with the mitigating sacrifice of Christ. When Miłosz, a Catholic, writes of witness literature as a project of bringing culture on trial, the Christian connotations of

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¹ Rev. 20:4.
the metaphor are present to him—and they should be to us when we think of what it means to do justice to the memory of a poet.

In her book on the Victorian novel, *The Crime in Mind*, the legal and literary scholar Lisa Rodensky pointed out that the way in which our notions of justice are conditioned by the practical constraints faced by the courts of law:

Novels do not carry the responsibility of reducing the many possibilities they present to a single decision. They do not issue verdicts. But the law does. The practical and urgent necessities of the law require it to be guided by general rules, and, in the end, to reduce the complexities and ambiguities of a case to a particular holding. This, among other things, distinguishes the work of law from the work of art.¹

In calling in and cross-examining witnesses in this chapter, my ends are opposite of issuing a verdict. A man who is not a saint must not be derided for “less than saintly behavior.” As Boris Kuzin noted, “not to be a hero is not the same thing as to be a scoundrel.” Similarly, to be known chiefly as the widow of a great poet is not the same thing as to be a nobody. To be a witness, one does not have to be a saint or a martyr, and because art is not governed by the same standards of evidence as criminal procedure, one does not even have to be an eyewitness to be able to testify about truths one has realized imaginatively. To be an artist is to be a witness to the truth of life apprehended in its tangled complicatedness—as in the lines of Robert Lowell:

an arabesque, imperfect and alive,
a hundred hues of green, the darkest shades
fall short of black, the whitest leaf-back short of white.

The key witness of Mandelstam’s life and work is his widow, Nadezhda Mandelstam, whose memoirs are widely known and will not be discussed here. And yet, her writings set the stage for the struggle between those who mostly leaned towards promulgating “the cult of Mandelstam” (among them Anna Akhmatova) and witnesses who sought to balance the emerging picture by demystifying the Mandelstams and their circle (the greatest among them being Emma Gerstein).

Over the years, Nadezhda Mandelstam gradually alienated many of the friends who remembered her husband. In the 1960s and 1970s, her apartment became a place of frequent visits for many younger intellectuals—among them, Joseph Brodsky, Anatoliy Naiman, Yuriy Freidin, and Tatiana Levina. These people, too, wrote about Nadezhda Mandelstam—and struggled to find the right tone for their writings. Their difficulties had to do with their attitudes to both the Mandelstams, just as their feelings for Nadezhda Mandelstam were influenced by her widowhood, and by her status as the surviving Mandelstam, in contrast with her husband.

2. Joseph Brodsky’s obituary of Nadezhda Mandelstam established, in the English letters, how both of the Mandelstams were to be talked about thereafter.¹ Brodsky described Nadezhda Yakovlevna, with whom he became acquainted in the 1960s, as a non-possessor who had herself become immaterial but for a wisp of smoke emanating

from her cigarette. That smoke was brought into the same relation to the extinguished fire symbolic of Mandelstam as the surviving Mandelstam’s prose vis-à-vis the poetry with whose survival she was credited. Nadezhda Yakovlevna’s identity itself was largely confined by Brodsky to that of a “shadow”—a widow devoted to memorializing by memorization.

She was living in a small communal apartment consisting of two rooms. The first room was occupied by a woman whose name, ironically enough, was Nietsvetaeva (literally: Non-Tsvetaeva), the second was Mrs. Mandelstam’s. It was eight square meters large, the size of an average American bathroom. Most of the space was taken up by a cast-iron twin-sized bed; there were also two wicker chairs, a wardrobe chest with a small mirror, and an all-purpose bedside table, on which sat plates with the left-overs of her supper and, next to the plates, an open paperback copy of *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, by Isaiah Berlin. The presence of this red-covered book in this tiny cell, and the fact that she didn’t hide it under the pillow at the sound of the doorbell, meant precisely this: the beginning of respite.

The small room, “eight square meters large.” One can guess at the significance of Brodsky’s comparison of the widow’s dwelling to an American bathroom: by convention, calculations of “жилплощадь,” the living area of government-issued Soviet apartments, did not include the bathroom, considered auxiliary to what was often called simply “the room,” and the kitchen. That the widow of Russia’s foremost modern poet might live in a room that in America would only do as a bathroom: this, to Brodsky, is sure to impress his readers. But something else that’s unbecomingly out of place shows in “eight square meters large”: Brodsky is fascinated by the size of American bathrooms, even as he writes the obituary of Nadezhda Mandelstam.

Just as Brodsky himself had difficulty finding the right tone in the American social setting that became his exile, the obituary vacillates between tonalities implied by
the choice of name: Nadezhda Yakovlevna at times “Mrs. Mandelstam,” and at times “Mme. Mandelstam.” Brodsky panders to the assumed lack of sophistication of his American readership—for Nadezhda Mandelstam is never referred to in the most natural way, by first name and patronymic—a form of decorous and formal reference in Russian that has become well-understood as such in English. However, the vacillation between the English and the French formal prefixes (seemingly of equal value to the author because both “Western”) discloses a dissatisfaction: “Mrs.” does not fit someone who insisted that she never had any interest in marriage or being called a “spouse” and eschewed anything that might have even a slight whiff of conventional respectability. “Mme.,” or “Madame,” trails its French perfume, evoking at once the worlds of upper-class luxury—and of the squalid faux luxury of the bordello.

In educated circles, especially among the literati, being the widow of a great man is enough to provide an identity. This is especially so in Russia, where in the Thirties and in the Forties the regime was producing writers’ widows with such efficiency that in the middle of the Sixties there were enough of them around to organize a trade union.

No great poet on this scheme is a woman, no man is a widower, and no widow is a poet: this orthodox world is divided into great men who write and die for it, and women who acquire an identity only when they become widows of great men. Brodsky proposes quite explicitly, with an intention of high praise, that Nadezhda Mandelstam herself was a product of her formative closeness to Mandelstam and Akhmatova:

Of the eighty-one years of her life, Nadezhda Mandelstam spent nineteen as the wife of Russia’s greatest poet in this century, Osip Mandelstam, and forty two as his widow. The rest was childhood and youth.
Even Akhmatova, a longtime mentor of Brodsky’s and a great poet in her own right, is placed in this world of husbands and wives when Brodsky remarks in passing that her husband, Nikolai Gumilyov, “was shot in 1921 by the Cheka—the maiden name of the KGB.” This phrase makes a telling connection between transformation and marriage and between acquisition of identity and marriage. Akhmatova stands in a peculiar relation to all this, for she did not trade her chosen pen-name for Gumilyov’s family name, and so, in the case of “Gorenko,” the last name she had received at birth, the phrase “maiden name”—“a phrase applicable to no one,”¹ in the words of Philip Larkin—does not apply.

To tell the reader to feel about Cheka then what one feels now about the KGB is convenient, but condescending. So is the surrealist and paradoxical portrayal of Nadezhda Mandelstam as a grand dame who is also a nobody:

The status of a non-person gradually became her second nature. She was a small woman, of slim build, and with the passage of years she shriveled more and more, as though trying to turn herself into something weightless, something easily pocketed in the moment of flight. Similarly, she had virtually no possessions: no furniture, no art objects, no library. The books, even foreign books, never stayed in her hands for long: after being read or glanced through they would be passed on to someone else—the way it ought to be with books.

The image of a non-possessor, small in the eyes of this world, sets up a contrast of contradictory identity: Nadezhda, the “small woman,” the belittled littler Mandelstam, is, it turns out, the same person as “Mme. Mandelstam,” whose memoirs made her kitchen a

“place of veritable pilgrimage.” If the memoirs have provoked hostile reactions, they could only have come from those who did not understand that “a prophet kicks the fallen dog not to finish it off but to get it back on its feet.” Her years were so full of hardship that, as in some institutions of the Soviet penal system, each one could count for three. “By this token, the lives of many Russians in this century came to approximate in length those of biblical patriarchs—with whom she had one more thing in common: devotion to justice.” All this culminates in a paean to Nadezhda Mandelstam’s memoir prose:

it wasn’t this devotion to justice alone that made her sit down at the age of sixty-five and use her time of respite for writing these books. What brought them into existence was a recapitulation, on the scale of one, of the same process that once before had taken place in the history of Russian literature. I have in mind the emergence of great Russian prose in the second half of the nineteenth century. That prose, which appears as though out of nowhere, as an effect without traceable cause, was in fact simply a spin-off of the nineteenth century’s Russian poetry.

This irresponsible praise would be leveled against Nadezhda Mandelstam’s reputation. What Brodsky alludes to as “simply a spin-off of nineteenth century’s Russian poetry” is the prose of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and other prose writers of those generations, who, some philologists claimed, were heirs to the poetry of Pushkin and Pushkin’s generation of versifiers. The highly theorized and not at all “simple” character of the claim is sidestepped by Brodsky, who invokes this idea in order to bolster another figure that has to do with marriage. This view of marriage comes, again, with the sense of primacy of one party over another:

Poetry always precedes prose, and so it did in the life of Nadezhda Mandelstam, and in more ways than one. As a writer, as well as a person, she is a creation of
two poets with whom her life was linked inexorably: Osip Mandelstam and Anna Akhmatova.

repeating day and night the words of her dead husband was undoubtedly connected not only with comprehending them more and more but also with resurrecting his very voice [...] The same went for the poems of the physically often absent Akhmatova, for, once set in motion, this mechanism of memorization won’t come to a halt. The same went for other authors, for certain ideas, for ethical principles—for everything that couldn’t survive otherwise.

The clarity and remorselessness of her pages, while reflecting the character of her mind, are also inevitable stylistic consequences of the poetry that had shaped that mind. In both their content and style, her books are but a postscript to the supreme version of language which poetry essentially is and which became her flesh through learning her husband’s lines by heart.

The striking thing about this grandiose obituary is that, being so full of historiosophically-backed praise, it is, on second glance, an insult to the woman who had died that winter. In placing her on a pedestal—but solely on the merit of having survived Mandelstam and helped his literary survival—it thrusts upon her a derivative identity with which she struggled her entire life—“childhood and youth” excepted. The exaggerated nature of the obituary’s praise masks its unacknowledged contempt for its subject. Of his own bigotries, Brodsky appears quite unaware. And yet, a writer cannot afford to be unaware of distortions bound to arise from substitutions and equivalences such as these: “If there is any substitute for love, it’s memory. To memorize, then, is to restore intimacy.” It is not clear why memory should be a substitute of any feeling whatsoever, and why love in particular is held equivalent to memory. But someone as well-acquainted with loss as Brodsky could only have been deceiving himself with the
latter claim: one memorizes in preparation for the loss, and to deny the reality of loss is to slight the real thing.

Concerned as it is with proving that Nadezhda Mandelstam’s memorization and memorialization left little to be mourned in the loss of Mandelstam, the obituary does not contemplate the loss of Nadezhda Yakovlevna herself. It leaves us with a kind of photographic still:

I saw her last on May 30, 1972, in that kitchen of hers, in Moscow. It was late afternoon, and she sat, smoking, in the corner, in the deep shadow cast by the tall cupboard onto the wall. The shadow was so deep that the only things one could make out were the faint flicker of her cigarette and the two piercing eyes. The rest—her smallish shrunken body under the shawl, her hands, the oval of her ashen face, her gray, ashlike hair—all were consumed by the dark. She looked like a remnant of a huge fire, like a small ember that burns if you touch it.

This imagery was picked up by other writers of the same generation as Brodsky, who surrounded Nadezhda Mandelstam as she became more and more isolated from the circle of friends she alienated with the help of her memoirs. The transcript of a memorial broadcast on Radio Svoboda contains reminiscences that revisit again and again Nadezhda Mandelstam’s smoking habit and the disembodied impression it helped produce:

Борис Мессерер: Наш контакт был непростым. Но тот образ, то восхищение ею, которое возникало в нашем сознании, очень трудно сейчас передать современному человеку. Это надо подробно и точно рассказывать, как она похожа, как мы тогда говорили, на струйку дыма, иссякающую, в которой плоть уже переставала быть чем-то значимым. Существовал только один дух. Хрупкие, тончайшие пальцы ее, которые неизменно держали в руках папиросы “Беломор,” так и стоят сейчас перед моими глазами, и струйка дыма от них застилает ее лицо и как бы усугубляет хрупкость ее образа.
Boris Messerer: Our rapport was not an easy one. But that image—that admiration that she elicited in our minds—would be very difficult to communicate to a present-day person. One would have to describe in great detail, very exactly, how much she resembled a thick stream of smoke, dwindling—her flesh had ceased to be significant. Only the spirit existed. Her fragile, delicate fingers, always holding “Belomor” cigarettes, are before my eyes even now. And the smoke streaming up from the cigarettes obscures her face, and, so to speak, underscores the fragility of her image.


Bella Akhmadulina: Boris Messerer told me to bring along a cast maker, to make a plaster cast of the face and hand. Those who were present said to me: “This is contrary to religion.” I said: “On the contrary. Otherwise we would not have the death mask of Pushkin.” So here is the only copy, in plaster. I had to pour a drink for the cast maker because he kept saying, “I’m afraid of the dead.” Now the only cast of Nadezhda Yakovlevna’s face and her right hand is kept in our house. Her beautiful face, and her delicate, amazing hand.

3. A key witness of Mandelstam’s life before, during, and after his Voronezh exile, was Emma Gerstein. A philologist by training, a detective by temperament, a spinster who had had long affairs with both Lev Gumilyov and with Nadezhda Mandelstam’s married brother, Evgeny Khazin, a less-favorite daughter of her parents who, at different times, found much comfort and much embarrassment in the Mandelstams’ milieu—she began publishing her memoirs in polemical counterpoint to the writings of Nadezhda Mandelstam, whose loud success was tainted by scores of inaccuracies. Gerstein’s
Memoirs are meticulous and include texts of poems, selections of pertinent letters, and other primary materials edited by Gerstein and supplied with her commentaries and analysis. Prompted by Akhmatova’s injunction, they are likely to have been unexpected in their doggedness. Gerstein writes:

В 1956 году после относительной реабилитации Мандельштама Анна Андреевна мне сказала: “Теперь мы все должны написать о нем свои воспоминания. А то, знаете, какие польются рассказы: ‘хохолок… маленького роста… суетливый… скандалист…’.” Она имела в виду издавна бытующие в литературной среде анекдоты о Мандельштаме.

In 1956, following Mandelstam’s partial rehabilitation, Akhmatova said to me: “Now we must all record our memories of him. Otherwise you know what tales will be told: ‘the tuft of hair… below average height… fussy… always causing rows’.” She had in mind the stories about Mandelstam that had long circulated in the literary world.

John Crowfoot’s English translation of Gerstein’s Memoirs—published under the title Moscow Memoirs—is based on the 1998 edition prepared by N. Kononov and published by St. Petersburg’s Inapress. Published quite late relative to other accounts, Gerstein’s essays fulfilled their author’s intention of correcting the facts and of revising the earlier placement of certain accents and the other memoirists’ use of chiaroscuro. Gerstein achieved this in part by establishing the facts as she remembered them, subtracting from prior accounts the bits she thought inaccurate, and adding significant detail and contexts; no less important in making her memoirs so compelling is their tone. Direct and calm, she writes in a securely intelligent voice free of hysterical pretences; she

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1 Gerstein, Мемуары, 415.
2 Gerstein, Moscow Memoirs, 378.
has no need to play the pundit or the siren; and though she may be vulnerable to anxieties concerning her own literary significance, no evidence of those anxieties interferes with her energies as an investigator and a passionate friend committed to the memory of her friends and unrivaled in the degree of detail in what she has committed to memory.

This tone was made possible in large part by Gerstein’s age at the time she was writing her memoirs. She had survived Osip, Nadezhda, Akhmatova and many other people who had once comprised the lively literary society brought back to life on her pages. Gerstein’s desire to set the record straight, often in direct contradiction of what was written by Nadezhda Mandelstam and Akhmatova, is tempered by a disinterestedness that permits her to remark unsentimentally on her own place in that circle, to report her disappointments without self-pity, and to balance her grievances with some of the fondest descriptions of the very people who occasioned them. Gerstein reconstructed the world she once shared with those three people, with a freshness of memory that can only be powered by a mind at once receptive and critical. Hers is a portrait of Mandelstam full of internal contradictions that amount to a richer kind of personal integrity, complete with conflict, tension, shifting moods and states of mind, and effervescence of his best moments that invariably were the best moments of his friendships. A tenacious and intelligent friend, Gerstein bore patient record of the stages and shades of their friendship.

A literary scholar and the author of a monograph on Lermontov in later life, Emma Gerstein was a confused young woman without a defined path at the time she first met the Mandelstams. They first met at a sanatorium where she was recovering from an
emotional shock and the depression that followed it. Because she had no literary aspirations, her acquaintance with Mandelstam was based solely on mutual rapport and liking. This rapport enabled Gerstein to remember the more vivid episodes of their friendship with refreshing exactitude. Here’s how she describes her strolls with Mandelstam at the beginning of their acquaintance:

Я искала утешения и, вероятно, откровенничала. Думаю так, потому что финалом одного такого душевного разговора был мой вопрос: “Правда, я несчастна?” А Осип Эмильевич так внимательно, серьезно на меня посмотрел и сказал: “Да, вы несчастны. Но знаете? Иногда несчастные бывают очень счастливыми.”

I was looking for consolation and was probably confiding in him. I think this because, as the finale of one such heart-to-heart talk, I remember asking: “Am I not unfortunate?” Osip Emilyevich looked at me carefully and seriously and said: “Yes, you are unfortunate. But you know something? Sometimes the unfortunate can be very happy.”

Gerstein appreciated this instantly, and her memoirs likewise report this aphorism with very little commentary.

What Gerstein has done is some excellent editing: the relevant episodes, contexts, and judgments are related in such a way that years and decades of complicated human relations condensed down to their defining features and most memorable moments. But it takes a discerning memory to pick out of the debris of a rather messy relationship that lasted for several decades the bits that are most illuminating, touching, humorous, or relevant to the biographies of the persons involved. Much of it is utterly unexpected: we learn, for instance, how beautifully Mandelstam would sleep:

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1 Gerstein, Мемуары, 10.
Он лежал на боку, подложив руку под голову, согнув колени, и все его
члены приобрели особую легкость. Как будто и нервная, но рабочая кисть
руки, и утончившиеся черты лица, и даже его странное телосложение
подчинились какой-то таинственной гармонии. Он совсем не был похож на
лежащего человека, а будто бы плыл в блаженном покое и слушал…

He lay on his side, with one hand under his head and with his knees bent, and his
every limb took on a new lightness. It looked as if the nervous but energetic hand,
the delicate facial features, even the strange build of his body had been made
the object of some mysterious harmony. He did not at all resemble a man lying down,
but seemed to float in blissful repose, listening to something.

This is a lovingly constructed memory, and this is why we heed more carefully when
Gerstein writes of the same Mandelstam as everyone else. This is true not only of
Mandelstam himself, but any of the people we encounter on her pages—for instance,
Yevgeniy Khazin: “How he would peel a pear with his thin, long-fingered hands!”

In his translator’s note on the texts of the poems, Crowfoot reminds us that he is a
historian, not a man of letters, and his translations of Mandelstam are meant only as an
aid to understanding the content of the poems. Leaving aside, for the moment, the whole
matter of what this might mean, one notices that the same kind of translator’s self-
scrutiny does not arise in relation to Gerstein’s prose. It should, because Gerstein does
possess a distinctive style that reflects the best features of the Russian intellectual style
more generally, with its trademark sensitivity to the broad intimations of small details,
bold intuitiveness tempered by sound sense, ease with life’s complicatedness, and a
comfortable appreciation of the conflicted and contradictory nature of human character—
and of the whole variety of personalities on her pages. This awareness that reaches both
wide and deep makes Gerstein, with her moral clarity, very forgiving. In her chapter
“Around Mandelstam’s Arrest and Exile,” she acknowledges: “I forgave Osip Emilyevich for his behavior during the investigation.” She is aware of her other qualities and transparent about those that might amount to a bias. She struggles to overcome her biases, but she lets the readers to make up their own minds: to this end, she supplies the most complete grounds possible without overburdening her text. In short, hers is a manner of “relaxed intelligence, with no relaxation of intelligence”; she steers away from anything resembling gossip, but we learn from her about a Mandelstam we do not encounter on others’ pages.

We learn about his body and appearance. His stature: “he was of a classical average build, but sometimes he looked taller than average, and sometimes shorter. This depended on his posture, and his posture depended on his internal state.” As for his build, “Mandelstam had a very strange build.” The striking disproportion of his torso to his lower body was very noticeable 

из-за неправильной постановки ног: пятки вместе, носки врозь. Это создавало отчасти шаркающую, отчасти вовсе не поддающуюся определению походку. Может быть, знаменитая запрокинутая голова Мандельштама, производящая впечатление подчеркнутой гордости, была связана с этим недостатком. Эта привычка как бы восстанавливала при ходьбе равновесие всего корпуса.1

because of the incorrect placement of his feet: heels together, toes apart. This accounted for his gait: in part, dragging his feet, in part, doing something that could not at all be defined. It is possible that Mandelstam’s famously raised head, which gave the impression of exaggerated pride, had something to do with this flaw. This habit restored the equilibrium of his whole body when in motion.

1 Gerstein, Мемуары, 21.
This motion meets with emotion in the tone of his voice—“he had amazing overtones in the lower register”—and in his laughter:

Мандельштам смеялся не как ребенок, а как младенец. Он раскрывал и закрывал свой беззубый рот, его прекрасные загнутые ресницы смежались, и из-под них ручьем текли слезы. Он вытирал их и мотал головой.¹

Mandelstam laughed not like a child but like an infant. He would open and close his toothless mouth, his eyes would close, and tears streamed from beneath his beautiful curled eyelashes. He would wipe them off and shake his head.

In the chapter on Mandelstam’s arrest and exile, Gerstein notes that after his stay on Lubyanka, Mandelstam’s eyelashes fell out and never grew back. This comes to life as powerfully as any other sign of the beginning of the end. But the beginning of their acquaintance is no less vividly recalled in the opening paragraph of her memoir:

В столовую вошла молодая женщина с умным лбом, чем-то изысканная, за ней муж, с сухим надменным лицом, нижняя губа длиннее верхней, изящный птичий нос, высокий лоб с большими залысинами, седоват.

Crowfoot translates this as three sentences:

A young woman of intelligent and rather refined appearance entered the dining-room. Her husband followed. A dry, haughty face with a long lower lip and an elegant beak of a nose; greying hair that receded far from his high forehead.²

This does not intimate the couple’s unity stated implicitly, subliminally, but unmistakably, in Gerstein’s phrase that separated the wife from the husband with nothing more than a comma. Another nuance in this portrait of Nadezhda is that her appearance

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¹ Gerstein, Мемуары, 20.
² Gerstein, Moscow Memoirs, 3.
would not be called refined—in the same chapter, Gerstein recalls that she was bow-legged, and other memoirists have referred to her as a “prosaic painter” and described the famous pranks that often shocked and provoked but would not lend themselves to the epithet “refined.” It is all the more perceptive of Gerstein to have picked up on that ineffable something that gave Nadezhda a mysterious sophistication that seemed not to spring from her various habits and qualities, but to persist in spite of them. Elsewhere, Gerstein remembered the way Nadezhda could wear a simple sweater: she had a “sporty elegance” about her. This, as well as a cheerful and ironic serenity that served as a screen between her and the outsiders.

A young woman with an intelligent brow, with something sophisticated about her, entered the cafeteria, followed by a husband with a haughty face, the lower lip longer than the upper, a graceful aquiline nose, and a high forehead under his receding and greying hair.

The “intelligent brow” is absent from the Crowfoot’s translation, and so is the “bouquet of lovely women”\(^1\) (blown up into “a galaxy of irresistible women”\(^2\)). Of Nadezhda Mandelstam’s manner of epigrammatic description, we read: “She has to make a character of everyone she meets.”\(^3\) In Gerstein’s Russian, this is made tongue-in-cheek sinister: “She must serve up her friends on a platter.”\(^4\) The “home slang” of the Mandelstams becomes, in Crowfoot’s translation, a “private language”—with an introduction of Wittgensteinian baggage; elsewhere, philosophical suggestions are left

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\(^{1}\) Gerstein, Мемуары, 46.
\(^{2}\) Gerstein, Moscow Memoirs, 53.
\(^{3}\) Crowfoot, Moscow Memoirs, 14.
\(^{4}\) Gerstein, Мемуары, 15.
out. Her own maturation is described by Gerstein as a transformation from one kind of human being into another—in this translation, “As life tried and tested me I ceased to lean on others and began to offer them support.” What is gone is the implicit metaphysics of a world of people divided in two kinds: “As life hardened me, I became less and less the ‘leaning’ type and more and more the ‘supporting’.”

Gerstein’s style is transparent and inconspicuous; it tempts the translator to neglect the style that does not in any way announce its importance. This is most evident in the way Gerstein’s supple syntax abundant with subordinate clauses has been converted by Crowfoot into an English that shifts between the trained clarity of brief sentences and simplistic journalese. One recognizes here the difficulty of translating a tone that is both educated and casually conversational and a style that steers away from pedantry and over-familiarity alike. It may be a result of the long confinement of serious and searching thought to the kitchens of the Soviet Union, that in its withdrawal from the public arenas, scholarly and political—i.e., public—thought found an unusual expression in the registers and conventions, the wit and the shorthands of language reserved, under normal circumstances, for private matters.

In her essay “Nadezhda Yakovlevna,” Gerstein recounted the power relations between the three women memoirists: Akhmatova, Mandelstam, and Gerstein herself:

“Воспоминания” стали распространяться у нас в самиздате в начале шестидесятых годов. Анна Андреевна узнала об этом от своей названой внучки. “Акума, там есть много о тебе,”—наивно рассказала Аня, уже прочитавшая эту запрещенную книгу. “Казалось бы, надо было Наде

показать мне, прежде чем распространять свою книгу,”—недоуменно заметила Анна Андреевна. Сама она относилась к вдове поэта и друга с большим вниманием. “Листки” ни в одном слове не расходились с Надиными версиями. При этом они были изначально задуманы как тенденциозная вещь. В этом я убедилась на собственном опыте.

Следуя пожеланию Анны Андреевны, я начала приводить в порядок свои единичные записи о Мандельштамах. Первые же наметки связного текста я показала ей. Не дочитав до конца и второй страницы, Анна Андреевна вскричала: “Нет, нет! Об этом нельзя писать!” Запрет относился к беглому упоминанию о распре Мандельштама с А. Г. Горнфельдом. Я удивилась. Этот литературный скандал был широко известен, неоднократно освещался в печати, сохранилось множество документов, относящихся к этому делу, наконец, вся “Четвертая проза” Мандельштама взошла на этом конфликте. “Почему же о нем нельзя даже упомянуть?”—“Потому что... потому что... (она задохнулась от волнения...) потому что Осип был не прав!”

Это—принципиальная позиция. Следовательно, было заранее условлено, что литературный портрет Осипа Мандельштама должен строиться на утаивании целых пластов его пестрой и бурной жизни. Я не могла принять эту систему строго подобранных умолчаний. Между тем одностороннее освещение личности Осипа Эмильевича повлекло за собой ряд искажений. В “Листках” встречаются эпизоды, в которых пресловутый “нас возвышающий обман” превращается в самую вульгарную неправду. Настало время, когда все эти темные места можно и нужно высветить.

The Memoirs began to circulate in Samizdat in the early sixties. Anna Andreyevna discovered this from her adopted granddaughter. “Akuma, there’s a lot there about you,” Anya said to her naively, having already read this forbidden book herself. “It seems that Nadya should have told me before publishing her book,” noted Anna Andreyevna in bewilderment. On her part, she treated the poet’s widow with great attention. Leaves from a Diary do not depart, not by a word, from Nadya’s versions of events. This, given that they were conceived as a tendentious work in their own right. This I came to understand through my own experience.

Following Akhmatova’s wishes, I began to put my scattered notes about Mandelstam in some order. I showed her the very first drafts of a continuous text. Without reading to the end of the second page Akhmatova cried out: “No, no!

1 Gerstein, Мемуары, 416.
2 The Russian title of Hope Against Hope.
You can’t write about that!” This prohibition referred to passing mention of the squabble between Mandelstam and Gornfeld. I was astonished. That literary row was widely known, it had been discussed repeatedly in the press, and a great many documents relating to the affair had survived—Mandelstam’s entire Fourth Prose, after all, had sprung from the conflict. “Why can’t we at least mention it?” “Because, because” (she was incoherent with agitation), “because Osip was in the wrong!”

This was a guiding principle. There was prior agreement that the literary portrait of Osip Mandelstam should ignore entire layers of his tangled and stormy life. I could not accept this set of rigidly enforced omissions. Moreover, the one-sided description of Mandelstam’s personality led to a series of distortions. In *Leaves from a Diary* one encounters episodes where this supposedly ennobling deception becomes translated into the crudest of untruths.

The end result of the editorial policies inaugurated by Akhmatova and Mandelstam’s widow was formulated by Gerstein’s translator, John Crowfoot, who wrote: “Mandelstam is regarded today as the twentieth century’s ‘literary martyr’ par excellence.”¹ The heartless vulgarity of this title is a distortion of the impulse to exonerate Mandelstam by sanctifying him that Akhmatova and Nadezhda Mandelstam sought jointly to realize. When Akhmatova wrote in the “Poem without a Hero” that “sin does not befit a poet,” along with Mandelstam she had to be thinking of herself, and perhaps imagining that if Nadezhda Mandelstam were to survive her, too, she would go about memorializing Akhmatova in the same way in which the two women memorialized Mandelstam.

4. “The cult of Mandelstam” created schisms within the circle of his friends soon after the writing and publication of memoirs had begun. In his 1970 memoir, Kuzin described the course of his friendship with Nadezhda Mandelstam after Osip’s arrest.

В 1934 г. отправился в ссылку О.Э., а весной 1935 забрали меня. Выйдя через два с лишним года из лагеря, я списался с Мандельштамами, приехавшими тогда в Москву.

В начале 1938 г. Н.Я., зная, что первые вести от О.Э. из этого лагеря [имеется в виду Колыма] придут нескоро, и что зимовать ему придется где-то близ Владивостока, приехала ко мне в Шортанды. […] Находясь у меня, Н.Я. по памяти записала все не напечатанные стихотворения О.Э. и оставила эти записи у меня. Ее память удивительна. Но после выхода американского собрания сочинений Мандельштама я увидал, что все же она сохранила в памяти все. Откуда же тогда стали известны стихи, отсутствующие в моем списке? — Всего вероятнее, что у Н.Я. существовала и другая запись. Тогда отпадает и вопрос о расхождениях, чаще небольших, но иногда и существенных, между текстом опубликованным и сохранившимся у меня. Первый, вероятно, более достоверен. Но, может быть, и не всегда. 1

И вот произошло нечто, лишенное всякого основания и смысла. В один из послевоенных годов я эту переписку [с Н.Я.] оборвал. Без всяких объяснений, так как объяснить свое поведение мне было нечем. И мало того, что без объяснений,— с полной уверенностью, что буду заподозрен в трусости.— Ведь в это время вторая волна сталинского террора как раз набирала свою полную силу и такое подозрение напрашивалось само собой. Я не имел в жизни случая проявить героизм. Поэтому я не могу утверждать, что трусость мне чужда. Но я хорошо знаю,— сознание, что я совершил постыдный поступок, было бы для меня непереносимо. Я и до сих пор не понимаю, что заставило меня прекратить переписку с Н.Я. […] Сведения о Н.Я. доходили до меня из разных источников. Каждый раз, слыша о ней, я вспоминал о своем безобразном поступке. Но я не пытался восстановить наши отношения, хотя я думаю, что это было бы возможно.

1 Kuzin, 177-8.
Если бы я продолжал свои отношения с Н.Я., то неминуемо вступил бы в какие-то связи с теми, кто создают—иное слова я не могу найти—культ Мандельштама.1

In 1934 O. E. set off for his exile, and in the spring of 1935 I was taken. After over two years in the camp, I was released and wrote to the Mandelstams, who at that time were in Moscow.

Early in 1938, N. Y., knowing that it would take a while to hear from O.E. in that camp [Kolyma] and that he would have to spend the winter somewhere near Vladivostok, visited me in Shortandy. […] During her stay, N.Y. wrote down all the unpublished poems of O.E. from memory and left those notes with me. Her memory is amazing. But after the publication of the American edition of Mandelstam’s works I saw that she had not preserved everything in her memory. So how did the poems missing from my copy become known? The most likely guess is that N.Y. had another copy. This would eliminate the question of variants, usually small, but occasionally significant, between the published text and the one I had preserved. The former is probably more sound. But perhaps not in every instance.

What finally came about was something utterly devoid of any sense and reason. In one of the years following the war, I terminated this correspondence [with N.Y.]. Without any explanation, because I had no explanation for my behavior. On top of that, I was certain that I would be suspected of cowardice. At that time, the second wave of Stalinist terror was gaining momentum and to suspect that would have been natural. I have not had occasion for heroism in my lifetime, and therefore cannot claim immunity from cowardice. But I know very well: the knowledge of having committed some shameful deed would have been unbearable to me. I still do not understand what made me stop my correspondence with N.Y. […] News of N.Y. would reach me from different sources. Each time I heard about her, I would remember my abominable deed. But I did not dare to set about restoring our relations, even though I think it would have been possible.

Had I continued my relations with N.Y., I would inevitably have formed some ties with those who are now creating—and I cannot find a different word for this—the cult of Mandelstam.

1 Kuzin, 178.
The word “cult” gathers in itself the accents that particularly invited Kuzin’s distaste. The noun “культур” did not figure in Dal’s dictionary of 1880—the standard dictionary of Russian language prior to the Revolution. By 1970, however, it was associated with Khruschev’s famously euphemistic formula employed in his 1956 speech “On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences,” which inaugurated a phase of scrutiny of the “personality”—while contradicting the very motives of that scrutiny by alluding to the “personality” it did not dare name.

The policy of sanctification led to conflicts, not only interpersonal but internal to its proponents, too. In 1957, Akhmatova

была совершенно сбита с толку постоянным взятым на себя обязательством идеализировать образ Мандельштама, вопреки ее же сентенции “...поэтам вообще не пристали грехи,” “он ни в чем неповинен, ни в этом, ни в другом и ни в третьем...” Тут, то есть в “Поэме без героя,” речь идет об амнистии грешнику, а в “Листках” отвергается самый факт греха. Безусловно, Анна Андреевна была несвободна в своих “Листках,” находясь под сильным воздействием направляющей руки Надежды Яковлевны.

found herself utterly confounded by her permanent commitment to idealizing the image of Mandelstam, against her own dicta, “sin does not befit a poet,” and “he is not to blame for anything at all.” The “Poem without a Hero” speaks about amnesty for a sinner, but the Pages reject the very fact of sin as such. Without doubt, Anna Andreyevna was not free in writing her Pages, since she was greatly influenced by the guiding hand of Nadezhda Yakovlevna.¹

If Nadezhda Yakovlevna and Akhmatova were responsible for the policy as to how Mandelstam would be remembered in memoirs of his contemporaries, Semyon

¹ Gerstein, Мемуары, 418.
Lipkin’s memoir of Mandelstam, “A Coal of Live Fire” followed their policy exactly. Lipkin was the only Russian poet to have known Mandelstam personally and live into the 21st century. He gave his first book of poems the title “Очевидец”—“Eyewitness.”

Lipkin was twenty years old when he first came to visit Mandelstam in 1931. Mandelstam stayed there from mid-January to June of that year, sharing a room with his younger brother, Aleksandr, and his wife and mother-in-law.

В широкой парадной было не очень светло, но я довольно отчетливо увидел человека лет тридцати, спускавшегося по лестнице мне навстречу. На руке он держал толстый портфель. Человек был явно чем-то напуган. Сверху низвергался высокий, звонко дрожащий голос Мандельштама: — А Будда печатался? А Христос печатался?

The vast foyer was dim, but I saw quite clearly a man of thirty or so walking down the stairs towards me. He carried a thick briefcase under his arm. The man looked frightened. Mandelstam’s high-pitched, trembling voice came from the top of the staircase: “What about Buddha?—Did he get published? What about Christ?—Did he get published?”

It turned out that someone who came to see Mandelstam just before Lipkin complained that he could not get his verse published. Mandelstam, who was also being ignored by the publishing establishment, made a scene.

The title of Lipkin’s memoir was borrowed from a line of Pushkin’s poem “The Prophet” (here with Dimitri Obolensky’s prose translation):

Духовной жаждою томим,  
В пустыне мрачной я влажился, —  
И шестикрылый серафим

1 Semion Lipkin, Угль, пылающий огнем, Moscow: Ogonyok, 1991.  
На перепутье мне явился.
Перстами легкими как сон
Моих зениц коснулся он.
Отверзлись вещие зеницы,
Как у испуганной орлицы.
Моих ушей коснулся он,—
И их наполнил шум и звон:
И внял я неба содроганье,
И горний ангелов полет,
И гад морских подводный ход,
И дольней лозы прозябанье.
И он к устам моим приник,
И вырвал грешный мой язык,
И празднословный и лукавый,
И жало мудрыя змеи
В уста замершие мои
Вложил десницю кровавой.
И он мне грудь рассек мечом,
И сердце трепетное вынул,
И угль, пылающий огнем,
Во грудь отверстую водвинул.
Как труп в пустыне я лежал,
И бога глас ко мне воззвал:
“Восстань, пророк, и виждь, и внемли,
Исполнись волею моей,
И, обходя моря и земли,
Глаголом жги сердца людей.”

Tormented by spiritual thirst I dragged myself through a sombre desert. And a six-winged seraph appeared to me at the crossing of the ways. He touched my eyes with fingers as light as a dream: and my prophetic eyes opened like those of a frightened eagle. He touched my ears and they were filled with noise and ringing: and I heard the shuddering of heavens, and the flight of the angels in the heights, and the movement of the beasts of the sea under its waters, and the sound of the vine growing in the valley. He bent down to my mouth and tore out my tongue, sinful, deceitful, and given to idle talk; and with his right hand steeped in blood he inserted the forked tongue of a serpent into my benumbed mouth. He clove my breast with a sword, and plucked out my quivering heart, and thrust a coal of live fire into my gaping breast. Like a corpse I lay in the desert. And the voice of God called out to me: ‘Arise, O prophet, see and hear, be filled with My
will, go forth over land and sea, and set the hearts of men on fire with your Word.¹

The origins of Pushkin’s image are in the narrative of Isaiah’s vision of glory:

Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts. Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged.²

Lipkin’s vision of Mandelstam was decidedly of this world. The host was gracious with Lipkin and insisted on helping him out of his coat—making up on the fly “an old English proverb”—“In the struggle of man and coat, take the side of man.” Although Lipkin witnessed Mandelstam only as an eccentric and unpredictable host, he felt that it was necessary to give his notes a title alluding—not tongue-in-cheek, as Mandelstam alluded to Buddha and Christ, but quite seriously—to Pushkin and to the world of Biblical prophets ravaged by their vocation. The figure of a “coal of live fire” proved durable—not surprisingly, because it served exceptionally well as a piece of rhetoric: not only did it link Mandelstam with Pushkin, but it also made the smoking cigarette in the hand of Nadezhda Mandelstam a symbol of continuity with the poetic tradition.

² Isaiah, 6: 5-7.
5. In 1997, the bilingual Russian journal *Philologica* published Nadezhda Mandelstam’s marginalia. These notes, written on the pages of her copy of Osip Mandelstam’s collected works, had been edited by Tatiana Levina.\(^1\) In the decades following the death of her husband, Nadezhda Mandelstam had alienated many of their mutual friends, and in the 1960s and 1970s, a different circle of friends came to surround her. It consisted of young dissidents who frequented the widow’s apartment, which became a kind of literary salon, as odd as it might be to use that word for her tiny dwelling. Joseph Brodsky who came to visit Nadezhda Mandelstam in that period, wrote years later in an obituary published by the *New York Review of Books*:

> she had virtually no possessions: no furniture, no art objects, no library. The books, even foreign books, never stayed in her hands for long: after being read or glanced through they would be passed on to someone else—the way it ought to be with books.\(^2\)

The volume annotated in the widow’s hand was a remarkable exception to this rule. Levina wrote in her preface to the marginalia:

> Забольные годы Н. Я. раздарила немало изданий Мандельштама, практически всегда снабжая их своими комментариями на полях. Но экземпляр, о котором я говорю,—особенный: он был при ней на протяжении многих лет, и потому его отличает высокая “плотность” и тавтологичность маргиналий. Over the years, N.Y. had given away many copies of various editions of Mandelstam, nearly always supplying them with her commentaries in the

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margins. But the copy I am writing about is exceptional: she had kept it with her for many years and because of that it is distinguished by particularly dense and tautological marginalia.

This personal copy was not simply “passed on” to Levina. It was a loan, which the young woman was supposed to return, but circumstances left the volume permanently in her hands:

Свой экземпляр 3-го тома американского “Собрания сочинений” Манделштама (New York — München 1969) Н. Я. Мандельштам дала мне осенью 1980 г., в конце сентября или в начале октября. 30 октября, в день рождения Надежды Яковлевны, я привезла книгу с собой, но получила разрешение оставить ее у себя до следующего раза. Однако в следующий раз, 29 декабря, возвращать книгу было уже некому. Тело Надежды Яковлевны лежало в гробу посредине комнаты, а на полках не осталось даже тех немногих книг, которые стояли там два месяца назад.

N. Y. Mandelstam gave me her personal copy of Volume 3 of the American Collected edition of Mandelstam (New York—Munchen, 1969) in the fall of 1980, either in late September or early October. On October 30, Nadezhda Yakovlevna’s birthday, I brought the book with me, but was allowed to keep it until the next time. But the next time, December 29, there was no one left to return the book to. Nadezhda Yakovlevna’s body lay in a coffin in the middle of the room, and the bookshelves were no longer holding the books that had stood there two months ago.

There was no sense in placing the book on an otherwise empty shelf, and the volume remained with Levina—for seventeen years—before she finally resolved to transcribe and publish the marginal notes. This long waiting period may be explained in part by the personal significance of the volume to Levina and in part by the sense of conflict between the privacy of the marginalia and its importance.
Books “are likely to outlive their owners,”¹ and this may caution the writer of marginalia who otherwise might “long to say something,” as did Mrs. Piozzi. This tension invites consideration to the posthumous privacy of marginal notes, particularly in instances when one senses that the urge “to say something” may have overpowered the writer’s better judgment. The character of the notes inherited by Levina is in many ways bewildering, and although she offers no specific explanation of her long wait, one can easily imagine how the eventual editor might have hesitated for seventeen years before finally broaching her task.

The gesture of loaning a book with one’s own marginalia makes ambiguous claims upon the recipient. The presence of the notes may go unremarked, but in receiving a copy of Mandelstam’s collected poems, Levina was tacitly entrusted with the content of the marginalia, and later with their guardianship.

Among Levina’s characterizations of the notes is the word “tautological,” which stands as a euphemism for “repetitive”: in its characterizations of certain people mentioned in the text of the edition—in Mandelstam’s letters and criticism, and in the editorial matter—the marginalia repetitive and insistent. Many of the notes perplexed Levina by the vulgarity of their language, and the publication in Philologica is prefaced by a cautious note rationalizing the motives of those invectives:

Нецензурная брань, встречающаяся в маргиналиях Н. Я., не оставляет сомнения в том, что они не были предназначены для печати. И в то же время характер помет указывает, что писались они не для себя: ведь не станет же

The obscenities in N. Y.’s marginalia leave no doubt that these notes were not intended for print. At the same time, the character of these remarks suggests that they were not written solely for herself: it is, after all, hard to imagine a person who would repeat to herself over and over again, like a mantra, in the margins of a book (in this case, more than one book), that so-and-so is a “bitch” and such-and-such is “scum” or “shit”—occasionally motivating these judgments with facts.

One of the names accompanied by such annotations is that of Nikolay Khardzhiyev, the editor of Mandelstam’s first posthumous edition. The pages are interspersed with curses directed at other people. In wondering about the impetus for the name calling, one runs into the question about the motives of all writing in books:

The writer of marginalia acts on the impulse to stop reading for long enough to record a comment. Why? Because it may be done and has been done; it is customary. Under certain conditions (subject to change) it is socially acceptable behavior. But it is seldom required behavior; not all readers write notes in their books. Those who choose to make the effort to register their responses must foresee some advantage for someone; so the question of motive resolves itself into another question, *cui bono?* For whose benefit is it done? And that in turn leads to the question of the addressee.¹

Levina pursues this question by attempting to match the text with possible kinds of audience, and this leads her to conclude:

¹ Jackson, *Marginalia*, 82.
It appears that the marginal notes were addressed to the people (mainly, to the members of N. Y.'s social circle) who, in publishing and commenting on [Osip] Mandelstam’s writings, or simply in their appreciation, would be guided by her specific perspective and attitude towards events and their dramatis personae. The brief and catchy formulae such as the one used in the title of this publication were meant to aid the transformation of Mandelstam’s biography into myth.

In Russian, “Mandelstam’s biography” refers unambiguously to the life of the man. What the English language gently underscores is that the biography of one Mandelstam is also, of necessity, the biography of the other. The overlap is but partial, and in the case of Nadezhda Mandelstam it was mistaken of Joseph Brodsky to insist that her life was only the life of a wife—and later, the life of a widow. If it is true that Nadezhda Yakovlevna used “catchy formulae” to crystallize the image of her husband, the same is true of her pithy self-descriptions. “Во мне было 42 кило при росте 165 сантиметров”—“I weighed 42 kilos being 165 cm tall.” In the margins of the essay on Yakhontov, she scrawls: “Я работала в цирке — под куполом. О. М. увидел и безумно испугался.” (“I worked in the circus, under the cupola. Mandelstam saw it and was frightened to death.”) The daintiness of Nadezhda’s feet adds to the self-portrait:

Была привезена огромная партия женских туфель, но они не подходили ни на одну ногу. У меня было 33—34 (сейчас 35—мне семьдесят семь лет). Но ни одна пара не подошла. Итальянец, который привез, предлагал бесплатно, но ничего не вышло. Оказывается, он скупил туфли с витрин — игрушечные или декоративные — старых образцов.

A huge lot of women’s shoes was put on sale, but they would fit absolutely nobody. I had size 33-34 (it’s 35 now, and I am seventy-seven years old). But not a single pair would fit me. The Italian man who had brought them offered me a
free pair, but that was no use. It turned out that he had bought up old toy and decorative shoes from all kinds of storefronts.

Next to the text of Mandelstam’s letter—

Твоя детская лапка, перепачканная углем, твой синий халатик — все мне памятно, ничего не забыл...

Your childlike little paw smeared with charcoal, your little blue robe—I remember everything, I forgot nothing...

—Nadezhda’s annotation: “Рисовала.” “I drew.” This simple phrase breaks out nimbly from the boundaries circumscribed by the words “specific perspective and attitude towards events and their dramatis personae.” It invites us to imagine a past life, not to restrict our feelings about the words of the letter. At the same time, over the years, Nadezhda Mandelstam invited her growing audience to imagine her marriage in ways that bothered the couple’s mutual friends. As part of a posthumous broadcast on Radio Svoboda, listeners could hear the record of an interview given by Nadezhda Mandelstam to a foreign correspondent:

Надежда Мандельштам: Вот что я могу вам рассказать о Мандельштаме, если вы ничего о нем не знаете. Он был замечательным человеком, мы часто вместе смеялись, с ним никогда не было скучно, и мы с ним были очень счастливы даже в самые тяжелые времена. И не я была тому причиной, а он. Иногда мы ссорились, у нас обоих были невыносимые характеры, но ночам мы всегда занимались любовью и с большим успехом. Может и смешно говорить о сексуальных успехах в семьдесят три года, но именно по этой причине мы и жили с ним вместе. Мы не могли друг без друга. Я пыталась ему изменять, но у меня ничего не получалось. Потому что он был лучше всех.

Nadezhda Mandelstam: Here’s what I can tell you about Mandelstam if you don’t know anything about him. He was a remarkable person, we often laughed together, I was never bored with him, and we were very happy together even in
the hardest of times. And I was not the cause of that—he was. Sometimes we
would fight, we both had insufferable personalities, but at night we always made
love, and very successfully. It may be ridiculous to talk about sexual
accomplishments at seventy-three years of age, but that was the reason we lived
together. We could not live without each another. I tried to be unfaithful to him,
but it never worked. Because he was the best.

None of the participants of the memorial broadcast were able to comment on the motives
of such an unorthodox introduction to Mandelstam. At the same time, this excerpt, as
well as the title of Levina’s publication, “ЛЮБИЛ, но изредка чуть-чуть изменял”—“He
loved me but was sometimes a little bit unfaithful”—paint a picture of a marriage where
each party found the other singularly well-suited to one’s own taste. The equality implicit
in this reciprocity was repeatedly overlooked and denied to Nadezhda Mandelstam. In
this manner, even Levina—an affectionate and reliable friend—gave her publication a
title suggesting that the marginalia derive their importance from what they contribute to
the portrait of the husband. At the same time, the choice of a title contradicts Levina’s
explicit estimate of the publication’s value:

The chief value of these marginalia might be that, in revealing certain sides of N.
Y.’s unusual personality, they help us, like no other source, to appreciate the full
measure of her subjectivity as a memoirist.

Like “tautological,” “subjectivity” here stands for something stronger—something like
“unfairness.” This charge was made against Nadezhda Yakovlevna by many
commentators on her memoirs. Writings intended for publication are open to such
charges, but the responsibilities of the writer of marginal notes are not so obvious. Even
in published form, such notes typically disavow their intentions to reach a specific
audience, together with any attendant responsibilities. In publishing Mandelstam’s notes, Levina has opened them up to scrutiny and judgment, and the temptation to judge is great when one faces a remark next to a name—“Levin,” for example—explaining in the margin: “Кто-то из литературного говна”—“Some literary shit.” The volume editor’s footnote hypothesizes that Levin might be either Fyodor Markovich Levin (a philologist and critic) or Boris Mikhailovich Levin (a screenwriter), and another marginal note records: “Не знаю кто”—“I don’t know which.” Another example is the crescendo, “идиотка—сука—блядь” (“idiot—bitch—whore”), directed at Nadezhda Pavlovich. Pavlovich gained these epithets by remembering, in her memoirs quoted in the edition, that Osip Mandelstam had an “unattractive, insignificant” face. The marginal note takes prompt revenge on the memoirist.

Some of the obscene name-calling resists literal translation into English, since English lacks the special register of violently charged taboo words, united in Russian by the category of “мат.” It is to Levina’s credit that in editing the notes she does not follow the usual print convention of indicating mat words with ellipses. The reader is therefore allowed to experience the compounded energy of those words as they are repeated from page to page. The word “блядь” (a mat word defined in the Russian Semantic Dictionary as a “fallen woman”) appears in the publication four times. Deemed obscene, for reasons that are likely to do with the “fallen” woman’s horizontality, the word was banned from print since the times of Catherine the Great. Its derivation makes it surprisingly suitable for cursing someone who lies in one’s memoirs: “Блядь—от славянского блядь—
заблуждение, ошибка, грех” (“Blyad’—from Slavonic блядь—deception, error, sin”).

Familial ties extend from “блядь” to “блядословить — лгать, обманывать, клеветать,” “to lie, to deceive, to slander.” The proto-Slavonic root blѧд-/blѧд- signifies “уклоняться, путаться”—“to evade, to be confused.” As in English, the Russian verb “to lie” has no opposite in the language. The Russian words “лажа,” “ложь,” “лгать,” and “лежать” are related in a way that parallels an observation which is not a lie although it appears in Christopher Ricks’s “Lies”:

*lie* in English means both to say something false while knowing it to be so, and to rest or (expressive of bodily posture) to be in a prostrate or recumbent position.

You cannot truth, a fact which both makes the telling of the truth a less glib matter than lying (“the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth”), and also brings out that speaking has to be posited on a presumption of the speaking of the truth.

The importance of the *lie/*lie pun is that it concentrates an extraordinary ranging and profound network of truth-testing situations and postures. It brings mendacity up against those situations and postures which constitute the great moments or endurance of truth: the child-bed, the love-bed, the bed of sleep and dreams, the sick-bed, the death-bed, the grave.

The grave, as in Dal’s dictionary: “Ложись въ ямку, мужичокъ, не страшно!” “Lie down in that hole, fear not, brother!” The *Semantic Dictionary* gives two proverbs associated with the noun “lie”: “У лжи короткие ноги” (“A lie has short legs”), meaning that lies don’t get far before they are discovered; “Ложь на длинных ногах”

1 The alternation of the letters “г” and “ж” in many Russian roots is at play in the Russian verbs “лгать” (“to tell lies”) and “лежать” (“to lie down”), whose older form, “легать,” containing a “г,” is recorded in Dal’s dictionary.

(“A lie has long legs”) admonishes that lies spread easily. But be it on long or short legs, a lie has a broad straddle. Truth, on the other hand, is not as glib a matter as we might wish because securing it requires a yet broader straddle: one uniting *witnessing* and *bearing witness*, where the former often makes an impossibility of the latter.

As a textual witness, the marginalia bear witness of Nadezhda Mandelstam in soliloquy and her internal state when one-on-one with her book, or her husband’s book—a book written by her husband, and written in by her. This duality, too, is witnessed by the marginalia, which also witness something overlooked by Brodsky in writing: “If there is any substitute for love, it’s memory. To memorize, then, is to restore intimacy.” What the marginalia bear witness to is the frustration of intimacy that cannot be “restored.” This frustration is channeled into notes in blue ballpoint pen scribbled on the photographic insert, around a photograph of Akhmatova: “Идиотское платье—опущенная грудь, костлявые плечи, базедовидная шея”; “С такой грудью—декольте!”; “и еще вышивка”; “Хорошо, что у Ахматовой не было денег. Она была на редкость безвкусной. В старости, очень толстая, она мне показала платье: ‘Я сама придумала фасон.’ Кокетка, платье бебэ. От кокетки оборки. Толста она так была, как бочка.” (“Idiotic dress—with her sagging breasts, bony shoulders, hyperthyroid neck”; “With breasts like hers—that neckline!”; “and that embroidery”; “It’s a good thing that Akhmatova had no money. She was remarkably tasteless. In her old age, very fat, she showed me a dress: ‘I designed it myself.’ A yoke, a baby-doll silhouette. Ruffles under the yoke. She was thick as a barrel.”) This dressing-down does not conform to the rationalization of the notes as a last testament, nor to any practical
rationale whatsoever. Their spiteful compulsiveness speaks of a relinquishment of memorializing by sanctifying. It also betrays the deep, dull pain of ever more distant yet forever irrecoverable loss: for Nadezhda Mandelstam, her marginalia in Osip’s book took the place of “talking in bed”:

Talking in bed ought to be easiest,
Lying together there goes back so far,
An emblem of two people being honest.

Yet more and more time passes silently.
Outside, the wind’s incomplete unrest
Builds and disperses clouds about the sky,

And dark towns heap up on the horizon.
None of this cares for us. Nothing shows why
At this unique distance from isolation

It becomes still more difficult to find
Words at once true and kind,
Or not untrue and not unkind.

H. J. Jackson, the writer of *Marginalia*, noted that “annotators often address the author directly”:

When Webb invokes “Jean Jacques” chummily in his copy of Rousseau, he is engaging in what Lamb called conversation “with the dead in their books”—that form of harmless fantasy, a common feature of the reading process, that sustains and rewards readers.¹

¹ Jackson, 84.
Familiar with Mandelstam’s *Conversation about Dante*, which had no interlocutor, the surviving Mandelstam was not alone in her “illusion of being alone with the author.” If anything, this illusion was strengthened by the reality of being, simply, alone. The same sense of aloneness, of being alone in conversation with one’s absent husband through a book of his poems, may explain the writer’s fury at those who had survived Mandelstam.

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1 Jackson, 95.
Chapter 5

THE PAVILION

1. In January 2013, Essays in Criticism published an essay by Kenneth Haynes and Andrew Kahn, titled “Difficult Friend: Geoffrey Hill and Osip Mandelstam.” ¹ Spanning decades, Hill’s fascination with the Russian poet, and the poems that emerged from the affinity felt by Hill, make a case for the thesis that literary witness need not be restricted by the standards of evidence that prompted Horace Engdahl’s definition: “A witness is a person who speaks out and says ‘I was there, I saw it, I can tell people!’” Hill’s only trip to the Soviet Union, write Haynes and Khan, did not take place until 1966, when he visited Moscow, Armenia, and Leningrad. All three locations are prominent in Mandelstam’s biography, and in his poetry. And yet, this trip took place almost thirty years after Mandelstam’s death, making it difficult for Hill to claim, “I was there”—for it would have been both true and untrue, just as the Soviet Union in the 1960s was, and wasn’t, the same country it had been in Mandelstam’s lifetime. Hill’s acquaintance with Mandelstam was a mosaic of impressions from the trip mingled with what had learned of Mandelstam from Dimitri Obolensky’s Penguin Book of Russian Verse (1962). Obolensky’s introduction to Mandelstam was based on what was known about the poet prior to the publication of the Moscow and Voronezh poems (and prior to the emergence of Nadezhda Mandelstam’s memoirs). The Penguin edition stated that Mandelstam

“wrote verse distinguished by its classical restraint, majestic conciseness, and sonority. Most of it is embodied in his two collections *Stone* (1913) and *Tristia* (1922).” The biographical note ended with the remark: “The circumstances of his death are obscure: according to one version, he was twice arrested and, on the second occasion, died while on the way to a concentration camp.” Among the selections from Mandelstam’s then-known poems was “Tristia” (1918), culminating with the image of seeing the future in a pelt-shaped blot of melted wax:

Да будет так: прозрачная фигурка  
На чистом блюде глиняном лежит,  
Как беличья распластанная шкурка,  
Склонясь над воском, девушка глядит.  
Не нам гадать о греческом Эребе,  
Для женщин воск, что для мужчины медь.  
Нам только в битвах выпадает жребий,  
А им дано гадая умереть.

So let it be: a small transparent figure lies, like a stretched out squirrel-skin, on a clean earthenware dish; a girl is gazing, bending down over the wax. It is not for us to tell fortunes about the Greek Erebus; wax is for women what bronze is for men. It is only in battle that the lot falls upon us; but to them it is given to die while telling fortunes.  

The fate of poets, then, appears to be a mixed lot, for Hill’s impression of Mandelstam, divined from the contours of what he knew, as from a “small transparent figure” of wax, had the character of an unmediated encounter: “I thought I saw my doppelganger walking towards me down the Nevsky Prospect”\(^2\). “I thought I saw” is aware of not meaning the

\(^1\) Obolensky, 358.  
\(^2\) Haynes and Kahn, 55.
same thing as “I was there, I saw it”—and yet, the reality of the imaginative experience exceeds what might be conveyed by “I imagined.” An affinity like this questions its own rights without forfeiting the possibility of friendship. Instead of forfeiture, there is the opening qualification that makes way for Hill’s elegy, “Tristia: 1891-1938”:

    Difficult friend, I would have preferred
    You to them. The dead keep their sealed lives
    And again I am too late. Too late
    The salutes, dust-clouds and brazen cries.¹

To the paradoxes of posthumous justice and unilateral friendship Hill acknowledges one may add the paradox of finding oneself in the service of the memory of someone one did not know.

    It is tempting to cast this imaginative (but not merely imaginary) encounter in terms of identification, but “identification” is a term too sterile for the fertile nature of sympathy, realized through the process of identification but not identical with it. Hill’s encounter with himself in the other, Mandelstam—“I thought I saw my doppelganger”—is a mirror image of another Petersburg encounter, with the other in oneself, described by Yakov Druskin in “Видение невидения” (“The Sight of the Unseeing”):

    Недавно я выходил из какого-то помещения. Подходя к двери, я поднял голову, чтобы не натолкнуться на что-либо, и вдруг увидел перед собою худого старика, чем-то знакомого, но очень чужого. Он шел прямо на меня и смотрел как бы сквозь меня. Мне стало страшно, и почти сразу же я понял: это я.

1 Geoffrey Hill, Selected Poems, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009, 43.
Recently I was exiting some building. As I came near the door, I lifted my head so as not to bump into anything, and suddenly saw an emaciated old man before me, who looked familiar in some way but also seemed a stranger to me. He was walking towards me and looking straight through me. I was frightened and almost right away understood: this is me.

A self-analysis follows:

Почему мне стало страшно? На улице я встречаю много чужих людей, но они мне не страшны: они не очень чужие, а тот, кого я увидел в зеркале, показался мне очень чужим. Почему? Я думаю, потому, что одновременно он показался мне чем-то знакомым. Именно знакомство с ним было тем, на основе чего я и мог почувствовать свою противоположность ему—чужое.

Why was I frightened? I meet many strangers in the street without fearing them: they are not very strange, but the one I saw in the mirror seemed very strange to me. Why? I think because at the very same time he also seemed familiar to me in some way. It was precisely that familiarity that was the ground of my feeling of being his opposite—of alienation.¹

And again:

Почему мне стало страшно? Потому что знакомое и близкое оказалось совсем чужим: знакомое и близкое чужое, причем совсем чужое, страшно. И еще: страшно было оттого, что он смотрел прямо на меня и как бы не видя меня, сквозь меня.

Why was I frightened? Because something close and intimate turned out to be alien: the close and intimate found to be alien, completely strange, is frightening. What was also frightening was that he looked directly at me and in such a way as if he did not see me; he looked through me.

Мне стало страшно потому, что я понял, что знакомое и близкое чужое, уже совсем чужое—не тот старик, которого я увидел в зеркале, а я сам: я сам себе чужой.

I was frightened because I understood that the close and intimate is alien, completely alien—not the old man in the mirror but I: I myself am alien to myself.

The grasp of what is intimate relies on understanding otherness and alienation; the grasp of what is alien relies on the feeling that it, too, is felt to be intimate in some negative capacity. Osip Mandelstam’s imaginative engagement with Joseph Stalin, or Lowell’s (Cal’s) with Caligula, or Cafavy’s with Nero are instances of sympathy capable of deciphering the intimately familiar in the features of the alien, and of shuddering at the alien features of the familiar. Hill’s engagement with Mandelstam is not simply identification, full or partial, for in the features of a poet oppressed by his epoch (“The circumstances of his death are obscure: according to one version, he was twice arrested and, on the second occasion, died while on the way to a concentration camp”) it is the sympathetic synthesis of similarities and differences vis-à-vis oneself that amounts to a commitment he makes to Mandelstam as his “doppelgänger”—his “double goer,” “walking towards me,” with a certain Germanic determination. The construct of a double conveys the feeling that the other is both identical to and distinct from oneself, and when the feeling gives rise to a real allegiance, albeit on one side only. “Tristia: 1891-1938” was the first homage paid by Hill to the real duty he incurred to Mandelstam at the moment of his imaginative encounter with him.

Sympathy, as Burke tells us, has the aim of helping the situation at hand. But what if it is not at hand but present to our imagination, as in the case of art and memory? And for a more specialized form of the question, what can literary arts do for life when it is
too late for help? The duty of witnessing that answers those questions, invites another, not fully answerable, question of how to proceed with respect to the danger of becoming an unreliable witness. The Nobel symposium on witness literature skirted this danger by presenting the “two aspects of the topic” as the topic’s two halves:

on the one hand, the particular claim to truth that witness literature puts forward; and, on the other hand, the process that leads from catastrophe to creativity and that turns the victim into a writing witness with the power to suspend forgetfulness and denial.¹

The reassurance of the word “process” is not earned in this passage or elsewhere in Engdahl’s survey, which evades the difficulty inherent in remembering and memorializing. The matter of trustworthiness becomes for Hill a matter of boundaries between art and life, which, when properly charted, appear to be permeable:

And it seems to me that the poets one trusts most are those who seem to suggest that art is the totality of our life and simultaneously admit that art has no connection with life. I accept both halves of the paradox as being absolutely true. That is why it is a paradox.²

Haynes and Kahn do not wish to point out that “both halves of the paradox” are untrue, that is, that this is no paradox at all. They write that in the Mandelstam elegy, “as in many of the poems on the fate of poets, the paradox takes the form of ‘tragedy’, both a nearly empty (though possibly redeemable) literary convention and also the hideous reality of life under Stalin. To substitute for the autonomy of the poem even admirable forms of

² Haynes and Kahn, 54.
public resistance betrays the oxymoron holding life and art in fertile tension; art is not the
be subjugated to life, nor life to art, when they collide.”¹ This spotlights another
predicament of memory—namely, that it is always belated, always after the fact and is of
necessity bound up with tragedy. The corollary dissatisfaction with language, which
always names after the fact, is likewise present to Hill:

*Kamen* does mean stone, the word
to be proven: as a moving light
narrowly outruns itself on a railed curve;

There is a great distance to travel between the Acmeist confidence in the word as a
“stone” and the much less secure sense of the word as a “moving light,” and reconciling
the two positions once they’re come upon depends not upon a wide straddle but on the
recognition that the endurance of words is a changeable endurance, different from the
endurance of stones. Memorization and memorialization are the response to the helpless
feeling of having come too late, the response that, in the language, can assume the form
of allusion, quotation, translation, or critical riposte, in addition to direct homage found in
forms like the obituary.

When the poet Aleksandr Velichansky died in 1990, the Orthodox priest
Aleksandr Kopirovsky wrote in an obituary titled “In Place of an Obituary”:

Смерть настоящего поэта, как известно, не означает конца его
существования—“душа в заветной лире мой прах переживет и тленья
убежит,” как было сказано однажды. Но также известно, что мысль лишь о
таком бессмертии не может принести ему успокоения при жизни.

¹ Haynes and Kahn, 54.
It is well-known that the death of a real poet does not signify the end of his existence—“in my sacred lyre my soul shall outlive my dust and escape corruption,”¹ as it’s once been said before. But it is also well-known that the thought of such immortality alone cannot bring comfort to a poet in his lifetime.²

Like many other forms of public expression, the obituary has become eroded by the hypocrisies and wishfulnesses arising from the disjunction between the intended audience of any given paper, radio program, etc., and the censorship whose demands could only be met at the cost of lethal amputations of thought and feeling. This schizophrenic style of public discourse hollowed out public written forms like the obituary, prompting Kopirovsky to write an obituary that disavowed what it was, gesturing towards some new and more heartfelt form. But with the first “it is well-known,” the heart of this anti-obituary withers, leaving behind a line of Pushkin—a line that said what had been said more than once before, but said first by Horace:

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Exegi monumentum aere perennius
regalique situ pyramidum altius,
quod non imber edax, non Aquilo impotens
possit diruere aut innumerabilis
annorum series et fuga temporum.
Non omnis moriar multaque pars mei
vitabit Libitinam; usque ego postera
crescam laude recens. Dum Capitolium
scandet cum tacita virgine pontifex,
dicar, qua violens obstrepit Auidus
et qua pauper aquae Daunus agrestium
regnavit populorum, ex humili potens,
princeps Aeolium carmen ad Italos
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² Aleksandr Kopirovsky, “Вместо некролога” [“In place of an obituary”], Православная община [Orthodox community], 1991, No. 4.
deduxisse modos. Sume superbiam
quaesitam meritis et mihi Delphica
lauro cinge volens, Melpomene, comam.

It has been said in English, too, by David Ferry:

Today I have finished a work outlasting bronze
And the pyramids of ancient royal kings.
The North Wind raging cannot scatter it
Nor can the rain obliterate the work,
Nor can the years, nor can the ages passing.
Some part of me will live and not be given
Over into the hands of the death goddess.
I will live on forever, kept ever young
By the praise in times to come for what I have done.
So long as the Pontiff in solemn procession climbs
The Capitol steps, beside him the reverent Vestal,
So long will it be that men will say that I,
Born in a land where Aufidus’ torrent roared,
Once ruled by Danaus, king of a peasant people,
Was the first to bring Aeolian measures to Latin.
Melpomene, look kindly on the honor
The Muse has won for me, and graciously
Place on my head the garland of Delphic laurel.1

In Russian, Lomonosov, Derzhavin, and Batyushkov produced versions of the ode, each
of them proclaiming to have raised a monument to himself, while each laying flowers at
the foot of the Horatian original and of one’s native predecessor. If the fires of Horace’s
model were kept alive in each of these imitations, it was not by a smothering adherence
to the Latin prototype, but by means of exquisite play within the bounds of the inherited
form. Lomonosov’s 1747 version of “Non omnis moriar” glossed Horace’s lines so:

1 David Ferry, trans. and ed., The Odes of Horace, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux,
Derzhavin made a bolder departure in 1795:

So it is! Not all of me shall die but a great part of me,
Escaping decay, will go on living after death,
And my glory will grow without wilting,
For as long as the Universe honors the Slavs.

Rumors of me shall roll from the White waters to the Black,
Where Volga, Don, and Neva flow, where Ural streams down from the range;
Everyone will remember among numberless peoples,
How, from obscurity, I rose up to be known

For having been the first to sing the virtues of Felicia
In the amusing Russian tongue,
To speak in heart’s simplicity of God
And speak the truth to kings with a smile.
Batyushkov was recommended by Obolensky as “an elegiac poet who learned much from French, Italian, and Greek classical models. His verses reflect an epicurean eroticism, combined with a powerful streak of melancholy.” His “monument” joins in immortality the poet and his muse:

Я памятник воздвиг огромный и чудесный,  
Pрославя вас в стихах: не знает смерти он!  
Как образ милый ваш, и добрый, и прелестный  
(И в том порукою наш друг Наполеон),  
Не знаю смерти я.

I raised a monument, enormous and a marvel  
To look upon, when I sang you in verse. It shall not know death!  
Like your own image, kind and beguiling  
(To this our friend Napoleon is testifying),  
I know not death.

Alexander Pushkin’s imitation of Horace engages with the alter ego of Alexander I:

Я памятник себе воздвиг нерукотворный,  
К нему не заростет народная тропа,  
Вознесся выше он главою непокорной  
Александрийского столпа.

I have erected a monument to myself, not built by hands; the track to it, trodden by the people, shall not be overgrown; it has raised its indomitable head higher than Alexander’s column [the granite memorial to Alexander I in St. Petersburg].

In challenging the political powers of his time, Pushkin puts his trust in his art and the powers of preservation inherent in the tradition’s continuity. Having accepted the title of Derzhavin’s successor ("Старик Державин нас заметил / И, в гроб сходя,

1 Fennell, 75.
багословил”—“The aged Derzhavin took notice of us, / And blessed us as he descended into the grave”), Pushkin was contemplating his implicit successorship to Lomonosov.

Нет, весь я не умру — душа в заветной лире
Мой прах переживет и тленья убежит —
И славен буду я, доколь в подлунном мире
Жив будет хоть один пигт.

No, I shall not die entirely—in my sacred lyre my soul shall outlive my dust and escape corruption—and I shall be famed as long as even one poet remains live in the sublunary world.

It is the continuity of ties between succeeding generations of poets and the importance of those bonds for preserving the achievement of the past that grounds the claim to friendship made by Geoffrey Hill in “Tristia: 1891-1938.” Friendship between poets who may have never known each other does not have to be one-sided, for it is reciprocated by the trust and the advance of gratitude of the earlier poet contemplating his dependence on the later one. And so, the later poet is not the only recipient of friendship’s gifts. But if Pushkin’s acceptance of this consolation moves us, it does so by the generosity of such an acceptance, for we sense in the willingness to be consoled in this way a forgiveness of the consolation’s insufficiency. There is generosity in meeting an insufficient consolation with an acceptance that says, This will suffice; there is tact in obstaining from the complaint that this will suffice because, well, it will have to. But it would be a misreading not to detect a trace of melancholy in “the proud Horatian boast that ‘not all of me shall die.’” As Haynes and Kahn point out, the endurance of poets
does not redeem their suffering or vindicate their actions. Acting and suffering, even when they have enduring consequences, do not do so in the way writing does, when writing endures.¹

“Tragedy has all under regard”—and one should not wish to eschew this reality. “Hill denies that the ‘quest for peace in life’ should be glossed as the ‘quest for a peaceful life’; it is, rather, a disguise of the impulse that seeks ‘peace in art’.” The reasons for it become obvious when we turn to the fates of the twentieth-century poets: “Clichés about ‘enduring’ or ‘immortal’ poetry obtusely ignore or serenely subsume the fact that these poets did not endure.” And yet, this observation, made by the authors of the same essay, is followed by a cliché: “Mandelstam in Siberia.” These three words, meant to jolt the reader awake to the reality of suffering, are not themselves awake to the fact that most of Mandelstam’s suffering took place before his fatal journey through Siberia. And yet,

Mandelstam was defeated; serious engagement with Mandelstam must recognise this, as it must recognise that such defeats—exile, prison, starvation—were not unique to him but the fate of millions. The problem is in how to acknowledge defeat without being “defeatist.” The poem, that is, needs to steer between the “brazen cries” of facile and self-serving celebration and complacent sighs of resignation. “Low rhetorical tension” is not intrinsically lax; it may be exactly judged, and the flatness of the poem—its deliberate understatement and repudiation of empathy—be entirely consistent with its moral burden.²

Hill’s handling of this moral burden begins with acknowledging the predicament:

How reconciled was Ovid by such time
as in Vorónezh he was no man’s fool?
I’m speaking brutally . . .

¹ Haynes and Kahn, 58.
² Haynes and Kahn, 59.
The rhetorical question is brutal because the only possible answer ("not very reconciled") condescends so knowingly to the poet’s disillusionments and because, in presupposing a timeless repetition of their untimely ends, it risks a complacent cynicism ("What did you expect?").

The accuracy of these remarks is attested by Kopirovsky, in his disavowal of the obituary form, by Pavel Nerler, in his documentary edition’s cynical pandering to a public felt to be tired of tragedy, and by the recollections of Yulia Voznesenkaya, who, in remembering a memorial evening that did justice to Leonid Aronzon, makes clear the degree to which any kind of formality came to be feared in Soviet Russia as hollow and false. The insistence on informality that emerged in the 1960’s Russia as the criterion of genuine communication was a response to the erosion of the forms of public communication by relentless state censorship. As a reaction to the deep malaise of the language, this distrust of formality was not a cure but a symptom, for it lets the possibility of formality braced by intention and commitment go by unrecognized. The following excerpt from Voznesenskaya’s 1975 diary, and the later discussion of Nerler’s publication of Mandelstam’s Lubyanka dossier, are to be held in contrast and tension with Geoffrey Hill’s commitment to “formality under duress.”

On 19 October 1975, the poet and dissident Yulia Voznesenskaya recorded her fresh memories of a memorial evening held for Leonid Aronzon shortly after his death.

Представь себе: посреди Политехнического городка, между уродливых зданий, кочегарами подобных—пятачок нетронутого парка. Под высокими деревьями, еще полными листьев—маленький (одноэтажный) светлый (т.е. сооруженный из одних окошек) павильончик.

Поэты говорят о своих отношениях с Аронзоном, о влиянии на них его творчества, рассказывают истории и легенды о нем. Никому не изменяет

Была подготовлена большая программа исполнения стихов Аронзона. Читали Биляк и Понизовский. Оба воспринимались великолепно, хотя читали в совершенно разной манере и достаточно далекой от манеры самого Аронзона.

В заключение вечера слушали голос Аронзона (запись Крыжановского). Тишина стояла немыслимая, благоговейная, чудная. В открытые окна чуть слышна была какая-то милая музыка из студенческого общежития. Пьяный дяденька подошел к павильону, принял тишину за безлюдье и помочился возле открытых дверей павильона—весь на свету!

Заупокойного елея никто не лил. Говорили красиво и сурово, не подрисовывая крыльышек. Например, Сорокин, говоря об отношениях Аронзона с друзьями, проиллюстрировал их двумя его стихотворениями. Оба называются “К друзьям”. Одно начинается словами: “Друзья мои—за что мне это чудо?”, другое кончается словами: “Друзья! Сойдите в жопу с корабля!” Не было той равнодушной сентиментальности, которая отличает все официальные торжества такого рода.1

Imagine this: in the middle of the Polytechnic campus, amidst ugly buildings that look like boiler rooms—a pristine patch of a park. Beneath the tall trees still full of foliage, a small (one-story), light-filled (all built out of windows) pavilion.

The poets speak of their relations with Aronzon, about his art’s influence on them; they tell stories and legends about him. Tact and taste never let anyone down: only Aronzon’s poems are read. Favorite texts are read, with explanations why they are favorite. Often one poem is repeated in several readings: “A Letter to Altschuler”, “No one now dares to embrace you”. “Morning” was read five times.

A large program of Aronzon’s poems was prepared for reading. The readers were Bilyak and Ponizovskiy. Both were excellent to listen to, even though they have completely different manners also very distinct from Aronzon’s own.

At the conclusion of the evening we listened to Aronzon’s voice (Kryzhanovskiy’s recording). The quiet that descended on us was unthinkable, reverent, marvelous. Through the open windows you could barely hear some music from the student dormitory. A drunk came up to the pavillion and, mistaking the quiet for an absence of people, urinated by the open doors, all lit up by the sun!

No one was pouring funereal frankincense. Everyone spoke of Aronzon beautifully, plainly, without adding angel wings. Sorokin, for example, when speaking of Aronzon’s relations with friends, illustrated them with two of his poems. Both of them are titled “To My Friends”. One begins with words: “My friends—how did I earn this blessing?”, the other ends with words: “Friends! Get the hell off my ship!” There was none of that indifferent sentimentality that marks all official events of this sort.

The choice of date, 19 October, was indicative of the nature of the event. A hundred and fifty years earlier, on October 19, 1825, Pushkin wrote to his Lyceum friends:

Я пью один, и на брегах Невы
Меня друзья сегодня именуют...
Но многие ль и там из вас пируют?
Ещё кого не досчитались вы?

I drink alone, and on the banks of Neva
My friends today will say my name…
But are there many of you feasting there?
Who else is missing from your ranks?

With Aronzon missing from the ranks it was imperative not to offend him by sentimentality, by the unintentional caricature of “angel wings,” or by lapsing into officialdom. This is why the appearance of the janitor in full sunlight and the comedy brought about by the quiet inside the pavilion is remembered with such glee. The passage, which I had to abridge, contains many other signs of relief at having escaped from the dreaded formality.
2. The wearing down of forms by the falsifying forces within language and the resulting disruption of continuity within the literary tradition was met by Geoffrey Hill with a commitment he summed up as “formality under duress.” Durability is to be attained by a fastidious cooperation with language, not by the suspicion of the very medium of the poet’s art. Here, Hill is in sympathy with the Acmeists: “for the word to be a touchstone, it must be put to the test, ‘proven.’” The durability of language depends on its resistance to being “exsanguinated” and exhausted, obviated by being made obvious. This demands that the writer, the reader—and the translator—should not “foreclose on ambiguities and ambivalences”:

Normally Hill greets claims about the value of the ineffable or the superiority of silence to language with ferocious skepticism [...], but here *The Orchards of Syon* places a premium on what is not communicated between reader and poet, and on the poetic word as it is not exhausted in meaning. With the three similes, Hill credits Mandelstam’s poetry with the ability to resist or elude, in part, the forces that adapt it to the demands of a particular perception, and he imagines the poet not wholly trapped within the limits of unreliable testimony, not entirely betrayed by the self-interested empathy or linguistic ignorance of poetry consumers. The final emblem, that of all-but-exsanguinated testimony, similarly encodes essential withholding: the word, if it survives at all after bleeding out, has preserved its elementary or ultimate secret, that of survival.¹

Hill speaks of “the admixture of formality and brusqueness” and the virtue of “formality under duress” (Leeds talk, 15, note 23 references Allen Tate as the source of the phrase), “yielding a sense of a past, of a formal tradition, that has the potential to make the present

¹ Haynes and Kahn, 64.
legible, but only when counterpointed against a present that threatens to make the past, and so itself, illegible.”¹

What Hill is up against is the position of distrust in the language articulated by Miłosz in *The Witness of Poetry*, where a poet in the second half of the twentieth century is likened to

a Roman who, witnessing the fall of Rome, seeks help in what is most durable because it is the most elementary and trivial and, for that reason, is able to grow on the ruins of states and empires. The poetry in the last few decades, not only in Poland but everywhere, has renounced meter and rhyme, and has begun reducing words to their components.

For Miłosz, language is suspect, and yet he is wedded to this medium by his art. Language embodies for Miłosz the malaise of culture, and yet he does not admit that in order to “put culture on trial” one must resort to the means of culture itself, its language, and its institutions (for the courtroom, the witnesses, the judge of such a trial would all be products of the culture, would be examining the language suspected of being an embodiment of everything that is wrong with that culture—examining it by means of that very language). The “global accusation at human speech” is only possible by means of the accused speech. This may be one of the reasons why Geoffrey Hill objected to the sentiment of “suspicion” against language which amounts, rhetorically, to a condemnation of language:

It is one thing to talk of literature as a medium through which we convey our awareness, or indeed our conviction, of an inveterate human condition of guilt or

¹ Haynes and Kahn, 56.
anxiety; it is another to be possessed by a sense of language itself as a manifestation of empirical guilt.

This clashes with the elevated moral status that Miłosz assigns to poetry, specifically the poetry of witness. In example after example from Polish poetry, he extols the virtues of poets who wrestle with the desecrated language in order to salvage the elements of culture that have withstood the trials of the past century.

What can poetry be in the twentieth century? It seems to me that there is a search for the line beyond which only a zone of silence exists, and that on the borderline we encounter Polish poetry.

The choice of the word “zone,” with its military and security connotations, suggests that war and mass imprisonment left a permanent imprint on the topography of “reality” as it is constituted in the imagination. But the imperative to pass over in silence that which we cannot speak of is unnecessary in view of the impossibility of violating it. When reality clashes with any reasonable picture of the world too violently and too comprehensively to allow a revision and adjustment of the worldview, the mind refuses to deal with the new information and represses it. Since no speaking is possible in the absence of conscious thought, there is no danger of uttering the unthinkable. The unthinkable is also the unspeakable. However, the blind spots formed in the mind as the result of repression complicate the awareness of the mind’s limitations in apprehending fully the frightening reality. The temptation to speak of things apprehended fragmentarily and incompletely is responsible for the artistic inadequacies of the literature that Adorno was warning against. These writings have their right to exist as documents, but as all documents, they cannot
be read naively, taken at face value. They also do not rise to the status of “witness literature,” which requires that the artist—the faithful witness—rise to the level of the challenge posed by the exceptionally difficult material, such as the reality of war.

One of the “pseudo-dogmas” that Geoffrey Hill would wish to eradicate is “that the degree of suffering experienced by persons of an artistic or a literary bent shall constitute an accurate register of the quality of their work.” This objection is directed at Miłosz and his volume, *The Captive Mind*, where he wrote:

The work of human thought should withstand the test of brutal, naked reality. If it cannot, it is worthless. Probably only those things are worth while which can preserve their validity in the eyes of a man threatened with instant death.

Geoffrey Hill objected to this on the grounds that 20th century should not arbitrarily be made arbiter of value.

if the cant word ‘elitist’ can now be applied anywhere, it should be placed against this passage. Miłosz, in the opening sentence here quoted, purports to establish new terms of the utmost purity: the existential finality of things and moments; and with the apparent equity of ‘work of human thought’ he gestures towards the inclusive; a general redemption of the imagination through the witness of extreme experience, of survived extremity. What the quoted passage actually communicates is something different: the elitism of the man-of-the-moment. It excludes from aesthetic regeneration those works unbaptized by an arbitrary extreme experience of ‘brutal, naked reality’.

Like Miłosz, Hill maintains an avowedly religious perspective, but it leads him to opposite conclusions:

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2 Hill, 402.
I would seriously propose a theology of language; and a primary exercise to be undertaken towards its establishment. This would comprise a critical examination of the grounds for claiming (a) that the shock of semantic recognition must also be a shock of ethical recognition; and that this is the action of grace in one of its minor, but far from trivial, types; (b) that the art and literature of the late twentieth century require a memorializing, a memorizing, of the dead as much as, or even more than, expressions of “solidarity with the poor and the oppressed.” Suffering is real, but “suffering” is a sing-song, that is to say, cant.1

In contrast to the admonishing vigor of these lines, Al Tempo de’ Tremuoti, Hill’s new volume, anticipated by Haynes and Khan in their essay, expresses a repudiation of the legislative ideal for poetry, “acknowledged or otherwise.”

In previous poems, Hill was unsparing about Blok; despite admiring the poetry, Hill found him extravagant and exasperating, morally culpable, and historically compromised. The difference in this book is not a new indulgence towards the sins of poets (Hill writes pithily, ‘Beautiful Lady’ meets assassin’s bomb’), but that, without trying to exculpate or redeem their errors, he sounds so untroubled by them.2

The word “indulgence” invokes the remission of sins for money, but the discovery made in Hill’s later thought is quite disinterested: it is that one needs not react with indignation to the errors of poets; “it is not necessary to denounce them when speaking of them, or raise one’s voice, or even convey a particular sense of moral urgency.”3 Hill emphasizes “the brazenness of late praise, its potential for opportunistic self-advertisement in press-ganging the dead to serve alongside one in some elite solidarity of literary greatness or moral martyrdom.” He believes, write Haynes and Kahn, “that it is nonetheless possible

1 Hill, 405.
2 Haynes and Kahn, 68.
3 Haynes and Kahn, 69.
to offer a true valediction, to write a poem which acknowledges but avoids these damning errors.”

1 Al Tempo “welcomes” Petersburg poets and their fates, though without indulging their sins.

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1 Haynes and Kahn, 56.
EPILOGUE

ON TRANSLATION

This dissertation makes use of a number of sources either not previously translated into English or requiring a new translation because available translations could not supply a reliable basis for analysis. These materials vary widely in kind, including poems, memoirs, letters, marginalia, official documents, scholarly prose, and radio transcripts. The responsiveness and resourcefulness that these different kinds of matter require in a translator cannot be encompassed by any translation theory. At the same time, in arbitrating among alternative ways of translating any given passage, the translator must not be arbitrary. The best of intuitions must be explicable in terms of principle. A related though separate principle is that of transparency about the principles at work in a translation.

Any translation presupposes a selection among available alternatives in rendering the original. These alternatives may be found on the planes of word choice with consequence for register and diction; word order and its effect on emphasis; syntax and punctuation with their expressive potentials, and phraseology with the contexts invoked by it. No translation can be an unconditional match of its original, and when the original is in some way ambiguous, the translator must adjudicate the relative importance of its aspects that cannot be recreated concurrently.

Internally, as practiced by the translator, translation is an exercise of sympathy and imagination, bringing the translator’s range of awareness together with her or his
expressive range. Externally, translation mediates, first and most obviously, between the expressive means of two languages and, second, between the text with an implicit intended readership and a new, and different, audience, separated from the original not only by language but also by time and other factors. Consequently, editors faced with the necessity of modernizing a text work under some of the same constraints and must address some of the same problems that face a translator. Each instance of judgment in translation occasions some practical choice, and this aspect of selection, too, accounts for the editorial dimension of translation as a practice. Translation is a form of literary art. It is also an editorial activity. Finally, the necessity to justify editorial decisions makes an act of translation a critical act.

These three aspects of translation become the more evident when at play where the stakes are high, as one finds that they are when working on originals that exert powerful moral claims, which must be communicated by the translation. In order to succeed, a translation must enable the reader to enter into a relationship with the text, to be joined with the mind of the text in such a way as to be able to interpret it critically and correctly. “The mind of the text” and not “the mind of the author,” because authorship participates in conventions that conventionally present themselves to scrutiny while obscuring the author. But if we can speak of the text betraying something that the opacity of the convention was meant to hide, or of “reading between the lines,” it is a part of the translator’s job to provide, wherever possible, the same marks that would guide a native reader in orienting oneself within the ambiguities of such a text.
The Russian sources used in this dissertation exhibit a range of forms and conventions of writing that come from various facets of life in Soviet Russia. This epilogue cannot give an exhaustive report of approaches taken vis-à-vis each type of source. Instead, this is a discussion of certain devices involved in achieving one priority that all translations on these pages had in mind: that of involving the reader in English in a genuine relationship with the originals, particularly with the moral and political dimensions of their language.

As with prose, translating poetry can be the means of living more intimately with the poem, of getting to know it from the inside out by recreating it, which involves the delicate and self-effacing task of communicating the what and the how of the poem. A translator must at once inhabit the imaginative space of the author and have the tact to remember not to imagine oneself the author. Resisting the temptation to project one’s own idiosyncrasies onto the text is a part of the translator’s task and the first of the sacrifices involved in the work of translation—sacrifices of some priorities for the sake of others. We can find a model of a radical and yet responsible, because clearly announced, sacrifice in John Fennell’s Penguin *Pushkin* (1964). In providing “plain prose translations of each poem” in the volume, Fennell succeeded in “erecting a monument” to oneself:

Я памятник себе воздвиг нерукотворный,
К нему не заростет народная тропа,
Вознесся выше он главою непокорной
Александрийского столпа.

I have erected a monument to myself, not built by hands; the track to it, trodden by the people, shall not be overgrown; it has raised its indomitable head higher than Alexander’s column [the granite memorial to Alexander I in St. Petersburg].
This gives the reader a secure sense of what the poem says, without any pretensions of conveying how it says it. The later caveat is signaled by the omission of lineation, although the trot follows closely on the feet of the original and line breaks could have been preserved. But the presence of lineation conventionally signals that what we are reading is verse, and it is true that the trot with added line breaks would constitute verse. However, restoring line breaks might mislead the reader into thinking of the resulting poem as “equivalent” to the original. This would be misleading because no equivalence is possible without a complete correspondence of all the elements of prosody, including most obviously rhyme and metre, but also modulation, and the subtleties of word choice and order. This is equivalent to saying that equivalence in translation is a pure ideality and that there is no such thing as a literal translation. An attempt to enrich the trot with those additional elements would distort the sense, which for Fennell was a priority that he succeeded in realizing.

A poem of central importance for Mandelstam’s biography and for his identity as a poet is “The Stalin Epigram”:

Мы живем, под собою не чуя страны,  
Наши речи за десять шагов не слышны,  
А где хватит на полразговорца,  
Там припомнят кремлевского горца.  
Его толстые пальцы, как черви, жирны,  
И слова, как пудовые гири, верны,  
Тараканы смеются глазища  
И сияют его голенища.

А вокруг него сброд тонкошеих вождей,  
Он играет услугами полулюдей.  
Кто свистит, кто мяучит, кто хнычет,
Он один лишь бабачит и тычет.
Как подкову, дарит за указом указ —
Кому в пах, кому в лоб, кому в бровь, кому в глаз.
Что ни казнь у него – то малина
И широкая грудь осетина.

We live without sensing the ground beneath our feet,
Our speeches die down at ten paces away,
And wherever there’s even a half-conversation,
The mountain man of Kremlin is always invoked.
His thick fingers are fatty as worms,
His words sure as weights of measure.
His cockroach eyes laugh,
And the tops of his high boots shine.

All around him clamor the thin-necked chieftains,
As he toys with the favors of those half-people,
And they yowl, and they whistle and moan—
He alone prods and probes and points.
He sends out his decrees like lucky horseshoes:
One gets hit in the groin, and the next in the eye, in the forehead.
Every death is a sweet little raspberry for him,
For his broad chest of an Ossetian.

The poem had been translated into English numerous times; the translations I had on hand were those by W.S. Merwin (with Clarence Brown), James Greene, Bernard Meares, and Paul Schmidt. None of these were satisfactory aids for discussing the political and moral import of the poem or its textual history. My translation here has traded some possible effects for achieving others, but still did not reconcile in English the senses implied by the word “страна,” signifying “country” or “land,” but also placed in the context of a phrase that suggests the association with “ground.” One of the things that had to be transported into English was the visceral chill and moral vertigo felt in the
detachment of the metaphoric “feet” from the metaphoric “ground”—the ground turned muddy in the abstracted first line of Merwin’s translation—

Our lives no longer feel ground under them.

“We live” is a great deal more direct that “We exist,” in Greene’s opening of the poem:

We exist, without sensing our country beneath us,

My first line is not a literal translation of the corresponding line in Russian but a literal translation of the Russian figure of speech for being “frightened senseless.” The verb “sensing” provided a bridge from Russian to English. What proved to be particularly difficult was to vary, as Mandelstam did, the common figure of speech by replacing “ground” with “land,” a choice intimating the feelings of groundedness and groundlessness used to characterize a political situation. A comparable maneuver in English would have to express in a single line the chronic fear arising on the crux of the political and the psychological, but since none presented itself, the alternative was to intimate more vividly the quality of the fear—the psychological component of the Russian line—and to place the entire burden of the political on the first-person plural pronoun: “We live.”

All of the poems on the pages of this dissertation, unless announced otherwise, were newly rendered using the same line-by-line approach. This, as against bolder tactics of George Kalogeris’s version of an earlier poem by Mandelstam:

Умывался ночью на дворе.
Твердь сияла грубыми звездами.
Звёздный луч — как соль на топоре.
Стьынет бочка с полными краями.
На замок закрыты ворота,
И земля по совести сурова.
Чище правды свежего холста
Вряд ли где отыщется основа.
Тает в бочке, словно соль, звезда,
И вода студеная чернее.
Чище смерть, солонее беда,
И земля правдивей и страшнее.

A line-by-line translation might be this (and only might be, for there is no such thing as a single literal translation):

I washed myself late at night, outside.
The firmament shone with hard stars.
A moon ray—like salt on an axe.
The barrel of water spills over and grows cold.

The gates are locked,
And the earth is harsh.
No purer foundation anywhere
Than the white truth of fresh cloth.

Like salt, a star melts in the barrel.
The water gets colder and blacker,
Death is purer, grief is saltier,
The earth is truer and fuller of terror.

The inadequacy of this translation—that it loses much of the poem’s sense of depth and movement—shows that a translation gets close to the original in some ways at the expense of others. When George Kalogeris converts the twelve lines of Russian into the twenty five lines of his English translation, he gets in some ways closer to providing a
literal translation of the poem and in some ways farther away from it. What matters is the balance—that we get closer to the truth of the poem:

As I was washing myself in the dark,
Washing outside where the ice-cold water
Kept spilling over the rim of the barrel,

The evening stars against the horizon
Glistened like salt on the blade of an axe.
As I was washing myself in the dark,

I saw the locked gate that couldn’t keep out
The menacing look of my surroundings,
Once it had entered my state of mind.

Soon the weavers will weave a new pattern
From anything they can get their hands on,
Looming there, in the near future:

No matter what fabric they happen to stitch
I don’t think the seams will ever be finer
Than a single line of honest speech.

Salt of the earth and stars of the sky
Dissolving now in the water’s reflection,
This briny water that keeps turning blacker,

Like some purer shade of appalling death—
As if our lips had already tasted
What’s steeped in the salt of worsening luck.

As I was washing myself in the dark,
Washing outside where the ice-cold water
Kept spilling over the rim of the barrel,

The earth edged closer to truth and terror.
The final proximity of truth and terror mirrors the proximity, in Black’s Law Dictionary, of “interrogation”—the means of mining for truth “formally and systematically”—to its neighboring terms: “in terrorem” and “in terrorem populi.” The translator is right to intimate this proximity, even though the word “interrogation” does not appear in the poem. The poem’s forebodings and anticipations are taken up thoughtfully and given room to develop. This is comparable not to dilution, but to allowing the build-up of momentum. The loss of concision means a dramatic deviation from the formal impression of the poem. Still, this translation is a model of entering the consciousness of the poem and realizing it by making a bold compromise. Since the difference of line count is obvious, this decision does not lead to deception, and the translation is successful in realizing the priorities to which the translator has openly committed himself.

The conventions of prose are no less intricate or challenging than those of poetry. The power of Emma Gerstein’s memoir is in part attributable to her candor and in part to the more significant underlying courtesy: without flattering the reader, Gerstein presents the results of her reflections for the reader’s own examination. Her honesty enables the reader to verify her conclusions; this liberty, in turn, involves the reader in a reciprocal responsibility to the author. This establishing of trust between the writer and the reader is mediated by a style that is casual, conversational, and at the same time precise, deliberate, and thoroughly decorous. The latter quality can be, and has been, overlooked, for it is realized largely by a nuanced use of proper names, which is one of the least translatable conventions of Russian usage. Here is Gerstein’s description of her visit to Lina Finkelstein:
Остановилась я у Лины Самойловны. В свободное время мы много и часто говорили о Сергее Борисовиче и о рукописях, которые, казалось, хранились ею как святыня. Письма Гумилева к Ахматовой и другие его автографы она мне не показывала, да я и не считала себя в праве заглядывать в них. Но автографы Мандельштама мы рассматривали, я держала их в руках, разбирала. Впрочем, Лина Самойловна показывала мне не все, ссылаясь на то, что чемодан с рукописями стоит под маминой кроватью и ей не хочется при ней его открывать. Она жаловалась, что мать ей чужой человек, не понимает ее верности памяти Сере́жи, просит распродать его библиотеку и архив. Естественно, мать в тайне желала, чтобы Лина вторично вышла замуж, но та повторяла: “Лучше Сере́жки на земле никого не было и не будет.”

I stayed at Lina Samoylovna. In our free time we spoke often and a great deal about Sergey Borisovich and about the manuscripts, which, it appeared, she was keeping like a holy relic. She did not show me Gumilyov’s letters to Akhmatova and his other autographs, but I did not think I had the right to look at them. But we did look at Mandelstam’s autographs, I held them in my hands and read them. Nevertheless, Lina Samoylovna did not show me everything, explaining that the suitcase with the manuscripts was under her mother’s bed and that she did not want to open it in front of her. She complained that her mother was a stranger to her, did not understand her fidelity to the memory of Seryozha, and kept asking that she sell his library and archive. Naturally, her mother wished secretly that Lina would get married again, but she only kept saying: “There’s never been and never will be anybody better than Seryozha.”

The passage exists within a web of relations and proprieties encompassing the various persons mentioned, the author herself, and her reader. Nikolay Gumilyov, Akhmatova, and Mandelstam are referred to by their last names, indicating that, although Gerstein had been friends with Akhmatova and Mandelstam, here she writes of them and of Gumilyov as literary, and public, figures. Lina Finkelstein and Sergey Rudakov were likewise friends of Gerstein, but when writing of them in the third person, she refers to them by first name and patronymic, in order not to put her reader in a false position by using first names, as when writing to a friend about a mutual friend. She uses the familiar
diminutive, “Seryozha,” when talking of how his widow had described her feelings for
the man who is to us “Sergey Borisovich,” and similarly, Lina Finkelstein is to us “Lina
Samoylovna,” unless we're being told what her mother thinks of her daughter, “Lina.” In
contrast with this passage, where she appears as a public figure, in the next one we see
Akhmatova as a friend of Gerstein’s, and so she becomes “Anna Andreyevna”:

I heard something nonsensical, but I soon forgot her exact phrase—until Anna
Andreyevna reminded me about it, nearly five years later. “Do you remember
how she said to you, ‘Don’t stick your nose into what’s none of your business’?!”
Yes, it came back to me, this was really her final phrase. I was quite confused
then as to why she had come to visit me at all. Evidently, she had not expected
that I would reply to her “confession” with a sober suggestion to query the MGB.

This formal way of referring to a longtime friend contrasts with Rudakov’s anxious
insistence on using forms suggestive of familiarity: to him, Akhmatova is “Annushka”
after almost the very beginning of the acquaintance, “Nadezhda Yakovlevna” in his
letters soon becomes “Nadya,” “Nadka,” “Nadine”—the tones descending from
familiarity to annoyance to ironic superiority. Mandelstam follows the same course in
Rudakov’s letters: from the poet “Mandelstam,” he becomes immediately an elder
acquaintance, “Osip Emilyevich,” and soon afterwards, we see cozy references to “Oska”
and “Osyuk,” which so bothered both Akhmatova and Gerstein when those longtime
friends were introduced to Rudakov’s letters by Khardzhiyev.
Сегодня уехала Надин. На вокзале она совсем распсиховалась и бедного Осюка извела до того, что он дрожащим голосом говорил: “Наденька, не сердись, ты ведь уезжашь.” И потерял палочку, которая, правда, нашлась в буфете. Его жалко страшно. Он притих и варил мне и себе какао. Перепачкал руки о кастриюлю, вытер их об лоб и ходил зеброй весь вечер.

Nadine left today. At the station she flew off the handle and drove poor Osyuk into such a state that he was saying, in a trembling voice, “Nadenka, you cannot get angry, you are leaving.” He lost his walking stick, which, luckily, was found at the buffet. He became awfully pitiful. He became quiet and was making cocoa for me and for himself. He smudged his hands on the pot, wiped them on his forehead, and looked like a zebra the whole evening.

In the final days of the correspondence, which document Rudakov’s preparations for a reunion with his wife in Leningrad, both the Mandelstams are subsumed under a single nickname—the plural of the casual “Oska”: Rudakov calls the couple “Oskas.”

This does not mean that the formula of the first name followed by the patronymic is always neutral and proper. The opposite potential of this form is noticeable in the tone of Pavel Nerler’s introduction to The Word and Deed, which opens with the words:

Осип Эмильевич Мандельштам был в достаточно напряженных отношениях с властями. Еще до революции за ним присматривала полиция, подозревая в нем возможное революционное бунтарство.

Osip Emilyevich Mandelstam had always been in fairly tense relations with the authorities. The police kept an eye on him even prior to the revolution, suspecting in him the possibility of revolutionary recalcitrance.

We are already familiar with the even more metallic usage of proper names in the protocol of Mandelstam’s testimony to Shivarov:

Кузин Б. С. отметил, что эта вещь является наиболее полнокровной из всех моих вещей, которые я ему читал за последний 1933 год. Хазин Е. Я.
отметил вульгаризацию темы и неправильное толкование личности как доминанты исторического процесса. Александр Мандельштам, не высказываясь, укоризненно покачал головой. Герштейн Э. Г. похвалила стихотворение за его поэтические достоинства. Насколько я помню, развернутого обсуждения темы не было. Нарбут В. И. сказал мне: “Этого не было”—что должно было означать, что я не должен никому говорить, что я ему читал этот пасквиль. Петровых—как я сказал—записала этот пасквиль с голоса и похвалила вещь за высокие поэтические качества. Лев Гумилев—одобрил вещь неопределенно—эмоциональным выражением вроде “здорово,” но его оценка сливалась с оценкой и его матери Анны Ахматовой, в присутствии которой эта вещь ему была зачитана.

Kuzin B. S. noted that this work is the most full-blooded of all the works that I had read to him in the last year, 1933. Khazin E. Ya. noted the vulgarization of the subject matter and the incorrect interpretation of personality as a dominant of the historic process. Aleksandr Mandelstam shook his head disapprovingly without comment. Gerstein E. G. praised the poem for its artistic qualities. If memory serves, there was no extended discussion of the topic. Narbut V. I. said to me: “This never happened,” which was meant to signify that I should not tell anyone that I had read this lampoon to him. Petrovykh—as I said—wrote down this lampoon and praised the work for its high poetic qualities. Lev Gumilyov endorsed the work by saying it was “swell” or some other indeterminate, emotive expression, but his response was not fully independent from that of his mother, Anna Akhmatova, in whose presence he had first heard the poem.

The placement of the last name before the initials is one of the signs of Shivarov’s active participation in formulating these claims. Named in a way that by convention implies an official point of view, these people are named not by Mandelstam but by Shivarov. This small textual detail amounts to an argument for exonerating Mandelstam.

Certain forms of address appear inconceivable, and striking when they occur not in fiction but in a transcript of a hearing. In translation, they may come to sound even more grotesquely fantastic, flashing through the opacity of official-speak. The translation should not let these moments of truth escape:
Вышинский: Скажите, предатель и изменник Ягода, неужели во всей вашей гнусной и предательской деятельности вы не испытывали никогда ни малейшего сожаления, ни малейшего раскаяния? И сейчас, когда вы отвечаете, наконец, перед пролетарским судом за все ваши подлые преступления, вы не испытываете ни малейшего сожаления о сделанном вами?

Ягода: Да, сожалею, очень сожалею...

Вышинский: Внимание, товарищи судьи. Предатель и изменник Ягода сожалеет. О чем вы сожалеете, шпион и преступник Ягода?

Ягода: Очень сожалею... Очень сожалею, что, когда я мог это сделать, я всех вас не расстрелял.

Vyshinsky: Tell us, traitor Yagoda, is it possible that in all your abominable, treacherous activities you never felt the slightest remorse, the slightest regret? And now, as you answer at last for your despicable crimes before the court of the proletariat, can it be that you do not feel any remorse for what you have done?

Yagoda: Yes, I do regret, I regret very much—

Vyshinsky: Attention, comrades justices. The traitor Yagoda feels regret. What is it that you regret, spy and criminal Yagoda?

Yagoda: I greatly regret—I greatly regret that, when I had the power to do so, I did not have you all shot.

Klyuyev’s letter to Klychkov, quoted in its entirely by Nerler in The Word and Deed, has not, to my knowledge, been translated previously. Its profound despair, the intensity of its plea, and its biblical intonations make it a challenging document. It was most important to preserve the force of its appeal to the recipient, addressed as “dear brother and fellow poet," and this meant preserving as much as possible the otherworldliness of Klyuyev’s language, justified by the savage otherworldliness of Klyuyev’s experience of his Siberian exile:
Дорогой мой брат и поэт, ради моей судьбы как художника и чудовищного горя, пучины несчастья, в которую я повержен, выслушай меня без борьбы самолюбия. Я сгорел на своей “Погорельщине”, как некогда сгорел мой прадед протопоп Аввакум на костре пустозерском.

Я сослан в Нарым, в поселок Колпашев на верную и мучительную смерть. Она, дырявая и свирепая, стоит уже за моими плечами. Четыре месяца тюремь и этапов, только по отрывному календарю скоро проходящих и легких, обглодали меня до костей.

Поселок Колпашев—это бугор глины, усеянный избами, дотуга набитыми ссыльными. Есть чего, продуктов нет, или они до смешного дороги. У меня никаких средств к жизни, милостыню же здесь подавать некому, ибо все одинаково рыщут, как волки, в погоне за жраньем. Подумай об этом, брат мой, когда садишься за тарелку душистого домашнего супа, пьешь чай с белым хлебом! Вспомни обо мне в этот час—о несчастном—бездомном старике—поэте, лицезрение которого заставляет содрогнуться даже приученных к адским картинам человеческого горя спец–переселенцев.

Небо в лохмотьях, косые, налетающие с четырехверстных болот дожди, немочный ветер—это зовется здесь летом, затем свирепая 50–градусная зима, а я голый, без шапки, в чужих штанах, потому что все мое выкрали в общей камере шалманы. Подумай, родной, как помочь моей музее, которой выколоты провидящие очи?! Помогите! Помогите! Услышьте хоть раз в жизни живыми ушами кровавый крик о помощи, отложив на полчаса самолюбование и борьбу самолюбий! Это не сделает вас безобразными, а напротив, украсит вас зорями небесными!

Прошу о посылке—чаю, сахару, крупы, компоту от цинги, белых сухарей, пока у меня рвота от 4–х–месячных хлеба с водой! Умоляю об этом. Посылка может весить до 15–ти кило по новым почтовым правилам. Летним сообщением идет три недели. Прости меня за беспокойство, но это голос глубочайшего человеческого горя и отчаяния.1

My dear brother and fellow poet, hear me without the struggles of vanity, for the sake of my destiny as an artist and of that monstrous sorrow and the depth of misfortune I have been thrust into. I have been burned alive at the stake of my

1 Nerler, 35-6.
own “Pogorelschina,” just as my forefather, Archpriest Avvakum, burned in the Pustozersk bonfire.

I have been sent to Narym, the village of Kolpashev, to meet a certain and miserable death. She, rent and vicious, already stands behind my shoulders. Four months of jail and transit look swift and easy only on a page-a-day calendar—they have gnawed me down to my bones.

Kolpashev is a mound of clay studded with lowly log houses, weathered, black from sorrows, and stuffed with exiles to the point of bursting. There’s nothing to eat, there is no produce, or else, it is laughably expensive. I have no means to survival, there isn’t anyone here to give alms, for everyone is the same in searching for grub like wolves. Think about this, my brother, when you sit down before a bowl of fragrant homemade soup, when you take your tea with white bread! Remember me in that hour—the miserable, homeless old poet whose sight alone sends shudders through special-regime exiles inured to hellish pictures of human suffering.

The sky in rags, oblique rains coming in from four-verst-wide swamps—this is what they call summer in this place. Then, a vicious 50-degree winter—and I am naked, without a hat, wearing someone else’s pants, because everything of mine has been stolen by the shalmans in the common cell. Think, my dear one—how to help my muse when her prophetic eyes have been gouged?!

Help me! Help me! Open your living ears, if only once in your life, to this bloody cry for help, and set aside for but half-an-hour your self-love and wrestling of vanity! This will not make you less beautiful, on the contrary, you shall be adorned with heavenly fire!

I beg you for a package—tea, sugar, grain, compote to help against scurvy, dried white bread, to help me while I am still vomiting after four months of bread and water! I implore you. The package can weigh up to 15 kilos by the new postal regulations. Transit takes three weeks in the summer. Forgive me for bothering you, but this is the voice of the deepest human sorrow and despair.

Another letter documenting profound despair—not the writer’s, but a third person’s—is Rudakov’s letter recounting Mandelstam’s outpouring of turmoil in Voronezh. Here,

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1 Approximately 60 degrees below zero Fahrenheit.
direct speech is overlaid by Rudakov’s own voice, and the reader must be guided mainly by the punctuation in separating these layers.

Он: “Я опять стою у этого распутья. Меня не принимает советская действительность. Еще хорошо, что не гонят сейчас. Но делать то, что мне тут дают—не могу. Я не могу так: “посмотрел и увидел”. Нельзя, как бы на корову, уставить и писать. Я всю жизнь с этим боролся. Я не могу описывать, описывать Господь Бог может или судебный пристав. Я не писатель. Я не могу так. Зачем это ездить в Воробьевку, чтобы описывать, почему это радиус зрения начинается за одиннадцать часов ползучки от Воронежа. Из Москвы наши бытовые писатели ездят за материалом в Самарканд, а Москвы не могут увидеть. Эти “понатники” меня с ума сведут, сделают себе же непонятным. Я трижды наблудил: написал подхалимские стихи (это о летчиках), которые бодрые, мутные и пустые. Это ода без достаточного повода к тому. “Ах! Ах!”—и только; написал рецензии—под давлением и на нелепые темы, и написал (это о вариантовой рецензии) очерк. Я гадок себе. Во мне поднимается все мерзкое из глубины души. Меня голодом заставили быть оппортунистом. Я написал горючую настоящих стихов и из—за приспособленчества сорвал голос на последнем. Это начало очень большой пустоты. Я думал, что при добролюбительности—жизнь придет, подхватит “фактами” и понесет. Но это была бы не литература. А пробиться сквозь эту толщу в завтрашний или еще какой день не могу, нет сил. [. . .] У меня полуфабрикат ужасен, я или ничего не даю, или уже нечто энергетическое. Я хотел очерком подслужиться. А сам оскандалился. Стихами—кончил стихи; рецензиями напплел глупости и отсебятину; очерком—публично показал свое неумение (он его показывал в редакции, и там сказали, что плохо). Это губит все. И морально, и материально. И бросает тень сомнения на всю мою деятельность и на стихи.” И т.д., и т.д.

Киса—это запись почти дословная, только очень сокращенная. В жизни это причитания, почти слезы. Но не психование. Все трезво, и есть вывод за целый период. Надеюсь, что оно минет. Что ни нового безумия, ни самоубийств не будет. Но по тому, как подтянулась Надин, и по ее словам о сходстве состояния с первым случаем, да и по собственному наблюдению—вижу, что скверно.

Мандельштам взывал от халтуры. Не тот Осип Эмильевич (или Ося), что с нами обедал, а гениальный, равный Овидиум, и чувствующий, что стихи трещат. Здесь даже ирония не напрашивается, и Оськой зову его только по привычке.
He: “Again I’m standing before this dilemma. The Soviet reality will not accept me. I’m lucky yet that they are not persecuting me. But I cannot do what it is that they let me. I cannot “go, have a look and see.” One cannot write as if one were a bull staring at a cow. I fought against that my whole life. I cannot describe, only the Lord God or a clerk of the court can describe. I am not a novelist, I cannot do that. […] I have sinned thrice: I wrote a sycophantic poem (about the pilots)—and it’s brisk, muddy, and vacuous. I wrote an ode without sufficient reason for it. “Ah, ah!” and nothing more. I wrote reviews—under pressure and on ridiculous subjects—and an essay (a variant of one review). I loathe myself. Everything nauseous is rising from the depth of my soul. I’ve been starved into opportunism. I wrote a tiny quantity of true verse and then, because of conformism, broke my voice on the last one. This is the beginning of a huge void. I thought that with a good attitude life itself would come and pick me up with “facticity.” But that wasn’t literature, and I cannot penetrate through something that thick into tomorrow or any other day, I simply lack the strength. […] My preliminaries are awful, either I give nothing at all or something energetic. I wanted to please them with my essay. And it became an embarrassment. With those verses I put an end to poetry; in the reviews I wrote stupidities and nonsense; with the essay, I’ve exposed my ineptitude (he showed it at the office of Pod’yom and they told him it was bad). This is the end to everything. Both moral and financial. And it casts a shadow of doubt on everything I do and on my verse.”

Kitty, this is almost a verbatim record, only abbreviated a great deal. In real life, he laments, he is near tears. But there is no madness. It’s all sober, and he has assessed this whole period. I hope that it passes. That no new madness, no suicides will follow. But by the way Nadine has suddenly got herself together, and from her descriptions of the previous episode, and even from my own observations—I see that this is serious.

Mandelstam is howling. It is not the same Osip Emilievich (or Osya) who ate dinner with us but the genius, Ovid’s equal, the one who feels that his poetry is in shambles. I cannot even be ironic here and only call him Oska out of habit.

In Rudakov’s transcription of “оппорТЮнист”—“opportunist”—the “Ю” is capitalized to highlight the pun of “opportunity” and “youth,” the latter beginning with the same letter. The opportunism of “hothouse youths,” derided by Mandelstam in his Voronezh “Stanzas,” is animating the pun that finds no comparable opportunity in English.
The object of translation is to represent the original faithfully for a reader unfamiliar with the original language. Like everywhere in literature, decisions in translation involve judgments—judgments that deal not so much in verdicts “correct” and “incorrect” as in weighing the comparative gains and losses of this or that approach. Although choices arrived at have no immediate practical consequences, the translator is responsible to the original. For the reader, the question to ask with regard to a translation is not whether it is the best one available (such information being, fortunately, subject to change) but in what way it is better than others, and in what way not as good.

We have seen that, far from being neutrally mechanistic, the translator’s role is that of active critical mediation, not only between languages but also between the past and the present, and between the worlds of the dead and the living. Translating passages from Olga Sedakova’s essay “Eternal Memory” required a transmission of Sedakova’s own mediation, between Old Church Slavonic and Russian, which is a part of her meditation on liturgical poetry:


1 Sedakova, 658-9.
We must note immediately that in the burial stikhiry this glory is largely put in question as “vanity” that will not survive death: “Вся суета человеческая, елика не пребывают по смерти: не пребывает богатство, ни существует слава: пришедшей бо смерти, вся сия потребишься…” (“All is human vanity that will not remain after death: the riches do not remain, glory does not walk together (with the dead): for with the death’s coming, all of this is destroyed.”) The threshold of the mortal and immortal (which, as we shall discuss later, coincides with the glorious and glorified) is found elsewhere. Glorious, or immortal here is not what is “great” but what is “not partaking in sin,” holy—in other words, partaking in God’s glory.

Where Sedakova followed her (modernized) transcription of a Slavonic liturgical fragment with a Russian translation, I had to transcribe the Slavonic and follow it with an English translation. The relationship of Russian and Church Slavonic, even in the present day, is to a great extent a symbiotic relationship—something that is not true for English and Russian. The Russian translation echoes the words of the Slavonic, whereas a translation into English introduces a much greater discontinuity. Nevertheless, the continuity of the translated text and its original stands in reassuring contradiction to the very words of this passage: not all will be destroyed, “Not all of me shall die.”
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ADMINISTRATIVE AND EDITORIAL EXPERIENCE

Faculty Assistant (Spring—Fall 2012)
Editorial Institute, Boston University

Editorial Assistant (unpaid internship, February—May 2007)
Boston Review

PUBLICATIONS

ESSAY

BOOK REVIEWS


TRANSLATIONS (RUSSIAN—ENGLISH)

Osip Mandelstam, six poems about Stalin, with a translator’s preface, forthcoming in Literary Imagination, 2013.
Osip Mandelstam, two poems, with a translator’s preface, Pusteblume, Issue 3, Winter 2009-2010.

LECTURES AND PRESENTATIONS

“Nadezhda Mandelstam’s Marginalia: Interrogating a Textual Witness,” delivered at the Conference of the Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers (ALSCW), University of Georgia, April 2013.
“Mandelstam’s Interrogation: Reading the Protocols,” delivered at the ALSCW Conference, Claremont McKenna College, March 2012.
“A Shipwreck on the Great Sea of Being: Dante’s Revision of Homer’s Odyssey,” delivered at the ALSCW Conference, Boston University, November 2011.
“The Proto-Existentialists: Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Edmund Husserl, Simone Weil,” four lectures delivered at the College of Arts and Sciences, Boston University, Fall 2009.

MEMBERSHIP

Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers (ALSCW)
Modern Language Association (MLA)
New England Modern Language Association (NEMLA)