Osip Mandelstam was a poet renowned for the breadth of his culture and the seeming ease with which he navigated this self-designated “blessed inheritance, / The wandering dreams of other bards.” But he was also, through no choice or fault of his own, a younger contemporary of Russian Symbolism. Transplanted as a small child from Warsaw to St. Petersburg, one of two centers of Russian Symbolism, he received his secondary education at the Tenishev School, where his teacher of Russian literature was Vladimir Gippius, a poet and aficionado of Symbolist verse with personal ties to the movement. In 1909, Mandelstam first participated in the poetry workshops of Viacheslav Ivanov, one of the Symbolist maîtres, and he continued to attend Ivanov’s “Academy” often, if not constantly, as late as 1911. Mandelstam’s own first published poetry was written contemporaneously with the beginning of the decline of Russian Symbolism, and the period of his poetry through 1911 has long been recognized, with some qualifications, but fundamentally accurately, as his “Symbolist” period.
Such a uniquely non-elective connection to Russian Symbolism—among all the manifold artistic phenomena that would later sound in the poet’s “thousand-barreled reed pipe, animated at once with the breath of all ages”—demands special consideration. Mandelstam’s overarching strategy for incorporating Western culture into his poetry was “licenced thievery,” i.e., complete freedom to choose or pass over the gifts of the past. Symbolism, however, could not be freely chosen because it had, in a sense, already been given.

At the same time, the “confessional mode” and prophetic stance of the Symbolist poet were not open to Mandelstam as a Jew and a newcomer. The poetry of the “second generation” of “mythopoetic” Symbolists had been dominated by the quest for an all-transforming, mystical union with the Divine Feminine or Russia as Bride. Mandelstam, the young and somewhat awkward Jew, was, as Gregory Freidin has pointed out, no suitable bridegroom for Russia. At the same time, as the movement aged and journals became ever more inundated with the work of epigones, the late-coming Symbolist poet no longer had access to the charismatic aura necessary to maintain the crucial tension of the diaphanous word, simultaneously relating to this-worldly and otherworldly reality. As Mandelstam himself was to put it a little over a decade later, “Russian Symbolism shouted so much and so loudly about the ‘ineffable’ [neskazannoe] that this ‘ineffable’ passed hands like paper money” (II, 423).

So what was given could not be taken; nor could it be effectively employed. In a poetics that would be dominated by “distanced reiteration,” Mandelstam first had to generate distance from Symbolism in order to create the aesthetic tension required for an effective and palpably new return.

In his earliest essay, “François Villon” (Fransua Villon, 1910), Mandelstam describes how Paul Verlaine “smashed the serres chaudes [hothouses] of Symbolism,” which contained the protective atmosphere allowing that movement’s embodied allegories to flourish. Verlaine in this sense repeats the feat of Villon, who freed French poetry from the medieval “rhetorical school,” the “Symbolism of the 15th century” (II, 301). It is inevitably implied that Mandelstam can be a Villon/Verlaine on Russian soil. However, Mandelstam, the poet, “learns from everyone and speaks to everyone.” After the initial Acmeist polemics of 1912–14, Mandelstam is more concerned with incorporating the Symbolist legacy as an enriching element of his verse than in “smashing” it. As Omry Ronen notes, “In accordance with its stated aims, acmeism subordinated all cultural codes, as material, to the tasks of poetry as such, considered to be the most universal of models.”

At the same time, Symbolism was more to Mandelstam than simply a
raw material, interchangeable with any other. One has a sense that the chaotic, Dionysian element foregrounded in Symbolism fed Mandelstam’s own worldview, that it was necessary to his art. After the too staid poetic cosmos of his first book, Stone (Kamen’, 1916), the poet, faced with the turmoil of the Great War, felt an inner call to reintroduce the Symbolist chaos to his poetry.14

However, by 1911–12, the Symbolist poetics had in many ways spent its charge. As noted above, lofty words had undergone “inflation” and hemorrhaged the value that was once perceived in their relation to a higher reality. A major question I will be asking on these pages is how does Mandelstam “reinvigorate” those elements of the spent Symbolist poetics that he actively needs? As I intend to show, his main tactic is to generate productive ambivalence of tone through a distinctive play with immediacy and distance. Mythopoetic Symbolism represents a historical stage in the development of Russian verse and of Mandelstam’s own poetry, with its own characteristic set of motifs, topoi, and narrative structures. As these elements of Symbolist poetics enter Mandelstam’s poetry, the fluid boundaries characteristic of the Symbolist worldview—between this world and the other world, biography and history, the world of art and the world beyond its frame—become mirrored within his poems. However, the Symbolists’ metaphysical boundary-crossings and conflagrations of distinct spheres were in the eyes of the Acmeists “unchaste.” When Mandelstam depicts such “encroachments,” as when the spiritual other enters his poetry, particularly in terms borrowed from the Symbolists themselves, there is always an open question as to the author’s attitude toward them and as to their ontological “reality,” both within and beyond the world of his verse.

The angle of refraction at which Symbolist topoi enter Mandelstam’s poetry—which is to say, the tone and the pragmatics of the text—is ultimately the key to meaning. However, tone is a notoriously difficult thing to pin down. Therefore, while Mandelstam’s oeuvre contains varied and often antithetical approaches to almost every problem, it is fortunate that his poems often hold the structural cues through which we can begin to question this angle. For instance, within two poems written in 1920 lurk elements of the Symbolist worldview. However, in “Venetian life, morbid and barren” (Venitseiskoi zhizni, mrachnoi i besplodnoi), boundary-dissolving masquerade—a fine analogue for one major element of the Symbolist worldview—is paradoxically contained by manifold non-permeable frames of paintings and mirrors. Remove is inscribed in the poem’s structure and imagery. In contrast, in “The spectral stage barely glimmers” (Chut’ mertsaet prizrachnaia stsena), with its permeable theater curtain and semiotically
unified space of theater and vestibule, the transcendent, otherworldly realm of art, which Mandelstam depicts in terms reminiscent of the Symbolists’ vision of their Ideal, leaks out—from stage to hall to vestibule to street—by analogy contaminating, if only temporarily, the world beyond the text. Not aesthetic distance, but immediacy of experience is implied.

At the end of the Introduction, in “The Curtain and the Onionskin,” I explore two of Mandelstam’s own “metadscriptions” of this play with immediacy and distance, two metaphorical embodiments within his writings of the productively unstable boundaries at the poet’s command.

“THE LIVING AND DANGEROUS BLOK . . .”

One major goal of this study is to delineate Mandelstam’s diverse strategies for writing and rewriting his relationship with the Symbolist heritage, primarily on the cusp of and after his “conversion” to Acmeism in 1912, and to seek out the visible traces of Mandelstam’s ephemeral play with the boundary between two poetics. As an upper chronological limit for the study, I take, roughly, the period after Blok’s death in the early 1920s. This encompasses Mandelstam’s most active overcoming and assimilation of the Symbolist legacy. During this time, Symbolist authors were still active on the literary scene in Russia, however they may have come to be overshadowed for posterity by the emergence of the new movements of Acmeism and Futurism. Moreover, the literary shadow of the poet’s own genesis within the Symbolist womb had not yet dissipated to be replaced by the shadow of history, paradoxical as that may seem in 1910s Russia. Within this time frame, I focus particularly on those strategies that are not reducible to an Acmeist/Symbolist dichotomy but continue to actively engage the Symbolist tradition.

My second major goal is to present, for the first time, a coherent narrative of Mandelstam’s relation to Alexander Blok, far and away the most compelling poetic voice among the Symbolists, and the only Symbolist poet who presented Mandelstam with any apparent creative anxieties.15 Mandelstam was perceptive enough to note that the rival poetic movement, Futurism, “should have directed its attack [ostrie] not against the paper fortress of Symbolism, but against the living and truly dangerous Blok” (II, 348). Blok loomed large, even from the face of postcards,16 and his high-Romantic stance, which maintained its tragic essence even when outwardly undermined by irony, was in many ways antithetical to that which Mandelstam would cultivate.

Blok’s poetry projected a cult of the Romantic persona. Mandelstam, in
the period we are considering, claimed that his memory was “inimical to all that is personal” (II, 99). In 1921, after Blok’s death, Yury Tynianov would write:

[A legend] surrounded [Blok’s lyric hero] from the very beginning; it seemed even that it anticipated the very poetry of Blok, that his poetry only developed and supplemented the postulated image.

In this image [people] personify the whole art of Blok; when they speak of his poetry, almost always behind the poetry they inadvertently substitute a human face—and it is this face, and not the art, that everyone loved.17

In contrast, the sensitive critic Boris Bukhshtab, writing in 1929, which is to say, without access to either the as-yet-unwritten poetry of the 1930s or Mandelstam’s early unpublished Symbolist verse, could assert, “a portrait accompanying Mandelstam’s poetry would be artistic tactlessness.”18

In addition, Blok’s rather uncharitable view of the young poet surely had some effect on their personal relations. Mandelstam intersected with Blok in the 1910s, as might be expected, at St. Petersburg/Petrograd cultural gatherings, but he also spent at least some time with Blok in close company, thanks to their common friend, Vladimir Piast. The attitude of Blok, who despised pretense in personal relations, could not have been entirely masked, and these feelings are documented in his diaries. A. L. Grishunin catalogs most of Blok’s derogatory and often anti-Semitically tinged remarks about the younger poet.19 He omits one particularly telling entry: “In the evening, the ‘Academy’—Piast’s talk, his old article about the ‘canon,’ Viacheslav Ivanov’s verbosity [mnogoglagolanie] put me to sleep entirely. In the evening, we drink tea at ‘Kvisisana’—Piast, I and Mandelstam (eternal [vechnyi])” (29 October 1911).20 “Eternal” nicely situates Mandelstam among the other tiresome presences that oppress Blok, while simultaneously, through a nod at the Wandering Jew (Vechnyi Zhid), hinting at both the younger poet’s ethnic identity and one widely noted element of his character (that of a wanderer).21

For Mandelstam, Blok’s poetry stood at the boundary between tragedy and tragic pose, which was, for him, its inherent travesty. Russian Symbolism struck the mature Mandelstam with its theatricality, and Blok possessed the voice that either could transcend this theatricality or was its most dangerous siren. Moreover, Blok’s often unpalatable and sometimes “maximalist” stances on social issues and history were foreign to the younger poet. And ultimately, Mandelstam was to find in Blok a repellent personal barstvennost’ (lordliness), judging by the subterranean jabs in Mandelstam’s prose. All
these elements combined to make Blok a deeply problematic figure, demanding much inner struggle on the part of Mandelstam.

In the context of Western literary scholarship, such a state of affairs brings to mind Harold Bloom’s theories on the anxiety of influence. In chapter 2, I set Bloom’s theories in the context of turn-of-the-century Russia. I demonstrate the awareness of Russian poets, long before Bloom, of the mechanisms and anxieties of influence, analyze Mandelstam’s ingenious and seemingly prescient dialectical evasions of Bloom, and finally, following David Bethea and Andrew Reynolds, consider the adjustments necessary to Bloom’s theories for application to Russian poetry, with its unique emphasis on word as deed and the lived life of the poet. Thus placed in proper perspective, Bloom indeed turns out to be useful for examining certain aspects of Mandelstam’s relation to Blok.

The heart of the narrative of Mandelstam’s relation to Blok is to be found in the chapters beginning with chapter 6, “Bedside with the Symbolist Hero.” Of course, it is not always possible or desirable to separate Mandelstam’s coming to terms with Blok from his assimilation of Symbolism more broadly.

**SYMBOLISM AND ACMEISM: AN OVERVIEW**

Russian Symbolism emerged in the 1890s under the influence of European, and particularly French, Symbolism and as a reaction to the positivist aspects of Russian literary realism and the social directedness of Russian literary criticism. These dogmas had exerted an almost suffocating dominance in the development of Russian poetry from the 1840s on, marginalizing aesthetic concerns and those poets who were given over to them. Early Russian Symbolist poets—for instance, Dmitry Merezhkovsky, Valery Briusov, Zinaida Gippius, Konstantin Bal’mont, Fedor Sologub—were importers of recent European cultural developments and proselytizers of a pan-aestheticizing worldview, megalomaniacal, amoral individualists and seekers of the new religious consciousness. Often, they combined these seemingly contradictory impulses in complex and paradoxical amalgams.

The second “generation” of Symbolists, whose literary debuts came shortly after the turn of the twentieth century, were deeply influenced by such contradictory forces as Friedrich Nietzsche, on the one hand, and Vladimir Solov’ev’s Sophiological theology and messianism, on the other. Drawing upon Orthodox religious philosophy, a variety of mystic traditions, German Romanticism, and the theories of the nineteenth-century Ukrainian linguist Alexander Potebnia, they developed a Neoplatonic understanding
of the nature and function of the word and artwork, the value of which lay in its connection to the greater reality of the ideal realm. Thus emerged an eschatologically oriented poetics, weighted toward tragedy (both personal and national), which viewed art from within a religious-teleological framework and valued Dionysian rapture and transcendence of the self.

These poets believed in the inseparability of life and art and the importance and the possibility of life-creation (zhiznetvorchestvo)—both on a personal-artistic plane and also on a cosmic scale, which demanded that the artist be a theurgist, that is, act upon the world through the connection of his or her art to a higher reality. Their ultimate goal, arising from these precepts, was, at least theoretically, collective creation—myth-creation (mitoftvorchestvo). At the same time, artists such as Blok and Andrei Bely could not help experiencing doubts as to the reality—or at least imminence—of all these things. Doubts generated more whirlpools of tragedy (heroic pessimism) and irony, disillusionment and rebirth, stoic renunciation of the poet-prophet’s path, and “heretical,” at times carnivalesque, aestheticism.

“ Mythopoetic” (myth-creating) is a potentially problematic term, and I want to make clear that I have no intention of implying an adequacy of the Symbolists’ works to the nature of myth in archaic cultures. The term is no more nebulous or inaccurate than the more broadly used “younger,” however, and it certainly speaks more profoundly, even if demanding corrections and qualifications, to the nature of the younger Symbolists’ art. In any case, we can speak of a striving toward myth, which perhaps, strictly speaking, “devolved” into the generation of narratives, but narratives that were latent in these poets’ works from the very beginning because of their investment in certain archetypal situations, which lent their works structure and commonality. Hence, the mythopoetic Symbolists’ works exhibit not only retrospective descriptions and rearrangements of their own earlier poetry into narrative form, but also anticipations in their early poetry of later developments, precisely because these developments are structured into the initial problem.

Blok’s poetic path, in particular, struck contemporaries with its apparent organicity, its semblance of natural generation from its roots. Modest Gofman, writing in 1908, highlights an important aspect of Blok’s poetry:

[Blok] starts from wavering and doubt in the existence of the World Soul as a Prekrasnaia Dama.

Но страшно мне: изменишь облик Ты,
И дерзкое возбудишь подозренье,
Сменив в конце привычные черты.
О, как паду и горестно, и низко,
Не одолев смертенья мечты.

And I fear: You will change Your appearance,
And will excite a brazen suspicion,
Having changed, in the end, Your familiar features.
O, how I will fall bitterly, and low,
Not having overcome the mortal reverie.

Gofman continues, “And the whole first romantic period of Alexander Blok’s work (ending with “The Snow Mask” [Snezhnaia maska, 1907, S.G.]) can be characterized as an unfolding of these lines.”

In terms of narrative, we might even speak, within the movement, of an overarching Romantic plot encompassing vision, loss, and circuitous return, enriched by memory. Blok imagined this inner history of the Symbolist poet’s path as a Hegelian triad (“On the Current State of Russian Symbolism” [O sovremennom sostoyanii russkogo simvolizma, 1910]), Bely in terms of the unearned, and hence sacrilegious, insight of the neophyte, leading to spiritual death and resurrection (“In Place of a Foreword” [Vmesto predisloviia] in Urn [Urna, 1909]).

The third major mythopoetic Symbolist poet and the movement’s most prominent theorist was Viacheslav Ivanov. His perspective seems, from the outset, all-encompassing and immutable, as if from above and beyond the drama. However, the same “myth” informs Ivanov’s early works on a different scale. On the one hand, this is the historical scale of humanity’s falling away from a direct experience of the deity, the need to seek paths back to closeness or communion in the present, and the expectation (chaianie) of universal community and a reborn archaic-religious tragedy as the ultimate goal of art in the future.

On the other hand, it is the ongoing and infinitely repeated drama of the individual soul’s path back to the deity, as depicted, for instance, in the poem “Maenad” (Menada, 1905).

The impulse to subjugate all other structures to the mythopoetic narrative is eloquently attested in poet Sergei Solov’ev’s review of All Melodies (Vse napevy, 1909), a late volume by Briusov, as noted above, one of the major Symbolist poets of the older generation.

The imperial quiet of fall has descended on the poetry of Briusov:

And ever more calmly, ever more submissively
I walk toward some Bethlehem.
With these words he ends his book. The poet heads for Bethlehem, carrying the gold of his poetry as a gift to the unknown god. It is pure and imperishable: the poet has turned to gold the tears of Orpheus, pining for his lost Euridice.\(^{36}\)

Briusov saw *All Melodies* as the end of an epoch in his poetry. His poem “Star” (*Zvezda*, 1906) is indeed written in the mythopoetic mode, summing up certain key themes of his poetry and submitting them all to an overarching narrative of mystical revelation and humble pilgrimage and expectation. However, “Star” is not the end of the book; it is one of four poems that, in their symmetry, make up the final section of *All Melodies*—“Conclusion.” “Star” is not even the last of these, each of which is a summation of Briusov’s poetry from a different perspective, stressing the many faces of his art. Solov’ev, however, has a need to see the mythopoetic narrative as the *telos* of Briusov’s poetry as a whole.

It is surely not coincidental that Mikhail Gasparov, supremely aware of Mandelstam’s writings and skeptical of the religious content of the Symbolists’ art, challenges the mythic status precisely of Don Juan and Carmen, those two archetypal plot kernels that Mandelstam, on the basis of Blok’s poetry, asserts have recently attained “civic equality” with myth.\(^{37}\) Mandelstam himself, as we see, chooses these words carefully, even as he accords Blok this grandest achievement among his contemporaries. Still, Mandelstam is receptive not only to Blok’s myth-making, but also to Ivanov’s claims to mythological thinking (in the archaic sense) and also applies the concept of contemporary myth-making in his own work.\(^{38}\) At the same time, Mandelstam is careful not to repeat the errors of Ivanov, who, despite the authenticity of his archaism—“never for a minute does he forget himself, speaking in his barbaric native tongue”—“unbelievably overloaded his poetry with Byzantine-Hellenic images and myths, significantly devaluing it” (II, 343, 341).

A sense of the power of myth-creation, at least within the artistic realm, is, in fact, one of the more profound aspects of the younger Symbolists’ influence upon Mandelstam. In his programmatic essay “Pushkin and Skriabin” (*Pushkin i Skriabin*, 1916–17?), Mandelstam writes about the “myth of forgotten Christianity.” This myth, the generative power of which is precisely in its occlusion of truth—Christianity has been forgotten, allowing us to search for it anew—is the gift, in large part, of the Symbolists themselves. Their anguished searchings betray their failure to recognize the redemption. Mandelstam’s *Tristia* demonstrates how this myth can become a fertile conceptual model, spreading through and organizing, to varying degrees, individual poems.\(^{39}\)
The diachronic Symbolist macroplot takes its inner dynamism at any given point from the striving of the poet—treated with seriousness or ironically undermined—to break down the walls of rational, three-dimensional, historical existence, traversing, through theurgy and life-creation, the boundaries between “this world” and the “other world,” art and life. As Briusov notes, “Art is only there, where there is audacious striving [derznovenie] to get beyond the limit, where there is a thrust beyond the boundaries of the knowable, in the thirst to draw even a drop of the ‘alien, otherworldly element’ [stikhi chuzhdoi, zapredel’noi].”

Acmeism originated in the wake of the Symbolists’ own “crisis” and debates on the nature of art, and not least from a desire to re-establish these boundaries, which the poets and their epigones had often too cheerfully vanquished. “The first condition of successful building,” wrote Mandelstam, “is sincere piety toward the three dimensions of space—to look at the world not as a burden and an unfortunate accident, but as a God-given palace” (II, 322).

Still, it was clear even from the beginning—at least to the Acmeists themselves—that this respect for boundaries should not exclude religious feeling. Nikolai Gumilev: “To always remember the ineffable, but not insult one’s thought about it with more or less likely conjectures—this is the principle of Acmeism.” Mandelstam: “The Middle Ages are dear to us because they possessed to a high degree a sense of boundaries and partitions. They never mixed different planes and related to the otherworldly with enormous restraint. A noble amalgam of rationality and mysticism and a perception of the world as a living equilibrium binds us to this epoch [ . . . ]” (II, 325).

The sense of boundaries and equilibrium in early Acmeism led, particularly in the poetry of Mandelstam, to the magnificent graphic and architectural poetry that to this day underlies some studies of Acmeist poetics. But the rigor of this distance between poet and world, subject and object, was precisely what was necessary in order to lay the foundation for more subtle play with, and sometimes assaults on, boundaries. As Sergei Averintsev wrote, “Mandelstam’s path to the infinite [ . . . ] is through the taking serious of the finite as finite, through the firm laying of a sort of ontological boundary.”

As has been noted many times, Acmeism defies easy or precise characterization in terms of chronology, adherents, or poetics. In a compelling synthesis, Oleg Lekmanov, in Kniga ob akmeizme (1998), defines the movement as a series of concentric circles. On the outside, there was the loosely allied Poets’ Guild, organized by Gumilev and Sergei Gorodetsky in October 1911, which included a fairly broad variety of mostly younger poets. Their meetings consisted of reading by each participant and grounded, detailed
discussion and criticism. Many of these poets published in the substantially Acmeist journal The Hyperborean (Giperborei), edited by the substantially Symbolist Mikhail Lozinsky. The middle circle consisted of those six poets who named themselves Acmeists, and whose collective publications, together with Gumilev and Gorodetsky’s manifestoes, presented the face of the new movement in early 1913. These were Vladimir Narbut, Mikhail Zenkevich, Gorodetsky, Gumilev, Anna Akhmatova, and Mandelstam. They still represented very broadly differing poetics, ranging from the more staid and classical to the more earthy and grotesque. (As Lekmanov and others have noted, Mandelstam himself leaned at times to the “left” wing, and even courted Futurism.) The innermost circle was defined by the “semantic poetics” and ongoing subtextual dialogue of those three poets, still varying broadly in temperament, the sum of whose works have largely defined our picture of the movement ex post facto: Gumilev, Akhmatova, and Mandelstam.

Victor Zhirmunsky, in his classic first analysis of the new movement, summarized Gorodetsky and Gumilev’s program: “the exiling from art of mysticism as a mandatory topic and the fundamental goal of all poetic creation,” “instead of a complex, chaotic, isolated individual—the variety of the outside world, instead of emotional, musical lyricism—precision and graphic visuality in the combination of words.” Generalizing, we can speak of a series of contrasts of emphasis, differentiating Symbolism and Acmeism in the Acmeists’ writings: music vs. architecture, the Dionysian vs. the Apollo-nian (chaos vs. cosmos), religious initiates vs. a guild of medieval craftsmen (but also Masonic builders), impressionism vs. clarity/precision, the other-worldly vs. the culturally distant and the extrapersonal (the interlocutor, the precursor) as the source of art’s seeking outside of itself.

Mandelstam noted, however, that “not the ideas, but the tastes of the Acmeists” dealt a mortal blow to Symbolism. “The ideas turned out to be adopted in part from the Symbolists, and Viacheslav Ivanov himself aided much in the construction of Acmeist theory” (II, 257). The Acmeists’ new tastes were connected, first and foremost, to a sense of balance—balance in worldview, balance in approach to the individual (lichnost’), and balance in the development of and attention to all aspects of poetic language, in a way that does not favor any one factor or distinguish between form and content.

Still, Acmeism also arose as a reaction against the hypertrophic musicality and vagueness of Symbolism. “For the Acmeists, the conscious sense of the word, Logos, is just as beautiful a form as music for the Symbolists,” wrote Mandelstam (II, 321). Later, Mandelstam would call the Acmeists “smysoviki” (senseworkers), and one of the most influential studies of the
The poetics of Acmeism finds its essence precisely in its “semantic poetics.” This semantic poetics was not neutral but tended toward the compounding of “ambivalent antitheses” and the multiplication of semantic vectors. Mandelstam had a deep affinity for the writings of Pavel Florensky, perhaps in part because, for Florensky too, “both thesis and antithesis, in their contradictory simultaneity, are essential to ‘truth.’”

This perception of truth as the simultaneous presence of contradictory perspectives and a feeling for the exponentially expansive associative potential of language underlie the dialogism of Acmeism—its renowned subtextual poetics. In the Acmeists’ poetry, the voices of others are not subsumed in the monolithic voice of the poet (as in Blok’s allusions to other poets, for instance) but remain a simultaneously composite and organic whole, a fugue of perceptibly competing voices and impulses, which is nonetheless transcended in the organic voice of the poet.

Competing and coexisting components of truth are also visible in the interrelation of humor and seriousness in Acmeism and in the nature of Acmeist irony. For Blok, irony was a destructive force, a seductive, derisive nihilism, which he himself applied to consummate artistic effect in the poetry and drama of his “antithesis.” The other Symbolists’ irony was more diverse and more constructive. However, it was hardly comparable in tone to the Acmeists’ “luminous [svetlaia] irony, not undermining the roots of our belief.”

Similarly, Acmeism was characterized by the sting of inside jokes, and in its early period, by a certain cabaret atmosphere, which can inform in absentia even the most serious of the Acmeists’ works. One did not hamper the other, and even existentially sustained it. In Mandelstam, the beautiful and serious—even lofty—“slow whirlpool” [medlennyi vodovorot] of “Sisters—heaviness and tenderness” (Sestry—tiazhest’ i nezhnost’, 1920) can reappear, transformed into the “funnel of a urinal” [voron(ka) pissuara] in a 1925 translation from Jules Romains’s Les Copains (1913), with no perceived threat to the integrity of the original context. In Blok’s poetry, such transformations, for instance, that of the transcendent Fair Lady into a prostitute or cardboard doll, are perceived as an attack on the ontological reality of the original revelation or, at the least, as a ridiculing of the poet’s earlier naiveté.

The expression “ambivalent antithesis” emphasizes the irreconcilable and unreconciled in Acmeism: “I’m a double dealer, with a dual soul, / I am friend of night, I’m day’s champion” [Dvurushnik ia, s dvoinoi dushoi, / Ia nochi drug, ia dnia zastrel’shchik]. However, Acmeist poetics can, as Omry Ronen demonstrates, also often be perceived as dialectical synthesis or sublation. The second wave of influence of Symbolism in Mandelstam’s poetry,
first visible in “Ode to Beethoven” (Oda Betkhovenu, 1914) and palpable throughout the poetry of the Tristia period (1916–early 1921), is just such a sublation of Apollonian and Dionysian, masculine and feminine impulses in a tonally ambivalent and entirely new synthesis worthy of the “hermaphrodite” lyric poet (“François Villon”).

Another powerful example of Acmeist sublation is Mandelstam’s understanding of the nature of the word. As we see in “On the Nature of the Word” (O prirode slova, 1922), the word, for Mandelstam, is freed of its connection to a Platonic idea, of its realism, in that counterintuitive medieval-philosophical sense that underlies Ivanov’s usage in the term “realistic Symbolism.” Hence, he is in his rights to speak of Russian nominalism (referring to the competing strain of thought, which saw meaning as deriving from linguistic convention). However, it is specifically the word’s “inner freedom”—its freedom from the bonds of reference and from utilitarianism, even (or especially) the utilitarianism of “mystic intuition”—which makes it akin to Christ, the Word, makes it “active flesh, resolving itself in an event” [plot’ deiatel’naia, razreshaiushchaiasia v sobytie] (II, 246). Mandelstam thus comes to a remarkably deep and original synthesis between linguistic rationalism and a “mystic presumption” about the nature of the word.

THE CURTAIN AND THE ONION SKIN

In Mandelstam’s works we encounter two images that most emphatically demonstrate, even embody, the poet’s play with the productively unstable boundaries between discrete spheres of existence: in one case, temporal planes, and in the other, poetry and life. As such, the curtain and the onion skin are fine models for the shifting and ambiguous state of remove at which the Symbolist heritage finds a place in Mandelstam’s poetry.

In the final paragraph of “In a Fur Coat above His Station” (V ne po chinu barstvennoi shube), the last essay of Mandelstam’s autobiographical The Noise of Time (Shum Vremeni, 1923–24), Mandelstam writes, “With trepidation do I lift [slightly, tentatively, S.G.] the film of onionskin covering the winter hat of the writer” [S trepetom pripodnimaiu plenku voshchennoi bumagi nad zimnei shapkoi pisatelia] (II, 108). The raising of the corner of the fine sheet of translucent paper that shielded portraits and engravings in the era’s books visually evokes the poet’s play with immediacy and distance. Moreover, the image that had been shielded by the layer of onionskin itself represents both immediacy—the writer’s unmediated contact with the frigid night of Russian reality, “where terrible statehood is like a stove, piping with
ice” [gde strashnaia gosudarstvennost’, kak pech’, pyshushchaia ’1dom] (II, 108)—and remove—the aristocratic “fur” that the writer of the nineteenth century “grew” in order to protect himself from the cold: “Night thickened his coat. Winter clothed him” (ibid.).

The essay’s overarching theme is the poet’s transition from vicarious witnessing of Symbolism as a child, experiencing contact with literature through the mediation of books and Symbolist “house servant” Vladimir Gippius, to Russian Poet in the present. This shift, echoed metaphorically in the poet’s initial stepping out into the cold together with Gippius, engenders ambivalence on several levels. Partly, this ambivalence is connected to issues of class, nineteenth-century Russian literature’s perceived barstvennost’ (aristocracy, lordliness), which will be at the center of our attention in terms of Mandelstam’s relation to Blok in chapter 12. But also, contact with reality is fraught with real dangers. The writer in the main stream of the Russian tradition is a writer in the world.66 As Bethea once put it, “the lived life of the poet” becomes “a record of the authenticity of the text.”67 And Mandelstam himself had seen in the death of the artist a final, transformative creative act (II, 313).

The onionskin thus represents the translucent, tissue-fine boundary between the writer as writer and the writer as social actor, between word as art and word as deed—in essence, between literature and life.68 Not surprisingly, this final image of The Noise of Time possesses a rich dualism. On the one hand, the present-tense “pripodnimaiu” [I lift] can convey past action, the perspective of the child, who, raising the corner of the onionskin together with Gippius, gets his first intimations of the exhilarating and frightening presence of the Russian poetic tradition. Mandelstam the child lifts the onionskin from the book-bound portrait of the writer cautiously, and he very well may let it fall in fright. On the other hand, the mature poet, in the 1920s, is forced to raise the onionskin in earnest, for the deaths of Blok, Gumilev, and Velimir Khlebnikov serve as an undeniable affirmation of the potent and, in fact, deadly relationship between literature and life. Still, there is an aesthetic pleasure to be derived from this play with perspective, a pleasure that one clearly senses in this passage as well.

Another locus of play with immediacy and distance, this time taken from Mandelstam’s poetry, is the “theater” curtain of “I will not see the celebrated Phèdre” (Іa ne uvizhu znamenitoi “Fedry,” 1915), the poem that closes the canonical 1916 edition of Mandelstam’s first book, Stone:

Я не увижу знаменитой «Федры»
В старинном многоярусном театре,
С прокопченной высокой галереи,
При свете оплывающих свечей.
И, равнодушен к суете актеров,
Сбирающих рукоплесканий жатву,
Я не услышу, обращенный к рампе,
Двойною рифмой оперенный стих:

— Как эти покрывала мне постылы...

Театр Расина! Мощная завеса
Нас отделяет от другого мира;
Глубокими морщинами волнуя,
Меж ним и нами занавес лежит:
Спадают с плеч классические шали,
Расплавленный страданьем крепнет голос,
И достигает скорбного закала
Негодованьем раскаленный слог...

Я опоздал на празднество Расина!

Вновь шелестят истлевшие афиши,
И слабо пахнет апельсинной коркой,
И словно из столетней летаргии
Очнувшийся сосед мне говорит:
— Измученный безумством Мельпомены,
Я в этой жизни жажду только мира;
Уйдем, покуда зрители-шакалы
На растерзанье Музы не пришли!

Когда бы грек увидел наши игры...

I will not see the celebrated \textit{Phèdre}
In a venerable, many-tiered theater,
From the high, soot-smoked gallery,
By the light of guttering candles.
And, indifferent to the bustle of the actors,
Gathering a harvest of ovations,
I will not hear addressed to the footlights,
A verse plumed with double rhyme:

How these veils weary me . . .
Theater of Racine! A mighty curtain
Divides us from another world.
Agitating with deep furrows,
Twixt them and us a curtain lies:
Classical shawls drop from shoulders,
A voice molten with anguish strengthens,
And the diction, inflamed by indignation,
Strikes a mournful temper . . .

I am late to Racine’s festivities!

The crumbled programs rustle once again,\(^69\)
And the scent of orange rind faintly wafts,
And my neighbor, as if awakened
From a hundred-year lethargy, says to me:
—Tortured by the ravings of Melpomene,
In this life I thirst for only peace.
Let us hence, while the jackals of the audience
Have not yet come to tear the Muse asunder.

If only could a Greek observe our games . . .

Outwardly, the poem affirms the inaccessibility of a cultural heritage that will forever remain in the past.\(^70\) The shift from the alexandrine couplets of Racine’s Phèdre to this poem’s blank verse seems to subtly reinforce the concept of a barrier that makes a perfect translation from one cultural idiom to another impossible. However, even in the first octave, as Gregory Freidin was first to note, Mandelstam quite vividly brings to life that very same theater of Racine, which his hero “will not see.”\(^71\) What is more, in the first monostich, Phèdre appears almost to empathize with the hero, to similarly suffer from the mutual impenetrability of their worlds.

“How these veils weary me!” she laments. And though, in the world of Racine’s tragedy, her words refer to the oppressive splendor that surrounds her in her shame,\(^72\) in Mandelstam’s poem the mention of these coverings (pokryvala) immediately precedes the theme of the “mighty curtain,” which, “agitating with deep furrows,” separates Racine’s theater from the present. Phèdre’s words, we are told, are directed at the footlights, that sublime boundary that forms the very essence of theater and is the natural locus of the invisible, but weighty, curtain. “Plumed,” like an arrow, or a swallow, Phè-
dre's line, which is to say Racine's poetry, tests the powerful dividing curtain from the opposite side.  

The description of the curtain is followed in the second octave by a pronounced crescendo—not quite conveyed in the translation, where the syntax has forced me to reverse the last two lines. Here, the poet mentally enters and seems on the verge of embodying in the present the space of Racine's theater. The structure of the poem primes us to expect that the “voice molten with anguish” will belong to Phèdre. However, Racine's heroine unexpectedly, but judiciously, fails to materialize in the second monostich, supplanted by the voice of the poet: “I am late to Racine's festivities!” I say judiciously because it was, after all, the dividing curtain that “agitated,” provoking this “diction, inflamed with indignation.”

Though the lyric persona once more laments having missed the performance, the third octave even more openly asserts the re-emergence—even resurrection—of Racine's era in the present: “Vnov' shelestit istlevshie afishi” [The crumbled (decayed) programs rustle once again]. In the final monostich, the poet again seems resolved to the firm delineation of cultural strata—twentieth-century Russia, seventeenth-century France, and the ancient Greece of Euripides. Mandelstam's attempts to breach the boundary between epochs are accorded the status of play, “games.”

However, in the next poem, which opens the poet's second collection, Tristia, all curtains are raised. Racine's Phèdre now declaims her role in proper alexandrine couplets. She is answered by a voice that speaks as part of an archaic tragic chorus and seeks to appease the god-like black sun, which has risen as a result of her guilt. Still, a consciousness of the fact that there was and is a curtain, and that it has been raised, remains. This consciousness serves as a prerequisite, allowing, in the end, for the more “Symbolist” poetics of Tristia as a whole, in which chronological and spatial boundaries are often wiped away, taboos subverted.

The poet's words in “Pushkin and Skriabin” about how the pre-existing salvation of the world by Christ frees the Christian artist to “wander the footpaths of mystery” in play (II, 315) are a similar logical “loophole.” They allow the poet not to renounce the footpaths of mystery—that is, the central theme of mythopoetic Symbolism—while at the same time not implicating himself in the Symbolists’ hubris. (The Symbolists of course believed that they were wandering or straying from these paths in earnest.)

Applied to Symbolism, play with the curtain or the onionskin, the translucent and dynamic barrier that separates the two poetics, amounts to play with the pragmatics of the text, the relation of the text to its audience and
to extratextual reality. In a variety of ways, not the last of which is a special sort of ambiguous and almost weightless irony, Mandelstam establishes one degree of separation between the “author” and renewed and reactivated motifs, ideas, and poetic devices borrowed from Symbolism. However, this paper-thin and always ambiguous separation often allows not so much for the dismissal or ridicule of Symbolist claims—for instance, to the transcendent power of word and name—as for their underhanded affirmation, with a renewed force, which proceeds from an infusion of conceptual complexity and healthy, self-deprecating doubt.

Mandelstam came to understand this power of ambiguous denial very early. So he concluded his earliest essay, on that “thieving angel” François Villon, and with it, later, his collection of essays, On Poetry (O poezii, 1928):78

“I know well that I am not the son of an angel, crowned with the diadem of a star or another planet,” said about himself a poor Parisian schoolboy, capable of much for the sake of a good dinner.

*Such* denials are equivalent to a positive conviction. (II, 309)79