Mandelstam, Blok, and the Boundaries of Mythopoetic Symbolism

Goldberg, Stuart

Published by The Ohio State University Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/24263
The various editions of Mandelstam’s first book, Stone, represent artistic visions of the poet’s development, not divorced from his actual trajectory, but rather shaped by his creative will in each new period. The 1913 edition of Stone takes the formed poet as a “given.” “A body is given me, what shall I do with it” [Dano mne telo, chto mne delat’ s nim], the collection begins, and later in the same poem, Mandelstam intones, “On the panes of eternity has already lain / My breath, my warmth” [Na stekla vechnosti uzhe leglo / Moe dykhanie, moe teplo”). In each of the later editions, however, a six-poem preamble precedes this tender, but unequivocal, assertion of the poet’s self-awareness as poet.

The canonical 1916 edition opens, to be precise, with an informal cycle of three four-line iambic-tetrameter miniatures, ostensibly fragments, each marked 1908 and displaying the same, relatively infrequent enclosing rhyme (m-F-F-m). These poems depict in iconic form three stages of the poet’s development:

(1) Genesis:
Сусальным золотом горят
В лесах рождественские елки;
В кустах игрушечные волки
Глазами страшными глядят.

In the forests Christmas trees
Burn with tinsel gold;
In the bushes toy wolves
Gaze with frightening eyes.

(2) Childhood, with its irrational fears, obliquely linked to Christianity (see chapter 5):

Из полутемной залы, вдруг,
Ты выскользнула в легкой шали —
Мы никому не помешали,
Мы не будили спящих слуг...

From the half-lit hall, suddenly,
You slipped in a light shawl—
We hindered no one,
We did not wake the sleeping servants . . .

The 1923 and 1928 editions reorganize this three-poem opening, while retaining its thematics. Growth is now reinforced formally, as Mandelstam reinstates the second stanza of “In the forests” and replaces “From the half-lit hall, suddenly” with the nostalgic, three-stanza “To read only children’s books” (Tol’ko detskie knigi chitat’, 1908). Also, Mandelstam highlights,
through the poems’ dominant subtexts, three early influences on his poetry: Pushkin, Romantic poet Fedor Tiutchev (a transparent allusion to whom was elided in the one-stanza version of “In the forests”), and Symbolist Fedor Sologub.\(^4\)

In the canonical 1916 edition, the image of the young woman in “From the half-lit hall, suddenly” provides a natural transition to “More tender than tender” (Nezhnee nezhnogo, 1909). This poem is, through its creative re-embodiment of one key *topos* and discursive reference frame of mythopoetic Symbolism—poetry to the mysterious female “**ty**” (you, fam.)—perhaps as good a starting point as any for a discussion of the ways in which Mandelstam subtly manipulates the tone of his earliest poems to draw tension from the Symbolist heritage, while not succumbing to its gravitational pull.\(^5\)

> Нежнее нежного  
> Лицо твое,  
> Белее белого  
> Твоя рука,  
> От мира целого  
> Ты далека,  
> И все твое —  
> От неизбежного.

> От неизбежного —  
> Твоя печаль  
> И пальцы рук  
> Неостывающих,  
> И тихий звук  
> Неунывающих  
> Речей,  
> И даль  
> Твоих очей.

> More tender than tender  
> Is your face,  
> Whiter than white  
> Your hand,  
> From the whole world  
> You are distant,  
> And all that is yours—  
> From the inevitable.
From the inevitable—
Your sadness
And the fingers of hands
Which do not grow cold,
And the quiet sound
Of speech
Which is not despondent,
And the distance
Of [i.e., in] your eyes.

The poem’s originality lies largely in its tone—delicate almost to the point of ethereality. A host of subtle formal achievements bring to fruition experiments from “The noiseless spindle” (Beshhumnoe vereteno) and “Your vivacious tenderness” (Tvoia veselaia nezhnost’), unpublished poems written in the same year. (We should keep in mind that it was the Symbolists—Ivanov, Briusov, Bely, and others—who introduced more aggressive formal, and particularly metrical, experimentation to Russian poetry.)

“Your vivacious tenderness,” in particular, reads like an etude of “More tender than tender.” Like its more successful cousin, it is configured on the backdrop of what was, by this time, the rather worn narrative, canonized in Symbolism, of the meeting between the poet and a mysterious or otherworldly woman:

Твоя веселая нежность
Смутила меня.
К чему печальные речи,
Когда глаза
Горят, как свечи
Среди белого дня?

Среди белого дня...
И та — далече —
Одна слеза,
Воспоминание встречи;
И, плечи клоня,
Приподымает их нежность.

Your vivacious tenderness
Disconcerted me.
What sense in sorrowful speech
When eyes
Burn like candles
In broad daylight?

In broad daylight . . .
And she [that one, fem.]—is far away—
One tear,
The memory of a meeting;
And, bowing shoulders,
Tenderness lifts them up.

The woman’s “vivacious tenderness,” her human warmth, contrasts with the “poet’s” “sorrowful speech.” The description of her eyes, which “Burn like candles / In broad daylight,” while clearly evocative of the hieratic dict

The second stanza, which takes place after her exit, also evokes the younger Symbolists’ mythopoesis—specifically, the moment of loss after the initial vision (perceived, after Baudelaire and Solov’ev, as a meeting). However, the woman’s human tenderness has been enough to reverse the sense of loss that is expected, and that receives a self-ironic jab in “One tear.”

“Your vivacious tenderness” has an unusually complex, even fanciful, strophic structure. Its rhyme scheme is a perfect mirror (AbCdCb bCdCbA), with nearly tautological lines at the center, differing only in punctuation and hence in intonation. The elaborate metrical structure is a near mirror as well. The combination of this highly structured form and the skittish and elliptical syntax of the second stanza makes it feel somewhat forced.

“More tender than tender” betrays a more elegant design. Its two stanzas consist of 16 lines of iambic dimeter, but with the penultimate verse split into two one-foot lines, thus introducing an extra line and rhyme. In the first stanza, a quatrain of alternating rhyme is encased in two layers of enclosing rhyme—a distorted mirror of sorts that is itself mirrored and distorted in the second stanza: AbCdCdbA AefGfGheh. This scheme is highly productive in terms of the phonic, rhythmic, syntactic, and semantic tensions generated. The poem opens in a static, almost iconic, close-up of face and hand, in lines seemingly unrhymed and in an oddly unfamiliar meter: “NizhN\'Eye N\'EZHn\'an\' / L\'TSO tv\'Yo, / BiL\'Eye B\'El\'an\' / T\'Ya ruKA.” The next two lines (“At M\'r\'o TSE\'an\' / Ty daliKA”) introduce movement, through alter-
nating rhyme and the concept of the heroine’s “distance.” But then the stanza resolves in stasis and apparent completion with two enclosing rhymes: “I VS'O tvaYO / At ni-izB'EZHnəvə.”

The second stanza opens with a combination of tautological rhyme and semantic destabilization, as the syntax of the closing lines of the first stanza is reinterpreted. Her sorrow has its source in the inevitable, rather than (or in addition to) being distant from it. Lines 10–15, which mirror lines 2–7 metrically, also present a complex semantic mirroring, coursing back from demeanor to hand to face (as the source of sound) and complicating the postulates of the first stanza. (“From the inevitable—Your sadness”—“From the whole world / You are distant”; “And the fingers of hands / Which do not grow cold”—“Whiter than white / Your hand”; “And the quiet sound / Of speech / Which is not despondent”—“More tender than tender / Is your face.”)

Most powerfully, Mandelstam overcomes the elaborate mirror structure’s gravitation toward stasis through the introduction of the hyper-stanzaic rhyme “rechei.” A passage in a draft to “François Villon” concerning the latter’s *huitains* (ababcbcd) and *dizains* (ababccddc) provides insight into how Mandelstam likely understood this rhyme’s function: “The introduction of a new rhyme ‘c’ in Villon has a special meaning. It is as if the strophe receives a push, comes alive, and resolves itself in the final line with an energetic or witty outburst.” Here too, the strophe and poem receive an unexpected stimulus with the introduction of the ‘h’ rhyme and resolve with great satisfaction in the final line.

The poem also has a tendency to compile rhythmically into longer units of two lines based on its syntactic structure. This places additional emphasis on “Rechei,” as the only line that frustrates the syntactic/metric coincidence of line pairs. The first three and the fifth of these pairs form composite lines of iambic pentameter, with a caesura after the third foot and a dactylic ending before the caesura. In other words, they feel, perhaps, like a clipped alexandrine. (Traditionally, iambic pentameter in Russian poetry has had either no stable caesura or a caesura after the fourth syllable.) At one of his lectures on versification, which Mandelstam attended on 23 April 1909, Viacheslav Ivanov had spoken about the opposite tendency, the potential of regular internal rhyme to split into shorter lines a series of long iambics, making reference specifically to alexandrines. Notably, Mandelstam’s intense formal experimentation in 1909 more or less coincided with these detailed lectures by Ivanov on prosody (with much attention to fixed strophic forms).

The leitmotif of rhythmic insufficiency in “More tender than tender” is also repeated on a larger scale, as the first stanza has a total of 40 syllables,
while the second stanza has only 38. The difference is slight, but it is palpable to the reader as the absence of the dactylic rhyme that would complete the mirror. The entire poem seems formulated rhythmically, on the deepest level, to create a feeling of quiet loss, which is balanced by the subtle uplift of the unexpected masculine rhyme in the final line. This formal brilliance, redolent of the more radical experiments of the youthful Bely (“World Soul” [Dusha mira, 1902]) and the youthful Vladimir Mayakovsky (“Down the Cobblestones” [Po mostovoi, 1913]), remains, in Mandelstam’s poem, wonderfully understated. It is remarkable that a poem in which 17 of 35 words are rhymed can sound so fragile.

In theme, “More tender than tender,” as I have noted, is a variation on the Symbolist genre, which might loosely be termed “verses to you” (not necessarily capitalized). The phenomenon I am speaking of is at once broader than and narrower than the tradition of Sophiological poetry, the topology of which has been charted by Lada Panova. It is narrower in that I segregate—perhaps somewhat artificially—one discursive framework used in poetry dedicated to the mystic Sophia (i.e., I—You—reader, but not I—She—reader), but broader because not all appeals by the Symbolists to the mysterious feminine “you” were intended to address the Eternal Feminine. In fact, a primary rationale for a broader approach is that play with the boundaries of the Sophiological tradition was a key element in the genre’s poetics. Surely an ambiguity inscribed in the poem itself underlies Blok’s misconstruing of Briusov’s Baudelaire-influenced “To Her, Close at Heart” (K Blizkoi, 1903) as a poem in the Solov’evian, Sophiological mold. (Blok, as is well known, quotes from “To Her” alongside Solov’ev for the epigraphs to the 1905 edition of Poems about the Fair Lady.)

A prime example of this type of play in Mandelstam himself is the poem “You passed through a cloud of fog” (Ty proshla skvoz’ oblako tumana, 1911). Here, Mandelstam achieves an exquisite balance between the image of a physical woman, implied particularly in the intimations of a threatening sexuality/sensuality in the second stanza, and an evocation of the World Soul as revealed in nature. The topos of the heroine’s appearance in nature, striding from behind a veil of fog, is combined with one of “Her” most characteristic features, the flush of her cheeks, which, later in the poem, is openly equated with the dawn or sunset. This may also, however, be understood as a sort of pathetic fallacy: “How your flush plays on everything!” [Kak na vsem igrayet twoi rumianets!] (my emphasis). Tanets-rumianets, moreover, is a typical Blokian rhyme. The picture is filled out by an eschatologically (or, more likely, a quasi-eschatologically) charged ending: “How the shining wound of bright days / Shows even through the cloud of fog!”
[Kak skvoz i v oblake tumana / Iarkikh dnei siaiaushchaia rana!]. (Blok had written, “Through the former clouds glanced / A bright unworldly gleam” [Proglianul skvoz’ tuchi prezhnye / Iarkii otblesk nezemnoi] [I, 171].) Penned eight years earlier, Mandelstam’s poem would surely have resonated as a Sophiological poem, but, as Mandelstam himself well understood, poems exist in a historical context within the ever-changing poetic tradition.\textsuperscript{14}

This “genre,” which is of particular importance to the mythopoetic Symbolists through the (often ambivalent) identification of the poem’s addressee with the Eternal Feminine, but which also marks the poetry of the older Symbolists, for instance, Briusov and Sologub, takes its roots in the poetry of Vladimir Solov’ev, Afanasy Fet, and the French Symbolists. These authors are, in turn, influenced by the poetry of Goethe, Dante, and Petrarch and by the tradition of courtly love poetry that influenced them.\textsuperscript{15} In other words, it is a tradition with the deepest cultural roots in European poetry and many antecedents in Russian poetry as well.

For ease of discussion, however, and also because I believe there is some degree of psychological validity to the association with Blok, I will consider “More tender than tender” against the backdrop specifically of Blok’s poetry. Other than perhaps Solov’ev, no Russian poet is as strongly associated as Blok is with this tradition of courtly love poetry and its descendants, since for no other Russian poet does it play such an enduring and central role.\textsuperscript{16} For no other Symbolist poet is orientation toward the female “You” such an integral element of the poet’s voice.\textsuperscript{17}

The possibility of a Blokian contrastive model is hinted at in the specific traits of the heroine. Tenderness, whiteness, and distance from (and simultaneous presence in) the world are all marked characteristics of Blok’s heroine of the period of \textit{Poems about the Fair Lady}. The disembodied face, hand, and speech are also typical of Blok. This is of course not to say that these features are not broadly employed throughout Symbolist poetry, and world poetry for that matter. In Blok’s early poetry, it is precisely these abstracted, clichéd features and epithets that have a high degree of semioticization. Therefore, it is paradoxically these “nondescript” features of the heroine of “More tender than tender” that are evocative of Blok’s early poetry—if not of Blok’s poetry exclusively.\textsuperscript{18}

Most importantly, Mandelstam’s “distance / Of your eyes” [dal’ / Tvoikh ochei]” recalls what is possibly the single most memorable feature of Blok’s Stranger: “I look beyond the dark veil, / And see an enchanted shore / And the enchanted distance” [Smotriu za temnuuiu vual’, / I vizhu bereg ocharovannyi / I ocharovannuiu dal’] (II, 212). This distance in the Heroine’s
eyes is analogous to the spiritual vistas accessible through the eyes of an icon. Mandelstam’s heroine, however, is also imbued with a striking, human warmth qualitatively different from the earthly side of Blok’s heroine—“the fingers of hands / Which do not grow cold, / And the quiet sound / Of speech / Which is not despondent.” This humanity is underscored by the complexity of her character: “The heroine is ‘enveloped in sadness,’ but her speech is not despondent.”

The overall effect is a humanizing of the heroine, while maintaining her connection to that which is beyond human comprehension (“the distance / of your eyes”). Rather than attempting to subvert the Symbolist model, as in “Your vivacious tenderness,” Mandelstam allows its echo to continue sounding, providing depth to his portrait. Without making any transcendent claims for his heroine (and, in fact, while guarding her humanity), he is able to bask her in the afterglow of the Symbolist heroine’s ambiguous divinity.

The power of “More tender than tender,” visible particularly in comparison with “Your vivacious tenderness,” grows out of its sophistication and sure-footed unity of tone. In contrast, the strength of the sixth poem of Stone, “There are chaste charms” (Est’ tselmudrennye chary), also written in 1909, is precisely in its tonal ambivalence:

Есть целомудренные чары:
Высокий лад, глубокий мир;
Далёко от эфирных лир
Мной установленные лары.

У тщательно обмытых ниш,
В часы внимательных закатов,
Я слушаю моих пенатов
Всегда восторженную тишь.

Какой игрушечный удел,
Какие робкие законы
Приказывает торс точенный
И холод этих хрупких тел!

Иных богов не надо славить:
Они как равные с тобой!
И, осторожною рукой,  
Позволено их переставить.

There are chaste charms:  
A lofty mode, a deep serenity;    
Far from the ethereal lyres      
Are the lares I have set.

At the painstakingly washed niches,  
In the hour of attentive sunsets,  
I listen to my penates'    
Always ecstatic stillness.

What a toylike domain, 
What timid laws 
Are proclaimed by a lathed torso    
And the cold of these fragile bodies!

Some gods one needn’t laud:  
They are as equals to you! 
And, with a cautious hand,  
You are permitted to rearrange them.

Omry Ronen gives the classic interpretation of this poem, on the basis of subtextual analysis, as a quintessential proto-Acmeist statement of Mandelstam’s new “attitude toward the poetry of the past, the ‘careful rearrangement’ and ‘justification’ of its lasting values.” Clare Cavanagh, in contrast, sees the poem as an embodiment of the young poet’s failure, in domesticating the great figures of the past, to make those poets speak, to create a poetry of living and dynamic voices.21

Despite the subtextual evidence linking Mandelstam’s penates to past poets and the validity of both of these above approaches, these figurines may be seen not only as the poets of the past, but also as a deflated image of the deified Ideal(s) of the mythopoetic Symbolists. The poem’s context, on this plane, is to be sought in a debate progressing at the time within the Symbolist camp. Sergei Gorodetsky, in his article “Idol-creation” (Idolotvorchestvo, 1909), having adopted Ivanov’s definition of “realistic” (essentially Neoplatonic) and “idealistic” (freely associative) Symbolism, accuses Bely and Blok of trading in their divine idea/Ideal for idols, in the form of poetic images:
Idea (ens realissimum) or eidōlon? For many poets this question is a fateful one. Where should one direct one’s creative energy: toward heralding the essential [sushchee], or toward the transformation of appearances [vidimost], toward the creation of fragile [khrupkie] images . . . ? How can one prefer a feminine, quiet receptiveness to superficially flashy, independent creation? Is it not better to sing one’s own ditty [pesenka], no matter what sort, than to sing another’s—even a divine other’s—song [pet’ s chuzhogo, khotia by i bozhestvennogo golosa]?22

Gorodetsky’s purpose is, of course, to denigrate the individualist’s “ditty.” Mandelstam, while accepting the terms of Gorodetsky’s argument, comes to a diametrically opposed conclusion. A ditty is held at least outwardly preferential to the divine song, and the Idea(is) of the mythopoetic Symbolists are exchanged for the prosaic figurines of household deities.

The second stanza is particularly crucial to establishing the poem’s double-voicedness. The “painstakingly washed niches” evoke, in particular, Blok’s patient service at the altar of his Ideal (“A youth, I light the candles, / I guard the incense flame” [Ia, otrok, zazhigaiu svechi, / Ogon’ kadil’nyi beregu] [I, 209]); “attentive sunsets”—the Argonauts’ (Bely’s circle) and Blok’s beloved sunset vigils.23 “Ecstasy” [vostorg] was a key concept, particularly for the Argonauts, and listening to the Ideal’s quiet is yet again evocative of the mythopoetic Symbolists: “To you, Whose Half-light was so bright, / Whose Voice calls through stillness” [Tebe, Chei Sumrak byl tak iarok, / Chei Golos tikhost’iu zovet] (Blok, I, 333, emphasis mine). In other words, the lyric persona’s care for his penaty is imagined through a contrast to the Symbolists’ worship of the Eternal Feminine, as it is represented in their poetry.24

This second stanza, then, interposes a palpable distance between the speaker and mythopoetic Symbolism, whether we take the penaty as the poets themselves (Symbolists as a subset of the greater tradition) or as the Symbolists’ gods.25 In stanza three, Mandelstam underscores his transfer of the mythopoetic Symbolists’ Ideal to the realm of play within the art work:

Какой игрушечный удел,
Какие робкие законы
Приказывает торс точный
И холод этих хрупких тел!

What a toylike domain [also “inheritance,” “lot”],
What timid laws
Are proclaimed by a lathed torso
And the cold of these fragile bodies!

As S. N. Broitman has noted, in Mandelstam’s early poetry the theurgic strivings of mythopoetic Symbolism are often redirected inward, into the world of the poem. In “There are chaste charms,” the Symbolists’ Ideal is reduced to a series of possibly metaphorical domestic idols, standing in “painstakingly washed niches.” And it turns out that in this small, precisely delimited poetic world, the boundary between “here” and “there” is no more binding than in a children’s game: the poet can touch (and even rearrange) his gods. The lyric persona’s assertion of his equality with these “gods” in the fourth stanza (“They are as equals to you!”) sounds a bit disingenuous, given his power to “rearrange” them. At the same time, however, the “poet” and his penates are made equal in their smallness.

Interestingly, Gorodetsky in his article criticizes as a blatant example of self-absorbed aesthetic excess Bely’s poem “The Wilderness” (Pustynia, 1907): “Ether; into the ether— / An ethereal way. / And, here— / The royal purple path of sunrise / Splits / The sapphire of the sapphire / Chamber” [Efir; v efir— / Efirnaia doroga. / I, vot— / Zari porfirnaia stezia / Sechet / Safir safirnogo / Chertoga]. “Here,” writes Gorodetsky, “is that meager little song, which to the idealistic Symbolist is dearer than apprehension of the Extant [Sushchego]; efir, efir, efir, safir, safir.” In Mandelstam’s poem, the “ethereal lyres” are contrasted with the penates, patrons and muses of his little ditty, and returned to their rightful status as a marker of “realistic” Symbolism. Compare, from a large number of examples, “And the blueing velvet of the ether / Drew close and caressed us” [I zalastilsia k nam / Golubeiushchii barkhat efira], from the first poem of Bely’s Gold in the Azure (Zoloto v lazuri, 1904), or Ivanov’s programmatic “Artistic Creation” (Tvorchestvo): “The ether is full of unperceived visages, / And above the azure midnight / New luminaries, to the strumming of harmonious lyres, / Sail through the stormless ocean” [Ispolnen oblikov neprózrennykh efir, / I nad polunoch’iu lazurnoi / Svetila novye, s briatsan’em stroinykh lir, / Plyvut chrez okean bezburnyi]. Indeed, the “ethereal lyres” in Mandelstam’s poem can refer at once to both types of excess characteristic of the Symbolists—artistic and epistemological.

In order to understand the ultimate sense of Mandelstam’s evocations of Symbolism here, we must consider the question of pragmatics that is latent in the conflict between Ronen’s and Cavanagh’s readings, as they, respectively, elevate and diminish the poet. Are Mandelstam’s deflated Symbolist gods
primarily a gesture of irony toward the Symbolists (“the Symbolists’ gods are material for my little ditty”) or a gesture of irony toward the self (“the Symbolists’ Gods, on entering the small world of my poetry, are reduced to idols/playthings”)? It is impossible to speak with certainty about the poet’s vantage point in relation to Symbolism, and this uncertainty becomes an important characteristic of the poem. “There are chaste charms” is full of tenderness for the penates and the “poet’s” domesticated world, infused with self-deprecating irony. However, at the same time, the poem hints at the possibility of equality with the great poets of the past, or even superiority over them. We are ultimately left asking: Is the speaker small, looking out, or huge, looking in?

In the period 1909–11, “purely” Symbolist poems are interspersed in Mandelstam’s writings with poems displaying varying degrees of individuation from Symbolism. Consider the poem “A meager beam, with chill measure” (Skudnyi luch, kholodnoi meroiu, 1911), which the poet valued enough to include in the exceedingly slim, 23-poem first edition of Stone. It was written two years after “More tender than tender” and “There are chaste charms,” yet it bears distinct tonal echoes of Blok’s poetry and a unity of individual voice characteristic of Symbolism:

Скудный луч, холодной мерою,
Сеет свет в сыром лесу.
Я печаль, как птицу серую,
В сердце медленно несу.

Что мне делать с птицей раненой?
Твердь умолкла, умерла.
С колокольни отуманенной
Кто-то снял колокола,

И стоит осиротелая
И немая вышина
Как пустая башня белая,
Где туман и тишина.

Утро, нежностью бездонное
Полу-явл и полу-сон,
Забытье неутоленное —
Дум туманный перезвон.

A meager beam, with chill measure,
Sows light in the damp forest.
I carry sorrow, like a gray bird,
Deliberately, in my heart.

What shall I do with the wounded bird?
The firmament has gone silent and dead.
From the fog-shrouded belltower
Someone has taken down the bells.

And the height stands
Orphaned and mute,
Like an empty white tower,
Where there is fog and silence.

Morning, bottomless with tenderness,
Half reality, half dream,
Unslaked oblivion—
The foggy peal of thoughts.

There are several *topoi* here that the early Blok frequently uses, though none could be distinguished as a specific reference to Blok among the greater body of Symbolist poetry. These include “sorrow”; bells; the mute heavens; an empty white tower, fog, and silence; and “Half reality, half dream.” In any case, however, foreign elements are fully integrated within Mandelstam’s lyric “I,” betraying no sense of distance or dissonance. “A meager beam” remains a whole and vital expression of Mandelstam’s poetic voice, the confession of a—in this “minute of poetic consciousness”—Symbolist poet.