Mandelstam, Blok, and the Boundaries of Mythopoetic Symbolism

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In the first two sections of this chapter, I examine the influence of Symbolism and Blok on Mandelstam after his conversion to Acmeism, but before his intense re-examination of Blok beginning in 1920. On the one hand, Blok provides material for parody; on the other, Blok’s metaphorical poetics and embodiment in poetry of anachronistic modernist time structures are of the first importance in Mandelstam’s renewal of his poetics in Tristia, which can rightfully be seen as a new synthesis of Acmeism and Symbolism. In general, however, Blok as an active problem seems to recede from Mandelstam’s poetry, only to reappear with renewed urgency in 1920. At the same time, the renewed Symbolist influence in Mandelstam’s poetry in Tristia is connected to the figure of Viacheslav Ivanov, who provided Mandelstam with the organizing myth of his second book, the “myth of forgotten Christianity.” This is the topic of the final section of the chapter.

FODDER FOR PARODY

Among the works that make up Mandelstam’s parodic “portrait gallery” of 1913—“Cinema” (Kinematograf), “Tennis” (Tennis),
“American Girl” (Amerikanka), “Dombey and Son” (Dombi i syn), “American Bar” (Amerikan bar)—is one poem that clearly plays upon the transformation of Symbolist imagery and diction, and, more specifically, the writings of Blok.

**Старик**

Уже светло, поет сирена  
В седьмом часу утра.  
Старик, похожий на Верлэна,  
Теперь твоя пора!

В глазах лукавый или детский  
Зеленый огонек;  
На шею нацепил турецкий  
Узорчатый платок.

Он богохульствует, бормочет  
Несвязные слова;  
Он исповедоваться хочет —  
Но согрешить сперва.

Разочарованный рабочий  
Иль огорченный мот —  
А глаз, подбитый в недрах ночи,  
Как радуга цветет.

Так, соблюдая день субботний,  
Плетется он — когда  
Глядит из каждой подворотни  
Веселая нужда;

А дома — руганью крылатой,  
От ярости бледна,  
Встречает пьяного Сократа  
Суровая жена!

**Old Man**

It's already light, a siren sings
Just after 6 A.M.
Old man, who resembles Verlaine,
Now is your time.

In [his] eyes is a cunning or childlike
Green fire;
On [his] neck he has pinned a Turkish
Patterned kerchief.

He blasphemes, mutters
Disconnected words;
He wants to give confession—
But to sin first.

A disenchanted worker
Or embittered spendthrift—
And [his] eye, struck in the depths of the night,
Blossoms like a rainbow.

Thus, observing the Saturday,
He stumbles on—while
From every gateway watches
Cheerful indigence;

And at home—with winged chastisement,
Pale from rage,
A severe wife
Meets the drunken Socrates!

Lada Panova cites “Old Man” as an example of eternal return in its cultural aspect, underscoring the contrast with the Symbolists’ more typical, pessimistic interpretation of the Nietzschean concept. Cyclicity is introduced through a series of comparisons. The old man bears a resemblance to Verlaine—a wink between author and reader. After all, the “disenchanted worker / Or embittered spendthrift” can hardly be imagined to perceive, through intoxication, pain and chastisement, his kinship to Verlaine. Mandelstam’s old man is also likened metaphorically to Socrates, a comparison—motivated by the tales of Socrates’ shrewish wife—that functions on the surface level as a “calque” for “drunken philosopher.” At the same time, the poem activates the traditional comparison, on the basis of physical
resemblance, between Verlaine and Socrates. This circle of culture, however, also embeds a pattern of “deflations,” which the author does not necessarily look upon negatively. These are the deflations of the image of Socrates in Verlaine—despite the poetic gift of the latter—and of Verlaine in the old man, in whom we presuppose no such gift. The poetic gift of Verlaine is instead implicitly shifted outside of the bounds of the poem to the author, who, as we have seen, subtly hinted at his own kinship to Verlaine in his first article, “François Villon.”

G. G. Amelin and V. Ia. Morderer have proposed as prototype of the old man Nikolai Kul’bin, futurist artist, autodidact art theorist, and organizer, whom Mandelstam would have known from the Stray Dog cabaret and whose physical resemblance to Verlaine and Socrates was “paid witness to by contemporaries.” However, having acknowledged that “this doesn’t help make sense of the poem itself,” Amelin and Morderer conclude that “the intentional disembodiment of the image of the old man and collapsing of the plane of reference does not allow one to directly relate him to anyone.”

There is, however, yet another prototype, which, when revealed, becomes of primary importance, unveiling an entirely new stratum of the poem’s plot. This layer is a parody on one of the most characteristic plot motifs of mythopoetic Symbolism, and especially its Blokian embodiment—the meeting with Sophia, the Divine Feminine, at sunrise.

The first element to catch the reader’s eye in this connection might be the collocation “glaz . . . tsvetet” (eye . . . blossoms) in lines 11–12. Blooming eyes are a characteristic marker of Blok’s idiolect: “And under the mask—so calmly / [Her] eyes blossomed” [I pod maskoi—tak spokoino / Rastsveli glaza] (II, 277); “Enamourment blossomed in curls / And in the early sadness of eyes” [Vliublennost’ rastsvela v kudriakh / I v rannee grusti glaz] (II, 152). I. I. Shkuropat has proposed looking at the same set of lines as a “parodic allusion to the typically Symbolist image of the rainbow.” Mandelstam clearly evinces Symbolist diction here.

The multicolored blooming of the old man’s black eye occurs as a result of that which took place “in the depths of night” [v nedrakh nochi], a time of Symbolist anticipation. The events of the poem are presented in implicit contrast to that which ought to have taken place at the dawn ("It’s already light, a siren sings / Just after 6 a.m."). In the typical early mythopoetic Symbolist or Blokian poem, the poet anticipates at this hour the appearance of, or meeting with, Sophia.

The old man’s wife is “severe” [surovaia]. Blok’s Heroine is described, in Poems about the Fair Lady, as both “strict” [strogaia] and (less often) “severe” [surovaia]: “Always haughty and severe” [Vsegda nadmenna i surova] (I,
229), “You are white, impassive in [Your] depths / In life—strict and irate” [Belaia Ty, v glubinakh nesmutima / V zhizni—stroga i gnevna] (I, 190). The final word of the poem, zhena (wife, but also woman [biblical, archaic]), is, of course, one name for the Symbolists’ ideal: “Vsë nevesta—i vechno zhena” [Ever bride—and eternally woman] (I, 330). Thus we can see in the morning meeting of this drunk “Socrates” and his shrewish wife a burlesque shadow of the Symbolist hero’s anticipated rendezvous with the Eternal Feminine at a more than simply daily dawn.

The secondary meanings of the word “sirena” reinforce this impression of betrayed hopes. The siren, “a beautiful, seductive, but heartless woman” (Ushakov), can be understood as the Fair Lady, enticing but deceiving the Symbolists. Likewise, the expression “winged chastisement” in the final stanza—first and foremost evoking the Russian for aphorism, “winged words” (krylatye slova)—also, in the context of the first stanza, recalls the mythological image of the half-bird, half-woman, who lures sailors to their deaths with her beautiful singing. “Sirens” (on a wharf, of a ship, the horn of a car) appear several times in Blok’s poetry with a similar double-voicedness.

The figure of the drunken hero specifically echoes imagery from Blok, who is, as we will recall, in his most famous lyric, “The Stranger” (Neznakomka, 1906), a drunken philosophizer: “You’re right, drunken monster! / I know: the truth is in wine” [Ty pravo, p’ianoe chudovishche! / Ia znaiu: istina v vine] (II, 213). In addition, one common mask of Blok’s lyric hero in the First Book is the “old man” (starik). One final textual echo ultimately confirms the powerful, subterranean presence of Blok. The reference is to his play The Stranger: 11

Старик, похожий на Верлэна У одного окна, за столиком, сидит пьяный старик — вылитый Верлэн.

Он богохульствует, бормочет Верлэн (бормочет громко, сам с собою)
Несвязные слова Верлэн (бормочет) И все проходит. И каждому — своя забота.
Верлэн (бормочет) И всем свой черед…
И всем пора идти домой…
(Blok, SS6, III, 67, 68, 70, 74, my emphasis)

Old man, who looks like Verlaine Near one window, at a table, sits a drunk old man—a dead ringer for Verlaine
He blasphemes, mutters  
Disconnected words  
Verlaine (mutters loudly to himself)  
Verlaine (mutters) And everything passes.  
And to each his own cares.  
Verlaine (mutters) And to each in his turn . . .  
And it’s time for everyone to go home . . .

Mandelstam follows Blok’s “Verlaine” home to his wife, and the images of this character and Blok’s lyric hero (conflated by many contemporaries with the poet himself) blend together, peeking out from behind Mandelstam’s satirical street portrait.

Mandelstam’s portrait functions perfectly well in the absence of the reader’s recognition of this second layer, losing none of its playful stylishness and sharp characterization. Subconsciously or consciously, however, contemporaries were sure to sense the superficial reappropriation of Symbolist lexicon, which contributes in a crucial way to the stylistic play. Tynianov wrote about parody, “If the backdrop dissolves into a general understanding of ‘style,’ the parody becomes one element of the dialectical change of schools, borders upon stylization.” In “Old Man,” this is not the case. The secondary Blokian plane of the poem, when recognized, retains a structural role, accentuating the poem’s comedic effect through an unexpected elevation of the thematic material that is parodied. And, in this sense, the Blokian layer clearly expands the poem’s scope and resonance.

**MODERNIST TIME POETICS**

The influence of Blok on Mandelstam’s poetics was first noted by Zhirmunsky in 1921, the year of Blok’s death:

Blok’s lyrics unusually boldly and consequentially develop the devices of the metaphorical style. The Romantic poet not only frees himself for good from a dependence on the logical norms of speech development, from the timid glance over the shoulder at logical clarity, consequentiality, he renounces even the possibility of actualizing the verbal construction in a non-contradictory image (visual conception [nagliadnoe predstavlenie]), i.e. he steps onto the path of logical contradiction, dissonance, as an artistic device, motivated by the irrationality of the poet’s overarching conception. In this sense, Blok is completely original and has among the Russian Romantic poets and first Symbolists only timid precursors. As far as the
newest poets go, several of them, like Mandelstam, or Mayakovsky, or the Imaginists, went even further than Blok in freeing the metaphoric construction from the norms of logically understandable and consequential practical speech, but nonetheless, in the main, they are wholly his pupils.\textsuperscript{13}

Analysis of Blok's influence on Mandelstam's poetics has been carried forward in more recent years by Pavel Gromov (with somewhat exaggerated conclusions, however), Mikhail Gasparov (who, unfortunately, deals with the topic only briefly), and, particularly, S. N. Broitman.\textsuperscript{14}

One element of Blok's metaphorical poetics appears to have had a particularly meaningful—and traceable—influence on Mandelstam: Blok's poetic embodiment of Modernist time structures. The older poet's boldness and especially his consummate skill in generating convincing poetic embodiments of the “inseparability and unfusedness” [nerazdel'nost' i nesliiannost']\textsuperscript{15} of disparate time frames, both mythical and historical (“Steps of the Knight Commander,” “On Kulikovo Field”), clearly played a decisive role in Mandelstam's development.

Only gradually did Mandelstam acquire the technical and philosophical markers of that conception of time aphoristically embodied in his idiosyncratic reading of Henri Bergson in “On the Nature of the Word” (1922):\textsuperscript{16}

Bergson does not consider phenomena according to the way they submit to the law of temporal succession, but rather according to their spatial extension [ . . . ] Phenomena thus connected to one another form, as it were, a kind of fan whose folds can be opened up in time; however, this fan may also be closed up in a way intelligible to the human mind. (II, 242)\textsuperscript{17}

A poetic analogue for this temporal syncretism is entirely absent in Mandelstam's earliest verse, in which the categories of eternity and atemporality are central, while the historical has yet to enter the picture.\textsuperscript{18} As early as “Hagia-Sophia” (1912), disparate historical time frames are juxtaposed. However, the connection is justified by the history of the church itself, which is the living composite of several eras' temples. In other words, the compacting of time within space (under the aegis of eternity) is still linked to an external logic tied to a definable and specific historical "reality."

Panova notes of the next poem in Stone, “Notre Dame,” that “a new technique gets our attention—through repetition, for the first time in Mandelstam's poetry, the idea of eternal return is introduced: “As once did Adam, splaying its nerves, / The light groined arch flexes its muscles” [Kak nekogda
Adam, rasplastyvaia nervy, / Igraet myshtsami krestovyi legkii svod].” Still, while Panova refers to eternal return in a cultural rather than existential or historical sense (itself a crucial development in Mandelstam’s poetics), and despite the pointedly time-oriented “nekogda” [once], differences in quality and scale dictate that conceptual analogy, rather than temporal repetition, remains the primary mechanism underlying the association of Adam, cathedral, and poem as fruits of creation. Importantly for our own discussion, here we still do not see that dissolving of boundaries between past and present and the radical anachronism that will be characteristic of many of Mandelstam’s mature poems and that clearly bears Blok’s stamp.

In 1912, Mandelstam almost certainly became acquainted with Blok’s “Steps of the Knight Commander.” Years later he would write:

But the acme of Blok’s historical poetics, the triumph of European myth, which moves freely in traditional forms and does not fear anachronism and contemporaneity is “Steps of the Knight Commander.” Here the layers of time fell one upon another in a poetic consciousness plowed anew [Zdes’ plasty vremeni legli drug na druga v zanovo vspakhannom poeticheskom soznaniil].” (II, 273, my emphasis)

This may be seen as a confession, with pinpoint precision, of the sense in which Blok’s poem had an impact on the younger poet. The next stage—after “Hagia-Sophia,” “Notre Dame,” and “Old Man”—in the simultaneous embodiment of disparate time frames in Mandelstam’s poetry is specifically a confrontation with the Petersburg myth, seen through the prism of blatant, unapologetic “anachronism and contemporaneity.” In “Petersburg Strophes” (1913), following references to Gogol’s “Overcoat” (Shinel’, 1842) and Eugene Onegin, Mandelstam evokes Blok’s cuttingly anachronistic motorcar (motor) from “Steps of the Knight Commander” and transplants the Evgeny of The Bronze Horseman (Mednyi vsadnik, 1833) to the early years of the twentieth century:

Пролетает, брызнув в ночь огнями,   
Черный, тихий, как сова, мотор.

Having sprayed [its] lights into the night, flies by   
A black motorcar, silent as an owl. (Blok, III, 94)

Летит в туман моторов вереница:   
Самолюбивый, скромный пешеход —
Чудак Евгений — бедности стыдится,  
Бензин вдыхает и судьбу клянет!

A string of motorcars flies into the fog:  
The proud, unassuming pedestrian—  
That eccentric Evgeny—is ashamed of his poverty,  
Breathes gas fumes and curses his fate.

An excised strophe from “The Admiralty” (Admiralteistvo), written in the same year, similarly connects Blok, through subtext (this time his “Venice” [Venetsiia, 1909]), to a freeing from the bonds of temporal progression:22

Живая линия меняется, как лебедь.  
Я с Музой зодчего беседую опять.  
Взор омывается, стихает жизни трепет:  
Мне все равно, когда и где существовать!

The living line meanders, like a swan.  
I chat with the Muse of an architect once more.  
The waters lap [my] gaze, life’s tremor grows still:  
I don’t care when and where I might exist!23

Quite possibly the apex of this Blokian Modernist time poetics in Mandelstam is reached in the poem “On a straw-covered sledge” (Na rozval’niakh, ulozhennykh solomoi, 1916). Broitman compares Blok’s “Venice” with Mandelstam’s poem:

[Gromov] saw that a definitively important role for the younger poet was played by the relation of inseparability and unfusedness [nerazdel’nost’ i nesliianost’] of the “I” and the historical personage in [Blok’s] “On Kulikovo Field” and the “Italian poems” [. . .] In both cases, we observe the inhabitation of a historical or mythological personage (John the Baptist—Tsarevich Dmitry) and first-person speech [. . .] But in both instances, the ultimate transformation of the speaker into the historic personage does not occur (as it would in mask lyric [rolevaia lirika]), nor the complete confluence of the hero with the “I.” In the finale of the poems, a “sliding” transition arises to another point of view, which presents a vision of the “I” from outside: “But a head on a black platter . . .” [Lish’ golova na chernom bliude . . .]—“The tsarevich is being taken . . .” [Tsarevicha vezut . . .].”24
Mandelstam’s poetic stance in “On a straw-covered sledge” is as close as he will come, certainly through the end of *Tristia*, to the reviving of a Symbolist and more specifically Blokian hero in his poetry. The inseparability and unfusedness of epochs that triumphs in the poetry of *Tristia*, and that does bear the stamp of Blok’s influence, is almost always accomplished without recourse to an “I” conflated with or playing the role of tragic hero in the historical drama.25

**THE MYTHOPOETICS OF TRISTIA**

In the Introduction, I wrote about the gravitation of mythopoetic (or myth-creating) Symbolism to the construction of overarching poetic plots defining whole periods of an artist’s creative production, or even a whole lifetime of poetry, as in the case of Blok’s lyric trilogy. Not only did this tendency consciously or unconsciously to mold overarching narratives and new myths have an impact upon the structure of Mandelstam’s second book, *Tristia*, but it was in fact Friedrich Nietzsche, beloved of the Symbolists, and Viacheslav Ivanov, the Symbolist maître and theoretician, who helped Mandelstam to frame that new myth which, more than any other, animates his second book—the myth of forgotten Christianity.

Both Ivanov, implicitly, and Nietzsche, explicitly, wanted to turn back the clock of cultural evolution, awakening more ancient impulses that could heal the present maladies of aesthetically and spiritually moribund nineteenth-century civilization. In *Tristia*, Mandelstam reverses this retrograde trend, setting aright the course of time. Emerging out of the darkness and into memory, he traces that history of the ages of culture that Nietzsche and Ivanov define and lament.

Nietzsche, in his seminal work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, describes both the generation of ancient Greek tragedy out of Dionysian music and Apollonian dreams and the degeneration of this art form, which represents for him the finest achievements of western culture, into lesser, overly rational and slavishly realistic forms of art. In the second half of his book, he predicts and calls for the birth of a new tragic age:

> “The Hellenic prototype retains this immeasurable value, that all these transitions and struggles are imprinted upon it in a classically instructive form; except that we, as it were, pass through the chief epochs of the Hellenic genius analogically, in reverse order, and seem now, for instance, to be passing backward from the Alexandrian age to the period of tragedy.”26
The Alexandrian age—those centuries of late antiquity abutting the birth of Christianity—often evokes associations with musty libraries, scholarly compilations, and imitative art. Nietzsche criticizes this age, seeing in it an ethos similar to the rationalism and materialism of the nineteenth century. The age of tragedy, in contrast, is, according to Nietzsche, characterized by a courageous pessimism that dares to stare into the terrors of existence, even as the Apollonian calm of the realized art work heals from the vertigo experienced at the edge of this abyss.

Ivanov accepts wholeheartedly Nietzsche's call for a new tragic age. “The chorus ought to be freed and reinstated completely in the fullness of its ancient rights,” he states in one essay. In another, he intones, “We ought to cast ourselves aside and become ancient in spirit.” “Nietzsche, the corybant” he continues, “first proclaimed the necessity of a return.” However, according to Ivanov, the seed from which Nietzsche's prophecy emerged fell on “the barren soil of contemporary ignorance of God.”

If the Dionysian is, for Nietzsche, an eternal pole in art, for Ivanov it is tied to a historical religion. Moreover, while Nietzsche rejects Christianity as false and enslaving, Ivanov sees a kinship, and even a genealogical continuity, between Christianity and the religion of Dionysus. The ecstatic religion of the suffering god Dionysus is, according to Ivanov, at the roots of Christianity, with its own suffering, dying, and resurrected god. Moreover, contemporary Christianity requires for its renewal a new influx of the Dionysian essence.

In Mandelstam's understanding, Ivanov's religious experimentation and religious syncretism amount to participation in his generations' gravest sin. “Time can flow backwards: the entire course of recent history, which with frightful strength turned from Christianity to Buddhism and Theosophy, bears witness to this . . . [ . . . ] What is this,” wrote Mandelstam, “ravings or the end of Christianity?” (II, 314). And yet this gravest sin, a generation's amnesia, is turned by Mandelstam to good, as it provides the myth that will structure his second book.

This structuring is implicit, loose, a chaotically unfolding internal imperative, and yet a palpable overarching presence. In any case, it is only such a narrative that we can seek, for no authoritative edition exists of Mandelstam's second book. Mandelstam had little or no control over the shamefully poor 1922 Berlin edition of Tristia, and he clearly set out actively to distinguish Second Book (Vtoraia kniga, 1923) from the earlier edition. The largely restorative Tristia segment of Poems (1928), though the closest we have to representing the poet's final will, was distorted by censorship. The replacement of the original final poem cardinally changed the book's trajectory, as did the absence of the Christian-themed poems, whether or not this may
have better fit Mandelstam’s mood in 1927. Thus we are forced to triangulate. It seems most logical to conclude that an “ideal” Tristia, undistorted and reflective of the original generative impulse, should include the Christian poems, adopt the more chronological structure and strict chronological boundaries of the later edition, and retain the quite meaningful original beginning and end points. It is roughly such a “hypothetical” Tristia (similar to that proposed by Freidin) to which I will appeal here. For reasons of space, I will present this mythopoetic narrative only at its most representative points. These are, however, characteristic of broader thematic and tonal vectors within the book.

Setting out on the path of anamnesis, Mandelstam’s lyric “I” must first reexperience earlier stages of culture in order to arrive in memory at the pre-existing Christian truth. In order to initiate his book and spark this process, however, it is necessary for the poet first to achieve a powerful shift, a forgetting of self accomplished through an exertion of memory aimed at the deepest past (Ivanov’s “We ought to cast ourselves aside and become ancient in spirit”). This shift occurs in Mandelstam’s “How these coverings” (Kak etikh pokryval i etogo ubora, 1916).

If, in “I will not see the celebrated Phèdre,” Mandelstam turns up the soil of several centuries with his poetic plow, in “How these coverings,” the poet digs a good deal further. Pulling up the floorboards of a French seventeenth-century theater, he discovers the orchestra of the ancient Athenian theater of Dionysus and finds there not a stone horseshoe, but a living chorus and the ancient cultic roots of tragedy. That we may speak here not simply of the roots of tragedy in the chorus, but of a chorus emerging from its roots in Dionysian religion, is implied in the chorus’s function—the “theurgic” appeasement, through a funeral dirge, of that dire force that is personified in the black sun:

— Мы боимся, мы не смеем
Горю царскому помочь.
Уязвленная Тезеем,
На него напала ночь.
Мы же, песьью похоронной
Провожая мертвых в дом,
Страсти дикой и бессонной
Солнце черное уймем.
—We fear to, we dare not
Help the royal grief.
Stung by Theseus,
Night fell upon him.
We, with funeral dirge,
Seeing the dead to the house,
Will the black sun
Of wild and sleepless passion appease.

For comparison, in Aeschylus’s *Seven Against Thebes*, a “strange, archaic” play (David Grene) by the earliest author of full-fledged Greek tragedy, the chorus does not expressly mourn for the dead. Instead it sings “the ill-sounding Furies’ dirge, / and the hateful Hades paean,” mollifying those chthonic forces that have exacted the tragedy’s tribute of blood.曼德尔斯塔姆拒绝伊万诺夫的艺术直觉，也不像较老的诗人那样在塑造他的合唱时回响他的“dithyrambs”和悲剧。然而，他以伊万诺夫对悲剧根源的理解绘制他的合唱：英雄的葬礼仪式作为令人敬畏、威胁的神的安抚。大部分是第一部分，*Tristia*由多尼索斯的冲动主导，通过倒退的时间和对文化根的渴望，这可以理解为对社会和建筑的秩序的狂欢性内核。这首诗在伊万诺夫影响下的“歌颂贝多芬”（Oda Betkhovenu, 1914）是最明显的这一趋势。然而，在*Stone*，这首诗呈现了一个与多尼索斯冲动有关的基督教启示的同步版本，而不是作为一个新艺术的声明，而是作为一个多尼索斯的重量物来平衡巴赫的逻辑的喜悦（“Bach” [Bakh, 1913]），实际上建立了阿米斯主义的平衡。

The diptych “I am cold. Transparent spring” (1916) illustrates well the retrograde pull that dominates the first half of *Tristia*:

I

Мне холодно. Прозрачная весна
В зеленый пух Петрополь одевает,
Но, как медуза, невская волна
Мне отвращенье легкое внушает.
По набережной северной реки
Автомобилей мчатся светляки,
Летят стрекозы и жуки стальные,  
Мерцают звезд булавки золотые,  
Но никакие звезды не убьют  
Морской воды тяжелый изумруд.

II

В Петрополе прозрачном мы умрем,  
Где властвует над нами Прозерпина.  
Мы в каждом вздохе смертный воздух пьем,  
И каждый час нам смертная година.  
Богиня моря, грозная Афина,  
Сними могучий каменный шелом.  
В Петрополе прозрачном мы умрем, —  
Здесь царствуешь не ты, а Прозерпина.

I

I am cold. Transparent spring  
Dresses Petropolis in green down,  
But, like a jellyfish [medusa], the Neva’s waves  
Fill me with mild disgust.  
Along the embankment of the northern river  
The fireflies of automobiles race,  
Dragonflies and steel beetles fly,  
The golden hairpins of stars shimmer,  
But no stars will kill  
The heavy emerald of the seawater.

II

In transparent Petropolis we shall die,  
Where Proserpina reigns over us,  
With every breath we drink deathly air,  
And every hour is our mortal term.  
Goddess of the sea, dread Athena,  
Remove [your] mighty, stone helm.  
In transparent Petropolis we shall die—  
Here reigns not you but Proserpina.45
Ivanov’s exquisite remark, “Spring was transparent to the gaze of the ancients: It was blossoming death [Vesna byla prozrachna dla vzora drevnikh: Ona byla tsvetushchaja smert’],” is the clear subtext of the poem. First quoted in relation to Tristia by Kiril Taranovsky, this passage explains the poem’s bipartite structure. The spring of the first poem is the death of the second, and through the stateliness and supposed eunomia (good public order) of Petersburg emerges, for seeing eyes, Proserpina’s kingdom in Hades. The translucent jellyfish, or meduza, is the conduit between the two stanzas.

This Medusa has larger implications, however, both for reading Mandelstam’s poem and for understanding Tristia in general. The surfacing of the Medusa is really a roundabout way of hinting that the real culprits of the book’s retrograde motion, the Furies, have come to the fore. As Richmond Lattimore states,

The Furies are older than Apollo and Athene, and, being older, they are childish and barbarous [ . . . ] in a Greek world they stand for the childhood of the race before it won Hellenic culture, the barbarian phase of pre-Hellenism [ . . . ] they have archaic uprightness and strictest in action, with its attendant cruelty [ . . . ] Apollo stands for everything which the Furies are not: Hellenism, civilization, intellect, and enlightenment.

Mandelstam, in his essay “The Nineteenth Century,” written some years after this poem, directly connects the Furies with Medusa, a natural association based on their appearance: “they come like gorgons, they / wear robes of black, and they are wreathed in a tangle / of snakes” (Aeschylus, The Libation Bearers, 1048–50). In his essay, the poet writes that the failing ancient Furies of the French Revolution washed “onto the shore of the nineteenth century already incomprehensible—not the head of the Gorgon, but a bundle of seaweed” (II, 280). That is, the washed-up Furies are something quite like this poem’s jellyfish.

What implications, then, does this connection have for the second half of the diptych?

Goddess of the sea, dread Athena,
Remove [your] mighty, stone helm.
In transparent Petropolis we shall die—
Here reigns not you but Proserpina.

On the deepest level, the poem describes a ceding of power by the Olympian Athena, patron not only of Athens but also of seafaring Petersburg, to the chthonic and archaic power of the Furies. Mandelstam thus reverses
the historical process depicted in Aeschylus’s *The Eumenides*. There, Athena establishes civic order in Athens and pacifies the Furies, incorporating them into the Olympian hierarchy by offering them a seat of honor in the underworld. Here, Athena relinquishes to the Furies power in the world above.\(^51\) The Furies are represented in first poem of the diptych through their visual likeness to Medusa, and in the second through their physical proximity to Proserpina, queen of the underworld. Never mentioned in the collection, they nonetheless represent that archaic force that, allied with the Dionysian, must be overcome to reach the poet’s goal of memory.

Characteristically, in its initial publication, this poem was constructed not as a diptych, but as a triptych, and the eliminated central poem, connecting the present-day Petrograd of the first stanza and the archaic mythological reality of the second, speaks of the city’s “Alexandrian poplars” [Aleksandriiskie topolia]. Before he can move forward in his wanderings to the Alexandrian age, however, Mandelstam must neutralize the power of the Dionysian chaos. This finally occurs in a poem from 1918, in which a concert of Schubert *Lieder* produces, through a series of associations, what initially seems to be a triumph of the Dionysian impulse: “And the horrible force of nocturnal return / That song, wild as black wine” [I sila strashnaya nochnogo vozvrashcheniia / Ta pesnia dikaia, kak chernoe vino].\(^52\) Instead, however, this Dionysian return is unexpectedly equated with a Doppelganger: “This is a double—an empty apparition— / Senselessly stares into the cold window” [Eto dvoinik—pustoe prividen’e— / Bessmyslenno gliadit v kholodnoe okno]. The Dionysian is reduced to a nightmare, false and without consequence, ecstatic disintegration to a Romantic perception of the divided and contradictory nature of man.

If Mandelstam’s history of culture in *Tristia* is truly a reversal of the cultural trajectory envisioned by Nietzsche, then the tragic and Alexandrian ages should abut within the book at a turning point recognizable as the “present.” Despite the fundamental non-linearity of Mandelstam’s book, arising from its organic structure—and why should, after all, the “footpaths of mystery” (“Pushkin and Skriabin”) not twist and turn on their way to the goal?—there are several poems at the center of *Tristia* that starkly represent this moment of the present. These are, most prominently, the prophecies of “To Cassandra” (Kassandre, 1917), the portents of “Among the priests a young Levite” (“Sredi sviazhchennikov levitom molodym,” 1917)—though here the moment of reckoning occurs in the context of retrograde time), and finally, “The Twilight of Freedom” (Sumerki svobody, 1918), with its “huge, awkward, / Creaking turn of the wheel” [ogromnyi, neukliuzhii, / Skripuchii povorot rulia].\(^53\)

The last large portion of *Tristia* is best understood as Mandelstam’s
tribute to Alexandrian culture. In any case, the psychology of his poems on the whole shifts rather dramatically. Rather than stare into the abyss, courting chaos, as did Nietzsche’s tragic man, Mandelstam’s lyric “I” strives to build an idyllic cultural edifice over the danger that surrounds him. In the face of years of war and devastation, he seeks to quiet in his poetry the Furies that have been so devastatingly released.

Mandelstam adopts two key elements from Nietzsche’s taxonomy of the Alexandrian in *The Birth of Tragedy*. These are the “yearning for the idyllic” and the culture of the opera, which answers this idyllic impulse. The thirst for the idyllic, which pervades many of the poems in the latter part of *Tristia*, is expressed most fully in a poem of 1919, “On the rocky spurs of Pieria” [На каменных отрогах Пиэрии].

На каменных отрогах Пиэрии
Водили музы первый хоровод,
Чтобы, как пчелы, лирники слепые
Нам подарили ионийский мед.
И холодком повеяло высоким
От выпукло-девического лба,
Чтобы раскрылись правнукам далеким
Архипелага нежные гроба.

Бежит весна топтать луга Эллады,
Обула Сафо пестрый сапожок,
И молоточками куют цикады,
Как в песенке поется, перстенек.
Высокий дом построил плотник дюжий,
На свадьбу всех передушили кур,
И растянул сапожник неуклюжий
На башмаки все пять воловьих шкур.

Нерасторопна черепаха-лира,
Едва-едва беспалая ползет,
Лежит себе на солнышке Эпира,
Тихонько грея золотой живот.
Ну, кто ее такую приласкает,
Кто спящую ее перевернет?
Она во сне Терпандра ожидает,
Сухих перстов предчувствуя налет.
Поэ́т дубы холодная крини́ца,  
Простоволосая шумит трава,  
На радость осам пахнет меду́ница.  
О, где же вы, святые острова,  
Где не едят надломленного хле́ба,  
Где только мед, вино и молоко,  
Скрипучий труд не омрачает неба  
И колесо вращается легко?

On the rocky spurs of Pieria  
The muses led the first circle dance  
In order that, like bees, blind rhapsodists  
Would give us Ionian honey.  
And a lofty cold drafted  
From a convex, maiden forehead  
In order that the tender graves of the archipelago  
Would open up to distant descendents.

Spring runs to trample the meadows of Hellas,  
Sappho dons a dappled little boot,  
And the cicadas forge with tiny hammers—  
As in the song—a little ring.  
A stout carpenter built a high house,  
All the chickens were strangled for the wedding,  
And an awkward cobbler stretched  
All five ox-hides for shoes.

A turtle-lyre unhurriedly  
 Barely, barely crawls, toeless,  
Lies, all to itself, in the sun of Epirus,  
Quietly warming its golden belly.  
Well, who will fondle her, such as she is,  
Who will turn her over as she sleeps?  
She, in dreams, awaits Terpander,  
Anticipating the onslaught of dry fingers.

A cold spring waters the oaks,  
Bare-headed grass rustles,  
Lungwort wafts to the delight of wasps.
O, where are you, sacred isles,
Where broken bread is not eaten,
Where there is only honey, wine and milk,
Creaking labor does not darken the sky
And the wheel turns lightly?

In Mandelstam’s essay “Pushkin and Skriabin,” the artist’s death is viewed as the final creative act that sheds light on all of his or her preceding work, an act that, in fact, causes the artist’s life and work to sound with its full resonance. In “On the rocky spurs,” Mandelstam faces the implications of this artistic credo, at the time of his “wedding” to Nadezhda Khazina in Kiev in 1919, during bloody months of the Russian civil war.56

The “lofty, cold draft,” which wafts from the “convex-maiden forehead” in line 6, is the breath that emerges from the empty skull of the sixth-century Greek lyric poetess Sappho, who will appear in the second stanza.57 In the logic of Mandelstam’s poem, Sappho must die “in order that” the “tender graves of the archipelago” should open up to “distant descendants.” These graves, it seems likely, are tender because they house Sappho’s ward-lovers, whose names and fates populate her fragments.58 The last tender grave is Sappho’s own, but Sappho’s poetry unlocks these graves, overcoming the effacing force of death and time:59 Life gushes forth in the second stanza’s montage of Sappho’s “wedding songs,” in Ivanov’s translation.60 However, as spring is the underside of death, so, according to Ivanov, is the wedding an inversion of the funeral feast.

The third stanza of Mandelstam’s poem is devoted to the turtle, the poem’s central image, which also gave the poem its name in all its publications before Second Book. The turtle-lyre, cherepakha-lira, which transparently hides the word “skull” (cherep), is a correlate for the poet, who sounds not only in, but through, death.61 The convex forehead from line 6 mirrors the turtle shell physically and functionally, and each of these in turn stands in for the poet’s own skull.62 A poet is also a turtle that must die in order to sing.

Sappho herself sings to her lyre in one fragment, “Come to life, O sacred one, / Sing me a song, turtle!”63 The irony was clearly not lost on Mandelstam. The story of the creation of the first lyre is related in the Homeric Hymn to Hermes. In contrast to Sappho, Hermes says to the turtle about to become his lyre, but only after a gruesomely violent death, “if you die, you shall make sweetest song.”64 Mandelstam’s turtle is pictured alive, i.e., awaiting the death that will turn her into the instrument of the archetypal lyric poet Terpander, as much as the animation that will come only afterwards from his fingers.
The turtle dreams of an erotic union with Terpander, who is himself human and a poet, hence “turtlish,” in the idiom of Mandelstam’s poem, which is to say—a potential soundbox. TerPANDR sounds like the Russian pantsyr’, or turtle shell.) The consequences of the poet’s union with inspiration, which can turn him from a turtle into a seven-stringed lyre, lie immediately below the surface of the text. And those consequences are lasting poetry but the death of the poet. Note also that the turtle warms itself in the sun of Epirus. While it is quite possible that “the image of the Epirian sunshine [. . . ] arose from the sonorous rhyme: lira—Epira,” “Epirus” is not necessarily “simply” a “signal-word” for ancient Greece. In any case, we cannot ignore the one concrete association of which Mandelstam was undoubtedly aware: Epirus was a gate to the underworld (Racine, Introduction to Phèdre).

Like the archetypal poets Terpander and Sappho, Mandelstam is both performer of, and sounding box for, his poetry. In an early programmatic poem, which nearly provided the title for his first collection, the poet is a “seashell” (rakovina), who will be animated with the in(spir)ation of a foreign night (“with whispers of foam, / Fog, wind, and rain . . .” [shepotami peny, / Tumanom, vetrom i dozhdem . . . ]). In the 1930s, he will return to the image of the human skull as the “soundbox” of poetry:

Размотавший на два завещанья
Слабовольных имуществ клубок
И в прощанье отдав, в верещанье
Мир, который как череп глубок

Having wound out into two testaments
A yarn of weak-willed possessions
And in parting given, in chirping
A world as deep as a skull
—“So that, friend of wind and drops” (Chtob, priiatel’ i vetra i kapel’, 1937)

Для того ль должен череп развиться
Во весь лоб — от виска до виска, —
Чтоб в его дорогие глазницы
Не могли не вливаться войска?
Развивается череп от жизни
Во весь лоб — от виска до виска, —
Чистотой своих швов он дразнит себя,
Понимающим куполом яснится,
Мыслью пенится, сам себе снится, —
Чаша чаш и отчизна отчизне,
Звездным рубчиком шитый чепец,
Чепчик счастья — Шекспира отец...

For that ought a skull develop
In full brow—from temple to temple
That into its dear eye sockets
Troops could not but pour?
The skull develops from life
In full brow—from temple to temple,—
Teases itself with the purity of its seams,
Shines with clarity, an understanding cupola,
Foams with thought, sees itself in dreams,—
Bowl of bowls and homeland to homeland,
Bonnet sown with a starry scar,
Fortune’s bonnet—the father of Shakespeare . . .
—“Verses on the unknown soldier” (Stikhi o neizvestnom soldate, 1937)

Salience (vypuklost’), particularly in Mandelstam’s later writings, is cognate
with semantic and creative fullness: the salience of the word-sheath, from
which associations radiate (“Conversation about Dante”), and the salience
of the skull-cupola.68

Mandelstam’s idyll, in the final stanza of “On the rocky spurs,” is not an
imagineing of the golden age of Sappho or the archipelago. Instead it expresses,
from a setting within the world, a desire for a life on the Blessed Isles, which
represent escape from the circle of life and death.69 Friedrich Schiller, in his
“Elysium,” wrote:

Ihre Krone findet hier die Liebe,
Sicher vor des Todes strengem Hiebe
   Feyert sie ein ewig Hochzeitfest.

Here love is crowned;
Safe from the harsh stroke of death,
   It celebrates an eternal wedding feast.70

What better sentiment could there be for a “wedding song”—and especially
at a time of civil war—than a desire to escape from Mandelstam’s own pro-
nouncement that “to die means to remember” and that death is the ultimate
creative act of the poet?
These same lines betray an allusion to Schiller's “Die Götter Griechenlands” (The Gods of Greece, 1788, 1793?), like “Elysium,” set to music by Franz Schubert. Schiller’s poem describes humanity’s loss of a pantheistic sense of the meaningfulness of nature, which has become dead and rationally mechanistic. The main intertextual link to Mandelstam’s poem comes in the twelfth stanza of the poem’s later version, the single stanza, which Schubert took for his Lieder:

Schöne Welt, wo bist du? Kehre wieder,
Holdes Blüthenalter der Natur!
Ach nur in dem Feenland der Lieder
Lebt noch deine fabelhafte Spur.
Ausgestorben trauert das Gefilde,
Keine Gottheit zeigt sich meinem Blick,
Ach von jenem Lebenwarmen Bilde
Blieb der Schatten nur zurück.

Beauteous world, where art thou? Return again,
Fair springtime of nature.
But, ah, your fabled dream lives on
Only in the enchanted realm of song.
The fields, deserted, mourn;
No god appears before my eyes.
Of all that vivid image of life
Only the shadows have survived.

In addition to the direct address to comparable—though not equivalent—idyllic realms with the identical complaint, “Where are you?”, the poems share a characterization of Greece as springtime and a fascination with the poetry that preserves the departed world. Moreover, the interlocking of Mandelstam’s poem—as we have read it here—and the Schiller context is powerfully reinforced in the final lines of “Die Götter Griechenlands”: “Was unsterblich im Gesang soll leben, / Muss im Leben untergehn” [Whatever shall live on forever in the poet’s song is destined to perish in life]. In addition, the image through which Schiller characterizes the present—“Ausgestorben trauert das Gefilde” [Deserted, the field mourns]—is quite similar to Mandelstam’s “Prostovolosaia shumit trava” [The bare-headed grass rustles]. In the Slavic world, as in antiquity, women bared their unbraided or disheveled hair in mourning, and, in any case, the phrase evokes the opening of Mandelstam’s sister poem to “On the rocky spurs,”
“Tristia” (as the title of Ovid’s work, usually translated into Russian as Skorbnye elegii, with its connection to skorb’—mourning). In Mandelstam’s poem, a lovers’ parting is mapped onto Ovid’s departure into exile—itself represented by Ovid as a death, which is mourned.74 Mandelstam’s mournful grass, like Schiller’s field, is orphaned, left behind, in our late-born world.

Schiller himself forcefully rejected the idea that his poem should be read as anti-Christian. However, this is just how his contemporaries interpreted it in its first publication, and the scandal and vitriol that surrounded the poem were enough to force Schiller to revise it, cutting it back from 25 to 16 stanzas. Even in the later version, the temptation remains to read it as a rejection of the Judeo-Christian God, all the more so if we take Fet’s translation. There, the lines “Einen zu bereichern unter allen, / Mußte diese Götterwelt vergehn” [So as to enrich one at the cost of all others / This cosmos of gods had to vanish] read “Chtob odin vozvysilsia vladykoi, / Mir bogov na gibel’ osuzhden” [In order that one be raised up as potentate, / The world of gods is sentenced to perish].75

Mandelstam’s poem reinforces this sense that Schiller’s work expresses a nostalgia for a time before Christianity. The “broken” (nadlomlennyi, cracked, but not sheared in half) bread of the final lines may be read as an allusion to the Eucharist, the adjective hinting at this through recalling the broken body of Christ.76 Moreover, the appropriateness of such an interpretation is confirmed in the next line, which contrasts the Eucharistic (or hard-earned) bread, not only to idyllic shepherds’ fare but also to the components of an ancient Greek libation for the dead.77 In this final stanza, we see a powerful nostalgia for a simpler, ideal time and space, free of “creaking labor” and need, a time when history’s wheel—taking one potential set of associations—turned easily and smoothly, without the blood-soaked pivots of revolution and civil war. However, we also see a nostalgia for a morally uncomplicated, pre-Christian world, a world of still as-yet-forgotten Christianity. The pull of retrograde time is thus not yet overcome, though the Eucharist is already on the tip of the poet’s tongue.78

As we have noted, for Nietzsche, the idyllic impulse of Alexandrian culture finds its ultimate expression in the art of opera. Several scholars have noted the repeated references to Meyerhold, Golovin, and Fokin’s contemporary production of Gluck’s opera Orpheus and Eurydice in the latter half of Mandelstam’s collection.79 Orpheus and Eurydice is an opera particularly well suited to supplant the tragic theater that colors the collection’s opening. First, there is, in this particular work, a highly unusual emphasis on the chorus.
Second, the same Furies that ascend anew to power in Mandelstam’s diptych are appeased in the opera by Orpheus’ singing. Finally, the plot of *Orpheus and Eurydice* provides a mythopoetic correlate for the drama of anamnesis, which is central both to the latter portion of *Tristia* and to the structuring of the book as a whole: Orpheus’ leading of Eurydice from Hades is akin to the poet’s attempt to regain the forgotten word.80

For the larger context of *Tristia*, it is important to recall also that Christianity came into being during the Alexandrian age. To quote Blok, the Alexandrian was that epoch “in which the Word was destined to be born” [v kotoroi nadlezhalo roditsia Slovu].81 *Tristia* ends with a poem that may be understood as an apotheosis of remembered Christianity, “St. Isaac’s under a veil of milky white” (Isakii pod fatoi molochnoi belizny, 1921).82 Taken together with “O, this air, drunk with trouble,” it enacts a Eucharist of Christian culture through representation of the physical church—“vessels” that carry the essence of the Christian revelation and Christian belief into the world in both the present and the implied future.

The rite of the Eucharist was clearly of symbolic importance to Mandelstam (as indeed it was for Ivanov). In 1915, the last year before the first poems of *Tristia* were written, Mandelstam wrote “Behold the pyx” (Vot daronositsa), entitled in an early version “Eucharist” (Evkharistiia). It is ecstatic in tone and describes a moment of timeless and unmitigated joy as the Tabernacle, the ornate chest that holds the Host (in Russian, the Gifts [Dary]), is held aloft before the congregation.

Importantly, in this poem Mandelstam uses the wrong word to refer to the Tabernacle. By using the word “daronositsa,” which technically refers to a small Tabernacle used for transporting the Gifts outside the church to the ill and dying, rather than the more correct “darokhranitel’nitsa,” Mandelstam wittingly or unwittingly emphasizes the fact that the Eucharist, and the gifts it holds, may be kept safe and transported through space and time. That Russian Tabernacles are often made in the shape of a church also has important implications in this regard. In both “O, this air” and “St. Isaac’s,” Russian cathedrals function as the Tabernacles that transport the Christian revelation through troubled and threatening times.

О, этот воздух, смутой пьяный
На черной площади Кремля.

. . .

А в запечатанных соборах,
Где и прохладно и темно,
Как в нежных глиняных амфорах,
Играет русское вино.

Успенский, дивно округленный,
Весь удивленье райских дуг,
И Благовещенский, зеленый,
И, мнится, заворкует вдруг.

Архангельский и Воскресенья
Просвечивают, как ладонь,—
Повсюду скрытое горенье,
В кувшинах спрятанный огонь...

O, this air, drunk with trouble,
In the black square of the Kremlin!

But in the sealed cathedrals,
Where it is both cool and dark,
As in tender, clay amphoras,
Plays Russian wine.

The [cathedral of the] Dormition, wondrously rounded,
All an amazement of heavenly arches,
And the Annunciation, green,
And it seems it will suddenly coo.

The [cathedrals of the] Archangel and the Resurrection
Are translucent like the palm of your hand
—Concealed burning is everywhere,
Fire hidden in jugs .

In one stanza, the church-vessels carry wine. In another, they are filled with the Holy Spirit (it seems that the Cathedral of the Annunciation will suddenly coo like a dove). In the final stanza, they are infused with fire. All three of these elements are associated with the Eucharist. However, these are also elements that potentially echo the Dionysian roots of Christianity pointed out by Ivanov, for whom fire is as much connected to Dionysus as wine. And Dionysus, like Christ, comes bringing a spiritual message about the immortality of the soul. Moreover, the spiritual fire within the churches betrays a disquieting kinship with the smuta (troubles) outside, distantly
recalling the “Russian schismatics, who immolated themselves in coffins” (II, 314), that Christian and Russian side of the Dionysiac Skriabin. This cleansing danger is present in the ritual of the Eucharist itself. The “flaming tongue of a new Pentecost [descent of the Holy Spirit, S.G.], which would burn away the old [vetkhii] person” in Skriabin’s Mysterium, can instead devour the unprepared. The Christian Revelation is preserved in the Church vessels, but it threatens to burst forth, scorching the world. In hindsight, it is possible to see in this final stanza a hint of the coming revolution, intuited as an inherently Russian and spiritual retribution.

Both “Behold the pyx” and “O, this air” were among four poems that Mandelstam labeled “Nonsense” (Erunda) and crossed out in the copy of Tristia he gave for posterity to the State Literary Museum in Moscow. By 1923, he may have rejected or, at the least, found too straightforward the exultant Eucharistic imagery of the former, while the latter poem was perhaps too forgetful, too easily lending itself to interpretation along the lines of Ivanov’s equation of Christianity and the Dionysian. Still, one cannot deny that “O, this air” profoundly anticipated “St. Isaac’s.” For, in “St. Isaac’s,” written five years later, the Russian wine is finally complemented with the bread that makes the experience of anamnesis complete. The cathedral itself serves in symbolic terms as the paten (in Russian, diskos) on which the Eucharistic bread is carried. The paten in the liturgy symbolizes the grave of Christ, and Mandelstam, elsewhere, calls St. Isaac’s Cathedral a “magnificent sarcophagus” (II, 313) and even a sarcophagus that is “part of an architectural ensemble, whole as a Tabernacle [darokhranitel’nitsa]” (III, 131–32). Moreover, the paten, in a Russian Orthodox service, is covered with veils, as is the cathedral in the poem. The dovecot, of course, refers us to the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Исакий под фатой молочной белизны
Стонет седою голубятней,
И посох бередит седые тишины
И чин воздушный сердцу внятный.

Столетних панихид блуждающий призрак
Широкий вынос плащаницы
И в ветхом неводе генисаретский мрак
Великопостные седмицы.

St. Isaac’s under a veil of milky white
Stands, a hoary dovecote,
And the staff chafes the gray silences
And the airy rite is audible to the heart.

The wandering phantom of century-old funeral masses,
The broad bearing-out of the winding-sheet,
And in an ancient fishing net the Gennesaretic darkness
Of the Lenten week.

The service depicted in the poem appears to be a composite of the Good Friday service and a memorial service for Pushkin, which Mandelstam had initiated in February 1921. This belated panikhida can only have been intended to return the night sun to its radiant aspect after almost 100 years of dormancy. As Mandelstam wrote in “Pushkin and Skriabin,” “Pushkin was buried at night [ . . . ] Marble St. Isaac’s—a magnificent sarcophagus—never did receive the poet’s solar body. In the night the sun was laid into a coffin” (II, 313). Moreover, in terms of the volume’s mythopoetic emplotment, Mandelstam’s real-life panikhida for Pushkin, when transfigured in its poetic re-embodiment in “St. Isaac’s,” recasts the archaic chorus’s theurgic appeasement of the black sun, from which the book began, in the mode of cathartically remembered Christianity.

After the opening, the poet turns in thought to St. Peter’s Cathedral in Rome and Hagia Sophia in Constantinople:

Соборы вечные Софии и Петра,
Амбары воздуха и света,
Зернохранилища вселенского добра
И риги Нового Завета.

Не к вам влечется дух в годы тяжких бед,
Сюда влачится по ступеням
Широкопасмурным несчастья волчий след,
Ему ж вовеки не изменим.

Зане свободен раб, преодолевший страх,
И сохранилось свыше меры
В прохладных житницах, в глубоких закромах
Зерно глубокой, полной веры.

Eternal cathedrals of Sophia and Peter,
Storehouses of air and light,
Granaries of universal good
And threshing barns of the New Testament.

Not to you is the spirit drawn in times of calamity,
The lupine tread of misfortune drags itself
Here up broadly sullen steps,
We will not betray it for all eternity.

For the slave is free, having overcome fear,
And above measure has been preserved,
In the cool granaries, in the deep bins,
The grain of profound, complete faith.

The path to the eternal cathedrals of Peter and Sophia lies through St. Isaac’s, which exists in time. Misfortune crawls up the steps to the very doors of St. Isaac’s, and, inside, a Russian Orthodox ceremony is being performed by a real congregation. At the moment of Eucharistic transfiguration, this worldly congregation can become united grains of that timeless bread that is the Church and the body of Christ. However, it is not enough simply to desire this communion. To be free, one must confront the world outside the Church, with all the fear this entails in times of war and famine: “For the slave is free, having overcome fear.” A Christian can confront this fear knowing that regardless of one’s personal fate, the grain of faith has been preserved. And in the same way, Mandelstam, in *Tristia*, can confront the Dionysian abyss, held strong by his “forgotten” faith in a pre-existing salvation.

It is the Christian artist’s firm belief that allows him to flirt with the Dionysian siren of pianism, to part in music with the voice, the anchor of personhood (“Pushkin and Skriabin”). And it is for this reason that the Christian artist Beethoven can create in his Dionysian hypostasis, without fear of the outcome. According to Mandelstam’s essay “Pushkin and Skriabin,” which was both deeply influenced by and argues with Ivanov’s writings, this pre-existing state of redemption is the source of the all-encompassing freedom of Christian art, which does not have to serve salvation—as the Symbolists would have had it—since the world along with the artist is already saved.

... Christian art is always action [... ] It is “imitation of Christ,” infinitely varied in its manifestations, eternal return to that single creative act which laid the beginning of our historical era [... ] Art cannot be a sacrifice, because it [the sacrifice] has already come to pass; it cannot be redemption,
because the world, together with the artist, is already redeemed—what remains? Joyful communion with God [. . . ] hide-and-seek of the spirit! The divine illusion of redemption contained in Christian art is explained specifically by this play with us of the Deity, who allows us to wander along the footpaths of mystery [misteriia] in order that we, as if of our own accord, should happen upon redemption, having experienced catharsis, redemption in art. (II, 314–15)\(^95\)

And so Christian art is free—but for what? It is free, it turns out, to forget, to tempt the abyss—so that artist and audience can experience redemption anew.

The theories of anthropologist Clifford Geertz are helpful in parsing the powerful emotional impact and real meaning that may be attached to this poetry as play, despite its separation from the drama of history. Play and world exist on symbolically connected, but distinct, planes. To help understand their connection, Geertz develops a notion of deep play. Play is deep (meaningful, aesthetically and emotionally charged) in that it compacts multiple layers of meaning and that the “marginal disutility of loss” is great.\(^96\) That is, the potential losses engendered by entering into the game far outweigh the potential gains. In the Balinese cock-fighting described by Geertz, excessively large sums of money are risked. In poetry, as per Mandelstam, the artist’s real death is cast into play.\(^97\) Geertz, who borrows the term “marginal disutility of loss” from the theoretical language of the Utilitarianist Benthamites, points out their error in attributing irrationality to play under these circumstances. It is, after all, not really money—or the individual life—which is at issue, but rather meaning. The poet’s play, while re-enacting in art the drama of redemption rather than redeeming the world, nonetheless creates meaning that exists beyond the text, within the world.

Ivanov’s greatest gift to Mandelstam was to present the younger poet with a far-reaching, almost all-encompassing conceptual framework, embracing huge swaths of Western culture, from which the younger poet could borrow, which he could transform or refute, but which would never run dry of material.\(^98\) In this sense, Ivanov is the author of a great “prayerbook” [trebnik], if in a slightly different meaning than his Futurist continuer, Khlebnikov, from whose “vast, all-Russian prayer book-image book” [ogromnyi vserossiiskii trebnik-obraznik] Russian poets “will draw for centuries and centuries” (II, 349).\(^99\) As Mandelstam wrote, conveying the relationship between the poetic innovator and the Pushkinesque synthesizer, “When the prayer books are written, then it is time to serve mass” [Kogda trebniki napisany, togda-to i služhit’ obedniu] (II, 350).
Ivanov’s “barbarism” and Dionysiasm may fall closer to the negative end of Mandelstam’s “unshakeable scale of values,” but they have a positive value as elements in his poetic and cultural metabolism. The Dionysian, the feminine, the barbaric “new life” that must ever be conquered by the illuminating Hellenic “Death” of Christianity, renewing the fabric of the world (“Pushkin and Skriabin”)—these chthonic, chaotic elements are as essential as Apollonian form and culture to the Acmeist lyric poet and his whole and balanced art.