Mandelstam, Blok, and the Boundaries of Mythopoetic Symbolism

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CHAPTER 10

“TO ANAXAGORAS” IN THE VELVET NIGHT

Немотствует дневная ночь
[The daytime night is voiceless.]
—Alexander Blok

Having banished the Symbolist lyric hero from his poetry during the earliest wave of Acmeism, Mandelstam, as we have seen, found himself in an enviable state of freedom in relation to the Symbolist heritage and to Blok in particular. However, three poems, all raising questions of theater and theatricality, bearing deep traces of Blok’s influence, and borrowing the characteristic meter of “Steps of the Knight Commander,” attest to the intensity of Mandelstam’s re-evaluation of Blok in 1920. Moreover, if, in the first two—“Venetian life, morbid and barren” and “The spectral stage barely glimmers”—Blok’s works and poetic persona serve primarily as a touchstone allowing Mandelstam to flesh out questions of theater and theatricality (see chapter 9), in the third, “We shall gather anew in Petersburg” (V Peterburge my soidemsia snova), the older poet’s role is more central. It is that role which I will interrogate here.

It is an understatement to say that Blok’s “Steps of the Knight Commander” was poetically compelling for Mandelstam. In “Badger Hole,” written after Blok’s death in 1922, Mandelstam calls this poem “the summit of Blok’s historical poetics” and praises the older poet’s rejuvenation of myth, his conflation of layers of time and history, in words reminiscent of his own poetic credo (II, 273). As
perceptive a scholar as S. N. Broitman apparently felt no friction between the visions of Blok in “Steps of the Knight Commander” and of Mandelstam in “We shall gather anew in Petersburg.” He sees Blok as the entry point and prism through which Mandelstam engages a whole range of historically diverse strata of poetic culture (a position resonant with the most positive of Mandelstam’s subsequent statements about Blok). In truth, however, Mandelstam’s powerful engagement of Blok in “We shall gather anew in Petersburg,” rather than integrating Blok into the curative cultural tradition represented by the hidden night sun of the poem, underscores most saliently the irreconcilable differences that distinguish their poetics and personalities.

In addition, the dominant subtexts of “We shall gather anew in Petersburg”—Blok’s “Steps of the Knight Commander” and Pushkin’s “To Krivtsov” (Krivtsov, 1817)—interact in a far more potent way than previously understood. Indeed, “To Krivtsov”—or “To Anaxagoras” (K Anaksagoru), as it was initially called—provides the discursive framework for a very personal challenge to Blok.

In exploring this intertextual and interpersonal nexus, I seek to reconstruct Mandelstam’s positioning of himself in relation to Blok at one precise moment, on the day in late fall 1920—24 November to be exact—when he made those changes that brought “We shall gather anew in Petersburg” to completion in the version published in Tristia. The document illustrating this moment is the signed and dated manuscript of the poem held in the Ivich collection. On this sheet, Mandelstam had written out a clean copy of the earliest extant version of the poem. He then made a significant and coherent set of revisions, bringing into focus (and in fact constituting anew) his relation to Blok in the poem.

The reading presented here of course does not pretend to any sort of exclusivity. That could only be a distortion of Mandelstam’s poetics, in which, as the poet wrote in “Conversation about Dante” (Razgovor o Dante, 1933), “Semantic wave-signals disappear, having performed their work: the stronger they are, the more yielding, the less inclined to tarry” (II, 364). Still, a rich and integral layer in the poem’s semantics and function stands to be recovered, and excavation of this layer is crucial to an adequate understanding of Mandelstam’s relation to Blok during his fantastically productive poetic fall of 1920.

If others saw in the Petersburg of 1920 a universal masquerade or a vast stage for monumental re-enactments of the revolution, Mandelstam appears
to have seen in it, in “We shall gather anew in Petersburg,” the potential for that inversion of masquerade that was the telos of the mythopoetic Symbolists: the mysterium.\(^5\) In Mandelstam’s 1922 essay “The Bloody Mystery Play of the 9th of January” (Krovavaia misteria 9-go ianvariia), Petersburg will be envisioned as an amphitheater where the mystery of the revolution of 1905 is played out. In “We shall gather anew in Petersburg,” the city is an open-air temple (“I will pray in the Soviet night”), carrying forward into the threatening present and uncertain future the buried revelation of art, visible to those who would see.\(^6\) The speaker’s esoteric vision of the buried Orphic sun, which is most likely the same “blessed, senseless word” for which the lyric persona prays in stanza two, identifies the poem’s “we” as members of a mystery religion. Their esoteric insight, however, is lost on the poem’s uninitiated, or imperceptive, ty (you, sing.):

В Петербурге мы сойдемся снова,
Словно солнце мы похоронили в нем,
И блаженное, бессмысленное слово
В первый раз произнесем.
В черном бархате советской ночи,
В бархате всемирной пустоты,
Всё поют блаженных жен родные очи,
Всё цветут бессмертные цветы.

Дикой кошкой горбится столица,
На мосту патруль стоит,
Только злой мотор во мгле промчится
И кукушкой прокричит.
Мне не надо пропуска ночного,
Часовых я не боюсь:
За блаженное, бессмысленное слово
Я в ночи советской помолюсь.

Слышу легкий театральный шорох
И девическое “ах” —
И бессмертных роз огромный ворох
У Киприды на руках.
У костра мы греемся от скуки,
Может быть, века пройдут,
И блаженных жен родные руки
Легкий пепел соберут.
Где-то грядки красные партера,
Пышно взбиты шифоньерки лож;
Заводная кукла офицера;
Не для черных душ и низменных святош...
Что ж, гаси, пожалуй, наши свечи,
В черном бархате всемирной пустоты
Всё поют блаженных жен крутые плечи,
А ночного солнца не заметишь ты.7

In Petersburg we will gather anew,
As if we had there buried the sun,
And for the first time we will pronounce
The blessed, senseless word.
In the black velvet of the Soviet night,
In the velvet of universal emptiness,
The dear eyes of the blessed women sing on,
Immortal flowers ever bloom.

The capital arches like a wild cat,
A patrol stands on a bridge,
Only a wicked motorcar will rush through the darkness
And cry out like a cuckoo.
I don't need a night pass,
I do not fear the watchmen:
I will pray in the Soviet night
For the blessed, senseless word.

I hear the light theatrical rustling
And a young woman's "ah"—
And a huge bundle of immortal roses
Is in Cypris's hands.
We warm ourselves from boredom at the bonfire,
Maybe centuries will pass,
And the dear hands of the blessed women
Will gather our light ash.

Somewhere are the red garden rows of the orchestra seats,
The chiffoniers of the boxes are sumptuously fluffed;
An officer's wind-up doll;
Not for black souls and base hypocrites . . .
Go on, if you will, extinguish our candles,
In the black velvet of universal emptiness,
The high shoulders of the blessed women sing on,
But you will not notice the night sun.

Several factors contribute to a distinctly Symbolist tonality in this masterpiece of Acmeist poetics. Among them are the legacy of Viacheslav Ivanov’s “teachings,” that Orphic heritage clearly implicated in the image of the night sun, and an expansive debt to Blok. Mandelstam’s multi-layered allusion to Blok is well documented and, besides “Steps of the Knight Commander,” includes reminiscences of “On the Snow Pyre” (Na snezhnom kostre, 1907), “Venice” (Venetsiia, 1909), “Three Missives” (Tri poslaniia, 1908–10), “The angry gaze of colorless eyes” (Serdityi vzor bestsvetnykh glaz, 1914) and “Voice from the Chorus” (Golos iz khora, 1910–14), as well as elements of Blok’s poetics taken in a broader sense.

In addition, Mandelstam’s prayer for the “blessed, senseless word” calls out for comparison with the Symbolists’ valorization of music, though this sense is transcended through a paradoxically conflicting association with the Logos—God as word (and, in its modernist inversion, the Word as god). Moreover, while not devoid of the connotations of romantic love more prominent in the draft version, this “blessed, senseless word” clearly has a transcendent quality, conveyed through its singularity and the fact that it will be pronounced, at least by this “we,” in the future for the first time.

In this sense, as has often been noted, it resonates with Nikolai Gumilev’s theory of the word. According to an abstract in Blok’s diary, Gumilev proclaimed: “In the beginning was the Word, from the Word arose thoughts, words, no longer resembling the Word, but having, however, It as their source; and all will end with the Word—all will disappear, and It alone will remain.”

Equally important, the lyric “I” of “We shall gather anew in Petersburg” finds himself part of a collective hero of a historically engaged cosmic narrative. It is the evidently theurgic nature of the lyric “we’s” relation to history, the world, and divinity, the focus on transfiguring reality through healing the now-nocturnal Sun of culture to allow for its ascendance in its diurnal aspect, which makes this poem the Acmeist heir apparent to the younger Symbolists’ works. A similar example of (literally) choral theurgy occurs at the end of Mandelstam’s second Phaedra poem, “How these coverings” (Kak etikh pokryval, 1916). There, however, the song of the chorus is destined to appease the dread Black Sun of incestuous guilt and history turned backward, the precise inverse of this poem’s night sun.
It is instructive to dwell in some detail on the ways in which the broader tensions between Mandelstam and Blok play out specifically in these two poems and in this period, before moving on to discuss the precise role of Blok in “We shall gather anew in Petersburg.” Despite Mandelstam’s effusive later praise of Blok’s poem, “We shall gather” represents a powerful swerve, in the Bloomian sense, in relation to Blok’s vision in “Steps of the Knight Commander.” The poets’ differences concern the nature and shape of history and time, the role of the individual in history, the character of the ideal, ethics, and the relation of the world to esoteric truth. (The full text of Blok’s poem may be found in the appendix.)

If “Steps of the Knight Commander” powerfully inspired Mandelstam, it also, one suspects, evoked deep ambivalence, not least due to the relation of the poet to history implied in the crucial concluding lines: “Donna Anna will rise at your mortal hour / Anna will rise at the mortal hour” [Donna Anna v smertnyi chas tvoi vstanet / Anna vstanet v smertnyi chas]. The presumably world-transforming awakening of Donna Anna, Maiden of Light [Deva Sveta], who has been courted by the unworthy, philandering Don Juan (with his worldly/demonic mistresses), is brought into a complex and subtly causal relationship with the hero’s death, which itself is implicitly necessary to the world’s redemption. The syntactic equation of universal and personal “mortal hours” in these final lines makes it clear that the moment of universal judgment and universal renewal is to coincide with the imminent hour of Don Juan’s own death. (And one cannot help overlaying this Don Juan onto the “poet,” given pervasive connections to Blok’s poetic mythology.)

Mandelstam was to write approvingly in The Noise of Time of how his boyhood friend, Boris Sinani, who grew up among the elite of the Socialist Revolutionary movement, very early put his finger on a fundamental inadequacy of a certain type of revolutionary. Sinani, with “scathing irony,” called “the carriers of ‘the idea of the individual in history’” Christlings (khristosiki) (II, 96). In this light, one may easily envision how Blok’s own Romantic individualism must have struck Mandelstam. Blok was author, for instance, of the famous (if inevitably misconstrued) lines “O, my Rus! My wife! The long path / Is painfully clear to us!” [O, Rus’ moia! Zhena moia! Do boli / Nam iasen dolgii put’!] (III, 286). True, he is monumentally self-critical, seeing himself, his generation, and his own social sphere as deeply flawed, as is
readily apparent from his essays. This, however, did not prevent him from imagining how the child, who “maybe, finally, with his little human hand, will grab hold of the wheel moving human history,” will be born from the seed of someone strikingly similar to Blok himself.\textsuperscript{17}

In contrast to Blok’s hero in “Steps of the Knight Commander,” Mandelstam’s hero in “We shall gather anew in Petersburg” is collective, and with this collectivity comes an undeniable, if perhaps qualified, humility. In death, the heroes’ gathered ashes will become, at best, a physical locus and artifact of the cultural memory. \textit{Their} death does not in itself herald the sun’s disinterment (as Don Juan’s death coincides with Donna Anna’s awakening), nor is it apparent in what world or life they will eventually come together to pronounce the transformative “blessed, senseless word.”\textsuperscript{18}

Mandelstam also envisions a different structure of history from Blok. Despite that anachronism and contemporaneity, that renewal of myth through collapsing of disparate time frames which Mandelstam so valued in Blok’s poem (II, 273), Blok’s historical myth in “Steps of the Knight Commander” essentially harmonizes with the Christian/apocalyptic model: it describes a nodal, transformative moment in the path to paradise regained, in contrast to those long stretches of “eventless” time, which Blok himself called \textit{bezvremen’e}.\textsuperscript{19} This Romantic model of history underlies the younger Symbolists’ service to the Eternal Feminine and thus implicitly informs large swaths of Blok’s poetry, serving as the desired escape from the tragedy of Nietzschean eternal return that is the poet’s lot in our frightening world (\textit{strashnyi mir}).

In “We shall gather anew in Petersburg,” the words “We will pronounce for the first time” [\textit{V pervyi raz proiznesem}] likewise can hint at a Christian/apocalyptic sense of time, in which this long-awaited act of pronunciation, \textit{prefigured} by prior gathering, would become a nodal moment, transforming the world and bringing about a categorically new state. However, even if we assume the transformative character of the blessed, senseless word, the overwhelmingly cyclical associations connected to the image of the night sun return us to an archaic, mythological viewpoint, in which the current darkness is only one phase in the ongoing drama of culture.

In addition, the poets find themselves at different points on the continuum. Blok’s Christian/apocalyptic pathos in “Steps of the Knight Commander” is founded on a sense that the moment of transfiguration is near. Moreover, his immediate post-revolutionary works, including “Intelligentsia and Revolution” (Intelligentsia i revoliutsiia, 1918) and “The Twelve” (Dvenadtsat’, 1918), would have given Mandelstam the impression that Blok believed he had been correct. In Mandelstam’s vision, “maybe centuries will
pass.” The Soviet Revolution ushers in, or maybe simply continues, a period
of outwardly bleak, contentless time (hence the boredom in line 21). This
time will be spent awaiting the next nodal moment, participating vicariously
in the inner, secret present, and embodying the still living, but now margin-
alyzed, past.20

A shifting of spatial relations also distinguishes “We shall gather anew
in Petersburg” from “Steps of the Knight Commander.” While both poems
are characterized by a perceptual penetration of the boundaries between
disparate spatial realms, the relation between, and valorization of, these
realms in the two poems are precisely reversed. Blok’s Don Juan/poet is
located “within,” in a room that is characterized by its physical and spiritual
emptiness: “It is cold and empty in the luxurious bedroom . . . the night
is desolate” [Kholodno i pusto v pyshnoi spal’ne . . . noch’ glukha]. This
same state is characteristic of life in general, which is symbolized by the
room (a variation on the Symbolists’ world-prison): “Life is empty, crazy
and unfathomable” [Zhizn’ pusta, bezumna i bezdonna]. The word bez-
donna (lit. bottomless, but also a neologism that sounds as if it might mean
“Donna-less”) reveals the absence of the Eternal Feminine from the hero’s
world.21

Retribution/fate (the motor [automobile] and the Knight Commander) is
located just beyond the boundaries of this room. The forceful entrance of the
Knight Commander (“the door flung wide” [nastezh’ dver’]) breaks down the
boundaries between the room and the near-beyond, supplanting the heavy
curtain and fog that enclose and isolate the inner space of the poem until
this moment. Beyond the intermediary space of the street is the outermost
“blessed realm” (“Iz strany blazhennoi, neznakomoi, dal’nei”). However, the
hero is able to hear, through the walls, the motor with its horn, located in the
near beyond, and perceive or intuit the song of the rooster, sounding in the
distant, blessed realm—spatially overcoming his isolation. The whole poem
serves as a record of the poet’s intuition of the distant presence of the blessed
realm and of the mechanisms of historical retribution already set in motion
to wake the World Soul/Maiden of Light/Donna Anna, returning her to his
empty, aspiritual world.

In Mandelstam’s poem, in contrast, the poet is located without, per-
ceiving or intuiting that which is within. The poem’s “we” gather, like the
coachmen of Eugene Onegin (and Mandelstam’s own Pushkin-influenced
“The spectral stage barely glimmers” and “Valkyries fly, bows sing” [Letaiut
val’kirii, poiut smychki, 1914]), at a bonfire outside the theater (read: temple
of culture) in the dark of the cold and formidable Soviet night.22 In a sense,
they gather in the near beyond of Blok’s poem, complete with its *motor.*

Night, however, is warmed for the poet by the presence, which he senses, of the theater (in the final 1920 version), love/Aphrodite (in the draft version of the poem), or the memory of a theatrical past, subtly underscored by the lexicon (in the 1928 version).

The poet perceives, or intuits, what is happening within the inner, theatrical sanctum. (“I hear the light theatrical rustling” [Slyshu legkii teatral’nyi shorokh]; “Somewhere are the red garden rows of the orchestra seats” [Gde-to gridaki krasnye partera]). Moreover, just as in Blok’s poem there are concentric outer realms, one more distant than the other, in Mandelstam’s poem there is an inner and even more “inner” realm. This is the esoteric realm of the night sun. As has been much noted, this night sun can also be seen as Pushkin, whose “solar body” is buried in the night in “Pushkin and Skriabin.”

One fundamental underlying disagreement between Mandelstam and Blok therefore concerns the *location* of the ideal and its presence within or absence from our world. While the two poems are united by the heroes’ perception or intuition of the ideal realm and share that night space, which is traversed by the *motor,* for the younger poet an Orphic/Kabalistic sense of the divine presence within the world leads to an overarching optimism in the face of “darkness.” For the older, an expectation of salvation from beyond (compare the *topoi* of distance [dal’], sunsets/sunrises [zori], the fallen star [padshaia zvezda], the other shore [tot bereg], etc., in Blok’s poetry) leads ultimately to a dualistic/Gnostic view of the spiritual emptiness of the given world (“strashnyi mir”) and, in its most pessimistic form, a “courageously sober” [muzhestvenno-tverdyi] gaze into the heart of the unbroken “Darkness and cold of the coming days” [Kholod i mrak griadushchikh dnei].

For the Blok of “Intelligentsia and Revolution,” published in 1918 and republished in 1919 and 1920, the revolutionary destruction and bloodshed to which the intelligentsia is destined is the inevitable and just retribution for the collective prior sins of the upper classes and will lead to collective good. The honest intellectual must recognize this and accept the pain that comes with the death and destruction of that which is personally cherished. Note, however, that, in Blok’s vision, if our love is not misplaced—in physical kremlins, palaces, paintings, or books, rather than “eternal forms”—that which we love will endure. For Blok, “love” is a form of spiritual vision (“perfect love drives out fear,” 1 John 4:18). In contrast, Mandelstam’s ethics centers on *romantic* love and beauty (poetry), camaraderie and tradition, as counterpoints to the bleakness of the surrounding night.
“TO ANAXAGORAS” IN THE VELVET NIGHT

It is these powerful discrepancies between the two poets’ worldviews that make it possible to set forth here a rather radical hypothesis about “We shall gather anew in Petersburg.” Given that what I am about to say is in some ways fairly obvious (as the metrical and other ties to Blok’s poetry were established long ago), I believe that the reason no one—to the best of my knowledge—has ever made the claim before is that the equation I will make appears, if taken out of context, vulgar and reductionist. However, through an analysis of the changes to the draft version, appropriate contextualization of the nature of Mandelstam’s challenge to Blok, and analysis of the structure of the Pushkinian layer of citation in the poem, I will demonstrate, I think convincingly, that, while not excluding other associations, the unseeing and apparently adversarial “ty” of Mandelstam’s poem is, in its published version, primarily Blok.

Gasparov and Ronen have noted that in “We shall gather anew in Petersburg,” the association of pronouns was undermined, inhibiting understanding: “we,” in line 1, by force of poetic tradition, is understood as “the poet and his beloved,” “we” in line 21 as “the poet and his comrades in art,” while the “you” in line 29–32 (as a result of the disappearance of the image of “fear, detester of the sun,” alluding to the distant beginning of the poem, to the “Soviet night” and emptiness) can be falsely understood as “the beloved,” as if the addressee of the poem does not believe in the rebirth of art in which the hero believes.30

I would argue, however, that no such confusion exists—beyond the deep and clearly intentional traces of Olga Arbenina’s initial presence, which are retained in the final version from the draft version. In fact, the changes recorded on the autograph of Mandelstam’s poem illustrate the way in which the poet reconfigured the “ty” of his poem in the final stages of his writing to allow for equation with a single contemporary. In the draft version, the “ty” of the poem relates to two completely distinct and irreconcilable entities—one potential motivation for Mandelstam’s revisions. The first of these entities, made explicit, is “Fear, detester of the sun” [Nenavistnik solntsa, strakh], a cosmic and unambiguously negative force.31 The second likely relates to his current love interest, Arbenina, an actress of the Aleksandrinsky Theater. In lines 25–28 of the draft version, she assumes a role fashioned upon that of Blok’s most recent theatrical heroine. Like Karmen-Del’mas, who retains her musical essence as she glides out of the theater through the orchestra seats in
“The angry gaze,” Mandelstam’s “ty” becomes a focal point for the theatrical essence as she similarly slips through the audience:

Через грядки красные партера
Узкою дорожкой ты идешь
И старинная клубится голубая сфера
Не для черных душ и низменных святош:

Through the red garden rows of the orchestra seats
You walk a narrow path
And the pale-blue, antique sphere billows
Not for black souls and base hypocrites:

The heroine, and the venerable, theatrical essence to which she is linked, exist not for the profane. This positively valenced “you,” which the poet must defend from “black souls and base hypocrites,” allows for no equation with the “you” of the final line, which, given the cosmic scale of its (vain) threat to the night sun, appears to be “Fear, detester of the sun”: “But you will not destroy the night sun” [A nochnogo solntsa ne pogubish’ ty]. The overall sense of this early version is that the greatest threat to the night sun of culture is our own fear, while Aphrodite’s “unwilting roses” (love) are the even more powerful antidote.

Mandelstam resolves the confusion of pronouns by removing both “fear, detester of the sun” and the above image of Arbenina (i.e., both earlier incidences of the second person) from the poem, leaving the second person only in the final quatrain. This, combined with the simple, but profound, change from cosmic “you will not destroy” [ne pogubish’] to personal “you will not notice” [ne zametish’], opens the door for the poem in its negative aspect to be addressed to an individual.

In doing so, Mandelstam recreates precisely the discursive situation of “To Krivtsov,” the main contrastive subtext through which he challenges Blok’s ethos:

Не пугай нас, мильный друг,
Гроба близким новосельем:
Право, нам таким бездельем
Заниматься недосуг.
Пусть остылой жизни чашу
Тянет медленно другой;
Мы ж утратим юность нашу
Вместе с жизнью дорогой;
Каждый у своей гробницы
Мы присядем на порог;
У пифосской царицы
Свежий выпросим венок,
Лишьный миг у верной лени,
Круговой нальем сосуд —
И толпою наши тени
К тихой Лете убегут.
Смертный миг наш будет светел;
И подруги шалунов
Соберут их легкий пепел
В урны праздные пиров.

Don’t frighten us, kind friend,
With the grave’s near housewarming:
Really, we have no time
To spend on such idleness.
Let someone else slowly sip
From the cup of cooled-off life;
We will lose our youth
Together with dear life;
Each of us will perch
On the doorstep of his tomb;
From the Paphian queen [Aphrodite]
We’ll coax a fresh garland,
An extra moment by faithful indolence
We’ll pour a vessel to pass—
And our shades in a cluster
Will run off to quiet Lethe.
Our mortal moment will be bright;
And the playful pranksters’ girls
Will gather their light ashes
Into the feasts’ now-idle urns.35

Pushkinian fearlessness in “To Krivtsov” contrasts with Blokian fear (“It is frightening in the luxurious bedroom at the hour of dawn” [V pyshnoi spal’ne strashno v chas rassveta]); Pushkinian “lightness’ in relation to ‘the accursed questions of existence,’ among them fate and death” (Broitman) to Blokian self-importance and seriousness; Pushkinian comradeship with Blokian
individualism; Pushkinian gathering of memory (“[They] will gather their light ashes” [Soberut ikh legkii pepel]) with Blokian dispersion (“I will scatter your light ashes” [Razmetu tvoi legkii pepel]). Moreover, in all of these instances, Mandelstam stands firmly with Pushkin, who, like Mandelstam in the draft version, finds his intercessor in the Paphian queen, Aphrodite, and her this-worldly love and beauty.

In fact, “We shall gather anew in Petersburg,” as a speech act, functions as a repetition of “To Krivtsov,” but with the revelers of the earlier poem exiled to the dark night of Soviet Russia. As Evgenii Toddes notes, Mandelstam’s poem was written almost exactly 100 years after “To Krivtsov,” i.e., one “cycle” (compare Boris Gasparov on motifs of “hundred-year return” in Mandelstam) after the “golden” moment in Russian poetry before Pushkin’s exile. It is surely through the discursive isomorphism between “We shall gather anew in Petersburg” and “To Krivtsov”—through the poem’s profound imitatio Pushkin—that the former is meant to achieve its fullest power as an act of theurgy, a healing of the Pushkinian sun.

“To Krivtsov,” initially entitled “To Anaxagoras” in reference to the fifth-century B.C.E. Greek philosopher accused of atheism, is addressed, like “We shall gather anew in Petersburg,” on the part of a “we” to a “ty”—an older friend, Nikolai Ivanovich Krivtsov, who is both part of and not quite part of the poet’s “circle.” Moreover, in addressing the poem to Krivtsov, Pushkin had addressed it to a pessimist (such at least is apparent from the poem itself) and materialist, who tried to sway the opinion of the young poet but whose ethos will always remain foreign. “Don’t frighten us, kind friend, / With the grave’s near housewarming” [Ne pugai nas, milyi drug, / Groba blizkim novosel’em], Pushkin’s poem begins. Could not virtually the same sentiment (“Don’t frighten us!”) be addressed to the author of “Voice from the Chorus”? Don’t try to frighten us with your dire, historiosophic prophecies!

Blok wasn’t exactly an atheist materialist like Krivtsov. However, in Mandelstam’s poem, the “you” of the final line is accused not of atheism, but of something far narrower and more specific: “But you will not notice the night sun” [A nochnogo solntsa ne zametish’ ty]. Why Mandelstam should have directed precisely this accusation precisely at Blok is in fact quite obvious: in a poetic debate that was surely closely followed by Mandelstam, Blok had publicly declared himself incapable of recognizing the “light” streaming through our everyday darkness. This was the exchange, published in no. 2 of The Hyperborean in 1912, between Blok and Vladimir Gippius, Symbolist poet and Mandelstam’s former teacher of literature from the Tenishev School.
Notably, the draft version of “We shall gather anew in Petersburg” seems, in part, to follow the outlines of what must have been some of Gippius’s most beloved lines, at least to judge by the inscription on one copy of his book, *Starry Night* (*Noch’ v zvezdakh*, 1915), held by the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg. Gippius quotes from the following stanza of his poem, “I was overtaken by ecstasy in the steppe” (*Menia vostorg v stei nastig*):

И я не верю в гулкий страх
Людского трепетного стада:
Мне солнца в небесах не надо —
Я вижу розы в вещих снах!

And I believe not in the resonant fear
Of the trembling human herd:
I need no sun in the heavens—
I see roses in prophetic dreams!

Here we have the same constellation of fear, darkness, roses, and (prophetic) art as in Mandelstam’s poem—the same claim to weather the outer darkness through connection to an inner artistic impulse.

But let us return to the dispute between Gippius and Blok. In his poem “All on Earth will die—both mother and youth” (*Vse na zemle umret—i mat’, i mladost’,* 1909), Blok had set forth an extreme program of asceticism and disavowal of life, calling upon his addressee (himself?) to sail for the North Pole and accustom his “tired soul” to the “shudderings of sluggish cold,” “So it would need nothing here, / When the rays rush *from there*” [Chto b bylo *zdes’*’ei nichego ne nado, / *Kogda ottuda* rinutsia luchi] (III, 220). It was the “*from there*” with which Gippius took issue. In his understanding, the divine light was already streaming invisibly through our world:

Ты думаешь — они оттуда ринутся?
Мне кажется, что — нет:
Но в час назначеный все опрокинутся —
Все зримые в незримый свет —

Незримый свет, который в зримом стелется [ . . . ]

You think—they’ll rush from there?
It seems to me, they won’t:
But in the appointed hour everyone will be toppled—
All the visible into the invisible light—

The invisible light, which spreads throughout the visible […]\textsuperscript{44}

Blok answered, in the meter and strophe chosen by Gippius:

Да, знаю я: пронзили ночь отвека
Незримые лучи.
Но меры нет страданью человека,
Ослепшего в ночи!

Ты ведаешь, что некий свет струится,
Объемля всё до дна,
Что ищет нас, что в свисте ветра длится,
Иная тишина...

Но страннику, кто снежной ночью полон,
Кто загляделся в тьму,
Приснится, что не в вечный свет вошел он,
А луч сошел к нему.

Yes, I know: from of old invisible rays
Have pierced the night.
But there is no measure to the suffering of a person
Gone blind in the night!

You know some such light flows,
Encompassing all to the core,
That in the whistle of the wind another quiet
Seeks us, persists . . .

But the pilgrim, who is full of snowy night,
Who has stared out his eyes gazing into the dark,
Will dream not that he has entered the eternal light,
But that a ray has descended to him.\textsuperscript{45}

Gippius’ bloated, 64-line rebuttal to Blok’s inspired reply was weak and didactic.\textsuperscript{46} Mandelstam answers Blok far more forcefully. Salvation is to be sought
not without (“from the blessed, unfamiliar, distant realm”), but within—and you, among us, will not notice it.

Some additional evidence suggesting that Blok is intended here is to be found in Mandelstam’s “Humanism and Modernity” (Gumanizm i sovremennost', 1922): “The future [griadushchee] is cold and frightening for those who do not understand this, but the inner warmth of the future [. . .] is as obvious to the contemporary humanist as the heat of a piping stove today” (II, 354, emphasis mine). Through an allusion to Blok’s “Voice from the Chorus” (“O, if only you knew, you children, / The cold and darkness of coming days” [O, esli by znali, deti, vy, / Kholod i mrak griadushchikh dnei]), Mandelstam makes it clear that Blok is one of those “who do not understand this” [kto etogo ne ponimaet], one of those who is blind to the inner warmth of the future, which is so obvious to the poet. The similarity to the “you will not notice . . . the sun” of “We shall gather anew in Petersburg” is apparent.

One cannot help feeling some modicum of unfairness in the singling out of Blok, if indeed that is what is happening in “We shall gather anew in Petersburg.” Not that it should matter: Anna Akhmatova wrote that Mandelstam spoke about poetry “dazzlingly [. . .] and sometimes was monstrosely unfair, for instance, to Blok.” Moreover, we should not forget that, if the poem mirrors “To Krivtsov,” as it appears to, then Blok is being accorded the role not of the chern’, the profani, despised and rejected out-of-hand, but of the “dear friend” (milyi drug), who, however, remains foreign to the ethos of the poet’s inner circle.

Why is it, though, that the accusation “But you will not notice the night sun” seems so unfair? First of all, it is difficult to rid ourselves of our knowledge, in hindsight, of Blok’s quickly approaching early death and his soon-to-be-pronounced Pushkin speech, through which the older poet will write himself indelibly into the Pushkinian cultural tradition—which is the cultural tradition in Russia and which lies at the heart of “We shall gather anew in Petersburg” and its project. Second, there is a natural desire, in evaluating any such accusation, to cast the broadest possible gaze at Blok’s writings (though no law required Mandelstam, of course, to react to all of Blok, rather than to specific poems). Blok’s poetry, particularly the poetry of the third book, is characterized by a rich, subtle, and pervasive counterpoint, which becomes one of the underlying organizational principles of his book and its cycles.

A third factor is the line “Go on, perhaps, extinguish our candles” [Chto zh, gasi, pozhalui nashi svechi]. There is a natural desire to read this trope as a maximally threatening metonymy, and, undoubtedly, this is one important sense of the poem. However, the sense of “we fear not death” (spiritual or
physical) is, given the imagistic structure of the poem in its final version, complementary to the sense of “we fear not the dark.” Note also that Mandelstam had already used an absence of candles to refer specifically to metaphorical, spiritual darkness in “Who knows, maybe, my candle will burn out” (Kto znaet, mozhет by’t, ne khvatit mne svechi, 1917). And, while Blok had not threatened the physical and spiritual existence of the artistic community, he had forcefully warned of the oncoming blackness, which one ought to fear, in no less prominent a place than the opening poem of his freshly published collection Gray Morning (Sedoe utro [Petersburg: Alkonost, 1920]):

Все будет чернее страшный свет [...]  
Еще века, века!

И век последний, ужасней всех,  
Увидим и вы и я [...]  

Весны, дитя, ты будешь ждать —  
Весна обманет.  
Ты будешь солнце на небо звать —  
Солнце не встанет.  
И крик, когда начнешь кричать,  
Как камень, канет...

The horrible light will be ever blacker [...]  
For centuries, centuries on!

And the final age, most terrible of all,  
You and I will see [...]  

You, child, will await the spring—  
Spring will deceive you.  
You will call the sun into the sky—  
The sun will not rise.  
And [your] cry, when you begin to scream,  
Will sink like a stone... (III, 71–72)

The final quatrain of Mandelstam’s poem can be read as a moment of revelation when all Petersburg bares itself as a vast theater. The extinguishing of the candles, rather than signaling an ending, removes the last barrier to true vision. It is in their absence that the blessed women’s bare shoulders are
fully visible, phosphorescent in the darkness on a universal stage, illuminated by the ever-present, but invisible, rays of the buried night sun. Two readings remain equally relevant: we fear not our death, in the knowledge that the performance will go on, and we fear not the historiosophic dark, knowing that it is illuminated from within.

The fundamental paradox of Mandelstam’s poem, in its relation to Blok, is that Mandelstam simultaneously singles out the older poet to polemicize with his vision and draws upon that vision to immense creative effect. Meter, imagery, phraseology, and particularly a pervasive sense of theater and theatricality are borrowed from Blok and re-embodied with undeniable enthusiasm. Blok’s art is thus accepted as theater and as part of that poetic-theatrical heritage which lives on in the heart of the Petersburg night. However, Blok’s worldview is rejected as a pessimistic vision blind to that very presence of which his art is an essential element.

So, fair or unfair, in late fall 1920, Blok found himself, in Mandelstam’s eyes, marginal to the circle of continuers and worshippers of Pushkinian culture, worshippers of the Word. This was a fate he would not have to suffer for long, however, for on 11 February 1921, Petersburg would celebrate the eighty-fourth anniversary of Pushkin’s death and Blok would read his famous memorial speech, “On the Calling of the Poet” (O naznachenii poeta), linking his own impending, but still hidden, tragic death to Pushkin’s for all time.