Mandelstam, Blok, and the Boundaries of Mythopoetic Symbolism

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As we have seen, the young Mandelstam’s jettisoning of the Symbolist lyric hero, so powerfully realized in Blok’s poetry, was integral to his adaptation of the myth-creation exercised by the younger Symbolists to a post-Symbolist poetics. After this first “triumph” in diffusing the source of Blok’s charismatic power, Mandelstam’s poetry betrayed not only parodic applications of Blok’s imagery, but also a profound receptiveness to Blok’s metaphorical poetics and embodiment in poetry of anachronistic modernist time structures. In the poet’s second volume, Tristia, the key component of Blok’s hero became for Mandelstam his theatricality, inevitably weighed against the older poet’s tragic stance.

As I have demonstrated on the basis of “We shall gather anew in Petersburg,” as late as November 1920, Mandelstam saw Blok as marginal and even antagonistic to the Pushkinian culture of the Word. And, in general, Mandelstam appears initially to have followed Annensky’s lead in judging Blok’s pose theatrical. However, this theatricality is ultimately transcended in the tragedy that emerged with Blok’s early death in 1921, presciently foreshadowed only months earlier in his famous Pushkin speech, “On the Calling of the Poet.”
The tragic Blok is subtly reflected in Mandelstam’s “Concert at the Railway Station.” And yet Mandelstam’s autobiographical prose and essays of the early 1920s continue to reveal a substantial discomfort with Blok. Blok’s barstvennost’, a matter of personality rather than genealogy, remains a defining characteristic of the poet for Mandelstam and ties him inexorably to the passing nineteenth century.

Blok’s politics and his cultural anti-Semitism continued to rile Mandelstam in the 1930s, as reflected in the “pointed” and “venomous” marginalia (now lost) that he spiritedly entered in Emma Gershtein’s mother’s copy of “Retribution.”1 And Mandelstam continued, while remembering some poems fondly, to relate to Blok with what appears to have been a notable pique.2 Blok’s poetics and relation to tradition remained largely foreign, as reflected in the famous critical passage in “Conversation about Dante.”3 In general, we may conclude that Blok continued to engage Mandelstam’s interest in the 1930s, but not, it seems, with anything close to the intensity that marked the years up to and surrounding the older poet’s death.4

The issue of Blok’s authenticity was clearly crucial for Mandelstam and in large part determined his developing relationship to the older poet. In fact, it would not be outrageous to assert that the most fundamental underlying difference between the two poets—that sea-change in poetics which, for Mandelstam and Akhmatova at least, heralds the inception of a truly “twentieth-century” literature—is a change in perception of the nature and source of authenticity and sincerity in the artwork. Is it not, above all else—including anti-Semitism—a failure to see the authenticity of Mandelstam’s art that explains Blok’s long indifference to his poetry?5 For one who does not sense the authenticity of a piece will at best note its fireworks. And both Mandelstam and Blok set far higher demands on poetry.

For Mandelstam, authenticity in the abstract is a constant (“poetry is the consciousness of one’s rightness” [II, 236]). However, the realization of poetic authenticity in time is dependent upon constant change:

Poetic speech is a crossbred process, and it is composed of two sounds: the first of these sounds is the, to us, audible and palpable transformation of the very instruments of poetic speech, arising in motion, in the impulse; the second sound is speech itself, that is, the intonational and phonetic work executed by the above-mentioned instruments. [. . .]

Poetic speech or thought can be said to sound only with a great degree
of conditionality, since we hear in it only the crossing of two lines, of which one, taken in and of itself, is absolutely mute; while the other, taken outside of instrumental metamorphosis, is bereft of any significance and any interest and can be paraphrased, which, in my opinion, is the surest sign of the absence of poetry [. . .] (II, 363–64)

The first of these two crossing lines, that which is mute, is the metamorphosis over time of the implements, the musculature of poetry. 6 Without this, verse, no matter how talented the author, will not be poetry. Only the constant metamorphosis of the tools of poetry, its inner generators, can assure the uniquely multi-semantic charge of the poetic image. 7

The versifier’s lines do not sound because his or her speech and worldview are constructed of clichés and associations already embedded in language and tradition and resurrected without interrogation. Nadson is “bad” [plokh], among other qualities, and despite the reality of his personal tragedy, because his “sincere” language and identity are bound by cliché. Herein lies the source of Mandelstam’s criticism of the Symbolist rhymes so beloved of Vladimir Gippius: *kamen’-plamen’* (stone-flame), *plot’-Gospod’* (flesh-the Lord), *liubov’-krov’* (love-blood). 8 They imply a laziness of creative will; patterns of thought given in the superficial realities of the language are perpetuated. Moreover, in the case of *liubov’-krov’* especially, these linguistic realities inscribe, in both civic and decadent poetry, a simplistic and questionable ethics. 9 (In contrast, Mandelstam felt the strong compulsion to “work speech, not heeding, just the two of us” [rabotat’ rech’, ne slushaias’, sam-drug].) 10

Blok, unlike Nadson, is a poet. While he is a gatherer of the clichés of the nineteenth century, his ship has its own “build.” His development as poet (“Letter on Russian Poetry”) implies his own understanding of poetry as work and his active search for an authentic voice, 11 as too his discomfort with his own “mask” and the ossification of his image in the public eye. 12 Still, one senses that, for Blok, sincerity or authenticity is conceptualized as stable, and in any case not dependent upon an abstract need to transform the implements of poetry. Development, it seems, is driven instead by a changing worldview shaped by events and discourse. 13

For Mandelstam and Blok, not only the constancy but also the constituents of the artwork’s authenticity are differently understood. For Blok, a key locus of the artwork’s authenticity is the person or persona of the artist. Blok’s vision of the “person-artiste” [chelovek-artist] (“The Wreck of Humanism”) demonstrates in no uncertain terms the importance for him of the artist as extraordinary individual (*lichnost’*). And it is no accident that he con-
ceives his life’s production of lyric poetry as a “trilogy of being embodied as a human being” [“trilogia vochelovecheniia”] (SS8, VIII, 344).

The poet Ilya Sel’vinsky’s maxim—“A talented poet is sincere; a major poet is candid”\(^1\)—seems, when faced with Blok’s poetry, quite plausible. Blok’s poetry presents the image of an almost terrifying, brutal candor, which hinges upon a seeming violence toward the “interests” of the self (understood in conventional terms). This includes Blok’s existential “heart pleads for death” [serdtse prosit gibeli],\(^1\) his “betrayal” of his own social sphere, and his diary-like exposing of the poet’s “falls” (padeniiia). Unlike the “misdeeds” of a decadent like Briusov, for whom flirtation with the devil was a form of pure exhibitionism, positively valenced by the poet, Blok’s “falls” retain their tragedy. His vices and offenses, however ecstatic, never lose their coloration as sin.

For Mandelstam, “candor” is not a relevant category. If anything, personal candor is perceived negatively, even if Mandelstam’s assertion—“My memory is inimical to all that is personal” (II, 99)—must be taken as hyperbole. (Personal candor, however, must be understood as distinct from the charismatic and cathartic “directness” of “Fourth Prose”—which transgresses all bounds of social propriety—or of the poetry especially of first half of the 1930s.)\(^1\)

Formal perfection clearly had meaning for Blok. Evidence of this, if it is needed, can be found in his remarks on his unsuccessful attempts to fix the technically imperfect poems of the first book.\(^1\) Mandelstam—as is powerfully evidenced by his skepticism toward the older poet—sensed and thirsted for a grounding of art in life. And yet a simple juxtaposition of book reviews by the two poets illustrates well the depth of their differences.

In asking, in 1908 (i.e., toward the middle of his poetic path), why one is left cold by the often formally perfect poetry of Nikolai Minsky, Blok answers: “[…] the incomplete sincerity of the poet. I think that we no longer have any right to doubt that great works of art are chosen by history only from the number of those of a ‘confessional’ nature […] only that creation where [the artist] burned himself to ash […] can become great.” He goes on to say that “If this [immolated] soul is vast it moves many generations, many peoples, many centuries.” However, “Any truth, confession, be it paltry, ephemeral, parochial […] we accept with open arms” (SS8, V, 278). In stark contrast, Mandelstam wrote, in reviewing Bely’s prose in 1923, “The sincerity of Bely’s book is a question lying beyond the bounds of literature […] A bad book is always a literary and social crime, always a lie” (II, 422).

Another measure of the artwork’s authenticity for Blok, inasmuch as he fits the mold of Ivanov’s “realistic” Symbolism, is its relation to the transcen-
dent Other. The Eternal Feminine will fade as that external truth against which the personal is weighed, that which must be intuited by the poet. However, the Other itself will remain in the form of the rumble of history (the poet’s “ear to the ground”) and the elemental “spirit of music.” When this music ceases to be audible, the poet himself largely falls silent.

Mandelstam finds the measure of the artwork’s authenticity not in a transcendent Other, but in the unique, pre-existing form of the poem itself, which the artist must divine and embody (“The Word and Culture”). And herein, unexpectedly, lies another most notable debt to mythopoetic Symbolism—a conception of the creative process as receptivity. Ivanov writes:

> We believe that the theurgic principle in art is the principle of least force and most receptiveness. Not to lay one's will on the surface of things—this is the highest precept of the artist, rather to discern and herald the hidden will of essences. As a midwife eases the process of birthing, so [the artist] ought to ease in things the emergence of beauty; with sensitive fingers he is called on to remove the film which hinders the birth of the word.”18

For Ivanov, the artist, through anamnesis, seeks the Platonic ideal, the realiora. He rejects invention that is not supported by an intuition of this greater reality.19 Mandelstam, just as vehemently, rejects (at least for himself) the artist’s individualistic, purely imaginative creativity. The great poet, for Mandelstam, is not a writer, but a scribe:

> The secret of his capaciousness is in the fact that he does not introduce a single word of his own. He is moved by anything whatsoever, just not contrivance, just not invention. Dante and fantasy—but that is incompatible! Shame, French Romantics—you unfortunate incroyables in red vests who have maligne Aligheri! What fantasy? He writes from dictation, he's a copyist, he's a translator . . . he's bent double in the pose of a scribe, glancing with fright at the illuminated original lent him from the library of the prior. [ . . . ]

> . . . Here let me work a little more, and then I have to show the folio, doused with the tears of a bearded schoolboy, to most strict Beatrice, who radiates not only glory, but literacy. (“Conversation about Dante,” II, 406–7)

Thus, it turns out that at the root of Mandelstam’s memorable image of poetry as dictation lies Ivanov’s concept of receptivity. Mandelstam seeks to recall not a metaphysical or spiritual ideal, but a pre-existing artistic
prototype, a “resounding cast of form,” for which he must listen, and which he must fill (II, 226). However, his “poet” too answers for his authenticity to a Fair Lady—a Fair Lady gifted with preternaturally impeccable literary taste.\footnote{20}

Candor, as stated, is not a valid category for Mandelstam, but sincerity is not equal to candor. In Mandelstam’s poetry, the ironic is incorporated into the sincere. For Blok, by his own admission, the ironic voice is destructive and must be overcome. Blok’s poetics functions on the assumption that sincerity is founded upon immediacy—immediacy of belief and immediacy of doubt, alike. Mandelstam’s perception of sincerity is bound up in play with immediacy and distance, tension between irony and “hieratic” self-assuredness. The way in which these tensions and this play are realized in relation to the Symbolist heritage has been a major focus of this study. Mandelstam’s Acmeism re-establishes boundaries and demarcates distance, but it does so for the potential energy that this discipline generates. The agitating, “mighty” curtains, which divide life and art, present and past, Symbolist and Acmeist poetics, can then emerge as featherweight sheets of onionskin paper, which may be raised and lowered at will, magical “Bergson’s” fans collapsing spatial, temporal, and conceptual distance between phenomena.

On these pages, I have examined how a supremely gifted poet converted the material of potential anxiety into myriad strategies for uninhibited creation. The tradition of his birthright is, for Mandelstam, like the verbal source material of “Notre Dame,” a “cruel weight” [tiazhest’ nedobraia] that can be formed by the poet into “the sublime.”

Ultimately, Mandelstam’s interaction with mythopoetic Symbolism proceeds on two interconnected levels. On the one hand, mythopoetic Symbolism functions as a poetic Weltanschauung that can have a continuing attraction and meaning for the poet or his lyric persona. The “feminine,” chaotic siren song of Symbolism remains ever the necessary complement of Apollonian, “masculine” cosmos, assuring the wholeness of the hermaphroditic lyric poet. On the other hand, mythopoetic Symbolism represents a historical stage in the development of Russian verse and of Mandelstam’s own poetry, with its own characteristic set of motifs, topoi, and narrative structures, its own body of verse. If, in the former sense, Symbolism continues to provide the inner abyss of Mandelstam’s poetry long after the watershed of 1911, in the latter, Symbolism, distanced through Mandelstam’s own Acmeist “wanderings,” can function as a distinct aesthetic realm, the bountiful source of ever new and generative play.