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“As the Cupola to Empty Skies”: The Eternal Chronotope of Poetry in Mandelstam’s Восьмистихия (Octaves) Cycle

Osip Emilyevich Mandelstam (1891-1938), a Silver Age poet and member of the Acmeist movement, wrote his philosophical Восьмистихия (Octaves) over the course of 1932-1935, during the beginning of Stalin's Terror. The cycle consists of eleven poems, of which I shall closely examine the fifth, sixth, and seventh. In the course of these three poems, Mandelstam poses questions about the origins of art and the role of the poet. In the fifth poem, he presents a cosmogony depicting a scene of conception between a primordial feminine “nature” and a divine masculine “firmament,” who engender a stunted, meager child—the poet. In his next poem, Mandelstam discards this cosmogony and attempts to create another vision of an age before poetry. He concludes, however, that this mythological epoch is in fact already inscribed within poetry, even before the poetry is written. In his seventh poem, Mandelstam further develops the idea of poetry in the age before the poet, invoking old masters of art and thought. Through a careful reading of these three poems, I shall argue that Mandelstam ultimately claims a worldview in which poetry exists prior to the poet. This set of three poems within the cycle can be understood as the initial construction, subsequent deconstruction, and final reconstruction of the mythology of the poet, that is, of Mandelstam’s own self-mythology.

Mandelstam's fifth poem in the cycle depicts a highly sexualized scene in which nature is metonymically inseminated by the vault of heaven. One of their progeny is a недоразбіток (dwarfling), who strives to understand an abundant internal space. There exist two distinct bodies

1 Osip Mandel’shtam, Stikhovoreniya, perevody, ocherki, stat’i, 1990. All translations mine.
2 Ibid., 198
of space—that is, not the places of the poem or the locations in which the events of the poem take place, but precisely spaces as bodies, as players themselves within the world of the poem. Both are present in the first two lines:

Преодолев затверженность природы,
Голуботвердый глаз проник в ее закон,  

[Having negotiated nature's firmness,
The eye of the firmament enters her law:]

I identify nature (прирона) not only as the first body of space, but as the body that will account for the majority of space in this poem. She is both characteristically and grammatically feminine; despite her assertive status as the first body presented in the poem, she also first appears as an object. Her firmness (затверженность) is the object of the participle “преодолев” (having negotiated) in line one, and her metonymic law is the object of “проник” (enters) in line two. In these lines, nature is figured as a female entity with a sort of protective, epidermal layer—perhaps akin to the hymen of a virgin—that guards her inner space. By the poem’s second line, the “голуботвердый глаз” (the eye of the firmament) has successfully negotiated that layer of firmity and entered into her law. For the remaining six lines, it is the law of nature that governs the logic of the poem.

The second body of space is less explicit; it is the firmament, the “голубая твердь” (blue vault of heaven) encrypted within the portmanteau “голуботвердый” (bluefirm). Coining this word allows Mandelstam to masculinize an otherwise feminine term, since the adjective modifies masculine “глаз” [“eye”] and because the “firmness” within the “firmament” is more apparent, as “голуботвердый” is composed of the words for “blue” and “firm.” The action in these two lines is predetermined: even before the reader has reached the finite verb “проник”

3 Ibid.
(enters), there is already a correspondence between the two entities of nature and the eye of the heavenly vault. This is due to the presence of the same root, “firm” (тверд), in the words “затверженность” (firmity) and “голуботвердый” (firmament). Indeed, that “твердь” (the vast vault of the sky), the same word that marks the spaciousness of this body, is the word that limits its expanse, that casts it, or rather him, as hard, condensed, monolithic, and phallic. The first word of the poem, “преодолев” (having negotiated), of which this heavenly body is the grammatical subject and which so strongly indicates his conquest to master nature, is grammatically dependent on the poem’s first finite verb, “проник” (enters). Again Mandelstam suggests this quality of determinism, reinforcing the image of the hard firmament entering spacious nature. Since there is no pause between a participle and its governing finite verb, there is no break between overcoming nature’s first layer and penetrating her inner space.

The spatiality of the firmament as figured in line two is complex; how can one body comprised of infinite space enter another? How can we recognize the vastness of the firmament as the agent of the verb “проник” (enters)? Until now, we have been speaking synecdochically about the firmament; he himself does not act, but rather his eye does, which stands for him. On a strictly mimetic level, this eye represents the human body; on a figurative level, it suggests a divine surveillance that is all-seeing and all-knowing. Immediately representative of omniscience and the human body, the heavenly eye—or to render it differently, the hard blue eye—becomes a demiurge. Where at first glance the image presented in these two lines seems purely Hellenistic, a classic image of Chaos impregnating Earth—perhaps taken from Hesiod’s *Theogony* or adapted from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*—a closer consideration indicates the God of the Hebrew Bible as this demiurge.
The next two lines continue the sexual imagery begun in the first two, but they are not dominated by our earlier godly tension between vast spaciousness and phallic hardness, or by themes of mastery, penetration, and surveillance. Instead, we find a feminine, sensuous, earthly fertility:

В земной коре юродствуют породы,  
И как руда из груди рвется стон.  

[In the earthen crust, breeds jest,  
And like ore, a moan is rent from her breast.]

Here we see the first of the offspring created in the sexual encounter between nature and the firmament. The poem suddenly changes verbal tense; instead of the historic past tense of “проник” (rendered “enters,” but in fact “entered”), reminiscent of divine origin stories, we now see the fresher, more urgent present tense to describe the conception of breeds and races, and their foolery in the crust of the earth. The present tense also governs the erotic “moan” of the earth, perhaps as she receives the pierce of the firmament, or perhaps as she engenders these breeds of progeny in her earthen crust, which is figured as uterine or womb-like, as they jest within rather than upon it (“В земной коре...” [In the earthen crust...]). Mandelstam has twisted the metaphor in line four, where nature, already anthropomorphized and depicted as a woman, lets out a moan that is “как руда” (like ore), rent from her breast. The earthly metaphor of raw metal ore, layered on top of the womanly metaphor of a moan during sex, and then again layered on top of the representation of nature, re-inscribes several theme already introduced in line one, including: the spontaneity of the scene depicted, the utter lack of any art, and the absence of all human design.

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4 Ibid.
The first two lines of this poem are governed by masculine language, and the second two are written in feminine language, but taken together—as they must be—the first half of the poem is a mythological genesis of an age before the artist. In the second half of the poem, however, a figure resembling the first poet appears, perhaps born from nature’s raw, ore-like moan:

И тянется глухой недоразвиток,
Как бы дорогой, согнутою в рог, —

[And a deaf dwarfling pulls itself taut,
Like a road, curving towards the horn.]

The недоразвиток (dwarfling) is marked as a poet by his unique status in the poem. He is distinct from the other breeds presented in line three through his self-seriousness, which is demonstrated by his creative and metaphysical agency over his own actions. The reflexive verb “тянется” (pulls itself taut), which suggests a striving for something greater, stands out in stark contrast against the “юродствуют” (jest[ing]) of the other breeds born from nature. In fact, their “юродствуют” (jest[ing]) recalls the classic trope of the artless “юродивый” (holy fool) throughout centuries of Russian literature. The dwarfling’s pulling himself towards the “рог” (horn or bugle) is a symbol of his poetic or musical capacity, and it also recalls the satyrs of antiquity. The word “недоразвиток” (dwarfling) does, in fact, suggest a kind of half-man, a not-quite-fully-grown man, resembling a mythological satyr. It strongly recalls Evgeny Baratynsky’s poem “Недоносок” [“Premature”], which also pertains to the poet's relationship to the heavenly and earthly realms. This poem ends with an image of a prematurely born infant, an incarnation of the poet, who serves his time on earth without real existence (бытие) and flees to heaven.6 As in Baratynsky's poem, Mandelstam's dwarfling struggles with the burden of his poetic gift; with

5 Ibid.
some strain, he pulls himself toward a musical instrument. There is a tension between this proclivity towards music and poetry and the dwarfling’s deafness, which prevents him from hearing the music of others. This deafness—the internal suggestion that Mandelstam’s dwarfling is not influenced by the works or the tradition of his predecessors, delicately balances the external influence of Baratynsky’s premature child-poet on Mandelstam’s poem. Here we already see the beginnings of what will be Mandelstam’s final conclusion: this dwarfling represents the first poet, but “firstness” will ultimately give way to a cyclical conception of poetry, where the first poet is already inscribed within prior poetry.

The final lines of the poem reinforce the status of the dwarfling as the first poet. Here, it is important to return to our earlier discussion of spatial bodies, as the dwarfling’s reaching for a horn appears to take place inside the abundant space of nature:

Понять пространства внутренний избыток
И лепестка и купола залог.

[So as to understand spaces, the inner plenty,
And the petal's pledge, and the cupola's.]

The dwarfling is further set apart from his sibling breeds and races due not only to his reaching for a horn, but also his longing to understand his environment. The verb “понять” (to understand) is the true marker of a human mind in the midst of this fertile coupling of the natural and the divine. These final lines of the poem represent a certain vision of the creative process; the poet struggles to understand the space around him in all its plentitude—Mandelstam again reminds us that we have fully “entered” nature’s law with the word “внутренний” (inner)—and then the poet creates a mimesis, an image in the likeness of what he sees. The petal and the cupola are examples of these images, as the petal is created in the likeness of both nature and

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7 Mandel’shtam, 198.
other “breeds” engendered in the “earthen crust,” or the soil itself. The cupola is an artificial structure made both for the purpose of worshipping heaven and also specifically in the likeness of heaven. It is a symbol or a pledge (забот) both of man’s will to art and his awe of the vastness of what he must represent. In this way, the cupola is a perfect miniature of the tension discussed earlier, between the vast, expansive spatiality of the firmament and the solid, hard, and piercing connotations it has in this poem. Like the firmament, the cupola both represents the heavens and stands out in phallic relief against the vault of the sky.

We are left at the close of the fifth poem in the Восьмистишия (Octaves) cycle with this envisioning of the birth of poetry: the first poet is distinguished among his siblings, all of whom are hybrids of the earthly feminine and the divine masculine, and he begins to create art in the likeness of his habitat. The sixth poem, however, rejects this vision in favor of a more cyclical understanding of artistic creation. Like all the poems in Mandelstam’s cycle, these two poems are certainly in dialogue, if not layered upon one another; despite the total shift in conviction, much of the fifth poem’s form has been retained in the sixth in terms of overall structure, semantics, and even vocabulary. As a result, the sixth poem reads very much like a reimagining of the fifth. The first four lines of the sixth poem are as follows:

Когда, уничтожив набросок,
Ты держишь прилежно в уме
Период без тягостных сносок,
Единый во внутренней тьме, —

[When you’ve destroyed the drafts,
You keep fast in your mind
An age unburdened by footnotes,
United in its inner murk.]

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 199.
The structural similarities of the two poems are immediately clear: each poem begins with a participle and introduces its subject and finite verb only in the second line. Additionally, each poem maintains the same rhyme scheme, even down to the gender of the rhyme. Mandelstam is compelled, in each poem, to construct this mythic, fabled chronotope in order to depict the world prior to the poet. The first line of the sixth poem, however, works to destroy what has come before it, rather than to create anew. The drafts (набросок) of line one have two different meanings. On a figurative level, given the striking resemblance between the two poems, it appears that Mandelstam works to destroy his most recent “draft”—the origin of poetry described in the fifth poem. On a more literal level, these drafts or sketches are clues that the addressee of line two is a poet or writer, an artist of some kind. Mandelstam here introduces a tension that will dominate the poem as a whole: on one hand, we see a sharp distrust of the written word; while on the other hand, the very identity of the poem’s protagonist is established as a poet.

The injunction to “keep fast in your mind” in line two furthers this tension, as Mandelstam poses two questions here: Can a poet be a poet without writing poetry? Can you hold a poem “в уме” (in the mind) instead of on paper? Line two casts a peculiar doubt over the status of the rest of the poem: on one hand, the poem has been written, while, on the other hand, we are immersed in a world where pages are destroyed, or rather where work is kept inside the mind. The age without the burden of footnotes reiterates the image of a time prior to poetry. Curiously, in this poem, poetry or written art is figured as a “footnote” to the epoch, whereas in the previous poem, it was depicted as a likeness or a mimesis. The language used to describe this epoch, held fast in the mind of the addressed poet, displays an uncanny resemblance to the language used to describe the earlier poet-figure, the dwarfling. The repetition of the word
“внутренний” (inner) between the poems is notable; where it was used to describe a body of space in the fifth poem, it is used to describe a body of time in the sixth. The “внутренняя тьма” (inner murk) recalls the womb-like situation of the dwarfling and his sibling breeds within the earthen crust. Finally, the fact of this epoch’s being “united”\textsuperscript{10} within its inner darkness recalls the law of nature governing the birth of the poet. This epoch, unburdened by the written word, functions and exists according to its own internal logic. Poems are figured as footnotes which would, in contrast to the murky darkness within, clarify and explicate from outside—but would be entirely futile. Halfway through the poem, it would seem that the world presented does not need poetry.

The second half of the poem works well to reverse this notion, however, through a recycling of Mandelstam’s cupola metaphor, as seen in the following four lines:

И он лишь на собственной тяге,
Зажмурившись, держится сам —
Он так же отнесся к бумаге,
Как купол к пустым небесам.\textsuperscript{11}

[And it barely—by its own pull,
Squinting—keeps itself up;
It relates exactly to paper
As the cupola to empty skies.]

The abundance of reflexives in these lines is noteworthy. There are three reflexive verbs (“зажмурившись” [squinting], “держится,” [keeps itself up], “отнесся” [relates]), one pronoun (“сам” [itself]), one possessive (“собственной” [own]). These words portray the agency of the subject, in this case the “period” or the time unburdened by footnotes. This period of time is much like the stretching dwarfling—and indeed there are many of the same words and tropes at

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.,
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
work: “на собственной тяге” (by its own pull) recalls the verb “тянется” (pulls itself taut). The buildup of tension before the long dash at the end of line six is identical in each poem. This age has a will of its own, and yet the last two lines compare it to an artificial structure, the cupola. As previously mentioned, the cupola works doubly to represent the object of its worship (seen from within, a cupola is created in the likeness of the firmament) and to stand as a manmade object in its own right, or essentially as a work of art (seen from the outside, a cupola stands in relief against the sky). The period of time relates to paper as the cupola does to these empty skies: at once an homage to the page and inscribed upon it, the pre-poetry age appears to be a poem itself. Seen from within, that poem is created in the likeness of the blank page, which serves as the poem’s object of worship and representation—and indeed, this sixth poem in the cycle addresses the notion of blankness. Seen from without, the ink of the poem stands in stark relief against the white of the page, reinforcing the poem’s status as a product of human design.

Finally, the cyclical, time warp quality of this poem is further developed by the change in verbal tense in the seventh line. Mandelstam moves from “держится” (keeps itself up) to “отнесся” (relates) with only a dash to separate the two verbs. The age has already related to paper as the cupola to the skies, which is to say that it has already become a poem, by the time it “keeps itself up”—although by some calculus that mythic age must be millennia earlier. This impossible tension between the present and the past, where the events of the present occur contemporaneously with or earlier than those of the past, suggests that for Mandelstam, the poem is both already written and waiting to be written. The poem is born not from the coupling of heaven and earth, but rather from the poet, who, by writing in one discreet historical moment, taps into a certain chronotope of poetry.
The seventh poem in the cycle furthers this understanding of poetry, established in the
sixth poem, as something simultaneously always present and waiting to be written. Additionally,
Mandelstam situates the poet within a lineage of poets, artists, and thinkers. Finally, he
introduces a new key element—the role of the crowd—and integrates it into his inquiry. The
famous names mentioned in the first three lines come as a bit of a shock after the hazy, abstract
imagery of cupolas the fifth and sixth poems:

И Шуберт на воде, и Моцарт в птичьем гаме,
И Гёте, свищущий на выощейся тропе,
И Гамлет, мысливший пугливыми шагами,
Считали пульс толпы и верили толпе.12

[And Schubert on the water, and Mozart in the avian clamor,
And Goethe, whistling on the twisting path,
And Hamlet, having thought by fearful steps,
They took the crowd's pulse and they trusted the crowd.]

Whereas the beginning of the fifth poem introduces a mythical origin of poetry, and the sixth
poem begins with the demolition of poetry, the seventh poem immediately introduces the reader
to several recognizable figures who serve as an alternative source of inspiration within the poem.
By invoking these men and establishing them as players in the poem, Mandelstam inaugurates a
new creation myth and a better origin story. At this point in his life, these figures served as
certain symbols for Mandelstam: Mozart and Schubert, sharing one line of the poem, appear to
represent the ideal free spirit of the artist, while the figure of Goethe combines art with science.
Late in his artistic career, writing in defiance of Stalin and the Soviet state, Mandelstam foresaw
and feared his own tragic fate, emulating Shakespeare’s Hamlet. Even the positions assigned to
these renowned thinkers within these four lines are representative of the stages in a man’s life:
the womb-like water for Schubert leads to the adolescent rush of avian clamor for Mozart,

12 Ibid.
resulting in the path twisting through a fully-grown man’s life for Goethe, which leads toward Hamlet’s fearful thoughts on death. In the fifth poem, Mandelstam figured the poet to be a stunted being, a half-man, and in the sixth poem, he effaced that vision, opting for an understanding of poetry that does not require writing, only to conclude that poetry is necessarily written. Here, in a gesture to the mythical, resurrected phoenix, Mandelstam revives the poet—himself—from the ashes of his previously destroyed drafts, and grounds himself in a lineage with Schubert, Mozart, Goethe, and Hamlet.

Mandelstam concludes the poem beautifully, with two metaphors concerning the paradox of poetry-before-the-poet, and an enigmatic statement for his final construction of the eternal poetic chronotope. Interestingly, he also introduces a first-person plural pronoun at the end of this poem, which is the only explicit self-implication in the whole cycle of poems.

Быть может, прежде губ уже родился шепот
И в бездеревности кружили листы,
И те, кому мы посвящаем опыт,
До опыта приобрели черты.¹³

[Maybe, before the lips, a whisper was already born
And leaves whirled in woodlessness,
And those to whom we dedicate our experience
Gained features before experience themselves.]

The final reference to the birth metaphors of earlier poems appears in the seventh poem as a whisper “born” before lips. In referencing the earlier genesis scene of the fifth poem, Mandelstam effectively rejects it once and for all. In the fifth poem, the earthly mother necessarily appeared prior to the dwarfling’s mimetic creation, whereas here, the poem “maybe” comes before the poet’s lips to speak it. The obscure entities referred to by the line “those to whom we dedicate our experience” appear to be works of art. Again we see a twist of verbal

¹³ Ibid., 199.
tense, staying in accordance with the argument of the poem; the artworks have already gained their distinguishing features before the artists create them. The act of dedicating experience is the act of creating art—but in this final envisioning, Mandelstam does not create art from nothing, or by imitating his natural environment. He instead immerses himself in a tradition of poets and artists, simultaneously working with the artifacts of a long history of human thought. For Mandelstam, the poet is metaphysically subservient to his predecessors and the products of his own endeavors, i.e., his own poems.

In these three poems of the Восьмистишия (Octaves) cycle, Mandelstam begins by proposing an origin of poetry born from the image of masculine, phallic, and godly figure of the firmament impregnating the sensuous, earthly, and feminine figure of nature—and the subsequent birth of the poet, one of their offspring. He later rejects this vision for another mythic chronotope, as he tries to imagine a time before the written word, but he concludes that this period of time is already inscribed within poetry. Finally, he develops this eternal poetic chronotope, establishing the poet as a member of a tradition of artists and thinkers who are servants to their own work while trusting in their audience. Linked closely to Mandelstam's cycling through visions of the genesis of poetry is the recycling of certain words and images. The cupola stands out as a particularly important metaphor since Mandelstam does not discard it. Erect throughout the creation, demolition, and resuscitation of this poetic chronotope—at once a testament to man's artistic creation and insignificant against the expanse of the firmament—this monumental image of the cupola is an ideal metaphor for the power of Mandelstam's own dense, yet expansive verse.
Works Cited


Appendix

Восьмистишия (Octaves) V-VII
(Translations my own)

V.
Преодолев затверженность природы,
Голуботвердый глаз проник в ее закон,
В земной коре юродствуют породы,
И как руда из груди рвется стон.
И тянется глухой недоразвиток,
Как бы дорогой, согнутою в рог, —
Понять пространства внутренний избыток
И лепестка и купола залог.

Having negotiated nature's firmity,
The eye of the firmament enters her law:
In the earthen crust, breeds jest,
And like ore, a moan is rent from her breast.
And a deaf dwarfling pulls itself taut,
Like a road, curving towards the horn,
So as to understand spaces, the inner plenty,
And the petal's pledge, and the cupola's.

VI.
Когда, уничтожив набросок,
Ты держишь прилежно в уме
Период без тягостных сносок,
Единый во внутренней тьме, —
И он лишь на собственной тяге,
Зажмурившись, держится сам —
Он так же отнесся к бумаге,
Как купол к пустым небесам.

When you've destroyed the drafts,
You keep fast in your mind
An age unburdened by footnotes,
United in its inner murk,
And it barely—by its own pull,
Squinting—keeps itself up;
It relates exactly to paper
As the cupola to empty skies.
ВII.
И Шуберт на воде, и Моцарт в птичьем гаме,
И Гёте, свищущий на вьющейся тропе,
И Гамлет, мысливший пугливыми шагами,
Считали пульс толпы и верили толпе.
Быть может, прежде губ уже родился шопот
И в бездревесности кружились листы,
И те, кому мы посвящаем опыт,
До опыта приобрели черты.

And Schubert on the water, and Mozart in the avian clamor,
And Goethe, whistling on the twisting path,
And Hamlet, having thought by fearful steps,
They took the crowd's pulse and they trusted the crowd.
Maybe, before the lips, a whisper was already born
And leaves whirled in woodlessness,
And those to whom we dedicate our experience
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