

The Science of Poetry: Poetic Process as Evolution in Mandel'shtam's "Conversation about Dante"

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The future of Dante criticism belongs to the natural sciences when they will have achieved a sufficient degree of refinement and developed their capacity for thinking in images.

—Osip Mandel'shtam, "Conversation about Dante"

The proper METHOD for studying poetry and good letters is the method of contemporary biologists, that is careful first-hand examination of the matter, and continual COMPARISON of one "slide" or specimen with another.

—Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading*

A Case for Grafting: The Place of Science in Contemporary Literary Criticism.

The promise of cooperation between science and literature expressed in the above epigraphs and what it holds for literary scholarship, above all, implies the initial distance separating the two, the nature of which depends on our definitions of each. The origin of this separation stretches as far back as the coinage of the term *scientist* in the 1830s. The *Oxford English Dictionary* states that science is "often treated as synonymous with 'Natural and Physical Science,' and thus restricted to those branches of study that relate to the phenomena of the material universe and their laws."¹ Literature, and, more generally, the humanities, which the *OED* defines as "the branch of learning concerned with human culture," are clearly excluded from this mix.² The incompatibility of the two bodies of knowledge has been most loudly asserted by C. P. Snow, who, in his now famous Rede Lecture of 1959, proclaimed that "a gulf of mutual incomprehension . . . , hostility and dislike, but most of all lack of understanding" between "the two cultures" is the unfortunate status quo.³

The blame for the lack of dialogue, Snow believed, lay squarely with the contemporary literary establishment, which, represented by the likes of T. S.

The epigraphs are from Osip Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," in *The Complete Critical Prose and Letters*, ed. Jane Gary Harris, trans. Jane Gary Harris and Constance Link (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1979; hereafter *CCPL*), 411, and Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York, 1960), 17, respectively. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own; I indicate where I have amended others' translations.

1. "Science, n." entry 5b., *OED Online*, at www.oed.com/view/Entry/172672?redirectedFrom=science& (last accessed 5 February 2014).

2. "Humanity, n." entry 2b., *OED Online*, at www.oed.com/view/Entry/89280?redirectedFrom=humanities (last accessed 5 February 2014).

3. C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge, Eng., 1993), 4. It is hard to overestimate the significance of Snow's lecture for the continuing relationship between science and literature, at least within the English-speaking academy, but its analysis is outside the scope of this paper.

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Eliot, W. B. Yeats, and Ezra Pound, he dismissed as a moral *arrière-garde*. The positivist pathos with which Snow registered the nadir in the relationship between scientific and literary establishments, as well as the rigidity of his definitions, might be seen today as, in the critic Stefan Collini's words, "an irrelevant anachronism."⁴ Yet, what perhaps might begin to explain the status of Snow's lecture as a foundational text for contemporary discussions of the interconnections between science and literature—most studies on the subject, this one included, begin with at least an honorary, if reluctant, nod to Snow—is not only that it inverts the Platonic hierarchy of spirit over matter, while preserving it, but that it ascribes to matter and, subsequently, its study, political and moral significance.⁵ It is through science that, according to Snow, its practitioners emerge as ultimate "realists," conscious that "the individual condition is tragic"—yet and because of it, intent on working to improve the condition of all.⁶

While the view that the difference between science and the humanities is the same as that between physical reality and metaphysics has been continuously and mercilessly debunked, Snow's argument that the two cultures lack a much-needed relationship as well as the implication of literature's irrelevance made half a century ago remains in the "present perfect." It is, unsurprisingly, literary studies, the branch of scholarship most often appointed the job of justifying the relevance of reading and studying literature, that finds itself most affected by this. Today, the influence of Snow's reproach to literature's inapplicability to the modern world's problems can be perceived through the not altogether convincing attempts of literary Darwinists to provide literature with a much-needed legitimacy by marrying it to evolutionary theory. What is at stake in such ventures is undeniably, as the critic Jonathan Kramnick argues, a question of value: "Whereas the rest of literary study has grown to suspect the value of literature for living, literary Darwinism understands that 'art is a human adaptation . . . established throughout the species because it has been selected as a behavior for the advantages it offers in terms of survival and reproduction.'"⁷

If literary Darwinism seeks to secure literature's (and its own) survival with a positivist—and now nativist—function by arguing for its necessity in human phylogeny, an opposite approach attempts to investigate the distance between the literary and the scientific by treating science as text, reinscribing it as a historically contextualized discursive practice.⁸ By focusing on "the

4. Stefan Collini, introduction to Snow, *The Two Cultures*, liv.

5. For other studies on this subject which begin with reference to Snow, see, for example, Charlotte Sleight, *Literature and Science* (Hampshire, Eng., 2011); Philip Coleman, ed., *On Literature and Science: Essays, Reflections, Provocations* (Dublin, 2007); Sharon Ruston, ed., *Literature and Science* (Suffolk, 2008); and Robert Crawford, ed., *Contemporary Poetry and Contemporary Science* (Oxford, 2006).

6. Snow, *The Two Cultures*, 6.

7. Jonathan Kramnick, "Against Literary Darwinism," *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 2 (Winter 2011): 315–47. The quotation within the text is from Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009), 81.

8. See James J. Bono "Science, Discourse, and Literature: The Role/Rule of Metaphor in Science," in Stuart Peterfreund, ed., *Literature and Science: Theory & Practice* (Boston, 1990), 59–89.

textuality of scientific discourse and the metaphoricity of the languages of science,” such approaches aim to problematize further the definitions of the *literary* and the *scientific*.⁹ While this line of inquiry investigates scientific language’s rhetorical properties, another focuses on (mis)appropriation of scientific methods and metaphors in literature. Hence, studies like Gillian Beer’s *Darwin’s Plots* constructively probe the interpenetrability of scientific and literary discourses through the analysis of how scientific modes of thinking in language have been “assimilated and resisted by [Victorian] novelists.”¹⁰

Predictably, on closer examination it is the poetics of those very modernists dismissed by Snow that was influenced most by contemporary scientific discourse.¹¹ As the critic Daniel Albright shows, in their aesthetic theories as well as practice, Eliot, Yeats, and Pound relied on the *pseudomorphism* (a term Albright borrows from Theodor W. Adorno) between physics and poetry.¹² Behind the modernists’ fascination with modern science, as Albright writes about Pound, stood a belief that, broken down to their elemental particles, “the arts and the sciences all draw together . . . : at the hypothetical limit, at the very quick of epistemology, there is convergence of speech, picture, song, and instigating force.”¹³

The two lines of inquiry in contemporary literary studies that could perhaps be broadly categorized as “science as literature” and “science in literature” merge in the theoretical writings of yet another modernist poet, Osip Mandel’shtam. While in his essay on Dante Alighieri’s *Divina Commedia*, “Conversation about Dante” (1933), Mandel’shtam makes use of the methods of natural science in developing a complex theory of the poetic process, in his travelogue, “Journey to Armenia” (1933), as well as various shorter pieces accompanying it, he treats the prose of such naturalists as Charles Darwin, Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, Peter Simon Pallas, and Carl Linnaeus as an aesthetic document. This crossing (скрещивание, to use Mandel’shtam’s own term, which he borrows from the natural sciences) of the literary and the scientific modes of perception can be viewed as an exemplary case of what Beer calls “transformation rather than translation” in the relationship between the two discourses.¹⁴ Moreover, having “achieved a sufficient degree of refinement and developed their capacity for thinking in images,” Mandel’shtam’s reading of Dante, making productive use of scientific theories, can be seen as a template for literary scholarship trying to bridge the gap between scientific and literary discourses.

In the “Conversation” Mandel’shtam advances a view in which natural science does not stand in opposition to literature, and poetry in particular, but endows it with a political and ontological sovereignty. Adopting the method

9. Bono, “Science, Discourse, and Literature,” 60.

10. Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Boston, 1983), 2.

11. See Daniel Albright, *Quantum Poetics: Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and the Science of Modernism* (Cambridge, Eng., 1997).

12. Albright, *Quantum Poetics*, 2.

13. *Ibid.*, 9.

14. Gillian Beer, “Translation or Transformation? The Relations of Science and Literature,” *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London* 44, no. 1 (January 1990): 81.

of analysis he discovers in his readings of natural scientists, Mandel'shtam is able to theorize the poetic process as a dialogue between author and reader in which cultural kinship between its participants is established as a break within their individuality and a recognition of the authority of the "poetic impulse" or "instinct." In turn, envisioning the poetic process as a dialogue that paradoxically suspends and transcends the individuality of its participants allows Mandel'shtam simultaneously to insist on the necessity of submission to the authority of the poetic message and to endow poetry with political autonomy. This article investigates the role of the natural sciences in Mandel'shtam's conceptualization of the poetic process. Ultimately, I argue, the latter would not be possible without the former.

A Case for Isomorphism: Poetry and Nature

Mandel'shtam's insistence throughout the "Conversation" that only the tools of contemporary science are able to reveal the full complexity of Dante's poetry comes from the special position of absolute sovereignty that poetry holds in relation to nature, declared in the opening thrust of the essay: "Poetry is not a part of nature, not even its best or choicest part, let alone a reflection of it . . . ; rather, poetry establishes itself with astonishing independence in a new extra-spatial field of action, not so much narrating as acting out nature by means of its arsenal of devices, commonly known as tropes."¹⁵

Mandel'shtam negates the possibility of mimesis between poetry and nature. Poetry doesn't repeat nature, nor is it its sublimation in language; poetry "performs" nature. Since poetry is structurally equivalent—or, to use Iurii Levin's useful term, *isomorphic*—to nature, it requires a new method of understanding, a set of tools that allow us to perceive its activity.¹⁶ By arguing for poetry's distinction from any other discourse and by insisting on poetry's ontological equivalence to nature, Mandel'shtam anticipates the existence of two parallel modes of analysis through which we perceive the activity of each. As is to be expected, contemporary literary criticism, against which Mandel'shtam directs much of the essay's polemic, is unable to grasp poetry's unique activity. If, however, literary criticism testifies only to what Mandel'shtam calls, in his 1925 essay "The Lunge," monstrous "poetic illiteracy," comparing the average Soviet critic's vision of Aleksandr Pushkin to reality refracted through a fish's eye, scientific discourse can do a much better job in regard to nature.¹⁷ Mandel'shtam's solution to the insufficiency of literary criticism (which seeks

15. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 397. Here we can see the re-imagining of Kazimir Malevich's suprematist impulse that similarly announces the liberation of art from nature, which Mandel'shtam initially rejects in "The Word and Culture" (1921) as a destruction of form.

16. See Iu. I. Levin, "Zametki k 'Razgovoru o Dante,'" in his *Izbrannye trudy: Poetika, Semiotika* (Moscow, 1998), 142–53.

17. Mandelstam, "The Slump," in *CCPL*, 204. Constance Link inaccurately translates the title of the article as "The Slump." As shown below, the comparison of the critic's eye to that of a fish is not only about distortion; it carries an additional sting by suggesting that critic's low evolutionary stance. The eye as an organ plays a crucial role in Henri Bergson's discussion of evolutionary theories.

to “describe the very thing that cannot be described, i.e. nature’s text brought to a standstill”), is to cross it with contemporary scientific discourse, such as that of medicine, physics, geology, or crystallography.¹⁸ “Conversation” is full of appeals to read poetry through the lens of contemporary science: the new literary criticism advocated by Mandel’shtam must recognize poetry’s isomorphic relationship with nature and embrace scientific analysis.¹⁹ Only then does it have the possibility of perceiving poetry’s specificity and uniqueness. As Elena Glazov-Corrigan writes, “The possibility of approaching reading as an organic process, that is, as the material of physiology, a science . . . was for Mandel’shtam an invaluable insight, a personal celebration.”²⁰ Literary criticism must learn from what Mandel’shtam calls “the method of living medicine.”²¹

“Conversation” is strewn with examples of the hybrid of literary and scientific analysis being defined as the instrument of amplification and penetration necessary for the proper understanding of the poetic process. Here is Mandel’shtam’s appeal to medicine: “A scientific description of Dante’s *Commedia*, taken as a flow, as a current, would inevitably assume the look of a treatise on metamorphoses, and would aspire to penetrate the multitudinous states of poetic matter, just as a doctor in making his diagnosis listens to the multitudinous unity of the organism.”²² Just like medicine, crystallography as a method must be brought into the study of Dante: “O poetry, envy crystallography, bite your nails in anger and impotence! For it is recognized that the mathematical formulas necessary for describing crystal formation are not derivable from three-dimensional space. You are denied even that element of respect which any piece of mineral crystal enjoys.”²³ And here is Mandel’shtam on physics: “It is terrifying to think that the blinding explosions of contemporary physics and kinetics were used 600 years before their thunder sounded. Indeed, words do not suffice to brand the shameful, barbarous indifference shown toward them by the pitiful compositors of clichéd thought.”²⁴

While the sheer abundance of these examples in “Conversation” gives a clear sense of the significance of science in general for Mandel’shtam’s method of commentary on Dante’s poetic process, the natural sciences in particular play a special role in the articulation of his views on poetry. The importance of the natural sciences for Mandel’shtam can be seen in their major presence in “Journey to Armenia,” as well as the number of articles surrounding this work, in which, as the critic Nancy Pollak writes, “Mandelstam indicates a relation between the naturalist’s eye and his ‘poetics.’”²⁵ Mandel’shtam states so directly in “Conversation”: “The future of Dante criticism belongs to the natural

18. Mandelstam, “Conversation about Dante,” 434.

19. Similarly, the poem is written “no longer by a poetic but by a geological intelligence.” *Ibid.*, 425.

20. Elena Glazov-Corrigan, *Mandel’shtam’s Poetics: A Challenge to Postmodernism* (Toronto, 2000), 63.

21. Mandelstam, “Conversation about Dante,” 408.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*, 422.

24. *Ibid.*, 433.

25. Nancy Pollak, *Mandelstam the Reader* (Baltimore, 1995), 17.

sciences when they will have achieved a sufficient degree of refinement and developed their capacity for thinking in images.”²⁶ As elsewhere in “Conversation,” here Mandel’shtam stays true to the figure of the crossing, proposing a hybridization of scientific and literary imaginations. Not surprisingly, this is precisely what he finds in the naturalists’ writings. If Dante is a poet whose insights forerun contemporary scientific discoveries, in Mandel’shtam’s reading, the naturalists appear as scientists with truly artistic sensibilities.

While Mandel’shtam’s attitude toward the naturalists has been explored in criticism, the role that his interpretation of their work plays in the development of his theory of the poetic process in “Conversation” has not received the attention it deserves. Outside the context of the “Conversation,” the most common way of dealing with Mandel’shtam’s treatment of the naturalists is to split them into two opposing camps, headed by Lamarck (whom Mandel’shtam embraces) and Darwin (whom he rejects).²⁷ Yet, as is evident from “Conversation” (and if, as Levin argues, characterizations of Dante’s poetic process in large measure reflect Mandel’shtam’s own), such rigid and stable positioning is foreign to Mandel’shtam’s poetics, which passionately rejects static symbolization. What is significant here in Mandel’shtam’s reading of the naturalists is not his preference of one naturalist over another but that in their writings he designates a particular mode of thinking directed at gaining insight into nature’s complex and systematic processes and adopts it in developing his concept of poetry.

My approach to Mandel’shtam’s treatment of the naturalists is closest to the one articulated by Glazov-Corrigan, who, in her monograph on Mandel’shtam’s theoretical writings (which to my knowledge contains the single most sustained reading of “Conversation”), puts forth a view that transcends this duality and regards the scientific method of apprehension as complementary to the poetic one. Glazov-Corrigan understands Darwin as Mandel’shtam’s “co-traveller” for part of their journeys but ultimately stresses the limitations of science.²⁸ “Poetry,” writes Glazov-Corrigan, “supersedes Darwin.”²⁹ There is no question that poetry—especially the *Divine Comedy*, the reading of which was, for Mandel’shtam, akin to “adoration and initiation,” according to his wife—is incompatible with Darwin’s writings.³⁰ Rather than seeing Mandel’shtam and the naturalists as engaged in the same project (as Glazov-Corrigan’s “co-travellers”), I view their relationship as one of adaptation. Mandel’shtam inherits from the naturalists a method of perception, which he in turn, adding to it a “sufficient degree of refinement,” adopts to investigate

26. Mandelstam, “Conversation about Dante,” 411.

27. See Hilary L. Fink, *Bergson and Russian Modernism, 1900–1930* (Evanston, 1999), 64–77; Boris Gasparov, “Lamarck, Shelling, Marr: Stikhotvorenii ‘Lamarck’ v kontekste ‘perelomnoi epokhi,’” in his *Literaturnye leitmotivy: Ocherki russkoi literatury XX veka* (Moscow, 1994); and Il’ia Serman, “Osip Mandel’shtam v nachale 1930-kh godov (Biologiya i poeziya),” in Robin Aizlewood and Diana Myers, eds., *Stoletie Mandel’shtama: Materialy simpoziuma* (Tenafly, N.J., 1994).

28. See Glazov-Corrigan, *Mandel’shtam’s Poetics*, 92–99.

29. *Ibid.*, 97.

30. Nadezhda Mandel’shtam, *Vtoraiia kniga*, ed. M. K. Polivanova (Moscow, 1990), 202.

the nature of the poetic process. As I show below, Mandel'shtam discovers the roots of a "physiology of reading," one necessary for the understanding of Dante (but that also he ascribes to Dante), in the writing of the naturalists, which in his interpretation appears as another figure of hybridization—an artistic practice of scientific description. Moreover, it is the naturalists' evolutionary principles, put through the crucible of Henri Bergson's *L'Évolution créatrice*, that provide Mandel'shtam with a framework in which the poetic process is seen as a dialogue that transcends individual personality. The naturalists' interpretations of organic processes—especially Lamarck's and Darwin's—allow Mandel'shtam to theorize the dialogic impulse in poetry as that which simultaneously requires its participants' submission and establishes kinship between them. The poetic process, for Mandel'shtam, is generated not by an individual's linguistic artistry but something that far surpasses it, what Mandel'shtam, following Bergson and the naturalists, calls *form-creating pulsion* (формообразующая тяга), *impulse* (порыв), and *instinct*.

A Case for Adaptation: Reading the Naturalists Reading the World

From his articles of 1920s to his theoretical works of the 1930s, Mandel'shtam's attitude toward contemporary natural science varied greatly. In his 1922 essay "On the Nature of the Word," he warns of the dangers that supporters of evolutionary theory in literature bring to its study:

A science based on the principle of connection rather than causality saves us from the bad infinity of evolutionary theory, not to mention its vulgarized corollary—the theory of progress. . . .

The theory of evolution is particularly dangerous for literature, but the theory of progress is nothing short of suicidal. If one listens to literary historians who defend evolutionism, it would appear that writers think only about how to clear the road for their successors, but never about how to accomplish their own tasks.³¹

Even though evolutionary theory, at least its Darwinian brand, stands in direct opposition to progress and implies neither determinism nor causality, least of all one that leads toward a general improvement of the status quo, for Mandel'shtam the difference here is only in degree, not in kind: evolution is dangerous; progress is murderous. In the same article, Mandel'shtam proceeds to discuss the process of literary development in which the amount of loss matches the gains—an idea that ironically stands in full concordance with Darwin's belief that, as Beer puts it, "evolutionary theory emphasized extinction and annihilation equally with transformation."³² In his criticism of the 1930s, however, Mandel'shtam's understanding of evolution underwent—under Bergson's influence—a considerable change.³³

31. Mandelstam, "On the Nature of the Word," in *CCPL*, 118–19.

32. Gillian Beer, introduction to *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, Eng., 2009), 15.

33. For Russian cultural life at the beginning of the twentieth century, Bergson's treatise on evolution, *L'Évolution créatrice* (1907), was the single most popular metaphysical text that elaborated on the significance of various theories of natural selection, at the

Bergson's critique of the mechanistic and rational view of evolution combines a reworking of both Darwinism and Lamarckism. Without rejecting either theory outright, Bergson declares that any scientific theory can by definition only shine light on the specific and limited aspect of human existence—existence uncontainable by any objectification, since its being is located in the realm of real time, or *la durée*. Bergson disagrees with Darwinists and neo-Darwinists, who attempted to synthesize Darwinism with genetics, on the issue of accidental and individual variation between living forms. He also rejects as mechanistic Darwin's hypothesis on the influence of external circumstances on evolution. On the other hand, he agrees with neo-Darwinists that "the essential causes of variation are the differences inherent in the germ borne by the individual, and not the experiences or behavior of the individual in the course of his career."³⁴ At the same time, while arguing together with neo-Lamarckians for a psychological cause of evolutionary change, Bergson sees their emphasis on the conscious effort of the individual as limiting. Crossing neo-Darwinism with neo-Lamarckism, Bergson puts forward a concept of "an *original impetus* of life," common to all life forms, "passing from one generation of germs to the following generation of germs through the developed organisms which bridge the interval between the generations."³⁵ For Bergson, this all-sustaining life force becomes the sought-for source guiding the evolutionary process. Bergson's theory, in which both self-preservation and self-creation are two equally important factors that move the evolution of living forms forward, manages to account for the inability of individual life forms to affect evolutionary processes (Darwinism) and at the same time salvages the notion of creative adaptation to the outside environment (Lamarckism).

Developing his own views on natural selection in his writings of the 1930s, Mandel'shtam closely follows the Bergsonian evolutionary model but shifts the focus from validating or denying the claims of evolutionary theory to the investigation of a particular mode of analysis that has the capacity to classify and synthesize organic life. In the process Mandel'shtam adds to Bergson's model two interrelated components that become crucial for the conceptualization of the poetic process in "Conversation."

The first is the assertion of isomorphism between nature and culture, and, as in "Conversation," poetry in particular. Writing about the naturalists, Mandel'shtam performs a quiet but important revolution, as a result of which the idea of evolutionary transformation is transferred from nature to the naturalists. Therefore, the object of Mandel'shtam's analysis is not evolu-

same time providing its readers with a broad philosophical frame. As the historian Alexander Vucinich writes, the book "combined a sensitivity for philosophical nuance with a broad understanding—and a firsthand study—of the theoretical intricacies of modern biology." Alexander Vucinich, *Darwin in Russian Thought* (Berkeley, 1988), 253. Bergson's ideas had a tremendous conceptual and thematic influence on Russian modernism in general and on Mandel'shtam in particular. Hilary L. Fink, in her study of Bergson's influence on Russian modernism, proposes that Mandel'shtam was exposed to Bergsonian philosophy while he studied in Paris in 1907–08, when Bergson's book on evolution appeared. Fink, *Bergson and Russian Modernism*, 64.

34. Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York, 1911), 85.

35. *Ibid.*, 87. Emphasis in the original.

tion as seen through the naturalists' writings but the evolution of their prose, and what Mandel'shtam is out to find is the principle of change within the writing style:

The natural scientist is not free to select his own writing style, nor does he find it ready-made. Every scientific mode requires its own unique method of organizing scientific material. Its formal aspect always supports a particular ideology and its attendant goals. The problem of a scientific literary form is especially evident in the natural sciences which have always served as an ideological battleground during times of crisis. Only after we have thoroughly studied the history of people's attitudes towards nature will we understand the laws governing the changes in the literary style of natural science.³⁶

The naturalists' writings are, first of all, a literary fact of their epoch, and, as Mandel'shtam states, their variations in style are conditioned by that epoch's ideological and political climate. Hence, Pallas is the miniaturist of the late eighteenth century, practicing "the imperial feudal art of miniature painting"; Lamarck and Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, are deists of the French revolutionary era who introduce into their style "a civic, revolutionary, and publicist rhetoric"; and Darwin is a nineteenth-century prose writer akin to Charles Dickens, purging "the scientific language . . . of bombast, rhetoric, and teleological pathos" and writing against "the didactic, sentimental, bittersweet literature that Dickens's predecessors had stuffed down [the reader's] throat."³⁷

The adaptation of the naturalists' method of analysis to the study of their own prose allows Mandel'shtam to treat their texts as aesthetic objects whose form clearly dominates over content: "To ignore the formal side of scientific writing is just as incorrect as ignoring the content of literary works, for the elements of art are present in both."³⁸ To explain the transformation of form, Mandel'shtam transplants the naturalists' descriptions of the organic world into his description of their prose, injecting his analysis with organist metaphors. The organ most instrumental in the shaping the particularity of the naturalists' writings is the eye, which, like fauna, adapts to its environment: "The eye of the naturalist, like the eye of a predatory bird, acquired the capacity for accommodation. It might be turned into military binoculars equipped for the most distant vision, or, just as quickly into a jeweler's magnifying glass."³⁹ Lamarck "cried his eyes out over his magnifying glass."⁴⁰ "The naturalist's eye is as much an instrument of his thought as is his literary style."⁴¹ And "of course, a *naturalist's style* is one of the keys to understanding his *world view*, just as his *eye*, his manner of seeing is the key to his methodology."⁴² To appreciate Mandel'shtam's method here, it is important to remember that in

36. Mandelstam, "On the Naturalists," in *CCPL*, 330.

37. *Ibid.*, 332–35.

38. *Ibid.*, 335.

39. Mandelstam, "Darwin's Literary Style," in *CCPL*, 342.

40. Mandelstam, "Journey to Armenia," in *CCPL*, 367.

41. Mandelstam, "On the Naturalists," 335. Translation amended.

42. Osip Mandel'shtam, "Zapisnaia knizhka (Zametki o naturalistakh)," *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v trekh tomakh* (Moscow, 2011; hereafter *PSS*), 3:322. Emphasis added.

L'Évolution créatrice Bergson arrives at the theoretical necessity of vitalism by focusing on the eye and through an analysis and a consequent rejection of different evolutionary theories that explain its development across species, from mollusks to humans.⁴³ The analysis of how the naturalists' vision determines their writing affects the reading process as well: "Reading the taxonomists . . . has a marvelous effect on your disposition; it straightens out the eye."⁴⁴ And so it should, since here, as in "Conversation," for Mandel'shtam the writing and reading processes merge with each other: "What is most remarkable and instructive in Darwin for all the writers is his concern to *read* in facts, in natural series."⁴⁵

To reveal the artistic measure of the naturalists' prose, Mandel'shtam borrows from them the concept of instinct. Just as Darwin focuses on the instinct of animals and insects, Mandel'shtam is interested in the form-shaping instinct of the naturalists. Mandel'shtam's adoption of instinct as a concept that explains the naturalists' artistry helps him establish a crucial parallel between their writing and the artistic practice in general and which in "Conversation" he develops into the theory of Dante's poetic practice: "I have in mind the instinct of selection, of hybridization and selection of facts, which comes to the scientific proof's help and creates an environment congenial for generalizations."⁴⁶ Darwin's scientific method coincides with Dante's poetic one, as Mandel'shtam announces the instinct of selection that drives the scientist's prose to perform the same function as the law responsible for the selection of artistic material: "In search of diverse anchor points he creates real, heterogeneous series, i.e., he forms groups of distinctions, contrasts, various colors. He extends coordinates from example to example, into the depth and width, working with the help of the genuine selection of material."⁴⁷ "Here," then, "the demands of science happily correspond to one of the most fundamental aesthetic laws. I have in mind the law of heterogeneity which encourages the artist to seek to unite in one form the greatest number of different sounds, concepts of various origins, and even antithetical images."⁴⁸ All the elements composing the poetic process in "Conversation," such as hybridization of the heterogeneous and, most important, antithetical images but also

43. It's no coincidence that the essay "On the Naturalists" contains a fantasy of looking at nature through the eyes of a butterfly: "And suddenly I caught myself madly wishing to have a look at nature through the painted eyes of that monster." Mandel'shtam, "On the Naturalists," 367. The hidden context of comparing the inept critic's eye to that of a fish also becomes apparent here.

44. Mandel'shtam, "Journey to Armenia," 366.

45. *Ibid.*, 323. Emphasis added.

46. Osip Mandel'shtam, "K probleme nauchnogo stilia Darvina (Iz zapisnoi knizhki pisatel'ia)," *PSS*, 3:270.

47. *Ibid.*, 3:272. If, next to the discussion of Lamarck's eye, Mandel'shtam "exposes the device," pointing to the source of his borrowing the desire to see the world through the eyes of a butterfly, next to his discussion of Darwin's scientific method he places an excerpt from Darwin's writings in which the latter explains the mutation of instincts through the process of evolutionary selection: "I will select only three . . . : the instinct which leads the cuckoo to lay her eggs in other birds' nests; the slave-making instinct of certain ants; and the comb-making power of the hive-bee." *PSS*, 3:272.

48. Mandel'shtam, "Darwin's Literary Style," 341.

the crucial submission of the naturalist and the poet to the law that governs the writing are present here.⁴⁹ While here Mandel'shtam transfers the concept of instinct from the naturalists' writings to his analysis of their own practice, in "Conversation" it becomes the driving force of the poetic process. Darwin's theorized selection instinct allows the naturalist to put together different constellations of meaning: "The ebb and flow of scientific truth, like the rhythm of a fairytale, animates each chapter and subsection. Darwin's scientific examples acquire significance only in the light of universal experience."⁵⁰ The undulating motion created by Darwin's process of natural selection is strikingly similar here to the one Mandel'shtam ascribes to Dante and which he himself practices in "Conversation."

Therefore, the main drive of Mandel'shtam's writings on the naturalists is to conceptualize what can be described as a *physiology of writing*, from which there is but half a step to what he terms the *physiology of reading*: "The physiology of reading still remains to be studied. Moreover, this subject differs radically from bibliography, and must be related to the organic phenomena of nature."⁵¹ Mandel'shtam does this by interpreting the naturalists' scientific discourse as artistic discourse but also by adapting their methods of interpreting and classifying the organic world to his analysis of their own writings. This allows for the possibility of what Mandel'shtam calls "organic thinking," necessary in order for us to "come close to the mysteries of organic life."⁵² Vision and instinct are required if one seeks to penetrate the mysteries of life; the possession of both unites the naturalists with Dante.⁵³ Just like the naturalists, who are able to understand the hidden processes governing organic life, Dante's comparisons penetrate the surface: they are not descriptive, argues Mandel'shtam, but "always pursue the concrete task of presenting the inner form of the poem's structure or driving force [тяги]."⁵⁴ The trope of vertical mobility becomes relevant here not for the hierarchical evaluation of Dante's journey from hell to heaven but precisely in the ascription of discursive matter's powers of penetration to his poetry. Notably, this vertical prowess corresponds to the one described in the poem "Lamarck" (1932), in which the speaker follows Lamarck, acting here in Virgil's role, in an agile descent (see, by way of comparison, Dante's agility) to the elementary levels of existence, where the processes that cease to be visible on the higher rungs of the evolutionary ladder can be still observed. It is at the very bottom of this ladder that the speaker is able to witness the synesthetic and heterogeneous coexistence

49. While I agree with Levin that for Mandel'shtam's vision of (poetic) nature's processes, struggle and dynamism are necessary components, it is clear from these passages that Darwin—as a practitioner of a certain interpretative method—can be seen as a stand-in for an artist and not simply an unambiguous representative of, in Mandel'shtam's words, "boring, bearded development." Mandelstam, "Journey to Armenia," 358. See Levin, "Zametki k 'Razgovoru o Dante,'" 144.

50. Mandelstam, "On the Naturalists," 333.

51. Mandelstam, "Addenda to 'Journey to Armenia,'" in *CCPL*, 393.

52. Osip Mandel'shtam, "Puteshestvie v Armeniiu: Drugie redaktsii, chernoviki, zapisnye knizhki," *PSS*, 2:411.

53. See Daphne West, "Mandelstam and the Evolutionists," *Journal of Russian Studies*, no. 42 (1981): 30–38.

54. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 410.

of organic—but also linguistic—matter, language that has not yet ossified into separate semantic units: “green grave,” “red breath,” “supple laugh.”⁵⁵

A Case for Dialogue: Transcending the Individual

If the assertion of parallelism between the naturalists’ analytic method and Mandel’shtam’s own textual hermeneutics is Mandel’shtam’s first major expansion of Bergson’s evolutionary model, the assignment of a powerful dialogic impulse to the relationship between environment and organism is the second. One can argue that the naturalists’ prose acquires a strongly dialogic tone once Mandel’shtam begins to treat it as literary. Hence, Lamarck is a “Shakespearean figure,” lapsing “into a legislative tone of voice” and decreeing “the laws of nature”;⁵⁶ Buffon uses “his own scientific treatises as a platform for revolutionary demagoguery”;⁵⁷ Linnaeus’s style is compared to the “garrulous eloquence of the sideshow,” and he to a preacher.⁵⁸ But the naturalist most infected with the desire to bring his work to the reading public is Darwin. For Mandel’shtam, the communicative function of Darwin’s work becomes a leitmotif in his reading of Darwin’s prose: “Darwin wrote as a person who is counting on support from the vast majority of his readers.”⁵⁹ His “attitude toward nature resembles that of a war correspondent, an interviewer, or a daring reporter furtively pursuing a news story at the scene of the event.”⁶⁰ He “always addressed himself to professional naturalists or to broad circles of amateurs. He had a tendency to create his own ‘public,’ meaning the upper crust of the educated bourgeoisie. Darwin’s work in the natural sciences taken as a literary *whole*, as a mass of thought and style, is nothing less than a perpetually pulsating *newspaper* of nature, seething with life and facts.” Thus, “if we want to define the tone of Darwin’s scientific speech, it is best to call it *scientific conversation*. . . . It was no accident that the most erudite man of his age spoke directly to the broad reading public over the heads of the scholarly caste. It was important to him to relate directly to this public.”⁶¹ The communicative function of literary practice is one of the most persistent and important features in Mandel’shtam’s conceptualizations of literature. Here it is sufficient to remember that in the 1922 article “On the Nature of the Word” Mandel’shtam’s division of literary practice into literature and philology is based precisely on the difference in their perspective addressees. “Literature,” writes Mandel’shtam, “is a social phenomenon. . . . Literature is a lecture, the

55. Mandel’shtam, *PSS*, 1:171. On synesthetic motifs in “Conversation,” see Jacob Emery, “Keeping Time: Reading and Writing in ‘Conversation about Dante,’” in this issue.

56. Mandelstam, “Journey to Armenia,” 367; “On the Naturalists,” 367.

57. Mandelstam, “On the Naturalists,” 332.

58. Mandelstam, “Journey to Armenia,” 369; “On the Naturalists,” 337.

59. Mandelstam, “On the Naturalists,” 334.

60. *Ibid.*, 333.

61. Mandelstam, “Darwin’s Literary Style,” 337–38, 340–41. Emphases added. The formula for Darwin’s ability to speak to “the broad reading public” echoes Velimir Khlebnikov’s proclamation that the use of *zaum’* allows poets to reach over the heads of governments to the hearts of people. Similarly, Mandel’shtam’s theorization on the nature of the poetic word as a bundle of meanings is a definite echo of Khlebnikov’s concept of the *self-made word*.

street”; its responsibilities are civic. The exercise of philology, on the other hand, is limited to the small circle of the initiated: “philology is domestic, intimate . . . philology is a university seminar, the family.”⁶² In contrast to literature, philology has an increased dialogic valence. For philologists, every word is multivoiced since they share a special attunement to the word’s historical development and the meanings it has accrued through its usage: “Philology is a family because every family is held by intonation and quotation, by quotation marks.”⁶³ In his writings on the naturalists it is through the discussion of their literariness that Mandel’shtam locates their shared need to communicate their ideas. While Lamarck’s, Buffon’s, and Linnaeus’s strong sense of civic duty can be associated with the notion of literature, Darwin’s prosaic familiarity resonates with Mandel’shtam’s conception of philology.

The source for the communicative impulse, however, transcends each writer’s individuality and exists on a deeper level: “Thus, for the environment, the organism is probability, desire, and expectation, while for the organism, the environment is a force which invites: not so much a covering as a challenge.”⁶⁴ The intersubjective relationship between the organism and the environment parallels the relationship between the naturalists and their ideological environment. It also becomes the primary relationship underlying the definition of the poetic process in “Conversation,” in which dialogue is understood not simply as communication between author and reader but—transcending the individuality of its participants—as an internal pull between the form-creating (формобразующий) instinct and its final manifestation as the world of the poem.⁶⁵

Poetry, according to Mandel’shtam, does not pursue any other goal besides its constant realization as form. Any component of the *Divine Comedy* is always already an integral part of the whole and belongs to it. For Mandel’shtam the “pulsion” between the part’s instinct and the whole that invites and challenges it characterizes the relationship between Dante and the dictating authority:

Examining the structure of the *Divina Commedia* as best I can, I come to the conclusion that the entire poem is but one single unified and indivisible stanza. Some incessant pulsion [тjага] pierces the entire poem . . .

The process of creating this poem’s form transcends our conceptions of literary invention and composition. It would be much more correct to recognize instinct as its guiding principle. The exemplary definitions proposed

62. Mandelstam, “On the Nature of the Word,” 123.

63. Ibid. See Alexander Spektor, “Family Romances in *The Noise of Time*: Mandelstam’s Autobiography as an Allegory for Literary Activity,” *Russian Review* 71, no. 1 (January 2012): 79–99.

64. Mandelstam, “Journey to Armenia,” 367. Significantly, this passage in the “Journey” is followed by the image of an orchestra’s conductor, who becomes a key metaphor for the figure of Dante in “Conversation,” wherein he is described as playing the role of mediator between the orchestra and the public: “When the conductor draws a theme out of the orchestra with his baton, he is hardly the physical cause of that sound. The sound is already present in the symphonic score, in the spontaneous collusion of the performers, in the throngs filling the auditorium, and in the structure of the musical instruments.” Mandelstam, “Journey to Armenia,” 368.

65. Mandel’shtam, *PSS*, 3:168.

here are hardly intended to show off my own metaphorical capacity. Rather, I am engaged in a struggle to make the work comprehensible as an entity, to graphically demonstrate that which is conceivable. Only through metaphor is it possible to find a concrete sign to represent the instinct for form creation by which Dante accumulated and poured forth his *terza rima*.⁶⁶

The functions of writer and reader merge in this passage. Both Mandel'shtam and Dante participate in the same search for a concrete sign capable of representing the poetic instinct for form. The dialogic principle between the organism and the environment Mandel'shtam points to in "On the Naturalists" frames this process and structurally recreates the relationship between the part and the whole of Dante's poem—between the "form-shaping impulse" and its manifestation in the form of the poem. The example with which Mandel'shtam demonstrates this "reciprocity" of poetic matter—the indissolubility of the part from the whole—is in itself a hybrid of organicist and technological tropes:

Just imagine an airplane . . . which in full flight constructs and launches another machine. Furthermore, in the same way, this flying machine, while fully absorbed in its own flight, still manages to assemble and launch yet a third machine. To make my proposed comparison more precise and helpful, I will add that the production and launching of these technically unthinkable new machines which are tossed off in mid-flight are not secondary or extraneous functions of the plane which is in motion, but rather comprise a most essential attribute and part of the flight itself, while assuring its feasibility and safety to no less a degree than its properly operating rudder or the regular functioning of its engine.⁶⁷

The deep teleological tautology of this image is asserted by Mandel'shtam's reading of Dante, in which the poetic process is explained as a triumph of the poetic function, fusing the metaphoric axis with the metonymic one. The metonymic addition of each consecutive airplane to the original one is immediately consumed by the centripetal pull of the image, as the whole formation of airplanes becomes the metaphor for the form of the poem itself. The content is always already form; for poetry, as for nature, there is no other, as each new element seamlessly and immediately becomes incorporated into the whole.⁶⁸

66. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 409. Translation amended.

67. *Ibid.*, 414. The image of "a monument of granite or marble whose symbolic function is intended . . . to reveal the inner structure of the marble or granite itself" performs a similar function, combining both a "natural," geological formation and a cultural artifact. *Ibid.*, 407. Mandel'shtam explains the cultural evolution of the symphonic orchestra similarly, infusing it with organic metaphors borrowed from the naturalists.

68. Mandel'shtam makes this argument even more effective by closely connecting textual examples from the *Divine Comedy* with the process that he describes—or, to be more precise, performs. Thus, "Conversation" begins with Dante's image of intertwined wrestlers which becomes Mandel'shtam's first metaphor for the crossing of poetic instruments with discursive material. The description of the *Divine Comedy*'s compositional principle, in which the movement of poetic matter is generated by oblique cases, is backed up by the intrusion of such historical realia from Dante's life as a wind-driven seafarer. The anatomy of Dante's eye, "so perfectly adjusted alone for the revelation of the structure of future time," immediately finds its resonance in Farinata's proclamations, in *Inferno*, about the dead's ability to see into the future. *Ibid.*, 420.

The idea of the non-separateness and fluidity of events (*la durée*) as applied to the poetic process establishes the groundwork for Mandel'shtam's emphasis on the palimpsestic, continuous creation of the poem: Dante writes drafts—expanding the poem layer by layer—not sculptures, in which the flow of history remains invisible; it also explains his definition of Dante's metaphor as “Heraclitean,” since an event transformed into poetic matter ceases to be static.⁶⁹ Mandel'shtam demonstrates the poetic matter's fluidity in his analysis of Dante's description of the eighth circle of hell in canto 26. In his explanation of the poetic matter's movement, in which the parts are inseparable from the whole and where metonymy perpetually transforms into metaphor, the poem becomes a self-sufficient microcosm.⁷⁰

69. The concept of poetry's indivisible reality as equivalent to that of nature finds its first elaboration in the drafts of “Journey to Armenia,” in which Mandel'shtam argues for the insufficiency of mimesis exactly on the grounds that representational literature cannot overcome its discreteness. Literature's (in this case, prose's) task is to be “incorporated into the continuum”:

Reality has the character of a continuum.

Prose which corresponds to reality, no matter how expressly and minutely, no matter how efficiently and faithfully, is always a broken series.

Only that prose is truly beautiful which is incorporated into the continuum as an entire system, although there is no power of method to prove it.

Mandelstam, “Addenda to ‘Journey to Armenia,’” 394. Mandel'shtam characteristically leaves these theoretical elaborations out of the “Journey to Armenia”'s final version. If this is “how” prose should be written—its decree—then “Journey to Armenia” is the result.

70. The development of Dante's metaphoric descriptions in which parts (i.e., separate metaphors) are indivisible from the whole (the complex description of Dante's arrival at the eighth circle) can be compared to a similar movement of divine matter in Gavriil Derzhavin's poem “God” (1785), in which God is everywhere yet moves in a downward trajectory. In representing God's descent while at the same time insisting on God's omnipresence, Derzhavin achieves an effect similar to the one Mandel'shtam ascribes to Dante. The movement from the top down on the semantic level constantly collides with the impossibility of further dissemination of divine matter—omnipresent by definition. God contains the universe in himself and at the same time gives birth to it:

О ты, пространством бесконечный,

...

Кто все собою наполняет,
Объемлет, зиждет, сохраняет,
Кого мы называем: бог.

...

А вечность, прежде век рожденну,
В себе самом ты основал:
Себя собою составляя,
Ты свет, откуда свет истек.
Создавший все единым словом,
В твореньи простираясь новым,
Ты был, ты есть, ты будешь век.

(O Thou, in universe so boundless, . . . / Who fills, incarnate, all that's living, / Embracing, keeping and fulfilling, / To Whom we give the name of GOD! . . . / And then didst found Eternal essence, / Before the Ages born in Thee: / Within Thyself didst Thou engender / Thy selfsame radiance's splendour, / Thou art that Light

At the same time, it is this movement of the poem's matter that transports the message from the poet to the reader. Poetry's dialogic directionality realized through the images of the indissoluble bond between the part and the whole, and movement that seek to destroy stasis, is the leitmotif of Mandel'shtam's essay.⁷¹ It composes the major semantic bundle of the essay and announces its presence from the very beginning, where Mandel'shtam has defined poetry as a transformation of language by poetic instruments. Its waves reappear throughout "Conversation" as an unceasing onslaught of metaphors too numerous to list here. For the purposes of my argument it is important to note that the continuous current of the poetic matter has a strong pull toward the future: as Mandel'shtam puts it, Dante's cantos "are missiles for capturing the future."⁷² Likewise, in the drafts of the "Conversation" Mandel'shtam speaks of the necessity of creating a new commentary for Dante that is "directed towards the future."⁷³ In general, one can say that the time of poetry is *dialogic futurum*—its propensity for the future establishes a law of continuity, indispensable for the poetic process.

The continuous flow of poetic impulses into the future, where it is meant to reach the reader, is upheld by the image of poetic activity as "the signal waves of meaning" that "vanish, having completed their work."⁷⁴ The waves, representing both the constancy of the poetic impulses' flow and their impermanence, reproduce the movement of what Mandel'shtam calls the "impulse to perform"—one of poetic activity's main characteristics.⁷⁵ The waves' advance affects the poem's form and is echoed by Mandel'shtam's preference for ornament (which he associates with stanzaic development) over pattern (which pertains to a single line). Significantly, the poetic impulse does not originate with the poet, nor does it remain impressed in discourse. It requires both the poet's and the reader's utmost susceptibility and receptivity, whose necessity Mandel'shtam conveys in "Conversation" by stressing Dante's unvarying and ecstatic readiness to receive the transmitted message. Mandel'shtam compares Dante's position to that of the monastic scribe, as well as to a schoolboy, "drenched in tears," who obtains instructions from the literate and "most severe Beatrice."⁷⁶ Not surprisingly, in order to understand

whence flows light's beam. / Thine ageless Word from the beginning / Unfolded
all, for aye conceiving, / Thou wast, Thou art, and Thou shalt be!

G. R. Derzhavin, *Poetic Works: A Bilingual Album*, ed. Alexander Levitsky, trans. Alexander Levitsky and Martha T. Kitchen (Providence, 2001), 130. See Alex Spektor, "Domestication of the Sublime: A Spatial Reading of Derzhavin's 'On the Death of Prince Meshchersky,' 'God,' 'The Swallow,' and 'To Evgeny. Life at Zvanka,'" in Catherine O'Neil, Nicole Boudreau, and Sarah Krive, eds., *Poetics, Self, Place: Essays in Honor of Anna Lisa Crone* (Bloomington, Ind., 2007), 108–37.

71. See, for example, Mandel'shtam's assertion that "the art of speech distorts our face in precisely this way, it disrupts its calm, destroys its mask." Mandelstam, "Addenda to 'Conversation about Dante,'" in *CCPL*, 443.

72. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 420.

73. Mandelstam, "Addenda to 'Conversation about Dante,'" 447.

74. *Ibid.*, 398.

75. *Ibid.*, 442.

76. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 437. This is an obvious reference to the Annunciation. On the teleology of "Conversation," see Glazov-Corrigan's analysis, in

Dante, readers must put themselves in the same position of instructional subservience and diligence: “If we could learn to hear Dante” is one of the most important instructions in the essay, in which the relationship between the student and the teacher is played out as one of its major themes.⁷⁷

Hence, Dante’s task of obedient listening merges with that of the reader of the *Divine Comedy*: “Above all, the reading of Dante is an endless labor.”⁷⁸ The same could easily be said about Mandel’shtam’s text itself: reading the essay, whose metaphoric density is easily on a par with that of its subject, is, first of all, a laborious process. Yet the difficulty encountered by the reader of Mandel’shtam’s work cannot be written off by its modernist poetics alone but is part and parcel of its own *raison d’être*; in order to stay true to its insights into the nature of poetry, Mandel’shtam’s text cannot simply describe them but must rather perform them. We can say that in “Conversation” practice and theory are inseparable: it is not only a treatise on Dante, nor, strictly speaking, an attempt to create a theory of poetics, even if it shines light on Mandel’shtam’s own poetic practice.⁷⁹ It is a work in which form is indissoluble from content, and Mandel’shtam’s understanding of poetic matter is realized in the text of his essay itself, becoming an integral feature of its poetics.⁸⁰

Reading “Conversation” as a text that insists on the unity between its form and its subject matter elucidates the specificity and evolution of Mandel’shtam’s vision of the poetic process, declared in one of his earliest essays, “On the Addressee” (1913), as a dialogue between poet and reader. In this early work, Mandel’shtam conceives of poetry as an attempt to reach not a specific and familiar but a distant reader. Poetry is addressed “to whom it may concern,” and the figure of the unknown addressee is delineated by the image of the ocean—of time, of language—separating poet and reader and at the same time directing the passage of the bottle carrying the message from one to the other. If in “On the Addressee” the identity of poetry as the “consciousness of being right” helps cross the distance between poet and reader, in “Conversation” the two are themselves brought close as the poetic process is compared to transcribing the dictation of a “most terrifying and impatient dictator.”⁸¹ Dante’s poetic impulses directed into the future can be seen as a variation on the message in the bottle that the poet of the earlier essay throws into the ocean. The conversation about Dante is simultaneously a conversation with Dante. The creative process of Dante the poet is the same one that

which she constructs a teleological, incremental movement of Mandel’shtam’s vision of the poetic process, analogous to Dante’s own movement from hell to paradise. Glazov-Corrigan, *Mandel’shtam’s Poetics*, especially chapter 5, “Periodization in the Transmutation of the Poetic Landscape: Metamorphosis of the Addressee in the 1930s,” 68–110.

77. Mandelstam, “Conversation about Dante,” 402.

78. *Ibid.*, 400.

79. On “Conversation” as an attempt to create a theory of poetics, see again Glazov-Corrigan, *Mandel’shtam’s Poetics*, especially 68–110. See also Levin, “Zametki k ‘Razgovoru o Dante,’” in which the critic suggests seeing Mandel’shtam’s reading of Dante as a key for understanding Mandel’shtam’s own poetics.

80. It is in this sense that “Conversation,” but also Mandel’shtam’s prose in general, should be considered a poetic text par excellence and not simply a prosaic filler (albeit one of the highest quality) written during the poetic standstill of the late 1920s.

81. Mandelstam, “On the Addressee,” in *CCPL*, 69; “Conversation about Dante,” 436.

forms the identity of Mandel'shtam the reader once both poet and reader have allowed the process to overtake their own personalities. Poetry must be addressed to no one in particular; at the same time, as Mandel'shtam suggests in "On the Addressee," it is receptivity to the poetic message that bestows on one the sense of identity: "What reader of Baratynsky's poem would not shiver with joy or feel that twinge of excitement experienced sometimes when you are unexpectedly hailed by name"?⁸² Consequently, the relationship that Mandel'shtam seeks to build with his reader is analogous to the relationship between Mandel'shtam and Dante. Thus, we can say that for Mandel'shtam the poetic process is a dialogue in which identity is not a given and stable entity but is, paradoxically, measured by the suspension of the personal. Identity is that which is created in the moment when the poetic utterance reaches its addressee. Conversely, only the poetic process is able to bring about the formation of the self, which exists through its union with the other. Hence, one becomes a *sine qua non* for the other. Only through poetry is true dialogue possible; where there's no dialogue, as in the case of Konstantin Bal'mont's verse, poetry—to borrow a phrase from Mandel'shtam, who himself borrows it from Fedor Tiutchev—"has never spent the night."⁸³

This dialogic particularity of Mandel'shtam's conceptualization of poetry also extends to the choice of terms used by Mandel'shtam in "Conversation" to characterize the poetic process. As Glazov-Corrigan shrewdly notes, the term *ispolnenie* (fulfilling), with which Mandel'shtam describes one of the main features of the poetic impulse, "allows for two meanings: 1 / creative performance and 2 / obedience to the command."⁸⁴ Similarly, to render the notion of the poetic impulse's vitalistic and continuous movement, Mandel'shtam defines poetic matter as *obratimaia* and *obrashchaiushchaisia* (translated by Jane Gary Harris and Constance Link as "convertibility" and "transmutability," respectively), conveying not only poetry's reciprocity and reversibility but also—as Glazov-Corrigan points out—its ultimate addressability.⁸⁵ As Mandel'shtam reiterates throughout "Conversation," the origin of poetry transcends the personal. Passing through Dante, the waves of poetic impulses pass on poetry's dialogic imperative to Mandel'shtam, Dante's reader, and, consequently, to us, the readers of "Conversation."

A Case for Sovereignty: Poetry as Kinship

"Conversation about Dante" does more than conceptualize Dante's poetic practice; it performs it. The undulating movement of the poetic impulse, combining in the ornamental development of the poem, which Mandel'shtam points

82. Mandelstam, "On the Addressee," 69.

83. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 397.

84. Glazov-Corrigan, *Mandel'shtam's Poetics*, 62.

85. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 414. On Bergsonian influences in "Conversation," especially the connection between Mandel'shtam's notion of *poeticheskii poryv* (which Harris translates as "poetic impulse") and Bergson's concept of *élan vital*, see Francis Nethercott, "Elements of Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution* in the Critical Prose of Osip Mandel'shtam," *Russian Literature* 30, no. 4 (November 1991): 455–66.

out by tracing the repetitions and transformations of Dantean metaphors, is steadily present throughout the poetics of “Conversation” in particular and in Mandel’shtam’s prose in general, wherein the same paradigmatic action, like the same dance figures performed each time by different partners, is allegorically acted out in different discursive material.

In *The Noise of Time* (1925), for example, Mandel’shtam repeats in various guises the metaphor of grafting, through which he mediates his tense relationship with his family and, ultimately, Russian literary culture. The grafting of two distinct cultures, those of his mother and father, is symbolized by the family bookshelf, on which each other’s books sit in close proximity, then, later, by the speech of the narrator, formed by his parents’ antinomic linguistic practices. The same action of grafting is performed in Mandel’shtam’s reading of the St. Petersburg text in which he “grafts” its primary antinomies of chaos and order onto each other. In *The Noise of Time* the bringing together of two different poles culminates in the autobiography’s final chapter, in which the tension between its opposing elements is what brings about Russian literature’s vitality and integrity.⁸⁶

Similar to grafting in *The Noise of Time*, the main semantic load in “Conversation” is carried by the kindred figure of hybridization, or crossing, as it extends from Mandel’shtam’s definition of Dante’s poetic practice to Dantean metaphors and, most important, to the stylistic and poetic particularities of Mandel’shtam’s essay itself. Hybridization is announced as its governing principle from the text’s very first sentence. Mandel’shtam carries over from his autobiography the image of the confluence of his father’s “languagelessness” with his mother’s “sonorous . . . great Russian language” (the union becoming the source of his own poetic practice) into its principal image of poetic process: the crossing of the “completely mute” line of “prosodic instruments of poetic discourse” and “discourse itself, i.e. the intonational and phonological performance of these instruments.”⁸⁷ If the principle of hybridization defines the poetic process in general, it also characterizes poetic practice’s source itself, as Mandel’shtam compares the “word” (which in the essay becomes a metonymic stand-in for any poetic unit, “be it a line, a stanza or an entire lyrical composition”) to “a bundle” (from which “meaning sticks out . . . in various directions”).⁸⁸ The *word* contains potentially infinite semantic heterogeneities within it, which the poet crossbreeds to achieve the desired effect.⁸⁹ Hence, Mandel’shtam writes that Dante, “when he feels the need, calls eyelids ‘the lips of the eye,’” crossing “the sense organs, producing hybrids, and bringing about the labial eye.”⁹⁰

From the very beginning of the essay Mandel’shtam constructs a series of isomorphic relationships: poetry itself is a “thought,” albeit of a special kind;

86. See Spektor, “Family Romances in *The Noise of Time*.”

87. Mandelstam, “Conversation about Dante,” 397.

88. *Ibid.*, 407.

89. On the possible connections between Mandel’shtam’s concept of the word and the linguistic theories of Nikolai Marr, see Boris Gasparov, “Lamarck, Shelling, Marr,” 187–212. See also Pollak, *Mandelstam the Reader*, 25.

90. Mandelstam, “Conversation about Dante,” 408.

its goal is “only the understanding which brings it about—not at all passive, reproducing, or paraphrasing understanding.”⁹¹ Its primary function is intelligibility (“Imagine something intelligible, grasped, wrested from obscurity”), yet the understanding it brings cannot be static: it is delivered “in a language voluntarily and willingly forgotten immediately after the act of intellection and realization is completed.”⁹² Similarly, poetry (the process of writing) and the perception of poetry (the process of reading) interfuse with each other; in other words, poetry is a special way of thinking that requires a special way of thinking. As Levin writes, “The perception of the work of poetry must be adequate to its creation.”⁹³

In his analysis of “Conversation,” Levin outlines a series of binary oppositions that govern Mandel’shtam’s model of the poetic process. While true poetry “acts out” true nature, establishing the ontologic equivalence of organic and inorganic worlds, false, or what Mandel’shtam terms “descriptive and explanatory,” poetry results in bringing “nature’s text . . . to a standstill.”⁹⁴ Mandel’shtam counterposes the principle of insuppressible dynamic change to a descriptive stasis. Likewise, the same binary opposition extends to the two components of the poetic process itself: the crossing of the phonetic sound of poetry, or what Mandel’shtam calls “discourse itself,” and the “completely mute . . . instrumental transmutation.”⁹⁵ Levin argues that poetic instrumentation requires material that would undergo the same metamorphosis transforming discourse into poetry.⁹⁶ Accordingly, if Dante, who is “a master of the instruments of poetry,” converts the lifeless “content” of discourse into poetry, Mandel’shtam seeks to perform an analogous metamorphic procedure with Dante, and he announces a liberation of the *Divine Comedy* from “an ignorant cult of Dantean mysticism” and the “Dante of French engravings.”⁹⁷ As Mandel’shtam insists, in “Conversation” the poetic matter of the *Divine Comedy*, ossified by bad literary criticism (as well as what he believes to be Aleksandr Blok’s poetic mis-inheritance), finally comes to life.

The law of continuity that governs the poetic process simultaneously exceeds the individuality of its participants and establishes kinship between them. Mandel’shtam achieves this by transferring the dialogic impulse from individual to instinct, the source of which can be traced to the drafts of his writings on the naturalists in which he begins to conceptualize the process of literary transmission:

While not yet a product of the reader’s energy, a book is already a crack in the reader’s biography. . . .

91. *Ibid.*, 397–98.

92. *Ibid.*, 398.

93. Levin, “Zametki k ‘Razgovoru o Dante,’” 149.

94. Mandelstam, “Conversation about Dante,” 402, 434.

95. *Ibid.*, 397. Translation amended.

96. Levin, “Zametki k ‘Razgovoru o Dante,’” 147.

97. Mandelstam, “Conversation about Dante,” 396, 411. Here it is appropriate to compare these supposedly lifeless French engravings with French impressionist painting, which, according to Mandel’shtam, fills the painted image with life: “This is the painting which elongates the bodies of horses as they approach the finish line of the hippodrome.” *Ibid.*, 433.

Our memory, our experience, including its gaps, the tropes and metaphors of our sense perceptions and associations, all fall into the book's rapacious and uncontrolled possession. . . .

[Thus the author's schema intrudes on your past experience]

We read books in order to refresh our memory, but therein lies the problem, for you can read a book only during the process of remembering.

When we are *completely* immersed in the activity of reading, we admire above all our own *generic* attributes. We experience, as it were, the ecstasy of classifying ourselves in various ages and stages.⁹⁸

Just like writing in "Conversation," reading is here viewed as a process that instantiates a submission of the reader's individuality to the power of the book's message. The gesture is much more of a surrender: Mandel'shtam describes reading through images of invasion and aggression, as the book unleashes the force that possesses its reader. At the same time, while reading cracks open the readers' individual biographies, it allows them to experience communion with their kin and "*generic* attributes," as if refocusing the connection from ontogenesis, the process of our individual development, to phylogenesis, the cultural development of our species.

By making instinct, not the individual, the carrier of the dialogic impulse, Mandel'shtam is able, on the one hand, to demonstrate poetry's hierarchical transmission from the top down—as Beatrice dictates to Dante-cum-scribe—and, on the other, to designate it as a realm protected from intrusions by external sources of authority, such as the state.⁹⁹ Dante's submission to the dictates of authority, and, consequently, the reader's submission to the text of the poem, is nothing less than a demonstration of poetic matter's perfect convertibility, as Beatrice becomes both the author and the addressee of the poetic impulse that constitutes the *Divine Comedy*.¹⁰⁰

While one can find numerous textual correspondences between Mandel'shtam's description of the naturalists and his description of Dante, the true significance of the naturalists' influence on Mandel'shtam lies in his adaptation of their analytic methods for his conceptualization of the poetic process.¹⁰¹ In reading the naturalists, Mandel'shtam discovers what the critic

98. Mandelstam, "Addenda to 'Journey to Armenia,'" 393–94. Brackets and emphasis in the original.

99. The fact that Mandel'shtam's insistence on the poetic impulse being handed down by the authorities to the submissive poet was a potential problem for a poet living in a totalitarian state is evident from the heated argument regarding this issue he had with Nadezhda Mandel'shtam, who initially refused to write down her husband's "most severe dictation." See Nadezhda Mandel'shtam, *Vtoraia kniga*, 164.

100. This insight comes from Emery, "Keeping Time."

101. In Mandel'shtam's descriptions, Dante acquires and combines characteristics of almost all of the naturalists. Hence, Mandel'shtam compares Lamarck's "descending movement down the ladder of living creatures" to Dante's descent into hell. Mandelstam, "Journey to Armenia," 367. He depicts Lamarck talking about the feeling of wrath that brings forth the emergence of horns on the foreheads of the combating animals—"But inner feelings, born of anger, direct 'fluids' to the forehead, aiding the formation of the substance of horn and bone"—and Dante describing mutation that is caused by suffering. Mandel'shtam's respect for Lamarck's youthful mastery can be compared to his admiration of Dante's agility as a teacher: "I tip my hat and let the teacher walk ahead of me. May the youthful thunder of his eloquence never be silent!" *Ibid.*, 368. "The way Dante

Margot Norris, also writing about Darwin, calls “modes of signification that make of Nature a text.”¹⁰² In Norris’s reading, Darwin “is not quite an empiricist . . . because what he construes as ‘facts’ are neither observable phenomena nor demonstrable forces but rather the relations between them.”¹⁰³ It is easy to see how closely Darwin’s approach to nature corresponds to the one Mandel’shtam attributes to Dante, in which the goal of poetry is to create, “act out,” and reveal the relationship between objects:

We do not know things themselves; on the other hand, we are highly sensitive to the facts of their existence. Thus, in reading Dante’s cantos we receive communiqués, as it were, from the battlefield and from that data make superb guesses as to how the sounds of the symphony of war are struggling with each other, although each bulletin taken by itself merely indicates some slight shift of the flags for strategic purposes or some minor changes in the timbre of the cannonade.¹⁰⁴

Norris places Darwin at the beginning of a tradition of biocentric art, whose end is “autotelic—not the production of a representation, an artifact, a form, an ideal, but the creative process itself, the discharge of energy and power.”¹⁰⁵ By insisting on the isomorphism between nature and art, Mandel’shtam reads Dante as a poet fully engaged in the same practice. For Norris, Darwin’s major accomplishment was a crucial paradigmatic shift through which he, while interpreting nature as a text, began questioning the function of authorship: “In place of an Author, or a governing intelligence, Darwin discovers force and desire (including human force and desire) as the power shaping natu-

understands it, the teacher is younger than the pupil, for he ‘runs faster.’” Mandelstam, “Conversation about Dante,” 400.

Dante also inherits Pallas’s attention to detail as well as his painterly mastery: “Pallas knows and likes only the *proximate*. He ties proximity to proximity with his ornate ligatured script. He extends his horizon with tiny hooks and hinges.” Mandelstam, “Addenda to ‘Journey to Armenia,’” 392. Emphasis in the original. “He does not use only subtle or superficial vegetable colors. He paints and tans and distills nature out of red sandalwood. He makes extractions out of steep slopes and pine forests . . . he distills dyes out of a mixture of birch leaves and alum for the Nankeen cloth used by Nizhegorod peasant women and for the blueprints of the heavens.” Mandelstam, “Addenda to ‘Conversation about Dante,’” 392. Translation amended. “Here the subject is the color of Geryon’s skin. His back, chest and sides are variously colored, ornamented with small knots and shields. Dante explains that neither the Turkish nor Tatar weavers ever used brighter colors for their carpets.” Mandelstam, “Conversation about Dante,” 412.

Dante also takes over Darwin’s newsman’s and interviewer’s skills: “Darwin’s attitude toward nature resembles that of a war correspondent, an interviewer, or a daring reporter furtively pursuing a news story at the scene of the event.” Mandelstam, “On the Naturalists,” 333. “The entire Biblical cosmogony with its Christian appendages could have been accepted by the educated people of that time so literally, as if it were a special edition of the daily newspaper. . . . In Canto XXVI of the *Paradiso*, Dante goes so far as to have a private conversation with Adam, to conduct a real interview.” Mandelstam, “Conversation about Dante,” 422.

102. Margot Norris, *Beasts of the Modern Imagination: Darwin, Nietzsche, Kafka, Ernst, and Lawrence* (Baltimore, 1985), 36.

103. *Ibid.*

104. Mandelstam, “Conversation about Dante,” 401–2.

105. Norris, *Beasts of the Modern Imagination*, 12.

ral forms.”¹⁰⁶ Mandel’shtam reaches a similar conclusion by treating Darwin as someone who “purged the scientific language, eradicating every trace of bombast, rhetoric, and teleological pathos.”¹⁰⁷ Moreover, following Darwin in displacing the idea of authorship from individual to instinct, Mandel’shtam defines the poetic process as a generator of biological kinship between its participants. Hence, Darwin’s scientific method provides Mandel’shtam a special mode of perception, which he ascribes to and practices himself in his reading of Dante. This, ultimately, is not an antihumanistic position but one that seeks to transcend anthropocentrism and seems to be necessary for poetry’s intended task—the experience of kinship unencumbered by our individual differences, working on ever expanding the impact of cultural and interdisciplinary acoustics.

106. *Ibid.*, 45.

107. Mandelstam, “On the Naturalists,” 332.