

# Keeping Time: Reading and Writing in “Conversation about Dante”

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## Transcription and the Senses

Osip Mandel'shtam's 1933 “Conversation about Dante” is the poet's most elaborate statement of his aesthetic philosophy and the most extended document of his reading process. In the afterword to the first Soviet edition, L. E. Pinskii described the essay as laying out its author's “most involved conception of the poetic.”<sup>1</sup> More recent years have seen detailed and persuasive interpretations of the piece as, in Elena Glazov-Corrigan's words, “a *key text of utmost importance*” in the development of Mandel'shtam's images and ideas.<sup>2</sup> Glazov-Corrigan's own reading of the essay as an allegorical journey of the poetic impulse into its material goes a long way toward rendering this dense text legible as both a linchpin in the system of motifs spanning Mandel'shtam's late poetic works and a coherent if highly metaphorical expression of a theoretical stance.

However, I approach “Conversation about Dante” in this article not chiefly as a theoretical statement or a poetic text in its own right or as a reservoir of motifs to be traced through Mandel'shtam's larger project, though it is all these things, but as a demonstration of and meditation on reading. As a document of a textual encounter by one of the great modern readers of poetry, Mandel'shtam's essay addresses perennial problems in our relation to written authority and the preservation of literary culture through time. “Are there many people who can read poetry? And yet almost everybody writes it,” Mandel'shtam complains in his 1923 essay “An Army of Poets.” “To read poetry is a most sublime and difficult art, and . . . the vocation of reader is no less respectable than the vocation of poet.”<sup>3</sup> My intent is not entirely to bracket Mandel'shtam's personae as theoretician and poet. Even if the lines above enjoin us to redirect our attention from genesis to reception, Mandel'shtam's practice of reading resonates deeply with his creative approach. The ideal of reading I elucidate here is part and parcel of a philosophy of ideal writing manifested in Mandel'shtam's essay through a highly poetic cluster of metaphors around the central image of the conductor's baton. Nonetheless, I want to find that point at which Mandel'shtam addresses us not primarily as a poet and theoretician of making poetry but as a reader trying to access verse through the technology of writing (“the finished poem,” he writes in

1. L. E. Pinskii, afterword to Osip Mandel'shtam, *Razgovor o Dante*, ed. A. A. Morozov (Moscow, 1967), 59.

2. Elena Glazova and Marina Glazova, “*Podskazano Dantom*”: *O poetike i poezii Mandel'shtama* (Kiev, 2011), 33. Emphasis in the original.

3. Osip Mandel'shtam, “An Army of Poets,” in *The Collected Critical Prose and Letters*, ed. Jane Gary Harris, trans. Jane Gary Harris and Constance Link (London, 1991; hereafter *CCPL*), 197, 193; Osip Mandel'shtam, *Sobraniie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh* (Moscow, 1993–94; hereafter *SS*), 2:342, 2:338. All English citations of Mandel'shtam's prose are to Harris and Link's translation, which I have on occasion made slightly more literal; for extended passages I have appended the original Russian in a block quote or footnote.

"Conversation about Dante," "is no more than a calligraphic product")—that is, to reconcile the visible script with the verbal performance.<sup>4</sup>

In a synesthetic image that nimbly suggests passage between the optical and auditory spheres, Mandel'shtam states that it is not deafness to the music of Dante's words but "blindness" to the visual aspect of performance that has prevented readers from fully appreciating his talent. "Insufficient respect for the poetic material which can be grasped only through performance, only through the flight of the conductor's baton—this was the reason for the universal blindness to Dante, to the greatest master and manager of his material, to the greatest conductor of European art."<sup>5</sup> The central metaphor of the conductor's baton (*dirizherskaia palochka*), to which generations of readers, like an unskilled orchestra, have failed to pay attention, occupies a nodal place in the essay's figurative structure, appearing at the climax of an ideal reading process in the sixth of its eleven sections.

When you read Dante with all your powers and with complete conviction, when you transplant yourself completely to the field of action of the poetic material, when you join in and coordinate your own intonations with the echoes of the orchestral and thematic groups continually arising on the pocked and undulating semantic surface . . . then the purely vocal, intonational, and rhythmical work is replaced by a more powerful coordinating force—by the conductor's function—and the hegemony of the conductor's baton comes into its own, cutting across orchestrated space and projecting from the voice like some more complex mathematical measure out of a three-dimensional state.

(Когда читаешь Данта с размаху и с полной убежденностью, когда вполне переселяешься на действительное поле поэтической материи; когда сопрягаешься и соизмеряешь свои интонации с переключками оркестровых и тематических групп, возникающих ежеминутно на изрытой и всколебленной смысловой поверхности . . . тогда чисто голосовая интонационная и ритмическая работа сменяется более мощной, координирующей деятельностью—дирижированьем и над голосоведущим пространством вступает в силу рвущая его гегемония дирижерской палочки, выпячиваясь из голоса, как более сложное математическое измерение из трехмерности.)<sup>6</sup>

This dense passage is remarkable not least for incorporating many of the essay's major themes. In the first place, it powerfully recalls Mandel'shtam's crucial but somewhat cryptic initial distinction between (1) the "mute" yet somehow "audible and sensible to us instruments of poetic discourse," which are the structuring elements that measure and pattern language in verse, and (2) "the discourse itself, that is the intonational and phonological" performance of the reader in response to these instruments—in other words, the

4. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," in *CCPL*, 442; Mandel'shtam, *SS*, 3:259.

5. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 440. "Неуважение к поэтической материи, которая постигается лишь через исполнительство, лишь через дирижерский полет,—оно-то и было причиной всеобщей слепоты к Данту, величайшему хозяину и распорядителю этой материи, величайшему дирижеру европейского искусства." Mandel'shtam, *SS*, 3:258.

6. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 425; Mandel'shtam, *SS*, 3:243–44.

vocal utterance.<sup>7</sup> Neither of these functions, in and of themselves, suffices to constitute the poetic text. The formal pattern is manifested in the verses we read or hear as an alienated sequence of articulations in sensory phenomena, while our spoken or subvocalized recitation is a homogenous flow of sound that becomes susceptible to paraphrase and deviation as it enters the sphere of ordinary language. Only at the moment the two phenomena coincide, when the reader's patterns of rhythm and intonation echo or are mapped onto the visual or kinetic "undulations" of the text's surface, does poetry become real in performance.

On the most literal level, this image represents the undulating line of script entering the eye as light waves and exiting the mouth as sound waves. Mandel'shtam credits Dante with an undiscovered science he calls "reflexology of speech" (*refleksologiya rechi*), according to whose principles Dante "signals with a light his sudden desire to express himself" and through which he "approaches most closely the wave theory of light and sound [and] determines their relationship."<sup>8</sup> Glazov-Corrigan sees the decaying wave's journey from light into sound as emblematic of Logos entering matter and therefore, at least in a radically simplified fashion, "the basic landscape of Mandel'shtam's universe."<sup>9</sup> But alongside any allegorical sense, Mandel'shtam has in mind the literal fact of synesthetic transcription in the arts: the printed page manifested as oral speech, the visual gesture of the conductor's baton regulating orchestral music, or, in the dancers' obedience to the rhythms of the waltz—"periodic undulating movements, the very same close listening to the wave that permeates all our theory of sound and light, all our scientific study of matter, all our poetry and all our music."<sup>10</sup>

The "hegemony of the conductor's baton," then, is brought into being by

7. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 397; Mandel'shtam, *SS*, 3:216. Translation modified. This opposition is presaged by his earlier "Notes on Poetry," which typifies poetry as a "battle" between speech and writing, "the positive and negative poles of the poetic language." Mandelstam, "Some Notes on Poetry," in *CCPL*, 166; Mandel'shtam, *SS*, 2:299. The same essay anticipates the idea in "Conversation about Dante" of the reflexology of speech through a discussion of Boris Pasternak's "breathing exercises," which physiologically determine the configuration of the reader's vocal organs. As in "Conversation about Dante," this process is compared to "the sacred ecstasy of space and bird's flight." Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 169; Mandel'shtam, *SS*, 2:301.

8. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 434. Translation modified. "Он передает порыв к говорению, то есть сигнализирует светом внезапное желание высказаться. Здесь он ближе всего подходит к волновой теории звука и света, детерминирует их родство." Mandel'shtam, *SS*, 3:252. In this sense, we can identify the essay's reflexology of speech with the comment, in Mandel'shtam's notes on "Journey to Armenia," that "the physiology of reading still remains to be studied." Mandelstam, "Addenda to 'Journey to Armenia,'" in *CCPL*, 393; Mandel'shtam, *SS*, 3:389.

9. Elena Glazov-Corrigan, *Mandel'shtam's Poetics: A Challenge to Postmodernism* (Toronto, 2000), 68.

10. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 421. "В основе вальса чисто европейское пристрастие к повторяющимся колебательным движениям, то самое прислушивание к волне, которое пронизывает всю нашу теорию звука и света, все наше учение о материи, всю нашу поэзию и всю нашу музыку." Mandel'shtam, *SS*, 3:340. The coexistence of allegorical and literal meanings is consistent with Mandel'shtam's understanding of Dante's use of the medieval exegetic technique of fourfold interpretation. On dance motifs in "Conversation about Dante" as a way of metaphorically grasping the interaction of material with form as movement, see also Anja Burghardt, "Manifesta-

synthesizing the categories of the senses, particularly sight and sound, and the artistic media associated with them. As Pinskii notes, throughout his essay Mandel'shtam engages Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's seminal distinction between the visual-spatial arts of sculpture and painting and the auditory-temporal arts of music and verse.<sup>11</sup> The conductor's baton partakes of both, existing in space as a visible phenomenon even as it exerts itself in time as the measure of a common orchestral rhythm. More profound and perplexing is how Mandel'shtam's baton both originates in and produces time: it "projects" into space from the temporal flow of language, he writes, but in the same stroke generates a "more complex measure [*izmerenie*] out of a three-dimensional state." As this higher measure birthed from three-dimensional space seems to be the fourth dimension, time, the hegemony of the baton is invested in literature's production of temporality, the preservation of a "panchronic and paradigmatic view of history" that Dmitrii Segal identifies as the central feature of Mandel'shtam's late poetics.<sup>12</sup>

Mandel'shtam's verse, emphasizes Segal, seeks to preserve the culture of the past in relation to the personality of the poet-creator and the urgent events of his day—most obviously, the Russian revolution and its aftermath. The theme of the baton, however, refocuses our attention from the poet's determining intent and his verse's structural attributes to the technical materials through which poetry is recorded and transmitted—that is to say, on issues current in media studies, the philosophy of writing, and reception theory, all of which revolve around aspects of cultural transmission that exceed direct authorial control and the semantic function of verse. If a finished poem is indeed "no more than a calligraphic product" that reaches its reader in a future far from the aegis of the poet, then under what authority is "the hegemony of the baton," which restores the text to the lived time of performance, generated? What power of compulsion or will maintains that hegemony, and what are the dangers in negotiating sight and sound, graphic image and dynamic performance? This article reads "Conversation about Dante" as an attempt to define the authority that regulates poetic performance in relation to other forces, sometimes overtly political ones, and to elaborate a theory of poetic notation adequate for the perpetuation of the text beyond the zone of the poet's personal influence.

In the central passage analyzed above, the baton figures the coordination of the marks on the page and the intonational performance that is the culmination of a successful reading. However, the baton first appears some twenty pages earlier as a prerequisite of writing, the poet's chief instrument in his encounter with matter (*materiia*) and his interaction with time:

Dante never enters into single combat with his material without having first prepared an organ to seize it, without having armed himself with some in-

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tion der Poetik: Osip Mandel'shtams 'Razgovor o Dante' als literarisches Kunstwerk und poetologischer Essay," *Zeitschrift für Slawistik* 56, no. 1 (2011): 21.

11. Pinskii, afterword, 68–69. See Mandel'shtam's disdain for "sculptural" interpretations of Dante in Mandel'shtam, "Conversation about Dante," 400; Mandel'shtam, *SS*, 3:219.

12. Dmitrii Segal, *Osip Mandel'shtam: Istoriia i poetika*, 2 vols. (Oakland, 1998), 2:771.

strument for measuring concrete time as it drips or melts. In poetry, where everything is measure and everything derives from measure, revolves about it and for its sake, instruments of measure are instruments of a special kind, performing an especially active function. Here the trembling hand of the compass not only indulges the magnetic storm but makes it itself.

(Дант никогда не вступает в единоборство с материей, не приготовив органа для ее уловления, не вооружившись измерителем для отсчета конкретного каплющего или тающего времени. В поэзии, в которой все есть мера и все исходит от меры и вращается вокруг нее и ради нее, измерители суть орудия особого свойства, несущие особую активную функцию. Здесь дрожащая компасная стрелка не только потакает магнитной буре, но и сама ее делает.)<sup>13</sup>

Here Mandel'shtam typifies poetry as deriving from the measure of time—rhythmic patterns of breath, intervals of rhyme and vocalic stress, and so on. As such, the baton, which measures the auditory-temporal performance of the orchestra through visual-spatial gestures, becomes the exemplary figure of the poetic instrument and can be assimilated into a whole series of the text's running metaphors. It is the fructifying phallus or "organ" with which the poet "enters into combat with his material," the "trembling compass needle" that both responds to and calls forth the magnetic storm, and, as Seamus Heaney has noted, it is a visual image of the tongue, itself mute, whose movements deep into the orchestra pit of the mouth articulate the undifferentiated flow of breath into measured, meaningful language.<sup>14</sup> Most insistently in this series of related figures, the baton is the pen or quill that is the instrument of writing in itself and in its associations with sexuality, religion, and law. "Now I will begin to describe one of the innumerable conductorial flights of Dante's baton," Mandel'shtam announces. "Let us begin with the writing. The pen draws calligraphic letters. . . . The quill pen is a small bit of bird's flesh. Dante, who never forgets the origins of things, remembers this, of course. His technique of writing with broad strokes and curves is transmuted into the figured flight of a flock of birds."<sup>15</sup> The swooping movements of the baton in the air represent the loops performed across the paper by the quill pen (*pero*), a metonym for the bird from which the plume was plucked and whose flight is reenacted by the writing hand.

Stéphane Mallarmé employs a similar figurative series in his 1897 poem "Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard," in which a "solitary distraught feather" (*plume solitaire épardue*) dramatizes the act of writing by descending, like the author's quill, from the upper left of the page, across the "white-

13. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 403; Mandel'shtam, *SS*, 3:221–22.

14. On sexual puns and the poet's fructifying "aspiration to become a seed," see Glazov-Corrigan, *Mandel'shtam's Poetics*, 131, 125, and Seamus Heaney, "The Government of the Tongue," *Partisan Review* 55, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 295.

15. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 437. "Теперь я попробую описать один из бесчисленных дирижерских полетов Дантовой палочки. . . . Начнем с письма. Перо рисует каллиграфические буквы. . . . Перо—кусочек птичьей плоти. Дант, никогда не забывающий происхождения вещей, конечно, об этом помнит. Техника письма с его нажимами и закруглениями перерастает в фигурный полет птичьих стай." Mandel'shtam, *SS*, 3:254–55.

ness" (*blancheur*) of the paper, to alight at last in the lower right corner as an illuminative flash of "lightning" (*en foudre*): an angelic or Luciferian word, a falling star or bolt of electricity, descended from the heights of the idea into the abyss of the material world.<sup>16</sup> In the preface Mallarmé stresses that the unconventional spacing and typography of his poem, spread out in fragments across the gutter of the printed book, "result, for whoever wishes to read it aloud, in a musical score," as the different fonts and typefaces "dictate" emphasis and the disposition of the lines stipulates "the rising and falling of the intonation."<sup>17</sup> Mallarmé's ambition to develop new techniques for modulating reception proceeds from a longstanding fascination with the possibilities of mass print media. In his 1895 essay "The Book: A Spiritual Instrument," the poet enjoins readers to execute the text as we would "music on the keyboard, actively, measured by the score," without, however, asking for "servile obedience: for each of us has that lightning-like [*éclair*] initiative that links the scattered notes together."<sup>18</sup> In order to be realized as continuity in the reader's performance, poetic notation trusts in our initiative, our spark of inspiration, or even, as we read in another essay of the same year, the reader and writer's common "obligation" to a divinity whose "rhythm" is performed on the "verbal keyboard."<sup>19</sup>

Where criticism on Mandel'shtam often stresses the lyric subject's function to suffuse and ground his texts, these Mallarméan parallels in Mandel'shtam's theory point to sites of poetic activity situated beyond the figure of the author. Writing on Mandel'shtam's essays of the 1920s, Thomas Seifrid shows how the linguistic theory of Aleksandr Potebnia informs the poet's treatment of the word as "a living being, a self," whose "absolute independence and right to self-definition" provide "a safe haven from the entropic forces perennially undermining Russian culture."<sup>20</sup> Insofar as "these personifying claims work toward . . . the construction of an alter-ego or alter-self which is also the embodiment of the whole of (Russian) verbal culture—and surrogate martyr of its various travails," a similar theological and philosophical identification of the poetic word and the creative self can be seen to underlie Dmitrii Segal's reading of Mandel'shtam's texts as constituting the unification of a fractured history and the lyric subject's self-identity.<sup>21</sup> In Segal's account of Mandel'shtam's preservation project, the poet's highly overdetermined texts are structured by what he calls the "ambivalent antithesis"—"a means of restoring cultural continuity, a bridge between divergent and contradictory parts of the text, the self-identity of the lyric 'I' of Mandel'shtam's

16. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, 1945), 468–69.

17. *Ibid.*, 454.

18. *Ibid.*, 380.

19. *Ibid.*, 647, 648. This latter essay, "La musique et les lettres," also employs the metaphor of a thunderbolt of inspiration spanning the heavens and the earth. Maurice Blanchot remarks that "in an artist so fascinated by the desire for mastery, nothing is more impressive" than Mallarmé's embrace of randomness, doubt, and inspiration. Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, 1982), 117–18.

20. Thomas Seifrid, *The Word Made Self: Russian Writings on Language, 1860–1930* (Ithaca, 2005), 74, 75.

21. *Ibid.*, 73.

poetry.”<sup>22</sup> In this critical context the essay’s speculation on inspiration and reception enters into an “ambivalent antithesis” itself, still directed toward issues of cultural transmission but engaging an ideology of the autonomous, intentional, and personified word with the contingencies of source and interpretation.<sup>23</sup> In “Un coup de dés” the divine electrical impulse descends with the writing feather or pen to come to rest on the bottom of the page, mirroring the poetic text or figurative die’s movement from the heights of the idea to its eventual reader—that random “final point that sanctifies it.”<sup>24</sup> In “Conversation about Dante” we encounter an analogous poetic journey, from the mystery of inspiration, on the one hand, to the mystery of the future audience, on the other, made possible by the metaphoric baton that mediates between the incommensurables of sight and sound.

### Transcription and Writing

A poetic and figuratively electric impulse (*poriv*) descending into matter is an ongoing metaphor in Mandel’shtam’s essay, wherein the journey that is poetry begins as the movement of Logos “into the depth of matter.”<sup>25</sup> The image derives from the *Divine Comedy* itself, a book that begins with a descent into the abyss and climaxes in a scene of divine writing. As Mandel’shtam paraphrases this late scene from *Paradiso*, the angelic hosts flock together to spell out celestial maxims “under the hand of a scribe who is obedient to the dictation”; they are like birds, “magnetized by green grass,” who assume the shapes of letters when they alight to peck at the bait scattered to them by a divine authorial hand.<sup>26</sup> Because Dante’s obedient angels are the spirits of just rulers (Joshua, Charlemagne, William of Orange) who in coordinated flight spell out the phrase “Diligite iustitiam qui iudicatis terram” (Love justice, you who judge the earth), the subtext is explicitly political, though Mandel’shtam’s use of it might conceivably be read as either a divine sanction

22. Segal, *Osip Mandel’shtam*, 1:7.

23. Mandel’shtam’s 1913 essay “On the Addressee” already speaks to these points, averring that the Pushkinian metaphor of the poet as “God’s bird” singing independently of an audience is true only if we understand the bird as “bound by a natural contract with God, an honor even the greatest poetic genius does not dare to dream of,” because “obviously, the one who orders the bird to sing, listens to its song.” The same piece compares the poet to a violinist playing on the psyche of his audience—but because there is no “supplier of living violins,” his ideal instrument is unknown and his poem is compared to a message in a bottle that finds its addressee only by chance. Mandel’shtam, “On the Addressee,” in *CCPL*, 67–68; Mandel’shtam, *SS*, 1:183–84. A full treatment of these themes’ development over the course of Mandel’shtam’s career is beyond the purview of this article, but many of the images in “On the Addressee”—reading as musical performance, the poet’s contract with the mob, the author as a bird under divine orders—recur, focused on more technical issues of reading and writing, in “Conversation about Dante.”

24. Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes*, 477.

25. Glazov-Corrigan, *Mandel’shtam’s Poetics*, 72.

26. Mandel’shtam, “Conversation about Dante,” 438 “Подобно тому как буквы под рукой у писца, повинующегося диктору и стоящего вне литературы как готового продукта, идут на приманку смысла, как на сладостный корм,—так же точно и птицы, намагниченные зеленой травой.” Mandel’shtam, *SS*, 3:255.

of temporal powers or a remonstrance of Stalinist brutality.<sup>27</sup> The scribal pen or baton that figures the possibility of poetry's transition between visible and audible manifestations is thus implicated not just in the transfer of a poetic impulse across sight and sound media—the mechanism by which poetic texts, which are measures of time of spoken language, are preserved beyond the immediate moment of performance into the long time of cultural history—but in a hierarchical structure according to which the obedient body of the angel, scribe, or bird enacts the desire of a higher power.

This paradisiacal writing would seem to be performed, without loss, in the marshaled bodies taking dictation from "that Mind, from which spring thy power / And motion" in order to illustrate how "justice here on earth / Comes from the heaven."<sup>28</sup> Mandel'shtam's description actually reverses the preceding image of a writer's quill mimicking avian flight inasmuch as the birds or angels now reproduce the motions of a scribal pen, so that two possible sources of the gesture of writing appear, by rhetorical sleight of hand, to be the same thing. Jacques Derrida has described this fantasy of the "immediate sign"—in which there is no distinction between signifier and signified and every word is realized in the addressee's understanding exactly as it is meant—as a shared gestural language, a "movement of the magic wand" that disallows any qualitative difference, as, for instance, that between visual writing and oral speech, between the signifying gesture and its replication in "the desiring body of the person who traces" it.<sup>29</sup> It is a perfect writing with a perfect reader. Yet, even as a fantasy, there is something unsettling in the image of the "writer's hand" governing the "obedient" body of the angel, bird, copyist, or reader through an irresistible force of "magnetism"; the word is shaded by its old meaning of hypnosis, since Mandel'shtam, earlier in this section, states that the "precondition" of the *Divine Comedy* is a "session of hypnosis," understood as "writing to dictation," and since his account of the determining electrical impulse deliberately recalls Franz Mesmer's theory of electrical fluids.<sup>30</sup> Friedrich Schiller, whose *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* lays out a dynamic between formative impulse and artistic material that resonates in part with Mandel'shtam's conception, is careful to specify that the artist, like an ideal government, must respect human beings' essential freedom; to use people as material is to violate the principle of free self-realization that is the very source of the aesthetic urge.<sup>31</sup> His stance is especially marked when read against the backdrop of the 1930s, when the phenomenon Boris Groys has called the "total art of Stalinism" (*Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin*) assimilated

27. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: The Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso*, trans. Lawrence Grant White (New York, 1948), 160.

28. *Ibid.*, 161.

29. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, 1976), 234.

30. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 436. Translation modified. Mandel'shtam, *SS*, 3:254.

31. Friedrich Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby, in Friedrich Schiller, *Essays*, ed. Walter Hinderer and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (New York, 1993), 93.



the aesthetic impulse to pattern material after an ideal image into the political impulse of social control.<sup>32</sup>

Mandel'shtam himself concludes his fantasy of divine writing by stressing both its impossibility and its relationship to juridical authority. "Writing and speech are incommensurate," he avers. Whereas series of discrete written words, like the measured patterns of poetry, "correspond to intervals," oral speech is formless and lawless, "always the same anxious flock of birds . . . a mob, which changes laws like gloves, and forgets in the evening the laws promulgated for the general welfare in the morning." The inconstant "mob" of ordinary speech longs for the poetic measure of time and the stabilizing force of law that will articulate its unorchestrated flow of sound into the performance of verse, but is in itself alien to the authoritative burden of written cultural tradition; the perpetual paraphrase of spoken language feels form and history only as "a magnetized impulse, a longing for the stern of a ship, a longing for a forage of words, a longing for an unpromulgated law."<sup>33</sup> If we read the magnetized longing for the stern of a ship as referring to the magnetic mountain in the voyages of Sinbad which attracts passing ships and reduces them to wreckage by drawing out their nails, the "incommensurability" of writing's fixative power and speech's chaotic flight results precisely from the mutual desire that motivates Derrida's immediate sign. The electrical impulse that directs the phallic nail (or compass needle, or pen, or baton) is also the attractive annihilative force, the desire for realization and readership, that threatens to unmake the ship, to end the journey, and to destroy the writer. At the same time, the inconstant flight of speech, perpetually rewording itself, yearns for the authoritative power of form, writing, and canonical law, to which, however, it can relate only through the forcible compulsion to imitate it.

Once again we recognize the fragile intersection of the instruments of poetic form and the ephemeral linguistic performance. Now, however, it articulates a political hierarchy. Where I spoke above of an ideal gestural sign spontaneously reproduced in the desiring body, as the dancer's movements reproduce the wave pattern of the music or the sound waves of a verbal performance reproduce the undulations of written script, here we see its double in the gesture of legal violence that compels the subjected body to obedience. The identification of political power and the technology of writing is a familiar trope. Derrida typifies it as the necessary counterpart of the fantasy of the

32. Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton, 1992), 3. At the other end of the Soviet period, a 1978 story by Vladimir Sorokin, "Zaplyv," utilizes the same Dantean subtext in order to rewrite *Paradiso's* obedient angels as instruments of an authoritarian hell. A host of swimmers, the organs of a propaganda ministry, floats in formation down a Stygian river of death, holding up torches to spell out a vapid political slogan for the audiences crowding the embankments and bridges along the way; the piece was later inserted into his 1999 novel *Goluboe salo*, in which it appears in the course of literature's infernal katabasis into the depths of the earth and, ultimately, the Stalinist past. Vladimir Sorokin, *Utro snaiper* (Moscow, 2002), 7–16.

33. Mandel'shtam, "Conversation about Dante," 438. Translation modified. "Есть намагниченный порыв, тоска по корабельной корме, тоска по червячному корму, тоска по неизданному закону." Mandel'shtam, *SS*, 3:255.

immediate sign, associated with a moral hierarchy in which "an enslaving violence is assigned to total literacy."<sup>34</sup> We are accustomed in this scheme to associate Mandel'shtam with the freedom of living speech against the authoritative power of writing. He explicitly distances himself from a writing contaminated by politics in his 1930 "Fourth Prose": "I have no manuscripts, no notebooks, no archive. I have no handwriting, for I never write. I alone in Russia work with my voice, while all around me consummate swine are writing."<sup>35</sup> A bodily poetry of memory and voice is crystalized in his wife's memoirs as a counterforce against the mechanical writing practiced by Soviet organs of propaganda and censorship. Bemoaning the destruction of Mandel'shtam's sound archive, she specifically opposes the identification of conducting and writing: "I remember O. M. reading and his voice," she recalls, "but it is inimitable and sounds only in my own ears. If you could hear it, it would become clear what he meant by 'conscious fulfillment' or 'conducting' [*dirizhirovan'e*]. Phonetic transcription and notation can give only the crudest outline of the pauses, the rising and falling of the voice."<sup>36</sup> In this account it is the loving body, rather than a technology of reproduction, that preserves the poetic corpus. "Until the age of 56 I remembered everything by heart—prose and verse alike," Nadezhda Mandel'shtam boasts. "At night I ran sleepless about the enormous factory floor and, servicing the machines, muttered verses to myself. I had to have everything by heart—for my papers could be confiscated, or my protectors in a moment of panic could take it all and throw it in the fire."<sup>37</sup> The stark contrast between the organic body that shelters spoken verse and the machinery of totalitarian authority to which poetry becomes exposed through writing is a crucial component in the mythologization of Mandel'shtam as Soviet martyr. He composes verses in his head for fear of leaving written evidence to his persecutors, comes close to tears when Anna Akhmatova recites Dante from memory in "the voice he loved so much," and, in Isaiah Berlin's account, directly intercedes in totalitarian writing by seizing a stack of signed execution forms from a drunken Cheka officer and ripping them to shreds.<sup>38</sup> These anecdotes are woven together into a compelling image of Mandel'shtam as an uncompromising partisan of freedom, life, and the spoken word against authoritarianism, death, and writing.

Lidiia Ginzburg's memoir account of a public reading of "Conversation about Dante" helps link this image to Mandel'shtam's performative practice. In his analysis of Ginzburg's impressions, Andrew Kahn notes "the absence of actual quotation . . . as though she somehow feared detaching the words from the performance."<sup>39</sup> For Ginzburg, what stands out in Mandel'shtam's verse is precisely the "fusion of musicality and language that creates in the

34. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 132.

35. Mandel'shtam, "Fourth Prose," in *CCPL*, 317; Mandel'shtam, *SS*, 3:171.

36. Nadezhda Mandel'shtam, *Vospominaniia* (New York, 1970), 295.

37. *Ibid.*, 295, 362–63.

38. *Ibid.*, 247; Isaiah Berlin, *The Soviet Mind: Russian Culture under Communism*, ed. Henry Hardy (Washington, D.C., 2004), 44.

39. Andrew Kahn, "Lydia Ginzburg's 'Lives of the Poets': Mandel'shtam in Profile," in Emily Van Buskirk and Andrei Zorin, eds., *Lydia Ginzburg's Alternative Literary Identities: A Collection of Articles and New Translations* (Bern, 2012), 180–81.

listener and reader a movement that seems analogous to the poet's own creative process," thereby synchronizing the subjectivities of reader and writer through what Ginzburg calls an "ordering of our consciousness."<sup>40</sup> The poet's own immediate audience thus seems to have reproduced the gesture of creation in personal experience as a gesture of appreciation. Yet far from being a spontaneous expression standing in stark opposition to writing and law, this synchronization of writer and reader is effected through careful supervision of the process of performance. Mandel'shtam "took pains to instruct the actor [Vladimir] Yakhontov how it ought to be," observes Henry Gifford of the poet's mistrust of readers. "He wants the reader to perform the complicated score Dante has put before him, and to control the performance exquisitely."<sup>41</sup> The "calligraphic product" that is written poetry is seen as a notation that directs the reader in detail how to enact the text as sound.

On this point there is a suggestively practical core to Mandel'shtam's philosophy of synesthetic transcription, one related to Dante's own synesthetic images. "Dante, when he feels the need, calls eyelids 'the lips of the eye,'" notes Mandel'shtam. "Suffering crosses the sense organs, producing hybrids, and bringing about the labial eye."<sup>42</sup> The synthesis of the organs of speech and vision points the way to a mode of textual performance in which reading and speaking, watching and listening, intersect each other. "If you attentively watch the mouth of an accomplished poetry reader," writes Mandel'shtam, "it will seem as if he were giving a lesson to deaf-mutes, that is, he works with the aim of being understood even without sounds."<sup>43</sup> As the angels in their "kinetic ballet" perform a divinely inspired text with their dynamic bodies, the lines of a poem literally determine the reader's movements.<sup>44</sup> "The mouth works, the smile nudges the line of verse, cleverly and gaily the lips redden, the tongue trustingly presses itself against the palate. The inner form of the verse is inseparable from the countless changes of expression flitting across the face of the narrator who speaks and feels emotion."<sup>45</sup> The poetic articulations fixed in the visual transcription are orchestrated in time within the reader's body according to the principles of "reflexology of speech"—most obviously by the vocal organs but also by facial expressions and, more obscurely, emotional life.

The loops and swirls of written letters certainly determine the curls

40. Ibid., 184.

41. Henry Gifford, "Mandelstam's *Conversation about Dante*," in Edward J. Brown et al., eds., *Literature, Culture, and Society in the Modern Age: In Honor of Joseph Frank* (Stanford, 1991), 76.

42. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 408. "Итак, страдание скрещивает органы чувств, создает гибриды, приводит к губастому глазу." Mandel'shtam, *SS*, 3:227.

43. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 421. "Если следить внимательно за движением рта у толкового чтеца, то покажется, будто он дает уроки глухонемым, то есть работает с таким расчетом, чтобы быть понятым и без звука, артикулируя каждую гласную с педагогической наглядностью." Mandel'shtam, *SS*, 3:334–40.

44. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 434; Mandel'shtam, *SS*, 3:252.

45. Mandelstam, *CCPL*, 399. "Уста работают, улыбка движет стих, умно и весело алеют губы, язык доверчиво прижимается к нёбу. Внутренний образ стиха неразлучим с бесчисленной сменой выражений, мелькающих на лице говорящего и волнующегося сказителя." Mandel'shtam, *SS*, 3:218.

and convolutions of the reader's lips and tongue in some narrow sense, but Mandel'shtam appears to believe the poetic text's manifestation in the reader's physiology has wider application. In rough drafts of the essay, the preceding quote about "the tongue trustingly pressing itself against the palate" occurs in reference to Aleksandr Pushkin rather than Dante, so I take it as a general statement about the determinative authority of poetic text rather than a comment specific to the Florentine master, who, according to Mandel'shtam, compels his reader to act out stammering, chewing motions, and so on.<sup>46</sup> Among modern European poets Mandel'shtam sees Rimbaud as "the closest to Dante's method," insisting that "long before Arthur Rimbaud's alphabet of colors, Dante linked color with the pleophany of articulate speech."<sup>47</sup> The synesthetic sonnet that Mandel'shtam alludes to here evinces a concentrated effort to make the reader's vocal organs and facial expressions coincide with the poem's content. Thus, the line "*I, pourpres, sang craché, rire des lèvres belles*" forces the reader to produce both the *i* sound that is its subject and, at the same instant, the smile that it describes.<sup>48</sup>

In keeping with more contemporary theory, we can connect this philosophy of transcription and performance to a reader response model whereby the reader is not the ground of meaning's production, per Roland Barthes, but is rather determined by the text. Wolfgang Iser goes so far as to claim that the text, by constituting a set of instructions that must be fulfilled, constructs the reader; Elena Glazov-Corrigan cites this point as consonant with her understanding of Mandel'shtam's poetic theory as one in which the reader's improvised performance responds to the text's determining impulse.<sup>49</sup> Mandel'shtam's essay enters into direct dialogue with the theory of its day, in particular Andrei Belyi's *Glossolaliia*—a treatise on synesthesia and mystical language that, like "Conversation about Dante," exists somewhere on the borderland between poetic and critical discourse.<sup>50</sup> During the writing of "Conversation about Dante," Mandel'shtam kept avid company with the venerable symbolist, whose "poem about sound" directly informed Mandel'shtam's metaphorization of textual performance as a "kinetic ballet" in its insistent characterization of the tongue as a eurythmic dancer mimicking language via gesture.<sup>51</sup> Amply illustrated with frames depicting a tongue, a dancer, and a written letter all mutually imitating a primal movement, *Glossolaliia*

46. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 443; Mandel'shtam, *SS*, 3:400.

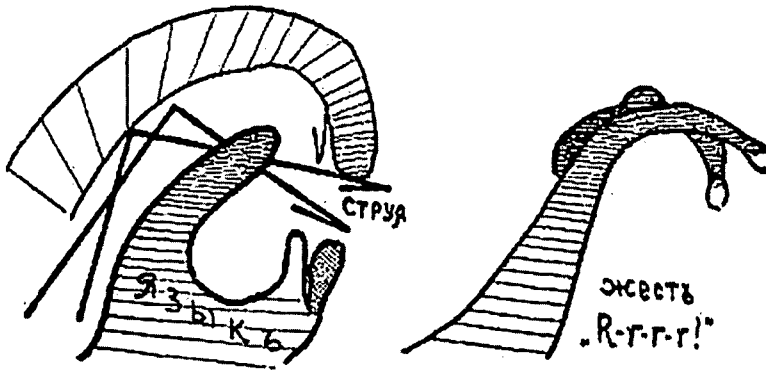
47. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 416, 437; Mandel'shtam, *SS*, 3:254, 3:235.

48. Arthur Rimbaud, *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters, a Bilingual Edition*, trans. Wallace Fowlie (Chicago, 2005), 140. Emphasis added.

49. Glazov-Corrigan, *Mandel'shtam's Poetics*, 133.

50. On the poet's friendship with Belyi, see Nadezhda Mandel'shtam, *Vospominaniia*, 162. The word *glossolaliia* occurs once in "Conversation about Dante," in reference to Dante "combining the incombable" functions of space and time. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 439; *SS*, 3:256. Jane Gary Harris suggests that although Belyi is never directly mentioned he serves as Mandel'shtam's interlocutor throughout the essay; its early drafts do explicitly ascribe to Belyi the idea that the human gait, or regulated periodic movement of the body, is the most developed form of conscious movement. See Harris's notes to "Conversation about Dante," in *CCPL*, 678.

51. Andrei Belyi, *Glossolaliia*, with parallel translation by Thomas R. Beyer (Dornach, 1990), 53. Mandel'shtam had already referred to Belyi's writing as "dancing prose" in a



Belyi's illustration of the tongue and body performing the *r* gesture. Andrei Belyi, *Glossolaliia: Poema o zvuke* (Berlin, 1922; Munich, 1971), 17.

lends the convergence of these phenomena cosmic force through a visual pun on небо, meaning either the sky (небо) or the roof of the mouth (нёбо). The hidden tongue or “armless dancer” in the enclosure of the mouth becomes a microcosm of the free and spontaneously moving body in the space between earth and sky. “The gestures of the arms reflect all the gestures of the armless dancer, dancing in a murky dungeon: beneath the arches of the palate [or sky]; the movement of the arms reflects an armless mimicry.”<sup>52</sup> This recursive structure of gestural imitation—the dancer reflecting the tongue that mimics the dancer—strongly anticipates Mandel’shtam’s dynamic of an authority that is perpetually displaced in the gestural contact between the light wave and the sound wave.

Given the cosmological context of Dante’s poem and its culmination in bodily writing on the heavenly firmament, “Conversation about Dante” may itself be playing with the visual pun on небо when Mandel’shtam writes, in his description of the written text’s determining influence on the vocal organs, that “the tongue trustingly presses itself to the palate.” The pun is obvious in a 1931 poetic fragment: “You, grave, / Don’t dare straighten out the hunchback—silence! / I speak for all with such strength, / That my palate becomes the sky, that my lips / Crack like pink clay. [Ты, могила, / Не смей учить горбатого—молчи! / Я говорю за всех с такою силой, / Что небо стало небом, чтобы губы / Потрескались, как розовая глина.]”<sup>53</sup> In this fragment the undulating body appears as a curved tongue or a hunchback, its wave form preserved against the straightening force of death through a resur-rective opening of the lips or tomb. The visual pun has already emphasized

(negative) 1923 review. Mandelstam, “A. Bely: Diary of an Eccentric,” in *CCPL*, 213–14; Mandel’shtam, *SS*, 2:322.

52. “Жесты рук отражают все жесты безрукой танцовщицы, пляшущей в мрачной темнице: под сводами нёба; безрукую мимику отражает движение рук; те движения—гигант огромного мира, незримого звуку; так язык из пещеры своей управляет громадою, телом; и тело рисует нам жесты; и бури смысла—под ними.” Belyi, *Glossolaliia*, 51.

53. Mandel’shtam, *SS*, 3:57.

the problematic nature of synesthetic transcription: fully appreciated only in the contrast of orthography and pronunciation, it showcases Mandel'shtam as a poet of script as well as speaking, even, or especially, in a text that stages the poetic utterance as a cosmic and everlasting act of giving voice to the dead. As the vocal apparatus becomes visible and the poetic word becomes audible—freeing the "armless dancer" from its dungeon, as Belyi's universal language of imitative gestures would have it—the tongue and palate add a kinetic, physiological dimension to the play of sight and sound. The mouth, an embodiment of the heavens and the earth, is rendered a microcosm of the universe of meaning it keeps from extinction.

The poem's opening lines are closely paraphrased in the 1937 "Verses on the Unknown Soldier," suggesting that Mandel'shtam's thoughts on transcriptive authority, particularly as encoded in the image of a bodily wave that preserves a poetic impulse, constitutes a rich theme throughout his late verse.<sup>54</sup> In the earlier "Slate Ode," the tongue that spans the heavens and the subterranean abyss of death recalls the relationship between human and divine writing, as Gavriil Derzhavin's stick (*palochka*) of chalk figures the Milky Way, a white streak of celestial writing communicating between stars and stones. Furthermore, the cycle of performance wherein the tomb's clay gives birth to the creative word addresses the aporia of resurrection central to poems like "When Psyche-Life Descends to the Shades" (1920), whose Orphic katabasis anticipates the Dantean themes of his 1933 essay: in its final image of hesitation at the Styx, the soul "breathes on the mirror, reluctant to exchange / The copper lozenge from its misty crossing. [дохнет на зеркало и медлит передать / Лепешку медную с туманной переплавы.]"<sup>55</sup> In these lines a synesthetic hesitation between the living word and the visual image figures the moment of performative intersection that is the poetic act—but also an oxymoronic agony in which the word and image exclude each other. As the soul exhales, its articulated breath or poetic utterance is made manifest as an image on the looking glass; but if the trace of mist there is proof of life, it is also proof of the breath having accomplished the fatal "misty crossing" from the depths of the body to the alienated surface of the mirror, where it actually effaces the poet's image by clouding over the glass. Similarly, to spit out the poetic word in the form of a coin stamped with writing is to make a metaphorical exchange between a momentary speech act and a fixed iconographic object; but in the same stroke it is to make the economic exchange that is Charon's price of passage into death. That is to say, we already discern in this text the aporetic and synesthetic displacement between atemporal visual art and dynamic verbal art that in "Conversation about Dante" is oriented toward issues of notation and authority.<sup>56</sup> The theory of transcription the essay elucidates leads, then,

54. "И за Лермонтова Михаила / Я отдам тебе строгий отчет, / Как сутулого учит могила / И воздушная яма влечет." Mandel'shtam, *SS*, 3:123.

55. Mandel'shtam, *SS*, 1:265.

56. Paul de Man argues that tropological economies of life and death necessarily draw the reader into their field of force insofar as the artwork becomes real in its audience's imagination only by absorbing the audience's creative life; in the time of our reading, we become a dead thing, an atemporal artwork, a statue. "By making the dead speak," he writes, "the symmetrical structure of the trope implies, by the same token, that the living

to ways of thinking of Mandel'shtam again primarily as a poet—but as a poet with suggestive and strongly held ideas about technologies of reading and writing in relation to aesthetic articulations of space and time.

### Transcription and Authority

Themes of synesthetic transcription become increasingly entwined with figures of authority in Mandel'shtam's late writings. To treat all the vexed questions of Mandel'shtam's attitude toward political power is, obviously, beyond this essay's scope. However, the scene of divine writing in *Paradiso*, in which the spirits of just rulers spell out a political maxim and the mob of speech longs for the authority of scriptural law, ineluctably implicates figures of ideal poetic authority in issues of political constitution. In these closing pages I want at least to recognize their points of contact. How can we relate Mandel'shtam's depiction of angelic dictation to his documented awareness of writing's use, or misuse, as a tool of political control? And how can we approach poetry with the "conviction" and "trustfulness" he recommends, when the "hegemony of the baton" that culminates the reading process is identified not just with dictation but dictatorship?

Mikhail Gasparov, arguing against Nadezhda Mandel'shtam's interpretation of "Verses on the Unknown Soldier" as an ethical counterweight to the "Ode to Stalin," has provocatively championed the need for a more complex understanding of Mandel'shtam's relationship to political authority, suggesting that "all the key verses of his last years deal with the acceptance of Soviet reality."<sup>57</sup> Here and in his reading of the "Ode" itself Gasparov addresses Mandel'shtam's efforts to participate in the relationship between an authoritative dictator and a worshipful multitude: in figuratively "merging with Stalin," the poet accomplishes a "merging with the people."<sup>58</sup> In this light Mandel'shtam's emphasis on the technical instruments that implement authorial or authoritarian intent may be occasioned by a desire to reconcile aesthetics with an essentially totalitarian conception of law. Projected from the person or the personified word onto the hierarchical structures of reading and writing that communicate cultural texts to future generations, structures of political authority can be figurally reinterpreted as guarantors of preservation.

In "Conversation about Dante" Mandel'shtam anticipates our mistrust on this point but complains that "therein lies the problem: in authority, or to be more exact, in authoritativeness, we can see only insurance against error and we are not at all equipped to understand that grandiose music of trustfulness."<sup>59</sup> While his appeal to faith in powers beyond the self may

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are struck dumb, frozen in their own death." Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, 1984), 78.

57. M. L. Gasparov, *O. Mandel'shtam: Grazhdanskaia lirika 1937 goda* (Moscow, 1996), 18.

58. M. L. Gasparov, "Metricheskoe sosledstvo 'Ody' Stalinu," in Robin Aizlewood and Diana Myers, eds., *Stoletie Mandel'shtama: Materialy Simpoziuma* (Tenafly, N.J., 1994), 105.

59. The "one time" Nadezhda Mandel'shtam admits to interfering in her husband's poetic affairs was her refusal to write to dictation Mandel'shtam's claim that Dante's poem

be difficult to accept in the immediate context of Stalinism, it is not wholly alien to the figure of authoritative writing elsewhere in his oeuvre. If we can find moments, as in "Fourth Prose," when Mandel'shtam treats writing as the trace and ground of a debased political authority, we can also find moments when writing is the carrier of a divine law beyond justification. I. M. Semenko, in her analysis of the genetics of "The Slate Ode," shows that the first preserved draft's relatively transparent image of a "patriarch" with a stone tablet—Derzhavin with his chalked slate or Moses with the Commandments—morphs over the course of the revision process into the metonymically related image of a writing stick (*svintsovaia palochka*), while "the inscription [*zapis'*] made by human hands upon the tablet . . . becomes the metaphorical geological inscription of fault lines and cataclysms."<sup>60</sup> The earth becomes a perfect text—analogue to Dante's climactic vision of "the scattered leaves of all the universe" bound by God's love "in one eternal book" or to Mallarmé's dictum that "everything on earth exists in order to end up in a book"—of which the poetic or legal text is a fragment or miniature model.<sup>61</sup> And what we mistrustfully take for a destructive, fracturing force—Derzhavin's river of time, which carries every human work into the maw of oblivion—may, in the final calculus that exceeds our comprehension, be the operation of patriarchal, authoritative writing, which miraculously preserves a fragile poetic inheritance against the entropic forces of chaos, change, and loss.

In this conception written verse is the medium of an originary authority, but the process is less like that described in Plato's *Phaedrus*, where transcribed speech is an ineffectual, orphaned imitation of the spoken word, and more like the heavenly impulse that Socrates, in the *Ion* dialogue, likens to the magnetic power by which a chain of iron rings, lessening in intensity but not in quality at each point of transmission, is suspended from a single lodestone—the original reference for Mallarmé's electrical flash of inspiration, Mesmer's account of magnetic fluids' hypnotic influence, and Mandel'shtam's own characterization of the poetic impulse's communication between writers and readers as a "magnetic" attraction. In Socrates's scheme the aesthetic urge passes from the divine muse through the possessed poet to the rapt reader, all of whom "receive the power of the original magnet from one another," as "the Muse first of all inspires men herself; and from these inspired

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is "directed towards authority; its sound is fullest; it is most concert-like at the point where it is caressed by dogma," which she interpreted as a concession to Soviet power. Mandel'shtam, "Conversation about Dante," 424; Mandel'shtam, *SS*, 3:242. "Mandel'shtam grew angry that I had become too smart for my own good and had begun to meddle. I told him to get a new wife . . . 'or hire a stenographer, like normal people: she'll write anything you like and not bat an eye.'" Nadezhda Mandel'shtam, *Vtoraia kniga* (Paris, 1972), 222. The poet seems to have eventually reclaimed his scribe's obedience, but the anecdote points to his own essay's origin in a dynamic of both dictation and sexual relations. On this point there are interesting parallels in Friedrich A. Kittler's analysis of gendered transcription technology in his *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, 1999), 183–86.

60. I. M. Semenko, *Poetika pozdnego Mandel'shtama: Ot chernovykh redaktsii k okonchatel'nomu tekstu*, 2nd ed. (Moscow, 1997), 10.

61. Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, 188. "Tout, au monde, existe pour aboutir à un livre." Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes*, 378.



persons a chain of other persons is suspended, who take the inspiration.”<sup>62</sup> For Mandel'shtam, Dante himself is not an originary author but a link in the chain who is subject to the power of his muse: he “writes to dictation, he is a copyist, he is a translator.”

When written down and ready, this is still not the end of the process, for the written object must be taken somewhere, must be shown to someone to be checked and praised.

It is not enough to say “copying,” for what we are involved with here is calligraphy in response to dictation by the most terrifying and impatient dictators. The dictator-overseer is far more important than the so-called poet.

. . . Now I must labor a little longer, and then I must show my notebook, bathed in the tears of a bearded schoolboy, to my most severe Beatrice, who radiates not only beauty but literacy.

(И когда уже написано и готово, на этом еще не ставится точка, но необходимо куда-то понести, кому-то показать, чтобы проверили и похвалили.

Тут мало сказать списыванье—тут чистописанье под диктовку самых грозных и нетерпеливых дикторов. Диктор-указчик гораздо важнее так называемого поэта.

. . . Вот еще немного потружусь, а потом надо показать тетрадь, облитую слезами бородатого школьника, строжайшей Беатриче, которая сияет не только славой, но и грамотностью.)<sup>63</sup>

Although literacy remains implicated in problems of poetic and indeed political authority, some things along the way have been turned around. The tracing of letters that had seemed the bodying forth of legal writ is here subject to a “dictator-overseer” identified not with writing but with reading—the schoolmaster or censor who approves the work. In a parallel metaphoric scheme, the authoritative pen or phallus that fertilizes and gives meaningful shape to feminine material now “takes dictation from the verbal material itself,” as V. B. Mikushevich puts it.<sup>64</sup> Finally, where we might have expected a bearded god or mustachioed tyrant disseminating the tablets of law, we instead find a bearded poet submitting copybooks to his young muse, a sly literalization of the essay’s early trope, borrowed from Dante himself, of the teacher being “younger than the student.”<sup>65</sup> The source of attractive authority, which Mandel'shtam implores us to hear as a “grandiose music of trustfulness,” is the power to dictate and to censor writing; but at the same time it is manifested as a beloved and divine force, the origin of the text and its ideal reader,

62. Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 2 vols. (New York, 1937), 1:291, 1:289.

63. Mandel'shtam, “Conversation about Dante,” 436–37; Mandel'shtam, *SS*, 3:254.

64. V. B. Mikushevich, “Estetika Mandel'shtama v ‘Razgovore o Dante,’” in Margarita Z. Vorob'eva, ed., *Smert' i bessmertie poeta: Materialy mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii, posviashchennoi 60-letiiu so dnia gibeli O. E. Mandel'shtama* (Moscow, 2001), 150.

65. Mandel'shtam, “Conversation about Dante,” 400. “В дантовском понимании учитель моложе ученика.” Mandel'shtam, *SS*, 3:220. The subtext for this aphorism is Dante's metaphor of his own teacher, Brunetto Latini, as the winner of a race in *Inferno*, canto 15, lines 121–24; the source for the image of the bearded Dante rebuked by Beatrice is *Purgatorio*, canto 31, in which Beatrice chastises Dante for his faithlessness.

to which the poet of the *Divine Comedy*, like a host of angels flocking to the magnetic power of scripture or a dancing body yielding to the music, submits out of his own desire and faith.<sup>66</sup>

As a fantasy of a censor to whose desired dictation the poet joyfully produces his "calligraphic products," this sexualized attraction between writing and speech, authority and action, instrument and material, is, in one respect, the displacement of a very real historical violence. However, Mandel'shtam also attempts to locate the genesis and realization of the poetic text precisely within this cycle of displacement. The *Divine Comedy* is apparently produced somewhere in the difference between authoritative dictation and censorious reading, which I understand to be analogized with other dynamics of perpetual displacement—above all, the wave-like alternation between light and sound, space and time, that is regulated by the conductor's baton. Indeed, this alternation of genesis and reception under the perpetual aegis of Beatrice, the speaking muse and reading censor, is precisely the "coordination of the impulse and the text," the "law of transmutable and convertible poetic material," that the essay's conclusion programmatically enjoins scholars to investigate.<sup>67</sup> While one element at play is the theme of reconciliation with temporal powers through a "Slate Ode"-like faith in a more distant and inscrutable destiny, Mandel'shtam's persistent dissolution of an authoritative origin into a structure of difference and reciprocal desire also suggests that he is seeking, in the dynamic of writing and performance, a mechanism that will cherish and sustain the poetic impulse more effectively than any single individual's gesture of imitation or control.

The baton, whose waving motions orchestrate audible music via visual movement by marking a common time, is not, in this sense, an extraneous and essentially oppressive function but rather the condition of a transcription through which poetry can be written and read in perpetuity, its vital spark oscillating between visual and audible media over a series of performances. To be sure, this is a variation on the fantasy of the immediate sign, in which the rhetoric of desire fills and obscures the signifying gap between text and performance. Yet even as a fantasy of sensual poetic plenitude, writes Derrida, "the gesture of passion rather than that of need . . . guards us against an already alienating speech, a speech already carrying in itself death and absence."<sup>68</sup> In

66. This imagery anticipates the closing lines of Mandel'shtam's 1937 lyric "Я в львиный ров и в крепость погружен," in whose conclusion the poet's participation in a universal joy (like that of Dante's angels) is compared to the music of an "organ" accompanying a female voice: "И я сопровождал восторг вселенский, / Как вполголосная органная игра / Сопровождает голос женский." Mandel'shtam, SS, 3:123. The text is metrically related to the "Ode to Stalin," composed that same month, and Gasparov reads its final stanzas as similarly sketching out the poet's role in the relationship between the dictator and the multitude, the poet first being equated with the leader and then entering into a global harmony. Gasparov, "Metriceskoe sosedstvo 'Ody' Stalinu," 103.

67. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 442. "Это закон обратимой и обращающейся поэтической материи, существующей только в исполнительском порыве. . . . Здесь все вывернуто: существительное является целью, а не подлежащим фразы. Предметом науки о Данте станет, как я надеюсь, изучение соподчиненности порыва и текста." Mandel'shtam, SS, 3:259.

68. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 234–35.

mediating between sight and sound, the baton occupies the site of hierarchical differentiation, but as an integral rather than an imposed authority. “Far from being an external, administrative accessory which could be done away with or a distinctive symphonic police which could be done away with in an ideal state,” stresses Mandel’shtam, the “invulnerable baton,” as the dynamic instrument that regulates and partakes of both space and time, “qualitatively contains in itself all the elements in the orchestra.”<sup>69</sup> In the essay’s rhetorical structure, the baton indeed contains, or is at least figuratively implicated in, the whole series of elements Mandel’shtam identifies with successful reading: magnetic impulse, sight, sound, writing, performance, orchestration, authority, oscillation. Moreover, because in poetry “everything is measure and everything derives from measure,” an instrument to measure time and make it visible is a condition, not just of the successful manifestation of articulated rhythmic intervals in a given poetic performance, but of the techniques of transcription that make possible their repeated performance—that is to say, that enable cultural tradition.

Chief among these techniques is, of course, writing, which the flight of the baton insistently figures. Mandel’shtam allegorizes the historical origin of writing by rehearsing the orchestra’s evolution from an audible to a visual measure of time—his essay’s most explicit image of writing as coextensive with history, and therefore an appropriate end for my own. Although Dante anticipates the baton in his poetry, Mandel’shtam tells us that it was not until 1732 that a music director began to beat out time with his hand rather than stamping his foot; in 1753 time was rapped out with a stick; and, finally, in 1810 an orchestra was “conducted with a baton made of rolled-up paper, ‘without the least noise.’”<sup>70</sup> In this account the audible and temporal art of music spontaneously gives rise to a principle of synesthetic authority, itself mute, which governs music by articulating it in discrete sections. For Mandel’shtam this invention parallels other technologies that render the continuous flow of time apprehensible as a series of segments corresponding to poetic measure, as, for example, the imprecise needle of the sundial was replaced by the mechanical clock that ticks off distinct seconds, or the pen’s spacing of letters on paper counteracts the tendency of “colloquial language” to “melt down the hostile chunks” of distinct written words.<sup>71</sup> The early baton’s relation-

69. Mandelstam, “Conversation about Dante,” 426.

В пляске дирижера, стоящего спиной к публике, находит свое выражение химическая природа оркестровых звучаний. И эта палочка далеко не внешний, административный придаток или своеобразная симфоническая полиция, могущая быть устраненной в идеальном государстве. Она не что иное, как танцующая химическая формула, интегрирующая внятные для слуха реакции. Прошу также отнюдь не считать ее добавочным немым инструментом, придуманным для вящей наглядности и доставляющим дополнительное наслаждение. В некотором смысле эта неязвимая палочка содержит в себе качественно все элементы оркестра.

Mandel’shtam, *SS*, 3:244–45.

70. Mandelstam, “Conversation about Dante,” 426; Mandel’shtam, *SS*, 3:244.

71. Mandelstam, “Some Notes on Poetry,” 165; Mandel’shtam, *SS*, 2:298. Translation modified. Nelson Goodman speaks at length of the relation between transcription and

ship to writing is underscored by its having been made of "rolled-up paper," reminiscent of the "rolled-up manuscripts . . . heavy and smeared with time, like the trumpet of the archangel," in the epigraph to Mandel'shtam's 1928 novella *The Egyptian Stamp*.<sup>72</sup> Where this epigraph expresses an aversion to the scroll, which is both writing on paper and a divine, apocalyptic musical instrument, "Conversation about Dante" looks to the same synesthetic figure as the spontaneous development of cultural tradition, the guarantor of the successful performance of cultural texts, and the mechanism that preserves them against forgetfulness, distortion, and decay. Alongside its invigorating theory of poetic performance, the essay reminds us that every such theory is also, at the same time, a theory of the notation that sustains the text from one reading to the next.

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digitization, arguing that only a transcription composed of discrete elements can be realized in another medium (as, e.g., a musical score is realized in sound performance or written text in oral recital). Nelson Goodman, *The Languages of Art*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, 1976), 159–64, 177–92.

72. Osip Mandelstam, *The Noise of Time: Selected Prose*, trans. Clarence Brown (Evanston, 2002), 133; Mandel'shtam, *SS*, 2:465.