Introduction
Mastery and Method in Poetry: Osip Mandel'shtam's "Conversation about Dante"

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> The major antinomy of Dante's experience is to be found in his rushing back and forth between the example and the experiment. . . . The position of the experimenter with respect to factology, insofar as he aspires toward a trusting union with it, is by nature unstable, agitated and off balance.
>
> —Osip Mandel'shtam, "Conversation about Dante"

One of the greatest controversies in Dante scholarship concerns the authenticity of the epistle to Cangrande della Scala, in which the poet (if it is indeed him) provides his patron with exegetical and epistemological strategies to be applied in approaching *Paradiso*, the third part of his *Divine Comedy*. Accompanying this section as a gift to della Scala, the epistle in itself would not have appeared in any sense out of the ordinary had it not followed its requisite dedication with an extensive commentary on the poem.[1] It is hardly surprising, then, that scholars heatedly debate the authorship of this letter, which purports no less than to prescribe how the *Paradiso* should be read, claiming authority of and over the text. Most significantly, the epistle contends that, just like scripture, the *Divine Comedy* is "polysemous, that is, having many meanings," requiring a manifold approach; specifically, the author of the letter cites the availability of literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical readings.[2] In providing commentary on his own work, especially such as leads the reader down several interpretive paths at once, does the poet solidify his authority over the text or weaken it? On the one hand, the letter in question, even as it begins humbly with the obligatory homiletic, constitutes an assertion of authority: the author is instructing his patron exactly how the text should be received. On the other hand, Dante's prerogative is somewhat lessened by his

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1. See Jay Rudd, *Critical Companion to Dante: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work* (New York, 2008), 293.

2. Quoted in Allan H. Gilbert, ed., *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden* (Detroit, 1962), 202.

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deference to the accepted medieval practice of fourfold exegesis (applied, most famously, to scripture).[3] And yet, even as he justifies his exegetical method via allusion to illustrious predecessors, Dante revises the course they ordain: unlike his foregoers, he equalizes all four interpretations.[4] Introducing this ostensibly slight variation on tradition, Dante gracefully reasserts his authorial autonomy, at the same time broadening his poem's polysemic field for the reader. This dance between dependence on tradition and creative choice, between submission and resistance, forms the "major antinomy" of Dante's poetics for Osip Mandel'shtam, in whose commentary on the Florentine it stands as a constant oscillation "between the example and the experiment."[5]

The Antinomy

We might expect this same wavering to characterize Mandel'shtam's "Conversation about Dante" itself, which multiple commentators, Iurii Levin chief among them, have interpreted as an autocommentary to Mandel'shtam's own poetry.[6] The purpose of Mandel'shtam's treatise on Dante, then, can be compared to that of the disputed epistle: to serve as an exposition of a method, a mode of reading-induced creation at once deferential and disruptive. Paradoxically, "Conversation about Dante" advances restless questioning as a form of reverential study, the insecurity and unsteadiness a precondition of unrivaled mastery of poetic material, and poetic material itself as an energetic field generated by two rival forces, one toward unity and the other toward diffusion.[7] Perhaps in its very adherence to this chain of paradoxical principles, the text enacts that which it calls for: "the original anti-commentary to the work of generations of scholastics, creeping philologists and pseudo-biographers."[8] In contrast to authoritative and impassive commentators, Mandel'shtam dilutes each claim to authority and influence with a disclosure of deference, delight, and doubt. In lieu of claims to knowledge, Mandel'shtam's anticommentary offers a qualitatively different form of poetic mastery, that of performative understanding.

3. This fourfold system of interpretation goes back to (among others) Augustine, who derived it in turn from the method of Origen, and it was popularized by Thomas Aquinas. See Madeleine Pelner Cosman and Linda Gale Jones, *Handbook to Life in the Medieval World*, 3 vols. (New York, 2008), 2:341. For an example of Thomas's fourfold interpretation, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, part 1, question 1, article 10, at www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.FP_Q1_A10.html (last accessed 1 May 2014).

4. Susan Handelman asserts that while Thomas ascribes primacy to the literal meaning, Dante presents all four interpretations as equal. Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany, 1982), 108.

5. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 423.

6. See Iurii Levin, "Zametki k 'Razgovoru o Dante,'" in *Izbrannye trudy: Poetika, semiotika* (Moscow, 1998), 142–52. Here Levin constructs his own fourfold scheme for reading Mandel'shtam's "Conversation": as an essay on Dante, a theory of poetics, an autocommentary, and a poem. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

7. "Instead of merely retelling the so-called content, we will look at this link in Dante's work as a continuous transformation of the substratum of poetic material, which preserves its unity and aspires to pierce its own internal self." Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 414.

8. Ibid., 440.

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Mandel'shtam's ruminations on the matter of poetry, including his own, come as if voiced by a guide, one reader advising another. (Note the pedagogical inflections of his first-person plural imperatives: "Let us investigate how the conductor's baton first appeared. . . . Let us listen to how the conductor's baton was born.")[9] For both Dante and Mandel'shtam, what poetry is (the theory of poetry, poetics) is deeply connected to what poetry does; its effect is measured by how it functions in the world, resonant especially in the act of reading.[10] Acknowledging readerly authority, both the epistle and the "Conversation" entangle the question of exegesis with that of power or control over poetry. Moreover, the reader of Mandel'shtam's brief yet seminal text becomes immediately aware that this is no placid scholarly meditation but a fiery portrayal of artistic energy. From the very outset, when poetry is said to result from the collision of static discourse with the force of "prosodic transmutation," the essay penetrates unyieldingly into the depths of Dante's poem, poetic essence, and being.[11]

The question of where poetic power's particular dynamo lies is imperative here; when a poet makes a gesture of interpretive concession toward the reader, a second authority figure is introduced, complicating this locus's clear delineation. The task of analyzing Mandel'shtam's reading of Dante has inevitably led each of this special section's essayists to reflect on the complex issue of Mandel'shtam's understanding of poetic agency at large. Given the timing of the essay's composition—during the highly politicized early 1930s—the question of authorship and authority explicitly addressed in the essay seems inextricably (if implicitly) linked with issues of political power. In its discussion of aesthetic method, then, this special section contributes to the controversial debates on Mandel'shtam's relationship to political life.

Perhaps the most impactful reconsideration of Mandel'shtam's involvement in 1930s Soviet political discourse is that of renowned philologist Mikhail Gasparov in his *O. Mandel'shtam: Grazhdanskaia lirika 1937 goda*. This study unsettled the longstanding portrait of the poet as resolute dissenter, a view that has gone hand in hand with the history of his victimization and extermination by the Stalinist regime.[12] Mandel'shtam's brave "Stalin Epigram" (1933), which denounces the reign of terror and led to the poet's arrest, is far better known than his "Ode to Stalin" (1937), which, along with "Verses on

9. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 426.

10. Nancy Pollak proposes that for Mandel'shtam, the making of poetry is indivisible from reading in and into the poetic tradition; "he thus defines the poet as a reader." Nancy Pollak, *Mandelstam the Reader* (Baltimore, 1995), 5.

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

12. Rereading "Verses on the Unknown Soldier" (Stikhi o neizvestnom soldate), Gasparov proposes an interpretation radically different from all prior ones: "The poem, which begins with the mass deaths in Stalin's war against his own people, appears quite complete and perfectly matches the traditional image of Mandel'shtam as a fighter against the regime and as its victim. And yet, this understanding is incorrect. In the poem's next-to-last redactions, this episode is followed by twelve more lines that make it clear that this roll call takes place not in a camp but during a military call-up; not among persons repudiated by the state but, to the contrary, among those summoned by it. This is not a renunciation of the Soviet regime but rather the acceptance thereof." M. L. Gasparov, *O. Mandel'shtam: Grazhdanskaia lirika 1937 goda* (Moscow, 1996), 14.

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the Unknown Soldier" (1937), according to Gasparov, constituted an attempt to accede to the power of the so-called Great Father. As Jacob Emery discusses in his article, the poet's own amanuensis, his wife, Nadezhda Mandel'shtam, detected notes of this coming capitulation in "Conversation about Dante," even though he wrote it in the early '30s, during a period of defiance. It is perhaps doubly ironic that Nadezhda Iakovlevna rebelled here, refusing to obediently record such poetic moments as sounded an acquiescent note, for in the piece itself Mandel'shtam likens Dante's poetic activity precisely to the labor of a scribe submissively taking dictation.[13] "Dante fawns upon authority," claims Mandel'shtam, defending this stance as founded on trust rather than fear.[14] Defying her husband's will, Nadezhda Iakovlevna in effect calls into question the scribe's full surrender to the authority of the dictator-author. But this gesture suggests that, herself unyielding to the hierarchy of authority, she nevertheless understood it in no uncertain terms: above stands the ruler, then the poet, and then, finally, the scribe. For Mandel'shtam scholars, including the contributors to this section, the referent of *authority* is more ambiguous.

Readers of Mandel'shtam's "Conversation" may be forgiven their disorientation. On the one hand, in describing the particular potency of Dante's poetry, the text overflows with metaphors of mighty forays, charges, and explosions; on the other, it asserts Dante's meek acquiescence, his utter submission to authority. The question of how the poet and his poetry can be both vigorous and yielding is further complicated by the indeterminacy surrounding the referents of *authority* in Mandel'shtam's perception thereof; moreover, the very term the poet uses for bringing poetry into being, *ispolnitel'stvo*, permits two contradictory interpretations.[15] As Elena Glazov-Corrigan notes, the word can signify both "creative performance" (with all the concomitant connotations of artistic initiative) and "obedience to the command"—thus affirming both activity and passivity at the same time.[16] Such contradictory cues have led scholars to take diametrically opposing positions on Mandel'shtam's theory of poetry. For example, in her study *Mandel'shtam's Poetics: A Challenge to Postmodernism*, Glazov-Corrigan notes the ostensible kinship between Mandel'shtam's foregrounding of ispolnitel'stvo in the poetic process and the poststructuralist "death of the author." Lest Mandel'shtam's poetics be understood via the prism of poststructuralism as a relinquishing of the author's authority—as, ultimately, the abandonment of any anchoring presence, coherence, or tradition in favor of an interpretive free-for-all—Glazov-Corrigan assays an ingenious harmonizing of Mandel'shtam's accent on futurity and readerly performance with the ever-present subtle pull of authorial guidance. On the other side of the spectrum is a far more political reading of "Conversation about Dante" by L. R. Gorodetskii. A scholar of the Judaic and biblical traditions, Gorodetskii

13. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 436.

14. Ibid., 424.

15. Osip Mandel'shtam, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh* (Moscow, 2010; hereafter *PSS*), 2:200.

16. Elena Glazov-Corrigan, *Mandel'shtam's Poetics: A Challenge to Postmodernism* (Toronto, 2000), 62.

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reads Mandel'shtam's approach to poetry as harking back, in numerous ways, to Talmudic exegesis—specifically, to the Talmud's conceptualization of the world as a text to be deciphered, its metaphoric thinking and nonlinearity, and its heightened sense of communicativity and dialogism. Gorodetskii is not the first to note this similarity, but he certainly provides the most unorthodox of explanations for it, citing Mandel'shtam's interest in Soviet newspeak and the language of Iosif Stalin.[17] According to Gorodetskii, Stalin, Mandel'shtam, and the Talmudists share an understanding of the text as life itself, as well as a method of generating texts as a form of ontological cognition via orientation toward semantic maneuvering: "The primary meaning of Mandel'shtam's statement on the language of Stalin (Soviet newspaper newspeak [*novoiaz*]) as 'my language' is that both Stalin and Mandel'shtam are people of the text par excellence, and brilliant textual manipulators as well."[18] In Gorodetskii's view, this semantic manipulation, in the sense of both engaging in rhetoric and controlling the reader, corresponds to a Talmudist's perpetual inquiry into the text and fiery attempts at persuasion.

Scholars (notably Geoffrey Hartman) have exposed commonalities between Talmudic and poststructuralist methods of interpretation;[19] thus, it is not surprising that what looks poststructuralist to Glazov-Corrigan should appear Talmudic to Gorodetskii. What is intriguing, however, is that the very elements leading Glazov-Corrigan to fear for the author's wellbeing and his ever-diminishing authority suggest to Gorodetskii the contrary, Mandel'shtam's supreme control of the shocked-and-awed readers.

Explosion as Metaphor and Method

To support the view of Mandel'shtam's poetry as a weapon, of the poet-warrior annihilating his readers' semantic defenses and determinedly spurring them (albeit along circuitous paths) into uncharted territories of being, Gorodetskii adduces "explosion" as the central trope of "Conversation about Dante": "Quite emphatically, there often appears a semantic space of explosion [*semanticheskoe prostranstvo vzryva*], a breakthrough [*proryv*] in the autocommentary on his own semantics."[20]

The dynamic mechanism of Mandel'shtam's text indeed operates like a chain reaction: the movement of the text is conditioned by explosion and

17. In his article "Mandel'shtam's *Ode to Stalin*: History and Myth," *Russian Review* 41, no. 4 (October 1982), Gregory Freidin gives an insightful analysis of the poet's borrowings from the "contemporary official rhetoric in all of its maniacal verbosity" in constructing this ode (412). Readings that note Talmudic echoes in Mandel'shtam's approach to poetry include Mikhail Epshtein, "Tsadik i talmudist: Sravnitel'nyi opyt o Pasternake i Mandel'shtame," *22*, no. 77 (June–July 1991): 186–209; Pollack, *Mandelstam the Reader*, 9; and Clare Cavanagh, *Osip Mandelstam and the Modernist Creation of Tradition* (Princeton, 1995), 199.

18. L. R. Gorodetskii, *Kvantovye smysly Osipa Mandel'shtama: Semantika vzryva i apparat inoiazychnykh interferentsii* (Moscow, 2012), 147.

19. See Geoffrey Hartman, "Midrash as Law and Literature," *Journal of Religion* 74, no. 3 (July 1994): 338–55; and Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*.

20. Gorodetskii, *Kvantovye smysly Osipa Mandel'shtama*, 25.

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fission, the collision of its various elements. The explosions (*vzryvy*) in this essay, not to mention its surges (*naplyvy*) and thrusts (*poryvy*), are too numerous to list; to quote just a few,

> The art of speech distorts our face in precisely this way; it disrupts its calm, destroys its mask. . . . Every word rushes to burst forth, to fly from the lips, to run away, to clear a space for others. . . . Only by stretching the point can one apply the term 'development' to this series of projectiles constructed in flight, which fly away, one after the other, in order to maintain the integrity of the movement itself. . . . It is terrifying to think that the blinding explosions of contemporary physics and kinetics were used 600 years before their thunder sounded.[21]

The overall effect of such passages is to construct a vision of poetry as a disruptive force that penetrates the calcified surface of being (and not just figuratively but as a physiological reaction evident on the reader's contorted face). It is especially through his explosions that Mandel'shtam forecloses the well-trod path of the search for meaning, nurturing instead in readers a perception of poetry's potentially euphoric impact on their very being and inculcating such methods of reading as render this impact more resonant.

Such a combustion-fueled transformation of readership, and of culture generally, might signal the dictatorial zeal of the poet, and yet it is possible to theorize explosiveness as a mechanism of cultural innovation in much less aggressive terms. In *Culture and Explosion*, for example, Iurii Lotman had in mind a much less total(itarian) view of cultural explosiveness.[22] In that study, the famed semiotician asserts that every sphere of culture includes both gradual development, based on the continuity and solidity of certain forms and norms, and dynamic, explosive ruptures. Moreover, both kinds of forces—the forces of stability and predictability, as well as those of volatility—owe their functionality to the existence of the other.[23] While the greatest intensity of information arises from the collision of opposing elements, each force has a key role to play: ruptures fuel innovation, while stability ensures succession and tradition.

Similarly, Mandel'shtam pinpoints dynamism and transformation as quintessential to poetry, presenting the Dantesque metaphor as the engine of metamorphosis precisely in its joining of irreconcilable elements.[24] Mandel'shtam admires Dante's method of anachronistically bringing together literary figures from different eras and places and having them engage in conversation, perceiving in this synchronicity and complementarity Dante's paramount discovery: "Having combined the uncombinable, Dante altered

21. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 399, 414, 433.

22. Juri Lotman, *Culture and Explosion*, ed. M. Grishakova, trans. Wilma Clark (Berlin, 2009). Having conceived the developmental model on which Gorodetskii draws for his interpretation of Mandel'shtam, Lotman, surprisingly, never mentions "Conversation about Dante" among his many examples of explosive texts.

23. Ibid., 12.

24. According to Mandel'shtam, the search for comparisons is at the heart of Dante's method of discovering and experiencing the world, of being in it: "'I compare, therefore I am,' so Dante might have put it. He was the Descartes of metaphor." Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 451.

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the structure of time."[25] And just as Mandel'shtam theorizes the dynamism of poetry, so does Lotman that of culture—the collision, in his view, of irreconcilable, alien semiotic spheres: "A minimally functional structure requires the presence of at least two languages and their incapacity, each independently of the other, to embrace the world external to each of them. This incapacity is not a deficiency, but rather a condition of existence, as it dictates the necessity of *the other* (another person, another language, another culture)."[26] Both Mandel'shtam and Lotman apply research performed in the natural sciences (especially thermodynamics) to conceptualize cultural systems as ultimately open to external influences (and thus to change and development) rather than closed in on themselves. For Lotman, who wrote his *Culture and Explosion* in 1991, as revolutionary developments were sweeping across Russia, such a theory of cultural process has political implications. By the essay's conclusion, it becomes clear that culture is to be conceived here as a ternary, not binary, system; Lotman seeks third-order elements neither entirely identical nor inimical to their predecessors. As opposed to a binary understanding of rupture in which the old is blasted and replaced by the new, his ternary system features explosions of mitigated destructiveness; the new does not fully supersede the old, but both elements abide in a newly risen structure. The coexistence of such elements, neither congruent nor entirely disparate, ensures the explosion's creative rather than destructive nature and the perpetuity of culture as a continuous discontinuity: "In the sphere of reality, explosions cannot disappear and the only real issue under discussion is how to overcome the fatal choice between stagnation and catastrophe."[27]

According to Lotman's theory of cultural dynamics, explosion is a generative force because it functions on the principle of complementarity rather than totality.[28] The innovative rupture is creative only insofar as it does not completely supersede all that came before. Much like Mandel'shtam's view of poetic matter, Lotman's theory of explosion postulates the reciprocal impact of example and experiment, with example paving the way for experiment and experiment imbuing example with resurgent life.

25. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 439.

26. Lotman, *Culture and Explosion*, 2. Emphasis in the original.

27. Ibid., 171.

28. Indeed, in his own commentary on Dante's *Divine Comedy* we find Lotman pinpointing two highly pertinent axes of movement: the absolute, transcendent movement upward that characterizes Dante's journey, and the horizontal, human trajectory of Ulysses's travels, as portrayed in this work. Proposing that each trajectory signifies a different worldview—Dante, a traveler, represents medieval man's submission to a preordained, religiously organized universe, while the Renaissance man Ulysses sees himself as the center of creation—Lotman argues against identifying Dante the poet with Dante the pilgrim, insisting instead on the dialogic complementarity of these two worldviews' trajectories in the *Divine Comedy*. The coexistence of these principles, as opposed to the replacement of one by the other, is also evident in Lotman's confounding of the directions of influence and transformation: his Dante is a follower of Ulysses in the drive to explore and cognize the world, even as the ancient Greek Ulysses represents the individualistic worldview of the Renaissance about to supplant Dante's religiously integrative medievalism. Iurii Lotman, "Puteshestvie Ulissa v 'Bozhestvennoi komedii' Dante," in *Semiosfera* (St. Petersburg, 2010), 303–13.

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The Equilibrium of Forces

It is perhaps in this reciprocity, rather than in authorial will, that one should seek the ties between Mandel'shtam's approach to poetry and Talmudic exegesis. In *The Midrash: An Introduction*, Jacob Neusner describes the Judaic approach to scripture in terms emphasizing complementarity. Talmudic commentary was not meant to explain the Torah, he asserts, but to articulate truth using the Torah as an example. Talmudic prerogative, then, is an authority marshaled by examples that foster rather than preclude experimentation: "While [Talmudic scholars], of course, appealed to Scripture, it was an appeal to serve a purpose defined not by Scripture but by a faith under construction and subject to articulation. Scripture formed a dictionary, providing a vast range of permissible usages of intelligible words."[29] If faith represents a form of connectedness to the whole, then the Talmudist is one who, in the course of reading rabbinical commentaries and seeking ways to understand and express truth, connects himself more closely to the whole by attempting new interpretive approaches. Such venturing is made possible by the all-encompassing nature of the whole, whose complexity allows for contradictory statements. Jewish hermeneutics anticipates and welcomes contradiction. As David Stern elucidates in his essay "Midrash and Indeterminacy," the multiplicity of meanings in midrash does not lead to indeterminacy (as in postmodernism) but to a more acute understanding of truth: "From a strictly hermeneutical perspective . . . both interpretations, even if they contradict each other, are considered true, equally alive to Torah's meaning and to the words of the living God."[30] Contradictions in Talmudic exegesis create depth and nuance rather than instability; their unresolved nature is suggestive of completeness. If each statement can lay claim to truth only insofar as this claim is partial, truth is therefore deputized.

The *Divine Comedy* likewise endorses the power of example, but apportions authority among a number of deputies. In the laborious movement through being, one cannot do without guides. Mandel'shtam acknowledges that Dante never travels alone, noting also that guidance in this case is a concerted effort, as neither Virgil nor Beatrice possesses full authority over Dante's movement: "While as a whole the *Divina Commedia* . . . is a questionnaire with answers, each of Dante's direct responses is literally hatched out, now with the aid of his midwife, Virgil, now with the help of his nurse, Beatrice, and so on."[31] The guides' authority is contingent, and amid this diffusion of power, their pilgrim-charge need not be entirely compliant.

An equilibrium of colliding forces is also evident in the very language of atomic explosions punctuating "Conversation about Dante." At the very beginning of the essay, Mandel'shtam contends that ispolnitel'stvo—the "creative performance" and "obedience to the command" of poetry—must not be passive: "What is important in poetry is only the understanding which brings it about—not at all the passive, reproducing, or paraphrasing understand-

29. Jacob Neusner, *The Midrash: An Introduction* (Lanham, Md., 1994), xi.

30. David Stern, "Midrash and Indeterminacy," *Critical Inquiry* 15, no. 1 (Autumn 1988): 140.

31. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 417.

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ing. . . . The signal waves of meaning vanish, having completed their work; the more potent they are, the more yielding, and the less inclined to linger."[32] Ispolnitel'stvo as the main principle of poetry must have something to do with poetry's "convertibility or transmutability," with its relation to itself, and with the regeneration of poetic tradition—the ties one poetic utterance has to all previous. Tradition is always present, ever speaking through the poet, such that the poet stands as a mediator of this art. But Mandel'shtam considers it crucial to dissociate this performative aspect from such mere transmission as would suggest passivity and thereby preclude the possibility of metamorphosis or the convertibility of energy.

Two Interpretative Paths

The core contribution of this special section's essays is in performing readings of Mandel'shtam's "Conversation about Dante" that remain faithful to the principle of equilibrium and complementarity of rival elements. Rather than choosing between example and experiment, or submission and autonomy, the contributors offer interpretations that are "agnostic" vis-à-vis the paradox of Mandel'shtam's poetics; eschewing a solution thereof, which might neutralize its explosive power, they find in its very antinomy a productive view on art. As a result, these commentators interpret Mandel'shtam's theory of explosive poetics in terms quite similar to Lotman's notion of cultural rupture. Tracing two divergent strands of the poet's metaphorizing in the essay—that pertaining to music, and the other to the natural sciences—the articles' authors, each following his own path, arrive at the deputation of authority in the matter of poetic creation and at something very much like a ternary structure of poetic transmission.

The issue of authority and its connection to reading and exegetic practice is treated explicitly in Jacob Emery's "Keeping Time: Reading and Writing in 'Conversation about Dante.'" Like the *Divine Comedy*, Mandel'shtam's essay pulsates with metaphors and is propelled by them; but the central image of the conductor's baton and "conducting" (*dirizhirovanie*) calls out for especial interpretation.[33] If the "Conversation" is a poetic text par excellence, then within it the baton acts out the surrounding discourse, giving readers cues and engaging them in the performance of reading the essay. Emery's article foregrounds the singular authority this instrument signals: for an orchestra to function properly, there must be but one central figure, one conductor with his controlling baton. The question of who is to hold this crucial tool, to occupy the privileged podium before the orchestra of poetry, is taken up in "Keeping Time"; intriguingly, Emery cites a number of instances in the text in which Mandel'shtam, far from arrogating all the baton's prerogative for himself, appears, as the poet says of Dante, to "fawn upon [an] authority" not his own.

Emery notes a particularly surprising element in the "Conversation":

32. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 398. The "understanding which brings it about"— *ispolniaiushchee ponimanie*—can also be translated as its "performative understanding." Mandel'shtam, *PSS*, 2:156

33. Mandel'shtam, *PSS*, 2:185.

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it ascribes the harmonious structure of the *Divine Comedy* to Dante's non-belonging and marginality and his concomitant keenness to be nearer the seat of authority. In fact, Dante's journey is marked especially by dialogues with deceased wielders of political and cultural influence, and his approach to paradise can also be understood in terms of fitting in more concertedly with the powers-that-be on earth. One of the key motivators of Dante's poetry is the magnetic pull the center exerts upon the exile, and Emery explores this desire for connectedness admirably.

In Emery's view, the orchestral conductor's power lies in connecting the visual and the aural, transforming the former's cues into the latter's performance. The conductor, while central to the performance, does not hold "originary power"; nor does Mandel'shtam's Dante, who, as Emery reminds us, in Mandel'shtam's words, "writes to dictation, he is a copyist, he is a translator."[34] In Emery's interpretation, the conductor's baton is a tool of mediation and connectivity, as is the conductor, in the most literal sense—a transmitter of poetic impulse. (Indeed, Mandel'shtam was aware of the etymological connection between orchestral conductorship and electrical conductivity in the French *conducteur.*)[35] The conductor's control is over the performance of the text but not over the text itself; to the contrary, he entrusts himself to the text's power and is led by it. "The aesthetic urge," notes Emery, "passes from the divine muse through the possessed poet to the rapt reader."

Emery acknowledges that this valorization of textual authority—a discourse, ultimately, of faithfulness—must necessarily be fraught with political implications given the origin of the "Conversation" in the 1930s. He suggests that the triangular aesthetic of mediation, by which the author does not reign supreme over the text's meaning but serves as a conduit between the higher power guiding him (whether tradition or muse) and the reader, might also be understood in political terms. However, in accordance with the "peculiar . . . convertibility or transmutability . . . [of] poetic material [*obrashchaemost' ili obratimost' . . . poeticheskoi materii*]," which admits no constant but the drive toward being and becoming, the baton is passed from Dante the scribe to his beloved reader Beatrice.[36] Thus, Emery argues, the direction of the poetic impulse ultimately gets reversed, and the intended reader ends up dictating to the poet. Emery proposes that, via the mechanism of displacement, the terrifying authority of a tyrant is transformed into that of a beloved and loving reader. The system of mediation continues with each new deputizing, each reader receiving authority like a baton in a relay. And the chain of poetry goes on. The "persistent dissolution of an authoritative origin into a structure of difference and reciprocal desire," writes Emery, "also suggests that [Mandel'shtam] 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."

This diffusion of authority is intimately connected to the question of method in poetry. Mandel'shtam would have us experience the poetic essence

34. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 436.
35. Mandel'shtam, *PSS*, 2:186.
36. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 414; Mandel'shtam, *PSS*, 2:173.

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through immersion, such that we are fully attuned to our own experience and to the transmission through us of the poetic impulse. In this view, reading as performance is to be understood in physiological terms. Mandel'shtam writes of Dante, "His 'reflexology of speech' is astonishing—a science, still not completely established, of the spontaneous psycho-physiological influence of the word on those who are conversing, on the audience surrounding them, and on the speaker himself."[37] Physicality is thus not just a metaphor; the reader's plunge into poetic matter is a bodily experience. Physicality, moreover, enables the perception of poetry as a generative force: the reader-performer who corporeally experiences poetry becomes more fully immersed in life.

The conductor (or the reader in the delegated role thereof) thus stands for incorporation into the world via poetry—for the establishment and experiencing, through this art, of relationality. In "The Science of Poetry: Poetic Process as Evolution in Mandel'shtam's 'Conversation about Dante,'" Alexander Spektor arrives at a similar conclusion via a different route. While Emery concentrates on the orchestral and the terpsichorean to elucidate the relationship between physicality and the experience of the intangible, Spektor addresses Mandel'shtam's use of tropes taken from the natural sciences. In particular, he emphasizes that metaphor, which links dissimilar phenomena and of which Mandel'shtam hails Dante as the master, is akin to the scientific method of classification by which extant heterogeneous phenomena are incorporated into new forms and systems and in the process themselves become rejuvenated. Spektor shows us how Mandel'shtam borrows the naturalists' method of reading nature as text for his own analysis of their texts' evolutionary development. Spektor alerts us to a similar move in the "Conversation" whereby the scientific method at the root of Dante's poetry inevitably also becomes the instrument of its analysis by the ideal reader, performer, or scholar. Spektor asserts that the scientific method—informed as it is by a "dialogic impulse" that "simultaneously requires its participants' submission and establishes kinship between them"—enables readers to transcend their individuality. The Bergsonian evolutionary model, he continues, leads Mandel'shtam to conceive a system of relationships in poetry (that is, the poetic tradition) within which one demonstrates one's creativity, even one's status as a living being, precisely by adapting to greater forces. Approaching poetry organically, then, means submitting to the principles of contiguity and responsiveness. Further, Spektor deftly illuminates the relationship between the seemingly dissimilar concepts of the scientific method Mandel'shtam's essay advocates and the "instinct" on which this same text relies. It is among these tropes that Spektor seeks an answer to the question of authority and its ties to authorship—whether the authorship of poetry or of analytic commentary thereon. Here "instinct" is the force of law to which poet or scholar must succumb during the process of creating; in Spektor's essay, authority, as interrogated by Mandel'shtam's "Conversation," is understood in almost metaphysical terms, as a force organizing and binding disparate phenomena and enabling author and reader, poet and commentator, to find contact, engage in dialogue, and establish kinship.

37. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 434.

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Like Emery's analysis of musical metaphors, Spektor's reading of scientific tropes brings us back to the ternary structure of poetic creation and consumption as conceptualized by Mandel'shtam, according to which, dialogue is enabled by the existence of a power that transcends the individuals engaged in poetic discourse. As opposed to Gorodetskii's view of the author or commentator as manipulator or dictator, Spektor emphasizes fellowship and a submission more reminiscent of communion than subjugation; his approach to the problem of political authority is to suggest that the verticality of poetic structure, with its incorporeal and eternal law enfolding all its participants in one organic totality ("the indissolubility of the part from the whole"), protects it from the intrusions of such external forces as the state.

Mandel'shtam ends his essay with a declaration of hope that future Dante scholars "will study the coordination of the impulse and the text."[38] Whether via the musical arts or the natural sciences, the commentators in this special section have found interpretive paths toward this coordinating and performative impulse in Mandel'shtam's own text. Together, the articles identify connectedness and diversity as the two simultaneous directions of the performative impulse that composes each poetic text into a multilayered commentary.

Coda

The fourfold pattern of complementary meanings Dante may or may not have described in the epistle to della Scala corresponds to the allegorical scheme medieval Christianity inherited from the Alexandrian exegetical tradition, especially as represented by the early Christian theologian Origen. But it is worth noting that Origen's manifold exegesis may itself have been influenced by, and in turn influenced, similarly multifarious rabbinical approaches to scripture and by Philo of Alexandria.[39] Perhaps, then, the genealogy of Mandel'shtam's treatment of text as manifold commentary—seemingly so reminiscent of Talmudic exegesis—can also (or even especially) be traced to his careful reading of Dante. In such a lineage, Dante would stand as mediator: the conductor or transmitter of certain practices of reading informed by the principle of the complementarity of opposing elements. These articles contribute to this tradition.

Using a rare quote from *Paradiso* (most of his citations are from *Inferno*), Mandel'shtam performs the fourfold interpretation of one of the work's most transcendent passages:

38. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 442.

39. David Winston, "Philo and Rabbinic Literature," in Adam Kamesar, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Philo* (Cambridge, Eng., 2009), 236. See also Cosman and Jones, *Handbook to Life in the Medieval World*, 341. In "Rabbinic and Christian Models of Interaction on the Song of Songs," in Marcel Poorthuis, Joshua Schwartz, and Joseph Turner, eds., *Interaction between Judaism and Christianity in History, Religion, Art and Literature*, (Leiden, 2009), Tamar Kadari refrains from "taking a position on the interesting question of whether [the coevals Origen and Rabbi Johanan] had any direct or indirect interaction," but she argues that they at least "shared a three-level understanding of the Song of Songs" (71). She cites the existence of a scholarly viewpoint that "stresses the influence of Jewish exegesis on Origen's work." Ibid., 65.

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E come augelli surti di Riviera,
Quasi congratulando a lor pasture,
Fanno di se or tonda or altra schiera,
Si dentro ai lumi santé creature
Volitando cantavano, e faciensi
Or D, or I, or L, in sue figure.

(As birds just risen from the water's edge, / as if in celebration for their food / flock now in circles, now in drawn-out lines, / so there, within those lights the blessed beings / were circling as they sang, turning themselves / First to a *D*, then *I*, then into *L*.)[40]

Here Dante, released from all earthly desires by Beatrice's divine love, notices that, like flocking birds, souls dance in a circle, forming the first three letters, *d i l*, of an as-yet-unwritten line—a moment of ekphrasis, specifically evoking the appearance of an illuminated manuscript. Mandel'shtam ends his quote there, before the reader discovers the message these letters will actually generate, "Diligite iustitiam qui iudicatis terram" (Love justice, you who judge the earth). As numerous Dante scholars point out, Dante's message, beginning so poetically, is laden with political import. The critical consensus reads the poet's special emphasis on the very last letter of the message, the eagle-like *m*, as an attempt to transmit his conviction that the perfect order is only possible under a monarch.[41] Mandel'shtam, however, while following Dante's metaphor of bird-letters in flight, arrives at a terminus vertically opposite to Dante's autocratic seat of justice and order: "The grammar of Old Italian exactly like our new Russian grammar partakes of the same fluttering flock of birds, the same motley Tuscan *schiera*, that is, the Florentine mob which changes laws like gloves, and forgets by evening those laws promulgated the same morning for the general welfare."[42] This detour serves as an apt précis of Mandel'shtam's politics; more important, however, this intrusion of inventiveness, the very note of insubordination, perhaps demonstrates best Mandel'shtam's autonomy as well as his dependence on and mastery of Dante's polysemic method. Attending to the metaphor of the birds, Mandel'shtam begins his commentary with the literal meaning, addressing the calligraphy itself—the art of composing letters. But then the physical act of writing generates other denotations. The letters' literal seeking after meaning turns out to harbor other quests as well: birds seek food (a natural analogy); unsettled people seek anchor, home, or law (a political analogy); and finally, images of transience and the urge for transcendence appear (the anagogical dimension). "There is no syntax—merely a magnetized impulse: a yearning for the stern of a ship [*korma*], a yearning for one's meal of worms [*po cherviachnomu*

40. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, vol. 3, *Paradise*, trans. and ed. Mark Musa (New York, 1986), 215.

41. Having fully deciphered the message, Dante dedicates seven stanzas to the last letter, *m*, which slowly takes the shape of a great eagle. Ibid., 216. Musa comments on this passage, "This mass of silver inlaid with an M of gold is a fitting background for the presentation of the sign for Monarchy. . . . Dante in his *De Monarchia* (I, xi, 2) writes: 'The highest justice is attained only under a Monarch; therefore, in order to have a perfect order in the world, there must be a Monarchy or Empire.'" Ibid., 219.

42. Mandelstam, "Conversation about Dante," 438.

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kormu], a yearning for an unpromulgated law, a yearning for Florence."[43] The word *yearning* (*toska*) attracts, in a "magnetized impulse" (*namagnichennyi poryv*), all four competing interpretations (the literal-metapoetic, natural, political, and anagogical) into one harmonious whole; and the pull of yearning characterizes writing, poetry, and life itself, both in its transient physicality and its inklings of transcendence. These competing interpretations don't cancel each other out but rather complement one another, contributing to an ever-expanding conceptualization that sets out to describe poetry and eventually describes life. Fueling this vision of the harmonious whole are yearning and unfulfillment. Mandel'shtam thus establishes absence or lack as the precondition of a meaningful pattern—a stance consistent throughout his poetics.[44] This pattern is given only as a promise, the fulfillment of which is ongoing, as all aspects of being, all living particles, are driven toward it in one concerted effort at creation.

43. Ibid. Translation modified.

44. Consider the episode in *Egipetskaia marka* (The Egyptian Stamp) in which a St. Petersburg drawbridge induces Parnok to hail "emptiness and gaping" as "magnificent merchandise [*pustota i ziianie—velikolepnyi tovar*]," or in "Chetvertaia proza" (Fourth Prose), in which the value of the bagel is said to lie in its hole, and "real labor" is likened to "Brussels lace," whose pattern is based on "air, perforations, skipping out [*vozdukh, prokoly, proguly*]." Mandel'shtam, *PSS*, 2:298, 2:358. On Mandel'shtam's view of art as the creative questing after connections between phenomena amid emptiness, see my "Indelible Inscriptions: Rewriting the Self in 'The Egyptian Stamp,'" in Bożena Shallcross and Ryszard Nycz, eds., *The Effect of Palimpsest: Culture, Literature, History* (Frankfurt am Main, 2011).

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