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The Enduring Power of the Classical World View

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For the poet, prophet, and politician, as for the lover, the king, and the anthropologist, the human is the measure of all things. Philosophers and psychologists define us as a perceiving consciousness, an object determined by the environment, a subject not only capable of heroic individualism but also of esoteric understanding. For some, our measure is beyond *things* and our true worth lies not only in the here and now but rather in our freedom to transcend the bounds of self and prevail beyond the limits of temporality. For the artist, whose creative consciousness aims to redeem the human image from the constraints of brute anonymity, the questions about our status must be asked if not finally answered.

The article considers the role that the classical world view plays in the process of artistic redemption. It looks at the Judeo-Christian and Classical legacies and their interpretations. Nineteenth-century Russian literature and religious philosophy are then analysed. The article winds up with a reading of select poems by Osip Mandelstam as special attention is paid to the ethical stance of the poet when confronted with the dictates of totalitarian power.
Keywords: classical world view, Judeo-Christian tradition, Russian literature, Osip Mandelstam, ethics, totalitarianism.

The Middle Estate

For the poet, prophet, and politician, as for the lover, the king, and the anthropologist, the human is the measure of all things. We are a little lower than the angels, an amalgam of divinity and delusion, a welter of good and evil impulses, acting with unexpected generosity and unwarranted cruelty. Philosophers and psychologists define us as a perceiving consciousness, an object determined by and enslaved to the environment that not only surrounds us but also defines us, a subject not only capable of heroic individualism but also of esoteric understanding. For some, our measure is beyond *things* and our true worth lies not only in the here and now but rather in our freedom to transcend the bounds of self and prevail beyond the limits of temporality. For the artist, whose creative consciousness aims to redeem the human image from the constraints of brute anonymity—who seeks to give our experience form—the questions about our status (paragon? paradox? parable?) must be asked if not finally answered. The artist would often say of his or her self-portrait (not necessarily of himself, or herself) that the practice of giving form, of wresting a shape from the vast indefiniteness, serves both functional and ontological ends and provides the only answer, however provisional, parabolic, or paradoxical, that is available to us in our present estate.

Architects, after a long apprenticeship, prove themselves masters of the trade in the crucible of their rarified, substantial dialect: the blueprint (a hypothesis) and the blueprint's translation into a habitable and aesthetically pleasing dwelling. Physicians, after a long apprenticeship, prove themselves in the crucible of an operating theatre or in the daily fulfilment of the little details that finally must transcend (but not ignore) the health, sickness, and eventual dissolution of the body and temperament that they treat and share. Scholars prove themselves by organizing and making public insights culled from painstaking research, and in their ability to pass on the heritage to those who receive them as authorities in their chosen fields. Artists, who can be likened to architects, scholars, or doctors of the soul, must translate

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inspiration, apprenticeship, influence, and allusion, into patterns and harmonies that are both structure and ether, an interplay of air and alum, buttressed arch and hovering wing, where apparently disparate insights can enter and marry to produce a phoenix offspring greater than the sum of its parts. Synergy. Out of the text's improbable web sometimes emerges a Frankenstein, sometimes an idiot, sometimes an exemplary individual: our great notions transfigured. The text may be poem, painting, novel, dance, drama, film, or symphony... but when the marriage is consummated (earth, air, fire, water) the child of our aspirations and defeats (our comedies and tragedies) can carry us beyond our earthly humours, trivia, and sorrow.

A vision of all the world's bills marked "paid" and unlimited credit extended. But when brought low by the pull of our estate's gravity, whether faced with life's overwhelming seriousness, or burdened by the weight of personal frustrations and ambitions, we face the abysses of sarcasm, cynicism, and maundering self-pity. In uncovering the world's shams we are likely to disclose our *own* bankruptcy. We have met both our heroes and enemies with a thousand faces.

"What is man, that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man, that thou thinkest of him?" This biblical query continues to vex us, and probably will for as long as we live, whether as individuals or as a species. For Mallarmé as much as for Augustine, for Derrida as much as for Lévi-Strauss, the term *human* can only inadequately cover the penumbra of celestial and terrestrial events and circumstances that constitute what we were, are, or might become. For poets, prophets, and penitents, our status is forever that of pilgrim and stranger – of Quixotes who sometimes confusedly, sometimes confidently explore the expanse between here and the other side of the dark mirror. Like Alice we confront the Looking Glass (our portrait painted by Velázquez), and in place of our image we see a passage to unfamiliar realms of the psyche, disturbingly familiar, even quotidian, but seen from another angle: fabulous, slyly mocking our tidy formulations, threatening the coherence of our habitual reflections, a world where all we catch of life's Cheshire cats is the grin. Or grimmer, we stand with Dante at the entrance to the Inferno, where we hear Virgil through the person of the Sybil warn: "The way to Avernus is easy: Night and day lie open the gates of death's dark kingdom. But to retrace your steps, to find your way back to daylight, that is the task, the hard thing" (Davidson 113). Passage from Here to There (from here to eternity) is always where we are, our existential condition, the setting for our dreams and fears as we undertake our heroic quests (helmeted in a barber's bowl) and return to our Dulcineas and Penelopes, our families and (un)faithful husbands and wives, after the day's Odyssey.

Here we are, caught in the middle, neither devil nor angel though a little of both, given dominion over the animals, marvellous in reason and appallingly irrational, we are the measure, the container and thing contained: symbol-mongers, mythmakers, parablers, sea-voyagers, earth-shakers, Babel-builders, form-givers. We live in "the middle estate," as we have since we began, where "divine transcendence and human degradation transpire" (Reed 35).

Abraham's Past, Passing, and To Come

Within the Judeo-Christian tradition Abraham is known as the father of faith, the first patriarch. Before Jacob changed his name to Israel – before the usurper became blessed of God and the founder of a nation – Abram changed his name to Abraham and thus was transformed by his faith, from just another wanderer in the desert to the first of the chosen: the first seed. God spoke to Abraham. But what did God say? According to the Biblical account, God put Abraham's faith to the severest of tests. God told Abraham to take his only son to the mountain and there to build an altar, and there sacrifice the innocent child. But Abraham's faith was equal to the challenge. Abraham believed in his God to such an extent that he was willing to call God's bluff, if that is what it was. But what sort of God would find it necessary or expedient to bluff his faithful servant? What lesson is this Biblical story supposed to teach us about the nature of faith or the nature of reality? The world of significance – of promises kept – was at one stroke emptied of meaning. Yet Abraham, beyond all logic and even beyond all ethical considerations, took Isaac to the mountain, built an altar for the sacrifice, and drew his knife, believing *in this life* for the promises God had made to him *and was breaking*.

Northrop Frye's biblical typology shows how one interpretation of this story could align it with the story of Christ and thus reframe its premises in relation to later events. Thus, Abraham's act of faith becomes an antitype and the sacrifice of Christ becomes the fulfilment of the story of Abraham which prefigures it. But the story has been interpreted within other frameworks for other purposes, with other results. For Søren Kierkegaard, Abraham's act of faith was exemplary in that it displayed a right relation to the power of the infinite which Abraham recognized at work in his life. It was his only possible response, given his recognition of that power, but from the human perspective – from Abraham's perspective – God not only was sending Abraham on an incomprehensible mission but also seemed determined to rob Abraham of his rightful reward, the son he had been promised for so long. Like the God of Jacob and the God of Job, the God of Abraham seems intent on *blackmail*, to recall Barthes' analysis of Genesis 32:22–32. But Kierkegaard concludes that Abraham's decision to listen to the "still, small voice" that has demanded the sacrifice provides us with the archetypal instance of how much human belief can cost us, and paradoxically, gain us:

> The glorious memory of the generations to come, the promise in Abraham's seed – this was no more than a whim, a passing fancy of the Lord, which Abraham was now to destroy forever.... The old man was not to rejoice on his deathbed, placing his hand on Isaac in blessing: but tired of life, he was to have to lay violent hands on Isaac. And it was God who tried him. Woe, woe to the messenger who came before Abraham with such tidings! Who was it dared to be this messenger of sorrow? But it was God who tempted Abraham.... But Abraham believed, and believed for this life. (*Fear* 19–20)

Kierkegaard's Abraham provides a model of faith that receives its full development only when seen in the context of the Dane's entire philosophical project. We will further consider the implications of Abraham's belief for Kierkegaard shortly, but let us do so by contrasting it to another Abraham: Franz Kafka's Abraham, who instead of being a model of faith is a model of *doubt*. We find Kafka's doubting Abraham depicted in a parable:

> But take another Abraham. One who wanted to perform the sacrifice altogether in the right way and had a correct sense in general of the whole affair, but could not believe that he was the one meant, he an ugly old man, and the dirty youngster that was his child.... He is afraid that after starting out as Abraham with his son he would change on the way into Don Quixote. The world would have been enraged at Abraham could it have beheld him at the time, but this one is afraid that the world would laugh itself to death at the sight of him... he is afraid that this ridiculousness will make him even bolder and uglier, his son even dirtier, even more unworthy of being really called. An Abraham that should come unsummoned! (44–45)

The dream of an exemplary Abraham as presented by Kierkegaard demonstrates the unflinching confidence in a God who, even if he demands the sacrifice of the first-born, can and will restore the son if he chooses, even resurrect him from the dead and so return what was lost by performing the impossible. The dream of a *ridiculous* Abraham – just another Abraham among many – is the nightmare of reaching the mountain only to find that God had not even called him, that the voices he has heard are only his own projections and fantasies. Or worse, that God has called him only to mock him – to exact a punishment for this would-be patriarch's presumptions.

> It is as if, at the end of the year, when the best student was solemnly about to receive a prize the worst student rose in the expectant stillness and came forward from his dirty desk in the last row because he had made a mistake of hearing, and the whole class burst out laughing. And perhaps he had made no mistake at all, his name really was called, it having been the teacher's intention to make the rewarding of the best student at the same time a punishment for the worst one. (Kafka 45)

Who can doubt Abraham's (Kafka's Abraham's) reluctance to heed the nearly inaudible voice that calls or tempts him to kill his own son? Who would tell Abraham that his doubts are unfounded, that God has *in fact* called him to Mount Moriah to sacrifice the son for whom he has waited so long and who has finally been given to him, miraculously? Who would tell Abraham that he is the chosen one, that he could not be mistaken, or vile, or old, or ugly?

The metamorphosis from lived experience to a text's exoskeleton may so encumber meaning as to prohibit its flight; Kafka laments this murderous weight (a loss of wings) in parable and paradox. But for Kierkegaard the liberating leap of faith is only possible in the act of falling or of dying. "In the Christian terminology death is the expression for the greatest spiritual wretchedness, and yet the cure is simply to die, to 'die from'" (*The Sickness* 15). We must die from our despair at our sinful, mortal, law-bound condition so that we can live beyond the coil of self-perpetuating fears and doubts – even satisfactions – that would weigh us down. In recognizing our lack of absolute identity or in despair at our limitations, we either implicitly or overtly attest to our provisional or incomplete nature, Kierkegaard tells us. "Man is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short it is a synthesis. So regarded, man is not yet a self" (*The Sickness* 18). But this lack of selfhood need not be a final condition, and in fact *cannot* be in Kierkegaard's philosophy. Where Kafka builds models of our despair and pathetic absurdity, Kierkegaard offers what he sees as the precondition for the spirit's liberation: faith to believe for this life, even by virtue of the absurd. Quoting Kierkegaard, Eduard Geisman summarizes this necessary relation to the infinite: "'By relating itself to its own self and by willing to be itself, the self is grounded transparently in the Power which constituted it.' And this formula... is the definition of faith" (24–25).

We must finally admit that it is as difficult to live by faith in our day and age as it was in Abraham's. Like Abraham we too wander in our various wildernesses or dance around our various golden calves, as did the disobedient children of Israel, even as Moses waited on Mount Sinai for the Commandments. We must agree with Kafka that the faith of Abraham is not only hard to live by, it is even hard to *recognize*. As Kierkegaard says of his modern-day Abraham, the knight of faith, he "looks like a tax collector... tends to his work... is solid through and through **...** [is] able to transform the leap of faith into a walk, absolutely to express the sublime in the pedestrian" (*Fear* 45). We must also agree with Kafka that Abraham may well have doubted what he heard or have felt himself unworthy of God's attention. The only conclusion we may be able to draw from the faith of Abraham is the one the Russian religious philosopher Lev Shestov offers us, echoing Dostoevsky's underground man:

> Suddenly the underground man rises up, the underground man who has declared himself, with such dreadful honesty, to be the vilest of men... with a voice not his own (for the underground man's voice, like his sight, is not his own), he cries: "It is false – it is a lie – God *asks* the impossible. *God asks nothing but the impossible*." (22)

Quixote

Another scruffy prodigal, who perhaps has read more than is good for a person, is Don Quixote de la Mancha. Quixote is virtuous, faithful, and true to his chivalric ideals. But in a world limited and enabled by our ability to give form to an otherwise "vast indefiniteness," Quixote the knight of faith becomes a man of form, the moony man in the text. In fiction faith is virtual, not actual, and the virtuous Quixote views his life through the dark glass of fiction. His code is that of chivalry and he learned it from a book. His quest is to make his world conform to what he has read. As Foucault says, Quixote's "whole journey is a quest for similitudes":

> The slightest analogies are pressed into service as dormant signs that must be reawakened and made to speak once more. Flocks, serving girls, and inns become once more the language of books to the imperceptible degree to which they resemble castles, ladies, and armies – a perpetually untenable resemblance which transforms the sought-for proof into derision and leaves the words of the books forever hollow. (47)

Quixote squanders the world's substance on his dream of heroic daring and chivalric sacrifice, and Cervantes thus undoes the world and makes it transparent even as he parodies the tradition of the knightly romance, the Camelot of the imagination which has turned this respectable if somewhat down-at-heels *Don* into a ludicrous, lugubrious buffoon. If this were all that the image of Quixote offered us, however, it is unlikely that he would still be sallying forth on the fields of our literature and culture. Quixote lives as a curious amalgam of virtuous idealist and raving madman; he is both sublime and ridiculous. His enigmatic – his quixotic – dreams of heroism and chivalry hold another attraction for modern hermeneutics. He is the man of, by, and for the book as long as his fond dreams last, and his power over us derives from the fact that he is the man of form, the form-giver whose quest transforms the kingdom of this world into the kingdom of the sign, and of *its* power. Or, as Foucault puts it:

> Between the first and second parts of the novel, in the narrow gap between those two volumes, and by their power alone, Don Quixote has achieved his reality – a reality he owes to language alone, and which resides entirely inside the words. Don Quixote's truth is not the relation of the words to the world but in that slender and constant relation woven between themselves by verbal signs. The hollow fiction of epic exploits has become the representative power of language. (48)

For Foucault, Quixote is exemplary as the tension between systems of signs; he represents intertextuality. We can only marvel at the way the errant knight Quixote puts his world at the service of the text. Quixote acts out the desires and fantasies of the chivalric romances that he ponders on; he is likewise the realization (and subversion) of the desires and fantasies of Cervantes' readers – us. Quixote presents us with both romantic agony and its ironic deflation.

We are the heirs of Quixote's legacy, and we who both mock his be(k)nightedness and lift him up as one who dared to dream the impossible dream, pure and chaste – for those of us still in the world, Quixote, though not of the world, lives. His truth is stronger than fiction, or his fiction shimmers before us as a species of truth. So claims Miguel de Unamuno, who holds up the venerable madman Quixote as a hero whose history is universal and whose personality extends beyond the work in which it was developed to embrace those ideals which we continue to nurture, even though they have been theatricalized, caricatured, and brutalized.

> Don Quixote must be painted with faith, above all with the faith that comes from a quixotic idealism, fount of all truly real creation, an idealism that in the end compels all Sanchos, no matter how little they like it, to follow along behind. Don Quixote must be painted with the faith which creates the unseen, in the firm belief that Don Quixote exists and lives and acts, in the same way those marvellous "primitive" painters believed in the life of the saints and angels they painted. (Unamuno, *Our Lord* 353)

We look over Quixote's shoulder as he reads his tales of chivalry, as if they were a script for a play in which he is to be the star attraction. Or as Reed says, "his [Quixote's] career is... the transformation of the passive activity of reading into an active mode. Don Quixote internalizes his experience of books and performs them" (77). And as we look over his shoulder or watch him sally forth in his barber's basin to do battle with windmills, though we are two, three, many times removed from his scene of reading, we applaud his foolishness and delusions of grandeur – or is it his *grandeur*? We too internalize his experience of books and his performance of them, and though we may shake our heads at his incompetence we dream our own impossible dreams. We take our position in the caravan, somewhere to the rear of the more worldly Sancho, Quixote's first disciple, and remembering our own dreams and disillusionment follow our prodigal, foolish brother and patron saint, our lovelorn, romantic hero.

The Idiot

The etymology of the word "idiot" includes the Greek and Latin glosses "*separate* from any collective identity" and "*innocent* of any system of knowing" (Holquist 111). Our hearts go out to the idiot Quixote as he sallies, lurches, stumbles, and flails through his misadventures, armed only with his literary ideals and a need to "do good," as it had been done in the idealized world of chivalric romances. Quixote, the free-lance scarecrow for love's sake, for honour's sake, unwittingly, dimwittedly bowdlerizes the very ideals and institutions he seeks to serve. Sorry dupe of a misbegotten turn of mind, Quixote despite his foolishness or because of it paradoxically becomes a testimony not only to the power of form in the world of the sign but also to the power of faith and persistence, as long as his madness (or *our* faith, persistence, and foolishness) endure. Dostoevsky's Prince Myshkin sees himself as the Russian Quixote; most of those who encounter him pity him: as an epileptic, as an otherworldly child ill-equipped for this world's middle estate – as an idiot. In Dostoevsky's portrayal, Prince Myshkin drops into the polite and not-so-polite intrigues of Russian society as if he were another prince, a *petit prince* from outer space who wanted nothing more than to water the flower on his tiny planet and care for his lamb. But in the deserts of this world Myshkin's separateness and innocence prove about as effective (and as exemplary!) as Quixote's armour and idealism. Myshkin believes in unity and wholeness, in the redeeming power of selfless love. His desire is to share a love as selfless as Christ's. But in *The Idiot*, Christ is frighteningly mortal, the crucified Christ laid in the tomb, as imagined by Holbein. Myshkin's quest for transcendence "is constantly exposed" by a "relentless insistence on the multiplicity of identities that are merely human, merely personal" (Holquist 112).

The struggle for wholeness and personal identity was one of Dostoevsky's ongoing writerly preoccupations. According to Nicholas Berdyaev, that struggle (the need to place the individual in relation to the cosmos) informs all of Dostoevsky's thought and art.

> Dostoevsky devoted the whole of his creative energy to one single theme, man and man's destiny. He was anthropological and anthropocentric to an almost inexpressible degree: the problem of man was his absorbing passion. For he did not see him as just a natural phenomenon, like any other though rather superior, but as a microcosm, the centre of being, the sun around which all else moves: the riddle of the universe is within man, and to solve the question of man is to solve the question of God. The whole of Dostoevsky's work is a plea for man, a plea which goes to the length of strife with God, which antinomy is resolved by referring human destiny to Jesus Christ, the God-man. (39)

It is Dostoevsky's genius, as heir to the tradition of nineteenth-century realism and as one of its luminaries, to set the myth of a cosmic individual, or a person striving to see the middle estate in its cosmic dimensions, in dialectical opposition to that which questions, mitigates, or destroys those aspirations. The foolishness of a Russian Quixote is therefore not so much ludic or ludicrous as tragic.

In meditating on *The Idiot*, the Russian Symbolist poet and philosopher Vyacheslav Ivanov provides a further commentary on these tensions and incongruities. Ivanov sees the epileptic Prince Myshkin as a sort of holy innocent, and a heavenly emissary. "The heavenly emissary," he says, "must deliver the world's soul from the bondage of an evil enchantment. He must free Andromeda from her chains, abduct Eurydice or Alcestis from Hades, waken the Sleeping Beauty" (96). As if he were such an emissary, Myshkin appears as if out of nowhere, to offer his selfless love and compassion to Nastasya Fillipovna. (In fact, Myshkin has not appeared out of nowhere; he has returned from an asylum in Switzerland.) On the same train that brings him back to Russia we meet his dialectical opposite, Rogozhin, who is fated to be both Myshkin's deadly rival for Nastasya Fillipovna and his *semblable*, his dark double and evil twin. Rogozhin understands the lust of the flesh and fascination that guilt and sorrow hold for Nastasya Fillipovna. The chance meeting on the train, foreshadowing the tragic rivalry and kinship to be developed throughout the novel, has both literary and philosophical implications. Myshkin enters Nastasya Fillipovna's life as if he has dropped out of the blue, a Quixote to the service of his Dulcinea. The problem, as Ivanov sees it, is that *both* Myshkin and Nastasya Fillipovna want to make of their abstract longings

something concrete. While Myshkin seeks an object for his devotion, someone to serve, someone to save, Nastasya Fillipovna is drawn further downward, toward the guilt and passion that she finds with Rogozhin. "It is disastrous for Nastasya Fillipovna and for Myshkin that both of them are beings who have come down from on high; for Myshkin's love is directed toward the Earth, and longs for a figure that is born of Earth and rises from Earth to meet him, not for one that descends towards Earth." (Ivanov 104)

The situation is further complicated both philosophically and dramatically by the fact that Myshkin too has his hard choices to make. He could accept the love of Aglaya Epanchina, a love of flesh and blood rather than a *congeries* of selfless ideals. But it seems that Myshkin's love, like Quixote's, knows no higher goal than its own enactment, and the needs – even the identity – of its object are eclipsed by its mythic projections. Myshkin determines to free Nastasya Fillipovna from her past, from her guilt, from her thirst for revenge and self-castigation. He would assure her that she is not vile, forgive her everything, reshape her according to his ideal vision of her, as Quixote would reshape the rustic Dulcinea into his Lady, his Beatrice, his Laura. But Nastasya is also held in thrall by the fascination she has for Rogozhin and all he represents. Myshkin makes matters worse rather than relieving Nastasya Fillipovna's burden. She struggles with her indecision: should she marry Myshkin and so accept his heedless forgiveness, his otherworldly vision of her ideal nature? Or should she abandon herself to Rogozhin, who feels his claim on her is the more binding, since it includes her guilt and sorrow? For Ivanov, her choice is between Earth with all its ironies, incongruities, and evils, and Heaven.

> Which of the two will win her: he who gives reality to the principle of life, and even under ordeal by fire proves himself capable of living; or he whom life rejects and repudiates? The one claims the bride by right of the boundless love which he, as a son of Earth, has for the heavenly Beauty that descends to redeem the world; the other claims her in his right as a son of Heaven filled with divine pity for the martyrdom of the Beauty whom the world has deformed and reviled. (Ivanov 104)

If this is an allegory, in its tragic ironies it does not point us toward a transcendent home but toward the middle estate where the demonic and angelic conspire and are brothers, one dark, one light. Nastasya Fillipovna has two loves, and she chooses the dark side, Rogozhin, who desires her as one deformed and reviled creature hungers for another. She spurns Myshkin's offer of indiscriminate forgiveness and accepts death at the hands of her lover, her murderer, Rogozhin. There will be no repetition here, no new heaven and earth, no restoration to well-being, no substitute sacrifice to take the place of Nastasya Fillipovna. After the murder has been committed, Myshkin, who feels guilty as Rogozhin, embraces the murderer and admits his complicity. Each of them kills the object of their love in their own way, though only Rogozhin thrusts the knife home. Nastasya Fillipovna, unable to transcend the world, could only feel mockery in Myshkin's talk of Beauty, Truth and Forgiveness. She succumbs to the contradictions in her nature, which can only be resolved at her death. Myshkin's compassion now has no object; beyond the futile gestures of consolation which he offers Rogozhin (who loved her as he killed her, as Othello loved Desdemona), Myshkin again is reduced to idiocy.
When after many hours the doors were opened and people came in, they found the murderer completely unconscious and raving. Myshkin was sitting beside him motionless on the floor, and every time the delirious man broke into screaming or babble, he hastened to pass his trembling hand softly over his hair and cheeks, as though caressing and soothing him. But by now he could understand no questions he was asked and did not recognize the people surrounding him; and if Schneider himself had come from Switzerland to look at his former pupil and patient, remembering the condition in which Myshkin had sometimes been during the first year of his stay in Switzerland, he would have flung up his hands in despair and would have said as he did then, "An idiot!" (Dostoevsky 616).

Myshkin's idiocy is not only clinical, it is archaic. He is a stranger to this world, an outsider who is existentially alienated; in the dénouement of his tragedy Dostoevsky shows us the fragility of his quixotic ideals. The form that he would lend to his life and to the lives of Nastasya Fillipovna and Rogozhin, his determination to believe *in this life* in compassion and forgiveness, in redemption, is shat-

tered. Myshkin's truth is a centre that will not hold. "The major symbol clusters of the novel – execution, the Holbein Christ, epilepsy, Don Quixote, money – swirl around a core that is common to them all: the failure of *kairos* to effect *chronos.* There is no wholeness that will remain unsplintered through its unfolding in time" (Holquist 122).

The Poet and the State

The music that Blok heard during the days of the Russian Revolution was that of great and usually unnameable forces – now a whisper, now a whirlwind. The music that Osip Mandelstam heard was both more personal and more austere, its harmonies alloyed of the Classical and Christian traditions: "Given time, the poetry of revolution becomes Classical" (53). But his references were not only those of the Homeric or Pindaric ode. What unified his music was the vision he gained from the Christian tradition, as the following remark attests:

> In the ancient world music was considered a destructive element.... Christianity did not fear music. With a smile, the Christian world said to Dionysus: "Well, go ahead, give it a try; order your maenads to tear me apart: I am wholeness, all personality, all welded unity". (53)

Hearing the cadences of a music both archetypal and apocalyptic, Mandelstam tried in his poetry to strike a balance between the life of politics and a life apart from politics. For him the poet's highest civic duty was to show compassion for the state even as it threatened to devour him. "There is nothing hungrier than the contemporary state, and a hungry state is more terrible than a hungry man. To show compassion for the state which denies the word is the contemporary poet's civic 'way'" (53).

In his life Mandelstam's compassion was certainly taxed to the breaking point. As the result of a single poem in which he vilified Stalin's cruelty, "The Mountaineer" (which compares Stalin to a mountaineer climbing over the skulls of his victims), Mandelstam was first exiled to Voronezh and then sent to one of the camps in the "Gulag Archipelago" where he died. His premonitions about the "New Age" were entirely justified, with regard not only to his personal destiny but also to the fate of untold millions. His poems remain as a monument not only to an era of modern history but also to the struggle of the poet to speak with a voice that can survive the hunger of time and the state. The poets raise their voice, which like a thousand-reed flute sounds its music or its warning. To the extent that the voice is heard above the noises in the street – or the laugh of the jailers – it resonates with prophetic urgency and takes on mythic proportions. It is in this sense that Classical poetry can be revolutionary, in that it endures and motivates us not only to show the state compassion but also to resist its injustices by appealing to the wider perspective.

Like Yeats, Mandelstam saw no singing school but the unageing, magnificent monuments. Like Yeats, Mandelstam erected his own monuments to the cataclysmic time through which he lived, though his poetry is not so much the record of an age as it is the record of an attempt to transcend his age and speak to the ages, to reach his own holy city, as Yeats determined to sail "to the holy city of Byzantium." Let us turn now to two of Mandelstam's monuments: "He Who Found a Horseshoe" and "Sumerki Svobodi" (which can be translated both as "Dawn of Freedom" and "Twilight of Freedom," or simply as "Half-Light of Freedom," suggesting the ambivalence Mandelstam felt as the age of the Czars passed away).

In *A Vision* Yeats declared: "As each age reaches its catastrophic climax it disintegrates, 'things fall apart': and yet within, as it were, the new age starts its growth, 'unwinding the thread the previous age has wound'" (quoted in Henn, 129). Mandelstam, like Yeats, believed that he was living in the midst of catastrophic times, that he was witnessing the end of an age. In "He Who Found a Horseshoe," Mandelstam weaves references to sea and land with references drawn from the Classical and contemporary age; the result is a complex verbal texture, an elegy to the individual and an evocation suggesting the spirit of an era. As Steven Broyde points out, "He Who Found a Horseshoe" depicts two ships: the ship of poetry and the ship of state. "The navigator of the ship of poetry is the poet; the navigator of the ship

of state is Peter I [Peter the Great], also its builder" (180). While navigating his fragile craft, the poet launches his poem, which Mandelstam likens to a note in a bottle.

Like this note in a bottle, the poem will find its way to its circle of friends, to its secret addressee. It will be both a monument of unageing intellect and a comment on historical events that owes no allegiance to the transience or vicissitudes of political power. (To indicate that "He Who Found a Horseshoe" was heir to the Classical legacy and not merely an occasional piece, Mandelstam gave it the subtitle "A Pindaric Fragment"; the subtitle also indicates that the poem has been severed from its heritage–it is a *fragment*.) The poem stands before us as a kind of shard that nevertheless speaks with a voice which transcends its writer's limitations, in the same way a note in a bottle does.

> Human lips,
> which have nothing more to say,
> Preserve the form of the last word said,
> And a feeling of heaviness remains in the hand,
> Although the clay pitcher
> half spilled while being carried home.
> What I am saying now, *I* am not saying,
> But it is dug out of the ground like petrified wheat.

We recall the words of John here: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit." We also recall the etymology of the word *symbol*: *symbolein* is said to derive from a time when the group or *polis*, in order to choose a representative, would break an earthen vessel and distribute the shards. The one who fit two shards together would be elected. So it is here with Mandelstam's "poem in a bottle." The poet's words, like petrified wheat or clay shards, choose their confidant. Whoever digs them out of the ground – out of the strata of intervening history – and reassembles them, will be the one chosen to tell or retell the true history of an age. In this way we may all participate in the archaeology of knowledge, or in an archaeology which revivifies the spirit of an age.

Elsewhere Mandelstam likens poetry to "an Egyptian ship for the dead. Everything for life is stored, nothing is forgotten in this barque" (quoted in Broyde 180). The poet-navigator, who must find a way through the darkness of an age's dying, must plumb the depths of a situation's turbulence so as to ascertain where its true north and its centre of gravity lie. It is this desire for *profundity* that leads the poet to myth and legend, to sacred and secular history, so that the moment may be measured against a wider perspective, and so that temporal may be gauged against the plumb line of the timeless.

> Under the salty heel of the wind the plumb will remain
> balanced, adjusted to the dancing deck.
> And the seafarer
> In an unbridled thirst for space,
> Dragging through the damp ruts the delicate apparatus
> of a geometrician,
> Will check the gravity of the earth's bosom
> Against the rough surface of the seas.

But it is not only the poet who takes measurements. The geometer's "unbridled thirst for space" could as well apply to the acquisitive state, with its obsession for geometric regularity. In Mandelstam's poem the measurements of the poet and those of the state are often at variance. Two kinds of hunger seek to occupy the same space at the same time: the poet's hunger for the communion of the Word, of the Logos, and the state's hunger, "more terrible than a hungry man." And there is a third, insatiable appetite that promises to devour them all, the omnivorous hunger of Time. "The life of the word has entered a heroic era. The word is flesh and bread. It shares the fate of bread and flesh: suffering. People are hungry. The state is even hungrier. But there is something still hungrier: Time. Time wants to devour the state" (Mandelstam, *Collected* 115). For the poet to navigate his ship or barque as it runs athwart the ship of state

is an act of heroism, both because the state desires the helm – desires to employ the poet's voice for its own ends — and because Time becomes Apocalypse and Cataclysm as one age dies and another is born, as the old regime falls and the Red Guardsmen take to the streets. For Mandelstam, the poet's calling is both priestly and prophetic.

"He Who Found a Horseshoe" begins at sea, as a note in a bottle cast upon the waters. It concludes on land with the Classical images of the hippodrome and of the horse, one of the symbols of Roman power. "In a poetic context," Mandelstam said, "the horse can represent a whole past epoch" (Mandelstam, *Collected* 50). And so it is here. The horse, wounded and dying, calls forth the death throes of the age as well as the struggles of the individual against the ravages of time and the state.

> A steed covered with lather lies in the dust and snorts,
> But the steep bend of its neck
> Preserves the memory of its flailing stride...

The statue of Peter the Great astride a rearing stallion overshadowed the city which bore his name until the Bolsheviks replaced that name with that of their master architect Lenin and so rechristened the city. But the statue remained after those of Lenin were torn down, and the city is once again Petersburg. Pushkin's petty clerk imagined the statue was pursuing him down the streets of the storm-tossed capital. In Mandelstam's elegiac ode all that is left of the horse is a horseshoe, to remind us of the glory that was Rome, Petersburg, and Leningrad.

> So, He who found a horseshoe
> Blows the dust from it
> And rubs it with fur until it shines,
> Then
> He hangs it over the threshold,
> Where it will rest,
> Never again to strike sparks from the flint.

The poem and the poet speak to us from the past, in his absence and long after the events which brought him joy or sorrow, which saw the rise and fall of empires. His message remains, a note in a bottle, a horseshoe lying in the dust. We pick it up and it speaks to us of a time beyond recall. But simply because it is *we* who have found it, it speaks to *us*, addresses us personally. It may tell us of past glories or injustices, but its features are effaced, almost illegible. Even as Mandelstam writes he realizes that Time has perpetrated its inevitable usury, that his voice is *already* muted, and that the state's claims about the dawn of a new age may in fact be the twilight of individual freedom. Certainly, that was true for Mandelstam, among the countless victims of Stalin's murderous ruthlessness. And it has been true for countless others who have tried to practice compassion or navigate their fragile craft on its perilous course.

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