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Review Of "Mandel'shtam's Poetics: A Challenge To Post-Modernism" By E. Glazgov-Corrigan

Sibelan E.S. Forrester

Swarthmore College, sforres1@swarthmore.edu

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Elena Glazov-Corrigan, *Mandel'shtam's Poetics: A Challenge to Postmodernism*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000. 194 pp. ISBN 0802047378.

Reviewed by Sibelan Forrester, Swarthmore College

The first virtue of Elena Glazov-Corrigan's book *Mandel'shtam's Poetics* is its focus on a rich but neglected part of that great poet's writing. Russian poets in the first two decades of the twentieth century typically wrote theoretical prose and developed critical as well as creative personae: the modernists approached society and social ills differently from nineteenth-century Realist novelists, but they still felt called upon to teach, if not in verse then in their other writing. Symbolists like Alexander Blok or Zinaida Hippis devoted a great deal of energy to "socially useful" prose, *publitsistika*, along with literary criticism proper; the Futurists made the polemical manifesto into a fine art. Along with Anna Akhmatova and Nikolai Gumilev, Osip Mandel'shtam (1891-1938) considered himself an Acmeist; that group, as Glazov-Corrigan notes, is among other things notable for its lack of a definitive artistic program—but all of the Acmeists, too, eventually wrote critical prose of one kind or another.

Mandel'shtam never composed in an impersonal scholarly style, divorced from his own poetic voice (as Akhmatova did, for example, in her scholarly articles on Pushkin). In his prose he is more comparable—as Glazov-Corrigan's comparisons suggest—to Boris Pasternak or Marina Tsvetaeva, his contemporaries and friends. Joseph Brodsky could as easily be speaking of Mandel'shtam when he writes, "prose for Tsvetaeva was nothing but the continuation of poetry by other means" (*Less than One: Selected Essays* [New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1986], 178); her critical prose (collected in *Art in the Light of Conscience*, translated by Angela Livingstone [Harvard University Press, 1992]) displays a similar insistence on the co-creative reader and a demanding texture and style that force the reader to work, in hopes of enriching or transforming his or her conclusions through that participation. However, Mandel'shtam's critical work has not been treated as a corpus worthy of study due to "the perception that he was too erratic, too impressionistic, and too impulsive a thinker to deserve the status of a theoretician" (6); most scholars have read his theoretical writings almost solely to illuminate his often opaque poetry. Glazov-Corrigan explicitly turns that approach on its head, reading Mandel'shtam's critical prose with the tools gleaned from study of his poetry and out of broad and deep familiarity with the scholarly literature on his poetry. She emphasizes the essential qualities of his prose's construction: "this book demonstrates that if Mandel'shtam's poetics is to be found anywhere, it is to be discovered not in the unity of vision underneath the metaphor but rather within the metaphor, which continuously changes and undergoes a series of metamorphoses" (10). Moreover, critics have often applied Mandel'shtam's critical statements to poetry written at very different periods; Glazov-Corrigan is scrupulous in leaving his ideas rooted in the context of the time when they arose, and she does not bring his poetry into the discussion at all.

The numerous other writers and literary movements cited here show Mandel'shtam's own attention to the broader societal and historical contexts of his theoretical and artistic concerns. Glazov-Corrigan shows him writing about earlier Russian poets, especially Pushkin; great European figures, including François Villon and Dante; major figures of the Symbolist movement; the Futurist poets he sometimes loved and sometimes dismissed in irritation; Formalist critics (some of whom later "grew up" into Structuralists); his fellow Acmeists; other

contemporary poets, especially Pasternak and Tsvetaeva; and a surprising array of non-literary figures, especially Charles Darwin but also friends of Mandel'shtam who were specialists in the biological and physical sciences. Most contemporary readers of Mandel'shtam's criticism were other poets; many of them (including Akhmatova and Marina Tsvetaeva) were offended by his aggressive and categorical statements. Mandel'shtam's authorial personality is not Glazov-Corrigan's subject, but it does creep in around the edges—as in footnote 18 to chapter 3, p. 156: "Mandel'shtam never directly discusses the work of Shklovsky but invariably speaks about him without irony, which in Mandel'shtam's case is tantamount to a resentful acceptance [. . .]." Perhaps his critical prose has been neglected in part because he is a more agreeable person in his (less penetrable) poetry.

The book's structure follows chronological development and gradually increasing complexity. After the introduction and a chapter on the unfolding of Mandel'shtam's early thought, three chapters trace particular elements of his theories of poetic creation through a sequence of his theoretical essays: the word in Mandel'shtam's poetics, "The Word in Action: The Hypnotic Power of Poetry," and the participation of the reader. For example, the second chapter treats the word through the metaphor of stone (1913-1919), the word as an expression of "inner and outer reality" (1921-22) the word as space (1925), and "the word as journey into the patterns of communication" (1930's). These three chapters exploit the value of a chronological approach in clarifying the development of the author's thought and its crises, but they are not limited to that approach. Like the poetry written during a certain period, each stage in the author's thoughts has its interpretative value, and, though Glazov-Corrigan treats Mandel'shtam's theoretical growth as a process of evolution, the earlier "organisms" of his thought are not necessarily more primitive and are not made extinct or irrelevant by later ideas. Each new discovery casts its light on the previous ones. The central and longest (fifth) chapter, "Periodization in the Transmutation of the Poetic Landscape: Metamorphosis of the Addressee in the 1930's," is devoted mostly to a detailed reading of Mandel'shtam's last big piece in the genre, "Conversations with Dante." Here Glazov-Corrigan takes the chronological approach of the previous chapters to a much more detailed level; the table of contents devotes more than a page to the list of individual points, making it easy to refer back to the chapter in search of a particular section. The final chapter offers a dazzling series of comparisons/contrasts of Mandel'shtam's thought to other poets, schools, and theoretical movements, concluding with a run through selected postmodernist ideas, somewhat anti-climactic only because the title suggests that this topic will form a major part of the book.

As a reader I have great praise for Glazov-Corrigan. Mandel'shtam's own depth and complexity seem to attract scholars who are themselves gifted with language, but Glazov-Corrigan is particularly so. Her prose is vibrant, rich and strongly allusive, as she makes significant strands of Mandel'shtam's thought more accessible without simplifying them. I could choose a multitude of her sentences as examples of "beautiful clarity." Her affection for and response to Mandel'shtam's writing never compromise her critical lucidity—she takes the poet seriously as a thinker in the most useful way. The reader gains not only a sophisticated set of ideas and interpretations, but also the sensual pleasure of aesthetic texture: Glazov-Corrigan too, tacitly, directs her reader to evolve as a perceiver and interpreter of the world. Even the art on the book's cover is beautiful and evocative, a photograph of a sculpture of Mandel'shtam by Grigory Israelevitch that is chosen with exquisite appreciation both for the poet's fate and "poetic face"

and for the matrix of Jewish, Russian and Soviet culture in which he worked and lived. Finally, although this point is hidden in the fine print, Glazov-Corrigan provides distillations of Mandel'shtam's thought that go well beyond what is written in his essays, making the substructure accessible to her reader:

...although I am speaking about a particular view of the effect of poetry, this view is never stated explicitly in Mandel'shtam's essays. Instead, the reader is confronted with highly impressionistic patterns of description, but there is nevertheless a fundamental repetition in the use of images and metaphors. The metaphors, invariably striking and powerful, are equally puzzling and challenging. What follows is once again a careful chronological reconstruction of a particular vision never stated overtly in the oeuvre itself, but always played out in recognizable patterns of description. Mandel'shtam presents poetry as an inner, hidden source of power, which manifests itself in, but is not reducible to, its visible configurations. This is a view that in fact guided (whether consciously or unconsciously) the patterning of his own work and that yet retained its hiddenness, to be displayed only in the repetitive series of metaphors on the surface of the text. (43-44)

Such buried meaning is entirely in the spirit of Mandel'shtam's theories about poetry's functions; the use of metaphor to convey multiple and complex meanings is clearly one of the poetic tools that he brings to prose writing. As writing became more difficult and dangerous in the last decade of his life, the impulse to "bury" messages must have been only intensified for all writers who were driven to "Aesopic" language in artistic expression.

My quibbles with this book are mostly quite small, beginning with minor but persistent irritation whenever the name "Mandel'shtam" is hyphenated as "Mandel-'shtam." There are several typographical errors or inconsistencies in transliterations, as well as occasional awkwardness in translated passages (chiefly those where Glazov-Corrigan does *not* note that she has altered them—perhaps she should have been more interventive). I wondered about the choice to give an identical footnote twice (note 8 to Chapter 1, p. 150, and note 8 to chapter 3, p. 155), and there is one outright error in note 24 to chapter 5, p. 166 (inadvertently abbreviated by a copy-editor?), claiming that the word "materia" means 'mother' in Russian. The word "mother" in Russian is "*mat'*," changing to "*materi*" (stress on the first syllable) in the oblique cases—certainly close enough to *materia* to assert that a Russian would see the resemblance immediately, but hardly identical. Aside from that, the footnotes are well-written and informative, hardly less finely crafted and pleasurable than the text itself. While checking my claims for this review I found some lacks in the index (a shame, since the book invites re-reading and the index is otherwise thoughtfully compiled). Sergei Averintsev's warmly worded and saturated foreword reads a bit like a positive internal review of the book's manuscript—aside from several well-chosen additional remarks about Mandel'shtam, it seems to serve mainly to encourage a reader who has picked up the book to go ahead and read it.

In the end, I have to wonder whether Mandel'shtam's poetics really are a challenge to postmodernism, as the title claims. Glazov-Corrigan sums up the ideas of some of the big names in postmodernist and/or poststructuralist criticism: Barthes, Kristeva, and Harold Bloom, also mentioning Foucault and Culler; she offers a succinct and well-worded comparison, or more often contrast, of their thoughts with Mandel'shtam's. Given her program of uncovering and

making explicit the patterns of thought and depiction that have until now been lying fallow in Mandel'shtam's prose, one might accuse her of setting up her own challenge to postmodernism with Mandel'shtam's critical writing as its material and pretext. That would be a rather po-mo way of "appropriating" any author, though one that is quite out of character given the rest of this book. It seems hardly surprising that a poet's theoretical writings would read differently from those of someone mainly known as a theorist: this book makes it brilliantly clear how much Mandel'shtam in his critical writing is always simultaneously poet and reader, intimately engaged in other writers' work but never far from his own concerns and energetic, sometimes aggressive, creative program. It is likewise hardly surprising that someone who has just been examined in such loving detail would sound more profound and complex than a theorist represented by a couple of summary points, or a critical movement represented by key ideas abstracted from two or three of its best-known practitioners. Why should these thinkers be seen as mutually exclusive if Mandel'shtam's contacts with the other writers Glazov-Corrigan includes in the final chapter are allowed to remain in a state of ambiguity and tension? Perhaps the title is just a bid for the eye of the reader who has not heard of Mandel'shtam but might be drawn by the promise of yet another challenge to postmodernism?

Or rather should we assume, since Mandel'shtam suggests via Glazov-Corrigan that a poet should seek relationship to other poets through love and admiration, that the reader and critic too should work to establish a theoretical model based on love and admiration, rather than on current critical fashion or jockeying for intellectual position? For those who might find Mandel'shtam a sympathetic critical guide, Glazov-Corrigan has distilled his positions admirably. For those who already know Russian poetry or criticism of the Modernist period, she offers a variety of rich and provocative readings. *Mandel'shtam's Poetics* is a substantial and rewarding book, whether it points us toward Mandel'shtam's poetry, to his prose—or to more scholarly works of the caliber of Elena Glazov-Corrigan's.