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READING/WRITING THE DIALECTICAL IMAGE—WALTER BENJAMIN AND OSIP MANDEL'STAM

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In the last four lines of “Notre Dame,” one of Mandel’stam’s manifesto-poems of Acmeist poetics, the poet vows to be apprenticed to the construction of the cathedral:

But the more attentively I studied
Notre Dame, your monstrous ribs, your stronghold,
The more I thought: I too one day shall create
Beauty from cruel weight. (*Selected Poems* 17)

This was 1912 and Mandel’stam and his fellow Acmeists were struggling to push away from what they perceived to be the mystical and mystified Symbolist aesthetics. The acmeist notion of the word as stone and phenomena rather than symbol, dominates Mandel’stam’s early poetry. “Notre Dame” and “Hagia Sophia” in fact read as textbook exercises in ekphrasis, where the poet’s task is two-fold—to describe the monument and to construct a cathedral-poem from the stony words. Ten years later, Mandel’stam still thought of the poet as the apprentice from the last stanza of “Notre Dame,” but his notion of the word had changed from a self-contained building block to a polysemic cluster, pointing beyond itself but still firmly grounded in the rich metaphoric texture of his poetry. For the Symbolist notion of the statically binary word Mandel’stam substituted the notion of metamorphosis and mutation as the principle of poetic composition and defined the poet as one who moulds the word rather than one who creates. In the poetry and essays of this middle period, the poet appears as the medieval scribe, the apprentice to nature or the archaeologist who must transcribe from image to language, but a language that preserves the visual, fragmentary quality of the image.

These two aspects of Mandel’stam’s poetics—the poem as a transcription of cultural and natural texts and the notion of the poetic word as polysemic cluster rather than discrete building block—will serve as my point of departure in this discussion. From here, I would like to proceed to a staged encounter between Mandel’stam’s poetics and the aesthetic and historiographic theory of Walter Benjamin. Questions of biographic or historical affinity aside, the intellectual kinship of Mandel’stam and Benjamin is striking in their shared notion of history as a non-linear and non-narrative form which stands to be disrupted, fragmented, blasted out of its sedimentary periodization and opened up to the present moment. To Benjamin’s allegorist-collector corresponds Mandel’stam’s figure of the poet as the ploughman who turns over buried strata of the past so as to create a new surface of synchronic time and spatialized history.¹ Opposed to intentionality, linearity, logic and grammar in the writings of Benjamin and Mandel’stam, is the image or figural thought. Mandel’stam’s poet and Benjamin’s critic or materialist historiographer share the task of bringing what Benjamin calls the historical object or the dialectical image to its legibility in the present.

Benjamin defines the dialectical image as “that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what has been to the now [*Jetzt*] is dialectical—not temporal in nature but figural” (*The Arcades Project* N2a, 3). What differentiates the image from a moment in a historical narrative is first of all its utter saturation with the present moment, and secondly, its arrested, fragmentary state. The individual images are not subject to reintegration into a hermeneutically sound but nonetheless narrative account of the past. Thus the image as a spatialization of time is first of all opposed only to narrative continuity and to the syntactical axis of language, not to language as such. Benjamin emphasizes the identity of image with language when he writes, “Only dialectical images are genuinely historical...and the place where one encounters them is language” (*The Arcades Project* N2a, 3). The idea of an image-language has already figured in Benjamin’s thought since the 1916 essay, “On Language as Such and the Language of Man,” as well as in “The Origin of German Tragic Drama.” In both essays, Benjamin distinguishes between an original language of names in which the utterance gives perfect expression to nature, and the contemporary fragmented and allegorical language of images, which unconsciously lets something of the expressive Name-language shine through. The image, then, is the repository of the unconscious word and it is the task of the critic to awaken the name within the image. If image contains language, then the task of interpretation is to “read” the image and strip the visual from the written, while at the same time preserving the image in its ekphrastic representation.

The Arcades Project, begun in 1927, is Benjamin’s most elaborate effort to do just that—to bring to consciousness the mythologized image and force it to speak in the double voice of past and present. In one of the many metacritical passages of *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin compares the arcades to an excavation sight, containing artifacts which await the critic so that they may be brought to light:

As rocks of the Miocene or Eocene in places bear the imprint of monstrous creatures from those ages, so today arcades dot the metropolitan landscape like caves containing the fossil remains of a vanished monster: the consumer of the pre-imperial era of capitalism, the last dinosaur of Europe. (R2, 3)

Excavation for Benjamin is synonymous with the revolutionary activity of reading, which is the material historiographer’s task. But is it also the task of Mandel’stam’s poet. In “Slate Ode” (1923), perhaps Mandel’stam’s most complex statement of his *ars poetica*, the poet-apprentice reads the markings on the slate made by nature and by Gavriil Derzhavin, the late 18th century Russian poet. Derzhavin’s poem, “The River of Time,” which he wrote on a slate board three days before his death, serves as the major sub-text for “Slate Ode.” Derzhavin’s poem is a meditation on the transience of nature and the works of man, allegorized in the image of the river, but ironically receiving its most Benjaminian allegorization in the fading of the poem itself from the slate board on which Derzhavin inscribed it. The poet of Mandel’stam’s “Slate Ode” is then engaged in a

three-fold reading: the markings on the stone which are at once natural and historical, and the inscription of Derzhavin's "The River of Time," which did after all survive.

The parallels between Benjamin's methodology in *The Arcades Project* and Mandel'stam's poetics in "Slate Ode" are here particularly suggestive and help us to understand the convergence of their definitions of the image. The metamorphic layers inscribed on slate in "Slate Ode" is what Mandel'stam calls "the meteorological record of the weather" or the deposits made by history.² But if the poet's contemplation of the stone's writing ended there, Mandel'stam's poem would differ little from Derzhavin's in the one-tier allegory of natural phenomena as an emblem of history. However, what at first appears as "the language of flint and air" in the first stanza is in fact already poetic language, referencing a poem by Mikhail Lermontov in which the poet sets out on a flinty path above which the stars are conversing. Lermontov's poet entertains a death wish in which death would be commuted to a sleep in which the poet would be lulled by natural, disembodied poetry (the rustling of the leaves, a voice singing of love). What Derzhavin's and Lermontov's poems have in common is the refusal to see nature as anything other than allegorical. In "Slate Ode," it is the task of the poet to awaken this writing, which in the first stanza is inscribed "on the soft shale of the clouds":

A mighty junction of star with star,
The flinty path in an older song
In language of flint and air combined:
Flint meets water and ring joins horseshoe;
On the soft shale of the clouds
A milky slate-gray sketch is drawn:
Not the discipleship of worlds
But the delirious dreams of mooning sheep. (*Osip Mandelstam: 50 Poems* 61-63)

Both Derzhavin's and nature's slate—both of which are coterminous in Lermontov's Romantic conflation of the voice of poetry and the voice of nature—become in "Slate Ode" the iconoclastic board that must be wiped clean in order for the new inscription to emerge. Thus tradition and nature become an almost transparent layer over which the poet writes. The images are not wiped clean, however, but emerge layered and synchronic in the final stanza of the poem, where the poet palimpsestically layers day and night, nature and poetry, tradition and the present act of writing:

And now I study the rough-hewn ledger
Of the scratches made in the slate-pencil summer:
The language of flint and air combined
With a stratum of darkness and a stratum of light.
And I want to place my fingers
In the flinty path from the older song
As in a lesion, binding, joining
Flint to water, ring to horseshoe. (63)

The site of reading, the metamorphic stone, is preserved as the material on which the poem is inscribed and as the central metamorphosis of the poem.

The “Slate Ode” enacts the rhetorically-paradoxical move of establishing the site of writing (the stone) to be identical to both the semantic content of the poem (a poem about slate and writing on slate) and the poetic language itself (the language of stone). We might compare Mandel’stam’s multiple encoding of his poetic enterprise to Benjamin’s metacritical language common to much of his writing. For example, in *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin describes his materialist historiographic enterprise as the making visible through citation of invisible ink which is the writing of history.³ Here writing occurs against the background of invisible ink that is at once the context and the material of inscription. In his essay on Goethe’s “Elective Affinities,” Benjamin writes,

One may liken him [the critic] to a paleographer in front of a parchment whose faded text is covered by the stronger outlines of a script referring to that text. Just as the paleographer would have to start with reading the script, the critic must start with commenting on his text.⁴

The central image of Mandel’stam’s “Egyptian Stamp,” a poetic-autobiographical work of the mid-twenties, bears some strikingly similar images of writing. The title of the work refers to Russian stamps of 1902 and 1906, whose image would fade when steamed. The narrator’s task in “The Egyptian Stamp”—as well as the poet’s in “Slate Ode”—is to preserve the fading image in a writing that will gloss the image and cover over it at the same time.

It is the relation between the body of the text and the marginalia and illuminations which define Mandel’stam’s poetics and Benjamin’s critical project. In Benjamin’s terms, the image is taken out of time, not out of connection with the historical situation which it brings to consciousness. In fact, in order for it to be brought to consciousness, the dialectical image must retain the sort of connection that the fossil allegorizes—it is imprinted on the cave as a cipher, but it is at the same time physically extant in the cave (and the cave-arcade in the metropolitan landscape). In Mandel’stam’s terms, the connection between image and context is summed up in the central image of “The Horseshoe-Finder,” written in the same year as “Slate Ode.” The title refers to the poet who extracts the artifact—whether this is an image, poetic discourse, or tradition—and integrates the artifact into a non-functional space where it nonetheless retains its historical memory:

So,
The horseshoe-finder
Blows off the dust
And rubs it with wool until it shines
Then
Hangs it on the threshold
So that it may rest.
And it will no longer have to strike sparks from flint.

Human lips,
which have nothing more to say,
Preserve the shape of their last word,

And the arm retains the sense of heaviness
Although the water
 in the pitcher was half spilt
 on the way home.

It is not I who speaks that which I speak.
But it is extracted from the earth, like the seeds of frozen grain. (*My translation*)

The horseshoe provides a striking image of Benjamin's dialectical image and Mandel'stam's trope in poetic discourse. Neither the historical fragment nor the poetic trope can be read as an isolated unit, an image to be interpreted through binary correspondence. The arcade is not a symbol of the nineteenth century, nor is it merely its metonymy. Rather, it bears an expressive and heuristic relation between the concrete historical form, namely the arcades, and its historical context.

In Mandel'stam's theory of poetic discourse, he calls the poetic trope metamorphic and defines the image as "an instrument in the metamorphosis of hybridized poetic discourse" (*The Collected Critical Prose and Letters*, "Conversation about Dante" 444). He calls Dante's tropes Heraclitean metaphors or metamorphoses which are figured by the mutation worked by nature on slate. "Dante's thinking in images," Mandel'stam writes, "as is the case in all genuine poetry, exists with the aid of a peculiarity of poetic material which I propose to call its convertibility or transmutability" (414). If the image is "an instrument in the metamorphosis of hybridized discourse," it serves a function, which, once deployed within a poem, is subsumed to the Heraclitean flow of the metamorphosis. As much as Dante "destroys the integrity of the image," Mandel'stam's own vertiginous metamorphoses preclude any stable correspondence. If image is the instrument, metamorphosis is the whole and the result in Mandel'stam poetics. Thus we can explain Mandel'stam's distaste for film in that the individual frames are not, as the image, assimilated to the whole of the metamorphosis. They remain locked in a sequence of symbolic stills which for Mandel'stam would resemble the static symbol of the Russian Symbolists.⁵ By the same token, film and photography for Benjamin represent a demystified and demystifying art form which breaks up mythical continuity and restores the image to its waking state. The reified, fetishistic nature of the dialectical image was the main point of contention between Benjamin and Adorno, who argued that Benjamin's philosophy "appropriates the fetishism of commodities for itself: everything must metamorphose into a thing in order to break the catastrophic spell of things" (*Prisms* 233). Thus, the dialectical image seems to stand in opposition to Mandel'stam's metamorphic image, the Heraclitean metaphor which "so strongly emphasizes the fluidity of the phenomenon and cancels it out with such a flourish, that direct contemplation, after the metaphor has completed its work, is essentially left with nothing to sustain it" ("Conversation about Dante" 417).

Are we finally to read Benjamin's dialectical image and Mandel'stam's poetic trope as diametrically opposed, one still, the other in motion? This position seems as simplistic as a complete correspondence between the two. However, if these seemingly contradictory positions can be reconciled, it is in the way in which the discrete images are brought together in Benjamin's critique and in Mandel'stam's poetry. The function of the dialectical image is to provide an alternate model of knowledge, one which favors

representation over knowledge and parataxic over syntactical language. Non-conceptual, nonlinear representation could just as well describe poetic discourse, whose claim to knowledge lies outside of logic or grammar. Poetic speech or the representation of the dialectical image is catastrophic language. As we have seen, it disrupts continuity and grammar, conceptual knowledge, and historical narrative. But the poetic trope and the dialectical image are also the inscription of the catastrophe, not only its cause or instrument. This is perhaps most apparent in "Slate Ode," where the record of natural catastrophes is inscribed in the stone, upon which material, the surface of the slate, the writing of the poem occurs. Thus language becomes both the site and the means of disruption. For Mandel'stam, this disruption is syntactical and grammatical, while for Benjamin it is historical, but for both it comes down to the lifting up of units of meaning out of time. In another poem from 1923, "My Time," the poet asks,

My time, my brute, who will be able
To look you in the eyes
And glue together with his blood
The backbones of two centuries? (*Selected Poems* 46)

The broken spine of the century can only be held in place by the poet's flute—within poetry rather than historical narrative. If Mandel'stam's poet supplies the glue, Benjamin's critic supplies the tools to break and set together precisely by not gluing but representing together. Benjamin's critical project can be seen as the integration of the dialectical images into a new text in which the fragments would be represented parataxically and poetically. This poetic quality of Benjamin's enterprise (to say nothing of his writing) in no way undercuts the messianic thrust of his project. The process and flux of poetic discourse does not obviate the arrested moments of dialectical thought. Rather, it constellates them into what Benjamin, with reference to Hölderlin, called the *Gedichtete* of the poetic text, its ground and metaphysical truth-content to which the poem points but never explicates or embodies. In this way, the fragments of observations, citations and metacritical remarks of *The Arcades Project* (to take only the most elaborate example of Benjamin's critical project) as well as the project as a whole, constitute the dialectical image. That is, a dialectical image as a fragment functions metamorphically rather than metaphorically, so that the project in its entirety is the image of the arcades as the allegorical flight of images, a fragmented series of tropes that both illuminate each other and are in turn illuminated by the poetic ground to which they refer. The image, then, functions as both a single trope and allegorical language as such—composition by means of disruption.

Benjamin's image is frozen only insofar as it is outside of time. In this respect it does not mimic the commodity, for it is not reified into the binary relation of the signifier and the signified, which would reduce it to the symbolic mode of correspondence between past and present. The redeemed image is not so much the static image as it is the pregnant moment. The allegorical flight of images is the infinite approach of thought to its object, as Adorno characterizes Benjamin's treatment of the objects of consumer society. That approach must be infinite, however, since the image cannot completely give way to the word which characterizes the Name-language. "Slate Ode" and *The Arcades Project* stand as records, over and above generic and discursive distinctions, of the poet-

critic's interpretive struggle to bring the image and the word into conjunction. The object of Mandel'stam's and Benjamin's projects is to join not only flint to water and horseshoe to ring, but also nature to culture, in a poetical/critical constellation that demystifies both.

Notes

¹ See "Word and Culture:" "Poetry is the plough that turns up time in such a way that the abyssal strata of time, its black earth, appear on the surface. These are epochs, however, when mankind, not satisfied with the present, yearning like the ploughman for the abyssal strata of time, thirsts for the virgin soil of time. Revolution in art inevitably leads to Classicism" (*Osip Mandel'stam: The Collected Critical Prose and Letters* 113).

² See "Conversation about Dante:" "Mineral rock is an impressionistic diary of weather accumulated by millions of natural disasters; however, it is not only of the past, it is of the future: it contains periodicity. It is an Aladdin's lamp penetrating the geological twilight of future ages" (439).

³ "The events surrounding the historian, and in which he himself takes part, will underlie his presentation in the form of a text written in invisible ink. The history which he lays before the reader comprises, as it were, the citations occurring in this text, and it is only these citations that occur in a manner legible to all. To write history thus means to *cite* history" (*The Arcades Project* N11, 3).

⁴ Cited in Hannah Arendt, Introduction, *Illuminations*, 5.

⁵ On Mandel'stam's views on film, see "I Write a Screenplay" in *Collected Critical Prose and Letters*, written in response to Shklovskii's advice that Mandel'stam try his hand at screenwriting.

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*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de rechercher
si, par hasard, se trouvait ici l'endroit où de telles
paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*.

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