

## LITERARY NOTES: INTERTEXTUAL REFLECTIONS

*QUOTE THE POETS EVER MORE:*  
 MICRO-ANALYZING INTERTEXTUAL GEMS  
 BY ANNA AKHMATOVA, VLADISLAV  
 KHODASEVICH, AND OSIP MANDEL'SHTAM<sup>1</sup>

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I presume none of the esteemed trio of poets would be scandalized by my pretentious title, given their intense intertextuality—and that with a pronouncedly Western, sometimes particularly Edgar-Poean, tilt.

I will examine several of their lines not usually seen as intertextually allusive—and try to show they actually are, sometimes on a strictly intra-literary basis, but often mediating in one way or another between literature and “life.”

Before going into detail, a couple of words about intertextuality. What kind of *priem* (device/technique/conceit)—is a hidden intertext?

First and foremost, it is a trope: the poet says explicitly one thing while implying another.

As a trope, it complicates and doubles the semantic charge of the line.

In the process, it stimulates the reader’s interactive involvement with the text, sending her on a quest for the quoted source.

Finally, once retrieved, the subtext, usually a classical one, lends to the newly minted line the authority of a solid “readymade,” thus raising the line’s symbolic value.

Talking of value, Rudyard Kipling is famous for having received, in his prime, ten shillings per word. His three younger Russian contemporaries had

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to do with much less, miserably under-paid as they were most of the time for their precious words. It is to their intertextual gems that I am devoting my talk, which, as we speak, *Ilchester Series* is generously sponsoring at about the Kiplingian rate—alas, not adjusted for a century of inflation.

### I

I will begin with a line from the 2nd stanza of Mandel'shtam's 1931 blank-verse poem "Eshche daleko mne do patriarkha ..." ("I'm still far from being a patriarch ..."; first publ. 1961; in Russia, 1966).

Когда подумаешь, чем связан с **миром**,  
То сам себе не веришь: ерунда!  
Полночный ключик от чужой квартиры,  
**Да гривенник серебряный в кармане,**  
Да целлулоид фильмы воровской.

(When you think of what links you to the **world**, / You can't believe it yourself: just trifles/nonsense! / A small midnight key to someone else's flat, / And a **silver dime in your pocket**, / And the celluloid of a crime flick.)<sup>2</sup>

The line I will focus on is the penultimate one, which at first blush seems just a shiny detail conveying the speaker's dignified settling for a modest treasure: a silver dime. The image represents several recurrent Mandel'shtam motifs: poor man's stoical pride; love, sometimes childish, for diminutive objects; relishing all that sparkles; attention to everyday *realia*, mundane but significant; longing for the big outside world. This seems to circumscribe the semantics of the line and call for no further probing. Yet, one can't help wondering: Is that it? Nothing else? None of the wide intertextual horizons the poet is famous for? Having posed the question, one can start looking for answers, which are at least threefold.

Firstly, in terms of the so-called "real commentary," what kind of *grivennik*, (ten-kopeck coin, dime, tenner) was current at the time of the writing? It turns out that precisely in 1931, it changed its look; a slightly different coin started being phased in that packed less silver than previously, but more copper and nickel instead, which made it look somewhat yellowish. As a result, Mandel'shtam and his contemporaries (there is convincing memoirist evidence) were nostalgic for the disappearing shiny piece and thereby for the long-lost silver dime of the prerevolutionary yore.

Secondly, there is a related literary fact: the existence in Russian literature, mostly prose, of a stable "*grivennik* topos": texts about a *grivennik*, exhibiting quite specific thematic connotations and the word itself often making it to the title. Skipping the details, let me just say that the *grivennik* is featured there as a minimal, but meaningful, unit of price, sufficient for a visit to the

2. All translations from the Russian are mine.

bathroom, a streetcar trip, a movie show, as well as a typical amount asked for as alms by beggars, and so on.

Finally, there is a specific literary text, in fact, a book title, that became a quotable, so that the phrase *vokrug sveta s grivennikom v karmane* (“around the world with a dime in your pocket”) entered the Russian language in the 1910s. The French original was the novel *Les cinq sous de Lavaredo* (*The Five Sous of Lavaredo*) by H. Chabrillat & Paul d’Ivoi (1894); it appeared in Russian translation in 1908.

To sum up:

The proverbial underwater bulk of Mandel'shtam’s textual iceberg is in this case very allusive: one third factual (the new minting formula of the coin) and two thirds literary/verbal (the *grivennik* topos; the French-to-Russian meme). Together, they flesh out the poet’s invariant *toska po mirovoi kul'ture*, “nostalgia for world culture.”

These additional references are not so much hidden as casually omitted by the poet, who proclaimed writing with *propushchennye zven'ia*, “skipped links.” Once retrieved, they legitimately enrich the reading; as is well known, Mandel'shtam looked, in his reader, for a fully congenial *sobesednik*, an “interlocutor.”

## II

My second case is of a different kind. We will look at a famous “real-life” line, representing a high point in Anna Akhmatova’s dramatic interactions with Stalin. As is well known, in August 1946 the poet was singled out (along with Mikhail Zoshchenko) for crushing Party criticism, delivered by Andrei Zhdanov, behind whom loomed Stalin himself. He is said to have been incensed by the standing ovation that greeted Akhmatova’s appearance and recital in a Moscow concert hall earlier that year.

Akhmatova and some of her friends claimed to know the Kremlin leader’s exact words that unleashed the official attack on her: “Kto organizoval vstavanie?!” (“Who organized the standing-up?!”). Here are some examples.

It was rumored that Stalin was enraged by the enthusiasm with which the audience received Akhmatova. According to one version, he asked, after some such event: “Who arranged the standing-up?” (N. Glen)

Akhmatova believed that <...> Stalin was jealous of the ovation she got: in April 1946, Akhmatova recited her poems in Moscow, and the audience applauded on their feet. Such applause was due, according to Stalin, to only one person, himself,—and suddenly the crowd went ahead and applauded some poetess (L. Chukovskaia, in her memoirs).

Zoshchenko related that the Decree was the result of Zhdanov’s report to the boss himself. The emphasis was on the concert at the Polytechnic, where the entire hall stood up when Akhmatova appeared on the stage. Allegedly, the boss asked: “Who organized the standing-up?” This sounds like a “quotation,” as Pasternak used to say, i. e., this is a phrase from the vocabulary of the person to whom it is ascribed [i. e., Stalin] (Nadezhda Mandel'shtam)

Most of those reporting the *dictum* agree in ascribing it to Stalin, albeit with careful reservations, using words like *allegedly* and *it was rumored*. Nadezhda Mandel'shtam stresses that the words did sound *tsitatno*, “quotation-like,” something that is relevant to my topic.

Yet, the issue remains open, as the provenance of the saying has not been documented. Stalin could well have authored it—and then again, it could have come from Akhmatova’s own poetic *atelier*—as one more of her famous *plastinki*, (“records”), i.e., vignettes with which she used to regale her guests.

Remarkably, the saying is known from literary circles close to Akhmatova, and not from governmental archives or Kremlinological studies. It circulates as part of *Akhmatoviana*, predominantly of the semi-amateurish sort, and does not appear in scholarly compendia of biographical information such as V. A. Chernykh’s 2008 *Chronicle* of the poet’s life (*Letopis' zhizni i tvorchestva Anny Akhmatovoi, 1889–1966*); it is also absent from Stalin’s biographies.

In line with my demythologizing take on Akhmatova’s life-creation (*zhiznetvorchestvo*), I have always suspected that the famous one-liner is her own cherished creation. Recently I stumbled onto some new evidence backing up this claim.

Akhmatova was a great fan and attentive reader of Shakespeare. References to his oeuvre abound in her texts. Her number one favorite among the plays was *Macbeth*, which she claimed to know practically by heart and once started translating. In the poem “Londontsam” (“To Londoners”; 1940) she refers to the 23 of Shakespeare’s plays, lists some of the famous ones and reserves the pride of place—in the two lines crowning the survey—for *Macbeth*.

Двадцать четвертую драму Шекспира  
Пишет время бесстрастной рукой.  
Сами участники чумного пира,  
Лучше мы Гамлета, Цезаря, Лира  
Будем читать над свинцовой рекой;  
Лучше сегодня голубку Джульетту  
С пеньем и факелом в гроб провожать,  
**Лучше заглядывать в окна к Макбету,  
Вместе с наемным убийцей дрожать,—**  
Только не эту, не эту, не эту,  
Эту уже мы не в силах читать!

(A twenty-fourth Shakespearean drama / Time is writing with its dispassionate hand. / We, who are ourselves participants at the plagued feast, / We better read Hamlet, Caesar, Lear / Over the leaden river; / It is better to be seeing Juliet, the dear little she-dove, / Into her grave today, with singing and burning torches, / Better to peek into Macbeth’s windows / [and] Tremble together with a hired murderer, /—Only not that one, not that one, not that one, / That one it is beyond us to read!)

Allusions to *Macbeth*, starting with a 1921 lyric and all the way to the much later *Poem Without a Hero* (*Poema bez geroia*) and the cycle “Shipovnik tsvetet” (“The Sweetbrier Blooms”) have been identified by commentators. They involve:

—bloodied hands (a nod to Lady Macbeth; *Macbeth*, V, 1):

В крови невинной маленькие руки,  
Седая прядь над розовым виском;  
(«Пусть голоса органа снова грянут...»)

(Small hands covered by innocent blood, / A strand of gray hair over a pink temple / (“Let the voices of the organ resound again...”).

—a ghost in a mirror (inspired by that of Banquo; *Macbeth*, IV, 1):

Есть в этом мире пожалеть о чем,  
И вот идет шекспировская драма,  
И страшен **призрак в зеркале чужом**.  
(«Меня и этот голос не обманет...», 1956)

(There are things in this world to regret, / And lo, a Shakespearean drama is afoot, / And the ghost in an alien mirror is frightening. (“I won’t be fooled by even this voice...”; 1956))

—guests with scepters etc. in Ch. I of *A Poem Without a Hero* (reminiscent of the show of Eight Kings in *Macbeth*, IV, 1):

И плащи, и **жезлы**, и **венцы**  
Вам придется сегодня оставить.

(Your cloaks, and **scepters** and **crowns** / Today you will have to leave behind.) Cf.:

Thou art too like the spirit of Banquo. Down!  
Thy **crown** does sear mine eyeballs. And thy hair,  
Thou other gold-bound brow, is like the first.  
A third is like the former.—Filthy hags!  
Why do you show me this? A fourth? [...]  
And yet the eighth appears, who bears a glass  
Which shows me many more, and some I see  
That **twofold balls and treble scepters** carry.  
Horrible sight! Now I see ’tis true...

(*Macbeth*, IV, 1)

—finally, the image of graves that cannot hold their dead, in the same chapter of the *Poem*:

Значит, хрупки **могильные плиты**,  
Значит, мягче воска **гранит**...

(This means the gravestones are brittle, / It means the granite is softer than wax...)

These lines go back to the scene at the feast where the ghost appears (III, 4):

If charnel-houses and our **graves** must send  
Those that we bury back, our **monuments**  
Shall be the maws of kites,

This is a reference Akhmatova made a point of registering in her *Notebooks*:

24 июля 1962 г.: «Макбетовские <стихи> (Явление тени Банко на пиру)». (“July 24, 1962: Macbethan [lines] (Banquo’s appearance at the feast).”)

Her fixation on *Macbeth* has been connected to “the tragic experience of her generation”: “the great terror” in general and the 1934 murder of Sergei Kirov

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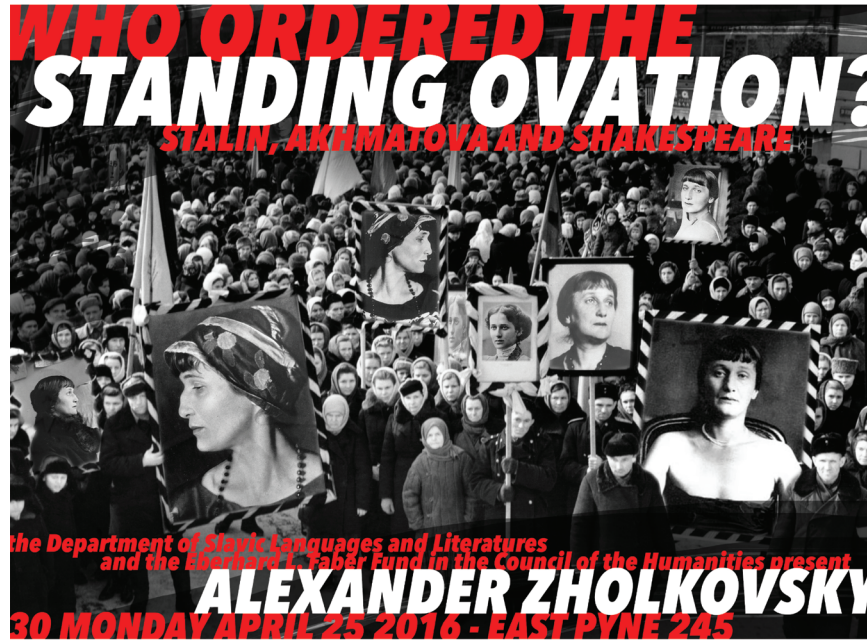
in particular. She naturally identified with Banquo while accordingly projecting Macbeth on Stalin.

Conspicuous by its absence among Akhmatova's references to the play is, in light of her "Macbethomania," one of the most stunning details of the same scene (III, 4). Haunted by the ghost which he, Macbeth, is the only one to see, of Banquo, occupying the seat at the head of the table, Macbeth repeatedly declines the lords' invitation to take this seat. Finally, he asks: "Which one of you did this?"

The similarity between this line (*Kto eto sdelal?*—in Boris Pasternak's translation) and "Who organized the standing-up?" is striking—and telling.

Akhmatova, thoroughly familiar as she was with the play in general and this scene in particular, was clearly in a position to borrow the line, adapt it to the occasion and ascribe it to Stalin. Alternatively, had it, in fact, come from Stalin, she would be likely to comment on the stunning similarity between the two utterances. However, she never did, not in the 1940s, nor later, either publicly or privately, orally or in writing. Had the words really been Stalin's, pointing out their Macbethan ring would have been a real coup for her. If she was the author, however, such an observation would give her away and let Stalin off the hook.

**All power to Anna Akhmatova!**



Poster advertising author's presentation of this section of the lecture; courtesy of its designer, Dr. Mark R. Pettus, Lecturer of Slavic Languages, Princeton University.

If not a definitive proof, this is, I believe, a cogent argument in favor of attributing the line to Akhmatova,—which, in my view, only adds to her achievement as a wordsmith.

To sum up:

The evidence for the link is circumstantial but strong.

The reference, if it is there, is clearly a secret one, not meant to be noticed by the general reader; once identified, it changes the picture radically but does not destroy it.

The link is between an utterance claimed to be a part of “life” (but most likely a newly coined verbal artefact) and a remote literary source; it thus offers a perfect instance of *zhiznetvorchestvo*, or life-into-art strategy.

### III

For my third exhibit, I turn to Vladislav Khodasevich’s signature poem “Pered Zerkalom” (“Before the Mirror,” 1924/1925):

*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*

Я, я, я. Что за дикое слово!  
**Неужели** вон тот—это я?  
**Разве** мама любила такого,  
 Желто-серого, полуседого  
 И всезнающего, как змея?

**Разве** мальчик, в Останкине летом  
 Танцевавший на дачных балах,—  
**Это я, тот**, кто каждым ответом  
 Желторотым внушает поэтам  
 Отвращение, злобу и страх?

**Разве тот, кто** в полночные споры  
 Всю мальчишечью вкладывал прыть,—  
**Это я, тот же самый, который**  
 На трагические разговоры  
 Научился молчать и шутить?

**Впрочем—так и всегда** на середине  
 Рокового земного пути:  
**От ничтожной причины**—к причине,  
**А глядишь**—запутался в пустыне,  
 И своих же следов не найти.

**Да, меня не** пантера прыжками  
 На парижский чердак загнала.  
 И **Виргилия нет** за плечами,—  
**Только** есть одиночество—в раме  
**Говорящего правду стекла.**

*(In the middle of the journey of our life*

I, I, I. What a weird word! / Is that one there really I? / Can it really be that (my) mother loved such a person, / Grayish-yellow, with hair turning white, / And omniscient like a serpent? // Can it be that the boy / Who used to dance at balls / At Ostankino in the summer—/ Is I, who with

each of my answers inspires loathing, / Anger and fear in newly hatched poets? // Can it be that the one who used to throw / All his boyish vivacity into midnight arguments / Is I, the same one who has learned to be silent and to jest / In response to tragic confessions? // Yet it is always like this midway / On the fatal journey through life: / [You go] from one trivial cause to another, / And behold, you have lost your way in the desert / And cannot find your very own tracks. // To be sure, [it was] not a panther in leaping pursuit / [that] Has driven me into a Paris garret, / And there is no Virgil standing behind my shoulders,— / There is only loneliness—framed / In the mirror that speaks the truth.)

The text proper is preceded by an explicit quotation: the epigraph from Dante, echoed later in the fourth and fifth stanzas, but this is not the poem's only intertextual reference. A powerful cluster of motifs—questioning the validity of language, facing one's split self in the mirror, the multiple untranslatable *razve*'s, the "mother" theme as well as the motif of stumbling through "trivial causes"—all these echo a classic of Russian prose.

Here is a passage from Lev Tolstoi's *The Death of Ivan Ilych* that couches the denial of an existential crisis in terms of: (i) *razve* clauses appealing to *mommy* and other childhood memories and (ii) of an insistent distancing of oneself from the textbook mortal man Caius. It also features the recurrent pronouns *tot* "that" and *tak* "so, like that," characteristic of Khodasevich's poem. I will rely on an English translation by Michael Katz of Tolstoi's tale, providing, in brackets, those Russian words that constitute crucial links between the two texts lost in translation.

[Ivan Ilych] knew he was dying but [...] simply [...] could not grasp it.

The syllogism he had learnt from Kiesewetter's *Logic*: "Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal," had always seemed to him correct as applied to Caius [...] That Caius [...] was mortal was perfectly correct, but **he was not** Caius, not an abstract man, but **he had always been** a creature quite, quite separate from all others. **He had been little Vanya, with a mamma** and a papa [...] with Mitya and Volodya [...] with all the joys, griefs, and delights of **childhood, boyhood, and youth. What did Caius know [razve]** of the smell of **that** striped leather ball Vanya had been **so** fond of? **Had [Razve]** Caius kissed his **mother's** hand **like that**, and did the silk of his **mother's** dress rustle **so** for Caius? [...] **Could [Razve]** Caius really preside at a session **as [tak]** he did? "Caius really was mortal, and it was right for him to die; but **for me, little Vanya, Ivan Ilych**, with all my thoughts and emotions, it's altogether a different matter [...] It cannot be that I ought to die."

Reluctantly, he starts realizing the ominous change in his appearance, and this involves two scenes with a mirror (in chapters V, VIII).

"Yes, there is a change." [...] Ivan Ilych locked the door and began to examine himself in the **glass** [...]. He took up a **portrait** of himself [...] and compared it with what he saw in the **glass**. The change in him was immense [...]

[H]e washed his hands and then his face [...] looked in the **glass**. He was terrified.

Against his obstinate denial (hence the disbelieving *neuzheli*'s, near synonyms of *razve*) he is shocked into realizing the truth (*pravda*):

It was **true [pravda]** that now the **quarrels** were started by him [...] "Has my mind **really [neuzheli]** weakened to such an extent?" [...]



“**Can** this [*neuzheli*] be dying? No, I don’t want to!” [...] > **Can it really** [*neuzheli*] be death?” [...]

[H]e would again begin asking himself **whether** [*neuzheli*] it alone was **true** [*pravda*] [...] “It **really** [*pravda*] is so! I lost my life over that curtain as I might have done when storming a fort. Is that **possible** [*neuzheli*]?” [...]

[T]hat **which** had appeared perfectly impossible before, namely **that** he had **not** spent his life as he should have done, might after all be **true** [*pravda*] [...] [H]e [...] saw clearly that it [his life] was **not real** at all [*ne to*].

Tolstoi’s favorite theme of truth-seeking informs the novella, in which the word *slovo*, “word,” appears often, mostly as part of Tolstoi’s recurrent motif of “false words,” trumped, to be sure, by death’s ultimate “truth”:

It was all done with clean hands [...] with French **phrases** [*slova*], and [...] with the approval of people of rank [...]

[Ivan Ilych] was going over what the doctor **had said**, trying to **translate** those **complicated**, obscure, scientific **phrases** [*slova*] **into plain language** and find in them an answer to the question: “Is my condition [...] very bad?” [...]

[H]e would [...] enter into **conversation** with his colleagues [...] pronounce certain **words** and open the **proceedings** [...]

[T]heir every **word** and movement confirmed to him the awful **truth** that had been revealed to him during the night [...]

In Khodasevich’s poem, this is echoed, among other things, by the problematizing of the “weird/wild [*dikoe*] word I” and focusing accordingly on metalinguistic matters, which are represented by the corresponding vocabulary (*ответом, поэтам, споры, разговоры, молчать, шутить, говорящего; answer, poets, discussions, be silent, to joke, speaking*).

An obvious question is whether—and how well—Khodasevich was familiar with *The Death of Ivan Ilych*. Surprise, surprise!.. Prior to writing the poem, he had reread several of Tolstoi’s works, including this novella. This resulted in, first, an oral paper about the poetry of Innokentii Annenskii, and then three published essays based on it (in 1921, 1922 and 1935).

The essay is a systematic comparison of Annenskii with Ivan Ilych in their attitudes to death and it favors that of Ivan Ilych, who overcomes death through newly found faith. Khodasevich zeroes in on their main difference: Annenskii is a poet, pondering and poetically expressing the distinction between a person’s two ‘I’s, one of which is his true self. In the process, Khodasevich quotes Tolstoi’s novella at length, including the textbook passage about Caius—mommy and all! The essay ends with two paragraphs that directly foreshadow the future poem:

[L]ife suddenly [...] is understood in a new way; the old “**I**” falls apart, and with it also falls apart death [...]. This is purification, catharsis, that which internally completes and transforms **tragedy**, endowing it with the meaning of a religious act [...] Drama is the same horror of human life, only one that fails to get its purifying resolution [...] the curtain falls before the protagonists [...] appear on the stage transformed. Drama is more terrible than **tragedy** because it [...] has *no way-out* [...] Drama, when deployed **in poetry**, stops at the point of horror—**before**

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the meaningless [...] stench of death. This is the horror of two **mirrors reflecting each other's emptiness**.

To sum up:

The case for an intertextual link is quite strong even on strictly textual grounds.

The reference is probably not intended to be perceived by the reader but neither is it pointedly secret; once identified, it suffers no loss, but rather accrues meaning.

It is supported by parallels in the poet's other texts—a godsend scholars can only dream of.

The link is between poetry and prose, that is, a somewhat remote source, albeit still within the boundaries of literature.

"Life" is not completely out of the picture, but the relevant elements of the poet's biography are couched in the vocabulary borrowed from a literary source.

Prominent among the borrowings are the auxiliary words, such as *razve*, *neuzheli*, *vprochem*, which form the syntactic and compositional backbone of the poem, but are the hardest to translate.

#### IV

I will now examine a short segment—highlighted in the text below—of Mandel'shtam's 1915 poem "Insomnia" ("Bessonitsa").

Бессонница. Гомер. Тугие паруса.  
Я список кораблей прочел до середины:  
Сей длинный выводок, сей поезд журавлиный,  
Что над Эллагою когда-то поднялся.

Как журавлиный клин в чужие рубежи—  
На головах царей божественная пена—  
Куда плывете вы? **Когда бы не Елена,  
Что Троя вам одна, ахейские мужи?**

И море, и Гомер—все движется любовью.  
Кого же слушать мне? И вот, Гомер молчит,  
И море черное, витийствуя, шумит  
И с тяжким грохотом подходит к изголовью.

(Insomnia. Homer. Taut sails. / I have read the catalogue of ships down to the middle: / This long(-extended) flock, this train of cranes, / That once rose up over Hellas. // A wedge of cranes to foreign borders/lands— / Divine foam on the heads of (the) kings—/ Where are you sailing to? **Were it not for Helen, / What would Troy alone be to you, Achaean warriors?** // The sea and Homer—all is moved by love. / To whom should I listen? / And lo, Homer is silent, / And the black sea roars, declaiming, / And draws close to my headboard with thunderous crashing of its waves.)

The poem's versatile references—from obvious to probable to possible to virtual—have been identified more or less definitively by what is sometimes

called “the Mandel'shtam industry,” beginning with Nils Åke Nilsson’s pioneering 1966 piece and culminating in Mikhail Bezrodnyi’s 2007 exhaustive summary (plus its online updates).<sup>3</sup> To give you an idea of the range of the allusions, here are, in addition to the master reference of *spisok korablei* to Book II of *The Iliad*, just two more examples:

*do serediny*, “to the middle,” line 2, connotes the *mezzo del cammin di nostra vita* from the opening line of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, liberally quoted by Silver Age poets;

*vitistvuia, shumit*, “roars, while declaiming,” is an inversion of part of the opening line of Pushkin’s “Klevetnikam Rossii,” (“To the Slanderers of Russia,” 1831): *O chem shumite vy, narodnye vitiii*, “About what are you **making** all this **noise**, ye, would-be **orators** for the people?!”

Yet, with Mandel'shtam, there always seems to be room for more intertexts. I’ll offer two new ones: a traditional hidden quote (in this section of the paper); and (in the next) an interplay with a verbal, not necessarily poetic, pattern. In fact, both my claims tend to focus on a redeployment of **patterns**, rather than on reference to specific words.

Let us look at the compound interrogative sentence in lines 7 and 8:

..... Когда бы не Елена,  
Что Троя вам одна, ахейские мужи?

(Were it not for Helen, / What would Troy alone be to you, Achaean warriors?)

The sentence as a whole sounds somewhat strained, on the brink of being linguistically suspect; so does its main clause *Chto Troia vam..?* Yet it is grammatical, after all, as corroborated by recourse to the electronic database: the poetic subcorpus of the National Corpus of the Russian Language.

The question/exclamation “Chto + Noun, Nom. + Pers. Pron. (sometimes Noun), Dat. + ..?/!” is a rhetorical formula widely used in Russian poetry. The pronoun is most often *me*, “to me” (or, at other times, *tebe, vam, emu, ei* etc.); the noun can be abstract (*жизнь, судьба, страх, боль, ...*; *life, fate, fear, pain*) or denote landscapes, the elements, segments of time, persons, communities, physical objects, and places:

*О, что мне закатный румянец, / Что злые тревоги разлук?* (Blok, 1907)

(Oh, what is to me the sunset’s blushing, / What [are] the angry anxieties of separations?)

*Сердце бьется ровно, мерно. / Что мне долгие года!* (Akhmatova, 1913)

(My heart beats evenly, measuredly / What are the long years to me?)

*Ой, левада несравненная / Украинская земли! / Что мне Рим? / И что мне Генуя, / Корольки и короли?* (Vladimir Narbut, 1910)

3, See the most exhaustive, as of today, catalogue of the relevant intertexts, compiled by Mikhail Bezrodnyi and enriched by his blogger-colleagues: <<http://ru-mandel'shtam.livejournal.com/11295.html>> and <<http://m-bezrodnyj.livejournal.com/35564.html>>.

(Oh, the incomparable woods / Meadows of the Ukrainian land? / **What is Rome to me?** / **And what [are] Genoa, / Little kings and big?**)

Thus, the phrase itself does not create interpretational anxiety calling for alternative, possibly intertextual, readings. In fact, ungrammaticality is not a necessary condition for such a search. Quite often at issue is not so much whether an intertextual reference in question is strictly indispensable, as what, once accepted, it does for the understanding of the poem as a whole.

My claim is that underlying the *Chto...?* phrase is Prince Hamlet's famous "Hecuba" remark (II, 2):

..... And all for nothing—  
For Hecuba!  
What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba  
That he should weep for her?

The phrase became proverbial in Russian—in everyday speech prose, drama, and poetry:

[Вы] думаете про себя: «**Что ему Гекуба?**» (Gor'kii, 1901);

(You think to yourself: What is Hecuba to him?)

[В]аши <...> Рошфоры <...> продолжают кричать:—Долой разоблачителей <...> **Что им Гекуба, что они Гекубе?**» (Korolenko, 1898)

(Your [...] Rocheforts [...] go on shouting: "Down with the Unmaskers [...] What is Hecuba to them, what are they to Hecuba!")

Для них, конечно, **что всё это? Что им Гекуба, и что они Гекубе?** Им отцы их достанут места и дадут деньги. (Nikolai Garin-Mikhailovskii, 1895)

(All this hardly matters to them. What is Hecuba to them, and what are they to Hecuba? Their fathers will get them positions and money.)

Общество акклиматизации взяло с [Александрова] арендных 2 000 рублей. Теперь вопрос: **что он Гекубе, что ему Гекуба?** Для чего сдались театру эти баловни судьбы, каковы их функции и **что они Гекубе**—непонятно... (Chekhov, 1885).

(The Acclimatization Society took 2000 rubles for a lease [from Aleksandrov]. The question arises: what is he to Hecuba, what Hecuba to him? Why were these darlings of fate so important to the theater, what functions do they have and what are they to Hecuba—it's all incomprehensible.)

Skipping an overview of *Hamlet's* translations and stagings in Russia, I will just mention the influential 1911 joint direction of the play by Stanislavskii and Gordon Craig. The upshot was that by 1915 familiarity with the Hecuba phrase was taken for granted and it became a sort of archetypal template for the entire paradigm of *Chto mne (emu, vam) to-to ili to-to...?* questions.

A telling example of its metaliterary use, and in a poetic context close to Mandel'shtam's interests, was Viacheslav Ivanov's polemical epistle to Mikhail Kuzmin:

Союзник мой на Геликоне,  
 Чужой меж светских передраг,  
 Мой брат в дельфийском Аполлоне,  
 А в том—на Мойке—чуть не враг! [...]

**Что вам общественность?—Гекуба!**  
**И род Гекаты—символизм!..**  
 («Соседство», 1912)

(My ally on the **Helicon**, / [But] alien [to me] in mundane intrigues, / My brother in [the realm of] **Delphic Apollo**, / But there—on the **Moika** [street]—almost an enemy! [...])

**What's public weal to you?—Hecuba! / And symbolism—a sort of Hecate!..** (V. I. Ivanov, “Neighborliness,” 1912)).

Mandel'shtam is known for turning to Shakespeare for intertexts (the time that is out of joint; the Hamletian “pipe”; Yorick's skull; and some others). And in his critical essays he liked setting the Bard up as a literary icon. As for the anonymity of this supposed reference (neither *Hecuba* nor *Hamlet* appears in the text of the poem), it is in accord with Mandel'shtam's already mentioned aesthetic of *propushchennye zven'ia*, learned at the feet of Innokentii Annenskii (who in turn took it over from Robert Browning).

Well, then, what is it that makes the intertextual presence of the Hecuba phrase in “Insomnia” so relevant—and therefore likely?

To begin with, it is the use of a highly poetic, classical proper name—*Troy*, of which *Hecuba* incidentally was the queen. Next to another proper name from the same Homeric plot underlying the poem, this time that of a woman, not a city, *Helen*, this stimulates further interpretative probing, which is likely to prompt the following virtual gloss: *\*What's Hecuba to you...? But perhaps, you mean not Hecuba, but rather Helen? Well, what THAT ONE is to you does make sense!* Remarkably, in one Russian version of *Hamlet*, Nikolai Polevoi's, popular on the 19th-century stage, the name *Elena* does appear next to *Hecuba*,—in the First Actor's delivery of the soliloquy of Aeneas:

Толико унижен **Гекубы** тяжкий рок!  
 Из уст ее летит проклятия поток  
 На тяжку жребия и счастья измену,  
 На бедствий всех **вину, коварную Елену**.

(So humiliated is **Hecuba's** heavy fate! / From her lips there flies a stream of curses / On the heavy change of her lot and fortune, / On the **treacherous Helen**, guilty of all the troubles.)

This liberty taken with the original text might find some justification in the passage from Virgil's epic (*Aeneid*, II, 499–508), where Aeneas—as he witnesses not only the death of Priam and the torment of Hecuba but also the attempts of Helen to hide—thinks of killing her in punishment for all the sufferings of the Trojans.

On a more general level, the Hecuba passage is congenial to “Insomnia” by its metatextual tenor. Just as Hamlet is pondering the First Actor's passionate

identification with Aeneas and Aeneas's with Hecuba, Mandel'shtam's speaker contemplates the message of *The Iliad* and the motivation of its characters.

Moreover, both texts emphasize the protagonists' preoccupation with their own problems: Hamlet is ashamed of his apathy, while the poem's speaker tries to figure out his place in the existential situation emblemized by the sea, *more chernoe*, that reaches all the way to his pillow. Just as Hamlet oscillates between his admiration for the actor's art and his own despair at his tragic predicament, Mandel'shtam's speaker wonders to whom he should listen—Homer or the sea,—and since Homer *molchit*, “is silent,” he opts for the sea, i.e., reality.

As we know, Hamlet will eventually make his choice and face *the sea* (!) *of troubles*. But before that he will stage a theatrical experiment, *The Mousetrap*, which will replicate and test reality and for which he will compose some additional verses, acquitting himself as a poet.

Hamlet's literary-mindedness is, indeed, quite in tune with “Insomnia”: his love of the theater (including his own former acting); his reading of books (*words, words, words*) and of other people's letters; as well as his soliloquys, which meditatively interrogate his own conscience and the world order, among them the famous “To be or not to be...” and the one involving Hecuba.

The latter features 9 question marks in the 55 lines, Mandel'shtam's poem, 3 in 12. To be sure, the questions themselves do not have to be plucked from Shakespeare (thus “Kuda plyvete vy..?” (“Whither do you sail?”) is clearly Pushkinian), but the tuning into Hamlet's meditative mood may have informed the poem's tonality.

Incidentally, as far as specific wording is concerned, Homer's “silence” (overdetermined by numerous subtexts) could also refer to Hamlet's famous last word: “The rest is **silence**” (*molchan'e* in several translations), which is echoed in some Russian translations of the Hecuba soliloquy by the same word. In N. Polevoi's Russian translation (“Ничтожный я, презренный человек, / Бесчувственный—**молчу, молчу**, когда я знаю...”). In the original, (“... / Yet I, / A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak / Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause, / And can say nothing”).

Hamlet's last words, wherewith he entrusts to Horatio the telling of his story, complete its transition to a metanarrative plane. The way the telling is cut off by Hamlet the narrator, but bequeathed to future audiences is somewhat akin to the open-endedness of “Insomnia.”

The poem's affinity with the Hecuba passage is not absolute. One major difference concerns the degree of intertextual/existential directness. While Hamlet addresses, if only mentally, an actual person, albeit an actor who performs a dramatic role, Mandel'shtam's speaker seems to directly engage the literary characters themselves, namely the Achaean warriors (in line 8). Yet, this very ‘directness’ is of a distant, metatextual, meditative sort, in the

spirit of poems titled “While Reading Homer/Dante/Pushkin,”—even if the actual reality, in the form of *more chernoe*, eventually does get a chance to chime in. Moreover, as Mandel'shtam apostrophizes the Greek warriors with his Hecuba line, he only plays at being direct, while what he actually does is to recast these mythological/historical heroes as a troupe of actors trying on the roles.

This mode of detached metaliterary reflection is characteristic of the poet's early writing. But sixteen years later he would write a poem, “Ja skazhu tebe s poslednei priamotoi...” (“I'll tell you with a last/final directness...”; 1931), which reads like a remake of the same plot, but this time a pointedly “direct” one:

Там, где эллину сияла  
Красота,  
Мне из черных дыр зияла  
Срамота.  
  
Греки сбондили Елену  
По волнам,  
Ну, а мне—соленой пеной  
По губам.  
  
По губам меня помажет  
Пустота,  
Строгий кукиш мне покажет  
Нищета.

(...Where for the Hellene there shone / Beauty, / At me there stared out of black holes / Obscenity. // The Greeks snatched Helen / [And carried her off] Over the waves. / As for me, I got salty foam / On my lips. // My lips will get smeared / By the Void. / A blunt zilch is shown/offered to me / By poverty.)

To sum up:

The reference to the Hecuba phrase is probable.

It is reduced to the generic verbal gesture for which it stands in the Russian language,—as the specific proper name is replaced by another.

Once accepted, the reference becomes an integral part of the detachedly meditative metatextual tenor of the poem.

## V

I will now focus on the structure of the conditional clause “Kogda by ne Elena” in the same stanza. Rather than inflicting on you the technicalities of my research, I will just outline the method I used, hoping that the results compensate for its apparent madness.

My interest is again in figuring out what it is that makes this clause, in fact, the entire compound sentence it opens, such a poetic success and to what extent the answer is, once again, intertextual. Only this time around I do not expect the intertext to be a specific line or name (even if it be one referenced

with a twist); what ends up referenced/borrowed is not a verbatim quote but a **linguistic pattern**. That is, the hypogram tackled by the poet we will consider a somewhat abstract formulaic paradigm and the intertextual effect achieved will be identified in terms of what the poet (Mandel'shtam) managed to make of it.

Turning to the same database (the Corpus) I searched for the texts that include the words *Kogda by ne*... And I netted from the pool of Russian poetry from Trediakovskii to the year 1915, about a hundred verse fragments, displaying an array of verbal possibilities that were at Mandel'shtam's disposal.

Most examples were quite predictable: two clauses, one conditional, of the *Kogda by ne* sort, the other the main one, each with a personal verb form, e. g.:

*И вряд ли б он прослыл героем, / Когда б не нюхал табаку.* (Nikolai Nekrasov, 1841).

(And hardly would he have become famed as a hero, / Had he not sniffed tobacco.)

To get a sense of what makes Mandel'shtam's sentence so special, think of the major difference between the Russian original and its English translation:

"Kogda by ne Elena, / Chto Troia vam odna, akheiskie muzhi?"

"Were it not for Helen (or: "If not for Helen"), / What would Troy **alone be** to you, Achaean warriors?"

What distinguishes the Russian sentence is, of course, the consistent **verblessness** of both its clauses, while the English prefers to supply copulas and sometimes cannot help doing so. The option of dispensing with the copulas is inherent in Russian grammar for different syntactic reasons in the two clauses at hand. The Corpus amply documents the poets' availing themselves of these opportunities.

First, there is a subclass of subordinate *Kogda by ne* clauses that omit the copula, e. g.:

**Когда б не** смутное **влечение** / Чего-то жаждущей души, / Я здесь остался б—  
наслажденье / Вкушать в неведомой тиши. (Pushkin, 1833).

(Were it not for the vague attraction / Of the soul thirsting for something [beyond the given], / I would have stayed here— / To imbibe delectation in this unknown silence.)

In turn, some types of the main clause can do without personal verb forms, even if they are not completely verbless featuring, as they do, infinitives, e.g.:

**Тебе бы** никогда стихов **не сочинять**, / Когда бы не далось тебе я очиниться. (Mikhail Murav'ev, 1773).

(You would never be up to composing verses, / Had I not let you sharpen me [the quill].)

Sometimes, very rarely, both clauses use such infinitive structures, free of personal verb forms:



Когда б не смелым быть, бояться б должно мух. (Mikhail Kheraskov, 1760).

(If one were not to be brave, / One would have to be afraid [even] of flies.)

There is even a remarkable example of an infinitive main clause in conjunction with a verbless nominative conditional one, in a very early Mandel'shtam poem:

Когда б не смерть, то никогда бы / Мне не узнать, что я живу. (1909).

(Were it not for death, I would never / have known that I am alive.)

But not once does there appear in the Russian poetic Corpus a full flush: two clauses completely devoid of verb forms, as is, uniquely, the case in “Insomnia,” which combines a nominative variant of the conditional clause (*Kogda by ne + Noun*) with a verbless interrogative clause (*Chto vam + Noun...?*)

This is a major coup achieved by Mandel'shtam in conveying his not very original theme, borrowed from *The Iliad* (III, 156–57). Literally:

“There’s nothing shameful about the fact that Trojans and well-armed Achaeans have endured great suffering for a long time over such a woman...” (trans. Ian Johnston online, <https://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/homer/iliad3.htm>)

Нет, осуждать невозможно, что Трои сыны и ахейцы / Брань за такую жену и беды столь долгие терпят (trans. N. Gnedich).

Let me stress that Mandel'shtam’s grammatical *tour de force* is not just a whimsical display of verbal prowess; it is an integral part of the poem’s overall poetry-of-grammar design.

“Insomnia” opens with three verbless nominative sentences: “Bessonitsa, Gomer, tugie parusa.” (“Insomnia. Homer, taut sails”), mimicking the syntax of Homer’s catalogue. (Nilsson aptly identified the underlying Russian tradition of nominative style going back to Afanasii Fet’s “Shopot, robkoe dykhan'e, / Trel'i solov'ia...” (“Whispers, timid breathing / The Nightingale’s trills,” and then Blok’s 1912 “Noch', ulitsa, fonar', apteka...” (“Night, Street, Streetlight, Drugstore”).

The 2nd stanza, the one featuring our verbless sentence, offers two more such lines:

Как журавлиный клин в чужие рубежи— На головах царей божественная пена...

(Like a wedge of cranes to foreign borders/shores— / Divine foam on the kings’ heads . . .—)

Against this pointedly verbless, as well as static and purely literary, background, the fully inflected verbs, especially the final “podkhodit k izgolov'iu,” sound all the more dynamic and real.

Another option picked by the poet from those inherent in the syntactic paradigm is having a proper, classical, name in each of the clauses, Helen (*Elena*) in one, Troy (*Troia*) in the other. This is, of course, in line with the

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poem's meditation over Homer and the value Mandel'shtam placed on poetic name-dropping. As he put it himself:

Трижды блажен, кто введет в песнь имя (1923).

(Thrice blessed is he who introduces a name into a song.)

Two other characteristic choices (also offered by the tradition) are the apostrophizing of literary characters and doing so in the interrogative—i.e., interactive, dialogical—form.

To sum up:

The intertext, or hypogram, is the structure of the compound sentence *Kogda by ne..., Chto..?*

The interplay with the hypogram consists in choosing from the set of its possible realizations one that combines several desirable characteristics that are relevant to the design of the poem and the poet's overall invariants, namely, verblessness, invocation of classical names, interrogative apostrophe.

That is what, to me, accounts for the poetic uniqueness of these lines, entitling the poet to congratulate himself the Pushkin way: *Ai da Mandel'shtam, ai da sukin syn!* (Attaboy, atta Mandel'shtam, you son of a bitch!). Or, to put it in more dignified terms, this is what makes these lines poetry, which by definition is lost in translation. These lines—and the other little intertextual gems that I had the privilege of discussing...

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