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Osip Mandelstam's Postmultilingual Condition

Over the past decade the field of Russian-Jewish literature, a subject which had previously been overlooked in German scholarship, has finally received attention in the work of Klavdia Smola and Olaf Terpitz. This important trend will, hopefully, continue to grow in the coming years.¹ This paper suggests approaching Jewish literature as part of the Russian canon by examining the question of linguistic belonging. Osip Mandelstam (1891–1938) reflected on this very idea in his poetry, by including the trope of a “mother tongue” in his writing. Mandelstam was one of the major poets of the twentieth century, and although he was not a Soviet poet, his life corresponded, chronologically, with the Soviet era.² His poetry, I would like to argue, problematizes the trope of belonging by integrating the multilingual dimension of language, or its heteroglossia, within a monolingual poetic project.

The publication of Jacques Derrida's seminal essay *Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthesis of Origin* brought to light the political implications underlying the concept of a mother tongue. Subsequently, literary critics have begun to reevaluate the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion inherent in the concept. Derrida reminds us that speaking and writing in your first language, and perceiving it within the logic of its origins as a mother tongue, can create an epistemic blind spot that prevents us from reflecting on the otherness of our first language. Thus, the metaphor of the mother tongue is rooted in the history of national states and their imagined communities. It is a concept that should be historically and politically contextualized and only then be analyzed within the poetic context. Focusing on the historical and political conditions in which the concept emerged proves particularly productive for understanding Russian-Jewish literature, for the issue of a first language already manifests itself in describing these writers as *Russian-Jewish*.³

Russian gradually became a language spoken by Jews in the late period of the Russian Empire, and this process was inseparable from the longstanding political transformations of Jewish life-worlds in the Pale of Settlement as well as

¹ See: Smola 2019, Terpitz 2008.

² For Mandelstam's poetic biography see: Freidin 1987.

³ On the terminology of Russian-Jewish Literature versus Jewish-Russian literature see: Shrayner 2018, xxi–1.

those that took place within Russian society itself.⁴ It was in the middle of the nineteenth century when Jews in Tsarist Russia started referring to themselves, as, or, rather began aspiring to be, “Russian Jews.” In order to do so they had to master a language that would eventually become the native tongue of the Russian Jewish intelligentsia. This interwoven relationship finds poignant expression in a letter written by Emanuel Levin, a close associate of Baron Ginsburg and one of the first members of the Society for the Promotion of Culture among the Jews of Russia. In this letter, he raises a striking question – “Is there, in the actual areas where the Jews are granted permanent residence...a language of the fatherland, a *Muttersprache*? The bureaucrats speak and write, though poorly, in Russian, the nobility in Polish, and the middle estate does not know how to write at all, and speaks in the Ukrainian, Lithuanian or Zhmud dialect” (Nathans 2002, 53).

The process of defining and shaping Russian as both the mother tongue and the national language of the Jewish population living in the Russian Empire that took place in the early decades of the nineteenth century marked a gradual but dramatic loss of what the historian Israel Bartal coined Eastern European Jewish diglossia (Bartal 1993, 141). The question of a mother tongue includes the complex relationship between the different political and cultural identities within the Jewish community and no less importantly, beyond it. Yasmin Yildiz analyzed the changes in the perception of European linguistic identities that have taken place since the eighteenth century from a political and cultural perspective. She characterizes these changes as a monolingual paradigm, in which individuals and social formations are imagined to possess one “true” language, a “mother tongue,” and through this possession they organically belong to an exclusive, clearly demarcated ethnicity, culture, and nation (Yeldiz 2012, 2).

The emergence of Osip Mandelstam and Isaak Babel⁵ on the literary arena represents the dramatic transition from multilingualism to monolingualism that took place in Jewish, and also Russian, literature written during the rise of the Russian Empire. It is through studying this shift that Russian-Jewish literature can be integrated into the teaching curriculum of Russian Literature. Mandelstam’s understanding of a native language can be divided into two simultaneous strategies. At first glance they might appear to be mutually exclusive, but they can be integrated by turning to Derrida’s paradoxical statement on the possession of language, “I have but one language – yet that language is not mine.” On the one hand, Mandelstam emphasizes both the singularity of his mother

⁴ For the cultural and political history of Russian Jewry see: Nathans 2002.

⁵ On Babel’s Cultural Biography see: Sicher 2012.

tongue and his ownership of the language, but on the other hand he develops an understanding of the otherness within language, which leads him to a new understanding of language in general, and of poetic language in particular, which he articulates in non-biological terms in his essay "Conversation on Dante."

Born in 1891, Osip Mandelstam was the first male member of his family to speak Russian as his first language. In his case Russian was, in fact, a tongue that his mother spoke, and he experienced it as his native language. It was his father, though, who enabled his son to enter Russian culture. His profession as a glovemaker enabled him to obtain a merchant's certificate of the first guild and to bring his family to St. Petersburg, where, at the turn of the century, Osip started studying in the prestigious Tenishev School. Whereas Mandelstam's predecessors followed the classical rules of the genre of the autobiography and presented their mainly Jewish audience with a detailed account of their life written in Russian, Mandelstam's fragmentary modernist texts resisted the conventions of the genre. Instead, he explored the possibility of creating a non-individual autobiography, a text that registers the changes in time and of the times through poetic language, thus creating a poetic self, conditioned by its historical existence in language. Unlike his bilingual or even trilingual contemporaries, such as Shmuel Joseph Agnon or David Hofstein, Mandelstam did not have to choose the language in which he would write, since he was raised monolingual. His "post-multilingual" condition influenced his perspective on the question of a mother tongue both from a historical and a poetic point of view. Mandelstam offers his readers a genealogical, and at that same time geological, understanding of a native tongue in *The Noise of Time*. It is in this experimental autobiographical text that he reveals the different layers of cultures, the traditional Jewish, and the secular Russian and German, which influenced the formation of his Russian, which he, in a Derridean sense, does not view as his own language:

In my childhood I absolutely never heard Yiddish; only later did I hear an abundance of that melodious, always surprised and disappointed, interrogative language with its sharp accents on the weakly stressed syllables. The speech of the father and the speech of the mother – does not our language feed throughout all its long life on the confidence of these two, do they not compose its character? The speech of my mother was clear and sonorous without the least foreign admixture, with rather wide and too open vowels – the literary Great Russian language. Her vocabulary was poor and restricted, the locutions were trite, but it was a language, it had roots and confidence. Mother loved to speak and took joy in the roots and sounds of her Great Russian speech, impoverished by intellectual clichés. Was she not the first one of her whole family to achieve pure and clear Russian sounds? My father had absolutely no language: his speech was tongue-toe and languagelessness. The Russian speech of a Polish Jew? No. The speech of a German Jew? No again. Perhaps a special Courland accent? I never heard such. A completely abstract counterfeit language, the ornate and twisted speech of an autodidact, whose normal words are inter-

twined with the ancient philosophical terms of Herder, Leibniz, and Spinoza, the capricious syntax of a Talmudist, the artificial, not always finished sentence, it was anything in the world, but not a language, neither Russian nor German. (Mandelstam 2002, 85)

It is striking to note that despite the fact that the four languages that appear in the text – Yiddish, Russian, German, and Aramaic (which remains unmentioned) – constitute a multilingual place, Mandelstam negates its existence. Furthermore, it seems like Mandelstam's writing is an attempt to overcome this inherited multilingualism, or at least to overcome its oral, phonetic traces. For is the ability to speak pure Russian not what is at stake here?

In her critical reading of Derrida, Emanuel Berger summarizes one of his main arguments in the following way: "The language spoken by any mother is an other's language, prior to becoming the language of the self and an element of the 'identity' of the subject who inherits it; for 'my' mother who gives me 'my' language is first of all an other to me. The language of Derrida's monolingual, Jewish mother from colonized Algeria is a language of the other and by no means her own" (Berger 2012, 14). And so is the language of Mandelstam's mother, her Russian is the language of the Russian Empire in which she was born and to which she strove to belong, and the very fact that Mandelstam calls it "Great Russian" attests to this historical and social context, just like his description of his mother's limited Russian reveals his internalization of the imperial monolingual paradigm. How important is it for him to stress the fact that the speech of his mother was clear and "without the least foreign admixture?" Should Mandelstam's description of the origins of his language therefore be understood as an attempt to mask her accent, to get read of that foreign admixture? But that would be only a partial reading, for while viewing his father's Russian as non-language, Mandelstam at the same time also capitalizes on his father's idiosyncratic version of multilingualism. His father's languagelessness proves to be extremely creative, precisely because his Russian functions as a site of otherness that resists the logic of origin.

In her reading of Mandelstam's seminal essay "Conversation on Dante," which was dictated to his wife Nadezhda around 1934–1935, Wai Chee Dimock asserts that Mandelstam's denationalization of language began with his attempt to learn Italian in order to read *La Divina Comedia* (Dimock 2001, 176). But as the quoted passage shows, he began questioning Russian's role as a national language a decade earlier. In his description of Russian, the Jewish mother tongue exists as traces left by a series of concealed languages, among them Yiddish, Aramaic, and German. Herein lies the crucial difference between Mandelstam's and Derrida's versions of how monolingualism becomes visible. Whereas Derrida emphasizes his own ability to write without an accent, when he claims that no

one would be able to detect his accent, unless he declared he was “French Algerian” (Derrida 1998, 46), Mandelstam seems to be interested in the contrary, namely, in incorporating the accent and non-language of his father into his accentless mother tongue. As a result, Mandelstam’s poetic speech became a site of constant negotiation between the lingual and monolingual paradigm, in which the Great Russian of his mother is imbued with the accent of his father, creating an accented Russian.

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