

LETTERS

TO THE EDITORS:

Slavists will be grateful to Mr. Brown for the information he gives on Mandel'shtam's life and work during his last years (Clarence Brown, "Into the Heart of Darkness: Mandelstam's Ode to Stalin," *Slavic Review*, December 1967, pages 584–604), in particular as he is so eloquently sympathetic to his subject. I would like, however, to take issue with him on two points, both made in the beginning of the article. According to Mr. Brown, Mandel'shtam's later poems "are in part obscure because what he wished or had to say involved, if said plainly, the danger of death" (page 584). This would imply that these poems were written in a kind of higher "Aesop's language," that the ciphering of the poem is, at least in part, not willed and, to that extent, a *pis aller*, an envelope of what with more effect should be said unadorned. I do not think this is true in general nor, in particular, for Mandel'shtam. But this implication leads Mr. Brown sometimes to a direct translating back into reality that is not warranted, it would seem to us, by the context. Is the "'shadow' whose alms had to be sought" (page 593) really Stalin? The context, in particular the fact that three lines earlier this same "shadow" is part of a simile ("Kak ten' ego"), makes this unlikely.

This brings us to our second point, namely, that it is "central to [Mr. Brown's] thesis that the poetry cannot be understood unless the life is known" (page 586). We are interested in a poet's life because he is the maker of poems that we like. If we study the life, the result may be a deeper understanding of what was essentially understood before. Poems that require the biography in order to be understood would be no more than *documents humains*, however gripping they may be as such. But poems are more than *documents humains* in this sense, and in particular Mandel'shtam's. Thus the first poem quoted by Mr. Brown gives up more of its secrets by itself than with the help of the biographical information Mr. Brown furnishes.

The presence of a Rembrandt in Voronezh is important, and art historians should go into that. But what in the poem "Kak svetoteni muchenik Rembrandt" is illuminated by it? Must Mandel'shtam necessarily be referring to this picture, and not, say, to his memory of another? The iconographical evidence in the poem does not necessarily point to a resurrection scene. No Rembrandt resurrection has a sleeping soldier in the foreground. The words "goriashchego rebra" seem to point to a scene on the cross or after, as they would seem to refer to the wound in Christ's side. "Goriashchego" points to a scene after the resurrection, when Christ was alive. This may refer us to Rembrandt's "Thomas," placing his hands in Christ's side (*rebra*, in Russian). This picture is in Russia. It has a sleeping figure in the foreground which, in Mandel'shtam's memory, may have been a soldier. The context indicates that the other watchers were not soldiers; they would then be the disciples grouped around Christ and Thomas. "Grozoiu" would then have a figurative meaning. In this interpretation the plural "spiat" would be unclear. If this plural form is beyond doubt, our identification would hardly be tenable. But the reference still would be to a picture of a scene that both Rembrandt and Mandel'shtam considered critical for humanity and which showed several people looking on.

The word "moego" before "goriashchego rebra" undoubtedly refers to what Mandel'shtam depicts, not to his own side. The identification is with Rembrandt, not with Christ (although a certain measure of transfer for both the painter and the writer is implied in "muchenik"). The bystanders in the scene depicted by Rem-

brandt were essential for its impact; in the second stanza the poet asks the master's forgiveness because of the absence in his own scene of these bystanders. We do not think that the second stanza contains "vague images of unease and guilt" (page 585), but an explanation and justification for this absence, introduced by the word "no" (but). Lines 3 and 4 of this stanza are the most difficult of the poem, but the biographical information that we are given provides no clue. To interpret the words "oko sokolinogo pera" as a pen that sees sharply, as a poet seeing sharp and clear, does not go beyond traditional boundaries. We need not go so much further to interpret the hot jewel boxes in midnight's harem as the stars, perhaps the Soviet stars; these lines thus function in the opposition between light and dark that is taken up in the first line, runs through "goriashchego" and "spiat," through "chernozelenoi temi," and on to the dusk of the last line. Both the poet looking at the life of day and the stars in the night disturb—to no good, for they do not bring good tidings to—a people that is alarmed by its *clair-obscur* situation, by the dusk it lives in. And in this alarm they do not want to come out of the dusk either to the lure of the midnight stars or to the fully clear day.

The amount of conditional in this explanation shows clearly that I do not consider it final. In particular, the net of associations could be spun further and clearer, first within the cycle, and then beyond it to other works. We will find several references to Rembrandt, to *mekh*, to the featherlike fire of two sleepy apples for eyes, to "kholshchevyi sumrak," etc. There will remain uncertainties, but more of them will be solved in this way than by direct biographical reference. No more than for Blok's or Pasternak's poetry do we depend on biographical evidence for our admiration and understanding of Mandel'shtam's poetry.

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JAN M. MEIJER
Utrecht

TO THE EDITORS:

In his very generous review of my *Tolstoy and the Novel* [*Slavic Review*, XXVI, No. 3 (Sept. 1967), 510–11], Professor [Ralph E.] Matlaw notes that there is no word *samodovol'nost'* in Russian. He is of course right: in the dictionary sense there is no such word as "self-satisfiedness" in English, but I think a critic could use it if he thought it more accurately descriptive in a critical context than would be "self-satisfaction." I intended *samodovol'nost'* as a coinage of this kind and for this purpose, which I should have made clear when I first used it in the book.

Professor Matlaw is a far more experienced Russianist than I, but I think he would agree that the *-ost'* suffix—like *-ness* in English but usually more euphoniously—has often been used to confer a generalizing and conceptualizing sense; see *narodnost'* and Pushkin's *samobytnost'*. As Viazemskii said, "Okonchanie *-ost'*—slavnyi svodnik."

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JOHN BAYLEY
New College
Oxford

TO THE EDITORS:

The recent review of the second volume of Siegfried Müller-Markus' *Einstein und die Sowjetphilosophie* by Maxim W. Mikulak (*Slavic Review*, December 1967, pp. 696–97) provides us with some useful information but also, it seems to me, with a misleading statement which should not go unchallenged. Einstein's relativity physics was not "officially banned," says Dr. Mikulak, and in fact its "title to ex-