

Egyptian Might, the Broken Staff, and the Thin Reed:
Possible Biblical Subtexts in Osip Mandelstam's "Notre Dame"

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ABSTRACT

Jenny Charlton Barrier: Egyptian Might, the Broken Staff, and the Thin Reed:
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(Under the direction of Ivana Vuletic)

This thesis examines possible biblical subtexts for the image of the reed in Osip Mandelstam's poem "Notre Dame." By exploring how the different metaphorical functions of the image of the reed in the Russian Bible can influence the reading of this image in Mandelstam's poem, the thesis draws connections with the image of the reed and the themes of Egyptian might and the meekness of Christianity earlier in the poem. The thesis also addresses how such an interpretation of the image of the reed could enhance other critical readings of the poem, especially those that see the poem as an expression of Acmeism.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Osip Mandelstam's 1912 poem "Notre Dame" has been the subject of extensive literary criticism. While much has been written on this poem and many avenues of interpretation have been followed, there is one path that as yet has not been explored. Various scholars have examined the image of the thin reed, "тростинка," and have interpreted it as being derived from different sources. Critics have postulated its origins as emanating from Pascal's view of the person as a thinking reed (Steiner 1977, 249) or as coming from one of Krylov's fables—which in turn came from La Fontaine—(Struve 1982, 198; Gasparov 2000, 28). While these analyses may and do have merit, another possible source for the image of the reed, the Judaic and Christian scriptures, should also be considered. This image is found in both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian scriptures, where it serves a variety of functions both figurative and literal. An examination of these functions, from that of a measuring stick to a symbol of false strength, can not only provide a new richness of interpretation for the image of the reed itself in Mandelstam's poem "Notre Dame," but also can shed light on the comparison of Egyptian might and the meekness of Christianity in the previous line of the poem.

This paper proposes to examine the possible biblical subtexts for the image of the reed in "Notre Dame." Since I am addressing one image in a poem full of imagery, my paper has a narrow focus and many aspects of the poem will be discussed only briefly or not

mentioned at all. For instance, this paper will not examine the place of the poem “Notre Dame” in the context of Mandelstam’s work as a whole, and will just briefly analyze the image of the reed in Mandelstam’s oeuvre. Although a large body of work has been written on the poem as a whole, this paper will concentrate on the critical literature which directly addresses the image of the reed.

CHAPTER II

Critical Interpretations of Mandelstam's "Notre Dame"

Much of the criticism on Mandelstam's "Notre Dame" concerns the poem's Acmeist qualities—Steiner, for example, calls the poem an Acmeist manifesto (Steiner 1977). Therefore, we must first examine the role of "Notre Dame" in the Acmeist movement. In formulating his Acmeist creed, Mandelstam was reacting against the legacy of the Symbolist poets. His poems "Notre Dame" and "Айя София" appeared at the end of a 1913 edition of *Аполлон*. This edition also contained Gumilyov's article "Наследие символизма и акмеизма" and Gorodetsky's "Некоторые течения в современной русской поэзии," which M. L. Gasparov categorizes as "статьи-манифесты" (Gasparov 1995, 12) of Acmeism. All three poets, along with Akhmatova, Zenkevich, and Narburt, were members of the "Цех поэтов," and all six poets contributed poems that appear after Gumilyov and Gorodetsky's articles in *Аполлон*. Gasparov says their platform focuses on two theses: "во-первых, конкретность, вещественность, посюсторонность; во-вторых, мастерство" (Gasparov 1995, 12). In his article "Утро акмеизма," which was published in 1919 but is believed to have been written much earlier, Mandelstam describes the tenets of Acmeism: "Любите существование вещи больше самой вещи и свое бытие больше самих себя - вот высшая заповедь акмеизма."

For Mandelstam, the word assumed the highest importance. In “Утро акмеизма” he stated that “Для акмеистов сознательный смысл слова, Логос, такая же прекрасная форма, как музыка для символистов.” In seeing the word instead of music as being primary and by not focusing on the figurative meaning of the word, Mandelstam is working against the Symbolist understanding of the mystical nature of the word. “The rejection of the boundless Symbolist mystery of the word and the emphasis on its dynamic concreteness thus led Mandelstam to a new concept of the word – as the *material* for poetry” (Steiner, 242). Mandelstam associates the material nature of the word with stone.

Можно сказать, что мир, создаваемый Мандельштамом, заполнял *эйдологическую пустоту*, отрицая действительность, вне идей и форм. Вслед за Бергсоном он ощущал жизнь как формообразующее воздействие духа на материю. Но для того, чтобы выразить это метафорически, ему необходимо было найти интегрирующую мифологему, подобную блоковской “музыке”. Ею стала мифологема *камня*. (Musatov 2000, 93)

Stone becomes a central theme for Mandelstam. R. D. B. Thomson equates the renaming of Mandelstam’s first poetry collection from *Раковина* to *Камень* as reflecting the way his poetic sensibilities changed in the early 1910’s.

The change in title marks Mandel’shtam’s move away from the symbolist manner of his early poetry to the Acmeist principles of the later poems in K1 [first edition of *Kamen’*], and, in particular, ‘Ajja-Sofija’ and ‘Notre Dame’. It was in 1911 that he met Gumilev and, as will be seen, the motif of ‘stone’ is connected in several ways with this change of poetic style and content. The interest of the title, then, lies less in the final destination than in the route by which Mandel’shtam was to attain it. Where ‘Rakovina’ serves as a point of departure *Kamen’* indicates the point of arrival. (Thomson 1991, 506)

The placement of “Notre Dame” at the end of the 1913 edition of *Аполлон* cements its status as an illustration of the Acmeist principles espoused in the journal. The motif of stone, the guiding image of his poetry collection, is also reflected in “Notre Dame” as the “тяжесть недобрая” from which the cathedral is constructed. The concept of stone,

however, mirrors more than just a concept of the nature of the word. “Символика *камня*, начиная с 1913-го включительно по 1915-й год, становилась у Мандельштама выражением идеи европейского универсализма, носителем которого был католический мир с Римом в центре” (Musatov 2000, 110). The idea of European universalism or “world culture” is very important for the Acmeists in general and Mandelstam in particular.

[А]кмеизм для него не только литературное явление, не только поэтическая школа, но появление в мировой культуре нового подхода к миру, философского, этического, религиозного, а в итоге — и политического.

Вот почему “Камень” еще больше, чем “Вечер” Ахматовой или “Чужое небо” Гумилева, походит на поэтический манифест, который будет подкреплён и обоснован теоретически в статье “Утро акмеизма” (Struve 1990, 193).

Unlike the Futurists, the Acmeists saw themselves as being the conveyors of the poetic heritage of the past in their poetry.

The Acmeists refused to break with the previous poetic tradition and see their own creation as something totally of the moment. For Mandel’stam in particular, it was obvious that modern poetry could not exist without tradition, a tradition which is not a mechanical recollection of a causal chain of events, but a creative use of all the impulses of the past. (Steiner 1997, 254)

Several scholars see Mandelstam’s emphasis on world culture as an expression of his personal search for identity and belonging within that culture.¹

The master plot that informs this passage and other of Mandelstam’s works might be summarized as follows: the poet, or one of his many surrogates, must struggle to re-form or outrun a chaotic past that can only be mastered by language. This language, in turn, provides the entryway into the society and culture that Mandelstam requires. . . this is the story that lends its shape to all of Mandelstam’s early poetry and prose, from his first essay on “François Villon,” (1910) to the multiple variants of his early collection, *Stone*. (Cavanagh 1995, 31-2)

¹This seeking for culture becomes a motif for Mandelstam not just at the time he was writing the poems of *Камень*. While written much later, this sense of not belonging to a specific culture comes to the forefront in *Шум времени*. Charles Isenberg, in his book *Substantial Proofs of Being: Osip Mandelstam’s Literary Prose*, describes the “twofold cultural displacement” in which the narrator of *Шум времени* is situated and with which he must contend. “Not only must he somehow come to terms with the cataclysmic disruption of pre-revolutionary Russian culture, but he must also come to terms with the fact of his Jewish descent. The conflicting claims put forward by these two traditions put his identity under tension from two directions” (Isenberg 1986, 54).

For V. Musatov Mandelstam's search for belonging mirrors that of the apostle Paul. He compares the "мучительную для автора 'Камня' проблему родства и происхождения" with Paul's "знаменитый принцип: 'Несъ Иудей, ни Еллин' (Гал., 3, 28)" (Musatov 2000, 112). In Gasparov's view, Mandelstam approaches his search "не по наследству, а по выбору и поиску" (Gasparov 2000, 30).

Mandelstam's poem "Notre Dame" addresses the Acmeist's concerns with both the nature of the word and world culture. Various critics have noted the Acmeist qualities espoused in "Notre Dame" and this forms the core of many interpretations of the poem. In his book on Mandelstam, Clarence Brown briefly mentions that "Notre Dame" and "Айя-София" both "seem triumphs (in differing degrees) of the Acmeist aesthetic: they are pictures of objects, presentational with graphic intensity" (Brown 1973, 187). In the article "Poem as Manifesto: Mandel'shtam's 'Notre Dame,'" Peter Steiner expands Brown's analysis and examines in depth the ways in which the poem serves as a manifesto of Acmeism. In this analysis, he looks at Mandelstam's essay "Утро акмеизма" and concludes that the "identity of themes and images in this essay and 'Notre Dame' is quite remarkable, especially the references to Notre Dame and architecture as a whole" (Steiner 1977, 240). The similarities between the poem and the essay, Mandelstam's prose manifesto, strengthen Steiner's case that "Notre Dame" serves as a poetic proclamation of the Acmeist ideal. Clare Cavanagh takes Steiner's terms and adds to them the concept of culture, saying "As manifesto, as Adam and Akme, 'Notre Dame' ties him [Mandelstam] to his own age and nation by way of the Acmeists" (Cavanagh 1995, 91). Musatov also links the basic tenets of Mandelstam's essay and Acmeism with the poem "Notre Dame." In starting his discussion of the poem, Musatov states that "Когда в 'Утро акмеизма' Мандельштам пишет, что акмеисты вводят

‘готику в отношении слов’, ... то следует помнить, что готика для него была не только символом дематериализации камня, превращенного в ‘кружево’, но и архитектурно организованным миром, в котором преодолена тяжесть” (Musatov 2000, 100).

For many scholars the cathedral provides an answer to Mandelstam’s search for a cultural home. Steiner calls Notre Dame a “kernel of culture, surviving the attacks of time” (1977, 251). N. A. Struve sees the image of the cathedral as the embodiment of all time that provides a simultaneous connection between the past, present, and future. In his appraisal, the image of the cathedral encompasses all of human history: Roman judges, Byzantine basilicas, Egyptian might, Christianity, and even the Cretan labyrinth (Struve 1990, 198).²

Cavanagh also says this outsider’s search for a place to belong permeates Mandelstam’s “Notre Dame.” However, in her view, the cathedral does not simply provide a cultural home. Like Mandelstam himself, the cathedral is beset with numerous cultural ties and pulls.³ In her evaluation, Cavanagh combines Steiner’s and Struve’s idea of the cathedral as

² В этом стихотворении поражает прежде всего временная и пространственная протяженность: прошедшее, настоящее, и будущее одновременно разворачиваются и свертываются, наподобие веера. Notre-Dame как раз и есть тот сгусток искусства, который не противопоставляет себя природе, а участвует в ее сложности; здесь как бы сгущена вся человеческая история, проектированная на сегодня и завтра: собор—символ, стоящий одновременно во времени и над временем, и тем самым в центре человечества. Все крупнейшие события индоевропейской цивилизации сжато представлены: римский юродизм, завоевательный и жесткий, —первый проект социальной архитектуры (народ—строитель законов, по меткому определению Андре Шенье); царственное величие византийского христианства (термин “базилика”, вероятно, навеян одноименным стихотворением Жерара де Нерваля); тяжелая египетская мощь, которой противостоит христианское смирение; критский лабиринт, похожий на лес (со всеми его символами, по-новому использованными поэтическим умом Европы.(Struve, 198)

³ Mandelstam, however, as the child of Central European Jews (he himself was born in Warsaw) saw both Russian and Western culture through the eyes of the perennial outsider, and he builds this outsider’s perspective into his tribute to Europe’s Christian tradition. Conquest, colonization, cross-fertilization, cultural theft—these are the common themes of all Mandelstam’s cathedrals and “Notre Dame” is no exception. He reminds us in the poem’s opening lines that the church, like Europe itself, has its beginnings in barbarism; it arises “where a Roman judge had judged a foreign nation.” Moreover, Notre Dame, like the Christian church itself, is the result of a pagan, classical legacy creatively transformed. Mandelstam calls the building a “basilica,” a Greek word used to designate a secular Roman structure that was later converted to serve the needs of the fledgling Christian church.

a bearer of culture for Mandelstam with the observation of many critics that “Notre Dame” is built on a series of contrasts.

Brown assesses Mandelstam’s “Notre Dame” as “a scene of assault and resistance. It is a harmony, or peace, but it is the peace of the stalemate and the stand-off, the result of balanced opposition, an equilibrium with the constant threat of sudden imbalance” (Brown 1973, 190). Steiner, in turn, also comments on the contradictions built into the poem, saying that it is “both a precise architectural construction and also a place of worship; it is the marriage of reason and faith” (Steiner 1977, 242). He calls the series of contrasts “the clash between skill and mystery, between the physical and the metaphysical, the main structuring principle of ‘Notre Dame’” (Steiner 1977, 242). Following Brown and Steiner, Gasparov also sees the interplay of force and counterforce in “Notre Dame” as the chief theme of the poem, an interplay that he sees in its most elemental state as the conflict of culture versus nature. In this early Mandelstam poem about a Gothic cathedral, culture is triumphant over nature: “культура преодолевает природу, устанавливая в ней гармоническое равновесие противоборствующих сил” (Gasparov 2000, 27). Although, like Brown, Gasparov says that the cathedral has arrived at a harmonious equilibrium, it is nevertheless built on contrast. “Описанию готики как системы контрфорсов соответствует стиль стихотворения как система антитез (особенно в III строфе) – антитез, сталкивающих природу и культуру, стихию и разум” (Gasparov 2000, 27).

Indeed, the poem’s very title is borrowed from another language and another culture, and the Latin letters that head a Russian text seem themselves to enact the confrontation of Rome and a “foreign nation” that the opening line describes. Foreign and native, history and newness, culture and barbarism, inside and out; Mandelstam’s poem is built on the tension between these opposing forces. His Notre Dame is simultaneously a “battering ram” (*taran*) and the “fortress” (*tverdynia*) that resists its blows. He thus reminds us of the tenuousness of any cultural construct, including of course his own poem, and of its reliance on the very violence and strangeness it seeks to contain. (Cavanagh 1999, 156-7)

These contrasts in the poem are most concentrated in its third stanza. Steiner notes the uniqueness of this stanza in its opposition to the rest of the poem, not just in its many antitheses but also in its grammatical structure.

The third stanza differs from the others in many respects. Its most striking feature is its abundance of nouns and adjectives, and corresponding lack of verbs. This lack would seem to evoke an illusion of stasis because of the inherent differences in the mode of signification between nouns and adjectives on the one hand and verbs on the other: nouns and adjectives may represent actions and processes, but they render them not as events – as verbs do – but as states. Nevertheless, the semantic organization of the stanza – the juxtaposition of lexical items suggesting contrasting qualities – is highly dynamic. (Steiner 1977, 247-8).

Of the various contrasts within this stanza, this paper will concentrate on the ones contained in the last two lines. “Египетская мощь и христианства робость,/С тростинкой рядом – дуб, и всюду царь – отвес.” The juxtaposition of Egyptian might and the meekness of Christianity in particular has elicited many critical comments.

For Steiner, the contrast of Egyptian might and the meekness of Christianity is not the contrast between two neutral ideas. Instead, he sees the phrase “Египетская мощь” as “an allusion to the Egyptian pyramids and their builders” (Steiner 1977, 248) and states that Mandelstam believed that the Egyptian builders misunderstood their material, creating structures which are “inorganic, heavy constructions, the verticality of which is not caused by a fragile equilibrium between the elements and the whole, but by a brutal force inimical to man” (Steiner 1977, 248-9). This inimicality is opposed in the second half of the line by “христианства робость,” which according to Steiner, Mandelstam saw as the preferred basis of architecture.

M. Gasparov in his article “Поэт и общество: две готики и два Египта в поэзии О. Мандельштама” examines the themes of the gothic cathedral and Egypt in early and late

Mandelstam. Taking issue with Steiner's ideas, Gasparov does not see the Egyptian theme in Mandelstam's poetry as monolithic. Instead, Gasparov sees positive connotations in both the themes of the Gothic and the Egyptian in Mandelstam's earlier poetry (Gasparov 2000, 35-6).⁴

Even though Gasparov thinks that the Egyptian theme in "Notre Dame" has positive connotations, he still regards the contrast of Egyptian might and the meekness of Christianity as antithetical. "Египетская мощь и христианства робость" – тоже антитеза:

христианский страх Божий неожиданно побуждает возводить постройки не смиренные и убогие, а могучие, как египетские пирамиды" (Gasparov 2000, 28). Here, according to Gasparov, the Egyptian pyramids have a positive connotation in Mandelstam's work; the Gothic cathedral and the pyramids are seen as similar manifestations of architecture.

"Египетская мощь" здесь входит как часть в структуру любезной Мандельштаму готики. И не только архитектурной, но и социальной – той, в которой есть ниши не только для гнетущей власти, но и для маленького человека, с запасом вещиц, одинаково нужных человеку и на этом свете и на том" (Gasparov 2000, 35). To strengthen his argument that for early Mandelstam the Egyptian theme is a positive one, Gasparov turns to Mandelstam's 1921 article "О природе слова," in which he states that even if all else is taken away, language will still remain. Mandelstam calls this feature of language "эллинизм." "Наконец, эллинизм – это могильная ладья египетских покойников, в

⁴However, Gasparov views the two themes as being contrasted in later Mandelstam, with the Egyptian theme developing the negative connotations which Steiner cites. Gasparov contends that the tendency to correlate the Gothic and the Egyptian first comes from the romantics and quotes Chaadaev as saying that there is "какую-то особенную связь между духом египетской архитектуры и духом архитектуры... готической" (Gasparov 2000, 26), a connection that is made evident in both buildings' vertical natures. Gasparov states Mandelstam's view is somewhat different from the romantics, since "у романтиков рассуждения о готике, устремленной ввысь, обычно были рассуждениями праздного зрителя" and comments that the tendency "представить эту высоту, эту вертикаль не как спонтанный взлет, а как результат трудной борьбы между архитектурными форсами и контрфорсами... в поэзию... впервые попадает, насколько мы знаем, именно у Мандельштама в 'Notre Dame'" (Gasparov 2000, 26).

которую кладется все нужное для продолжения земного странствия человека, вплоть до ароматического кувшина, зеркальца и гребня... Все для жизни припасено, ничего не забыто в этой ладье.”⁵

As previously noted, Steiner treats the phrase “Египетская мощь” in “Notre Dame” as an image with negative connotations for Mandelstam: “in contrast to this, ‘christianstva robust’ ’ implies a completely opposite attitude to one’s fellow men” (Steiner 1977, 249), whereas Gasparov treats the image as having positive connotations: “в ранних стихах между готикой и Египтом – сходство” (Gasparov 2000, 26). While both critics have come to opposite views of the way the Egyptian theme works in the poem, they see it as contrasting the idea of the meekness of Christianity. For Steiner, the contrast comes in the way humanity is treated; he states that the Egyptian theme represents the exploitation of humanity (the individual is used as a brick used by the state in the building of the pyramids). In opposition stands the meekness of Christianity, which is exemplified by the gothic cathedral. To support this assessment of the Middle Ages, he quotes Mandelstam’s “Утро акмеизма:” “Самый скромный ремесленник, самый последний клерк владел тайной солидной важности, благочестивого достоинства, столь характерного для этой эпохи.” For Gasparov, the same contrast between the Egyptian and the gothic occurs in later

⁵Whereas Steiner states in his discussion of “Notre Dame” that Mandelstam “speaks about the Egyptians’ misunderstanding of what should be considered as ‘material’”(248), Gasparov contends that it is only in the later Mandelstam that the Egyptian theme becomes negative. Both critics point to Mandelstam’s 1923 article “Гуманизм и современность” to make their points. “Бывают эпохи, которые говорят, что им нет дела до человека, что его нужно использовать, как кирпич, как цемент, что из него нужно строить, а не для него... Египтяне и египетские строители обращаются с человеческой массой как с материалом, которого должно хватить, который должен быть доставлен в любом количестве.” Steiner seems to take for granted that Mandelstam would have the same views in his 1912 poem as he did later in 1923, while Gasparov thinks that the events of 1921 and 1922 “(расстрел Гумилева, высылка интеллигенции, гонение на церковь, суд на эсерами, учреждение Главлита...)” caused this sudden change of view (Gasparov 2000, 37). Gasparov states that in the later Mandelstam, “Механическая громадность” пирамид для Мандельштама противоположна “динамичности” (диалектичности) готики: пирамида мертва цельностью готика живет противоборством частей”(Gasparov 2000, 37).

Mandelstam. However, in early Mandelstam the contrast is not between ways of viewing humanity; both Egyptian might and the meekness of Christianity have positive connotations. Instead, Gasparov sees the contrast as being between weakness and strength: “христианский страх Божий неожиданно побуждает возводить постройки не смиренные и убогие, а могучие, как египетские пирамиды” (Gasparov 2000, 28).

Cavanagh’s interpretation of the themes of Egyptian might and the meekness of Christianity is purely biblical. Like Struve, Cavanagh sees the cathedral as a symbolic bearer of human history, but for her, this history is not universal but Judeo-Christian.

This potential is realized in Notre Dame’s monstrous, built body, which metonymically holds all Judeo-Christian history within its walls. It is Adam, humanity’s first beginnings, and also the mother of God, whose son, the Second Adam, is the race’s final salvation. It holds “Egyptian might,” which evokes the Old Testament oppressions of the Chosen People, and “Christian modesty,” the meekness and suffering through which these oppressions were redeemed. Its basilica is a classical inheritance transfigured through Christianity, and with its “Gothic soul” it enters European history. (Cavanagh 1995, 88)

Thus, Egypt does not evoke images of architecture but rather the persecution and subsequent liberation of the Israelites from Egypt. Unlike in Steiner, for whom Egypt’s negative connotations are based on the nature of its pyramids, here Egypt figures negatively based on the story of Exodus. Like Gasparov, who sees strength in the weakness of Christian humility, Cavanagh sees this modesty as redemptive.⁶

While most critics address the contrast of Egyptian might and the meekness of Christianity, fewer have specifically examined the image of the reed in their interpretations of Mandelstam’s “Notre Dame.” Gasparov views the juxtaposition of the thin reed with the

⁶As will be demonstrated in the next chapter, the consideration of a biblical subtext for the image of the reed also colors the interpretation of Egyptian might and the meekness of Christianity. Egypt’s might becomes false strength in comparison to the power that is the meekness of Christianity.

oak as a continuation of the contrasting Egyptian might and the meekness of Christianity in the preceding line. He calls this “та же мысль в конкретном образе” (Gasparov 2000, 28). Ryszard Przybylski also connects these two lines, seeing them as “an echo of the so-called forest theory of the Gothic” (Przybylski 1987, 116), as seen in Chateaubriand and Huysmans, in which the upward thrust of the cathedral is reminiscent of the growth of trees. “One such antinomy (the reed and the oak) in the totality of the forest organism called the poet's attention and allowed him to see Notre Dame as a fusion of heavy stone and delicate azure, of Egyptian pride and Christian humility” (Przybylski 1987, 117).

In the most basic interpretation of this line, the thin reed is equated with weakness, while its counterpart, the oak, becomes its opposite, strength.⁷ It is interesting that Steiner couples this interpretation of the reed's fragility with Pascal's image of the person as a thinking reed, since in Pascal's formulation the feebleness of the human-reed is counterbalanced by its ability to reason. Steiner first advances the view that in “Notre Dame” “the ‘trostinka’ signifies man” (Steiner 1977, 249); a view which he takes from Kiril Taranovsky's interpretation of the poem “Из омута злого и вязкого.”⁸ Steiner takes Taranovsky's

⁷Steiner states that:

If “trostinka” is the symbol of fragility, its opposite, “dub”, is emblematic of strength. “Dub” is the most positive of the words in its group. It is an organic, erect object whose material is not an obstacle to its height. The shift in the ordering of the members of the two groups, strong/material and light/spiritual, in the last line of this stanza has a definite chiasmic effect, moreover, especially if seen against the background of the immediately preceding pair, “egipetskaja mošč” and “christianstva robst.” (Steiner, 249).

⁸In this analysis, Taranovsky says that the reed in the second line “Я вырос, тростинкой шурша” is Pascal's *roseau pensant*.

Man is but a reed, the most feeble thing in nature, but he is a thinking reed. The entire universe need not arm itself to crush him. A vapor, a drop of water suffices to kill him. But, if the universe were to crush him, man would still be more noble than that which killed him, because he knows that he dies and the advantage which the universe has over him, the universe knows nothing of this.

--All our dignity then, consists in thought. By it we must elevate ourselves, and not by space and time which we cannot fill. Let us endeavor then, to think well; this is the principle of morality. (Pascal

Pensees 347)

Taranovsky traces Mandelstam's inspiration as coming from Tjutchev's poem “Певучесть есть в морских волнах” (Taranovsky, 52).

interpretation of the image of the reed in this one poem and places it in turn on “Notre Dame.” Struve follows Steiner’s lead and includes Pascal in his list of associations called up by the reed.⁹ Gasparov also continues Steiner’s analysis of the reed in “Notre Dame” as Pascal’s thinking reed and like Taranovsky says that this idea was transmitted to Mandelstam through Tiutchev’s poetry (Gasparov 2000, 28).

Struve, followed by Gasparov, offers a more productive subtext for interpreting the reed in one of Krylov’s fables, “Дуб и трость” (1805). In this fable, the oak tells the reed that it is weak, as the smallest wind can shake it, and in comparison the oak lauds its own strength. The reed counters that although it bends at the slightest breeze, it does not break. It is finally vindicated when a strong storm comes and, although the reed is bent to the ground, the oak is uprooted.¹⁰ This reading subverts expectations of strength and weakness—what

⁹“противопоставление “тростник”—“дуб” отзывается Лафонтеном—Крыловым, отчасти Паскалем, “мыслящий тростник”(Struve 1982, 198).

¹⁰ С Тростинкой Дуб однажды в речь вошел.
"Поистине, роптать ты вправе на природу,-
Сказал он,- воробей, и тот тебе тяжел.
Чуть легкий ветерок подернет рябью воду,
Ты зашатаешься, начнешь слабость,
И так нагнешься сиротливо,
Что жалко на тебя смотреть.
Меж тем как, наравне с Кавказом, горделиво,
Не только солнца я препятствую лучам,
Но, посмеаяся и вихрям и грозам,
Стою и тверд и прям,
Как будто б огражден ненарушимым миром:
Тебе все бурей - мне все кажется зефиром.
Хотя б уж ты в окружности росла,
Густую тению ветвей моих покрытой,
От непогод бы я быть мог тебе защитой,
Но вам в удел природа отвела
Брега бурливого Эолова владенья:
Конечно, нет совсем у ней о вас раденья".-
"Ты очень жалостлив,- сказала Трость в ответ,-
Однако не крушись: мне столько худа нет.
Не за себя я вихрей опасуюсь:
Хоть я и гнусь, но не ломаюсь -
Так бури мало мне вредят;
Едва ль не более тебе они грозят!
То правда, что еще доселе их свирепость

was once considered strong has been proved otherwise and weakness is converted into strength.¹¹

Although Cavanagh states that “Foreign and native, history and newness, culture and barbarism, inside and out; Mandelstam’s poem is built on the tension between these opposing forces” (Cavanagh 1999, 157), her interpretation of the reed and the oak equalizes any such tensions. In her interpretation, the differences still exist but become united into a stronger whole.

In this stanza, though, the reed that represents a weak and wavering self in earlier lyrics stands beside the oak, an emblem of might and thus apparently the feeble reed’s antithesis. In this new construct, however, it is the equal of the forest’s most powerful tree, and their proximity does not endanger the distinct identity of either. They are united by a structure that yokes together differences and makes of them a strength, a structure that derives its vitality precisely from the volatile, incongruous combinations of which it is made. (Cavanagh 1995, 87)¹²

Твою не одолела крепость,
И от ударов их ты не склонял лица:
Но - подождем конца!"
Едва лишь это Трость сказала,
Вдруг мчится с северных сторон,
И с градом и с дождем шумящий аквилон.
Дуб держится,- к земле Тростиночка припала.
Бушует ветер, удвоил силы он,
Взревел - и вырвал с корнем вон
Того, кто небесам головой своей касался
И в области теней пятою упирался.

¹¹This same concept, of the weak becoming strong, as will be demonstrated in the next chapter, is provided by a biblical subtext for the reed.

¹²Cavanagh’s basic idea corresponds with my biblical interpretation in which the reed symbolizes simultaneously both strength and weakness.

CHAPTER III

Biblical subtext for the image of the reed in “Notre Dame”

Mandelstam’s poetry is replete with allusions to other works, so that the reader must continually contend with the problem of its subtext. Brown, in his introduction to Mandelstam’s works, ascribes the following sentiment to Mandelstam: “If you would read me, you must have my culture,” and states that “there are few modern Russian poets whose demands are so heavy as those of Mandel’shtam”(Brown 1969, XIV). Brown thinks that Mandelstam’s themes stem from all of Western art and culture; literary themes alone originate from sources as diverse as Homer and Poe (Brown 1969, VIII). In his article “The Problem of Context and Subtext in the Poetry of Osip Mandel’shtam,” Kiril Taranovsky examines the importance of finding and understanding the subtext in Mandelstam’s poetry. He defines the concept of subtext and classifies it into four distinct categories.

If we define the context as a set of texts which contain the same or a similar image, the subtext may be defined as an already existing text (or texts) reflected in a new one.

There are four kinds of subtexts: (1) that which serves as a simple impulse for the creation of an image; (2) *zaimstvovanie po ritmu i zvučanju* (borrowing of a rhythmic figure and the sounds contained therein); (3) the text which supports or reveals the poetic message of a later text; (4) the text which is treated polemically by the poet. The first two do not necessarily contribute to our better understanding of a given poem. However, (2) may be combined with (3) and/or (4), and (3) and (4) may, in their turn, be blended. (Taranovsky 1974, 168)¹³

¹³My formulation of the biblical subtext of the reed falls into the third of these subtext categories.

Taranovsky claims that Mandelstam viewed readings on topics as diverse as literature, architecture, and the natural sciences as possible sources for his poetry. Literature in particular heavily influenced Mandelstam.

The Old Testament and the Apocalypse, Homer and Sappho, Ovid and Tibullus, Dante and Tasso, Racine and Balzac, Dickens and Edgar Allan Poe, Deržavin, Batjuškov, Pushkin, Jazykov, Tjutčev, Lermontov, Fet, Blok, Andrej Belyj, Vjačeslav Ivanov, Gumilev, Akhmatova—these are only some of the sources reflected in Mandel'stam's poetry, either as obvious reminiscences or as enciphered subtexts. (Taranovsky 1974, 151-2)

Since Mandelstam's writing draws from a multitude of sources, which in turn inform the reading of the text, "the investigation of all of Mandel'stam's literary and cultural sources becomes a very important prerequisite for a better understanding and fuller appreciation of his poetry" (Taranovsky 1974, 153).

Following Taranovsky, Gasparov says that Mandelstam references other sources in his poetry to cause the reader to draw associations between the poem and that original source.

Книжный путь к культуре порождал в Мандельштаме обостренное чувство того, что все слова—заемные, выученные, чужие. . . Но для него это было не недостатком, а выгодой,—помня об источнике каждого слова, он мог рассчитанно возбуждать в читателе ассоциации, связанные с употреблением этого слова в источнике. (Gasparov 1995, 10)

Mandelstam himself sanctions the importance of understanding the subtexts in his poetry. In "Слово и культура" he acknowledges and countenances the idea that poets draw from their predecessors. "Так и поэт не боится повторений и легко пьянеет классическим вином." In "Барсучья нора" Mandelstam states that "Установление литературного генезиса поэта, его литературных источников, его *родства* и происхождения сразу выводит нас на твердую почву. На вопрос, что хотел сказать поэт, критик может и не ответить, но на вопрос, откуда он пришел, отвечать обязан..."

Having established that locating and examining subtexts in Mandelstam's poetry is vital to its understanding, we must now turn our attentions to the reasons that make it fruitful to search for such subtexts in the Bible. While Taranovsky does mention the "Old Testament and the Apocalypse" first in his list of sources reflected in Mandelstam's poetry, other scholars have expressed doubts that Mandelstam's biblical knowledge was sufficient to warrant attributing the scriptures as a direct influence on him. In the article "Библейские образы и мотивы в стихотворении О. Э. Мандельштама 'Ласточка'" В. С. Ostrer addresses the Jewish theme in Mandelstam and alludes to the issue of Mandelstam's familiarity with the Bible: "Мандельштам был слишком мало знаком с Библией... чтобы библейские... сюжеты, мотивы, а часто и кальки с иврита можно было объяснить прямым заимствованием" (Ostrer 1977, 195). Ostrer justifies an examination of the biblical subtexts of the image of the swallow in "Ласточка" on the following grounds:

Надо думать, здесь мы встречаемся в мировом фольклоре. Наша задача, однако, проще задачи фольклориста: даже не будучи близко знаком с еврейской религиозной традицией, Мандельштам ясно сознавал ее значение для своей поэзии, чувствовал и понимал близость еврейской культуры и мировоззрения своего поколения русских поэтов. (Ostrer 1977, 195).

In contrast to Ostrer, Omry Ronen finds a biblical source for the image of the plumb line in "Notre Dame" without resorting to any explanations of why the Bible might or might not be a valid subtext for Mandelstam. Ronen's interpretation of the plumb line has been embraced by other critics, including Steiner (1977, 250) and Cavanagh (1995, 88).

Without resorting to either Ostrer's claim that Mandelstam just happened to absorb Jewish culture or Ronen's silence on the issue, it is possible to justify looking to the Bible for subtexts in Mandelstam's works. Up to the early 20th century, the Bible belonged to the realm of basic cultural knowledge. Poets and other writers made use of biblical references

in their works with the assumption that readers had a basic level of biblical literacy. As Mandelstam was truly immersed in both the Western European and the Russian literary traditions, in all likelihood he was also conversant with their biblical themes. In writing a poem about a Christian cathedral, Mandelstam seems to be inviting the reader to search for a subtext within the scriptures.

Before examining the possible biblical subtext of the image of the reed in “Notre Dame,” I will briefly review the use of the image of the reed in Mandelstam’s poetry. An analysis of Mandelstam’s oeuvre yields eight other poems where one of the words “трость,” “тростник,” or “тростинка” appears. In none of these poems, however, does he use the image of the reed in the same way as he does in “Notre Dame,” nor does a biblical subtext seem relevant in any of these instances. Two of these poems (“Из омута злого и вязкого” and “Есть иволги в лесах, и гласных долгота”) like the poem “Notre Dame,” belong to his first collection *Камень*. Taranovsky interprets the image of the thin reed, “тростинка,” in the first of these poems (written in 1910) as Pascal’s *roseau pensant* (Taranovsky 1976, 52).

Из омута злого и вязкого
Я вырос, тростинкой шурша,
И страстно, и томно, и ласково
Запретною жизнью дыша.

In the second of the poems from *Камень*, written in 1914, in which images of nature and poetry intertwine, the reed, тростник, symbolizes a panpipe.

Как бы цезурою зияет этот день:
Уже с утра покой и трудные длинноты;
Волы на пастбище, и золотая лень
Из тростника извлечь богатство целой ноты.

In Mandelstam's "Египтянин," a poem which did not appear in any collection but whose 1913 composition makes it contemporaneous to the poems in *Камень*, the image of the reed appears as a simile for the narrator's knees.

От радости мои колени
Дрожали, как тростник.

This is the only occurrence outside of "Notre Dame" in which the image of the reed is associated with Egypt. Gasparov says this poem was "прямо взят из научно-популярной книги Масперо" (Gasparov 2000, 36) which had been translated into Russian, and views it in the context of the positive associations of Egypt in Mandelstam's early work. In the poem "Феодосия" which appears in *Tristia*, the word "тростинка" is used to emphasize the thinness of ships' masts when viewed from a distance.

Тростинки мачт, хрусталь волны упругий
И на канатах лодочки-гамаки.

The image of the reed appears in two poems from the *Воронежские тетради*. In the first of these, "Не у меня, не у тебя - у них," the "тростник" again symbolizes a musical instrument.

И с воздухом поющ тростник и скважист,
И с благодарностью улитки губ морских
Потянут на себя их дышащую тяжесть.

In the second poem "Улыбнись, ягненок гневный с Рафаэлева холста," the thin reed seems to be just that, a plant.

На скале черствее хлеба — молодых тростинки рощ,
И плывет углами неба восхитительная мощь.¹⁴

¹⁴In *Новые стихи* neither the words тростник nor тростинка appear, but rather трость. Here, in keeping with the modern Russian meaning of the word, which Ozhegov defines as a "палка для опоры при ходьбе," the трость is a staff, as in Mandelstam's 1931 poem "Еще далеко мне до патриарха."

То усмехнусь, то робко приосанюсь
И с белорукой тростью выхожу, -
The staff also appears in his 1932 poem "Батюшков."
Словно гуляка с волшебною тростью,

The various ways in which the image of the reed is used in the above poems would seem to support Buxstab's statement about Mandelstam's poetry—at least where this image is concerned.¹⁵

In Mandelstam we also find a number of favorite, repeated words, but they do not acquire from repetition any symbolic meaning whatsoever. The themes all of Mandelstam's poems are not correlated, do not force these words to correlate in one's consciousness, threads of thought do not extend from a word used in one poem to the same word used in another poem. Words pass from one verse to another without creating a common theme and without becoming symbols. (Bukhshtab 1970, 270)

Although the images of the reed that appear elsewhere in Mandelstam do not have a biblical subtext, one can be postulated in the image in "Notre Dame". While the word "тростинка" does not appear in the Russian Bible¹⁶, the words "тростник" and "трость" collectively appear seventy-six times. Unlike in more modern usage, (Ozhegov defines тростник as a reed, "водяное или болотное растение из сем. злаков с коленчатым

Батюшков нежный со мною живет.

¹⁵Thomson, in his examination of the three different editions of Mandelstam's *Камень*, makes a convincing argument that this is not the case with the image of stone, which he sees as being consistent throughout the collection.

It is clear that Buchštab's remarks about the absence of any permanent correlations between the words, themes and images of Mandel'stam's early poetry are not borne out by the facts. On the contrary, several clusters of images not only coexist there, but persist throughout his entire life-work. If we study the 1913 edition of *Kamen'* we can trace the evolution of its initial theme, the 'sea-shell', mysteriously cast upon the shores of eternity, into the Acmeist ideal of the artist-builder, challenging the cosmic void; the insubstantiality of 'foam', 'breath', and 'smoke' leads to the monstrous grandeur of Gothic cathedrals and Russian aristocracy; for Mandel'stam himself the association of the 'falling and rising stone' with the Acmeist word and the consequent renunciation of Symbolism, seems to have been unconsciously linked with the idea of the loss of 'svjaz' or the Fall, and with a premonition of his own fate. Throughout the image retains its disturbing and sinister connotations, and it is far from being the simple affirmation of the architectural aspirations of Acmeist poetry that most commentators have assumed. (Thomson, 520)

¹⁶The Russian text I am using is the synodal translation of 1876, which is the translation Mandelstam would have been familiar with. It was the first full translation of the Bible into Russian that was widely accepted. Previous attempts at Bible translation were deemed heresies and the copies were collected and burned (Рижский, 1978). The synodal translators attempted to keep the Russian Bible as close as possible to the Slavonic Bible. "Для православного духовенства по полне понятным причинам представлялось, конечно, очень желательным, чтобы русский перевод как можно меньше отличался от славянской Библии"(Рижский, 159). This created complaints even at the time that the translators attempted to "охранять стиль переводов от приближения к современному языку"(Рижский, 163). The Bible was not translated again into Russian until 1956. Since I am concerned with the words as Mandelstam might have encountered them, I am not examining why these words were chosen in the Russian translation, or comparing their sources in the Hebrew or Greek texts. The English translation (I am using the New Revised Standard Version) has various translations for the Russian words "тростник" and "трость," which are also not of concern here.

твердым стволом,” and трость as a cane or walking stick, “палка для опоры при ходьбе”), in the Russian Bible, the words are somewhat interchangeable. Here the word “трость” appears meaning a plant twelve times, as in the following verse from Matthew. “Когда же они пошли, Иисус начал говорить народу об Иоанне: что смотреть ходили вы в пустыню? трость ли, ветром колеблемую?” (Matthew 11:7). A similar use of the word “трость” is found in Isaiah 9:14 “И отсечет Господь у Израиля голову и хвост, пальму и трость, в один день.” Dal’s dictionary supports that the earlier Russian meaning of the word “трость” was the reed, calling it a swamp plant or type of “камыш.” In both of these passages, the word “трость” is used metaphorically. In the first verse, Christ uses the image of the reed to represent the people’s preconceived ideas of John the Baptist. In the second, the image of “трость” symbolizes the comforts which Israel is in danger of losing. The word “трость” here, even if used metaphorically, clearly refers to the plant, not the walking stick.¹⁷

The interchangeability of the two words “тростник” and “трость” in the Bible flows in just one direction. There are no occurrences where the word “тростник” appears with the meaning of a rod or staff. Although the word “тростинка” as it appears in “Notre Dame” is not present in the Russian Bible, this does not mean that the Bible should be dismissed as a possible source for Mandelstam. The sound association and etymological relationship between the words “тростинка,” “тростник,” and “трость” alone make the comparison valid. Also, as in the passage from Matthew cited above, the word “трость” appears not

¹⁷It is interesting to note that the word “трость” is used to mean “reed” only when used metaphorically. Where the image of the reed occurs with no metaphorical coloring, the word “тростник” is used, as in the following passage on the birth of Moses: Moses’ mother “но не могли долее скрывать его, взяла корзинку из тростника и осмолила ее асфальтом и смолою и, положив в нее младенца, поставила в тростнике у берега реки”(Exodus 2:3). It is the figurative meaning, however, that will prove most useful in the context of Mandelstam.

just with the meaning of reed, but with the connotation of a thin one, which can be “shaken by the wind.”

Since the various words for reed in the Bible are in an interchangeable relationship, all of their separate uses will be examined. The various occurrences of the “тростник” and “трость” can be divided into several categories, according to the meaning afforded them by the text. One of these meanings of “трость” or “тростник” is an expensive, fragrant item.¹⁸ While this reference can be dismissed immediately as an inspiration for the reed in Mandelstam’s “Notre Dame,” it can, however, be used to show that in the Biblical text the two words are, at least in part, interchangeable. “возьми себе самых лучших благовонных веществ: смирны самоточной пятьсот [сиклей], корицы благовонной половину против того, двести пятьдесят, тростника благовонного двести пятьдесят” (Exodus 30:23). “Ты не покупал Мне благовонной трости за серебро и туком жертв твоих не насыщал Меня; но ты грехами твоими затруднял Меня, беззакониями твоими тростинк отягощал Меня” (Isaiah 43:24). In the first passage cited the word “тростник” is used, while in the second “трость” appears; in both cases, the meaning is the same, that of an expensive, fragrant item.

Another possible meaning in the Bible for the word “трость,” but not “тростник,” is that of pen. This is another meaning which appears in Dal, where it is defined as a “камышевое писчее перо древнихъ и нынѣ многихъ азятцевъ.” As a writing instrument, the word “трость” appears in positive, negative, and neutral contexts. “Излилось из сердца моего слово благое; я говорю: песнь моя о Царе; язык мой--трость скорописца” (Psalm 45:1). “Как вы говорите: ‘мы мудры, и закон Господень у нас’? А вот, лживая трость

¹⁸This occurs in Exodus 30:23, Isaiah 43:24, Jeremiah 6:20, and Ezekiel 27:19.

книжников [и его] превращает в ложь” (Jeremiah 8:8). “Многое имел я писать; но не хочу писать к тебе чернилами и тростью” (3 John 1:13). While it might be interesting to contemplate the image of “трость” as a writing instrument in Mandelstam’s poetry, I do not believe that it is warranted. In “Notre Dame” Mandelstam says that “из тяжести недоброй/ И я когда-нибудь прекрасное создам,” and as he is a poet, it would seem likely that a pen would enter his creative process. However, the placement of “тростинка” beside “дуб” and directly after “Египетская мощь” and “христианства робость” would seem to nullify that interpretation. Also, the meaning of “трость” as pen is a rather obscure one.

An additional meaning of the word “трость” which yields a more profitable avenue to explore is that of a measuring stick. This is one of the primary meanings of the word in the Russian Bible. It appears thirty-five times in this context, thirty-two of these in the book of Ezekiel alone and the other three in Revelation.¹⁹ The following passage is typical of the ones in Ezekiel:

И вот муж, которого вид как бы вид блестящей меди, и льняная вервь в руке его и трость измерения, и стоял он у ворот. И вот, вне храма стена со всех сторон [его], и в руке того мужа трость измерения в шесть локтей, [считая каждый локоть] в локоть с ладонью; и намерил он в этом здании одну трость толщины и одну трость вышины. Потом пошел к воротам, обращенным лицом к востоку, и взошел по ступеням их, и нашел меры в одном пороге ворот одну трость ширины и в другом пороге одну трость ширины. И в каждой боковой комнате одна трость длины и одна трость ширины, а между комнатами пять локтей, и в пороге ворот у притвора ворот внутри одна же трость. И смерил он в притворе ворот внутри одну трость. (Ezekiel 40:3b, 5-8)

Even if Mandelstam did not have this specific meaning of “трость” in mind in “Notre Dame,” it is an interesting concept to consider. The presence of the plumb-line, “отвес,” in the same line as the reed “тростинка,” does not make the idea of a building tool out of place

¹⁹“Трость” in the meaning of measuring stick can be found in Ezekiel 40:3-8, 41:8, 42:16-20, 45:1-4, 48:8-21 and Revelation 11:1, 21:15-6.

in this stanza. After all, it is the use of such construction aids that allowed “позаботилась подпружных арок сила, / Чтоб масса грузная стены не сокрушила.”

Ronen suggests that in addition to the literal meaning of plumb-line, the image of “отвес” has a Biblical subtext.

The clue to the moral and social meaning of the ‘plumb line’ is offered by the Bible, in which it signifies the testing of the truth and rectitude of the house of Israel, as well as the punishment for wrong-doing (Amos 7:7-8): Такое видение открыл Он мне: вот, Господь стоял на *отвесной* стене, и в руке у Него *свинцовый отвес* [note that the ‘plumb line’ is implicitly linked with the ‘lead stick’ of line 14]. И сказал мне Господь: что ты видишь, Амос? Я ответил: отвес. И Господь сказал: вот, положу отвес среди народа Моего, Израиля; не буду более прощать ему. The same symbol occurs in *Isaiah* 34:11 (вервь разорения и отвес уничтожения). (Ronen 1983, 123)

The image of the reed serves a similar function in the previously quoted passage from Ezekiel. The prophet is shown a vision of the restored temple while he is in exile in Babylon. After being shown the temple, the prophet is told “Ты, сын человеческий, возвести дому Израилеву о храме сем, чтобы они устыдились беззаконий своих и чтобы сняли с него меру” (Ezekiel 43:10). It would seem that, much like the plumb-line, the reed could be used not just as a literal measuring stick with which to demarcate heights and depths, but also as a figurative measuring stick with which the house of Israel is to measure itself against the perfection that is the temple. This figurative meaning of the measuring stick “трость” also occurs in Revelation. Here, again in a vision, the apostle John relates that “И дана мне трость, подобная жезлу, и сказано: встань и измерь храм Божий и жертвенник, и поклоняющихся в нем” (Rev. 11:1). John measures not just the temple and altar but also the worshippers inside.

Now the question arises as to how this figurative use of “трость” as a measuring stick in the Bible relates to the poem “Notre Dame.” Unfortunately, Ronen’s discussion of the

image of the plumb-line is concerned with its implications for “Трифельная ода,” with just a brief mention that the image also occurs in “Notre Dame.” Steiner adopts Ronen’s interpretation and states that “we can see that ‘otves’ is being used metaphorically”(Steiner 1977, 250) but never addresses how this metaphorical use impacts the interpretation of the poem. Steiner’s only concern seems to be that the image of the plumb-line not be interpreted literally as instead “of emphasizing the organic mystery, the image of the plumb-line metonymically [sic.] suggests the *téchne* of Gothic architecture”(250)²⁰. The metaphorical implications of both the images of “трость” and “ответ” could reflect the first line of the poem: “Где римский судия судил чужой народ.” While neither the Israelites in Ezekiel nor the worshipers in Revelation could possibly be seen as a “foreign nation” within the context of these Bible passages, the act of measuring people by some standard is central to the act of judging. Another more fanciful interpretation comes in the image of the giant Adam whose “чудовищные ребра” belong both to him and the cathedral and whose muscles play in the “крестовый легкий свод.” The sheer dimensions of this Adam-cathedral invite the reader to measure them.

The possible biblical inspirations for the image of the reed in “Notre Dame” become most illuminating when other figurative uses of the words “тростник” and “трость” are examined. In many cases, these images are used metaphorically to illustrate something that is weak, such as the nation of Israel in this passage from 1 Kings. “И поразит Господь Израиля, и [будет он], как тростник, колеблемый в воде, и извергнет Израильтян из этой доброй земли, которую дал отцам их, и развеет их за реку, за то, что они сделали у себя идолов,

²⁰I take issue with Steiner’s assertion that the plumb-line must not be read literally. While in the third stanza it is true that most of the images do emphasize the organic, the second and fourth stanzas are concerned with the craft of the cathedral. The poet wants to understand the secret plan which keeps the walls from collapsing under their own weight; he wants to create something beautiful from unkind or evil weight. Far from running from the “*téchne* of Gothic architecture,” Mandelstam seems to be embracing it.

раздражая Господа”(1 Kings 14:5).²¹ The same equivalence of the image of the reed with weakness is found in the New Testament in Matthew 11:7 quoted above and also in a verse from Luke that echoes it. Both verses reference people’s perceptions of the prophet John the Baptist: “По отшествии же посланных Иоанном, начал говорить к народу об Иоанне: что смотреть ходили вы в пустыню? трость ли, ветром колеблемую?”(Luke 7:24) In both 1 Kings and Luke, the image of the reed is used to show the real or imagined weakness of the nation or person to which it is being compared. This is the simplest of the metaphorical uses of this image in the Bible and by itself would not be sufficient to postulate a possible biblical subtext for the image of the reed in Mandelstam. The image used as an example of a weak plant can be found in many other non-biblical sources. Contrasted with this view of the reed as weak, the oak in “Notre Dame” becomes its opposite by reason of its strength, a view point which Steiner reaches without ever having considered the Bible as a possible source for Mandelstam’s image.

A more trenchant metaphorical use of the image of the reed comes in Isaiah, where it becomes symbolic of the little person. Here, the messiah is depicted as not breaking even the bruised reed: “трости надломленной не переломит, и льна курящегося не угасит; будет производить суд по истине” (Isaiah 42:3). While it might be possible to read this passage as the messiah being merciful to injured water plants, the image of the reed is a metaphor here for those in the lower strata of society. The bruised reed here seems similar to the “Самый скромный ремесленник, самый последний клерк” who “владел тайный солидной важности, благочестивого достоинства” in the Middle Ages as formulated by Mandelstam in “Утро акмеизма.” In referring to the value of the smallest unit of society

²¹It is interesting that the reed is in one place used to symbolize the restoration of fortunes rather than their removal; “И превратится призрак вод в озеро, и жаждающая земля--в источники вод; в жилище шакалов, где они покоятся, будет место для тростника и камыша”(Isaiah 35:7).

Steiner states that Mandelstam “identified this type of social organization with Gothic architecture” (Steiner 1977, 249), an association which Gasparov also makes (Gasparov 2000, 29). Seeing the image of the reed in light of Isaiah, as symbolizing the common person, provides an interpretation that is similar to Pascal’s thinking reed. “Man is but a reed, the most feeble thing in nature, but he is a thinking reed” (Pascal *Pensees*, 347). In both cases, the human is viewed as the weakest of the weak. The differences, however, lie in the source of redemption. In Pascal, it is in the person’s capacity to think, whereas in Isaiah redemption lies in God’s justice. The former interpretation would illuminate the line “Души готической рассудочная пропасть,” while the latter would seem warranted by the setting of the cathedral and the phrase “христианства робость.” Perhaps, the answer lies not in either/or, but in both/and. The contrast of the two redemptions could be yet another example of the “equilibrium with the constant threat of sudden imbalance” (Brown 1973, 190) that Brown deems to be at the heart of “Notre Dame.”

The image of the reed as a symbol of weakness is used not only in reference to Israel and to humanity in general, but also to Egypt. One such passage has already been cited above: “И не будет в Египте такого дела, которое совершить умели бы голова и хвост, пальма и трость” (Isaiah 19:15). A few verses before this the prophet states: “и оскудеют реки, и каналы Египетские обмелеют и высохнут; камыш и тростник завянут” (Isaiah 19:6). While in neither of the above passages is Egypt itself equated with being the reed, the image of the reed is used to illustrate Egypt’s weakness. The future tense in both passages projects this weakness as Egypt’s future state; presumably Egypt is not yet aware that its fortunes will turn.

This reading of Egypt as weak would seem to contradict the juxtaposition of “Египетская мощь и христианства робость” in “Notre Dame,” since “мощь” would not appear to have any room for weakness. As noted above, it also is at odds with Steiner, who says that “Egyptian might” refers to the pyramids and architecture. For Steiner, the theme of Egypt is one of strength, even if that strength carries negative connotations. For Gasparov “Egyptian might” corresponds to Mandelstam’s view of the gothic; its strength lies in its ability to find room “для маленького человека” (Gasparov 2000, 35). Cavanagh sees Egyptian might as referring to the oppressions of Israel from the book of Exodus (Cavanagh 1995, 88). The weight of both the poem “Notre Dame” and the critical literature about it would seem to nullify any interpretation of Egypt as being weak, as it appears to be in these passages from Isaiah. Can a biblical subtext be posited for the connection of the image of the reed with the theme of Egypt in “Notre Dame”? The answer is found when the passages in which Egypt itself is equated with being a reed are examined.

When the image of the reed is used as a metaphor for Egypt, the symbol becomes one of false strength. In the three passages where this occurs, Egypt is called a staff of reed that sends splinters into those who lean upon it. In the first of these passages, the Lord speaks to the prophet Ezekiel. “И узнают все обитатели Египта, что Я Господь; потому что они дому Израилеву были подпорою тростниковою. Когда они ухватились за тебя рукою, ты расщепился и все плечо исколол им; и когда они оперлись о тебя, ты сломился и изранил все чресла им” (Ezekiel 29:6-7). In both 2 Kings 18:21 and Isaiah 36:6, this same thought appears in identical words. This time it is not the Lord who speaks but the king of Assyria.²² “Вот, ты думаешь опереться на Египет, на эту трость надломленную,

²²The king is planning to conquer Israel and is subsequently destroyed when King Hezekiah puts his faith in neither Assyria nor Egypt, but in God.

которая, если кто опрется на нее, войдет ему в руку и проколет ее. Таков фараон, царь Египетский, для всех уповающих на него.” In all three passages, what purports to be “Египетская мощь” is shown to be a false strength. The rod that should provide protection and support proves to be a hollow reed that only injures those who rely on it.

When the phrase “Египетская мощь” is interpreted to represent false strength, the meekness of Christianity in contrast becomes something strong. This change of meaning for “христианства робость” seems warranted since in “Notre Dame” the phrases “Египетская мощь” and “христианства робость” occur in a series of antitheses. Despite their disagreements on the nature of “Египетская мощь,” Steiner, Gasparov, and Cavanagh all see “христианства робость” as having positive connotations in the poem. For Steiner (1977, 249) and Gasparov (2000, 35), the strength of meekness lies in Christian architecture, whereas Cavanagh (1995, 88) sees this meekness as redemptive.

In this interpretation which subverts expectations of strength and weakness, “Египетская мощь” becomes analogous to the oak in Krylov’s fable; both are purported to be invincible, but prove not to be. Like Krylov’s reed, “христианства робость” appears weak but becomes stronger than that which should be strong. The strength of Krylov’s idea of the reed and “христианства робость” lies in their supposed weakness, in their ability to give way before a superior power. In Krylov, the reed does not break because in its weakness it bends before the storm. In biblical texts from David and Goliath to the baby in the manger, that which appears weak triumphs over giants or kings through humility and trust in God. Preconceived notions of power and might are found to be baseless. This view of the false strength of Egypt, as embodied by the staff made of reed, is not intended to supplant

Krylov's fable as an inspiration for Mandelstam but rather to enhance it. As such, it unites the images of Egyptian strength, the meekness of Christianity, and the thin reed.

As illustrated above, two contrasting figurative uses of the image of the reed as a plant emerge from the Hebrew scriptures. When viewed through the lens of Isaiah 42:3, where the bruised reed is not broken, the image becomes a symbol of the little person and as such can be associated with "христианства робость." When seen through Isaiah 36:6, the image of the reed symbolizes false strength which gives color to Mandelstam's "Египетская мощь." There is yet another image of the reed in the scriptures which encompasses both of these seemingly disparate images, this time from the Christian scriptures.

Тогда воины правителя, взяв Иисуса в преторию, собрали на Него весь полк и, раздев Его, надели на Него багряницу; и, сплетши венец из терна, возложили Ему на голову и дали Ему в правую руку трость; и, становясь пред Ним на колени, насмехались над Ним, говоря: радуйся, Царь Иудейский! и плевали на Него и, взяв трость, били Его по голове. И когда насмеялись над Ним, сняли с Него багряницу, и одели Его в одежды Его, и повели Его на распятие. (Matthew 27:27-31)

Here the reed is meant by the soldiers to be a mocking symbol of absent strength, similar to the broken staff that is Egypt in the book of Isaiah. By giving Christ a reed instead of a scepter and a crown made of thorns, the soldiers are trying to illustrate their belief that the man they scorn is just that, a lowly man with no claims to any kind of power. However, in the context of the Christian scriptures, this weakness they attribute to Christ is actually strength. Unknowingly, the guards have given what they believe to be a false symbol of strength to one who is actually strong. Within the story of the text, the one they mock as being king of the Jews, actually is the king, and the symbols they give in a jeering way to show his lack of power become symbols of his might.²³ The reed that the Roman guards

²³ In contrast to both the flogging and the crucifixion, the mocking scene is given in vivid detail. . . Thus the irony of the scene is what is important for Matthew. Jesus is indeed king, but kingship is

give Christ as an ersatz scepter incorporates both strength and weakness; it is a flimsy caricature of a monarch's power and a fitting sign of the power of a God become man.

This discussion of the possible biblical subtext for the image of the reed addresses one image in an entire poem full of imagery and therefore does not intend that the image of the reed is to be read as the guiding image for interpreting "Notre Dame." Critics have successfully interpreted the poem without considering that the image might possibly have a biblical subtext. Still, the possibility that such a subtext might exist can bring new nuances into the poem's interpretation. How then, could the possible biblical subtext for the image of the reed affect our reading of "Notre Dame"? We have already seen above how it might inform the preceding line "Египетская мощь и христианства робость," but can such a reading illuminate the poem as a whole? Can it exist in dialog with other critical interpretations? One of the most prevalent critical interpretations of "Notre Dame" is that the poem is an Acmeist manifesto. This is the view espoused by Steiner (1977) and endorsed by Musatov (2000), Gasparov (2000), Thomson (1991), and Struve (1990). The image of the reed best fits into this interpretation when Steiner's analysis of the nature of the word is considered. For Steiner, Mandelstam adopts a belief in "the polysemicity of the word. For the word conceived as an organism cannot be a static unit with only a single referent" (Steiner 1977, 241). A biblical subtext for the image of the reed contains this

here redefined. The mock coronation is a parody of Jesus' own (coming) pronouncement in 28:18 *b. . .* All the accoutrements and insignia of royalty are mockingly noted: Jesus is a clown-king, complete with "robe," "scepter," "kneeling," and "acclamation." The crown of thorns is not just for additional torture; the sharp points radiating outward represent the rays of divinity surrounding the ruler's head, used on coins to portray Hellenistic kings. Matthew makes the ironic scene complete by adding the reed/scepter to Mark and by changing the (imperial) purple robe for an ordinary chlamus, the Roman soldier's cape instead of an emperor's robe. The latter is not only more historically realistic (where would soldiers get an emperor's robe?), but also heightens the irony, making the ordinary "robe" the same kind of parody as the thorns/crown and the stick/scepter. In contrast to the homage paid the true king of the Jews by the magi (2:11), Jesus is greeted by being spit upon and struck, and in contrast to the universal practice of kingship in this world, the true king receives violence rather than inflicting it. (Boring 1995, 488)

polysemicity. Within the scriptures the image becomes a metaphor for both weakness and strength. It becomes both strength masquerading as weakness—the scepter-reed given to Christ by the soldiers—and weakness cloaked in the guise of strength—the broken staff-reed of Egypt.

The image of the reed as a measuring stick can also inform the Acmeist analysis of the poem. Gasparov cites “мастерство” (Gasparov 1995, 12) as one of the two theses of Acmeism. In “Утро акмеизм” Mandelstam describes the Acmeist’s connection with the architect: “Акмеизм—для тех, кто, обуянный духом строительства, не отказывается малодушно от своей тяжести, а радостно принимает ее, чтобы разбудить и использовать архитектурно спящие в ней силы.” Like the image of the plumb-line that follows it, the image of the reed as an architectural tool emphasizes the craft of the cathedral.

Another critical interpretation of “Notre Dame,” advocated by Steiner (1977), Struve (1990), and Cavanagh (1995), is that the idea of the cathedral serves as a bearer of culture for Mandelstam. All three critics state that Mandelstam searched for a cultural home in the construct of the cathedral; for Steiner and Struve, this construct provides a home, whereas for Cavanagh the home that is provided is one built on contradiction. A biblical subtext for the image of the reed provides another foundation stone for this cultural home, supplying yet another Judeo-Christian underpinning. The image of the reed is no longer just one of a plant that exists in opposition to the oak, but it is part of the religious and cultural legacy which the idea of the cathedral represents for Mandelstam.

The passage from Matthew, in which the reed-scepter is given to Christ, provides the most productive possible biblical subtext for interpreting the image of the reed in the poem as a whole. If, as I postulate, in these verses from Matthew the image becomes a symbol of

weakness turned into strength, or a symbol of strength and weakness co-existing in a single entity, how does that inform our reading of Mandelstam's "Notre Dame?" I would like to lay forth the claim that in this interpretation, the image of the reed becomes a miniature echo of the idea of the cathedral itself. As cited above, Brown states that "Notre Dame is a scene of assault and resistance. It is a harmony, or peace, but it is the peace of the stalemate and the stand-off, the result of balanced opposition, an equilibrium with the constant threat of sudden imbalance" (Brown 1973, 190). The nature of the cathedral is of conflicting forces held in an uneasy stasis, just as within the reed dwell the concepts of strength and weakness, both vying for supremacy. In the cathedral, the flying buttresses contain something that looks like a ram, a "бездействует таран," that yields the image of something meant for destruction actually being used for strengthening. In the last verse, the cathedral is called a "твердыня," or stronghold, a place of defense in times of war; yet, the rams, as seen above, are used not for destruction but for strength. The cathedral is an elemental labyrinth and incomprehensible forest. The image is of something that would crush the individual on its own but, when used with craft, becomes lofty and airy. All of these contradictions point to the contradiction of the cathedral itself, that something made of heavy stone could appear to be so light. Just like the reed, the cathedral contains conflicting images which twist and turn, and instead of being one or the other, it is both.

NOTRE DAME

Где римский судия судил чужой народ,
Стоит базилика,- и, радостный и первый,
Как некогда Адам, распластывая нервы,
Играет мышцами крестовый легкий свод.

Но выдает себя снаружи тайный план:
Здесь позаботилась подпружных арок сила,
Чтоб масса грузная стены не сокрушила,
И свода дерзкого бездействует таран.

Стихийный лабиринт, непостижимый лес,
Души готической рассудочная пропасть,
Египетская мощь и христианства робость,
С тростинкой рядом - дуб, и всюду царь - отвес.

Но чем внимательней, твердыня Notre Dame,
Я изучал твои чудовищные ребра,
Тем чаще думал я: из тяжести недоброй
И я когда-нибудь прекрасное создам.

1912

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