

Title: Osip Mandelstam and the Dating of Poetry
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In 1914 Osip Mandelstam presented, in his essay “O sobesednike” (On the co-locutor), an image of poetic communication in which a tempest-tossed sailor throws a bottle overboard, inside of which he has written his name and the date of the storm. The bottle, “addressed to the one who finds it,” is found many years later by a wanderer in the dunes, who claims that, since he found it, the bottle was addressed to him in particular—thereby wresting authority over the message from the sailor to the bottle’s finder.

In 1937, Mandelstam composed his “Stikhi o neizvestnom soldate” (Lines on the unknown soldier), which ends with this stanza:

Я рожден в ночь с второго на третье
Января в девяносто одном
Ненадежном году — и столетья
Окружают меня огнем.

(I was born in the night between the second and third
Of January in the unreliable year
Of '91 — And the centuries
Surround me with fire.)

Here Mandelstam is occupying the position of the doomed sailor: stamping the manuscript with his date and his name (which appears as the signature that, visibly or invisibly, follows the last line).

These milestones mark a movement of Mandelstam’s thoughts on reading over the course of 23 years and numerous upheavals. As a young poet, concerned with establishing his voice and authority in terms of his poetic predecessors, he is more concerned with the finder of the message than with its sender—as soon as the wanderer finds the message, the sailor disappears from his thoughts. But as a mature poet and a victim of a hostile regime, Mandelstam will now theorize the doomed sender.

My paper tracks the correspondence between the appearance of dates in Mandelstam’s writing and his evolving theory of reader reception, with guidance from Jacques Derrida’s essay on dates and reading, entitled “Shibboleth.”