

Title: Mandelstam, Platonov, and the Rhythm of Utopia
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Osip Mandelstam's 1920 article "Government and Rhythm" (Gosudarstvo i ritm) describes a complex intersection of progressive cultural trends with Mandelstam's own poetic concerns. Mandelstam frequented eurhythmics studios in Petrograd in the early 20s, and even formed an "Institute of Rhythmics" via the Ministry of Culture. In "Government and Rhythm," Mandelstam explicates his enthusiasm for movement in political terms: "The new society is held together by solidarity and rhythm... The masses have solidarity. Only the collective can have rhythm." Yet his apparently utopian political philosophy also echoes his thoughts on poetry during this period. "The collective does not yet exist," he writes in the same article, "It must still be born. Collectivism appeared before the collective." This thought is reminiscent of ideas and images central to Mandelstam's poetry and critical writing through the 1920s into the 30s, which posit that the intuition of structure which makes poetry possible is itself already a linguistic phenomenon.

Andrei Platonov in his short novel of 1930, "The Foundation Pit" (Kotlovan), gives us a dystopian vision of the birth of the collective into its waiting structure. The collective is born, as if parodying the rhythmic theories of the 20s, into a mad dance of both bodies and words in which the "organization" of the individual means as only as much as his emptying out. In "The Foundation Pit," the structure of collectivism exists only linguistically; it is carried forth and exchanged in words that refer only to one another, disjointed not only from the reality against which they're spoken but also from their own history. Mandelstam in 1920 put forth his theory hoping that a rhythmic organization of the individual and of society would lead to a "conscious creation of history." A decade later, Platonov seems to be mourning that same hope.