

## ILYA KAMINSKY'S *DANCING IN ODESSA*: ON EXILE, AMNESIA AND POETIC ANAMNESIS

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This paper focuses on the Russian emigrant poet Ilya Kaminsky and his book of poems *Dancing in Odessa* (2004), which in my talk becomes a background for reflections on otherness, minority, exile, absence, silence and poetic recollection. But first I will have a brief look at the city, which occupies such a prominent place in Kaminsky's poetry, to put my presentation into a wider context.

In the Russian cultural imaginaries Odessa is connected to the concept of the kaleidoscope; it is a mechanism refracting history, culture and nationalities in pluralistic ever-changing settings (cf. Richardson 2008). In these imaginaries the city even comes close the Foucaultian idea of certain spaces as *heterotopia* or otherness, an *anti-topos* to more hegemonistic, monolithic structures (Foucault 1984). Moreover, Odessa in a quintessential way is similar to the palimpsest, being a tight layer of different cultural and ethnic stories, a meeting place of diverse tendencies and divergent impulses.

Notions of Odessa as a meeting place are to a high degree reinforced by its geographical location. Odessa was founded in 1794 by the sea, and was from its beginning a passage to the world through its ports. It was a border town, situated like Saint Petersburg at the periphery of the nation, signalling openness towards the international community. As Saint Petersburg has been called the Palmyra of the North, Odessa has been called the Palmyra of the South, alluding to the image of the city as a beacon of culture and enlightened humanity in otherwise harsh and primitive surroundings.<sup>1</sup>

Such notions were strengthened by the many creative people linked to Odessa, not least within Russian literature, a list so long I can refer only to a few of them. Already Alexander Pushkin,

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<sup>1</sup> For a broad introduction to the historical development and the cultural image of Odessa in the period of the Russian Empire, see Herlihy (1987, 1991).

the iconic poet of the Russian Golden Age, documented its cosmopolitan nature. He lived here in internal exile from 1823-1824, commenting in letters *inter alia* to his brother (Pushkin 1962, IX: 70) on its international, vivid character, with French as a common language and European papers and magazines everywhere to read. In Odessa, as he famously wrote in his masterpiece *Evgenij Onegin* “all breathes Europe to the senses” (Pushkin 1998: 222). Rather ironically, his being expelled from “civilized” Saint Petersburg was thus a dislocation that relocated him in one of the most Europeanized societies in Russia. Incidentally, this situation says something about the paradoxical dynamics in the (Westernized) Empire between centre and periphery, between metropolis and provinces, between majority and minority and between colonizer and colonized.<sup>1</sup>

Great writers connected to the Russian prose tradition in the 19th century, like Nikolay Gogol, can also be linked to the literary myth of Odessa. Gogol spent some time here in 1850, struggling, in vain as it were, to complete the second part of his *Dead Souls*. Furthermore, literary legends of the so-called Silver Age had an abundance of ties to Odessa; suffice it to mention Anna Akhmatova, who was born here and Boris Pasternak, who stayed here for longer periods during his young and formative years. In the writings of both can be found poetic echoes of the city by the sea.

A bit later, before and around 1920, Odessa became the home of the Odessan school of Russian literature. This was a group of people, many, if not all Jews, who contributed to the Odessa mythology by developing a specific poetics of Odessa. These poetics elaborated the life of the colourful Jewish communities and inscribed, in a nostalgic manner, the Jewish trickster-culture into Russian high culture.<sup>2</sup> For a while Odessa even supplanted Saint Petersburg as the capital of the Russian literary imagination and the Odessa-text (before this anti-authoritarian trend was repressed) became an intellectual and aesthetic force similar to the Petersburg-text in Russian cultural history. Foremost followers of this trend were Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov. The greatest of them all, though,

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<sup>1</sup> For these intriguing dynamics, see f. ex. Helle (2014).

<sup>2</sup> On this culture, see f. ex. Tanny (2011).

was Isaak Babel who (before he eventually was killed by the NKVD in 1940) with his Odessa-stories mapped the Jewish urban landscape of Moldavanka through recreating its unique *kolorit*.<sup>1</sup>

Another famous figure associated with Odessa is the border thinker Michael Bakhtin who spent part of his adolescence here and in 1913 joined the historical and philological faculty at the local university. It was then, in Odessa, that Bakhtin started to read Martin Buber's "philosophy of dialogue", which allegedly strongly influenced his own theories on dialogism and otherness/alterity.<sup>2</sup> One can also suppose that his time in Odessa, with its multilingual scene and its open playful atmosphere of many tongues, was essential in forming his thinking on polyphony, *heteroglossia* and carnival. The same sense of fun and irreverence that gave birth to Babel's Rabelaisian gangster left its mark on Bakhtin (see Clark/Holquist 1984: 27). And quite possible another of his main thoughts, the value of outsideness or exotopy (внеаходимость) is somehow related to Odessa. The importance of standing outside one's own core culture, always being on the boundaries, on the meeting point between different voices and consciences are all ideas that could have been inspired by the cross-cultural border city of Odessa.<sup>3</sup>

The city's idiosyncratic identity was not least a result of its varied demography, with people from all over the world coming together. Especially important was the Jewish element and the Odessan Jews constituted a highly characteristic ethnic and cultural minority, being construed in the Empire's cultural imagination as a

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<sup>1</sup> See Sicher (2112), for an investigation into the complexities of Babel's identity situation, being a Jew, yet also a Russian writer with all its inherent contradictions.

<sup>2</sup> On this relationship, see Friedman (2001). See also Todorov (1984:117f.), who briefly comments on this connection.

<sup>3</sup> As Bakhtin himself formulated the necessity of outsideness (1987: 7): "In the realm of culture, outsideness is a most powerful factor in understanding. A meaning only reveals its depth once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue which surmounts the closedness and onesided-ness of these particular meanings, these cultures".

very specific “inner other”.<sup>1</sup> Babel once described Odessa as a place made by the Jews, indicating their strong contribution to the many-faceted face of the city (2002:75). And although there were pogroms in pre-revolutionary Russia, the Jews thrived in Odessa, which was sometimes referred to as the gate to Zion or the star of exile, a port town offering possibilities to stay, as well as to leave. Also after the Bolshevik overturn the situation for the Jewish society was more or less stable, and about 1940 it has been estimated that more than 40 per cent of the population in Odessa was Jewish. The situation changed dramatically during the second world war, with the Romanian occupation and the Odessa Massacre, atrocities executed by the Nazis, resulting in the death of approximately 100.000 Jews (in and around the city). Stalin’s rule further demolished the Jewish segment, as did the waves of mass emigration in the 1970s and again in the 1990s. To day only about 3 per cent of the people here are Jewish.<sup>2</sup>

Naturally, these horrors and losses created dissonances in the cultural imagery of Odessa as a picturesque counter-community, a world of *joie de vivre* and *laissez faire*, a place of pluralism and openness.<sup>3</sup> The image of Odessa now transforms into an even more complex semantic structure, in which the traditional picture of the city as a magical, joyful *anti-topos* is fused with reminiscences of tragedies and traumas.

The dense palimpsest of Odessa, its dramatic history and intriguing mythology, are all reflected in *Dancing in Odessa*. Its author, Kaminsky was born here and left with his Jewish family to the U.S. in 1993, when he was sixteen. Only 4 years old, while still living in the USSR, he became deaf due to improper treatment in the Soviet medical system. Despite this handicap, he learned English to a surprisingly degree of brilliance, and when his work

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<sup>1</sup> On Europe’s various inner others, see f. ex Helle (2014).

<sup>2</sup> For information and statistics concerning the Jewish population in Odessa in the 20th and 21th century, see Richardson (2008).

<sup>3</sup> For a recent work that brings forth the contradictions and complexities connected to the history of the city from its founding to our days, see King (2012).

was published in 2004, it became a huge success, among readers and critics alike.<sup>1</sup>

The Russian Jew Kaminsky then, writes from his diaspora “in a language not mine” (2004: 1), about his hometown Odessa, seeing it through the cloudy lenses of an emigrant. In one perspective, his *Dancing* represents the poet’s attempt to renegotiate from his displacement his own identity, and come to terms with the conditions of exile and the haunting questions of abandonment and guilt. That his quest for reconciliation with the past is somehow connected to the Jewish dimension is made explicitly clear by his symbolic toast to (and citation from) Theodore Herzl, the visionary father of modern Zionism (2004: 25).

In his quest Kaminsky brings to life a lost universe, both geographically and chronologically. *Dancing in Odessa* is an associative journey back and forth between people, time and places, a technique that makes its construction seem both heterogeneous and fragmented. However, the wholeness of the text does not fall apart, but is powerfully held together by constant repetitions of recurring themes and images. The most important of these are silence and memory.

*Dancing in Odessa* is filled with a peculiar sense of silence, a condition often thematized by Kaminsky himself as a necessary precondition for the creation of poetry. Loosing his outer hearing has given him an extraordinary awareness of communication through muteness, a kind of inner hearing. He claims to be able to see words and sounds, and perhaps this capacity is what makes his poems so visible, so tangible, for us.<sup>2</sup> Silence is essential to Kaminsky because it is a precursor of memories, the place for memories to be born. So when he reworks the contradictory and complex implications of exile through topics of nostalgia, longing, displacement and grief, it is always with a focus on memory; or to be more precise, the recollection of the dead. The line “Memory, [...] stay awake” goes like an incantation through the text, emphasising the importance of

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<sup>1</sup> For a short biography of Kaminsky, see: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/ilya-kaminsky> (accessed on 08 November 2013).

<sup>2</sup> This is explicitly thematized in *Dancing*: “My secret: at the age of four I became deaf. When I lost my hearing, I began to see voices “ (2004: 5).

talking about and with the dead, those who are no longer physically amongst us. Only through the act of writing can they be kept alive: “If I speak for the dead,» reads the introduction or the “Author’s Prayer”, “I must write the same poem over and over / for an empty page is the white flag of their surrender” (2004: 1).

Kaminsky’s inspirational drive is thus to force back from the state of amnesia through a process of poetic anamnesis a world gone and forgotten. This recovery of the past, though, is not a passive rendering or an “objective” recapitulation of something lost; it is rather an active reinvention, a creative reimagination of his biography through the power of poetry.<sup>1</sup> As such, *Dancing in Odessa* reinvents and resurrects from oblivion the fate of the poet’s family as Jews in Soviet Odessa, with heart-rending glimpses into horrific experiences. Consequently Kaminsky’s dancing through his pages sometimes takes the form of a *dance macabre*, recalling the tragic aspects of a period of brutal wars and political repressions. The serious and lofty tone is however commingled with the low and mundane. And the aspects of madness and suffering are interwoven with moments of gaiety and absurdity, even with a feeling of ecstasy and elevation: “[A]nd the darkest days I must praise” (2004: 1), Kaminsky sings out, in a celebratory voice not often heard in post-modernist poetics.

Not only the poet’s personal memories of a magic and tragic city are being revived through Kaminsky’s reinventing glance. *Dancing in Odessa* is text that functions as a meaning-generating mechanism – to borrow an expression from the Russian cultural thinker Yuri Lotman – on many levels.<sup>2</sup> By implication, it is a highly intertextual construction, playing itself out against a vast intellectual and literary tradition, both European and Russian. As readers we become part of a poetic dialogue that starts already with the dedication and with a citation – the only one in Russian – from one of Anna Akhmatova’s most programmatic poems: “Мне голос был” (Mne golos byl – I heard a voice). This (certainly for Russians) mythic phrase immediately plunges us deep into the dramas of

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<sup>1</sup> On the complex dialectics of rememberence and reinvention, see Kontopodis (2009).

<sup>2</sup> On the text as a meaning-generating mechanism, see Lotman (2000).

emigration and the conflicting feelings of escape and leaving one's native land, one of the most disturbing underlying patterns in Kaminsky. In this paper, though, I will not present a detailed, text-oriented analysis of *Dancing*, but rather go into the poet's project of evoking the dead, and use this as a way to speak about a few of those coming to life through Kaminsky's incantations. □

The heart of the collection, its cornerstone and longest sequence, is the elegy for Osip Mandelstam, significantly called "Musica Humana". Mandelstam is often regarded as the greatest Russian poet of the 20th century. A most central figure of the Silver Age, belonging to the brilliant group of akmeists, he died after living years in internal exile, in a Gulag camp near Vladivostok in 1938.<sup>1</sup> His death was the last event in a chain of misfortunes that started with his writing a satirical epigram about Stalin, in which the "cockroach-moustached" Georgian is called, among other things, a "murderer and peasant-slayer" (2004: 69f.). This epigram was aesthetically one of Mandelstam's weakest works, but with a raw, instant power to secure his own destruction. As Mandelstam himself once said with foreshadowing insight into the connection between murder and poetry in (Soviet) Russia: "Poetry is respected only in this country, people are killed for it. There is no place where more people are killed for it" (cf. Nadezhda Mandelstam 1999: 161).

Mandelstam was born in Warsaw in 1891, into an upper-middle class family of almost assimilated Jews. He grew up in Saint Petersburg; the Europeanised Imperial capital, feeling divided between his Jewish and Russian identity, between a minority and a majority culture, always an outsider, always on the border, internalizing as it were, in his own writings the condition of exotopy. Typically he claimed to have no native country, considering himself a world citizen who's only home was within the classical cultural and humanist tradition. Even more than his akmeist colleagues he yearned for, even felt a "nostalgia for world culture" (Nadezhda Mandelstam 1999: 249), a sphere dominated

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<sup>1</sup> On Mandelstam's life and work, see Freidin (1987); see also Cavanagh (1995).

by Antiquity, Dante, French classicism, Pushkin and so forth, and which for him constituted the universal memory. He was obsessed by the possibilities of the poetic word to recollect, once uttering in *The Word and Culture*: “Poetry is the plough that turns up time in such a way that the abyssal strata of time, its black earth, appear on the surface” (1991: 113). For Mandelstam it is through this well of universal memory that the poetic word emerges. In his conception of the past as a reservoir of cultural reminiscences the poetic language becomes not only a tool to connect the poet to the world history; through poetic language history is itself created and recreated. As Mandelstam expresses this notion in his essay *On the Nature of the Word*: “So highly organized, so organic a language is not merely a door into history, it is history itself” (1991: 122).

The poet’s strategy of turning back to understand the present could be seen as a counter strike against his epoch’s paradoxical ethos of disruptions, disinheritance and discontinuity. Moreover, his idea of poetry as remembrance and reinvention can be considered one of modernism’s most complex, ambitious and challenging visions of tradition (see Cavanagh 1995).<sup>1</sup> For Mandelstam then, the poetic text is a palimpsest, in which like in a kaleidoscope are refracted the utterances of former cultural periods, and every word appears (as may be Bakhtin would formulate it) through another word, reactivating its cultural dynamics. Every poetic word recollects so to say, its history and becomes a defender of human culture and memory. But for the words to sing, silence is a necessary condition. “Silentium” was for Mandelstam (as in the Romantic Wordsworthian aesthetics) not the opposite of creation; it was its other and necessary side, a primordial muteness lying behind every poetic utterance. In his *Dancing Kaminsky* explores these thoughts; a line of thinking no doubt familiar to him who in his deafness sees silence as the *locus* where poetic images are born.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For Mandelstam, then, the past is not a fixed and completed entity; it has to be reinvented through the remembrance of the poetic speech. As he himself formulates this idea: “[Y]esterday has yet to be born” (1991: 113).

<sup>2</sup> On the tradition of muteness in Romantic poetry, see Pack (1978). On this tradition in Russian poetry, see Khagi (2013).



Mandelstam was intensely drawn to border towns and places where the (European) culture was heterogeneous, dense and diverse, reflecting world civilization and humanity, like Athens, Istanbul and Saint Petersburg, a fascination we find reembodyed in numerous of his poems. Probably Odessa could also be linked to this fascination sphere, in Kaminsky's version certainly so. In his book he elaborates the myth of Odysseus (incidentally one of Mandelstam's poetic heroes) as being linked to Odessa: "I was born", he writes, "in the city named after Odysseus and I praise no nation" (2004: 54). By this linking Kaminsky makes his hometown into the quintessential traveller's city, a conglomerate of crossing influences, an Arcadia of ancient layers of culture. As such, the Black sea port could be moved into the circle of Mandelstam's cities of human civilization, albeit on a more metaphorical level. The main city of humanity, though, for Mandelstam was Saint Petersburg. His obsession with the Northern capital is reflected in *Dancing* where Kaminsky presents it as an antithesis to the dehumanized world of Stalinist Moscow or "The new State":

It is the 1930s: Petersburg is a frozen ship.  
The cathedrals, cafés, down Nevski Prospect  
they move, as the New State  
sticks its pins into them" (2004: 15).

But notwithstanding the attacks from the new order, Saint Petersburg keeps its place as an incarnation of humanity and world culture. Kaminsky develops this theme by recreating Mandelstam's longing to return after being expelled into exile in the provinces: "He believed in the human being. Could not cure himself of Petersburg. He recited by heart phone numbers of the dead" (20014: 21).

Not only Mandelstam and his intimate surroundings, like his wife Nadezhda Nikolaevna, who later wrote gripping memoirs of her husband and his time, are resurrected through the imaginaries of Kaminsky's poetic plough.<sup>1</sup> In the section called "Travelling

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the two volumes, *Hope Against Hope* (1970) and *Hope Abandoned* (1974), both first published in the West in English, translated by Max Hayward from the Russian original, which circulated in a samizdat

Musicians” people close to Mandelstam like the haunted poet Marina Tsetaeva and the before mentioned Isaac Babel speak to us through the book’s many-layered fabric. Kaminsky also brings to life the words of the emigrant poet Joseph Brodsky, a Russian Jew with a history at the same time both similar and not similar to his own. And again the narrative of otherness, separation, marginalization, poetic muteness and poetic memory are told with consuming intensity, mapping a poetic landscape of exile, both external and internal, and the poet’s tragic fate in an oppressive society. For Brodsky, Mandelstam was the *Ur-Sänger*, a modern Orpheus, who for the sake of his poetic song was sent to hell, never to come back and forever lost to his Euridike (see Brodsky 1986: 144). The Orpheus theme of poetic sacrifice and loss runs like a *Leitmotif* through Kaminsky’s lines, constituting an important semantic dimension.

In *Dancing in Odessa* also non-Russians are also poetically recollected, not least Paul Celan. This preeminent German-speaking Romanian poet was born in 1920 into a Jewish family in Northern Bukovina, in the former kingdom of Romania, in Czernowitz, sometimes called “little Vienna” (now the Ukrainian city of Chernivtsi – Чернівці). Both Brodsky and Celan (or Paul Antschel as was his real name) were deeply concerned with Mandelstam, an attraction that might explain their being invited into Kaminsky’s universe. In particular Celan felt a unique kinship with Mandelstam who for him was one of his “tutelary spirits” (Felstiner 2001: 7).<sup>1</sup> The Russian poet, Celan once wrote in a letter, “offered what is brotherly in the most reverential sense that I can give the word” (Felstiner 2001: 131). As such, Celan regarded Mandelstam as an *alter ego* (cf. Felstiner 2001: 131), seeing intimate bonds between them, both in their life and their work, bonds, which for us are actualized when Kaminsky brings them together on his pages.

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version in the Soviet Union in the 1960s. In these memories her husband is transfigured into a sublime symbol of the artistic martyr under Stalin’s repressive regime.

<sup>1</sup> In Felstiner (2001) one can find a thorough examination of Celan’s life and work in English.

On the biographical level Celan considered Mandelstam's fate as a prefiguration of his own and he interpreted his own alienation in the world as a parallel to that of Mandelstam's (cf. Felstiner 2001: 131).<sup>1</sup> The older Russian poet lived in exile for five years and died *en route* to a labour camp in the Russian Far East, Celan spent two years of forced labour in southern Romania. Both were Jewish, but sought (albeit ambivalently) to fit into the dominant culture and language of the places they grew up in. Both struggled with their Jewish heritage and inclinations to abandoning Judaism altogether. Their experiences were those of a double inner exile, both encountered anti-Semitism, feeling more or less marginalized, as strangers in their countries, while simultaneously feeling like strangers also in relation to the Jewish communities. As Mandelstam, who always moved from location to location, never having a permanent home, Celan was a drifting person, always on the way on a "nomadic trajectory".<sup>2</sup> As Celan, Mandelstam was a rootless cosmopolitan – безродный космополит – who had no belongings except language (with all its inherent limitations and distancing).

Interestingly, it has been argued that «the true centre of modern Russian culture was not with those "most Christian", but their opposites – the antipodal Yids» (Freidin 1987: 9). Clearly Mandelstam was aware of this dual role. He was a social pariah and an outcast modernist while at the same time bearer of a high culture, which he sought to integrate into the context of a universal cultural memory. In this manner, Mandelstam, as later his younger colleague from Bukovina, was much more than a national poet or a Jewish poet since he contributed to the world's literary tradition far beyond the boundaries of the physical native land (cf. Glazova).

Also the poetic perspectives and practices of the two poets seem to converge. For instance, Celan's conception of silence as an other dimension of poetry connects him to Mandelstam

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<sup>1</sup> The relationship between Celan and Mandelstam is an intriguing subject that has attracted broad scholarly attention, also quite recently. An introduction to these problematics can be found in Glazova (1996-2001).

<sup>2</sup> On this concept, see Verdicchio (1990).

(and to Kaminsky): For Celan “das geschwiegene Wort” (from his early poem “Argumentum e Silentio”) is a force, and as such “Verstummen”, the muteness, is not a negative condition, but rather, as for Mandelstam, silence and poetic speech are intertwined, phenomena at once mutually hostile and mutually attractive.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, the two poets both worked with complex metamorphoses, reflected in their highly sophisticated, distorted language. This poetic speech disorder or inarticulateness (косноязычие), an intended distortion or twisting of words as an aesthetic technique, can be related to what Mandelstam in *The Noise of Time* (2002: 78 ff.) called the “Jewish chaos” (“хаос иудейский”). The Jewish chaos is a reference to the distinctive *heteroglossia* that characterized the Jewish language situation, being a constant oscillation between different languages and alphabets, forms and styles, a creative linguistic practise which made Tsvetaeva claim that all “poets are Jews” (“все поэты – жи́ды”).<sup>2</sup>

In his writings Mandelstam criticized the blind emphasis on the technological development of Stalin's industrialization; Celan in his poems opposed the Nazi obsession with machines. Both Celan and Mandelstam reacted against the indifferent, repetitive and merely quantitative progress with an entirely different concept of the human (cf. Glazova). Both coming from countries and epochs already lost or falling apart, like sunken landscapes and disappearing *Eutopias*, felt obliged to turn back rather than to look forward to the future. And arguably the most significant link between Celan and Mandelstam consists in their idea of a poem as a repository of memory, a unique way to preserve the cultural and ethical values inherent in the Humanist tradition (cf. Glazova). The literary work is thus a place where that which is current and personal comes alive while recurring to what is gone and forgotten, or as Celan in enigmatic, but beautiful sentences describes the poetry of Mandelstam:

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<sup>1</sup> On the paradoxical poetics of silence, see Celan's text from 1960, “Der Meridian” (1986, III: 197). See also Olschner (1994).

<sup>2</sup> This expression can be found in a poem from 1924, “Poem of the End” (Поэма Кюнца); for an English translation, see Tsvetaeva (1971: 121).

Bei [...] Ossip Mandelstamm [ist] das Gedicht der Ort, wo das über die Sprache Wahrnehmbare und Erreichbare um jene Mitte versammelt wird, von der her es Gestalt und Wahrheit gewinnt: um das die Stunde, die eigene und die der Welt, den Herzschlag und den Äon befragende Dasein dieses Einzelnen. Damit ist gesagt, in welchem Maße das Mandelstamm'sche Gedicht, das aus seinem Untergang wieder zutage tretende Gedicht eines Untergegangenen, uns Heutige angeht (1986, V: 623).<sup>1</sup>

This for me somewhat inscrutable but never the less meaningful description is connected to Mandelstam's understanding of poetry as a plough that turns up the black earth of our collective cultural history. The earth is a symbol of the meeting of present and past, and an image that is reflected in Celan's poem "Schwarzerde" from the collection *Die Niemandrose*.

And it is precisely in *Die Niemandrose* that Celan's poetic dialogue with Mandelstam is most strongly expressed. This collection (*The No-Man's Rose*) was written between 1959 and 1963 (after Celan had completed a number of translations of Mandelstam, translations that led to their poetic *Nebeneinandersetzung* in *Die Niemandrose*). The dedication in the first edition reads: "Dem Andenken Osip Mandelstamm's", and Celan shall have insisted upon spelling the name Mandelstamm (cf. Fisch 2000) which refers to Stamm, tribe or family, a germanization allegedly done to emphasize the Jewish kinship between them. By adding an extra m to Mandelstam, Celan also invoked the association to the almond tree as an image of the poet and the Jew generally speaking, since Mandelbaum is a Biblical term allegorically relating to this people (cf. Glenn 1973: 12; Ivanovic 1999: 60).

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<sup>1</sup> "For Osip Mandelstam the poem is the place where that which can be perceived and attained through language is brought together around that central point from where it gains form and truth: around the existence of a singular being, who questions his own time and the world's, and the heartbeat and eternity/the aeon. This expresses the extent, to which extent Mandelstam's poem, the poem of a sunken one, emerging from its sinking again to light, matters to us to day".

Mandelstam pulsates through the *Die Niemandrose* in themes of Jewishness, persecution, loneliness, suicide attempts, rejections from publisher etc. and he has the role of an astral double, a second self and an embodiment of all Jewish victims. Mandelstam though, never had the opportunity to reembody his traumas from the years of repression and banishment since he perished before he could transform these events into (poeticised) recollections. Celan on the other hand survived the Holocaust and inscribed its horrors into his haunted writings. The dedication of *Die Niemandrose* to Mandelstam is therefore an act that is memory-keeping, not only for Celan's own experiences in his Nazi controlled homeland, but also for Mandelstam's personal Holocaust in the Soviet extermination system (cf. Glazova).

When Kaminsky through the pages of his *Dancing in Odessa* brings both Mandelstam and Celan back to live again, seeing them through the prism of his aesthetic reimagination, this is another act of memory-keeping, a method of reventive recollection, a way of speaking for the dead. However, in addition to the tragic dimension so often characterizing the dipping into a dark past, in Kaminsky we also glimpse an almost unconditional belief in humanity, in people's ability to overcome and survive. Despite the disintegration due to pain, loss and persecutions being evoked in the book, this aspect is counterbalanced by a celebration of life. The poetry walks on a tightrope between suffering and enlightening (almost Bakhtinian) laughter, moments of hope, humour and passion. Precisely these carnevalesque constellations seem to be incarnated also in the cultural imagery of the kaleidoscopic city on the Black Sea, which notwithstanding overtones of tragedy and sorrow even to day seems to have retained its powerful magnetism. This magnetism was felt and captured very intensely 100 years ago, by Babel, may be the greatest singer of Odessa. He wrote in 1916, in a short story called "Odessa" and long before the execution squad would silence his poetic voice, some evoking lines, with which I would like to end my presentation:

"Odessa is a horrible town. It's common knowledge.  
[...]. And yet I feel that there are quite a few good things  
one can say about this great town, the most charming city

of the Russian Empire [...]. In Odessa there are sweet and oppressive spring evenings, the spicy aroma of acacias, and a moon filled with an unwavering, irresistible light shining over the dark sea” (2002: 75f.).



*Leonid Pasternak (1896):  
Alexander Pushkin at the Seashore (of The Black Sea)*

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