

## Rethinking Dickens in the light of Osip Mandelstam's case

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### Abstract

The Russian presence of Dickens can generally be reduced to several types: first, he is a “teacher” admired at the national level, the creator of the “Christmas narrative canon”; second, a mythological figure, his texts being the source of parables and anecdotes; finally, his name has turned into a common thing, an object of everyday life, a symbol in the representative list of European writers. Mandelstam's poem “Dombey and son” is a pattern of Russian Dickensian.

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### Keywords

mythologization, transformation of canon, translation, reception, montage/collage, storyline and verbal mosaic)

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Learning and acquisition of Dickens heritage by the Russian culture went through several stages, each of them knowing their climaxes: 1840s-1860s, the turn of the 20th century, and the 1930s. Then in 1950-1970s.

While the nineteenth century has been studied quite comprehensively in this regard (Katarsky), the reception of Dickens works and biography in the 20th century has been investigated rather incoherently and mostly had to do with the history of translations and ardent translators' discussions around the linguistic and stylistic interpretations (Azov).

Nevertheless, there is a big gap between the perception of Dickens heritage and Russian and European Dickens studies. So for decades special periodicals and projects exist in Anglo-Saxon academic space. For instance, *Dickens Quarterly* is the official scholarly publication of the Dickens Society, founded in 1970 at the Modern Language Association Convention. The journal publishes papers on all aspects of Dickens's life and literary works in a range of formats including scholarly articles, essays, notes, and reviews. Another one is the Fellowship's journal, *The Dickensian*, founded in 1905, publishes a wide range of articles on the life and work of Charles Dickens, contributed by scholars from around the world. It also publishes edited and annotated transcriptions of newly discovered Dickens letters. In addition to its articles, each issue carries reviews of books, plays, films and TV productions, together with reports of Fellowship activities and other Dickens-related news.

A lot of new research appeared up to the 200th anniversary of Charles Dickens (Hollington).

*The Reception of Charles Dickens in Europe* – the latest addition to Bloomsbury's *Reception of British and Irish Authors in Europe* series – presents forty-two essays, written by a multinational group of Dickens scholars and translators, that survey Dickens' pan-European and influence.

The essays in this collection track how Dickens could be simultaneously subsumed into powerful preexisting literary templates and catalyze avant-garde aesthetic currents.

Emily Finer investigated the Russian and Soviet reception of the novels of Charles Dickens in the twentieth century. She asked why Dickens was canonized for the mass reader and how his novels were translated, re-written, theorized and imitated. She also included into the research field the Mandelstam's poem "Dombey and son". But the interpretation of the poem projections on the Soviet lyrics and prose of 1920-1930s remained beyond of its focus. (Hollington)

However, it is important for us to recognize that each of those periods (of revived interest in and affection for Dickens generated precedent texts in poetry, prose, and journalism, which opened up and 'privatized' again and again the figure of Dickens and his writing paradigms, which form a special world. In this paper, we are going to talk about the forms of this "Dickens infection" in the Russian organism.

Attraction to Dickens in the poetry of the 20th century may be fully illustrated through the example of Mandelstam's poem "Dombey and Son".

The poetic nature of Mandelstam appears to be close to that of Dickens. Mandelstam used similar techniques in his work: he could hear the humming of the finished poem and would not rest until the text was all articulated and each word took its place—and then he only had to do the polishing. Physical presence of an almost materialized lyric image is what brings Dickens and Mandelstam together.

The poem "Dombey and Son" is a perfect proof of this affinity and kinship. The text seems to be quite understandable. What's in there, at first glance? Recognizable features of the Dickens universe. A familiar scenery. Yet, something is confusing. It's the sputter. The parlance. The transfer and reassembly of details which form sort of a dedicated workshop with a layout table. However, if we take a closer look, we will see that all the details have gone mixed up. Mikhail Gasparov explains this organization of Mandelstam's poems by his habit "к пропуску связующих звеньев между опорными образами" (to omit the links between the backbone images) (Gasparov 91). That is why the poem "Dombey and Son" is a set of concise and intensive fragmentary images, or outer markers:

[...] свистящий язык, грязная Темза, дожди и слезы, контора и конторские книги, табачная мгла, «на шиллинги и пенсы счет», судебная интрига, железный закон, разорение и самоубийство. Все образы — диккенсовские, но к роману «Домби и сын» они не сводимы. Оливер Твист — персонаж из совсем другого романа; в конторе он никогда не работал; Домби-сын с клерками не общался; судебной интриги в «Домби и сыне» нет; банкрот в петле явился, скорее всего, из концовки третьего романа, «Николас Никльби»; но любвеобильная дочь опять возвращает нас к «Домби и сыну». Получается монтаж отрывков, дающий как бы синтетический образ диккенсовского мира, — все связи между ними новые. Читатель, воспринимая их на фоне заглавия «Домби и сын», ощущает все эти образные сдвиги с особенной остротой. «Домби и сын» — легкое стихотворение для «Нового Сатирикона», но мы увидим, какое серьезное развитие получила эта поэтика пропущенных звеньев у Манделштама в дальнейшем. И не только в стихах, но и в прозе, где у него почти невозможно уследить за сюжетом; и даже в обиходной речи.<sup>1</sup> (Gasparov 91-92)

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<sup>1</sup> [...] whistling language, dirty Thames, showers and tears, office and office books, tobacco haze, "на шиллинги и пенсы счет" (sums of shillings and pence), judicial intrigue, iron law, desolation and suicide. All images are borrowed from Dickens but not restricted to the novel *Dombey and Son*. Oliver

The demonstrable results of the “poetics of omitted links” in “Dombey and Son” mentioned by Gasparov virtually echo the interpretation of Chesterton, which confirms the legitimacy and appropriateness of such “vaults” of characters from one Dickens’s novel to another. The same specifics of Mandelstam’s distortions was noticed by Lidiya Ginzburg: He would

сознательно изменял реалии. В стихотворении «Когда пронзительнее свиста...» у него старик Домби повесился, а Оливер Твист служит в конторе — чего нет у Диккенса... Культурой, культурными ассоциациями Манделштам насыщает, утяжеляет семантику стиха; фактические отклонения не доходят до сознания читателя.<sup>2</sup> (Zapiskiye 42)

### Mandelstam about Dickens and more

Mandelstam “concerning Dickens”... Both Chesterton and Mandelstam, each in his own way, showed the conventionality of boundaries between the texts and the specific nature of characters in this literary and beyond-literary world. Here, characters and their speech easily drop their original, inherent author’s roots, break free from their leashes and live their own lives, independent from the author, critics, translators, or readers. As we can see, Mandelstam implemented the “Chesterton program” quite demonstrably in his poem by adjusting Chesterton’s method of reading to a different, poetic language and materializing Chesterton’s idea and understanding of how the Dickens novel is organized. Both Chesterton and Mandelstam regard the Dickens novel as a novel club where the importance of novel narration patterns is inferior to that of characters or readers, who access the club and exist there as equal members, migrating freely within it in accordance with their vision of the plot and choosing partners at their own discretion. It should be appreciated that Mandelstam most likely never read Chesterton, so the coincidence was purely accidental, yet no less significant, “trap-like”. Mandelstam’s “piercing whistle” reveals Gogol’s metaphor from *Dead Souls*:

Впрочем, если слово из улицы попало в книгу, не писатель виноват, виноваты читатели и прежде всего читатели высшего общества: от них первых не услышишь ни одного порядочного русского слова, а французскими, немецкими и английскими они, пожалуй, наделят в таком количестве, что и не захочешь, и наделят даже с сохранением всех возможных произношений: по-французски в нос и картавя, по-английски произнесут, как следует птице, и даже физиономию сделают птичьей, и

Twist is a character from a totally different novel, and he never worked in an office; Mr. Dombey’s son never interacted with clerks; there was no judicial intrigue in *Dombey and Son*; the bankrupt person with his neck in a noose was most probably taken from the end-piece of the third novel, *Nicholas Nickleby*; but the loving daughter brings us back to *Dombey and Son* again. Thus, we can see a montage of fragments, a synthesis of the Dickens’s world, as all links between the fragments are new. The reader, who perceives this fragmentary picture against the background of the title (*Dombey and Son*), feels these imaginative shifts particularly sharply. *Dombey and Son* is a frivolous poem for *Novy Satirikon* magazine, but we will see how Mandelstam developed his poetics of omitted links later, not only in poetry but also in prose where his storylines are almost untraceable, and even in everyday conversations...

<sup>2</sup> deliberately change the *realia*. The old Dombey hangs himself in the poem “Kogda pronzitelneye svista...” [When I Hear English Spoken...], and Oliver Twist works in an office, which he never did in Dickens’s novel... Mandelstam saturates the poem semantics with cultural associations, making it heavier; the reader’s conscience is unable to embrace the distorted facts.

даже посмеются над тем, кто не сумеет сделать птичьей физиономии<sup>3</sup>. (Gogol 164-165)

### Dickens-Chesterton-Mandelstam-Gogol

This pattern forms a “trap” that interpreters of Mandelstam’s “Dombey and Son” and successors-practitioners fall really zestfully into.

This ‘pocket-size’ Dickens, compressed and ‘zipped’, if we resort to computer terms, into the six lines – this Mandelstam’s Dickens is very structured. What we have in the end is “morphology” of the Dickens novel, 14 or 15 years before Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale*. Mandelstam’s “morphology” is what builds the meta-plot described by Delir Lakhuti. However, this ‘supertext’ is to some extent bigger than just an abstract formula of a novel, although the latter is certainly implied. The ‘supertext’ has several orientations. The first one, using Lakhuti’s terminology, is an abstract of Mandelstam’s poetic world as it had developed by the 1910s based on what was only projected, looming and taking shape. The second one is about the “Russian disease”, the “Dickens infection”, and subsequent recovery from it. Dickens’s material per se or passed through the poetic filter of Mandelstam and others, who got ‘infected’ earlier or later, the immune resistance of culture after Dickens and thanks to him—that’s the sophisticated perspective opened by the discussions on Mandelstam’s “Dombey and Son”.

The phrase “Английский язык”<sup>4</sup> with the intentional shift of stress to the first syllable ([ˈʌŋlʲɪjskʲɪ]) becomes a deliberate colloquialism, distortion, and mockery, providing a panoramic accessibility of concise and sketchy formulae of the Dickens world, which miraculously fit and grew into the world of Mandelstam’s poetry and Russian language. “Dombey and Son” is not about Dickens, Dombey or son at all. It’s about Dickens *à la russe*, about [ˈʌŋlʲɪjskʲɪ] and [ˈʌŋlʲɪtskʲɪ] (Bely) instead of [ʌnˈɡlʲɪjskʲɪ], about the unique type of language, “Englishrussian”, which pervades every corner of the Russian literature, and also about the phonetic phenomena of sound matrixes, elementary particles of the two languages grown together, which demonstrate how the Dickens artistic space took root into the Russian deepest conscience, language habits and culture as a universal role model in charge of everything English. This way, the original “Dombey and Son” is an observation platform providing a panoramic view of the underlying overlaps, and the poem is a verbal map presented in a convenient ‘pocket-size’, look-through format.

Mandelstam’s verbal and figurative poignancy is most of all felt against the background of other texts where Dickens is “present”:

Черный матрос, о котором Диккенс сказал бы,  
Что его неизвестность известна по всей России;  
Черный матрос в парусах суровой бушлатки,

<sup>3</sup> However, it’s not the writer’s fault if a word from the street gets in a book. It’s the fault of readers, first of all those from the high society: they are the ones you won’t hear a single decent Russian word from, the ones who will pour tremendous amounts of French, German, and English on you and will even imitate all possible pronunciations, talking through their nose and making guttural sounds in French, talking in a bird-manner in English, and even making a bird’s face, and even laughing at those who cannot make a bird’s face.

<sup>4</sup> “Английский язык” (angliyskiy yazyk) is Russian for “English language”. The correct pronunciation requires the second syllable to be stressed, i.e. [ʌnˈɡlʲɪjskʲɪ].

Имевший манеру хмуриться при улыбке  
И часто зевать (ему не хватало ветра),  
В античной позе качался на ножке стула  
С обнаженными мышцами голоса и рук. (Selvinsky)

А этот, новый, всё прогнал  
Рождественскою сказкой Диккенса. (Pasternak)

Привычные покинув стены,  
Клуб, погруженный в сонный транс,  
Пять краснощеких джент[е]льменов,  
Кряхтя, влезают в дилижанс. (Rozhdestvensky)

Mandelstam's "Dombey and Son" is a clot, a concentration, and a milestone of how the body of the Russian culture was experiencing Dickens as a healthy infection at both poetic and, broader, cultural levels. It's not only the recognizable features of the Dickens novel world that are of importance but also the ones that are 'invented' by the poem, the ones that migrate from Russia to the Dickens universe, the ones that mark the seemingly accidental exchange, which is absolutely legitimate, in fact. Thus, careful readers know that Dickens never mentioned "yellow" water, while Mandelstam talked about "Темзы желтая вода" (yellow waters of the river Thames). Yellow color symbolizes the cultural optics of the city, mostly that of Saint Petersburg. This symbolism was mastered very well by the Russian literary tradition and had become quite recognizable by the 1910s. Thus, the picture of London life suddenly reveals familiar strokes of Saint Petersburg. Mandelstam's iambic pentameter 'swishes' both in English and in Russian, offering another, third verbal dimension and opening a new perspective of continuing the Russian Dickens in the 20th century. The strange 'prophetic' fate of Mandelstam's "Russianenglish" poem can be proved by its "anonymous" creeping into "Povest o pustyakakh" (The Story of Trifles) by Yuri Annenkov (Boris Temiryazev), in which images of Moscow and Saint Petersburg are peeping out through the author's reminiscence of puppet, toy-like sceneries of the Dickens theater.

Над Петербургом плавает туман. Петербургский туман похож на лондонский, как канцелярия Акакия Акакиевича на контору Скруджа. Туман порождает чудесные вещи. <...> Нынче чудес не бывает, но туман остался таким же. Его хлопья, лоскутья — серо-желтые призраки заволакивают город, медленно изгибаясь, меняя очертания, становясь все плотнее и непроницаемее. Город плавает, покачиваясь, пустой, холодный, беззвучный. Плавает воспоминание о городе, пропавшем в тумане<sup>5</sup>. (Annenkov)

This is an excerpt from Chapter I. Whistle, various types of whistling, and hoots cut through the narration, accompanying the theme of the old and the new life shattering to pieces. These pieces are brought back together forming a different mosaic, and suddenly

<sup>5</sup> The fog is floating over Saint Petersburg. Saint Petersburg fog resembles that of London like Akaky Akakievich's department resembles Scrooge's office. Fog produces miraculous things. [...] There are no miracles these days but the fog remains the same. Its flakes and rags are hazing the city as ghosts dressed in grey and yellow, curving slowly, changing their shapes, growing thicker, impermeable. The city is floating and rocking on the waves of fog, empty, cold, and silent. Floating is the memory of the city that once dissolved in fog.

– distinctly and anonymously, as in a photo, like a tune, or another autonomous verbal structure, or a part of speech – Mandelstam's passage is reproduced word by word, having become urban folkloric and almost anyone's by 1934, when "Povest o pustyakakh" was written:

Над петербургским Пантеоном плывет холодный, желтый туман. В тумане маячат бесплотные контуры, вырезанные из картона подобия людей, серые, бесцветные, недокрашенные. Они движутся как заводные куклы. Они маячат в туманных улицах города, как куклы в комнате игрушечного мастера Калеба. Нуся Струкова в гарсоньерке, насвистывая «Интернационал», разглаживает пижаму своего мужа.

У Чарльза Диккенса спросите,

Что было в Лондоне тогда –

Контора Домби в старом Сити

И Темзы желтая вода... –

так читает вполголоса озябший политрук пробираясь в тумане, и ямбы опадают к ногам оранжевым листопадом, и — пока в квартире доктора Френкеля гости отгадывают смысл советских сокращений (Р.С.Ф.С.Р. означает: «Разная Сволочь Фактически Сгубила Россию»; Совнарком означает: «Совет Народных Комиков»; ВЧК – «Век Человеческий Короток»; ВСНХ — «Всероссийский Слет Новоиспеченных Хапуг»; РКП(б) – «Редкая Картина Подхалимства (безграничного)» или «России Капут Пришел (безусловного)» и т.д.), пока гости пробавляются отгадыванием, заменившим распространенную игру в шарады, пока — в угоду дочкам Френкеля и бабушкам — ведутся разговоры о балете, об императорском Театральном училище, о выездах юных воспитанниц на дворцовой линейке, о Петипа и Чекетти, о Павловой и Карсавиной, о парижских триумфах и превосходстве классики над пластическими импровизациями Дункан, — в передней раздался громкий звонок хозяина<sup>6</sup>. (Annenkov)

<sup>6</sup> A cold yellow fog is floating over the Pantheon of Saint Petersburg. Ethereal figures, cardboard cut-outs resembling people are looming in the fog, undercolored or colorless. They are moving like wind-up dolls, looming in the foggy city streets like dolls in toymaker Caleb's room. Nusya Strukova is ironing her husband's pyjamas in the garçonnière, whistling *l'Internationale*.

“У Чарльза Диккенса спросите,  
Что было в Лондоне тогда –  
Контора Домби в старом Сити  
И Темзы желтая вода...”

the political commissar was reading in a low voice, making his way through the fog, feeling cold; iambic verses were falling to his feet like orange leaves; and, as the guests were guessing Soviet abbreviations (RSFSR means “Raznaya Svoloch Fakticheski Sgubila Rossiyu” (All Kinds of Cattle Have Virtually Ruined Russia), Sovnarkom means “Sovet Narodnykh Komikov” (Council of People's Comics), VChK means “Vek Chelovecheskiy Korotok (Human Life Is Short), VSNKh means “Vserossiyskiy Slyot Novoispechyonnykh Khapug (The All-Russian Soviet of Newly-Crowned Crooks); RKP(b) means “Redkaya Kartina Podkhalimstva (bezgranichnogo)” (A Rare Example of (Unconditional) Bootlicking) or “Rossii Kaput Prishyol (bezuslovny)” (The (Absolute) End of Russia, etc.) – the game that had replaced the ubiquitous charades – in Dr. Frenkel's flat, as they were having conversations about the ballet, the Emperor's Theater School, royal receptions for young ladies, Petipa and Cecchetti, Pavlova and Karsavina, the French glory, and the advantage of classics over Dulkan's plastic im-

Although Danilevsky's work deserves high appreciation, "Povest o pustyakakh" seems to be undercommented. It's not about the obvious lacunas in his commentary, next to the meticulous and sometimes even redundant way of providing information (thus, the female interpreter "Гамсуна, Гауптмана, Сельмы Лагерлеф и Бьернсона" (of Hamsun, Hauptmann, Lagerlöf, and Bjørnson) Annenkov mentions in passing among the inhabitants and visitors of the Art Center is, without doubt, Anna Ganzen, while the double portrait of "активного безбожника товарища Бабанова" (comrade Babanov, active atheist) and "товарища Цапа" (comrade Tsap), the Komsomolets "с лицом Христа" (with a face of Jesus), who "отправил в "Красную Газету" обстоятельную корреспонденцию о том, что комсомолец Бабанов <...> ходит к девочкам" (sent an exhaustive correspondence to *Krasnaya Gazeta* accusing Komsomolets Babanov <...> of wenching), unveils a mocking caricature of poet Alexander Tynyakov).

What's much more important is that the commenter doesn't always provide an accurate indication of references to someone else's texts which pierce through *Povest o pustyakakh* full of citations. Just one example. Among the numerous sketches of Petrograd in Annenkov's story, there is one that ends in an excerpt from Mandelstam's "Dombey and Son":

У Чарльза Диккенса спросите,  
Что было в Лондоне тогда –  
Контора Домби в старом Сити  
И Темзы желтая вода...

Another time in his work, the author describes the Neva capital in the following way: "Туман лондонского Сити лижет перила моста" (The London City fog is licking the bridge parapet). Danilevskiy spots this reminiscence of "Dombey and Son". However, Annenkov's phrase about "клетчатых панталонах" (checkered bloomers) of painter Courbet only makes the commenter recall Annenkov's 1921 drawing where Courbet appears "в черном долгополом пиджаке и клетчатых брюках" (in a black Prince Albert coat and checkered trousers). Meanwhile, it would be highly relevant to quote the final lines of "Dombey and Son":

И клетчатые панталоны,  
Рыдая, обнимает дочь...

What's more, if we remember that it was not Dickens's novel that Mandelstam borrowed the "checkered bloomers" from but illustrations of artist Phiz (Phiz would crosshatch the dark areas of his drawings), we will observe a most interesting situation: poet Mandelstam looks to artist Phiz when depicting the old Dombey; artist Annenkov looks to poet Mandelstam when depicting Gustave Courbet. There's even more in it. Getting back to "Povest o pustyakakh", let's pay attention to the fact that Courbet's "checkered bloomers" appear in Annenkov's story surrounded by typically "Mandelstamian" patterns:

provisations – in order to please Frenkel's daughters and the old ladies – the bell rang loudly in the hallway, announcing the arrival of the host.

Князь Петр видел под аркой Генерального штаба – тучного, бородатого человека [...] в бархатном пиджаке и клетчатых панталонах, закинувшего голову” [едва ли не самая выразительная деталь мандельштамовского облика, отмечаемая всеми мемуаристами – А. Г.], чтобы разглядеть парящего в небе ангела [ср. в мандельштамовском стихотворении “Дворцовая площадь”: “Столпник-ангел вознесен” – А. Г.].<sup>7</sup> (Gorenko)

Memoir-based “Povest o pustyakakh” by Temiryazev (Annenkov) cites topical songs, “трактирные песни – бумажные розы своего времени” (tavern songs, the paper roses of their times), criminal and frivolous romances (Annenkov 35-37, 54-55, 79, 166-167, 191, 310-309). It is not unexpected that Mandelstam's poem is used in the story anonymously, as “anyone's” folkloric text. In poetic transcription, the Dickens world coexists next to chastushki, wanderer's tales, and couplets. (Neklyudov)

Mandelstam's “Dombey and Son” is the climax, the peak, the milestone of this demonstrative story of experiencing someone else's as one's own. The morphology of Russian “use of Dickens”, to which Mandelstam's text is actually tending, is not a collective “readers' dream” about England of the Dickens era, but rather a reality embodied in words. Mandelstam constructed a case of Russian Dickensian. (Brown) Mandelstam's simple collage, or metatext, is a handy tool to consolidate, at least conventionally, the forms of this persistent participation and intervention of Dickens in Russian philology.

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<sup>7</sup> Prince Peter could see a corpulent bearded man [...] in a velvet suit jacket and checkered bloomers, standing under the arch of the General Staff Building with his head back [which is perhaps the most significant trait of a Mandelstam's character spotted by all memoirists – A.G.] to see the angel hovering up in the sky [cf. in Mandelstam's poem *Dvortsovaya Ploshchad* (Palace Square): “Столпник-ангел вознесен” (The angel-stylit is rapt) – A.G.).



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