

The question of the reception of antiquity in Russian literature has never produced any theoretical or conceptual unanimity; there was no direct archeological or linguistic heritage that would tie Russian culture to Greek or Roman civilizations and thus produce a consistent reception of antiquity. However, the classical legacy in Russia exerted a great influence on the formation of national literature (Knabe 2000). Reception studies focus on the difference between *Rezeption* (“reception”) when the work of art is absorbed by a general audience and *Wirkung* (“response”) when it evokes reactions of some elite cultural agency (Holub, 1984, xi).

My talk focuses on the latter and offers an interpretation of one such reaction to classical antiquity by two Russian poets: Alexandr Pushkin and Osip Mandelstam. Both poets offer a “response” to Ovidian exile from Rome and subsequently “edit” it. That “response” serves as an example of how the history of reception of ancient texts and ideas is intermingled with and to some extent shaped by the artistic forms and cultural politics of the receiving tradition (Hardwick, 2003, 32).

In 1820 Pushkin is exiled to Bessarabia (current Moldova) by the Emperor Alexander (Gasparov, 1985). While traveling there Pushkin evokes Ovid in several of his letters and poems. The most noteworthy poem is “To Ovid” in which Pushkin, while comparing his exile to Ovid’s, gently but firmly criticizes the Roman poet’s inconsolable sadness in his exile poems. In his poem Pushkin depicts the Ovidian plight as joyous and restorative. He chides Ovid for his failure to foresee that his poetry will survive every sovereign and all the vicissitudes of life. Pushkin rejects Ovid’s “sad poems” and offers a view of exile and nostalgia as inspiring not debilitating states. That perception of banishment must be viewed in the context of Pushkin’s preoccupation at that time with the figure of the Russian exile Petr Chaadaev and with Pushkin’s own concern for poetic legacy (Terras 1966, 257; Struve 1962, 606).

With Mandelstam, we move into an even more self-conscious world. The poet’s evocation of Ovid’s poetry of exile, reveals a radical attempt to recenter and reinterpret the present through the past. In one of these poems the feeling of joy and rebirth familiar from Pushkin appears again as Mandelstam imagines himself (in the first person) to be the exiled Roman poet. This poem must be viewed in the context of Mandelstam’s relationship with his beloved city of St. Petersburg. Mandelstam, although not physically exiled, views himself as an “inner” exile in the city, which in the havoc of the surging revolution he no longer comprehends or accepts. Ovidian exile is seen as a coveted lot, a rebirth of sorts. The finest irony of Mandelstam’s mythology of St. Petersburg is a contrast he draws between the dark, northern capital and the world of sunlight, associated with the Crimea and the Black Sea. The Black Sea, however, is precisely the region Ovid portrays as a bare northern wasteland. Thus there is at play here a double displacement. Mandelstam sees Ovid’s physical separation from the city as an enviable fate preferring the sweetness of fantasy to the heartbreak of living in the city bound for degradation.

