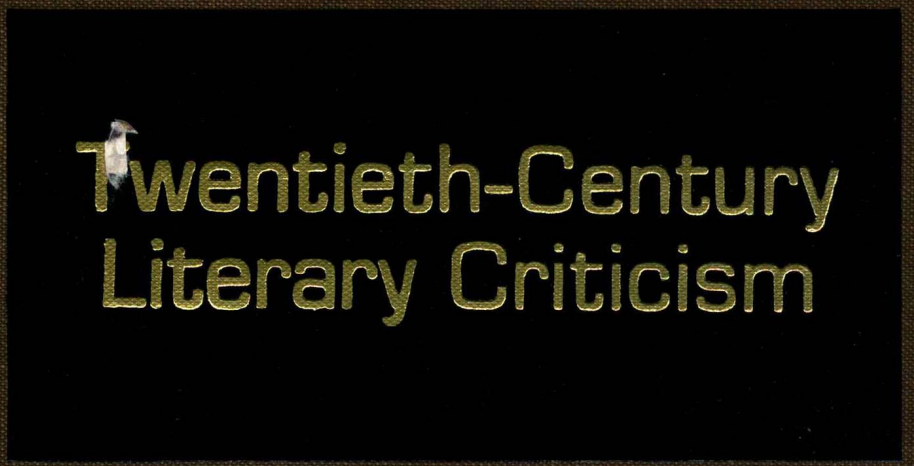

TCLC 225

Volume 225

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers Who Lived between 1900 and 1999, from the First Published Critical Appraisals to Current Evaluations

Thomas J. Schoenberg
Lawrence J. Trudeau
Project Editors

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Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol. 225

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 76-46132

ISBN-13: 978-1-4144-3866-5
ISBN-10: 1-4144-3866-4

ISSN 0276-8178

Printed in the United States of America
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 13 12 11 10 09

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

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Contents

Osip Mandelstam
1891-1938

(Full name Osip Emilievich Mandelstam; also transliterated as Ossip; also Emil'evich or Emilevich; also Mandelshtam, Mandel'shtam, Mandel'štam, or Mandelstamm) Russian poet, novella writer, essayist, travel writer, and critic.

The following entry provides an overview of Mandelstam's life and works. For additional information on his career, see *TCLC,* Volumes 2 and 6.

INTRODUCTION

Osip Mandelstam is generally considered one of the most important Russian poets of the twentieth century. During his career he produced essays, fiction, autobiographical sketches, and a travelogue, but he is most often remembered for his poetic works, including *Kamen'* (1913; *Stone*), *Tristia* (1922), and *Voronezhskie tetradi* (1980; *The Voronezh Notebooks*). Mandelstam employed the techniques of neoclassic formalism in his poetry and explored themes related to human experience, time, the importance of language and art, freedom, and religious experience. His verse reflects the literary trend away from Russian Symbolism toward an aesthetic based on physical reality and direct expression, known as Acmeism, which emerged in the early twentieth century. Along with the poets Nikolai Gumilev and Anna Akhmatova, Mandelstam is considered a leading representative of this literary movement. After achieving critical success early in his career Mandelstam suffered political persecution under the regime of Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union, and was ostracized, arrested, and imprisoned. Several decades after his death in 1938, his reputation was restored, and he is now recognized as one of the foremost writers in Russian literature. Fellow Russian poet Joseph Brodsky praised Mandelstam's lyricism and profundity, declaring that "he worked in Russian poetry for thirty years, and what he did will last as long as the Russian language exists."

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Mandelstam was born January 3, 1891, in Warsaw, which at the time was a part of Russia; but he soon after moved to St. Petersburg with his Jewish parents, Flora Osipovna and Emil' Veniaminovich Mandelstam. In St. Petersburg Mandelstam attended the Tenishev Commercial School, where he first began writing poetry. After graduating in 1907 he began attending meetings at the apartment of the Symbolist poet Viacheslav Ivanovich Ivanov, and he published his first poem in the August 1910 issue of *Apollon.* He also traveled extensively during this time, visiting Germany, France, Switzerland, and Italy, and attended classes at the Sorbonne and the University of Heidelberg, where he studied Old French literature. Mandelstam returned to Russia in 1911 and entered St. Petersburg University, concentrating on philosophy. In order to bypass laws barring the enrollment of Jews, he converted to Protestant Christianity. Although Mandelstam never earned a degree, he became proficient enough in both Latin and Greek to read the works of Homer and Ovid in the original.

While still a student he joined a guild of poets, founded by Nikolai Stepanovich Gumilev and Sergei Mitrofanovich Gorodetsky, which rejected the Russian Symbolist movement. The guild introduced a new literary aesthetics, known as Acmeism, which championed the direct expression of ideas through images rather than symbols. Mandelstam's first collection of poetry, *Stone,* reflects key Acmeist literary tenets and is considered an exemplar of the movement. During this period Mandelstam also wrote essays, many of which were published in the journal *Apollon.* Due to poor health Mandelstam was exempted from serving in World War I with the Russian armed forces but was affiliated with various war-relief activities in St. Petersburg.

During the 1910s he traveled to the Crimea and became romantically involved with the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva. An expanded version of *Stone* was published in 1916, which included a poem-cycle dedicated to the city of Rome. During the Russian Civil War, he spent time in St. Petersburg, then known as Petrograd, as well as Moscow, Kiev, Georgia, and the Crimea. In 1919 Mandelstam met his future wife, Nadezhda Iakovlevna Khazina, whom he married in 1922. Mandelstam's second volume of poetry, *Tristia,* was published that same year.

In 1924 Mandelstam moved to Leningrad with his wife. He worked as a freelance translator and reviewer but refused to join the literary groups that were controlled by the Communist Party. He wrote little poetry during this time but produced several works of prose, including a collection of autobiographical essays, *Shum vre-*

meni (1925; *The Noise of Time*). He also produced *Egipetskaia marka* (*The Egyptian Stamp*), a novella published together with *The Noise of Time* in 1928. That same year Mandelstam also published *Stikhotvoreniia,* a volume of new and previously published poems, and *O poezii,* a collection of his essays on art and literature.

Mandelstam was able to publish works during this period, despite his opposition to the Communist Party, largely with the help of Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin, a poetry enthusiast who was politically connected with Stalin. In 1929, after Mandelstam was falsely accused of plagiarism as a result of a publishing error, Bukharin interceded on the poet's behalf and arranged for him and his wife to travel to Armenia as journalists to escape controversy and mounting political persecution. Mandelstam spent six months traveling and wrote extensively. He returned to Moscow in 1930 but continued to experience tension under Stalin's rule, despite several attempts to appease the new order in his works. Nevertheless, he continued to produce poetry during the early 1930s, which resulted in the "Moskovskie tetradi," translated as *The Moscow Notebooks* in 1991. He also wrote travel sketches inspired by his trip to Armenia, which were published as *Puteshestvie v Armeniiu* (*Journey to Armenia*) in 1933.

Near the end of 1933 Mandelstam attended a small gathering of friends and acquaintances, where he recited a satirical verse about Stalin, characterizing him as an executioner with a cockroach mustache. Someone at the party reported the incident to authorities, and in May 1934 Mandelstam was arrested and sentenced to exile in the Urals. After jumping out of a second story window in a hospital in Cherdyn, he broke an arm and was allowed to spend his exile in Voronezh, located south of Moscow. During this time he produced three more volumes of poetry, collected and published as *The Voronezh Notebooks.* Mandelstam's sentence ended in May of 1937, but he and his wife were not allowed to return to Moscow. On May 2, 1938, Mandelstam was arrested a second time, tried for antigovernment activities, and sentenced to five years of labor in Siberia. He never served his sentence, dying on December 27, 1938, while in transit to a Gulag camp.

MAJOR WORKS

In his first collection of poetry, *Stone,* Mandelstam introduced a number of important themes that he would revisit throughout his literary career. Like much of his later work, the collection relies heavily on traditional forms, including iambic meters and conventional patterns of rhyme. In this work the poet also eschewed Symbolist techniques, employing instead vivid imagery and direct expressions of thought, emotion, and experience, in keeping with the Acmeist aesthetic. While Mandelstam emphasizes the greatness of St. Petersburg throughout the collection, many of the poems reflect his preoccupation with Christianity and other ideas associated with Western culture. In the poem "Aiia-Sofiia," or "Hagia Sophia," he employs figures from Greek myth and Christian history to explore the interaction between humanity and the divine. In "Silentium," however, the poet's focus turns to the importance of music and poetry. Time is a significant theme in the work as well. Mandelstam embraced the "pan-chronic" philosophy of Henri Bergson, as reflected in the poem "Notre Dame," which projects the idea that space and time are linked by memory, forming an organic whole.

Mandelstam's second volume of verse, *Tristia,* takes its title from a collection of elegies written by Ovid during his exile in Tomis. Like *Stone,* the collection employs classical formal techniques. The opening poem, "Kak etikh pokryval i etogo ubora / Mne pyshnost' tiazhela," features a dialogue between a chorus and the Greek goddess Phaedra, and treats the subjects of death and renewal, using the image of the "black sun" to symbolize the tragic or self-sacrificing love that conquers death. Several poems in the collection explore themes related to religion, time, love, and the importance of language, while others reflect the political upheaval taking place during that time. In "V Peterburge my soidemsia snova" ("We shall meet again in Petersburg") Mandelstam characterizes language as something that must be defended against destructive forces. In "Sestry—tiazhest' i nezhnost'," he introduces the idea that art can overcome death. In one of the best-known poems of the collection, "Voz'mi na radost', iz moikh ladonei," the poet treats the subject of love.

Mandelstam also produced several significant works of prose during his literary career. His autobiographical work, *The Noise of Time,* consists of a series of vignettes that offer impressions of life in St. Petersburg during the 1890s and early 1900s. The collection features sketches of the poet's childhood, as well as several character studies of influential figures from his early life. Four other essays in the volume are inspired by his recollections of Feodosia, a port in Crimea, where he stayed in 1920. From this collection of memories and personal experiences, the poet perceives the "sound" of the turn of the century, which he describes as "the noise of time."

Another prose work, *The Egyptian Stamp,* is a surrealistic novella that depicts a day in the life of its protagonist, Parnok, a young Jewish intellectual who lives in St. Petersburg. On this summer day in 1917 Parnok wanders through the city, trying to recover his morning coat, which, after he failed to make payments, has been repossessed by his tailor and sold to a captain. Upon

going to the laundry he is told that a dress-shirt he thinks is his own actually belongs to that same captain. Later that day Parnok witnesses a mob dragging a thief to the river to be drowned, whom he is unable to save from death despite his efforts. At the end of the novella the narrator reports that Parnok did not go home for supper but continued to wander through the city, dreaming of a new coat. The captain, however, departs on a train for Moscow, with Parnok's shirt and coat in his suitcase. In addition to delineating Parnok's sufferings, Mandelstam also offers insights, often ironic, into Russia's brief period of democratic government.

Mandelstam's travelogue, *Journey to Armenia,* is another of his prose works that has received attention from critics. Some chapters of the work are focused on the places that the author and his wife visited, including "Sukhum," which depicts the capital city of the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic. In other chapters Mandelstam provides a portrait of the Armenian people, who are described as noble, beautiful, and kind, and reveals his fascination with the Old World culture of the region. In addition to offering sketches of the landscape and people, the author also explores various topics, including the relationship of literature and science, as discussed in the section titled "Vokrug naturalistov" ("Around Naturalists"). *Journey to Armenia* ends with the story of Arshak, an Armenian King, who suffers defeat and is left to die in prison. Mandelstam's major prose works have increasingly drawn the attention and praise of critics in recent decades. Charles Isenberg has declared that "Mandelstam's literary prose at its best has a richness of meaning that is equal to anything in the Russian tradition."

Mandelstam's later poetic efforts, collected in *The Moscow Notebooks* and *The Voronezh Notebooks,* reflect his ongoing preoccupation with time, science, and human experience, but they also reveal the poet's growing struggle with the Soviet Union under Stalin. In "Za gremuchuiu doblest' griadushchikh vekov" ("For the resounding glory of future ages"), written in Moscow in 1931, the speaker of the poem describes his age, or era, as a wolfhound running at his shoulder but admits "there's no wolf's blood in me." In "Kvartira tikha, kak bumaga" ("The flat is silent like a sheet of paper"), which was written in 1933, the speaker mocks his own attempts at reconciliation with the Soviet regime and expresses indignation at the compliance of others.

The poems collected in the three volumes of *The Voronezh Notebooks,* written in the latter half of the 1930s, are more hermetic than his earlier work and indicate the poet's despair with his country and his own life. "Eshche ne umer ty" ("As yet you are not dead") and "Kuda mne det'sia v etom ianvare?" ("Where shall I find a place this month of January?"), both of which were written in 1937, reveal the speaker's anguish. In another poem, titled "Lishiv menia morei, razbega i razleta," the speaker laments his loss of freedom but declares, "Yet you could not take away my moving lips." The immortal and transcendent nature of art is another important theme in the collection, and Mandelstam employs references to Greek art and mythology in several poems, including "Kuvshin" ("The Jug") and "K pustoi zemle nevol'no pripadaia" ("Casually Touching the Bare Earth"), which invokes the figure of Persephone. The poems of *The Voronezh Notebooks* are also noted for their formal and stylistic qualities. Mandelstam relied heavily on puns and wordplay in the volume and often employed complex metaphors in order to convey meaning. Jane Gary Harris has asserted that both *The Moscow Notebooks* and *The Voronezh Notebooks* "contain direct, impetuous, and poignant utterances," maintaining that "a limpid precision, sharpness of focus, and a vivid, dynamic inner mobility grace the lyrics of maturity with an elegant grandeur rarely encountered in twentieth-century verse."

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Mandelstam was quickly established as an important new voice in Russian poetry with the publication of his first volume of verse, *Stone,* in 1913. Political upheaval in Russia adversely affected his literary career, however, following this initial success. In the years following the revolution and Bolshevik takeover in 1917, Mandelstam refused to surrender his work to the propagandist concerns of the Communist Party, and he was subsequently ostracized by Russia's pro-state artists and intellectuals. *Tristia,* which focused on the concerns and experience of the individual rather than the collective, further alienated Mandelstam from his peers and displeased party officials. During the mid- to late 1920s, Mandelstam had increasing difficulty publishing his poems in literary journals, but with the support of Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin, he managed to issue several works of prose. But the poet remained a target of the Communist Party.

In 1933 Mandelstam's satirical depiction of Stalin prompted the poet's arrest and exile. After his release in 1937 he tried but ultimately failed to regain the approval of the literary establishment. In an effort to appease his detractors, he composed and recited the now-controversial "Ode to Stalin," a poem that described the dictator as "the man who moved the world's axis." But Mandelstam's efforts proved futile. In the Soviet Union his reputation was destroyed, and his work was forgotten after his death, even in émigré literary circles, for more than a decade.

Several factors contributed to a renewed interest in Mandelstam's work during the latter half of the twentieth century. In 1955 Boris Andreevich Filippov and

Gleb Petrovich Struve published a collection of his poetry in New York, and as the political climate in the Soviet Union thawed during the late 1950s, Mandelstam's reputation in his native country was partially rehabilitated. During this time Mandelstam's widow, Nadezhda, also collected and archived her husband's writings, and she investigated the details of his last months in exile, which she reported in her memoir, *Vospominaniia* (1970; *Hope Against Hope*). As a result of her efforts Mandelstam's later work survived and garnered the attention of audiences in Europe and the United States. Several critics, including Clarence Brown and Jennifer Baines, produced longer studies of the poet's oeuvre in the decades that followed, and Mandelstam was eventually established as one of the most important Russian poets of the twentieth century.

In more recent studies scholars have continued to explore the thematic and formal developments in the author's poetry and prose, and many have especially appreciated the range and variety of his work. Often citing the complexity and richness of his poetry, critics have placed Mandelstam, along with Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak, and Marina Tsvetaeva, among the foremost poets of his generation. Franz Wright has remarked that "there have been a few poets who have maintained a connection with the supernatural and superliterate dimensions of language; and if any in our century have borne the burden and glory of this connection, Osip Mandelstam is certainly to be counted among them." Wright concludes that, "at the same time, he was constantly and fiercely aware of himself as an artist, a master of his craft."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Kamen' [*Stone*] (poetry) 1913
Tristia (poetry) 1922; also published as *Vtoraia kniga,* 1923
Shum vremeni [*The Noise of Time*] (essays) 1925
Egipetskaia marka [*The Egyptian Stamp*] (novella) 1928
O poezii (essays) 1928
Stikhotvoreniia [*Poems*] (poetry) 1928
Puteshestvie v Armeniiu [*Journey to Armenia*] (travel sketches) 1933
**The Prose of Osip Mandelstam* [edited and translated by Clarence Brown] (essays and novella) 1965
Razgovor o Dante [*Conversation about Dante*] (essay) 1967
Sobranie sochinenii. 3 vols. [edited by Gleb Struve and Boris Filippov] (poetry, essays, novella, and letters) 1967-69
Complete Poetry of Osip Emilevich Mandelstam (poetry) 1973
Osip Mandelstam: Selected Poems [translated by Clarence Brown and W. S. Merwin] (poetry) 1973
Osip Mandelstam: 50 Poems [translated by Bernard Meares] (poetry) 1977
Osip Mandelstam: Selected Essays [translated by Sidney Monas] (essays) 1977
Mandelstam: The Complete Critical Prose and Letters [edited by Jane Gary Harris] (criticism and letters) 1979
Voronezhskie tetradi [edited by Viktoria Shveitser; *The Voronezh Notebooks*] (poetry) 1980
Sobranie sochinenii. 4 vols. [edited by Gleb Struve and Boris Filippov] (poetry, essays, criticism, novella, and letters) 1981
The Eyesight of Wasps (poetry) 1989
The Moscow Notebooks (poetry) 1991
A Necklace of Bees (poetry) 1992

*This work includes *The Noise of Time, Theodosia,* and *The Egyptian Stamp.*

CRITICISM

Gleb Struve (lecture date August 1972)

SOURCE: Struve, Gleb. "Osip Mandelstam's Versions of Barbier's *Ïambes.*" In *Expression, Communication and Experience in Literature and Language: Proceedings of the XII Congress of the International Federation for Modern Languages and Literatures Held at Cambridge University, 20 to 26 August 1972,* edited by Ronald G. Popperwell, pp. 295-97. London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 1973.

[*In the following lecture, Struve describes Mandelstam's translations of Auguste Barbier's poems "la Curée," "Quatre-Vingt Treize," "l'Émeute," and "la Popularité" as "the most impressive Russian versions of Barbier," and he highlights the similarities between themes in the translations and those in Mandelstam's own work.*]

Six versions of Auguste Barbier's poems are known to have appeared in print over Osip Mandelstam's signature. Five of them were poems from *Ïambes* and one from *Lazare.* Four of the five from *Ïambes* had to do, directly or indirectly, with the July Revolution and belonged to 1830 or early 1831. They were: 'la Curée', 'Quatre-Vingt Treize', 'l'Émeute', and 'la Popularité'. The fifth of the *Ïambes* poems was 'l'Idole', the famous exposure of the revived Napoleonic cult. Only two of those five poems were translated by Mandelstam in their entirety, viz. 'la Curée' and 'Quatre-Vingt Treize'. The others were partial translations.

Most of Mandelstam's translations from Barbier were published in 1924, and apparently all of them were made in 1923.

In her remarkable *Memoirs,* two volumes of which appeared, in 1970 and 1972, outside the Soviet Union (the first volume was soon translated into several languages; in English it has been published under the title *Hope Against Hope*), Nadezhda Mandelstam, the poet's widow, says that, of all his translations (some of which he did for vulgar pecuniary reasons), Mandelstam particularly valued his versions of Barbier, alongside with a long narrative poem by the Georgian poet Važa Pšavela (pseudonym of Luka Razikašvili). Barbier's poems were more than just translations for him: in them he expressed some of his own experiences, moods, and ideas. This probably explains some very selective cuts he made in some of them.

More specifically, Mme Mandelstam, at the same time, connects the translations of 'la Curée' with what she calls Mandelstam's 'attempts to come to terms with his epoch'. She describes those attempts as 'fruitless'. For Mandelstam, she says, 'there was no addressee in Soviet reality', and 'the chorus of true adherents of the new religion and the new State used, in its ritual observances, the language of the Revolution, but it had no use for an upstart intellectual, with his doubts and vacillations'. She thinks that Mandelstam's choice of 'la Curée' was not accidental, that for him it had a topical meaning, that it was about those people who had already betrayed that 'fourth estate' to which he was still loyal and to which, in a poem written a little later, he swore an oath of allegiance.

If Mme Mandelstam's interpretation, in the first volume of her *Memoirs,* of her husband's motivation in translating 'la Curée', in which Barbier combines his enthusiasm for the July Revolution with an invective against those who hurried to seize and share the booty, may sound a little subjective and unconvincing, what she says about it in the second volume is more specific and carries greater conviction.

She recalls that when they settled down in Moscow in 1923, she saw her husband as she had never seen him before: 'so concentrated, so stern, so self-contained'. They were living in the Herzen House which Mandelstam was later to dub 'the obscene *hotel particulier*' (*pokhabnyj osobnjak*), with a view of the 'twelve lighted Judas windows'. A change in his poetry had come earlier, in Tiflis. Now came the period of 'oaths': thus, a vow of poverty, not for the sake of poverty, but as a kind of spiritual test, was made in **'The Life of St Alexis'** and complemented in **'Aliscans'**, both of them adaptations from medieval French poetry. In them, says Mme Mandelstam, her husband 'expressed himself and his thoughts about our future'. The translations from Barbier were also not fortuitous: 'They represent an attempt to interpret the present by analogy with the past: the tamed mare [in the poem about Napoleon], drunkenness, and, above all, the partitioning of the booty by the victors and the bone thrown at the feet of the greedy bitch'. The selections from Barbier were quite deliberate, especially that of 'la Curée': 'in it we see his attitude to the popular revolution and his aversion to the victors who make their own use of the fruits of popular victory'. This last theme Mme Mandelstam sees as particularly 'topical' in those days.

What Mme Mandelstam does not mention is that in the same issue of the magazine *Prožektor,* in which his translations of 'la Curée' appeared, Mandelstam published an essay on Barbier. In this essay he had to speak very cautiously about the political implications of Barbier's poems, and he avoided dotting his *i*'s. The essay contained, however, a very interesting appraisal of Barbier as a poet and of the means by which he produced his poetic effects in *Ïambes* and achieved such a staggering impression on his contemporaries. Mandelstam saw three main reasons for this:

1. Barbier's use of Chénier's 'virile iambics' (he was himself a great admirer of Chénier),
2. Freedom from the conventions of literary language and use of 'coarse, harsh, and cynical words', and
3. Mastery of grand poetic similes as though meant for the podium.

In all these three respects Mandelstam tried to follow Barbier very closely, and did so with great success. His translations of Barbier, and especially of 'la Curée' and of part of 'l'Idole', are the most impressive Russian versions of Barbier, who was very popular in Russia between the 1840s and 1860s.

Mandelstam also said that Barbier had learned the efficacy of poetic imagery in the school of Dante of whom he was a great admirer. For Mandelstam himself *The Divine Comedy* was 'the greatest political pamphlet of his time'. What Mandelstam had to say about Barbier and Dante is very suggestive in the light of his later interest in, and preoccupation with, Dante, which found its expression in his prose piece ***Razgovor o Dante* (*Talking about Dante*)**, written in the 1930s but published only posthumously.

Clarence Brown (essay date 1973)

SOURCE: Brown, Clarence. "Three Poems of *Tristia*" In *Mandelstam,* pp. 219-52. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973.

[*In the following essay, Brown examines three poems from the collection* Tristia*—"On the Sledge," "We shall gather again in Petersburg," and "Solominka"—and discusses Mandelstam's purpose in placing the poems together in the 1928 edition of the volume.*]