



Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris before construction of the nineteenth-century spire. Photo: Gustave Le Gray, 1859.

POETRY DESK

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Notre Dame

Osip Mandelstam

Translated by Philip Nikolayev

Where Rome's judge judged an alien populace,
Atop a basilica, joyous and the first,
Like Adam once, a gracefully ribbed vault,
Giving its nerves a stretch, flexes its muscles.

The secret plan gives clues externally:
The forceful flying buttresses ensure
That though the mass is high the walls endure,
The vault's battering ram looms harmlessly.

Sporadic labyrinth, inscrutable forest,
The reasoned chasm of the Gothic mind,
Christian meekness and Egyptian might,
The reed next to the oak, ruled by the nivelling plummet.

But by and by the more attentively
I peered at monster ribs, old stronghold Notre Dame,
The more I thought that I too may one day from some
Unkindly heaviness create a thing of beauty. ✱

1912



Osip Mandelstam (1891–1938) was born in a Polish Jewish family, grew up in St Petersburg, and became one of the most important Russian poets of the twentieth century. He was affiliated with the Acmeist movement, which prized clarity, vividness, and humanist values. In the 1930s, after publicly criticizing Joseph Stalin, he was arrested and sent to GULAG. He died on the way to the camps of cold and hunger.