

MANDELSTAM. By *Clarence Brown*. New York and London: Cambridge University Press, 1973. viii, 320 pp. \$13.95.

SELECTED POEMS. By *Osip Mandelstam*. Translated by *Clarence Brown* and *W. S. Merwin*. New York: Atheneum, 1974. xix, 100 pp. \$7.50.

Mandelstam's poetry has finally found its readers, in the West as well as in Russia. It found them in Russia sooner, often passing from reader to reader in typescript or even handwritten copies (in students' notebooks). But, and this is an important difference, it really reached them as the spoken word, as the performed, the sung poem. Merely reading Mandelstam, as most Western scholars do, is rather like studying a musical score, the more so for the slow reading of detailed structural analysis. Hence the arid quality of much of what passes for Mandelstam criticism. This is especially true of the many articles which presume to "deal with" one or a few poems in meticulous explications. Mandelstam's verse is fertile ground indeed for intrepid academic entrepreneurs. They make careers out of little collections of rough stones which turn out, upon examination, to be no more than handfuls of dust. These verbal travesties, in stifling pedestrian prose, desperately lack the very qualities they attempt to examine in Mandelstam's poetry.

It occurs to me that in Russia, amid all the talk of Mandelstam's verse which I recall (with some of his choicest readers), I never heard anyone say, "What does it mean?" More pertinent to these (mostly young) Russians were considerations of variant readings, the availability of the poetry, and, most of all, the reciting of it. In the verbal performance of Mandelstam's verse, this admittedly small group treated it as incantation, as liturgy, even as shibboleth, the last a highly specialized but socially important function.

Happily, my negative comments are not about Clarence Brown's study of Mandelstam's poetry. On the contrary, one senses that Brown has heard its singing inwardly, if he has not sung it outright. Professor Brown has a very unprofessional gift, precisely the natural gift which sensitive Russian singers of Mandelstam possess: a seemingly immediate comprehension of the poem's deep structure. He begins his study with the poet and gives us Mandelstam's life in detail only up to the point where Nadezhda Mandelstam begins her account in *Hope Against Hope*. He re-creates the poet's personality in the first half of his career as it is available only to one who has had the advantage of extended stays in the Soviet Union and the invaluable, not to say unique, privilege of study and association with some of those who were closest to Mandelstam. This factor gives Brown's book an extraordinary authority possessed by few, if any, of the ever growing tribe of Western *Mandel'shtamisty*, some of whom would not be welcome in the same houses, in any case.

The readings Brown gives to key poems (unfortunately only up to 1925) form the other half of this book, and are something of a tour de force—of a piece with Victor Terras's and George Ivask's articles on Mandelstam. Anyone who can make his way through as densely structured a poet as this is to be commended. Yet, if the book has certain flaws, they are here. Its structural excursions tend to incline too much in the direction dictated by the restraints of formal criticism, tied as it is to the printed text of the poem. And, in my opinion, Professor Brown is not always entirely right in this structural detail. For example, he bases a reading, albeit a convincing one, of *V Peterburge my soidemsia snova* on the variant "January night" for "Soviet night," a change clearly necessitated by the censors, and

one which leaves dangling, among other things, that “*zloi motor*,” which is obviously a Cheka vehicle.

Most of the larger formulations of the book seem adequate to Mandelstam's art, but not all of them. Brown cites one of Mandelstam's images from “Talking about Dante,” for the associative linkages of a poem: the multiple aircraft (one machine creating another while in flight, launching it, this second creating another, and so forth). He might better have drawn upon a similar image from the same source—the boatman who crosses the river by leaping from junk to junk. Here, the point is that the boatman is unable to say how he did it. Poetry is the tracing of an impossibly complex, unrecoverable line. Surely, it was this secret line of crossing which held those Russian readers—rather those Russian singers—of Mandelstam, who never thought to ask for a crib.

Still, more often than not, Brown does exhibit, in large and small things, what is certainly most important in a critic—an intuitive grasp, however dark, of what the poem was before it was a poem, that to which the secret line only points. He speaks about the preverbal existence of the poem, at least about Mandelstam's practice, which seems to have presumed it. This represents a break, if a somewhat tentative one, with Slavic literary studies in this country.

For one of the book's most successful analytic insights, Brown adapts the term drift (no doubt in the Russian sense of *veianie*) to describe the internal migration of imagery in Mandelstam's poetry. This is a form of analysis which ultimately depends upon the critic's intuitive grasp of the poems, and it is an example of the perception which frequently gives this study more than mere authority of fact.

At one juncture, however, a significant current in Mandelstam's verse is simply sidestepped: its meeting with and assimilation of the Christian tradition in Western culture. True, Brown apologizes graciously for the omission, but this does leave some of the great religious poetry of the twentieth century untouched. Brown also passes over, without comment, the elements of dandyism and the notes of praise for the imperial grandeur of Russia which appear in some of Mandelstam's earlier masterpieces (*Admiralteistvo*, *Peterburgskie strofy*). But these are relatively minor oversights. It is essential to any extended study of Mandelstam's poetry, on the other hand, to account for his response to that element in the “drift” of Western culture which is the Christian tradition. In fact, one feels in Mandelstam's poetry a “longing for Christian culture,” to paraphrase his famous, and quite late, formulation of Acmeism (“a longing for world culture”).

This study of Mandelstam is well written; Brown mercifully breaks away from the prevailing style of the “life and work.” His language does not embarrass its subject, which says much of course. He also gives us glimpses of himself in the process of growing up to this work and engaging in it. Partly this book is about the writing of it, somewhat in the manner of the more impressionistic scholars of an earlier day, when to be “in literature” also meant to write well. These occasional passages are some of the most engaging in the book.

Professor Brown has attempted to give us Mandelstam in still other ways. He has translated his prose and collaborated with the American poet W. S. Merwin to produce the best book of translations from Mandelstam's poetry presently available. It is the best one if only because Merwin is the best poet to have tried it. Merwin has, with Brown's expert assistance, as the latter admits in his preface, translated Mandelstam into Merwin. This direct contact of poet with poet cannot help but be

an enrichment of English and American poetry (as are Lowell's few Mandelstam translations, published some years ago in the *New York Review of Books*). What is lacking is Mandelstam, who is more in evidence in the small number of translations, with their greater fidelity and less ambitious aims, which Brown has attempted alone.

The lyric ecstasy associated with the spoken or sung verse of Mandelstam would be best rendered by a Dylan Thomas. This would give us close to half of Mandelstam in English. The other half, the reverberations of intellect and culture in his verse, would have to be provided by a Wallace Stevens, from whom Brown takes several epigraphs in his *Mandelstam*. Together these two dead poets, so dissimilar in themselves, would give us almost a whole Mandelstam in English. What would remain untranslated would be the essential Mandelstam, and we are not ready for that. The study (and translation) of silence is a science of the future.

H. W. Tjalsma
Leverett, Massachusetts

POEMS OF NIGHT AND DAY. By *Fyodor Tyutchev*. Translated by *Eugene M. Kayden*. Boulder: *The Colorado Quarterly*, University of Colorado, 1974. xvi, 96 pp. \$5.00.

This "slim volume" of verse translations from Tyutchev is pleasant to look at, to handle, and to read. Mr. Kayden's selection of lyrics (eighty-eight in all) is unexceptionable; his overall strategy—to approximate the rhyme, meter, and stanzaic forms of the original without allowing them to become a Procrustean grid—is wise; and the grace and fluency of the translations themselves bespeak a sensitive ear for pleasant poetic effects.

But is Tyutchev a "pleasant" poet? In a well-known essay, Ezra Pound once distinguished between "soft" and "hard" poetry, expressing, as he elaborated the distinction, a strong preference for the latter. It is the translator's main shortcoming that, by beveling some of the more jagged edges of Tyutchev's verse, he turns a predominantly "hard" poet into a "soft" one. Thus, to cite but four examples, Mr. Kayden drapes Tyutchev's spare enumeration: "Zemlia zelenela, svetilsia efir,/ Sady, lavirinfy, chertogi, stolpy" ("Dream at Sea"), with all manner of pretty epithets: "Sweet grasses and roses aglow in clear air,/ White palaces, gardens, fair halls, colonnades." Working in the opposite direction, he dilutes the beautiful and gravid "umil'naia, tainstvennaia prelest'" ("Autumn Evening") to a mere: "fair autumn hour." The "hard" and Baudelairean "ugriumiye tusklyi ogn' zhelan'ia" ("I Love the Beauty of Your Eyes") is softened to the vaguely Swinburnean "longing dark and ecstasy." And in "Twilight," the poet's anguished imperative "Dai vkusit' unichtozhen'ia" is rendered by the Norman Vincent Pealish "Grant a fuller life of wholeness."

"La critique est aisée; l'art est difficile." If Mr. Kayden softens and sweetens Tyutchev a little too often for one reader's tastes, he has nonetheless shaped many a smooth and pleasing line. The first stanza of "Summer Evening" may stand as an example:

Down from her head the earth has rolled
The sun's great flaming ball aside;
In twilight peace the tongues of flame
Are swallowed by the ocean tide.