

Mandelstam's "Ode" to Stalin

Editorial note: The contributors of the following material wish to remain anonymous. The translation is intended only as a literal rendering.

The haphazard unearthing of Osip Mandelstam's late poetry and the biographical data of his (all too literal) struggle for existence produces the effect of a mosaic gradually and painstakingly pieced together by several hands. One mysterious piece, long thought lost, was the poem allegedly written in praise of Stalin sometime in the 1930s. For many Western readers at least, the first mention of the poet's tribute to the dictator was in Anna Akhmatova's memoirs of Mandelstam published in the émigré miscellany *Vozdushnye puti*, vol. 4 (1965): ". . . he maintained that poems are written only as the result of strong emotional shocks, joyful as well as tragic ones. Concerning his own poem in praise of Stalin—'I'd like to say not Stalin, but Dzhugashvili' (1935)—he said to me: 'Now I understand that it was a sickness.'"¹

With the publication of the first volume of Nadezhda Mandelstam's memoirs, we learned that at the beginning of 1937 such a poem was actually written and that it failed to fulfill its intended function, that is, the poet's physical preservation.² (Mrs. Mandelstam does feel that it may have played a role in her survival.) She describes the—for Mandelstam—extraordinary effort to produce the necessary encomium. The poet who always fashioned the complete poem in his head before setting it down now adopted an alien regimen:

Near the window in the room at the seamstress's stood a square dining table which served us for absolutely everything. O.M. took possession of the table and spread out his pencils and paper on it. He had never before done anything of the sort: paper and pencils, after all, were necessary only at the end of his work. But for the sake of the "Ode," he decided to change his habits, and from then on we were forced to eat on one

1. Reprinted in Anna Akhmatova, *Sochineniia*, vol. 2 (New York: Inter-Language Literary Associates, 1968), p. 181. Compare the line she cites with line twelve, stanza two of the "Stikhi o Staline."

2. Nadezhda Mandel'shtam, *Vospominaniia* (New York: Chekhov Publishing Corporation, 1970); note particularly the chapter entitled "Oda," pp. 216–20. All citations from the memoirs, unless otherwise identified, are from this chapter.

little corner of the table or even on the window sill. Every morning O.M. seated himself at the table and took pencil in hand: a real writer. A regular Fedin. I even waited for him to say "at least one line a day," but that, thank God, never happened. After sitting for a half-an-hour or so in the writer's pose, O.M. would suddenly jump up and begin to berate himself for his lack of craftsmanship. "Now Aseev, there's a craftsman. He wouldn't even stop to think, but would get it down right off." Then, suddenly calming down, O.M. would lie down on the bed, ask for tea, get up, feed sugar to the neighbor's dog through the *fortochka* [. . .] once again pace the room and, brightening up, would begin to mutter. This meant that he had not been able to smother his own poems, and they had broken loose and conquered the evil spirit.

From the matrix that was the ode there came day after day, as Mandelstam himself notes with some surprise, the offshoots comprising the cycle that concludes the Second Voronezh Notebook.³ Clarence Brown in his article "Into the Heart of Darkness: Mandelstam's Ode to Stalin" (*Slavic Review*, December 1967) explores at length the genesis of the cycle. The phonetic and semantic relationships between these remarkable poems and the "Ode" are sketched out by Nadezhda Mandelstam. Despite the prolonged battle with himself, Mandelstam did manage to put together a poem to Stalin; as Mrs. Mandelstam writes: "At the last moment, O.M. nevertheless did what was demanded of him—he composed the panegyric."

Nadezhda Mandelstam also writes of the obsessive nature of the image of Stalin even for a man like her husband. "In order to write such an 'Ode,' one had to tune oneself like an instrument, to submit consciously to the general hypnosis, and to put oneself under the spell of the words of a liturgy which in those days was stifling every human voice." Readers familiar with the standard eulogizing poems of that time will recognize the canonic features of the poem: the father figure, the warrior, the wise ruler who leads all of humanity into a future which he both shapes and divines; like other creative artists of the time, Mandelstam denigrates himself and desires to be found worthy of the Master. Indeed one notes with particular interest Mandelstam's avoidance of the repulsive personal attributes of Stalin that stand out so vividly in the notorious epigram that he wrote less than three years before: the huge cockroach mustaches, the fat, worm-like fingers. Instead we have the outlines of the smiling portrait that stared "from a million frames": the

3. See Osip Mandel'shtam, *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Inter-Language Literary Associates, 1967), pp. 236–53, the poems numbered 346–361, 363–369, 371. Of the twenty-four poems only thirteen (numbered 198–210, in another sequence) are to be found in Osip Mandel'shtam, *Stikhotvoreniia*, Biblioteka poeta, Bol'shaia seriia (Leningrad, 1973).

wise, friendly, happy, powerful, kind eyes, thick eyebrows, the firm mouth, the imposing successor of Lenin.

Despite the standard aspects of the portrait of Stalin, this is no ordinary poem of praise, and not only because it was written by a poet of Mandelstam's stature. The poem is laden with ambiguity throughout and the final four lines—printed as a separate poem in the Struve-Filippov edition (No. 341)—present a terrifying image which coexists strangely with the poignant persona of the poet. We recall Mandelstam's desperate statement to his wife: "Why, when I think of him, are there all those heads in front of me, mounds of heads? What does he do with all those heads?"

Even though Mandelstam asked a friend to destroy the ode when he left Voronezh for the last time, his widow herself preserved it as she did nearly the entire poetic corpus. Many advised her to get rid of it as though it had never been written. She refused: "Because the truth would be incomplete. A double existence was the absolute fact of our time, and no one escaped it. The difference was that others composed these odes in their apartments and dachas and received rewards for them. Only O.M. did it with a rope around his neck. Akhmatova, when the rope was being tightened around the neck of her son. Who will condemn them for these poems?!"

Unlike the "facile doggerel" (*gladen'kii stishok*) about the construction of the White Sea Canal, also written in 1937, which Akhmatova and the poet's widow gave themselves permission to burn,⁴ the "Ode" survived. It is printed here for the first time.

4. Nadezhda Mandel'shtam, *Vospominaniia*, the chapter "Irratsional'noe," pp. 47–53.

Стихи о Сталине

1

Когда б я уголь взял для высшей похвалы—
Для радости рисунка непреложной,—
Я б воздух расчертил на хитрые углы
И осторожно и тревожно,
Чтоб настоящее в чертах отозвалось,
В искусстве с дерзостью гранича,
Я б рассказал о том, кто сдвинул мира ось,
Ста сорока народов чтя обычай.
Я б поднял брови малый уголок,—
Гляди, Эсхил, как я рисуя плачу!

2

Я б несколько гремучих линий взял,
Все молодежью его тысячелетье,
И мужество улыбкою связал
И развязал в ненапряженном свете,
И в дружбе мудрых глаз найду для близнеца,
Какого не скажу, то выраженье, близясь
К которому, к нему,—вдруг узнаешь отца
И задыхаешься, почуяв мира близость.
И я хочу благодарить холмы,
Что эту кость и эту кисть развили:
Он родился в горах и горечь знал тюрьмы.
Хочу назвать его—не Сталин,—Джугашвили!

3

Художник, береги и охраняй бойца:
В рост окружи его сырым и синим бором
Вниманья влажного. Не огорчить отца
Недобрым образом иль мыслей недобором,
Художник, помоги тому, что весь с тобой,
Кто мыслит, чувствует и строит.
Не я и не другой—ему народ родной—
Народ-Гомер хвалу устроит.
Художник, береги и охраняй бойца:
Лес человечества за ним идет густея,
Само грядущее—дружина мудреца
И слушают его все чаще, все смелее.

VERSES ABOUT STALIN

1

Were I to take up the charcoal for the highest praise—
For the indubitable joy of the drawing,—
I would split space by sketching out cunning angles
Both cautiously and anxiously,
So that the present would be reflected in the strokes,
Verging on audacity in [my] art,
I would tell of him who has shifted the axis of the world,
Honoring the customs of one hundred and forty peoples.
I would raise a tiny corner of the eyebrow,—
Observe, Aeschylus, how I weep [while] drawing!

2

I would take a few resounding lines,
His whole youthful millenium,
And bind [his] courage with [his] smile
And unbind [it] in a relaxed light,
And in the friendship of the wise eyes I shall discover for the twin
(Which one, I shall not say) that expression, drawing near
To which, to him,—you suddenly recognize the father
And you gasp, having sensed the nearness of the world.
And I wish to thank the hills
That developed this bone and this wrist:
He was born in the mountains and knew the bitterness of prison.
I want to call him—not Stalin,—[but] Dzhugashvili!

3

[O] artist, cherish and guard the warrior:
Surround him full length with a damp and dark-blue pine forest
Of moist concern. Do not grieve the father
With unkind image or with holding-back of thoughts,
[O] artist, help him, who is entirely with you,
Who thinks, feels, and builds.
Not I and not another—[rather] his own people—
The people [who are a] Homer will see to the praise.
[O] artist, cherish and guard the warrior:
The forest of mankind follows him thronging,
The future itself is the retinue of the sage,
And [ever] more often, more boldly is he heeded.

4

Он свесился с трибуны как с горы
 В бугры голов. Должник сильнее иска.
 Могучие глаза решительно добры,
 Густая бровь кому-то светит близко,
 И я хотел бы стрелкой указать
 На твердость рта—отца речей упрямых.
 Лепное, сложное, крутое веко, знать,
 Работает из миллиона рамок.
 Весь—откровенность, весь—признанья медь.
 И зоркий слух, не терпящий сурдинки,
 На всех, готовых жить и умереть
 Бегут играя хмурые морщинки.

5

Сжимая уголек, в котором все сошлось,
 Рукою жадною одно лишь сходство клича,
 Рукою хищною—ловить лишь сходства ось,—
 Я уголь искрошу, ища его обличья.
 Я у него учусь—к себе не знать пощады,
 Несчастья скроют ли большого плана часть,
 Я разыщу его в случайностях их чада . . .
 (.)
 Пусть недостойн я еще иметь друзей,
 Пусть не насыщен я и желчью и слезами,
 Он все мне чудится в шинели, в картузе,
 На чудной площади с счастливыми глазами.

6

Глазами Сталина раздвинута гора
 И вдаль прищурилась равнина.
 Как море без морщин, как завтра из вчера—
 До солнца борозды от плуга—исполина.
 Он улыбается улыбкою жнеца
 Рукопожатий в разговоре,
 Который начался и длится без конца
 На шестиклятвенном просторе.
 И каждое гумно и каждая копна
 Сильна, убориста, умна—добро живое—
 Чудо народное! Да будет жизнь крупна.
 Ворочается счастье стержневое.

4

He has leaned from the rostrum as if from a mountain
Over the hillocks of heads. The debtor is stronger than the claim [against him].
The powerful eyes are decisively kind,
The thick brow close by sheds light on someone.
And I would want to indicate with an arrow
The firmness of [his] mouth—[which is] the father of stubborn speeches.
[His] sculpted, complex, severe eyelid, it seems,
Is at work out of a million frames.
[He is] all frankness, [he is] all brass of recognition.
And his vigilant hearing, which tolerates no muting,
[His] louring wrinkles, ever playful, are rushing
At all who are prepared to live and die.

5

Clutching the charcoal, in which everything has come together,
With a greedy hand summoning only the resemblance,
With an avid hand—to catch only the axis of resemblance,—
I shall crumble the charcoal, searching for his likeness.
I learn from him not to spare myself,
If misfortunes should conceal part of the great design,
I shall still discover it in the vicissitudes of [misfortunes'] fumes . . .
(.)
Though I am not yet worthy of having friends,
Though I am not sated with bile and tears,
I still seem to be seeing him in [his] greatcoat, in [his] cap,
On the wonderful square, with [his] happy eyes.

6

By Stalin's eyes is the mountain put asunder,
And the plain peered into the distance.
Like the sea without wrinkles, like tomorrow out of yesterday,
Furrows made by the giant plow [reach] to the sun.
He smiles the smile of the harvester
Of handshakes in a conversation
Which has begun and continues without end
In the six-oathed expanse.
And every threshing floor and every [hay] shock
Is strong, close-packed, clever—living wealth—
The peoples' miracle! Let life be big.
Happiness is turning on its axis.

7

И шестикратно я в сознание берегу
Свидетель медленный труда, борьбы и жатвы
Его огромный путь—через тайгу
И ленинский октябрь—до выполненной клятвы.
Уходят вдаль людских голов бугры:
Я уменьшаюсь там, меня уж не заметят,
Но в книгах ласковых и в играх детворы
Воскресну я сказать, что солнце светит.

1937

7

And I, a deliberate witness of labor, of struggle and of harvest,
Cherish in sixfold measure in my consciousness
His immense journey—through the taiga
And Lenin's October—to the vow fulfilled.
The mounds of human heads recede into the distance:
I am there diminished, I'll not be noticed any longer,
But in gentle books and in children's games
I shall be resurrected to say the sun is shining.

1937