

Narrative: OSIP MANDELSTAM: THE VORONEZH NOTEBOOKS

A critical edition and translation by John High and Matvei Yankelevich

The project being proposed is a critical English-language edition of the *Voronezh Notebooks* of Osip Mandelstam. This body of poems, written during his exile, in a period between destitution and hope, mark the moment of Mandelstam's crossing from modernist tradition to postmodern poetics and his negotiation of individuality and collectivity in the precarious political context of Stalin's 1930s.

Relying on recently available archival material and manuscript versions and a wealth of scholarship written in the post-Soviet period, the proposed edition would offer new translations (done collaboratively by myself and John High) and contextualizing commentary on Mandelstam's crowning poetic achievement. The aim is to provide the general reader as well as scholars with annotations that unpack some of the more hermetic aspects and hidden references in the poems. In addition, our edition would contain pertinent bibliographic and biographical information, a time line of the poet's life, relevant documents from his NKVD files, and comparisons between early publications and contemporary authoritative editions.

The existing translations of Mandelstam do not incorporate these new findings, and, until very recently, the translation and interpretation of Mandelstam in the English-speaking West have been affected by ideological battles that continue to resonate in the wake of the Cold War. With new material available from opened NKVD files and the archives of the poet's wife, the famed memoirist Nadezhda Mandelstam, the time is ripe to reevaluate Mandelstam's final poems.

The Voronezh Notebooks.

Mandelstam referred to the poems written in the 1930s as "the new poetry" (commonly known as "the later poetry" in the West). The body of verse he wrote in Voronezh consist of three "notebooks": the first was written from April to August 1935, the second from December 6, 1936 to the end of February 1937, and the third from the beginning of March to May 4, 1937. In these exilic poems, Mandelstam investigate the deep relation between the poet's mode of creation and the cycles of nature. Images of a nostalgic "world culture" are strangely mixed with coded contemporary political references and fused with the language of Soviet culture. The new poetry, dense with neologism and etymological play, is layered with references to the old culture (nineteenth-century literature, Dante, the painters of the Renaissance, classical civilization, etc.), while also intimating the crisis of the emerging Soviet regime, and obsessed with the poet's own imagined "resurrection" in his verse.

Unwilling to change his writing for the sake of the Socialist cause and therefore marginalized as a cultural figure by the late 1920s, Mandelstam survived in the Soviet system as long as he did because of the influence and help of such important political and literary figures as Nikolai Bukharin and Boris Pasternak. By the winter of 1933, intentionally or not, Mandelstam was challenging the regime: in one poem he insinuated that Stalin was the "wolf" of Russian culture. The next year, Stalin sent Mandelstam into exile—eventually to the city of Voronezh—because of a poem in which the poet depicted the dictator's body in terms of "worms" and "cockroaches." "One gets it in the balls," Mandelstam wrote of Stalin's victims, "the other in the forehead, one split between the eyes."

As Gregory Freidin and other scholars have pointed out, Mandelstam's idealism and courage in personally attacking Stalin in his poetry was not all it appeared to be. In fact, in time Mandelstam did all he could to save himself and his wife by writing letters and poems (including the "Ode" to Stalin) in which he acquiesced to—and even celebrated—the Soviet order, and made efforts to redeem himself with Stalin. Chiefly, he wanted his poetry published and accepted by the regime that condemned him; he never relinquished hope of returning to publication, but, unlike Pasternak, he did not succeed in his attempt to navigate his poetry into "acceptable" Soviet culture. He spoke to no one about the torture he endured after his arrest; however, he attempted suicide twice—once while in the infamous Lubianka Prison after writing the Stalin epigram, and then in Cherdyn before his relocation to Voronezh. He eventually came to see his own fate inextricably bound to the violent times he lived in—represented in the Voronezh poems in such images as the "mounds of human skulls"—and with time he consoled himself in his poetry through the very associations that haunted and, eventually, destroyed him. He wrote the *Notebooks* under the constant threat of his inevitable death, which finally came in a transit camp near Vladivostok on December 27, 1938.

Reception and Translations.

In later years, Nadezhda Mandelstam made alterations to her husband's poetry to create the illusion that he never yielded to Stalin's regime and the constraints of Soviet censorship. Her changes affected the image of Mandelstam in the West and even led to translations that smoothed over the complexities of the poet's politics and attitudes toward the Soviet state. Our work seeks to address this long-overlooked circumstance by providing evidence of variant versions of the poems and debates surrounding Mandelstam's original intentions. For example, in the case of the poem beginning "If I'm taken captive by our enemies," (1937) it is important to know that Mandelstam's confidants diverged on the verb used in the final line—"будить" [to awaken] or "губить" [to destroy]—the choice of which greatly alters any resulting translation and the interpretation of the poem's political motives. (The final quatrain of this poem in our translation reads: "Then a flock of years in flames will descend, / Lenin will shimmer past—a heavy rainstorm, / And on this earth that will evade decaying, / Stalin will wake both life and reason.")

Though Burton Raffel and Alla Burago translated and published Mandelstam's *Complete Poetry* in 1973, many of the variants of the Voronezh poems were not included: that material was not available in the three volumes of the original *Sobranie sochinenii* [*Collected Works*], edited by Russian émigré scholars Gleb Struve and Boris Filippoff. As a result these translations lack the consistency of style as well as unity of content and form essential to Mandelstam's work. Selections of the poetry have been diligently translated, yet often based on misinformed and even censored versions of the poems, including W. S. Merwin's translation with Clarence Brown in 1973, David McDuff's translation, also in 1973, and James Greene's translation of 1978. In 1996, Richard and Elizabeth McKane published translations of *The Moscow Notebooks* and *The Voronezh Notebooks* which they had begun in the late eighties before new archival information was fully accessible. Although Andrew Davis's translation of 2016 transmits some of the formal play of the Voronezh poems, the translator admits to his "halting Russian," and the book is replete with mistakes on the level of grammar. Davis's edition provides only minimal historical context (repeating earlier biases and legends), omits several poems deemed too politically motivated, and changes the order of poems.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that most extant English translations (and Davis's is no exception) follow the prevailing Cold War view of Mandelstam as a heroic individual resistant to the Soviet regime and miss Mandelstam's critical layering of thematic and linguistic worlds. Yet, Mandelstam was not strictly a political poet, nor did he cleave to a single perspective—his political stance was sometimes one of accommodation, and other times of resistance, or even proud submission. These seemingly paradoxical yet simultaneous positions are reflected in the poetry's contradictory shifts from poem to poem, stanza to stanza, line to line.

A New Translation.

A new and complete translation of the poetry—one which presents the poems in their originally planned order with annotations as to the circumstances in which they were composed and preserved—will contribute a substantive body of work for English-language readers as well as scholars concerned with Mandelstam's oeuvre. The archives in the Lubianka and Butyrki prisons, RGALI (the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art) in Moscow, Pushkinskii Dom in St. Petersburg, the regional KGB offices, the University in Voronezh, new archives acquired by Pavel Nerler and the Mandelstam Society, as well as annotations made by Nerler, Mikhail Gasparov, Yuri Freidin, and other scholars, and the commentaries of Nadezhda Mandelstam and other contemporaries and members of the poet's close circle, have opened the doors for this work.

Our translations attempt to reflect the orbiting political subtexts of the poetry, as well as Mandelstam's deep identification with nature, with the "black earth" itself. Building upon the foundations laid by our predecessors, our edition will, in turn, provide new material for the study of the poet's life and work, enhanced by scholarship on the ethical and linguistic choices Mandelstam was making in his exilic writings.

Mandelstam stretches the limits of accepted poetic forms, coins phrases, makes up neologisms, employs archaic diction in the midst of idiomatic speech, and does so in such a way as to produce a new poetic language. A translation of his poetry requires as radical a transmutation of language as in the original Russian poems and one that mirrors the poet's complex relationship to Soviet ideology and beliefs.

For a Russian intellectual of the early twentieth century, raised in a tradition of anti-egoism and self-sacrifice, his own personal adversity did not constitute sufficient grounds for rebellion against the regime. Mandelstam seeks a way to adapt to the contemporary society, negotiate his past sense of a self and personal legend, and—at the cost of his own life—finds a new poetics and a hermetic freedom.

Qualifications.

As a translator of early twentieth-century Russian avant-garde authors (Mayakovsky, Malevich, Guro, Khlebnikov, Kharms, Vvedensky, and others), I bring to this project specific knowledge of the period as well as the poetics of Mandelstam's contemporaries. Having edited more than forty books for the Eastern European Poets Series at Ugly Duckling Presse, among them a number of critical editions (including a volume of Baratynsky's verse and letters that received an award for Best Scholarly Translation from AATSEEL) and several volumes with extensive annotation and historical commentary, I am well-suited for the work outlined in this proposal. My extensive experience in teaching the craft and the theory of translation (at Columbia University and elsewhere) is also relevant to the work at hand. My involvement in the translation of contemporary Russian poetry paired with my deep engagement with the history of American poetry and contemporary English-language poetic practice (as a poet, a publisher, teacher, and critic) will serve our goal of relaying Mandelstam's work to a contemporary English-language readership.

Work Plan.

After twelve years of collaborative work on the *Voronezh Notebooks*, having created near-final drafts of more than two-thirds of the poems, we are now prepared to take the final steps toward the completion of this critical edition.

With the support of the NEH, John High and I will travel to Moscow and Voronezh to conclude our review of archival materials and to meet with poets and scholars for feedback on our work. Also, in Voronezh, we will finalize our commentary on specific references in Mandelstam's poems to the city's topography.

Within the time frame of the grant, we will complete our translations of the three notebooks through the collaborative process we have developed; and we will write the biographical introduction, detailing the idiosyncrasies of Mandelstam's writing in its historical context in a way that would be useful not only to the average reader, but to scholars and students of Russian literature as well. This introduction will also flesh out the differences and provenance-narratives of the various alternate variants of the Voronezh poems. Together, we will also finish compiling a detailed bibliography and a list of suggestions for further reading.

In addition, we will be dividing some of the work for the auxiliary (but no less important) elements of the planned edition: John High will compile a detailed chronology of the poet's life between 1934-1938, and will organize a selection of photos and relevant arrest documents from NKVD files, along with photos of Mandelstam and his milieu of the time, as well as significant excerpts of the Mandelstams' correspondence with Pasternak, Akhmatova, and others; I will provide detailed annotations and commentaries to each of the poems in the collection (including comparisons of alternate versions); I will also write a translators' introduction that will describe our collaborative method and research as well as the relationship of our approach to contemporary theories of translation, and also offer some comparisons to previous translations.

It is important to note that John High and I will review each other's individual work and correspond about all phases of the project. This critical edition project will be well served by our collaboration (a synthesis of our approaches to the translation), and the combination of the varied experience with Russian poetry and Soviet literary history that we bring to the project.

With translations that accurately reflect Mandelstam's original poems based on recently available textological evidence and scholarship, and with commentary and contextualizing essays that shed further light on the circumstances of the poet's exile and his attempts at self-reformation in the context of Stalin's regime, the planned edition will open a window onto the complexity of Mandelstam's poems as well as his life and times. The resulting book would constitute a major study of one of the great poets of a tragic period of Russian history.