

Narrative
John High

OSIP MANDELSTAM: *THE VORONEZH NOTEBOOKS*

(A critical edition and translation by John High and Matvei Yankelevich)

The project is a critical English-language edition of the *Voronezh Notebooks* of Osip Mandelstam. These 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 Matvei Yankelevich) and contextualizing commentary on Mandelstam's crowning poetic achievement, providing 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, it would contain pertinent bibliographic and biographical information, a timeline of the poet's life, relevant documents from his NKVD files, and comparisons between early publications and contemporary authoritative editions.

With new material available from opened NKVD/KGB files and the archives of the poet's wife, the renowned memoirist Nadezhda Mandelstam, the time is ripe to reevaluate Mandelstam's final poems. 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.

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. Mandelstam's exilic poems 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 political references and fused with the language of contemporary 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), 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 literary 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 as that 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 of what 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 Lubyanka 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 what he called 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 altered her husband's poetry to create the illusion that he never yielded to Stalin. Her changes affected the image of Mandelstam in the West and even led to translations that smoothed over the complexities of the poet's conflicted 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 "If I'm taken captive by our enemies..." it is important to know that there exist divergent perspectives of Mandelstam's use of the verb 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. (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 up 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: the 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. Since then, 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 also in 1973, and James Greene's translation of 1978. More recently, 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 aspects of the Voronezh poems, the translator acknowledges a lack of fluency in Russian and does not include any historical context or commentary.

Furthermore, most extant English translations followed the western academic view of Mandelstam as a heroic individual resistant to the Soviet regime and miss Mandelstam's critical layering of thematic and linguistic worlds. Mandelstam was not strictly a political poet—his political stance was sometimes one of accommodation, and other times resistance, or even proud submission, 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 original order, ascribing proper dates and footnotes in accordance with 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 canon. 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, as well as new archives acquired by Pavel Nerler and the Mandelstam Society, annotations made by Gasparov, Freidin, Nerler, and other scholars, as well as the commentaries of Nadezhda Mandelstam and other contemporaries, 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, providing in turn, 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.

A translation of Mandelstam's poetry requires almost as radical a transmutation of language as his originals and one that mirrors the poet's paradoxical relationship to Soviet ideology and beliefs. He 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.

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.

Brief Project Background: John High

As a poet and translator, I have spent many years researching and translating Mandelstam's work. With the assistance of four Fulbright Fellowships in Moscow, I met with Russian scholars, linguists, and poets, and was invited

to Voronezh where I met with experts and visited his home of exile. I bring a long-term study to this project. I have lived with the poetry. Mandelstam has, in fact, become an inevitable influence on my own books of poetry. As the primary editor of *Crossing Centuries: The New Russian Poetry*, along with collaborative book translations of Nina Iskrenko, Alexei Parshchikov, and Ivan Zhdanov, and engagement with dozens of translations and editorial work of other Russian poets, I have cultivated an editorial skill in negotiating the complexities of translation and compilation of manuscripts. I also have had the privilege of participating in (often organizing) countless conferences, talks, and festivals related to Russian poetry.

Work Plan: John High and Matvei Yankelevich

Along with Matvei Yankelevich and our collaborative work for twelve years, we are well prepared to complete this critical edition. As part of our final research we will return to Voronezh to meet with scholars, to Moscow to conclude our archival review and dialogues with the Mandelstam Society and scholars mentioned above, and to visit the transit camp where Mandelstam starved to death.

With the support of the NEH, Yankelevich and I will be able to complete our ongoing translations of the three notebooks together. Yankelevich and I will write a biographical introduction which will shed light on the idiosyncrasies of the writing, the period, and the poet, in a way that would be useful not only to the average reader, but to scholars and students of Russian literature. This introduction will include the story of the translations and make comparisons between variant versions of the poems.

In addition, I will compile a detailed chronology of the poet's life between 1934-1938, and will organize photos and all relevant arrest/NKVD files currently available, along with historic photos from the time period; I will also prepare a selection of significant correspondence between Pasternak and Akhmatova and other seminal figures (including Stalin and the Writers Union) to whom the Mandelstams sent his poems. My collaborator, meanwhile, will complete detailed annotations and commentaries to each of the poems in the collection (including comparisons of alternate versions). Yankelevich will also write a translator's introduction that will describe our collaborative method and research, and offer comparisons, where relevant, to previous translations. Together we will also compile a detailed bibliography.

It is most important to observe that Yankelevich and I will collaborate on all phases of the project, and moreover, this critical edition is only possible by our mutual work as translators, poets, editors, and scholars and the unique experience we bring to the project together.

Along with translations based on new textual and archival findings that more accurately reflect Mandelstam's original poems, the proposed book would open a window onto the paradox of Mandelstam's life and times. This material will make clear the circumstances of Mandelstam's exile, the implications of his own self-betrayal, the intermittent discovery of a mythic self, and his attempts at self-reformation with his own life and with Stalin's regime. The resulting book would constitute a major study of one of the great tragic poets of a tragic period of Soviet history.