

T H E       P O E M S       O F  
O S I P   M A N D E L S T A M  
T R A N S L A T E D   F R O M   R U S S I A N   I N T O   E N G L I S H  
B Y     I L Y A     B E R N S T E I N

The Poems of

OSIP MANDELSTAM

translated from Russian into English

by Ilya Bernstein

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## TRISTIA

I have learned the art of departure  
In loose-haired lamentations of the night.  
The oxen chew, the waiting continues –  
It is the last hour of the city watch.  
And I honor the ritual of that darkness  
When, bearing up the sorrow of the road,  
Tearful eyes looked into the distance  
And a woman's tears mixed with the muses' song.

Who can say, when hearing the word “departure,”  
What kind of separation we have in store?  
What does the rooster’s cry foretoken  
When a fire burns in the acropolis?  
And at the dawn of some new life,  
While an ox lazily chews its cud in the stall,  
Why does the rooster, herald of a new life,  
Beat his wings on the city wall?

And I admire the habitude of spinning –  
The shuttle whirrs, the spindle hums –



Look, here comes barefoot Delia already,  
Flying at us as swansdown flies!  
Oh, our life's meager foundation,  
How scanty is the language of joy!  
All has already been, and all shall be repeated,  
And only the moment of recognition is sweet.

Let it be so: a small transparent figure  
Lies on a spotless platter of clay –  
Even so a squirrel pelt looks spread-eagled.  
A maiden leans over it and studies the wax.  
It is not for us to tell fortunes about Erebus.  
What wax is to women, bronze is to men.  
Our lot is cast for us only in battle,  
While they in fortune-telling meet their end.

*1918*



I was washing in the yard at night.  
The firmament was brilliant with rude stars.  
On an axe, the starlight looked like salt –  
The barrel cooling, filled up to the brim.

The gates are tightly shut and locked  
And the earth in conscience most severe.  
No foundation is likely to be found  
As pure in truth as fresh canvas.

Like a grain of salt, a star melts in the barrel,  
And the water becomes even blacker –  
Evil fate more salty, death more pure,  
And the earth more frightening and truer.

*1921*



With the pink foam of fatigue on his soft lips,  
The bull in fury works the green waves,  
Snorting, without love for swimming – woman-crazed –  
The backbone is unused to the burden, and the labor is great.

The wheel of a dolphin rises from time to time  
And a prickly sea urchin appears now and again.  
Tender hands of Europa, take what you like!  
Where will you find a more wished-for yoke for the neck?

Bitter to Europa's ears is each mighty splash.  
The swelling sea is in turmoil on all sides.  
She is frightened, it seems, by the water's oily gloss  
And would like to slip down from the rugged back.

Oh, how much dearer to her is an oarlock's creak,  
A flock of sheep in the bosom of a wide deck,  
And over a high stern the flitting of fish –  
Her oarless rower continues to swim ahead.

*1922*



I know not since when  
This little song began –  
Who scrapes against it, what thief?  
What tinkling mosquito-prince?

I would like to talk  
About nothing once more,  
To scrape a match, to push  
The night awake with my shoulder;

To throw haystacks and haystacks apart,  
And that heavy hat of air;  
To rend, to tear the sack  
Where the caraway is packed.

So that the pink blood's link –  
The tinkle of these dried herbs –  
May be discovered, purloined  
Across lifetime, hayloft, and sleep.

*1922*



Up a little ladder I climbed  
To a hayloft in utter disarray –  
I inhaled the clutter of space,  
The detritus of milky stars.

And I thought: Why awake  
The swarm of drawn out sounds,  
In this eternal wrangle why chase  
Wondrous Aeolian scales?

The Big Dipper's stars are seven.  
The earth's good senses are five.  
The darkness swells and tinkles,  
And grows and tinkles again.

A hay wagon, enormous, unyoked,  
Athwart the universe stands.  
The ancient chaos of the hayloft  
Will tickle, prickle a man...

Not with our own skin's scales –  
Against the hair of the world we sing.  
We tune our lyres as if  
Anxious to grow a fleece.

Scythemen carry back  
Finches that fall from the nest –  
From burning rows I will break  
And to my own tone row retrogress.

To make the pink blood's link  
And the handless tinkle of grass  
Part ways: the one – made firm,  
The other – a nonsense dream.

*1922*

## THE AGE

My age, my beast, who will be able  
To peer into your pupils  
And with his own blood glue together  
The vertebrae of two centuries?  
Blood-the-builder gushes  
From the throat of earthly things,  
And a parasite merely trembles  
On the threshold of new days.

A creature, as long as it is living,  
Must carry its spine intact,  
And a wave plays in a backbone  
That is invisible to sight.  
Like a child's tender cartilage  
Is the age of an infant earth –  
But like a lamb they have sacrificed  
Life itself, bending low its head.

In order to free the age from bondage,  
To begin the world anew,  
The joints of days, gnarled and knotted,  
Must be tied together by a flute.

It is the age itself that causes  
Human sorrow to undulate  
And in the grass an adder breathes  
Like a golden measure of the age.

Buds will swell again as always  
And green sprouts will spurt,  
But your backbone has been broken,  
My wonderful pitiful age!  
And with a meaningless smile,  
You look backward, cruel and weak,  
Like a beast that used to be agile,  
On the tracks of your own feet.

Blood-the-builder gushes  
From the throat of earthly things,  
And the ocean's cartilage splashes  
Hot fish against tepid shores.  
And from the elevated bird net,  
From the humid heaps of blue,  
Indifference, indifference  
Spills over your mortal wound.

*1922*



## THE SLATE ODE

*We shall not know but from the voice  
What that thing was which scratched and struggled...*

From star to star – a mighty bond,  
The flinty path from the old ballad.  
The flint, the air – their common tongue –  
The flint with water – ring meets horseshoe.  
Upon the soft shale of the clouds  
There is a milky slate stone picture –  
Not the discipleship of the world,  
But the delirium of sheep dreaming.

We sleep upright in thickest night  
And have a sheepskin hat to warm us.  
The spring trickles back into the rock  
In chains of speech that whirl and warble.  
Written by fear, written by shifts,  
Using a milky lead pencil,  
This is the ripening rough draft  
Of the disciples of running water.

Goat cities of the precipice,  
The mighty layering of flintstones;  
And even so, another ridge –  
Sheep churches and habitations!  
They heed the sermon of the plumb,  
Water instructs them, time erodes them –  
And they have saturated long ago  
The air and its transparent forest.

Like a dead hornet beside the hive  
The bright day is swept out in shame  
And night-the-vulture carries back  
Burning chalk and feeds the slate stone.  
To erase the impressions of the day  
From the iconoclastic panel  
And like a chick to brush away  
Visions that are already transparent!

The fruit matured. The grapes grew ripe.  
The day raged as it always rages.  
With gentle games of knucklebones  
And with the coats of angry sheep dogs.

Like litter from the icy heights –  
The underside of green impressions –  
The hungry water runs,  
Twisting and playing like an animal,  
  
And like a spider, crawling toward me –  
Where every bond is splashed by moonbeams,  
On an astounding ascent,  
I hear the shrieking of the slate stone.  
I break the night, the burning chalk,  
To make a hard immediate record,  
I exchange noise for an arrow's song,  
I tune my strings for strident fury.

Who am I? Not a simple mason,  
And not a roofer or a shipwright –  
A double-dealer, with twin souls,  
Friend to the night, herald of the daylight.  
Blessed is he who has called flint  
A disciple of the running water,  
And who has fastened, on solid ground,  
Latchets around the feet of mountains.

And now I study the diary,  
The scratches of a slate stone summer,  
The flint, the air – their common tongue,  
With sediments of light and darkness.  
And I desire to thrust my fingers  
Into the flinty path from the old ballad,  
As into a wound – locking in a bond  
The flint with water – ring meets horseshoe.

*1922, 1937*



For the rattling glory of ages to come,  
For the high tribe of men,  
At the feast of the fathers I have forfeited my cup,  
And my joy, and my honor as well.

A wolfhound-age leaps up on my back,  
But I am not a wolf by blood.  
Better find me a coat of Siberian steppes  
And stuff me inside, like a hat...

Let me no more look at the coward, at the mire,  
At the bloody bones in the wheel,  
Let the blue foxes blaze the whole night through  
In their primordial beauty for me.

Lead me into the night, where the Yenisei flows  
And the pine tree reaches the star,  
Because I am not a wolf by blood  
And only my equal will take my life.

*17–18 March 1931, end of 1935*

## CANZONE

Is it true that I will see tomorrow –  
On my left the heart is beating, keep on beating! –  
You, the bankers of the alpine landscape,  
You, the shareholders of the gneiss's greatness?

With an eagle's professorial pupil –  
Trained for Egyptology and numismatics –  
There are birds there who are sullen and crested  
With tough meat and broad breastbones.

That is Zeus who's winding and adjusting  
With his cabinet-maker's golden fingers  
His marvelous onion-glasses –  
A present to the seer from the psalmist.

He looks through those binoculars of Zeiss's –  
A precious present from King David –  
And he notices all of the gneiss's wrinkles,  
Every pine tree, every flea-sized village.

I will leave the land of the Hyperboreans  
To saturate my destiny with eyesight.

I will say “selah” to the protector  
Of the Jews for his raspberry kindness.

The unshaven mountains aren't clear yet,  
And the stubble of the brushwood prickles,  
And the valley's fresh, clean as a fable,  
And green to the point of wincing.

I like field binoculars that offer  
A usurious facility to vision.  
Of the colors in the world, two haven't faded:  
Yellow jealousy and red impatience.

*26 May 1931*

## LAMARCK

There was an old man, as shy as a boy,  
An awkward, timid patriarch...  
Who is ready to cross swords for nature's honor?  
Why, of course, the fiery Lamarck.

If all living things are merely scribbles  
Made in one transient, dying day,  
Then on Lamarck's moveable ladder  
Let me take the bottom rung.

I'll come down to the annelids and the cirripeds,  
Brushing past lizards and snakes.  
Over pliant planks and gullies  
I'll decrease, like Proteus, and melt away.

I will wear a calcareous mantle  
And hot blood I will give up.  
I will curl myself into the seafoam  
And attach with suction cups.

We went past the orders of the insects  
That have shot glasses for eyes.



He said: all of nature is in fractures,  
Vision ends – you see for the last time.

He said: sonority is over.  
No more Mozart – you loved him in vain.  
Now begins the silence of cobwebs,  
An abyss beyond our strength.

And nature stepped away from us,  
As if she needed us not at all,  
And she slid a longitudinal brain,  
Like a rapier, inside a dark sheath.

She forgot, she came too late to lower  
The drawbridge for those who have  
Red inhaling and exhaling,  
Supple laughter, a green grave...

*7–9 May 1932*



Oh, how we love to dissemble  
And how easily we forget  
That in our childhood we are nearer  
Than in our riper years to death.

A sleepy child still holds a saucer  
And from it slowly sips a grudge,  
But I have nobody to pout at  
And am alone on every road.

The beast will moult, the fish will frolic  
In the oblivion of the waves –  
Oh, that I might forget how skewed  
Are human passions, human cares.

*14 May 1932*

## TO THE GERMAN LANGUAGE

*Freund! Versäume nicht zu leben,  
Denn die Jahre fliehn  
Und es wird der Saft der Reben  
Uns nicht lange glühn!*

*Ewald Christian von Kleist<sup>1</sup>*

To my own ruin, to my own contradiction,  
Like a moth flying toward a midnight flame,  
I want to make an exit from our speech  
For all that I will owe to it forever.

There is between us praise without flattery,  
And friendship to the hilt, without dissembling,  
So let us learn some seriousness and honor  
In the West, from a foreign family.

Poetry, you are well served by tempests!  
I remember an officer, a German –  
The handle of his sword was snared in roses  
And on his lips was the goddess Ceres...

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<sup>1</sup> *Friend! Fail not to live, / For the years fly / And the juice of the grapes / Will not long warm us!*

The fathers in Frankfurt were still only yawning.

There was as yet no word of Goethe.

Hymns were composed, and horses pranced

And leaped in place, like letters.

Tell me, my friends, in which Valhalla

Did you and I crack nuts together?

What kind of freedom did we inherit?

What were the landmarks that you left me?

And directly from the page of a yearbook,

Directly from its perfect freshness,

You stepped into the grave unfearful

As if going to the cellar for a bottle.

A foreign speech will be my outer skin,

And long before I dared to be born

I was a letter, I was a grapevine verse,

I was the book about which you dream.

When I slept without form or feature,

I was awakened by friendship, as by a gunshot.

God Nachtigall, give me the fate of Pylades

Or else pull out my tongue – I do not need it.

God Nachtigall, I am still being recruited  
For new plagues, for seven-year slaughters.  
The sound has narrowed, the words hiss and riot,  
But you are alive, and with you I am undaunted.

*8–12 August 1932*

## ARIOSTO

In all of Italy the most genial, the smartest,  
Courteous Ariosto has grown a trifle hoarse.  
He takes delight in cataloguing fishes  
And peppers all the seas with wicked nonsense.

And like a musician with ten dulcimers,  
Tirelessly tearing his narration's thread,  
He leads hither and yon, himself not knowing where,  
A tangled history of knightly scandals.

In the language of cicadas, a captivating mix  
Of Pushkin's sadness and Mediterranean bluster –  
He trips over his own lies, reveling with Orlando,  
And quakes from head to foot, transfiguring himself.

And he commands the sea: make noise, and do not think.  
And the maiden on the rock: lie uncovered...  
Just tell us more – from you, we cannot have enough,  
While blood runs in our veins, while our ears are full of noise.

And city of lizards, city without a soul,  
If only you gave birth to such men more often,

Oh hard Ferrara! Hurry, and tell us more,  
While blood runs in our veins, again right from the start!

Europe is cold. And Italy is dark.  
Power is repulsive, like the barber's fingers.  
But he continues to play the courtier to perfection,  
Cunningly smiling through the winged window

At the lamb on the hill, at the monk on the donkey,  
At the soldiers of the duke, slightly deranged  
From wine-drinking, the plague, and garlic,  
And at the infant sleeping in a net of flies.

And as for me, I love his furious amusement –  
His language meaningless and salty-sweet,  
Those lovely couplings of colluding sounds...  
Those pearly bivalves that I fear to pry apart.

Courteous Ariosto, perhaps an age will pass  
And into a single broad and brotherly blueness  
We will yet pour your azure and our Black Sea.  
... We were there, too. We, too, have heard those stories...

*4–6 May 1933*

## OCTAVES



I love the formation of tissue  
When after two, after three,  
Or after four attempts at inhaling  
I draw an unbroken breath.

And using the arcs of racing  
Sailboats to trace green shapes,  
Like a child that has never known a cradle,  
Space sleepily plays with itself.

*November 1933, July 1935*



I love the formation of tissue  
When after two, after three,  
Or after four attempts at inhaling  
I draw an unbroken breath.



And I feel so sweet and tormented  
When that moment arrives  
And suddenly an arc is extended  
Through this muttering of mine.

*November 1933 – January 1934*



When, after destroying the sketches,  
You diligently hold in your mind  
A period without heavy glosses,  
Intact in interior dark,  
And nothing holds it together  
But the pull of its own weight,  
It is as poised before paper,  
As a dome before empty skies.

*November 1933 – January 1934*



O butterfly, O Muslim maid,  
Cut open in a shroud,  
Lady Alive and Lady Dying,  
So large – so you as you are!

A biter with such large whiskers  
Bound up inside a burnous –  
O shroud unfurled like a banner!  
Fold your wings – dare I look?

*November 1933 – January 1934*



The jagged paw of the maple  
Cupped in a spandrel floats,  
And pictures can be assembled  
Out of butterflies' speckles on walls.

Certain mosques are alive  
And I can now surmise:  
Perhaps we are Hagia Sophia  
With countless numbers of eyes.

*November 1933 – January 1934*



Tell me, thou desert draftsman,  
Geometer of the Arabian sands,  
Can lines, unbounded, prevail  
Against the blowing wind?  
“Its Judaic tremor  
Never enters my thoughts!”  
His memories are of murmurs  
And murmurs of memories wrought...

*November 1933 – January 1934*



Schubert in water, and Mozart in birdsongs,  
And Goethe whistling on the winding path,  
And Hamlet reasoning with timid footsteps,  
Measured the pulse of the crowd and believed the crowd.

Maybe before there were lips, there was already a whisper,  
And leaves circled around in treelessness,  
And those to whom we dedicate our learning  
Prior to any learning acquired their traits.

*November 1933 – January 1934*



Overcoming the rigidity of nature  
The hard blue eye penetrated its law.  
In the earth's crust minerals riot  
And the cry strains at the breast like ore.

And the blind preformation stretches,  
As if along a road that curves like a horn,  
To understand space with its inner surplus –  
The implied petal and the implied dome.

*January – February 1934*



The sixth sense in a tiny appendage,  
The lizard's parietal eye,  
The snails and oysters in their cloisters,  
Or what the shimmering cilia say –  
  
The inaccessible, at such close distance!  
No looking, no untying it allowed –  
As if you have been handed a folded message  
And have to answer it right now...

*May 1932 – February 1934*



Out of bowls full of pins and pestilence  
Causality's delusions we drink.  
With hooks we touch infinitesimals  
Like the lightest of deaths.  
And where the spillikins have coupled  
The child makes not a peep –  
In little eternity's cradle  
A big universe sleeps.

*November 1933, July 1935*



And into the garden of magnitudes,  
Neglected, I step out of space,  
And I tear the unreal consistency  
And constancy of causes and effects.

And your textbook, infinity,  
I read on my own, alone –  
A leafless volume of remedies,  
Of problems where roots have grown.

*November 1933, July 1935*



What street is this?

This is Mandelstam Street.

What an impossible name –

No matter which way you turn it,

It comes out crooked, not straight.

Little about him was straightforward.

His temperament wasn't perfect.

And that is why this street,

Or more precisely, this pit,

Has come to be known

By the name of this Mandelstam...

*April 1935*





Yes, I lie in the earth, moving my lips,  
And what I say will be repeated by every schoolboy:  
The earth is nowhere as round as on Red Square  
And its slope has a voluntary firmness.  
Nowhere is the earth as round as on Red Square  
And its slope is unintentionally expansive,  
Rolling all the way down to the rice fields –  
As long as someone on earth lives in bondage.

*May 1935*



A wave like any other, that breaks the back of another,  
Hurls itself at the moon with all the sorrow of bondage,  
And the young swarming janissary waters –  
That citadel of sleepless undulations –  
Curves over, crashes, and carves a pit in the sand.

And through the air, crepuscular and fleecy,  
You seem to see a crenellated wall not yet begun  
And the soldiers of suspicious sultans falling  
From ladders of foam – detaching, splashing –  
While eunuchs coolly pass poison around.

*27 June – July 1935*



I will perform a smoky rite:  
Before me in disfavor lie  
The strawberries of a seaside summer:  
Carnelians with a double spark  
And an agate, like an ant.

But dearer to me is the simple soldier  
Of the deep sea – gray and wild –  
Who makes nobody glad.

*July 1935*

## THE BIRTH OF A SMILE

The instant when a child begins to smile,  
Partly in bitterness, partly in sweetness,  
The end points of its smile – all jokes aside –  
Become submerged in oceanic chaos.

The baby feels unconquerably good.  
With the corners of its lips it plays in glory  
And a rainbow-seam is already being stitched  
For the endless recognition of reality.

A landmass rises from the water on its paws –  
The snail of the mouth begins its migration –  
And one Atlantic moment strikes the eyes  
To the light music of surprise and admiration.

*9 December 1936 – 17 January 1937*



Not mine, not yours, but theirs  
Is all the power of the ultimate heirs:  
It is their air that sings in the hollow reed  
And with gratitude the snails of human lips  
Will draw upon themselves their breathing load.

They have no name. Enter their cartilage  
And you shall become an heir to their dominions.

And for human beings, for their living hearts,  
Meandering in their coils, their evolvings,  
You will delineate their joys  
And that which torments them – in tides, ebbing and flowing.

*9–27 December 1936*



In idleness inside a mountain an idol dwells  
In protective, boundless, idyllic chambers,  
While necklaces fall from his neck like drops of fat,  
Protecting the ebb and flow of his slumber.

A peacock played with him when he was a boy  
And he was fed on an Indian rainbow  
And given milk out of rose-colored clay  
And had no lack of cochineal.

Somnolent bone has been tied in a knot.  
Hands, knees, and shoulders have been made human.  
He smiles with his extremely quiet mouth.  
He thinks it in his bones, and feels it in his head,  
And struggles to recall his human figure.

*10–26 December 1936*



You're not dead yet, you're not yet all alone,  
As long as with your beggar lady friend  
You take delight in the greatness of plains  
And in the cold, the snow, and the darkness.

In splendid indigence, in mighty poverty,  
Live in tranquility and contentment.  
Those days are blessed, blessed are those nights,  
And the sweet labor of song is blameless.

He is unhappy who is cut down by the wind  
And fears the barking of dogs like his own shadow.  
And he is poor who, half alive himself,  
Goes begging for alms from a shadow.

*15–16 January 1937*



What shall we do with the deadness of level lands,  
With our wonder at their drawn out hunger?  
For that which we deem openness in them  
Is what we see ourselves falling asleep,  
And the question grows: where are they going, where have they been,  
And could it be that he now crawls on them  
Who is the one we scream about in our dreams –  
The Judas of a mankind yet to be?

*16 January 1937*





Do not compare: who lives is beyond compare.  
Embracing the equality of the plains  
I felt somehow caressed and scared,  
And the sky's circle was my pain.

And I addressed my servant the air,  
Awaiting tidings from him or service,  
And I prepared to sail, and sailed along the arc  
Of uninitiated journeys.

Where there is more sky for me, there I am ready to roam,  
And clear despair will not release me  
From the Voronezh hills, which are still young,  
To the all-human hills of Tuscany.

*18 January 1937*



Today I am in cobwebs made of light –  
Black-haired, fair-brown –  
Mankind needs light and clear blue air  
And it needs bread and Elbrus snow.

And there is no one to consult with me,  
While I will hardly find one on my own:  
Not in the Urals, not in the Crimea –  
There are no such transparent, weeping stones.

Mankind needs a poem mysteriously familiar,  
To be awakened by it all his days  
And in the sound of it to lave forever –  
As in a flaxen curl, a nut-brown wave.

*19 January 1937*



Where are the bound and fastened moans?  
Where is Prometheus – the rock’s support and buttress?  
And where is the hawk – and the yellow-eyed burst  
Of claws emerging from a lowered forehead?

All that is gone: tragedy is no more.  
But these lips that draw nearer, nearer –  
But these lips enter right into the core  
Of Aeschylus the freight handler, of Sophocles the logger.

He is an echo and a hello, a milestone – no, a plowshare.  
The stone-and-air theater of growing ages  
Has risen to its feet, and everybody wants to see everybody –  
Those who were born, the deadly, and the deathless.

*17 January – 4 February 1937*



As a celestial stone awakens the earth somewhere,  
An outcast poem has fallen, a poem that knows no father.  
The unimplorable – a find for the creator –  
Can be but what it is – none passes judgment on him.

*January 20, 1937*

[ODE TO STALIN]

If I were to employ charcoal for highest praise –  
For the unalloyed gladness of a picture –  
I'd cut up the thin air with the most subtle rays,  
Feeling of care and of alarm a mixture.  
So that the features might reflect the Real,  
In art that would be bordering on daring  
I'd speak of him who shifted the world's wheel,  
While for the customs of a hundred peoples caring.  
I'd raise the eyebrow's corner up a bit,  
And raise it once again, and keep on trying:  
Look how Prometheus has got his charcoal lit –  
Look, Aeschylus, at how I'm drawing and crying!

I'd make a handful of resounding lines  
To capture his millennium's early springtime,  
And I would tie his courage in a smile  
And then untie it in the gentle sunshine;  
And in the wise eyes' friendship for the twin,  
Who shall remain unnamed, I'll find the right expression,  
Approaching which, you'll recognize the father – him –  
And lose your breath, feeling the world's compression.

And I would like to thank the very hills  
Which bred his hand and bone and gave them feeling:  
Born in the mountains, he knew too the prison's ills.  
I want to call him – no, not Stalin – Dzhugashvili!

Painter, guard and preserve the warrior with your paint:  
Surround him with a blue and humid forest  
Of damp attention. Not to disappoint  
The father with images that are unwholesome, thoughtless,  
Painter, help him who's everywhere with you,  
Reasoning; feeling; always, always building.  
Nor I nor anyone else, but all mankind, that's who –  
Homer-Mankind will raise his praise's ceiling.  
Painter, guard and preserve the warrior with your paint;  
The woods of humanity sing after him, growing thicker –  
The very future itself, the army of the sage –  
They listen to him ever closer, ever quicker.

He leans over from the stage, as from a mount on high,  
Into the mounds of heads. The debtor far surpasses  
The suit against him: strictly kind the mighty eyes;  
The thick eyebrow at someone nearby flashing;

And I would draw an arrow to point out  
The firmness of the mouth – father of stubborn speeches;  
The plastic, detailed eyelid, and about  
Its outline, framing it, a million ridges;  
He is all frankness, recognition, copper, and  
A piercing earshot, which won't tolerate a whisper;  
At everyone prepared to live and die like men  
Come running playful somber little wrinkles.

Squeezing the charcoal in which all has converged,  
And with a greedy hand seeking only a resemblance –  
Trying to find only the resemblance's hinge –  
I'll crumble up the coal, pursuing his appearance.  
I learn from him, not learning for myself.  
I learn from him to show myself no mercy.  
And if unhappiness conceals the plan's great wealth,  
I will discover it amid chaos and cursing.  
Let me remain as yet unworthy to have friends,  
Let me remain unfilled with tears and with resentment;  
I still keep seeing him in a greatcoat, as he stands  
In an enchanted square, with eyes full of contentment.

With Stalin's eyes a mountain is pushed apart.  
The squinting plain looks far into the distance:  
Like a sea without seams, the future from the past –  
From a giant plow to where the sun's furrow glistens.  
He smiles a reaper's smile, the smiling friend,  
Reaper of handshakes in a conversation  
Which has begun and which will never end  
Smack in the middle of all of Creation.  
And every single haystack, every barn  
Is strong and clean and smart – a living chattel,  
A mankind miracle! May life be large.  
Listen to happiness's axis roll and rattle.

And six times over in my consciousness I keep,  
Slow witness to the labor, struggle, and harvest,  
His whole enormous path – across the steppe,  
Across Lenin's October – to its kept promise.  
Into the distance stretch the mounds of people's heads:  
I become small up there, where no one will espy me;  
But in kindhearted books and children's games, instead,  
I'll rise again to say the sun is shining.



The warrior's frankness: there exists no truer truth.  
For air and steel, for love and honor,  
One glorious name takes shape on reader's tongue and tooth,  
And we have caught it and have heard its thunder.

*January – February 1937*



Like chiaroscuro's martyr Rembrandt,  
I have gone deep into speechless time,  
And the flash of my burning rib  
Is guarded neither by those warders  
Nor by this warrior who sleeps beneath the storm.

Will you forgive me, splendid brother,  
And father and master of the black-green murk –  
But the eye of the falcon feather  
And the jewel box smoldering in midnight's harem  
Trouble to ill effect, trouble to no good end  
A nation being fanned by twilight's bellows.

*4 February 1937*



The carved-out curves of coves, the pebbles, and the blue,  
And the languid sail continued in a cloud –  
Having but glimpsed your worth, from you I am divorced:  
How bitter sea grass is – longer than organ fugues –  
That has such lying hair and smells of lingering lies  
And mellows the head with iron languor  
While rust gnaws gently at the shallow shore...  
So why have other sands been laid beneath my head?  
You, guttural Urals, you, broad-shouldered Volga,  
Or these here level lands – these are my only rights –  
And with my whole chest I must still inhale them.

*4 February 1937*



I sing when my throat is wet, my soul is dry,  
My vision damp enough, my mind not too too clever.  
Is the wine wholesome? Are the wineskins sound?  
Does my blood quicken with Caucasian fervor?  
And my chest grows tight – languageless – silent:  
It is not I who sing now – it is my breath that sings –  
My hearing scabbarded, my head as good as deaf...

A song not sung for gain is a tribute to itself –  
Gall to one's enemies, and a delight to friends.

A one-eyed song that grows out of the moss –  
A monody, the gift of a life of hunting –  
Sung in saddles and by upright men  
Who hold their breath free and open  
And have no other care but, honestly and sternly,  
To deliver the young free of sin to their wedding.

*8 February 1937*



Armed with the eyesight of subtle wasps  
Who suck on the earth's axis, the earth's axis,  
I sense all that I have witnessed  
And I rehearse it without purpose.

And I do not draw, nor do I sing,  
Nor do I drag the black-voiced bow:  
I only suck at life and take delight  
In envying the mighty, cunning wasps.

Oh, if only I myself might be forced  
Some day – bypassing sleep and death,  
Pricked by the air and by the summer's warmth –  
To hear the very axis of the earth...

*8 February 1937*



Into a lions' den and fortress I am cast  
And I sink lower, lower, lower,  
Under the leaven torrent of these sounds,  
Stronger than lions, more potent than the Torah.

Your call – how near, how near it comes  
To the commandments' birth and beginning –  
The threading together of Oceanic pearls  
And the chaste baskets of Tahitian women...

O landmass of chastising song, advance!  
With the bottom-heavy voice at its deepest.  
No wealthy daughter's sweetly savage face,  
O foremother, is worth your little finger.

My time is still unlimited: I, too,  
Have accompanied the universe's rapture  
Even as an organ playing at half voice  
Accompanies the voice of a woman.

*12 February 1937*

## VERSES ON THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER

### 1.

Let this air be the one to witness it,  
The long-range beat of its heart,  
Even in trenches active, omnivorous,  
A substance, a windowlessness.

These stars are such zealous denouncers!  
They just have to keep looking – what for? –  
In reproof of the judge and the witness  
At this substance, this windowlessness.

And the rain – that unfriendly sower,  
That manna without a name –  
Still remembers the crosses that dotted  
This V-shaped battle line.

And the people, cold and feeble,  
Will kill and starve and freeze,  
While inside his well-known monument  
The unknown soldier lies.

Teach me, you feeble swallow  
Who have forgotten how to fly,  
How without wings and a rudder  
To manage this grave in the sky.

And for one Mikhail Lermontov  
I will answer on all counts –  
How a hole in the air gapes for man  
And a coffin to straighten him out.

2.

Like grapes in wiggling formations,  
These worlds threaten our world.  
They hover, like stolen cities,  
Like golden slips of the tongue, accusations,  
Like berries of a poisonous cold –  
Expanding in tent-constellations,  
A dripping fat of gold...



3.

Through the ether, the decimalized  
Light of speeds crushed into a ray  
Begins a numeric transparency  
With rows of zeroes and pain.

And the field of fields brings a new field  
In a crane's triangular flight –  
The news comes in a light-dust update  
Bringing yesterday's battle's light.

The news comes in a light-dust update:  
“I'm not Leipzig, I'm not Waterloo,  
Not the Battle of the Nations, I'm something new  
And will light up the light of the world.”

4.

The mash and the hash of Arabia –  
Light of speeds crushed into a ray –  
And slanting its soles on my retina,  
The ray stands up on my eye.

Millions killed inexpensively  
Have made a path in the void.  
Good night! And farewell to them  
From the fortresses of the earth!

Incorruptible sky of the trenches,  
Sky of large-scale, wholesale death,  
After you, away from you, totality,  
My lips rush in the dark –

Past the shell-holes, the ditches and barricades,  
Above which he loomed in the gloom:  
The sullen, pockmarked, and humiliated  
Genius of overturned tombs.

5.

The infantry is good at dying  
And the chorus sings well in the night  
Above Schweik's crushed smile  
And the lance of Don Quixote  
And the bird-like legs of the knight.

And the man is friends with the cripple –  
There'll be work for the one and the other –  
And a family of wooden crutches  
Knocks about on the century's outskirts –  
Hey, fraternity, planet earth!

6.

Does the skull have to develop –  
From temple to temple, forehead-wide –  
So that through its cherished eye sockets  
Troops might be poured inside?

The skull develops from living –  
From temple to temple, forehead-wide –  
With the purity of its seams it teases itself,  
Shines as the dome of consciousness,  
Foams with thought, dreams about itself,  
The cup of cups and the fatherland's fatherland,  
With a starry stitch held together,  
The cap of happiness – Shakespeare's father...

7.

Shining clarity, perspicacity,  
Turns red and rushes back home,  
As if nightmares overloaded  
Both skies with their pallid flames.

Nothing serves us but what is in surplus –  
Up ahead is a reckoning, not a wreck,  
And fighting for air to subsist on  
Is no glory for others to seek.

And as I overload my consciousness  
With a nightmarish being alive –  
Aren't I drinking this brew by choice  
And eating my head under fire?

Is this why they prepared a receptacle  
For fascination in empty space –  
So that stars that were white initially  
Could turn red and rush back home?  
Do you hear, stepmother of the galaxy,  
Night, what is going to take place?

8.

Blood fills the aortas

And a whisper runs down the rows:

“I was born in ninety-four,

I was born in ninety-two.”

And as I squeeze in my fist

The faded year of my birth,

My bloodless mouth whispers:

I was born on the night from the second

To the third of January in one

Unreliable year and the centuries

Surround me with flames.

*1–15 March 1937*



Maybe this is the point of insanity,  
Maybe this is your conscience – this,  
The knot of life, wherein we are recognized  
And untied in order to exist.

Thus transcendent crystal cathedrals,  
Like a diligent spider, light  
Stretches out over ribs, then gathers them  
Once more in a single beam.

Beams of pure lines, grateful ones,  
Steered by a quiet ray  
Will gather, will meet someday  
Like guests with their heads unbarred.

Only not in the sky, but on earth,  
As in a house filled with song.  
How not to harm, not to frighten them?  
If only we live so long...

For what I am saying, forgive me...

Softly, softly read it to me...

*15 March 1937*



I am lost in the sky – what to do?  
He to whom it is near, reply!  
It was easier to ring for you,  
Dante's discuses nine.

Not I can be sundered from life.  
Its dream is: to kill, then to kiss.  
And my ears, my eyes, my eyeholes  
Overflow with Florentine grief.

Then lay not upon my temples  
Laurels that kiss and cut  
But tear my heart into pieces  
Of that blue ringing sound...

And when I sleep, after serving,  
In life to the living a friend,  
It will echo deeper and higher –  
The reply of the sky in my breast.

*9–19 March 1937*





I am lost in the sky – what to do?

He to whom it is near, reply!

It was easier to ring for you,

Dante's discuses nine,

Breathless, in black, in blue.

If I am not ancient, not useless –

You, who stand over me,

If you are a cupbearer and tapster –

Give me force without idle foam

To drink to the rotating tower

Of wrestling, reckless blue.

Starling house, blueness, blackness,

Samples of bluest shades –

Vernal ice, ice of spring, ice supernal –

Clouds, the wrestlers of charm –

Hush! They are pulling the bridle of a storm.

*9–19 March 1937*



So that sandstone – that friend of raindrops  
And wind – might preserve them within,  
What herons and bottles in bottles  
Were scratched in sandstone by kings.

Exemplary dog-heads embellished  
In Egypt the government's shame,  
Dead men were stuffed with rubbish,  
And bric-a-brac pyramids remain.

My confrere is a different story –  
A singer, but a sinner besides –  
I can still hear his teeth gnashing,  
Who claimed carelessness as a right...

His weak-willed estate – he unwound it,  
Two testaments' worth of yarn,  
And he left, in parting, in chirping,  
A world as deep as a skull.

The mischievous neighbored the Gothic  
And he spat on spiderweb rights:  
Cocky schoolman and thieving angel,  
The incomparable Villon, François.

He's an outlaw in heaven's clergy –  
No dishonor to sit next to him –  
And when the end of the world approaches –  
Even then, skylarks will ring.

*18 March 1937*



Blue island made great by its potters,  
Green Crete! Their offerings are baked  
In the resonant earth: can you hear them –  
Those dolphin fins underground?

This sea is remembered and present  
In clay made happy by firing,  
And the fossilized force of the vessel  
Has cracked into ocean and passion.

Give me back what is mine, blue island,  
Flying Crete, give me back my labor  
And nourish the fired vessel  
From the teats of the flowing goddess.

This took place and was sung in the blue,  
Before Odysseus, long ago,  
Long before food and wine  
Were ever called “yours” and “mine.”

So recover your health and radiate,  
You star of the ox-eyed skies!  
And a flying fish is an accident –  
Just the water itself saying “yes.”

*21 March 1937*



The Greek flute's theta and iota –  
As if unsated by word of mouth –  
Not handmade, beholden to no one,  
Walked its valleys, ripened, repined.

And one can't put it down and leave it,  
Or still it by clenching one's teeth,  
Or push it into words with one's tongue,  
Or push it apart with one's lips.

And the flautist will never know peace:  
He imagines that he is alone,  
That he modeled his native sea  
In purple clays long ago...

Whispering with vibrant, ambitious,  
Whisper-remembering lips,  
He is anxious to be resourceful  
And he parcels out sounds with thrift.

In his wake we shall not repeat him  
By worrying clay in our hands,  
And when I was filled with the ocean  
My own measure grew hateful to me...

And my own lips are unlovely –  
For murder grows from that root –  
And I dwindle, unwillingly dwindle,  
The equinoctial time of the flute.

*7 April 1937*



The pear tree and the bird cherry have taken aim at me –  
Their scattershot force strikes at me unfailingly.

Flower clusters and stars, stars and flower clusters –  
What is this twin authority? Which inflorescence is trustworthy?

Could it be their whipping, could it be their blossoming  
That strikes the air weightlessly, flails it with their unity?

And the double fragrance's sweetness has no permanence:  
Straining and dragging – it is mixed and fragmentary.

*4 May 1937*



[POEMS TO NATALYA SHTEMPEL]

1.

Leveling herself upon the hollow ground,  
With loveliness in her uneven steps,  
She walks, keeping a little bit ahead  
Of her quick girlfriend and young man companion.  
She is carried forward by the cumbered freedom  
Of this her vivifying imperfection  
And it may well be that a lucid guess  
Would like to linger for a while in her steps –  
About the fact that this springtime weather,  
For us, is the foremother of the tomb,  
And that it will begin again forever.

2.

There are women who belong to the damp earth,  
Whose every step is like resounding sobbing.  
To escort the resurrected and to be the first  
To greet the dead is their calling.

To demand tenderness from them is a crime  
And to part with them is beyond our powers.  
Today, an angel; tomorrow, a worm from the grave;  
And the day after – nothing but a shadow...  
That which was movement once shall be removed...  
Flowers are immortal, the sky is all-embracing,  
And what will be is no more than a promise.

*4 May 1937*



*A Note on Mandelstam's Poems*

When Mandelstam wrote, "I never write. I alone in Russia work from the voice," he was being literal. Here is how Viktor Shklovsky, Mandelstam's neighbor for a time in the early 1920s, described him: "With his head thrown back, Osip Mandelstam walks around the house. He recites line after line for days on end. The poems are born heavy. Each line separately." And here is how Sergey Rudakov, a young philologist and poet who visited Mandelstam in exile in Voronezh, described him in 1935: "Mandelstam has a wild way of working... I am standing in front of a working mechanism (or maybe organism, that is more precise) of poetry... The man no longer exists; what exists is – Michelangelo. He sees and remembers nothing. He walks around mumbling: 'Like a black fern on a green night.' For four lines, four hundred are uttered, literally... He does not remember his own poems. He repeats himself and, separating out the repetitions, writes what is new."

In whose company does such a poet belong, who found no company in all of Russia? Happily, in the company of Yeats, who wrote: "I have spent my life in clearing out of poetry every phrase written for the eye, and bringing all back to syntax that is for ear alone." Or is writing from the voice not yet the same thing as writing for the ear? In Mandelstam's poem about the ears – "Not mine, not yours, but theirs..." – he calls them the ultimate heirs of the air, which becomes songful with their dominionship over it. This poem seemed to me to have a place already prepared for it in English when I translated it and Mandelstam's formula for the ears as the air's heirs

received lexical welcome, confirmation, approval. And when he talks about a “breathing load” in the same poem, he imagines human lips inhaling an air heavy with what is hearable in it.

A line that is arrived at only after a hundred alternatives have been spoken out loud and pushed aside is a line that very probably has nowhere left to go but where it finally went. If such poems are born heavy, then their weight is incantatory. Each line in them imposes a far-flung silence around itself and, freed from any interference, makes itself memorable. This was a feature of Mandelstam’s poetry from first to last, and it is the truest measure of his uniqueness in Russian poetry.

“Any period in poetic speech, be it a line, a stanza, or a complete lyrical composition,” wrote Mandelstam, “must be regarded as a single word.” It was the birth of such single words, we may fairly say, that Shklovsky and Rudakov witnessed when they described how Mandelstam made poems. And it is not as texts, but as indelible single words – formally if not functionally akin to magic spells – that we possess Mandelstam’s lines and poems when we retain them in memory.

*When, after destroying the sketches,  
You diligently hold in your mind  
A period without heavy glosses,  
Intact in interior dark,  
And nothing holds it together  
But the pull of its own weight...*

I would write the biography of Mandelstam as a poet in terms of the progressive amplification of these incantatory acoustics in his work. Mandelstam had architectural ambitions for his poetry when he started out – that *Stone* in the title of his first book was meant for building – and as a young poet he bundled them up with his poetic diction. A silence surrounds the lines of his early poems, but it is easy to interpret it, thanks whether to these poems’ subject matter, whether to their stateliness of form, as a silence that might be expected to surround classical style or elevated speech. The “pull of their own weight” is apparent in them, but it is attached to something outside itself that seems to call for such weight, and so partly supplants, partly usurps its pull.

One such poem is included here: the programmatic “Tristia,” which opens with Ovid saying goodbye to his wife and closes with Hector saying goodbye to Andromache. The poet eats the bread of departure, which is leavened by these leavetakings, and finds in it the sweetness of recognition.

It was only after he returned to poetry in 1930, after a five year absence from it, that Mandelstam fully liberated his incantatoriness from its former ceremoniality, to use two probably impossible words. Or to put it more tidily: from the silence surrounding his lines, every trace of rhetoric vanished. Or, emblematically: in his last and longest work of prose about poetry, “Conversation about Dante,” (1933), Mandelstam shows himself as devoted as ever to the image of the stone, but his architectural metaphors are replaced by

geological ones. And with this poet's leap from would-be architect to would-be geologist, which he accomplished without ever taking his hand off that same stone, began Mandelstam's great period of 1930–1937, which undoubtedly cast a transformative light on all his earlier work.

\*

Mandelstam has a poem that may be called an initiation. It was written in the fall of 1921 in Tiflis, Georgia, after he learned that the poet Nikolai Gumilev, his friend and mentor, had been shot. The poem begins: "I was washing in the yard at night," and it is included here. Mandelstam also has a poem that was called (by Boris Pasternak, when Mandelstam recited it to him) a suicide. This is his epigram on Stalin, which was written at the end of 1933 and was the cause of his first arrest. I have not been able to translate it, except for its first line: "We live all but numb to the land underfoot."

Mandelstam also has a poem that is a monstrosity: his ode to Stalin, written in the middle of his last and most creative period in the spring of 1937. Joseph Brodsky called this poem – which begins: "If I were to take up charcoal for highest praise..." – Mandelstam's Charcoal Ode (as opposed to his "Slate Ode," about which below). This proposed label rings true to me and makes me think of a stanza from another Mandelstam poem in which drawing with charcoal is mentioned, written three years earlier, on the occasion of the death of Andrey Bely:

*And in the crowd stood an engraver  
Preparing to transfer to true copper  
What a cartoonist charcoaling paper  
But nigglingly had time to capture.*

One wonders about the copper plate engraving for which the ode to Stalin would have been just a charcoal sketch. Would it bring out different details differently? Did Mandelstam himself leave it in some other poem? Perhaps it is there in the same ode, looked at from a different angle. A Charcoal Ode, then, with a Copper Ode inside, resulting in a strange double vision – a monster poem.

This was the first Mandelstam poem I translated, and my translation was a youthful prank: I wanted to try something I called “simultaneous translation of poetry,” which involved translating a poem as quickly as possible and taking any liberties necessary, while sticking as closely as possible to the rhyme and meter scheme of the original. The translation of the ode to Stalin in this collection is the result of that exercise. I have included it because it seems to work as a poem, if read briskly, and because it seems to me that doing it as a prank was the proper way to translate a poem which in some strange way was itself a prank – or maybe an anti-prank, if one can imagine such a thing...

As for the “Slate Ode,” it is Mandelstam’s hermetic *ars poetica*. Written in 1923, it is an exciting poem to read in Russian, with a violently achieved conceptual compactness, which might bring to mind Hart Crane’s “Atlantis.” I have tried to do this grand syllogism



justice in English. Since it quotes from no less a figure in the history of the English language than the gravedigger from *Hamlet* in its penultimate stanza, it deserves to be visited by English speakers.

A couple of things about this poem should be said to dispel some superficial obscurity and to leave behind only that which is genuinely dense. It was inspired by an unfinished poem that the eighteenth-century poet Gavril Derzhavin wrote down on a writing slate three days before his death, sometimes called “On Corruptibility” (1816):

*The river of time in its rushing current  
Bears all the affairs of men away  
And drowns in the abyss of oblivion  
Nations, kingdoms, and kings.  
And if through sounding lyre and trumpet  
Something does happen to remain,  
Then eternity's maw will devour it  
And enfold it in the common fate.*

Both writing slates and the slate pencils used for writing on them were made of slate (two different kinds), so that “slate” sometimes refers to the writing implement and sometimes to the tablet – its meaning should be clear from context in the poem. After slate pencils, chalk also came to be used for writing on slate, which is also mentioned in the poem. Finally, the Russian word for slate is a loan word from the German *Griffel*. This sounds very close to “griffon” and gives rise to a series of obviously phonetically

motivated bird images in the poem. Hence, the “shrieking of the slate stone” on a precipice above the rushing current.

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The first Mandelstam poem that I translated not as a prank was the “Verses on the Unknown Soldier,” written shortly after the ode to Stalin. This poem, which Mandelstam defined as an oratorio, is an apocalypse – his *Apocalypsis cum Figuris*. It concludes with a roll call of the dead, among whom the poet numbers himself.

Mandelstam had already put himself in the position of one already dead, but much less anonymously dead, in a poem written two years earlier: “Yes, I lie in the earth, moving my lips...” This poem belongs to a tradition in Russian poetry of translations and rewritings of Horace’s *Exegi monumentum aere perennius*, which had first been translated by Mikhail Lomonosov in 1747 and then rewritten by a whole succession of poets, whose versions referred to their predecessors’ in Russian more than to the Latin original. The most famous of these rewritings, which indeed became a poem “repeated by every schoolboy” in Russia, is Pushkin’s from 1836:

*I have raised a monument to myself not made by hand.  
The people’s path to it shall not become overgrown.  
It has uplifted its unruly head higher  
Than Alexander’s column.*

*No, all of me will not die – my soul in the sacred lyre*

*Will outlive my ashes and avoid decay  
And glory shall be mine as long as in the sublunary world  
At least one poet remains.*

Grimly reimagining Pushkin's monument in 1935, Mandelstam places himself underground, the earth bulging above him, the bulge stretching out over the earth.

During the last year of Mandelstam's exile in Voronezh, he and his wife became friendly with a young woman named Natalya Shtempel, for whom Mandelstam wrote two poems that he described, after reciting them to her, as "the best thing I've written."

*There are women who belong to the damp earth,  
Whose every step is like resounding sobbing.  
To escort the resurrected and to be the first  
To greet the dead is their calling.*

Who is the resurrected? Who is the dead? Obviously, Mandelstam himself – already dead during his life, and beckoning his listener to be the first person to greet him as such; already resurrected during his life, again in her company. But death and resurrection do not follow their usual order: we are shown the poet first as newly resurrected, by means of this poem, and only after this for the first time as dead, also by means of this poem. This is not the death of one who dies namelessly among the many; neither is it a death that leaves behind a monument inscribed with an impossible name; rather, it is the death-in-life of a poet and its proper realm poetry

itself.

Natalya Shtempel walked with a limp, hence the opening lines of the first of the two poems dedicated to her:

*Leveling herself upon the hollow ground,  
With loveliness in her uneven steps,  
She walks, keeping a little bit ahead  
Of her quick girlfriend and young man companion.*

The young man and woman mentioned in the fourth line were simply friends of Shtempel's with whom she and Mandelstam had gone out walking on a May night shortly before Mandelstam wrote this poem, but I like to imagine that "her quick girlfriend" and "young man companion" referred also with a sweet-and-sad smile to Shtempel's other friends – Mandelstam and his wife themselves.

December 11, 2013



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Earlier versions of some translations have appeared in *Persephone*, *Circumference*, *Raritan Quarterly*, *Jubilat*, *Ars Interpres*, *Calque*, and *Osip Mandelstam: New Translations* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2006).

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