MANDELSTAM, Osip (1891-1938)

One of the major Russian modernist poets of the twentieth century. Along with Nikolai GUMILEV and Anna AKHMATOVA, he was a chief figure of ACMEISM, a movement that sought to supplant the esoteric and mystical poetry of then-dominant SYMBOLISM by capturing the beauty of the real world in clear and concrete images. Mandelstam’s first two collections of poetry *Stone* (1913) and *Tristia* (1922) cemented his reputation as an artist of leading importance. In *Stone* Mandelstam conceptualized the poet as an architect-craftsman who builds a breathtaking structure word by word. Here and in his literary essays Mandelstam reaffirmed a deeply humanistic worldview, a credo that led him to identify with a medieval vision of man-centered culture. Mandelstam’s individualistic worldview did not accord well with the Soviet emphasis on materialism and collectivism and after 1917 he found himself increasingly marginalized. Mandelstam was arrested and exiled in 1934, and re-arrested and sentenced to eight years in the Stalinist GULAG in 1938. He died in December 1938 in a transit camp in Siberia. His wife Nadezhda Mandelstam preserved much of his archive and published an important set of memoirs about their life together that appeared in English in the 1970s.

Born in Warsaw, Poland, Mandelstam spent his school years and much of his adult life in St. Petersburg (after 1914 Petrograd, after 1924 Leningrad). The city, its architectural splendor, and its connection to death, the underworld and mythological motifs are recurring themes in his poetry. Mandelstam is the author of the Acmeist manifesto “Morning of Acmeism” (written between 1912 and 1914 but published in 1919), in which he conceived of the poet as craftsman rather than emotionally charged seer. He identified personally and artistically with the Acmeist worldview even long after the movement was outmoded following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

**Mandelstam at age 23 in 1914**

Mandelstam’s first two collections of poetry *Stone* (1913) and *Tristia* (1922) cemented his reputation as an artist of leading importance. In *Stone* Mandelstam returned to his concept of the poet as an architect-craftsman who builds a breathtaking structure word by word. Mandelstam’s verses and essays from this period are characterized by deep erudition and a sense of Russia’s organic connection to European culture, an understanding that was continued with the poems of *Tristia*. The title of this second book refers to Ovid’s eponymous collection of poetry from the period of his exile on the Black Sea. Through Russia’s location on the opposing shores of the same body of water, Mandelstam posits his own connection to the classical world and its mythologies. In *Tristia* the poet communicates the deep melancholy of Ovid’s exilic period, a condition that Mandelstam once described as “a yearning for world culture.”

**I have the present of a body – what should I do with it**

**so unique it is and so much mine?**

**For the quiet joy of breathing and being alive,**

**tell me, whom have I to thank?**

**I am the gardener and the flower,**

**in the dungeon of the world I am not alone.**

**On the glass of eternity has already settled**

**my breath, my warmth**

**On it a pattern prints itself,**

**unrecognizable of late**

**Let the lees of the moment trickle down –**

**the dear pattern is not to be wiped out.**

**from *Stone***

**Translation David McDuff**

**We shall die in transparent Petropolis**

**Where Persephone reigns over us.**

**We drink with every breath the deadly air**

**And every hour is our last.**

**Terrible Athena, goddess of the sea,**

**Remove your mighty helmet of stone.**

**We shall die in transparent Petropolis,**

**Where Persephone reigns, not you.**

**From “I am cold…” in *Tristia* (poem written 1916)**

**Translation Bruce MeClelland**

Mandelstam’s humanistic and individualistic worldview did not accord well with the Soviet emphasis on materialism and collectivism and after 1917 he found himself increasingly marginalized. Ekeing out an existence as a translator, Mandelstam experienced a five-year long poetic writer’s block, which he referred to as a period of “poetic deafness,” from 1925-30. During this period he continued to produce prose, essays and literary reviews. His autobiographical novella *The Noise of Time* (1925) and virtuoso, disjointed tribute to post-revolutionary St. Petersburg *The Egyptian Stamp* (1928) are highly regarded pieces of prose writing that did not fit well with the Soviet literary aesthetic. By 1934 Mandelstam was disenfranchised enough to write and recite to a small circle an insulting poem about Stalin, an act that was denounced and, in this period of preparation for the Great Terror (1936-38), led to Mandelstam’s arrest and interrogation. Mandelstam was sentenced to exile following a famous phone call by Stalin, during which poet and future Nobel Prize laureate Boris Pasternak was consulted on Mandelstam’s poetic importance. Mandelstam served out his exile in the southwestern city of Voronezh and returned to writing poetry. His *Voronezh Notebooks,* published posthumously, are marked by a turn to a less elevated, more colloquial language.

**Mandelstam’s arrest photo 1938.**

Mandelstam was released from exile in 1938 and re-arrested and sentenced to eight years in the GULAG (considered to be a death sentence) in the same year. For decades the circumstances and exact date of his death were unknown, but it is now accepted that he died in December 1938 in a transit camp in Siberia. Mandelstam’s literary legacy, including many important unpublished manuscripts, were preserved by his wife Nadezhda Mandelstam, who hid and entrusted manuscripts, committed a large amount of her husband’s poetry to memory and managed to evade the notice of the Soviet authorities by living in small towns and constantly moving from place to place. In the 1970s she published a series of remarkable memoirs about her life with Mandelstam (they met in 1919) that illuminate the reality of existence in Leninist and Stalinist Russia. Mandelstam was posthumously rehabilitated during Krushchev’s period of de-Stalinization, and his poetry was republished and translated into English and many world languages. He is currently regarded, along with a handful of poets including Anna Akhmatova, Alexander Blok, Boris Pasternak and Marina Tsvetaeva, as a preeminent representative of Russian modernism.

**An early photo of Nadezhda Mandelstam**

Megan Swift

University of Victoria

References and Further Reading

Brown, Clarence. (1965) *The Prose of Osip Mandelstam.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Brown, Clarence. (1973) *Mandelstam.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973.

Clarence Brown created the first book-length English-language studies and translations of Mandelstam’s work. They are an excellent starting point for any serious study of Mandelstam’s poetry and prose.

Cavanagh, Clare. (1995) *Osip Mandelstam and the Modernist Creation of Tradition.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

An excellent examination of Mandelstam as a self-conscious participant in the inheritance and creation of European modernism.

Harris, Jane Gary. (1979) *Osip Mandelstam, Complete Critical Prose.* Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis.

This volume includes a translation of the Acmeist manifesto “Morning of Acmeism” as well as a complete set of Mandelstam’s literary essays and reviews. These tend to be dense and can be difficult, but also illuminating about the ideas behind Mandelstam’s poetry and prose.

Isenberg, Charles. (1987) *Substantial Proofs of Being: Osip Mandelstam’s Literary Prose.* Columbus: Slavica Publishers, Inc..

A well-argued examination of major themes in Mandelstam’s prose works.

Mandelstam, Nadezhda. (1970) *Hope Against Hope: A Memoir.* Trans. Max Hayward. New York: Atheneum.

Mandelstam, Nadezhda. (1974) *Hope Abandoned.* Trans. Max Hayward.

Nadezhda Mandelstam’s memoirs are incredibly detailed, subjective, emotional and evocative of the Lenin and Stalin eras. They are simultaneously controversial and the best source of information on Mandelstam’s life and art, and the major figures he interacted with, in those years.

Nancy Pollak, (1995) *Mandelstam the Reader.* Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

A well-written and well-argued investigation of the importance of the act of reading, or consuming, texts for Mandelstam’s creation of his own art. Also a good investigation of Jewish themes in his work.

Source URLs for images.

Figure 1. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Osip_Mandelstam>

Figure 2. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Osip_Mandelstam>

Figure 3. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nadezhda_Mandelstam>