

# Osip Mandelstam

# 137 (The Ode on Slate)

## I

A mighty joining, star with star,  
The flint path of the earlier song  
Where, in the tongue of flint and air,  
Flint touches water, horseshoe ring.  
But on the soft shale of the clouds  
Is running milk-like a rough draft.  
Not an apprenticeship to the worlds,  
Enfevered dreams of sheep adrift.

## II

In dense night on our feet we sleep  
Warm underneath a sheepskin cap.  
A murmur backwards, springwards stretches:  
A chain's, a chiff-chaff's, human speech's.  
Here scribbles fear, earthquake, a rift.  
A milk-like stick of lead is scratching:  
The students of running water sketching  
Their first rough draft.

## III

Steep as a city of goats they hang,  
Flint's mighty strata! Still, aslope  
The immense precipices cling  
Churches, settlements of the sheep,  
to whom the plumb-line preaches,  
Whom time hones, whom the water teaches.  
O air's transparent forest, full  
From having long since eaten all!

## IV

A hornet lying dead near the hive,  
The pied day was swept out disgraced.  
She-harrier Night comes. Bearing live  
Bright chalk she feeds slate in its nest.  
From the blackboard, that iconoclast,  
Wipe what the day was scrawling. Shake  
From the cupped hand its nestling-like  
Transparent visions.

V

Fruit swelled. Tall grew the vines.  
As a day rages, so that day.  
A tender game of knucklebones.  
At noon fierce sheepdogs' fur. A cry  
Like refuse from the icy heights,  
The seamy side of green images,  
The hungry water curls or splits,  
Playful and shy, whelp-like, it plays

VI

And like a spider to me it creeps  
Over joints splashed by the moonlight  
And there on the astonished steps  
I hear the screeching of the slate.  
That's your voice, Memory?... Human speech's  
Voice, tearing night in two parts, teaches  
Or hurtles black slate forestwards  
Or seems torn from the beaks of birds.

VII

By his voice only a man detects  
What scratched there, what scored with its claws  
If on the calloused slope one draws  
No line but as the voice directs.  
I flare, like chalk, I split the night,  
For the firm instant's right I write,  
Trade a steep noise for arrows' singing,  
Trade order for an eagle's winging.

VIII

Who am I? No upright stone-mason,  
No roofer, not a shipwright; aye,  
A double-dealer double in soul,  
Night's friend, the skirmisher of day.  
Blessed is he who first called flint  
The student of running water! Blessed  
Is he who by their latchets bound  
The hills' feet to the solid ground.

IX

Therefore I study the diary,  
White summer-scratches in the slate,

The tongue formed out of flint and air,  
The dark streak and the streak of light,  
And want to put my finger there,  
Into the flint path of that song  
As into a wound, to find what tie  
Makes water flint, makes horseshoe ring.

Moscow 1922

(*transl. Karl Maurer*)

**N o t e s.** Original meter iambic tetrameter, rhymed A B A B with full rhymes (whereas my English often uses slant rhymes: "star / air, song / ring" etc. The rule I set myself is that whereas the vowels may vary, final consonants must be identical). The original has no half-lines (from dislike of "filler" I left three: in II, III, IV) and no unrhymed lines. In V, line 4, "A cry" is not in the Russian; apart from that one place I am not conscious of having added anything. Most of it is as "literal" as a prose version would make it.

On this poem there is a splendid study by Omry Ronen, *An Approach to Mandelstam* (The Magnes Press: Jerusalem 1983) pp. 59-223. See also M. L. Gasparov, "Mandel'stam's 'The Slate Ode': The History of the Text and The History of Its Meaning" in *Philologica* 2 (1995), online at [http://www.rvb.ru/philologica/02eng/02eng\\_gasparov.htm](http://www.rvb.ru/philologica/02eng/02eng_gasparov.htm) (a brief essay, really excellent so far as it goes, but it wholly ignores Mandelstam's classical sources).

Of the poem's many palpable "subtexts" many are Russian and seem best ignored here. Even the most densely allusive poem is *not* a game of echoes but must stand on its own feet! But three especially constant "subtexts" should be quoted here. The first two are present simultaneously -- sometimes in conflict, sometimes unified -- throughout the poem, most plainly in the first and last stanzas:

(A) Mikhail Lermontov (summer 1841):

Выхожу один я на дорогу;  
Сквозь туман кремнистый путь блестит,  
Ночь тиха. Пустыня внемлет Богу,  
И звезда с звездою говорит.

I go out alone on the road.  
The flinty path glistens through the mist.  
The night is quiet, the wilderness is listening to God,  
And star is talking to star.

(B) F. R. Derzhavin (an unfinished ode, scrawled by him on a slate board not long before his death on 8 July 1816, and found by those who found his body):

Река времен в своем стремлени  
Уносит все дела людей  
И топит в пропасти забвенья  
Народы, царства и царей.

А если что и остается  
Чрез звуки лиры и трубы,  
То вечности жерлом пожрется  
И общей не уйдет судьбы.

The river of time in its flowing  
Bears off all works of men  
And drops into the abyss of oblivion  
Peoples, kingdoms, kings.  
And if something should yet remain  
Through sound of lyre and trumpet  
It will be covered by eternity's maw  
And it won't escape the common fate.

(C) Ovid, *Ex Ponto* 4.10.3-8. The italicized words are those italicized by Omry Ronen:

ecquos tu *silices*, ecquod, carissime, *ferrum*  
duritieae confers, Albinovane, meae?  
*gutta cavet lapidem*, consumitur *anulus* usu,  
aterritur *pressa vomer aduncus* humo.  
*tempus edax* igitur *praeter nos omnia* perdit,  
cessat duritia mors quoque victa mea.

And what *flint* is there, my dearest, what *iron*,  
Albinovanus, that you (can) compare with my hardness?  
Water-drop hollows stone, the *ring* is worn by use,  
the *curved ploughshare* thinned by pressing soil.  
Thus *gnawing Time* destroys all things but me;  
even death hangs back, frustrated by my hardness.

See also a passage closely kin to this, Ovid, *Tristia* 4.6, quoted below apropos of stanza V; also perhaps Ovid, *Amores* I.15.31 ff. But Mandelstam took most to heart, I think, the passage quoted above; for I think that he echoes it also in an early essay. He says that there are some times (like his own) inimical to man; and when that happens "man must be the hardest thing on earth; and he must be to it as a diamond is to a pane of glass".

As for "subtext" (B), Mandelstam refers to it in his essay "The 19th Century":

Derzhavin on the threshold of the nineteenth century scratched on his slate board a few verses which could serve as the *leit-Motiv* of the whole oncoming century: [*he quotes the poem*] ... (The 19th century) did not like to speak of itself in the first person but loved to project itself on the screen of strange epochs... With its dreamless thought, as with an immense mad projector, it cast histories out over the dark sky; with gigantic illuminated tentacles it rummaged in the wastes of time; it plucked out of the darkness this or that chunk, burned it up with the blinding glitter of its historical laws, and indifferently allowed it to drop into nothingness as if nothing had happened.

--i.e. it tore things wholly from context; it strangely played with disconnected pieces, to which it attributed this or that external, alien meaning; so that everything became "interesting" yet nothing much.

And very illuminating seem to me some passages from M.'s memoir *The Noise of Time*

(transl. Clarence Brown, *Mandelstam*, p. 122-3). Like the ode, this prose was written in 1923 (see Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Abandoned* p. 429):

I repeat--my memory is not loving but inimical... Where for happy generations the epic speaks in hexameters and chronicles I have merely the sign of the hiatus, and between me and the age there lies a pit, a moat, filled with clamorous time, the place where a family and reminiscences of a family ought to have been. What was it my family wished to say? I do not know. It was tongue-tied from birth--but it had, nevertheless, something that it might have said. Over my head and over the head of many of my contemporaries there hangs congenital tongue-tie. We were not taught to speak but to babble--and only by listening to the swelling noise of the age and the bleached foam on the crest of its wave did we acquire a language ["foam" being one of M.'s favorite images of chaos, pure discontinuity, formlessness, non-being. Now he tries to relate this to the revolution:].

...Nature--revolution--eternal thirst--inflammation (perhaps it envies those ages when thirst was quenched in a quiet home-like way by simply going off to the place where the sheep were watered... it dares not, it is afraid to approach the sources of existence.)

But what did these "sources of existence" ever do for the revolution Very indifferent was the flow of their rounded waves! For themselves they flowed, for themselves they joined together to form a current, for themselves they boiled and spouted! "For me, for me, for me, says the revolution. "on your own, on your own, on your own," answers the world.

"... [p. 132] Looking back at the entire nineteenth century of Russian culture--shattered, finished, unrepeatable, which no one must repeat, which no one dares repeat--I wish to hail the century, as one would hail settled weather, and I see in it the unity lent it by the measureless cold which welded decades into one day, one night, one profound winter, within which the terrible state glowed, like a stove, with ice.

And in this wintry period of Russian history, literature, taken at large, strikes me as something patrician, which puts me out of countenance: with trembling I lift the film of waxed paper above the winter cap of the writer. No one is to blame in this and there is nothing to be ashamed of. A beast must not be ashamed of its furry hide. Night furred him. Winter clothed him. Literature [all--but esp. 19th-c. Russian literature] is a beast. The furriers--night and winter."

This last image points to the wool in stanza II and the sheepdogs' fur in V. Compare also (from "Midnight in Moscow" [1932] as translated by Clare Cavanagh p. 238): "I'll tighten up the bottle-weight / On the wide-swinging kitchen clock. / Time's fur is remarkably rough, / But just the same I love to catch it by the tail: / After all it's not to blame for its own flight, / And I guess it cons us just a tiny bit." (Or as R. and E. McCane: "I shall tighten the weight / of the fast-running kitchen clock. / My God, this time is rough, / and yet I have to catch it by the tail. / It is not to blame for its own pace, / and yet it is a petty thief.")

From the above notes, and from those that follow, you can sense what a stupendous, dream-like, dream-dense concentration of images this poem is. *It would be a great mistake to be demoralized by this.* Remember that (as Alexander Blok discerned, when watching him at a poetry reading) Mandelstam worked in part with his dreams. Bear in mind that this could be seen as a limitation as well as a virtue, and that no poem exists for the sake of our tracking down its "subtexts." So long as your reading is not plainly wrong or poor, you can simply ignore a line's origins and--giving this as much time as it needs; years, perhaps--make your own exact, strong sense of it. After all, with regard to these "subtexts," that is what Mandelstam, who certainly was not conscious of some of them, did.

stanza I) ---*Flint and air*. Lermontov's life was a "flinty path," his death (recalled in other poems) an "airy grave". ---*The fevered dreams of sheep adrift*. I.e. not true attentiveness to that river of Time

which "bears into oblivion / Peoples, kingdoms, kings." He wrote in a rough draft: "What kind of ransom should be paid / for apprenticeship to the universe / so that the black slate pencil be guided (trained) / for firm and instant writing." As soon the poem will show, one escapes the power of time's current by listening to it very intently--by which I mean, among other things, extreme attentiveness to one's own voice's sound. (Or as Robert Frost: the poet's voice is a "white backwards wave" that rises rhyme-like in the stream of time, finding patterns, finding sense in it; the poem's voice is an eddy, a catch in the current, a being flung backwards towards the source, towards the eternal, as if in prayer.)

But this doesn't happen yet. These "sheep" are not poets; or even if they are, they are still submerged like others in the noise of time. That queer movement begins (only briefly, then relapses) in the third line of the next stanza.

"Derzhavin's chalk, the milky foster brother of the stream and lightning" (rough draft).

On *ring* and *horseshoe*, see my note to the last stanza.

stanza II) ---*Underneath the warm sheep-skin cap*. The sheepskin cap is two things at least. It is (A) the starless overcast fleecy sky, (B) the arrogant "iconoclastic" intelligentsia (of whom Mandelstam longs not to be one) whose orientation (as we shall see) is a mirage. --*a rift*. I.e. among other things the revolution. ---*a chain's...* I don't know if Ronan is right, that this recalls the magnetized iron rings of poetic inspiration in Plato's *Ion* (though M. does recall that in his poem "Heaviness, tenderness"), but I feel that, because of Slate Ode's first line, Ronan is right to cite Job 38: 31 ff.: "Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades, or loose the cords of Orion?" (Vulgate, "Numquid coniugere valebis micantes stellas Pleiades, aut gyrum Arcturi poteris dissipare?")

--*their first rough draft*: its *roughness* pervades the whole poem because, as Nadezhda Mandelstam once said, "Poetic speech itself is '*infinitely raw, more unfinished than so-called conversational speech*.' ... in poetry everything is said anew, as if for the first time; and there are far fewer frozen phrases and word combinations than in conversational speech" (N. Mandelstam, *Mozart and Salieri*, tr. Robert McClean, Ann Arbor 1973, p. 107; the words I italicized are from M.'s "Conversation about Dante").

stanza III) Note that this stanza's meaning (as always) is double. The sheep "taught" by the plumb-line are foolish, yet wise: the plumb-line recalls both free-masonry and the bible; time's whetting of them and water's teaching recalls Ovid (quoted below, on stanza VI). The vertiginousness of this landscape represents moral, social and religious hierarchy, which Mandelstam *respects* even though he finds it repugnant. And just think about this: the guardians of these sheep are the sheepdogs of stanza 5. (They are "fierce" yet "kind", they have a "kind fierceness", like the dogs in M.'s poem "What steepness in the crystal pool!")

stanza IV) In what follows, it seems, "the day" is not the past but the recent past, "yesterday," as in M.'s essay "Storm and Stress": "Whoever does not understand the new has no comprehension of the past, and whoever understands the past must also comprehend the new. The whole tragedy arises when, instead of the real past with its deep roots, we get "yesterday." This "yesterday" is easily understood poetry, a hen-house with a fence, a snug little corner where domestic fowl cluck and peck about. This is not work done upon the word but rather respite from the word.'

Note also: a hive represents creativity, the honey--that "underground sun" or "night sun" or "tender, heavy net"--of poetry. The gaudy wasp, not a maker of honey, had no business there.

In a rough draft, for the present "chalk" (MEL) Mandelstam had "honey" (MED); and that sub-image, that submerged image still lingers.

stanza V) Ronen says p. 152, "However, the most important subtext of these lines, which presents the pattern of relationship between time, maturation, and erosion (i.e. the creative and destructive aspects of M.'s 'teacher' and 'beast')" -- and which uses exactly the same images that M. uses -- is Ovid's *Tristia* IV, vi, 9-15 (my transl.):

tempus ut extensis tumeat facit uva racemis,  
vixque merum capiant grana quod intus habent;  
tempus et in canas semen producit aristas,  
et ne sunt tristi poma sapore cavet,  
hoc tenuat dentem terram renovantis aratri,  
hoc rigidas silices, hoc adamanta terit.

Time makes the grapes swell in spreading clusters,  
so that they can scarcely contain the wine within,  
time pushes the seed into in white wheat ears,  
and ensures that fruits taste not bitter,  
thins the tooth of the plow making the earth new,  
wears away hard flint, wears away diamond.

stanza VII) ---*Flaring like chalk*: the Russian says lit. "like burning chalk", and note that "burning" is an epithet he elsewhere applies to honey (as noted above). ---*arrows singing... eagles..*: M. echoes Pindar; for example, these places (my translations; M. read them in fine-textured German translations): *Ol. 2. 83-92* "Many are the swift arrows beneath my arm / inside the quiver, / that speak to the knowing (*sophoi*): but for the crowd they need / interpreters. Knowing (*sophos*) is he whom nature teaches much; the self-taught are boisterous / in their chattering, like daws, and in vain the pair of them babble / against the holy bird of Zeus [i.e. the eagle] / Now at the mark aim the bow! Come, heart,-- whom are we hitting, / letting fly arrows from a kindly heart? We aim at Akragas" (etc.) That is the likeliest passage, since it has both images. But M.'s memory always conflates; and for the eagle see also *Nem.3.80-82*, *Nem. 5.21-3*; and for the arrows, these two other passages (it is impossible not to quote them--they are too enchanting!): *Ol. 9. 5-14* "But now from the Muses' far-shooting bow / shower ruddy-lightning-wielding Zeus and the sacred / height of Elis / with arrows like these, / (Elis) which once the Lydian hero Pelops / won as the finest dowry of Hippodameia; / [10] and let fly a winged sweet / arrow towards Pytho! [i.e. Delphi]. For no mere words that fall short do you fit (to the string) / while trilling the lyre for the wrestling of a man / from illustrious Opous"; and *Nem. 6. 27-30* "I hope / by having spoken loudly to have hit the mark in the center / as by having shot from a bow"

stanza VIII) This again probably echoes Pindar; e.g. *Nem. 5. 1 ff.* (my transl.; again Pindar speaks of himself, enchantingly): "I am no sculptor, to make statues that rest standing on the same base, -- / no, but on every merchantman, in each skiff, sweet song, / go forth from Aigina, to announce that / Lampon's son Pytheas (etc.)

But probably M. is also recalling *Hamlet* Scene 5, Act 1, which he also knew in translation: "Who is he that builds stronger than either the mason, the shipwright or the carpenter?" And the last two lines (re putting the finger in the wound; unloosing the latches of the sandals [an image here reversed] recall of course the New Testament, John 20:25.

I suppose that he does mean touching the open wound of human suffering (which is also Christ's suffering); and that he identifies it with the old song because that too was an exposing of

human suffering. By rewriting the old song, i.e. by reinventing it, he explores it, discovers its origin; crosses the gap between two ages; turns the horseshoe into a ring. (And makes the horseshoe ring: this pun of course in English, not Russian; but to me seems utterly right, because this poem was written not long after #100, the Horseshoe Ode.)

A FURTHER NOTE (*e-mail sent once to students, when they seemed to need more help*)

The above notes try to describe objectively what to me seem poetic facts; this 'summary' is only my opinion about them (how I myself make sense of them). The river whose roaring pervades the poem is both destructive and creative -- so destructive, that it is like an image of Non-being itself; so creative, that it is like an image of the Creation itself. Therefore basically one discerns in it two things: (A) the dull roar of the river of time, bearing into oblivion all "peoples, kingdoms, kings", erasing "yesterday, with its house and picket fence" etc.; yet (B) the at first incoherent stirring of poetic speech, of "unpolished, infinitely raw" poetic speech, that is, speech free of all the petrified clichés that our daily speech tends to have. This is that mere "murmur", that "backwards, springwards stretches, / A chain's, a chiffchaff's, human speech's." Seen in this its second aspect, this river is the spring -- or rather, is near the spring, and from the spring -- in which all life arises; and the murmur of poetic speech is like a reenactment of the Creation. Poetic speech is not the Creation (Mandelstam is not a Symbolist gnostic, putting human speech in place of divine), but by prayer, it is close to it, is in touch with it, is kin to it.

This "chain" of a river also recalls the magnets of inspiration in Plato's *Ion*. Poetic inspiration is like a sudden quick, sweet glimpse of the creation.

But what relation, what cause and effect, can there be between these opposites, destruction and creation? Only by looking the human condition -- utter destruction -- right in the face -- that is, by entering a dark night of the soul -- can you be oriented towards the Creation. Poetry, like simple real prayer, is nothing but orientation towards the source of all light. It is nothing but -- in pitch blackness -- facing in the right direction, to where a new day will dawn, which is still invisible, except in one poet's inner hearing. Hence, "a double-dealer double in soul, / night's friend, the skirmisher of day." Among all poets known to me, to me Mandelstam alone seems so literally "skirmisher of day" that he seems to me (not always, but again and again) a kind of prophet, telling me of my own future.

When you see a whole world crumbling, the only path to be taken is that of "inner hearing". When you do this attentively enough, you begin to tap that "voice" all your own that is audible only in certain dreams. That is, you begin to speak with the very voice of your soul. That is why M. wrote in "Fourth Prose", "I alone in Russia work with the voice, while all round the unmitigated muck write."

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