



The Selected Poems

Osip Mandelstam , Clarence Brown (Translator) , W.S. Merwin (Translator) , ????

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Osip Mandelstam is a central figure not only in modern Russian but in world poetry, the author of some of the most haunting and memorable poems of the twentieth century. A contemporary of Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsveyeva, and Boris Pasternak, a touchstone for later masters such as Paul Celan and Robert Lowell, Mandelstam was a crucial instigator of the "revolution of the word" that took place in St. Petersburg, only to be crushed by the Bolshevik Revolution. Mandelstam's last poems, written in the interval between his exile to the provinces by Stalin and his death in the Gulag, are an extraordinary testament to the endurance of art in the presence of terror.

This book represents a collaboration between the scholar Clarence Brown and W. S. Merwin, one of contemporary America's finest poets and translators. It also includes Mandelstam's "Conversation on Dante," an uncategorizable work of genius containing the poet's deepest reflections on the nature of the poetic process.

The Selected Poems Details

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From Reader Review The Selected Poems for online ebook

Vit Babenco says

“Sleeplessness. Homer. Taut sails.

I have counted half the catalogue of ships:

That caravan of cranes, that expansive host,

Which once rose above Hellas.”

Antiquity and modernity, ancient times and nowadays – in a single stanza **Osip Mandelstam** establishes a link between eras making his poetry timeless.

“When the city moon looks out on the streets,

And slowly lights the impenetrable town,

And darkness swells, full of melancholy and bronze,

And songs of wax are smashed by the harshness of time;

And the cuckoo is weeping in its stone tower,

And the ashen woman descends to reap the dead world,

Quietly scattering huge spokes of shadow,

And strews yellowing straw across the floorboards...”

Imagery, tropes, metaphors, symbolism and allegory: in the hands of a master, they are capable to work miracles.

“We exist, without sensing our country beneath us,

Ten steps away our words evaporate,

But where there are enough for half a conversation

We always commemorate the Kremlin’s man of the mountains.

His fat fingers slimy as worms,

His words dependable as weights of measure.

His cockroach moustache chuckles,

His top-boots gleam.”

It isn’t often that the poesy is priced so dear. **Osip Mandelstam** was a genius who paid with his life for his poetry.

Mike Young says

from NOÖ [14]:

Read a lot of this on a bus in the fog and drizzle of a deeply enwintered Massachusetts. Osip Mandelstam was a Russian through the busy times: the Revolution, Stalinism, wars. He died in a gulag. You can tell he knew the dirt and the wine both without lying. You can tell he liked clapping until his cheeks turned red. You can tell he liked weeping enspooned with a beautiful woman as they both lay on a frozen lake and withstood the wind that was keeping the ice below them from giving way. You can tell he liked whispering to bears instead of riding them. I finished this book exhausted on a train, and everything I dog-eared was because it named a feeling I’d felt namelessly before, like: “After midnight the heart picks the locked silence / right out of your hands.” To bring it full around: “After midnight the heart has its banquet, / gnawing on a silvery mouse.”

El says

Osip Mandelstam was a member of the Guild of Poets, aka Acmeism, an early 20th-century Russian literary movement with other recognizable names such as Anna Akhmatova. Mandelstam's anti-establishment poetry was difficult to publish and after denouncing Stalin in 1934 he was sent into exile (his first but not last experience). The thing about Russian poetry (specifically of the non-conformist variety) is that is deliciously dark, and cold, and real:

O Lord, help me to live through this night -
I'm in terror for my life, your slave:
to live in Petersburg is to sleep in a grave.

The big difficulty I have with excerpted poetry in collections such as this is that I am always wondering what I am missing. I have a problem with someone telling me how I should read something, so reading a selection of someone else's choices makes me grumble inside. However, for a first experience in reading Mandelstam I have to say the choices here were quite yummy and it certainly makes me want to read his full poetry. Extra-delicious is *Conversation about Dante* included at the end.

Meow!

Jeff Jackson says

I'm at a loss for words about these astonishing stanzas. Concise, swift, and unflinching, they're saturated by a sort of black sun beauty. Steeped in Greek mythology and Dante's verses, Mandelstam was thrust into exile by Stalin and unwillingly became a poet of desperation and abandonment, writing stinging lines about what happens when history decides to grind your mind and body into dust. There are echoes of Paul Celan here, but Mandelstam's poetry in this superb translation offers its own singular rhythms. I wish I could physically push this slim book into YOUR hands, the way I wish somebody had slipped it into mine years ago.

Juliet Wilson says

I admit I picked up this book in a second hand shop with no expectations other than I should read some Mandelstam. I ended up really loving his writing. Osip Mandelstam was born in 1891 and is considered to be one of the great Russian poets of the era. He died in 1938 on his way to a Siberian labour camp.

Mandelstam's poetry is lyrical and thoughtful and in this edition beautifully translated by Clarence Brown and W S Merwin (the new USA poetry Laureate). Most of the poems in this selection are not titled but are given numbers.

There is a very high level of political engagement in Mandelstam's poetry and a strong feeling for nature. Some of his poems draw a picture of a Nature pushed to the margins and almost seem prophetic, for example, 116 talks about the plight of the bees:

For us, all that's left is kisses
tattered as the little bees
that die when they leave the hive.

But lay to your heart my rough gift,
this unlovely dry necklace of dead bees
that once made a sun out of honey.

Osip Mandelstam - Selected Poems translated by Clarence Brown and W S Merwin and published by Penguin

Jenna says

My interest in Osip Mandelstam was initially piqued when I learned that he had a whirlwind love affair with my homegirl Marina Tsvetaeva in 1916. Brief though it was, this liaison was the inspiration for Tsvetaeva's bittersweet poem "Where does such tenderness come from?" ([link](#)), which was set to music by Dmitri Shostakovich in 1973. Funny how these short-lived sexual connections, these absent-minded stirrings of one type of brine with another, end up leaving such a huge footprint on the universe.

My copy of Mandelstam's "Selected Poems" was brought out by the same publishing house from whence issued my copy of Tsvetaeva's "Selected Poems" (i.e., Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics -- those sea-green paperbacks whose glossy covers are so pleasant to stroke with one's entire hand).

On the cover of Marina's book, there is a black-and-white photo of Marina herself, unsmiling, with thick dark eyebrows and a timeless Cleopatra-esque haircut.

On the cover of Osip's book, there is an abstract painting of a red rectangle superimposed on a background of wavy blue and gray lines.

Why such a difference?

Maybe it has something to do with the fact that Marina's poetry is largely autobiographical -- and sometimes even egoistical, in the best sense of the word:

"In a world where most people
are hunched and sweaty
I know only one person
equal to me in strength."

In contrast, Osip's poetry often seems to take a broader, more cosmopolitan, more historical perspective, and his poetic voice is sometimes self-deprecating and self-effacing:

"I have accompanied the rapture of the universe
As muted organ pipes
Accompany a woman's voice."

The texture of Marina's poetry is often harsh and jagged and wild, whereas Osip's neoclassicism-tinted poetry is almost always confined within marble columns of rhyme and meter.

Of course, this assessment of Marina's and Osip's differences is overly simplistic: it is easy to argue that these two Russian giants in fact have more similarities than differences. Like Tsvetaeva's, Mandelstam's poetry is built around an autobiographical framework (his is the archetypal tale of a poet who seals his own fate by opposing his homeland's tyrannical government). Like Tsvetaeva, Mandelstam is not deficient in self-worth and sometimes even displays a fair amount of braggadocio ("My blood is not wolf's blood/And only an equal shall kill me"). Both Tsvetaeva and Mandelstam enjoy incorporating Greek myths into their poetry: Tsvetaeva likens herself to the star-crossed Amazon queen Penthesilea, while Mandelstam compares himself and his wife Nadezhda to that most primal of mixed-race couples, Zeus and Europa.

I think I will be returning to these poems again and again.

Jim says

Great literature cuts the ground from under your feet. If you think you understand wholly, you are deluding yourself. As Osip Mandelstam writes in the single prose piece in this collection, an essay entitled "Conversations About Dante":

It is only very conditionally possible to speak of poetic speech or thought as sonorous, for we hear in it only the crossing of two lines, and of these one, taken by itself, is absolutely mute, while the other, taken apart from its instrumental metamorphosis, is devoid of all significance and all interest and is subject to paraphrase, which is in my opinion the truest sign of the absence of poetry. For where one finds commensurability with paraphrase, there the sheets have not been rumpled; there poetry has not, so to speak, spent the night.

Repeatedly, as I read the poems in this collection, I had to confess my inadequacy. I would read a stanza, say to myself that it was great, and start wondering wherein that great lay. Some lines hit you like a sledgehammer wielded with immense force, such as in this lines written while the poet was imprisoned in Siberia:

You took away all the oceans and all the room.
You gave me my shoe-size in earth with bars around it.
Where did it get you? Nowhere.
You left me my lips, and they shape words, even in silence.

Then there are the striking images, as in Poem 129 written in 1922:

The scalp tingles with cold.
Nobody speaks out.
Time pares me away
Like the heel of your shoe.

Life overcomes life.
The sound fades out.
Something is always missing.
There's no time to remember it.

You know, it was better before.
But there's no comparing
how the blood used to whisper
and how it whispers.

It's plain that some purpose
is moving these lips.
The tree-top laughs and plays
into the day of the axes.

What an image! I think I will find myself coming back to these poems because they continue to resonate. As I do not know Russian, I cannot evaluate the translation by Clarence Brown and W. S. Merwin. To the extent that it repeatedly stops me in my tracks, wondering, it is highly successful.

Edward says

Foreword, by Nadezhda Mandelshtam

Foreword, by Donald Davie

Translator's Preface

Introduction, by Donald Rayfield

from **Stone** (1913, 1916, 1923 and 1928)

--The careful muffled sound
--Suddenly, from the dimly lit hall
--To read only children's books
--On pale-blue enamel
--What shall I do with the body I've been given
--A sadness beyond words
--Words are unnecessary
--*Silentium*
--Ear-drums stretch their sensitive sail
--Like the shadow of sudden clouds
--I grew, rustling like a reed
--Sultry dusk covers the couch
--How slowly the horses move
--Light sows a meagre beam
--*The sea-shell*
--I hate the light
--In the haze your image
--No, not the moon, but a bright clock-face
--*The traveller*
--*The casino*
--*The Lutheran*
--*Hagia Sophia*
--*Notre Dame*

--Poisoned bread, satiated air
--Horses' hooves ... The clatter
--There are orioles in the woods
--Nature is Roman, and mirrored in Rome
--Sleeplessness. Homer. Taut sails
--Herds of horses gaily neigh or graze

Unpublished in the Struve/Filippov editions

--Newly reaped ears

Two poems first published by Struve/Filippov, 1964

--The hunters have trapped you
--The old men of Euripides, an abject throng

from **Tristia** (1922)

--How the splendour of these veils and of this dress
--We shall die in transparent Petropolis
--This night is irredeemable
--Disbelieving the miracle of resurrection
--Out of the bottle the stream of golden honey poured so slowly
--Spring's transparent-grey asphodels
--*Tristia*
--Sisters: heaviness and tenderness bear the same insignia
--Return to the incestuous lap
--When Psyche -- life -- descends among shades
--I have forgotten the word I wanted to say
--For the sake of delight
--Here is the pyx, like a golden sun
--Because I had to let go of your arms
--When the city moon looks out on the streets
--When, on my lips a singing name, I stepped
--I like the grey silences under the arches

from **Poems** (1928)

--I was washing at night in the courtyard
--To some, winter is arrack and a blue-eyed punch
--Rosy foam of fatigue on his sensual lips
--As the leaven swells
--I climbed into the tousled hayloft
--*My time*
--*Whoever finds a horseshoe*
--*1 January 1924*

Two poems published in Novy Mir (1931 and 1932)

--*Armenia*
--*Batyushkov*

Poems published posthumously

--*Self-portrait*

--I was only in a childish way connected with the established order
--Help me, O Lord, to get through this night
--For the resounding glory of eras to come
--I drink to the blossoming epaulette
--*Impressionism*
--*Ariosto*
--We exist, without sensing our country beneath us
--The body of King Arshak is unwashed
--Your narrow shoulders are to redden under scourges
--*Black earth*
--Yes, I'm lying in the earth, moving my lips
--You took away my seas and running jumps and sky
--My country conversed with me
--For those hundred-carat ingots, Roman nights
--A wave advances -- one wave breaking another's backbone
--I shall perform a smoky rite
--I shall not return my borrowed dust
--I can't make sense of today
--Like a belated present
--I would sing of him who shifted the axis of the world
--You still haven't died, you're still not alone
--I look the frost in the face, alone
--Oh, these suffocating, asthmatic spaces of the steppes
--Plagued by their miraculous and all-engulfing hunger
--Don't compare: anyone alive is matchless
--What has contended with oxide and alloys
--The mounds of human heads disappear into the distance
--Listening, listening to the early ice
--A little boy, his red face shining like a lamp
--Where can I put myself this January?
--Like Rembrandt, martyr of light and dark
--Breaks of the rounded bays, shingle, blue
--I sing when my throat is damp, my soul dry
--Eyes once keener than a sharpened scythe
--Armed with the eyesight of narrow wasps
--I am plunged into a lion's den, a fort
--If our enemies take me
--Life's reticulations loosen, madness looms
--This is what I want most of all
--This azure island was exalted by its potters
--As if words were not enough
--I raise this greenness to my lips
--With her delightful uneven way of walking

Notes and Acknowledgements

Further Reading

Eadweard says

It may be, night, you do not need me;
Out of the world's abyss,
Like a shell without pearls,
I am cast on your shores.
Indifferently, you stir the waves
And immitigably sing;
But you shall love and cherish
This equivocal, unnecessary shell.
You shall lie down on the sand close by,
Apparelled in your raiment,
And bind to the shell
The colossal bell of the billows.
And your whispering spray shall fill,
With wind and rain and mist,
The walls of the brittle shell –
A heart where nobody dwells ...

Where a Roman judged a foreign people
A basilica stands and, first and joyful
Like Adam once, an arch plays with its own ribs:
Groined, muscular, never unnerved.
From outside, the bones betray the plan:
Here flying buttresses ensure
That cumbersome mass shan't crush the walls –
A vault bold as a battering-ram is idle.
Elemental labyrinth, unfathomable forest,
The Gothic soul's rational abyss,
Egyptian power and Christian shyness,
Oak together with reed – and perpendicular as tsar.
But the more attentively I studied,
Notre Dame, your monstrous ribs, your stronghold,
The more I thought: I too one day shall create
Beauty from cruel weight

There are orioles in the woods,
and length of vowels Is the sole measure in accentual verse.
But only once a year is nature lengthily protracted
And overflowing, as in Homer's measure.
This day yawns like a caesura:
Quiet since morning, and arduous duration;
Oxen at pasture, and a golden indolence
To extract from the reed one whole note's richness

Some on their coins depict a lion,
Others a head;
Various tablets of brass, of gold and bronze
Lie with equal honour in the earth.
The century, trying to bite through them, left its teeth-marks there.
Time pares me down like a coin,
And there is no longer enough of me for myself

Your narrow shoulders are to redden under scourges, Redden under scourges and to burn in frosts.
Your child-like arms are to lift heavy irons,
To lift heavy irons and to sew mail-bags.
Your tender soles are to walk barefoot on glass,
Barefoot on glass and blood-stained sand
And I am here to burn for you like a black candle,
Burn like a black candle and not dare to pray.

Joaco says

I don't usually read poetry, but this book was something else. I am coming here from Tolstaya's The Slynx and it was totally worth it. I have copied below some excerpts from three different poems I really liked:

This one had a hugely emotional impact on me, I could almost feel his regret bleeding through the page:

I could not keep your hands in my own,
I failed the salt tender lips,
so I must wait now for dawn in the timbered Acropolis.
How I loathe the ageing stockades and their tears.

This one was written during his time living in Ukraine while the great famine was going on. He was living in Strykym:

Nature wouldn't know her own face.
From the Ukraine, the Kuban, terrible ghosts.
And the famished peasants, in felt shoes,
stand guard at their gates, never touching the rings.

And the poem which landed him on jail, tortured, and mentally broke him:

But whenever there's a snatch of talk
it turns to the Kremlin mountaineer,

the ten thick worms his fingers,
his words like measures of weight,
the huge laughing cockroaches on his top lip,
the glitter of his boot-rims.

An excellent author. Also, he read Poe's poems which is was a great surprise as well because he referenced some of them. Even if you do not like poetry, it would be a good option to try it out.

Kate Savage says

Mandelstam once said: "Only in Russia is poetry respected, it gets people killed. Is there anywhere else where poetry is so common a motive for murder?" He wrote some non-conforming stanzas and ergo died in transit to a Soviet labor camp, after living for years in exile. (My favorite line of his about Stalin is: "He rolls the executions on his tongue like berries. / He wishes he could hug them like big friends from home.")

I don't love Mandelstam's early poetry, about honey and tree boughs and birds in flight. So I'm also complicit, because what morphs these words into magic is his terror. Instead of musing on Persephone's bees he begins to write:

No, it's not for me to duck out of the mess
behind the cabdriver's back that's Moscow.
I'm the cherry swinging from the streetcar strap of an evil time. What am I doing alive?

We'll take Streetcar A and then Streetcar B,
you and I, to see who dies first.

His work is spectacular.

You took away all the oceans and all the room.
You gave me my shoe-size in earth with bars around it.
Where did it get you? Nowhere.
You left me my lips, and they shape words, even in silence.

Chris Schaeffer says

My copy is so dog-eared it can't even stay closed unless its wedged between two other objects.

Antonio Delgado says

There is finesse in these poems that without being romantic are not quite existential either. Certainly history

and political struggles have a weight on the poems, but they are not historical or political poems. If there is a tension is between a western heritage and an eastern life and cultural experience.

Steve says

Osip Mandelstam in the eyes of the NKVD

*The people need poetry that will be their own secret
to keep them awake forever,
and bathe them in the bright-haired wave
of its breathing.*

Osip Mandelstam (1891-1938) was born in Warsaw to a wealthy Jewish family that was sufficiently well connected to be allowed residence in St. Petersburg and to enroll young Osip in the elite Tenishev School (in which the very aristocratic Vladimir Nabokov would matriculate a decade later). Like most Russian intellectuals Mandelstam welcomed the Revolution, but earlier than most he distrusted and then despised the Bolsheviks who purged their way to the levers of power. His friend and fellow Acmeist (an "ism" in which the Imagists could have recognized themselves), Nikolay Gumilev, was placed before a firing squad already in 1921, so Mandelstam would have been in trouble even if he didn't openly detest the new regime. His travails in the gulag and in exile are well known due to his wife's, Nadezhda's, famous memoir *Hope Against Hope* and need not be rehearsed here.

Mandelstam and Alexander Blok are regarded by some experts as the greatest Russian poets of the 20th century. I know little about Russian poetry, and I certainly wouldn't try to choose "greatest" poets when they write in a language I do not read. But I do know that one of the greatest poets of the 20th century in the German language - the Romanian born Paul Celan - was deeply moved and influenced by Mandelstam's poems, which is more than enough recommendation for me. In fact, Celan published the first book length selection of translations of Mandelstam's poetry into a European language in 1959. This book I have finally read,(*) along with English language translations of Mandelstam's poetry by a collaboration of the Mandelstam specialist, Clarence Brown, and the well known American poet, W.S. Merwin(**)

Most of my favorite 20th century poets wrote at least a few translations, and though the bulk of Mandelstam's translations were forced upon him in order to be able to eat while he was banned from publishing his own work or in the midst of his own poetic doldrums, he also wrote some translations in order to become intimately familiar with an admired poet's craft, to ingest and incorporate it into his own voice. That the translation also resonates with the translator's voice and diction can hardly surprise(***), and Celan's differ quite markedly from Merwin/Brown's. Consider for a moment these two versions of a very early poem from 1908:

*Christmas trees burn in the forest with gilded flames,
toy wolves glare from the bushes -*

O my prophetic sadness,

*O my calm freedom,
and the dead crystal vault of heaven laughing without end!*

*Der Tannen weihnachtliches Leuchten,
der Wälder Flittergold.
Der Spielzeugwolf, der im Gesträuche
mit seinen Augen rollt.*

*O weise Schwermut, wohlberedte,
o Freiheit, fern dem Schall.
Des Firmaments, des unbelebten, steten,
hohnsprechender Kristall!*

In Celan's book the original is placed *en face*, so one can see that Mandelstam wrote this poem in two quatrains with rhyme scheme abba. Clearly the Americans have taken much liberty in both respects, while Celan saved more than a hint of the structure, though at the cost of giving the wolves incongruously rolling eyes instead of ferocious ones. The final couplet is pure Celan. Indeed, one sees in Mandelstam's poems relatively little punctuation, but Celan's translations are full of commas, colons and dashes that give the poems a slow, irregular rhythm focusing the reader's attention more fully on the sounds and the cumulative effect characteristic of middle and late period Celan.

But my primary purpose here is not to compare the translations, though I do prefer Celan's. And I deliberately distracted you with this comparison using the example of a very minor piece. Enough of that. What about the original work in so far as I can triangulate it behind the screen of different translators and languages?

The earliest poems in these collections, written when Mandelstam was 17/18 years old, such as the poem above, are rigorously rhymed, short, distilled and mysterious. But his poetic rhetoric soon expanded to include narrative and personae along with his emotion-laden images, resulting in some strong multiple page poems like "The Horseshoe Finder." He wrote delightful apostrophes to some of his favorite historical figures (like Lamarck) - in which he exercised some of the idiosyncratic ideas I briefly noted in my review of his *Journey to Armenia* - and moving elegies to disappeared contemporaries (like Andrei Bely). Greco-Roman allusions are made frequently, and all thought is associative. As the reader moves through his work (both volumes present the work chronologically), the increasing weight of despair and outbursts of defiance begin to predominate. As I mentioned in my review of his *Journey to Armenia*, there were times when this weight crushed all the poetry out of him. The wonder is that he was able to find his poetic sources again and again.

I'll give Mandelstam the last word, in a poem from 1931 written after one of his stints in the gulag.

*No, I was no one's contemporary ----ever.
That would have been above my station.
How I loathe that other with my name.
He certainly never was me.*

*The age is a despot with two sleepy apples
to see with, and a splendid mouth of earth.
When he dies he'll subside onto the numb*

arm of his son, who's already ageing.

*As the age was born I opened my red eyelids,
My eyes were large sleepy apples.
The rivers thundered, informing me
of the bloodshot lawsuits of men.*

*A hundred years back,
on the camp-bed, on a drift of pillows,
there was a sprawled clay body: the age
getting over its first drunk.*

*What a frail bed, when you think
how the world creaks on its journey.
Well, we can't forge another.
We'd better get along with this one.*

*In stuffy rooms, in cabs, in tents,
the age is dying. Afterwards
flames will flutter like feathers, on the apple-skins,
on the curled wafers of horn.*

(*) *Gedichte. Aus dem Russischen übertragen von Paul Celan*

(**) *The Selected Poems of Osip Mandelstam* (1973). This volume also contains a translation of Mandelstam's essay about the poetics of one of his favorite poets, Dante Alighieri.

(***) This is one of the reasons why I resolved some time ago to read multiple translations of poetry, when available.

Stephen says

I always used to carry the select Osip in my pocket. A profound poet. The works by his partner are a feat of memory and love that is simply monumental .
