Caught between epigram and ode

How Mandelstam's balancing act under Stalin ended in the Gulag

*By* Gregory Freidin

IN THIS REVIEW

MANDELSTAM’S WORLDS

Poetry, politics, and identity in a revolutionary age

Andrew Kahn
Osip Mandelstam (1891–1938) has elicited more devotion than any other poet of Russia’s glorious modernist pleiade. In Russia, his poetry resurfaced in samizdat typescripts during the post-Stalin decades, when Soviet leaders alternately “thawed” and “chilled” the country’s cowed, traumatized society. Soon, along with other previously silenced voices, Mandelstam became an emblem of both anti-Stalinism and a modern cosmopolitan culture, still tightly rationed by the Party-state. He also came to be venerated as a poet-martyr for denouncing Stalin as a brutal despot in his “Stalin epigram” of 1933, a unique act of civic courage that led to his arrest, banishment to provincial Voronezh and eventual death in the Gulag. The brilliant memoirs of his widow Nadezhda Mandelstam, passed around in samizdat and published abroad in Russian and English in 1970, reinforced and added depth to this image.

In Mandelstam’s Worlds, Andrew Kahn aims to offer an expansive reading of the post-1917 poetry and, pointedly, a revision of what he calls the “Cold War image of Mandelstam”. The latest of a dozen English-language books on the poet, his hefty study benefits from documents, correspondence and memoirs that came into circulation in this century. This alone should make it timely and valuable; it is further distinguished by Kahn’s attention to Mandelstam’s translations, journalism, “literary jobbing” and the contemporary press.

Concerned above all with Mandelstam’s “political identity”, Kahn bookends his study with the poet’s responses to the October Revolution and his “Ode to Stalin” of 1937. But he casts his net widely. After dealing with the poet’s politics in the 1920s, he devotes separate chapters to the aesthetics of Mandelstam’s poetry; his poetic explorations of evolutionary biology and cognitive psychology; his uses of the visual arts, including “moving pictures” (Kahn’s reading of the 1931 poem “I’m still far from being a patriarch …” as a Chaplinesque pastiche will raise eyebrows); his poetry of romantic and spiritual attachments; and his “spaces of exile”, devoted to the “Voronezh Notebooks” (1934–7).

Of the more than 200 poems that Mandelstam composed in his later years, Kahn selects about two dozen for his erudite, at times impressionistic close reading. Some, like “The Twilight of Freedom”, “The Age”, “The Slate Ode”, “1 January 1924” and “The Octets” – are defining masterpieces; the choice of others, especially from the Voronezh cycles, seems more idiosyncratic. Still, the volume gives a good sense of Mandelstam’s range, brilliance and, yes, relevance for our own “twilight of freedom” age.

Inexplicably, given his interest in Mandelstam’s politics, Kahn refrains from engaging with the “Stalin epigram” and leaves unexamined its links to Mandelstam’s earlier Socialist Revolutionary affinities. Beginning with the lines “We live, not sensing the country under our feet. / Our speech can’t be heard at ten paces, / And where there’s enough for a half-conversation, / There the Kremlin highlander is invoked …”, the poem skewers Stalin as a repulsive tyrant presiding over a gang of snivelling chieftains. Its eight rhymed couplets of stinging and easy-to-remember anapaestcs were intended for mass protest - a “verbal political
poster of great power”, to quote the words attributed to Mandelstam in his 1934 interrogation record.

By contrast, Kahn devotes many pages to the epigram’s counterpart, the expiating “Ode to Stalin”, composed in exile four years later. “Isolated and preserved” by Stalin’s personal edict, Mandelstam gradually forced himself to embrace “the will of the people” and composed a grand paean to the leader. The “Ode” is Mandelstam’s second longest poem and one in which he touches on his poet-as-Christ theme. Yet Kahn represents it by only two of its seven stanzas, omitting the line alluding to Christ’s prayer of the cup. Without engaging seriously with prior readings, he argues for treating the “Ode” as a clever circumlocution repudiating its almighty addressee:

the sincerity of the “Stalin Ode” (“Oda Stalinu”) lies somewhere in the ironic gap between overt statement and motivation as can best be ascertained within the whole of a work whose overstatement, conditionality, and grotesqueness create tonal instability rather than the positive affirmation usually required of panegyric.

This makes for a provocative symmetry: having already departed from most scholarship by painting Mandelstam as identifying with Bolshevism in the dozen years after the Revolution, Kahn then casts the exiled poet as a trickster who, anxious to make amends, “overpraised” Stalin in a way that undermined his “Ode”’s message. It is hard to reconcile such cunning with the unabashedly Stalinist love poem (not mentioned by Kahn) that Mandelstam addressed, months after the “Ode”, to his then-flame Yelegonida Popova.

What was Stalin’s response to Mandelstam? The irony of history is that the encounter between the poet and the despot turned out to resemble two ships – a canoe and a dreadnought – passing each other in the night. When Stalin learned of Mandelstam’s arrest in 1934, he was in the process of stage-managing the upcoming First Congress of Soviet Writers, and grew angry at his secret police for acting without his personal sanction. Recent research by Gleb Morev (cited by Kahn) shows that the deputy director of the secret police, having been chastised by Stalin, never dared to pass to the leader a copy of the epigram. There are no indications that Stalin ever saw the “Ode”, either.

Nor was he personally involved in Mandelstam’s ultimate demise. In May 1938, at the height of the Great Terror, Mandelstam and his wife were comfortably ensconced at a Writers’ Union retreat, hoping that the “Ode” would soon be published and bring about rehabilitation. Meanwhile, Vladimir Stavsky, a fellow writer who headed the Union, was becoming apprehensive that Mandelstam’s lobbying of his writer-friends might lead to trouble in the ranks. He pleaded with the secret-police chief Nikolai Yezhov to “solve the Mandelstam problem”. Yezhov obliged. The poet was arrested, tried and convicted of “anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda”. He was given a five-year term (ten was the norm) but, his health undone by his ordeals, he died in a labour camp near Vladivostok in late December, a few days before turning forty-eight.
Kahn concludes his study by citing in full Mandelstam's famous poem of 1931 in which he objects to being unjustly attacked by the “wolffound age”: he is not a “wolf by blood”, that is, not a bourgeois class enemy to be hunted down by the Revolution. Consistent with Mandelstam's complex view of the regime, the opening lines rebuff the notion that the ends justify the means: “For the sake of the thundering glory of the coming ages, / for the sake of the lofty tribe of humanity, / I have been deprived of my cup at the feast of the forefathers, / of my joy and my honour …” (my translation). Though Kahn usually offers his own translations, here he uses one by someone else, and Mandelstam's message is turned on its head. “For the sake of the thundering glory” becomes “For the future’s children and their fortune”. The poet's sarcasm disappears - collateral damage, it seems, to Kahn's revisionism.

Translating Mandelstam's poetry into plain English is a hard task, and, on the whole, Kahn acquires himself well: his renderings, placed alongside the originals, are tasteful and close to the literal. But there are lapses that lead him astray. Take Kahn's translation of Mandelstam's anti-Lenin verse of 1917, “When the October favourite was readying for us the yoke of violence and anger ...”. In 1934, under interrogation, Mandelstam volunteered that the phrase “October's favourite” referred to Lenin. Still, straining to fit the poem into his thesis that Mandelstam did not oppose the Bolshevik regime until much later, Kahn hesitates to accept Lenin as the referent and incorrectly translates “favourite” (vremenshchik) as “time-server”. The Russian word refers to a minion who wields power on the monarch's whim and whose legitimacy is temporary (hence the derivation from the Russian vremya). It was the whim of the moment, goes the poet's invective, that empowered Lenin pro tempore, leading to the downfall of the legitimate leader, the Socialist Revolutionary Alexander Kerensky, heir to Peter the Great and now a Christ figure being “crucified” by the mob.

Reignited by the Revolution, Mandelstam's own erstwhile Socialist Revolutionary fervour and abiding loyalty to the cause of the “fourth estate” (the labouring people) motivated his gradual reconciliation with the Bolshevik regime in the 1920s and his “Ode to Stalin” in 1937. But the same affinities could also drive him to burst out in loud protest against a despot's usurpation of the people's power, as in his “Stalin epigram” of 1933. Then, in a fit of “Socialist Revolutionary recidivism”, as he put it during interrogation, he defined Stalin for all eternity as a shiny-booted, cockroach-moustached, worm-fingered, murderous tyrant bent on suppressing speech and surrounded by a coterie of thin-necked miaowing and whimpering führers. The canoe sails on.

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