Concert at a Railway Station
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Translator’s note

The translations were originally made from the edition Osip Mandel’shtam, Sochineniya v dvukh tomakh, Tom pervyi, Moscow, Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1990, compiled by P.M. Nerler, with notes by the latter and A.D. Mikhailov. They were reworked on the basis of A.G. Mets’s 2009 edition, Osip Mandel’shtam, Polnoe sobraniye sochinenii i pisem v tryokh tomakh, Tom 1, Moscow, Progress-Pleyada. Despite numerous editors’ and scholars’ efforts, the authoritative text of many poems – in particular, the post-1930 poems almost entirely unpublished in Mandelstam’s lifetime – remains unstable. This derives from uncertainties as to whether changes and variants resulted from deliberate artistic choices and revisions, (self-) censorship, concealment, miscopying, misdictation, the memorization process, false recollection at a much later date, and/or oral transmission, or lack of access to copies deposited with friends for safekeeping, or a combination of these, on the respective parts of both Osip Mandelstam and his wife Nadezhda Mandelstam, his de facto secretary while he was alive and plenipotentiary literary executor – at great personal cost to herself – after his death. As an indication of this textual instability and to facilitate comparison, some variants have been included in the main text placed in square brackets, where they represent additions, or in the notes where they are alternatives. The Mets edition has also been followed with regards to the naming of poems, omitting titles by which poems have subsequently become known but which were not Mandelstam’s.

The selection and its title are the translator’s. Notes have been largely kept to a minimum of what seems necessary to understand discrete references, without being exhaustive as to the background to the original poems’ writing. Readers interested in the latter are referred, with regard to the later poems, to Richard and Elizabeth McKane’s The Moscow and Voronezh Notebooks (Bloodaxe, 2003). Some non-exhaustive bibliographical information can also be found in the notes.

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none into English at the time of going to press). Thanks are also due to earlier and other current translators of Mandelstam, whose work has, among other things, provided me with an opportunity to cross-check my own interpretation of the originals; José Manuel Prieto’s account of translating into Spanish the poem that has become known as “The Stalin Epigram”, and translated here as ‘We live, but feel no land at our feet’, was particularly helpful (http://www.bu.edu/translation/files/2011/01/Allen-Handout2.pdf, last accessed 2 September 2017). I am extremely grateful for the assistance provided to me by Iliya Bolotyansky, Vadim Erent, Alexander Filyuta, Ilia Kitup, Eugene Ostashevsky, Nadja Otten and Alexei Prokopiev in answering frequent and extensive queries, as well as to Kelvin Corcoran, Henry King, Andrew Reynolds, Justin Quinn, Emma Liggins, Antonia Maxwell, Christian Hawkey, Anthony Barnett and Antony Rowland for assistance, support, information and feedback, both major and minor, to Tony Frazer for his patience, also to Alan Baker and John Bloomberg-Rissman, and not least to Sabine Heurs, for putting up with several years of frequent distracted silence intermittently interrupted by mumblings in Russian and English. All shortcomings in the translations remain mine.
from

Stone

SAMPLER
SAMPLER
The muffled sound of the fruit that carefully broke from a branch, amid the incessant chant of the silence deep in the woods…

1908
Read only what children would read,
and dream what children think matters;
once the great things lie scattered,
shake off grief and rise to your feet.

Existence exhausts me to death –
oh nothing it owns is of worth.
But I love this desolate earth:
I’ve never known any place else.

In that distant garden, I’d rock
on a wooden swing. I recall
how the spruces were dark and tall
in the delirium of the fog.

1908
Against the pale-blue enamel
that April makes conceivable,
the branches of birch trees will stand
and gradually ripen to evening.

Their pattern is sharp and complete,
that stiffened gauze is fine,
like a drawing that somebody’s neatly
traced out on a plate of china.

Some merciful artist performs
a design on the glassy heavens,
knowing the transience of such force,
oblivious to the sorrow of death.

1909
No moon but a clock-face. How’s it a sin
that while it dazzles my eyes I examine
the muted stars’ milky light?

Poet Batyushkov,\(^1\) son to a parson,
how he’d spout on. “What’s the time?” they’d ask him.
“Eternity”, he replied.

\(1912\)
On Foot

To M.L. Lozinsky

Nearing mysterious mountain tops,
I can’t defeat the fear I feel;
content with every swallow aloft,
I love how the bells rise into a peal.

I’m an ancient walker. A chasm reveals
a sagging bridge I approach and cross;
I think I can hear the snow uncongeal,
how the whole of time ticks on stone clocks.

But I’m no traveller whose name would stop
your eye on pages the light will steal.
There’s a grief I sing but keep concealed.

The flying bells bear my soul off,
but avalanches roll in the hills for real.
No music pulls me back from the drop.

1912
Hagia Sophia

Hagia Sophia, where the Lord ordained
that the emperors and nations should halt,
that dome of yours hangs on a chain
from the heavens, observers report.

The centuries followed Justinian’s lead
when, for the sake of gods that were foreign,
Ephesian Diana allowed him to steal
one hundred and seven green marble columns.

But what was your architect thinking
as he lavished out apses and recesses,
and with his intensity of spirit and vision
deployed them to the east and the west?

Sublime temple, afloat in the world,
your forty windows a triumph of light,
the four archangels on sails unfurled
in your dome are an even sublimer sight.

Outliving centuries, nations, topped
by a sphere, it’s wise this building,
and the seraphim there and their echoing sobs
won’t warp its dim-lit gilt.

1912
Notre Dame

A basilica stands where Roman justice
judged another nation: displaying its nerves,
as joyful as Adam to have stood there first,
the light cross-vault plays with its muscles.

But a secret scheme is revealed outside:
the strength of the saddling arches forestalls
the buckle and collapse of the laden walls,
and the war-ram of the bold vault stays idle.

Maze of the maker, forest to pass
understanding, the Gothic mind's abyss,
Egyptian force, the meekness of Christians,
oak beside reed where plumblines are bars.

But what might I one day create,
stronghold Notre Dame. I’d think on my trips
to study and study those monstrous ribs:
a kind of beauty from hostile weight.

1912
Bach

The parishioners are children of dust, no icons here but the boards where the psalms of Johann Sebastian are nothing but numbers in chalk.

What clashing voices reside in disorderly pubs and cathedrals, but Bach, you exult like Isaiah: nobody trumps you in reason.

High-level squabbler, I guess you found the mind good handrails by holding hard to the evidence when you played your grandkids chorales.

And sound? Old man, you’re stubborn and none of those sixteenth portions are anything more than your grumbling in the polysyllabic organ.

Now, the Lutheran preacher ascends to his pulpit’s blackness and mingles the din of his speeches with yours, that would answer in anger.

1913