

Poems by Osip Mandelstam



One of the two or three greatest 20th century Russian poets, Osip Mandelstam, was born in 1891 into a Jewish family in Warsaw. He grew up in the imperial capital of St. Petersburg and published his first book of poetry at the age of 22. Like most Russian intellectuals of his time he welcomed the overthrow of Tsarism, but soon became suspicious of the regime that rose in its place. Like his friends Boris Pasternak and Anna Akhmatova, he took a stand against Stalinism. Exiled to Armenia, his work was heavily censored.

Then in 1934 he was arrested for writing a poem attacking Stalin. He was exiled again, then finally arrested and put on a prison train to Siberia. He died in a prison camp there in 1938. The sad odyssey of his final years is told in the memoir *Hope Against Hope*, written by his widow, Nadezhda Mandelstam, and published in this country several years ago (see RAMPARTS, Sept. '71). Suppressed for over 30 years in Russia, the major body of his poetry is now for the first time appearing in English, translated by Mandelstam's biographer, Clarence Brown, and the poet W. S. Merwin.

*For the sake of the future's trumpeting heroics,
for that exalted tribe,
I was robbed of my cup at my fathers' feast
and of my laughter and honor.*

*The wolfhound age springs at my shoulders
though I'm no wolf by blood.
Better to be stuffed up a sleeve like a
fleece cap
in a fur coat from the steppes of Siberia,*

*and so not see the snivelling, nor the
sickly smears,
nor the bloody bones on the wheel,
so all night the blue foxes would
still gleam
for me as they did in the first times.*

*Lead me into the night by the Yenesej
where the pine touches the star.
I'm no wolf by blood,
and only my own kind will kill me.*

17-28 March 1931

*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. As for
Moscow,
one minute she's a crouched sparrow,
the next she's puffed up like a pastry—
how does she find time to threaten
from holes?*

*You do as you please, I won't chance it.
My glove's not warm enough for the drive
around the whole whole Moscow.*

April 1931

TO THE GERMAN LANGUAGE

*Destroying myself, contradicting myself,
like the moth flying into the midnight flame,
suddenly all that binds me to our language
tempts me to leave it.*

*What is there between us? Praise without
flattery.*

*Unfeigned friendship, face to face.
Let an alien family, to our west,
teach us seriousness and honor.*

*Poetry, you put storms to good use.
I remember a German officer,
his sword hilt wrapped with roses
and Ceres on his lips.*

*Already, in Frankfurt, the fathers were
yawning,
and no one had yet heard of Goethe,
they were writing hymns, stallions were
prancing
in their places, like letters of the alphabet.*

*Friends, tell me, in what Valhalla
did we crack nuts together, you and I?
What freedom was ours to spend as we pleased,
what landmarks did you leave for me?*

*And we ran straight from the first-rate
newness
of a page of an almanac
down shallow steps, unafraid, into the grave,
as into a cellar to draw a jug of Moselle.*

*An alien language will be my swaddling
clothes.
Long before I dared to be born
I was a letter of the alphabet, a verse like
a vine,
I was the book that you all see in dreams.*

*When I was asleep and without feature
friendship woke me like a shot.
Nightingale-god, let Pylades' fate be mine,
or tear my tongue out, for it's no use to me.*

*Nightingale-god, I'm being conscripted still
for new plagues, for seven-year massacres.
Sound has shrivelled, words are hoarse and
rebellious,
but you're alive still, and with you I'm at
peace.*

8-12 August 1932

*Our lives no longer feel ground under them.
At ten paces you can't hear our words.*

*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.*

*Ringed with a scum of chicken-necked bosses
he toys with the tributes of half-men.*

*One whistles, another meouws, a third
snivels.*

*He pokes out his finger and he alone goes
boom.*

*He forges decrees in a line like horseshoes,
One for the groin, one the forehead, temple,
eye.*

*He rolls the executions on his tongue like
berries.*

*He wishes he could hug them like big friends
from home.*

[November 1933]

This poem was the occasion of Mandelstam's first arrest (1934).

*As a stream falls from a single crack
in a glacier
and its taste has two faces, one forward
one backward, and one is sweet and one hard,
so I die for the last time through each
moment of these days,
and one way the old sighing frees me no
longer,
and the other way the goal can no longer be
seen.*

Moscow. December 1933

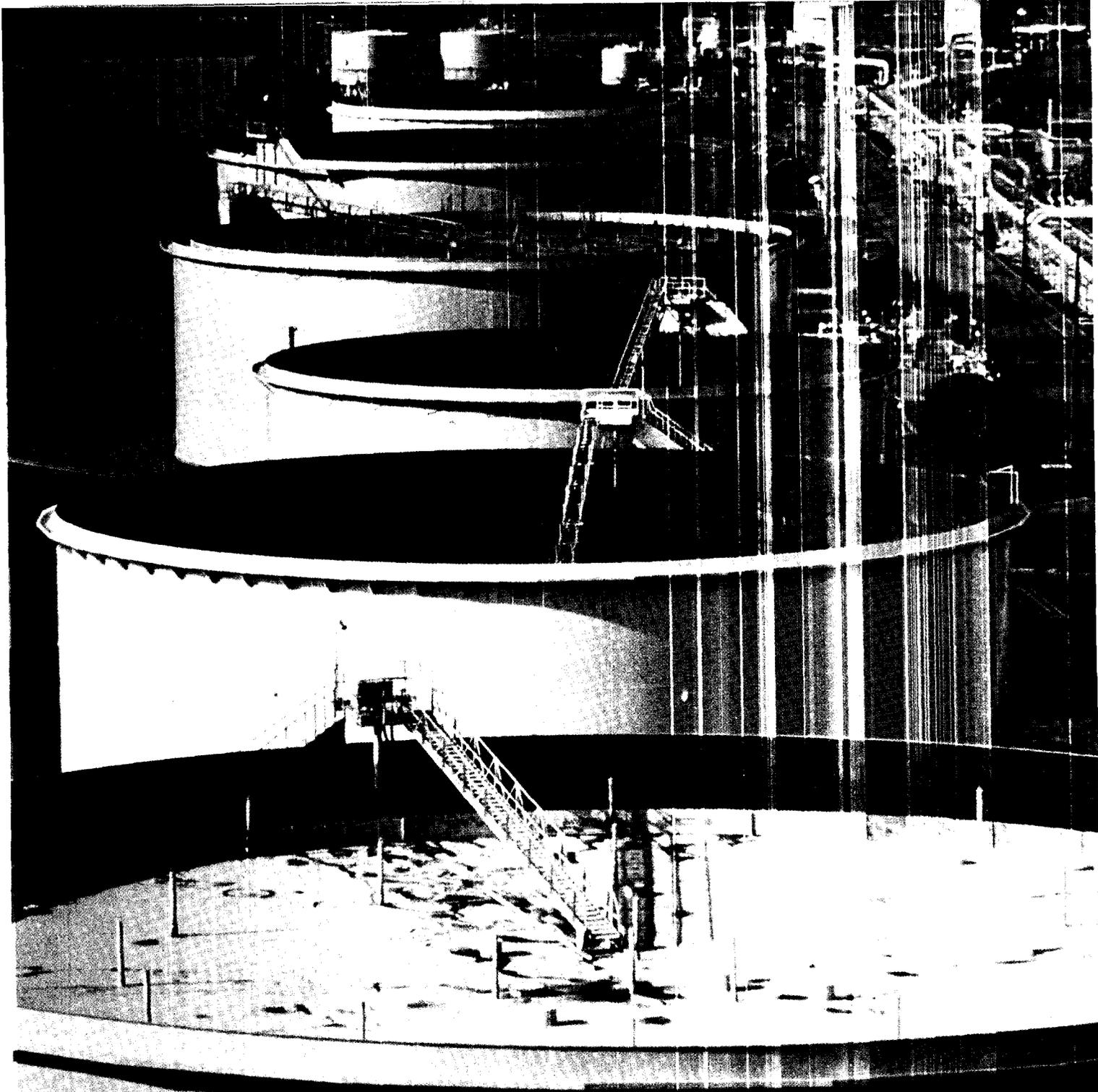
*You took away all the oceans and all
the room.
You gave me my shoe-size in earth with bars
around it.
Where did it get you? Nowhere.
You left me my lips, and they shape words,
even in silence.*

Voronezh [1935]

*Once a line of verse, in disgrace, father
unknown,
fell from the sky like a stone, waking the
earth somewhere.
No supplication can alter the poet's invention.
It can only be what it is. No one will judge it.*

Voronezh. 20 January 1937

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