

Power of the Word

POEMS OF AKHMATOVA

Translated by Stanley Kunitz
with Max Hayward

Atlantic Monthly Press—Little, Brown
173 pp., \$7.95

OSIP MANDELSTAM: SELECTED POEMS

Translated by Clarence Brown
and W. S. Merwin

Atheneum, 99 pp., \$7.50

COMPLETE POETRY OF

OSIP EMILEVICH MANDELSTAM

Translated by Burton Raffel and
Alla Burago, with an introduction
by Sidney Monas

State University of New York Press,
353 pp., \$15.00

JOSEPH BRODSKY: SELECTED POEMS

Translated by George L. Kline,
with a foreword by W. H. Auden
Harper & Row, 172 pp., \$5.95

Reviewed by Susan Jacoby

Translations of great poetry are always major literary events, but the emergence of these Russian poets into their rightful place in world literature is something more in the nature of a miracle. Russian poetry offers the twentieth century's most eloquent testimony to the enduring power of the uncorrupted word.

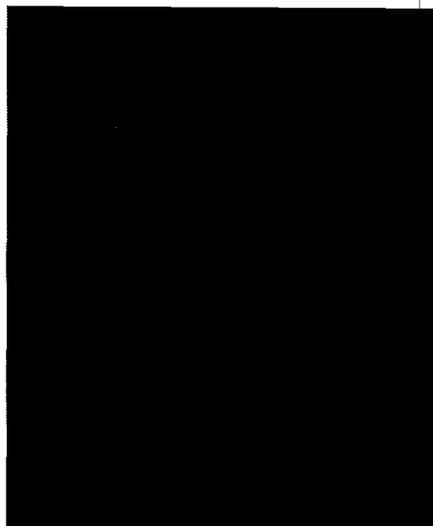
Poetry occupies a totally different place in Russia than it does in the Anglo-Saxon world. It is a moral force, a mechanism that helps people deal with life, a way of "bearing witness" in the early Christian sense. All of these poetic functions are implicit in Anna Akhmatova's austere introduction to her poem "Requiem," a near-biblical lament for the sufferings of the Russian people under Stalin.

In the terrible years of the Yezhov terror I spent seventeen months waiting in line outside the prison in Leningrad. One day somebody in the crowd identified me. Standing behind me was a woman, with lips blue from the cold, who had, of course, never heard me called by name before. Now she started out of the torpor common to us all and asked me in a whisper (everyone whispered there):

"Can you describe this?"

And I said: "I can."

Susan Jacoby has written for many periodicals on Russian literature and Soviet affairs. She is the author of Moscow Conversations, a book of profiles of ten Russians ranging from political dissidents to party members.



Then something like a smile passed fleetingly over what had once been her face.

Successive Soviet leaders have always understood the importance of poetry; that is why they have tried so hard to bend poets to the service of the state. It is difficult to imagine an American dictator expending much energy on the fate of poems or of the men and women who compose them. Osip Mandelstam once remarked that Russia was the only country where poetry was really important, because people were killed for it.

The failure of the Soviets to kill genuine poetry is demonstrated by the lives and art of Mandelstam, Akhmatova, and Joseph Brodsky. Censors must be appalled by the tenacity of the moral and esthetic links between the verse of Akhmatova and Mandelstam, rooted in the Silver Age of Russian poetry at the turn of the century, and the thirty-three-year-old Brodsky, who is generally regarded as the most talented Russian poet of this generation. At the time of Stalin's death twenty years ago, many Russian intellectuals thought those links had been dissolved.

Their pessimism was understandable. Mandelstam, now acknowledged as the supreme Russian poet of the twentieth century, died in a prison camp in 1938, when he was only forty-seven years old. He was arrested for the first time in 1934, after writing—and recklessly reciting to a circle of friends—a poem that described Stalin handing down murderous edicts, "one for the groin, one for the forehead, the temple, the eye." There could have been no other fate for a man whose cultural values, firmly rooted in humanism, classicism, and the Judeo-Christian tradition, were anathema to the philistinism of any New Order. After the

revolution, the wanton destruction of cultural traditions became a recurring theme in Mandelstam's poetry.

My animal, my age, who will ever be able
to look back into your eyes?
Who will ever glue back together the
vertebrae
of two centuries with his blood? . . .

The buds will go on swelling,
the rush of green will explode
but your spine has been shattered,
my splendid derelict, my age.
Cruel and feeble, you'll look back
with the smile of a half-wit:
an animal that could run once,
staring at his own tracks.

—1923

[translation by Brown and Merwin]

A different painful destiny awaited Akhmatova, who was Mandelstam's close friend. Her first husband, the poet Nikolai Gumilev, was shot in 1921 for his role in an alleged conspiracy against the Bolshevik government. Their son Lev was arrested three times during the Stalin years, and his precarious position was used to torment and threaten his mother. After a brief period of official toleration (and occasional publication) during World War II, Akhmatova was expelled from the Soviet Writers' Union and was officially denounced as a "half-nun, half-whore who combines harlotry with prayer." Unlike her beloved friend Mandelstam, she lived to see her official reputation restored and much of her work published in her own land (albeit in censored form—"Requiem" is one of the many poems that have never appeared in full in the Soviet Union).

Before her death in 1966, Akhmatova lived to see something much more important than the publication of any bowdlerized poems: a resurgence of the values that had been preserved during the years of the terror by the courage and anguished determination of a few members of the older generation. Respect for the integrity of language was one of the values that began to reassert themselves in the young people who came to maturity after Stalin's death. The late 1950s gave rise to the extraordinary phenomenon known as *samizdat* (literally, "self-publishing"), under which typed copies of suppressed literature were passed from hand to hand. *Samizdat* introduced young Russians to an entire generation of writers who had not been published—whose very names had been proscribed—since the Twenties. Mandelstam's widow, Nadezhda, describes the relationship between *samizdat* and the cultural regeneration in the second volume of her

memoirs (*Hope Abandoned*, also to be published this month by Atheneum). She recalls how she and Akhmatova lived through eighteen years in which they could only mention Mandelstam's name when they were alone together, "trembling over a handful of his poems."

When at last the first signs of hope appeared, Akhmatova kept saying: "Nadia, all's well with Osia." By this she meant that he was being read again. It took me some time to appreciate the importance of *samizdat*, and I was upset because M. wasn't printed, but Akhmatova had an answer to this as well: "We live in a pre-Gutenberg age" and "Osia has no need of a printing press." . . . I gradually saw how right she was: poetry is an elusive thing that can neither be hidden nor locked away. It was poetry that blazed the trail for prose along the mysterious byways leading to the new readers who suddenly sprang up from nowhere.

Joseph Brodsky was a member of the *samizdat* generation. He was fortunate to have been Akhmatova's friend and protégé during the last years of her life; in her native city of Leningrad, she provided a physical as well as a spiritual link between her own generation and those young people who were awakening to their cultural heritage. Even though death no longer hovered over every word, the life of an authentic poet was difficult enough in the new generation. In 1964 Brodsky was exiled as a "social parasite" to a farm in the Arctic. Like Mandelstam, his work appears only in *samizdat* in his own country. And he is now an unwilling exile from the Soviet Union: In 1972 the secret police offered him a set of unpalatable choices and "invited" him to leave. He lives in the United States, lecturing on comparative poetry at universities and continuing to write in his own language. Some of his new poetry is already turning up inside the Soviet Union in *samizdat*.

IT IS FORTUNATE THAT different English translations are becoming available at the same time, because the connective tissue between the poets and the generations provides part of the intellectual pleasure for a reader. No extensive translations of Mandelstam or Akhmatova would have been possible before now: complete Russian-language editions were not available until the mid-1960s. Since the Soviets have published Akhmatova only in part and Mandelstam not at all, the task of preparing complete editions of their work fell largely to émigré scholars. Foreign readers and translators owe a great debt to Gleb Struve and



Terrence McCarthy

Brodsky—"Combines pagan and Christian symbolism with a modern sensibility."

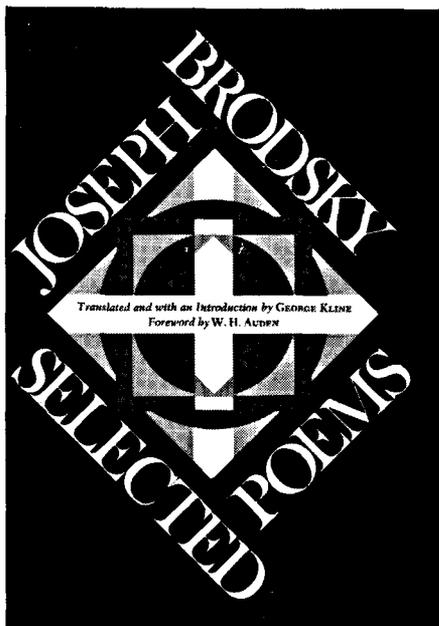
Boris Filippov, who edited the massive Russian editions of Mandelstam and Akhmatova upon which all of the English translations are based. Brodsky's poetry has been translated much more quickly, of course, because he began writing at a time when there was a relatively steady flow of *samizdat* to the West. He met his American translator, George Kline, long before he was forced to emigrate from the Soviet Union.

None of these poets is easy to translate. Mandelstam is a poet of the highest complexity, both in language and imagery. His poems command the same intensity of attention from a Russian reader as Wallace Stevens does from an English one, and they are saturated with as many levels of meaning. Akhmatova's style and language are similar and more traditional, but she may be even more difficult to translate because her ideas are clothed in such chaste form. In *The New York Review of Books*, Joseph Brodsky has written that "the contrast of traditional form to so-called contemporary content gives the work greater scale and tension. The principle is extremely simple: Here is a normal person, with arms and legs, properly dressed, a tie and stickpin, but just look at the way he talks!" Brodsky's own poetry poses a formidable task for a translator. His extensive use of Greek mythology, a special echo of Mandelstam, is an important element in the heavy intellectual demands he makes on his readers. Brodsky combines pagan and Christian symbolism with a modern sensibility that trans-

forms old myths into stunning contemporary allegories. The ability to breathe new life into myth is so rare among young poets that it immediately sets Brodsky apart as an "old man's young man." In this respect, he bears comparison to the young T. S. Eliot as well as to Mandelstam.

The Russian language makes exceedingly difficult demands on poetic translators. Russian is a more onomatopoeic language than English; there is simply no way to translate some of the relationships between sound and meaning. In translation, the first section of Akhmatova's "Requiem" begins with the line, "At dawn they came and took you away" and ends with, "I'll stand and howl under the Kremlin towers." The Russian phrase for "to howl under the towers" is *pod bashniyami vyt*. To my ear, the word *vyt* conveys a compound of screeching and moaning, fear and fury. *Bashniya*, the nominative singular for tower (*bashniyami* is the plural of the prepositional case), is a word that suggests the implacable solidity of a feudal structure. The combination of the two Russian words captures a precise image of impotent grief juxtaposed against the indifferent symbols of power. Any translation can only be an approximation (and I think Stanley Kunitz and Max Hayward came up with a rather good one in this instance).

In translating Russian poetry into English, a special problem is created by the fact that the Russian language does not demand strict word order. A line of



Russian prose or poetry may be arranged in several different ways, all grammatically correct and more than one pleasing to the eye and ear. The English translator, in contrast, does not have a free hand in juggling nouns, verbs, and modifiers.

The ideal translator would obviously be a great English-language poet with an intimate knowledge of Russian. In the absence of such a fortunate freak of genius and education, the reading public can expect two types of poetic translations. The most common method is a collaboration between a poet with little or no knowledge of Russian and a scholar who understands the language. The translations of Akhmatova and Mandelstam are examples of the collaborative method. The only other alternative is to leave translating entirely to scholars of Russian language and literature. That method has usually proven unsatisfactory, because the scholars were unable to produce translations worthy of being considered poetry. George Kline's translations of Brodsky are a happy exception to the rule. A professor of philosophy at Bryn Mawr, Kline has been more faithful to the spirit (and, not incidentally, to the metrical structure) of Brodsky's poetry than the other translators have been to Akhmatova and Mandelstam. W. S. Merwin and Burton Raffel have made virtually no attempt to reproduce the meter of Mandelstam's verse; Kunitz has tried (and succeeded) in some poems but not in others.

Clarence Brown, an eminent scholar who has devoted much of his career to Mandelstam's poetry, seemed to be an-

icipating criticism when he wrote in his introduction that "Merwin has translated Mandelstam into Merwin" and that "this strikes me as the happiest of coincidences." He also grumbled that "arbiters of their own brand of literalism everywhere have probably by now read far enough into this book." With all due respect to Brown's academic distinction, this strikes me as a rather cavalier dismissal of a serious issue: the extent to which a translator should reshape a poem in his own image. The problem becomes more acute when a poet-translator must depend on someone else for access to the language, and therefore to the deepest levels of meaning, of the original poem. "Twilight of Freedom," written in 1918, provides some insights into what is lost when a poet of Mandelstam's stature is translated into something other than Mandelstam.

Let us praise the twilight of freedom,
brothers,
the great year of twilight.

A thick forest of nets has been let down
into the seething waters of night.
O sun, judge, people, desolate
are the years into which you are rising!

Let us praise the momentous burden
that the people's leader assumes, in tears.
Let us praise the twilight burden of power,
its weight too great to be borne.
Time, whoever has a heart
will hear your ship going down.

We have roped swallows together
into legions.
Now we can't see the sun.
Everywhere nature twitters as it moves.
In the deepening twilight the earth swims
into the nets
and the sun can't be seen.

But what can we lose if we try one
groaning, wide, ungainly sweep of the
rudder?
The earth swims. Courage,
brothers, as the cleft sea falls back from our
prow.
Even as we freeze in Lethe we'll remember
the ten heavens the earth cost us.

The meaning of this poem is not fully clarified until the last line, and Merwin's translation conveys a fundamental misunderstanding to a reader who is not completely familiar with the time in which the poem was written. The confusion in the last line is created by the verb *stoit*, which has the dual Russian meaning of "to cost" and "to be worth." Russians who know English invariably translate the line as "the earth was worth ten heavens to us." The essence of Mandelstam's philosophy, expressed in this poem and many others, was his preference for the pain and pleasure of ordinary human life over the revolution-

ary dreams of heaven on earth. His wife mentions this particular line of poetry in her many references to her husband's humanistic philosophy; Mandelstam simply did not spend his personal or poetic energy yearning after heavens. Merwin may understand this himself, but the translation is totally misleading.

The Raffel and Burago edition correctly translates the last line but also offers some clumsy poetry that characterizes much of the book. The first two lines read: "Glorify, brothers, freedom's twilight—/the great crepuscular year." *Crepuscular*? The word may be educational for anyone who did not take Latin seriously in high school (which means most Americans under the age of thirty-five), but it has nothing of Mandelstam in it. He uses complex language, but only when the complexity is essential to precision. The Russian word for twilight, which Mandelstam uses in the poem, is straightforward.

I find George Kline's philosophy of translation more congenial, because he insists on a more scrupulous respect for the meter, imagery, and tone of the poet. Kline occasionally betrays the fact that he is not a poet himself when he commits banal couplets like: "The Wise Men will unlearn your name./ Above your head no star will flame." But many of his translations are masterful reconstructions that convey something of the tone of Brodsky's writing as well as his unique combination of myth and a modern sense of the absurd. The poem "Nunc Dimittis," written in 1972, begins with what seems to be a simple Bible-based account of Christ's presentation in the temple and shifts to compelling images of death.

He ended and moved toward the temple's
great door.
Old Anna, bent down with the weight
of her years,
and Mary, gazed after him, perfect
in silence.
He moved and grew smaller, in size and
in meaning. . . .

He went forth to die. It was not the loud din
of streets that he faced when he flung
the door wide,
but rather the deaf-and-dumb fields of
death's kingdom.
He strode through a space that was no
longer solid.

The roaring of time ebbed away in his ears.
And Simeon's soul held the form of the
Child—
its feathery crown now enveloped
in glory—
aloft, like a torch, pressing back the
black shadows,

to light up the path that leads into death's realm, where never before until this point in time had any man managed to lighten his pathway.

The old man's torch glowed and the pathway grew wider.

Kline then makes a successful shift to the ironic tone of "Odysseus to Telemachus," the last poem in the Brodsky volume.

My dear Telemachus,
The Trojan War
is over now, I don't recall who won it.
The Greeks, no doubt, for only they
would leave
so many dead so far from their own
homeland. . . .

Regardless of their individual merits, each of these translations would better serve its readers by more detailed explanatory notes, including English transliterations of lines that do not yield easily to translation. The translations of Akhmatova are the only ones published in a bilingual edition; although such editions are admirable and desirable, they are not especially useful to readers who do not know the Cyrillic alphabet. Many Russian scholars insist that transliterations are too "foreign looking" to the American eye. I think they underestimate both the devotion and the linguistic curiosity of people who love poetry. The dedication to "Requiem" is sensitively translated as: "Such grief might make the mountains stoop." An American can certainly appreciate the more evocative sound of the Russian when it is spelled out: *Pered etim gorem gnutsya gory*. The phonetic connection between the Russian words for grief, stoop, and mountain can be understood by any reader; the explanation belongs in a note on the poem and not in a book review.

Despite their deficiencies, all of these translations are major contributions to world literature. They are pioneering works, and the first translations of great writing have a way of generating better translations in the future. There is a universal imperative in the greatest poetry of any language. As Akhmatova wrote in a tribute to Boris Pasternak, another great poet of her generation:

For spying Laocoön in a puff of smoke,
for making a song out of graveyard thistles,
for filling the world with a new sound
of verse reverberating in new space,

he has been rewarded by a kind of eternal
childhood
with the generosity and brilliance of
the stars;
the whole of the earth was his to inherit,
and his to share with every human spirit. □

Faulkner's Fancywork

FLAGS IN THE DUST
by William Faulkner
Random House, 370 pp., \$8.95

Reviewed by Panthea Broughton

Random House must have been tempted to promote this book as an all new but hitherto unknown novel by the late William Faulkner and to imply that a sleuthful professor has just now discovered it moldering away on an obscure library shelf. The publication history of *Flags in the Dust*, though curious, is not quite that dramatic, and Random House has fortunately resisted the temptation to exaggerate it.

Finishing the book in 1927, Faulkner assumed it, his third novel, would make his reputation. Instead, it almost finished his career; during one year a total of eleven different publishers rejected *Flags*. Finally Harrison Smith,* then at Harcourt Brace, saw the manuscript and strongly recommended it for publication. Alfred Harcourt agreed to publish it but stipulated that it be cut, preferably by someone other than Faulkner. Thus, in September 1928, Harcourt Brace sent Faulkner a contract calling for a shortened version of *Flags in the Dust*, to be entitled *Sartoris* and delivered in sixteen days. By that time Faulkner was willing to let his agent, Ben Wasson, reduce *Flags to Sartoris* (for fifty dollars); apparently that was then the only way any of it could get published. And so *Sartoris* was published in 1929 as Faulkner's third novel. Nevertheless, Faulkner preserved some five versions of *Flags in the Dust*. Deposited at the University of Virginia library, they may have been virtually forgotten, but they did not molder and they were not lost.

Throughout the years *Sartoris* held an important place in the Faulkner canon as the first of the Yoknapatawpha novels. Only the restored *Flags in the Dust* really indicates just how varied and inexhaustible a resource that Mississippi setting, Faulkner's "own little postage stamp of native soil," would be.

*Later, publisher of *Saturday Review*.

Panthea Broughton teaches English at Virginia Tech. Her book *William Faulkner: The Abstract and the Actual will be published by Louisiana State University Press in September*.

WILLIAM FAULKNER

The complete text, never before published,
of Faulkner's third novel, which appeared in 1929
in a much shorter version as *Sartoris*.

Ostensibly the book deals with the return of young Bayard Sartoris after World War I, his marriage to and desertion of Narcissa Benbow, and his death on the very day his son is born. But events compound throughout the novel so that the doings of the Benbows, the Snopeses, and the MacCallums rival those of the Sartoris family. Blacks and poor whites and *nouveaux riches* and aristocrats thicken its pages, until heroes fade into the crowd and die with scarcely an epitaph. Plot and subplots merge and finally become indistinguishable. The very existence of a plot is, in fact, questionable. And that, of course, is what worked against the novel in 1928. Outraged over its apparent plotlessness, no one before Hal Smith had seen what a considerable achievement this book was; no one had sensed its promise of greater things to come.

And so it is rather like time-traveling to have, hot off the press in 1973, a novel whose strengths eluded the professionals in 1928. The question for modern readers thus becomes: Are we any smarter than those eleven foolish publishers who rejected the book in 1927-28? Or, more precisely, Are our standards more refined than theirs? Thus we are tempted to read the book, not in its own right, but rather as a gauge for testing the sophistication and subtlety of our present critical standards.

In 1928 apparently the only operative standard was an inflexible notion of plot unity; *Flags* failed that test. Editors and publishers deemed it prolix, diffuse, unstructured, unacceptable. From that point of view, Faulkner's novel was a little like the "interminable fancywork" of a certain old lady in *Flags*. Faulkner somewhat ironically explains how she worked on her patchwork for fifteen years without ever divulging what it was to be when completed. This woman car-