ESSAYS ON MANDEL'ŠTAM

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FOREWORD

My first serious encounter with Mandel'śam's poetry took place over forty years ago, in Prague, where I was spending the summer of 1931, having just completed my sophomore year at the Law School of Belgrade University. There, in the famous Slavic bookstore in Wenceslaus Square, I happened on the first edition of Tristia (1922)—which, strange though it may seem today, had not yet sold out, despite the fact that only three thousand copies had been printed. Until then I was familiar with only a few of Mandel’śam’s poems, published in various anthologies; reading Tristia prompted me to search out the other two books of his poetry. Thus I discovered his unique poetic world, whose fascination was to remain strong for the rest of my life. Though taken with the “music” of his verse and his exquisite imagery, I was annoyed with my inability to understand the cryptic messages of certain of his poems, to grasp their “deep meaning.” Even at that time I believed that there must be one, since the majority of his poems did not present problems in this respect. Later, during my philological studies at Belgrade University (1933–36) and at the Charles University in Prague (1938–39), I became aware of the many “poetic reminiscences” in Mandel’śam’s poetry; it was not difficult to recognize at least those from Lermontov and Tjutčev. Subsequently I came to believe that in order to understand his poetic world, one had to acquire Mandel’śam’s culture, as far as possible. However, neither in the thirties, nor in the next two decades, did I think of undertaking such a task.

My second major encounter with Mandel’śam occurred after I came to this country (in 1958) and bought the New York edition of Mandel’śam’s Sobranie sočinenij (1955). At this time I became primarily interested in his versification, especially when I noticed that his iambic hexameter after 1915 has a most original rhythmic structure, unprecedented in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russian poetry. It
was then that I decided to make a thorough statistical description of his verse, based on the texts published in Sobranie sočinenij. My study “Stixosloženije Osipa Mandel’štama (1908–1925)” appeared in the International Journal of Slavic Linguistics and Poetics V, 1962.

While working with Mandel’štam’s poetry line by line, I became convinced that his poetic themes and images needed to be studied in the broad context of both his poetry and his prose writings. By this time I was finding many reminiscences from other poets, primarily Russian, which helped me to understand the poetic messages of several poems labeled enigmatic. I was astonished to find him appropriating images from the poetry of Vjačeslav Ivanov, whose poetic world I considered an antipode of Mandel’štam’s. Nonetheless, it was in Ivanov’s translation of Sappho and in his original poetry that I found the key to the interpretation of two Mandel’štam poems containing ancient Greek images. My first essay to deal with Mandel’štam’s poetic themes and imagery, “Pěely i osy v poëzii Mandel’štama” (published in the 1967 Festschrift for Roman Jakobson), also represented my first attempt to analyse his poetry in the double terms I have designated context and subtext.

Exactly at that time several Harvard graduate students who were aware of my current scholarly interests asked me to give a seminar devoted to Mandel’štam’s poetry. This seminar took place in the spring of 1968, and proved exceptionally successful. I am very grateful to all its participants for lively discussions and for stimulating questions which helped me to formulate my own views more precisely. Naturally enough, these discussions and questions centered on theoretical problems, particularly the function of “other voices” in his poetry.

The seminar resulted in more than one publishable (and published) paper, and two excellent doctoral dissertations, to whose authors—Omry Ronen, now of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and Steven Broyde, of Amherst College—I should like to offer my sincere gratitude. Our intellectual exchanges over work in progress, theirs and my own, were no less valuable than the bibliographical checking they so willingly undertook on my behalf. I am further indebted to Steven Broyde for his translation of those essays of mine that were originally published in Russian.

Since this book is so closely connected both with my research and teaching at Harvard, I am particularly gratified that it should appear in the present series. My warm appreciation extends to the Harvard University Press for undertaking such a complex work, and to my
colleague and friend, Donald Fanger, general editor of the Harvard Slavic Studies, for his help in making this publication possible.

The essays here collected and revised have all been previously published: seven of them in various Mouton and Company publications and one in California Slavic Studies (see the Author’s Note at the end of this book). I would like to thank the Edicom N.V. and the University of California Press for their permission to include them here.

This volume would have been poorer without the generous help of scholars who read some of my essays in manuscript or commented on them after their first publication. I owe a debt of deepest gratitude to my teacher and friend Roman Osipovič Jakobson for friendly criticism and valuable advice. Gratitude of the same order goes to my dear Moscow friends, Mixail Leonovič Gasparov and Jurij Iosifovič Levin, for detailed letters responding to problems raised in my essays, for their helpful and stimulating suggestions, and, finally, for supplying me with some texts and information unavailable to me in this country.

Last, but not least, I am very much indebted to Mrs. Leslie O’Bell of the Harvard Society of Fellows for helping in a variety of ways to prepare the manuscript for publication.