

Preface

Osip Emilevich Mandelstam was a great poet, a great critic, and a profound humanist, perhaps even one of the last of the breed, though let us hope not. There is much interest in him now, if not exactly a "bandwagon." In any case, I am not a bandwagon man; my aim is to serve.

I thought Mandelstam better served by a careful, if broad, selection than by a complete volume of his prose. Inevitably a certain subjective element has entered into my choices of what to include. I have included all the essays that Mandelstam himself collected in the volume of literary essays published in his lifetime, *About Poetry*. In addition, I have tried to limit myself to the literary essays. I have excluded the journalistic pieces, though some of them, like the interview with Ho Chi Minh or the account of the Mensheviks in Georgia, are quite interesting. I feel I would have Mandelstam's approval here. The charming little radio play that he wrote in Voronezh about the early life of Goethe gave me more pain, as did the piece called "Sukharevka," but I decided finally they did not fit well into the "mix." Some of Mandelstam's reviews are interesting, especially his review of Huysmans; yet they do not really display Mandelstam at his best, nor do the two articles dealing with problems of translation.

On the other hand, the fragment "Pushkin and Scriabin," which Mandelstam himself seems to have rejected, seems to me so central to his thought, so full of the swelling of all his major themes, that in spite of its clearly fragmentary nature and its many obscurities it had to be included. "Fourth Prose," which might as easily have been included among Mandelstam's autobiographical writings, is nevertheless so important a commentary on his idea of his calling and his distinction between "poetry" and "Literature" that it similarly could not be left out. I must also confess that I could not resist the eloquence of its angry style; after a first, superficial impression of incoherence, the profundity and impersonality of its anger cannot but make a lasting impression on the reader. It should be more obvious that *Journey to Armenia* is not simply a travel piece. Even more than Andrei Biely's book about Armenia, to which

it bears a previously unacknowledged kinship, it is an essay on culture, on literature, on life; and it is quite central to Mandelstam's thought.

A number, though by no means the greater number, of these essays have been previously translated by other hands. Of those I have seen, the only one that struck me as unimprovable upon was the "Conversation about Dante" in the version by Clarence Brown and Robert Hughes. With their permission, the essay is included in this volume in their translation. Other translations are my own; I have worked on them long and hard, and with English cadences as much on my mind as the Russian. I wish I could have done better; but I have done my best.

Although "Conversation about Dante" is the last of the essays included here in its date of composition, I have placed it first, because it seems to me the most comprehensive statement of Mandelstam's ideas about poetry and poetics. The essays that were included by Mandelstam in his volume *About Poetry* follow in the order in which he arranged them.

I have tried to keep scholarly apparatus to a minimum. Names and events presumably well known to every educated reader have been neither footnoted nor endnoted. I have had my Interlocutor in mind throughout; but he (or she) is at times, I must admit, a conveniently nebulous figure. He is an educated, intelligent reader, interested not only in Russian literature, but in *literature*. He is not a specialist. He may or may not know Russian. The idea that even "specialists" (i.e., graduate students in Russian literature) actually read Mandelstam in the original Russian, if they don't have to for a given seminar or assignment, is a kind of fond Cloudcuckooland that I have no wish to disrupt, though I don't believe in it for a moment. I hope this book will help them, as I hope the previous Mandelstam volume that I edited helped them, in spite of its regrettable mistakes (*Complete Poetry of Osip Emilevich Mandelstam*, translated by Burton Raffel and Alla Burago, edited by Sidney Monas [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1972]). But the book is not primarily, and certainly not exclusively, for them. Mandelstam is a world figure, and he should be known to anybody who cares at all about literature and has the sensitivity to respond to a major poet. I do not really know whether the Interlocutor will coincide with the actual readers of this book. He may be somewhere among them.

Most of the notes are endnotes, so that the reader may consult

them or not as he sees fit. In some cases, where a brief and simple explanation seemed more immediately called for, I have used a footnote.

The system of transliteration used here is based on that of the Library of Congress, but it may be overstatement to call it a system. I have deferred to common usage: Tolstoy, and not Tolstoi; Biely, not Belyi; Scriabin and not Skriabin. In some cases, where the person involved seems to prefer a given usage, I have retained it: Filipoff, for instance, rather than Filippov. I have preferred to keep Russian names ending in *-skii* in the more familiar *-skiy*. It isn't entirely satisfactory, but I tend to eschew fanatic spelling.

In the course of preparing this volume, I have had much help from a large number of individuals, and I hope, if I have not managed to acknowledge them all, none will be offended. Clearly, final responsibility is mine alone, and none of the good people mentioned here should be held to blame in any way for the book's shortcomings.

All students and readers of Mandelstam must first and foremost acknowledge their debt to his indefatigable widow, Nadezhda Iakovlevna. I have profited not only from her two books of memoirs and her interesting critical essay, but also from personal interviews and brief correspondence. The Struve-Filipoff edition of the *Collected Works (Sobranie Sochinenii, 3 vols. [New York: Language Library Associates, 1972])*, especially volume 2, which contains all the Russian essays translated here, is an indispensable source. I have not only used the Struve-Filipoff texts but have also taken information from many of their notes and have taken much light from the essays by various hands that are included in the three volumes. I wish to thank Clarence Brown and Robert Hughes for permission to include their translation of "Conversation about Dante." In addition, I have had much valuable help and advice from them both. Translations from the poems of Gumilev and Mandelstam are by Burton Raffel and Alla Burago, with some emendations by me. Translations from the French are by Carolyn Cates Wylie, who has also served as an exceptionally alert and conscientious copy editor. All other translations are mine. George Ivask has been unstinting of his time and deep knowledge of Russian literature, and I owe him a great deal. Two readers from a university press submitted criticisms of the translations that I at first could not help resenting but in the long run came very much to appreciate, along with the comments of two readers for the present press, one

of them most helpfully detailed. I have had help and encouragement from many people: Rita and David Monas, Alla Burago, Elnora Carrino, and Louis Iribarne. William Arrowsmith gave me good cheer when I needed it. Carol Monas, my wife, was a stalwart support, a good critic. The person who seemed to identify with the work of getting Mandelstam into English almost as much as I did, who worked unstintingly and indefatigably, typing, correcting, criticizing, arranging was Gianna Kirtley, and I wish to thank her specially.