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OSIP MANDELSTAM IN THE POETRY AND PROSE OF SEAMUS HEANEY

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Abstract

The article focuses on the influence the figure of the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam had on the poetry and prose of Seamus Heaney, who is often considered to be the greatest Irish poet since W. B. Yeats. It presents an analysis of Heaney's poems and essays dedicated to the Russian poet and tries to define the role Mandelstam played in the development of Heaney's poetic system, his philosophy and principles. The article aims to show how Heaney's perception of Mandelstam changed through time by looking at the poems from his early and later poetry collections as well as by analysing his prose works included in his collections of essays such as "Preoccupations", "Finders Keepers" and "The Government of the Tongue". The article not only reveals Heaney's attitude towards Mandelstam, but also helps to get a deeper understanding of the impact Mandelstam has had on contemporary Irish poetry.

Keywords

Irish poetry, dialogue of cultures, Seamus Heaney, Osip Mandelstam.

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In his life and writings Seamus Heaney (1939-2013), an Irish poet, critic, translator and Nobel Laureate, always paid great attention to Eastern European and Russian poetry. Many of his essays, interviews and lectures on poetry are dedicated or contain references to Czeslaw Milosz, Zbigniew Herbert, Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak, Joseph Brodsky and Osip Mandelstam.

Mandelstam became one of the central figures in Heaney's poetic system. His constant presence (or "shadow presence", as defined by Heaney himself [16: 175]) can be sensed both in the poetry and prose of the Irish poet. Heaney first became

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acquainted with Mandelstam's oeuvre in the early 1970s, when Harvill Press published a translation of Nadezhda Mandelstam's *Memoirs* under the title *Hope against Hope* (1971). In 1973, two very significant books came out — *Mandelstam*, a biography of Mandelstam written by Clarence Brown, one of the first Mandelstam scholars in the USA, and *Selected poems* by Osip Mandelstam translated by C. Brown and W. S. Merwin. Nearly twenty years later, in an article to the Irish times Heaney would write that by the time he got to know Mandelstam's poetry and prose, "Mandelstam's name was a revered one, partly because of a growing appreciation of the intrinsic genius of his writings, but mostly because of the heroic figure he had become in the literary consciousness of the West" [7].

In 1974 Heaney reviewed the above mentioned translations of Mandelstam's poems and Nadezhda Mandelstam's *Memoirs*. The review appeared in *Hibernia* and later was included into Heaney's collection of essays *Preoccupations* (1980) under the title *Faith, Hope and Poetry: Osip Mandelstam*. It shows pure admiration for Mandelstam's endurance and sacrifice, for his inner determination to stay true to the poetic word even at the cost of his life. Speaking about the fate of "the banished poet", Heaney draws a link between the situation in the Soviet Union and the situation in Northern Ireland, because by the end of 1960s and early 1970s the conflict in Ulster with its endless bombing and shooting in the streets had reached its highest point. Those years were also marked by tragedies known as Bloody Sunday in Derry and Bloody Friday in Belfast. On the one hand, Heaney refers solely to the Northern Irish realities, where poetry became a means of expressing political attitudes. However, there are certain parallels with the official doctrine of the Soviet Union, which can be seen, for instance, through the Orwellian figure of "an official from the ministry of truth". This identification of Ulster with the totalitarian Soviet regime can also function as a kind of warning: "We live here in critical times ourselves, when the idea of poetry as an art is in danger of being overshadowed by a quest for poetry as a diagram of political attitudes. Some commentators have all the fussy literalism of an official from the ministry of truth" [4: 219-220]. In the closing paragraph of the essay Heaney once again refers to Mandelstam's example and expresses his own point of view: "Mandelstam's life and work are salutary and exemplary: if a poet must turn his resistance into an offensive, he should go for a kill and be prepared, in his life and with his work, for the consequences" [4: 220]. It seems that Heaney tries to answer a question that has been bothering him for a long time — how a poet should live and act in difficult times of political conflicts. His voice sounds determined and almost defiant, but the reality proves to be much more complicated. In his book *The Literature of Ireland: Culture and Criticism* Terence Brown observed that "Heaney has always been a poet anxious to do the world some good, troubled by his art's apparent incapacity to make things happen. <...> In Heaney's poetry of that difficult decade, there are suggestions of guilty fear that he has betrayed his art to the gross conditions of a squalid conflict, and, conversely, that he has stood idly by as others have suffered" [1: 190-193].

In 1972 Heaney moves to County Wicklow in the Republic of Ireland and the feeling that he has fled his responsibility, which is almost explicitly expressed in his early poetry collections, becomes even stronger. Thus, in *Exposure*, a poem from his collection *North* (1975), the poet reproaches himself for not having the courage to follow Mandelstam's example and "turn his resistance into an offensive":

*And I sometimes see a falling star.
If I could come on meteorite!
Instead I walk through damp leaves,
Husks, the spent flukes of autumn,
Imagining a hero
On some muddy compound,
His gift like a slingstone
Whirled for the desperate.
How did I end up like this?
I often think of my friends'
Beautiful prismatic counselling
And the anvil brains of some who hate me... [3: 72]*

Professor Margaret Mills Harper once noticed that in his poetry Heaney seems to have been afraid for a long time to straighten his shoulders and look up [2]. The poem cited above proves this idea, for instead of raising his head up to the skies, the poet walks through damp leaves, listening to his friends and his enemies, to the remarks said behind his back, and at the same time imagining another poet — Mandelstam, a hero who did not betray his poetic gift even when he knew that he was doomed. In the eighth stanza Heaney admits, "I am neither internee, nor informer / An inner émigré" who, while "blowing up these sparks / For their meagre heat", has missed "The once-in-a-lifetime portent, / The comet's pulsing rose" [3: 72-73].

It is important to understand that Heaney began his work on *Exposure* in 1973 (the earliest of the drafts is dated November 28, 1973), which means that the poem appeared almost at the same time as the essay *Faith, Hope and Poetry*, when Heaney was discovering more details and facts about Mandelstam's life and work. If we compare the drafts of the poem, we can see that with each new version Mandelstam's image becomes brighter and more clearly defined. At some point Heaney even imagines himself in the prison camp, as if trying to figure out how he would act if he were to share Mandelstam's fate: "If I were telling a metre now / On some muddy compound, / Interned among comrades, or bonded / To history among emigres" [10]. However, in the final version of the poem Heaney distances himself from Mandelstam, calling himself "a wood-kerne / Escaped from the massacre, / Taking protective colouring / From bole and bark..." [3: 73], while Mandelstam is a hero whose "gift like a slingstone / Whirled for the desperate" [3: 73]. Such antithesis strengthens the self-accusative tone of the poem.

Heaney's perception of Mandelstam depends on his attitude towards his poetic art and his role as a poet. Therefore, it changes when the need to justify his poetic art, to find excuses for escaping from the scene of suffering and for not taking an active part in history (which is one of the central themes of *Exposure*) disappears. Thus, in contrast with *Exposure* that portrays Mandelstam as a hero who sacrificed his life for poetry (this is probably the most widespread image of the Russian poet in the West), Heaney's later poem *M.* from his collection *The Spirit Level* (1996) represents Mandelstam primarily as a kindred poetic soul, whose poetic philosophy and principles are very similar to Heaney's. Undoubtedly, the historical and political contexts that determined Mandelstam's fate are still important, but Heaney puts the emphasis on the feeling of inner freedom that lies at the core of all Mandelstam's writings. Heaney openly admires the possibilities of language, which is both an instrument and, as Joseph Brodsky wisely remarked, the real Muse of a poet. The whole poem sings praise to the sound and the sounding word:

*When the deaf phonetician spread his hand
Over the dome of a speaker's skull
He could tell which diphthong and which vowel
By the bone vibrating to the sound.*

*A globe stops spinning. I set my palm
On a contour cold as permafrost
And imagine axle-hum and the steadfast
Russian of Osip Mandelstam [8: 57].*

Using M. M. Harper's metaphor we can state that Heaney finally managed to look up and stop worrying about "what is said behind-backs". This change is already suggested in the title of the collection — *the Spirit Level* — because the phrase is a word play that refers not only to a light air bubble floating on the surface, but also to another meaning of the word *spirit*, which is a person's soul, his true immortal self. In its mood and mode *M.* is completely different from *Exposure*. Although both poems are set in the prison camp, which Heaney brings to Siberia, the leading role in *M.* is given to the poet's voice, to the ever-lasting sound of his poetic speech. Curiously, in the draft versions of the poem, this phonetic — or articulative — aspect seemed even more explicit, because initially the poem was entitled *Articulation of Siberia* [11]. But eventually Heaney chose the title *M.* — the first letter of Mandelstam's surname that replaced his initials in the English translations of his wife's memoirs (in the Russian original, Mandelstam is referred to as O. M.). By doing so Heaney seems to have given the poem a stronger air of dedication to the Russian poet.

From the very beginning it becomes evident that the imagery of the poem comes from Mandelstam's *Conversation about Dante*, which had a profound influence on Heaney: "If you attentively watch the mouth of an accomplished poetry reader, it will seem as if he were giving a lesson to deaf-mutes, that is, he works with the aim of being understood even without sounds, articulating each vowel with pedagogical clarity" [14: 421]. In the first stanza there is a speaker (a poetry reader) who pro-

nounces each sound with exemplary diction and clarity, articulating even the most subtle nuances so that even a deaf person can distinguish each vowel, each diphthong by the vibration of the speaker's skull. It is a disputable question whether there are diphthongs in the Russian language, but they are definitely present in Italian: "Remember Virgil's marvellous supplication to the wiliest of the Greeks. It is completely suffused with the softness of Italian diphthongs" [14: 435].

The Divine Comedy is a key to understanding the works of both Mandelstam and Heaney. However, in the case of Heaney it is important to take into account not only the influence of Dante himself, but also the influence of Mandelstamian Dante. Heaney's essay *Dante and the Modern Poet* is filled with pure excitement and admiration for "the unpredictable intuitive nature of Mandelstam's genius" [9: 175]. Heaney delights in limitless possibilities of language, his voice echoes with eagerness and excitement: "Osip Mandelstam's Dante is the most eager, the most inspiring, the most delightfully approachable recreation we could hope for and what I want to do next is to indulge in what Mandelstam says Dante indulges in, 'an orgy of quotations'" [9: 175].

The poem *M.* is a celebration of the sound and the word singing under the dome of a human skull. One instantly recalls the invaluable comment made by Nadezhda Mandelstam about Mandelstam's *Verses on the Unknown Soldier* in her *Second Book* which was known to Heaney through Max Hayward's translation *Hope Abandoned* (1974): "Man, as the possessor of a skull, is the true miracle, and every man is unique and irreplaceable. By virtue of living, thinking, and feeling, he is a Shakespeare. And Shakespeare is Shakespeare by virtue of being a man, of possessing a skull ('the bonnet of bliss, the father of Shakespeare')..." [12: 487]. If we listen carefully to Heaney's poem, we can hear that the vibration of the speaker's skull goes nearly through every line of the poem because of the resonating diphthong in the words like *dome—bone—globe—cold*. The effect of the dome filled with sound is made even stronger by the nearby dental and labial consonants *d* and *b* as well as by the sonorants *m* and *l* that lengthen the resonance of the vowels that follow or precede them.

The second stanza conveys another sound — the sound of the axle-hum. It reminds us of the very sound Mandelstam strives to hear in his poem *Armed with the sight of the fine wasps*: "Oh if only once the sting of the air and the heat / of summer could make me hear / beyond sleep and death / the earth's axis, the earth's axis" [13: 125]. Some scholars believe that axle-hum "evokes the wagon tracks in which the detainees of the Soviet Union were deported to remote prison camps", and this sound along with the image of the land "cold as permafrost" helps recreate the cruel atmosphere of Stalinist times [18: 31]. However, arguments against this theory can be found in Heaney's own essay about Christopher Marlowe's poem *Hero and Leander*: "At the core of this verse, there is a kind of axle-hum, a feeling that the words are both being launched free and riding true upon some high flight-path. Marlowe's lines possess the lift and drag of orbit, a promise that entropy can be kept at bay for as long as invention can keep exercising itself" [6: 35]. The roots of Heaney's axle-hum go deep into the archetypal image of axle-tree, around which the world revolves. This image

also appears in Marlowe's *Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*: "As are the elements, such are the heavens, / Even from the moon unto the empyreal orb, / Mutually folded in each other's spheres, / And jointly move upon one **axle-tree**" [15: 217].

Like Mandelstam, Heaney listens carefully to the humming of the axle-tree, and in his poem it flows into the sound coming out from the poet's throat even in the god-forsaken prison camp among the permafrost of the faraway Siberian land. In his mind's eye Heaney takes a long journey to Siberia and hears the poet's voice — "the steadfast Russian of Osip Mandelstam".

In his article *Heaney and Eastern Europe* Justin Quinn argues that Heaney did not know any Slavic languages and, therefore, could only wonder how Eastern European or Russian poetry (for example, the poetry of Mandelstam) could sound in the original [17: 93]. This statement is partially true, because without the knowledge of the Russian language a poet has to rely only on his or her intuition and poetic sense of language in order to imagine the possible sound and form of the original which, as a rule, get lost almost completely when translated into English. Nevertheless, it is essential to keep in mind that in 1972 Heaney already met Joseph Brodsky and, as a result, could hear Brodsky's poetry and poetry of other Russian poets in the original. What is more, on January 6 in 1991, a bilingual reading of Mandelstam's poetry was organized in London to mark the centenary of his birth, and during this reading Heaney read Mandelstam's poems in English, while Brodsky provided the Russian originals. Perhaps, having access to Mandelstam's poetry in its own language, that is, in its own element, helped Heaney see Mandelstam not only as a hero (as in *Exposure*), but as a poet, whose steadfast voice cannot be silenced even in the heart of ice-covered mute Siberia.

By using the adjective *steadfast* Heaney creates a bridge between his poem and Mandelstam's *Journey to Armenia*. To be more precise, the poem alludes to Mandelstam's notes on Armenia, which were included in the Addenda and which Heaney also quotes in his essay *Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam*: "(If I accept total immersion in sound, steadfastness and vigour as time-honoured and just, my visit to Armenia has not been in vain.) If I accept as time-honoured both the shadow of the oak tree and the shadow of the grave, and, indeed, the steadfastness of speech articulation, how shall I ever appreciate the present age?" [5: 85]. Thus, the poem *M.* becomes an homage to the great poet and a monument to the poet's voice which sounds in unison with the humming of the axle-tree and which enters deep into the very heart of the Earth while rising at the same time high up to the spirit level.

The figure of Mandelstam, as a poet and as a hero, as an example and a kindred poetic soul, accompanies Heaney through all his life — from the early 1970s and up until the very end. Heaney's perception of Mandelstam reflects the feelings and pre-occupations of Heaney the poet and helps trace how they changed and developed through time. Even the two poems analysed in the present article allow us to see the way Heaney's attitude towards poetry and secrets of the poetic craft evolved. As opposed to *Exposure*, full of doubts and remorse, *M.* is a determined acceptance of the poetic gift, and an affirmation of a poet's right to sing.

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ОСИП МАНДЕЛЬШТАМ В ЭССЕИСТИКЕ И ПОЭЗИИ ШЕЙМАСА ХИНИ

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Аннотация

Статья посвящена влиянию О. Э. Мандельштама на творчество Шеймаса Хини, крупнейшего ирландского поэта со времен У. Б. Йейтса, переводчика, эссеиста и Нобелевского лауреата 1995 г. В статье проводится анализ стихов и эссе Хини, в которых присутствуют отсылки к русскому поэту, предпринимается попытка определить, какую роль сыграл Мандельштам в формировании поэтической системы, творческой философии и принципов Хини, и проследить, как менялось восприятие Мандельштама ирландским поэтом с течением времени.

В статье рассматриваются стихотворения, вошедшие как в ранние сборники Хини, так и в более поздние, а также эссе из его книг «Пристрастия» и «Чур, мое!» (пер. Г. М. Кружкова). Данное исследование позволяет не только раскрыть особенности рецепции Мандельштама в творчестве Хини, но и составить представление о том, какое значение приобрел русский поэт для современной ирландской поэзии.

Ключевые слова

Ирландская поэзия, диалог культур, Шеймас Хини, О. Э. Мандельштам.

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