

Osip Mandelstam
Two Poems from 1937
Translated from Russian by Ilya Bernstein

1.

Я нынче в паутине световой —
Черноволосой, светло-русой, —
Народу нужен свет и воздух голубой,
И нужен хлеб и снег Эльбруса.

И не с кем посоветоваться мне,
А сам найду его едва ли:
Таких прозрачных, плачущих камней
Нет ни в Крыму, ни на Урале.

Народу нужен стих таинственно-родной,
Чтоб от него он вечно просыпался
И льянокудрю, каштановой волной —
Его звучаньем — умывался.

2.

Может быть, это точка безумия,
Может быть, это совесть твоя —
Узел жизни, в котором мы узнаны
И развязаны для бытия.

Так соборы кристаллов сверхжизненных
Добросовестный свет-паучок,
Распуская на ребра, их сызнава
Собирает в единый пучок.

Чистых линий пучки благодарные,
Направляемы тихим лучом,
Соберутся, сойдутся когда-нибудь,
Словно гости с открытым челом, —

Только здесь, на земле, а не на небе,
Как в наполненный музыкой дом, —
Только их не спугнуть, не изранить бы —
Хорошо, если мы доживем...

То, что я говорю, мне прости...
Тихо-тихо его мне прочти...

1.

Today I'm in a spiderweb of light—
As if in black hair, and in fair—
What people need is light and air of blue,
And they need bread and Elbrus Mountain snow.

And there is none who might enlighten me,
While I will hardly find one on my own:
Not in the Urals, not in the Crimea—
There are no such transparent, weeping stones.

The people need a poem mysteriously near,
To be awakened by it all their days
And in the sound of it to lave forever—
As in a flaxen curl, a nut-brown wave.

19 January 1937

2.

Maybe this is a point of mindlessness,
Maybe this is your conscience—this,
The knot of life, in which we are recognized
And untied into that which is.

Thus life-surpassing crystal cathedrals
Are stretched onto ribs by light,
That painstaking spider, who gathers them
Once more in a single beam.

Beams of pure lines, grateful ones,
Steered by a quiet ray
Will meet, will unite someday
Like guests with their heads unbarred.

Only not in the sky, but on earth,
As in a house filled with song.
How not to harm, not to frighten them?
If only we live so long...

Forgive me for speaking out loud...
Read it quietly to me now...

15 March 1937

Mandelstam was not the first person to compare the retina to a spiderweb—the Greek anatomist who first described this body part had given it the name *arachnoides*—but he was perhaps the first poet to envision *himself* in the midst of photoreceptive tissue, as he does in the first of these poems, surrounded by luminous filaments and experiencing a clarity in which even the needs of the nation become viewable. The image of poetry as a kind of sensory organ allowing for a vision otherwise inaccessible is a constant theme in Mandelstam's later poems. For him, poetic saying enables seeing, rather than the other way around, and the ideal poem is a “gift from the psalmist to the visionary.”

In his youth, Mandelstam compared the poetic word to a stone, and he revives this image in the second stanza here, only now he knows what kind of stone it must be: one that is endowed with the faculty of vision, one that is capable of tears... and such stones not even the expanse and geological variety of Soviet lands can produce.

Finally, in the third stanza, Mandelstam lays old metaphors aside and says directly what this poem is about: it is a poem *about* a poem, one that could become an ever-open eye for the people, ensuring their wakefulness. Only the filaments out of which *its* retina would be spun would be made not of light, but of its own sound, which would wash those who see through it in the manner of lachrymation. That sound, alas, cannot be rendered in translation, at least not by me, so readers of this poem in English are barred from judging whether the actual poem before them itself is such a poem as is described in the poem. Russian readers are likely to say that it is.

In the second poem, composed a couple of months later, Mandelstam's attention shifts from the spiderweb to the spider who spins it. The starting point is once again the eye, through which we are simultaneously grasped by others and unbound into waking life ourselves. The poem's second stanza repeats this figure, now not from our point of view, but from the point of view of light, imagined as a busy little spider. Spinning a retina out of rays that issue out of itself, it sends these filaments out into the world, to render objects visible, and collects them again in a bundle when they are reflected back into the eye. The eye,

considered from this angle, is simply an intrusion by light into human anatomy, a convergence of its multiple rays in a single bundle or beam.

It is in the third stanza of this poem that Mandelstam embarks on a description of a mysterious process in which multiple such bundles, shown the way by a ray, themselves undergo a still further bundling. What is he describing in this beautiful image of light guiding light? He is describing human eyes being led by the light of day toward a shared focusing. What will be the common object of their attention? What can it be but a poem: not one spoken out loud, but one that appears on a page, where readers' eyes gather across the ages in silence. This is why the ray that facilitates their concentration is given the epithet "quiet": because it plays a role in a context in which out-loudness might have been expected. But across the ages a poem survives only on the page, in the written word, voicelessly. Yet notice the contrast between the silence in which the steering, the gathering, and the reading take place, and the music that fills the house once the guests arrive.

Finally, who is the addressee of the last two lines? The reappearance of the word "quietly" gives it away: I believe it is to the bundles of light in his own eyes that Mandelstam offers this apology for using his voice, lest it disturb the process envisioned in the preceding stanzas.

I have published translations of these two poems before, though not side by side, and not in this form. *The Poems of Osip Mandelstam*, trans. Ilya Bernstein (2014), is available online from EPC Digital Editions (http://epc.buffalo.edu/library/Mandelstam_Poems_Ilya-Bernstein.pdf) and in traditional book form from M-Graphics Publishing. The translations presented here are new.

I.B.