

“Ode to the Great Leader” or “Ode to the Poet”: Identifying the Hero in Osip Mandel'shtam’s “Poems about Stalin”

MATTHEW McGARRY
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN

Since its publication in 1973, Osip Mandel'shtam's "Poems about Stalin" [Stikhi o Staline] has been a subject of much controversy. Uncomfortable with the poem's seemingly positive depiction of Stalin, early critics of Mandel'shtam, including Clarence Brown, believed the work to be nothing more than a desperate attempt by the poet to save himself and his wife from an undesirable fate (Brown 601). Although frequently relegated in both a physical and figurative sense to the "notes" (*primechaniia*) of Mandel'shtam's collected works, interest in the text following its initial appearance failed to dissipate. Citing the poem's thematic depth, tropic complexity, and linguistic richness, critics such as Gregory Freidin rejected viewing the ode as either a blemish or an anomaly, arguing instead that the work was not only a source of great pride to the poet, but also one of the crowing achievements of Mandel'shtam's entire *oeuvre* (Freidin 250-271).

Although preserving the poem's reputation on an artistic level, Freidin's reading of "Poems about Stalin" has done little to diffuse the debate surrounding the text's actual meaning and its significance as one of Mandel'shtam's final poetic statements. In fact, it is possible to argue that Freidin's recognition of the work's aesthetic merits has served only to intensify the controversy surrounding the poem. His analysis of the text posed an important question: Is the poem an earnest attempt, as Freidin asserts, by a "great master of verbal art" to pay "tribute" to a "great master of political power" (260)?

With this in mind, the purpose of this discussion is twofold. First, it is to shed light on the question of authorial intent: Is the poem simply a panegyric to Stalin? Second, it is to demonstrate the manner in which Mandel'shtam expands the narrative contours of the ode. Unlike the panegyrics of Pindar, Gavril Derzhavin, and Konstantin Batiushkov, Mandel'shtam's poem is not controlled by a single hegemonic subject whose being dominates the text, but, rather, the

narrative landscape of Mandel'shtam's "Poems about Stalin" is a place of struggle between two epic figures: the poet and the leader. Presented with two potential heroes, the reader is challenged to eschew the poem's misleading title and to determine if this text is in fact an ode to *velikomu vozhd'yu* (the great leader) or *poetu* (the poet). The reader must decide whether "Poems about Stalin" is the poet's last attempt to live in harmony with his times, or if it is one of Mandel'shtam's final manifestations of Pushkinian defiance against a despot whom he viewed as an usurper and tyrant.

A brief overview of the ode as a genre will help to ground an analysis of Mandel'shtam's text. From its beginnings, the ode has possessed the aura of the "priest-prophet" (Maddison 9). In antiquity, modern Western Europe, and Russia (at least until Derzhavin) the ode was not a genre of personal reflection, but of public declaration; the addressee of the ode was never a concealed figure who understood the hidden meaning behind the bard's musings, but, rather, was the collective masses. Poets choosing to disseminate their message to the public via the ode were viewed not simply as artists within their specific cultures, but as seers and prophets who wrote with the implicit understanding that their verse could significantly influence the future of their people and nation.

The aforementioned characteristics that readers most often associate with the ode reflect the legacy of the genre's primogenitor, the Greek poet, priest, and prophet Pindar. Although Pindar wrote in all the poetic forms of his time, the one for which he is most famous is the *epinikia* (Maddison 11). A triumphal song, the *epinikia* was traditionally performed during the commencement of one of Greece's four national games, to mark a victor's return home, during a temple procession, and at feasts celebrating military victories. The typical *epinikia* was comprised of a strophe, antistrophe, and epode that described the nature of the hero's immediate conquest while contextualizing it within a myth that served as the connective tissue linking the present to the past. Afterwards, the poem concluded with a reaffirmation of the hero's victory followed by a reflective commentary and/or prayer (Preminger and Brogan 377).

From the *epinikia*, Pindar derived the structural blueprint for the mature odes that would bear his name. Similar to the *epinikia*, the Pindaric ode is a highly symmetrical genre comprised of triadic sections, each possessing a strophe, antistrophe, and epode. Within the structure of the ode, each unit serves a specific function. Metrically and

rhythmically identical to one another, the strophe and antistrophe respectively present a position and counter-position. The sense of tension that emanates from this juxtaposition leads to the epode, a stanza possessing a different arrangement of lines and feet that concludes the triad. In many instances, the epode serves to resolve the conflict between strophe and anti-strophe either at the conclusion of the ode, or to provide what appears as objective commentary that helps facilitate the transition to the next strophe.

One of the most readily discernable features of the Pindaric ode—one preserved in all subsequent odic traditions in both the West and Russia—is the genre’s didacticism. Specifically, all Pindaric odes strive to impart wisdom to the audience. In order to show his audience the path toward enlightenment, the poet often publicizes personal experiences and revelations, as in the epode of Mandel’shtam’s “Poems about Stalin.” The poet’s willingness to share his views with the public on the surface appears problematic, especially in light of the genre’s civic orientation; however, the speaker’s desire to disseminate his thoughts and visions is consistent with the elevated position of the poet in the Pindaric ode. As Carol Maddison aptly notes: “the poet, like the hero, was part of the glory of Greece. It was he who preserved the traditions, who gave life to those who otherwise would die. He, too, was god-inspired and as much a part of the great deed as the victorious athlete” (8). As will soon become apparent, Pindar’s model provides Mandel’shtam with the ideal medium to reassert the immortality of the Russian poet.

Mandel’shtam’s debt to Pindar is not immediately apparent. This is evident in the poem’s first stanza where in place of a heroic awe-inspiring Pindaric first strophe, Mandel’shtam begins the ode in a thoughtful, if not anti-climatic, tone. Reflective rather than apostrophic, the poet writes:

Когда б я уголь взял для высшей похвалы
 Для радости рисунка непреложной, —
 Я б воздух расчертил на хитрые углы
 И осторожно и тревожно. (“Stikhi o Staline” 439-42)¹

Initially, the first strophe appears inadequate for the task of writing a celebratory ode to Stalin. Consider the language and imagery of the first line. To write an ode of supreme praise, the poet chooses the most ordinary of writing implements—a piece of charcoal.

Mandel’shtam’s decision to render his ode through such humble means is striking. Not only does it defy generic convention, but it

also challenges the reader to question the author's literary *ustanovka* (motivation). Instead of adhering to convention and beginning the ode with an exclamatory pronouncement linking the craft of the poet to the heroic and superhuman deeds of his hero, Mandel'shtam's opening conveys a sense of weariness and hesitation. An astute student and critic of literature, Mandel'shtam was clearly aware of the formal codes governing the Pindaric ode. Does Mandel'shtam's inability to adhere to convention confirm the view that he was unable to coerce his creative muse into serving a particular patron (Coetzee 74)? Or, perhaps the piece of charcoal is synonymous to the incomplete circle of the horseshoe in Mandel'shtam's Pindaric fragment, "He Who Found a Horseshoe" (Cavenagh 165)? In other words, are the shadowy, indefinite lines of the charcoal that Mandel'shtam will use to render his portrait of Stalin the relics of a once hallowed generic form?

Although both readings, particularly the latter, have merit, the first line of the poem reveals neither inadequacy nor longing for the resurrection of bygone cultures and values. The reflective and seemingly weary tone of the ode's initial lines enables Mandel'shtam to begin the process of refocusing his audience's attention. Rather than begin his panegyric in a manner affirming the hierarchical Pindaric relationship between artist and patron, Mandel'shtam concentrates solely on the thoughts of the poet. Mandel'shtam's subtle opening serves two functions. First, it temporarily relegates the work's namesake, its actual *hero*, Stalin, to the margins. Second, it elevates the narrative position of the poet above the reader. Mandel'shtam's poet, thus, is not simply a *glashatai* (herald) in the service of the state, but an actual figure replete with his own thoughts and views.

Let us now return to the significance of the poet's chosen writing instrument—the piece of charcoal. Not simply the remnant of a great odic tradition, this implement also enables Mandel'shtam to forge a direct link with his most important literary forbearer—Pushkin. Perhaps a relic of the form the lyric "The Prophet," the charcoal symbolizes the poet's yearning to not only harness the creative and regenerative forces of his predecessor's muse, but also to signal the reader that he, in the tradition of Pushkin, is a poet who, with his immortal words, will *zhigi serdtsa* (burn the heart) of those who have forgotten him (Pushkin 84). Embedded within the image of the discarded piece of charcoal is a statement of poetic intent that undercuts the work's apparent purpose. Mandel'shtam's goal is not neces-

sarily to celebrate Stalin, but rather, the poet.

In order to celebrate the poet, Mandel'shtam needs to shift the poem's narrative focus. Herein lies the second function of the charcoal. Thanks to the piece of charcoal, Mandel'shtam forges a bond with the one figure whose cultural legacy not even Stalin could overshadow—Pushkin. Mandel'shtam's skillfully executed link to Pushkin enables him to present the poet not as Stalin's servile bard, but as a hero whose accomplishments and deeds merit an ode of his own.

In the second quatrain of the first stanza, the antistrophe, the poet shifts the narrative focus of the ode to his hero:

Чтоб настоящее в чертах отозвалось,
В искусстве с дерзостью гранича,
Я б рассказал о том, кто сдвинул мира ось,
Ста сорока народов, чтя обычай.²

Upon first glance, the identity of the hero appears self-evident. To most Russians of the era, there existed only one individual capable of shifting the world's axis while simultaneously honoring the customs and traditions of one hundred and forty people—Stalin. In this lies the genius of Mandel'shtam's technique: cognizant of the differences between listening and reading, Mandel'shtam creates an ode that is both Pindaric and Horation. As an oratorical Pindaric ode, the hero of the text appears to be Stalin; however, when read in the tradition of the Horation panegyric, the identity of the protagonist is far from certain. After all, if we exclude the title, at no point within the first eight lines does Mandel'shtam explicitly reveal his hero's identity. Should readers then place their faith solely in the accuracy of the title? Evidence from the strophe suggests the presence of another Herculean being—the poet. As the heir of Pushkin's "The Prophet," Mandel'shtam's poet is a superhuman figure who shapes the world through his immortal verse.

The final quatrain of the first stanza is the epode. Here, Mandel'shtam privileges the reader to the details comprising the poet's craft:

Я б поднял брови малый уголок,
И поднял вновь и разрешил иначе:
Знать, Прометей раздул свой уголёк, —
Гляди, Эсхил, как я, рисуя, плачу!³

Returning to the images invoked in the strophe, Mandel'shtam describes how he would create his hero. Not satisfied with his initial efforts, the poet reworks his creation and declares upon completion

that he has rendered Prometheus, the Greek Titan chained by Zeus to the Caucasus for giving fire to humankind. As the image takes shape, it is clear that Prometheus represents the poet's elusive hero.

Whom does Prometheus embody? Is he the Soviet Titan from the Caucasus, Stalin, or the punished poet? Although it is possible to make a case for Stalin, both the structure and content of the stanza identify the poet as Prometheus. Two interconnected factors support this contention. The first concerns the image of charcoal that both strophe and epode share. This subtle trope ties poet and hero together. The image of Prometheus blowing on his coal symbolizes the poet striving to reignite and harness the creative power of the prophet's piece of charcoal. In turn, this picture defines the poet's relationship to his "patron," who, like Prometheus chained to a rocky crag atop the Caucasus for deceiving Zeus, must pay the ultimate price for defying the Great Leader.

After elevating him to the status of hero, Mandel'shtam begins to contextualize the poet's relationship to his nemesis—Stalin. As in the first stanza, Mandel'shtam's descriptions are hardly overt. Instead of identifying Stalin directly, Mandel'shtam builds his image gradually with a series of well-conceived and deftly executed verses. This is particularly evident in the stanza's opening strophe:

Я б несколько гремучих линий взял,
 Все моложавое его тысячелетье,
 И мужество улыбкою связал
 И развязал в ненапряженном свете...⁴

Seeking to enhance the formal and thematic link between the second and first stanzas, Mandel'shtam opens the strophe with a conditional statement. Central to this line is the dialogic meaning of the adjective "gremuchii" (thunderous). As a word on a page, the definition of *gremuchii* is clear; however, similar to verses seven and eight in the first stanza, the meaning of *gremuchii* changes when processed aurally. When read aloud in true Pindaric fashion, *gremuchii* sounds like the Russian word for rattlesnake, *gremuchaia zmeia*, which is a significant motif from Mandel'shtam's "wolf" poem.⁵

The antistrophe of the second stanza prepares the reader for Stalin's formal introduction in the epode:

И в дружбе мудрых глаз найду для близнеца,
 Какого не скажу, то выраженье, близясь
 К которому, к нему, – вдруг узнаешь отца
 И задыхаешься, почуяв мира близость.⁶

Perhaps the most significant element of this quatrain is the final word in the first verse—*bliznets* (twin). On the surface, the term appears to be a reference to Stalin's revolutionary father and brother-in-arms—Lenin. Since propaganda photos and posters frequently presented Lenin and Stalin together, the public often viewed the two as twins. Albeit conceivable, this reading overlooks the obvious—the two Josephs. Having established himself in the first stanza, the poet is now ready to introduce his twin, the leader—Joseph. Rather than introduce him directly, Mandel'shtam, in the remaining three lines of the antistrophe, alludes to his identity through associative expressions that readers would immediately link to the father and creator of worlds—Stalin.

Mandel'shtam's skillful handling of the antistrophe enables him to identify his twin on his own terms:

И я хочу благодарить холмы,
 Что эту кость и эту кисть развили:
 Он родился в горах и горечь знал тюрьмы.
 Хочу назвать его – не Сталин, – Джугашвили!⁷

As in the strophe, Mandel'shtam employs a series of Stalin-specific tropes to describe his subject. Similar to the preceding strophes of both stanzas, Mandel'shtam exploits the oratorical dimension of the ode. In lines one through three of the epode, Mandel'shtam utilizes the rhetoric of the era to manipulate his audience's understanding of the subject. In the epode's final verse, however, Mandel'shtam plays a trick on his reader. After building up his readers' expectations, Mandel'shtam reveals that his twin is not necessarily Stalin, but Dzhugashvili.

What is significant about the poet's desire to name his twin Dzhugashvili and not Stalin? Numerous readings of this not so subtle distinction abound, including the highly probable interpretation that it constitutes another level of the two Josephs theme (Freidin 267). Despite its plausibility, such a reading is not germane to understanding the textual relationship between poet and leader. Mandel'shtam's wish to "name him not Stalin, but Dzhugashvili" suggests a desire to level not only the narrative playing field of the ode, but also to assert the primacy of the poet. Instead of identifying him as Stalin, Mandel'shtam dares to name him Dzhugashvili, which, in juxtaposition to the poet who is the literary and cultural *naslednik* (heir) of Pushkin, reduces him to the status of a mere mortal.

The third stanza presents the reader with the challenge of iden-

tifying the speaker's subject. This problem is immediately evident in the stanza's opening strophe:

Художник, береги и охраняй бойца:
В рост окружи его сырым и синим бором
Вниманья влажного. Не огорчить отца
Недобрым образом иль мыслей недобором.⁸

The stanza's opening apostrophe appears to encourage the artist to defend and honor his subject. Again, as in the first stanza, on the oratorical plane the term *boets* (warrior) and its masculine pair *otets* (father) seemingly point to Stalin; however, when read within the aforementioned contexts of the first stanza, the subject's identity appears to be that of the poet. As he renders his image of the poet-prophet, Mandel'shtam elevates his subject to the status of warrior-father. No longer is the bard's subject simply an artist-seer, but he is a builder and soldier charged with the construction and defense of his native culture. Given the nature of his responsibility and cultural position, it is the artist's task to "not upset the father with an unwholesome image or an inferior thought" (Freidin 258).

In the antistrophe, Mandel'shtam considers the question of poetic/artistic responsibility:

Художник, помоги тому, кто весь с тобой,
Кто мыслит, чувствует и строит.
Не я и не другой – ему народ родной –
Народ-Гомер хвалу утронг.⁹

Similar to the strophe, this quatrain opens with an apostrophic address to the poet exhorting him to help his other, presumably his patron—Stalin. Although such a reading is possible, the third verse indicates otherwise. According to Mandel'shtam's lyrical *I*, the poet's *other*, the one for whom he writes, whose glory in the Homeric fashion he celebrates, and to whom in final judgment he is ultimately responsible is not Stalin, but the Russian *narod* (people).

To preserve this sacred bond with people and to empower him to use his talents for their benefit, the artist must honor and handle with care the image of the poet:

Художник, береги и охраняй бойца:
Лес человечества за ним поет густея,
Само грядущее – дружина мудреца
И слушает его все чаще, все смелее.¹⁰

Inspired by his bold verse and daring vision, the people will gather as one behind the poet and follow him into the future.

In the fourth strophe, Mandel'shtam shifts the focus of the fourth stanza back to the anti-hero—Stalin. As Freidin observes, this stanza has the narrative character of a newsreel (262). This is immediately apparent in the opening strophe:

Он свесился с трибуны как с горы
В бугры голов. Должник сильнее иска.¹¹

Unlike the quatrains that begin the first three sections, Mandel'shtam truncates the opening strophe of the fourth stanza. Formally, Mandel'shtam's decision to abbreviate the strophe serves to accentuate its cinematic quality. As the stanza opens, the reader seems to be watching a newsreel of Stalin addressing the masses. Ironically, as Freidin notes, Stalin, unlike Lenin, was not a particularly gifted orator. Instead of emphasizing one of his subject's strengths, Mandel'shtam deliberately highlights one of his most glaring shortcomings, which in turn lends the strophe an Aesopian dimension that further reduces Stalin's stature in the text.

After setting the stage, Mandel'shtam uses the antistrophe to provide a detailed rendering of Stalin.

Могучие глаза решительно добры,
Густая бровь кому-то светит близко,
И я хотел бы стрелкой указать
На твердость рта – отца речей упрямых
Лепной, сложное, крутое веко, знать,
Работает из миллиона рамок.
Весь – откровенность, весь – признанья медь.¹²

Although Mandel'shtam's description of Stalin appears flattering, it is in reality laden with examples of Aesopian language. Consider the image of Stalin's eyebrows. Having described his "mighty," yet "decisively" kind eyes, Mandel'shtam reduces Stalin to a cartoon figure in the following line. Later, in the sixth line, the poet, after describing the leader's firm and resolute mouth, observes that he is also the "father of stubborn speeches." Finally, to conclude the strophe, Mandel'shtam writes that Stalin is all "sincerity, he is—all brass of fame." Mandel'shtam's subtle use of the word *priznanie* (fame) undercuts the meaning of *otkrovennost* (outspokenness) in the previous clause. Besides fame, *priznanie* also means confession. Thus, within a single line, Mandel'shtam challenges the reader to question the hero's actual sincerity. Juxtaposed to the solemn image of the artist/poet in the third stanza, Mandel'shtam's portrayal of Stalin appears more akin to a caricature than to a serious portrait.

The twofold nature of the strophe and antistrophe also defines the character of the epode. More somber than parodic, Mandel'shtam writes:

И зоркий слух, не терпящий сурдинки,
 На всех готовых жить и умереть
 Бегут играя хмурые морщинки.¹³

Whereas the hero of the third stanza, the poet, is an inspiring figure that strives to lead his people toward the future, Stalin is an intolerant leader whose concern is not simply life, but death.

In the fifth stanza, Mandel'shtam once more grasps the charcoal to render how he will try to capture the likeness of his subject. Perhaps more so than in previous stanzas, Mandel'shtam's dialogic narrative makes it possible identify the subject as either the poet or Stalin. Consider the poet's description in the antistrophe of his relationship to the hero:

Я у него учусь не для себя учась.
 Я у него учусь – к себе не зная пощады,
 Несчастья скроют ли большого плана часть
 Я разыщу его в случайностях их чада...¹⁴

If read, as some redactions suggest, as the "Ode to Stalin," the hero's identity seems clear; however, Mandel'shtam never explicitly bestowed this title upon his work. Consequently, it is important to frame this section within the poet-hero contexts that Mandel'shtam establishes in the first two stanzas. Having already identified the poet as Pushkin's heir, Mandel'shtam's lyrical *I* details the nature of the relationship between teacher and pupil. As he strives to sketch a portrait of the poet that is worthy of his mentor, the speaker describes the magnitude of the burden that rests upon his creative shoulders. The poet's task is not an easy one; he learns to create not for himself, but to honor his master and fulfill his creative responsibility.

As the stanza concludes, Mandel'shtam alludes to another figure that the poet cannot avoid:

Он все мне чудится в шинели, в картузе,
 На чудной площади со счастливыми глазами.¹⁵

Standing with "happy eyes" in the middle of Red Square, Stalin is the *other* whom the poet must overcome if he is to ensure his poetic and social legacy.

Mandel'shtam's direct reference to Stalin in the epode leads directly to the opening strophe of the sixth and penultimate stanza of the poem. As the opening strophe indicates, the focus of this stanza,

more so than in any of the previous five, is clearly Stalin.

Глазами Сталина раздвинута гора
И вдаль прищурилась равнина.
Как море без морщин, как завтра из вчера –
До солнца борозды от пауга-исполина.¹⁶

After one reading, the strophe seems to paint a heroic picture, which Freidin believes “describes the transformation of the earth under Stalin’s vision” (262). Indeed, Stalin, with eyes capable of splitting mountains, appears to be a figure capable of monumental deeds. While rendering a Zeus-like character, Mandel’shtam’s hyperbolic language simultaneously lends a grotesque element to Stalin. Unlike the solemn, well-measured image of the poet that he describes in earlier stanzas, Mandel’shtam’s portrayal of Stalin is decidedly disproportionate. In short, the poet’s Stalin is not a hero, but a distortion that kindles feelings of revulsion, fear, and even a sense of comedy.

In the antistrophe, Mandel’shtam proceeds to give flesh to his monstrous caricature:

Он улыбается улыбкою жнеца
Рукопожатий в разговоре,
Который начался и длится без конца
На шестиклассном просторе.¹⁷

With the smile of a reaper, Stalin shakes hands and converses without end about the “expanse” of his infamous six-fold oath. As in the strophe, Mandel’shtam’s subtle description of Stalin as a “harvester of handshakes” (*zhneti*) dehumanizes his subject. Here it is important to observe Mandel’shtam’s choice of words. Rather than describing him as a “cultivator” of relationships, Mandel’shtam deliberately depicts Stalin as one who harvests handshakes as one harvests crops on a collective farm.

In the epode, Mandel’shtam employs a spondee that underscores the inflated portrayal of Stalin conveyed in the first eight verses:

И каждое гумно и каждая копна
Сильна, убориста, умна – добро живое –
Чудо народное! Да будет жизнь крупна.
Ворочается счастье стерженное.¹⁸

Strewn about the floor are the sheaves, the human material of the fourth stanza ready for the threshing machine of the harvester: Stalin.

Having presented the *vozhd'* (leader) in his *real* contexts, the poet is ready to reveal to the reader the true hero of the poem:

И шестикратно я в сознании берегу
 Свидетель медленный труда, борьбы и жатвы
 Его огромный путь – через тайгу.¹⁹

И ленинский октябрь – до выполненной клятвы.

Referring once again to Stalin's six-fold oath, the poet states that he has been witness to many labors, struggles, and harvests. On the surface, the subject of the strophe appears to be Stalin. Again, appearances are deceiving, for embedded within the strophe is not simply a description of Stalin's journey, but of Mandel'shtam's own difficult passage. Similar to his twin, Mandel'shtam too has experienced the desolate expanse of the Russian taiga and the initial euphoria of the Revolution (Cavanagh 146).²⁰

Central to understanding Mandel'shtam's poetic intent in the strophe is the line "do vypolnennoi klyatvy" (fulfilled oath). Specifically, what is the oath and for whom is it made? Is it a reference to Stalin and his realization of his six-fold oath, or does it signify a sacred trust between leader and poet? The answers to these questions lie in the ensuing quatrain.

Уходят вдале людских голов бугры:
 Я уменьшаюсь там, меня уж не заметят,
 Но в книгах ласковых и в играх детворы
 Воскресну я сказать, что солнце светит.²¹

Although reduced to being simply another anonymous face amongst the masses, the poet boldly declares that it is his image and not that of the Leader that will be resurrected and preserved for time immemorial. In the ensuing line, as the poem draws to a conclusion, it becomes clear that the hero of Mandel'shtam's ode is not Stalin, but the poet.

Правдивей правды нет, чем искренность бойца:
 Для чести и любви, для доблести и стали.
 Есть имя славное для сжатых губ чтеца –
 Его мы слышали и мы его застали.²²

As a successor to the poet-prophet, Mandel'shtam's lyrical *I* is a warrior charged not simply with the task of defending the artist's image, but also with preserving it. Mandel'shtam's ode thus constitutes the poet's fulfillment of his sacred oath not to Lenin, to the new Soviet state, or even to Stalin, but to the poet.

In conclusion, "Poems about Stalin" represents one of Mandel'shtam's final poetic wills and testaments. Veiled beneath a series of well-conceived and cleverly rendered Aesopian descriptions of Sta-

lin, the poem presents an image of another figure, the poet, whose being and work will outlast those of the Leader in the cultural conscience of the Russian people. Mandel'shtam's "Poems about Stalin," thus, in the tradition of Derzhavin's "Pamiatnik" [Monument] (1795) and Pushkin's "Ya pamyatnik sebia vozdvig nerukotvornyi" [I have made a monument to myself made not by hand] (1836) is an ode to the poet, a monument intended to preserve the image of this figure for eternity and the sanctity of the poetic craft for future generations.

Notes

1. [Were I to take up the charcoal for the sake of supreme praise – / For the sake of the eternal joy of drawing – / I would divide the air into clever angles / Both carefully and anxiously.] This and all subsequent translations by Freidin.
2. [To make the present echo in his features / (My art bordering on audacity), / I would speak about him who has shifted the world's axis / Honoring the customs of one hundred and forty peoples.]
3. [I would lift a small corner from his brow / And lift it again, and redraw it differently: / Oh, it must be Prometheus blowing on his coal – / Look, Aeschylus, how I weep as I am drawing.]
4. [I would take a few thunderous lines, / His youthful millennium entire, / And would bind his courage with his smile, / And let it loose again, illuminated softly.]
5. "Za gremechuyu doblest' gryadushchikh vekov..." For the complete text, see Mandel'shtam, v. 2, p. 162. Written in March 1931, the "wolf" poem was part of a polemic between Mandel'shtam and Pasternak about the state of poetry in the twentieth century. In a word, Mandel'shtam disagreed with Pasternak's "trivialization of the poet's calling." For an excellent treatment of this dispute, see Freidin.
6. [And in the friendship of his wise eyes, I shall find for the twin / (I won't say who he is) that expression, drawing close to / Which, to him – you suddenly recognize the father / And gasp, sensing the proximity of the world.]
7. [And I want to thank the hills / That have shaped this bone and this hand: / He was born in the mountains and knew the bitterness of jail. / I want to call him, not Stalin, – Dzhugashvili!]
8. [Artist, cherish and guard the warrior: / Surround him entire with a damp blue forest / Of moist concern. Do not upset the father / With an unwholesome image or an inferior thought.]
9. [Artist, help him who is with you completely, / Who is thinking, feeling, and building. / Not I, no, not another – his dear people – / The Homer-people will offer him a triple praise.]

10. [Artist, cherish and guard the warrior: / The forest of mankind growing ever denser is singing behind him, / The future itself is this wise man's retinue, / And it heeds him more and more often, with ever greater daring.]
11. [He is bending over a podium as if over a mountain / Into the hillocks of heads. A debtor stronger than any claim.]
12. [His mighty eyes are decisively kind, / His thick eyebrow is glaring at somebody, / And I would like to mark with an arrow / The firmness of his mouth – the father of stubborn speeches; His eyelid, sculpted, complicated and abrupt, / Projects, verily, out of million frames. / He is – all sincerity, he is – all brass of fame.]
13. [And his farsighted hearing is intolerant to muffling. / His careworn little wrinkles are playfully stretching / To reach out to all who are ready for living and dying.]
14. [I am learning from him, but learning not for my own sake, / I am learning from him to be merciless to myself. / Should even a part of his great plan be hidden by misfortunes, / I'll seek him out in the fumes of these accidents...]
15. [Still, I sense his presence: in his military coat and cap / He is standing in the miraculous square, his eyes happy.]
16. [The mountain came apart under Stalin's eyes, / And the plain is squinting into the distance. / Like a sea without wrinkles, like tomorrow out of yesterday – / The furrows of a colossal plough reach to the sun.]
17. [He is smiling with the smile of a harvester / Of handshakes in the conversation, / Which once began and has continued since, without end / On the expanse of six oaths.]
18. [And each threshing-floor and each sheaf / Is strong, fit and clever – living wealth – / People's miracle! May life be large. / The axle of happiness keeps on tossing and turning.]
19. [And six times over I cherish in my mind – / A slow witness of labors, struggles, harvests – / The enormous distance he has traversed across the taiga, / And from the Leninist October – to the fulfilled oath.]
20. Although hard to believe, Mandel'shtam, albeit never enthralled with its leadership, initially supported the Revolution. For a critically contextualized treatment of this topic, see "The Currency of the Past" in Cavanagh.
21. [The hillocks of the people's heads are growing more distant: / I am diminishing in them, won't even be noticed, / But in tender books and in children's games, / I shall be resurrected to say that the sun – shines.]
22. [No truer truth exists than a warrior's sincerity: / For honor and love, for valor and steel, / There is a glorious name made for the taut lips of a rhapsode – / We've heard it, we lived to see him.]

Works Cited

- Brown, Clarence. "Into the Heart of Darkness." *Slavic Review* 26 (1967): 584-64.
- Cavanagh, Clare. *Osip Mandelstam and the Modernist Creation of Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton U P, 1995.
- Coetzee, J. M. "Osip Mandel'shtam and the Stalin Ode." *Representations* 35 (1991): 72-83.
- Freidin, Gregory. *A Coat of Many Colors*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1987.
- Maddison, Carol. *Apollo and the Nine: A History of the Ode*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960.
- Mandel'shtam, Osip. *Sobranie sochinenii Mandel'shtama*. "Stikhi o Staline." 439-42. Moskva: "Terra," 1991.
- Pushkin, Aleksandr. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii Pushkina*. Moskva: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1974.