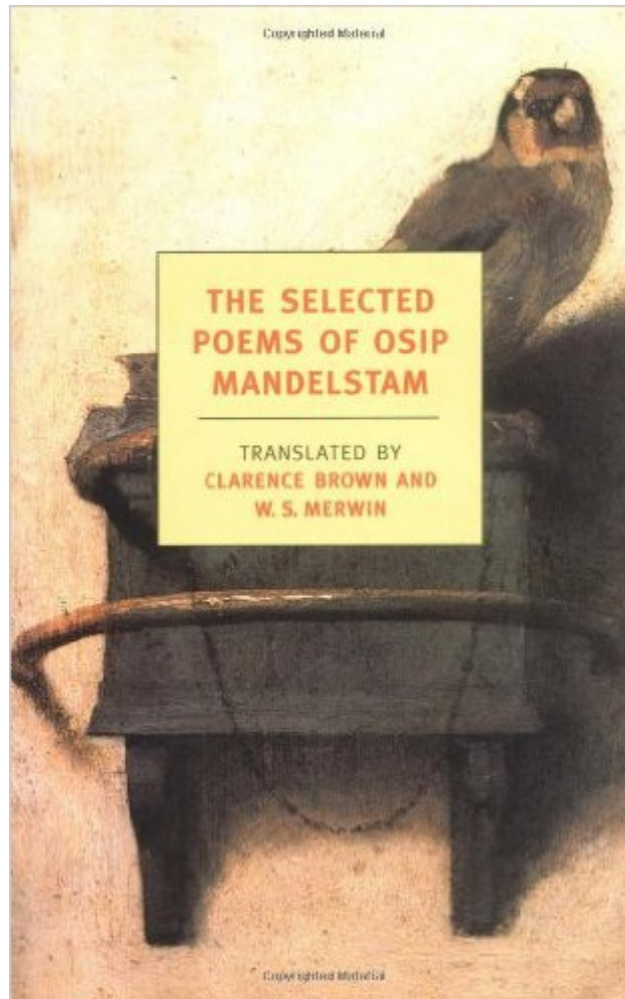


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The Selected Poems Of Osip Mandelstam (New York Review Books Classics)



Synopsis

Osip Mandelstam is a central figure not only in modern Russian but in world poetry, the author of some of the most haunting and memorable poems of the twentieth century. A contemporary of Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetayeva, and Boris Pasternak, a touchstone for later masters such as Paul Celan and Robert Lowell, Mandelstam was a crucial instigator of the "revolution of the word" that took place in St. Petersburg, only to be crushed by the Bolshevik Revolution. Mandelstam's last poems, written in the interval between his exile to the provinces by Stalin and his death in the Gulag, are an extraordinary testament to the endurance of art in the presence of terror. This book represents a collaboration between the scholar Clarence Brown and W. S. Merwin, one of contemporary America's finest poets and translators. It also includes Mandelstam's "Conversation on Dante," an uncategorizable work of genius containing the poet's deepest reflections on the nature of the poetic process.

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Customer Reviews

I like Merwin's Mandelstam more than that of five other translators with whom I've compared Mandelstam translations. It often takes three readings of a Mandelstam poem to get why it was written---not what it is about, please---but WHY it was written. That is what you look for. After that the sense of the poem will appear. Well, Robert Lowell's imitations of Mandelstam are impressive, especially of the Stalin poem. However, in THE COMPLETE POEMS OF ROBERT LOWELL, there

are only a dozen or so Mandelstam poems while the Brown/Merwin book has 97 pages of poems, along with a long forward. If you have any sense you will leap from this book to Nadezhda Mandelstam's HOPE AGAINST HOPE and HOPE ABANDONED---the story of her husband Osip's murder by Stalin. These two books have an inner light beyond praise and are two of the last century's greatest prose works---and they are marvelously translated by Max Hayward (who elsewhere has been battered for his early first English translation of ONE DAY IN THE LIFE OF IVAN DENISOVICH; nonetheless his Nadezhda Mandelstam works could not be bettered). A warning: once you get into twentieth-century Russian poetry and especially Marina Tsvetaeva and Anna Akhmatova you will find yourself drunk with agonies. These poets lived through societal horrors under Stalin that you can't grasp without reading Nadezhda Mandelstam. We have nothing in English like twentieth century Russian poetry. By the way, you will want the New York Review of Books Classics paperback edition of OSIP MANDELSTAM: SELECTED POEMS (by Merwin/Brown expanded).

These translations of Mandelstam's poems are not so much Mandelstam as they are W.S. Merwin channelling Mandelstam. I prefer Clarence Brown's translations in his critical study of 1972, Mandelstam. The problem with Brown's book is that it doesn't include any of Mandelstam's poems written in the 1930s. This book, on which Brown and Merwin collaborated, does, and for that reason it is valuable. It is valuable for another very good reason. It includes Mandelstam's very interesting long critical essay on "The Divine Comedy," "Conversation About Dante," translated by Clarence Brown and Robert Hughs. This essay struck me as being important, not because of what it says about Dante whom I have not read, but because it seems to me to offer insight into understanding Mandelstam's own poetry or at least his method. Here are a few suggestive quotations: Poetic speech is a crossbred process, and it consists of two sonorities. The first of these is the change that we hear and sense in the very instruments of poetic speech, which arise in the process of its impulse. The second sonority is the speech proper . . . (103) Understood thus, poetry is not a part of nature . . . Still less is it a reflection of nature, . . . but it is something that . . . settles down in a new extraspatial field of action, not so much narrating nature as acting it out by means of its instruments, which are commonly called images. (103) In poetry only the executory understanding has any importance, and not the passive, the reproducing, the paraphrasing understanding.

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