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PART I

The communities of Europe

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On recognition and renewal

HENRY GIFFORD

In all the moral confusion of Europe in the twentieth century its greatest poets may turn out to have been the surest guides. This might seem a singularly old-fashioned statement. Matthew Arnold believed that poetry would become for humanity ‘an ever surer and surer stay’,¹ and the idea evokes a now faded image – the high-minded reader subjecting to intelligent perusal the works of the poet-sages ancient and modern. ‘The eternal note of sadness...Sophocles long ago / Heard it on the Aegean...’ This dignifies our disquiet, and ‘Dover Beach’, from which the lines come, is one of Arnold’s successes in poetry. Yet they bear out what Eliot said about his being ‘academic poetry in the best sense; the best fruit which can issue from the promise shown by the prize-poem’.² Such modern poets as I shall discuss would never have qualified for the facile triumph of a prize-poem. They had to educate their readers out of that ‘educated’ taste on which the latter prided themselves. I am not contending that the poet is primarily a teacher. If in any sense he ministers to our spiritual or moral sickness, that is only because he obeys the injunction, ‘Physician, heal thyself.’

What then is the ground for asserting that the poetry of a few men and women has been of such central importance to the age beginning in the second decade of this century? Europe some eighty years ago saw itself as the guardian of civilization, the world’s natural presiding genius. Nothing could be more poignant than Henry James’s letter to another novelist, Rhoda Broughton, on 10 August 1914, six days into the First World War:

Black and hideous to me is the tragedy that gathers, and I’m sick beyond cure to have lived on to see it. You and I, the ornaments of our generation, should have been spared this wreck of our belief that through the long years we had seen civilization grow and the worst become impossible. The tide that bore us along was then all the while moving to *this* as its grand Niagara... It seems to me to *undo* everything, everything that was ours, in the most horrible retroactive way...³

‘Ornaments of our generation’ – the innocent vanity sounds rather

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absurd to a time that has swept its own mantelpiece bare. The full cadences of his letter bespeak a bygone leisure and calm – even though James had before this confessed to ‘a sense of disaster’. The worst is now possible, everywhere. Cavafy only a year later published a strangely prophetic poem to be confirmed by the new order of things, which indeed was merely a very old one restored. The Theodotus of its title was the time-server who brought to Julius Caesar the head of his opponent Pompey on a bloodstained dish. It ends with a warning:

And don't feel complacently that in your life
circumscribed, ordered and prosaic
such spectacular and dreadful things do not exist.
Perhaps at this very time into a neighbour's
well-regulated house there enters –
invisible, insubstantial – Theodotus
bearing just such a ghastly head.⁴

George Seferis commented on this poem: ‘Horror is not the exclusive privilege of Caesar, or of the poet.’ The ghastly head is ‘the symbol of everyday horror in our own ordered life’.⁵ Fifty years after Cavafy's poem he wrote one of his own that reflects the savage civil war in Greece, when it had been cleared of the Nazis:

Who was it heard at noon
the dagger being whetted on the stone?
What horseman came
with tinder and torch?
Everybody washes his hands
and refreshes them.
And who disembowelled
the woman, the infant and the house?
No one is guilty, not a trace.
Who went away
with clatter of hooves on the paving stones?
They have expunged their eyes, blind.
No witnesses remain for anything.⁶

In that poem is recorded the final degradation of the age we live in, and it is happening in Europe. Was it to this that the tide had been moving, through all the confident and vainglorious years of the European past?

Recognition and renewal sum up the particular duties of the poet in Europe, now and always. He has at his disposal the long memory of the European consciousness, surely unique in the history of civilizations. There is in our own history an element of rare good fortune, at least on the spiritual and cultural plane. Europe would seem to have been

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destined for unity in diversity. The three main language groups of the continent – Romance, Germanic and Slavonic – share the same origins and are permeable by one another. Europe's boundaries are roughly coextensive with those of Christendom before the fall of Constantinople, and all through the Western half of the continent, until the late seventeenth century, Latin was current as the language in which literate men could freely move in a common intellectual realm. The Eastern Church did not impose Greek on the liturgy in its provinces, as Latin had been imposed in the Roman obedience. Thus the Russians failed to participate in the Renaissance, and so too did the Greeks, although it was refugee scholars from Byzantium who started the process. Eliot wrote in 1951: 'We are all, so far as we inherit the civilisation of Europe, still citizens of the Roman empire...'⁷ This view was rightly challenged by Seferis. Nonetheless, from Eliot he learned to appreciate Dante as 'a teacher, a master of the craft' who remained that for him throughout his life.⁸

By the beginning of this century the poets of Western and Eastern Europe had come virtually to share the same culture. As Czeslaw Milosz has written, young men like himself, from the so-called 'blank spots on the map', flocked to Paris, marvelling at 'the perfect stability and the continuity of the life in *la ville lumière*'. Later he would have to acknowledge

There is no capital of the world, neither here nor anywhere else...⁹

The lights of Paris went out in 1940. All that we have today, as Auden put it in his poem 'September 1, 1939', are those scattered 'ironic points of light' that 'flash out wherever the Just / Exchange their messages'. His identification of the Just (spelt with a capital letter) may sound a trifle complacent, and to be ironic is not the whole of a poet's witness. More important perhaps, and more closely bearing on the role of the poet, is the exchanging of messages. The breakdown of civilized life in Europe, should that eventually come, would not destroy this communication between 'the Just', if we may interpret that term as meaning the best poetic minds of the age.

But how can one be sure of this? Almost the only certainty in these times is that all predictions about the shape of things to come are untrustworthy. Yet there seems no reason for despair when it is possible to show that in the very recent past, and under conditions all but intolerable, such communication had still not been suppressed. Osip Mandelstam, whom the Russian poet of today nearest to him in

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sympathies, Joseph Brodsky, has called ‘the child of civilisation’,¹⁰ is here the exemplary case. It is not a matter only of his convictions, as a European with responsibilities towards all that Europe means, but what greatly enhances his achievement is that he was compelled to act on the central stage of our time. The twentieth century has been described in various ways. This has been a time, according to one view, in which Europeans, without realizing it, have thought in German, under the spell of Nietzsche or Marx, of Freud or Jung, or finally perhaps of Kafka. Alternatively, we may have shared with the rest of the world the stresses of adapting to the American century. But the inescapable fact is that for seventy-five years Europe has been hypnotized by events in Russia. The vast territories of what chose to be called the Soviet Union – though it was a union only by fiat, and the Soviets had no real say in its government – served as the proving ground of tendencies which had been building up in Europe ever more formidably since the Enlightenment. Russia was not the expected theatre for their demonstration in practice. Nor could Mandelstam have foreseen his own part as a main witness and judge of these events. But poetry has always been nourished by the unforeseen. In that way it is undoubtedly true to life.

Had he not perished in a concentration camp, probably at the end of 1938, Mandelstam would have been a prime target for Stalin’s campaign of the late 1940s against ‘cosmopolitanism’. He is a poet of extraordinarily wide culture, even among the Russian poets, his contemporaries. Mandelstam had the good fortune to attend the Tenishev School in Petersburg, almost certainly the best then in Russia. This gave him a good classical background, though knowledge of Greek came to him later as a personal discovery. He studied Old French at Heidelberg, and at the Sorbonne more briefly; his verse renderings of fragments from the twelfth century *Vie d’Alexis*, for example, are faithful to the medieval spirit; his earliest essay was a penetrating study of Villon. Later he would become as much devoted to Dante as any twentieth-century poet, including Eliot. Mandelstam indeed felt it was necessary for him to reject the allures of Tasso and Ariosto. Their mellifluous tones delighted him, but he was afraid that to follow them would compromise his integrity as a Russian poet.

The Acmeist movement, headed by Nikolay Gumilyov, Akhmatova’s first husband, in which Akhmatova herself and Mandelstam were the outstanding participants, remained entirely a Petersburg school. Architecture, not music, was the analogue it sought for poetry, and the

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architecture of the city, the work mainly of Italian masters, set it apart from the limitless Russian hinterland. Mandelstam's first book of poetry was entitled *Stone*, and three of its most characteristic poems are sonnets that describe buildings: Hagia Sophia, Notre Dame, and the Admiralty in Petersburg. The geographical spread is representative of his interests. He delights in the craftsman's skill that fashioned these buildings, but though they will outlive the generations he does not see them as monuments. An essay of this time (1913), 'The Morning of Acmeism', defines the architecture of Notre Dame as 'a festival of physiology', Dionysiac in its revelling. Mandelstam values the Middle Ages because, along with their rationality and mysticism, they reveal 'a sense of the world as a living equilibrium'.¹¹ The classical poetry of the Acmeists, and of Mandelstam in particular, does not deal in monuments. He has nothing in common with Hérédia, he is not like Gautier a worker in 'marble, onyx, enamel', though Gautier was an acclaimed master of the Acmeists. The essential quality of Mandelstam's imagination is the daring behind the regular forms, the inner dynamism that he admired above all in Dante.

So far I have been able to avoid reference to one of Mandelstam's most famous pronouncements. He had been asked, before an audience some time in the earlier 1930s, what may have been intended as a hostile question, how to define Acmeism, and he promptly said: 'Nostalgia for world culture.'¹² The reason for being shy of this phrase is that the word 'nostalgia' today carries heavier overtones than it probably did for Mandelstam. Nostalgia by now has become the English disease, or disability. It seeks to preserve the forms of the past, the great houses that few can afford to live in, the ceremonial masking a void. But restoration is not the same as renewal, and this brings us to Mandelstam's understanding of recognition. We shall see that when he spoke of a nostalgia for world culture, he did not imply that poetry should cease to be forward-looking. He would have agreed with Eliot that it must 'urge the mind to aftersight and foresight'.

In the Petrograd of 1921, the hungriest year, Mandelstam was not alone in believing that 'at last we have gained an inward freedom, a real inward gaiety'. The material privations seemed to have made possible a life of the spirit, a metamorphosis in which the word became flesh, and mere bread – a joy and a mystery. That ideal soon vanished over the horizon. But the essay expressing it, 'The Word and Culture', has nothing illusory at the centre. Here Mandelstam expounds an idea to which he would remain constant. This he defines in a memorable image:

‘Poetry is a plough turning up time so that time’s deepest layers, its black earth, come out on top.’ His was one of those epochs, he contended, in which humanity is not satisfied with the present day. The deep layers of time appeal to it as strongly as virgin soil does to the ploughman. And he makes a further pronouncement: ‘Revolution in art leads inevitably to classicism.’¹³

This is not an ironic prediction of the triumphs of Soviet architecture, the heavy and inert classical style that no totalitarian regime can do without. Mandelstam, we might have guessed from his essay ‘The Morning of Acmeism’, being interested only in the ‘dormant forces’ of architecture – as revealed in the structure whether of a poem or a building – could not understand classicism as other than revolutionary. Later he would decry any attempt to seek in Dante’s *Commedia* a monument from the past. ‘Time for Dante’, he objected, ‘is the content of history understood as a single synchronic action.’ This made Dante our contemporary and inexhaustibly new.¹⁴

Mandelstam’s paradoxical claim in ‘The Word and Culture’ is that in 1921 the old world, seemingly lost beyond recall, was actually more alive than it had ever been. He quotes from his poem ‘Tristia’,¹⁵ a line that would be virtually the device on his shield in all future campaigns:

And sweet to us is only the moment of recognition.

The poem not only takes its name from Ovid’s cycle lamenting his banishment from Rome, but recognizes the situation of Ovid as one that will be re-enacted in the twentieth century:

Who can tell from the word ‘parting’
What separation lies before us?

It has all happened before, and repetition is the law of life.

But the corollary of this demands that the act of repetition should bring renewal, making the past utterance more urgently ours. Mandelstam cannot be content with the historical Ovid, Pushkin or Catullus. He needs to have them ‘afresh’. And he is haunted by a line from Catullus, ‘Let us hasten to the renowned cities of Asia’ – *ad claras Asiae volemus urbes*. It belongs to a poem set in the spring, the season of renewal, and it ‘torments and troubles’ Mandelstam, he says, as no ‘Futurist riddle’ ever did.¹⁶ Significantly, the two following lines speak of a mind trembling with desire to go wandering, and of feet which eagerness makes stronger. The ‘silver trumpet’, as he calls it, of Latin verse like Catullus’ had never been heard in Russian. It must be; and his own ‘Tristia’ does miraculously catch the authentic note.

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Mandelstam is very much a representative poet of the age, in his situation and in the profound sense he entertains of European tradition. When I say representative I am thinking principally of his peers, the leading national poets in other countries who more than ever before turned to the immense range of European poetry, past and present, to sustain their own efforts. It is interesting that like Eliot and Seferis he should have approached that tradition with something of the anxiety felt by the dispossessed. He doubtless exaggerated a little when he asserted that his Jewish father spoke no real language but, if Mandelstam is to be believed, 'the ornate and contorted speech of an autodidact', at home neither in German nor in Russian. His mother, also Jewish, prided herself on the bookish jargon of the Russian intelligentsia which she had carefully acquired.¹⁷ As a small boy in imperial Petersburg, inspired by its military and civic splendours, Mandelstam saw that it held no place for him.¹⁸ Eliot was not dispossessed in that absolute fashion, but like Ezra Pound he had emigrated to Europe in search of a finer civilization, consoling himself with the belief that 'the consummation of an American' was 'to become... a European – something no born European, no person of any European nationality, can become'.¹⁹ Seferis had been born outside Europe, though in an ancient Greek community, that of Smyrna, lost to him forever when it fell to the Turks in 1922. He would always regret the crowding of Greek culture into one small mainland territory, when it had once spread, in Cavafy's words about its language, 'as far as Bactria and to the Indians'. In exile with the Greek government during the Second World War, he was driven to meditate on the meaning of Hellenism and the prospects of its survival. Hellenism naturally was central to the idea he had formed of European culture.

Poetry, in spite of notable successes won in the twentieth century, has been hard pressed on many sides. For that reason, if no other, its best practitioners have become Europeans in the truest sense. They have collaborated in a single endeavour with the keenest mutual recognition. It might be argued that this has always been so. The Latin poets were adept and untiring pupils of their Greek predecessors; Chaucer measured his strength against the courtly poets of France and turned later to Dante and to Boccaccio as a story-teller, while Dante's own choice of Virgil as his guide and mentor in the first two canticles of the *Commedia* exemplifies the spirit of European poetry at its most vital, in the endless task of assimilation and the discovery of new strengths. It is also true that the same tides of fashion, both in sensibility and form, have flooded every corner of European poetry from one age to the next.

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However, what seems to be specific to ours is the international status, during their lifetime, of major poets. This may have been anticipated by Goethe, the prophet of *Weltliteratur*, but, a conscious Olympian, he presided from his unchallenged eminence. He had no need to form alliances, or to do more than bow graciously to a rising star like Byron, whose personality dazzled him, but about whom Goethe said 'The moment he reflects, he is a child.'²⁰ In our own century, and this becomes more true the nearer we are to its end, the poet is compelled to seek out others who share his vision. This I have called European, though it might be more accurately defined as international.

Eliot maintained that 'European culture has an area, but no definite frontiers: and you cannot build Chinese walls.'²¹ One salient feature of our intellectual history is that ever since the time of the Greeks the frontiers have been open. Europeans are receptive learners, and the forces that have shaped their civilization came from afar. Consider the beginnings of the Greek experiment. It started in Ionia, on the western fringe of Asia Minor. Here Homer is said to have been born (Seferis' own city of Smyrna has claims to be reckoned the place); the first stirrings of philosophical thought established the Ionian school, the Seven Wise Men headed by Thales of Miletus; the first historian of Greece, Herodotus, came from Halicarnassus. Seferis was enthralled by the spectacle of Hellenic enlightenment spreading from the age of Alexander the Great, and he acknowledges, like Cavafy, that the civilization founded by the Greek diaspora was the work both of Hellenes and non-Hellenes. Thus from the start European culture owed much to foreign peoples bordering the Eastern Mediterranean, to Egyptians, to Hittites, and many others; as it later would to Hebrew religious thought. Finally, having received so much from beyond, 500 years ago Europe began to overflow into the New World. It would spread its main languages, those of the colonizers, Spanish, Portuguese, English, French, Dutch, not only through the Americas but all over Asia, Africa and the Pacific. The result has been the Western civilization of modern times that the rest of humanity is unable to resist, no matter how ruinous some of its effects have proved to be.

So the extent of this 'area' of European culture, both in time and space, is very large, and its character highly diversified. If we look back to the situation just before the First World War, in those astonishing four or five years during which the arts throughout Europe were seized with the spirit of innovation, one thing stands out clearly. The movement was, within the whole of Europe and to some degree in the

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Americas, practically simultaneous and therefore international. This may have been Europe's last major contribution to world culture. It is certainly remarkable for its achievement in poetry, then and in the period that carried on the initial impulse until the aftermath of the Second World War and our present decline.

Here it is appropriate once more to invoke Mandelstam. In 1922 (a year incidentally that saw many seminal works appearing throughout Europe) he published a much longer essay than 'The Word and Culture', in which he dealt with an issue of concern to many twentieth-century poets. 'On the Nature of the Word' is a far-ranging and profound disquisition on the relation not only of a literature, but a nation's survival in the spirit, to the language. Like Bergson he is interested above all in 'the inner connection of phenomena'. His was a mind, as he explains, that sought 'unity and connection', and in his view the Russian language is 'not only a door into history, but history itself'. It seemed to him that 'the falling dumb of two or three generations would bring Russia to historical death'. He defined nihilism as 'excommunication from the word'.²²

Is it extravagant to maintain that excommunication from the word constitutes the darkest of all menaces in the world today? Mandelstam went on to protest that the fire which devours philology – a cherishing of the word – 'is ulcerating the body of Europe...laying waste for culture the soil' it has already scorched.²³ To recognize this peril in 1922, before the wholesale debasement of language by the totalitarian regimes in Europe, was perhaps not difficult, but only a poet could have had the insight to gauge its magnitude. The centrality of this vision is what now needs to be shown.

Mandelstam accused Russian Futurism of displaying 'a lack of faith in language which is simultaneously a fast runner and a tortoise'.²⁴ When reviewing the literary scene in Moscow at this time, he said that poetry always needs 'the twofold truth of invention and memory'. This he thought Pasternak alone among the Muscovites had achieved.²⁵ Language as a fast runner has been recognized by Joseph Brodsky: discussing the poetry of Marina Tsvetaeva he claims that the language can urge a poet into regions not attainable otherwise, and beyond the reach of spiritual or psychological concentration in itself. This precipitancy is due to the speed with which a poet's ear outpaces both imagination and experience.²⁶ Language at the service of poetry makes its own connections, enlarging consciousness, and validating what might otherwise have appeared inconceivable. However, it is the second