

THOUGHT CENSORSHIP UNDER TOTALITARIANISM: A PRECARIOUS RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THOUGHT AND VOICE IN MANDELSTAM

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“Brain-washing” technology became known for the first time during the Korean War. In the Chinese hospital where war captives were held, attempts at “thought reform” were regularly performed. Many of them had been converted to communism, which alerted American society. This led to an investigation and findings concerning “communist mind control.” Studies have been made, of which *Brain-Washing in Red China: The Calculated Destruction of Men’s Minds* by Edward Hunter, which popularized the term “brainwashing,” is probably best known.

43

Although it was the Chinese military service that gave the practice its name of “brain-washing,” the prototype of the technique had been developed in Soviet Russia in the 1930s. Let me quickly note, though, that it has been debated whether the science of brainwashing had been studied and developed in Communist Russia, which subsequently transmitted the knowledge to China, or whether China developed its technique independently. The historical relationship has never been sufficiently established.

It is, however, largely acknowledged that the trial procedures used by the Stalin regime were essentially what one might call “mind control” or “brain-washing” in the broad sense from today’s standpoint, and so was the tradition introduced by the secret police of the post-Stalin Soviet Union and the countries of Eastern Europe. The psychologist Lifton argues in his book *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*:

The Russian Communist contribution to thought reform is immediately apparent in much of the content and many of the forms of the process: the allegedly scientific Marxist-Leninist doctrine; the stress upon criticism, and confession as features of ‘ideological struggle’; the organizational techniques of iron discipline; the demands for purity of belief and absolute obedience; and the practice of informing upon others in

the service of the party. Certainly, many of the pressures used to extract confessions in penal thought reform [in China] closely resemble techniques used by the Russians during the great Soviet purge trials of the late 1930's....Eastern European Communist nations have employed similar confession methods. (389)¹

The difference between Russia and China is that while the Soviet totalitarian regime was interested in deleting thought and memory from a “culprit” and coaxing “confession,” China went further. China wanted to transform human personality completely with new beliefs, ideas, logic, etc. The purpose of this paper, however, is to explore the nature of thought and non-thought vis-à-vis language through the life and works of Osip Mandelstam in his confrontation with Soviet mind control and in relation to the psychologist/linguist Lev Vygotsky. I will limit my scope of analysis of brain-washing to its Soviet version, but not to the Chinese.

44 Lifton in the above-mentioned book lists the fundamental principles of the techniques of “brain-washing.” The first stage is termed a “struggle,” in which a captive is confined to a small cell and is under constant and disturbing interrogation that combines “hint, threat, and promise.” The threat often concerns people who are close to the “convict”: family members, relatives, close friends, and so on. Isolation is an important part of the technique. It is accompanied with humiliating treatment in the prison cell, normally in solitary confinement, often without a guard, which gives a greater sense of isolation, and with the deprivation of sleep. In this process of “struggle,” the interrogated can wipe out his/her own pre-existing thought and become a tabula rasa, into which any new memory or doctrine can be overwritten. Thus, the whole procedure may lead to a wild confession, not based on any fact.

Mandelstam was one of the victims of the interrogation of Liubianka during the Great Terror. On the very early morning of May 16, 1934, the officers of the GPU (Joint State Political Directorate; formerly Cheka, the Central Committee) visited him and after a lengthy house search that lasted for six hours, Mandelstam was arrested.² The charge was for his composing a satirical poem referring to Stalin, a copy of which was in the possession of the authorities. The poem reads:

We live, not feeling the ground under our feet,
no one hears us more than a dozen steps away,

And when there's enough for half a small chat—
ah, we remember the Kremlin mountaineer:

Thick fingers, fat like worms, greasy,
words solid as iron weights,

Huge cockroach whiskers laughing,
boot-tops beaming.

And all around him a rabble of thin-necked captains:
he toys with the sweat of half-men.

Some whistle, some meow, some snivel,
he's the only one looking, jabbing.

He forges decrees like horseshoes—decrees and decrees:
This one gets it in the balls, that one in the forehead, him right between the eyes.

Whenever he's got a victim, he glows like a broadchested
Georgian munching a raspberry. (*Complete Poetry* 228)

The first stanza of the earlier version of the poem was supposed to be read differently. The interrogator was in possession of them and he recited them to Mandelstam during the interrogation. This version is recorded in the memoir of the poet's wife, Nadezhda Mandelstam:

We live, deaf to the land beneath us,
Ten steps away no one hears our speeches.
All we hear is the Kremlin mountaineer,
The murderer and peasant-slayer. (86)

45

Obviously, these lines were a sufficient reason to exile or execute the poet. Possibly understanding his desperate situation, Mandelstam was superbly docile and outspoken in the course of interrogation. For instance, Nadezhda Mandelstam states the case:

The interrogator probed into M.'s feelings about the Soviet system and M. told him that he was willing to co-operate with any Soviet institution except the Cheka.³ He said this not out of daring or bravado, but because of his total inability to be devious. I believe this quality of M.'s was a puzzle to the interrogator, one he could not fathom. His only explanation for such a statement, particularly when it was made to his face, would have been stupidity, but stupidity of this kind he had never encountered before. (84)

The trial of Mandelstam thus appears to have been an easily manageable one, barely needing extensive "thought reform." The biographer Nakahira narrates:

Mandelstam was taken in Liubianka and at the first interrogation on the seventeenth spoke everything out. He cooperatively made all the entries in the report form of questioning before the interrogation. He was a "facile prey" for authorities who did not need torture. At the interrogation he acknowledged that he was the author of "works of an anti-revolutionary nature." (295; translation mine)

Nonetheless, the GPU did not spare special "brainwashing" techniques in interrogating the poet. The trial did follow typical Soviet techniques, as described by Lifton, for obtaining confession.

Firstly, Mandelstam was put to extremely unpleasant conditions and was exposed to constant interrogation, threat, and deprivation of sleep. Nadezhda Mandelstam relates:

Part of the function of these people [i.e. interrogators, prison officials, et al.] was to

unnerve and wear down prisoners under interrogation, to make their lives a misery... M. was put through the physical ordeal which had always been applied. It consisted mainly of not being allowed to sleep. He was called out every night and kept for hours on end. (75-76)

Threats against family members and isolation from them also took place:

In his cell M. sometimes heard a woman's voice coming from a distance and thought it was mine. It sounded as though I was complaining, groaning or talking very quickly about something, but it was so indistinct that he could make out no words at all. He concluded that the interrogator's hints that I too had been arrested must be true. When we later discussed this, we were not sure whether or not it had been an auditory hallucination....There was some talk of the secret police having among their special equipment phonograph records with the voice of a "standard" wife, mother or daughter which were used to break a prisoner's spirit....Methods like these are possible only if a prisoner's links with the outside world are broken from the moment of his arrest. Apart from the signatures in the receipt book for packages, he is left completely in the dark about the people he has been torn from. (77-78)⁴

46

It turned out that the technique used by the interrogator to frighten M. was an utterly primitive one. Mentioning somebody's name—mine, Akhmatova's or my brother's—[the interrogator] would say that he had obtained certain statements from us. When M. inquired whether whoever it had been arrested, the interrogator gave no definite answer, but dropped a casual-sounding hint that "we have them here," only to deny a few minutes later that he had said any such thing. Uncertainty about such matters always has a devastating effect on the prisoner. (80)

As mentioned earlier, effectively tormented and harassed by such interrogating techniques (which more or less subscribed to the basics of Soviet brainwashing), Mandelstam confessed everything rather easily, acknowledged that he was the author of the poem about Stalin and told the interrogator the names of most of those to whom he recited the poem.

On the basis of the confession, retrieved thus, the sentence was issued to exile the poet to Cherdyn, a small village in the Urals where Mandelstam attempted suicide. After the attempt he was sent to a more favorable, bigger city, Voronezh.

Now, here in Voronezh in 1937 during exile, Mandelstam composed an ode to Stalin, something diametrically different in nature from the satirical poem for which he was exiled. Critics are divided in interpreting and evaluating the ode. Some prefer to see an intricate irony and hidden sarcasm against the dictator concealed under the cover of apparent obedience and submissiveness, instancing a "doubletalk." Some think that it is to be understood literally, attesting to the destruction of the poet's ego in the face of totalitarianism. For instance, the researcher Coetzee conjectures that Mandelstam was driven by certain madness and that there was no question of insincerity:

[T]o think of the ode as a sly piece of work guarded by an irony invisible to its subject, as an insult masquerading as a tribute, would be entirely mistaken. Not only is there no insincerity written into and readable out of the poem, there is even a certain fervor

or at least feverishness detectable....Mandelstam did indeed circle around and around the subject of an ode to the tyrant, descending deeper and deeper into a whirlpool that Nadezhda called madness. (76)

In the celebrated study, *Russia on the Cross*, the Japanese Slavist, Kameyama, explores the intermediate position that negotiates the above two polar interpretations. In the notes preceding the writing of the ode, entitled and published as *The Voronezh Notebooks*, Mandelstam writes of “Judah of all the nations who is to come.” As Stalin was then commonly dubbed “Father of all the nations,” “Judah” in *The Notebooks* must be a reference to the dictator. Kameyama argues, however, that since “Judah” originally meant “Praise be to him,” the comparison here is ambiguous, that is to say, Stalin is both the laudable, proto-Messiah of all the nations and the traitor against God (70). The image of a traitor ties into the reference to “Prometheus” in the ode obviously referring to Stalin (“Know how Prometheus blew up his charcoal / Look Aeschylus, how I am drawing and crying!” [*Sobranie sochinenii* 3:439]). To explain the association of Prometheus with Stalin, Kameyama quotes Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*: “Such the sin / Wherefor he must receive Heaven’s recompense, / That he may learn to accept the almighty sway / Of Zeus, and cease befriending humankind” (235). Stalin, just like Prometheus, is the fallen lover of mankind, the traitor to God, and the adorer of Power.

47

It is, however, precisely Mandelstam himself who has resisted God and is punished by Him (or God-like Stalin) in exile. Therefore, it can be argued, Mandelstam was considering Stalin as his own double; after all, Stalin and Mandelstam shared the same first name (Josif and Osip). This interpretation gains legitimacy in the second stanza of the ode that reads:

Я б несколько гремучих линий взял,
 Все молодежавое его тысячелетье,
 И мужество улыбкою связал
 И развязал в ненапряженном свете,
 И в дружбе мудрых глаз найду для близнеца,
 Какого не скажу, то выраженье, близясь
 К которому, к нему,—вдруг узнаешь отца...

(*Sobranie sochinenii* 3: 439)

(I would take a few resounding lines,
 His whole youthful millennium,
 And bind [his] courage with [his] smile
 And unbind [it] in a relaxed light,
 And in the friendship of the wise eyes I shall discover for the twin
 [Which one, I shall not say] that expression, drawing near
 To which, to him,—you suddenly recognize the father...

(“Mandelstam’s ‘Ode’ to Stalin” 687)

“The twin” in the fifth line of the stanza is often considered to represent Lenin: Stalin

being as great as the first leader of Soviet Russia. However, since the lines say, “drawing near [to that expression of the twin] you suddenly recognize the father,” the reader should rather see Stalin himself, who is “the father of all the nations,” in the image of the twin. And since it is “I,” the author of the poem, who finds the “right expression of the father,” we are invited to interpret that it is Stalin and Mandelstam that are the twins.

Thus we find an ambiguous yearning of Mandelstam for Stalin, a desire to be one with him. Conversely, Stalin, who punished Mandelstam, was also much attached to him. He was an ardent reader of Mandelstam and after the latter’s suicide attempt, he made special effort to rescue him and moved him from the small town of Cherdyn to the more favorable Voronezh.

We will leave Stalin for now to investigate the ideas of another ardent reader of Mandelstam: the psychologist Lev Vygotsky. The seventh and last chapter of his most important work, *Thought and Language*, entitled “Thought and Word,” has lines **48** from Mandelstam’s poem, “Swallow,” as an epigraph. The four lines quoted read:

The word I forgot
Which once I wished to say
And voiceless thought
Returns to shadows’ chamber.

(*Thought and Language* 210)

Vygotsky was actually seriously influenced by Mandelstam’s ideas about language. Some of the arguments found in Mandelstam’s essay “On the Nature of Word” are developed by Vygotsky in the book *Thought and Language*.

In this concluding chapter of the book, Vygotsky explores the relationship between thought and language, but in order to do so he first differentiates external and inner speech. He insists that, contrary to a popular misconception, inner speech is *not* external speech minus sound. They are structurally different: if external speech is more or less complete and structured, inner speech is predicated, abbreviated, and has preponderance for meaning. Vygotsky maintains: “[External speech] cannot be achieved by merely vocalizing silent speech. It is a complex, dynamic process involving the transformation of the predicative, idiomatic structure of inner speech into syntactically articulated speech intelligible to others” (248-49). Such a predicative, idiomatic feature of speech would be maximized in pure thought. Thus, for Vygotsky, inner speech is a *kind* of thought which is linguistic: “We can confidently regard [inner speech] as a *distinct plane of verbal thought*” (248).

But, then, is thought itself verbal or not? Vygotsky appears to be somewhat ventriloquial. For instance, at one point he argues:

Inner speech is not the interior aspect of external speech—it is a function in itself. It still remains speech, i.e., thought connected with words. But while in external speech thought is embodied in words, in inner speech words die as they bring forth thought. (249)

Here, it seems he is presuming “pure thought,” which is *not* connected with word and which can function at the death of words (i.e. inner speech). However, he proceeds to argue that: “[Inner speech] is a dynamic, shifting, unstable thing, fluttering between word and thought, the two more or less stable, more or less firmly delineated components of verbal thought” (249). Here, he seems to be assuming that [pure] thought is one component of *verbal* thought (another component being word). If so, thought is linguistic.

For now, we will leave this ambiguity as it is and rather pay attention to Vygotsky speaking of a “dynamic, shifting relationship between word and thought.” Obviously, he was conceiving of word and thought as mutually determining and contradicting, and dialectically related, components. Consequently, for Vygotsky, thought was never an entity, existing prior to, and independent of, language as Descartes viewed it.⁵ It was verbal in the final instance, at least, in the sense that thought always stands in the dialectical relationship to word.

Vygotsky’s view necessitates reconsideration of the phenomena commonly observed under totalitarianism, such as lip-service, silent submission, doubletalk, and so on, because in all of these phenomena thought and language are conceived to be independent of, and separate from, each other. One would be, so it is assumed, paying lip service or using doubletalk, making an enunciation that does *not* corresponds to one’s inner, voiceless true thought. In silent submission one’s inner thought contradicts the potential, voiced enunciation that can be. This idea is typically expressed by Nadezhda Mandelstam in her memoir: “Unpublished verses have the same status as thoughts, and...nobody should be banished for his thoughts” (96). One is impeccable as long as one does not voice one’s own thoughts without, whatever those thoughts within may be; one can send the dictator applause on the surface while thinking critically of him at heart.

Vygotsky is skeptical of such an independent relationship between word and thought. They are always mutually, dynamically, and dialectically influencing each other. His insight, then, challenges the interpretation of Mandelstam’s ode as a subtle satire, concealing his attack on Stalin. The expressed word always already permeates his thought. If we are to agree with Kameyama’s interpretation of the ode, in which the poet oscillates between the harsh criticism of the dictator and the identification with him, that oscillation is in parallel with the poet’s sway between the published (recited) ode and his hidden thought, both contradicting and permeating and re-shaping each other.

Is it, then, that Vygotsky correctly understood Mandelstam’s poesy and his conception of the relationship between thought and word when he used his poem as an epigraph and developed the poet’s ideas in the essays? In fact, the quote appears to be quite apt. The poem does seem to be a description of the precarious moment before thought turns into word. However, Mandelstam here is not conceiving of thought which exists prior to language and seeks a way of becoming it. On the contrary, word has been “forgotten,” by which the poet seems to be implying that word exists pri-

marily, begets thought and subsequently is lost. Word was in the past and is prior to thought.

Nonetheless, in the essay “The Word and Culture,” he annuls such cause-and-effect relationship by rejecting the linear development from the past to the future. Forgetting, for him, did not necessarily concern the past. Remembering was not open to the future, either:

Poetry is the plough that turns up time in such a way that the abyssal strata of time, its black earth, appear on the surface. There are epochs, however, when mankind, not satisfied with the present, yearning like the ploughman for the abyssal strata of time, thirsts for the virgin soil of time....One often hears: that is good but it belongs to yesterday. But I say: yesterday has not yet been born. It has not yet really existed....Classical poetry is perceived as that which must be, not as that which has already been.

(*The Complete Critical Prose* 113-14)

50 With this anachronism (the past [yesterday] is to come and this coming future constitutes poetry [language]),⁶ Mandelstam diverts from the theoretical position of Vygotsky which is essentially dialectical and, consequently, dependent on a linear notion of time.⁷ This difference entails Mandelstam’s far more nominalist idea. For Vygotsky thought and language dialectically and dynamically determined and affected each other. For Mandelstam, the poet, language was thought, and without language there was no thought, for he rejects the cause-effect relationship between the two as he renounces linear time as well. This explains Mandelstam’s identification of memory with thought. When one forgets word, i.e. when one is without word, one does not operate thought. Conversely, thinking was tantamount to remembering.

This may explain the mis-rendering of the poem in the English translation of Vygotsky’s book *Thought and Language*. It concerns the adjective “voiceless” in the passage: “voiceless thought / Returns to shadows’ chamber.” The word “voiceless” translates the Russian “*bezplotnye*,” which means “not possessing flesh.” Of course, one would take it to mean “not embodied” or “not actualized.” And as long as it concerns “word,” one is tempted to understand it to mean “voiceless.” But Mandelstam makes a distinction between simple, pragmatic aspect of thought which is barren and the poetic word which *is* flesh. In “The Word and Culture,” Mandelstam argues: “For [Christian, or every acculturated person] the word is also flesh, and simple bread, further, is a joy and a mystery” (113). Therefore, word for Mandelstam *was* flesh, the real, the significant, and the phrase “voiceless thought” in the poem-epigraph should not be rendered so, but should be translated as “*flesh-less thought*.” The qualifier “*bezplotnye*” does not indicate that a certain thought has not been voiced, remaining internal. It is about a certain substance that word, as well as thought, should possess. Mandelstam’s problem consciousness does not concern the distinction between inner and external word, as Vygotsky and his translator mistakenly conceived.

Consequently, Mandelstam would not have conceived of the contrast of enunciation and voiceless inner thought, or of that of linguistic thought and non-

linguistic thought. Thought realized through word was the only realistic thing for him. Doubletalk was impossible. On the contrary, non-thought was possible when words are lost.

But as a poet, he could not remain silent. He could not but weave words after words. This explains why he responded with excessive talkativeness to the interrogation. We have already seen how responsively he spoke up at Liubianka, but his attitude appears to have been consistent throughout his life. Or we can refer to an earlier incident in the poet's life. When Mandelstam was captured in 1920 by the army of General Vrangal and was confined to a private cell, he started to knock at the door. As the guard asked what he needed, Mandelstam cried out: "You should release me. I am not made for a prison." At the interrogation, he told the questioner: "It is about time you tell me flatly, whether you would release an innocent man or not" (Nakahira 422). Mandelstam was not a master of doubletalk.

As a matter of fact, not only Mandelstam, but also many other convicts of the Soviet brain-washing police were, despite the common belief, willing to talk just as much as the poet, even exaggerating the "truth." According to the researcher Beck:

51

The method of interrogation, proudly referred to by officials of the NKVD as the Yezhov method, consisted of making it the arrested man's primary task to build up the whole case against himself, more or less with his own inventive powers. Every arrested man had not only to invent his own "legend" but at the same time to do his utmost to make it plausible in every detail, relating it to actual events or giving them the desired twist.

The grotesque result of this was that the accused strained every nerve to convince their examining magistrates that their invented legends were true and represented the most serious political crimes possible, so that the stories should not be rejected as too improbable or insignificant. If they were rejected, it meant only a continuation of the interrogation until the legend was altered or replaced by a new one involving a sufficiently serious political crime....A worker in an educational supplies factory in which blackboards and globes were manufactured maintained that he belonged to an organization whose object was the construction of artificial volcanoes to blow the entire Soviet Union sky-high. (44)

Before beginning to weave out a wild story, the mind of a convict has to be emptied. Any thought would be demolished, creating a tabula rasa. Into it is built a new narrative, that is, a new thought, something one truly believes one had thought of.

In 1938, Mandelstam was arrested for the third time. He was sentenced to exile to a camp in the Far East. In the Vladivostok camp, apparently, he was still quite straightforward concerning his "thought" which he should have kept "voiceless." Upon the request of his bedmates, he was willing to recite his satire on Stalin. Ironically, however, Mandelstam was by then so enfeebled that he could not read the poem loud enough for other prisoners to hear it or understand it (Polianovskii "Smert' Osipa Mandelshtama" 27 May 1992). The poet ruined his health and died there.

Vygotsky escaped such a fate as he met his death young. He died of tuberculosis in 1934, just a few years before the peak of the Great Terror. Although he was critical of

formalism, since his version of Marxism was not exactly the official historical materialism and as he was Jewish, he would, probably, have faced the doom of interrogation, mind control, and eventual liquidation. But Vygotsky would have been cautious; he would not have been unmediated like Mandelstam during the interrogation. Vygotsky knew that inner thought and external speech are separate, but mutually mediating. In other words, he knew his enunciation would affect his thought; word and thought were dialectically determinant. By contrast, Mandelstam rejected such a form of resistance altogether. For word was the only reality he had and there could have been no thought except in word.

NOTES

- 52
1. It may be apt here to note that, in spite of the ardor of the early critics of the communist “inhuman” technique, the CIA was quick to learn it and to develop it to a level of efficiency not achieved by its “teachers.”
 2. Nadezhda Mandelstam and Anna Akhmatova give the night of May 13 and the morning of May 14 as the dates of arrest. E. Polianovskii maintains, on the basis of the archival materials, that they are mistaken and that the true date was May 16 (“Smert’ Osipa Mandelshtama” 25 May 1992).
 3. Or to be precise, the GPU, as Cheka had been renamed by the time of the arrest.
 4. Polianovskii insists, further relying on archival materials, that “no recording of the voices of a typical wife or a mother was played” and that “it was all hallucinations of Mandelstam” because “[Mandelstam] was an easy prey and no tormenting technique was necessary” (“Smert’ Osipa Mandelshtama” 25 May 1992). I have no historical records to refute or support Polianovskii’s insistence. Suffice it to say that such techniques (the use of recordings of female voices, etc.) were actually used and that they could have been applied to Mandelstam as well.
 5. Such an idea of Descartes is implied in passages in *Discourse on the Method*. For instance, Descartes distinguishes human beings from animals in terms of linguistic ability in this way: “[Brutes] could never use speech or other signs as we do when placing our thoughts on record for the benefit of others....[T]hey cannot arrange different words together, forming of them a statement by which they make known their thoughts” (116-17). Thoughts are formulated before they are transformed into a verbal form, in which they are recorded and known externally by other consciousnesses.
 6. Mandelstam is speaking of “classical poetry,” but it is not likely that he found essential difference in this respect between classical and modern poetry, especially, concerning his own poetic works.
 7. It should be noted, though, that Vygotsky was critical of evolutionist views.

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