little-known documents

The Wheat of Humanity

OSIP MANDELSTAM

INTRODUCTION AND TRANSLATION BY RICHARD LEE PIERRE

Introduction

AT THE END OF 1922, AFTER YEARS OF REVOLUTION AND CIVIL WAR, THE SOVIET UNION WAS FORMALLY INCORPORATED, BRINGING AREAS OF THE former Russian Empire into an ostensibly unified conglomerate. Though conflicts continued to smolder, Spenglerian discourse from the area touted a flourishing Slavic East in opposition to a declining European West. For the thousands of Russians and other émigrés from the former Russian Empire living abroad in Europe, this opposition presented a conundrum: should their sympathies lie with their cultural home or with the West, where they experienced daily life?

Berlin was then home to the largest community of Russian émigrés, sizable enough to support a thriving Russian publishing trade.[1] One of the city's émigré newspapers, *On the Eve* (Накануне; Nakanune; 1922–24), had close connections to Moscow and was overtly sympathetic to the Bolshevik cause. The newspaper served as a mouthpiece of the "changing landmarks" (сменовеховство; smenovekhovstvo) movement, which aimed to persuade émigrés to accept Soviet policy. Accordingly, *On the Eve* was "full of talk about the decline of Europe and the rise of the East" (Williams 269).[2]

Nevertheless, the 7 June 1922 edition of this newspaper published "The Wheat of Humanity" ("Пшеница человеческая"; "Pšenica čelovečeskaja"), by the St. Petersburg–based poet and essayist Osip Mandelstam.[3] The article contradicts the editorial view of *On the Eve*, extolling the virtues of pan-European integration rather than expressing support for a centralized Russian seat of influence. It rejects messianistic nationalisms that promise cohesion by distinguishing one group from another. This critique leads to the text's basic but striking analogy, centered on simple domestic imagery: just as bread is made of wheat but the processes of milling and baking render individual grains indiscernible, European identity is attainable only when conceived "as a whole" (как целое; kak tseloe) and "as a moral identity" (нравственная личность; nravstvennaya lichnost) rather than as a consortium of disparate parts.[4]

Closely related to "The Wheat of Humanity" are Mandelstam's "Government and Rhythm" ("Государство и ритм"; "Gosudarstvo i ritm"; 1920),

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which likewise meditates on questions of collectivity and social reform; "The Word and Culture" ("Слово и культура"; "Slovo i kul'tura"; 1921), which examines the intersection of state and culture in postrevolution Russia; and "Humanism and the Present" ("Гуманизм и современность"; "Gumanizm i sovremennost'"; 1923), which uses similar vocabulary of domesticity and of catastrophe. Like these better-known essays, "The Wheat of Humanity" discusses culture and political upheaval. In casting a wider net to consider both East and West, however, its metaphors become more extravagant, its rhetoric patently fervent. The essay has no qualms about its political point of view. Mandelstam declares that "[h]enceforth, politics as an elemental force is dead," citing an "imperialistic war" (the First World War, the Russian Civil War, or both) that brought nationalistic ideas to a dead end. The essay characterizes European nations as grains of wheat longing to be milled into unity. To compare European consciousness and political cohesion to a sack of flour or a loaf of bread, however, is not an altogether useful tactic. Readers must have wondered what the author of the essay (signed by a probably obscure "O. M.") thought they should do, in the uncertain wake of political revolution.

The point of "The Wheat of Humanity" is encased in the literariness of its prose. Its vivid, unconventional metaphors confound and resist unraveling into threadbare platitudes. Its language is somewhat akin to that of notable modernist works that emerged around 1922, including James Joyce's *Ulysses*, T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and *Sonnets to Orpheus*, and Mandelstam's collection *Tristia*. Stylistically connected to literary modernism, "The Wheat of Humanity" implies a less definitive stance on modern politics. Despite the essay's clear suggestion that European cohesion is desirable—or at least preferable—it is hard to believe that Mandelstam is trying to persuade anyone to do anything other than recognize that the "soil of Europe" (европейская почва; evropejskaja počva) stretches at least from St. Petersburg and Moscow to the Alps and beyond. For all its fervor, "The Wheat of Humanity" excels as the work of a poet rather than that of a pundit.

Mandelstam was not entirely removed from politics.[5] He was initially intrigued by Soviet unification, and "The Wheat of Humanity" may indicate his curiosity about the promise of Communist internationalism. The bitterly critical tone of some of his later works, however, led to his arrest and eventual death en route to a Siberian camp. Even in 1922, Mandelstam warily cautions that no grand ideas should replace the catastrophic messianistic nationalisms. Each miniscule grain in the essay's central metaphor is said to preserve not the lofty political rhetoric of a new Soviet world but the ancient myth of Europa holding on, "with weak hands" ("слабыми руками"; "slabymi rukami"), to the neck of Jupiter in the guise of a bull.

The wider dissemination of "The Wheat of Humanity" enriches our understanding of how politics and literary language connect in Mandelstam's works.[6] Assembling virtuosic language to examine its political moment, the text compels us to reflect broadly on metaphor as a means to estrange political thought rather than to simplify it. As questions of European identity and cohesion continue in the twenty-first century, understanding this connection proves as urgent as ever.

Notes

1. During this time, at least forty-seven Russian-language publishing houses and several magazines and daily newspapers operated in Berlin (Glad 157).

2. Hilde Hardeman, Robert C. Williams (268–75), and A. V. Osipov discuss *On t* 's ideology. Hardeman notes that the newspaper's perspective was influenced by Oswald Spengler's *De* (*De Unt* ; 1918), which was well known among the intelligentsia in Russia and in Berlin.

3. Em Mindlin discusses Mandelstam's involvement with *On t* , which also published his lyrics "Europa" ("Европа"; "Evropa"), "I love the gray silence under the arches" ("Люблю под сводами седыя тишины"; "Ljublju pod svodami sedyja tišiny"), and "The One Who Found a Horseshoe" ("Нашедший подкову"; "Našedšij podkovu") and his essay "Humanism and the Present" (101–05). Unlike these texts, "The Wheat of Humanity" appeared in the newspaper's main section, not its literary supplement; perhaps this placement explains the essay's subsequent neglect.

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4. When quoting from "The Wheat of Humanity" in this introduction, I have, as needed, supplied Russian terms in nominative forms rather than as inflected in the original text, so that they do not clash with the grammar of the English introduction.

5. Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou ("Age" and "Beast"), and Jacques Rancière position Mandelstam's works in terms of temporality and political experience.

6. "The Wheat of Humanity" is omitted from *The Complete Critical Prose and Letters*. The rediscovered essay was reprinted in Russian during the 1980s and is included in *Collected Works* (Собрание сочинений). See Fleishman; Toddes; and Sokolov.

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The Wheat of Humanity

Many, many grains in a sack, no matter how they are shaken or strewn about, are all one and the same. A given quantity of Russians, Frenchmen, or Englishmen does not itself form a nation.[1] The grains in the sack are the same as the unground wheat of humanity: a net quantity. This net quantity, this wheat of humanity, yearns to be ground up, turned into flour, and baked into bread. The state of grain in the bread corresponds to the state of identity in the completely new, nonmechanistic union that is called a nation. Yet there are ages when no bread is baked, when barns fill up with grains of the wheat of humanity, but nothing is milled. The miller becomes decrepit and weary, and the broad, webbed wings of the mills helplessly await work.

The oven of history—the hot domestic stove from which many browned loaves have issued—once so wide and spacious, has now gone on strike. Everywhere, the wheat

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of humanity is making noise and becoming agitated. The wheat does not want to become bread, although it is being compelled to do so by surly proprietors, the owners of the barns and granaries that consider themselves the wheat's masters.

The era of messianism has definitively and irrevocably ended for European nations. Any messianism runs approximately as follows: only we are bread; you all are simply a grain not worth grinding—but we can make it so that you become bread, too. Yet any messianism is unfair and deceitful from the start and calculated to strike an impossible resonance in the consciousness of those whom it approaches with such an offer. No messianizing and silver-tongued nation has ever been heard by another. Everyone has been talking in a vacuum, not noticing one another, and delirious speeches have been flowing all at once from different lips.

There is one fact that contributes to the rise and proliferation of any messianism, that compels nations to rave deliriously like unreliable Pythian oracles, and that for a long time has turned Europe into a Pythian bazaar of national ideas. This fact is the uncoupling of the political, economic, and essential cultural life of nations—the stratification of the political and national plan. Crudely formulated, it is the failure of political and national boundaries to coincide. But the gypsy camp of ethnography is no place for beasts of prey. Here, the tame bear dances, and the eagle is bound by its injured talon. One can regard the political violence of Europe, its indefatigable desire to refashion its borders, as the prolongation of a geologic process, as the need to prolong the era of geologic catastrophes and fluctuations in history. This era is characteristic of the youngest, most tender, and most historical continent, whose bones are still not fused, like the bones of a child's skull. But political life is catastrophic in its essence. The spirit of politics—its nature—is catastrophe, the unexpected shift, destruction. It was fine for the Bürgers in *Faust*, sitting on a bench, smoking a pipe, to discuss Turkish affairs.[2] An earthquake is nice from afar, when it poses no danger. For Europe—thoroughly political by worldview—if the roar of political events is not audible, it is an event: "Beloved silence is the delight / of kings and earthly kingdoms."[3] That is, the simple absence of a catastrophe has been almost physically perceived, like some thin ether of silence. The catastrophism of a political element essentially led to the rise of the strongest current in the bowels of historical Europe. This current sought to kill political life as such, to annihilate an independent and catastrophic political element, and to do battle with historical catastrophe—wherever and in whatever form it might have appeared. This current erupted from such a depth that its manifestation resembled a catastrophe. Yet, it is not catastrophic by nature. Only through a misunderstanding could it seem like a new political earthquake, like one new historical catastrophe in a succession of others.

Henceforth, politics as an elemental force is dead, and its life is thrice blessed. Many still speak the old language, but a political congress like those in Vienna and Berlin is no longer possible in Europe.[4] No one will listen to the actors, and, moreover, the actors have forgotten how to perform.

Thus, the halting of Europe's political life as an independent, catastrophic process that ended with an imperialistic war coincided with the cessation of the organic growth of national ideas and with a general disintegration of nationalities into simple human grain, into wheat. Now we should heed the voice of this wheat of humanity—the voice of the masses, as it is incoherently called now—to understand what is happening to us and what the coming days have in store.

The wheat of humanity will not be turned into flour in the mill of political history, nor with the heavy millstone of catastrophe. Nowadays, everything that is not politics in the old sense of the word is thrice blessed. Blessed is economics with its pathos of universal

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domesticity; blessed is the flinty axe of class struggle. Blessed is everything that is absorbed into the great concern about the organization of world economics, blessed is any kind of housekeeping and home economics, blessed is any kind of concern for the universal hearth. Good in an ethical sense and goods in an economic sense—that is, in the stock of utensils and tools of production, of universal belongings that have been accumulated by dint of hard work over the millennia—are now one and the same.

A nation is no longer defined in the process of political conflict. Political independence no longer makes a nation. Only after having thrown our sack into this new mill, under the millstone of this new concern, will we receive pure flour—our new essence as a people.

The shame of yesterday's messianism still burns bright on the face of European nations, and I do not know of a more burning shame after all that has taken place.[5] Any national idea in contemporary Europe is doomed to be a nonentity so long as Europe does not regard itself as a whole, so long as it does not conceive of itself as a moral identity.[6] Without a broad, maternal European consciousness, no small nation is possible. For us, a way out of national disintegration—from the condition of the grains in the sack—and into universal unity, into internationality, comes through the rebirth of the European consciousness, through the reestablishment of Europeanism as our great nationality.

"The feeling of Europe"—hollow, dejected, burdened with wars and civil strife—is returning into the sphere of active, working ideas. Russia preserved this feeling for Europe surreptitiously and zealously. It stoked this fire in advance, as if it were anxious that it could die out. Let us recall Herzen—not his worldview but his feeling completely at home in Europe.[7] He roamed the countries of the West like the master of a huge estate. Let us recall the relationship of Karamzin and Tyutchev to the land of the West, to European soil.[8] Both felt the soil of Europe most powerfully where it reared up into mountains, where it preserved the living memory of a geologic catastrophe. There, in Switzerland, Karamzin shed the sentimental tears of a Russian traveler. The best of Tyutchev's verses are dedicated to the Alps. This Russian poet's completely unique, thoroughly spiritual relation with the geologic violence of the Alpine ridge is explained by the fact that, there, the violent geologic catastrophe reared up its own historical land into mighty ridges: the land supporting Rome and St. Peter's Basilica, the land that bore Kant and Goethe. Because there, "[s]omething festive blows, / like the silence of Sundays."[9] Thus, Tyutchev's Alpine verses are inspired by a historical sense of European soil, and the European Himalayas are crowned by the double tiara for the poet.

In Europe these days there is no and should not be any grandeur—neither the tiara nor the crown nor grandiose ideas like massive tiaras. Where did all this grandeur disappear to—the whole mass of the cast gold of the historical forms of ideas? It returned to the state of an alloy, into the golden, molten magma. It did not vanish, but that which now poses as greatness is just a substitute, a fake, papier-mâché. One must look soberly: Europe these days is an enormous barn filled with the grains of humanity, with the real wheat of humanity, and the sack of grain is now more monumental than the Gothic style.

But each grain preserves the memory of an ancient Hellenic myth, about how Jupiter transformed into the lowly bull so that he could carry his precious burden—the tender Europa—on his broad back through earthly waters, snorting heavily, with the rosy-colored foam of weariness on his lips.[10] With weak hands, she held on to his strong, square neck.

Translator's Notes

"The Wheat of Humanity" was first published in *On the Eve* (Накануне; Nakanune), 7 June 1922, pp. 2–3.

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1. Mandelstam uses the term *narod* (народ), signifying both "nation" and "people," throughout the essay. The related term *narodnost* (народность; "nationality" or "nation") and the adjective *natsionalnyy* (национальный; "national") are also used interchangeably in the essay to signify both the messianistic nationalities it rejects and the pan-European collectivity it offers as an alternative. My translation uses "nation" except when "people" is needed for clarity's sake.

2. Goethe, *Faust*, part 1, lines 860–63.

3. From Mikhail Lomonosov's "Ode on the Anniversary of Empress Elizabeth's Ascending to the Throne, 1747" ("Ода на день восшествия на всероссийский престол ея величества государыни императрицы Елисаветы Петровны 1747 года"; "Oda na den' vosšestvija na vserossijskij prestol eja veličestva gosudaryni imperatricy Elisavety Petrovny 1747 goda"): "Царей и царств земных отрада, / Возлюбленная тишина" (196).

4. Mandelstam is probably referring to the Congress of Vienna (1814–15) and its efforts to stabilize post-Napoleonic Europe, as well as the Congress of Berlin (1878), which was similarly intended to stabilize the Balkans after the Russo-Turkish war.

5. These references to "yesterday" and "all that has taken place" exemplify a fundamental vagueness in Mandelstam's text. They may refer to the whole history of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European nationalisms that Mandelstam alludes to elsewhere in the essay, to their presumed decline by 1922, to the crisis of national identity ignited by the Russian Revolution and civil war—or perhaps to all these at once.

6. The "national idea" (национальная идея; "natsionalnaya ideya") in the context of Russian history signifies a fundamental, unifying principle that would encompass and inform both policy and cultural life. Debates about which principle constitutes the national idea have perennially emerged throughout the political and social transformations of modern Russia.

7. The populist Alexander Herzen (1812–70) is best known for his autobiography *My Past and Thoughts* (Былое и думы; Byloe i dumy) and novel *Who Is to Blame?* (Кто виноват?; Kto vinovat?). For much of his career, Herzen lived abroad, in Geneva, London, and Paris.

8. Nikolai Karamzin (1766–1826) is the Russian author of *History of the Russian State* (История государства Российского; Istorija gosudarstva Rossijskogo) and *Letters of a Russian Traveler* (Письма русского путешественника; Pis'ma russkogo putešestvennika), written after his travels in England, Germany, France, and Switzerland. The poet and diplomat Fyodor Tyutchev (1803–73) lived in Germany for many years, connecting with the likes of Heinrich Heine and Friedrich von Schelling.

9. From Tyutchev's "Over the hills grown thick with vineyards" ("Над виноградными холмами"; "Nad vinogradnymi xolmami"; 1836?): "И нечто праздничное веет, / Как дней воскресных тишина" (67).

10. These lines allude to Mandelstam's lyric "With the rosy-colored foam of weariness on his soft lips" ("С розовой пеной усталости у мягких губ"; "S rozovoj penoj ustalosti u mjagkix gub"), published in *Universal Illustrated* (Всемирная иллюстрация; Vsemirnaja illjustracija; July 1922) as "Europa" and simultaneously in *On the Eve* without a title. The lyric may be an allusion to Valentin Serov's painting *The Rape of Europa* (Похищение Европы; Poxiščenie Evropy; 1910).

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