BETWEEN THE LINES: LITERATURE AS STRUGGLE OF MEMORY AGAINST FORGETTING

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“The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting,” wrote Milan Kundera in his novel The Book of Laughter and Forgetting. The Literature itself has an important role in that struggle, as it has the ability to replace with words the silences of history, and to remember what historiography will decide, or will be forced, to forget. The authors who disagree with the repressive political systems and governing regimes of the countries in which they live are opposing the oblivion imposed by censorship, and become chroniclers of personal stories and specifics of human existence that would otherwise be forgotten without their work. The experience of the current moment transformed into literature is an act of establishing coherence and integrity of history that is interrupted, divided or written by the ruling regimes.

When he wrote his poem “The Stalin Epigram”, Osip Mandelstam was certainly aware that these verses need to be written, but must be whispered. “The Stalin Epigram” is witnessing the poet’s personal experience and stance about the time and the circumstances he lived in.

We can find there his own feeling of the life that became distasteful (“We live without feeling the country beneath our feet”), and the fear of the people that would be reported if they are critical about the political system (“More than ten steps away you can’t hear what we say”), and the omnipresent feeling that one has to praise Stalin in own conversations (“But if people would talk on occasion, They should mention the Kremlin’s mountain man.”). What follows are verses with ironic portrayal of the tyrant and the people close to him, and ends with Stalin’s self-will and cruelty:

“He is forging his rules and decrees like horseshoes –

Into groins, into foreheads, in eyes, and eyebrows.

Every killing for him is delight,

And Ossetian torso is wide.”

That poem, and act of remembrance against forgetting, an act of struggle against tyrannical power had to be written, but must be whispered, and the poet whispered those verses to his closest friends. As we know from Nadezhda Mandelstam memoirs, Boris Pasternak called “The Stalin Epigram” suicidal poem and he asked the poet not to repeat it to anyone. Osip Mandelstam continued to recite it to his close friends, or more precisely to those he considered being his friends, and someone betrayed him. After the interrogation in Moscow’s Lubyanka Prison, a long internal exile begun for the poet and his wife – first in Cherdyn, then in Voronezh. Later he was sentenced to a five-year term and deported to the far east where he died in Vtoraya Rechka transit camp, near Vladivostok, in 1938. Before that he tried to please Stalin in order to save his own life, and wrote “Ode to Stalin”, but the praising of the tyrant didn’t helped. When I have read the great Russian painter Ilya Repin’s memoirs, who escaped from the Soviet Union, and lived in Finland, rejecting the kind Stalin’s offers to return to his homeland, I always remember Nadazda Mandelstam’s memoirs about her husband sufferings, and also Osip Mandelstam’s prose “The Noise of Time”, where he wrote about Finland with love, remembering his childhood perceptions of the towns (Vyborg and Terijoki, that later, unfortunately, were annexed by Soviet Union) in which lived his family’s friends. This is how he depicted his childhood remembrances of Finland: “From Vladimir Solovyov to Blok, pre-revolutionary Petersburg was redolent of Finland, sifting its sand from one hand to the other, rubbing its granite forehead with the light Finnish snow, and listening in its deep delirium to the sleighbells of the squat Finnish horses. I always had a troubled intimation of the special meaning that, for a Petersburger, resided in Finland: people drove there in order to think to the end what could not be thought to the end in Petersburg, pulling the low snowy sky down to their very eyebrows and dozing off in small hotels where the water in the pitcher was icy. And I loved the country where all the women are immaculate laundresses and the drivers of the horsecabs resemble senators.” The words “I loved the country” are the core words in his chapter about his childhood memories about Finland, and when I think of it, I wonder: if it was possible for Mandelstam to escape to Finland, would he have written poems that wouldn’t be whispered, but shouted, would he continue his prose, would he follow up his “The Noise of Time”, and write about more recent years, those of political repression? As readers, we miss his writings on these subjects. Would he live the joy of exile, the one that Ilya Repin experienced in Finland, or he would have gone through the bitterness of dislocation, detachment and discontinuity?

One of those who points to another aspects of the exile is Milan Kundera, who writes about the exile as a liberating condition, questioning even the attitude of compassion which, according to him, was dominant towards exiles: "In the second half of the twentieth century," says Kundera, "everyone became particularly sensitive to the fate of people expelled from their lands." "That compassion obscured the problem of exile with weeping moralism and overshadowed the specific nature of the life of the persecuted." According to Kundera, the nature of the life of the exile is characterized by a sense of freedom and openness to the world, and this claims he supports by the words of the Czech author Vera Linhartova, who after 1968 lives in Paris. She writes about exile as a liberating departure "somewhere else, obligatory in the unknown, and open to all possibilities." Kundera declares her claim of exile valid not only for her, and supports it with the fact that, after the fall of communism, "almost none of the major artists who emigrated hurried to return to their country? How come? Did not the fall of communism encourage them to celebrate the Feast of the Great Return in their homeland?" According to Kundera, the reason why artists do not return home after the collapse of social systems is the experience of exile as freedom and liberty, but he concludes that "everyone experiences their exile in a unique way", which he, regardless of the previously stated views, defines the experience of exile as an individual experience that can not be identical and may not coincide in its basic properties with the experiences of another exile. And this leads us to the words of Edward Said: “Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile’s life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever.”

Osip Mandelstam lived in a repressive political system different than the ones today, as well as Milan Kundera and Edward Said wrote about the exile of the twentieth century and in twentieth century, but I believe that their experience and their writings can help us perceive and understand better the regimes, exile, and wars of our time. And the mission of the writings of the authors that live in the repressive systems or in exile will be the same as always: it will be a struggle and a victory of memory over forgetting.

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