Bernie Meares was a case. When the Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia he got in his car and drove to Prague to protest. A little Armenian soldier pointed his gun at him and said ‘My captain says I don’t get to shoot you’. When Joseph Brodsky was expelled from the Soviet Union, Bernie collected some cash and drove to Vienna to help him out, but Brodsky had already been met by the Auden crew, so his assistance wasn’t needed.

In the 70s Brodsky helped him put together a book of Mandelstam’s poems in English translation. When I got to Geneva, Bernie, who worked as a translator at CERN, lent us his Meyrin flat. He didn’t think much of Mandelstam’s early work; he loved one of the late Voronezh poems, which goes something like this (it’s best read aloud):

I

Stumbling over the bare earth

On she goes. A lilting gait

Propels her quick across the heavy tilth

Ahead of her lively company; she’s yet

Drawn by that straitened freedom,

By her own inspiring flaw.

And it might turn out – some kind of joy

Stalls in her step, the dawning thought

That this spring weather in all its charm

is primal mother to the vaulted tomb

And is, for ever more, about to start.

II

Kin to the raw earth, there are some women

Whose every footstep is a harrowing cry.

Their calling is to accompany the risen

And to be first to welcome those who have died.

To expect their tenderness would be a crime,

But who could ever say goodbye to them?

Today an angel, tomorrow a kirkyard worm

Then all but the merest trace is taken from us.

What was one step away, runs out of time.

Flowers are immortal, the sky is sublime,

And what will be – is just a promise.

(Osip Mandelstam, *K pustoi zemle…*, 4 May 1937, translated by Peter McCarey 2 April 2024)

I felt it was about time for a new version. Also, Bernie’s translation – though preferable to the Brown & Merwin collection published by Penguin – had its own problems. Brodsky had pushed him to rhyme his translations, but Bernie didn’t get it. Indeed, in his intro to the book he says that this poem does ‘no more than hint at rhyme’, which is plain wrong. I have kept the rhyme scheme because without it those last two lines look arbitrary and a touch banal; the rhythm and rhyme of the poem have to hug them tight and keep them (this isn’t the only Mandelstam poem crowned by such assertions that seem to come out of nowhere: there’s one in Tristia and a cracker in ‘Getting washed outside at night’).

My own translation, of course, has its own problems: I take it all to heart – otherwise why do it? (answer: for money). It is not my poem so I try not to misrepresent it (this seems an obvious point but many poets, especially in monoglot cultures, think that the goal is simply to produce a new poem). On occasion an obstacle isn’t lexical but personal, for example I find some of Mandelstam’s machismo silly and I don’t want it to spoil an otherwise wonderful lyric. Sometimes I just don’t get what he’s trying to say; take the line (literal version) ‘and every step of theirs is a resonant sobbing’. I can’t hear that, unless the soil is so sopping wet that it sucks off their galoshes, but that would be inappropriate slapstick. What I *do* hear in ‘gulkoe rydan’e (resonant sobbing) is a verbatim lift from Mandelstam’s own St Sophia, written twenty-five years earlier:

On the pendentives, under the dome, four / archangels are the most beautiful of all. // This wise, spherical building / will outlive nations and centuries / and the resonant sobbing of the seraphim / will not tarnish its dim gilding.

Mandelstam refers to these women as angels; the ‘gulkoe rydan’e’ echoes that. ‘Harrowing’ fits because a harrow is a plough and they are walking on tilth. The Harrowing of Hell precedes the Resurrection, something ‘forever more about to start’. I used ‘quick’ for the echo of ‘the quick and the dead’. Is that too much? For some it will be. For a poem of this calibre another translation will always be needed.