The Struggle of the Artist
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His sight is trained
On the road ahead
But his eyes yearn
For his wife instead.

She follows behind,
Neither dead nor alive.
Wealth and Spring
May yet let her live.

The grade is steep
And growing steeper
While this hero’s heart
Sinks ever deeper

Into fear and doubt—
Does Eurydice follow?
He hears her strides
Echo empty, hollow.

Step after step,
Note after note,
Orpheus continues
The song that he wrote
For his beautiful wife,
A nymph of the trees:
Indeed for her, he would
Cross seven seas.

But something is wrong,
Orpheus knows.
Surely by now she’s
Consumed by shadows.

Do not think in this way,
O Son of Apollo.
If you turn back
You will only wallow

In sorrow and grief
For the rest of your years
Knowing that you
Are the cause of your tears.

For as you passed
From that world to this,
The sight of your love
You could not resist.

But now she is gone,
Into shadows of course,
And you had not thought
Your life could get worse
Analysis

Professor Amy Adams’s “Russian Literature under Stalin” class spent the fall semester of 2013 studying various writers who lived during the Stalinist era. We discussed the importance of these writers to our understanding of life during that time, and the courage they possessed in order to compose the works that they did. In a time when the Stalinist government severely punished an act even slightly opposed to uniformity, it is amazing that such works as we examined exist. These included Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We* (the precursor to George Orwell’s *1984*), Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*, Eugene Yelchin’s *Breaking Stalin’s Nose*, as well as a variety of other novels and poems. One of our assignments invited us to write our own poems, putting ourselves in the place of those such as Anna Akhmatova or Osip Mandelstam, who risked their lives for their work. Like many of the great Russian poets of this era, I chose to encode truths in metaphor.

My poem, and the hidden messages it constructs, are based on the ancient story of Orpheus and Eurydice. In this tale, the poet Orpheus enters the underworld while playing his lyre to rescue the spirit of his deceased bride Eurydice. Hades, ruler of the underworld, is so moved by Orpheus’s music that he agrees to let Eurydice go. His only condition is that, as Orpheus walks out of the underworld, he cannot turn around to see if Eurydice is following him. Orpheus agrees, and he begins to walk away while avoiding looking around. At the last minute, however, his nerve fails him and he turns around to see if Eurydice is following him. As he turns, he catches a glimpse of her before her spirit fades away and is lost forever.

Part of the assignment included an explanation of our own poems, and here follows a revised version of that original essay.

Poets of the Stalinist era faced a great moral decision: record the atrocities they witnessed and sacrifice their careers, or succeed in society by functioning as government-approved “engineers of human souls”, a term for writers coined by the Stalinist regime. While many chose the safe route of feeding propaganda to their audiences, some could not bear to be silent about their own hardships and the sufferings of those around them. The renowned poets Osip Mandelstam and Anna
Akhmatova fall into this category. They employed their literary talents to paint a picture for posterity, a picture so unusual that straightforward prose could hardly suffice. Coded poetry, along with other art forms, served as a perfect vehicle for the thoughts of the tormented Soviet citizens.

“The Struggle of the Artist” opens with the juxtaposition of looking forward versus looking back. This pairing is reminiscent of the Soviet concept of perceiving things not as they are or were, but as they will be. The poem’s protagonist, Orpheus, must not look behind him, keeping his vision focused forward, to the future. Soviet citizens were also required to keep their sight trained forward. The poet Mandelstam was not capable of acquiescing to this fallacy; his wife described him as “a man who knew that you cannot build the present out of the bricks of the future.”

In The Whisperers, Orlando Figes describes a recollection from Wolfgang Leonhard, a German Communist who visited Moscow as a child in 1935. At the time of his family’s visit, Moscow did not sell present day maps of the city: “We used to take both town plans with us on our walks. One showing what Moscow had looked like ten years before, the other showing what it would like ten years hence.”

Like Leonhard, Orpheus is forced to look either to the past, his memories of his wife, or to the future, when she will hopefully be alive once again.

Once curiosity overcomes Orpheus, however, and he glances behind to see Eurydice is truly following him, she disappears before he can fully see her. A woman’s glance toward her former home proved just as fruitless in Anna Akhmatova’s poem “Lot’s Wife.” God forbade Lot and his family to turn around while they departed from their homeland, just as Hades forbade Orpheus from glancing at his beloved. Akhmatova writes: “She glanced—and bound by mortal pain/ Her eyes could no longer see (10-11).” In the same way, Soviet citizens tended to be unable to see the whole truth of what was going on around them, for such perspective was not only discouraged by the government but also painful to recognize. Even if they could understand, it was impossible to rationalize. Anyone perceived as an enemy of the party was purged, and many were sent to forced labor camps.

Hades presents Orpheus with a challenge, the same challenge that Stalin presented to his Comrades: do not look. Do not observe that people are disappearing for the most trivial
offences, that even this society is dysfunctional. The only difference is that if Stalin had caught Orpheus glimpsing at Eurydice, then Orpheus, rather than his beloved, would have perished. This mythological allusion represents the struggle faced by many Soviet citizens: recognize the truth and face it, or know that it is there and ignore it. Choosing the former almost always ended badly, and the latter, though it could not ensure safety from the Secret Police, was certainly the safer option.

“The Struggle of the Artist” uses a code to portray the mental struggle many artists encountered. The tie to mythology helps to make it a timeless piece, so a person from any time period can find a way to understand the experiences of Stalinist-era poets. The focus on the future contrasted against the past, the internal dilemma of whether or not to see, and the imposing authority figures all relate to themes of other artists of this time. Stalin sought to silence them, but the magnitude of what they witnessed could not be left unsung. They found they could communicate their messages through elliptical language, using symbols and metaphors that can be traced throughout their works. In *Hope Against Hope*, Nadezhda Mandelstam describes how her husband Osip wrote his poems: “The process of composing verse also involves the recollection of something that has never before been said, and the search for lost words is an attempt to remember what is still to be brought into being”.

It almost seems as though the poets living under Stalin were listening to the same unheard soundtrack. United as one creative entity, they strove to preserve their thoughts for the next generation, so no future nation would travel down the path on which the Soviets found themselves.
Notes to the Poem

1. “The road ahead” represents Stalin’s emphasis on thinking of things as they will be, not as they are now.

2. Just as in Anna Akhmatova’s “Poem about Petersburg”, the authority figures represent Stalin.

3. “The song” is a metaphor for a poem.

4. Orpheus is analogous to a poet: he forms art from music notes, a poet from words.

5. Like Orpheus straining not to look at his wife, poets such as Mandelstam and Akhmatova tried not to see the ugly truth of the world in which they lived. Recognizing it proved unavoidable.

6. Constant fear transformed those who lived under Stalin into semblances of their former selves, like Eurydice.
Bibliography


Notes

1 Mandelstem (1970) 115
2 Figes (2007)
3 Mandelstem (1970) 187