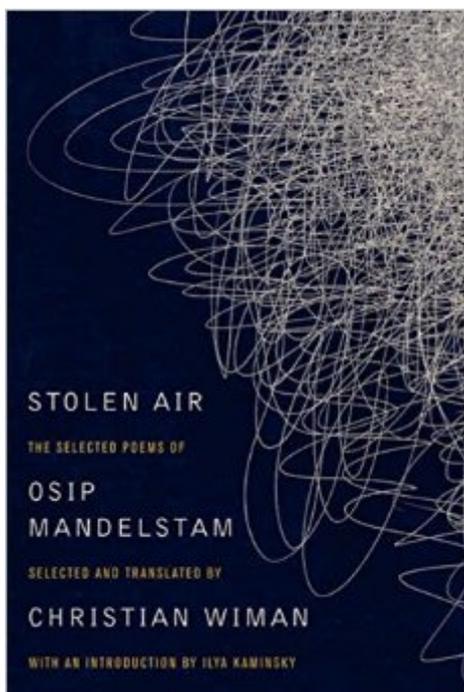


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# Stolen Air: Selected Poems Of Osip Mandelstam



## Synopsis

Osip Mandelstam was perhaps the most important Russian poet of the nineteenth-century—a crucial instigator of the revolution of the word—that took place in early twentieth-century St. Petersburg and a political non-conformist who earned the enmity of Stalin and his totalitarian regime. With *Stolen Air*, Christian Wiman, editor of *POETRY*, America's oldest and most prestigious magazine of verse, offers a new selection and translation of Mandelstam's poetry—from his hard-edged and highly formal early poems to his almost savagely musical later works—for a new generation to be moved by, marvel at, and appreciate.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Mandelstam is one of the greatest poets of the 20th century and, unfortunately, little known by general readers in the US. Among the virtues of this book is Ilya Kaminsky's introduction, which is not only informative, but lyrical and poetic itself. As other reviewers have noted, Wiman's poetry captures (I trust, not reading Russian) a muscular musical sound to Mandelstam's poetry that is lacking in other translations. I appreciate, for example, Wiman's assertive use of alliteration, assonance, and internal and slant rhyme. Some of the poems virtually punch one from the page. Among my favorites are "Bring Me To The Brink" ("The pain that sings in me does not sing, and is true"); "Leningrad"; "Gown of Iron"; Faith ("Mother of maple, mother of snow"); "To Natasha Schtempel" ("Because the soul of brokenness is the soul") and the sublime poem "The Necklace." In the latter case, though, I find the translation by W.S. Merwin and Clarence Brown more forthright and simpler, in a positive way. Compare these two translations: "Love, what's left for us, and of us, is this Living remnant, loving revenant, brief kiss Like a bee flying completed hiveless" (Wiman) "For us,

all that's left is kissestattered as the little beesthat die when they leave the hive" (Merwin)Of course, this is purely subjective, but I find Merwin's translation, without the verbal tricks, more effective in capturing the melancholy sense of ending, with the bittersweet solace of love, than Wiman's. Occasionally, Wiman's translations of Mandelstam (and Wiman is very upfront and honest that these are ultimately his poems, not Mandelstam's, because of the nature of translation) read too contemporary to me, too much like Wiman's own poetry or the poetry of Franz Wright. Nevertheless, this is certainly a book that contemporary poets and readers of poetry should own.

I have been reading the poems of Osip Mandelstam in translation since I first encountered him through Nadezhda Mandelstam's magnificent memoir, *Hope Against Hope*, in 1970. Many very fine poets have produced fine versions in English of the poems and prose of the most amazing Russian poet of modern times--one is tempted to say, certainly one of the most amazing poets, period. W.S. Merwin and Clarence Brown, James Green, Sidney Monas, Bernard Meares, and others have helped make him available to those of us with limited or no Russian. Now we have Christian Wiman and Ilya Kaminsky's magnificent *Stolen Air: Selected Poems of Osip Mandelstam*. I do not mean in any way to denigrate the achievements of the other poets and translators, but only to say that Wiman and Kaminsky have created a truly great book, a work of power and poetry that brings Mandelstam to us (that in itself is a great achievement), offering him to us in the form of English poems that stand with the best of modern poetry--not just of translations (of which we are privileged in our time to have many that achieve greatness as translation--from Daniel Mendelsohn, John Ashbery, Richard Howard, to name only a few) but great poetry. For anyone who values Mandelstam, for anyone who cares at all about poetry, Wiman's volume is essential. Read it however you can, buy it if you can. You will treasure it.

Wiman has captured Mandelstam's voice and music brilliantly in his marvelously evocative translations of the works of one of the most challenging and important Russian poets. The collection spans the entirety of Mandelstam's career and includes many works not elsewhere translated. As reviewed in *Russian Life*

These translations are beautiful and memorable. I have no idea how faithful they are to the original. But the mind for images and sounds is definitely not missing. Its also good (though disturbing) to read some of Mandelstam's later poems, right before his untimely death at the hands of the

criminally insane.

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