



**MANDELSHTAM'S
WALL
- ИГОРЬ ВАРЯГЕТО -**

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A
Alliteration

MANDELSHTAM'S WALL | IGOR BARRETO
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BETWEEN BEAUTY AND RUIN

On Mandelstam's Wall

SERGIO CHEJFEC

Igor Barreto's new book is condensed like an impossible compendium of all his previous poetry, and constellated like the physical and historical world it alludes to. *Mandelstam's Wall* has something of the treatise in the question it is governed by — but does not answer: in what way can we cut out social reality to provide a recognizable, and even poetic, version of it. On the one hand, it represents an immeasurable complexity, local and cosmic at the same time; on the other, the writing pursues the specific fragment and the gaze focused on eloquent details. This oscillation between the whole and the detail inspires the poetic economy of the book, and is also what constitutes the challenge to anyone trying to describe its luminous architecture.

Mandelstam's Wall emerges as an ongoing work, under construction, similar to works in a popular neighborhood, urban enclaves that never slow down and that need, like any scarcely legible territory, a poet to describe them. But the poet — call him Barreto or Mandelstam — does not want only to highlight the social vicissitudes of the place, he is also trying to construct the enclave based on his own gaze adhering to the context. As the poem “The Canary” says, the daily accounting “keeps us alive in an eternal present”.

Life, eternal present. I would like to stress this aspect of *Mandelstam's Wall*, the relationship with time. It can be said in general that poetry makes of the synchrony between utterance and what is uttered its brand as a genre. Poetry thinks of itself as song and, as such, the duration of what is said overlaps the duration of what is referred to. Even more, poetry erases the chronological gap between what is said and what is referred to.

This atemporality specific to the genre is magnified, or complicated, by the representation of time that *Mandelstam's Wall* proposes. On the one hand, there are constant references to the eternalizing of the present or of a key instant, one where individual destiny seals its relation to life, that is to death; on the other hand, there are also many representations of the ephemeral character of events which,

nevertheless, occur out of time and are condemned to repeat themselves. These situations are momentary not only because the telling of them is delimited, but because they belong to different orders of reality and imagination. They have the duration of a metaphor. Another important feature is that, in the temporal economy of *Mandelstam's Wall*, events consume themselves, expire before they have finished happening. In this tendency to expire, which anticipates or cancels the resurrection of components, the respiration of the text is inscribed: on the one hand poetry, on the other narrative. As if verse and prose signed an agreement to find a new way of representing.

The spontaneous flowering of occurrences makes use naturally of a repertory of components: throughout the scenes, characters, motifs, happenings, places follow each other. The stage is the ghetto, that is, the barrio, *villa*, *favela*, settlement, whatever the neighborhood is called, and the wall becomes the vertical plane on to which developments are projected or written. The components function as links in a multiple narrative, on the one hand, but also as indicators of what we could call a chronological porosity. Without this porosity, each story would not be at the same time the others. The text would not produce the strange choral effect that *Mandelstam's Wall* possesses, even though the voice of the speaker remains constant in the different formats, including the cases where it is masked behind the tombstones of deceased neighbors.

Time involves, on the other hand, an appeal to history. On *Mandelstam's Wall* — or just on the wall — marks of other eras are inscribed. Emblems of privation, of social decay too; and including reverberations we could call atavistic. We might look for direct references, social drama or cruelty given shape as something evident and constitutive. And nevertheless, I suppose, an enumeration of real facts and tragic stories would not account for the bitter and formidable — but also vain — victory of the book over the real and historic.

Because *Mandelstam's Wall* is not aiming to expose an era; on the contrary, it functions as a machine to demolish the history of today, decomposing it into volatile particles and splinters of meaning. In this rhetorical machine, the present is predominant with a particular inclination toward the urgent and exceptional. I think the principal, subversive connection *Mandelstam's Wall* establishes with the social and political history it discloses, does not therefore reside in what is told and alluded to, but in how it makes itself an echo of the same a-historicity in which Venezuelan society has been living for a long time. The wall reveals a web of orphaned sensibilities, which can be dated but are lasting, never ending. It comes from the notion of history emitted by political power: time as continuous present, something constantly provisional and transitory. The wall rises in a time which is administered only by power and

belongs to no one in particular, only to anonymous characters; it possesses defined actors but they are blurred, and for that reason it encodes its silent wager in the memory of the community.

If the present is eternal to the point of exhaustion and this is its worst feature, the past comes to its rescue. Probably, when in *Mandelstam's Wall* we read Mandelstam, we should also think of an imaginary Ferdinandov. That other ghost or Russian visitor who from the port of La Guaira spread himself over the neighboring Caribbean in a scarcely verifiable handful of legends. Here the perspective operating is that of the foreigner, and for that reason, though the supra-temporality of the state is not abolished, it can see and focus in a different way.

The present becomes eternal in Ojo de Agua, the barrio itself, to the point of exhaustion, and as a result the territory shows through its obituaries an incorrigible elegiac tendency. The dead are still there, says *Mandelstam's Wall*; they remain as stories of contiguous companions. Thus, Ojo de Agua is to Barreto what Hell is to Dante and Spoon River to Edgar Lee Masters.

How does language move between past and present, between the land of the dead and that of individuals immobile in their atemporality? One of the most eloquent tools of this text consists, paradoxically, in its apparently minor tone. As in Barreto's *Carama* and other collections, we can find in these poems the accents of the old local chronicler, or constructions close to crime reporting. The resistance to an elevated style and the choice of a register at the same time plain and exact, discreet but ironic, elliptical and brief, with a syncopated use of adjectives, produce the effect of a work which is unusually compact and kaleidoscopically moving.

When I say compact I am not referring only to its morphology or cogency, but also to an aspect related to scale: the book as a miniature of the world it is attempting to speak of. Between reality and its representation, a truth is established which is not always determined by what is given, but by the terrain of the implicit from which reality is challenged. This is what *Mandelstam's Wall* seems to suggest, for example when it describes flamboyants as giant bonsais, ruffled blankets as representing rocky shores, glasses cases as resembling coffins. These small scale scenographies are related to the floating stories told in the book's different formats, obituaries, chronicles, poems, witness accounts.

The singular architecture of this work and the unerring temperature of its song make me think of something that exceeds the idea of the book as object, and approaches a sort of installation or textual concert. So strange as a literary flowering that it would seem not to need readers to see confirmed its beauty and its otherness. On the contrary, probably readers need this book in order to calibrate their knowledge of the world and to live in a different way the interminable present many inhabit.

MANDELSHTAM'S

WALL

- IGOR BARRATO -

To Wales

A Wales

Vive tranquilo y consolado
En la pobreza opulenta, en la miseria poderosa.
Son benditos los días y las noches
Y es inocente la fatiga dulce y sonora.
CUADERNOS DE VORONEZH. OSIP MANDELSTHAM

Fuego nuestro que estás en el miedo.
“FUEGO, FUEGO, FUEGO”. MALCOLM LOWRY

basura tiene que ser el poema de nuestra época porque la
basura es lo bastante espiritual y creíble como para
embargarnos la atención, estorbando, poniéndose por medio,
amontonándose, apestando, manchando los arroyos
BASURA. A. R. AMMONS

Uno, dos y tres,
Todo lo que ves,
Dos, tres, cuatro
Todo es teatro
“TABLA DE MULTIPLICAR”. ANA BLANDIANA

In sumptuous penury, in mighty poverty

Live comforted at rest—

Your days and nights are blest,

Your sweet-voiced labor without sin.

OSIP MANDELSHTAM, *VORONEZH NOTEBOOKS*

Our fire, which art in fear.

MALCOLM LOWRY, "FIRE, FIRE, FIRE"

garbage has to be the poem of our time because

garbage is spiritual, believable enough

to get our attention, getting in the way, piling

up, stinking, turning brooks brownish . . .

A. R. AMMONS, *GARBAGE*

One, two and three,

Everything you see,

Two, three, four

Everything is an act.

ANA BLANDIANA, "MULTIPLICATION TABLE"

STROKES ON THE WALL

RAYAS SOBRE EL MURO

YO vengo del encuentro con las antípodas. Quiero decir que en estos años me ha preocupado por la posibilidad de atar poéticamente dos extremos. Al final, siempre doy con el deseado nudo, ese contacto con la «unidad» (que es el nudo) donde se cierran sobre sí las ideas y las imágenes. Se trata de un juego con palabras que vincula tanto seres como situaciones de distinta naturaleza. Pero basta de rodeos y senderos entre la hierba; hay que contarlo de una vez, ahora y aquí. Resulta que viviendo en la parte alta del barrio de Ojo de Agua, en una zona llamada Monterrey, me encontraba en un terreno baldío que hacía las veces de estacionamiento, aunque también de plaza para tomar cervezas, y justo en ese lugar conocí a un hombre alto, muy melancólico, que decía llamarse: Osip Mandelshtam.

En un barrio caraqueño, en una favela, en un posible ghetto, es difícil contradecir a alguien sin temer a una refriega física o verbal. Miré a su cara con recelo y le pregunté de forma directa:

—¿Usted es el afamado poeta ruso, Osip Mandelshtam?

A lo cual respondió sin ánimo, como si hablara de algo consabido.

—Como lo ha dicho señor, a sus gratas órdenes.

El rostro verdadero de Mandelshtam, el que había conocido a través de tantas fotografías, su cara ancha de ojos agrisados y juntos, con labios delgadamente rectos, ese rostro se disolvió con nostalgia sobre otro de cabello entrecano que tenía una ligera cicatriz en su boca como la marca de alguna operación de origen leporino ocurrida quizás en su primera infancia. Esta escena acontecía una tarde en un cementerio de automóviles aparcados simétricamente y cuyos parabrisas reflejaban de manera anamórfica, destellos y figuras de seres y casas que se ladeaban desapareciendo en una lejanía sucia.

Allí, con toda seguridad, estaba yo atrapado en la ficción, cediendo minuto a minuto ante ella como solo les puede ocurrir a seres que padecen graves dificultades económicas; tanto que la ilusión los somete al vaivén de sus mareas con relativa facilidad. Tenía enfrente al más grande poeta ruso contemporáneo, quien extendía su mano ambigua pero real en señal inequívoca de amistad. O tal vez, aquel individuo era algo como un caracol que se ocultaba sinuoso en la espiral de la concha de otro parecido a él.

I'm back from an encounter with the antipodes. I mean that in recent years I've been preoccupied with the possibility of tying together poetically two extremes. In the end, I always come up with the desired knot, the contact with "unity" (which is the knot) where ideas and images close in on themselves. I'm speaking about a word game that links both creatures and situations of different kinds. But enough of detours and grassy paths; it has to be told at once, here and now. The fact is that, while I was living at the top of the Ojo de Agua barrio, in a zone called Monterrey, I happened to be on a vacant site that served as a parking lot, though also as a plaza for drinking beer, and at that place I met a tall, very melancholy man who said he was called: Osip Mandelshtam.

In a Caracas barrio, in a slum, in a possible ghetto, it's not easy to contradict someone without having to fear a physical or verbal brawl. I looked at him warily and asked directly:

—*Are you the famous Russian poet Osip Mandelshtam?*

To which he answered, unemphatically and as if it was generally known:

—*As you say, señor, at your service.*

The true face of Mandelshtam, that I knew from many photos, his wide face with grayish, close-together eyes and delicately straight lips: that face dissolved nostalgically onto another with graying hair that had a faint scar on its mouth like the mark of an operation for a harelip performed perhaps in early childhood. This scene occurred one afternoon in a cemetery of symmetrically parked automobiles whose windshields reflected shapelessly flashes and figures of people and houses that tilted as they disappeared into a dirty distance.

There, obviously, I was trapped in fiction, giving in to it minute by minute as can happen only to people who suffer serious financial difficulties, so that illusion subjects them to the fluctuations of its tides with relative ease. I had before me the greatest contemporary Russian poet, who was holding out his

Una amiga llamada Wales me contó que, en una exposición dedicada a la música caribeña, le presentaron a un personaje que juraba ser, a pie juntillas, el famoso pianista cubano Tony Valdez. Decía Wales:

—Te juro que llevaba puesto el mismo chaleco gris de rayas negras, con aquellos lentes redondos de pasta blanca y, para colmo, daba noticia y razón de todo lo concerniente al afamado músico.

Así que me dije: por qué este señor no podría querer llamarse y ser el desterrado poeta que recitaba mirando al cielo colocándose la mano derecha tras la nuca. Era posible, y yo debía abstenerme de ponerlo en duda a riesgo de pronunciar un llamado a las furias que deambulaban por los callejones del barrio con violenta firmeza.

Aquellos días que pasé viviendo en el sector Monterrey arrendé un par de cuartos dispuestos a los extremos de un pequeño patio encementado, una suerte de breve terraza desde donde avistar la extensión de Ojo de Agua: miraba sus barracas de ladrillos rojos y sus escaleras empinadas, interrumpidas cada tanto por estrechas veredas horizontales. Todas las paredes de las casas asomaban a una cierta elevación dos ventanucos iguales a los ojos amenazantes de un niño capaz de todo; o también se parecían a los hoyos que en la greda de la cuesta del cerro hacían las golondrinas y los vencejos. Al contemplar el barrio resultaba fácil asociarlo con la imagen de un ghetto. Un mundo delimitado, hecho a la medida de los que traían en su cuerpo alguna marca indeleble.

Cierta noche soñé con un grupo de mujeres maduras, espectralmente blancas, que pasaron corriendo por un bosque de abedules, seguidas muy de cerca por soldados que las acribillaban con potentes fusiles AK-47. Pero volvamos a Mandelshtam, que en la Rusia del dictador Iósif Vissariónovich Stalin fue lector apasionado de la Divina Comedia. En el ghetto de Ojo de Agua vivía una considerable colonia de italianos, dueños de abastos y algunos locales donde reparaban bicicletas. Claro que estos italianos no leían al Dante. Ellos pasaban las horas enterándose de su lejano país en un diario de pocas páginas llamado La Voce d' Italia. Pero me gustaría agregar, por simple añadidura, que los italianos de Ojo de Agua conformaban un grupo cerrado que provenía de un tronco familiar común, con un rasgo muy particular, mejor sería decir un trauma esencial, que los unió desplazando su antiguo apellido y creando uno nuevo más acorde con el dolor que pudo infligirles la experiencia de la Primera Guerra Mundial.

Básicamente, hablo de dos hermanos que abandonaron las riberas del Lago di Garda (al norte de Italia) a bordo de un vapor de escasa tripulación, el St. Petersburg, bajo el mando del capitán Augustus Libenberg. Luego de una accidentada travesía por el mar Adriático y el Mediterráneo, al llegar al Atlántico la caldera principal del barco se dañó en pleno océano y una corriente tomó el control de la nave. El capitán Libenberg, con un dejo de irónica amargura y aquellas erres arrastradas sobre cubierta, les aclaró a todos:

—Nada que hacer, nada que hacer. El mar es una desgracia. (Encerrándose luego en su camarote).

Pasaron dos semanas y el planchón de ocho pies de calado continuó al garete hasta encallar en el puerto de La Guaira, en Venezuela. Desde esa costa de cocoteros encumbrados y helechos arborescentes se fueron directo al ghetto de Ojo de Agua, donde decidieron, en memoria de lo ocurrido, asumir el apellido «Guerra». El abuelo se llamaría: Guido

ambiguous but real hand as an unmistakable sign of friendship. Or, perhaps, that individual was something like a snail hiding sinuously in the spiral of a shell of another similar to it.

A friend called Wales told me that, at an exhibition on Caribbean music, she was introduced to a character who swore blind that he was the famous Cuban pianist Tony Valdez. Wales said:

—*I swear to you that he was wearing the same gray vest with black stripes, with those round glasses with white plastic frames, and to top it off he could tell you all there is to know about the famous musician.*

So, I said to myself: Why should this gentleman not want to call himself and be the exiled poet who recited looking up at the sky and putting his right hand behind his neck. It was possible, and I must abstain from casting doubt on it because my words would risk being a summons to the furies that roamed the alleys of the barrio with violent determination.

Those days I lived in Monterrey, I rented a couple of rooms at the end of a small concrete yard, a sort of short terrace from which to view the expanse of Ojo de Agua, overlooking its red brick shacks and its steep stairways, interrupted at intervals by narrow horizontal alleys. All the house walls sported at the same height two makeshift windows like the threatening eyes of a child who would stop at nothing; or they were also like the holes that the swallows and swifts made in the clay of the hillside. Observing the barrio, it was easy to associate it with the idea of a ghetto. A demarcated world, made to the measure of people who bore on their bodies some indelible brand.

One night I dreamed of a group of mature women, ghostly white, who were running through a birch wood, followed closely by soldiers who were firing at them with powerful AK-47 rifles. But let's get back to Mandelstam, who in the Russia of the dictator Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin was a passionate reader of the *Divine Comedy*. In the Ojo de Agua ghetto, a sizeable colony of Italians was living, owners of grocery stores and some bicycle repair shops. Of course, these Italians did not read Dante. They spent their time looking for information about their distant country in a newspaper of a few pages called *La Voce d'Italia*. But I would like to add, just by the way, that the Italians of Ojo de Agua formed a close-knit group that descended from a common family stem, with a very particular characteristic, or better a fundamental trauma, which united them, making them discard their former surname and create a new one more in accordance with the pain that the experience of the First World War had inflicted on them.

Basically, I am speaking about two brothers who left the shores of Lake Garda (in Northern Italy) on board a steamship with a meager crew, the *St. Petersburg*, under the command of Captain Augustus Libenberg. After a rough crossing of the Adriatic and Mediterranean Seas, when they reached the Atlantic the ship's main boiler broke down in mid ocean and a current seized control of it. Captain Libenberg, with a touch of ironic bitterness and dragging his *r*'s on the deck, made it clear to everyone: