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EAST & WEST

On Nadezhda Mandelstam

A Voice in the Silence

By Milovan Djilas

IT IS A LONG-STANDING but still current belief that out of the totality of suffering under totalitarian régimes there will eventually emerge new forms of art, a new conscious understanding of mankind, of society and power, of classes and nations, of ideas and personalities. In actual fact, more often than not it is Literature which is under consideration, viewed as a synthetic expression both of reflective thought and of sensibility. Nevertheless, no literary (or other) works of an epoch-making nature have yet actually appeared, despite the fact that there is no lack of documentation and analysis. The artists and thinkers of Eastern Europe (including, of course, the Soviet Union) are nowadays neither shut off nor threatened to such an extent as to make it impossible for them to express themselves, albeit with a certain risk and, where necessary, outside their own native lands.

It would seem that Art and Philosophy need only a minimum of their "own" native soil, their "own" environment; they also, apparently, emerge as a result of individual and quite unforeseeable impulses. But what meaning today, in a world which is rapidly becoming no more than a village, can be attached to "own" native soil and "own" environment? George Orwell was English and wrote long before Solzhenitsyn. Undoubtedly totalitarian régimes are brought into being by the action of definite forces and certain national and other conditions, but not outside or completely contrary to the rest of the world. Tyranny has always existed, but totalitarianism is a world-wide modern phenomenon which is made possible only by complex and irresistible inner forces and tensions.

Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (published in the Soviet Union in 1962) is incontestably almost the only succinct account of the lower depths reached in the methodical reduction of human beings to the status of domestic animals in Stalin's camps. But with this work the publication inside the Soviet Union of material dealing with the themes of the Purges and the Camps came to a full stop. Since that time in the West there have appeared a large number of literary works and even more first-hand accounts; and very recently, the two volumes of the memoirs of Nadezhda Mandelstam[1] (the wife of Osip Mandelstam, the talented and significant poet, who died in a camp in 1938) have been published in Russian. The crumbling edifice of totalitarianism has long since been unable to restrain such bold spirits, even less to hold back life itself.

It is not enough to say that these books by Nadezhda Mandelstam are among the most shattering first-hand accounts ever written of suffering and violence. Above all else, the books make up a work both of complex structure and of exceptional poetic and intellectual force.

THE FIRST BOOK in the main keeps to the chronology of the persecution and suffering of Nadezhda's husband during the 1930s, whereas the second portrays individual events which were of significance to his life and creative writing, from the Revolution almost up to the present day. But the books are very similar, both in the manner of their exposition and in the themes which they present. They give a selective, analytical account of events and situations, and a spiritual and literary sketch of post-Revolutionary Russia. They are the outcry of an unhappy, exceptionally intelligent and highly educated woman. They document the black depths of immeasurable and unjustifiable violence, and echoes of torments and patient suffering beyond the comprehension of reason and which only the human species is capable of inflicting. Every cell, every atom of Nadezhda Mandelstam's being is saturated with misery and grief. But this did not poison or darken her mind but rather illuminated it; it

[1] The first volume, *Recollections* (*Vospominanija*), was published by the Chekhov Publishing Corporation (New York, 1970), and the second, *The Second Book* (*Vtoraya kniga*), by the YMCA Press (Paris, 1972). In the English version, the first book, translated by Max Hayward, is called *Hope Against Hope* (Harvill Press, London; Atheneum, New York; 1970), and the second, which has not yet appeared, *Hope Abandoned*. Quotations from both are reproduced here by kind permission of Mr Hayward and Harvill Press.

calmed her anger and aroused her capacity for thought. The time of saints and martyrs is not past. One can only hope that it will not have to last until there are no more human beings.

NADEZHDA MANDELSTAM's books are only indirectly about the camps. They tell of—they think of—life "in freedom." But that life is made up of oppression and privation in many forms, and especially of uncertainty, which is even more terrible than the living death of the camps. Still, Nadezhda suffered too much and is too intelligent not to understand that "Stalinism" was not an episode or an "error", but a breakthrough and a transformation of a certain type of society.

These are not books of the defeated—they are books of the uncompromised, of the uncompromising, those who never accepted violence and unanimity of thought. For this reason alone they became "superfluous."

The Mandelstams were not against the Revolution: but it neither intoxicated nor corrupted them. I believe they were well disposed towards it, if only as a kind of cutting away of decayed flesh. In the second book Nadezhda recalls the mass homage at Lenin's lying-in-state as the last flicker of a people's revolution. The Mandelstams undoubtedly could not come to terms with post-Revolutionary bureaucratic and dogmatic restrictions. They were the kind of intellectuals and artists who cannot submit to any régime for the simple reason that their critical attitude and apartness serve as a defence for their visions and are the prerequisite of their creative abilities. Most of the romantic poets were like this—as are many contemporary thinkers, Bertrand Russell, Albert Camus, Leszek Kolakowski, Jean-Paul Sartre. But whereas these spirits might well be intransigent towards any régime, it is only totalitarian régimes which the Mandelstams, shut off within their own visions and artistic innovations, cannot endure, since such régimes combine an "infallible" scientific dogma with tyrannical power. Nadezhda's narrative reveals how closely linked to the Stalinist establishment of terroristic total power was the development and intensification of her own and Osip's mute and total suffering. There is perhaps no tragedy here, for tragedy must contain a measure of reason and sense. But personal misfortune is depicted and symbolised by misfortune on a national scale.

There is none of the helplessness of individuals subjected to terror, or the insane delight in terror and the panic-stricken bewilderment when confronted with it. And just as "Stalinism" could not have arisen anywhere but in post-Revolutionary Russia, the Mandelstams would not have suffered anywhere but in Stalin's realm, in those lands subjected to Stalin's apparatus.

YET IN NADEZHDA'S ACCOUNT this suffering acquires another remarkable characteristic. It becomes at the same time a love poem, a "poem" as persistent as the realities of life in countries of political persecution, but which no one until now had composed in such a succinct way, or incorporated with such spontaneity into the whole picture of political and cultural events. Nadezhda shared with her husband the loneliness of "exile", right up to the time he was taken away to prison and concentration camp. She had also accompanied him earlier, during his European wanderings and journeys. She has continued to accompany him after his death, even more faithfully and consistently.

HERE WAS a poet of Jewish origin who wrote in Russian, a language which he enriched with deepened meanings and with elegant and subtle associations. Nadezhda—helped and sustained by that fearless and celebrated poet, Anna Akhmatova—hid Osip's manuscripts and copied, memorised, and then reproduced his texts. She took it upon herself as her sacred duty to save the poet's work and, with his work, his name; and she watched and worked to this end for more than twenty years. She devoted all her mature years to this task. This is what she lived for. During the nights filled with fear she would be interrupted by the noise of a car—would it stop in her street or pass on?—or by the expectation of a ring at the door of her flat.

The "superfluous", the liquidated poet is not published in the Soviet Union, even today. But Osip's works have nevertheless appeared recently in the West. Nadezhda has been set free from the burden of her life's vow, and with it from the fear for her own fate. Only then was she able to dedicate herself to her own literary work. In her youth she had studied painting, but then she was obliged to take up something "more practical" and she took a doctorate in English language, and spent a good deal of time as a teacher. But she had another profession—the role of a camp wife. This is what makes up the Dante-like tragedy of her poem. She remained faithful to her unfinished life with Osip, the kind of life between passionate, intelligent and unconforming people which creates itself from ecstasies and quarrels, from petty betrayals and naïve intrigues, from mad creeds and inspired flashes of genius.

Fearing that they might throw her into a camp and, possibly, set Osip free, she wrote a letter on 22 October 1938 and kept it for him:

> Osia, my beloved, faraway sweetheart!
>
> I have no words, my darling, to write this letter which you may never read, perhaps. I am writing it into empty space. Perhaps you will come back and not find me here. Then this will be all you have left to remember me by.
>
> Osia, what a joy it was living together like children—all our squabbles and arguments, the games we played, and our love. Now I do not even look at the sky. If I see a cloud, who can I show it to?
>
> Remember the way we brought back provisions to make our poor feasts in all the places where we have pitched our tent like nomads? Remember the good taste of bread when we got it by a miracle and ate it together? And our last winter in Voronezh. Our happy poverty, and the poetry you wrote. I remember the time we were coming back once from the baths, when we bought some eggs or sausage, and a cart went by loaded with hay. It was still cold and I was freezing in my short jacket (but nothing like what we must suffer now: I know how cold you are). That day comes back to me now. I understand so clearly, and ache from the pain of it, that those winter days with all their troubles were the greatest and last happiness to be granted us in life.
>
> My every thought is about you. My every tear and every smile is for you. I bless every day and every hour of our bitter life together, my sweetheart, my companion, my blind guide in life.
>
> Like two blind puppies we were, nuzzling each other and feeling so good together. And how fevered your poor head was, and how madly we frittered away the days of our life. What joy it was, and how we always knew what joy it was.
>
> Life can last so long. How hard and long for each of us to die alone. Can this fate be for us who are inseparable? Puppies and children, did we deserve this? Did you deserve this, my angel? Everything goes on as before. I know nothing. Yet I know everything—each day and hour of your life are plain and clear to me as in a delirium.
>
> You came to me every night in my sleep, and I kept asking what had happened, but you did not reply.
>
> In my last dream I was buying food for you in a filthy hotel restaurant. The people with me were total strangers. When I had bought it, I realised I did not know where to take it, because I do not know where you are.
>
> When I woke up, I said to Shura: "Osia is dead." I do not know whether you are still alive, but from the time of that dream, I have lost track of you. I do not know where you are. Will you hear me? Do you know how much I love you? I could never tell you how much I love you. I cannot tell you even now. I speak only to you, only to you. You are with me always, and I who was such a wild and angry one

and never learned to weep simple tears—now I weep and weep and weep.
It's me: Nadia. Where are you?
Farewell.
Nadia.[2]

IN THE CAMP Osip Mandelstam was finished off by cold, hunger and exhaustion. The letter remained with Nadya who kept it and lived by it. And she donated it to our universal treasury—for those who love, and those who believe, and those who fight for legality and liberty.

BUT THIS INTIMATE THEME of Nadezhda's memoirs is only at first sight the most moving of all. No less moving, and certainly more profound, are her observations concerning the régime under which she had to love and live, and about the people with whom she shared a destiny.

It is a life and a society to all intents and purposes ordered, even convinced that it is ordered, by logical "scientific" methods, but in fact deprived of all rationality and sincerity. It is an absolute truth and a scientific method which have been transformed, once in power, into a kind of total violent madness. The life and ideas of Nadezhda Mandelstam—incidentally not unlike, to a large extent, my own—experienced and progressed through conditions in which "consciousness was turned inside out." That is to say, ideology was transformed into an inverted world or rather into an asocial community and an asocial personality.

> Our encounter with the irrational forces that so inescapably and horrifyingly ruled over us radically affected our minds. Many of us had accepted the inevitability—and some the expediency—of what was going on around us. All of us were seized by the feeling that there was no turning back—a feeling dictated by our experience of the past, our forebodings about the future and our hypnotic trance in the present. I maintain that all of us—particularly if we lived in the cities—were in a state close to a hypnotic trance. We had really been persuaded that we had entered a new era, and that we had no choice but to submit to historical inevitability, which in any case was only another name for the dreams of all those who had ever fought for human happiness. Propaganda for historical determinism had deprived us of our will and the power to make our own judgments. We laughed in the faces of the doubters, and ourselves furthered the work of the daily press by repeating its sacramental phrases, by spreading rumours about each new round of arrests ("that's what passive resistance leads to!") and finding excuses for the existing state of affairs. The usual line was to denounce history as such: it had always been the same, mankind had never known anything but violence and tyranny. . . .[3]

[2] *Vtoraya kniga* (*Hope Abandoned*), pp. 694-695.
[3] *Hope Against Hope* (*Vospominaniya*), p. 44.

This is not the world which Kafka discovered or in which he firmly believed, but a world which has become Kafka-esque. It is a world in which one's own times were considered free and fortunate if the presentation of petitions or complaints was not regarded as a criminal offence. It is a world in which even Boris Pasternak's wife was constrained to state as a mother: "Most of all my children love Stalin—and after that me. . . ."

It is a world in which denunciation became something perfectly understandable, if not even inevitable, as a natural part of life.

> We lived in a world where people were always being "hauled in" and asked for information about our thoughts and feelings . . . only Zoshchenko refused . . . some suspected that everybody they met was an informer, others that they might be taken for one. . . . We all became slightly unbalanced mentally—not exactly ill, but not normal either. . . .[4]

It was a régime under which poets would voluntarily stay all night with their colleagues to ensure that no "enemy poem" could be destroyed in the interval between the police at the door-bell and the raid. There, to paraphrase Nadezhda, many still uncounted millions were deprived not only of life but even of death. They died without names and without graves, numbed and senseless from what they had endured, or destroyed as being of no progressive social value.

NADEZHDA MANDELSTAM is not writing mere history or sociological analysis, but both one and the other, as can be seen even in her laceratingly poetic meditations. Nadezhda's life followed its course in accordance with the development of Soviet society, from the Revolution through Stalinism to Brezhnev. The ancient Greeks identified wisdom with suffering: here suffering becomes wisdom. From the disasters of Nadezhda's life and ordeals, her mind was enriched and a new consciousness, a new perception of the world came to be formed.

But Nadezhda Mandelstam knows, more keenly and more profoundly than those who persecuted her (and than those who now menace her), that it was not everyone, not even the majority who suffered as she and Osip did. The Russian tragedy of Stalinist violence is a result of the fact that there were many who were on the side of illegality and evil, and the majority—almost everyone—submitted and were silent.

> "Unanimity" came about not as a consequence of bribery or intimidation. Terror works only when people are impressed by the very idea of it; bribes can only be placed in outstretched palms and unanimity, by the same token, is only possible when people are ready to abandon independence of thought in order to enjoy the feeling of being surrounded by the like-minded.[5]

Much the same thing can be said for Russian, for Soviet literature. It has earned its unenviable role by helping illegality, in one way or another, over a period of several decades, and by forcing the most creative writers right up to the present day to become internal émigrés. It is just because this régime was not (and has not even today become) the régime of a minority that it deceived and brought about the downfall of the majority itself. By understanding this, Nadezhda was able to elevate her own and Osip's suffering to the level of an all-Russian, and perhaps even a universal, tragedy.

THIS FEARSOME RÉGIME of a deluded, erring, and cowed majority did not come about by chance nor did it remain static. From revolutionary enthusiasm it moved to total violence and has now reached the stage of bureaucratic conservatism, that of an ossified reaction. But the life of the individual—Nadezhda's life—remains the same and unaltered. The historical phases and changes of the Soviet régime are the alternations of nightmares and phantoms to Nadezhda's innocence and insight. Nadezhda does not reject change, especially "change for the better." But she knows, as she remarks with an anxious detachment, that the essence has not changed and is not soon going to become something different. The régime as a whole, unreal in its derangement and real in its force and deception, is continuously reflected in Nadezhda's suffering meditations. There will not be, at least for the time being in

[4] *Hope Against Hope*, pp. 86-88.
[5] *Vtoraya kniga* (*Hope Abandoned*), p. 450.

Russia, very many who will find joy or comfort in Nadezhda's account. Truthful about herself and Osip, she had no reason to be servile or accommodating to others: in her words speak an epoch and the people of an epoch. No doubt many will reject the truth of one or another detail. I, too, have tried; and I did not overlook that people are happiest to forget, and that they can easily justify sins against their beliefs, against their conscience. But those who attack Nadezhda Mandelstam should know that she has already forgiven them all. Capable of so much, she is not capable of forgetting or of being silent about the truth: and this is not only for the sake of those who have been or who are, but for those who are still to come and who have to know.

But a first-hand account must be a source-book of contemporaries: Nadezhda's book is a poetic eulogy of a small number of Russians, a few famous individuals who overcame fear and life. The poet Anna Akhmatova, with all her weaknesses and fantasies, grows into a heroic, wise figure of Russia and of modern history. Here, too, is Boris Pasternak with his enthusiasms and eccentricities, his talent and his piety. And Bukharin, right up to the time when he himself was threatened. . . . But alas, such people can be counted on one's fingers.

Nadezhda's memories are overshadowed by an endless number of villains, from paid informers to murderers, even unto the highest spheres of power and intellect. Who are they? Representatives of the masses, of the collective society? Mere servile trimmers of a totalitarian ideology? Violent characters seeking to identify themselves with Nation and Class?

THE MASS OR COLLECTIVE MAN is a composite, faceless being. Such a creature is possible only where society has been destroyed and the oppressed individual is cut off from his community. "Collective Man" is an ideological fiction, in actual fact a being deprived of both collectivity and individuality. For only the individual, only subjective, individual man can be collective: he is this by his very belonging to nation and class. But even though today, like it or not, the significance of the individual and his classic individuality must be stressed, this should not lead to the conclusion that a return should be made to "individualism" as a philosophy; only that individuality must be guarded and maintained if there is to be any kind of national progress and social stability. For it is under totalitarian, ideological rule, which destroys society by making it "conflictless" and "perfect", and reduces man to the level of a domestic animal by regarding him as the "highest form" of ape, treating him as a means to its "ideal" end, that class and national factors have continued to smoulder and to manifest themselves. The schismatics persist, that "mysterious tribe which survives despite all the laws of history and logic. . . ."[6]

NADEZHDA MANDELSTAM'S WORK is made more acute by its unerring and desperate irony, that irony which is the characteristic refinement of her Hebraic tradition but which also shows the inventiveness of an agile mind. In this spirit I understand her identification of the Soviet régime with the "Thousand-year Tsardom". But I would wish to add this: who can know how long such a régime can last? One thing seems to me to be certain: Nadezhda Mandelstam's book is perhaps the most tragic book of our time and will long outlive the millennial rulers—possibly because it is the work of a poet-thinker, and not of an ideologue or a politician. This kingdom too will pass. Its imperial power will give way in historical time, but its terror should not be forgotten. It is this act of remembrance that Nadezhda Mandelstam is striving for:

> People were then being killed so casually and on such a scale that nobody had time for tears or words of sympathy. From the beginning of the thirties, it became customary to vilify those who perished, so there was no longer any question of shedding a tear for them.[7]

Nadezhda Mandelstam's work is an act of reason and truth, and therefore in its way an act of judgment, not a punitive one but punishing for all that. Clearly it was just those people who were the most concerned about the fate of the régime who brought it to its final absurd consequences. The comparison of the Russian with the French Revolution is, in my view, untenable; the first was a process of organic West European development and the second a matter of an ancient retardation. Difficult though it may be, it is necessary to get away from the idea of two great turning-points, the 18th of Thermidor and the XXth Congress, or that two classically revolutionary dramas were determined by the different doings of the Robespierres and the Stalins.

[6] *Vtoraya kniga*, p. 568.
[7] *Vtoraya kniga*, p. 103.

Can a Nadezhda Mandelstam ever emerge as a victor? Would not indeed a victory for her be a kind of defeat, a most terrible punishment? "I only desire to remain a human being at the moment of ultimate suffering."[8] She was just that, and it is for this that Russia and the world will remember her.

T. S. ELIOT observes somewhere that the emergence of a great writer disturbs the existing order of all writers before him. I would add that every appearance of a truly artistic work poses anew the question: what is art? So it is with Nadezhda Mandelstam's work.

But my admiration for both the person and the literary record would be in shadow and remain only half stated if I did not also point out certain differences; and it is not even of importance whether they are significant divergences in our points of view. But surely it is, above all, just that observance and respect of differences which is vital to the development of new thought and of other relationships, of a new moral sensibility, which Nadezhda and I, I have no fear or shame in stating, already share.

Firstly, God and universal Christian love. I do not believe in either, but not because I would consider the first transitory or prejudiced, and would reject the second. I am a believer, but not in any traditional or indeed in any form of religious, supra-human, extra-cosmic forces. But I believe. Yet is there any sense in expressing, in formulating the belief, if it is not to be the beginning of some new proselytising or "utopianising" faith? I believe in conscience and ideas, both capable of improving or at least of changing unendurable relationships. What gives us a guarantee that any new god would not, taken in conjunction with the known and accepted divinities and faiths, arouse new and cruel divisions among people? It may be good and necessary for church and state to be in accord; but for one's faith, for people, it is surely better if it is a personal question of individuals and their various religious communities. At least for me this is confirmed by the religious wars of the past and the demented frenzy of contemporary pseudo-religious ideologies. Nadezhda Mandelstam bore witness to the power and beauty of heresy, and I take note of that. I too belong to the camp of the heretics, at least with regard to the faithful of a "scientific" ideological orthodoxy. But at the same time Nadezhda Mandelstam emphasises Christianity because she is evidently inspired by the spirit of a universal Christian love. Universal love, yes!—but why should it be Christian? Is Buddhist or Islamic love worthless and non-universal? Should only that which is indisputable in one single—and always one's own—religion be acceptable? Christian love, in so far as it applies to revelation and universality, barely extended beyond the area of the Roman Empire and, later, of European civilisation. Even in these areas it was not everywhere interpreted in the same way because it cannot be understood or maintained outside the institutions of the various divided churches. The wise and tragic Nadezhda Mandelstam observes the prophetic and universal force of Dostoevsky, without forgiving him nevertheless his anti-Catholicism. This is where the differences between us begin, less because Dostoevsky's concept of the World and of Man is religious and old-fashioned, than because his "universality" is essentially Russian. The world has suffered more than enough (and many, in Russia most of all, are still suffering) because of "Marxist-Leninist" universality, im-

[8] *Vtoraya kniga*, p. 103.

planted in Russia and bolstered up by "Russian" forces. It is to be feared that some new religious "universal love" could become a new way of spreading the power and influence of a most dangerous (and not yet disintegrating) empire. For what could it do with men who want a different universal, or even a religion of their own, or their own idea of love? A common humane language and mutuality can only be created today outside absolute values.

FOR MYSELF, I do not consider that mankind, particularly its "Western" breed (to which in a broad sense Russia also belongs) is becoming dehumanised or is being threatened with self-destruction by an atomic war or by the fatal pollution of the environment. What is humanism or "humanisation", if under these headings is meant any kind of groupings of values outside the extension of the human condition to which belongs, in the first instance (just because it is Man who is under scrutiny), the possibility of freedom? Mankind, "Eastern" and "Western", has never been human in the sense of a deep coincidence of religious and philosophical ideals. Such ideals moved people and will move them now; but can their possible, materialised achievements ever coincide with the ideal?

So it will remain, so it must be, otherwise civilised creativity would be extinguished and the human race die out. Has the world not always been "bad" for those who desired to explain it or change it? Then let it remain so in order that mankind through its most talented and fearless spirits be conscious of realities and try to change them. Mankind, I am convinced, is not capable of destroying itself. It did not create itself and cannot will its end. I am not saying that all the hydrogen bombs do not have the power of vast annihilation. Is anyone sufficiently mad to make use of them? Will anyone ever make use of such power? This, perhaps, is already a kind of faith. Even so, it is my persuasion, for I do not regard man as god-like. I simply consider that we have to turn towards man (man with a small "m"), that is, to real individual persons and not to symbols and abstractions, not to a God-man or a Man-god. It almost seems to me sufficient if we oppose ourselves—if we are no longer capable of rendering them powerless—to those who in the name of certain ideal aims would resort to weapons of mass annihilation.

FINALLY, greetings and congratulations to Nadezhda Mandelstam. Dear Nadezhda, no one, at least to my knowledge, has ever spoken so authentically and profoundly about human fear as you have. I can only conclude that you have overcome fear. As in all martyrs, in you has been found something greater, perhaps even more worthy than life. Evidently the only thing that still leaves you in fear and trembling is the hypodermic needle, lest by means of some foul drug they should poison your will and force you to recant and retract and deny yourself. That, too, is just what I was afraid of in prison: and, like you, of that alone. But no. They do not resort to that any more, not because they themselves have changed but because they know that the Régime —what a strange word for the most total evil and a most elevated ideal!—has not confirmed itself as perfect, not even in the eradication of "alien" ideas and "superfluous" social and ethnic groups. Truth is indestructible and has again broken through the totalitarian darkness. It is your work, your books which protect you; they cannot be retracted or denied; it is already the whole world for you. You have fulfilled your duty towards Osip, Russia, and mankind; and above all, to yourself.

Going home

(for Douglas Dunn)

Why we died
Remains a mystery
Though without moral content.

The recipes, rhyming slang
And archaic ailments
Of a foreclosed species—

Only a misleading fraction
Will survive on file
To show we could crack a smile.

Only an unrepresentative sample
Will persist on tape
To show what we meant by hope.

Extraordinary people
We were in our time, how we
Lived in our time

As if blindfold
Or not wholly serious,
Inventing names for things

To propitiate silence.
It is silence we hug now
In the indigestible

Dawn mist which clings
All afternoon
To the south shore of the Humber;

For ours is the afterlife
Of the unjudgeable,
Of the desolate and free

Who come over
Twice daily from Hull
Disguised as shift-workers

And vanish for ever
With a whisper of soles
Under a cindery sky—

The sort of sky
That broke the hearts
Of the foundered legionaries.

Like them we are
Spirits here
With our lunch-boxes and

Papers of manumission,
Our speechless debarkations
Without zest or issue.

A pale light wanes
At the pierhead
As if to guide us home

To the blank Elysium
Predicated on our
Eschewal of metaphysics,

A sunken barge rots
In the mud beach
As if finally to discredit

A residual poetry of
Leavetaking and homecoming,
Of work and sentiment;

For this is the last
Homecoming, the end
Of the rainbow.

And the pubs are shut.
There are no
Buses till morning.

Derek Mahon