

ASHES ON THE EARTH: SELECTED WORKS OF JOSEF STALIN

*Only in Russia is poetry respected; it gets people killed.
Is there anywhere else where poetry is so common a
motive for murder?*

—Osip Mandelstam

BIOGRAPHY

In his early poems Stalin makes no effort to conceal his emotions, and he shows clearly that he was capable of genuine religious feeling and possessed a romantic attachment to the oppressed, following a centuries-old poetic tradition. Already there is evidence of a small but real poetic talent.

—Robert Payne, *The Rise and Fall of Stalin*

Before he became
arguably the most expert
mass-murderer of an era noted for its butchery
Josef Djugashvili Stalin of Soviet Georgia
was a promising poet.

A romantic by temperament
he magnified the names
of spirited forebears,
skies of the homeland
and resolute martyrs
whose banners read fervently
freedom—

In some poems one can feel
the harsh grandeur of the Caucasus,
Georgian slopes and orchards
are evoked with the power
of dedicated, sensitive men
and women, sheets in hand

who felt the music pulse in marrow
the wind that blew through pores
the tears of the world, the “light
in lovers’ eyes”—

years later he strangled his wife
and slew twenty million others

1. TO THE MOON

Move on, inexhaustible one—
Never bowing your round, scarved head,
Scatter the misty clouds,
Great is the providence of the Almighty.
Gaze gently upon the busy world
That lies outspread beneath you;
Sing a hymn to the peak where Prometheus died
Still rising like a steeple through the air.
Know well that those who once fell
Like ashes on the earth, who long ago
Succumbed to the oppressors
Will rise again and soar, winged with hope,
Above the sacred mountain.
And as in bygone days
You glowed among the clouds,
Let your rays now play in splendour
Over the brilliant sky.
I shall tear like paper my silver blouse
And bare my breast to the moon
And with outstretched hands
Praise her who suckles the world with light.

for my mother, August 1895

(Freely adapted from Josef Stalin's second published poem, which appeared in the liberal-progressive Georgian literary periodical Iveria, October 1895)

2. ELEGY

Father, you will be for me always
The shadow of the onion spire chasing me home
Through dust at sundown up the Sobarnaya.
You will be for me always
The great drinker, great brawler whom men
Of our street defame since his departure
Without warning to a shallow grave. Father
You will be for me always
The cruel rhetorician, the bell-voiced actor
Who made a plank table his pulpit, a fist his scripture,
A wife and child his battered congregation.

You will be for me always

The onion spire that hung at your thighs
When you bathed, the virile aroma
Of your breath and body,
Mortal as incense, foreign as the ikons
That made your room a forbidden chamber
Steeped in mysterious powers. Father
You will be for me always
Those black brows like a hawk's wings arching
Avid of prey, you will be for me beatings
We must have deserved
Though you would not give us a reason, father,
You will be these things though you have left, you will stay
My teacher, my shadow, you
Drunk as a cobbler, boot-nails and brandy,
Hammer at the throat, you deity, Father,
I am nailed to the future
You will be for me always.

1896 for *Vissarion* (?-1890)

3. ON READING DARWIN

From the shore I watched a cargo of chickens
Spill from a barge into the river.
Trapped in their wooden cages they floated
Momentarily in the freezing currents, then mutant
With fear, attacked one another, turned
Into fighting cocks, quarrelling,
Screeching, bleeding as their barred
Coffins filled with water.

From the riverbank I saw the bargemen
Forfeiting profit for a moment's diversion
And laughing at the disappearing birds
I thought of hungry schools
Of fish scuttling through the bars
Like the scoured ribs of drowned sailors
And white wings beating an idle descent
Through an evolving darkness.
From the riverbank I saw their feathers
Form alien words on the face of the waters;
At first I could not read them and I was afraid.

The seminary, 1896

4. EKATERINA

With her death the last shards of compassion in me
Are crushed. For too long I have squinted at the world
Through sheets of stained glass: the deep
Scarlet of sacrificial wounds, Christ's passion, the crimson
Fingers of a tyrant Father. I walk from the churchyard
For the last time. Will you walk with me? I promise
We will not look back. No moving shade
Of pane could temper death's spectrum, or alter
The cast of my recollections. All dead. I regret everything
But the future. Walk beside me for your own good.
I shall drive histories before me like a flock of lambs.

1905

*(By this alchemy the glass of introspection is changed
to the steel of pure activity. The lens and scope
become the iron barrel.*

*An intercession of many years,
civil war, victory, railroads and hydroelectric dams,
provinces burning in the nerves of Stalin.
Another marriage. A honeymoon.)*

5. 1921: AN ORDER TO THE RED ARMY NEAR ROSTOV

Call it the return of the prodigal son.
Call it anarchy, call it order. Why should I care
what you call it? Call it murder.
Yes, take this down, all of it. Call it
an order.

“Posterity expects one of two things
from its engineers: firmness coupled with regret
over savage necessity, or else
the remorseless will to urge all means
to their imperative endings. With no regret.

“People are thrilled by any stranger
unafraid of the power they fear. History
stalls without electricians. Rusts. I am
a conductor. I have gripped
live wires in my fist and felt currents
pulse in my fibres like blood.
I am steel, like the century.
I am the new epoch, rumbling like a tank
out of the future, towards you.

“Remember this: there is no law
but the law of steel, which is to say
all survivors learn to refine
the crude iron that blood contains
into armour, alloyed
with every element of cruelty
and tempered by beatings, injury and fear,
forged in the primal mould with crosses, bayonets
and machine-guns. There is no other law. These implements
have a half-life of centuries.

“I am Stalin

and my order is this: General 0—— will lead elements of the Red Army stationed near Rostov south via Astrakhan over the passes into Georgia. All resistance will be crushed with indiscriminate fury. In Tiflis, Batum, Gori, anywhere it appears. Crushed.

“People? Do my people still live there?
No. All dead. Take this down.

“I have no people. I am Stalin.”

6. PHOTOGRAPH OF A GUTTED VILLAGE, GEORGIA

Should I be moved by this

Should I howl repentance and write poems
For the murdered comrade
And his wife, for the crippled child they would have beaten senseless
As soon as it could stumble

Should I dedicate psalms to the village mayor
Who slumped in the tavern every weeknight
Drunk, lecturing his witless electors,
Then tottering home to threaten his wife

Should I take up a collection
For the beggars who burned to death in the loft
Whose lives were a festering and a famishing
Who bred with the blind lust of dogs a line of stillborn sons

My comrade and his wife, the mayor, the village beggars,
Gone. This much, at least, I have corrected. You must understand
There are times these cratered vistas
Hold no nostalgia for me.
“Adorable Georgia”

Why should I be moved

Or weep and gather into my arms
The child squatting at the frame of the photograph, crooked
From beatings it took while still in the womb—

Perhaps it was the drunken mayor or his colleagues
Perhaps it was my murdered comrade
Whose brain at death hobbled back
Over its most brutal accomplishments, dreaming
Of blood as his eyes filled with it
Perhaps it was you my father, my father,
Why have you tormented me,
Twenty million times I have remembered

1922 (1949)

7. ELEGY IN EARLY WINTER

Nadezhda, it is snow they are calling for
from the Caspian Sea to Archangel.
And you are not here to see it.
With the rest of them you have disappeared
like the breath of old women at the doors
of cathedrals on Martyr's Day, like a widow's prayers
in winter, hoof prints on the tundra,
whatever will not be sustained through time
or language. Your flesh
has proven snow, and like the rest of them
you melt: white cells and singular crystals
trampled, muddied by the stiff boots
of soldiers in Red Square. The Army, the Kremlin,
exiles and internees, all insubstantial
as myrrh from a censer, yellowing leaves
in the annals of the dead. My own being
is all I can credit. I am real. I do not melt.
And these others—tonight, these cumulous others—
the wireless crying out for snow
from the Black Sea to Archangel.

1932

8. ON HITLER

The strong man sees his enemy not as an impediment but a catalyst. The enemy is a clandestine alloy without which metals can be made no stronger. Ultimately the difference between the strong and the weak inheres in this: that one man seeks and grapples with enemies, and evil, while the other avoids them for fear of vitiating the purity of his moral fibre. Which therefore rusts and crumbles away.

Evil is the philosopher's stone you must seek and seize and consume.

The weak are afraid of swallowing molten ore.

from a diary, Christmas 1943

9. TWO ELEGIES: A SON AND A COLLEAGUE

It will be said that now truly I have no people
because in Hitler I had found a kind of brother.
We held the same view of the dwarfs and freaks
who populate our earth with their squabbling litters,
for they are without ambition and therefore soulless.

We have played for loftier stakes
and he has lost, though in his turn he made moves
that alarmed me, challenged me, made me stronger,
and took a son, my last true flesh, forever hostage.

from a letter, May 1945

10. TESTAMENT

Regret is for the foolish and temperamental. Cowards
call priests to their bedsides and repent.

The sentimentalist writes poems.

This is not a poem.

Knowing death is near, I set down this testament,
this explanation—no apology
and no poem.

1. The killings will emerge, no doubt of it. However
ingeniously they are concealed, corpses will always find
a way to surface. In a dream I saw thousands of them
afloat on the Kura, pocked with sores and the bites of small
fish, bloated with allegation. No doubt of it. I know power
too well to pretend my memory, my statues, the cities named
for me are safe from desecration.

2. An old priest from the provinces said to me once, On
your deathbed you will remember God, and He you. The
dying always reach out to Him: free-thinkers, libertines,
ideological atheists, the most powerful politicians. Be careful
He has not turned from you.

I wish the priest were here now so that I could spit in his
beard and tell him I am not afraid. I did not leave the seminary
because there is no God. I left the seminary to surpass God. I
have surpassed God. I look forward to Our meeting should
He exist, for I could crush Him also if I desired.

3. I remember a young poet. He talked of reading my verses in an old literary journal he discovered in some attic. He wept as he spoke to me, kissed my hand; he said I was a great poet and would I return to my writing. Into my palm he pressed a thin sheaf of papers.

I slapped him across the face and told him to move out of my way. Poetry is for dreamers, I told him. Look around you. Was this city, were these buildings, this nation, built on dreams? Do I look to you like a dream? What has the moon to do with Russia?

I crumpled his papers and threw them onto the pavement.

A nation is being built around you, bridges, airports, highways and factories, and you are writing poems. Do you think your pen, a million such as yours, could have stopped Hitler? When even the pen of a great poet like M—— proved useless against real power? I can't stand to think that young men believe such things. Leave me, I can't bear to look at you.

And of course he hurried away—lucky to be alive, he must have thought.

Regret is for fools, perhaps, but this I regret in weak moments.

I picked up the crumpled papers and took them with me. They were variations on my first poems, beautifully written, much better, I think, than the originals.

As I crossed names off my lists and signed warrants I found myself weeping, like a boy, weeping for the first time in years. I put the poems away in a drawer but the sentiment would not leave me. I had to burn every page before I could return to work.

11. "O POET, THE GEORGIANS HAVE PREPARED FOR YOU
A MONUMENT IN HEAVEN"

At six I could swim in the River Kura. My friends shouted encouragement from the banks, though I knew they envied my strength and courage. The Kura's cold, glinting current attracted them but they were terrified of its darkness and depth. I was attracted but not afraid. I was at home in the current, glad for the impassable distance a few strokes could open between me and them. "Come back, Soso," they would begin to shout. "Come back to shore." And I would. On the banks we would wrestle until I threw them, one after another, into the mild shallows, where they thrashed and sputtered like apoplectics. Often I had to help them out.

Though I was the smallest of our group I was admired and feared and obeyed. Even then I sensed all around me an impotence, a cosmic docility that deferred to the rich, the strong, the determined. My family did not have money but I was strong for my age and determined.

At seven I caught smallpox. My face after the affliction was pocked and cratered as a battlefield, yet I found the disfigurement strangely appealing. As if I had been wounded gravely in some decisive conflict and was imperfectly healed; as if someone had pressed from my skin small tokens of an invaluable metal.

The poems came much later, though I was still a boy when I wrote them. They are perhaps a bit florid; I was filled at the time with a sentimental affection for Georgia and her past. I cherished the smells of the streets—from goat manure to *shashlik* and rosewater sweets—and the way Gori looked from the mountain under moonlight. I wanted to rip open my shirt and bare my breast to the moon. I wanted to stretch out my arms and worship the moon that showered the sleeping earth with light. *Know well*, I sang, *that those*

*Who long ago succumbed to the oppressors
Will rise again and soar, winged with hope,
Above the sacred mountain . . .*

At seventy it occurs to me (in facetious moments) that I have filled the sky thousands deep with soaring forms, there is hardly room for them to manoeuvre, they collide and plummet like massed cherubim in a religious tapestry. Though you would not want to call them oppressed; they were and are as vicious and debauched as the artists who prefigured them. I crushed them to the last man.

And don't bother pointing self-righteously at certain lines in my poetry; every author becomes a hypocrite with time. My actions have annulled all juvenile hypocrisy by overwhelming it with tides of actual blood. Ink is thin by contrast, the page pale.

A dictator is a poet of supreme accomplishments: his words are always heard and he can make them mean whatever he desires. He carves from the body of the world an order hewn in his own image. A god does no more.

1949

12. DEATHBED DREAM

but gori from the mountainhead was lovely in sunlight
an old man with a black walking stick
let me taste his tobacco he had fought at sebastopol
against the english and french the wars he sang me
were full of flags in blue wind and polished brass and white
horses how the river kura shimmered at noon I would swim there
and people on the banks were clapping
to see a child in the water they had meat and bread in woven hampers
winebottles glittered like ice and the hot sun
lit up a face among many it was nadezhda
years before I met her watching from the banks as I reached out
my hand I think she saw and toppled towards me into the river
disappearing quickly without a sign

CODA

Poet and dictator Josef Stalin was born in the town of Gori, Georgia, in December 1878.

His poems were written and published some twenty years before the Russian Revolution, when Georgia was a province of Czarist Russia. His name at the time was Josef Vissarionovich Djugashvili and he was a student in the Georgian Orthodox seminary in Tiflis. Years later, during his rise to power, he adopted the pseudonym “Stalin,” a variant on the Russian word for steel.

He married Ekaterina Svanidze in 1904. Ten months later she died of complications associated with the birth of a son, Yakov. Soon after her death, Stalin left his ancestral province to pursue political ambitions in the north.

In 1921, two years after marrying his second wife, Nadezhda Alliluieva, he ordered the Red Army to return to Georgia and crush all counter-revolutionary resistance “with indiscriminate fury.”

In 1932 Nadezhda Alliluieva died under mysterious circumstances. There is some reason to believe that Stalin might have murdered her after a quarrel. During the Second World War, Stalin’s son from his first marriage, Yakov, was taken prisoner by the Nazis and later perished in one of Hitler’s death camps.

The great Russian-Jewish poet Osip Mandelstam, first arrested in 1934 for writing a poem critical of Stalin’s policy of collectivization, died in one of Stalin’s own camps after his second arrest in 1938.

Stalin himself died in 1953.