

many modern novelists have chosen a shapely literary style over a hard reckoning with the world around them. They work mainly at conveying their own sensibilities or their characters' psychology. McCarthy longs for books by the likes of Dickens, Balzac, Tolstoy, and Flaubert. These were authors, she says, who, because they dealt with subjects that affected their readers' lives, were "looked up to as [spokesmen] on all sorts of matters: medicine, religion, capital punishment, the right relation between the sexes." McCarthy does not rebuke her contemporaries by name. But she lauds John Updike's *The Coup* (1978) and the works of some American Jewish novelists—those few (Bellow, Malamud, Roth) probing questions of politics, class, or religion.

STONE

by Osip Mandelstam
Princeton, 1981
253 pp. \$17.50 cloth,
\$7.95 paper

In May 1934, Mandelstam, a 43-year-old Russian poet, was arrested and exiled to the Urals. His offense was reciting to friends a poem, included in this anthology, about Stalin: *His fat fingers are shiny, like slugs, / and his words are absolute, like grocers' weights.* But most of his early poems, written when Mandelstam was in his late teens and early 20s, are about cityscapes. St. Petersburg, made of stone, is the image by which he proclaims that the poet is not a creator but a builder: *Stone, become a web, / A lace fragility: / Let your thin needle stab / The empty breast of sky.* St. Petersburg later became, for Mandelstam, a symbol of Western order and respect for people, virtues lacking in Stalin's tyrannical regime. Mandelstam died of "heart failure" in 1938. He was "rehabilitated" in 1956, but his poems were not allowed to appear in the Soviet Union until 1974, and then only in an edition intended primarily for sale abroad. He once compared a poem to an Egyptian funereal barge in which "everything needed for life is stored . . . and nothing is forgotten." Mandelstam's own "ship of death," as translator Robert Tracy notes, has already carried him "into many alien harbors; someday it will even reach a Russian port."