

## MARJORIE PERLOFF

*Anna Akhmatova in Translation*

ANNA AKHMATOVA , *The Complete Poems*. Expanded Edition. Translated by Judith Hemschemeyer. Edited and introduced by Roberta Reeder (Boston: Zephyr Press and Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 1997)

ANNA AKHMATOVA , *The Complete Poems*. Bilingual Edition. Translated by Judith Hemschemeyer. Edited and introduced by Roberta Reeder. 2 vols (Boston: Zephyr Press, 1990)

ANNA AKHMATOVA , *The Word that Causes Death's Defeat: Poems of Memory*. Translated, with an introductory biography, critical essays, and commentary, by Nancy K. Anderson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004)

ANNA AKHMATOVA , *Poems of Akhmatova*. Bilingual Edition. Selected, translated, and introduced by Stanley Kunitz with Max Hayward (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Mariner Books, 1973)

ANNA AKHMATOVA , *Selected Poems*, translated by D.M. Thomas (Penguin, 1988)

'In 1973,' Judith Hemschemeyer explains in her Preface, 'I read a few of Anna Akhmatova's poems in translation in the *American Poetry Review* and was so struck by one of them that I decided to learn Russian in order to read them all.' The poem in question was the 1912 eight-line lyric *Pot usknel na nebe siniu lak* ('The sky's dark blue lacquer has dimmed'). 'Three years later,' adds Hemschemeyer, 'when I could read the Russian and compare the existing Akhmatova translations with the originals, I became convinced that Akhmatova's poems should be translated in their entirety, and by a woman poet, and that I was that person.'

It's a bold declaration. True, Hemschemeyer had published a few volumes of her own poems, but were her poetic gifts equal to her chosen task? And can she have learned enough Russian in three years to translate such a complex and difficult oeuvre as Akhmatova's? Hemschemeyer admits to relying on what she calls 'literals' throughout -- a habit now common enough in the translation world but never, to my mind, quite as successful as translations produced by genuinely bilingual (or multilingual) authors: Pierre Joris on Paul Celan, Richard Sieburth on Hölderlin and Gerard de Nerval, or Michael Heim on Chekhov, Thomas Mann, and Milan Kundera.

Despite such cavils, Hemschemeyer's two-volume edition, published in 1990, the result of more than fifteen years of work, must be regarded as a milestone. Not only does the elegant Zephyr Press two-volume edition contain all of Akhmatova's extant poems *en face*, annotated and with a detailed chronology, but it also includes a 150-page biographical sketch by Roberta Reeder, Isaiah Berlin's now famous memoir of the poet, and over 100 photographs documenting her tempestuous life. The 'expanded' one-volume paperback edition, published some seven years later, adds seventy hitherto unpublished poems and fragments, a further set of photographs, and

an even fuller set of notes by Roberta Reeder. At one-third of the price of the original, it looks like a real bargain, but the reader should be warned that this thousand-page edition is in English only and that it has some astonishing lapses. Reeder's biographical essay, for example, is cut to about a quarter of its original length and although it has footnote numbers, the notes themselves -- 73 in all -- are nowhere to be found!

Oddly enough, Nancy K. Anderson's translation of the long late poems -- *Requiem*, *The Way of All the Earth*, and *Poem Without a Hero* -- raises similar problems. Like Hemschemeyer and Reeder, Anderson decided that her translations could only be understood in the context of Akhmatova's life and culture, and so half of *The Word that Causes Death's Defeat* is a biographical/historical narrative. As it happens, Anderson's short, incisive narrative is the best thing in the book; by contrast, the lengthy critical essays on the poems, supplemented though they are by excerpts from Akhmatova's notebooks and early versions of *Poem Without a Hero*, are somewhat flat-footed -- more running commentary than full-fledged criticism. Then, too, once we have the story of Akhmatova's life before us, it is frustrating not to have the earlier great lyrics that constitute an index to that life as it was actually being lived.

Since neither Hemschemeyer nor Anderson gives us a wholly satisfactory 'Collected' or 'Selected' Akhmatova in English, the reader might consult the earlier more modest selections by Stanley Kunitz and D.M. Thomas. The latter, best known to US readers as the author of *The White Hotel* (1981), is fluent in Russian: his Penguin *Selected Poems* is a very modest compendium but works hard at capturing the nuances of Akhmatova's style. Kunitz, collaborating with Max Hayward, the translator of *Dr Zhivago*, has given us an excellent short bilingual edition of Akhmatova's key poems, with a good introduction and notes.

And there is a larger stumbling block. Reading my way through Hemschemeyer's hefty volumes, I began to wonder whether Akhmatova was translatable at all. Her poems are almost always written in short rhyming stanzas, in which *melopoeia*, to use Pound's term for verse music, trumps not only *logopoeia* ('the dance of the intellect among words'), but also *phanopoeia* (the 'casting of images upon the visual imagination'). Rhyme, anaphora, assonance, alliteration -- this dense musical chiming, central to Akhmatova's lyric, cannot be carried over into English, a highly uninflected language in which rhyme is much rarer and always calls attention to itself as a device rather than being part of the rhetorical flow, as it is in Akhmatova's verse. Then too Russian, unlike English, is rich in long polysyllabic words in which stresses cluster together: our own function words, pronouns, and prepositions -- *my, me, this, that, in, from, where, by, over, next to* -- have no equivalent in Russian, where modifiers, quali-fiers and tense indicators are generally absorbed into the verbs and nouns themselves. Consider the following stanza from 'Anno Domini II':

*Vse raskhishcheno, predano, prodano,  
Chernoi smerti mel'kalo krylo,  
Vse golodnoi toskoyu izglodano,  
Otchego zhe nam stalo svetlo?*

Everything has been plundered, betrayed, sold out,  
The wing of black death has flashed,

Everything has been devoured by starving anguish,  
Why, then, is it so bright?

In English, the words 'has been plundered' translates the single verb form *raskhishcheno*, expanding the line by two extra words, even as the word *prodano* translates as 'sold out', adding a third. Line 2 is similarly expanded by 'of' and 'has', and so on. Thus Akhmatova's tightly packed alliterative lines inevitably lose some of their impact.

What about the vexed question of rhyme? 'To reproduce [Akhmatova's] rhyme in full rhyme in English,' writes Hemschmeyer, 'one would have to skew the sense of the poem by reaching for a rhyming word at the expense of the meaning. And the result would be a trite-sounding series of jingles whose rhymes are boringly anticipated by the reader, a sort of doggerel.' Hemschmeyer's solution is 'to rely mainly on slant rhyme, internal rhyme, assonance and alliteration... often an x-a-y-a rhyme scheme, one that satisfies but doesn't cloy the ear'. 'As for rhythm,' she explains, 'the Russian language has a wealth of magnificent polysyllabic words and since each word gets only one [major] accent, the good poet can command a healthy variation of metrical feet in the line... It was, of course, impossible to adhere to Akhmatova's exact meters and say in English what has to be said.' Anderson agrees that the usual free verse translations of Akhmatova 'failed to give any sense of the work's sound or rhythm... I chose to strengthen the stanza structure by keeping the end rhymes (or at least inexact rhymes) while using a meter comparable with, rather than the same as, Akhmatova's.'

A semblance of rhyme, then, without its closural properties, in rhythms approximating (but not reproducing) the original. Does it work? And how can the translator convey the drama of Akhmatova's often breathless short lyrics -- poems that give us snapshot after snapshot of a particular situation, arrested *in medias res*? Indeed, the immediacy of her lyric, with its dense polysyllabic word clusters, is such that the reader can feel the poet's actual presence, her fusion of life and art, the paradox being that Akhmatova's is a poetry of great reticence and obliquity and deeply erotic though it refuses to describe sexual encounters in any specificity.

In a cruel caricature, Stalin's Politburo agent Andrei Zhdanov attacked Akhmatova's lyric protagonist as 'half-nun, half-harlot... or rather both nun and harlot, mingling fornication and prayer'. This attack came in 1946 and Akhmatova was immediately expelled from the Union of Soviet Writers and her new collection of poems, then at the printer's, seized and destroyed. But however vicious Zhdanov's denunciation, it is true that paradox and sharp contrast, in her life as well as her work, characterised Akhmatova from the beginning.

Born in 1889 in rugged country on the Black Sea, Anna Andreyevna Gorenko, as she was named, grew up in the elegant surroundings of Tsarkoe Selo, just outside Petersburg, in the shadow of the sumptuous Catherine Palace. Anna was only seventeen when she defied her naval officer-engineer father, who jeered at her poetic aspirations, by renouncing his name in favour of her maternal grand-mother's, Akhmatova; a name, Anna felt, that had the proper poetic ring. When she was twenty-one, she married, evidently on the rebound from a secret first love, the poet Nikolai Gumilyov, who had worshipped her since she was fourteen. Indeed, crushed by her earlier refusals, this ardent suitor had made a number of suicide attempts.

Nevertheless, once married, Gumilyov was soon unfaithful, as was Akhmatova herself: on an extended stay in Paris in 1911, she fell in love with the painter Modigliani and modelled for him both dressed and undressed. Her first book of poems, *Evening*, appeared in 1912, the year she gave birth to her only son, Lev Gumilyov. The boy was brought up in the country by his paternal grandmother; Akhmatova, having little interest in motherly duties, visited him only in the summers. Yet in the Stalinist years to come, when Lev was arrested on various trumped-up charges and finally deported to the Gulag, Akhmatova repeatedly risked her life for him. Lev became her obsession, the object of her devotion. Even so, in the 1950s, when Lev returned to normal life in Petersburg, Akhmatova rarely saw him, because, as she told a friend, she considered his cynical attitude to life irritating. Of such contradictions the poet's lyric was born.

In the pre-First World War years, Akhmatova was at the centre of the brilliant artistic life of Petersburg, reading at the Stray Dog Café, where Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky were regulars, and having numerous friendships and love affairs with poets and intellectuals. Her second collection, *Rosary* (March 1914), was wildly popular with her peers and the larger public alike. But, as Akhmatova wrote in her diary, *Rosary* had only a six-week life span, for 'in early May the Petersburg season was beginning to die down; *everybody* was going away. This time the parting with Petersburg turned out to be forever. We returned not to Petersburg, but to Petrograd; from the nineteenth century we suddenly found ourselves transported to the twentieth, everything had changed.'

From Petersburg to Petrograd to Leningrad. Akhmatova had divorced Gumilyov in 1918 and married the prominent Middle Eastern scholar Vladimir Shileiko. In August 1920, a former mistress of Gumilyov's turned *apparatchik* found the once well-off Akhmatova in her pitiful apartment, 'emaciated and dressed in rags, boiling soup in a borrowed saucepan'. The visitor immediately helped the poet and her husband get some food and got her a job at the library of the Agronomy Institute. But from then on, Akhmatova's life became a series of nightmares. Gumilyov, with whom she had remained friends, was executed in 1921, and in 1925 her poetry was banned. She did not publish again until 1940.

Yet unlike many of her friends, fellow poets, and lovers, Akhmatova refused to leave Russia. She felt it was her destiny to stay and serve her people. In 1926 she moved to Fountain House, the former Scheremetev Palace on the Fontanka Canal, in a *ménage à trois* with the critic Nikolai Punin and his wife. Here, making a scant living by scholarly and archival work, especially on Pushkin, Akhmatova witnessed the suicide of Mayakovsky in 1930, the arrest and deportation of her beloved Osip Mandelstam in 1934, and the Great Terror thereafter, followed by the outbreak of the Second World War and the siege of Leningrad. For a moment no longer persona non grata, when in 1942 she wrote some patriotic poems about the war (largely done so as to save her son from execution), Akhmatova was rehabilitated and honoured, but in August 1946, the Zhdanov decree precipitated her total eclipse as a writer. It was not until Stalin's death and Khrushchev's new régime of the later 1950s that Akhmatova was allowed, for the first time in some fifty years, to travel to the West -- to Rome and then to Oxford where she received an honorary doctorate. At the time of her death from a heart attack at age 76, Akhmatova was finally at peace. In her last diary entry, she records her fascination with the newly published fragments of the Dead Sea Scrolls, whose

versions of Old Testament events she planned to compare to those of the Hebrew Bible. Hers was, as the cliché would have it, an indomitable spirit.

Anderson's biographical sketch, on which I've been drawing here, gives a terrifying picture of what it meant to live in the Stalinist era, when the deaths of the 1932-33 forced famine alone ran to at least five million, and when, during the Terror itself, as many as seventy per cent of the men who constituted Stalin's inner circle were purged. No one can fail to admire Akhmatova's sheer survival skills -- her memorisation of her long poems, too dangerous as they were to commit to paper, her struggles to get Lev and various friends out of prison, her stubborn defiance of authority.

And yet, although she knew only too well the horrors of the Stalin regime and the Gulag, she seems to have had little interest in or understanding of the Soviet or global politics that determined her own fate. Isaiah Berlin makes this clear in his poignant memoir of Akhmatova. Berlin, whose family left Petersburg in 1909, when he was ten, visited Akhmatova at war's end in 1945. He was only the second foreign visitor the poet had met since 1914, and since she could converse with him in Russian about mutual friends, acquaintances, and literary issues, their evening together turned into an all-night marathon; indeed, they talked well into the next day. Of Osip Mandelstam, whose arrest she had witnessed personally, she said, 'Poems ... far better than mine, were the cause of the death of the best poet of our time, whom I loved and who loved me.' And she recited for him both Mandelstam's poems and her own *Poem Without a Hero*.

Berlin presents Akhmatova as a brilliant literary commentator (on Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Pasternak, Gorki), with a mind very much her own (she castigates Tolstoy for punishing Anna Karenina), a still beautiful, dignified, tragic figure, for whom 'Leningrad after the war was ... nothing but a vast cemetery, the graveyard of her friends'. But when, a few months after her single meeting with Berlin, the Zhdanov decree came through, she was evidently convinced that Stalin wanted revenge because he had found out that she had 'committed the sin of seeing a foreigner without formal authorization, and not just a foreigner, but an employee of a capitalist government'. That Berlin was never employed by any government didn't matter. Twenty years later, when Akhmatova visited Oxford, she told Berlin that their meeting in 1945, which she came to regard as a lovers' tryst, had 'inadvertently started the cold war and thereby changed the history of mankind'. She had already referred to the cataclysmic nature of her relationship to her new soulmate in a number of poems, for example 'Cinque', dated 26 November 1945, which has an epigraph from Baudelaire's 'La Martyre' ('*Autant que toi sans doute il te sera fidèle / Et constant jusques à la mort*') and begins:

As if on the rim of a cloud,  
I remember your words,

And because of my words to you,  
Night became brighter than day.

Thus, torn from the earth,  
We rose up like stars.

There was neither despair nor shame,  
Not now, not afterward, not at the time.

But in real life, right now,  
You hear how I am calling you.

And that door that you half opened,  
I don't have the strength to slam. (Hemschemeyer)

The translation of this final couplet can't quite capture the closure of the original, with its clanging rhyme -- *pritokr'il [half-opened]/ ne khvatit sil* (strength does not suffice). For Akhmatova, we might say, the political was always inherently personal.

### 'Love conquers by deception'

Like Tolstoy's 'realistic' prose in *War and Peace*, Akhmatova's early lyric looks almost artless. True, the rhymes and rhythms are carefully crafted, but the emotions expressed -- anticipation, tenderness, excitement, dismay, rage, disappointment, joy -- seem, at first reading, merely 'natural' expressions of autobiographical impulses. But, as Akhmatova's early Russian Formalist critics understood, the speaking voice Zhadnov was to dismiss as 'half-nun, half-harlot' was at once autobiographical and an artful poetic construct, foregrounding paradox and oxymoron. 'The lyrical theme,' wrote Boris Eichenbaum, 'of which Akhmatova is the center unfolds by means of antitheses and paradoxes; it eludes psychological formulation; it is "made strange" by the incongruity of her states of mind.' This incongruity is reinforced by the poems' sound structures: the tight melodic verses can barely contain what is a colloquial, casual discourse. Akhmatova's syntactical transitions are abrupt and unanticipated; her vocabulary spare, matter-of-fact, and often prosaic.

Consider the little poem '*On lyubil*' ('He Loved...'), which appears in Akhmatova's first collection *Evening* (1912), published when she was twenty-three:

*On lyubil tri veshchi svete*  
*Za vecherney pen 'e, belikh pavlinov*  
*I stertye karti Ameriki*  
*Ne lyubil, kogda placyut deti*  
*Ne lyubil chaya s malinoy*  
*I zhenskoy isteriki*  
-- *A ya bila ego zhenoy* [transliteration mine]

Formally, this is a ballad stanza with alternating four- and three-stress lines, rhyming *abcabc*. Here is Hemschemeyer's translation:

He loved three things in life:  
Evensong, white peacocks  
And old maps of America,  
He hated it when children cried,  
He hated tea with raspberry jam

And women's hysterics.  
... And I was his wife.

In rhyming 'wife' with 'life', this translation retains some-thing of the original's force.  
But Kunitz's version is more pointed:

Three things enchanted him:  
White peacocks, evensong,  
And faded maps of America,  
He couldn't stand bawling brats,  
Or raspberry jam with his tea,  
Or womanish hysteria.  
... And he was tied to me.

In either case, we can see what makes the original so forceful. The poem was prompted by Akhmatova's recognition, soon after her marriage to Gyumilov, that they were incompat-ible. The spare imagery is carefully chosen: the first three lines refer to Gyumilov's own offbeat tastes -- evensong, white peacocks, old maps of America (he was constantly travelling to exotic places) -- while the next three, as Roberta Reeder notes, evoke daily life -- crying children, sticky rasp-berry jam, women's hysterics. Is the poem directly autobiographical? Not really, for Akhmatova had not yet had a child when she wrote it in 1910, and even after the fact, she was hardly the doting mother, feeding her child raspberry jam. Rather, what makes the ballad and its punch line so effective is that the poet gives us three 'masculine' refer-ences followed by three 'feminine' ones as if to say that marriage is itself a source of discord, an inability to reconcile the antinomies of gender.

The characteristic economy and matter-of-factness of 'He Loved...' is given elegant variations in the poet's second volume, *Rosary* (1914), where Akhmatova comes into her own. In an understated poem called 'Outing' about her wild love affair with Modigliani in Paris, she recalls that 'My feather brushed the top of the carriage', and 'With a hand almost not trembling / Once again he touched my knees'. But the romantic glow is extinguished by the 'odor of petrol and lilacs' that permeates the air of the carriage. And in this context, lines 5-- 6, 'The evening was windless and fettered by sadness / Under the firmament's vault of clouds', become significant: the odour made stronger by the windless air is somehow ominous for the lovers.

The same irony characterises 'In the Evening', addressed, so Rehder's notes tell us, to Artur Lourié, the avant-garde composer Akhmatova met at the Stray Dog cabaret in 1913, with whom she had a brief affair. Their rela-tionship was stormy -- both were married at the time -- but after the Revolution, Lourié helped Anna get a job and she briefly moved in with him and his then mistress Olga Glebova-Sudeikina, the beautiful and charismatic actress who was to become one of the main characters of *Poem Without a Hero*. Lourié left Russia in 1922, first for Berlin, then for the US from where, forty years later, he wrote to Akhmatova, renewing their friendship. Lourié, so the story goes, 'sought the image of Akhmatova in every other woman with whom he was involved'.

'In the Evening' ( *Vecherom* ) has four quatrains, rhyming *abba*, as in *sadu/gorem/morem/lidu* in the first. Here is Hemschemeyer's translation:

The music rang out in the garden  
With such inexpressible grief,  
Oysters in ice on the plate  
Smelled fresh and sharp, of the sea.

He told me: 'I am your true friend!'  
And he touched my dress.  
How unlike a caress,  
The touch of those hands,

As one might stroke a cat or a bird,  
Or watch slender equestriennes ride...  
Under the light gold lashes  
There is only laughter in his tranquil eyes.

And the voices of mournful violins  
Sing through the drifting smoke:  
'Praise heaven above -- for the first time  
You're alone with the man you love.'

The poem begins on a familiar romantic note: the 'inex-pressible grief' conveyed by the music seems to set the stage for the poet's own tale of lost or unrequited love. But -- and this is an Akhmatova signature -- the symbolic properties (here, the mournful violins) are undercut by the actual situation depicted. The lovers are dining on 'Oysters in ice on a plate' that 'Smelled fresh and sharp, of the sea'. The aphro-disiac oyster signals the lover's touch, but again there is qualification. He touches, not quite her body but only her dress, and she notes that 'the touch of those hands' is 'unlike a caress' -- indeed, the sort of touch one applies when stroking a cat or bird. The lover's oddly 'tranquil' eyes 'Under the light gold lashes' are always 'laughing'. Nothing, it seems, is taken seriously by him. And yet, so attracted to this man is the narrator that she can only 'Praise heaven above' for letting her be, 'for the first time... alone with the man [she] loves'.

The most enigmatic line in the poem is the tenth: how is the lover's touch related to his sight -- to the watching of 'slender equestriennes' as they ride by, perhaps as part of the floor show? Evidently, given the context, the speaker pictures the man, whose 'touch' is so casual, mentally undressing those slender girls on horseback and touching their bodies. But whether stroking a cat or contemplating the equestriennes, the lover keeps his cool. He remains uninvolved. As such, the incident doesn't augur well for the poet: despite the glamorous restaurant setting and the violins, despite his declaration 'I am your true friend' and his first tentative touch, his demeanour suggests an insouciance that accords poorly with her own excitement at being, for the first time, alone with the man she loves!

Akhmatova's love lyric is full of such ironic twists. 'After the Wind and the Frost' plays on the hackneyed metaphor of 'stealing' the heart, the twist being that the lover who has stolen hers 'will return the prize'. In 'The Guest', 'needing nothing', on the lover's part, turns out to be qualified as 'That I have nothing to refuse him'. One of the most famous of the *Rosary* poems, this time not quite a love lyric, is 'For Alexander

Blok', dedicated to the great Symbolist poet, with whom Akhmatova, as a member of the Acmeist group, which advocated a hard-edged realism instead of muzzy *symbolisme*, had a somewhat strained relationship. Blok had written a poem to Akhmatova portraying her as a Carmen figure. It begins:

Beauty's terrible, they will tell you --  
Round your shoulders languidly  
You will draw a Spanish shawl,  
Put a red rose in your hair (trans. Alex Miller)

Akhmatova's response deals with a visit, described years later in her memoir 'My Half-Century':

On one of the last Sundays of 1913 I brought Blok copies of his books so that he would inscribe them for me... But in the third volume he wrote out his madrigal dedicated to me: 'Beauty is frightening, they'll tell you.' I have never had the Spanish shawl in which Blok portrays me, but at the time Blok was mad about Carmen and made a Spaniard out of me too. And it goes without saying that I never wore a red rose in my hair... At our last meeting, backstage at the Bolshoi Dramatic Theater in 1921, Blok came up to me and asked: 'But where is your Spanish shawl?' Those were the last words that I ever heard him say. (trans. Ronald Meyer, Northwestern University Press, 1982)

Hemschemeyer's poetic version is more indirect and hence more devastating:

I visited the poet.  
Precisely at noon, Sunday.  
It was quiet in the spacious room,  
And beyond the windows, intense cold.

And a raspberry sun  
Above shaggy, bluish smoke...  
How keenly my taciturn host  
Regarded me!

He had the kind of eyes  
That everyone must recall,  
It was better for me to be careful,  
And not look at them at all.

But I will recall the conversation,  
The smoky noon, Sunday  
In the tall, gray house  
By the sea gates of the Neva!

The first stanza is more effectively translated by Thomas:

I came to him as a guest.  
Precisely at noon. Sunday.  
In the large room there was quiet,

And beyond the window, frost

Both Thomas and Kunitz follow the original in using the present tense, whereas Hemschemeyer places the whole narrative into the past. But the key stanza, the third, in which Hemschemeyer uses rhyme quite subtly, strikes me as more effective than Thomas's:

His eyes are of the kind that  
Nobody can forget. I'd  
Better look out, better  
Not look at them at all.

Or Kunitz's:

His eyes are so serene  
One could be lost in them forever.  
I know I must take care  
Not to return his look.

Perhaps none of the three versions can quite convey the abrupt, harsh-sounding stanzas of the original, but even in translation, Akhmatova's sardonic response comes through. The great poet evidently demanded punctuality and precision; the frost outside the window, moreover, is matched by the coldness within Blok's 'spacious room'. The scene is set precisely -- the winter 'raspberry sun / Above shaggy, bluish smoke' providing the analogue to the non-conversation of these two so dissimilar poets. The speaker remembers nothing but those unforgettable eyes -- the eyes in which one must not look. Why not? Are their depths so enticing? So off-putting? So destructive? The poem does not tell us; instead, it comes full circle to the Sunday setting of the first stanza, 'In the tall, gray house / By the sea gates of the Neva'. The oddest line is 13, 'But I will recall the conversations' ('talk' in Kunitz and Thomas), because the host has just been described as 'taciturn' -- one who looks at his guest with penetrating eyes rather than uttering so much as a word. One can therefore take that last stanza as sarcastic -- a purposely sing-song ballad refrain, whose pedantic detail undercuts what has just been said. The final image is of gridlock between the two poets, with Anna turning away from those cruel (or are they captivating?) eyes.

### 'The Vault of Alien Skies'

*White Flock*, published in the year of the Revolution, *Plantain* (1921), and *Anno Domini* (1922) carry on these bitter-sweet, intimate themes, although references to war and death now become prominent. But what about the late work, produced or at least initiated in the terrible years *entre deux guerres* when Akhmatova, unable to publish and subsisting on menial jobs, watched as her friends were executed or sent to the Gulag?

Read against the context of Akhmatova's brilliant first decade (1912--22), which takes up the entire first volume of the Hemschemeyer edition (and roughly half of the

paper-back English edition), the long later poems may seem puzzling, if not disappointing, in their sobriety and didacticism. *Requiem*, prompted by Lev Gumilyov's sudden arrest in 1940 and dedicated to the women of Russia standing watch at the prison gates where their husbands or sons were incarcerated, is a cry of unrelieved pain and obsession with death. Stylistically, the sequence is quite original, combining prose -- 'Instead of a Preface', added in 1957 -- with lyrics of different lengths and verse forms. In Anderson's new translation, 'Prologue' begins:

There was no one who smiled in those days  
Except the dead, who'd found peace at last.  
Like a tacked-on extra, a useless weight,  
From its prisons dangled Leningrad.

In Hemschemeyer, this reads:

That was when the ones who smiled  
Were the dead, glad to be at rest.  
And like a useless appendage, Leningrad  
Swung from its prisons.

In both cases, the translation makes clear that, except for the metaphor of Leningrad as 'useless' weight, 'dangling' from its prisons, the discourse is straightforward, even flat. Rhyme is the main figure, and it, of course, is lost in translation. Akhmatova does embed more intimate lyrics (e.g., 'Quiet, quiet the Don flows') within the more public pronouncements of the 'Dedication' and 'Epilogue', but the sequence's pathos is not tempered by the irony and perspectivism that characterise Akhmatova's earlier lyric. 'The role of the poet-witness,' writes Anderson, 'is to ensure that the suffering women are not forgotten, to continue always to grieve on their behalf.' But positioning of the poet and her friends as victims can make for bathos, as in this passage from Part V, as translated by Hemschemeyer:

For seventeen months I've been crying out,  
Calling you home.  
I flung myself at the hangman's feet,  
You are my son and my horror

Anderson's stanza, replicating Akhmatova's rhyme structure, is more fluent but equally sentimental:

Seventeen months of futile pleas,  
I cry for you to come,  
I've knelt down at the hangman's feet,  
For you, my dread, my son

Indeed, the unrelieved darkness of *Requiem* leaves the reader little room to manoeuvre.

*Poem without a Hero* has much greater semantic density. The 744-line text is divided into three parts: 'The Year Nineteen Thirteen', 'Flip Side', and 'Epilogue'. 'Nineteen Thirteen' begins in the present, with the poet, alone in her flat at the Sheremetev

Palace on New Year's Eve 1941, engaging in a familiar Russian folk custom: on the last night of the year, if a young woman places two lit candles between two facing mirrors, she can conjure up the reflection of her future lover. But here the reflection is not of the future but of Akhmatova's past, specifically a series of tableaux of 1913 Petersburg, beginning with a masquerade ball, whose revellers are caricature versions of the poet's acquaintance: 'the Demon himself' with a 'sorcerer's power to beguile' (Alexander Blok), the 'Mile-Post' (Mayakovksy), and the 'most elegant Satan', a 'mocking grinner' (the dandyish critic Mikhail Kuzmin). At the heart of the revelry is the suicide of Vsevolod Knyazev, a rejected lover of Akhmatova's great friend, Olga Sudeikina, the 'wonder with flaxen hair' who performed at the Stray Dog and in various theatricals. Knyazev and Olga Sudeikina are presented as Pierrot and Columbine in a bitter-sweet and decadent pastoral drama.

There are complex threads and allusions throughout 'Nineteen Thirteen', but the gist of the tableaux is fairly straightforward: dazzling and glamorous as pre-war Petersburg may have been, it was, in Akhmatova's eyes, also quite corrupt -- a frivolous, upper-class world of decadent pleasures. 'Flip Side' (Part 2) portrays a 1940s' editor, unable to understand Akhmatova's poetic purpose and avoiding her politically incorrect rendition at a time when Socialist Realism was all. And the Epilogue, which takes place on 'the white night of June 24, 1942 with Petersburg in ruins, introduces the possibility of renewal as figured in the final vision of the poet, soaring over war-ravaged forests ... impelled by demonic force'. The awaited redemption never comes, but the poem's last line, 'Russia went before me to the east', suggests that some day, the great nation, great city, and the poet herself will rise again.

The difficulty with this narrative is that *Poem without a Hero* never quite probes the relationship of Petersburg's past to its present or future. If Silver Age Petersburg was too self-absorbed, frivolous, and materialistic, its antithesis, the gloomy hellish Leningrad of World War II, was, after all, ten times worse. Could these extremes have been avoided? Or was the second inherent in the first? Where did the revolution go wrong? How are we to understand characters like the 'Petersburg doll' based on the enigmatic and erotic actress Olga Sudeikina, with whom Akhmatova lived for a few years in the early twenties? Despite (or perhaps because of) Akhmatova's ceaseless revisions, *Poem without a Hero* seems unsure of itself, the complexities promised in the brilliant first part never being resolved or even addressed later on. It is as if Akhmatova's terrible experiences from the early 1920s to the present had made it impossible for her to conjure up more than brilliant fragments.

The translators do their best to render these fragments in their original verse forms. In her Preface, Anderson, perhaps alluding to Hemschemeyer, argues that the extant translations, most of them in free verse, don't do *Poem without a Hero* justice. An exception, she remarks, is D. M. Thomas's version, which 'keeps Akhmatova's exact meter while reducing the *Poem*'s end rhymes to assonances'. By contrast, her own translation 'keeps the end rhymes ... while using a meter compatible with, rather than the same, as Akhmatova's'. Is Anderson's an improvement? Here is the candle and mirror ritual at the opening of 'The Year Nineteen Thirteen', first in transliterated Russian:

*Ya zazhgla zavetnye svechi  
Chtoby etot svetilsya vecher*

*I s toboi, ko mne ne prishedshim,  
Sorok pervyi vstrechayu god*

Literally, this reads, 'I lit the precious candles, / So that the evening would be illuminated, / With you, who have not come to me, / the year '41 I celebrate'. *Svechi* (candles) and *vecher* (evening) rhyme approximately, with *svetilsya* (lit up) producing an internal rhyme with both words. There is also much alliteration, as in *zazhgla zvetnye*. Part I is mostly written in rhyming tetrameter couplets, but lines 3-- 4 stand out as an exception, the noun *god* (year) standing apart from the second-person verb *prisedshim* above. Anderson renders the four lines (visually arranged in a step pattern) as follows:

I've set the cherished candles alight  
    To give enchantment to this night,  
        With you, the guest who didn't arrive,  
            I planned to honor Forty-one's birth.

Compare this to the following:

(1)

I have lit my sacred candles,  
One by one, and with your absent  
Companionship I hallow  
The coming forty-first year. (Thomas)

(2)

I have lit my treasured candles,  
one by one, to hallow this night.  
With you, who do not come,  
I wait the birth of the year. (Kunitz)

(3)

I have lit the sacred candles,  
So that this evening might shine,  
And with you, who have not come to me,  
I will greet the forty-first year. (Hemschemeyer)

The most natural, colloquial version is Kunitz's, but his elimination of '41', a necessary number in the poem, blurs its meaning. Thomas's begins well but the run-on second line, presumably designed so as to honour the metre, undercuts the straightforward syntax of the original. Hemschemeyer captures the poem's tone more fully but gives little sense of the stanza's sound structure. Still, I find all three translations more satisfactory than Anderson's, whose sing-song rhyming lines ('alight/'night') neither convey the subtlety of Akhmatova's sound -- the move from *svechi* to *svetilsya* to *vecher* and the emphasis on the non-rhyming *god* ('year'), nor respect the mystery associated with the 'you' who has not come. The words 'guest' and 'arrive' rationalise the situation, as does the word 'birth' in the final line.

Then, too, Anderson's rhymes are often unfortunate: for example, 'That story's being told all over, / You're a mere child, Signor Casanova', which sounds like a weak version of Byron, or the couplet 'To heat the holidays bonfires burned, / And carriages on bridges overturned', which trivialises the grimly moving panorama of Chapter 3. Indeed, although Anderson is quite right that rhyme is central to the original, English simply cannot yield the possibilities of the inflected Russian, so rich in rhyming suffixes. Thomas's decision to follow the meter rather than the rhyme scheme may thus be the right one, although he, like Kunitz and Hemschemeyer, who render Akhmatova's stanzas in predominantly free verse, inevitably flattens out sound structures that are central to the poem's lyric form.

Since no translation can quite capture the particular *poeticity* of this late fragmented collage poem, the best solution is probably Hemschemeyer's original decision to present Akhmatova in a bilingual edition that allows the reader with even a modicum of Russian to sound out the original rhythms. But even in this case, we see as through a glass darkly: translations of such 'musical' and metrical poetry must be understood as reproductions of, not analogues to, the original.

One turns with some relief from these long ambitious poems to the uncollected lyrics published at the back of Hemschemeyer's one-volume edition. Given Akhmatova's prodigious output in *Rosary* and *White Flock*, it is astonishing that so many exquisite poems remained unpublished. Here is '*Belaya Noch*' or 'White Night' of 1914:

A sky white with a frightful whiteness,  
And the earth like coal and granite.  
Under the withered moon  
Nothing shines anymore

A woman's voice, hoarse and impassioned,  
Doesn't sing, but yells, yells.  
On the black poplar right above me  
Not a single leaf rustles.

Was this why I kissed you?  
Was this why I tormented myself, loving?  
To remember you now, calmly and wearily,  
With loathing?

In the third stanza, Hemschemeyer takes the liberty of producing a fore-shortened last line instead of somehow retaining the consonantal rhyme *lyubya / tebya*. It works well: all the images look ahead to that loathing: the fright-fully white sky, the earth, like coal and granite, the withered moon that suggests that 'Nothing shines anymore'. The second stanza turns the speaker into a distanced third person or rather merely a voice, one that 'Doesn't sing, but yells, yells'. The second couplet shifts back to 'me' and it takes a minute to realise that she is herself the one who yells, in eerie contrast to the black poplar night where 'Not a single leaf rustles'. All that remains is 'loathing'.

What is the cause of the break-up described here? In Akhmatova's lyric, one rarely knows *why* something has happened. Is 'you' a reference to Akhmatova's husband

Gumilyov? Does it matter? Or does that brilliant second stanza with its contrast between the human cry and the silence of nature say quite enough? The past has been swallowed by the present in what strikes me as an eerie anticipation of the Revolutionary ethos and the chaotic years to come. 'White Night' and Akhmatova's related lyric is unique in twentieth-century love poetry in its refusal of closure -- a refusal that has a surprising dénouement in the reversal of fortune, this time for the better, of Akhmatova's last years. But then this poet was never interested in causal explanation. This, she tells us, is how love works, but I can't explain what it is or *why* it is always on the verge of turning into something else -- why love turns into hatred or contempt or even indifference.

Hemschemeyer's translations are not always elegant; they remain inevitably mere shadows of the originals. But supplemented by Kunitz's and Thomas's earlier versions, by Isaiah Berlin's memoir, by Roberta Reeder's critical apparatus, and Nancy K. Anderson's biographical sketch and versions of the late poetry, Akhmatova's oeuvre is beginning to reach the Anglophone readership it deserves. The threshold has now been reached for the next stage in Akhmatova studies -- the stage where no study of twentieth-century poetry can afford to ignore the work of one of its great poets.