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***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 & London: Yale University Press. xiii + 320 pages.**

**\$30.**

### **Marjorie Perloff**

The life of the great Russian poet Anna Akhmatova (1889-1965) might itself be the subject of a long narrative poem. Born Anna Andreyevna Gorenko, she defied her naval officer father when she was only seventeen by renouncing his name in favor of her maternal grandmother's, Akhmatova—a name, so Anna felt, with the proper poetic ring. When she was twenty-one, she married, on the rebound, 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 modeled for him both clothed and in the nude. Her first book of poems *Evening* appeared in 1912, the same year she gave birth to her only son, Lev Gumilyov. The boy was brought up in the country by his paternal grandmother; Akhmatova visiting 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 would repeatedly risk her life for him. Lev became her obsession, the object of her devotion. Even so, in the 50s, when Lev returned to normal life in Petersburg, Anna rarely

saw him, because, as she told a friend, she considered his cynical attitude to life irritating. Of such contradictions, the poet's works were born.

But I anticipate. Akhmatova was at the center of the brilliant artistic life of pre-World War I 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; little by little *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 somehow serve her people. She now made her home in the former Sheremetev 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 World War II and the siege of Leningrad. For a brief time, in 1942 when she wrote some patriotic poems about the war (largely so as to save

her son from execution), Akhmatova was rehabilitated and honored, but in August '46, the Central Committee of the Communist Party suddenly ousted her from the Union of Soviet Writers and destroyed the entire print run of her forthcoming collection of poems. Her enemy was the Politburo member Andrei Zhdanov, who denounced her lyric voice as that of "both nun and harlot, mingling fornication and prayer." Akhmatova's poetry, wrote Zhdanov, was the work of "a half-crazed upper-crust lady running between the boudoir and the chapel." It was not until Stalin's death and Khrushchev's new regime of the later 1950s that Akhmatova was rehabilitated and allowed, for the first time in some fifty years, to travel to the West—to Rome and 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, which she planned to compare to the Bible. Hers was, as the cliché would have it, an indomitable spirit.

Or so it seems. Nancy K. Anderson's biographical sketch, which takes up approximately half of *The Word that Causes Death's Defeat*, does not claim originality, but its concise, pointed, and colorful narrative, placing Akhmatova's life firmly in its cultural, political milieu, makes for absorbing reading. Anyone who thinks that ours is an especially dark time, should ponder what it meant to live in the Stalinist era, when the deaths of the 1932-33 forced famine alone ran to at least 5 million, and when, during the Terror itself, as many as seventy percent of Stalin's inner circle were purged. No one can fail to admire Akhmatova's sheer survival skills—her memorization of her long poems which were too dangerous to commit to paper, her struggles to get Lev and various friends out of prison, her sheer defiance of authority, without parallel in our own "radical" circles.

But all this activity exacted a poetic price—a price critical commentary on Akhmatova's late poetry—and here Anderson is typical—has chosen to ignore. "Poem without a Hero," written in 1942 and revised continuously between then and 1962 was considered, by Akhmatova herself, to be the "summit of my creative path," and critics like

Anderson have taken this judgment at face value. Indeed, Anderson's biographical narrative, so she tells us, was no more than an afterthought, designed to contextualize and clarify the meanings of *Poem without a Hero* and the related *Requiem* of 1940. For *Poem without a Hero*, the translator provides an Appendix, containing the first (Tashkent) version of the poem (1942) as well as the poet's notebook excerpts, and a long critical essay and extensive commentary.

For non-Russian readers, who know Akhmatova chiefly as a lyric poet, the great love poet of "Three Things Enchanted Him," "The Guest," or "Lot's Wife"--poems translated by Stanley Kunitz (Houghton Mifflin 1973) and D. M. Thomas (Penguin 1985), and constituting the bulk of the first volume of Judith Hemschemeyer's monumental bilingual *Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova* (Zephyr 1990)—the late poems (Anderson also includes the short *Ways of All Earth*), read outside the context of the larger oeuvre, may seem puzzling, if not disappointing. *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. The Prologue, for example, 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.

And although Akhmatova embeds more intimate lyrics (e.g., "Quiet, quiet the Don flows") within the more public pronouncements of the "Dedication" and Epilogue, the poem's pathos is not tempered by the irony and perspectivism that characterize 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." As such, "Requiem" is primarily notable for its elaborate musical structure, the variety of its stanzas and rhythms. But in English, where rhyme is much more difficult to achieve and function

words undercut the intensity of the multi-syllable nouns and verbs that characterize Russian, the effect is difficult to duplicate. Indeed, such passages as "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" (Poem V) are close to bathos.

*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 revelers are caricature versions of the poet's acquaintance: the "Demon himself" with a "sorcerer's power to beguile" (the Symbolist poet 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, the beautiful 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 "1913", but the gist of the tableaux is fairly straightforward: Dazzling and glamorous as was pre-war Petersburg, 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-raved 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. How did A lead to B? Where did the revolution go wrong? What might the avant-gardists have done differently? How are we to understand characters like the "Petersburg doll" based on Olga Sudeikina? Despite Akhmatova's ceaseless revisions, *Poem without a Hero* is finally a poem without a meaningful moral compass, the complexities promised in the brilliant first part never being resolved or even addressed. 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.

And here the problem of translation arises. In her Preface, Anderson argues that the extant free verse translations 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. (D. M. 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 and Hayward)

(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 honor the meter, 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"—nor respect the mystery associated with the "you" who has not come. The words "guest" and "arrive" rationalize 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 trivializes 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 rhyme 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 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 Akhmatova's lyric, the best solution might be to provide a bilingual edition (we have one in Kunitz and in Hemschemeyer's two-volume edition of the *Complete Poems*), and I wish Anderson had given us one, framed by her very fine and useful biographical narrative as well as her commentaries. As it stands, the problematic translation is not saved by the elaborate apparatus of critical essays, notes, and appendices. Indeed, the "critical" essays tend toward running commentary and explication rather than any sort of serious analysis of poetic form. Nevertheless, the inherent interest of Akhmatova's life and of her astonishing modernist poems, still so little known in the West, make this a curiously appealing book—a collage testament, so to speak, to the workings of poetic power.