

Russian Poetry Mini-Sampler

From 'Poem Without a Hero' by Anna Akhmatova

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.

Dear God!
the flame has drowned in crystal,
and the wine, like poison, burns
Old malice bites the air,
old ravings rave again,
though the hour has not yet struck.
Dread. Bottomless dread...
I am that shadow on the threshold
defending my remnant peace.

Let the gossip roll!
What to me are Hamlet's garters,
or the whirlwind of Salome's dance,
or the tread of the Man in the Iron Mask?
I am more iron than they.

Prince Charming, prince of the mockers —
compared with him the foulest of sinners
is grace incarnate...

That woman I once was,
in a black agate necklace,
I do not wish to meet again
till the Day of Judgement.

Are the last days near, perhaps?
I have forgotten your lessons,
prattlers and false prophets,
but you haven't forgotten me.
As the future ripens in the past,
so the past rots in the future —
a terrible festival of dead leaves.

*All the mirrors on the wall
show a man not yet appeared
who could not enter this white hall.
He is no better and no worse,
but he is free of Lethe's curse:
his warm hand makes a human pledge.
Strayed from the future, can it be
that he will really come to me,
turning left from the bridge?*

From childhood I have been afraid
of mummers. It always seemed
an extra shadow
without face or name
had slipped among them...

You...
you are as old as the Mamre oak,
ancient interrogator of the moon,
whose feigned groans cannot take us in.
You write laws of iron.

Creature of special tastes,
you do not wait for gout and fame
to elevate you
to a luxurious jubilee chair,
but bear your triumph
over the flowering heather,
over wildernesses.
And you are guilty of nothing: neither of this,
that, nor anything..

Besides
what have poets, in any case, to do with sin?
They must dance before the Ark of the Covenant
or die! But what am I trying to say?

In the black sky no star is seen,
somewhere in ambush lurks the Angel of Death,
but the spiced tongues of the masqueraders
are loose and shameless

A shout:

“Make way for the hero!”

Ah yes. Displacing the tall one,
he will step forth now without fail
and sing to us about holy vengeance...

There is no death, each of us knows —
it’s banal to say.

I’ll leave it to others to explain.

Is this the visitor from the wrong side
of the mirror? Or the shape
that suddenly flitted past my window?
Is it the new moon playing tricks,
or is someone really standing there again
between the stove and the cupboard?

This means that gravestones are fragile
and granite is softer than wax.
Absurd, absurd, absurd! From such absurdity
I shall soon turn gray
or change into another person.
why do you beckon me with your hand?
For one moment of peace
I would give the peace of the tomb.

Anna Ahkmatova remained in Leningrad throughout its 900-day siege in World War Two, and spent the rest of her life laboring over ‘Poem Without a Hero’, the elegy for her country’s fallen in World War Two. This is only a small excerpt from the beginning of the poem. (That she had three prefaces to this poem was fascinating.)

Why Is This Age Worse...?

Why is this age worse than earlier ages?
In a stupor of grief and dread
have we not fingered the foulest wounds
and left them unhealed by our hands?

In the west the falling light still glows,
and the clustered housetops glitter in the sun,
but here Death is already chalking the doors with crosses,
and calling the ravens, and the ravens are flying in.

Translated by Stanley Kunitz (with Max Hayward)

from 'Poems of the Thirties: 286 [The Stalin Epigram]'

By Osip Mandelstam (Translated by Clarence Brown and W. S. Merwin)

Our lives no longer feel ground under them.
At ten paces you can't hear our words.

But whenever there's a snatch of talk
it turns to the Kremlin mountaineer,

the ten thick worms his fingers,
his words like measures of weight,

the huge laughing cockroaches on his top lip,
the glitter of his boot-rims.

Ringed with a scum of chicken-necked bosses
he toys with the tributes of half-men.

One whistles, another meows, a third snivels.
He pokes out his finger and he alone goes boom.

He forges decrees in a line like horseshoes,
One for the groin, one the forehead, temple, eye.

He rolls the executions on his tongue like berries.
He wishes he could hug them like big friends from home.

Osip Mandelstam, "from Poems of the Thirties #286 [The Stalin Epigram]"
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Source: Selected Poems (Atheneum Publishers, 1973)

By this time, the early 1910s, Mandelstam had already forsaken his actual studies in favor of writing, and he had begun contributing verse to Apollon, St. Petersburg's leading literary journal. In 1913 he published his first verse collection, *Kamen*—translated as *Stone*, which immediately established him in the upper echelon of Russian poets. During the era when *Stone* was first published, symbolism was the dominant form of poetic expression among Russian poets. Mandelstam, however, renounced the symbolist style and its metaphysical, even occult aspects. His own poems were direct expressions of thoughts, feelings, and observations. As such, Mandelstam ranked as an Acmeist, which is to say that his poems were acknowledged to be rooted in intuition and a humanist perspective. Appropriately enough, Mandelstam himself described his Acmeist style as “organic.”

* * *

Yevgeney Yevtushenko

Gentleness

THIS can't go on:
is after all injustice of its kind.
How in what year did this come into fashion?
Deliberate indifference to the living,
deliberate cultivation of the dead.
Their shoulders slump and they get drunk sometimes
and one by one they quit;
orators at the crematorium
speak words of gentleness to history.
What was it took his life from Mayakovsky?
What was it put the gun between his fingers?
If with that voice of his, with that appearance,
if ever they had offered him in life
some crumbs of gentleness.
Men live. Men are trouble-makers.
Gentleness is a posthumous honour.

EXERCISE:

Read the poems above and write a cover poem, or choose a line from the poems as epigraph (or title) and write a poem regarding the Russian war in Ukraine. Perhaps there is a fleeting reference to Ukraine, or the poem is about the character of men who start wars, or something else comes up, perhaps more urgent in your own life and the grief felt points you to deeper and more personal griefs. That the U.S. and Canada have their own atrocities to account for does not get us off the hook, so remember the graves of indigenous children and the country that felt it proper to begin the nuclear age, its colonial legacy and its ongoing wars. As always, rage has to be transformed and compassion is a higher level of energy than anger. There is room for both in the poem, but the trick is to go somewhere deeper than rhetoric. That this all happens on the cusp of spring in the Northern Hemisphere ought to give you some energy, ideas, possibilities for juxtaposition. Or your own life at this time is juxtaposed with the war in Ukraine and this exercise goes into your Spring 2022 (& All) journal.