

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC

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Volume 126

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers

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Preface

A Comprehensive Information Source on Contemporary Literature

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC presents significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered by *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign writers, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Format of the Book

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Features

A *CLC* author entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the author’s name in the form under which the author has most commonly published, followed by birth date, and death date when applicable. Uncertainty as to a birth or death date is indicated by a question mark.

- A **Portrait** of the author is included when available.
- A brief **Biographical and Critical Introduction** to the author and his or her work precedes the criticism. The first line of the introduction provides the author's full name, pseudonyms (if applicable), nationality, and a listing of genres in which the author has written. To provide users with easier access to information, the biographical and critical essay included in each author entry is divided into four categories: "Introduction," "Biographical Information," "Major Works," and "Critical Reception." The introductions to single-work entries—entries that focus on well known and frequently studied books, short stories, and poems—are similarly organized to quickly provide readers with information on the plot and major characters of the work being discussed, its major themes, and its critical reception. Previous volumes of *CLC* in which the author has been featured are also listed in the introduction.
- A list of **Principal Works** notes the most important writings by the author. When foreign-language works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets.
- The **Criticism** represents various kinds of critical writing, ranging in form from the brief review to the scholarly exegesis. Essays are selected by the editors to reflect the spectrum of opinion about a specific work or about an author's literary career in general. The critical and biographical materials are presented chronologically, adding a useful perspective to the entry. All titles by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type, which enables the reader to easily identify the works being discussed. Publication information (such as publisher names and book prices) and parenthetical numerical references (such as footnotes or page and line references to specific editions of a work) have been deleted at the editor's discretion to provide smoother reading of the text.
- Critical essays are prefaced by **Explanatory Notes** as an additional aid to readers. These notes may provide several types of valuable information, including: the reputation of the critic, the importance of the work of criticism, the commentator's approach to the author's work, the purpose of the criticism, and changes in critical trends regarding the author.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** designed to help the user find the original essay or book precedes each critical piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- A concise **Further Reading** section appears at the end of entries on authors for whom a significant amount of criticism exists in addition to the pieces reprinted in *CLC*. Each citation in this section is accompanied by a descriptive annotation describing the content of that article. Materials included in this section are grouped under various headings (e.g., Biography, Bibliography, Criticism, and Interviews) to aid users in their search for additional information. Cross-references to other useful sources published by The Gale Group in which the author has appeared are also included: *Authors in the News*, *Black Writers*, *Children's Literature Review*, *Contemporary Authors*, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, *DISCovering Authors*, *Drama Criticism*, *Hispanic Literature Criticism*, *Hispanic Writers*, *Native North American Literature*, *Poetry Criticism*, *Something about the Author*, *Short Story Criticism*, *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, and *Something about the Author Autobiography Series*.

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- Each new volume of *CLC* includes a **Cumulative Topic Index**, which lists all literary topics treated in *CLC*, *NCLC*, *TCLC*, and *LC 1400-1800*.
- A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all the authors who have appeared in the various literary criticism series published by The Gale Group, with cross-references to Gale's biographical and autobiographical series. A full listing of the series referenced there appears on the first page of the indexes of this volume. Readers will welcome this cumulated author index as a useful tool for locating an author within the various series. The index, which lists birth and death dates when available, will be particularly valuable for those authors who are identified with a certain period but whose death dates cause them to be placed in another, or for those authors whose careers span two periods. For example, Ernest Hemingway is found in *CLC*, yet F. Scott Fitzgerald, a writer often associated with him, is found in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*.
- A **Cumulative Nationality Index** alphabetically lists all authors featured in *CLC* by nationality, followed by numbers corresponding to the volumes in which the authors appear.
- An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, novellas, dramas, films, record albums, and poetry, short story, and essay collections are printed in italics, while all individual poems, short stories, essays, and songs are printed in roman type within quotation marks; when published separately (e.g., T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*), the titles of long poems are printed in italics.
- In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale has also produced a **Special Paper-bound Edition** of the *CLC* title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of the index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index: it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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¹Alfred Cismaru, "Making the Best of It," *The New Republic*, 207, No. 24, (December 7, 1992), 30, 32; excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 85, ed. Christopher Giroux (Detroit: Gale, 1995), pp. 73-4.

²Yvor Winters, *The Post-Symbolist Methods* (Allen Swallow, 1967); excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 85, ed. Christopher Giroux (Detroit: Gale, 1995), pp. 223-26.

Suggestions Are Welcome

The editors hope that readers will find *CLC* a useful reference tool and welcome comments about the work. Send comments and suggestions to: Editors, *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, The Gale Group, 27500 Drake Rd., Farmington Hills, MI 48333-3535.

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Anna Akhmatova

1888-1966

(Pseudonym for Anna Andreyevna Gorenko) Russian poet, translator, and essayist.

The following entry presents an overview of Akhmatova's career. For further information on her life and works, see *CLC*, Volumes 11, 25, and 64.

INTRODUCTION

Anna Akhmatova spent a major part of her career not being able to publish her work in her own country, yet she refused to be silenced. By remaining one of the few artists who did not emigrate during the years of Stalinist oppression in Russia, and by having friends memorize her verse when committing it to paper would have been dangerous, she guaranteed herself and the Russian people a voice. As such she has become one of the most important artistic figures in twentieth-century literature.

Biographical Information

Akhmatova was born Anna Andreyevna Gorenko in Kiev, Russia. Her father was a naval architect and moved the family to the Baltic in 1905. After her father and mother separated, the family settled in Tsarkoe Selo, just outside St. Petersburg. In 1910, Akhmatova married the poet Nikolai Gumilyov, who was at first reluctant for her to pursue poetry. When he saw her talent, however, he encouraged her, and together with poets such as Osip Mandelstam they began the Acmeist movement in Russian poetry. The movement was in opposition to the prevailing Symbolist poetry of the era. At the age of 22, she published her first volume *Vecher* (1912; *Evening*). Her middle-class father had asked her not to dishonor their family name with literary pursuits, so she published under the pseudonym Anna Akhmatova, the Tartar name of her maternal great-grandmother who had descended from Genghis Khan. She developed a cult following in the literary world of St. Petersburg with her second volume, *Chetki* (1914; *Rosary*), and she gained a brilliant reputation in Russia where her poetry was widely read. In 1913 she left Gumilev and eventually married Vladimir Shileiko, an Orientalist, whom she divorced in 1921. The Revolution of October 1917 changed both Akhmatova's life and career. In 1921, her first husband Gumilyov was executed after being charged with involvement in a counter-revolutionary conspiracy. She did not emigrate like other artists, and in 1925, there was an unofficial ban on her work. During this period, Akhmatova continued to write poetry, often about the cruel acts being committed in the name of the Revolution and un-



der the rule of Stalin. She memorized her verses and had friends memorize them, fearing arrest if a written copy were found. She married again at this time, to Nikolai Punin, a critic and historian, but this marriage also ended in separation. Many of her friends were arrested and died under Stalin's persecution, and she suffered another great loss in 1935 when her son, Lev Gumilyov, was arrested and subsequently spent fourteen years in prison and in exile in Siberia. The poems in her *Rekviem* (1964; *Requiem*) were inspired by her trips to visit her son in prison in Leningrad and express the sense of loss she felt by the separation. In 1939, Stalin allowed several of her poems to be published, but Akhmatova again fell out of government favor in 1946 when she was denounced by Andrey Zhdanov, Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Zhdanov began an ideological campaign against her work, calling it too personal to be relevant to a socialist society. She was expelled from the Union of Soviet Writers and ostracized from the Russian literary world for the next ten years. She was only readmitted to the Union after the death of Stalin. The ban on Akhmatova's work was not officially lifted until 1988, but interest in her work burgeoned anyway and by the 1960s

Akhmatova was world famous. In 1964 she won the Etna-Taormina international poetry prize, and in 1965 she received an honorary doctorate from Oxford University.

Major Works

A major influence on Akhmatova's work was her relationship to the Acmeists—writers who attempted to restore clarity to poetic language and who utilized the ordinary objects and events of daily life for their subject. Her poems explore her search for identity as a woman, a poet, and a Russian, as they delve into the complexities of human nature. In many of her early volumes the theme of love dominates along with attendant motifs of romantic meetings and separations, togetherness and solitude, and jealousy is often present. The poems in *Evening* paint a portrait of love as long periods of suffering broken up by rare moments of happiness and joy. In *Rosary* she deals with her feelings of guilt and loss over the breakup of her marriage with Gumilev. The poems in this collection contain many religious elements, expressing her strong belief in Christianity. With her third book, *Belaya Staya* (1917; *The White Flock*), Akhmatova turns to more civic-minded themes, including the foreshadowing of World War I in "July 1914." *Requiem* tells the story of a mother separated from her only son and was inspired by Akhmatova's own story and those of the thousands of other Russian women with whom she waited outside prison walls. This cycle of poems chronicles the era of Stalinism and the grief and horror suffered during these years. *Poema Bez Geroya; Triptykh* (1960; *Poem Without a Hero; Triptych*) chronicled her life before and after World War II. The poems described such personal events as love affairs and the suicide of a young cadet who was in love with Akhmatova's friend, but through these autobiographical accounts, she chronicled an epoch time period in world history. In this collection are many veiled statements and complex allusions that are much more opaque than her previous work.

Critical Reception

Critics often discuss Akhmatova's work in its relation to the Acmeist movement. As with other Acmeists, reviewers find Akhmatova's work more straightforward than that of her Symbolist predecessors. Critics often discuss Akhmatova's literary debt to Russian poet Alexander Pushkin, including her unselfconscious impulses, use of allusions, and superb diction and rhythms. Stanley Kunitz states, "[Akhmatova's] poems exist in the purity and exactness of their diction, the authority of their tone, the subtlety of their rhythmic modulations, the integrity of their form." Reviewers praise Akhmatova's unique voice, many arguing that her verse is definitive. John Simon says, "I do see a poet with an original vision and a personal voice who manages to maintain her individual talent within the tradition." Many reviewers discuss the impact the Russian political climate had on

Akhmatova's career and how it helped to infuse a civic element in her work. Many assert that she was the veritable voice of the Russian people during one of its most harrowing periods in history. More specifically, some critics claimed Akhmatova was the mouthpiece for subjugated Russian women and a true feminist leader before Feminism. Ervin C. Brody asserts, "A chronicler of the isolated and intimate psychological events of a woman's emotional and intellectual life as well as the political events in the Soviet Union, Anna Akhmatova is one of Russia's greatest poets and perhaps the greatest woman poet in the history of Western culture."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Vecher* [Evening] (poetry) 1912
Chetki [Rosary] (poetry) 1914
Belaya Staya [The White Flock] (poetry) 1917
Skrizhal: Sbornik [Ecstasy Collection] (poetry) 1918
U Samogo Morya [At the Very Edge of the Sea] (poetry) 1921
Podorozhnik [Plantain] (poetry) 1921
Anno Domini MCMXXI (poetry) 1921
Anno Domini (poetry) 1923
Stikhi [Poems] (poetry) 1940
Iz Shesti Knig [From Six Books] (poetry) 1940
Izbrannie Stikhi [Selected Poems] (poetry) 1943
Tashkentskie Stikhi [Tashkent Poems] (poetry) 1944
Koreiskaya Klassicheskaya Poeziya [Korean Classical Poetry; translator] (poetry) 1956
Stikhotvoreniya 1909-1957 [Poems 1909-1957] (poetry) 1958
Poema Bez Geroya; Triptykh [Poem without a Hero; Triptych] (poetry) 1960
Stikhotvoreniya 1909-1960 [Poems 1909-1960] (poetry) 1961
Collected Poems: 1912-1963 (poetry) 1963
Rekvium: Tsikl Stikhotvorenii [Requiem: A Cycle of Poems] (poetry) 1964
Beg Vremeni [Race of Time] (poetry) 1965
Golosa Poetov [Voices of the Poets; translator] (poetry) 1965
Lirika Drevnevo Egipta [Ancient Egyptian Lyrics; translator; with Vera Potapova] (poetry) 1965
Stikhotvoreniya 1909-1965 (poetry) 1965
Klassicheskaya poeziya Vostoka [Classical Poetry of the East; translator] (poetry) 1969

CRITICISM

Stanley Kunitz (essay date 1935)

SOURCE: "On Translating Akhmatova," in his *A Kind of*

Order, A Kind of Folly, Little, Brown and Company, 1935, pp. 39-46.

[In the following essay, Kunitz discusses the difficulty in translating Akhmatova's poetry from its original Russian.]

Pasternak was once rebuked by a pedant who came to his door bearing a long list of the poet's mistakes in translating *Hamlet*. The complaint was greeted with laughter and a shrug: "What difference does it make? Shakespeare and I—we're both geniuses, aren't we?" As if to justify his arrogance, Pasternak's *Hamlet* is today considered one of the glories of Russian literature. My Russian friend who passed the anecdote on to me was unable to recall the visiting critic's name.

The poet as translator lives with a paradox. His work must not read like a translation; conversely, it is not an exercise of the free imagination. One voice enjoins him: "Respect the text!" The other simultaneously pleads with him: "Make it new!" He resembles the citizen in Kafka's aphorism who is fettered to two chains, one attached to earth, the other to heaven. If he heads for earth, his heavenly chain throttles him; if he heads for heaven, his earthly chain pulls him back. And yet, as Kafka says, "All the possibilities are his, and he feels it; more, he actually refuses to account for the deadlock by an error in the original fettering." While academicians insist that poetry is untranslatable, poets continue to produce their translations—never in greater proliferation or diversity than now.

The easiest poets to translate are the odd and flashy ones, particularly those who revel in linguistic display. The translator of Akhmatova, like the translator of Pushkin, is presented with no idiosyncrasy of surface or of syntax to simplify his task. Her poems exist in the purity and exactness of their diction, the authority of their tone, the subtlety of their rhythmic modulations, the integrity of their form. These are inherent elements of the poetry itself, not to be confused with readily imitable "effects." The only way to translate Akhmatova is by writing well. A hard practice!

Akhmatova's early poems, like those of most young poets, tend to deal with the vagaries of love, breathtaking now and then for their dramatic point and reckless candor. It has been said that she derived not so much from other poets as from the great Russian novelists of the nineteenth century. She herself enters into her poems like a character in a work of fiction, or in a play. On New Year's Day, 1913, when she was twenty-three, she broke a poem open with an expostulation that the guardians of the State were later to use against her: "We're all drunkards here, and harlots: / how wretched we are together!" On the next New Year's Day she wrote, in bravura novelistic style:

"What do you want?" I asked.
"To be with you in hell," he said.
I laughed: "It's plain you mean
to have us both destroyed."

He lifted his thin hand
and lightly stroked the flowers:
"Tell me how men kiss you,
tell me how you kiss."

This was the period of her brilliant, if disastrous, first marriage, when husband and wife were the toast of the Bohemian set of St. Petersburg, he as Gumi-lev (Gumi-lion) and she as Gumi-lvitsa (Gumi-lioness). Her slender grace and aristocratic aquiline profile were as celebrated as her verses. Though in the post-Revolutionary years that followed she was to meet with terrible misfortunes; endure the indignities of poverty, official contempt, and silence; and suffer the death or exile of those dearest to her, she remained proud and spirited. Even in her last days, after her "rehabilitation"—sleazy bureaucratic euphemism!—she refused to wear the geriatric mask of complacency. In delirium she wrote:

Herewith I solemnly renounce my hoard
of earthly goods, whatever counts as chattel.
The genius and guardian angel of this place
has changed to an old tree-stump in the water.

Tragedy did not wither her: it crowned her with majesty. Her life, in Keats's phrase, became "a continual allegory," its strands interwoven with the story of a people. Indeed, her poems can be read in sequence as a twentieth-century Russian chronicle. The only way to arrange them is in chronological order, while attempting to cover the breadth of her themes and of her expressiveness, which ranges, in Andrei Sinyavsky's words, "from a barely audible whisper to fiery oratory, from modestly lowered eyes to thunder and lightning."

I wish I were a better linguist than I am, but in default of that aptitude I count myself lucky in my partnership with Max Hayward. Akhmatova herself translated with outside help from a number of languages, including Chinese, Korean, Ancient Egyptian, Bengali, Armenian, Georgian, and Yiddish. Translator-poets in the past have consulted linguists as a matter of course, without feeling the need for acknowledging the assistance they received. The modern tendency, reflecting the dynamics of our curiosity about other cultures, is to facilitate and formalize the collaboration between poet and scholar. Largely owing to such combinations of skills, all literatures, however minor or esoteric, are at the point of becoming world literature. If, on occasion, I have rather boldly rendered a line or a phrase, it has always been on aesthetic grounds, never because I felt that my in-

formation was unreliable. Intuition is a blessing, but it is better to combine it with clarity of understanding.

In certain quarters the "literal version" of a poem is held sacred, though the term is definitely a misnomer. As Arthur Waley noted: "There are seldom sentences that have word-to-word equivalents in another language. It becomes a question of choosing between various approximations." Translation is a sum of approximations, but not all approximations are equal. Russian word order, for example, says: "As if I my own sobs / out of another's hands were drinking." One has to rearrange the passage to make it sound idiomatic, and one may even have to sharpen the detail to make it work in English, but one is not at liberty to indulge in willful invention. The so-called literal version is already a radical reconstitution of the verbal ingredients of a poem into another linguistic system—at the expense of its secret life, its interconnecting psychic tissue, its complex harmonies.

Here is an early poem of Akhmatova's, written in the year following her marriage to the poet Gumilev—a very simple poem, perhaps the best kind to use for illustration. If you follow the original text word by word, this is how it reads:

He liked three things in the world:
at evening mass singing, white peacocks
and worn-out maps of America.
Didn't like it when cry children,
didn't like tea with raspberry jam,
and female hysterics.
But I was his wife.

Despite its modesty, the Russian text has its charm and its music, which the slavish transcription forfeits completely. Whatever liberties one takes in translation are determined by the effort to recreate the intrinsic virtues of the source:

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.

My deviations from the literal are for the sake of prosodic harmony, naturalness of diction, and brightness of tone. The poem in English is based on the irregular trimeters of the original, and it suggests the rhyming pattern without copying it exactly.

"Lot's Wife" is one of Akhmatova's most celebrated poems, often quoted by Russian poets and often imitated too. The theme seems to fascinate them, for fairly obvious reasons.

And the just man trailed God's shining agent,
over a black mountain, in his giant track,
while a restless voice kept harrying his woman:
"It's not too late, you can still look back

at the red towers of your native Sodom,
the square where once you sang, the spinning-shed,
at the empty windows set in the tall house
where sons and daughters blessed your
marriage-bed."

A single glance: a sudden dart of pain
stitching her eyes before she made a sound . . .
Her body flaked into transparent salt,
and her swift legs rooted to the ground.

Who will grieve for this woman? Does she not seem
too insignificant for our concern?
Yet in my heart I never will deny her,
who suffered death because she chose to turn.

After Richard Wilbur and I discovered that we had been separately struggling with translations of "Lot's Wife," we compared our versions. Both of us acknowledged that it was the last stanza in particular that had given us a bad time. "Literally" it reads:

Who woman this weep for will?
Not least does she not seem of losses?
Only heart my never will forget
Woman who gave life for one single peep.

The sentiment is noble, but the sound in English is ridiculous. The problem each of us had faced was how to restore the dignity and style that had been lost in transit. Wilbur's fine translation concludes:

Who would waste tears upon her? Is she not
The least of our losses, this unhappy wife?
Yet in my heart she will not be forgot
Who, for a single glance, gave up her life.

Technically Wilbur's considerable achievement is to duplicate the original ABAB rhyme scheme (not, wife, forgot, life) without wrenching the sense, whereas I have only the second and fourth lines rhyming to suggest the contours of Akhmatova's measured quatrains. My impression, however, is that Wilbur has had to sacrifice, for the sake of his rhymes, more than they are worth. In a poem of his own I doubt that he would say, "Yet in my heart she will not be forgot / Who, for a single glance, gave up her life." Nobody speaks like that, but the constrictions of the pattern did not leave him sufficient room in which to naturalize his diction.

In one of my many discarded versions of the stanza I wrote:

Who will grieve for this woman? Does she not seem
the very least of losses in our book?
Yet in my heart I never will forget her,
who died in payment for a backward look.

Perhaps I felt that the force of "backward look" had already been dissipated in the first stanza, and perhaps my ear resisted the terminal clink of the rhyme, but I can see now that those abandoned lines have the advantage of greater fidelity to the text and ease of movement. I may have made the wrong choice. In any event, I doubt that I have finished tinkering with "Lot's Wife."

The object is to produce an analogous poem in English out of available signs and sounds, a new poem sprung from the matrix of the old, drenched in memories of its former existence, capable of reviving its singular pleasures. The Russian poet Nikolai Zabolotsky had another figure for the process. He said it was like building a new city out of the ruins of the old.

Akhmatova is usually described as a formal poet, but in her later years she wrote more and more freely. Some of her poems, particularly the dramatic lyrics that developed out of her histrionic temperament, are so classically joined that they cannot be translated effectively without a considerable reconstruction of their architecture; others are much more fluid in their making. To insist on a universally rigid duplication of metrical or rhyming patterns is arbitrary and pointless, at any rate, since the effects are embedded in the language of origin and are not mechanically transferable to another language. Instead of rhyme our ear is often better pleased by an instrumentation of off-rhyme, assonance, consonance, and other linkages. Prosody is not founded on law, but on the way we speak, the way we breathe. In this connection Osip Mandelstam's widow offers a pertinent commentary:

In the period when I lived with Akhmatova, I was able to watch her at work as well, but she was much less "open" about it than M., and I was not always even aware that she was "composing." She was, in general, much more withdrawn and reserved than M. and I was always struck by her self-control as a woman—it was almost a kind of asceticism. She did not even allow her lips to move, as M. did so openly, but rather, I think, pressed them tighter as she composed her poems, and her mouth became set in an even sadder way. M. once said to me before I had met Akhmatova—and repeated to me many times afterward—that looking at these lips you could hear her voice, that her poetry was made of it and was inseparable from it. Her contemporaries—he continued—who had heard this voice were richer

than future generations who would not be able to hear it.

It may be some comfort to reflect that poets are not easily silenced, even in death. As Akhmatova herself wrote, towards the end, "On paths of air I seem to overhear / two friends, two voices, talking in their turn." Despite the passage of time, the ranks of listeners grow, and the names of Akhmatova and Pasternak and Mandelstam are familiar even on foreign tongues. Some of us are moved to record what we have heard, and to try to give it back in the language that we love.

Translation is usually regarded as a secondary act of creation. One has only to cite the King James Bible, Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, Chapman's *Homer*, Dryden's *Aeneid*, Fitzgerald's *Rubáiyát*, and for modern instances the poems of Pound and Waley, to demonstrate the fallacy of this view. Poets are attracted to translation because it is a way of paying their debt to the tradition, of restoring life to shades, of widening the company of their peers. It is also a means of self-renewal, of entering the skin and adventuring through the body of another's imagination. In the act of translation one becomes more like that other, and is fortified by that other's power.

Yelena Byelyakova (essay date April 1990)

SOURCE: "Anna Akhmatova: 'Mother Courage' of Poetry," in *Unesco Courier*, Vol. 43, April, 1990, p. 48.

[In the following essay, Byelyakova provides an overview of Akhmatova's career.]

The life of Anna Akhmatova was a tragic one. Although she had her moments of glory she also experienced terrible humiliations.

She was born in 1889, and her youth coincided with an extraordinary literary flowering, the silver age of Russian poetry. Her first volume of verses, *Večer (Evening)* was published in 1912. It was followed two years later by *Chyotki (Rosary)* which was reprinted eight times and made her name. The themes of most of her early poems are meetings and separations, love and solitude. Their style is rigorous, laconic.

Her poetry was read throughout Russia, and the critics predicted a brilliant future for this "Russian Sappho". She published regularly—*Belaya staya* (1917; *The White Flock*), *Podorozhnik* (1921; *Plantain*), and *Anno Domini MCMXXI* (1922).

Unlike many intellectuals in her circle, Akhmatova did not