Two Poems

BY MARGARET ATWOOD

The translation of poetry is an impossible task. Operations manuals are easy to translate. Novels may be approximated. But the essence of a poem is in its sounds, the resonances those sounds have for native speakers of their language, the web they form with the history of that language and therefore of that people. About all you can do when you are "translating" a poem is to make another poem that will run parallel to the original, in more or less the same direction.

What I have been asked to do here is another impossible task. It's one of those things you say *yes* to over the phone, without really understanding what you've been asked to do, and how unlikely it is that you'll be able to do it with any assurance or grace.

The proposition was that I should choose a poem of Anna Akhmatova's, another one by myself that was related to it, and then comment on why I chose them. But once I began to look, difficulties loomed large. The first was, of course, that I cannot read Russian. I can look at Akhmatova's originals, and by examining the shapes of the letters make a guess at the kinds of rhymes and assonances she employs, but beyond that I have to rely on translators; and once you've read several translations of the same poem, you realize what enormous room for variant readings exist.

The second is Akhmatova's amazing life, and the larger-than-life legend that has accumulated around her. Here is a woman born in the nineteenth century, who suffered, in her own country and, one might say, in her own body, some of the most major calamities of the twentieth: the disaster of the First World War, the chaos of the Russian Revolution, the repressions following that, the terror under Stalin, the devastations of the Second World War; attendant upon these, the execution of her first husband, the imprisonment of her son, and the deaths, exiles and censorship of a great many members of her own writing generation. She herself was not allowed to publish in Russia for many years; she emerged from this imposed silence to be greeted with an acclaim bordering on worship, and was then suppressed again. For women, she is paradigmatic in that it was her quality as a female that was used against her in attacks by her enemies. She was accused of being both nun and whore, of concentrating on the personal to the exclusion of the (approved) political, of talking too much about "love", of being too "subjective." From this point in time it all sounds rather familiar, but Akhmatova was not permitted to counter with "the personal is political," that slogan then being some thirty years in the future.

And here is another difficulty: time. To which I add space. How could I hope to find a poem of mine that would be close enough to one of hers to make comparison in any way meaningful? Fifty years separate our birthdates. Although we are both children of the northern hemisphere, and of the north, a continent divides us. I was born when repression in the Soviet Union was at its height; I began writing poetry in the fifties, era of the Cold War to be true, but in a land flowing with milk, honey, and large cars with tailfins; far from believing itself to be witnessing the dissolution of a literary tradition, it thought it did not have one. Apart from a few highschools which have taken my books off their curriculae, no one has banned my work. None of my friends has been shot by the government of my country for what she has written, no war has lately been fought on Canadian soil. My experience of twentieth-century large-scale horrors has been mercifully second-hand.

What poems should I choose? In Akhmatova's work there is a great range, from personal lyrics to meditations on the state of her generation, to uncompromising poems on the imprisonment and suppression suffered by the voices of her country. In the end, I decided to bypass the obvious — even the wonderful and much-quoted "Lot's Wife," which would be the easy choice for

Anna Akhmatova, 1920s *courtesy* NOVOSTI PRESS AGENCY

a publication such as this one — and to pick the marvellous tribute to Boris Pasternak, in its luscious translation by Stanley Kunitz. This poem dates from 1936, during the height (or depth) of the Stalin reign of terror; yet it is a celebration of life-on-earth, of the "thisness," the particularity, the fullness of reality. As well as being a lovely and generous praise of a fellow artist (and one who had also incurred the displeasure of the tyrant), it is filled with the quiet defiance of art. Even to make poetry, under such conditions, is a form of resistance. As Akhmatova herself says of Pasternak's work, it is a "song" made out of "graveyard thistles." But nevertheless a song.

I suppose it is this quality of "nevertheless" — of praising despite the heavy odds — that unites our quite disparate poems. Akhmatova faced the destruction of her homeland; we of this later age have been staring in the face another kind of destruction, potential rather than actual. We've grown up with the Bomb, and are now overshadowed by environmental catastrophe. The threatened homeland is as large as the earth.

So the poem I have chosen is "Last Day."

Last Day

This is the last day of the last week.
It's June, the evenings touching
our skins like plush, milkweed sweetening
the sticky air which pulses
with moths, their powdery wings and velvet
tongues. In the dusk, nighthawks and the fluting
voices from the pond, its edges
webbed with spawn. Everything
leans into the pulpy moon.

In the mornings the hens
make egg after egg, warty-shelled
and perfect; the henhouse floor
packed with old shit and winter straw
trembles with flies, green and silver.
Who wants to leave it, who wants it
to end, water moving
against water, skin
against skin? We wade
through moist sun-
light towards nothing, which is oval

and full. This egg
in my hand is our last meal,
you break it open and the sky
turns orange again and the sun rises
again and this is the last day again.

Boris Pasternak

He who has compared himself to the eye of a horse
peers, looks, sees, identifies,
and instantly like molten diamonds
puddles shine, ice grieves and liquefies.

In lilac mists the backyards drowse,
and depots, logs, leaves, clouds above;
that hooting train, that crunch of watermelon rind,
that timid hand in a perfumed kid glove . . .

All's ringing, roaring, grinding, breakers' crash —
and silence all at once, release:
it means he is tiptoeing over pine needles,
so as not to startle the light sleep of space.

And it means he is counting the grains
in the blasted ears; it means
he has come again to the Daryal Gorge,
accursed and black, from another funeral.

And again Moscow, where the heart's fever burns.
Far off the deadly sleighbell chimes,
someone is lost two steps from home
in waist-high snow. The worst of times . . .

For spying Laocoön in a puff of smoke,
for making a song out of graveyard thistles,
for filling the world with a new sound
of verse reverberating in new space,

he has been rewarded by a kind of eternal childhood,
with the generosity and brilliance of the stars;
the whole of the earth was his to inherit,
and his to share with every human spirit.

— 19th January 1936

The poem "Last Day," is reprinted from Margaret Atwood's True Stories, *(New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), p. 103. Anna Akhmatova's poem "Boris Pasternak" is reprinted from* Poems of Akhmatova, *translated and introduced by Stanley Kunitz, with Max Hayward (Toronto and Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1973), pp. 83; 85.*

 Anna Akhmatova, 1959 *courtesy* NOVOSTI PRESS AGENCY