

## Meetings with Anna Akhmatova: Translation as Interrogation

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In the poem 'Roses' Stephen Berg writes, 'and I still feel your mouth, opening to mine, | our tongues greeting each other'.<sup>1</sup> This physical coming together of tongues evokes the metaphoric coming together of tongues in the act of translation. Soviet-born poet and translator Joseph Brodsky, in an interview with Sven Birkerts, extends Berg's metaphor: 'With a foreign culture, a foreign realm that you think you are never going to see, your love affair is a lot more intense'. In her essay 'The Politics of Translation', Gayatri Spivak describes the 'love affair' of translation as 'the most intimate act of reading'. She explains,

Unless the translator has earned the right to become the intimate reader, she cannot surrender to the text, cannot respond to the special call of the text [...] In order to earn that right of friendship or surrender of identity [...] you have to be in a different relationship with the language.<sup>2</sup>

Translation as friendship or love affair – between writer and translator, source-language text and target-language text, original culture and receiving culture – requires, as virtually any act of human collaboration does, communication. In *The Translator's Turn*, Douglas Robinson takes up the idea of translation as a social activity; for Robinson, translation is most significantly a dialogical interaction between the translator and the source-language writer. This 'dialogical interaction' or dialogue is, as Hans-Georg Gadamer describes in *Truth and Method*, 'a process of coming to an understanding. Thus it belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself to the other'. The conversation that occurs on the pages of a translated text is an 'adventure in empathy'.<sup>3</sup> Translators must strive to understand the particular writers they encounter.

This encountering echoes the works of twentieth-century Russian poet Anna Akhmatova. As Judith Hemschemeyer explains in her 'Translator's Preface' to *The Complete*

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Berg, *With Akhmatova at the Black Gates* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1981), p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Brodsky, Interview with Sven Birkerts, *The Paris Review*, 83 (Spring 1982) [accessed 7 Nov. 2011], n. pag; Gayatri C. Spivak, 'The Politics of Translation', in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. by Lawrence Venuti, 2nd edn (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 369-88 (p. 372).

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Robinson, *The Translator's Turn* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), pp. 133-36; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 283; qtd. in Sherry Simon, *Gender in Translation* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 75.

*Poems of Anna Akhmatova*, ‘She [Akhmatova] was a poet of encounters’.<sup>4</sup> In Akhmatova’s lyric poetry there is a relentless search for the other, the ‘you’ figure – whether that ‘you’ is beloved, muse, historical being, or abstract concept. From the first work in her first collection, a poem titled ‘Love’, Akhmatova establishes the central focus of her poetry, what she terms ‘meetings’. Yet as the critic Kornei Chukovsky writes, ‘her [Akhmatova’s] poetry nourished on the feeling of lack of possession, parting and loss’.<sup>5</sup> Parting becomes a permanent feature of Akhmatova’s life: ‘After World War II, when Akhmatova returned to Leningrad, non-meetings occurred more often than meetings in her life and her poetry because of the absence of the friends who had emigrated and the detention and death of those who had remained in Russia’.<sup>6</sup> The non-meetings of Akhmatova’s later works reveal the breakdown of the collaboration between the poetic personae ‘I’ and ‘you’.

Similarly, the collaboration or meeting between translator and writer is always already a non-meeting; translator and writer seldom physically meet. Further, in a translation, it is the translator (at most, the translators) who has agency. Writers of the original texts are excluded from the process of translation at the precise point at which their texts end. The tension inherent in the translator-writer collaboration, therefore, recalls the more negative definition of collaboration: ‘traitorous cooperation with the enemy’.<sup>7</sup> This definition resonates with the events of Akhmatova’s own life, specifically her two meetings in 1945 and 1946 with the scholar Isaiah Berlin, who was then working for the British Embassy in Moscow. As David N. Wells explains in his historical account of Akhmatova’s life, ‘in Stalin’s Russia, contact with foreigners was regarded with deep suspicion by the authorities, and, by seeing Berlin on several occasions, Akhmatova was running a considerable risk’.<sup>8</sup> Akhmatova’s collaboration with Berlin, therefore, became a point of suspected betrayal. The French word *trahir*, to betray, is especially telling for its linguistic similarity to the French words *traduire*, to translate, and *traductrice*, translator. Akhmatova was engaged in both *trahir* (if only on the basis of Stalin’s suspicions) and *traduire* (among her translations are the letters of Rubens and the verse of various Armenian poets). Affiliation between translation and treachery gestures toward the possibility of upheaval in the translational love affair.

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<sup>4</sup> Judith Hemschemeyer, ‘Preface’, in *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova*, by Anna Akhmatova, 1 vols (Somerville, MA: Zephyr Press, 1990), pp. 1-19 (p. 2).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7; qtd. in Richard McKane, ‘Introduction’, in *Selected Poems*, by Anna Akhmatova (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), pp. 7-12 (p. 10).

<sup>6</sup> Hemschemeyer, pp. 11-12.

<sup>7</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn (n.p.: Oxford University press, 1989) [accessed 7 Nov. 2011], s.v. collaboration.

<sup>8</sup> David N. Wells, *Anna Akhmatova: Her Poetry* (Oxford: Berg, 1996), p. 20.

Collaboration seeps into interrogation. In the Russia of Stalin, the word ‘interrogation’ reverberates with meaning. Akhmatova’s poetry itself is as much an interrogation – sometimes explicitly, often implicitly – of the Soviet regime she was immersed in, as it is a space of encounters.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, in the act of translating, Akhmatova’s English translators – in particular, Hemschemeyer, Stanley Kunitz with Max Hayward, Richard McKane, and Berg – interrogate Akhmatova’s original Russian poems, as well as the process of translation.

The paratextual elements of the various translations of Akhmatova’s poetry partake in the process of translational interrogation. Just as translation involves choice – from what to translate to how to translate it – so too the presentation and physical arrangement of a translated text is based around a series of choices. These choices often reveal the theoretical implications underpinning the text. From the outset, Hemschemeyer frames her translation of Akhmatova’s complete poems as a collaboration. The cover page, title page, and table of contents are bilingual (English and Russian). Moreover, alongside Akhmatova’s name on the cover page, Hemschemeyer’s name appears as the translator and Roberta Reeder is noted as the editor. In her ‘Translator’s Preface,’ Hemschemeyer elaborates on this collaborative process: ‘I became convinced that Akhmatova’s poems should be translated in their entirety, and by a woman poet, and that I was that person. Using literals provided by Ann Wilkinson for the first 300 poems and by Natasha Gurfinkel and Roberta Reeder for the rest, I translated the poems’.<sup>10</sup> The collaborative process of this text is not only between primary translator and writer, Hemschemeyer and Akhmatova, but it also invites the voices of Ann Wilkinson, Natasha Gurfinkel, and Roberta Reeder. Language is another entity invited into the translational collaboration. Hemschemeyer explains, ‘I repeated the poem over and over to myself in Russian to get the rhythm. Then, using the literal translation as a base, I would invite felicitous English words to alight in some kind of regular line’. Hemschemeyer also suggests that the ‘English-speaking reader find a Russian friend to read aloud [...] some of the poems’.<sup>11</sup> This extra-textual relation between English-speaking and Russian-speaking readers parallels the textual collaboration between translator and writer.

Even though Hemschemeyer frames her text as a collaboration, interrogation becomes inevitable. The facing pages of *The Complete Poems* engage in a silent battle for authority: the original Russian on the verso side of the page versus the English translations on the recto side. Whether read or understood by the reader, the Russian poems appear first, and their

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 14, 22-23.

<sup>10</sup> Hemschemeyer, pp. 6-7.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 17-18.

presence is a constant reminder that the adjacent English poems are secondary or removed. To *translate* is to come too late. A translation necessarily misses the ephemeral moment of the original text; it is a non-meeting. Moreover, there is visual tension between the Russian verso sides and the English recto sides. Although Hemschemeyer endeavours to maintain ‘Akhmatova’s line breaks and the look of the poem on the page,’ there are instances of noticeable disparity between original and translation.<sup>12</sup> For example, the lines of the poem ‘Little Song’ are conspicuously longer than the lines of its Russian counterpart, ‘*Piesinka*’.<sup>13</sup> These discrepant line lengths not only foreground the disparity between the two languages, but they also gesture toward the interrogational process of translation. The longer lines of ‘Little Song’ interrogate the possibility of equivalence in translation. Instead, translation is presented as multiple and subjective. The pages of *The Complete Poems*, therefore, both literally and metaphorically face (confront, challenge) each other.

In their *Poems of Akhmatova*, Kunitz and Hayward also employ facing pages, which work to foreground the translational process. This text is not only a collaboration between translator and writer, but also between poet and linguist, Kunitz and Hayward. The cover and title page both read: ‘Selected, translated and introduced by Stanley Kunitz with Max Hayward.’ The word ‘with’ here is especially telling: unlike the expected conjunction ‘and,’ which is ‘simply connective,’ the preposition ‘with’ denotes ‘personal relation’.<sup>14</sup> ‘With’ is an accompaniment, a collaboration. It is also an indicator of power relations: Kunitz has more authority over the text than Hayward. Collaboration once again turns interrogation. In his preface, ‘A Note on the Translations,’ Kunitz comments on his collaboration with Hayward:

I doubt that Akhmatova would have been surprised at the nature of the collaboration responsible for this volume. She herself [...] translated with outside help from a number of languages [...] 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 [...] is to facilitate and formalize the collaboration between poet and scholar [...] I count myself lucky in this partnership [...] For so interdependent an association, the prerequisites are a reciprocity of trust and confidence, together with a congeniality of temperament.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> Anna Akhmatova, *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova*, trans. by Judith Hemschemeyer, ed. by Roberta Reeder, 2 vols (Somerville, MA: Zephyr Press, 1990), 1, pp. 526-27. Transliteration of Russian throughout is mine.

<sup>14</sup> *OED*, s.v. and, with.

<sup>15</sup> Stanley Kunitz, ‘Preface’ in *Poems of Akhmatova*, by Anna Akhmatova (London: Collins and Harvill Press, 1974), pp. 29-35 (pp. 31-32).

Through this preface, Kunitz makes his collaboration with Hayward explicit. Every translated poem in *Poems of Akhmatova*, therefore, is a result of the understanding between Kunitz and Hayward. As Kunitz articulates in a 1982 interview with Chris Busa, ‘If I didn’t have someone to help me with the Russian text, I would certainly be lost. I’ve worked mostly with Max Hayward, who understands what I want from him.’<sup>16</sup>

The understanding between Kunitz and Hayward implies a mutual acceptance of the Akhmatova poems chosen for translation in their collection. Kunitz asserts, ‘No poem has been selected for inclusion that was not judged conspicuously fine or representative [of Akhmatova’s poetry]’. Yet this judgement is necessarily biased and particular. The inclusion of one poem over another, the specific sequence in which the poems appear, and the layout of the poems on the page all contribute to the interrogation of Akhmatova’s original texts. Discussing her poetry, Wells writes, ‘The linguistic structures of Akhmatova’s verse, then, act in such a way as to compel the reader to take her work as one continuous text, to search for the meanings of individual poems in those that surround them’.<sup>17</sup> Akhmatova’s work is contextual, deriving meaning as much from its surroundings as from the individual poems themselves. These poems are ‘with’ poems, as opposed to ‘and’ poems. They are related and work together; thus, their rearrangement in Kunitz with Hayward’s text is a disturbance, an interrogation of the original Russian verse.

In *Selected Poems*, McKane also translates and rearranges some of Akhmatova’s more recognized poems. Yet, unlike the collections translated by Hemschemeyer and Kunitz with Hayward, McKane’s text dismisses the collaborative aspect of translation. McKane’s name does not appear on the cover, and it is not until the title page – three pages in – that readers are told that this is a work of translation. Moreover, both McKane’s introduction and the introductory essay by Andrei Sinyavsky neglect to comment on or even mention translation. The only time the word ‘translation’ appears in these introductions is when McKane speaks about Akhmatova as a translator.<sup>18</sup> A short acknowledgement to the original Akhmatova collection from which these poems are translated is inserted (perhaps as a final thought) on the verso side of the page following the table of contents. The miniscule font and easily-overlooked location of this acknowledgement attest to the translator’s invisibility in this work. Moreover, the rest of the book, with its lack of facing pages, presents *Selected Poems* as an English-language text. The translator is marginalized – pushed into a corner of a

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<sup>16</sup> Stanley Kunitz, Interview with Chris Busa, *The Paris Review*, 83 (Spring 1982) [accessed 7 Nov. 2011], n. page.

<sup>17</sup> Kunitz, ‘Preface’, p. 31; Wells, p. 33.

darkly-lit interrogation room. In the power struggle between translator and writer, the translator loses. In his essay ‘On the Problem of Translation,’ Friedrich Nietzsche depicts a different dynamic between translator and writer. He explains that for the Ancient Romans ‘to translate meant to conquer – not merely in the sense that one would omit the historical dimension but [...] above all, in the sense that one would delete the name of the poet and insert the translator’s name in its place’.<sup>19</sup> The translator’s supremacy in Roman antiquity contrasts with the translator’s subordination to the writer in *Selected Poems*. McKane becomes a present absence in this text, always there, but imperceptible, hiding behind the face of the source poet. Akhmatova’s face, which appears both on the front and back covers of the text, is another paratextual element that participates in the interrogation of translation. First, the pictures of the elderly Akhmatova on the front versus the young Akhmatova on the back work to highlight the process of growth and transformation. This process gestures at the process of translation, which is itself a transformation: something new born of something old. Moreover, these pictures frame the text, emphasizing that the work is enclosed between the two Akhmatovas; McKane is once again shunned as the invisible translator.

If the paratext of McKane’s *Selected Poems* conceals the translator, the paratext of Berg’s *With Akhmatova at the Black Gates* renounces the translator altogether. Berg begins his afterword by rejecting the term ‘translation’ as a description for his text: ‘Not translations or versions or imitations, these poems started several years ago when I read Richard McKane’s translations of Anna Akhmatova’s poetry in his *Selected Poems of Anna Akhmatova*’.<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, the English translations Berg is working from are taken from a text where the translator is kept out of view. Yet Berg’s interrogation of translation begins long before this afterword. The cover page of his text reads: *With Akhmatova at the Black Gates: VARIATIONS / Stephen Berg*. The preposition ‘with’ again recalls a collaboration, presumably between Berg and Akhmatova this time. Unlike the other translations of Akhmatova’s works, however, no clear dichotomy is established between Berg as translator and Akhmatova as author. Indeed, Berg presents himself as author and his text as a series of variations. Variation implies alteration. In the sense of music, particularly, it denotes ‘a modification with regard to the tune, time, and harmony of a theme, by which on repetition it

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<sup>18</sup> McKane, p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘On the Problem of Translation’, trans. by Peter Mollenhauer, in *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*, ed. by Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 68-70 (p. 69).

<sup>20</sup> Stephen Berg, ‘Afterword’, in *With Akhmatova at the Black Gates* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1981), pp. 65-6 (p. 65).

appears in a new but still recognizable form'.<sup>21</sup> Berg's poems are variations: simultaneously original and full of Akhmatova's ideas and images. In a wider sense, these poems are also translations. As George Steiner explains, 'a human being performs an act of translation, in the full sense of the word, when receiving a speech-message from any other human being'. Octavio Paz reiterates this idea in 'Translation: Literature and Letters.' He writes, 'In its first phase, the translator's activity is no different from that of a reader or critic: each reading is a translation, and each criticism is, or begins as, an interpretation'.<sup>22</sup> Berg must translate the message he receives from readings of both McKane's English translations and Akhmatova's original Russian poems before his text can become variation.

The Berg-McKane-Akhmatova collaboration is necessarily one of tension. Although now rare, 'variation' also denotes discord or discrepancy between two or more entities.<sup>23</sup> This discord translates into interrogation, both of Akhmatova and of the translation process. The forward slash that separates 'VARIATIONS' and 'Stephen Berg' on the cover page is itself a site of interrogation. A slash implies the word 'or.' On the one hand, by refusing to settle for one alternative, 'or' allows a range of possibilities. On the other hand, 'or' threatens to become an ultimatum: either Akhmatova or Berg, but not both. Moreover, the slash visually and linguistically evokes a cut or a wound. The interrogation process of translation opens itself to the possibility of violence. Interestingly, the position of the slash before Berg's name seems to imply that this text leans on Berg as its sole creator. In his afterword, Berg addresses the debt he owes to McKane and Akhmatova: '[I] wrote until, most of the time, I could barely remember those English originals or trace the debt I owed [...] Finally I wrote the poems as my own [...] But I know they are based on a voice I sense is doubly mine: love and loss in myself and in another – the mixture is infinite, the many sources unclear'. Debt and the double voice recall Walter Benjamin's concept of 'double indebtedness': the original requires translation and is, therefore, indebted to the translation, just as the translation requires the original and is, therefore, indebted to the original.<sup>24</sup> Through mutual debt, translation and original become inseparable, mirroring the 'infinite mixture' or collaboration of Berg's text.

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<sup>21</sup> *OED*, s.v. variation.

<sup>22</sup> George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 48; Octavio Paz, 'Translation: Literature and Letters', trans. by Irene del Corral, in *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*, ed. by Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 152-62 (p. 159).

<sup>23</sup> *OED*, s.v. variation.

<sup>24</sup> Berg, 'Afterword', p. 65; qtd. in Jacques Derrida, 'Des Tours de Babel', trans. by Joseph F. Graham, in *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*, ed. by Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 218-27 (p. 227).

Hayden Carruth speaks of this collaboration in his foreword to *With Akhmatova at the Black Gates*:

Akhmatova and Berg discovered each other, so to speak, in the English translations, and thereafter carried on a dialogue across cultures, times, and the frontier of death. It has been an acute, loving, utterly candid dialogue, from which came these poems different from any that either Akhmatova or Berg would or could have written on their own [...] These poems are a fusion of two lives, two minds, two sensibilities.

Carruth does not depict the collaboration between Akhmatova and Berg as a writer-translator collaboration. Instead, Akhmatova and Berg are two separate beings that come together to produce a series of poems. As Carruth explains, ‘At the beginning were three distinct people: Akhmatova, the translator (sometimes more than one), and Berg himself [...] But I have been able to see in their progressive drafts how the poems have moved [...] toward a fourth separable personality, mythic and amenable’.<sup>25</sup> Since this foreword is written by Carruth (as opposed to Berg), readers are first introduced to Berg as poet rather than theorist or translator. It is not until the afterword at the end of the text that Berg voices the poetics behind *With Akhmatova at the Black Gates*. This paratextual arrangement, just as the paratext of the other Akhmatova translations, works to interrogate the process of translation – whether it is one of openness or secrecy – underpinning the text.

Akhmatova’s translators also interrogate the original Russian poems and the possibilities of translation by exposing the ambiguities present in Akhmatova’s lines. In ‘Translation: Literature and Essays’, Paz stresses poetry’s tendency toward ambiguity:

Every word holds a certain number of implicit meanings; when a word is combined with others to make up a phrase, one of those meanings is activated and becomes predominant [...] one of the characteristics of poetry, and perhaps its distinguishing trait, is the preservation of a plurality of meanings.

For Akhmatova, especially, ‘there is a careful and complex ‘writing between the lines’ [...] Like many writers of the Soviet Union she frequently says one thing while seeking to convey something else’.<sup>26</sup> Writing poetry within a framework of widespread literary censorship, Akhmatova’s work brims with double meanings. Yet the act of translation, which is rooted in decision-making, often abandons ambiguity for the certainty of a particular choice. In *Translating Baudelaire*, Clive Scott elaborates on translator choice: ‘the process of choice,

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<sup>25</sup> Hayden Carruth, ‘Foreword’, in *With Akhmatova at the Black Gates* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1981), pp. ix-xi (p. x).

<sup>26</sup> Paz, p. 158; Wells, p. 22.



almost hypertrophied in translation, subtly changes the mode of writing. While the ST [source-text] writer has made choices which become a progressive concealment of the alternatives, the choices and the alternatives of the translator remain peculiarly visible'. This visible act of choice-making ensures that the translator 'must state clearly how he understands [the source text]'.<sup>27</sup> Little room is left for multiple interpretations. One of Akhmatova's early untitled poems beginning '*Szhala ruki pad tyomnoy vual'yu...*' [Wrung hands under dark veil...]<sup>28</sup> presents an ambiguity in the voice of its narrator. Hemschemeyer translates this first line as 'Under her dark veil she wrung her hands...'. Kunitz with Hayward, on the other hand, translate this same line as 'I wrung my hands under my dark veil...'.<sup>29</sup> The dichotomy between Hemschemeyer's third-person narrator and Kunitz with Hayward's first-person narrator is a result of the ambiguity in the original Russian line: the verb *szhala* [wrung] is conjugated identically for both the pronouns 'she' and 'I,' and, since the subject is not made explicit, it is unclear which of these pronouns Akhmatova intended. In the English translations of the poem, however, the ambiguity cannot be maintained. The context of the poem becomes crucial for the translation of this line, and yet it is a context that does little to reveal the intended narrator. The rest of the poem depicts a quarrel in the form of a lovers' dialogue. This intimate situation would suggest that a first-person narration is suitable for the piece. In addition, the 'near exclusive use of a first-person narrator' in Akhmatova's early poetry supports Kunitz with Hayward's choice of the first-person voice.<sup>30</sup> Alternatively, Hemschemeyer's third-person narrator introduces further layers into the poem: a third party (is it author, reader, outside observer?) enters the scene; issues of distance surface and veil this meeting of lovers with mystery. Both Hemschemeyer's and Kunitz with Hayward's translations are linguistically and contextually valid. Yet each one lacks the possibilities of the original: neither translation can encompass both the intimacy of first-person narration and the distance of third-person narration. As Gadamer explains, 'every translation that takes its task seriously is at once clearer and flatter than the original. Even if it is a masterly re-creation, it must lack some of the overtones that vibrate in the original'.<sup>31</sup> Translation, therefore, interrogates the very possibility of maintaining ambiguity.

Ambiguity is also present in Akhmatova's later, overtly political cycle of poems titled *Requiem*, particularly in the poem '*K Smierti*' [To Death]. In this piece, 'the speaker invites

<sup>27</sup> Clive Scott, *Translating Baudelaire* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), p. 218; Gadamer, p. 386.

<sup>28</sup> Literal translations throughout are mine.

<sup>29</sup> Akhmatova, *Complete Poems*, I, p. 219; Anna Akhmatova, *Poems of Akhmatova*, trans. by Stanley Kunitz and Max Hayward (London: Collins and Harvill Press, 1974), p. 43.

<sup>30</sup> Wells, p. 10.

death to come to her to release her from her torments'.<sup>32</sup> The final two lines of this poem, however, can be interpreted in two radically distinct ways. Hemschemeyer's translation of the lines reads, 'And the final horror dims | The blue luster of beloved eyes'. Here the final horror possesses agency and is situated in an active phrase. Kunitz with Hayward's translation is comparable: 'and the blue lustre of my loved one's eyes | is clouded over by the final horror'. The final horror once again possesses agency, but it is now situated in a passive phrase. Conversely, McKane's translation of the final two lines is more positive and redemptive. It reads, 'And the blue lustre of loving eyes | conceals the final horror'.<sup>33</sup> Here the final horror no longer possesses agency: instead of the one concealing, it is now the one concealed. Although McKane's interpretation of the lines is semantically antithetical to both Hemschemeyer's and Kunitz with Hayward's interpretations, it is nevertheless a valid translation. The Russian verb *zastilayet* [covers] can apply to both the final horror and the blue lustre. In attempting to render an effective English translation, however, translators must choose a single interpretation; therefore, the English translation necessarily *zastilayet* (covers, conceals, dims) the multiple meanings present in the original Russian lines.

Interestingly, Berg's translation-variation of Akhmatova's 1959 poem 'Atryvak' [Fragment] exposes and addresses many of the ambiguities of the original poem. Hemschemeyer and McKane also engage with the translation of 'Fragment,' but their translations, much like Akhmatova's poem, leave questions unanswered (see Appendix for a copy of these poems). By developing the original two-stanza poem into seven stanzas, as well as deleting the initial ellipses, Berg interrogates the very notion of this poem as a fragment. Berg's 'Fragment, 1959' also recalls another definition of 'interrogate': 'to cause (a computer memory or memory element) to give a signal that corresponds to or reveals information contained in it'. Translation often engages in this second type of interrogation: it 'reveals' elements of the original that were not initially discernible. In his essay 'On the Art of Translation,' Hugo Friedrich addresses the possibility of this second type of interrogation. He asks, 'Does the translation create levels of meaning that were not necessarily visible in the original text so that the translated text reaches a higher level of aesthetic existence?'.<sup>34</sup> Although it is difficult – and perhaps irrelevant – to know whether the translated text attains

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<sup>31</sup> Gadamer, p. 386.

<sup>32</sup> Wells, p. 72.

<sup>33</sup> Akhmatova, *Complete Poems*, II, p. 107; Akhmatova, *Poems of Akhmatova*, p. 111; Anna Akhmatova, *Selected Poems*, trans. by Richard McKane (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 100.

<sup>34</sup> *OED*, s.v. interrogate; Hugo Friedrich, 'On the Art of Translation', trans. by Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet, in *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*, ed. by Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 11-16 (p. 11).

‘a higher level of aesthetic existence,’ it is important to recognize the translated text’s ability to generate hitherto unobserved meanings. Berg’s extended ‘Fragment, 1959’ generates many such meanings. For example, the ‘*agni*’ [fires, lights] at the beginning of Akhmatova’s poem become, in Berg’s variation, gunfire, ‘the constellation of the Snake,’ fireflies, night lights, ‘the corpse of an old man | sh[ining] in the dark,’ and the moon. Berg’s piece, therefore, interrogates and explores the uncertainties of Akhmatova’s original poem. ‘Fragment, 1959’ works in the reverse direction of the translations that select either the third-person or first-person voice, the ‘clearer and flatter’ translations that position the final horror as either active or passive.<sup>35</sup> Instead, Berg’s poem presents a gathering – a self-reflexive meeting, perhaps – of myriad forward slashes or alternatives and then refuses to choose amongst them.

The various translations of Akhmatova’s poems also employ self-reflexivity to interrogate themselves as translations. Speaking to the personified Death in ‘To Death,’ Akhmatova commands it to come dressed as a story ‘*vs’em da tashnaty znakomay*’ [known nauseatingly to everyone]. Hemschemeyer translates this line as ‘so sickeningly familiar to everyone’. Kunitz with Hayward translate this line as ‘the one we’re sick of hearing, day and night’. Most notably, McKane translates this line as ‘known *ad nauseam* to everyone’.<sup>36</sup> The presence of the Latin phrase *ad nauseam* in the middle of this English translation of a Russian poem is jarring. *Ad nauseam* is both appropriate, in the sense that it captures the original Russian line, and inappropriate, in the sense that it is not an English phrase. Moreover, it meta-translationally draws attention to the untranslatability of certain ideas, interrogating the assumption that linguistic equivalents exist between any two given languages.

Kunitz with Hayward’s translation of the poem beginning ‘*My n’e um’eyem prashchatsa*’ [We don’t know how to say goodbye] also highlights the process of translation. This poem paints the meeting of two lovers who fear life will tear them apart. Particularly telling is the line that reads ‘*Ty zadumchiv, a ya malchu*’ [You are pensive, and I keep quiet]. Hemschemeyer translates this line quite literally as ‘You are pensive and I keep still’. Conversely, Kunitz with Hayward translate the line as ‘you’re moody, I am your shadow’. Unlike Berg, who sets out to write variations of Akhmatova’s poems, Kunitz with Hayward define their text as translation. In his preface to *Poems of Akhmatova*, Kunitz writes, ‘one is not at liberty to play arbitrarily with the given’. Yet the translation ‘you’re moody, I am your

<sup>35</sup> Berg, *With Akhmatova*, p. 51; Gadamer, p. 386.

<sup>36</sup> *Complete Poems*, II, pp. 106-07; Akhmatova, *Poems of Akhmatova*, p. 109; Akhmatova, *Selected Poems*, p. 100.

shadow' appears to conflict with such an assertion. In context, this line becomes less arbitrary. Kunitz with Hayward partly recreate the *a-b-a-b* rhyming scheme of Akhmatova's Russian lines. Consequently, the word 'shadow' at the end of the poem's fourth line must rhyme with the word 'shoulder' at the end of the poem's second line. Although 'shadow' and 'shoulder' are not perfect rhymes, the consonance between them ensures their linguistic and positional pairing. The words 'I am your shadow' also recall Kunitz's introductory assertion that 'the [translated] lines are only a shadow of the original text'.<sup>37</sup> 'You're moody, I am your shadow' therefore becomes a meta-translational statement about translation as a shadow of the moody (open to multiple interpretations, and thus, multiple translations) original text.

Translation as shadow of the original text is a familiar metaphor in translation studies. In 'The Politics of Translation' Spivak writes, 'The task of the translator is to facilitate this love between the original and its shadow'. Once again, notions of collaboration between translator and writer surface. The shadow or translation is attached – whether romantically or physically – to the original source of light. Using Dutch writer Joost van den Vondel's elaboration of this metaphor, Theo Hermans writes, 'the translator is like Phaeton, who wanted to drive the chariot of the sun and was struck down'. Vondel further describes translation as 'a pale star which derives its light from the sun', 'candlelight compared to sunlight', and 'reflected light in contrast with direct light'. It is clear that images of light are used to *highlight* the inferiority of translations. Yet in the process of translation, 'A new light falls on the text from the other [translating] language'.<sup>38</sup> This is often the light of the interrogation room.

As the translators of Akhmatova's poetry, Hemschemeyer, Kunitz with Hayward, McKane, and Berg interrogate Akhmatova's texts and the process of translation through paratext, ambiguity, and self-reflection. The light these translators cast on the possibilities and limitations of translation is both bright and warm – the warmth of a collaboration or love affair. In translation, 'one language licks another, like a flame or a caress'.<sup>39</sup> This is the meeting of tongues. One of Akhmatova's early poems '*Piesnia Pasliedn'ey Vstriechi*' [The Song of the Last Meeting] stages the tensions between dark and light, indifference and warmth. The last stanza of Hemschemeyer's more literal translation of this poem reads, 'This

<sup>37</sup> Akhmatova, *Complete Poems*, 1, p. 431; Akhmatova, *Poems of Akhmatova*, p. 65; Kunitz, 'Preface', pp. 32-33.

<sup>38</sup> Spivak, p. 370; qtd. in Theo Hermans, 'Images of Translation: Metaphor and Imagery in the Renaissance Discourse on Translation', in *The Manipulation of Literature: Studies in Literary Translation*, ed. by Theo Hermans (London: Croom Helm, 1985), pp. 103-35 (pp. 114-15); Gadamer, p. 386.

<sup>39</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'What Is a "Relevant" Translation?', trans. by Lawrence Venuti, in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. by Lawrence Venuti, 2nd edn (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 423-46, (p. 424).

is the song of the last meeting. | I glanced at the dark house. | Candles were burning only in the bedroom, | With an indifferent-yellow flame'. The last stanza of Berg's variation of this poem reads, 'This is our last meeting – this place, this voice. | I looked back at the shape of the dark house. | Candles guttered in the bedroom window; | behind them, eyes and a torso'.<sup>40</sup> In both versions, the dark house with its burning candles in the bedroom – the place of love making – recalls the shadow-light metaphor of translation and original, respectively. Berg's final image of 'eyes and a torso' is especially haunting. The 'torso' evokes the possibilities of translation: the birth of something new out of the source text. The 'eyes', moreover, come to symbolize the gaze of the translator-interrogator. In his afterword, Berg comments on the relation between sight and translation: 'Beginning with other texts is sometimes a way of managing the forbidden. It provides that mask (or is it a mirror?) through which we may speak directly without being seen'.<sup>41</sup> It seems that the eyes behind the waning candlelight of Berg's poem are the same eyes behind the mask or in front of the mirror of translation, watching, waiting in the shadows for someone to meet them.

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<sup>40</sup> Akhmatova, *Complete Poems*, 1, p. 227; Berg, *With Akhmatova*, p. 3.

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## Appendix

Translations/Variation of Akhmatova's 'Atryvak' [Fragment]

### Fragment

(Translated by Judith Hemschemeyer)

...And it seemed to me that these fires  
Were with me until dawn.  
And I didn't inquire – what color  
Those strange eyes were.

And everything trembled and sang,  
And I didn't know – was it winter or summer,  
Were you friend or foe?

(Akhmatova, *Complete Poems*, II, p. 281)

### Fragment

(Translated by Richard McKane)

...And it seemed that these were fires  
flying with me until dawn,  
and I did not find out  
what colour were these strange eyes.

And everything around trembled and sang,  
and I did not find out if you were friend or foe,  
if this was winter or summer.

(Akhmatova, *Selected Poems*, p. 81)

## Fragment, 1959

(Stephen Berg)

And entering towns the guns had missed,  
towns out of storybooks,  
we saw the constellation of the Snake  
but we were afraid to look at each other.

The earth smelled like an orphanage – potatoes,  
disinfectant, shoes – I believed faceless  
Time walked beside us: years, centuries.  
And someone shook a tambourine, someone we couldn't  
see.

There were noises and tiny bluish-yellow lights.  
What did they mean, those fireflies  
signalling to us, beckoning? We stopped.  
I even thought those noises were the lights.

Then we walked on together. I was with you, you were  
with me.

It was like that dream I had: the corpse of an old man  
shone in the dark, a baby clung to his chest, both  
wrapped in a cocoon.

I could see the twitchy, delicate, wax-like hands of  
the baby

dabbling at the man's chin. The moon slid out,  
suddenly. We met, we said goodbye.  
If you remember that night, as I do,  
wherever you are now, whatever fate

steers your life, know what I know: the time  
we had was sacred like a great king's dream  
turned by his people into a myth they use  
to keep from believing life is a dream.

Whatever I looked at was alive, everything had a voice,  
but I never found out: were you a friend, an enemy,  
was it winter, summer? Smoke, singing, midnight heat.  
I wrote thousands of lines. Not one told me.

(Berg, pp. 51-52)