



POETS' DIALOGUE

(Three letters from Akhmatova to Brodsky)

In the 1950-s and 1960-s the life of Anna Andreevna Akhmatova was linked to the lives of four young Leningrad poets – Dmitry Bobishev, Anatoly Nayman, Evgeny Rein and – somewhat later – Joseph Brodsky. This interlinking of lives and traditions formed an extraordinary literary oasis that calls for careful study. The foundation has already been laid in the book by A.Nayman “The End of the First Half of the 20th Century”, extracts of which were published in “Noviy Mir” (№ 1–3, 1989) under the title “Stories about Anna Akhmatova”, and released as a complete edition (M.: Hudozhestvennaja Literatura, 1989).



Anna Akhmatova and Joseph Brodsky

The interaction between great poets, whether contemporaries, or separated from each other by decades or centuries, is sometimes expressed as many-layered and complex dialogues of a unique cross-cultural nature. Among these is the nostalgic dialogue, with a strong underground level between Mandelstam and Dante. It can only be described as a dialogue for Mandelstam undoubtedly “heard” the response. The same, almost intimate, conversation binds Akhmatova and Pushkin. So also is the reserved but continuous dialogue between Alexander Kushner and Baratynsky. There are more obvious examples still e.g. Tsvetaeva and Pasternak, Tsvetaeva and Rilke.

The intense dialogue between Akhmatova and Brodsky, started during her lifetime, still continues, judging by Brodsky’s remarkable conversation with Solomon Volkov (“Continent”, № 53, 1987).

The epistolary character is not always predominant in the dialogues between poets who are contemporaries. It is too early now to comment upon this element in the relationship between Akhmatova and Brodsky. But the researcher should start thinking in this direction and collect material.

Among Joseph Brodsky’s papers with which, following the will of his deceased father — Alexander Ivanovitch Brodsky- I was entrusted¹, there were found three letters by Akhmatova. Two of them were delivered by Anatoly Nayman to the village of “Norinskoe” Arkhangelsky region, where the addressee lived in exile.

I telephoned Joseph and he agreed to the publication of the letters. For the first time they were published in “Akhmatova’s Collection” released in Paris in 1989.

J. Gordin

1

Oct. 20, 1964

Joseph,

From the endless talks that I have with you day and night you have to know all that has or hasn’t happened.

Случилось:

*И вот уже славы
высокий порог,
но голос лукавый
Предостерег² и т. д.*

Не случилось:

Светает — это Страшный Суд³ и т. д.

(word-for-word translation)

Happened:

*Here is the high
Threshold of fame,
But the sly voice
Gave me the worn etc.*

Did not happen:

*It is the break of dawn –
This is the Doomsday etc.*

Promise me just one thing — to be perfectly well. There is nothing worse in this world than bed warmers, injections and high blood pressure. But the worst of all is that all of this is irreversible. When you are in good health, there might be golden paths before you, joy and a divine mingling with nature, which captures everyone who reads your poems.

Anna

2

Joseph,

Candles from Syracuse. I am sending you the primordial flame, which has been in turn almost stolen from Prometheus.

¹ This was written in 1989. The entire Brodsky’s archive was later handed over to the Russian National Library upon Brodsky’s consent. (author’s note)

² From the poem “Along all Earth’s ways” (author’s note)

³ The first line of Akhmatova’s poem “From “Travel Diary”” (author’s note)

⁴ This is what Akhmatova used to call her house in Komarovo granted to her by the Literature Fund. (author’s note)

⁵ Anna Kaminskaya – the granddaughter of Akhmatova’s last husband N.N.Lunin. (author’s note)

⁶ Anatoly Geleskul (author’s note)

⁷ Poem by Brodsky (q.v.: “The Day of Poetry” – 1967. L., 1967. p.134-135; Brodsky J. “A Stop in the Desert”. New-York, 1970. p.139-141) (author’s note)

I am in Komarovo, in the Art Centre. In the booth⁴ there is Anja⁵ and accompanied by her people. Today I went there and remembered our last autumn with music, with the well and your poem cycle.

And again the heaven-sent words breezed in: "Above all is the greatness of purpose".

In the evenings the sky already turns pink, though the main part of winter is still ahead us.

I want to share with you my new mischief. I am dying of green envy. Read "In.Lit." № 12 — "The Quest" by Leon Felipe... I am envious of every word there, every intonation. So much for an old man! And so much for the translator⁶! Never before have I seen one as good as this. Feel for me.

The poem commemorating the death of Eliot⁷ is not worse, but for some reason I feel no envy. On the contrary — I feel blissful because I know it exists.

I have just received your telegram. Thank you. It seems that I have been writing this letter for a very long time.

Anna

February 15,
1965 Komarovo

3

Joseph, dear!

As the number of unsent letters from me to you has imperceptibly reached three figures, I have decided to write you a real letter, i.e. a tangible real letter (in an envelope, with a stamp, with an address), and then I got a little confused.

Today is the St. Peter's Day — the very heart of summer⁸. Everything shines and lights up from the inside. So many other St. Peter's Days come to my memory.

I am in the booth. The well creaks, the ravens chirp. I am listening to Purcell bought on your advice ("Dido and Aeneas"). It is something so powerful that one cannot talk about it.

It turns out that we have left England the day after **the** storm, which had become a real disaster and which was mentioned in the papers. When I found out about it, it became clear to me why the France I saw through the train window appeared so frightening. And I thought: "The same sky must

be above a major battle" (the day of course turned out to be the anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo, which I learnt in Paris). Black wild clouds chasing each other, the whole land flooded by lurid muddy water: rivers, brooks, lakes broken out of their banks. Stone crosses rising above the water — there are many cemeteries and graves from the last war there. Then there was Paris, white-hot and unrecognizable. Then there was the way back with the only desire to get to Komarovo as soon as possible; then — Moscow and everybody on the platform with flowers as in the sweetest of dreams.

Did the mosquitoes ease off over there? They have already gone here. Tolja⁹ and I are finishing the translation of Leopardi, and meanwhile the poems wander somewhere far away echoing each other, and nobody goes with me, where Rastrelli's wonder glows — the Smolny Cathedral.

And your last-year words remain valid: "Above all is the greatness of purpose".

I am grateful to you for the telegram — you are very good at antique style both in epistolary genre and in drawings; when I see them I always recall Picasso's illustrations to "Metamorphoses".

I am reading Kafka's diaries now.

Keep in touch.

Akhmatova

P.S. I think you would have enjoyed the meeting with Harry¹⁰. His wife is a sweetheart.

And here is a completely overlooked and forgotten verse, which fell out of my papers:

Глаза безумные твои
И ледяные речи,
И объяснение в любви
Еще до первой встречи¹¹.

Your restless eyes
And ice-cold speech,
And words of love
Before encounter.

Perhaps this is from the "Prologue"¹² ■

⁸ According to the digest the letter dates 10, July 1965 (author's note)

⁹ Anatoly Nayman (author's note)

¹⁰ J.Brodsky's friend – G.Ginsburg-Voskov (author's note)

¹¹ First published in A.Nayman's Notes ("Noniy Mir" No 2, 1989, p.131) (author's note)

¹² Meaning Akhmatova's burnt poetical play (author's note)