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Thirty-three poems

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Synopsis

The work which follows is divided into two sections. The first section consists of the thirty-three original poems of the title. The second section consists of notes which reflect at length on both the process of writing love poetry and on the poems and other works which have influenced the composition of these thirty-three pieces.

The writer's intention has been to demonstrate the challenges facing a poet wishing to write love poetry at the end of the twentieth century -- and what remains important about such an endeavour. The writer has also shown in what way the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova has had a crucial influence on her own poetry and she has analysed Akhmatova's love poetry with a view to comparing it to her own.

In addition, other influences have been invoked, and the difficulty of establishing an appropriate language or lexicon for love poetry has been demonstrated by means of references to writers such as Roland Barthes, Jonathan Dollimore and Friedrich Nietzsche.

The writer has analysed a number of original poems in order to place them within the context of modern love poetry. She has also defined what, to her mind, constitutes good love poetry at this time, in this age -- that is, on the cusp of the twenty-first century.

Introduction

'Whenever Brodsky sounds like Auden it is not in imitation but in homage, and the homage is openly confessed' (Derek Walcott, 'Joseph Brodsky', What the Twilight Says: Essays, p.138)

Assessing the nature and degree of poetic influence is never easy.

Influence is frequently subtle, even insidious; one is not always aware that another's ideas and techniques have been assimilated into one's writing.

That said, discovering a poet whose work one admires unreservedly is a little like falling in love: a certain amount of transference must necessarily take place. Influence is inevitable.

Of course, it is ultimately the quality of language that attracts one to any given poet, regardless of what that poet chooses to write about. In Max Hayward's introduction to Akhmatova's Selected Poems there is a passage describing Akhmatova's response to Innokenty Annensky's poetry when reading it for the first time:

Reading The Cypress Box, she was, as she records, "oblivious to the world." This sudden illumination was decisive: she had found her voice . . . (p.6)

Reading Akhmatova's poetry for the first time, I was similarly 'oblivious to the world'. Akhmatova's use of language made me want to attempt to write with similar clarity and intensity. I recognised my own voice, albeit very weakly, in Akhmatova's more forceful and impassioned one.

Even in translation, Akhmatova's poetry is deeply felt and profoundly resonant. These qualities attracted me because they suggested that, for

Akhmatova, poetry was more than just art -- it was, perhaps, a crucially life-giving, life-saving medium. Few British and American (never mind South African) poets can claim a similar role for their poetry -- one suspects that they would not want to, either.

What makes Akhmatova unique is her somewhat singular fearlessness -- her determination to speak of things that lesser poets shy away from. Even today, she has the power to shock, not due to some cheap trick or some lurid turn of phrase, but due to her unflinching courage and honesty. Reading her poetry today, one is struck by how modern she is; how her voice has carried through the years, charged with all the authority (moral and poetic) it could claim in the middle decades of the century.

If Akhmatova's poetry has not gone out of fashion, it is because she never adhered to any fashion. What I refer to in my thesis as her 'anachronistic purity' has, ironically, been her strongest suit, her secret weapon. She is a poet of very few idiosyncrasies. Her poetry is personal, but it is not a poetry of personality. In short, she has insisted that language and form bear the weight of her talent, rather than resorting to quirks of style, strained metaphors and embarrassing confessions. Her disdain for extravagance and rhetoric, the enemies of good lyric poetry, have stood her in good stead.

Poetry was a serious business for Russians who lived under Stalin's rule -- literally a case of life and death, in some instances -- and Akhmatova, like many Russian poets, wrote to live and, later on, lived by what she wrote. Such commitment to a craft cannot help but find its

way into what has been crafted. More importantly, someone who is forever transmuting life into art is also, inevitably, a witness. No poet would ever wish to be a witness to unremitting suffering but, having no choice, Akhmatova elected to describe, as faithfully as possible, the darkness of her times: a darkness, incidentally, not entirely without light. Akhmatova never shied away from pain, but her poetry is not as bloody or bitter as one would expect it to be. Its lyricism sets out to prove that beauty and faith are possible -- largely thanks to language.

If Annensky's language helped Akhmatova to find her voice, it is far from inaccurate to say that Akhmatova's language helped me to find mine (albeit with the help of translators). It was never my intention to imitate or borrow from her poetry, but if my voice does, indeed, 'imitate' hers, such imitation is nothing more -- or nothing less -- than a sincere act of homage.

*

The poems that follow have not been arranged chronologically. This is because poetic development is seldom linear: poets frequently return to earlier influences, grapple with problems they thought they had solved, or restate matters that have been differently stated elsewhere. The notion of poetic influence, too, bedevils one's attempts to make sense of one's work in terms of chronology. I have therefore arranged the poems arbitrarily, according to their relative conversational strengths.

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At the Dacha

I used to love the afternoons
of lying by the water
where the misted reeds
were licked by heat,
the grey and white of heat.

I loved the evening,
reddening to sunset,
with its fruit and vodka
in the little room
still full of us, the old
and rusted bed, the spreads
as musty as the time
behind another time,

the mystery of the life we had
and in that place
where love was not
the arbiter of goodness or
the test by which we
threw ourselves towards our fate.

The grapes have darkened
and that house has turned
towards another world: its own,
without us.

The house your father built,
the garden of your mother
and the outside river
unlike any other –
siltless and polluted,
full of tasteless fish
that long Ukrainian summer –
nothing hurts like this.

Ukraine, 1995

Soliloquy

I listen. Everything that used to be
invades my room and silence is the air
that nurtures me, contains the sullen care
I feed on, sucks the future out of me.
In all this time, a memory would be
too sad; an inappropriate goodbye
might slip from me, or silence, with a sigh,
become some dubious poetry.

Protect me from the wordlessness of lips.
Come back and be the talk that can sustain
my breath, and be the one thing to remain
intact in every solitude that grips
my mind. The darkness forming on the stair
could be my last, my greatest, love affair.

Calendar

Tonight you're struck
by miniature things.

A prickle of light,
a shadow of wings:

the shimmer a moth
gives off as it flutters

over the grass
away from the gutter

covered with leaves.
By saying his name,

you, too, fly dumbly
into a flame.

You've heard him leave.
The hunger within

dies down for a while,
forgets its own din.

You look at the clock:
it mirrors your face

and all alterations
made in this place –

your social agenda
tacked to the wall,

the calendar picture
silent and small

beside the black numbers,
lovingly penned.

That picture: distraction.
Those numbers: the end.

Ice

You can barely hear the rain.
The wearily decisive tread
of one who's left another's bed
for good is likely to remain

an echo on the empty street.
Winter's earlier this year.
Streetlights find each other merely
from the dark in which they meet

in dimming radiance. The day's
burnt, the day has burnt away,
and as you try to say his name,
ice defines your windowpane.

Tears

Now and again
those tears – whose tears? –
come into mind,
remain in mind

as if they wash
yet never cleanse
the surface of years,
that surface round

as eyes or bubbles,
glass or cobbles;
the helpless nature
of convex things.

Your breasts, in his hands,
were made his own:
so cupped, they were still
and firm like stone

but soft. And yet
they escaped you, out
of your body, your nature:
they stood alone

for him to cover,
no longer yours.
A dark head above them. . .
a few grey hairs. . .

So long ago. What man? Which tears?

At the End

Choice was not a guest.
That's how tired they were.
Mouths appeased
by bread, salt, a final kiss.

No tears to reprimand.
They'll testify
to neither's feeling angry.
They did their best.

The rest isn't long.
Promise, argue, bless.
Dry spasm
of the tongue's helplessness.

One can smile, somehow,
and be grateful for
the simplest kind of end:
in truth, a death.

Salt

**Write about salt,
the feel of salt
on a lonely cheek;**

**secret of salt
that stings and burns
on the lonely tongue;**

**kiss remembered
or forgotten;
kiss half-buried**

**in the heaviness
of the heart.
Write about salt**

**and all the various
hidden meanings
of the tear**

**brushed away
in cold or civilised
company.**

Finality

**Like the branches
of a rotting tree,
wanting to unhand
a gift of blossoms,**

**you have grown
towards me
in your loneliness.
But the tree is dead –**

and we are in it.

Woman at the tip

Looking back, the rubble still appears
as bleak. The rain has dampened it to grey
and garbage trucks
have somersaulted rubbish
over it – reminds me of the day
I found a shoe, a bit of grubby lace,
a photo frame quite naked; not a face
to stamp that square. The vaulted cardboard back
was bent a bit; the comma of a crack
had smeared that glass . . . I didn't want to save
the thing: it had no value; no hand
had claimed it. Not the shadow of a scrawl
was on that paper . . . no sign at all
that someone, somewhere, in the grip of love,
had trapped some image there
to be the god of.

Still no treasures . . . merely the remains
of lunch: some long-stale bread, an empty bottle.
Blue against
the puddle of the dump,
a lonely letter, sodden, with its inks
all run together, like the tiny swells
of separate raindrops pooling into wells . . .
Did the sender send it? The receiver
read this wash of ink in separate lines? –
notes on music scores, precise and upright,
comprehensive; listing little crimes
or naming errors, acts to be committed,
hands to be unjoined; legs fitted
into that small scissoring of love . . .
something else
I've now so little need of.

Message

Washed up on the shore, a bottle clouded
with a grimy salt; interior shrouded
by the fog of glass. The sea exhales,
coughs a little, spits; the message given.
Where's the note that begs to be forgiven
for the misty longings it unveils?

Like the bruised face of a homeless woman,
this reminds us we are frail, and human.
Someone, drunk or stupid, threw this in;
message or no message, it's the same.
Clotted blue, the sea, as in a vein,
sluggishly returns to where it's been.

Offering this bottle, sea invents
one more way to patent unguents.
In its gritty oil, a curl of letters
like the leaves congealing in your teacup.
Spilling now, like tears, out of a sea-cup,
all the salt of years: a sip of bitters.

On the River
— for Josef Brodsky

Night

There's no darkness here: the watchful moon
rises on the bend of silent river,

while the clouds march, a faint platoon,
on towards the treeless eastern hemisphere.

The river swallows everything not huge;
the moon sits; gulps and bobs and shivers,

not quite sinking. Not a streetlight, car,
nothing to show how close to city life we are.

Morning

Damp. The plop of hidden fish. The mist
spread out like a hand,
a great and covered dish
of delicacies: caviar, some small shrimps,
vodka to complete the list. Our late camp
rallies to the call; warming fingers lift
dishes from the night before to take them down
to the makeshift jetty. Muddy algae clings
and undulates: the waves from someone's boat
slap onto the concrete, and the soap's afloat.
Nine o'clock at last. Volodya's braved
the chill to catch us fish. Now we are saved.

He skins and guts the fish. I collect the tiny
contact lenses of the scales that rainbow
effortlessly on my palm. But eyeless,
all these little mirrors hang and magnify
nothing of significance. Volodya slaps
the salt into a barrel; one fish moves –
its mouth shuts, giving up its air
as its body stiffens and its caviar
drops, a shapeless pouch, into my hand. I swear.

Afternoon

No wind. The sky is grey and heavy.
Chessmen stand about the board. I sit
reading *Treasure Island* just as Vanya
with his wooden leg arrives to watch and crit

black's move. The cup of wine is passed
round to me again. The players think.
Only Vanya's mutter and the knight's rap
on the captured square can cause an eye to blink.

Dealt a hand he's never seen before,
Jim is quite resourceful. I should be the same.
Gambling freely with an old adventure – exile –
I could score, grab the prize and win the game.

Jim takes the ship, the Queen has fallen,
night hurries on, the wine is finished.
Still, fish plop and splash, with no regard
for capture or conclusion. Or a playing card.

Ukraine, 1995

Before the dawn

Rocks like eggs.
The albumen
of dewy mud.
The river mouthless.

That black morning,
stuck in sleep,
we bridged the top
of rocky outcrops.

Grass wound
into lover's knots;
mud warm
as the breath of dogs.

Back before
the dry-eyed sun-up
time, we climbed back
into our bodies,

voiceless

Advice

Hush. Don't say it. Or say it's nothing:
that long, still night, the leaves' cool rustling . . .
or the dropped moon, day's leaden coupling
with night, the sun coming up too soon . . .

I'd love to tell you. It's easy, really.
Kiss and confess. Look back or away,
or turn to the window, sighs now abating;
last square of language crossed for the day . . .

There's the long silence of understanding.
Also a motionless wringing of hands,
the mute consolation of night; the disbanding
of all our loves and the heart's commands . . .

Waiting

Wind. The cypress.
How the curtain flies!
This night is endless.

Harvest

Summer of such wind and salt
that the air was rich with it,
stinging, and I lay beside
one I could not be without . . .
On the dune, softer sand
and the smoothness of a bleached
branch of driftwood in my hand
felt as good as pillows. *You,*
you . . . it was like a shout,
somewhere through your whispering
as my hand, on your skin,
reached to ease your darkness out . . .

In a heavy, heat-filled room
where mosquitoes fought the net,
dredging for the sweeter blood
of the body and its sweat,
how I lay and stared, appalled
by how much I wanted you:
you, so little known, so quickly
knowing. And you rose to go . . .
No, no . . . stay (I said),
since I've never loved like this,
wait. Stay with me (I begged):
sleep, talk, return this kiss . . .

Somehow, in the hottest night
of that hottest year, we stayed
close; we were lying, spent,
pleasure killing memory
right until the moon dissolved
on the boundary of a dawn
watery with dew. From
the grass – grass as ripe as corn –
mist rose. A tree's unpicked
shadows turned to veins and leaves,
and the darkness melted into
light. And I held these sheaves.

Lilac

- for Anna Akhmatova

I walked as far as the lilac bush
and shielded my sun-struck eyes
to see where the line of light began,
where shadow might surprise

the leafy borders of that plant.
I found its scent confusing.
I wish I had not paused like that,
with noonday sun infusing

the earth with such impossible heat
no sprinkler could undo it;
nor could the steps of my own two feet
be light on it, renew it.

I walked as far as the lilac bush,
my eyes on its blooms, unready
to wish on it, now, a season of
profusion, wild and heady.

Sweetness

If youth is sweet, then convalescence
(Nietzsche wrote) is twice as good:
the sudden clarity, the sadness
and the passion – understood –

contribute to an infinitely
precious comprehension; as
a sour cherry, glazed in chocolate
full of sugar, milky white,

can utterly seduce the traveller
still reclining, on the train,
his legs wrapped in a rug; his face
the epicentre of joy and pain.

Klev

I

We've walked all day. The swollen domes
of Churches rise and drop like stones
behind the hill. The streets are steep
as we descend; we just can't keep

those domes in view. I'll miss the gold,
the polished icons cheaply sold,
the solemn darkness round the doors
where incense drifts; the tiled floors. . .

We're passing women dressed in black
who cross themselves, their headscarves slack.
They're walking with a dreamy air,
their lowered eyelids marked with prayer.

A crowd has gathered in the park.
At fountain's rim the stone dogs bark.
A gargoyle stares, its dead eyes grim;
our fingers brush like seraphim.

II

We stop at last at Golden Gate,
that fortress of an older state
of bloodied grace, where horsemen kept
their pact with God, but while they slept

the Tartars came, the Mongols flew
across that plain. I never knew
a place of siege could be so strong.
I feel sure the story's wrong.

It's getting cold. The shadows break,
like fractured sunlight on a lake,
between the buildings. We should leave.
The streets are clearing, loved ones cleave

to loved ones. As we walk, I'll view
those ruined Churches, built anew.
Once bombs had fallen, looters gone
the morning came, the sun still shone

and touched the streets, the cherry trees,
the chestnuts, the peripheries
of silent gardens, shadowed walls
where ivy slowly clings and crawls. . .

III.

We'll catch our train at six and brood
for sleepless hours, nibble food
like listless mice. I'll leave this place,
remembered like a loved one's face,

but scarcely touched or traced. I'll see
those cobblestones, the monastery
and tired women draped in black.
The swollen domes. And doubled back

against itself, that other time,
the mirror image of some crime
committed somewhere. Love, or war,
those two crimes we are living for,

on which we thrive: embrace and breed;
confine, defeated by our need,
or free, without a second thought.
All we have held, believed in, sought,

we give away. But let's not think.
The train is pulling out – let's drink
our warm champagne, eat bread and cheese.
Let's sit quite still and count the trees.

Idyll

Streets that lean against the slope
lead away from houses where
families inhabit shapeless air,
children sleep, or skip with rope,
or do their lessons. Evening's chill
is long, suburban, beautiful
with voices, talk, and laughter held
in light like prisms, like the weld-
ed ends of things, the final glue
that binds and clings: the families who
may love and err; who may forgive
each other's little slights, and live.
In the street, the crouch of night:
maple, oak, the flap of wings;
but there's shadow in that light:
the narrow, permitted end of things.

Adam

Bicycles were everything,
then you taught me how to swim,
and you placed a plastic ring
on my little finger.
You were blonde and I was thin,
and your boyish, freckled grin
was the prize I had to win –
I would always linger

way beyond my time for bed.
Flashlight balanced overhead,
now, I search for words you said –
but I can't recall them,
and your voice is lost or dead.
All that fills my aching head
is the sum of years; the knowledge
none can heal nor stall them.

The fall

Bridging the ugly black-on-tan
gap of the burnt-out lot across
from your place
where your white horse ran,
zig-zagged through the tracing smoke,

we were nine or ten and I was
tough as a boy, almost your twin –
born on the same day, '69.
You were my hero; I, your heroine.

Over the streaky stumps of grass
doused by apprentice firemen,
you ran
just like you rode: ahead,
and arrow-quick to make the clearing.

Later, trophies of your rides –
crushed rosettes and dented cups –
braced you
as you tossed, concussed,
thrown on a splintering log. You broke

the spell; your face, its white-on-tan,
your anxious, child-like shock, were mine;
your face was never
quite the same.
Nothing was quite the same. A crack

had opened there, between us; I was
lost before you, powerless,
and lonely – hero, sprinter, twin,
so long adored, the first, the strong one –

knowing I'd never run after you
again but, all reined in, would walk on.

Picking flowers

You never loved
the earth; never saw in it
much more than the clotted
home of death,

tomb for bones
compacted, where the flesh decays
into gluey cobwebs
and the soul obeys.

You never loved
the earth; never nurtured it,
though it bled its petals
for your vase;

saw the wildflowers
of the world as wilderness;
all the seeds, light and profuse,
a loveless kiss.

Touch

Someone brushes up against you
on a crowded morning train.
Wool on wool – a warm arm finds
your hand, your elbow. Then he's gone.
What would you give – an extra hour
of travelling, dream-like, side by side,
in that winter crush – to feel
that touch, and to be warm inside?

Lines for a lover

I loved . . . and I recall a certain day
when the sea was gentled by the evening
and a lovely calm descended, leaving
waves to get their measure of the bay.

I loved; in my eyes there was no ending,
though I knew you had a love, and would not
sacrifice a thing for me; I could not
put my hands up, though I was defending

youth, and heart, and humour. I could rue that
with a tiny shrug. It seemed enough
to pretend to lose; or to be tough.
But I wasn't tough. You always knew that.

Encounter with Van Gogh

Here is the table, here the cloth
on which I set a loaf of bread
with wine to taste . . . raising your head
you light a candle; I, a moth,
flutter towards that budding flame,
the edge of where its fury is.
Meet your eyes and catch the lovely
dark blue of your irises.

Black eyes

Slow hands, gentle voice and black eyes.
All these things you offer, and my old life
has me stranded, stripped of all disguise,
wanting unashamedly . . . Some midwife

will deliver kids of yours, with black eyes,
in some room with paintings and a view
of the snow of Central Park. It's wise
not to penetrate the future. Wiser, too,

not to be a part of it. To put aside
thoughts of ancient blessings. It's a curse
to believe that Charon gives a ride
to an unbeliever with an empty purse.

Rings

Nervous dark. The rain sweeps down
from branch to sill. My neighbour's kitchen
floods with light, her wedding ring,
while dishwashing, is twice as bright.
That window there reflects her life.
I, too, was someone's wife. It's strange
how things can end. Still, they remain
intact: a stubborn rearrangement
of the facts. I've had my fill
of words that grieve and weep. I know
the sad compression, like a sigh,
when someone leaves. Divorce. The courage
not to die. . . She's unaware
her life's become a treatise on
the things I fear: the tiny lies,
the gradual ways to disappear . . .

Her plates are dry, they're neatly stacked.
The TV's on? A baby cries?
I can't hear, so it's just the same
as reading lips through wind and rain.
She really ought to get some rest
from that domestic happiness
inside her little well-lit box.
The clock says eight. There's news at eight
but why right now? The world still turns
and nothing stops it: not a fresh
disaster, or a hurricane.
She leaves the room. The light still burns.

My hands begin to tidy up.
First it's my coat and then my cup:
objects inclined to sink much deeper
into objectness. That glass,
for instance, leaves its watery rings
on wood. The thousand natural shocks
that flesh is heir to mark our skins
with age. . . her face floats into view
but now I'm looking at my pillow:
strands of hair, like threads of darkness,
lying loosely there, and when
I lie down, they are where my heart is

as I fall asleep. This hollow
for my head is deep: I'll hurtle
to the hole that Alice tunnelled
where appalling nights are funnelled

into rooms where objects loom.
The shadows of a shallow stream
surround me. If I drink, I'll grow
into my adult size and go
into the garden. . . I'm awake,
it's after nine. Her light is on,
her curtains closed. But on that stage
the spotlight of my private rage
has fallen; falls. Its breaking light
becomes my dark, my nervous, night.

The Room, Again

We part. I change the lock,
rearrange the room.
I lie. I nearly dream.
The dream refuses me.

I buy a book,
sell your favourite chair.
I re-embrace the nook
that huddled where

that chair was placed.
I dust it, clear the air.
The cobweb disappears
and in its place a pair

of high-heeled shoes,
ones I never wore.
Space consumed by you,
space that went before,

is filled, again, with something
of your memory.
You, so tall, would want
me taller. Now I free

myself, at last, from all of this:
the room, again,
becomes a function of me,
a remember-when,

a gift, a better friend,
a healing scar,
a space I re-embrace,
and everything you are

can sit here in this poem,
a kind of prison, where
I regulate the hours
and the flow of air.

Hotel

If I'd gone away with you,
darling, when you'd asked me to;
seen that room above the sea,
three hours from the ordinary;

if the stairs, creaking, steep,
and the vase, flushed with deep
greys and pinks, had been our view,
(if I'd gone away with you);

tables long, tables laid
and the sheets an endless, frayed
array of white, embroidered blue,
(if I'd gone away with you);

if we'd slept, close and curled
in the centre of that world,
hours from what we always do,
(if I'd gone away with you)

then I'd have this image, dear,
of your skin, your smile, the clear
picture of our future life.
But I'm someone else's wife.

That Old Trap

Someone waits at home . . .
the same old story.

Here's the variation:
this is me and you

about to lose whatever
we elected once

to get us through our lives.
I didn't think of you

at all, when his arms
were strong around me,

even when his lips
were closed on mine,

softly as a trap shuts
on a small mouse;

only heard the faint
shatter, crunch of spine.

After Dinner

Your guests have left, the dishes lie about,
the candles have gone out, the air is stale
and yet you sit, quite still. The darkness breathes
around you. Even you cannot refill

this empty glass. Your hands are by your side,
eyes still on the wall, the very place
his shadow rose and fell all evening. Somewhere
he is driving now and his remembered face

holds its grave composure while his eyes,
full of smoky cynicism, slowly rise
to meet your own. He looks away and smiles
and you are filled, are flooded, as the woman

by his side is talking, talking, while your guests
continue in their drunken clatter to convey
forks to mouths and glasses to their lips. They stay
in long, continuous laughter – an array

of life still in its prime, a youthful chatter
of cups on saucers, knives on dinner plates
and the glass' accidental shatter –
doesn't matter, darling – so you wish away

your life, the whole beginning of it, anyway,
settle for a place shut in his gaze.
Other voices reach you, in and out of phase,
but you stay, simple as an outline

traced out on a piece of paper, shaded
by the recognition of his eyes today,
watching as you watch his fingers play
with a cigarette. You have to turn away;

you sigh, as only darkness and the night
reach down to touch you now and fill your sight.

What was said

He says: "I'm in a forest,
no light enters; night
belongs to me. I live there."

He says: "A grave
has grown on me; the mushrooms
cling, I find myself inheriting

the soft moss and its millipedes;
the scent of dew; a look
and feel of weeds."

He says: "These footprints
on my skin; my trodden tongue;
a body made for trampling."

What can she say? "I love you –
stars and fireflies
flicker round you endlessly;

lilies rise; the river's dew
comes off you; tiny worlds
divide and thrive.

You're belly-soft. You are alive."

Love, again

I haven't a clue
how night became this quiet,
how words were stilled
and love defined its end.

We'd muttered, while all
around us life went on,
about the kind of happiness
we'd soon befriend . . .

I couldn't predict
that light would change abruptly
and squint along
the river like a sigh

but even walking
down the street, I manage
to feel the rain
squeezed from a drying eye.

The night is quiet.
We'll go on as before.
After the rain
a few leaves have uncurled

and love, again,
a tentative old woman,
creeps into
the cold and mortal world.

**Notes towards a self-definition:
Anna Akhmatova, love poetry and other influences**

An exploration of the nature and tradition of 'love poetry' would fill several tomes, never mind a short thesis. It is not my intention to wrestle with definitions; the definition of 'love poetry' is open to debate and capable of further refinement. What follows is my own 'theory' of the genre.

In simple terms, a 'love poet' is not someone who has written exhaustively (let alone exclusively) about love. The poet whose best, most successful, poems are 'love poems', or poems which hinge on a situation of emotional and/or physical intimacy are, however, contenders for such a title.

Such contenders may view the 'love poet' label with some ambivalence. It is not difficult to believe, in moments of introspection, that love is scarcely acceptable currency for the modern poet.

'Do not write love-poems,' Rainer Maria Rilke warned the young would-be poet Franz Xaver Kappus in 1903 -- no doubt aware that many poets begin their careers by writing such poems (often of the awkward and sentimental kind) (Rilke, p.19).

One is also wary of falling into the traps that await love poets. Love poems are dangerous for precisely the reasons that love itself is dangerous -- one can seldom disguise one's greatest vulnerabilities or failings. Of course, one may argue that love poems are as close to love itself as cheques are to cash. This is undoubtedly true, but faking in love is easier and, one might argue, more readily forgivable, than faking in poetry.

'Eroticism is the cerebral sexual activity of man,' Jonathan Dollimore writes in Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture (p.250). Friedrich Nietzsche, in Beyond Good and Evil, wrote: 'The degree and kind of a man's sexuality reaches up into the topmost summit of his spirit' (p.73). This being the case, love poems have far more to do with one's sensibility than one's sexual organs.

If this is taken as a given (and, language being the currency of poetry, this may well be indisputable), it is clear why many love poems fail. The dangers of being too crass/puerile/coy/graphic inhere in language itself. If the cliché is the enemy of poetry, it is doubly the enemy of love poetry.

*

What makes Akhmatova's love poetry so successful as love poetry? Its success may be due to the fact that Akhmatova had a particular instinct, or talent, for clarity and emotional honesty. It may be because, even as a young poet, her good sense kept her from any kind of messy confession or melodrama. Or it may simply be because she understood that love poetry has more to do with language (the spirit) than it has to do with love (the flesh).

'It is the finite's nostalgia for the infinite that accounts for the recurrence of the love theme in Akhmatova's verse, not the actual entanglements,' Joseph Brodsky wrote in his seminal essay on Akhmatova, 'The Keening Muse' (Brodsky, pp.45,46).

On the other hand, her success may be attributed to the simple fact that she managed to avoid the usual traps; in truth, the only 'traps' she fell

into were ideological ones. Her detractors labelled her a 'love poet' largely to prove that she lacked a social conscience.

In 1923, P Vinogradskaya wrote: 'Why, there is nothing in [Akhmatova] except love, nothing about labour, about the collective . . . except for God and love she cannot see anything further than the tip of her nose'; and in 1939, B Mikhaylovsky wrote: 'Akhmatova's only theme is that of rather similar amatory experiences, the same old story sung over and over again. Moreover, this theme remains within the confines of narrowly personal circumstances and moods -- it does not widen out (as in Blok), does not link up with philosophical or social problems' (Haight, p.73).

Although such criticism is not only biased but substantively untrue, it nevertheless points to one of the problems inherent in love poetry: its limited scope. This is, perhaps, why only a handful of poets attempt to make a 'career' of it -- at some point, such poetry is in danger of becoming 'the same old story sung over and over again', even for the most adroit of poets.

In an attempt to avoid 'the same old story', not because of any criticism levelled at her but because of the rigorous emotional integrity that kept her from the cliché, Akhmatova began to give voice to increasingly tragic heroines, both named and unnamed. These heroines were neither 'characters' nor 'types'; rather, they were sketches for a work-in-progress: a developing sensibility.

In his book on the language of love -- A Lover's Discourse -- Roland Barthes proposes to create 'a portrait -- but not a psychological portrait; instead, a structural one which offers the reader a discursive site: the site of someone

speaking within himself, amorously, confronting the other (the loved object), who does not speak' (Barthes, p.3).

Any attentive reader will see that this definition of a lover's discourse can be applied to love poetry itself; in fact, it unwittingly provides a remarkably accurate definition of love poetry.

If Akhmatova's heroines are brushstrokes rather than fully rounded characters, it is because Akhmatova understood that love poems are necessarily artificial; that 'a writer's sentiments inevitably subordinate themselves to the linear and unrecoiling progression of art' (Brodsky, pp.372,373).

A few essential details, then, define Akhmatova's heroines: they are 'Cleopatra', 'Lot's Wife', 'Rachel'; they are strong in the face of adversity and ruin; they are more likely to be proud and sarcastic than overcome with grief in the face of love or loss.

Such defiant strength, such 'heartlessness', was a feature of Akhmatova's language, and it was to become her trademark. Her friend, the critic Nikolay Nedobrovo, wrote in a 1915 essay: 'Akhmatova's very voice, firm, even self-confident, her very calmness in confessing pain and weakness, the very abundance of anguish, poetically refined -- all bear witness, not to tears over life's trivialities, but to a lyrical soul sooner harsh than soft, cruel than lachrymose, and clearly masterful rather than downtrodden' (Haight, p.200).

Of course, poetry allows a narrator to 'have the last word', as it were -- it is a 'controlled environment' in which line breaks and full stops can dictate an ending, and the tenor of an ending, more effectively than any verbal exchange. It is interesting, then, that Akhmatova sees to it

that her heroines either come off second best, or win at a great cost.

It could be said, however, that her language -- the true character in her poems -- is always 'masterful' -- hence the ambiguity, the complexity, of her love poems.

If she has ensured that love is neither consoling nor fulfilling in her poetry, it is not due to masochism or neurosis. Rather, Akhmatova understood the potential of such a position, clarified elsewhere by Nietzsche: 'The sense of the tragic increases and diminishes with sensuality' (Beyond Good and Evil, p.85). By identifying the erotic with loss/absence/death, Akhmatova is magnifying the desire of her narrators -- and, of course, the bitter, even tragic, consequences of such desire.

This provides her with the necessary tension with which to express a suffering consciousness. If Akhmatova appears to court suffering on behalf of her heroines, it is because anguish provides a heightened state of consciousness -- and of language.

Retelling the story of Cleopatra's suicide is a case in point. Though the poem adds nothing to the character of Shakespeare's Cleopatra, it fuses death and eroticism with a disturbing elegance:

Cleopatra

I am air and fire . . .

— Shakespeare

She had already kissed Antony's dead lips,
she had already wept on her knees before Caesar . . .
and her servants have betrayed her. Darkness falls.
The trumpets of the Roman eagle scream.

And in comes the last man to be ravished by her beauty --
 such a tall gallant! -- with a shamefaced whisper:
 "You must walk before him, as a slave, in the triumph."
 But the slope of her swan's neck is tranquil as ever.

Tomorrow they'll put her children in chains. Nothing
 remains except to tease this fellow out of mind
 and put the black snake, like a parting act of pity,
 on her dark breast with indifferent hand.

– 1940

(Selected Poems, p.95)

The first image, that of kissing 'Antony's dead lips', is powerfully erotic, and it carries the full weight of what can be recognised as Cleopatra's anguish (Cleopatra is not the narrator, so the narrative itself must be invested with some kind of 'insight').

The last image -- the snake being placed on the breast 'with indifferent hand' -- is equally powerful, largely due to the use of the word 'indifferent', prefigured by that other deliberately misleading and ironic word, 'tranquil'). As in so many of Akhmatova's poems, the heroine's 'resignation' is anything but, and is shot through with bitter acceptance and proud forbearance.

In 'Cleopatra', one is made acutely aware of a suffering consciousness. In other poems, Akhmatova gives preference to an ironic mode of discourse.

Both modes, the ironic and the tragic, serve the poet well, but the tragic sees Akhmatova at her strongest.

Joseph Brodsky may as well have been talking about Akhmatova's work when he wrote, in an essay on Marina Tsvetayeva, 'Footnote to a Poem', "The truth is that at the heart of every tragedy lies the undesirable version of time; this is most obvious in classical tragedies, where the time (the future) of love is

replaced by the time (the future) of death. And the content of the standard tragedy, the reaction of the hero or heroine remaining on stage, *is a denial, a protest against an unthinkable prospect*' (Brodsky, p.247).

Such a protest need not end in suicide, as it does (and as it must do) in 'Cleopatra'. Nevertheless, Akhmatova's choice of tragic heroine is entirely appropriate, given her predilection for bringing love and death into such close proximity in her poetry. This poem (and others) dramatises an association often made by lesser mortals, and succinctly expressed by Georges Bataille: '... anguish, which lays us open to annihilation and death, is always linked to eroticism; our sexual activity finally rivets us to the distressing image of death, and the knowledge of death deepens the abyss of eroticism' (quoted in Dollimore, p.254).

*

Perhaps it is a truism to say that desire is dependent more upon absence than presence. When Denis de Rougemont wrote about Tristan and Iseult, in his 1940 study Love in the Western World, he recognised the contradiction inherent in desire: 'What they need is not one another's presence, but one another's absence. Thus the partings of the lovers are dictated by their passion itself'.

Desire has its roots in a sense of separateness or loneliness -- but de Rougemont would have us believe that this sense of isolation is itself desirable. That may well be; but it is not always easily endured.

'Absence persists -- I must endure it,' writes Barthes. 'Hence I will manipulate it . . . produce rhythm, make an entrance onto the stage of language. This staging

of language postpones the other's death . . . to manipulate absence is to . . . delay as long as possible the moment when the other might topple sharply from absence into death' (Barthes, p.16).

*

If the other has the potential to 'topple sharply from absence into death', it is also true that, at some point, the other's absence may be construed as abandonment (grief, too, embraces the notion of abandonment: 'How could he die and leave me here all alone?').

A certain amount of absence is tolerable, but the other's prolonged absence -- and the waiting it engenders -- feels like abandonment (even if this is not the case).

This 'absence-become-personal' is, as Barthes points out, an episode of language 'which stages the absence of the loved object -- whatever its cause and its duration -- and which tends to transform this absence into an ordeal of abandonment' (Barthes, p.13).

The 'always present I' and the 'always absent you' are, of course, both present in an 'episode of language': the other is 'absent as referent, present as allocutory'.

The 'insupportable present' (called 'that difficult tense' by Barthes) is also the condition of love poetry. Jan Montefiore, in her book Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women's Writing, draws much the same conclusion: 'Barthes's reflections [in A Lover's Discourse] constitute an infinitely sophisticated version of the "gone-here" game representing presence

in absence: that is, it articulates an Imaginary relationship in Symbolic terms, just as the love-poem does' (p.107).

Akhmatova's poem 'White Night' addresses just such an 'absent' beloved:

White Night

I haven't locked the door,
Nor lit the candles,
You don't know, don't care,
That tired I haven't the strength

To decide to go to bed.
Seeing the fields fade in
The sunset murk of pine-needles,
And to know all is lost,

That life is a cursed hell:
I've got drunk
On your voice in the doorway.
I was sure you'd come back.

1911, Tsarskoye Selo

(You Will Hear Thunder, p.18)

Abandoned, the narrator can only 'hallucinate' the presence of the beloved (the 'hallucination' being a function of language): 'I've got drunk / On your voice in the doorway.' Denying that her beloved has perhaps disappeared for good (died?), the narrator hasn't 'locked the door, / Nor lit the candles' (The practice of lighting candles for the dead is hinted at, but the effect is partially diluted by the image of the unlocked door, and the sense that return is possible.) As Freud has pointed out, loss does not necessarily have to be of a concrete nature: 'The object, for instance, is not actually dead, but only lost as an object of love' (my emphasis) (Barthes, p.107).

This is a crucial point in terms of Akhmatova's, and my own, poetry. The 'always absent you' can be resurrected in poems -- as is the case in 'White Night' -- but such an invocation seldom brings any satisfaction: 'You don't know, don't care, / That tired I haven't the strength // To decide to go to bed.' The Russian writer Korney Chukovsky expressed the opinion, in 1921, that '[Akhmatova] was the first to reveal that to be unloved was a subject for poetry' (Haight, p.69). Yet this is not an entirely accurate observation. The equation 'I love, but I am not loved; I am loved, but I do not love' does not quite do justice to the complexity of 'White Night' and other similar poems. Barthes comes closest to approximating the poet's sensibility when he writes: 'I thought I was suffering from not being loved, and yet it is because I thought I was loved that I was suffering; I lived in the complication of supposing myself simultaneously loved and abandoned' (p.187).

A number of my own poems also address this equation. 'Ice', for example, sees an 'abandoned' lover reflecting on the state of her failed relationship. The language is deliberately spare and unadorned, intended to convey tiredness or resignation.

'Calendar' begins in a similar vein but ends with a slightly less resigned sense of despair; indeed, the poem comes to suggest that love is but one 'distraction' on the way to 'the end' (death). This is hinted at early on in the poem when the lover identifies herself with a moth flying into a flame -- suggesting that eroticism has a compellingly death-like aspect.

Interestingly, in this poem, the invocation of the loved one's name plunges

the lover into a metaphorical hell-fire; in 'Ice', 'as you try to say his name / ice defines your windowpane' -- the lover's inability to speak the loved one's name keeps her from a kind of damnation. She is 'saved', at least temporarily, by being heartless, unemotional, stoical.

These lovers bear a passing resemblance to the narrator of 'White Night'.

In all three poems, the lover must come to terms with 'the end', a deferred or reluctantly embraced inevitability.

In 'White Night', the narrator appears to have surrendered to time: 'I was sure you'd come back' (i.e. 'You are never coming back, you have abandoned me for good'). At the same time, there is a sense in which she is perpetually waiting, and therefore not surrendering at all. She defers all decisions; she refuses to take action in the world; she inhabits a perpetual 'white night' by refusing to light candles, which would be a recognition of the inevitability of darkness. 'Am I in love?' Barthes asks in A Lover's Discourse. 'Yes, because I'm waiting' (p.39). To cease to wait is to accept 'abandonment'. One of my own poems -- a haiku -- dramatises such a scene:

Waiting

Wind. The cypress.
How the curtain flies!
This night is endless.

The repetition of the 's', the sibilance, might suggest the sigh (of longing? of impatience?) of the lover. ¹

1. (Barthes: 'A (classic) word comes from the body, which expresses the emotion of absence: to sigh: "to sigh for the bodily presence" ' (p.15).)

At the same time, the 'sigh' prolongs the line audibly, making the lover's waiting that much harder to bear. The use of the word 'flies' only emphasises this because, although the word hints at the expression -- the cliché -- 'time flies', time actually seems to slow down. The curtain flies (in the wind) and the moment is witnessed by the wakeful narrator (who would ordinarily be asleep). The narrator is therefore 'marking time', and the night is, in fact, perceived to be 'endless'.

This haiku -- like many haiku -- appears largely impersonal, presenting a 'scene' rather than an 'experience'. There is no 'crisis point' in the poem, as in 'Ice' and 'Calendar', but this is because the narrator is trapped in the 'insupportable present' -- the future is unclear but, paradoxically, it is only the future that can bring certainty. Waiting therefore engenders hope.

Many of Akhmatova's poems have all the brevity and suggestiveness of a haiku -- one of their strongly appealing features-- and Akhmatova is fond of presenting an emotion or a state of mind in terms of a natural object or a weather condition. It is precisely this 'elusiveness' (present even when Akhmatova is writing quite straightforwardly about cherry trees, candles or raspberry jam) that makes Akhmatova's language so powerful -- much is, and remains, deliberately unsaid.

Barthes has identified such 'elusiveness' as part of the code of Japanese haiku.

A kigo -- a 'season-word' -- is used to define the state of mind of the writer.

Love poets can benefit from such devices, suggestive, as they are, of scenes all lovers find familiar.

There is little that is original about love, but much that can be made to seem original through choice of words, rhymes, metres and other devices. The kigo can often bridge the gap between the significant and the apparently meaningless: 'Amorous notation retains the kigo, that faint allusion to the rain, to the evening, to the light, to everything that envelops, diffuses,' writes Barthes (p.174).

'Wind' and 'night' can therefore be said to contain all one needs to know with regard to the miniature 'love story' told in 'Waiting'. At the same time, these words are peculiarly, deliberately opaque. They are meaningless until one 'cracks the code' and reads them as profoundly symbolic.

Akhmatova is chary with her use of images and symbols, and the few she selects carry more weight, and resonate more impressively, than they would if they were ubiquitous. This is a useful lesson for love poets in danger of trying to 'say everything' in their poems, and over-explaining or over-analysing as a consequence -- always a temptation when writing about something as emotionally fraught as love.

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Despite Akhmatova's penchant for terse, laconic pronouncements, her poetry has nevertheless been read as intensely personal and at least partly autobiographical. This is due to the fact that she never shied away from writing about 'flash points' or 'crisis points' in human intimacy -- critical and defining moments that change characters and/or situations irrevocably. These moments appear to have been drawn from experience, and Akhmatova's consistent use of the first person pronoun reinforces this impression.

Critics have debated the autobiographical nature of her poems, and Akhmatova herself contributed to the speculation when she wrote, in an autobiographical fragment, that she worked in the 'the genre of the "erotic diary" ' as a young poet (Amert, p.5).

Justin Doherty, in his book The Acmeist Movement in Russian Poetry, is quick to point out, however, that 'the notion of lyric poetry as autobiography, though an enduring one, is one which Modernism came to question, and one which Acmeists addressed in a variety of interesting ways' (p.171).

According to Doherty, Akhmatova created a 'consciously literary' autobiography by altering dates and places of composition and carefully arranging poems so as to hint at some kind of 'story'.

The 'diary entry' quality of these poems may fool the reader into taking each love 'episode' or 'adventure' literally. But is this what Akhmatova intended? According to Amanda Haight, 'As [Formalist critic] Eykhenbaum pointed out, one of Akhmatova's poetic tricks was to make readers feel they have been allowed to read an intimate diary, and it is only after careful consideration that we realize how very impersonal this "personal" diary is' (Haight, p.60). By suggesting that love was actually a 'code' or a 'language' for Akhmatova, Joseph Brodsky effectively scotched the idea that the 'entries' in her 'erotic diary' had any value other than as a record of her aesthetics.

'Poets' real biographies are like those of birds, almost identical -- their real data are in the way they sound,' Brodsky wrote. 'A poet's biography is in his vowels and sibilants, in his meters, rhymes, and metaphors . . . With poets,

the choice of words is invariably more telling than the story line . . . '

(Brodsky, p.46).

The point is a contentious one, but Brodsky may simply be saying that poems, too, have biographies and, like poets, they select what to reveal and what not to reveal.

Finally, though, whatever they omit is just as telling as what they include.

Susan Amert, in her book In a Shattered Mirror -- the Later Poetry of Anna Akhmatova, points out that 'though [Akhmatova's] early poems disclose to the reader the persona's experiences and emotions, they rely to a great extent on concealing information from the reader' (p.8).

Akhmatova's flirtation with autobiography -- her 'erotic diary' -- was something more than a literary parlour-game, however. By hinting that her poetry is partly autobiographical, she is drawing the reader with what may or may not be akin to a 'confession' (and readers are notorious for wanting to blur the boundaries between writers' lives and works).

Sooner or later, all poets have to decide how much autobiographical material they feel comfortable using in their work. Akhmatova often made apparently personal revelations in her poems, but her delivery was frequently cool and detached and she liked to use the devices of irony or the 'mask' (as in 'Cleopatra', for example). Swooning lyricism is frequently propped up against formidably rigid forms. This creates an interesting poetic tension, and I like to think that Akhmatova has influenced my own poetry in this regard.

Akhmatova was not, strictly speaking, a technical innovator; her forms were largely conventional. Indeed, critical contemporaries accused her of 'formalism' due to her apparently come-what-may adherence to strict 'classical' structures. Such criticism is just, though hardly damning. For one thing, Akhmatova could no more abandon her forms than she could her mother tongue. They were as much a part of her poetic sensibility as was the Russian language.

Furthermore, her forms were no doubt suggested by the poetry of much-loved literary predecessors: Pushkin, Dante, Annensky. Admiration often leads to imitation, and Akhmatova had no reason not to entrust her voice to familiar forms of lyrical expression.

It is always easier for a young poet to write according to tradition; at the same time, it is possible for traditional forms to become entrenched in one's psyche. If a number of my own poems follow strict metrical and formal sequences, it is because 12 years' practice has made such structures second nature.

My poem 'Soliloquy' is a straightforward Shakespearean sonnet and, like 'White Night', is addressed to an absent beloved. The title of the poem is ironic; clearly, the poem has an addressee: 'Protect me . . .', 'Come back . . .'. At the same time, the 'I' of the poem is crucially alone.

The challenge, in writing this poem, was to create and maintain a certain lyrical intensity within the confines of the sonnet form. It is interesting that this proved to be not only possible but unavoidable; the form demanded brevity, compression and, eventually, the necessary kind of claustrophobic intensity called for by the subject matter.

The narrator is alone, suffering, apparently abandoned by a loved one. The scene is 'conventional' but it is worth noting that no love poem can hope to be 'original' except through language, as pointed out earlier. Language is therefore of crucial importance -- not least because, as this poem demonstrates, it is a consoling medium: 'Protect me from the wordlessness of lips.'

*

Akhmatova has mistakenly been read as a poet of elegance and refinement, a somewhat precious heir to pre-revolutionary literary culture. It is true that she made an attempt to 'resurrect classical accuracy of expression and artistic perfection of form' (D Vygodsky, Haight, p.55). But she did this because she had no choice -- she gravitated towards aesthetic order because it called for clarity of diction.

Even before she wrote her later, harrowing poems about the effects of Stalinism, she saw herself as a witness to changing times. If she was, indeed, 'the product of a dying class', it was poetry's good fortune; her vehement rejection of Futurism and other forms of 'aesthetic vitality' gave her work an even greater sense of anachronistic purity.

Joseph Brodsky interpreted her 'formalism' in a characteristically penetrating way: 'Her poems approach the folk song not only in structure but in essence, for they emerge always, invariably, as laments' (Brodsky, p.46).²

2. Brodsky has written elsewhere that the 'two genres requiring the highest pitch' are 'the love lyric and the funeral lament' (Brodsky, p.267).

Brodsky may have seen something of the simplicity of the folk song in her poetry, but critics like Zhdanov had a more ideologically jaundiced view of her work, seeing 'formalism, art for art's sake, individualism, decadence and death' -- and everything these qualities ostensibly represented.

The irony is that Akhmatova's forms were anything but decadent and self-indulgent. They were punishingly self-constraining. As such, they were able to reach places Futurism was quite unable to reach -- not only the past (which had produced not only Pushkin and Dante but Annensky, who had a profound influence on the Acmeists in general), but also the realm of lyricism.

What is interesting about Akhmatova is the fact that her use of classical forms never inhibited her lyricism. If anything, it intensified it.

Nietzsche's dialectic concerning the Apolline and the Dionysiac, particularly with regard to tragedy, may, perhaps, clarify this point. I have chosen this analogy because I think it encapsulates the push and pull between classical order and lyrical rapture very well. This tension is inherent in Akhmatova's poetry and, perhaps, in my some of my own as well.

Nietzsche considered the two 'gods of art', Apollo and Dionysus, to be in violent opposition to one another, uniting only to produce Attic tragedy. In pointing out that Homer and Archilochus were considered to be the 'forefathers and torch-bearers of Greek poetry' (The Birth of Tragedy, p.28), Nietzsche had to deal with the thorny problem of 'how it is possible to consider the "lyric poet" as an artist' in the first place. His conclusion is revealing:

As regards Archilochus, learned research has revealed that he introduced the folk song into literature, and that for this deed he was accorded his unique place beside Homer in the universal estimation of the Greeks. But what is the folk song as distinct from the utterly Apolline epos? What is it but the perpetuum vestigium of a unification of the Apolline and the Dionysiac? (The Birth of Tragedy, p.32)

Nietzsche goes on to write: 'In the poetry of the folk song, then, we see language doing its utmost to imitate music' (p.33). Akhmatova's poems have precisely this musical, lyrical, quality. Her use of classical forms did little to dampen her lyricism and I am inclined to think that they enhanced it because, as de Rougemont, has pointed out, 'passion is deepened and releases its energies only in proportion to the resistance it meets' (Dollimore, p.335). Form can provide just such a sense of resistance; the trick is to make sure that a poem contains an appropriate amount of lyricism.

Two of my poems dramatise this tension between formal constraint and lyrical release: 'Hotel' and 'That Old Trap'. Formal constraint serves to heighten the sense of moral probity -- or the rejection thereof -- in these poems; form as an enactment of ethical resolve is an interesting concept, and one which Joseph Brodsky championed in Russian poetry in his essay 'The Child of Civilisation': 'Russian poetry has set an example of moral purity and firmness, which to no small degree has been reflected in the preservation of so-called classical forms without any damage to content' (Brodsky, pp. 142, 143).

On another level, any work of art -- any poem -- dramatising the pull between 'obsession and responsibility' ('Sea Grapes', Walcott, p.125), or Freud's 'desire and civilisation', generates a kind of tension that works on two levels: the aesthetic and the ethical. In 'Hotel', for example, the narrator

imagines the scene that might have been played out had conscience not gained the upper hand. The scene is played out in language, instead; erotic desire pervades the poem but is very much contained, in terms of both content and form.

Formally, the repetition of the line 'if I'd gone away with you' -- framed, for the most part, in parenthesis -- emphasises the fact that the scene being enacted is unreal.

The question as to why the narrator had not gone away with the object of her affections is, of course, unanswered until the end of the poem, which creates a certain amount of (linguistic) tension (particularly since 'if' is repeated, over and over, without the corresponding 'then' that would effect closure).

Also, there are just two sentences in the 20-line poem, the first running to all of 19 lines. The last line, which 'resolves' the poem, also serves to undermine the very resolution it offers. The narrative may be fulfilled but the narrator is denied such fulfilment (or is able to achieve fulfilment only at the expense of morality).

'Hotel' focuses on a sense of all-pervasive loss, with the understanding, however, that what is lost has been voluntarily given up -- at least on the face of it. The love that flows unchecked from stanza to stanza is finally brought up short, and the harsh reality of the line 'But I'm someone else's wife' builds a veritable brick wall of formal and ethical resistance. There is nothing even vaguely negotiable about this statement.

'That Old Trap' is a rather more direct, though somewhat less dramatic, poem; it presents an actual instance of infidelity. The poem is addressed to a lover or

husband and is something of a 'penance poem' -- an apology for putting obsession and desire above a committed relationship. However, it is by no means certain that the narrator is contrite; rather, she acknowledges that she is 'about to lose' the relationship and she must live with the consequences of her 'spineless' act: 'the faint / shatter, crunch of spine' indicates that ethical uprightness has been destroyed.

Eroticism as a more promising (though no more fulfilling) force is expressed in a poem like 'Touch' -- a Cavafy-like fragment that focuses on a 'chance encounter'.

The caressing words 'brushes', 'crush' and 'touch' are prolonged on the tongue, heightening the sense of sensuality and, at the same time, the sense of the isolation of the speaker.

The speaker's loneliness is emphasised in two ways: first, by means of the repetition (coupling) of words: 'Wool on wool', 'side by side' (the speaker 'hallucinating' erotic contact); and secondly, by means of the rhetorical question that concludes the poem -- 'What would you give . . . to feel / that touch, and to be warm inside?' (The implied, the true, question being 'What would you not give?'.)

The speaker is alone on a 'crowded' morning train, which heightens the privacy, the intensity, of the experience. The 'he' in the poem is never fleshed out, but I have tried to create a sense of disembodiment rather than fetishism. The emphasis is on a feeling of physical aloneness, which can cause an acute awareness of another's physicality.

The 'dream-like' quality of the journey further separates the narrator from the

'civilised' world, the relentless motion of both time and train. Such a 'suspension' suggests that the speaker has virtually succumbed to erotic temptation. This poem, unlike 'Hotel' and 'That Old Trap', takes desire one step further (though no closer, it should be said, to physical fulfilment).

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Love is not always and unvaryingly tragic. If this were so, love poetry would be little more than the reflex of a psyche doomed to reconstitute 'rather similar amatory experiences' without any hope of release. Perhaps one of the greatest challenges for the love poet is to find alternative ways of presenting the amorous experience.

If, as adults, we are necessarily co-opted by adulthood, by civilisation, it is up to the love poet to try to retain some link, however tenuous, with what lies beyond the mundane confines of responsibility. One route to take is to write about transgressive love: infidelity or illicit love, for example. Another route to take is to embrace a certain vulnerability.

The most difficult route for the love poet to take is the route of emotional vulnerability, largely because he or she is automatically co-opted by the genuine in language. This is not to say that a poem intrinsically 'tough' or 'heartless' cannot be vulnerable -- but the vulnerability will either take the form of irony or move towards the register of tragedy, as in Akhmatova's poem 'Cleopatra'.

Akhmatova seldom explored the tender or fulfilling aspects of love, and it is, perhaps understandably, somewhat easier to write about Pyrrhic victories than about honourable yet mundane defeats.

Absence and abandonment are not preconditions for tragic love poetry, but longing and nostalgia frequently are. Without a sense of longing or nostalgia, a love poem necessarily becomes somewhat less tragic. It need not, however, lose any crucial sensuality or eroticism.

Poems such as 'Harvest' and 'What was said' are two such examples. In 'Harvest', the narrator almost anticipates abandonment ('And you rose to go . . . / No, no . . . stay (I said)'). The poem surprises, however, and the love promised in the first stanza of the poem finds fulfilment in the third. The 'harvest' referred to is intended to represent sensual fulfilment, if not emotional fulfilment; at any rate, the poem marries tender language with tender experience for a reason – and this is a far cry from the bitterness of poems like 'Ice' and 'Calendar'.

Similarly, 'What was said' shows the narrator affirming love despite her lover's apparent cynicism. He says: 'A grave / has grown on me', but she counters this assertion with: 'You're belly-soft. You are alive.'

Life-affirming, love-affirming poetry's greatest adversary is, of course, sentimentality. A fear of sentimentality can keep many a love poet resolutely set on showing the darker side of love.

One of the greater risks, in this regard, is trying to write successfully about love in childhood. My poems 'Adam' and 'The fall' take issue with this, pointing out, however, that the absolute, unconditional love of childhood must necessarily change or vanish once the disillusionment of adulthood sets in. The original title of 'The fall' was 'The first one', but I replaced it with the (to my mind) more symbolically resonant title.

The poem has a strong autobiographical component. The 'story' is factual in that the poet, age 10, was 'in love' with a boy born on the same day as herself, who had a white horse, and who was involved in a riding accident. All these facts, however, hopefully have a broader significance on a symbolic level. The 'white horse', for example, is a resonant symbol in a poem addressing the notion of ideal or innocent love.

This takes the strain of autobiography off the narrative -- a strategy that is decidedly useful to love poets either tired of their inner dramas or looking for alternative ways in which to present them.

The central idea in the poem is, of course, the hero's 'fall' and its ramifications. On a literal, childish, level, the narrator recognises her 'twin', 'the first, the strong one', is not invincible -- and with this recognition comes the narrator's awareness of separateness. Her 'hero' (the words is repeated in the poem) is, however, 'brought down' in more ways than one.

At this point, the narrator rejects the idea of love as oneness or union. ('I'd never run after you again' takes on a double meaning here: 'run after' as in 'follow, imitate', or as in 'pursue', in a romantic sense.)

There is a constant pull between joining and separating forces running throughout the poem. Hyphenated words are used in abundance: 'black-on-tan', 'burnt-out', 'zig-zagged', 'arrow-quick', 'white-on-tan' (a mirror image of 'black-on-tan'), and child-like. On the other hand, line endings enforce separation: in line 2, 'across' allows the motion of crossing to take place, both visually and semantically; the word 'ran' ends two lines in the poem, pushing the poem on

energetically; the words 'broke' and 'crack' end stanzas as well as lines; and 'walk on' concludes the poem, pushing the narrator into her chosen future.

'Adam' resonates with 'The fall' in terms of both its title and its subject matter. The title is patently symbolic but, again, has its roots in autobiography: the boy referred to in the poem was named 'Adam', and was the poet's 'first love' in early childhood.

Once again, childhood and adulthood are juxtaposed, and childhood is presented as an idyllic, paradisaical country (Eden?), glimpsed again (if more darkly) in yet another poem about children in particular and families in general: 'Idyll'. In a sense, childhood is a place free of the 'archetypal anguish', the 'active passion of Darkness', that is adult love (Dollimore, p.64).

One of Akhmatova's poems, 'By the Seashore', also views childhood as an ideal state: the lines 'I was gay, and bold, and wicked, / And never knew I was happy' (You Will Hear Thunder, p.31) point to the poet's awareness of adulthood's (and love's) almost unendurable burdens.

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By now, the influence of Akhmatova's poetry on my own should be evident. That said, I believe that, although I have taken Akhmatova's work as a starting point, I have moved away from it quite dramatically in some cases -- poems like 'Rings', 'Kiev' and 'On the River' are three such departures.

On the other hand, my poem 'Lilac' was written with Akhmatova in mind (hence the dedication), and her influence is very strong in poems such as 'Ice', 'Love, again' and 'Lines for a lover' (although 'Lines for a lover' was almost exclusively influenced by one of Alexander Kushner's untitled poems -- the last

stanza is quoted in full below. Kushner is essentially one of Akhmatova's 'literary heirs'; Akhmatova was his mentor at one stage).

I loved . . . oh, when was that? I've forgotten now, but
it's been a long time -- not this life, not this era,
some other. How foreign that ardor has proved
to be: all that fire, and wet cheeks, and etcetera.
So what's all this fuss -- that I loved? So I loved . . .

(Apollo in the Snow, p.47)

That said, Akhmatova had little interest in exploring the nuances of different kinds or qualities of love in her poetry; in any event, history provided her with other fascinating comundrums (though, as Amanda Haight has pointed out, 'to the end of her life she wrote poems about love').

The attraction, for me, is the way in which Akhmatova presented love: she bypassed sentimentality, transmuted anger into noble fury, and never questioned the complex mix of tenderness, grief and ecstasy that is so much a part of love in her poetry. She gave love a human face without idealising it or turning away from it with bitterness and cynicism.

Love poetry has been of particular interest to me, not only because it promotes a heightened state of consciousness, language and lyricism but because it is, quite simply, one of the best ways in which we, as human beings, can communicate our most intimate experiences in as lucid and courageous a manner as possible. Love poetry can distill what it is about us that makes us human, even if the resulting portrait is, perhaps inevitably, one of hapless fallibility.

The poems I have submitted offer -- at least in part -- such a portrait.

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* These books have not been directly referred to in my thesis but they have
formed an integral part of my reading. Some of them have also had some
influence on my poetry.