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The Poetic Craft of Bella Akhmadulina by Sonia I. Ketchian

Review by: Sibelan Forrester

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same passage as: “Chiyo had not had a particularly romantic feeling for Kō; instead, she found Sakai’s objections persuasive; they joined with her undercurrent of doubt and she saw she too did not trust Kō.” Tansman’s translation of this critical passage creates a different impression of the whole story. Chiyo indeed has had a vague interest in Kō, and their relationship is one of the main threads of this story, but she has been wise enough to sense Kō’s imprudence herself and to trust the family elder’s judgment. The story ends when Kō, who has committed crimes, disappears in disgrace, proving Sakai correct. Nor is Fujii’s translation free of such errors. He translates the opening passage of *Kabi*, for instance, as “Ogin was officially registered as Sasamura’s legal wife just barely before the registration of their child’s birth” (p. 173). Shūsei’s original text reads, “It was almost at the same time as the birth registration of their child that Sasamura entered his wife into his family registry,” placing the responsibility of procrastination squarely on Sasamura. As the story develops, the reader learns that the indecisive Sasamura is forced into accepting his maid Ogin as his wife after she kept refusing to give up their baby for adoption. Fujii’s rendering removes the agent of registration, a curious omission in the work where the central concern is subjecthood and agency.

Yet these minor inaccuracies in their readings of Japanese do not mar Tansman’s and Fujii’s inspiring criticism; rather, they show how very difficult a task it is to translate from Japanese. Kōda Aya’s perceptive stories and Tansman’s sensitive explication are a pleasure to read, and Fujii offers a new vista on the interpretation of modern Japanese literature and thought.

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The Poetic Craft of Bella Akhmadulina. *Sonia I. Ketchian*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993. Pp. vii+248.

Bella Akhmadulina is one of the foremost living Russian poets. From the start of her literary studies and emergence in the group of talented young Moscow poets during the years of the Thaw, even into the years of glasnost’, her relationship with the Soviet literary establishment was uneasy. In 1979 her story “Mnogo sobak i sobaka” (Many dogs and a dog) appeared in the banned unofficial almanac *Metropol’*. Akhmadulina was not punished for her participation as harshly as some lesser-known contributors—indeed, she was able to travel abroad for readings of her poetry in the 1980s—but official disfavor delayed her election to the Soviet Writers’ Union until 1988.

Neither expelled from her country nor rewarded there for conformity, she received less attention than some contemporaries from Western media or the Soviet establishment. For many years she seemed best known for her (brief) marriage to Evgenii Evtushenko or her highly photogenic profile, while translations and slender new paperback editions brought her maturing poetry to readers outside the Soviet Union.

Akhmadulina soon moved beyond the declamatory style of many of her peers into personal, spiritual, and artistic questions, allying her work with the previous generation's creative devotion to preserving and restoring Russian culture. Her mature poetry draws integrally on canonical nineteenth-century Russian poets and especially on the great modernists. Osip Mandel'shtam and Marina Tsvetaeva died when she was a small child, but Anna Akhmatova and Boris Pasternak were alive at the beginning of her career, and in the 1960s literary circles had increasing access to the work of all these poets. Akhmadulina claimed the high moral ground of that tradition, along with the rhyming and semantic innovations of Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva, in order to carry it on with the stamp of her own individuality. Sonia I. Ketchian, specialist on Akhmatova, is well aware of Akhmadulina's relationships to the previous generation of poets—her attention to the echoes of other voices is one strong point of this thorough study.

Ketchian's book is the first monograph on Akhmadulina in any language. Rather than present the poet to new, English-language readers, Ketchian concentrates on a detailed close reading of one set of poems. Following a brief introduction, the first two chapters trace, respectively, "the spiritual essence of the poetic speaker" and the early poetry. Seven other chapters and the conclusion read Akhmadulina's 1983 collection *Taina* (The secret), with reference to her 1987 collection *Sad* (The garden) and to subsequent work that is thematically related.

Ketchian cares deeply about poetry and about Akhmadulina in particular—indeed, the book includes pictures of her with the poet and the title page of *Taina*, with a helpful translation of the poet's warm inscription to Ketchian. She cites informatively from conversations with her subject, who emerges as a very private and tactful individual. In general, though, the book avoids biography to concentrate on published work. Ketchian unfolds the phonetic, lexical, and allusory treasures of the poetry, arguing that *Taina* and *Sad* confirm Akhmadulina's right to move in the highest circles of Russian poetry. The wealth of information and interpretation sends a reader hungrily back to Akhmadulina with a freshened sense of detail and a new view of patterns in her writing. I read the book with great pleasure; each

time I picked it up felt like stepping into the same river, admiring the bright pebbles of quotation in the scholar's hands.

Ketchian is the sort of enthusiastic and stubborn reader that any poet would both hope for and fear. She brings to bear considerable erudition in the work of other poets, both of the nineteenth century and the Silver Age; the results are often illuminating, although rarely surprising. I admire her willingness not to subsume poetry within one or another overarching theory, although the lack of a framework makes her book somewhat formless and difficult to paraphrase. Her tendency toward repetition creates a sense of circularity, especially since she hardly ever cites whole poems, offering instead a few lines and paraphrasing the rest so that the poems too often blend into one another rather than appear in their own shapes. Since her analysis follows the order of the poems in *Taina*, Ketchian's book might best be read alongside a copy of the original collection, as extensive marginal notes for the student or scholar.

Ketchian's focus on prior models makes her discussion somewhat heavy on Akhmatova, whose surname can look confusingly similar in print (Akhmadulina's is her own, Akhmatova's a pseudonym borrowed from a female ancestor). Ketchian contrasts Akhmadulina's writing habits to Akhmatova's as if Akhmatova were the only Russian poet ever to compose poetry in her head before writing it down (p. 31) instead of comparing her to other "desk" writers (e.g., Tsvetaeva or Pasternak). She refers to Akhmatova's "firing" of her poems (like pottery?), the ritual of jotting, memorization, and burning that Lidiia Chukovskaia described, without giving an uninformed reader its historical background: fear that the secret police would find and misuse anything she wrote down. The resemblance to Keats argued in the first part of the book is tenuous, based more on Akhmatova than on Akhmadulina, and a few of the references to other poets who write in English or Armenian also reflect the author's erudition more than the poet's influences.

Ketchian dutifully treats Akhmadulina's more explicit references to Tsvetaeva (perhaps a safer muse and model than Akhmatova because she was dead and named so differently), although some are missed or ignored: the title "Zvuk ukazuiushchii" (The guiding sound) recalls the distinction between "guiding" and "commanding" sounds in Tsvetaeva's 1926 "Poët o kritike" ("Poems about Criticisms," in *Art in the Light of Conscience: Eight Essays on Poetry by Marina Tsvetaeva*, trans. Angela Livingstone [Cambridge, Mass., 1992]), and the treatments of Tarusa never mention the members of Tsvetaeva's family (daughter, half-sister) who had houses there during Akhmadulina's lifetime. The repeated insistence that Aleksandr Pushkin displaces Tsvetaeva as

poetic ideal at the end of *Taina* is not entirely supported by the evidence Ketchian assembles.

Overall, the emphasis on dead poets rather than a more contemporary context situates Akhmadulina as writing mostly in a kind of vacuum—just herself, her table, and her bookcase—that Ketchian populates with the authors she herself knows best. Such an approach becomes a limitation in the first book on any poet, even if it does spring from respect for a living subject's privacy. Finally, Ketchian draws on an eccentric selection of old and older works for theoretical and thematic support. It is fun to see footnotes to a 1922 article from the *Atlantic Monthly* or a 1935 Harvard Ph.D. dissertation, but, since Akhmadulina was not yet born then (nor, moreover, was she in anglo-phone territory), there may be more suitable clues to her verses' cultural background.

The technical quality of the volume is high, and the Cyrillic quotations are pleasantly free of errors. Although the chapters tend to overlap in themes and material, three indices allow a scholar to check conveniently for references to other poets and individual poems by their English and Russian titles. The translations, as befits a Slavist, aim for accuracy rather than artistic effect. They are correct but sometimes ambiguous, especially for readers who know no Russian. For example, "Uporstvuesh'. Ne khoresh' byt'" is given as "You're being obstinant [*sic*]. You don't want to be," rather than "You're acting obstinate. You don't want to exist," a clumsy but more apposite rendering (p. 20). I would quarrel with translating "s chelovekom / / Liubimym mnoiu" (from the early poem "Vlecheta menia starinnyi slog") as "with the man beloved by me" (p. 42) instead of "with a/the person beloved by me," but then Ketchian is a scholar who feels comfortable writing (in her book on a woman's poetry), "Throughout the ages man has looked up at the moon, studying it, admiring it, and fearing it. Through study he has learned to measure time" (p. 70). Occasional oddities of phrasing interrupt the flow of writing, for example, "an evolvment of the investigation" (p. 112). Some footnotes do not fully identify sources or refer to older and more obscure editions of much-published poets. Ketchian's many good ideas would have emerged to greater effect with a bit more editing.

Still, for the reader who is as patient as Ketchian herself, this book has considerable riches to offer. Its brief introduction will be useful to undergraduate students of literature and to readers of Akhmadulina in translation. Even those already acquainted with Russian poetry, but perhaps not so familiar with Akhmadulina, will find much of the book informative.

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