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TWO ACMEIST IMAGES OF UNINTELLIGIBLE POETRY¹

To the memory of Mixail Gasparov

A fruitful inquiry into metapoetic themes and images in acmeism, as well as the hidden subtexts of such images, implied in the text itself by covert citation, was inaugurated almost four decades ago by Kiril Taranovsky (Тарановский 1967: 1993 примеч. 21), who had traced back the figurative meaning of the titles of Akhmatova's and Gumilev's poetry collections, *Четки* (*Rosary*) and *Жемчуга* (*Pearls*), to Puškin's poem "В прохладе сладостной фонтанов..." ("In the sweet coolness of the fountains...")². During the same year, Viač. Vs. Ivanov published his pioneering analysis of Xlebnikov's poem "Меня проносят..." ("They carry me...") and its pictorial subtext as a metaphor of metaphor (Ivanov 1967).

Since then, the study of quotation, overt or covert, metonymic or metaphorical, paraphrastic or intersemiotic, has become an indispensable tool of textual explication and hermeneutic scholarship. The reflexive poetics of acmeism, because of its set toward historical juxtaposition of cultural texts, collation, and value judgement³, invites special attention to its enigmatic metapoetic vocabulary.

Several entries in this vocabulary are figurative representations of reduced referentiality in poetry, e. g., "word as such (слово как таковое)" and "trans-sense (заумь)" (cf. Ronen 1991; Ronen 1993).

Two recurrent figures of speech, in particular, appear to signify in the acmeist poetry and critical prose the related concepts of a bygone, dead poetic style or an alien poetic language, both perceived as undecipherable riddles, presumably ornamental or purely euphonic, with their actual concrete original referentiality totally eroded and replaced by an associative paronomastic virtual meaning, which the poet as a reader or a listener imposes upon them. Thus Mandel'stam suggested in his essay *Storm and Stress* (*Буря и натиск*, 1923) that on the eve of 1914 all of Russian poetry "practically presented itself to the new inquisitiveness and the renovated hearing of the reader as transrational" ["В сущности, тогда вся русская поэзия новой пытливости и обновленному слуху читателя предстала как заумная" (О. Мандельштам 1990: 288)].

Both of the metapoetic tropes to be discussed can be identified and interpreted as abbreviated but recognizable quotations.

The first of these tropes is the image of dead nightingales. It is shared by two acmeists, Gumilev and Mandel'stam, as is another pertinent and better remembered mythopoetic metaphor, the dead bees (Тарановский 1967).

Gumilev, in one of the poems (1917) from the collection *К синей звезде* (*To the Blue Star*), wrote of the lovers who, like blind children, would, on mountain tops, search for wilted roses and listen to dead nightingales⁴.

Mandel'stam, in his essay *Заметки о Шенье* (*Notes on Chénier*) used the same simile, somewhat modified by analogy with the “necklace of dead bees”, as well as the necklace of “tear-pearls” or “pearl-tears” that Taranovsky (1976: 165—166) found in Viačeslav Ivanov and Pečerin, but which, in the long run, had probably originated from “Jehuda ben Halevy”⁵, a subtext in which also the “beautiful nightingale world” (*Schöne Nachtigallenwelt*) of the troubadours had been memorably evoked by Heine (Ronen 1983: 220).

The relevant phrase in Mandel'stam's *Notes on Chénier* reads: “⟨...⟩ вся романтическая поэзия, как ожерелье из мертвых соловьев, не передаст, не выдаст своих тайн, не знает завещания” = “⟨...⟩ the entire romantic poetry, like a necklace of dead nightingales, would not give out, would not give away its secrets, would not know what legacy is” (О. Мандельштам 1990: 164).

G. Levinton perceived here an allusion to the dead nightingales of Gumilev's poem out of *К синей звезде* (Левинтон 1994: 34). This may be so, but if it is, we are dealing with a quotation within a quotation, for the figurative collocation “dead nightingales” derives from a well-known source, Heine's posthumously published long poem “Bimini”, a fragment of which Gumilev has translated into Russian⁶. In the history of world poetry, “Bimini” is remembered as one of the last testaments of romanticism, and Heine's dead nightingales are a brief recollection of the perished romantic dream:

Auf den Häuptern welke Kränze,
Schauen sie mich an wehmütig;
Tote Nachtigallen flöten,
Schluchzen zärtlich, wie verblütend

(= *On their heads the withered garlands // Sadly look at me; // Dead nightingales flute // And sob tenderly, as if bleeding to death*).

In the same poem, the old native nurse from whom Ponce de Leon has learned about the font of youth on the island of Bimini wears an exotic “head-dress of padded hair interlaced with countless little birds”: ⟨...⟩

Hebet sich der Haarwulstkopfputz, // Der gespickt ist mit unzähl'gen // Vögelein <...>

Earlier, in 1826, the image of a chorus of dead nightingales appeared in Chapter IV of Heine's *Ideen: Das Buch Le Grand*, in the evocation of the poet's old age and death: "⟨...⟩ die Geisterchöre verstorbenen Nachtigallen flöten aus der Ferne" = "⟨...⟩ the ghostly choirs of dead nightingales will flute from afar".

The two parallel images, Gumilev's and Mandel'stam's, appear to be, therefore, a characteristic instance of divergence from the same text that has been part of the common subtextual corpus of the Guild of Poets. It may be recalled in this connection that the presence of the Heine component in Mandel'stam's art is seldom acknowledged by modern scholars, and sometimes denied outright (Аверинцев 1990: 17 примеч. 1), even though considerable evidence of it has been identified since N. Berkovskij's early study of Mandel'stam's prose (Берковский 1930: 161—162; 1989: 290—291), a pioneering work in this and other respects. The reason, in this particular instance, may have been N. Ia. Mandel'stam's disparaging remark about Heine as "a poet for lazy readers" in her second book of memoirs (Н. Мандельштам 1990: 445). But then, even though, as Apollon Majkov wrote, *His shadow has long been flashing // In the gardens of our native poetry*⁷, the full extent of Heine's impact upon Russian verbal art remains generally undetermined and most often ignored especially where the poetics of nonfiction is concerned, from *Past and Thoughts* through *The Writer's Diary* to *Solitaria* (Ронен 2003а: 223—225, 227; 2003б: 75—78).

It is typical of the acmeist dialogue of diverging and converging quotations that there exists also an earlier, seemingly parallel, but, upon closer scrutiny, complementary or even contrastive image of a nightingale that has lost its voice in a poem by Akhmatova, "Как вилелась в мои темные косы..." (1912). The situation here is the reverse of "Bimini" and *Das Buch Le Grand*: Heine's dead nightingales sing from afar; Akhmatova's live nightingale is mute and can but listen breathlessly to somebody else's distant song⁸.

Expressing, as it does, the acmeist idea of reception as a creative challenge, Akhmatova's image of the voiceless nightingale is a metapoetic interpretation of the lines from Millevoje's famous elegy *La chute des feuilles* (1811): *La bocage était sans mystère, // Le rossignol était sans voix* = *The grove was without its mystery, // The nightingale was voiceless*.

This is obviously an instance of convergence of heterogeneous quotation-based images.

The other metapoetic image of an incomprehensible but significant message with a lost code is specific to the art of Mandel'stam, with some notable cognates in the poetry of Benedikt Livšic (“И вот умолк повествователь жалкий...”, 1924) and a more distant and thematically contrastive parallel in Gumilev's *Дракон* (*Dragon*, 1921). This is the image of a sea monster, or of seaweed, or of the monster turning into a heap of seaweed. The perilous euphony of Italian verse was described by Mandel'stam as “a meaningless salty-sweet tongue”, “a shut pearl oyster” that one is afraid to open with a knife⁹, a monster with azure brain and moist eyes for scales¹⁰. The “vinegar sponge” in this poem, “Не ищущай чужих наречий...” (“Tempt not foreign idioms...”), derives, of course, from the gospel, but enters the same semantic field of ‘grotesque marine life’ and establishes a link with Pasternak's image of poetry as “a Greek sponge”¹¹, on the one hand, and, on the other, with Mandel'stam's own interpretation, in *Разговор о Данте* (*Discourse on Dante*, 1933)¹², of *Inferno XXXII*, 4: ⟨...⟩ *Io premerei di mio concetto il suco* ⟨...⟩ = ⟨...⟩ *I would press out the juice of my conception* ⟨...⟩ (trans. by H. W. Longfellow).

A closely related figurative evocation of the poet-reader's attempt to penetrate an alien aesthetic system occurs in one of the draft versions of Mandel'stam's *Грифельная ода* (*Slate Ode*, 1923): ⟨...⟩ *Какая мука выжимать // Чужих гармоний водоросли* = ⟨...⟩ *What a torment it is to squeeze out // The seaweed of alien harmonies* (Ronen 1983: 222).

“Seaweed” in Mandel'stam's metapoetic vocabulary should be compared to his images of hay, shaggy fur, tangled hair, and other composite, hybrid, metaphoric/metonymic tropes signifying “trans-sense”. As has been pointed out in the earlier studies (Ronen 1983: 70 n. 10; Taranovsky 1987: 122—124; Ронен 1991: 41—42; Ronen 1993: 48—49), this theme, the theme of the “hayloft” (*сеновал*), is likewise clearly affiliated with Pasternak's recurrent image of the primeval, pre-cosmic (Тименчик 1994: 70) chaos of hay (*омет* ‘stack of straw’, *копна* ‘haycock’, *сеновал* ‘hayloft’, *травы в грозовом мешке* ‘herbs in a thunderstorm bag’, etc.).

In Mandel'stam's essay *The Nineteenth Century* (*Девятнадцатый век*, 1922), the image of seaweed conveyed the notion of a discarded, debased and misunderstood heritage, the jetsam of a finished historical era. The French Revolution, embodied in the “ancient frenzy” of Chénier's iambs, is represented here, by means of a dissimilated pun (Ронен 1989), as a gorgon (i. e., medusa ‘jellyfish’), whose head is washed ashore as a baffling tangle of seaweed: “The French Revolution ended when the spirit of ancient raving flew away from it; it had incinerated priesthood,

slain social determinism, carried out to the end the cause of Europe's secularization, and splashed out on the shore of the nineteenth century no longer understood, not Gorgon's head, but a bundle of seaweed. A deep respect for the bygone nineteenth century imposes an attitude of sufficient confidence in regard to its reactionary depth. Out of the union of reason and the furies was born romanticism, a mongrel monstrosity equally alien to the sublime rationalism of the Encyclopedists and to the ancient host of the revolutionary storm" = "Французская революция кончилась, когда от нее отлетел дух античного беснования; она испепелила жречество, убила социальный детерминизм, довела до конца дело обмирщения Европы и выплеснулась на берег девятнадцатого столетия уже непонятая — не голова Горгоны, а пучок морских водорослей. Глубокое уважение к минувшему девятнадцатому столетию заставляет относиться с достаточным доверием к его реакционной глубине. Из союза ума и фурий родился ублодок, одинаково чуждый и высокому рационализму энциклопедий, и античному воинству революционной бури — романтизм" (quoted according to the original 1922 magazine version as reproduced in Мандельштам 1993: 268).

This is a close paraphrase of Innokentij Annenskij's metaphoric evocation of the mystery of Hamlet in his essay *Проблема Гамлета* (*The Problem of Hamlet*, 1907). The two riddles, Mandel'stam's riddle of romanticism's descent (the union of reason and the furies producing a monster) and Annenskij's riddle of Hamlet suspecting the illegitimacy of his origin, are both riddles of birth: "The mystery of Hamlet sometimes appears to me a fabulous sea monster <...> A modest spark in the actor is enough for the gawking crowd on the shore to spot in the water a black outline of the catch and to start clapping <...> Yet you cannot wager that the mystery of Hamlet, having flashed at us even in full view its enigmatic silver, might not turn out on the shore merely a *stack* <Annenskij's italics. — O. R.> of useless and even putrid seaweed" = "Тайна Гамлета представляется мне иногда каким-то сказочным морским чудовищем <...> Довольно самого скромного огонька в актере, — чтобы толпа ротозеев на берегу увидела в воде черный силуэт добычи и принялась рукоплескать <...> Впрочем, не ручайтесь, чтобы тайна Гамлета, сверкнув нам и воочию своей загадочной серебристостью, не оказалась на берегу лишь *стогом* никуда не годной и даже зловонной морской травы" (Анненский 1979: 162—163).

In this context it becomes clear why Mandel'stam has wistfully compared Annenskij's own self-defeating role as a mediator between the great

occidental tradition and the sleepy end-of-the-century Russia to an eagle “which would claw Euripides, Mallarmé and Leconte de Lisle”, “haughtily release the catch, letting it fall of itself”, and “bring us nothing but a handful of dry grasses in his clutches” (*On the Nature of the Word*, 1922)¹³. This vivid critical parable of Mandel’štam is a compressed citation of Fet’s lines about the poet whose *winged sound // Snatches in flight and fixes at once // The dark delirium of the soul and the vague smell of grasses, // Like <...> Jupiter’s eagle <...> carrying a shaft of lightning in his sure clutches*¹⁴.

The meaning of Mandel’štam’s words about the inability of Annenskij, the militant philologist and quotation-master, to serve as a mediator, a translator or a bearer of any kind of influence is crucial to a correct understanding of the significance of citation in Russian modernism. The art of quotation is, after all, or has been before acmeism, a mediating art. Annenskij’s variety of this art, however, with its unemphatic but consistent foregrounding of the secondary, the peripheral elements of the subtext and substituting one riddle, previously unnoticed, for another, obvious and famous, as in his essay on Hamlet, truly makes him a forerunner, not only of acmeist criticism, but of the deconstruction at its rare artistic best.

NOTES

¹ The article is based on the author’s paper “Some Metapoetic Quotations in Acmeism” presented at the symposium “Textual Intersections: On the Significance of Citation in Twentieth-Century Russian Literature” (UCLA, February 16, 1996).

² Cf.: <...> *Поэт когда-то тешил ханов // Стихов гремучим жемчугом = <...> The poet had once delighted the khans // With the resonant pearls of his verses; <...> И четки мудрости златой = <...> And the rosary of golden wisdom.*

³ Cf.: “Акмеизм <...> хотел быть лишь ‘совестью’ поэзии. Он суд над поэзией, а не сама поэзия” = “Acmeism <...> wanted to be only the ‘conscience’ of poetry. It is a judgement over poetry, and not the poetry itself” (Mandel’štam’s note to L. V. Gornung, 1923, in ЖТМ: 30).

⁴ Cf.:

Однообразные мелькают
Все с той же болью дни мои,
Как будто розы опадают
И умирают соловьи.

Но и она печальна тоже,
Мне приказавшая любовь,
И под ее атласной кожей
Бежит отравленная кровь.

И если я живу на свете,
То лишь из-за одной мечты:
Мы оба, как слепые дети,
Пойдем на горные хребты,

Туда, где бродят только козы,
В мир самых белых облаков,
Искать увянувшие розы
И слушать мертвых соловьев.

⁵ Cf.: *Perlentränen, die, verbunden // Durch des Reimes goldnen Faden // Aus der Dichtkunst güldnen Schmiede // Als ein Lied hervorgegangen = Pearl-tears, which, joined together // On a golden thread of rhyme, // Out of the goldsmith's forge of the poetic art, // Came forth as a song.*

⁶ Characteristically, it was first published as an original fragment by Gumilev in ГЧ: 375, 379.

⁷ Cf. the original: *Давно его мелькает тень // В садах поэзии родимой, // Как в роще трепетный олень, // Врагом невидимым гонимый.*

⁸ Cf.:

Как вплелась в мои темные косы
Серебристая нежная прядь,
Только ты, соловей безголовый,
Эту муку сумеешь понять.

Чутким ухом далекое слышишь
И на тонкие ветви раки,т
Весь нахохлившись, смотришь — не дышишь,
Если песня чужая звучит.

А еще так недавно, недавно
Замирали вокруг тополя,
И звенела и пела отравно
Несказанная радость твоя.

⁹ Cf.: *Друг Ариоста, друг Петрарки, Тасса друг — // Язык бессмысленный, язык солоно-сладкий. // И звуков стакнутых прелестные двойчатки — // Боюсь раскрыть ножом двустворчатый жемчуг (“Друг Ариоста, друг Петрарки, Тасса друг...”, 1933, 1935).*

¹⁰ Cf.: *Что, если Ариост и Тассо, обворожающие нас, // Чудовища с лазурным мозгом и чешуей из влажных глаз? // И в наказание за гордыню, неисправимый звуколюб, // Получишь укусную губку ты для изменнических губ (“Не искушай чужих наречий...”, 1933).*

¹¹ In the poem *Spring (Весна, 1914): Поэзия! Греческой губкой в присосках // Будь ты (...);* cf. in Pasternak's manifesto *A Few Propositions (Несколько положений, 1918, 1922):* “Современные течения вообразили, что искусство как фонтан, тогда как оно губка” = “Modern currents fancied that art was like a fountain, whereas it is a sponge”.

¹² Cf.: “Я выжал бы сок из моего представления, из моей концепции’, — то есть форма ему представляется выжимкой, а не оболочкой <...> Но выжать что бы то ни было можно только из влажной губки или тряпки. Как бы мы жгутом ни закручивали концепцию, мы не выдавим из нее никакой формы, если она сама по себе уже не есть форма” (О. Мандельштам 1990: 224).

¹³ Cf. the original: “Неспособность Анненского служить каким-то бы ни было влияниям, быть посредником, переводчиком, прямо поразительна. Оригинальнейшей хваткой он когтил чужое и еще в воздухе, на большой высоте, надменно выпускал из когтей добычу, позволяя ей упасть самой. И орел его поэзии, когтивший Еврипида, Малларме, Леконта де Лиля, ничего не приносил нам в своих лапах, кроме горсти сухих трав <...>” (О. Мандельштам 1990: 180—181).

The image of tangled, tousled grass, so prominent in Mandel’stam’s “hayloft” poems as a blended trope signifying self-sufficient, “trans-sense” word (Ronen 1993: 44, 48), in all probability also derived ultimately from Annenskij’s symbolic evocation of the “Word” in his letter to Vološin, who had quoted it in his essay *I. F. Annenskij — lirik (I. F. Annenskij the Lyricist)* published originally in *Apollon*, 1910, № 4, sect. 2, 11—16: “...not only your (heavenly) luminaries, but every brown patch of the unawakened, still crepuscular grass tousled by the night... knows that it is *The Word*, and that *they* — the luminaries — cannot ever be *anything but a word*, and hence their beauty, and adamant quality, and anxiety, and dejection” [in the original: “...у Вас не только светила, но всякое бурое пятно не проснувшихся, еще сумеречных трав, ночью скосмаченных... знает, что они *Слово* и что ничем, кроме слова, им — светилам — не быть, что отсюда и их красота, и алмазность, и тревога, и уныние” (Волошин 1988: 523)].

¹⁴ Cf. the original: *Лишь у тебя, поэт, крылатый слова звук // Хватает на лету и закрепляет вдруг // И темный бред души, и трав неясный запах; // Так, для безбрежного покинув скудный дол, // Летит за облака Юпитера орел, // Сноп молнии неся мгновенный в верных лапах* (“Как беден наш язык...”, 1887).

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