

Jane Kenyon's Poetics and the Anna Akhmatova Translations: A Dialogical Relationship

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The act of translating a poem from one language to another presumes that the silent work of the translator will make the poet heard in the other language. However, new poetic realities can emerge when the translator and the poet's voices begin to engage one another. Jane Kenyon's 1984 translations of Anna Akhmatova's poetry from Russian into English are an example of how a poet can enter into a dialogue with another in spite of the barriers of language and time. With translation help from Vera Sandomirsky Dunham, Kenyon's experience translating left indelible marks on her relationship with language. Scholars have yet to fully consider the significance of translation on Kenyon's writing, and Akhmatova's impact demands to be explored if readers are to expand their understanding of Kenyon's poetry. Though Kenyon's poetics remain unarticulated in a cohesive or authoritative text, her poetic philosophies surface in alternative ways, such as the Akhmatova translations. The dialogical relationship between Kenyon's poetry and her translations of Akhmatova manifests in Kenyon's approach to poetic form in her own poetry, particularly in regards to the relationship between gender and language, the creation of poetic weight with brevity, the prioritizing of the poetic image over technique, and in the materializing of abstractions.

One poem that illuminates the ways in which Kenyon and Akhmatova speak to each other is through the relationship between language, gender, and theology in Kenyon's poem "Depression" from *The Boat of Quiet Hours* (1986). Akhmatova's influence seems stronger in several of the poems from this collection than in Kenyon's later work, which is no surprise since Kenyon admits to writing "most of the poems in *The Boat of Quiet Hours* in the years during and right after I had been working on the translations" (Kenyon, "An Interview with David Bradt" 179). In "Depression," Kenyon alludes to the Biblical passage in Luke 7:38 when upon seeing

Christ gone from his tomb, the women “burst out to tell the men, are not believed....” (Kenyon, *Collected Poems* 5). She writes of the women’s experience of Christ as one of tremendous sorrow since they “bathe his feet / with tears” (3-4) and carefully tend to him only to “find the empty tomb,” (4) and then they “are not believed” (5) after this saddening loss. However, the title “Depression” extends the poem beyond the suffering of Biblical women like Mary Magdalene as alluded to in this poem. The title suggests a parallel between the dismissal of these Biblical women’s experience of the sacred and the dismissal of contemporary women’s experience of mental illness who likewise “are not believed” (5) by the men in their lives. The parallel between depressive states and the sacred from a feminine perspective speaks to questions of language and gender in Akhmatova’s poetry and in Kenyon’s difficulties translating.

Robert Bly, who first published Kenyon’s translations, encouraged her to work closely with Akhmatova’s poems as a formational experience. After Bly read Kenyon’s early poems in manuscript form, he told her it was time “to take a writer and work with that writer as a master,” to which Kenyon replied “I can’t have a man as a master” (McNair 178). Judging from Kenyon’s response to Bly, attention to gender has always been important to her own poetry. In Kenyon’s translation notes for the Akhmatova poem “There is a certain hour every day” from *Plantain* (1921), Kenyon uses the English word ‘melancholy’ for the Russian word *toska*, which “has a feminine gender” (Kenyon, *Collected Poems* 346). In the Akhmatova poem, Kenyon keeps melancholy gender neutral, but she notes that in the Russian version of Akhmatova’s poem, “*she* pulses like blood, *she’s* warm like a sigh, etc., thereby making ‘sisters’ of the speaker and the melancholy to which she addresses herself” (346). A gendered linguistic difference such as this one leads Kenyon to notice that “something, I think, crosses the barrier between our

languages” (312). Kenyon begins “Depression” by describing “... a mote. A little world. Dusty. Dusty” (1). Though she uses the word ‘mote’ to refer to a very small piece of something, like a speck of dust, it is possible that she is punning it on the word ‘moat’ as in the barrier around a castle. The word ‘barrier’ in Kenyon’s comment may resurface and transform in the beginning of “Depression” as a moat rather than a mote. It is almost as if Kenyon’s hallmark use of the ellipse at the beginning of the poem is itself a crossing, a junction, or a form of movement from two different points in time and language, like a speck of dust floating across space or the crossing of a moat. The difference in languages is an enabler of dialogue rather than an impediment.

Kenyon then crosses this linguistic ‘moat’ made possible by Akhmatova and picks up on the gendered relationship of *toska* or melancholy by writing the poem “Depression”. Joyce Peseroff, a poet and close friend of Kenyon, confirms the importance of gender in the poem since she writes that “‘Depression’ results from 1) being a woman; 2) knowing something sacred; and 3) not being believed” (Peseroff 23). Kenyon continues to explore the relationship between women and melancholy beyond *The Boat of Quiet Hours*, especially in a theological context. Kenyon was fixated on Mary’s maternal sorrows, such as the poem “Looking at Stars” from *Let Evening Come* (1990) in which Kenyon invokes “the son / whose blood spattered / the hem of his mother’s robe” (Kenyon 2-4) as opposed to “The God of curved space, the dry / God” (1-2). Kenyon reduces the figures of Mary and Jesus to mother and son and pairs it with an underlining of the violence done unto Jesus; she distills the overarching narrative of Mary’s pious and glorified suffering into tangible maternal sorrow. As Peseroff notes, “Kenyon often infuses spiritual longing with psychic pain, using the Bible as her lexicon,” (Peseroff 23) but Kenyon’s blending of psychic pain and theological language may also stem from Akhmatova. Though

Kenyon did not translate this particular poem, she mentions that the Akhmatova poem “Requiem,” which details Soviet purges in the 1930s, commemorates the women who stood waiting outside of prison gates with parcels for their husbands, sons, and brothers by comparing “the suffering of these women to Mary’s at the Crucifixion” (Kenyon, *Collected Poems* 312). In this sense, Akhmatova’s poem illuminates how feminized experiences of tragedy can gain new meaning when framed by theological language, which then becomes a trademark of Kenyon’s own poetry. Exposure to translation difficulties such as grammatical gender in Russian pushed Kenyon to think about the psychological and spiritual relationship between women and language, resulting in heightened formal attention to the power of language to convey “the human truth about the complexity of life” (Kenyon, “An Interview with Daniel Bradt” 175). Kenyon even quotes Akhmatova’s poem “Like a white stone in a deep well” when asked about why poetry matters: “It is joy and it is pain” (175).

The dialogue between Kenyon and Akhmatova is also heard in Kenyon’s play with short lyric poems that have immense poetic weight assigned to them. Wesley McNair, poet and acquaintance of Kenyon and her husband Donald Hall, remarks that Bly’s encouragement to translate Akhmatova was “the most important single piece of advice [Kenyon] ever received as a poet” (McNair 61). One of the reasons why the translations transformed her relationship to form was that she “discovered the possibilities of the brief lyric, which she was to explore for the rest of her writing life” (62). In Kenyon’s poem “Wash,” also from *The Boat of Quiet Hours*, she attends to ordinary objects in the vein of Akhmatova in order to infuse each of the poem’s eight lines with a sense of heaviness and sensuality. Part of what helps both Akhmatova and Kenyon achieve weight is their primacy of the image over form. When considering that Kenyon’s initial

attempts at translation began with her “collecting all the versions I could of a given poem, and then attempting to write my own version,” (Kenyon, “An Interview with Daniel Bradt” 178) it is logical that image drives her translations more than formal technique since it was all that she could initially transform. Though losing “the formal perfection of the Russian verses” (Kenyon, *Collected Poems* 312) bothered her co-translator Sandomirsky Dunham, Kenyon chose to sacrifice “form for image” (313) because it “embodies feeling,” (313) and that is precisely what she does with the image of a blanket hanging out to dry in her own poem “Wash”.

In “Wash,” the “blanket” (1) literally hangs “on the line” (2) below it, giving visual weight to the blanket on the poetic line. Kenyon also draws attention to its movement. The consonance in her description of how the blanket “snapped and swelled” (1) creates sonic movement. There is even visual movement created by the double “p” in “snapped” and double “l” in “swelled” that leads the eye down and up, like a blanket moving back and forth in “a hot spring wind” (2). The moving blanket mimics the “restless” (8) movements of the lovers in bed, giving the object sensual weight. At the end of the poem, she reinforces the metaphysical and emotional weight of the blanket. She “took the blanket in, and we slept, / restless, under its fragrant weight” (7-8). The act of sleeping under the blanket visually takes place underneath all the rest of the lines of the poem, mimicking the weight of the blanket over the lovers’ bodies. Kenyon gives weight to the poem by recreating what she loved in Akhmatova’s poetry: “the sudden twists these poems take, often in the last line” (309). She mentions the twist ending of Akhmatova’s poem “Yes I loved them...” in which Akhmatova lists commonplace material objects and sensory experiences, such as “the small table, glasses with frosted sides,” (2) the “fragrant vapor rising from black coffee,” (3) and “the fireplace” (4). These sensory images

resemble the ones in “Wash”: “a hot spring wind” (2) and “early flies lifting their sticky feet” (4). Akhmatova’s poem ends with “the first helpless and frightening glance of my love,” (6) infusing the material objects with emotional resonance, similar to Kenyon’s blanket. Kenyon claims Akhmatova’s “devoted attention to details of sense always serves feeling,” (309) and Kenyon devotes the same attention to the sensory experience of the blanket in “Wash” to convey “the sensual life” (309) celebrated in both Akhmatova’s and Kenyon’s poems.

McNair recalls how after Kenyon read one of her early Akhmatova translations to a group of poets and friends, “she went back to the poem, taking pleasure in the ‘sudden twist’ of its conclusion, where simple images are charged with eroticism” (McNair 62). By imitating Akhmatova’s sudden twists at the end of extremely short poems, Kenyon achieves the same highly charged sensuality Akhmatova does with her attention to ordinary objects and sensory experiences. The joining of “imagery with intense emotion” (Peseroff 22) is “something that would become Kenyon's signature,” (22) clearly positioning Akhmatova as a major influence on Kenyon’s relationship to form and her fixation on the importance of the poetic image in only a small number of lines.

Another Kenyon poem that is deeply connected to the Akhmatova translations is “Who” from *The Boat of Quiet Hours*. In the poem, Kenyon dissociates herself as the author of her own poetry, and instead claims that “These lines are written / by an animal, an angel, / a stranger sitting in my chair” (Kenyon, *Collected Poems* 1-3). Kenyon’s unfamiliarity with herself as a writer echoes the time when she mentioned that after she finished the Akhmatova translations, she “became so close to those poems that I forgot they weren’t mine” (Kenyon, “An Interview with Daniel Bradt” 179). McNair makes a similar remark when writing about when Kenyon

nervously asked for her husband's opinion on her first collection of poetry several years after it had been published. McNair recalls that "I see now her doubts came also from her encounter with Akhmatova, who had changed the way she worked so much as to make some of her first poems seem foreign to her" (McNair 63). The similarities between the two poets can seem overwhelming. Kenyon's work is "akin to Akhmatova's early work not only in its method but its content: the allusive imagery drawn from nature or domestic life, the dreamy speech, the tone of anguish or melancholy" (63). Interestingly, Akhmatova herself worked as a translator from Asiatic languages and from French, but it was "an activity she compared to 'eating one's own brain'" (Kenyon, *Collected Poems* 311). Translation begins to take a similar toll on Kenyon through her frustration with a lack of identity in "Who," suggesting that translation is far more than a simple exercise in linguistics, and is closer to "what Kenyon called 'the inside of one person speaking to the inside of another'" (Peseroff 23). Perhaps the "Who" in Kenyon's poem is Akhmatova engaging their dialogical relationship.

If Kenyon's translation work affected her on an emotional level as profoundly as it did in her poetics, the poem "Who" begins to appear inseparable from the translation process. She asks herself "Who is it who asks me to find / language for the sound / a sheep's hoof makes when it strikes / a stone? And who speaks / the words which are my food?" (Kenyon, *Collected Poems* 7-11). The sound of the sheep's hoof striking a stone is a sensory experience that seems untranslatable into language, but this was a task Kenyon faced often in translation. She remarks that "It seems impossible to translate a single Russian syllable that means 'What did he have to do that for?'" (313). The problem rears its head again in the Akhmatova poem "Wild honey has the scent of freedom" in which the sensory experience of an object, such as "Wild honey" (1) or

“an apple,” (6) is paired with the scent of an abstraction, such as “freedom” (1) or “love” (6). In this poem, Akhmatova materializes the immaterial, which is precisely what frustrates Kenyon with the example of the sound of the sheep’s hoof, and she begins to lose her sense of purpose in “Who”.

The literal translation of this Akhmatova poem made it impossible for Kenyon to keep the abstractions in parallel positions within their stanzas, but Kenyon decided to “leave out the verb” (346) and invent the word ‘watery’ to make it work, otherwise it would read “Of water smells the mignonette, / and of apple — love” (346). Kenyon’s syntax in the poem “Evening at a Country Inn” takes a nod from Akhmatova’s convoluted syntax: “Now the horses are back in their stalls, and the dogs nowhere in sight / that made them run and buck / in the brittle morning light” (3-6). The strained and awkward syntax “mirrors the strained situation in the poem,” (Peseroff 23) in which someone in the poem “laughed only once all day” (Kenyon, *Collected Poems* 7) and is “thinking of the accident” (15). Kenyon’s frustrations with translating abstractions both in a foreign language and in her native language drive her to question the point of the process, but it leads to poems like “Evening at a Country Inn,” in which she successfully finds language for the abstract, a “language for the sound / a sheep’s hoof makes when it strikes / a stone” (8-10).

Kenyon and Akhmatova speak to each other through their writing, and it is through the merging of their two poetic voices that Kenyon’s formal strategies and philosophies manifest. Kenyon’s attention to gender and language, particularly as they relate to the sacred, can be traced back to her revelations while translating grammatical gender from Russian. It is also Akhmatova that invites Kenyon to attempt the brief lyric and end poems with a twist, allowing Kenyon to imbue each line with gravity and sensuality, and harness the emotional significance of the

commonplace. The poetic image then comes to the fore for Kenyon as it allows her to achieve the meaning she seeks to communicate, both in terms of poetic weight and in the materializing of abstract sensory experiences or concepts. Translating as it is seen in Kenyon's work as a poet suggests that new linguistic and emotional realities can unfold beyond the bounds of time or language, elevating poetry to a powerful art of dialogue.

Works Cited

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