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Edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Marina Balina

Excerpt

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## I

BORIS GASPAROV

## Poetry of the Silver Age

The moniker ‘Silver Age’ refers to the epoch of early and high modernism in Russian culture, which began around the mid-1890s and was put to a rather abrupt end by the October 1917 Revolution. While the most fundamental feature of this time period is marked by its idealist philosophical revolution – a trend Russia shared with other European cultures – its most spectacular manifestation on the Russian scene undoubtedly belonged to poetry and art. In less than a quarter of a century, Russia produced a remarkable constellation of poets, quite a few of whom (Alexander Blok, Mikhail Kuzmin, Osip Mandelstam, Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak, Marina Tsvetaeva, Velimir Khlebnikov, Vladimir Mayakovsky) stood at the world-wide cutting edge of the poetic culture of their time. The very feeling of the era seemed to be saturated with poetry: even those authors whose main talent and achievements lay in the domain of prose – such as Andrei Bely, Dmitrii Merezhkovsky, Zinaida Gippius, Fedor Sologub, and Ivan Bunin – made significant contributions to the poetic landscape of the time as well.

The flowery name of the age was probably indigenous to the epoch itself, although it never surfaced in documents of the time, perhaps because it was just too obvious to be mentioned. It lay dormant in the collective memory for almost half a century, until it surfaced almost simultaneously in two venues – in the title of critic Sergei Makovsky’s memoirs, *On the Parnassus of the Silver Age* (Munich, 1962), and in a line in Akhmatova’s ‘Poem without a Hero’ (first published in 1965) which mentions ‘the silver moon hovering brightly over the Silver Age’.<sup>1</sup>

By virtue of its name, the era claimed a special relationship with the ‘Golden Age’ of Russian poetry, that is to say, of Pushkin and the Pleiades of his contemporaries from the 1810s to the 1830s. This reference implied a kinship between the two ages – a connection established circuitously around the epoch of ‘positivism’ and realism (that is, the second half of the nineteenth century), now a target of sharp critique by adepts of neo-Kantian and idealist philosophy, and modernist aesthetics. The Silver Age symbolically

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bowed down to its hallowed predecessor, a gesture in which a nostalgia for the unsurpassable harmony of the past was underlain by the awareness of the superior emotional energy and intellectual maturity of the modern. Against the backdrop of the Golden Age's absolute 'harmony', the new age cast itself as cursed with self-reflection, torn apart by contradicting passions, willing to go to any length in exploring the heights of the sublime and the depths of vice, while simultaneously exalted and desperate about its own wretchedness. In many respects, this attitude was reminiscent of how the champions of 'sentimental' or 'Romantic' poetry (as defined by Friedrich Schiller and Friedrich Schlegel) had viewed their optimistically 'naive' predecessors of the previous century. The neo-Romantic undertones of the Silver Age stood, once again, in sharp contrast to the age of realism, and in firm defiance of it.

Another association ushered in by the epoch's name was that with the Roman Silver Age of Petronius and Nero, an allusion encouraging apocalyptic prophecies and eschatological expectations. The Silver Age perceived itself as a fragile flower doomed to fade quickly, due to both its delicate beauty and poisonous corruptness.

Despite the powerful overall image with which the Silver Age went down in history, it was also an epoch of rapidly evolving and diverse trends. Its major watershed appeared around the year 1910, which divided the Silver Age into two seemingly disconnected yet related stages: 'Symbolism' and 'post-Symbolism' (or 'avant-garde'). The latter in its turn took a bifurcated path due to the rivalry between the two dominant schools of the 'Acmeists' and the 'Futurists', which had little in common with each other, but which nevertheless adopted and transformed, each in its own way, the Symbolist heritage.

### Symbolism

The term 'Symbolism' served as an umbrella name for a variety of aesthetic phenomena emerging at the turn of the twentieth century in Russia whose overt differences were sometimes more apparent than their essential affinities. The most obvious internal distinction derives from the two subsequent waves of the movement – the so-called 'elder' and 'younger' Symbolists.

The emergence of the 'elder' stage was marked by Merezhkovsky's collection of poems programmatically titled *Symbols* (1893). As a poet, Merezhkovsky was soon overshadowed by Valerii Briusov and Konstantin Balmont, but he remained the movement's principal ideologue throughout the 1890s and early 1900s. The next wave arrived at the turn of the new century, with Andrei Bely and Viacheslav Ivanov emerging as its leading

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theoreticians and Alexander Blok and Ivanov representing its main poetic achievement. Another major figure of the time was Mikhail Kuzmin, who for many years remained one of the epoch's defining forces while staying aloof from all literary parties.

The philosophical, aesthetic, and psychological foundations of the movement were embodied in three towering figures of the preceding century: Charles Baudelaire, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Richard Wagner. The central concept of the symbol had as its primary source Baudelaire's programmatic poem 'Correspondences' (1857), which described the world as a 'forest of symbols', palpitating with allusions like animated columns in the temple of nature and casting 'familiar glances' at man as he traverses this enchanted forest. The symbols flutter with metamorphoses, showing themselves in a variety of appearances – as colours, sounds, odours – whose suggestive and elusive resemblances (or 'correspondences') carry the promise of an ultimate wholeness of the transcendent realm of the spirit, which finds in them fragmented and scattered representations.<sup>2</sup>

In the Symbolists' view, any particular phenomenon appears to be wrapped in a web of associations, no matter how tenuous or contradictory, which spreads into infinity. Whenever the subject of Symbolist poetic consciousness sees the colour red, it brings home the ideas of blood, passion, murder, lecherousness – but, also, of stained-glass windows in a cathedral, making sanctity and vice, confessional awe and violent frenzy all fuse into a contradictory synthesis. The red lanterns at the church altar merge with the red lanterns of the house of ill repute, portending the advent of a heavenly female figure – who may well turn out to be a prostitute (Blok, 'Whenever I enter dark temples').<sup>3</sup> An echo of a shepherd's horn heard in the mountains carries a momentous revelation that the human body, like a musical instrument, exists not for its own sake but as a means for spreading echoes into the infinite (Ivanov, 'The Alpine horn'<sup>4</sup>).

The lyrical subject of Symbolist poetry readily forfeits his quotidian existence in pursuit of such transcendent moments. He plunges himself into the depths of vice and lowliness for a chance to discern in them glimpses of the sublime. In doing so, the subject cuts simultaneously a demonic and Christ-like figure – experiencing satanic joy amidst infernal orgies but at the same time feeling crucified by his passions. He revels in the vision of the world – and himself – being overtaken by chaos and violence while ardently prophesying, from the brink of extinction, the new 'dawns' looming beyond the annihilating apocalypse (Briusov, 'Where are you, future Huns?'<sup>5</sup>).

Among the most characteristic features of Symbolist culture is its urbane, cosmopolitan character. Symbolism is about opening horizons, reaching out to the most remote places and, ultimately, to the unreachable. It encourages

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one to challenge the frontiers of one's culture, and even one's native language. While Rainer Maria Rilke made a Russian Orthodox monk the poetic voice of his early *Book of Monastic Life*, Ivanov's subjects felt at home in Renaissance Italy and ancient Greece. A fashionable trait of the time was to give an exotic (mostly Latin) name to a poem or a book of poems (Ivanov's *Cor ardens*, Briusov's *Stephanos* and *Tertia vigilia*, Alexander Dobroliubov's *Natura naturans et natura naturata*). The urban landscape's dense cohabitation of diverse phenomena, restless commotion, and sharp social contrasts presented a fertile ground for hunting down symbolic correspondences, while its stark pictures of vice and social injustice portend apocalyptic catastrophes, with hordes of the disenfranchised threatening to engulf the city's dubious splendour. Frenzied urban scenes became a 'trade-mark', particularly for Briusov and Blok.

At the beginning of the movement in Russia, the early adepts of the new school adopted 'Symbolists' as their name; the public and critics in the 1890s, however, preferred to call them 'decadents'. Indeed, it seems fair to say that in the 1890s the 'decadent' side of the nascent movement was more tangible than the 'symbolist' one. The 'elder Symbolists' proved more successful in making gestures of defiance toward the conventional bourgeois moral order and utilitarian aesthetics than in articulating aesthetic and philosophical principles of their own. While the example of the French Symbolists and the Russian 'metaphysical' poets (Fedor Tiutchev, for example) was eagerly adopted, their influence was initially more atmospheric and stylistic than intellectual. But the 'decadent' aspect, which involved self-aggrandizement, defiant extravagance, and demonic posturing, was plainly visible even to those who were unfamiliar with the intricacies of modernist aesthetics.

The foremost example of this early 'atmospheric' Symbolism can be found in the poetry of Balmont. Unlike Baudelaire or Tiutchev, Balmont does not strive to plumb the transcendent meaning of images of nature and human life that come his way. As far as themes and motifs of his poetry and its metrical and strophic repertory are concerned, Balmont appears more closely related to his immediate predecessors in the 'twilight' epoch of the 1880s, such as Semen Nadson or Iakov Polonsky. Traditional images in his poetry are wrapped in a dense web of paronomastic associations, out of which the meaning arises via glossolalia.

Balmont reached the Symbolist vision on the most elementary and most elemental level. While the other Symbolist poets mostly shied away from his visceral glossolalia, his influence on certain leading figures of the post-Symbolist decade (notably Khlebnikov and Pasternak) was palpable.

Similarly, Briusov's pursuit of the trans-empirical progressed on more an emotional than a metaphysical level. He sought to pierce the surface of

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the ordinary by striving toward the exotic and the extreme; he preferred introducing rarefied colours ('Lilac hands over a pale yellow wall'; 'Invisible hands embroider over the blue atlas with yellow silk') to exploring the symbolic values of ordinary ones. Briusov's subject appears more interested in grasping 'moments' (*migi*) of transcendent vision than in representational phenomena that might trigger them. In a characteristic fit of defiant egocentrism, Briusov's poetic subject professes his hatred to 'ignominious' nature, declaring that 'only the realm of the dream is eternal'<sup>6</sup> ('There is something ignominious in nature's might'). Briusov revelled in provoking shock, bewilderment, and outrage, a posture emblematically represented by his most notorious one-line poem: 'Oh, cover your pale legs!'<sup>7</sup> (He added insult to injury by suggesting privately that what he meant in this monostich was not a daring erotic scene, as many guessed, but the sight of the crucifix.)

The early stage of Symbolism made the idea of 'art for art's sake' its profession of faith, maintaining it against populist tastes, utilitarianism, and (as part of the same 'package') conventional morality. In terms of poetic practices proper, this attitude catalysed the development of sophisticated and esoteric poetic forms and patterns of versification. This trend was particularly tangible in Briusov, and later in Ivanov, who embraced technically demanding genres (such as the 'wreath of sonnets') and rare metrical and strophic forms (i.e. the trochaic heptameter in 'The Pale Horse'). The result was a paradoxical double allegiance among Russian Symbolists to the two competing schools of French poetry, the Symbolists and the Parnassians (the latter led by Théophile Gautier). In particular, Briusov's poetic style combined the neoclassically chiselled poetic form with emotional hyperbolism and graphic extremism of images and situations. In the 1900s, this trend was maintained by Blok, whose poetic diction had a distinct 'Pushkinian' ring to it, making the expressionist eruptions of his imagery all the more striking. It was perhaps this 'Parnassian' inclination that hindered Russian Symbolists from bolder experiments with versification; examples of irregular metre or free verse were rare. The explosive combination of two contradictory elements of poetic discourse retained its spell into the epoch of the Russian avant-garde, whose foremost representatives (such as Pasternak, Akhmatova, and Mandelshtam) remained loyal to classical (though occasionally slightly modified) metres.

Unlike the predominantly decorative and rhetorical postures of the 'decadents', the next generation's concerns remained primarily in the metaphysical and ideological spheres. While retaining the cosmopolitan aesthetic orientation of their predecessors, the younger Symbolists became ardent champions of a mystical 'Russian mission'. The generation of the 1900s defied the quotidian routine – but not in a decadent gesture, rather in the

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spirit of a Nietzschean critique of conventional morality that was perceived as a vehicle for the radical spiritual transformation of life. This plunge into the depths of demonic chaos is carried out in the name of a Dionysian challenge to the smug Apollonian veneer of civilization. Ivanov hailed Dionysus as the 'Slavic god' (citing his ostensible Thracian origin), viewing his confrontation with the indigenously Hellenic Apollo as a prototype of the challenge to Western rationalism by proponents of the 'Russian idea' like Dostoevsky and Vladimir Soloviev. Russia's unique position between the worlds of Western rationalist modernity and Eastern primordial chaos portend its destiny to become the playground of apocalyptic catastrophe and renewal. In suicidal exaltation, the Symbolists revelled in a vision of rising hordes of 'Scythians' or 'Mongols' bringing a bloody renewal to the aging world – even if this renewal meant the annihilation of its prophetic champions. The atmosphere of mystical exaltation, frenzied self-abandonment, and catastrophic prophetic visions – typical of the 1900s – was subsequently amplified by shattering political events: the Russo-Japanese war, the Revolution of 1905, and ultimately, the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution. In the 1910s, this mood found a particularly powerful expression in Bely's novel *Petersburg* and Blok's poems *The Scythians* and *The Twelve*.

Ivanov's enormous influence throughout the 1900s can be explained, besides merely by his personal charisma, by the fact that his poetry was entirely driven by the philosophical ideas and messianic aspirations of the time. There is something almost didactic in the persistence with which Ivanov's poetic subject points toward the symbolic reverberations of every phenomenon that comes his way. The phenomena themselves tend to be of a rather generic nature: a sudden change of light, a sound, a fleeting shape. The very 'tedium' of their impoverished features highlights the infinite richness of echoes they evoke ('Taedium phenomēni').<sup>8</sup> Sometimes, the symbol-building process does not need any empirical trigger at all. In the poem 'Eros pierced me with the rays of his arrows',<sup>9</sup> the familiar associative cluster of redness, passion, blood, fire, and suffering goes straight to secondary images, over the head of empirical reality: Eros' piercing arrow evokes the execution of Saint Sebastian, the 'bunch' of arrows turns into a bunch of brushwood thrown onto a pyre; both execution scenes – the arrows and the fire – are symbolically represented with 'piercing' rays of the sunset, whose redness is replicated in 'springs' of blood trickling over the subject's body (a hint at ejaculation, making the symbiosis of erotic passion and the execution complete). The hermetic density of the poem's imagery is as striking as the absence of any non-generic life detail, and is further underscored by the abundance of lofty cultural references. Ivanov's somewhat abstract other-worldliness is reflected in his language, saturated

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with heavy Church Slavonicisms, many of his own coinage; from the pen of Ivanov, an accomplished classicist, the Russian language itself turns into a hint at (or a recollection of) Church Slavonic and Greek.

Blok, on the other hand, manifested an ability to convey mystical meaning through sharp detail in which an other-worldly subtext did not obfuscate its empirical palpability; on the contrary, it is the vividness of the physical world that makes the sense of the metaphysical so acute. Discovery of the ‘false infinity’ of the material world is triggered by a casual glance at a city landscape, perpetual in its banality: ‘A night. A street. A lantern. A pharmacy. Senseless and dim light. You may live another quarter of a century – everything would be the same; there is no escape.’<sup>10</sup> The predicament of modernity, which brought itself to the brink of extinction by challenging God’s creation, reveals itself at an aviation show, at the moment an airplane precipitates to the ground: the impassioned monologue addressed to the ‘wingless, soulless and faceless bird of steel’ is punctuated by an anapaestic rhythm – an echo of a cheap waltz played at the show, to which music the ‘bird’ performs its fatal circling in the air (‘In an uncertain, precarious flight’).

Perhaps the most powerful influence that triggered the younger Symbolists’ movement was the philosophy of Vladimir Solovev: his critique of the rationalism of Western philosophical tradition (of which the much-despised ‘positivism’ was only one particular instance), his idea of love and the eternal feminine as a metaphysical concept and, finally, his invocation of ‘Pan-Mongolianism’ – the new wave of barbarians coming from the East to destroy, and thus renew, the aging Rome of modern civilization. One of the epicentral images of Blok’s poetry – the ‘Fair Lady’ (*Prekrasnaia Dama*) – clearly stemmed from Solovev’s concept of the feminine. The Lady’s lofty image lurks in the figure of ‘The Unknown Woman’ (*Neznakomka*) spotted in crowds.

The most striking poem representing this thematic domain is the famous ‘The Unknown Woman’. Its subject finds himself in a low-life restaurant, amidst ‘drunkards with eyes of rabbits’ proclaiming their trite toast, ‘In vino veritas’.<sup>11</sup> It is a world of unbearable vulgarities, from which the subject escapes in the company of his only friend – a glass of wine. Suddenly, a virginal figure, clad in silk, appears at the scene, slowly moving amidst all the clatter. The fluttering ostrich feathers of her hat evoke the vision of an ‘enchanted shore’, on which her blue eyes (hidden behind a veil) blossom like flowers. Apparently, the subject is not totally oblivious to the dubious side of this vision – it is hard to imagine a lonely woman coming to such a place being anything other than a prostitute who has come there in search of clients. No one but he could divine the mystical side of her appearance;



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realizing that he owes the secret treasure of his revelation to ‘the monster of drunkenness’, the poem’s hero is now ready to concede that in wine there is, indeed, truth.

The unbearable suspense of eager expectations of the Lady’s advent, as well as fears about the character she may choose for her incarnation in the world, permeate Blok’s poetry of the 1900s. His earlier book, *Verses on a Beautiful Lady*, is palpable with these dualities; years later he plunged into the depths of despair and dejection, a state that reached its climax in the book entitled *Terrible World*. As Bely suggested in his *Memories of Alexander Blok* (published after Blok’s death), Blok in the 1910s found his ‘Sublime Lady’ in the image of Russia. Blok’s late poetic cycle, *On the Field of Kulikovo* (1913), dedicated to one of the defining moments in Russia’s history (its first major victory over the Tartars in 1380, after a century and a half of subjugation), seems to substantiate this idea. In this vein, Blok’s two long poems of 1918, *The Twelve* and *The Scythians*, can be seen as revealing the other side of the duality that for Blok was inalienable from the idea of the Fair Lady. In these poems, written in the wake of the Revolution, Blok’s Russia, like his Unknown One of the 1900s, assumes features that are simultaneously sublime and lowly, redemptive and horrifying.

One thing that was rare among Symbolist poets of both generations was irony. Their lofty visions and their satanic ravings proceeded alike, in a mode of unqualified eagerness. Although Blok’s *The Fair Show Booth* caricatured clichés of Symbolist images and postures so relentlessly that even his close associates felt embarrassed, Blok’s own self-annihilating sarcasm was as remote from irony proper as were outbursts of Symbolist megalomania; it contributed to the vision of a world precariously balancing between the sublime and the ridiculous.

In the overheated world of the 1900s, Kuzmin and his poetry stood out as a single but remarkable exception in this regard. Kuzmin maintained close personal and artistic relationships with some of the leading figures of the epoch (notably Ivanov), yet his art stood in a class of its own. In Kuzmin’s poetry, every phenomenon encountered acquires a mode of elegant stylization touched with mild irony. A weekend trip to the countryside in the summer (‘Where can I find words to describe the stroll, a Chablis on ice, a freshly toasted loaf of bread, and the sweet agate of ripe cherries?’),<sup>12</sup> a morning after a night of love (‘They washed, they got dressed’), a train taking the subject from ‘northern frenzies’ to ‘the land of Goldoni’, with its simple and serene joys (‘It is a joy to fly away in a fast train’) – every scene turns into a tableau recalling Watteau or Fragonard: straightforward and ingenious, innocently naive and daring, serene and evocative, unabashedly artificial and rich with perceptive observations. Kuzmin’s world is a radiant



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literary Arcadia, yet – as befits the original Arcadia, in contradistinction to its sterile neo-classical representations – it is palpable with physical sensations.

## Acmeism

1910 was dubbed as the year of the decisive ‘crisis of Symbolism’ by its protagonists. In the foreword to his poem *The Retribution*, written in the wake of the Revolution (1918), Blok cast a retrospective glance at the ‘crisis’ alongside varied events of the same year – from Tolstoy’s death to the proliferation of mid-air catastrophes that marked the dawn of the aviation era, to the sudden popularity of circus wrestling contests (a reminiscence of the late Roman empire) – putting them together in a paradigm rife with eschatological symbolism. The immediate cause of the crisis was a polemical exchange between Briusov, Blok, and Ivanov concerning the essence and the goals of the movement, which highlighted sharp disagreements among its leading proponents. Perhaps a more substantial sign of the impending crisis was the establishment in 1909 of a new journal, *Apollon* (*Apollo*) (under Makovsky’s editorship): originally believed to be another publishing vehicle of Symbolism, it in fact quickly turned into a stronghold of a nascent school of poetry whose very first steps were marked by a pointed criticism of Symbolist theories and poetic practices.

Nikolai Gumilev, a poet with considerable Symbolist credentials by that time and a close friend of Ivanov, emerged as the leader of a small group of younger poets, among them Anna Akhmatova (his ex-wife) and Mandelstam, which challenged the very foundation of the Symbolist heritage. Adepts of the new trend initially gave it the name ‘Adamism’ (signifying a return to the directness of meaning with which Adam had originally bestowed names on all the phenomena around him). The name the new school eventually settled upon, ‘Acmeism’, was suggested (with a hint of irony) by Ivanov; by virtue of its etymology (from Greek *akme* ‘frontier, cutting edge, the foremost state’) it alluded to the Acmeists’ allegiance to the ‘upper crust’ of meaning, in contradistinction to the Symbolists’ metaphysical depths. The group defined itself in a series of influential programmatic articles, in particular Gumilev’s ‘The Heritage of Symbolism and Acmeism’ and Mandelstam’s ‘The Morning of Acmeism’ (a subtle contrast to the Symbolists’ ‘dawns’). Kuzmin’s programmatic essay, pointedly titled ‘About Beautiful Clarity’ (published in *Apollo* in 1910), with its critique of irrationality and intemperance as ‘barbaric’ qualities, had a catalysing effect on the new school.

The emergence of Acmeism coincided with anti-Symbolist and anti-expressionist trends in European art and poetry. One can see significant

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parallels between Acmeists and Anglo-American Imagists, Rilke's evolution away from his early Symbolist style in the 1910s (*Neue Gedichte*), and the poetry of Guillaume Apollinaire. Acmeists accused their Symbolist predecessors and mentors of losing sight of direct, substantial meanings while chasing symbolic correspondences – of not seeing 'trees' in the symbolic 'forest', as it were. Mandelshtam wrote that under the order of Symbolism, all phenomena lose their own footing, with each phenomenon existing solely by 'winking' at some other: the rose winks at the maiden while the maiden winks at the rose.<sup>13</sup> The proclaimed return to substances did not mean, however, that what Acmeists promoted was only direct, unmediated meanings. For them, 'tangible' meant grounded in culture. A word might resound with a multitude of meanings, provided that each of them could be placed in its authentic cultural 'home'.

Symbolist polysemy was based on the universal network of symbols, within which individual symbols could easily be transformed into each other. Acmeist polysemy arises from individual ideas or images resounding against each other due to the 'duration' of the global cultural tradition. A Symbolist poem deliberately blurs the contours of phenomena so that they do not obstruct the trans-experiential vision. An Acmeist poem builds a cultural 'home' under whose 'roof' different concepts, no matter how distanced in space and time, come together as 'cohabitants'. Mandelshtam's image of Homeric Greece as a world of domesticity, in which every household object becomes simultaneously an object of culture and art, stood in contrast to Ivanov's vision of Greece as the land shaken by the Dionysian challenge.

The titles of Mandelshtam's two books of poetry in the 1910s, *Stone* and *Tristia*, exemplify the two defining features of Acmeist imagery: its tangible nature and its cultural appeal. There is nothing 'mysterious' (in the Symbolist sense) in Mandelshtam's images, for all their density; they may be complex, but they are not vague.

The Acmeist appeal to diverse cultural chronotopes in an effort to 'bring them home' (a feature once formulated by Mandelshtam, according to his wife, as 'the yearning for world culture') made their poetry intensely intertextual. Another aspect of this effort to domesticate every cultural space involved the sharply outlined social and psychological parameters of any situation being described. While the former aspect of Acmeist poetics was particularly characteristic of Mandelshtam, the latter found the most notable expression in Akhmatova's early poetry.

Mandelshtam's poem about the solstice ('There are orioles in the woods, and the vowels' length, the sole measure in tonic verse')<sup>14</sup> is characteristic of his early style. In a seemingly baffling leap of meaning, the poem suggests that, 'only once in a year', the metrical 'duration' of Homer's