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| **Acmeism (c.1911–1921)** |
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| Acmeism, a Russian literary-modernist, post-Symbolist movement, emerged in St Petersburg in 1911, in the wake of the crisis of Russian Symbolism, and lasted until 1921, the year when its major theoretician and poet, Nikolay Gumilev, was shot as a counter-revolutionary. Conceptualized as a new school of poetry by two disaffected Symbolists from the Guild of Poets (*Tsekh Poetov*), Gumilev and Sergey Gorodetsky, Acmeism became one of the major currents in the post-Symbolist Russian literary avant-garde, competing with the more vociferous Futurism for advancing contemporary Russian poetry into the future. Despite the movement’s brief history and its seemingly conformist alignment with Symbolism, major Acmeist poets such as Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966) and Osip Mandelstam (1891–1938) placed Acmeism firmly on the map of both Russian and European modernism, on par with Vladimir Mayakovsky’s Futurism and Alexander Blok’s Symbolism. |
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Referring to the Greek *akme* for “frontier, cutting edge, the foremost state,” the name of the movement expresses the Acmeists’ desire to shift the poetic expression from “the Symbolists’ metaphysical depths” to “the directness of meaning,” or “the ‘upper crust’ of meaning” (Gasparov 9). In seeking to understand the abstract through its concrete manifestations the Acmeists anticipated Ezra Pound’s ideogrammic method for Imagism. Acmeism and Imagism’s chronological and conceptual proximity manifested modernity’s greater materialist dynamics: the new significance of the ordinary and everyday, modernism’s spatialized understanding of time and deep chronology of space, and a new attention to matter and its experiential dimension. Significantly, the Acmeists’ world of concrete things or physical objects was a world deeply steeped in culture, the poetic word reverberating “with a multitude of meanings” with the poem transformed into “a cultural ‘home’ under whose ‘roof’ different concepts, no matter how distanced in space and time, come together as ‘cohabitants’” (Gasparov 10). Poetry thus serves as a mediator between the mundane reality of the physical world and global culture. The Symbolists’ vision of ‘distant worlds’ (as in Blok’s longing for ‘мирам иным’) becomes displaced by the poet’s ‘homesickness for the world culture’—Mandelstam’s famous shothand definition of Acmeism (Brown ix). Sharing the literary avant-garde’s energy and its valorisation of progress under modernity, the Acmeists set out to create “a living poetry of the object-word,” to become masters “of things and material values… builder[s] and creator[s] of the material world” (Mandelstam, 1991:132). Sergey Gorodetsky captured the Acmeists’ emphasis on a new materialist poetics in describing Acmeism’s poetic subject as “this world, sonorous, colourful, having form, weight, and time” (Gorodetsky 48).  The Acmeists’ attention to poetic language, form, and poetry’s place in the world of things meant doing away with Symbolism’s concepts of “the transcendental Word” and the figure of “the artist as mystical visionary” (Roberts 23), without embracing, however, the Futurists’ radical emphasis on language and idea of the ‘self-sufficient word’ (‘Самоценное, самовитоe Словo’) or ‘the word as such’ (‘Словo как токовое’). It was the anarchy of linguistic proliferation, implicit in the etymology of the Russian coinage, ‘Самоценное, самовитоe Словo’—the word that twists, eddies and whirls of its own accord—that clashed with the Acmeists’ emphasis on a new poetic order and poetry’s context-conscious meaning. (‘Самоценное, самовитоe Словo’and ‘Словo как токовое’ featured prominently in the Futurist manifesto, *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste* (1912), and Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksej Kruchenykh’s pamphlet, *Declaration of the Word as Such* (1913), respectively.)  In contrast with Symbolism’s valorisation of fluidity and Futurism’s experiments with linguistic destruction, the Acmeists advocated poetic precision, clarity, and logic, aiming at compressed and precise poetic forms. In his 1922 essay, “On the nature of the word” (“O природе слова’), Osip Mandelstam distinguishes the Acmeist view of poetry as needing neither symbolic correspondences nor an abstract poetic language of babble. Poetry has to return to perception in order to free itself from a “horrifying *contradanse* of ‘correspondences’” to be itself (Mandelstam, ii: 254; qtd. in Doherty 46). Acmeist poetry, despite multiple elements of classical and cultural mythologies, is immersed in the world of social and physical realities, plucking its themes from everyday life, which are as unmistakably post-Symbolist as their vivid linguistic inventiveness. They sought to avoid the trappings of Futurism, yearning to harness a positive constructive energy of being in the world, in contrast to the avant-garde’s assault on meaning and perception. They marched in time with the poetic avant-garde, distinct from it yet “bound together by a shared attitude to the ‘spoken word’” (Makovsky 217). |
| Further reading:  Brown, Clarence. “Introduction.” Osip Mandelstam, *The Selected Poems of Osip Mandelstam*. New York: NYBR, 2004.  Doherty, Justin. *The Acmeist Movement in Russian Poetry: Culture and the Word*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1955.  Gasparov, Boris. “Poetry of the Silver Age.” *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Russian Literature*. Eds. E. Dobrenko and M. Balina. Cambridge: Campridge UP, 2011, 1–20.  Gorodetsky, Sergey. “*Nekotorye techeniya v sovremennoy russkoy poesii*  [*Some currents in contemporary Russian poetry*]”. *Apollon* 1 (1913): 46-50.  Makovsky, Sergey. *Na Parnase ‘Serebryanogo veka’* [*On the Parnassus of*  *the ‘Silver Age’*]. Munich, 1962.  Mandelstam, Osip. “O природе слова.” *Sobranie sochineniia v trekh tomakh*.  [*Collected Works in Three Volumes*]. Vol. ii. Washington: Inter-Language Literary Associates, 1971. For English edition, see Osip Mandelstam, *The Collected Critical Prose and Letters*. Ed. Jane Gary Harris. Trans. Jane Gary Harris and Constance Link. London: Collins Harvill, 1991.  Roberts, Graham. *The Last Soviet Avant-Garde: OBERIU—Fact, Fiction, Metafiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. |