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| ACMEISM |
| АКМЕИЗМ |
| Acmeism (АКМЕИЗМ) was a major literary movement of the Russian Silver Age. Although difficult to date precisely, scholars generally agree that Acmeism unofficially began with the closing of the major Symbolist publication *Vesy* (*The Scales*), coinciding with the appearance of the journal *Apollon* in 1909, and ended with the execution of its nominal founder, the poet Nikolay Gumilyev (1886-1921), shortly after the Russian Civil War. Conceptualized as a new school of poetry by two disaffected poets from the *Guild of Poets* (*Tsekh Poetov*), Gumilyev 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 (1889-1938) and Osip Mandelstam (1891-1938) placed Acmeism firmly on the map of both Russian and European modernism, on a par with Alexander Blok’s Symbolism and Vladimir Mayakovsky’s Futurism. |
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Despite the movement’s brief history and its seemingly conformist alignment with Symbolism, major Acmeist poets such as Anna Akhmatova (1889-1938) and Osip Mandelstam (1891-1938) placed Acmeism firmly on the map of both Russian and European modernism, on a par with Alexander Blok’s Symbolism and Vladimir Mayakovsky’s Futurism.  File: gumilyev.jpg  In order to appreciate the critical import and aesthetic significance of Acmeism it is necessary to understand the way it differed from Symbolism and Futurism. In contrast with Symbolism’s valorization of fluidity and Futurism’s experiments with linguistic destruction, Acmeism advocated figural precision and clarity, aiming at compressed and discrete poetic forms. While drawing on multiple elements of classical and cultural mythology, Acmeist verse, nevertheless, is immersed in the world of social and physical realities, plucking its themes from everyday life. Acmeism thus eschews the other-worldly mysticism of Symbolism and the *ad hoc* destructivism of Futurism by harnessing a constructive energy of being-in-the-world.  The Acmeists rejected Symbolism and Futurism because they viewed their poetic projects as unrealizable. Specifically, what the Acmeists found most problematic about both movements were their founding paradoxes: to know the unknowable and creation via destruction. Was it possible, for example, Gumilyev asked, to remember, let alone know, a place where one has never been, and by extension, to create a new literary tradition from nothing? Mandelstam reinforces this concern in his essay “Francois Villon” where he notes that what distinguished the French poet from his contemporaries of the late Middle Ages was his interest in the “timeless” things of everyday life, not the “moon,” the stars, and other things of the cosmos that he could only imagine but never know. Theoretically and practically, the shortcoming of Symbolism and Futurism, for the Acmeists, was that as movements they were held captive by pictures of idealistic goals that, for all intents and purposes, in either the Symbolist *a priori* or Futurist *a posteriori* senses, never did, nor could possibly exist.  File: Mandelstam.jpg  The moon and other such neutral “objects” were completely excluded from his poetic usage. On the other hand, he livened up immediately whenever the discussion centered on roast duck or on eternal bliss, objects which never quite lost hope of acquiring.  Mandelstam, “Francois Villon”  Acmeists sought to correct this problem by setting the poet a different task. Instead of envisioning the poet as a trailblazer, seer, discoverer, oracle, or destroyer as the Symbolists and Futurists did, the Acmeists viewed her as a craftsperson, builder, labourer, and creator. With this in mind, Acmeists believed that the poet’s task was to strive for the “highest degree” of clarity and precision that was possible in her verse. Acmeists thus eschewed manifestos of the type the Symbolists and Futurists authored, which elucidated in a language distinct from their art the underlying theory motivating their poetry and prose. For the Acmeists, such a platform was nothing but a repetition of a Kantian hierarchy of formal categories that served only to widen the chasm between subject and object. The Acmeist poet’s theory was her practice, as evidenced in the creative result derived from the force generated by the momentary contact between the craftsperson and her material.  The radical extent to which Acmeist poets broke from the theoretical and practical precedents of their Symbolist contemporaries is apparent in both their nuanced notion of gravity and their peculiar definition of Logos. For all the Acmeists, gravity is the fount of the poet-builder’s creativity, the natural force of resistance that holds the keystones of Gothic cathedrals together, making it possible not only for the mason to overcome with the chisel the resistance of every stone, but also the generation of more text via the addition of new pieces. This is evident in the way Mandelstam celebrates the generative dynamism of the Middle Ages in the final poem of *Stone*, “Notre Dame” (1912). Unlike his rendering of the Byzantine Orthodox basilica Hagia Sophia in the collection’s penultimate piece, Mandelstam presents the Catholic cathedral Notre Dame as an open-ended, historical structure built by man in Time from the ground up, against gravity, rather than as a finished, a-historical entity suspended from the eternity of heaven by God.  File: Notre dame.jpg  File: Basilica.jpg  Where the Roman justice judged a foreign people, Stands the basilica: first and joyous, Just like Adam, with nerves stretching, The vault, a cross of air, flexes its muscles.  But outside a secret plan emerges: Here labored the strength of arching stone So the freighted mass won't crush the walls, And the cocky vault's battering ram is still.  *Stanzas I & II from “Notre Dame”*    The Acmeists’ textualist sense of gravity motivated their understanding of Logos. The Acmeists did not define the Logos as the definitive center that functioned as the source of everything, be it life, meaning, or non-life. As Mandelstam notes, there is no latent content to the Logos because it describes the “conscious sense” with which the poet approaches and handles the material of her craft, the word. The Logos as such is, as Gumilev suggests in the concluding stanzas of “The Word,” what prevents creation from atrophying into archaic metaphors tied to dead referents. Inspiration for life, not just poetry, as Akhmatova indicates in her biting lyric, “I have no use for odic regiments,” thus comes not from lofty sources eternalized by tradition and convention, but rather from the unexpected, such as the trash heap one inadvertently passes every day on the street.  File: Akhmatova.jpg  Acmeism’s contribution to European Modernism as an aesthetic and critical movement is profound and extends beyond the singular reputations of its leading poets, Mandelstam, Akhmatova, and Gumilyev. Acmeist reconsiderations of the relationship between art and life and, by extension, time and history are decidedly contemporary and germane to recent conceptions of aesthetic production, historiography, and rhetoric. To modern and post-modern critics of the so-called linguistic turn, Mandelstam’s reading in “The Slate Ode” of the eighteenth-century Russian poet Gavril Derzhavin’s last poem, “The River of Time,” would most certainly resonate loudly: the “here and now” of the present drowns all peoples (poets and kings alike) and all realms (movements, conventions, and empires) in the perpetual flux of the present’s creative abyss. |
| Further reading:  (Doherty, 1995)  (Driver, 1968)  (Gasparov, 2011)  (Mickiewicz, 1975)  (Mickiewicz, The Acmeist Conception of the Poetic Word, 1975)  (Roberts, 1997) |