

Exile, Escape, and Reprieve: Poetry of Displacement from the Russian Revolution through World War II

Michael Sarnowski

In a 2008 interview with *Words without Borders*, Polish poet Anna Frajlich theorized:

Every mythology needs geography. We needed Ithaca, we needed Troy. In the American mythology, you have the Mississippi, or the Wild West. In Polish literature, for centuries, the east is the mythical space, and definitely for all those people who were born in Lithuania or what is now the Ukraine, that land was the very Arcadia (Frajlich).

Whether real or fictionalized, the mythology of place is unavoidable throughout the history of literature. Whether you are navigating Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, Eliot's unreal London, or Dante's Hell, if tracing the origin of influence, content and context are inseparable to writing and the factors of its origin. One particularly complex period regarding the relationship between literature and place was between the 1917 Russian Revolution and the end of World War II, when countless people were displaced and deracinated. Defined both literally and figuratively, in this analysis "displacement" will be used as a malleable term to represent the prevented ability of one to write uninhibited (the displacement of voice), forced removal of one from their native land (the displacement of body), and the changing circumstance of culture when one's borders are redrawn, freedoms are revoked, or one's community is ruptured (the displacement of identity). Along

with countless civilians, writers in this period were also threatened; align themselves with the ideals of the state or be silenced. This uprooting, struggle, and perseverance manifested change in all facets of life, including art, and unmistakably in poetry. To glean clarity of the varied results of displacement within Russian and Eastern Bloc poetry after the Russian Revolution of 1917, Anna Akhmatova, Osip Mandelstam, and Czeslaw Milosz, respectively, are indelible examples of the displacement of voice, body, and identity.

Anna Akhmatova: Displacement of Voice

Born in Odessa in 1889, Anna Akhmatova is considered one of Russia's greatest poets, a woman whose life and poetry served as a companion to the Russian Revolution, the Terror of Joseph Stalin's reign, and both the vulnerability and strength of the human spirit amid hardship. Though Akhmatova's early career flourished in artistic circles of St. Petersburg, and later in life when her career had a far reaching readership, the middle of her writing life was marred by personal and political factors which caused a displacement of voice.

As a young writer, Akhmatova was told by her father that her poetry would bring shame to their family, and denied her the ability to write under their family surname, Gorenko (*Collected* 21). Anna chose the pen name Akhmatova, the name of her great grandmother, a Tatar princess and descendant

of Ghengis Khan (*Collected* 39). With power seized by the Bolsheviks after the 1917 Revolution, writing which did not serve the state was considered to serve no purpose. Akhmatova, who aligned herself with her contemporaries Osip Mandelstam, Boris Pasternak, and Marina Tsvetaeva, was dismissed by state official Andrei Zhdanov for writing poems with “mists of loneliness and hopelessness” (*Collected* 22). As a member of the Acmeist movement, which avoided symbolism and vagueness in favor of honest depiction of life under state control, an unofficial ban was placed on publishing Akhmatova’s work from 1925 to 1940 (Hayes), and she was simultaneously isolated from the literary community in St. Petersburg (Feinstein 159). Added pressure on Akhmatova was tangential, as seen in the arrest and subsequent execution of her first husband Nikolai Gumilev, and the extensive imprisonment of her only son, Lev. Despite the enormous pressure from the silencing of her work and the brutal treatment of family and friends, Akhmatova remained devoted to Russia and opted not to flee. Though ushered at different points in her life along with other writers and artists to areas such as Chistopol and Tashkent, Moscow, and numerous residences in St. Petersburg, Akhmatova’s dedication demonstrates a fissure between her feelings towards Russia, and those who flexed their influence over it. In 1922, she began a poem, “I am not among those who left our land / to be torn to pieces by our enemies” (“I am not among those who left our land” 1-2) and in a visionary moment, concludes, “We know that history / Will vindicate our every hour” (13-14).

Akhmatova’s alignment with Russia while being banned, isolated, and physically displaced was reinforced by what has been characterized by Richard McKane as the Christian poetics of suffering. As a result, the hardships of Akhmatova’s life allowed for a deeper connection to the poet Dante, who while in exile from Florence wrote

The Divine Comedy, and spoke of earthly suffering and *contrapasso*, the punishment for one’s sins which takes place in the afterlife. Moral guidance and foreboding aside, hardship in Akhmatova’s poetry resonated with her audience for putting a voice to the collective suffering and trauma of a nation. Ultimately, this prevailing reminder that the sustenance of the whole is more important than the individual can be seen in Akhmatova’s poetry, and as if expecting to be the next victim, her poems convey the idea that “truth must survive, even if the people perish” (*Collected* 27).

During his reign, Stalin was responsible for the death of millions. Yet, even with her anti-Bolshevik ties and poetry chronicling personal suffering and the suffering of Russian people under Stalin’s rule, Akhmatova was not one of them. This is a similar turn of events as could be said for Fyodor Dostoevsky roughly seventy years earlier. Dostoevsky was sentenced to death for allegedly participating in anti-government activities. On December 22nd, 1849, Dostoevsky was brought before a firing squad, and moments before the executioners took aim, he was granted a reprieve (Teuber). Instead of being shot, he was sent to work at a Siberian labor camp for four years before going on to write *Notes from Underground*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*, among others. In the case of Akhmatova, the decision to maintain harsh pressure on those around her by Stalin, who was a poet prior to focusing his efforts on Marxism and the Bolshevik Party, is curious. Between Akhmatova’s history of dissent towards the direction Russia was heading after the Revolution, and the sheer brutality of Stalin’s rule, it is surprising that Akhmatova was spared. In 1919, Akhmatova wrote:

*Why is this century worse than those that have gone before?
In a stupor of sorrow and grief*

*it located the blackest wound
but somehow couldn't heal it.*

*The earth's sun is still shining in the West
and the roofs of towns sparkle in its rays,
while here death marks houses with crosses
and calls in the crows and the crows fly over
("Why is this century worse" 96).*

In the years of banned publication that followed, Akhmatova continued to write, though primarily in the form of literary criticism on Pushkin. What is unique and has perhaps helped cement Akhmatova as a literary landmark, is her perseverance through her ban and displacement to not waver or compromise her resistance. Akhmatova's suffering and displacement did not result in hushed themes or a softening of truth, but ultimately a roar from St. Petersburg which chronicles the plight of Stalin's terror and her propensity for finding inspiration in the most desperate of times. As her poem "The Muse" echoes from her own personal hell, "'Was it you who dictated / to Dante the pages of *Inferno*?' She answers: 'It was I'" (7-8).

Osip Mandelstam: Displacement of Body

A contemporary of Akhmatova's within the Acmeist movement was Osip Mandelstam, who is responsible for the famously foreshadowing statement: "Only in Russia is poetry respected, it gets people killed. Is there anywhere else where poetry is so common a motive for murder?" (High). Born in Warsaw, Poland in 1891 which belonged to the Russian Federation, Mandelstam was raised in St. Petersburg and worked as a translator and newspaper correspondent while writing poetry, essays, criticism, and memoir. The charged state response to Mandelstam's work was primarily prompted by his outspoken objection to Stalin and the ruthlessness of 1930's Russia. Mandelstam's poetry, life, and death are all indicative of his observation and eventual first-hand

experience with displacement.

Though Mandelstam's poem "Wolf" was never written down, word of its harsh criticism of Stalin spread, which prompted a phone call to Mandelstam's friend and fellow poet Boris Pasternak from Stalin himself. Stalin asked Pasternak to evaluate Mandelstam's "stature as a poet," and though Pasternak referred to him as "a master," a hesitation in answering was interpreted by Stalin as incrimination (Feinstein 148). Mandelstam's poem "The Stalin Epigram" was a verbal lashing directed at Stalin and his henchmen, and their disregard for human life. W.S. Merwin's translation provides us with the vivid imagery that Stalin surrounds himself, "Ringed with a scum of chicken-necked bosses" ("Stalin" 9), and that Stalin "rolls the executions on his tongue like berries. / He wishes he could hug them like big friends from home" ("Stalin" 15-16). Mandelstam had read the poem at a few public gatherings, and was soon arrested. Like the fate of Akhmatova and Dostoevsky, Mandelstam was reprieved, and instead of being sentenced to death, was exiled to Cherdyn, Ural. After appeals made by friends of Mandelstam, the sentence was reduced and though no longer in exile, he was banished from major cities. From here he moved to Voronezh in Southern Russia with his wife Nadezhda.

After again being arrested for "counter-revolutionary activities," Mandelstam was sent to a Siberian labor camp for a five year sentence. Of the five year sentence, Mandelstam served four months before dying of an unknown illness in the brutal December cold. Despite undergoing arrest, exile, and living in the harsh conditions of labor camps for speaking his mind, Mandelstam did not temper his commentary on the state. Though he attempted to write an ode to Stalin to ease the pressure placed on him, it was ultimately an unsuccessful feat, for Mandelstam felt "twisted by lies" (O'Brien 2). Mandelstam upheld

his idea that “There are two kinds of world literature, that with permission and that without permission,” and that those who did not ask permission “took language as if it was stolen air” (O’Brien 2). This is an apt description, a two-fold statement demonstrating not only the sustenance felt from artistic expression, but the need for breathing room amid a suffocating environment of oppression. The misery a displaced Mandelstam felt only heightened the power of his writing, as his story and legacy have grown posthumously. In “Musica Humana: an elegy to Osip Mandelstam,” Ilya Kaminsky writes of the St. Petersburg Mandelstam was forced out of, remarking that it “stands / like a lost youth / whose churches, ships, and guillotines / accelerate our lives” (“Musica” 19).

Czeslaw Milosz: Displacement of Identity

Like Mandelstam, a writer whose origin and sense of identity was displaced by moving among lands with redrawn borders and shifting culture, is Czeslaw Milosz. Along with famed post-war Polish poets such as Wislawa Szymborska and Zbigniew Herbert, Milosz is a poet of witness who chronicled life in Eastern Europe in the 1930’s, his time in Warsaw during World War II, and the years of regime change that followed. Though born in Lithuania, a nation of the Russian Federation in 1911, Milosz considered himself a Polish poet because it was the language of his family and the language used for all of his writing. Milosz never characterized himself as Lithuanian or Polish, but rather has said “I am a Lithuanian to whom it was not given to be a Lithuanian” and that his family had spoken Polish since the 16th century (O’Doherty). This tug-of-war over identity and belonging was complicated when Polish authorities confiscated Milosz’s passport, in effect “imprisoning” him in Poland, which prompted his choice to defect to Paris in 1951, and then emigrate to America in 1960 (Jastremski). Since his writing was banned from publication in Poland

under a then-communist government, it wasn’t until receiving the Nobel Peace Prize for Literature in 1980 that his work became familiar to most Poles.

As one would presume, the traumatic position of witnessing World War II from Warsaw was extremely impactful on Milosz and his poetry. Particularly in the poems written between 1943 and 1945, which were published in his collection titled *Rescue*. Milosz experienced displacement of identity, home, and belonging, not only by living in the near extinguished Warsaw, but through survivor’s guilt, and feeling added responsibility from the luxury of being alive. Milosz’s poetry often blends natural imagery and street scenes with internal monologue to broaden the discourse to a metaphorical plane. Among his most affecting poems are moments of questioning, such as in his 1943 poem “Song of a Citizen,” in which the speaker asks:

*So who
is guilty? Who deprived me
of my youth and my ripe years, who seasoned
my best years with horror? Who,
who ever is to blame, who, O God? (36-40)*

The speaker then concludes that he “can think only about the starry sky, / about the tall mounds of termites” (41-42). This scale between the enormous and the minute, the haunting questions of blame, and the image which parallels those responsible for the horrors of war with termites exemplifies Milosz’s attempt to use the familiar to explain the unfathomable. In 1945, in the wake of the Warsaw Uprising, and nearing the end of World War II, in Milosz’s writing we see the crystallization of his desire for poetry to be more than an exercise in expression. In Milosz’s most anthologized and celebrated poem, “Dedication,” the speaker ruminates over the question, “What is poetry which does not save / Nations or people?” (14-15). This

pressure and fragility of purpose is compounded in the poem "In Warsaw," when, surrounded by death and questioning the role of the poet, the speaker asks "How can I live in this country / Where the foot knocks against / The unburied bones of kin?" (28-30) and "Was I born to become / a ritual mourner?" (35-36). The overwhelming vulnerability of trying to establish one's sense of self-worth while constantly being pitted against the guilt of surviving is no clearer for Milosz than in these moments. Here, Milosz carries a tradition of war poetry by asking how one moves forward after unquantifiable loss, just as T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* remarks in disbelief, "I had not thought death had undone so many" (63), or W.H. Auden, who wrote in the poem "September 1, 1939," "Mismanagement and grief: / We must suffer them all again" (32-33). Similar to the perseverance of Akhmatova and Mandelstam, Milosz counters this despair with simplicity by stating in the poem "In Warsaw" that "It's madness to live without joy" (42). To envision ourselves in the position of a survivor, those spared by war, simply living one's life can be seen as a responsibility. Milosz concludes "Dedication," a poem directed at "You whom I could not save" (1), by outlining his course of action: "I put this book here for you, who once lived / so that you should visit us no more" (24-25). In these lines, the speaker is making an offering to those who have died so that they do not have to return to a world which took everything from them.

As a witness to World War II, Milosz's poetry speaks to sentiments familiar to countless people, Eastern Europe and beyond. To experience displacement through defection from a country restricting one's ability to express a dissenting opinion, and to have survived a war and complete upheaval of culture, has lent Milosz to a readership that for over half a century has crossed borders, languages, and markers of identity. Beyond questions of nationality, heritage, language, and

political affiliation, Milosz's poetry is ineffaceable for its appeals to humanity and its continual reminders of mortality, responsibility, and beauty.

In conclusion, though the theme of displacement could be used to contextualize artistic expression throughout history, between the 1917 Russian Revolution and through World War II, it was an unavoidable factor. Banning, censoring, imprisonment, exile, forced labor, and death were all potential repercussions for challenging regimes or expressing revolutionary ideals. If one is displaced, they are not where they should be or want to be, likely unable to do what they want, not around the people or places they would be under their own free will, they are directly or indirectly under pressure, and in the case of a poet, they are forced to ask oneself if their art is worthy of their suffering.

As heirs to poetry of displacement and trauma, whether it is the work of World War II Hungarian poet Miklos Radnoti, whose poems were found on his body after he had been shot into a mass grave while on a forced march, or Brian Turner's collections *Here*, *Bullet* and *Phantom Noise*, which chronicle his experience as an American soldier in Iraq and transitioning back to civilian life, we the readers are given the responsibility of constructing history with the greatest possible accuracy. In E. Ann Kaplan's "Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature," Kaplan questions whether cultural trauma can be effectively translated from one cultural group to another, particularly when identity politics interfere. Kaplan asks how a country remembers and understands cultural trauma, such as Holocaust suffering in Europe, "or the delay in confronting slavery or the decimation of Native Americans in the United States" (Kaplan 66). The displacement of this trauma, this national "forgetting," is often the result of "historical trauma," by which Kaja Silverman

means “an historical ramification extending far beyond the individual psyche” (Silverman 55). As noted by Dominick LaCapra on South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Trials, the confrontation of crimes against society, is a “process of working through to be historically informed” and to create “both a livable society and national collectivity” (*Writing History* 44). Yet, in the past century, many representations of war and trauma in artistic mediums such as film, have focused on themes of “heroism, bravery, and triumph” instead of addressing their horror and aftermath (Kaplan 85). For this reason, poets like Akhmatova, Mandelstam, and Milosz stand out as unique perspectives for documenting struggle, conflict, and one’s attempt to cope. It must be remembered that each of these poets speak to their readers and countries, not necessarily *on behalf* of. This is crucial because of the immeasurable range of differing opinions and experiences. There can never be a single cultural narrative, and the concept of culture is inherently born out of conflict, or as Jim Clifford characterizes it, as perhaps an understatement, “predicament” (MacLeod).

Out of this inevitable cycle of conflict are the minute and sweeping changes for the course of human history. Even though they were banned, exiled, and forced to submit to a cultural identity which did not reflect their own free will, Akhmatova, Mandelstam, and Milosz responded to various methods of displacement as all great voices do, by throwing a flare into the night to let others know they’re not alone.

REFERENCES

- [1] Akhmatova, Anna. “I am not among those who left our land”, “The Muse”, “Why is this century worse”. *Collected Poems*. Ed. Richard McKane. Bloodaxe Books. 1989.
- [2] Auden, W.H. “September 1, 1939”. *Poets of World War II*. Ed. Harvey Shapiro. The Library of America. 2003.
- [3] Eliot, T.S. *The Waste Land*. Ed. Michael North. W.W. Norton & Co. 2001.
- [4] Feinstein, Elaine. *Anna of all the Russias: The Life of Anna Akhmatova*. Vintage Books. 2007.
- [5] Frajlich, Anna. Interview by Cynthia Haven. “Emigration, Displacement and Loss in Polish Poetry: An Interview with Anna Frajlich”. *Words Without Borders*. 21 Jan 2008. Web. <http://wordswithoutborders.org/dispatches/article/emigration-displacement-and-loss-in-polish-poetry-an-interview-with-anna-fr#ixzz1wHtmftRh>
- [6] Hayes, Tim. *Poetry and Power*. *The Missouri Review*. 11 Oct 2007. Web. <http://www.missourireview.com/tmr-blog/tag/anna-akhmatova/>
- [7] High, John and Matvei, Yankelvich. “Translator’s Note: ‘Yet to die. Unalone still’”. *Poetry Foundation*. Web. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poemcomment/185217>
- [8] Jastremski, Kim. “Biography: Czeslaw Milosz”. *Internet Poetry Archive*. Web. <http://www.ibiblio.org/ipa/poems/milosz/biography.php>
- [9] Kaminsky, Ilya. “Musica Humana”. *Dancing in Odessa*. Tupelo Press. 2004.
- [10] Kaplan, E. *Ann. Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*. New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2005
- [11] LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.
- [12] MacLeod, Scott. “The Predicament of Culture”. 03 Feb 2003. Web. <http://scottmacleod.com/2003Feb03PolyphonyClifford.htm>
- [13] Mandelstam, Osip. “The Stalin Epigram”.

- Against Forgetting. Ed. Carolyn Forché.
Trans. W.S. Merwin and Clarence Brown.
W.W. Norton & Company. 1989.
- [14] Milosz, Czesław. “Dedication”, “In
Warsaw”, “Song of a Citizen”. *New and
Collected Poems (1931-2001)*. Ecco. 2001.
- [15] O’Brien, Edna. “The Danger Zone”. *The
New Yorker*. 2003. http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2002/06/03/020603on_onlineonly01?currentPage=all
- [16] O’Doherty, Enda. “All Things Considered”.
Dublin Review of Books. 17 Mar 2011. Web.
http://www.drb.ie/more_details/11-03-17/All_Things_Considered.aspx
- [17] Silverman, Kaja. *Male Subjectivity at the
Margins*. New York and London: Routledge,
1992.
- [18] Teuber, Andreas. “Fyodor Dostoevsky
Biography”. Brandeis University. Web.
<http://people.brandeis.edu/~teuber/dostoevskybio.html>