Chapter 5

A Trio from the Acmeist Entourage:
Annensky, Voloshin, and Kuzmin

The tradition of iconography traced in the previous chapter was assimilated into the very core of Acmeist poetry and poetics. Three renowned poets of the Acmeist milieu, namely Innokenty Annensky, Maksimilian Voloshin, and Mikhail Kuzmin, tapped into this important current as well. While these poets do not fit neatly into any single modernist group, their treatment of the arts illuminates Acmeist ecphrasis due to common roots and the respect they commanded in the literary environment of their day.

1. Innokenty Annensky: Plasticity and Musicality, or the Quest for Immortality

Le temps n’est qu’un mensonge: il fuit;
Seul existe celui qui crée . . .

(Emile Verharen, “La multiple splendeur”)

Among the immediate precursors of the Acmeists, Innokenty Annensky (1855–1909) exerted perhaps the most telling influence on their poetics. Despite the fact that Annensky scorned attempts to affiliate him with any school of the Silver Age, the Acmeists venerated him as a mentor. Annensky published in Apollon (three long articles entitled “On Contemporary Lyrisms” appeared in the first several issues), but at the time Apollon had not yet become a strictly Acmeist journal. Meanwhile, Annensky was regarded by many as a symbolist, although the symbolists themselves distinguished their own mystical, prophetic art from Annensky’s poetic style, which Viacheslav Ivanov aptly labeled “associative symbolism”:

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The Symbolist poet of this type selects as the starting point for his creative process something physically or psychologically concrete, and, without defining it directly, often even without mentioning it, depicts a series of associations linked to it in a particular way. The revelation of this link helps to realize, in a clear and multi-faceted way, the psychic meaning of the phenomenon, which has become a feeling for the poet. This process can also help to give the thing a . . . meaningful name.²

The concrete quality of Annensky’s subject matter was also at odds with symbolist abstractions. Like Kuzmin and, to some extent, Voloshin, he tended to use words in their primary meanings, foreshadowing Acmeist poetics. Another part of Annensky’s legacy that appealed to the Acmeists was his devotion to French poetry. Sam Driver writes that “Annensky was closer to the French Symbolists and the Parnassians than any of his compatriots.”³ Finally, his systematic references to music and the plastic arts affected Acmeist discourse on the nonpoetic arts.

Annensky’s lyric poetry lies on the crossroads between the Russian and French traditions. According to Lidia Ginzburg, he was heir both to the psychologically charged Russian literature of the nineteenth century and the French verse of “beautiful objects.” There was, however, a major rift between the context created for these objects in French poetry and in Annensky. While in France poets focused on aesthetic things for their own sake, chiefly to reproduce plastic qualities through language, Annensky employed objects as signs of people’s psychological state or the human condition in general.⁴ Works of the plastic arts and music were thus integrated into an ontological context to function as allegories or, to use Ivanov’s definition, “associative symbols” for man’s psychological condition. Hence the strong lyrical element and confessional tone in Annensky, a facet that separates him even more starkly from the French poets, especially the Parnassians.

Annensky’s entire body of verse is an enormous discourse on the limitations of earthly existence; the lyric persona’s existential fear often leads him to seek eternity through the creative process. In a number of Annensky’s poems, this creative process is equated with musical composition. Music, however, cannot mitigate suffering and death, for musical composition inevitably involves pain, as in the following poems from the posthumous collection The Cypress Chest ([Kiparisovyı larets], 1910):

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Smychok vse ponial, on zatikh,
A v skripke ekho vse derzhalos’ . . .
I bylo mukoiu dla nikh,
Chto liudiam muzykoi kazalos’.⁵
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The bow understood everything
And fell silent, but in the violin
The echo held on . . . and what seemed
Music to people was agony to them.⁷