

Innokenty Annensky

Twenty-five Poems

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Introduction

Innokenty Annensky (1855-1909), born in Omsk but raised and educated in Saint Petersburg, was a poet, critic, scholar, and translator. Scarcely published as a poet in his lifetime, his career was spent as a professor and administrator, a translator of classical Greek (in particular the plays of Euripides), and the author of numerous essays and reviews, in Tsarskoe Selo (the site of an imperial palace and township, fifteen miles south of Saint Petersburg). The poet Nikolai Gumilev (the husband of Anna Akhmatova) graduated from the school of which Annensky was the director, and called him 'the last of Tsarskoe Selo's swans.' Praised initially by the Symbolists, the clarity, imagery and mood of his poetry later inspired Gumilev to form the Acmeist group, which included Akhmatova and Osip Mandelstam.

The Bow and the Strings

'How dark and deep the delirium!
How clouded the moonlit height!
To be close to the violin so long
Yet not know the strings in the light!

Who summons us now? Illuminates
Two sad, faded faces?'...and then,
The bow felt something, suddenly,
Seize them both, unite them, again.

'Oh, so long apart! Tell me one thing
In the darkness: are we no less?'
As the strings pressed closer, touching,
Sounding, trembling, in that caress.

'Is it true? Yes? Separation enough!
Shall we part not, and so remain?'
And the violin too sighed 'Yes'
Though its heart was gripped with pain.

The bow understood, and was still,
Yet, on and on, the note sounded,
What seemed music to others, to them,
Was torment and ruin unbounded.

Not till dawn were the candles quenched;
The strings, all night...sang on, instead...
And the dawn found them, there alone,
Drained, on their black velvet bed.

Twin Sails

Whether a fiery heat hangs here,
Or the foaming waves run free,
Twin sails of the one vessel,
We are filled by the one breeze.

A storm of longing poured over us,
With its retinue of mad dreams,
Yet fate has silently drawn a line,
Forever, between us, it seems.

Where all is dark, and borne darkly,
In the starless southern night,
Two sails, alone, are forbidden,
Incandescently, to unite.

After the Recital

Over the avenue, a black sky descending,
Heart fails to conquer its lassitude, its pain...
Dim lights in the darkness, muted voices.
Of the dream, is this all that shall remain?

Oh, her satin gown, its melancholy!
Black shoulder-straps, neck pitifully white!

How sad I felt for her gaze, her pleadingly-
Resigned, white-gloved, tender arms in the night!

What depths of the soul were scattered there;
Dispersed among the restless, and unmoved!
What starlit sounds, nurtured in the silence,
Poured out, lilac-shaded, and deeply-loved!

As, at times, an agitated string will snap,
And tender, ardent, beneath the lunar rays,
Amethysts roll into the dew-wet grass,
Swift to dissolve, leaving barely a trace.

Among The Worlds

Among the worlds, the one bright sphere,
One star's name alone I utter,
It's not that to me she is dear,
It's that I pine amidst the others.

And, when I'm torn with doubt, alone
It's to her, I pray, for clear sight.
It's not that she shines brighter,
Rather, with her, I need no light.

The Steel Cicada

I knew: *She* would return,
To be with me – *Anguish*.
With that tinkle and slam
Of the watchmaker's lid.

He, who clicks the lid open,
Unites the steel heart's tremor
To the swift whirring of wings,
Then uncouples it, ever.

Impatiently, the cicadas
Feel their wings, stirring, beating:
Are they glad; is happiness close?
An end to their suffering...

They have so much to say,
So far to go...
Ah, our ways, cicadas,
Separate so!

Our friendship here's a miracle.
We two, you and I,
Are only together a moment,

While the lid lifts on the sky.

It will tinkle, and slam,
And you'll be far away...
In silence *She* will return,
To be with me – *Anguish*.

Amethyst

When the crimson day kindles,
When the blue with flame is kissed,
How often I summon twilight,
The cool twilight of amethyst;

And, that the amethyst's facets
Aren't scorched by sultry rays,
I let only a candle flicker here,
Dissolved, in its liquid gaze,

Lilac, ardent, melting, here,
A gleam, ever reassuring
That somewhere, past simple connection,
Exists a radiant merging.

After The Storm

Did my sad heart, that languishes,
In craving the storm, not bow
To the white, the crimson flashes?
Yet I've fallen in love here, now,
With pure turquoise, fathomless,
The world's gaze of weariness.

All that constitutes azure
Has poured itself out in streams.
Beneath ripples of gold, embroidered;
All that's free of storm-filled dreams,

With tenderness in its look, is seen
To have drenched the garden's green.

Through that turquoise glass
The storm's exhausted gaze,
As if from a foreign domain...
None of its harsh displays,
In sorrowful eyes, still live.
Did you love? Do you forgive?

The Shade

The shadows roam, and the shades plead:
'Set me free! Let me vanish so!'
Though from this silvery moonlight
Where then, where can they go?

The lilac bush's green ghost
Clings to the window-glass...
Shadows, shades, leave but this one,
Leave but this one, and pass!

She is silent, motionless,
Bearing traces of tears,
With two May-lilac sprays
In the coils of her braided hair...

I am faithful yet, to her silent song,
As in delirium's despair,
On the steps to the garden's gravel,
I will follow here, there...

O pale phantom, tell me swiftly,
Speak of my guilt, error's flight,
While the panes of the gallery
Are, as yet, dark with the night.

Lilac will fade, flowers deceive,
But I – I'm true as the morn!
It's cold in the mist, there are wounds in the mist
Before dawn...

Winter Romance

The quivering mercury's frozen,
The wind an unbearable whine...
Yet, if you listen still, forget
The creak of the shattered pine!

Behind the gloomy candle, there
Gaze at the black window-glass;
Refuse to think, if you can,
Refuse to think of what's past.

Winter will not concede: it's harsh!
Time, perchance ...to reconcile!
Or it's hours of that lyre, and this
Thing hanging above us the while?...

No Word

No word, no response, no greeting,
The world like a desert, apart.
My thoughts, failing question or answer,
Weigh fearfully on the heart.

Amidst hours of longing and anger,
The past truly fades without trace,
Like the sound of a lost harmony,
Like a star that falls from its place.

Autumn Scene

Four had not yet struck... yet, as soon
As the pale sun gilded the domes above,

Like a misted river, a faded steppe,
Cloud gently, on high, began to move,

Its motion involving such tenderness,
Betrayal's ire lost, separation's pain,

The heart craved accompanying music...
Yet snow filled the peaks, the dead plain,

And, all night, the breakers' hiss severed
The rays stretched, between earth and sky...

And, near dawn, someone, dispelling dreams,
Hissed we were doomed, gave a muffled cry...

The banks of motionless cloud seemed frozen,
As night rolled by, failure the sole sensation...

Torment

Bad weather's darkened flurries
Hold a white secret...a tinkling
In the silence, of a bracelet,
Now silent, and now ringing.

A dread of stolen happiness –
I drink greedily, ever,
Cold lips' honey and poison,
Gripped by voluptuous fever.

Grey darkness: this dream
Only your presence stirs,
The creak of snow, a gleam,

Fogged patterns made by chance,
On the glass, warm consonance
Of lips, and lilac, and furs.

Snow

I could love chill winter
Say 'yes' to its heavy burden...
From which not even smoke
Can rise to the clouds.

Those distinct outlines
That weighty flight,
That indigent blue,
And tear-drenched ice!

But I love the snow enfeebled
By the heavens above –
The crystalline white,
Those banks of lilac...

And all above, in thaw...
As, freeing the heights,
They collapse, exhausted,
There, on the slippery slopes.

Like flocks in the mist
Immaculate dreams –
On perilous cliffs,
Sacrificed to Spring.

Song Without Music

In impenetrable autumn, misted lights,
And the spray flying, high and cold.
In impenetrable autumn, misted lights,
The wheel-tracks scarcely tinted gold.

Misted lights, in impenetrable autumn,
But mistier are the fumes of poison.
In impenetrable autumn, here, alone,
And yet our hearts, oppressed, are silent...

You'll take the cup, untasted, from my lips,
Because the lights are misted now...

Night Stanzas

The sun's rays are quenched in the shadows,
On the sand, in the garden filled with dream.
All in you is sweetly-incomprehensible,
Yet I recall your words: 'I'll come to you.'

Black smoke, but you are airier than smoke,
And more tender than the down on a leaf,
Though I know not by whom you are loved;
You're dreamed, though I know not by whom.

The diamond lights will not descend
To follow you through abandoned places.
Only the scented stock is spread around,
For you, like a sweetly perfumed carpet.

I remember that night, an endless dream,
But it was not I that languished and longed.
In the lamp on the birch-tree, forgotten,
The melting wax, it was, wept and burned.

Scent Of The Lily

The scent of the lily weighs on me,
Because, within, lurks secret decay.
Better to breathe resin, blue resin,
Simply, to drink it in, undistilled...

Setting aside Beauty's seductions,
I'll love her mirage in the smoke...
And the imperishable flowers
Of fire, I alone will see as blue.

Stars

No flower-like stars in the misted sky;
None alight in this diffident evening...
Though languid firs gleam on the glass,
And all around us the snow-gusts pass.

The flakes that fall on your eyelashes
Stop you seeking my eyes, gazing,
Tears indeed, yet not scorching my heart,
Stars indeed, yet weary of shining...

Such is love's mad resentment,
Stars drowning against their will...and I,
In pain, I envy those flakes of snow,
Knowing it's through them that you cry...

The Prism

Triply magical is my prism:
Beneath its first crystal face –
Hands, tormented, unclasped,
The fiery embers scattered.

Though you see the fires no more
If you turn to the second face –
There pale hands are outstretched
Clutching dark emptiness.

If you view the final face –
Neither clasped nor parted hands...

Though no brighter colours exist
Than that rainbow, torment ended!...

Two Kinds Of Love

There's a love that's like smoke:
If confined – it stupefies too.
Set free – it vanishes...
To be smoke – yet born anew.

There's a love that's shadowy:
That lies, by day, at your feet, – by night,
Hears you, embraces you silently...
To be shade! – Joined, in the dark and light.

Winter Sky

On, and away, flew the melting snow,
Igniting cheeks, incandescent.
I'd not thought the moon so small,
Nor the clouds so misted, distant.

I'll leave, I'll ask for nothing at all,
Since it seems my fate's set on high.
I'd not thought the moon so lovely,
So lovely, so troubling, in the sky.

Close to midnight. No-one and no-one's,
Tired most by the spectre of life, I stand,
And gaze at the misted moonbeams there,
In my oft-deceived Motherland.

Autumn

Autumn, you're here again, my friend,
Yet, in the net of bare branches,
The pale blue was never colder,

Never the snow more deadening.

Never sadder the tatters now, that I
View, never darker your waters.
In your shabbily-faded sky
Amber clouds trouble my passing.

To see all, finally, numbed...
Strangely new the air to me...
I thought it would prove more painful, to find
Words emptied of mystery.

The Bronze Poet

The clouds whiten now in the bluish dome,
The leafy crowns clear, as yet, in the heights,
But dusk is gleaming, the shadows grow long;
In the heart, from afar, a phantom alights.

Was the tale forever (who knows?) brief as this;
Or perhaps the latter half I forgot to read?...
The clouds extinguished in the pallid dome,
Night has already touched the darkened trees...

They have become – the bench, its occupant, now,
In the motionless twilight, heavier; dire the gleam.
Don't move – the carnations will glisten and bow,

The bushes dissolved in the air, merge, and pass,
And the Bronze Poet, free of oppressive dream,
Leap from his pedestal onto the dew-wet grass.

Poetry

Life's events, Mind's creativity,
Are painfully merged in you, I find.
While, amidst hints of rare beauty,

None is subtler, none is more refined...

In this unstably-flickering world,
Where all is mirage, you feel love's powers,
All its unresolved dissonances,
Amidst the restless stir of the flowers.

Our ideal, you torment us too,
Invisibly, imperceptibly,
Among these spaces pale and empty;

So recklessly, so unrelentingly,
It's impossible, once having loved you,
Not to love you ever more madly.

Concealment

Only those whose sleep is concealed,
Breathe sweetly...
The curtain across my window
Quivers, barely.

If you're true to the dream, you will come.
Are you truly that one?
I sense: the garden's there, the lilac's there,
Flooded with light, undone.

All is good in the fiery blue,
In the fresh rustling,
Yet, the charms of bright enchantment
Are, to me, the strangest thing...

The bees make honey in the hive,
Drunk on the flowers...
The heart is only alive,
In dream, in the starlit hours.

Black Spring

(Thaw)

Beneath ringing copper – it goes,
The coffin, on its way,
Terribly tilted the nose,
Like wax, on display.

Does it want to draw breath, there,
Into that empty chest?...
The last snow, white but sombre,
Muddy the road, at best.

Only a sprinkle, turbid,
Poured in decay, the sigh
Of Black Spring, stupid,
Gazing into the fish's eye...

Past brown roof-shingles' peeling,
Past plaster walls greening,
Then, over the numb clearing,
The birds, on swollen wing...

Mankind! Your road is mud,
These ruts are your last breaths;
While nothing proves sorrier
Than the meeting of two deaths.

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