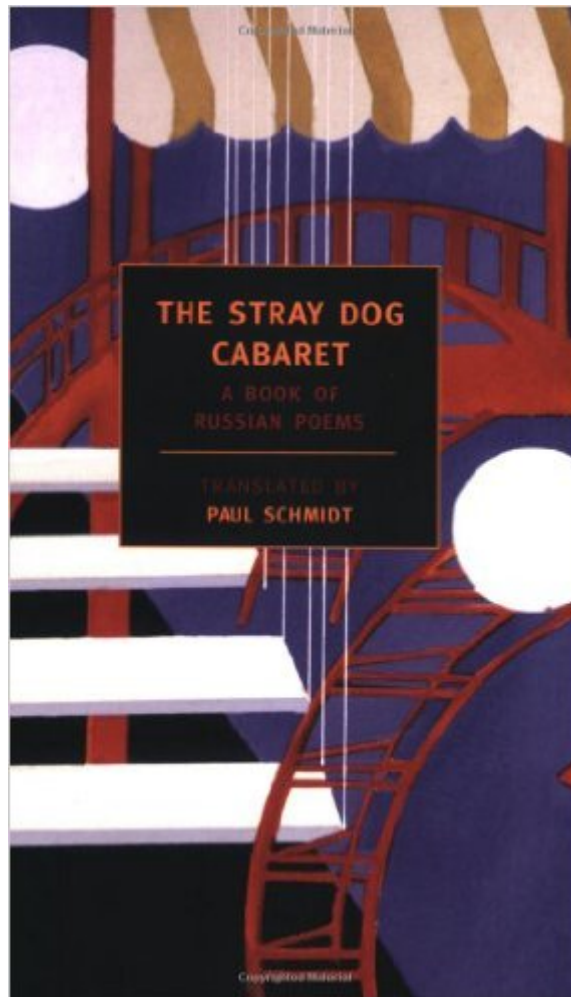


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The Stray Dog Cabaret: A Book Of Russian Poems (New York Review Books Classics)



Synopsis

A New York Review Books Original A master anthology of Russia's most important poetry, newly collected and never before published in English. In the years before the 1917 Russian Revolution, the Stray Dog cabaret in St. Petersburg was the haunt of poets, artists, and musicians, a place to meet, drink, read, brawl, celebrate, and stage performances of all kinds. It has since become a symbol of the extraordinary literary ferment of that time. It was then that Alexander Blok composed his apocalyptic sequence "Twelve"; that the futurists Velimir Khlebnikov and Vladimir Mayakovsky exploded language into bold new forms; that the lapidary lyrics of Osip Mandelstam and plangent love poems of Anna Akhmatova saw the light; that the electrifying Marina Tsvetaeva stunned and dazzled everyone. Boris Pasternak was also of this company, putting together his great youthful hymn to nature, *My Sister, Life*. It was a transforming moment—not just for Russian but for world poetry—and a short-lived one. Within little more than a decade, revolution and terror were to disperse, silence, and destroy almost all the poets of the Stray Dog cabaret.

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Customer Reviews

The poets here are the more prominent Futurists (Vladimir Mayakovsky, Velimir Khlebnikov, Boris Pasternak) and Acmeists (Osip Mandelstam, Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva) as well as the "hooligan" poet Sergei Esenin and the great late-Symbolist Alexander Blok. Though Pasternak is well known (if mostly for *Zhivago*) and though a good many readers who are familiar with the

crimes of Lenin and Stalin might know something *about* Akhmatova, Tsvetaeva, and Mandelstam, my strong suspicion is that most of these people aren't very widely read in the English-speaking world. This is a shame. These poets were part of the last wave of a Russian renaissance that stretched well back into the Nineteenth Century. In the generations before the Symbolists and Acmeists, we find another splendid set of writers--Fet, Tyutchev, Gippius, Annensky--as well as some very fine painters and composers. Partly because of the difficulties of rendering Russian verse into English, and partly because communists and fellow travelers would later present pre-Bolshevik Russia as a uniformly vulgar and repressive hell-hole, this cultural flowering has largely been forgotten. Paul Schmidt (who died in 1999) and the editors of this collection should be commended for doing what they can to refresh our memories. Can one find nits to pick? Well, sure. Schmidt's strength as a translator is capturing the flavor of this group of poets, and there are times when this leads him to sacrifice a lot more of the sense than I would like. Schmidt introduces, with little success, American street slang into Blok's "Twelve." In Khlebnikov's "When the winking wax-wings whistle," Schmidt's inclusion of "mockingbird" is ludicrous on both linguistic and ornithological grounds. In Mayakovsky's "Me," Schmidt actually *invents* the insipid refrain, "And it makes / me / cry," a decision that made / me / cringe. Speaking of "Twelve," I suppose it had to be included here because of its fame, but I have never been able to understand the reason for the poem's high standing, especially when so much of Blok is so much more pellucid and powerful. I have similar feelings about Tsvetaeva's "Poem of the End," and it is unfortunate that these longish poems take up so much space in "The Stray Dog Cabaret." But enough nitpicking. There is an awful lot to admire in such a slender volume. The collection starts well, with a stark imagistic piece by Blok. There are several strong Mandelstam poems in here: "This life of constant thrills will drive us crazy," "Somebody gave me this body," "Insomnia," "Leningrad," "The Poem about Stalin," and "All I want to do is escape the madness here." The Akhmatova selection is good, is mostly free of histrionics, and includes fine renderings of "There were three things in life he loved" and "I drink to the wreck of our life together." Esenin evokes the Russian countryside in a pleasingly mournful way in both "I am leaving my home in the country" and "The Backstreets of Moscow." Though I'm no Mayakovsky fan, his "Suicide Poem" is quite moving in Schmidt's translation. Pasternak's "Thunderstorm for a Moment Forever" is a little lightning-strike of a masterpiece, an example of metaphor helping us re-see the world. Though I've already mentioned my reservations about "The Poem of the End," some of my favorite poems in here are by Tsvetaeva: "I am an empty page beneath your pen," "It may be that a better way," "Homesickness." But the one I can't get out of my head is "I'd like to live with you / in some small town," with its succession of sharp images from everyday private life. Less

than a year after Tsvetaeva wrote her poem (December, 1916), everyday private life was likely to be seen as counterrevolutionary, and it is impossible to keep the tragedy of the October Revolution out of one's head when reading these poems today. The poems and the history get strangely jumbled together, with beauty and value getting all mixed up with loss and grief and insanity. And one of the most heartbreaking things is that it did **not** require nine decades of reflection to know what was going on. Akhmatova writes, "This is the moment they told us would come some day / when there's nobody alive to hear what we say. / The world is no longer the place it used to be. / Be still, don't break my heart. Be silent, poetry." Here is Tsvetaeva: "I'm still alive. That may be soon / a sin." Here is Mandelstam: "All I want to do is / escape the madness here. / To rise into the light / where I can disappear." And here is Akhmatova again: "In the west the familiar light still shines / And the spires of cities glow in the sun. / But here a dark figure is marking the houses / And calling the ravens, and the ravens come."

This book gives a verse portrait of the circle of Russian poets that formed around the Stray Dog Cabaret in pre-revolutionary St. Petersburg. The translation is tuned for the spoken word and to American ears. The translator also performed them live, and I can hear that vitality in the translations. Some translations are excellent. In particular, Blok's "Twelve" gives more of a sense of the informality and immediacy of the Russian than others I've seen. Some of the Mandelstam poems I preferred earlier translations, as they are more restrained and so suit his work better. Some of the choices are questionable. In particular, changing the dedication of one of Blok's poems from Marina Nelidova to Anna Akhmatova is problematic. The addition of "And it makes/ me / cry" to a Mayakovsky poem is not one of the better moments in the collection. However, the collection does very much provide a vivid collective portrait of Russia's greatest poets moving from bohemia to Stalinist horrors. If it introduces new audiences to Russian poetry, all the better.

This precious lil' ten-buck bouquin is the perfect and savoury intro to Russian post-revolutionary poetry ! Rated a just - and generous - 5 on the mirth side of the mirth-ennui scale, the bouquin (yeah, I keep calling it bouquin - French slang for book or old book - comes from Dutch boek) packs into its extremely well designed 140 pages simply THE BEST THERE IS ON THE SUBJECT WITHOUT LEARNING FRENCH OR RUSSIAN ! The editorial concern responsible is affiliated or belongs to the N.Y. review of books magazine (which is fine though slightly hillbilly as some American corporate journalism has become ...) and so this bouquin of theirs is really very impressive due to the thorough n.y. review professionalism of it all: great translations from 8 (!)

poets, very very fine translations by Paul Schmidt (this guy was great. look him up. a wonderful icon of American post-war culture and theatre and intelligentsia. gay but married Stockard Channing. and translated Chekhov and lots of Russian literary goodies - this anthology is from his literary estate). This Stray Dog anthology also does not skimp on good and efficient knowledge tools, like a juicy introduction by Catherine Ciepiela, and a chummy afterword by Honor Moore, who knew Paul Schmidt in college (Harvard where else...). Somehow, reading these poems, you are magically transported to St. Petersburg, to the Stray Dog Cabaret (which really existed), to the dismalness of revolution and to the glory of poetry (ah... well... and if it's too much for you, there's always vodka...). A MUST ! TOP MARK IN THE MIRTH-ENNUI SCALE.

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