A R T I C L E

The Mental Travellers: On Blake's Reception by Nikolai Gumilyov

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1 WILLIAM Blake drew the attention of the influential Russian poet and literary critic Nikolai Gumilyov (1886–1921). Gumilyov was the first to translate "The Mental Traveller" into another language, in the period from 1918 to 1921, and his late poetry contains many traces of Blakean influence.

2 In Russia, the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first two or three decades of the twentieth were an epoch of real poetical flourishing, later called the Silver Age. There were many artistic movements, the main being Russian symbolism, acmeism, and Russian futurism. Gumilyov was a founder of the acmeist movement and became one of the most original poets of his time. The acmeists—Ossip Mandelstam, Mikhail Kuzmin, Anna Akhmatova—contrasted their ideal of Apollonian clarity with the "Dionysian drunkenness" propagated by the Russian symbolist poets. Gumilyov wrote of acmeism, "The unknowable, in a real sense of the word, cannot be known. … All the efforts in this direction are unchaste. … Always mindful of the unknowable, but not offending our thought about it with more or less likely speculations—that is the principle of Acmeism" (*Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* 7: 149).[1]

3 As a poet and as a leader of the Guild of Poets, Gumilyov deeply influenced poetry in Russia and among White émigrés. Aleksandr Perfilyev[2] wrote of him as "the last diamond of the purest water on a closed necklace of Russian classical lyrics" (Perfilyev 521). Gumilyov was far from a mystic or visionary poet, at least in his early lyrics and theoretical works. He attached great importance to clarity of thought and excellent poetical form, stating in 1910: "Poetry, written even by the true visionaries in a trance state, is of value only insofar as it is good enough. To think otherwise is to repeat the well-known mistake of the sparrows that tried to peck the painted fruits" (*Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* 7: 55).

4 Later, after the 1917 Revolution, he reconsidered this topic: "Poetry and religion are two sides of the same coin. Both require spiritual work from a man. Not for the sake of a practical goal, as ethics and aesthetics, but for a higher goal unknown to a man" (*Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* 7: 235). Here, writing of the poet as a medium, Gumilyov emphasizes the poet's responsibility to the reader. Some scholars have noted the growing metaphysical orientation of his late work. Gleb Struve[3] observed in 1964 of Gumilyov's last book, *Ognennyi stolp* (*Pillar of Fire*) (1921):

> There are a number of poems in *Ognennyi stolp* in a completely new spirit for Gumilyov, poems whose distinguishing feature is visionariness, those touches to the unknown, to the unknowable, which Gumilyov the Acmeist once condemned in Symbolist poetry. … Here we can already speak about the influence of … the English visionary poet William Blake, whose poetry Gumilyov undoubtedly encountered in his last stay in the West. (578)

And Vyacheslav V. Ivanov[4] commented in 1988:

> Gumilyov's rejection of the rhetorical form of poetry bequeathed by the nineteenth century is not accidental: in fact, he wanted to disclaim much of the legacy of this century, therefore he was looking for new guides. Perhaps one of them was Blake … Blake was akin to the new element of visions and insights that enveloped Gumilyov at the time of perceiving "the light pouring therefrom." (233-34)

I think Ivanov does not mean that Gumilyov himself had visions—he had too solid a reputation as a reasonable, extremely rational man and poet. But, despite the basic principles of acmeism, after 1918 he wrote some really vi-

1. All translations are mine, except those from *Selected Works*, which are by Burton Raffel and Alla Burago.

2. Perfilyev (1895–1973) was a "Russian journalist, poet and writer" (*Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aleksandr_Perfilyev>).

3. Struve (1898–1985) was a "Russian poet and literary historian" (*Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gleb_Struve>).

4. Vyacheslav Vsevolodovich Ivanov (1929–2017) was a "Russian philologist, semiotician and Indo-Europeanist" (*Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vyacheslav_Ivanov_(philologist)>).

sionary poems, such as "Zabludivshiisia tramvai" ("The Tram That Lost Its Way").[5]

5 Gumilyov first mentioned Blake in 1913—he wrote in a review that Blake couldn't be seen as a contemporary poet, as he had lived much earlier (Gumilyov, "*Antologiia sovremennoi poezii*" 72). Most likely, his deeper acquaintance with Blake's poems occurred in 1917–18, during his two visits to London. Russian émigré Boris Anrep,[6] a close friend of Akhmatova's, introduced Gumilyov to the literary circles of London and facilitated his acquaintance with William Butler Yeats.[7] Gumilyov visited Yeats's house from 16 to 18 June 1917 (Kruzhkov 56-57). In a letter to Akhmatova,[8] he wrote of Yeats as the "English Vyacheslav [Ivanov]"[9] (*Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* 8: 208), meaning a symbolist and mythographer. Gumilyov began translating Yeats's play *The Countess Cathleen* (translation not preserved) and sent two poems by Yeats to Mikhail Zenkevich[10] for translation (Kruzhkov 50-51). I have good reason to believe Gumilyov bought one or two Blake editions during this European trip.

6 Despite advice to the contrary, Gumilyov returned to Petrograd in 1918 and tried to accustom himself to the new Russian Bolshevik reality. He actively read Blake; Georgy Ivanov recalled how Gumilyov "got up late, wandered half-dressed around the rooms, read either Blake or *Mir prikliuchenii*, sat down at the table, began to write …" (234).[11] The records of Gumilyov's contemporaries show that he was not only fond of Blake's lyrics, but also sought to read his prophecies. According to Irina Odoevtseva,[12] Gumilyov "took a volume of Blake off the shelf," but ignored her attempt to impress him with "The Tyger." He asked her to read aloud another work by Blake, but she could not understand anything—"certain comprehensible words in incomprehensible collocations," mixed with drawings. Gumilyov seemed to be disappointed with her intellectual level (51-52).

7 We cannot say for sure what Blake editions Gumilyov possessed. He was a passionate reader who bought many books in Russia and abroad and tried to save them even in the years of famine after the revolution, although he had to use some for heating. After his execution in 1921, part of his collection was probably confiscated. The rest was sold by his widow, Anna Gumilyova-Engelhardt, in part to the Institute of Russian Literature in Saint Petersburg. In the latest published list of Gumilyov's collection, there are no Blake books (see Filicheva). He may well have had Ellis and Yeats's *The Works of William Blake* (1893), which includes some facsimiles of the illuminated books—if we believe that Odoevtseva saw the facsimiles. He may also have had Yeats's edition of 1905.

8 I had found one mention of the fact that Gumilyov was translating Blake's poem "The Mental Traveller" (*Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* 4: 309),[13] but the text had never been published as either a translation or an original poem by Gumilyov. In January 2019 I discovered that a handwritten translation of the first part of "The Mental Traveller" (without specifying the original author) is stored in the Museum of Anna Akhmatova in the Fountain House in Saint Petersburg (illus. 1). Only one page of the translation is in the museum; nothing is known of the other pages. I have published a transcription in the journals *Russkaia literatura* and *Scando-Slavica*. Reconstructing the text was difficult because of the illegibility of Gumilyov's handwriting: I relied on both the manuscript and Blake's original. Even with the risk of misreading some words, I considered it important to present this vivid (albeit clearly draft) translation to the Russian reader for the first time, after almost a century.

9 It is very probable that Gumilyov, personally acquainted as he was with Yeats, worked with Yeats's *Poems of William Blake* (1905), where the quatrains of "The Mental Traveller" are not numbered—unlike Gilchrist/Rossetti in 1863 and Ellis/Yeats in 1893. Also, there are no capitalized words in

5. The phrase quoted in the passage above from V. V. Ivanov—"the light pouring therefrom"—is from this poem.

6. Anrep (1883–1969), a Russian sculptor, mosaicist, and poet who lived in London from February 1917, was clearly fascinated by Blake's mythological imagery. He showed the influence of Blake both in his epics and in his artistic style. Before returning to Russia in April 1918, Gumilyov left some books and manuscripts with Anrep.

7. Ellis and Yeats's edition of *The Works of William Blake* (1893) "'started the Blake reception in … Russia'" (Erle and Paley 5, quoting Klaus Peter Jochum).

8. Gumilyov was Akhmatova's first husband.

9. Vyacheslav Ivanovich Ivanov (1866–1949) was a "Russian poet and playwright associated with the Russian Symbolist movement. He was also a philosopher, translator, and literary critic" (*Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.orgwiki/Vyacheslav_Ivanov_(poet)>).

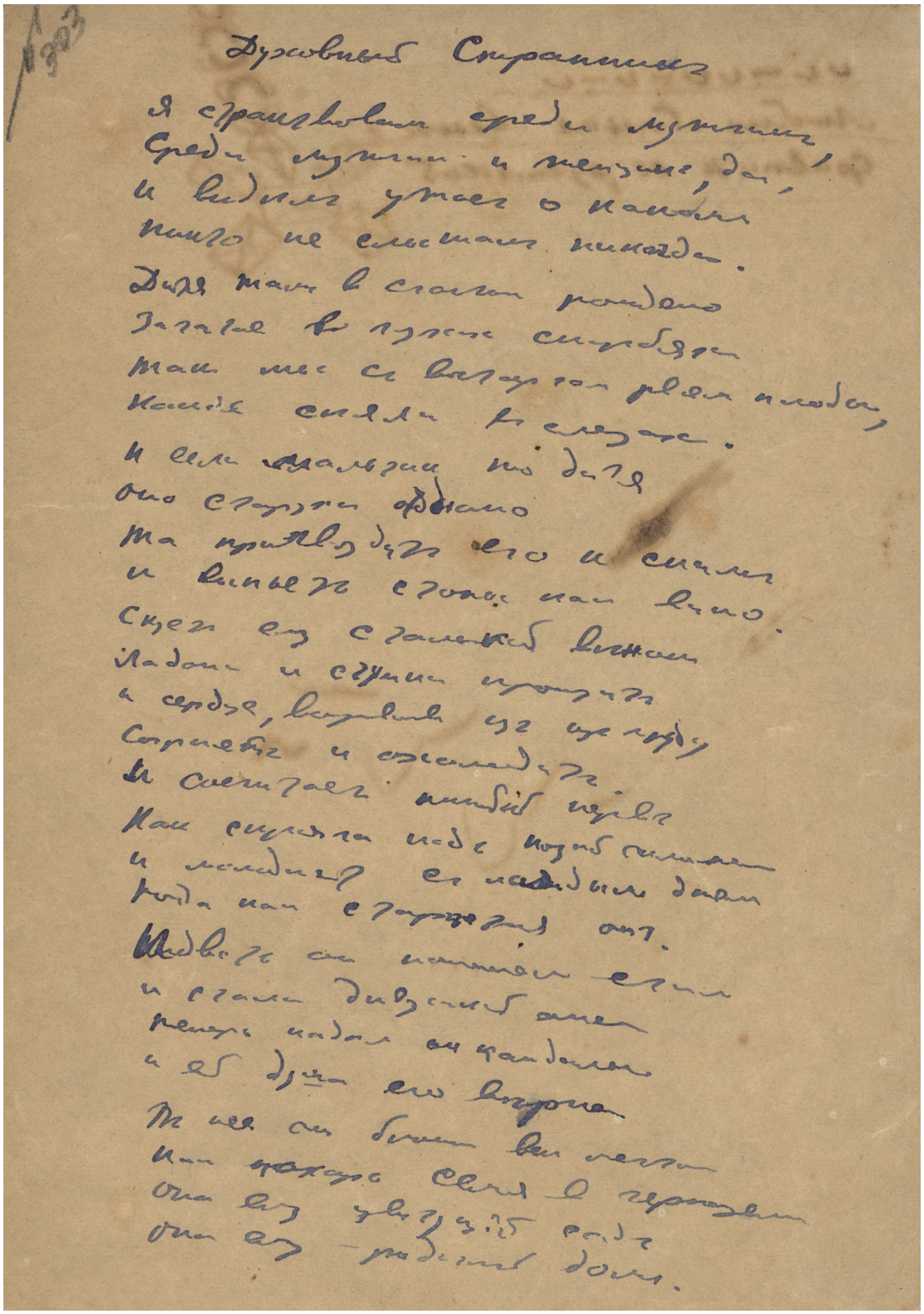
10. Zenkevich (1886–1973) was a "Russian … poet, writer, translator and journalist." He was a "prominent figure in the Acmeist movement" and "one of the founders of the Soviet school of poetry translation" (*Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikhail_Zenkevich>).

11. Georgy Ivanov (1894–1958), a White émigré, was a poet and essayist.

Mir prikliuchenii (*World of Adventures*) was an illustrated magazine, a collection of stories, published 1910–18 and 1922–30 in Saint Petersburg by Petr Soikin.

12. Odoevtseva (1895–1990) was a "Russian poet, novelist and memoirist …. She joined the Second Guild of Poets, was tutored by … Gumilyov, … and became his favorite student" (*Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irina_Odoyevtseva>).

13. This information is in the commentary to the volume (213-364), by Michael Basker, Tamara Vakhitova, Yurii Zobnin, Aleksandr Mikhailov, Vladimir Prokof'ev, and German Filippov.



1. A translation of Blake's "The Mental Traveller" by Nikolai Gumilyov: first seven quatrains. One page, in ink. 16.0 x 11.3 cm. Museum of Anna Akhmatova in the Fountain House, Saint Petersburg, Russia. MA KP-12558, fonds 20, inventory 1, dossier 6.

Yeats's edition,[14] just as there are none in Gumilyov's manuscript; the first seven quatrains of the poem occupy one page, as they do in Gumilyov's document.

10 The manuscript is mentioned in the memoirs of Pavel Luknitskii,[15] where the record of 19 November 1925 states:

> AA [Anna Akhmatova] and Punin[16] were sitting on the sofa. I began to sort out the autographs of Nikolai Stepanovich [Gumilyov] and gave AA the autograph of "The Mental Traveller", which I examined today. AA was not satisfied with my reading of one of the lines ("Which sang in tears"), saying that it would be more accurate to read "Which sowed in tears …." One word remained unrecognized. Punin turned the page in his hands for a long time, but even he did not make out this word.

This diary entry implies that Gumilyov's version of "The Mental Traveller," analyzed several years after his death, was perceived as an original poem (otherwise it would have been compared to Blake's poem, where the corresponding line reads "Which we in bitter tears did Sow"). Perhaps Akhmatova recognized the verse from the Bible that Blake rephrases here: "They who sow with tears will reap with joy" (Psalm 126:5). Although Akhmatova herself mentioned Blake in the 1940s and 1960s, she hardly knew his poetry well in the 1920s. But it is interesting to note that two of Akhmatova's lovers, Anrep and Gumilyov, were fond of Blake.

11 Subsequently, the manuscript was acquired by a bibliophile, Moisei Lesman. In the description of his manuscript collection, this page is listed under Gumilyov: "'The Mental Traveller' ('I wandered among men …'). No date. Clean autograph. 1 p." (Lesman 296). Thus, Lesman possessed only one page of the translation. It was not mentioned in dissertations devoted to Gumilyov and was not recorded in the academic literature. Blake's "The Mental Traveller" and Gumilyov's translation therefore had similar fates, since Blake's poem also remained only in manuscript form for decades.

12 Why was Gumilyov interested in this particular Blake text? A leitmotif in Gumilyov's poetry is the spiritual pilgrimage, the return to the "India of the Spirit"—his special image of Eden or a promised land in "Zabludivshiisia tramvai." After returning to Bolshevik Russia, he may have been interested in Blake's desire to generalize history epically, to draw a cyclic diagram of development and fall.

13 The translation was probably made between 1918, when Gumilyov returned to Russia, and 1921, when he was executed. In 1919–20 he actively engaged in a literary life: he gave lectures at poetry classes, was involved in translations from English—poems by Coleridge and Southey, ballads about Robin Hood—and was a member of a special collegium for poetry translations at the Vsemirnaya literatura (World Literature) publishing house. As noted above, this text is the first known translation of "The Mental Traveller." The next was a French version by Auguste Morel and Annie Hervieu, published in *Navire* in 1925; in 1935 a Spanish translation by Pablo Neruda followed, and so on. The poem was not translated into Russian again until 1975, when an anthology of English Romantic poets was published in the USSR. The 1970s was a great decade in the Russian reception of Blake, a period when some poets, including Brodsky, engaged in a dialogue with Blake (Serdechnaia and Serdechnyi 517-24). In comparison with five later Russian versions of "The Mental Traveller," Gumilyov's is distinguished by special poetic integrity and power. He strives for maximum naturalness of style, along with preserving the details of the original. For example, he retains the image of the miser, while in many other translations it is lost.

14 During the years when he was reading and translating Blake, Gumilyov was writing his "Theory of Integral Poetics," where we read:

> The poet must be the owner of some valuable sensation, previously not recognized. This gives rise to a sense of catastrophe in him; it seems to him that he is saying his last and most important thing, without comprehension of which the earth may as well not have been born. This is a very special feeling, sometimes filling you with such trepidation that it would hinder speech, if not for the related feeling of victory, the consciousness that you are creating perfect combinations of words, such as those that once raised the dead and destroyed walls. (*Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* 7: 236)

Such a messianic understanding of the poet's work seems truly Blakean: after the revolution, Gumilyov reevaluated the reality around him and moved closer to a tragic and prophetic view of the world.

15 Some of Gumilyov's late poems directly point to Blake or to his prophetic generalization of reality. In "Pamiat'" ("Memory"), which begins *Ognennyi stolp*, an allusion to "And did

14. In Sampson's edition (1905), the quatrains are not numbered, but, unlike the other editions listed, words such as "Land of Men," "Babe," and "Woman Old" are capitalized.
15. Luknitskii (1902–73) was a Russian prose writer, poet, journalist, and collector of materials about Akhmatova and Gumilyov.
16. Nikolay Punin (1888–1953) was a "Russian art scholar and writer. He edited several magazines" and was a "lifelong friend and common-law husband" of Akhmatova (*Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nikolay_Punin>).

those feet in ancient time" appears in the twelfth quatrain (V. V. Ivanov 234):

> Flames roast my heart, will roast my heart
> until the new Jerusalem's
> clear, pure walls rise
> in Russian fields.
> (*Selected Works* 110)

For a more accurate insight into the meaning of this allusion, we need to expand the context. Gumilyov's poem is devoted to the spiritual evolution of a man throughout his life: a romantic child, an arrogant poet, a free traveler, a soldier, and an architect. This quatrain refers to the last stage of development, the "stubborn architect / of this dark temple" (*Selected Works* 109). Poetry is considered here as the construction of the temple, the true abode of the spirit. This last stage of the lyric hero's evolution largely coincides with Blake's "And did those feet"; Blake's images of burning and fire are reflected in Gumilyov's "Flames roast my heart." "And did those feet" ends with the desire to build the Jerusalem of the spirit, but for Gumilyov something apocalyptic happens after the construction of the new Jerusalem—the "sudden-blooming" Milky Way and the next strange "renewal," a death of the hero's soul: "My soul will die. / Snakes shed their skins, we change / souls, not bodies" (*Selected Works* 110).

16 The epic amplitude of prophecy can be heard in Gumilyov's poem "Estestvo" ("Nature") (1919). The world here seems to be degrading; the cover taken off nature exposes its material and chthonic essence (Blake uses similar images—Vala's Veil and the Mundane Shell). "In these slow, inert / Transformations of nature," you can hear an echo of the endless metamorphoses of Blake's titan heroes. Gumilyov creates the image of the almighty poet who possesses a powerful and ancient language:

> Poet, you alone have a power
> To comprehend the terrible language
> Which sphinxes spoke
> In the circle of dragon lords.

This image is also very close to Blake's understanding of poetry as prophecy. The lyric hero speaks to the poet:

> Become a thing now, a former God,
> And speak the word to the thing,
> So that the globe that gave birth to you
> Suddenly flinches on its axis.
> (*Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* 4: 63)

Blake shows the globe of Earth shaking in *The Book of Ahania* (E 86), a poem Gumilyov could have read in Ellis/Yeats or in Yeats's 1905 edition. Gumilyov's image of the poet-bard, who penetrates the essence of things and has a right to the original Word, recalls the "Introduction" to *Songs of Experience*, where a bard is able to hear the "Holy Word" and exclaims "O Earth O Earth return!" (E 18). The image of the "Holy Word, / That walk'd among the ancient trees" is very likely a source for Gumilyov's famous "Slovo" ("Word") (1919), which begins:

> Then, when God bent His face
> over the shining new world, then
> they stopped the sun with a word,
> a word burned cities to the ground.
>
> When a word floated across the sky
> like a rose-colored flame
> eagles closed their wings, frightened
> stars shrank against the moon.
> (*Selected Works* 107)

Blake's motifs and images can also be seen in "Dusha i telo" ("Soul and Body") (1919). This mini-cycle of three poems refers both to the system of contrasts in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* and to the relation of body and soul in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Gumilyov offers an antithesis between a soul and a body, and shows that all oppositions are just the mind plays of Someone Great, the fruit of His imagination. The poet does not name Him, but we understand that He is a kind of universal mind, having in itself everything—a solipsistic sleeping God. The cycle ends with the words of this God answering the disputing soul and body:

> I sleep, and the endless depths
> cover my unutterable name—
> and you, you're a feeble echo from
> the lowest level of my being!
> (*Selected Works* 106)

17 Gumilyov attached particular importance to the poems of the Pickering Manuscript. He was working on a new poetry book, *Poseredine stranstviya zemnogo. Stikhi 1921–* (*Midway upon the Journey of Life. Verses 1921–*),[17] and he chose as an epigraph lines from "The Land of Dreams":

> Father, O Father, what do we here,
> In this Land of unbelief & fear?[18]

In August 1921, Gumilyov was arrested and executed as part of the trumped-up Tagantsev conspiracy, a crackdown on intellectuals. Only in 1992 was he rehabilitated.

17. This title clearly refers to the opening of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.
18. Quoted from Timenchik 1: 480.

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