Translation Of "The Diving Bell: Poems" By E. Ignatova

E. Ignatova

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Introduction

Elena Ignatova’s poetry works to protect her readers and herself in a hostile, often toxic environment. It offers ways to approach and understand experience, even as it reflects the flaws and compromises of human beings in an imperfect world.

Ignatova draws attention to the tragic disharmony between how things should be and how they are: the dark side of Russian history from the days of Prince Igor and the Mongol invasions, through the oprichniki (gang of armed bodyguards) of Ivan the Terrible, to the Revolution, the Second World War, and the breakdowns and difficulties she has witnessed in her own lifetime. Her language mobilizes Soviet officialese and conversational vocabulary, along with remnants of old poetic solemnity, religious, official and folk locutions. And religion for Ignatova plays a role like poetry’s: it is a source of rigor and epiphany that makes her poetic speaker uncompromisingly self-critical but also may enable a burst of joy or hope against a depressing background. She doesn’t force her religion on her reader, but it is strongly present—a Russian Orthodox or Biblical cultural undertone with residues of folk belief, an inevitable and essential part of the landscape, and deeply felt personal experience.

Elena Alekseevna Ignatova was born in Leningrad in 1947. Her family, as she comments, had no particular tradition of reading poetry. She spent a good part of her childhood with grandparents in a Russian village near Smolensk, a setting that informs many of her poems. By her teens she had begun to seek out other poets and writers in Leningrad;
including the aged Anna Akhmatova, whom she described as stately and imposing as Catherine the Great. In Dangerous Acquaintances, her memoir about Sergei Dovlatov, Ignatova writes, “I recall with gratitude the literary atmosphere of the 1960s, with its harsh division into good and bad, decent and indecent, with its stubborn refusal to accept everything that was of the alien mentality.”

Ignatova was not much younger than the best-known “Leningrad poets,” Joseph Brodsky and his circle, but those few years made a crucial difference in her experience. Her self-image as a poet formed in the stimulating atmosphere of the Khrushchev-era “Thaw,” and, like many of her peers, she remained true to her literary ideals as she came of age and Soviet culture settled into Brezhnev-era stagnation. Ignatova became an artistic dissident against the hopelessly compromised literary establishment, though she never joined the more alienated literary “underground.” She had graduated with a degree in Philology from Leningrad State University and lectured there in Russian philology until 1979. Her first publication was in the journal Смена (‘Shift’) in 1963, but after 1968 she published mostly abroad and in samizdat—the unofficial, usually hand- or typewritten, self-publishing system that made so much literature available to those Soviet citizens lucky enough to live in the metropolis and willing to risk spending time with potentially dangerous manuscripts. Her friends included other disaffected writers; she has written with particular affection about her friendship with Venedikt Erofeev.

In 1975 Ignatova first published a poem abroad, in so-called tamizdat, and her first book of poems, Стихи о причастности (‘Verses about Belonging’), appeared in Paris the following year, with the obligatory editorial note that it was being published without the author’s knowledge or approval. Two collections came out later in samizdat: Здесь, где живу (‘Here where I live,’ 1983), and Стихотворения (‘Poems,’ 1985). The opening of the Russian literary scene under glasnost gave her new access to readers and recognition as a writer. Her first and last “official” Soviet book, Теплая земля (‘The Warm Earth,’ 1989), came out from the prestigious “Soviet Writer” publishing house in Leningrad. During these years she also wrote screenplays for literary documentaries on Akhmatova, Blok and Bely.

In 1990 Ignatova and her family moved to Israel, not long be-
fore her native city's name was changed back to St. Petersburg. She published Небесное зарево ('Celestial Glow') in Jerusalem in 1992. However, her native city has always been present in her writing, and she “returned” in 1997 with the substantial historical and cultural survey Записки о Петербурге ('Notes on St. Petersburg'), which she revised and expanded in a second edition in time for the city's 300th anniversary. Here she intersperses her own experiences and urban family connections with citations from famous Russian writers and 19th-century and earlier memoirs. The book traces deep layers of history and memory: Ignatova's Petersburg is a palimpsest city. She notes in the introduction, “I wrote this book because I was looking for answers to questions that are important for our time, but mainly because I wanted to look into the past of Petersburg, into its ordinary life, to feel the breath and warmth of this departed life, to hear the voices of people from earlier generations. And to understand better the meaning of the gift we have received—a surprising city, our common link with its destiny.” Her most recent collection of poetry, Избранное, was published in Jerusalem in 2005.

The Diving Bell presents a small part of Ignatova's work, but aims to trace her most urgent themes. Along with the beauties and chimeras of Leningrad/St. Petersburg, she describes other parts of the Russian Empire or Soviet Union, Lithuania, Crimea, or the steppe, rural Smolensk and the woods of the far North, dotted with relics of labor camps. More recent treatments of émigré experience may recall the loss of pre-Revolutionary Russian culture in some of her earlier poems. Ignatova does not date her poems, though sometimes dates are implied by topics like Chernobyl or Saddam Hussein's soldiers in the first Gulf War. When she points to an era more specifically, it is often the “nature preserve” of childhood in the 1950s, a time whose pleasures and beauties become troubled in the adult’s more informed recollection. Classical culture, history and mythology appear, as befits a philologist:

You can spend a century reading Herodotus: Scythians beat Persians, then the Persians burn someone ... But the bloodstains fade. In your history are the rustle of olives, the peasant smell of sweat.

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The coarse clan of the Greeks grows pettier,
the naval vessel hastens towards Egypt.
We cannot drink up all of a stranger’s grief,
we see just names, like stubble after reaping,
and the walking-staff beat out on these lands’ stone.

And where is it, land of the arrogant Lydians,
gold-bearing rivers and golden linen sails,
where the world’s in embryo, where it’s still so dense,
where the blood of burned cities walks around the sky,
where man is cruel and naked and free of care ...

Other poems cite Ovid, the exile so important to Pushkin and
Mandelstam, two Russian poets who could not travel freely but com­
penated for that with the imaginative power of their writing. Ignatova’s
more recent poetry is set in Israel, especially Jerusalem where she now
lives, and treats both émigré sorrows (loss of ties of friendship and
residence, erosion of memory, and unwitting, even unwilling changes
in the poet’s self and perceptions) and the local combination of beauty
and violence that is, ultimately, another form of things she had expe­
rienced earlier in Russia.

The poems are full of plants, trees, sun, and water. Ignatova’s land­
scape embodies nature and culture, clouds over a granite embankment,
a marching band reflected in rainy pavement. Her Leningrad verses are
often set in a park, full of visible signs of past history, crystallizing that
city’s poetic life for the delight and refinement of human beings. The
poems are also marked by economy. It is a truism that Russian sentences
will be longer than their English equivalents, and this is true of many
of Ignatova’s lines, but not all. Some are almost painfully spare, such as
“погост, где брат мой спит без снов” (from the third poem in the cycle
“And of Russian Verse ...”), a mere eight beats in seven words, which
I can render no more sparely than “a churchyard where my brother
sleeps dreamless,” ten syllables that barely scan. Or, «Поэт со мной,
москвич с лицом изгоя”—a line of iambic pentameter that means,
literally, “the poet with me, a Muscovite with the face of an outcast.”
The longest lines, such as “The harshest times can’t force you to drink
down the drivel of humility,” are still densely and tensely detailed.

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Like Russian vodka, her verse is highly concentrated, infused with aromas, colors, bitter hints of what remains unsaid. Her tragic worldview often lingers on the scars of Russian history: the Revolution, Stalinism, the Second World War, or events in Israel. Critic Mikhail Kopeliovich comments, “Ignatova is primarily elegiac; harshness is more characteristic of her than lyrical relaxation,” and this is true of both her form and her underlying philosophy. Words or motifs (mica; clouds; the titular diving bell itself) gain intensity through shifting contexts and changes in tone. Hers is a poetry of address, often citing an interlocutor so she can respond with an alternate view of events. The formal aspects as well as clear citations recall Derzhavin, Akhmatova, Mandelstam, Tsvetaeva, and Pushkin, yet the verse has an unmistakably contemporary stylistic range, colored by current events and dissident angst, the subversive linguistic play and conversational ease of the late Soviet period. Poems take shape in places where she has visited or has family ties (Crimea, Smolensk). Her work of the 1990s brings in the new, ancient environs of Jerusalem, described as crystalline, distinct from St. Petersburg’s characteristic granite, a more chaotically igneous material. Ignatova says, “I am convinced that art is active: it can reflect the destruction of the world, of the historical connections of eras, of the human soul—or, on the contrary, can strengthen those connections. I have always wanted to write about the internal connection, the harmony of the world even in difficult times, about the connection of the past with our own fates, about Russia, about the connections of spaces: of the world of the Russian village, where I passed my childhood, of St. Petersburg and the Holy Land.” In their recurring images and concerns, her poems create similar webs of connection within this volume.

Readers and translators frequently comment on the persistence of what Russians call “classical” verse, meaning that it adheres more or less strictly to meters that became standard in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In essence, it is poetry that rhymes, scans, and therefore feels old-fashioned to North American readers. I am not sure that the Russian language really does offer more rhymes than other European languages (Pushkin, at least, did not think so!), since the easy solution of rhyming grammatical endings would not be used by a self-respecting poet. Nonetheless, many of the available rhymes are not yet overused, and slant rhyme feels quite fresh in the hands of a poet.

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like Ignatova. In a formal sense, at least, I might compare her verbal texture to Dylan Thomas’s or Sylvia Plath’s. As Daniel Weissbort has pointed out, the poets of the Silver Age exerted a “delayed influence” on more recent writers, as their uncensored work splashed onto the Russian literary scene only in the late 1980s. Even if many forbidden things were available to a young philologist in Leningrad in the 1960s and 1970s, they were banned from public discourse almost until the end of the Soviet period, when the Russian literary scene changed irrevocably. For some in Ignatova’s generation, maintaining traditional meters offers a way to safeguard artistic integrity, to integrate and extend the humanistic tradition of the Modernists. Ignatova’s earlier poetry tends to be formally looser and more experimental, while her mature work is more classical in this sense. Thus, her distinctive voice feels familiar, or better—familial—to a reader who is acquainted with her predecessors: she consciously lives up to their example in this and other ways.

In most cases I have not used completely free verse in rendering Ignatova’s poetry. I tried to capture sense and shape by paying Peter and Paul simultaneously, aiming for literal accuracy in meaning with maximal re-creation of form, and letting each concern serve to correct the other. I have chosen slant rhymes (sometimes quite obliquely slanted, like “channel” and “magic,” “braid” and “sweet,” or “strolling” and “peculiar”), when I could without padding or distorting the syntax, and copious assonance within and among lines. The translations emphasize rhythm above all, the persistent pulse of each poem, usually with a meditative walking pace, andante. I hope these compromises, given the more laissez-faire atmosphere of contemporary poetry in English, will convey the feeling of a “classical” style without infuriating readers who can read and appreciate the original Russian.

This translation could not have been made without support and suggestions from others. Elena Alekseevna Ignatova generously gave me advice on selecting poems, sent texts of work not yet published in collections, and answered questions about words and ideas: she has been as thoughtful and spiritually present in e-mail as she is in her poetry. I owe many thanks to Jim Kates of Zephyr Press, who encouraged my interest in translating Ignatova for the 1999 volume In the Grip of Strange
Thoughts, for inviting me to undertake this project, and for responding to drafts with patient and nit-picking comments. I first read Ignatova’s verse in 1990, when Arlene Forman loaned me the copy of Тёплая земля she had brought back to Oberlin from Leningrad. I thank Mark Markish (Ieromonakh Makarii) for his sharp eye and high standards of English grammar, and for taking time from a tremendously busy schedule to read the translations in draft. Expert translator Draginja Ramadanski had several valuable comments on this introduction. I have profited from Marina Rojavin’s refined sense of language and profound knowledge of Russian poetry and culture, and from Yelena Forrester’s musical ear and literate English style. N. B. inspired me in this work, as in everything. Any remaining infelicities are mine alone.

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