

**BOOK REVIEW**

Literature and Fine Arts

My Only Crime: Poems, Translations, Lives & Akhmatova's Requiem by Richard Lourie. New York: Poets & Traitors Press, 2024. 142 pp. \$16.00 (paper). ISBN 978-0-9990737-7-3**Sibelan Forrester** Swarthmore College
E-mail: sforres1@swarthmore.edu

When I picked up this book, I asked myself: Is it *that* Richard Lourie? A quick glance at the back cover proved that it is indeed he. How could the publisher resist using quotes from Saul Bellow and Czesław Miłosz, and from reviews in *The New Yorker* and *The Financial Times*? Lourie has published in a variety of fields, both academic and popular—mostly history but also biography and cultural topics—as well as translations from Russian and Polish. This is a very different kind of book: it brings together translations, original poems and, at the end, a few brief biographies of the poets Lourie has translated.

The introduction, “Godfathered In,” describes some lucky meetings with poets and scholars who saw Lourie’s talent and partly encouraged, partly pushed him to achieve great things. Some clearly saw him as one of their own, though he was born in the United States and had to learn Slavic languages. The introduction ends describing an illegal visit to the Georgian city of Gori, birthplace of Joseph Stalin, where Lourie was hauled to a police station and had to play a slightly critical fan of the dictator to get out safely—“the best evening of my life,” he concludes (p. 23). Other Slavists too may recall sensing that our careers involved unusual encounters, if not real danger.

Lourie has taken advantage of opportunities to mingle with and write about people the reader may have heard of (Delmore Schwartz, whose ghost features on page 67; Hugh Mclean, better known to Slavists than to poets). Some poems address the fate of East European Jewry or the author’s own Jewish ancestors. Titles include “What Have You Taught Me, Robert Lowell?” “Emily Dickinson Considers the Speed of Light,” and “Dylan Thomas Filching Dress Shirts from His Host.” The original works, only a few previously published, are mostly not formal but clearly well fashioned, with internal rhyme. One, “4th,” is more formal and perhaps has to be as it imagines how past U.S. heroes would react to our comfortable Independence Day celebrations in July.

The poets translated from Polish and Russian include Evgeny Vinokurov, Henryk Grynberg, Naum Korzhavin, Alexander Pushkin (“five sonnets from *Eugene Onegin*” rhyme and scan elegantly), Aleksandr Wat, Czesław Miłosz (here without his properly spelled ł), Vyacheslav Ivanov, Nikolai Gumilev and, as the subtitle promises, Anna Akhmatova. Her *Requiem*, in particular, is becoming one of those much-translated works, though not yet comparable to *Eugene Onegin* (or Dante’s *Inferno*). Lourie holds to the original form or rhyme scheme only in places; the first part is rendered with a dignified touch of archaic style: “I took no refuge under foreign skies, / Nor under foreign wing I sought relief. / I was with my people all those days, / Together, in our homeland, to our grief” (p. 96). “The Sentence” is formal, too, suiting its solemnity and treatment of terrible news as a deceptively simple thing. One could object that he changes “[na] zhivuiu grud” to “the living heart of a mother”—to avoid potential sexual implications, or because the heart is more sentimental than the breast that links



a child to nurture and nourishment? The second part of the Epilogue both rhymes and retains some of the original's energetic trimeter. This version of *Requiem* is dedicated to the memory of Alexei Navalny—underlining again how literature interweaves with history and politics. Lourie feels comfortable making considerable changes in some lines: “Ty syn i uzhas moi” comes out as “All for you, my son, my unending fear,” ten syllables to the original six, even though lines tend to be shorter in English translation than the Russian originals with their average of longer words (p. 104).

What is the nature of Poets & Traitors Publishers? “Traitors” of course is in the sense of “*traditore*.” The book's front matter lists seven other books from the press, all combining original poems alongside that poet's translations. This book's title, *My Only Crime*, comes from the final poem, “Dracula's Apology,” and the vampire presents another metaphor for the translator, who takes in and is nourished by the blood of the author, hijacking the original's immortality. On the whole this book is a tasty mixture of fresh and processed blood, so to speak, and like other books from this press offers the pleasure of good poems. The various texts, translations, and original poems related to the translations reveal things about the character and interests of the poet/translator—particularly worth knowing when the poet/translator is *that* Richard Lourie.

ORCID

Sibelan Forrester  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5601-2308>