

John Cournos Among the Imagists: Prelude to Petrograd

Author: Marilyn Schwinn Smith

Issue: Vol 5, no. 1 (2021)

Abstract

This article explores the overlooked contributions of John Cournos (1881–1966), a Russian-Jewish immigrant to the US, to the Anglo-American Imagist movement and his role as a bridge between English and Russian literary cultures. It examines his relationships with key figures such as Hilda Doolittle (writing under the name H.D.), Richard Aldington, and Ezra Pound, as well as his work translating Russian authors. The study delves into Cournos's time in Petrograd during the 1917 revolution, his poetry inspired by H.D., and his interactions with Russian poet Anna Akhmatova. Highlighting his literary and cultural exchanges, the article situates Cournos within the modernist movement, emphasizing his efforts to blend Russian and Western literary traditions amid geopolitical upheaval.

Note: For part 2 of this article see Marilyn Schwinn Smith, "An American in His Native Land: John Cournos in Petrograd," *JRAS* 6, no. 1 (2022). [<https://doi.org/10.17161/jras.v6i1.17977>]

John Cournos Among the Imagists: Prelude to Petrograd

Marilyn Schwinn Smith

1. Introduction

On 2 February 1918, poet H. D. (1886-1961) wrote from London to her fellow American John Cournos (1881-1966) in response to the packet he had sent from revolutionary Petrograd: "I read the poems with great joy—the one to A.A. touched me deeply."¹ Neither the poem nor the identity of its addressee has appeared in either H. D. or Anglophone scholarship. Locating the poem and identifying its addressee has been the province of scholars in Russia. The poem "To A. A." invites us to take a deeper look into the working relationship between Cournos and H. D. In doing so, the Anglophone reader comes to a broader understanding of John Cournos's overlooked position of among the Anglo-American Imagists, of the role he played in bridging English-language and Russian literary relations, and of England's wartime activity in Russia.

From among his several vocations, John Cournos is remembered certainly not as a poet but as a translator. Born in what today is Ukraine, Cournos was fluent in Russian and began translating into English in 1908, when living in Philadelphia. In London at the time of the Great War, he worked for the British War Department, translating military cables from Russia at Marconi House. Cournos was then recruited to serve on the British government's Anglo-Russian Commission in Petrograd. His official duties involved writing articles for Russian periodicals designed to sustain public sentiment for remaining in the war. Arriving in Petrograd 14 October 1917, mere weeks before the Bolshevik coup, Cournos was subject to the dire conditions of a city stricken first by the war and now by revolutionary disorder and violence. Yet he was writing poems and mailing them to his close friend in England. The poem that touched H. D. deeply reads:

O lily,
Frail white flower,
A joy to behold!

The hurricane blows,
Felling huge trees,

1. Donna Krolig Hollenberg, "Art and Ardor in World War One: Selected Letters from H. D. to John Cournos," *Iowa Review* v. 16, no. 3 (fall 1986): 126-155, 141.

The beech and the oak,
And the tall sycamore.

O lily sweet,
Dear and frail,
Will you still stand
When the winds cease to blow?
Will you still hold high
Your fair proud head?
Will you look with pity
On the beech and the oak
And the tall sycamore
That lie stretched on the ground
When the winds cease to blow?
(*To A.A.* – November 1917)²

The fair proud head held high is an eloquent evocation of Cournos's addressee, the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova (1889-1966), depicting her as she was at the time and as she was to remain across the cruel span of her life in Soviet Russia. Cournos identified Russian literature as a literature of pity. Asking whether the lily will look with pity on the trees laid low after the winds of revolution have ceased to blow, Cournos uncannily forecasts Akhmatova's future position in Russian poetry.³ Cournos had long hoped to become Akhmatova's authorized translator. Residence in Petrograd availed him the opportunity to meet her.

Aside from the poem's beauty, H. D. would have been inclined to appreciate the poem for its resonance with her own poetry. Compare "To A. A." with H. D.'s poem "Sea Lily," written the previous year.

REED,
Slashed and torn
but doubly rich—
such great heads as yours
drift upon temple-steps,
but you are shattered
in the wind.

2. First published: M. B. Meilakh, "Al'bom Anny Akhmatovy. 1910—nachala 1930-kh godov," *Pamiatniki kul'tury. Novye otkrytiia. Ezhegodnik 1991* (Moscow: Nauka, 1997), 46. I gratefully acknowledge Boris Dralyuk for locating this publication on my behalf. Roman Timenchik dates the poem to November 1917. "'Zapisnye knizhki' Anny Akhmatovoi," *Etkindovskie chteniia: sbornik statei v. 2-3* (St. Petersburg: Evropeiskii universitet v Sankt-Peterburge, 2006), 238. Timenchik's entry for Cournos includes several little noted documents, 238-42.

3. Cournos, familiar with contemporary Russian literary culture, may well have known of Akhmatova's reputation among Russian poets as a "Cassandra." On Akhmatova's early reputation, see Roberta Reeder, *Anna Akhmatova: Poet and Prophet* (Los Angeles, CA: Figueroa Press, 2006), chapters 2 and 3 *passim*.

Myrtle-bark
 is flecked from you,
 scales are dashed
 from your stem,
 sand cuts your petal,
 furrows it with hard edge,
 like flint
 on a bright stone.

Yet though the whole wind
 slash at your bark,
 you are lifted up,
 aye—though it hiss
 to cover you with froth.
 (“Sea Lily” 1916)⁴

“To A.A.” and “Sea Lily” share the motif of survival in the face of environmental devastation. The sea lily not only survives but is “lifted up.”

Yet though the whole wind
 slash at your bark,
 you are lifted up
 Cournos appropriates and transmutes these lines in his query:
 O lily sweet,
 Dear and frail,
 Will you still stand
 When the winds cease to blow?
 Will you still hold high
 Your fair proud head?

Cournos’s poem translates H. D.’s aesthetics to another realm, extending her personal aesthetic—the survival of the artist’s integrity—to encompass the social survival of a people racked by war and revolution. His frail lily grows not at the sea-coast, but at the verge of Russia’s great forests of beech, oak, and sycamore. Huge trees, not relatively fragile reeds, are stricken by the gale. Whether the lily will survive the devastation, as does H. D.’s flower, remains an open question: “Will you still stand/When the winds cease to blow?” And if so, “Will you still hold high/Your fair proud head?” Notably, where H. D.’s lily is “lifted up,” Cournos suggests that his lily, if surviving the hurricane, will not require lifting up, but will “hold high” of its own strength.

4. H. D., *Sea Garden* (London: Constable, 1916), 21. Cournos implies that he was involved in the search for a publisher for *Sea Garden* in his roman à clef devoted to these years, *Miranda Masters* (1926), 142.

The women poets H. D. and Akhmatova share the distinction of epitomizing poetic movements otherwise characterized as masculine – the Anglo-American Imagists and the Russian Acmeists. Parallels between the two movements and two poets have intrigued scholars for decades.⁵ John Cournos possessed the rare distinction of serving as a living link between these two poets. This essay charts the path toward his poem, “To A. A.,” detailing the people, events and circumstances which led a Russian-Jewish immigrant to Philadelphia to meet H. D. in London, preparing him to compose “To A. A.” once he arrived in Petrograd, 1917.

2 John Cournos Among the Anglo-Americans: “Come, my Philadelphians!”⁶

In 1912, Ezra Pound brought together fellow Philadelphians as they arrived in London including Hilda Doolittle, soon to acquire the sobriquet “H. D.” by which she is commonly known, and John Cournos, prolific translator from the Russian. None were born in Philadelphia and none chose to return.

Ezra Pound (30 October 1885, Hailey, ID – 1 November 1972, Venice, Italy) was raised in the Philadelphia suburb of Wyncote when his father obtained work at the Philadelphia Mint. Ezra met Hilda Doolittle in 1901, during his first semester at the University of Pennsylvania. After transferring to Hamilton College where he earned his BPhil, Pound returned to Penn for an M.A. granted in 1906, then began, but did not complete, his doctorate. Landing in London, August 1908, Ezra quickly found his way into the city’s nascent modernist art communities laying the groundwork for the Anglo-Americans.

Hilda Doolittle (10 September 1886, Bethlehem, PA – 27 September 1961, Zurich, Switzerland) moved with her family in 1895 to the Philadelphia suburb of Upper Darby when her father assumed the position of Professor of Astronomy at the University of Pennsylvania. Having met Ezra through her brother Gilbert, she maintained an ambiguously intimate relationship with him throughout her life. She arrived in London, October 1911, where Pound quickly introduced her to his British friends.

John Cournos (6 March 1881, Zhitomir, Ukraine – 27 August 1966, New York City) immigrated to Philadelphia’s Jewish Quarter together with his mother and some siblings in 1891. During grammar school, Cournos sold newspapers on the streets of Center City before school hours. He was later hired by the Philadelphia *Record*, where he rose to the position of Sunday art editor before leaving the city in 1912. With the dream of becoming an author, he abandoned financial security

5. An extensive bibliography of this scholarship in Kirsten Blythe Painter, *Flint on a Bright Stone: A Revolution of Precision and Restraint in American, Russian, and German Modernism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2006).

6. I draw this quotation from Peter Brooker’s chapter “Nights at the Cave of the Golden Calf (72-92) in his *Bohemia in London* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). It appears in a subsection consisting of extracts from Ford Madox Ford’s *Marsden Case* (1923) into which Brooker interpolates imagined conversations at the Cave of the Golden Calf. I quote such an interpolation, words spoken by Ezra Pound addressed to H. D., whose “head bent to catch the earnest words of Cournos,” 79.

and sailed for the Continent, arriving in London at the end of June.

Varying experiences of the city and its culture created a lasting bond among these three.

Fellow Americans, especially Philadelphians, arriving in London were drawn into the growing community of American and British artists. When Philadelphians James Whitall and George Wolfe Plank arrived in London in 1914, Cournos introduced them to H. D. and her British husband, Richard Aldington. Richard Aldington [Edward Godfree Aldington] (8 July 1892, Portsmouth, England – 27 July 1962, Sury-en-Vaux, Cher, France) was a novelist, memoirist, critic, biographer and one of the first Imagist poets. On the advice of Pound, Aldington was made literary editor of the *Egoist*, where he ensured the publication of Cournos's and H. D.'s work. Aldington had met H. D. in 1911, and they married in 1913. The still birth of their child in 1914, his deployment during the Great War, and his extra-marital affairs strained the marriage, and they separated in 1919. His 1929 semi-autobiographical war novel, *Death of a Hero*, was lionized in Russia, leading to his visit to that country late in his life. Whitall was to produce the fifth number of the couple's "Poets' Translation Series"; Plank illustrated numerous of H. D.'s works. Once centered around Ezra Pound, they participated in what has come to be known as the Anglo-Americans. The term Anglo-American refers most broadly to English-language cultural phenomena across the centuries. The narrowly defined term "Anglo-American Imagists" came into usage with scholarship on the "school" of Imagist poetry propagated by Ezra Pound. I use the term "Anglo-American" not specifically in reference to the Imagist poets, but to encompass the network of associations among British and American artists set in motion by Pound's energetic proselytizing.

When Cournos arrived in London, he brought with him two skills with which to make his way – journalism and translation. As a free-lance journalist, Cournos gravitated to venues frequented by London's artists from many fields, whether painting, or theatre, or sculpture, or writing, commingling across genres, gathering informally in a variety of venues. Prominent among them were the Café Tour d'Eiffel in Percy Street off Tottenham Court Road, Café Royal in Regent Street, Vienna Café in New Oxford Street, The Cave of the Golden Calf at 3 to 9 Heddon Street, and the ABC and Lyons tea shops scattered throughout the city. (During his time in wartime Petrograd, he was to frequent what remained of that city's cabaret life, where poets, painters and actors mingled.) There were also fortuitous encounters in the British Museum reading room. More formally, Cournos was soon attending several of the city's "salons": Monday evenings at W. B. Yeats's 18 Woburn Buildings, T. E. Hulme's Tuesday evening gatherings at 67 Frith Street, the regular readings and lectures at Harold Munro's Poetry Bookshop at 35 Devonshire Street, Theobald Road. The habitués of these venues overlapped to a considerable degree. From among them, Cournos gained entry to a broad cross-section of London's art world.

Journalism proved the path by which Cournos met Pound. *En route* to London, he had interviewed for *The New York Times* the theatre director Edward Gordon Craig, about whom there was considerable interest in New York's avant-

garde theater circles.⁷ When Craig himself arrived in London, he invited Cournos to join the committee for his proposed School for the Art of the Theatre. Cournos suggested that his Philadelphia friend, Henry Slonimsky, newly arrived in London, be invited to join the committee.⁸ Henry Slonimsky (9 October 1884, Minsk [Liachowitch], Russia – 12 November 1970, New York City) immigrated with his family to Philadelphia, graduating from the city's premier Central High School. In a reverse of Pound's academic trajectory, Slonimsky spent his first collegiate year at a small college on the outskirts of Philadelphia (Haverford) before transferring to the University of Pennsylvania. Cournos's friend in Philadelphia since at least 1904, Slonimsky arrived in London August 1912, after completing his doctoral degree under Hermann Cohen at the University of Marburg.⁹

As chance would have it, Slonimsky had a passing acquaintance with Pound. Charles Norman reports that Slonimsky first met Pound when they acted as "voluntary ushers" at Penn football games.¹⁰ Cournos recounts: "At one of the later meetings held in John Street, Adelphi, Ezra Pound turned up. [. . .] After the meeting, the three of us [Pound, Slonimsky, and Cournos], accompanied by [Ralph] Hodgson, went to the basement of a public house in the Strand, and talked."¹¹ Cournos promptly interviewed Pound for his former Philadelphia paper.¹² Slonimsky, like H. D. and Cournos before him, was introduced into Pound's London circles. Best documented of these was Pound's introduction of Slonimsky to T. E. Hulme's Tuesday evening salons at 67 Frith Street. Memoirs of the period memorialize their sparring. Richard Aldington recalls being "impressed by [Slonimsky's] skill and eloquence in refuting the arguments of the English Bergsonian, T. E. Hulme."¹³ The afterlife of Pound's and Slonimsky's

7. John Cournos, "Gordon Craig," 30 June 1912. New York Times Book Review (New York Times Archive. Viewed 17 Jan. 2012). Cournos lists the New York Times Book Review, the Boston Transcript, the Philadelphia Record, the Independent, and Craftsman as "open to suitable material from me." The initial material consisted of interviews with as many internationally known figures "as interested the American public." John Cournos, *Autobiography* (New York: Putnam, 1935), 223.

8. Arnold Rood lists Cournos and Henry Slonimsky among the committee's members, dating the committee's meetings from 19 September 1912 until 3 June 1913. "E. Gordon Craig, Director, School For the Art of the Theatre," *Theatre Research International*, v. 8, no. 1: 1-17, 6. Slonimsky served as secretary for "The Society of the Theatre." See his 19 October 1912 letter to the editor published in London's "The Academy. A (Monthly) Record of Literature, Learning, Science, and Art," 526. I thank Dr. Jonathan W. Malino for bringing this letter to my attention.

9. Slonimsky appears as Julius Strogovsky in Cournos's romans à clef: *The Mask* (1919), *The Wall* (1921) and *Babel* (1922).

10. Charles Norman, *Ezra Pound* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 3-4. J. J. Wilhelm also recounts the Pound-Slonimsky relationship in *The American Roots of Ezra Pound* (New York: Garland, 1985), 114-15.

11. Cournos, *Autobiography*, 234.

12. [John Cournos] "Native Poet Stirs London. Ezra Pound wins Critics' Praise." *Special Correspondence of "The Record."* London, Dec. 29. *The Philadelphia Record* (Jan. 1913), People section.

13. Richard Aldington, *Life for Life's Sake; A Book of Reminiscences*. (New York: Viking, 1941), 118.

re-acquaintance during 1912 is memorialized in two lines appearing in Canto LXXVII of Pound's *Pisan Cantos*:

‘Haff you gno bolidigal basshunts? . . .
Demokritoos. Heragleitios’ exclaimed Doktor Slonimsky 1912—¹⁴

Thus, these two Russian-Jewish immigrants to Philadelphia entered Pound's expansive circle of London friends, notably H. D. and Aldington.

John Cournos met H. D. and Aldington in 1912. They all attended T. E. Hulme's salon and shared friendships with Ezra Pound. In July 1913, Aldington and H. D. re-encountered Slonimsky in the Luxembourg Gardens of Paris.¹⁵ H. D. was particularly taken with Slonimsky, corresponding with him after this visit.¹⁶ Slonimsky remained on cordial terms with Aldington through 1959, long after Aldington's break with Cournos. Cournos took over Pound's room in Kensington in March 1914, “not many yards” from the Aldingtons' flat in Holland Place Chambers, where the newly-wed Pound soon moved. The Philadelphians were still socially intimate. H. D.'s and Cournos's friendship deepened through proximity of dwellings and Cournos's growing friendship with Aldington. Their closeness continued into Aldington's war service, until Cournos's return to England after his 1917-1918 sojourn in Petrograd. By 1915, they dispersed: Cournos to Bloomsbury and the Aldingtons to Hampstead Heath, later joining Cournos at 44 Mecklenburgh Square.

2.1 The Anglo-Americans and Translation

Translation was a major component of the trio's--Pound, H. D./Aldington, and Cournos-- shared interests. Their translation practice was intimately bound with an emerging modernism, regardless of language of origin or age of original text.¹⁷ Pound was translating from Provençal, Italian and Latin; Aldington from

14. See unpublished paper by Jonathan W. Malino, “Haff you gno bolidigal basshunts?...” (Canto 77/152-3): Ezra Pound and “Doktor” Slonimsky. 21st Ezra Pound International Conference,” Rapallo, Italy. Slonimsky's dissertation, titled “Heraklit und Parmenides,” appeared in *Philosophische Arbeiten*, a series edited by Hermann Cohen and his colleague, Paul Natorp.

15. Aldington's encomium of that Paris meeting [Aldington, *Life for Life's Sake*, 118-19] is noted in numerous H. D. biographies. H. D.'s biographers have relied on Aldington's faulty dating of the Paris meeting (May 1912). In her biography of Aldington, Vivien Whelpton, *Poet, Soldier and Lover: 1911-1929* (Cambridge, U.K.: Lutterworth Press, 2014), correctly dates the meeting as July 1913, a date confirmed by my own and Dr. Malino's research.

16. See Slonimsky – H. D. correspondence included in the Henry Slonimsky collection of Richard Aldington papers, 1913-1959 at Southern Illinois University Special Collections Research Center.

17. For discussion of modernist translations by Pound, H. D. and Aldington, see *The Classics in Modernist Translation*. Eds. Miranda Hickman and Lynn Kozak (London: Bloomsbury, 2019). On H. D. specifically, see Caroline Zilboorg, “H. D.'s Influence on Richard Aldington,” *Richard Aldington: Reappraisals*. Ed. Charles Doyle. (Victoria, B.C.: English Literary Studies, 1990), 26-44; on the Poets' Translation Series see Caroline Zilboorg, “Joint Venture: Richard Aldington, H. D. and the Poets' Translation Series,”

Greek, Latin and French; H. D. from Greek; Cournos from Russian. Cournos's translation practice ("foreignizing rather than domesticating," to use Venuti's terms) was already established in Philadelphia and probably altered only to the extent his command of English and familiarity with the literature increased. However, Pound's efforts to bring Cournos's work to the attention of publishers, paralleled by the efforts of both H. D. and Aldington, cannot be overestimated. The trio supported each other professionally through introductions and helping each other get their works into print.

Before relocating from Philadelphia to London, Cournos had begun what became a lifelong vocation of translating Russian literature. Translation was always more than a much-needed source of income for Cournos. Given his lack of proper schooling, translation would enhance the language skills he was acquiring as a journalist, particularly in view of his desire to become a writer. More importantly, translation figured as a species of "cultural work," an intervention into a dominant culture. Cournos's translation work must be viewed in conjunction with those sentiments which drew him to explore political responses to immigrant life in a rapidly industrializing American city. At the turn of the century, American literary critics were lamenting the decline of American literature, citing industrialization as a significant cause. They contrasted the state of American literature to the popularity of literature emanating from Russia during America's "Russian Craze", attributing Russian literature's better qualities to its roots in a predominantly agricultural society. Against the backdrop of increasing nativist activity in the United States, Cournos wrote in "Literature and Industrialism" (1903) of the potentially salutary effect of immigrants on American literature.¹⁸

[I]t can be readily seen that the characters of the American and the Russian are so strikingly different that it would be utterly impossible for each to produce the same literature, [. . .]. The writer, though an enthusiastic admirer of the literature of Russia, which is the literature of human feeling, is of the opinion that the prospects for the future of American literature are unusually bright. With the blending of the many homogenous forces present, because of steady immigration, there should come also the blending of the different natures of literature.

Once in England, Cournos continued to seek out new authors for translation, authors whose writing might contribute to the kind of transnational cultural work he had espoused in 1903.

Philological Quarterly v. 70, no. 1: 67-99; and Elizabeth Vandiver, "'Seeking Buried Beauty': The Poets' Translation Series," *The Classics in Modernist Translation*, 7-18. For a discussion of Cournos's modernist translation, see Rebecca Beaseley "Modernism's Translations," *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernism*. Ed. Mark Wollaeger, with Matt Eatough. (New York: Oxford UP, 2012), 551-70.

18. John Cournos, "Literature and Industrialism," *The Era: An Illustrated Monthly Magazine of Literature and of General Interest* (Philadelphia: Henry T. Coates, 1903), v. 12, 371-3, 373. [Era Magazine][continuation of *The Literary Era: A Monthly Repository of Literary and Miscellaneous Information*, Porter & Coates] <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433104244698;view=lup;seq=379>

As journalism brought Cournos together with Pound, his art criticism (another species of journalism) facilitated his first translations published in England. Through a series of introductions initiated by his friend, the English etcher William P. Robins, Cournos met J. C. Squire, newly appointed literary editor of the *New Statesman*. By May 1913 his translations of Anton Chekhov and Maxim Gorky, authors whom he had already translated in Philadelphia, began appearing in the *New Statesman*. Bashir Abu-Manneh notes that under Squire, the *New Statesman* engaged extensively with Russian fiction through literary-critical studies of Russian authors, essays and reviews of translated works: “The NS, in fact, responded to the growing public interest in Russian literature by publishing some itself. The year 1913 stands out as a particularly good year for Russian fiction, when the NS published no less than six Russian short stories that were specially translated for the journal by John Cournos” (145).¹⁹

Cournos held a unique position among these Anglo-Americans, a stature he derived from the Anglophone world’s growing familiarity with and interest in Russian literature during the Great War. The “Russian Boom” in England facilitated publication of his translations from the Russian, expanding his work with modernist authors, exemplified by his translations of Leonid Andreev while still in Philadelphia. Cournos’s translations of Fedor Sologub (1863-1927) were his major literary accomplishment of the war years.²⁰ *The Little Demon* by Sologub was the most significant of these translations. Aldington assisted Cournos with *The Little Demon* between late 1915 and early 1916. Though credited as co-translator of *The Little Demon*, Aldington probably did little more than review the manuscript for the quality of its English. Aldington may have checked *The Created Legend* as well for its English. Norman Gates suggested that Aldington’s task was probably “to rewrite Cournos’s literal rendering,”²¹ a premature judgement that influenced later critics.

19. Bashir Abu-Manneh, *Fiction of the New Statesman, 1913-1939* (Newark: U of DelawareP, 2011). Among the translations are: “The Lottery Ticket” by Anton Tchekhov, v. 1, no. 4: 115-16; “It is Done, Father” by Maxim Gorki, v. 1, no. 9: 272-4, “authorized translation”; “The Student” by Anton Tchekhov, v. 1, no. 19: 594-5; “The White Dog” by Feodor Sologub, v. 2, no. 37: 339-40; “The Hoop” by Feodor Sologub, v. 3, no. 64: 371-2.

20. Aside from short Sologub pieces published in the *Egoist*, are: *The Old House, and Other Tales* by Sologub. London, M. Secker, 1915, 1928 [New Adelphi Library, v. 44]; *The Old House, and Other Stories* New York: A Knopf, 1916. [E. M. Forster reviewed Cournos’s translation of *The Old House, and Other Tales* by Sologub in “Short Stories from Russia,” *New Statesman* (24 July 1915): 373-4.] “Feodor Sologub” *Fortnightly Review* (1 Sept. 1915); *The Little Demon* by Sologub. Translated by John Cournos and Richard Aldington. (London: Secker, 1916; New York: Knopf, 1916); *The Created Legend* by Sologub. Translated by John Cournos. (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co, 1916; London: Secker, 1916); “Feodor Sologub as a Dramatist” by John Cournos. *The Drama. A Quarterly Review of Dramatic Literature* 6:23 (329-45), *The Triumph of Death. A Tragedy in Three Acts with a Prologue*. By Sologub, translated by John Cournos. *The Drama*, v. 6, no. 23: 346-84, (Chicago: Dramatic Publishing Co., 1916).

21. Norman Gates, *A Checklist of the Letters of Richard Aldington*. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1977), 44.

The story of Cournos's final Sologub publication before leaving for Russia offers a portrait of continuing mutual assistance among these erstwhile friends. 6 June 1916, Aldington wrote from Devon to Charles Clinch Bubb of Cleveland, Ohio, acknowledging receipt of Bubb's subscription to the Poets' Translation Series and agreeing to Bubb's proposal to print some of these translations as booklets on his small hand-press at his private The Clerk's Press.²² Aldington immediately recommended H. D.'s *Choruses from Iphigeneia in Aulis*. Over the course of 1916-1917, The Clerk's Press printed eleven booklets by participants of Pound's original Imagist circle. Aldington's letters to Bubb make clear that H. D. was in frequent communication with the printer, managing in this matter, as in so many other of Aldington's literary affairs.²³

Bubb next contacted Pound in respect to printing some of Pound's translations. Aldington had endorsed the printing of Pound's translations of troubadour Arnaut Daniel's Canzoni, writing 14 October 1917, "So far as I know it [the Canzoni] has never been printed anywhere, except in various periodicals" and offering to speak with Pound.²⁴ Bubb then contacted Cournos. 23 January 1917, Cournos responded to Bubb's solicitation, agreeing to the printing of short Sologub pieces already published in the *Egoist* and enclosing the two pieces recently published in *The Welsh Outlook*. On the 29th, he sent along another three Sologub pieces previously published in London's *Nation*. Bubb printed *Little Tales by Feodor Sologub. An Authorized Translation from the Russian by John Cournos* on 24 July 1917.²⁵ 30 August 1917 Cournos wrote that he had received his copies of the booklet, adding:

At the present moment, I have nothing suitable for you, though I hope to have something later. Indeed, just now, I am busy preparing for a journey

22. H. D. and Aldington, whose relationship had been enmeshed with the practice of translation from the beginning, initiated their Poets' Translation Series in 1915. In her biographical entry for Cournos, Carolyn Zilboorg writes: "Although he did not contribute to either of the Poets' Translation Series, Aldington kept Cournos in mind as a potential translator of Russian and Hebrew authors." Carolyn Zilboorg, Richard Aldington and H.D.: Their Lives in Letters, 1918-1961 (Manchester; New York: Manchester UP, 2003), 84.

On knowing Hebrew, learning poetry and memorizing Isaiah while growing up, Cournos wrote: "I was too young to understand the significance of the words, but the sound captivated, as the sound of English was to captivate me later, as one is captivated by an infusion of a rich red wine." *Autobiography*, 40.

23. See 'Bubb Booklets': Letters of Richard Aldington to Charles Clinch Bubb. Ed. Dean H. Keller (Francetown, NH: Typographeum, 1988).

24. 'Bubb Booklets,' 39. See also, Pound to Bubb – The Arnaut Daniel Letters. Introductions by John T. Bailey and Hugh J. Brown (Cleveland, OH: The Rowfant Club, 2003). Four canzoni had appeared in *The New Age* (1911 and 1912); one appeared in *Hesternae Rosae* (1913). Pound published two collections containing Daniel's canzoni in 1920: *Umbra* (London: Elkin Mathews) and *Instigations* (New York: Boni & Liveright).

25. John Cournos, [Translator](#). *Little Tales by Sologub*. ["The typography and presswork done by Charles Clinch Bubb, clerk in Holy Orders, at his Private Press in Cleveland this twenty-fourth day of July, mdcccxcvii." "Forty copies only printed upon Tuscany hand made paper"], (Cleveland, OH: Printed at the Clerk's Private Press, 1917).

to Russia, where I am to do some semi-official Anglo-Russian work, I do not know for how long. I hope to be able to send you some translations from there.²⁶

The journey to Russia was to disrupt his relations with the Aldingtons. But it enabled him to meet authors and artists related to his work, including Sologub, Aleksei Remizov, Kornei Chukovsky, Konstantin Somov, and Akhmatova.

Unlike Cournos, H. D. was translating from an ancient language, in a field with a long (though newly contested) tradition, in a field whose barriers were rarely breached by women practitioners. Like Cournos, who was translating several authors while focusing on Sologub, H. D. drew on a number of Greek poets while elevating Euripides to a central position. Pound's involvement with H. D.'s translation practice differed vastly from his with Cournos. Pound sent three of H. D.'s earliest poems -- "Hermes of the Ways", "Priapus" "(From the 'Anthology')", "Epigram", "(After the Greek)" -- to Harriet Monroe in Chicago.²⁷ They appeared in the January 1913 issue of *Poetry*. Cournos is remembered as a translator rather than as a poet; the reverse is true for H. D. Yet the relationship between translation and poetry is more complicated in her case.

Eileen Gregory writes: "The idea and practice of translation is central to H. D.'s writing and self-conception throughout her career [. . .] H. D. clearly imagined herself as translator, perhaps as much as poet," writing further: "Though H. D.'s first poems published in *Poetry* were named translations, strictly speaking they are poems that embed the translation of an epigram, and, even more accurately, they are amalgams of epigrams."²⁸ Where two poems in *Poetry* are signed "H. D.," "Epigram" is signed "H. D., 'Imagiste.'" The five-line poem, "Epigram", reads:

The golden one is gone from the banquets;
 She, beloved of Antimetetus,
 The swallow, the bright Homonoea:
 Gone the dear chatterer;
 Death succeeds Antimetetus.
Poetry 1.4 (122)

"Epigram" occupies a fabled position in the history of early modernist poetry. Numerous accounts, with minor variations, exist of a meeting, some set in the British Museum, among Pound, H. D., and Aldington, during which Pound read

26. Letter held by The Morgan Library and Museum: Call #: Unbound Ray Cournos MA.

27. These three verses are among the seven H. D. poems later published in the collection assembled by Pound and published as *Des Imagistes* (1914): *Sitalkas*, *Hermes of the Ways I*, *Hermes of the Ways II*, *Priapus* (Orchard), *Acon*, *Hermonax*, *Epigram*. Pound had been hired by Monroe in August 1912 as a regular contributor to *Poetry*.

28. Eileen Gregory, "H. D. and Translation," *Cambridge Companion to H. D.* Eds. Nephie J. Christodoulis and Polina Mackay. (New York: Cambridge UP, 2012), 143-57, 143, 146.

this poem, penciled in emendations, and applied the signature – H. D., *Imagiste*. In H. D.'s poem, Pound saw the embodiment of T. E. Hulme's notion of the role that the image and *vers libre* could play in renovating English-language verse.

2.2 Anglo-American Imagist Verse

In the Foreword to his publication of Cournos's prose translations of Sologub, Charles Bubb wrote: "Mr. Cournos says, 'Sologub's little fables are interesting not only as showing the author's satiric trend, but also because the same ideas are reiterated more elaborately in his plays, stories and novels, and more exquisitely in his poems. Russia may have produced greater poets, but surely not a finer one'."²⁹ Cournos specialized in prose translation, yet read widely in Russian verse and, under the influence of his new Imagist friends, began writing his own verse. His first published verse, a translation from the Russian, appeared through Pound's intervention in Harriet Monroe's Chicago-based magazine, *Poetry*.³⁰ A month later, Pound included Cournos's translation in the first imagist anthology, *Des Imagistes*. Cournos had been instrumental in the publication, having referred Pound to his New York based friend, Alfred Kreymborg, editor of *The Glebe*, which published the first edition of the collection.³¹

During the years of his greatest intimacy with H. D., 1915 and 1916, Cournos took a greater interest in writing original verse. "Among the Rodins at South Kensington (With Buddha in the Background), *January, 1915*" is the earliest dated poem in Cournos's first collection of verse (*In Exile*, 1923) and bears traces of the Kensington neighborhood where they had all lived, of the Latin classical world of Aldington, of the Biblical world of Cournos's upbringing, and of the Japanese aesthetics of Pound.³² "Over Devon Hills," dated "*Devon, April, 1916*," belongs to the period when Cournos shared the cottage in Devon that he had helped secure for the Aldingtons, where they remained from February through

29. Cournos, *Little Tales*, 6.

30. "The Rose" by K. Tetmajer. *Poetry*, v. 3, no. 4: 132 (Jan. 1914). Cournos's translation was probably made from a Russian translation of the poem by the Polish poet, Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer. A Russian translation appeared a 1907 edition of Tetmajer's collected works published by Moscow's V. M. Sablin in a section titled "Verse in Prose". [http://az.lib.ru/t/tetmajer_k/text_stihi_v_proze_oldorfo.shtml]

31. *The Glebe*, v. 1, no. 5: 54 (February 1914). Edited Alfred Kreymborg (December 10, 1883 – August 14, 1966) and Man Ray (August 27, 1890 - November 18, 1976), *The Glebe*, produced ten issues in 1913 and 1914. The anthology was subsequently published by independent publishers with whom Cournos also had connections: *Des Imagistes*. New York: Albert and Charles Boni; London: Poetry Bookshop, 1914.

The Glebe featured non-traditional works by authors whom Cournos knew during his time in Philadelphia and NYC, e. g. Charles Demuth's play in *The Glebe*. See also, Cournos, *Autobiography*, 269-70 and Alfred Kreymborg, *Troubadour* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1925), 134.

32. *Poetry*, v. 10, no. 6 (Sept. 1917); John Cournos, *In Exile*, (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1923), 40. The poem's title references the 18 sculptures gifted to the South Kensington Museum, currently the Victoria and Albert Museum, by Rodin in 1914, supplementing the Museum's acquisition of St John the Baptist in 1902.

the end of July 1916.³³ Cournos joined them in March, remaining there until early August.³⁴ H. D. would have been writing many of the poems to appear in her first collection of verse, *Sea Garden* (1916), while continuing work on translations from Euripides.

“Over Devon Hills” is dominated by the recurrent theme of Cournos’s life—difficulty, which it shares with motifs in H. D.’s “The Cliff Temple” (*Sea Garden*). The speaker of “The Cliff Temple,” ascending toward “the world-edge,/pillar for the sky arch,” is situated mid-way, beneath the sea-hawks and gulls yet above the booming wind. Cournos’s speaker is likewise mid-way, between the valley and the height:

“Higher up, on the hills,
A gale blows,
The storm god is astride.
[. . .]
Above my head the flying sea-mist,
The hovering sea gull—
No larger than a butterfly.”

The poems of *Sea Garden* are noted for the commingling, to the point of identity, of beauty and fragility with sharpness and hardness. And pain. The ascent toward the cliff temple is torturous: “I was splintered and torn:/the hill-path mounted/swifter than my feet.”

Mounting the Devon hills, Cournos’s speaker drags himself upwards:
Step by step—panting,
Retarded by stones, mud,
And my own clothes—shackles.
Straining toward the wind, the mist, the gulls.

Despite the poems’ manifold differences, shared motifs when combined with a dominant motif of aspiration reflect the influence of H. D.’s images, if not her poetics. H. D.’s influence on Cournos’s poetry is most visible in the poems they each submitted to *The Little Review*’s “Vers Libre contest.” Submissions were due 15 August 1916. Both poems were likely written in Devon, before H. D. and Cournos departed from Devon. More than any of his other poems, this poem by Cournos adheres most closely H. D.’s early, short verse. Compare:

The Assault (by John Cournos, 1916)
You come –
Black of wind,
Black of beak,

33. Cournos, “Over Devon Hills,” In Exile, 18-20.

34. Additionally, there was the companionship of his friends John Mills Whitham and Carl R. Fallas. A visit from his London friends Elena and Evgenii Somoff resulted in financial support enabling Cournos to begin writing his first novel, begun 1 April 1916.

Flock on flock –
Ravenous, cawing.

Your cries – arrows –
Shrill, clamorous, strident,
Pierce the heart.

O wounded reverie
On still water,
White in faint mist,
You spurt red drops.

O white swan,
Shape of magnificent sadness,
Spread out your wings,
Flutter white through the air,
Disperse the black, the raucous.³⁵

Sea Poppies (by H. D. 1916)

Amber husk
fluted with gold,
fruit on the sand
marked with a rich grain,

treasure
spilled near the shrub-pines
to bleach on the boulders:

your stalk has caught root
among wet pebbles
and drift flung by the sea
and grated shells
and split conch-shells.

Beautiful, wide-spread,
fire upon leaf,
what meadow yields
so fragrant a leaf
as your bright leaf?³⁶

35. Cournos, "The Assault," *The Little Review*, v. 3, no. 10 (April 1917): 21; *In Exile*, 38.

36. H. D., "Sea Poppies" *Sea Garden*, 20; *The Little Review*, 11.

The opening strophes share short lines, marked by strong initial and end stress; the initial “B” of Cournos’s lines two and three correspond to the initial “F” of H. D.’s lines two and three, while his “Flock on flock” echoes H. D.’s “fluted” and “fruit.” Their strongest similarity lies in the austerity of depiction.

You come –
 Black of wind,
 Black of beak,
 Flock on flock –
 Ravenous, cawing. (Cournos)

Amber husk
 fluted with gold,
 fruit on the sand
 marked with a rich grain (H. D.)

Having noted that “Sea Poppies” and Maxwell Bodenheim’s “Images of Friendship” were the only two poems to have received more than one vote and were, therefore, the “winners” of the contest, Margaret Anderson printed on the following pages ‘honorable mentions’, interspersing her own opinion of the poems. Cournos’s poem appears first after the following comment: “The following four were not mentioned by any of the judges, but in my judgment they are better than many of the ‘honorable mentions’.”³⁷

“Sea Poppies,” like “Sea Lily,” appeared in *Sea Garden*, which contains five “sea flower” poems. The poems’ five flowers – rose, poppies, violet, iris, and lily – are, in most cases, reeds: the coastal flora of Devon. H. D.’s land- and sea-scapes are generally evocative of the Attic coastline or New England coastline of her youth. Days spent at the Devon coast would have kept this sea and its coastal flora foremost in her consciousness. It is probable that “Sea Lily” was written during H. D.’s stay in Devon in 1916; the lily of “To A. A.” echoes the title of H. D.’s poem. Key words of the sea flower poems are harsh, marred, meagre, stunted, flung, torn, stained, slashed, and shattered. Summarizing the essence of H. D.’s sea flowers, Kirsten Painter sees their fight for survival as the source of their beauty.

Although frail, the flowers are hard as rock, and, although rent by the gale, they are ultimately more enduring than other flowers, because their travails have endowed them with a pungent, unique smell and the ability, like flint, to make fire.³⁸

37 The Little Review, 20.

38 Painter, *Flint on a Bright Stone*, 193. For Painter’s analysis of the sea flower poems, see pp. 190-194, esp. 191-2 for “Sea Lily.”

3 Cournos and London's Russians

When John Cournos left Philadelphia for London in 1912, his intention was to become an author in the English tradition. His embrace by the Anglo-Americans provided him with a financial lifeline by supporting his work as a translator. A further consequence was his ensuing friendship with H. D., who strongly influenced the development of his own poetic style. This influence is seen most clearly in the poems they submitted to the *vers libre* contest and when comparing H. D.'s "Sea Lily" with his poem addressed to Akhmatova.

Equally important in laying the groundwork for Cournos's meeting with Akhmatova were the connections he made with Russians in London. The city was home to numerous Russian émigrés, political emigrants no less significant than literary figures. Association with émigré communities facilitated access to the latest literary works coming out in Russia, works not yet in circulation in the West. Among these émigrés were recent arrivals from Russia and others who travelled between the two countries or maintained connections with the artists of St. Petersburg. Through acquaintance with these Russians, Cournos was kept apprised of St. Petersburg's vibrant literary scene, discovering contemporary authors for translation. Renewing his U.S. passport in January 1917, Cournos listed two foreign countries for travel: England for residence and Russia to study. The intention to travel to Russia listed on his passport application could only have reflected a desire to further his promising translation work, a desire confirmed in his 30 August 1917 letter to C. C. Bubb, quoted above. Residence in Petrograd would expand his literary connections.

Among Cournos's literary connections in London, three stand out: Zinaida Afanas'evna Vengerova (1867-1941), Elena Kontantinovna Somoff (1888-1969) and her husband Eugene Ivanovich Somoff (1881-1962). A professional literary figure, Vengerova traveled widely throughout western Europe, returning frequently to Russia.³⁹ Often in London, Vengerova lived at 54 Bloomsbury Street in September 1914, across from the British Museum. Cournos may well have met her around this time in the museum's Reading Room, which he frequented. Or at one of the Russian émigré salons, such as that of Vengerova's friend Fanny Stepniak, which Cournos also attended.⁴⁰ He was certainly acquainted with Vengerova by the autumn of 1914.

It is probable that Cournos introduced Pound and Vengerova. The 2 November 1914 number of the *Egoist* (I:21) carried a "Preliminary Announcement of the

39. On Vengerova, see also: Rachel Polonsky, *English Literature and the Russian Aesthetic Renaissance* (Cambridge, Eng., New York: Cambridge UP, 1998), 26-7, 29; "Zinaida Vengerova and Her Unpublished Correspondence," edited by Rosina Neginsky. *Revue des Etudes Slaves* (1995) v. 62: 1-4; Rosina Neginsky, "Zinaida Vengerova," *Russian Women Writers*, v. 2. Ed. Christine D. Tomei. (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc. 1999); Charlotte Rosenthal, "Zinaida Vengerova: Modernism and Women's Liberation," *Irish Slavonic Studies* (1987) v. 8: 97-105.

Interestingly, Vengerova was distantly related by marriage to Cournos's friend, Henry Slonimsky.

40. Fanny Markovna Stepniak (1855-1945), widow of Sergei Stepniak-Kravchinsky (1851-1895), political assassin and author of *Underground Russia*.

College of Arts,” authored by Pound.⁴¹ It listed among its instructors “Zinaida Vangerova [sic], to offer a course on “Russian Contemporary Thought”; her qualifications: “Published works: Seven volumes of essays in Russian. Contributor to ‘The Fortnightly Review,’ etc.” Pound, himself, was listed among the College’s instructors, to offer a course in Comparative Poetry; his translations of Arnaut Daniel’s ‘Canzoni’ were cited among his qualifications. Also listed among the instructors was “Ivan Korshune (John Cournos),” translator “of various tales by Gogol, Korolenko, Dostoyevsky, Gorky, Turgenev, Chekov, Andreyev, Sologub, Remizov, etc.” to offer a course on “Russian Novelists.” All but the last two of these authors had been translated before Cournos’s arrival in England. His first translation of Sologub, “The White Dog,” appeared on 20 December 1913 in London’s *New Statesman*.⁴² Cournos’s first published translation of Remizov did not appear until he included a short section of Remizov’s “The Betrothed” in “Kultur and the Russian Conscience,” *Harper’s Weekly*, 24 July 1915. It is notable that Pound knew of Cournos’s work on Remizov as early as 1914.⁴³

Pound’s College of Arts never materialized, but his announcement in the *Egoist* contains a number of interesting details. That Cournos is listed under his birth name, Ivan Korshune, marks Cournos’s ambivalence about his departure from Russia as a child and the subsequent adoption of his stepfather’s surname. It also marks the exotic appeal for the Anglo-Americans of his biography. H. D. regularly addressed him in her correspondence as Korshune and signed herself with a Russian diminutive, “Hildushka.”

Vengerova established the connection between Cournos and Sologub, initiating their correspondence, praising Cournos’s translations and conveying texts between London and St. Petersburg.⁴⁴ Sologub responded positively. In a letter to Alexander Izmaylov, Sologub expressed his preference for Cournos’s *The Old House* over Stephen Graham’s *Sweet-Scented Name*, adding: “John Cournos’s Russian is excellent — he was born in Russia, but ended up in America as a child, and in terms of his upbringing and life, he is an American. He is a very

41. Pound had proposed in May 1913 “A College of the Arts,” in the *New Age*. Titled “America: Chances and Remedies. V,” subtitled “Proposition III—The College of the Arts,” Pound’s article muses on national subsidies for the arts in European nations, wondering why in America there existed only private patronage for individuals. Suggesting New York or Chicago as attractive sites, he proposed that America was ripe for much broader support for the arts than existed in Europe. (*New Age* v. 13, no. 5: 115-16.) It is reasonable to presume that Pound was partially inspired by his participation in Craig’s committee in late 1912.

42. Cournos, translator of “White Dog” by Sologub, *New Statesman*, v. 2, no. 37: 339-40.

43. Writing to Remizov 30 May 1924 in reference to the forthcoming publication of his translation of *The Clock*, Cournos says: “I had wished to tell you that there is a good prospect of my finding for my translation of “Часы” which I made in 1916 and which I had told you about when I was in Petrograd during 1917-18.” (Remizov Papers. Amherst College Center for Russian Culture. Box 1, folder 10. Digital page 152-4.)

44. See Teternikova- Vengerova, Sologub – Vengerova, and Sologub – Cournos correspondence: Harvard University, Houghton Library, Russian MS 61 (2-4, 6).

literary, sensitive person, and he writes artfully. He wrote an essay about me for the *Fortnightly*, which will appear (if it hasn't yet) in the next issue."⁴⁵

Another consequence of Cournos's introducing Vengerova and Pound was her interview of Pound for an article on the Vorticists, whom she labelled "The English Futurists," published in the first issue of Russian almanac, *Strelets* in January or February 1915.⁴⁶ While dismissive of Vorticist theorizing, she is generally appreciative of Pound's verse. At the conclusion of her article, Vengerova names a number of Imagist poets, including Aldington, and quotes a poem by H. D. Should Akhmatova have read the article, which well she might have, she would have known of H. D. and her poetry at least since 1915.⁴⁷

Unremarked in the historical or critical literature of the period is Elena Somoff. Introducing his translation of Andrei Bely's novel, *Petersburg* (1959), Cournos acknowledges Elena's and Eugene's gift to him of the book's first edition during the early years of the Great War.⁴⁸ In 1916, Elena and her husband Eugene visited Cournos in Devon, where he was staying with the Aldingtons. In view of his evident poverty, they decided to contribute a pound per week to allow him the freedom to work on what would be his first novel, *The Mask* (1919).⁴⁹ Elena [Helen] Konstantinovna Odinets was born 21 January 1888 in St. Petersburg. She married Evgenii Ivanovich Somov [Eugene Somoff], born 24 April 1881 Kiev, on 20 October 1915 in Brentford, just north of the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew. Their place of residence at that time was 48 Esmond Road, Bedford Park, located between Brentford and Kensington in London. Cournos wrote of her, "she was a spirited Georgian, who had a keen intellect, and was personally acquainted with the best writers and artists in Petrograd and Moscow."⁵⁰ As Vengerova connected Cournos with Sologub, the Somoffs may have been his conduit to Anna Akhmatova, whose early poetry had appeared in Russian literary journals since 1911. Like Vengerova, through their connections in Petrograd's art world,

45. <https://lucas-v-leyden.livejournal.com/204098.html>. I thank Boris Dralyuk for bringing this to my attention.

Vengerova, as a regular contributor to the *The Fortnightly*, may have secured Cournos's entrée to the journal.

46. See Julia Trubikhina, "Imagists Rejected: 'Vengerova, Pound and A Few Do's and Don'ts of Russian Imagism.'" "Appendix: Zinaida Vengerova 'English Futurists' (1915): Translation." *Paideuma. A Journal Devoted to Ezra Pound Scholarship* v. 27, nos. 2&3: 129-51.

47. I thank Michael Lavery for inspiring me to re-read Vengerova's article.

48. "The translator owes a great debt to Eugene Somoff and his wife Elena Konstantinovna for first introducing him to Biely, and in particular for presenting him early during the First World War with a copy of the first Russian edition." Andrey Biely, *St. Petersburg*, translated by John Cournos, (New York: Grove Press, 1959), xviii. First Russian edition, *St. Petersburg*: M. M. Stasiulevich, 1913.

The history of Cournos's *Petersburg* translation is a tale in itself. See Marilyn Schwinn Smith, "Immigrant Bookshop, Establishment Magazine: Publishers of John Cournos's Andreev Translation." Unpublished conference paper, ASEEES Annual Convention, virtual, November 5, 2020.

49. Cournos, *Autobiography*, 288. Part I of *The Mask*, "Russia," was dedicated to Elena; Part II, "America," was dedicated "To H. D."

50. Cournos, *Autobiography*, 288.

the Somoffs were in a position to provide Cournos with the latest literary texts, possibly obtaining Akhmatova's poetry for Cournos as early as 1915.

Cournos was translating Akhmatova's verse during the Great War. In 1957, Richard Aldington recalled reading, during the war, translations of a Russian poetess whose work bore striking similarities with the verse he and his friends were writing.⁵¹ Russian scholars presume that the poet Aldington referred to was Akhmatova and that Cournos was the translator. Roman Timenchik cites an interview with Akhmatova undertaken by P. N. Luknitskii during the 1920s as further evidence of Cournos's familiarity with Akhmatova mid-1910s. Luknitskii had inquired whether much had been written about her in England in earlier years. Akhmatova replied that a lot had been written in the summer of 1916.⁵²

When Cournos left for Petrograd in October 1917, he had already been in communication with Akhmatova. Among the Cournos papers at Harvard's Houghton Library is a copy of Akhmatova's second collection of verse, *Chetki* (1915, first published in 1914), inscribed to him and dated June 1917.⁵³ The volume may have come into his hands through Akhmatova's husband, fellow poet Nikolai Stepanovich Gumilev (1886-1921), who visited London, also in June 1917. However, Gumilev's military postings as part of the Russian Expeditionary Force in France make it unlikely that he obtained the book directly from his wife. The book may have arrived through the post. Or it may have been delivered by an intermediary, perhaps the Somoffs. Or, Vengerova.

Gumilev did meet Cournos during his June visit. Elaine Rusinko, in reconstructing much of Gumilev's activity in London, places him in the city between 14 and 21 June 1917.⁵⁴ In addition to Gumilev's compatriots living in London, Rusinko identifies figures, notably those affiliated with *The New Age* and Harold Munro's *Poetry Bookshop*, most responsible for Gumilev's English connections. Cournos was to varying degrees associated with a number of these figures, though his primary associations were among the less established. 20 June 1917, Gumilev wrote to his wife reporting on Cournos. His less than

51. "Была — около 1914 года — русская поэтесса, чье творчество, на-сколько я мог судить по переводам, имело нечто общее со стиха-ми, которые пытались писать мои друзья и я. Помнится, ее произведения отличались оригинальностью и тонкостью чувств." *Inostrannaia literature*, (1963), no. 8: 228. Quoted by Roman Timenchik on page 240 in "'Zapisnye knizhki' Anny Akhmatovoi" op cit and page 335 in his *Poslednyi poet. Anna Akhmatova v 1960-e gody*. Tom 1. 2nd corrected and expanded edition. (Jerusalem: Gesharim; Moscow: Mosty Kul'tury, 2014).

Aldington's memory of dates is fallible and the year 1914 is probably incorrect.

52. Timenchik speculates that Akhmatova had in mind things written by Cournos. "Курнос был одним из первых вкладчиков в английскую ахматовиану. В 1920-е годы на вопрос П. Н. Лукницкого <<О Бас много писали в Англии? Раньше--в прежние годы?>>--Ахматова ответила: <<Писали... Много... В 1916 году летом>> (Лукницкий, П. Н. Асумиана "Встречи с Анной Ахматовой, 1924-1926". Париж, 1991. Т. 1. С. 79). Возможно, имелись в виду какие-нибудь печатные сообщения Джона Курноса." Timenchik, "'Zapisnye knizhki' Anny Akhmatovoi," op cit, 240.

53. Given the differing calendars, June Old Style would range between June 14 and July 13 on the British calendar.

54. Elaine Rusinko, "Gumilev in London: An Unknown Interview," *Russian Literature Triquarterly*, 1979, (Twentieth Century Criticism), no. 16: 73-85.

complimentary descriptive term, “obscure graphomaniac,” together with his remark that there were other good translators among the British who will do poetry, suggests that Gumilev was not recommending him as translator.⁵⁵

Rusinko identifies C. E. Bechhofer (1894-1949) as Gumilev’s principal contact at *The New Age*. Bechhofer had met Gumilev in Petrograd during his 1915 stay in the city.⁵⁶ If Akhmatova had intended Gumilev to assess Cournos as translator, Bechhofer’s friendship with Gumilev would likely have been prejudicial. In 1916, at age 22 and based on his brief time in Russia, Bechhofer published *Russia at the Cross-Roads*, presuming to explain to the British and the Russians alike what they collectively misapprehended about the geo-political status of Russia. The same year, he published *Five Russian Plays*, “translated [by himself] from the originals with an introduction”.⁵⁷ The introduction stated that the texts were selected for their greater reflection of European, rather than purely Russian qualities. In characterizing the not altogether Russian qualities of Chekhov, Bechhofer wrote: “Chéhov is not a great writer; he is really a journalist, and his work has no permanent importance. A French critic has compared his work with the cinematograph, he himself called it ‘sweet lemonade.’ It was not vodka—there lies its significance. He was an embryo European . . .”⁵⁸

In a review titled “Not Vodka,” Cournos expressed displeasure with the quality of Bechhofer’s translations.⁵⁹ But it was Bechhofer’s presumption to term the character of Russian literature as “vodka” that drew his ire. He cast Bechhofer’s unfortunate word choice in terms of the then current British obsession with the “Russian Soul,” that is, another example of the seemingly ceaseless Western “othering” of Russians.⁶⁰ No less offensive to Cournos, if not mentioned, must have been Bechhofer’s explicit rejection of the very authors Cournos was translating, authors Cournos would have categorized among the ranks of European modernists. Bechhofer wrote: “The decadence of such modern writers as Andréyev, Górkí, and Sólogub lies in their refusal to recognize this fact [that is, now that Chekhov had “led Russian literature out of its purely Russian groove, the natural step was for it to become more and more European, without losing its national impulse”]; they continue to write in a narrow style, dwarfed in that by the genius of their forerunners, uninspired by the Renaissance of European solidarity

55. “Курнос просто безызвестный графоман, но есть другие хорошие переводчики, которые займутся русской поэзией.” (Гумилев, Н. Соч. в 3 т. М. Т. 3. С. 245). Quoted by Roman Timenchik on page 240 in “‘Zapisnye knizhki’ Anny Akhmatovoi” op cit.

56. Carl Earl Bechhofer Roberts (1894-1949). Wikipedia lists Bechhofer as a trooper with the 9th Lancers during the Great War; Rusinko indicates that he was a foreign correspondent in Petrograd at the time he met Gumilev, early 1915.

57. C. E. Bechhofer, *Russia at the Cross-Roads*. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd.; New York: Dutton, 1916). *Five Russian Plays*. (New York: Dutton; London: Kegan Paul, 1916).

58. Bechhofer, “Introduction” ix-xvi, *Five Russian Plays*, xiv.

59. Cournos, “Not Vodka.” *Egoist*, (Sept. 1916), v. 3, no. 9: 134.

60. See Michael Hughes, “Searching for the Soul of Russia.” *Twentieth-Century British History*, v. 20, no. 2: 198-226.

that the war has revealed . . .”⁶¹ Compounding the situation were the number of competing voices jostling to offer themselves as best qualified to represent Russia, its culture and its literature, to the British public. Cournos entered the fray with enthusiasm, not least with his choice and defense of Sologub texts.⁶²

Had he been asked, Bechhofer surely would not have recommended Cournos to Gumilev as translator for Akhmatova. Furthermore, Gumilev’s interest in poetic translation may have been primarily for his own poetry. Bechhofer continued a discussion of translating Gumilev’s verse after the poet returned to Paris from London. Bechhofer and his fellow contributor to *The New Age*, Paul Selver, both published collections from the Russian in 1917. In his own collection, Bechhofer reprinted both his own and Selver’s translations previously printed in *The New Age*.⁶³ Selver published exclusively his own translations of modern Russian verse.⁶⁴ Bechhofer was interested in Gumilev’s recent poem, “Pantum” (“Goncharova i Larionov. Pantum”) and his latest book of verse, *Kolchan (Quiver)*.⁶⁵ He requests that Gumilev send him these works; he will take them to Selver, and they will commence work right away on the “Anthology.”⁶⁶ In the end, Gumilev appears in neither book, and Cournos did not become Akhmatova’s authorized translator. His

61. Bechhofer, “Introduction,” xiv.

62. Cournos’s 1914 contentious exchange of letters to the editor with Huntly Carter in the pages of the *Egoist* had devolved into a series of mutual insults. Carter, “Art and Drama: The War and Some Survivals,” (*Egoist*, v. 1, no. 19: 376-8; Cournos, “Carter, Craig, Reinhardt, Wagner and Blake,” *Egoist*, v. 1, no. 20: 398 (15 Oct. 1914); Carter, “Scene 2: Enter J. C.,” *Egoist*, v. 1, no. 21: 416 (2 Nov. 1914); Cournos, “More Light for Mr. Carter” *Egoist*, v. 1, no. 22: 431 (16 Nov. 1914); Carter, “A Small Helping of Truth, Mr. Cournos!” and Cournos, “Exit Mr. Huntly Carter,” *Egoist* v. 2, no.1: 15 (1 Jan. 1915).

63. *A Russian Anthology in English*. Edited by C. E. Bechhofer. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd.; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1917). Bechhofer’s selections are primarily prose. With the exception of an extract from Akim Volynsky’s book on Dostoevsky, translated by Bechhofer, all the selections had previously appeared in English by various translators. The collection includes 25 named authors, a final section titled “Ballads and Songs,” and, as an Appendix, and an extract from Pushkin’s Mozart and Salieri translated by Bechhofer.

64. Paul Selver (1888-1970), novelist, poet, translator; best known for his translations from the Czech. *Modern Russian Poetry. Texts and Translations. Selected and translated with an Introduction by Paul Selver* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd.; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1917).

65. “Pantum” refers to a genre of Malay oral poetic. “Goncharova i Larionov. Pantum” (1917) appears in volume 2, page 167 of Gumilev’s 4 volume collected works, published by Kamkin in 1962.

66. Bechhofer’s letters to Gumilev, dated 27 & 29 June 1917, are held in the Amherst College Center for Russian Culture: Jacob K. Bikerman Collection on Nikolai Gumilev. Series 1, Sub-Series 2: Correspondence to N. Gumilev.

As Bechhofer uses the term “Anthology,” it is possible that he had in mind his own collection, rather than Selver’s collection of verse. Evidently Gumilev wrote both a short story and a poem designated with the term “pantum”. See, *Volia Rossii*, 1931, No 1-2 (53-58). Bechhofer may have intended to include a piece of Gumilev’s prose.

only known translation did not appear until 1923.⁶⁷ But he did travel to Petrograd, befriend Akhmatova, and compose his poem to her.

At the request of the British ambassador to Russia, Sir George Buchanan, the Foreign Office asked novelist Sir Hugh Seymour Walpole (1884-1941) to engage in propaganda work in Petrograd to counter the successful German efforts. (Literary figures featured prominently among British propagandists.)⁶⁸ Walpole, who had been in Russia intermittently as a journalist since 1914, set up the new headquarters upon arriving in Petrograd on February 14, 1916, where he was “quickly installed in a small office on the Morskaya with Harold Williams and Major C. J. M. Thornhill. There was no other staff and scarcely any money. [. . .] By the end of September [1916] he was back in Petrograd, and within a few weeks he was the proud occupant of large offices on the Admiralty Quay, with a staff of twelve. His writing-paper was boldly headed ANGLO-RUSSIAN BUREAU, and one of the first requisites of the original scheme, that it should remain modest and under cover, had disappeared. Henceforth it was popularly known as the ‘British Propaganda Office,’ and whatever use it might have had was neutralized by the bright light of publicity.”⁶⁹

Appointment to the Anglo-Russian Commission by Walpole enabled Cournos to live in Petrograd from October 1917 to the beginning of March 1918. Cournos reports that, when soliciting him for the Commission, Walpole said “he had heard about me from friends we had in common in Petrograd; he was also familiar with my articles.”⁷⁰ Walpole, who knew Sologub socially,⁷¹ may have been referencing Cournos’s article on Sologub published in the *Fortnightly Review* on 1 September 1915. Cournos’s and Walpole’s common acquaintances included Vengerova. Beyond Vengerova, we can speculate that Cournos’s friends in England, Elena and Eugene Somoff, may have established for Cournos correspondence with their Petrograd acquaintances. As Cournos wrote, Elena “was personally acquainted with the best writers and artists in Petrograd and Moscow.”⁷² Further, Eugene Somoff was on good terms with his father’s cousin, Konstantin Somov, a painter

67. Anna Akhmatova, “Зачем притворяешься ты,” (1915) *Белая стая*, (Петроград: Гиперборей, (сентябрь) 1917). Translated by John Cournos as “The Call,” In *Exile*, 64. In a letter to Gumilev dated 15 August, Akhmatova indicates that *Белая стая* (White Flock) had been printed, though she had not yet received her copy. Amherst College Center for Russian Culture: Jacob K. Bikerman Collection on Nikolai Gumilev. Series 1, Sub-Series 2: Correspondence to N. Gumilev.

68. The commission was originally called the Anglo-Russian Propaganda Bureau or Anglo-Russian Bureau. See Rebecca Beasley, chapter 4.3 “The Russian Revolutions and The Anglo-Russian Commission” *Russomania: Russian Culture and the Creation of British Modernism, 1881-1922* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2020), 374-97. On the evolution of the commission, see especially pp. 377-86.

69. Rupert Hart-Davis, *Hugh Walpole: A Biography* (London: Macmillan, 1952), 151, 156.

70. Cournos, *Autobiography*, 294.

71. Writing to Henry James, 15 March 1915, Walpole wrote: “My evenings are spent with quite the most interesting set in Russia just now—all the chief writers, artists and musicians—Merejkowsky, Sologub, Glazounov, Scriabine, Somoff . . .” (Hart-Davis 135).

72. Cournos, *Autobiography*, 288.

and major figure in the city's art world.⁷³ Walpole lived with Konstantin from March 1915 until his final departure from the city in November 1917.

Walpole was in England numerous times after moving in with Konstantin: 22 October 1915 - February 1916, four more times in 1916, as well as January and June - October 1917. He may have met with Eugene on these occasions at Konstantin's suggestion. After his appointment as head of the Anglo-Russian Commission in January 1916, Walpole may even have discussed with Eugene the possibility of recruiting Cournos for his Commission before Eugene, himself, travelled to Russia during the summer of 1917. Walpole contacted Cournos in August 1917.

Cournos possessed numerous credentials to recommend him for a semi-official government position in wartime Petrograd. Beginning 1916 or 1917, he worked for the Wireless Press in Marconi House, translating Russian government cables. Cournos's characterization of his work: "It was in its way a responsible position requiring accuracy; it was also a position of confidence, for the news sent by the Russian Government wireless had to go to the censor first before being released for the press."⁷⁴ The security clearance which came with this work, together with his familiarity with government concerns, would have constituted a strong recommendation for a position with the Commission. Cournos's engagement in British cultural life as art critic, polemicist and poet, combined with his familiarity with Russian literary culture, further recommended him as an ideal candidate to bridge the two cultures. Cultural propaganda, the public face of Cournos's work, was directed at Russia's literate classes. He was to contribute articles on English life to Russian magazines designed to cultivate fellow feeling between the two allies, thereby encouraging popular support for Russia's commitment to the Allied war effort.⁷⁵

When Cournos was invited to join the Anglo-Russian Commission, there were compelling reasons not to accept the position. Though his financial condition was precarious, he was engaged in a number of projects and at work on his first novel. Further, the disastrous conduct of the war had been a significant factor in the revolt three months previously (the February/March revolution) that had resulted in the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II and the establishment of a provisional government. The war continued to go badly on the Russian front, anti-war sentiment was high,

73. Konstantin Andreevich Somov (1869-1939), co-founder with Alexandre Benois, Sergei Diaghilev and Leon Bakst of *Mir Iskusstvo* (The World of Art), influential arts magazine and arts movement. On Walpole's relationship with K. Somov, see Hart-Davis, *passim*.

74. Cournos, *Autobiography*, 290. The passage in Cournos's autobiography describing this work refers to the period beginning August 1916 but does not make explicit the date he began work at Marconi House. Richard Jaschke may have been the person responsible for bringing Cournos to the attention of Marconi House. A publisher, Jaschke's address appears in Cournos's address book from the relevant time period.

75. Citing Foreign Office papers, Beasley states that Cournos was employed as an "assistant for journalist work," 378.

living conditions were poor and the streets not altogether safe, to which Walpole conscientiously alerted Cournos.

There were, however, personal factors to induce acceptance of this potentially dangerous assignment that would take him away from London—the city he had made his home in 1912 and was to remain his favorite domicile for decades. Cournos experienced a high degree of ambivalence about his departure from Russia, referring across his life to his childhood spent outside Kiev as an idyll. Further, he felt animosity toward his stepfather, Bernard Cournos, and may well have hoped to meet his father and family remaining in Russia. Shortly after arriving in London, Cournos made contact with his older brother through relatives in Petersburg. Leon Korshun subsequently visited Cournos in London for three days in the autumn of 1912, putting him in communication with their father, then living in Odessa.⁷⁶ Yet prospects for furthering his literary goals were the strongest inducement to accept the position. The years in London had set the stage for all that he was to experience during his brief sojourn in revolutionary Petrograd. And for the composition of the poem “To A. A.”.

About the Author

Marilyn Schwinn Smith, an independent researcher affiliated with Amherst College, has presented and published internationally across a varied range of subjects. She has written on the city of Holyoke’s community farm, Nuestras Raices and on the Northampton Silk Project. Among English-language writers, she has dealt with memoirist Anne Morrow Lindbergh, photo-journalist Ruth Gruber, novelist Virginia Woolf, classical scholar and Russophile Jane Ellen Harrison, and poet H. D. The Russian-language authors about whom she has published include Aleksei Remizov and Marina Tsvetaeva. The career of John Cournos is the current focus of her work.

76. See Cournos, *Autobiography*, 220-22.