

## Russia's Antigone

from Anna Akhmatova: Poet and Prophet

Roberta Reeder

Anna Akhmatova has taken her place as one of the greatest poets and prophets of the twentieth century. At first compared with Sappho<sup>1</sup> because of her exquisitely lyrical love poems, Akhmatova later assumed the role of Cassandra,<sup>2</sup> becoming a prophetess of doom; and like Antigone, she was left behind to bury the dead and to teach us that it is an ethical imperative to remember them....

The evolution of Akhmatova's poetry represents the evolution of her personal response to the dramatic events occurring in her country. Recognition of her poetic gifts began in 1912, with her first collection of poetry, *Evening*, when Russia was already in the throes of chaos and revolution... But World War I marked a significant change in Akhmatova's work, and soon she began to take on the role of the traditional village "Wailer": Overcome by grief, those in the village who lost someone turned to the Wailer to articulate what they felt. Then, as the dreams of the Revolution turned into a Stalinist nightmare, Akhmatova became the voice of an entire people—of the women who lost men in the apocalyptic events of this century, and her own son, who was among them....

Akhmatova never regretted her decision to remain in Russia, and watched as those who left often lost their creative urge, were misunderstood or merely ignored.

1. **Sappho** (c. 610–c. 580 B.C.): Greek poet known for her love lyrics.

2. **Cassandra**: in Greek mythology, a daughter of Priam, king of Troy. She could foretell the future, but her prophecies were never believed.

## All the unburied ones

Anna Akhmatova

translated by Judith Hemschemeyer

All the unburied ones—I buried them,  
I mourned for them all, but who will  
mourn for me?

## I am not one of those who left the land

Anna Akhmatova

translated by Stanley Kunitz

I am not one of those who left the land  
to the mercy of its enemies.  
Their flattery leaves me cold,  
my songs are not for them to praise.

- 5 But I pity the exile's lot.  
Like a felon, like a man half-dead,  
dark is your path, wanderer;  
wormwood<sup>o</sup> infects your foreign bread.

- 10 But here, in the murk of conflagration,  
where scarcely a friend is left to know,  
we, the survivors, do not flinch  
from anything, not from a single blow.

- Surely the reckoning will be made after  
the passing of this cloud.  
15 We are the people without tears,  
straighter than you... more proud...

8. **wormwood**: herb that produces a bitter oil. The word can also refer to something that produces feelings of bitterness.