

Title: The Asthma of Poetic Creation
Author: Ona Renner-Fahey, University of Montana

Since in Ancient Greece the Muse was said to breathe the poem into the poet, classical notions of poetic inspiration were closely bound with the act of breathing. In keeping with this myth, then, a poet's creativity would necessarily be hampered if he or she were experiencing shortness of breath or choking. In many cultures, such an experience might be considered a purely negative one; however, Russian culture's long tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy and its inherent beliefs of salvation through suffering provide a unique arena within which to consider and revisit the classical myths of inspiration, including the difficult and oppressive ones. True creativity, as scholars of Russian culture such as James Billington have noted, involves suffering.

In my paper I will look at the motifs of breath and, in particular, of asthma and fear of asphyxiation in modernist Russian poetry. I will show how the motifs are closely connected to the theme of poetic creation. Mandelstam, whose concern with asthma has been well documented, will serve as my point of departure. I will then compare the use of the motifs by his contemporaries, including Pasternak and Tsvetaeva.

Ona.renner@mso.umt.edu