

# Regarding Anna Akhmatova:

Akhmatova's Evolution from Performative Tragedy to Traumatic Verse

By

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*For those who have been my inspiration*

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## INTRODUCTION

Anna Akhmatova is regarded as one of the greats of Russian Poetry. Though she may not be well-known in the West, Akhmatova remains a Russian cultural and literary icon. Her work has been a point of interest in literary circles. She was one of the leading female literary figures in Russia during the first half of the twentieth-century, setting a precedent for female poets. Her work was idolized by younger generations in Russia at the time for her treatment of women in her poetry and her femininity (Strakhovsky 4).

To this day Akhmatova is seen as being a voice for women during a time when women's issues were often not addressed. Over the years Akhmatova's contemporaries and scholars gave her the role of the "Poetess of Tragic Love" (Strakhovsky 18) based off of the themes she dealt with in her work. While this is true, the title is reductionist. Akhmatova is much more than the poetess of tragic love. Her career may have been founded upon this concept of tragic love, but it evolved into something much greater. As time progressed, Akhmatova no longer was a poet of tragic verse but a poet of traumatic verse. This evolution is rarely discussed in regards to Akhmatova as both a woman and poet, and the impact of her later work is therefore reduced into fitting into this cultivated public persona from early in her career.

Observing Akhmatova's evolution from tragic verse to traumatic verse reveals ways in which people find ways to communicate (collective) trauma. This shift comes not from time but focus. Akhmatova lived during an intense time in Russian history, witnessing the 1917 Russian Revolution, the Russian Civil War, both World Wars, the creation of the Soviet Union, Stalinism, and ultimately the Thaw. These were all periods of monumental change throughout Russia (and Eastern Europe), and constant wars, famines, purges, and uncertainty traumatized generations.

As these events occur, Akhmatova could no longer turn a blind eye, and she had to shift her focus in her poetry.

Akhmatova still spoke about the experience during the height of Stalinism, but her language and forms of communication and creating an emotional bridge to the reader evolved. To ignore this evolution in her poetic career is a disservice to Akhmatova and overlooks fundamental aspects of her work and how collective trauma and memory are preserved when she was actively censored by the Soviet government.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### **The Lyric Representation of Trauma**

While trauma and the way we think of trauma is relatively recent, people have historically sought to find purpose and reason for their experiences as a way to show that their lives have meant something or left some sort of impact on humanity. Trauma therefore becomes a main focus in this search for meaning or some greater purpose in people's lives. If one or many experience some sort of trauma, there must be a reason as to why it happened. There is a search for a deeper meaning to the trauma because one wants rational explanations as to why something so life-shattering occurred. In turn, people often attempt to heal from trauma by communicating their experience with the belief this opens the door to a clear-cut, linear healing process.

Healing from trauma, however, is not a linear experience, nor is it something that is easily understood. Trauma itself is complex and muddy, as the experience of trauma is innately subjective to each person. Because everyone has their personal threshold as to the amount of (mental) pain they can undergo, trauma manifests in unique ways to each individual person. In this regard, trauma can be thought of as a labyrinth. The outside framework and overall shape looks the same for each person; however, the inner mechanisms as to how the trauma actually manifests and affects someone differs from person to person, similar to how all labyrinths will look similar from the outside, but the inner maze will always differ. The path people must take to get out is never the same, nor is the way people choose to walk through it. Therefore the experience of understanding, processing, and discussing trauma differs from person to person.

Due to the guise of similarity that masks the complexities lurking underneath, the task of communicating trauma, which is already a Sisyphean task, becomes more convoluted. Elaine Scarry describes how communicating trauma and traumatic experiences is a nearly impossible task: “(Physical) pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries as a human being makes before language is learned” (Scarry 4). Pain is the limit of language, which limits how people communicate and share the pain they experience. Although Scarry focuses on physical pain, the same concepts can be applied to considerable mental pain and anguish. Trauma, which is extensive and severe mental pain, therefore supersedes language and forces us to rethink language.

Despite the fact that trauma negates the use of (coherent) language, it does not mean that trauma cannot be communicated or untranslated. Perhaps the traumatic language used differs from place to place, but the overall feeling and understanding of traumatic language is intuitively understood. Scarry brings up an interesting point based on this idea that trauma language differs depending on the native language, but it can be translated and understood by others:

This is not to say that one encounters *no* variations in the expressibility of pain as one moves across different languages. The existence of culturally stipulated responses to pain—for example, the tendency of one population to vocalize rise; the tendency of another to suppress them—is well documented in anthropological research. So, too, a particular constellation of sounds or words that make it possible to register alterations in the felt-experience of pain in one language may have no equivalent in a second language: thus Sophocles’s agonized Philoctetes utters a cascade of *changing* cries and shrieks that in the original Greek are accommodated by an array of formal words [...], but that at least one translator found could only be rendered in English by the uniform syllable “Ah” followed by variations in punctuation[...] (Scarry 5)



Here, Scarry describes ways in which people translate different expressions of pain. This shows that depending on where someone is from and their background, the way a person manages to vocalize trauma or pain can differ. What's unique about this is that each person can therefore translate this iteration of pain or trauma into their own interpretation. Although communicating trauma can be translatable in this regard, these iterations of trauma and/or pain still have lexical gaps that does not necessarily portray the event that occurred in full. This does not mean, however, that there is a norm for communicating trauma or pain. Because trauma manifests differently in each person, each person develops their own traumatic language to communicate what they underwent. Differences in traumatic language are another reason why trauma supersedes language, and we need to rely more on intuition and personal experience as a means to understand trauma.

Scarry's discussion of the "*changing* cries and shrieks" uttered by Philoctetes in Sophocles's play being translated into English brings forth another unique feature of communicating trauma. Scarry states the only viable translation one translator could find was the exclamation, "Ah" in conjunction with noting anthropological research stating that different cultures have different responses to pain. Scarry is correct that different cultures have different responses to pain, but I would like to bring that one step further: there are generational differences in communicating trauma. This is important because each generation has its own unique culture and characteristics that impact the ways in which people communicate with one another. Therefore, there are lexical gaps between generations that further impair communicating trauma.

For example, we can think about the way in which Millennials and Gen Z communicate and share their trauma on social media. Unlike previous generations, Millennials and Gen Z grew up

when social media was rapidly becoming a part of everyday life and use. Social media, as the name suggests, allows people to share with one another, crossing cultural, linguistic, and national boundaries. This allows for Millennials and Gen Z to strengthen their ties through sharing generational experiences and identities (Napoli 184). Social media allows these generations to share their collective memory and experiences. Because this is so broad and all-encompassing, the collective memory of Millennials and Gen Z is more solidified because it is so widely shared.

Memes have become the Millennial and Gen Z mode of communicating collective memory and trauma because it is a form of communication that allows people to process and remember these events. Sharing experiences that older generations often consider personal and therefore impolite to discuss become ways for younger generations to form a better sense of identity in relation to one another. Additionally, it is a sense of solace and companionship:

Each *like*, each *post*, each *tag* helps to seal the belonging and strengthen the group. [...] Moreover, it appears that the younger ghosts share a critical approach to the performativity of adults. Essentially it is a lack of competence; the present results suggest that adults [...] are perceived as “out of place,” sometimes even as “improvised” or “pathetic”. From a certain point of view [...] younger subjects seem to consider adults as technically incompetent. [...] Adults are not familiar with Internet language and are prone to make “digital gaffes” [...] (Napoli 190).

It is clear that younger generations enjoy the ability to have a collective sense of identity and belonging, relying on the solace that others have experienced what they have. Social media therefore becomes the perfect conduit to share these experiences and create an archive of collective memory and history.

For older generations such as Baby Boomers and Gen X, however, this is not quite the case. First, Baby Boomers and Gen X did not grow up with the same technology that Millennials and

Gen Z had. Therefore, older generations often have a different view of social media.

Additionally, the concept of trauma and post-traumatic stress are fairly new concepts, so older generations tend to have a sense of shame that go with their collective trauma. Often these generations were told that they don't talk about this sort of thing, or perhaps it was a failure of language that prevented them from being able to share their experiences. The fact that older generations were taught that they do not or cannot discuss (collective) trauma because it is seen as "improper" along with social media and modern technology as more foreign concepts to them shows the generational differences in how people discuss trauma.

These innate differences between communication and trauma create tension when people are limited to language alone. Dori Laub and Daniel Podell explore this tension and how it further affects the ways in which people communicate trauma:

According to Laub & Auerhahn, 'Because of the radical break between trauma and culture, victims, often cannot find categories of thought or words to express their experience'; they cannot articulate trauma even to themselves. 'Knowing—in the sense of articulation, analysis, elaboration, and reformulation—requires the preservation' or reclaiming of the internal other that is destroyed in situations of terror. Too 'close to the extreme experience, survivors are captive observers who can only repeat it. Indeed, they may not even be able to remember it, except for the haunting, fragmented visual percepts that they cannot integrate affectively into their personality' (Laub & Podell 992).

It's interesting that Laub and Podell state that survivors of trauma are observers rather than participants. This means that because language is useless when expressing trauma, people stagnate. If they cannot articulate what occurred, they cannot begin to undergo the process of understanding and working through trauma. Ultimately this stagnation and passive observation

gets passed down from generation to generation, and it becomes harder for anyone to articulate trauma. There becomes an inherent absence or nothingness.

Absence, therefore, is a key marker of trauma. This absence is not only the absence of language but the absence of memory and comprehension. As Laub and Podell point out, the sense of one's internal self is "destroyed in situations of terror," which eliminates the possibility for memory to be preserved as a means to recall and communicate these events (Laub & Podell 992). The lack of preservation of memory and knowledge leads to fragmented recollection, creating gaps not only within one's articulation of trauma but also in one's personality. Traumatized language implores one to make note of absence and ask themselves, "Why is there absence here, and what does that mean? What does this absence tell us?"

With absence, fragmentation, and lack of language, trauma escapes concrete articulation; however, it does not mean that people do not attempt to convey such experiences. Fragmentation and absence implore people to read between the lines and fill in these gaps with their own interpretation. As a result, people are drawn to more artistic mediums as a way to express trauma. Artistic mediums require someone to interact with what is at hand, whether it is a painting or a play or a lyric poem. The participant therefore must engage with and insert themselves in the material as a way to understand communicated trauma.

Although traumatic language can be articulated through any artistic medium, lyric poetry is an ideal form of traumatic verse; as Charles Simic said, "Little said and much meant is what poetry is all about" (Simic 14). Lyric language is supposed to make things happen, as if through a spell, which urges us to ask: How? It is better to ask what a poem does rather than ask what the poem is about, as poems create an experience that is real and tangible to the reader.

Effectively communicating trauma requires the person listening, reading, or witnessing the shared trauma to immerse themselves in that experience. This can be thought of as communicating trauma through simulation; one does not tell exactly what happened because “...representations of a traumatic experience in art may resonate in response to that absence” (Laub & Podell 1992). This type of simulation does not tell absolute facts as to what occurred. Instead, the simulated experience creates an environment where one can feel and connect to emotions. Rather than simply being given an answer or hearing a story point-blank, the person must interact with a world that is created and placed before them.

These representations simulate an event that occurred, which allows one to engage in the event and have a chance to connect with the material on a deeper level, filling in the absence that trauma leaves. Precise articulation and factual details are no longer necessary because the simulated event allows one to experience what happened for themselves, invoking one’s own memory as a way to empathize. Although the person who engages in the simulation may not be able to articulate the trauma and absence, they are able to understand the experience in their own way.

The concept of a simulation can also be thought of as worlding. Throughout a poem, a poet is able to describe and create a world that feels real to the reader. This worlding is poetry and the poet making something from within and it manifesting. Worlding creates a tangible reality of something, and that reality is where and how the narrative takes place. This “something” does not come from nothing; the “something” is already based off of the poet’s experiences and knowledge of the world they live in, and their words and conviction in it being real make the the

something real to anyone who reads the poem. Anne Carson describes how this sort of manifestation and creation occurs in art:

Polygnotos and the generation of painters that followed him took as their starting point the two-dimensional picture plan of archaic style and developed a new technology for the representation of three-dimensional reality. With the invention of techniques like foreshortening, linear perspective, mixing and radiation of colors, superposition of paints and patching of surfaces, as well as various kinds of proportional adjustment for optical illusion, these painters transformed flat surface into an illusory world of objects moving in space. ... painters were no longer decorators of surfaces but magicians who conjured the real world upon the viewer's eye. (Carson 47)

Carson may be talking about visual art; however, she connects this concept of “magicians who conjured the real world” back to the Greek poet Simonides and how he learned from painters (Carson 47). Any form of art is about willing suspension of disbelief and the attempt to create a real world for people to immerse themselves in. Just like magicians, poets are able to create new things a reality through words alone. Imagination and thoughts manifest into reality to show different facets of the world.

Traumatic art's reliance on memory and emotion allows one to bear witness to the art while forming an organic connection to the story shared, fostering a participatory nature in the communication of trauma. The demand to participate in trauma encourages and allows the reader to engage in an active way so that they can find themselves in the event that's being recreated/simulated. Dissimilar to a documentary, communicating trauma must be participatory. Documentaries are formal and neutral, as they present people with concrete facts about precise instances of an event. People will listen to and understand the event, but that does not mean that they interact with it on a more personal level. One cannot disconnect oneself from the art;

response to trauma in literature cannot be disinterested because one cannot be an active participant by being disconnected.

The simulated experience breaks down the fourth wall between a reader and this other world. The reader then becomes a part of the simulated experience, and they bring their own knowledge with them. The simulation means that a reader does not need to know every last detail about what is being said. They are experiencing the event as it unfolds, therefore they can rely on their prior knowledge, experiences, and even their lack of knowledge. Both Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss touch upon this idea in their reader response theories. Although a reader can walk into the text and know every last factual detail about word choice, the historical period the text was written in, and biographical facts about the author, that knowledge does not mean that the reader connects to the text. While literary analysis is important, the deeper meaning to a text arises when the reader is able to bring the knowledge they do have and use it as a lens to understand the text.

Perhaps this seems counterintuitive when students are often told that they need to do research on a text in order to properly analyze it; however, that prior knowledge is crucial to the reader connecting to a text, which bridges the gap between traumatic language and the reader. If done correctly, the simulation will evoke the reader to have a response to the traumatic event that occurred. This creates a better and deeper understanding because it is more personal and connects the reader to a different time and place.

One of the most important things that a reader can admit is that they don't know (everything). It is impossible for a single reader to understand every last reference and facet of a text. These aspects can bring about another understanding of a text, but that knowledge can limit

the shared experience. Instead, the reader's own background allows them to experience a text in a way that is unique to them. Readers can then evolve at the same time as the text, creating a symbiotic relationship where the reader and text feed one another and foster growth and new knowledge and modes of thinking. Multiple perspectives and interpretations of a single text show that readers are connecting on a personal level and actually engaging in the narrative. Stories are not documentaries, so it is not a story's purpose to give straightforward facts. Stories are supposed to engage the reader and help the reader apply the morals and outcomes of the text to their own life.

The amount of worlding and manifestation that poetry involves reveals that poetry is a changing reality created through language. As the reader evolves, so does the manifestation of the poem, and vice versa. The manifestations of poetry are able to change and reveal fluidity, much like the real world. In spite of a world and narrative being built through language, the words are ultimately arbitrary. One can analyze each and every word in a poem, but understanding each word separately does not mean that one understands the poem.

Each word can be thought of as a puzzle piece, and the reader needs to find a way to put the pieces together to see the whole image. Poetry shocks the reader into recognizing its meaning and purpose, and that recognition is based off of experience and incongruity. The reader cannot be shocked into recognizing meaning and purpose when they get caught up in the tiny details. Focusing on small fragments can detract from the larger picture, especially when not every last word is known. This goes back to the idea Iser's and Jauss's beliefs that a reader does not need to have a full-bodied knowledge of a text in order to understand it.



Despite language being vital in our day-to-day life, words can fail us. This can manifest as either trauma negating language, incorrect word choice, or misinterpretations and misunderstandings. This is why it is more important to focus on how a reader reacts and responds to a poem. The reaction and response is a culmination of the full-bodied experience of participation and simulation, and it shows how the reader connects to, interprets, and understands what is at hand. It is proof that the reader has truly engaged in the text as a witness rather than sitting on the sidelines as a passive observer. The reader's connection to the failure of language is a point that Scarry touches upon:

[...] We come full circle back to Virginia Woolf's complaint about the absence (or what should more accurately be designated the "near-absence" of literary representations of pain. Alarmed and dismayed by his or her own failure of language, the person in pain might find it reassuring to learn that even the artist—whose lifework and everyday habits are to refine and extend the reflexes of speech—ordinarily falls silent before pain. The isolated instances in which this is not so, however, provide a much more compelling (because usable) form of reassurance—fictional analogues, perhaps whole paragraphs of words, that can be borrowed when the real-life crisis of silence comes. (Scarry 10)

It becomes clear that the failure of language is a near daily occurrence, especially in regards to traumatic language. What's interesting to note is that Scarry does not mention singular words from texts that can be used to encapsulate a traumatic event. Instead, she mentions "whole paragraphs of words that can be borrowed" (Scarry 10), implying that words on their own have no greater meaning. Words together, however, have power because that togetherness forms a full picture even if certain pieces are missing.

Focusing solely on words and meaning does not help us arrive at a better understanding of pain and trauma; finding a way to connect and relate to experiences that are shared, regardless as

to how fragmentary they may be, demands that we pay attention to the experience. This activity and engagement in lyric poetry circumvents the failures of articulating pain and trauma because at the crux of it, the poet is not articulating the facts. The poet instead communicates the experience and reason for the pain and trauma. Deemphasizing words and emphasizing the worlding that the words create both acknowledges absence (of language). Stagnation is thus avoided, and the reader and poem evolve alongside one another.

### **Commodification of Tragedy**

The concept of traumatic verse stems from a long history of tragic verse, its roots tracing back to Ancient Greece and Rome. However, often tragedy is misconstrued for trauma and vice versa. While these two terms are connected, and trauma is a subset of tragedy, they are not the same. Tragedy can be thought of as a purely simulated experience: you watch events unfold and have a sense of admiration for the person who undergoes the ordeal. Yes, you understand the event was sad and that there is a sense of loss, but you merely sympathize. You agree there is loss, and you agree that the tragedy was something that had to happen for the story to progress and ultimately come to an end.

Tragedy became a way for people to relay cultural morals, historical events, and share the realities of the real world through the guise of mythology and history. Pride and a more nationalistic sense of identity developed from this tragedy: undoubtedly these are not cheery tales, but they provide us heroes to look up to and inspire us to do great deeds for the betterment of humankind. Look at classic figures such as Aeneas or Odysseus. These heroes have bleak

tales, and people recognize the tragedy that they underwent. However, people revel in these tales because each reader is a passive observer watching these epics unfold.

This tradition was passed down throughout the centuries throughout the globe not only as a means to uphold societal norms and cultural memory, but as a form poetic tradition. A factor as to why tragedy has such a long history is because of its commodity to people. Anne Carson dates this back to the Greek poet Simonides, who started this practice of creating music or poetry to make money (Carson 15). By opening up commissions, Simonides essentially began his process of commodifying the arts, thus changing the meaning of the piece created.

Commodification marks a radical moment in the history of human culture. People who use money seem to form different relationships with one another and with objects than people who do not. Marx gave the name “alienation” to this different. Marx believed that money makes the objects we use into alien things and makes the people with whom we exchange them into alien people (Carson 17).

The people who receive or interact with art that is commodified tend to interpret it differently because the rationale for making the art is for money rather than a pure need to express. This also means that since this commodification process began so long ago, it’s been passed down alongside of poetic tradition. Along with Neoclassical ideals of laurel leaves, the Mediterranean breeze, and columns, there was a need for poetry to be a commodity. Poets not only thought about what inspired them but what type of stories people wanted to hear.

This is partially why tragedy has persevered in society. There is no true risk when interacting with tragedy because the reader is far enough removed from the simulation, and they know that they cannot get hurt. Tragedy is predictable and formulaic, so it becomes a sense of

cathartic safety to the reader. They are able to feel the tragedy and process the sadness that goes along with it, but it is not anything they have to confront in their personal lives.

Trauma, on the other hand, demands confrontation and is not easily commodified. Trauma as a concept itself was not even fully recognized until the 1980s, forty years after it was referred to as “war fatigue” during World War II and “shell shock” in World War I (Kliem 2018). It’s hard to commodify something that has only become defined within the last forty years, and moreover it’s hard to make profit off of such significant events. The question, however, is not why we have not or cannot commodify trauma but why does trauma supersede commodification. The simple answer is that trauma requires readers to engage in and participate with the text seriously.

Rather than being able to understand what the person is going through, the reader understands the person undergoing the experience. We cannot understand great Classical heroes like Odysseus and Aeneas because they are above us; however, trauma and traumatic verse focuses on the “everyman” type of person. There is no hero or some greatness behind the focal point of trauma; the person is simply a person, existing in this time. For much of history, no one wanted to read tales about the “everyman” because they were the everyman. They wanted to lose themselves in these stories of greatness without the risk of needing to confront their own traumas. In short, the difference between tragic and traumatic can be summarized as thus: tragic is symbolic identification whereas traumatic is biographical/real identification.

Thus the form of Classical poetry became commodified and therefore seen as the idealized poetic form. Poets from numerous countries wanted to emulate this style and capture its essence because that is how a poet gained notoriety and money. Russia, of course, also followed suit in

this tradition. Even iconic early Russian poets such as Alexandr Pushkin partook in the Neoclassical tradition, telling these stories of great, tragic heroes and their losses. However, the mid-twentieth century brought forth a change in the sphere of Russian poetry: tragedy turned to trauma and became a key stylistic feature of Russian poetry.

### **Tragic and Traumatic Verse in Soviet Poetry**

As Zbigniew Herbert wrote, “The usual intensity of political life (in Poland) during the last eight or ten years had an impact on literature and created a new sense of social obligation among writers and intellectuals [...] The sense of social obligation was shown in direct political activity [...] It also resulted [...] in the awareness that literature has to and should perform a new role [...]” (Herbert 5). Herbert is specifically referencing the period of Martial Law in Poland. This is important because this was a time when ordinary law was suspended and direct military control took over. This particular Martial Law was enacted as a way to stop the democratization of Communist Poland, so it became a form of political suppression. Political suppression immediately connotes misinformation, nationalistic propaganda, and a state-mandated/imposed history and status.

Herbert may focus on Communist Poland in the 1980s, but his statement carries over to Soviet Russia. Soviet Russia, especially during the 1930s, was known as a place of intense censorship and government control over its citizens. People were (politically) oppressed, and often the everyman lacked the ability to share their most private thoughts without fear of severe repercussions.

When the state controls the narrative, there is little wiggle room, and often people are afraid to speak out in fear of the repercussions they may face. However, truth needs to find a way to reach the people. If the state cannot do its job by properly informing its citizens, writers and intellectuals will take the state's place and do their best to spread awareness in literature. This literature is meant to inform and preserve a sense of cultural and historical memory about what is occurring. It is an attempt to negate the state's propaganda and attempt to communicate the real, gritty truth of the everyman.

As Herbert writes:

The act of writing came to be conceived as an act of recording or registering facts. This awareness has become particularly intense since the declaration of the state war or "martial law." In a country where official communications are permeated with propaganda and lies, literature has a new function to fulfill, a function that is normally reserved for history and the media—to provide information, and to give an undistorted account of a situation or of events. (Herbert 5)

Literature is therefore almost a sort of fail-safe. Words can be false and fail us, but words can also help teach us and provide us with truth. It all depends on how the words are used and who is using the words. The poet takes an active role in the political environment and engages with the more difficult parts of reality, bears witness to these events, and do their best to relay that information as accurately as possible.

Although Herbert specifically focuses on Poland, the same concept can be applied to Russia. Starting in the early twentieth-century, Russia became a hotspot for intense political activity. Of course this is not to say that Russia prior to the twentieth-century never dealt with

(intense) political activity, but the twentieth-century brought about changes that were unforeseen by many.

The 1917 Revolution became the catalyst for the movement of trauma over tragedy, as it brought forth cultural/social, governmental, and ideological changes that drastically affected all aspects of life. Typically such intensive societal overhaul takes years; however, these changes were rapid, which did not allow the (common) people to have proper time to process these events. Moreover, these modifications were not wanted by all of Russian society. This sudden uprooting of life plunged Russia into a civil war months after the 1917 Revolution that lasted for six years and further lead to disarray in a country that had been greatly affected by World War I.

Though these are all contributing factors to Russia's weakened state and susceptibility to both cultural and generation trauma, Stalinism amplified all changed implemented within the new Soviet Union. An aspect of Stalinism that greatly lead to this move away from the use of tragic verse to traumatic verse is the role of Socialist Realism and censorship.

Socialist Realism promoted an idealized view of Soviet life, which erased any of the tragedy that countless people faced. Some folks were exiled because of their political beliefs, others had friends and family killed during the Russian Civil War and/or World War I, and countless others were still trying to an understand exactly what happened and how their way of life changed over night. Socialist Realism pushed forth this idea that the Soviet Union was a place where people were happy and nothing bad was happening. This idealization, however, did not reflect the realities of Soviet life, and it created a disconnect between Soviet citizens and the state narrative and agenda. This disconnect lead to resentment towards the Soviet government and its people.

Socialist Realism buried trauma from the public eye as well. People were prohibited from openly sharing their experiences and speaking out against the state, so the trauma people endured became taboo. There was no outlet for people to discuss the horrors of daily life, so people remained silent. People buried their trauma so that they would not be condemned. Moreover, there was a sense of shame that came with these feelings because it went against what the Soviet state said life was like. Any discussion of trauma was therefore not acceptable, so ignoring trauma became the social norm.

While Russia has always been a highly censored state, Stalinism brought forth a new level of censorship. During this time, departments were in place only to censor a wide array of material. Anything counter to the Soviet state's narrative was effectively censored, erasing it from the narrative. Citizens of the Soviet Union were banned from speaking out against Stalin or the Soviet Union in any way, shape, or form. Soviet citizens even went so far as to censor themselves in personal letters, diaries, and journals. There was an innate fear that personal belongings and sentiments could fall into the wrong hands, and then there would be consequences. It was a frequent occurrence for those who spoke against the State's written history or narrative to get reported by a neighbor or family member to the secret police, and suddenly that person would disappear in the middle of the night. Stalinism created a culture in which there was no trust between anyone.

By 1930 [...] it was becoming increasingly difficult for anyone to publish at all. Stalin was now firmly in power and his control of society extended to the arts. In August 1929 there was a concerted attack against the writers Boris Pilnyak and Yevgeny Zamyatin. The condemnation of their work marked a clear turning point in the relationship between the intelligentsia and the state. Henceforth the Stalinist line would become harder, and any trace of criticism of the state would be forbidden. (Reeder 114)



Stalin hired artists to be a part of his secret police, and these artists had the job to collect all photos of enemies of the state, even families' personal photographs, and draw over the face of the enemy of the state with a new one. People were quite literally erased from being, and no one knew if or when it would happen to them. This meant that the identity of Soviet citizens was both worthless and replaceable. The constant threat that anything you say or do could lead to complete and total erasure from history.<sup>1</sup>

During Stalinism, citizens were living in a constant state of fear and uncertainty brought on by their government. Additionally, they were being told that their lives should be happy, they should be happy, and the terrors that people knew were occurring were not actually happening. The Stalinist narrative attempted to replace this fear, dissatisfaction, and terror with the happy Soviet citizen. The state narrative attempted to erase the facts of daily life and rewrite history to show the Soviet people as content, safe, and thriving.

This was not only censorship, but historical revisionism. Stalin and the Soviet state actively thought to rewrite the narrative, gaslighting the collective Russian people. It was as if the message promoted was, "This did not happen, and it is wrong to consider any losses as anything other than for the 'Greater Good.'" Stalinism's historical revisionism and censorship was an attempt at an intensive political and aesthetic project (Dobrenko 2). By rewriting history, Stalinism attempted to rewrite the Soviet people and culture, which Evgenii Dobrenko describes:

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<sup>1</sup> More detail on the Stalinist regime, secret police, and societal oppression can be found in words such as: Froese, P. (2004), *Forced Secularization in Soviet Russia: Why an Atheistic Monopoly Failed*. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 43: 35-50. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2004.00216.x>  
Dobrenko, E A, and Jesse M. Savage. *Making of the State Reader: Social and Aesthetic Contexts of the Reception of Soviet Literature*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1997. Internet resource.  
Vatlin A. IU, et al. *Agents of Terror Ordinary Men and Extraordinary Violence in Stalin's Secret Police*. The University of Wisconsin Press, 2016.

The Soviet reader, spectator, or listener is not simply a recipient [...]: in accordance with the doctrine of “reshaping society” that lies at the heart of Socialist Realism, he is the *object* of reshaping, “molding.” He himself is the essential part of the project, and in the final analysis, the functions of Soviet literature [...] are focused on this “reforging of human material.” In the classical Stalinist definition of Soviet writers as “engineers of human souls,” it is precisely this *focusing* of aesthetic activity upon the reader that is emphasized. One could define Soviet culture as a political and aesthetic project *radically focused on the recipient*. (Dobrenko 2)

The level of censorship on both a governmental and personal level impedes the ability to have any meaningful way to process events that have occurred. Similar to how Scarry writes that part of the reason trauma in literature is so compelling is because it shows people that they are not alone and gives them the means to better verbalize their own trauma (Scarry, *The Body in Pain*). Censorship limited Soviet writers from communicating this psychological pain everyone faced in a direct manner. However, Soviet writers did find a loophole and mimicked the Soviet state’s actions: the writers, too, “radically focused on the recipient” (Dobrenko 2). This loophole was to focus on the everyman of the Soviet Union. The work did not have epic heroes who did great deeds. Instead, the focus was placed on how the average person lives and survives during this time, humanizing protagonists and removing this weight of greatness to them.

Although poets have always seen themselves as the way to relate truth to war, such as Homer and Ovid with their epics regaling acts of heroism, tragic death, and adventure, Neoclassicist ideals of poetry no longer served the same function in Soviet Russia. State-issued propaganda told lies and dictated what could be said, editing history to reflect the ideas of the state. These ideas of world culture and Classicism no longer reflected the world known to Soviet citizens, and writers had to find new modes to communicate the daily terrors and tragedies in a censored state. This became the origin of traumatic verse in the Russian tradition. Classic ideals

could not scratch the surface of information that writers were compelled to share, and the writers needed new ways to encapsulate the Soviet experience.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Introduction to Akhmatova

While there are countless Soviet poets who use traumatic verse, Anna Akhmatova is the most iconic study. Throughout the course of Akhmatova's poetic career, she communicated her pain and suffering, both her tragedies and traumas. It is no surprise that Akhmatova and her poetry became a Russian cultural icon, who still pervades Russian culture today, fifty-five years after her death.

Akhmatova's journey first began during the Silver Age of Russian poetry, most notably marked by its connection to the Classical tradition and antiquity (Forrester xxxix-xli). Publishing her first poetry collection in 1912, Anna Akhmatova became a household name; however, there is an element of falsehood to this. Like many other poets throughout the centuries, Akhmatova entered the sphere of poetry with a public persona. This is an important factor to note because a large part of Akhmatova's evolution from tragic verse to traumatic verse is dependent on how strong her public persona is in her work.

Though she is known throughout the world as Anna Akhmatova, she was born in 1889 as Anna Andreevna Gorenko to parents Andrei Antonovich Gorenko, a naval engineer, and Inna Erazmovna Stogova, an aristocrat (Forrester 5). Despite Akhmatova's dream of becoming a poet, her father did not approve of this choice and said she could not use her family name if she published her work. In response, she took the pseudonym Akhmatova, her Tartar great-grandmother's name, which was the creation point of her public persona. This alias may seem unassuming to non-Eastern European readers, but there is a dynamic, mysterious, and royal connotation to Eastern European readers and academics. It has been theorized that Akhmatova's

great-grandmother was actually a Tartar princess. The use of “Akhmatova” as a pen name mythologizes the poetess’s bloodline because it shows this ancient connection to Russia and her nativity and belonging to the country. Additionally, not everyone is descended from royalty, which gave Akhmatova a unique standing within the sphere of Russian poetry. This connection to an ancient bloodline and royalty raised Akhmatova’s importance and social standing in (Russian) society.

### **Akhmatova’s Performative Tragedy**

Akhmatova took over the scene of Russian poetry the way people go viral on social media today. Her marriage to Nikolai Gumilyov, a cofounder of the Acmeist movement, her public persona and aesthetic, and the publication of her first poetry collection propelled Akhmatova into notoriety. By the time Akhmatova published her second collection of poetry, *Rosary*, in 1914, people were buying her photographs in bookstores, much like how we now buy posters of celebrities and stars we admire.

Akhmatova became a name known throughout Russia by 1917, and she was lauded for the themes she tackled in her poetry. These themes focused on issues women faced in Russian society such as: infidelity, unrequited love, and sex (Forrester 6). Other scholars have even called her a “Poetess of Tragic Love” because of her ability to write about the full-bodied experience of love, which includes joy, the “honeymoon period,” love lost, betrayal, and feelings of grief, loneliness, and despair (Strakhovsky 2).

Such topics could, in theory, be considered traumatic; however, within Akhmatova’s early work, these themes are tragic. Akhmatova’s early work heavily adheres to the Neoclassical



The scene Akhmatova creates reveals much to the reader. This poem takes place in mid to late summer, which is not only typically the season associated with the most intense love but also joy and freedom. However, this typically cheery connotation is juxtaposed by the mournful singing of orioles and the violence of the sickle cutting ears of corn. This melancholy and harshness create a tone that is nostalgic. This nostalgia enhances when Akhmatova writes, "Now the joyful bells would ring,/And a long look through dusty eyelashes" (l. 7-8). Once again there's juxtaposition between the joyful bells and the dusty eyelashes, creating that sense of looking back at a particular moment.

It isn't until the final stanza that the readers realize there is no hope for this love. "I am not waiting for love's tender flatter/In anticipation of the inevitable darkness" (l. 9-10) tells the reader that the speaker has been heartbroken before and knows what's to come. The speaker has given up on this grand love, and the reader is able to understand that heartbreak. The sentiment of a broken heart is familiar, and though it is sad, it feels safe to the reader. This safety and understanding of the event are markers for tragic verse.

Until the final two stanzas, Akhmatova used the present tense to describe these events. In the final two lines, she suddenly switches to the past tense. This immediately lets the reader know that the speaker is looking back on this relationship. Clearly at one point it had been happy and innocent, but something changed, ending the relationship. The reader sympathizes with the speaker, and there is sorrow felt. However, there is no empathetic bridge or connection. The speaker is too vague and could be anyone, as is the event. The event is undoubtedly tragic, as all heartbreaks are innately tragic; however, it lacks that real connection and biographical symbolic connection that traumatic verse requires.

Moreover, the reader does not participate in this poem. Much like the speaker, the reader sits on the sidelines and watches the speaker reminisce about this event. It is as if we get caught up in a memory only for a second and then are back in reality. There is no delay in this transition, and we adapt back to what we need to do in reality and acknowledge that what happened was only a fleeting memory. There are no consequences or confrontations in this poem, merely rose-tinted glasses on a lost love.

A similar pattern is also seen in “Like a white stone at the bottom of a well.” This poem was written a year before “I hear the orioles’ perpetually mournful voice,” so there are clear similarities between the two poems in both structure and thematic nature. The themes and structure of Akhmatova’s early work can be seen as her signature, and the more formulaic nature of this early work implies that this poetry could be easily commodified and enjoyed by mass audiences.

Как белый камень в глубине колодца,  
Лежит во мне одно воспоминанье.  
Я не могу и не хочу бороться:  
Оно — веселье и оно — страданье.

Like a white stone in the depths of a well,  
One memory lies within me.  
I cannot and do not want to fight.  
It is joy, and it is suffering.

Мне кажется, что тот, кто близко взглянет  
В мои глаза, его увидит сразу.  
Печальней и задумчивее станет  
Внимающего скорбному рассказу.

It seems to me that the one who looks closely  
Into my eyes will see him immediately.  
He becomes sad and more thoughtful  
Than listening to a sorrowful tale.

Я ведаю, что боги превращали  
Людей в предметы, не убив сознанья,  
Чтоб вечно жили дивные печали.  
Ты превращен в мое воспоминанье

I know that the gods turned people into  
objects,  
Without killing consciousness,  
So that wondrous sorrows live forever.  
You are turned into my memory.

Just like “I hear the orioles’ perpetually mournful voice,” this poem is also written in the alternate rhyme scheme, creating a sense of familiarity, comfort, and expectation as to what is to



come.

The final stanza of this poem is also important because Akhmatova invokes classical imagery. “I know that the gods turned people into objects,/without killing consciousness” (l. 9-10) is a clear reference Classic myths. A trope often seen in these myths is the gods either being angered by mortals or taking pity on them for their plights and turning them into another object such as: the myth of Arachne, who was turned into a spider for her hubris, or Narcissus and Echo turning into the narcissus flower and an echo respectively. Akhmatova’s allusion to this trope plays heavily into the Classic aesthetic. Moreover, Akhmatova’s mention of gods hints at the polytheistic religions of Ancient Greece and Rome, further separating the reader from the current time and place. She mythologizes and Romanticizes the ancient world, which creates a sense of longing for the old.

The final two lines give a sense of purpose to the speaker’s pain. Yet again the juxtaposition of “wondrous sorrows” (l. 11) shows that there is a love-hate relationship with this memory. This everlasting memory is not terrifying to recall, though it is sad. The speaker seems to revel in her melancholy, which makes readers admire her. Despite her heartbreak and constant memories, she still lives on. Once more this is a feeling that many people relate to and can sympathize with; however, Akhmatova the poet keeps the reader and speaker at arm’s length. There is no deeper connection between the two than a basic understanding as to how heartbreak affects people and memory being eternal, even if the memory is twinged with sorrow.

While such themes such as this heartbreak Akhmatova describes do not preclude the possibility for traumatic verse, the way in which Akhmatova uses her language creates an overarching tone of both melancholy and triumph. There is no absence, and the speaker is able

to articulate the pain she feels. The speaker is not immobilized by the overwhelming amount of grief she feels because she is able to say what happened. Moreover, this repeated mood of nostalgia creates a sense of fondness, which is something that does not appear in traumatic verse.

Traumatic verse is more chaotic than tragic verse. Yes, there can be a melancholic and nostalgic tone, much like tragic verse; however, it is difficult to pinpoint a single tone in traumatic verse. There is anger, confusion, grief, sorrow, hope, and disbelief in conversation with each other at once. This dialogue between a wide array of emotions is not found in Akhmatova's early poems, especially the feelings of confusion and disbelief. Akhmatova's early work shows that these tragic events have been processed, and while the speaker may not be happy with the outcome, the speaker understands what has occurred and is therefore able to move forward.

It's clear that Akhmatova's early works were centered around an ideal as to what poetry could and should be, and hence her poetry had a more limited scope of themes, tones, and language. After all, Akhmatova was a part of the Acmeist movement<sup>2</sup>, and the poets she studied under strongly relied on the tradition of the Classical world. The Neo-classic ideals perpetuated by Acmeism were focused on this sense of longing for world culture, as Osip Mandelstam noted, so it is understandable that Acmeist poetry would focus on melancholy and nostalgia.

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<sup>2</sup> Acmeism began in the early twentieth-century and was a form of Neo-classic poetry. This Acmeist school includes Russian poets such as Osip Mandelstam, Alexandr Blok, Nikolai Gumilyov, and Mikhail Kuzmin. The most common summary of Acmeism comes from Osip Mandelstam, who said the movement was "a yearning for world culture." However, Acmeism itself is a bit hard to define, as each poet saw the movement in their own light. Nevertheless, it relied heavily on the aesthetics of the Classic world and a nostalgia for it. More information can be found:

Driver, Sam. "Acmeism." *The Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1968, pp. 141-156. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/304255](http://www.jstor.org/stable/304255). Accessed 29 Mar. 2021.

Nevertheless, just because something is melancholic or nostalgic does not mean that it is traumatic; melancholy and nostalgia are painful and can limit language, but they are feelings that do not inherently impede and destroy language. The pain behind these feelings is still communicable.

To an extent, this pain that Akhmatova conveys in her early work is not personal. Of course Akhmatova does draw upon personal experience, but she is ultimately writing for her audience and writing what was easily commodified. Akhmatova's career rose to the heights it did because she was a female poet writing during a time that was dominated by men. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Akhmatova wrote on the experience of women, which set her apart from her peers. To keep the audience she had and further solidify her public persona, Akhmatova continued to write on themes that brought her notoriety.

While there is nothing inherently wrong writing for your audience, a more personal and real or biographical element is lost. The work may still affect the readers, but the pain felt when reading is fleeting, and the worlding of the poem is not as strong. The worlding of the poems are painted through nostalgia, and often that nostalgia is too overpowering to truly manifest a real world from the poem. Reading Akhmatova's early work feels like looking at an old photograph album and reminiscing for only a moment before the album is closed, and the memories fade as fast as they were awoken.

This creates a sense of performance. The pain communicated is not necessarily false, but it almost feels theatrical. Being a voice for women, especially scorned women, creates a one-sided view of Akhmatova, yet readers are drawn to this performance because it allows them a form of escapism from their lives and allows them to experience the world through the eyes of another.

Akhmatova's famous poem "Lot's Wife" is a brilliant example how she builds a world within her poem that allows the readers to escape into a fantasy world for the duration of the poem and then return to reality without any repercussion.

*Жена же Лотова оглянулась позади его и  
стала соляным столпом. -Книга Бытия*

И праведник шел за посланником Бога,  
Огромный и светлый, по черной горе.  
Но громко жене говорила тревога:  
Не поздно, ты можешь еще посмотреть  
На красные башни родного Содома,  
На площадь, где пела, на двор, где пряла,  
На окна пустые высокого дома,  
Где милому мужу детей родила.  
Взглянула — и, скованы смертною болью,  
Глаза ее больше смотреть не могли;  
И сделалось тело прозрачною солью,  
И быстрые ноги к земле приросли.  
Кто женщину эту оплакивать будет?  
Не меньшей ли мнится она из утраг?  
Лишь сердце мое никогда не забудет  
Отдавшую жизнь за единственный взгляд.

1924 г.

*Lot's wife looked behind him, and she became  
a pillar of salt. -Book of Genesis*

And the righteous man followed the  
messenger of God,  
Huge and bright, along the black mountain.  
But the alarm spoke loudly to his wife:  
It's not too late, you can still look back  
At the red towers of native Sodom,  
At the square where you sang,  
At the empty windows of the high house,  
Where your dear husband and children were  
born.  
She looked — and, shackled by mortal pain,  
Her eyes could no longer look;  
And her body became translucent salt,  
And her quick feet rooted to the ground.  
Who will mourn this woman?  
Is she not the least of her losses?  
Only my heart will never forget  
The one who gave her life for a single glance.

1924

By relying on a well-known allegory, the reader is transported to this specific story within the Book of Genesis. Akhmatova puts her own spin on this tale. Dissimilar to the original biblical story, Akhmatova makes Lot's wife the focal point of the piece. The emphasis placed on a character who had previously had passing mention changes the narrative of the tale and also provides the Akhmatova trademark of emphasizing the woman's experience. The title as well

immediately signifies to the reader who this tale is about and that we will sympathize with Lot's wife.

The quote from the Book of Genesis that Akhmatova has at the beginning of the poem almost has the same effect as, "Once upon a time in a land far, far away..." It sets the stage for the tale and creates a definitive time and place in which the reader immerses themselves. The reader is no longer the reader, but an observe to this story; however, the story is not necessarily "real" to the reader. It is real in the sense that it is a known story, but it is not real because no one has ever actually seen another person turn into a pillar of salt. The tragedy of this even is not real, but it evokes an emotional reaction, thus making the tragedy performative.

Akhmatova builds this performative trauma in each stanza. The first stanza introduces Lot's wife and the plight she is facing. Many people can empathize with needing to move, but few can truly empathize with needing to flee your homeland. Therefore, the reader's identification is symbolic, which denotes a tragic tale. This stanza also creates a foil to Lot's wife: the angel who warns her to flee. Foiling Lot's wife with the angel immediately makes her more sympathetic to the reader, and she becomes a hero the reader can easily admire.

The second stanza then creates a sense loss and dismay by describing Sodom and Lot's wife's connection to it. The reader's sympathy towards Lot's wife is deepened, which further solidifies her as the tragic hero of this piece. This is amplified when Lot's wife "shackled by mortal pain,/...could no longer look" (l. 9-10). Suddenly the reader bears witness to Lot's wife's transformation, and the reader cannot help but feel sadness for her.

The final stanza then poses a question to the reader. Who will mourn Lot's wife? The original story in Genesis may not have Lot's wife as a main character or present her as

sympathetic, but saying that she “...gave her life for a single glance” (l. 16) implies that Lot’s wife was not foolish, and she instead made a choice to look back. She knew the risks, and she took it so she could look one final time at her home. This is an act that is heroic and borders martyrdom; she willingly gives up her life for this glance, and the reader cannot help but feel a sense of pride that Lot’s wife would take that risk.

“Lot’s Wife” is not merely tragic because of the story told, but how the story is told. Even though Lot’s wife is the hero, she does not speak. This prevents the reader from forming a more personal connection with her, limiting the empathetic bridge and real identification between the reader and Lot’s wife. Instead, this tale is told by a third, unnamed person. The speaker retells this story to the reader, as if the speaker were telling their child, the reader, a bedtime story. Because the reader is immediately placed into a spectator role, the reader cannot participate in the story. The experience is simulated for the reader, and that prevents the reader from thinking, “Oh yes, this thing you’re talking about is mine, too.” “Lot’s Wife” is brilliantly tragic, and it does show a step in evolution from Akhmatova’s earliest work, but it is still not traumatic.

This poem is an example of Akhmatova savoring and romanticizing the role of the martyr. Although Akhmatova flips the script on the classic Biblical story by making Lot’s wife the sympathetic main character, the poem focuses on this idea that it is noble Lot’s wife gave up her life to look back upon Sodom and Gomorra. To claim someone gave their life in order to fulfill a final wish cannot be traumatic because it gives meaning to a horrid event while clearly communicating what occurred. This sort of poetic technique can be compared to the tragic hero archetype: the hero is sympathetic to the readers, but the hero’s flaws are the cause of their downfall.

Traumatic verse, on the other hand, does not have room for a tragic hero. The reason and cause for the trauma is not a hero who is ultimately their own demise; instead, the trauma stems from a series of and/or a singular event that is out of the control of the person/people who are traumatized. There is an innate sense of absence for the purpose of the trauma, which creates a helpless and mournful tone.

As time progresses, Stalinism rises, and (collective) trauma becomes a more prominent feature in Soviet society, Akhmatova's poetry evolves to reflect the new reality of her life and the lives of others. This evolution is most felt in regards to a movement away from more performative pain and tragedy to personal pain and trauma, which becomes the articulation of collective pain. Akhmatova evolves from performative tragedy to personal tragedy after the execution of her husband Gumilyov is executed and her son is sentenced to prison. Suddenly Akhmatova can no longer the world around her, and she must confront what she fears the most. This is what any mother, wife, or daughter would fear, and it needs to be shared.

## CHAPTER THREE

### A Reading of “Requiem”

“Requiem” is the pinnacle of Akhmatova’s evolution as a poet of traumatic verse. Akhmatova’s early work has a consistent tone of performance to it because the work is impersonal and revels in themes of martyrdom and heroism. However, “Requiem” lacks that level of performance. Part of this absence of performance can be attributed to the fact that there are no martyrs or heroes in “Requiem” as it deals with the everyman rather than a figure of greatness. Additionally, Akhmatova’s work was not a commodity during Stalin’s reign. She was banned from publishing during a large portion of the time she wrote “Requiem” (Forrester 6), so logically there was no point in creating a tragic tale that was easily commodified.

A large aspect as to why Akhmatova’s “Requiem” contains minimal aspects of performative trauma is because she herself became an everyman during Stalin’s Great Terror. Akhmatova no longer had the platform to speak out in a way she had grown accustomed to, which effectively erased her public persona. She became a part of the collective, and in order to try and process her own feelings and experiences, she wrote. The time of the Great Terror is seldom written about, as this was the peak of Stalin’s historical revisionism, but “Requiem” survives as an in-depth experience of the types of trauma people faced in their everyday lives.

Similar to her early work, the reader is able to see the figures in the poem as themselves or anyone they know; however, “Requiem” demands the reader to participate in the text. The reader does not have the pleasure or safety of sitting on the sidelines and observing from a distance; the reader becomes a part of the text and must confront the same horrors that



Akhmatova and Soviet women faced. The opening of “Requiem,” “Instead of a Forward” sets the tone that this poem has deep, personal meaning:

В страшные годы ежовщины я провела семнадцать месяцев в тюремных очередях в Ленинграде. Как-то раз кто-то «опознал» меня. Тогда стоящая за мной женщина с голубыми губами, которая, конечно, никогда в жизни не слыхала моего имени, очнулась от свойственного нам всем оцепенения и спросила меня на ухо (там все говорили шепотом):

– А это вы можете описать?

И я сказала:

– Могу.

Тогда что-то вроде улыбки скользнуло по тому, что некогда было ее лицом.

1 апреля 1957 г., Ленинград

In the horrific years of Yezhov, I spent seventeen months in the prison lines in Leningrad. One day someone recognized me. Then a woman with blue lips standing behind me, who, of course, never in her life had heard my name, woke up from the inherent numbness of us all and asked me in my ear (there everyone spoke in a whisper):

-Can you describe this?

And I said:

-I can.

Then something like a smile slipped over what had previously been just her face.

1st April 1957, Leningrad

First, it's important to note that this opening is called “Instead of a Forward.” Often a forward is used for the writer to explain how the text or concept for the piece came into existence, and often it includes acknowledgements to those who played a role in the creation. Akhmatova, however, does not emphasize her process or her inspiration for “Requiem”; she alludes to the idea that if this unnamed woman had not approached her, Akhmatova would have not written “Requiem”. This anonymity is important to note because Stalinism erased anyone and everyone's identity. When everyone is no one, anyone can be someone.

“Instead of a Forward” is also the starting point for Akhmatova to introduce the reader to traumatic verse. Akhmatova writes, “Then a woman with blue lips standing behind me [...] woke up from the inherent numbness of us all and asked me [...]” This is a form of pain so severe that

there is no language to describe it. Instead, people become numb and shut down as a means to cope. Sharon Bailey writes:

Analogous to the isolation imposed on the prisoners, the wives and mothers are shown to be essentially deprived of speech [...] On the one hand, this speechlessness is a consequence of the physical suffering. Even to produce her whispered question, one of only two examples of spoken communication in the cycle, the woman [...] had to rouse herself from a stupor into which everyone had fallen. (Bailey 329)

Language is no longer a possibility here, which is dissimilar to how Akhmatova articulates pain in her early poems. She is no longer telling a tale of Classic heroism and death; Akhmatova is describing the experiences of the everyman. It's important to note the use of "describing" as well. Akhmatova could have written that the woman asked her, "Can you explain this?" Or "Can you write this?" Yet Akhmatova specifically writes, "Can you describe this?" Describing something is not necessarily precise, as it is dependent on being there and present as an event happens.

This woman does not ask Akhmatova to write down exact facts in this experience; this woman simply asks Akhmatova to describe them. The process of describing these events is personal, and it is the foundation to Akhmatova building an empathic bridge where the reader connects to the shared experience. Moreover, the act of describing places the reader in a participatory role within the poem. The reader cannot disconnect themselves from the description or say that this is simply a story; the description manifests the time and place this event occurred, and the reader is forced to confront the horrors.

Additionally, this request to describe "this" goes beyond simulating the experience. It asks Akhmatova, who was also reduced to simply another woman, an incredibly human request to do

something for a collective group of people. This is a moment of pure human connection and empathy that goes beyond simply witnessing. These are people who are desperate to share their story in hopes that somehow it will be remembered and help them.

Akhmatova also does not rely on a third person narrator who retells a tale or a speaker who is reminiscing on a past event. She relies on herself to share what she and other women experienced during this time, and that “realness” and biographical aspect signifies real identification between the reader and Akhmatova. Much like the woman’s request to Akhmatova, Akhmatova requests the reader to enter into this time with her and participate in it.

Moving away from the concept of the martyr also shows a clear marker of Akhmatova’s evolution from tragic verse to traumatic verse. To be a martyr means that the pain and suffering one endured in life has meaning and purpose, that was for the greater good. Yes, there is suffering, but it is for a purpose, and there is ultimately a somber yet happy tone after the martyr’s sacrifice; there is remembrance and honor. This is tragic in every sense of the word. It is not traumatic, however, because this pain and sacrifice does not supersede the use of language. Akhmatova’s use of both Biblical and mythological allegories as a means to communicate the tragic stories of martyrdom ties back to the Neo-Classical ideals of poetry. Without martyrdom and sacrifice, what is left? A person who has been affected so profoundly by the traumas around them that they do not know what to do or how to act. There is no sad yet happy ending, and there’s an absence that stems from not known why they had to endure this ordeal. Both the reader and speaker have more questions than answers at the end of traumatic verse.

## The Worlding and Historicity of "Requiem"

Another difference between Akhmatova's early work and her later work is the setting for "Requiem." Her early poems either have no defined location or a generalized location based off of the Mediterranean and places of the Classical Age. "Requiem" is uniquely Russian in its setting.

По столице одичалой шли,  
Там встречались, мертвых бездыханней,  
Солнце ниже, и Нева туманней,  
А надежда все поет вдали.

We walked mindlessly through the capitol,  
Where we met, more breathless than dead,  
The sun low, and the Neva foggy,  
And hope still sings in the distance

This excerpt mentions the Neva River, which runs through Saint Petersburg, then known as Leningrad. Mentioning a geographical feature such as the Neva creates a precise setting for the story and the reader, which makes a better simulated experience for the reader. Akhmatova's mention of the Neva is not the only time Akhmatova mentioned uniquely Russian geography. Shortly after the previous excerpt, Akhmatova mentions, "...a Siberian blizzard" ("Dedication" l. 21), and she mentions Leningrad and the Don River in "Preamble." Concretely placing these events in Russia makes the world-building of the poem stronger, manifesting this world into being. This is no longer a simulation because this world becomes a reality to the reader, and the reader is forced to interact with this world's surroundings.

These brief mentions of Russian geographical features neither mythologize nor romanticize the location; it is a place used to recreate history and (collective) memory. This is a stark contrast to Akhmatova's earlier work where there was almost a reverence and longing to the Classic world and locations. The Classic settings of Akhmatova's early work romanticize and laud Classic ideals, which merely simulates those worlds. By refusing to mythologize or

romanticize Soviet Russia, Akhmatova develops the reality of the place, which also forces importance on herself and the people she describes rather than the world.

Akhmatova does more to simulate this experience than just mention particular Russian features. Throughout the course of “Requiem,” Akhmatova makes quite a few historical references that span Russia’s history. One of the first historical references Akhmatova makes is when she refers to the prisoners in the camps as “Русь”/Rus’. This particular term harkens back to Russia’s ancient history of Kievan Rus’. Similar to how Akhmatova creates a sense of an ancient bloodline through her pseudonym, referring to the prisoners as being of Kievan Rus’ creates a sense of grand importance. It implies that these ancient people and the prisoners are one in the same. There is a sense that this sort of repression and persecution is a long-withstanding issue in Russian history.

Additionally, this comparison goes against Stalin’s historical revisionism. This deepens the ties to the problematic and oppressive Russian history that is often glazed over and “forgotten” because of historical rewrites. This both historicizes the terrors of Stalinism and modernizes the long history of terrors and trauma throughout Russian history.

Akhmatova does not dwell on this comparison, so there is no sense of reveling in martyrdom. This is once more a notable difference from Akhmatova’s early work. These people, the Rus’ are not admirable or people who inspire greatness; they are merely people who are existing within this world and doing the best they can to survive. This creates a weight to the line that invokes a more somber feeling than a sense of nationalistic pride. No one is proud that their people have suffered from oppression throughout the centuries; they are tired and weary, and they are not great heroes. They are just people.

The fact that the focal point of “Requiem” is the every(wo)man and the experience of the every(wo)man facilitates a deeper connection between the reader and the text. There is not the same grandeur that separates the godly from the human, and the reader is able to read the text and understand that while they may not have the exact same experience, they understand and connect to the people within the text. Akhmatova’s humanization of herself and others in “Requiem” says to the readers, “This event I’m talking about is yours, too.” The reader identifies themselves with Akhmatova and the women.

Akhmatova once more involves a connection to the past when she writes, “I will, like the archer wives,/ Howl underneath the Kremlin cupolas.” (l. 7-8) The aforementioned ‘archer wives’ refer to a specific historical occurrence. In the seventeenth-century, numerous men who had been a part of the Russian army were executed on the orders of Peter the Great for attempted mutiny. Responding to the execution of their brothers, husbands, and sons, women stormed Peter the Great’s palace, screaming over the injustice of the executions.

It is also important to note that Akhmatova is speaking about her experience in the prison lines, which was often filled with mothers and wives whose sons and husbands had been arrested and sent to labor camps. Additionally, this references the fact that those in charge of a country can commit atrocities against its citizens. This also ties into how Akhmatova creates a sense of deep tragedy and repeated trauma throughout Russian history without twisting it into martyrdom and a source of nationalistic pride.

Akhmatova once more touches upon the inarticulate nature of trauma. The women who gather underneath the Kremlin are in severe emotional pain, perhaps even physical pain as well.

These women do not speak or argue; they howl. Howling is not precise, nor does it clearly articulate the pain they are in; however, it encapsulates the pain they all feel.

Denied articulate, human speech, the women wail like the wives of the Streltsy (I), cry like the mother pleading for her son or Mary Magdalene (V and “Crucifixion”), howl like the woman against whom the door is slammed (“Epilogue II”), or fall silent like John and the Mother (“Crucifixion”). (Bailey 329)

Just as Bailey writes, Akhmatova repeatedly writes about moments during which pain superseded language. This frequent absence of language denotes how severe and horrific these events were for Akhmatova as well as every other woman who stood in the prison lines. Absence of concrete language to describe trauma shows the importance of Akhmatova describing these events rather than telling them. Describing the events allows Akhmatova to be imprecise and as poetic as she likes as means to capture this moment in time.

In addition to the absence of language, there is also uncommon language used in “Requiem.” For example, Akhmatova also uses the word, “горнице/gornitse” (1) which can be translated as “chamber” but instead has a more ancient and rural connotation. Akhmatova also uses the word “месяц/mesiats” (2) which in modern Russian means “month,” but in antiquated Russian means “moon.” Akhmatova purposely chooses these antiquated terms to deepen this connection of people throughout the centuries, which also includes people reading “Requiem” in the future.

This in compilation with the archer wives and Kievan-Rus’ imply that this is not the Soviet world. It’s a deep sense of personal connection to history and losses endured throughout the centuries, and it’s also a way that Akhmatova disconnects herself from the trauma. There’s a

looming sense of disassociation because the emotions are so overwhelming that the situation does not feel real (to Akhmatova). In order to protect herself, Akhmatova tries to distance herself from the event.

References such as these connect the events of “Requiem” to a broader sense of repeated, collective trauma. She uses this as a tool to explain how people can turn to the past to show that we can empathize with and learn from the past, which can help us process our own trauma and find solace that we are not alone. This is in contrast to Akhmatova’s earlier work where Akhmatova’s third person narrator is a martyr, and it feels as though Akhmatova revels and cherishes this sacrificial role.

Looking back at Akhmatova’s portrayal of Lot’s wife as the sympathetic, tragic hero, Akhmatova’s description of the archer wives is a stark contrast. Lot’s wife died for a reason, and she made a her choice; there is a senselessness to the pain the archer wives feel, and while they do what they can to have their voices heard, it is futile. Peter the Great won’t listen to them, for they are merely women, plain Russian citizens. There is nothing great or heroic about them. This creates a feeling of stagnation, which plays a role in traumatic language. Because one cannot simply articulate trauma, there are moments of pause and silence which perhaps communicate more about a traumatic event than words.

By setting a historical precedent in “Requiem,” Akhmatova begins the process of collectivizing the trauma she endured, thereby allowing both Akhmatova and the readers to bear witness to the horrors she and others endured. This is made clear in the opening “Instead of a Forward,” which is not written in verse. In a way “Instead of a Forward” almost feels like the prologue of a Shakespearean play. Often someone, or in other cases a chorus, recites a sonnet



that not only explains the scene of the tale that will be told but gives a brief introduction to the characters that will take part. This dialogue breaks down the fourth wall and implores the readers to become a part of the text and experience the events for themselves. The reader is asked to respond and react, rather than merely graze the surface.

It is therefore important to note that Akhmatova does not name anyone in the opening to “Requiem.” This anonymity opens the door for any reader to become a part of these events. On top of that, the lack of names also hints at the fact that people’s identities were completely stripped away at this time of Soviet history. Stripping away any and all identities while creating a vibrant and real scene creates an immersive experience for the reader, and the reader has nothing else to do but fully engage in the text.

### **Religion and Religious Symbolism in “Requiem”**

Before delving deeper into the poem, it is of utmost important to understand how Akhmatova structures this piece. Akhmatova is a lyric poet, which means that her poems are short, song-length, and often based on musical structure. While “Requiem” can be read as a singular poem, which makes it quite lengthy, there are separate sections of “Requiem” that cover different themes. These themes range from concepts involving war, loss, hopelessness, the grieving process, uncertainty and fear, hope, and healing.

Because the structure of each section varies from one another, “Requiem” can be thought of as a collection of short works that memorialize the events described. “Requiem” is also an interesting choice for a title of the entire work, as it is a strongly religious word. By naming this entire collection “Requiem,” Akhmatova implies that each section of this work is a hymn, mass,

or dirge for those that died. This further implies that “Requiem” is a series of remembrance, commemoration, and (psychological) process for the collective rather than a singular person.

The name “Requiem” also implies that perhaps this piece of work is itself a mass for the dead:

A requiem is a mass for the dead or a musical composition in honor of the dead. The funeral elegy, the literary equivalent of a requiem, is traditionally a poem written on the occasion of a death, serving the dual function of commemorating the deceased and of contemplating the nature of death in general. At first glance, Akhmatova’s *Requiem* would seem to have little in common with either [...] for the son had not died [...] However, despite the lack of funeral or eulogistic elements, many of the most fundamental elegiac conventions can be found in the cycle. (Bailey 325).

Although Akhmatova’s son did not die during his time in prison, many other lives were lost, and therefore “Requiem” can be seen as calling upon and invoking the memory of *all* who perished during the Great Terror. In turn, there is a sense that each section within the text could be read as a prayer, a lamentation, a chant, and so on and so forth. Therefore this poem is set up almost the way a sermon is, guiding the readers through a journey and asking them to apply the lessons learned and stories told to their own lives. As Susan Sontag writes:

Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience, the cumulative offering by more than a century and a half’s worth of those professional, specialized tourists known as journalists [...] Awareness of the suffering that accumulates [...] elsewhere is something constructed. (Sontag 18)

Through the basic structure that Akhmatova sets in place through just the name “Requiem,” Akhmatova goes a step beyond making the readers spectators. She makes them witnesses alongside herself in her recollections and lamentations, which raises the readers’ awareness as to the suffering and trauma those who experienced such atrocities endured. Each reader therefore

has a personalized lens to explore how one can process and understand mass amounts of trauma when both literally and figuratively that severity of pain cannot be articulated and translated.

As previously mentioned, “Requiem” can perhaps be read structurally as a mass for the dead, which becomes more clear through Akhmatova’s continuous use of religious imagery and invocation of religious themes. I want to bring attention to the fact that masses have different forms of prayers, chants, and lamentations, all of which have their own structure and form. It is no surprise, then, that each section of “Requiem” has its own unique structure. Even if one does not know the proper names of various meters, verses, rhythms, and rhyme schemes, poetry is meant to be read aloud. Simply by listening to the cadence of the words and flow of the poem, particular moods are invoked, which produces emotional reactions and connections. The lyric form of “Requiem” therefore becomes the vehicle for cultural memory.

“Requiem” also demands the reader to interact with Akhmatova herself, and it’s important to note that Akhmatova was a part of the Russian Orthodox faith. “The Russian writer Korney Chukovsky called Anna Akhmatova ‘the last and unique Orthodox poet’ (Macarskaia 242). Akhmatova used religious symbols throughout the entirety of her work; however, there is a difference in the religious symbolism Akhmatova uses in her early work in comparison to her later work.

Although we can think back on the way in which Lot’s Wife fulfills this role, we will look at her poem “You are always mysterious and new.”

Ты всегда таинственный и новый,  
Я тебе послушней с каждым днем.  
Но любовь твоя, о друг суровый,  
Испытание железом и огнем.  
Запрещаешь петь и улыбаться,  
А молиться запретил давно.  
Только б мне с тобою не расстаться,  
Остальное все равно! Так, земле и  
небесам чужая,  
Я живу и больше не пою,  
Словно ты у ада и у рая  
Отнял душу вольную мою.

Декабрь 1917

Обращено к Владимиру (Вольдемару)  
Шилейко.

You are always mysterious and new,  
I am more obedient to you every day.  
But your love, oh austere friend,  
Is trial by iron and fire.  
You forbid singing and smiling,  
And you forbade to pray for a long time.  
If only I would not part with you,  
The rest is all the same! So, a stranger  
To earth and heaven,  
I live and no longer sing,  
As if you were from hell and from heaven  
You took my licentious soul.

December 1917

Addressed to Vladimir (Volodemar) Shileiko.

“You are always mysterious and new” clearly is one of Akhmatova’s early poems. There is little wording to the poem, and the speaker allows the reader to sympathize with the situation rather than the speaker themselves. Moreover, there is intense reverence in this piece. Akhmatova uses religious symbolism as a way to evoke feelings of nostalgia and a sense of world culture as well as more erotic undertones to connote the type of love she talks about. Her early use of religious symbolism plays into Akhmatova’s performance of pain. The use of religion gives pain and tragedy meaning, and it turns the speakers into martyrs and heroes.

Several literary critics have analysed religious motives as an individual means of literary expression, such as Eichenbaum and Vinogradov. The latter undertook a detailed study of Akhmatova’s work that examined the presence of religious

symbols...Vinogradov covers the use of the religious symbols as a means of creating new forms of erotic feelings, achieving a new style of loving lyric. (Macarskaia 242)

Akhmatova uses religion as a means to refine and Russify Neo-classical ideals of intense, passionate love. It plays into her trope of great, tragic love, turning the speakers into martyrs and heroes. This is not the case in her later work, especially in "Requiem." The religious symbolism and language in "Requiem" are much more somber and reserved, especially since it's structured as a mass for the dead.

The theme of the cross in the sense of "bearing one's cross" also appears in times of historical upheavals, such as wars, revolutions or the Stalin era.

This is the case in Akhmatova's poem 'Requiem' (1935-1940), dedicated to the black years of the Stalin era... Here, the theme of the cross symbolises the common fate condemning the Russian people and is associated with the lethal destiny of innocent victims thrown in prisons... (Macarskaia 242).

Though Macarskaia focuses on the symbolism of the cross in "Requiem," the same understanding can be applied to the entirety of the poem. Macarskaia makes note of a shift in the way in which Akhmatova uses religious symbolism. Instead of focusing on the individual connection to God, the presence of religion in daily life, and martyrdom often associated with religion, Akhmatova uses religious symbology as a means to commemorate the victims of Stalinism and remember. This becomes a form of perseverance and collective memory.

This structuring of "Requiem" is important because the structure itself is an act of defiance and historical revisionism. "Requiem's" overall aesthetic and structure is heavily inspired by Eastern Orthodoxy, which has been a fundamental part of Russian culture throughout the ages. Additionally, Eastern Orthodoxy's connections to Slavic paganism create an ancient system of

beliefs that were intrinsically a part of Russian culture. However, during the Soviet Union, especially under Stalin's rule, there was a ban on religion.

Under communism, the Russian religious landscape consisted mainly of two competitors—a severely repressed Russian Orthodox Church and a heavily promoted atheist alternative to religion called “scientific atheism.” ...Atheists waged a 70-year war on religious belief in the Soviet Union. The Communist Party destroyed churches, mosques, and temples; it executed religious leaders; it flooded the schools and media with anti-religious propaganda; and it introduced a belief system called “scientific atheism,” complete with atheist rituals, proselytizers, and a promise of worldly salvation (Froese 35).

Stalin wished to completely abolish any and all sorts of religion in the Soviet Union, and he had an atheist five year plan to pursue this goal of a totally secular Soviet state. The state's written history says that there was no religion in the Soviet Union and that it had been atheist. However, Akhmatova's *Requiem* rewrites the state's history. This particular poem shows that even though religion was technically banned in the Soviet Union, the people never abandoned it. Religion is an aspect of Russian culture that connects the people to one another, and it fosters a sense of community and collective as well as providing a sense of peace and solace.

Akhmatova was often criticized by the Bolsheviks for her use of religion and religious symbology. It was also a reason why Akhmatova's poetry was no longer published after 1924; her use of religion throughout her work went against the Soviet ideals (Macarskaia 242). Even though her work was not being published, she still continued to write. This also shows a noted difference between Akhmatova's early work and her later work. Akhmatova's early poetry focused on commodity and profit, but her later work was no longer writing as a means for

commodity. Her work was no longer seen as valuable and profitable in the Soviet Union, and instead it was thought of as being dangerous.

Akhmatova's defiance of Soviet rhetoric and ideologies parallels the way the Soviet Union revised history through Socialist Realism, propaganda. Much like Soviet propaganda, Akhmatova focuses on the collective experience of the Soviet people; however, this collectivization does not erase or depersonalize the Soviet people. Instead it shows the ways in which the people persisted and found solace and peace in a highly traumatic time.

This background further ties in to the concept of the horizon of expectations: even if a reader does not have a comprehensive knowledge of prosody, the sounds and patterns are still familiar to the reader. Thus the reader has the ability to fill in the blanks and describe the emotional experience they have when reading the poem, touching upon what it reminds them of and describing the overall experience of the piece. Moreover, even without the historical context, the power of the tones Akhmatova uses throughout "Requiem" paint a vivid picture for the reader(s). There is a deep sense of reverence and appreciation, and the reader can still infer and interpret this symbolism without knowing the role of atheism and absence of religion during the Soviet Union.

### **Chronology, Processing, and the Stages of Grief**

Although Akhmatova clearly based this piece off of a religious service, she made a choice not to have the sections of "Requiem" go in chronological order after "Вступление (Vstyuplenie)"/ "Preamble." Now it is important to note that technically the poems are arranged in chronological order based off of when Akhmatova wrote the poems; however, the subject matter of the poems is not necessarily chronological.

This complex cycle of fifteen poems and one prose paragraph was written during the height of the Stalinist Terror... The cycle consists of an epigraph, three introductions, and ten poems which are organized chronologically documenting the arrest and sentencing, periods of overwhelming grief, denial, incomprehension, and withdrawal (Bailey 324).

Though “Requiem” is technically set up in a chronological order based off of when Akhmatova wrote the poems, each section of the collective poem deals with new subject matter. Each section has a new location and a new time, and it gives the reader a sense of jumping from memory to memory. These different “memories” could even be thought of as separate photographs out of order that tell a cohesive story by eliciting an array of responses from the reader.

Photographs of an atrocity may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or simply the bemused awareness, continually restocked by photographic information, that terrible things happen (Sontag 13).

Just like the photographs that Sontag describes, each section Akhmatova writes conveys different reactions. Each section has its own unique tone, time, and space, and each reader will connect to it in a different way. Each of these separate response show that the reader actively participates in the text and engages with the material that Akhmatova presents. There is no way for the reader to be removed from the text, and they must confront the horrors.

In order to understand this, we will look at some sections that show snapshots into the horrors Akhmatova recalls and shares with the reader.



1

Уводили тебя на рассвете,  
За тобой, как на выносе, шла,  
В темной горнице плакали дети,  
У божницы свеча оплыла.  
На губах твоих холод иконки,  
Смертный пот на челе... Не забыть!  
Буду я, как стрелецкие женки,  
Под кремлевскими башнями вить.

1

At daybreak they took you away,  
From you, like on rise, I went  
Into the dark chamber where children cried,  
At the icon case the candle collapsed.  
The coldness of the icon on your lips,  
Mortal sweat on your brow...Do not forget!  
I will, like the archer wives,  
Howl underneath the Kremlin cupolas

There's a sense that something is beginning and this is the start of the story. Akhmatova describes the day the secret police took her son away. Although the description of the scene is not extensive, it is intense. There is a sense of isolation, sorrow, and loneliness. Without many words, Akhmatova creates a clear image in the reader's mind. Additionally, Akhmatova's alternating rhyme scheme (aBaBcDcD)<sup>3</sup>. This rhyme scheme gives the impression that this is a story and even plays off of the language and rhythm of lullabies. The pace feels slower because the rhymes don't come one after another, so the beat feels slower. The reader is slowly being pulled into this dark world, and they cannot stop reading.

The reader expects this story to continue chronologically, and we expect to know what happens next; however, Akhmatova changes the entire scene in the next section:

2

Тихо льется тихий Дон,

---

<sup>3</sup> The lowercase letters indicate feminine rhyme whereas the capital letters indicate masculine rhyme.

Желтый месяц входит в дом.

Входит в шапке набекрень,  
Видит желтый месяц тень.

Эта женщина больна,  
Эта женщина одна.

Муж в могиле, сын в тюрьме,  
Помолитесь обо мне.

2

The quiet Don is flowing silently,  
The yellow moon enters the house.

He enters in a skewed hat,  
The yellow moon sees a shadow.

This woman is sick,  
This woman is alone.

Husband in the grave, son in prison,  
Pray for me.

Not only is the reader in a new place without any warning, the structure of the poem changes. Instead of an eight-line poem with an alternating rhyme scheme in the original Russian, there are four two-line stanzas that have an AA BB CC DD rhyme scheme. Granted, the first line does have more of a slant rhyme between “Дон/*Don*” and “дом/*dom*,” but it still works. The couplets draw attention to the rhyme, and punctate each line. This is especially true because each couplet is closed, which shows that there is pause after each line. Both Akhmatova and the reader need to pause after each line, which slows down the beat and creates a tone of thought and reflection.

Each stanza is also relatively brief and does not contain the flow that “1” has. Without speaking in fragments, it gives the sense that each stanza is fragmented from one another. This fragmentation creates a sense of absence, hinting that something is missing. The reader does not know what is missing, and it’s unclear if Akhmatova knows what is missing as well.

Another important difference between “1” and “2” that shows this disjointed manner Akhmatova writes in is her use of pronouns. In “1” she solely uses personal pronoun, and we know she is talking about her personal experience of losing her son. However, “2” has a

disassociated feeling because Akhmatova uses an array of pronouns. She first sets the scene by describing the Don River and the time of day. She purposefully uses the word “месяц/mesyats” for “moon” so that she can use a masculine pronoun. Up until the final stanza, the moon is the one observing, and he sees a woman who is a shadow, who is sick, who is alone. Suddenly Akhmatova changes the pronouns in the very last line, pleading to perhaps the moon or the reader or no one, “Pray for me” (l. 8).

Akhmatova becomes “this woman” to whom the moon refers. This disconnect and disassociation feels both foreign and familiar. It’s a moment of disembodiment and absence from one’s self. This is important because this shows a struggle to communicate trauma.

The struggle to represent trauma, to others and to oneself, involves the struggle between knowing and not knowing, between facing memories and resistance to facing memories that are buried deeply within the mind of the individual or society. The struggle necessarily fluctuates in intensity, with the opposing forces alternating in their dominance over one another (Laub & Podell 1000).

Akhmatova did not struggle to communicate her trauma in “1” the same way she struggled in “2.” Akhmatova begins to show the reader how she is struggling, and because of that, she begins to lose her grasp on language. In attempting to communicate how her trauma manifests, she begins to lose her language. However, the reader intuitively understands this, and in the absence feels a deep, empathetic connection to Akhmatova and understands this trauma.

The stakes are raised in “3” as Akhmatova begins to describe the disassociation and disbelief she feels. “3” is perhaps the section that is most like prose. There is no rhyme scheme, and though the original Russian does have a flow to it, there is no real beat. This tells the reader

to take a step back and observe. This moment is a call for reflection and realization that this is a story being told, this is something that demands not only observance but participation.

3  
Нет, это не я, это кто-то другой страдает.  
Я бы так не могла, а то, что случилось,  
Пусть черные сукна покроют,  
И пусть унесут фонари...  
Ночь

3  
No, this isn't me, it's someone else suffering.  
I couldn't do that, but let the black cloth  
Cover what happened,  
And let the lanterns carry it away...  
Night

The jarring nature of the first line beginning with “No, this isn't me...” breaks down the fourth-wall within Akhmatova's recollection of these events. Suddenly the memory is shattered, and there's some sort of acknowledgement that she is looking back. There's a sense of denial that she is still the same person she was, and it is as though she no longer recognizes herself in such a state.

The denial also manifests when Akhmatova says, “I couldn't do that, but let the black cloth/ Cover what happened,/ And let the lanterns carry it away...” (l. 2-4). She is saying that she could not suffer that much, and instead she covered it up and let it go away.

Akhmatova returns to using the pronoun “I” in “3.” Not only does this shift indicate reflection, but it develops personalization between Akhmatova and the reader. The reader must confront these difficult emotions that Akhmatova discusses. She no longer abstracts herself into an archetype or universal; instead she collectivizes her experience and others' through sharing this denial. In “3” Akhmatova takes off her mask and speaks as an individual to whom others already relate.

Without the mask or abstractions, Akhmatova is more relatable, and the empathetic bridge is fully built. The reader connects to this shared experience of denying that they, too, can be

traumatized. Recognizing themselves in Akhmatova's words, the reader cannot disconnect themselves from what she says. There is no other choice but to participate and confront these feelings from which people shy away; the reader is demanded to participate and ask themselves these very questions.

Akhmatova spends only a moment ruminating on this before she immerses herself and the reader back into memories, creating a sense of disjointed thoughts and feelings. This displacement that Akhmatova uses throughout "Requiem" actually parallels the way in which trauma functions. One does not know what to expect or what flashback will lead into another or what trigger will be a catalyst for a flashback.

Additionally, the way in which Akhmatova uses displacement and recreated a disjointed series of thoughts creates an environment in which the reader is demanded to participate. The reader does not have the luxury to sit down and process what's just been said. The reader is thrown into another experience, and the reader cannot disassociate from that. Perhaps the reader feels disassociation in Akhmatova's writing, but that does not mean the reader has the ability to detach themselves from what's being said.

Constantly throwing the reader into new situations and scenarios shows that the reader needs to take an active role to truly understand what Akhmatova is communicating. It's not simple; it's not easy. The reader is forced to confront these problems head-on without any reprieve. It parallels the way in which trauma functions: once a traumatic event begins and one becomes traumatized, it cannot stop and it does not stop even after the traumatic event has ended. The reader and person who underwent the trauma is still in the process of understanding the traumatic event. Thus Akhmatova depicts the real-world experience of trauma.

By lowering her mask, Akhmatova is able to capture that experience and show that she is not a martyr. The people whose lives were lost and those who lost loved ones are not martyrs either. They are merely people who were subjected to horrors on a daily basis. The reader is able to identify themselves with Akhmatova and the collective, and the reader cannot turn away.

The way Akhmatova sets up "Requiem" is a mass for the dead and her act of remembrance and respect, but it's also Akhmatova's journey in learning to understand these losses not as sacrifices for the greater good or as deaths with greater purpose. It's not about martyrs and saints; it's about people who were persecuted and lost their lives. This is not tragic because there is no purpose to the loss. In this world there is no such thing as "for the greater good." For there to be a "greater good" would fall under the guise of Socialist Realism. It would say that these people died so that the Soviet Union could fulfill its true and full potential.

That is not what "Requiem" is. It is Akhmatova recalling the collective experience of the everyman. Each loss was personal and meant something, and many losses were without purpose. The entirety of "Requiem" is watching Akhmatova have an epiphany as to how to cope with her trauma. Moreover, Akhmatova does a brilliant job at simulating these traumatic events through displacement and fragments. The story Akhmatova tells in "Requiem" continues no matter where it's been left off. The reader cannot know unless they continue reading, which is what makes this form of collective memory so effective.

"Requiem" is not a singular, semi-immersive event where the reader gets lost in this fantastic, Neo-classic world; it's not yearning for this place that was. The world the reader is brought into is terrifying, and the reader does not know what to expect at any point. There is no

comfort within the text because there is no time to breathe or think in the text; it merely keeps going.

The reader, in order to truly understand, must keep following the text and participating with it to make it to the other side. The disjointed features of “Requiem” therefore become turning points in Akhmatova’s ways of thinking and understanding, which in turn grants the reader the ability to have the same epiphanies and understandings. These epiphanies tend to appear most in Akhmatova’s interjections into her recollections of events.

“3” is the first interjection Akhmatova makes where there is a strong tone of denial over the events that happened and her reaction to the events. “7 Verdict” is another interjection. The first stanza is a much different tone than “3.”

И упало каменное слово	And the stone word fell
На мою еще живую грудь.	On my still living chest.
Ничего, ведь я была готова,	Nothing, because I was ready,
Справлюсь с этим как-нибудь	For I can handle this somehow.

Unlike the denial and grief felt in “3,” there is almost a sense of peace stemming from acceptance in “7 Verdict.” While the message is somber because the “stone word” (l. 1) is weighted and therefore painful, Akhmatova feels prepared to handle the situation. The reader understands that this is a moment where so much has gone wrong and Akhmatova has already been through so much that nothing can phase her at this point. After all, the body can tolerate so much pain before it eventually becomes accustomed to the constant (heart)aches and sorrows.

However, though there is a level of acceptance to this, Akhmatova has not fully processed these events. The second stanza goes as follows:

У меня сегодня много дела:	Надо, чтоб душа окаменела,
Надо память до конца убить,	Надо снова научиться жить

Today I have a lot to do:  
I must kill the memory to the end,

I must make my soul turn to stone,  
I must learn to live once again.

This “to do” list is a coping mechanism. Any reader can understand this “to do” list, as it is the way many people deal with grief. “Killing the memory” means forgetting the event ever happened, which is a natural response to a traumatic event. One often wishes it never occurred because that means they would not have to process this weight. It is a fallacy that if a memory were to be “killed,” then all will be well. There will still be a scar even if the wound is not fresh.

Moreover, Akhmatova says she must make her “soul turn to stone” (7). To kill a memory, one must become stoic and pretend like it has not affected them. Naturally one wants to be strong and remain strong when dealing with trauma. At this point Akhmatova thinks that if she can just forget and put on a stone-cold face, she will be able to live again. However, this is a monumental task list for only a day. How can one forget, turn to stone, and learn to live within twenty-four hours?

Although rushing to be better is not how processing trauma works, this list makes perfect sense. This is a survival mechanism; it is Akhmatova and the reader’s process to return to “normal.” However, there are still tones of denial as there is this want to forget what happened. This is fool’s acceptance: one will only accept what happened if one is able to forget.

This back and forth between quasi-acceptance and denial mimics how healing from trauma is not a linear process. Linear healing based off the five stages of grief is often a misconception; yes, there are five stages to grief, but the process is not linear. At points people may oscillate back and forth between different stages before eventually arriving at true acceptance. Moving



back and forth between these reactions is incredibly relatable, and the reader is able to see themselves in this role.

Akhmatova ultimately arrives at a more stable acceptance in “Epilogue.”

Узнала я, как опадают лица,  
Как из-под век выглядывает страх,  
Как клинописи жесткие страницы  
Страдание выводит на щеках,  
Как локоны из пепельных и черных  
Серебряными делаются вдруг,  
Улыбка вянет на губах покорных,  
И в сухоньком смешке дрожит испуг.  
И я молюсь не о себе одной,  
А обо всех, кто там стоял со мною,  
И в лютый холод, и в июльский зной  
Под красною ослепшею стеною.

I learned how faces fall,  
How fear peeps out from under eyelids,  
How hard pages written in cuneiforms  
Displays suffering on my cheeks,  
How curls of ashen and black  
Become silver suddenly,  
A smile withers on the lips of submission,  
And fear trembles in a dry laugh.  
And I'm not praying for myself alone  
But for everyone who stood there with me,  
And in the bitter cold, and in the July heat  
Under the red, sightless wall.

To state that Akhmatova “[...] learned how faces fall,/How fear peeps out from under eyelids,” (“Epilogue I,” l. 1-2) reveals that this process of understanding did not happen overnight. Akhmatova even alludes to the fact her experience in processing trauma took years, as “[...]curls of ashen and black/Become silver suddenly,” (“Epilogue I, l. 5-6). Though the tone of this passage is tinged with sadness, the overall feeling is neutral. This neutrality gives the sense that Akhmatova has had time to process the trauma she and others endured and how it will forever be a part of her. She no longer wishes “[...] to kill the memory to end” (“Verdict 7” l. 6) or “[...] make [her] soul turn to stone,” (“Verdict” l. 7). Instead, she and the other women are able to coexist with their traumatic experiences. Akhmatova acknowledges this experience is not unique to her when she writes, “And I’m not praying for myself alone,/But for everyone who stood there with me,” (“Epilogue I,” l. 9-10).

This acknowledgement of the trauma of others is a difference from Akhmatova's early work. Akhmatova's early work focuses on the experience of a singular speaker rather than a collective. The shift from personal pain to collective trauma is an indicator of Akhmatova's evolution as a poet. It reveals she viewpoint is no longer as insular or self-serving; she is more concerned with others than herself alone.

Another feature that highlights Akhmatova's acceptance of her trauma is her lack of extreme language. In previous sections, Akhmatova uses volatile and violent descriptions, often in relaying the emotions she feels. The section "To Death" is an example of Akhmatova's extreme language.

К смерти

Ты все равно придешь — зачем же не  
теперь?  
Я жду тебя — мне очень трудно.  
Я потушила свет и отворила дверь  
Тебе, такой простой и чудной.  
Прими для этого какой угодно вид,  
Ворвись отравленным снарядом  
Иль с гирькой подкрадись, как опытный  
бандит,  
Иль отрави тифозным чадом.  
Иль сказочкой, придуманной тобой  
И всем до тошноты знакомой,-  
Чтоб я увидела верх шапки голубой  
И бледного от страха управдома.  
Мне все равно теперь. Клубится Енисей,  
Звезда Полярная сияет.  
И синий блеск возлюбленных очей  
Последний ужас застигает.

To Death

You will come anyway — why not now?  
I wait for you — it's very difficult for me.  
I put out the light and opened the door  
For you, so simple and wonderful.  
Take whatever form you want for this,  
Break in as a poisoned shell  
Or sneak up with a weight, like an expert  
bandit,  
Or fumes poisoned with typhoid.  
Or a fairytale, invented by you  
And everyone is sickly familiar, —  
So that I can see the top of the blue hat  
And the landlord, pale with fear.  
I don't care now. The Yensei swirls,  
The North Star shines.  
And the last horror covers  
The blue glimmer of beloved eyes.

This conversation with death is pleading and desperate, especially when the speaker requests Death to take whatever form Death wishes and whisk the speaker into oblivion. The reader is able to empathize with this futile bargaining for everything to be okay. Nevertheless,

this is an extreme response, and the language itself is incredibly loaded and weighs heavily on both the reader and speaker. To wish that oneself dies from a bandit's attack or typhoid in order to see their son one final time is viscerally violent and heartbreaking. This is not neutral or accepting: this is bargaining, which is another stage of grief.

“Epilogue” lacks such intense and all-consuming emotions conveyed in “To Death.”

Akhmatova relays the sense that she has come to terms with loss and has learned she cannot erase what happened. The fact that she has arrived at a place where she is, “[...] not praying for myself alone/But for everyone who stood there with me,/And in the bitter cold, and in the July heat/Under the red, sightless wall” (“Epilogue I”, l. 9-12) shows her progress. Yes, there is still sorrow and pain, but Akhmatova is not overwhelmed by these emotions any longer.

This sentiment of acceptance and understanding is carried over in “II.”

Хотелось бы всех поименно назвать,  
Да отняли список, и негде узнать.

I would like to call everyone by name,  
But they took away the list, and it's  
nowhere to be found

Для них соткала я широкий покров  
Из бедных, у них же подслушанных  
слов.

I have woven a wide shroud for them  
From the poor words overheard by them.

О них вспоминаю всегда и везде,  
О них не забуду и в новой беде,

I remember them always and  
everywhere,  
I will not forget about them even in a  
new disaster.

Just like “Epilogue I,” Akhmatova maintains her position that she does not want to forget what happened during the Great Terror. What happened during this time is always with her, and she refuses to forget those who were lost. By saying that she's “[...] woven a shroud for them (II, l. 11) shows her reverence and remembrance for those that perished. This not only can be seen as reverence for the dead but also Akhmatova's way of making these deaths visible (Bailey 343). This act of acknowledgement and respect is something that resonates with any reader by

providing a sense of comfort that the reader, too, can acknowledge traumatic experiences and still live.

The tone is not necessarily hopeful, but it is remarkably more positive than any other section in “Requiem.” As Sharon Bailey writes:

Whereas the ten central poems are by their very existence a memorial to the victims of the Terror, “Epilogue II” lays emphasis on the act of articulating memory as a defense against the continued suffering. In this poem, Akhmatova purposefully invokes language itself as a weapon. Throughout the cycle the poet, as well as all of the women, are shown bewildered, speechless and defeated. In “Epilogue II” Akhmatova overcomes this. Geographic locations distinguish themselves from each other and remain fixed to their proper historical significance. The women with whom Akhmatova stood in line begin to stand out from the mass of individuals [...]. (Bailey 342)

Akhmatova takes a powerful stance here. Despite the horrors she endured, she wants to remember, going so far as to say later, “Then, I am afraid to forget in blissful death/The rumbling of the black prisoner van./To forget how the hateful door slammed/And the old woman wailed like a wounded animal” (II, l. 27-30). This is not an easy choice, but it gives Akhmatova and the women a source of power. Stalin attempted to completely erase the identities of those who perished during this time, and Akhmatova and the women change that narrative by choosing to remember. The names many no longer exist in memory, but the experience and knowledge of this time and the traumatic events that occurred are not forgotten.

The reader comes to the realization at the end of the poem that “Requiem” goes beyond the experience of a singular person. The text itself is greater than that, as it is a lasting monument and memorial to those that perished during the Great Terror. This realization is somber, and there is a weight that goes along with this, especially in the last couplet as Akhmatova writes, “And let the prison dove walk in the distance./Let the ships go quietly along the Neva” (II, 33-34). At this point the reader is not accustomed to this sense of freedom, as many sections in “Requiem” make reference to prisons or prison bars. Akhmatova’s newfound sense of freedom

and levity that she describes is almost jarring, but it is welcomed by the reader because it is a source of catharsis.

Despite the relief from experiencing such traumatic events, both the reader and Akhmatova cannot simply forget what happened. This experience, like the ships along the Neva, continue to go quietly along in the minds of the readers. This trauma cannot be forgotten, but one can learn to accept it and live with it.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear as to why Anna Akhmatova is still regarded as a Russian cultural icon. Early in Akhmatova's career, she cemented an easily com modifiable aesthetic as a poet of tragic love (Strakhovsky 4). Even though her early poetry was performative tragedy, there was an aspect to the themes Akhmatova touched upon that resonated with her readers. It is, of course, worth noting that Akhmatova's work has always resonated with readers, but it is a disservice to still only regard Anna Akhmatova as a poet of tragic love.

This is not to disregard the power and importance of Akhmatova's early work but bring forth a new perspective on Akhmatova and her work. As mentioned in chapter two, Akhmatova evolved alongside her work. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Akhmatova did not become an émigré, and she remained in Russia during some of the most culturally and historically traumatic events of the age. During a time when she was banned from publishing and bearing witness to countless horrors, Akhmatova continued to write as a way to cope with the trauma she endured.

Communicating trauma still remains a Sisyphean task. There is no way to ever truly understand or overcome a traumatic event, nor is there language that can precisely articulate a traumatic experience. No human ever wants to feel like they are alone, and because trauma supersedes language, it can often feel as though traumatic events are isolating. As I noted in chapter one, people often turn to representations of (psychological) pain that encompass the experience of trauma. This articulation does not need to be precise but rather an understanding and acknowledgement between a writer and reader. The reader can therefore take this literary representation of trauma and apply phrases and expressions to their own experience(s).

Anna Akhmatova's poetic evolution from tragic verse to traumatic verse shows how expressing trauma does not need to be precise. Although Akhmatova is unable to articulate

exactly what she endured and the level of pain she felt, her description of the traumatic events she and other women experienced during the Great Terror recreates the events for the reader.

Akhmatova evolves from a poet who simulates a tragic experience to a poet who evokes a traumatic experience by building an empathetic bridge that requires identifying the real. She demands the reader to participate with the text and confront these difficult experiences. To solely regard her as a poet of tragic love is a disservice because it negates the impact of her later work and the experiences she was trying to preserve. Her work remains accessible to readers, and her recreation of the Soviet women's collective trauma still resonates. The memory of these people continue on, and Akhmatova provides her contemporary readers means to express their own pain. Thus, Akhmatova is a poet of trauma.

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## APPENDIX

Как белый камень в глубине колодца

Like a white stone in the depths of a well

Как белый камень в глубине колодца,

Like a white stone in the depths of a well,

Лежит во мне одно воспоминанье.

One memory lies within me.

Я не могу и не хочу бороться:

I cannot and do not want to fight.

Оно — веселье и оно — страданье.

It is joy, and it is suffering.

Мне кажется, что тот, кто близко взглянет

It seems to me that the one who looks closely

В мои глаза, его увидит сразу.

Into my eyes will see him immediately.

Печальней и задумчивее станет

He becomes sad and more thoughtful

Внимающего скорбному рассказу.

Than listening to a sorrowful tale.

Я ведаю, что боги превращали

I know that the gods turned people into

Людей в предметы, не убив сознания,

objects, Without killing consciousness,

Чтоб вечно жили дивные печали.

So that wonderous sorrows live forever.

Ты превращен в мое воспоминанье.

You are turned into my memory.

1916 г.

1916



Ты всегда таинственный и новый,  
  
Ты всегда таинственный и новый,  
Я тебе послушней с каждым днем.  
Но любовь твоя, о друг суровый,  
Испытание железом и огнем.  
Запрещаешь петь и улыбаться,  
А молиться запретил давно.  
Только б мне с тобою не расстаться,  
Остальное все равно! Так, земле и небесам  
чужая,  
Я живу и больше не пою,  
Словно ты у ада и у рая  
Отнял душу вольную мою.

Декабрь 1917

Обращено к Владимиру (Вольдемару)  
Шилейко.

You are always mysterious and new  
  
You are always mysterious and new,  
I am more obedient to you every day.  
But your love, oh austere friend,  
Is trial by iron and fire.  
You forbid singing and smiling,  
And you forbade to pray for a long time.  
If only I would not part with you,  
The rest is all the same! So, a stranger  
To earth and heaven,  
I live and no longer sing,  
As if you were from hell and from heaven  
You took my licentious soul.

December 1917

Addressed to Vladimir (Volodemar) Shileiko.

Жена же Лотова оглянулась позади  
его и стала соляным столпом.

-Книга Бытия

И праведник шел за посланником Бога,  
Огромный и светлый, по черной горе.  
Но громко жене говорила тревога:  
Не поздно, ты можешь еще посмотреть  
На красные башни родного Содома,  
На площадь, где пела, на двор, где  
        пряла,  
На окна пустые высокого дома,  
Где милому мужу детей родила.  
Взглянула — и, скованы смертною  
        болью,  
Глаза ее больше смотреть не могли;  
И сделалось тело прозрачною солью,  
И быстрые ноги к земле приросли.

Кто женщину эту оплакивать будет?  
Не меньшей ли мнится она из утрат?  
Лишь сердце мое никогда не забудет  
Отдавшую жизнь за единственный  
        взгляд.

1924 г.

Lot's wife looked behind him,  
And she became a pillar of salt.

-Book of Genesis

And the righteous man followed the  
        messenger of God,  
Huge and bright, along the black mountain.  
But the alarm spoke loudly to his wife:  
It's not too late, you can still look  
At the red towers of native Sodom,  
At the square where you sang,  
At the empty windows of the high house,  
Where your dear husband and children were  
        Born.  
She looked — and, shackled by mortal pain,  
Her eyes could no longer look;  
And her body became translucent salt,  
And her quick feet rooted to the ground.

Who will mourn this woman?  
Is she not the least of her losses?  
Only my heart will never forget  
The one who gave her life for a single glance.

1924

## Реквием (Поэма)

### Вместо Предисловия

В страшные годы ежовщины я провела семнадцать месяцев в тюремных очередях в Ленинграде. Как-то раз кто-то «опознал» меня. Тогда стоящая за мной женщина с голубыми губами, которая, конечно, никогда в жизни не слышала моего имени, очнулась от свойственного нам всем оцепенения и спросила меня на ухо (там все говорили шепотом):  
– А это вы можете описать?  
И я сказала:  
– Могу.  
Тогда что-то вроде улыбки скользнуло по тому, что некогда было ее лицом.

1 апреля 1957 г., Ленинград

### Посвящение

Перед этим горем гнутся горы,  
Не течет великая река,  
Но крепки тюремные затворы,  
А за ними «каторжные норы»  
И смертельная тоска.  
Для кого-то веет ветер свежий,  
Для кого-то нежится закат —  
Мы не знаем, мы повсюду те же,  
Слышим лишь ключей постылый скрежет  
Да шаги тяжелые солдат.  
Подымались как к обедне ранней,  
По столице одичалой шли,  
Там встречались, мертвых бездыханней,  
Солнце ниже, и Нева туманней,  
А надежда все поет вдали.  
Приговор... И сразу слезы хлынут,  
Ото всех уже отделена,  
Словно с болью жизнь из сердца вынут,  
Словно грубо навзничь опрокинут,  
Но идет... Шатается... Одна...  
Где теперь невольные подруги  
Двух моих осатанелых лет?  
Что им чудится в сибирской вьюге,  
Что мерещится им в лунном круге?  
Им я шлю прощальный свой привет.

## Requiem

### Instead of a Preface

In the horrific years of Yezhov, I spent seventeen months in the prison lines in Leningrad. One day someone recognized me. Then a woman with blue lips standing behind me, who, of course, never in her life had heard my name, woke up from the inherent numbness of us all and asked me in my ear (there everyone spoke in a whisper):  
-Can you describe this?  
And I said:  
-I can.  
Then something like a smile slipped over what had previously been just her face.

1st April 1957, Leningrad

### Dedication

Mountains bend before this grief,  
The great river does not flow,  
But the prison bars are strong  
And behind them “custodial lairs”  
And deathly yearning.  
For someone, fresh wind blows,  
For someone the sunset lounges —  
We do not know, we are the same near and far,  
We hear only the loathsome keys and creaking  
From the heavy steps of soldiers.  
We rose as if for early lunch,  
We walked mindlessly through the capitol,  
Where we met, more breathless than dead,  
The sun low, and the Neva foggy,  
And hope still sings in the distance.  
The verdict...tears immediately flood,  
From everyone already separated,  
As if life is taken from the heart with pain,  
As if rudely tossed on ones back,  
But she goes...staggers...alone....  
Where are the unwitting friends now  
From my two possessed years?  
What does a Siberian blizzard seem to them?  
What do they see in the lunar circle?  
I send them my farewell greetings.

## Вступление

Это было, когда улыбался  
Только мертвый, спокойствию рад.  
И ненужным привеском качался  
Возле тюрем своих Ленинград.  
И когда, обезумев от муки,  
Шли уже осужденных полки,  
И короткую песню разлуки  
Паровозные пели гудки,  
Звезды смерти стояли над нами,  
И безвинная корчилась Русь  
Под кровавыми сапогами  
И под шинами черных марушь

1

Уводили тебя на рассвете,  
За тобой, как на выносе, шла,  
В темной горнице плакали дети,  
У божницы свеча оплыла.  
На губах твоих холод иконки,  
Смертный пот на челе... Не забыть!  
Буду я, как стрелецкие женки,  
Под кремлевскими башнями выть.

2

Тихо льется тихий Дон,  
Желтый месяц входит в дом.

Входит в шапке набекрень,  
Видит желтый месяц тень.

Эта женщина больна,  
Эта женщина одна.

Муж в могиле, сын в тюрьме,  
Помолитесь обо мне.

3

Нет, это не я, это кто-то другой страдает.  
Я бы так не могла, а то, что случилось,  
Пусть черные сукна покроют,  
И пусть унесут фонари...  
Ночь.

## Preamble

It was when I smiled,  
That I was dead, glad to be at rest.  
And Leningrad swayed with a  
Needless appendage near its prisons.  
And, when mad with torment,  
Those already condemned walked,  
And the short song of separation  
Sung by locomotives' honks,  
Stars of death stood above us,  
And the innocent Rus writhed  
Underneath bloody boots  
And under tires of black phantoms.

1

At daybreak they took you away,  
From you, like on rise, I went  
Into the dark chamber where children cried,  
At the icon case the candle collapsed.  
The coldness of the icon on your lips,  
Mortal sweat on your brow...Do not forget!  
I will, like the archer wives,  
Howl underneath the Kremlin cupolas.

2

The quiet Don is flowing silently,  
The yellow moon enters the house.

He enters in a skewed hat,  
The yellow moon sees a shadow.

This woman is sick,  
This woman is alone.

Husband in the grave, son in prison,  
Pray for me.

3

No this isn't me, it's someone else suffering.  
I couldn't do that, but let the black cloth  
Cover what happened,  
And let the lanterns carry it away...  
Night.

4

Показать бы тебе, насмешнице  
 И любимице всех друзей,  
 Царскосельской веселой грешнице,  
 Что случится с жизнью твоей —  
 Как трехсотая, с передачею,  
 Под Крестами будешь стоять  
 И свою слезою горячею  
 Новогодний лед прожигать.  
 Там тюремный тополь качается,  
 И ни звука — а сколько там  
 Неповинных жизней кончается...

5

Семнадцать месяцев кричу,  
 Зову тебя домой,  
 Кидалась в ноги палачу,  
 Ты сын и ужас мой.  
 Все перепуталось навек,  
 И мне не разобрать  
 Теперь, кто зверь, кто человек,  
 И долго ль казни ждать.  
 И только пыльные цветы,  
 И звон кадилый, и следы  
 Куда-то в никуда.  
 И прямо мне в глаза глядит  
 И скорой гибелью грозит  
 Огромная звезда.

6

Легкие летят недели,  
 Что случилось, не пойму.  
 Как тебе, сынок, в тюрьму  
 Ночи белые глядели,  
 Как они опять глядят  
 Ястребиным жарким оком,  
 О твоём кресте высоком  
 И о смерти говорят.

7

Приговор

И упало каменное слово  
 На мою еще живую грудь.  
 Ничего, ведь я была готова,

4

I would show you, the mocker  
 And the favorite of all friends,  
 Tsarskoye Selo cheerful sinner,  
 What will happen with your life—  
 Like the three-hundredth, with delivery,  
 You stand underneath the Crosses  
 And with your hot tears  
 Burn through the New Year's ice.  
 There the prison poplar sways,  
 And not a sound—and how many  
 Innocent lives are ending there...

5

I scream for seventeen months,  
 I call you home,  
 I threw myself at the executioner's feet,  
 You are my son and my terror.  
 Everything is forever muddled,  
 And now I can't understand  
 Who is the monster, who is the man,  
 And how long the execution is to wait.  
 And only dusty flowers,  
 And the ringing of incense burner, and traces  
 Somewhere to nowhere.  
 And a huge star looks straight into my eyes,  
 And threatens  
 With imminent death.

6

Light weeks fly by,  
 I don't understand what happened.  
 White nights glance,  
 Like you, son, in the prison,  
 As they look again  
 With a hot, hawkish eye,  
 About your high cross  
 And talk about death.

7

Verdict

And the stone word fell  
 On my still living chest.  
 Nothing, because I was ready,



Справлюсь с этим как-нибудь.  
У меня сегодня много дела:  
Надо память до конца убить,  
Надо, чтоб душа окаменела,  
Надо снова научиться жить.  
А не то... Горячий шелест лета,  
Словно праздник за моим окном.  
Я давно предчувствовала этот  
Светлый день и опустелый дом.

8

### К смерти

Ты все равно придешь — зачем же не теперь?  
Я жду тебя — мне очень трудно.  
Я потушила свет и отворила дверь  
Тебе, такой простой и чудной.  
Прими для этого какой угодно вид,  
Ворвись отравленным снарядом  
Иль с гирькой подкрадись, как опытный  
бандит,  
Иль отрави тифозным чадом.  
Иль сказочкой, придуманной тобой  
И всем до тошноты знакомой,-  
Чтоб я увидела верх шапки голубой  
И бледного от страха управдома.  
Мне все равно теперь. Клубится Енисей,  
Звезда Полярная сияет.  
И синий блеск возлюбленных очей  
Последний ужас застилает.

9

Уже безумие крылом  
Души накрыло половину,  
И поит огненным вином  
И манит в черную долину.

И поняла я, что ему  
Должна я уступить победу,  
Прислушиваясь к своему  
Уже как бы чужому бреду.

И не позволит ничего  
Оно мне унести с собою  
(Как ни упрашивай его  
И как ни докучай мольбою):

For I can handle this somehow.  
Today I have a lot to do:  
I must kill the memory to the end,  
I must make my soul turn to stone,  
I must learn to live once again.  
Otherwise... Summer's hot rustle  
Is like a celebration outside my window.  
I long since anticipated this bright day  
And empty house.

8

### To Death

You will come anyway — why not now?  
I wait for you — it's very difficult for me.  
I put out the light and opened the door  
For you, so simple and wonderful.  
Take whatever form you want for this,  
Break in as a poisoned shell  
Or sneak up with a weight, like an expert  
Bandit,  
Or fumes poisoned with typhoid.  
Or a fairytale, invented by you  
And everyone is sickly familiar, —  
So that I can see the top of the blue hat  
And the landlord, pale with fear.  
I don't care now. The Yensei swirls,  
The North Star shines.  
And the last horror covers  
The blue glimmer of beloved eyes

9

Madness already covered  
Half the soul with its wing,  
And it gives me a drink of fiery wine  
And beckons me to the black vale.

And I realize that I should  
Give the victory to him,  
Already listening to myself  
Like someone else's delirium

And it will not allow me  
To take anything with me  
(No matter how you beg it  
And no matter how you pester with pleas)

Ни сына страшные глаза —  
Окаменелое страданье,  
Ни день, когда пришла гроза,  
Ни час тюремного свиданья,

Ни милую прохладу рук,  
Ни лип взволнованные тени,  
Ни отдаленный легкий звук —  
Слова последних утешений.

10

#### Распятие

Не рыдай Мене, Мати,  
во гробе зрящия.

Хор ангелов великий час восславил,  
И небеса расплавились в огне.  
Отцу сказал: «Почто Меня оставил!»  
А Матери: «О, не рыдай Мене...»

Магдалина билась и рыдала,  
Ученик любимый каменел,  
А туда, где молча Мать стояла,  
Так никто взглянуть и не посмел.

#### Эпилог

I

Узнала я, как опадают лица,  
Как из-под век выглядывает страх,  
Как клинописи жесткие страницы  
Страдание выводит на щеках,  
Как локоны из пепельных и черных  
Серебряными делаются вдруг,  
Улыбка вянет на губах покорных,  
И в сухоньком смешке дрожит испуг.  
И я молюсь не о себе одной,  
А обо всех, кто там стоял со мною,  
И в лютый холод, и в июльский зной  
Под красною ослепшею стеною.

II

Опять поминальный приблизился час.  
Я вижу, я слышу, я чувствую вас:

Not a son's terrified eyes—  
Petrified suffering,  
Not a day passed when a thunderstorm came,  
Not an hour of prison meeting,

Not a sweet coolness of hands,  
Not an anxious shade of lindens,  
Not a light, far-off sound—  
The words of last solaces.

10

#### The Crucifixion

Do not weep for me, Mother,  
Seeing me in the grave.

The choir of angels glorified the great hour,  
And the heavens melted in fire.  
He said to his Father: "Why did you leave me!"  
And to his mother: "Oh, don't weep for me..."

Mary Magdalene fought and sobbed,  
The beloved disciple turned to stone,  
And no one dared to look  
Where the Mother silently stood.

#### Epilogue

I

I learned how faces fall,  
How fear peeps out from under my eyelids,  
How hard pages written in cuneiforms  
Displays suffering on my cheeks,  
How curls of ashen and black  
Become silver suddenly,  
A smile withers on the lips of submission,  
And fear trembles in a dry laugh.  
And I'm not praying for myself alone  
But for everyone who stood there with me,  
And in the bitter cold, and in the July heat  
Under the red, sightless wall.

II

Again the funeral hour approached.  
I see you, I hear you, I feel you.

И ту, что едва до окна довели,  
И ту, что родимой не топчет земли,  
  
И ту, что красивой тряхнув головой,  
Сказала: «Сюда прихожу, как домой».  
  
Хотелось бы всех поименно назвать,  
Да отняли список, и негде узнать.  
  
Для них соткала я широкий покров  
Из бедных, у них же подслушанных слов.  
  
О них вспоминаю всегда и везде,  
О них не забуду и в новой беде,  
  
И если зажмут мой измученный рот,  
Которым кричит стомильонный народ,  
  
Пусть так же они поминают меня  
В канун моего поминального дня.  
  
А если когда-нибудь в этой стране  
Воздвигнуть задумают памятник мне,  
  
Согласье на это даю торжество,  
Но только с условием — не ставить его  
  
Ни около моря, где я родилась:  
Последняя с морем разорвана связь,  
  
Ни в царском саду у заветного пня,  
Где тень безутешная ищет меня,  
  
А здесь, где стояла я триста часов  
И где для меня не открыли засов.  
  
Затем, что и в смерти блаженной боюсь  
Забить громохание черных марушь,  
  
Забить, как постылая хлопала дверь  
И выла старуха, как раненый зверь.  
  
И пусть с неподвижных и бронзовых век  
Как слезы, струится подтаявший снег,  
  
И голубь тюремный пусть гулит вдали,  
И тихо идут по Неве корабли.

And the one barely carried to the window,  
And the one that doesn't trample the dear earth,  
  
And the one that shook her beautiful head,  
She said: "I come here, as if it were home."  
  
I would like to call everyone by name,  
But they took away the list, and it's nowhere to  
be found  
I have woven a wide shroud for them  
From the poor words overheard by them.  
  
I remember them always and everywhere,  
I will not forget about them even in a new disaster  
  
And if my tortured mouth is clamped  
With which a hundred million people shout,  
  
Let them also remember me  
On the eve of my memorial day.  
  
And if someday in this country,  
They they plan to erect a monument to me,  
  
I give consent to this celebration,  
But with only one condition— do not put it  
  
Near the sea where I was born:  
The last link with the sea is severed,  
  
Not in the royal garden at the treasured stump  
Where an inconsolable shadow seeks me,  
  
But here, where I stood for three hundred hours  
And where the bolt was not opened for me.  
  
Then, I am afraid to forget in blissful death  
The rumbling of the black prisoner van,  
  
To forget how the hateful door slammed  
And the old woman wailed like a wounded  
animal.  
And let the melted snow flow from the  
Motionless bronze eyelids like tears  
  
And let the prison dove walk in the distance,  
Let the ships go quietly along the Neva.