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The Aesthetics of Anna Akhmatova's Poetry

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Abstract:

This paper claims that Akhmatova's poetry adopts a neoclassical style through which she is able to investigate history. The poetry is a visionary commentary on historical experience and is able to project hope into the dark corners of Russian history. By combining the characteristics of a neo-classical style with optimism and reflection on historical trauma Akhmatova forges a distinctive poetic voice. The paper analyses some of the poet's major poems so as to understand how history and the self is developed and treated.

Keywords: Akhmatova, poetry, Russia, Requiem, Poem without a Hero.

Akhmatova's poetry is concerned with finding hope out of the ruins of history. By focusing on the terrors of lived experience and transmuting them into prospects of hope Akhmatova re-envisioned Russian history.

The poem *Requiem* opens with an understated introduction to the terrors of Stalin's purges. The stanza *Instead of a Preface* shows that the ability to communicate the experience of terror is in itself a source of solace. The stanza *Dedication* argues that the sorrow of terror is human made rather than natural. Human activity is shown to precede natural calamities. Prison becomes the source of woe. Freedom is contrasted to the hateful condition of captivity. Hope is severely tested by adversity. Friends are brought together by chance and friendship is viewed as contingent. She sends her farewell greeting to friends who must imagine their fate. This farewell is for a people who are going through tremendous hardship and who may not survive. The poem *Prologue* paints a dark vision of Leningrad as being a vast prison. Only the dead smile in a terrorized Leningrad. The songs of farewell are sung by Locomotive whistles indicating the metallic and industrialized nature of human oppression. The stars are those of death, turning a trope of hope into despair.

The first part of the poem *Requiem* opens with a slow tempo. The candle becomes a marker of the slow passage of time. The imagery of howling comes to describe the enormity

of pain suffered and mourned. The Kremlin towers symbolize the indecipherable aspects of human life and society. The second part of the poem opens quietly and above all slowly. The yellow moon symbolizes time gone awry and askew. The figure of the yellow moon is repeated and connotes illness. The request for prayer reaches out to the reader and indicates the helplessness of the woman who has so far survived.

The third part of the poem is a nocturnal scene. It opens with the displacement of suffering onto an imagined body. Light is slowly taken away as darkness engulfs the poem. Lanterns are taken away, signifying human causality. The fourth part of the poem shows how oppressive structures in society force people to fit in. Silence portends suffering and the end of innocent lives.

The fifth part of the poem opens in a pained manner, stating that the distinction between man and beast has become blurred. The tracks from somewhere to nowhere denote the impossibility of finding an immediate solution to life's horror. The strangeness of the symbol of the impending star as a sign of death makes the poem come alive. This is likely a lamentation for a missing person. There is a sense of impending doom in the poem as an execution is expected. The sixth part of the poem concerns a son who is in prison. Time passes quickly and is distorted by the experience of prison. Being in prison is viewed in the poem as a sacrifice with religious connotations. The seventh part of the poem talks about a prison sentence. Despite the enormity of the sentence the narrator states that she shall manage. She desires to kill memory so as to make life more bearable. She desires to turn her soul to stone, presumably to make herself more stoic. She must learn how to live again, which shows how drastically she must alter her life. The contrast between the brilliant day and the deserted house is poignant and emotionally expressive. The eighth part of the poem is addressed to death. Addressing death in familiar and intimate terms it requests death to come, welcoming death. The poem expresses the sense that death does not affirm life. The poem associates eyes with vitality and life.

The ninth part of the poem describes the madness that comes upon the traumatized narrator who overhears herself. The narrator meets her son whose eyes have turned to stone. She meets him in prison. The shadow of the lindens tremble. The final words of consolation are far-off and the sound is fragile. The picture of desolation that is painted by the poet conveys a haunted and dehumanized atmosphere and landscape. The tenth part titled "Crucifixion" is a moment of heightened passion. The imagery of a choir of angels and the heavens dissolved in

fire is conventional. The straitened relationship with his parents marks the crucified. He is forsaken by his father and his mother weeps for him. The disciple turned to stone indicating the power of the crucifixion to transmute the body. The Mother is depicted as sacred and none dares glance at her. The Epilogue I is a description of the physicality of those who suffer from state terror. The effects of terror can be seen on faces, on eyelids and cheeks. Hair color changes to silver. Smiles fade and fear can be seen on a dry laugh. She prays for all those who stood with her. In Epilogue II she remembers those she has lost. She is unable to list them by name. The list of names has been confiscated hinting at the malignant power of the state. All that she has from them are meager, overheard words. She vows to always remember them. She has faith that she will be remembered. She says she stood for three hundred hours, and the doors were never unbolted for her. This shows the intense persecution she suffered. The terrible image of an old woman howling like a wounded animal reminds us of the horror of state terror. The end of the poem is in a state of calm. Melting snow, motionless lids of bronze, the cooing of doves and the calm ships all signify a state of peace in the aftermath of grief and loss. The poem *Requiem* charts the emotional development of the theme of suffering and deep loss. The poem was written over a considerable period of time and is an amalgamation of many different variations on the idea and feeling of loss and grief. We are given the emotional development of loss from intense and turbulent feelings to an aftermath of calm. As a commemoration of the victims of state terror it uses understatement and restraint to convey thought and feeling.

The poem *Dante* is a meditation on the role of the poet who must not return to his origins but must develop onwards. Dante is portrayed as being exceptionally strong in character and as a consequence does not look back. Fate is depicted as wild and energetic. Dante is portrayed as being captivated by Beatrice. Dante refuses to walk through Florence signifying his resolve to achieve despite adversity.

The poem *Cleopatra* opens with the imagined capture of Cleopatra by Augustus. Cleopatra is portrayed as betrayed by her servants. Cleopatra is a captive of her own beauty. Cleopatra is like a swan's neck, peacefully inclined. Cleopatra's children will be put in chains. The poem ends by showing Cleopatra joking with a boy and saying farewell with the viper. She places the viper on her dusky breast with an indifferent hand, signifying her casual assurance and certainty. The joke with the boy shows Cleopatra as calm headed and certain of her task. Cleopatra shows bravery in the poem as she is not afraid of the viper and maintains her grace. The definitiveness of history, its clean grasp of historical logic pervades the character

of Cleopatra. Cleopatra is both calm and active in the poem, able to act with resourcefulness and without hesitation or worry.

The poem *Willow* marks out the narrator's close connection to a willow plant. The willow accompanies the narrator all her life and its weeping branches inspires her dreams. She finds it strange she has outlived the willow. The willow is a tree capable of strangeness. The Willows converse in strange voices. The death of the willow makes her silent and she is in grief without sentimentality. The death of the willow is like the death of a brother. The slow passage of time is viewed in a neoclassical style marked by balance and restraint.

The poem *From the Cycle "Youth"* combines various images by juxtaposing them, including flower kiosks, gramophones, and gas lamps. The cherry trees are described as mourning and their petals are described as rain like. The description of the cherry trees' is a triumph of neoclassical imagery. There is a reference to the battle of Tsushima. The landaus of people outlive them. She describes her youth as being happy, likening it to a masquerade, a carnival and a grand gala. Her youth has been lost and the house she inhabited no longer remains. The poignant loss of an avenue of trees, of hats and shoes, of a fallen tower and of a silent abandoned house all demarcate the loss of youth. The son not returning to the house denotes something gone astray in the world. The persistent questioning of youthful memories haunts the narrator. Witnesses from her youthful memories include the Pavlovsk station waiting room, and a white maned waterfall. The poem evokes the joy and sorrow of youthful memories.

In the poem *The Cellar of Memory* the narrator denies that she lives grieving, and that reminiscence gnaws at her. She does not visit memory often and it always surprises her. She thinks upon the passage of time as it is already thirty years since they bid the ladies goodbye. She states that she is forbidden to appear anywhere, a reference to the Stalinist terror. She does not mourn the past as she takes solace in the paintings on the walls and the warm fireplace. Despite mold, fumes and slime, two emeralds flash. The shock of state terror dislocates her sense of reality. She questions where her home is and where is her reason.

The poem *Thus dark souls take flight...* begins mysteriously. The poem states that she lived for years in hopes. She states she does not need anything on earth anymore. She no longer needs Homer or Dante. This is to her the last evening. The poem repudiates the legacy of Homer and Dante and frees the poet from the burden of the poetic past. The poem is a desire to free the poet from history.

The poem *When someone dies* is a study in perspective. The poem declares that when someone dies his portraits change. The eyes and the lips change. She states that she noticed it when she returned from a certain poet's funeral. She states that she has checked frequently and that her conjecture has been confirmed. The poem is a study in the relationship between the living and the dead and between poets. The fraught relationship between poets makes death a significant event.

The poem *Parting* speaks of the years spent parting. The chill of real freedom and the vision of gray garlands are the outcome of many years of parting. The outcome of parting is also the cessation of treasons and betrayals. There is a great deal of evidence of the perfect innocence of the poetic narrator. Her innocence is in contrast to the pain of parting. The ghost of the first days knocked at the door and in bursts the silver willow. The silver willow is a symbol of splendor and wonder. Despite being frenzied, disdainful and bitter, a bird began to sing in rapture about how much they cherished one another. The silver willow and the bird both give hope and wonder. The last part of the poem entitled "The Last Toast" is a description of the evils of life. The narrator says that she shares loneliness. She has been betrayed by lies. She states that the world is cruel and depraved, and that God did not save. The poem is an acknowledgement of the harshness of life and God.

The poem *Mayakovsky in 1913* is a complex work of literary criticism. The narrator proclaims that Mayakovsky's poems made sounds harden and in them new voices swarmed. She proclaims that Mayakovsky was hard working and was not idle. Mayakovsky brings the quality of novelty to poetry. Mayakovsky is portrayed as a poetic revolutionary, being able to destroy and create poetic forms. Mayakovsky is depicted as lonely and dissatisfied. Mayakovsky's poems produced an audible response in audiences. Mayakovsky quarrelled violently with the city, showing an essentially urban imagination. Mayakovsky's reputation was swift and fast spreading. Mayakovsky is today treasured, and his name rings out like a battle cry. The poem is a eulogy for Mayakovsky.

The poem *Inscription on the Book Plantain* is about the tropical plant, the Plantain. The plant is a symbol of revivification. The plant is a symbol of far off spring. The plant revives the poet's ability to produce poetry. The plant is associated with the color green. Children dance rapturously to the tune of a barrel organ. Life comes to its fullness of expression. Frenzied blood leads her to the one road that is predestined for all. This road is likely to involve death and loss.

The poem *Leningrad in March 1941* is a poem on the experience of the mundane. The sundial on the Menshikov house is a symbol of the city of Leningrad. A steamship passes, raising a wave. The steamship is a symbol of the everyday and the miraculous. The spires and the waters are united by their reflection of light. In contrast the side street is a black slit. The city has a luminous quality to it. Sparrows sit on the wires signaling the existence of wildlife in the city. These excursions have been learnt by heart. She feels a salty tang which is just right. The salty tang is the uniqueness of the city.

The poem *Poem without a Hero* describes the years 1940 to 1962. In the first dedication the narrator states that she does not have enough paper and is writing on a first draft. Pine needles on a grave and in boiling foam signal the presence of death. The funeral march of Chopin is used to describe the sense of death in these years. The second dedication states that for the narrator spring and loneliness are related. In the third dedication a man will come bearing death. In the introduction she says that she will descend to dark vaults after having surveyed everything. In part one of the poem the narrator is surprised that she has survived and that nobody has sentenced her. She has since childhood feared maskers. She states that poets and sinning don't go together. She desires rest. She desires the word that conquers death and solves the riddle of her life.

The poem *Love* describes love as a little snake. Love is described as fearful. In the poem *Secrets of the craft* the narrator states that poetry comes out of one triumphant sound. The narrator rejects the traditional forms of odes and elegies. Poetry should defy what people think it is. Poetry grows out of the ordinary and mundane. The muse is depicted as capricious. The muse at times attacks you and at other times is silent for extended periods.

Akhmatova is able to understand history through a neoclassical style that balances emotion and cognition. The restrained and unsentimental style which she adopts enables her to comment on history without being overwhelmed by it.

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