Akhmatova’s poetry of the middle period constitutes of three collections—White Flock (Belaya staya, 1917), Anno Domini (1921) and Plantain, (Podorozhnik, 1921). Though the middle period may be related to the early one in many ways, it yet marks a significant stage in itself, which shows several changes in Akhmatova as a poet. These changes were indeed due to changes in her personal life and in the contemporary history she belonged to. This was the period when she was divorced from Gumilev, married to Shileiko, and again divorced from him too; this was the period when Blok died and Gumilev was killed: when the First World War and Civil War ended and when the peace-time cynicism of the new order began to be felt. It is, therefore, hard for Akhmatova to retain her early poses without any change in them. The most significant aspect of her poetry of this period is that now the more private concerns of the heroine of the Acmeist period are seen giving way to public themes of poetry and war. As regards the personal or love poetry of this period, it may be seen that the earlier dependence on ‘micro-narratives’ is reduced and greater weight is now placed over explorations of the role of experience. Sometimes it even seems likely that Akhmatova intended at least some of the love poetry of the period to be read as an allegory of the political situation. These poems thus may be observed as representing perhaps the final stage of development of the biographical themes of Evening and Rosary.
The transitional Akhmatova of the middle period may, however, be seen most prominent in her concern with essentially political themes taken from her experiences of the contemporary turbulent times. Of all the three collections, *Anno Domini* is seen displaying most her association with these themes. Here political poems are spread throughout the collection in recognition that the private and public worlds of the heroine are no longer distinct, and in conformity with the civic role of the poet announced in the lines: *And my brother said to me:/Great days have arrived for me,/Now you alone must preserve/Our sorrows and our happiness.* (*That August Like a Yellow Flame, Tot avgust, kak zheltoe plamya*) These works thus may be seen typifying Akhmatova's tendency to place increasing emphasis on the world about her while providing an exact counterpart to the tormented personal relationship between the heroine and hero.

As it will be seen, Akhmatova continues to deepen the resonances of her texts of this period by allusion to folklore and to literary and cultural monuments of the past, as for example, the park at Tsarskoe Selo and the work of the 19-th century poets associated with it. Biblical and church imagery may also be perceived evoking the authority of the cultural tradition.

In many ways, Akhmatova's poetry of the middle period, starting with the publication of *White Flock* (*Belaya staya*) in 1917, can be seen as a continuation of the work of her early career. The dominant focus still remains the emotional state of the heroine in her search for a beloved worthy of her affections. Gary Saul Morson, in his study of Akhmatova's poetry of the middle period, contrasts her manner with that of Pasternak and finds that "avoiding the riddles, shocks, paradoxes, alarms, and excursions characteristic of Pasternak, Akhmatova yet
remains a woman of mystery, ... ... still writing as if her reader must already have been initiated into all the details of her private life." Morson's observation is right so far as the subject of continuity of her early career is emphasized. A careful study of the poems of the middle period will, however, reveal that even in the exploration of the emotional state of the heroine, Akhmatova went through considerable changes. It can be seen that she still alludes to her lover as thou or he as she did in her early poetry. Yet there are striking differences. The importance on the present moment, which had been a fundamental element of Akhmatova's poetry in *Evening* (1912) and *Rosary* (1914), for instance, now gives way to a more thoughtful handling of the heroine's state of mind. The insistent portrayal of precise episodes in the love drama and the cautiously recorded particulars that extensively characterize Akhmatova's early poetry now may be seen changed to an elegiac mode of discourse. The foremost feature of this elegiac mode is that it is burdened with remembrances of events that took place mostly in the past. The following poem, for instance, may be referred as a thoughtful exploration of past moments:

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Evening, sloping
Path before me.
Only yesterday, in love—
He implored, 'Don't forget'.
Now only the winds
And the cries of the shepherds.
The cedars in uproar
By the clean springs.  (Parting, 1915)
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The winds and the cries of the shepherds of the immediate present are used here merely to illuminate the past moment of significance. Such reflective mood can indeed remind us the haikus, as quoted below, by such famous Japanese poets as Basho or Buson:

Night that ends so soon:  
in the shallows still remains  
one silver of the moon.\(^3\)

The Japanese perfection in Akhmatova has been stressed by Alexis Rannit also in his discussion of Akhmatova's poetry before the 1930s.\(^4\) It is, however, not that this reflective mood was totally absent in the Akhmatova of *Evening* and *Rosary*. David N Wells finds some of the poems in *Rosary* certainly foreshadowing it,\(^5\) as we may observe in her famous invocation to the willow who, she thinks, shares her grief and suffering:

Willow, tree of the water nymphs,  
Don't bar my way!  
In the snowy twigs black jackdaws,  
Black jackdaws shelter.  
*(I Know, I Know, Again the Skies, Znaiu, znaiu,—snova lyzhi, 1913)*

While in both the early collections such thoughtful explorations of the emotional states of mind appear in fragments, in the poetry of the middle period they may be seen to move to the center stage. Now not only the minute details of experienced moments are checked, sometimes the poems even appear quite independently devoid of any guise or image taken from the heroine's biography. These are indeed striking changes. In the early Akhmatova, the reader was led to
accept the various guises or images taken up by the poet or the poetic persona for expressing herself as well as her intimate emotions. Now we have poems, as the one cited below, where there is profound statement of thoughtful meditation over some emotional entanglement, without any image or guise:

There is a frontier-line in human closeness
That love and passion cannot violate—
Though in silence mouth to mouth be soldered
And passionate devotion cleave the heart.

(There is a Frontier-Line in Human Closeness,
_Ea't'v blizosti liudei zavernaia cherra_, 1915)

Of course, her new meditative mood brings changes to her language and form too. In comparison to the language of the early poetry, her language now starts to become, as it is clear above, increasingly formal. The conversational vocabulary and syntax of the early poetry now gives way to a diction which is capable of bearing the burden of her new reflective mood. The _dol'nik_ tends to yield to the iamb⁶, and the rhymes too become more exact now.

This poem, addressed to Nikolai Nedobrovo, well illustrates the inability of the poetic persona to act in response to the addressee's declaration of love. In many poems, again, memory may be seen to play the most important influence on her thoughts as experience leads the heroine into a deeper understanding of her feelings. In the following lines, it is the memory of the beloved that makes her to trace back, but she is able to recognize her fate with a certain philosophical detachment:

Everything promised him to me:
The sky's faded, scarlet rim,
Sweet dream on Christmas Eve,
The many-sounding wind at Easter,
... ... ... ... ... ... ...

I could not but believe
That he would be friends with me,
As I walked the hill slopes
On the hot stone path.

(Everything Promised Him to Me,
Vse obeshchalo mne ego, 1916)

A rare note of calm and peace, arising out of a sense of resignation, now captures her:

Like a white stone in the well's depth
One memory lies within me.
I can't and don't want to fight it:
It is happiness and it is suffering.

(Like a White Stone in the Well's Depth, 1916)

The sharp and unexpected image of the white stone lying in the well's depth is effective enough to bring it out that memory really hurts. The projection of words here sounds more meticulous than it had been in her early poetry. Each and every word has been employed carefully and sparingly so as to express the sense of philosophical detachment the speaker feels within her. The speaker can not fight memory, for it carries with it the past moments of elation. The last lines of the poem reveal that she has grown mature enough to control herself:

I know that the gods metamorphosed
Men into objects and didn't kill consciousness.
So that the marvel of sorrow may live forever,
You are metamorphosed into my memory.

*(Like a White Stone in the Well’s Depth, 1916)*

Memory, thus, has a crucial role to play. It is memory which teaches the heroine to wait and search. She looks forward to the future and as spring approaches, she recognizes a change within herself:

> And the song that annoyed you before,  
> Enraptured, you sing as new.

*(These Days Come Before Spring, 1915)*

The theme of waiting, even amidst uncertainty, seems to reflect well the heroine’s journey towards maturity. She is not sure of the response from her beloved; she knows not whether he is alive at all; but she is sure of her devotion to him, as she reflects in the following:

> I don’t know if you’re alive or dead.  
> Can you on earth be sought,  
> Or only when the sunsets fade  
> Be mourned serenely in my thought?

> All is for you: the daily prayer,  
> The speechless heat at night,  
> And of my verses, the white  
> Flock, and of my eyes, the blue fire.

*(I Don’t Know If You’re Alive or Dead, 1915)*

The creative role of poetry has been recognized here. It may be that she has lost her beloved, but she is all ready to keep its memory and everything alive in the form of verse. In *Rosary* itself, poetry had been confirmed as the exclusive
medium for the cathartic release of unbearable sorrow and pain; now the figure of the Muse is seen appearing with insistent regularity. In By the Sea Shore, 1915, Akhmatova’s first narrative poem belonging to this period, for instance, the classical Muse appears in peasant dress, but is nonetheless identifiable by her flute:

I began to dream often of a girl
In narrow bracelets and a short skirt,
With a white flute in her cool hands.

(By the Sea Shore, 1915)

It is this girl with a white flute in her cool hands, who instills the heroine with the power to formulate a song with which to welcome the tsarevich when he arrives. The 1914-poem, Loneliness (included in White Flock), also brings out the heroine’s reliance on the Muse: pain and suffering of the heroine has burnt the Muse’s hand, but it is because of her that she finally succeeds in completing her verse:

And the Muse’s sunburnt hand
Divinely light and calm
Finishes the unfinished page. (Loneliness, 1914)

The Muse has been seen here as double of the heroine as well as her antagonist. Love and suffering are identified as the raw material of poetry, which indeed replaces them as the focus of the heroine’s attention: poetry lasts after love is elapsed. In the following poem also (included in White Flock), the soothing effect of poetry has been recognized against sufferings of love:
The road is black by the beach—
Garden. Lamps yellow and fresh.
I’m very calm.
I’d rather not talk about him.

I’ve a lot of feeling for you. You’re kind.
We’ll kiss, grow old, walk around.
Light months will fly over us
Like snowy stars. (The Road is Black by the Beach, 1914)

However, poetry brings with it its own complications too. The public
rehearsal of the passion and disappointment that produce it lead to further
suffering in the form of public humiliation. Yet like love itself, the preservation of
its memory in the form of verse is an irresistible avocation.

The memory of lost love, poetry, and humiliation—these three may be
found altogether in the following short poem:

One hope less will become
One hope more,
And this song, against my will,
I will give over to laughter and profanation.

(I have Stopped Smiling, Yaulybat’ sya perestala, 1916)

Some epigrammatic and apparently simple constructions were often there in her
early collections also, but now her new mood has made them more explicit and
direct, making them almost free from hints and impressionistic suggestions.

The transitional Akhmatova of the middle period may, however, be seen
most prominent in her concern with the themes of war and its attendant loss,
separation and death. By contrast with Pasternak’s verses, which so blithely
ignore wartime sufferings, Akhmatova’s work of the period may be seen revealing profound concern for the troubles of her fellow citizens. These works also typify her tendency to place increasing emphasis on the world about her while drifting away from the self-obsessed mood of her earlier writings. In a poem composed on the day preceding Germany’s declaration of war on Russia in 1914, she describes that summer as a sinister season of intense heat and drought, adding a prophecy of evil and good made by a crippled stranger:

All month a smell of burning, of dry peat
Smoldering in the bogs.
Even the birds have stopped singing,
The aspen does not tremble.

The god of wrath glares in the sky,
The fields have been parched since Easter.
A one-legged pilgrim stood in the yard
With his mouth full of prophecies:

“Beware of terrible times... the earth
opening for a crowd of corpses.
Expect famine, earthquakes, plagues,
And heavens darkened by eclipses.” (July, 1914, Iyun, 1914)

The change in Akhmatova’s choice of her imagery brought by her latest concern with the political theme may deserve particular mention here. Smell of grass, sea or brine had been there in her early poetry immensely. But now, the smell of dry peat smoldering in the bogs, in association with the god of wrath and the one-legged pilgrim faithfully declare the authenticity of her new experience which is
terrible. War has been seen here as potentially presaging the end of civilization itself. In Memory of 19 July 1914 (Pamyati 19 iyula 1914), again, alludes to the outbreak of war and Akhmatova here foresees soldiers' wives groaning over their fatherless children, widows' sobs sounding through the villages, and trampled fields warmly sprinkled with red wetness. These are indeed the details that restlessly pronounce her detachment from her early associations, declaring at the same time her more insistent concern with the real that the Acmeist ideals emphasized. Akhmatova herself here recognizes her new role as the spokesperson of such collective suffering of her people:

The shadows of songs and passions disappeared
From my memory like a burden no longer required.
The Almighty ordered it, emptied,
To become a grim book of fearful news.

(In Memory of 19 July 1914, Pamyati 19 iyula 1914)

In 1915, she may be seen looking back on the horrors of the war's early months, comparing Russia's present sufferings with past experiences that can now be seen as blessings:

We thought ourselves bereft, destitute.
But after loss upon loss
Had rendered each day
A Day of Remembrance,
We took to hymning
God's great bounty,
And our own former riches.

(That Voice Arguing with the Great Silence,
Tot golos, s tishinoi velikoi sporya, 1915)
Akhmatova also commemorates the sufferings of wartime Petrograd, a 'city of sumptuous parades', that has now become "a camp of savages":

What has happened to our capital?  
Who grounded the sun?  
Our standard's black eagle  
Seemed like a bird in flight.

(That Voice Arguing with the Great Silence,  
Tot golos, s tishinoi velikoi sporya, 1915)

The two unanswered questions in the first two lines followed by explicit observations on what has already happened leave no space for her early poses and restraints here. She is, of course, eager to sacrifice herself, if only she can alleviate her country's sufferings. In the following eight-line poem, for instance, she offers herself as a sacrificial victim:

Give me grim years of sickness;  
Give me choking, insomnia, fever.  
Take my child, my lover,  
My mysterious gift of song.  
Thus I pray at Thy service  
After many weary days:  
May the cloud over dark Russia  
Become radiant with glory. (Prayer, Molitva, 1915)

The intensity of her emotions, successfully rendered in the medium of a devotional song, is transferred directly to the reader's heart. The same note of urgency to be of some help to the suffering country may be felt also in the following:
To earthly solace, heart, be not a prey,
To wife and home do not attach yourself,
Take the bread out of your child’s mouth,
And to a stranger give the bread away.

(To Earthly Solace, Heart, Be not a Prey, 1921)

In comparison to White Flock, however, Anno Domini may be seen exploiting in large measure Akhmatova’s concern with the theme of politics. Emphasizing on the strong chronological perspective of the title of Anno Domini, David Wells comments that the title, with its echoes of medieval chronicles, announces from the outset that the work is to be a record of the times in which it is written. The nationalist stance is evident in poems that celebrate the traditional way of life or rural Russia, such as in Bezhetsk (1917) which opens with the following description of the Russian countryside:

The river flows unhurriedly down the valley,
The house on the hill has many windows,
And we live as we did under Catherine,
Going to church and waiting for the harvest. (Bezhetsk, 1917)

The peaceful rhythm of these lines further combines a powerful evocation of Christmas in the Russian countryside with a refusal to accept the invitation of stern memory to examine the past:

There stern memory, so ungiving now,
Threw open her tower-rooms to me, with a low bow;
But I didn’t enter, and slammed the fearful door;
And the town rang with the news of the Child that was born.

(Bezhetsk, 1917)
The way she speaks of her refusal of the invitation of stern memory makes it clear that she has been strengthened by the spiritual way of life evoked in the ideal rustic scene in the previous section of the poem. In order to speak her refusal, hence, she has not felt the necessity of a change in the metre or the rhyme-scheme of the poem. In this poem, as Wendy Rosslyn has noted, 'the mundane is exalted and endowed with spiritual significance.' Apart from these, there are also more reasoned statements of the poet’s position with regard to her country. In *When in the Throes of Suicide* (*Kogda v toske samoubiistva*, 1917), for example, she rejects the idea of exchanging her part in her country’s suffering for the life of an exile. When she was asked to leave the "wild and sinful country", she reacted thus:

> But indifferently and calmly
> I blocked my ears, like a child,
> Not to be tempted by dirty talk,
> Not, in my mourning, to be defiled.
> *(When in the Throes of Suicide, Kogda v toske samoubiistva, 1917)*

In the later *I’m not One of Those Who Left the Land* (*Ne s temi ya, kto brosil zemlyu*, 1922), she rejects both the temptations of exile and the blandishments of the new political masters whose actions had surrendered Russia to war:

> I’m not one of those who left the land
> To the mercy of its enemies...
> Their flattery leaves me cold.
> My songs are not for them to praise.
> *(I’m not One of Those Who Left the Land,
> Ne s temi ya, kto brosil zemlyu, 1922)*
The metre employed here is in perfect tune with her resolve and stance. The
preferences to retain her moral independence at whatever cost it may bring:

We, the survivors, do not flinch
From anything, not from a single blow.

Surely the reckoning will be made
After the passing of this cloud.
We are the people without tears,
Straighter than you ... more proud...

(I'm not One of Those Who Left the Land,
Ne s temi ya, kto brosil zemlyu, 1922)

The motifs of fear, death and separation, which arise out of the terror of
the war, may also be seen informing many poems of the period. In Why is This
Vorse (1919), for instance, the dread as well as grief leaves in the mind of the
reader an unanswerable question of responsibility:

Why is this age worse than earlier ages?
In a stupor of grief and dread
Have we not fingered the foulest wounds
And left them unhealed by our hands?

(Why is This Age Worse, 1919)

These are all self-suggesting questions, but they are weighty enough to
question the factors responsible for the tragic situation of the present scenario. In
the following poem also the note of chaos and desire for death finds poignant
expression:

It seems that man's voice
Will never ring out here,
Only the stone-age wind
Beats on the black gates.
It seems to me that I alone
Survived under the sky,
Because I was the first who wished
To drink death's wine.

(It Seems That Man's Voice, 1917)

The Moon Stopped Behind the Lake (Za ozerom luna ostanovilas, 1922) from Plantain is also full of images of death and decay beyond the control of the protagonist:

Sensing
A terrible misfortune, we at once fell silent.
The owls shrieked a requiem,
And a stifling wind raged in the garden.

(The Moon Stopped Behind the Lake,
Za ozerom luna ostanovilas, 1922)

The words employed here deserve special mention. Akhmatova here speaks of owls that 'shrieked' a requiem and of a 'stifling' wind that 'raged' in the garden. The choice of words here has evoked a perfect picture of the subject in the poem. This is indeed a great feat on her part; it seems that her words are not simply words. They are pictures and thereby they attain significance in her poems. This is, however, not the result of the influence of the Art Novea over her, rather, it might be associated with the pronounced aversion of the Acmeist within her against the Symbolist projection of words. With the advancement of her poetic career, it will be seen, she attained more perfection in this regard.
Moreover, it may be seen that Akhmatova intended at least some of the love poetry of the period to be read as an allegory of the political situation. The parallel between the heroine's private and public lives and the juxtaposition of clearly political poems and apparently personal ones seem to be too deliberate to be purely coincidental. Poems such as You are Always mysterious and New (Ty vsegda tainstvennyi i novyi) and Traveller Dear, You are Far Away (Putnik milyi, ty daleche), which talk of enthrallment and forced meekness before a pitiless master, are certainly liable of interpretation in terms of current events. It is this background that affects her relationship with the figure of the hero:

The sun was like a rebel forcing the capital
And the spring-like autumn caressed it so thirstily
That it seemed the transparent snowdrop would
Blossom white...
That was when you, cool and calm, came to my door.

(The Freak Autumn Built a High Vault in the Sky, 1922)

Some poems, on the other hand, may be seen offering an occasional moment of consolation in the contemplation of nature or in communion with the Muse, as is clear in the acknowledgement of a moment of hope amid the prevailing mood of destruction in the following:

Everything has been plundered, betrayed, sold.
The wing of black death has flashed by.
Everything has been devoured by starving anguish.
Why then do we find it so bright? (Everything Has Been..., 1921)

The Doors are Thrown Wide Open (Shiroko raspakhnuty vorota) describes a moment of understanding occasioned by the sound of church bells. It ends by
recording a moment of shelter from the emotional vicissitudes of the heroine’s life:

Now I am calm and happy.
Goodbye my quiet one, you will always be dear to me
For allowing a wanderer into your home.

(The Doors are Thrown Wide Open, Shiroko raspakhnuty vorota)

Most of the poems in Plantain suggest a new start after the tribulations of Anno Domini. Wells finds that the epigraph to the collection sets the entire collection in the past. The line In those days of fable, from Tyutchev’s poem I Knew Her Even Then (Ya znal ee sshche togda), in itself suggests a nostalgic look at the past as well as evoking Tyutchev’s portrait of a beautiful woman whose perfection has been overcome by death.

Poems like Rachel (Rakhil, 1921) and Lot’s Wife (Lotova zhena, 1922-24) have, again, recourse to absolute and religious values as a source of strength. Akhmatova, for example, describes the constancy of the love between Jacob and Rachel in the Biblical story in spite of the former’s marriage by trickery to her sister Leah. In Lamentation (Prichitanie), she describes the congregation leaving a church in terms of saints from the orthodox canon: their everyday simplicity is saintly in its mundane determination. A similar search for durable values is found in, for example, A Monstrous Rumour Wanders through the Town (Sluh chudovishchnyi brodit po gorodu), where the comforting conclusion of the tale of the Blue Beard is suspected of not meeting the heroine’s present circumstances.

Other poems may be seen locating comfort in nature, or in the act of remorse, or in the expectation of forgiveness before death. The lost innocence of Akhmatova’s earlier art is also celebrated in, for example, Leaving the Groves of...
My Sacred Homeland (Pokinuv roshchi rodiny svyashchennoi), where the muses of her youth are compared to ‘girls who have not yet known love’. And a new function for art is revealed in That August, like a Yellow Flame (Tot avgust, kak zheltoe plamya), in the context of the First World War. Just as the face of the capital is changing as a result of the war, so too the warrior and the poet must both adopt new roles:

And my brother said to me:
Great days have arrived for me.
Now you alone must preserve
Our sorrows and our happiness.

(That August, like a Yellow Flame, Tot avgust, kak zheltoe plamya)

The social role which Akhmatova had begun to embrace is seen to assert itself with even greater force in a poem written in 1924. This poem had identified her muse with that of Dante and implied that her task in describing contemporary Russia was parallel to the Italian poet’s in portraying the Inferno:

I say to her, ‘Was it you who dictate
The pages of Hell?’ She answers, ‘It was I’. (Muse, 1924)

Indeed this reference to Dante may be perceived evoking the authority of the tradition that Akhmatova embraced since her very early times for the intended poetic strength and power. It is this authority that has helped her in rendering successfully her new reflective mood in the poetry of the middle period. Reference may again be made to the ringing of bells in the poem, Frosty Sun. From the Parade (1914):

Here the house was all but white,
Glass-porched.
So many times my deadly pale hand
Held the bell-ring. (Frosty Sun. From the Parade, 1914)

The ringing of bells here is seen as providing a link between the present and the historical and religious traditions of the city where she lived, and leads her to reflections on duty or on a change that has taken place in her view of the world.

The cultural past has, thus, remained always a source of direction for Akhmatova and her poetry. Throughout her texts of this period, it is, therefore, easy to find out how she continues to intensify her new reflective mood, represented by the shifts both in her content and style, by allusion to that past with all its riches that range from folklore to literary and cultural monuments. Her direct and almost prosaic style in her civic poems of this period may, for instance, relate to her close association with the early heroic poems of the Russian poetic tradition. Her civic themes of courage, sacrifice, martyrdom etc. of this period of course display great similarity with the same themes ushered in those early heroic poems and there might be seen similarities in their representation too. The lyrical spontaneity, shared by a strong reverence for narrative, for instance, is seen in both Akhmatova and those heroic poems. Besides some rhythmic features, like the one of a special balance when several short syntactic units are followed by one or two long ones, as seen in the following, may relate Akhmatova’s poetry of this period to the rhythmic prose of the 12th century chronicle narratives, like that of Cyril of Turov’s Sermons:

The road is black by the beach—
Garden. Lamps yellow and fresh.
I’m very calm.
I'd rather not talk about him.

I've a lot of feeling for you. You're kind.
We'll kiss, grow old, walk around.
Light months will fly over us
Like snowy stars.  

(The Road is Black by the Beach, 1914)

_By the Sea Shore_ (1915) is, again, exemplary of the way in which reference to folklore and to the literary tradition gets combined in her work. A young girl waiting eagerly for the arrival of her _tsarevich_ is essentially folkloric in spirit, and to increase the impact of this situation Akhmatova uses anaphora and other forms of repetition within relatively simple stylistic constructions in the same way as in folk poetry. The use of animal imagery— the cicadas who chattered restlessly, the jellyfish that swam into the bay, the cranes who coorleed in the sky, the dogs that howled all night, the white gull crying over the wormwood steppe, a donkey nibbled by the wicket gate ---- also has much in common with folkloric models. The heroine's unselfconscious identification with the natural world, for instance, is conveyed using a traditional pattern of repetition in the lines:

A green fish would swim up to me
A white gull would fly up to me
But I was daring, wild and cheerful
And quite unaware that this was happiness.

(By the Sea Shore, 1915)

The nature imagery of the following lines which narrate the discovery of the dead _tsarevich_ by the heroine also reminds the rich imagery of folk poetry:
Dusky and tender my Tsarevich
Lay quietly and looked at the sky.
His eyes greener than the sea
And darker than our cypresses—
I could see them fading...
Better to have been born blind.

(By the Sea Shore, 1915)

The song of the ocarina and the clay pipe (Blue Varnish Faded in the Sky, 1912), the regular beat of unshod hooves (I See, I See the Crescent Moon, 1914), the song of the nightingale on the crooked pine (A Log Bridge Blackened and Twisted, 1917), the gipsy boy who cried under the black shawl ('Tall Woman, Where is Your Gipsy Boy, 1914)—all these references merely remind us of Akhmatova's close association with folklore of the past Russia. In Dream (1915), there is the reference to the Tsaritsa's garden in Tsarskoe Selo:

You saw the Tsaritsa's garden
The intricate white palace... (Dream)

Tsarskoe Selo itself is a recurring motif in many poems, as in Everything Promised Him to Me (Vse obeshchalo mne ego, 1916):

The red vine shoots,
Waterfalls in the park... (Everything Promised ..., 1916)

Reference may also be made of Akhmatova's borrowing from Pushkin for her By the Sea Shore (1915). As Zhirmunskill has pointed out, the poem relies on Pushkin's Tale of the Fisherman and the Golden Fish (1833) for its title, its particular adaptation of folkloric verse metre and its vocabulary and syntax.10 Akhmatova's title is taken from the first lines of Pushkin's tale:
There lived an old man and his wife
On the edge of the blue sea.

(Tale of the Fisherman and the Fish, 1833)

This reference contributes to the image of the sea as the source of fulfillment that is central to By the Sea Shore (1915). Just as the sea in Pushkin’s tale is the magical source of power for the fisherman and his wife and also the source of their downfall, it is similarly the element of freedom for the heroine of By the Sea Shore (1915) and the source of both fulfillment and grief simultaneously. The long awaited tsarevich comes, eventually, from the sea, but he is dead.

The “visual acumen and expressive power” of Derzhavin’s poetry may also be seen as another strong influence on Akhmatova. These famous lines from Derzhavin’s The Waterfall may be, for instance, illustrative of his craftsmanship of this world of stones and metals:

Lo! like a glorious pile of diamonds bright,
Built on the steadfast cliffs, the waterfall
Pours forth its gems of pearl and silver light:
They sink, they rise, and sparkling, cover all
With infinite refulgence, while its song
Sublime as thunder rolls the woods along...

The visual acumen and expressive power of the following lines from Akhmatova’s By the Sea Shore (1915) can illustrate well how she was affected by Derzhavin’s craftsmanship:

Sun baked the well’s depths,
Grilled scolopendras on stones,
Tumble-weed ran wild
Like a hunchback clown somersaulting,
And the sky flying high
Was blue as the Virgin's cloak—
Never had been so blue. (By the Sea Shore, 1915)

Apart from these, Biblical and church imagery may also be perceived evoking the authority of the cultural tradition. Chukovsky, focusing on her almost consistent concern with religious associations in this period, says that in comparison to the lightness of thought and feeling, her poetry now displays "an afterlife wisdom and the calm of a soul which has overcome suffering and earthly cares." A diction that makes widespread use of Church Slavonic forms and religious imagery may be seen to bring into the Akhmatova of this period a tremendous grandeur that is in perfect tune with her new reflective mood. The informal vocabulary and syntax of Rosary and Evening are now almost absent. Words taken from the lexicon of Orthodox Christianity, like crucifix (Black Road Twisted, 1913), Saviour (Freshness of Words..., 1915), Apostles and the Psalms (Under an Empty Dwelling's Frozen Roof, 1915), for instance, now occur with some frequency. The most significant role played by these religious imagery and associations is that they have helped her in expressing lyrically the most varied of feeling and emotions. However, it may be seen that when ecclesiastical motifs are used in poems where love is the predominant concern, as in How can You Look at the Neva (1914), for example, new connotations are formed which would otherwise not be present:

How can you look at the Neva,
How can you go out on the bridges?
Not for nothing have I been called sad
Since I first dreamed of you.
The wings of black angels are sharp,
The last judgment is near
And the crimson bonfires
Like roses flower in the snow.

*(How can You Look at the Neva, 1914)*

In the following, again, there is the reference to Fra Angelico whose blindness has been referred to voice the speaker's reaction to the cruelty of the contemporary times:

Freshness of words, simplicity of emotions,
If we lost these, would it not be as though
Blindness had stricken Fra Angelico...

*(Freshness of Words, Simplicity of Emotions, 1915)*

The ecclesiastical motifs are used also to highlight the sense of duty and responsibility. Thus, in *In the Kiev Church of the Divine Wisdom (I v Kievskom khrames premudrosti boga)*, the speaker insists that the icon of St Sophia and the sound of the cathedral bells will remind her of the vows she has made to her beloved. In *I will Tend the Black Flowers-Beds (Budu chernye gryadki kholif)*, the distinction is made between wild flowers which grow spontaneously and flowers which are cultivated with great care and effort. It is only the latter that can be taken to St Sophia as a sign of repentance, because, like the faith necessary for salvation, they require assiduous attention and selflessness to ensure that they grow up. The poem implies that natural instincts must be overcome in the interests of duty.
Reference to the Bible is made also as revelatory of the speaker's aspiration for peace amidst moments of unprecedented historical terror:

Under an Empty Dwelling's Frozen Roof
Dead days. Here no living comes.
I read the Acts of the Apostles
And the Psalms.
(Under an Empty Dwelling's Frozen Roof, 1915)

The Bible indeed provides her with faith and courage for the forthcoming days:

But the stars are blue, the hoar-frost downy,
And each meeting more wonderful,
And in the Bible a red maple leaf
Marks the pages of the Song of Songs.
(Under an Empty Dwelling's Frozen Roof, 1915)

Sometimes exemplary characters from Biblical or ecclesiastical history may be seen used by the poet to illuminate the situation of the speaker. In The Dry Lips are Tightly Closed (Plotno somknuty guby sukhie), for example, Akhmatova describes the funeral of the Russian Saint, Evdokiya and likens the scene to an unexplained event in the life of the lyric heroine. In Your Hands are Burning (Goryat tvoi ladoni) the torments of the hero are compared to those of St. Anthony and the repression of memories is likened to the firmness of Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene also appears in connection to the speaker's inability in becoming a good mother:

A mother’s fate is a torture of joy,
I was not worthy of it.
They unlocked the wicket gate into white paradise,
Mary Magdalene took my little son.

('Tall Woman, Where is Your Gipsy Boy..., 1914)

On the other hand, in the three Biblical Poems—Lot's Wife (Lotova zhele, 1922-24), Rachel (Rakhil, 1921), Michal (Melkhola)—three episodes from the Old Testament have been used to interpret the perspective of the usual concerns of Akhmatova's poetry. Thus Lot's Wife stresses the memories of domestic happiness associated with the city of Sodom which make it impossible for Lot's wife not to turn back. Rachel relates how Jacob was tricked into marriage with Leah and emphasizes the emotional trauma of his forced separation from Rachel and the latter's shouldering resentment of her sister. The third poem, Michal, investigates contradictory feelings of Saul's daughter, Michal, who finds herself attracted to her father's dependent, David, even though she despises him for his lowly origins.

A similar expansion of meaning is achieved through Akhmatova's use of material from Russian and Ukrainian history. In In the Kiev Church of the Divine Wisdom (I v Kievskom khrame premudrosti boga), there are allusions to the Mongol invasion (through the icon in St Sophia which survived it), to Mazeppa and to Prince Yaroslav.

To sum up, strictly changing socio-political scenario, in combination with the changes in her personal life, had brought about changes both to the content and manner of Akhmatova of this period. The persistent portrayal of precise episodes in the love drama and the cautiously recorded details that widely describe Akhmatova's early poetry now is changed to an elegiac mode of discourse. The thoughtful exploration of the emotional states now comes to the center stage. Thematically, this new reflective mood is exemplified generally in
the poems of memory and waiting, and in those where the creative role of poetry is acknowledged.

The transitional Akhmatova of the middle period is prominent best in her concern with the themes of war and its attendant sufferings, fear and death. These concerns characterize her increasing emphasis on the world about her. Even some of the poetry of the middle period now represent themselves as allegories of the political situation.

Her new meditative mood brings changes to her language and form too. Her language now is capable of bearing the burden of her new reflective mood.

Akhmatova, of course, intensifies her new reflective mood by allusions to that past with all its riches that range from folklore to literary and cultural monuments. The references to the past writers like Dante or Pushkin assert with greater force the social role Akhmatova had begun to embrace since this period. The Bible and other religious texts are used extensively to represent the most varied of feelings and sentiments. Sometimes ideal characters from the Biblical or ecclesiastical history are used to illuminate the situation of the speaker. Her direct and almost prosaic style in the civic poems of this period relate to her close association with the early heroic poems of the Russian poetic tradition. Of course, the assimilation of historical and political themes, in full spirit with the literary and cultural tradition of Russia, becomes increasingly insistent in the work Akhmatova produced in the 1930s onwards.
Notes and References:


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8 Rosslyn, Dr Wendy: *The Prince, the Pool and the Nunnery: Religion and Love in the Early Poetry of Anna Akhmatova*, Avebury, Amersham, 1984, p-26


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