Chapter-3

POETRY OF THE LATER PERIOD (1930—1966)

By the later poetry of Akhmatova, we have specified her poetry since 1930 up to 1966, the year of her death. The year 1925 was a significant year in Akhmatova's poetic career, because it was when her poetry was banned by an unofficial resolution of the Communist Party of Soviet Russia. Since then, she published little in print and when in 1936 she revived again, her poetry showed significant marks of departure, both in form and content, from her early periods. It may be seen that before 1925, especially in her 1921 collection, Anno Domini, Akhmatova's poetry had already displayed a recognizable shift from private to public and historical subject matters; and now, in her later period, this shift is to be seen acquiring an epical dimension in such poems as Requiem (Rekviem, 1935-40), and Poem without a Hero (Poema bez geroia, 1940-65). In the periods before 1925, Akhmatova had composed only one longer poem, By the Sea Shore in 1915; but, now, in the later period, she is seen to deal with longer forms and to organize poems in lyric cycles (such as In 1940, Northern Elegies, Requiem, etc.) more frequently than in the early and middle period. The expansion of forms now evidently allows her for a broadening of theme. Akhmatova now not only deals more extensively with public and historical subject matter, but also with metapoetic reflection on the role of the poet and the creative process. Now, there is to be seen a significant shift also in the way in which the speaker presents herself and a greater number of autobiographical referents. The range of different personae presented in the early verse now seems to be replaced by a single voice which is much closer to Akhmatova's own. However, this self is fractured and a split between the
speaker and her past self occurs, so that she is often confronted with the apparition of her former self. At the same time, there is also to be seen a pronounced increase in the allusive density of the poems, which only clarifies, inspite of the numerous shifts and innovations in them, Akhmatova’s sincere concern with the tradition.

It may be seen that many scholars have tried to underline in Akhmatova’s later poetry in particular a response to postmodernism. They have specified the 1930s as the period of modernism’s crisis and they argue that Akhmatova’s later poetry coincide with this period. During this period, there was official ban on both modernism and formalism in Russia and yet, Wendy Rosslyn observes that, inspite of such prohibition, *Poem without a Hero* is indisputably a modernist work. Similarly, Catriona Kelly remarks that Akhmatova did not discard modernism in her later poetry and her *Poem without a Hero* is undoubtedly one of the great Russian modernist works. Alexandra Harrington, again, cites Solomon Volkov who claims that the different citations— often obvious, sometimes hidden or encoded— in *Poem without a Hero*, make it a significant postmodernist text. There are again some critics who deny the very existence of Russian postmodernism altogether. They offer the active suppression of modernism by Stalinism in the 1930s to 1950s as its reason. It is true that the assertion of party control over literature and propaganda campaigns against formalism and modernism resulted in an understandable unwillingness on the part of the Soviet poets to innovate. There is, as a result, a sense in which a gap in Russian culture was created during the 1930s to 1950s, certainly with respect to poetry. With the exceptions of Akhmatova and Pasternak, the Stalinist period of Russian poetry was just like a desert. While Pasternak was working during this period in a simpler idiom than before, Akhmatova’s majority of innovative works
remained unpublished. This study in this chapter aims at underlining the
different innovations or shifts in the poetry of Akhmatova of the later period,
but not in the way of those critics searching elements of postmodernism in
them, but in close observation of her contact with the tradition with which she
was associated since her early career.

In her essay *Poets with a History and Poets without a History* (1941),
Marina Tsvetaeva has identified Akhmatova as one of the latter-
quintessentially lyric poets whose style is fully developed in their very first
poems. Such poets do not, in Tsvetaeva’s view, develop or mature. Poets
with a history, by contrast, go through many phases and are typically poets of
themes like Goethe or Pushkin. Susan Amert, in her study of Akhmatova’s
poetry, however, has refuted Tsvetaeva’s assessment of Akhmatova. As she
writes:

Akhmatova may have been born a poet without a history, but the cataclysmic
events she lived through—particularly the Russian revolution and its
aftermath—transformed her into a “poet with a history”.

The logic behind Amert’s assessment is obvious here. A study of
Akhmatova’s later poetic career through the 1930s and 1940s can establish it
well that she had been the true witness to the history of her times. In *Poem
without a Hero*, the speaker may be seen commenting on herself:

Believe me, I’m fed up with
The celebrations of civic death.

*(Poem without a Hero, Poema bez geroia, 1940-65)*

Her ‘civic death’ is indeed an explicit reference to those turbulent times
Akhmatova had to go through since the 1920s. Her poetry was effectively
banned by an unofficial party resolution of 1925 that was never made public and about which she did not learn until 1927. She made several attempts to publish her work between 1926 and the mid-1930s, but of no avail. Many people, especially abroad, were persuaded by the suppression of her work that Akhmatova was dead. Isaiah Berlin recalls a conversation he had in 1945 with the literary critic Vladimir Orlov:

I asked him about the fate of the writers in Leningrad. He said, "You mean Zoshchenko and Akhmatova?" Akhmatova to me was a figure from a remote past; Maurice Bowra, who had translated some of her poems, spoke about her to me as someone not heard of since the First World War." Is Akhmatova still alive?" I asked.7

Roberta Reeder cites an entry under 'Akhmatova' in the Literary Encyclopaedia for 1929, which describes her as "a poetess of the aristocracy who has not found a new function."8 As Akhmatova wrote much later, in 1958, with autobiographical directness:

And the megaphone speaks.
I find out how nasty I was
That year, and how then I became
Even more terrible.

How at thirty I was considered old.

(Lyrical Digressions to the Seventh Elegy, Liricheskoe otstupleniia sed'moi elegii, 1958)

The reference to the thirties deserves special mention here. The 1930s are the years which saw the fully developed dictatorship of Stalin. Gary Saul Morson finds the Stalin epoch "considerably longer and more severe than the First World War, the revolution, and the Civil War combined."9 The conflict
between Russian writers and the Russian State may be seen reigning supreme during this epoch. One single proof of this fact is that "in emigration alone nearly 400 volumes of Russian poetry by over two hundred and fifty poets are said to have been published in the forty years following the Revolution."\textsuperscript{10} The principle of socialist realism was now enforced upon the writers in Russia and it was instructed that the writers would have to "assist the Party in its task of completing the task of social transformation now in progress, of consolidating the gains already made, and of educating the people in the ways of virtue."\textsuperscript{11} This was of course a way of subordinating literature to extra-literary purposes of the State, and such an environment was hardly conducive to the free expression of ideas. In her biography of the poet, Roberta Reeder notes that by 1935, Akhmatova felt an emptiness, a sense that her Muse had forsaken her.\textsuperscript{12} But it is not true, as Lidiya Chukovskaya writes, that Akhmatova did not write poetry at all during this period.\textsuperscript{13} In \textit{A Brief Note on Myself} (1965), she herself recognizes:

\begin{quote}
I have never stopped writing verse. For me, it is my link with time.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

This is indeed reflective of her responsibility as a poet, in the long tradition of Russian poetry, to speak out on social, moral and political issues. By this time she was denied access to any means of presenting her work to the reading public, and even though at the rare instances, as in 1940, she was granted permission to publish, she did not enjoy the same editorial freedom as she had in the early years of her career. "For the most part, her poetry was kept secretly on scraps of paper, circulated in manuscripts amongst friends, or very often, preserved only in memory without written versions."\textsuperscript{15} Chukovskaya, in her memoir of Akhmatova, describes how poems would be written out for a moment, memorized by Akhmatova's visitor, and then burnt
in the stove. In the *Burnt Notebook (Sozhennaia tetrad)* of 1961, Akhmatova may be seen reflecting upon the conditions in which she was writing poems: here she implicitly contrasts her published works of the early period with her fragmentary and threatened later poetry:

Showing off on the bookshelf  
Is your fortunate sister,  
But over you are the splinters of flocks and stars,  
And under you the coals of a fire.  
How you prayed, how you wanted to lie,  
How you feared the acrid flame!  
(*Burnt Notebook, Sozhennaia tetrad, 1961*)

Yet it is significant that by this time, she felt more than ever that she was one of the few people still able and willing to chronicle the era through which she was living, and to keep alive the literary and social traditions of the past. In her *Autobiographical Sketches* (1957-61), Akhmatova implicitly casts herself as a poet who was silenced—a kind of poetic death—in the mid-1920s, but who has been resurrected. She describes her return to poetry in 1936 after the extended period of near silence following the 1925 ban in terms which emphasize that both she and her poetry are qualitatively different. She remarks that her handwriting and voice have changed and thereby intimates that a kind of change has taken place. She describes all this in apocalyptic terms, suggesting historical catastrophe:

In 1936 I begin to write again, but my handwriting has changed and my voice already sounds different. Life puts in harness a Pegasus, who in some way recalls the Pale horse of the Apocalypse or the Black horse from poems then not yet born. “Requiem” (1935-40) springs up. A return to the early manner is impossible. Which is better, which worse, is not for me to judge. 1940 is the
apogee. Poems ring out ceaselessly, treading on one another’s heels, rushing and panting; they are diverse and sometimes, probably, they are bad.  

The mention of Pegasus here is in itself suggestive of death and rebirth into another form. According to Greek mythology, Pegasus sprang from the blood of Medusa after Perseus had decapitated her. Similarly, Akhmatova likens her Muse to a phoenix, raised from the ashes, as may be seen in her poem *They will Forget!* *How Amazing* (1957). It is not without reason that Victor Erlich has called the whole episode of death and reemergence of Akhmatova the “myth of the artist as a tragic hero” in post-revolutionary Russia.  

As is evident, Akhmatova herself recognizes, in clear and precise terms, the shift in her poetry by this time. Scholarly works on Akhmatova offer explanations of the relations between the early and later poetry that are broadly similar to the poet’s own. The impact of historical events on the poet and her speaker is one of the major factors in the change in her poetry identified by scholars and is supported by Akhmatova’s description of it as a kind of apocalypse. In the later period, Akhmatova may be seen becoming increasingly preoccupied with public themes, dispensing altogether with the love diary or lyrical novel format of her early books and locating herself in a larger context than before. She may be seen to speak on behalf of others. As Rosslyn sees, “Generally speaking, in her later poems Akhmatova moves from the exploration of psychology to social, historical and philosophical concerns.” This is, however, not to say that her concern with psychology disappears. Of course, many later poems may be seen displaying the same features and concerns as their early counterparts. Nadezhda Mandelstam observes with some justification that whenever Akhmatova was “left in peace, she always reverted to the pure and placid manner of her early work”. Sam
N Driver considers all these aspects, and finds that "there are definite 'new emphases' in the later period, but ultimately little that can not be traced to the earlier work". Verheul argues cogently for a shift in emphasis, asserting that secondary elements of the early work become primary in the later poetry:

When we compare the poetry of Akhmatova's initial five books... with her verse from the later 30s onward— that is to say Akhmatova's work from before and after her period of relative poetic silence--- we discover on various levels of the structure of her poetic world characteristic differences in emphasis, a changed weight and significance of forms of expression and of poetic motifs that often play only a secondary role in the "earlier" poetry.

To spell out the public role of the poet may be seen as one of such dominant motifs of Akhmatova's poetry of the 1930s. In a poem written in memory of Mikhail Bulgakov, who died in 1940, Akhmatova writes of herself as the sole remaining voice prepared to speak out:

You are no more, and everything around is silent
About your sorrowful and noble life.
Only my voice, like a flute, will sound out
At your silent funeral feast.

(In Memory of Mikhail Bulgakov, 1940)

The image of the flute, or reed, the conventional accessory of the lyrical muse was present in her early poetry also, but now it has been used against wider perspectives. This same image is found again in a poem addressed to Mikhail Lozinsky which records the return of poetic inspiration:

And above thoughtful Lethe
The reed will come to life and sing. (To Mikhail Lozinsky, 1941)
David Wells finds these lines echoing Pushkin's celebration of creativity in his 1828 poem *The Muse (Muza)*, but at the same time he makes it clear that Akhmatova's inspiration is not the calm process of poetic apprenticeship which is recorded in Pushkin's poem. Instead, it is the turbulence of the times in which the poem is written. The opening line of the poem can make it clear: "In an hour when worlds are falling apart..." In her study on Akhmatova, Judith Hemschemeyer rightly says that she "used poetry to give voice to the struggles and deepest yearnings of the Russian people, for whom she remains the greatest of literary heroines." In the *Introduction (Vstuplenie)* to the cycle *Requiem*, which describes in penetrating detail the experiences of a generation of women in the queues outside Stalin's prisons, Akhmatova echoes these lines and notes with pride the duty that has taken on her shoulders:

In the terrible years of Zhdanov terror I spent seventeen months waiting in line outside the prison in Leningrad. One day somebody in the crowd identified me. Standing behind me was a woman with lips blue from the cold, who had, of course, never heard me called by name before. Now she started out of the torpor common to us all and asked me in a whisper:

'Can you describe this?'

And I said,

'I can'.

Then something like a smile briefly lit up what had once been her face.

(Requiem/Introduction, Vstuplenie)

In the first poem of the cycle *The Secrets of the Craft (Tainy Remesla)*, written between 1936 and 1940, again, Akhmatova may be seen speaking of the birth of a poem in terms of a sound gradually detaching itself from a background of undifferentiated groans, complaints and whispers:

Then I begin to understand,
And the simply dictated lines
Fall into place in my snow-white notebook.

(The Secrets of the Craft, Tainy Remesla, 1936-40)

The other two poems of the cycle also both emphasize that poetry can emerge from negative phenomena, or from objects normally held in disregard. Thus *I have no need for Odic Regiments (Mne ni k chemu odicheskie rati)* stresses that there is poetry in weeds:

If you only knew from what rubbish
Poems grow, knowing no shame.

(The Secrets of the Craft, Tainy Remesla, 1936-40)

And *On Poetry (Pro Stikhi)* provides a list of poetic subjects recalling Pasternak’s *Definition of Poetry (Opredelenie poezii)* in its structure and comprehensiveness, but unlike Pasternak’s poem, ending on a distinctly sombre note:

It is bees, it is clover,
It is dust and darkness and stifling heat.

(The Secrets of the Craft, Tainy Remesla, 1936-40)

It was, however, not possible for Akhmatova to put direct and open comment on the Stalinist society of the 1930s, “although she was alone in turning it quite so adeptly into a central feature of the myth surrounding her.” The poems written during the 1930s bear witness to a courageous attempt to keep alive the traditions of free speech in a political climate of ever-increasing despotism. Thus Akhmatova succinctly expresses the fears that prevailed at all levels of society during the Terror:
I drink to our demolished house
To all this wickedness,
To you, our loneliness together,
I raise my glass—
And to the dead-cold eyes,
The lie that has betrayed us,
The coarse, brutal world, the fact
That God has not saved us.

(The Last Toast, 1934)

The reference to Stalin as First Secretary of the Communist Party is unmistakable in the following:

For this buffoonery,
To be frank,
I should expect lead pellets
From the secretary. (For this buffoonery)

Imitation from the Armenian (Podrazhanie Armyanskomu) also presents a picture of Stalin as a despotic monster who has devoured the child of the speaker:

...... You who hold
the world like a bead, beloved
Of Allah, was my little son
To your taste, was he fat enough?

(Imitation from the Armenian, Podrazhanie Armyanskomu, 1930s)

Another key-text in this connection is the 1936 poem Dante. On the surface this poem is an account of Dante’s refusal to return from exile to his native Florence on the humiliating terms offered to him by the government of the city in 1315:
But he did not walk barefoot,
In a penitent’s shirt, with a lighted candle,
Through his beloved Florence,
Treacherous, base and longed for... (Dante, 1936)

However, as Pamela Davidson has noted, the poem is much more than this. In view of the keen interest of Akhmatova and her circle, Dante’s beloved Florence provides an intensified image of the poet’s city and is clearly identified with St Petersburg. The persecution of Dante by the Florentine authorities thus becomes an allegory for the attacks on Akhmatova and others, and more broadly on Russian culture as a whole, made by the Soviet state. This allegorical projection also highlights Akhmatova’s obvious distance from her early manner.

It is, however, not Akhmatova alone who had to suffer an extended period of silence during the Stalinist era. Mandelstam experienced a similar crisis between 1925 and 1930, and during this period he abandoned poetry in favour of prose. Like Akhmatova, Pasternak too had to go through sessions of severe attack from the state. Nadezha Mandelstam writes, reflecting on the condition of these three poets, thus:

Was it just coincidence that these three active poets were striken by dumbness for a time? Whatever the differences in their basic attitudes, the fact is that before they could find their voices again, all three had to determine their places in the new world being created before their eyes.

That Akhmatova became sure about her new role may be sensed even in her apocalyptic confession that a return to the early manner was impossible for her. In Dante (1936), the artistic integrity of the greatly persecuted poet, emphasized by the focus on negative actions, speaks of the persecuted writers of Akhmatova’s own generation:
Even after death he did not return
To his ancient Florence.
When he left, he did not look back,
It is to him that I sing this song. (Dante, 1936)

As is clear in the fourth line, it is this group alone who deserves of being celebrated in her own verse. There is, however, a definite implication that there exists another group of writers which she will not celebrate, a group who did look back and did return to Florence, or, in other words, did compromise their principles, and betray their duty as writers for their own material advantage. By evoking Dante's disapproval of this group, Akhmatova is able to encode into a superficially impassive poem about fourteenth-century Italy her own assault on the expedient champions of Stalinist literature.

As in Dante (1936), in other poems of this period also Akhmatova may be seen showing her resolve in full measure. Thus, the 1933 poem Wild Honey Smells of Freedom (Privol''em pakhnet dikii med), characterizes the smell of various objects and concludes that blood smells only of itself:

Wild honey has the scent of freedom,
dust--of a ray of sun,
a girl's mouth--of a violet,
and gold--has no perfume.

Watery--the mignonette,
and like an apple--love,
but we have found out forever
that blood smells only of blood.

(Wild Honey Smells of Freedom, Privol'(em pakhnet dikii med, 1933)
Akhmatova further invokes the examples of Pontius Pilate attempting to absolve himself of the blood of Jesus by symbolically washing his hands, and of Lady Macbeth frenziedly trying to rub from her hands the blood of the murdered Duncan. She seems simply to mean the impossibility of hiding responsibility for the deaths of others. In Some Geography (Nemnogo geografii), a poem dedicated to Mandelstam and written during his visit to Leningrad in 1937, Akhmatova sees the city not as the European capital of Pushkin and other writers, but as a transit point to the network of camps and places of exile in the Asian parts of the Soviet Union, listing half a dozen place names in a parody of an exotic travelogue. Another important poem of this time is Cleopatra (1940) that retells the story of the Egyptian queen, Cleopatra, derived principally from Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra. Akhmatova’s account of Cleopatra’s downfall and suicide follows the order of the events in the play quite closely. What interests Akhmatova above all is the dignity and courage with which Cleopatra meets her fate, retaining her integrity, dignity and tragic grandeur in the face of political persecution from Rome. Cleopatra learns from Dolabella that she and her children will be sent to Rome in chains, but she is not worried at all and instead of resignation chooses death for herself, which explains for her own sense of majesty. The persecution Cleopatra suffers at the hand of Augustus comes to stand for the condemnation of Akhmatova and her work under the Stalinist regime:

And tomorrow they’ll put the children in chains.
Oh, how little she still had to do on earth -
Joke with the boy, and place the black snake,
Like a final gesture of pity, on her dark breast
With an indifferent hand. (Cleopatra, 1940)
Poems like *Voronezh* of the mid 1930s, again, may be seen evoking the theme of exile in Akhmatova's poetry. This poem, written on the occasion of Akhmatova's visit to Mandelstam there in 1936, evokes, especially in the opening section, a note of triumph by its reference to the victory of Peter the Great in 1380 at the Battle of Kulikovo, not far from Voronezh. The vision Voronezh, thus, is a confident one, as may be sensed from the following:

> And the poplars, like goblets brought together,  
> Suddenly ring out more strongly above us,  
> As if thousands of guests were drinking  
> To our joy at a wedding feast. (*Voronezh*, 1936)

This confident vision of Voronezh is, however, thrown into despair and dejection in the concluding four lines of the poem, where there is the hint that Mandelstam will not survive Stalin's oppressions:

> But in the room of the disgraced poet  
> Fear and the Muse keep watch in turns.  
> And the night goes on,  
> Which knows no dawn. (*Voronezh*, 1936)

As David Wells rightly comments, the superficial beauty and dignity of *Voronezh* is shown to conceal a state of moral corruption which is unable to tolerate the existence of a true poet.30

In some of the poems of this later period, there may, again, be seen a shift in the way the speaker presents herself and a greater number of comprehensible autobiographical referents. This self, however, seems to be fractured and often a split between the speaker and her past self occurs, so that she is confronted with the apparition of her former self. The following
lines may reveal, for instance, a return to the imagery of her early poetry and thereby a return to her earlier self:

Hasn’t he sent a swan for me,  
Or a boat, or a black raft?  
In the spring of 1916 he promised  
To come soon in person.

(Hasn’t He Sent a Swan for Me, Ne prisal li lebedya za mnoyu, 1936)

But the ironic tone of the final lines of the poem suggests that that earlier self is fractured: her faith is now no longer active:

What can I do? The midnight angel  
Talks to me till dawn.

(Hasn’t He Sent a Swan for Me, Ne prisal li lebedya za mnoyu, 1936)

In That Town, which I have Loved since Childhood (Tot gorod, mnoi lyubimyi s detstva, 1937), she has seen the city of St Petersburg as a ‘squandered inheritance’. She recognizes that the Russian language has survived till date, but her previous life has totally disappeared without trace:

Everything swept off like transparent smoke,  
Smouldered to ashes in the depths of the mirrors...  
And then the noseless fiddler  
Began to play about the irretrievable

Indeed she now proceeds to reevaluate that past, as may be seen in the 1936 poem Some Exchange Fond Glances (Odni glyadyatska v laskovye vzory), where the memory of pre-revolutionary Tsarskoe Selo, and of its cultural trendsetter Nikolai Nedobrovo, to whom the poem is dedicated, becomes subject to the closest scrutiny:
But all night I negotiate
With my indomitable conscience.

(Some Exchange Fond Glances, Odni glyadyatska v laskovye vzory, 1936)

It is of course the sincere declaration of her fractured self. A similarly restrained attitude towards the memory of the past is found in the poems of 1940. In The Cellar of Memory (Podval pamyati, 1940), she seems to acknowledge a great distance between the present and a past that is vanished forever and cannot be recreated. Here she uses a description of the basement that had previously housed the Stray Dog cabaret as a metaphor for an account of a mental journey into the depths of memory. The speaker recognizes that she cannot return there, for the past is now no longer what it was:

I am too late. What a calamity!
I cannot show myself anywhere.

(The Cellar of Memory, Podval pamyati, 1940)

At the same time, however, the present is characterized as profoundly insecure:

Well, let’s go home!
But where is my home, and where’s my reason?

(The Cellar of Memory, Podval pamyati, 1940)

In Willow (Iva, 1940), the significance of the past may be seen linked closely with the cultural environment of pre-revolutionary St Petersburg. On the surface the heroine of Willow begins by recalling her childhood in Tsarskoe Selo and goes on to lament that this is no longer accessible to her. The main focus of reminiscence, the heroine’s favourite memory, is the willow tree itself, a traditional folkloric and literary symbol of grief. This memory, however, is seen as unfeasible; since others that do not
have the same emotive connotations have replaced the particular willow that the heroine remembers. The poem comes to convey a sense of isolation from the poetic past as well as the material and emotional past: a return to the past is impossible and the recognition of this impossibility causes the heroine anguish, 'as if a brother had died':

Its stump sticks up, and other willows
Talk in other voices
Under our, under those skies.
And I am silent... as if a brother had died. (Willow, Iva, 1940)

Another examination of the literary past is found in Prehistory (Predystoriya), begun in Leningrad in 1940, and later to become the first of a series of Northern Elegies. In it Akhmatova looks back behind the changes that have been made to the architecture of the city to the period immediately before her birth, to the environment of the 1870s. These are seen, like the image of Tsarskoe Selo presented manywhere in her poetry, as a 'bridge to the experience of Akhmatova's generation'. The historical landscape, which is presented in the poem, has been acknowledged to be both accurate and highly evocative. It is rich in contemporary detail:

The rustle of skirts, the checked plaids,
The walnut frames around the mirrors,
Which were amazed at Karenina's beauty.
And in the narrow passages, the wallpaper
We so admired as children. (Northern Elegies)

There are, of course, numerous references to writers and literary works of the period - to Tolstoy's Anna Karenina as in the above passage, to Turgenev's novel Fathers and Children, to Nekrasov and Saltykov-Shchedrin,
whose homes on Liteinyi Prospect are mentioned. It is through the memorial plaques erected after their deaths that the presence of the writers Nekrasov and Saltykov-Shchedrin is introduced into the poem. Most particularly, *Prehistory* includes a condensed account of the life and works of Dostoevsky. The opening lines of the elegy not only mention him by name, but offer a view of St Petersburg as if from Dostoevsky's writing desk.32

Dostoevsky's Russia. The moon
Is almost a quarter hidden by the bell tower.
The pubs are open, cabs fly by,
Five-storey heaps are going up
On Gorokhovaya Street, at Znamene, near Smolnyi.

*(Northern Elegies)*

Towards the later part of the poem also, the poem may be seen referring to many other places associated with Dostoevsky—Staraya Russa, Optina Pustyn, and Baden—and "to themes in his novels".33 Dostoevsky is shown as the presiding genius of his age; having suffered both mock executions on Semenovsky Square and Siberian exile, he is able to penetrate to the essence of Russian society and to record it:

The country shivers, but the Omsk convict
Has understood everything and given it up for lost.
And now he shuffles everything around,
And like some kind of spirit
Rises up over the primordial chaos.
Midnight strikes. His pen squeaks,
And many pages reek of Semenovsky Square. *(Northern Elegies)*

At the same time there may be seen many points that make it clear that the tradition represented by Dostoevsky is related to present actuality. There are, for example, many associations that suggest isolation
from the past and a return to the present. The list of social evils, for instance, may be cited:

Everything is changing, hurried, anyhow....
Fathers and grandfathers are beyond comprehension.
Lands are mortgaged. And in Baden there is roulette.

(Northern Elegies)

Of course, Akhmatova here uses Dostoevsky and the tradition he represents both as an artist and as a social commentator in the same way as she uses Pushkin elsewhere in her poetry, and it is quite appropriate that this poem should have been referred to as a 'myth of origins'.

David wells rightly notes that as the effects of war in Europe began to be felt during the course of 1940, a further dimension was added to Akhmatova's fear of cultural dispossession. It was no longer merely Russian cultural values that were under threat. This may be seen illustrated by poems responding to events in Britain and France, which were later included in the cycle In 1940. One of these characterizes the fall of Paris as the ending of an era:

When an epoch is buried
No psalm is sung over the grave. (In 1940)

The only possible response to such enormity is silence. In another poem of the same cycle, Hitler's attempted invasion of Britain may be seen viewed in terms of tragic consequence that are extremely unbearable for the outside, Russian observer:

Only not this, not this, not this,
This we do not have the strength to read! (In 1940)
A more sustained discussion of the notion of cultural continuity is contained in the long poem The Way of All the Earth (Putem vseya zemli), also written in 1940. In a note on this poem,36 Akhmatova linked it with the storm of Vyborg during the Russo-Finnish War of 1939-40 and the subsequent peace treaty signed on 12 March 1940, in which Finland ceded a southern tract of land to the Soviet Union. The military imagery of the first section certainly suggests the circumstances of 1940:

‘Here is my pass, comrade,
Let me go back...’
And the warrior calmly
Turns his bayonet away.
(The Way of All the Earth, Putem vseya zemli, 1940)

In the second fragment she sees a vision of the Crimea, generally associated with the beginnings of creativity in her work. But now the Muse does not recognize her. Access to the world that she represents is cut off:

You will return here,
Return more than once,
But again you will stumble
On the hard diamond.
(The Way of All the Earth, Putem vseya zemli, 1940)

The third fragment presents a nightmarish vision of the heroine searching for something unspecified in an empty house, but finding instead a man with his throat cut. That this has been a recurrent dream and that it is in some way connected with the time of the First World War is suggested by the lines:

For it is not a joke
That for twenty-five years
I have seen the same
From the perspective of 1940 the time period mentioned here appears to point to 1915. It has been suggested that there is a specific connection between these lines and the complex of guilt that Akhmatova felt in connection with the death of Nedobrovo the following year:

Trenches, trenches,
You will lose your way!
Only shreds of old Europe
Still remain.

As Verheul has noted, the visions which make up the poem are coherent by two literary motifs whose imagery recurs throughout: the story of the lost city of Kitezh; and the testament of the Kievan prince Vladimir Monomakh, from which the epigraph purports to be taken. Kitezh, according to Russian legend, was miraculously saved from destruction by the Tatars in the thirteenth century and hidden at the bottom of a lake. Akhmatova follows rather the adaptation of the legend found in Rimsky-Korsakov's opera, *The Tale of the Invisible City of Kitezh and the Maiden Fevroniya*, which focuses on the attempt of the last surviving inhabitant of the city, who was taken captive by the Tatars, to return to Kitezh. She succeeds in doing this, triumphantly, only in death. In *The Way of All the Earth*, the heroine's frustrated journey into the past parallels Fevroniya's wanderings and the two are identified in the first fragment:

I, the woman of Kitezh,
Have been summoned home.
The final fragment of the poem returns explicitly to the legend, suggesting that escape from the nightmare visions of the past, and re-entry into the city of Kitezh, is only possible in death:

Now no-one will go
With the woman of Kitezh
... ... ... .......
Lay me to rest in my last
Dwelling place.
(The Way of All the Earth, Putem vseya zemli, 1940)

Throughout the whole poem, thus, events of different periods may be seen merged into 'a timeless co-presence of the past and the future'.

Another important work that reveals Akhmatova’s unfolding of contemporary history and public experience is Requiem. Though the arrests of Akhmatova’s son Lev and of Nikolai Punin in 1935 and of Lev again in 1938 provided the immediate backdrop for this long work, it may be seen as a powerful account of the victims of the purges and their relatives in general. Akhmatova herself indicates in her autobiographical prose that it belongs to her new manner. On the surface, the work seems to relate to her earlier manner in that it is clear and direct; a statement that "requires no elaboration or explanation". But, Verheul is seen to distinguish it from the early verse on the grounds that the arrangement of lyrics creates a coherent narrative. Despite there being no plot in the traditional sense, the ten lyrical poems at the center of the work register the speaker’s process of emotional change. The logical progression through psychological states creates the impression that there is a consistent persona. Several critics have tried to demonstrate that Requiem’s component parts are organized symmetrically. Focussing on the structure of the poem, Ann Lisa Crone, for example, argues that the cycle is
structured according to a rhetorical pattern called antimetabole, whereby the first poem relates to the last in terms of imagery and theme, the second to the penultimate, and so on, with the ninth poem of the numbered sequence forming the centre. Indeed this unique structural pattern which is behind the success of the poem may be cited as one proof how Akhmatova developed down the years over the form and structure of her poetry.

The whole poem has been designed to convey two different orders of experience, the private and the personal. Although public and civic themes do appear in Akhmatova's poetry prior to the composition of Requiem, no other work is seen announcing quite as boldly as does Requiem her solidarity with her fellow citizens. The presence of framing texts, comprising an epigraph, dedication, forward, introduction and epilogues, which set the lyrical poems at the centre in a precise historical context, gives the work an epic quality. This epic quality is significantly new in Akhmatova and it, of course, again and again affirms her position at a distinct pole from her earlier manner of miniature lyrical drama.

Verheul, in his book, has pointed out to the coherent narrative created by the arrangement of lyrics in the poem. He is right, and it may be argued that Akhmatova could not have faithfully expressed the weight, pressure and crisis of the hours had she rejected this narrative pattern for her poem. Almost like a true experimentalist, Akhmatova may be seen to proceed in this poem. The very Introduction, which is an integral part of her poem and which describes in piercing detail the experiences of a generation of women in the queues outside Stalin's prisons, is nothing but some kind of documentary prose. The imposition of a prosaic narrative level at the very beginning indeed has a role to perform: it creates the deliberate impression that this introductory text belongs to the real world in which Akhmatova wrote the
poem. It also tells the reader what kind of narrative to expect and "emphasizes that Akhmatova speaks with the authority of personal experience".44

Like the Introduction, the Dedication is also another level interposed before the main text begins. The Dedication in particular not only makes it clear that the poems which follow are written in the name of a large and anonymous group of women, but also specifies the time frame of the cycle:

Where now are the chance friends
Of those two demoniacal years?

The Prologue, on the other hand, focuses rather on place:

And Leningrad dangled around its prisons
Like a useless appendage.

Later by referring more broadly to the sufferings of 'Rus', it affirms that the description of Leningrad is meant to stand also for the entire country.

The central section of the poem begins with an arrest, laconically described in the first line of the first poem: 'They took you away at dawn.' The scene is likened to a funeral, but a note of defiance is implied by the heroine's comparison of herself to the wives of the Streltsy in the last two lines:

Like the wives of the Streltsy
I shall howl under the Kremlin towers.

In the poems which follow, however, this defiance gives way to a gradual breakdown of personality. In the second poem the speaker sees herself partly as someone else:

This woman is ill,
This woman is alone,
Son in prison, husband in the grave,
Pray for me.

And in the third poem the gap between mental processes that predate the arrest and the current reality is rendered explicit. The speaker is unable to believe that it is indeed her own actions that she is watching:

No, it is not I, it is somebody else who is suffering
I should not have been able to bear it.

The fourth poem makes a particular stage in the history of individual prisoners— their mothers and wives queuing outside the Kresty prison in Leningrad in order to hand over parcels, and shows the speaker contrasting her present fate with her life in earlier years. The fifth, explicitly situated seventeen months after the arrest, shows increasing disorientation:

Everything has been muddled forever,
And now I cannot work out
Who is a beast and who is a human being.

This is also reflected in the sixth poem. The seventh, entitled Sentence, initiates a further new stage. Notification that her son has been sentenced — presumably to death — throws the speaker back into despair:

And the word fell like a stone
On my still living breast.

She is led into another round of denial and suppression of her emotions:

Today I have many things to do:
I must kill my memory off completely,
My heart must turn to stone,
I must relearn how to live.
The next two poems deal with different and more extreme manifestations of despair: in the first, the speaker invites death to come to her to release her from her torments; in the second, it is insanity which is seen as the only possible form of consolation even though it will remove all memories of the past.

The tenth and final poem, *Crucifixion*, which represents the carrying out of the sentence passed in the seventh poem, that is the execution of the heroine’s son, discursively reflects her inability to speak after this latest shock. In order to describe this culmination of the narrative, Akhmatova has recourse to Biblical history and finds a model in the crucifixion of Jesus, and particularly in the responses of female figures—Mary Magdalene and Mary the Mother of Jesus— to the crucifixion:

Mary Magdelene beat her breast and sobbed,
The beloved disciple turned to stone,
But no one even dared to look
At where the Mother stood in silence.

Haight has suggested that the three figures here represent three different stages of suffering: Mary Magdalene the defiance of poem *No.1*, John the beloved disciple the paralysis of, for example, *No.7*, and Mary the Mother a deep understanding arrived at by passing through all stages.45

However, invoking the crucifixion is not merely a method for projecting the sufferings of women in Russia in the late 1930s on to a universal plane. In theological terms crucifixion implies resurrection, and this note of resurrection may be seen rendered explicit in the two poems which form its Epilogue. Having passed through the Terror documented in the poems of the narrative, the speaker finds she has survived and is able to record the experience of her sisters:
And I pray not for myself alone,
But for all those who stood there with me
In the bitter cold and in the heat of July
Under that blind red wall.

The final poem contains an affirmation of the power of words to recall the female, indirect victims of Stalinism and also an assertion that the act of recalling has its own healing and protective effect:

For them I have woven a broad shroud
From poor words, overheard from them.

Having established the power of such a monument, Akhmatova then considers where such a monument should be placed. She rejects locations that have associations with her life and poetry before *Requiem*—the Black Sea coast and the park at *Tsarskoe Selo*—and insists that it should be outside the prison walls in Leningrad, so that even in death she should not forget the events of the 1930s. This choice too marks a partial rejection of the poetry of Akhmatova’s youth as she now turns herself as the public chronicler of the Terror.

There are, however, some critics who may be seen to underline in Akhmatova’s poem some of the formalistic aspects that discard the notion of a greater organic wholeness. According to these critics, behind the superficial clarity and simplicity of the *Requiem* cycle, there may be perceived a considerable complexity of imagery, allusion and compositional technique. As Michael Basker has argued, the disorientation of the persona is mirrored stylistically in the cycle in many ways.\(^4\)\(^6\) Most obviously, Basker sees, there is no certain link between the various poems that make up *Requiem*: they vary greatly in length, material format and rhyme scheme; they do not maintain
unity of place - some are clearly set in Leningrad, while others are on the river Don (No.2) or in Biblical Palestine (No.10); they do not contain a consistent narrative viewpoint, changing abruptly, for example, between the first and third person (Dedication, No.2). Much of the imagery is similarly dislocated, even verging on the surreal, as in the opening lines of Dedication:

Mountains bend down before this grief,
The great river does not flow.

or the description of prisoners in Prologue:

Regiments of the already condemned were marching
And the whistles of steam engines
Sang brief songs of farewell.

This is much more nearly the Leningrad of Nikolai Zabolotsky than of Akhmatova's early poems. Wells finds that expressions from different semantic registers are placed in juxtaposition throughout the poem. As he sees: "The religious metaphors that abound in the cycle serve to highlight the extent of events by their incongruity: Crosses is the name of a prison (No.4); the scene of arrest is compared to a funeral (No.1). Even the title of the work, Requiem, has its associations above all with Catholic Christianity and the civilization of Western Europe. The numerous allusions to Old Russia further serve to set the work in an orthodox historical context rather than in a more broadly European one."47

There is, however, answer to all these dislocations in the poem. These dislocations are there, because Akhmatova is not representing here the seemingly plaintive experiences of a girl rejected by her lover; instead, she is representing here the complexities of a collective experience at a time that has become completely out of joint. When experience itself is complex, its
representation in art too can not be expected to become simple. Whether it is Leningrad (Prologue) or Don (No.2) or the Biblical Palestine (No.10), the experiences of humiliation is the same and hence are universal in appeal. It, therefore, does not matter if the lyrics vary greatly in length, material format and rhyme scheme; they represent certain uniformity, because the experience represented is capable of incorporating anyone living under the conditions prevailing in Russia at that time. The polymetricality and fragmentation of Requiem, thus, only confirm Akhmatova's evolution of her art from her early and middle careers. It also assures her power to handle the poetic form to her utmost advantage.

As might be expected from knowledge of Akhmatova's early poems, the superficially limpid poetry of Requiem is rich in evocations of other literary works. Allusions may be detected to a very wide range of authors from Euripides, Dante and Shakespeare to Tyutehev, Nekrasov and Mayakovsky. Akhmatova herself highlights the most salient one when she places quotation marks around a phrase from Pushkin that occurs in Dedication:

But the prisons bolts are firm,
And behind them lie the 'convicts' burrows'.

Pushkin's 1827 poem, In the Depths of the Siberian Mines (Vo Glubine Sibirskikh Rud), from which the quoted phrase is taken, is addressed to the participants of the abortive Decembrist uprising. Pushkin's poem was designed to encourage the convicted Decembrists and to reassure them that the ideals of freedom that they had attempted unsuccessfully to uphold were still alive in the outside world and would eventually prevail. The poem concludes:
Love and friendship will reach you  
Past the somber bolts,  
As my free voice reaches you  
In your convicts' burrows.  
Your heavy fetters will fall,  
Your dungeons will collapse,  
And freedom will greet you at the entrance,  
And your brothers will give you back your sword.

The position in Requiem, however, is quite different. The prisons of the Gulag are seen as impenetrable ('But the prison bolts are firm'): there is no hope of Akhmatova's voice reaching them, and it is to the survivors that the cycle is addressed. The contrast with Pushkin's poem, as Basker notes, throws 'into emphatic relief the utter bleakness of the modern period.'

Similar effects are achieved by other references to external texts throughout Requiem. Its overtly folkloric language, alluding to a pre-industrial world, increases the pathos of the description of the women crushed by the totalitarian state in poem No.2:

Gently flows the gentle Don,  
Yellow moonlight leaps the sill,  
Leaps the sill and stops astonished as it sees the shade  
Of a woman lying ill,  
Of a woman stretched alone.  
Son in prison, husband in the grave,  
Pray for me.

The lyrical spontaneity and sincerity of tone and the imagery drawn from the world of Nature and the familiar world in this lament may again remind us to
Yaroslavna’s lament in *The Lay of Igor’s Host*. It may be assumed that Akhmatova might have somehow alluded to this gem of the Old Russian period through her memory of it. In Akhmatova’s poem, the speaker, who is a widow, is lamenting for her son who is in prison, while in *The Lay*, Yaroslavna, Igor’s wife, is in lament for her husband who has not returned from the battle. Being overwhelmed with grief for her dear husband, Yaroslavna prays to nature to free her husband from captivity:

> Bring to me my Weal,
> O Sovereign One,
> That I may cherish him,
> That I may not have to send after him,
> Tears out to sea,
> In the early dawn."49

In both the laments, the language employed sounds like some rhythmic prose, but it is charged with sincerity of expression which results from the intensity of experiences. This is exactly the way of folk poetry, and researchers have found that Yaroslavna’s lament was directly “constructed on the basis of a folk lament.”50 In Yaroslavna’s lament, it is said that in order to reach her husband, Yaroslavna wants to “fly like a linnet over the Danube”51; she wants to dip her sleeve “trimmed with beaver pelt”.52

The invocation of death in No.8 (*You will come in any case, so why not now*) again achieves a particular intensification of emotion from its similarities to Pushkin’s appeal to a dead lover in his poem *Incantation* (*Zaklinanie*) and from parallels in a poem by Chenier, *Let Death Come! – Let Death Deliver Me* (*Vienne, vienne la mort! – Que la mort me delivere*), with its appeal to the notions of justice and truth.53 As Amert has noted, there are also ironic allusions to works of officially promoted Soviet literature which project a contented world
grotesquely at variance with the one described by Akhmatova.\textsuperscript{54} In *Dedication*, for example, the lines—*For someone a fresh wind is blowing,/ For someone the sunset is luxurious*—are a contemptuous echo of Vasily Lebedev Kumach’s widely circulated hymn to Stalinism, *Song of the Motherland* (*Pesnya o rodine*), written in 1935, and in particular, the lines:

\begin{verbatim}
A spring wind is blowing across the country,
With every day life is more joyous.
And no one on earth
Knows how to laugh and love better than we do.
\end{verbatim}

(*Song of the Motherland, Pesnya o rodine, 1935*)

In *Requiem*, by contrast, no one laughs, and love itself is a source of suffering and pain. Writing in the same metre as Lebedev Kumach, Akhmatova takes issue with positive, cheerful sentiments, adopting a mournful and funeral tone.

Another function of literary allusion in *Requiem* is to indicate and honour poets known personally to Akhmatova who became victims of Soviet repression. There are, for example, several more or less direct allusions to the work of Mandelstam and Gumilev, who were by this stage completely unable to reach an audience directly. For instance, there may be perceived strong parallels between Mandelstam’s *Stalin Epigram* and Akhmatova’s *Introduction* in *Requiem*. In both, people speak only in whispers and are consumed by a numbering torpor. Both Akhmatova and Mandelstam adopt a collective ‘we’ and make it their task to speak for the ordinary inhabitants of what Mandelstam’s widow describes as a depersonalized world where everything human was silenced.\textsuperscript{55}

The transitional Akhmatova of this period can indeed invite a glaring comparison of her epic manner (as in *Requiem*) with that of the renowned
Assamese poet, Nilmoni Phookan (b. 1933). In his early career, Phookan, who has more than ten collections to his credit, was often recognized as a poet of the silences by the critics. It was because Phookan's work, like that of the early Akhmatova, often spoke of the intensely personal experiences of the poet. An earnest desire for love, ecstasies of finding himself amidst the bounties of Nature which again is often seen in its tranquility and serenity, a meditative reflection over the mysteries of life and the universe---these themes were often expressed in Phookan's poetry in the attire of unique imagery drawn from a living, yet tranquil world. The following poem which speaks of the mysterious experiences of the poet haunted by the exquisite beauty of a night may be cited as an example of his early manner:

Ecstasy

In this frost-silent Japanese silk-night
If I could die,
in this flash of blue, radiant with fire-flies,
like your smile.

If you too were dead,
in my sweet kisses,
like some jasmine-buds dying
in this silent frost.

In all the hymns, prayers, tears,
fragrances, memories and elegies
of this earth,
could rise on the white wings
of golden dreams,
and were they all,
but mists of this frost-silent
empty night. (1956) 56
The imagery employed here is as laconic and transparent as in the early Akhmatova. The words chosen are often familiar, yet precise. The language elsewhere exposes mannerisms in such expressions as *frost-silent Japanese silk-night*, but in the main it is revelatory of the poet's intense emotions within. But this manner did not last long. In an autobiographical note, Phookan himself recognizes that when the Assam movement took place during the 1980s to turn all humanity and its attendant values to nothing, he was compelled to shift from his early manner. Phookan's poetry now came out to represent the fears, the whispers, the cries, the wounds as well as the pains of millions of people who suffered during that period of howling terror and horror. Phookan's representation of his experiences now becomes universal, just as it has been seen in Akhmatova of the later period. The following poem may be cited for an illustration:

*Do Not Ask Me How I Have Been*

Do not ask me how I have been
I haven't ask me either
down the Kolong flows
a young, female torso
What I was last night
king hermit farmer labour
lover rebel poet
a tiger looking for waterholes
after the kill
I forgot what I was

Do not ask me how I have been
After all I am not alone
for, even after the last supper
I have not bid adieu
nor could I take my leave
I have not laughed since Auschwitz
nor cried either

And where can I go
I forgot where I came from
the day clings on to life
vomiting blood
the bones and bits
trudge along the road
with wry laughter

Do not ask me how I have been
for dogs in coital ecstasy
in shop-front showcases
at the Bhutnath grounds
the blind Kaali fancies
a girdle of male genitals.

For everyone has the same fear
even the dead
to say or not to say
to do or not to do
to open the door or the window
for, this long wait since then
Fibs lies pretence deceit
Youth cruel kind

Do not ask me how I have been
because it's darkness now
Now even it flickers
Now even it glimmers
adversity travail disaster
and in their wake
the banner of man's blood
For in my trousers pockets I carry
two forbidden hands
a bullet reddens in flight
in my bosom
for, it is silence all around
the terrible din of peace

Do not ask me how I have been
down the Kolong flows
a young, female torso
because, for forty-two hours
my corps lay there
on the footpath of Guwahati.

For even now I have my eyes open
even my death stares open eyed
for, in pool and puddle
in creek and lake
fish in shoals glisten

O you, my ambling horseman.57 (1981)

The change is indeed perceptible: it is not the change of the content alone; as in Akhmatova of the later period, the form as well as the language too is changed throughout because of the poet's response to his historical times. The later poem by Phookan is really an epical projection of the nightmarish reality of the immediate present. The 'I' in the poem is not necessarily the poet himself; instead it may refer to anyone who gets merged into the voice of the poet's persona. The form is now longer so as to bear the weight of the theme in the poem, and the language also undergoes tremendous changes. In comparison to the language of the first poem, here it sounds more colloquial and much nearer to the speech of the common man.
whose experiences are the actual subject of the poem. Indeed this comparison of two poets from two different countries but sharing almost the same dimension of experiences of the same century can make it clear that poets cannot remain isolated from their immediate history. It is this intense concern with their immediate social and political history that accounts for their ultimate maturity as poets. It is true both for Akhmatova and for Nilmoni Phookan.

In the other seminal work of the later period, *Poem without a Hero*, again, personal and historical destiny, private and public events, may be seen organically linked. The present is illuminated by the past, as events flow from Stalinist Leningrad back to Tsarist Petersburg. Akhmatova succeeds in making the reader live within such vanished moments and to feel for a while that the past is as real and urgent as the present. In this journey of discovery and self-discovery she looks mostly backward, as if listening to the echoes of the distant voices of the past and skillfully weaves present and past lives into direct, vivid communication. Like *Requiem*, *Poem without a Hero* too can impressively display Akhmatova's transition from her earlier manner. Like *Requiem*, it is also a longer poem, a *poema*, and the expansion of forms allows for a broadening of theme. Akhmatova herself regarded it as the crowning work of her life, a final distillation of memory, historical insight and personal emotion into a poetic statement about the destiny of Russia. Before we proceed to look into the details of Akhmatova's new manner in this poem, an account of its background and thematic aspects follows.

The actual action of the poem begins in 1913, an age decadent and corrupt but also bright and colorful. The main event is a senseless, romantic suicide of a young officer and poet, Vsevolod Knyazev. This event shook the
intellectual circle to which Akhmatova belonged and, in retrospect, she felt that everybody of that group, herself included, was guilty and should repent. She used this senseless death as a prelude to predict the horrors of the impending war and implied that the catastrophe that visited the land later was a parable for the sins of the world; indeed, it was a collective punishment. The portrayal of succeeding epochs is marked by images of devastation, suffering, and retribution involving both the innocent and the guilty. History's muse has been muffled, her poetic voice stilled, and her capacity to seize the imagination lost.

Dread. Bottomless dread...
I am that shadow on the threshold
defending my remnant peace.

Akhmatova here draws a parallel between events of the present in Western Europe and an unspecified past disaster in her own Russian experience, predicting that this disaster is about to be repeated:

What is there in the mist -
Denmark, Normandy, or
Was I myself there earlier,
And is this a repeat of moments
Forgotten forever?

Akhmatova foresees the coming of war to Russia in 1941 and compares its arrival with that of the war of 1914, which brought revolution in its wake and mass destruction not only of human beings, but also of codes of behaviour and cultural traditions.

The image of Knyazev-Pierrot in Poem without a Hero can be associated much less ambiguously with Osip Mandelstam. The first dedication, for
example, bears alongside the initials Vs. K. the official date of the anniversary of Mandelstam’s death, and textual and biographical allusions has been found in it to both poets. In the body of *Poem without a Hero* the words spoken by the cornet before his suicide, ‘I am ready for death’—are a reflection of words spoken by Mandelstam to Akhmatova in February 1934, shortly before he was arrested for the first time. The phrase is also to be linked with Gumilev, through his play *Gondla*, which contains the lines: (‘I am drunk on the wine of grace and am ready for death’). By virtue of the combination of the images of the three poets in the character of the cornet, their deaths are seen as on one level equivalent and the cornet’s suicide in 1913 acquires a clear political meaning. The cornet represents not only the naivety and immaturity of A. Knyazev, but also commemorates the destruction by the Soviet regime of Mandelstam or a Gumilev. His death both prefigures the breakdown of civilization that came with war and revolution after 1913, and foreshadowed the deaths of individuals during the Terror of the 1930s.

That Akhmatova, in writing *Poem without a Hero*, had an explicit political agenda is indicated by a note in which she links its genesis with the revolution of 1917:

It is impossible to say when *Poem without a Hero* first began to sound in my head; either happened when I was standing with my companion on Nevsky Prospekt (after the dress rehearsal of *Masquerade* on 25 February 1917), and the cavalry swept along the pavement like lava, or .... When I was standing no longer with my companion, on the Liteiny Bridge at the time it was unexpectedly raised in broad daylight (an unprecedented event) in order to let the minesweepers through to the Smolnyi Institute to support the Bolsheviks (25 October 1917). How should I tell which?
The reference to *Masquerade* seems to have implications for an understanding of *Poem without a Hero*. February 25, 1917 was the date of the opening performance of Meyerhold’s celebrated production of Lermontov’s *Masquerade*. Meyerhold is alluded to several times in *Poem without a Hero*, and this play may well have been called particularly to Akhmatova’s mind in 1940, when she began to write her poem, since a revival of *Masquerade* in Leningrad in December 1938 was the last work in the theatre that Meyerhold completed. Although they were not personally close, his arrest in June 1939 and death in a Moscow prison in February 1940 removed another important link between Akhmatova and the artistic world of 1913.

*Masquerade* is a story of jealousy and revenge set in Petersburg society in the 1830s, combining a romantic melodrama with a satire on the hypocrisy and cynicism of aristocratic morals. In Meyerhold’s production considerable emphasis was placed on the figure of the Stranger, who was interpreted as a demonic force impelling the hero, Arbenin, to poison his wife at a masked ball on suspicion of adultery. The Stranger then takes the leading role in revealing to Arbenin that his suspicions were groundless and driving him to madness. The character of the Stranger is one possible source for the mysterious figure ("without a face or a name") who appears twice in Akhmatova’s masquerade and is closely, if obscurely, linked with the demonic world and with the downfall of the cornet. Lermontov’s Stranger has no name, and he describes himself to Arbenin as having no single face of his own:

I have been with you everywhere,
Always with a different face, a different costume.

There is also a broader parallel between *In the Year Nineteen-Thirteen* and *Masquerade* in that both works use a masquerade setting to show how an
amoral and frivolous society can be the cause of unnecessary suffering and death. Akhmatova’s comments on the origins of Poem without a Hero reveal that the story of the Petersburg masquerade is intended to point first of all to an examination of the history of Russia in the twentieth century and secondly to an investigation of the role of the poet in Russian society. Each of these themes provides a unifying thread through the various parts of the work.

The political theme is seen being announced indirectly from the very beginning of Poem without a Hero through the epigraph to the introductory prose passage headed Instead of a Preface (Vместо предисловия). In the very beginning is a quotation from Pushkin’s Evgeny Onegin: Some are already dead and the others are far away. The line is taken from the last stanza of chapter eight of Pushkin’s work, where he takes leave of his readers and notes that those to whom he read the first chapter are now either dead or far away. The immediate context reads:

But those to whom in friendly meetings
I read the first stanza…
Some are already dead, and the others are far away,
As Sadi once said.

Although Pushkin carefully ascribes the phrase picked out by Akhmatova to the thirteenth-century Persian poet Sadi, by the time he came to use it in Evgeny Onegin it had acquired a definite contemporary meaning. The expression has, as Vladimir Nabokov has noted, a complex literary history in other authors as well as Pushkin. What is important here is that by the time of Evgeny Onegin, it had come to constitute an unambiguous reference to Pushkin’s friends in the Decembrist movement, who had suffered either execution or exile. Consequently, when Akhmatova used the phrase at the
beginning of *Poem without a Hero* it was clearly associated with both a literary and a political tradition. Akhmatova’s poem both continues the literary writers and preserves the political awareness demonstrated by Pushkin.

Writers are frequently alluded to in the *Poem* by direct or indirect quotation from their work. For example, the following lines from Akhmatova’s *Poem*,

> But I am afraid: I myself will come in,
> Without taking off my lace shawl.
> I will smile to everyone and fall silent.

have allusions to these lines from Blok:

> ‘Beauty is terrible’, they will tell you,
> You will throw your Spanish shawl
> Lazily on to your shoulders

(Blok: *To Anna Akhmatova/ Anne Akhmatovoi*)

More examples may be supplied in this respect. Indeed, the allusions, frequently covert to Knyazev, Kuzmin, Gumilev, Mandelstam and others which abound in *Poem without a Hero* were for a long time the only way in which these poets, in many respects typical of Akhmatova’s generation and of the poetry of the 1910s and 1920s, could be represented in print in the Soviet Union, even in periods of relative thaw. Many of the people she refers to in this way were not in sympathy with the Soviet government, and had been destroyed or exiled by it. Akhmatova’s work is thus a tribute to her fellow poets, who would otherwise be forced into permanent silence.

In its revelation of the exact conditions of life and culture in the Russia of the 20th century, Akhmatova’s work really acquires an epical grandeur. She recalls an era in which there were no more heroes; only pseudo-Romantic
masqueraders. The hero-individualist of the nineteenth century had come to the end of the road and his epigones (unless, like Knyazev, they died young) would be offered up wholesale to the Moloch of war and revolution. The usual escape was into irony, mummery, or blind devotion to an authoritarian creed. Indeed Akhmatova has been helped by her command over the form in the representation of this massive theme in her *Poem*. The unique stanza form of *Poem without a Hero* has been the focus of several studies. Indeed the very title hints at the primacy of form over content. The poem is based on the *dol'nik*, a metre popularised by Alexander Blok, used extensively by Akhmatova, and more generally particularly characteristic of the Silver Age.64 By the 1940s, when Akhmatova began work on *Poem*, Russian poets had become considerably less experimental with form65: indeed, from as early as the 1920s poetry, had begun to move away from the kind of prosodic experimentation which had been prevalent in the 1910s.66 Akhmatova’s view that the failure of Blok’s *Retribution* (*Vozmezdie*) resulted from the lack of a sufficiently novel stanza form — a potential pitfall for any poet writing in the wake of Pushkin’s *Eugeny Onegin* — can be seen as a crucial factor in the creation of the stanza form for *Poem*.67 Akhmatova was of the opinion that the only way to compose a successful long poem is to write against the established rules of the genre. In short, the specific task which she appears to have set herself, as is generally acknowledged, was to create something principally new, to underline dissimilarity to what has gone before.68 This necessitated the creation of a suitable stanza form.

When studied minutely, it may be seen that in creating her own stanza form, Akhmatova consciously revives the technical display and formalism characteristic of the beginning of the century. Following Pushkin and Nekrasov, Blok (in *The Twelve*), Kuzmin and Mayakovsky, Akhmatova turned
in Poem without a Hero to the search for a new form. The special stanza, which has already received the name ‘Akhmatova stanza’, became this form. It consists of a basic rhyme scheme (aabccb) from which the poet departs periodically by adding extra rhyming lines. Korney Chukovsky’s impressionistic description of Akhmatova’s stanza identifies organic ties between the metre and rhythm of the poem and its themes, as well as highlighting the novelty of Akhmatova’s stanza form:

... the greatest emotional power is added to each of the poem’s images by its disturbing and passionate rhythm, which is organically linked to its disturbing and passionate thematics. This capricious combination of two anapaestic feet, now with an amphibrach, now with a single iambic foot, may be called ‘Akhmatova’: as far as I am aware, such a rhythmic system (and, equally, such a stanza form) were up to this point unknown in Russian poetry.69

At its base lies the dol’nik — a three-stress line with a varying number of unstressed syllables between stresses (one or two) and before the first stress, typical of Akhmatova’s lyrics. In the Poem, in comparison with her lyrics, Akhmatova’s dol’nik displays a more regular form: the beginning of the line is always anapaestic (two unstressed syllables before the first stress). In front of one of the two remaining stresses there can stand one unstressed syllable (an iambic foot), then in front of the other in the same line there will be two unstressed syllables (an anapaestic foot); or both feet are anapaestic, like the first. As Chukovsky’s individual descriptions suggest when read alongside one another, a tension between order and disorder is a key feature of the Akhmatova stanza’s metrical properties, as well as its rhyme.70 It is characterized on the one hand by regularity, yet on the other by its capacity for variation, complexity and its inherent elasticity. This latter characteristic
allowed Akhmatova to develop what, for her, as Vitaly Vilenkin remarks, was an 'atypical method of composition'\textsuperscript{71}, amplifying her text almost endlessly, rather than altering and cutting it.

Apart from the stanza form, there are other points, made by Akhmatova herself in the prose about her poem, which emphasize the work's novelty. She writes, for example, 'in the poem there is absolutely nothing traditional'\textsuperscript{72} Similarly, she repeats one reader's judgment of the work as possessing all the qualities of a completely new work in the history of literature owing to its relationship with music, thereby implicitly linking its novelty with its prosody.\textsuperscript{73} Of course, her reader is right—from the very beginning where there is a quotation from Da Ponte's libretto to Mozart's \textit{Don Giovanni}, the poem is full of musical references. It is composed in symphonic movements and its metre also gives it a triple-beat rhythm of ferocious energy, dancing lyrically, demonically, tragically in one incurable impulse from beginning to the end. Viktor Zhirmunsky finds that the musicality of the poem establishes a relationship even with Symbolist poetry against which Akhmatova had started her career as an Acmeist. Zhirmunsky said that the poem might be regarded as a fulfillment of the Symbolists' dream; that is, it is that which they advocated in theory, but never realized in their works (magic of rhythm, enchantment of vision), and that in their poems there is none of this.\textsuperscript{74}

Zhirmunsky also establishes a relationship of the \textit{Poem} with futurism. He finds that by means of its layout, Akhmatova's poem echoed the futuristic designs as found in some of the famous futuristic poets such as Mayakovsky. The following arrangement of the lines, for instance, may be cited\textsuperscript{75}:

\begin{quote}
And it was I, your ancient
\end{quote}
Conscience, found the burnt pages
Of a story, in his home,
Placed on the edge of a sill
The dead boy's will
And on tiptoe left the room.

Of course, all these novelties in her Poem only helped Akhmatova in an ever remarkable evocation of a troubled society. It is not that she crossed the boundaries of tradition, instead the bundle of obvious or hidden allusions in the poem make it clear that the poem is an implied testament to the ongoing vitality and greatness of an entire culture. It is an unforgettable account of human existence in one of the most crucial periods and places in world history. To Berlin, who asked whether she would ever annotate the poem since the allusions might remain totally unintelligible for future readers, Akhmatova replied that when "those who knew the world about which she spoke were overtaken by senility or death, the poem would die too, it would be buried with her and her century ... the past alone had significance for the poets ..."76

Of course, Ahhmatova's reply reaffirms her sense of reverence for a distinct cultural past and tradition with which she had associated herself long ago as an Acmeist.

To sum up, the innovations or shifts in Akhmatova's earlier manner were indispensable, because the exact conditions of life and culture were changing drastically, and poetry demanded in it an urgent representation of all those changes. It is against this background that in the later period, Akhmatova becomes unswervingly preoccupied with public themes. The shift from intense personal concerns that characterized her early poetry now
acquires an epical dimension by their more urgent address to the large contexts of contemporary life. The comparative study of Akhmatova with the leading Assamese poet, Nilmani Phookan, attempted towards the end of this chapter, has related to these shifts in both the poets. In the later period she becomes more frequently involved with longer forms and now, the expansion of forms evidently leads to a broadening of theme. The polymetricality and fragmentation of these later poems also confirm Akhmatova’s evolution of her art from her early and middle careers. They also assure her power to handle the poetic form to her utmost advantage.

Her involvement with the tradition also becomes more organic now. Her deep concern with the tradition during this period is most sincerely expressed in varied the allegorical representations of contemporary experiences. Besides many non-Russian texts, she uses materials from the Russian medieval history as her allusions, but projects them onto the contemporary situation mostly by the method of contrast. There are, among numerous references to writers and literary works of both the past and present. All these only authenticate her power over the tradition.

Notes and References:


2 Rosslyn, Dr Wendy: The Prince, the Fool and the Nunnery: Religion and Love in the Far Poetry of Anna Akhmatova, Avebury, Amersham, 1984, p-84


8 Reeder, Roberta: *Anna Akhmatova: Poet and Prophet*, St. Martin’s Press, New York, 1994, p.31


11 Ibid, p.8


14 Akhmatova, Anna: *A Brief Word about Myself*, in Soviet Literature, April, 1989, pp.6-7


17 Akhmatova, Anna: *Autobiographical Sketches* (1957-61), in Soviet Literature, April, 1989, p.78

18 Ibid., p.78


20 Rosslyn, Dr Wendy: *The Prince, the Fool and the Nunnery: Religion and Love in the Early Poetry of Anna Akhmatova*, Avebury, Amersham, 1984, p.223

22 Driver, Sam N.: *Anna Akhmatova*, Twayne, New York, 1972, pp- 84-6


27 *Ibid.*, p-68

28 Akhmatova and Dante in *Dante Encyclopaedia* at http://www.google.com/

29 Mandelstam, Nadezhda: *Hope against Hope*, Trans. Max Hayward, Athenium, New York, 1983, p-143


38 *Ibid*, p-140

39 Akhmatova, Anna: *Autobiographical Sketches*, Russian Literature, April, 1989, p- 41

40 Driver, Sam N.: *Anna Akhmatova*, Twayne, New York, 1972, p-58


49 *The Lay of Igor’s Host*, Translated by Bernard Guilbert Guerney in *A Treasury of Russian Literature*, The Bodley Head, London, 1948, pp-17-33


51 *The Lay of Igor’s Host*, Translated by Bernard Guilbert Guerney in *A Treasury of Russian Literature*, The Bodley Head, London, 1948, pp-17-33

52 *The Lay of Igor’s Host*, Translated by Bernard Guilbert Guerney in *A Treasury of Russian Literature*, The Bodley Head, London, 1948, pp-17-33


56 Translated by the poet himself, included in *Signatures: One Hundred Indian Poets*, edited by K Satchidanandam, National Book Trust, India, 2000, p-221

57 Translated by Pradip Acharya, included in *Selected Poems of Nilmoni Phookan*, Sahitya Akademi, 2001, p-45


Sherr, Barry P: *Russian Poetry: Meter, Rhythm, and Rhyme*, U P of California, Berkeley, 1986, p-131


Ibid., p-44


Ibid., p-221

Quoted in *Chaosmos: Observations On The Stanza Form of Anna Akhmatova's Poem Without a Hero* by Alexandra K. Harrington, Slavonica, 13 (2) 2007, pp-99-112

It is worth noting in connection with this that the stepped lines are reminiscent not only of Futurism but also of the poetry of the Symbolist Andrei Bely, who first used them.