

CHAOSMOS: OBSERVATIONS ON THE STANZA FORM OF ANNA AKHMATOVA'S *POEM WITHOUT A HERO*

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Recent critical observations on Akhmatova's Poema bez geroia (Poem Without a Hero) are drawn together, suggesting that it detaches itself from modernism and moves beyond it in various ways. These ideas are then extended in relation to the poem's innovative stanza form. It is argued that Poem represents a conscious attempt to revive the formalism and spirit of experimentation that was characteristic of the Silver Age. Akhmatova both demonstrates and celebrates modernist poetics, but ultimately exceeds modernism by establishing a new poetical system which regards modernism with considerable irony. The unusual stanza constitutes an important part of this dual desire both to revive, and to establish a distance from, Silver Age modernism. The stanza manifests a peculiar capacity for variation and frequently departs from its basic structure, so that previous descriptions of Akhmatova's stanza in scholarship discern both regularity and a capricious elasticity. This paradoxical combination of order with unpredictability suggests that the stanza might usefully be characterized — employing scientific discourse as a metaphor — as a kind of chaotic system. It furnishes Akhmatova with a means of establishing a dialogue with chaos at the level of prosody which constitutes a formal expression of the theme of disintegration and chaos which is central to the poem.

In recent years, appeals to postmodernism have been made sporadically, but with increasing frequency, by critics in relation to *Poema bez geroia (Poem Without a Hero)*, Anna Akhmatova's most obviously metafictional and experimental text. The arguments that have been advanced tend to centre on the fact that rampant and self-conscious intertextuality plays a key role in the poem's construction. Solomon Volkov, for instance, observes that 'its citations — obvious, hidden and encoded — from works by Petersburg authors make it the quintessential postmodernist text'.¹ In an article which draws on Mark Lipovetskii's writings, L. G. Kikhnei and O. R. Temirshina suggest that the poem marks the beginning of the 'neo-baroque' tradition of Russian postmodernism, in that it is orientated towards the culture of the past and is concerned with bringing about a 'revival' (*vozrozhdenie*) of Silver Age modernism, rather than evincing a break with it.² Lipovetskii himself, along with his co-author Naum Leiderman, contends that late works by Akhmatova such as *Poem* and *Rekviem (Requiem)* belong to the category of 'postrealism', which establishes a compromise between, or fusion of, postmodernism and realism.³ In short, the notion that *Poem* detaches itself in various ways from modernism seems slowly to be gaining critical currency.⁴

This article aims to draw together these disparate arguments and to extend them in relation to Akhmatova's unusual stanza form, the technical virtuosity and display of which indicate a conscious attempt on the poet's part to revive the formal experimentation characteristic of the Silver Age. The 'Akhmatova stanza', as it has come to be known, combines order with a high level of unpredictability and considerable potential for variation and, in this regard, it invites comparison with recent scientific and postmodern rethinking of the relationship between order and chaos. Its paradoxical combination of order and disorder finds parallels with certain theoretical descriptions of postmodernist poetics which draw upon what is popularly known as 'chaos theory', providing useful terminology for describing the stanza, and further grounds for regarding *Poem* as a pioneering example of Russian postmodernism.

Early Russian postmodernism is generally perceived to have arisen from a desire to 'revive' or 'return to' modernism, and to 'reconnect Russia with a variety of "lost" modernist traditions'.⁵ The development of modernism in Russia was hampered by the imposition of socialist realism and official campaigns against 'formalism', so that this 'return' to modernism is inevitably accompanied by a paradoxical awareness of the impossibility of such a move after years of totalitarian control over cultural production. As Lipovetskii observes, early Russian postmodernism simultaneously expresses two contradictory tendencies:

On the one hand there was the need to return to modernism, to use the aesthetic arsenal of the classics; this is why the works of Russian postmodernists display so many features that are characteristic of modernist aesthetics. On the other hand, there was the gradual recognition of the impossibility of "restoring" modernism after decades of totalitarian aesthetics. We find this recognition in the search for an ironic contact with or distancing from the modernist classics.⁶

Poem is an early expression of this impulse and it certainly displays numerous features characteristic of modernist aesthetics; in effect, it constitutes a dramatisation of Akhmatova's 'return' to the modernist era from the perspective afforded her by hindsight. The first part of the poem, 'Deviat'sot trinadtsatyi god' ('The Year Nineteen Thirteen'), involves the visitation in 1940 of the 'author' by the 'shades' of 1913 and the re-enactment of the memory of events concerning them. As has long been recognised, it contains numerous allusions to other texts, many of them dating from the 1910s, and it exhibits an array of typically modernist devices (including spatialized time, a non-linear narrative which imitates the play of the mind, collage, and montage), and it reworks characteristically modernist themes (in particular, the harlequinade and apocalypse).

'The Year Nineteen Thirteen' is presented by Akhmatova as a self-sufficient text-within-a-text, which is then commented upon by a fictional 'editor' (a devotee of socialist realism) in the metapoetic second part of *Poem*, 'Reshka' ('Tails') and then reflected upon again, albeit to a lesser extent and more obliquely, in the Epilogue. The poem as a whole thereby portrays an 'author' character in the process of composing a modernist text, many of the features of which are conspicuously old-fashioned and ideologically suspect for the 1940s, but are unmistakably redolent of Silver Age literature. Marina Tsvetaeva's rather sarcastic response to an early draft of the poem testifies to its anachronistic quality and perhaps also to its problematic political credentials: 'Надо обладать большой смелостью, чтобы в 1941 г. писать о Коломбине, Пьеро и Арлекине' ('One needs to possess great courage in order to write about Columbine, Pierrot and Harlequin in 1941').⁷

A remark made by Brian McHale in relation to James Joyce's *Ulysses* (a novel greatly admired by Akhmatova and perceived by her as remarkably similar in conception to her own text)⁸ serves well to describe *Poem Without a Hero*:

At one and the same time a founding text of "High Modernism" and a postmodernist text, a "demonstration and summation" of modernist poetics and a parody of modernist poetics; it defines and consolidates modernism yet at the same time exceeds and explodes it.⁹

Poem too is a 'demonstration and summation' of modernist poetics which 'defines and consolidates modernism' by containing within itself a self-conscious representation of a modernist text, 'The Year Nineteen Thirteen', the subject of which is the modernist era. It also 'exceeds and explodes' modernism by juxtaposing the two temporal worlds of 1913 and 1940, thereby turning Silver Age modernism into an object for evaluation and a target for considerable irony.

As Roman Timenchik demonstrates, Akhmatova consciously, and with polemical and parodic intent, makes use of various fragments of the cultural range of 1913 which were already thought of as somewhat hackneyed at the time. For example, he cites the collocation *поцелуйные плечи* ('kissable shoulders'), which Briusov had declared in print to be outdated in 1910.¹⁰ Akhmatova demonstrates and celebrates modernism, but she also exposes and explodes it by incorporating its more clichéd moments and establishing an ironic distance from its language and its hopes for the advent of a new, ideal reality. In 'Tails', she implies that, like her fictional editor, she considers the content and themes of 'The Year Nineteen Thirteen' to be outmoded from the vantage-point of the 1940s:

И сама я была не рада,
Этой адской арлекинады
Издалёка слышав вой.¹¹

And I myself was not happy
When I heard from a distance the howl
Of this hellish harlequinade.

She also indicates that the arrival of the 'Real' twentieth century marked a complete break with the literary and cultural past:

И серебряный месяц ярко
Над серебряным веком стыл.
[...]
А по набережной легендарной
Приближался не календарный —
Настоящий Двадцатый Век.¹²

And the silver moon brightly
Froze over the silver age.
[...]
And along the legendary embankment
Drew nearer not the calendar —
But the Real Twentieth Century.

Dubravka Oraič has argued cogently that Akhmatova's poem belongs to an early postmodernist model, which she calls the 'museum of modernist art'.¹³ In this museum model of postmodernism, Oraič states, a relationship is established by the author between his or her own text and modernist or avant-garde art.¹⁴ This assessment provides independent support for Kikhnei and Temirshina's reading of *Poem* as a neo-baroque piece which remythologizes cultural ruins and fragments with a view to bringing about a revival of early Russian modernism. These ideas also chime with Timenchik's view of Akhmatova's methods, which

he characterises in terms of *bricolage*: she recombines cultural fragments to create her own myth of the Silver Age.

Akhmatova's intensive engagement with Silver Age modernism leads, as Timenchik and Oraič both indicate, to various forms of deep structural quotation. Timenchik finds that the plot of 'The Year Nineteen Thirteen' is in itself a 'sign' of the poetry of 1913, and illustrates this by reference to poems from the period manifesting close similarities in plot.¹⁵ Oraič points out that the stepped lines (*lesenki*) employed by Akhmatova in *Poem* reveal its close relationship with avant-garde art, recalling the practice of Cubo-Futurist poets such as Vladimir Maiakovskii. It might also be argued that the other ways in which Akhmatova brings style and the linguistic medium to the foreground provide further signals of the text's affinity with turn-of-the-century avant-garde aesthetics in general.¹⁶ Her use of capitals, italics and acrostics are all ways of exploring the 'look' of the text, of making the poetry impact visually upon the reader. For instance:

Б	<i>Звук шагов тех, которых нету,</i>
Е	<i>По сиящему паркету,</i>
Л	<i>И сигары синий дымок.</i>
Ы	<i>И во всех зеркалах отразился</i>
Й	<i>Человек, что не появился</i>
	<i>И проникнуть в тот зал не мог.</i>
З	<i>Он не лучше других и не хуже,</i>
А	<i>Но не веет Летейской стужей,</i>
Л	<i>И в руке его теплота.</i>
	<i>Гость из Будущего! — Неужели</i>
	<i>Он придет ко мне в самом деле,</i>
	<i>Повернув налево с моста?</i> ¹⁷
W	The sound of the steps of those who are not here
H	Across the gleaming parquet,
I	And the blue smoke of a cigar.
T	And in all the mirrors
E	The man, who did not appear
	And who could not enter that hall is reflected.
H	He is not better than the others, nor worse,
A	But he does not waft Lethe's chill
L	And there is warmth in his hand.
L	Guest from the Future! — Will he really
	Come to me
	Having turned left at the bridge?

The vertically aligned words compel the reader to acknowledge the text's materiality by disrupting a linear reading. Elsewhere in the poem, Akhmatova shapes her poetry into a visual representation of an appropriate object, and uses capitalisation to create the impression of a disembodied voice or shout:

ИЗ ГОДА СОРОКОВОГО,
КАК С БАШНИ, НА ВСЕ ГЛЯЖУ.
КАК БУДТО ПРОЩАЯСЬ С НОВА
С ТЕМ, С ЧЕМ ДАВНО ПРОСТИЛАСЬ
КАК БУДТО ПЕРЕКРЕСТИЛАСЬ
И ПОД ТЕМНЫЕ СВОДЫ СХОЖУ.¹⁸

FROM THE FORTIETH YEAR,
AS FROM A TOWER, I LOOK AT EVERYTHING.

AS THOUGH I WERE TAKING LEAVE ONCE MORE
 FROM THAT TO WHICH I SAID GOODBYE LONG AGO
 AS THOUGH I CROSSED MYSELF
 AND AM GOING DOWN BENEATH DARK VAULTS.

The indentation in the left-hand margin resembles a staircase, visually reproducing the descent to the past described in the poetry.

Deep structural quotation in *Poem* can also be discerned at the level of prosody. *Poem* is often praised for its prosodic inventiveness, a quality not usually regarded as characteristic of Akhmatova's poetry,¹⁹ and its unique stanza form has been the focus of several studies.²⁰ Akhmatova's view that the failure of Blok's *Vozmezdie* (*Retribution*) resulted from the lack of a sufficiently novel stanza form — a potential pitfall for any poet writing in the wake of Pushkin's *Evgenii Onegin* — can be seen as a crucial factor in the creation of the stanza form for *Poem*. 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.²¹ In short, the specific task which she appears to have set herself, as is generally acknowledged, was to 'создать нечто принципиально новое, подчеркнуть непохожесть на предыдущее' ('create something principally new, to underline dissimilarity to what has gone before').²² This necessitated the creation of a suitable stanza form.

A number of claims made by Akhmatova in the prose about her poem emphasize the work's novelty. She writes, for example, 'в поэме нет никакой традицион [ности]' ('in the poem there is absolutely nothing traditional') and 'таких поэм никто не писал' ('no one has ever written such a poem').²³ 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.²⁴ The significance which Akhmatova accorded her stanza is illustrated by her regretful mention of it in a poem of 1946, 'I uvidel mesiats lukavyi' ('And the cunning moon saw'):

Теперь меня позабудут,
 И книги сгниют в шкафу.
 Ахматовской звать не будут
 Ни улицу, ни строфу.

Now they will forget me
 And my books will gather mould in the cupboard
 No street, nor stanza,
 Will be given the name Akhmatova.

The stanza form of *Poem* establishes a relationship with Symbolist poetry through its musicality, much as it does with futurism by means of its layout.²⁵ Viktor Zhirmunskii conveyed his views on *Poem*'s relationship with symbolism to Akhmatova, who repeatedly includes them in different pieces of prose relating to it. She writes, for example:

В. М. Жирмунский очень интересно говорил о поэме. Он сказал, что это исполнение мечты символистов, т. е. это то, что они проповедовали в теории, но никогда не осуществляли в своих произведениях (магия ритма, волшебство видения), что в их поэмах ничего этого нет.²⁶

V. M. Zhirmunskii spoke very interestingly about the poem. He said that it is a fulfilment 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.

The idea of both demonstrating and exceeding modernism is implicit in this observation. In creating her own stanza form, Akhmatova consciously revives the technical display and formalism characteristic of the beginning of the century. Indeed the very title *Poem Without a Hero* hints at the primacy of form over content. The poem is based on the *dol'nik*, a metre popularised by Aleksandr Blok,²⁷ used extensively by Akhmatova, and more generally particularly characteristic of the Silver Age. By the 1940s, when Akhmatova began work on *Poem*, Russian poets had become considerably less experimental with form: indeed, from as early as the 1920s poetry had begun to retreat from the kind of prosodic experimentation which had been prevalent in the 1910s.²⁸

Akhmatova's stanza form is unique and distinctive, but like everything else in *Poem*, it has various intertexts. It bears marked similarities to the stanza form of the second 'stroke' (*udar*) of Mikhail Kuzmin's poetic cycle of 1927, *Forel' razbivaet led* (*The Trout Breaks the Ice*), as Timenchik was first to observe.²⁹ This similarity is not accidental: Akhmatova had been reading Kuzmin's poem and discussing it with Lidiia Chukovskaia in 1940, the year in which she embarked upon the composition of *Poem*, and the two works have noticeable thematic correspondences.³⁰ Kuzmin's first two stanzas read:

Кони бьются, храпят в испуге,	A
Синей лентой обвиты дуги	A
Волки, снег, бубенцы, пальба!	b
Что до страшной, как ночь, расплаты?	C
Разве дрогнут твои Карпаты?	C
В старом роге застынет мед?	d
Полость треплется, диво-птица;	A
Визг полозьев — «гайда, Марица!»	A
Стоп... бежит с фонарем гайдук...	b
Вот какое твоё домовье:	C
Свет мадонны у изголовья	C
И подкова хранит порог. ³¹	d

Kuzmin's rhythmical patterns are based on a four-foot *dol'nik*. His rhyme scheme is regular and each stanza divides into halves, which consist of two feminine rhymes and a masculine line. The two masculine lines in each stanza do not rhyme with one another.

Akhmatova's stanza (here, from 'Tails') follows a similar pattern, but her masculine lines are rhymed, unlike Kuzmin's, and her *dol'nik* is ternary:

И со мною моя «Седьмая»,	A
Полумертвая и немая,	A
Рот ее сведен и открыт	b
Словно рот трагической, маски,	C
Но он черной замазан краской	C
И сухою землей набит. ³²	D

Nina Lisnianskaia, writing after Timenchik, has uncovered another intertext for the stanza: Marina Tsvetaeva's lyric 'Kavaler de Grie' ('Cavalier de Grioux'), written on New Year's Eve 1917 (a significant date, as *Poem* is set on New Year's Eve 1940). The first two stanzas of Tsvetaeva's poem read:

Кавалер де Гriez! Напрасно	A
Вы мечтаете о прекрасной,	A
Самовластной, в себе не властной.	A
Сладострастной своей Manon.	b

Верницею вольной, томной.	A
Мы выходим из ваших комнат.	A
Дольше вечера нас не помнят.	A
Покоритесь. — Таков закон. ³³	b

Tsvetaeva's lyric is based on a three-foot *dol'nik*, as is Akhmatova's, and their rhyme schemes are remarkably alike. Tsvetaeva's first three feminine lines are rounded off with a masculine line, which rhymes with the final line of the second quatrain. However, in the two quatrains which follow this quotation, the masculine lines are unrhymed, rendering them rather more like Kuzmin's stanza. Akhmatova's stanza follows a pattern similar to that established across Tsvetaeva's first two quatrains, as Lisnianskaia demonstrates with the following quotation from *Poem*:

Крик петуший нам только снится,	A
За окошком Нева дымится,	A
Ночь бездонна — и длится, длится —	A
Петербургская чертовня. . .	b
В черном небе звезды не видно,	C
Гибель где-то здесь, очевидно,	C
Но беспечна, прятна, бесстыдна	C
Маскарадная болтовня. ³⁴	b

Lisnianskaia contends that Kuzmin borrowed from Tsvetaeva, and then Akhmatova borrowed from them both.²⁶ The shortcoming in her argument is that the example that she cites from *Poem* to illustrate her case is, in fact, an irregular stanza, consisting of eight lines. It is taken from 'The Year Nineteen Thirteen', in which departures from the basic six-line rhyme scheme are strikingly frequent. Nonetheless, a comparison with the more regular stanzas of 'Tails' confirms that Lisnianskaia's overall premise has foundation:

И сама я была не рада	A
Этой адской арлекинады	A
Издалёка слышав вой.	b
Все надеялась я, что мимо	C
Белой залы, как хлопя дыма,	C
Пронесется сквозь сумрак хвой.	b

As in 'Tails', the stanza in the Epilogue is six lines in length, but individual stanzas there are not separated by numbers or line spacing:

Так под кровлей Фонтанного дома,	A
Где вечерняя бродит истома	A
С фонарем и связкой ключей, —	b
Я аукалась с дальним эхом,	C
Неуместным смущая смехом	C
Непробудную сонь вещей.	b
Где свидетель всего на свете,	A
На закате и на рассвете	A
Смотрит в комнату старый клен	b
И предвидя нашу разлуку,	C
Мне иссохшую черную руку,	C
Как за помощью, тянет он. ³⁶	b

In short, Akhmatova's stanza possesses the same metre as Tsvetaeva's, and incorporates rhyming masculine lines, as does hers, but in its most common variant it is the length of

Kuzmin's. It is a genuine blend of these two precursors, but it exceeds them both in its potential for variation.

Akhmatova's stanza is at its most complex and varied in 'The Year Nineteen Thirteen', the part of the poem that conjures up the Silver Age and constitutes a text-within-a-text. After this, in 'Tails' and the Epilogue, order establishes itself. 'The Year Nineteen Thirteen' begins as follows (the dividing lines, which are not present in Akhmatova's text, indicate stanza breaks):

1	Я зажгла заветные свечи,	A
	Чтобы этот светился вечер,	A
	И с тобой, ко мне не пришедшим,	A
	Сорок первый встречаю год.	b

5	Но...	
	Господняя сила с нами!	C
	В хрустале утонуло пламя	C
	«И вино, как отравы, жжет».	b

	Это всплески жесткой беседы,	A
	Когда все воскресают бреды,	A
10	А часы все еще не быют...	b
	Нету меры моей тревоге,	C
	Я сама, как тень на пороге,	C
	Стережу последний уют.	b

	И я слышу звонок протяжный,	A
15	И я чувствую холод влажный,	A
	Каменею, стыну, горю...	b
	И, как будто припомнив что-то,	C
	Повернувшись вполоборота,	C
	Тихим голосом говорю:	b

20	«Вы ошиблись: Венеция дождей —	A
	Это рядом... Но маски в прихожей,	A
	И плаши, и жезлы, и венцы	b
	Вам сегодня придется оставить.	C
	Вас я вздумала нынче прославить,	C
25	Новогодние сорванцы!»	b

	Этот Фаустом, тот Дон-Жуаном,	A
	Дапертутто, Иоканааном;	A
	Самый скромный - северным Гланом	A
	Иль убийцею Дорианом,	A
30	И все шепчут своим Дианам	A
	Твердо выученный урок.	b
	А какой-то еще с тимпаном	A
	Козлоногую приволок.	b
	И для них расступились стены,	C
35	Вспыхнул свет, завывли сирены,	C
	И, как купол, вспух потолок.	b

	Я не то что боюсь огласки...	A
	Что мне Гамлетовы подвязки!	A
	Что мне вихрь Саломеинной пляски,	A

40	Что мне поступь Железной Маски!	A
	Я сама пожелезней тех...	b
	И чья очередь испугаться,	C
	Отшатнуться, отпрянуть, сдаться	C
	И замаливать давний грех? ... ³⁷	b

As is her usual practice with her intertexts, Akhmatova does not engage in mere imitation of Tsvetaeva or Kuzmin, but rather uses their stanza forms as a base and develops them further. In 'The Year Nineteen Thirteen' the basic six-line structure which establishes itself throughout 'Tails' and the Epilogue can only be seen in the second, third, and fourth stanzas above. It is not regularly employed. The rhyme scheme of the first stanza (lines 1–7) is characterised by inexact rhymes (*свечи* is rhymed with *вечер*), and the stanza is seven lines long. The second stanza consists of six lines with exact rhymes: *беседы* and *бреды*, *бьют* and *уют*, *тревоге* and *пороге*. Moreover, the pattern does not clearly establish itself until later in the text. This variation makes the pattern initially difficult for the reader to discern, and an appreciation of the basic stanza is complicated by the range of expanded and contracted versions of it which appear throughout 'The Year Nineteen Thirteen'.

As all this suggests, Akhmatova's stanza is highly complex and elastic. It consists of a basic rhyme scheme (AAbCCb) from which the poet departs periodically by adding extra rhyming lines. This is the case, for instance, with lines 30–31 above, which were a relatively late addition to the text in comparison with the lines surrounding them. As lines 1–3, 26–30, and 36–40 illustrate, any number of additional rhyming feminine lines can potentially be included. It is also possible for extra masculine lines to be inserted, as with line 31. Lines 26 to 36, therefore, contain a mixture of interpolated feminine and masculine rhyming lines, the addition of which allows the stanza to be expanded. These expansions bear, of course, upon semantics: they tend to coincide with particularly dramatic or chaotic episodes in the narrative, such as the arrival of the masquerade figures, their effect being to heighten the tension and sense of ensuing catastrophe.

Over the four parts of 'The Year Nineteen Thirteen', approximately sixty per cent of the stanzas are six lines in length, with the other forty per cent varying between four lines and eleven. At times, it becomes almost impossible to determine where one stanza ends and the next begins. For instance:

Санчо Пансы и Дон-Кихоты	A
И, увы, содомские Лоты	A
Смертоносный пробуют сок,	b
Афродиты возникли из пены,	C
Шевельнулись в стекле Елены,	C
И безумья близится срок.	b
И опять из Фонтанного Грота,	D
Где любовная стынет дремота,	D
Через призрачные ворота,	D
И мохнатый и рыжий кто-то	D
Козлоногую приволок. ³⁸	b

The new rhyme in line 7 seems to begin a new stanza. However, the masculine rhyme of the preceding stanza (line 6) is echoed in the final line of the quotation. Subsequent lines begin a new pattern of rhymes altogether. This example could therefore be thought of either as a six-line stanza followed by a five-line stanza, or as an eleven-line one. The Akhmatova stanza incorporates a level of unpredictability and flexibility which expresses formally the

pervasive disintegration and chaos that are an essential part of the thematics of 'The Year Nineteen Thirteen', which deals with the destructive advent of war and revolution.

Kornei Chukovskii'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:

[...] наибольшую эмоциональную силу каждому из образов поэмы придает ее тревожный и страстный ритм, органически связанный с ее тревожной и страстной тематикой. Это прихотливое сочетание двух анапестических стоп то с амфибрахием, то с одностопным ямбом может называться ахматовским: насколько я знаю, такая ритмика (равно как и строфика) до сих пор была русской поэзии неведома.³⁹

[...] 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.

Zhirmunskii also comments upon the metre and rhythm of the stanza and, like Chukovskii, he emphasises its novelty. However, where Chukovskii sees intricacy and capriciousness, Zhirmunskii discerns regularity:

Вслед за Пушкиным и Некрасовым, Блоком (в Двенадцати) и Маяковским Ахматова обратилась в «Поэме без героя» к поискам новой формы. Этой формой стала особая строфа, уже получившая название «ахматовской строфы». В ее основе лежит дольник — характерный для лирики Ахматовой трехударный стих с переменным числом неударных слогов между ударениями (один или два) и перед первым ударением. В поэме, по сравнению с лирикой, долники Ахматовой обнаруживают более регулярную форму: начало стиха всегда анапестическое (два неударны перед первым ударением); перед одним из двух остальных ударений может стоять один неударный слог (стопа ямбическая), тогда перед другим в том же стихе обязательно стоят два неударных слога (стопа анапестическая); либо обе стопы — анапестические, как первая.⁴⁰

Following Pushkin and Nekraskov, Blok (in *The Twelve*) and Maiakovskii, 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. 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.

Zhirmunskii identifies the three standard rhythmic variations to which Akhmatova's lines are subject. As his and Chukovskii'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. 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 Vitalii Vilenkin remarks, was an 'atypical method of composition', amplifying her text almost endlessly, rather than altering and cutting it.⁴¹

The paradoxical and innovative combination of order and disorder manifest in Akhmatova's stanza leads irresistibly in the direction of Russian postmodernist theory, in particular Lipovetskii's characterisation of postmodernist poetics as a 'dialogue with chaos'. In order to

pin down what distinguishes postmodernist works from the literature which precedes them, Lipovetskii invokes the branch of modern science popularly known as 'chaos theory'. Over the last quarter of a century or so, scientists have reconceived chaos as complexity, rather than as total disorder, and have discovered that order can be concealed within, or can arise from, a chaotic system. 'Chaos' turns out to be a misnomer. Lipovetskii is not alone in his perception that postmodernism 'quite naturally takes its place alongside these theories'.⁴² Various western literary critics have also drawn extensive and often illuminating parallels between scientific models of chaos and postmodernist poetics. N. Katherine Hayles, one of the most prominent among these, believes there to be a strong similarity between chaos theory and Derridian deconstruction.⁴³ Scholars of Joyce's work often invoke scientific models in their interpretations of his fiction (it is perhaps relevant that Akhmatova herself, as mentioned earlier, thought of *Ulysses* and *Poem* as remarkably similar in conception to one another).⁴⁴ Some researchers remain adamantly opposed to the idea that chaos theory can usefully be applied to literature, and those literary scholars who draw elaborate parallels between postmodernist poetics and scientific theory frequently lay themselves open to charges of factual inaccuracy or of making 'intellectual impostures'.⁴⁵ It nonetheless seems perfectly legitimate for other disciplines to draw upon science as a conceptual resource and to borrow apposite terminology from scientific discourse, provided that it is acknowledged that this usage has been adopted for their own specific purposes.

Postmodernism, in Lipovetskii's view, differs from the literature that precedes it by making chaos 'an equal participant in the dialogue with the artist' and admitting it into the very structure of a literary work. In this respect, the traditional privileging of order over chaos is rethought in postmodernism. The postmodernist writer strives to 'overcome the binary opposition of chaos and cosmos [. . .] and to redirect the creative impulse toward a *compromise* between these universals'.⁴⁶ Lipovetskii (following Umberto Eco) borrows the Joycean term 'chaosmos' to describe this paradoxical combination of order and disorder, and argues that postmodernist compromises between the two, rather than resolving contradictions, lead to a new intellectual space for the constant interaction of binary oppositions.⁴⁷

A corresponding capacity of Akhmatova's poem has often been observed in criticism. For example, Tat'iana Tsiv'ian identifies:

at least [. . .] two hypostases of the poem that are in opposition, and even almost in contradiction, to each other and which, nevertheless, not only co-exist in time and space but, moreover, form a real unity of opposites.⁴⁸

The two hypostases upon which she focuses in detail are spontaneity and premeditation, *Poem* being presented as the creation of both at the same time. Akhmatova repeatedly casts her poem as an entity which came to her unbidden and complete — '*Я не звала ее*' ('I didn't call her'), yet the notions of authorship and literariness are also continually highlighted — '*Три «к» выражают замешательство автора*' ('The three 'k's express the author's confusion'). This paradox gives rise to various related oppositions, such as that between finishedness — '*«Еже писахъ — писахъ»*' ('What is written is written') — and unfinishability — '*Раньше поэма кончалась так*' ('Formerly, the poem ended thus'), or that between inarticulate sound (the Blokian *гул* or 'rumbling sound' which pervades the Petersburg of 1913) and the word (the use of *чужое слово* or 'alien discourse' in the poem's construction). The poem is the product, as Tsiv'ian observes, both of 'divine sound' — or perhaps something closer to postmodernist noise? — and a 'sober, precise plan' according to which information is

enciphered. This doubling is the basis of its structure, in the depths of which lies this 'amalgamation of two opposites'.⁴⁹ Throughout the poem other binary categories often blurred in postmodernism, such as centre and periphery, become difficult to distinguish, and the work as a whole is an amorphous hybrid, which constantly spills over its own boundaries and threatens to turn into something else altogether, be it play, ballet, or screenplay. Moreover, the speaker is herself unable to distinguish between opposite categories:

Золотого ль века виденье
Или черное преступленье
В грозном хаосе давних дней?⁵⁰

Is this a vision of the Golden Age
Or a black crime
In the menacing chaos of bygone days?

The image of a golden age suggests perfection and harmony (especially in connection with Dostoevskii, to whom these lines clearly allude), whereas the reference to a 'black crime' is redolent of evil and disintegration. The suggestion is that the Silver Age is neither, and both, of these opposites. Elsewhere in her later work, Akhmatova displays her interest in cosmogony and explores the role of chaos in the process of creation: this is particularly apparent in the first of her 'Severnye elegii' ('Northern elegies'), 'Predystoriia' ('Prehistory'), in which she depicts Dostoevskii rising up above primordial chaos and creating the chaotic, out-of-joint world into which she and her generation were born.⁵¹ The traditional passage from chaos to form is recast as a passage from primordial chaos to a different kind of chaos. Akhmatova's project in *Poem*, which is closely related to 'Prehistory', is to find appropriate forms for conveying the 'menacing chaos' of the past.⁵²

Akhmatova's stanza form in *Poem*, which is characterised by an underlying order that is initially difficult to discern as it permits extensive variation, can be described in terms of 'chaosmos'. This term provides a means of characterizing the stanza as a complex system and of accounting for its particular features. These particular features can, in turn, be described by invoking scientific terminology. One of the peculiarities of the stanza form in *Poem* is that the basic pattern emerges slowly, only achieving consistent regularity in 'Tails'. In this respect, analogies can be drawn with the 'dissipative structures' discovered by Ilia Prigogine in the 1970s; these being dynamic, self-propagating systems which undergo a transformation from the apparently chaotic to the increasingly ordered. These systems are unbalanced, open ones, which interact with their environment — similarly, Akhmatova's dynamic stanza allows new material from outside the text to be introduced and absorbed into it. Moreover, concealed within the unpredictability of the stanza in 'The Year Nineteen Thirteen' are deep structures of order that might be thought of in terms of 'recursive symmetry', a feature of chaotic systems whereby the same general form is repeated across different length scales, as though it is progressively enlarged or diminished. The expansions and contractions of the basic six-line stanza in 'The Year Nineteen Thirteen' constitute different-length repetitions of the same general form. To think of order as relative, as the replication of symmetries that permit asymmetries and unpredictability, provides a means of characterising the Akhmatova stanza's peculiar combination of pattern with capricious departures from that pattern.

Lipovetskii concludes that the close interaction between postmodernist poetics and the world model of chaos, which he sees as expressed in the breakdown of the artistic system's traditional structures, does not necessarily result in the fragmentation of artistic unity. The

formation of a new, non-classical, chaomic system within an artistic whole is also possible. The artistic attempt to seek hidden order in chaos and to transform it into cosmos is based, Lipovetskii asserts, on a contradictory understanding of chaos:

From the very beginning, chaos is perceived both as debunking all kinds of rules and providing a form of paradoxical survival for old cultural systems and for the creation of new ones.⁵³

This serves well to describe Akhmatova's achievement with regard to Silver Age modernism, which is both demonstrated and exceeded in her poem. The 'museum', *bricolage*, or 'neo-baroque' models of intertextuality allow old cultural systems to survive at the same time as a new poetical system, from which the old one is evaluated, comes into being. In *Poem*, Akhmatova is engaged in a two-fold project: on the one hand she celebrates and preserves the literary past, and on the other she innovates and revitalises old forms to create a new poetic system. Her complex stanza is one of the most sophisticated expressions of this dual impulse.

¹ St. Petersburg: *A Cultural History*, trans. by Antonina W. Bouis (New York: Free Press, 1995), pp. 472–473.

² "Poema bez geroia" Anny Akhmatovoi i poetika postmodernizma', *Vestnik moskovskogo universiteta*. Seria 9, no 3 (2002), 54–64 (p. 54).

³ *Sovremennaia russkaia literatura*, 3 vols (Moscow: Editorial URSS, 2001), III, p. 98.

⁴ See my recent monograph, *The Poetry of Anna Akhmatova: Living in Different Mirrors* (London: Anthem, 2006) for further discussion of Akhmatova's poetry in connection with theoretical models of Russian postmodernism.

⁵ Thomas Epstein, 'Introduction', in, *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture*, ed. by Mikhail Epstein, Alexander Genis and Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001), pp. vii–xii (p. ix).

⁶ *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos*, ed. by Eliot Borenstein (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), p. 8.

⁷ Anna Akhmatova, *Sobranie sochinenii*, ed. by S A Kovalenko and N V Koroleva, 6 vols (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1998–2002), III, p. 241 [hereafter referred to as A3].

⁸ Lidiia Chukovskaia, *Zapiski ob Anne Akhmatovoi*, 2 vols (St Petersburg: Neva, 1996), I, pp. 20, 211 and 347.

⁹ *Constructing Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 55. The same might also be said of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Eliot is another writer with whom Akhmatova felt a particular affinity.

¹⁰ 'K semioticheskoj interpretatsii "Poemy bez geroia"', *Trudy po znakovym sistemam*, 6 (1973), pp. 438–42, p. 441.

¹¹ A3, p. 192.

¹² A3, p. 185.

¹³ 'Avangard i postmodern', *Russian Literature*, 36 (1994), pp. 95–114, p. 96.

¹⁴ Oraič, p. 105.

¹⁵ Timenchik, p. 439.

¹⁶ For an excellent study of the avant-garde, see Gerald Janeček, *The Look of Russian Literature: Avant-Garde Visual Experiments 1900–1930* (Princeton: University Press, 1984).

¹⁷ A3, p. 174.

¹⁸ A3, p. 170.

¹⁹ Anthony J. Hartman, 'The Metrical Typology of Anna Axmatova', *Studies in Honour of Xenia Gasiorowska*, ed by L. Leighton (Columbus: Slavica, 1982), pp. 112–23 (p. 119).

²⁰ See for example, Nina Lisnianskaia, 'Tainaia muzyka "Poemy bez geroia" Anny Akhmatovoi' (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1991) and N. G. Kosacheva, 'K analizu "Poemy bez geroia" Anny Akhmatovoi', *Russian Language Journal*, 31 (1977), 135–145. See also R. D. Timenchik, 'K analizu Poemy bez geroia', in *Materialy XXII nauchnoi studencheskoj konferentsii* (Tartu: Tartuskii gosudarstvennyi universitet, 1967), pp. 121–123.

- ²¹ See *Tvorchestvo Anny Akhmatovoi* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1973), p. 174.
- ²² “‘Poema bez geroia’ Anny Akhmatovoi: Nekotorye izucheniiia v sviazi s problemoi “tekst-chitatel””, *Anna Akhmatova 1889–1989: Papers from the Akhmatova Centennial Conference, Bellagio, June 1989*, ed. by Sonia Ketchian (Oakland: Berkeley Slavic Specialties, 1993), pp. 238–48 (p. 246).
- ²³ A3, p. 261.
- ²⁴ A3, p. 221.
- ²⁵ 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 Belyi, who first used them.
- ²⁶ A3, p. 221.
- ²⁷ M. L. Gasparov, *Ocherk istorii russkogo stikha* (Moscow: Nauka, 1984), p. 256.
- ²⁸ Gasparov, p. 254.
- ²⁹ ‘K analizu *Poemy bez geroia*’, p. 123.
- ³⁰ Chukovskaia, I, 127.
- ³¹ Mikhail Kuzmin, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia* (Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1990), pp. 283–294 (p. 285).
- ³² A3, p. 193.
- ³³ Lisnianskaia, p. 20.
- ³⁴ A3, p. 176.
- ³⁵ Lisnianskaia, p. 21.
- ³⁶ A3, p. 199.
- ³⁷ A3, pp. 171–173.
- ³⁸ A3, p. 178.
- ³⁹ Kornei Chukovskii, ‘Chitaia Akhmatovu’, *Moskva* 5 (1964), pp. 200–203 (p. 200).
- ⁴⁰ Zhirmunskii, p. 175.
- ⁴¹ ‘On A Poem Without a Hero’, in *Anna Akhmatova 1889–1989: Papers from the Akhmatova Centennial Conference, Bellagio, June 1989*, pp. 249–265 (p. 250).
- ⁴² *Russian Postmodernist Fiction*, p. 27.
- ⁴³ See her *Chaos Bound* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990) and the various essays in *Chaos and Order: Complex Dynamics in Literature and Science*, ed. by N. Katherine Hayles (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
- ⁴⁴ Peter Francis Mackey, *Chaos Theory and James Joyce’s Everyman* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999; Susan Shaw Sailer, *On the Void of to Be: Incoherence and Trope in Finnegan’s Wake* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1993).
- ⁴⁵ Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Intellectual Impostures: Postmodern Philosophers’ Abuse of Science* (London: Profile Books, 1998).
- ⁴⁶ *Russian Postmodernist Fiction*, p. 30.
- ⁴⁷ *Russian Postmodernist Fiction*, p. 31.
- ⁴⁸ ‘The Double Bottom of the Casket; or, Two Hypostases of ‘Poema bez geroia’, in *The Speech of Unknown Eyes*, ed. by Wendy Rosslyn, 2 vols (Nottingham: Astra, 1990), I, pp. 113–120 (p. 114).
- ⁴⁹ ‘The Double Bottom of the Casket’, p. 120.
- ⁵⁰ A3, p. 183.
- ⁵¹ See Susan Amert, ‘“Predystoriia”: Akhmatova’s Aetiological Myth’, in *Anna Akhmatova 1889–1989: Papers from the Akhmatova Centennial Conference, Bellagio, June 1989* (Oakland, CA: Berkeley Slavic Specialties, 1993), pp. 13–28.
- ⁵² See my article ‘Finding Form for Chaos: Dostoevsky’s The Adolescent and Akhmatova’s Poem Without a Hero’, in *Dostoevsky on the Threshold of Other Worlds: Essays in Honour of Malcolm Jones*, ed. by Lesley Milne and Sarah Young (Ilkeston: Bramcote Press, 2006), pp. 46–63 on this issue.
- ⁵³ *Russian Postmodernist Fiction*, p. 35.