READING BETWEEN THE LINES:
'. . . A IA MOLCHU', AKHMATOVA'S
SILENT-SPEAKING ELEGY

The subject of this article stems from research conducted for a larger study of Anna Akhmatova, which attempted to provide a more coherent framework than formerly existed for understanding the differences between her early period and her later one, the dividing-line being her long period of relative silence after the unofficial ban of her work in 1925 until her 'return' to poetry in around 1936.[1] In the poetry of the late 1930s onwards, there is a noticeable increase in intertextual allusion, metapoetic themes, and ironic play with the figure of the author. These features, among others, of Akhmatova's later poetry, most notably of *Poema bez geroia* and 'Severnye elegii', provide grounds for reading her work in the light of apposite discourses about postmodernism. The appeal to postmodernism, although the term in itself is not unproblematic, not least in relation to Akhmatova, is advantageous in that it allows us to identify ways in which the later period detaches itself from the earlier and to determine how Akhmatova moves beyond modernism in some respects.[2] This can reveal new dimensions to familiar works and generate new readings of them, helping to elucidate the shift that takes place in Akhmatova's poetic system in the late 1930s.

My focus here is on one of the hitherto largely unexplored areas in which a perceptible shift takes place in Akhmatova's later period. I am concerned with the spatial, visual dimension of her poetry: that is, with the ways in which she draws attention to the aesthetics of the material text or uses space on the page as a conceptual icon, as a means of graphically conveying ideas and amplifying the discursive meaning. This involves making the distinction between the world projected by the text and its discourse on the one hand, and the text's existence as a material object in the real world of experience, as print on paper, on the other. First, the discussion will consider the role this visual dimension plays in postmodernist poetics. It will then go on to give an account of visual features of Akhmatova's poetry, before focusing in some detail on the last, apparently incomplete, elegy in Akhmatova's cycle of 'Severnye elegii', '. . . A ia molchu'. The 'look' of this elegy draws the reader's attention to itself in various ways and with different effects. In general, Akhmatova gives her text a fragmentary, unfinished appearance, drawing attention to spacing and the materiality of the page by incorporating rows of dots, in order to provide a visual analogue for the threatened status of her poetry and to reflect upon her own marginal status in Soviet culture. Her use of elisions, truncation, and blank space on the page in '. . . A ia molchu' constitutes a particularly interesting instance of what

is actually a much broader concern with the aesthetics and materiality of the literary work on Akhmatova's part in her later period.

A useful theoretical starting-point for an examination of the elegy is provided by the construction of postmodernism advanced by Brian McHale. This is one among many available constructions, but has been chosen strategically here for the insights it offers into Akhmatova's work. McHale's broad thesis about postmodernist fiction is that it 'differs from modernist fiction just as a poetics dominated by ontological issues differs from one dominated by epistemological issues'.[3] In other words, postmodernist fiction is concerned primarily with ontological issues, and it deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions that bear either on the ontology of the world that the text projects or on the ontology of the literary text itself, its mode of existence (p. 10). It is the latter category that is of particular interest here. McHale devotes a section of his study to what he calls 'Worlds on Paper', and examines various postmodernist exploitations of typography and page layout (pp. 179–96). As he observes, to think about a book in this way is to think 'about its *ontology*, its modes of being, in the plural' (p. 180). More recently, McHale has turned his attention to long postmodernist poems, finding that these make similar use of signifying blank spaces and unusual spatial arrangements to draw attention to the materiality of poetry itself.[4] He has also written on postmodernist lyric, demonstrating that it too frequently highlights the ontological 'cut' between the real world and the world of the poem's discourse as a means of bringing ontological organization to the foreground.[5] Among the strategies available to lyric for so doing are those that provide a means of 'laying bare' its material and spatial plane, such as concrete poetry and related phenomena.[6] Other critics dealing with postmodernist lyric concur that postmodernist poetry displays a concern with disclosing the physicality of language and describing it as a material texture.[7]

This concern with print, layout, and the physical page is not, of course, the exclusive preserve of postmodernism, but can be seen rather as a development and extension of the experimentation with the visual aesthetics of the literary work that is apparent in the work of European modernist poets such as Stéphane Mallarmé or Guillaume Apollinaire, and which is particularly reminiscent of Cubo-Futurism in the Russian context, from Vladimir Maiakovskii's *lesenka* to Vasilii Kamenskii's ferroconcrete poetry. As Gerald Janeček indicates in his study of Russian avant-garde visual experimentation, the roots of this phenomenon pre-date modernism itself and lie ultimately in manuscript culture (which existed in Russia well into the nineteenth century), the *lubok*, and figure poetry (Simeon Polotskii).[8]

[3] Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987), p. vii.

[4] Brian McHale, *The Obligation toward the Difficult Whole: Postmodernist Long Poems* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), pp. 251–53.

[5] Brian McHale, 'Postmodernist Lyric and the Ontology of Poetry', *Poetics Today*, 8 (1987), 19–44 (pp. 20, 24).

[6] 'Postmodernist Lyric', p. 27.

[7] James McCorkle, 'The Inscription of Postmodernism in Poetry', in *International Postmodernism: Theory and Literary Practice*, ed. by Hanos Bertens and Douwe Fokkema (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins, 1997), pp. 43–50 (p. 43).

[8] Gerald Janeček, *The Look of Russian Literature: Avant-Garde Visual Experiments, 1900–1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 6–10.

Avant-garde experimentation with the concrete, visual features of poetry could not develop naturally in the Soviet Union of the 1930s, when such 'formalism' was forbidden, but it was revived in the post-Stalinist period, and forms part of Russian postmodernism's engagement with the lost context of early modernism.[9] An interest in drawing the reader's eye to the page and presenting poetry as partly a visual experience is displayed by such diverse modern and contemporary Russian poets as Andrei Voznesenskii, Viktor Sosnora, Dmitrii Prigov, Nina Iskrenko, Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, or Vsevolod Nekrasov. The work of these poets frequently highlights, in various ways, the ontological 'cut' between the world projected in the text and the real world in which the text exists as object or artefact.

Experimentation of this kind is certainly not associated with Akhmatova, and indeed in her early period she does not display any great concern with the look of the text, or pay any special attention to the paratext. By paratext I mean, following Gérard Genette, any features of the text that present it and also make it present: titles, subtitles, dedications, and so on. Or, to put it differently, anything that surrounds a text and announces it as one.[10] These paratexts form a (potentially slippery) boundary between two distinct ontologies: the world projected in the text, and the real world in which it is purchased and read.

This is not to say that Akhmatova was indifferent to the messages conveyed by the external appearance of her poetic collections. For *Vecher*, her first collection, in keeping with the Acmeist view of the poet as craftsman, Akhmatova opted for a fairly conservative, unfussy look. The book contains an elegant frontispiece by Evgenii Lansere and vignettes by A. Beloborodov, and includes a preface by Mikhail Kuzmin. However, the function of these paratextual elements is conventional (they introduce a new poet making her debut), and the boundaries between the text and the world beyond it are not overtly problematized or foregrounded. Akhmatova's subsequent early collections are even plainer in appearance and do not draw particular attention to themselves. All this stands in marked contrast to the obsessive interest in the look of the material book displayed by her Futurist contemporaries. Aleksei Kruchenykh and Maiakovskii, for instance, published the first editions of their work in lithographic form, as handwritten text, making them look like manuscripts rather than published books. Futurist collections typically blended text and image, used unusual typographical layouts or styles, and were printed on unconventional materials, such as coloured paper, or on very cheap paper, with badly trimmed pages and poor-quality binding.[11]

Similarly, Akhmatova does not appear to experiment with typography or layout in her early period, and the space on the page is largely used conventionally, as a traditional marker of poetry, to indicate line endings and stanza breaks. As Joseph Brodsky remarked, the early Akhmatova was 'blatantly non-avant-

[9] See Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos*, ed. by Eliot Borenstein (Armonk, NY, and London: Sharpe, 1999), pp. 7–8, on the post-Stalinist nostalgia for early Russian modernism.

[10] Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin, Literature, Culture, Theory, 20 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[11] Janeček, pp. 83, 70, 72.

garde'.[12] Or, at least, any avant-garde features of her poetry tend to be concealed within compact, classical forms.

Although the look of the text does not impose itself with any force upon the reader in Akhmatova's early period, a number of poems do make explicit mention of the physical page and the act of writing. The title of Akhmatova's 1916 collection *Belaia staia* refers to the poems themselves, as one of its constituent poems makes clear:

> И стихов моих белая стая,
> И очей моих синий пожар.[13]

In 'Uedinenie' of 1914, Akhmatova writes:

> И недописанную мной страницу,
> Божественно спокойна и легка,
> Допишет Музы смуглая рука.
>
> (I, 73)

This constitutes an example of the kind of 'auto-meta-description' (*avtometa-opisanie*) described by Roman Timenchik: the text is self-referential, in that it comments on its own creation.[14] The expression and content planes of the poem merge together: within the poem, the muse completes the poet's text, and this coincides with the end of the poem before us on the page. As Paul M. Waszink points out, through the use of *avtometaopisanie* here, Akhmatova seems 'to "freeze" the reading process, making the text spatially determined by doing so'.[15]

Sometimes metrical effects have a slight impact on the visual dimension of the poetry. The lyric 'Ved' gde-to est' prostaia zhizn' i svet', written during the First World War, incorporates a truncated central stanza to underline the discursive meaning of the text, which describes conversations that are inhibited and broken off:

> Ведь где-то есть простая жизнь и свет,
> Прозрачный, теплый и веселый . . .
> Там с девушкой через забор сосед
> Под вечер говорит, и слышат только пчелы
> Нежнейшую из всех бесед.
>
> А мы живем торжественно и трудно
> И чтим обряды наших горьких встреч,
> Когда с налету ветер безрассудный
> Чуть начатую обрывает речь, —
>
> Но ни на что не променяем пышный
> Гранитный город славы и беды,
> Широких рек сияющие льды,

[12] Joseph Brodsky, 'Introduction', in Anna Akhmatova, *Poems*, trans. by Lyn Coffin (New York: Norton, 1983), pp. xiii–xxxi (p. xvi).

[13] Anna Akhmatova, *Sochineniia*, ed. by M. M. Kralin, 2 vols (Moscow: Pravda, 1990), I, 110. All further references to Akhmatova's poetry are to this edition, by volume and page number.

[14] R. D. Timenchik, 'Avtometaopisanie u Akhmatovoi', *Russian Literature*, 10–11 (1975), 173–212.

[15] Paul M. Waszink, 'Some Observations on Allegory in Akhmatova's Early Poetry', *Slavic and East European Journal*, 46 (2002), 743–61.

> Бессолнечные, мрачные сады
> И голос Музы еле слышный.

<div align="center">(1, 89)</div>

However, the reader may not even notice on a visual level that there are fewer lines to this particular stanza than to the preceding and succeeding ones, and the effect is primarily prosodic rather than aesthetic.[16]

A few early poems begin with 'And' or 'But', as though they are fragments of a larger whole or continuations of a monologue or train of thought. Only rarely is this effect reinforced by Akhmatova's use of punctuation (the elision or *mnogotochie*), but there are a few examples, among them the following:

> . . . А там мой мраморный двойник
>
> . . . И на ступеньки встретить
>
> . . . И кто-то, во мраке дерев незримый[17]

There is nothing unconventional about this use of punctuation, and indeed, in all these cases punctuation is deployed in the service of an epistemological, not ontological, concern: namely, to convey the speaker's psychological processes and the movement of her consciousness. It is not designed to bring to the foreground the materiality of the poetry in any sustained way, even if it does reveal an underlying degree of spatial determination.

There is only really one notable example of an early poem that highlights the status of the poetry as a made thing and material object, and that is Akhmatova's acrostic of 1916, in which the first letters of the lines spell out the name 'Boris Anrep':

> Бывало, я с утра молчу
> О том, что сон мне пел.
> Румяной розе и лучу
> И мне — один удел.
> С покатых гор ползут снега,
> А я белей, чем снег,
> Но сладко снятся берега
> Разливных мутных рек.
> Еловой рощи свежий шум
> Покойнее рассветных дум.[18]

However, in this isolated example of Akhmatova's play with the text at a material level, the acrostic is not flagged up by typography, and easily passes unnoticed by the reader.

These examples from the early period, even when taken together, do not amount to evidence of any real interest in the 'look' of her poetry on Akhmatova's part. Yet, when set against the context of the later period, they gain importance as embryonic and latent examples of a conscious concern with the material space of the page that can be seen to emerge more clearly in the later poems, from about 1936 onwards.

[16] This constitutes another example of *avtometaopisanie*, as the reality of the text coincides with the reality of the world represented within it. See also Waszink on the role of the dash in Akhmatova's early poetry.

[17] 'V Tsarskom Sele', I, 26; I, 49; 'Otryvok', I, 51.

[18] 'Pesenka', I, 142.

The second and third poems of the central lyrical sequence in *Rekviem* are good examples of this:

<div align="center">

II

Тихо льется тихий Дон,
Желтый месяц входит в дом.

Входит в шапке набекрень —
Видит желтый месяц тень.

Эта женщина больна,
Эта женщина одна,

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

III

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

</div>

<div align="right">(1, 198)</div>

These lyrics are short and fragmentary. On the one hand, the pared-down quality of the verse is an epistemological strategy, which mirrors the speaker's shocked state and her difficulty in articulating her experience. The second poem in particular seems to reflect in formal terms the disintegration of personality that *Rekviem* documents. However, these poems also gesture towards ontological issues—the reader becomes aware of the blank space on the page that lies between the lines and surrounds these poems. The truncated final line of the second poem in particular seems to fade away into the blank space of the page, so that the visual appearance of the poetry acts as a kind of objective correlative for the difficulty in conveying extreme experience and for the breakdown of personality described. The black print of the isolated word 'Noch'' stands out against the white of the page, acting as a conceptual icon for nothingness, oblivion, and silence.

The metapoetic theme of the destruction of poetry in Akhmatova's later period, which arises from her historical situation and the realities of literary life under Stalin, leads to increased reference to the physical existence of the poetry and to a more sustained consideration of its material mode of existence as print on a page. Mark Lipovetsky describes an important distinction between Russian and Western postmodernist fiction that is of relevance here (and he is not alone in making this point):

The fundamental issues for Western post-modernism are the blurring of the boundaries between centre and periphery, the decentralisation of consciousness (expressed in the concept of the 'death of the author'), and the fragmentation of the modernist model and its pathos of the creative subject's freedom. Yet Russian postmodernism arises from the search for an answer to a diametrically opposed problem: cultural fragmentation and disintegration, together with the literal (rather than metaphysical) 'death of the author'.[19]

[19] 'On the Nature of Russian Post-Modernism', in *Twentieth-Century Russian Literature: Se-*

We might also extend this to include the Derridean concept of the 'death of the book'.[20]

In her later, metapoetic poetry, Akhmatova frequently draws attention to the fragility of her poetry's material existence and thus directs the reader's attention to its ontology, its modes of being in the world. For instance, the early image of the white flock becomes a burnt flock in the lyric entitled 'Ty vydumal menia':

> В тот навсегда опустошенный дом,
> Откуда унеслась стихов сожженных стая.[21]

Akhmatova repeatedly draws our attention in this way to the division between the two ontologies of the world of the text, its discourse, and the real world in which it leads its precarious material existence. The poetry is often presented as without a physical existence, and its ontological status is therefore made paradoxical or unclear. For example, the poems of one cycle, 'Shipovnik tsvetet' are designated in a subtitle as deriving 'Iz sozhzhennoi tetradi', yet they have somehow survived, to appear upon the page in front of us. The reader might assume that the poems have been memorized and copied out, but for the fact that in one of the cycle's constituent lyrics, 'Son', the speaker claims:

> И вот пишу, как прежде без помарок,
> Мои стихи в сожженную тетрадь.
> (I, 271)

Given that the verb *szhech'* means to burn up completely, to cremate, we are forced to accept the paradox of the speaker inscribing her poetry into a notebook which has been completely destroyed by fire.

Another poem underlines the contrast between her early, published collections, with their legitimate place on the bookshelf, and her threatened later production. The former lead a material existence, whereas the latter flies off as a disembodied voice:

> Уже красуется на книжной полке
> Твоя благополучная сестра,
> А над тобою звездных стай осколки
> И под тобою угольки костра.
> Как ты молила, как ты жить хотела,
> Как ты боялась едкого огня!
> Но вдруг твое затрепетало тело,
> А голос, улетая, клял меня.
> И сразу все зашелестели сосны
> И отразились в недрах лунных вод.
> А вкруг костра священнейшие весны
> Уже вели надгробный хоровод.
> (I, 269)

lected Papers from the Fifth World Congress of Central and East European Studies, ed. by Karen L. Ryan and Barry P. Scherr (London: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 319–38 (pp. 321–22). See also Clare Cavanagh, 'The Death of the Book *à la russe*: The Acmeists under Stalin', *Slavic Review*, 55 (1996), 125–35 (p. 127).
    [20] See Cavanagh, pp. 125–27.
    [21] 'Shipovnik tsvetet', I, 272.

In her own version of Bulgakov's 'Manuscripts don't burn', Akhmatova indicates that the burning of the notebooks paradoxically ensures the poetry's survival and provides a guarantee of immortality.

In the poems mentioned above, the metapoetic theme bears upon the ontology, or mode of existence, of the text, but without underlining the discursive meaning visually. In *Poema*, however, Akhmatova pays unprecedented attention to the visual dimension and to the aesthetics of the text. The look of the poetry is immediately striking, and quite unlike Akhmatova's customary conservative and traditional layout:

> Я зажгла заветные свечи,
> Чтобы этот светился вечер,
> И ч тобой, ко мне не пришедшим,
> Сорок первый встречаю год.
>
> Но . . .
> Господняя сила с нами!
> В хрустале утонуло пламя
> «И вино, как отрава, жжет».
>
> (1, 322–23)

This arrangement is clearly reminiscent of the practice of creating stepped lines (first employed by Andrei Belyi, and then developed by Maiakovskii). Akhmatova's *lesenka* is generally used rather differently from its use by either of these authors, and merits a separate study of its own. Akhmatova employs her own version of the *lesenka* primarily in order to announce the text's affinity with Futurism and as a form of structural quotation of the avant-garde.[22] This forms part of a conscious demonstration and development of Silver Age poetics in *Poema*, which sounds and appears at times like a strange, anachronistic throwback to the 1910s.[23] The use of stepped lines suggests that Akhmatova wants the text not only to sound but also to look reminiscent of early Russian modernism. This is in itself a postmodernist move: Akhmatova revives modernism, but at the same time she stands at a distance from it and subjects it to considerable irony.

Broadly speaking, time is spatialized in *Poema*, in which the speaker looks at the past from the height of a tower ('kak s bashni na vse gliazhu') and descends into its dark vaults ('pod temnye svody skhozhu'), and the choice of stepped layout emphasizes this at a visual level (1, 322).

Although there are differences between Belyi's and Maiakovskii's unorthodox layouts, in both the visual devices are signs that guide performance. The reader is forced from the outset to notice the unconventional arrangement of the poetry, which acts in conjunction with the discursive level. In his prose, Belyi's layout is used for visual impact, for emphasis, at dramatic moments, and to signal shifts to another consciousness. In his poetry, he employs a column layout (*stolbik*), by breaking lines into pieces and arranging them vertically.

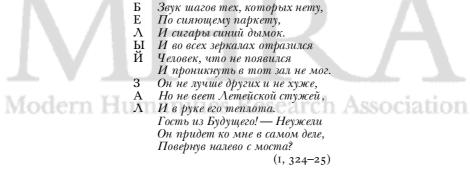[22] See Dubravka Oraić Tolić, 'Avangard i postmodern', *Russian Literature*, 36 (1994), 95–114 (p. 102).
[23] See my article 'Chaosmos: Observations on the Stanza Form of Anna Akhmatova's *Poem without a Hero*', forthcoming in *Slavonica*, 13 (2007), on Akhmatova's revival of Silver Age modernism at the prosodic level of the text.

This arrangement is often in conflict with the metre, and serves to highlight certain words for emphasis.[24] Maiakovskii's stepped layout has various functions: it sets off some words for special emphasis, delineates internal rhyme and other sound repetitions, intensifies pauses, and automatically slows recitation.[25] Akhmatova's layout is used for the latter purpose upon occasion:

<div align="center">

Поэтам

Вообще не пристали грехи.

Или стинуть! . .

Да что там!

Про это

Лучше их рассказали стихи.

(I, 325)

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As if to acknowledge her engagement with avant-garde visual experimentation, Akhmatova's words 'Pro eto' here are an allusion to Maiakovskii's long poem of that title, in which he invented his stepped layout.[26]

Like her avant-garde contemporaries of the 1910s, Akhmatova now draws attention to the physicality of the page and focuses the reader's attention on the text as object, revealing it to be a world on paper. She thus implicitly encourages the reader to reflect upon the ontology of the text, on its modes of being in the world, and on its status as a created, material object. Various strategies are used to this end. For instance:

<div align="center">

Б   *Звук шагов тех, которых нету,*
Е   *По сияющему паркету,*
Л   *И сигары синий дымок.*
Ы   *И во всех зеркалах отразился*
Й   *Человек, что не появился*
     И проникнуть в тот зал не мог.
З   *Он не лучше других и не хуже,*
А   *Но не веет Летейской стужей,*
Л   *И в руке его теплота.*
     Гость из Будущего! — Неужели
     Он придет ко мне в самом деле,
     Повернув налево с моста?

(I, 324–25)

</div>

The vertically aligned capital letters displayed in the margin disrupt a sequential reading and emphasize the ontological cut between the world projected by the text and the world in which an author creates it and makes decisions about how to order it, arrange it, and present it.

Akhmatova includes further play with typography in *Poema*, in particular through the use of italics (as above) and capital letters. These contribute to and underline the discursive meaning. Italics seem most often to introduce a voice situated at a different narrative or temporal level from the un-italicized sections:

<div align="center">

(Сколько гибелей шло к поэту,
Глупый мальчик: он выбрал эту, —

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[24] On Belyi, see Janeček, pp. 25–67.
[25] See Janeček, pp. 227–36, on Maiakovskii's *lesenka*.
[26] See Janeček, p. 222, on *Pro eto*.

Первых он не стерпел обид,
Он не знал, на каком пороге
Он стоит и какой дороги
Перед ним откроется вид . . .)
(1, 334)

Capitals function similarly, but they also have the effect of suggesting a shout or perhaps an echo. They thereby contribute to the sense of the speaker having descended into the dark vaults of the past.

The interest in the materiality of the text extends, in Akhmatova's later period, to a new consideration by her of the paratexts of her poetry. Her long works *Rekviem* and *Poema bez geroia* are both paratextually overladen. They are each surrounded and supported by material which mediates between the text and the real world beyond it, raising classic postmodernist issues such as the relationship between centre and periphery and giving a great deal of scope for play with the figure of the author. Both poems have a rather grandiose, imposing appearance as a result of all this paratextual paraphernalia.

In *Rekviem*, in terms of textual space, the frame (comprising a foreword, epigraph, introduction, dedication, and two epilogues) accounts for almost half the sequence. Although ultimately the paratext of *Rekviem* works to some extent to unify the text and to recentre the disintegrating lyrical 'I' of the central sequence, the very fact that such an extensive paratext is required for this purpose provides strong evidence of the text's centrifugal properties.

In the case of *Poema*, there is an even greater proliferation of paratextual elements: titles, subtitles, various epigraphs, prose introductions, dedications, two epilogues (one of which appears in the middle of the text and the other, more conventionally, at the end). Akhmatova also employs footnotes, which disrupt a linear reading and introduce a discourse at one remove from the world projected in the text. Here, the paratextual elements manifestly do not succeed in unifying the text at all, however. Rather, they add to the impression of amorphousness and contribute to the poem's tendency to spill over its own boundaries.

In the end, despite all the attention given to the presentation of *Poema* as a literary work complete with title, epilogues, footnotes, and so on, Akhmatova repeatedly emphasizes its improvised, unfinished quality. She writes:

. . . .
. . . а так как мне бумаги не хватило,
Я на твоем пишу черновике.
(1, 320)

This is an obvious metaphor for intertextuality on the one hand, but on the other, it draws attention to the text's improvised, draft-like features and to the particular mode of its existence, as words on paper. Here the row of dots suggests an absence, a missing or torn page. Akhmatova uses the technique of starting with 'And' or 'But' that is familiar from her early work, but now she conveys the idea that this is a fragment from a larger whole both at the level of discursive meaning and by more noticeable visual means.

The mention of 'your rough draft' is an allusion to Osip Mandel'shtam and

his essay of 1933, 'Razgovor o Dante', in which he observes that just because the drafts of the *Divine Comedy* have not come down to us, we should not assume that there were no ink-stained manuscripts, or that the text somehow appeared fully grown. However, Mandel'shtam continues, the lack of the drafts has played a 'dirty trick' on us, so that people talk and write of Dante as though he had expressed his thoughts directly on 'official paper', thereby subordinating the process of creation to the finished product. Mandel'shtam goes on to assert that the rough draft is never destroyed, in that there are no ready-made things in poetry, and claims that the safety of the rough draft is the statute ensuring the preservation of the power behind the literary work.[27] This is essentially Mandel'shtam's (much earlier) version of Bulgakov's maxim 'Manuscripts don't burn'.

Akhmatova builds upon this idea of the rough draft in *Poema*, where she introduces the concept of the 'main text' (*osnovnoi tekst*) and uses her footnotes to draw the reader's attention, apparently gratuitously, to earlier versions and variants. In other words, she quite deliberately shifts the focus of attention on to the process of creation rather than on to the text as a finished product. It is worth noting that Lipovetsky regards this kind of emphasis on the unfinishedness and unfinishability of the creative process as a hallmark of postmodernism.[28] Akhmatova's poem is consciously given the appearance of a work still in progress, in which authorial decisions about what to include or exclude have yet to be finally made. She made sure that there was a large number of manuscript versions of *Poema* in circulation and authorized, without close examination, many of these, so that according to some estimates it exists in over a hundred different versions. As though in response to Mandel'shtam's assertion that rough drafts are never destroyed, Akhmatova's text is presented as rough draft without a final, official version.

The incomplete quality of the poem is also reinforced by the absence from the main text of certain stanzas with sensitive political content. This absence is signalled by rows of ellipses that serve to turn these missing parts of the text into an icon. Their absence is not concealed, but is advertised to the reader, visually by means of blank sections, and textually by a footnote which refers the reader to Pushkin's missing stanzas in *Evgenii Onegin*, these being stanzas that Pushkin claimed he could not and did not wish to publish. In Akhmatova's poem, the blank spaces provide a new means of conveying meaning at the material level of the text: the visual indicator of absence allows Akhmatova to hint at censorship and to comment wordlessly upon the threatened status of her poetry, and thereby to gesture silently, via the authority of Pushkin, towards how official culture would respond to her work.

All of the above has a bearing on '. . . A ia molchu', upon which Akhmatova worked between 1958 and 1964. The poem was to be the last in the cycle of 'Severnye elegii', begun in 1940, like *Poema*. There is no final version of this poem, either. It exists in a large number of manuscript versions in Akhmatova's

[27] 'Conversation about Dante', in Osip Mandelstam, *The Collected Critical Prose and Letters*, ed. by Jane Gary Harris, trans. by Jane Gary Harris and Constance Link (London: Collins Harvill, 1991), pp. 397–442 (pp. 415–16).

[28] *Russian Postmodernist Fiction*, pp. 21–23.

notebooks, all of them looking incomplete and exhibiting draft-like qualities ('vse eti redaktsii i varianty nosiat chernovoi kharakter' (1, 419)). Akhmatova observed that the elegy was thought through to the end ('dodumano do kontsa'), but that, 'as always', something was noted down, something lost, something forgotten, something remembered (1, 418). The implication is that the poem was composed, lost or destroyed, and then Akhmatova tried to reconstruct it from memory. This has led editors to consider it to be 'unfinished'; however, in the light of *Poema*, Mandel'shtam's rough drafts, and in view of the poem's subject-matter—the poet's silence—this final 'look' may be cultivated and deliberate, even if it was originally the product of the inimical circumstances in which Akhmatova was writing. The draft-like appearance certainly contributes to, rather than detracts from, the reader's understanding. The blank spaces form a kind of visual commentary on, or sign for, the lost and forgotten passages, but they also act as an effective vehicle for expression in their own right.

The poem, in its most complete variant, reads:

. . . А я молчу — я тридцать лет молчу.
Молчание арктическими льдами
Стоит вокруг бессчетными ночами,
Оно идет гасить мою свечу.
Так мертвые молчат, но то понятно   5
И менее ужасно . . . .
Мое молчанье слышится повсюду,
Оно судебный наполняет зал,
И самый гул молвы перекричать
Оно могло бы, и подобно чуду   10
Оно на все кладет свою печать.
Оно во всем участвует, о Боже!
Кто мог придумать мне такую роль?
Стать на кого-нибудь чуть-чуть похожей,
О Господи! — мне хоть на миг позволь.   15
. . . .
И разве я не выпила цикуту,
Так почему же я не умерла
Как следует — в ту самую минуту?
. . . .   20
Нет, не тому, кто ищет эти книги,
Кто их украл, кто даже переплел,
Кто носит их, как тайные вериги,
Кто наизусть запомнил каждый слог
. . . .   25
Нет, не к тому летит мое мечтанье,
И не тому отдам я благодать,
А лишь тому, кто смел мое молчанье
На стяге очевидном — написать,
И кто с ним жил, и кто в него поверил,   30
Кто бездну ту кромешную измерил
. . . .
Мое молчанье в музыке и песне
И в чьей-то омерзительной любви,
В разлуках, в книгах . . .   35
          В том, что неизвестней
Всего на свете. . . . .

. . . .
Я и сама его подчас пугаюсь,
Когда оно всей тяжестью своей   40
Теснит меня, дыша и надвигаясь.
Защиты нет, нет ничего — скорей.
. . . .
Кто знает, как оно окаменело,
Как выжгло сердце и каким огнем,   45
Подумаешь! Кому какое дело,
Всем так уютно и привычно в нем.
Его со мной делить согласны все вы,
Но все-таки оно всегда мое
. . . .   50
Оно мою почти сожрало душу,
Оно мою уродует судьбу,
Но я его когда-нибудь нарушу,
Чтоб смерть позвать к позорному столбу.
                                                  (I, 265–66)

The opening of the elegy presents a poet forced into silence; the reference to thirty years (l. 1), interpreted biographically, takes us back roughly to the first unofficial ban of Akhmatova's work, in 1925. This silence is described in negative terms; it is enforced and unnatural, thrusting the poet into an unnatural role ('Kto mog pridumat' mne takuiu rol'', l. 13) and distorting her fate ('Ono moiu uroduet sud'bu', l. 52). Here, as elsewhere in the cycle of elegies, Akhmatova draws upon Romantic ideas of an inauthentic self or role. Her diction in lines 13–15 of the elegy is particularly reminiscent of Boris Pasternak's lyric 'Gamlet', for instance, which centres on these themes.

The silence depicted is not an empty one: it is an active force ('idet gasit' moiu svechu', l. 4), a claustrophobic weight ('tesnit menia', l. 41), an all-pervasive presence ('vo vsem uchastvuet', l. 12). Paradoxically, it is a deafening silence—it resounds everywhere—it is louder than the roar of rumour, it fills a courtroom.

Akhmatova's elegy, in presenting us with a speaking silence, draws upon other classic Romantic themes, this time relating to the impossibility of expressing oneself adequately or being fully understood. W. David Shaw observes that in Romantic elegies

Silence and reserve are more than a stylish aesthetic of despair. As for Augustine, time moves toward eternity the way each syllable in their sentences moves towards the silence of the period at the end. We have to linger over the dashes and caesuras, over the periods and ellipses, listening there for meanings that are otherwise inaudible.[29]

He goes on to note that 'the paradox of the unspeakable is a form of irony, a way of speaking without saying anything' and that, given the Romantic understanding that we can know the truth but never speak it, 'an elegy should be one part speech to three parts silence'.[30]

Akhmatova's elegy has a strongly Romantic vein in this regard, but differs in key respects from Romantic elegy. The main difference for her is that

[29] *Elegy and Paradox: Testing the Conventions* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), p. 103.
[30] Shaw, p. 105.

the problem is now twofold—not only is a thought once spoken a lie, but the poet is not allowed to speak on certain taboo themes. Silence is turned into a necessary means of expression, the only viable alternative to capitulating to official prescriptions for literature. As Victor Erlich observes:

It is [. . .] most conspicuously and massively in Stalin's Russia, that the poet was confronted with a terrible choice between silence, if not actual annihilation, and spiritual betrayal.[31]

We might think here too of Isaak Babel, and his declaration of himself at the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934 as master of a 'new genre of silence'.

The speaker of Akhmatova's elegy is depicted on trial, perhaps in front of the Writers' Tribunal: Akhmatova referred to this poem as 'Posledniaia rech' podsudimoi' (I, 419). The reference to drinking hemlock (l. 17) also relates to the idea of the writer on trial, since it is an allusion to Socrates, tried for refusing to acknowledge the gods recognized by the state and for corrupting the youth (all of which has manifest correspondences to Akhmatova's situation).[32]

It is possible to identify various subdivisions or types of silence in Akhmatova's elegy.[33] The first of these is the kind of silence discussed above, 'pragmatic silence': that is to say, the silence that results from having been silenced, having one's discourse prevented—the silence of political repression.

The second form of silence we encounter is a 'semantic silence': this corresponds simply to absence of speech, elision, pauses, gaps, and lapses. This is a recurrent feature of this elegy, in which lines are truncated or apparently missing, lending the discourse a fragmentary and disjointed quality. For instance, after the mention of the reader who has memorized every syllable in line 24 ('naizust' zapomnil kazhdyi slog'), the discourse breaks off and resumes again, like a train of thought interrupted and then picked up. The whole text gives the impression of a voice struggling to speak, fading in and out of earshot. The central paradox is that if the poet is silent, how can we be listening to her voice?

This 'semantic silence' blurs in Akhmatova's poem into 'aesthetic silence'—a deliberate refusal to speak or else recoil from the unspeakable, again reminiscent of Romanticism but also of Theodor Adorno's famous remarks about poetry after Auschwitz. There are various examples of this silence in the text. The first point at which the poet falls silent is in line 6, after the statement that the silence of the dead is less frightening. The blank spaces which follow allow us to finish the thought for ourselves: the silencing of the living is more disturbing than the silence of the grave. The gaps and hesitations force us to listen in for inaudible meanings. Another moment of aesthetic silence occurs with the cryptic mention in line 36 of 'that which is least known in the world'

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[31] *The Double Image: Concepts of the Poet in Slavic Literatures* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1964), p. 15.

[32] I am grateful to John Waś for pointing out that Socrates himself is a 'silent author'. He did not write a single work, and all our knowledge of his thought derives from Plato and others who heard him speak.

[33] I have adapted these from McHale, *The Obligation toward the Difficult Whole*, p. 246. He in turn acknowledges Robin Lakoff, 'Cries and Whispers: The Shattering of the Silence', in *Gender Articulated: Language and the Socially Constructed Self*, ed. by Kira Hall and Mary Buckholtz (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 25–50.

(note here also the indentations and change in layout, for emphasis). The poet falls silent again, leaving us to speculate as to what this reference to the 'least known' thing might intimate. All the dotted lines (*ottochie*) indicating missing lines occur at key points in semantic terms, and gesture towards hidden meanings.

Akhmatova's elegy, in enacting silence by incorporating rows of dots, graphically illustrates her theme. The poem is all the more effective for its elisions and visual gestures towards the unsayable and unutterable. The dotted lines occur at key points, visually portraying the silence that is the subject-matter, amplifying and extending meaning. In line 31, which describes the abyss, the gap that follows is a graphic sign of emptiness and bottomlessness. In line 42, which ends with the words 'net nichego — skorei', the blank space acts as a visual analogue for the nothingness that is described in the poetry. In short, typography and white space function as 'conceptual icons' which serve to capture the unutterable, in the various senses of the things the poet refuses to say, the things that are not allowed to be said, and the things that cannot be described. The silence of the represented world becomes visible on the plane of expression, so that the text comments graphically on its own creation. This is a much more developed and extended manifestation of *avtometaopisanie* than is to be found in the early period.

As Shaw remarks in his study of elegy, 'when elegies aspire to silence, they aspire to the integrity of a blank page or void' (p. 133). Postmodernist poetry, in McHale's understanding, takes this desire literally, so that its sites of fracture and breakdown are visible. Postmodernist poetry is frequently presented as a 'poetry under erasure', which we see being subjected to a kind of 'dematerialization'. For this reason, postmodernist poems often include 'lost' and 'missing' passages.[34]

One of the key features that distinguishes this elegy from its companion pieces in the cycle of Northern Elegies is the fact that it is rhymed. The others are all composed in blank verse. However, no consistent scheme emerges from the incomplete text, and the poem divides into irregular-sized sections. None the less, the phonic qualities of the text assist the reader in trying to read between the lines and listen for inaudible meanings. For instance, here, 'slog' (l. 24) immediately suggests the rhyme 'zheg', which reminds us again of the conditions in which Akhmatova was writing. It hints at her practice of giving someone lines on a piece of paper to memorize by heart, the paper copy of which was then burnt over an ashtray. We are prompted to consider the mode of being of texts in Stalinist Russia, and to reflect upon the literal—rather than metaphorical—death of the book or of the author.

The material text and its ontology are a central theme of the elegy. Various features of the poem draw an implicit or explicit contrast between the unprinted and the printed word, between silence and the published text. The black and white imagery of the ice and night indirectly suggests the black and white of print on a page, as well as conveying emptiness and silence. The speaker also claims in line 11 that the stamp of her silence is on everything—this is surely

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[34] McHale, *The Obligation toward the Difficult Whole*, pp. 251–52.

wordplay, *pechat'* meaning stamp, but also signifying printing, type, the press. In line 29 the speaker claims that her silence can be written on a banner. It has a paradoxical materiality of its own—the silence somehow *is* the text, the carrier of meaning.

Lines 21–31 are difficult to interpret, but it may be that here Akhmatova contrasts her current silence with the period of her early fame. She writes cryptically of the one who searches for books, who even bound them—this indicates texts with a material existence, perhaps her own early collections. She describes these negatively: they can be stolen and they can imprison the reader. Of course, the mention of a reader who has learnt them by heart suggests another interpretation. *Rekviem* was memorized by trusted readers, and was also 'stolen', being published abroad (in Munich in 1963) without Akhmatova's permission. Rather than praising this reader who memorizes her poetry, therefore, Akhmatova's speaker admires the one who acknowledges her silence, and who believes in it. Unlike the texts that can be stolen and taken possession of by others, this silence belongs to her (she says, 'vsegda moe', l. 49) and cannot be wrongly appropriated. The reference in line 11 to the 'stamp' of the speaker's silence also recalls the expression 'Na moikh ustakh pechat' molchaniia', meaning 'My lips are sealed', raising the idea that the speaker's muteness is a consciously chosen position.

Indeed, despite its oppressive qualities, at the close of the poem Akhmatova turns her silence into a positive, and presents it as a choice: she can elect to break it and summon death. This reverses the usual association of discourse with life, silence with death. After all, she has already made it clear that this silence is far worse than the silence of the dead. This reversal is an expression of control over her situation, of spiritual freedom. Ultimately, silence is cast as an eloquent indictment of the world in which the speaker finds herself, a preferable alternative to spiritual betrayal, and like the Burnt Notebook, which features frequently in Akhmatova's late poetic system, it becomes a genre, a mode of expression, in its own right.

The visible gaps and spaces in the elegy give its text a damaged, incomplete, draft-like appearance, taking us back to Mandel'shtam's contrast between the rough draft and official version. Indeed, Akhmatova made this kind of analogy herself when she once remarked to Nadezhda Mandel'shtam that they were living in the pre-Gutenberg era. She shows a heightened awareness, born of circumstance, of the various modes of a text's existence in a culture in which access to the printing press was frequently denied.

It seems significant that Akhmatova pays most attention to the possibilities afforded by layout at the times when her work could not be published and disseminated publicly. Her use of paratextual material and various graphic means of expression allows her to give her manuscripts a certain physicality, or materiality, that publication would usually provide. In '. . . A ia molchu', she makes a virtue of necessity: gaps and silences result from her situation but they also comment upon that situation metapoetically, and the reader is prompted to consider the issue of the text's threatened and precarious mode of existence in the world of experience. Akhmatova's gruesome reference to her 'Seventh' in *Poema* underlines this theme:

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

(I, 337)

The poem, personified here, is half-dead and dumb—its mouth is stopped up, and its ability to communicate is impaired, if not destroyed. The fact that Akhmatova writes poems about her elegy and that it generates other texts (she also composed a 'Liricheskoe otstuplenie Sed'moi elegii', itself fragmentary and full of *ottochie*) indicates that this text, and the very fact of its unfinishedness and unfinishability, which these other texts emphasize, are of crucial importance to an understanding of her later period.

In Akhmatova's later period, when the text's material existence is threatened, space can take on an iconic function. The reader is literally compelled to try to 'chitat' mezhdu strok'. Our attention is directed to the creative process itself, rather than to the text as the final product of a creative act. In the case of this elegy, the rough draft has indeed proved to be the statute ensuring the text's preservation.

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