

3. 'Golden-Mouthed Anna of All the Russias': Canon, Canonisation, and Cult¹

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The widespread worship of her memory [...], both as an artist and as an unsundering human being, has [...] no parallel. The legend of her life and her unyielding passive resistance to what she regarded as unworthy of her country and herself, transformed her into a figure [...] not merely in Russian literature, but in Russian history in our century.

Isaiah Berlin²

In theoretical discussions of the canon, there is perceptible slippage between canonical *authors* and canonical *works*.³ Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966) qualifies not only as the canonical author of a range of canonical texts, but also as a major cultural icon. The Akhmatova museum at Fontannyi Dom is one of Petersburg's most important post-Soviet cultural sites relating to literary history, attracting on average 30,440 visitors a year, and the city now boasts 4 monuments to the poet.⁴

1 I should like to express my thanks to the organizers of, and participants at, the enjoyable and productive project workshops for their invaluable comments on drafts of this essay, and also to Tom Wynn for his. The title incorporates a phrase from Marina Tsvetaeva, 'Zlatoustoi Anne — vseia Rusi' (1916), *Sochineniia*, edited by Anna Saakiant, 2 vols. (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1988), I, 79.

2 Isaiah Berlin, 'Anna Akhmatova: A Memoir', in *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova*, edited by Roberta Reeder, translated by Judith Hemschemeyer (Boston: Zephyr Press, 1997), pp. 35–55 (p. 53).

3 Tricia Lootens, *Lost Saints: Silence, Gender, and Victorian Literary Canonization* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1996), p. 6.

4 Details available at <http://www.russianmuseums.info/M127>

Berlin's words, written before the collapse of the Soviet Union, certainly still apply in twenty-first-century Russia — and in themselves constitute an element in Akhmatova's canonisation.

How and why did Akhmatova, a poet whose work was enormously popular in the pre-revolutionary period, but then became apocryphal (non-canonical, hidden away) in the Soviet era, become a key presence in the poetic canon and a figure of such significance in post-Soviet society? Akhmatova is an instructive example of a poet whose canonical status and international renown were by no means guaranteed or inevitable.⁵ Her trajectory sheds revealing light on the mechanics of, and strategies involved in, literary canonisation, offering ways of productively bringing together and testing different theoretical perspectives on canonicity and canon formation, as well as exploring how these relate to popular phenomena such as secular sainthood and celebrity. As Berlin's remarks indicate, Akhmatova's canonical position is not explicable solely in terms of the intrinsic qualities of her poetry, but is also linked, as canonicity is generally, to 'complicated considerations of social and cultural history'.⁶ One of the foremost among these in the Russian context is the tendency to view literature, and especially poetry, as a surrogate, or secular religion — Berlin characterises the popular attitude towards Akhmatova as one of 'worship' and, as Boris Gasparov notes, in Russia 'the sanctification of literature (an attitude that often included the sanctification of the writer as well) became a conscious element of society in the nineteenth century'.⁷ This elevation of the author to secular sainthood extends across Eastern Europe, where 'serious literature and those who produce it have traditionally been overvalued', according to a recent cultural definition.⁸

5 Catriona Kelly, 'Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966)', *A History of Russian Women's Writing 1820–1992* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 207–23 (p. 210).

6 Robert Alter, 'Introduction', in Frank Kermode, *Pleasure and Change: The Aesthetics of Canon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 3–12 (p. 12).

7 Boris Gasparov, 'Introduction', in Iurii M. Lotman, Lidiia Ia. Ginsburg, Boris A. Uspenskii, *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History: Essays*, edited by Alexander D. Nakhimovsky and Alice Stone Nakhimovsky (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 13–29 (p. 13). See also: Catriona Kelly, *Russian Literature: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 26; G. S. Smith, 'Russian Poetry: The Lives or the Lines?', *The Modern Language Review*, 95 (2000), xxix–xli (p. xli); Svetlana Boym, *Death in Quotation Marks: Cultural Myths of the Modern Poet* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 15–16.

8 Andrew Baruch Wachtel, *Remaining Relevant After Communism: The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 4.

This essay begins by exploring some of the extra-literary factors which contributed to Akhmatova's popular appeal and canonicity, such as her iconography, her strategies of charismatic self-presentation, and the vast industry of adulatory biographies and canonising memoirs devoted to her. It goes on to address how these relate to and combine with more strictly literary and aesthetic factors; in particular, her insistent textual practices of auto-canonisation and self-mythologisation, and her poetry's mnemonic qualities. It demonstrates that much of her success rests on the extent to which she was sensitive to cultural expectations of writers, composing her poetry and creatively shaping her biography to create the impression of herself as a unique, extraordinary individual. Roland Barthes famously sought to reduce the author to a function of the text, claiming in 1968 that the cultural image of literature was 'tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions'.⁹ An anti-biographical critical stance is completely unsuited to the case of Akhmatova, who has entered the canon as a biography and personality — a literary celebrity and 'figure [...] in Russian history', as Berlin puts it. As this essay shows, the 'passive resistance' that he highlights made her a particularly important role model and emblematic figurehead for the Russian intelligentsia.

Iconography, Biographical Mythmaking, and the Hagiographic Epitext

In his historical study of fame, Leo Braudy observes:

To understand why some are remembered with more force than others, we need to investigate the process by which fame becomes a matter of premeditation, a result of media management as much as of achievement, as well as how the great of the past behaved in such a way as to project larger-than-life images of themselves.¹⁰

Akhmatova made explicit attempts to impose herself upon the imaginations of others from the outset. To invoke Pierre Bourdieu's

9 Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern*, edited by S. Burke (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), pp. 125–30 (p. 126).

10 Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and its History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), p. 15.

analogy, she entered the literary field with an instinctive feel for the game and played her trump cards with consummate skill.¹¹ Born Anna Gorenko, she adopted the exotic pseudonym which Iosif Brodskii later called 'her first successful line' and Marina Tsvetaeva (the only other plausible contender for the title of greatest Russian woman poet) characterised as an 'immense sigh' ('ogromnyi vzdokh').¹² When Akhmatova entered literary life, it was virtually unknown for women to make their way into the canon of great writers, but modernity offered new opportunities upon which she capitalised, carefully shaping her persona and expertly assimilating a tradition of women's writing that she simultaneously disavowed. She later claimed in an epigram that she 'taught women how to speak'.¹³ Her restrained, unsentimental treatment of the theme of love, combined with her studiously self-possessed, imperial bearing, soon earned her the canonising titles of 'Sappho of the North' and 'Anna of All the Russias'.¹⁴

Akhmatova's lyrics were immediately recognizable, bearing a distinctive stylistic stamp, or 'imprimatur'.¹⁵ They had a confessional quality, presenting laconic narratives arranged 'narcissistically [...] around her persona', creating what Tom Mole terms a 'hermeneutic of intimacy' — the impression that they could only be understood fully through reference to their author's personality, to which they gave the illusion of access.¹⁶ This, along with the biographical fact of her marriage to another prominent poet, Nikolai Gumilev, helped

11 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, edited by Randal Johnson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), p. 150.

12 Joseph Brodsky, 'The Keening Muse', in *Less Than One: Selected Essays*, edited by Joseph Brodsky (London: Penguin, 2011), pp. 34–52 (p. 35); Tsvetaeva, 'Zlatoustoi Anne' (see note 1).

13 Anna Akhmatova, 'Mogla li Biche slovo Dant tvorit'...' (1958), *Sochineniia*, edited by M. M. Kralin, 2 vols. (Moscow: Pravda, 1990), I, 280. See also Kelly, 'Anna Akhmatova' and Alexandra Harrington, 'Melodrama, Feeling, and Emotion in the Early Poetry of Anna Akhmatova', *The Modern Language Review*, 108 (2013), 241–73 (pp. 267–68) on Akhmatova and other women poets.

14 Andrew Baruch Wachtel and Ilya Vinitsky, *Russian Literature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), p. 181; Tsvetaeva, 'Zlatoustoi Anne' (see note 1).

15 Aaron Jaffe, *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 20.

16 Aleksandr Zholkovskii, 'The Obverse of Stalinism: Akhmatova's Self-Serving Charisma of Selflessness', in *Self and Story in Russian History*, edited by Laura Engelstein and Stephanie Sandler (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 46–68 (p. 50); Tom Mole, *Byron's Romantic Celebrity: Industrial Culture and the Hermeneutic of Intimacy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), pp. 22–23.

elevate Akhmatova to literary stardom. An adept self-marketer, she engineered a comprehensive move from the periphery into mainstream Russian culture by downplaying her Ukrainian heritage and emphasising her connections with aristocratic Tsarskoe Selo and metropolitan Petersburg.¹⁷ As her career developed, Akhmatova reacted to contingency, moving away from her pre-revolutionary persona of demure yet decadent *femme fatale* and cultivating the (equally paradoxical) image of victimized martyr and triumphant survivor of Stalinism, thereby successfully inscribing herself in a hitherto exclusively male tradition of the Russian poet as heroic fighter against tyranny.

Akhmatova was an immediate heir to — and particularly skilled practitioner of — the neo-Romantic notion of *zhiznetvorchestvo* (life creation), developed by her older contemporaries, the symbolists, which conceived of life as art form in its own right and produced concerted efforts to impose an aesthetic pattern on behaviour and biography.¹⁸ Numerous observations made by Akhmatova's contemporaries suggest that she often acted in accordance with a biographical imperative and shaped her conduct according to aesthetic criteria. Natalia Roskina recalled that 'she generally spoke to affirm her own conception of her life' and Nadezhda Mandel'shtam observed, 'She lived always aware of her own biography'.¹⁹ She was in the habit of repeating anecdotes she was keen to have remembered, thereby creating a mythology, or body of stories about herself.²⁰ Although Akhmatova could hardly have single-handedly generated the interest in her that followed her death in 1966 or influenced the reintegration of her work into Russian literature in subsequent decades, she was extremely keen to control

17 See Alexandra Harrington, 'Anna Akhmatova', in *Russia's People of Empire: Life Stories from Eurasia, 1500 to the Present*, edited by Stephen M. Norris and Willard Sunderland (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012), pp. 255–63 (p. 256) and Aleksandr Zholkovskii, 'Anna Akhmatova: Scripts, Not Scriptures', *Slavic and East European Journal*, 40 (1996), 135–41 (p. 137).

18 See *Creating Life: The Aesthetic Utopia of Russian Modernism*, edited by Irina Paperno and Joan Grossman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); Alexandra Harrington, 'Anna Akhmatova's Biographical Myth-Making: Tragedy and Melodrama', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 89 (2011), 455–93 (pp. 455–59).

19 Natalia Roskina, 'Goodbye Again', in *Anna Akhmatova and Her Circle*, edited by Konstantin Polivanov, translated by Patricia Beriozkina (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1994), pp. 162–98 (p. 175); Nadezhda Mandel'shtam, 'Akhmatova', in *Anna Akhmatova and Her Circle*, pp. 100–29 (p. 121).

20 Anatoly Naiman, *Remembering Anna Akhmatova*, translated by Wendy Rosslyn (New York: Henry Holt, 1991), pp. 81–82.

representations of herself and to lay down an official, coherent version of her life and career for posterity. Biography in Russia had long involved 'setting out an author's creative path, according to a Romantic model' and representing the writer's life as a 'saintly path of suffering and triumph'.²¹ Akhmatova's tendency to 'live biographically' and to shape the narrative of her life according to traditional models is revealing of the extent to which she both understood, and responded to, dominant cultural expectations.²²

As Braudy notes, 'Whatever political or social or psychological factors influence the desire to be famous, they are enhanced by and feed upon the available means of reproducing the image'.²³ Similarly, Chris Rojek observes that celebrities seem 'superhuman' because 'their presence in the public eye is comprehensively staged'.²⁴ When Akhmatova published her first collection, *Večer* (*Evening*, 1912), contemporary readers were already inclined to confer celebrity status upon literary figures and to recognise them through visual images (postcards of Aleksandr Blok had been on sale from at least 1909, for instance).²⁵ Akhmatova exploited her own striking physical appearance, becoming one of the most frequently photographed, painted, and sculpted of cultural figures during her lifetime.²⁶

Among the best-known portraits of Akhmatova is a stylised photograph of 1924 by Moisei Nappel'baum (Figure 3.1) which displays her distinctive profile complete with fringe and aquiline nose. The pose, as well as the sculptural sharpness of the image, is reminiscent of a monarch's head on a coin, and automatically connotes power and authority. Of all the photographs published in the Ardis collection of Nappel'baum's portraits (of which it is the cover image), this is the only one in complete 180-degree facial profile.²⁷ Akhmatova's pose, this suggests, was not typical of Nappel'baum's practice. It proceeded from

21 Kelly, *Russian Literature*, p. 58.

22 Sophie Ostrovskaja, *Memoirs of Anna Akhmatova's Years 1944–1950*, translated by Jesse Davies (Liverpool: Lincoln Davies & Co., 1988), p. 48.

23 Braudy, p. 4.

24 Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), p. 13.

25 Gregory Freidin, *A Coat of Many Colors: Osip Mandelstam and his Mythologies of Self-Presentation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), p. 44.

26 See M. V. Tolmachev, 'Akhmatova v izobrazitel'nom iskusstve', in *Tainy remesla, Akhmatovskie chteniia 2*, edited by N. V. Koroleva and S. A. Kovalenko (Moscow: Nasledie, 1992), pp. 158–97.

27 Moisei Nappel'baum, *Nash vek*, edited by Il'ia Rudiak (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1984).

what was already an established way of representing the poet from the side, as with Natan Al'tman's portrait of 1914, Osip Mandel'shtam's poem 'Vpoloborota, o pechal'...' ('Half-turning, o grief...', 1914), and her own auto-description, 'a profile fine and cruel' ('profil' tonok i zhestok'), in a lyric of 1912.²⁸ While her lyrics invite intimacy, her portraiture creates distance — she exemplifies the combination of the 'fantasy of intimacy' and 'reality of distance' that is a feature of celebrity.²⁹



Fig. 3.1 Among the best-known portraits of Akhmatova is a stylised photograph by Moisei Nappel'baum (1924). © E. Tsarenkova and E. Nappel'baum, all rights reserved.

In Nappel'baum's picture, Akhmatova wears a bead necklace evoking her greatest critical success, the collection *Chetki* (*Rosary*, 1914), and lyric self-portrait, 'Na shее melkikh chetok riad...' ('On the neck a string of fine beads', 1913). As well as the necklace — presented simultaneously

28 'Protertyi kovrik pod ikonoi', Akhmatova, *Sochineniia*, I, 70.

29 David P. Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 178.

as religious artefact and item of female jewellery — Akhmatova wears a cloche hat, which on the one hand announces her as modern and bohemian, but on the other serves to cover her hair demurely. All this visually articulates the famous nun/harlot dichotomy which was used by Boris Eikhenbaum in 1923 to highlight the oxymoronic characteristics of Akhmatova's heroine, then appropriated in 1946 by Andrei Zhdanov, whom Stalin had placed in charge of cultural policy, as condemnation.³⁰ In this respect, the photograph accumulated meanings over time, so that its symbolic value as icon shifted correspondingly. Other photographs and portraits of Akhmatova similarly testify to her 'sophisticated understanding of self-presentation'.³¹

Visual portraits can be 'linked to the contexts of narratives about personal qualities that constitute a body of myth and a hagiography'.³² Akhmatova's 'meaning' as major writer is generated and organised not only by her portraits, poetry, and fragmentary prose, but also by a substantial epitextual apparatus (epitext being the term used by Gérard Genette to denote all the material surrounding a text, but not appended to it, which circulates 'in a virtually limitless physical and social space' and which can be 'overwhelmingly authorial', even if compiled by others).³³ In Akhmatova's case, this epitext is comprised of the biographies, memoirs, critical studies, and so on devoted to her, with which her iconography and poetry interact in complex ways.³⁴ In

30 Boris Eikhenbaum, 'Anna Akhmatova: Opyt analiza', *O poezii* (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1969), pp. 75–147 (p. 136); Andrei Zhdanov, 'O zhurnalakh "Zvezda" i "Leningrad": Iz postanovleniia TsK VKP (b) ot 14 avgusta 1946 g.', in *Sovetskaia pechat' v dokumentakh*, edited by N. Kaminskaia (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1961), pp. 94–98. On the nun/harlot representation of women in the Silver Age, see T. A. Pakhareva, 'Obraz "monakhini-bludnitsy" v kul'turnom kontekste serebriannogo veka', *Anna Akhmatova: epokha, sud'ba, tvorchestvo: Krymskii Akhmatovskii nauchnyi sbornik*, 9 (2011), 227–37.

31 Helena Goscilo, 'Playing Dead: The Operatics of Celebrity Funerals, or, the Ultimate Silent Part', in *Imitations of Life: Two Centuries of Melodrama in Russia*, edited by Louise McReynolds and Joan Neuberger (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 283–319 (p. 294).

32 James F. Hopgood, 'Introduction', in *The Making of Saints: Contesting Sacred Ground*, edited by James F. Hopgood (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), pp. xi–xxi (p. xiii).

33 Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, translated by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 344 and 351.

34 The texts comprising the epitext are too numerous to list here, but they include: Amanda Haight, *Anna Akhmatova: A Poetic Pilgrimage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976); Lidiia Chukovskaia, *Zapiski ob Anne Akhmatovoi*, 3 vols. (Moscow: Vremia, 1987; 2013); and works in other media, such as the documentary film

combination, these materials possess a phenomenal extra-literary power and — as is increasingly acknowledged — in large part reproduce an image of Akhmatova that the poet herself consciously constructed and promoted, reinforcing her own biographical mythmaking, and glossing over any detail that threatens to destabilise the received image of moral exemplar and persecuted genius.³⁵ They thus perpetuate a hagiographic, adulatory version of Akhmatova's biography and personality, creating a one-sided, monumental image that is both 'larger and leaner' than life.³⁶ Literary scholars have also contributed to the hagiographic discourse on Akhmatova, perhaps because she conforms to an elitist model of authorship that produces what Rebecca Braun calls 'creator fetishism' — the elevation of authors to the status of an intellectual and moral ideal.³⁷

Akhmatova as Canon-Maker

Robert Alter suggests, however, following Frank Kermode, that it is not academics, but 'writers, resuscitating and transforming and interacting with their predecessors, who both perpetuate and modify the canon', so that the canon is somehow 'intentional, possibly on the part of writers who aspire to enter it'.³⁸ This is largely borne out in the case of Akhmatova, who exhibited what might be termed a canon mindset. From early on, she and her fellow Acmeists were concerned with protecting the high literary achievement of the past. Initially the greatest challenge came from avant-garde futurist contemporaries who advocated throwing her cherished Aleksandr Pushkin and Fedor Dostoevskii overboard from the 'Steamship of Modernity'.³⁹ Later, a more serious threat was posed

directed by Semen Aranovich, *Lichnoe delo Anny Akhmatovoi* (Lenfil'm, 1989); and John Tavener's musical setting, *Akhmatova: Requiem* (1980).

35 Solomon Volkov describes her as the 'master par excellence of self-fashioning': *The Magical Chorus: A History of Russian Culture from Tolstoy to Solzhenitsyn*, translated by Antonina W. Bouis (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), p. 161.

36 Zholkovskii, 'Scripts', p. 14 and 'Obverse', p. 46. See also his 'Anna Akhmatova: Piat'desiat let spustia', *Zvezda*, 9 (1996), 211–27 and 'Strakh, tiazhest', *mramor (iz materialov k zhiznetvorcheskoi biografii Akhmatovoi)*, *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach*, 36 (1996), 119–54; Harrington, 'Biographical Myth-Making', pp. 469–73.

37 Rebecca Braun, 'Fetishising Intellectual Achievement: The Nobel Prize and European Literary Celebrity', *Celebrity Studies*, 2: 3 (2011), 320–34 (pp. 322–23).

38 Alter, pp. 7 and 4.

39 Available at <http://feb-web.ru/feb/mayakovsky/texts/mp0/mp1/mp1-399-.htm>

by the Soviet regime with its dislike of modernism, limited canon, and prescriptive attitude towards literary production, so that perpetuating a non-official counter-canon became a matter of cultural preservation.

Akhmatova was herself prescriptive in her recommendations (she pronounced that 'two hundred million people' should read Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha* (*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*), and displayed a pronounced tendency to list, rank, and use superlatives (Dostoevskii is 'the most important'; Franz Kafka is 'the profoundest and most truthful of modern authors', etc.).⁴⁰ Her view of the poetic canon was conservative, with Pushkin at its apex, and the only significant revisions she made were in the realm of prose: she disliked Anton Chekhov, and also demoted Ivan Turgenev and Lev Tolstoi.⁴¹ These idiosyncrasies (which indicate a pronounced anxiety of influence) aside, her personal canon, insofar as it can be constructed on the basis of her poetry and recorded observations about literature, resembles a reduced version of Harold Bloom's.⁴² She admired Homer, Hesiod, Sophocles, Euripides, Horace, Virgil, Ovid, Dante, and Shakespeare, among others, and would presumably have agreed with T. S. Eliot, whom she also revered, that a poet must embody 'the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer'.⁴³

Of major significance for Akhmatova's canonical status is the position she assumed as a living relic and guardian of the Silver Age of Russian culture. Something of a 'fallacy' and 'cultural construct of retrospective origin', this period, which saw the first explosion of Russian modernism across the arts, came to be regarded as a charmed, legendary era in the Russian collective consciousness.⁴⁴ Akhmatova undertook a large-scale poetic reflection on the Silver Age in the latter part of her career, asserting her right to act as its chronicler, and placing herself at its centre. Various poems reminisce about the 1910s and its denizens, and

40 Roberta Reeder, *Anna Akhmatova: Poet and Prophet* (London: Allison & Busby, 1994), p. 372; Roskina, p. 187; Berlin, p. 42.

41 See Olga Tabachnikova, 'Akhmatova on Chekhov: A Case of Animosity?', *Russian Literature*, 66: 2 (2009), 235–55.

42 Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1994).

43 T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *Points of View* (London: Faber & Faber, 1941), pp. 23–34 (p. 25).

44 Omri Ronen, *The Fallacy of the Silver Age in Twentieth-Century Russian Literature* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic, 1997); Galina Rylkova, *The Archaeology of Anxiety: The Russian Silver Age and its Legacy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007), p. 6.

they often take the form of subjective summaries of their individual achievements which are given an objective, authoritative character. Blok is thus characterised as the 'tragic tenor of the epoch' and 'monument to the beginning of the century'.⁴⁵

Akhmatova's most concerted attempt to mythologise the Silver Age and establish her own place in it is her sprawling, multilayered *Poema bez geroia* (*Poem Without a Hero*, 1940–1965). The poem blends different modernist idioms and combines diverse material from memory in the manner of *bricolage* (the term used by Claude Lévi-Strauss to characterise the typical patterns of mythological thought).⁴⁶ It presents Akhmatova as self-appointed expert and commentator on, and evaluator of, the Silver Age, as well as a key participant. In this respect the poem both contributes to Akhmatova's biographical legend and has a particular canon-making thrust. The poem itself lays claim to canonical status for its innovative daring and unique formal structure, and can legitimately be regarded as one of the first Russian postmodernist texts. It interacts closely with modernism, from which its principles of composition are derived, but succeeds and exceeds it, celebrating modernism and evaluating it with hindsight. The poem proved timely: it both pre-empted and, in its late stages of composition, was energized by a resurgence of interest in the Silver Age that remained strong from the mid to late 1960s into the post-Soviet era. Akhmatova wrote:

Time has worked upon *Poem Without a Hero*. Over the last 20 years, something amazing has happened; that is, before our very eyes an almost complete renaissance of the 1910s has taken place. [...] Mandel'shtam, Pasternak, Tsvetaeva are being translated and coming out in Russian. [...] Almost no-one has been forgotten, almost all are remembered.⁴⁷

Akhmatova's remark indicates her awareness of the incompleteness of the Silver Age canon and of the role that chance — a neglected factor in discussions of canonicity — can play in canon creation.⁴⁸ She went to considerable lengths to ensure her own place through a form of intertextual auto-canonization. One of her late poems, 'Nas chetvero'

45 'Tri stikhotvoreniia' (1944–1960), in Akhmatova, *Sochineniia*, I, 289.

46 R. D. Timenchik, 'K semioticheskoi interpretatsii "Poemy bez geroia"', *Trudy po znakovym sistemam*, 6 (1973), 438–42 (p. 439); Lévi-Strauss developed the concept of *bricolage* in *La Pensée sauvage* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1962).

47 Anna Akhmatova, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 6 vols. (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1998), III, 255.

48 Alter, p. 4.

(‘The Four of Us’, 1961), part of the cycle ‘Venok mertvym’ (‘A Wreath for the Dead’), is a particularly blatant exercise in self-promotion and canon formation, and operates according to the assumption that — as Kermode puts it — each member of the canon ‘fully exists only in the company of others; one member nourishes or qualifies another’.⁴⁹ It reads:

Нас четверо
Комаровские наброски

Ужели и гитане гибкой
 Все муки Данта суждены.
 О.М.

Таким я вижу облик Ваш и взгляд.
 Б.П.

О, Муза Плача.
 М.Ц.

...И отступилась я здесь от всего,
 От земного всякого блага.
 Духом, хранителем ‘места сего’
 Стала лесная коряга.

Все мы немного у жизни в гостях,
 Жить — это только привычка.
 Чудится мне на воздушных путях
 Двух голосов переключка.

Двух? А еще у восточной стены,
 В зарослях крепкой малины,
 Темная, свежая ветвь бузины...
 Это — письмо от Марины.⁵⁰

49 Kermode, p. 33. Akhmatova was not the first Russian modernist to compose poetic wreaths — Viacheslav Ivanov’s ‘Venok sonetov’ (1909) was written in memory of his wife. On ‘Venok mertvym’, see N. L. Leiderman and A. V. Tagil’tsev, *Poeziia Amny Akhmatovoi: ocherki* (Ekaterinburg: Slovesnik, 2005), pp. 67–87.

50 Akhmatova, *Sochineniia*, I, 253, reproduced with permission. The translation is my own.

There are Four of Us

Komarovo Sketches

Is the lithe gypsy really also fated to experience

All Dante's torments?

O. M.

This is how I see your face and glance.

B. P.

O, Muse of Weeping...

M. Ts.

...And here I renounced everything,

All earthly blessings.

The forest tree stump became

The spirit, guardian of 'this place'.

We are all a little like guests in life,

To live — is just a habit.

It seems to me that on the airy highways

Two voices call to one another.

Two? But still, by the eastern wall,

In a thicket of sturdy raspberry bushes

There's a dark, fresh branch of elder...

It's — a letter from Marina.

Akhmatova identifies the major Russian poets of the twentieth century as herself, Mandel'shtam, Tsvetaeva, and Boris Pasternak. She effectively operates according to the axiom that there is strength in numbers — it would have been an act of extreme hubris to name only herself, but in celebrating her famous contemporaries and including herself in a poetic quartet, the self-aggrandizement of the gesture is somewhat mitigated. Nonetheless, Akhmatova still makes herself the central, focal point of interest by quoting lines from poems addressed to her.

The main body of the lyric enters into intertextual contact with the other poets, most notably Pasternak and Tsvetaeva (the fact that allusion to Mandel'shtam is less in evidence is in itself revealing — of all three, Akhmatova held him in the highest regard and they were on the closest

personal terms). On the face of it, Akhmatova pays particular homage to Pasternak: the key phrase 'airy highways' ('vozduzhnye puti') is drawn from his 1924 short story of that title, and Akhmatova's own title immediately recalls his lyric 'Nas malo. Nas, mozhetsya byt', troe' ('We are few. There are, perhaps, three of us...', 1921).⁵¹ The original three were Pasternak himself, Vladimir Maiakovskii, and Nikolai Aseev, his fellow futurists, so that Pasternak's poem also has a canon-making dimension.

Underlying Akhmatova's surface homage it is possible to detect a pronounced degree of polemic. She had a tense, competitive relationship with Pasternak, from whom she became somewhat estranged towards the end of his life. There are strong indications in memoirs that she was jealous of his Nobel Prize — a marker of his own canonization — and she was offended by what she saw as his neglect or imperfect knowledge of her poetry and apparent demotion of her as an important figure of twentieth-century Russian verse.⁵² Her line 'To live — is just a habit' ('Zhit' — eto tol'ko privychka') is both an echo and refutation of Pasternak's maxim, from 'Gamlet' ('Hamlet', 1946) — the most well-known of the Zhivago poems and key component of Pasternak's own self-mythology (it was read at his graveside): 'Life isn't a stroll across a field' ('Zhizn' prozhit' — ne pole pereiti').⁵³ 'Nas chetvero' thus offers a covert challenge and corrective to Pasternak, while purporting to cement his position in Russian poetry alongside Akhmatova's own.

Roman Timenchik points to the complex origins of this lyric, which arose from a chance confluence of impressions and reminiscences.⁵⁴ In 1961, Akhmatova was in hospital reading Tsvetaeva. In 'Nas chetvero', she alludes to Tsvetaeva's work through the image of the *buzina* (elderberry branch), the central motif of the lyric 'Buzina tsel'nyi sad zalila!' ('Elderberry filled the entire garden!', 1931–1935) and a prominent image in an essay of 1934, from which Akhmatova's rhyme

51 Boris Pasternak, *Vozduzhnye puti: Proza raznykh let* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1982), pp. 123–35.

52 Reeder, pp. 360–66.

53 Boris Pasternak, *Izbrannoe*, edited by A. Pikach, 2 vols. (St Petersburg: Kristall, 1998), II, 518.

54 Roman Timenchik, 'Rozhdenie stikha iz dukha prozy: "Komarovskie kroki" Anny Akhmatovoi', in *Analysieren als Deuten: Wolf Schmid zum 60. Geburtstag*. Edited by L. Fleishman, C. Götz and A. A. Hansen-Löve (Hamburg: Hamburg University Press, 2004), pp. 541–62 (p. 541).

maliny/Mariny also derives. In the essay, Tsvetaeva states her wish to be buried 'under an elderberry bush' ('pod kustom buziny').⁵⁵

Akhmatova reacted contemptuously to Tsvetaeva's essay, describing it as 'terrifying stupidity' ('strashnaia glupost').⁵⁶ The negative tone of this appraisal is also perceptible in other remarks about Tsvetaeva, in relation to whom Akhmatova displays a pronounced anxiety and rivalry.⁵⁷ There is evidence to suggest that Tsvetaeva was equally ambivalent about Akhmatova, and that the latter sensed this: she perceived Tsvetaeva's 1916 poems dedicated to her as 'not altogether benevolent'.⁵⁸ Alyssa W. Dinega argues cogently that Tsvetaeva's cycle is far from being the 'adoringly eulogistic' tribute that it appears. Instead, its poems constitute 'interlocutionary minibattles' in which Tsvetaeva engages in a 'contest of competing mythologies'. Dinega concludes that the cycle constitutes an attempt 'ironically [to] canonize' Akhmatova as pre-eminent female poet of all Russia in order to allow Tsvetaeva to 'stake out her own poetic domain' in contrast.⁵⁹

Although the final stanza appears to be a tribute and expression of kinship, when considered against the biographical context of Tsvetaeva's suicide, the line 'To live — is just a habit' in the previous stanza seems singularly glib and unfeeling. Moreover, while the two (male) voices of Pasternak and Mandel'shtam intersect on the 'vozdukhnye puti', Tsvetaeva is denied this triumphant overcoming of time and space: she is less audible ('Two?' ('Dvukh?')), and the elderberry branch is likened to a letter, not a poem. She is given an inferior position in the quartet and effectively discarded in the undergrowth, not quite-but almost-buried, albeit not under an elderberry bush according to her wishes, but in a thicket of raspberry bushes.

Akhmatova's poem is paratextually heavy.⁶⁰ A twelve-line lyric, it is bolstered by a grandiose set of title, subtitle, and three epigraphs (which

55 'Kirillovny', in Tsvetaeva, *Sochineniia*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1980), II, 77–84 (pp. 83 and 84).

56 Timenchik, 'Rozhdenie stikha', p. 544.

57 Tamara Kataeva, *Anti-Akhmatova* (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 2007), pp. 400–06 and *Otmena rabstva: Anti-Akhmatova 2* (Moscow: Astrel', 2012), pp. 37; *Akhmatova bez gliantsa*, edited by Pavel Fokin (St Petersburg: Amfora, 2008), p. 235.

58 Timenchik, 'Rozhdenie stikha', p. 544.

59 Alyssa W. Dinega, *A Russian Psyche: The Poetic Mind of Marina Tsvetaeva* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), pp. 37–38.

60 For a definition of the paratext see Genette, p. 1.

together are about a third as long as the main text). Genette identifies four distinct functions of an epigraph, all of which are in operation here. The first is to 'elucidate and justify' the title: here the epigraphs reveal the identity of the 'four' in question. The second is to comment on the text, 'whose meaning it indirectly specifies or emphasizes': Akhmatova's epigraphs serve primarily to signal the idea of dialogue between poets, and they also articulate and reinforce key aspects of her personal mythology, arguably the poem's real theme.⁶¹ The epigraphs from Pasternak and Mandel'shtam recall her charismatic, youthful physical image, and the quotations from Mandel'shtam (again) and Tsvetaeva convey the idea of tragic suffering.⁶² A third, more oblique function of an epigraph is to give 'indirect backing' ('the main thing is not what it says but who its author is'): this is clearly a key motivation for Akhmatova. Last but not least, the fourth function is what Genette calls 'the epigraph-effect', whereby an epigraph is intended as a sign of culture. With it, an author 'chooses his peers and thus his place in the pantheon'.⁶³

Martyrdom and Martyrology

Rekviem (*Requiem*, 1935–1961), probably Akhmatova's best-known work, is a compelling and instructive example of a canonical poem which led a precarious, 'furtive, underground' mode of existence — relying exclusively on human memory for its survival, as it was too dangerous to keep a written version.⁶⁴ The story is well known: Akhmatova entrusted the poem to the memories of a small group of friends, scribbling lines down on a scrap of paper so that they could be silently memorised (to avoid detection by the microphones installed in her apartment), at which point the scrawled words were immediately burnt over an ashtray. The poem's preservation therefore involved a combination of chance and

61 Genette, p. 160.

62 On the mythologising function of epigraphs, see David Wells, 'The Function of the Epigraph in Akhmatova's Poetry', in *Anna Akhmatova 1889–1989: Papers from the Akhmatova Centennial Conference, Bellagio*, edited by Sonia Ketchian (Oakland, CA: Berkeley Slavic Specialties, 1993), pp. 266–81 (p. 273).

63 Genette, p. 160.

64 Clare Cavanagh, *Lyric Poetry and Modern Politics: Russia, Poland, and the West* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 112.

individual acts of heroism (as with other non-conformist classics, such as Mandel'shtam's *Voronezhskie tetradi* (*Voronezh Notebooks*)).

In many respects, the conditions in which non-official poetry existed in the Soviet Union of the 1930s resemble older, oral traditions: Nadezhda Mandel'shtam called this the 'pre-Gutenberg era' of Russian literature.⁶⁵ Mandel'shtam's Stalin epigram, 'My zhivem, pod soboiu ne chuiia strany...' ('We live without feeling the country beneath us...', 1933), the most notorious example of an 'oral' work of the Soviet 1930s, was not written down until the poet transcribed it at his police interrogation.⁶⁶ The form of the poem — rhyming couplets — seems expressly designed for ease of oral transmission, and it duly bypassed the entire state censorship apparatus before it came to the attention of the authorities: it was apparently recited from memory by deputy GPU and future NKVD head, Genrikh Iagoda.⁶⁷

John Guillory observes that 'there can be no general theory of canon formation that would predict or account for the canonization of any particular work, without specifying first the unique historical conditions of that work's production and reception'.⁶⁸ This is manifestly the case with *Requiem* (which was composed secretly, circulated widely in *samizdat* during the Thaw, and was published in the Soviet Union for the first time during *perestroika*, a period which produced what one commentator calls 'an altogether curious historical phenomenon — the *swift transformation of elite culture into mass culture*').⁶⁹ These culturally-specific historical and contextual factors also have a bearing on the intrinsic, aesthetic qualities of the text, because it was designed for memory.

65 Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope*, translated by Max Hayward (London: Collins and Harvill Press, 1971), p. 192.

66 Cavanagh, p. 115.

67 The *Gosudarstvennoi Politicheskoi Upravlenie* (GPU) was the State Political Directorate, the intelligence service and secret police of the Soviet Union. The *Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del* (NKVD) was the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, which oversaw the work of the GPU. Mikhail Gronas, *Cognitive Poetics and Cultural Memory: Russian Literary Mnemonics* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), p. 7.

68 John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 85.

69 Konstantin Azadovski, 'Russia's Silver Age in Today's Russia', <http://www.pum.umontreal.ca/revues/surfaces/vol9/azadovski.htm>

Mikhail Gronas's study *Cognitive Poetics* offers a compelling way of accounting for *Requiem's* canonical status through its mnemonic qualities. Gronas likens aesthetic pleasure to sexual pleasure, suggesting that it, too, possesses an evolutionary logic, and hypothesising that 'what sexual pleasure is to genes, aesthetic pleasure is to memes' (the minimal units of cultural evolution or transmission first postulated by Richard Dawkins in 1976).⁷⁰ Gronas continues:

What we subjectively experience as being thrilled, elated, soothed, moved, or inspired by a poem is in fact the poem's (or, rather, its memes') way to make sure that it replicates and propagates in human memory, the only medium that matters for things immaterial.⁷¹

In other words, according to this view, the great works of the literary canon are the mnemonically fittest and, to survive culturally, a text must possess 'certain mnemonic qualities [...]: it must comply with the demands of individual readers' memories and fit in with the mechanisms of institutionalized cultural memory, also known as the literary canon'.⁷²

Gronas identifies Akhmatova in passing as a mnemonic poet.⁷³ Certainly, her concise, metrically traditional poetry has a strong mnemonic quality. To give an anecdotal piece of evidence: her second collection gave rise to a game, 'telling *Rosary*', whereby one person would begin to recite a poem and the next would complete it.⁷⁴ Brodskii observes that Akhmatova's poems 'could be committed to memory in a flash, as indeed they were — and still are — by generations and generations of Russians'.⁷⁵

Although the text of *Requiem* as a whole is relatively long, its component parts, particularly the ten lyric poems that form its core, are all fairly brief (the longest has twenty lines). The second and third poems read:

⁷⁰ Gronas, p. 1; Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 30th Anniversary Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 192.

⁷¹ Gronas, p. 3.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

⁷⁴ Haight, p. 30.

⁷⁵ Brodsky, p. 40.

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.⁷⁶

II

Quietly flows the quiet Don,
Yellow moon enters a home.

He enters with hat aslant —
Yellow moon sees a shadow.

This woman is ill,
This woman is alone,

Husband in the grave, son in prison,
Pray for me.

76 Akhmatova, *Sochineniia*, I, 198, reproduced with permission. The translation is my own.

III

No, it's not me, it's someone else suffering.
 I couldn't, and what happened,
 Let them cover it in black cloth,
 And let them take away the lanterns...
 Night.

This brevity is highly successful in artistic terms — the fragmentary quality mirrors the persona's psychological breakdown and conveys the inadequacy of words to describe her experience. At the same time it has a more practical function: the cycle is broken down into short units, making it more readily memorisable. The folk metre of poem two assists in this process, as does the allusion to Blok's lyric 'Noch', ulitsa, fonar', apteka' ('Night, street, lantern, pharmacy', 1912) in poem three, because these features give further hooks for memorisation. Akhmatova's prevalent use of intertextuality is, in general, highly relevant to the issue of mnemonics. As Gronas writes, 'a mnemonic poet's mind is filled with preexisting poetic utterances that serve as material or background for the ones being newly created': it is significant that, for Akhmatova, allusion to other texts is not merely a prevalent device, but is frequently the primary principle of composition.⁷⁷ In one poem, she even suggests that poetry is nothing other than 'one magnificent quotation' ('odna velikolepnaia tsitata').⁷⁸ It is also worth noting that memory is arguably the major theme of Akhmatova's later poetry, and that *Requiem* itself is explicitly an act of memory which presents *remembering* as a moral imperative.

In taking a Darwin-inspired memetic approach to literary canon formation, Gronas sees himself as occupying the middle ground between the two poles of the canon debate — the 'aesthetic' (which, like Kermode, holds that canonicity arises from intrinsic qualities of texts) and the 'institutional' (which, like Guillory, stresses academia and curricula as sites of power in canon formation). The mnemonic approach complements these, defining canonicity as a 'measure of how often a text is read, reread, mentioned, cited, and analyzed over

⁷⁷ Gronas, p. 82.

⁷⁸ Akhmatova, 'Ne povtoriai — dusha tvoia bogata' (1956), *Sochineniia*, I, 301.

a historically significant slice of time; that is, as a yardstick of textual recurrence or reproducibility within a culture'.⁷⁹ According to this criterion, *Requiem* probably emerges as Akhmatova's most canonical text, not least in the West, where it has gained a secure foothold in Russian literary studies. Donald Loewen, analysing data collected from forty-six North American universities in 2006, noted that since 1982 *Requiem* had featured increasingly prominently on curricula: in 1982 it was the twelfth 'most frequently used' work, in 1992 the tenth and, in 2002, the seventh (the six works which the respondents used more are all works of prose). The most common reason given for the choice of text was 'literary merit'.⁸⁰ On this basis, *Requiem* undoubtedly deserves its place in the canon. It is, as Catriona Kelly contends, 'a work of artistic skill dedicated to a morally impeccable purpose'.⁸¹ Clare Cavanagh remarks similarly that *Requiem* is 'internationally acknowledged as both a masterwork of modern writing and one of the past century's greatest testaments to an age of mass terrors'.⁸²

Brodskii notes that the fact that Akhmatova's poetry is easily memorized is not in itself enough to make people want to commit it to memory — its appeal lies in its sensibility, the poet's treatment of her theme.⁸³ Both Kelly and Cavanagh point to *Requiem*'s unimpeachable moral credentials and Terry Eagleton, in a discussion of the relationship between poetry and morality, suggests that poems 'are moral statements [...] not because they launch stringent judgements according to some code, but because they deal in human values, meanings and purposes'.⁸⁴ While this is perhaps debatable as a general definition of poetry, *Requiem*'s humanity and powerful clarity as moral statement undoubtedly help to account for its enduring popularity and memorability. Kermode, in a reflection on aesthetic response, argues that canonical works produce in readers a complex form of pleasure that combines happiness with dismay.⁸⁵ Commenting on this view,

79 Gronas, pp. 8 and 52.

80 Donald Loewen, 'Twentieth-Century Russian Literature and the North American Pedagogical Canon', *Slavic and East European Journal*, 50 (2006), 172–86 (pp. 176–78 and 179).

81 Kelly, *Russian Literature*, p. 88.

82 Cavanagh, p. 126.

83 Brodsky, p. 40.

84 Terry Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p. 29.

85 Kermode, p. 23.

Alter suggests that in reading certain texts, 'We feel a keen sense of exhilaration in the magisterial power (and the courage) of the poetic imagination together with a wrenching experience of anguish over the vision of suffering or gratuitous evil or destructiveness articulated in the work'.⁸⁶ Again, the problems with Kermode's argument (and with Alter's sweeping use of 'we') notwithstanding, this description would probably encapsulate many readers' immediate responses to *Requiem*.

Requiem is not only aesthetically successful and morally satisfying, but contributes significantly to the image of Akhmatova as suffering martyr or survivor dissident (Anatolii Naiman calls it a 'martyrology').⁸⁷ It cannot be adequately appreciated without reference to the political context in which it was composed and which it indicts, or to the circumstances of Akhmatova's own biography, which gave her the authority to write it (it was directly inspired by the arrests of her son Lev Gumilev and common-law husband Nikolai Punin during the Ezhov Terror). It is thus central to Akhmatova's personal mythology and to her prevailing image as moral exemplar, staunch patriot, and implacable opponent of Stalinism. In it, she equates herself with both Mary, mother of Christ, and Russia itself, metonymically standing for all Russian women and assuming the role of 'chief mourner for a stricken people'.⁸⁸ Her words in the epigraph, 'I was with my people then' ('Ja byla togda s moim narodom'), are spoken more like a monarch than a silenced and disgraced poet.

Akhmatova as Secular Saint and Charismatic Leader

In Russia, a significant role in canon formation has historically been played by the intelligentsia (who influence public opinion through its members' roles in publishing houses, editorships of journals, and, latterly, television, radio and the internet).⁸⁹ This culturally-specific situation makes wholesale application of some Western theories of the canon problematic. In Guillory's understanding, for instance, the canon

86 Alter, p. 9.

87 Anatoly Naiman, *Remembering Anna Akhmatova*, translated by Wendy Rosslyn (New York: Henry Holt, 1991), p. 135.

88 Cavanagh, p. 126; Wachtel and Vinitsky, p. 181.

89 Rosalind Marsh, *Literature, History, and Identity in Post-Soviet Russia, 1991–2006* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 17.

is not formed by a particular community of readers or social group. Rather, he emphasises the role of academia, the educational syllabus, in the reception and reproduction of literature and the canon.⁹⁰ These ideas can be productively applied to Russia only with some context-sensitive modifications: if 'institution' is taken to mean the cultural intelligentsia, the main propagators of the idea of literature as religion (who are not exclusively academics or educators), it becomes possible to understand more clearly why Akhmatova has achieved such cultural prominence, and how hagiographic, canonising memoirs like Lidiia Chukovskaia's have played a key part in this process.

The genre of memoir itself, as 'a mode of bestowing power', focused on a shared experience of a historical period ('stories of intimate life embedded in catastrophic history'), assumed a major role in the historical construction of the identity and community of the Russian intelligentsia.⁹¹ Chukovskaia's record of her conversations with Akhmatova is a prime Soviet-era example, which forms part of a larger body of memoir literature that 'basically expresses the viewpoint of the old Russian intelligentsia and tends to be a literature of moral protest, either against the Soviet regime as such or against the abuses of the Stalin period'.⁹² These memoirs provide a means of rationalising a paradoxical situation which involved compliance with the regime in terms of behaviour, coupled with non-compliance in viewpoint.⁹³ From the early 1930s onward, despite their ideological opposition to Soviet power, intellectuals were powerless actively to resist it.⁹⁴ Moreover, the intelligentsia — especially the cultural intelligentsia — constituted a highly privileged group within Soviet society. As Sheila Fitzpatrick points out, Stalin's regime made 'the basic decision to put its money on

90 Guillory, p. vii.

91 Beth Holmgren, 'Introduction', in *The Russian Memoir: History and Literature*, edited by Beth Holmgren (Evanston: North Western University Press, 2003), pp. ix–xxxiv (p. xxii); Irina Paperno, *Stories of the Soviet Experience: Memoirs, Diaries, Dreams* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), p. 11; see also: Holmgren, *Women's Works in Stalin's Time: On Lidiia Chukovskaia and Nadezhda Mandelstam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

92 Sheila Fitzpatrick, 'Culture and Politics under Stalin: A Reappraisal', *Slavic Review*, 35 (1976), 211–31 (p. 211).

93 Vladimir Shlapentokh, 'The Justification of Political Conformism: The Mythology of Soviet Intellectuals', *Studies in Soviet Thought*, 39 (1990), 111–35 (p. 114).

94 Smith, pp. xxiv–xxxv.

kul'turnost' (culturedness) [...] and to honor the old non-Communist, nonproletarian cultural intelligentsia'.⁹⁵ The *zhdanovshchina*, the major 'disciplinary operation against the cultural intelligentsia' (of which Akhmatova was the most prominent literary victim in 1946), caused widespread fear, but did not threaten the intelligentsia's existence or result in arrests.⁹⁶ Prominent cultural figures, although harried by censorship and consumed by dread of imprisonment, were generally afforded a degree of protection when it came to their physical fates, and Stalin intervened directly in the cases of famous non-conformist poets. In relation to Mandel'shtam, the greatest literary martyr of the period, his initial order was to 'isolate, but preserve'.⁹⁷ Similarly, he exhorted officials to leave Pasternak, 'that cloud-dweller' in peace, and he personally approved the list of cultural figures, including Akhmatova, to be evacuated from wartime Leningrad.⁹⁸ The power relations between party leadership and intelligentsia, which tend to be framed in terms of repression and purging, are thus more complex: 'the party had the political power to discipline the intelligentsia, but lacked the will or resources to deny its cultural authority'.⁹⁹ The intelligentsia was fragmented (many had emigrated, others were physically destroyed) and terrified, but was nonetheless largely able to maintain its traditions and separate sense of identity throughout the Stalin period.¹⁰⁰

After Stalin's death in 1953, intellectuals were increasingly able to confront the regime without fear of instant arrest, but only a minority dared to do so, so that a by-product of political conformism in the 1960s and especially the 1970s (the period following Akhmatova's death) was the intelligentsia's need to develop 'a special mythology capable of exculpating passive intellectuals as well as those who collaborated with the authorities'.¹⁰¹ Chukovskaia's memoirs play a role in this, because they vividly describe the 'anatomy and physiology of the fear which was deeply rooted in the minds of intellectuals after 1917' and provide a

95 Fitzpatrick, p. 229.

96 *Ibid.*

97 Mandel'shtam, *Hope Against Hope*, p. 63.

98 See Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Young Stalin* (London: Phoenix, 2008), p. 59; Constantin V. Ponomareff, *The Time Before Death: Twentieth-Century Memoirs* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), p. 48.

99 Fitzpatrick, p. 230

100 *Ibid.*, pp. 230 and 219.

101 Shlapentokh, p. 113.

positive model of 'passive resistance' (as Berlin expresses it) in the figure of Akhmatova, who held sharply critical views of the system privately but was never flagrantly disobedient publicly.¹⁰² Her occasional acts of conformism — most notably the publication of her pro-Stalinist 'Slava miru' ('In Praise of Peace', 1950) — were performed under duress, to protect her son. Akhmatova's 'passive resistance' (which maps onto what Aleksandr Zholkovskii characterises as her exercise of 'power through weakness', a strategy available as a result of her gender) proved less self-destructive than the active opposition of Mandel'shtam.¹⁰³ As Zholkovskii observes, it is 'precisely as a "survivor dissident" that she has been so representative of and, therefore, acceptable to the Soviet (now post-) intelligentsia'.¹⁰⁴ This view, he suggests elsewhere, conforms to a broader liberal approach to non-conformist classic authors that sees them either as innocent victims of the regime or penetrating critics of it (and sometimes both) who, despite being forced into certain compromises, did not espouse its ideology.¹⁰⁵

Irina Paperno points out that belonging to the intelligentsia 'implies allegiance to values associated with nineteenth-century tradition: alienation from the establishment; rejection of accepted living forms, valorization of poverty, suffering, and self-denial; [...] staunch belief in literature as a source of moral authority [...]'.¹⁰⁶ These are central elements of the mythology surrounding Akhmatova — consider, for instance, her uncompromising stance in relation to Soviet authority, her unconventional household arrangements, the homelessness *topos* of her biography, her poverty and nun-like image, stoicism and poetic theme of renunciation, the role of the execution of Gumilev and imprisonments of her son and Punin in her biography, her dedication to her vocation.¹⁰⁷ This mythology conforms absolutely to the culturally-ingrained view of literature as a quasi-religion, according to which the poet's life is seen as a martyrdom and the literary text as gospel.

102 *Ibid.*, p. 125.

103 Zholkovsky, 'Scripts', p. 138.

104 *Ibid.*

105 Aleksandr Zholkovskii, 'K pereosmysleniiu kanona: sovetskie klassiki nonkonformisty v postsovetskoi perspektive', <http://www-bcf.usc.edu/~alikh/rus/ess/reth.htm>

106 Paperno, p. 60.

107 On Akhmatova's asceticism, see Rylkova, p. 85.

The values listed by Paperno strongly echo the Christian conception of Christ's passion and by extension, narratives of saints' lives. Saints — religious or secular — are important as a focal point for identity building, providing a resource to turn to for wisdom in the face of hardship, bestowing 'sacred meaning on certain types of conduct and experience'.¹⁰⁸ Rojek observes that celebrities, as secular icons, 'simultaneously embody social types and provide role models', and argues that celebrity has a political as well as a social function, in that it 'operates to articulate, and legitimate, various forms of subjectivity that enhance the value of individuality and personality'.¹⁰⁹ Max Weber's classic definition of charismatic authority is apposite here:

Charisma is a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader.¹¹⁰

Akhmatova's emblematic importance for the intelligentsia (Paperno calls her its 'sacred cow') arises from the way in which she provides a role model that embodies its key values and reflects its own self-mythology, validating and bolstering its sense of identity.¹¹¹

Iconoclasm and Mass Culture

In recent years, Akhmatova's image has suffered as a result of what Kermode calls the 'effect of monumentalization that is always the risk of [...] elevation to the status of canonicity'.¹¹² He refers specifically to the annulment of pleasure in a particular literary *work*, but in Akhmatova's case it is the *author* that has been subject to this process of monumentalisation, so that a distinctly iconoclastic trend has entered discourses about her in the post-Soviet era.

¹⁰⁸ Hopgood, pp. 15–16.

¹⁰⁹ Rojek, pp. 16 and 53.

¹¹⁰ Max Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building*, edited by S. N. Eisenstadt (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 48.

¹¹¹ Paperno, p. 60.

¹¹² Kermode, p. 75.

Zholkovskii makes what is arguably the most significant critical intervention in Akhmatova studies since the 'semantic poetics' of the 1970s or formalist studies of the 1920s — although his focus is not primarily her poetry — in a series of articles which argue that Akhmatova's life-creating strategies are uniquely Soviet but, because of her anti-Soviet stance, produce the 'obverse of Stalinism', making her a paradox of 'resistance-cum-replication'.¹¹³ He repeatedly emphasizes the Stalinist key of Akhmatova's behaviour, concluding that her careful manufacture of her image reveals her to be a 'power-smart' contemporary of Stalinism.¹¹⁴ While he refutes the established view of Akhmatova as martyr, presenting her instead as a totalitarian ideologue whose capricious exercise of control over others was symptomatic of a form of Stockholm Syndrome, he does not contest her right to a position in the canon, although the grounds for her inclusion are significantly revised. Akhmatova's value, he asserts, resides not in her critical view of Soviet life but rather the opposite: her close identification with its fears and typical strategies.¹¹⁵ He observes: 'The indisputable force of her poetry and persona lays a strong claim on a lasting place in the Russian literary canon — as perhaps the most durable specimen of the siege culture of her time', noting that she succeeded in establishing a cult that not only rivalled Stalin's, but proved to have greater staying power.¹¹⁶

However provocative and controversial Zholkovskii's thesis may appear in connection with a poet who is synonymous with moral protest and symbolises the suffering of the entire Soviet Union of the 1930s, it is difficult to ignore some striking parallels with Stalin's personality cult. Beth Holmgren, citing dissident historian Roy Medvedev's evidence on Stalin, observes:

His opinions on every topic and in every discipline were cited as sacred scripture; his image proliferated as the icon of the great Leader [...]. At least on the public surface of Soviet society an almost religious, enraptured atmosphere prevailed in which '[t]he social consciousness of the people took on elements of religious psychology'.¹¹⁷

113 Zholkovsky, 'Obverse', p. 68.

114 Zholkovsky, 'Scripts', p. 141.

115 Zholkovsky, 'Obverse', pp. 62 and 68.

116 *Ibid.*, p. 68; Zholkovskii, 'Piat'desiat let spustia', p. 211.

117 Holmgren, *Women's Works*, p. 5.

A similar phenomenon is certainly observable in relation to Akhmatova. However, to make extended comparisons between her and Stalin is, as Galina Rylkova remarks, irresponsible.¹¹⁸ Moreover, the Soviet period of Akhmatova's career sees not so much an emulation of Stalin's cult of personality as the development of mythmaking and self-advertising strategies that were shaped prior to the revolution by the theatrical, neo-Romantic cultural milieu in which she was formed as poet and which built upon nineteenth-, and even eighteenth-century traditions.¹¹⁹ Boris Groys highlights Stalinist culture's fundamental Romanticism, expressed in its aspiration to extend art into life, so that modernist and avant-garde life-creation were transformed into Stalinist world-creation.¹²⁰ To over-emphasise the Stalinist influence on Akhmatova's behaviour (as Zholkovskii does), is to downplay the extent to which Stalin — who in his youth was a published Romantic poet — had himself assimilated the cultural traditions upon which Akhmatova drew.¹²¹ It is entirely possible to turn Zholkovskii's argument on its head, making Stalin the imitator, and Akhmatova, and other modernists, the originals.¹²²

Zholkovskii's deconstruction project has had a discernible impact on popular writing on Akhmatova, notably in two books by Tamara Kataeva: *Anti-Akhmatova* (2007) and *Otmena rabstva* (*Abolition of Slavery: Anti-Akhmatova 2*, 2012) — the slavery in question being the perceived obligation to venerate Akhmatova.¹²³ Unlike Zholkovskii, who does not dispute the quality of Akhmatova's poetry, Kataeva aims to demote her in the canon.¹²⁴ She goes much further than Zholkovskii in debunking the prevailing image of Akhmatova as unimpeachable moral authority and victim of Stalinism, presenting her as an egotistical, fame-obsessed and lazy drunkard, as well as a terrible mother, who did not actually suffer at all.

118 See Rylkova's article 'Saint or Monster? Akhmatova in the 21st Century', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 11: 2 (Spring 2010), <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/379896>

119 Harrington, 'Biographical Myth-Making', p. 458.

120 Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, translated by Charles Rougle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

121 On Stalin as poet, see Sebag Montefiore, pp. 56–59.

122 Harrington, 'Biographical Myth-Making', pp. 488 and 492–93.

123 See note 57 in this chapter.

124 Kataeva, *Anti-Akhmatova*, pp. 455–87.

Kataeva's books are tendentious hatchet-jobs, yet despite their manifest flaws, they contain some astute observations and have been highly popular — *Anti-Akhmatova* went to three large print runs in two years. Predictably enough, they have prompted various outraged reactions from members of the intelligentsia keen to 'defend geniuses from mass culture'.¹²⁵ After the publication of *The Abolition of Slavery*, the poet Iunna Morits published a strident poetic defence of 'the great Anna Akhmatova' entitled 'Defekatsiia defektologa K' ('The Defecation of Speech Therapist K').¹²⁶

These demythologising and iconoclastic interventions are unlikely to do Akhmatova's reputation any serious damage or topple her from her pedestal. In fact, they are a paradoxical indication of her continued celebrity and cultural dominance: as Dmitrii Bykov suggests, her 'unforgiven-ness' ('neproshchennost') and the mixture of strong emotions that she evinces are 'the guarantee of her immortality'.¹²⁷

Secular Sanctification and the Power of Legend

A particularly noticeable feature of the debate generated by the Zholkovskii/Kataeva challenge to the received image of Akhmatova is the prominence of rhetoric drawn from religion and relating to religious canonisation. This clearly both arises from and reacts to the conception of literature as a form of surrogate religion and the elevation of Akhmatova to secular sainthood (the 'widespread worship' that Berlin observes). Zholkovsky charges scholars with writing 'hagiobiographies', and Kataeva objects strenuously to the idea of Akhmatova's 'saintly feat' ('podvig') and to the public 'veneration' ('blagogoveli pered Akhmatovoi') of her.¹²⁸ Viktor Toporov praises Kataeva for the fact that she 'took on the sacred' ('pokusilas' na sviatoe'), remarking that Akhmatova's poetic significance has been exaggerated and that her

125 Natal'ia Ivanova, 'Mythopoesis and Mythoclassicism', *Russian Studies in Literature*, 45: 1 (2008–2009), 82–91 (pp. 85–86); Natal'ia Lebedeva, 'Gil'otina dlia zvezdy: kak zashchitit' geniiev ot masskul'ta', *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, 446 (February 2007), <http://www.rg.ru/printable/2007/08/22/chukovskaya.html>

126 Kataeva is a *defektolog*, or speech therapist. See http://www.morits.ru/cntnt/ne_dlya_pe/defekaziya.html

127 Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_oKxZkqKsIs

128 Kataeva, *Anti-Akhmatova*, p. 127.

life was far from being the 'great martyrdom' ('velikomuchenichestvo') that it is generally perceived to be: 'there is a place for her in the literary pantheon, although not the main one', he writes, 'but in the saints' calendar, hardly' ('a vot v sviattsakh — edva li'). All this, he continues, is obvious to anyone with any serious knowledge of Russian poetry, and yet it is perceived as 'blasphemy' ('koshchunstvo') to say so.¹²⁹

The analogy between literary and religious canonisation is not wholly superficial or frivolous, for all that literary canonisation is a secular process.¹³⁰ Moreover, as the case of Akhmatova demonstrates, there appears to be a strong relationship (as well as confusion) between what, in religious terms, are two distinct categories: canonisation and sanctification. Canonisation is technically a formal process of adjudication (the closest analogy in literary terms is the Nobel Prize, which Akhmatova was never awarded, although she did receive a major Italian literary prize and an honorary doctorate from Oxford). Sanctification, on the other hand, is a popular process. The immense symbolic capital of authors in Russia has led to figures like Akhmatova becoming objects of worship. Even literary museums, like the one at Fontannyi Dom — as secular shrines complete with relics — seem to borrow from popular cults of saints. This secular sainthood resembles its religious counterpart in so far as it engenders strong emotions of identification or devotion: Akhmatova's grave in Komarovo is permanently adorned with flowers, icons, votive candles, and other offerings from members of the public.

There is inevitably a certain circularity to canonicity: Akhmatova is popular because she is in the canon, and in the canon because she is popular. She successfully constructed a larger-than-life persona, which was then promoted and embellished by others, particularly the late and post-Soviet intelligentsia, but also Western commentators like Berlin. Scrutiny of Akhmatova's assumption of canonical status proves instructive because, although various theoretical explanations for canonicity help to illuminate what lies behind her place in the canon — be they institutional, aesthetic, mnemonic — they clearly operate alongside factors that bear more closely on the phenomena of

129 Viktor Toporov, 'No, Bozhe, kak ikh zamolchat' zastavit!', *Vzgliad*, 18 August 2007, <http://vz.ru/columns/2007/8/18/101677.html>

130 Lootens, p. 3.

literary celebrity and secular sanctification and which tend to feature less prominently in theoretical discussions of canonicity.¹³¹ The case of Akhmatova is indicative not only of the extent to which religious conceptions and practices permeate Russian attitudes towards literature but also of how mythmaking and legend formation can shape the canon.

131 A noteworthy exception is Lootens.