

Saint or Monster?

Anna Akhmatova in the 21st Century

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Akhmatova bez gliantsa (Akhmatova without Luster). A project of Pavel Fokin. 473 pp. St. Petersburg: Amfora, 2007. ISBN-13 978-5367006230.

Elaine Feinstein, *Anna of All the Russias: The Life of Anna Akhmatova*. xiv + 322 pp. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2005. ISBN 0297643096.

A Film about Anna Akhmatova. Directed by Helga Landauer; original literary synopsis and interviews by Anatolii Naiman. New York: Das Films, 2008. In Russian, with English subtitles, 2 parts, 105 minutes.

Nigel Hamilton, *Biography: A Brief History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007. 345 pp. ISBN-13 978-0674024663.

Tamara Kataeva, *Anti-Akhmatova*. 559 pp. Ekaterinburg: EvroINFO, 2007. ISBN-13 978-5875320705.

In April 1966, one month after Anna Akhmatova's death, a minor literary critic, M. Busin, accused Soviet censorship of inflicting permanent damage on Akhmatova's poetic legacy.

We certainly don't know Akhmatova's poetic legacy in its entirety. The fine mesh of the [Communist] Party censorship sieve has let through

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only some of its pitiful crumbs. Some of her legacy has reached us by roundabout ways. A lot of it, however, has undoubtedly been lost irrevocably.

What the late poet's friends manage to preserve from the party-driven vandalism will become fully known to us only after the seeds of the future free and noble Russia that she sowed sprout and communist despotism disintegrates into ashes.¹

By the early 2000s, Busin's dreams had come true beyond his wildest expectations. As it turns out, the disgraced Communists did not sink into ignominy alone. They also managed to drag down with them such seemingly indestructible constructs as the Russian Silver Age and one of its major constituent parts—the Akhmatova institution.² Since *perestroika*, Akhmatova's legacy has not only been successfully recovered, rediscovered, studied, and carefully stored for posterity in multivolume collections of her works of poetry and prose, in literary museums, and in numerous books of memoirs but also subjected to scrutiny and rigorous reconceptualization.

On 18 August 2007, the literary critic Viktor Toporov shared his impressions of Tamara Kataeva's *Anti-Akhmatova* (2007), which is aimed unequivocally at discrediting Akhmatova as one of Russia's cultural icons. He wrote:

Having taken as her model [Vikentii] Veresaev's *Pushkin in Life*, [Kataeva] compiled an encyclopedia of Akhmatova's unguarded self-exposing remarks about "time and herself" as well as equally scary (from an objective standpoint) opinions about her that were expressed, primarily, by ecstatic contemporaries—both male and female. . . . The image that emerges is monstrous. Of course, any genius is a monster, but genius Akhmatova, most likely, was not. Nor was she the queen of Russian

¹ M. Busin, "Anna Akhmatova: Chelovek i poet" (1966), in *Anna Akhmatova: Pro et Contra. Antologija*, 2 (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Russkoi khristianskoi gumanitarnoi akademii, 2005), 347.

² On the codependent relationship between the Bolshevik revolution and the Silver Age, see Galina Rylkova, *The Archaeology of Anxiety: The Russian Silver Age and Its Legacy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007)—reviewed in this issue of *Kritika*. Alexander Zholkovskiy (Aleksandr Zholkovskii) was the first to introduce the concept of the "Anna Akhmatova institution" and to analyze its activity. See his "Strakh, tiazhest', mramor (iz materialov k zhiznetvorcheskoi biografii Akhmatovoi)," *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach* 36 (1995): 119–54; "Anna Akhmatova: Scripts, Not Scriptures," *Slavic and East European Journal* 40, 1 (1996): 135–41; "Anna Akhmatova—piat' desiat let spustia," *Zvezda*, no. 9 (1996): 211–27; and "The Obverse of Stalinism: Akhmatova's Self-Serving Charisma of Selfishness," in *Self and Story in Russian History*, ed. Laura Engelstein and Stephanie Sandler (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 46–68.

poetry; rather, she was a duchess, or, more likely, a marquise who was making up a diary with [Konstantin] Somov's illustrations.³

Toporov, whom one would expect to have read "The Northern Elegies," "The Way of All the Earth," *Requiem*, and *A Poem without a Hero*, chooses the familiar path well trodden by Soviet bureaucrats such as Andrei Zhdanov, who preferred not to notice Akhmatova's postrevolutionary output, foregrounding instead her lyrical poems of the early 1910s.

The literary scholar Alexander Zholkovsky (who in his own words, is in part "responsible for concocting this de-mythologized mishmash"), on the contrary, thinks highly of Akhmatova's poetry.⁴ It is Akhmatova's "manipulative personality" and her contrived survival strategies that Zholkovsky finds most objectionable. He was among the first to suggest that Akhmatova was not crushed by Stalin but had successfully adapted to Stalinism.⁵ Accordingly, in his interview with Dmitrii Bykov about *Anti-Akhmatova* and its cultural resonance, Zholkovsky invited the students of Akhmatova to act not as "evangelists but as historians of religion." Although not fully condoning Kataeva's interpretive strategies, Zholkovsky nevertheless sees the value of her book as "provoking a serious philologically grounded response, [in the form of] an authentic biography of Akhmatova, which has not been written yet."⁶ What does Zholkovsky mean by an "authentic" biography? Is it ever possible to write one? Roman Timenchik's *Anna Akhmatova in the 1960s*, which covers extensively "only" one decade of Akhmatova's life, is a colossal monument to his heroic work of some 40 years. Its sheer volume of information—together with its singular manner of presentation, complete with endnotes occupying two-thirds of the book that was meant as footnotes to Akhmatova's own *Zapisnye knizhki* (Notes)—raised questions about his book's audience and readability, which prompted Irina Prokhorova to explicate the book's unusual structure

³ Viktor Toporov, "No, Bozhe, kak ikh zamolchat' zastavit'?" *Vzgliad: Delovaia gazeta*, 18 August 2007.

⁴ Aleksandr Zholkovskii, "Akhmatova-2007," *Russkii zhurnal*, 3 October 2007.

⁵ See his works listed in n. 2. The poet Boris Slutskii (1919–86) was probably the first to create a multifaceted revisionist portrayal of Akhmatova in his poem "Ia s toi starukhoi khladno-vezhliv byl..." (1971?), in his *Sobranie sochinenii*, 3 vols. (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1991). I am grateful to Marat Grinberg for this information. Catriona Kelly was the first to submit that Akhmatova had succeeded in promoting her career as one of Russia's greatest poets by skillfully positioning herself as "the only female victim of Soviet cultural politics" (*A History of Russian Women's Writing, 1820–1992* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1994], 209).

⁶ Zholkovsky is quoted in Dmitrii Bykov, "Sud nad Akhmatovoi," *Ogonek*, 6 August 2007.

in light of a familiar “computer logic.”⁷ Thus the appealing but murky idea of writing a “real,” “authentic,” or “credible” biography of Akhmatova—as well as of any creative personality in general—deserves closer examination.

To begin with, what exactly are the functions of a literary biography? In 1925, the Pushkin scholar Boris Tomashevskii explained that the major thrust of a literary biography is to create a “frame”: that is, “The life of a poet constitutes the frame that befits his creative activity.”⁸ Obviously, biographers have been stretching their “frames” to accommodate their own ambitious agendas and expectations of their intended audiences. As a result, while being the most popular literary genre nowadays, biography has also become an extremely complex genre. Russian biography today is one of the means of creating and transforming society’s cultural and social hierarchies. The vast and growing institution of Akhmatova biography offers a perfect case study to track down some of these changes. Since biographers’ truthfulness has been the major point of contention with biographers in general and with Akhmatova’s biographers and their readers in particular, I address this issue in a separate section on biography as a source of information. This is followed by my readings of four biographies of Akhmatova, where I discuss how different biographers work with their sources, examine their claims to “objectivity,” discuss their audiences and characterize briefly the current state of the Russian biography institution.

Why Study Biography?

“Biography—that is to say, our creative and non-fictional output devoted to recording and interpreting real lives—has enjoyed an extraordinary renaissance in recent years,” the biographer and historian of biography Nigel Hamilton writes. “Not only has it become, in the West, the dominant area of nonfiction broadcasting and publishing, from television to the Internet, but it is now one of the embattled front lines in the struggle between society’s notions of truth and imagination” (1). What makes biography a distinct literary genre and an indispensable research tool is its unique combination of and reliance on “history, politics, sociology, gossip, fiction, literary criticism, psychoanalysis, documentary, journalism, ethics, and philosophy.”⁹ As Hermione Lee reminds us, “readers of biography are greedy readers, with an insatiable appetite for detail and story. There are all kinds of ways of satisfying

⁷ Irina Prokhorova, “Nedavnee proshloe kak vyzov istoriku,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 83 (2007): 10.

⁸ Boris Tomashevskii, *Pushkin: Sovremennye problemy istoriko-literaturnogo izucheniia* (Leningrad: Obrazovanie, 1925), 56.

⁹ Hermione Lee, *Body Parts: Essays in Life-Writing* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2005), 3.

these appetites.”¹⁰ Analyzing readers’ appetites and biographers’ means of satisfying them may, therefore, provide insights not only into the history of the biography institutions (with all their inherent controversies and contradictions) but—more broadly—into the ongoing modifications of Russian national identity. Nevertheless, self-conscious reflection on the writing of Russian biography¹¹—and of biography in general¹²—has been largely absent. There is an impressive array of scholarly books and articles devoted to the biographies and biographers of individual outstanding Russian cultural figures, such as Aleksandr Pushkin, but up to now little attempt has been made to study the functioning of the culture of Russian biography in changing social, political, and cultural contexts.

Until recently, Russian biographers have not concerned themselves with self-reflexivity and self-justification. Nor have they dealt with any secrets of their trade or engaged in any debates on their professional ethics and qualifications, such as one can find in the works of many British and American biographers.¹³ This is totally understandable. Russian literary biography is a relatively new cultural institution that originated in Pavel Annenkov’s biographical sketches of the celebrated men of the 1840s. It was later developed in the first critical responses to Annenkov’s biographies of Pushkin (1873, 1874), to the publication of Ivan Turgenev’s letters in 1884, and to the publication in 1887 of Pushkin’s collected works together with his correspondence, unfinished pieces, and literary drafts. In his essay “The Violation of [a Writer’s] Will” (*Narushenie voli* [1889]), the writer Ivan Goncharov condemned his learned contemporaries for the destruction of the late writers’ “magnificent integrity” by airing their “diapers” and “child-like doodles” that were never meant for public consumption and circulation. “Biographers would do well to study each writer from a distance; let them accumulate some facts and information, but why make the writer hurt himself with his own words?” Goncharov said at the end of his essay.¹⁴

Goncharov was not alone. Given the reputed penchant of the Russian public to hold their cultural figures in high esteem (or, alternatively, to make them responsible for every calamity that befell the Russian people in the

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ See Dmitrii Kalugin, “Iskusstvo biografii: Izobrazhenie lichnosti i ee opravdanie v russkikh zhizneopisaniiax serediny XIX veka,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 91 (2008): 84.

¹² “Why [...] has so little been written about the nature, history, interdisciplinary pursuit, cross-media expansion, and ethics of biography? Why is there in print no single, accessible introduction to the subject, either for the general reader or the specialist?” (Hamilton, 1).

¹³ See, for instance, Carl Rollyson, *A Higher Form of Cannibalism? Adventures in the Art and Politics of Biography* (Chicago: Ivan Dee, 2005).

¹⁴ Ivan Goncharov, “Narushenie voli [January 1889],” *Vestnik Evropy* (1889): 86–87.

course of the last two centuries) and given the historically blurred boundaries between the public and the private spheres, it is not surprising that Russian writers and cultural celebrities have been singularly preoccupied with their posthumous legacies and have done everything in their power to prevent any possible damage to their reputations. They have done so by (1) ridiculing biographers as a perniciously ignorant crowd, (2) writing their own biographies, (3) practicing self-concealment, and (4) surrounding themselves with relatives, zealous acolytes, and admirers who could be trusted with the production of embellished and “definitive” accounts of their lives. In fairness, Akhmatova herself practiced all the above strategies with consummate skill.¹⁵ Hence it is not surprising that adherence to faithfulness and authenticity has become an obsession with many Russian biographers and their readers.¹⁶

The work of a Russian biographer (as well as of any biographer interested in Russian subjects) has never been easy. For years, Russian biographers were forced to live on an austere diet of cultural canon with its etiolated but professedly wholesome representatives. In 1985, this party-controlled abstinence started to give way to the smorgasbord of the emergent market economy, with biography becoming one of its many attractive commodities. There occurred a noticeable shift in the biographer’s work—from traditional moralizing and textual analysis and interpretation to telling a good story, in which the writer’s good cooking, inexplicable tantrums, and infidelities were just as important as his/her literary works and other accomplishments. Whereas 19th-century critics, such as Pavel Annenkov, were primarily wrestling with aesthetic and ethical problems—aiming to show their subjects’ integrity and wholeness (*tsel’nost’*), contemporary biographers are understandably more concerned with how to sell their books to the highest-bidding publisher, how to make their books more provocative, and how to gain notoriety and success with the readers.¹⁷

¹⁵ See the works cited in notes 2 and 5 and Rylkova, *The Archaeology of Anxiety*, chaps. 4, 7.

¹⁶ See, for example, a heated debate that was provoked by Viktoriia Schweitzer’s open letter to Anastasiia Tsvetaeva in 1982, in which Schweitzer, a recognized authority on Marina Tsvetaeva, accused Anastasiia Tsvetaeva of bending the truth about the last decades of her sister’s life in her second book of memoirs (Schweitzer, “Otkrytoe pis’mo Anastasii Tsvetaevoi po povodu 2-go toma ee ‘Vospominanii,’” *Syntaxis* 10 (Paris, 1982): 233–38. See also Emma Gerstein, *Moscow Memoirs [Memuary]*, 1998], trans. John Crowfoot (New York: Overlook Press, 2004); and Gerstein, “Na fone vsekh revizii veka,” *Pamiat’ pisatelii* (St. Petersburg: Inapress, 2001), in which Gerstein exposes Nadezhda Mandel’shtam as a manipulative liar who unscrupulously usurped the right to speak for the dead.

¹⁷ See Evgeniia Ivanova, “‘Zimnii vziat i zagazhen,’ ili Novyi biografizm v stile talk-show,” a review of Irina Luk’ianova’s *Kornei Chukovskii, Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 90 (2008): 315–38. Although Ivanova’s review is ostensibly devoted to Irina Luk’ianova’s book, her main target is Luk’ianova’s husband, the popular writer and biographer Dmitrii Bykov, whose own biography of Boris Pasternak was awarded the “National Bestseller” prize in 2006. Ivanova

Akhmatova's biographers are no exception.¹⁸ In his review of Viacheslav's Nedoshivin's *Wandering about the Silver Age* (2005), the Akhmatova scholar Vadim Chernykh describes Nedoshivin's book "as one of the numerous examples of modern biographers choosing not to adhere to the truth in their narratives. All they seek is scandalous notoriety. They, apparently, don't care that such an attitude leads to the belittlement and vulgarization of their subjects."¹⁹ In *The Silent Woman*, a provocative account of the ways in which Sylvia Plath's legacy was handled by her estate, Janet Malcolm writes: "There is no length [a biographer] will not go to."²⁰ With this no-holds-barred approach, any expedient comes in handy—from a crowbar to a cudgel. One of Kataeva's supporters suggested in all honesty that the allegedly false but entrenched impressions of Akhmatova could be dislodged not only with the help of a wedge but with a crowbar as well.²¹

Kataeva's opponents beg to disagree. Natal'ia Ivanova, a deputy editor of the periodical *Znamia* and one of the leading biographers of Boris Pasternak, recently complained about the overall degradation of consumers' tastes. Ivanova was appalled that her contemporaries found satisfaction in such "simulacra" as Kataeva's *Anti-Akhmatova* and Valerii Todorovskii's feature film, *Totalitarian Rock* (Stiliagi, 2008). Instead, according to Ivanova, they should have read the "exceptionally well-researched" *Akhmatova in the 1960s* and watched Aleksei Gherman Jr.'s *Paper Soldier* (Bumazhnyi soldat, 2008), the latter complete with suffering and naturalistic details in contrast to its "light-weight simulacrum."²² Ivanova's passionate call for the preservation of high academic standards, "good" sense, and "good" taste points to one crucial

blames Luk'ianova and Bykov for propagating low academic standards, which she detects in their uncritical treatment of sources, in their tendency toward sweeping generalizations, and, ultimately, in seeking cheap success with their readers. See also Bykov's letter to the editors, "Iurii Miloslavskii—tozhe moe sochinenie," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 92 (2008): 433–41; and Ivanova's response, "Prezhde chem trebovat' satisfaktsii," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 93 (2008): 436–42.

¹⁸ See the discussions on the blog "T. Kataeva *Anti-Akhmatova*—Super," initiated and maintained by Moskva trgovyi dom knigi (www.moscowbooks.ru/forum/topic.asp?id=1163&offset=20). In their attempts to account for the book's scandalous popularity, many respondents accused Kataeva of writing the initial message to attract attention to her own book and/or employing professionals to promote her book on that blog using various guises.

¹⁹ V. A. Chernykh, a review of Viacheslav Nedoshivin's *Progulki po Serebrianomu veku*, in *Anna Akhmatova: Epokha, sud'ba, tvorchestvo. Krymskii Akhmatovskii nauchnyi sbornik*, 4 (Simferopol': Krymskii arkhiv, 2006), 222.

²⁰ Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 9.

²¹ A. Baburov, "Anti-Akhmatova kak zavershenie russkogo postmodernizma" (community. livejournal.com/chto_chitat/2007/08/20).

²² Natal'ia Ivanova, "Podmena" (OpenSpace.ru, 30 January 2009). See also her "Mifotvorchestvo i mifoborchestvo," *Znamia*, no. 11 (2007): 180–85.

property of any biography: that is, its relatedness to the times of its conception.²³ This is something that even sophisticated literary critics tend to forget. What Zholkovsky and later Kataeva chose to highlight in their accounts of Akhmatova's life speaks volumes not so much about what Akhmatova was like in "real" life as about the ethos of the 1990s and 2000s, respectively, as well as about their intended readerships and their expectations.²⁴ In Anais Nin's words, "We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are."

Zholkovsky's unquestionable talent, brilliance, and erudition notwithstanding, his approach is not all that different from Kataeva's. They both trap Akhmatova in a contemptible network not so much of Akhmatova's own power games as of their own post-Soviet re-creations of Stalinist and post-Stalinist Russia, in which Akhmatova's rather inconsequential indiscretions are equated with Stalin's heinous crimes against humanity. To suggest today (as Zholkovsky and Kataeva do) that the recognition that Akhmatova achieved during her lifetime is comparable to the personality cult of Stalin or to her own posthumous fame is highly irresponsible.²⁵ Likewise, to say

²³ For example, until recently, Russian writers of memoirs about great people were expected to emphasize their subjects' ability to inspire awe and even fear. Thus some recollections of meetings with Ivan Turgenev in the early 1880s—when his younger interlocutors felt invariably awkward and froze in fear in his presence—are not all that different from similar accounts of how various people felt in the presence of Akhmatova in the 1960s. See A. G. Ostrovskii, *Turgenev v zapiskakh sovremennikov: Vospominaniia, pis'ma, dnevniki* [1929] (Moscow: Agraf, 1999), 309–15.

²⁴ Cf. Mikhail Gasparov's comments on the relationship between the real-life Aleksandr Pushkin and the Pushkin institution: "Sections devoted to the writer's *Nachleben* [legacy], 'Pushkin through the Ages,' are a traditional component of the history of literature, but they are usually provided as appendages [*doveski*] of chapters about Pushkin, whereas they should be appendages of chapters about the ages. What was thought about Pushkin at the times of Pisarev, Gershenzon, and Stalin, and what you and I think about Pushkin now tells [us] little about Pushkin but a great deal about these different periods of time. And that is where those different perceptions belong. Consequently, our [present-day] perception of Pushkin will be coterminous not with Pushkin but with Pisarev and will not lay claim to being the absolute truth. And so the Pushkin described in the section dealing with the period 1799–1837, that Pushkin that is as remote from us as Aeschylus, will be less pawed over [*zhalapan*] by our ego-centric dialogues with him" ("Kak pisat' istoriiu literatury," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 59 [2003]: 145); and "Everybody fancied the woman whom Pushkin loved most on the basis of his/her own disposition.... Psychoanalyzing Pushkin is a questionable undertaking, but psychoanalyzing the students of Pushkin is quite realistic" (*Zapisi i vyypiski* [Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2000], 258).

²⁵ To quote Elif Batuman on a different but related subject: "The figurative 'fascism' of the free market is nothing like the Fascism of the Nazis.... It's both wrong and dangerous to believe that a hospital is just like a concentration camp—or that the offices we work in are just like Zolaesque coal mines—or that the windmill, because it is big and has arms and because it destroys a previous model of agronomic livelihood, is just like a man-eating giant. To put it differently, the windmill is just like a giant—until you charge at it with a lance and it nearly

that Akhmatova, as manipulative as she might have been, could be held accountable for the embellished image of herself that became prevalent in the period from the early 1960s to the early 1990s, is to bend the truth. This was a time when a mere mention of Akhmatova's name generated interest, provided a pass to literary and near-literary circles, gave jobs, and often advanced people in their academic careers. This saintly Akhmatova (whom some critics nowadays find so hard to bear) was brought to life not at her own whim but in response to the cultural and political agendas of many disgruntled Russian intellectuals and students of Akhmatova who—to suit their own needs—eagerly contributed to the creation of a vast mythology about Akhmatova's superhuman resilience and untarnished personality. Even if we accept that, like Lidiia Chukovskaia, they chronicled Akhmatova's deeds out of sheer love for her and with an eye to cultural preservation in general, their records are no different from any other documents and are open to biased readings and interpretations, my own included.²⁶

As recent debates surrounding the release of Andrei Tarkovskii's long-awaited journal, *Martirologue*, and of Liudmila Saraskina's mammoth biography of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn²⁷ have demonstrated, readers of such accounts peruse them for specific information even if they also take the trouble to read them from cover to cover. They may search for proofs of Tarkovskii's wisdom and overly exacting attitude toward himself²⁸ or, conversely, signs of his crankiness and obnoxiousness.²⁹ Marc Chagall, who, unlike Tarkovskii, lived to be 97 and in his last decades enjoyed the status of the "most public" and the "best loved" living artist, nevertheless did not escape critics' scrutiny.

dislocates your shoulder" ("On Complaining," a review of Elisabeth Roudinesco's *Philosophy in Turbulent Times: Canguilhem, Sartre, Foucault, Althusser, Deleuze, Derrida*, *London Review of Books*, 20 November 2008).

²⁶ Even writers' own diaries and notes should be treated with great caution. As Leonard Woolf explains in his introduction to an incomplete version of Virginia Woolf's diaries: "At the best and even unexpurgated, diaries give a distorted or one-sided portrait of the writer, because, as Virginia Woolf herself remarks somewhere in these diaries, one gets into the habit of recording one particular kind of mood—irritation or misery, say—and not writing one's diary when one is feeling the opposite. The portrait is therefore from the start unbalanced, and if someone then deliberately removes another characteristic, it may well become a mere caricature" (Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, ed. Leonard Woolf [San Diego: Harvest, 1982], vii–viii).

²⁷ Cf. two critical responses to Saraskina's approach to writing Solzhenitsyn's biography; one comes from a literary critic, the other from a Russian historian: Alla Latynina, "Prizvanie i sud'ba," *Novyi mir*, no. 6 (2008): 168–76; and Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Like a Thunderbolt," a review of Liudmila Saraskina's *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn*, *London Review of Books*, 11 September 2008: 13–15.

²⁸ See Alla Latynina, "Dostich' absoliuta," *Novyi mir*, no. 8 (2008): 157–64.

²⁹ Valerii Kichin, "Isповed' i propoved': O besposhchadnosti dnevnikov Andreia Tarkovskogo," *Martirologue*, *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, 8 April 2008.

Their opinions have ranged from seeing Chagall as one of “the very great artists of our time,” to an “overproductive, repetitive, and shallow” personality, to “a self-consciously calculating opportunist,” to a “canny manager of his own fairyland,” to “a painter who carefully cultivated his image as a ‘lovable, fantastical Jewish genius from Vitebsk.’”³⁰ Where, then, can one find the “real” Chagall, Tarkovskii, or Akhmatova?

Biography as a Source of Information

In the concluding section of her *Silent Woman*, Janet Malcolm describes her visit to an artist, Trevor Thomas, who happened to be Sylvia Plath’s neighbor in the months leading up to her suicide. Thomas’s house strikes Malcolm as “a depository of bizarre clutter and disorder... Along the walls and on the floor and on every surface hundreds, perhaps thousands, of objects were piled, as if the place were a secondhand shop into which the contents of ten other secondhand shops had been hurriedly crammed.” When the visit is over, Malcolm starts seeing Thomas’s house

as the metaphor for the problem of writing. Each person who sits down to write faces not a blank page but his own vastly overfilled mind... The goal is to make space where a few ideas and images and feelings may be so arranged that a reader will want to linger awhile among them, rather than to flee, as I had wanted to flee from Thomas’s house. But this task of house cleaning (of narrating) is not merely arduous; it is dangerous. There is the danger of throwing the wrong things out and keeping the wrong things in; there is the danger of throwing too much out and being left with too bare a house; there is the danger of throwing everything out... The fear that I felt in Thomas’s house is a cousin of the fear felt by the writer who cannot risk beginning to write.³¹

Situated structurally two pages prior to *The Silent Woman*’s end and chronologically just before Malcolm embarked on writing her book, this candid passage both asserts her authority as an ingenious storyteller and plants seeds of mistrust that every reader of biography knows only too well: is it just a story, or was it like that in real life?

In 1996, Zholkovsky wrote an extended review of Roberta Reeder’s biography *Anna Akhmatova: Poet and Prophet* (1994). In his eyes, Reeder’s “most complete to date biography” has a number of flaws.

³⁰ See a summary of different opinions of Chagall and his work in J. Hoberman, “Bohemian in Vitebsk,” a review of Jackie Wullschlager’s *Chagall: Love and Exile*, *London Review of Books*, 9 April 2009: 17–20.

³¹ Malcolm, *The Silent Woman*, 202–5.

Reeder's approach to biography writing is disarmingly simple. "Image creation" is not part of her active vocabulary. Nor are "constructed self," "poet's personal myth," "discourse strategies," "charismatic power," and the like.... Roberta Reeder's love of Akhmatova turns her into the latter's pawn, a disciple dutifully taking down a holy writ posthumously dictated—authorized as it were, by the Akhmatova estate.... The image of Akhmatova the book conveys is a winning amalgam, preprogrammed by the poet herself, of three stereotypes: aristocrat, prophet, and heroic opponent of the regime. To begin with, Akhmatova was "not an aristocrat by birth." ... But if there exists such a thing as a self-made aristocrat, Akhmatova was one.... Nor was she a prophet, in the real sense.... Akhmatova was not a prophet for two simple reasons: her obsession with herself (only natural in a poet) and her fixation on the past, not the future.... Accordingly, the only thing she expected from the future was her eventual recognition—which she did live to enjoy.... Finally, as a victim/foe of Soviet officialdom, Akhmatova was different from her great contemporaries: Mandelstam, Tsvetaeva, Pasternak, or even Maiakovskii. A victim by proxy through repressions against N. S. and L. N. Gumilev and N. Punin and in person through decades of silencing and vilification, she was very circumspect in voicing her dissent and navigating her way back to official acceptance in later years.... Unlike the other four, [Akhmatova] did not emigrate, practice literary disobedience, or commit suicide. She was much too wise and detached in her role-playing for that.

After Zholkovsky's "finally," the expression of his resentments of Reeder's misrepresentations of the "real" Akhmatova takes another three to four pages, complete with long quotations from available memoirs, all of which is meant to attest to Akhmatova's insensitive, authoritarian, manipulative (and even cruel) personality. Reeder, according to Zholkovsky, is strangely silent about this or that revealing episode in Akhmatova's life. Had she made an effort to fill in all those gaps, we would see Akhmatova as "a struggling human, all too human."³² I disagree. It is one thing to produce a repository of Akhmatova's various indiscretions, but it is quite a different thing to put them into a cohesive biographical narrative that would embrace and make sense of Akhmatova's long and turbulent life and creativity. The latter task is different from an act of ascribing meaning to one's own collections of carefully chosen quotations. This is the hallmark of Zholkovsky's articles of this kind.³³ It is interesting that, so

³² Zholkovsky, "Anna Akhmatova: Scripts, Not Scriptures."

³³ In the words of Aleksandr Etkind, "Zholkovsky gives us a more colorful description of a thirst for power than when we read historians of Stalinism. This is quite understandable: unlike those who surrounded Akhmatova, Stalin's inner circle was neither able nor inclined to keep a written record of his signature words, gestures, and mannerisms. At the same time,

far, he has failed to apply his findings about Akhmatova's Stalinist personality to his own analyses of her poetry. This should not come as a surprise. As the Blok scholar Dmitrii Maksimov observed after citing his own examples of Akhmatova's human deficiencies: "Undoubtedly, in her own poetry she was definitely more fair, uplifting, and finite than in her spontaneous oral speech. It was in her poetry that she was able to soar over the mundane and to express what was really important."³⁴

It is hard to imagine any artist of considerable talent who has not hidden a few skeletons in his/her closet. And if his/her admirers fall prey to the artist's self-presentation strategies, self-pity, and mythmaking, they are bound to be disillusioned later or even sooner, as was the case with John Cheever (1912–82), who during his lifetime was hailed by journalists as "a celebrant of sunlight," and as a "Prospero of suburbia." "Almost immediately after [Cheever's] passing, [this image of him] began to fall apart. With the publication of his letters, his daughter's memoirs, and, most astonishingly, selections from vast, unforeseeably dark journals he kept all of his adult life, readers learned the extent to which his interior life was contorted by alcohol and depression and the guilty struggle to repress his homosexual longings."³⁵ Similarly, many friends and admirers of Aleksandr Blok (1880–1921) were shocked by the nightmarish quality of his personal life that was revealed to them after the publication of Blok's diaries and correspondence in the late 1920s. It was her reading of Blok's diaries that made Akhmatova belatedly change her view of Blok from seeing him as a "sweet and nice" human being to a repulsive person "with a communal apartment mentality."³⁶

On 5 November 1925, Akhmatova launched into an unusually long monologue about two different types of biography writing. "I nearly lost my voice [because] I talked uninterruptedly for such a long period of time," she concluded with a chuckle. Akhmatova's passionate interest in biography was no accident. By then, for nearly a year, she had been working with Pavel Luknitskii, a younger poet and literary scholar, on the biography of Nikolai Gumilev (1886–1921), the famous poet, whom Akhmatova had known

we tend to learn less about how all those details correlate with Akhmatova's poetry itself. The reconstruction of [Akhmatova's] biography has acquired a life of its own, but it hasn't led to recontextualizing Akhmatova's creative process" ("Novyi istorizm, russkaia versiia," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 47 (2001): 15.

³⁴ Dmitrii Maksimov, "Ob Anne Akhmatovoi, kakoi pomniu," in *Vospominaniia ob Anne Akhmatovoi* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1991), 124.

³⁵ Jonathan Dee, "Suburban Ghetto: John Cheever, Misread and Misunderstood," a review of Blake Bailey's *Cheever: A Life*, *Harper's Magazine*, April 2009: 71–72.

³⁶ Rylkova, *Archeology of Anxiety*, 93–96.

since her girlhood and to whom she was married from 1910 to 1918.³⁷ Some biographers, according to Akhmatova, tend to idealize their subjects, as was the case with Valentin Krivich's biography of his father, a renowned poet, Innokentii Annenskii (1856–1909). Although Krivich was 29 at the time of his father's death, he nevertheless "knew little about his father" and did not know how to interpret various sources that were available to him 16 years after his father's death. As a result, Krivich's Annenskii is presented not as a remarkable man of letters but as a "schoolteacher, school principal, [and] bureaucrat." Krivich "idealizes his father and distorts his image" at the same time. Krivich's biography is "replete with welcoming and farewell letters" that Annenskii received at the times of his new appointments and other trivial details that throw little light on his private life and poetic accomplishments. "You," Akhmatova told Luknitskii,

chose a different route. You decided to collect everything.... Even all that dirt that sticks to everyone's name.... This is a flawless approach but [it] requires a responsible attitude on the part of the biographer.... You should never forget: This biography that you've been working on might become the gravest indictment.... You need to understand every little detail, [and] sort out every little speck of dirt ... and only having done so can you start creating the *real* image [*podlinnyi oblik*] of Nikolai Stepanovich [Gumilev]....

[Just] imagine someone saying this about Annenskii in three years time: "Well, this is all very well, but [Annenskii] was a gambler." ... And who is going to defend Annenskii from this accusation?... A remark like this that someone uttered out of spite, might ruin [his] whole biography.... But if an accusation like that is [ever] thrown at you with regard to Nikolai Stepanovich, you will be able to reply: "A gambler?... Playing cards?... Yes, he did gamble, but this gambling occupied [only] *such and such* a place in his life. [And Gumilev] assigned to it *such and such* a meaning." And you will have [ample] proof [to support your statements]. And you will be able to refute any unwarranted accusations.³⁸

Do biographers—as Akhmatova insisted—need to familiarize their readers with *every* detail of writers' lives? The answer seems to be—obviously—yes, they do. But only in theory. In practice, it is hardly ever feasible to combine a "truthful" account of an artist's life—with all its idiosyncracies, trepidations,

³⁷ For more information on this collaborative project, see Pavel Luknitskii, *Vstrechi s Annoi Akhmatovoi*, 1, 2 (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1991, 1997); and Rylkova, *Archeology of Anxiety*, 100–5.

³⁸ All the quotations in this paragraph are from Luknitskii, *Vstrechi s Annoi Akhmatovoi*, 1: 231–33. Akhmatova's emphasis.

anxieties, indecisions, indiscretions, contingencies, and various imponderables that, however gripping, do not necessarily illuminate such an evasive process as creativity—with a rigorous analysis of that person's artistic legacy. Each biographer has no choice but to favor life over creativity,³⁹ or creativity over life.⁴⁰ One can hardly do justice to both, however long and detailed an account is going to be, to say nothing of the fact that, to succeed, every biographer has to prove her subject's continued vitality and relevance for us today, an ambition that is not always in agreement with an all-inclusive mode of representation, such as that advocated by Akhmatova and by Zholkovskiy.⁴¹

Akhmatova through a Glass Darkly

Although Akhmatova's relatives and contemporaries are mostly dead and the possibility of finding any significantly new information about her is rather slim, over the last few years she has merited several new biographies, scholarly articles, feature films, and documentaries, all of which lay claim to illuminate

³⁹ A good example of this type is Donald Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov: A Life* (London: Flamingo), 1998). Cf. comments by James Wood: "Stupendously, Chekhov's fullest biographer has little time for Chekhov's writing. It appears to obstruct the siege of biographical 'fact.' Donald Rayfield tells us in his preface that Chekhov's works are discussed 'inasmuch as they emerge from his life and as they affect it, but less as material for critical analysis. Biography is not criticism.' Of course, this separation of life and work, as a butcher might separate knives for raw meat and for cooked, is primitive. Biography is criticism, especially in the case of Chekhov, who so often evaded life to strengthen his work. Undoubtedly, Rayfield offers a newly full idea of Chekhov's life—he is more brutal, more cruel, more ordinary, more lonely. But his book is only greyly rich: a massive diary of travel and letters and meetings. About the writer, he tells us almost nothing, and in several places disarms facts of their literary context. On the whole, it would be better if he never mentioned Chekhov's work, because his brief comments seem merely mandatory. 'Gusev,' he tells us, 'is an awesome portrayal of nature's indifference to death.... Chekhov's post-Sakhalin phase had begun.' 'Ward 6' is 'a bleak allegory of the human condition. There is no love interest.' Of 'The Student' (Chekhov's own favorite), he comments: 'This is "late Chekhov," where ... all is evoked, not stated.' And so on" ("What Chekhov Meant by Life," in Wood's *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief* [New York: Modern Library, 2000], 87).

⁴⁰ A good example of this type is Lev Losev, *Iosif Brodskii: Opyt literaturnoi biografii* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 2006), part of the *Zhizn' zamechatel'nykh liudei* series. Dmitrii Bykov's bold attempt to unite life and creativity in his thought-provoking biography of Pasternak in the same series sometimes results in puzzling exaggerations. Often enough, Bykov's Pasternak looks, thinks, and sounds like one of Bykov's contemporaries and less like a man of the first half of the 20th century (see his *Boris Pasternak* [Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 2006]).

⁴¹ See Anna Muza's discussion of Kornei Chukovskii's strenuous attempts to adjust the biography of a famous poet, Nikolai Nekrasov, to the needs of contemporary life. In fact, in the course of his lengthy literary career, Chukovskii authored different versions of Nekrasov's life, with each version attempting to accommodate and sometimes even account for the ever-changing cultural and political developments ("Kornei Chukovskii, and 'Men and Books of the 1860s' in the 1920s," in *Out of the Shadows: Neglected Works in Soviet Prose: Selected Essays*, ed. Nicholas Luker [Nottingham, UK: Astra, 2003]).

new aspects of Akhmatova's personal life and creativity. While every biographer, in Meryle Secrest's words, sees her task as "not just record[ing] but reveal[ing]" her subject's inner motives and hidden agendas,⁴² the zeal with which Akhmatova's biographers rush to deconstruct and discredit her (or, conversely, to absolve and protect her) as one of Russia's moral beacons is truly astounding.

Apart from Roman Timenchik's overwhelmingly and excitingly rich *Anna Akhmatova in the 1960s*, these new biographies present little new factual information about Akhmatova. What distinguishes one biography from another is the number of "warts" that biographers want us to see on Akhmatova's canonical face (such as her manipulativeness, her anxiety about her international reputation, her allegedly doomed lesbian relationships, her "heavy" drinking in Tashkent during the war, etc., etc.). British and American biographers have been employing the "warts-and-all" approach since the 19th century. In Russia, however, it is still a novelty. And who could be a better target than Akhmatova? On the one hand, Akhmatova's life is relatively well documented. Every biography draws heavily on various collections of memoirs (including Chukovskaia's *The Akhmatova Journals*), Akhmatova's personal records, and her numerous attempts at writing her own biography as witnessed by her famous *Notes* (*Zapisnye knizhki*). On the other hand, the record of Akhmatova's life, however complete, is all in fragments, notes, and some odd bits and pieces, which invite (almost beg for) thoughtful (and thoughtless) rearrangement and reinterpretation, a challenge that Akhmatova's new biographers have willingly embraced.

"On July 17 [1945], [Sofia] Ostrovskaia and Akhmatova spent a whole day together, drinking vodka and eating crab salad for lunch," Elaine Feinstein informs her readers. "In this relatively comfortable period of Akhmatova's life," Feinstein continues,

the usual financial pressures had been alleviated, since Akhmatova was now receiving a pension of 500 roubles a month, nearly double a professor's salary.... Describing Akhmatova's lesbian behavior, Ostrovskaia presents herself as ignoring it yet is unusually explicit at several points in [her] diary about Akhmatova's sexual advances. For instance, on 22 September 1946 [Akhmatova] kept Ostrovskaia with her until 4 a.m.: "... a drunken, lonely woman. Once again there is her dual sexuality. I pretend I am shortsighted in everything.... It is distasteful to me, odd and strange. She bares her breast, sighs, kisses me on the lips with her

⁴² Meryle Secrest, *Shoot the Widow* (New York: Knopf, 2007).

sharp stinging lips—the way she once used to kiss her lovers no doubt. I hasten to depart.” (216)

A “naïve” reader of this passage might not guess that these two meetings that Feinstein describes in one uninterrupted flow, in fact, were one year apart or might forget that the second meeting (with kisses, etc.) took place shortly after the infamous Party Resolution of 14 August 1946, which had a direct effect on Akhmatova’s life for several years to come. From Ostrovskaia’s full diary entry of 22 September 1946 we learn that Ostrovskaia and Akhmatova were drinking vodka all day in the company of the poet Ol’ga Berggol’ts and her husband, all three doing everything in their power to cheer Akhmatova up.⁴³ Not to mention that 500 roubles in 1945 was not a lot of money, which explains why Akhmatova, according to Ostrovskaia, was always “badly dressed.”⁴⁴ At the Leningrad Department Store, “they sell ... ladies’ stockings [for] 90–400 roubles, and there is always a queue for the stockings.”⁴⁵ All that interests Feinstein in these episodes is how honest Ostrovskaia was in her recollections. Did she reciprocate Akhmatova’s feelings? Or was this just another instance of misunderstanding, so typical of Akhmatova’s unfortunate love life?

The problem with memoirs of any kind lies in their very selective and conveniently irresponsible nature. Whether consciously or subconsciously, any memoirist decides what to preserve for posterity and what to keep out of his/her narrative. Sofia Ostrovskaia’s memoirs—which are especially popular with scholars seeking an illustration of Akhmatova’s indiscretions—are a good example of narratorial evasiveness and reticence that are intrinsic to the genre. As is clear from her own journal, Ostrovskaia was very much aware of all the advantages and pitfalls of her assumed role vis-à-vis Akhmatova. Ostrovskaia (1902–83) introduced herself to Akhmatova at a public reading of poetry in September 1944. Three months later she recorded in her diary:

I do not know what [Akhmatova’s] attitude to me is, what she thinks of me, why she invites me to her place and comes to mine. I know nothing. I feel a troubled love for this woman, unease, expectancy, bitterness, uncertainty, thankfulness, a youthful and radiant feeling of success...., and at the same time there is in me the precise, painstaking observation of the memoirist, the playing with words, with incomprehension, the

⁴³ Sophie Kazimirovna Ostrovskaia, *Memoirs of Anna Akhmatova’s Years 1944–1950*, trans. Jessie Davies (Liverpool: Lincoln Davies, 1988), 48–49.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

challenge of writing memoirs. I think Akhmatova senses this, though not fully, and feels both my first and my second emotions.⁴⁶

In the next sentence Ostrovskaia says that she wrote Akhmatova “a fairly long, agitated and at the same time carefully worded letter.” However, apart from one sentence from that letter—“La plus royale entre les femmes”—the rest of the letter is not revealed.⁴⁷

It is not clear from Ostrovskaia’s journals what made her change her feelings toward Akhmatova from elation at their frequent meetings (September 1945) to resentment at her being “saucy and egotistical” ten months later. Her notes from January to July 1946 are few and sketchy until we get to longer entries from July–September 1946.

[Akhmatova] is saucy, egotistical, plays at being the good queen, is profligate, has ceased to live her own life, for she lives only biographically with an eye on the gesture and the word “for the future.” Strange fame. I often think of the strangeness of this fame in our days.... Beside her is the pathological pornography of climacteric [Faina] Ranevskaia with whom (after vodka) I loiter around town after the rain, and beside her is the ‘strange’ communist Olga Berggolts, clever, lively, attractive, in love with her matador husband.... Beside her are the official lesbians [including] Troitskaia, Ben ‘iash, and Slepian, [the latter] with a luxury flat and dubious earnings. And bowing and scraping critics and readers. And frankincense and myrrh and adoration—and everything floats in a kind of small cloud that has the whiff of a splendid burial vault.⁴⁸

Did Ostrovskaia with time become less gullible and start to see through Akhmatova’s little tricks? Did she simply fall out of love with Akhmatova? Was she jealous of Akhmatova’s other companions? Or was she jealous of Akhmatova’s fame (Ostrovskaia, as her journals indicate, suffered from being a virtually unknown writer all her life)? We will never know. Ostrovskaia herself has this to say about the nature of such abrupt changes in her tastes and moods: “Today I looked through and re-read the Pre-Raphaelites and wondered how I could ever have liked them 20–25 years ago! Why did a really bad drawing by Gabriel Rossetti excite me? Why did I see something special in Holman Hunt and Burne-Jones?—Ruskinism. I put the books on one side to be sold without regret.”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 47–48.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 50.

If Feinstein openly questions Ostrovskaiia's truthfulness, she is much more credulous with regard to her other sources of information. As it turns out, in her interpretation of this or that episode, Feinstein often relies on the opinions of Akhmatova's "adopted" granddaughter, Anna Kaminskaia, and Evgenii Rein (b. 1935), Anatolii Naiman (b. 1936), and Dmitrii Bobyshev (b. 1936). The latter three were young Leningrad poets who befriended Akhmatova in the late 1950s–early 1960s and subsequently became known as the "Akhmatova orphans." As her acknowledgments indicate, in 2003 Feinstein interviewed Kaminskaia, Naiman, and Rein and exchanged e-mails with Bobyshev. Although Kaminskaia was born in 1939, Feinstein cites her "new insight into the reasons behind the arrest" of Nikolai Punin and Lev Gumilev in 1935. When one checks the footnotes, one realizes that Kaminskaia's insight was based on her reading some unidentified files from the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) archives, which however were not available for Feinstein's perusal (149, 297).

Although Rein and Naiman came to know Akhmatova when she was already 70 years old, Feinstein often seeks their opinion about the lesser-understood events of bygone years, as in the case of Akhmatova's "close friendship" with the famous actress Faina Ranevskaiia during World War II. Were they lovers? What made Akhmatova suddenly break off her relationship with her most loyal companion, Lidia Chukovskaia? Feinstein writes:

Ranevskaiia was an open lesbian and it has been suggested that her close friendship with Akhmatova in Tashkent had an erotic element. There are reports that Ranevskaiia liked to tickle her feet, which Akhmatova enjoyed very much. Yevgenii Rein agreed that the quarrel with Chukovskaia had been about Ranevskaiia and conjectures: "probably there was a lesbian element in that friendship. Chukovskaia was a bit puritanical." Anatolii Naiman thought the lesbian element was unlikely, and I have to say what comes through Ranevskaiia's memories of this period is a deep love untouched by the least sensuality. She loved Akhmatova's spirit. (200)

Here we go again—Ranevskaiia's memories! Not to mention the well-known fact of Ranevskaiia refusing to write any extended recollections of Akhmatova.

The readers of *Anna of All the Russias* can treat themselves to a rare photograph of Blok and Gumilev together—taken, as the inscription says, in 1924—although both men had died in August 1921. The picture of Akhmatova as a girl is identified as a picture of her mother and vice versa. The picture of Nikolai Punin is identified as that of Boris Anrep, Anrep is identified as Punin, Vladimir Shileiko is identified as Artur Lur'e, and so on, and so forth. The inserts also include photographs of Kaminskaia, Naiman, and Rein, all

taken by the author in 2003. In general, Feinstein has produced what may be described as a “well-meaning” and reasonably detailed biography, with Akhmatova’s poetry quoted only sporadically to serve as illustrations of this or that episode. The verses’ function is decorative—they serve as icing on the soggy cake of Akhmatova’s life. In 2006, *Anna of All the Russias* was translated into Russian and was well received as “one of the very few impartial and objective” biographies of Akhmatova.⁵⁰ At a Moscow bookstore *Anna of All the Russias* (*Anna Akhmatova*, in Russian) usually can be found next to Kataeva’s *Anti-Akhmatova*. The latter deserves a discussion of its own.

Biography as Pathography

In his interview with Dmitrii Bykov, Zholkovsky says that he “doesn’t want to be enslaved [by the Akhmatova institution].” In an interview with the “Ekho Moskvy” radio station, Kataeva quips, “I also don’t like to be enslaved.” “My book,” she says,

is for those who don’t particularly like Akhmatova as a poet and are not really interested in her, but they should, nevertheless, know that Akhmatova’s cult is not worthy of being sustained. She is not an idol worthy of being “our everything,” nor is she worthy of being the Anna of all the Russias. Nor is she worthy of being our moral beacon, nor is she worthy of being everything that has been associated with Akhmatova’s name. That’s what prompted me to express my opinion.⁵¹

Unlike Zholkovsky, Kataeva is not a literary critic: she is a speech pathologist (*defektolog*) or simply an infuriated female reader, as she herself and her fans define her position vis-à-vis Akhmatova. As a result, *Anti-Akhmatova* is a peculiar crossbreed of the New Historicism—which has been prevalent in Russian cultural studies since the late 1990s⁵²—and pathography (“biography

⁵⁰ See, for example, the advertisement posted by “ozon.ru” (www.ozon.ru/context/detail/id/2894210).

⁵¹ *Kul'turnyi shok*, 11 August 2007. The full transcript can be found at www.echo.msk.ru/guests/14494.

⁵² Cf. Paul A. Cantor’s remarks: “The real thrust of the New Historicism . . . is an attempt to rewrite history in order to champion the marginal, the outcast, the long suppressed figures. . . . At the same time it tries to show how major cultural figures we have long admired were actually implicated in historical forms of oppression, usually along lines of race, class, and gender. As a form of cultural history, the New Historicism is always countercultural. It tries to overturn conventional hierarchies and above all to undermine traditional polarities, constantly working, for example, to efface the distinction between elite and popular culture. . . . The New Historicism represents the egalitarianism of the contemporary world set loose to rewrite the cultural history of the past” (“Stephen Greenblatt’s New Historicist Vision,” *Academic Questions* 6, 4 (1993): 25. See also Etkind, “Novyi istorizm, russkaia versiiia,” 7–40.

as pathography” in Joyce Carol Oates’s apt definition from 1988).⁵³ Kataeva has no eye for delicate hues or subtle details. Her two colors of choice are black (for everything related to Akhmatova) and white (for everything that is not Akhmatova). The proverbial whore of Babylon pales in comparison with Kataeva’s Akhmatova. “The concepts of moral cleanliness, political squeamishness, etc., were totally alien to Anna Andreevna Akhmatova,” Kataeva writes in the opening paragraph of her section on Akhmatova’s “civic courage” (59). Kataeva’s favorite mode of operation is to fabricate piles of unsubstantiated accusations, such as the charge that Akhmatova was indifferent to the suffering of her fellow Leningraders during World War II. To Kataeva this is clearly not enough, so she combines her ridiculous claim with making Akhmatova solely responsible for the death of Marina Tsvetaeva’s son, Georgii Efron: “The basest failing of Anna Akhmatova was her crass insensitivity: war, drunkenness, fornication, intrigues, fame, the death of her nearest and dearest, the death of Tsvetaeva’s son—she wouldn’t help out of jealousy—and the millions of deaths in Leningrad—she was inured to it all” (529).

Akhmatova’s menopause is the subject of a separate chapter “Trying to Act Shamefully or Going Post-Menopausal” (“Popytka srama, ili postmenopauza”). There, Kataeva relies on research of medical experts and produces an impressive list of symptoms that accompany menopause, such as frequent heart palpitations, dizziness, insomnia, fears and anxieties, excessive weight, and incontinence. According to Kataeva, all of Akhmatova’s health problems in the late 1930s and early 1940s were nothing but signs of approaching menopause and should have been treated accordingly: that is, ignored with dignity (259–60). “Menopause is not treatable,” Kataeva explains, “but the peak of the critical transition is followed by a return to normalcy, and there arrives a second youth” (261). “Climacteric changes,” Kataeva continues with confidence,

are a woman’s mellowing period, leading to a state of a “seductively ripe cherry” again. And this transitional period—menopause—doesn’t irrevocably turn women into vicious bitches. In the case of Akhmatova, she just lacked breeding and self-respect to deal with her menopause in a dignified manner, and yet the stabilization of her hormonal system proved very beneficial for her: during the war she became much prettier, put on some weight, and acquired a gravitas that was befitting her age but that, truth to tell, later mutated into indecent hubris.

⁵³ Joyce Carol Oates, “Jean Stafford: Biography as Pathography,” in *Where I’ve Been, and Where I Am Going* (New York: Penguin, 1999).

To support her allegations, Kataeva quotes Nadezhda Mandel'shtam's letter to Boris Kuzin: "[Akhmatova] is blooming, becoming beautiful and quite shamelessly younger." "Note the style," Kataeva interjects, "Nadezhda Iakovlevna has lost her head in hopes of an 'intimate relationship' with Akhmatova" (261).

Although numerous "ordinary" educated readers were appalled by Kataeva's cavalier treatment of one of Russia's most revered cultural icons, Kataeva received considerable support both from totally "naïve" readers (who claimed that they had not even known Akhmatova's name prior to reading Kataeva's book)⁵⁴ and from professionals, like Viktor Toporov, who contributed to her visibility by writing reviews, taking part in round-table discussions, and so on. One critic writing under the pseudonym of "A. Baburov" (and "babur") took time to explain to ordinary readers the difference between Zholkovskiy's and Toporov's academic projects and Kataeva's passionate feminist investigation:

Why did neither Zholkovskiy nor Toporov deconstruct Akhmatova's myth completely? Were there particular reasons for this, were they scared of [Akhmatova's] "long arms," were they pressed for time, or was it that they just couldn't be bothered to exhaust the subject? But even had they found the time, overcome their fears, or exhausted the subject, the matter wouldn't have been closed. It would still have been open simply because a complete deconstruction of Akhmatova could have been achieved—and this becomes clear only after you have read the whole of the book—only by a woman as passionate in her anti-Akhmatova stance as Akhmatova herself was in the Akhmatova-promoting campaign that was her lifelong project. "There's no protection against a crowbar in a fight except for another crowbar." "Like cures like." These conventional truths are very relevant to what has happened.⁵⁵

In their misplaced enthusiasm, Kataeva's admirers like to compare *Anti-Akhmatova* to Vikentii Veresaev's *Pushkin in Life* (1926–28) and Aleksandr Bakhrakh's *Bunin in a Housecoat* (Bunin v khalate, 1979). Regrettably, what Kataeva has produced is not an "Akhmatova in a Housecoat"—which would have been interesting and even true to life, as Akhmatova hardly ever wore anything else at home—but rather an "Akhmatova: A View from the Toilet

⁵⁴ For both positive and negative views of *Anti-Akhmatova*, see various blogs, such as www.liveinternet.ru/users/1150469/post57695561; and www.moscowbooks.ru/forum/topic.asp?id=1163&offset=0.

⁵⁵ A. Baburov, "Anti-Akhmatova kak zavershenie russkogo postmodernizma" (community.livejournal.com/chto_chitat/2007/08/20).

Bowl.” Metaphorically speaking, each time Akhmatova sits on the toilet she gets scrutinized from beneath by Tamara Kataeva’s malevolent eyes. There’s just one little thing that Kataeva is missing, though: that Akhmatova lived in a communal apartment. And she was not the only tenant who used the communal bathroom. As for the menopause and menstruations, Kataeva has missed the boat by a long shot. All these gaps left by Russian realists have long since been filled by the works of Viktor Erofeev, Vladimir Sorokin, and others. There is a big difference, though: in his wonderful essay on Chekhov, “Between the Bed and the Couch” (1992), Erofeev devotes 6 pages to such matters, whereas Kataeva gives us 600.⁵⁶ It may be conceded that *Anti-Akhmatova* is a provocative book. What is more important, however, is that it is a poorly written book. It does not de-familiarize Akhmatova sufficiently to qualify as a form of unmasking or to induce people to want to read and re-read it, as they do the fourth chapter of Nabokov’s *Gift* (1937) or Iurii Karabchievskii’s *The Resurrection of Maiakovskii* (1983). Kataeva’s discourse does not measure up to the de-familiarizing dumbness of Mikhail Zoshchenko’s characters, nor to the “inquisitiveness” of Lev Losev’s Pushkin scholar with his “minks” and “blinds,”⁵⁷ nor to the scintillating generosity of Gogol’s Khlestakov and Siniavskii’s Terts. In all honesty, the book is cause for neither indignation nor laughter. It is neither fish nor fowl. And it certainly will not stimulate any significant discussion. It will be cause for some talk, which will soon peter out. It is too far-fetched and derivative. This is not a *Walks with Pushkin*. It is as if someone wants to fetch a heavy sledgehammer but cannot lift it off the ground.

Study versus Understanding

In the last chapters of *Anti-Akhmatova*, much of Kataeva’s argument is based on the fact that Lev Tolstoi allegedly declined the Nobel Prize for literature in the 1900s, while Akhmatova was besotted by the idea of getting it in the 1960s. The latter, in Kataeva’s eyes, was a sign of Akhmatova’s weakness and even wickedness. We see Kataeva’s Tolstoi immersed in thoughts about life and death, while Akhmatova is wasting her last days on petty squabbles. However, the idea of what it meant to receive a Nobel Prize in the 1900s was quite different from what we assign to this award nowadays and from what Akhmatova might have thought about this honor back in the 1960s. As Martin Puchner explains in his review of Toril Moi’s book on Henrik

⁵⁶ See Viktor Erofeev, “Mezhdru krovat’iu i divanom (A. P. Chekhov),” *Strashnyi sud: Roman, rasskazy, malen’kie esse* (Moscow: Soiuz fotokhudozhnikov Rossii, 1996).

⁵⁷ On Losev’s Pushkin scholar, see A. K. Zholkovskii, “‘Pushkinskie mesta’ L’va Loseva i ikh okrestnosti,” *Zvezda*, no. 2 (2008): 215–28.

Ibsen: “Alfred Nobel had specified that the prize for literature should go to ‘the most outstanding work of an idealistic tendency,’ and the committee saw itself as the last bastion of idealism against the Modernist onslaught. The first Nobel laureates, now long forgotten, were all chosen for their idealism, and each of them was preferred over an anti-idealist rival: Sully-Prudhomme (1901) over Zola; Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1903) over Ibsen; and, after Ibsen’s death, Paul Heyse over [Thomas] Hardy (1910).”⁵⁸ From this record it is clear that Tolstoi’s chances of receiving the prize before 1910 were rather slim. Whatever Kataeva may think of it, Tolstoi’s preemptive resignation was neither sincere nor meaningful.

Likewise, to ridicule Akhmatova’s attempts to impress her younger interlocutors (most of whom were aspiring poets, such as Joseph Brodsky) with her exaggeratedly perfect personality is to fail to understand the nature of Akhmatova’s relationship with her future “orphans.” In fact, those gatherings bear a close resemblance to private creative-writing workshops, a taste for which Akhmatova would have developed in her own youth when such *kruzhki* were an integral part of any Russian poet’s creative upbringing.⁵⁹ “Personality,” Louis Menand observes, “is a job requirement for the workshop teachers, and it doesn’t matter what sort. Teachers are the books that students read most closely, and this is especially true in the case of teachers who are living models for exactly what the student aspires one day to be—a published writer. Writing teachers may therefore cultivate their own legends.”⁶⁰

This list of Kataeva’s cultural misunderstandings/misconceptions and *faux pas* can be continued. No matter what we might think or say now about Akhmatova and her status in Russian culture, Akhmatova truly belongs to a different epoch. *Anti-Akhmatova* illustrates most clearly the abyss between Kataeva’s perception of things and the subject of her research. The word “research” (or more precisely, “investigation”) features prominently in her magnum opus. Here is just one example:

I have conducted a little investigation and established that good housekeepers are loved more and that men are more willing to marry such women. Moreover, even women who are only concerned with the way they look tend to attract limitless, all-consuming love more often than

⁵⁸ Martin Puchner, “Staging Death,” a review of Toril Moi’s *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy*, *London Review of Books*, 8 February 2007: 21.

⁵⁹ On the importance of the Russian *kruzhok* culture, see Barbara Walker’s *Maximilian Voloshin and the Russian Literary Circle: Culture and Survival in Revolutionary Times* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 1–23, 40–65.

⁶⁰ Louis Menand, “Show or Tell: Should Creative Writing Be Taught?” *New Yorker*, 8–15 June 2009: 82.

slatterns. Gala Dali was an expert on home furnishings and jewelry, and Wallis Simpson—the lady paid for by the British Crown—believed that being always well groomed and running an orderly household were her only and indisputable virtues. One has to admit, though, that nobody fell in love with the slatternly Akhmatova deeply enough for her to make history on account of that love. (385)

One may agree or disagree with such pronouncements. *Anti-Akhmatova* had three print runs in two years and is obviously in demand. What I definitely disagree with is that Kataeva and her supporters are supposedly writing a new page in Russian literary and biography studies. What is happening now to Akhmatova is by no means new in Russian culture. Back in 1925, the literary scholar Boris Tomashevskii described the 1920s as a period of “stagnation” in Pushkin studies:

All Pushkin scholars without exception are enamored of Pushkin’s personality and creativity. For them Pushkin is beyond comparison; his opinions—are indisputable.... The sense of Pushkin’s vitality has worn off and he has become an icon. Pushkin’s contemporaries are all but forgotten: they are all seen either as Pushkin’s “friends” or as some kind of “bizarre mediocrities.” Pushkin has been neutralized [*Pushkin neutralizovan*]. “Pushkin studies” without any impact from the outside are running the risk of becoming a quagmire, unless, of course, they are blown up by younger scholars from the inside.

In an interpretive mode similar to that used by the latter-day critics of Akhmatova, Tomashevskii invited his colleagues to deprive Pushkin of the “absolute” status that he had enjoyed in the last third of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century. “We should give up the idea of a messianic Pushkin, complete with the usual division of the history of Russian literature into its pre-Pushkin Old Testament and its post-Pushkin New Testament periods. It is time to slide Pushkin back into his rightful historical slot and study him as any other rank-and-file cultural figure,” Tomashevskii continued.⁶¹ The same year, another literary scholar, Iurii Tynianov, launched a similar iconoclastic campaign to debunk Pushkin as “our everything” (*nashe vse*). He insisted that, although Pushkin’s greatness was unquestionable, it was by no means unique. “Pushkin,” according to Tynianov, “was one of the many representatives of his epoch.”⁶² In 1999,

⁶¹ Tomashevskii, *Pushkin: Sovremennye problemy istoriko-literaturnogo izucheniia*, 74.

⁶² Tynianov is quoted in Sergei Bocharov, “Iz istorii ponimaniia Pushkina,” *Siuzhety russkoi literatury* (Moscow: Iazyki russkoi kul’tury, 1999), 228. In 1961, Akhmatova, no doubt, was

Sergei Bocharov perceptively observed in his summation of this polemic, “[i]n the 1920s, the best and strongest representatives of the new Pushkin studies declared a war on Pushkin as a cultural icon and advocated a scholarly secularization of the Pushkin phenomenon.”⁶³

Whereas Pushkin’s biographers traditionally have had as much freedom in writing about Pushkin as they could handle, the Akhmatova memory institution, on the other hand, used to work under completely different conditions. For nearly 40 years, its activity was controlled by the very object of this institution’s research: Akhmatova herself. As Mikhail Bakhtin famously observed, no one can see himself in his totality.⁶⁴ The privilege of seeing a person in his or her wholeness belongs to that person’s undertakers.⁶⁵ Since, by these definitions, Akhmatova could not see herself as a whole, she could not but stimulate a partial, one-sided approach to her creativity among her various admirers and critics. This piecemeal approach was, in large part, determined by the general trend in Soviet studies of the Silver Age: to smuggle something forbidden into the public domain, it was necessary to split that forbidden something into an innumerable number of pieces and to stick those pieces into an innumerable number of footnotes and commentaries—like storing something on innumerable shelves for future use. It was believed that the politically risky information stashed away in this way would come in handy some day. This irrepressible need to dissect, separate, and combine in a practically parody-like way is reflected in the current mounting flood of publications in a highly popular series dubbed “Writers without Luster” (*Pisateli bez gliantsa*) aimed at enlightening the popular masses by allegedly portraying the writers in question the way they really were. Thus, by arming oneself with the book *Akhmatova without Luster*, the inquisitive reader will find out that, in her lifetime, Akhmatova did not subsist exclusively on wilted carrots (as in Lidiia Chukovskaiia’s and Anatolii Naiman’s accounts) or indulge in vodka and gourmet foods (as in Feinstein’s and Kataeva’s reconstructions), but that she was also very fond of millet porridge with pumpkin (see the

“writing back” to Tomashevskii and Tynianov when she was working on her “Word about Pushkin” (“Slovo o Pushkine”), in which she famously re-asserted Pushkin’s right to be the best representative of his generation. According to Akhmatova, Pushkin’s friends and acquaintances, however illustrious and magnificent, were no longer interesting in their own right—all of them “gradually came to be called [just] Pushkin’s contemporaries, and were later simply laid to rest in card catalogues and name indices . . . relating to Pushkin’s works” (“Word about Pushkin,” in *My Half-Century: Selected Prose*, trans. Ronald Meyer [Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997], 148).

⁶³ Bocharov, “Iz istorii ponimaniia Pushkina,” 228.

⁶⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Chelovek u zerkala,” *Sobranie sochinenii*, 5 (Moscow: Russkie slovari, 1997).

⁶⁵ See Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

section “Attitude to Food”). The book continues in a similar vein—how many husbands, how many verses, and so on. Everything is carefully categorized, commented on, and added to the Akhmatova personal file—a kind of natural history and anthropology handbook covering topics from “A” to “Z” (such as “Adresa” and “Zdorov’e”) while at the same time failing completely to provide a forceful picture of a living poet.

Understanding versus Study

As Sergei Bocharov reminds us, the renewed interest in understanding Pushkin (as opposed to studying him) was triggered in the 1930s by the works of Russian philosophers. Thus “Semen Frank in the jubilee year of 1937 formulated in a special article the ‘tasks of gaining an understanding of Pushkin,’ which do not coincide with the tasks of Pushkin studies (or studying Pushkin).” Frank defined the need for such a differentiation by the necessity of “pausing to think and look back in order to see the forest, not just the trees.”⁶⁶

So who nowadays is pausing and looking back? I would say—cinematographers.⁶⁷ If the Hollywood biographers for the most part have been “content to produce culturally unchallenging love stories and tales of hard-won fame, often a mirror more to the studio head than the head of the subject” (Hamilton, 227), Russian film biography as a genre is still a novelty, serving as a much-needed crucible for experimentation and a welcome outlet for biographers’ ambitions. Semen Aranovich’s *The Anna Akhmatova File* (Lichnoe delo Anny Akhmatovoi, 1989) is undoubtedly one of the finest documentaries about an artist in a time of troubles. On the surface, Aranovich’s Akhmatova is no different from the other glorifying accounts of her life that appeared at the time of her centennial in 1989. In Tomashevskii’s terms, *The Anna Akhmatova File* seeks to find a frame that in retrospect would show Akhmatova as an epitome of Russian culture and as a major factor in the deconstruction of the Stalinist institutions. Accordingly, Aranovich “demonizes” and personifies Stalinism in the figure of Stalin and in the members of his immediate entourage, while its victims, and at the same time, the forces of resistance, are represented primarily by Akhmatova and some other Russian poets and writers, including Blok, Gumilev, Pasternak, Tsvetaeva, Mandel’shtam, Zoshchenko, and Solzhenitsyn.

Any filmmaker who attempts to present such unimaginables as Stalin’s terror and components of artistic genius faces the dilemma between representation

⁶⁶ Bocharov, “Iz istorii ponimaniia Pushkina,” 229.

⁶⁷ See also a feature film *Luna v zenite*, directed by Dmitrii Tomashpol’skii, 4 episodes, Krupnyi plan (Russia), 2007.

and its limits. Such a bold task entails the dangers of trivialization and sentimentality, as can be seen from Aranovich's decisively whitewashed presentations of Akhmatova's strained relationships with Nikolai Gumilev and with her son, as well as with other writers and poets. Akhmatova comes across mostly as a self-sufficient and wholesome individual. Where other people are at a loss for words, Akhmatova comes to their rescue by articulating their most ineffable thoughts and feelings. Although Aranovich's historical and moral stance seems to be clear, the film as a whole resists a definitive interpretation. The viewer is not lured into seeing unity where there is none (for example, Akhmatova's thoughts are voiced by two different actresses, while her poetry is always recited in her own voice as preserved by the records). Contextualizing Akhmatova's legacy within the framework of Stalinism and the subsequent de-Stalinization would ultimately—by implication—serve to excuse Stalinism and its atrocities. Not to mention the tricky fact that some of Akhmatova's most celebrated poems were indeed directly inspired by the regime and its aftermath.

When in 1988 Aranovich was asked to make a film about Anna Akhmatova, he was apprehensive despite his fame and experience. "We knew her. I remember seeing her and helping her in and out of the car. How can one capture the image of such an extraordinary human being on screen?"⁶⁸ Another problem was the shortage of available footage of Akhmatova. In her old age, when the filmmakers started to become interested in her, Akhmatova adamantly declined numerous offers to be filmed. "Just let them listen to my voice," Akhmatova instructed the scriptwriter Irina Murav'eva when she approached her with the idea of a television program featuring Akhmatova reading her articles about Pushkin. "But what shall we show to our viewers?" Murav'eva protested. "Show them my youthful photographs," Akhmatova replied with a smile.⁶⁹

Thus it is not surprising that all documentaries about Akhmatova share the same iconographic visual and verbal material in order to convey the extraordinary quality of Akhmatova's life. *The Anna Akhmatova File* is famous for its incorporation of all available footage of Akhmatova, yet repetition is the film's central trope. The scene to which Aranovich keeps returning over and over again is the funeral service devoted to Akhmatova at St. Nicholas's Cathedral on 10 March 1966 and the memorial service at the Leningrad Writers Union. In 1966, Aranovich and Solomon Shuster demonstrated courage by filming Akhmatova's funeral for posterity despite strong protests

⁶⁸ Aranovich is quoted in Irina Pavlova, "Aranovich Semen: Odinochestvo letchika v polete," TV Kul'tura, 23 July 2004 (www.tvkultura.ru/theme.html?id=682&cid=86).

⁶⁹ Irina Murav'eva, "Posleslovie k fil'mu [*Requiem*]," *Zvezda*, no. 6 (1989): 176–82.

from both the representatives of the KGB and Akhmatova's immediate family. This 60-minute film remained on the shelf for 20 years. Since 1987, various directors have had access to this archival material and have incorporated some of its most representative scenes into their own versions of Akhmatova's life, as can be seen in the concluding portion of Konstantin Artiukhov's documentary *Requiem* (1988).

In *The Anna Akhmatova File*, Aranovich shows Akhmatova in her coffin five times at almost even intervals. The camera closes in on Akhmatova's dead face; and many events from her life are, in fact, reported over her dead body. Aranovich has used footage of state funerals in his other documentaries, but in *The Anna Akhmatova File* he employs it obsessively, which can hardly be explained by his infatuation with his own footage. The film makes Akhmatova's dead body haunt the viewers. Moreover, Aranovich creates the feeling that Akhmatova's body has not been buried yet. With a certain stretch, the film can be seen as a progression from the funeral service at St. Nicholas's Cathedral to the cemetery in Komarovo where Akhmatova's body was finally laid to rest. Then we see the grave and the tombstone. Other documentaries about Akhmatova actually start by showing her grave, as if to underscore the fact that the object of their representations is not recoverable, which, according to Eugenio Donato, is a precondition for any representation: "The corpse [is] a necessary condition for the logic of any representational system, [and it] will ... always remain in a relationship of absolute Otherness to such a system."⁷⁰

In *The Anna Akhmatova File* Akhmatova's dead body dominates the film. Whether intentional or not, it is precisely the presence of her dead body through the entire film that precludes what Donato describes as the "conceptual idealization" of Akhmatova and questions the validity of her being presented as a martyr, ideal wife, companion, ideal friend, ideal mother, and so on.⁷¹ In the late 1980s, the validity of such idealized clad-in-stone representations of Akhmatova and other representatives of her generation—many of whom had met with tragic deaths under Stalin—was rarely challenged and often taken for granted. In psychoanalytic terms, the "normal" mourning for the dead was replaced by a never-ending melancholia. In his film, Aranovich mourns Akhmatova and lays her body to rest, resisting the dangers of internalization and incorporation, so typical of many recollections of Akhmatova

⁷⁰ Eugenio Donato, *The Script of Decadence: Essays on the Fictions of Flaubert and the Poetics of Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 199.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 200.

that were produced after Akhmatova's death and before the early 1990s.⁷² The film does not end with the funeral, nor does it end at the familiar site of the grave. The final shots feature amateur footage of Akhmatova happily strolling in Golitsino in 1964 to the sound of her own voice reciting:

But I warn you,
I'm living for the last time.
Not as a swallow, not as a maple,
Not as a reed, not as a star,
Not as water from a spring,
Nor as bells in a tower—
Shall I return to trouble you
Nor visit other people's dreams
With lamentation.⁷³

Since some of the similes enumerated by Akhmatova in this poem refer us back to some of the most striking images employed by Aranovich in his film (such as the bell on top of a belfry tower at the very beginning, “a maple tree,” “water from a spring”), the poem appears to provide some sort of a metacommentary not only on the film's limits of representation but on the limits of any representation. In Maurice Blanchot's words, the image of a thing “is not the same thing at a distance but the thing as distance, present in its absence, graspable because ungraspable, appearing as disappeared.”⁷⁴

Unlike Aranovich's film, *A Film about Anna Akhmatova* is a very personal portrayal of Akhmatova as seen through the eyes of her younger contemporary and literary secretary Anatolii Naiman (the idea and interviews) and an even younger Helga Landauer (the director). The film presents an odd mixture of rare documentary footage from the beginning of the 20th century and interviews with Anatolii Naiman, who is either shown leafing through some old photographs or visiting places that he had either visited together with Akhmatova or that she visited herself and that, like Slepnevo, were particularly important for her development as a poet. At one point, Naiman is shown building a fire in front of Akhmatova's shack (Budka) in Komarovo. According to the synopsis, he is “re-enacting a scene that he

⁷² Because of her poor health at the time of Akhmatova's death, Lidiia Chukovskaia did not see Akhmatova in the coffin—a misfortune that she never ceased to regret. Interestingly, her *The Akhmatova Journals*—in which, as many critics have pointed out Akhmatova's voice is often indistinguishable from Chukovskaia's own voice—has clear signs of incorporation that took the place of “normal” mourning.

⁷³ Anna Akhmatova, *Selected Poems*, trans. D. M. Thomas (London: Penguin, 1985), 71. This poem is from 1940.

⁷⁴ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 255–56.

played out regularly, several times a week” while Akhmatova was still alive. Naiman ceaselessly emphasizes that Akhmatova lived at a different pace, at a different time. To judge her using our units of measurement is a crime and a gross violation of cultural laws. “She lived in a different era, when people didn’t know such speed as we are used to now.... The air was different.... The snow was different.... The sound was different.” Naiman speaks slowly, enunciating every word to help his viewers appreciate what it was really like living and writing poetry 100 years ago. “Akhmatova was exceptionally beautiful, and she was terribly horrifying. She made you feel terrified because all of a sudden you were made aware that she was not part of this world and that she didn’t belong in this room.... **She was writing poetry against a totally different background, the way it was written at the times of Homer and Dante.**”

The camera lovingly glides over canals and embankments, the old Europe and the trenches of World War I. Who can now tell for certain what Akhmatova saw or might have seen? At one point we see some views of Paris, then pictures of Akhmatova, then pictures of the painter Amadeo Modigliani, then the streets of Paris again. Naiman comments: “A young man and a young woman in one of Paris’s little parks, the only two people in the world who knew that they were Modigliani and Akhmatova, prepared to do what they were going to do in world art and poetry.” Despite comments such as this, the director stops short of projecting a satisfyingly unproblematic image of the great poet (for example, some well-known events in Akhmatova’s life are conspicuously missing). Landauer makes no effort to help her viewers by modernizing the old footage. The viewer is left squinting in the hope of getting the whole picture, yet there is no whole picture. Everything flows in front of your very eyes and yet at a noticeable distance as if to emphasize Akhmatova’s inherent strangeness and otherworldliness. Whether we like it or not, she is not one of us, Landauer and Naiman seem to imply.⁷⁵ Naiman keeps showing

⁷⁵ In his introduction to the fourth edition of *Remembering Anna Akhmatova*, Naiman compares Akhmatova to a unicorn: “When I was 23, I met someone that put me in mind of a unicorn.... An ancient book says: ‘The unicorn does not have a partner and lives for 532 years. In its old age, having lost its horn, the animal tends to be weak, becomes increasingly lonely, and dies.’ That is the picture I witnessed, and that is the way I envision Akhmatova today: lonely—not due to circumstances but owing to the nature of the personality she was endowed with; born somewhere in Egypt or somewhere in India; having the head of a deer, the legs of an elephant, and the general shape of a horse with a meter-long horn growing from the middle of its forehead, as described by Pliny [the Elder]; inducing horror by her foreignness and awe by what she has suffered; and possessing healing powers thanks to the wonderful properties of the horn ... True, it’s only a vision. But this vision is more distinct than anything that my memory has preserved of the reality that surrounded her, including the extraordinary specific features of that reality” (*Rassказы o Anne Akhmatovoi* [Moscow: AST/Zebra E, 2008], 12).

us different photographs of Akhmatova: "I want to show this Akhmatova, and this Akhmatova, and that Akhmatova, and that Akhmatova." "I want a film about Akhmatova," he keeps repeating to the camera as if he were not preaching to the choir and Landauer might change her mind and make a film about someone else instead. At the end of the film we see the last shot of Akhmatova. She is young and smiling, standing on a balcony with her back to Nevsky Prospekt. Naiman comments: "We are trying to see who is who and what is what in this photograph. But take Akhmatova out of the picture, and there will be nothing to attract your attention to it." Naiman made his point. When the film was over, I felt sad.

A Film about Anna Akhmatova, with its slow motion and sometimes uninteresting characters, reminded me of Ivan Bunin's story "Long Ago" (Dalekoe [1922]), which is told through the eyes of a young man who lives in Moscow on Arbat Street in a hotel together with two other characters. The student is so preoccupied with himself that he doesn't take time to come to know his neighbors. His account of their daily routines is utterly devoid of events and boring to read. The student longs to start a new life and leave his hotel. The reader follows his story with sleepy eyes, until the narrator is made to realize at the very end (and so does the reader) that that seemingly uneventful spring was truly the best episode in the narrator's life. Of course, as is often the case with Bunin, the narrator comes to this realization much later, presumably, as a result of World War I, separations, losses, and revolutions. To me, "Long Ago" is a true masterpiece, a rare instance when readers willingly fall prey to the narrator's point of view and are made to flip through pages with boredom, eagerly looking forward to the story's conclusion. As Bunin shows, by doing so, they inadvertently hasten not only the end of the story but the end of the world as they used to know it.

Do we really want to remove Akhmatova from our cultural picture? Or, in Tomashevskii's words, do we want to slide Pushkin (in this case Akhmatova) back into "his/her rightful historical slot?" How can we be sure that this is what we really want? Do we really want to wait for another "1937" to appreciate what we have lost and to start campaigning for "understanding" as opposed to our present-day all-consuming "objectivism" and "deconstruction"? There is a time to cast away stones and a time to gather them together. In the Russian literary studies of the last 25 years these two emblematic activities have been practically indistinguishable from each other. Over this period, the time of tearing cultural phenomena to pieces has coincided with the time of gluing the same pieces back together. However, the problem is that, not infrequently, the pieces that are being put together do not fit or belong together.

It is like trying to glue a crocodile tail onto a pig body while explaining that that is exactly the way the two parts existed in the past—or is the way we see that past as a result of our deconstructions.

Coda: Why Akhmatova?

The first sentence in Dmitrii Bykov's response to *Anti-Akhmatova* is: "[Akhmatova] has suffered again; and again [this public humiliation] took place in the month of August." Indeed, why is it *always* Akhmatova? What's wrong with *her*? For starters—unlike her illustrious contemporaries such as Pasternak, Tsvetaeva, and Mandel'shtam—Akhmatova had no sons, daughters, or husbands who regarded it as their duty to come up with a definitive and comprehensive account of her life for posterity (Chukovskaia's preservationist duties were divided among Akhmatova, Chukovskaia's late husband, her father, and later Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn). In fact, Akhmatova's son, Lev Gumilev, after her death contributed to the dissemination of a rather unflattering image of Akhmatova, particularly as that of an uncaring and selfish mother. More important, Akhmatova was born in 1889, so her centennial in 1989 set off a spree of commemorative festivities followed by the centennials of Pasternak (1990), Mandel'shtam (1991), and Tsvetaeva (1992). As the first public tribute to the Silver Age, Akhmatova's centennial was bound to be disproportionately opulent and replete with exaggerations about Akhmatova's role in 20th-century culture, prompting subsequent deconstructions of her larger-than-life personality. In general, *perestroika*, with its daily revelations about Russia's political and cultural past, had succeeded in discrediting many ideological premises and assumptions of the Soviet era. It opened the doors to collective distrust and suspicion. Over the last 25 years, the Akhmatova institution—and the Russian biography institution in general—has gone through various transformations, showing at the same time remarkable vitality and adaptability to the needs of the day.

It would seem that the anti-Akhmatova campaigns of the 1990s and 2000s—whether recognized as such by their opponents and supporters or not—were not so much directed against Akhmatova as a real person *per se*. Rather they functioned as a trope for what Nigel Hamilton defines as "the pursuit of biography." Paradoxically, such a pursuit combines a "challenge to received ideas of privacy and reputation since ancient times" with being "integral to the Western concept of individuality and the ideals of democracy, as opposed to dictatorship or tyranny" (2). In many ways, Akhmatova's identifiable penchant for authoritarian behavior—which could be contingently compared to Stalin's dictatorship—was foregrounded not for the sake of establishing some truth about her life and creativity but, most likely, to scare any opponents of

democratic transformations. Biography, which many Russians still see as being based on hard facts and, therefore, as a trustworthy source of information, has become an ideal tool for anyone seeking to destabilize established cultural and social norms. The evolution of Russian biography writing, however, is different from the evolution of its Western counterpart. It took Western biography writers nearly a century to finally do away with “the Victorian notions of propriety and privacy” (Hamilton, 213). In Russia this happened much more quickly and in a more haphazard fashion. Moreover, in Russia the process of overthrowing the tenets of privacy and propriety coincided with the process of re-inventing the very same notions as new cultural and social norms. In many ways, Tamara Kataeva’s *Anti-Akhmatova* is a crude product of these complex and traumatic transformations. To quote Vadim Nesterov’s review of *Anti-Akhmatova*, “What is bad is not that the fence around the ghetto of the ‘Great National Literature’ has been demolished. What is bad is that this fence was destroyed not where the front gate used to be, but somewhere near the latrine.”⁷⁶

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⁷⁶ Vadim Nesterov, “Razgovor defektologa s poetom” (www.gazeta.ru/culture/2007/8/22/a_2072500.shtml).