

# TEXTUAL REVISION, STALINIST REVISIONISM, AND THE OBLIGATIONS OF MEMORY:

Situating Anna Akhmatova's  
*Poem Without a Hero*

by

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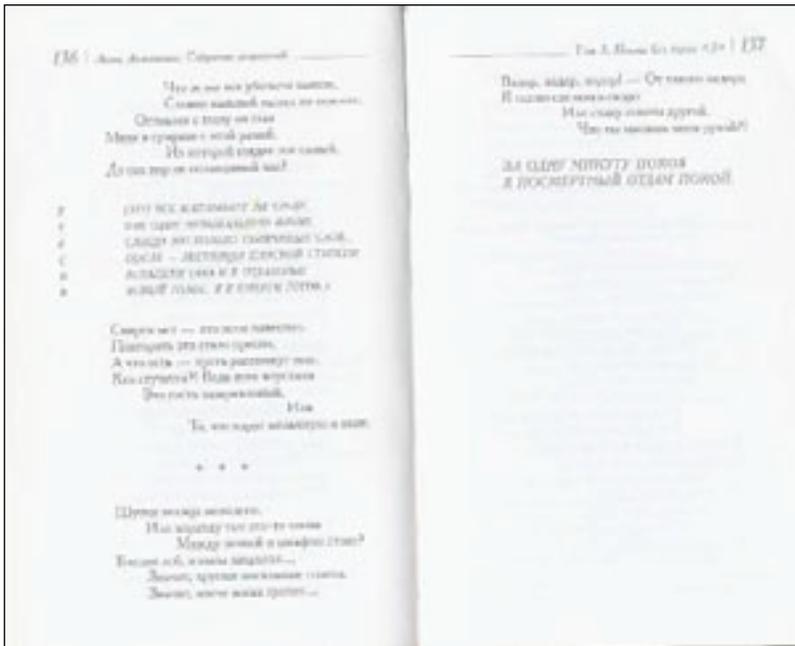
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**Abstract:** Textual revision is the process a poet uses to bring a work's aesthetic aspirations closer to realization. Historical revision is the process by which historians bring narratives of the past into closer alignment with a perceived "truth." This article brings these disparate disciplinary concepts of revision to bear on a reading of Anna Akhmatova's *Poem Without A Hero* in order to explain more fully her 20 years of changes, additions and deletions. It finds the poem is not only an aesthetic object with which the poet struggled to find an architectural structure and strophic form, but it is also the narration of a liminal and emblematic moment during the siege of Leningrad about which, with the epistemological habits of mind of a historian, the poet struggles to narrate a historical "truth."

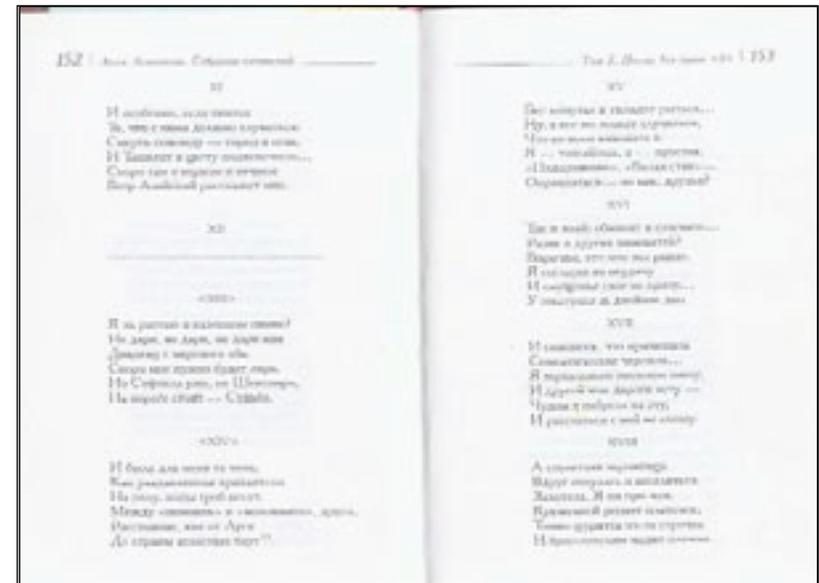
This article seeks to account for incessant revisions in Anna Akhmatova's *Poem Without a Hero* and the resultant increase in textual indeterminacies as the enactment of the work of memory within a particular historical moment. In order to understand that context and moment, I bring an interdisciplinary inquiry to the ontologically disparate phenomena of textual revision and historical revision, borrowing ideas from historians White (1999), Appleby, Hunt, et. al. (1995). I argue that the 20 years of revision that engaged Akhmatova with this poem led her to project a voice that performs the epistemological struggles that define historians. My

account neither refutes nor replaces other accounts of the text's multiple versions such as those who see Akhmatova's project as a quest over the years to find the poem's organizational architecture, or those who see a poet's oppositional and carnivalesque strategies within a culture of ruthless state control of the arts.

Though not published during Akhmatova's life, copies of the poem circulated among friends as early as 1942. Where previous editors redacted editorial solutions drawing from the versions and variants left unpublished at her death to produce a text of *Poem Without a Hero*, T.A. Gorkova's six-volume complete Russian edition of Akhmatova (1998-2004) simply prints four complete texts of the poem. Each represents a text that Akhmatova had readied for possible publication. The problem of her incessant revising is often viewed as a long journey toward resolving formal problems: organization, how the poem is sectioned, the layering of voices as reflected in fonts, italics and page layout, and, most famously,



*Poem Without a Hero*: Triptych. 1956 version, shows variety of fonts and typographical layout from end of Chapter I (Gorkova 3 [1998] pp. 136-7.)



*Poem Without a Hero*: Triptych. 1956 version, shows six-line stanza and dots for self-censored stanza from end of Chapter I (Gorkova 3 [1998] pp. 152-3.)

the quest toward the remarkable six-line strophe which is used in over half the final version.

Anatoly Nayman (1993) argues that groping toward the six-line strophe was less a quest to resolve a formal problem than it was the realization of a particular set of gestures:

Its first line, for example, attracts one's attention and excites one's curiosity; the second carries one away irrevocably; the third is frightening; the fourth leaves one at the edge of the abyss; the fifth bestows the gift of bliss; and the sixth exhausts all remaining potential and concludes the stanza. But the next stanza begins "everything afresh . . . (pp. 120-1)"

I have no dispute with formal revision analyses; however, I wish to propose an additional problem operating in Akhmatova's production of this sonorous, haunting and teasingly elusive work. Because the poem is about the obligations of memory, and even, one might say, the very work of memory, it enacts the struggle to re-present the past that defines the project of history.

Before moving on to see how textual revision as well as increasing indeterminacy of meaning engages Akhmatova in the problematics of historical revision in a way that injects into her poem a voice I call the voice of the historian, we need to see the poem as an entirety. Running around 40 pages, the poem falls in three large sections of equal structural weight. Some versions are subtitled *Triptych*. Part 1, the longest section, divided into four chapters, “tells” the “story” of New Year’s Eve in 1941, when the narrator is alone in her room in Leningrad during the bombing with air raid sirens sounding and flashes visible out the window. She has lit candles to bring in the New Year. Suddenly a crowd of maskers bursts in, dressed as such famous literary characters as Don Juan and Faust. They are artists, poets, dancers and actresses who had been regulars at The Stray Dog cabaret circa 1913.

Sketchily and with complex allusions to her own and other writers’ lines and phrases, the maskers reenact a tragic episode from January 1913, in which Akhmatova’s dear friend, the dancer actress Olga, callously seduces and then callously rejects a young cadet officer, who commits suicide. The 1913 events, as they are told, hint at impending retribution. Critics have “unpacked” references to Kuzmin, Meyerhold, Knyazev, Blok, Nedobrovo, Sudeikina, Salomea Halpern, and others. Versions after 1946 include a masker called “the guest from the future.” He is identified as Isaiah Berlin, the English Oxford historian and diplomat.

In 1945 England and the Soviet Union were ostensibly allies. Berlin joined a delegation traveling to Russia where he visited Leningrad, the city of his boyhood. During an outing to a used bookstore, he was astonished to learn that Akhmatova was still alive. Because her last book had appeared in 1923, people in the West assumed that she was dead. He went to visit her. Both have left accounts of that incredible night—a cathartic meeting of minds that profoundly changed the intellectual directions of each and had far-reaching consequences for her future. György Dalos’s book (1999) about their friendship agrees in part, as does her protégé, Joseph Brodsky (Volkov, 1998), that Akhmatova was not being merely paranoid when in later years she claimed that Berlin’s visit in the fall of 1945 provoked the Anglo-Soviet Cold War. Zhadanov’s public denunciation of her at the Writers Congress the next year, the re-arrest of her son who was sent to a gulag in Siberia, and her eviction from the Union of Soviet Writers, thereby eliminating her ability to earn a livelihood, were results of his visit, probably at Stalin’s direct behest.

The sketchiness of “telling” and “story” becomes the theme of the poem’s Part 2. With humorous banter, the narrator imagines she has an editor who is

considering publication of the work in hand. Even though Stalin personally and for a very brief time lifted the ban on her publishing, and even though she made radio broadcasts and did public readings in support of the war against Fascism and was even suggested for the Stalin prize, all of which brought her renewed prominence, for Akhmatova to imagine publication of this unconventional work is rather preposterous. The imagined editor and his remarks are a joke between Akhmatova and her imagined readers. She and the imagined editor engage in a phone exchange. He raises objections to the “readability” of Part 1:

I  
 My editor was quite vexed  
     Swearing he was busy and sick,  
     So got an unlisted phone  
 Then grouched: “Three themes at once!  
     Reading those last lines,  
     Can’t even tell who loves whom.  
 II  
 Who met whom, and in what order,  
     Who’s victim, who’s survivor,  
     Who’s the author, who’s the hero—  
 This private stream-of-consciousness  
     About a poet and a swarm of ghosts,  
     What use has it for readers now?”<sup>1</sup>

Part 2 also has the famous sections of missing stanzas marked by rows of dots. (See example above of a page from the 1956 version.) She took this device from Pushkin who in the 19th century had used it to mark passages censored by the poet before the Tsar’s censors could. The graphic display of absent lines tells the reader, I know and you know that I cannot give you my whole poem, but what I do give you has nothing to trouble censors. Akhmatova’s missing lines have been restored in editors’ footnotes. Among other matters, they mention the purges in the 1930s and her son’s years in labor camps. Her conversation with the editor seeks to reassure him that his concerns are groundless, but embedded in the middle of several pages are reminders that any Stalinist editor should have grave concerns. Part 2 is a profound meditation on the work’s reception by readers of many kinds: its anxieties are those of one who has taken on the mantle of public sage.

Part 3 is subtitled “Epilogue: To My City.” Her identification as a representative of a community of sufferers is powerfully thematized. She

shares the misery of the siege of Leningrad, she asserts that her poem bonds her to her people, and astonishingly she positions it as fundamentally a witnessing to the war. It is not a war poem, but a poem whose meanings are shaped in a time of war. The final stanzas tell how she is evacuated by plane for eventual settlement in Tashkent (as were many of her fellow writers), where the turn to the east is hinted at as a hopeful turn away from the horrors that Europe to the west has wreaked upon her land.

I take “Triptych” to mean that three parts function as separate entities speaking across and through each other, as medieval altarpieces often did. So let’s step back and look at the whole poem. It is the record of or representation of a decisive and liminal event in the poet’s life, but an event whose significance to her was at the far extreme of private confession. It is a moment in which her epistemological understanding of her place in the world and her role in Russian literature was forever altered. Her sensationally popular early books register psychological nuances of private emotions. In the late 1930s and early 1940s in *Requiem* and *The Way of All the Earth* (her other two large poems), Akhmatova learned to use the devices of psychological nuance to stand “atop her 40 years” (as she says at the outset of *Poem Without a Hero*) as witness, sage and representative of her people. Like all liminal experiences, the past is present in the present and because of the present, changes, and the future is present as well, such that the present in its full ontology as presence looks backward and forward simultaneously. Thus, the poem is not about 1913; it is about 1941. The poem records and represents an event whose telling Akhmatova sees as collectively momentous. The act of writing, besides being the work of a poet, through the incessant revisions, becomes the work of a historian, not merely a memoirist.

In all four of Gorkova’s versions, the first section ends with this passage, even though use of the upper case varies:

#### AFTERMATH

ALL IS IN ORDER: THE POEM LIES THERE  
AND, AS EXPECTED, KEEPS QUITE STILL.  
WELL, BUT WHAT IF A NEW THEME ERUPTS,  
POUNING ON THE WINDOW WITH ITS FIST,—  
AND FROM FAR OFF, IN RESPONSE TO ITS PLEA,  
ARE HAIR-RAISING SOUNDS—  
GURGLING, WAILING, SHRIEKS  
AND AN APPARITION WITH CROSSED ARMS? . . .

Ambiguity is rife. An “aftermath” is not an “afterward”; it is a consequence. The phantasmagoric events which climax in suicide as recounted in Part 1 have led to “order” and “a poem that lies there.” But this textual stasis is already seen as imminent for “eruption” and a pounding fist. The reader is warned that all is not orderly. This authorial ploy, adroit in its foreshadowing, turns out to prepare the reader not at all for what follows. Part 2 is called “*Intermezzo: РЕШКА*”—shifting from the Italian to the Russian. “РЕШКА”<sup>2</sup> (reshka) in my view is best translated “Flip Side” as in the toss of a coin. An intermezzo is an interlude. That the “poem lies there quite still” is not true; it is hardly complete, but the reader must wait through an intermezzo before getting on with the rest of it. “Flip Side,” despite being a postponing intermezzo, simultaneously answers Part 1. Tossing coins can be a playful game of chance, or it can be a serious way to determine a choice. From the reader’s perspective, these ploys that seem to define the sequential relationships between sections of her poem are also “teases.”

The first stanza of “Flip Side” starts with the imagined editor already cited. The lines of “Aftermath” and those beginning “Flip Side” do not vary, but the choices of epigraphs to introduce “Flip Side” make the space between the two sections increasingly indeterminate. Version one of “Flip Side” has a dedication and short epigraph:

To V. G. Garshin  
“I drink of Lethe’s flood,”  
Pushkin

Version two has no dedication and expands the Pushkin to two lines, giving its source:

I drink of Lethe’s flood,  
My doctor has forbade despondency:  
“A Modest House in Kolomna”  
Pushkin

Garshin was removed from the poem after Akhmatova’s return to Leningrad at the end of the war for reasons too complicated to explain here. In the comic poem, *The Modest House in Kolomna* Pushkin occasionally addresses the reader with personal comments. He starts to speak about a painful past and states as antidote, “he drinks of Lethe’s flood,” the river of forgetfulness. Reference to Hades tinges this “forgetfulness” with the finality of death—a rather dire cure for painful memories. By placing the epigraph after “Aftermath,” at the top of “Flip Side,” Akhmatova seems to say she too

no longer wants to remember. But in version two, with Pushkin's next line added, she echoes his joke. He wants to "forget" because to remember leads to despondency, which his doctor forbade, so "Lethe's waters" become a modern pharmaceutical. Echoing this kind of banter with one's reader, "Flip Side" launches into the imagined banter of the editor. Pushkin's second line shifts the epigraph's tone from "dire" to "banter," echoed in the shift of tone from "Aftermath" to "Flip Side."

. . . I drink of Lethe's flood,  
My doctor has forbade despondency:  
*Pushkin*  
. . . a jasmine bush,  
Where Dante passed and air was parched.  
*N.K.*

In the third version, Akhmatova does not forgo all "direness," for a new second epigraph offers an opposing image of death, not Lethe's forgetting, but Dante's *Inferno* of shades who never forget. In part their punishment is incessant memory. Neither epigraph mentions its source.<sup>3</sup> The lines come from Nikolay Klyuev's *To the Slanderers of Art*.<sup>4</sup> Klyuev was the best of the so-called peasant poets.<sup>5</sup> Akhmatova knew and respected him. Written in 1932, his poem laments the fate of Russian poetry under the first decade of the Soviets. It begins:

Furious, I rebuke you in sorrow.  
For ten years, you did not allow  
The horse of poetry, with its bridle  
Of diamonds, its hooves of gold, saddle  
Hand-stitched in harmony, one single fist of oats,  
Nor, drunk with meadow dew, did you let  
It go free to revive the swan's lame wing!<sup>6</sup>

Later he cites Akhmatova's silence during those years:

Akhmatova—a jasmine bush,  
Scorched by asphalt and gray pitch—  
Is she lost on the path through the dark pits  
Where Dante passed and the air was parched,  
Or is she a nymph spinning flax into crystals?  
Among Russian women, remote and subtle  
Anna is a cloud at sunset, she reflects  
Streaks of gray light like rockets!

For readers in the know, Klyuev's lines remind readers of Akhmatova's enforced silence between 1922 and 1940 with a double whammy of "direness"—inferno and Soviet rule.

We are not done with the space between "Aftermath" and "Flip Side." Version four replaces the personally moving Klyuev epigraph with one that is, if anything, direr:

My doctor has forbade despondency:  
*Pushkin*  
In my beginning is my end.  
*Motto of Mary of Scotland*

Mary is quoted in English with the Russian translation footnoted. Like Mary, executed by Elizabeth I after years of arrest, Akhmatova suffered years of surveillance by Stalin and his authorities, and for her, like Mary, death seemed a forgone end. The epigraph encapsulates the liminal moment that the poem seeks to document—a beginning in 1913 returns as memory in the present of 1941 pointing to the "guest from the future" who presages a dire end, all of which transforms the poet from private lyricist to public witness. Direness is underscored by excising the "banter" of Pushkin's lines; Lethe and the poem's title are both gone. Version four also adds a prose synopsis and stage direction before the phone call with the imagined editor.

*The author discusses a poem about 1913 concerning a number of other people—in particular, the romantic poema<sup>7</sup> that originated in the XIX century (and whose charm had survived for 100 years). The author assumed too hastily that the spirit of the poema could be revived in its city of origin, Petersburg.*

*Place of action—Fontana House. Time—5 January 1941. Out the window, the specter of a snow-covered maple. Scarcely has the infernal harlequinade of the year 1913 rushed past, rising up out of the stillness of that great quiescent epoch and leaving behind it the typical mess of any festive or funereal procession—still-smoking torches, colored blotches on the ground, sacred keepsakes forever lost. Wind whorls in the stove pipe, and in its howl one may divine a few very covertly and skillfully hidden fragments from Requiem. About what glimmers dimly in the mirrors, it is best not to ask.*

Earlier versions give no year for the editor's remarks; this version places "Flip Side" a mere five days after the events of Part 1. Preposterously,

in those five days, she has not only experienced a liminal event of self-shattering psychological resonance, she has written a poem that her editor has already read, and attempts at phone conversations have failed. Has the poet lost all control over the verisimilitude of her material?

From version to version, the space between “Aftermath” and Flip Side” becomes increasingly indeterminate. Throughout the poem the increase of indeterminacy has been seen as a Soviet-era poet’s strategy to resist systematic state control of artistic production, censorship, and the anticipated alternative outcomes—arrest, exile, labor camp or execution. One is reminded that Mikhail Bakhtin was her nearly exact Soviet contemporary, the theorist who taught us how profoundly even in monologic and autocratic cultures, the preposterousness of the carnivalesque can engage an oppositional dialogic function. Such readings of her ploys and elusiveness champion Akhmatova as an oppositional artist who maintained integrity at great personal cost, and the poem as testament to moral anti-Stalinist courage. Isaiah Berlin’s (1999) autobiographical essay of their friendship is one of the most moving of these readings. I have no dispute with the hagiographers.

However, these features are more than just oppositional and brave. They enact the work of memory within a particular epistemological context and historical moment. That context is the pervasive culture of ongoing historical revisionism conducted programmatically by Stalinist institutions of knowledge-production: history, literary criticism, encyclopedias, public trials, and even photographs, as we will see. I argue therefore that in consort with its oppositional moves, *Poem Without a Hero* is a text imbricated in the epistemology that views the past, and memory itself, as ever-shifting targets, fraught with traps of deception, error and reversal. As the poem strains to find a voice and form that set it apart from any tinge of Stalinist ideology or normative socialist realism, it does so enmeshed in the very epistemological fraughtness that it seeks to escape.

Editorial revision (a problematic of textual analysis and literary criticism) and historical revision (a problematic of theorizing history) are activities generally thought to be ontologically unrelated. In order to register some of the special power of this poem, I argue that in this instance they are inextricably connected. With a few of the poem’s textual features now in view, I focus my argument on one passage—not atypical—that underwent revision in each of the four Gorkova versions. I will pause first to develop ideas from historians White (1999), Appleby, Hunt, et. al. (1995) as a framework for reading Akhmatova’s revisions, using the problematic of historical revision to understand better Akhmatova’s incessant textual revisions.

In the literature on “history and memory,” the names of Pierre Nora, Maurice Halbwachs, Andrea Huyssen, Michel Foucault and Hayden White surface again and again. The 1990s saw several conferences and special topic editions of journals that had “history and memory” as theme. Many dealt with the problem of public memorials and exhibits (the Vietnam Veterans Memorial or the Enola Gay at the Smithsonian) or with the history of the Nazi regime and the Holocaust. They probed the problems inherent in morally responsible and responsive re-presentations of the past. Hayden White’s prominence in this trend is due to his tireless meditation on the problems of history as representation and narrative. His frequently cited 1992 essay, “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth in Historical Representation,” exposes three assumptions about historical narratives that he regards as naïve, an argument that is introduced with an analogy to science.

Scientific explanations openly purport to bear upon only those aspects of events—for example, quantitative and therefore measurable aspects—which can be denoted by the linguistic protocols used to describe them. (p. 27)

By this I understand that consistent quantifiable and therefore predictable events are a linguistic protocol, a representational system—some form of mathematics—but not the event itself; for scientists, these protocols count as explanations. He then goes on to say:

It is less obvious in traditional narrative accounts of historical phenomena because: first, narrative is regarded as a neutral “container” of historical fact, a mode of discourse naturally suited to representing historical events directly; second, narrative histories usually employ so-called natural or ordinary, rather than technical languages both to describe their subjects and to tell the story thereof; and third, historical events are supposed to consist of or manifest a congeries of real or lived stories that have only to be uncovered or extracted from the evidence and displayed before the reader to have their truth recognized immediately and intuitively. (p. 27)

The naïveté of the notions that a non-technical ordinary language might be natural, or that stories might be extracted to tell themselves—White’s second and third points—is fairly transparent. His first point requires explanation. His analogy between scientific and historical explanations asserts that scientists accept that their explanations are contained within the limits of

their linguist protocols—mathematics. Their ability to move explanations forward and generate knowledge is in part because they accept the distinction between event and the protocol of representation. The analogous protocol for historical explanations would seem to be facts, artifacts, documents, eyewitness accounts. If scientists agree on the mathematical calculations and results, they will reach nearly identical explanations, so if historians look at the same “facts,” they must reach nearly identical explanations. White, however, says that it is not the “facts” that are the protocol of historical representation but the “container” of the facts. And that container is narrative.

I go a step further. Just as scientists, when they reach the limits of mathematics seek to extend the protocol itself by developing new maths, so historians, when the explanatory success of their current narratives fails, should develop new narrative tools, not just new narratives. Akhmatova’s incessant textual revision discovers for her a new narrative role—a new tool—in which the narrator takes on the epistemological behavior of a historian.

The naïveté that lies behind the three common assumptions about historical narratives is the same naïveté that has made the phrase “historical revisionism” pejorative and dismissive. If the past is self-explanatory and has been once recorded, say a history of the Soviet Revolution, what incentive or motive would any historian have to research and write about it again? Historians re-plow the same ground not always because new facts, artifacts or documents have come to light, but because the story needs re-narrating or revision. In writing history, the vast majority of work is perforce revisionary.

Appleby, Hunt and Jacob’s *Telling The Truth About History* (1995) is another mid-1990s reflection on the problematic of writing history; like White, Appleby, Hunt and Jacob also speak of the primacy of narrative:

Like memory itself, every work of history has the structure of a plot with a beginning, middle, and end . . . Thus, to argue for a return to narrative, as some traditionalists have done, is to miss the cardinal point that historians have never entirely departed from it. Not surprisingly, “narrative” has become one of the charged code words for the current struggles over history. (p. 231)

Instead of the relativism they see endemic to postmodernism, they propose what they call “practical realism.” Unlike White’s attention to the structuring

nuances of narrativity, their interest in narrative is more straightforward; it is their nuanced discussion of the subject-object relationship that makes their ideas useful:

. . . positivists ignored the undeniable subjectivity of the sentient beings who alone initiate all scientific inquiries . . . Realists now must think more deeply about the nature of the relationship between a curious, imaginative, culturally shaped investigator and the passive objects under investigation. Objects arouse curiosity, resist implausible manipulation, and collect layers of information about them. Objectivity can only refer to a relationship between persons and these fascinating things; it cannot reside outside of persons. Any standards of objectivity we erect must focus on that relationship. (p. 260)

They argue for a mediated middle ground, and they too turn to the problem of “memory and history,” seeing memory in two roles: the role that history plays in a society, and an aspect of the subjecthood of the “realist” interrogator of the past.

In exploring how memory affects the writing of history, we have drawn attention to the psychological need for comprehending experience which calls for accuracy, as well as the human drive for personal recognition that encourages myth-making. . . . What this book insists upon is the human capacity to discriminate between false and faithful representations of past reality and, beyond that, to articulate standards which help both practitioners and readers to make such discriminations:

. . . The contemporary example of the bogus scholars who say there was no Holocaust painfully demonstrates the contrary. (p. 261)

Indeed, as they point out, there is a dangerous form of “historical revisionism” in which a person for some ideological agenda willfully distorts or ignores significant bodies of evidence generally embraced by people who have researched the field well. As a pejorative label, “revisionist” is therefore two-edged; it may be applied in scorn to those whose ideological agendas make a mockery of historical methods, such as the Holocaust deniers, but it may also be used to malign a narrative of the past which scandalizes the person making the charge. For those whose narrative of the end of World War II is about a courageous decision to drop the atomic bomb and bring the war to a mercifully quick close, saving

lives on both sides, to ask the Smithsonian to acknowledge the horrendous suffering of innocent Japanese citizens in Hiroshima was a “revisionist” attack upon the honor of the Enola Gay’s mission and its meaning for American history.

Akhmatova along with many Soviet-era intellectuals knew well the ideological implications of state-sponsored “historical revisionism.” She also knew how views seen as oppositional were maligned as revisionist. Here is one blatant example of the ongoing historical revisions that were typical of Stalinist sanctioned historiography.

### Stalinist Historical Revisionism



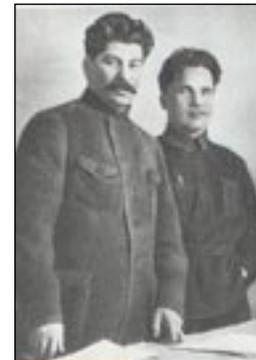
“Retouching History,” September 1999, *Life*, p. 95

Antipov, Stalin, Kirov, Shvernik and Komarov, 1926—a widely printed newspaper photo.



“Retouching History,” p. 96

Official Stalinist revisionist photograph, example 1: Komarov was executed in 1937 soon after this photo was published.



“Retouching History,” p. 96

This photo appeared in *Joseph Stalin: A Short Biography* (1949), with no indication that it was 23 years old.



“Retouching History,” pp. 95-96

Official Stalinist revisionist photography, example 2: By 1940 Antipov was imprisoned in Orel when this photo appeared in *History of the U.S.S.R.* (The fold due to the page spine is in the photo source not the original).



“Retouching History,” p. 96

The official 1929 oil painting by Isaak Brodsky, used in public places for over 20 years, is shown above right. It is based on the 1929 photo, and, because this painting was so well known, the mutations of the original photograph would be hard for many attentive readers not to notice.

With this excursus on historical revision in mind, let's turn back to *Poem Without a Hero* and its textual revisions. I choose a passage that comes climactically near the end of Chapter 1 of Part 1 in Gorkova's fourth version. It is not atypical. In all four versions my line indentations scrupulously follow the wildly changing typography of Gorkova's texts. Her first version is titled "The Year 1913, Or Poem Without a Hero And Vice Versa By Anna Akhmatova." The 15-line passage reads:

A cry: "Hero to the proscenium!"  
 Don't get excited, he's certain to come forth  
 Quick to take someone's place . . .  
 Why are you all running off together,  
 As if each of you found a bride,  
 Abandoning me face to face  
 In the dusk of that black window  
 Which down to this very hour  
 Weighs its unbewailed time.  
 They do not drift in all at once  
 Like a single musical phrase,  
 I hear only discordant words.  
 Later . . . on a flat step in the stairwell  
 A flare of gas and from the distance  
 A clear voice: "I am prepared for death."

Gorkova's second version, titled "The Year 1913, Or Poem Without A Hero *Triptych* 1940—1945 Composed by Anna Akhmatova," reads:

The cock's cry is just a dream to us,  
 Night is an abyss that goes on and on,—  
     Petersburg devilishness.  
 No star shows outside the narrow window,  
 And through the stifling acrid impertinence  
     The masqueraders chatter . . .  
 A cry:  
 "—Hero to the proscenium!"  
 Don't get excited, he's certain to come forth  
     Quick to take the place of the one  
 Set about divine retribution . . .  
     Why are you all running off together,  
     As if each of you found a bride,

Abandoning me face to face  
 In the twilight and this mirror  
     To stare down what will become  
 The parched pores of an unbewailed time.

[It does not drift in all at once.  
 Like a musical phrase  
 I hear a few random words: Farewell! Time's up!  
 Later on a flat step in the stairwell  
 Gas erupts and from the distance  
 A clear voice: "I am prepared for death."]

Death does not exist—well-known fact  
 Too insipid to repeat,  
 But whatever does exist—let them tell me.  
 Who knocks!—Everyone has already come in.  
     You are either the one behind me, or  
 The one glimpsed fleetingly out the window.

The first version is narrated from the lyric present in 1941 about the "dreamt" past of 1913 by the person who experienced the "dream," and as the phantom maskers recede, one of them "cries" for the "hero" to appear on stage. The narrator assures the masker "he" will appear. But the maskers run off. In the last three lines the details of the Leningrad bombing reassert themselves as the "dream" fades into the present, and a voice clearly says she or he "is prepared for death" as if expecting a bomb to land. As the narrator is left alone "face to face with the black window," the passage's one ambiguity occurs with the lines "which down to this very hour / weighs its unbewailed time." There are several variants for the second line here. Did the maskers abandon her once in 1913 and again in 1941 before the same black window, so that the "unbewailed time" is the past? Or is the narrator's present sometime after 1941 retelling the events of the war-besieged night so that "this very hour" is the time of the telling and not the time of the events, and the liminal events of 1941 remain "unbewailed"? Other than these two lines, version one is straightforward.

Version two brings in several new elements. A "cock's cry" ushers in the final scene but not a new day. According to Akhmatova, it is a direct allusion to Blok's poem, "The Footsteps of the Commendatore," his version of the Don Juan story when the statue comes to drag Don Juan to hell. Lines 3-4 read:

Outdoors, peace, where strange and distant,  
A stupid rooster is heard.

In version two the narrator's reply to the cry includes one new broken-off line that echoes the theme of Blok's poem:

Set about divine retribution . . .

The narrator's reply ends with a variant of the "unbewailed time" line, and a different voice is layered into the passage, marked by indentations and brackets. For me this voice is the narrator in 1941, and the narrator replaying to the "cry" for a hero returns with the passage, "Death does not exist . . ." She, for me, is the recorder or "historian," if you will, who recalls and narrates the liminal moment of 1941. Unlike the first version where the narrator's position in time is ambiguous, in version two, in Tashkent revising a few years after the first draft, Akhmatova establishes a perspective that looks back to 1941 looking back to 1913. It would be a mistake to assume this perspective is omniscient. The problem of fidelity to both pasts would disappear if the Tashkent narrator novelistically knew or could know everything. In Appleby, Hunt, et. al.'s sense, the narrator performs her subjectivity and its restraint on omniscience. She is like a historian struggling to re-present the past with as much integrity as possible, even though a novelistic recreation of it is not possible. We also note the "black window" has become a mirror.

Gorkova's third version of the parallel passage, is titled "POEM WITHOUT A HERO *TRIPTYCH* A Work By Anna Akhmatova Leningrad—Tashkent—Moscow 1956." It is only five lines longer than version two, with three significant changes:

Poets

In general are not lumped in with sin.

Dance before the Ark of the Covenant

Or get lost . . .

Enough! About that

Their verses say it better.

The cock's cry is just a dream to us,

Night is an abyss that goes on and on,—

Petersburg devilishness.

No star shows outside the narrow window,

And suffocating, acrid, shameless

The masqueraders chatter.

A cry:

"Hero to the proscenium!"

Don't get excited, he's certain to come forth

Quick to take the place of the one

Set about divine retribution . . .

Why are you all running off together,

As if each of you found a bride,

Abandoning me face to face

With the twilight and this mirror,

To stare down what will become

In this season a time of sorrow?

C

IT DOES NOT DRIFT IN ALL AT ONCE

U

LIKE A MUSICAL PHRASE

R

I HEAR A FEW CONTRADICTIONARY WORDS . . .

S

LATER—A FLAT STEP IN THE STAIRWELL.

I

GAS FLARES IN THE DISTANCE

V

AND IN A CLEAR VOICE:

E

I AM PREPARED FOR DEATH

Death does not exist—well-known fact,

Too insipid to repeat,

But whatever does exist—let them tell me.

Who knocks?! Everyone has already come in

But it may be just behind the mirror,

Or

Else glimpsed fleetingly out the window.

The first lines are new and seem to argue an exemption for poets from whatever standard of judgment the poem sets forth, as if unlike others whose behavior is condemned, because they are poets, their mistakes might be "condoned." This seems to be an internal argument being waged in the mind of the 1941 narrator. The reference to David, Yahweh's favorite, is striking. The internal argument first excuses poets as favored like David, then dismisses them to "get lost," then says their verse is the standard by which they must be judged. That the 1941 narrator has this internal debate just before the "cock cry" with its resonance of retribution is psychologically fascinating. The "historian" voice provides layers of nuance that make the truth of the liminal events of 1941 both more ambiguous as to how they

are narrated and more truthful as to how they were experienced. The “unbewailed time” line is recast as “in this season a time of sorrow” and the 1941 narrator, “abandoned” to her “mirror,” now is unambiguously situated in the time of war, and the punctuation marks a real question where the earlier versions had not. The third point worth remarking is the passage beginning “*IT DOES NOT DRIFT IN ALL AT ONCE.*” As if desperate for readers to hear the difference of voice, the small brackets of version two are replaced with uppercase italics, and down the left margin of the lines, the word “cursive,” as if to say the passage has been glossed onto the poem in a later, different handwriting. These bold typographic changes do not alter the “historian” role of this voice; they graphically imprint the voice onto the text as an act of revision.

Finally, Gorkova’s version four is the longest, running 39 lines: “POEM WITHOUT A HERO TRIPTYCH 1940—1965 By Anna Akhmatova”:

Poets  
 In general are not lumped in with sin.  
 Dance before the Ark of the Covenant  
 Or get lost! . . .  
     Enough! About that  
     Their verses say it better,  
 The cock’s cry is just a dream to us,  
     Outside the window the Nevá seems to smoke,  
     Night is an abyss that goes on and on—  
     Petersburg devilishness . . .  
 No star shows in the black heavens,  
     A dire doom seems near at hand,  
     But carefree, acerbic, unashamed,  
     The masqueraders chatter . . .  
 A cry:  
     “Hero to the proscenium!”  
     Don’t get excited: he’s certain to come forth  
     Quick to take the place of the one  
     Set about divine retribution . . .  
 Why are you all running off together,  
     As if each of you found a bride,  
     Abandoning me face to face  
 In the twilight and a black mirror,  
     To stare down what will become

The bitterest drama  
 And the yet unbewailed time?

*It does not drift in all at once,  
 Like a musical phrase  
 I hear a whisper: “Farewell! Time’s up!  
 And though I leave you to live,  
 You will be MY widow,  
 You—Darling, sunshine, sister!”  
 On the landing two shades merge . . .  
 Later . . . on a flat step in the stairwell  
 A cry: “No need!” and from the distance  
 A clear voice:  
     “I am prepared for death.”*

*The torches go out, the ceiling descends. Again the white  
 (mirrored) hall becomes the author’s room. Words from  
 the darkness:*

Death does not exist—well-known fact  
 Too insipid to repeat,  
     But whatever does exist—let them tell me.  
 Who knocks?  
     Everyone has already come in.  
 It may be just behind the mirror. Or  
     Else glimpsed fleetingly out the window . . .

Other than adding a line of verisimilitude in the description of the Leningrad of 1941 “outside the window the Neva seems to smoke” and restoring the “unbewailed time” line giving it a lead-in with “the bitterest drama,” the significant changes of version four come near the end. After “I am prepared for death,” Akhmatova adds to this version a stage direction. As we have seen, stage directions appear elsewhere. On the one hand they seem to render the events as artifice. The narrator seems to watch her own memories as if performed on stage. On the other hand, they subtly give nuance to the memories so that we are always aware that the author does not claim “total recall” but is enmeshed in the problem of “telling” her past.

I believe the new passage in italics is evidence of this struggle. If these 10 lines are still the “historian’s” voice as I have been calling it, she hears another

voice which whispers the three-and-a-half lines starting with “Farewell!” There is a scene being retold by the “historian” who uses direct quotations. We have not seen this scene before. Based on prior details, the two shades are the Olga-Columbine figure and the man with whom she callously flaunts her attachment so that the Knyazev-Pierrot figure witnesses them, thus driving him to suicide. Another voice warns there is “no need” to go so far, suggesting perhaps it is not too late to stop the tragic farce. This I take it to be the Akhmatova of 1913 who elsewhere “bewails” her complicity in the tragedy. If this is correct, then Knyazev would seem to be the one “prepared for death.” In version one these words occurred during the 1941 bombing; many revisions later, they fall from the lips of a suicide in 1913.

But who says the three-and-a-half lines of “Farewell”? The poet associates “darling” and “sister” with her dear friend Olga. It must be Akhmatova speaking, but not Akhmatova “the historian” nor the 1913 Akhmatova who says “No need!” She must therefore be the 1941 Akhmatova whispering both to the narrator-historian and Olga that she cannot “kill her off,” as a novelist might. Instead, the 1941 Akhmatova becomes as if dead to Olga, making Olga now a widow. In this subtle way the poem passes judgment and refuses to condone Olga’s cruel coquetry. In the struggle to narrate the past accurately the “historian” splits Akhmatova into three voices. Akhmatova sought 20 years to find the narrative tool to do this with such deft seamlessness.

This discussion of this passage hardly exhausts it. Much has been written on the layers of allusions for the lines “I am prepared for death,” “Death does not exist—well-known fact” and “Or/else glimpsed fleetingly out the window.” And the maskers and “Petersburg devilishness” have genealogies going back to at least half a dozen theatrical productions during the 1913 era involving seemingly everyone from Blok to Stravinsky, and from Kuzmin to Meyerhold. None of this can be dealt with here. What is important is to see that the process of revision has layered the material to create a voice which engages “revisionist” issues as understood by historians. The textual revisions are the means by which a genuine “historian’s” perspective emerges in the poem, and she is a historian, because through revising her narrative, she knows that the past is never fully reclaimed but can with new narrative tools be re-narrated as a more accurate re-presentation of it.

Let me review the ground I have covered. The incessant 20-year revision of *Poem Without a Hero* has fascinated commentators who have focused their explanations of the poet’s revisionary impulse as a quest for form and/or a strategy for oppositional speaking in a culture of absolutism

and censorship. I offer a third approach. An attempt to hold in mind the tri-partite totality of the poem has led me to conclude that it articulates a liminal event in the poet’s life that by her earliest readers was perceived to be emblematic of her society and culture as the poem astonishingly sought to reclaim a repressed and uncondonable past that simultaneously and ominously ushered in a dread-laden future. I suggest that the burden of the poet’s quest to articulate that astonishing event, especially in an unfolding dialogue with early readers, led her to ongoing revisions because she came to enact not only the role of historical witness—her stance in the great poem *Requiem* of 1938—but the role of historian. Therefore, from a historian’s stance, she wrestled with the essential rhetorical problematic that Hayden White identifies as the historian’s project itself, re-narrating the past, but her stance as historian took place in a culture of institutionalized, deliberate revisionism in the pejorative sense. Revision in this poem is the activity of a historian seeking to get right a 1941 liminal event during the siege of Leningrad where, even then, during the slight thaw in Stalinist culture, visions and re-visions of the past were always mine fields of personal risk. Just as significantly, the historian’s voice that emerges in the poem is a consequence of textual revisions, not as a precondition for them.

Even for historians who respond sensitively to Appleby, Hunt, et. al.’s dictum to engage explicitly the subject-object relationship, their roles as narrators are typically distinct from their historical objects. By contrast, Akhmatova as historian-cum-poet in the subject-narrator role, describes an event about Akhmatova, the woman besieged in Leningrad in 1941—her historical object. For this reason, I doubt she could ever be as sanguine as Appleby, Hunt, et. al., in their assurance of a “human capacity to discriminate between false and faithful representations of past reality.” Furthermore, the blatancy of Stalinist revisionism and the general paranoia of her friends to question it made any claim to “faithful representations” highly suspect. Finally, Appleby, Hunt, et. al., (1995) note in passing that a historian’s “drive for personal recognition . . . encourages myth-making,” by which they mean acknowledgment of one’s subjecthood in the curiosities one brings to the past object as part of one’s inquiry. I believe Akhmatova’s insistent habit in *Poem Without a Hero* of resisting personal myth-making manifests her struggle against exploiting herself as the subject of the past she tells.<sup>7</sup> The poem enacts the unresolved battle of a kind of Heisenberg who seeks by every possible ploy not to disturb the object of observation, but which at every point imposes the observer’s consciousness upon its object. Not only is the object a moving target; the consciousness of observation from revision

to revision is too. The Stalinist state sought an omniscient overview of all its subjects, and at several points during her life Stalin took a personal interest in Akhmatova with immediate and often dire consequences for her. Her narrator eschews novelistic omniscience in favor of a historian's quest to tell the past as manifested in the process and problems of revision.

Akhmatova's revisions are thus inextricably a historian's quest to tell the past and a poet's quest for form. Readers can only fully view with any completeness the resulting text, in all its maddening indeterminacy, by simultaneously viewing it as the construction of a verbal artifact (the work of textual revision) and the construction of a past event (historical revision). To hold the phenomenon of this two-leveled construction, one must also, I believe, hold in mind multiple versions of the text simultaneously, because to see her poem unfold across 20 years of ceaseless revisions is to see it as what in part it is, a meditation on the processes of making historical witness make meaning. T.A. Gorkova's editorial choice to print four versions responds to the poem's intrinsic diachronic construction.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Russian, whether by Akhmatova or others, are by Mager and appear in *Poem Without A Hero: Five Versions with annotations of the poema, "Prose about the poema: Pro Domo Mea," "From the ballet "The fortieth year"" and an anthology of related poems by Akhmatova and others* (Akhmatova, 1999-2006).

<sup>2</sup> РЕШКА in Russian means "tails" as in "heads or tails." Until 2004 this title has worried all translators, no one finding a single word to fit Akhmatova's colloquialism. Arndt uses "Tails" with a brief endnote to explain it. Kunitz and Haywood (Akhmatova, 1967) don't translate it at all. Mayhew and McNaughton (Akhmatova, 1989), like Hemschemeyer (Akhmatova, 1990, 1997a), opt for "The Other Side of the Coin." Nancy K Anderson (2004) found what Mager thinks is a near ideal solution in her phrase "Flip Side."

<sup>3</sup> I think naming the poem would alert censors to it as a dangerous work. See following note. Because some Klyuev works continued to be published under the Soviets while others were banned, by not including the name, Akhmatova may be banking on the fact that general readers (and potential censors) might not immediately know the source, whereas readers-in-the-know—her imagined audience—would. Having decided not to name the work by Klyuev, she may have decided that to name Pushkin's poem as in version 2, would call

attention to the missing title for Klyuev. These are speculations, and they do not explain why she did not restore Pushkin's title to version 4 which drops the Klyuev epigraph altogether.

<sup>4</sup> Klyuev's poem, "To The Slanderers of Art" (or "To The Blasphemers of Art," or "To The Revilers of Art"), is of tremendous interest in understanding both Klyuev's and Akhmatova's careers. Using the same Russian word, the title recalls the title of Pushkin's famous 1831 poem, "КЛЕВЕТНИКАМ РОССИИ" ("To the Slanderers of Russia"), which is a passionate defense of Russia's invasion of Poland against Western European intellectuals who had denounced Russia. Pushkin defends Russia for its autocratic acts; Klyuev defends Russian poetry against the state's autocratic acts.

One of the epigraphs to "SECOND PART: Intermezzo: FLIP SIDE" is based on lines 42-43 of Klyuev's poem. Both Reeder (1994) and Hemschemeyer (1997a) in their notes cite Richard McKane's note to his translation of *Poem Without a Hero* where he translates two excerpts from Klyuev's poem (*Anna Akhmatova: Selected Poems*, 335). These excerpts are lines 1-8 and 40-48 based on the Russian edition edited by Alexander Michaelov (St. Petersburg, 1999). Reeder (1994) states in her note:

Akhmatova says in her memoirs of Mandelstam that in 1933, when the Mandelstams were visiting Leningrad, Osip recited parts of Klyuev's poem to her. (p. 549)

In the notes to their translation of these memoirs, Anna Lisa Cone and Ronald Meyer cite the following passage in *My Half Century* (1997b):

I saw with my own eyes Klyuev's declaration at Varvara Klychkova's (sent from the camps, petitioning for amnesty): "I, sentenced for my poem 'The Blasphemers of Art,' and for some mad lines of my drafts . . ." (I took two lines as an epigraph for my "Tails") ["The Other Side of the Coin"]. (Akhmatova, 1997b, p. 373)

In Chapter 11, Reeder (1994) discusses the genesis and progress of *Poem Without A Hero*. Discussing the above-mentioned epigraph, she states:

The text is prefaced by an epigraph from a poem of Klyuev to Akhmatova, "The Revilers of Art." It is a superb tribute to Akhmatova and the horror of her silence, when she writes so little, and what she writes is not allowed to be published. He is angry that for ten years Akhmatova did not give a handful of oats to the horse of poetry, with its diamond-studded bridle, its golden-shod hooves. The poem ends with the comparison of Akhmatova to a jasmine bush . . . It was for this poem that Klyuev was sentenced to exile in the camps. (p. 420)

Reeder is not correct to say the jasmine line (40) comes at the end of the

poem; far from it, the Dante reference is in line 45 (not even the mid-point) and the poem is 114 lines altogether.

How much this 1933 poem was a direct cause of Klyuev's arrest and exile to Siberian camps in 1934 is open to dispute. According to Reeder (1994), he was shot in 1937. What is beyond dispute is that Akhmatova believed this poem was a direct cause, just as she believed her visit from Isaiah Berlin at the end of the war was a direct cause of the Cold War between England and the USSR. The Klyuev poem became part of her burden of responsibility to the past and to bear witness—a piece in her private mythology. Actually, even though his enthusiastic poems for Lenin (1918-19) were republished in a major collection in 1924 (Zavalishin, 1958, p. 96), Klyuev had become disenchanting with the Revolution due to the forced collectivization of the recently seized peasant lands. Poems siding with land-owning peasants were officially denounced as “Kulak literature.” In the late 1920s, he wrote several long anti-Bolshevik poems of great power: “The Village,” “Lament for Esinen,” and “Aftermath of Fire.” Contrary to Reeder, Zavalishin (1958) states:

In 1933, branded as a spokesman for the kulaks, Klyuev was exiled to Siberia. He died in 1937, on his way back to Moscow for a verdict concerning his future, and the “suitcase full of manuscripts” which he carried with him vanished without trace. (p. 100)

<sup>5</sup> Nikolay Aleksevich Klyuev (1887-1937) is a major poet of the early 20th century in Russia. His father was a Samoyed (Christianized northern Eskimo tribe), and Klyuev spent part of his childhood in the tents of nomad herdspeople. He was deeply attracted to the religion of the Old Believers but also knew the legends of Lapp and Siberian pagan gods. His mother traced her family to the 17th century Rus'. She “was an incessant weeper, a ‘bearer’ of laments or ‘wails’ of ancient Russian poetry” (Zavalishin 92).

Klyuev's poetry represents a deliberate assertion of northern peasant and tribal culture in opposition to Westernized intellectualism. Stravinsky's ballet, *The Rite of Spring*, is a musical analog, although his primitivism is a deliberate modernist concoction, rather than the expression of his personal cultural identity as it was for Klyuev. Klyuev initially embraced the Soviet Revolution, especially because the property of great estate owners was redistributed by the peasants whom the Bolsheviks encouraged, but later he rejected it. His poetry often fuses a celebration of raw northern landscapes, Old Believer rites and mysticism, the pantheons of indigenous pagan religions, and the earthy details of the yearly cycle of peasant life—farming, herding and hunting. He can be incantatory with an evocative epic sweep and celebratory imagery reminiscent of Neruda or Whitman, or he can be delicate and lyrical.

<sup>6</sup> To my knowledge Klyuev's poema has not been translated into English. I worked from the text given in *Сердце Единорога: Стихотворного и*

Поэмы. (*The Narwhal's Heart: Verses and Poems*) (Klyuev, 1999), and this is included in the manuscript (Akhmatova, 1999-2006).

<sup>7</sup> Another way to understand this point is to think of autobiography—a kind of history. Akhmatova admired Mandelstam's *The Noise of Time* and Pasternak's *Safe Passage*. In volume five, T.A. Gorkova collects a number of short prose pieces by Akhmatova under the title *Pro domo sua* (*About Their House*). In piece 13, which to Mager's knowledge has not been translated in English, Akhmatova comments on the autobiographies of Mandelstam and Pasternak, suggesting that in the 1950s she contemplated writing a similar work. Instead of an autobiography, she wrote *Poem Without a Hero*.

13>< Успеть написать одну сотую того, что думается, было бы счастьем. < . . . >  
Однако книжка—двоюродная сестра «Охранной гримоты» т «Шума времени»—должна возникнуть. Боюсь, что по сравнению со своими роскошными кузинами она будет казаться замарашкой, простушкой, золушкой и т.д.  
Оба они (и Борис, и Осип) писали свои книги, едва достигнув зрелости, когда все, о чем они вспоминают, было еще не так сказочно далеко. Но видеть без головокружения 90-е годы XIX века почти невозможно.

(Akhmatova, 1998-2005, Vol. 5, p. 171)

<13> If I succeed to write one-hundredth of what I think about writing, it would be happiness < . . . >

Even so, a book—a cousin to *Safe Conduct* and *The Noise of Time*—ought to stem from them. I fear that by comparison with its extravagant cousins it will seem like a frump, a simpleton, a Cinderella, etc.

Both of them (Boris and Osip) wrote their books barely arriving to adulthood, when all that they remembered was not yet a distant fairy tale. But to see now, without dizziness, the 1890s is almost impossible.

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