Sonja Magnuson, University of California, Santa Barbara

“I Drink to Our Ruined House”: Re-Constructing Private Space in Anna Akhmatova’s Later Poems

Virginia Woolf, in her 1929 essay “A Room of One’s Own,” theorized that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.”¹ This idea denotes possession of wealth and space as the pinnacle requirement for a successful female writer. Galina Rylkova contends that Woolf’s Russian contemporary, Anna Akhmatova, exemplifies Woolf’s conception of a female artist through her personal experience of mental illness, gendered criticism, and political dissidence. Rylkova distinguishes the special constraints on female artists in Woolf’s England and Akhmatova’s Russia:

Woolf’s statement, however correct in general, proved to be wrong when applied to successful women writers of Stalin’s and even Khrushchev’s Russia. In fact, evidence of their talent seemed to be in inverse proportion to the amount of privacy they were able to enjoy and the amount of living space they were free to occupy.²

Akhmatova’s hoarding, as described in Lydia Chukovskaya’s memoirs, made her “habitat” a sort of museum in which odd antiques and neglected trinkets served as a deconstruction of “Stalinist institutions”³ and an archive of Soviet collective memory. Fascination with cluttered, obscure objects framed Akhmatova’s political and artistic dissidence, as she employed a constructionist approach in which confined space and cluttered objects are the only true narrative of trauma and state terror. Repeated suggestions of isolation and a destabilized narrative voice in Akhmatova’s later poetry help to shape Akhmatova’s narrative of

² Ibid.
³ Ibid., 77.
an idealistic figure bound by special constraints. In this paper I will examine Anna Akhmatova’s poetic portrait of a female artist confined by the repressive influence of the open, public domains of state control and artistic tradition. For Akhmatova’s later poetry, the disassembling of a single subject is marked by clashing iconographic representations of confined space as a writer’s archive of collective memory.

Ryklova makes use of autobiographical information, memoirs, and the recollections of fellow Soviet writers in order to analyze Akhmatova’s obsession with collecting objects to construct private space. However, I would argue that Akhmatova’s tendency to reconstruct herself using fragments from her past had been evident in her poetry since the beginning of her artistic career. Nancy K. Anderson recounts Akhmatova’s decision to become a poet:

When she was seventeen, it came to her father’s attention that she was so unladylike as to aspire to recognition as a poet, and he warned her not to bring shame upon his name. She replied, “I don’t need your name” and promptly disowned the entire masculine side of her lineage by choosing as her literary name the maiden name of her maternal grandmother, Akhmatova.  

Akhmatova’s turn to the maternal figure as a creative influence demonstrates her alienation from her patriarchal roots; and it also explains her dislike of the title “poetess,” which she considered a condescending term that defined her by gender and delegitimized her work. A similar instance can be found in her poem “To the Muse” (Музе), where the typical female muse figure is condemned by the narrator as an isolating, toxic influence: “The Muse my sister came / and took the gift of gifts away.” The narrator blames the female muse for preventing her from fulfilling other roles and archetypes, such as “girls, wives, widows” (девушки, женщины, вдовы...), and

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5 Stanley Kunitz and Max Hayward, trans., *Poems of Akhmatova* (New York: Mariner Books, 1997), 49. All subsequent quotations in the Russian original and in English translation are from this source.
the narrator is relegated to the role of a slave to the muse. The restrictive nature of the muse as a
divine and inherently female source of inspiration would later cause Akhmatova to view the
Russian avant-garde’s obsession with Romanticism as reductive and dismissive of women’s role
in the literary process. Osip Mandelstam identified women’s poetry as the worst thing about
literary Moscow, for its “unconscious parody of poetic inventiveness as well as of
reminiscence,” so that “the majority of Muscovite poetesses are bruised by metaphor.”6 Although
Mandelstam and Akhmatova maintained artistic connections, Mandelstam’s essay on literary
Moscow is proof of the opinion that women writers were limited to using ready-made phrases
and expressions, and lacked the avant-garde’s ability to manipulate language in an innovative
way, as well as purging poetry of the dead associations of the past.

Both the Russian symbolists and futurists ignored Akhmatova’s conflict with the
gendering nature of art, and alienated her obsession with the physical present. To Akhmatova,
the symbolists and futurists’ conception of language as arbitrary appeared to be a revival of
outmoded Romanticism, to such an extent that she broke ties with the Symbolists when they
began to portray the symbolist Alexander Blok as a romantic hero. Instrumental in Akhmatova’s
perception of Blok was his wife, whom she saw as having been relegated to the role of a muse
when she fell under public scrutiny for her memoirs about Blok. The disassembling of the muse
character increased Akhmatova’s suspicion of the privileged role afforded to male artists in
tackling grand philosophical schemes, while female artists were expected to portray the
mundane. In this light, Akhmatova’s participation in the Acmeist movement with Osip
Mandelstam and Nikolay Gumilev marked the resurgence of the mundane or immediately
present objects, by conceiving of language as a complex architectural structure that cannot be

6 Osip Mandelstam, “Literary Moscow,” in Sidney Monas, trans., Osip Mandelstam, Selected
Essays Selected Essays (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1977), 134.
arbitrarily altered or manipulated. Nadezhda Mandelstam describes the Acmesists’ relation to language in the following way:

Three-dimensional space and life on earth were essential because he [Osip Mandelstam] wanted to do his duty by his “host”…In his view, the world was not hostile to the poet or—as he put it—the builder, because things are there to be built from.\(^7\)

Thus, the Acmeists reversed the symbolists’ and futurists’ idea of the poet as a re-possessor of diluted artistic conventions in favor of the pious artist actively engaged in manipulating language’s physiology. In Osip Mandelstam’s words, this was an acknowledgement of the “sovereignty of the law of identity” that “poetry acquires in lifelong feudal possession all that exists, without condition or limitation”\(^8\). The Acmeists’ humility and respect for the unknown emphasized the treatment of a single subject as a microcosm of a broader structure that subsists in all perceptions, however immediate or illusory, poetic or “non-poetic”\(^9\).

Akhmatova’s early poetry before 1918 treats a single subject with an anecdotal approach, although the “small poem” (маленькая поэма) creates a distance between objects and disassociates the narrator’s relationship to the subject. The poem, “Three Things Enchanted Him” (as it is commonly titled in English), begins with a thesis that functions as a promise to the reader. The three subjects that are immediately delineated, “white peacocks, evensong, / and faded maps of America,”\(^10\) contain no overt connection to each other, and are listed with a frankness that obscures the narrator. The repetition of “любил” (loved) maintains the stability of the subject, while the shift between “enchant” and “couldn’t stand”\(^11\) incorporates linguistic

\(^7\) Kunitz and Hayward, 12.
\(^8\) Mandelstam, 131.
\(^9\) Kunitz and Hayward, 9.
\(^10\) Ibid.
\(^11\) Kunitz and Hayward, 9.
variety but disrupts a continuous narrative. The introduction of “womanish hysteria”12 in the English text is harsher and more sudden than in the Russian original, which uses the more continuous addition, “и женской истерии”13 (and female hysterics). The emergence of the feminine figure after the ellipses in the final line, “…and he was tied to me” (...а я была его женой)14, notes the absence of narrative continuity, so that the speaker shows enters as the pious observer before the subject and is hesitant to announce their voyeurism. Although the speaker’s intrusion allows her to become the new subject, she is still absorbed into the list of objects by using the possessive “его” to note her relationship to the former subject.

This early poem maintains a definitive structure by delineating a thesis that describes the relationship between the items in the list. The irony of the female speaker’s intrusion into the poem expresses a desire to enter the taxonomic structure that the male figure inhabits, although the two remain alienated from each other by the poem’s conception of space: “womanish hysteria” is the final faculty of the speaker listed, and portrays the speaker, although she cannot fully claim her actions due to the spatial restraint of the ellipses. The ellipses, then, are also ironic in their intention and ultimate failure to suggest a continuation, since the conjunction at the beginning of the clause interrupts a relationship between the woman’s behavior and the woman herself.

The distance between speaker and object is heightened in Akhmatova’s later poems. Marina Tsvetaeva identified Akhmatova as a “poet without a history,”15 for her determination of style at a young age and maturity of voice. There is no doubt, however, that the ending of

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12 Kunitz and Hayward, 9.
13 Kunitz and Hayward, 9.
14 Ibid.
Akhmatova’s “silent period” (1922-1936) transformed her style to one full of pastiches, in which she quoted from other texts and expressed mediated portrayals of multiple subjects within one poem. The beginning of the poem, “Northern Elegy,” asserts the effect of events on Akhmatova’s life and poetry during her silent period: “I, like a river / Have been turned by the harsh epoch.”\(^{16}\) This shift is reflected in a biographical sketch:

Thus the later [Akhmatova] leaves the genre of the “erotic diary” (любовный дневник)—a genre in which she knows no rivals and which she left, perhaps, even with some regret and a backward glance, and switches to meditations on the role and fate of the poet, on the craft, to lightly sketched, broad canvases.\(^ {17}\)

Although Akhmatova’s later poetry would occasionally return to the short narrative poem (маленькая поэма), her sketches of objects or anecdotes pivoted toward a single object or speaker that wanders through a waste land of dispossessed spectacles and can only hypothesize about stepping outside of itself. As a result, her later poems meander between unconnected places and frequently place the speaker as the last setting, so that identity alone details a topographical understanding of setting.

Amert describes Akhmatova’s post-WWII poetry as a pilgrimage unable to occur, given the oppressive state of concentrated space. Memory, then, is restructured based on Akhmatova’s recollections in her earlier poems with a degree of asceticism. The poem “This Cruel Age Has Deflected Me” begins with an image of a river diverted from its course. The implication here is that the river has a predestined course of action that is disturbed when it is deflected to a parallel reality in a sister channel (в другое русло). The identity and origin of the speaker and the associated river are never expressed, although some concept of past is expressed in the line,

\(^{16}\) Kunitz and Hayward, 129.
\(^{17}\) Ibid., 4.
“How many spectacles I’ve missed” (О, как я много зрелищ пропустила). It becomes apparent, however, that the speaker is a writer or an artist haunted by a metaphysical specter of regret for having remained silent, to the extent that the artist experiences a usurping (заняла) of her voice. The poem shifts between the voices of the writer referenced, the “certain woman” (женщина какая-то), and the actual speaker. The abrupt shifting within the poem to a grave marks the speaker’s disassociation of life and death and prompts the proclamation, “I know beginnings, I know endings too” (Мне ведомы начала и концы). She seems unable to establish a logical connection between the two states and, thus, combines them in the phrase “life-in-death” (жизнь после конца). The destabilization of temporal connections between life and death makes the final line jarring in its disconnection from the divergent speaker’s previous assertion: “The grave I go to will not be my own” (Я не в свою, увы, могилу ляжу). Although Akhmatova delineates a stylistic death in her reference to the writer's grave, which ends the quest narrative of the river, it appears as an unsatisfactory conclusion. Although the speaker prophesies that her death will be consumed by her public identity, the private identity that she maintains ultimately speculates that stepping outside of herself will lead only to self-alienation.

Akhmatova's texturing of the public self as erratic and destabilized recalls Fyodor Dostoevsky's construction of Petersburg as a suffocating and material-based space. Akhmatova considered Dostoevsky her main literary influence, and named him the writer to whom she felt most indebted, especially in iconography, which Amert describes as follows: “icon, particularly the iconographic representation of the Madonna, appears...as a religious-aesthetic symbol of

18 Kunitz and Hayward, 129.
19 Kunitz and Hayward, 129.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
great importance—a literal image of beauty toward which man turns in reverence and longing."

Much like Dostoevsky's character of Sonya in *Crime and Punishment*, or Shatov in *The Devils*, Akhmatova’s Cleopatra is portrayed as a noble, downtrodden bastion of moral purity against a depraved landscape. Cleopatra approaches Caesar with submission and “weeps on her knees before him [Augustus]” (на коленях перед августом слезы лила), while she serves as the intermediary of affection for Antony by kissing his “dead lips” (целовала Антония мертвые губы). The poem is structured as a list with the adverb “already” (уже) preceding Cleopatra’s first two actions, so the submission to male figures is established as an imperative for the fallen woman. As the poem continues, the characters that attempt to humiliate Cleopatra become more transparent. The “last man to be ravished by her beauty” (входит последний плененный ее красотою) exists within a power hierarchy of male characters in the poem, and he warns Cleopatra, “You must walk before him, as a slave, in the triumph” (Тебя как рабыню…в триумфе пошлет пред собою). It is clear that Cleopatra is instructed to maintain public dignity in order to appear to the absent “he” as a triumphant slave, although she consciously rejects this notion of nobility and recreates her own pride in the contrasting image, “But the slope of her swan’s neck is tranquil as ever” (Но шеи лебяжьей все так же спокоен наклон). The anonymous “they” have the power to penetrate the private sphere and threaten Cleopatra’s maternity by putting “her children in chains” (а детей закуют), although “they” cannot complete any destruction of the private self. Although Cleopatra is projected to become complacent to an amorphous collective “they,” she retains a part of herself in her only possession, the black serpent, which serves as a shield between her and her oppressors. The

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22 Amert, 87.
23 Kunitz and Hayward, 95.
24 Ibid.
creation of the female character as a clever muse distinguishes Akhmatova’s iconography from Dostoevsky’s; whereas Dostoevsky believes that the downtrodden icon regains dignity as an aesthetic portrait of beauty, Akhmatova’s Cleopatra regains dignity by using an object to create distance between her and her oppressors.

The subject of the mythological or historical female icon sets up an intermediary between the real and the unreal. For Akhmatova, it is impossible to know whether the representation of the female artist within a public sphere represents the private, constructed identity of the female artist. Akhmatova’s development as a poet from the rise of the avant-garde to the mid-Soviet period reveals that her relationship to her poetic subject is frequently connected to her allocated range for expression. Whereas her original involvement in the Acmeist movement shaped her poetry into an aesthetic practice with a defined distance between the speaker and the subject, her later poetry destabilizes the identity of the speaker. The consequential multiple identities of the speaker then juxtapose the expected behavior of the female artist in a public setting against the more complex and confessional female voice represented to the reader. Tsvetaeva’s recognition of Akhmatova as a “poet without a history” comments on the difficulty of construing any true identity or style within Akhmatova’s poetry, since she was so often subjected to manipulation by both the Soviet public and her fellow artists. Akhmatova’s structuring of an ideal through established objects or character traits is a response to both Socialist realism and the avant-garde’s construction of a symbolic character from abstract ideals of morality and honesty. Ironically, the Soviet government’s attack on Akhmatova as “a nun and a whore” was a misappropriation of critic Boris Eikhenbaum’s analysis of Akhmatova’s heroines as “half ‘harlot’ with stormy

passion and half a ‘beggar nun’ able to pray to God for forgiveness.” Both criticisms of Akhmatova’s dialogic imagination further emphasize her method of delegitimizing patriarchy for its loss of authority when abstracted from the private conception of the father to the public domain of the state. In this respect, the open space becomes more repressive for its lack of a singular identity, whereas a closed room places the artist in an area where disorganized spaces and objects create a labyrinth for the artist to structure and navigate. Akhmatova’s effort to de-romanticize the noble, downtrodden woman, and replace her with a complex character structured around present objects and visible character quirks, captures her own life story of a female artist stricken with simultaneous desires for public reputation and genuine self-expression.

26 Ibid.
Works Cited


