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**“WHO ORGANIZED THE STANDING OVATION?”:
STALIN, AKHMATOVA, AND SHAKESPEARE**

I

We'll be looking at a famous one-liner, representing a high point in Anna Akhmatova's dramatic interactions with Stalin. As is well known, in August 1946, the poet was singled out, along with Mikhail Zoshchenko, for crushing Party criticism, delivered by Andrei Zhdanov, behind whom loomed Stalin himself. He is said to have been incensed by the standing ovation that greeted Akhmatova's appearance and recital in a Moscow concert hall earlier that year. Akhmatova and some of her friends claimed to know the dictator's exact words that unleashed the official attack on her: “Kto organizoval vstavanie?!” (literally, “Who organized the standing-up?!”).

(1) – This is me earning the Decree, -- Akhmatova would say about a photograph taken at one of the evening concerts in Moscow in the spring of 1946 <...> It was rumored that Stalin was enraged by the enthusiasm with which the audience received Akhmatova. According to one version, he asked, after some such event: "Who arranged the standing-up?" (N. Glen).

(2) Akhmatova believed that <...> Stalin was jealous of the ovation she got: in April 1946, Akhmatova recited her poems in Moscow, and the audience applauded on their feet. Such applause was due, according to Stalin, to only one person, himself – and suddenly the crowd went ahead and applauded some poetess (L. Chukovskaia).

(3) Zoshchenko related that the Decree was the result of Zhdanov's report to the boss himself. The emphasis was on the concert at the Polytechnic, where the entire hall stood up when Akhmatova appeared on the stage. Allegedly, the boss asked: “Who organized the standing-up?” This sounds like a “quotation,” as Pasternak used to say, i. e. this is a phrase from the vocabulary of the person to whom it is ascribed (N. Mandel'shtam).

Most of those who report the *dictum* agree in ascribing it to Stalin, – with careful reservations, using words like *allegedly*, *supposedly*, *as rumor would have it*. Nadezhda Mandel'shtam stresses that the words did sound *tsitatno*, “quotation-like,” -- something that is relevant to my today's topic, dealing with (inter)textuality, rather than with the phenomenon of the purges per se.

Remarkably, depending of the attribution, the meaning of the remark generates different connotations.

If we take it to have been actually authored by Stalin, it strikes us with its Grand-Inquisitorial overtones: those who have plotted the unauthorized demonstration must be found and punished; the Central Committee should issue a harsh Decree and send Zhdanov to Leningrad empowering him to undertake the necessary repressive measures. This is a program that is crystal clear, ominously resolute and completely devoid of the power-playfulness characteristic of some of Stalin's real and apocryphal statements.¹

These meanings do not disappear if we see the remark as coined by the poet herself – and ascribed to Stalin, -- as they confirm her position of a victim of Stalinist repressions. Only in this case, other connotations come to the fore: the playful, ironic ones, with the joke this time being

Allusions to *Macbeth*, beginning with a 1921 poem and all the way to the much later *Poem Without a Hero* and the cycle “Shipovnik tsvetet,” have been identified by the commentators. These involve:

Item: the bloodied hands (a nod to Lady Macbeth; V, 1):

- (5) В крови невинной маленькие руки,
Седая прядь над розовым виском;
(«Пусть голоса органа снова грянут...»)

Little hands covered by innocent blood, A strand of gray hair over the pink temple (“Let the voices of the organ sound loudly again...”).

Cf. *Macbeth*, V, 1:

- Doctor*
- (6) What is it she does now? Look, how **she rubs her hands**.
Gentlewoman

It is an accustomed action with her, **to seem thus washing her hands**: I have known her continue in this a quarter of an hour.

Lady Macbeth

Yet **here's a spot** <...> Out, **damned spot! out, I say!** <...> What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account?--**Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him** <...> What, **will these hands ne'er be clean?** <...> **Here's the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand**. Oh, oh, oh! <...> **Wash your hands**, put on your nightgown; look not so pale.--I tell you yet again, Banquo's buried; he cannot come out on's grave <...> To bed, to bed! there's knocking at the gate: come, come, come, come, **give me your hand**. What's done cannot be undone. --

Item: a ghost in a mirror (inspired by that of Banquo; IV, 1):

- (7) Есть в этом мире пожалеть о чем,
И вот идет шекспировская драма,
И страшен **призрак в зеркале чужом**.
(«Меня и этот голос не обманет...», 1956);

There are things in this world to miss/grieve for, And lo, a Shakespearean drama is afoot, And the ghost in an alien mirror is scary (“I won’t be fooled by this voice...”; 1956).

Cf. *Macbeth*, IV, 1:

- (8) Thou art too like the spirit of Banquo. Down!
Thy crown does sear mine eyeballs. And thy hair,
Thou other gold-bound brow, is like the first.
A third is like the former.—Filthy hags!
Why do you show me this? A fourth? Start, eyes! <...>
And yet the eighth appears, **who bears a glass**
Which shows me many more, and some I see
That **twofold balls and treble scepters carry**.
Horrible sight! Now I see ’tis true;
For the blood-boltered Banquo smiles upon me
And points at them for his.

Item: guests with scepters etc. in Ch. I of *A Poem Without a Hero*:

- (9) И плащи, и **жезлы**, и **венцы**

Knowing how insecure his position is, he has every reason to suspect the lords. It is indeed possible that they have arranged the apparition – that one of them has dressed him[=mself up or has dressed up an actor.

“Which of you have done this?”

But the lords have no idea what he is talking about (*Olesha*. 160-161).

Here Olesha is relishing the scene that follows the episode of Macbeth’s conferring with the murderers who have just reported that Banquo has indeed been killed on his orders. And now, in the presence of the lords, he is haunted by the ghost -- which he is the only one to see -- of Banquo occupying the seat at the head of the table, that is Macbeth’s royal seat. Scared, he repeatedly declines the lords’ invitation to take it. And finally asks: “Which of you have done this?”

Here is the scene, with some cuts:

(13)

SCENE IV. Hall in the palace.

A banquet prepared. Enter Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Ross, Lennox, Lords, and Attendants

Macbeth

You know your own degrees; sit down: at first

And last the hearty welcome.

Lords

Thanks to your majesty.

Macbeth

Ourself will mingle with society,

And play the humble host <...>

Lennox

May't please your highness sit.

The Ghost of Banquo enters, and sits in Macbeth's place

Macbeth

Here had we now our country's honour roof'd,
Were the graced person of our Banquo present;
Who may I rather challenge for unkindness
Than pity for mischance!

Ross

His absence, sir,
Lays blame upon his promise. **Please't your highness
To grace us with your royal company.**

Macbeth

The table's full.

Lennox

Here is a place reserved, sir.

Macbeth

Where?

Lennox

Here, my good lord. What is't that moves your highness?

Macbeth

Which of you have done this?

Lords

What, my good lord?

The similarity between the line *Which of you have done this?* (*Кто это сделал?* -- in Pasternak’s translation) and *Кто организовал вставание?* (Who organized the standing-up?) is obvious, uncanny, and telling.

Akhmatova, -- thoroughly familiar as she was with the play in general and this scene, much referenced by her, in particular, -- was clearly in a position to borrow the line, adapt it to the occasion and ascribe to Stalin. Alternatively, had the line, in fact, come from Stalin, she would be likely to comment on the striking similarity between the two utterances. But she never did, either in the 1940s or later, publicly or privately, orally or in writing. Were the words really Stalin's, pointing out their Macbethan ring would have been an impressive coup for Akhmatova. On the contrary, if she was the author, such an observation would give her away and let Stalin off the hook.

On the subject of "being given away," let me quote Anatolii Naiman, one of my favorite and staunch opponents, who, however, provides valuable ammunition for my argument. In his *Remembering Anna Akhmatova*, he reports a different occasion on which she practically gave herself away by ascribing to some Italian critics -- and though them to Dante himself -- an inordinate praise of her.

(14) [W]hen a large group of poets went to Italy at the invitation of their Writer's Union and she was not allowed to go, she said, smiling artfully, "The Italian newspapers are saying that they would rather see Alighieri's sister than his namesake." And to make this seem more plausible she repeated in Italian, "La suora di colui" ("His sister"). By "namesake" she meant Margarita Aliger, who had gone to Rome, but there was no point in inquiring which Italian newspapers had said this. «La suora di colui» is the Moon in Canto XXIII of *Il Purgatorio*, his sister -- the Sun's.

And I interpreted what she said in the same way when, returning from doing an errand for her on my bicycle at Komarovo, I heard, "Not for nothing do people call you Hermes." There were no other "people," apart from herself, to be seen (Eric Nayman, *Remembering Anna Akhmatova*, 1989: 82).

If not a definitive proof, the Macbethan parallel is, I believe, a potent argument in favor of attributing the *vstavanie* remark to Akhmatova, -- which, in my view, only adds to her achievement as a wordsmith.

To sum up this anecdote in more theoretical terms:

- The evidence for the intertextual link is circumstantial but strong, strong but circumstantial.

- The reference, if it is there, is clearly a secret one, not meant to be noticed by the reader; once identified, it changes the picture radically but does not destroy it -- in fact, rather enriches it.

- The link is between an utterance claimed to be a part of "real life" -- but most likely a newly coined verbal artefact -- and a remote literary source; it thus offers a perfect instance of *zhiznetvorchestvo*, life-creation, or life-into-art strategy.

And it is on some of the *zhiznetvorcheskie* issues that I'd like to focus in what remains to be said today.

IV

I don't know whether it is in your curriculum, but as I was preparing this talk, I looked up Akhmatova in the English-language Wikipedia and discovered there a link to my Akhmatoclastic article, "The Obverse of Stalinism: Akhmatova's self-serving charisma of selflessness." In Russian, I have published many more of those and have been time and again reviled for my demythologizing readings of her life and works.

I'd like to point out to my opponents that my take on her, based on scrutinizing her *zhiznetvorcheskii* myth, is much more flattering to her than theirs. How come? Here is how. As they insist that everything she ever wrote, said, gestured, or silently implied was not a myth but the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help her God, they are actually denying her a major part of her creativity.

My first test case, of the problematic authorship of the *vstavanie* line, was taken from "reality," -- even if it proved to be also somewhat literary. The second case will be of the opposite kind -- literary proper: from the famous finale of her longer poem *Requiem*'s Epilogue.

(15)

А если когда-нибудь в этой стране
Воздвигнуть задумают памятник мне,
Согласье на это даю торжество,
Но только с условием -- не ставить его
Ни около моря, где я родилась:
(Последняя с морем разорвана связь),
Ни в царском саду у заветного пня,
Где тень безутешная ищет меня,
А здесь, где стояла я триста часов
И где для меня не открыли засов

And if someday in this country
They decide to erect a monument to me,
I give my consent to this festivity
But only on this condition -- not to build it
By the sea where I was born,
(I have severed my last ties with the sea),
Nor in the Tsar's Park by the hallowed stump
Where an inconsolable shadow is looking for me;
But here, where I stood for three hundred hours
And no one for me did slid open the bolt.

I always felt there was something very remarkable -- brilliant, yet strange, almost fishy -- about this sequence, especially the part about the choice of place for erecting the monument. Such acute immediate readerly reactions must be treasured and preserved because they are usually quite relevant but, alas, susceptible to being repressed by received wisdom and canonized interpretation. Here, the canon is of course that of Akhmatova the selfless and heroic victim/survivor of Stalinism.

In a sense, this is similar to the case of the famous “humane” passage in Gogol’s “Overcoat,” which was seen as a *humane* pronouncement by the *humane* Gogol of his *humane* championing of the *humane* underdog, the Little Man of Russian literature, Akakii Akakievich. Until, of course, Boris Eikhenbaum came along and taught us that the passage was just another verbal tune among the many stylistic registers of the text. Because, as he provocatively – and programmatically -- stated, everything in a literary text is *postroenie i igra*, construction and play.

To quote another theoretical eminence, Michael Riffaterre, our “strange” first impressions are reactions to what he, in his *Semiotics of Poetry*, called the *ungrammaticalities* of the poetic text, which are evidence that precisely there something crucially creative is at play. Ungrammaticalities are clues that yield, on a second reading, an understanding of the deep structure and *significance* of the text.

By the time I started thinking about these striking lines from *Requiem* I already had an idea of how to read Akhmatova’s poetry as part of her *zhiznetvorchestvo* and in light of her subsequent cult. Her core invariants I defined as a narcissistic will to power and self-promotion under the guise of weakness, poverty, self-abnegation etc. For this, I was of course much attacked on both continents. Let me stress, that at issue here is not a simple difference of opinion but an important distinction between semantics and pragmatics in the study of poetry, especially the poetry of those authors who choose the path of *zhiznetvorchestvo*.

The proof of the text – and its *plaisir* – is, of course, in its close reading, and I tried it on these lines several times over the years.

My first attempt at figuring out what was so remarkable there zeroed in on the convoluted pattern of the speaker’s articulated desire. Namely, on the peculiar way the civic insistence on sharing the *common* fate of Stalin’s victims was combined with a rather *unique* sort of “feminine

willfulness, even capriciousness.” That stance is of course quite characteristic of Akhmatova in general. Accordingly, her choice of site and design for the monument follows the whimsical pattern of “I want this but not that, I want it in this way but not in that way.”

I wrote that up, published -- and got a lot of flak for daring to find fault with the lines of Akhmatova the heroine of resistance. In response, I stressed the importance of paying attention to the *specific way* she voiced that resistance -- as opposed to merely noticing the *generic* resistance as such. And there the matters stood for a while, without convincing my opponents, in particular the now late Benedict Sarnov.

To strengthen my position, I decided to study these lines in a relevant broader context: the “monument” topos that goes back to Pushkin, Derzhavin and Horace -- by way of Mayakovsky, Esenin, Briusov and some others. I’ll spare you the many twists of this study (my article is available in Russian, including online), among them the tell-tale fact that Akhmatova envisages a real physical -- bronze monument -- not a figurative poetic one, as would befit the Horatian tradition.

What’s even more interesting, is that her “willfulness” does not stop at the use of the whimsical pattern “not this or that but only that other thing.” By requesting a particular site for her monument she actually goes beyond the extant and familiar “monument topos”, which does not involve any choice-making, just the proud statement of an already achieved poetic status. She thus transforms this monument topos, by fusing it with another archetypal motif, let’s call it “sepulchral,” the topos of “death and grave,” which does offer such options. Let me stress, that these are two different *topoi*, and Akhmatova willfully – creatively – mixes the two.

To illustrate the sepulchral topos, with its insistence on posthumous choices, let me quote two classical examples: Pushkin’s “Brozhu li ia vdol’ ulits shumnykh...” [Whether Wandering Along Noisy Streets...; 1830] (13) and Lermontov’s Vykhozhu odin ia na dorogu...” [Alone I Come out Onto the Road; 1841] (14):

(16)

И хоть бесчувственному телу
Равно повсюду истлевать,
Но **ближе к милому пределу**
Мне все б хотелось почивать.
И пусть у гробового входа
Младая будет жизнь играть,
И равнодушная природа
Красою вечною сиять.

And although to the senseless body
It is indifferent wherever it rots,
Yet **closer to my beloved countryside**
I still would prefer to rest.
And **let it be**, beside the grave's vault
That young life forever will be playing,
And indifferent nature
Be shining in eternal beauty.

(17)

Я ищу свободы и покоя;
Я б хотел забыться и заснуть...
Но не тем холодным сном могилы:
Я б желал навеки так заснуть,
Чтоб в груди дремали жизни силы,
Чтоб дыша вздымалась тихо грудь;
Чтоб всю ночь, весь день мой слух лелея,
Про любовь мне сладкий голос пел;

Надо мной **чтоб** вечно зеленея,
Темный дуб склонялся и шумел.
I seek for freedom and peace;
I would like to find oblivion and to fall asleep...
But not with the cold sleep of the grave:
I would like to fall asleep forever **in such a way**,
So that the forces of life would slumber in my breast,
And that it would heave in gentle breathing;
So that an enchanting voice, delighting my ear,

Would sing to me of love day and night;
And, forever green, over me

A dark oak **would** bend and rustle.

In Russian poetry there are more instances of this motif: “the poet’s foreseeing his/her death of choice,” notably the very influential ones from Kuzmin:

(18)

Сладко умереть
на поле битвы <...>
Сладко умереть
маститым старцем <...>
Но еще слаще, еще мудрее,
истративши все именье <...>
поужинать
и, прочитав рассказ Апулея в сто первый раз,

в теплой душистой ванне,
не слыша никаких прощаний,
открыть себе жилы;
и чтоб в длинное окно у потолка
пахло левкоями,
светила заря,
и вдалеке были слышны флейты.

and Gumilev:

(19)

И умру я не на постели,
При нотариусе и враче,
А в какой-нибудь дикой щели,
Утонувшей в густом плюше,

Чтоб войти **не во всем** открытый,
Протестантский, прибранный рай,
А туда, где разбойник, мытарь
И блудница крикнут: вставай!

I’ll skip analyzing these, but stress their distinct focus on the, so to speak, private. personal choice of the ‘mode of dying’ – not on choosing the site and shape of the monument, which is a different, public affair.

What makes Akhmatova’s capriciousness both so pronounced (that is, defamiliarized, equals ungrammatical) and yet so persuasive (that is, naturalized, equals, in Riffaterrean terms, converted), in a word, poetically successful? Precisely the fact that, in order to transcend/reshape one topos, the monument one, she resorts to another, different, yet cognate one – the sepulchral, or gravesite, which, being a ready-made, familiar motif, artistically legitimizes her desire to pick and choose.

[As I looked into these “posthumous” topoi, I realized there was a third cognate one, which was probably also instrumental in helping Akhmatova naturalize her “willfulness.” It is the “testamental,” topos, where the poet, imagining his/her death, outlines the various desires and agendas to be fulfilled by posterity, be they personal, literary, or political, including sometimes the wish that a street or city be renamed after the late poet.]

V

Leaving aside the many subtleties of Akhmatova’s “Epilogue” and its intricate play of desires and preconditions, let’s proceed to some conclusions.

After I gave a paper on the subject in Moscow, at the *Lotmanovskie chteniia* several years ago, a colleague, came up to me with a most unexpected remark. She said: “What did you want to say – that she was bad, *plokhaia*?” This is a very telling reaction. For this kind of scholar, in

contemplating Akhmatova, there are only two possible tacks: finding her good (obviously, the right one) or bad (obviously, wrong).

Thus predisposed, essentially prejudiced, such a scholar fails to see that I actually was able to pinpoint and demonstrate some heretofore undetected aspects of the poet's creativity, her art. In fact, I showed how original and innovative she was. But for that I had, of course, to abandon the beaten path of unconditional, uncritical, incurious and therefore unscholarly admiration for the poet as traditionally perceived and to take the high road (some would say, low) of surprised reaction, curiosity, probing and, yes, demythologization.

I hope I succeeded today in demonstrating the advantages of such an approach. If you simply side with the idealized image of the author, imposed on us by his/her own pragmatic strategies, we rob ourselves, as scholars, of an opportunity to actually study that image, which is a valuable artefact. We let ourselves be co-opted by the posthumous estate of the poet (the AAA institution, as I dubbed in an early piece) and start behaving like cult followers, groupies, practitioners of a faith, rather than like scholars, anthropologists, historians of religion.

Speaking in familiar literary-theoretical terms, it's still the same good old fallacy of believing that everything in the poetic text is *natural*, rather than *constructed*. Once, prodded by the Formalists, we allowed ourselves to study the patterns and devices underpinning the syntax (structure) and semantics (tropology) of the literary text, its literariness. It is now time to realize that *zhiznetvorcheskie* strategies are also *postroenie i igra*, that they rely on similar devices, techniques, fictions, tropes, and that our task is not to perpetuate the belief in their *naturalness* but, on the contrary, to see, appreciate and analyze their *literariness*, *artfulness*, *artifice* -- and *naturalization*. Otherwise, we miss the best -- *artistic* -- part of it. The relationship between the poet and the reader, i. e. the *pragmatic* aspect of poetry, is no less subject to structural analysis than rhymes, meters, metaphors and other strictly textual poetic devices.

Among the poets with a strong *zhiznetvorcheskii* component, Akhmatova and Khlebnikov seem to have been especially -- outrageously -- successful in turning the corresponding disciplines into extensions of their cults. I call this school of study *solidarnoe chtenie*, *co-opted reading*. Akhmatologists and Klebnikologists tend to take every word -- poetic, artistic -- of these masters of self-promotion literally, at face value. You can hear them saying, for instance, that Khlebnikov discovered the laws of time and such like. As a result, the actual serious study of the rich poetic oeuvre of such poets as Akhmatova and Khlebnikov remains in its infancy -- hampered by the self-imposed limits of following strictly in the footsteps of the authors. *Shag v storony rassmatrivaetsia kak pobeg*, "A step sideways is treated as flight," in the parlance of Soviet-time gulag-guards.

Looking on the positive side, this leaves a vast field open for our study, practically unexplored -- up for grabs. But only so if you come to it with open eyes and thus ready to discover the "bad" -- actually, exciting -- truths.

¹ Ср.

- Других писателей у меня для вас нет, работайте с этими (А. А. Фадееву или Д. И. Поликарпову).

- Что будем делать [с маршалом Рокоссовским, на которого доносят, что он завел любовницу – знаменитую актрису Валентину Серову]? Завидовать будем.

- Эту книжку [«С тобой и без тебя» Конст. Симонова] достаточно было бы издать тиражом в два экземпляра – один для нее [той же Валентины Серовой], один для него (А. А. Жданову).

² Впрочем, предлагалась и осмысление вставания как реально организованного:

«Любопытен известный эпизод со "вставанием" и с апокрифическим вопросом Сталина: "Кто организовал вставание?". Иосиф Виссарионович со своей дьявольской проницательностью, вероятно, и здесь оказался прав: вставание, скорее всего, было организовано. Технику "организации" легко можно себе представить: "коллективная Лидия Корнеевна" кому надо позвонила, кто-то прошелся по рядам, кто-то молча подал пример, одним из первых поднявшись со стула, -- а разработано все это было, вероятно, самой Анной Андреевной, исподволь внушившей мысль о желательности вставания конфиденстам и confidentкам. Мастерский ход, который игрок гроссмейстерского класса Сталин сразу же разгадал. И ответил памятным, слишком памятным контрударом». (*Топоров 1998*)