

Synopsis

A Few Essential Introductory Words

This is the story of a tragic fate from which the irrefutable impression of radiant happiness and victory emerges.

Not because the periods of happiness were so long and powerful that they overwhelmed the sorrow—on the contrary: joy lasts only moments, days, or at best weeks, while on the other hand sorrow is constant: “sorrow then, sorrow now, sorrow without end.”

But because, apparently, the tragedy finds expression in poetry that is stronger than the fact of that tragedy. It finds expression in a harmony that prevails over fate. It finds expression in the creative act that leads the way out of death’s domain.

The story has to confirm this state of affairs—it has to guide the viewer to the images that confirm it, and emphasize those images.

The poet formed her credo when she was 25, with a fierce candidness that did not allow for a backward glance:

*I’ve stopped smiling now,
a chill wind freezes my lips,
THERE’S ONE HOPE LESS NOW,
ONE SONG MORE.
AND IN SPITE OF MYSELF I’LL GIVE
THAT SONG UP TO JEERS AND CURSES,
because a lover’s silence is
unbearably painful to the heart.*

The conditions that they at the root of “Requiem” and other poems of suffering bring tragedy—in both the literal and the literary senses of the word—to the peak of expressiveness. But at the same time there is the triumph of:

*The cold, pure, bright flame
of my victory over fate.*

The message Anna Akhmatova gets out to people is as grand as, if not grander than, that of the great male Russian writers: LIFE IS FULL OF GREAT SUFFERING, UNBEARABLE PAIN, THE MOST EXTREME HUMILIATION, BUT A HUMAN BEING IS CAPABLE OF OVERCOMING ALL THIS. INDEED, THAT’S WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A HUMAN BEING.

In contrast to the men writers, Akhmatova doesn’t preach and teach this, but simply lives the life that demonstrates it, or as they used to say in past times about poets, she “sings this life.”

The weight always has to be shifted away from Akhmatova the grieving, keening, sorrowful, and towards Akhtmaova the victorious, joyous, full of happiness that almost

seems to have nothing to do with that other Akhmatova and independent of her, creating out of this happiness something that never existed before.

This figure embodies tragedy, but is by no means a champion of suffering; on the contrary, it is an extraordinarily attractive, lively personality in the highest degree, so that I, a young man, always felt I wanted to be in her presence.

This must become the guiding principle in choosing scenes and images—and most importantly, their sequence—from the synopsis that follows. The synopsis offers what amounts to a generous helping such scenes and images, more than are needed, although it is important to note that they are organized along specific plot lines. Some of them can—and certain of them must—appear twice, or even three times, “playing” differently at different moments of the story.

Note: With the exception of cases so noted, the lines of poems within the synopsis aren't spoken, but are strictly part of the description of the scene.

Last but not least:

Things (or scenery, or situations) named by the poet can come to life. Magic, if you like—but above all “Adamism”—Adam names a bird “dove” and it becomes a dove, cooing and flying like a dove. (Something like in 8 1/2, where during the first half of the film the main character moves by objects that in the second half find their own rhythm and begin to “move” themselves.) It would be good to find some method, even a formal one if there is no good way to do it naturally, that would do the same thing in this film. For example: a frame with a maple tree, its leafy branches motionless over the water—then the leaves start to fall, but what sets them in motion is a voice saying “maple leaves are falling already on the swans' pond.” But everything else in the frame remains frozen. (it doesn't have to be exactly this way—but something along these lines.)

1.

Northern Elegies.

First elegy

Ancestors. The dead. All Souls.

1870-1890.

Petersburg, Liteiny Prospect (it would be good to find photographs showing the odd-numbered side before it was built up).

[key lines] 1) And the windows' glass was as dark as a mineshaft, / and in it a glimpse of something that happened, / better not to look at. 2) The mirrors' walnut frames, / astounded by Karenina's beauty.

Second elegy.

Hamlet and Ophelia, exchanging roles, confessing to one another.

1910s.

Tauric Chersonesos (Archers' Bay). Tsarskoe Selo (the formal part)

[key line] “Or by a reflection in someone else's mirror.”

Third elegy.

Gumilev. Archetypal man. Ancient tragedy as the essence of life—its inevitable, its most ordinary and its best manifestations: marriage, youth, children.

1912-1921.

Slepnyovo, Tsarskoe Selo (its merchants quarter).

[key line]: “Not to see / what is happening behind the looking-glass.”

Fourth elegy.

Punin. Aeneas.

Beginning of the 1920s – 1940.

Soviet Leningrad: Fountain House (and in general the whole landscape of her former life) is like a decorative façade, behind which lies total ruin (the vegetable gardens on Mars Field), the “bloodied floor” and all the reality of *Requiem*. Pushkin’s Petersburg is reborn as Dostoevsky’s.

[key lines]: My former home still watched me / with a squinted, malevolent eye, / with that window I will always remember.

Fifth elegy:

Olga. Eve.

1917-1966.

Europe, Paris. The poems, one reflected in the other, “To wake up at dawn” and “It’s simple, it’s clear” with the background “When in the gloom of suicidal thoughts...” (there’s an old recording of this). Gradually the figure in “luxurious furs” is getting crowded out by the image of the “impoverished beggar” and the film clips of “gay Paris” on the verge of World Wars I and II by clips of people fleeing the city in June, 1940.

[key line]: “To enter, as if into a mirror, with the dull consciousness of Betrayal and a wrinkle that wasn’t here yesterday...]

Sixth elegy.

Equivalence to a shadow. “I” as a conversation partner, in resistance to complete isolation.

The time is unclear: always and never.

The place is unclear: everywhere and nowhere.

[key line]: Portraits secretly alter their looks.

[*] “In my youth I used to say that I couldn’t understand how people lived in times of war and terror.”

2.

Introduction of AN [Anatoly Naiman] and rough sketch of the *mise en scene* of the film (AA’s portrait and her voice reading poetry in the background, a quick

succession of frames conveying the content of the Elegies—a summary and chapter outline of what is to unfold and repeat in the film to come).

Komarovo.

The station.

The “kennel.”

Naiman is building a fire in front of the house—repeating a scene that played out regularly, several times a week, at Akhmatova’s. (The fire is one of the vehicles of motion—as water, the bird and others will be below, see, for example, chapter 8).

The route of a nearby walk (to Lake Street; or to Zhirmunky’s dacha).

The outing (on foot, by bike, or by car) to the cemetery and “along” it to Pike Lake.

The trip along the edge of the Bay of Finland—to places “way out in the country” (perhaps to Leonid Andreyev’s dacha).

Kronstadt on the horizon.

Wild rose in bloom; particularly along the edge of the Bay.

Snow. Snow falling. Blizzard. Falling snow. The courtyard of the House of Creativity in the snow. A ride in a Finnish sleigh.

Vyborg. “A population center of medium density.”

Rock face in water.

An overall view.

Signing of the (1940) peace treaty with Finland.

Subtext: Finland—Scandinavia—the North.

Finland as occupied (by force) territory.

I enter deserted houses,
someone’s just-abandoned cozy home.
All is quiet, except for flitting white shadows
in other peoples’ mirrors.

.....
(Suomi looks tender and mysterious
in its empty mirrors.

.....
And the dull splinter of the new moon gleams
like the Finn’s serrated knife.)

The “white shadows” are, in particular, the winter-camouflaged infantry on skis, the most widespread image of the Finnish war of 1940.

Plus Hyvinkää—the tuberculosis sanatorium in 1915: “I’m living at white death’s house / on the threshold, in darkness.”

Scandinavia is a cultural toponym of Symbolism (and in general for the beginning of the century:) “the undisputed premiere thinker of the time, Knut Hamsun,” the “other premiere thinker Ibsen.”

From this follows: “This land, though not my native land” with its catalogue of Symbolist clichés—

and the “Native land” (which we “mix and crumble” (see “mixed and crumbled [mesivo, kroshevo]” of Mandelstam: the first appearance of his face) of Acmeism.

To think about: maybe a scene from “A Doll’s House” or “Hedda Gabler” or “The Master Builder” in a Norwegian production. Illustrations to *Pan* and *Victoria* (if not to *Mysteries*), similarly “Scandinavian.”

The North, in the space of Akhmatova’s poetry, is quite clearly set against the hostile West, East and South:

The West slandered me and didn’t believe its own words,
And the East luxuriously betrayed me,
The South was stingy meting out its air,
smirking at my boisterous lines.
But the clover stood, as if on its knees,
The moist breeze sang in a pearl horn,
Thus my old friend, my faithful North
Comforted me, as it alone could do.

3.

The sequential order of all the following material will be dictated by two interconnected, underlying, developing plot trajectories.

The first is the transposition of the “symbols” of the 1910s (Symbolism, sanatoriums) and the 1940s (military invasions) to the 1960s. This gradually prepares the way for the transposition of the atmosphere and events of 50 years ago (the Silver Age) into the setting of a circle of young poets (Bobyshev, Brodsky, Naiman, Rein). In the same way as the violence of the beginning of the Second World War informs and is representative of the quality of suffering inherent in Akhmatova’s fate as a whole. (To be filled out and “mined” by subsequent plot development markers.)

The second is sketched in Akhmatova’s aphoristic remark, “In my youth I loved architecture and water more, now I love music and earth.”

Water as continually playing, continually in motion and moreover as a metaphorical element, can motivate the action of this entire story. The story is not defined by its chronological order, but by a self-willed, pouring stream. Akhmatova next to the Tsarskoe Selo statue “Girl with Broken Pitcher” (photo from the beginning of the 1920s) would be an obvious good place to start. “I felt vague fear / before that oft-sung girl.” That poem’s beginning “Already the maple leaves / are falling on the swans’ pond” suggests the path the gaze takes past the water...

The ponds of Tsarskoe Selo.
Tyarlevsky Brook.
A Slavic woman at Pavlovsk.

The Summer Garden's pond.
The Swan Canal.
The Fontanka (her residences were Bldg. 2, Bldg. 18; Fountain House).
The Neva River: "the shining ice of wide rivers"; the river of revolutionary times; "the sun is lower, and the Neva more clouded" (the time of the Terror); the times of the Blockade; the unearthly "mouth of the Neva-Lethe".
The wooden Isaac's Bridge has caught fire and is floating towards the mouth of the Neva (June 11, 1916).
Floods.
Tuchkov Alley (Bldg. 17, apt. 29; the year 1914).
Cadran solaire on the Menshikov House.
"Like a tiny slit the alley shows black"—Solov'yovsky.
The Bay of Finland (with the islands and from Komarovo).
The freight port.
Harbour (the hospital at the Harbour, 1961).
the Black Sea (Sevastopol, Chersonesos).
Venice.
The Seine; maybe the Arno.

Light lays down its own pathways on the water.

The noontime golden "airplane runway" of the southern sea, seeming to continue up into the sky as it fades in the distance.

(Golden pathways laid down by the wind:

-in the Tver district, over a field of oats, over a field of rye;

-over the tall grass of the momentarily blooming Asian desert.)

"Having dived out of a prison delirium, sepulchral lanterns burn."

Funeral procession of Italian night-time lanterns.

Paths of moonlight, enticing the young sleep-walking girl.

4.

Petersburg's water inevitably and organically guides the eye to the city's architecture. The same architecture that Akhmatova "loved in [her] youth" and exchanged for music in her old age.

(Here the following demand attention:

- a) Mikhailovsky Square with the Philharmonic and the Malyi Opera Theater—and the "Stray Dog" and the Russian Museum in Mikhailovsky Castle;
- b) Mariinsky Square with the Opera Theater, the Conservatory and the Glinka monument: places associated with Blok, Officer's Street—"I came to visit the poet").

R e f l e c t i o n s i n w a t e r .

Water reflects and simultaneously almost generates the architecture. In Akhmatova's case there are three architectural elements that increasingly attract her attention: stairs, arches, and the market and train stations.

Steep stairs lead to the cellar location of the Stray Dog. ("When I go to the cellar with a lantern, / I seem to hear again the dull collapse / Behind me there's rumbling on the narrow staircase");

- and beneath the "blessed arch/vault" of memories of the Sixth Elegy.

Steps lead:

to Vyacheslav Ivanov's "Tower";

to the ruined tower at the Orlovsky Gates at Tsarskoe Selo (N. Gumilev);

to the Tower, from which "From the year 1940" (that crucial threshold year of her life) the author of the *Poem without a Hero* "looks at everything";

(and then steps down "beneath the dark vaults" of that very same Stray Dog);

up to the top floor of the Arch of the General Staff Building—where they tried her son in military court;

to the Military Prosecutor's office (Nevsky Bldg. 2) – to find out her son's fate;

to the Palazzo Ursino in Taormina – up a high, steep staircase, the kind that is fatal for heart patients, for what was, in essence, paltry recognition.

Dante's steep stairs of homelessness. (Guglielmo Giraldis's illuminations to the *Divine Comedy* could be used here).

The stairs leading up the Eiffel Tower – "my rusty, somewhat skewed contemporary (1889)", above which "circled aeroplanes looking like shelf racks."

And, again hidden behind music ("Bachianas Brasileiras"), - "as if what lies there ahead is not the grave, / But a mysterious flight of stairs": could this be Jacob's ladder?

Prison vaults.

The Neva is not eager to break through to the majesty of the Palace architecture—it slows its flow and spreads out in breadth along the "Crosses" "Prison No. 1".

On the opposite side is the "Big House": the NKVD, the KGB. A long staircase – which Akhmatova ascended in 1957 to "close" cases of those accused under statute 58.

Around the corner is Shpalernaya Street with its famous prison, where N. S. Gumilev, among others, was incarcerated before being shot.

Gradually, towards Okhta, architecture disappears, giving way to the formlessness of factories.

Smolny Cathedral is the last Petersburg gentleman, casting an eye over the triumph of industrial zones.

And through it seeps the zone of the camps.

Quisquis ubique habitat nusquam habitat. He who lives everywhere lives nowhere. Train stations are waiting halls, the home of the homeless.

Finland Station with the electric commuter train to Komarovo unfolds behind the “Crosses” prison.

Vitebsk Station, the former Tsarskoe Selo Station, with its steep stairs where Innokenty Annensky fell [with a fatal heart attack] – the station most visited by AA in her youth.

Moscow Station is the one associated with the last years of her life. Its twin is Leningrad Station in Moscow.

Warsaw and Baltic stations, forever fallen out of use since precisely the time Europe fell out of use.

Belorussia and Kiev stations in Moscow – Rome in 1964, London in 1965.

R a i l w a y r i g h t - o f - w a y [in Russian: “alienated pathway”]

5.

Which city—Leningrad? revolutionary Petrograd? Petersburg?—was reflected in the Neva before Akhmatova when she went out on the embankment of the Fontanka?

Or went up to the granite parapet of the building of the Twelve Colleges?

Or down the steps to the boat landing in the Summer Garden?

At Senate Square?

At the Academy of Arts next to the sphinx?

Or—even simpler—to the pier on the Fontanka just opposite Fountain House?

Is the the city “sung by the first poet”?

The city that Parasha Zhemchugova saw as she went out in a boat along the canal that emptied into the river right at that place?

“The dark city on the threatening river” that “was my blessed cradle” “and my celebratory marriage bed”?

The city that “knows how / To seem to be an antique lithograph of, perhaps, the ‘seventies” with its “moon, one quarter hidden by the bell tower” of the Church of Simeon and Anna?

The city hanging “like a useless shop sign” from its own prisons? The “smothering exile to the Enisei, / train change to Chita, To Ishim, to waterless Irgiz, to the famed Atbasar, Transfer to the ‘Freedom’ camp, To the corpse-like twilight of rank prison bunks” (Mandelstam’s face)?

Or the city where “our shadows [are] forever beneath the arches of Galernaya” – “above the dark-watered Neva, / Beneath the cold smile of Emperor Peter”?

What reflection appeared to her in the Swan Canal? Was it the parade grounds of Mars Field, where in 1915, during the night, they drilled new recruits to the beat of the drum?

Mars Field as the “vegetable garden, already dug up and half-abandoned (1921)”, “under dark clouds of crows’ wings”?

What did she see on the water of the pond in the Summer Garden?

The reflection of “stately lindens” – or tangled brush, cut across by foul-smelling trenches and fox-holes (1941)”?

The statue “Night” “in her starry veil, in mourning poppies, with her wakeful owl” – being buried at the beginning of the war; being dug back up after the Blockade?

A swan, that “as before swims across the ages, / Admiring the beauty of its double”?

And the most mysterious of all!

What does she see as she looks in the mirror, in the photograph in Tashkent, 1942? The Akhmatova of *Rosary*? The Akhmatova of *Anno Domini MCMXXI*? *Requiem*? *The Poem without a Hero*?

Or the Akhmatova looking in the mirror in 1965, at her writing desk in Komarovo? The Akhmatova of the 50-year anniversaries. Arising from the image of 50 years ago, from the entourage of the 1910s. From the cloud of close friends, loved ones, poets. Gumilev, Mandelstam, Modigliani, Nedobrovo, Anrep, Lurie, the young Punin, Lozinsky, Shileiko.

But if she sees them, then who do I see, glancing for a moment in the same mirror as I pass behind her? Them? or the four of us, the young Bobyshev, Brodsky, Naiman, Rein, apart and together? The “Poets’ Guild”? Or our little circle of the end of the 1950s and the early 60s? There, where the face of Blok appears before her—isn’t it her own face imprinted in that moment in the reflective foil, so that over the next fifty years it appears before my own eyes?

(Perhaps one could “play” on the physical likeness, in portraits, of the young Mandelstam and the young Brodsky?)

6.

In the beginning was Sound:

- the rumbling of waves from the Bay of Finland (or, a secondary layer, the Neva on a granite parapet) washing up (sweeping up, crashing down) on the sand (rocks, gravel);
- choking on one’s own words; the whistle of wind in the leaves (branches), moan of trees in the wind (breeze, gusts);
- the persuasive babble of rain, incomprehensible trans-sense of hard rain, beating against the windowpane, against the roof, eaves, the road, against speech;
- chirping, bird trills, melting into the simplest cascade of sounds;
- the birth of intonation in the approaching and retreating buzz of a bee, a beetle, a mosquito;
- a flash of pale lightning in the distance and the “roll of thunder subsiding”, conveying some sort of inchoate message;
- clocks chiming the hour, the ticking of watches, repeating the multiplication table, ironclad rules;

- sometimes displeased, sometimes tender rustle and whisper of a map of the Bay being turned and unfolded, on which it is possible to discern the name “Komarovo” in the north and “Tsarskoe Selo” in the south;
 - Bacchantes running out to the edge of the forest (a black-figured vase, a painting... “Evoe – and the voice of languor”);
 - the uneven systole/diastole on the screen of the oscillometer;
 - the sound track of a film;
 - lines of poems as they “lie down” on a piece of paper; -
- All this coalesces to an almost mechanical rhythm –

from which a neutral, bass voice—also “mechanical” or “digital” sounding at first —

after a moment turning into (“in our ears”) the words of “Seaside Sonnet” in Akhmatova’s voice. It is the water, foliage, birds, bees, etc. that have coaxed it into existence.

To the words “And it seems such an easy one, / Showing white in an emerald thicket / A road leading to a destination I won’t reveal” a big interior mirror is carried out onto Lake Street (Komarovo).

In the mirror a road shows white amidst the forest.

Our gaze goes into the reflection –

and at the words “There among the trunks still lighter, / And everything is like the alley / At the pond at Tsarskoe Selo” –

it comes out into the alley of Ekaterininsky Park in Tsarskoe Selo.

7.

*(Any scenic film about Tsarskoe Selo: the more detailed, the better).
1900-1910s.*

The post-revolutionary years.

The ruins of the 1940s.

In particular: the Cameron Gallery. Faux gothique. Annensky’s grave.

Gostiny Dvor. The tower/ruin at the Orlovsky gates.

Pavlovsk Station: a concert [newsreel])

Snow. Snow falling. Blizzard. Falling snow.

Ponds. Swans. A swan taking flight.

(It seems to me the following text is appropriate here:)

It was a time when it snowed not at all as it does these days, and in fact wasn’t anything like what we have now. When it snowed and snow lay on the ground and it melted in the same way it always had—as in the psalm-singer David’s time, in Homer’s time, in Dante’s, in Pushkin’s and in Blok’s. It follows that poetry was somehow different then from what people call poetry now. Snow

has become what people clear off the city streets, off roads and sidewalks. What they shovel off roofs and balconies. What they take off somewhere and add to huge piles of snow they've already removed from somewhere else. Poets now drive snowplows.

It was a time when we were young. Shining eyes, ruddy cheeks, scarlet mouths, springy step, supple voice. As always when one is young, the world itself was young, and we were open to it. It goaded us, we met it with a heap of poems. Everything around us and inside of us was full-sized. Happiness was happy, beauty was splendid, loneliness was desolate, tragedy hopeless, pain immense. Back then tears could still flow, burning on our cheeks and cold by the time it reached our chins.

It was like that then, but that's the way it always is. It was like that a half century before our time, when Akhmatova was young. She was 70 when we found her. But she found us young. When she said to me, "I can't imagine Kolya dressed like you, in a jacket and sweater," there was more than just the observation in what she said—she was comparing. Comparing Kolya, Osip and herself with Dima, Zhenya, Joseph and me. Not to compare would have been unnatural, as she was then having a slew of 50-year anniversaries: of her marriage, the publication of her first books, the formation of the Poets' Guild. She was recalling all this at the same time as she saw us. We were different from them, we yielded first place to them, probably, in all matters. But for her we were once again a circle of young poets, with all that shining, ruddiness, lightness of step and joy and "sharp eyes that saw everything." She was entering the middle of the century—in part along with us. She was recalling the Silver Age, and we were entering it—in part along with her.

The meaning of poems that were written before we existed and waiting for us to read them, entwined with the air we breathed, wasn't limited to the way their beauty worked on us, much less their political, civilian or didactic content. It goes without saying that the magic of the words was paramount; it goes without saying that the pain that dictated them found its unmediated response in our hearts. But poems reigned over our lives in those days. Not just those of us who wrote poetry, but our entire circle of young people, everyone who sensed the necessity in poems, who sought them out, who wanted to read them over and over, knew them by heart. Blok's poems, *The Cypress Chest*, *Cloud and Flute*, *My Sister Life*, *Stone*, *Rosary* and *Anno Domini*, *European Night*, the poems of *Sorrow* and *the End*—aside from the aesthetic pleasure, they gave us a model for spiritual reactions and concrete behavior. "I sent you a black rose in a glass" signified not only a poetic gesture, but also how one behaves with one's beloved, how one departs oneself in a crowded restaurant, how one departs oneself in general. Our love affairs, our young romances were guided by poetry as a codex of human relations—like those that were compiled in the Middle Ages.

Here, possibly, once again to the statue of the Girl with Broken Vase.

Possibly to the place where the “dark-complexioned youth wandered the pathways”, where “the prickly pine needles thickly carpet low tree stumps”.

And if we go to where “in deathlike dreams the castle sleeps”, then it must be to draw close to the crystal coffin and wake the sleeper there.

Because “so many lyres are hung on the branches here.”

And “every flowerbed in the park seems to be a fresh grave.”

(which reminds us one more time of the newspaper hung up in the train station on September 1, 1921, with the report of the execution by firing squad of Nikolai Gumilev.)

But the dramatic and moreover mournful note here is premature. A young creature is beginning real life, which “spread before her like the meadow, where once Proserpina strolled.” There are plenty of meadows, glades and open squares where statues of ancient heroes and gods pop up, expected or unanticipated, in Tsarskoe Selo. Akhamtova, “in a somnambulistic trance,” might pass them without seeing them. She is already in the grip of the poetic element, and not far off is Recognition, Love, Being in Love, Fame. Their sculptural allegories also arise here and there in the parks of Tsarskoe Selo. Direct impressions fill the heart of a teenager, and a young woman at that, with “earthly joy”, gaiety, a feeling of happiness. “And the holidays weren’t counted twelve, but as many as there were days in the year.”

“A light autumn snow / Fell on the croquet lawn.”

“In the living room candles are lit, / During the days their flicker is softer, / From the greenhouse they’ll bring / A whole bouquet of roses.”

“They’re leading horses down the pathway, / Long waves of combed manes.”

“In the shade of Elizabethan boskets / the granddaughters of Pushkin-era beauties stroll / All in modest boaters, in tight corsets, / And holding parasols in their wrinkled little hands.”

“Light carriages wend their way from the station to the park, / they rush as if from some grand funeral. / Inside them society ladies wear summer dresses.”

“A funeral procession, coming from or going to the train station, went along with unbelievable pomp: a chorus (of boys) sang with angelic voices, the coffin was not visible beneath all the living greenery and flowers wilting in the frost. They were carrying lit torches, the priests were swinging their censers, masked horses stepped with measured tread. Behind the coffin were the officers of the Guard (somehow always reminiscent of Vronsky’s brother, that is, “with drunken, open faces”) and gentlemen in cylinder hats. In the carriages behind the hearse sat the consequential old ladies with their retinues, seeming to be awaiting their own turn (and all this was like the description of the funeral of the Countess in “The Queen of Spades”)... “Part of some enormous funeral of the 19th century”... “This spectacle amidst the blinding snow and bright sunlight of Tsarskoe Selo – was magnificent; the same thing, in the dull yellow light usual in

those times and the thick darkness that oozed from everywhere, could be frightening and even somehow infernal.”

“The flat horizon of winter, / Its bonfires and gloom, and torpor, / Round hills of dry snow.”

“In this park noise was never heard, / Only a rusty weathervane creaked in the distance... The moon shines quietly and sullenly, the snow is marble white.”

“The choir sang so beautifully at mass.”

“The hanging spheres / of early-lit lanterns are squeaking, / More and more festively, and brighter / The snowflakes glitter, blowing by.”

“Through softly falling snow / Beneath a dark-blue sieve steeds gallop.”

“And his gilded footman / Stands motionless behind the sleigh, / And the tsar looks around strangely / with light, empty eyes.” (Hemschemeyer 294)

She walks along “among flower kiosks and the hiss of a gramophone, beneath the sly, drunken gaze of gas lanterns.”

She sees “the cupola, burning hot with music, of Pavlovsk station.”

“And the white-maned waterfall at Babolovsky Palace.”

All this material, so familiar to her as a resident of Tsarskoe Selo, that it just seems everyday, contains something in itself that a third of a century later will seem like a “masquerade,” “carnival,” “a grand-gala spectacular.”

Pavlovsk is a natural inseparable extension of Tsarskoe Selo.

“Pavlovsk is always a holiday, because you have to go by vehicle.”

“The most languid and shady.”

“A round meadow, still water.”

“As soon as you go through the iron gates, / a blessed trembling touches your heart, / You’re not living, you’re walking on air, you’re delirious.”

“In late autumn the wind wanders, / fresh and sharp, glad of the absence of people. All in white hoarfrost black spruce trees / stand on slightly melted snow.”

“And a little bird sits on the bronze shoulder of Kifared the Red-breasted.”

Muses arranged “starlike” around Apollo-Kifared. A bird on the shoulder of a statue (in principle, of any statue). Perhaps a water-color brush could appear in the frame and paint the bird red? If so, it could temporarily guide the viewer’s gaze, which would follow its free movements.

It could entice us to Bakhchisarai,

- where “beyond the motley fence, By the contemplative water, We happily recalled the gardens of Tsarskoe Selo”;
- “And suddenly we recognized Ekaterina’s eagle – that’s him! He flew down to the pit of a valley From the magnificent bronze gates”.

From here it’s not a long flight to Chersonesos, the genuine antiquity of which once again brings to mind the statues of Pavlovsk and Tsarskoe.

<I have the impression that there are still mileposts in the Crimea—the same kind as the ones that led from Petersburg to Tsarskoe Selo and that you can still see today as you drive past Pulkovo>.

(Perhaps even on to Odessa: a view of the port “at the end of the 40-day strike” of 1905 (?))

The description of the funeral already lent an air of anxiety and mourning to the holiday mood. Troublesome signs amidst the beauty of Tsarskoe Selo begin to multiply little by little, gradually reducing the “little toy town” of “parks and auditoriums” to Nameless Alley (where Akhmatova spent her childhood: “on this spot by the train station a little park or square was laid out [?]”).

Then there’s “I didn’t hold human voices dear, but understood the voice of the wind.”

“The little alley... grew profusely with weeds – burdocks that I used to fashion into little baskets when I was very young, and luxuriant nettles and fabulous thistles.”

“I loved thistles and nettles, but more than anything else I loved the silver willow.”

“At the shore the silver willow Touches the bright September waters.”

“And the silver willow burst in With the hoary splendor of its branches.”

“The wooden-beamed bridge Grew blackened and crooked.”

“And coarse moss crept along the walls.”

“And in the alley a shabby fence, A three-windowed house and a grey lawn.”

“I’ll describe you As Chagall did his Vitebsk.”

“The bay trotter raced along.”

“Just before the [railroad] tracks Was the grandest pub.”

“Light blue snowbanks With Petersburg in the distance.”

“The quartermaster’s depots And the coachmens’ yard.”

“There a young she-devil Is telling the guests their fortunes.”

“A striped guardhouse And a stream of tobacco smoke.”

“Up late drinking vodka And digging into pudding.”

“And the wide sledge was steered By a giant cuirassier.” [Hemschemeyer

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Not realizing it, she “inherits

- felitsa
- the swans
- the bridges
- all the Chinese ornaments
- the gallery passageways of the palace
- and lindens of unearthly beauty.
 - o And even [her] own shade,

- all distorted by fear,
- and the shirt of the repentant
- and sepulchral lilacs

8.

Repeated images of travel (horses, carriages, sleds) could certainly be used as means of redirecting the viewer's attention – not as a consequence of biography or its facts, but as a means of movement in the frame, a *vehicle*.

“How I wish The light blue snowbanks With Petersburg in the distance
Would appear.”

“Steam wafts from the imperial stables, The Moika sinks down in the
gloom, The light of the moon, as if purposely, is dimmed, And where we're
headed—I can't make out.”

“Between the tombs of grandson and granddad The disheveled garden
floundered.” (let it be Mikhailovsky Garden – between Mikhailovsky
[Engineers'] Castle [where Pavel the grandfather died] and the Cathedral of the
Saviour on the Blood [where Alexander II, the grandson, died]). (In front of
Engineers' Castle the monument to Peter with the inscription “To my great-
grandfather from his great-grandson,” from Pavel).

“Mars Field towers with icebergs, and Swan [canal] lies crystal-covered.”

“Without torches, the Neva's embankment was black as pitch.”

“And like a heavenly bird, Your voice flutters just above my shoulder.”

“And warmed by a sudden ray of light Snowy ash shows so warmly
silver.”

“And I saw my city Through a rainbow of last tears.”

“There was a little alley, snow-covered, and not long.” Tuchkov.

The parallel births of poems – and paintings reflecting the image of the
poet.

A trail of tracks on the whiteness of newly-fallen snow – like the letters of
a line of poetry. They form into groups – mimicking the way vessels wintering on
the Neva crowd against one another. “Vainly seeking on the pale, pure sheet Of
untrodden snow Your tracks from yesterday, And along the river, where the
schooners like doves Tenderly, tenderly nuzzling one another, long until spring for
grey coastal waters, - I approached the old bridge.”

“There's a room there like a cage, Way up under the roof in a heavy, noisy
house, Where he whistled like a finch at his easel.” (Bldg. 17)

Altman's portrait of Akhmatova (1914), first bit by bit, and then the whole
thing emerging from the canvas. To this day the painting looks like it was just
finished yesterday – and at the same time it conveys the essence of Akhmatova's
image like no other. “As in a mirror I looked anxiously At the grey canvas, and
with every passing week My likeness with the new painting of me Became ever
more bitter and strange.”

The combination of risk, danger (in some instances mortal danger), accompanied by creativity – with harmony in the sum total. [?] “That dear artist, With whom I climbed out the window Of a light-blue mansard onto the roof And walked along the parapet above a fatal abyss, to see the snow, the Neva and the clouds.”

“Our muses are friendly With a carefree and captivating friendship, Like girls who know nothing of love.”

Is it snow whirling up from the ground, or a red-breasted bird, or a short train in winter arriving at a small, provincial station – they cast their gaze over the tranquility and Christmas solemnity of Bezhetsk.

The main street.

“There are white churches there and reverberant, glistening ice, There bloom the cornflower-blue eyes of my dear son. Above the ancient city shine the diamond Russian nights And the sickle, low in the sky, is more yellow than linden honey.”

“There dry blizzards fly up from the fields beyond the river, And people, like angels, joyful for the Divine Holiday, Put their rooms in order, lit the lamps before the icons, And the Good Book lies on the oak table.”

And the city resounded with the merry peals of Christmas bells.”

By sled down the slick winter road to Slepnyovo. “Sled, felt boots, bear rugs, enormous fur wraps, tingling silence, snowbanks, adamant snow.” “It sparkled all over and crunched, The ice-encrusted garden.” “The Promised Land.”

If it’s summer, on the other hand, why not let the streams of rivers, streams, brooks, guide the viewer’s eye? Towards carefree life, “summer vacation”, tranquility, being in love.

Swampy river in Bezhetsk.

Photographs of Slepnyovo in the 1910s.

“Tilled fields laid out over rolling hills in even squares, mills, marshes, drained swamps, “cattle gates and fields and fields of grain”.

“But we live like they did in Catherine’s time: attending services and waiting for the harvest.”

A two-story manor house – now located in the outskirts of Bezhetsk. “A many-windowed house perched on a hill.”

“I remember only the garden, looking sparse and vulnerable in the fall And the cranes crying, and black fields.”

A room with a north-facing window, an icon of “Christ in prison”. A narrow, hard couch. A portrait of Nicholas I on the wall. The remains of an old library in the bookcase.

Malachite jewelry and a woman’s delicate lace cap.

“A circle of yellow lamplight.”

“The door is half-open, The sweet smell of lindens wafts in... On the table lie forgotten A riding crop and a glove.”

(“On the trunk of a gnarled spruce An ant highway.”)

“The neighbor there is chatting over the fence With a girl as evening comes on, and they hear only the bees, the most tender of all conversations” <*the painting by Millet in the Hermitage* {?}

“A crane at the ancient well, Above him, clouds like boiling foam.”

“A gently inclined road through the woods, A wretched, slightly crooked bridge.”

“Heaps of vegetables lie in the beds, motley on the black earth.”

“The dahlias have straightened up Along the silver pathway, Home of snails and wormwood.”

There’s a small pond there, the kind Where the pondscum looks like brocade.”

“The pond lazily shows silver, Life is easy in a new way... Who will I dream of today in the motley net of my hammock?”

“The wide pond skinned over With rusty scum, and grew more shallow.”

“A guest is coming, riding by the golden field.”

“In the parlor, he kisses my grandmother’s hand And on the steep staircase my lips.”

“In my solitude in Tver I remember you with bitterness.”

“The trace horse cast a sidewise eye and curved its neck classically.”

“The peasant women went into the fields to work in homespun dresses, and then the old women and awkward maids seemed more slender than ancient statues.”

“One ear of grain tightly pressed against another The sickle cuts through with a snake-like whistle.”

“And the short hems of the slim reapers Like flags flying in the wind on a holiday.”

“I gathered mushrooms in both Slepnyovo gardens.”

“Slepnyovo is like an arch in architecture... first it’s little, then it gets bigger and bigger and finally—total freedom (this is if you go out).

9.

Arch of the General Staff. Opens onto Palace Square – “total freedom”. (in opposition to the interior, narrow kafka-esque staircase of the Military Court, see above.)

“Onto balconies, where no one had set foot for centuries”.

The city, the former capital, with which the heroine is on intimate terms, is the double of her generation: “when over the Neva That special, pure hour holds sway And the May wind blows Past all the above-water columns, You—like a sinner seeing his last, heavenly, sweetest dream before dying.”

But, when the city does show its character, it is more often than not gloomy. “Strict, dark city of many waters.”

“Winter horizon And a driving snowstorm along the Neva.”

“What do you see, looking dully at the wall, At the hour when dawn still lingers in the sky?

Is it a seagull on the water’s blue surface, or Florentine gardens?

Or Tsarskoe Selo’s enormous park, Where anxiety crossed your path?

Or do you see at your knees that man, Who escaped your spell for White Death?

No, all I see is the wall – and on it, the reflections of the sky’s fires as they go out.”

But with the curiosity of a foreigner,
captivated by every novelty,
I looked at how the sleds flew by,
and listened to my native tongue.

This moment of transformation of normal reality is key. The amazement at the sleds that look unlike themselves—they look exotic. (*Film is capable of showing this by pinpointing and separating it from its surroundings, putting it on a blank background.*) The same kind of amazement, when “And your body is surprised by its own agility, and you don’t recognize your own house”. Her native language appears untouched, new: “You are moved, singing that song You used to find so tiresome”. (*All good books, Proust noted, look a little foreign.*) This union: of a transformed sled and a transformed language – causes an explosive flash, like the spark of a chemical reaction: the beginning of creativity, the birth of a poem.

It’s inexplicable—it is possible to fix only the circumstances of its inexplicableness: “Before spring comes there can be certain kinds of days: beneath the heavy snow the meadow rests, the trees make a merry, dry noise, And the warm wind is soft and supple”. The landscape of Slepnyovo.

In the given instance sleds are a detail of the cityscape. It doesn’t matter whether it is Petersburg or Tsarskoe Selo: “Everything was swept away in a transparent fog, Melted away in the depths of mirrors... And now already the noseless fiddler Has started to play a song of no returning”. This is one more condition of the creative act: the clearing away of events, the white paper. Poetry breaks into the white space: “And with a wild freshness and strength Happiness wafted against my face”.

A unified moment, an undifferentiable happiness – creativity brings it, or reality or memory brings it: “As if a friend from a dear age Went out with my onto the porch”. The landscape is universal: Slepnyovo, Tsarskoe Selo.

10.

Travels of 1912

Genoa (perhaps, memories of Odessa)

Pisa
Florence (the gardens)
Bologna
Padua (Giotto's "Akhmatova" [obrazy]
Venice (a little picture, such as a postcard—from her poem
"Venice")
Painting and architecture: "the impression is something like a dream you
remember all your life".
Commedia dell'Arte

Voronezh (1936)
"The unsteady movement of lacy sleighs".
The monument to Peter.
"The light-green vault, Washed out, murky, full of solar dust".
Mandelstam.
The Don.
The expanse of land beyond the city.
"From the young Voronezh hills to the universally human, dark
blue hills in Tuscany".

Return to the travels of 1912.
This time each of the visited cities is a descent to one of the circles of the
Divine Comedy: along all the same steps of the illuminations by Guglielmo
Giraldi.

Dante's images of cities in the *Divine Comedy*. <There is a recording of
Akhmatova's voice reciting the poem "You demand my poems directly" from the
cycle "Wild Rose in Bloom" with an epigraph in Italian from the *Comedy*. The
spot where, when he heard her reciting the lines, "Osip started to cry: 'Those
words—in your voice.'">

Commedia dell'Arte: this time via a picture of Sudeikina – and by this
means again the Stray Dog, going underground, etc.

11.
Police photographs (full face and profile) of Mandelstam.
Ditto of Meyerhold.
Of Lev Gumilev.
Of Punin, if they can be found.
Dozens of similar photographs, melded into one unity, continuing beyond
the borders of the frame.
Page one of Mandelstam's case file.
The same of Meyerhold's.
Lev Gumilev's.
Punin's.
Case files tossed onto a table, covering its entire surface.

The movement (from a distance) of a lone figure along the prison walls of the Crosses Prison – instead of the prison lines of “Requiem”.

“Van Gogh’s “Prisoners’ walk [look up name in English]” – instead of documentary evidence of prisons of the 1930s.

12.

Van Gogh’s “Prison Exercise Yard” on the wall in a museum.

Paintings from the end of the 19th-beginning of the 20th centuries on the walls of a museum <“*Guernica*” as a symbol?>.

Goya’s “Capriccios”.

Botticelli’s illustrations to Dante.

(Guglielmo Giraldi’s illuminations to the *Divine Comedy*)

The Louvre (the building) or the Orsay Museum.

Paris.

In particular, the pre-dawn carts of fresh produce on their way to the Central Market

The Eiffel Tower, early photos or film clips, preferably with a plane “like an open shelf rack” flying over.

Posters of the Ballet Russe

Documentary footage of the Ballet Russe in Paris

Art Nouveau (drawing, painting, architecture) – the kind AA could have seen when she was young. Let’s say, Beardsley’s illustrations to Wilde’s “Salome”, “Field of the Blessed [Elysian Field? find the English]” by Becklin [Becklin? or what?], a metro station (“Port Dauphine”)

Circus at the beginning of the century; Modigliani’s drawing “On the Trapeze” [? ¹]; photograph of AA as the “Snake-woman”

A café-chantant, Luna Park

Modigliani’s series of drawings of Akhmatova

Modigliani’s paintings in general

From a distance: a young man and a young woman in one of Paris’s park squares, the only two people in the whole world who knew that they were Modigliani and Akhmatova, who were prepared to do what they were going to do in world art and poetry.

Documentary footage of the German invasion of Paris in June 1940.

¹ [from msr] I found this image on the web, called “Anna Akhmatova on Trapeze”:
http://museum.ru/gmii/modigliani/modi_en/gallery/drawings/sh_11-12.html

13.

Post-war Leningrad, bombed out, gaping holes everywhere, but to the extent possible, not in somber lighting.

The end of the first decade of the 1900s/beginning of the 1910s

If possible, the views of the places where parades/troop drills took place, both before the revolution and after, in ruins and deserted

The frozen Neva with figures crossing over it (at various times)

The Summer Garden, criss-crossed with trenches in 1941.

As much of the city as possible, either completely deserted or with the occasional figure walking.

Telephone booths

Smolensk Cemetery (“it’s somewhere by the wall”: Blok’s grave)

Photograph of Akhmatova with Olga Glebova-Sudeikina.

Sudeikin’s portrait of a dancing O. G-S and a photograph of her as close as possible to this description:

You prophesy, bitter one, and dropped your arms,

A lock of hair plastered to your bloodless forehead,

And you smile – O, you didn’t lure

A single bee with that rosy smile,

Or bemuse a single butterfly.

Your eyes are lunatically bright, and your gaze
is nervously fixed on something far away.

Is it sweet reproach to someone dead,

Or gracious forgiveness to the living

for your exhaustion and shame?

Smolny (view from Suvorov [what?] and from Shpalernaya [st.]; possibly, from an arriving automobile: Tavricheskaya [st.?]; Kavalergardskaya [st.] (from Krasnaya Konnitsa).

View from the cathedral across the Neva towards the bridge we’re already familiar with, with the Crosses Prison, factories, and Okhta.

Moscow.

Conception Monastery.

Saviour-Andronikov Monastery.

Trinity-Sergeev Monastery at Sergeev Posad.

14.

“...and since there wasn’t enough paper,

I’m writing on your rough draft.

And look! another’s phrase is seeping through

And, like a snowflake on one's hand in those days,
it melts, trustingly and without reproach.
And Antonius's dark lashes
Suddenly opened wide – and there is green smoke
in them, and a dear, familiar breeze begins to blow...
Is it the sea?

No, it's only pine needles
on a grave, and in the boiling seafoam
Closer and closer...

Marche funebre

Chopin..."

From the words “and there is green smoke” to the end of the poem Akhmatova's voice recites – to the accompaniment of the growing sound of Chopin's march. For a while only the music sounds. Then these words over it:

And such a powerful force
pulls at the charmed voice,
As if up ahead it's not the grave,
but a flight of mysterious steps.