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## Requiem: Heart-Wrenching “Mass Song” or a Smoke Screen?

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# Bibliographic Trace

*Research in progress for ENGL 2333: World Literature II*

Faculty Mentor: W. Scott Cheney, Ph.D.

In an 1870 letter, Emily Dickinson described poetry this way: “If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way?” During the twentieth century, the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova wrote poetry that embodies Dickinson’s intense definition. My World Literature students read *Requiem*, Akhmatova’s most famous long poem, and grapple with the suffering it vividly depicts under Stalin’s purges of the 1930s. Akhmatova’s unique voice and veiled purposes capture their attention, and I ask students to make sense of the poem by writing a Bibliographic Trace. This short paper pushes them into the library databases to find three academic articles that are in conversation. In other words, they find a recent article and explore its bibliography to find a second article. They must then use the bibliography of that second article to find a third article and explain how all three critics interpret the difficult poem over time. The connections between articles are not always tidy and linear, but students learn to see how academic research is a collaborative negotiation of ideas that develops with each new reader and critic.

Marie Peteuil’s Bibliographic Trace deftly opens up the dialogue between three literary critics (Sharon Bailey, Susan Amert, and Boris Katz) whose articles on Akhmatova’s *Requiem* were written over the span of seven years in the 1990s. In doing so, two words characterize the path Marie’s paper traveled to reach publication: revision and dedication. When she first started working on the assignment in class, Marie reached out for my feedback before the draft was due. She then further improved the final paper by revising it after getting detailed comments back from me. Then before submitting it for publication after our class ended, she revised again to be sure it was in its best possible form. After submission, the publication process took at least two more rounds of revision before it became this finished manuscript. Because Marie was dedicated to her project, she was able to dig deeply into the source material and add supplementary sources to augment her points. The many hours she spent with the poem and secondary material allowed her to uncover a unique reading of the text: that Akhmatova’s poem ultimately retells the story of the crucifixion while describing the Great Purge in Russia. Being dedicated to the craft of revision is difficult and time consuming, but Marie is now an emerging expert on *Requiem* and its corresponding research.

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ENGL 2333

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*Requiem*: Heart-Wrenching “Mass Song” or a Smoke Screen?

“Stalin’s ‘Great Purge’ of 1935-1938 sent millions of people to prison camps and made the 1930s a time of terror and uncertainty for everyone” (Puchner 1168). Anna Akhmatova’s *Requiem* is not only an individualized lyric of her personal experience during the purges of the 1930s in Leningrad, Russia, but it also speaks to the public experiences in Leningrad. Akhmatova writes deeply personal works with a strong poetic voice, while also creating powerful universal themes. She utilizes her life experience in Russia and the controversial political climate to write heart-wrenching, profound poetry. She started writing full-length poems later in her career, using musical influences and allusions to political events to shape her work. When Akhmatova first “wrote” *Requiem*, many of her friends memorized it, as they did with several of her works during this time, because it was too dangerous to be written down. The poem itself is actually comprised of fifteen different poems (ten numbered poems plus various dedications, prologues, and epilogues), which tell the stories of the “anguish of mothers whose husbands and sons are suffering, and who helplessly look on, able to only express their yearning and grief” (Reeder 18). In an analysis of Anna Akhmatova’s poems, Susan Amert points out that “The ‘Dedication,’ which constitutes a brilliant recasting of the genre of the ‘mass song,’ serves as the overture of *Requiem*, prefiguring the tragic progression of the ten

numbered texts and the restorative impulse of the ‘Epilogue’” (31). While some critics agree that *Requiem* is a new sort of requiem, focusing on loss instead of death, more critics investigate how Akhmatova uses *Requiem* as a cover for deeper, more disputed content.

The first article I came across in my journey to uncovering the meaning behind *Requiem* was Sharon M. Bailey’s 1999 article, “An Elegy for Russia: Anna Akhmatova’s Requiem,” which concentrates on the elements of Akhmatova’s work that make *Requiem* an elegiac requiem. According to Bailey, a “requiem” is “a mass for the dead or a musical composition in honor of the dead” while a “funeral elegy” is “traditionally written on the occasion of a death, serving the dual function of commemorating the deceased and of contemplating the nature of death in general” (325). Bailey argues that while *Requiem* does focus on loss and suffering as opposed to death, it is considered an elegy—a literary requiem. Bailey later states that “*Requiem* is an elegy mourning the loss of life for the wives and mothers left behind” (329). Bailey justifies this by explaining the “living death” seen in a heartbroken mother throughout the lyric. Akhmatova begins with the poem “Instead of a Preface,” exemplifying this “living death”: “Then something that looked like a smile passed over what had once been her face” (1171); Akhmatova illustrates a woman who, while technically alive, is void of meaning. Interestingly, translator Judith Hemschemeyer emphasizes this “living death” by putting “recognized” in quotation marks earlier in the poem (131). At first glance, the reader may not even pick up on such a nuanced choice; however, this further suggests the concept of a void. The quotation marks around the word “recognized” imply a figurative or ironic meaning

of the word; the people in the prison lines are described such that their appearances are not remarkable enough to recognize them as living, breathing individuals. Bailey argues that this isolation and agony provide the “living death” because, at this point, the women are not living but merely surviving. Bailey later states that “nearly all of the physical descriptions of the women...show them to be like corpses; in ‘Epilogue 1’ their cheeks are stiffened and etched as if petrified,” which she goes on to compare to an “animal-like” state (329). The women portrayed in Akhmatova’s poems are not given individual characteristics that would make them human. Instead, they are written in zombie-like states with no discerning differences, highlighting the elegy status of Bailey’s argument.

Bailey cites two notable documents in her article, the first being Susan Amert's 1992 "In a Shattered Mirror: The Later Poetry of Anna Akhmatova," which explains the importance of the women's characteristics in the poem to reflect this "living death." This article examines Akhmatova’s later work—post 1935. Susan Amert addresses the same descriptive characteristics that Bailey discovered and explains that “Russian Orthodoxy teaches that the face embodies the highest spiritual qualities and values...accordingly, facelessness would betoken the loss of the spirit or soul” (34). However, even with this in mind, Amert takes a different direction in deciding whether *Requiem* is an elegy, a requiem, or something else. In contrast to Bailey’s intrinsic approach, Amert studies the extrinsic characteristics of the text, looking for allusions and other techniques to understand the poem, ultimately discovering that although this poem is classified as a requiem, the hidden political commentary provides a more insightful look into Akhmatova’s work. She spends most of her time analyzing the “Dedication” section. The

lines “For someone a fresh breeze blows, / For someone the sunset luxuriates” stand out against the surrounding text because it has a wistful tone instead of a melancholy one (Henschemeyer 133). She discovers that “the solution to the riddle of these lines lies in a most unlikely source...penned by Vasilii Lebedev-Kumach” (Amert 43). The reference surprises Amert because Lebedev-Kumach’s work was considered “sort of an unofficial national anthem” in Stalin’s Russia, which political standing contrasts that of a requiem (43). Akhmatova alludes to Lebedev-Kumach’s work to compare the overall feeling associated with the national event to the feelings of the individual throughout the event. Amert decides that *Requiem* is a requiem, but more importantly, she notes that Akhmatova skillfully uses allusions to sneak in her feelings about the conditions of Russia in her time.

The second noteworthy article that Bailey cited was “To What Extent is *Requiem* a Requiem? Unheard Voices in Anna Akhmatova’s *Requiem*,” written in 1998 by Boris Katz. Interestingly, Katz also cited the previous article I had referenced by Susan Amert. While Katz does not agree with Amert or Bailey, he does analyze Akhmatova’s classical music influences and how she integrates subtext in her poems to question the assumption that the poem is a true requiem. He proposes that Akhmatova’s *Requiem* is influenced by Modest Petrovich Mussorgsky’s operas, *Boris Godunov* and *Khovanshchina*, due to her allusions to his “funeral bells...among the distinctive features of his best-known operas,” which parallels Mussorgsky’s work (Katz 256). She often refers to music and singing as she does on line 15 of “Dedication”: “Hope keeps singing from afar,” indicating that these references are parallel to the events that take place in

Mussorgsky's operas (Akhmatova 1171). Additionally, the heroine in Mussorgsky's opera, "Marfa...is fearless, scorns any danger, and in the end, burns herself for the sake of the true faith" (Katz 257). One could argue that the speaker at the end of Akhmatova's "Epilogue II" in *Requiem* has similar characteristics in that she stands up for the fellow women waiting in the lines outside of Kresty Prison, even stating that "if ever in this country / They decide to erect a monument of me, / I consent to that honor / Under these conditions" (1177). She offers herself as a symbol of her beliefs, similarly to how Marfa does in *Khovanshchina*.

While Katz does not believe that *Requiem* is a true requiem, he does find that Akhmatova alludes to the Crucifixion and that the title masks that discovery. He believes that "the title Requiem...illustrates Akhmatova's typical manner of hiding one source under the name of another one, for it was another Catholic prayer that served as verbal and musical subtext for Akhmatova's *Requiem*" (Katz 260). He specifically points to "Poem X" of Akhmatova's *Requiem* that alludes to the *Stabat Mater*: "a medieval devotional poem about the Virgin Mary's vigil by Christ's Cross" (Katz 260). The *Stabat Mater* is a Latin poem adopted by the Christian religion to show the pain the Virgin Mary felt during the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Even though Akhmatova grew up in the Russian Orthodox Church, fellow poet and friend Antoly Naiman reveals that Akhmatova favored the Pergolesi composition of this Catholic poem and listened to it frequently (Katz 253). In addition, Akhmatova was friends with composer Arthur Laurie, who converted to Catholicism and who Akhmatova has referenced in one of her other poems (Katz 263). The *Stabat Mater* says, "Is there one who would not weep, /

whelmed in miseries so deep, / Christ's dear Mother to behold?" (Caswell). Akhmatova responds to this in her "Poem X" saying, "And to his Mother: 'Oh, do not weep for Me...'" (1175). Katz concludes that *Requiem* is Akhmatova's retelling of the Crucifixion, unlike the conclusions of Bailey and Amert. He explains how Akhmatova applies this biblical event to the political atrocities happening in her country at this time, specifically the Purges of Leningrad, Russia (262).

Akhmatova carefully chose the title and literary techniques to cast a smoke screen over a larger political and religious message. As Katz mentions, "Thus, ultimately it is not a requiem that Akhmatova wrote, despite the title *Requiem*. Rather it is a very Russian, even very Soviet, and of course, very Akhmatovian version of *Stabat Mater*" (262). Given that *Requiem* does not seem to truly be a requiem, the reader may question why Akhmatova chose this title. Critic and biographer Roberta Reeder explains that "due to censorship, Akhmatova employs a device that in Russian is called *tainopis*, or 'secret writing' which indirectly alludes to political and personal events" (23). For Katz, "*Stabat Mater* was too closely connected with Catholic Liturgy and had no equivalents among Orthodox prayers" (263). Akhmatova had close contacts with those in the Catholic church and may have wanted to express her feelings without exposing these relationships. Before the Epilogue Akhmatova writes, "Mary Magdalene beat her breast and sobbed, / The beloved disciple turned to stone, / But where the silent Mother stood, there / No one glanced and no one would have dared" (1176). She illustrates an image of the women in this time through these lines, while also inserting the reference to *Stabat Mater*. Based on these articles, it does not matter if *Requiem* is, in fact, a



requiem. What is remarkable about her work is the political retelling of the *Stabat Mater*, which is a retelling of the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ that she hides beneath layers of poetic structure and allusion. This is strengthened by the direct quotation from the Bible in “Poem X,” “Why hast Thou forsaken me?” (*King James Bible*, Matt. 27.46). Even more fascinating, while the Crucifixion was a brutal and tragic murder, its message also provides a beacon of hope. Anna Akhmatova’s *Requiem* makes this statement about hope in our darkest times by retelling this tragic story from the point of view of Mary Magdalene, who was a follower of Jesus and witnessed the Crucifixion and the Virgin Mary’s Vigil. The comparison is apparent from the speaker’s description of the women in the lines of Kresty Prison and the pain and suffering that they all feel, including the speaker. At its heart, the most significant message of *Requiem* is that there is hope, even in our darkest times.

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