

# Confronting the Image: Works of Art in some Poems by Anna Akhmatova

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All of Akhmatova's poetic oeuvre is charged with extratextual meaning through allusions and references to the sister arts, painting, sculpture, music and ballet. Only in a very few poems, however, are works of visual art, imaginary or real ones, described explicitly. In this paper I wish to look in detail at two poems concerning works of art. They are: "Inscription on an Unfinished Portrait" ("Надпись на неоконченном портрете," 1912) and "The Old Portrait" ("Старый портрет," 1910).

I have chosen these poems because, in their depiction of images of women, they express an acute awareness of the circumstances under which these images are produced and received. These two poems express the viewer's response while interpreting the story behind the picture, that is: the ideas present in the picture, or, to be more precise still; the implied painter's way of looking at its model. I propose to treat the pictorial descriptions in these poems as an evaluative and interpretative discourse: Whilst the lyric voice is that of the spectator, the reader's task is to interpret the lyric I's interpretation, in other words; explicate the gaze of the spectator. This said, I also would like to point at the gendered relationship between the image and the word. The pre-dominant aspect

## Старый портрет<sup>1</sup>

Сжала тебя золотистым овалом  
Узкая, старая рама;  
Негр за тобой с голубым опахалом,  
Стройная, белая дама

Тонки, по-девичьи, нежные плечи  
Смотришь надменно-упрямо;  
Тускло мерцают высокие свечи,  
Словно в преддверии храма.

Возле, на бронзовом столике цитра  
Розы в граненом бокале ...  
В чьих эта пальцах дрожала  
палитра  
В этом торжественном зале?

И для кого твои жуткие губы  
Стали смертельной отравой ?  
Негр за тобою, нарядный и грубый,  
Смотрит лукаво.

## Надпись на неоконченном портрете

О, не вздыхайте обо мне,  
Печаль преступна и напрасна,  
Я здесь на сером полотне,  
Возникла странно и неясно.

Взлетевших рук излом больной,  
В глазах улыбка иступленья,  
Я не могла бы стать иной  
Пред горьким часом наслажденья.

Он так хотел, он так велел  
Словами мертвыми и злыми.  
Мой рот тревожно заалел,  
И щеки стали снеговыми.

И нет греха в его вине,  
Ушел, глядит в глаза другие,  
Но ничего не снится мне  
В моей предсмертной летаргии.

## The Old Portrait

Pale, slender lady,  
The narrow antique frame compresses you in  
a golden oval,  
A Negro stands behind you with a pale blue  
fan.

Your shoulders are tender, girlish slender,  
You gaze stubbornly, arrogantly;/Tall  
candles dimly flicker, As if at a church  
doorway.

A zither lies on a little bronze table,  
There's a rose in a cut-glass vase...  
In whose hands did the palette tremble./ In  
this magnificent hall?

And for whom did your cruel lips  
Become fatal poison?  
The Negro behind you, elegant and coarse/  
Slyly looks on.

## Inscription on an Unfinished Portrait

Oh, don't sigh over me,  
That would be useless, criminal grief.  
Here on this square of gray linen,  
I emerged strangely and vaguely.

The painful fracture of the upraised arms,  
A smile of frenzy in the eyes,  
I could not be otherwise  
Before the bitter hour of delight.

That's what he wanted,  
that's what he ordered  
With dead, malevolent words.  
My anxious lips turned crimson,  
And my cheeks became white as snow.

And he's not guilty of any sin,  
He left, He's gazing into other eyes;  
But I, I dream of nothing  
In my fatal lethargy.

<sup>1</sup> The poems are quoted from Roberta Reeder (ed.), *Anna Akhmatova, Polnoe sobranie stikhotvorenij*, Sommerville 1990. The English translations are by Judith Hemschmeyer, quoted from *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova*. Sommerville 1990.

of woman's role in patriarchal society has been that of a sign, – inscribed with meaning, but not producing it. This has provided her with an otherness in relation to language. We can say that the image is theorised in terms of a peculiar lack of distance between the sign and its referent. Regarding this relationship between woman and the image, the film theorist, Mary Ann Doane explicates: "The nearness of signifier and signified in the iconic sign negates the distance which defines phonetic language. And it is the absence of this crucial gap which also, simultaneously, specifies both the hieroglyphic and the female." She exemplifies this with an anecdote about how Freud, in his celebrated lecture on Femininity, argued that his subject would not apply to his female listeners, because, as he said: "you yourself are the problem." Freud's eviction of the female spectator/auditor coexists with the invocation of hieroglyphic language. Too close to herself, entangled in her own enigma, she cannot achieve the necessary distance of a second look.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, these passages from Doane's study of women in cinematic narrative, also apply to Akhmatova's rendering of her female protagonists. It seems to me that the female representation in cultural tradition, – the constructed image of woman – constitutes an important underlying thematic area, especially in Akhmatova's early poetry.

As for the two poems in question, both probably concern imaginary works of art, pictures brought into being by the poems themselves. However, the pictures are described so as to give the reader a sort of visual notion of them. The detailed description of "The Old Portrait" even provides the reader with an idea of the period and style to which it belongs. Several features bring eighteenth-century paintings to mind, – f. ex. the oval form of the frame and the motif of a beautiful noblewoman who is attended by a black

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *Femme Fatales: feminism, film theory and psychoanalysis*. New York 1991. pp. 17-18.

male servant. The possession of a black boy was regarded as a sign of high status among European aristocratic ladies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and together with the pet-dog, the Negro servant was frequently included in portraits.<sup>3</sup> This would mean that to a degree, (but only to a degree, as the painting is fictive), the conventions and typologies of this period add to the meaning of the poem. In contrast, Akhmatova's other poem, "The Unfinished Portrait," cannot be defined that easily in terms of period and style because it renders only the face and the pose of the arms of the woman depicted.

The woman represented in "Inscription on an Unfinished Portrait" is referred to in the first person singular of the personal pronoun, which seems to vivify her and endow her with the voice of a lyric I, but with this impression competes a strong notion of the voice as a fictive construct in the viewer's imagination. The idea of a viewer is partly generated by the title, which underscores the fact that the words of the persona are a written text. What is more, the description of the woman's features in the second stanza: "the sick fracture of the upraised arms / A smile of frenzy in the eyes," and in the third stanza: "My lips anxiously turned crimson, / And my cheeks turned white as snow" implies an external stance. The fluctuation between an internal and an external stance is typical of Akhmatova's early manner of representing a lyric heroine. Just as in many of her love poems where, to quote Viktor Vinogradov, the poet seems to be observing in a mirror the outer signs of her inner condition,<sup>4</sup> so the rendering of the heroine from an external point of view ruptures the unity of the represented heroine and the lyric voice. In this way the lyric I is able to

<sup>3</sup> See David Dabydeen, *Hogarth's Blacks: Images of Blacks in Eighteenth-Century English Art*. Kingston-upon-Thames 1985.

<sup>4</sup> Viktor Vinogradov, *O poezii Anny Akhmatovoj (stilisticheskie nabroski)*, (On the Poetry of Anna Akhmatova [stylistical sketches]). Leningrad 1925. In: *Anna Akhmatova: Tri knigi*. Ann Arbor 1990, p. 268.

situate herself outside the image of the protagonist, and to talk about her.

The first two stanzas in "Inscription on an Unfinished Portrait" concentrate on the description of the woman in the picture. In the third stanza a person referred to as *he* is introduced. On a formal level the feminine I and *he* are here juxtaposed in an opposition of parallel lines. This opposition is also expressed in the end-rhymes and further enhanced, - the mutually rhyming words being similar as for grammatical form and part of speech. In the first and the third line the rhyming words are verbs in the past tense: *velel* (ordered) and *zaalel* (turned crimson). In the second and the third line the adjectives in the instrumental plural, *zlymi* (malevolent) and *snegovymi* (snow-white) echo one another, constituting a parallelism that generates meaning. The verb and the epithet that refers to the woman on the picture: "my mouth anxiously turned crimson and my cheeks turned white as snow" denote on the one hand passive physical reactions governed not by will, but by emotion. On the other hand, the verbs referring to *him*, "wanted," "ordered," indicate intellectual action and power. Thus, the feminine I of the poem and *he* form an oppositional relation, a relation in which her characteristics are the outcome of his conscious actions. In his desire and power he has created her as she appears in the picture: "That's what he wanted, that's what he ordered with dead malevolent words." The mentioning of "words" in the third stanza gives a broader meaning to the motif of the picture. It is as if he has now created her image with words. The traditional gendered relation between word and image is here made explicit. Even if she is the one endowed with a voice, the envoicing does not empower the image. Negations of the woman's subjectivity are repeated through all four stanzas in various ways. - 1. stanza: "Grief is useless and criminal," 2. stanza: "I could not be otherwise." In the third stanza the negation of the woman's subjectivity is

indicated by the formal and semantic parallelism that presents her appearance as a result of his will, and in the 4. stanza the notion of an inner life is negated: "But I, I dream of nothing / In my fatal lethargy."

As I have tried to show, I read the discourse of the poem not as that of the picture, but that of the sympathetic spectator. In the picture the spectator does not see a representation of a woman, the model, but the mind or the ideas of the artist that created her. In turn, this mind present in the picture is fractured through the spectator, that is the lyric voice, only to appear in the light of the spectator's words. This response can be read in the epithets, "sick" and "anxiously," which describe the image, – and in the description of the artist's words as "dead" and "malevolent."

It seems to me in the description of the picture Akhmatova is responding to ideas about art and gender in Russian intellectual life at the turn of the century. In the aesthetic movement, the interpretation of 'woman' and 'the feminine' constituted a continuation and reinforcement of already existing structures of thought, in which woman with her procreational potential was seen as representing nature and a cyclic, trivial reality. In European *fin de siècle* culture in general the fear of Nature's blind brutality seems to be of major concern. Art was represented as Man's possibility to overcome the destruction of nature. And through art woman too was aestheticized, and in this transcending of her naturalness, the male poet or male artist makes her a sign of his own spiritual concerns. Related to this is also the Symbolist idea of a reciprocal relation between art and life. Through aestheticization in art the ideal and true nature of worldly phenomena are revealed and begin working back on reality. According to Vladimir Solov'ev, the religious philosopher, who greatly influenced the thinking of the Symbolist writers, this process would eventually lead to the victory over death. The artist's role was to continue the work

of the Divine Creator.<sup>5</sup> Irene Masing Delic, in her essay on the symbolist idea of art as life-creator describes the symbolists utopian goals as follows: "Art must become no less than the task of divinization of man and woman, of making human beings into perfect works of art, which being perfect neither procreate by giving birth to new mortals nor die, but live forever as the immortal gods." The divinization of Man was meant to be completed through a process of metamorphosis, merging the artist and his made-to-art beloved resulting in an immortal androgynous spiritual being.<sup>6</sup>

This myth of the male artist vs. 'nature' and 'woman' constitutes the frame of reference of Akhmatova's poem. The words mentioned in the third stanza seems to allude to the symbolist notion of the creative act as being analogous to God's creativity as it is rendered in the first lines of The gospel according to St. John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Presenting a negative version of the myth, Akhmatova's poem demonstrates the similarity between the artist and the Divinity as false. The metamorphosis is depicted as incomplete, as "unfinished." The Portrait and the story of its becoming can be interpreted as a realised metaphor of the myth's failure. In Akhmatova's poem the creator's words are not made divine flesh, and that is a deviation from the symbolist myth. On the contrary the creator's words are described as *evil* and *dead*. Instead of being a force that brings immortal life, the artistic act generates only the death of the woman, presented as entombed in the frame of the picture.

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<sup>5</sup> See Vladimir Solov'ev's essays, "Obschii smysl iskusstva" ("The General Meaning of Art," 1890) and "Smysl liubvi" ("The Meaning of Love," 1892-94).

<sup>6</sup> Irene Masing-Delic, "The Living Work of Art: The Symbolist Pygmalion and His Antecedents." In: Irina Paperno, *Creating Life: The Aesthetic Utopia of Russian Modernism*. Stanford 1994, pp 51 - 82.

The implications of representational art are also elaborated on in the poem "The Old Portrait," where a more complex system of figurations of text and picture is at work. In this poem two time levels, past and present, are represented in connection with three notions of space: 1) the painting 2) the site of the spectator, that is the *nunc*, and 3) the modelling scene in the past, as it is imagined by the spectator. The poem opens with the frame and ends with the background, with the gaze of the servant standing behind his mistress. In her commentary on this poem Wendy Rosslyn argues that the description in the first stanza functions as a transposition of the pictorial into the verbal: "the ability of the Russian language to convey the present tense of the verb 'to be' by ellipsis allows nouns, adjectives and adverbs to predominate massively over verbs and conveys an impression of stasis."<sup>7</sup> This, I think, is true on the level of the poem's sense of here and now. However, in line three and four of the third stanza, the static image is extended to encompass drama not represented by the painter. This extension of the depiction is vaguely anticipated in the second stanza's last lines. By the rendering of the flickering light, movement is suggested. Moreover, the reference to 'doorway' alludes to a transition from one level to another. The unsettling glance of the black servant in the last lines hints at a further extension of a narrative. This glance creates an unexpected and enigmatic conclusion in a manner typical of the early Akhmatova.

In the first stanza, though, the presence of the servant functions at the level of the static painting. He is there merely as an aesthetic foil, to serve as a contrast to the lady's white complexion, as an enhancement of her aristocratic appearance. This juxtaposition of the savage and the civilized

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<sup>7</sup> Wendy Rosslyn, "Painters and Painting in the Poetry of Anna Akhmatova." In: Sonia Ketchian (ed.), *Anna Akhmatova 1889-1989. Papers from the Akhmatova Centennial Conference*. Oakland 1993, pp 170-85.



is also represented in the black servant's appearance: – elegant and coarse at the same time. Furthermore, the configuration of white mistress and black male servant is usually charged with eroticism. White European culture, for whom this kind of sensuous physicality and striking naturalness implied the animal-kingdom, considered the Negro to be more libidinous than the White man. As W. J. T. Mitchell has pointed out, the black figure in white culture, just like that of the woman, takes on the characteristics of a sign: "Race is what can be seen (and therefore named) in skin colour, facial features, hair etc.. expose race. Whiteness, by contrast is invisible, unmarked; it has no racial identity, but is equated with a normative subjectivity and humanity from which race is a visible deviation."<sup>8</sup> In consequence, the black servant and the aristocratic lady of Akhmatova's poem can be viewed as two expressions inscribed with similar meaning, not in relation to each other, but each in relation to the cultural norm.

Through a metonymical reference to the painting painter: "in whose hands did the palette tremble" (3.stanza, line 3), the spectator interprets the mind behind a work of art. This reference to the trembling palette indicates a relation between the finished painting the artist's anxious desire. Since the artist has painted the lady's eyes with an expression of refusal and the servant's countenance with an evil look, those figures appear as phantasmatic images of the artist's anxiety towards the enigma of the Other. Both semantically and formally in the rhyming pattern, the sly, malicious look of the black servant in the last lines parallels the deadly effect that the lady has on her admirers. The spectator, in turn, seems to interpret these frightening qualities of the depicted couple as a result of the artist's own fright. It could be the

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<sup>8</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, "Ekphrasis and the Other." In: W. J. T. Mitchell (ed.), *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. Chicago 1994, p. 162.

image that constitutes potential danger. There is a third poem addressing a work of art, "Statue in Tsarskoye Selo" (1916) describing Sokolov's statue "The Milkmaid."<sup>9</sup> Here the female protagonist of the poem explicitly expresses uneasiness toward her male companion's admiration for the statue, whose charm, she insists, is just a pose. Again the work of art evokes fear in the female observer: "I felt a vague fear before this celebrated maiden" (from the third stanza), "And how could I forgive her/ The delight of your enamoured praise.../You see, for her, so fashionably nude, /It's fun to be sad" (4. stanza).

Traces of such an aestheticizing of woman are found in many of Akhmatova's early love-poems, poems which do not deal with art explicitly. In these poems, often rendering a meeting between the heroine and her lover, we find the same pattern: the actions of the puppet-like heroines are presented as a sort of false play. Displaying a stereotypical femininity, they can be said to pose the woman as an object of art. As such they are unable to respond to love. And as is shown in a number of poems in Akhmatova's first collections, these doll-like figures cause the death of innocent bright-eyed boys.

In 1928 Rene Magritte painted one of his famous pictures with the text, "this is not a pipe" of an object clearly resembling a pipe in order to express the difference between representation and the thing itself. In her poems Akhmatova seems to make the same point. In addition she dramatizes the treachery of images. In my view, this is clearly a strategy in order to resist being identified with the traditional image of woman, – an identification that may prevent her from speaking, and deny her access to subjectivity.

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<sup>9</sup> The statue is situated in Tsarskoye Selo Park and depicts the heroine of a La Fontaine fable, "The Broken Pitcher." The statue is also the subject of a poem by Aleksandr Pushkin written in 1830.