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THE FORTIFIED CITIES: THE ARTIST’S RESPONSE TO THE TOTALITARIAN PRESSURE (ON THE SUBJECT OF THE RECENT POLEMICS ABOUT A. ZHOLKOVSKY’S ESSAY ON ANNA AKHMATOVA)

Once upon a time a dissident called Vladimir Bukovsky found a curious way to cope with the brutality and boredom of Soviet prison. He built himself a castle. First he made up a plan and then he started putting the castle together in his mind – stone by stone. And one day there it stood, perfect to the last polished floorboard. Bukovsky thought that this imaginary construct had saved both his life and his integrity: since then he was able to deal with the authorities standing on the high battlements of his very own impregnable castle.

In 1996 Alexander Zholkovsky published a paper titled “Anna Akhmatova – fifty years later.” (The jubilee in question was the fiftieth anniversary of the notorious “Decree on the journals Zvezda and Leningrad” that launched a persecution campaign against Akhmatova.)

The article caused a major uproar both in the literary circles and among the lay reading community.

If we set aside both Zholkovsky’s post-postmodernist polemic verve and the holy fury of his opponents, we could probably hear what the instantly notorious article actually says.

Zholkovsky maintains that within the current Russian cultural ambience there exists a myth of Anna Akhmatova. A myth, a cult, a physical and cultural entity that Zholkovsky defines as “AAA (Anna Andreevna Akhmatova) Institution”. On one level this is a quite natural development, for prominent figures of Russian culture have always tended to be mythologized by the public. Stanislaw Jerzy Lez has noted: “When gossip grows old, it turns into a legend,” and in Akhmatova’s case this rule is wholly applicable.

However, Zholkovsky proceeds to state that the main body of the myth was created not only from the outside, by the public, but also from the inside, by the poet herself. He claims that the “AAA Institution” was a product of careful image-making on Akhmatova’s part. He suggests that Akhmatova was consciously using the events of her life – be they tragic or joyful, momentous or trivial – to create a “perfect” biography of a poet.
Zholkovsky builds his case using memoirs of Akhmatova's inner circle: people who knew, admired and loved Akhmatova. He vividly demonstrates the techniques Akhmatova employed to induce awe, fear and admiration. He provides examples of her using traditionally "weak" poses – those of a victim, abandoned lover or a capricious illogical female – to ensure total control of her habitat. Thus, weakness was transformed into a source of power. He shows Akhmatova rewriting history; for example, establishing herself as Gumilev's widow (despite their divorce and Gumilev's subsequent marriage to Anna Engelgart); turning offenders into non-persons, "this man does not exist for me any more"; and finally manipulating the future by editing her friend's memoirs.

Zholkovsky indicates that the methods employed by the victim of the Soviet system were surprisingly similar to the methods of the system itself. Moreover, he maintains that the same non-pluralistic, static, unquestionably dominant quality was also characteristic of Akhmatova's poetry. (He also reminds the readers that within the cultural framework of the Russian "Silver Age" poetry and biography were one, and that Akhmatova obviously shared this conviction.)

In Zholkovsky's opinion Akhmatova's poetry, like Akhmatova's biographical myth, achieved its classical timeless invulnerability by adopting some features of the contemporary environment. The Soviet totalitarian state, while being hostile to Akhmatova, had also envisioned itself in marble and bronze.

Zholkovsky's article describes Akhmatova as an "iron woman", a tank (in her own words), a grand master level chess-player, a brilliant creator of a personal cult that have long survived that of Stalin. He claims that Akhmatova, while being by no means subservient to the Soviet authority, was as much a part of the Soviet cultural milieu as the totalitarian regime that persecuted her.

The article, as we have already mentioned, caused pandemonium. The most interesting point was that Zholkovsky was attacked on moral, not scholastic, grounds. He was branded a soulless iconoclast, profaning the sacred treasures of Russian culture. This very stance of Zholkovsky's opponents corroborated to the validity of his claims. For a sacrilege could be committed only against a recognised religious symbol. If Zholkovsky was a blasphemous infidel, then Akhmatova was a cult object.

However, today our concern lies not with what was said in the polemics, but rather with some things left unsaid. It seems to us that for all its conceptually ingenious and well-researched brilliance Zholkovsky's de-mythologising sortie has two vulnerable openings. The minor, albeit an important one, concerns his intonation.