Wesleyan University The Honors College

Nikolai Gumilev, Modernist Mythmaker

by

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Class of 2008

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in Russian Languages and Literature

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2008

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to my family, for everything.

Thanks to everyone who has taught me Russian, especially those in the Russian Department of Wesleyan University, Professors Irina Aleshkovsky, Priscilla Meyer, and Duffield White.

Thanks to Lyudmila Djekieva and Alexander Korotkov for their linguistic advice.

Thanks to my housemates, Irina Itriyeva, Annalee Pratt, and Emily Rosen-King, for reading over sections of my draft, and especially to Morgan Frank, for editing all of it the week before April 14th.

Thanks to Howie Lempel, a man of honor, for his tremendous emotional support.

Deepest thanks to my advisor, Professor Susanne Fusso, who has helped me enormously with every aspect of this project, and without whom it would have been abandoned long ago.

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Note on the Text

All Gumilev poems, except for the 1913 version of "Пятистопные ямбы" ("Iambic Pentameters") and all poems from the collection *К синей звезде (To A Blue Star)*, come from the Struve-Fillipov edition of his complete works. In this thesis, I will refer to poems quoted from this edition by volume number, page number, and line number. For example, (2:53-54, lines 13-16) would refer the reader to lines 13-16 of a poem located on pages 53 and 54 of Volume Two. Citations of poems that have already been quoted will give only line numbers. Other editions of Gumilev were consulted for their notes. In my research, I have made extensive use of the website *Николай Гумилёв: электронное собрание сочинений* (*Nikolai Gumilev: Electronic Complete Works*) for translation and searching. Complete reproductions of every poem closely analyzed in this project can be found in both Russian and English in an appendix at the end of this thesis. All uncredited English translations throughout the work are original, literal, and non-poetic.

Introduction

Nikolai Gumilev was born to a bourgeois family in the Kronstadt area of St. Petersburg in 1886. Though originally a sickly child who had to be educated at home until he turned ten,[1] an intense love for literature and a remarkable capacity for self-reinvention eventually led him to become someone quite different: a soldier, an explorer, and a great poet. Against his family's wishes, he made his way to North Africa three times in his youth (once in an official capacity to collect anthropological artifacts for a state museum). While most other major Russian literary figures avoided the conflict, Gumilev volunteered to serve in the First World War as soon as it was declared. In 1915, he was twice awarded the illustrious Cross of St. George for bravery. Though he did not support the Revolution, Gumilev refused to participate in the dissenting intelligentsia's mass emigration to the West, and made the opposite journey to Russia from Paris in 1918 immediately after his term of service ended. He did not last long there. In 1921 he was executed for alleged participation in the Tagantsev conspiracy to restore the Tsar to the throne. He would not deny the charges, proudly announcing to his interrogators that he was a monarchist.[2]

This remarkable history and poetic persona, comparable in Russian literary history only to Lermontov's, have overshadowed Gumilev's poetic legacy: Gumilev the Poet-Warrior is far more well-known than Gumilev the Poet. Yet his literary

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[1] Michael Basker, introduction to Nikolay Gumilyov, *The Pillar of Fire. Selected Poems*, translated by Richard McKane, with introduction and notes by Michael Basker (London: Anvil, 1999), 23.

[2] Leonid I. Strakhovsky, *Craftsmen of the Word. Three Poets of Modern Russia* (Westport: Greenwood, 1949), 51. It is still uncertain whether or not Gumilev actually participated in the conspiracy.

accomplishments are certainly his most significant. He formed part of the staff of the important journal *Apollo,* also worked on several more minor publications, co-founded the Poets' Guild, organized lectures, spearheaded the influential Acmeist movement, and acted as co-head of the Poetry Division of the House of Arts with Alexander Blok after the Revolution. Beyond these energetic organizing activities, Gumilev wrote extensively, publishing plays, fiction, criticism, journalism, and translations in addition to his poetry.

The literary scene that the young Gumilev first entered was a Symbolist one.[3] Russian Symbolism, influenced by but quite distinct from its French counterpart, constituted a rebellion against the socially conscious realism that had characterized nineteenth-century Russian literature. Novelists like Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Turgenev made prose the dominant form of the period. Most writers then neglected poetry or used it to give a ring to their political messages. The Symbolists, who emerged just before the beginning of the twentieth century, reclaimed verse as an end in itself. They directed their attention to technique, pioneering formal innovations that soon pushed poetry back to the forefront of Russian literature. Style and sound were now important, and Symbolist poetry became known for its decorative and musical qualities.

New focus fell upon the spiritual power of poetry. To varying degrees, Russian Symbolists rejected the world around them in favor of a higher, truer, immaterial reality, accessible only through art and through perfectly conceived,

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[3] Sources on Symbolism include Evelyn Bristol, *A History of Russian Poetry*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991; Justin Doherty, *The Acmeist Movement in Russian Poetry,* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995); George Gibian and H.W. Tjalsma, eds, *Russian Modernism, Culture and the Avant-Garde* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1976); and Ronald E. Peterson, ed., *The Russian Symbolists. An Anthology of Critical and Theoretical Writings* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1986).

transcendent symbols. Myth, music, and magic infused Russian literature. Konstantin Balmont was an early advocate of "musical" poetry. Alexander Blok wrote of the "Beautiful Lady," a human manifestation of Sophia, the Wisdom of God and the "Eternal Feminine," who in his later poetry assumed various ambiguous guises, appearing sometimes as a prostitute, a Gypsy, or an actress. The eccentrically esoteric Andrei Bely conducted detailed studies of literary devices and world religions, relating them both to magic. The erudite Vyacheslav Ivanov explored classical mythology and the occult. Innokenty Annensky, a professional classicist, explored some of the same themes with more restraint. Valery Bryusov's energetic literary organizing and cultivated "demonic" persona made him an important figure, as well as a mentor to younger writers. Extending beyond poetry, Symbolism came to encompass all of turn-of-the-century Russian culture. In painting, the "World of Art" movement, championed by Alexander Benois, made markedly unreal, stylized images of doll-like figures and eighteenth-century pastiches fashionable. Alexander Scriabin applied the Symbolist mindset to music, and Vsevolod Meyerhold used it to revolutionize theater.

Symbolism's hold on Russian culture was so powerful and pervasive that, for some, it eventually became more of a religion than an artistic movement. Moreover, consumed by their quests for higher realities, some poets had forgotten the technical lessons taught by the movement's pioneers and began to produce floridly mystical verse. Around 1910, this tendency contributed to Symbolism's "crisis," which was exacerbated by the increasing divide between the younger Symbolists, led by Vyacheslav Ivanov, who had become embroiled in the exploration of poetry's theurgic effects, and the more aesthetically-minded older generation, led by Valery Bryusov.

Several new poetic "schools" emerged from this split. Two claimed they were replacing Symbolism. One group was the Futurists, a collection of young radical poets largely unassociated with the Symbolist mainstream. They styled themselves as hooligans, and in their first manifesto, "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste," they threatened to toss all preceding Russian literary tradition, "Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc., etc.[,] overboard from the Ship of Modernity," and replace it with a new, completely original, and entirely modern language made of "arbitrary and derivative words," a language that "glimmer[ed] with the Summer Lightning of the New Coming Beauty of the Self-sufficient (self-centered) Word."[4]

Another group called themselves the Acmeists. The Acmeist school was co-founded by Gumilev and Sergei Gorodetsky, and included among its ranks his wife Anna Akhmatova and the younger poet Osip Mandelstam. They argued that poetry's goal should be exactness of form rather than religious revelation, and advocated simplicity, concreteness, and renewed attention to the classical literary tradition. In his 1913 manifesto "Acmeism and the Legacy of Symbolism," Gumilev authoritatively explains the name of their movement:

> To replace Symbolism there is a new movement, which, whatever it is called – Acmeism (from the word *ακμή*, the highest degree of anything, flower, florescence) or Adamism[5] (a manfully firm, clear view of life), – demands, in any case, greater balance of powers and more exact knowledge of the relationships between subjects and objects than there was in Symbolism.[6]

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[4] David Burliuk, Alexander Kruchenykh, V. Mayakovsky, and Victor Khlebnikov, "Slap in the Face of Public Taste," in *Russian Futurism and its Manifestos, 1912-1928,* edited by Anna Lawton, translated by Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 51-52.
[5] This name was proposed by Gorodetsky.
[6] Nikolai Gumilev, "Acmeism and the Legacy of Symbolism," in *On Russian Poetry*, translated by David Lapeza (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1977), 21.

Robert T. Whittaker, Jr. points out that Gumilev's challenge to Symbolism is milder than it was sometimes taken to be, for he was "not the systematic adversary of Symbolism that Belinsky was of Romanticism, that Chernyshevsky was of aestheticism, or that Merezhkovsky[7] was of Naturalism… unlike them he did not seek to expunge this major movement from the history of poetry… [for t]he legacy of Symbolism is Acmeism itself."[8] Nevertheless, and not surprisingly, the Symbolists reacted to the new group with some hostility.

Gumilev and his fellow Acmeists had recently been Symbolists themselves, and Gumilev in particular had been deeply involved in the movement. Pamela Davidson quotes Akhmatova later describing him as one of those who regarded Symbolism almost religiously: "Всего нужнее понять характер Гумилева и самое главное в этом характере: мальчиком он поверил в символизм, как люди верят в Бога" ("It is most necessary of all to understand Gumilev's character and the most important aspect of that character: as a boy, he believed in Symbolism the way people believe in God").[9] The head of his lycée in Tsarskoe Selo was Innokenty Annensky. When Gumilev first began writing verse, he closely modeled his works on the turn of the century's "king of poetry,"[10] Konstantin Balmont. Later, he took Bryusov on as his teacher after the latter pointed out his imitative tendency in a review of his first collection, "Путь конквистадоров" ("Path of the Conquistadors"). Bryusov wrote:

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[7] Belinsky, Chernyshevsky, and Merezhkovsky: champions of realism, materialism, and Symbolism, respectively.
[8] Robert T. Whittaker, Jr., "Nikolai Gumilev and Acmeist Criticism (Translator's Preface)" in *The Russian Symbolists*, edited by Carl Proffer and Ellendea Proffer (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1975), 50.
[9] Pamela Davidson, "Gumilev's Reviews of Viacheslav Ivanov's *Cor Ardens*:
Criticism as a Tool in the Polemics of Literary Succession," in *Russian Writers on Russian Writers*, edited by Faith Wigzell (Oxford: Berg, 1994), 64.
[10] See Ronald E. Peterson, "Introduction" in *The Russian Symbolists* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1986), 11.

> …the words of André Gide were chosen as an epigraph: "I became a nomad in order to voluptuously touch everything that wanders." To the point of painfulness, certain stanzas recall his images, then Balmont's, then Andr. Bely's, then A. Blok's… There are coincidences of entire lines: for example, the line "With a curse on pale lips" («С проклятием на бледных устах»)… was already said by K. Balmont ("Dead Ships") («Мертвые корабли»). Mr. Gumilev wields the form of verse far from perfectly… But in the book there are also several beautiful lines, truly felicitous images. We surmise that this is only the "path" of a new conquistador and that his victories and conquests lie ahead.[11]

The embarassed "new conquistador" did everything he could to erase all record of his first book (he presented his next collection as though it were his first) and spent some time on the path of Bryusov as the older poet's disciple.[12] Eventually, however, concerns about the lack of sophistication of his versification and ideas led him to attend Ivanov's renowned lectures on poetry. These two writers grew quite close. Gumilev became a regular at Ivanov's Wednesday night literary-philosophical-occult gatherings in his third-floor apartment, ominously nicknamed "The Tower," and under the influence of his new mentor began studying theosophy and mysticism, despite his assurances to Bryusov that he had not begun to believe in what the latter called Ivanov's "Dionysian heresy," or occult obsessions. To some extent, Ivanov seems to have reciprocated Gumilev's esteem, for Ivanov nearly accompanied Gumilev on his second trip to Africa in 1909.

But they had a falling-out in 1910, when the older poet reviewed Gumilev's third collection, *Жемчуга* (*Pearls*) in *Apollo.* As Bryusov had in his review of *Path of the Conquistadors*, Ivanov chided Gumilev for being an apprentice who too much

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[11] Valery Bryusov, "N. Gumilev. Put' konkvistadorov. Stikhi. SPb., 1905. Ts. 80 k," in *Sredi stikhov. 1894-1924. Manifesty. Stat'i. Retsenzii,* edited by N.A. Bogomolov and N.V. Kotrelev (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1990), 165.
[12] Information on Gumilev's relationships with his mentors from Pamela Davidson.

resembled his teacher (who was, this time, Bryusov). But Ivanov's review was far more insulting than Bryusov's had been, for by this point Gumilev was an established literary figure: he had been writing for five years and even published poetry reviews in *Apollo* himself. Moreover, Ivanov's tone was far more condescending than Bryusov's had been. He begins the review by writing:

> A master does not need an imitator; a pupil delights him. A great master demands independent talent from a true pupil, and upon such a talent he imposes obedience: in willing obedience strength matures. N. Gumilev is not wrong to call Valery Bryusov his teacher: he is a pupil of the sort that no master could fail to recognize; and he is still a pupil.[13]

Ivanov then proceeds to negate this empty praise by showing that Gumilev is in fact far more of an "imitator" than a "true pupil":

> [Gumilev] delights in the techniques of his mentor and in his pose; he strives to reproduce the protrubant die of his speech (выпуклый чекан его речи), his majestic lyric and lyroepic system; copies his pathos and tempo; at times half-consciously re-thinks his favorite thoughts.[14]

Ivanov continues in this vein for several pages, singling out certain elements of *Pearls* for praise, but for the most part dismissing the collection and its author as derivative. The review concludes with the following "prognosis":

> …when real experience of the soul, purchased with suffering and love, will tear away the gaze of the poet from the veils still obstructing the true reality of the world, then the "firmament and the water" («суща и вода») will separate within him, then his lyric epos will become an objective epos, and with pure lyric – his hidden lyricism – then for the first time will he belong to life.[15]

Ivanov scholar Pamela Davidson writes that "the implication was that Gumilev should shed his youthful romanticism and come to adopt a more Ivanovian type of

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[13] Vyacheslav Ivanov, "[Review of Gumilev, *Pearls*]" in *Apollon*, 7(1910):38 (2nd pagination).
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ivanov, "[Review]," 41.

poetics, characterized by a combination of real experience and a belief in a higher transcendent reality, rather than by the subjective world of fantasy and dreams."[16] Insulted and humiliated, Gumilev angrily rebelled. In 1911, he and Gorodetsky founded the Poets' Guild and drew other poets they knew from Ivanov's Tower into it. Two years later, they declared that Symbolism's final moment had arrived and began calling themselves Acmeists.

Symbolists were skeptical that the Acmeists' dedication to form and to "this world" really set them apart from other poets. In 1921, Bryusov, reviewing Gumilev's final collection *Огненный столп*, or *Pillar of Fire*, claimed that the latter had never stopped being a Symbolist.[17] In his article on Acmeism, Sam Driver writes that Gumilev's "rebellion was, in fact, without a cause, since the older generation had begun to think in terms similar to his own."[18] Around that period, several of the most important Symbolists, Blok, Bryusov, and Ivanov, were calling their disciples to renew their attention to form and poetic structure just as the Acmeists did. Moreoever, Gumilev's later poetry, particularly that found in his final and finest collections, *Костер,* or *Bonfire,* and *Огненный столп,* or *Pillar of Fire*, did seem to retain some elements of Symbolist "otherworldliness." Gleb Struve, in his essay "Творческий путь Гумилева," or "Gumilev's Creative Path," actually labels many of the poems in *Pillar of Fire* as either "magical" or "Symbolist."[19]

Yet while Acmeism came to be understood as a movement that entirely eschewed the otherworldly, an understanding mostly derived from Akhmatova's

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[16] Davidson, 54.
[17] In Gleb Struve, "Tvorcheskii put' Gumileva," in *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh,* Vol. 2, edited by G.P. Struve and B.A. Filippov (Washingon: Kamkin, 1964), XVIII.
[18] Sam Driver, "Acmeism," *Slavic and East European Journal* 12(Summer, 1968): 142.
[19] Struve, "Tvorcheskii put'," XXXIII-XXXIV.

realistic love poetry and Mandelstam's densely layered landscapes and still-lifes, for Gumilev, Acmeism had never called for a rejection of Symbolist subject matter, but rather a different approach to it. To quote at length from his essay "Acmeism and the Legacy of Symbolism":

> Russian Symbolism directed its main energies into the realm of the unknown. By turns it fraternized with mysticism, then theosophy, then occultism. Some of its strivings in this direction nearly approached the creation of myth. And it has the right to ask the movement coming to take its place whether it can boast only of its animal virtues, and what attitude it takes toward the unknowable. The first thing Acmeism can answer to such a question is that the unknowable, by the very meaning of the word, cannot be known. The second, that all endeavors in that direction are unchaste. The whole beauty, the whole sacred meaning of the stars lies in the fact that they are infinitely far from earth and that no advance in aviation will bring them closer. He who conceives of the evolution of personality always within the conditions of time and space reveals a poverty of imagination. How can we remember our previous existences (if that is not a patently literary device), the time we were in the abyss, with myriads of other possibilities of being, of which we know nothing, except that they exist? For each of them is negated by our being and each in turn negates it. The feeling of not knowing ourselves, childish and sweet to the point of pain – that is what the unknown gives us. François Villon, asking where the most beautiful women of antiquity are now, himself answers with the mournful exclamation:
>
> …Mais où son les neiges d'antan!
>
> And this allows us to feel the unearthly more strongly than whole discourses on which side of the moon houses the souls of the dead… The principle of Acmeism is always to remember the unknowable, but not to insult one's idea of it with more or less likely conjectures. This does not mean that it denies itself the right to portray the soul in those moments when it trembles, approaching another; but then it ought to shudder only. Of course, knowledge of god, the beautiful lady Theology, will remain on her throne, and the Acmeists wish neither to lower her to the level of literature, nor to raise literature to her diamond coldness. As for angels, demons, elemental and other spirits, they are part of the artist's materials and need not have a specific gravity greater than other images he chooses.[20]

[20] Gumilev, "Acmeism," 23-24.

Gumilev seems to contradict himself in this paragraph. Of the Symbolists' interest in the supernatural, he writes, vaguely, that "all endeavors in that direction are unchaste," then proceeds to discuss "previous existences" (without quite clarifying what he means by this) and sanction the use of "angels, demons, and spirits" in poetry, as long as the artist is careful not to take them too seriously. And both "previous existences" and "spirits" seem to belong to quite a different category from Villon's nostalgia for antiquity.

Yet examined within the context of Gumilev's own poetry, the position outlined in "Acmeism and the Legacy of Symbolism" becomes clearer. In a frequently cited poem written in 1913, Gumilev's lyric hero expresses a Villon-like nostalgia for the values of yesteryear:

Я вежлив с жизнью современною,
Но между нами есть преграда,
Все, что смешит ее, надменную,
Моя единая отрада.

Победа, слава, подвиг – бледные
Слова, затерянные ныне,
Гремят в душе, как громы медные,
Как голос Господа в пустыне.

(I'm courteous with modern life,
But there's a barrier between us,
Everything that makes it, the haughty one, laugh,
Is my sole delight.

Victory, glory, exploit – pale
Words, now forsaken,
Roar in my soul, like brass thunderclaps,
Like the Lord's voice in the desert.) (1: 243-244, lines 1-8)[21]

[21] From the Gleb-Struve edition of Nikolai Gumilev's complete works, in the first volume on pages 243-244. All Gumilev poems from this edition will be cited using this internal format hereafter.

In the next stanza, it becomes clear that the lyric hero's nostalgia comes not just from a general ideal of the legendary past, but from one derived explicitly from literature. He frames his longing in specifically Biblical and Homeric terms:

Всегда ненужно и непрошено
В мой дом спокойствие входило;
Я клялся быть стерелою, брошенной
Рукой Немврода иль Ахилла.

(Always unneeded and uncalled-for
Would tranquillity enter my home;
I vowed to be an arrow, thrown
By the hand of Nimrod or Achilles.) (9-12)

Later, the hero's imagined world expands beyond these two concrete sources into a fantastic pastiche involving the eighteenth century and pagan priests worshipping him, a metal idol:

Но нет, я не герой трагический,
Я ироничнее и суше,
Я злюсь, как идол металлический
Среди фарфоровых игрушек.

Он помнит головы курчавые,
Склоненные к его подножию,
Жрецов молитвы величавые,
Грозу в лесах, объятых дрожью.

И видит, горестно-смеющийся,
Всегда недвижные качели,
Где даме с грудью выдающейся
Пастух играет на свирели.

(But no, I'm not a tragic hero,
I'm more ironic and drier,
I rage, like a metal idol
Among porcelain playthings.

He remembers curly heads,
Bent down to his pedestal,
The majestic prayers of pagan priests,
A thunderstorm in the forests embraced by trembling.

And he sees, laughing sorrowfully,

The perpetually motionless swing,
Where, to a lady with her chest jutting out,
A shepherd plays a pipe.) (17-24)

Here, the presence of pastiche and the fact that the idol is obviously a simile makes it clear that the pagan references are "part of the artist's materials," not an indication that the poem strives to access an exotic spirituality by invoking pagan gods. The priests worshipping the lyric-hero-as-idol represent the past's reverence for poetry as poetry. The frivolous "real world" in this extended simile, the "porcelain playthings"[22] and the "lady with her chest jutting out" on a moribund "perpetually motionless swing," represent the silly and static Symbolist scene. This scene has transformed poetry into something decorative, erotic, and musical; there, it is no longer something that could cause a forest to tremble, and certainly nothing that could continue the traditions of the Bible and Homer.

The images here can be linked to specific Symbolist clichés. The eighteenth-century image of the swing recalls Alexander Benois and the World of Art. The "lady" in line 23 parodies the Beautiful Lady to whom Blok worshipfully dedicated much of his verse. The piping shepherd in the last lines of the poem recalls the figure of the "shepherd mid deserted mountains / Who trumpeted on an Alpine horn" that Ivanov uses in his 1912 essay "Thoughts About Symbolism" as a metaphor for a Symbolist poet.[23] Gumilev's poem argues that the purely literary uses of fantasy

[22] Victor Zhirmunsky was probably the first critic to connect toys in this poem with the "молодое поколение" ("young generation"), presumably the young generation of Symbolists. See Victor Zhirmunsky, "Preodolevshie simvolism," in *V.M. Zhirmunskii. Teoriya literatury. Poetika. Stilistika* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1977), 129.
[23] Vyacheslav Ivanov, "Thoughts About Symbolism," in *The Russian Symbolists. An Anthology of Critical and Theoretical Writings*, edited and translated by Ronald E. Peterson (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1986), 181.

employed by the Acmeist lyric hero prove ultimately more powerful than Symbolism's theurgical extravagances.

For Gumilev, the literary use of fantastic imagery like that in the above-quoted poem is essential to the Acmeist method. In his essay "The Anatomy of a Poem," he lists four elements of poetry: phonetics, stylistics (a category that encompasses tone and figures of speech), composition (which concerns ideological as well as mechanical structure), and eidolology, a term coined by Gumilev which he defines as "the themes of poetry and the poet's possible relationships to those themes."[24] He adds that eidolology "directly adjoins poetic psychology."[25] The meaning of the term "eidolology," which Gumilev uses in other essays and which he apparently convinced at least Gorodetsky to use as well,[26] has not always been entirely clear. Alexander Blok called it "для меня непонятно, как название четвертого кушанья для Труффальдино в комедии Голдони" ("incomprehensible to me, like the name of the fourth dish for Truffaldino in Goldoni's comedy").[27] The critic Raoul Eschelman has mistaken it for "eidology," a phenomenological term used by the philosopher Johann Freidrich Herbart. He explains that "Herbart's concept refers not to representation (the image implied by eidos) but rather to a cognitive monad that mediates between the mind and the world. It is unclear whether Gumilev, who knew no German, could have encountered this particular term."[28]

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[24] Nikolai Gumilev, "The Anatomy of a Poem," in *On Russian Poetry,* translated by David Lapeza (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1977), 32.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Justin Doherty, *The Acmeist Movement in Russian Poetry*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 127.
[27] Samuil Schwarzband, "Aleksandr Blok and Nikolaj Gumilev," *Slavic and East European Journal*, 32(Autumn 1988):379.
[28] Raoul Eschelman, *Nikolai Gumilev and Neoclassical Modernism. The Metaphysics of Style* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1993), 62.

The etymology proposed by Justin Doherty, "from the Greek *eidolon*, 'image,'"[29] seems more likely not only because the word "eidolon" is a more logical root of "eidolology" from a linguistic standpoint, but also since Gumilev may have encountered it during his time studying theosophy with Ivanov. Among theosophists, a Homeric definition of this word, which Georg Autenrich gives as "*phantom*, esp. *shades* of the dead who flit about in the lower world,"[30] gained currency. The *Occult Glossary* published by the Theosophical University Press defines "eidolon" as "a word meaning 'image' – of the man that was… The ancients called these human shadows, 'shades'… and each such shade is but an *eidolon*, or 'astral image' or pale copy of the physical man that was"[31] – a sort of spiritual residue, in other words, in some ways similar to the soul.

Doherty notes the significance of this secondary meaning in his discussion of the relationship between Mandelstam's conception of a word's "psyche" ("soul"), as described in his 1921 essay "The Word and Culture," and Gumilev's "eidolology." In "The Word and Culture," Doherty writes, Mandelstam expands his notion of the word's "logos," or true meaning, into a "psyche," which encompasses the meanings assigned to it by other poets.[32] Since every poem always evokes this history of poetry, Mandelstam writes, "Poetry is a plough that turns up time in such a way that the abyssal strata of time, its black earth, appear on the surface."[33] Or, as he puts this idea

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[29] Doherty, 118.
[30] Georg Autenrich, "Eidolon," in *Homeric Dictionary*, translated by Robert Keep (London: Duckworth, 2002), 97.
[31] G. De Purucker, *Occult Glossary. A Compendium of Oriental and Theosophical Terms* (Pasadena: Theosophical University Press, 1972), 42.
[32] See the section "The Acmeist Concept of the Word (*Slovo*)" in Doherty, 231-243.
[33] Osip Mandelstam, "The Word and Culture" in *Critical Prose and Letters*. 2nd ed, edited by Jane Gary Harris, translated by Jane Gary Harris and Constance Link (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1990), 113.

another way later in the essay, "The world has become not a seven-stop, but a thousand-stop flute, brought to life all at once by the breathing of the ages."[34]

Since the secondary meaning of "eidolon" is similar to "psyche," and since Mandelstam and Gumilev were so closely associated, Doherty argues that the two concepts must be related, and that Gumilev's "eidolology" must refer to more than just imagery, but to images already bearing meaning – the "shades" of older poetry. He explains,

> The priority of the signified over the signifier, of depth of meaning over the surface texture of the poem, distinguishes Mandel'stam's theory of the word; it also characterizes Gumilev's *eidolon*, that higher sense and organizing principle which dominates other elements of poetry. In looking back to the Greeks in their desire to comprehend and describe their art, Gumilev and Mandel'stam show a common Acmeist concern.[35]

Since "The Word and Culture" and "The Anatomy of a Poem" were both published in the same magazine, the first issue of the almanac published by the Poets' Guild (which Gumilev revived as soon as he returned to Russia), a connection between the two poetic concepts expressed in these essays is more than plausible. The eminent Mandelstam scholar Omry Ronen even writes about Mandelstam using the same terminology as Gumilev: "M.'s attitude toward his 'paternal deities' involved a constant shifting of the 'eidola' of the poets in the subtextual array of historical affinities and unexpected typological correspondences."[36] While Ronen could be referring to the theosophical term from which eidolology derived rather than to Gumilev's term itself, in either case his use of it supports the possibility of a closeness between the two theories.

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[34] Mandelstam, "Word and Culture," 116.
[35] Doherty, 243.

Gumilev had also used the term "eidolology" back in the earlier days of Acmeism, however, and his use of the word then suggests that it is not quite the same as Mandelstam's "psyche." For Gumilev, the term is more closely caught up in the delineation between Symbolist and Acmeist uses of the fantastic and mythical. In his review of Gorodetsky's *Willow*, he observes that

> The mythopoeic period of Sergei Gorodetsky is very significant first of all because the poet fell into error, thinking that mythopoeism is the natural outcome of Symbolism, while it is a decisive departure from it. Myth is the self-contained image, having its own name, developing in internal accordance with itself… Dreaming of myth, Sergei Gorodetsky understood that a different school was indispensable for him, one more rigorous and fruitful, and he turned to *Acmeism*.[37]

This designation of myth as a "self-contained image, having its own name, developing in internal accordance with itself," seems related to the concept of "eidolon," the image bearing meaning independently of the meaning the poet gives it. Myths and myth fragments, or eidola, are heavily laden signifiers. Unlike empty images, to which a poet can attribute any meaning at all, myths are "self-contained… developing in internal accordance with [themselves]" because they contain within themselves a complete and coherent narrative. To create such narratives, by recombining eidola from other myths or by inventing a new story entirely, is to engage in mythopoeism. This review therefore implicitly places mythopoeism under the Acmeist category of eidolology. Moreover, in a review of Gorodetsky's next collection, *Flowering Staff*, Gumilev explicitly singles out the former's eidolology for praise.[38]

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[36] Omry Ronen, *An Approach to Mandel'stam,* (Jersusalem: Magnes, 1983), XV.
[37] Nikolai Gumilev, "[Review of Gorodetsky, Bestuzhev (XXVII)]" in *On Russian Poetry,* translated by David Lapeza (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1977), 121.
[38] Nikolai Gumilev, "[Review of Gorodetsky, Akhmatova, Radimov, Ivanov, Khodasevich, Chuzeville (XXXII)]" in *On Russian Poetry*, translated by David Lapeza (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1977), 142.

Claiming mythopoeism for the cause of Acmeism by equating it with eidolology constituted a polemical move. In his essay "Gumilyov's 'Akteon': A Forgotten Manifesto of Acmeism," Michael Basker shows how Gumilev reworked the myth of Akteon not only to better relay his Acmeist message, but also to show how an Acmeist could use myth. After describing how Gumilev deliberately changed aspects of Ovid's original work while preserving others, making his source obvious, Basker writes,

> Gumilyov's motive may be traced to a celebrated quarrel with Vyacheslav Ivanov, who was the specific target for much of the Acmeists' "anti-Symbolist" polemic. In the spring of 1911 Ivanov had subjected Gumilyov's newly completed cycle, *Bludnyy syn* [*The Prodigal Son*], to a verbal critique of unprecedented ferocity. Though no details are available,[39] it is known that the issue under debate was "the limits to the freedom with which a poet may rework traditional themes."[40]

Ivanov had a different conception of mythopoeism, and for him, Basker explains, this mythopoeism was an essential aspect of Symbolist poetry because true myths, ancient or contemporary, provided access to lofty realities and truths. "Canonical myth is a repository of eternal truth," Basker continues, "and any 'idealistic' attempt at its reinterpretation, any personal modifications or aetheticizing endeavour to instil new content, would result in trivial distortions and lifeless spectres of the truth."[41] According to this formulation, Gumilev's poems were idiotic experiments that tainted the pure and powerful myths he took as his subject matter for the sake of achieving relatively minor artistic ends.

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[39] Since Basker only cites secondary sources here, the original reviews have presumably been lost.
[40] Michael Basker, "Gumilyov's 'Akteon': A Forgotten Manifesto of Acmeism," *Slavonic and East European Review* 63(October 1985):502.
[41] Ibid., 503.

Rather than destroying old myths, Ivanov argues in his essay "On the Joyful Craft and Joy of the Spirit," true poets create new ones with art fashioned "in accordance with the tastes and needs of the time."[42] Art expresses the fundamental character of the epoch that produces it and in doing so "creates life"[43] by exposing life's deepest meanings to the people. According to Ivanov, his own epoch and its people called for "universal truth… discovered in symbols."[44] "The artist" of his age, he writes, has

> suddenly recalled that he had once been a mythopoet (*mythopoios*), and toward the nation's soul, he timidly bore forth his own, new-old soul, which was revived with new intuitions, filled with the voices and tremors of previously unknown mysterious life, sprinkled with the dew of new-old beliefs and clairvoyant visions.[45]

Though Ivanov concedes that "old myths naturally turn out to be kin to new myths,"[46] Gumilev's conscious reconfigurations of old myths that made no attempt to express or produce the living spirit of turn-of-the-century Russia did not qualify, in the older poet's view, as "new myths." "In the final analysis, lyric poetry creates life, not icons,"[47] Ivanov observes in "The Testaments of Symbolism," a line that translator Robert Bird presumes in his notes to be directed toward the former's excessively aesthetic former protégé Gumilev.[48]

For Gumilev, as for Mandelstam, classical myths and earlier literature were not a "repository of eternal truth," but a rich source of material for new poetry.

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[42] Viacheslav Ivanov, "On the Joyful Craft and Joy of the Spirit" in *Selected Essays*, translated by Robert Bird (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 113.
[43] Ibid., 116.
[44] Ibid., 125.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Viacheslav Ivanov, "The Testaments of Symbolism," in *Selected Essays*, translated by Robert Bird (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 46.

Elements of myths could be summoned, like the spirits of the dead, and be given new life and new meanings in poems that alluded to old ones. Unlike Mandelstam, Gumilev strove to preserve the narrative elements of the mythic literature he alluded to – Struve notes that more than one critc has written of his epic muse.[49] The poems in which he best demonstrated his Acmeist mythopoeism, the exciting, fantastic, and often complex poems of *Bonfire* and *Pillar of Fire*, which incorporate and distort a dazzling array of myths, legends, and citations from world literature, have therefore been mistaken by Struve and others for being Symbolist in nature. Close investigation of the allusions and subtexts in Gumilev's poetry, however, reveals that this later Symbolism is actually an Acmeist eidolological reformulation.

Kirill Taranovsky and his student Omry Ronen have shown how important intertextuality is in the poetry of Mandelstam. Their method of identifying and analyzing "subtexts" ("an already existing text (or texts) reflected in a new one")[50] proves essential to the comprehension of some of Mandelstam's more obscure poems, whose meanings turn out to depend on the reader's recollection of the other works – subtexts from Russian literature, world literature, or Mandelstam's own writing – that they covertly reference. This sort of analysis, Taranovsky argues, is the key to "solving" Mandelstam's "cryptic poems," which are not intended to be merely mysterious, as some have argued. Describing his early encounters with Mandelstam, he writes

> Though taken with the "music" of his verse and his exquisite imagery, I was annoyed with my inability to understand the cryptic message of certain of his poems, to grasp their "deep meaning." Even at that time I

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[48] Robert Bird, note 68 to "The Testaments of Symbolism," in Viacheslav Ivanov, *Selected Essays,* translated by Robert Bird (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 251.
[49] Struve, "Tvorcheskii put'," XVIII.
[50] Ronen, XI.

> believed that there must be one, since the majority of his poems did not present problems in that respect.[51] (v)

Many of Gumilev's later poems, like "Память" ("Memory") and "Заблудившийся трамвай" ("The Tram That Lost Its Way"), present similar difficulties.

Though this method is not applied extensively to Gumilev by either critic, Ronen suggests that it could be. He notes that all of the "acmeist [sic] poets viewed the entire body of world poetry as a creative manifestation of the eternal return and laid stress on the fundamental unity of poetic speech."[52] Moreover, in a general discussion of subtext, Ronen uses the Gumilev poem discussed in this chapter as an example, identifying in it echoes from Lermontov's "Поэт" ("The Poet"). Like Gumilev's piece, Lermontov's laments the diminished status of the poet by comparing it to a decorative object, in this case a dagger once used by a warrior: "Игрушкой золотой он блещет на стене / Увы, бесславный и безвредный!" ("Like a golden toy it sparkles on the wall / Alas, inglorious and innocuous!")[53]

Gumilev's own status as a poet has diminished much over time. Though during his life he was considered as prominent as the other two great Acmeists, Mandelstam and Akhmatova, more recently, Gumilev has received far less critical attention than they. This diminished stature is due in part to his untimely death and in part to a reputation based on inadequate early assessments of his work that were never effectively dismissed. In 1916, Victor Zhirmunsky's important essay on Acmeism, "Those Who Have Overcome Symbolism," briefly distinguishes Gumilev for "his active, open, and simple manliness, his tense spiritual energy, his

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[51] Kirill Taranovsky, *Essays on Mandel'stam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), v.

[52] Ronen, XII.

temperament."[54] This judgment is not entirely inaccurate, for in this period Gumilev wrote much about his exotic experiences exploring Africa and what he endured during the war, but it is superficial. Moreover, after Gumilev was killed and his works were promptly banned in the Soviet Union, he slipped into obscurity, and little was done to expand Zhirmunsky's insufficient appraisal, which was written long before Gumilev published *Bonfire* and *Pillar of Fire*. Ignoring the character of these later works, Strakhovsky titled the Gumilev section of his 1959 book on Acmeism "Poet-Warrior."

Struve and Fillipov attempted to bring the poet back into the public eye with their four-volume set of his collected works, published in the United States. Struve's two famous essays, "Н.С. Гумилев. Жизнь и личность" ("N.S. Gumilev. Life and Private Life") and "Творческий путь Гумилева" ("Gumilev's Creative Path"), published in 1962 and 1964, respectively, introduce the first two volumes and attempt to establish a basis for serious critical assessment by outlining the poet's life and works and highlighting the quality of his later work, especially the enigmatic and experimental "The Tram That Lost Its Way."

Toward the end of the twentieth century, as Soviet censorship began to wane, more prominent scholarship in Russian and in English from critics like Vyacheslav Ivanov,[55] Roman Timenchik, and Michael Basker began to appear. But superficial evaluations that emphasized Gumilev's early, manly persona persisted. Sidney Monas's introduction to the first substantial English edition of Gumilev, published in 1972, complains that "Gumilev's insistence on and pride in 'a firm, manly attitude,'

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[53] Ronen, XV.
[54] Zhirmunsky, 129.
[55] A late twentieth-century critic who is of no relation to the Symbolist poet.

comes dangerously close to what we tend to see as a boy scout attitude, gotten up in somehow supercrackly rhetoric"[56] and emphasizes his inferiority to the other Acmeists, though he does praise some of his later poetry, most extensively "Tram." Evelyn Bristol's section on Gumilev in her 1991 *History of Russian Poetry* extends "manliness" to encompass his later poetry, arguing that in that period his manliness "lay in his capacity to face philosophical questions."[57] She also mentions "Tram."

Another, more meaningful consensus reached by almost all scholars, however, is that Gumilev's work merits further study. Though highly praised, much of his late, enigmatic poetry has not been closely analyzed, with the predictable exception of "Tram," an unusual work that nevertheless still baffles most readers. By applying the subtext method to several of Gumilev's most cryptic later poems, this thesis will attempt to cast them in a new, more productive critical light. It will explore how the poet used his particular method of myth-making, itself subversive from a Symbolist point of view, to engage in anti-Symbolist polemics. This adversarial position, together with his tactical allusions to other works, gave Gumilev a framework in which to define his own poetic task.

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[56] Sidney Monas, "Introduction," in *Selected Works of Nikolai S. Gumilev,* translated by Burton Raffel and Alla Burago (Albany: SUNY, 1972), 13.
[57] Evelyn Bristol, *A History of Russian Poetry*, (New York: Oxford University Press,1991), 211.

A New Eden: "Ezbekiya"

The last poem in Nikolai Gumilev's collection *Костер*, or *Bonfire*, depicts a pivotal moment from his life in 1907, ten years before the poem was written, during a period when Gumilev still called himself a Symbolist. Indeed, until its complex Biblical and polemical subtexts emerge, this poem, "Эзбекие" or "Ezbekiya," seems almost Symbolist itself, for its lyric hero seems to reject the world in favor of a poetic vision. Scorned by a woman – who is, according to his first wife Anna Akhmatova, herself[58] – he has attempted to retreat from the world, and now wanders Egypt immersed in a suicidal gloom. Though he had been enthusiastic about his earlier trips to Africa, the exotic no longer excites him, and he can think only of death. One evening in Cairo, however, he visits the garden of Ezbekiyeh, or Ezbekiya, as it is often called in English. The transcendent beauty of this place overwhelms him and restores his will to live; on the spot, he swears never again to consider the "easy death" of suicide before seeing the garden once more. But the poem ends on a gloomy note. Now, in 1917, the narrator is contemplating a return to Ezbekiya. Though not explicitly mentioned, a renewed death-wish is strongly implied, a matter I will explore in more depth further on.

Some critics have interpreted the poem as an Acmeist statement. Michael Basker describes the lyric hero's "stoical commitment to life on God's earth, whatever it may entail" as "the very essence of his Acmeist morality."[59] Earl D. Sampson agrees, citing the Russian critic Yurii Verkhovsky in support of this view:

> The poem[60] as a whole… provides an excellent example of the late Gumilev's mastery in combining the concrete realism of Acmeism with lyrical and metaphysical themes of great resonance, or as Verkhovsky puts it, "harmonious fusion of the ontological basis of the world of things, or, in other terms, of the spiritual-musical element with a chromatic-plastic perception of the sensible world."'[61]

"Ezbekiya" indeed describes how a profound experience of earthly beauty might compel a man to continue living on earth. The nature of this experience, however, is actually quite unearthly. As Verkhovsky observes, the "chromatic-plastic perception of the sensible world" that characterizes the author Gumilev's post-Symbolist style in 1917 is combined here with a "spiritual-musical element" – Symbolism – that colors the lyric hero's vision of reality in 1907. This lyric hero decides to live not for the sake of a "stoic commitment to life on this earth," but because, in Ezbekiya, this world affords him contact with two *other* realms: the divine and the artistic.

He finds this garden moving because of the fabulous images it conjures in his artistic imagination, an indication that his attraction to the place is not quite an expression of straightforward love for this world. Viewing Ezbekiya's landscape, the lyric hero sees a fantasy far more appealing than the cold world inhabited by cruel women he had so recently considered taking dire measures to escape:

> Там пальмы тонкие взносили ветви,
> Как девушки, к которым Бог нисходит.
> На холмах, словно вещие друиды,
> Толпились величавые платаны,

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[58] Michael Basker, notes to "Ezbekiyeh" in Nikolai Gumilyov, *The Pillar of Fire. Selected Poems.* Translated by Richard McKane. Introduction and notes by Michael Basker, (London: Anvil, 1999), 230.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Here Sampson specifically treats another poem in *Bonfire*, "Рабочий," or "The Worker," but immediately afterwards describes "Ezbekiya" as another illustration of the same point, and explains that Verkhovsky's quotation actually deals with the latter work.
[61] Earl D. Sampson, *Nikolai Gumilev,* (Boston: Twayne, 1979), 128.

И водопад белел во мраке, точно
Встающий на дыбы единорог.

(There slender palms raised their branches,
Like maidens to whom God descends;
On the hills, like prophetic druids,
Thronged majestic plane-trees,

And the waterfall shone white in the gloom, like
A unicorn rearing.) (2:30-31, lines 13-18)

These fanciful creatures turn out to be characters from Gumilev's own poetic universe. His early Symbolist poetry often dealt with the romantic, the medieval, and the mystical. In the notes to "Ezbekiya" in the International Library of Poetry edition of Gumilev's verse, Evgeny Peremyshlev indicates that a unicorn appears in "Потомки Каина," or "Cain's Descendants," which was first published in 1909, only a few years after "Ezbekiya" is set, in a collection (*Жемчуга*, or *Pearls*) that Gumilev began writing in 1907.[62] There, the unicorn appears in connection with another of "Ezbekiya's" fantasy-images, the maidens, as part of a list of some consequences of original sin:

Для юношей открылись все дороги,
Для старцев – все запретные труды,
Для девушек – все янтарные плоды
И белые, как снег, единороги.

(For youths all roads were opened,
For old men – all forbidden labors,
For maidens – all amber fruits
And unicorns, as white as snow.) (1:94-95, lines 5-8)

Since the unicorn is traditionally considered a symbol of chastity, its juxtaposition with "amber fruits" and now-fallen "maidens" is ironic in "Cain's Descendants," but

[62] Evgeny Peremyshlev, notes to "Ezbekiye," in Nikolai Gumilev, *Stikhotvoreniia*, (Moscow: Vsemirnaya biblioteka poezii, 2007), 450.

in “Ezbekiya” the unicorn and the pious maidens represent an ideal posited as an alternative to the real, tormented relationship that drove the lyric subject to Egypt in the first place.

The last imaginary image, the druids, also appears in *Pearls*, in the poem that directly follows “Cain’s Descendants” – “Камень,” or “The Stone.” This piece is explicitly a work of fantasy: it describes a sinister stone-creature summoned from the sea by “угрюмые друиды”, or “gloomy druids” (1:95-96, line 5), to deliver inexorable vengeance. Gumilev links druids more explicitly to literary production in another poem from *Bonfire*, “Канцона третья,” or “Third Canzone.” This piece expresses nostalgia for an older, purer world:

> Земля забудет обиды
> Всех воинов, всех купцов,
> И будут, как встарь, друиды
> Учить с зеленых холмов.
>
> И будут, как встарь, поэты
> Вести сердца к высоте,
> Как ангел водит кометы
> К неведомой им мете.
>
> (The earth will forget the offenses
> Of all the warriors, of all the merchants,
> And as in days of old, druids will
> Teach from the green hills.
>
> And as in days of old, poets will
> Lead hearts into the heights,
> As an angel leads comets
> To a boundary unknown to them.) (2:24, lines 5-12)

Here, Gumilev clearly links these imaginative figures – druids – to figures representing the imagination – poets – and both to an imagined ideal of an ancient world superior to this one. The druids’ connection to poets suggests that Gumilev identifies some aspect himself with them, and that the power they wield in his poems

is one he might like to possess. “The Stone,” written not long after the episode of romantic disappointment alluded to in “Ezbekiya,” shows their abilities to enact revenge, and “Third Canzone” restores the status they enjoyed in ancient times. Imagining the plane-trees as druids gives the lyric hero an opportunity to imagine a more amenable identity for himself than that of the scorned lover. Ezbekiya reawakens him not to nature’s intrinsic beauty, but to his own imagination’s ability to poetically reconfigure the real world into a better one.

An alternate reality of fantastic poetic images is not the only “other world” to which Ezbekiya grants the hero access, however. This poem’s divine elements are also extremely important. Gumilev’s description of the garden conveys a strong Biblical mood:

> Но этот сад, он был во всем подобен
> Священным рощам молодого мира:
> Там пальмы тонкие взносили ветви,
> Как девушки, к которым Бог нисходит.
>
> (But this garden, in everything it resembled
> The sacred groves of the young world:
> There slender palms raised their branches,
> Like maidens to whom God descends.) (11-14)

The phrases “garden,” “sacred groves,” and “young world” bring to mind the Garden of Eden, and Ezbekiya’s Mediterranean setting and foliage are similar to those of the Holy Land. Its palms, in fact, even recall the Song of Solomon, which explicitly compares the palm to a young woman: “How fair and pleasant you are, O loved one, delectable maiden! You are stately as a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters. I say I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its branches.”[63] Though

[63] The Song of Solomon in *Holy Bible,* New Revised Standard Version, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Nelson, 1989), 7:6-8.

ostensibly a love poem, the love described in the Song is often interpreted as an extended metaphor for divine rapture. By referring to it here, then, Gumilev expresses three things: that the world of Ezbekiya is similar to the world of the Bible, that it suggests a new sort of passion superior to the one he has just lost (the palm-maiden image's erotic aspect relates the two directly), and that this passion is superior because it connects him with God.

In fact, the lyric hero's relationship with God constitutes the very crux of this poem. In line nine, he recalls praying over his contemplated suicide. Later on, in the poem's central fifth stanza, stars appear:

> Ночные бабочки перелетали
> Среди цветов, поднявшихся высоко,
> Иль между звезд, – так низко были звезды,
> Похожие на спелый барбарис.
>
> (Moths flew back and forth
> Amidst flowers, which raised themselves high,
> Or among stars, – so low the stars were,
> Resembling ripe barberries.) (19-22)

This strange passage seems to deal with earthly straining toward the divine: first the moths fly among the flowers "which raised themselves high," mimicking the God-seeking palm-maidens, and then they reach the stars. The exaggerated caesura after the second foot, combining a comma and a dash, indicates the speaker's profound shock at his next discovery – that he feels closer to the stars, too.

The stars' distance from humanity is an important concept for Gumilev. In "Acmeism and the Legacy of Symbolism," he uses it as a metaphor for the unattainability of the divine: "The whole beauty, the whole sacred meaning of the stars lies in the fact that they are infinitely far away and that no advance in aviation

will bring them closer."[64] The juxtaposition of the stars and flowers draws a parallel between the earthly garden and the unearthly God that seems to approach the hero as he stands in Ezbekiya. God's tantalizing closeness resembles the "ripe barberries" of the divine stars, almost ready to drop. A prickly plant with a tart fruit, the barberry, as a metaphor, also encompasses the suffering the hero endured before reaching Ezbekiya.[65]

The lyric hero's relationship to God culminates in the next stanza with a vow:

> И, помню, я воскликнул: «Выше горя
> И глубже смерти – жизнь! Прими, господь,
> Обет мой вольный: что бы ни случилось,
> Какие бы печали, униженья
> Ни выпади на долю мне, не раньше
> Задумаюсь о легкой смерти я,
> Чем вновь войду такой же лунной ночью
> Под пальмы и платаны Эзбекие».
>
> And, I remember, I cried: "Higher than woe
> And deeper than death is life! Accept, O Lord,
> My freely given vow: that no matter what happens,
> Whatever woes, humiliations
> May fall to my lot, not before
> Will I begin to think about easy death,
> Until I once more enter, on just such a moonlit night,
> Under the palms and plane-trees of Ezbekiya." (23-30)

This promise – an unconditional acceptance of the world as it is after an earlier rejection of it – continues the poem's biblical subtext by echoing the promise God offers Noah after destroying the world in a fit of angry disgust at humanity's disappointing sinfulness:

> Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the LORD smelled the pleasing odor, the LORD said in his

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[64] Gumilev, "Acmeism," 23.
[65] *The Encyclopædia Britannica,* s.v. "barberry," via The Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, http://www.britannica.com

> heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease."[66]

Just as Noah's proof of the earth's goodness reconciles God to humanity's sinfulness and reinforces his relationship to man, so too does the beautiful revelation of the garden – a gift from God – also reconcile Gumilev's lyric hero to the "woes and humiliations" of earthly life and strengthens his relationship with his creator.

Ezbekiya bears no small resemblance to the world after the flood. Gumilev describes the garden as a floral realm, populated only by a few flying insects, like the earth after it was purged of all animal life but that preserved by Noah in the ark. The hero is alone, like these survivors, and the garden "in everything… resemble[s] / …the young world" (11-12), evoking not only the first garden of Eden, as previously mentioned, but also the restored Eden of the earth after it was purified by the flood. Moreover, like that earth, Ezbekiya was once actually underwater. According to *The Rough Guide to Egypt*, before the garden was constructed in 1870, "in medieval times a lake fed by the Nasiri Canal and surrounded by orchards existed [t]here."[67] This evocation of Genesis not only underlines the lyric hero's new closeness to God and the biblical world, but by connecting it to the Lord's promise, it also conveys the strength of his own vow.

"Ezbekiya" also evokes a second Biblical covenant: God's promise of Messiah. The fulfillment of this promise is prefigured in the Gospel of Luke by

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[66] Genesis in *Holy Bible*, New Revised Standard Version, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Nelson, 1989), 8:20-22.
[67] Dan Richardson, "Ezbekiya Gardens and North to Ramses" in *The Rough Guide to Egypt* (Rough Guides Ltd. London: Penguin, 2007), via http://www.roughguides.com/website/travel/destination/content/default.aspx?titleid=11&xid=idh468807976_0146 (accessed November 1, 2007).

Gabriel's annunciation to Mary:

> The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy; he will be called the Son of God."[68]

The image of the palms "like maidens to whom God descends" in line thirteen evokes this story. Palms are linked to messianic anticipation in another way, too. In the Gospel of John, Christ's followers celebrate his arrival by "taking branches of palm trees" and "shouting, 'Hosanna!'"[69] The sense of expectation these palms provide is swiftly met in lines seventeen and eighteen with the appearance of "the waterfall [that] shone white in the gloom, like / A unicorn rearing." According to the *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, "Latin patristic writers averred parallels between Christ born of the Virgin Mary and the unicorn, which could be captured only by a virgin."[70] Elsewhere in the Bible, and in this poem's subtext, water signifies creation (when "a wind from God swept over the face of the waters," shortly before the Garden of Eden[71]) and destruction (Noah's flood, as recently discussed), but here, by virtue of its association with Christ, water is transformed into a symbol of redemption – the waters of baptism. No longer the all-encompassing lake of Ezbekiya's past, the flow of this waterfall is powerful but directed; now God asserts power not through annihilation, but through reclamation and redemption.

At this point, in lines nineteen through twenty-two, which describe the stars' (and, by implication, God's) shocking nearness, Gumilev's lyric hero is redeemed.

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[68] The Gospel according to Luke in *Holy Bible*, New Revised Standard Version, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Nelson, 1989), 1:35.
[69] The Gospel according to John in *Holy Bible*, New Revised Standard Version, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Nelson, 1989), 12:13.
[70] Richards, Earl J. "Unicorn." In *Dictionary of the Middle Ages,* Vol. 12. (New York: Scribner, 1989), 280.
[71] Genesis, 1:2, 2:8.

Like Christ, and Lazarus by Christ, he is resurrected,[72] for in his vow he relinquishes his death wish. But, though unconditional in the sense that no "woes" or "humiliations" can shake him from it, the hero's vow nevertheless includes a loophole. He swears not even to begin thinking, задумать, about death until returning to Ezbekiya, but he leaves open the possibility that after returning he may once more decide to kill himself. By repeating his journey – the vow stipulates that the return must occur on "just such a moonlight night," and under the same "palms and plane-trees" – the hero presumably hopes to also repeat his extraordinary redemption, but it is not guaranteed.

Repetition, or, to put it another way, echoing, plays an important role in this poem. For example, in several respects it evokes the Symbolist Alexander Blok's "О смерти," "About Death," which was published in 1907, the year when "Ezbekiya" takes place, in a collection entitled *Vol'nyie mysli*, or *Free Thoughts.*[73] Echoes of both these titles appear at critical points in Gumilev's poem. In line nine, the lyric hero prays "о смерти," "for death,"[74] to establish "Ezbekiya's" emotional context. Later, in the fifth stanza, which (at least temporarily) resolves this conflict, the phrase recurs: in an "обет вольный" ("freely given vow," (25)), a phrase that echoes "free thoughts," the hero swears never to think "о легкой смерти" ("about easy death," (28)) before returning to the garden. A comparison of the two poems' highly unusual forms also suggests a connection between them. Both are long, unrhymed poems with stanzas of uneven length, a format that was highly irregular in Russian poetry of the

[72] It is worthy of note that in the Gospel of John, these two resurrection stories bookend the palm episode to which Gumilev alludes.
[73] Alexander Blok, "O smerti" in *Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh.* Vol. 2, edited by V.N. Orlov, A.A. Surkov, and K.I. Chukovskii (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1960), 295-298.
[74] Here, one Russian word – the preposition "о" – translates into both "for" and "about."

period. Both are also written in iambic pentameter, a much less common meter than the pervasive iambic tetrameter of Pushkin. These striking parallels suggest that "About Death" is a subtext to "Ezbekiya."

Given their technical similarities, it is not surprising that "About Death" resmembles "Ezbekiya" in content as well as form. This poem is also a long, thoughtful discourse on death and will. Some of the musings expressed in it are remarkably similar to the ones in Gumilev's poem. Its first stanza, for example, is very much like the second stanza in "Ezbekiya."

"Ezbekiya":

Я женщиною был тогда измучен,
И ни соленый, свежий ветер моря,
Ни грохот экзотических базаров,
Ничто меня утешит не могло.
О смерти я тогда молился Богу
И сам ее приблизить был готов.

(Then I was tormented by a woman,
And neither the salty, fresh wind of the sea,
Nor the din of exotic bazaars,
Nothing could console me.
Then I prayed to God for death,
And was ready to bring it closer myself.) (5-10)

"About Death":

Всё чаще я по городу брожу,
Всё чаще вижу смерть – и улыбаюсь
Улыбкой рассудительной. Ну, что же?
Так я хочу. Так свойственно мне знать,
Что и ко мне придет она в свой час.

(More and more often I wander through the city,
More and more often I see death – and I smile
A reasonable smile. Well, so what?
That's the way I want it. So it is for me in my own way to know,
That it will come to me, too, in its own time.) (1-5)

The life affirmation in Blok's final stanzas also has much in common with the

epiphany that life is “higher than woe and deeper than death” (23-24) and his fervent vow to live “no matter what happens” (25) that occurs to the lyric hero in Gumilev’s poem:

Сердце!
Ты будь вожатаем моим. И смерть
С улыбкой наблюдай. Само устанешь,
Не вынесешь такой веселой жизни,
Какую я веду. Такой любви
И ненависти люди не выносят,
Какую я в себе ношу.

Хочу,
Всегда хочу смотреть в глаза людские,
И пить вино, и женщин целовать,
И яростью желаний полнить вечер,
Когда жара мешает днем мечтать
И песни петь! И слушать в мире ветер!

(Heart!
You be my guide. And observe death
With a smile. You’ll get tired yourself,
You won't be able to bear such a gay life
As I lead. People can’t bear
Such love and hate
As I carry within myself.

I want,
I always want to look into human eyes,
And drink wine, and kiss women,
And fill the evening with a frenzy of desires,
When the heat of the day keeps me from dreaming
And sing songs! And hear wind in the world!) (110-122)

Despite their obvious correspondences, “About Death” and “Ezbekiya” are not identical. Though the latter clearly refers to Blok’s work – both present a wanderer’s thoughts on death and will in highly similar poetic formats – the narrative of Gumilev’s poem diverges from its model significantly. This divergence indicates a

polemical engagement with Symbolism in general and Blok in particular.[75]

In Blok's poem, the narrator is shaken from his disgust with the banal world by actually witnessing death. As he is passing a racetrack, a jockey falls to his death and is carried away. This event reminds him of another death he had observed not long before, of a worker who slipped into the sea while trying to unload a barge. In both cases, these tragedies stir the crowd to humane action before it returns to trite normalcy. For the narrator, seeing death becomes a real-world experience that allows him to glimpse something higher – a Symbolist moment of transcendence – and inspires him to continue seeking such moments by living life to the fullest.

Gumilev exaggerates the concept of transcendent Symbolist moments in "Ezbekiya." At first, it seems as if the lyric hero is having just such an experience, albeit one rather less sophisticated than that related by Blok's narrator. The echoes from Gumilev's own Symbolist poetry are difficult to overlook and, for one familiar with this poet's work, easy to figure out. Yet closer analysis of the poem shows that beneath these rather uncomplicated Symbolist fantasies lies a richer Biblical subtext structured according to the mature Gumilev's sophisticated mythopoeic technique. The older Gumilev, the author of "Ezbekiya," shows that what his young lyric hero initially mistakes for a Symbolist experience is actually a religious one. He privileges his outlook by executing his later method more skillfully.

Gumilev explicitly establishes that the equivalent moment of transcendence in "Ezbekiya" is religious by openly attributing it to God. When the lyric hero finds inspiration in Ezbekiya, it compels him to make an arrangement with God, not with his own heart. This arrangement is also not permanent. While Blok's hero resolves to

[75] See Schwarzband for more details on the polemical relationship between these two poets.

wait for death whenever it may come, Gumilev's narrator gives himself a role to play in his fate. Returning to Ezbekiya re-opens the possibility of suicide. It remains ambiguous whether this hero will "Войти в тот сад и повторить обет / Или сказать, что (он) его исполнил / И что теперь свободен…" ("go into that garden and repeat the vow / Or say, that [he] fulfilled it / and is now free…") (43-45). As Sampson has noted, the word "умереть," "to die," would fit metrically and logically into the end of line forty-five, which is left blank because of the vow that prohibits the hero from even considering suicide again.[76] By determining the nature of the hero's return experience, God ultimately determines his fate. The narrator himself cannot know, and the text of the poem hints that he harbors a doubt that the return trip will be a duplicate of the first.

"Ezbekiya" echoes itself as well as "About Death." With every recollection of 1907, the narrator repeats himself. For example, the words "десять лет," "ten years," occur each of the three times he begins thinking back to Ezbekiya. Significantly, however, the phrases containing these words change. The first time they appear, the thought containing them constitutes the entire first stanza:

> Как странно – ровно десять лет прошло
> С тех пор, как я увидел Эзбекие,
> Большой каирский сад, луною польной
> Торжественно в тот вечер освещенный.
>
> (How strange – exactly ten years have gone by
> Since I saw Ezbekiya,
> A huge Cairan garden, by the full moon
> Solemnly illuminated on that evening.) (1-4)

When they reappear in line thirty-one, the narrator dwells on the idea of the garden

[76] Sampson, 129.

itself for only one line before moving on to its contents, which appear the first time around only in the third stanza:

> Как странно – ровно десять лет прошло,
> И не могу не думать я о пальмах…
>
> (How strange – exactly ten years have gone by,
> And I can't help but think about the palm trees…)

At the beginning of the next and last stanza, these words recur again, but this time the thought devoted to them is reduced to only half a line: "Да, только десять лет…" ("Yes, only ten years…").

The introduction of the phrase "yes, only" is significant: it makes explicit the reduction that has occurred over the course of the poem. Like an echo, the narrator's memory of the fabulous garden grows weaker every time he returns to it. In the sixth stanza, Ezbekiya has become a word, like a ghost, invisible and maybe imaginary:

> И вдруг оглядываюсь я, заслыша
> В гуденьи ветра, в шуме дальней речи
> И в ужасающем молчаньи ночи
> Таинственное слово – Эзбекие.
>
> (And suddenly I look around, hearing
> In the drone of the wind, in the murmur of the faraway river,
> And in the awful silence of the night
> A mysterious word – Ezbekiya.) (35-38)

Though he acknowledges that he is far from Ezbekiya, and that a return may once again change his life, here the narrator reveals that in his mind the garden has ceased to be one of the "sacred groves of the young world" and become only a haunting memory.

In "Ezbekiya," Gumilev alludes to Blok, but changes Blok's Symbolist experience into a religious one and transforms the latter's willful narrator into a man

humbled before and dependent on the grace of God. This is not the only poem in which Gumilev polemically attacks Blok by means of modified citation, however. In "Among the Gypsies," Gumilev transforms the other poet's celebrated masterpiece "The Stranger" into a daring and daringly experimental attack on the entire venture of Symbolism.

The Threat of the Occult: “Among the Gypsies”

It is not immediately apparent that “У цыган” (“Among the Gypsies”) condemns Symbolism’s efforts to contact other worlds as demonic, or even that it also engages in anti-Symbolist polemics at all. In simplest terms, this poem describes an encounter between a Russian officer and a group of Gypsies. Most play stringed instruments as one, a girl, dances. The drunk and lustful officer imagines raping her. Since he is rich and of higher social standing than the Gypsies, he could humor this whim with impunity. Halfway through the poem, however, the tables turn. The officer's intoxication and lust now overwhelm him. The Gypsy girl intensifies his stupor, circling him and enticing him as she dances. Suddenly, she stabs him with a piece of flint, and the waiters carry his body away, presumably to strip it of valuables.

This sordid account of a petty crime takes on a deeper significance for the narrator, who witnesses it from another table. This nameless narrator undergoes a strangely mystical experience as he watches these events unfold. He begins feeling displaced from the “real” world of the tavern: “Так убедительно поверил я рассказу / Про иные, родные мне края” (“So earnestly I began to believe that story / About other lands, native to me”) (2:51-53, lines 7-8). Then he begins seeing strange visions. The Gypsies seem to become the oxen whose tendons created their instruments’ strings, the officer turns into a tiger, and the tavern is replaced by a second reality, the outdoor site of a mystical ritual sacrifice, which will presumably be performed by the predatory tiger that dominates the scene:

> Пламя костра, пламя костра, колонны
> Красных стволов и оглушительный гик,
> Ржавые листья топчет гость влюбленный,
> Кружавщийся в топле бенгальский тигр.

(Bonfire flame, bonfire flame, columns
Of red tree-trunks and a deafening whoop,
The enamored guest tramples rusty leaves,
The Bengal tiger circling in the crowd.) (13-16)

Moreover, in the poem's seventh and central stanza, a third reality appears to the narrator, revealing yet another identity for the officer:

Мне, кто помнит его в струге алмазном,
На убегающей к Творцу реке,
Грозою ангелов и сладким соблазном,
С кровавой лилией в тонкой руке?

([Could it be] for me [to see him], who remembers him in the diamond bark,
On the river running away toward the Creator,
With a storm of angels and sweet temptation,
With a bloody lily in a thin hand?) (25-28)

After this perplexing vision, the narrator's attitude toward the scene changes. He directly addresses the Gypsy girl, ordering her to murder the customer:

Девушка, что же ты? Ведь гость богатый,
Встань перед ним, как комета в ночи,
Сердце крылатое в груди косматой
Вырви, вырви сердце и растопчи.

(Girl, what are you doing? That's a rich guest,
Stand before him, like a comet in the night,
A winged heart in a shaggy chest,
Pull it out, pull out the heart and trample all over it.) (29-32)

The lady then becomes the tiger, and kills the officer. While Gumilev leaves the question of whether or not the narrator actually spoke these orders aloud ambiguous, like so many of the poem's events, figurative hints from earlier stanzas suggest that the Gypsies had been the predators all along, a matter I will address in more detail further on. The narrator's words, then, are not a command, but an encouragement; his vision in the seventh stanza unveiled something about the secret, true natures of the

guest and the girl that convinced him of her crime's righteousness.

Confusion, secrecy, and hiddeness persist throughout the poem, reinforcing its already powerful sense of mystery. Though his style is usually fairly straightforward, Gumilev describes this poem's events disjointedly, almost deliriously, sometimes jumping from the tavern into the narrator's mystical visions without any segue. His meter here is also deliberately disconcerting. For instance, instead of traditional syllabo-tonic verse, his meter is accentual, a technique that was still somewhat avant-garde when the poem was published in 1921. His lines seem to be arrayed in accentual "feet" called dol'niks, in which, according to Michael Wachtel, "intervals [between stresses] are only one or two syllables."[77] This would make sense, for Earl D. Sampson notes that "*dol'niks*… comprise a significant portion of [Gumilev's] poetry, and he is recognized as one of the poets… responsible for introducing the *dol'nik* and establishing it as a standard metrical form in Russian poetry."[78]

But in several instances here, these intervals disconcertingly last longer than two syllables. For example, in the appropriately mysterious lines seven and eight, "Так убидительно поверил я рассказу / Про иные, родные мне края" ("So earnestly I began to believe that story / About other lands native to me"), the three-syllable intervals before the first and second stresses in the first line and before the third syllable in the second seem strikingly incongruous in the midst of all the other one- and two-syllable intervals. Moreover, unlike most of the lines in this poem, line eight does not have four beats, but only three. These disorienting techniques make the reader, like the guest in the first line, feel "как в дурмане," as though drugged or in a

[77] Michael Wachtel, *The Cambridge Introduction to Russian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 23.
[78] Sampson, 91.

daze (1).

In the same way, the more "earthly" passages describing the tavern use meter to induce a sensory overload. The Gypsies' singing and dancing completely overwhelm the drunken officer, preventing him from realizing what they actually plan to do: "Ах, здесь слишком много бубнов гремучих / Слишком много сладких, пахучих тел " ("Ach, there are too many roaring tambourines here, / Too many sweet, pungent bodies") (19-20). Gumilev conveys this overwhelming sensation by modifying the standard dol'nik, stuffing six stresses into line nineteen, including three consecutive beats at the beginning.

The atmosphere within the world of the poem also contributes to the general sense of confusion in "Among the Gypsies." Its smoke and noise makes it hard for the narrator to perceive this man's true identity. Directly before the crucial seventh stanza, struggling to pick the officer out from the crowd, the speaker asks, "Мне ли видеть его в дыму сигарном, / Где пробки хлопают, люди кричат?" ("Could it be for me to see him in the cigar smoke, / Where corks pop, people yell?") Even after his revelation, when he eggs on the Gypsy girl, a veil of mist continues to hover over the scene as it fades in and out of the second reality:

> Шире, всё шире, кругами, кругами
> Ходи, ходи и рукой мани,
> Так пар вечерний плавает лугами,
> Когда за лесом огни н огни.
>
> (Wider, always wider, in circles, in circles,
> Go, go and lure him with your hand,
> Thus evening mist floats in meadows,
> When beyond the forest are fires and fires.) (33-36)

That Gumilev associates, even conflates, this enigmatic mist with the Gypsy girl is significant. He makes the Gypsies invisible characters in this poem, even

though, as the title itself indicates, they are ubiquitous. Aside from the girl, the first Gypsies to actually appear are the waiters who carry away the officer in the twelfth stanza; otherwise, they are identifiable only audibly, through their instruments. Even the girl's first appearance as part of the officer's rape fantasy of a "[г]ортанный голос – жалобы девичьи / Из-под зажимающей рот руки" ("A guttural voice – girlish complaints / From under the hand covering the mouth") (11-12) obscures her true nature. A hand partially covers her face, and his imagination, which construes her as a victim instead of a murderer, hides her identity.

In the same stanza, the Gypsies in general are also conflated with victims – the oxen whose tendons produced their instruments' strings: "Вещие струны – это жилы бычьи, / Но горькой травой питались быки" ("Prophetic strings – these are the ox sinews / But the oxen have been feeding on bitter grass") (9-10). These oxen, the Gypsies' alternate identity, seem to be the obvious prey for the officer's tiger self. Traditional Russian literary conceits about relations between Russians and Gypsies, or between Russians and other low-status foreigners, support this construal. Gypsies are often depicted as essentially different from Russians, free, mysterious, captivating, and peaceful. In "Цыганы" ("The Gypsies"),[79] Alexander Pushkin describes how a Russian lad, Aleko, in love with a Gypsy woman, Zemfira, abandons society to share her glamorous nomadic freedom, only to discover that he cannot live as a Gypsy. When Zemfira's free spirit leads her to take another Gypsy as a lover, Aleko murders both of them in a jealous rage. Pushkin presents this jealousy, which Zemfira's father describes as a "домашний дух" (domestic spirit)[80] particular to

[79] Alexander Pushkin, "The Gypsies," in *Pushkin Threefold*, translated by Walter Arndt (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1993), 274-313.
[80] Ibid., 309.

Russians, as explicitly non-Gypsy.

Jealousy's bloody repercussions are even more foreign to Zemfira's family. After burying his daughter and her lover, Zemfira's father does not take revenge, but exiles Aleko for being incompatible with his peaceful people, and even wishes him well:

> Мы дики; нет у нас законов.
> Мы не терзаем, не казним –
> Не нужно крови нам и стонов, –
> Но жить с убийцей не хотим…
> Ты не рожден для дикой доли,
> Ты для себя лишь хочешь воли;
> Ужасен нам твой будет глас:
> Мы робки и добры душою,
> Ты зол и смел, – оставь же нас,
> Прости, да будет мир с тобою.
>
> (We are savages; we have no laws,
> We do not torture, do not put [men] to death –
> We have no need of blood and groans –
> But live with a murderer we will not…
> You were not born for the life of the wild,
> You for yourself alone crave freedom;
> Dreadful will be your voice for us:
> We are timid and good of soul,
> You are fierce and bold – leave us then;
> Farewell, may peace be with you.) (512-521)

While the Gypsies are wild and sometimes fickle, then, the Russians are powerful and cruel. Another Pushkin poem, "Чёрная шаль" ("The Black Shawl"), similarly depicts a Russian man killing a foreign woman in a frenzy of jealous, lustful rage after catching her with another, non-Russian man: "Я помню моленя… текущую кровь… / Погибла гречанка, погибла любовь!" ("I remember pleading… flowing blood / The Greek woman perished, love perished!") (23-24)[81] The officer's

[81] Alexander Pushkin, "Chernaya shal'" in *Sobraniie sochinenii v desiati tomakh,* Vol. 1, (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1959), 120.

disturbing fantasy in "Among the Gypsies" thus continues a literary tradition of Russian violence against foreign victims, an oppressive cycle that seems to be the bitter grass on which the Gypsy-oxen feed.

But the tenth stanza of "У цыган" proves this explanation incomplete. Here, the prey animals become violent:

> Вот струны-быки и слева и справа
> Рога их – смерть, и мычанье – беда,
> У них на пастбище горькие травы,
> Колючий волчец, полынь, лебеда.
>
> (There are the string-oxen left and right,
> Their horns are death, and their bellowing is woe,
> They have bitter grasses to feed on,
> Prickly thistle, wormwood, goosefoot.) (37-40)

This more specific description of the bitter grasses in line forty allows greater insight into the true nature of the Gypsies. Goosefoot is a Biblical plant, according to the Archimandrite Nikofor's Encyclopedia.[82] It is used in Job[83] as an example of the sort of food eaten in desperation by the starving outcasts who mock Job. Wormwood appears in Revelation[84] as a divine punishment, a star summoned from heaven by an angel to fall into the rivers of earth, making a third of these rivers bitter and poisonous bodies of water that kill all who drink from them. Prickly thistle, meanwhile, refers to the guest himself. The only other time the adjective "колючий" (prickly) appears in the poem is in line seventeen, which describes the way wine drips out of the officer's moustache: "Капли крови текут с усов колючих" ("Drops of

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[82] JesusChrist.Ru -- Server Khristianskoro Obsheniya, "Lebeda -- Bibleyskie Slovari Onlain," GERHARD Company, via http://jesuschrist.ru/lexicon/NikiforEncyc/%CB%C5%C1%C5%C4%C0 (accessed October 19th 2007)
[83] See Job in *Holy Bible*, New Revised Standard Version, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Nelson, 1989), 30:4. English translations of Job tend to use "mallow" instead of "goosefoot," but in Russian the word "лебеда," which translates into "goosefoot," appears.
[84] Revelation in *Holy Bible*, New Revised Standard Version, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Nelson, 1989), 8:10.

blood flow from prickly whiskers"). These blood drops are metaphorical, but prophetic. So is the third stanza, in which the Gypsies' strings are literally described as "вещие," prophetic, and where the bitter grass first appears. The Gypsies, historically outcast, maligned, and oppressed, eaters of goosefoot, will now carry out a sort of divine punishment, as the wormwood did, by "feeding" on their traditional oppressor, the prickly-whiskered Russian officer, by murdering and robbing him.

Though he inverts their traditional status as victims, Gumilev does preserve one typical characteristic of the Gypsies: their association with music. In this poem, however, music and sound become connected to violence. Line thirty-eight conflates ox horns with death and bellowing with woe. The Gypsies' collective "horn" is the flint that their representative, the girl, uses to murder her quarry in line forty-four, a weapon that Gumilev explicitly compares to a "гортанный крик," or throaty yell, in line forty-two. "Bellowing," which may be interpreted as a metaphorical reference to the music the gypsies produce – their cry, so to speak – also possesses a dreadful power here. The Symbolists believed that music possessed the transcendental power to connect its human listeners with "other worlds," and for this reason they sought to incorporate musical elements into their poetry. In Gumilev's poem, the Gypsies use music to hypnotize the officer into entering their trap.

Initially, the officer has nothing to do with music. In the first stanza, Gumilev associates this figure with the visible, material world, describing him only in terms of his appearance:

> Толстый, качался он, как в дурмане,
> Зубы блестели из-под хищных усов,
> На ярко-красном его доломане
> Сплетались узлы золотых шнуров.
>
> (Fat, he reeled, as though drugged,

> Teeth shone out from under predatory whiskers,
> On his bright-red hussar jacket
> Are plaited knots of golden cords.) (1-4)

Not only does the poet neglect four of the five senses in this passage, he also places great emphasis on his subject's worldliness. The uniform and its trappings are emblems of his high social status, his predatory teeth and moustache suggest physical power, and his fatness and intoxication demonstrate that he has partaken of earthly pleasures to excess. His embodied presence stands in stark contrast to the invisible, disenfranchised Gypsies. It also makes him more susceptible to their influence: as discussed earlier, in the fifth stanza his intoxication makes the music, as well as the smell and potential taste of the Gypsies' "sweet, pungent" (20) bodies, too much to bear.

By the sixth stanza, he has given in and joined them, for the narrator perceives the officer beating out a rhythm on the wet, wine-soaked table with the pipe he had been smoking: "На мокром столе чубуком янтарным / Злого сердца отстукивающим такт" ("On the damp table with an amber chibouk / Beating out the rhythm of an evil heart") (23-24). This stanza directly precedes the seventh, the turning point after which the girl begins to hunt him. Her strike disables his physical strength, his trappings of power, his ability to intoxicate himself, and even his sight – "Рухнул грудью, путая аксельбанты / Уже не пить, не смотреть нельзя" ("He collapsed on his chest, tangling his aiguillettes, / Already it's impossible to drink or to look") – in short, all his connections outside of the invisible, sonic realm of the Gypsies. Music does indeed bring woe to the officer.

Sound also has a stereotypically Symbolist effect on the narrator by putting him in touch with a different reality by inducing his otherworldly visions. In the

second stanza, the sounds of a string and a voice directly precede his first recollection of "another world":

> Струна… и гортанный вопль… и сразу
> Сладостно так заныла кровь моя,
> Так убедительно поверил я рассказу
> Про иные, родные мне края.
>
> (A string… a guttural howl… and suddenly
> My blood began to ache so sweetly,
> So earnestly I began to believe that story
> About other lands, native to me.) (5-8)

This poem does more than continue Symbolism's tradition of connecting music with the unearthly; it also recalls a specific work, Alexander Blok's famous "Незнакомка," or "The Stranger."[85] In this piece, the narrator visits a tavern, sees a strange prostitute, and suddenly recognizes her as a being who transcends his world but is nevertheless connected to him. She is a new incarnation of the Beautiful Lady, the holy, idealized personification of divine wisdom to whom Blok dedicated his earlier poetry:

> И странной близостью закованный,
> Смотрю за тёмную вуаль,
> И вижу берег очарованный
> И очарованную даль.
>
> (And entranced by a strange nearness,
> I look through the dark veil,
> And I see an enchanted shore
> And an enchanted distance.) (37-40)

Blok's protagonist exercises a double influence on Gumilev's poem. In his drunkenness and lust, this character resembles Gumilev's officer, but the similarities

[85] Alexander Blok, "Nieznakomka," in *The Heritage of Russian Verse*, translated and edited by Dmitri Obolensky (Bloomington: Indiana, 1976), 262-264. I have adjusted Obolensky's literal prose translation to introduce line breaks.

of their transcendent visions of the faraway yet familiar link him even more closely to the speaker in "Among the Gypsies."

This speaker's second vision, also preceded by music – the same music that the guest is enchanted into tapping out with his pipe, in fact – reinforces the poem's connection with Blok by endowing the officer with a specific otherworldly persona that is comparable to Blok's Beautiful Lady:

> Мне, кто помнит его в струге алмазном,
> На убегающей к Творцу реке,
> Грозою ангелов и сладким соблазном,
> С кровавой лилией в тонкой руке?
>
> [Could it be] for me, who remembers him in the diamond bark,
> On the river running away toward the Creator,
> With a storm of angels and sweet temptation,
> With a bloody lily in a thin hand? (25-28)

The officer's alter ego, who carries "a bloody lily in a thin hand," seems feminine, like the Beautiful Lady. This figure is also riding in a "diamond bark," The word "diamond" appears very rarely in Gumilev's writing, and one of the few instances of its occurrence alludes directly to Blok. In "Acmeism and the Legacy of Symbolism," Gumilev writes, "Of course, knowledge of god, the beautiful lady Theology, will remain on her throne, and the Acmeists wish neither to lower her to the level of literature, nor to raise literature to her diamond coldness."[86] This statement explicitly and polemically engages with Blok's concept of the Beautiful Lady as an incarnation of Sophia, the "wisdom of God," pitting against it a superior Acmeist concept of religion as something necessarily separate from literature. By using the word "diamond" in "Among the Gypsies," Gumilev recalls this essay and brings his dispute with Symbolism to the fore.

Additionally, with a structural comparison of these two poems, more compelling evidence emerges to support Gumilev's polemical engagement with "The Stranger." The narrator's vision of the diamond bark occupies a position in "Among the Gypsies" equivalent to the one in which the stranger first appears in Blok's piece. Both "Among the Gypsies" and "The Stranger" are composed of thirteen four-line stanzas, with a pivotal turn in the middle seventh stanza that distinctly changes the tone of the poem's second half. Gumilev's narrator begins encouraging the Gypsy girl to kill the officer after glimpsing the diamond bark, a shift in attitude that will be discussed in more depth further on. A similar shift in the narrator's attitude occurs in "The Stranger." The first six stanzas describe the oppressive banality of everyday life; after the appearance of the stranger, however, the poem celebrates her mysterious connection to the "enchanted distance," a reality remoter but truer and more compelling than restaurants, bakery signs, and crying children in the piece's first half. As a new incarnation of the Beautiful Lady, she is a point of access to a divine realm.

In another part of "Acmeism and the Legacy of Symbolism," Gumilev explains why he takes issue with this Symbolist effort to access God through poetry:

> Russian Symbolism directed its main energies into the realm of the unknown. By turns it fraternized with mysticism, then theosophy, then occultism. Some of its strivings in this direction nearly approached the creation of myth. And it has the right to ask the movement coming to take its place whether it can boast only of its animal virtues, and what attitude it can take toward the unknowable. The first thing that Acmeism can answer to such inquiry is to point out that the unknowable, by the very meaning of the word, cannot be known. The second, that all endeavors in that direction are unchaste.[87]

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[86] Gumilev, "Acmeism," 24.
[87] Ibid., 23.

Taking into account this opinion, together with the obvious resemblances between "Among the Gypsies" and "The Stranger," it becomes evident that Gumilev's piece is in part a critical response to some aspects of Symbolism as they are represented in Blok's poem, and therefore part of the poetic, polemic dialogue between the two writers that Samuil Schwarzband has discussed in his article "Aleksandr Blok and Nikolaj Gumilev."[88]

In "Among the Gypsies," Gumilev recasts Blok's drunk, romantic narrator by exaggerating the "animal lusts" at play in his scandalously "unchaste" attempts to seek the divine in living women to the point that he is unrecognizable, a boorish officer contemplating rape. His own visionary narrator also seems derived from Blok's hero, but Gumilev's protagonist, though aware of his nostalgia for "other lands," never approaches them – for him, "the unknowable cannot be known." Adopting a more appropriate distance from it, he observes instead the Symbolist parody figure's observations of a "Beautiful Lady." While the unknown is not a suitable subject for poetry, man's struggles with it are, Gumilev argues later in his essay: "The feeling of not knowing ourselves, childishly wise and sweet to the point of pain – that is what the unknown gives us."[89] And, in fact, a revelation about a human "self," the officer's (and, by extension, Symbolism's) true identity, is what Gumilev's narrator eventually sees.

In his essay about this poem's mythopoeic aspects, Pavel Pazdnikov discusses this enigmatic revelation at great length. He interprets the essential conflict here to be the "simultaneous existence in the human body of two opposing charges: the 'divine,'

[88] See Schwarzband.
[89] Gumilev, "Acmeism," 23.

personified in Solomon, and the 'demonic,' whose personification in this case turns out to be Asmodeus."[90] King Solomon, legendary for his wealth and wisdom, also possessed a magic ring he used to summon flocks of demons to do his bidding. Paznikov identifies him as the passenger in the "diamond bark" (since diamonds are a sign of wealth; the word "струг," or "bark," is also associated in many of Gumilev's poems with royalty[91]) accompanied by the "storm of angels" (which he considers to be demons, since demons were once angels).

This storm of angels could also be interpreted, however, as a misidentification of the demonic as divine. According to *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, Solomon used his ring to force demons to perform tasks contrary to their evil natures, like building the Temple of Jerusalem; his power over demons is a sign not of allegiance with Hell, but opposition to it.[92] His secret identity as an inverted Solomon reveals that the officer is tainted by sin. Other elements in the stanza – the "bloody lily," a perverted version of an image frequently evoked in the Song of Solomon as a sign of love, and the phrase "sweet temptation" – indicate that one of these sins is, unsurprisingly, lust, a sin that might be particularly prevalent among men seeking God in female beauty. Another Symbolist sin is pride. The diamond boat on the river running toward the Creator symbolizes their ambitious but futile searches, and also foreshadows the officer's imminent death. The unknowable cannot be known; the officer's secret self is not

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[90] Pazdnikov, Pavel. "Mifopoeticheskie aspekty stikhotvoreniia N. Gumileva 'U tsyigan,'" via http://gumilev.ru/main.phtml?aid=65081919 (accessed October 19th, 2007)

[91] Such as "С тобой я буду до зари" ("I Will Be With You Until the Dawn") (1:4-5) and "Песня о певце и короле" (Song of the Singer and King) (1:8-10) in *Путь коквистадоров* (*Path of the Conquistadors.*)

[92] Information on Solomon from Kaufmann Kohler and Louis Ginzberg, "Solomon" in *The Jewish Encyclopedia.* 2002. The Kopelman Foundation, via http://jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=894&letter=S&search=solomon (accessed October 25th 2007)

Solomon, King of Israel, man of God, and human ideal, but a twisted parody of him.

The role played in this poem by the demon lord Asmodeus, whom the narrator evokes by name in line fifty, is even less straightforward than Solomon's. Since the narrator addresses him as a waiter – "Счет, Асмодей, нам приготовь!" ("Asmodeus, prepare us the check!") – one can presume that neither the narrator nor the guest, whom at that point the Gypsy waiters have carried off, is secretly the demon king. Furthermore, since he is addressed as a waiter, it follows that he is actually aligned with the Gypsies, whose invisibility, strange powers, and bloodlust now seem not only signs of their marginalization, but indicators of demonism. This demonism ties in with another issue Gumilev took with the Symbolists' truth-seeking: their eventual fraternization with the occult. Like Symbolists toying with black magic, the patrons of the Gypsies' establishment enjoy themselves there without recognizing their hosts' potential threat.

Though it would be reasonable to categorize Asmodeus as a Gypsy, this simple explanation is complicated by other evidence in the poem. According to one of the legends described in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, Asmodeus, like the guest, was once captured after he was given wine and "drank until his senses were overpowered."[93] The demon also shares the narrator's insight into secret truths, "judg[ing] persons and things according to their real character and not according to their appearance in the eyes of human beings." The diffusion of Asmodeus's influence suggests that he is not just a character in the poem, but a power. In his notes to Richard McKane's translation, which support an association of the Gypsies with

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[93] Kohler, Kaufmann, and Louis Ginzberg, "Asmodeus" in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*. 2002. The Kopelman Foundation, via http://jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=2019&letter=A&search=asmodeus (accessed October

the infernal, Michael Basker suggests that Mikhail Lermontov's "Пир Асмодея" ("Feast of Asmodeus") serves as a subtext to "Among the Gypsies."[94] In that poem, demons prepare dishes representing human sins and ceremoniously present them for their king's delectation.[95] Ironically, the dish most evoked in "Among the Gypsies," the heart of a fickle woman, is rejected by Lermontov's demon lord as "trop commun" (25), but in Gumilev's poem the banal heart of this lustful officer is exactly what the Gypsies are harvesting, delivering righteous retribution for the officer's sins of lust, greed, and pride as well as serving their demonic lord.

After his vision, presumably granted by the demon with power over such revelations, the narrator begins encouraging the Gypsy girl because he now believes her task is righteous. His enthusiasm comes through in the urgent meter: all the lines in the eighth stanza begin with a beat. The seventh stanza, full of repeated words and consecutive amphibrachs, conveys the hypnotic effect of the Gypsy girl's own movements. Like the guest, the narrator has become entranced. But after the girl's flint finds its target in line forty-four, he seems to reel as he did in line eight: the brief description in lines forty-seven and forty-eight, "Засуетились официанты / Пьяного гостя унося" ("The waiters bustled about / Carrying away the drunken guest"), contains only five stresses total, creating a disturbing sense of lag in the two-, three- and four-syllable intervals between them. The source of his dismay becomes apparent in the poem's final stanza:

Что ж, господа, половина шестого?

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[94] Michael Basker, notes to "With the Gypsies" in Nikolay Gumilyov, *The Pillar of Fire: Selected Poems*, translated by Richard McKane. (London: Anvil, 1999) 238.

[95] Mikhail Lermontov, "Pir asmodeia," in *Sobraniie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh. Tom pervyi.* (Moscow: AN SSSR, 1958) 282-284.

Счет, Асмодей, нам приготовь!
Девушка, смеясь, с полосы кремневой,
Узким язычком слизывает кровь.

(What, gentlemen, half-past six?
Asmodeus, prepare us the check!
-- The girl, laughing, from the flint strip
Licks up the blood with a thin tongue.) (51-52)

Becoming aware of the time, the narrator not only re-enters the "real" world, but also expresses a desire to leave it. The discomfort with which he returns to his own personal reality after witnessing the officer's brutal punishment suggests that he has become aware of his own sins, an awareness he tries to escape by requesting the check to leave. But requesting a check can also be seen as a metaphor for a "tallying-up" of sins. Asmodeus's judgment of the officer, then, will also be extended to the narrator. His gentlemen companions, unmentioned up to this point, are also included in the check, and therefore universalize the poem's message. They could be seen as the Symbolist community, humanity generally, or even – since the narrator addresses them directly – as the readers themselves. At the very end, Gumilev underlines this menace by closing the poem with an image of the gleeful pleasure the demonic Gypsy takes in her crime; the last word in the Russian poem is "blood."

Though the fierce anti-Symbolist polemics Gumilev incorporates into "Ezbekiya" and especially into this poem might suggest that his adversarial stance was what gave all his work its fire, his opposition to Symbolism eventually led him to ask questions about his own poetic task. This less oppositional position sometimes turned out to be more fruitful than its alternative. Two of the pieces written in this vein – "Memory" and "The Tram That Lost Its Way" – are unquestionably among Gumilev's finest, and will be analyzed in the next two chapters of this thesis.

Poetic Rebirth: “Memory”

A particularly powerful form of Nikolai Gumilev’s intertextual mythopoeism emerges in two of his most famous, most lauded, and most puzzled-over poems, “Память” (“Memory”) and “Заблудившийся тавмвай” (“The Tram That Lost its Way”). Both were published in his final and most mature book of verse, 1921’s *Огненный столп*, or *Pillar of Fire,* and though they do not appear there consecutively, these poems can be properly understood only when interpreted with respect to one another. In other words, while both works independently present myths that rely on extensive citations from a variety of texts in the same way “Ezbekiya” and “Among the Gypsies” do, “Memory” and “Tram” can also be intertextually linked to reveal a greater myth. While this myth begins, in “Memory,” from a somewhat anti-Symbolist position, it quickly develops into a deeper examination of the lyric hero’s conception of himself and his poetic task, presented through a reconfigured Orthodox Christian framework.

“Memory” presents the reader with what seems to be a poetic autobiography, fifteen stanzas describing five different stages of the author’s life: childhood, early youth as a poet, his days as an explorer and a soldier, and finally his present self. But while some of the events described in this piece – his military service, his journeys abroad – reflect the actual events of Gumilev’s life, “Memory” is far more of a poetic than a literal autobiography. The opening stanzas frame the progression of the lyric hero’s experiences in mystical rather than historical terms:

> Только змеи сбрасывают кожи,
> Чтоб душа старела и росла.
> Мы, увы, со змеями не схожи,

Мы меняем души, не тела.

Память, ты рукою великанши
Жизнь ведешь, как под уздцы коня,
Ты расскажешь мне о тех, что раньше
В этом теле жили до меня.

(Only snakes shed their skins,
So that the soul ages and grows.
We, alas, aren't like snakes,
We change souls, not bodies.

You, Memory, with the hand of a giantess,
Lead life, as though under a horse's bridle,
You will tell me about those who earlier
Lived in this body before me.) (2:35-37, lines 1-8)

This process of "changing souls" deliberately invokes, and inverts, the concept of reincarnation.

Gumilev inverts this idea because, for him, reincarnation was not a literal description of spiritual progress over a series of lifetimes, but a metaphor for personal change and development over the course of one life. He expresses this conception of it in greater detail in his 1913 essay "Acmeism and the Legacy of Symbolism":

> He who conceives of the evolution of personality always within the conditions of time and space reveals a poverty of imagination. How can we remember our previous existences (if that is not a patently literary device), the time we were in the abyss, with myriads of other possibilities of being, of which we know nothing, except that they exist? For each of them is negated by our being and each in its turn negates it. The feeling of not knowing ourselves, childish and sweet to the point of pain – that is what the unknown gives us.[96]

This section of the essay, which denounces the direction Symbolism takes in its investigation into the unknown ("by turns it fraternized with mysticism, then

[96] Gumilev, "Acmeism," 23.

theosophy, then occultism"),[97] presents Acmeism as a different way to approach even spiritual poetry. Gumilev evokes reincarnation, one of the occult and exotic mystical beliefs so popular among his Symbolist contemporaries, and then reinterprets it as an effective metaphorical way to understand a real spiritual phenomenon, "the evolution of a personality."

A worldly man who had traveled much, Gumilev himself was certainly familiar with the traditional Hindu-Buddhist doctrine of karma-driven reincarnation. He uses it in "Прапамять," or "Forememory," a poem published in his 1918 collection *Костер*, or *Bonfire*. This poem's last stanza explicitly roots it in an Indian framework:

> Когда же, наконец, восставши
> От сна, я буду снова я, --
> Простой индиец, задремавший
> В священный вечер у ручья?
>
> (When, finally, rising up
> From sleep, will I be me again –
> A simple Indian, having dozed off
> On a sacred evening by the river?) (2:21, lines 13-16)

But while Gumilev deliberately evokes this well-known concept of reincarnation in order to make the novelty of his own version more striking, as well as to preserve an element of "karma" (this will be explored in more depth later), the main framework of the mythology he actually develops in "Memory" is Greek. According to *The Encylopedia Britannica,* the Greek goddess of memory, Mnemosyne, is a Titaness, like the "giantess" mentioned in the second stanza.[98] As the mother of the Muses, she is associated with poetry. The adherents of the mystical Orphic sect also associate her

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[97] Ibid.
[98] Information of Mnemosyne from *The Encyclopædia Britannica,* s.v. "Mnemosyne," via The

with reincarnation. Members believed that the souls of the dead were reincarnated after they drank from Lethe, the river of oblivion, and forgot their previous lives. By drinking from Lethe's twin, which bore Mnemosyne's name, instead, Orphics could end the cycle of reincarnation. Again, Gumilev inverts tradition in his poem – Memory facilitates rather than ends the cycle of reincarnation by "lead[ing] life," and with it the succession of new souls, "as though under a horse's bridle." This inversion serves as a reminder that reincarnation is used here as metaphor for the development of personality rather than a mystical concept. It also makes reincarnation a more useful metaphor: after all, the means by which a person becomes aware of "past selves," understands them, and changes, is memory.

By combining and inverting different reincarnation mythologies, Gumilev argues that one can use the themes (and, implicitly, techniques and other developments) pioneered by the Symbolists without making their mistake of descending into "mysticism, theosophy, and occultism," and thus harvest more fruitful artistic results. "This [feeling of not knowing ourselves] allows us to feel the unearthly more strongly than whole tomes of discourse [about] which side of the moon houses the souls of the dead…"[99] Gumilev continues in "Acmeism and the Legacy of Symbolism" shortly after the excerpt quoted above. Mystical and occult imagery "are part of the artist's material and need not have a specific gravity greater than the other images he chooses."[100]

Before this article was written, Gumilev perceived a similar, purely poetic conception of reincarnation in the Symbolist Fyodor Sologub's 1908 collection

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Encylopaedia Britannica Online, http://www.britannica.com
[99] Gumilev, "Acmeism," 23.
[100] Gumilev, "Acmeism," 24.

Пламенный круг, or *Fiery Circle,* which presents itself as a record of the author's various previous incarnations, including Adam, a king's dog, and a medieval German executioner. In this book's preface, Sologub explains this idea:

> Born not for the first time, and surely not for the first time completing the circle of outward transformations, I calmly and simply open up my soul. I open it up – I want the intimate to become universal.
>
> The dark earthly soul of man flames up in sweet and bitter ecstasies, becomes refined and ascends the never-ending staircase of perfections into eternally unreachable and eternally longed-for abodes.
>
> It thirsts for a miracle – and a miracle will be given to [this soul].[101]

Gumilev's non-literal interpretation of this preface may have been mistaken. Sologub's conception of this idea is more in keeping with the Indian conception of reincarnation as a cycle of rebirths determined by behavior in previous lives than the version Gumilev describes in his essay. While the latter uses it to describe "the evolution of personality" and even wards off misinterpretation by suggesting that the remembrance of previous existences may be "a patently literary device," Sologub mentions "outward transformations," describes human passions as means of access to "the never-ending staircase of perfections," and alludes to a mysterious "miracle" granted to the ascending soul that longs for it. In other words, the preface to "Fiery Circle" does not demand a non-mystical interpretation.

Yet in his review of this collection, Gumilev interprets Sologub's use of reincarnation as a metaphor for personal growth, just as he would use it himself later: "The pearls of [Sologub's] experiences are brought up from the depths, where all souls merge into one accord. In his work he follows the advice of Schopenhauer: to

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[101] Fyodor Sologub, "Predislovie," in *Plamennyi krug,* in *Fyodor Sologub,* edited by Ian Albrecht, http://sologub.narod.ru/texts/poems_plamenny.htm (accessed November 14th 2007)

renounce the will for the sake of contemplation."[102] That is, Gumilev perceives Sologub's mechanism of poetic creation as the distillation of "pearls" of experience that touch on something universal, for they "are brought up from the depths, where all souls merge into one accord." These "pearls" are then made more universal because they become disassociated from Sologub. By "renouncing the will," the poet mutes his personal passions and identity, and his experiences become refracted into the alternate identities of the past incarnations. This technique makes the experiences of Sologub's "past selves" seem more distant, less specific, and, as a result, chillingly closer to the reader.

For example, in one of these poems, "Нюренбергский палач," "Nuremberg Executioner," the titular protagonist describes how his private self has been transformed by his violent profession. Though on its surface this is an experience most readers would be unfamiliar with, more fundamentally, it draws on and expresses something more universal:

Сурово хмуря брови,
В окошко постучу,
И дома жажда крови
Приникнет к палачу.

Мой сын покорно ляжет
На узкую скамку.
Опять веревка свяжет
Тоску мою.

Стенания и слезы –
Палач – везде палач.
О, скучный плеск березы!
О, скучный детский плач!

(Sternly wrinkling my brows,

[102] Nikolai Gumilev, "[Review of Sologub] (II)," in *On Russian Poetry*, translated by David Lapeza (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1977), 40.

I will knock at the little window,
And at home the thirst for blood
Will press up close to the executioner.

My son will humbly lie
On the narrow bench.
Again the rope will constrain
My anguish.

Groaning and tears –
An executioner is an executioner everywhere.
Oh, the tiresome swash of the birch!
Oh, the tiresome child's crying!) (49-60)[103]

The narrator's laconic, physical description of his secret violent inclinations toward his own child, inclinations closely bound up with his alienating personal experiences working as an executioner, nevertheless conveys only the very emotional essence of this experience, excluding details that might over-personalize the poem in a way that would distance the reader. In this way, "the intimate becomes universal." In his review, Gumilev makes his admiration for the poems in *Fiery Circle* evident. "…None are completely forgotten," he writes. "All of them have the ability of stars to appear at this or that hour of the nighttime silence."[104] Indeed, several allusions to Sologub appear in *Pillar of Fire,* most obviously in the book's title.

In "Memory," Gumilev refigures Sologub's conception of reincarnation to examine the progress of human personality. The universalizing element connecting disparate reincarnations that was so important in Sologub remains present here. Though Gumilev's lyric hero construes his old souls as entirely unrelated to each other and to his present self, just like Sologub's "past selves," they are in fact unified in several ways: all have once inhabited the same body; structurally, the descriptions

[103] Fyodor Sologub, "Nyurenbergskii palach" in *Plamennyi krug,* in *Fyodor Sologub,* edited by Ian Albrecht, http://sologub.narod.ru/texts/poems_plamenny.htm (accessed November 14th 2007)

of each of the first four incarnations occupy exactly two stanzas each; and, as Earl D. Sampson notes, each incarnation is subject to "the pathos of endeavor."[105] He explains,

> In speaking of the first soul, the child, he had said, "Memory, Memory, you won't find a sign,/You'll not convince the world that that was I." Yet there is a "sign," a link between all the stages: the Superman impulse, the desire for experience and achievement beyond the reach of ordinary human beings. The child is a "wizard-child"; the poet "wanted to become a god and a tsar"; the explorer is envied by the clouds, and the waters sing to him; and the "builder" is going to bring about the Millennium.[106]

This pathos pervades even the meter of the poem. According to Gumilev's "On Translations of Poetry," pentameter is the meter of the epic, and "the trochee, rising, winged, is always agitated and now anxious, now moved, now amused; its sphere is song."[107] Russian structuralist critic Kirill Taranovsky also links the use of this meter to the "supertext" that he considers to have influenced the character of all later Russian poetry written in the same form, Mikhail Lermontov's "Выхожу один я на дорогу," "I Go Out onto the Road Alone." As Ian K. Lilly summarizes, "the trochaic pentameter quatrain with alternating two-syllable and one-syllable (feminine and masculine) rhymes… [is] a compositional unit [Taranovsky] was able to correlate with the predominance of both the dynamic motif of the journey and the static motif of life."[108] Both of these motifs can be found in "Memory," but rather than opposing each other, they are combined. "Static life" becomes a "dynamic journey."

The succession of endeavoring souls assumes a trajectory. Each incarnation,

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[104] Gumilev,"[Review of Sologub]," 40.
[105] Sampson, 133.
[106] Sampson, 133-134.
[107] Nikolai Gumilev, "On Translations of Poetry," in *On Russian Poetry*, translated by David Lapeza (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1977), 37.
[108] Ian K. Lilly, "Conviviality in the Prerevolutionary 'Moscow Text' of Russian Culture" in *The*

being imperfect, is "static" in the sense that it cannot transcend the defining boundaries ascribed to it. Yet with reincarnation progression occurs: new personalities not only replace their predecessors, but also improve on them. The dreamy, mystical child interested in the magical powers of words, whom the speaker disavows so much that he tells Memory, "Не уверишь мир, что то был я" ("You won't convince the world that this was I") (16), becomes a real poet. This poet is, in turn, also rejected for his ambition ("Он совсем не нравится мне, это / Он хотел стать богом и царем") ("I don't like him at all, it was / He who wanted to become a god and a tsar") (21-22). He is transformed into a succession of two personalities so similar that the speaker confuses them ("Память, ты слабее год от году, / Тот ли это, или кто другой [?]") ("Memory, you're weaker year by year, / Was it he or someone else [?]") (33-34). They are related because both serve less self-centered causes – one adventures, becoming such a specimen of manhood that even "…завидовали облака" ("…the clouds envied [him]") (28), and then the next places his now-glorious self in the service of a greater purpose – he "Променял веселую свободу / На священный долгожданный бой" ("…exchanged his cheerful freedom / For holy long-awaited combat") (35-36). Though combat is "holy," however, the pattern of continuously improving souls suggests that the task of the next soul must be even grander.

The cause assumed by the present speaker is great indeed. In the poem's eleventh stanza, this incarnation describes himself in no uncertain terms:

> Я – угрюмый и упрямый зодчий
> Храма, восстающего во мгле,
> Я возревновал о славе Отчей,

Russian Review 63(July 2004):427.

Как на небесах, и на земле.

(I am the sullen and stubborn architect
Of a temple, rising in the gloom,
I have become jealous of the Father's glory,
In heaven as it is on earth.) (41-44)

Here, Sampson observes an allusion to Freemasonry, a movement that had gained profound influence in Russia during the period of Gumilev's poetic activity.[109] According to Maria Carlson,

> After 1911 national Russian Masonic lodges proliferated in every area of the Russian empire, in parallel with the Spiritualist societies, Theosophical branches, and other occult movements… By February 1917 there were twenty-eight known major (and many more minor) Masonic lodges in Russia, together boasting some 2,500 members. The movement had permeated every level of Russian professional and intellectual life. Nina Berberova points out that "at this time – from the start of the First World War and right up to February 1917 – there was no profession, institution, civic or private society, organization, or group in Russia without Masons."[110]

One of the organizations visibly influenced by Masonry was Gumilev's own Acmeist Poet's Guild, the very name of which recalled Masonry's origin as a guild of medieval builders.[111] In particular, Osip Mandelstam, who titled his first poetry collection *Камень* (*Stone),* liked to use stones as a metaphor for words and architecture as a metaphor for the construction of true Acmeist poetry. In "The Morning of Acmeism," he writes,

> Vladimir Soloviev[112] experienced a peculiar prophetic horror before gray Finnish boulders. The mute eloquence of the granite mass startled him like sorcery. But Tyutchev's[113] stone, which "having rolled down the mountain, lay in the valley, torn loose from itself, or loosened by a

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[109] Sampson, 133.
[110] Maria Carlson, "Fashionable Occultism," in *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, edited by Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal (Ithaca: Cornell, 1997), 147.
[111] Information about Masonry from Albert G. Mackey, *Encyclopedia of Freemasonry* (Philadelphia: McClure, 1927).
[112] Turn-of-the-century mystical poet and philosopher, neo-Gnostic, Symbolist forefather.
[113] Nineteenth-century metaphysical poet, adopted Symbolist forefather.

> sentient hand," is the word. The voice of matter in this unexpected fall sounds like articulate speech. Only architecture can answer this challenge. Reverently the Acmeists raise this mysterious Tyutchevian stone and make it the foundation stone of their own building.[114]

Gumilev, too, employed this metaphor during Acmeism's most active period. The specific Masonic allusions Sampson notes refer to two poems from one of Gumilev's collections written during that era, *Колчан,* or *The Quiver*. "The image in stanza 11 of building a temple as a metaphor for a spiritual feat has appeared earlier, in 'The Middle Ages'…and in the first version of that natural companion-piece to 'Memory,' 'Iambic Pentameters.' In both the earlier poems the source of the metaphor in Masonic imagery is made explicit," he writes.[115]

Aside from presenting evidence of the young Gumilev's interest in Masonry, "Средневековие" ("The Middle Ages") offers little insight into "Memory," so it will not be examined here. The other poem, however, is quite relevant. The ninth stanza of the 1913 version of "Пятистопные ямбы," or "Iambic Pentameters," bears a striking resemblance to the eleventh stanza of "Memory," in which the current narrator reveals himself as a "sullen and stubborn architect." It reads,

> Лишь изредко надменно и упрямо
> Во мне кричит ветшающий Адам,
> Но тот, кто видел лилию Хирама,
> Тот не грустит по сказочным садам,
> А набожно возводит стены храма,
> Угодного земле и небесам.
>
> (Only occasionally, haughtily and stubbornly
> The decaying Adam cries within me,
> But that one who saw Hiram's lily,
> That one will not grow sad over fairy-tale gardens,
> But piously erects the walls of a temple,

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[114] Osip Mandelstam, "The Morning of Acmeism," in *Critical Prose and Letters*. 2nd ed, edited by Jane Gary Harris, translated by Jane Gary Harris and Constance Link (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1990), 62.
[115] Sampson, 133.

Pleasing to earth and to the heavens.) (49-54)[116]

Both poems lead up to the erection of the temple by describing the formative experiences of an autobiographical lyric hero. Each depicts how the conflicting currents of human pride ("I have become jealous of the Father's glory"; "…haughtily, stubbornly, / The decaying Adam cries within me") and divine duty come to play roles in this construction.

In this vein, both make reference to Hiram Abif. This man was the legendary architect of Solomon's temple. He is revered in Masonic lore for giving as much careful attention to his religious devotions as he did to designing plans over the course of the building's construction, thus achieving harmony between the earthly and the spiritual. "Iambic Pentameters" names him explicitly (51); "Memory" refers to the temple he built and describes the present narrator as its "sullen and stubborn architect" (41), thereby conflating him with the assiduous Hiram. Alluding to Hiram Abif's and Masonry's concerns with harmony between heaven and earth, they also both reference the Lord's prayer, quoting part of the fourth verse, "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

The presence of Masonic references in conjunction with that line brings to mind the line preceding it, "Thy kingdom come." Though no universal doctrine of Freemasonry exists, the general goal of the organization is the accomplishment of God's will on earth, which culminates in the construction of a heavenly kingdom. A passage from *A Spiritual and most Precious Perle* quoted in the *Encyclopedia of Freemasonry* describes an early conception of Freemasonry as a way of human life

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[116] Nikolai Gumilev, "Piatistopnye iamby," in *Polnoe sobraniie sochinenii v desiati tomakh. Tom vtoroi: Stichotvoreniia. Poemy. (1910-1913),* edited by N.N. Skatov, N.A. Groznova, Yu.V. Zobnin,

that mirrors the ways of God: "As the Free-Mason heweth the hard stones…. Even so God the Heavenly Free-Mason buildeth a Christian Church."[117] Both "Iambic Pentameters" and "Memory," then, present their lyric heroes' difficult life experiences as ultimately culminating in the holy Masonic mission of "building the temple" by preparing for the heavenly kingdom. "Memory" even goes so far as to suggest that its narrator will play the central role of Hiram.

Masonic imagery persists into the next stanza of "Memory," which also introduces allusions to the Book of Revelation. In fact, the two patterns of allusion are intimately connected: Revelation's author, John of Patmos, is considered one of the patron saints of Freemasonry, for Revelation describes the creation of a New Jerusalem and the restoration of the old Jerusalem's lost temple, not in a physical form but rather in a spiritual one, "for [the city's] temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb."[118] With the appearance of the New Jerusalem begins a thousand-year period of "heaven on earth," a heavenly kingdom ruled by Christ, which represents the culmination of Masonic aims.

For the present narrator of "Memory," the establishment of a New Jerusalem is the ultimate goal, too:

> Сердце будет пламенем палимо
> Вплоть до дня, когда взойдут, ясны,
> Стены нового Иерусалима
> На полях моей родной страны.
>
> (The heart will be scorched by flame
> Right up until the day when will rise, bright,
> The walls of a new Jerusalem
> On the fields of my native country.) (45-48)

A.I. Pavlovskii, and G.V. Filippov (Moscow: Voskresen'e. 1998), 143-145.

As Gleb Struve notes in his commentary to this poem,[119] this stanza also recalls one written by William Blake in his preface to *Milton: a Poem,* a piece commonly known as "Jerusalem":

> I will not cease from Mental Fight,
> Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand
> Till we have built Jerusalem
> In England's green and pleasant land. (13-16)[120]

Struve notes that Gumilev was interested in English poetry and could certainly have encountered Blake during the time he spent in Europe, including England, in 1917 and 1918. In fact, it was during this period that "Jerusalem" experienced a revival in England. According to *The Guardian*, in an effort to stir up enthusiasm for the war effort, the poem was set to music in 1916 and became a popular patriotic hymn.[121]

Despite its Englishness, the flavor of patriotism presented by Blake in "Jerusalem" must have resonated with Gumilev. In this poem, which describes Christ's apocryphal visit to England and the speaker's poetic response to that event, Blake perceives an intimate connection between religion, art, and his nation. In the quoted stanza, he presents artistic production – "Mental Fight" – as the poet's duty to God and country. Like Blake, Gumilev saw poetry as his own most important contribution to the "heavenly kingdom." One can perceive this in a poem from *Bonfire,* "Канцона первая" ("В скольких земных океанах я плыл…") or "First

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[117] Mackey, 333.
[118] Revelation in *Holy Bible*, New Revised Standard Version, 2nd ed., (Nashville: Nelson, 1989), 21:22.
[119] Gleb Struve, notes to "Pamiat'," in Nikolai Gumilev, *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh.* Vol. 2, edited by G.P. Struve and B.A. Filippov (Washington: Kamkin, 1964), 292.
[120] William Blake, preface to *Milton: a Poem in 2 Books,* in *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, edited by David V. Erdman (New York: Doubleday, 1965), 95.
[121] Wane, Mary. "Tune into Jerusalem's fighting history." *The Guardian* 8 Dec. 2000, via Guardian.co.uk, http://www.guardian.co.uk/letters/story/0,3604,408355,00.html#article_continue, (accessed December 12th, 2007)

Canzone" ("I have sailed in so many earthly oceans…"):

В скольких земных океанах я плыл,
Древних, веселых и пенных,
Сколько в степях караваны водил
Дней и ночей несравненных…

Как мы смеялись в былые года
С вольною Музой моею…
Рифмы, как птицы, слетались тогда,
Сколько — и вспомнить не смею.

Только любовь мне осталась, струной
Ангельской арфы взывая,
Душу пронзая, как тонкой иглой,
Синими светами рая.

Ты мне осталась одна. Наяву
Видевший солнце ночное,
Лишь для тебя на земле я живу,
Делаю дело земное.

Да, ты в моей беспокойной судьбе —
Ерусалим пилигримов.
Надо бы мне говорить о тебе
На языке серафимов.

(I have sailed in so many earthly oceans,
Ancient, joyous, and foamy,
Driven so many caravans in the steppes
Of incomparable days and nights…

How we laughed in those bygone days,
My carefree Muse and I…
Rhymes, like birds, would fly together then,
How many – I don't even dare to remember.

Only love has been left to me, like the string
Of an angelic harp beseeching,
Piercing my soul, as though with a slender needle,
With the blue lights of heaven.

Only you have been left to me. Wide awake,
Having seen the nighttime sun,
Only for you do I live on the earth,
Do I accomplish my earthly task.

Yes, in my uneasy fate you are

The Jerusalem of pilgrims.
I should speak of you
In the language of seraphims.) (2:22)

Like "Memory" and "Iambic Pentameters," "First Canzone" describes its lyric hero's past experiences at length and then subordinates them to his present goal, the only thing that matters to him any more, the poem's addressee, his beloved: "Только любовь мне осталась, струной / Ангельской арфы взывая" ("Only love's been left to me, like the string / Of an angelic harp appealing") (9-10).

Significantly, though the lyric hero treats the "вольная Муза," or "care-free Muse" (6), of his early poetry rather dismissively in the second stanza, the love that emerges into the foreground of his life still remains intimately linked to the art of versification. The lyric hero dedicates the present poem to her, and he describes love's appeal as harp music. This image relates to poetry, for music is intimately connected to poetic art. In the third stanza, the narrator describes how he dedicates everything he does to this new love, confessing "Лишь для тебя на земле я живу, / Делаю дело земное" ("Only for you do I live on the earth, / Do I accomplish my earthly task") (15-16). The last stanza, which I will quote again, makes it clear that this earthly task, speaking of her "in the language of seraphims," is a poetic one:

Да, ты в моей беспокойной судьбе –
Ерусалим пилигримов.
Надо бы мне говорить о тебе
На языке серафимов.

(Yes, in my uneasy fate you are
The Jerusalem of pilgrims.
I should speak of you
In the language of seraphims.) (17-20)

The stanza also associates this beloved with a holy goal, "the Jerusalem of pilgrims." Moreover, at two significant points in the poem, the halfway point (line 10) and the

end (line 20), angels are described as her heralds and as the only beings with a language worthy of describing her. These lines seem to place the beloved in the position of God. It also suggests that the narrator's divine purpose is "speak[ing] of her / in the language of seraphims" – writing poetry, in other words.

In his notes to Richard McKane's translation of "Подражанье персидскому," or "Imitation of the Persian," another poem published in *Pillar of Fire*, Michael Basker remarks that Sufi poetry, a tradition Gumilev imitates there, typically employs romantic passion as a religious metaphor: "This is a poetry of 'mystical eroticism' and 'mystical hedonism,' in which love and wine are dominant metaphors for union with God: a striving toward the ultimate purpose of loss of self in the infinity of divine love."[122] In "First Canzone," the narrator's personal sacrifice is less a loss of self than surrender of self to a more Masonic divine purpose, but the love-God conflation remains. Just as Gumilev's presentation of Masonry in "Iambic Pentameters" is consistent with his use of it in "Memory," so one may presume that the poetic divine purpose in "First Canzone" is the same divine purpose in "Memory." This is even more plausible when we consider Acmeism's traditional use of architectural design and construction as a metaphor for writing poetry when evaluating the temple in the eleventh and twelfth stanzas of this poem.

Poetry actually constitutes an important theme that persists throughout "Memory." Even in the earlier parts of the poem, before it emerges as the narrator's holy task, references to important poetry appear as subtexts. In addition to the strains of Mikhail Lermontov, Fyodor Sologub, and William Blake, already explored, one

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[122] Michael Basker, notes to "Imitation of the Persian" in Nikolay Gumilyov, *The Pillar of Fire: Selected Poems*, translated by Richard McKane (London: Anvil, 1999), 235.

can detect hints of Gavrila Derzhavin, Alexander Pushkin, Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak, Osip Mandelstam, Marina Tsvetaeva, and even Gumilev's own earlier poetry. Here, too, hubris enters into the discussion, and it becomes clear that hubris, like karma in the traditional Hindu-Buddhist conception of reincarnation, determines the nature of subsequent incarnations.

In fact, the description of the first "soul," the magical poet-child, seems primarily derived from autobiographical poetry Gumilev wrote about his own childhood. As Sampson notes, "[Stanzas three and four of "Memory"] echo[] 'Autumn' and 'Childhood' from *The Pyre* ('shaggy and red, my dog…. Who is dearer to me than even my own brother….' II, 5; and 'As a child, I loved wide / Meadows that smelled of honey, / Copses, dry grasses…' II, 6)…"[123] Another line in this first section, line twelve – "Словом останавливавший дождь" ("Who could stop the rain with a word") – recalls the first stanza of another Gumilev poem published in the same collection, "Слово," or "The Word":

> В оный день, когда над миром новым
> Бог склонил лицо свое, тогда
> Солнце останавливали словом,
> Словом разрушали города.
>
> (On that ancient day, when over the new world
> God leaned down his face, then
> They stopped the sun with a word,
> With a word they destroyed cities.) (2:39, lines 1-4)

This poem, in turn, alludes both to the Bible (Joshua 10 and 6, respectively) and to Derzhavin. Significantly, in the Biblical stories mentioned, while God accomplishes the miracles that stop the sun in its tracks and destroy Jericho's walls, Joshua's own

[123] Sampson, 132.

human words initiate them. “There has been no day like it before or since, when the LORD heeded a human voice,” it is noted immediately after the account of the sun miracle.[124] Though the rest of this sentence – “for the LORD fought for Israel”– explains that this apparent lapse of divine absolutism is really no such thing (for it grants authority to the chosen people fighting a battle that furthers God’s cause), alluding to a story in which God obeys the command of a powerful human word nevertheless suggests that the magical boy is showing the first signs of the poetic hubris later deplored by the lyric hero in the sixth stanza of “Memory.”

“The Word” also alludes to another poem that discusses Joshua of Nun in relation to artistic hubris, Derzhavin’s “Привратнику,” or “To the Doorman”:

> Един есть бог, един Державин,
> Я в глупой гордости мечтал;
> Одна мне рифма – древний Навин,
> Что солнца бег остановлял.
> Теперь другой Державин зрится,
> И рифма та ж ему гордится;
> Но тот Державин – поп, не я:
> На мне парик, на нем скуфья.
>
> (There is one God, there's one Derzhavin,
> I dreamed in stupid pride.
> I have one rhyme – ancient Navin,[125]
> Who stopped the course of the sun.
> Now a different Derzhavin is seen,
> And he can be proud of the same rhyme;
> But that Derzhavin is a priest, not I:
> On me there's a wig, on him there's a skull-cap.) (1-8)[126]

This particularly allusion not only elaborates on the issue of poetic hubris, but also suggests a connection between hubris and piety, a connection that foreshadows the last few incarnations of the lyric hero of “Memory.”

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[124] Joshua in *Holy Bible*, New Revised Standard Version, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Nelson, 1989), 10:14.
[125] i.e., Joshua of Nun.
[126] Gavrila Derzhavin, “Privratniku” in *Stikhotvoreniia,* 2nd ed. (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1957),

Repentant recollections of past hubris continue in the poetic allusions of the next stanzas. The fifth stanza contains several references to Gumilev's contemporaries:

> И второй… Любил он ветер с юга,
> В каждом шуме слышал звоны лир,
> Говорил, что жизнь – его подруга,
> Коврик под его ногами – мир.
>
> (And the second . . . He loved the wind from the south,
> In every sound he'd hear the ringing of lyres,
> He said that life was his girlfriend,
> That a rug under his feet was a world.) (17-20)

The third line of this stanza echoes the title of Pasternak's 1917 collection *Сестра моя – жизнь*, or "My Sister Life." This book's remarkably original modernist style made a great impression on the world of Russian poetry, including Gumilev's fellow Acmeist Mandelstam, who in the essay "Some Notes on Poetry" remarked of it that "No poetry is more healthful at the present moment!"[127]

Tsvetaeva was another inventive stylist of the era admired by Mandelstam and even by Gumilev (though rather condescendingly – his review of her first collection described it as "not just a charming book of girlish confessions, but a book of fine poetry"[128]). Line twenty of "Memory" – "[He said] that a rug under his feet was a world" – recalls a famous poem published by her in 1915 that begins with the following lines:

> Мне нравится, что Вы больны не мной,
> Мне нравится, что я больна не Вами,
> Что никогда тяжелый шар земной
> Не уплывет под нашими ногами.

344.
[127] Osip Mandelstam, "Some Notes on Poetry" in *Critical Prose and Letters,* edited by Jane Gary Harris and translated by Jane Gary Harris and Constance Link, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1990), 168.
[128] Nikolai Gumilev, "[Review of Druzhinin […] Tsvetaeva, Ehrenberg (XVII)" in *On Russian Poetry*, translated by David Lapeza (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1977), 86.

(It pleases me that you're not ill with me,
It pleases me that I'm not ill with you,
That the heavy earthly sphere will never
Float away under our feet.) (1-4)[129]

Significantly, both allusions change the quoted phrases in ways that make Gumilev's narrator more domineering: by changing life from a sister into a girlfriend and limiting the wide, emotionally precarious world depicted by Tsevtaeva to "a rug beneath his feet," the lyric hero's second incarnation foolishly places himself in a deluded position of power.

An echo of Mandelstam can be heard in the second line of the above-quoted stanza from "Memory." Mandelstam is generally acknowledged as a major contender for the title of greatest twentieth-century Russian poet, and was certainly a greater poet than Gumilev, who, during the early years of Acmeism, nevertheless acted as a sort of mentor by steering Mandelstam away from Symbolism. In his reviews of the first two editions of *Камень*, or *Stone*, Mandelstam's first book, Gumilev divides the former's oeuvre into "Acmeist" and "Symbolist" stages. He praises the poetry of both periods as excellent, but explicitly privileges the Acmeist pieces that had been produced under his own influence. At this point, Gumilev writes, Mandelstam "is not yet perspicacious, he lives in a half-sleep"[130]; he worships "Music with a capital M"[131] and for it is willing to "renounce… even poetry."[132] Mandelstam was, in other words, the sort of poet who heard "in every sound… the ringing of lyres."

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[129] Marina Tsvetaeva, "Mne nravitsia, chto Vy bol'ny ne mnoi…" in *Poeziia Serebrianogo veka*, edited by A. Bondarenko (Moscow: Biblioteka Vsemirnoi Literatury, 2007), 643.
[130] Nikolai Gumilev, "[Review of Adamovich, Ivanov, Lozinsky, Mandelstam (XXXIV)]" in *On Russian Poetry*, translated by David Lapeza (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1977), 163.
[131] Nikolai Gumilev, "[Review of Bryusov […] Mandelstam […] Sologub (XXXI)" in *On Russian Poetry*, translated by David Lapeza (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1977), 134.
[132] Ibid., 135.

The works this young poet produced eventually became widely known as subtle and sophisticated masterpieces. Gumilev's programmatic classification of Mandelstam's nuanced early poetry as simply "Symbolist" – and not only Symbolist, but Symbolist in a way that anticipates Acmeism – exemplified a tendency in his own personality for which he would later be criticized. His stringent adherence to Acemism would later become one of the reasons why he was rated a lesser poet than Mandelstam. By referring to a period when he tried to control Mandelstam after Mandelstam had clearly proven himself the superior writer, Gumilev acknowledges both his poetic and personal shortcomings.

The seventeenth line, "And the second… He loved the wind from the south," brings to mind a poem Gumilev's wife Akhmatova wrote about him[133] in which she openly criticizes his arrogant aesthetic posturing:

> Он любил три вещи на свете:
> За вечерней пенье, белых павлинов
> И стертые карты Америки.
> Не любил, когда плачут дети,
> Не любил чая с малиной
> И женской истерики
> …А я была его женой.
>
> (He loved three things in the world:
> Singing at vespers, white peacocks
> And worn maps of America.
> He didn't love it when children cried,
> He didn't love tea with raspberry
> And womanly hysterics
> …And I was his wife.)[134]

Allusion to this poem is an expression of humility. In fact, in itself the inclusion of

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[133] According to many scholars, including Michael Basker, who includes it among "Some poems of Anna Akhmatova to or about Gumilyov" in the English Gumilev collection *The Pillar of Fire.*
[134] Anna Akhmatova, "On liubil..." in *Sobranie sochineniia v shesti tomakh,* Vol. 4, (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 2000), 31.

references to Akhmatova, Pasternak, Mandelstam, and Tsvetaeva, whom Max Hayward describes as a group "regarded with no equals in their generation,"[135] is a sign of concession by the present, less proud lyric representation of Gumilev, who proceeds to criticize his past self's pretensions quite harshly in the next stanza:

> Он совсем не нравится мне, это
> Он хотел стать богом и царем,
> Он повесил вывеску поэта
> Над дверьми в мой молчаливый дом.
>
> (I don't like him at all, it was
> He who wanted to become a god and a tsar,
> He hung up a poet's signboard
> Over the doors in my silent home.) (21-24).

The next self seems amenable to the present lyric hero, who claims to "love" him. Unlike the previous incarnation, this one is distinguished not by his own unfounded pride, but by admiration shown to him from the outside:

> Я люблю избранника свободы,
> Мореплавателя и стрелка,
> Ах, ему так звонко пели воды
> И завидовали облака.
>
> (I love the chosen one of freedom,
> The sea-traveler and rifleman.
> Oh, the waters sang so loudly to him,
> And the clouds envied him.) (25-28)

This third incarnation finds favor not only with the narrator, but also with nature (represented by the clouds) and even freedom itself. The powerful romantic charisma depicted here is underscored by an allusion to the fourth stanza of "Стансы," or "Stanzas," a Pushkin poem celebrating Peter the Great:

> То академик, то герой,
> То мореплаватель, то плотник,

[135] Max Hayward, appendix to Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope*, 2nd ed. (New York: Modern Library, 1990), 422.

Он всеобъемлющей душой
На троне вечный был работник.

(Now an academic, now a hero,
Now a sea-traveler, now a carpenter,
He with an all-embracing soul
Was a perpetual worker on the throne.) (13-16)[136]

Like the lyric hero's third self, Peter the Great appears here as a multi-talented, wide-ranging, superhuman sea-traveler who deserves his formidable reputation. The concluding lines of this stanza also tie it into the fourth incarnation of Gumilev's lyric hero, closely related to this one ("Тот ли это, или кто другой" – "Was it he, or someone else" (34)), who "Променял веселую свободу / На священный, долгожданный бой" ("Exchanged his cheerful freedom / For holy long-awaited combat" (35-36)), that is, service to the state. In all the many role he plays, Pushkin's Peter is ultimately "a perpetual worker on the throne," which is what makes him truly great. Since Pushkin's dedication of the poem to Tsar Nicholas I was a covert criticism of the Russian monarchy – he was trying to convince Nicholas to emulate the flexible Peter by being a great and merciful Tsar who would display clemency to Pushkin's friends, the Decembrist rebels, rather than following the conservative line of his predecessor Alexander I – Gumilev's use of the poem to aggrandize himself is somewhat ironic. This citation is a diminished criticism of a diminished hubris.

The poetic subtext of "Memory," then, follows the trajectory of the narrator's incarnations. The imagined divinity of the first becomes the exaggerated, absurd, and eventually self-aware hubris of the second. This self-awareness leads to his charismatic third incarnation, who actually develops his abilities, and then to the

[136] Alexander Pushkin, "Stansy," in *Aleksandr Pushkin. Stikhotvoreniia. Poemy. Evgenii Onegin. Dramaticheskiie proizvedeniia. Proza* (Moscow: Biblioteka Vsemirnoi Literatury, 2006), 144.

fourth, who puts them to use. Placed in the context of the fifth incarnation, a divinely inspired poet in the vein of William Blake, it becomes clear that these stages have contributed to the present lyric hero's abilities as a poet and to his awareness of the duties accompanying this role as he perceives it.

With this realization, which takes place in the eleventh stanza, a structural shift occurs in the poem. While the meter and number of lines per stanza remains constant, the thematic grouping of stanzas into pairs, two for the introduction and then two for each incarnation, ends here. Having reached the present, the lyric hero's tone changes; his account of his own experience cannot be so condensed. Moreover, with this ultimate purpose arrives a sense of finality. The dominant tone of the last five stanzas of "Memory" is apocalyptic. The "New Jerusalem" of the twelfth stanza comes directly from Revelation:

> Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.[137]

In fact, this mysterious opening of the heavens appears in the thirteenth stanza of "Memory":

> И тогда повеет ветер странный --
> И прольется с неба страшный свет,
> Это Млечный Путь расцвел нежданно
> Садом ослепительных планет.
>
> (And then a strange wind will begin to blow --
> And a frightening light will spill from the sky:
> It is the Milky Way that has unexpectedly flowered
> As a garden of dazzling planets.) (49-52)

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[137] Revelation, 21:1-2.

Strangely, this opening of the heavens is described *after* the New Jerusalem. Even more strangely, the stanza after this one features a mysterious figure resembling the one who communicates the Book of Revelation to John of Patmos, who at first seems a disembodied voice but then reveals himself to be "one like the Son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest":[138]

> Перед мной предстанет, мне неведом,
> Путник, скрыв лицо; но всё пойму,
> Видя льва, стремящегося следом,
> И орла, летящего к нему.
>
> (Before me will appear, unknown to me,
> A traveler, having covered his face; but I will understand everything,
> Seeing the lion, rushing after him,
> And the eagle, flying toward him.) (54-56)

These animals, which cause the narrator to "understand everything," also come from Revelation. Four living creatures surround the throne of God, "the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle."[139] Since these four animals are generally taken to represent the Evangelists,[140] "understanding everything" could be taken to mean that the narrator has recognized these creatures from the Bible and now recognizes the "unknown traveler" as Christ. It becomes evident, then, that the narrative of "Memory" flows backwards, from the fulfillment of the Apocalyptic prophecy and the establishment of the New Jerusalem to the beginning of Revelation and, ultimately, to Christ.

A backwards movement also takes place in the last stanza, for it returns to the

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[138] Ibid., 1:13.
[139] Ibid., 4:7.
[140] See Martin Werner, "The Four Evangelists Symbols Page in the Book of Durrow," *Gesta*, Vol. 8 No.1(1969): 3.

first two lines of the poem:

> Крикну я… но разве кто поможет, --
> Чтоб моя душа не умерла?
> Только змеи сбрасывают кожи,
> Мы меняем души, не тела.
>
> (I will scream . . . but will anyone really help, --
> So that my soul will not die?
> Only snakes shed their skins,
> We change souls, not bodies.) (57-60)

This last stanza is ambiguous. The lyric hero's fear of losing his present soul suggests that in spite of the apocalyptic finality of the last few stanzas, his current incarnation is by no means his last. At the same time, these lines also remain within the apocalyptic paradigm by recalling another passage in Revelation, which describes the reaction of John of Patmos to seeing a living Christ:

> When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, "Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades. Now write down what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this."[141]

In light of this potential allusion, the last stanza of "Memory" does indeed seem to imply that the lyric hero has reached an ultimate stage that has endowed him with the task of a sacred scribe. But Gumilev never resolves this ambiguity in the poem; only examining this poem in the context of "The Tram That Lost Its Way" can take our analysis further.

Mad Inspiration: "The Tram That Lost Its Way"

According to the memoirs of his student Irina Odoevtseva, Nikolai Gumilev conceived his remarkable poem "Заблудившийся трамвай," or "The Tram That Lost Its Way," in a strange burst of almost supernatural inspiration:

> Even now I don't understand how it happened. I was walking along a bridge across the Neva. It was dawn and there was no one around. Deserted. Only crows were cawing. And suddenly a streetcar flew past me, very close… Something suddenly pierced me and dawned upon me… It was as though I recalled something from long ago, and at the same time, I seemed to see what will be. But it was all so vague and oppressive. I looked around, not understanding where I was or what was happening to me… And then it happened. I suddenly found the first stanza as though it came to me complete and not as though I myself had composed it… I continued to recite line after line as though reading someone else's poem. All, all to the end… Probably because I didn't sleep all night, I played cards, drank… and was extremely tired, probably that explains this mad inspiration.[142]

Though the facts presented in this account are impossible to verify, it still offers an important clue for interpreting this piece.

"Mad inspiration" differs radically from Gumilev's usual modus operandi. Under the aegis of Acmeism, he stressed the importance of painstaking craftsmanship and concreteness. He tended to draw inspiration from identifiable "muses": literary works, specific individuals (such as Elena D., to whom he devoted the album *К синей звезде*, or *To A Blue Star*), or his own experiences (in "Отъежающему", "To The Departing One,"[143] he mentions "Муза Дальних Странствий," his personal "Muse of Far-Off Travels"). As Gumilev describes it, this way of working, while sometimes

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[141] Revelation, 1:17-19.
[142] Elaine Rusinko, "Lost in Space and Time: Gumilev's 'Zabludivsijsja Tramvaj," *Slavic and East European Journal,* Vol. 26, No. 4 (Winter, 1982):398-399.
[143] (1:237-238).

connected to uncontrollably painful situations, nevertheless allows the author to retain conscious control over the writing that his muse elicits:

> Неизгладимый, нет, в моей судьбе
> Твой детский рот и смелый взор девический,
> Вот почему, мечтая о тебе,
> Я говорю и думаю ритмически.
>
> (Not erasable, no, in my fate
> Are your childish mouth and bold maidenly gaze,
> This is why, dreaming of you,
> I speak and think rhythmically.) (1-4)[144]

If one believes Odoevtseva, however, "The Tram That Lost Its Way" was not languidly generated by means of a muse. A harrowing experience with a careening car summoned a bizarre vision in Gumilev's near-delirious mind; the tram itself forcibly inspired the poem. This episode brings to mind another source of inspiration described in ancient Greek mythology: the winged horse Pegasus, who was "the favourite steed of the Muses, bearing poets on their flights of poetic inspiration," according to the *Oxford English Dictionary.*[145]

In fact, the text of the poem itself endows the mysterious tramcar with attributes very similar to those of Pegasus. As in Odoevtseva's memoir, the tram's appearance, heralded by cawing crows (which have wings) a lute (representing poetry), and thunder (alluding to Zeus), initiates the lyric hero's flight of inspiration:

> Шел я по улице незнакомой
> И вдруг услышал вороний грай,
> И звоны лютни и дальные громы,
> Передо мною летел трамвай.
>
> (I walked along an unknown street
> And suddenly heard a crow's cawing,

[144] Nikolai Gumilev, "Neizgladimyi, net, v moei sud'be…" in *K sinei zvezde* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1979), 62.
[145] *The Oxford English Dictionary,* s.v. "Pegasus" (Def.1), via OED Online, http://dictionary.oed.com

And the ringing of lutes, and far-away thunder,
Before me a tram was flying.) (2:48-50, lines 1-4)

In the next stanza, Gumilev's lyric hero, like a poet swept up by Pegasus, inexplicably finds himself a passenger on the flying tram:

Как я вскочил на его подножку,
Было загадкою для меня,
В воздухе огненную дорожку
Он оставлял и при свете дня.

(How I jumped onto its footboard
Was a mystery to me,
In the air a fiery road
Was left by it even in the light of day.) (5-8)

The "fiery road" forged in the tram's wake recalls not only "the sparks generated by [a speeding] tram," as Elaine Rusinko notes,[146] but also the lightning heralded by the first stanza's "far-off thunder." Thus, the tramcar, like Pegasus, "carries the thunderbolt of Zeus."[147] The poem's third stanza expands the image of Zeus's thundercloud and also alludes more explicitly to Pegasus himself by endowing the tram with wings:

Мчался он бурей темной, крылатой,
Он заблудился в бездне времен…
Остановите, вагоновожатый,
Остановите сейчас вагон.

(It rushed along in a dark, winged storm,
It had lost its way in the abyss of times…
Stop, tram-driver,
Stop the car right now.) (9-12)

Roman Timenchik's study of the development of the tram image in early twentieth-century Russian poetry supports this interpretation. In his article, he tracks

[146] Rusinko, 387.
[147] *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Pegasus," via The Columbia Encyclopedia online, http://www.bartleby.com

the associations that have accumulated around this symbol: as the "successful competitor of the horse (удачливый конкурент лошади)… [the tram] adopted the attributes of the enemy it had pushed aside."[148] Moreover, the noise and sparks the machine produces caused many poets to associate it with storms. In descriptions of trams, "самое обычное сближение из небесной сферы – молнии," he observes ("the most typical association from the heavenly sphere are lightning bolts").[149] Their roaring brings to mind not only thunder but "contextual association with the God of Thunder."[150] Considered within its literary-historical context, then, the Pegasus interpretation remains consistent.

Like other interesting poetic images, however, Gumilev's tram can be interpreted variously. Earl D. Sampson considers it a "nightmare vision"[151] that "has jumped the tracks of chronological time."[152] Yurii Krol' reads it as a time machine.[153] Irene Masing-Delic interprets it as a vehicle for souls traveling the cycle of reincarnation, which "usually follows a shuttle route along the time dimension of the future, but in ["The Tram That Lost Its Way"] it has missed the track of the future and derailed into the track of the past."[154] Louis Allain, considering it within the context of Russian literary tradition, argues that the tram "упоминается о «птице

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[148] R.D. Timenchik, "K simvolike tramvaia v russkoi poezii," in *Simvol v sisteme kul'tury. Trudy po znakovym sistemam XXI*, edited by Yu. M. Lotman (Tartu: Tartuskii gosudarstvennyi universitet, 1986), 135.
[149] Ibid., 137.
[150] Ibid.
[151] Sampson, 134.
[152] Ibid., 135.
[153] Yurii Krol', "Ob odnom neobychainom tramvainom marshrute," *Russkaia literatura* 1 (1990):61-83.
[154] Irene Masing-Delic, "The Time-Space Structure and Allusion Pattern in Gumilev's 'Zabliudivshiisia Tramvai," *Essays in Poetics*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (April 1982):68.

тройке» Гоголя" ("recalls Gogol's 'bird troika'").[155] Yurii Zobnin perceives the tram-driver as a modern Virgil conducting the lyric hero through the inferno of twentieth-century Petrograd,[156] an interpretation Michael Basker considers "perhaps the most substantial and challenging"[157] of the critical responses he summarizes in his notes to the poem's English translation.

Situating the image of the tram within the framework of the Pegasus myth, however, permits new and compelling insights into the poem. One relates to Pegasus's link with the warrior-hero Perseus, who beheaded Medusa, thus facilitating the spontaneous genesis of the horse that gruesomely sprang out of her bloody neck. In the first stanza of a poem describing Canova's sculpture of the hero, Gumilev not only depicts Perseus as a strong and glorious hero, as he was in traditional mythology, but also, in the very first line, gives him a new dimension by associating him with art:

> Его издавно любят музы,
> Он юный, светлый, он герой,
> Он поднял голову Медузы
> Стальной, стремительной рукой.
>
> (The Muses have loved him for a long time,
> He's young, bright, he's a hero,
> He lifted the head of Medusa
> With a steely, impetuous hand.) ("Perseus" ("Персей"), 1: 233-234, lines 1-4)

These lines echo Gumilev's poetic descriptions of his own warrior-poet persona, the essence of which is most succinctly contained in the eighth stanza of "Memory":

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[155] Louis Allain, "Zabludivshiisia tramvai N. S. Gumileva," in *Etiudy o russkoi literature* (Leningrad, 1989), 113.
[156] Yurii Zobnin, "'Zabludivshiisia tramvai' N. S. Gumileva (k probleme deshifirovke ideino-filosofiskogo soderzhaniia teksta)." *Russkaia literatura*. 4(1993):176-192.
[157] Michael Basker, notes to "The Tram That Lost Its Way" in Nikolay Gumilyov, *The Pillar of Fire: Selected Poems*, translated by Richard McKane (London: Anvil, 1999), 236.

Высока была его палатка,
Мулы были резвы и сильны,
Как вино, впивал он воздух сладкий
Белому неведомой страны.

(High was his tent,
His mules were frisky and strong,
Like wine, he would drink in the sweet air
Of the country unknown to the white man.) (2: 35-37, lines 33-36)

Moreover, the last lines of "Perseus" describe a scene not depicted by Canova: the prize Andromeda, the foe, and the approach of victory.[158]

The goddess Victory plays a similar role in the triumphant final stanza of Gumilev's famous war poem "The Advance" ("Наступление"), which was published in the same collection as "Perseus":

"Perseus":

Вот ждет нагая Андромеда,
Пред ней свивается дракон,
Туда, туда, за ним победа
Летит, крылатая, как он.

(There waits naked Andromeda,
Before her coils the dragon,
That way, that way, after him victory
Flies, winged, like he.) ("Perseus", 13-16)

"The Advance":

И так сладко рядить Победу,
Словно девушку, в жемчуга,
Проходя по дымному следу
Отступающего врага.

(And so sweet it is to dress Victory,[159]
Just like a girl, in pearls,
Passing along the smoky footprint

[158] Canova, Antonio. *Perseus*. (Museo Pio Clementino, Vatican Museums, ca. 1800), via Art Resource, http://www.artres.com
[159] A feminine word in Russian.

Of the retreating enemy.) ("The Advance", 1:240-241, lines 21-24)

This association with Perseus establishes a continuity between the lyric hero in "The Tram That Lost Its Way" and Gumilev's earlier personas, the first hint at "Tram's" deep connection to "Memory." Additionally, it complicates his relationship to the tram-as-Pegasus. Like Perseus, and as a poet, he is responsible for its creation, but like Pegasus, the "lost" tram develops a life of its own, catching its passenger up in a frenzy of "mad inspiration" that he cannot control.

This powerlessness on the part of the poet also appears in another of Gumilev's poems, which mentions Pegasus explicitly:

Поэт ленив, хоть лебединый
В его душе не меркнет день,
Алмазы, яхонты, рубины
Стихов ему рассыпать лень. […]

Он встал. Пегас вознесся быстрый,
По ветру грива, и летит,
И сыплются стихи, как искры
Из-под сверкающих копыт.

(The poet is lazy, although the swanlike
Day will not darken in his soul,
He is too lazy to scatter
The diamonds, sapphires, and rubies of verse. […]

He stood up. Swift Pegasus has risen aloft,
His mane is in the wind, and he flies,
And verses are scattered, like sparks,
Out from under glittering hooves.) (2:1184, lines 1-4, 17-20)

This piece, written in 1920, the same year as "The Tram That Lost Its Way," not only depicts the same sort of inspiration as the later poem, but even uses similar imagery to describe it: the lost tram's fiery trail clearly corresponds to the spark-like verses scattered by the horse's hooves. The tram itself is therefore easily identifiable with Pegasus.

This interpretation sheds light on the disjointed depiction of space and time in "The Tram That Lost Its Way." Critics who have not dismissed the poem as simply surreal have constructed elaborate metaphysical mechanisms to explain the flying tram's bizarre jumps through different periods and places, and especially the human characters' curious tendency to be dead one moment and alive the next. Rusinko, for instance, has explained the jumps as a depiction of Bergsonian time. Krol' argues that while "the poem's time is linear,"[160] the tram is a time machine carrying the lyric hero backwards, and explains the events that fail to fit into this pattern, like Mashenka's death and resurrection, as metaphorical. Masing-Delic, meanwhile, begins from the premise that the lyric hero is already "in the state of death"[161] at the beginning of the poem, and then argues that his subsequent deaths and resurrections occur because the tram, running backwards through time, is dragging him through his past lives. Within the Pegasus framework, these inconsistencies cease to be problematic; the lyric hero's strange visions are the products of his imagination, which is working so intensely that his ideas, rather than developing into full-fledged individual poems, elide into one another with a jerky violence and a disconcerting accentual meter consistent with the gait of an animal like Pegasus or with the movement of a turn-of-the-century tramcar.

As many have observed, these fragmented images, which make up the bulk of the poem, bear a strong intertextual relationship to works that influenced Gumilev as well as to his own poems. This begins to become evident in the fourth stanza, which takes Gumilev across three bridges located in three separate countries in a single line:

> Поздно. Уже мы обогнули стену,
> Мы проскочили сквозь рощу пальм,

[160] Krol', 216.
[161] Masing-Delic, 68.

Через Неву, через Ниль и Сену
Мы прогремели по трем мостам.

(It's too late. We'd already skirted the wall,
We tore through a grove of palms,
Across the Neva, across the Nile and the Seine
We thundered along three bridges.) (13-16)

As many critics have noted, these three rivers represent important settings of Gumilev's own life: St. Petersburg, Africa, and Paris. Like "Memory," "Tram" contains elements of poetically refracted autobiography. The impact these three places had on Gumilev's poetic development was significant. It was in St. Petersburg (and its suburb, Kronstadt, the poet's childhood home) where Gumilev first began writing poetry, where he met his first poetic role model, Innokenty Annensky, and where he formed the Acmeist group that first established his reputation as an important figure in Russian literature. Gumilev had also lived in Paris, where he studied, honeymooned, and spent time during and after the war. French poetry had a profound influence on his work. In an article on the relationship between Blok and Gumilev, Samuil Schwarzband quotes a passage in which Blok mocks Gumilev's extra-refined literary sensibilities by labeling them "French":

> When they start to speak about "art for art's sake," and then soon after about literary genres and forms, of purely "literary" problems, of the special place that poetry occupies, and so on, and so on – this, maybe, is sometimes interesting… We are used to okroshka, botvinia and bliny,[162] and French herbs… can only please gourmets.[163]

Another important element of Gumilev's writing came from his "Muse of Far-Off Travels," or his journeys to exotic foreign countries, especially Africa, which inspired an entire book of poetry (*Шатер,* or *The Tent*), a whole collection of short

[162] Traditional Russian dishes. Okroshka is a kind of vegetable soup made with kvass, botvinia is a kind of fish soup made with kvass, and bliny are thin pancakes, often filled.

stories (*Тень от пальмы,* or *The Shadow of the Palm*), and many other separately published pieces. One of his African stories, "Вверх по Нилу (Листы из дневника)" or "Up the Nile (Pages from a Diary)," describes the experiences of two European travelers seeking the source of the Nile and "новое познанье, которое укажет другую сторону всех вещей" ("new knowledge that will show a different side of all things").[164] In an ancient pyramid, they discover mystical secret words. Words of power are symbolically linked to poetry; thus, the Nile, like the Seine and the Neva, is connected to inspiration.

Another foreign element, the "grove of palms" from line fourteen, both indicates the tram's (and the poetic imagination's) ability to instantaneously transcend its immediate setting and illustrates an important use of the exotic in Gumilev's poetry. He often uses the palm motif to juxtapose striking natural beauty against personal emotional distress in poems like "Эзбекие," or "Ezbekiya," "Отрывок из пьесы," or "Excerpt from a Play," and this piece:

> Рощи пальм и заросли алоэ,
> Серебристо-матовый ручей,
> Небо, бесконечно-голубое,
> Небо, золотое от лучей.
>
> И чего еще ты хочешь, сердце?
> Разве счасте – сказка или ложь? ...
>
> (Groves of palms and thickets of aloe,
> The dull silver brook,
> The sky, endlessly blue,
> The sky, golden from the rays.
>
> And what more do you want, heart?
> Is happiness really a fairy tale or a lie? ...) (1:133, lines 1-6)

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[163] Schwarzband, 378.
[164] Nikolai Gumilev, "Vverkh po Nilu. (Listy iz dnevnika)," in *Afrikanskaia okhota* (St. Petersburg: Azbuka-klassika, 2007), 86.

By alluding to the places he had visited, Gumilev also alludes to the poetry they inspired him to write. The tram's voyage across the globe is really a trip through the poet's past writings.

In the next stanza of "The Tram That Lost Its Way," the lyric hero learns that his strange vehicle also possesses the ability to cross more than just spatial boundaries:

> И, промелькнув у оконной рамы,
> Бросил нам вслед пытливый взгляд
> Нищий старик, – конечно тот самый,
> Что умер в Бейруте год назад.
>
> (And, having flashed by the window frame,
> An old beggar man threw after us an inquisitive glance –
> Of course, the same one
> Who died in Beirut a year ago.) (17-20)

Yevgeny Slivkin argues that the source of this beggar may lie in one of Gumilev's poems, possibly in "Мои читатели" ("My Readers") or "Паломник" ("The Pilgrim"):

> In "My Readers" the following figure appears: "старый бродяга в Аддис-Абебе, покоривший многие племена" (60) (the old vagrant in Addis-Abebe who had subdued many tribes). This image recalls that of "the old beggar, who died in Beirut." […] Perhaps Gumilev chose Beirut as the place of the old beggar's death because of its position as the boondocks of the Islamic world (as it was in the first third of the twentieth century), where Akhmet-Ogly [of "The Pilgrim"] also died: "Он скоро упадет без сил и слов в одном из тех восточных городов, где вечерами шепчутся платаны" (173-174) (He will soon fall, powerless and without words, in one of those oriental cities where plantains whisper in the evenings).[165]

If this is so, then this "compound image"[166] also serves to connect the tram ride to Gumilev's oeuvre in general and the "exotic period" he is so well known for in

[165] Slivkin, 146.

particular. The figure of the revived dead man alludes to the fact that part of Gumilev's poetic process consists in reference to (one might say resurrection of) the "eidola," shades, of his earlier work by means of intertextual allusion.

Gradually, the disoriented narrator begins to realize that the limits of this tram are effectively those of human imagination:

> Где я? Так томно и так тревожно
> Сердце мое стучит в ответ:
> Видишь вокзал, на котором можно
> В Индию Духа купить билет?
>
> (Where am I? So languidly and so anxiously
> My heart beats in response:
> "Do you see the station where you can
> Buy a ticket to the India of the Spirit?") (21-24)

His "heart," by musing, opens his own soul as another possible destination for the tram and subject for poetry. Gumilev became particularly interested in spiritual and mystical poetry during the last period of his life, and tended to associate the search for truth about the world and identity with the East. This inclination can be observed in poems like "Путешествие в Китай" ("Journey to China") and "Возвращение" ("The Return"), which idealize China as an ultimate spiritual destination, and the following poem, "Прапамять" (Forememory), in which the truth-seeking narrator situates his "real self" in India:

> Когда же, наконец, восставши
> От сна, я буду снова я –
> Простой индиец, задремавший
> В священный вечер у ручья?
>
> (When, finally, having awakened
> From sleep, will I be me again –
> A simple Indian, who has dozed off
> On a holy evening by the stream?) (2:21, lines 13-16)

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[166] Ibid.

Another reincarnation-related poem implicitly referenced by this mention of India is, of course, "Memory." This piece's deeper connections to "Tram" will emerge later.

Rusinko's research indicates that although Gumilev generally tended to explore India as a poetic topic, this particular instance of inspiration must have arrived not as the result of long, thoughtful consideration, but in a frenzied burst, for according to her

> It is [Roman Timenchik's] idea[167] that the flight of the streetcar in this poem follows the route of a real Petersburg *tramvaj*. At this point in the route, according to [Timenchik], the streetcar passes a museum where the current exhibit was a display of Indian art… the image represents a point in "real space."[168]

Though the lyric hero's surroundings in "real space" cannot limit the Pegasus-tram's flight, they may influence it. In this case, a glance at a museum instantly sends his imagination careening toward the possibility of traveling to "India of the Spirit."

Rusinko also identifies the next stanza with an actual location in Petersburg: "The route proceeds along Kronverkskij Prospekt past Sytnyj Rynok,[169] where one's imaginary reconstruction of the trip would place the greengrocer."[170] The same sort of instantaneous inspiration may thus also be attributed to this image. Like the "India of the Spirit," however, the grocer in the poem differs significantly from the one that inspired it:

> Вывеска… кровью налитые буквы
> Гласят — зеленная, — знаю, тут
> Вместо капусты и вместо брюквы
> Мертвые головы продают.

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[167] This idea is not discussed in Timenchik's article. Since in her own article Rusinko writes that Timenchik "clarified this idea for [her]" (388), we may presume that he conveyed it to her personally.
[168] Rusinko, 388.
[169] An outdoor market.
[170] Rusinko, 392.

В красной рубашке, с лицом, как вымя,
Голову срезал палач и мне,
Она лежала вместе с другими
Здесь, в ящике скользком, на самом дне.

(A signboard… letters swollen with blood
Read "greengrocer" – I know, here
Instead of cabbages and instead of rutabagas
They sell dead heads.

In a red shirt, with a face like an udder,
The executioner cut off my head too,
It lay together with the others
Here, in the slippery box, on the very bottom.) (25-32)

Many critics have noted the revolutionary subtext in these lines. The disgusting, udder-faced executioner's red shirt evokes the Russian Revolution, which Gumilev opposed so openly that he was eventually executed for his monarchism. Meanwhile, the executioner's method – beheading – and the vegetables that severed heads replace bring to mind the Bolsheviks' French predecessors, who used cabbages to test the guillotines with which they would later dispose of the aristocracy.

Slivkin fastens onto this image, interpreting it as the central one in the poem.[171] He argues rather unconvincingly that "the streetcar in Gumilev's poem is not a means of transportation, but an unusually constructed guillotine"[172] resembling the horizontal guillotine "set up on a supporting rail laid straight on the pavement"[173] used for a public execution in Paris in 1908, when Gumilev lived there. Yet though some of the evidence that Slivkin cites in support of his theory – the correspondence between the "площадка" (platform) once observed on a guillotine by the novelist Ivan Turgenev with the lost tram's "подножка" (footboard), his observation that "the

[171] Yevgeny Slivkin, "The Last Stop of the Death Machine: An Attempt at a Rational Reading of 'The Runaway Streetcar' by N. Gumilev," *Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 1. (Spring, 1999):137-155.

words Grai and LiuTNia[174] together form an anagram of the world GiL'oTiNa," and his association of the tram's thundering sound with Dr. Guillotine's observation that his machine "falls like thunder," for instance[175] – is unpersuasive, the connection he makes between beheading and the tram itself (rather than just the executioner) has significance.[176] In the legend of Pegasus, the horse is born from the body of Medusa after Perseus beheads her – inspiration springs from the aftermath of violence.

For Gumilev, this myth could illustrate the bloody preoccupations he displayed in his own writing. Rusinko observes that "Gumilev is said to have foretold his violent death in his poems. The decapitation at the hands of the greengrocer-butcher here is particularly gruesome, but decapitation is not an uncommon motif in Gumilev's work."[177] In particular, she cites its appearance in one of his prose pieces as a source for "Tram's" grisliest scene:

> …In the conclusion of the prose sketch "Afrikanskaja oxota" ("African Hunt") from 1916 (4, 141-52), …the poet dreams that he is executed by decapitation for participation in a palace coup. As in "Streetcar," the persona exhibits no apparent anxiety, and describes his death in a matter-of-fact fashion. Indeed, the conclusion to "African Hunt" is positively serene[:]
>
> The battue ended. At night, lying on my straw mat, I pondered why I felt no remorse, killing animals for amusement, and why my blood-tie with the world only becomes stronger from these killings. And at night I dreamed that, for participation in some Abyssinian palace coup, I am decapitated. Bleeding profusely, I applaud the skill of the executioner and rejoice at how simple it is, how good, and not at all painful.[178]

Like the Beirut beggar and the "India of the Spirit," this allusion reinforces the tram-

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[172] Slivkin, 140.
[173] Ibid., 141.
[174] In lines two and three of "The Tram That Lost Its Way" – "thunder" and "[of a] lute," respectively.
[175] Slivkin, 144.
[176] Citing Timenchik, who argues that "the intrusive idea of decapitation was initially connected to the theme of the streetcar" (4, as quoted and translated by Slivkin).
[177] Rusinko, 289.

trip's connection to Gumilev's literary activities. Here, however, the inspirational allusion is doubled. This image refers not just to an instance of inspiration, but to an instance of inspiration about inspiration, for within the story the beheading occurs in a dream. Its pale resemblance to a real death (the victim feels no pain, and despite his recent beheading manages to praises the executioner's abilities) as well as its context (the lyric hero falls asleep "ponder[ing] why [he] felt no remorse…[for] killing") emphasizes its literariness: rather than presenting speculations about the physical experience of decapitation, this scene and its equivalent in "The Tram That Lost Its Way" are poetic ruminations about the lyric hero's spiritual and emotional relationship to death.

This spiritual-emotional dimension persists from "India of the Spirit" in the sixth stanza, through the decapitation scene, and into the ninth stanza, in which the lyric hero's long-lost beloved, Masha, appears. This covert continuity unites the apparently disconnected subjects featured in these three sections of the poem. Though thematically unrelated, they are emotionally associated for the lyric hero, and the order of their appearances follows the logic of emotional association – a logic that bears much resemblance to the progressive sequence of souls depicted in "Memory."

His spiritual and poetic yearning for the exotic led Gumilev to Africa, where (according to his own literary record, at least) he braved many dangers and (according to "Пятистопные ямбы," or "Iambic Pentameters"[179]) eventually became estranged from his wife Anna Akhmatova, who remained in Russia. Following these

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[178] Ibid.
[179] (1:222-225).

emotional threads, the lyric hero's flight of fancy brings him to a scene of similar estrangement:

> А в переулке забор дощатый,
> Дом в три окна и серый газон...
> Остановите, вагоновожатый,
> Остановите сейчас вагон!
>
> Машенька, ты здесь жила и пела,
> Мне, жениху, ковёр ткала,
> Где же теперь твой голос и тело,
> Может ли быть, что ты умерла?
>
> Как ты стонала в своей светлице,
> Я же с напудренною косой
> Шёл представляться Императрице
> И не увиделся вновь с тобой.
>
> (But in the alley is a fence made of boards,
> A house with three windows and a gray lawn…
> Stop, driver,
> Stop the car right now!
>
> Mashenka, you lived and sang here,
> For me, your fiancé, you wove a carpet,
> Wherever are your voice and body now,
> Could it possibly be that you died!
>
> How you moaned in your chamber,
> And I, with a powdered wig,
> Went to present myself to the Empress
> And didn't see you again.) (33-44)

Though continuous with the thread of emotional association that runs through the preceding stanzas, this new twist in the tram's path startles the passenger nevertheless. He repeats his cry from the third stanza, and intensifies it with an exclamation point: "Stop, driver, / Stop the car right now!" In Russian, rhythm in addition to repetition contributes to these lines' arresting effect. As noted earlier, the meter of "The Tram That Lost Its Way" is accentual and therefore irregular, but almost all of the lines contain three or four beats. The only exception is the repeated

line “Stop, driver” – “Остановите, вагоновожатый” – in which two beats are distributed over eleven syllables. The rhythmic result is two long stretches of unstressed syllables – first three, then five, with only one unstressed syllable following the second beat. By tripping up the tongue, they literally stop the flow of the poem read aloud. Earlier, Gumilev used these striking lines to draw attention to the lyric hero’s realization that the tram “had lost its way in the abyss of times” (10). The repetition of these earlier lines not only signals a return to something familiar (old love), but also an important turning point in the poem’s plot. As it turns out, the hero’s relationship with Mashenka becomes the crux of the remainder of “The Tram That Lost Its Way.” Her appearance marks a profound shift in the poem. Rhythmically, it becomes smoother and less tram-like. Thematically, the spiritual-emotional dimension that ran through the background emerges into foreground, replacing discussions of poetic inspiration, and references to Pegasus disappear. We may presume that at this point the driver heeded the lyric hero’s instructions and allowed him to step out of the tram.

Since Mashenka here becomes “Tram’s” primary focus, identifying her is clearly an important critical task, but scholars attempting to explain this figure by locating her source in literature or history have disagreed. A wide variety of potential inspirations have been proposed. Many critics, including Gleb Struve, Irene Masing-Delic, and Louis Allain, argue that she is an allusion to Masha Mironova, the heroine of Alexander Pushkin’s *The Captain’s Daughter*,[180] citing her name, the mention of an Empress (undoubtedly Catherine the Great), and the Pushkinian language used in

[180] Alexander Pushkin, *The Captain’s Daughter*, in *The Complete Prose Tales of Alexandr Sergeyevitch Pushkin*, translated by Gillon R. Aitkin (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 335-475.

the tenth stanza ("светлица" is an antiquated term for "chamber" used by Pushkin to denote Masha's room in *The Captain's Daughter*[181]) as some of their evidence. Allain makes a very persuasive argument, citing parallels between the tram-driver and Pugachev and reading the beheading scene as an allusion to the punishments inflicted by Pugachev on the nobility and later by Catherine on the rebellious peasant himself during the Pugachev rebellion. Perhaps even more persuasive evidence in favor of the Pushkin hypothesis is Odoevtseva's recollection that "Mashenka on that first morning [of frenzied inspiration] was Katenka," but that Gumilev changed her name due to "love for Pushkin."[182] According to Zobnin, a manuscript of the variant recalled by Odoevtseva (which also included a change in the eleventh stanza) was recently found in an archive of Gumilev's papers.[183] While this discovery provides no concrete support for the Pushkinian origin of the name "Masha," it does make Odoevtseva's claim seem more likely.

On the other hand, this parallel is not perfect. While the hero Grinev worries that his beloved Masha may die in *The Captain's Daughter*, they are eventually reunited. When the lyric hero of "The Tram That Lost Its Way" wonders about his Masha's death, line forty-four ("And [I] didn't see you again") suggests that his fears may have come true. Moreover, in *The Captain's Daughter*, it is Masha, not her fiancé, who presents herself to the Empress, and in doing so she does not abandon her lover, but even saves his life. The shortcomings of this reading have been noted by advocates of another interpretation: that Mashenka is a stand-in for Anna Akhmatova. The biographical parallels between these two figures have already been noted. More

[181] Allain, 137.
[182] Slivkin, 149.
[183] Zobnin, 189.

persuasive are the textual connections between this poem and Akhmatova's works. Line thirty-nine, "Где же теперь твой голос и тело" ("Wherever are your voice and body now"), clearly recalls the last stanza of a 1912 Akhmatova poem, which seems to answer this question:

> Смертный час, наклонясь, напоит
> Прозрачной сулемой...
> А люди придут, зароют
> Мое тело и голос мой.
>
> (The hour of death, bowing, will imbue
> With transparent mercuric chloride…
> And people will come, will bury
> My body and my voice.) (13-16)[184]

Basker notes that "Akhmatova recognized [the house in the ninth stanza] as the Shukhardin house where she lived as a girl in Tsarskoye Selo."[185] Krol' discusses Akhmatova's use of line thirty-three as the epigraph to her 1963 poem "Царскосельская ода" ("Tsarskoe Selo Ode").[186] Furthermore, Rusinko has observed that in these three stanzas Gumilev uses language, images, and a mood typical of Akhmatova.[187]

Yet the name in the poem is "Masha," not "Anna." Like the points of departure from the plot of *The Captain's Daughter*, this clear discrepancy aggressively dissuades readers from attributing a single, unambiguous interpretation to this image in spite of convincing evidence to support it. As a result, various other speculations about the origin of this figure have arisen. Struve skeptically documents

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[184] Anna Akhmatova, "Umiraia, tomlius' o bessmert'i…" in *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh,* Vol. 4, (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 2000), 63.
[185] Michael Basker, notes to "The Tram That Lost Its Way" in Nikolay Gumilyov, *The Pillar of Fire: Selected Poems*, translated by Richard McKane (London: Anvil, 1999), 237.
[186] Krol', 210.
[187] Rusinko, 393-395.

Anna Gumileva's[188] assertion that the Masha in "Tram" is actually the poet's cousin:

> A. A. Gumileva's account is valued for its details about familial and everyday life, but it is a little naive, and some of its conjectures and conclusions do not inspire particular confidence. This comes into play, for example, with her account of Gumilev's love for his cousin, Masha Kuz'mina-Karavaeva – supposedly the only true love in Gumilev's life. Not even speaking of the fact that in this part of the account the chronology is entirely muddled, it is difficult to understand why Madame Gumileva relates 1920's "The Tram That Lost Its Way" to Masha's early death…[189]

In spite of Struve's rejection of the Kuzmina-Karavaeva hypothesis, however, Zobnin connects it to Odoetseva's assertion that "Mashenka" was originally "Katenka" and concludes that the "Tram's" eleventh stanza is in fact a reference to an event in the life of the eighteenth-century Russian poet Gavrila Derzhavin that parallels one of Gumilev's own experiences.

According to Zobnin, the dying Kuzmina-Karavaeva decided to transfer from a Finnish sanatorium to one in Italy in 1911. Gumilev accompanied her there on December 24th, and she died five days later, presumably after he left, if this situation is parallel to the one in the poem. Anna Gumileva attests that before another parting (earlier, though Masha's death already seemed imminent) he whispered, "Машенька, я никогда не думал, что можно так любить и грустить" ("Mashenka, I never thought that it was possible to love so much and be so sad")[190] – precisely the last two lines of "The Tram That Lost Its Way." If we trust Struve, this last detail is unlikely, but the similarities between the stories of Mashenka and Kuzmina-Karavaeva remain: both end with sad partings that lead to unexpectedly permanent separations.

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[188] Nikolai Gumilev's second wife.
[189] Gleb Struve, "N.S. Gumilev. Zhizn' i lichnost'," in Nikolai Gumilev, *Sobranie sochinenii. Tom Pervyi*, edited by G.P. Struve and B.A. Filippov (Washingon: Kamkin, 1962), VII.
[190] Zobnin, 188.

Similar to both the eleventh stanza and the Kuzmina-Karavaeva episode is the story of Derzhavin and his wife.[191] Ekaterina Yakovlevna and her husband had a tender, loving, and supportive relationship, but unfortunately certain consequences of his civil service career eventually endangered her health. The climate of Tambov, the swampy province Derzhavin was assigned to govern, made her ill, and a brief entanglement in her husband's political quarrels worsened her condition. Though she temporarily recovered, her health had taken another downturn when Derzhavin was asked to appear in court. Apparently, she encouraged him to leave. In his biography of Derzhavin, Vladislav Khodasevich writes: "Two days before her death she asked Derzhavin to go to Tsarskoe [Selo] to petition for one of their acquaintances. 'God is gracious,' she said, 'so perhaps I will live long enough to bid you farewell.'"[192] Like Gumilev and "Tram's" lyric hero, Derzhavin left his beloved without realizing that he would never see her again.

His poetic response to this tragedy, "На смерть Катерины Яковлевны, 1794 году июля 15 дня приключившую," or "On the Occasion of the Death of Ekaterina Yakovlevna, Having Occurred on July 15th, 1794," bears a strong resemblance to the eleventh stanza of "The Tram That Lost Its Way," which ends with the line "И не увиделся вновь с тобой" ("And I didn't see you again" (44):

О ты, ласточка сизокрылая!
Ты возвратишься в дом мой весной;
Но ты, моя супруга милая,
Не увидишься век уж со мной.

(Oh you, grey-winged swallow!
You will return to my springtime home;
But you, my darling spouse,

[191] Information on Derzhavin from Zobnin and Vladislav Khodasevich, *Derzhavin: A Biography*, translated by Angela Brintlinger (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007).
[192] Khodasevich, 150.

Will never see me again.) (13-16)[193]

The eleventh stanza of "Tram" also features a powdered wig – a sign that it takes place in the eighteenth century – and mentions "the Empress" Catherine II, whose court Derzhavin left his Ekaterina Yakovlevna to visit. Additionally, as noted previously, Mashenka's original name was Katenka, which is a diminutive of Ekaterina. Zobnin argues that Mashenka represents a conflation of Kuzmina-Karavaeva and Ekaterina Yakovlevna, both women who died tragically of long-term illnesses in the absence of the poets who loved them.

Yet the Derzhavin story also bears some similarities to the Akhmatova-Gumilev story. Tsarskoe Selo was where Gumilev and Akhmatova met and grew up, and just as Derzhavin's career endangered his wife's health, Gumilev's travels contributed to his marital difficulties. Moreover, in further support of the Akhmatova hypothesis, the last stanzas of "The Tram That Lost Its Way" also echo Akhmatova's poem "Стихи о Петербурге," or "Verses about Petersburg," which I have reproduced in its entirety in order to show the extent of its relationship with Gumilev's poem:

I

Вновь Исакий в облаченьи
Из литого серебра…
Стынет в грозном нетерпеньи
Конь Великого Петра.

Ветер душный и суровый
С черных труб сметает гарь…
Ах! своей столицей новой
Недоволен Государь.

II

Сердце бьется ровно, мерно,
Что мне долгие года!
Ведь под аркой над Галерной
Наши тени навсегда.

Сквозь опущенные веки
Вижу, вижу, ты со мной –
И в руке твоей навеки

[193] Gavrila Derzhavin, "Na smert' Kateriny Iakovlevny, 1794 godu iyulia 15 dnia prikliuchivshuiu," in *Stikhotvoreniia* (Leningrad: Biblioteka Poeta, 1957), 207.

Неоткрытый веер мой.

Оттого, что стали рядом
Мы в блаженный миг чудес.
В миг, когда над Летним Садом
Месяц роковой воскрес –

Мне не надо ожиданий
У постылого окна
И томительных свиданий,
Ах! любовь утолена.

Ты свободен, я свободна
Завтра лучше, чем вчера –
Над Невою темноводной
Под улыбкою холодной
Императора Петра.

(I
Again St. Isaac's[194] is in vestments
Made from poured-out silver…
The steed of Peter the Great
Freezes in fierce impatience.

A stuffy and stern wind
Blows the soot away from black chimneys…
Ah! The Sovereign is dissatisfied
With his new capital.

II
The heart beats evenly, measuredly,
What are the long years to me!
After all, under the arch over Galernaya
Are our shadows forever.

Through lowered eyelids
I see, I see, you are with me –
And in your hands forever
Is my unopened fan.

Because we stood next to each other
In the blessed moment of miracles.
In the moment, when over the Summer Garden
The fateful moon was resurrected –

[194] St. Isaac's Cathedral.

I don't need periods of expectation
At the hateful window
Or agonizing meetings,
Ah! love has had its fill.

You are free, I am free,
Tomorrow will be better than yesterday –
Over the dark-watered Neva,
Under the cold smile
Of the Emperor Peter.)[195]

Akhmatova wrote this piece in 1913, the year Gumilev returned from the long journey to Africa that effectively, though not immediately, ended their marriage,[196] and indeed the poem depicts a romantic separation.

It also alludes extensively to Pushkin's "The Bronze Horseman," an 1833 poem depicting Peter I's foundation of St. Petersburg in a swamp as a superhuman expression of imperial power.[197] Pushkin's poem culminates in an eerie scene: the protagonist Evgeny, distraught that his fiancée Parasha has perished in a flood that was the inevitable result of the city's location, goes mad and curses the statue of Peter the Great. To his horror, the statue comes to life and chases him through the city. Though Akhmatova's Peter does not move, his spirit nevertheless still affects the lives of the city's inhabitants: the final stanza, in which the narrator tells her lover to become reconciled to their separation, closes on the image of "the dark-watered Neva / Under the cold smile / Of the Emperor Peter" (27-29). These lines, then, conflate the emotional strain that separates the lyric heroine and her lover with the flood that separated Evgeny and Parasha, and attribute it, like the flood, to Peter the Great and the coldness emblematized by his smile. Akhmatova's narrator implies that Peter's

[195] Anna Akhmatova, "Stikhi o Peterburge" in *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh*, Vol. 4, (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 2000), 69-70.
[196] Sampson, 28.

coldness has had an effect on her; the lament "Ah!" precedes mentions of both Peter's dissatisfaction with his city (8) and her own frustration with love (24).

The coldness that compelled Peter to force his subjects to construct a city "on bones"[198] in a place where it was hazardous to build and dangerous even to live could also be attributed to the series of emperors (and one empress) who tried to erect cathedrals on the site where St. Isaac's now stands. That spot's particular swampiness made construction extremely difficult. Execution of this imperial vision demanded forty years of labor extended over three reigns and the lives of hundreds of serfs. By including the image of St. Isaac's Cathedral in her poem, Akhmatova extends the thread of cruelty beyond Peter and situates it, through herself, in the present.

This cathedral also appears in "The Tram That Lost Its Way." In fact, it is only one of many points of correspondence between the two pieces. Like "Tram," "Verses about Petersburg" features a steadily beating heart (9-10) in conjunction with spatio-temporal disjunction (11-15) and also a woman waiting in her room separated from her lover (21-24). These similarities would be enough evidence to establish "Verses" as a subtext to "Tram," but still more echoes of Akhmatova's poem can be found in the last four stanzas of Gumilev's:

Понял теперь я: наша свобода
Только оттуда бьющий свет,
Люди и тени стоят у входа
В зоологический сад планет.

И сразу ветер знакомый и сладкий,
И за мостом летит на меня
Всадника длань в железной перчатке
И два копыта его коня.

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[197] Alexander Pushkin, "Mednyi vsadnik" in *Pushkin Threefold*, translated by Walter Arndt (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1993), 400-427.
[198] This phrase, and other information about the construction of St. Isaac's, from *Nevsky Prospekt*, "St. Isaac's Cathedral," via http://nevsky-prospekt.com/isaacs.html (accessed March 5th 2008)

Верной твердынею православья
Врезан Исакий в вышине,
Там отслужу молебен о здравьи
Машеньки и панихиду по мне.

И всё ж навеки сердце угрюмо,
И трудно дышать, и больно жить…
Машенька, я никогда не думал,
Что можно так любить и грустить.

(I've understood now: our freedom
Is only a light beating from over there,
People and shadows stand at the entrance
Of the zoological garden of the planets.

And suddenly there's a wind, familiar and sweet,
And beyond the bridge flies onto me
The hand of a horseman in an iron glove
And two hooves of his horse.

As the true stronghold of Orthodoxy,
St. Isaac's is cut into the heights,
There I will have a public prayer said for the health
Of Mashenka and a requiem for me.

And all the same the heart is sullen forever,
And it's hard to breathe, and painful to live…
Mashenka, I never thought
That it was possible to love so much and to be so sad.) (45-60)

Placing these stanzas in the context of "Verses about Petersburg" sheds much light upon them. Their similarities indicate that the two poems are in dialogue with each other, and their differences constitute Gumilev's response. As he did in his citations of Pasternak and Tsvetaeva in "Memory," he repeats many of Akhmatova's images while changing their tenors. The freedom and shadows mentioned in Gumilev's twelfth stanza recall Akhmatova's shadows (12) and freedom (25). For her, they represent eternal memories of an impermanent relationship and freedom from that relationship after its conclusion, respectively. Gumilev inverts these

meanings. By describing freedom as "a light beating from over there" (46), he casts it not only as an illusion, but also as a sign of dependence on something greater, not liberty. Likewise, his shadows are not memories of the past, but the secret, cosmic reality of the present: "People and shadows stand at the entrance / Of the zoological garden of the planets" (47-48). Both poets mention wind, but while Akhmatova's is "stuffy and stern" (5), Gumilev's is "familiar and sweet" (49). St. Isaac's cathedral in Gumilev's poem is not a symbol of power and cruelty but "the true stronghold of Orthodoxy" (53). He also changes the Bronze Horseman. While Akhmatova's is "[frozen] in fierce impatience" (3), Gumilev's statue is even more supernaturally animated than Pushkin's, which "с тяжелым топотом скакал" (galloped with a heavy tread) (455) after Evgeny: Gumilev's Horseman flies (50).

Closer subtextual analysis reveals that, like Mashenka, the Bronze Horseman is a complex composite figure. Its heightened supernatural effect stems from the fact that, like his contemporary Andrei Bely in his novel *Petersburg,*[199] Gumilev conflates two Pushkinian statue characters, the Bronze Horseman and the Stone Guest. The latter is the title character of a miniature play of the same name that Pushkin wrote in 1830 based on the legend of Don Juan or Don Giovanni.[200] In it, Don Juan offers a mocking dinner invitation to a stone statue erected in memorial of a man he killed. To his horror, the statue comes to life and actually accepts, eventually dragging his murderer to hell soon after arriving to the meal. This was before Pushkin wrote "The Bronze Horseman," and his vision of the Stone Guest probably affected his

[199] Andrei Bely, *Petersburg,* translated by Robert E. Maguire and John E. Malmstad, (Bloomington: Indiana, 1978), 213-214. Though the version of *Petersburg* from which my edition was translated came out in 1922, the year Gumilev died, it is very likely that he read the first 1916 edition, for he followed Russian literature closely and had published reviews of Bely's poetry.

conception of the Horseman. Moreover, in productions of Pushkin's likely source, Da Ponte's opera *Don Giovanni*, the statue is often mounted on a horse.[201] As with the Bronze Horseman, its first indications of being alive are movements of its eyes and head in response to insolent provocation.

Like Akhmatova's Horseman, Pushkin's is a manifestation of cruelty and power, but the Stone Guest represents divine justice. In Lorenzo Da Ponte's 1787 libretto, he repeatedly exhorts Don Giovanni to repent.[202] In E.T.A. Hoffmann's 1813 version of the story, this legend becomes a battle between good and evil.[203] Don Giovanni represents a fallen man who has received from the devil "the thought that through Love, through the enjoyment of women, he can experience on earth the fulfillment of those joys of which our heart can offer us merely a divine intimation,"[204] Donna Anna is a woman "chosen by Heaven to use the love by which Satan had brought about the Don's downfall in order to make him aware of the divine power within him and therefore rescue him,"[205] and as soon as evil "bring[s] about her earthly downfall"[206] at the hands of Giovanni, the Stone Guest becomes a vehicle of heavenly vengeance and dispenses with the libertine.

Alexander Blok's poem "Шаги командора" ("The Steps of the Commander"), composed between 1910 and 1912, seems to follow Hoffmann's lead

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[200] Alexander Pushkin, "Kamennyi gost'," in *Stikhotvoreniia. Poemy. Evegenii Onegin. Dramaticheskie proizvedeniia. Proza.* (Moscow: Biblioteka vcemirnoi literatury, 2006), 609-641.
[201] Lorenzo Da Ponte, *Don Giovanni*, translated by Ellen H. Bleiler (New York: Dover, 1964).
[202] Da Ponte, 198-199.
[203] E.T.A. Hoffmann, "Don Giovanni," in *Six German Romantic Tales*, translated by Ronald Taylor, (Chester Springs: Dufour, 1993), 104-117.
[204] Hoffmann, 113.
[205] Hoffmann, 115.
[206] Hoffmann, 114.

more than Pushkin's.[207] He portrays Donna Anna as deceased, as she is at the end of Hoffmann's tale. Blok's Don Juan is racked with guilt, the Donna Anna before whom he is guilty is a Christ-like "Дева Света" ("maiden of light") (35) lying "скрестив на сердце руки" ("with arms crossed over her heart") (11) who "встанет в смертный час" ("will arise at the fatal hour") (40), and the stone Commander, who stands poised at the threshold without pulling Don Juan down into Hell, represents the holy torment of conscience more than divine justice.

It is this aspect of the Commander, recast as the Bronze Horseman, that Gumilev evokes in "The Tram That Lost Its Way." Mashenka's connections to literary and historical figures like Masha Mironova, Ekaterina Yakovleva, Masha Kuzmina-Karavaeva, Anna Akhmatova, and especially Donna Anna emphasize her status as a victim and a wronged woman. Though Gumilev's careful references to several women ensure that his readers recognize Mashenka as a composite archetype, derived from many sources and not equivalent to any one of them, Donna Anna and Anna Akhmatova emerge as the most significant of these sources in "Tram's" final stanzas. Donna Anna, who shares Akhmatova's first name and who is mentioned in "Пятистопные ямбы" ("Iambic Pentameters"), a poem Gumilev wrote about his estrangement from his first wife, certainly fits into the "Tram"-"Pentameters" framework. Just as Akhmatova associated her lyric heroine with the cruel Horseman in her poetic explanation of the separation, Gumilev associates his lyric hero with the existentially tormented Don Juan depicted by Hoffmann and Blok,[208] and in doing so casts himself as guilty both in the relationship and in the universe at large, which

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[207] Alexander Blok, "Shagi komandora" in *Sobranie sochinenii.* Vol. 3, (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1960), 80-81.

explains the religious register he adds to Akhmatova's shadows, freedom, and cathedral.

The "sweet and familiar wind" carries this register, too, when placed in the context of "Memory." "Memory" actually includes many images that appear in the end of "Tram," for it is at this point that the parallels between the two poems fully emerge. The image of the cathedral so central to "Memory" appears here, and a cosmic garden like the "zoological garden of the planets" and wind are both featured in the thirteenth stanza of "Memory":

> И тогда повеет ветер странный —
> И прольется с неба страшный свет,
> Это Млечный Путь расцвел нежданно
> Садом ослепительных планет.
>
> (And a strange wind will begin to blow —
> And a frightening light will spill from the sky:
> It is the Milky Way that has unexpectedly flowered
> As a garden of dazzling planets.) (49-52)

These lines lead up to the appearance of a figure that much resembles Christ in the Book of Revelation:[209]

> Предо мной предстанет, мне неведом,
> Путник, скрыв лицо: но всё пойму,
> Видя льва, стремящегося следом,
> И орла, летящего к нему.
>
> (Before me will appear, unknown to me,
> A traveler, having covered his face; but I will understand everything,
> Seeing the lion, rushing after him,
> And the eagle, flying toward him.) (53-56)

Since this Christ oversees Judgment Day, it follows that this subtext links him to the vindictive Bronze Horseman in "The Tram That Lost Its Way." This connection

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[208] Gumilev also followed this lead in his own 1910 poem "Дон-Жуан" ("Don Juan"), which depicts the libertine regretting his lifestyle.

heightens the Horseman's status in the poem almost to that of the tram. In fact, reexamining this figure, it becomes clear that the tram and the Horseman are really different versions of the same creature. Gumilev depicts the statue as a flying horse, like Pegasus. Since spiritual-emotional poetic concerns had become dominant over more aesthetic ones immediately before the tram dropped the lyric hero off in front of Mashenka's house, one may presume that at this point in the narrative the lyric hero's personification of his imagination transformed from the tram's odd urban Pegasus into a terrifying bearer of judgment. Aside from the connections of the Horseman to Akhmatova's poem and to Pegasus, this explains why Gumilev uses the Horseman instead of the Stone Guest: the former, who chases Evgeny all through Petersburg and subjects all of Petersburg to his will, is more powerful, more terrifying, and more relentless.

The lyric hero reacts to the Horseman's judgment in the last two stanzas of "Tram," which also contain yet another connection to "Memory." Here, he decides that he "will have a public prayer said for the health / Of Mashenka and a requiem for [himself]" (55-56), suggesting that he has died, but then describes how it is "hard to breathe, and painful to live" in the next stanza (58), implying that he is still alive. Krol' explains that in these lines Gumilev is using the same conceit of reincarnation that he employed in "Memory." The prayer for Mashenka is a sign of the "life" of the lyric hero's renewed love for her, which defined his last incarnation, and the requiem for himself is actually an acknowledgement of the death of his past self, for when he lost her that last incarnation died:

It means that the poet's former soul died and life's happiness and

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[209] See chapter on "Memory" for more on this.

> lightness have left together with it:
>
> > And all the same the heart is sullen forever,
> > And it's hard to breathe, and painful to live…
>
> The expression "sullen heart" echoes with the words "I am the sullen and stubborn architect" from "Memory"; sullenness is a sign of the poet's new soul.[210]

Krol' thus argues that the soul narrating "Memory" is identical to the one narrating "The Tram That Lost Its Way."

The link between them might be found in their references to "Iambic Pentameters." In "Memory," the allusion to this poem marks a turning point in the lyric hero's sequence of souls, the moment when he becomes a Masonic hero, the "sullen architect" of worthy poetry who has finally transcended the petty personal flaws that characterized his past selves and reached the culmination of his endeavors by assuming a holy task. Allusion to "Iambic Pentameters" marks a turning point in "The Tram That Lost Its Way," too, but here the moment referenced is quite a different one: the lyric hero's separation from his beloved. In "Tram," the appearance of Mashenka marks the disappearance of Pegasus and the replacement of poetic concerns with personal ones. This is the opposite of the movement that takes place in "Memory." Taking into consideration the lyric hero's guilt toward Mashenka, one may conclude that "The Tram That Lost Its Way" is a document of the lyric hero's "transcended" past catching up with him, the petty personal life that he abandoned in favor of pursuing his heroic and poetic endeavors returning to haunt him in the persons of Mashenka and the Bronze Horseman. This aspect of the poem gives the "abyss of space and time" a second meaning: not only does the lyric hero plumb the

[210] Krol', 213.

depths of his personal and literary experiences for his ideas, his poetic journey ends up becoming a personal journey into his past that concludes with a condemnation of his crimes from a superhuman dispenser of judgment.

While The Bronze Horseman is merciless, however, his equivalent in "Memory" is Christ. The requiem in "The Tram That Lost Its Way" serves not only to mark the death of the lyric hero's "sullen architect" incarnation, but also to offer the hero himself a chance for redemption. The doctrine surrounding the Orthodox requiem service called "панихида," or panikhida, suggests another, more specific framework in which these two poems could be placed. According to the online Russian Orthodox library *Bogoslovy.ru*, the panikhida is a musical service that takes place after a body is buried in order to calm the departed soul, which is distraught because

> according to the teachings of the Church, a human soul passes through terrifying ordeals at that time when its body lies breathless and dead, and, doubtlessly, at this time the soul of the deceased has a great need for the help of the Church. The panikhida helps the soul cross over into another life…. Having completed the panikhida, the Holy Church draws all our attention to how the souls of the departed ascend from earth to the Divine Judgment, how they must approach this Judgment with fear and trembling, confessing their deeds before the Lord, not daring to anticipate the secrets of His judgment on our departed souls from the always-justly-judging Lord.[211]

These two moments aptly describe "The Tram That Lost Its Way" and "Memory," respectively. The terrifying visions that pass through the madly inspired mind of the lyric hero of "Tram," which seem not to have been summoned by his own imagination, become in this context an ordeal to be endured before passage to the

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[211] Bogoslovy.Ru, "Pravoslavnoe Pominovenie Usopshikh. Panikhida," *Bogoslovy.Ru*, via http://www.lw.bogoslovy.ru/panihida.htm (accessed March 7th, 2008) ("Using materials from the

next world upon completion of the panikhida, or, in the context of the service combined with Gumilev's own mythology, before his old soul can pass and make way for a new one after the end of his own panikhida for himself. This panikhida is the poem "Memory," which purges the lyric hero of the demons of his old souls and ends by signaling the imminent death of even his present one.

Here, as usual, Gumilev changes his source material to better suit his own purposes. Though suggested, confession, the last step in the soul's journey, never occurs. Both poems serve as confessions, of sorts, but neither perfectly fulfills the purpose of the sacrament. On the surface of "Memory," his unrepentant lyric hero "confesses" by proudly reciting his personal progress, rather than his sins, before coming face-to-face with God. Personal failures are assigned to past selves or hidden in subtext, not to his current venerable incarnation as architect of a poetic Jerusalem. In "The Tram That Lost Its Way," the lyric hero does indeed confront his past, but veils it so deeply in layers of subtext that it is not immediately clear that he has – it is a confession only to himself. By failing to satisfactorily address the most important element of the soul's journey from earth, Gumilev leaves his lyric hero's salvation pending. In doing so, he heightens the two poems' dramatic power and remains consistent with his old Acmeist credo. As he wrote in "Acmeism and the Legacy of Symbolism," poetry may, and should, "portray the soul in those moments when it trembles, approaching [the unknown]; but then it ought to shudder only."[212]

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book of Saint Afanasii (Sakharov) *On the Remembrance of the Deceased According to the Regulations of the Orthodox Church* and several brochures printed by Orthodox publishers.")

[212] Gumilev, "Acmeism," 23-24.

Slaying the Dragon of Symbolism: Conclusion

Subtextual analysis reveals that Gumilev's later "Symbolist" poetry was actually carefully designed not to be Symbolist at all. Its mythical elements derive from a variety of texts and traditions, including theosophy, freemasonry, Greek mythology, and the Bible, and its poetic arguments (which are frequently polemical and anti-Symbolist) incorporate citations from Russian poetry (including Gumilev's own) and world literature. From these sources, Gumilev isolated what he called "eidola" and what I call simple "myths," or compelling images associated with basic and usually fantastic plots, and then inverted, modified, and recombined these units to create new and more complex narratives. The results of this poetic technique, mythopoeism, were not the sort of sacred, inalterable "pure myths" advocated by his former mentor, the Symbolist poet Vyacheslav Ivanov – in fact, the elder poet considered these reconfigurations heretical. But because the narratives Gumilev created were recognizably related to their source material, and since in their scope, subject matter, and self-containment they themselves still resemble legends, rather than twentieth-century stories making reference to the past, I would contend that they are modernist, rather than traditional, myths.

Despite its adversarial elements, Gumilev's mature mythopoeism was not entirely rooted in its opposition to Symbolism. It was modernist and therefore coherent with a trend being developed by other modernist poets, in Russia and elsewhere. H.W. Tjalsma observes, as many have done, that the Western European modernist tradition finds significant parallels in Russian literature of the same period: "T.S. Eliot's essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' might well have been written

about [Mandelstam,] his great Russian contemporary. All cultures and all times coexist in the consciousness of the poet, whose grasp of them is concrete, actual, and complete."[213] Yet a few lines of Eliot's work seem almost written for Gumilev:

> …we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of [a poet's] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously. And I do not mean the impressionable period of adolescence, but the period of full maturity.[214]

Gumilev's acute awareness of his poetic predecessors, which in his youth manifested itself in painfully obvious imitation (such as the "coincidences" with Balmont that Bryusov observed in 1905), eventually developed into a sophisticated intertextual mythopoeic technique.

Had Gumilev not met such an untimely death, there is no doubt that he would have continued producing these modernist myths. In 1921, shortly before his execution, he published the "First Song" of the "First Book" of his cosmogonic "Поэма начала," or "Poem of the Beginning," in the Poets' Guild's almanac, which in fact bore the same title as the first book of "Poem of the Beginning," *Дракон,* or *Dragon*.[215] The large fragment contained twelve twenty-line sections, and Gumilev must have considered it a significant component of his oeuvre, for in his notes to the "Poem of the Beginning," Gleb Struve mentions that the poet recorded twenty-six lines of it on a phonograph record.[216]

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[213] H.W. Tjalsma, "The Petersburg Poets," in *Russian Modernism. Culture and the Avant-Garde, 1900-1930,* edited by George Gibian and H.W. Tjalsma (Ithaca: Cornell, 1976), 80.
[214] Thomas Stearns Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methune, [1920]), via Bartleby.com, http://www.bartleby.com
[215] "Dragon" was actually written a few years before it was published and before Gumilev's death, between 1918 and 1919 (see Sampson, 161), but the fact that he published it in 1921 indicates that he was planning to continue the work.
[216] Gleb Struve, notes to "Drakon" in Nikolai Gumilev, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 2nd Vol, edited by G.P. Struve and B.A. Filippov (Washington: Kamkin, 1964), 340-342.

The plot concerns the Lemurian priest Moradita, who has travelled to an amethyst cliff in the Lunar Mountains in search of a golden dragon. He finds it just as the creature is waking from a thousand-year-long sleep to die. The priest, whose people worship the dragon as a god, hopes that the beast will reveal to him the secrets of the universe before leaving it. To communicate, he draws lines in the dirt, a human approximation of the dragon's own language of sparkling scales, for "Не хотел открыть Морадита / Зверю тайны чудесной слов" ("Morodita did not want to reveal / To the beast the miraculous secret of words.") (2:239-247, lines 119-120). Humbly, he asks the dragon to reveal his occult knowledge:

> Зарожденье, преображенье
> И ужасный конец миров
> Ты за ревностное служенье
> От своих не скроешь жрецов.
>
> (The origin, transformation,
> And terrible end of the worlds
> You, in exchange for zealous service,
> Will not conceal from your own priests.) (137-140)

But the dragon refuses to give away his secrets "твари с кровью горячей, / Не умеющею сверкать!" ("… to a creature with hot blood, / That doesn't know how to sparkle!") (159-160)) The angry Moradita accidentally reveals his own secret knowledge, and pronounces the forbidden word "om." The world begins to shake, and the dragon starts dying. The priest, realizing what he has done, wounds his chest with the dragon's claws and revives the creature with his own blood. Then the dragon sparkles, presumably using his last moments to tell Moradita everything. At this point, the song ends.

Sampson calls the ambitious piece "no less than an original, invented cosmology-mythology,"[217] but, just like Gumilev's other work from the period, "Poem of the Beginning" actually makes extensive use of citation. The late twentieth-century critic Vyacheslav Ivanov (no relation to the poet) notes that Gumilev's "eidology [sic] is the study of images that the poet creates or draws from various traditions"[218] and argues that Babylonian epic poetry considerably influenced "Poem of the Beginning."[219] In 1917, Gumilev prepared a translation *The Epic of Gilgamesh* for the publishing house Dorma with some help from Akhmatova's second husband, the eminent Assyriologist Vladimir Shileiko. A year later, Shileiko began preparing a collection of translated Assyrian and Babylonian poetry for World Literature, the Soviet publishing house where Gumilev worked as an editor after returning from Paris. Shileiko's collection included both *Gilgamesh* and the Babylonian creation epic, *Enuma Elish*, which the Assyriologist translated as "Когда вверху" ("When On High").[220] In this epic, the god Marduk slays the angry goddess Tiamat and uses her body to create the world and the blood of her consort Kingu to create mankind. Because Tiamat bore monstrous children to battle Marduk and the other gods, she has come over time to be perceived to be a dragon herself, and Ivanov argues that Moradita's struggle with the golden dragon deliberately parallels the Babylonian epic.

Ivanov also points out that Gumilev's version of the story explicitly departs from its model. When the dragon refuses to reveal his occult wisdom to Moradita, his

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[217] Sampson, 161.
[218] Viacheslav Ivanov, "Zvezdnaia vspyshka. Poeticheskii mir N.S. Gumileva," in Nikolai Gumilev, *N.S. Gumilev. Stikhi. Pis'ma o russkoi poezii* (Moscow: Zabytaya kniga, 1989), 28.
[219] Information on Gumilev's translation from ibid., 28-32.
[220] S. Landon, trans., *The Babylonian Epic of Creation* (London: Oxford, 1923).

words echo Gumilev's poem "Я и вы," or "You and I," which, the critic notes, was written at almost the same time as "Poem of the Beginning":

"You and I":

Не по залам и по салонам
Темным платьям и пиджакам –
Я читаю стихи драконам,
Водопадам и облакам.

(Not in halls and in salons
To dark dresses and jackets –
I read my poems to dragons,
To waterfalls and clouds.) (2:10, lines 5-8)

"Poem of the Beginning":

Разве в мире сильних не стало,
Что тебе я знанье отдам?
Я вручу его розе алой,
Водопадам и облакам.

(Are there really no strong ones left in the world,
That I must give my knowledge to you?
I will entrust it to a crimson rose,
To waterfalls and clouds.) (149-152)

The critic points out that by giving the dragon lines he had assigned to his lyric persona in a different poem, Gumilev both explicitly disrupts the credibility of the myth's "purity" and conflates himself with the dragon. He also associates his lyric hero's poetry with the dragon's secret knowledge.

Yet Moradita also appears to be a Gumilevian alter-ego. He is introduced as a "стрелок и лирник" ("a bowman and a lute-player") (15), apparently an ancient equivalent of Gumilev's "warrior-poet." Moreover, like an Acmeist, he wields the power of "the word." Ivanov, too, connects the destructive force of Moradita's "om" to another of Gumilev's late poems, "Слово" or "The Word":

В оный день, когда над миром новым

Бог склонял лицо Свое, тогда
Солнце останаливали словом,
Словом разрушали города.

On that ancient day, when over the new world
God leaned down His face, then
They stopped the sun with a word,
With a word they destroyed cities. (2:39, lines 1-4)

Ivanov reveals the conflict between these two poetic personas, but goes no further. This conflict is easier to interpret when explored in the context of the theosophical subtexts in "Poem of the Beginning." The priest Moradita hails from Lemuria, a country that Gumilev only mentions but that Madame H. P. Blavatsky, the founder of theosophy, describes in detail. Though Lemuria was originally a hypothetical continent postulated by nineteenth-century scientists who were trying to understand how Africa and Asia might have once been connected, Blavatsky reinvented it as the ancient home of humanity's "third root race," a lost continent predating even Atlantis. Theosophy's fantastic Lemurians, said to be most directly related to "the flat headed aborigines,"[221] were racist caricatures with "yellowish brown skin," "a long lower jaw," and "a strangely flattened face [with] eyes small but piercing and set curiously far apart," of enormous stature – "between twelve and fifteen feet" – and "ungainly" proportions.[222] They were also asexual and, according to William Scott-Elliot, kept dinosaurs as pets.

Except in stature, Gumilev's Moradita little resembles these Lemurians;[223] besides being the poet's alter-ego, he is a man

[221] Blavatsky in Sumathi Ramaswamy, Sumathi, *The Lost Land of Lemuria; Fabulous Geographies, Catastrophic Histories,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 57.
[222] Scott-Elliot in Ramaswamy, 60.
[223] At one point, Blavatsky also describes the Lemurians as "towering giants of godly strength and beauty" (Ramaswamy, 60), creatures that seem more similar to Moradita, but Ramaswamy calls this a "contrary insistence" (60) that contradicts her and her followers' more racist descriptions.

Превышая вершину леса
Ярко-красной повязкой лба,
Пальм стройней и крепче платанов,
Неуклонней разлива рек,
В одеяньях серебротканных.

(Exceeding the height of the forest
With the bright-red bandage on his forehead,
Slimmer than palms and firmer than plane-trees,
More inexorable than the flooding of rivers,
In garments of silver cloth.) (84-87)

Although Gumilev's conception of Lemuria departs from theosophy, Blavatsky's philosophical-religious system, which he studied, and whose texts were the first to cast Lemuria as a lost continent, is certainly its source. For Gumilev, the key element in theosophy's Lemuria was probably the Lemurians' connection to language. Sumathi Ramaswamy writes that theosophists considered them the first pre-human race that "learned to speak (albeit in monosyllables)."[224]

Moradita's language has connections to theosophy, too. According to the *Occult Dictionary* published by the Theosophical University Press, the word "om" is

> a syllable of invocation…that… should never be uttered aloud, or in the presence of an outsider, a foreigner, or a non-Initiate, and it should be uttered in the silence of one's mind… There is strong reason to believe, however, that this syllable of invocation was uttered… by the disciples in the presence of their Teacher.[225]

In Gumilev's poem, the dragon is both an outsider and a teacher, particularly when considered in a theosophical framework. Blavatsky associates dragons with knowledge:

> It is in the religious doctrines of the Gnostics that we can best see the real meaning of the Dragon, the Serpent, the Goat, and all those symbols of Powers now called Evil… The fact is, that even as a common ophidian it has always been a dual symbol, and as a dragon

[224] Ramaswamy, 59.
[225] De Purucker, 120.

> it has never been anything else than a symbol of the Manifested Deity in its Great Wisdom.[226]

Moreover, the "Stanza of Dzyan," the ancient Atlantean scripture that Blavatsky claimed to have received from her secret teachers, whom she called the Mahatmas, presents "serpents" (which in Russian are almost synonymous with dragons) as those "who taught and instructed [the Fifth Race]."[227] Again, by conflating the outsider and the teacher, and by having his dragon pass wisdom on to a Lemurian rather than to a member of the Fifth Race (ours, according to Blavatsky), Gumilev deliberately blocks the possibility of interpreting "Poem of the Beginning" as a purely theosophical creation.

Nor are the only subtexts in the work theosophical. In addition to *Enuma Elish*, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* can also be felt in Gumilev's poem.[228] Moradita's quest for knowledge of "The origin, transformation, / And terrible end of the worlds" (137-138) parallels Gilgamesh's quest for immortality. After his friend Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh travels to Mount Mashu to ask Utnapishtim, the only man to have achieved immortality, to reveal his secret, just as Moradita travels to the Lunar Mountains in search of the dragon's knowledge. Utnapishtim – who, like the dragon, is worshipped as a god – then chastises Gilgamesh for his impudence in seeking knowledge not given to humans:

> No man has ever seen Death.
> No one ever heard Death's voice
> but Death is real and Death is loud.
> How many times must a home be restored
> or a contract revised and approved?

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[226] H.P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion and Theosophy*, 3rd Ed. Vol. 2, (London: The H.P.B. Press, 1893), 404.
[227] Ibid., 24.
[228] Danny P. Jackson, trans., *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Wauconda: Bolchazy, 1992).

How many times must two brothers agree
not to dispute what is theirs?
How many wars and how many floods must there be
with plague and exile in their wake?
Shamash is the only one who can say.
But there is no one else who can
see what Shamash only can see within the sun.
Behold the cold, cold corpse from a distance,
and then regard the body of one who sleeps.
There seems no difference. How can we say
which is good and which is bad?
And it is also like that with other things as well.
Somewhere above us, where the goddess
Mammetum decides all things,
Mother Chance sits with the Anunnaki
and there she settles all decrees of fable
and of fortune.
There they issue lengths of lives;
then they issue times of death.
But the last, last matter
is always veiled from human beings.
The length of lives can only be guessed.[229]

This reproach is very similar to the dragon's refusal to share his knowledge with Moradita. In the lines following the passage already quoted, in which the dragon tells his visitor that he would prefer to give his knowledge "to waterfalls and clouds" (152), he derides the priest for being human:

Я вручу его кряжам горным,
Стражам косного бытия,
Семизвездию, в небе черном
Изогнувшемуся, как я;
Или ветру, сыну Удачи,
Что свою прославляет мать,
Но не твари с кровью горячей,
Не умеющею сверкать!

(I will entrust it to mountain ridges,
To the guards of sluggish being,
To the seven starred constellation, in the black sky
That is curved, like I am;
Or to the wind, son of Good Fortune,

[229] *Gilgamesh,* (Tablet X: 231-256).

> That glorifies its mother,
> But not to a creature with hot blood,
> That doesn't know how to sparkle!) (153-160)

The speakers of both quoted passages eventually go back on their words. In *Gilgamesh,* Utnapishtim eventually agrees to share his secret, despite the speech quoted above, and in "Poem of the Beginning" the dragon is ultimately forced (by the very blood he so belittles) to relay his knowledge. Utnapishtim's secret turns out to be a special plant that bestows eternal life upon those who eat it. Gilgamesh manages to find this plant, but before he has time to eat it himself, a serpent swallows it. In the end, it was not for humans to have. This experience forces the hero to come to terms with his own mortality.

Allusions to *The Epic of Gilgamesh* bring the shadow of Gilgamesh's final disappointment into "Poem of the Beginning." The theosophical elements present in Moradita's quest for secret knowledge associate it with the Symbolists and their quests for "other worlds," often through occult sects like theosophy (in the case of Vyacheslav Ivanov) and anthroposophy (Andrei Bely), as well as through poetry. In "Poem of the Beginning," poetry is represented by two opposing forces, which are presented as two versions of the author himself, the dragon and Moradita. The old dragon, like the serpent in Gilgamesh, hoards the sort of knowledge that older-school Symbolists seek, the secrets of "the origin, transformation / And terrible end of the worlds" (137-138). This figure could be construed as a conflation of Gumilev during his Symbolist period and the Symbolists who influenced him, particularly the esoteric Vyacheslav Ivanov, whose occult interests were much associated with the ancient world. The dragon also regards humans skeptically. Just as the Symbolists eschewed realistic subjects in favor of mystical symbols that would grant them access to other

planes, the dragon tells the priest that he prefers roses, waterfalls, and constellations to humans. The dragon's own status as a mythical creature could be interpreted as a comment on the Symbolists' own perception of themselves as not of this earth.

Meanwhile, young Moradita, priest, poet-warrior, and wielder of "the Word," represents Acmeism. Moradita's quest for the dragon's knowledge mirrors Gilgamesh's search for immortality, and because of this, his story may be interpreted as that of an Acmeist "returning to Symbolism" – a return that was often attributed to Gumilev himself by critics studying his later poetry. Yet at the end of the poem, the dragon's knowledge does not simply transfer to Moradita, as Gilgamesh hoped to transfer immortality to himself and become a god like Utnapishtim. When the dragon refuses to share his knowledge with the priest, Moradita uses his own, independent, human power – the Word – and his own human flesh – his blood – to extract his adversary's wisdom. Moradita takes the dragon's knowledge without sacrificing his identity or his humanity, and, in the process, the ancient beast dies.

To return to the poetic polemics behind this battle, "Poem of the Beginning" may be interpreted not as an Acmeist return to Symbolism, but rather as an Acmeist appropriation of Symbolism, which is portrayed here as a dying monster from an ancient world. This piece both exemplifies and explains Gumilev's later poetry, which requisitioned many of Symbolism's mythical elements and attitudes while ignoring its doctrines and rejecting its excesses to create a unique kind of poetry, just as Marduk creates a new world at the end of *Enuma Elish.*

Unlike Mandelstam, whose dense intertextuality serves to link reminiscences from world literature to the complex impressions of the lyric hero, Gumilev preserves the stories of the fragments he borrows, or, when lifting only images, often

incorporates them into his own narratives. In “Ezbekiya,” he rewrites the Bible to better contrast a religious moment from his own life with an experience of Symbolist transcendence depicted in “About Death.” “Among the Gypsies” presents “The Stranger” in combination with the diabolic occult in order to critique Symbolism’s otherworldly strivings. “Memory” and “The Tram That Lost Its Way” extend beyond polemics, using citations from an enormous range of literary sources to define Gumilev’s own grand poetic task. Then, to describe this task’s glorious execution, he incorporates elements from mankind’s oldest stories into “Poem of the Beginning.” Though the narratives his poetry presented were neither entirely original, nor unaltered retellings of classics, Gumilev’s stories nevertheless do not seem like pastiches – they are complete and self-contained. His epic muse led him to invent modernist myths, new worlds for the new world of twentieth-century poetry.

Appendix

"Ezbekiya"

How strange – exactly ten years have gone by
Since I saw Ezbekiya,
A huge Cairan garden, by the full moon
Solemnly illuminated on that evening.

Then I was tormented by a woman,
And neither the salty, fresh wind of the sea,
Nor the din of exotic bazaars,
Nothing could console me.
Then I prayed to God for death,
And was ready to bring it closer myself.

But this garden, in everything it resembled
The sacred groves of the young world:
There slender palms raised their branches,
Like maidens to whom God descends;
On the hills, like prophetic druids,
Thronged majestic plane-trees,

And the waterfall shone white in the gloom, like
A unicorn rearing;
Moths flew back and forth
Amidst flowers, which raised themselves high,
Or among the stars, -- so low the stars were,
Resembling ripe barberries.

And, I remember, I cried: "Higher than woe
And deeper than death is life! Accept, O Lord,
My freely given vow: that no matter what happens,
Whatever woes, humiliations
May fall to my lot, not before
Will I begin to think about easy death,
Until I once more enter, on just such a moonlit night,
Under the palms and plane-trees of Ezbekiya."

How strange – exactly ten years have gone by,
And I can't help but think about the palm trees,
And about the plane-trees, and about the waterfall,

Showing white in the gloom, like a unicorn.
35 And suddenly I look around, hearing
In the drone of the wind, in the murmur of the faraway river,
And in the awful silence of the night
A mysterious word – Ezbekiya.

Yes, only ten years, but, a sullen wanderer,
40 Again I must go, must see
The seas, and storm clouds, and foreign faces,
Everything that no longer seduces me,
Go into that garden and repeat the vow
Or say, that I've fulfilled it
45 And that I'm now free…

"About Death"

1 More and more often I wander through the city,
More and more often I see death – and I smile
A reasonable smile. Well, so what?
That's the way I want it. So it is for me in my own way to know,
5 That it will come to me, too, in its own time.

I was walking past the races along the highway.
A golden day dozed on heaps of scrap-metal,
And beyond the desolate fence, the hippodrome
Showed green beneath the sun. There blades of grass
10 And dandelions, blown by the spring,
In caressing rays dozed. And in the distance
A rostrum pressed down with its flat roof
Onto a crowd of idlers and fashionable women. Little flags
Gleamed here and there. And on the fence
15 Passersby sat and gaped.

I walked and heard the swift dash of the horses
Along the light ground. And the swift clatter
Of hooves. Then – a sudden cry:
"He fell! He fell!" – they shouted on the fence,
20 And I, having jumped up onto a little stump,
Saw everything at once: far off were flying
Jockeys in bright clothes – toward the slender post.
Having lagged behind them a little, a horse galloped
Without a rider, its stirrups flying up.
25 And beyond the foliage of the curly birch-trees,
So close to me – lay the jockey,
All in yellow, in the green spring grass,
Fallen on his back, having turned his face
To the blue caressing sky.

As though he'd been lying forever, he'd stretched out his arms
And tucked in his leg. He lay so well.
People were already running toward him. From far away,
Gleaming with slow spokes, a landau
Spun softly. People ran up
And lifted him up…

And there hung
A helpless yellow leg
In close-fitting riding breeches. His head
Flopped down somewhere on his shoulders…
The landau drove up. Upon its pillows
So carefully and tenderly they laid
The chicken-like yellowness of the jockey. A person
Jumped up awkwardly onto the footboard, and froze,
Supporting his head and leg,
And the solemn coachman turned back.
And just as slowly the spokes were spinning,
The coach-box, axles, splashboards were gleaming…

To die so well and freely.
His whole life he galloped – with one persistent thought,
To finish first. And at a gallop
The panting horse stumbled,
He could no long support the saddle with the strength of his legs,
And the frail stirrups flapped up,
And he flew, tossed away by a jolt…
He struck the back of his head against his native,
Springtime, friendly earth,
And in that moment – in his brain passed all the thoughts,
The only necessary ones. They passed through –
And died. And his eyes died.
And his corpse dreamily gazes upward.

How well and freely.

Once I wandered along the embankment.
Workers were carting from the barges
Lumber, brick and coal in wheelbarrows. And the river
Was even bluer from the white foam.
In the unbuttoned collars of work shirts
Peeped out sunburned bodies,
And the light eyes of free Rus
Shone sternly from the blackened faces.
And right there, children with naked legs
Kneaded piles of yellow sand,
Swiped – now a brick, now a log,
Now a little beam. And they hid. And there

Already their dirty heels sparkled,
And mothers – with loose-hanging breasts
Beneath dirty dresses – waited for them, cursed
And, having given a box on the ears, took away
The wood, little bricks, little beams. And they dragged them,
Bending down under the heavy burden, into the distance.
And once again, returning in a joyful crowd,
The kids began to steal:
One a little beam, another a little brick…

And suddenly a splash of water resounded and a cry:
"He fell! He fell!" – they shouted again from the barge.
A worker, having dropped the handle of a wheelbarrow,
Pointed somewhere into the water,
And the bright crowd of work shirts rustled
There, where on the grass, in the cobblestones,
On that very bank – there lay a vodka bottle.
One dragged the boat-hook.

And among the piles,
Driven into the water along the embankment,
A person was rocking lightly
In a work shirt and in ripped-up pants.
One grabbed him. Another helped,
And they dragged out onto the shore and laid
A long stretched-out body,
From which water was pouring in a stream.
A policeman, clattering his saber on the stones,
For some reason laid his cheek upon the damp
Chest, and diligently listened, apparently,
To his heart. People gathered round,
And each new arrival asked
The same stupid questions:
When did he fall, and how long was he lying,
In the water, and how much did he drink?
Afterwards everyone began to quietly walk away,
And I set off on my own way, and listened
As an earnest, but drunken worker
Authoritatively said to the others
That wine destroys men every day.

I'll go wander some more. While there's sun,
While there's heat, while my head
Is dull, and my thoughts are listless…

Heart!
You be my guide. And observe
Death with a smile. You'll get tired yourself,

You won't bear such a gay life
As I lead. People can't bear
Such love and hate
As I carry within myself.

I want,
I always want to look into human eyes,
And drink wine, and kiss women,
And fill the evening with a frenzy of desires,
When the heat of the day keeps me from dreaming
And sing songs! And listen to the wind in the world!

"Among the Gypsies"

Fat, he reeled, as though drugged,
Teeth shone out from under predatory whiskers,
On his bright-red hussar jacket
Are plaited knots of golden cords.

A string… a guttural howl… and suddenly
My blood began to ache so sweetly,
So earnestly I began to believe that story
About other lands, native to me.

Prophetic strings – these are the ox sinews,
But the oxen have been feeding on bitter grass,
A guttural voice – girlish complaints
From under the hand covering the mouth.

Bonfire flame, bonfire flame, columns
Of red tree-trunks and a deafening whoop,
The enamored guest tramples rusty leaves,
The Bengal tiger circling in the crowd.

Drops of blood flow from prickly whiskers,
He's languid, he's full, he's drunk,
Ach, there are too many roaring tambourines here,
Too many sweet, pungent bodies.

Could it be for me to see him in the cigar smoke,
Where corks pop, people yell,
On the damp table with an amber chibouk
Beating out the rhythm of an evil heart?

For me, who remembers him in the diamond bark,
On the river running away toward the Creator,
With a storm of angels and sweet temptation,
With a bloody lily in a thin hand?

Girl, what are you doing? That's a rich guest,
Stand before him, like a comet in the night,
A winged heart in a shaggy chest,
Pull it out, pull out the heart and trample all over it.

Wider, always wider, in circles, in circles,
Go, go and lure him with your hand,
Thus evening mist floats in meadows,
When beyond the forest are fires and fires.

There are the string-oxen left and right,
Their horns are death, and their bellowing is woe,
They have bitter grasses to feed on,
Prickly thistle, wormwood, goosefoot.

He wants to stand, he can't… the toothy flint,
The toothy flint, like a guttural scream,
Under the velvety paw, threateningly raised,
Is stuck into his winged heart.

He collapsed on his chest, tangling his aiguillettes,
Already it's impossible to drink or to look,
The waiters bustled about,
Carrying away the drunken guest.

What, gentlemen, half-past six?
Asmodeus, prepare us the check!
-- The girl, laughing, from the flint strip
Licks up the blood with a thin tongue.

"The Stranger" (translated by Dimitri Obolensky)[230]

In the evenings the sultry air
Above the restaurants is savage and heavy,
And the breath of spring and corruption
Carries the sound of drunken shouts.

In the distance, above the dust
Of the lanes and the boredom of suburban villas,
The gilded sign over the bakery can just be seen,
And a child can be heard crying.

And every evening, beyond the toll-gates,
Their bowler hats tipped at a rakish angle,
The practiced wits strolls about
Between the ditches with the ladies.

On the lake the rowlocks creak,
And a woman shrieks,
While in the sky the moon's disk, inured to everything,
Leers senselessly.

And every evening my only friend
Is mirrored in my wine-glass
And, like myself, is subdued and dazed
By the tart and mysterious liquor.

And nearby, sleepy waiters
Hang about beside the adjoining tables,
While drunkards, with rabbit-like eyes,
Shout: "In vino veritas!"

And every evening at the appointed hour
(Or am I only dreaming it?)
The figure of a girl, swathed in silk,
Moves across the misted window.

And, slowly passing among the drunkards,
Always unescorted,
Breathing perfumes and mists,
She sits down alone by the window.

Her resilient silks,
Her hat with its black plumes,
And her narrow hand adorned with rings

[230] I have Americanized Obolensky's spelling and grammar and introduced line breaks.

Breathe an air of ancient legends.

Entranced by this strange nearness,
I look through a dark veil,
And see an enchanted shore
40 And an enchanted distance.

Hidden mysteries are entrusted to me,
Someone's sun has been committed to my care,
And the tart wine has pierced
All the convolutions of my soul.

45 And the drooping ostrich plumes
Wave in my brain,
And blue fathomless eyes
Flower on a distant shore.

A treasure lies buried in my soul,
50 And the key is entrusted to me alone!
You are right, you drunken monster!
I know: truth lies in wine.

"Memory"

1 Only snakes shed their skins,
So that the soul ages and grows.
We, alas, aren't like snakes,
We change souls, not bodies.

5 You, Memory, with the hand of a giantess,
Lead life, as though under a horse's bridle,
You will tell me about those who earlier
Lived in this body before me.

The first: ugly and thin,
10 In love only with the twilight of groves and
A fallen leaf, a magical child
Who could stop the rain with a word.

A tree and a ginger dog,
That's who he took as his friends.
15 Memory, memory, you won't find a sign,
You won't convince the world that this was I.

And the second . . . He loved the wind from the south,
In every sound he'd hear the ringing of lyres,

He said that life was his girlfriend,
20 That a rug under his feet was a world.

I don't like him at all, it was
He who wanted to become a god and a tsar,
He hung up a poet's signboard
Over the doors in my silent home.

25 I love the chosen one of freedom,
The sea-traveler and rifleman.
Oh, the waters sang so loudly to him,
And the clouds envied him.

High was his tent,
30 His mules were frisky and strong,
Like wine, he would drink in the sweet air
Of the country unknown to the white man.

Memory, you're weaker year by year,
Was it he or someone else
35 Who exchanged his cheerful freedom
For holy long-awaited combat.

He knew the torment of hunger and thirst,
Anxious sleep, the endless journey,
But Saint George twice touched
40 His chest untouched by a bullet.

I am the sullen and stubborn architect
Of a temple, rising in the gloom,
I have become jealous of the Father's glory,
In heaven as it is on earth.

45 The heart will be scorched by flame
Right up until the day when will rise, bright,
The walls of a new Jerusalem
On the fields of my native country.

And then a strange wind will begin to blow --
50 And a frightening light will spill from the sky:
It is the Milky Way that has unexpectedly flowered
As a garden of dazzling planets.

Before me will appear, unknown to me,
A traveler, having covered his face; but I will understand everything,
55 Seeing the lion, rushing after him,
And the eagle, flying toward him.

I will scream . . . but will anyone really help, --
So that my soul will not die?
Only snakes shed their skins,
We change souls, not bodies.

"The Tram That Lost Its Way"

I walked along an unknown street
And suddenly heard a crow's cawing,
And the ringing of a lute, and far-away thunder,
Before me a tram was flying.

How I jumped onto its footboard
Was a mystery to me,
In the air a fiery road
Was left by it even in the light of day.

It rushed along in a dark, winged storm,
It had lost its way in the abyss of times…
Stop, tram-driver,
Stop the car right now.

It's too late. We'd already skirted the wall,
We tore through a grove of palms,
Across the Neva, across the Nile and the Seine
We thundered along three bridges.

And, having flashed by the window frame,
An old beggar man threw after us an inquisitive glance –
Of course, the same one
Who died in Beirut a year ago.

Where am I? So languidly and so anxiously
My heart beats in response:
"Do you see the station where you can
Buy a ticket to the India of the Spirit?"

A signboard… letters swollen with blood
Read "greengrocer" – I know, here
Instead of cabbages and instead of rutabagas
They sell dead heads.

In a red shirt, with a face like an udder,
The executioner cut off my head too,

It lay together with the others
Here, in the slippery box, on the very bottom.

But in the alley is a fence made of boards,
A house with three windows and a gray lawn…
Stop, driver,
Stop the car right now!

Mashenka, you lived and sang here,
For me, your fiancé, you wove a carpet,
Wherever are your voice and body now,
Could it possibly be that you died!

How you moaned in your chamber,
And I, with a powdered wig,
Went to present myself to the Empress
And didn't see you again.

I've understood now: our freedom
Is only a light beating from over there,
People and shadows stand at the entrance
Of the zoological garden of the planets.

And suddenly there's a wind, familiar and sweet,
And beyond the bridge flies onto me
The hand of a horseman in an iron glove
And two hooves of his horse.

As the true stronghold of Orthodoxy,
St. Isaac's is cut into the heights,
There I will have a public prayer said for the health
Of Mashenka and a requiem for me.

And all the same the heart is sullen forever,
And it's hard to breathe, and painful to live…
Mashenka, I never thought
That it was possible to love so much and to be so sad.

"Poem of the Beginning." First Book: "Dragon."

First Song

1

From beyond the ocean's fresh waves
A red bull raised up its horns,
And shadowy deer ran
Toward the stony shores.
Near the stony shores
In a noisy damp shadow
Like silver pearls
They accumulated on the moss.
The red bull changes faces:
Now it's stretched its wings out wide,
And soars, an enormous bird,
Devouring space.
There to the door of a light-blue temple,
Holding the key to secrets and miracles,
Enters a bowman and lute-player,
By the open path of the heavens.
Winds, blow, so that the waves sing,
So that the tree-trunks in the forest drone,
Enter, winds, into the pipes of the canyons,
Proclaiming his praises!

2

Having revived her hot body
In the aromatic nighttime darkness,
The earth once more throws herself into the task
Incomprehensible to her herself.
She fills with a green juice
Blades of grass tender as children
And fills the noble heart of a lion
With crimson, divinely-high juice.
And, always desiring another,
Onto the hungry, hot sand
She pours out again and again
Both the green and the red juice.
Hundreds of times since the creation of the world,
Dying, dust was changed,
This rock once snarled,
This ivy soared in the heavens.
Killing and resurrecting,
To swell into the universal soul –

This is the holy will of the earth,
Incomprehensible to her herself.

3

The shaggy and sleepy ocean,
Having found a reliable support,
Dully rubbed itself like a green lip
Against the foot of the Lunar Mountains.
And over it in a sheer wall
An amethyst cliff
Started running and then froze,
Pressing itself against the heavenly dome.
To the depths, in the nights and the days,
The amethyst shone and blossomed
In many-colored little fires,
Just like a swarm of cheerful bees.
Because there, twisting its rings,
Beginning to awake from a centuries-long sleep,
Older than waters and brighter than the sun,
There was the golden-scaled dragon.
And like a sacred goblet
For the wine of primordial powers,
The body of the universe didn't carry him,
And the Creator in dreams didn't carry him.

4

The dragon woke up and raised
The ambers of his stormy pupils.
Today he glanced around for the first time
After a dream of ten centuries.
And the sun, young for humans,
Didn't seem bright to him,
The heat of the fire blazing in the sea
Seemed to be strewn with ashes.
But another joy deep
In his heart ripened, like a sweet fruit.
He felt the breathing of fate,
The inaudible flight of dear death.
The murmur of the sea and the southern wind
Began a single song:
"You will say goodbye to the unnecessary earth,
And you will go home, into the silence.
On your tired body
Life has blunted its spike,
Death's lips are tender, and white
Is her young face."

5

But from the east, out of the whitish gloom,
Where in the forest a path wound like a snake,
Exceeding the height of the forest
With the bright-red bandage on his forehead,
Slimmer than palms and firmer than plane-trees,
More inexorable than the flooding of rivers,
In garments of silver cloth
Walked an unknown man.
He walked alone, calmly and austerely,
Lowering his eyes, like one
Who for long time by a familiar road
Has been walking many days and nights.
And it seemed that the earth was running
Under his feet, like water,
Like a black tarry board
Lay his beard on his chest.
As though carved out of granite
His face was light, but his gaze was heavy…
The priest of Lemuria, Moradita,
Was walking to the golden dragon.

6

It was frightening, like meeting
A striking sword head-on, without armor,
To unexpectedly see the dragon's
Cold and slippery gaze.
The priest remembered that for ten centuries
Every man who had been here
Had seen only the red nets
Of his closed crocodile's eyelids.
But he was silent and with a black lance
(Wise men used to carry such things)
On the sand before his sovereign
He drew a secret sign:
Just like a rod lying in the dust,
The symbol of mortal nature,
Both a vertical one, meaning
The descent of divinity,
And a short one, hidden between them,
Just like the connection of these two worlds…
Morodita did not want to reveal
To the beast the miraculous secret of words.

7

And the dragon read, bending
His gazes toward the mortal for the first time:
"There is, sovereign, a golden thread
That connects you and us.
Many years I spent in the darkness,
Trying to grasp the meaning of being,
You see, I know the holy signs
That your scales guard.
Their reflection from sun onto copper
I studied night and day,
I watched as you raved in your dream,
Burning with a changing fire.
And I know that, more precious
Than these spheres and crosses, and goblets,
You will give us your knowledge,
Having awoken on your last day.
The origin, transformation,
And terrible end of the worlds
You, in exchange for zealous service,
Will not conceal from your own priests."

8

In answer, his scales began to sparkle
On his spine, raised up like a bridge,
As the streams of rivers sparkle
Before the bowing moon.
And, angrily biting his lips,
Suppressing the streams of words,
Morodita began to read on them
The combination of lines and crosses:
"Are there really no strong ones left in the world,
That I must give my knowledge to you?
I will entrust it to a crimson rose,
To waterfalls and clouds;
I will entrust it to mountain ridges,
To the guards of sluggish being,
To the seven starred constellation, in the black sky
That is curved, like I am;
Or to the wind, son of Good Fortune,
That glorifies its mother,
But not to a creature with hot blood,
That doesn't know how to sparkle!"

9

Only dryly crunched the lance,
Broken in two by the priest,
Only gazes flashed wildly
On his granite face
And they were fixed adamantly
Into the darkness of the already extinguishing eyes
Of the dying dragon,
Sovereign of the ancient races.
Human strength pushed against
The fate insufferable to it,
With blue blood the huge vein
Swelled on the open forehead,
Lips opened slightly, and freely
The bright voice, rich and full,
Rolled along the shores,
Like the midday smell of palms.
For the first time the lips of a man
Dared to speak during the day,
For the first time ever
Resounded the forbidden word: Om!

10

The sun blazed up with a red heat
And cracked. A meteor
Tore itself off and with light steam
Jerked away from it into space.
After many millennia
Somewhere beyond the Milky Way
It will tell a comet it meets
About the mysterious word Om.
The ocean roared and, swept up,
Retreated in a mountain of silver.
So a beast goes away, scorched
By a charred log of human fire.
The palmate branches of plane-trees,
Spread about, lay on the sand,
No kind of hurricane force
Could have so bowed them until now.
And there rang out in momentary pain,
Through delicate air and fire
Shaking the body of the universe,
The secret word Om.

11

The dragon shuddered and again
Fixed his gaze on the stranger,
Within him death struggled against the power of the word,
Unknown until now.
Death, his reliable ally,
Was floating up from far away.
Like bellows of a gigantic forge,
His sides swelled up.
The nails of his paws, in pre-death languish,
Furrowed the surface of the rocks.
But without voice, without movement
He bore his torment and waited.
The white cold of final suffering
Swam in his heart, and he was just about
To go away from the human will
Scorching his heart.
The priest understood that the loss was terrible
And that one cannot deceive death,
He lifted the right paw of the beast
And laid it on his own chest.

12

Drops of blood from the fresh wound
Flowed out, fresh and warm,
Like springs in the crimson dawn
From the depths of a chalky rock.
Like a divine, sacred crossbelt
Its streams flushed crimson
On the precious twinkling
Of the golden scales.
Just like the sun in the dawn sky,
The dragon filled with life,
His wings tore in the wind, and his cocklike comb
Rose up, stained with blood.
And when without words, without movement,
The priest asked him again with a gaze
About the birth, transformation
And end of primordial forces,
The iridescence of the scales further
Illuminated the slopes of the ledges,
Just like an inhuman voice,
Transformed from sound into a beam of light.

“Эзбекие”

Как странно — ровно десять лет прошло
С тех пор, как я увидел Эзбекие,
Большой каирский сад, луною полной
Торжественно в тот вечер освещенный.

Я женщиною был тогда измучен,
И ни соленый, свежий ветер моря,
Ни грохот экзотических базаров,
Ничто меня утешить не могло.
О смерти я тогда молился Богу
И сам ее приблизить был готов.

Но этот сад, он был во всем подобен
Священным рощам молодого мира:
Там пальмы тонкие взносили ветви,
Как девушки, к которым Бог нисходит;
На холмах, словно вещие друиды,
Толпились величавые платаны,

И водопад белел во мраке, точно
Встающий на дыбы единорог;
Ночные бабочки перелетали
Среди цветов, поднявшихся высоко,
Иль между звезд, — так низко были звезды,
Похожие на спелый барбарис.

И, помню, я воскликнул: «Выше горя
И глубже смерти — жизнь! Прими, Господь,
Обет мой вольный: что бы ни случилось,
Какие бы печали, униженья
Ни выпали на долю мне, не раньше
Задумаюсь о легкой смерти я,
Чем вновь войду такой же лунной ночью
Под пальмы и платаны Эзбекие».

Как странно — ровно десять лет прошло,
И не могу не думать я о пальмах,
И о платанах, и о водопаде,
Во мгле белевшем, как единорог.
И вдруг оглядываюсь я, заслыша
В гуденьи ветра, в шуме дальней речи
И в ужасающем молчаньи ночи
Таинственное слово — Эзбекие.

Да, только десять лет, но, хмурый странник,
Я снова должен ехать, должен видеть
Моря, и тучи, и чужие лица,
Всё, что меня уже не обольщает,
Войти в тот сад и повторить обет
Или сказать, что я его исполнил
И что теперь свободен…

“О смерти”

Всё чаще я по городу брожу.
Всё чаще вижу смерть - и улыбаюсь
Улыбкой рассудительной. Ну, что же?
Так я хочу. Так свойственно мне знать,
Что и ко мне придет она в свой час.

Я проходил вдоль скачек по шоссе.
День золотой дремал на грудах щебня,
А за глухим забором - ипподром
Под солнцем зеленел. Там стебли злаков
И одуванчики, раздутые весной,
В ласкающих лучах дремали. А вдали
Трибуна придавила плоской крышей
Толпу зевак и модниц. Маленькие флаги
Пестрели там и здесь. А на заборе
Прохожие сидели и глазели.

Я шел и слышал быстрый гон коней
По грунту легкому. И быстрый топот
Копыт. Потом – внезапный крик:
«Упал! Упал!» -- кричали на заборе,
И я, вскочив на маленький пенёк,
Увидел всё зараз: вдали летели
Жокеи в пестром – к тонкому столбу.
Чуть-чуть отстав от них, скакала лошадь
Без седока, взметая стремена.
А за листвой кудрявеньких березок,
Так близко от меня – лежал жокей,
Весь в желтом, в зеленя'х весенних злаков,
Упавший навзничь, обратив лицо
В глубокое ласкающее небо.
Как будто век лежал, раскинув руки
И ногу подогнув. Так хорошо лежал.
К нему уже бежали люди. Издали',

Поблескивая медленными спицами, ландо
Катилось мягко. Люди подбежали
35 И подняли его...

И вот повисла
Беспомощная желтая нога
В обтянутой рейтузе. Завалилась
Им на' плечи куда-то голова...
40 Ландо подъехало. К его подушкам
Так бережно и нежно приложили
Цыплячью желтизну жокея. Человек
Вскочил неловко на подножку, замер,
Поддерживая голову и ногу,
45 И важный кучер повернул назад.
И так же медленно вертелись спицы,
Поблескивали козла, оси, крылья...

Так хорошо и вольно умереть.
Всю жизнь скакал - с одной упорной мыслью,
50 Чтоб первым доскакать. И на скаку
Запнулась запыхавшаяся лошадь,
Уж силой ног не удержать седла,
И утлые взмахнулись стремена,
И полетел, отброшенный толчком...
55 Ударился затылком о родную,
Весеннюю, приветливую землю,
И в этот миг – в мозгу прошли все мысли,
Единственные нужные. Прошли -
И умерли. И умерли глаза.
60 И труп мечтательно глядит наверх.

Так хорошо и вольно.

Однажды брел по набережной я.
Рабочие возили с барок в тачках
Дрова, кирпич и уголь. И река
65 Была еще сине'й от белой пены.
В отстегнутые вороты рубах
Глядели загорелые тела,
И светлые глаза привольной Руси
Блестели строго с почерневших лиц.
70 И тут же дети голыми ногами
Месили груды желтого песку,
Таскали – то кирпичик, то полено,
То бревнышко. И прятались. А там
Уже сверкали грязные их пятки,
75 И матери – с отвислыми грудями
Под грязным платьем – ждали их, ругались

И, надавав затрещин, отбирали
Дрова, кирпичики, бревёшки. И тащили,
Согнувшись под тяжелой ношей, вдаль.
80 И снова, воротясь гурьбой веселой,
Ребятки начинали воровать:
Тот бревнышко, другой – кирпичик...

И вдруг раздался всплеск воды и крик:
«Упал! Упал!» -- опять кричали с барки.
85 Рабочий, ручку тачки отпустив,
Показывал рукой куда-то в воду,
И пестрая толпа рубах неслась
Туда, где на траве, в камнях булыжных,
На самом берегу - лежала сотка.
90 Один тащил багор.

А между свай,
Забитых возле набережной в воду,
Легко покачивался человек
В рубахе и в разорванных портках.
95 Один схватил его. Другой помог,
И длинное растянутое тело,
С которого ручьем лилась вода,
Втащили на' берег и положили.
Городовой, гремя о камни шашкой,
100 Зачем-то щеку приложил к груди
Намокшей, и прилежно слушал,
Должно быть, сердце. Собрался' народ,
И каждый вновь пришедший задавал
Одни и те же глупые вопросы:
105 Когда упал, да сколько пролежал
В воде, да сколько выпил?
Потом все стали тихо отходить,
И я пошел своим путем, и слушал,
Как истовый, но выпивший рабочий
110 Авторитетно говорил другим,
Что губит каждый день людей вино.

Пойду еще бродить. Покуда солнце,
Покуда жар, покуда голова
Тупа, и мысли вялы...

115 Сердце!
Ты будь вожатаем моим. И смерть
С улыбкой наблюдай. Само устанешь,
Не вынесешь такой веселой жизни,

Какую я веду. Такой любви
И ненависти люди не выносят,
Какую я в себе ношу.

Хочу,
Всегда хочу смотреть в глаза людские,
И пить вино, и женщин целовать,
И яростью желаний полнить вечер,
Когда жара мешает днем мечтать
И песни петь! И слушать в мире ветер!

“У цыган”

Толстый, качался он, как в дурмане,
Зубы блестели из-под хищных усов,
На ярко-красном его доломане
Сплетались узлы золотых шнуров.

Струна… и гортанный вопль… и сразу
Сладостно так заныла кровь моя,
Так убедительно поверил я рассказу
Про иные, родные мне, края.

Вещие струны — это жилы бычьи,
Но горькой травой питались быки,
Гортанный голос — жалобы девичьи
Из-под зажимающей рот руки.

Пламя костра, пламя костра, колонны
Красных стволов и оглушительный гик,
Ржавые листья топчет гость влюбленный,
Кружащийся в толпе бенгальский тигр.

Капли крови текут с усов колючих,
Томно ему, он сыт, он опьянел,
Ах, здесь слишком много бубнов гремучих,
Слишком много сладких, пахучих тел.

Мне ли видеть его в дыму сигарном,
Где пробки хлопают, люди кричат,
На мокром столе чубуком янтарным
Злого сердца отстукивающим такт?

Мне, кто помнит его в струге алмазном,
На убегающей к Творцу реке,

Грозою ангелов и сладким соблазном,
С кровавой лилией в тонкой руке?

Девушка, что же ты? Ведь гость богатый,
30 Встань перед ним, как комета в ночи,
Сердце крылатое в груди косматой
Вырви, вырви сердце и растопчи.

Шире, всё шире, кругами, кругами
Ходи, ходи и рукой мани,
35 Так пар вечерний плавает лугами,
Когда за лесом огни и огни.

Вот струны-быки и слева и справа,
Рога их — смерть, и мычанье — беда,
У них на пастбище горькие травы,
40 Колючий волчец, полынь, лебеда.

Хочет встать, не может… кремень зубчатый,
Зубчатый кремень, как гортанный крик,
Под бархатной лапой, грозно подъятой,
В его крылатое сердце проник.

45 Рухнул грудью, путая аксельбанты,
Уже ни пить, ни смотреть нельзя,
Засуетились официанты,
Пьяного гостя унося.

Что ж, господа, половина шестого?
50 Счет, Асмодей, нам приготовь!
— Девушка, смеясь, с полосы кремневой
Узким язычком слизывает кровь.

“Незнакомка”

1 По вечерам над ресторанами
Горячий воздух дик и глух,
И правит окриками пьяными
Весенний и тлетворный дух.

5 Вдали, над пылью переулочной,
Над скукой загородных дач,
Чуть золотится крендель булочной,
И раздаётся детский плач.

И каждый вечер, за шлагбаумами,
10 Заламывая котелки,

Среди канав гуляют с дамами
Испытанные остряки.

Над озером скрипят уключины,
И раздаётся женский визг,
А в небе, ко всему приученный,
Бесмысленно кривится диск.

И каждый вечер друг единственный
В моем стакане отражён
И влагой терпкой и таинственной
Как я, смирён и оглушён.

А рядом у соседних столиков
Лакеи сонные торчат,
И пьяницы с глазами кроликов
«In vino veritas!» кричат.

И каждый вечер, в час назначенный
(Иль это только снится мне?),
Девичий стан, шелками схваченный,
В туманном движется окне.

И медленно, пройдя меж пьяными,
Всегда без спутников, одна
Дыша духами и туманами,
Она садится у окна.

И веют древними поверьями
Её упругие шелка,
И шляпа с траурными перьями,
И в кольцах узкая рука.

И странной близостью закованный,
Смотрю за темную вуаль,
И вижу берег очарованный
И очарованную даль.

Глухие тайны мне поручены,
Мне чьё-то солнце вручено,
И все души моей излучины
Пронзило терпкое вино.

И перья страуса склонённые
В моем качаются мозгу,
И очи синие бездонные
Цветут на дальнем берегу.

В моей душе лежит сокровище,
50 И ключ поручен только мне!
Ты право, пьяное чудовище!
Я знаю: истина в вине.

“Память”

1 Только змеи сбрасывают кожи,
Чтоб душа старела и росла.
Мы, увы, со змеями не схожи,
Мы меняем души, не тела.

5 Память, ты рукою великанши
Жизнь ведешь, как под уздцы коня,
Ты расскажешь мне о тех, что раньше
В этом теле жили до меня.

Самый первый: некрасив и тонок,
10 Полюбивший только сумрак рощ,
Лист опавший, колдовской ребенок,
Словом останавливавший дождь.

Дерево да рыжая собака,
Вот кого он взял себе в друзья,
15 Память, Память, ты не сыщешь знака,
Не уверишь мир, что то был я.

И второй… Любил он ветер с юга,
В каждом шуме слышал звоны лир,
Говорил, что жизнь — его подруга,
20 Коврик под его ногами — мир.

Он совсем не нравится мне, это
Он хотел стать богом и царем,
Он повесил вывеску поэта
Над дверьми в мой молчаливый дом.

25 Я люблю избранника свободы,
Мореплавателя и стрелка,
Ах, ему так звонко пели воды
И завидовали облака.

Высока была его палатка,
30 Мулы были резвы и сильны,
Как вино, впивал он воздух сладкий
Белому неведомой страны.

Память, ты слабее год от году,
Тот ли это, или кто другой
35 Променял веселую свободу
На священный долгожданный бой.

Знал он муки голода и жажды,
Сон тревожный, бесконечный путь,
Но святой Георгий тронул дважды
40 Пулею нетронутую грудь.

Я — угрюмый и упрямый зодчий
Храма, восстающего во мгле,
Я возревновал о славе Отчей,
Как на небесах, и на земле.

45 Сердце будет пламенем палимо
Вплоть до дня, когда взойдут, ясны,
Стены нового Иерусалима
На полях моей родной страны.

И тогда повеет ветер странный —
50 И прольется с неба страшный свет,
Это Млечный Путь расцвел нежданно
Садом ослепительных планет.

Предо мной предстанет, мне неведом,
Путник, скрыв лицо: но всё пойму,
55 Видя льва, стремящегося следом,
И орла, летящего к нему.

Крикну я… Но разве кто поможет, —
Чтоб моя душа не умерла?
Только змеи сбрасывают кожи,
60 Мы меняем души, не тела.

“Заблудившийся трамвай”

1 Шел я по улице незнакомой
И вдруг услышал вороний грай,
И звоны лютни, и дальние громы,
Передо мною летел трамвай.

5 Как я вскочил на его подножку,
Было загадкою для меня,
В воздухе огненную дорожку
Он оставлял и при свете дня.

Мчался он бурей темной, крылатой,
10 Он заблудился в бездне времен…
Остановите, вагоновожатый,
Остановите сейчас вагон.

Поздно. Уж мы обогнули стену,
Мы проскочили сквозь рощу пальм,
15 Через Неву, через Нил и Сену
Мы прогремели по трем мостам.

И, промелькнув у оконной рамы,
Бросил нам вслед пытливый взгляд
Нищий старик, — конечно тот самый,
20 Что умер в Бейруте год назад.

Где я? Так томно и так тревожно
Сердце мое стучит в ответ:
Видишь вокзал, на котором можно
В Индию Духа купить билет?

25 Вывеска… кровью налитые буквы
Гласят — зеленная, — знаю, тут
Вместо капусты и вместо брюквы
Мертвые головы продают.

В красной рубашке, с лицом, как вымя,
30 Голову срезал палач и мне,
Она лежала вместе с другими
Здесь, в ящике скользком, на самом дне.

А в переулке забор дощатый,
Дом в три окна и серый газон…
35 Остановите, вагоновожатый,
Остановите сейчас вагон!

Машенька, ты здесь жила и пела,
Мне, жениху, ковер ткала,
Где же теперь твой голос и тело,
40 Может ли быть, что ты умерла!

Как ты стонала в своей светлице,
Я же с напудренною косой
Шел представляться Императрице
И не увиделся вновь с тобой.

Понял теперь я: наша свобода
Только оттуда бьющий свет,
Люди и тени стоят у входа
В зоологический сад планет.

И сразу ветер знакомый и сладкий,
И за мостом летит на меня
Всадника длань в железной перчатке
И два копыта его коня.

Верной твердынею православья
Врезан Исакий в вышине,
Там отслужу молебен о здравьи
Машеньки и панихиду по мне.

И всё ж навеки сердце угрюмо,
И трудно дышать, и больно жить…
Машенька, я никогда не думал,
Что можно так любить и грустить.

Поэма начала. Книга первая: Дракон

Песнь Первая

1

Из-за свежих волн океана
Красный бык приподнял рога,
И бежали лани тумана
Под скалистые берега.
Под скалистыми берегами
В многошумный сырой тени
Серебристыми жемчугами
Оседали на мох они.
Красный бык изменяет лица:
Вот широко крылья простер
И парит, огромная птица,
Пожирающая простор.
Вот к дверям голубой кумирни,
Ключ держа от тайн и чудес,
Он восходит, стрелок и лирник,
По открытой тропе небес.
Ветры, дуйте, чтоб волны пели,
Чтоб в лесах гудели стволы,
Войте, ветвы, и трубы ущелий,
Возглашая ему хвалы!

2

Освежив горячее тело
Благовонной ночною тьмой,
Вновь берется земля за дело
Непонятное ей самой.
Наливает зеленым соком
Детски-нежный стебли трав
И багряным, дивно-высоким,
Благородное сердце льва.
И, всегда желая иного,
На голодный жаркий песок
Проливает снова и снова
И зеленый и красный сок.
С сотворенья мира стократы,
Умирая, менялся прах,
Этот камень рычал когда-то,
Этот плющ парил в облаках.
Убивая и воскрешая,
Набухать вселенской душой,
В этом воля земли святая,
Непонятная ей самой.

3

Океан косматый и сонный,
Отыскав надежный упор,
Тупо терся губой зеленой
О подножие Лунных Гор.
И над ним стеною отвесной
Разбежалась и замерла,
Упираясь в купол небесный,
Аметистовая скала.
До глубин ночами и днями
Аметист светился и цвел
Многоцветными огоньками,
Точно роем веселых пчел.
Потому что снова там кольца,
Вековой досыпая сон,
Старше вод и светлее солнца,
Золоточешуйный дракон.
И подобной чаши священной
Для вина первозданных сил
Не носило тело вселенной,
И Творец в мечтах не носил.

4

Пробудился дракон и поднял
Янтари грозовых зрачков,
Первый раз он взглянул сегодня
После сна десяти веков.
И ему не казалось светлым
Солнце, юное для людей,
Был как будто засыпан пеплом
Жар пылавших в море огней.
Но иная радость глубоко
В сердце зрела, как сладкий плод.
Он почуял веянье рока,
Милой смерти неслышный лет.
Говор моря и ветер южный
Заводили песню одну:
— Ты простишься с землей ненужной
И уйдешь домой, в тишину.
— О твое усталое тело
Притупила жизнь острие,
Губы смерти нежны, и бело
Молодое лицо ее.

5

А с востока из мглы белесой,
Где в лесу змеилась тропа,
Превышая вершину леса
Ярко-красной повязкой лба,
Пальм стройней и крепче платанов,
Неуклонней разлива рек,
В одеяньях серебротканных
Шел неведомый человек.
Шел один, спокойно и строго
Опуская глаза, как тот,
Кто давно знакомой дорогой
Много дней и ночей идет.
И казалось, земля бежала
Под его стопы, как вода,
Смоляною, доской лежала
На груди его борода.
Точно высечен из гранита,
Лик был светел, но взгляд тяжел,
— Жрец Лемурии, Морадита,
К золотому дракону шел.

6

Было страшно, точно без брони
Встретить меч разящий в упор,
Увидать нежданно драконий
И холодный и скользкий взор.
Помнил жрец, что десять столетий
Каждый бывший здесь человек
Видел лишь багровые сети
Крокодильих сомкнутых век.
Но молчал он и черной пикой
(У мудрейших водилось так)
На песке пред своим владыкой
Начертал таинственный знак:
Точно жезл во прахе лежавший,
Символ смертного естества,
И отвесный, обозначавший
Нисхождение божества,
И короткий, меж них сокрытый,
Точно связь этих двух миров…
— Не хотел открыть Морадита
Зверю тайны чудесной слов.

7

И дракон прочел, наклоняя
Взоры к смертному в первый раз:
— Есть, владыка, нить золотая,
Что связует тебя и нас.
Много лет я провел во мраке,
Постигая смысл бытия,
Видишь, знаю святые знаки,
Что хранит твоя чешуя.
— Отблеск их от солнца до меди
Изучил я ночью и днем,
Я следил, как во сне ты бредил,
Переменным горя огнем.
— И я знаю, что заповедней
Этих сфер и крестов, и чаш,
Пробудившись в свой день последний,
Нам ты знанье свое отдашь.
Зарожденье, преображенье
И ужасный конец миров
Ты за ревностное служенье
От своих не скроешь жрецов.

8

Засверкали в ответ чешуи
На взнесенной мостом спине,
Как сверкают речные струи
При склоняющейся луне.
И, кусая губы сердито,
Подавляя потоки слов,
Стал читать на них Морадита
Сочетанье черт и крестов:
— Разве в мире сильных не стало,
Что тебе я знанье отдам?
Я вручу его розе алой,
Водопадам и облакам;
Я вручу его кряжам горным,
Стражам косного бытия,
Семизвездию, в небе черном
Изогнувшемуся, как я;
Или ветру, сыну Удачи,
Что свою прославляет мать,
Но не твари с кровью горячей,
Не умеющею сверкать! —

9

Только сухо хрустнула пика,
Переломленная жрецом,
Только взоры сверкнули дико
Над гранитным его лицом
И уставились непреклонно
В муть уже потухавших глаз
Умирающего дракона,
Повелителя древних рас.
Человечья теснила сила
Нестерпимую ей судьбу,
Синей кровью большая жила
Налилась на открытом лбу,
Приоткрылись губы, и вольно
Прокатился по берегам
Голос яркий, густой м полный,
Как полуденный запах пальм.
Первый раз уста человека
Говорить осмелились днем,
Раздалось в первый раз от века
Запрещенное слово: Ом!

10

Солнце вспыхнуло красным жаром
И надтреснуло. Метеор
Оторвался и легким паром
От него рванулся в простор.
185 После многих тысячелетий
Где-нибудь за Млечным Путем
Он расскажет встречной комете
О таинственном слове Ом.
Океан взревел и, взметенный,
190 Отступил горой серебра.
Так отходит зверь, обожженный
Головней людского костра.
Ветви лапчатые платанов,
Распластавшись, легли на песок,
195 Никакой напор ураганов
Так согнуть их досель не мог.
И звенело болью мгновенной,
Тонким воздухом и огнем
Сотрясая тело вселенной,
200 Заповедное слово Ом.

11

Содрогнулся дракон и снова
Устремил на пришельца взор,
Смерть борола в нем силу слова,
Незнакомую до сих пор.
205 Смерть, надежный его союзник,
Наплывала издалека.
Как меха исполинской кузни,
Раздувались его бока.
Когти лап в предсмертном томленьи
210 Бороздили поверхность скал,
Но без голоса, без движенья
Нес он муку свою и ждал.
Белый холод последней боли
Плавал по сердцу, и вот-вот
215 От сжигающей сердце воли
Человеческой он уйдет.
Понял жрец, что страшна потеря
И что смерти не обмануть,
Поднял правую лапу зверя
220 И себе положил на грудь.

12

Капли крови из свежей раны
Потекли, красны и теплы,
Как ключи на заре багряной
Из глубин меловой скалы.
Дивной перевязью священной
Заалели ее струи
На мерцании драгоценной
Золотеющей чешуи.
Точно солнце в рассветном небе,
Наливался жизнью дракон,
Крылья рвались по ветру, гребень
Петушиный встал, обагрен.
И когда без слов, без движенья,
Взором жрец его вновь спросил
О рожденьи, преображеньи
И конце первозданная сил,
Переливы чешуй далече
Озарили уступы круч,
Точно голос нечеловечий,
Превращенный из звука в луч.

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