

## RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS IN THE POETRY OF ANNA AKHMATOVA

Maria Macarskaia

Université Catholique de Louvain  
Faculté de philosophie, arts et lettres  
Place Blaise Pascal, 1 bte L3.03.11  
B-1348 Louvain-la-Neuve  
Belgium

Email: maria.macarskaia@uclouvain.be

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**Abstract.** *The culture of the Silver Age in Russia is represented by a pleiad of novelists and poets, among whom Anna Akhmatova is a central figure. At that time, the Orthodox religion had an important influence on Russian poetry, with the poet being a prophet, according to Akhmatova. Terms in the religious lexicon, such as God, the divine, prayer, angel, Christ, sin and paradise, colour her entire body of work from beginning to end. This iconic poetry reflects the Slavic soul so well, on the borderline of nature, legend and mystical reference.*

**Keywords:** *literature, culture, poetry, God, religion, Paradise, mystic*

How can we perceive the religious symbols in Anna Akhmatova's poetry and the fact that she belongs to the Christian orthodoxy? The Russian writer Korney Chukovsky called Anna Akhmatova "the last and unique Orthodox poet",<sup>1</sup> with religious symbols already appearing clearly in her early poems at the start of the 20th century – such as 'Stal mne rezhe snitsia, slava Bogu' (1912), 'Kolybelnaja' (1915), 'Ty vseгда tainstvennyj I novyj' (1917) and 'U samogo moria' (1914). In these poems, we can see the presence of terms such as God, sound of the bell tower, celestial czar, Christ, prayer, paradise, hell and monk.

The theme of the cross is particularly present in the poem 'Kolybelnaja' (1915) – 'Podarili belyj krestik tvoemu otcu' – in which the mother talks to her son about his father fallen on a battlefield. Here, the cross that raises itself upon his grave symbolises the end of human life: 'Bylo gore, budet gore, goru net konca'. The same theme of the cross also appears in the poem 'Just by the Sea' (1914): 'Ja otdala cyganke cepochku I zolotoj krestilnyj krestik'.

The small cross that we carry on a chain symbolises the permanent presence of God in the life of people. The theme of the cross in the sense of "bearing one's cross" also appears in times of historical upheavals, such as wars, revolutions or the Stalin era.

This is the case in Akhmatova's poem 'Rekviem' (1935-1940), dedicated to the black years of the Stalin era and, more specifically, to the 17 months during which she would spend entire days queuing in front of a Leningrad prison. Here, the theme of the cross symbolises the common fate condemning the Russian people and is associated with the lethal destiny of innocent victims thrown in prisons: 'Kak treksotaja, s peredacheju pod krestami budesh stojat'.

Several literary critics have analysed religious motives as an individual means of literary expression, such as Eichenbaum and Vinogradov. The latter undertook a detailed study of Akhmatova's work that examined the presence of religious symbols and in 1922, his article 'About the symbolism of Anna Akhmatova' was published in the literary review 'Literaturnaja mysl'. In the article, Vinogradov covers the use of the religious symbols as a means of creating new forms of erotic feelings, achieving a new style of loving lyric.<sup>2</sup>

Such a call to religion by Akhmatova was, however, severely criticised by some literary critics who sided with the *Bolsheviks*. They stigmatised her as a poet who symbolised decadence, a lack of will and debauchery, asserting that the lack of responsibility could but engender bad poetry. The religious philosopher V. Iljin interpreted in his own way Akhmatova's reflection on creating verses in her poem 'Mne ni k chemu odicheskie rati' (1940): 'Kogda b vy znali iz kakogo sora rastut stixi, ne vedaja syda, kak zheltyj oduvanchik u zabora, kak lopuxi i lebeda',<sup>3</sup>

In Akhmatova's diary at the time, she wrote: "After 1924, my poems did not appear any more in the press; they were prohibited, mainly because of the presence of the religious symbols... After my poetic evenings in Moscow in 1924, a decree was

1 Čukovskij K., *Anna Akhmatova*, Kniga, Moskva, 1999.

2 Vinogradov V., *O simvolike Akhmatovoj*, Literaturnaja mysl, Moskva, 1922.

3 Iljin V., *Kogda zhe vozroditisia velikaja russkaja poezija*, Werden Verlag, Munich, 2006.

published on the suspension of my literary activity. The decree did not forbid the pursuit of literary activities as such, yet carried a ban to publish them.”

It will be understood that all attempts to study Akhmatova’s work, particularly the religious aspects of her poems, were hence banned and disrupted for numerous years in Soviet Russia. Yet in spite of the negative attitude of literary circles towards her work, she did not leave the country and kept writing.

In her poems from that time, one can feel her mourning the fate of her country and, at the same time, a detachment from that chaotic world, uncovering mystical motives that are bound to the expectations of a fiancé. The gift of being a poet is regarded as a blessing and the poet is a missionary close to their people.

During the tragic decade of 1930 to 1940, Akhmatova shared the fate of several contemporaries. Her son was imprisoned and she had lost her husband, the poet Goumilev, who was accused of taking part in an anti-government plot and shot not far from Petrograd in 1921. In her poem ‘*Rekviem*’ mentioned earlier, Akhmatova speaks of her feelings following the loss of a loved one.

The events described in her poem, which evoke the Stalinist terror, demonstrate the pain felt not only by herself, but also by all those who had been separated from loved ones who were thrown in jail. She speaks of the anguish of all those women she has seen standing in front of such prisons. In this, we see the measure of her patriotic feelings and her association in the fate of her fellow people.

One feels the distress of a woman overwhelmed with despair and cut off from the whole world with its joys and concerns in an abyss of human suffering. One has the impression that these lines recall the tears of Yaroslavna mourning her beloved and all the Russian soldiers: ‘*Budu ja, kak streleckie zhenki pod kremlevskimi bashniami vyt’*’.

In the chapter ‘*Raspiatie*’ (‘Crucifix’), one feels a link with music, which intervenes as a sacred sphere connecting us with the passage to another world and with one’s salvation in the religious sense of the term: ‘*Khor angelov velikij chas vosslavil, i nebesa rasplavilis v ogne*’.

In 1946, meanwhile, Akhmatova was excluded from the Union of writers and her works were not published again until 1961.

The topic of her relationship with religion appears in the indictment of Zhdanov of 14 August, 1946.<sup>4</sup> That author gossips contemptuously about the poetry of an insane aristocrat who, between her boudoir and her priory, stirs her mystical and erotic experiments.

Although authorised to deal again with Akhmatova’s work thanks to the trend of “de-Stalinisation” in the late 1950s, Soviet literary critics were nevertheless forced to turn away from the theme of “Akhmatova and religion”, as well as other undesirable subjects, such as her attitude to the revolution and Soviet power or still to the repressions of the post-Soviet period.

In 1964, Akhmatova received the *Etna-Taormina International Prize in Poetry* and in 1965 she was proclaimed Doctor Honoris Causa of Literature by the University of Oxford. Is it possible to translate Akhmatova’s poems? Few translators have dared to do so... At this

4 Zhdanov, *Postanovlenije ot 14 avg. 1946*, Moskva, 1946.

stage, I would like to propose a short analysis of the translation into French of the extracts of the poem 'U samogo moria' (1914) owed to a talented translator, Sophie Benech.<sup>5</sup>

My analysis will focus on the phonetic and syntactic level.

### 1. At the phonetic level:

When analysing the translation proposed by Sophie Benech, we note that the translator uses an alternation of the same consonants in French as in Russian to reproduce the whistling of the wind.

A. Repetition of the sound "s" in Russian and in French, conferring a particular rhythm to the poem.

« Дули с востока сухие ветры »

« Des vents de sécheresse soufflaient d'est »

B. Repetition of the rolled sound "r" and the palato-alveolar fricatives in Russian on the one hand, and the diphthongs and nasal sounds in French on the other:

« Падали с неба крупные звезды  
В нижней церкви служили молебны  
О моряках, уходящих в море »

« De grosses étoiles tombaient du ciel  
Dans l'église basse on disait des messes  
Pour les marins qui partaient en mer »

The alternation of these diphthongs creates a particular rhythm in French. By using means of expression appropriate to French in this way, the translator manages to reconstitute the rhythm and music of the Russian original text.

### 2. At the syntactic level:

The proportions of the Russian text are respected in French, even though certain stanzas are longer in the French version. That is understandable, given that Russian is more laconic than French and the latter tends to be more descriptive.

Russian: « О моряках, уходящих в море. »

French: « Pour les marins qui partaient en mer. »

5 U samogo moria, trad. du russe par Sophie Benech, Éd. Interférences, 2005.

In Russian, the author uses a participle, whereas in French the translator prefers a subordinate clause. This is logical, considering that in general participles are more often used in Russian, whereas a subordinate clause is more frequent in French.

By using linguistic means most appropriate to French in this way, the translator generates an adequate rhythm that recreates the melody of the original text. Such a melody is therefore easily perceived by a French-speaking reader.

## Conclusions

The theme of orthodox religion, which permeates Anna Akhmatova's work from beginning to end, confers on her a depth and strength that feeds the human being at any time of their existence, and more particularly in periods of distress or confusion. The rhyme and the rhythm of her poems stir memories of liturgical songs, while their picturesque aspects carry our thoughts like Master's canvas.

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## RELIGINIAI SIMBOLIAI ANOS ACHMATOVOS POEZIJOJE

Maria Macarskaia

Université Catholique de Louvain, Belgija

**Santrauka.** Rusiškojo Sidabro amžių reprezentuoja ištisa plejada romanistų ir poetų tarp kurių Ana Achmatova išskirama kaip centrinė Estetinio periodo figūra. Tuo laikotarpiu išskirtinį poveikį rusų poezijai dare rusų ortodoksų tikėjimas. Anot Anos Achmatovos, poetas – tai pranašas. Visu jos drabus nuopradžios iki pat galo nužymi tokie žodžiai kaip Dievas, dieviškas, malda, angelas, Kristus, nuodėmė, rojus. Jos poezija tampa ikonišku slaviškos sielos ženkle, ji kupina gamtos, legendų, ir mistinių įžvalgų.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** litertaūra, kultūra, poezija, Dievas, religija, rojus, mistika

**Maria Macarskaia.** Louvaino Katalikiškojo universiteto, Filosofijos, menu ir literatūros fakulteto docent, dr. Mokslinių tyrimų kryptys: Rusijos studijos, vertimas, trapkultūrinė komunikacija.

**Maria Macarskaia.** Université Catholique de Louvain. Faculté de philosophie, arts et lettres. Dr. Research interests: Russian studies, translation, intercultural communication.